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WARCRY SITES

Interview with a Rebel Model and Her Servants

10/7/2003 - 12:01 AM - [Filed by Claudius Tiulea]

All products need some kind of symbol, slogan or persona to identify it self with, and in this case, games are not excluded. How many of you remember the Star Craft chick? How many of you bought the game because of the Star Craft chick?

That's one example of how great persona advertisement is being done and that's something that Imperial Wars succeeded with. Their model, Melissa Hooven, managed to raise peoples attention at the E3's by going there with a Cleopatra attitude and a ultra-galactic battle uniform. I asked the game developer, the artist and the model about the market strategy and how it feels to be working as a game-model.

Melissa Hooven: Imperial Wars Model

Larry Dunlap: Game Developer

Bruce Dean: Art Designer

WarCry: What is the idea behind having a female model posing as a rebel? Is it about image?

Larry: Well, yeah. . We do want some one that our population of players can relate to. But there is quite a bit more to it than that. For some time now I have wanted some kind of "spokesperson" for Imperial Wars, an image that would be immediately identified with the game for marketing. There are good lessons out there from several games that have been successful in creating a persona so closely identified with their game that just seeing the image immediately lets you know what game product the image represents. It just makes marketing a little easier.

At first all of our images illustrated the character types that a Starlord in Imperial Wars could chose to play. And at first we thought that maybe we could use one of the great images that Bruce had done for them. They hardly get seen enough for me. But that seemed to go against the grain since no one character really defines the game. Bruce and I talked about it a lot and I don't remember exactly what happened or who suggested it but we came up with the idea of using the Rebel character from the game. This NPC is a loosely defined kind of AI player that the gameserver uses to add a little spice to flying around in the universe. This way no one would mind that his or her favorite character wasn't the Imperial Wars figure. I also think there was less "baggage" associated with this image since it isn't defined in a game sense but is a kind of fuzzy image from the back story that left Bruce a lot of latitude for creativity.



Bruce: Sometimes the cart does pull the horse. When I first started doing the art for Imperial Wars, I was strongly influenced by movies just as Larry was strongly influenced by science fiction literature in envisioning the characters. The first seven characters I painted were all like character actors. Coincidentally, they were all male (except for the Houri, a shape shifting, androgynous character neither male nor female). While full of character they were also all old and/or unattractive. In my mind they stood for the archetypal characters one would find in cinema, the Trader, the Raider, the Baron, the Warlord, the Philosopher, and the Terminator. The initial criticism I got as art director for Imperial Wars was obvious; no

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women, no young attractive men?!?! Who would the players relate to for their avatars? It was always my intention to have several possible avatars for each character type, but I hadn't realized that I had taken them so far in one direction. I made a concerted effort to create new characters that would address this glaring problem. We brought several young models into the studio and I photographed them, not really knowing at the time which model would become which character. Initially we used Melissa's body and the face of another model for our female Raider. I finished a new round of character paintings, mostly female, mostly young and beautiful. We now had a good mix of avatars.

Larry also asked for a "signature" character that could sort of stand for the game beyond images for each character type. Larry had hopes for the female raider based on my early sketches but when I painted the Raider, I envisioned a tough, and somewhat "punked out" young pirate and I stubbornly clung to my vision. We had endless talks about our signature character. In the meantime I had these photographs of the beautiful Melissa sitting in my files. She hadn't quite fit any of the character types I had in mind. We had an epiphany of sorts. The Rebel is an NPC, a non-playing character in the game. The gameserver AI actually plays the role of the rebel. I got excited about doing a painting of Melissa. Her photos fit the role of the Rebel, a regal, combative leftover from the Imperial age. I painted the rebel using a compilation of poses of Melissa and Larry and I agreed that this Rebel is the signature player image that will stand for all of Imperial Wars.

Warcry: What kind of work involves when posing as a model for IW?

Melissa: It's harder than it looks... It's all about patience and trusting the people you are working with. We're all trying to create this image, this symbol, this character... the Rebel, and I, as a model, I am trying to be on eye level with the creative team. I want to be the person that they have been picturing. It was a long shoot and plenty cups of coffee to get to the end of it... but it was well worth it though.

Warcry: Melissa looks like a character from a science-fiction movie and her clothes hold an 80's cliché. She wears very little armor and her helmet doesn't seem to be very protective. What was Gucci thinking?

Larry: First a little reality. I have made it a point to speak to many female game players about their roles in online gaming, and to several male players who love playing female roles. Almost to a person, they wanted their character images to be someone attractive as an alter ego. A couple of years ago, one inveterate lady role-players had a lot to say on this subject to me. If I may paraphrase: "Hey, I want to be attractive. It helps my character usually to be pretty and I think some guys play women because that gives them an advantage over other guys sometimes. But just because it's a female image I don't want to be thought of as weak. But most of all, I don't want to have to wear uncomfortable clothing. If that armor looks like it's going to chafe my thighs, I'm not wearing it!"



So there's nothing wrong with a sexy attractive lady somewhat scantily clad as a warrior. There is a long history of it in speculative fiction. And here comes the next part. First, the rebel is a remnant of an ancient galactic race where pockets of the old empire still exist on isolated worlds, left behind in the collapse of interstellar civilization. Garments are worn from a sense of tradition even more than a sense of utility. And the Imperials, despite their antiquated retro look, had a lot of cool technology, including invisible body armor! After all, the Mensa Theiliot Brotherhood developed the powerful Jewels of Power while the final dynasty was in power. At least I'd like to think our rebel lady is so protected.

Bruce: I guess I have to take the heat for this one. With Larry's blessing, my vision for the game has always been something I call "retro-techno." Again this vision is influenced by literature and cinema. But I have a rationale that I will stand by (unless you press me too hard). Larry wrote a comprehensive back-story for Imperial Wars. This back-story has turned out to be a favorite jumping off point for many of our citizens. They argue the merits and feasibility of our ships, our artifacts, our costuming and everything else,

including our logo while accepting the back-story as gospel. They have even taken the trouble to write side stories to the back-story. I can summarize the back story by telling you that Imperial Wars begins with the rediscovery of an ancient technology that allows for interstellar travel as well as some pyrotechnics and strategic weaponry that may have seemed magical to some unenlightened members of the bygone civilization. Melissa wears her helmet, not so much for physical protection, but as a talisman from the ancient empire that may, indeed protect her in ways that she may not fully understand. Beyond that, if you want to cover up Melissa with some form of protective armor you will have to answer all the complaints I'm sure that would generate.

An interesting aside to this question is my dependence on our community for criticism. I am generally as protective of my images as most artists. But I find myself posting unfinished images on our forums, rough drafts, initial ideas, almost everything I come up with, I post and wait for a response. This has created a kind of developmental document on our forums. One can see, for example, our Baroness, or our new Terminator or even our logo in transition. I put something up, our citizens post comments, and I change my initial idea, sometimes several times, until we feel that we have nailed the image. Larry places great trust in the community of players that has developed around IWars and I have learned to trust them as well. In fact, Larry and I spent many hours trying to come up with a catch phrase, a bit of copy that would somehow attract new players to the enjoyably complex (not complicated) experience that playing Imperial wars provides. He came up with the brilliant idea to use phrases from the in-game emails and universe postings that were written by our citizens. You can now find these phrases, along with artwork from the game, on our banners that grace this site and several others.

WarCry: You got a lot of attention at E3. What happened over there?

Melissa: What a great time... let me tell ya! I've never been to an E3 show before, let alone in one place with that many people. When I got there, I was immediately overwhelmed and very excited. People's reactions were great. I wore an Imperial Wars shirt that advertised the game, so I think we got some people to check the game out. We walked around, met a lot people, went around in the huge showcase rooms, had lunch, met some more people, played a couple video games, watched the army stunt show, ran into Nick Nolte (the actor), got my name "graffiti(ed)" onto a piece of paper, met some more people, grabbed a soda, played the US Open video game (I love tennis so that was a bonus for me), got my picture taken a bunch of times, met the army men, got interviewed by the Jimmy Kimmel show and National Lampoon magazine... you know the usual E3 stuff. I'm glad that we got to promote the game in such a classy way by just walking around (fully clothed) meeting and talking to people, instead of having a booth and being in a bikini like some of the models at the show. All in all I had such a fun day. I'm looking forward to going again next year.

WarCry: Will we see more of Melissa in the future?

Melissa: I hope so. I feel honored to be apart of the Imperial Wars team with Larry and Bruce, who are a pleasure to work with and to represent a game that's unlike any other in it's field.

Larry: Melissa was absolutely great and a terrific sport. She spent a very, very long and tiring day at the photo shoot and was cheerful, helpful and full of suggestions of her own. That made a big impression on those of us who were getting to know her. She works with my fiancée Laurie so from Laurie we knew she was a very cool person. But none of us expected her to just be so bright and energetic in this role.

The E3 thing was kind of a last minute deal. We didn't have a booth or anything but I was speaking on a panel at the show so Scott Miller, our public relations manager, figured we should see if Melissa would be willing to come down and meet people there, just days before the show opened. Fortunately, we're located in Los Angeles, but still I was pleased and gratified to hear how willing and excited Melissa was to drop everything to come be the Imperial Wars Rebel Lady. The minute she walked into the main door, she was turning heads and her attitude was so perfect for the kind of person that should represent all of our work. It is our hope that we can continue to have Melissa come to

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events where Imperial Wars is a part of the events and that more images and paintings of her can grace our game and site.

Related links

More about Melissa: <http://www.imperialwars.com/Library/BirthofaRebel.htm>
Imperial Wars home page: <http://www.imperialwars.com/>

Feedback: Claudius@warcry.com