



September 20th, 2014

Being a gamer, you are always on the lookout for new games. In fact, it would be sadly fair to state that an outsized amount of your time is occupied with gaming, whether the practice itself or the culture surrounding gaming. One good thing this does for you is teach you how to gamify reality, which makes it significantly less dreary. So when you stumble upon randonneuring, you relatively quickly recognize it as a game, in which you play as a cyclist in first person perspective, attempting to ride a route in a fixed amount of time. The canonical quests (brevets) are open to the public and consist of 200k, 300k, 400k and 600k, as well as larger (1000k, 1200k, 1400k, 2000k) rides. The time limit usually demands an overall speed of 15km/h which can be made even less forgiving by routes going over the canonical limits; if it's 320kms you still have 20 hours, which means you have to manage 16 km/h overall; also, sometimes there's mountains in the way which in some configurations / microclimate take significantly more time on ascent than they're willing to yield on descent. Routes are known in advance and if you're living in the current year and don't need additional cognitive challenge, you can just use your pocket computer to follow the turn by turn navigation instructions, tracing a line connecting the dots in the helpfully provided GPX by slowly moving a triangular icon and yourself using your legs. It's a proper role playing game, where you gain experience

and equip your character. You have intelligence, willpower, handling skill, pedal pushing strength and grip strength and core strength, length of extremities, stamina, dexterity, luck; lots of equipment, the beating heart of which is your own body and the main accessory a human-powered device such as a common bicycle, though some players use tricycles and even push scooters. You have sandwiches of +300kcal apiece, two 750ml bidons filled with water and/or an isotonic electrolyte solution that provides a temporary buff. Your bicycle has a frame, some wheels and usually pedals all connected with screws and bolts into a functional vehicle that enables you to propel yourself at moderate speeds across the landscape to great release of happy neurotransmitters. Once you recognize it as a game, you are able to realize that it's the best game you've thus far played.



May 21st, 2016

It is somewhat an endurance sport and it gets really hard in the advanced levels, but as in any role-playing game or real world skill, incremental grinding is a thing. In a stroke of luck, since the game is really addictive, the experience you gain is real life experience and the equipment you pay for is also usable in the rest of your life, outside of the game. So long as you're moderately fit you can access a wide range of challenging quests in delightful scenery, with bonus handicap modifiers such as not sleeping well

the night before or the ever-popular rain that comes with additional skill checks on serpentine downhill you can fail to slide on the asphalt if your friction is sub par.



June 20th, 2015

The repercussionary thing about a game played on the real life platform is that everything has a cost and everything enables gains in reality. You consume food and you need sleep. You gain muscle, overall aerobic fitness, navigational skills, a large increase in the awareness of your surrounding environment, tons of good loot that you get the blueprints for by seeing it in other people's setups and then pay for the right to use in quests and the rest of your life. As in any persistent multiplayer role-playing game worth its salt, you gain lots of acquaintances and some really good friends, who are automatically your IRL friends since, once again, that is the platform the game is played on. It's also worth considering that this RL-as-a-platform thing means that game physics are being computed by pretty much the entire Universe and its graphics are as good as you fading eyesight allows.

To gamefy an activity well you should not impose an outside structure, but tease out and seize the threads of patterns that comprise that activity to create a feedback loop for player's enjoyment and gain. It's as much

observation as it is design. Consider the ingenious stroke of masterful game design by whoever decided that quests are only time limited and that randonneuring is not a race. This deviation from the usual competitive deathmatch of the racing genre is an instant source of cooperation and great camaraderie, which fed by time spent together, tempered by rain and hardship, blossoms into lasting friendship of the kind the player would lend a person their toothbrush at any time up to mid March 2020.



September 19th, 2015

The game is massively multiplayer, with quests being played around the world every week in most countries. The records are public and cheating means a lifetime ban, which provides a nice chilling effect on bragging about stuff you didn't do and makes the main focus at any time making it in time. Quests are homologated with an organization based in France and a honor-based system with flexibly stringent checks is applied locally through a trusted source. It's a simple, minimal formalization of game's rules - the player has to acquire proof of visiting a checkpoint at a certain time. They get the stamped seal of an organization while its representative, the weighted average of which leans towards the form of a gas station attendant, noting the time, signs acknowledgement of players' latexed-butt-scratching presence slobbering with eyes fixed on a literal

article of food being sold behind the counter and soon to be snarfed in the parking lot.

Now listen to me y'all, the funny thing about cycling in general as an activity is that it is comparatively generous with what psychologists call flow. Cycling commands your attention immediately as you take off and points it at your surroundings, your muscles pumping out watts, almost effortlessly keeping your balance. Flow is said to be the state of concentration or complete absorption with the activity at hand and the situation; this Shangri-La of hobbies is almost a prerequisite in any cycling, where from the get go you move faster than your brain is used to handle and you're one inattentive moment - such as falling very gently asleep for a tiny half-second - from being inconvenienced such as slightly blindsided by the strong air push-and-suck of a passing truck, get too close to the rotation of the half dozen wheels on your side as they pass by arm hair-raisingly close to you made wobbly by your Ortlieb Ultimate Classic 6 affixed to the handlebars you're firmly gripping now while struggling with the side-vectored draft, a wobble that luckily finishes away from the monster's wheel and makes you elaborately jumpfall into the canal next to the road in a way that merits the Benny Hill theme. After you get back to reality, it slaps you with adrenaline, punishes you with cortisol, rewards you with the endorphine as freshly awake you once again begin to notice your surroundings and discover yourself in the middle of night in central Bosnia in 2019., with the sounds of animal susurrations coming from both sides of the forest the road you're on bifurcates and the moon bright above, the Milky Way well visible and teasing the eyes upwards with a multicolored shimmer of jewels not cheesy since they're really there as you're seeing, no additional motor-powered vehicles to be seen anywhere and a literal mountain to climb over before the sunrise if you want to have the slightest chance of making the raid in time. You are not a speedrunner, but flow is rarely a problem when cycling.



June 28th, 2015, D. going strong in the morning after a day and a night

It's very explicitly stated that a player is not in competition with other players and as such it is established that it's a coop game. It's not even necessary to pronounce the rule, there's no need to codify a rule that's so obvious - though, interestingly, many of the back-group players try to, with varying levels of bitterness, whenever their group is breaking up and someone quicker is pumping ahead to a tempo that's too sharp for their aching legs. Such is the game. Even if a player is the hottest shit around, so many different situations arise in an IRL game that has raids lasting days! Such an abundance of emergent game goodness when there's a need to feed and clothe the player and feel the cold and push through anything, with no saving of game state and no fast travel mechanism - such, it is, that once in a while anyone gets slapped down by the RNGsus and is made humble as their teammates take out of their inventories a magnesium tablet or a piece of homemade pie or a powerlink for their chain or the ever-popular inner tube; everyone who makes it their hobby learns that everyone profits if the players are in it together and when you see a dude broken down by the side of the road you can be certain that's sooner or later going to be you. Riding in groups is also safer (or at least feels that way, the only anecdotal data that has matured to the only possible final outcome for all humans is the case of a dear Serbian randonneur friend you knew from riding together who was

in fact killed in a collision with a car riding a brevet in a group). However, riding as a pack is indisputably fun and social and pools resources used for cutting through the atmosphere and the atmosphere, the omnipresent medium into which you put stuff and hardly notice between farts outside of the game can really pardon the pun be a drag. Thus groups are formed during the raid, with tension of attributes such as fitness and climbing skill breaking up the general audax ideal (of all riding together) into manageable chunks and a few solitary boy wonders blazing ahead. Audax riding sounds like fun, but it really makes little sense with today's range of cycling equipment and skill levels. And they're all represented in randonneuring - the diversity of people drawn to it is notable; it's a game with an impressive ratio of openness (public invitations, cheap, accessible to a broad section of all cyclists) and seriousness (codified enough that there's no cheating and oftentimes hard as fuck). You can actually procure an adequate second-hand bicycle on your local online classified ads site for less than the price of a gaming console plus an AAA game, add about 10 to 15 Euro adjusted for inflation for participation fee, a part of which sum you get back in edible form, and start playing a great MMORPG that has notable positive health effects by sending an e-mail in response to a public invitation for, let's say, a 200km brevet.

It's 2012 and you have been grinding the commuter class character for about seven years. Your daily route is 16km, you sometimes cheat by taking your bicycle on the train and you run your bikes into the ground, with no knowledge of the concept of maintenance and very little awareness of how rich an open world game riding a bicycle can make your surroundings, for hundreds of kilometres in every direction. You discover randonneuring through a metafilter post from 2007, googling that weird word "randonneur", trying to piece together just what the hell Jure Robič, the guy you randomly read about in NY Times, was doing when his star was tragically extinguished on a narrow mountain forest road in Plavški Rovt near Jesenice in Slovenia in an impact with an oncoming car. You are standing there fresh-faced, the only guy in cotton clothes, shuffling your victuals and an unused bike toolset in your huge panniers, a sole normie in a mixture of

well provisioned MAMILs and sleek athletes in sponsor-stamped lycra you've never before seen embarking on a ride in such a number, about to dip your toe into the considerable challenge of riding from Sveta Nedelja to Senj and back (about 316 km) in less than 20 hours.



May 19th, 2012, first quest

It is May 19th 2012, your spankin' new Kona Jake still under 1k km and just starting to demand a cleaning of the drivetrain by taking away 10-ish going on 20-ish Watts of your pushing force due to gunk stuck to the chain, the virginal packing industrial lube already getting encumbered by soot particles from cars' exhausts, becoming sticky and prone to try jumping onto the slice of cassette that the rear derailleur you didn't know needs adjustment was biased towards. The steering of your rear-heavy, dummy-thick dumptruck of a bike, carrying way too much clothing in the double-sided panniers, all jumpy and twitchy yet slow and as you aren't yet relaxed about leaning into the turns sporting the turning radius of a truck; your pedals in no way connected to your shoes, instantly marking you as a tourist just as much as having to stop riding to drink water (the only bottle is in your panniers) or sweating uphill in a black cotton tank top. Everyone left you like a cartoon cloud 500 metres after starting, alone to pedal pondering your dubious midlife crisis management choices in your head, constantly

feeling the cars zipping by as an irritant. The first checkpoint's a hotel in Josipdol at roughly the 100th kilometre, where you made it in about 6 hours of fugly car-infested D1 and D23, only marginally less stressful but much more picturesque with grand views of Mrežnica, leaving you a still luxurious-seeming 14 hours for the remaining roughly 216 kms.

Your comfortable breathing space *vis-à-vis* the clock pretty much evaporated in a brutal forever climb to Mala Kapela, culminating incomprehensibly in only triple digits height at 880-ish metres; you're tired but never mind, you're exhilarated, you got this, you know from half sleeping in a car along this road that it's just a few minutes of light driving / riding to Senj and the halfway point, so no wonder you feel your asshole clench and the hairs on your arms stand up in fear when you see the physical manifestation of Vratnik pass, far over there in the Howard Shore-scored lotr distance, where your car-divoted sense of the space between Kapela and Vratnik tells you Italy should have assuredly begun.

You make it to the halfway point in Senj five minutes ahead of the limit, directly following 45 minutes of careful downhill where every burst of speed gets promptly tempered by seconds of white knuckled squeeze pulling the cable keeping your crappy Kore cantilevers tight - a long downhill on the insides of an enclosed forested mountainside serpentine through several beautiful gorges, spring water from a fountain near the top, down to the seaside from Vratnik - a downhill that overstays its welcome, shows you that you can get very tired and achy just descending; a downhill that you with the help of gravity have just turned into solid two hours of climbing. Looking at the sea with half the time gone and knowing Sveta Nedelja is a hundred-fifty metres higher against the gravity than the sea you're cooling your feet in, it's clear that you have to do a bit more work than you just did in these 10 hours during the 10 hours that follow. It seems preposterous; your legs are sore olive branches wrapped in well-beaten steak, knees are rubbery and feet prone to just not giving a fuck on landing a step; ass neurons have luckily given up sending any more warnings and it's just a numb void informationwise. Your clothes are heavy with salt and itching, Jake's transmission is crunchy and unreliable, everything is soiled and

wrong and prone to giving up. You wash your face in the gas station toilet, eat some sugary crap you pay gas station prices for and then —

There's really nothing to do but stand up holding your bike to the right, bringing your right leg over the seat with the care of a pensioner who has to pay out of pocket for hip replacement, lean onto the handlebars and place your weight onto whichever pedal is offering itself. Just like grabbing a controller after a night of gaming at a LAN party, your thumb sore from spamming the one good attack Johnny Cage has all night. You distribute weight from left to right cyclically for an hour and a half like a drunk bear, your soles alternating the burning sensation on the slow crawl up the serpentines back to Vratnik. There's straight parts open to the wind from the top that pours down the gorges to push on your head and chest and always another turn ahead, it seems endless, that impossible long distance that 30-ish kilometres can be felt as when they are the ones leading into 200s and the sun is going down. It's worrying that at this point you seem to have lost your ability to lose the sense of passage of time; while usually when it gets hard you can just look at your surroundings and as your gaze hits upon something two hours have flown and you've pedalled the entire time, now it's the same numb rhythm counting down the seconds and you're obviously going too slow pushing as hard as you can. The small climbs you don't even remember going down drag for tens of minutes, you count regular features of the road such as the perfunctory little bollard igloos that wouldn't keep a half-determined driver from careening into the abyss crawling by you snaillike, you see the names of places you're sure you've left behind already return (Brinje again?), you sit and it hurts so you get up but your feet hurt more, so you half sit and coast for 20 metres, shedding your speed in seconds, feeling like a seal hobbling on dry land. After you (finally) make it back again to the highest point, to Kapela, only about a hundred and (10? 20?) something kilometres to go (you're not quite sure) but you are sure you're not going to make it. It's too late, too dark and you're too tired. You spent three hours on the last thirty kms. You'll have to give up and train more, then come back. Find another fucking hobby, one that's not insane masochism. The reality of the forests surrounding the road is getting oppressive, you remember that people die of exposure, what the

fuck does that even mean? How tired can you get and still keep going? How slowly and painfully can the time tick by? Why would anyone subject themselves to this shit and call it a sport? It would have been a nice moment to replay old hustler Aurelius' timeless advice to "remind yourself that it is neither the future nor the past which weighs on you, but always the present: and the present burden reduces, if only you can isolate it and accuse your mind of weakness if it cannot hold against something stripped so bare."

Shivering from exposure to the dark forest air even though it's late spring you push off and fly faster and faster downhill from Kapela to Josipdol; almost 20 kilometres of manageable downhill, the serpentines wide and the road thickly triple-laned in all the right places, something like 6 to at most 8% downhill - and incredibly you immediately again start having fun, kicking the timer's ass and flowing instead of crawling painfully through time with your mind's eye. It's almost a shame to stop for fresh spring water on that downhill, the flow is too good - all the potential energy from gravity that you built up grinding the climbing minigame drunk bear style now released at a rate seemingly optimal for release of good chemicals - not just serotonin and the endorphine you earned in pain, but even playfully affectionately anthropomorphizing Jake petting it as a good old horse envelops you in the warm embrace of oxytocin. You are wide open, your brain chemistry somewhat broken in a good way, receptive to whatever the moment keeps bringing; you holler jingoistic nonsense as you whoosh down and get startled by the shushing of scared something but you're too fast, you're celebrating the state of cycling, steadily zipping downhill in a ride that has never seemed closer to flying and seems to go on forever.

Sun going down seems like some sort of karmic cutoff, as if the event will stop existing once dusk snuffs the riders who are still on the way. Yet as the darkness envelops your slice of the globe, incredibly, improbably, aching all over on the road with lively traffic constantly whizzing by, you find yourself still having fun. In time you will realize that while not many cyclists outside the game plan to ride overnight, it's an unavoidable part for the player and only the beginner quests of 200 during summer months are exempt. You

will have to learn how to power through the night and stay awake, quickly spot a spot to shut your eyes for a few minutes, you'll unlock a new tier of minigames that darkness brings and learn how night with its sparse traffic can provide an advantage in conquering the quest.

And so you make it, last of those who showed up and managed to finish in time, beaten to a pulp after something like 316 kilometers with 3600 meters of climbing, with just 45 minutes to spare of those 20 hours you spent riding alone, and a new love. The gamemaster A. is the only one waiting for you, with his kind smile, congratulations and some calories, always warm and reliable, even though it's an hour and some after midnight and everyone else who participated is already at home snoring. You made it from the capital to the sea and back in a single ride. It's a harmonious melding of two opposites: on the one hand, you were exerting like crazy the whole time making you by the end so broken you can barely make it 1.2 km to your home, and on the other it was a nice ride through majestic natural beauty and all your whatifing teases that you could have given the game more had it demanded it. It's certainly the best game you've ever played.



September 8th, 2018

You underestimated, though, the potential of the game to take over your life. As it caught traction in Croatia, the number of challenges offered throughout the year ballooned to fill about half of weekends throughout the year and since it's a sport all your social circles consist uniformly of enablers. It's interesting to note how a similarly addictive, time-intensive and logistically challenging gaming undertaking - such as lugging your pc to (and a whole weekend spent playing Counter-Strike at) whoever's house is most like a frat at the moment - can generate some friction with one's spouse, but play a brevet and it's cool, you might get coddled extra comfy afterwards. The game technically being a sport represents a ludic life hack of a tremendous magnitude, allowing you to play the game with the best graphics and physics possible all the time with complete support from everyone around you.

Your bicycle demands attention. With the bikes you had before (a cheapo Trek 4300 hardtail MTB and Jamis Allegro 3x that's a bit heavy but rather nice as a commuting bike), maintenance was never a priority and cleaning the drivetrain was something you've done once a year, completely wrong, steadily degreasing and degrading your bearings with a pressurized miniwash. Jake's drivetrain is now grimy, the front inner tube you've obviously bought is too wide for the tire and bulging in one spot, rear wheel's axle is suspiciously crunchy and there's a clicking coming from the bottom bracket as you shift your weight from the left pedal to the right. You have experience enough to know there's no point in taking your bike to the shop for maintenance - the shop will happily replace worn out parts they have in stock (and your Kona has an FSA MegaExo BB with a 19mm spindle that no one ever has in stock), but they'll no more clean you bike than painstakingly parse and decode your rambling instructions on how to reproduce the clicking sound that's driving you mad. You already begin to suspect what you now know is the truth - cleaning is the single most important factor in preserving your bicycle and having it run comfortably and reliably. At this point you've tried more than a dozen bicycle shops over the years commuting and it seems almost as if knowledge of bicycle mechanics requires (or cultivates) a slightly to moderately autistic grouchy disposition, the best of them intimidating wizards where the vibe in the

shop dictates you present your shitty bicycle without looking them directly in the eye and shut up while they do the work of diagnosing with arcane gestures. Nowadays with an upgraded set of eyes, you see how such vibe springs from legends that are created, over decades of good bicycle mechanics being undervalued for their work as society undervalues self-powered transportation on every level; the masters of their craft eke out an existence as employees of shops that always prefer selling new shit to repairing shit already sold, their hair turning gray over years of battling impossible requests from an endless parade of cheapskates with never-maintained bikes expecting miracles without veering into three digit payments.

Once you realize you can do 360 kilometers on a bicycle in 24 hours and meet people who can do it seemingly endlessly, you begin to see the memetic chunks forming this disdain for bicycles in everyday life through popular culture. It's unfortunate how it works against such a delightful and ingenious invention, the only transportation you need in way more situations than you realize - and it's especially unfortunate how this lay of memetic land breaking up cycling into incompatible domains exaggerated into stereotyped warring factions has a chilling effect when it comes to sharing and preserving knowledge. Industry tells you what a cyclist in a genre you identify with needs this season through advertising and its sister the review, killing last year's standards and making everyone move to a new standard that'll last for a few years in several almost-compatible variants, always lighter than what came before, but mostly also less durable and more expensive to maintain.

"It is very efficient use of my time, but it is slow in real time" quoth rms, explaining how it's reasonable to browse the web by mailing a daemon to fetch the web pages you want and then mailing them to yourself. This zen koan is too much for the modern man, who needs to be somewhere rtf now. Yes, you need time to earn the money to pay for your car and the gas to make it go to sit in a box with a still miniscule but provably elevated chance of death or disfigurement and also separate money and time for the gym or a preferably outdoors hobby preferably aerobic and involving movement

since when you're commuting with a car to a sedentary job you're wasting away - but doing it all at once for next to no money a part of which you also get to eat is, somehow, just too radical.

The bad news is, the amount of maintenance it takes is severely underrated. At this point, after the brevet and months of service, Jake is moderately wounded. Ranting at cagers during your bikemute is not distracting enough anymore, you still hear the clicking and it gets worse every ten kms. You need to fix your bike, it's really somehow a shitheap now, less than half a year since you bought it. It's remarkable (and thus not a trivial observation) how small improvements and limited but properly directed maintenance can make a huge difference in equipment durability, ride safety and comfort, but it's just as remarkable how quickly a bike equipped with a hypothetical new groupset and fancy cables/tubing, freshly lubed and with new tires goes to shit when it encounters the road with its diesel-spewing monsters, occasional strada bianca, rain washing away the lube but somehow (you swear to Sheldon Brown in your monologues grunted while cleaning your drivetrain) actually facilitating the unwashable grime, the streets salted from autumn to spring as if snow still exists in our latitudes sprayed on your chain by the front wheel seesawing left to right in november rain as shards of flint and unprobable shapes of glass and portions of paper clips and thorns are accumulating in your tires and the water seeping into your bike's joints when you flex the frame accelerating on your feet makes them clicky and the operation less than smooth - in a few years of unlocking maintenance specialization in your local bike kitchen you will be able to see it in your mind's eye, but in 2012 you click your bikemute away and worry whether you'll even ride a brevet again on this bicycle. Then you remember you met these two dudes bikemuting three years ago.

They are E. and B. and they're sociologists. You know them from way back in college and three years ago in 2009. when you met them they had a van and some tools for bicycle repair, tools they were taking to Frankopanska street to start a community bicycle kitchen; and the reason they stopped to tell you that fact is the same as the reason that you remember all this three years

later - your Jamis (Allegro 3x) was busted; as you were riding to work, passing by an entrance to the local beer garden's parking lot, an SUV lurched as they are wont to across the shitty pedestrian strip between a wall and Vukovarska (a four-lane artery of the lower inner city) that you were riding as a overweight bearded dude but in the game of cycling with its many impossibly high ceilings still a sweet summer child and hit you in the back wheel, squeezing just enough to break a few spokes and make your wheel wobbly and distort your brake disk. Now in 2012, with a different bicycle, considering your meagre options for bicycle maintenance, you remember this thing exists and having access to tools and volunteers and some donated bicycle parts for free seems like a nothing-to-lose proposition.



So you go there and then (to Biciklopopravljajona or bic/pop, in Frankopanska 1 on Thursday at 5 pm) and discover another miracle in the heart of Zagreb - a temporary autonomous zone of incredible utility and impeccably trashy bikepunk aesthetics, a band of sisters and brothers sharing a whole new memetic continent of bicycle reuse, green activism and the many genres of cycling; people just chilling and organizedly drinking beer, geeking over bicycling equipment retro or modern or both; a place where a hundred bikes are cleaned with the same litre of diesel or a single

bike a hundred times; there are tools and donated parts and every week there's a smorgasbord of new old donated clunkers that volunteers fix and give on to charities or directly to immigrants who need transportation. You'll spend, at the time of writing, eleven years coming here with your bikes - six years and more than 100.000 kilometres of Jake before you decide you've earned an upgrade.



During the first years coming to bic/pop your character gains experience and unlocks whole new tech trees - you learn that cleaning the drivetrain regularly would save you money on equipment even if it wasn't practically free in bic/pop and that to slide into a nice spot on the curve showing increased work and diminishing returns you should clean it after about 600 kilometres or so. You clean it in diesel, which can after it be left to sediment the black grime away and reused over and over again. After cleaning, you ride it for 100 to 200 kms or an hour of rain (whichever comes first) without applying any lubrication, then wipe down the chain, rear derailleurs' jockey wheels and the chainrings, apply lube and ride for 300 to 400 more or even more, until it's gunky with a crunchy texture. If there's a brevet on Saturday (as there usually is), you'd clean Thursday, bikemute a lubeless Friday and apply some chain oil before the big raid Saturday morning. To properly clean the drivetrain, you don't need much in terms of tools or, as you'll

discover once you get fairly proficient, even time. Just something slightly weighty with a nice edge to open the powerlink with and you can take off the chain, then remove the back wheel, use the chain whip to hold the cassette in place while you remove its locking ring - slide it all off the freewheel hub and clean the chain and cassette in diesel with an old toothbrush. If the rear derailleur needs it, you can remove the jockey wheels and clean them in the same way. Put it back together and your ride is once again smooth.

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It's 2018 now, the sixth season you're an active player and you're in deep, more than a hundred quests deep with two pretty epic four-digit raids sprinkled in your recent years. You've apportioned a part of your grind into a new mount - a perfectly unassuming and in other ways perfect little titanium road bike made by local Croatian artisans, Ti-22 by Chelichana, lithe and springy when you push it, stable and well balanced, flying over gravel and soaking the road through a carbon fork and some vibrating titanium triangles, a comfortable roadie that you can only squeeze some of the 28cs on, but since it's perfect you don't really need more.

So you're in when S. calls you, though you initially wish them good luck and refuse to consider the quest that sounds so completely deranged - it's now Wednesday and you're supposed to get out of work early on Friday and go with S. and his son M. more than a thousand kilometres to Bucharest, arriving ideally before midnight to catch some sleep at a hostel, then six hours later start a 600k with Romanian randonneurs, going straight east for almost two hundred kilometers, then north to the Black Sea and border with Ukraine, a pinch more to the east to the Danube delta park, straight south and then back west to turn around and come into Buchrest from the east side. You dun goofed, tho. If you really intended to refuse, you shouldn't have looked at the GPX, the route on a map wiggling through land you've never seen is always a trigger. It seems very flat and doable - that was the selling point for S., who wanted to finish it to be eligible for

pre-registration of PBP in 2019 (kind of a meta game) and who has a problem with climbing. They were vague on the return trip, since the two of them, (you don't have a driving license, that's how you discovered the game playing commuting since bicycle is the only tolerable means of transportation, as national railways is at that point a hollowed-out shell that hasn't been maintained let alone upgraded for what seems like decades and the local bus lines were apportioned to companies that after a few years of cutting back made them just inflexible enough) - anyway, the two of them would have to drive a car back for more than ten hours after riding a bike for forty hours - that there alone is surely enough to reveal the entire enterprise as the fooliest of errands. Besides, six hundred is hard enough when it's local and you start fresh with a positive handicap of sleeping until the last moment relative to most of the others, can't imagine starting in a country you don't know, don't speak the language, don't know how to get sustenance, how far from one island of provisions to the next, a lot of it seems rural, are there families of dogs living on the edges of human settlements as in Bosnia? Being always packed for a brevet, you don't need to consider more than that tidbit, really - whether to get some pepper spray as you feel the dog situation potential might warrant it. Are you really considering it? What, the ride? It's there, the two of them are going anyway, your spouse seems mildly encouraging (though you can't really know with her, it might just be her nature always wishing for everyone to live happily and to their full potential), there is really not that much difference between this and starting from Belgrade, is there? You're probably just going to be asleep for most of the ride there and about being late Monday you can truthfully claim that your friends' plan was unrealistic (hope you won't be asked whether unbeknownst to you) or that someone kidnapped you and took you to Romania to participate in an insane challenge - it happens. You download the Openstreetmap map of Romania for OSMand to your phone and load up the GPX file just to see it - and now there's really nothing left to do since you'd never pepper spray a dog, no matter how menacing he or she seems. You're really in and you're already packed - it took those seconds of downloading Openstreetmap data, since the game taking over your life means you live with your bike always packed for a brevet and less than a day of background churning is all it takes for your brain to decide. You can

realistically go planless, the game is everywhere the same - you send in an email to register for the quest and you show up at the right geo coordinates at the right time on your bicycle to play.

Bikes affixed to the car, the three of you in good spirits, you make it into Serbia almost in good time; the plan is revealed as pretty unrealistic in Belgrade, where what seems the six-lane bypass goes, chopped up by traffic lights, through the middle of the city with all of rush hour. You start negotiating with the undaunted clock; maybe you can be at the hotel at three in the morning and still get two hours of sleep? You drift in and out of sleep all through Serbia, waking up as your head bumps into the glass as the car navigates serpentine roads following endless river canyons. The timezone change you completely didn't take into account (maybe some planning would have been nice after all) slaps one more hour from your hand entering Romania. After some more hours bumping your head on the window in your sleep going through fields and forests you are there. The hotel is Monte Carlo something, after sleeping most of the way there in the car you're too tired to notice it properly, it's a weird almost-highrise with a luxury hotel knockoff feel, the ceilings very low and cardboard thin walls. You hurry everything along, it's past three a.m. and the night clerk showing you where your bikes will be stashed does not appreciate you having to get up at five. In the end, you set your alarm, crying cat meme eyes, forty five minutes from the moment you lay down, asleep immediately. You wake up after snoozing only once, you are already ridiculously tired, your bones aching from about fourteen hours in the car. You put yourself together as well as you can, the three of you rotate for the toilet and shower and it seems crazy but you're there at 6, the imposing Bucharest square transformed into an event by the wonderful sight of 30ish Romanian randonneurs hanging out in the early morning light filtering through the light smog, checking their equipment and yelling each other the time in response to yelled inquiries. You can go into any part of the world at a time an event is starting and find a tribe of sorts, real people you share at least a portion of identity and folklore with - that alone these days represents a genuine miracle that would make the game a worthy hobby. The day promises to be very dry and possibly too hot to ride comfortably, but the

only thing you're really worried about is feeling like you need a nap at the very start, after your nominal sleep.

Your first time playing the game on a Romanian server, the quest proves more difficult than it seemed on paper. The roads are a mixed bag - there's lots of horse-powered transportation and outside of the admittedly huge Bucharest, the asphalt quickly becomes spotty, especially once nearer the Black Sea when you turn north - regular patches of unpaved road, some weird enough you double check with OSM and whether you're still on track. The wind is not too strong, but pretty relentless and you find yourself catching up to whoever is ahead and playing the watt-saving drafting game for hours, just watching their cassette, choosing your gearing based on theirs minus the wind resistance so that your rate of spinning is matched, or you need to let the noisy freewheel buzz at stochastic intervals which somehow seems like a microaggression breaking the flow. This simple minigame embedded in the larger game is addictive once you taste its benefits: so long as you're directly behind someone else, as close as possible to their back wheel, you need much less power to move forward. And the closer you are to them, the more you're pulled into their tunnel, until at a few millimetres away from their tire it seems like only the weight of your legs on the pedals is enough to keep you gliding forward, the fluid mass of air cut in two and pushed aside by the body in front of you and the knife of their bicycle making a perfect momentary wake into which yours can slot with least effort, the hungry sucking tunnel, though the mental toll of elevated vigilance and having to respond to every twitch from the person pulling you gets to be a bad price to pay when you're surfing after them only a finger's width away. The minigame can be notoriously risky if the person in front of you is twitchy - if they're tired, spinning for a few seconds then and releasing to coast while stretching their back, the value proposition of drafting is simply not there, similar to how having to dodge rocks while you eat would ruin a free lunch. So in playing the drafting minigame you constantly trade exertion for vigilance, always aware of signals from the player pulling you (if they signal at all) and their proclivity for slowing down suddenly, but you need to push 30 to a 100 Watts less depending on the wind. You learn the dirt between the slices of their cassette and the sponsors

of their jersey intimately as you spin, you imagine the huge fluid atmosphere you're always immersed in, constantly being slashed by the narrow tire of the person in front of you, pushing the air left and right and up around them for a brief moment as they push onto the pedals and the chain pulls on the cassette and inside the freehub cage in their back wheel hub the metal latches pushed by the springs catch onto their grooves and pull the casing of the freehub and the wheel with it around the wheel axis, gliding on tiny metal spheres. If you touch the tire of the bicycle you're drafting behind, you'll most probably fall and damage your mount and/or character. You play the minigame for hours, sometimes risking it with Romanian randonneurs whose style you don't know and whose reactions you can't predict, but mostly M. is pulling you two boomers like a champ. When you notice someone drafting behind you, you start signalling potholes or obstructions with gestures.



The road mostly goes through cultivated fields or in between deciduous forest, runaway industrial hemp in bloom lining its sides. Romanians, like most randonneurs you've met, are friendly and inquisitive players of both sexes, all ages and shapes. They wear jerseys celebrating their 1k+ raids of recent years, some of them have the 2015 PBP ones. No matter where on

Earth you play it, the game is reassuringly similar. Control points have friendly people offering coffee, fruit and pastry; everyone you meet resting or riding seems to be in a great mood.

As the night approaches, the scenery gets weirder - you ride by large sandy hills that look about to crumble onto the asphalt, like dunes cut in half by the road, though somehow the walls of sand are holding. Sun going down, you slowly approach some mildly menacing mountains in the distance. You have to wait more than once in the dust for a herd of cows to cross the road. M. is pulling S. and you in his wind tunnel and all three of you are beat up real bad. Some Romanian riders you meet have a plan to sleep at about half way point in a rented apartment. You decide to continue for as long as you can and sleep when you start hallucinating, which is a rule of thumb that works in the sense it hasn't killed you yet.



M. and S. as the night approaches

The control near the halfway point, just south of the Ukrainian border is a cozy gas station that looks like a bodega slash a hoarder's living room, with a huge upholstered armchair that's falling apart into rags and a meagre selection of weird snackfoods. But it's warm and outside it's near chilly midnight and you're barely keeping yourself together - a moment that is the

quintessential game - three days ago you planned some light hiking with your family for this weekend, instead you're climbing mountains near the Black Sea with no one to call for help, about to spend the night riding dead tired. You eat some crap, chug an energy drink that doesn't help at all, nap for a minute or two on the ground outside the station and then inside and peruse the worst toilet you've ever been to, just a gray cinderblock building through some bushes behind the gas station with no windows and no lighting of any kind, no water and no sink or toilet paper. You wave your mobile phone flashlight around and find a triangular hole in the middle of the room that seems to have no bottom. The whole place stinks horribly and if you were superstitious you'd feel it gives off bad vibes. When you've finished with possibly least dignified shit in your life, you find S. snoozing on the curb in front of the gas station. There's no one around, the three of you climb the hill ahead, the road entering deep forest as soon as you start. You are tired enough to have no sense of time, but climbing seems to go on for around half an hour (which would mean it's just 300 meters of ascent, making it about 6% over 5 kilometers), but you're really an unreliable narrator for this one. Once you reach the top and the road starts sinking, you discover that exertion of climbing was pretty much the only thing keeping you awake. As soon as the road starts sinking, you're cold descending, you shiver and your hands while pulling brake levers hurt as hell; sleep hits you as bicycle light projected onto the asphalt somehow gets too tiring to look at. It's around 2 or 3 in the morning and all three of you feel it. Now you are lightly hallucinating, at times not sure if you're in Hungary or Romania, pareidolia starting in earnest and all of the fuckers you see are laughing horribly. All of you need a stop as soon as there's a chance by the side of the road. Since chances of a bus station or paved anything are pretty slim in this forest, you stop where an unpaved logging road is branching off from the main one. You just lie down on the logging road wrapping yourself in your rain poncho, set the alarm for half an hour and are all asleep almost immediately.

You wake up moderately wet in a merited slight panic, as the rain that started in the forty minutes you slept and snoozed took some time to wake you up. S. and M. are even worse off since they didn't use a rain poncho for

a blanket. Apparently, they were woken by the rain and had a hard time getting you to come up from sleep until they removed your poncho and let the rain sting your lycra'd torso. You need time to pull yourself together and wake up properly, but there's no roof here and it's raining. Someone is shivering loudly as you rub your sides, hugging yourself and trying to find a reason to not get on the bike. It's one of the worst nights of your randonneuring and you have to often remind yourself that the worst rides make the best memories once it's over.

As the dawn creeps, there's surprisingly lots of climbing. Pareidolia and the worst of sleepyness is chased away by the dawn, but as you top each hill you have a feeling you've been here before, real scenery mixing with the dream you've had in the forest and portions of Hungary you rode before. There's been zero cars since last night, it's just you and the road. All of you are scuffed by no sleep. M. is faster than S. and yourself and reaching the top of each hill you discover him reliably curled up in a foetal position directly by the side of the road and enjoying a snooze.



M. resting

After descending the mountains and a hard morning dragging south through the Danube delta, second day is again completely flat and the wind

is not an enemy this time. Your team has about 200km to go and about 13 hours left and you can once again marvel at how much easier the final hours are once you realize you might make it in time and that the pain will be over in three or four of your 16km commutes. Everyone is tired though and not having a family member to share the adventure with now becomes an advantage, S. and M. now seem mad at one another, you're too tired to properly note what it's about and you're not sure it would be helpful to pry, M. was probably pulling ahead too hard or something, he'll know one day the pain of being left behind by the strong legs of your own son to fight the wind alone after near 30 hours of incessant riding - you shouldn't take anyone's anger too heavily when you're so far into a brevet, emotions get amplified depending on where in the bipolar cycle of a long one you are; you're toiling in the grey dumps for hours, combing the experience for anything to call fun like a starving lemur feeling through shit for cooked corn kernels; then the wind changes or the road turns away from it or an espresso hits you just right and you have the best hobby in the world, flying over the road for glorious hours. The usual. There's a stop at La Partid, a picturesque restaurant with wonderful coffee and great food and apparently it's paid for; the participation fee of about 15 euro goes a long way in Romania, you gotta give them that, this is like the fourth stop they're feeding you. S. is sleeping outside in the space between the road and the sidewalk that's the dog toilet with a beer in his hand, looking like the least shameful local drunk, not being picked up by the police only because he's in a jersey with a bicycle nearby, this absolutely degenerate behavior demonstrating once again the wonderful carefree spirit of the tired randonneur for whom the world really turns into the proverbial personal oyster.

The suburbs preceding Bucharest fill you with hope, than despair, as you wonder whether they might be endless - you could swear there's two of Zagreb's longest east-west axis on each side of the city; S. is stopping to sleep again on the dirt in front of the wall of some small factory - the security dudes take a professionally interested look but stay discreet and

polite; you go ahead, despondent as it is now obvious neither of you will finish in time to avoid rain; the drizzle is a subjective three and a half out of ten as the city starts proper and takes out its huge triple-laned boulevards, some of which have an inexplicable row of pavement curb stones separating the lanes and you'll later learn S. crashed, hitting this unfamiliar feature in a double-laned roundabout mere kilometres from the goal, in the considerable rain; M. and he made it in the last quarter of the final hour, S.' bike somewhat scuffed, the delicate lines askew as if his briefcase or the entire headset is slightly bent and some scratches on him but as happy as you've ever seen him; you're done, back at the square you started from almost 40 hours earlier, 600 km of Romania added to your score in a single weekend. Some of the nice people you remember as a blur stayed behind waiting for the three of you who are the last finishing. S. and M. pay for their hard earned medals, the optional pieces of metal now magic talismans imbued with the memories of what father and son have been through together in the 40 preceding hours and the three of you get in the car in what by now is a deluge building up to the cathartic peak of 10 hourly millimetres to sleep as the rain washes Danube mud off your bikes and onto the roof of the car hoping no one will steal 'em while you're out.