TRANS · núm. 15 · 2011
DOSSIER · 19-28

While most game publishers are well aware of standard localisation practices, far fewer are familiar with the notion of culturalisation, the process by which content is further adapted for a broader, diverse audience. However, unlike localisation which is usually perceived as a production step that takes place later in the development cycle, culturalisation is a holistic *modus operandi* for global game design, development and distribution that starts at the beginning of the project. While content creators must remain true to their game's vision, they must increasingly account for the multicultural and politically volatile markets in order to maximize the global reach of their game titles.

KEY WORDS: video games, geopolitics, culture, culturalization, localization, globalization

Culturalization: The Geopolitical and Cultural Dimension of Game Content

KATE EDWARDS
Geographer & Principal Consultant, Englobe Inc.

Culturalización: La dimensión geopolítica y cultural del contenido de los videojuegos

Pese a que la mayoría de los distribuidores de videojuegos están al corriente de las convenciones sobre la localización, aún hay muchos que no parecen entender bien la idea de **«culturalización»**, *el proceso a través del cual se adapta el contenido para conseguir atraer a una audiencia más plural. No obstante, y a diferencia de la localización que se entiende normalmente como una parte de la producción que tiene lugar hacia el final del ciclo de desarrollo, la culturalización requiere un* modus operandi *holístico desde el principio para introducir el aspecto global tanto en el diseño, como en el desarrollo y la distribución del videojuego. No cabe duda de que los creadores de videojuegos tienen que ser fieles a su idea, pero no pueden dejar de reconocer el carácter multicultural y políticamente volátil de muchos países importadores si quieren optimizar su éxito y permanencia en el mercado global.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: videojuego, geopolítica, cultura, culturalización, localización, globalización

In 2002, work was moving forward on a hand-to-hand combat game named Kakuto Chojin (Dream Publishing/MS Game Studios 2002) that was envisioned as a solid addition to the original Xbox line-up of game titles. The designers, developers, writers, artists and all involved gave their best effort and created a solid title, yet with one little exception. Unfortunately, an audio track was incorporated into the game that included a chanted portion of the Qur'an, the holy scripture of the Islam religion. The error was caught after the title was completed, packaged and about to be placed on store shelves. The decision at the time was to fix the audio track and replace it with something else, but release the already-packaged copies only in the United States. Despite the intended outcome to only limit exposure in the "safe" U.S., the issue became widely known within a few weeks and made front page news in the Middle East. Kakuto Chojin was subsequently banned in Saudi Arabia and a few other Muslim countries and the public backlash became so widespread that the product eventually had to be globally recalled and discontinued. It's staggering to think that all of that hard work and good intentions by the development staff were essentially eliminated by a single piece of content.

We often hear about incidents like this in the game industry as well as in other types of businesses. For example, product marketing has often made mistakes with product names that don't translate well into other languages or with advertising campaigns that are misunderstood. Such problems are quite common and they usually provide a good laugh after the fact. Yet such mistakes prove to be costly for companies on many levels — not just the quantitative loss of potential revenue from a specific market but the greater qualitative effects of negative public relations, damage to the company's image, and a strained relationship with the local government. In the worst-case scenario, a local government may not only ban the product but take more direct action against the company's subsidiary personnel, including detainment for questioning and even incarceration. Usually this is *never* the desired result for any game publisher, regardless of how progressive their intentions might be with their content.

While some regions tend to be more prone to geopolitical and cultural sensitivities, such as the Middle East and East Asia, the reality is these types of issues can affect any locale. Often times the news media only covers those issues that are more inflammatory; if a local government or consumers don't complain loudly, the media is less likely to carry the story. For this reason, some in the game industry perceive the Spanish and Latin American communities to be somewhat "safe" for making cultural mistakes yet these cultures are certainly not immune to these issues and have seen their fair share of offenses in video games as well as other media.

So how can game content creators prevent issues like these from happening? Do we strive to improve our methods of game content localization or do we need to take a completely different approach? Culturalization is going a step further beyond localization as it takes a deeper look into a game's fundamental assumptions and content choices, and then gauges their viability in both the broad, multicultural marketplace as well as in specific geographic locales. Localization helps gamers simply comprehend the game's content (primarily through translation), but culturalization helps gamers to potentially engage with the game's content at a much deeper, more meaningful level. Or

conversely, culturalization ensures that gamers will not be *disengaged* from the game by a piece of content that is considered incongruent or even offensive.

For most game developers and publishers, localization is an assumed aspect of game distribution; most U.S.-based publishers already regularly localize their games into FIGS (French, Italian, German & Spanish) and Japanese — and increasingly into Chinese, Korean, Russian, Scandinavian languages and others on a regular basis. However, with a significant portion of game industry revenue being generated through localization and the trend of a growing global focus of the industry (as per PricewaterhouseCoopers' annual analysis and others'), localization alone isn't going to be enough to sustain revenues and interest. This is especially true as more and more local game development starts to increase, putting home grown content in competition with global IPs. Latin America is perceived as a somewhat yet-untapped market however the complexities of localizing Spanish for the specific nuances of each Latin American country can be daunting and expensive for any company. Thus game publishers usually localize into Castilian Spanish and hope that it's "good enough" for Latin American consumers, but it's not just an issue of language.

While the trend is slowly changing, most localization efforts on a game title currently happen later in the development cycle which leaves little room for ensuring a completely thorough and effective localization. Usually the better examples of game localization are cases where localization considerations were addressed early on and throughout the project. This is particularly true of the process of content culturalization. In order to account for locale-specific content sensitivities, culturalization requires a very *proactive* approach to content design and development, wherein the international viability of the content is considered throughout the cycle. Put simply, culturalization isn't just a required step for selling overseas; it becomes a holistic *modus operandi* for the game's design, development and distribution which acknowledges the reality of global exposure on the first day of release.

The following text will briefly discuss some key aspects of culturalization and leverage several examples that illustrate how these aspects are persistent and relevant to the Spanish and Latin American gaming communities.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXT

Most people who work in the game industry have some awareness of cultural cause and effect, realizing that an action in one context can lead to either positive or negative reactions in another context. Some of these reactions are predictable while others may appear completely irrational. The way that a local gamer will react to game content has a lot to do with the context in which they exist, such as their religion, their ethnicity, their language, their location, and so forth. Also consider the other contexts in which the gamer operates — their social connections, their economic status, their educational background, the political environment, and so on. In other words, there are a lot of underlying reasons for why people in a specific culture react to certain game content in one way or another. It's important to consider this fact when thinking about a local market's reaction to game content; not everyone is reacting in the same way and for the same reasons.

So what does "culture" mean for game content? First consider these two simplified definitions:

Content: Information created for perpetuation and dissemination; in game titles, it's basically anything a player will see, hear or read.

Context: The circumstances or events that form a unique environment in space and time, within which information is created and managed.

From a geographic and sociological perspective, these definitions can yield the following new definition:

Culture: The accumulated, managed content of a specific context.

In a simplified way, we can look at *any* specific culture — whether Latino or Arab or whatever — as a combined set of "content assets" that clearly define the look, feel, sound, taste and general nature of the culture. Along with those assets come expectations for what will or will not fit within the norms of that culture. If we think about culture in this way, it's often easier to comprehend how the content assets of a game's world might conflict with the expectations for what fits in the content assets of a specific culture. So if the game contains a piece of content that doesn't fit with the culture's expectations or is noticeable enough to shock the gamer out of the game's context and reinforce their own cultural worldview, then a potential problem arises.

The good news is that most experienced gamers in any locale understand the difference between the game's context and their own cultural origins. Because they play regularly and they have likely played a lot of different types of games, they are less likely to react negatively to a piece of content that might normally not fit with their expectations. For most gamers, the concern is usually focused on whether or not the gaming experience is fun — and less about if the content is potentially offending them.

However, the bad news is that most cultural backlash around video game content doesn't originate with gamers; rather it comes from the *unintended* audience surrounding those gamers. These are typically the people who don't play games, who don't understand the content-context relationship between the game world and real world, and who often have a negative predisposition towards games. While the local gamer might see something offensive in a game and shrug it off, their parents, local lawmakers, clergy, and others may become outraged at what they see without taking the time to understand why it's in the game and what role it plays. Ironically, the more backlash the unintended audience creates, the more interest gamers seem to take in the "controversial" game title. Often times this has encouraged game developers to keep their content edgy, but over time this pushing of cultural boundaries can have a detrimental effect for the game publisher in a local market, such as creating distance with their intended gamer audience and possibly provoking government sanctions.

GEOPOLITICAL AND CULTURAL FORCES AT PLAY

The inherent reality of our global, information-based society is that *content carries culture*; it's a reflection of the culture in which it was created and it evokes reaction from the cultures to which it's distributed. Given this, it's often difficult for a game designer in one locale to be aware of and account for the issues that could cause problems in another locale. However, by considering the following broad categories of cultural aspects that most often generate

conflict between the game's context and local cultures, it is possible to proactively reduce the potential for issues to arise.

1. Sacred and Secular Cultures

Game content creators need to be uniquely sensitive to the underlying mechanics of the cultures into which their game titles are to be disseminated. If a specific culture has a more sacred basis for their daily activities and social administration, meaning they might follow a specific religious faith, then the rules pertaining to sensitivity and acceptability will be quite different from a culture based on a more secular outlook. In general, a society based on sacred rules tends to be less flexible and yielding to the context in which information appears because they are following what they consider to be a higher standard than human judgment; i.e., if the potentially problematic content appears *at all*, regardless of context, then there is potential for backlash.

As an example comparison, perhaps no regions capture both the promise and fear of game content publishers as much as China and the Middle East. The two areas are a study in contrast, not only from the obvious cultural differences and languages, but from the underlying mechanisms that drive the respective societies. On one hand, the Chinese society is managed as a "secular" form of government and social engineering, and on the other hand the Middle East, speaking specifically of the predominantly Islamic countries, is managed from a more "sacred" perspective — basing their government functions and society on the tenets of their religion. From a game publisher's perspective, the end result of swift judgment and/or rejection may be perceived as identical responses but the respective reactions are based on entirely different reasons.

It's important to understand that a piece of content that challenges the tenets of a religion or belief system is one of the most potentially volatile issues in game design. Remember the *Kakuto Chojin* example mentioned at the beginning of this article? Consider that this mis-use of the Qur'an is not too dissimilar from the extreme worldwide backlash that resulted from the Islamic community over the editorial cartoons of Mohammad that were published in a Danish newspaper in 2005. To followers of the specific faith, religious content is often a sign of hope and perseverance and generates deep, significant feelings. At the same time, such highly revered and widely recognized symbols do not allow much (if any) modification or reinterpretation; any such deviation from the classic ideal is usually an invitation for severe backlash.

In 2002, the first-person shooter game entitled *Matanza Cofrade* (Daniel TH) was quickly criticized in Spain for its portrayal of zombies carrying Christian crucifixes and wearing habits and outfits of the Catholic church. In Sevilla, where the game originated, the local Catholic organizations known as the Hermandades de Sevilla (Brotherhoods of Seville) were outraged at this imagery and one of them, the Hermandad del Cristo del Gran Poder (Brotherhood of Christ's Great Power) actually indicted the game's author. Among the charges was that the game's creator was "attacking religious sentiments" by violating the penal code which prohibits those who "through any kind of document make a mockery of the tenets, beliefs, rites and ceremonies of any religion and those who profess." When the trial began in 2005, the game's creator issued an apology and the charges against him were quickly dropped.

2. The Long (and Short) Tail of History

Without question, the issue of historical accuracy is one of the most sensitive issues for local cultures. Many cultures are extremely protective of their historical legacy and origins, so any alternate or reimagined history can often yield strong, emotional reactions. Using the concept of the "long tail", consider how many cultures celebrate major events in their past, even some that occurred many centuries ago. People long remember because such events helped to shape their particular culture and/or nationality and are integral to their identity.

In November 2007, a PC-based game called *Shadows of War* ("Sombras de Guerra", Legend Games 2007) was released in Spain that allows the player to reenact the 1936-1939 Spanish Civil War. The game portrayed the violent conflict which cost the lives of an approximately 500,000 people and was the event that initiated General Franco's subsequent 36-year dictatorship. In the game, the player had the option of acting on the side of Franco's victorious forces or play as the eventually-defeated republicans.

Perhaps understandably, the game's release caused widespread outrage because the country is still struggling to reconcile with the deep, long-lasting legacy of the conflict. To make matters potentially worse, the game was released on November 20, 2007 — the anniversary of the death of General Franco and a date on which fascist groups often congregate to celebrate the late dictator. And as if that wasn't sensitive enough, the game's release also occurred just a few weeks after the Spanish parliament had passed a law pertaining to historical memory — one of the most controversial pieces of legislation in Spain's democratic history because it sought to recognize Franco's victims.

The game received widespread criticism in Spain, but some gamers embraced the ability to play either side of the conflict and virtually re-write history. While the game's creators felt that the realism and real-world history was a good lesson to reinforce about striving to avoid repeating the past, many of those directly affected by the loss of family members and friends during that era felt the issue is still far too sensitive — even 70+ years later.

The impact of leveraging history in games has been known in several game titles, from other real-time strategy games like *Rise of Nations* (Big Huge Games/Microsoft 2003) and *Civilization* (MicroProse 1991) to war-oriented titles like *Call of Duty* (Infinity Ward/Activision 2003) and *Medal of Honor* (Dreamworks Interactive/Electronic Arts 1999). History is a compelling topic for a game, but it's rarely possible to provide the full context of a historical event. Inevitably something must be overlooked for the sake of game play and this is one aspect that is often noticed — the lack of detail in some manner, from costumes to locations to the series of events. The reality of employing history in games is a lot like a cartographer making a map: the world must be generalized (i.e., remove information) for the map to be useful for its intended purpose. Most maps don't show every actual tree and other feature on the landscape, and so it is with games based in history.

And it's important to stress that it's not just more distant history that can be problematic. Recent history can be a very sensitive topic as the memory of the events and outcome are very fresh in people's minds. Depicting a recent conflict or otherwise traumatic event can often cause a swift backlash due to perceived insensitivity on the part of the game developer.

3. Intercultural dissonance

Besides the more volatile issues of history and religion, there is a host of issues that fit under a broad category that addresses various forms of disagreement, misperception, attitude and ongoing friction between cultural groups. Chief among the intercultural issues is the perceived inequitable treatment of a specific culture, ethnicity and/or nationality. Typically a specific group feels that they are being included or excluded with a negative intent. The majority of such perceptions are typically focused on ethnicity, i.e., being singled out on the basis of race.

In the case of Hispanic cultures, this disparity has certainly been evident in video games. In 2009, a study entitled "The Virtual Census: representations of gender, race and age in video games" was conducted by the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Southern California. This study found that a mere 3% of all video game characters were of a Hispanic ethnicity and actually none of those characters were "playable" by the gamer. Hispanics weren't alone however as nearly all other identifiable ethnic groups were also under-represented. Besides white males who dominate game character design, the only exception were African-American males who appeared in proportion to their occurrence in the real population, however their appearance was confined to a very narrow range of game genres — primarily sports titles and games tied to African-American celebrities such as 50 Cent's appearance in 50 *Cent: Bulletproof* (Genuine Games/Sierra Entertainment 2005). In separate study from 2009 entitled "Playing with Prejudice: The Prevalence and Consequences of Racial Stereotypes," researchers found that African-American characters were more likely to be represented as villains and were often given particularly frightening characteristics. Yet by comparison, other surveys of game content have shown that Hispanic characters are portrayed as villains 14.3% of the time compared to African-Americans at 4.8% (and as a benchmark, white male characters serve as villains 76.2% of the time).

Most non-gamers would point to the *Grand Theft Auto* series (Rockstar Games 1997) as a prime example of games exploiting racial stereotypes, especially Hispanics as gang members, drug dealers and involved in various other crimes, yet *Grand Theft Auto* is only the more obvious title. In 2005's *Total Overdose: A Gunslinger's Tale in Mexico* (Deadline Games/Eidos 2005) and its 2007 quasi-sequel *Chili Con Carnage* (Deadline Games/Eidos 2007) were both criticized for their very demeaning depictions of Mexicans as drug dealers and criminals. The simple online game *Border Patrol* portrays Mexicans as three varieties — Mexican nationalist, Drug smuggler, or Breeder — and has only one stated objective: "shoot Mexicans crossing the United States border." John Murray, a Kansas State University psychologist who's studied violence and stereotypes in the media for over 30 years, said that "If Blacks and Latinos are always portrayed as the villains, or as the victims who get killed often and easily, that is code for powerlessness. These images persist because too few minorities are in the industry." There is a lot of truth in this opinion. Even when game developers have good intentions and wish to use a Hispanic character — they'll usually rely on a limited stereotype of a Hispanic individual because they don't have sufficient understanding. In the case of the game *Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter* 2 (Red Storm Entertainment/Ubisoft 2007), the Mexican state of Chihuahua actually banned the game

because Mexican rebels were being portrayed as antagonists and the game stereotyped the cities of Chihuahua and Ciudad Juarez.

Unfortunately, video games are beginning to attract various cultural groups who often possess less-than-mainstream worldviews. They view the games medium as a way to promote their potentially fringe cultural contexts and help generate more appeal for their cause. Many of these titles are low-hanging fruit for media outlets that often use them as examples of how the video game industry is inherently negative and debased. This isn't a surprise when such games have included titles like Muslim Massacre: The Game of Modern Religious Genocide (Eric Vaughn 2008), Ethnic Cleansing: The Game (designed by and for neo-Nazis) (Resistance Records 2002), and Special Force (Hezbollah 2003) (created by the Hezbollah to train their youth on how to kill Israelis).

4. *Geopolitical Imaginations*

One of the most basic ways that national governments make themselves known to content developers of all kinds is through the reinforcement of their territorial sovereignty and their local geopolitical "imagination". This often involves geographic issues where the government claims certain territories and they expect those territories to be shown as integrated with their nation, whether it's on a functional map or even in the world of a video game. For companies that are involved in online cartography, such as Google and Microsoft, there are constant challenges from governments seeking to reinforce their perceived territorial control through these companies' online maps — making requests for boundary changes, name changes, and so on. With some governments, such as China and India, there is absolutely no room for negotiation on this issue — in fact they maintain laws that dictate how national maps must appear.

A prime example of this enforcement occurs in Argentina with the Islas Malvinas (Falkland Islands) dispute. Despite the 1982 Falklands/Malvinas War which saw Argentina's defeated attempt to gain control of the islands from the United Kingdom, the government of Argentina has reinforced its local viewpoint that the islands are Argentine. All maps in Argentina show the islands as Argentine territory, along with the UK-controlled South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands as well as a claimed slice of Antarctica. This reinforcement of sovereignty has even appeared on postage stamps in Argentina as well as a variety of other formats. Several video games resulted from the 1982 conflict, all from the British perspective — such as *Strike Fleet* (LucasArts/Electronic Arts 1987), *Jane's Fleet Command* (Sonalysts Combat Simulations Inc./Electronic Arts 1999), and *Harpoon* 3 (Advanced Gaming Systems 2001). Not to be outdone by these UK-centric titles, in 1999 an Argentine developer created an alternative game entitled *Malvinas* 2032 (Sabarasa 1999), in which gamers command Argentine forces to reclaim the Falklands/Malvinas 50 years after the 1982 war.

Similarly, in 2006 Hugo Chavez (the current president of Venezuela) and his political supporters were upset at the game *Mercenaries 2: World in Flames* (Pandemic Studios/Electronic Arts 2008) as they claimed it depicted Chavez as a tyrannical leader and showed Venezuela as being on the verge of political and social chaos. Game titles like this actually helped encourage the Venezuelan government become the first country in the world to pass a comprehensive law in 2009 that prohibits the manufacturing, distribution, selling, rental, playing and/or

exhibition of violent video games; the law went into effect in March 2010 and carries heavy penalties.

History, religion, intercultural conflict and geopolitical friction — these are the "big four" topics that can affect game design and development and usually the places where problems may occur — for Spanish and Latin American game players as well as any other locale. Naturally there are many subcategories related to these, but these are the fundamental issues. And it's also important to emphasize — as has likely been surmised, that it's typically never just a question of history or of geopolitics but rather a complex intertwining of all these factors. With this minefield of potential sensitivities, it's perhaps easy to see why some game developers might choose to overlook such issues and simply hope for the best outcome. Fortunately, developing games for the Latino audience doesn't have to be left to such random chance.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

It's very important to stress that whatever geopolitical and cultural issues that may be discovered in the game content; every game publisher has a choice as to whether or not to change the content. Most companies choose to do so because it means preserving a key market or opening up a new one for business. However, there are times when it may not make sense to make even a surgical content change and the game may release as planned. In cases such as this, it becomes critical to document any decision-making in the form of a solid defensive explanation. This doesn't have to be a long treatise on how the content choices were made, in fact shorter is better, but the rationale for including potentially risky content should be clear.

Replying on the "freedom of speech" argument won't go very far with many local governments because in many locales around the world that concept doesn't carry much meaning. Instead, focus on the fact that careful research was conducted and a decision was reached that serves the company's goals and the local consumers' expectations. Such a document won't necessarily save a company from all repercussions. But showing that content decisions were careful and conscientious rather than random and brash can help in diminishing or diffusing government and consumer backlash.

Because of the apparent marginalization of Hispanic characters in game content as well as the general lack of awareness of sensitivities within the Spanish and Latin American regions, it's clear that the game development community has yet to make solid progress. As stated previously, Latino cultures are not the only ones that are often misrepresented in game content, but by adopting a culturalization approach to content development, game developers can begin to be more conscientious in their choices. Well-executed culturalization within a game development cycle is not something that happens overnight, nor without some commitment of some resources, but the benefits to a company's content quality, improved government relations, and respected image amongst local consumers can prove to be an invaluable return on investment.

Game designers should feel free to create the games they wish to create, but they can't forget the global, multicultural audience — including the many gamers in Spanish and Latin American countries — who will be participating in their creative vision and hopefully enjoying it without any cultural disruption or offense. While culturalization may seem like

an easy way to dampen the creative forces behind game development, it's actually a path to ensuring that the enjoyment of that creative vision can be maximized to as many cultures as possible. Thus the real key to the culturalization method is to simply respond respectfully and proactively to the local market's perception of the developer's intentions, i.e. just taking a moment to view the potential game content from the local context.

RECIBIDO Y VERSIÓN FINAL: NOV. DE 2010
ACEPTADO EN ENERO DE 2011