

Getting into... GAMES LOCALISATION

Have you ever wondered why everyone seems to like their Xbox 360 or PLAYSTATION®3 so much? Games used to be a kids' domain; however, nowadays companies are constantly branching into new markets and releasing products that defy the traditional definition of a videogame. Most of you will have seen the adverts about "games" that you can sing along to, that keep you fit and even help you cook! Whilst games might still not be everyone's cup of tea, this expansion, which is taking place across many foreign markets, means that there is plenty of work out there for translators interested in the field.

However, games localisation involves much more than translation, and linguists working in this area need to be aware of certain technical and legal issues that might not necessarily apply to other fields. To start with, games companies are extremely protective of their products, and this means that often the translator has to work without having seen the product at all, despite having signed any necessary confidentiality agreements. It is not uncommon for the translator to only know the title of the game and the platform it will be played on. Sometimes, if they are lucky, they might get a few screenshots of the characters or the menu screens.

This lack of information becomes an acute problem when attempting to translate strings composed of a single word, with no context at all. Aside from the usual problems of gender and number, and whether a word is a verb or a noun ("pause"), certain terms will have completely different translations depending on the context; for instance, "wheel" in a racing game could refer to the steering wheel or to one of the four rotating wheels of the car.

Another common problem that games translators have to face on a daily basis is the lack of space on screen, meaning that in particular occasions they cannot exceed a certain number of characters when translating, which in screens such as the menus can be extremely challenging. And to this challenge you have to add the fact that games translators have to branch into other fields, such as translation of scripts and subtitles. Most localised games these days are dubbed, subtitled or both, so it is also important to have the necessary skills to carry out this type of work.

Other issues that need to be taken into account include the use of TRCs, placeholders and concatenation. TRC stands for Technical Requirements Checklist and it refers to a list of terms or "authorised names" that the translator must strictly follow; they include terms such as the names of the platforms and peripherals and in many cases the terms are copyrighted, so it is imperative to use the approved translations.

Placeholders are also very common in games localisation and can pose endless problems. For instance, even the simple sentence "You have won a %d" will have to be translated slightly differently in many languages depending on the gender of the object that "%d" is replaced with, as in "You have won a car".

Concatenation can be even trickier. In the games localisation industry, it refers to combining several separate strings to form a sentence. Using a similar example to the one in the previous paragraph, the translator could find themselves having to translate the following table:

ENGLISH	SPANISH
You have won a	Has ganado una
gold	oro
silver	plata
bronze	bronce
coin.	moneda.

When combining them, the results will be “You have won a gold coin”, “You have won a silver coin” or “You have won a bronze coin”. However, it is clear that this syntax is not going to work in many languages. For instance, in Spanish “Has ganado una oro moneda” is incorrect; “oro” should appear at the end and be preceded by a preposition: “Has ganado una moneda de oro”. Since the syntax has been programmed into the game and cannot be altered, in a case like this it would be useful to translate the first string as “Has ganado una moneda de” and leave the last cell empty, or just with a full stop. However, this is only a very basic example and challenges of this type can be much more difficult to solve.

Any translators wishing to work in the games localisation field should be able to tackle all these issues and also start familiarising themselves with the games and the associated terminology used in them. Some of the most common terms can vary from one company to another, or between different platforms and consoles, so it is very important to become aware of these differences. Similarly, it is not uncommon for games translators to specialise in a few genres; the style and terminology can vary widely and, whereas some games contain a lot of technical information (for instance, car specifications in racing games), others use a very flowery language that will put the translator’s creativity to the test (role-playing games, or RPGs, with long and complicated stories).

It is also helpful to find a job in-house within a game company. Even though the industry is fairly young, most translation companies specialised in this area will hardly consider translators without game experience. Obviously, it helps to be an avid gamer, but working for a game company also provides an excellent perspective on what type of issues you will have to face as a freelancer. Some companies, such as Blizzard and NCsoft have in-house translation teams, and most of the others have localisation testing departments, which check all the text once it has been implemented in the game.

In terms of tools, it is not necessary to have specialist software, as most of the work comes in Excel or even Word format. However, using TM software can be very beneficial due to the sheer number of repetitions and the need for consistency within the games, which can sometimes surpass the 100,000 words mark.

There has not been much written about games localisation to date, but those interested in the field could benefit from reading the “Game Localization Handbook” by Heather Maxwell Chandler (2005). It provides a comprehensive description of the games localization process and will be undoubtedly helpful for anyone thinking about branching out in this industry.

Silvia Ferrero

Silvia Ferrero
Spanish Freelance Translator & Interpreter
Chair of the NWTN, Associate of the Institute of Translation & Interpreting
<http://www.silviaferrero.co.uk>
<http://www.medialoc.net>