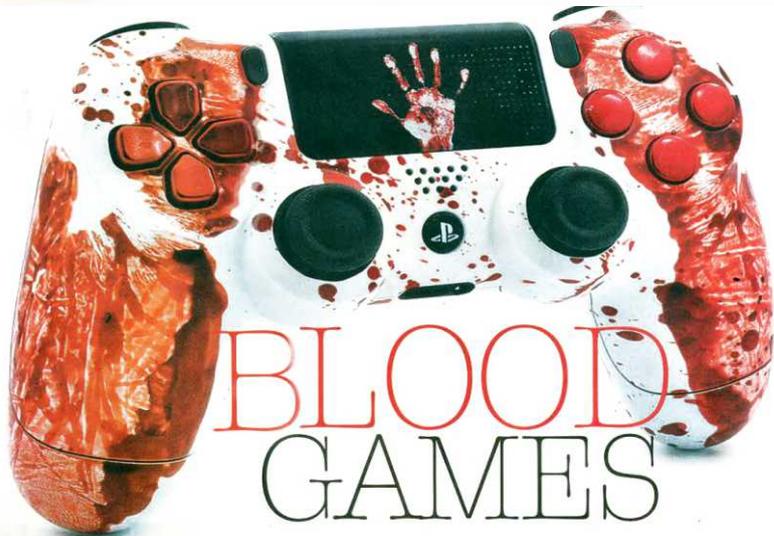


From people live-streaming their suicide on social media, to those risking their life in search of PokemonGo, to fatal games like the Blue Whale Challenge, the gaming world has started instigating children as young as 10, to kill themselves. SANGEETA YADAV speaks to experts about the spectre of virtual



Mama, do you have the trust of the Blue Whale,” asked a 10-year-old girl from a top-end Gurgaon school. The mother was stunned. Even her small little daughter was talking about the deadly game. “To win trust you have to send them your nude pictures. You have to cut off your small finger and post the picture and the video of that to them. Only then you get to play the game. It is important that they trust you mama,” she added. The shocked and worried this mother of two (even her son in Class II told her how his friend had already downloaded this game on his iPad) ran to school to discuss why and how her children would know all this and how to stave off the danger. The teachers were as worried and said these were disturbing times and the children need to be under subtle but sustained monitoring.

Circulars have been issued from all schools for the regimen to follow for parents. Worryingly however, everyone knows about this online suicide game which the police now say they have offloaded from the national servers. The step, it seems, has come a bit late.

On July 29, 2017, a 14-year-old boy jumped to death from the terrace of a seven-floor building in Andheri East, Mumbai. He had photographed himself sitting on the parapet just before jumping off and captioned it: “Soon the only thing you would be left with is a picture of me.”

All his friends knew he had taken up the Blue Whale Challenge but no one squeaked. After creating havoc in Russia with the death of over 130 children from November 2015 to April 2016, and again making headlines from early this year across the countries, the deadly Blue Whale Challenge made its way to India and had this boy, a game addict, as its first victim.

The Blue Whale game, also known as A Silent House, A Sea Of Whales and Wake Me Up At 4:20am, consists of a series of 50 horrifying tasks assigned to players by administrators to be completed in a 50-day period and share photos of each task completed.

The tasks start off easy — listen to certain genres of music, wake up at odd hours, watch a horror movie, among others, and then slowly escalate into carving out shapes on one's skin and self mutilation to win trust and eventually suicide.

“The Internet is being used to exploit the sadistic tendencies among its users and often encouraging them to commit self harm, even suicide. There are a horde of games, e-books and videos available which encourage users how to commit suicide in different ways. These suicide games are being offered because there is a market for them. People who are dejected or depressed are most likely to play such games of committing self-harm,” president of cyberlaws.net and mobilelaw.net Pavan Duggal explains.

In just a month, more than eight children in India have fallen prey to this suicidal game. Some have been rescued and many are struggling to come out of it. Like the Blue Whale Challenge, there have been many other games designed to trigger the players to self-harm or to committing suicide.

In July 2017, the game called Mariam was released in the UAE. It revolved around a child lost in the forest and the players had to help her to find her way back home. Users were exposed to all sorts of strangers since the game had access to a number of apps and folders from the participant's smart phone and could even retrieve photos from the albums of those playing it.

Games are used not just for killing purposes but to get players addicted to it and then brainwashing them for deadly activities. In 2016, a game called AL Badayer, named after an area in Sharjah in UAE, was believed to

have coded messages for children to lure them into joining a terror group.

The most challenging thing for the cyber cell is to identify the creators of these game. “Today, with the advent of the darknet, more and more of these kind of games are increasingly using features of anonymity provided by the darknet for communicating with their targets. Since the games providers are very clever, they seldom leave behind electronic footprints. Given the fact of the increased propensity to use Darknet, getting the darknet identity of perpetrators from darknet service providers becomes a virtual impossibility,” Duggal tells you.

Every day, there is some or the other suicidal content been generated online by gamers. Game developers spend years researching on creating stronger deadlier content like the Blue Whale which is not accessible to everyone and available through hidden platforms. This makes them difficult to identify and block.

“Massive suicidal content is being generated online. Game creators have tasted blood. They have seen that there is a demand and more significantly that children are willing to be brainwashed. Consequently, they are working overtime to generate such trash,” Duggal adds.

The Blue Whale game developer Philipp Budeikin was just 22 when he unleashed it on the net. The Russian, who got convicted in July last year for the suicides, feels that victims of his game are a “biological waste” which he needed to “cleanse society” from. What gave him a boost is the experience of sadistic pleasure by inflicting pain on the victim and their families.

“The Internet presents a ruthless ecosystem. There are so many sadists who get pleasure by creating such games and constantly providing the ecosystem for children to end their lives. Often, the creators of such games are ruthless and do not have any

emotions. Further, they love to play with the feelings of the users. They get motivated by variety of factors, not bothering about the trail of suffering they leave behind,” Duggal says.

Prof (Dr) Sanjeev P Sahni, principal director, Jindal Institute of Behavioural Sciences, agrees. He adds that “an individual who creates such games may have suffered from a traumatic disturbed childhood or belong to broken families where harming others is considered normal. Such people possess traits of psychoticism or neuroticism. They need psychological help.”

What's more alarming is that there are a plenty of pro-suicidal groups functioning actively in India and other countries that are propagating such games. “We have number of such pro-suicidal groups functioning in India. Currently, there is no data on it. However, these indigenous groups have seen the success of the Blue Whale Challenge and are increasingly offering their customised versions of self-harm and suicide games, targeting an existing market,” Duggal tells you.

Other games like Pokemon Go, made plenty of people across countries an addict, so much so that they didn't realise they were risking their lives by going on a Pokemon hunt in the middle of the traffic or running on roof tops.

Last year, more than 14 people died and 55 injured after they met with an accident while playing Pokemon Go to find various places.

Many mysterious deaths of youngsters have been cited for gaming addiction, youngsters not able to face defeat and rejection. Back in 2001, 21-year-old US-based youth Shawn Woolley committed suicide, and his mother claimed that because it was over a popular game called EverQuest, a massively multi-player online role-playing games (MMORPGs), which she suspected pushed him over the edge after a rejection or a betrayal.