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Interview with Larry Dunlap on Imperial Wars

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Larry Dunlap, Game Designer for Imperial Wars and one of the Intelligent Life Games founders, tells us what his game, IWars is all about. Several independent game designers are bringing new game concepts to the Internet. Intelligent Life Games is just launching what promises to be one of the more interesting concepts, an integration of cutting edge web communication technologies and the "classic" game style of the meatier strategy games of the past.

IWars is not like most games on the market, it fits in a more unique category: EPMG (Episodic Metagame)

WarCry: Imperial Wars bills itself as unique style of online game. Would you give us a quick description of it before we start?

Larry: Imperial Wars is a mix of several game styles. Technically, it is a turn-based, strategy, multiplayer online role-playing game of diplomacy set in the ruins of an ancient stellar civilization. That's kind of a mouthful so we call it an EPMG, or Episodic Metagame: Episodic because the turns form episodes during game play and Metagame because so much of the game is played in the role-playing and communication turn interval that takes place outside of the strategy game structure. We are often lumped in with the persistent world games because IWars does fit the definition of persistence by being a game that lasts a long time and because the game world evolves whether players manipulate their empires or not. 16 Starlords play simultaneously with enough time between turns to let players from all over the world compete in the same game universes. The turn interval lets Starlords create strategies of alliance and war through embedded game communications like email, private forums and instant messenger and that allows room for the players to have a real life. These game universes have a rich and compelling beginning, middle and end and since they can last up to 4 months, it is important for these games to breathe, to favor an incremental play style rather than the consecutive play that MMOGs demand.

The strategy aspect is based upon each Starlord beginning with control of an industrially rich Homeworld with a relatively simple world/empire economy and 5 star fleets waiting for ships and a command to begin exploration. The role-playing facet arises through a choice of a Character Type that each Starlord makes from 7 iconic science fiction archetypes – Baron, Raider, Terminator, Philosopher, Trader, Warlord, or the chameleon Hourai. Each player gets points unique to their character's attributes but to maximize their points they need to negotiate interactions with one another while competing with one another for points at the same time – a creative tension. As these points lead to an endgame, the political intrigue heats up as players jostle for position, join



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alliances or leave them to jump out from the pack. Role-playing, as the leader or "voice" of a civilization, is the most effective way to entice a Starlord to work with your empire rather than another. Mixed into the play are ancient artifacts with various values and powers and several kinds of worlds that affect how the game evolves.



Warcry: I'm still a bit confused here. Can you please define the term "Persistent world"?

Larry: Webster's defines persistent as "existing for a long or longer than usual time or continuously". Recently on a game industry panel that I was on, several online publishers agreed that the definition for a

persistent world was a game space where things changed whether the player was there or not. I would also add to this specific use of the term persistence, the quality of constant or persistent communication between players throughout the game. So I propose that there are "infinitely" persistent worlds and "finitely" persistent worlds. We fall into this latter branch.

We are turn-based rather than a game where time flows continually. Turn-based games have been notoriously unsuccessful on the web despite the fact that this game style plays more strongly to the strengths of the Internet. Without going into a long explanation I believe that by closely integrating web communication into our graphical game engine and automating nearly every facet of the game we have maximized the turn/move play cycle in this style of game. It was a conscious decision to allow turn intervals that let a lot of the action take place between the turns, strictly in the hands of the players in what we call the Metagame, building to mini-conclusions at the end of each episode.

All multiplayer games have a "Metagame" aspect to them. It is the very specific sense of community that surrounds game play. In Saturday night poker, it is bluffing, hanging with your buddies and table talk. In Monopoly it is the "local" rules and deals that go way beyond the rules but are agreed upon by the players. In pickup sports it's the interpretation of the rules to fit the situation like say, "the driveway is out of bounds." We have made every effort to bring this sense of open play inside the game structure with almost no limit to how the rules can be interpreted.

Warcry: Is there a reason why there are only 16 players in an Imperial Wars universe? Have you considered rising the number of players who can play in each game or the number of worlds in a universe?

Larry: In the world of Massively Multiplayer Game Universes, 16 players may not at first sound like very many players and there might be a tendency to think you're getting cheated by not having hundreds if not thousands around you. But one has to ask if a massive numbers of players isn't more of a necessity for an MMOG than the feature it is promoted to be. While fantasy world simulations are fascinating to visit (and I make it a point to walk around in as many as I can find time for) they need massive numbers of people online to be certain that there is some sort of interaction. But you cannot really have much of a relationship with most people in this environment. It is obvious that you must be online together often to have any depth of relationship with

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another player but less obvious are two other factors. One, if you and your comrades do not play equally as often, soon you will no longer be enjoying the same experiences as your character levels change, communication between players is therefore not persistent. And two, there is not a true effect of actions and the resulting consequences from them. People commit horrible virtual crimes on one another in this environment knowing that there is little or no consequence since the likelihood of meeting again will be very small. If this require a game presence of the publisher than this intrusion damages the game concept. These fantasy worlds can become very amoral environments that appeal more to adolescent murder fantasies than real adventuring. Often this kind of anti-social activity is blamed on human nature. I don't believe that, I think it is a failure in the environment. In the end analysis, massive numbers of players has been made to sound a lot more attractive than it actually turns out to be. There are times when less is more.



WarCry: Alright, so what events can occur in a game of 16 players?

Larry: To directly address the number of 16 players in an IWars universe, I believe the depth of the relationships in our kind of game is more important than the number of players in the game.

Consider that Jared Diamond in his book, "Guns, Germs, & Steel" speaks of how many actual relationships exist in a small clan or community, which is just what an IWars universe becomes. For 16 players there are potentially 120 dyad, or one to one potential relationships (16 times 15 divided by two) or 1,120 possible triad relationships including one to three and all possible permutations, and similarly, for quad relationships between 16 players, there are 10,920 potential combinations. And these relationships can potentially shift from episode to episode as conditions evolve and diplomatic declarations of Ally, Neutral or Enemy are made between players adding tone to these coalescing relationships. In Imperial Wars there is more than enough complexity for these associations to become more intense with more gradations. And I believe, because of this, they are less contentious and more productive in creating engrossing game play than in the massively subscribed games. Communications are constant and integral to game play so these relationships continually broaden and deepen. It is very clear in our experience that 16 players are more than enough to insure a deep and compelling interactive game experience.

Sixteen is a magic numbers in the consciousness of human beings. It seems a number we can easily comprehend but actually, as shown above, it is full of complexity. This number, or a variant of it, occurs over and over again in many game environments and designs (and not just because it is a hex number, it is true for games well before the digital era). In the case of Imperial Wars, the mixture of 7 (another key number) character types divided into the 16 Starlord positions insures several different mixes of games as players join the game queue for a new universe. The game server is required to select a minimum of two and maximum of three of each character from the queue when begins the process of creating a unique universe for play. To delve a bit deeper into the design, there are 350 worlds of various types and the Homeworlds are so placed to practically guarantee that players will begin meeting each other very early in the game, which is when the

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stories begin to flow. There are 220 starfleet engines in each universe, besides the 80 shared out among the players at the beginning, 49 gems and 14 ancient relics that have varying and competing values for Starlord characters and provide trading possibilities, as well as 7 Power Jewels that directly affect game objects.

Without covering the ranges of world values and their connections I can tell you there is a specific equilibrium of numbers and concepts intermixed to balance Imperial Wars, to insure an interesting and exciting universe every time out. It took a long time to find this balance and the numbers that create it. It is a challenge to test a game that lasts months. There must be just enough complexity to give depth and challenge throughout a game that is going to last a long time without adding confusion. To add more worlds, players, artifacts, starfleets, etc. would not add any discernable advantage to the player's fun quotient, only confusion, and the death of any game design.

WarCry: You have mentioned that IWars is a "lifestyle" game, a game players can play at their own schedule. What does that mean?

Larry: I believe that one of the "flaws" of other types of persistent world games is the myth of real-time. First it is not really real-time, in most of these games there is a 1 to 3 hours of real-time to game-time. Next, there is no circadian rhythm to the characters; they don't sleep, eat, defecate, or perform any of the other real-time functions that are not very fun or are gross. Also, it is technically impossible to affect an online game space in real-time, though brilliant programmer illusionists create the impression. So time in a persistent world is really an idealized state. But, because the world is constantly in action whether you are in it or not, you lose out if you are not online. You will miss adventures, opportunities to gain levels or experience or needed tools. The environment motivates the player to stay online as much as possible, even all the time, sleeping in front of the monitor. Setting aside the business model flaw of how expensive this motivation is to the online publisher, this creates a huge conflict between r/l (we even have a shorthand for real life) and this fantasy life. It is easy to see the direct correlation between how much time a player spends online and how well he or she will do in their fantasy world. Like Hiro in Neal Stephenson's Snowcrash, you might deliver pizzas in your real life but you must spend most of your life online to be a warrior prince and the greatest sword fighter in the "Metaverse".

It is completely surprising how many people can devote 30 hours or more a week to play online in a persistent world. But in the end it limits how many people can actually play and can cause life upheavals for the players. Turn-based games, with a good design, can supply all the compelling depth of a great game environment and still allow people to get on with their lives. By setting a turn interval, controllable by the players but with a deadline, they can actually attend a college and go to class, go to sporting events, have a love interest that does not necessarily play online games, get married and have children, own a pet and even travel and still satisfy their game playing urge. We call Imperial Wars a "lifestyle" game because you can fit it into your life. It doesn't demand to be played all at one time in some unending long substitution for life, it is spread out incrementally, in little pieces of play that can be made and savored over many days. Doing well in Imperial Wars is more about playing well with the time that you have available to play than the quantity of time you have to play. Some players will constantly analyze their moves and turns and spend hour after

engrossing hour at it. Others will quickly grasp their positions and move in incremental 15-minute or so periods all through their move interval as they find time in their work or personal schedule to jump on line and save some part of their move. Some will let the IWars client sit in the background on their monitor and jump back and forth to it while they work on other things. This is the essence of a lifestyle game; it allows you to have one!

I should point out that the players can also move the game as fast as they wish to play as well. Quick Submissions rather than Saves from all players will immediately turn the game before the deadline. Deadlines are just to make sure that each turn actually does take place. Also, veterans are often forming "lightening" games, which can be run in a long weekend and some have experimented with no time limit at all so there are many potential variations.

WarCry: It was mentioned that as the designer, you purposely kept the world economies simple and left out some of the standard strategy concepts like tech-trees in IWars for a particular reason. What reason would that be?

Larry: The short answer is that you want to eliminate everything you can that might impede play between human players, which is where real interactive game play fun comes from. Tech trees can only be considered standard in stand-alone solitaire strategy games. They were one of the ways devised to create challenge to a player in building up civilizations in a solitaire strategy game. I have seen in some of the RTS games that sometimes tech trees are ways for the same basic player types to differentiate themselves. In Imperial Wars, the character types are already differentiated; Traders can carry more raw materials, Warlord Battlestars can move faster, Philosopher's convert minions, and so on without getting into too many game play details. We want to make sure the game balance is consistent and that the emphasis of game play goes towards player interaction and not solitaire play.

For instance, one of the earliest online space games that I ran across spent way too much time on waypoints between worlds and what kind of hulls, weapon systems and/or ship types for my taste. While I admired many of the game's concepts, it rapidly became too about accounting instead of the interactive adventure I had hoped for. My goal for Imperial Wars was to create a universe of worlds for Starlords to inhabit without lost time on solitaire game aspects left over from previous game designs made for a different medium. Challenges in IWars should come from the other Starlords and the interaction of their different character types rather than calculation of time and distance, manipulating intricate world economies or comparing the benefits of seventy different kinds of laser canons. What's fun in that? Stargates connect the worlds and travel is instantaneous so Starlords can get around their universe and play the game. Trading fleets is a valuable and common way to integrate players into each other's empires to maximize their potential. It is a game designer's challenge to find just the right balance between simplicity of play and the complexity needed to allow a player to suspend disbelief in the game environment. It is the same challenge that a literary author has. Reading a story or watching a movie requires that the story be able to move forward without so many mechanics that they get in the way of the story while still keeping a plausible background to support the story. While I love all the classic strategy games, our new online strategy game designs have to sort out what is needed in the environment of the Internet and discard everything else.

WarCry: Speaking of strategy, could I, or anyone else, use the well known strategy that gives you (unfair) "advantages"?

Larry: There are two areas that we are adamant about cheating. One is hacking in an attempt to cheat in our game server. We have gone to great extremes to make our server as secure from hacking as we know how. Even if our client is reverse-engineered, it will not help a player change any aspect of the game data.

WarCry: As a self-funded developer who is now beginning to self-publish your online game, have you had to live with limits on what you could offer in your first version of Imperial Wars?

Larry: We have had to live with many limitations in the execution of the game but none at all at the basic game design level. At most game studios they seem to design games by looking at their technology first and then seeing how to fit a game to it. For a number of reasons too lengthy to go into here, IWars was designed as a game concept outside of a computer. Actually, it conceptually began life as a cross between a game and an interactive television series.

As a game designer, I believe strategy games are actually played in the mind. The pieces on the board or on the screen are merely placeholders for the mind and ways to help visualize the patterns and actions of the game. *[Editors note: Larry must be a Matrix fan]* In online games, especially, is not about the skill of pounding a key or mouse button and winning because your computer is better or your connection faster or where you happen to live geographically. I think real-time game play on the Internet is a complete myth. The Internet is just not designed for it and despite the brilliant men who program the servers to make them appear to be, it just isn't so.

Anyway, the goal of the graphics, animation, anything that exists on the screen is to drive the game play, to move the story and to help immerse the player in the game world. We have delivered the entire Imperial Wars rule set for how our game universe works so all the game play is there. I believe we still have much to do in using available technology to bring more immersion and clarity to future versions of the game. Early on we had to make the choice with our limited resources of where we would put our effort and we chose the backend over the game client. This means the game client can be much more robust, with fuller animation, art and integrated web services without altering the backend database to any great degree. This choice also means that we can do it incrementally so that development can continue parallel to the game service itself.

WarCry: Alright, so tell us who is going to play this game. What audience are you targeting?

Larry: This has a quick and long answer. Our target audience will read the Imperial Wars website or this interview and within 5 minutes will say, "This is the game I have been looking for since the Internet became the World Wide Web!" On the other hand, describing this audience as a demographic is much more difficult. If you will indulge me I'd like to quickly trace the history of how certain literary and technical influences helped create the atmosphere for the MMOG, and in another branching of influences helped create the EPMG, as represented by Imperial Wars.

Our current role-playing persistent worlds are outgrowths of the early adventure text games that evolved from war games in the early 1970's. Around 1971 Dave Arneson and Gary Gygax

influenced by the literature of Tolkien's *The Lord of The Rings* and Lieber's *Swords and Sorcery* series brought a fantasy role-playing element to war games that they named *Dungeons and Dragons*. As these games migrated onto the Internet they became known as MUDs, MOOs and MUSHes. When technology advanced to allow the melding of graphics and simulated real-time to MUD content, the MMOG was born. Personally, I think that *Ultima Online*, which integrated a graphical MUD with the successful themes of the *Ultima* stand-alone computer game, created the biggest revolution in online gaming, which in turn spawned *Everquest*, still the reigning champion MMOG today. This progression has been both good for the online game business in the attention it has brought to it and bad because it has stunted the growth of alternate game styles.

Imperial Wars also claims war gaming ancestry but its design was influenced by strategy games like *Civilization*, *Tradewars* and one of the first multiplayer online games *MegaWars III* on CompuServe. The character, turn interval and role-playing influences come from play by mail classic *Starweb*, some of the campaign length war games from SSI, and *Diplomacy*. The game environment itself derives from the literary influences of Isaac Asimov, John W. Campbell, Jack Vance, C.J. Cherryh, Greg Benford and many others who wrote masterful science fiction adventures set within galactic empires. The strategy facet of *Imperial Wars* has been somewhat streamlined to play better in a multiplayer environment and has integrated the best web Internet communications that it can directly into the game's user interface to further underscore interaction.

From this abbreviated history I think it is fair to infer that 10 factors of player experience or interest might attract players to an *Imperial Wars* Universe.

1. Players familiar with some kind of strategy and war gaming experience will find the simultaneous move game play mechanics easy to grasp.
2. Players who appreciate a well-balanced strategy game that takes place in a rich graphical sci-fi story environment.
3. Players familiar with certain kinds of play-by-mail or play-by-email games who will more easily grasp the turn interval concepts.
4. Players who are aware of, or have played alternate role-playing games than D&D, such as *Diplomacy*, will find it easy to grasp the diplomatic relationship aspects of *IWars*.
5. *IWars* will appeal to players who want a more of a "game" experience with clear-cut goals than a simulated world encounter that employs leveling and treadmills for player advancement.
6. It is a game for players who enjoy the rich nuances of direct player interaction that goes beyond just whacking an opponent reminiscent of when game play was a really a social face-to-face event rather than a solitary activity played alone with an animated computer program.
7. *Imperial Wars* will fit the lifestyle of the more mature gamer who has a life and wants it that way but still loves deep and significant game play.
8. *IWars* may appeal to persistent world gamers who have grown in real life past the kind of time commitment required or who would just like to try something different.

9. Players who enjoy the "tourist" aspect of gaming amongst beautiful worlds and are comfortable in email relationships with people who share similar values.

10. Players who are also readers or fans of science fiction themed stories that would like a deeper experience in that kind of universe.

WarCry: I see, but how about making IWars a 3D game? One of your staff-workers was saying that he would like to see IW in a 3D environment, with animated moves being displayed after each turn. Is that a vision that you all share and want to accomplish?

Larry: Where 3D digital graphics will directly serve game play or more effectively absorb players into the immensity and wonder of an interstellar space environment, we'll use it in our next version. The design is complete and we will be implementing animation into the commands and moves during turn intervals and in re-playing turn results even before that. Imperial Wars was originally conceived to use full video to display the turn results and while we will do this digitally, at least for now, the design follows that original path. I am excited about both of these concepts because I think they will better illustrate how to make moves in Imperial Wars making game play even more intuitive. We have finished designs for better data management, better star map controls and filters, better and more web integration

Well, there is just so much more that we want to do. We did not produce this game for a quick hit like a shelf game where the goal is to sell the box and move on. Our goal is to be here next year, the year after and the year after that continually developing and adding along the way. Great art and graphic design are important keys to that. Bruce Dean, a world-renowned illustrator and art designer for IWars, has given us the worlds that grace our current game but he chafes at all that he would like to do. Next version we'll definitely let the reins out more.



WarCry: How do Fleets operate in combat?

Larry: One of the most important objects in IWars is the star fleet. Each of the 300 fleets in the game starts off as an empty engine capable of flinging an attached group of ships instantly through the Stargates to another world. Its technology is far behind the simple

civilizations that first discover them. Until a fleet is populated with one or more ships, it is flightless and harmless. Once assembled, the fleet takes on the combined attributes of its component ships. If you were to think of it in board game terms, you can define this game piece and continue to re-define it as it moves throughout the worlds of the universe.

There are four major characteristics that every fleet shares: Fleet Strength - offensive power, Shield Strength - defensive protection, Speed - the number of worlds the fleet can travel in a single move, and Cargo Space - how many raw materials the fleet can haul.

There are several other defining characteristics that apply depending upon what kind of Character owns the fleet and carrying a Jewel of Power can affect fleet abilities. Each character has a choice of three kinds of ships to purchase for these fleets, which cannot be moved or their ownership maintained until at least one ship is attached to them. BattleStars are the slowest, most expensive but most powerful ships, Scouts, which are the least

powerful but most inexpensive, fastest and most flexible and last, the cruisers (or freighters for the Traders) the best cross between speed, power and cost. By combining the individual ship attributes, a fleet value for each of the major characteristics is reached.

Combat between each individual fleet is easily calculated. Each ship adds its Fleet Strength and Shield Strength to the entire fleet; by subtracting Fleet Strength of the attacking fleet from Shield Strength of the defending fleet, any fleet that has Shield Strength remains alive with ships being destroyed in a specific order. At first glance this seems very simple. The complexity is not in individual fleet battles but armada battles, as enveloping moves from unseen directions and the worlds have their effect on the outcome of the battles. In a more passive role, fleets can be set as sentinels to powerfully ambush non-allied fleet traffic passing through their orbits.

Fleets are not only for combat but also ferry raw materials and carry artifacts and Imperial Credits, the game's currency. They are the one uniformly required resource in the game by all characters to make mobile the plans and schemes of the players. Scouts on fleets play important roles when converted as probes to unexplored worlds, fortresses to establish world ownership, forays to capture unpopulated fleets or missiles fired through a Stargate to a neighboring world. And for the Terminator, Scout ships are especially valuable when converted to robots for attacking and replacing world populations and under the right circumstances to charge their Gravitronic Disruptors for blowing up worlds and forcing their suns to Nova! BattleStars too can have special values as they move one world faster for the Warlord, are Mobile Factories for the Traders, and convert Minions for Philosophers and generally give all their owners a warm and fuzzy feeling of security. For general duties, like hauling and policing around your own empires, the cruisers and freighters are just the ticket.

WarCry: How many games do players get to play every month? Give us an average number.

Larry: In theory it would be fine with us for players to play in any number of universes simultaneously. However, we noted something in the open beta games. Because Imperial Wars games start with a couple of easy turns there is a tendency to think that there will be plenty of time to play in multiple games. That is not very likely. So, beta testers often signed up for several games and then had to drop out of some of them as the universes heated up and they were suddenly confronted with managing large empires in each of them. This is not good for the health of the games. It is natural for a certain attrition rate in a universe as players will wish to resign from games in the natural course of game play but it is damaging to the game balance for players to leave simply because they committed to too many games.

For most people it will be all they can do to be fully involved in one game, or at most two. On the other hand, players should have that option once they are aware of how IWars plays. And often, it is useful to start up one game as another is winding down. So, once a new player has played in 10 consecutive turns, they are free to begin a second simultaneous game. Once they have completed a game, they can play in up to 3 simultaneous games. Also, new players can substitute into games with openings from resignations for another 3 games. If that isn't enough games we are happy to let players with a responsible player history play in any number of games they wish by contacting the Galactic Effectuator directly.

WarCry: The subscription for IW is \$10.95 per month. That price is close to the price of other MMOGs that had huge budgets for their creation and where the servers are always busy. How did you come to set your subscription price in relation to the other MMOGs?

Larry: First, the cost of a game service or anything else should be based primarily on its value, which in our case is how much fun is it? For the kind of player that likes strategy role-playing in a sci-fi universe Imperial Wars is at least as much fun as any game anywhere that I have ever played. This is a very subjective opinion, of course, but it is nonetheless sincere. So our cost is comparable to many of the other persistent world games. I think Imperial Wars offers a great value for the number of hours one can play in an Imperial Wars universe since you move and the Starlords you play with are always available to you. I have never heard a comment about price from players who have actually played and are familiar Imperial Wars. Veterans realize that paid players mean "players who are likely to respect their positions in a universe" and that makes them more fun.

While bandwidth expenses are significantly less for us than those of other persistent world games, our other costs, such as customer service, promotion and so on are no different. More importantly, cost is not what determines price. A Blair Witch Project or an inexpensive but brilliant Robert Altman film costs the same to see at the box office as a Steven Spielberg or Peter Jackson blockbuster though costs are in no way comparable. StarWars Galaxies shouldn't cost more to play than Dark Age of Camelot because it took 10 times as much money to make.

Maybe the most important point is that we are blazing a trail in our game niche and we can't expect to have a large player base right away. We are prepared for the long and difficult prospect of searching out our audience and helping them find us. Our veteran players seem to understand that there is a partnership between the game producer and the player community in a game service. The revenue they provide funds our efforts to find and expand our player base, to maintain our service so that this game exists and promotes a healthy, involved veteran core. Our goal is to have the best, brightest and most involved game players possible. That may be incompatible with having the largest player base and that is just fine with all of us. As we are self-funded we still have to pay what we can for promotion, customer service and general overhead as well as our own investment to pay back. By any conventional accounting our team has spent well over a million dollars producing this game and though most of that debt is in contingency payments those people who have invested their time, materials and money have a right to a return on their investment.

WarCry: Thanks for taking your time Larry!

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