

The Quest: A Race to Fix the Spaceship in an Hour

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Four hopeless Brits are hurtling toward Earth in a broken spaceship with limited oxygen. Twenty-year-old Alex Stirling, a 6-foot-5-inch student from London, exclaims mournfully, “The code to get to the control room is probably in the sleeping pod, but I can’t fit in it, I’m too long.”

This is “Space Odyssey,” a quest or interactive quiz game, which involves an intricate system of caches, codes and clues. In Stirling’s quest, players find themselves in danger. Only their wit and cunning can save their lives.

Questers have to get the ship back on course by getting to the control room through a series of locked doors, which can only be opened with a combinations of numbers, letters and symbols displayed on safety notices, screens and — Stirling was right — on the inside of the gently glowing sleeping pods. They only have an hour to do it.

Moscow is currently a quest-crazy city with dozens to play with a myriad of themes. What is

expected of a questgoer remains constant: crack the codes and escape the situation you've been plunged into. Claustrophobia, which offers "Space Odyssey," was founded in December 2013 and now offers 33 different quests on its website, with a further 35 in the pipeline. Some of the quests sound obvious — "Escape from Sing Sing Jail," "Bank Robbery" — but others are more ingenious. In "Soviet Flat," you are friends of a dissident who has just been arrested for possessing anti-Soviet propaganda and you have an hour to clear the flat of compromising material. In "Psychiatric Hospital," you are journalists investigating strange goings on at the asylum but your first task is to get out of the straitjackets you are put in. One future quest is called "Saw" based on the gruesome horror movie.

There are more than a hundred quests in Moscow alone according to the site questfinder.ru.

Valentina Zhukova, quest creator at Claustrophobia, explains why she thinks quests have taken off so spectacularly: "Russians love them. It's great to do with friends — like going to the cinema, but more sociable, plus it's mentally stimulating. We try to make them both logical and entertaining." So, for increasingly health-conscious Moscow, quests are plugging a gap left by drinking? "Oh yes," Zhukova said, laughing. "Quests definitely are better for your brain than certain other social activities."

Claustrophobia's "Space Odyssey" was thought up by Zhukova. "We start off with a theme, then we try to work out how many rooms we'll need, then we think about the details," she said. "OK, so we need a safe here, should the code use numbers or symbols, how are we going to convey the right information to the players? Then we search and search on the Internet to get the right components, then we bring it all here and assemble it."

Another company, "Project Neuron" has a more stripped-down style of quest that takes place in either a Morgue, a Circus or a Cube. Organizers claim to be running secret laboratories for the study of human behavior in confined spaces "to measure human potential in situations close to the extreme."

"'Project Neuron.' That room actually rocked my world," said quest fan Alexandra Arkhipova, 26. "It's an unbelievable atmosphere, unbelievable lights, and the space itself makes you almost a different person. It feels like you really are inside the story, you are becoming a part of it. ... We kept talking about it for days — that's how good it was."

The quests are separated into easy, medium and hard and a number of people go regularly.

Sofya, 12, goes to quests on the weekend with her three best friends. "We used to race against the clock, but now we've started doing quests where you're pitted against another team. We completed a really hard one, 'Bunker 1,' in 54 minutes."

Arkhipova, who has been on at least eight quests, called it "a new kind of fun. When you're there, it's not actually an hour — time and space are transformed and ... you live the story. It's an amazing feeling."

Paige Reynolds, a 20-year-old student from London, failed "Space Odyssey" with her three friends, including Stirling and this writer, even though it was one for beginners. The fastest time to complete "Space Odyssey" was a lightning-quick 24 minutes, 5 seconds. Around 60 percent of participants complete their quests, but Reynolds is not discouraged by being worse

than 12-year-old Sofya who finished one of the hardest quests.

“For someone who isn’t fond of small spaces and hates fantasy, I couldn’t be happier that I have finally ticked one kvest off my list,” said Reynolds. “I would definitely recommend quests to anyone with a passion for puzzles and lateral thinking, but would certainly advise a good night’s sleep and a strong coffee beforehand. Perhaps it’s a game more suited to the smart, innovative, chess-playing Muscovites.”

Claustrophobia’s quests are for 2-4 players and cost from 2500-4500 rubles each. Phobia.ru Tel. 8 800-555-7288. Many other Moscow quest providers can be found at questfinder.ru.

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