Creating Games for Global Players: Understanding the Geocultural Dimension of Game Content

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Lecture Goals

- Understand the challenges of Geopolitical and Cultural (i.e., Geocultural) Risks in Game Content.

- Learn **why** it's important for games to address such risks.

- Learn **how** you can review your own content for potential geocultural issues.

- Understand **when** it's appropriate to check for content risks.

Point #1: The Basic Goal of a Game is to be "Fun"

- Most games are designed to be "fun" for their audience, not to be a negative or "offensive" experience.

- Consider these game traits that contrast a "fun" experience from an "offensive" one:

| Fun	Offensive
Entertains & Engages	Frustrates & Invokes Anger
Positive Diversion	Negative Distraction
Builds Community	Divides Community
Educates & Enlightens	Stereotypes & Overt Ignorance
Quality yields Revenue & Trust	Errors yield Sanctions & Mistrust

Point #2: Two General Types of Game Audiences

- ***Intended***: Game players and enthusiasts who generally understand the relationship between a game's content and its context.

- ***Unintended***: People who don't play games and/or have little exposure to content in the game context.

- The *Unintended* group is a larger concern for games as they are more prone to label game content as problematic or "offensive".

- If a game is perceived as "offensive", this can increase popularity among the *Intended* audience while strongly isolating the *Unintended*.

Why are Geocultural Issues Important to Games?

Because of religious issues like in *Kakuto Chojin* in 2003

- Audio containing chanted verses from the Islamic Qur'an was mistakenly included in the game.

- The game reached the Middle East markets unintentionally.

- Local governments and consumers vocally protested after discovering the content.

- The game crossed over the line of acceptability and eventually required a *global recall.*

- This event had parallels to similar events (e.g., the Danish political cartoons of Mohammed in early 2005).
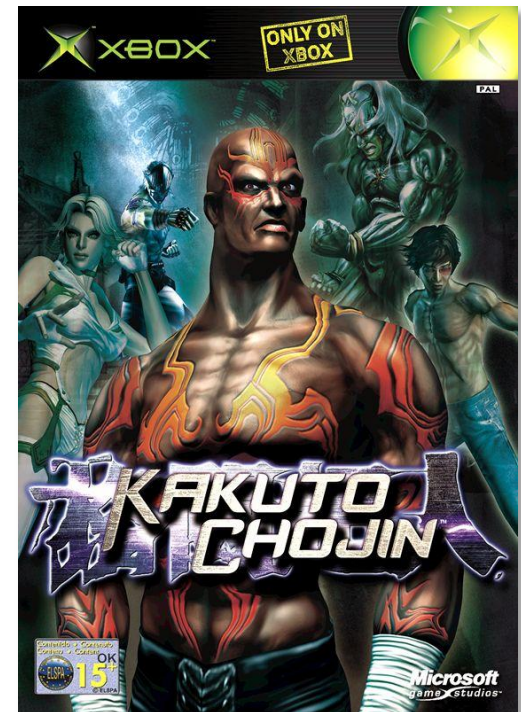
Little Big Planet (2008)

- The release of this game was delayed in October 2008 due to a song in the soundtrack that included lyrics taken directly from the Islamic Qur'an (the song was Toumani Diabate's 'Tapha Niang').

- Sony proactively recalled the game before release to fix the problem, at a significant cost.

- Gamers and pundits criticized Sony for the action, but Sony realized the greater long-term PR cost if this content was released worldwide.

Why are Geocultural Issues Important to Games?

**Because of historical issues like in *Hearts of Iron* in 2004**

- Despite the historical setting of the game (World War II), China banned the title in response to how Taiwan and Tibet are shown in the game (as independent).

- The territorial divisions made sense for game play (similar to the board game *Risk*).

- China's government was unwilling to accept the historical context of the game's content.

- *Hearts of Iron* is one of many titles that has had historical issues.
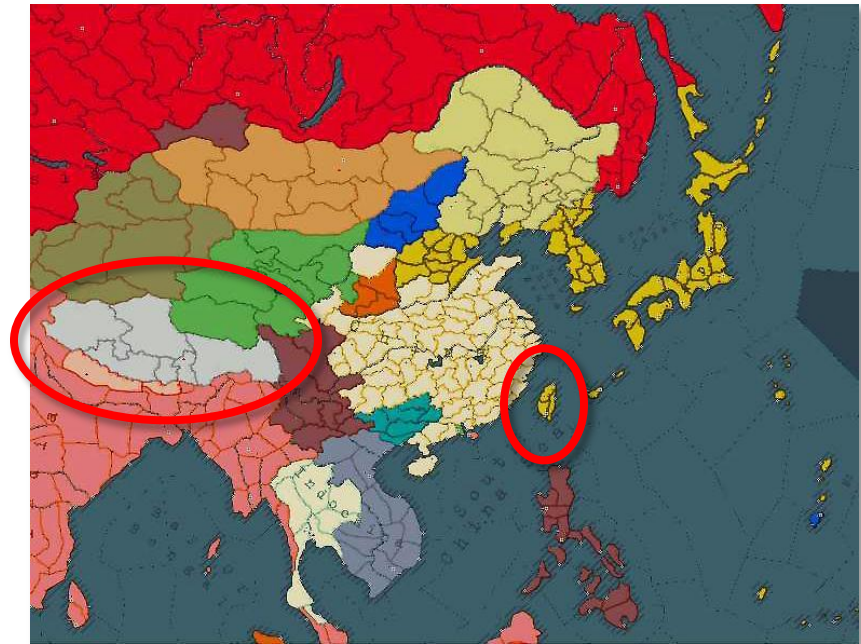
Why are Geocultural Issues Important to Games?
Because of packaging issues like in *Age of Empires II* in 2001

- This packaging for *Age of Empires II* was ineffective in Korea due to the presence of the Japanese samurai.
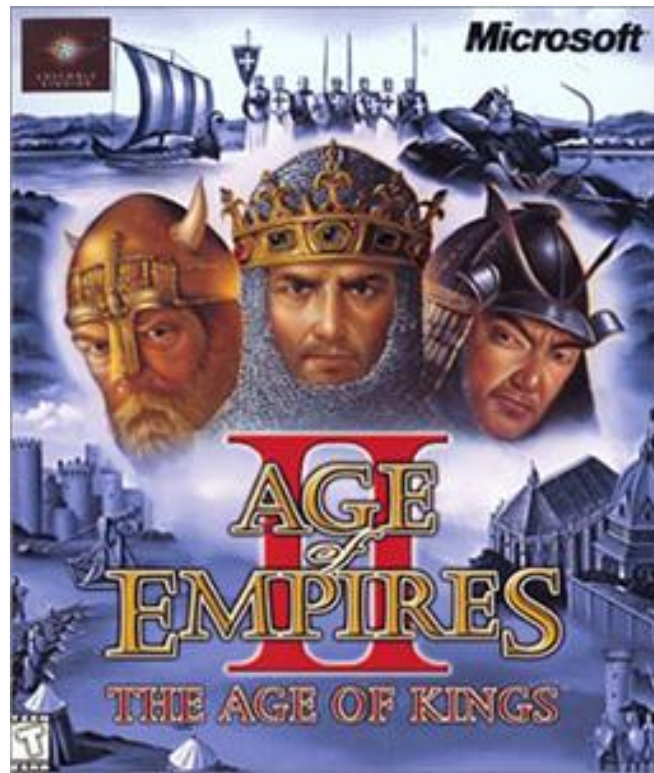

- Consumers were not willing to purchase a game with an offensive historical image.

- For the *AoE II* expansion pack, a Korean figure was prominently used (see below).

Why are Geocultural Issues Important to Games?

**Because of religious issues in *Resistance:Fall of Man* in 2007**

- Game designers for this title replicated the Manchester Cathedral (UK) without permission.

- The Church of England, being against violent games, was outraged at the cathedral's presence in the game and demanded an apology.

- Sony said that their cathedral only bore "some resemblance".

- Sony and the Church held talks to reach an agreement on the use of the Manchester Cathedral (which could not be removed from the game).
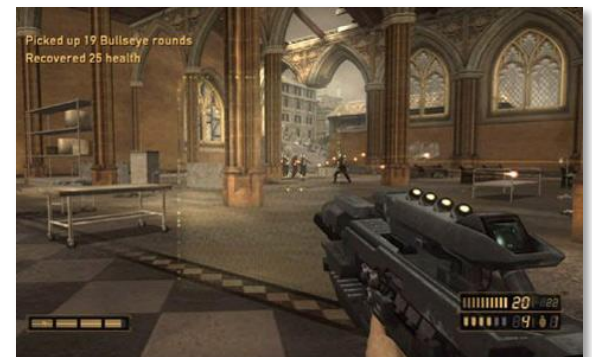
The Game Industry's Future is *Global*

- PricewaterhouseCooper's projections for 2007-2011 indicate a global gaming market worth $48.9B by 2011 (up from $37.5B in 2007).
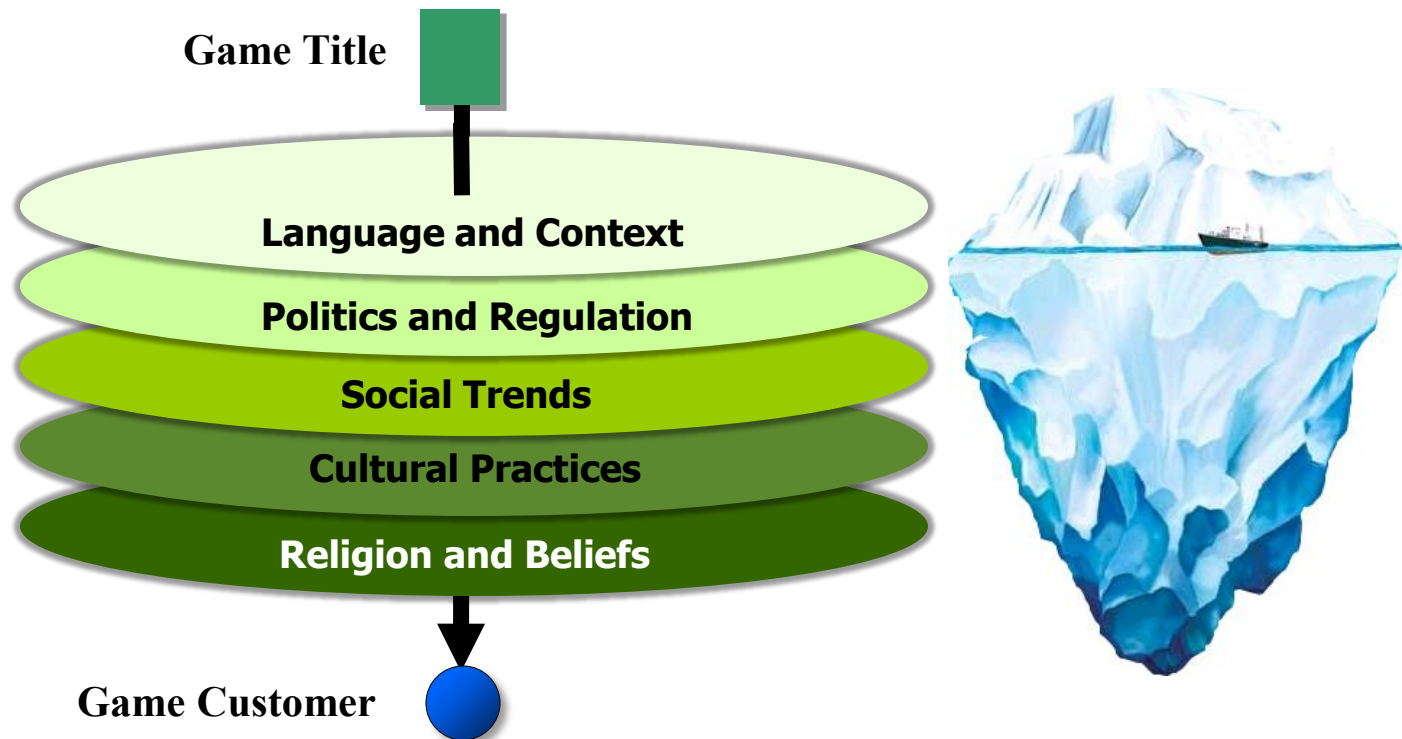
- U.S. sales will lag behind the world during the next 5 years, averaging 6.7% annual growth while Asia and EMEA will average 10% or more.
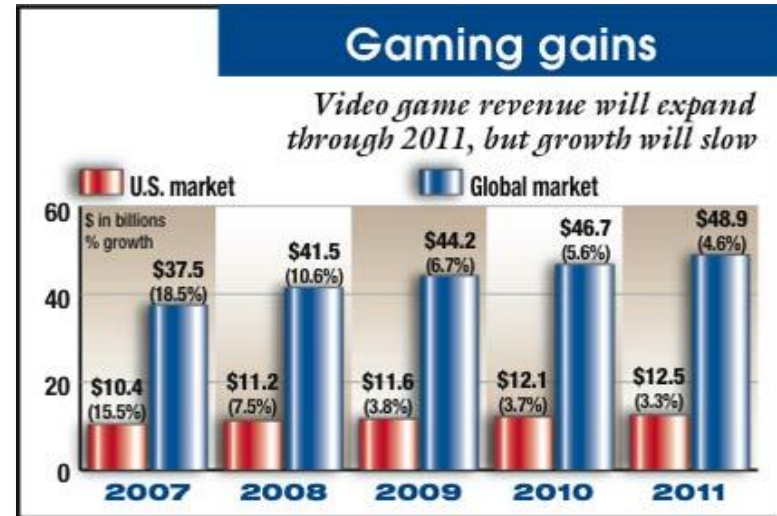
- Increasing revenue requires increasing global exposure, which means game content will be exposed to many more cultures and locales.

- **Bottom Line**: Appealing to a more global audience will be critical, which implies geocultural considerations.

The Iceberg Model of Culture

- Some cultural characteristics are obvious above the surface, but many critical aspects cannot be seen.

- Deep-level geocultural qualities greatly affect local customer perceptions; reactions to content issues in games typically occur in relation to one or more of these *deep* aspects.

Game Title

Language and Context

Politics and Regulation

Social Trends

Cultural Practices

Religion and Beliefs

Game Customer

Summary: Why are Geocultural Issues Important?

- **Primary Goal**: Protect the game developer's (and industry's) image and revenue stream, as well as allow local customers to simply enjoy a "fun" game.

- **Additional Goals:**

  - Minimize/eliminate local market backlash events.

  - Build gamer loyalty and trust in your content.

  - Expand revenue potential by adapting the appeal of your game content across cultural boundaries.

  - Catch issues that are NOT covered by review boards, such as the ESRB, PEGI, CERO and so on.

  - Review yourself, or else expect potential sanctions by government(s).

How to Approach Geocultural Issues in Games

- **Basic Methodology:**
  - *Step 1: Identify the Most Obvious Issues*
  - *Step 2: Triage to Determine Severity*
  - *Step 3: Develop Solutions and Resolve*

- Performing *effective* geocultural review doesn't happen overnight, it takes time and experience.

- Any chance of success begins with 2 conditions:
  1. Each game designer, developer and artist needs to be mindful of the geocultural dimension of their content.
  2. Geocultural review *must* be integrated into game development lifecycles and must have an owner.

How to Find Geocultural Issues in Games
Step 1: Identify the Most Obvious Issues

Examine by Theme; most sensitive include:

◉ **Religious**:
- Any direct or indirect use of a real-world religion or belief system
- Fictional belief systems that mimic real-world elements
- Use of religious icons, symbols, imagery and architecture

◉ **Ethnic**:
- Using real-world ethnic/gender stereotypes
- Emphasizing cultural issues and conflicts on the basis of race

◉ **Historical**:
- Direct depiction or modification of real historical events and people
- Extrapolating various futures involving current cultures/governments

◉ **Cultural**:
- Any concepts, allegories and 'feelings' derived from real-world cultures
- Cultural stereotypes and extrapolations

Examine by Content Type

Content which often generates geocultural issues (i.e., just about *anything* the player will see, hear or read):

- **Character Design:** Appearance and back story, emulation of real people, races, etc.

- **Environment Design:** Use of real-world locales and landmarks, or mimicry of such locales.

- **Text:** Onscreen dialog, UI elements, game documentation & manuals, real or fictional geographic and character names

- **Images:** Maps, flags, banners, icons, symbols, photos, cinematics

- **Audio:** Voice, music, lyrics, sound effects

- **Packaging:** Box art, box text

- **Branding and marketing:** Brand names, advertising campaigns, promotional items

Examine by Locale

Virtually any market can hold potential risk, but

the following have proven to be more challenging:

- **North America:** United States (sex, extreme violence)
- **Asia:** China, Korea (south), Japan, Singapore, India
- **Europe:** United Kingdom, France, Italy, Germany, Spain
- **Middle East:** Virtually the *entire* region, but particularly Saudi Arabia, Egypt, UAE

Example of Easy Identification

What's wrong with this picture?

- Use of the Taiwan flag in **Ninja Gaiden's** UI screen
- Use of the sensitive name "ROC" for Taiwan
- Use of "Country" to indicate the locale

Example of Difficult Identification

- The much-anticipated *Fallout 3* was not released in October 2008 to India due to "cultural sensitivities"
- The issue centered on the appearance of deformed, 2-headed Brahman cattle (called "Brahmin" in the game) that can be killed and eaten.
- Brahman cattle are sacred to the Hindu religion and laws in India protect the animals from harm.

How to Find Geocultural Issues in Games
Step 2: Triage to Determine Severity

- <u>All</u> decisions regarding potentially sensitive content must have a rationale based on informed decision-making.

- **Key**: Separate ***Reasonable Risks*** from ***Overt Offenses***

- ***Reasonable Risks***: Content that *might* be sensitive but is a reasonable risk given the local market conditions and the context within the game.

- ***Overt Offenses***: Content that will always be a problem and should be avoided, regardless of context in the game.

- ***Don't guess – do the homework!*** Utilize external subject-matter expertise (if you need it) and/or input from local markets (if that's an option).

Example of a Reasonable Risk

- In November 2007, Singapore banned the game ***Mass Effect*** due to the presence of apparent "lesbian intimacy".

- The ban was removed a few days later and the game allowed to release with an "M18" rating.

- The issue has had *zero effect* on ***Mass Effect's*** sales.

- But the controversy spilled to U.S. news outlets (like Fox) who wanted to make it an issue:
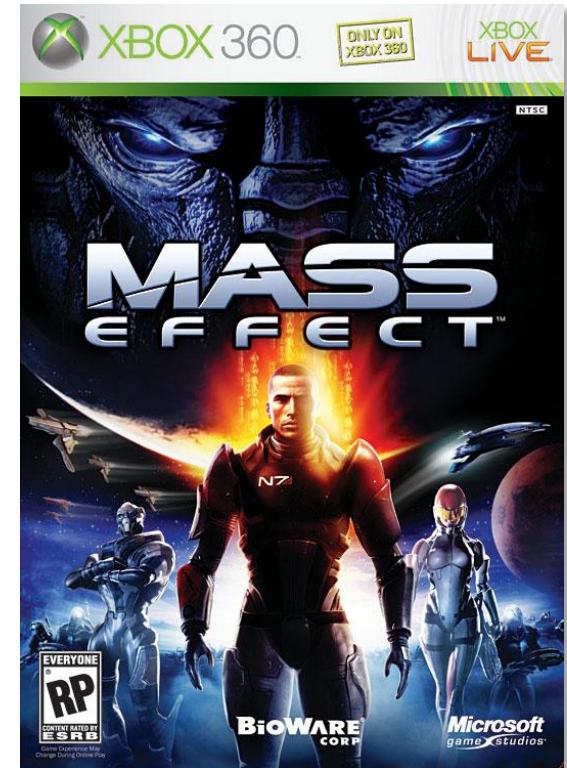
Example of an Overt Offense

- In 2004, *Ghost Recon 2* was banned in South Korea because the story featured a rogue North Korean general who was trying to consolidate power.

- The Korean Media Rating Board (KMRB) considered the content to be too politically sensitive and they banned the game.

- In Korea, *any* depiction of North and South Korea at war, or any portrayal of North Korea as a villain is considered to be very sensitive.
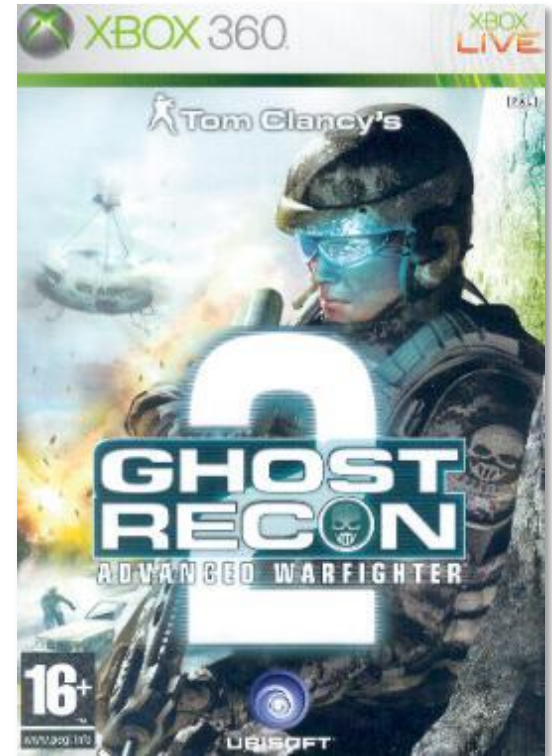
How to Find Geocultural Issues in Games
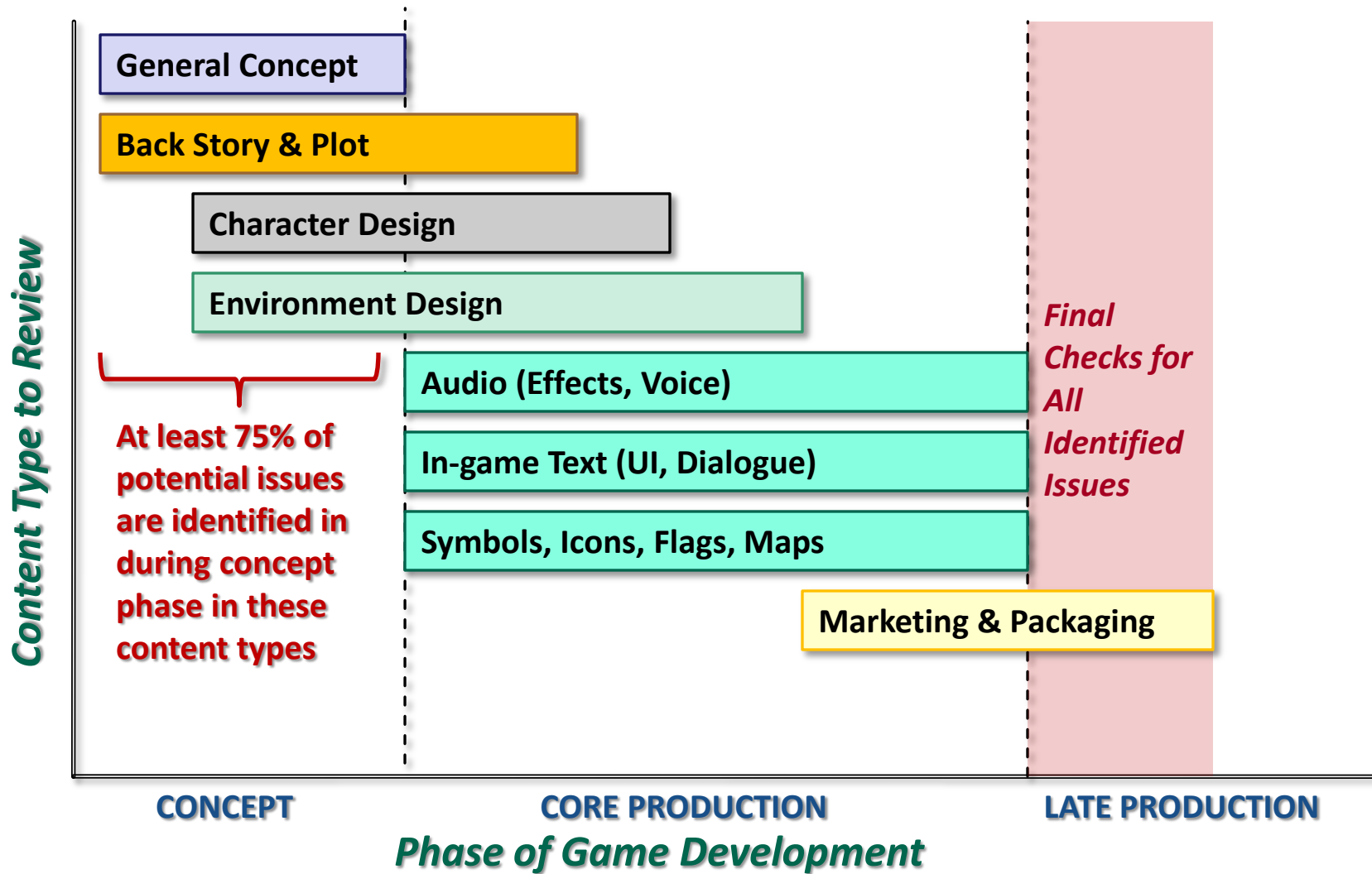*Step 3: Develop Solutions and Resolve*

- Based on the Step 2 triage, develop solutions that address the most problematic issues/locales.

- **Maintain your *original intent*** as best as possible, but be responsive to local sensitivities.

- **Goal:** ***Be surgical*** – make only the *most minimal change* to the least amount of content.

- **Err on the side of caution,** if uncertain about an issue.

- **Build your defense:** If you ultimately choose to include known, sensitive content then have a solid rationale for its presence.

Example of Resolution

- A *single* character name in ***Halo 2*** was considered potentially sensitive to a specific cultural group and region.

- Out of context, the name 'Dervish', a title from Sufi Islam, wasn't too sensitive.

- Within context, 'Dervish' set up a potentially offensive allegory related to the plot – U.S. (Master Chief) versus Islam (Prophet of Truth & the Covenant).

- This issue unfolded shortly after 9/11.

- In the end, the character's name was changed to '**Arbiter**'.

Ideal Schedule for Geocultural Review

Content Type to Review *(y-axis)*

Phase of Game Development *(x-axis)*

General Concept

Back Story & Plot

Character Design

Environment Design

Audio (Effects, Voice)

In-game Text (UI, Dialogue)

Symbols, Icons, Flags, Maps

Marketing & Packaging

At least 75% of potential issues are identified in during concept phase in these content types

Final Checks for All Identified Issues

CONCEPT   **CORE PRODUCTION**   **LATE PRODUCTION**

Unlocking Geocultural Sensitivity

Given the global variables that currently favor geocultural issues to arise, a specific issue is 'unlocked' when the following 'tumblers' fall exactly into place:

- **Specific Locale**
- **Specific Type of Person**
- **Specific Content & Context**
- **Easy Discoverability**

In other words: the right person in the right locale viewing the product, discovering the specific content in a unique context and taking action on the basis of their perception about the company's intent. *This dynamic is challenging to predict!*

The Power of Community

- In terms of geocultural risk, the differences between online and boxed content are minimal; all the fundamental risks apply to *both* methods of delivery.

- However, online content has the added strength of numbers and community activism – particularly if a geocultural is found. ***Community is online's double-edged sword***.

- **First impressions are key** – get the geocultural aspects right or else the community may be relentless against you.

- Most geocultural issues result from unintentional actions, but most offending issues are perceived to be *completely intentional* by the local consumer/government.

The Power of Community – An Example

- In July 2006, a problem arose in the Chinese MMO *Fantasy of the Journey West;* China's most popular online game.
- The wall painting in the city government office had the appearance of the Japanese rising sun.
- Over 10K players gathered in the office to protest (but the company replied "No comment").
- *The Irony*: The painting was inspired by a Chinese work called "Sunrise in the East."

Closing Remarks

- Create the game you want to create, but don't forget the *global, multicultural audience* who will experience it.

- If you choose to include known, sensitive content then be prepared with a **defensible rationale**, particularly in an online release where you can't predict who will be exposed.

- You cannot predict *every* issue, particularly in an online context; if you miss something and receive local backlash – **don't panic**! React, but avoid a knee-jerk reaction.

- The key to managing geocultural content is to respond respectfully and proactively to the *local market's perception* of your intentions (i.e. view the issue from their perspective).

Thank you!

Questions or Comments?

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