Welcome to Codeverse, where kids learn to build games and hack light fixtures

August 29 2018, by Ally Marotti, Chicago Tribune

Eight-year-old Cillian Rhodes was hosting a dance party.

He hacked the concert lights in the small, dark room, making them flash and move around. Another kid bounced around next to him.

"I control all the lights now," Cillian said, tapping the screen of his iPad and looking toward the lights on the ceiling. As he changed the colors, the lights flashed across his face and lit up his spiky blond hair. "I can make it red, orange, yellow, green, blue, violet."

Cillian was learning to code. Armed with an iPad and kid-specific coding language, he and the roughly 30 other 6- to 12-year-olds attending camp at Codeverse Lincoln Park learned to create games and control the TVs, speakers and robotic arms in the space. The coding studio, which opened a year ago in the Goose Island neighborhood and just raised $10 million from investors including Chicago-based venture capital firm Listen Ventures, is set to expand to the north and west suburbs.

Coding has been gaining prominence in schools throughout the Chicago area in recent years as educators and tech companies stress the importance of the skill for the future workforce. Mayor Rahm Emanuel has said computer programming is a language students should be fluent in. Chicago Public Schools has made taking at least one credit of computer science a graduation requirement, starting with the class of 2020. Apple has teamed up with CPS and City Colleges of Chicago to

offer its free coding curriculum to teachers.

After-school boot camps and coding clubs have also been springing up. Another kids coding franchise, Code Ninja, is eyeing expansion in the Chicago area, and national nonprofit Girls Who Code is also active in the area.

Still, Codeverse co-founder and Chief Marketing Officer Katy Lynch said "kids are not getting enough of it." That's especially true for younger children, who may struggle with some of the more complicated concepts of learning a programming language. To help with that, Codeverse developed its own coding language for children, called KidScript.

"When you look at the world of coding today, the things you think about are the adult languages that exist," Lynch said. "The issue with those languages is that they're pretty advanced. You'd never be able to sit a 6-year-old in front of Python and say, 'OK, learn it.' "

The company plans to open studios in Wilmette and Naperville this fall and hire about 60 new employees in the Chicago area over the next three months. The new studios will offer weeklong camps, after-school and weekend classes.

Eventually, Codeverse plans to expand nationally and offer KidScript as a standalone service. Lynch said the company is going to Wilmette and Naperville next because the communities are family-focused and supportive of Codeverse. Plus, the company has relationships in Naperville after demonstrating KidScript at schools there.

The Lincoln Park studio is set up so children can choose their own adventure, Lynch said, weaving around the students on a recent afternoon. The students come in, put their shoes in their cubbyholes and

learn the lay of the land. Once they're settled, the children grab their iPads—outfitted with custom-made kidproof cases—and disperse based on age and skill level.

"If I'm 12 and you're 6, I'm not going to want to hang out with you and code with you," Lynch said.

One boy sat against the wall on a recent afternoon, immersed in his iPad, his yellow-socked feet crossed. A girl lounged on a purple beanbag. Nearby, a boy looked back and forth between his iPad and a robotic arm he was controlling. Someone announced there was a dance party in a dark corner room—the Black Hole, they call it—where 8-year-old Cillian was writing code to control the lights.

"I'm shocked," said Shalini Mendelsohn, whose 8-year-old daughter Simrin attends Codeverse's camp. "I thought they'd come here and just kind of play games, but they're not. They're learning to code."

Simrin hasn't learned to code in school, Mendelsohn said. She and her husband are both in the information technology industry—she works for Apple, and he works for IBM. Simrin has access to laptops, watches and the like, but this is the first time devices have become functional for her, outside of putting on Netflix, her mother said.

Simrin was sitting between her parents, showing them the game she was developing. It involved a dog attempting to jump up and make a cannon shoot. If you lose, the dog gets turned into a cat. Simrin lost on purpose and laughed.

Codeverse is catering to a developing need among school-age children, said Paul Earle, adjunct lecturer in innovation and entrepreneurship at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management.

"This generation believes that it's up to them to make their own way and to innovate and disrupt and create the future," Earle said. "Codeverse plugs into that beautifully because you're giving young people the hard skills early on to be a digital entrepreneur."

Innovation and entrepreneurship can also offer a pathway to prosperity, and Codeverse would do well to become accessible to communities of different economic profiles, Earle said.

Codeverse offers weeklong classes for $800. A monthly membership, which includes a 75-minute class each week, is $225. There is also a four-month option for $175 per month.

Though the students learn only one language at Codeverse—KidScript—experts say learning one programming language is a good starting point to gain more knowledge about coding. Apple's Everyone Can Code program, which is being taught through the partnership with CPS and City Colleges, teaches only the company's programming language, Swift.

After class last week, Ellie Rosenberg, 8, was showing off the game she was developing. It's called "Robot Dash," and the player's objective is to dodge falling boulders while jumping from brick to brick and trying to touch a floating slice of pizza.

Ellie was working on making the game a little easier—she has yet to win—but not too easy. She's also working on deciding what she wants to be when she grows up.

"I really like baseball, and I really like to engineer stuff," she said, eyes not leaving the iPad screen. After a pause she looked up and added, "Which would include coding."