

Risks in cyberspace and possibilities of prevention

(overview essay)

Lenka Szokalová, Martin Dominik Polínek

Abstract: *The central theme of the article is the phenomenon of online communities within cyberspace. We reflect on why they are important for many adolescents who experience unacceptance and failure in their lives, and above all we draw attention to the downsides of cyberspace and the risks these young people may encounter. This current and little explored topic is supported by research on the role-playing game operators and players. Based on the results, we are considering how to maximize cyberspace prevention and make the cyber environment safer.*

Keywords: *prevention, cyberspace, cyberbullying, cybergrooming, cyberstalking, sexting, online communities, qualitative research*

1 Introduction

Prevention, as understood and practiced today, focuses on cyberspace only marginally. Prevention means all measures aimed at preventing and minimizing the phenomena associated with risky behavior and its consequences. Prevention may be any type of formative, educational, medical, social or other intervention aimed at preventing the occurrence of risky behavior, preventing its further progression, mitigating existing forms and manifestations of risky behavior or helping to address its consequences.¹ The term is based on the Latin word *praeventio* and must be distinguished from the term *repression*. Repression should only be used when a phenomenon cannot be avoided or prevented. It is ideal to combine these two strategies; however, the so-called balanced approach does not mean a 1 : 1 ratio of

¹ National Strategy of Primary Prevention of Risky Behavior of Children and Youth for the Period 2013–2018. Prague: Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 8.

prevention to repression, as prevention proves to be far more effective and also more economical (Hutyrová, Růžicka, Spěváček, 2013).

Although cyberbullying is classified as risky, prevention of this phenomenon is far less sophisticated than in other types of risky behavior (eg substance abuse) (cf. Polínek, 2015, Polínek, Polínková, 2016). This is due to the fact that cyberspace is a relatively new and constantly evolving phenomenon, and also because there are certain specifics that are not expected to be a common preventive action. Polínek (2015), for example, in his preventive decalogue mentions a long-term relationship as a protective factor in the child's healthy development, which is a phenomenon difficult to implement within cyberspace. It also deals with the phenomenon of creativity in the same spirit, but it also has its specifics within the virtual environment (cf. Polínek, Polínková, 2016). Let's try to look into the specifics of one virtual environment: role-playing games (RPG).

2 Role-play games

Adolescents experiencing peer unacceptance in their lives, problems at home, school failure, often spend most of their free time at the computer. Through virtual games, they can create a second life, build a strong avatar, and experience success through the game. There are so-called role-playing games where players enter a role-playing game. One type of RPG game is that players choose the look of their "avatar" and through the keyboards they go into a fantasy world where they fight for some rewards. In addition, there is a less known variant of RPG games, so called text games. By the literary form the player describes the appearance and behavior of his character, which are by means of the text with interaction with other characters. These games also often offer secondary benefits, which are online player communities. Hine (2008 in Ševčíková 2014) describes the community as a social space in which people interact and engage in certain activities. The advantage of the community in the online space is the fact that it enables fast connection with people throughout the Czech Republic. Although online communities are not even remotely established for therapeutic reasons, there is a certain interaction among members which is often supporting. Mioviský (2010) sees the community as a means of primary prevention. He perceives that way rather the therapeutic community, but he himself states that the communities historically originated just from interest groups at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries.

Online communities have certain specific features compared to real-world communities. First, it is important to mention anonymity and distance, which greatly supports the effect of "behavior with released brakes" (Suller, 2004 in Ševčíková, 2014). This "release" could be more accurately described as greater openness and less inhibition in communicating with others. We can also talk about the induced feeling that our behavior in the online world may not have any real consequences in

the offline world. There is also a certain change in behavior and acting in the online space compared to the behavior and acting in real everyday life.

Why do individuals look for community membership during adolescence? We often find connections to the social background of the offline environment. Towards online communities are often directed young people who, for some reason, are refused or even excluded from their normal environment and within the community they find understanding for their diversity and they find the feeling of belonging.

The research (cf. Ševčíková, 2014) suggests that there is indeed a link between online community search and peer rejection in the real world. Furthermore, the community can be an attractive environment for young people seeking new experiences. So we can say that online communities offer adolescents experiencing real-life problems at home, at school, or among peers a safe environment where they can experience a corrective experience, share similar problems and feel acceptance. But is this environment really safe? There are several real risks that we can encounter on the Internet.

3 Internet risks

One of the most common risks in the Internet environment is **cyberbullying**. Unlike ordinary bullying, cyberbullying takes place in a virtual environment. Vanessa Rogers (2010) lists several types of how to affect a victim in cyberbullying:

- Flaming – Internet discussions which are aggressive and attacking.
- Harassment – Repeatedly sending offensive and offensive messages.
- Denigration – Spreading lies and slander to disrupt victims' relationships or tarnish their reputation.
- Impersonation – Commenting and distributing materials under a pseudo name.
- Outing – Disclosure of sensitive information or secrets without the person's consent. (Outing is also used in connection with the intentional disclosure of homosexual orientation without the consent of the person concerned.)
- Trickery – Coercion or persuasion of the victim to disclose secrets and subsequent publication on the Internet.
- Exclusion – Deliberate excluding from an online group. (Unsupported as a precautionary measure. Exclusion is with the intention of harming the victim.)
- Cyberstalking – Repeated humiliation and harassment. It often involves threats and intimidation.

Another risk on the Internet is **cyberstalking**. These are persecution on social networks, repeated sending of messages and e-mails or attacking a profile on social

networks or the whole computer. Most of them are offenders the victim knows (Čírtková, 2004).

No less serious risk on the Internet is cybergrooming. The term cybergrooming refers to the behavior of some Internet users that results in intimate rapprochement with the prospective minor. Once the intimate relationship is established, the cybergroomer induces the child to have a personal meeting that can lead to sexual abuse, abuse for child prostitution, child pornography production, etc. It is therefore a kind of psychic manipulation that is realized through the Internet (Berson, 2002 in Kopecký and Szotkowski, 2015).

Cybergrooming is often closely related to sexting. It is an act of electronic distribution of your own photos or videos with sexual context (Kopecky, Szotkowski, 2017).

4 Specifics and risks within online communities linked to textual RPGs

Research has been conducted across several online communities in text-based games focused on the Harry Potter story, which is still a popular topic for a large number of adolescents. The research focused on the perception of potential risks by the text game operators, their experience with them, and whether they are interested in helping them to maximize the prevention of projects and gain knowledge on how to proceed in case of threat to players.

Research questions also targeted text game players; they focused on what the game or community membership offers them, how safe they feel in the environment, whether they have direct experience with some of the risks on the Internet, and what they have dealt with in such a situation.

In general, therefore, the research intent was to examine the current situation of combating the dangers in cyberspace in the Harry Potter theme text games environment, to shed light on the seriousness of the current situation. This is a qualitative survey, as the aim was not to determine the frequency of risks but their severity. Based on specific cases, both management and players identified the needs of these communities in preventing cybersecurity.

Two questionnaires were created for data collection of this research. For the first questionnaire there could be identified as the basic set of people from operators positions who are involved in the creation of text role-playing games, especially from the Czech Republic. The basic sample was narrowed to a selection method by the method of deliberate selection, the criteria of which were the following conditions: the subjects of the research had to be people forming the operator positions of text games focused on the Harry Potter story mainly from the Czech Republic. The questionnaire was disseminated using the snowball method, i.e. the questionnaires were

sent out with a request to share with other project leaders on the topic of the Harry Potter story (cf. Mioviský, 2006).

For the second questionnaire, all text game players from the Czech Republic were designated as the basic set. The intentional sample consists of text game players focused on the Harry Potter story. These games are Czech, but often there are also players from the Slovak Republic. The questionnaire was disseminated through the institution, i.e. the management of the game shared a questionnaire with its players asking to complete it.

Questions addressed to the game operator focused on several topics. At the beginning on the time of the existence of the text game, the number of active players, the age limit of the players, the most common age category, the possibilities of “out-of-the-box” communication (so if there is an online community of the players) Consequently the questions were focused on risks on the Internet, if they occurred, how they were dealt with and if there is interest in professional advice in this area.²

Questions for text game players focused on the age of the players, what school they were attending, how long they had been playing a text game, and whether they were playing one or more games on the subject. Furthermore, the questionnaire focuses on the benefits of the game and the online community, whether players have found new friends in the community, whether they have met them in person, whether they use official meetings organized by game operators and whether their parents know about these activities. The conclusion of the questionnaire focuses on their subjective sense of security, whether they have already encountered negative experiences within the online community and how this situation has been solved.

The questionnaire intended for operators of text games thus showed some important information. Text game players are mostly 15–20 years old. With a few exceptions, projects have no age limit. All games have established extra-game communication. An overwhelming majority of respondents have already encountered a situation where there was a need to deal with the dangers on the Internet, and most operators are interested in consulting in this area. Respondents chose a handbook designed specifically for the operators of text games as the most useful option, but they also see some advantages in carrying out a lecture with an expert in this field.

Regarding the results of the questionnaire survey designed for players, we can say that in the largest representation players are aged between 17–20 years, mostly students of secondary schools and grammar schools. Half of the players have been

² The operators of the game are mostly recruited from persons aged 18–20 years who are oriented in the field of information technology, programming, design and of course in the themes the game is oriented to. Within the game and the community, they create the authority to which players turn with confidence to expect advice and, in case of direct confrontation, intervention to resolve the situation. It can be assumed that in the case of serious risks that players can encounter on the Internet, without studying optimal strategies, it is difficult to cope.

playing text games for over a year. Most of them are kept on one text game. Very interesting are the answers, which examine what participation in a text game or on-line community of players gives to players. In addition to the default answers, there are also very remarkable answers that players have verbally added. They appreciate the fact that they are practicing creative writing with a text game. Interesting is the answer, which indicates that the author is fully aware of the fact that within the on-line community he/she can manipulate others without serious sanctions. Players appreciate the opportunity to make new friends through the online community. Up to 91.1% of players made new friends thanks to a Harry Potter text game. Moreover, in most cases, friendship does not just end at cyberspace. A total of 71.4% of respondents have already had personal meetings with these "online friends" several times. Half of the players used organized official meetings for personal meetings, but the results also showed fear of not accepting in a real meeting.

More than half of the respondents told their parents that they were playing text games, some even showed them pages, and 20% of the players showed their parents the channel of communication of the gaming community. However, 19% of respondents said parents had no idea of this because they were not interested in their leisure activities.

The results regarding the subjective feeling of safety of the players on the discord (communication channel) could be evaluated positively. The vast majority of players feel safe, but they are attentive to whom they confide in personal matters. The results also point to the confidence that players have with text game operators. This is paradoxical given that 58.9% of the respondents encountered negative phenomena as part of their work in the text game or online community. Relatively positive, however, is the finding that most of the negative phenomena encountered by players in text-game environments and, above all, online communities are social phenomena that we can commonly encounter outside the Internet. However, the occurrence of the risks mentioned above (see Chapter 3) has been confirmed.

The final question asked how these negative manifestations were dealt with. The most common answer was that nothing had to be done. The second most common answer was that the respondents confirmed their confidence in the game operator, who solved the situation. Two players admitted that the situation was not resolved because they were afraid to admit it. None of the respondents contacted real-life friends or parents. Several respondents added to the 'other' option that they could handle situations of this type themselves. One of the respondents added the following sentence: "It is impossible to solve it. The stronger will always control the weaker."

If we compare the results of the questionnaire survey by contrast and comparison method, we find the points of view from the operators and players of text games are not very different.

Table 1

TOPIC	Game operators	Text game players
Age	15–20 years	17–19 years
Communication of players	100% established extra-game communication	91,1% found friends within community
Encounter with danger in cyberspace	68,8% yes	58,90%
Concrete situation	Most often sexting	Most often sexting and kybergrooming
Solution	Exclusion of the attacker	Reporting to the operators / manage individually / with a friend from the community

5 Discussion: Ethopedics and cyberspace

Both sides, both the game operators and the players themselves, admit encountering the issue of cyberspace danger. These are often problems associated with sexting and kybergrooming. These problems need to be solved in some way. Players put trust in the hands of the game operators. They investigate the situation and after warning / agreement they often proceed to expel the attacker from the game and community. However, there is a fact that an attacker can easily create a new e-mail and create a new account with a different identity and project, and they return to the community soon. Which brings us to the need to develop a more effective solution strategy. Game operators perceive as one of the effective options the creation of a handbook directly for their needs, which would lead them to the possibility of increasing the effectiveness of prevention and, where appropriate, to refer to the relevant organizations that are designed to solve these serious phenomena.

Based on the findings, a text game guide has been developed for the operators to ensure that players are prevented, as up to now there has been intervention in the occurrence of a particular problem. But is this sufficient help to ensure increased security in online communities?

When creating this research, the unfortunate fact arose that most of the Czech professional literature dealing with these risks falls under sociology and not ethopedy. The most beneficial source of information was the eSafety project, and Kamil Kopecký (the operator of the project) himself said that he did not know how to apply the ethopedist to his team. In today's world, countless everyday matters, including human communication, are moving into the online space, and it is no different for manifestations of behavioral and emotional disorders. It is evident that the effects of ethopedy should begin to focus on cyberspace. Contemporary adolescents are looking for help, acceptance, friends, establishing intimate relationships, and are a very easy target for

cyber attackers. Therefore, maximizing prevention in this area with a view to ensuring the greatest possible safety should be one of the cardinal topics implemented in the modern concept of ethopedic care.

References

- [1] Čírtková, L. Psychologické poznatky k nebezpečnosti pronásledování (stalking). *Kriminalistika: Čtvrtletník pro kriminalistickou teorii a praxi* [online]. 2004, 4 [cit. 4. 6. 2019]. Dostupný z https://aleph.nkp.cz/F/?func=direct&doc_number=000940714&local_base=ANL.
- [2] Eckertová, Lenka a Dočekal, Daniel. *Bezpečnost dětí na internetu: rádce zodpovědného rodiče*. Brno: Computer Press, 2013. ISBN 978-80-251-3804-5.
- [3] Kopecký, Kamil a Sztokowski, René. *Kyberšikana a další formy kybernetické agrese MŠMT příloha č. 7*.
- [4] Kopecký, Kamil a René Sztokowski. *Nebezpečné komunikační techniky spojené s ICT pro ředitele základních a středních škol*. Olomouc: Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci, 2015. ISBN 978-80-244-4555-7.
- [5] Miovský, Michal. *Kvalitativní přístup a metody v psychologickém výzkumu*. Praha: Grada, 2006. Psyché (Grada). ISBN 80-247-1362-4.
- [6] Miovský, Michal A Pavel Bartík. *Primární prevence rizikového chování ve školství*. Vydání první. Praha: VFN v Praze, 2010. ISBN 9788087258477.
- [7] *Národní strategie primární prevence rizikového chování dětí a mládeže na období 2013–2018*. Praha: MŠMT, 2013.
- [8] Hutýrová, M., Růžicka, M., Spěváček, J. (2013). *Prevence rizikového a problémového chování*. Olomouc: UP.
- [9] Polínek, Martin Dominik. *Tvořivost (nejen) jako prevence rizikového chování*. Olomouc: Univerzita Palackého, 2015. ISBN 978-80-244-4842-8.
- [10] Polínek Martin Dominik a Polínková Zdeňka. *Rozvoj žáka s jinakostí na ZUŠ*. Olomouc: Univerzita Palackého, 2016. ISBN 978-80-244-5056-8.
- [11] Rogers, Vanessa. *Kyberšikana: pracovní materiály pro učitele a žáky i studenty*. Praha: Portál, 2011. ISBN 978-80-7367-984-2.
- [12] Sexting a rizikové seznamování českých dětí v kyberprostoru, 2017 [online] E-bezpečí [cit. 3. 6. 2019]. Dostupné z: <https://www.e-bezpeci.cz/index.php/ke-stazeni/vyzkumne-zpravy/96-sexting-a-rizikove-seznamovani-2017/file>.
- [13] Ševčíková, Anna. *Děti a dospívající online: vybraná rizika používání internetu*. Praha: Grada, 2014. Psyché (Grada). ISBN 978-80-247-5010-1.

(reviewed twice)

Mgr. Lenka Szokalová
ÚSS PdF UP v Olomouci
Žižkovo nám. 5
77140 Olomouc
Czech Republic
e-mail: lenka.szokalova@gmail.com

Mgr. Martin Dominik Polínek, Ph.D.
ÚSS PdF UP v Olomouci
Žižkovo nám. 5
77140 Olomouc
Czech Republic
e-mail: polinekm@seznam.cz