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**Imperial Wars Exclusive Interview**

Posted on Friday, January 17 @ 22:07:36 EST (6451 Reads)

Posted by: [Zanthor](#)

Topic: [Imperial Wars](#)



Scott Miller, PR man for Imperial Wars, contacted me recently offering me an exclusive interview. I took a look at their site and decided it was a game that would interest many of you so I took him up on it. What he returned was quite a nice chunk of information, some great questions answered and I'm sure you'll have many more. (Submit them!) Anyhow, it's a long read, but a good one, so read more and enjoy!

Ok, Since this is the first time many of the OGCAN readers have heard about Imperial Wars, I'd like to start with the basics and move on towards the more complex issues later in the interview. Tell me a little bit about the team you have working on Imperial Wars...

First the basics, we call Imperial Wars and episodic Metagame. We throw that into the ring with all of the acronyms and then hope we can easily explain it. So far we can't. Maybe it'll be a first here. It is a combination, war-game, role-playing game, board game, PBM game with all the chatter and fun of a Saturday night poker game or a Sunday afternoon Monopoly game. Of course that is a lot of concepts and really explains nothing.

As Dungeons & Dragons evolved from war games, so did Imperial Wars, nothing left to chance and all conflict resolved logically, turn-based with simultaneous play. In our case, the role-playing comes from the way the characters in the game are designed rather than dice rolls that artificially give a player attributes. The board game attributes might describe the atmosphere that surround an IWars universe, what we call the meta-game. In a way, everything that happens in an IWars universe happens to support the Metagame where we think the real game is going on.

At Intelligent Life Games, we define the Metagame as that cool stuff that happens outside of the game rules, where people talk across the table, make local rules and generally enjoy the social aspects of an activity with others. But to make that more fun, we throw in 350 worlds, chock full of homeworlds, Imperial Worlds, Black holes, Novas, Wormholes, and the odd Rebel world. To move through these worlds, the players get 300 star fleets. Not all at once of course, and they have to wangle ways to get them from one another. Then there are the Jewels of Power, the Imperial Relics and the Ancient gems to spice things up a bit.

In the game is full email and instant messenger, whose address books are populated as you meet the other Starlords in your own pocket universe. But maybe the best thing about the game is the ease with which it fits itself into your lifestyle and yet retains the immersive quality of a long-term game. Unlike games that demand your complete and full attention, IWars co-exists with the rest of your life. It brings back not only the really fun social aspects of gaming but also those wonderful lost emotions

of anticipation and contemplation. This is not a game for everyone; it's not the long-awaited breakthrough game of the Internet masses. The target is much higher than that. We just wanted to make the most fun game that we could think of.

How did the games concept come to be born?

Imperial Wars was born out of disaster. Long ago, in a galaxy far, far... uh no wait. That's a different story. I was involved in an interactive game/cable television venture called The Games Network. For a while we had the chance to revolutionize computer gaming by delivering computer games to televisions via cable TV and it was exciting. However, the company died at birth, unable to fund the required number of set top boxes to make it work. But, I was contemplating back then what kind of game that we, as a company could produce over such a network. And of course it was a combination of all the games I saw and loved and those that I remembered and wished could be translated into this interactive medium. That game, evolved over many years into Imperial Wars.

The main reason this is an important story is because that means that IWars has different parents than the persistent world games. The MMPOGs or MMPRPG antecedent games can be traced from Ultima Online back to LegendMUD, back to Colossal Cave with a stop off at Hack and Rogue and flavored midway through by D&D. Imperial Wars on the other hand, had ancestors in Play-by-mail, Diplomacy, wargaming, and board games. For some horrible reason the game world seems to have decided that the only kind of game that can be called an online game must be a persistent world. Hey, I love them and I play them, sometimes, which is why I'll never do very well in them. But they are only one way of gaming on the Internet, and in the long run, maybe not even the best way. We need more choices.

Some of the old school online gamers may get the feeling that Imperial Wars was inspired partly by an old e-mail game called VGA Planets. Did VGA planets have any direct or indirect effect on the creation of the concept?

Editors Notes: VGA Planets was originally announced on comp.sys.ibm.pc.games in November of 1992. (Original Post.)

Actually, IWars design was pretty well finalized when VGA Planets and its stepchild Stars came along. Two bigger influences were Kesmai's MegaWars III and FBI's Starweb. However, VGA Planets probably started from the same seeds that have spawned IWars. What sets IWars apart from all of these games is the way it is embedded into the Internet. We try to use all the tools that players are now familiar with for communication. Much as we may disguise it with Bruce Dean's artwork, we're really setting up this big communication game. To make that work, we have to have a really good game at the foundation that will capture a player's imagination and make that player want to communicate. But the energy happens once that communication starts taking place.

I understand you are currently in closed Beta, how long have you been developing the game and when are you hoping to ship?

Actual development began with a website over 5 years ago. However, code started getting written just short of 4 years ago. We state a lot about what we are doing on our website in what we call our "Manifesto". We are doing this because we love it, are passionate about it, and want to play this game and others like it. Our business model calls for the game to be free with a subscription charge for turns. This seems fair because if we can't deliver good value for money, people won't play. That puts the pressure squarely on us to deliver a great game, every time, every turn and not on whether we have a good public relations or marketing campaign and a cool looking box, which we do have by the way.

Speaking of shipping, do you have a publisher yet? Are you looking for one, or planning on utilizing the first hits free marketing method?

Intelligent Life Games is the online publisher and producer of Imperial Wars but is always looking for a big brother. My own background is not just in cable TV but also the music business and the developer/publisher model that currently exists is not

tenable. After my experiences in big time finance, going public and all, we formed ourselves with the expectation we'd have to do the whole thing ourselves but with the hope that we could find a fair business and strategic partner or partners. The great thing about the Internet is there is nobody between the player and us and that what makes that philosophy possible. Because of interviews like this and the open access of the Internet to our website, we have the greatest of opportunities. We can compete with the biggest companies in the world. Why? Because this isn't about money. This is about fun. In the long run, if you have fun playing with us, we'll be here for a long time to come.

With all that said, you can only have so much expertise on a team. We are unique, each with our own skills and talents but we have to re-invent the wheel all too often because we don't have quick access to certain resources and experience. Plus access to the best tools and marketing dollars to help get us in front of our audience would be great. The hardest thing about bringing a unique game to the Internet is finding your audience. For the MMPOGs, its easy. The next persistent world's audience is currently playing DAoC, EQ, or UO. You know where to go steal them. There is a lot of cannibalization going on right now. For us, we need to find those readers and watchers of speculative fiction that want to try our kind of game experience. And money could really help us penetrate to that audience.

The forums are currently readable only by registered users, when the game opens up are you planning on allowing unregistered users to read the posts? (This would allow better understanding of what they are getting when they play.)

When we began with our first chosen set of testers, we didn't think it was fair to put their comments out for everyone to see, since they couldn't play yet. But now that we are in open testing for registered forum members, everything is open for all visitors to the Imperial Forums.

How do you feel the EPMG will be received in the world of MMPOG's? Are you seeking the more "I have a life" based gamer, appealing to those who have less time to sink into their entertainment?

Well, my first thought was that we might have to struggle to find our own audience. Yes, it is likely that there is a segment of players playing in the MMPOGs that might like to try something different but who could guess how many? Then one of our first testers posted on her own, that she hadn't gone back to one of the major MMPOGs since she had discovered IWars and never intended to. She explained that she was a full-time nurse with two kids and that game was killing her. That is one person and very apocryphal, however it just might be that there are people starved for a game that they can emotionally enjoy but that doesn't just require all of their time.

We have been finding that the military and the universities around the world are full of avid gamers who can't control their own schedules. We have a lot of older visitors and players I think, who enjoy the more contemplative pace of IWars. I think we are a viable option for anyone who thinks the gameplay with depth is more important than any other factor in a game. And that could be just about anyone.

For those who have the time, the pace of the game may be a touch slow, can you concurrently participate in more than one game?

There are a number of factors that will speed up play before we bring IWars fully online with the final version. The most important one is our plan to offer the first two moves offline. There are several advantages to this. First, this allows the first time player a lot of time to play with the simple mechanics of the game without any pressure. At the same time, it encourages people who are not interested in this kind of game to quit. We really don't want to drag people into these games that don't really understand them or didn't really know what they were getting in to. Also, the veteran player can run through the first two moves in a couple of hours or much less. Last, way too much hassle for a grief player to go through so we avoid the great majority of them. This helps us protect the players who actually submit their second move. They are assured that they are in a Universe with 15 other players who actually want to play.

At the same time, I would like to point out that by turn 5 most players are yelling for more time to get their moves in. Once you start meeting Starlords, there's a whole lot to do and no one will complain about the pace of the game. And consider whether killing a bunch of rabbits or dying a bunch of shirts is considered a real good time at the beginning of a leveling game. While you're waiting for your IWars turn you could always read a good book, re-introduce yourself to your family, do your daily exercises or a host of other usefully things. You "ease" into an Imperial Wars universe, but when you're there you have stuff to do, not just "macroing" around leveling up. Last point and then I'll let this alone. IWars is built to respond to the players themselves. It is completely automated. If the players finish and submit their moves, the game turns. There is no deadline unless the players let it arrive so it isn't the game that is slow, it is paced to the players themselves, and features like the first two moves offline will have an affect on this part of the process as well.

To answer your question about being in more than one game, we allow testers to join two games but we will be checking to see if this is too overwhelming or not. We'll see what the testers tell us.

You state on the website that players will not need to be online at the same time to share in a game, how long is the time limit before a player simply loses their turn?

Players enter a game queue after registering their game account. The account registration gives them an anonymous Screen Name that is theirs all through their life in the IWars community. Once they have registered they enter an automated game queue that lets them choose the player they will play and a player name for this universe. An email will arrive confirming their entry into the queue. When the queue fills up, a brand new unique universe is created for those sixteen people and they are notified by email that they have 24 hours to sign in and make their first move. Of course, all moves are simultaneous. We'll alter this a bit when they enter the queue at move 2, but the principle will be the same. Right now we are testing with 48 hours between turns until turn 4 when the deadline moves to 4 days. These intervals are all part of the testing and can and will be tweaked. We see a time in the future when different queues will be offered for people who want to play faster or slower, or for veteran players who want to "design" and host their own games, changing the configuration, within certain parameters, of the kind of game they want to play. But only veteran players will truly understand the way this game breathes and that time is a necessity. Missing two moves in a row constitutes a drop and the game will automatically remove that player from the universe and make it available to a substitute player queue. Dropping will also have other penalties. We support resigning from a game, which is an available option but dropping is impolite to everyone in your Universe.

How much are you planning on charging for the game and how much to subscribe per month or turn?

We plan to charge \$10.99 per month right now. However, if you play in a universe where there are less than 2 moves, you might end up playing less since it will be \$3.95 a turn for those that hangover. But a player will never pay more that \$10.99 a month. At the moment we are not sure whether to support two games at the same time because we're not certain that it is wise to encourage that. We'll try to determine that in the testing. There will be lots of ways to win free months, however. Whenever you do things that support the community and make the game experience better for those around you, we'll give you free months. And your Starlord peers will be able to do that for you when they rank how much they enjoyed being in a game with you.

Speaking of the month/turn based billing, are you reading my mind? (I was just thinking how nice it would be to only pay for the time I actually spent PLAYING a game!)

Hopefully, that's how it will turn out. The MMPOGs are strange in a way. They encourage you to be online all the time or you will miss something, yet that is what drives their cost up. We encourage you to play as much as you want because it rarely affects our servers. The only time your socket is really connected is during the Save or Submit process. So, do as much as you want as often as you want. It's okay with us.

The team looks very diverse and talented, what do each of you feel you bring to

Imperial Wars that's unique and special?

Well, I guess we have to start with me to kind of relate each of the team members. My name is Larry Dunlap and my first brush with the Game Industry was in the early eighties with The Games Network. As noted earlier, this spectacular flameout was an experience that provided me with a very unique education in several disciplines, however difficult and traumatic it was. That business got started simply because I was a computer game fan and I wanted to find a way to put computer games in front of people who didn't own computers. The difference between then and now for me, is then we were a channel for nearly every game published at that time, while now we are the actual creators, the developer and producer. My background following TGN brought me experience in designing big database systems, technical writing, and technical training and other useful disciplines. So, I supply the design, I am the keeper of the vision and write the specs and am the focal point for the team as well as being general dogsbody as required.

Bruce Dean is a world-class artist. You will find his work available all over the world; just punch his name into Google. Bruce and I met playing softball and we struck up a friendship that culminated with pencil sketches of IWars characters for my first GDC about 5 years ago. Partly through continued association and partly through Bruce's son, Tyler's interest in online gaming, Bruce found himself drawn more and more into the project and took over the art design for the game, which immediately improved it. His subtle design and knowledge creates the distinctive look of an Imperial Wars universe and gives the characters that play in it, life. Now Bruce takes an active interest in every aspect of the game making process and makes himself especially available in the forums community. He is currently working on a new Rebel character for IWars.

Without Mike Kienenberger there would likely be no Imperial Wars. Mike's background is diverse, running from experience with the huge super-cooled computers at the national computing center headquartered at the University of Alaska to working on the NeXT operating system. His love is network programming in all of its different shades. He is also a strategy gamer and was determined that IWars meet all the standards of a great strategy game. His standards are exacting and he holds all of the rest of us to it. Without a person with the knowledge, discipline, work ethic and drive that Mike has provided us, it would be impossible to offer this game. His skills are not those of the usual game programmer but for us they were the unique combination of skills necessary to make our game.

Mike Fawcett is an instructor at Full Sail, a game programming school in Florida when he's not working on the IWars game client. I met Mike at GDC and he took over the graphics component when it became apparent that graphics programming was not Mike K's favorite task but which is Mike F's. Since then the user interface has improved immensely.

Nick Palmer is our composer and has several layered compositions in the can for IWars as soon as we can get around to getting his new work into the game client. We have always felt from the very first time Nick sent us compositions to work with that he had captured the essence of the Imperial Empire. Nick has done work for several television productions and is now making himself available to the game industry.

The assistance of Jessica Mulligan on our Advisory Board is unparalleled. Jessica has forgotten more about the online game business than most know about it. The effect of her constant support and help are impossible to fully determine. While there have been a lot of industry people who have been aware of what we are trying to accomplish and they have always been supportive and helpful, none have dived right into the water with us and helped us try to avoid the pitfalls that have befallen other developers the way Jessica has.

We have had contributions from others, such as designer Aaron Cammarata who designed levels for every Tony Hawk, Pro Skater version, who designed our starmap. It is likely in the upcoming weeks that there will be other "guest" programmers as well. The whole has somehow been greater than the sum of its parts. This actually works within our plan of continuing to develop this game even after its in play. The nature of this game allows that and we intend to take full advantage of it. If I have my way, the IWars you see today and the one you see next year and the year after that

will illustrate a continuing growth of the game and the adaptation of it to the most current technology. After all you could play IWars on your cell phone!

[Scott Miller](#)

Marketing and Community Manager

[Intelligent Life Games](#)

[Imperial Wars](#)

Of course you can find more information about Imperial Wars at the links above, or feel free to comment here, I'm sure that Scott and maybe even Larry will answer some for us.

And some related links to the story...

[Alterslash](#) did a short opinion on the interview and my posting to /. which you may find interesting.

[Zanthor](#) comments: Lots of comments on this one over on [SlashDot](#)... I'm amazed at how well the servers taking the abuse, and I hope you all enjoy the interview!

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It's not the Host (Score: 1)

by [Calren](#) on Sunday, January 19 @ 10:41:18 EST

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Pfft, the reason why the server is doing just fine is because I'm casting buffs on it to raise my Technomancy level.

Hey, it's better than camping spawns, or getting around to these three Outside the Spotlights I have roughed out in my head.

[[Reply to This](#)]

- [Re: It's not the Host](#) by [Zanthor](#) on Monday, January 20 @ 06:28:04 EST
 - [Re: It's not the Host](#) by [Calren](#) on Monday, January 20 @ 08:50:47 EST

Re: Imperial Wars Exclusive Interview (Score: 1)

by [Helam](#) on Friday, January 17 @ 23:55:20 EST

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This is *exactly* the kind of experience an old fart like me has been hoping for. As a nearly "seasoned citizen" (just 3 more years until my AARP card) I just don't have the time or the energy to powergame like I used to. Not to mention, I've never been able to keep up with most of you Young Whippersnappers when it came to "twitch" games. I'm **really** looking forward to seeing how this plays out.

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Re: Imperial Wars Exclusive Interview (Score: 1)
by Calren on Saturday, January 18 @ 00:01:37 EST
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First off, Zanth you evil monkey, you've stolen the "longest post" award from me!

As for the game, it might appeal to someone, but my wallet's remaining in my pocket as far as this is concerned. things with turns haven't been too fun to me lately, I think it's because I crave making people scream "WTF?" as their ship/building/ect bursts into flames. Then again my tastes in games have been odd lately...

goes back to playing [Puzzle Pirates](#) as Calren the Multicolored

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- [Re: Imperial Wars Exclusive Interview](#) by Anonymous Coward on Saturday, January 18 @ 16:44:51 EST
 - [Re: Imperial Wars Exclusive Interview](#) by Calren on Sunday, January 19 @ 10:22:44 EST
 - [Re: Imperial Wars Exclusive Interview](#) by Zanthor on Sunday, January 19 @ 12:42:56 EST
 - [Re: Imperial Wars Exclusive Interview](#) by Calren on Sunday, January 19 @ 20:52:59 EST
 - [Re: Imperial Wars Exclusive Interview](#) by Calren on Monday, January 20 @ 05:47:03 EST
 - [Re: Imperial Wars Exclusive Interview](#) by Anonymous Coward on Wednesday, January 22 @ 23:19:18 EST
 - [Re: Imperial Wars Exclusive Interview](#) by Calren on Friday, January 24 @ 08:49:39 EST

Re: Imperial Wars Exclusive Interview (Score: 0)
by Anonymous Coward on Wednesday, January 22 @ 23:20:26 EST

Who's idea was it to put the entire interview response in italics and the questions in bold? If anything that should be switched, but in the ideal world both question and answer would be in a normal font.

So I couldn't track my old eyes to read it properly so what does MMPOG and EPMG stand for?

[[Reply to This](#)]

- [Re: Imperial Wars Exclusive Interview](#) by Zanthor on Thursday, January 23 @ 00:00:26 EST

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