

New video game takes players on a flying space tumble

By Marie Chestney
staff writer

The Saker One Space Probe — one of the latest and hottest entries in the video game craze — lets you shoot at space invaders while you're spinning around high in the air.

But the mini-fun machine — with its plexiglass hatch, cockpit, controls and blasts of compressed air — is turning out to be more than just another "Star Wars" video game.

The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) is eyeing the Livonia-made-and-based sphere as a training vehicle for astronauts. Hollywood is looking at the airborne ball, now berthed in the city's Diamond J Bar, Farmington and Plymouth roads, as a possible new space adventure hero.

Aircraft companies are eyeing the latest invention of John Sassak, flamboyant Livonia industrialist, sportsman, bar owner and engineer, as a new way to train helicopter and jet pilots.

FROM LONDON, Australia, Vancouver, Japan and other parts of the world, the calls keep rolling in to Sassak at his offices at Segmented Carbide Die, 36855 Schoolcraft.

Some of the callers want to lease one of the new video machines when they go into production in June. Others want to buy stock in Sassak's new invention. Still others, mostly the national media, want to publicize Sassak's new space game which debuted last month in a national entertainment publication and which is expected to soon add fire to a flickering video game market.

"THE VIDEO game market has died down and this will stimulate it," said Sassak, looking like an astronaut in his NASA hat and silver space shuttle jacket emblazoned with an American flag. "I think this (the Saker One) will be good for two to three years, but I'm finding new applications I hadn't even thought about."

One of those applications might come from NASA. Last week, NASA whisked the pint-sized video game off to Cape Kennedy, Fla. to give it a ring-side seat at the launching of the space shuttle behemoth, Challenger.

NASA wanted to spotlight Saker One, Sassak said, because they saw it as a potential training vehicle for astronauts once it was hooked up with more sophisticated equipment.

"Astronauts are trained in tumblers," he said. "They do a lot of tumbling coming back from space."

In Saker One, astronauts would get the sensation of tumbling and flying without the burden of bulky space suits. A top Hollywood writer, Sassak said, is now writing a space fantasy about a boy who rides the sphere into outer space, only to discover he can't get back.

If a movie is made, Sassak plans to put a Saker One inside every theatre showing it.

SAKAR ONE has been a top attraction in Sassak's bar for only four months. But the space ship has seen seven years in the making. Sassak said he got the idea for the airborne ball while shopping in a department store. "I saw a Ping Pong ball held in the air over a vacuum cleaner and I thought, 'it would be fun to ride inside that ball.'"

Sitting inside the Saker One is like sitting inside a helicopter. Covering you is a plexiglass screen. In front of you is a video screen, control levers, gauges, an inboard video computer and space ships dueling it out on the screen.

To add reality to the duel, to get the feeling of flying while dodging lasers, simply push the levers forward or backward. If pushed forward, the craft spins forward; if pushed backward, the craft tumbles backward.

ONCE TURNED ON, the craft rises from its pad and is held aloft by a blast of compressed air. Once airborne, the craft spins and tumbles safely within a circular plexiglass shield.

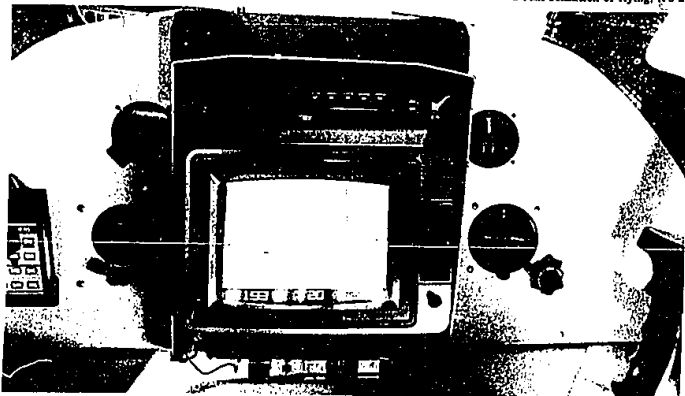
"It's a real sensation of flying. It's a

game that completely involves you," said Sassak, 60, who has degrees in aeronautical and metallurgical engineering from Wayne State University and who last gained national attention by perfecting the "mechanical bull."

Saker One floats only a few feet off the ground, but Sassak said future models could float as high as 60 feet. By June, Sassak hopes to be making

25 games each week, each one costing about \$30,000 to produce.

At the moment, however, Saker One is strictly bar entertainment. For \$1, more than 100 bar patrons each night get a chance to strap themselves inside the craft and spin high over the crowd. "We get some people who have had an awful lot to drink and they are a lot more sober coming out than going in," Sassak said.



MARGENE JOHNSTON/staff photographer

Saker One players are faced with this console of gadgets and gauges when they slip inside the craft. Invented by Livonia industrialist John Sas-

sak, the craft spins off the ground on a cushion of air, giving players the sensation of both tumbling and flying through space.

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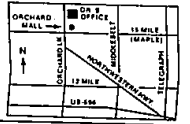
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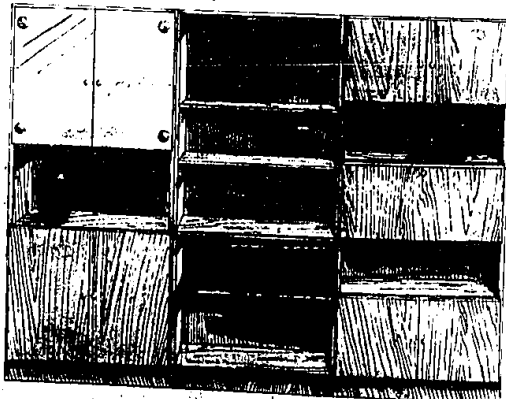
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