

# How To Become a World Champion At Twilight Imperium in 10 Easy Games

By Jonno

In 2022 I won the Space Cats Peace Turtles 616-person Twilight Imperium tournament, and here are some of my thoughts so that you too can be a world champion. This is written for anyone interested in playing this wonderful game and I will try not to assume previous knowledge or experience. The finals were my 10th game of Twilight Imperium, so in comparison to many other good players I am lacking experience; please take everything written here with a large grain of salt. More importantly, all advice given here is general and needs to be adapted to your unique local gaming environment, which just means the actual players at your table on the day. I hope you enjoy reading this as much as I did putting it together for you.

Twilight Imperium (TI) can look like a marathon due to its long (4-10+ hour) play experience, but I think of it more as a 100m sprint with hurdles, ran in super slow motion. Each move builds into the next, and planning ahead for the most efficient path is a necessity. A single misstep can have devastating repercussions – it may not be that hard to deserve to win a match of TI, but it is certainly very easy to lose. Efficiency and forward thinking are key, which is particularly difficult as the objectives are revealed progressively, with the most valuable objective only revealed in the fifth and usually final round. It is also at its heart a diplomatic game, and most games will be determined by the relationships that you build with the other players. Games will be won and lost based on your ability to convince the other players to allow you the chance to win.

Here are some tips to help you win world championships:

## **Before the game**

### Understand that you can do pretty much whatever you want

There are a number of rules in Twilight Imperium, most of which are to do with the board and the pieces on it. However, the vast majority of what decisions you make are to do with the players at the table. Here, there are very few set rules, and ultimately, if the actions you take lead to you winning, then those actions were good in this specific game. Normally, giving all your trade goods away to another player, or letting someone conquer your home system are bad ideas which prevent you from winning, but if you do them and win, then they were successful choices! That doesn't mean you should recommend everyone do those exact things in their games, but maybe they should think about it.

### Read the rules cover to cover including FAQs

Many players have been taught to play the game by other players, and have never at any point sat down and read the rules themselves. I find that by reading the whole rule book I come across rule subtleties that I did not previously know existed. For some people, reading rules is not a fun activity, but luckily I tend to enjoy it. While I read rules I make up scenarios in my head where those rules would be relevant, and try to think about what the unintended consequences of those rules might be. Games can be won and lost by properly understanding, or failing to understand, important rule distinctions. Having a solid grasp of the rules also frees your brain from thinking about them during the game, giving you room to focus on the game itself.

### Know where all the points come from

This game is won by achieving your 10<sup>th</sup> point. Knowing exactly where those points can come from and how to get them is essential to plan ahead, so that you are most prepared to grab them when the opportunity comes. For me this meant writing out an Excel table with the different categories of points, and having a short think about how to achieve them. Some points have hard prerequisites which you must routinely work towards – eg technology and structure objectives. If you do not go for Tech in the earlier rounds, you may not be eligible to score those objectives if they are revealed later on. Others, such as control objectives, can be flexibly achieved, particularly when you are good at the diplomatic side of the game. Remember, many of these points can be directly given to you by other players, keep that pathway open!

Here is my summary of the different types of points available:

Public objectives Secret objectives - Action Phase - Agenda Phase - Status Phase Relics - Shard of the Throne - Obsidian	Agendas - Mutiny - Seed of an Empire Action cards - Imperial Rider Support for the Throne Imperial Strategy card Racial abilities – e.g. Winnu
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### Make a plan for the draft and the first turn

In the SCPT tournament there was a pregame draft for your position, slice, faction, and starting turn order. If the pool of draft components is known before the game, you can have a think about what you would like to achieve in the draft. For each of my games I would think about how the other players would most likely want to draft, and then planned what I would like to do depending on each pick order I would be in. My predictions were often wrong, but they still helped take the pressure off my brain in the moment, particularly when I was first pick.

### Ask for advice

The pool of experience and insight that this community possesses cannot be overstated. Knowing that I lacked experience I asked others for their thoughts of my draft plans and general strategy ideas. I read strategy guides and followed discussions on the Discord and Reddit pages. These were essential for helping shape my ideas and playstyles, and helped me understand some finer points of the game. Sometimes it can scary to ask strangers for advice, but in my experience everyone was extremely accommodating and helpful. Knowing who to ask can also be tough, what I did go back to my previous games and write to some of the people I had played with already, especially those who were better than me.

### Be fit

In order to concentrate effectively for the entire 10+ hours you need to be physically and mentally fit. This means maintaining a basic regime in your everyday life of regular sport, healthy eating, and sleeping hygiene. Plan out the food you will eat over the course of the day, and ensure a regular supply of healthy snacks. Drinking lots of water is good for the body, and needing to go to the toilet often gives you time to rest your brain for a minute and come back with a fresh perspective.

## **At the start of the game**

### Read all your faction components, twice

In each of my 2022 tournament games I forgot faction abilities or got components wrong. There are so many factions and abilities in this game, if you're not one of those rare people who has memorised every component then it can help to just look at the text a couple times at the start of the game, and maybe halfway through as well.

### Read all of your opponents faction components at the start of the game

There's even less chance of you remembering the special rules of other players, so just give yourself a reminder by looking at their components at least once.

### Set up the style of the game

I like to have a quick, explicit conversation with the other players about how I like to play, and find out what kind of game the other players would like to have. Some people will have set views of what they want – nice, aggressive, competitive, narrative, etc. Spend a little time finding that out, and if it doesn't align with your views, see if you can come to a compromise – you will be spending a lot of time together, you should try to make it fun! In this conversation I would often talk about how I am here to work together, that I like to make deals that are honoured, etc, which speeds up how people can judge me and gets the game rolling. If I were someone who does not value non-binding deals, or will defend my slice to the death, telling other people that also speeds up the game by helping set expectations.

## **During the game**

### Make a plan to get your 10<sup>th</sup> point

Recognise the various win conditions and reassess each turn if you can set up for at least one.

- Win from ahead
  - You get ahead in point scoring tempo, then you successfully defend your homesystem from all attackers. If you are strong enough, you don't even need to pretend that you are not winning. Some factions are very good at this, such as Titans or Nekro.
- Win by surprise
  - *Let your plans be dark and impenetrable as night, and when you move, fall like a thunderbolt – Sun Tze.* Get yourself to 9 points, and then score an Action Phase secret to win. This often requires deliberate obfuscation of your plans, and redirecting the attention of the table towards other players. Most good players are trying to prevent anyone winning like this, and try to predict and block easy Action Phase secrets being scored. This means for example not leaving out lone fighters which could be destroyed with Anti-fighter barrage, PDS fire, or a Flagship. Researching Lightwave Deflector and thereby gaining the ability to move through other player's units greatly increases your ability to seize unexpected opportunities to score.
- Win in order
  - This is a traditional method – get to 8 or 9 and be able to score your last points, then winslay each player who would score before you. Sometimes this involves the

“win-slay chain”, in that every player is invested in winslaying the people directly in front of them, but needs the help of other players to do so. Navigating this winslay chain can be complicated, and sometimes means deliberately appearing to reduce your own chance to win in order to gain the help of others. Everyone in the chain needs to believe that helping winslay will increase their own personal chance of winning, otherwise what’s the point. Before you prevent anyone from being able to slay you, you need to ensure the people in front of you will be slain. For example, if you use Diplomacy to make your homesystem unassailable, the players behind you in the winslay chain now have no reason to winslay the person in front of you, as you would definitely win before them regardless. This may actually reduce your chance of winning. Remember that the front of the order is usually the player with Imperial, who can use it during the round to score, then the players with Leadership, Diplomacy etc.

- Be the last one standing
  - This is often the result of a chaotic last round, or a complicated winslay chain. You try your best to win, then a whole bunch of chaos happens, and somehow you are the only player left to score, or can score using Imperial first action next round. This is hard to predict, but can happen if you are lucky and keep fighting to the end. Not giving up until the game is actually over is essential to allowing yourself the chance at this kind of win. Remember that the other players may also be exhausted at the end of the game; they may make unexpected mistakes which allow you to get the win.
- Get winmade
  - Have someone help you win, either through giving you a point with Support for the Throne, allowing you to score an objective (eg by retreating from a system so you can score an Action Phase secret), or choosing not to winslay you. Many people have varied and sometimes very strong opinions about winmaking, which goes beyond the scope of this discussion, except to keep it in mind as a potential game-ending event.
- Make a (Magi’s) gambit
  - This is where you agree with another player to make a play which has one outcome of them winning, and one outcome of you winning. For example, you help a player make a longshot attack on a system, if they win the battle they win the game, if they lose the battle they will give you the support you need to win. In doing so you have increased the chances of both players winning. This is how the 2022 finals ended (spoilers ahead) – NekroDiesTwice and I gave our relic fragments to Cody to get him to winslay nerfzerg, who was ahead of us in the winslay chain. Cody could then use the fragments to draw a relic which may have gotten him his last point to win the game, and if he didn’t, the winner would be either NekroDiesTwice or I. If Cody had not winslain nerfzerg then Nekro and I definitely could not win, if Cody didn’t get the fragments then he could not have won. Making such a gambit increased all three player’s chances of winning, and I have to admit, was really fun.

### Play to win and be efficient about it

*A-B-C. A-Always, B-Be, C-Closing. Always be closing – Blake, Glengarry Glen Ross.* Every decision you make should bring you closer to winning the game, ideally by directly scoring at least one point, ideally multiple. For example, you are sending a ship out to gum between you and your neighbour and you have three hexes as options. The hex next to their homesystem can fulfil a secret objective, as can systems with wormholes. Hexes on the edge of the board fulfil two public objectives. Hexes in anomalies can be attacked for a secret objective, and having ships next to anomalies can fulfil a

secret objective. Therefore an efficient, if aggressive, play would be to place your ship on the edge of the board on a wormhole, next to their homesystem and an anomaly. Ideally, once you move a ship you should never move it again if its current position could fulfil a future objective. This is part of what makes Dark Energy Tap (DET) so great – you get an extra reward for a move that may already be completing several objectives. You have only so many moves to make in the game, only so many ships that will be built, try to stretch value out of every piece you have.

### Be nice

Good relationships are of vital importance in this game. Understanding the other players helps you predict their actions and reactions to other player's moves. To understand other people you need to interact with them regularly, which is easy to do if you set up a communicative and enjoyable relationship. I encourage talking to your neighbours each time you move, and judge how they react to your turns. Even when you attack or disadvantage a player, talk to them and let them know why you are doing what you're doing, and if you can try to work out a way of softening the blow. If possible, forge a narrative they can get on board with – it's easier to understand getting attacked if it's a reasonable retaliation for an earlier aggression on their part.

### Build a reputation

How the other players perceive you will determine how they treat you and make deals with you. If you are known to be someone who breaks deals, I will try to not make deals which involve trusting you (such as non-binding deals where I don't get the advantage at the start). Being seen as someone trustworthy makes dealmaking easier and faster, and personally more fun. I much prefer working well with people, and if I lose because my support partner won then I am still happier than if someone won with whom I had lots of unpleasant conflict. Personally I endeavour to never break deals, including the spirit of the deal and not just the letter. This was easy for me in the 2022 tournament, because I had made the decision to play like this before the games started. I think the lasting reputation of being someone of their word is worth more than the temporary advantage one gets by backstabbing, even if that advantage wins a game or two. I find being supportive builds rewarding relationships, which is really the fun part of this game and community. This is not to say I look down on players who break deals, and I certainly enjoy a good betrayal, it's just the way I have found I like to play in a competitive setting, and I honestly believe it helps me win games.

### Be appropriately assertive

*He will win who knows when to fight and when not to fight – Sun Tze.* Being nice does not mean being weak. You will sometimes have to take systems from other players in order to forward your goals, and knowing how and when to do this is important. If you need to attack a player, do it, and tell them why you are doing it and what it means to you. If they give you social resistance, such as complaining, be strong in your conviction that it is the right thing to do for your chance to win (assuming, of course, that it is). Everyone is playing to win, and that will often require conflict. Such conflict does not need to be unpleasant, but you don't have to shy away from taking what you think is necessary for your win just because it inconveniences others. When you are being threatened or exploited, particularly if you overextended or are otherwise in the weaker military position, make sure to let the other players know what this exploitation means for you. Sometimes you just accept the exploitation and move on, sometimes you counter with another threat, such as non-military support to another player. This is a diplomatic game and there are many theatres of war – the military ships, trade goods, political support, sharing of knowledge, action cards, or even your Support for the Throne! If you are conflict averse in your normal life, enjoy the safe space this board game provides to practice being more assertive. As long as you are nice about it, the worst

that happens is you lose a game or two. Often putting up even minimal resistance will help opponents seek easier, more compliant targets to attack.

### Avoid wasting resources (mostly I mean ships)

*Build your opponent a golden bridge to retreat across – Sun Tze.* A cornered enemy will fight to the death, resulting in a costly battle, for you and them. If you need to attack a system and you give your opponent an opportunity to retreat, or even move before the battle would take place, you allow each other to reduce the cost of the conflict. Remember that you may need their ships to win someone else later, so try not to squander resources where you can. Negotiate conflicts and let players save face, redefine the relationship to define the needs of the now, don't get caught up in the narrative of last turn if it is no longer helping you win. If you have just struck a blow against a player, don't provoke them into a forever war, give them an opportunity to deescalate and work together towards your common goals.

### Be unpredictable

*All warfare is based on deception. Hence, when we are able to attack, we must seem unable; when using our forces, we must appear inactive; when we are near, we must make the enemy believe we are far away; when far away, we must make him believe we are near. - Sun Tze.* Since many ways to win the game require other players not blocking you, it is important to hide your true paths to the win. Often you do not need to do this deliberately, as playing efficiently and setting yourself up for future opportunities will already hide your immediate intentions. For example, having a strong mixed fleet near Mecatol will allow you to score many public and secret objectives without telegraphing that you are going for any specific objective in particular. Other objectives, such as having 11 infantry on a planet, require moves which are more difficult to hide. If this is the case, you can sometimes set up as if you are going for another objective as well, e.g. by also building 5 destroyers, and if other players have only limited resources they will have to guess which path they try to block, which may divide win attempts. Some technologies such as Lightwave Deflector, Fleet Logistics, and Sling Relay allow tactical flexibility which is hard to predict. Action cards are also an obvious source of unpredictability, and simply keeping a few in your hand can be a helpful bluff. Often your goal is not to have the players have no idea what you are doing, but just to confuse, delay, and divide them long enough to give you a chance to score.

### Keep all players invested in the game

The nature of Twilight Imperium means that each player can have enormous influence on each other, even if they themselves have no chance of winning. Some players, upon recognising that there really is no chance left to win, will stop playing, or at least stop making actions which affect other players. There are many opinions about this which is a discussion for another time. Ultimately what is important is that if you want those people to help you win, such as by trading with you or wining someone else, you need them to believe that they can still win the game. This may involve heavy personal cost to you, such as not taking their home system, giving them huge financial support, or even giving them a point or two. As discussed before, whatever you do that helps you win is a good idea, even if it looks like a bad idea at the time. Only you can judge what is appropriate on the day for your game with the players at your table.

### If the current board state is not working in your favour, shake things up

*In the midst of chaos, there is also opportunity – Sun Tze, or more recently Chaos is a ladder – Petyr Baelish, George R.R. Martin, Game of Thrones.* If other players are well on track to winning before

you in order, and your chances of a surprise win are slim, then you should consider shaking up the flow of the game. This might be because you fell behind on scoring, you got invaded, or lost an important battle. Now might be the time to give your Support for the Throne to someone unexpected, use a powerful ability such as Mahact's Benediction, or pass an Agenda like Ixthian Artifact that shakes things up. The aim would be to set the winners against each other so that they cannot maintain the status quo and just coast into a win. This is often achieved via talking, so relies on the relationships built during the game. Remember that there are usually other players who also feel like they are behind, and they may help you in taking down the leaders. Alternatively, one of the leaders may be happy to take a small hit in order to get your support bringing down their rival. Remember, as this game has only one winner and six players, it is not a free for all, it is 5v1, but who appears to be the 1 can change very rapidly.

### Find a buddy

Two players working together will usually achieve more than any single player going it alone. This is the basis of the "boat floating" meta, in which the rising tide lifts all boats. This idea is mechanically built into the game with the commodity/trade good situation – commodities are mostly worthless to you, and become valuable only when you give them to someone else. Players who trade them and receive value in return will generally do better than players who do not trade. I like to find at least one buddy in each game with whom I can easily and honestly trade – hopefully someone I never have to attack. Building a good relationship makes things easy, our discussions are based on mutual trust and good experience, so it is quick to communicate we want without having to get into details about each deal – we know the other will support the spirit of the deal. If you could do this with each other player that would be ideal, but the reality is that it takes time, emotional and social energy to build and maintain relationships, so focusing on only one neighbour may be more practical.

### Unify your allies/Divide your opponents

This game is often 5v1, the 1 being the person who looks like they will win first. Identifying that person is often difficult, but sometimes it is not. If you can, unify the table in believing that another player is that 1 person, and support the alliance in bringing them down. On the flip side, if players are talking about how you are the current leader, try to sow division and prevent a solid plan forming against you. Ways to do this include bringing attention to other potential winners, fomenting social division by bringing up past grievances, complaining about the impossibility of your secret objectives (see: Hollywooding. If your objectives truly are impossible, consider showing them), or bribing other players to attack each other. Most people do not want to be betrayed, so will be reluctant to join an alliance if they are not sure that they will come out of it better off than their "teammate". This inhibits teamwork, and it is often easier to break up gangs than it is to form them. However, if the table is communicating honestly and the players have logically agreed to gang up on you, try not to worsen the play experience by continually trying to break up the alliance, recognise when and where to apply pressure – you might just have to cop a hit or two first.

### Every enemy is an ally, every ally an enemy

Alliances can be fluid in this game, with the balance of who needs to support who changing every single action. If your goal is to win, then remember to look at your opponents as allies, and choose to support each other even if you have just fought a 3 hour war. Grudges can be useful and fun, but letting one get in the way of working together will result in less games won. On the other hand, remember that each of your allies are also trying to win, so keep an eye on them. If you are resolute in not directly attacking your allies, then consider other ways of reducing their chance to

win before you such as by supporting their enemies (who may also be your allies, you can be friends with everyone!).

### Play to the end

*No hesitation, no surrender, no man left behind – John Thundergun, Thundergun 4: Maximum Cool.* Even when the chance seems wildly out of reach, keep searching for those opportunities to catch up. Go back through your list of where points are available and give yourself chances to score them, even if it's only with wild longshots. Remember that this is a diplomatic game – at any point the others players could just hand you the last points that you need, or more likely, they hand you points they thought were safe, then you surprise them with the win. It's fine to stop if you don't want to play anymore, but if you want to win, then maybe you need to keep going.

### Maintain a healthy mind

Drink lots of water. Take lots of breaks, especially to get out of the room with the computer/board and go stretch instead. The stress of the game, and the heavy emotional and political manipulation from other players, can warp your view of reality. Give your brain room to breathe by just doing nothing – this frees you up to reassess your position and find new possibilities. This a long game, it can survive a five minute break before you make a game-changing decision. Often you can do this without pausing the game if you go at the end of your turn and let people know you are out of the room.

### **At the end of the game**

#### Win with humility, lose with grace

Be authentically grateful for the time you got to spend with the other players at the table. Appreciate that the process of playing well is more important than the outcome, and often most if not all players “deserved” the win. This is a game of chance, so sometimes even the right decisions will be unsuccessful, and in the end the person who won was the person who got that 10<sup>th</sup> point. If you are a graceful loser and a humble winner people are going to enjoy the experience more, and you'll have more opportunities for good games in the future.

#### Ask for feedback

I like to talk to the others players and even the audience who watched what they thought about my choices and playstyle, as well as any other tips. Many people have been very responsive to being asked their opinions, and that information helps make me a better, more personable player.

### **After the game**

#### Review your games and learn from them – wins and losses

Without going crazy about it, watch through your game from the audience's perspective. Some things that were hidden to you may become obvious, and you will gain empathy with the other players at the table. You may also notice rules errors and unforced mistakes on your part, which should help reduce the chance you'll make those same mistakes again. Keep in mind however, you can spend infinite time and effort playing through games from the past, but don't beat yourself up about it – look forward to the future and enjoy the now.



## Watch other people's games

*A reader lives a thousand lives before he dies... The man who never reads lives only one.* – Jojen Reed, George R.R. Martin, *A Dance with Dragons*. Watching games builds experience and exposes you to strategy and diplomatic ideas you may not have come up with independently. You will see how other players make decisions, and what the audience thinks about those decisions. You can't expect to have more experience than everyone else combined, so tap into that collective knowledge and learn from others.

## Listen to the Space Cats Peace Turtles podcast

They're the ones who got me into the online community and I've loved listening to hundreds of hours of their content. They've helped form my base knowledge, understand "the meta", explore high level strategies, and are just great fun to hang around. If you haven't gotten into them then give it a try, either by just finding the latest episode, or by finding a topic that interests you like a deep dive into your favourite faction.

## **Conclusion**

So that's it! If I had to summarise I'd say:

- Do whatever you want
- Read the rules and your game components
- Talk to the players at your game and get to know them
- Think a lot, watch games, listen to the podcast, talk to people about their thoughts
- Play to win and don't give up
- Have fun with the whole process
- Be authentically nice

Thanks for reading! Now you can go off and become the next world champion. I hope you enjoyed it and I'd love to hear your thoughts.