

# Virtual Reality Center Puts Locals in Control

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Virtual reality recreation centers will soon open in a number of the city's film theaters and shopping malls, St. Petersburg navy and aviation simulation system producer Transas announced Friday at the presentation of its new line of arcade game cabins.

Virtual reality trips with family and friends have long since become a favorite leisure activity in major western cities. Among the world's most famous centers offering virtual reality entertainment are the Disney network, including Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow, or EPCOT, and DisneyQuest, FantaWild and FunPlex in the United States, the Ancient History Center in Greece — combining games and educational programs — and the London Virtual Planetarium in the United Kingdom.

The Transas virtual reality center opening this summer in St. Petersburg will be the first virtual reality amusement center in Russia, said Irina Ostroumova, the company's manager of special projects.

Transas invested about \$1 million in its first virtual reality center to begin operation at the end of June this year. The center will be located at the Nord shopping mall on Prospekt Prosveshcheniya. Nord is owned by the Adamant chain. "We agreed to take part in the project because it has no analogies in the country and we are bound to see high demand," Nord's director Yelena commented, declining to give her last name.



Transas plans to eventually build four to five virtual reality amusement centers in the city — one per 1 million residents.

Transas, short for TRANsport SAFety Systems, was started in 1990. The company's annual revenues amount to \$55 million. Employing 700 people, Transas has a distribution network in 80 countries. "The entertainment products

are the result of our 10 years of work on navigation equipment and simulation station design," said Nikolai Lebedev, president of the Transas group.

Other navigation equipment producers have developed similar tech-

nologies for civilian markets, but it takes years to collect them into one system to be applicable for high-tech amusement, so Transas should see no strong domestic competitors in the near future, Lebedev added. In Lebedev's

view, the world virtual reality amusement market is worth hundreds of millions of dollars, but it is difficult to estimate how large this market will be in Russia. "We expect to take a large part of the Russian market," he said.

According to Ostroumova, four to five permanent centers — one per 1 million people — will be opened in St. Petersburg alone. After the project is tested in St. Petersburg, similar centers will be started in Moscow and abroad. Negotiations are already in progress with Germany, she said. Transas has also designed mobile centers to be used in the Leningrad Oblast.

Rides will feature classic scenarios such as fairy tale trips for kids costing about 60 rubles per hour, group battle simulations and virtual romantic voyages for adults at prices that vary depending on the time of day. A virtual reality journey in a closed cabin for two will cost approximately 600 rubles per hour. Drinks and snacks can be ordered to the cabin and plastic cards will be used for billing. Inexpensive six-minute rides will be available for people on the run. "We just want them to step in for a virtual reality ride and go on with their shopping," Ostroumova explained.

When asked whether Transas plans to introduce more sophisticated trips, using more touch-sensitive interaction, glasses and smells, Ostroumova replied that they "don't do 4D or splash people with water." It is possible that Transas will introduce such products in the future, she said.