‘All Your Base are Belong to us’. Not if we can help it: Video Game Localization for an evolving industry

Unprecedented Growth

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Which 2007 hit generated the most sales revenue at its launch out of Spiderman 3, Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, and Halo 3? It is important to note that Peter Parker’s latest adventure had the biggest opening weekend of any movie ever, and JK Rowling’s last in the Harry Potter series certainly received masses of press coverage.

But, in-spite of this, the actual answer is Halo 3, Bungie’s epic conclusion to the Master Chief’s story.

So while video games were initially targeting the ‘boy gamer’, it seems that a new, broader audience now confronts the industry, and holds different expectations for their games.

For instance, video games now have to market themselves to a wider age range, both genders, families, and commuters, as well as their traditional user base. Current research by Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) shows that 40% of current gamers in the US are female, with 80% of this group opting to play more casual titles on the Nintendo Wii.

So as the movie, music, and publishing industries seem to be stagnating, the rise of the casual gamer has ensured that the video game industry is gathering momentum. Statistical data proves this; in 2008, the gaming sector was worth $48.3 billion. To put that in perspective, that means, on average, 9 games were sold every second of every day.

Nevertheless, the video game industry is expected to be valued at $68.3 billion in 2012, which demonstrates the growing popularity of video games as a mainstream form of entertainment.
The problem

So why have video game developers been so apathetic towards the localization of their titles in this global market? Poor translations have often plagued the gaming industry, with some farcical examples including:

‘A winner is you!’ from the 1986 Nintendo game Pro Wrestling.

‘Congraturation!!! You have completed a great game. And proved the justice of our culture. Now go rest our heroes!’ from Nintendo’s Ghostbusters game of the 1980s.

‘All your base are belong to us’, the classic line from Toaplan’s Zero Wing that has inspired songs, T-shirts, and even the ‘ALL YOUR VIDEO ARE BELONG TO US’ message from YouTube after their system crashed in June 2006.

While current games no longer see such aberrations, the gaming industry often fails to take the required time to adequately localize each release for the international audience. According to Justin Potts, the Localization Manager at Active Gaming Media, publishers occasionally demand a localization turnaround time of 48 hours. This seems to be a huge shame, as games can take years to develop, yet are undermined by a nonchalant approach to localization.

A Changing Paradigm?

For a major release, over half of sales can come from outside of North America. With this information, publishers need to become more accommodating when localizing their titles.

Video game localization can be a very interesting prospect for translators, as the text needs to remain accurate and functional, but it is also fundamental that it continues to entertain. Creative translators are assigned projects as opposed to a direct translation, and are able to make any changes deemed necessary. Some language experts even demand alterations to the story, design, and graphics to help a game localize.

For instance, in 2000 Square released Final Fantasy IX, which became both a critical and commercial success. Yet, Square was forced to revise the name of their main protagonist, whose name literally translated from the Japanese is Zidane.

In North America, Zidane was able to retain his name. However, in Europe the name Zidane bore a resemblance to the name of the world-class French footballer Zinedine Zidane. Square were concerned that the use of Zidane’s name would not only incur legal problems, but it would also introduce incorrect connotations for the game.
Therefore, **Zidane became Djidane in the French version of Final Fantasy IX, and Yitán in the Spanish.**

Square, now SquareEnix, has always been a pioneer in terms of game localization. It is hoped that their example combined with the commercial success of franchises such as Final Fantasy, Dragon Quest, and Kingdom Hearts will encourage developers to dedicate enough resources to the adequate localization of games.

**Localization versus Taste**

When a game is released in another region, publishers always change the box art to appeal to culturally different audiences.

An interesting example is that of Kirby, the rotund, pink ball that has stared in his own video game series and television show. Yet, on his journey from Japan to the US, Kirby has become seemingly angry.

Aside from the obvious changes to the language, the biggest difference between the Japanese and American covers of the game are in Kirby’s eyes. By sporting a pair of angry eyebrows, Nintendo were trying to appeal to an American audience who has branded Nintendo with a ‘kiddy’ image.

Although the informed gamer is aware of what to expect from a Kirby game, Nintendo clearly believed that in order for a Kirby game to sell in the US, Kirby had to somehow appear more mature than his cute Japanese counterpart. Similarly, Quantic Dream’s Heavy Rain was subject to a similar alteration of the box art for the American and European versions of the game. Although the game is targeting the same audience in terms of demographic, Sony and Quantic Dream have assumed that potential users in different continents would react differently to the game’s artwork.
While the European version of the game's cover provides a striking image, laced with subtle hints to the games themes, the American art gives an obvious indication of what to expect from Heavy Rain. Although both game covers feature the same bloodstained origami figure, the games localizers decided to give the American audience a picture of Madison Paige, the female lead, and the image of Scott Shelby holding a gun.

As an Englishman, based in England, my personal reaction is that the European cover is far more intriguing and so better suited to grabbing my attention on a shop shelf. I also think that the US box art only succeeds in making an innovative and intelligent game like Heavy Rain look like a generic action-adventure game.

However, I would be interested to find out whether American gamers agree with me, or believe that the European cover is too artistic, vague, or even pretentious. Did Sony and Quantic Dream agree that more obvious clues to the games themes were needed in order to excite the US market? Or, quite simply, do boobs and guns shift more units in America than in Europe?

**Moving Forward**

‘How do you truly globalize?’ asked Yoichi Wada, President of SquareEnix at the 2010 Tokyo Game Show.

‘I think you have to work with people that grew up overseas, who grew up breathing the culture. It’s impossible otherwise’.

To advance, it is essential for the video game industry to work with native, professional translation experts. These experts need to employ creative translation, or transcreation, services to produce accurately translated content that will not only remain loyal to the original script, but also provide a relevant and entertaining experience for the gamer.

Yet, the localization process requires more than an accurate translation of text, as localizers are required to often amend the story, design, and graphics of a game. We have observed how the box art can change between the continents, and even how character names have been altered to suit the needs of a region.

But with the gaming industry continuing to grow, it is essential for translators to receive training in this emerging field. With new games and new platforms constantly being developed for the expanding community of gamers, there are opportunities for translators and translation companies to work in this exciting industry.

**Now it is time for the video game industry to react to the global gaming market by spending the time and resources to localize new releases.**

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