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X-Prize man launches rocket race

Peter Diamandis, the man behind the \$10m X-Prize for suborbital space travel, has brought forward his new initiative: the Rocket Racing League.

The RRL will see Grand Prix-style races between rocket planes, flown by top pilots through a "3D trackway" just 5,000ft (1,500m) above the ground.

The first "X-Racers" will be built for the series, but it is hoped new teams will soon enter with novel designs.

Events will be staged across the US, culminating in a final in New Mexico.

Dr Diamandis says the RRL's mission, much like the Ansari-sponsored X-Prize, is to serve as a technology accelerator.

He wants it to speed up development in the areas of airframe, propulsion and spacecraft design.

The concept behind the league may remind people of the pod races in *The Phantom Menace*, the first of the *Star Wars* prequels.

"The Rocket Racing League will inspire people of all ages to once again look up into the sky to find inspiration and excitement," said Dr Diamandis, who holds the position of chairman in RRL.

"New aerospace technologies coupled with the spirit of competition will not only extend the boundaries of entertainment, but continue the public's appetite for space ignited a year ago when the Ansari X-Prize was awarded."

Aerial tracks



The aim of the league is to speed up aircraft and spacecraft design

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“ The Rocket Racing League will inspire people of all ages to once again look up into the sky to find inspiration and excitement ”

Peter Diamandis

The \$10m prize was given to the team behind SpaceShipOne, a rocket ship that made two successful trips into suborbital space within a fortnight.

The ship has now been retired to the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum in Washington DC, but its technology is already taking the next step forward.



An updated and evolved version of SS1 is to be built for the Virgin Group to take fare-paying passengers on short journeys into space.

Each pilot will follow his or her own "virtual tunnel" of space

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The first prototype X-Racer will be launched this weekend.

Designed and built by XCOR Aerospace, it will be flown by Colonel Rick Searfoss, a former astronaut and space shuttle commander.

Virtual tunnel

The first RRL events are expected to take place next year.

Dr Diamandis said the races would be run over aerial tracks that were about two miles (3.2km) long, one mile (1.6km) wide, and about 5,000ft high, running perpendicularly to spectators.

The X-Racers will take off from a runway both in a staggered fashion and side by side, and fly a three-dimensional course with long straights, vertical ascents, and deep banks.

Each pilot will follow his or her own "virtual tunnel" of space with the aid of satellite-navigation technology, safely separated from their competitors by a minimum distance.

Spectators will be able to follow the races by looking at the exhaust plumes in the sky and on hand-held GPS tracking devices.

The project has the support of the US Federal Aviation Administration.

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