

TRANSIT

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TechnologieKultur

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Transit

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v1.0.0

Published by konsensus.net 

CONTENTS

About this Piece	v
1 Transit	1
1.1 Minimum Satsflow Level	1
1.1.1 Adrenaline	1
1.1.2 Hamster wheel	2
1.2 Medium Satsflow Level	4
1.2.1 Sweat	4
1.2.2 Encounters	5
1.3 Maximum Satsflow Level	9
1.3.1 Lemonade	9
1.3.2 Confrontation	9
Source	13

ABOUT THIS PIECE

TechnologieKultur · Jul 30, 2024

An article published by konsensus.net.

CHAPTER ONE

TRANSIT

1.1 Minimum Satsflow Level

1.1.1 Adrenaline

Halfway dressed in his tight GraviBall overalls, he lunged forward to block the access to his computer terminal. He tripped over a dangling sleeve and his outstretched arm was intercepted and twisted behind his back before he had even hit the floor.



Figure 1.1: transit

With his cheek pressed to the smooth cool surface he watched, together with his visitors, countless lines of evidence running down the screen. His body squirmed under the guard's expert grip and his legs kicked violently. He screamed and started up in his hibernation pod with a pounding heart and splitting headache.

So, it wasn't just a horror story that transit sleep always ended with a shock-dream. Horror, it seemed, was needed to scare the life back into immobilized space vegetables. The roar in Viktor.Adler.Transit402's ears gradually subsided to the inevitable background hum that reminded him of his dependence on life support systems. At the same rate as the air flowed into his claustrophobic cabin, his Satsflow streamed right into the operator's pool.

Though his head had cleared, he couldn't get rid of the stale taste of two weeks of vegetative state lingering in his mouth — the official aftertaste of minimum Satsflow travel. At least I won't have to taste this gloop here, Viktor thought as he unplugged the nutrient-solution tube, licking his finger anyway. He retched with a grimace and shuddered, while he took off the wiring that had stimulated his muscles during hibernation.

1.1.2 Hamster wheel

After the health checks, Viktor.Adler.Transit402 appeared at the door of Veronica.Valdez.Transit373, waving his hand over the proximity sensor. The door opened to reveal a short woman with dark brown eyes, who had been introduced to him as Veronica.Valdez.LaE00449 barely a Martian year ago. She looked a bit worn after the vegetative phase, but the laugh lines in her round face immediately made him comfortable.

“I still can’t believe,” he interjected before she could even greet him, “that Areopolis’ regulators are sending me back to Earth like that!”

It was the continuation of their pre-hibernation conversation. She added, “Just stop whining! The board of La Esperanza made the same fuss about it. Otherwise, I wouldn’t be hanging out in this semi-coma for almost three hundred days now.” Her voice softened again, but the bitterness was still evident. “Why did you have to get caught diverting those measly communication fibers?”

While the sturdy Viktor kept his silence, the crackling thundercloud stomping beside him with clenched fists went on. “What am I supposed to do on Earth? I haven’t been there for more than fourteen Earth years. I was so glad to finally get away. And now? My whole career is ruined. Who on Earth needs an exo-botanist to tell them all about subsurface agriculture on Mars, huh?!”

“They’ll never be able to establish real self-sufficiency on that rusty ball without you.”

His clumsy attempt to boost Veronica’s self-esteem didn’t help, and she just continued to march silently beside him. Her strained lips and furrowed brow didn’t encourage any further comments.

Their footsteps echoed through the tunnel. The tunnel’s rotation provided artificial gravity and always seemed to lead uphill. Although Viktor towered over his companion, they had fallen into lock-step by now. The hamster wheel was the only exercise available during the short waking periods of transit.

Later, Veronica told him about an engineer from AsiaPacific Corp in the Elysium volcano who had been fired over his collaborative efforts with her city, La Esperanza. She promised to get Viktor

invited to the medium Satsflow level of the ship somehow, so they could meet.

1.2 Medium Satsflow Level

1.2.1 Sweat

Viktor.Adler.Are000187 knew that thousands of spectators spread all over Mars (and probably even a few areophilic Earthlings with a few minutes of signal delay) would be watching the game. Images from La Esperanza's rotating gravidrome streamed every conceivable viewing perspective onto the screens of GraviBall fans who were eager to see if his Areopolis Speartips would wrest the title from the Enrobinados in their rusty brown overalls.

Torn between gravity and centrifugal force, Viktor propped his hands on his knees and took deep breaths. Sweat trickled down through his gray coveralls. The Areopolis Speartips had just scored a spectacular goal, and he imagined for a moment how the Satsflow of the enthusiastic spectators streamed back to the operators of the gravidrome and, of course, to him and his teammates. He was unaware of his maximally inconvenient position in front of the muzzle from which a new ball would be shot. All he heard was a resounding "Fupp!" as it went off, pulling his leg out from under him so fast that he slammed backwards onto the playing surface with the back of his head.

A bright flash split his head, and his ears rang with thunder. He jolted up and found himself in the tangle of cables and hoses of his transit booth.

1.2.2 Encounters

With white knuckles, Viktor clung to the handle next to the glass door. He waited for a transport pod to take him back to his level through the longitudinal axis of the ship. His permit was about to expire, and he was afraid of being penalized with medium Sats-flow. As he hung there, longing for a little artificial gravity, he thought of his encounter with Kenshi. He had introduced himself as Kenshi.Matsuyama.APC00841, only to immediately correct himself and replace his old affiliation with the apparently deeply shameful .Transit159. Just one of his many quirks, like regularly apologizing for his ‘inadequate’ English, although he spoke it with an engineer’s precision.

Most surprising to Viktor, was Kenshi’s reluctance to pursue a position in the free and open-source city. With his qualifications and the collaborative tendencies for which he had been fired, he seemed like a perfect fit. That’s what Viktor himself would have done, at least, if the clause in his contract with Areopolis had not explicitly imposed his return to Earth – immediately and at his own expense – in case of contract breach.

Even though one had to admit that the open-source unicorns were a pretty colorful and wild bunch, his tight-lipped refusal to join “such an unpredictable omnium-gatherum” seemed a bit excessive. Kenshi was a passionate engineer, and the unicorns were known for making any kind of junk work, fly, drive, or drill.

Echoing through a connecting tube, the animated conversation of two other passengers approached.

Between the laughter, he made out a semi-familiar conglomeration of words from English, French, and various other languages

becoming ever more common on Mars. More and more people from consensus-based regions of the southern Terran hemisphere were drawn to Mars these days. He had, therefore, been trying to learn OpenAustralis for quite a while. With a little effort, he was able to translate most of it on the fly.

Viktor swung around on his own axis and had to look twice when the two young men pushed off from the edge of the tube to glide over to him. They resembled each other to a hair and were also dressed identically. The large multicolored emblem on their chests immediately caught his eye. It was the head of a unicorn encircled with:

Ubuntu Urban Unicorn * init 40.04

It was easy to verify that the twins were indeed inhabitants of the open-source city that had begun two Martian decades earlier as an inflatable habitat. Their IDs read Anthony.Okafor.U3038776 and Gregory.Okafor.U3038777.

They gave him a friendly nod and were about to continue their conversation, when Gregory elbowed his look-alike, causing them to drift apart a bit. “Ant, look! Do you know who that is?”

Viktor translated to himself. Anthony squinted his eyes for a moment and bit his lip before his face brightened. Immediately, it burst out of him. “Der Adler! That’s the eagle from the Areopolis Speartips, Greg!”

The correctly identified GraviBall player would not have been surprised to hear them break into supportive chants for their unicorns. Instead, they started joking around with flapping arms about how spectacular the “Reverse Eagle” or – with respect to his German heritage – the “Rückwärts-Adler” had been.

That involuntary stunt had been named after him when the GraviBall team of La Esperanza defended their title, mostly because it left Areopolis without its top scorer.

Once the twins got a grip of themselves again, they admitted that they would actually like to have a throwing technique as good as his and were, in fact, big fans, although he obviously was affiliated with the wrong city.

They had, more than once, streamed some extra Satsflow to him through their spectator channels in appreciation of a particularly impressive move.

With a tender *Kshhhhhhhhhh*, the glass door slid open, and all three shimmied into the softly lit transport pod. Until they were all strapped in, there was a moment of concentrated silence. Viktor used the pause to properly phrase his question, in perfect OpenAustralé, about the twins' reasons for travel to Earth.

"U3 University gave us a scholarship," Anthony replied.

Gregory went on. "Whoever is born in the Urban Unicorn on Mars is sent to Earth for four years on their twelfth Martian birthday to learn about the other open-source cities."

The ride ended quickly, and they clambered out of the capsule. The twins asked their new best friend if he wanted to join them to explore the minimum Satsflow level and afterwards have beer at the Gravity Bar on their own level (tapped from their Satspool, of course).

It got a little awkward when Viktor had to explain that he wasn't allowed to leave that level without an official invitation and permission. They asked him, of course, how it had come about that he had to return to Earth under such circumstances.

“It’s really a long story,” he said. “But I’ll tell you what happened during my next waking period if you get the bar and beer issue sorted out for me.”

At that point, they parted ways, patting each other’s shoulders vigorously. As he swung into a tube that branched off to his destination, the two unicorns sent a few more cheers after him.

On the way to the medical bay, he wondered what it would be like to play GraviBall in unicorn overalls.

On arrival, he scanned his ID with little enthusiasm to complete the final bio-check before he would be put back into transit sleep. Instead of the expected assignment, however, he received a notice that his sleep period had been delayed by a full day.

Somewhat concerned about the extra Satsflow that using the hamster wheel, mess hall, and hygiene pods meant for a full day, he inquired about the reason for the change. The answer was memorably succinct and took the form of an encoded personal message to him:

Amr.Khamees.NeMa00017 is expecting you tomorrow at 15:00 at the maximum flow level \[Unit 0.0.3\].

N.B.: Satsflow temporarily suspended

Viktor reread the message a couple of times and furrowed his brow in puzzlement. Who is this guy? he thought, and went straight to his computer terminal to find out. His information request immediately returned a glaring *access restricted* notification. He switched the terminal off with a deep sigh and curled up in his bunk. Brushing tubes and cables aside, Viktor closed his eyes and soon fell into a profound natural sleep.

1.3 Maximum Satsflow Level

1.3.1 Lemonade

The Hypagora of Areopolis never ceased to fascinate Viktor.Adler.Areooo187. He traversed the underground vault as he always did on his way to the communication node of the city, touching the lush greenery that grew along the paths. He slowed and stopped where Klara.Balabanova.Areooo865 stood early in the morning whenever she was not engaged in her primary activity. Her fingers danced on the old-fashioned transverse flute, which looked like an original from Earth. Between them, the melody flowed in one direction and some Satsflow in the other, until he had to hurry off to be on time for work in the node.

In the center of the dome, he stopped once more and looked up. His outgoing Satsflow for city operations slowed a bit as the artificial lighting faded and the smallish sun rose above him. It shone through the oval pool of water in the dome ceiling into the heart of the city, dyeing it with the color of blood-orange lemonade.

The glow gradually brightened to a fluorescent white, while a faint beeping to his left started to impose itself on his consciousness. Viktor lolled in his bunk. He even turned onto his other side for a few more minutes without getting tangled in cables or tubes.

1.3.2 Confrontation

Viktor had checked his Satsmeter constantly since he got up, and the level had indeed remained unchanged. Not only the Satsflow for the extras of being awake, such as an artificial gravity shower,

but also the ubiquitous minimum Satsflow for the life support systems seemed to be frozen for him today.

He had still no clue who this Amr.Khamees.NeMa00017 might be. Maybe Veronica knew something about him, but she was already vegetating in her transit cabin again.

Very rarely was there a leak of any information about the activities and inhabitants of New Madina, conveniently situated in the middle of the ice-rich highlands of Arabia Terra on Mars.

Of all the free private cities on Mars, New Madina probably took the “private” part most seriously, except for the Urban Unicorn, which was proprietary to its core.

The door sighed *Kshhhhhhhhhhh* again. As Viktor swung out of the capsule that had hauled him along the longitudinal axis of the ship, he marveled at the amount of space the craft encased at this end. After adjusting his coordinate system, he checked his watch for the seventh time in the past five minutes and immediately headed to Unit 0.0.3.

Once there, he found no door, but rather a veritable portal with an ID next to it and an abstract family crest above it. The common pleb wondered what it represented.

Just as Viktor was pondering how to announce his presence, the door halves slid apart, and he found himself face to face with a discreetly dressed gentleman with a precisely trimmed gray beard. The man clasped his hands behind his back and examined Viktor with his profound eyes.

Mr. Khamees beckoned his tall visitor into the hallway and further along toward his study. Viktor experienced a pleasant increase of centrifugal gravity on the way there and became aware of

the perfect silence when it abruptly ended with, “Isn’t it fascinating, Mr. Adler, that a series of exercises devised to prevent low-gravity muscular atrophy could, within a few years, become the focal point of a global identity for all the Martian colonies?”

Viktor didn’t know the appropriate response but nodded slowly.

“You are not only an outstanding GraviBall player, as far as I know, but originally brought other qualifications with you to Mars,” he added.

“Yes, I signed on as a telecommunications engineer on Mars and have spent the last few years working on synchronizing the blockchain between Earth and Mars. After all, our Satsflow transactions on the second and third layers need to be settled regularly. But we both seem to know that,” Viktor replied.

Amr.Khamees.NeMa00017 remained silent for a moment before he continued in a grave voice. “I know why you were put in this transit ship by the city regulators.”

Viktor swallowed hard. How did this man know about the proof-of-origin algorithm that would indicate the spatial distance between an ASIC mining a new bitcoin block and the isochronic center of hash in the block header? The regulators in Areopolis had good reason to keep the lid on the discovery that got him and Veronica booted from Mars. This innovation would effectively eliminate the threat of Terran stakeholders leveraging their enormous resources to hash-bomb any Martian fork of the blockchain.

Mr. Khamees gave him a feisty look and asked him in his most condescending tone, “So, it’s not enough for you deplorable lot

that we let you stream your Satsflow between all individuals, settlements, or spacecraft on and around Mars for free? How dare you disregard the primacy of Earth, the Genesis planet.”

That triggered Viktor, who physically towered over his host, and words burst out of him. “If Mars is ever going to have its own identity, it must come through the cooperation of all cities, whether free, private, open-source, or whatever. It needs global trade, infrastructure, and self-sufficiency to develop an economy instead of just implementing the business interests of Earth managers. If settlement of Martian Satsflow transactions accrues transaction fees only on Earth, it is taxation for which Mars receives nothing in return.”

“You hit the nail on the head!” Amr Khamees returned with a dramatic change of attitude. Beaming at the confused revolutionary, he went on to explain. “I discussed your ideas with my eldest brother, who runs the family business in New Madina. Unfortunately, he shares neither your idealism nor my love for the red planet. I’ve been ordered back to Earth to rethink my loyalties to our family and Terran business operations.”

Amr snorted contemptuously and added, “I won’t, though. I’m already mobilizing my network and considerable resources to return to Mars as soon as possible. Mars deserves a flourishing society, but in order to achieve that, I will need a team.”

SOURCE

Originally published at konsensus.net/article/transit