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# Ronin uses gaming as a business training technique

All in good fun

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BY **LIZ MERFELD** NOVEMBER 29, 2012 3:00 PM

If someone blindfolded you, spun you around and plopped you down on the third floor of the historic Madison train depot on West Washington Avenue, you might think you've landed in Seattle, Portland or San Francisco.

But you'd still be in Madison, in the office of **Ronin Studios & Consulting**, a startup that designs and develops mobile and web-based learning games, simulations and applications for adult learners.

In the eyes of the people who run Ronin, Madison is the only noncoastal city with a thriving "serious game" development industry. And there's a UW-Madison department specializing in games and learning right in Ronin's backyard.

A growing body of research places gaming at the forefront of learning. Not games that build memory through rote

learning, but games that offer a deeper level of learning. Using games to help area corporations and nonprofits recruit, train, and enhance participation is what Ronin founders Scott Kohl (CEO) and Alan Stoffer (CMO) had in mind when they met through **Accelerate Madison**, an IT-focused networking organization. (Full disclosure: I know Kohl socially.)

At the time, Kohl had just left Filament Games and had assembled a group of developers seeking a client. Stoffer, a consultant finishing his MBA at UW-Madison, knew a company that needed a game, but had no developer.

Over the summer, they worked to pull together a proposal and design document for one of the largest professional training companies in the U.S. While the project eventually stalled and the original team dissolved because of poor timing, Kohl says, "That got the ball rolling for us. Just having discussions with the client was enough to spark interest from others." A team of experienced professionals who not only loved games and learning but could weather the risks of startup life signed on.

Then Ronin needed to flesh out exactly what its approach to game-based learning would be.

"We don't necessarily want to 'gamify' things," Kohl explains, using what has become a buzzword referring to the use of game-like rewards to motivate and engage employees or customers.

"Gamification has been a huge trend in the last two years," says creative director Dr. Moses Wolfenstein, who came to Ronin from UW-Madison's Educational Leadership & Policy Analysis department and its Games Learning Society.

Wolfenstein notes a recent Delta SkyMiles program in which travelers unlock "achievements" like free flights and luggage. Much like Foursquare, it uses game elements in a nongame context. In many cases gamification is a good solution, he allows, but "it can be shallow and result in quick burnout."

True game-based learning, the team at Ronin feels, is about "helping people make meaningful choices," says Wolfenstein.

**Digital game-based learning can be traced back** to the 1950s, when the Department of Defense began using games to simulate war. In the '70s the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency started using videogames to train soldiers and today continues to advance game-based learning technologies.

It's only been in the last decade or so that videogames have been widely used in adult learning, with applications like corporate training, health care, engineering and biology.

**Foldit**, the online protein-folding game that helped solve a problem that had stumped computers and scientists for years through crowdsourcing, is a good example of a serious game.

Ronin's second chance to develop a game came later in the summer, when a business contact referred **Cool Choices**. Cool Choices is a nonprofit started by a Wisconsin task force

on global warming that aims to inspire people to reduce greenhouse gas emissions through personal changes. Ronin is now developing an online and mobile game that uses challenges involving recycling or transportation to help people make more environmentally sustainable choices.

"It's a great time for us to be doing this," Kohl says. Game-based learning is on its second wave: It's been a luxury for Fortune 500 companies, but in the next three to five years, as costs drop, Kohl expects it will become commonplace.

**Participation in casual gaming has spiked**, says Ronin game designer and developer Max Lerner. Now, anyone who plays games on his phone or Facebook can be considered a gamer, whereas gamers used to need a dedicated device like a Gameboy. "The barrier to entry has dropped," Lerner notes.

Wolfenstein says companies thinking about the future should note research from the **Pew foundation** showing that 97% of people ages 12-17 play computer, web, portable or console games: "These kids will be entering the workforce in a decade."

However, he also sees the "edutainment movement" as a cautionary tale. Early-learning games for children and other vertical markets like defense turned out to be fads, never

accomplishing what they set out to. "There is a new level of interest in adult learning that is unprecedented," Wolfenstein warns. "But there's no guarantee that games will find a place. We are trying to help ensure that future by making games that have depth and provide real learning, rather than just providing the wow factor."

CEO Kohl sees Ronin as staying rooted in Madison, perhaps part of a Midwest nexus, partnering with companies in Milwaukee and Minneapolis. He hopes to one day make games that have an impact on the industry itself, and the world. "We've discovered some taboo topics that we'd love to make and fund," he says, as similar companies have created games to raise awareness about human trafficking and genocide, or educate people about HIV and teenage pregnancy.

"We would love to see the growth of games for learning expand to the entire world, including the Third World," Lerner says. "Imagine what people could accomplish if everyone had the ability to learn whatever interested them."

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