

VIRTUAL REALITY MEETS THE MULTIPLEX

Imax is convinced VR belongs in theater complexes — it has a deal with Warner Bros. and a *Justice League* tie-in in the works — while a rival sees the genre more as a marketing tool By Carolyn Giardina

Virtual reality headsets, tailored to the individual, and movie-going, a group activity, might seem poles apart, but various VR business models will be rolled out at CinemaCon, where it is expected to be trumpeted as the newest addition to the multiplex. A bullish Imax is already developing its plan to install VR pods in theaters and other public spaces with a test site, the VR Experience Centre near The Grove in L.A., supported by content deals from the likes of **David Ellison's** Skydance and game developer Ubisoft. (Regal is developing two pilot centers in L.A. and New York, and AMC is planning a N.Y. site.) "It's designed to be social," says Imax CEO **Richard Gelfond**



The popular Rabbids VR Ride at the Imax VR Centre in Los Angeles.

of the Imax installation, which lets friends watch a monitor to see what the headset-wearer is experiencing. (It's also working on multiplayer games.) Imax has inked a co-financing and production deal with Warner Bros. Home Entertainment for three VR experiences based on studio tentpoles, beginning with *Justice League* in late 2017. The experiences will play an exclusive window at Imax centers before being released to other platforms.

Barco, the digital cinema manufacturer, is taking a different approach with its Cinerama-like **Barco Escape** theater format. "We believe cinema is a community experience," says Barco Escape CEO **Todd Hoddick**, who is looking to VR for its promotional value. On the upcoming **Wesley Snipes** movie *The Recall*, footage has been shot simultaneously for VR and Barco Escape. The film will launch in limited release on wide-format Escape screens. The related VR experience, drawn from an early section of the film and containing a cliffhanger, then will be released, and the hope is it will drive viewers to non-Escape theaters as *Recall's* run widens. "We wanted a model that would help theaters attract younger audiences," says **Kevin Dewalt**, CEO of Minds Eye, which is producing *Recall* as part of a six-picture deal with Barco. "We're selling a VR piece, creating a separate revenue stream, but also marketing the film."

