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### Imperial Wars Interview

Intelligent Life Games details its interesting online space empire building game.

Tuesday March 11, 2003 | [Prophet](#)

*Today we talk with Larry Dunlap, Creative Director at Intelligent Life Games about the company's **Imperial Wars**, an untraditional online space strategy game for the PC (and that's a major understatement as you'll soon find out below) that blends numerous gameplay elements with a gameplay system that allows for flexibility amongst players due to the complexity and length of turns. Confused? We were too until Mr. Dunlap offered us the full details..*



[The War Room.](#)

**GameSpy:** Give us an overview of Imperial Wars - what kind of game is it and what general gaming conventions does it use?

**Larry Dunlap:** Intelligent Life Games is offering Imperial Wars, a long-lasting game experience, part role-playing, part strategy wargame and completely immersive. Each player assumes one of seven character choices to become a Starlord and joins 15 other Starlords among the worlds of an ancient star-spanning empire that has left behind recently discovered Stargates at your homeworld. Play begins as each Starlord's civilization discovers the Stargate and five fleet engines, ready to fly their ships through the Stargate and into the unknown.

Iwars is a multiplayer game as immersive game as a persistent MMOG but flexible enough to fit its schedule to the player's schedule. These universes last months and build in drama and suspense climaxing to powerful endings. Imperial Wars is unique amalgamation of game types and not easily categorized though we call it a Episodic Metagame. The basic structure and mechanics come from relatively simple strategy/wargaming concepts, the communication and diplomacy from other gaming antecedents and the role-playing aspects from another game concept. The game is embedded into the communications of the Internet where the part of the game we call the Metagame is played.

A reasonable question to ask I think is how does this simultaneous turn-based game becomes a Metagame. How does that happen? We

define a Metagame as all the stuff that goes on outside of the rules. But we include it right in the game. It's the bluff in poker on Saturday night; it's the money under Free Parking in your Saturday afternoon Monopoly game's local rules. It's the dynamic energy that makes a game live beyond the static rules of the game itself because the players control the play. Though there are timed deadlines for turns in the Metagame players are constantly moving game objects and always involved in the persistent Internet presence of your fellow Starlords through the in-game email and messenger.

**GameSpy:** Give us some background information on the team and anyone else who's path has intersected with this game.

**Larry Dunlap:** The core development team is made up of myself, Larry Dunlap, who originally founded a digital cable television network to broadcast computer games, Bruce Dean, whose fine art hangs in great collections around the world and whose illustrations have graced the front of Super Bowl programs and who illustrated the Wells Fargo stagecoach among much else, Mike Kienenberger, a network guru who nursed Cray Supercomputers at the Arctic Region Supercomputing Center and worked on developer tools at NeXT, and Michael Fawcett, who instructs in game design at Full Sail, a game programming school in Florida. We have also had some guest programmers, such as Aaron Cammarata or Tony Hawk fame and some who have asked to remain anonymous.

When I first began this project, two of the most important and encouraging people were Gordon Walton at Maxis, whom I still consider my mentor and role model and Jessica Mulligan. Jessica has since associated herself with us as an advisor and her enthusiasm and encouragement have been a key to us getting over the wall into our open testing. Scott Miller, the Unknown Player has brought his energy to us to do our PR and marketing and there are a number of people who labor over the newsletter, forums and IRC channels, too numerous to name here I am certain.

**GameSpy:** What genres are rolled into this game?

**Larry Dunlap:** I am fascinated by that question. All game developers stand on the shoulders of really creative and talented people who have made games before them. Imperial Wars has a strategy/wargaming background that stretches back over 4,000 years to Sun Tzu and the 19th century sand table games of the German empire. As the current crop of MMORPG's are influenced by Tolkien and to some degree Fritz Lieber (Swords & Sorcery), IWars gets its literary inspiration from Asimov's Foundation series. My personal inspiration for campaign-style, multiplayer gameplay was Kesmai's MegaWars III on Compuserve where games lasted 3 to 4 weeks at a time. This concept of a game that you could be immersed in yet ended so you could begin again really appealed to me.

As for the Metagame concepts, IWars is influenced from two areas, one of them not in the traditional game arena. First, games like Diplomacy, your average Saturday night Poker game, and Monopoly style board games – all instances where the game goes way beyond the rules. If these other game styles and science fiction literature influence and create the atmosphere for IWars then we must find an

environment for this "beyond the rules" kind of interaction to take place in. The Internet. IWars includes in-game email and messenger to allow that kind of open communication between anonymous players. It follows then that you must have the time and space for all of this Metagame action to take place in and that's why there is significant space between turns. Starweb, the classic play-by-mail grand dame provides the model for simple but pure game mechanics but more importantly the concept of layered character types, which leads to the most interesting role-playing consequences much different than the usual AD&D configuration.

**GameSpy:** How do characters advance in Imperial Wars?

**Larry Dunlap:** I mentioned layered characters a moment ago. By this I mean, characters that have very different ways of playing the same game and also very different game goals even though they are all striving in the end for points to win. The texture of the individual's personality and the leavening of the current game situation further deepen Starlord roles. Let me give you a quick example. Philosophers travel through an IWars universe converting planetary populations into minions who follow their beliefs. However, converting these minions on worlds he DOES NOT OWN magnifies the Philosopher's points. So the Philosopher needs to find ways to NOT own worlds but still keep his important producing worlds and to secure his homeworld, somewhat conflicting goals. To complicate matters, if his minions propagate far enough, they will take over the parent world in the Philosopher's name permanently decreasing the world's value and likely upsetting the world's original owner. Fortunately, there is a Terminator who can solve this problem by targeting minions at a world. But Martyr points compensate the Philosopher for the lost minions. This interaction spreads through all the character types in far too many ways to describe here but the layers created by the way the characters fit together create some very intriguing stories that pop up the more the Starlords interact in a universe.

Starlords do not have to labor to create a story in IWars; it just happens, and because of that so does the role-playing. Starlords are anonymous, which we make every effort to maintain, so role-playing is almost the only way you can compete for the attention of the other Starlords in the game, though role-playing is not required. It is a very fresh and open way of playing, not diluted by the creation of a developer. This puts some responsibility on the player to play, to move things around and to get in touch with the other players and to understand the game. But that responsibility is the buy-in necessary for the player to be invested in the game and to care about the outcome. Let's face it, when you don't want to take this responsibility of a player you are really looking for television.

Two things are very different in this style of role-play. There is no leveling in Imperial Wars, which I consider the bane of the MMOGs. Leveling is intrinsically unfair to the rookie or the veteran, the newbie or elder and forces the game operator to choose a balance between retaining its player base and adding to it. An impossible choice solved only by an unhealthy compromise. In the end leveling in MMOGs is self-defeating, intrinsically limiting the player base. In a finite zero-sum game you have an end, declare someone a winner and move on to a new beginning. Thank goodness we don't have to be concerned

with leveling.

The last difference I'll mention here is player attributes. The knowledge and skills that you bring to the game are the ones you actually have. You don't roll them up on dice or look at them on a chart. If you are smart and creative or more knowledgeable than another player and can sniff out traps than that skill is yours. Your strength may be that you are a great communicator and love the interaction between Starlords. If you are a meticulous planner and can figure out every permutation of a move, that specialty will shine through. Each individual's actual persona plus the chosen character's mechanics create an unlimited spectrum of possibilities.

**GameSpy:** At the heart of this game it seems like there's a turn-based strategy element - is there a lot of micromanagement in the game?

**Larry Dunlap:** Turn-based strategy comes from its wargaming antecedent where there are a lot of little pieces. If not carefully managed, these little pieces can overwhelm the game and that has been my main complaint with many, if not most of the genre. These games should not just be for accountants. It was a conscious choice to keep the mechanics of the game as simple as possible. Conflict is very straightforward, might makes right. How you strategically move your fleets and use your resources over the worlds you can see is and how you use your diplomatic tools, has more to do with your strategy than a single battle. Star fleets fly directly from one Stargate to another, no waypoints or other wasted effort. The universe starmap completely wraps, which creates lines of supply issues and assures that everyone is equally surrounded. The world economies and the fleet building mechanisms are very simple and for the most part operate automatically, creating Imperial Credits whenever the economic components exist to make them. I still believe we can improve this aspect of IWars and it is something we already plan to address in upcoming AI design. However, speed is not an issue in IWars so it does not seem to be a big player issue to date.

**GameSpy:** What's the basic role of the player? What can they do, what do they have dominion over and what are some key elements of gameplay that they'll have to focus on in order to have a decent standing in the world?

**Larry Dunlap:** Players command fleets and worlds from a god-like view within their own empires and in other Starlord Empires as the game progresses. But in the War Room, the main focus of the Metagame, Starlords meet as equals. The mix of a game must include at least two of every player except the Houri, a shape changer character that can take on the characteristics of any other player in the game at will. The roles are very disparate, a Raider, a Terminator, Trader, Warlord, Baron, Philosopher, and the Houri. They are defined by their attributes and the way in which they interact with one another. Several game mechanisms supply motivation for player interaction. Gifts and introductions let Starlords rapidly meet each other, expand both their empires and mesh their influences into other empires.

At the beginning of each universe when characters are selected, each

player is asked to choose a number between 15,000 and 20,000. The average of these numbers represents the finish line, the final score. Once that point total is met or exceeded the game ends. Starlords can assume a particular window for a game to end but not project exactly when it will end.

**GameSpy:** In laymen's terms explain what an Episodic persistent Metagame is.

**Larry Dunlap:** To explain this fully, I need to start with the concept of a Metagame. In one sense, it is the designer's nightmare because it's where the game is entirely out of control, where it transcends the rules. On the other hand, this is where a game escapes from the static rules and becomes a dynamic story. We have made the effort to include that inside of our game. The Metagame, to have real meaning must have room to breathe and that leads to persistence, which is why there are these long turns so that the players can actually "play" in this environment before game objects actually change. What happens is the game is played so much in this "meta" state that the turns themselves, actually mark the beginnings and endings of chapters of an episode in this ongoing space opera the player is immersed in.

I am going to get some argument about using the word "persistent" in describing IWars. The MMOG's have taken one of its meanings, to be "never-ending" to define persistence but a meaning that is equally as important is "long-lasting", so we believe that IWars represents a that style of persistent play since a game universe can take 3 to 4 months to complete. Over the course of the game each character type will score points in a variety of ways and their progress in the game has to be judged in different ways. It takes much longer for a Terminator to start scoring large numbers of points but near the end of the game, if the Terminator has been successful in husbanding resources and avoiding cost conflict, this Starlord will be blowing up whole worlds in a very spectacular and chilling way for very big points. Conversely, the Barons and Warlords start out very quickly as their points come from owning and conquering worlds and fleets in the early stages when there is much less competition and they are challenged to keep this early advantage as the game goes on. This is an over simplification but hopefully catches the essence that each character type's strategy is very, very different and that is at the heart of the game.

**GameSpy:** Give us some details on the first three episodes and why you decided to dedicate the first two to offline play.

**Larry Dunlap:** For new players, the first three turns are more about learning the gameplay, getting comfortable with the game mechanics. How do fleets move and how do you build ships on to them? How do you fly them off to the next worlds? Where is the Starmap and how do they filters here work? What's in the War Room and where's my email? How do I save my moves, and how do I submit them? It's a chance to be comfortable with the mechanics and the rather exotic game emotions of expectation and suspense, and to some degree apprehension.

For veterans it is the positioning and gathering of useful game objects such as world, fleets and artifacts that can be used later in the game to trade for better game objects, position or other actions that will

help them maximize their potential and succeed in the universe. In both cases it is the Exploration part of a 4X game, which IWars somewhat represents as well.

Running the first few turns apart from a game universe is a design with many advantages for our players and for us. It accomplishes a lot of things. We find that most players know whether they want to play a game like Imperial Wars within the first two moves, most within the first one. So, by letting these two moves happen outside of a universe, we are sure that those who continue really understand and want to play the game. But there is more. This way new players can take their time; feel their way along before they commit to a real game.

Meanwhile the vets can fly through these early turns, setting up the way they want their empire to look before they actually start turns where they are likely to meet another Starlord. This is not yet actually implemented in the beta games but will be at our earliest opportunity.

**GameSpy:** I read in the FAQ that a turn can take up to two weeks - what happens during a turn that makes it take so long?

**Larry Dunlap:** Obviously in the case of the first few turns, there is nothing that would require much time. But once the interaction starts that changes drastically. Right now, we run the first three turns for 1 day, the next two turns for 2 days and turns take place every four days after that though that is likely to slip to a week as the players are requesting more time. Let me always remind people that the players set the turn intervals and not us. If you have ever played Diplomacy you have noted that there never seems to be enough time for players to meet with each other and make deals and side deals and plans and so on. During my days at The Games Network, we use to have 5 or 6 games running simultaneously at the Games Mansion (our offices). Turns took place once a day and even then there were complaints.

While the medium of the Internet is electronic it is not instantaneous, which is exactly why Imperial Wars plays so well within it. There is a real "realtime", not the myth of the RTS or MMOG games. In real time, people involved in important things have other activities and interests as well. They live life and meet to cooperate and plan when and where they are able to. This game is so deep and rich with relationships and thoughtful approaches to play that speed is not the important point. IWars lives within a person's lifestyle instead of taking over a person's life. You play it the way you would read a really good book, putting it down for a while and then returning to it as time and opportunity allows.

I want to emphasize that we don't enforce these turn intervals. If all of the players submit their moves, the game turns then, on the spot. We only enforce deadlines in case players don't get all their moves submitted to keep the game moving along. It has been our experience so far that people want the early turns to move fast but pretty much beg us for more time as the game rapidly deepens and broadens. Also, we plan variations in the future for those who might want a lightening game that moves as fast as an hour at a move, or for those who would like a slow and contemplative game for turns up to two weeks. In the end, it is up to the players to tell us what they want and we are listening. You just can't determine what the length should be until you have experienced it.

**GameSpy:** Do you see a problem with turn lengths when the game garners more players?

**Larry Dunlap:** Absolutely not, and thank you for your assumption that we will garner more players. • As I mentioned, the players actually set the turn intervals and we only set the limits. This is not a technology issue at all. However, once a player has become a veteran, we envision allowing them to set up an "invite" game where they can set several parameters, one of them being the turn interval. There has already been some discussion by one group of players about how to set up a lightening game that would be played over a weekend. It includes schedules for sleeping and eating and is a general hoot to read about in the forums.

**GameSpy:** You list characters on the official page but don't offer any details on them - are they historical figures in the universe and how much of a role do they play in affecting the story line?

**Larry Dunlap:** The characters are archetypal characters from science fiction space opera and we see them in historical to modern day science fiction. By setting their motivation from their play mechanics these stories are retold in unique and different ways in every game and written by the players themselves, almost without trying. The Terminator is a character as old as science fiction, from Saberhagen's Berserker series, Asimov's Robot Stories or any of the many sagas where machines turn on their creators. Philosophers have abounded throughout history and science fiction as the real drivers of political change, Karl Marx, Ghandi and Star Trek's Vulcan Spock for instance. The Traders are popular heroic figures in Bester's Cities in Flight series and CJ Cherryh's galactic empire novels. Warlords and Raiders also are common as well as do the avaricious Barons. The Houri is the only alien of the lot and even this character is humanoid with the desire to fit within the human structure of the old empire.

We have been asked why everyone is human, with the possible exception of the Houri. Simply because of the Metagame. Starlords can play as disparate a character as they wish to but the best stories are comprehensible and based on human dreams and emotions that drive the game and story forward. Also, it is hard to get another Starlord to work with you if they can't comprehend some weird alien motivation. So in our backstory and in the game the motivations are pretty human.

Personally, I think that maybe the biggest breakthrough that IWars makes in multiplayer online games is this new approach to role-playing, so yes, these character/Starlord roles are the most significant thing about the game. Their depth within this universe is a constantly growing organic thing, as it must to satisfy players who are playing for months at a time. We are all constantly amazed at the creativity and depth of the players who are involved in our earliest games; here in our first few weeks of open play.

**GameSpy:** Can you die in this game or lose everything? What can you do to bounce back?

**Larry Dunlap:** Since this is not the MMOG world, dieing is not the

same issue as it would be to an first person player. From a god view, you can you're your fleets and worlds but as long as you have objects that exist in the game you won't die. You may choose to resign out of a game and that is the normal course of affairs sometimes. On the other hand the most likely outcome is that these strong relationships between players keep people playing long beyond the point where there is any opportunity to win. Most players redefine their victory conditions without even realizing they are doing it. Players will most often stay in a game to help a player they are close to do well or as often to try and stop another player that they want to see fail. Or they just become really comfortable in their universe and hate to leave. In a long, persistent and immersive game like this, winning is a lot less important then the play itself. The trauma comes when a game ends. This might be hard to believe until you experience it but it is so completely true.

Another interesting point for those who follow wargames is the way the universes are setup it is very difficult to blitzkrieg another player. Lines of supply are strained. There are some built in automatic defenses, too. When you expand rapidly in one direction you will be weak in another. If you lose too many resources, even in winning a conflict, you weaken yourself to another player or coalition of players. Not that it can't be done, but it must be very well planned and there are usually more efficient and cheaper ways to take another Starlord out of contention rather than a fight to the death. Despite its name, Imperial Wars is much less about open war then it is about controlled conflict. While Starlords compete for points they still need each other to maximize point making potential. Important game resources like worlds and fleets and artifacts are finite so they must by maintained and not wasted or lost. Diplomacy, saber rattling, intimidation, favors, innuendo and rumor are often the most powerful weapons in the game.

**GameSpy:** Tell us about fleets and what roles they play in the game.

**Larry Dunlap:** If you were to think of Imperial Wars as a board game, you could consider the 350 Worlds as spaces and the fleets as the pieces that move among the world spaces. However, there are some interesting differences to consider. The World spaces can be fortified and changed in many ways. There are 300 fleet engines in IWars and the fleets, rather than having a constant value, have no value until the type of ships you choose for them define them. There are only 3 kinds of ships for any character's fleets, yet the way they are configured determine how these fleets will move, defend and attack, as well as other attributes specific to a particular character-type, such as Traders having Freighters where the other Starlords have Cruisers. Starlords play with a hidden board, only seeing worlds where there they have a presence, own worlds or have fleets in transit or in orbit.

**GameSpy:** Tell us about gems, jewels, relics and other artifacts in the game – what are they used for, how gained and what benefits do they afford the player?

**Larry Dunlap:** There is a rich backstory to Imperial Wars and the artifacts in the game are a part of that tapestry as well as important game objects. Of these ancient imperial artifacts, only the jewels actually have the power to alter the game. There are seven of them

and their technology is such that they can impose rules such as cloaking or protection or viewing. Or, the Jewel of Fate, which has a different power that must be discovered in every game. They are valuable for their strategic use. The relics and gems help define the characters as each character competes for particular relics with certain other characters. Each character in Imperial Wars gains points from owning a certain category of gem and competes with players who are playing the same character as they are. In each gem category there is a minus value for the cursed gems that removes points from a player for owning them. Owning sets of the gems can create bonus points at the end of game that may change the outcome, as this bonus is not counted until after the finishing score is met. Game artifacts are another potential object for trade and interaction between Starlords.

**GameSpy:** Imperial Wars seems overly complex for a casual user to pick up and play in a short period of time - is this false assumption or is the game geared towards more of a hardcore audience?

**Larry Dunlap:** This is difficult to answer. Imperial Wars, from the beginning was designed to be as easy to play as possible but to be a complex game that unfolds over time. This design was conceived over several years. After all, a game that brings together people for a period of months must continue to grow in depth and interest and deeply involve them over time. It is a difficult balance to be complex enough to instill the desire to see what is next and still avoid the terrible other "c" word, Confusion. On the other hand, it was never meant to scare people away. The point of the game for me was to make the single amalgamated game that I have always wanted to play. So one doesn't have to read the rulebook to play but for players who want depth and really play well then there is a comprehensive player's manual there. What keeps the playing field level for the non-strategy, more casual player, is the role-playing and diplomacy. A great communicator will always do well and will usually win out over straightforward strategist who has not made the proper friends. Beware of those who can do both well.

If, in the final analysis, we have executed our user interface development correctly, this game should be easier to pickup and play than any even slightly similar game. On the other hand, mastering it should be near impossible. It should open like an onion, layer by layer, with surprises and depth and story and character growth at each turn and episode. Like a great novel it should draw you in from the simple easy viewpoint of one character in the story until you suddenly find that you are enmeshed in a delicious plot that you hope will never end. That is the goal and I think that if we haven't completely achieved it 100% yet we're getting pretty close. This question really speaks to who is an Imperial Wars player. Many of them will be MMOG players who want the depth and immersion of a persistent world but need to have a life as well. But we expect many to be people who had never really considered themselves game players before but are fascinated by the story development, speculative fiction in all its mediums and the science fiction theme will be drawn to immerse themselves in this fictional universe. Part of the challenge for us is to find them and give them the opportunity to experience the game.

**GameSpy:** The beta version of the game is currently available to the public - where do they have to go to sign up?

**Larry Dunlap:** Drop by [www.imperialwars.com](http://www.imperialwars.com) where we would be thrilled to see you. As you can tell by this in depth interview and our own disclaimer, this game is not, and was not intended for everyone. If you were looking for a casual game, like Bejeweled, let's say or a session game like Unreal Tournament or an MMOG like Everquest, oops, wrong door. However, if you'd like to give episodic metagames a try you just might discover a new form of game that is Internet and life style friendly where you'll make new friends that could last you a life time. It might be your kind of game experience.

**GameSpy:** Final Question: What's the monthly charge going to be for this game? There was talk of charging per turn -- Is that something you're still considering?

**Larry Dunlap:** The subscription model seems to offer the best flexibility for everyone it seems, so Intelligent Life Games plans to charge about \$10 a month when Imperial Wars is ready for commercial launch, which is when we can believe we can deliver fair value for it. On the other hand, ILG will only charge for a turn, if that is less then the subscription fee. If you only play one turn in a thirty-day period then we will only charge for that turn. Currently, that is planned to be \$3.95, but players will never play more than the monthly subscription fee, though they could pay less. It is our plan to pass out a lot of free turns, even though this is not the current model of most online game companies. Free turns are going to be based on how well players make the game fun for themselves and for others. One of those ways for instance, following every game, players completing a game will rank each other in six categories. Players who are ranked high enough will win free turns. Players who finish games may win free or reduced rates. On the other hand, players who drop out without notifying us, using the in-game or web process made available for that, will be penalized.

Our model calls for us to give away Imperial Wars game client. But in a sense there is a broader game, which is the Metagame of the broad Imperial Wars community. There will be a small one-time charge to reserve Screen Names within the community, which will allow Starlord to freely participate in all of the community activities including the opportunity to play as substitutes in games that need players to fill in for Dropped and Resigned Starlords.

*Thanks to Scott Miller and Larry Dunlap for answering our questions at length. You can learn more about the game at [www.intelgames.com](http://www.intelgames.com). At the time of this writing we've learned that Intelligent Life Games plans to launch Imperial Wars in late May of this year, so if you want to try out the game for free now is the time to head over to the official site and sign up!.*

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