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Predators use gaming consoles to 'get foot in the door'



By Wendy Koch, USA TODAY

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Sexual predators are using gaming consoles such as the Wii, PlayStation and Xbox to meet children online.

"Child predators are migrating from traditional methods to alternate media," says Detective Lt. Thomas Kish of the Michigan State Police. "They are going to places where children are."

Predators view games that allow kids to access the Internet and text message other players as a "foot in the door," he says.

Parents may not realize that gaming consoles have become Internet devices or that savvy kids can bypass parental controls, says Marc Rogers, director of Purdue University's Cyber Forensics Lab.

Police who have been doing stings in Internet chat rooms for years now are going undercover to catch predators playing interactive games, ranging from Grand Theft Auto to old-fashioned chess and checkers. They're making arrests.

In Utah, a man was charged this year with sexual exploitation of a minor for enticing a 12-year-old boy he met through an online game into having sex, says Lt. Jessica Farnsworth, field commander of the Utah Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force. She says predators meet kids on a game, "groom them and then try to move off the game."

In December, Michigan prosecutors convicted Adam Glenn Schroeder of criminal sexual conduct with a minor and using a computer to commit a crime. He used a game, World of Warcraft, to lure a 12-year-old girl into having sex with him. He was sentenced to 10 years in prison.

Police had found Schroeder on other games. "This guy had been doing it for a while," Kish says.

In another case, Kish says, a 10-year-old boy playing the Halo Xbox game got a video message from a man that showed the adult engaged in a sex act.

Farnsworth says her office has seized many Xbox machines for investigation and has received training from the maker, Microsoft, on how to extract text messages and other information from them.

Microsoft trains police at national conferences, says Tim Cranton, associate general counsel for the company's Worldwide Internet Safety Enforcement program

Cranton says the Xbox has password-protected "family settings" that allow parents to turn off Internet access or track content and contacts. PlayStation and Wii also have such controls.

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