

Armchair skippers race virtual Vendee Globe

November 19 2012, by Sandra Lacut



A man plays Virtual Regatta on his computer in Paris. "Virtual Regatta" has signed up some 300,000 players from around the world since the 20 real-life skippers set off from western France on a three-month solo quest for yachting's ultimate prize.

Navigating stormy seas by day and night, hundreds of thousands of virtual skippers are sailing the Vendee Globe while safe and dry at home thanks to an online version of the round-the-world yacht race.

"Virtual Regatta" has signed up some 300,000 players from around the

world since the 20 real-life skippers set off from Sables d'Olonne in western France on November 10, on a three-month solo quest for yachting's ultimate prize.

"I've been immersed in it from the word go thanks to the real-time weather simulator," Philippe Barrier, a cameraman and sailing enthusiast from the Paris area, told AFP.

"The day they left there were two possible routes: I headed due south before the wind dropped, and then I set a westerly course," said the 38-year-old, whose boat "Le_Filou", was ranked 10,047th on Thursday.

The game's virtual sea was dark with boats this week as the thick swarm of competitors set off. Latecomers are free to join at any point, tacking on to the end of the race.

With real-time weather reports, feeding them accurate wind speed and direction, the players set a course as if they were alongside the real-life competitors.

"You can't feel the spray, but you get a lot of the same sensations as at sea," said Barrier. "I'm competitive by nature, so it's amazing to be able to take part in a real race, in real time, with so many people."

And here of course, nobody gets hurt.



British skipper Samantha Davies sails aboard her "Saveol" monohull off the coast of Penmarc'h, Western France, during a training session in September. Navigating stormy seas by day and night, hundreds of thousands of virtual skippers are sailing the Vendee Globe while safe and dry at home thanks to an online version of the round-the-world yacht race.

"It's fun—you can run adrift, turn around, grind almost to a halt—but unlike the real skippers you don't have to worry about colliding with a [trawler](#)," said Louis Andre of the French online game firm Many Player, which developed "Virtual Regatta" in 2006.

"Our goal was to bring yachting to a wider public—we've achieved that tenfold!" said Andre, whose firm has since developed versions for other major races—the Route du Rhum, or Jacques Vabres.

Afficionados include the two-time Vendee Globe winner Michel Desjoyeaux, but around half of all players have no experience of sailing.

Weather maps are updated twice a day, at 7:57 am and pm, for players to tweak their strategy.

"I try to spend as little time as possible at the computer—but to have good visibility over the coming seven days," said Barrier, who plays mostly after his baby son is tucked up in bed.

"If I plan things right, then I only have to log on to check my course." He estimates his daily play time at half a hour—racing as a "purist" without add-on options.



Skippers compete on board their monohulls at the start of the Vendee Globe, in Les Sables d'Olonne, western France, on November 10, 2012. Hundreds of thousands of virtual skippers are sailing the Vendee Globe while safe and dry at home thanks to an online version of the round-the-world yacht race.

For David Houzelot—codenamed "Dadouteam_1", racing in around 6,000th position—the comfort of having satellite navigation, an automatic pilot for nighttime, and extra choice of sails was well worth paying 20 euros (\$25).

"Without it's like navigating with a sextant," joked the 43-year-old businessman, himself a yachtsman.

"The game is about playing with the wind, about thinking ahead, racing hard but also making friends," he said.

"Lots of people play in a team, like a relay race. You can spend a minute or an hour on it."

But while safe from capsizing, the virtual skippers risk glitches of a modern kind, like one recent morning when a technical bug left the site off-limits for five hours, costing some players thousands of places in the ranking.

Twenty skippers began the real-life Vendee Globe race but 16 remain.

Kito de Pavant withdrew and one of the favourites, Marc Guillemot, quit when his keel suffered irreparable damage.

Samantha Davies dismasted in strong winds, while Louis Burton, whose boat was hit by a trawler, pulled out after wind conditions made it impossible for him to return to Les Sables d'Olonne to repair a damaged shroud.

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