

MEDIA RELEASE

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Improving health training through gaming

World-leading creative media institute, SAE, is spearheading new initiatives to improve health practitioner training through gaming.

Students and staff from SAE's Brisbane campus have teamed up with University of Queensland (UQ) researchers to create serious games that help psychologists transition from the classroom to consulting room.

'Serious games' is a new module initiated by SAE to teach students the art and science of creating games that teach, train and inform audiences.

SAE senior games lecturer and technology innovator, Dr Ralf Muhlberger, said a key focus of this year's module was to get students thinking about ways to improve health and wellbeing through gaming.

Enter UQ's Master of Applied Psychology (MAP) program, which is now working with SAE serious games students to develop new ways to help psychology students by creating virtual mental health environments and clients.

Nine students have spent the past three months conceptualising, designing and programming engaging and interactive games that teach key therapeutic skills to provisional psychologists who are working with mental health clients for the first time.

"It's all about learning through play," Dr Muhlberger said.

"There's plenty of talk about the negative effects of playing video games, but less about the positive things that can be achieved. All the research tells us that information is better understood and retained if taught in a fun way.

"Our students have been hard at work developing games specifically for psychology students who have completed a four-year degree and are about to start working with clients in stressful situations.

"The games are designed to hone the foundation skills they learnt at University by simulating real-world situations."

UQ School of Psychology Placements Manager for the MAP program and Psychologist, Gillian McGregor, said the serious games project was already kicking goals, identifying new ways to help students share and retain information, learn new skills and build confidence once they've left university.

"There are a number of key skills that these students need to acquire before being deemed ready to work with actual clients," she said.

"Typically, these are taught in a blitz orientation week, and students are inundated with information. Experience tells us that they struggle to retain information during this time and need more opportunities to practise their skills before working with clients.

"Our hope is that with new gaming technology designed by the SAE students, our psychologists will be able to test their skills on virtual clients – and ultimately build confidence in their capacity to assess mental health conditions."

SAE games student Anthony Hope, 29, said he was rethinking his career focus after working on the serious games project with UQ.

His game, *In Session*, is a 'choose your own adventure' designed to increase the bond between a player and virtual clients in simulated work environments.

"It's been a real eye opener for me, and an area I never thought of working in before," he said.

"The best part is that you can use the fundamentals of gaming to help and teach people. It's not just about entertaining."

Fellow **games student Ben Lovegrove**, 24, said the course at SAE was "less about being hammered with theory alongside 300 other students, and far more about gaining experience with hands-on work".

"SAE really fosters this through its small class sizes, practical studio units and links to industry through staff who are so well-connected," he said.

"I chose to study here because it's one of the few places that has a real focus on games. You're in a creative space with people who respect games as a profession."

His game, *First Session*, is designed to help trainee psychologists simplify conversations, view feedback from peers and build confidence in diagnosing clients.

SAE students are also designing games to help manage stress and anxiety. **Games student Jamie Proudlock** said he had first-hand experience of the capacity for games to improve mental health.

His game, *Into the Wind*, creates a digital, immersive experience that helps users cope with and manage stress by flying through canyons while navigating obstacles. The game uses heartbeat monitors to record player stress levels in real time, and feed it back into the game in the form of a crosswind.

"The more stressed you are, the more crosswinds you're up against," Mr Proudlock said.

"You soon realise that in order to minimise or utilise crosswinds to navigate your path, you need to remain calm by breathing deeply and slowly, and clearing your mind."

Proudlock said that designing and developing the game had equipped him with new stress management skills that he could apply in his daily life.

"In the final development phase of his project, I found myself experiencing the stress of the upcoming deadlines as a crosswind, and realised that I just needed to take a clear path forward and stick with it," he said.

Dr Muhlberger said students would be presenting their projects to staff and students for testing and feedback, before pitching to clients for potential development.

"It's a fantastic way for them to put their game design and development skills to the test in a real-world environment."

The students are examining ways to incorporate biofeedback in their games, such as heart rate and gaze tracking, to measure emotional responses.

"What we're doing here is affective gaming – where the player and game exchange affective signals that can be measured," Dr Muhlberger said.

"This type of gaming is already being used in medical research overseas, and presents truly exciting opportunities for the Australian health sector."

Note for media: SAE games students will showcase their games alongside industry professionals on **Friday, 18 December from 5pm at White Canvas Gallery, Fortitude Valley**. The exhibition features games made by students in a few weeks, as well as games in development.

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About SAE

SAE Australia offers Higher Education and VET education opportunities to almost 3,000 students, including certificate, diploma and degrees across the following major fields of study; audio, film, games, animation, web and graphic design. SAE is also one of the world's leading creative media institutes, with 54 campuses in 28 countries. In 2004, SAE acquired leading digital media and games educator, Qantm College. SAE is a part of the Navitas group. Further information about SAE is available at www.sae.edu.au.

About Navitas

Navitas is an Australian global education leader providing pre-university and university programs, English language courses, migrant education and settlement services, creative media education, student recruitment, professional development and corporate training services to more than 80,000 students across a network of over 120 colleges and campuses in 31 countries. Navitas is an ASX Top 100 Company. Further information about Navitas is available at www.navitas.com.

For further information contact:

Cathy Tobin - Corporate Affairs Manager, SAE

Tel: 0498 004 023

Email: c.tobin@sae.edu