Dubbing workflow in AAA video games

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Key words

- Synchronization: is the process of matching a target language translation to the screen actors' body and articulatory movement in a recording made in a dubbing studio
- Time constraint (TC): when referring to dubbing, it is about the limitation of length that the translation must have so that the dubbing fits some specific characteristics
- Non-player character (NPC): Usually used to refer to characters in an MMORPG that are computer controlled
- Script: datasheets containing all the dialogs from a video game (usually Excel datasheets)
- User interface (UI): refers to the texts through which a user interacts with a video game (menus, commands, etc)
- On screen text (OST): all texts appearing withing a video game that are not UI (inventory screens, item descriptions, text prompts, dialogue trees, skill trees, labelled maps, subtitles, objectives and other text-centric HUD elements)
- Cinematic: is a sequence in a video game that is not interactive, interrupting the gameplay
- As-rec: exact transcriptions of the content of the dubbing audios of a video game
- CAT tool: Computer-assisted translation, is translation software which can help translators translate faster and improve translation quality
- Translation memory: is a database that stores sentences, paragraphs or segments of text that have been translated before
- Glossary: an alphabetical list of words relating to a specific video game

The process of dubbing a videogame

Quotatotion

- Including Dubbing
- Including translation

Translation

- UI, OST and Script
- Adjusting the translations for the dubbing

Recordings

- Creating as-recs of the recorded audios
- Making a LQA of the as-recs

Bug reports

- Re-translations
- Re-takes and pick-ups

As we can see in the workflow of the previous diagram, the dubbing process of a video game is complex and implies the perfect synchronization of several teams belonging to two companies (the developer/publisher of the video game) and the company in charge of the localization (which in turn can subcontract an external recording studio).

For this entire process to end up being a success, there are several concepts that must be known and several intermediate quality steps that must be considered and established beforehand before starting.

Here is a chronologicallist of the sequence of events that usually occur during the dubbing of a video game:

- The client has already started to develop a new video game that they are going to want to localize and dub into one or more languages and ask a localization company for a quotation for the project
- When making the quotation, you have to take into account how many pre-production hours, dubbing actors, total studio hours, dubbing director, sound team working hours, cost of translations and adaptations for dubbing and sound team post-production hours, among others.
- Normally the client sends technical audio specifications (type of microphone, type of files they want to receive, etc). It is always important to consult

with the audio team in case you have to incur purchases for the project, to be able to include them in the quote.

- Once the project has started, the translation of both the script, the UI and OST begins. For this step, a CAT tool is usually used and you must always keep in mind that for the dialogue, subtitles, UI and OST, there is usually a character limitation. The usual set is a maximum deviation of +10% in the tool to ensure the length of the translations is adapted to the original text.
- The casting of actors for the main voices of the video game is carried out. The client sends samples of the original voices and the localization company looks for sound-alike voices to send several samples to the client and they choose the one they want to use in the end.
- The client will begin sending original audio files for the dubbing to begin and some scripts indicating the type of TC for each line as well as instructions for dubbing. These TC indications, as we will see later, will determine the type of dubbing that must be applied in the study and also the type of adjustment that must be made on the texts in order to comply with that TC.
- Pre-production begins: the audio team will prepare the files for the dubbing sessions and the scripts that will be used in the studio.

- A specialist (normally the dubbing director himself) will adjust the translations so that they can be recorded following the TC instructions sent by the client.
- Once all the material has been recorded, the audio team performs the post-production. We will stop at this point later because it is very important in the healthy workflow of a complete localization.
- The client receives the assets and implements them in the game. Normally their QA team tests the game and submits translation or dubbing bug reports that the localization company has to re-translate/re-dub.

The goal of localization is to create an enjoyable, understandable, and non-confusing play experience for the end user by paying heed to their specific cultural context while being faithful to the source material. The suspension of disbelief is of utmost importance to the process; if a player feels as though the product was not meant for them, or if the localization creates confusion or difficulty in comprehension, this may break immersion and disrupt the player's ability to continue the game.

Synchronization

The different types of audiovisual texts might require a higher or lower level of synchronization. For example, depending on how closely a character is seen or how bright the lights are in a shot, synchronization in dubbing will be applied either more strictly or more loosely.

In the case of dubbing video games, the synchronization is not done in the same way as in a film; it is instead understood as "a gradation of constraints" that the translator has to take into account. Professionals involved in the localization process note that videos are rarely available when translating the text, not even in the dubbing studio, where they instead work with the audio files recorded in the original language and use the audio waves as their main reference.

This renders it impossible for the types of shot to be the determining factor in synchronizing the dubbed audio. Restrictions are therefore applied depending on the game situation in which the translated audio will be reproduced. Sometimes these restrictions are transmitted to the translator simply as a certain number of characters (not exceeding the original number of characters by more than 10%), but translators and dubbing professionals tend to develop a certain intuition about how restrictive the text should be depending on the game situation in which those lines will be reproduced.

- Game action displays specific gameplay in which the players are performing and moving continuously, so restrictions will not be very stringent, mainly depending on where the voices come from (on-screen characters, thoughts, walkie-talkies) or the photography of the scene (perspective and lighting). The normative code also plays an important role in the case of game action: depending on the mechanics of the game and the perspectives and movements available to the player, synchronization will need to be more or less carefully applied (e.g., a game that allows only a third-person perspective will always show other characters' faces with a lower level of detail than a game in which other characters can be seen more closely).
- The normative code and the possible camera and character movements for the player are also important in dialogues sent in scripts. They always differ depending on the game but, generally speaking, a possible closer perspective of the characters involved in the dialogue and their expressiveness are taken into account (mobility and paralinguistic).
- Finally, cinematics tend to imitate the dubbing in movies. Although no videos are usually available, they tend to be dubbed so as to imitate the original sound wave as much as possible, since the more the two audio waves resemble each other, the more probable it is that all the semiotic codes will fit together when the final dubbed version is completed.

Whereas in the former the dubbing studio produces the final version of the dubbed product, in the latter, neither the translators nor the dubbing professionals see the final results until the developer has received all the translated assets and

integrated them to produce the final version of the game—which can vary greatly from the expectations of the professionals involved in the localization process.

To sum up, depending on the gradation of constraints expected in each situation and the number of semiotic codes involved, up to five types of synchronies can be found in the dubbing of a video game:

- Time constraint (TC): the translated utterances must be the same length as the originals, with a 10% or 20% margin.
- Wild (VO): no time restriction applies.
- Strict time constraint (STC): the translated utterances must be exactly the same length as the original ones (not taking into account internal pauses or specific intonation).
- Sound-sync (SS): the translated utterances must be exactly the same length as the original ones, including internal pauses and intonation.
- Lip-sync: the translated text must be exactly the same length as the original, including pauses, and must resemble the lip articulation.

The manner in which these five types of synchronies are applied depends on how restrictive each game situation is. Restrictions can be associated with the different semiotic codes, as explained above. These ideas are also illustrated in the table below. The impact of the semiotic codes creating the different levels of constraints when translating and dubbing allows a comparison to be established between the taxonomy of synchronization in video games and the three

synchronies already seen in films and TV: the more restrictive the game situation is expected to be, the more the dubbing will resemble the types of synchronies used in films.

Game situation (alternated by the player's actions)	*Type of synchrony*
Tasks	▪ VO
Game action	▪ TC
Dialogues	▪ STC ▪ SS
Cinematics	▪ Lip-sync

Adjusting the translations

As we have mentioned before, the translations must be adjusted in order to comply with the doable specifications requested by the client. Now that we have seen the different types of synchronization, we will understand the importance of that step of the process.

The adjuster is usually an external specialized professional who must be provided with certain important information so that our quality process does not suffer:

Age of the public
Language/cultural barriers
Religious believes

Taking into account that the adjuster is not usually part of the translation team for the scripts, we must ensure that their work continues with the consistency standards established by the QA team that has reviewed the translations in terms of:

- Glossary: a translated term may be too long or may not meet the necessary conditions for lyp-sync. If this is so and it is an important term in the game (for example the name of a group or faction within the game) the decision to change it should always be made with the translation and QA team of the game.
- Cultural, religious or humorous aspects within the game: if agreements have been reached with the client regarding terms that they should not use due to religious or cultural issues related to language, the age of the players to whom the game is directed or due to the rating of the game, the adjuster must know and respect them.

Post-production: the as-rec

As said before, once all the material has been recorded, the audio team performs the post-production.

Within this process, it must be taken into account that many times what is recorded in the studio is not exactly what has been translated or what has been adjusted due to the needs of the actor or the natural flow of the video game.

So, at this stage of the project the audio team listens to all the audio again and fills in a column in the script called "as-rec".

The as-recs are the definitive texts that contain the exact text recorded in the audios.

These texts are extremely important because they are the ones that the client will receive as final translations and are normally used for the video game subtitles.

But, as we have said before, from the translation to the as-rec, the adjuster, the dubbing director, the dubbing actors and the audio team have all been involved. And none of them is usually a linguist, so these texts may contain errors.

That is why it is of the utmost importance that they go through the translation QA team again so that they can review them and notify, where appropriate, of possible errors that have to be re-recorded (if, for example, a glossary term has been dubbed of the video game in an incorrect way or the agreement with the client regarding foul language, humor or culture of the video game has been violated).

Bug reports: re-takes and pick-ups

One of the main endpoints of localization is done through bug reports. These reports are created by the testers and contain all the translation or dubbing/audio errors found while testing the game.

If the error comes from a translation error but does not involve dubbing (for example, a text cut off on the screen that needs to be shortened), the translation team will take care of correcting and forwarding the corrections to the client.

But if the error is translation, dubbing or audio (some click or sound that has "created") then this causes re-recordings. There are two types of re-recordings that are important to know about:

1. Re-takes: these are errors produced by the localization team. The cost of these re-recordings is not assumed by the client, but by the localization company
2. Pick-ups: they are errors coming from the client itself. Sometimes they are small changes that the client wants to re-translate and re-record because they are updates to the videogame script. The cost of these re-recordings is paid by the client.

The role of the translation team

As we have seen, the beginning of any localization of a video game begins with the translation team, but their role cannot stop there. Both in the process of reviewing the as-rec and correcting translation bugs that may or may not involve re-dubbing, the translation team has an important role that should not be relegated to the early stages of the dubbing process.

It is important that the translation PMs and the audio PMs are in constant contact, share information, opinions and points of view so that the achievement of the perfect localization of the video game is a success. They must form a very well-oiled team and have great communication to row all in the same direction.

Translation Memories and Glossaries

As we can see, the localization cycle of a videogame that includes dubbing involves a continuous updating of the translations produced in the first stage. This supposes a continuous update of the translation memories and the glossaries of the video game.

It is of vital importance that the TMs and the glossaries contain the latest translations (as-rec) sent to the client and also the changes produced by bugs.

To achieve this, the "Context" concept in CAT tools is very important, as anchors the translation of a line to a metadata (usually called Key or ID in the client repository) that allows the exact line to be quickly found and updated. Usig this we can make sure that our TMs contain the exact translations that the client has implemented in the game.

The added value of these TMs and glossaries is that, if the client is satisfied and, for example, develops a second part of the video game, they know that this knowledge and data base can be re-used correctly and will not cause annoying inconsistencies so criticized by the users themselves within the main sagas.

Accents and language variants

A key point that must be taken into account and always agreed with the client is the one concerning acts and language variants in dubbing.

For example, when a non-native speaker appears in a video game for Iberian Spanish, it is very common for dubbing actors to be asked to do accents imitating the pronunciation

of a speaker of that language (for example, French accent for dubbings of Marion Cotillard in European Spanish).

It is becoming more and more obsolete due to the awareness that exists regarding the discrimination and ridicule of non-native speakers of a language (we all know the famous case of Apu in the Simpsons series). But it is always better to consult with the client about their preferences.

It is also quite common for characters with another mother tongue to appear who speak in their language. These phrases are usually left in the original version and only subtitled but, again, it is always best to consult with the client.

A very common case that often occurs is that Spanish speakers appear in video games created especially in the United States. Normally different accents are used I dubbing into Spanish to highlight the origin of the character. The problem comes when it is assumed that the main character does not understand what this other is saying because they change the language. Localisms are normally used to reproduce this situation in dubbing.

As an example of this, we have Gloria, from the Modern Family series. Many times, the rest of the characters in the series do not understand her because of her pronunciation or when she speaks in Spanish and it is a really issue to re-create the situation in Spanish.