

Empire

By Zeph Auerbach

As they reached the lift, Imogen got out her phone. She did a quick border check, finding no immediate threats. She scrolled through the messages, but she'd read them all before. Arushan still hadn't made an official response to her trade offer. Expansion on her south-western border was progressing fine-

"Hey, I thought we said no playing on nights out?" Mark said, half-mock-whining and half-plain-whining.

"I'm just checking, I'll be literally 6 seconds," Imogen snapped back. "Besides, I thought we also said we wouldn't schedule social events that clash with important 9:45s."

"*Important!*" Mark scoffed. He gave her a cheeky grin to make it clear he was making fun of her.

"It *is* important. You know as well as I do this is just the calm before the storm. Any one of them is going to strike against me and you know it."

Imogen reluctantly logged out of *Empire* and put her phone in her pocket.

Now they could fully appreciate this quality time together, standing in silence in a lift.

She looked at her husband, Mark. In-game: Mark the Methodical, a solid mid-score player; at peace with her; good at optimising his economy and researching new technologies. She judged him to be a mild-but-non-negligible militaristic threat, as he lacked long-term goals and never seemed to be building up to a game-changing move. This went against her maxim: *Always have a project.*

Out-game: web developer; smartest and kindest person she knew; energetic and loyal, with thick black hair and beard like some kind of adorable emo puppy dog; founder/director of his own tech company with 5 employees, whose latest contract was £150,000 for making one visible change on one single page of Argos' customer service system; husband of mid-to-high skill level.

"How about I promise you tomorrow we'll have a Master Chef all-nighter with pizza and our laptops out?" Mark said. Imogen smiled and nodded theatrically in response. He continued, "But we haven't seen Arushan and Jacob for over two months." The lift pinged and they walked out to the flat.

"We talk to them *every day*, almost every single hour."

"That's *Empire*," he said, as they reached the door and knocked.

"So?" she said.

Empire was an always-on, long-term, 1-turn-a-day strategy game that they played on their computers and their phones. You grew cities, built units, raised taxes, researched technologies, expanded your borders – all with the ultimate aim of world domination.

The current game had been going for 2 years and 9 months. They could log in at any point in the day and it didn't matter if others were logged in at the same time. It was a rare treat to be logged in when you noticed another player moving their units; this became a rare horror if you realised those units were coming for you. One turn every day with no breaks (even on Christmas day). 2 years and 9 months ago, 15 of them had wandered out into the randomly generated landscape with just a lone settler, looking for the right spot to call their home. There were now only 10 players left, since 5 had already been wiped off the map one way or another.

These were 5 friends they now barely talked to. They didn't have *Empire* to talk about, after all.

In-game: Imogen the Implacable; top score, top economy, highest population, world's most feared military; founder and *de facto* leader of one of the strongest blocs in the game; world target *number one*; cautious to the point of paranoia.

Out-game: hard-working homelessness prevention officer ("I love my job *but I don't know how long I can do it for...*"); happy wife feeling increasingly broody; crochet and macramé enthusiast-

The door opened and it was Arushan.

In-game: Arushan the Resplendent, most advanced in technological progress; proud owner of the most impressive cities in the world. But he played the game like he was playing at dolls' houses, furnishing his cities with things that looked pretty instead of things that *worked*. His empire was teeming with tall and impress-looking monuments that had little impact on the game.

Out-game: a lecturer in macro-economic theory who had little faith that his neat diagrams had any bearing on the real world; as *good* with an economic model as he was *bad* with personal finance; always the host and gushing with good humour;

"Why haven't you responded to my trade offer?" Imogen asked.

"Offer? I think you must have misclicked, because what I saw was nothing but an *insult*," he said, as he went in for a hug. "And 'good evening' to you too!"

"We brought some wine," Imogen said, holding it forward.

"It comes with no contractual obligations," Mark added.

"Beautiful, beautiful," Arushan said, beckoning them in.

Mark wore a huge beaming smile as he entered, so happy to be there. As they took off their jackets, Imogen checked her phone out of pure habit and saw she was low on battery. Amateurish, she thought. She bit her lip and asked, "Can I charge my phone?"

"Sure, sure!" Arushan said.

Damn it, she thought. *Never show weakness*.

So was it Arushan who was plotting against her? He'd been suspiciously cooperative recently. She knew he had some undisclosed transport ships off the coast of her southern shore. Trade ships or war ships? It was impossible to tell. She knew he coveted her capital, *Mirrorwall*, for its majestic temples and its strategic location. It was the jewel in her crown. If that went there was a chance her whole empire would come apart at the seams. She'd stuffed it with defensive units, but were they enough? He would've run the numbers and-

"What do you think of our latest addition?" Arushan asked, pointing proudly at his glass cabinet showcasing a dozen crystal Swarovski animals. The latest addition was a little iridescent newt.

"Pretty," she said, finding it difficult to feign more enthusiasm. But she savoured the moment of seeing him so happy. It was difficult to square this Arushan with the Arushan of her spreadsheets, where she tracked his revenue, population, and research rates. She reviewed the spreadsheet periodically for abnormalities that might signal a lurch in a different direction. But now and again it was nice just to see him in the flesh.

And this was a safe place—a simplified place. Imogen was a member of around a dozen small private chat groups—trade talks, fragile secret pacts, precarious blocs - and it was in those groups where the big deals were made and plots were hatched.

Here? With so many players out in the open? You couldn't discuss anything serious.

So they were going to watch some film and have a bit of takeaway.

Imogen checked her phone. No movement. Calm. Ostensibly nothing to worry about. But that's what they wanted her to think. *A decisive strike will come swiftly and without forewarning.*

They got to the living room and Arushan popped open some Prosecco. His partner, Jacob, got up from the golden suede sofas. "Hi there," Jacob said quietly.

Jacob the Bloodluster. In-game: a chaotic militarist, doggedly genocidal, set out to exterminate all others at whatever cost to him. You were offended if he wasn't trying to annihilate you. A black box player – all you saw were the berserkers at his extremities, and he kept all else hidden from view. No embassies, friendships, pacts.

Out-game: a thoroughly lovely, soft-spoken guy. He worked as a point of liaison between different regulatory bodies associated with the National Health Service. His role was dug so deep into bureaucracy that he might've been making the most profound impact on saving people's lives, or making no difference at all. It was impossible for anybody to tell, least of all him.

One flourish to Jacob's militarism was that at the moment he struck he almost always sent a jokey message with a barely coherent pun. *Bow down and warship your new God.... Come on Trireme!.... Everything's going loco, down in catapulto.....* That's the sort of message Imogen feared she'd see in her 'Game Over' screen.

Phalanx for nothing!

Jacob's economy surely suffered from his isolationist path, but Imogen had a real respect for how closely he held his cards. It made her think she'd been too open, putting herself at risk. *You can give away information for free, but it will cost you.*

"How's the day job?" Jacob asked. A line like this came from him not as a pleasantry but as genuine interest. She told him about how her week had been. She'd been coordinating a new outreach surgery and had been able to spend a decent amount of time with some new clients, who were all vulnerable people at risk of homelessness, usually for multiple reasons (mental health problems, addictions, job losses, rental prices). There were always more people in the queue, but she felt like she was winning battles on a daily basis, even if she was an insignificance in the war.

She told Jacob about one of her regular clients who she'd met just a few hours ago, out on the pavement near the support centre, and the moment she'd put her clipboard down and gone off-script. She loved talking to people, looking into their eyes, making the connection. She could escape from the targets, the data-tracking, the budget cuts. She could escape from *Empire*.

Then after leaving her client that little bit less anxious and more sorted, she would get on her feet, walk away, log back in, and lose herself in the game once again.

Jacob only ever talked about the game tangentially and in surreal comical statements. Was he the threat? He came across as opportunistic, single-minded, and solitary. But she had no idea what was going on in that black box. When would he unleash his full force and run amok within her borders? *Assume that everyone has a plan; hope that they do not.*

Imogen felt a little more distant from Jacob than the other guys, and she couldn't help but think it was because they hadn't ever really had a private chat group going. They'd never planned out a secret attack together or been forced to unite against a common enemy.

After a bit of catching up, Imogen called out to Arushan, "How's your war going with Ludwig?" This was a war Arushan was fighting only reluctantly, against Ludwig the Maniacal, the computer-controlled AI bot that'd taken over from a friend of theirs, Dominic. After

playing with them for over 2 years, Dominic had abruptly gone AI. *Going AI* was one of the worst social moves you could make in this circle. It's what you did if you couldn't hack *Empire* – when you couldn't keep up with the constant reminders and demands. Going AI was like booking into a rehabilitation centre – probably for the best, but you could hardly still expect to hang out with your friends. Those who went AI were uncomfortable reminders that the real-world existed and it asked too much of people.

“Ludwig is an annoyance but I've got it in hand,” Arushan said. “Soon I will adorn my cities with his ill-gotten treasures.”

Arushan went off to sort some snacks and Imogen checked in with the main chat group. This was where all 10 remaining players hung out, pushing out 250+ message a day, ranging from the mundane to the profound and everything inbetween. On Imogen's phone, some of the people on here shared one surname, as she'd met them through the game: 'Brian Empire', 'Owen Empire' - even 'Mark Empire', as this was how she'd first known him and she'd never gotten round to changing it. This was where they discussed all things *Empire*, shared funny selfies, debated the odd moral dilemma, and sparred in juvenile braggadocio.

Today they'd been talking about the buzz of excitement they got when they secretly logged into *Empire* at their workplaces. 'Owen Empire' said he'd only just installed it on his work desktop and it felt so naughty. Jacob said he had set himself a rule only to log in under exceptional circumstances (but it was a rule he loved to break). Arushan said that even though he had his own office he still minimised the screen every 20 seconds like he was looking at porn, and he had a battery of excuses prepared for if a colleague walked in (“*I'm just running a large-scale economic simulation....*”).

The messages went on through night and day, even when they didn't see each other for weeks or months. It was often the first thing they checked upon waking, and the last thing they checked before sleep. The main group was their playground, their common room, their pub.

They took *Empire* pretty seriously. But oh how they loved it.

It wasn't long before Brian arrived. In-game: Brian the Benevolent, Imogen's arch nemesis. Skilled at all aspects of the game, especially growth and diplomacy. He was a man renowned for his tentacles - spreading out to parts of the map others thought he couldn't reach, charming people in private groups into fiendish and elaborate schemes. He was Janus-faced but hard to resist, always offering trinkets and gossip for your cooperation. Never seen to be up to no good, but known to be at it all of the time. He didn't like to get his hands dirty. He probably wouldn't personally lead a strike against her, but he'd gladly be the architect.

Out-game: he always wore the same black jeans and purple shirt, but other than that was unctuous and captivating. He always had time for you and gained your trust almost immediately, making you feel like could share with him your deepest secrets. Brian was a campaigner for social justice and equality who had incidentally just inherited a whole house from his grandparents. He had no plans to give up the house, and had produced a 10, 000 word essay on why he wasn't morally obligated to do so.

It was worryingly convincing.

Brian was a cast-iron threat. But try as she might, Imogen just couldn't get a firm grip on his slippery tentacles.

“How *are* you?” Brian said, sitting close to her, embracing her shoulder, and giving her his full attention.

“I’m great,” Imogen said. “And I’m definitely ready for a new turn.”

“You’re not the only one,” Brian said, flashing his eyes and almost licking his lips, “I’m champing at the bit. Now,” he said, looking this way and that to check nobody else was in earshot, “I’ve got a couple of proposals for you – a few very tasty morsels...”

Imogen feared that Brian had his tentacles wrapped around her closest allies. Imogen was publicly a member of a bloc of 4 players, the others being Mark, Arushan, and a friend called Emily. Together, they had been through it all. They’d grouped together after a series of vicious assaults around a year ago led by Dominic and Owen (with Brian most likely calling the shots). They’d been forced to share technologies and allow movement of troops through each other’s borders. They’d painstakingly planned wave after wave of counterattacks, each of which had been an adrenaline-fuelled joy to carry out. There had been a time when their private chat group had been the most active of them all, and they had trusted each other as much as anyone could in this game.

But now they were all wary of each other. The messages had reduced to a trickle. Everything had gone quiet. Imogen was almost certain that there was a mole in the bloc, who was leaking their information to Brian. Was it Arushan? Could it be Mark? Who was the puppet of Brian?

“What are you offering me?” Imogen whispered back to Brian, but then the others came over, the popcorn was ready, and they started watching the film.

They were settled into the film, which was interesting enough but didn’t require full attention. Imogen was lying with her head on Mark’s lap. She was on her phone, idly tinkering with city management. You could never do enough of this. *Wars are won by menial admin.*

But why were a couple of the others on their phones too? She was suspicious. What were they up to?

She had a few chats going. One of them with Brian, where he was presenting his tasty – if poisoned – morsels. And they were comparing the relative pros and cons of different types of government allowed in the game. Imogen had to be careful, since Brian was adept at the subtle art of information leeching. He liked to over-share to draw her in, proudly boasting about this or that. Imogen was taciturn, guarded.

She ran an intel report on Mark as she looked up at him. She always got a warm feeling when she saw the wedding ring on his finger. It was *Empire* that had given Mark to her. This is where they had first met – his spearman, her scout, down by the river that today still formed their border. This had originally been *her* group of friends and he’d been invited in by Jacob when they were working on an NHS project together. After some tense in-game diplomacy and a couple of skirmishes, Imogen and Mark had met face-to-face at a Jimmy Eat World gig and hit it off. Two years later they were married.

They called the river ‘*The Seine*’, after where he’d proposed to her. They had even given it this label in the game.

They’d included in-jokes about *Empire* in their wedding speeches. No, not not all of the guests had understood them, but the game had meant so much to them that they didn’t care. Besides, the references could’ve easily been explained if people asked, and the game was fairly well documented.

There were some players (Christie and Owen) who objected to the whole thing and said it simply wasn't fair. Natural alliances would seep into game alliances. But what are you going to do? You can't hold back love. And you can't stop a game a year in.

She checked her watch. Only 40 minutes until 9:45. *Surely* they needed to make their move on her then. At the current trajectory she would soon be untouchable.

Then Erica came in, Arushan and Jacob's flatmate. She shuffled through to do some washing up.

There were a couple of quiet *Hi's* and then a long awkward silence in the room. Erica was a childhood friend of Arushan. She used to be in *Empire*, and a prominent player at that. In-game: powerful, peaceful, ambitious. Then she'd been on her hen party (engaged to a non-player) when – after weeks of planning – they'd double-turned her.

'Double-turning' was what some players did at the time of a new turn, 9:45. *Seconds* before the new turn came around, they would use up the movement points of aggressive units to position them close to another player's city. Then 9:45 would come and refresh their movement points. As fast as they could they'd attack the city in an attempt to capture it.

There were some who said that this was not the way the game was intended to be played. *Empire* was a finely balanced turn-based game, like chess, and you can imagine how cheated a chess grandmaster would feel if his King was killed by a double-turn. Some refused to countenance using a double turn on a point of principle. They saw no honour in it.

Others double-turned with simple glee. They built up to a colossal and meticulously orchestrated strike with months-long D-Day like preparations. Then they waited for the fated 9:45 to pounce, hoping their quarry wouldn't spot their troops fast enough to react.

After all, if Kasparov could've double-turned, he would've done.

Imogen publicly condemned double-turning but privately admired it. *There are many paths to victory; best keep them all open.*

So it was a double-turn that had ruined Erica's hen party. She'd been in Edinburgh, dressed as a nun, with all of her closest friends - including Imogen and another *Empire* player, Christie – all dressed as nuns. They'd spent the day knitting underwear together and daring each other to drink more and more Scotch. They had only just arrived at their first bar. Erica had just been confiding to Imogen something about her teenage years, something that only came out with alcohol, and then she'd checked her phone-

'ERICA', came the message, '*You might want to check all of your capitals, ERICA.*' It was Jacob. 9:46.

Erica had asked Imogen to come with her to the toilet and there, distraught and dressed as a sexy nun, she'd logged in to find 5 of her greatest cities razed to the ground, and her former capital – her pride and joy – now in Jacob's hands. There had been a few conspirators, widely believed – but not confirmed – to have been coordinated by Brian. Jacob had simply been told the time and the place. He later claimed he didn't even know Erica was on her hen party.

Through tears, Erica had asked Imogen if she knew anything about it, but she promised that she didn't (which was true, and Imogen kicked herself for such a lapse in military intelligence). It slowly dawned on them that the conspirators had needed someone on the inside, someone with them there, one of the nuns, to keep them informed about whether Erica was logged in or not.

They went outside and confronted Christie, who confessed after a few evasive answers. There ensued much shrieking and name calling. The rest of the party didn't understand. Wasn't it just a game?

On the group's wiki page, the event was chronicled as *The Hen Party Massacre*. Here different views were put forward about whether a line had been crossed. It was also a common topic of bedroom conversation between Imogen and Mark. Imogen had felt a lot of sympathy for Erica, perhaps because she'd had a visceral reaction to seeing her so traumatised. But Mark had stuck with the line, "She knew what game she was playing."

If you're not playing the game to win, you're playing a different game.

Not only did it end Erica's hen party early, but it also ended a few friendships. And it ended Erica's game. On returning to London, Erica had performed the act even more sacrilegious than double-turning: she'd *gone AI*. She'd turned all of her empire over to the computer's control and never logged in again. She'd even left the main chat group.

As Erica continued with her washing up, the awkward silence lingered. There were people in the room thinking, '*She could've gotten back on her feet, she should've sought revenge. We were ready to rally behind you.*' When Erica turned the tap off and left she gave them all a perfunctory smile.

It was pretty chilling.

Imogen looked up at Mark, winced a little, and squeezed his hand. Erica used to be their friend. Mark clearly didn't know where to look; he hated to see people hurt and he found awkward moments unbearable.

Imogen checked the main group but there wasn't all that much activity. Most of them were here in this room after all.

In their private group, Imogen flippantly pressed Brian on who his mole was in her bloc. Brian jokingly assumed the truth of the mole hypothesis and ran through an analysis of why he might've chosen each of the candidates. She found their bitter enmity a comfort. She knew exactly how much she could trust him, even if this was: not at all. For most of the first year, Brian had himself been out in the lead, and they both knew what it was like to be out there, vulnerable, by yourself. *It is lonely at the top.*

Why weren't they going for her? They could see she was growing only stronger.

They barely noticed when the film ended, and then the buzzer rang for the takeaway.

"Amazing!" said Mark, bounding to the door. "So, so hungry."

"As am I," said Brian, rubbing his hands together, "Hungry for a new turn."

They sat down at the dinner table as Jacob and Arushan laid out the steaming foil Indian takeaway containers in front of them. It was 9:43. Conversation was light and noncommittal. All 5 of them were logged into *Empire* – Imogen, Mark and Jacob on their phones, Brian and Arushan on their laptops. Their eyes darted across the screens as they watched for movement. Imogen referred to this as her act of *vigilance*. Even if you yourself were not planning something, you needed to quickly react if you were under attack. Sneaky encroachments could come from any direction. You didn't want to be the victim of another *Hen Party Massacre*.

One shift of a unit could be the start of an avalanche. 9:44. Nobody pretended anymore that they were interested in anything except seeing in the new turn. They sat in silence and could hear each other breathe. They were paralysed by the act of perception.

Who'll have the guts to strike me? Imogen thought. Who's the mole in my bloc? How many of them are in a pact to seal my fate? She looked around the room. Jacob would drink her blood without a moment's thought. Mark's soft smile might conceal dark thoughts of pragmatism. Arushan – how long could he resist lapping up her palaces and citadels? Was he a puppet of Brian? How far had Brian's tentacles reached?

For the final 30 seconds, Imogen was absorbed in *Empire* in her entirety. She was in that map, she was leading her cities, she was responsible for her troops. Its economy coursed through her, its production fed off her.

9:45. A new turn.

Mark emitted a strange yelp of delight (it was typical for some of them to get simply *too into it*). Sighs of relief were heard around the table. Nobody had been attacked. They each read their messages, moved their units, and checked what their cities were working on. They remained almost in silence, just sharing the occasional "Ooh!" or "Oh?" They checked the updated leader board showing who was top for all of the different metrics. Then one by one they logged out, feeling they could finally relax into their food, safe in the knowledge they had 24 hours to finish taking their turns.

"So we all saw who's way out in the lead for both population and economy," Brian said. "I give it 20 turns until Immy wins."

"So do something about it," Imogen said, as she ripped into a large chunk of chicken. "And whatever it is you're doing, just get on with it."

Wry smiles came up around the room. Imogen had gone a little red and Mark must've noticed because he stroked the back of her hand reassuringly.

That was all they had to say about *Empire* for now. Talk turned to work, weddings, babies. There was always a bit of a lull after the rush of a new turn.

After the meal, Arushan made a round of espresso martinis and brought out the karaoke set. They took it in turns to sing their hearts out and annoy the neighbours.

Imogen went to the toilet as Mark was screaming his lungs out to a Fall Out Boy song and the others were up to a bit of embarrassing dancing. She took her rucksack with her. She went inside, locked the door, took a deep breath, and got a laptop out of the rucksack. She sat on the toilet seat and logged into *Empire*. She performed a dozen actions in quick succession, until she was ready. She checked again and again. Was everything in place? Had she planned for every possibility?

She could hear Mark straining his vocal chords at the chorus. She loved him so much.

But victory was within her reach.

Over the last few months she had amassed exactly 28 artillery, 16 riflemen, 10 cavalry, and 4 engineers. In massive armies she sent them across the river she had not crossed for over two years: the crossing of the *Seine*. The game asked her if she was sure she wanted to declare war on Mark the Methodical and she confirmed without hesitation. She didn't have much time. She had a plan and it was crystal clear to her.

Always have a project.

She sent wave after wave of artillery against his capital. He had tougher defences than she had predicted but she had planned for such a thing. She was aiming for nothing other than a capture of his capital, which would throw him into utter disarray. She hoped it

would trigger a civil war that would rip his empire in two. She hadn't needed the double turn because of their close proximity, both in-game and out.

Had he expected it? Was that why he had built up those troops? Or had he been preparing for his own attack on her? Was he the mole in their bloc?

She seized his capital and, with amazing luck, it triggered a civil war. In that instant he lost half of his cities, which he had been growing for nearly three years. Outside, she could hear him trailing off on the final verse of the song. It was a song they usually sung together. It had been played in the late-night embers of their wedding night.

She went after another three cities. The first two fell but the last one stood.

She mopped up a few of his units out in the field. In the end it had been too easy. She had captured three great cities and the balance of the game had swung even more in her favour. Once the others realised what had happened, they would surely concede the game.

She closed the laptop. The song stopped. No other song took its place. She guessed that one of them had found out and they were now all frantically checking their empires. She pictured herself striding boldly into the room, a face full of pride.

She unlocked the door and stepped outside. Her heart was pumping, she was breathing fast. She felt victorious and elated. By conquering those cities, she had defeated them all.

As she entered the room, she found them all anxiously checking their screens. Her Mark was sitting on the edge of the sofa, bent forwards, his hand up against his forehead. He must have been checking for what remained, picking through the corpses. "You knew what game you were playing," she thought but did not say.

Arushan got up and graciously offered her a handshake, but she was stunned. She found herself speechless, her mouth dry. She hadn't felt this guilty since she'd been caught misbehaving as a small child.

Mark had not looked at her yet. He did not say anything. And when he did, what would he say?

She wanted desperately to be back there. To be with her thriving empire once again.