Weather app teaches kids to read radar with the goal of saving lives

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Kids can save lives when severe weather strikes.

At least, that's the idea behind an app created by students at OU to teach kids how to read and interpret weather radar.

Severe weather is no joke, but this app makes it a game.

9-year-old William McGovern-Fagg is one of the main testers.

"Sometimes they go from weak storms to intense storms really quickly and you're not necessarily watching every plane at every moment," he said, explaining one challenging aspect of the game.

He shows us how to play. You have to route plans to different airports on the map of the U.S. and be sure to navigate around storms to avoid damage. And William says kids can learn a lot from it.

"About the radars, what the different colors on the radar mean, what the SPC Outlook means," he said.

His mom, Dr. Amy McGovern, led a small team of OU meteorology and computer science students to develop the free app, called Storm Evader.

"I think educational gaming is a new era," she said, "I think the outreach to the kids to learn through the engagement in the games is really becoming very popular throughout all of the United States right now."

Student and developer Andrea Balfour says people can help save lives if they understand how to read and interpret radar.

And the radar in the game is more than just a simulation. It comes from recent dates in history that players can select, including May 31, when the widest tornado in history hit El Reno.

"So here the storm's firing that produced the El Reno tornado," William said, pointing to the screen.

The app is a lesson in real-world knowledge, demonstrating that this knowledge should not be limited to meteorologists. The ultimate goal is a completely informed community, before a storm hits.

"If there's an EF-5 tornado on the ground nobody in its path should be able to say 'I didn't know it was coming,'" said student and developer David Harrison.

William says it teaches lessons that that everyone should understand.

"Just living here you have to know about this stuff!" he said.

The same group is now working on an app geared specifically toward tornado safety. They say the tasks will include city planning and emergency management to get townspeople to safety before a tornado strikes. It should launch at the end of the summer.

You can download Storm Evader for free in the iTunes app store.