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## Are you game for new way of learning?

Mike Thomas

COMMENTARY

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The next revolution in video games is coming out of Orlando. [Conspiracy Code](#) is perhaps the most radical game of the decade.

It is not violent. It is not a major technological breakthrough.

Conspiracy Code is an entire 10th-grade history course, now offered online by Florida Virtual School. A technology accused of rotting young minds now is being used to educate them.

Students must thwart a plot by a shadowy group called The Conspiracy to rewrite history. They control two digital teenagers, Eddie and Libby, who track down the Conspiracy through a series of clues. Each clue is a history lesson.

This is just the beginning. The Florida Virtual School is testing a game for remedial readers. More are in the works. This puts the virtual school, headquartered in MetroWest, at the vanguard of a coming revolution in online education.

As I play Conspiracy Code, I am reminded of playing the video tennis game Pong back in the 1970s.

Conspiracy Code is the Pong of digital education. And we know where Pong led.

Should we be horrified? Is Conspiracy Code to education what Cocoa Puffs are to nutrition, a surrender to junk food because it's what the kids want to eat, not what they should eat?

Those who are old-school about school certainly will feel that way. Our education model is based on regimentation, socialization, the notion that kids learn at the same speed, the constant presence of a teacher, and the lugging around of books.

But there are those, including me, who think it's time to modify this model. We are teaching kids who live in a digital world the same basic way we taught kids who pushed plows. Technology like this provides options to reach students rather than shoehorn them all in the same classroom format.

Conspiracy Code isn't for everybody. I've been at it for two days, and it isn't for me. But I am of the pre-Pong generation.

Like other games, it has levels that you must traverse. That requires finding clues hidden in various items such as computers and notebooks. When you click on them, the colorful 3-D graphics vanish, and a very two-dimensional history lesson pops up in text form. The information is delivered in itemized fashion rather than narration, which gave me some concern about context. But unlike the students, I didn't have an online teacher to fill in gaps.

You read the material, answer some questions, and then return to Libby and Eddie to find the next clue.

The game is nothing more than an entertaining portal into a history class, written to meet state standards.

A state-certified teacher follows the student's progress, evaluates his work, answers questions and stays in constant contact through the Internet and phone calls.

"We want to give kids choices," says Andy Ross, the chief sales and marketing officer for Florida Virtual School. "Some do well in traditional classes. Some do well in online classes. Some play games well and like learning this way. If I can reach kids who say, 'I hate history, but I like this,' then I've done my job."

So far, 380 kids have signed up for Conspiracy Code, with most giving it positive reviews on survey forms. Ross says he has surveys from 38 students who dropped the class, with many saying their computers couldn't run the software.

But one complained, "I thought this would be easy, but it requires too much work."

Conspiracy Code was a joint venture — the virtual school provided the curriculum, and 360Ed, a small downtown Orlando company founded by Ben Noel, a former vice president at Electronic Arts, provided the game. They plan to market it across the country, and there is growing interest.

Noel, who also heads the UCF Florida Interactive Entertainment Academy graduate program, thinks Orlando can become a national hub for online-education technology.

The potential is unlimited.

Conspiracy Code is basically a game layered over an academic course, like tempura batter on broccoli.

Next-generation games could merge the game and course into a seamless package.

Think of Florida's top high-school-physics students competing with the best of California and New York in a race through the galaxy, calculating their way around black holes and through wormholes. And overseeing the game would be top graduate students from MIT. Link the best and brightest and let them feed off one another.

Vo-tech students could combine to build the ultimate stock car and then race against one another in the Daytona 500.

Imagine several companies like 360Ed competing over who can best teach low-income kids to read. Imagine a company such as Apple joining in, rewarding students with free iTunes for completed assignments.

This will all come to pass. And who knows? In 50 years, we could well find Conspiracy Code in the Smithsonian Institution.

*Mike Thomas can be reached at 407-420-5525 or [mthomas@orlandosentinel.com](mailto:mthomas@orlandosentinel.com).*

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