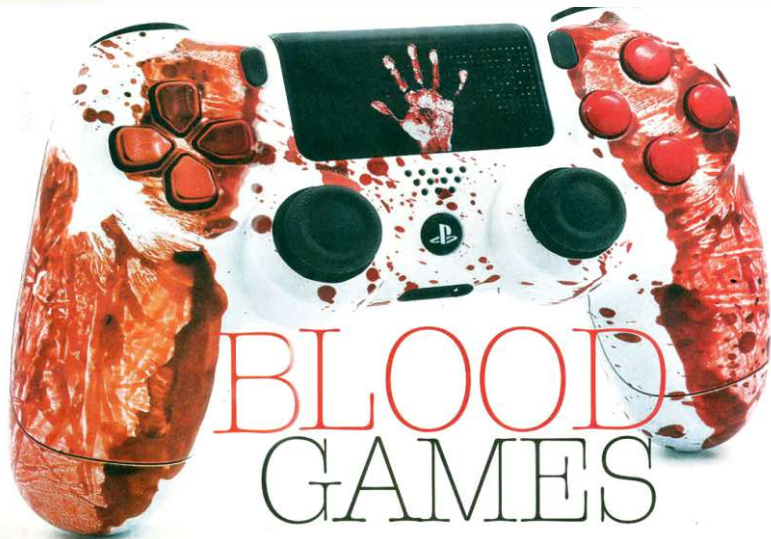


From people live-streaming their suicide on social media, to those risking their life in search of PokemonGo, to fatal games like the Blue Whale Challenge, the gaming world has started instigating children as young as 10, to kill themselves. SANGEETA YADAV speaks to experts about the spectre of virtual



**M**ama, 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.

Another case took place on December 27, 2004, when 13-year-old Zhang Xiaoyi from China, after playing for World of Warcraft for 36 hours straight, jumped off a tall building leaving a suicide note behind saying he wanted "to join the heroes of the game he worshiped."

His parents sued the game distributors for \$12,500.

Gaming addiction is being tagged worldwide as the biggest online havoc. Avid gamers spent hours playing online and show major behavioural changes. It makes them aggressive, violent and pushes them to crime. For instance, 17-year-old Daniel Petric murdered his mother and injured his father after they refused to let him play Halo 3.

People playing such games turn revengeful and can go to any extent to vent out the anger after losing the game. One such incident took place in Beijing in 2012 where a young boy, who was addicted to playing World of Warcraft, lost the game with his classmate and took revenge by killing him. He mentally visualised himself as being a fire mage, and set his classmate on fire.

The biggest factor leading the older generation to game addiction is the easy way of earning a lot of money and investing their bank balance by buying virtual valuable items available in the games. Selling virtual items include currency or gold, virtual items like armour, weapons, mounts, etc, boosting services levelling, Player vs. Player (PvP), achievement completions, and selling game accounts.

Mobile games like Clash Royale and Clash of Clans are making people earn money hand over fist. Whereas online games like World of Warcraft, Dota 2, Counterstrike Global Offensive, Eve Online, Entropia Universe are encouraging them to spend huge money on virtual items and also often get cheated by other players.

In 2005, Qiu Chengwei, 41 from Shanghai, stabbed competitor Zhu Caoyuan repeatedly in the chest for selling his cyber-sword 'dragon sabre' that was used in the Legend of Mir 3 game. Qiu and a friend jointly won their weapon and lent it to Zhu who then sold it for 7,200 yuan (over Rs 69,000). Qiu went to the police to report the theft but was told the weapon was not real property protected by law.

While China has no laws to deal with the ownership and theft of virtual property, some countries (such as South Korea) have a section of their police force that investigates in-game crimes. Back in 2013, a 13-year-old boy from Vietnam was arrested after he killed and robbed an 81-year-old woman for \$6.20 to spend on an online game.

Even after these games come into light due to shocking deaths and suicides, the Government takes time to offload them or the platform from the Internet space.

"Regulating these online self harm or suicide games is not a political priority. That is the reason why we find that the existing policies of the Government do

not cater to regulating such violence. Further, the Information Technology Act, 2000 is silent on these issues. Given the lack of appropriate priority and urgency to regulate online games, we find them visiting us with all their horrors," Duggal says.

To earn money sitting at home by just playing virtual PvP games, many people get serious health issues which can be fatal. For instance, after a 50-hour Starcraft session, a South Korean man collapsed and died of heart failure. The craze of the game was such that he stopped using the washroom when required and slept for short durations. There have been other cases in China where people have been playing a single game anywhere from three to 15 days without a break.

To deal with the rising menace, a strong regulatory framework and compulsory workshop on cyber crime for all age groups is needed. "India can come up regulate such self-harm games through a legal framework for which appropriate amendments to the Information Technology Act, 2000 are needed. In addition, we need to look at the entire issue of intermediary liability from a fresh perspective. Service providers cannot be mere spectators as their platforms get misused by self-harm game administrators for perpetuating their illegal designs on targeted victims. We need to create massive awareness programmes among children in schools and colleges to sensitise them to the consequences of such games," Duggal opines.



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## DEADLY SIGNS

- Lack of sleep or insomnia
- Sudden withdrawal from daily routine activities
- Lack of communication with parents and peers
- Poor personal hygiene
- Isolation
- Lack of sense of time
- Unable to keep with schedules
- Feelings of guilt
- Euphoric feelings
- Self-harm inflicting talks and acts
- Constantly talking of death
- Talking of life after death
- Excessively spending time alone

## NEED FOR CHECKS & BALANCES

Bursting with curiosity, 12-year-old Richek, a tech savvy student at Amrita Vidyalayam, Delhi, came home with a question for the family: "What is Blue Whale Challenge? All my friends have been talking about it in school."

Next day, Richek got a long circular from his school requesting parents to keep an eye on their children's activities online and offline and making sure they didn't play suspicious games that could be harmful mentally, psychologically or physically.

"Although the Internet has become a huge craze with the youngsters, as it has proved to be a great source of assistance, yet it acts as an unvarying source of threat to their existence. There are many sites/ games which are not conducive for the young minds. They divert their attention towards undesirable acts or things which can hamper their growth. The most recent development on the networking site is the advent of the game "Blue Whale Challenge" where the youngsters are targeted very easily," the circular said.

Guidelines by this vigilant school included:

- Monitor the digital behaviour and subtly keep an eye on their Internet activity. It is important for you to understand what websites, apps and social media platforms they are on.
- Make sure they know when and how to report and block any malicious or inappropriate messages or posts.
- Be careful about over sharing of personal information such as the details related to your school, telephone number or anything that identifies where you might live. Consider not using full name for your profile.
- Use the T-shirt test when it comes to sharing images online or sending pictures or videos to friends. Would you wear it on your T-Shirt? If not then don't send it.
- Parents need to keep talking to children. Take interest in your child's activity. Give them space to share their feelings instead of negating them.
- Have regular conversation about the risk such as cyber bullying and grooming they may be exposed to and how to deal with them and ensure they feel free to come and talk to your counsellor if you see anything upsetting.
- Never reprimand your child for whining, crying or staying aloof. Try to find out the reason behind the behavioural change. Talk to your child for at least 20 minutes daily. This will help you read trouble signs — are they bullied, body shamed or going through academic decline?
- If you are worried about your child's emotional welfare or feel that they many have come across The Blue Whale Challenge, consult a psychiatrist. Consulting a psychiatrist is not an act of defaming yourself or putting yourself into any shame. It is a corrective remedial measure meant for the welfare of your children.

Many Public and Private school across India have rolled out the similar circulars and have been conducting cyber security workshops to prevent children from falling for such deadly games.

"We have a monthly cyber safety workshop by Rakshit Tandon, a cyber safety expert working closely with UP Police. The students are made aware of the danger lurking in cyber space and the adverse effects of gaming and social media," Sunita Nagpal, Principal, Delhi Public School (DPS), Sushant Lok, Gurgaon, says.

Nagpal points out that students with depressive tendencies are being cyber bullied.

"Children who are indulging in this game are already loners prone to be depression or are having some psychological issues. We ensure that we have an interactive time in the morning between the children and parents where our teachers discuss emotional issues and encourage children to talk. All our teachers have been trained to identify children who are not behaving normally. We contact the parents get them counselling and if the condition is bad, we recommend psychological help. That's how we help them to come out of it," Nagpal adds.

Abha Kohli, counsellor at the Shiv Nadar School, is planning to release guidelines and conduct workshops. "Considering the growing threat of the Blue Whale Challenge, we plan to spread wider awareness among our parent and teacher communities. As part of this, the school will be sharing guidelines for parents on how to stay alert and watch out for any signs jeopardizing the safety of their ward through online challenges. The school will also hold sessions with all staff members and senior students on the subject of safety in the cyber world," Kohli says.

Some activities that schools and parents are making their children do are: "Encourage the child to engage in extracurricular activities. Not reprimand them unnecessarily. Keep lines of communication open. Observe behavioural changes and regulate his time on the internet. Encourage children to read books," Prof (Dr) Sanjeev P Sahni, Principal Director, Jindal Institute of Behavioural Sciences, says.