

Futures

Freemium

It's no game. By Louis Evans



When the numbers filtered down from endless space, folded into neat little packets, we did not call the President. We called Derek.

Derek was a billionaire, which made him at least 100,000 times as important as any one of us. He'd made his money the way new tech overlords always had: one good idea (supposedly his own), followed by subsequent investments in the good ideas of others.

That first good idea was in games. Derek's freemium models – free to play, pay to win – were the most effective on the market. You've probably played his games yourself; I know I have. At first, the gems or coins or sweets do just what you want them to, whirling into place. You ascend effortlessly. But then, you start to lose. Then the invitation, so innocent. *Would you like to upgrade? Click here!*

Ten billion clicks had made Derek very rich indeed. And, like so many men whose ambitions come to exceed the circumference of the globe, Derek turned his sights upwards.

The tawdry thrusting rockets of a Musk or a

Bezos – all flame and soot and risk and potential failure – were not for him. No, Derek had loftier ambitions. Derek wanted aliens.

That's why he came to us. Our institute was in a bad way. We'd been searching for extraterrestrial life for a long time, but our budget was shrinking and public indifference was growing. When Derek made his offer, we were wary. We fretted about autonomy; the threat to free publication of our research. Six weeks later Derek was sitting in the director's swivel chair – the one with the superlative lumbar support.

So when the signal came down from the heavens, we called Derek.

He whooped with joy, promised us huge bonuses. Giggled until tears streamed down his face. But he refused to go public with our findings. He told us to wait. The institute is sworn to share knowledge with the public, press and government. Waiting is not in our mission statement. But then again, there we were on his private island, with his computer security squad controlling the Internet and his

personal navy controlling the boats. There was not a lot of room for disagreement.

Derek told us to reply to the aliens' message. We told him this was irresponsible and pointless. Surely, we said, the extraterrestrials were many light-years distant; we could not receive a return signal for tens of millennia. But Derek insisted. And we did what he said.

And what do you know? We got a reply. The extraterrestrials copied our signal.

We sent prime numbers; they sent primes of their own. We tried large composites. They sent us back the factorizations of those large composite numbers. Seconds after our signal, mere seconds.

Such a feat is beyond the mathematics and science of humanity. All the computers on Earth could run from now till doomsday and not factorize a single number of the size we sent. For the extraterrestrials it must have been like two plus two.

We told Derek. He swivelled in his posture-fit-nano-mesh-system chair. He paused, tilted his head, and smiled.

Futures

The impossibility of factorizing large numbers is the basis of most modern encryption. It protects corporate secrets, banking secrets, military secrets. Derek knew this. There are those who would pay large sums to have large numbers factorized. Derek knew this, too.

And so Derek sold the aliens as a service. He didn't tell anyone that the secret sauce was godlike beings from beyond the stars, who were mere moments away from us by radio.

In retrospect, perhaps we should have all been a bit more concerned about that.

Instead, Derek was coy. He was evasive. He kept out of the range of the CIA. A fat cable brought encryption codes to our island, and we beamed them at the sky and wrote down the replies. Derek made nearly a trillion dollars in a few weeks, selling the secrets of the world to its wealthiest snoops.

One day, as a joke – but a joke that was more hopeful than speculative – Derek asked us to send the ETs details of the stock market. Seven days of trading.

In return they sent us next week's prices. Not perfectly, but the chaotic froth of the markets

was encompassed by their estimates. Derek became richer and richer at an alarming, exponential rate. Soon the one-time freemium phone-game mogul was the wealthiest man ever, living or dead.

A lesser man than Derek might have wondered how the ETs performed this feat. Not Derek. Derek was, he told us proudly, product-focused. The aliens provided reliable answers, and so the service worked. That was what mattered.

And then Derek told us to ask the aliens how he might become President of the United States.

When we translated their reply we were struck by an undeniable familiarity.

"That answer isn't available on your free trial. Would you like to upgrade?"

The price was Saturn's moon Titan.

Surely, we thought, such a question would have to go before the parliaments and congresses of the world.

Derek did not talk to anyone. "Do it," he said.

Within three years, he was President. Still, the questions kept arriving in our inboxes.

"How can I outmanoeuvre this political rival?" "How can I win this yacht race?" "How can I seduce that pop star?" "How can I become King of Earth?"

We paid with Uranus, Neptune, Saturn and Jupiter. We paid with Mars and Venus and Mercury. We gave them the Sun. We paid with Antarctica and Australia, Africa, Eurasia and the Americas; we paid with every scrap of land on Earth save for this little island. Never was a man more successful in all his quests than Derek. And only he, and we, knew that the entire Solar System was in hock to powers beyond our imagining.

And so it was without shock that one morning we emerged from our communal dorms, rubbed sleepy eyes, and saw ships like mountains hanging insolently in the sky. We knew they had come to collect.

It's free to play, but you pay to win.

Louis Evans is a writer in New York. He spent five years in the SF Bay working for technology start-ups.