

STEAM carnival mixes the digital with the physical

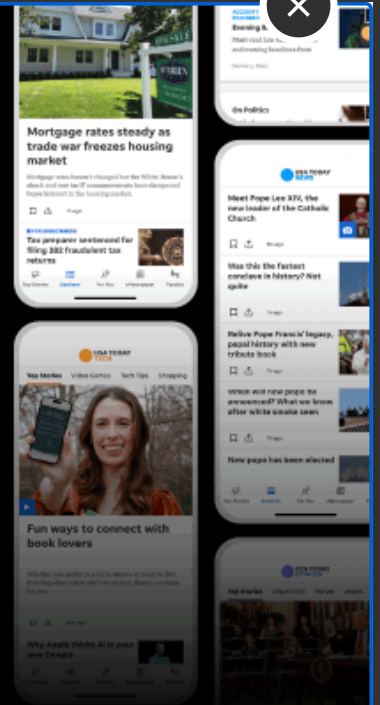
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ahead of time. That is until the fellows from a startup called STEAM Carnival turned up.

The company, which is funded on Kickstarter (and close to its goal of \$100,000), is in the process of creating kits that middle and high school students can use to reimagine the types of high tech carnival amusements demonstrated on the D stage. Co-founder and STEAM Carnival CEO Brent Bushnell walked on stage on stilts. Conference producers Walt Mossberg and Kara Swisher participated in attractions built around a giant red trackball and giant joystick, and a variation on

the Jacob's Ladder amusement in which you show how strong you are by wielding a hammer. All the attractions, most of which could not be demonstrated at D because of their scale and scope, mix the digital with the physical. Robotics, lasers and electronics are in the mix. It would seem to be a mad inventor's fantasy.

Many of those mad inventors will be young people. STEAM hopes to distribute the first wave of kits to kids in the fall; what the youngsters create will be shown off in spring 2014 at traveling high tech carnivals to be held in Los Angeles and San Francisco.

The company has produced about 40 carnival games. In one Pixel Toss game (not shown at D) a half-dozen kids are meant to fling tennis balls against a wall — when balls make contact, the wall is supposed to turn into a virtual pinball installation. Next to the various attractions will be examples of how you too can produce something creative.

Indeed, the name STEAM is derived from the acronym STEM, shorthand for Science, Technology, Engineering and Math. The "A" that is part of the STEAM name signifies Art.

"When we tell kids what we do they go nuts," says CEO Bushnell who apparently comes to this naturally as the son of Atari founder Nolan Bushnell.

I suspect the kids (and for that matter older people) who find this appealing may be the same people who not only love video games, but who also want to build Lego robots. And STEAM also hopes to connect kids to online mentors.

The kits that will be distributed to students contain the kind of electronic components that might show up in a video game and include cables, switches, "Raspberry Pi's" (inexpensive credit card sized computers) and "Arduinos" (microcontrollers used to interact with objects). Arduinos can be used to turn on lights or—we are talking carnivals here—used in flame-throwing amusements.

Except you may not want to try that at home, or on the D stage. As Bushnell said of the fire department officials who said they could not show off some of the more fiery experiments at D: "It's so much easier to say no."

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