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Space strategy games always have a loyal and vocal fan base an a newly announced space strategy title called Imperial Wars from Intelligent Life Games hopes to bring more than a few wrinkles to the genre, not the least of which is its persistant online features. HomeLAN got a chance to chat with Larry Dunlap, the founder of Intelligent Life Games, to find out more about their plans for Imperial Wars.

HomeLAN - How did Intelligent Life Games come to be formed?

Larry Dunlap - John, Intelligent Life Games was formed to be the conduit for developing, producing and publishing Imperial Wars, a game system we call an multiplayer episodic Metagame. Imperial Wars was pretty well written as a game system more than 10 years ago. When we came to begin development of Imperial Wars my very first concern was making sure I wasn't starting something that would ever having be stopped due to a need from some outside resource. I had been in a business in the past where funding drove whether we were going to be in business from month to month and a lot of the energy and effort that could have been better spent on the actual project was wasting on the eternal dog and pony show. So I believed we needed a parallel path: 1) a commitment from those of us on the action teams to take this game all the way to offering IWars commercially to the individual player on the internet and self-fund ourselves, or 2) a way to share equity with a partner who was willing to step in at some point and help us with resources and or funding and still shelter Imperial Wars.

As ILG, us, built the game it became apparent that ILG may have a lot more to offer than just Imperial Wars. It is feeling like Imperial Wars represents an under-served niche of the game community that wants and needs episodic metagames. So ILG can now adapt its game engine and game concepts for other projects. This is important because we had to invent a developmental, operational and business model for ourselves knowing we might have to go it alone. The result has been a leaner more efficient game engine and an operating overhead that may be less than 25% of what most MMOG games require. We're still on our own but we are a very good deal for someone who would like to join us in this niche. So we continue on our parallel path.

HomeLAN - How did the idea for Imperial Wars come about?

Larry Dunlap - As the founder of a cable television channel that planned to distribute computer games over cable in the early eighties, I found myself seeing

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every important game written over that period of time, judging them for strength or weakness in an interactive context. TGN, The Games Network, was became an NASDAQ traded company as GNET and was potentially a very big deal until its spectacular flameout when we couldn't raise the hundreds of millions necessary to manufacture our set-top cable boxes in the quantity necessary to meet the demand. That was frustrating!

As a broadcast channel for computer games, standing on the edge of cable interactivity, I started thinking about the day when we might create our own content and the seeds for Imperial Wars were planted then. At the foundation of the game would be characters taken from science fiction within the ruins of an ancient galactic empire. I always loved those kinds of stories, the Foundation trilogy concept. I really liked couple of wargames that were not very well known because they were just too arcane, and they became the starting inspiration for game structure. I am old enough to remember the board games that my whole family used to play together with friends and neighbors back in Indiana and that the fun was in the playing as much as the winning. While not completely fleshed out I was viewing this as a potential interactive television project. I loved the open gaming of Diplomacy and Dungeons and Dragons at its earliest introduction.

Access to that huge cable television network ended disastrously for me but I couldn't help continuing to work on the concept of Imperial Wars even to the point at one time of creating a version with a couple of programmer friends as a computer moderated text game. But it wasn't until the Internet really came of age that I could see a way to actually produce this game. During TGN days I was introduced to the Arpanet and quickly sensed the potential for changing how people communicated with one another. But it wasn't until 1997 that it struck me that the Internet was pervasive enough to be used for Imperial Wars and the best part, the access to this giant communication network wasn't opened by a bunch of corporate cable operators. We could go directly to the player on our own.

As the author of the game, and I use that turn because it was written before it was designed and I think that is what gives it a special texture, I think this is a very special game and game experience. But it would have been nothing but vivid dream but for the willingness of Bruce Dean, a world-renowned artist and Mike Kienenberger, the most brilliant programmer I have ever met, to harness their prodigious talents to delivering this concept into the world. And most remarkably, while freely kibitzing and criticism, their willingness to subordinate their own creative process into delivering the vision I was bringing to them.

HomeLAN - There are a large number of massively multiplayer games of all times already out there or in the works. Do you feel Imperial Wars will be able to make its make in this genre?

Larry Dunlap - The designers and developers of several of the major MMOGs are friends and mentors and I have the greatest respect for them. What amazingly fertile minds they have. They have been able to do miraculous things with

WEEKLY POLL

Are you going to be buying Horizons when it launches this week?

- Yes; I am looking forward to playing it.

- I will wait until the first reviews come in.

- I have no interest in Horizons.

- I have no interest in MMORPGs.

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technology to force servers to deliver these persistent worlds, to make us believe that there are real-time places in these servers. But it one of the most irritating things to me is equate Massively Multiplayer Games with a broader category - Multiplayer Online Games.

MMOGs grew out of the earliest games for computers. The Soul of a New Machine describes how the adventure game Colossal Cave became a way of testing a new OS. In those days computers were primitive and solitary so the games were too. But as computers advanced and the Arpanet became the Internet, socialization allowed people to play these text adventure games together in what we know as MUDs. The learned Richard Bartle has formalized this game form in a very erudite way. From a MUD with the characters of Richard Garriot's hit solitaire game Ultima, primitive but effective moving graphics and a Tolkienesque influence and a D&D flavor Origin Systems produced Ultima Online for us. Sometimes it seems to me that everyone who does anything in MMOGs worked at Origin at some time or another. Jonathon Baron at Microsoft said at GDC last year that he considered an experiment designed for the most, 50,000 people that went madly successful.

The success of UO and the other follow-on MMOGs have blinded many people to other games and other game systems so now it is almost impossible to find the millions of dollars necessary to develop, promote and operate an online game. What makes IWars so much different from these graphical MUDs or MMOGs is that it had different, if just as venerable parents. Its design foundation is as old as the MMOGs but comes from Wargames, tabletop games, and board games. And it blends in the anticipation and suspense of PBM and turn-based games with the ongoing Metagame of Diplomacy, Monopoly and your Saturday night poker party.

HomeLAN - What can you tell us about the back-story for the game?

Larry Dunlap - Sure, the back-story is fun. Over thousands of years a galactic empire rose, covering hundreds of worlds. In the latter millennium of the empire, it was always ruled by a dynasty chosen from one of the six Baronies of the empire. During the long rise of the confederation of worlds known simply as the Galactic Empire, the distance between those who developed and knew the technology that allowed communication and travel to effectively have an empire, and those who used it widened. A great theocracy called the Mensa Theliot husbanded this knowledge and used it as a source of political power. They sent priests to all the worlds with the methodology to turn on and off their technology but with not actual knowledge of how things worked. That information was kept at a world called Humm, the center of the Mensa Theliot religion and learning and ruled by the elite Mathmatists. There was a tenuous balance between the tripod of power represented by the Theliots, the Emperor and the Baron's Landsraad, which governed the far reaches of space from the capital world of the empire, Throne and through the most important piece of technology, the Imperial Stargates.

In a story that delves deeply into the rifts in this power structure driven by a weakened, fearful and grasping Emperor and the discovery by the Mensa Theliots of

the technology to create the Jewels of Power that destabilized this tripod. The empire dissolved into small scrabbling little pocket empires that eventually ran down because they could not understand or control the Imperial technology.

Form more than a thousand years of the Imperial Stargates lay hidden and unused until at a few brave worlds, puny chemical or nuclear space ships reached lifted from their surfaces and discovered the huge and ancient machined Stargates, invisible from view until now. Most of these souls retreated in fear to their worlds terrified by the implication that at any time a master race could emerge from these mysterious space rings. But sixteen worlds bravely face the uncertainty of the Stargate, solve the mystery of the fleet engines and become the Starlords of the Restoration.

HomeLAN - What kinds of playable characters are available in Imperial Wars and how is character generation handled?

Larry Dunlap - There are 5 or 6 basic elements to Imperial Wars but none more important than the Characters that provide the dynamic motivation of the game. Bear in mind that IWars is an environment but it is also a game not just a simulation that you kind of stumble around in and try to find something interesting to do. It has a beginning, middle and an end.

The actual rules of Imperial Wars are static. They are not determined by chance or dice roll. They are invariable and can be counted on and we like to think follow a natural logic chain. The characters are designed to both need one another to be successful yet to be in competition with one another for the end of the game.

Sixteen players choose one of seven characters to play so there is always multiples of each character class. These characters represent archetypal characters of classic science fiction. They are the Baron, the Warlord, the Terminator, the Trader, the Philosopher, the Raider and the shape-changing Houri. An example of how they might work together is the Philosopher's need to travel through worlds other than his own "converting" minions to his cause. These pleasant minion folk are wonderful workers and cause no trouble to the owners of the worlds acting as normal members of the world's population. However, when there are enough of them they start to proselytize and convert other population until they eventually take over the world. Oddly enough this is usually not to the Philosopher's advantage and can be a big embarrassment. Philosophers usually receive much less for a world that they own then one with many minions on another Starlord's world and this kind of takeover is not looked on kindly by many kinds of Starlords. A Terminator who gets points for killing populations with terminator robots can solve this dilemma. The World owner has usually traded something to the Philosopher for the right to travel through his empire and they both know that through, ahhh, crowd control, they can both com out ahead. So even though the Terminator may kill off some of these Philosopher minions, that same Philosopher gets martyr points for minions killed in the line of duty. And last but not least, Holy War is always an option. This is really a simple example of the textures that exist between all the players and lead to a

completely different kind of role-playing than are common in most RPG style games.

This role-playing springs directly from the natural story lines that just get created almost without any necessity for level design in these games and the anonymity of the players themselves encourages people to take on the persona of their character. While encouraged, role-playing is not required to play IWars but it is often an advantage to have a nice little story worked up about why you, as a Raider are really a nice fellow there to help a neighboring Starlord keep his production in check. Arbitrary game systems or dice rolls do not create the attributes of the players. If you are wiser, you are wiser because you have thought through the various scenarios and found solutions. If you find traps, its because you know and understand the game and all of its subtleties.

HomeLAN - How "big" is the universe in the game?

Larry Dunlap - There are 350 worlds connected by the Stargates in Imperial Wars. There are homeworlds, black holes, wormholes, Novas, Rebel worlds, ancient Imperial Worlds, high industry, high mines, high population worlds and just plain old worlds. Through a simple economy these world produce Imperial Credits. There are 300 fleet engines that can activate the Stargates among these worlds, helpless until they have ships built onto them. The types and number of ships alter each Fleet's value. Also scattered among these worlds are 49 Imperial Gems, 14 Ancient Relics and 7 Jewels of Power. This is the field of play for up to 3 or 4 months in the life of a Universe. At first it feels huge, then sort of comfy and after awhile down-right crowded! You hate to get involved in "voting" someone off the Universe, but…

There are sixteen players per universe and here is where I take a stand against the world Massively in multiplayer games being the only game in town. In persistent worlds when you never know who or when people will be online maybe you need thousands of people to play though I don't buy it. But you are never going to interact with very many and there are many sociological studies that discuss how and why.

This is my argument for player relationship complexity and we've already proven it in test games. 16 players create 120 possible dyad relationships (16 times 15 divided by 2). And I believe we have a huge number of potential triads 600 if I have done my math right and quads, 2250, and maybe even the odd quint relationship. So with a multiplier in here somewhere for time measured over turns, the potential for different relationships between players is in the thousands. Alliances can be permanent or shifting, made tactically for one sort of situation and a different for another. Most alliances run between 3 and 5 players, so you generally have 2 to 3 viable groups, or tribes, or clans going at any one time. However, these are shifting and coalescing relationships that can often change from turn to turn. Add to that chaos, diplomatic relationship declarations of Ally, Neutral and Enemy and the attendant changes this makes in what players see and do at each other's worlds. There is an interesting efficiency of numbers that makes sixteen a number that seems totally within our grasp intellectually, maybe even seems like a small

number, until you put that many of us together in an enclosed space with motivation to accomplish something. I think that's all the relationship I can stand, how about you?

HomeLAN - What sort of occupations are available in the game?

Larry Dunlap - Well each character has what you might call a broad occupation as part of its definition but they can be interpreted in a lot of different ways. Most people consider the Trader the least likely of characters to be warlike. However I have already talked to a player that is determined to use the Trader's special abilities to haul Raw Materials around to see if he can build up his resources to play IWars as a Warlord. He thinks he might do just as well as hauling stuff around for other Starlords. Not a thing in the world to keep him from trying it. No arbitrary rules to play in any particular fashion, the rules are static.

Secondly, think about that word occupations for a second. When I play a game, I'm not online to do an occupation. I want to play. While I loved playing UO, I hated making shirts and I hated fishing and I hated hunting rabbits or rats in DAoC. I mean there is enough lame stuff you have to do in the world to not want to stab a key on your keyboard over and over until you get something good enough to go out and have a little fun. So you don't have to have a job in IWars. We give you all the tools for an adventure - you go make one.

HomeLAN - How is combat handled in Imperial Wars?

Larry Dunlap - The game is played at world and fleet level so combat is between these objects and is completely straightforward, he with the most wins every time. There is no fog of war, no dice rolls. This means that when combat is called for the superior strategist or tactician, who can see or sense the flow of forces and lines of supply will win. What is much more important is what will be the effect of combat? Will you use resources that are needed to score points? Will your loss of resources weaken you so that another neighbor might try to take you out? Have you judged correctly the flow of fleets to and from various world clusters? The judgments are on this "global" level rather than a "squad" level.

Iwars is more about conflict then combat. By its nature a zero-sum game will produce one winner eventually. So the competition to have the most points when the game ends sets the basis of the conflict. But as shown above, there is also the need for cooperation. Competition, cooperation and strategical decisions lead to many different solutions other than combat. Paraphrasing from the Foundation trilogy "War is the last refuge of the incompetent." There are many types of negotiation and brinksmanship and alliance that must be considered before open hostilities need break out. There is innuendo and rumor and threats and bluffs. Is the friend of my enemy my enemy or a possible spy? Maybe you want to send in inspectors? And isn't that a lot more how things really are?

HomeLAN - What sorts of ships are available in the game?

Larry Dunlap - The purpose of ships are used to create Fleets. The four attributes of a Fleet are, 1) Fleet Strength, offensive power, 2) Shield Strength, defensive power or hit points, 3) Speed, or world hops per turn, and 4) Cargo space for raw materials. There are essentially three kinds of ships, Scouts, very flexible no offensive power, 4 world hops and no cargo space. Next are the Cruisers, the best average of these four attributes, and the BattleStars, which are very powerful but can only move 2 worlds per turn and carry little cargo. There is some variation and characteristics that change depending upon which character owns them but this is the basic lineup. Exploring fleets will be mainly scouts that can be turned into fortresses to protect captured worlds, or that can be sent to capture unowned fleets or to probe neighbor worlds. Cargo fleets tend to be the Cruiser (Trader's have freighters) and the Enforcer fleets have BattleStars. The slowest ships on a fleet determine its movement limitation.

If you were to consider fleets to be moving pieces on a game board of 350 worlds, the ships on them would define how and what kinds of moves these game pieces make.

HomeLAN - Is there any player vs. player conflict in the game?

Larry Dunlap - As I am sure you see at this point it is entirely player vs. player but in a very textured way. Since most of the games you see are really avatar based, it is hard to see Imperial Wars in that light. You have this sort of god-view of your empire and the conflict is between your fleets and worlds and influence through out your universe rather than in individual combat.

HomeLAN - What other unique gameplay elements are in Imperial Wars?

Larry Dunlap - This could be a long answer so I'll stick to 3 elements here.

First Iwars is a lifestyle game choice. As a player trying to find a game that is immersive and that you can really sink your teeth into but still maintain a job, a mate, maybe even a pet is pretty hard with the MMOGs. That is a really defining attribute of IWars. The Metagame allows you to communicate in game with your fellow Starlords but in ways that are Internet-friendly. You have an email account with an address book that is automatically populated as you meet players in your universe. We are soon to put in and in game messenger that will allow real-time chat in game in a very sophisticated way. You have a forum board where you can address your whole empire or the whole Iwars community at large. These are familiar and comfortable communication tools.

So you can play at your own pace. A turn just sets the end to one episode and the beginning of the next in the Metagame that surrounds it. Players set their own pace in IWars and it is not done in ticks. If everyone submits their move, the game

moves. A deadline is established to make sure the game does move of course, but it is up to the players so if someone has a paper to get done, or a play they have to go to or to or a visit to a sick friend, God forbid, a job they don't lose their place in Imperial Wars.

Second, player responsibility. We provide this playground, what I like to call mental monkey bars with all of this depth wrapped around it. But the players have a responsibility to reach out and make their game. IWars doesn't try to control the player and make them have fun, they control the game and it is their responsibility to wrench all of the fun out if that they can. It is not a linear game except that time will inexorably march on. That is the only way real stories can get told. We haven't gotten to the rating system but even more important than winning will be ratings. Your rating will be based on 6 attributes of why playing Imperial Wars with this person rocks or sucks and winners will get free months.

Third and last for now, this is a game where you want to play with veterans who can help your character play more successfully. It is not more fun playing with and beating up newbies. You will want to play with the best players and those with the most interesting RPG voices and creative ways of seeing the subtleties of the game not the weakest because that is uninteresting. If just beating up newbies, which I just hate in leveling games, is your thing, you will want to look elsewhere than IWars.

HomeLAN - How do players communicate with each other in the game?

Larry Dunlap - That is a really good point, since really, and despite its name, Imperial Wars is a communication game. There is in-game email that can be notify your regular mail, There is Instant Messenger, and Bulletin Boards. Communication is part of the Metagame and while we encourage it with in-game communication tools and anonymity, people are free to call each other on the phone if they want, visit each other's universes at the same time, fly to each other's cities and plan a move over lunch or whatever they care to do. We protect their anonymity but if they break it and choose other methods of communication it is a player's own choice.

HomeLAN - How many players can play Imperial Wars at one time and how is your network structure set up?

Larry Dunlap - As noted above, sixteen players play in each newly minted universe, created specifically for each group. Games can be expected to last about between 22 and 28 turns. When a player signs up he chooses an end score from with a certain window. The game will end when an average of those choices is met.

The entire process of requesting inclusion in a universe is automated as is being dropped by the game, game resignations, and substituting into games. That way we as Galactic Effectuators can concentrate more on helping players play and not spend any time on the unnecessary administration of a game like this. It would get

overwhelming if done any other way.

Larry Dunlap - It is a client-server game with the data staying exclusively on the server and all the servers are clustered inside a firewall for data security. The client serves as a viewer so a fast connection is not necessary. The connection is only activated on opening a game and at Save and Submit.

HomeLAN - You are currently going through an open beta for the game. How is that coming along?

Larry Dunlap - I am astounded by the response! Our open beta began on the 28th of December. It isn't a month yet and we've been slashdotted, offered many opportunities to tell our story and talk about our baby. Despite our efforts to scare off players who might think of this as a casual game we have started up tens of universes. Our forums are alive with players and player interaction. For a new game concept we've been extremely fortunate. But it is way early yet. For games that are as deep and consuming, yet lifestyle friendly, it will still be a few months before the current crop of Starlords emerge from the test universes with the final verdict. Of course, if they keep playing I guess that will be a pretty good indicator.

We are also constantly adding final features that are better off being fitted in place during a live environment so we can judge their impact. We are still watching player balance and default turn interval and a myriad of other things so it is a true collaborative effort between the playtesters and the Galactic Effectuators.

HomeLAN - What is the current plan for officially launching the game and what will the pricing structure be?

Larry Dunlap - Our concern is meeting our own standard and design specification before commercial launch. Also we have a pre-determined idea of how big our satisfied player base should be before launch. It is our plan to meet these goals before spring. But we want to avoid a launch before we feel that we're really ready for it and both we and our players have that luxury since we give our game away and we do not have to synch up with a store launch of a shrink-wrap box.

Our monthly subscription rate will be much the same as other online games, $10.99 per month but, we also limit turn costs to $3.95 a turn, so if a player completes a game and doesn't start a new one he will only be charged for turns actually played. You'll never pay more than our monthly rate but you might pay less. We don't just keep punching your credit card for as long as we can. So it will be our responsibility to make it fun. Why else would people pay us?

HomeLAN - Finally is there anything else you wish to say about Imperial Wars?

Larry Dunlap - Thanks for the opportunity to say thanks. It isn't supposed to be possible to do what we're doing. Online multiplayer games are too expensive to

develop and even if you do, it's supposed to be next to impossible to publish and promote them. So I want to say thanks to my teammates who get up every day and move another rock as we try to move this mountain. I want to thank people like Webcountry and OpenBase who have believed in us and given us tools so can create with the best of the best. I want to thank people who have inspired and helped me personally over the last several years like Jessica Mulligan, Gordon Walton at Maxis and Raph Koster at SWG. And I'd like to thank you, the unsung heroes for indie developer/publishers like us the online journalists who give us a voice to your audience. You help keep the dream of the Internet alive and open to all game makers and not just the giant corporations that own the other media.

Links

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