

## Sexual predators target kids through online video games

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BY VANCOUVER SUN    MAY 6, 2013

While your kids are fighting the bad guys online they could be the target of real-life villains who troll video gaming sites looking to sexually exploit children and youth.

The practice made headlines last week in Winnipeg where police there say they are investigating cases of U.S.-based predators luring children through video game consoles and while it's not a new phenomenon, Internet child safety experts said it is one that many parents ignore.

"I have been feeling for some time that while we have started to pay some attention to girls' activities in social networks around sexual behaviours, what we haven't been paying attention to at all is the gaming world," Merlyn Horton, executive director of Safe Online Outreach Society, said of parents' awareness of the risks of online video gaming.

"This doesn't stop at the Manitoba border .... The gaming environment is even more open and unattended than the web and parents don't realize that once we plug an Ethernet cord (connecting a game console to the Internet) into the back of them, the game consoles become something different.

"Relationships are formed, young people are subject to emotional manipulation, just like they are everywhere else."

Horton said many parents might be shocked at the language, the abuse and the deceit that can occur in online games, with adult predators masquerading as youth to gain the friendship and trust of young online players.

"Unplug the headset while your kid is playing a game, listen to the language and listen to what is going on," she said.

In its story on the Winnipeg investigations, the CBC launched a small sting operation in which reporter Gosia Sawicka posed as a 13-year-old girl on PlayStation Home, a free game accessible on PlayStation 3.

Within minutes, her online persona Emgiir13 was approached by several people, many asking sexually explicit questions and asking for photos, sending private messages and invitations to voice chat.

Predators don't limit themselves to mature-rated games, Horton said, but rather target online games that attract children in the age range they are seeking.

"If an adult with a sexual interest in children prefers kids aged six to nine, he will attempt to infiltrate a site where that age group is active online," Horton said.

RCMP spokesman Sgt. Rob Vermeulen said parents need to educate themselves, know what games their children are playing and who they are communicating with in the game.

"Watch their language used and if the person wants to move to another medium to continue talking, this is a red flag," Vermeulen wrote in an email to The Sun. "A child should never go and meet someone they are gaming with. Should you identify your child is being lured by a predator, contact your local police and report it. Your local police can contact the provincial ICE Unit for support."

Signy Arnason, the director of Cybertip.ca, a tip line run by the Canadian Centre for Child Protection, said her organization gets about two reports every month over concerns about children being approached through online gaming.

"Offenders are going to be any place where children are," she said. "That occurs on social networking sites, it occurs through a variety of apps, it occurs in gaming environments.

"It is not unique, it is going to occur wherever you have kids."

The Vancouver police department receives from five to 10 complaints every year regarding attempts to contact through a game console system, VPD spokesman Const. Brian Montague said.

"There has never been one that we're aware of where there has been a successful contact between a predator and a victim; there has never been a meeting.

"No charges have been laid in Vancouver," Montague said.

Arnason said the number of video game-related concerns reported to the tip line doesn't necessarily reflect the extent of the issue because the reports only come as parents become aware of problems with their kids.

"We are only made aware of a potential luring incident when parents or somebody around the child becomes aware of it," she said. "It may have started in gaming and moved to texting.

"It is certainly likely that it happens a lot more often than we are aware of."

Arnason echoed Horton's belief that parents may not be aware of the capabilities of video game consoles.

"I don't think they think about the connectivity and communicating with others through voice ... and some of the risks that that presents," she said. "We are used to thinking about the personal computer and checking that.

"But I don't think parents have wrapped their heads around the fact their children can play with people around the world and communicate with them (through video game consoles)."

Cybertip.ca's mandate is to protect children from online sexual exploitation by receiving and analyzing tips from the public about potentially illegal material and referring any relevant leads to the appropriate law enforcement agency and/or child welfare agency.

Arnason said they have had 90,000 reports overall since 2005 with 26,000 in the past year alone.

"Certainly this issue is not going away," she said.

Police and Internet safety experts encourage parents to keep open lines of communication with their children and encourage them to talk about what happens online.

Children can be hesitant to tell their parents if they have been approached inappropriately online because they fear their parents will simply ban them from online gaming.

"Those are the biggest barriers - the fear of losing the technology or that adults won't respond," said Horton. "They may feel guilty and a little bit responsible for what has happened.

"What is most important is keeping the lines of communication open. Make sure it is reinforced over and over again that if they come and tell you stuff, you will work it out together."

While the New York state attorney general's office asked online gaming companies last year to ban registered sex offenders, Horton said such measures don't ensure offenders are kept away because they can create many online personas to avoid detection.

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