

# The Challenge of Localizing Video Games for Latin American Spanish

Marina Ilari



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As a kid, I did a lot of pretending with my younger brother. We would talk through our toys and act out all kinds of scenarios with them. What I didn't realize at the time is that the voices we gave our toys didn't sound like our Argentinean voices at all. Our toys actually spoke neutral Latin American Spanish because that's what we were accustomed to hearing actors use on TV and in movies. Looking back, I think it is pretty strange that our own toys — our own imaginary characters — did not speak the same way we did. It was almost as if they were from some faraway land that had little to do with our own culture and dialect.

Latin American (LATAM) Spanish doesn't speak to any one audience in particular. Instead, it attempts to speak to many audiences across Latin America, regardless of the country they are from. There are some particular things to consider when localizing video games into LATAM Spanish and localizers face specific challenges when trying to implement a one-size-fits-all approach.

## One for all and all for... none?

Having worked as a LATAM Spanish linguist for over a decade, I'm all too familiar with the "neutral Spanish" terminology intended for the Latin American audience; nine out of ten projects I have worked on have required this variant. LATAM Spanish is not actively spoken anywhere, but rather it is a dialect of Spanish purposefully designed to sound neutral, and thus widely understood throughout the region. And, for the most part, it does accomplish this mission. People in Latin America are used to reading this variant of Spanish in subtitles and hearing it in dubbed audiovisual content. We are exposed to it from a young age through cartoons and video games. And — just like my brother and I did when we were kids — we internalize it.

However, neutrality doesn't come without consequences. In order for a localization to make sense in the 20 different LATAM countries where Spanish is spoken, regionalisms have to be deep-sixed. Think about a stripped-down language with no colloquialisms, no slang, no jargon... basically nothing that would be included in the Urban Dictionary — where, by the way, you can find the definition of "deep-sixed" (a synonym of "disposed of") if that one stumped you. Regionalisms



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spice up the language; they can make it more fun and playful, more relatable. Without these country-specific words and phrases, you're left with a bland, washed-up version of Spanish.

This is especially relevant in video game localization because, depending on the genre, video games can be packed with colloquialisms. From narrative to dialogue, there's no question that cultural references, jokes, slang, idioms, and wordplay abound in video games. And when, as a localizer, you are barred from transferring these ideas into a particular country's target language and culture, you may end up with a lackluster result. The translation will be understood, but it probably will not resonate as well with the target audience.

### Don't they all speak Spanish though?

Perhaps the most widely-known Spanish variants are European Spanish, spoken in Spain, and Latin American Spanish, spoken nowhere but targeted to 20 different countries. When a video game developer or publisher is looking to have their game localized into Spanish, the first distinction they have to make is between the European and LATAM variants. These variants are very different from one another and definitely should be considered separate languages, especially if you are trying to truly resonate with one market or the other. European Spanish speakers would be turned off and even confused by the LATAM Spanish variant, and vice-versa.

When localizing into European Spanish, you are targeting a potential market of roughly 50 million people that speak one variant of that language. Sure, there are different accents and dialects within Spain, but they all speak what is known as "European Spanish" or Castilian Spanish. Localizers for this variant of Spanish have a huge advantage over those localizing

into LATAM Spanish. Because they are targeting one specific country, they can use colloquialisms to make the text relatable and ensure it resonates effectively with that target audience.

When the content to be translated uses a lot of colloquial language, defining the target audience can make a huge difference in the content's reception. Take, for instance, the subtitling and dubbing of a movie like *Deadpool*. The Spanish localizers who translated and adapted the dubbing script for *Deadpool 2* actually won a prestigious award in Spain for their work. Their script was inventive and full of humorous swearing — just like the original. Moviegoers in Latin America, on the other hand, had to sit through a *Deadpool 2* with no slang, no country-specific curse words and no foul language that people they know actually use. In Argentina, a group of fans took things into their own hands and fan-dubbed a portion of the movie into Argentine Spanish. This version was full of Argentine slang and colloquialisms. The video went viral and people are still sharing it, which just goes to show how impactful a country-specific localization can be, especially for an audience so used to settling for a watered-down and unrelatable neutral version.

### You might want to avoid this common mistake

One additional challenge when localizing into LATAM Spanish is that you need to make sure the translation is not offensive or inappropriate in any country. Some words or terms are completely inoffensive in some countries but taboo in others. It would be virtually impossible for a translator to know all the different meanings every single word has in so many different countries, so native speakers of the Spanish dialect are needed to detect possible faux pas.



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I have heard and seen so many instances of this kind of mistake in game localizations — some so offensive or ridiculous that gamers just can't let them go. So, what's the solution? Ideally, your localization partner should have a diverse team representing all the different Spanish-speaking countries. This team should scour any Spanish translations for offensive and inappropriate language, and place all forbidden words on a blocklist so that their translation tools automatically flag these terms and help the team avoid them.

### Houston, we have a neutrality problem

There are some subjects for which it's simply impossible to find an applicable word in all different variants of Spanish. When you encounter this dilemma, you can resort to using the terms that would be the least confusing or specific. Sometimes that means using the term that the country with the largest population employs, which in the case of Latin America is Mexico. However, often Mexican speakers will say something differently than everyone else in Spanish-speaking Latin America, so in those cases, you will need to use your best judgement and determine whether it's worth siding with the majority. It can be a constant push and pull. It's certainly difficult to navigate, and it's never perfect.

An extreme example of these problems is the Spanish voiceover of *Grim Fandango*. In this game, the developers decided to localize to European Spanish. The tone in general is neutral enough to be comprehensible for Latin American audiences, even though not ideal because many words are lost. For example, the poisoning with "gazpacho" at the beginning of the game (which is left as in the English original) might reveal that we are in a world of Mexican characters for a US player, but it would not mean much for a Latin American player.

Also, though Spanish-speaking audiences have praised this voiceover, there is one big problem with it: for the voice of the main antagonist, Domino Hurley, the developers chose an Argentine accent. You might not know this, but Argentines are known all over Latin America for being wise guys, both in the sense that they are always trying to cheat and in that they can sound overconfident.

Being an Argentine myself I know this is a prejudice, but from the business point of view the decision can be questioned because it risked alienating Rioplatense (the Spanish variant spoken in central Argentina and Uruguay) players who in general would not get the "joke" of the wise guy talking like an Argentine. To add to the problems, instead of using an Argentine actor they used a Spanish actor faking an Argentine accent, which can be quickly recognized by any Rioplatense speaker.

### Should I just go with Mexican Spanish?

Since Mexico is the Latin American country with the largest Spanish-speaking population, 126 million people, would it make sense to just localize your content into Mexican Spanish? You certainly could, and it would resonate better with that audience. However, you would be essentially alienating the 300 million Spanish-speakers in the rest of Latin America. Mexican Spanish is unique to that country and the colloquial language used there is not applicable to other countries. If you aim to reach all of Latin America, and you cannot localize for each specific country, your best bet would be to use neutral Latin American Spanish. It's not ideal, for the reasons outlined above, but it's collectively accepted in the region.

For example, in *Batman: Arkham Knight*, we experience an outstanding Latin American Spanish voiceover that has also been praised by audiences. The quality of the acting makes it

feel like we are watching a real movie equal to the original English voice acting. Yet it is still not a perfect experience for players in most variants. There are many street expressions throughout the game and during the fights, but translations like “¿Qué diablos?” (for “what the hell?”) or “bastardo” (for bastard) sound extremely unnatural, naïve, and even dumb in most Spanish variants. This threatens the suspension of disbelief for many players, as it is very unlikely that threatening thugs would talk like this. But also, everyday things in the game can be hard to understand for some audiences due to the use of the Mexican alternative, as in the opening sequence in which Agent Owens orders waffles with “tocino” (bacon), which is not the word for bacon in other regions.

If you are looking into localizing your Spanish content further to truly resonate with specific markets, you may want to follow the trend of using Mexican, Argentinean, and Colombian Spanish as primary variants for Latin America. And if you do localize regionally, your content will stand out. Not many companies do this, but if you buck the trend, you will probably give native-speakers of those countries a reason to talk about your game. Of course, you’ll want to make sure you have a good following or big potential following in those regions in order to get the best

ROI. The localization targets need to be part of your brand’s strategy.

### Know thyself and know thy audience

When thinking about localizing your materials into Spanish, you need to be especially aware of what type of content you have. For materials such as ads and websites, which market and promote your game, it might be a good idea to localize the content to a specific audience. It’s no secret that well-localized, targeted copy sells better.

You could also consider using different Spanish variants and accents for the characters in your game, and even tie these identities into the story. This would add character dimension and diversity to the game, and it would be something original that Latin American audiences would notice and appreciate.

There is so much unexplored territory when it comes to localizing games effectively for LATAM Spanish. There is room for improvement, innovation, and change. As Don Quixote de la Mancha said: “To change the world, my friend Sancho, is not madness nor utopia. It’s justice.” Giving Latin American Spanish speakers some justice by fully localizing for them might be the change the region is yearning for. ☺



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