



Bring Your “A” Game to Video Game Localization

If you’re a translator who is passionate about games and audiovisual content, if you like to get creative and enjoy jobs of the “transcreation” type, and if you’re not afraid of a good challenge, this could be a good niche for you. From in-game scripts to packaging and marketing, video games offer a broad spectrum of content bound to keep translators engaged and entertained—and challenged!

As gaming quickly becomes the world’s favorite pastime and as video game developers and publishers continue to invest to internationalize their games, there are more opportunities for professional translators who have a passion for localizing this type of content. However, the gaming industry calls it “video game localization” instead of “video game

translation” for a reason. Video games require translators to take so much more than the translatable text into account. Its localization is a target-oriented translation and its goal is to entertain.

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The following describes the different aspects to consider when working on video game localization so that you can bring your “A” game each time.

THE GAMER IS EVERYTHING

When localizing a game, we need to constantly think about who will be playing that game; we need to think about “the gamer.” We want the gamer to be entertained and feel compelled to continue playing the game, and to buy products from that developer or publisher. If a segment doesn’t translate effectively into the target language, or the translation could confuse the gamer or disrupt their experience, we might need to consider sacrificing the accuracy of the localization that we render. This means that some character names, terminology, and complete phrases might need to be entirely transcreated. Think of it as switching the focus from words to intention and emotion. The gamer comes first. We want those playing the localized version to be immersed in the universe of the game and to have the same experience as those playing the non-localized version of the game. Your job is to make them feel that the game was designed for them.

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So, do you need to be a gamer yourself? There are conflicting opinions on this. I’ve seen successful game localizers who are not gamers themselves, but who love creative translations and are detail-oriented. I’ve also seen full-time gamers fail at localization because they lack other important traits that a good video game localizer should have. Therefore, you don’t necessarily have to be an active

gamer yourself, but you need to *like* and *understand* games. Why? Because you'll likely be required to play and familiarize yourself with the games you localize.

THE CONTENT TO LOCALIZE VARIES—A LOT!

One of the most fascinating aspects of video game localization is the large variety of content that needs localization. From in-game scripts to packaging and marketing, video games offer a broad spectrum of content bound to keep translators engaged and entertained. And when I say “entertained,” I mean challenged.

Most video games will have in-game and marketing assets to localize. Some of this content can include:

- User interfaces (menus, help screens, on-screen tutorials, etc.)
- Narratives, dialogues (scripts for dubbing or subtitling)
- Songs
- Manuals
- Official game guides
- Packaging
- Marketing and promotional material (digital and print)
- Websites (game website, newsletters, blogs, etc.)
- In-game graphics
- User agreements

You might be thinking, “does this mean that I’ll be translating a legal document one day and a piece of artwork the next for the same game?” The answer is, yes. The versatility of a good video game localizer should not be taken for granted.

BE CREATIVE, BUT THIS IS YOUR INCREDIBLY REDUCED SPACE TO DO IT!

Perhaps one of the biggest challenges in video game localization is this dichotomy between needing to be bold and creative and balancing this with the character limitations that might be imposed. For translators of languages

that tend to be considerably longer than English, reducing the length of your translation to fit the character limit can be a real nightmare. However, it’s important to understand that those limits are there for a reason. In video games, as with other domains such as software localization, the user interface might be designed in a way that only allows a certain amount of space for text. If we don’t follow the character limit, the text will be truncated—something we need to absolutely avoid unless we want to have altercations with the video game testers.

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Fortunately, we have technology as an ally when dealing with character restrictions. If you’re working with a computer-assisted translation tool, you can set it up to automatically count and show you the characters used in each segment, and even notify you if you’re exceeding the limit. If you’re working directly in Excel, you can also configure it so that the segment next to where you’re typing the translation shows you the number of characters used. Let technology help you with the tedious character counting to enable your imagination to flow and render an amazingly creative translation. You’ll surely need to tap into your imagination, get cleverly inventive, and be resourceful to express the same meaning and feel of the original in a limited space.

TAGS AND VARIABLES AND GENDER, OH MY!

Two important elements that you’ll have to deal with in video game localization

are tags and variables. Translators are likely all too familiar with these, especially if they translate software. Tags are formatting indicators in the text that must stay exactly the same in the translation. We have to identify what the tags are modifying to place them correctly in our translation. Sometimes the purpose of the tag is very obvious. For example, a tag that reads <COMMA> is referring to the punctuation mark. Variables, on the other hand, are values that can change, depending on the conditions or on information that’s passed to the program. For example, a segment that reads “%n requests” indicates that the variable is going to represent a number, as in “2 requests.”

Beware! If the target language you translate into has masculine and feminine form, variables can be especially tricky. A classic example in Spanish is the phrase “USERNAME, welcome!” Translating this literally might not work well, depending on the gender of the user. For example, it’s okay to say “*Juan, bienvenido*,” but what if the user is a woman? I cannot say “*Maria, bienvenido*.” because I would be addressing the female reader with the masculine form. Therefore, you must use an alternate translation that avoids using the feminine or masculine form in Spanish, such as “USERNAME, *te damos la bienvenida*.”

LANGUAGE-SPECIFIC JOKES AND REFERENCES

A large number of video games will have language-specific jokes, puns, sarcasm, irony, and pop-culture references. Significant colloquial language might be used. Such fixed phrases or expressions cannot be translated literally, so we need to find the right equivalent in our target language.

For example, the phrase “a piece of cake” might not translate literally into the target language, so we need to find an equivalent to convey that something is very easy. In Spanish, we have the saying “*es pan comido*” (“it’s eaten bread”), which is an idiom that means that something can be done easily. There are other fixed phrases that

could be used in this translation, such as “*es juego de niños*” (it’s a kids’ game), “*es una papa*” (“it’s a potato”—for the enjoyment of Argentine readers!), or “*es como tirarles a patitos en la feria*” (it’s like shooting rubber ducks at the funfair), etc. Of course, you can choose the one that fits the context and the target audience better.

Many years ago, I encountered a phrase that had me puzzled: “to the choppaaaa.” What is “choppa?” I couldn’t find the word in the dictionary and my research attempts were not getting me anywhere. (Keep in mind that this was over 12 years ago, and it wasn’t as easy to Google and get hundreds of visual references.) I finally asked my husband, who is a native English speaker, if he knew what this phrase could refer to, and he laughed (really hard). It turns out that “to the choppa” is a reference from the movie *Predator*, in which Arnold Schwarzenegger shouted “to the chopper” (the helicopter), but because he has an accent, it sounded like “choppa.” My husband told me that if you were not born in the U.S. in the 1980s, you might not understand this cultural reference.

Video games are packed with pop culture references, so buckle up and enjoy that ride, or as I like to call it now, to the chopper!

TO LOCALIZE OR NOT TO LOCALIZE... THAT IS THE QUESTION.

One of the common debates is if proper names should be localized in video games. For example, do we want “Hannah” to be called “María” in Spanish? This, of course, depends on what route the game developers want to follow.

However, a good rule of thumb should be: when a name carries meaning, we don’t want the gamer to miss that in their language. For example, if a character’s name is “Berry Cute” because it’s a strawberry, we might want to think about an equivalent in the target language that carries the same meaning—something about the fruit and the cuteness.



If a segment doesn’t translate effectively into the target language, or the translation could confuse the gamer or disrupt the player’s experience, we might need to consider sacrificing the accuracy of the localization that we render.

This same criterion should be applied to all proper names within the game, including the in-game art, geographical places, entities, battles, etc. Otherwise, you risk the gamer missing out on the immersive experience of the game. Remember that localization is your ally for creating an immersive experience for gamers in any language.

Unleashing your creative self will serve you well in this field, but remember you should never forget that video game localization is an audiovisual entertainment form. This means that you cannot separate the text from what players are seeing and hearing on-screen. So, have fun being creative with your translations, but don’t forget the visual and audio aspects. Don’t exceed the character limitation, don’t place the tags and variables incorrectly, and basically, don’t have fun (just joking!). Video game localization

can be lots of fun, but at the same time very technical.

This article does not intend to be comprehensive, since there are numerous other aspects that are important to video game localization. Rather, I hope I’ve provided a small window into what it could be like to localize video games. ●



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