

BLUE WHALE CHALLENGE: A TECHNOLOGICAL EVIL

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Abstract

The title of the paper is Blue Whale Challenge which deals with the recent game which has taken the lives of many people mainly teenagers. The paper starts with the evolution of the game, and how it has affected the human mind. The paper further analyses to what extent influential the game is. It also deals with the cases linked to Blue Whale Game in India. There are many cases where a lot of teenagers were rescued at the last stage of the game. This paper includes the cases of Blue Whale Game across the world. This paper not only focuses on the on studying the problems relating to Blue Whale game, but also other similar technical traps existing around the world. The aim of the study is to examine as to why such threats are being posed and how to curb them. The analysis part of the paper deals with how and why children are trapped into this virtual world. The paper finally concludes with a suggestive note which would protect the people as well as create a better and safe society to live in.

Introduction

The whole article focuses on the Blue Whale Game which has posed threat to the lives of people across the world. The blue whale challenge is an online game which originated in Russia back in 2013. It is a game which has multiple tasks, most of which involve self-harm are assigned to players over a period of 50 days, and ends in the player committing suicide. There are curators designated to these players who guide them with the tasks. It is believed that this game originated in Russia and gradually spread to other countries. The worst thing about this game is that even if the player wants to quit the game, the threats of the

administrators hang around their heads. The threats vary from holding the secrets of the players as a tool for blackmailing to destroying their families. Even in cases where the victim is rescued at the early stages, he/she refuses to cooperate for the investigation in the fear of the safety of the family as well as their lives. India witnessed several suicides which had a link with this game in some form or the other, prompting demands that the game be banned. Various psychologists have come up with the theory that people who suffer from low mental stability are likely to get more affected by these evils and added that parents ought to be vigilant in these matters. It is not only the Blue Whale Game which has adverse effect on the life of humans, but other similar games which have high fatal rates. The teenagers must be trained in such a way that they can distinguish the real world from the virtual world. Apart from this parents must monitor the daily online activities of their children. The central government even passed an order stating that Facebook and Google have to take down all the materials connected to the challenge. Criminal Investigation department and other authorities have taken a lot of efforts and steps to ensure the safety of citizen. This game has become a serious evil and it is necessary to stop it.

Evolution of the Blue Whale Game

The Blue Whale Challenge is believed to be a suicide game wherein a group of administrators or a certain curator gives a participant a task to complete daily for a period of 50 days, the final of which is the participant commits suicide. The participants are supposed to share photos of the challenges completed by them. The daily tasks are generally easy at the beginning, such as listening to certain genres of music, waking up at odd hours, watching a horror movie, among others. By time, the tasks towards the end of the games involves slowly escalate to carving out shapes on one's skin (usually the blue whale), self-mutilation and eventually suicide. It is supposedly believed that this game had started in Russia back in 2013, with F57, one of the names of the so-called "death group" of VKontakte (Russia's largest social network).¹ The first suicide was witnessed in 2015. A former psychology student, Philipp Budeikin was expelled from the university on the grounds that he invented the game. According to Budeikin, his purpose was to "clean" the society by pushing to suicide those he deemed as having no value. He was arrested with charges of inciting at least

¹ Economic Times, August 20, 2017, <<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/panache/blue-whale-challenge-and-other-games-of-death/articleshow/60135835.cms>>

16 teenagers. The term "blue whale" comes from the phenomenon of beached whales, which is linked to suicide.

The **Blue Whale challenge came into picture in Russia almost five years ago** and is believed to have killed more than 100 teens so far. The creator of this game was sentenced to three years of imprisonment for seeking out and instigating teenagers on the Internet to take the challenge, which ends up in the participant committing suicide. Reports are of the opinion that a lot of young minds are succumbing to this sort of online exploitation. In this obscure subversive challenge-based game, teens are given tasks to complete which are of extreme nature growing by each level. Game administrators, who are appointed to extract the personal information of the kids to ensure they do not back out.

The tasks in the game include climbing a crane, carving a specific phrase on the person's own hand or arm, listening to music, poking a needle to the arm or leg, doing secret tasks, standing on a bridge and roof, and watching videos sent to the challengers by the administrator.² The ultimate task is to commit suicide. It is mandatory for the players to upload photos of the completed tasks, and if they refuse to do so, the game administrators may threaten to harm family members, in short victimize the players and compel them to do the task. Therefore, once started, it is impossible to back out from the game. Apparently, the game has claimed the lives of more than 130 kids around the world.

Cases Linked to Blue Whale Challenge in India

A 15 year old boy of a government school in Jhunjhunu was involved in the deadly Blue Whale challenge. The boy was reluctant to share his secret as he was terrified that the trap setters would harm his family if he'd stop following the instructions provided to him. Psychologists and other officials counseled the boy and assured him of his family safety which dissipated some of his fears. The boy's mobile phone was seized making sure that he not having any access to the game anymore. The boy further opened up and told the principal that a anonymous boy had approached him asking whether he played the Blue Whale challenge and also he got help from that same boy to clear the first two levels of the game, first one being carving 'f57' on his hand with a blade and the second one being carving

² News 18, August 12, 2017, <<http://www.news18.com/news/india/14-year-old-boy-addicted-to-blue-whale-challenge-hangs-self-in-bengals-west-midnapore-1489995.html>>

‘YES’ on his legs.³ The next was for him to carve a Blue Whale on his hand and surprisingly, there was three other kids that were in a similar condition like that of his. This investigation was quite helpful in gaining evidence as to this trap because this was one of the rare cases where the victim was thereby saved by the authorities.

Similarly, in another case, the Criminal Investigation department save a student from committing suicide who had crossed eight levels of Blue Whale online dare game by counselling by interfering before it was too late. On 13th august, a boy from West Mednipore had committed suicide. The officials suspected that his suicide was linked to the task assigned by the Blue Whale challenge. Ankan Dey had killed himself by a plastic bag which led to choking and thereby resulting in his death. After his death, it was his friends that informed the family about the boy’s involvement into the Blue Whale challenge. Later, another boy from the same locality had confessed of him being involved into the Blue Whale challenge as well and also having completed three levels of this trap. He, with the help of his friends was saved in time and this led to more alertness towards this Blue Whale challenge, especially amongst the youth of the area.

A 14-year-old Solapur boy who left home to allegedly complete a task assigned to him in the Blue Whale game was rescued by the police on August 10 on his way to Pune. The boy appeared to be lost and silent at the time of rescue. “As soon as we were informed by our counterparts in Solapur, we intercepted the bus and rescued the boy, who was on his way to complete a task given by the Blue Whale Challenge game,”⁴ a Bhigwan police station officer said. “The boy’s businessman father came to the police station and took him home,” he added.

A third-year engineering student from Kolkata was suspected to have completed eight stages of this game after an image of the Blue Whale was seen to be carved on his arm. He came to know about the game from a WhatsApp group and took it lightly thinking as to what bad could come by playing a game. The challenge where he quits the game was when he was told to chop his tongue off.

³ The times of India City, <<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/pune/class-9-boy-on-way-to-finish-blue-whale-challenge-rescued/articleshow/60016336.cms>>

⁴ Financial Express, <<http://www.financialexpress.com/india-news/what-is-blue-whale-game-5-places-in-india-where-teenagers-have-fallen-victim-to-the-dangerous-online-dare/811040/>>

In another case, a 13-year-old Parth Singh was found hanging in his room. At the scene, his father's phone was seen at the side of his body with the page of the Blue Whale opened. His family says that the child had been playing for the past few days on his father's phone without informing him.

In Thiruvanthapuram district of Kerala, the parents of a sixteen-year-old boy raised doubts on the death of their son and suspected that it was due to the Blue Whale challenge game that their son ended his life. Kerala IG stated that children who suffer from low mental stability are likely to get more affected by these evils and added that parents ought to be vigilant in these matters.

“The Blue Whale game or challenge is a psychological game which doesn't have affect on all kids but only selected one with low mental stability. This game cannot be downloaded and played as people generally perceive. This game is not easily available and doesn't affect all children. It is more like a chat between two players, the tutor on one side and the victim on the other”⁵

In another case, a class 7 boy from Indore, Madhya Pradesh, was saved at the last moment as he tried to jump off from the third-floor of his building in school, allegedly in order to accomplish the final level of the Blue Whale challenge. He reached the last level and was stopped by his friends who spotted him standing very close to the edge. The local police said that a sum of Rs. 2 crores were promised to him if he completes the game. It shows one of the reasons as to why these young innocent children go to such extent and start playing such kinds of challenges putting their lives at risk.

This criminal conspiracy became one step closer to being solved. It is yet to be calculated as to at what level this Blue Whale organization strength is at and what is their primary objective and how deeply are they now breathing into our civilization?

Other Reported Cases

RUSSIA

⁵Manoj Abraham, Inspector General of Kerala Police

In March 2017, authorities were investigating multiple cases of related to suicide. Two 15-year-old kids were alleged to have jumped off a building in Siberia after completing 50 tasks sent to them. Before killing themselves, they left messages on their social network pages, with the photo of a large blue whale captioned "End".

US

The body of a 15-year-old was found in San Antonio, Texas, on July 8. A cellphone had broadcasted the teen's suicide. A 16-year-old girl from Atlanta was also suspected to have killed herself as a result of the influence of this challenge. One of the hideous case was when a 32 year old girl mutilated herself falling a victim to the Blue Whale Challenge.

BRAZIL

A 15-year-old student was pulled back when she was on the parapet of the Buarque de Macedo Bridge, preparing to jump from it. There were several cuts on her arms, including one in the shape of a whale, it was alleged that she was attempting the last phase of the challenge. A 17-year-old boy from São Paulo wrote on Facebook "a culpa é da baleia" ("blame it on the whale"), minutes before attempting to jump an overpass, where he was saved by firefighters.

CHINA

In Ningbo, Zhejiang, a suicide group was founded by a 10-year old girl who posted several photos of her self-mutilation related to the Blue Whale.⁶ Since then authorities took up monitoring and scrutinizing mentions of the game on forums and live broadcasts.

PORTUGAL

An 18-year-old girl threw herself from an overpass to the railway line. The authorities found various mutilations on her body, upon investigation, the girl admitted that she was motivated

⁶ The Economic Times, August 20, 2017, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/panache/blue-whale-challenge-and-other-games-of-death/articleshow/60135835.cms>

to do so by a person on the internet named as "Blue Whale". There has been at least 90 victims of the challenge identified in Portugal.

ITALY

The challenge described as a real Russian "game" with 50 strict rules and powerful tutors. The suicide of a teenager in Leghorn was linked to this challenge. Italian website Polizia Postale defines Blue Whale as "a practice that seems to possibly come from Russia" and offers advice to parents and teenagers.

Similar Technological Atrocities

Just like the Blue Whale Challenge, in UAE, there has been emergence of a similar kind of game called the 'Mariam', The local police issued warnings against the game and urging the people to not let their children play this game. It consists of terrifying audio and visual effects and relies on collecting people's personal and private information. This data can be further used by either people for phishing, theft, or extortion. The game revolves around a lost child and the people playing the game are supposed to help the child reach his home. The game requires people to answer personal questions like, "where is your home located" and "What's your Facebook account". Without answering such questions, the players cannot proceed to the next level. It was also known that this app can retrieve photos from the player's galleries as well as all confidential information from their smart phones. Experts have echoed the police's concerns, with some comparing it to the international challenge game 'Blue Whale' that has reportedly pushed the teens around the world to self-harm and suicide.

The Ghost Pepper Challenge is considered to be the hottest in the world. Teens stick the pepper in their mouths and record their reactions. This leads to excruciating pain in the mouth, but some people also get worse reactions. It can cause nausea, gagging and even hospitalization.

The Cinnamon Challenge requires teens to swallow a spoonful or more of cinnamon without drinking any water. This shady game causes severe respiratory and glottal issues and in extreme cases lead to collapsing of lungs and other related organs. There have been reports of gruesome deaths arising from this challenge.

Ice & Salt Challenge involves pouring salt on the body, followed by immediately placing ice over it, which causes a burning sensation. The main task is to bear the pain for the longest time. The Choking Challenge gained popularity among teenagers who began choking themselves to get high. The players believed that cutting off oxygen to the brain would result in temporary ecstasy. Teenagers hope that they would stop just in time, but fail most in doing so ending up losing their lives. The game is estimated to have claimed 250 to 1,000 lives every year in the US. In the Car Surfing Challenge, a teen “surfs” on the roof, bumper or hood of a car.

It involves riding in a sofa, skateboard, sled or any other object hitched or tied to a moving vehicle.⁷ Deaths were caused by head trauma in most cases

Analysis

How is it that we have reached at such a stage in our civilization that some game or an app can lead to loss of life. Life is the biggest gift for the human kind as us wasting it on such stuffs is something which is hard to believe. What are the people gaining by tricking others into such traps? Are the people involved into the Blue Whale challenge actually innocent? What if the makers of the game had some sort of leverage on the so called ‘victim’? Its hard to know that. The question that arises is that what was the necessity for them to take such risks to download this app? Were they somehow forced by some coercion or undue influence to join this death game? Well if that is true then we are in a serious trouble, Trouble that is equivalent to modern form of terror. If not stopped, this could be one of the major problems of the global network. World Wide Web was formed to make our lives easy. But when such horrifying cases arise, we question not the need for the net but the level of trust we can have on our cyber security. In developing countries like India where a large chunk of our illiterate population uses the internet, it seems easy for the people with evil motive to deceive them and use them for their personal gains. If not personal gains, then maybe just to watch the world burn. Hacking into global economic systems is understandable but taking lives for reasons unknown can very much termed as terrorism and not just a mere cybercrime.

If we take a note of as to what steps were taken by the Indian government to curb such incidents, we come to know that on 12th October 2017, A committee of computer and other

⁷ The Economic Times, August 20, 2017 <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/panache/blue-whale-challenge-and-other-games-of-death/articleshow/60135835.cms>

experts has been set up to probe cases of suicide allegedly caused by the blue whale challenge game, which is linked to the deaths of several children globally. A bench of Acting Chief Justice Gita Mittal and Justice C Hari Shankar of the Delhi High Court was also informed by the government that it had issued directions to Google, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Microsoft and Yahoo to ensure that all links of the Blue Whale Challenge and of similar games are removed from their platforms.

On 13th October 2017, the Supreme Court sought the government's response on a plea seeking to firewall virtual games like Blue Whale which has allegedly led to several suicides. A bench headed by Chief Justice Dipak Misra asked the government to constitute an experts committee to make such firewalls. The bench, comprising Justices A M Khanwilkar and D Y Chandrachud, also restrained all high courts from entertaining such pleas.⁸

Suggestions

Faced with such scenarios, it is extremely important that children are trained in such a way that they recognize and realize online risks, making media literacy extremely important. Researchers have come up with the conclusions that there is severe deficiency of psychologists in our country and also that parents are unwilling to consult their kids to a psychologist. It is thus important to develop the ability of critical thinking, which will help them understand the difference between fantasy and reality.

The teenage brain can be complex and confusing. Many cases show that teenagers complain about loneliness.⁹ They complain their parents are too busy for them and they have no friends. There are kids in search of ending their life because no one likes them. These are the same kids who are searching 'painless deaths' on Google. Games like Blue Whale Challenge are just one platform to reach out to such depressed kids. Once the children feel neglected, they automatically enter into the world of online games. Even the parents fail to notice that this obsession ultimately is leading their child getting victimized. Parents need to keep talking to the kids and make them feel

⁸ Live Mint, E-paper, October 13, 2017, <http://www.livemint.com/Politics/9sjmL58q25GE2YQUGw27IN/Supreme-Court-seeks-governments-reply-on-plea-to-firewall-B.html>

⁹ The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/apr/08/teenagers-loneliness-social-media-isolation-parents-attention>

like they have someone to go to when in stress. They must give them space to share their feelings without negating them. Mistakes parents generally make are reprimanding their teens for whining, crying or staying aloof. Instead of bursting at them, they should try to find out the reason behind unnatural behavior. Monitoring their digital behavior and subtly keeping an eye on their internet activity is extremely important. Also, the government can put more emphasis on this agenda as it affects the general people. Workshops can be set up for such purposes and also some form of outreach program which would aim towards ruling out any such serious involvement of any innocent person into this terror trap can be established. They must realize that its no less than other primary issues like food, shelter etc. For the generation entering into a modern phase, these technological evils are yet to be fully controlled.

Conclusion

Even though the government took steps to counter such cyber terrors, the blue whale remains to be one of the biggest mysteries of the world. It would be interesting to monitor a possible outcome of such case. What if someone from the administration intentionally downloads the Blue Whale Challenge and tries to investigate it playing it pretty close to the chest? To investigate it on ground zero is yet to be seen, or maybe its happening and the common people just don't know of it yet. As a vigilant and a responsible citizen, rather than waiting for the government to catch the culprit, one must restrain themselves from such mysteries. The world is full of such online content which isn't just harmful to the person only but sometimes poses a threat to the community and in some cases to the national security as well.