Consumers take for granted that entertainment content is available in their local language, whether they are in Rome, Madrid, Warsaw or Tokyo. Delivering on that expectation requires the efforts of a highly skilled, meticulously coordinated and highly passionate and creative group of people who work ceaselessly, to tight deadlines with content that can change right up until the final disc is printed or the game is released online.

This article discusses how localization decisions are reached and reveals at what point in the development process pre-production should commence. It will stress the importance of close project management and investigate some of the challenges involved in reaching the ultimate goal of shipping a localized product simultaneously with the English version worldwide.

KEY WORDS: Game localization, management, Return on Investment, resource planning, sim-ship.

Game Localization Management: Balancing linguistic quality and financial efficiency

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La gestión de la localización de videojuegos: el equilibrio entre la calidad lingüística y la eficacia financiera

Los consumidores de hoy en día dan por sentado que todos los productos de ocio a su disposición van a estar traducidos a su idioma, ya vivan en Roma, Madrid, Varsovia o Tokio. La satisfacción de esta expectativa requiere el trabajo apasionado, constante y bien coordinado de equipos de traductores creativos que tienen que ser capaces de rendir al máximo bajo la presión de los continuos cambios en el videojuego en sí, y las fechas de lanzamiento inamovibles.

Este artículo analiza las decisiones que hay que tomar en localización y sugiere el momento idóneo durante el proceso de desarrollo en el que debiera comenzarse la preproducción. Se recalca la relevancia de una gestión de proyectos cerrada, y se explican los retos a superar si se quiere alcanzar el objetivo de la distribución simultánea del juego a nivel mundial.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Localización de videojuegos, gestión, rentabilidad, planificación de recursos, distribución simultánea.

INTRODUCTION

According to the ISFE consumer survey 2010, 25.4% of adults in Europe can be considered as gamers. This figure has been increasing over the past years due to technological advances on the console and PC side. Devices such as the Wii and iPhone/iPod touch have also encouraged parents, mothers and even grandparents to engage in interactive entertainment regularly.

Just as in film or television, consumers now take it for granted that entertainment content is available in their local language, whether they are in Rome, Madrid, Warsaw or Tokyo. Delivering on that expectation requires the efforts of a highly skilled, meticulously coordinated and highly passionate and creative group of people who work ceaselessly, to tight deadlines with content that can change right up until the final disc is printed or the game is released online.

This article discusses how localization decisions are reached and reveals at what point in the development process pre-production should commence. It will stress the importance of close project management and investigate some of the challenges involved in reaching the ultimate goal: of shipping a localized product simultaneously with the English version — worldwide.

SOME KEY TERMS

Localization. The term localization refers to the translation of software from one language into another taking into account cultural considerations. As a technical term it is widely accepted in the software industry, and thus is also used in the context of interactive entertainment.

Game development process. Due to the variety of games from the simple early mobile games to movie-like experiences on PC and consoles, there is no standard process or timeline that works for all game development projects. Traditionally, game development has been going through the same process as business software with the following stages:

- Feature specification. The project content and features are outlined and decided upon.
- Development. The core phase of the project in which the main programming takes place.
- Alpha. All pieces of the project come — together — a playable game version is generated. From here to Beta the focus is on fine tuning the interactive entertainment experience.
- Beta. All features are complete. From here on the development teams focus on fixing functionality bugs, first and them linguistic bugs.
- Release Candidate. All bugs are closed; the software is «final» and can be sent to manufacturing.

LOCALIZATION DECISION AS AN INVESTMENT

The decision of whether or not to localize a game and into which languages is generally driven by the publishing and studio teams dedicated to that game.

The fact that *text* inside a game is localized for the core European markets (France, Italy, Germany, Spain, often abbreviated as 'FIGS') is pretty much a given for most large franchises these days. But localization is rarely just about translation anymore. Decisions beyond that revolve around the depth of localization, among them whether to include audio recordings, the requirement for famous voiceover actors or whether to expand localization for markets outside FIGS. The basis for these decisions

varies depending on the company but they are generally driven by two main business considerations:

1. Return on Investment (ROI). The localization decision is driven by the assumption that localizing the game will increase the overall profitability of the project through increased sales in markets other than the Anglo-Saxon speaking countries. This has to be weighed up against the cost of translating and recording the text and audio content — all of which have considerable cost implications: The translated text scope of a game like Dragon Age: Origins (Bioware/EA 2008) for example is over 1 million words!

2. Strategic localization decisions. Sometimes, there are business reasons in which a publisher wants to enter into or grow a strategically important market for a certain game or genre. A high short term investment may therefore be set off against the mid to long-term goal of being successful in that market. As an example, Microsoft or Sony may decide to invest in localizing for a particular market at a loss to push their console sales.

PRE-PRODUCTION

When the decision to localize has been taken, the resource planning and pre-production needs to start a long time ahead of the game's launch date. The timeframe for this strongly depends on the size of the game content (number of words, speech recordings, type of game (linear or open world)).

a) Resource Planning — a fine balance between creativity and deadlines

At Electronic Arts, we select individual translation and recording vendors for each language. These vendors tend to have a wealth of experience with the particular franchise and are accustomed to working inside the localization process at EA.

Localization of interactive entertainment content requires translators that are specialized in the multimedia/interactive field as «the translation of multimedia interactive products such as video games cannot and should not follow concepts and norms developed for other types of text» (Bernal-Merino 2009:246). The difference between multimedia and other types of translations is most remarkable in the level of creativity that is given to — and also expected from — the translator. Unless working on a book or movie license, the translator is asked to «transcreate» the text freely, for example giving proper names to characters and places that replicate the user experience in the target language. For example in *Littlest Pet Shop* (an Electronic Arts game around the popular toy franchise by Hasbro (www.hasbro.com/littlestpetshop/en_US/), the song name «Shake Wag and Disco» was translated to «Tatzentanz» (literal translation: paw dance) in German and to «Le lièvre du samedi soir» (literal translation: Saturday Night Hare — but really referring to «La fièvre du samedi soir» (Saturday Night Fever) in French. Both translations moved far away from the source text and tried to combine a reference to music/dance with a reference to pets — the main subject of the game.

An added challenge to the truthful translation of the text in its broader context is the fact that the translator will likely only see the text in script form (Word or Excel) rather than as part of a playable build of the game that would communicate the environment and feel. As the game experience is more than the total of its parts, this can have an impact on the appropri-

ateness of a translation to the game's context — close collaboration between the localization and development teams is therefore crucial. While some translators may relish this creative freedom, this always has to be balanced with research activities for text parts with realistic background (technical details like in a racing game such as the *Need for Speed series by EA*) and strict discipline due to space restrictions or a looming delivery deadline.

To ensure the game's core theme and feel are accurately and adequately reflected in the localized text, publishers and translators have to keep a close working relationship throughout the project. Providing a clear brief at the start of the project and engaging in regular linguistic review of the texts, (as well as a thorough test in game), help mitigate any risks of straying too far from the intended meaning, guaranteeing playability and fun across languages.

b) Project Schedule to achieve 'sim-ship'

After the localization decisions have been made and the right vendors for the genre have been selected, pre-production starts in close cooperation with the development teams. The most important document for all involved in the project is the Project Schedule. This maps translation, recording and testing timings so that the ultimate goal, which is the simultaneous shipment of all the different language versions on the same day around the world, is achieved.

It may appear simpler to complete the English version of a game and then work on the localization. However, localization needs to happen in parallel with the final stages of development to ensure the development team is able to make changes in the game code that is shared between the English and the localized versions before this is finalized. Once a game is complete, the development teams move on to new projects and so no further changes are possible.

One of the biggest challenges of localization in interactive entertainment is that no one project is like another. Deciding the best point at which the localization process should be initiated can depend on the type of game, the scope of the requirements or even the philosophy of the development team. For example, for some developers it seems too risky to make late changes impacting localization while for others a change that is enhancing the customer experience is worth the risk at any stage of the process. Recently, the traditional milestones in the development process have become less visible as more and more developers introduce the Agile methodology: an approach to development that heavily relies on rapid iterations and thus by definition creates more incremental updates for localization than the traditional model.

In all projects, there will be a point though at which the main text development is slowing down and the content is very close to final. This tends to be the best time to engage. Start any earlier and you may waste time and money on translating or recording too much text that is later changed or not used, any later and there will not be enough time to complete all the steps in the sim-ship localization process.

Localization teams always need to remain flexible throughout and absorb text updates. Managing this process by asking the development teams to deliver the translation assets in modules as they are finished instead of getting everything in one go is crucial to avoid duplication or missing out entire segments.

The art of localization planning lies in managing a project without having all the information about the scope of the text or audio and still causing minimal disruption to

the development teams finishing the game on time. Efficient quality control checks are a vital component to ensuring the final localized versions are of equal quality to the original English version of the games.

DELIVERING QUALITY UNDER PRESSURE

This cannot be achieved without a close partnership between development, localization teams, and the external translators. Working with individual freelancers who have experience with a certain game or franchise helps, as they have developed an «instinct» for detecting context within the seemingly context-free files. They are picking up on even the smallest hint and information on the game that could help them with the translation. And of course, the communication with the internal localization team and the game development team needs to be smooth and streamlined. As mentioned above, there is a lot of time-pressure, so nobody will have the chance to do extensive research; freelancers' questions need to be answered and turned around swiftly in order to make the deadline and ensure that the text integration in the game happens on time. Providing all the information upfront is always the best strategy because, in most cases, it will eliminate translators' need to ask.

For audio localization the situation is quite similar. Usually the recordings happen early in the localization process, in order to have enough time for a «pickup session» in the recording studio, in which missing lines are recorded and initial errors can be fixed. Realistically, there are several «pickups» for games with large audio parts. Of course, this part of the process is under a lot of scrutiny as it is also the most expensive part of localization, since it requires recording studios, voiceover actors, etc. Typically, the translation, recording,

and implementation of audio for games takes between 20% and 40% of most localization budgets and it may be as high as 75%. Correcting mistakes that occur during the recordings can be costly as the recording studio needs to be booked again and the actors need to be called back to another session. Keeping a close eye on the localization budget can also played into the timing of when localization should commence. Too early in the process it will lead to too many pickup sessions — but too late in the process and it will put excessive pressure on the recordings which is also a risk to quality.

With all these pressures on cost and timelines, the only means to achieve good quality in localization is an excellent level of communication along the localization chain, i.e. from the dev teams through internal project management to the translators/recording studios and localization testers. The partnership between all those groups which are most of the time in different locations and time zones is extremely hard to build and maintain. Managers, team leads, and coordinators typically have good communication skills, those moving into the localization would be advised to be proficient multicultural leaders, mindful of the intricacies of each culture and territory they are dealing with, and flexible enough so as to accommodate time zone differences.

LONG-TERM VIEW: EDUCATE AND CLEAN UP THE PROCESS

In addition, «evangelizing» developers and influencing them to better prepare their code for localization should be an ongoing exercise. That is indeed a very important factor to enable cost-effective and high-quality localization. And there are many actions that can be taken on that front: mandatory localization training

for programmers, cooperation amongst companies, publication of basic internationalization guidelines, etc.

But for most companies that is far from being the reality. The perfectly prepared localization project with ideal code and timelines, with perfect on-time communication with the developers is a gem that is hard to find. Turning this exception into the rule requires conscious cooperation between all parties involved, and general managers may need to allocate some time for localization department members to further enhance game localization best practice.

I believe we need to accept the reality that infinite quality means infinite cost and infinite time but at the same time never give up trying to improve the localization process. Sometimes this might mean making tough decisions on quality vs. cost vs. timelines. Sometimes this might mean trying to extend your influence into the localization process and getting access to the code at an earlier stage. And most of the time this means cleaning up your own pipeline to eliminate errors/defects early on.

Over the past years, key stakeholders of the game localization industry have been working on initiatives that address the points mentioned above: on the one hand creating game industry standard white papers to help developers create localization friendly code, and on the other hand improving the localization process through implementation of best practices in dealing with the day-to-day issues of game localization.

From my perspective it is key to continue to strengthen localization as an intrinsic part of the overall game development process. By doing this we will achieve the perfect outcome: an efficient localization process that delivers a profitable return on the developers/publishers investment in localization and enhances the entertainment experience of the final consumer.

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