LOCALISATION
AND THE CULTURAL CONCEPT OF PLAY IN GAMES

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Video games are one of the leisure activities of choice of many children and adults around the globe. The gender gap has also been shrinking in the last few years, and almost equal percentages of males and females are taking to digital entertainment as a pastime. Contrasting with what some people might think, the attraction to this leisure activity does not seem to interfere with the enjoyment of other entertainment options such as reading, watching TV, or going to the theatre, as shown in a survey commissioned by the BBC and published in December 2005.

The demand for entertainment software is nowadays coming from a growing number of countries around the world, and it has prompted game publishers to partially or fully translate their products into more languages to maximise ROI. The game industry is making as much if not more money that the film industry, but they also need Hollywood like budgets to be able to cover the cost of triple A titles. For this reason, game internationalisation and localisation, which has historically been a matter of translating a few phrases embedded in the game code at the end of the process, is becoming an integral part of the development of any video game, and so it is starting to be addressed earlier in the project. Game companies would at first handle their own localisation in-house, but they quickly realised that localising games has got nothing to do with the facile idea of substituting *Hello* with *Hallo*, *Hola*, or *Ciao*. There are a considerable amount of linguistic, cultural, and even technical and legal factors that turn game localisation into a complex process that requires careful planning and adequate expertise.

Nowadays most companies offering translation services have had to specialise greatly since the very specific demands of each niche are too pronounce and technically costly to cater for all types of translation, or even software localisation. The demand for video games in many countries around the world, (particularly the US, UK, Germany, France, Spain, Italy, and Japan), and the growing complexity of entertainment software products, provides enough workload for localisation companies to dedicate their efforts solely to game localisation all year round, despite the marked seasonal nature of game releases.

WHAT'S DIFFERENT ABOUT TRANSLATING GAMES?

Similarly to when we read a book or watch a film, in video games there is often text and dialogue to be read, or listened to and watched. Both in literary and filmic terms the author or director wants us to empathise with the protagonist of the story and follow his/her story. As readers and viewers, we accept the non-influential nature of this relationship with the central characters of these creations. We are spectators of a story we cannot change nor even influence in the slightest mode. Video games aim at establishing a different type of relationship with players, that of 'masters of their destiny'. That is not to say that games are boundless, since there is normally a very clear goal, mission, or quest to fulfil, but the way each player reaches that end is always unique to their personality, and it is linked to their own skills in prevailing over the challenges the game throws at them. What this means for the localisation team is that they have to enthuse players who belong to other cultures with the same energy the game delivered to the original culture, and give them the right information, in the right style so that they can beat the game feeling like the heroes the game advertises. The place of origin or the language of development of the game is not relevant to the game experience itself. When gamers play and immerse themselves in the virtual world of the game, the game needs to be talking to them at all levels in order not to break the illusion created. But how can this be achieved?

Interactivity, variables, and grammar

In order to allow players to feel really immersed in the game experience, game code has to be programmed with variables which value will change depending on their choices. The same applies to dialogic interactivity. In those games where players are free to choose their avatar, race, gender, personality, etc. linguistic variables have to are built into the dialogue so that the game addresses players in specific terms, enhancing their experience. However, grammar is different in all languages and inaccurate variable formulation will spoil gamers enjoyment, as we can read in many fan forums, by producing confusing and incorrect renderings of the original script.

Cultural context and stories

Another important issue to take into account is the cultural context the game is taking for granted. We could assume a small degree of shared background knowledge amongst hardcore gamers around the globe, but that won't apply to most gamers. The place we grow up in, the customs and lifestyle of the country we live in can be dramatically different from one player to another. The concept of funny, acceptable, honour, etc. the very way people interact depends on long established traditions particular of each country or territory. Historical games have to be particularly careful about the perspective they take, frontiers in maps, etc. Apart from the obvious legal implications, these issues can influence greatly the number of sales in a particular country.

Audio and music

The audio of a game is of great importance, and this is why developers employ professional composers to give a signature sound to their creations. Music takes players gracefully by the hand in quite moments, adds mystery in scary passages, and it excites them in action sequences. However, many games feature popular music from famous singers and bands. In these cases, the artists selected have to be reconsidered for other countries, where those particular artists might be marginal, unknown, or unpopular for some reason.

Unicode

Some developers, in their desire to be unique, design their own fonts but only for the language of development which becomes problematic when alphabets in other countries have extra characters or even completely different ones. All game should use UNICODE so that the game engine can display on screen the characters original to each language with its diacritics.

Hardware

Television standards conversion for consoles can bring some annoying glitches if the system to convert from NTSC (525 lines, 29.97 frames per second) to PAL (625 lines, 25 frames per second) is not well devised. High definition TVs may change some of this, but, for the moment, it is only increasing the complexity by adding another standard to the equation. Keyboards and controls may not be exactly the same from one country to the next, or they might be used in a different way, that's why it is always a good idea to offer key configuration and control mapping in games, so that players can get more out of the game by customising controls.

Size constraints

The actual size of the gaming device is also very relevant to translation. Hand held devices (such as the PSP, or the Nintendo DS) have smaller displays and lower resolutions. Desktop consoles have the normal TV resolution, and computers can normally adjust their setting depending on the graphics card installed. Screen size and line length affects negatively to those languages where words are naturally longer, such as German, or Spanish, making translators condense, rephrase, and even invent abbreviations to convey meaning.

Legal

Regulations change from country to country, which means that publishers need to make sure that games can be made to adhere to the local legal system if they want to release the game in that country. Usual bones of contention are violence

level, nudity, and sex. Directly linked to this are age rating systems, and they have a relevant part to play in the actual promotion and selling of the games. Some games maybe sold to 16 year old in one country, while they might be only be accessible to 18 year old in others. There are different rating boards and even when a group of countries might share the same guidelines, they might apply them in different ways depending on the legal system of the country. Some of the most respected rating boards are ESRB for the US, PEGI for Europe, ZERO for Japan.

THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

It is also very important to know the way the industry behind it operates, since it dictates the very specific way of receiving and delivering work to the team. There are different tasks that require language specialists within the localisation phase of any given project, from the translator to the linguistic tester or the localisation coordinator, they all have an important part to play in the process. Time is, as ever, a key variable in the equation. Most games take between one and two years to be developed. Only a small fraction of this time is reserved for localisation. In some cases, the translation of linguistic assets may start when the script is closed, but it is common practice to start when the game is in beta stage, i.e., almost finished. When game development does not stick to project milestone deadlines the localisation process becomes squeezed between their finishing day and the sim-ship (simultaneous shipment) release day, which is an unmovable deadline because it obeys seasonal market forces. In these rather frequent cases, publishers may double up on the number of localisation agencies and/or translators and testers to compensate for the delay.

However, team-translation and coping with long days is not the most challenging task of working for the game localisation industry. Because of the strict observance of copyright laws and the fact that often the video game may not be actually available for translators, many have to work blindly from a ‘naked’ spreadsheet. From the translator’s point of view, information depravation is far

more taxing than time constraints, as well as being more error-prone since working without context and cotext hampers their decision-making process, generating in the best of cases, a functional but rather uncreative rendering. The game has been translated and it is playable, but fans are not impressed because the poor quality of the localisation defeats its own purpose: to thrill and engage the gamer. There are several things that can go wrong when localising a game such as a confusing UI (user interface), poor voice acting, but certainly, one of the things players complain about in their internet forums is the lack of translation quality, and how sometimes they have to go back to the original version to find out what to do and how.

POSITIONS WITHIN THE GAME LOCALISATION INDUSTRY

Whether working for the developers directly or for an outsourced game localisation company as a freelancer, the video games industry needs a variety of professionals in order to guarantee the satisfaction of international markets. The following is a brief description of the main roles:

- Localisation managers: They are normally the point of contact for publishers and ultimately responsible for obtaining all the original linguistic assets, and delivering the translated ones fully tested. Managers need to liaise with the localisation coordinators to make sure that the language register is correctly pitched, as well as compliant with each platform's branding and naming conventions.
- Localisation Engineers: Engineers are the only people allowed to access the game engine and manipulate game-builts. They are responsible for extracting translatable strings out of the game code, and inserting them back again once translated. They normally organise these strings into spreadsheets which translators will use to produced their localised version. Engineers are also responsible for correcting bugs reported by linguistic testers.
- Translators (in-house, freelancers): They are responsible for the bulk of the translation process at the beginning of the project. Translators are expected to

work with TMTs (such as SDL Trados), word processors, tables, and spreadsheets. The variety of formats and lack of context can make language professionals' task unnecessarily complex.

- Localisation coordinators: They are in direct contact with all the translators and (outsourced) companies handling the translation, as well as with the head linguistic testers. These professionals are responsible for making sure that all language versions go smoothly and on target. Coordinators have to verify that 'bug reports' are being filled in accurately, and that relevant information is being shared among all testers, as well as checking that engineers understand the corrections detailed in the report.
- Head linguistic testers: They are in charge of overseeing the linguistic proofing, and overall quality of the languages being tested, as well as the implementation of bug reports that will in turn be passed on to engineers who have to make the corrections in the game code.
- Linguistic testers: They have to meticulously explore every text, option, dialogue, and menu of the game and verify that the language used is terminologically accurate, correctly written, and in line with the feel of the original game.

LET'S TALK ABOUT COMMUNICATION

Despite the size of the industry, and the many years game localisation has been happening there have been very few events in which game localisation professionals have had the chance to meet and talk about the issues that affect all of them. As an established professional activity, the game localisation community needs a forum in order to share common knowledge and work towards a best practice whitepaper or set of standards. This debate will benefit the game industry by offering the best game experience across languages and cultures, the game localisation industry by working with all the resources they need in time. This is why the game localisation round table this 16th of October in Seattle under the Localization World flag is a great opportunity for game developers, publishers, and localisers to meet.