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FEATURES



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~ Interview with Larry Dunlap ~

By [Joey Connelly](#)

Recently I was contacted by Scott Miller, the Marketing and Community Manager for [Intelligent Life Games](#), about a game the studio currently has in development called "[Imperial Wars](#)". Curious as to what this sci-fi "episodic meta-game" was all about, I recently got to speak with Larry Dunlap, the Creative Director for Intelligent Life Games, who gave me the skinny on this ambitious upcoming title.

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Joey Connelly: Thanks for taking time out of your schedule to talk with me. So, what is your involvement with the development of Imperial Wars?

Larry Dunlap: Thank you for taking the time to talk with me. At Intelligent Life Games, we have been working in the dark for the last several years and it is astonishing to watch what is happening as we come out into the light of day. Right now we are excited and thrilled that many people seem to like and understand our game. We don't want to get too excited because the jury will be out for a while on Imperial Wars. It is a game with a long-lasting flavor so it will be months yet before the veterans emerge from their universes, like groundhogs, to give us their opinions. So, thank you, Joey.



Imperial Wars is a multi-player "episodic meta-game"

I'm a founder of ILG and I serve as the Creative Director of the team, the Lead Designer and keeper and protector of the Holy Grail, the vision of the game. It's a constant balancing act for all of us, a sort of Cirque du Soleil, because, like every one else on a small team we stretch and balance all the time. I wear multiple hats depending upon the hour and day of the week.

JC: On the Imperial Wars website, the game is described as being an "episodic meta-game". Would you elaborate on what exactly that is?

LD: Well, let's start with the Metagame part first, partly because that's the most exciting part and partly because that's what changes a turn-based game into an episodic game. The Metagame is that hugely entertaining part of a game that takes place outside of the game's rules. Most game designs try desperately to quash this aspect of a game since it falls dangerously outside of the control of the design. It's a little like trying to design organized chaos. But the environment surrounding a game is the most spontaneous and fun thing about games, as well.

The Metagame is what everyone is doing at the Saturday night poker party except laying out their cards. It's the bluffing, the table talk, the munching while taking a break, it's the walk around outside between hands. It's the Sunday afternoon Monopoly or Risk game with local rules, and catching the penalty money from some of the spaces when you land on Free Parking and the deal making and deal breaking that fall way outside the rules. It's the feel of the sun on your back, the strategies of play, the stolen base and the beers after a softball game. It's the social aspect of gaming and the organized

disorganization of parlor games like Diplomacy. The rules are designed to be static so the players can be dynamic and play around them.

The Internet is first and foremost a social place. To this day 60% of the use of the Internet is for email. Imperial Wars follows that lead and creates a communications gamespace with in-game email, an embedded Messenger with address books populated automatically by the players in the game as you meet them and open Forums for each universe, kind of a sub-community inside the larger Iwars community. This allows a lot of different kinds of communication at varying levels of immediacy. While we make a real commitment to anonymity, people can and often give up their anonymity, however, to call each other on the phone or even travel to each other's cities to meet one another. We have a player recently from here in the states who is traveling on spring break to England where he has already made arrangements to meet some IWars buddies he has met while playing. Not only will he get in his game turns but they're working out plans for clubbing together whilst in the UK.



Maybe that sounds like pen-pals or a giant chat room or something. Well, what can you put together that would make people want to engage in that kind and level of communication? By far the hardest effort has been in creating a deceptively simple science fiction based wargame with a lot of depth played at world and star fleet level. It is a fun game element all on its own and there was a time when that game alone would be enough to attract a lot of players. But it is really interesting when human creativity drives it. So the next game element is the role-playing aspect that is radically different from most current role-playing. Here the attributes of your character choice of the seven available determine your role-playing "voice" instead of attributes assigned by dice roles or other arbitrary systems. The key to

interaction in IWars is the strategical motivation to compete contrasted against the tactical need to cooperate and the different ways that is realized among the sixteen players in a universe. These characters are drawn from the archetypal type of characters you find in the great science fiction classics and movies. The Raider, Baron, Trader, Philosopher, Warlord, Terminator and the skin-changing Hourii. Role-playing is optional, not demanded. But if your role-playing enhances your character enough to give you an advantage in convincing another player to work with you rather than a competitor to gain mastery of your corners of the universe then role-playing is an advantage.

When this is all closely integrated together you get a whole that is larger than its parts. You get a long-lasting game taking place in real-time (not that imaginary real time of the session and persistent games) with a lot of suspense, anticipation and emotion that creates feeling of episodes as a turn rolls over. This sense of episode is enhanced because there are no ticks, the players can control the turns. The game will move as fast as they do unless they don't move fast enough, of course, and then a deadline keeps the game moving along.

JC: It seems that you're taking a much different approach to multi-player online gaming than what the current crop of MMOG titles are offering. How does your game differ from popular MMOG titles like Ultima Online or EverQuest?

LD: As you can already see, it is very, very different, right from its conception. The MMOG's made their way up from the solitaire adventure games of the earliest days of electronic gaming, when due to the primitive nature of the environment, games were played solitaire. Colossal Cave and Adventure and the following Zork were solitaire puzzle games. Then someone figured out how to put more than one person into an online dungeon and the MUDs were born. Add a dose of Dungeons and Dragons (actually a tabletop wargame to begin with), graphics, a change in emphasis on the simulation of environments and you have the present generation of MMOGs.

I don't ever want to disparage these MMOGs. I think they are miraculous inventions in that they take the impossible and almost make you believe it. I take my hat off to the geniuses that are designing and building them and I really like and respect those of them I have met and know. The Internet is not a real-time place and yet their servers can almost give you that illusion. On the other hand I sat in a major game attorney's office in Century City last week and he perked up when he heard that I was a game

maker. He says, "Oh, yeah, you make Massively Multiplayer Online Games, right?", and I say, "Uh, drop the Massively and we make multiplayer online games" and I watched his eyes glaze over. Now that does upset me. The MMOG guys have had a long run and they have convinced a lot of the free world that MMOG equals online games, that they are the only viable game system. Nope, sorry I disagree. There are a lot of game styles that are way under-served and they need some room to grow as well.

Imperial Wars has an interesting beginning I think, and its only important in seeing how different game systems create modern games. Through an odd quirk of fate, a surprisingly right guess, and a venture capitalist who shared the vision of computer games being broadcast and played on cable television I entered the game business as a broadcast publisher in the early eighties. We managed to attract some very bright young software engineers from Caltech, an astonishingly capable marketer, a sprinkling of cable veterans and a couple of refugees from Atari. Danged if The Games Network didn't almost pull it off, licensing every known game title in the US and far east in those days and lining up cable systems with more than 6 million subscribers. The company went public as GNET on NASDAQ, probably before it should have and for not enough money to support the enormous cost of building the set-top boxes that could bring twenty computer games to a cable subscribers home for \$15 a month. We had a test system up and proving the technology and the cover of TV Guide was in sight when we went belly-up.

Before I realized the trauma and toll that that TGN's failure would take, I had been doodling with an idea for the game I wanted us to make when we got to add our own content. I felt that we were in the infancy of interactivity and that by combining video and the computer in just the right way on this giant network we could create a really cool game. After all I got to look at every game that was being made at the time for all their strengths and weaknesses. It would have to be a science fiction based game because games and sci-fi were basic obsessions since high school. Also, it needed to have the interaction of the board games I'd grown up with Indiana. Of course the people who played it wouldn't be close to each other geographically so the game had to have some way to promote interactions and most important, it had to be a totally immersive, satisfying and long-lasting game experience but still fit people's active life styles. I chose aspects of more games than we have time to discuss here but at least two were wargames and I willingly stood upon all their shoulders while trying to stir these concepts all together into something new. The good and bad thing was my career in games and cable television was to be rudely interrupted.

The point to this long-winded diatribe is that IWars was conceived about the same time that Zork was being published and had entirely different although just as worthy ancestors as the MMOGs. While everyone right now seems to be trying to make the same online game with different looks and chasing the same customers, at ILG we're trying to make a different and unique game that has proven fun concepts derived from its ancestors. When UO hit the Internet, finally the good thing about waiting for IWars had arrived. I'd had a lot of time to put into this game concept, honing it and working with it and even developing it into a computer-moderated text game for a while. It is exciting now to see it come to life.

A final contrast between Episodic Metagames and MMOGs. The MMOG's are time-eaters, demanding players to spend as much time online as possible so as to not miss something in this illusion of real-time. The Episodic Metagame lives easily within the lives of people who cannot afford the tyranny of time that an MMOG imposes and still delivers the same immersive quality that a major game experience provides. IWars will wait until you have time to come play. You and your fellow Starlords need space to cogitate and contemplate and email communication lets that process take place on different time schedules. So a big difference is the time requirement for players to play.

JC: Does the game contain any ongoing storylines/quests or is it rooted solely in turn-based, single game player vs player strategic gameplay?

LD: Interesting question because this question came up on our forums recently from a newer player. Before anyone could respond several of the other players answered. There are always quests in Imperial Wars but they aren't pre-programmed, they are derived. There are old Imperial Gems and ancient Imperial Relics and the Jewels of Power in the game and some characters favor them over others and some that have negative effects. The interaction of players creates "quests" by the very virtue of the game elements and the way they are combined. And that is one of the very key aspects of

Imperial Wars. While there are suggested ways to play the game there is no pre-determined way whatsoever. I like to think of the game rules as a set of mental monkey bars around which are wrapped seven different character attributes, sixteen players and the motivation to both compete and cooperate in an ancient galactic empire. From there the players swing through the game writing their own story, playing their own games and doing a much better job of it than any level designer could create for them. The more active, and almost by definition more successful players completing a game are usually quite anxious to find some way to relate the experience, the story they have just lived through. If you visit our forums you can already see these stories taking shape in the Universe Forums for games yet that have months to run.

JC: Will player's characters be able to increase in skills or abilities?

LD: Leveling is the bane of online games. It is the permanently unbalancing factor in an activity that requires balance. I have never been to a game conference where one of the topics wasn't how to balance an MMOG. The answer is simple. You can't. The new players want to compete with the advanced players. The experienced players want an advantage earned by their experience and commitment. In the long run you have to please one or the other and you must satisfy your steady player base first to stay in business. The game makers who make persistent worlds worry and grumble over the new players that they lose because of it. Leveling is a leftover from solitaire gaming when players got things for achieving and it has never worked well in multiplayer games.



In Imperial Wars you gain skills or abilities by actually having them and learning the depths of the characters and the game itself. They are not awarded to you artificially. If you want to be wiser or smarter or have more stamina or to find hidden traps, you're going to have to actually be capable of doing that. You'll earn them by your play and your understanding and your role-playing voice.

JC: How far along in development is the game and do you already have a publisher?

LD: We are far enough along in development to begin open beta testing though it stretches us to the limit. There are certain development goals that we have to complete before we can launch ourselves commercially and while they are in sight though they are agonizing to complete. While the current game players who are playtesting stress us in their demand for our attention they also inspire us with their enthusiasm and their amazing willingness to put up with things I thought they might blast us for. We have gotten flamed just once, and even our flamer had to reluctantly agree that he liked the game even if he hated the UI. Fortunately, our community stood up for us and what could be better than that they understand what we're trying to do.

Before my brush with cable and broadcast game publishing, I was in the music business and became very familiar with the business model that music publishers use. I felt that model was very unfair to musicians and the music business is paying for its hubris now in more ways than one. The game business needs to wake up and smell the coffee burning. The constant ravaging of creative talent in the game business is discouraging to me as a game fan because it costs us all as devotees of the art. The larger the budgets and teams, the less chance we have of seeing brilliant game concepts shining through. Oh we're seeing bigger and better sequels and games based on licensed franchise names but we're not seeing enough break-through game concepts because there is almost no one out there who will fund them.

We are self-funded and our team right from the beginning has been committed to taking our game all the way to final step, the individual player on the Internet, if we couldn't find a fair deal. So far we are still on our own though we continue to hope to find that big brother who will be willing to trade resources and funding for a share of this game niche. One of the reasons that ILG and teams like us have any chance without the big promotion dollars of a publisher is because of people like you and the other online journalists who give us space to tell our stories and to hosts like Webcountry in LA and OpenBase who through strategic partnerships have given us professional tools and environments we

couldn't have otherwise afforded to create on the most professional level. Many experts believe that an independent developer just can't bring an online game to the Internet because it just costs too much to develop it. But if we can tell our story then the player will decide what is possible and what is not. That is the democracy of the Internet and I wouldn't have it any other way.

JC: What's the projected date for public release and will there be a monthly fee?

LD: As I said earlier, we have certain defined goals to hit and that is more important to us than a solid date. Since we consider ourselves a game service and not a retail shrink-wrapped game product, ha - we don't even have a channel to a store shelf, there is no particular day we have to launch in synching up to a store launch. If you forced me to predict then I would say we expect to be commercially launched before spring but we must have the game completed to our first design spec first and we must reach a certain number of satisfied test players before we'll take that step. In short we have to be happy with our service before we feel we can charge for it.

Also since we are a game service, we give the game itself away and will charge a subscription fee of \$10.99 per month or less. If turns end a game in an odd 30-day period, then we will only charge \$3.95 for that turn. I like this model because it us up to us to prove our game is fun every month of its existence. I think we can do that. People have asked for full game prices and we will accommodate that and we will award a lot of free months for community members who not only play for their own fun but also add to the enjoyment of the players around them.

JC: Sounds good to me. I'm often taken aback at how you have to spend upwards of \$50 on an MMOG title (just for the installation CD), only to then have to shell out \$13 a month or so just to play it. I think ALL online game developers should offer a free download of their game if there's a monthly fee to play. Good show! Will there be a consistent release of new content to be patched into the game?

LD: Boy, am I glad you asked this question because I was just thinking I'd missed something I wanted to say earlier when you asked about development. I think online game development is the neatest thing ever. It is a collaborative effort between players and design team. As a developer/publisher you are connected to your audience, always, and that is a 380-degree concept change from the retail game products. A lot of the MMOG teams that I listen to talk about going to a live team after launch. While I agree in a principle with that and understand the change in the emphasis for the live team's tasks, I (we) will also be in full development for a long, long time. See, our games end. That means that when you re-enlist for a new game you're likely to get a new client because there is so much more that we want to do and such a smooth path forward to get there. We can hardly stop where we plan to now, simply because we have talked about all the things that we can continue to do to add to the game and the community, an integral part of the game.. Imperial Wars version 1 will be a complete and terrific game I think. But it won't approach the Imperial Wars of a year from now and of a year after that. But that's what comes of being first in a niche. We have lots of room to invent. I can tell you one thing, I suspect there will be an Imperial Wars game coming to your phone and PDA one of these days.

JC: A lot of upcoming MMOG's require pretty high-end PC's in order to run their games. Will this be the case with Imperial Wars?

LD: No, not really. And a fast connection isn't a necessity either, except for downloading the game and we have a relatively small download of less than 30 MB. The data structure is all on the server but the game elements are all in the client so there is not a lot of necessity for a quick or persistent connection. You really only connect when you first login and when you Save or Submit a move, although it doesn't seem that way. Also, there is no need to move things around the screen in the same way as a FPS or RTS game does. Imperial Wars is game that "breathes" and needs the space and time for contemplation. It is anything but a twitch game. The emphasis is on game play here not just the greatest number of triangles we can move around. I am not disparaging graphics except when they are the focus of the



"...eye candy for the sake of eye candy will not exist in this game"

marketing and the reason that the game exists. Bruce Dean our Art Director has done a masterful job of creating characters and a wonderful galactic environment that we play IWars in and we have major plans graphically for the future. On the other hand, the graphics will always serve the game play and eye candy for the sake of eye candy will not exist in this game. As Bruce and I often have discussed, the best games are where the art is so effective that the craft is hidden behind the gameplay in the same way that a master writer's words disappear in the thoughts and concepts that make up a story.

JC: Is the current beta period open to new play-testers or is closed?

LD: We sent our first open invitations out to our forum members on December 28, just before the New Year, so it has been less than a month since we entered open testing. So the answer is yes with the small caveat that you must register as a Charter Citizen on our Imperial Forums. We want new players to sense the density of the comments and threads that are running throughout the forums and get a better grasp of what they are getting into. We do not want people forming games without getting a grasp of the depth of the game they are entering! In the forums for each universe it is fun to drop in and see how people address each other outside of their in-game communications. It is astonishing to see how rapidly this community is growing and how quickly the players are grasping these new game concepts. I was told by one of the top agents in the game biz that people wouldn't easily learn a new way to play. I bit my tongue rather than be argumentative but MMOG gaming is really pretty new and didn't have an easy learning curve. We are constantly working to make IWars more intuitive and I think it will likely be considered a very easy game to learn to play by the time we are finished with the interface.

JC: Thanks again for chatting with me about this most intriguing game. It's nice to see developers making an attempt at bucking the trend and offering something fresh in today's stale online gaming market. Is there anything else you'd like to say in closing?

LD: I must re-iterate how important it is for people like you and game sites like yours to take the time to talk to the inventive and creative independent game makers. Giving space to the indies alongside the major game developers and publishers is like water on a planted seed. The voice you give to us is an opportunity to be heard and for our visions to bloom. From these blooms players gain choice and the opportunity to have a game experience that best fits them and their lifestyle. It helps bring freshness and life to a young but already stagnating industry just as it is about to hit its most ambitious year with the launch of so many major game titles. And it helps perpetuate the promise of the Internet to not just be another media channel owned by the corporate giants. So, Thank you.

JC: You're welcome, and good luck with the ongoing development of Imperial Wars.

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For more information on "Imperial Wars", visit the official website at www.ImperialWars.com



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