

Los Angeles Times

By Matt Stevens, Los Angeles Times

December 11, 2011

Erin Reynolds is a graduate student, so she knows at least one thing for certain.

"Everyone feels stress," she said.

That's part of the reason Reynolds and 12 others on her team created a video game that uses heart-rate sensors to help players learn to stay calm as they wind their way through a decrepit house filled with their characters' horrific memories.

The 28-year-old USC cinematic arts student said she believes her psychological thriller game, *Nevermind*, can help people develop ways to cope with stress. She wasn't the only designer pushing the limits of what video games can do.



Students demonstrate "Inside the Minus Lab" at Demo Day

Reynolds was one of nearly 160 students who showed off eight semester-long game projects to an audience filled with industry professionals at the university's Demo Day last week. It was the 13th time students have publicly exhibited their work but the first jointly planned effort between USC's School of Cinematic Arts' interactive media division and its Viterbi School of Engineering's department of computer science. The two schools have offered an advanced games class together since 2007.

The teams of students included designers, sound specialists and idea people. Some of the art

for the games arrived digitally from Atlantic University College in Puerto Rico.

And the games themselves were as diverse as their creators.

One group conceived of Combiform, a gaming console in which players attach their controllers to one another to play interactive games together; players move in sync, for example, as they balance coffee cups without spilling. Another group presented Forest Walker, an iPad application with the goal of attacking predators as they crossed the screen. A third team made Tales from the Minus Lab, a standard adventure game with a twist: The protagonist can grow and shrink inside the lab, at times roaming through a miniature dollhouse or romping through the giant lab.

The only common theme among the projects was that students took chances, said Michael Zyda, director of USC's GamePipe Laboratory.

"The great thing about having students make games in academia is that they can think outside of the boxes that the commercial industry is bound by," Zyda said. "When the commercial industry invests in a new title, they have to get a huge return. Students can take big risks. It's an interesting model for innovation."

Representatives from industry giant [Electronic Arts](#) said they were impressed by the passion they saw on stage. Jon Van Caneghem, a company vice president, agreed that industry decision-makers are "absolutely" hesitant to take risks on new concepts.

But he also said the game industry is hiring and that these students have a leg up because they have so much time to experiment.

"Being able to prove something out as a prototype — there's nothing like that," he said after watching more than two hours of demonstrations. "We would love to take part of our teams and run off and spend six months or a year and build a prototype. But at the moment we can't. It's cost-prohibitive. So these guys are in an exceptional position."

Zyda said he keeps track of his students after they leave and estimates that GamePipe Laboratory alumni have developed games that have reached more than 375 million players.

Reynolds helped build a game called Ultimate Band when she worked at Disney, between undergraduate and graduate school at USC. She said there's nothing like seeing your project in stores.

When that happens, all the stress pays off.

"There's a secret among my game developer friends and I," Reynolds said. "Whenever you see your game on a [GameStop](#) shelf or a Target shelf, you kind of just nudge it to the front."

matthew.stevens@latimes.com

[Twitter.com/MattStevensLAT](https://twitter.com/MattStevensLAT)