It's a funny game
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Game translation is a rather unknown quantity. It is not exactly software localisation or audiovisual translation; it is a relatively new kind of translation and few papers or studies have been produced on the subject. However, perhaps because computer games are gaining more prominence in our society, it is attracting more attention from translators and linguists alike.

So what sets computer game translation apart and what are the main common problems faced by translators? One of the characteristics is the combination of elements that have to be translated: manuals, game guides, game documentation, cut-scenes, user interface and scripts for subtitling and dubbing.

The approach to the translation will vary depending on the particular format. Translating a manual does not pose the same difficulties as translating the in-game text, which is often subject to restrictions on the number of characters used for a particular text box on the screen. Translating a voiceover script, where dubbing has to be lip-synced, creates other problems.

The second main feature of games translation is creativity. A game is a complex product: its purpose is to educate, entertain, train, amuse and move the player. It is an interactive medium; for it to work, the player has to grab the game pad and push a button and take decisions.

With every new title, publishers promise the players the 'ultimate gaming experience', a 'more real than real' adventure. So, unlike with most software localisation, where the main objective is to explain the functionality of the product, the main factor here is the gaming experience.

The translation has to be adapted to deliver this experience, and translators are almost given green light to modify, adapt and customise the game for the target audience and/or removing cultural references, to make the game more 'real' to the player. Of course, this should be done with the permission of the authors or distributors.

This freedom is used to modify the names of characters, puns, cultural references and key terms in the game, while elements of the other culture and local expressions may be added to retain the spirit of the original.

Translators can play with different language characteristics, giving a character a particular accent, for example, and they can vary the language to indicate the background of the character, their level of education or status. In computer game translation, the key is to favour the target culture over the original culture.

Localisation of this kind is a complex procedure that includes the cultural, technical and legal adaptation of the product, as well as the transfer of language. However, developers have tended to create games without planning for the possibility of localisation, and only when the product is selling well have they thought about exporting it.

Although things are changing, and developers and publishers are now beginning to consider the target audience carefully at the planning stages, and to take the appropriate measures to accommodate localisation, the necessary level of flexibility is often still lacking. If the game has not been adequately prepared for the high standard of localisation needed to ensure that the gaming experience lives up to the expectations, the translator will face a number of problems.

Information drain

A games translator will frequently receive nothing more than an Excel file with columns containing incomprehensible information. If they are lucky, they may receive additional details, such as the name of the game, the genre and the nature of the text they have received – whether it is a manual, dialogue or in-game text. They are

often unsure if the dialogue will appear subtitled in the game or if it will be dubbed (in which case it is also important to know if lip-sync is required).

The lack of information and, more importantly, the lack of context is the origin of countless problems. First, there are grammar issues: it may be impossible to determine whether a word is a verb or a noun. Errors can occur over the gender of an individual or, in the case of a noun, the definite and indefinite articles, and it can often be unclear how many items or individuals are concerned.

Most computer games are created in English or Japanese, which poses problems for the translator because of the substantial differences between their grammatical structure and those of the main target languages for the industry.

Dialogue can create many problems if there is no information about the character the speaker is addressing, because the level of formality between the characters is embedded in many languages.

"I'm not sure I can make this much clearer…" and "You ready to go?" are two strings of dialogue which, when translated into FIGS (the industry acronym for French, Italian, German and Spanish), illustrate some of these problems. In the first example, it is impossible to know whether the speaker is male or female, and therefore whether the translation should be, in Spanish, "No estoy seguro…" or "No estoy segura…"

In the second instance, the translator can only guess whether the speaker is addressing one person or several individuals, and whether the relationship between them is formal or informal. The possible translations are manifold: "Estás/Está/Están lista/listo/listas/listos…"

The lack of context can often cause major translation errors that players can spot easily. A common mistake is the translation of 'shell' as "concha" ('seashell') in Spanish when it refers to a type of ammunition. In a military game this mistake should be easy to avoid, but in another type of game the translator may encounter the word in the middle of a long list of terms with no context, and it would be very difficult to determine the correct meaning.

One case that became famous in the industry recently was the literal translation of "a piece of cake". But how could the translator have known that this was not a reference to a literal slice of cake if the string appeared out of context?

Translators need to see the strings in context and they also need to know the order in which the lines of dialogue are spoken. However, dialogues are often not ordered chronologically, but instead they appear by character. Furthermore, questions and answers are not shown together, and may be listed in different parts of the file.

Another problem is that lines spoken by the character played by the gamer are normally translated in male form, which is fine if the character is male, but if the character is not gender-defined, this implies that players are always male.

Similarly, if the player can pick different characters –some male, some female– and the dialogue is identical regardless of which character they pick all the dialogue strings should be in duplicate to provide feminine forms of nouns, verb participles and adjectives for the female characters.

This grammar issue can be anticipated and solved by simply duplicating the dialogue strings when the game is originally created but may be impossible to resolve at a larger stage.

Breaking codes

A variable is code that is replaced during the game by a different value or term, depending on the choices made by the player and the plot development, for example "%s gets a %d". Here, the variable '%s' will be replaced by the name of the player and the variable '%d' by an item given to the player. All the terms that could apply to this variable value '%d' are generally grouped together in a different part of the file, with no context given.

The problem for translators from English is that the indefinite article 'a' has no gender, but the list of items is likely to require indefinite articles of different genders in other languages. The straight translation into Spanish would be

"%s ha conseguido un %d". The terms that can replace the variable may be listed in a separate part of the file ('sword', 'hammer', 'shield', for example). The translation would be as follows:

English	Spanish
Sword	Espada
Hammer	Martillo
Shield	Escudo

However, this would mean that the text that appears during the game would contain grammatical errors: "Mick ha conseguido un espada".

There are two possible solutions open to the translator, the first being to replace the indefinite article by a colon. The string would be rendered as "%s ha conseguido: %d" and the text would appear during gameplay as "Mick ha conseguido: espada", "Mick ha conseguido: martillo".

A more appropriate solution would be to omit the translation of the indefinite article and to include the indefinite article in male or female form in the list of terms that replace the variable, depending on the gender of each word.

So the string would be translated as "%s ha conseguido%d", and the variables as "una espada", "un martillo", "un escudo". During the game, the text would then appear correctly as "Mick ha conseguido una espada", "Mick ha conseguido un martillo".

The concatenation of strings works in the same way as variables, as both resources are used to avoid the repetition of text strings. When an action in the game has several possible results, instead of writing a sentence for each potential situation, developers write one sentence and the sections that change are implemented in the form of variables or concatenations, which are combinations of strings.

The strings of text are stored in different files that are extracted from the game engine and combined to form a sentence. So instead of including the full sentences 'You win a blue car', 'You win a green car', 'You win a black car', the following concatenation will be created:

String	English	Spanish
1	You win	Has ganado
2	a blue	azul
3	a green	verde
4	a black	negro
5	Car	coche

When joining strings 1 + 2 + 5 the result is 'You win a blue car'. However, if the text is translated without taking into account the way the strings will be combined during the game, the result will be incorrect: "Has ganado azul coche" instead of "…un coche azul". The word order in a sentence will not the same in every language; while the structure in English is 'adjective + noun', in Spanish the rule is 'noun + adjective'.

One solution would be to translate extra text in each string, and to leave the string 'car' untranslated:

String	English	Spanish
1	You win	Has ganado un coche
2	a blue	azul
3	a green	verde
4	a black	negro
5	Car	

However, this would not work if the possible prizes were increased to include motorbikes, trucks and bicycles in the available colours, as this would require the translator to maintain the original strings.

Size matters

The lack of space on the screen affects the translation and is yet another element to consider when deciding how to approach a string of text. Even if the user interface (UI) is scalable and can accommodate more text in buttons, menus or text boxes, the screen will be of a limited size (especially when with portable devices such as mobile phones).

Languages such English and Japanese, in which the majority of games are originally created, are very adaptable and can express a great deal in just a few words. But other languages, such as Spanish and German, require much more space.

To avoid nasty surprises and prevent text being cut off on screen, most developers calculate the maximum number of characters that will fit in the UI. Translators have to work within those limits which can be totally unrealistic: if the limit is calculated from the number of characters contained in the original string, it would be quite difficult to shorten certain words.

For example, if the maximum number of characters in the string "save" is four (the number of letters in the English word), it will be impossible to translate it into Spanish, which would require seven characters: "guardar".

In such cases, translators have to invent abbreviations. In most languages there are common abbreviations or shortenings, such as "pto. (punto)" and "dcha. (derecha)". But in the case of "guardar", the only way around it would be to cut the term to 'guar' or 'gua' (depending on the space available), which would barely be intelligible to gamers.

Restrictions on the number of characters are necessary, but the only real solution is for developers to take into account the fact that localised text will be around 25-30 percent longer than English text. Extra space must be available to accommodate longer words.

Working apart

Inconsistency of terminology is one of the weaknesses in computer game translation. Quite often translators spot inconsistencies within the different elements of the original text –the names of menu items and buttons in the manual may not match the names in the on-screen text, for example.

However, because game translation is generally subject to tight deadlines, the content is often shared between several translators. One translator might work on the manual, while a second on the dialogue and a third on the in-game text. In order to ensure the quality of the final product, it is vital that the team is well coordinated and that everyone share terminology in the form of a glossary updated daily, or a translation memory program –but this rarely happens.

It is also important to create glossaries to provide with the translators with specific guidelines regarding the nature, tone and style of the text to make sure that the translations are consistent in all elements of the game.

Testing, testing

Language testing must clearly form a key part of localisation and an integral part of the quality assurance (QA) process. If developers and publishers anticipate these problems and take steps to avoid such issues, the language testing should only take a few days.

The better prepared the translators are in terms of information, the more experience they have in computer game translation and the more familiar they are with the genres of the games they work in, the easier the task for the testers will be.

Similarly, the language testers should also be professionally trained, so they can spot grammatical mistakes, typos and style issues – and avoid introducing new mistakes themselves. At the risk of stating the obvious, a good tester should know what to look for when reviewing a localised game.

A poor translation can have a negative effect on the gameplay experience. Players may not understand what they have to do and might get distracted from the action because they have to read the dialogue and keep an eye on the game interface. Even if the translation is not enough to deter gamers from buying a title, they will certainly complain about the quality of translations and may even re-translate games that do not come up to scratch.

Luckily, the localisation model is starting to change, and developers and publishers now appreciate the importance of integrating localisation into the early stages of development. They are increasingly anticipating the need for extra space in the UI for localised text. They are taking into account the masculine, feminine and neuter forms in other languages, and often duplicate dialogue strings to accommodate all the variables.

They are beginning to provide more information to the translator including a synopsis of the plot, the game name and genre, the names and a brief description of the main characters, and screenshots of characters and items.

Until very recently, computer game translation was considered small fry in the translation world; after all, a computer game is just a game. However, like their players, computer games have grown up and are now one of the main sources of entertainment. 'Serious' games exist that go beyond mere entertainment: games such as Peacemaker, which has the noble objective of raising awareness of the conflict in the Middle East.

There are games that aim to educate everyone from children to professionals in the military or health industries; games have been devised to support election campaigns and to raise awareness of particular social issues. It is also worth remembering that the global industry is increasingly important economically. In 2005, it was worth an estimated US$29bn, and it continues to grow.

It is time to acknowledge the importance this are of translation. Children, teenagers and adults spend many hours every day in front of a screen, so it is vital that the language of computer games is correct and that the translation process is as rigorous as it would be in any other format. Some games could even replace or complement text books; all the more reason to demand a professional translation.

Learning From The Amateurs

Since the beginning of videogames, gamers in Spain have joined forces to translate their favourite titles into Spanish – an interesting hobby that calls for some organisational skills, an advanced level of English, plus a good deal of programming skills to extract the text files, integrate the text back into game and make it work.

While gamers might lack the training and experience of professional translators, they have a certain advantage: they are familiar with the game, they have played it, they have seen the user interface and heard the dialogues. There is no doubt they have the context that professional translators lack.

In the Spanish amateur game translation scene, the most popular website is maintained by a community of gamers called Clan DLAN. They are responsible for organising the translation of many role-playing games, including 'Oblivion IV: The Elder Scrolls', the translation for which, most Spanish gamers agreed, was not up to the game.

Through forums, they prepare and share translation guidelines and glossaries. As in the professional world, every game has a project manager who coordinates the work and a long list of volunteer gamers-turned-translators.

Needless to say, players prefer a good professional translation than spending hours translating the games themselves. Unfortunately, many games are available only in the original language, leading to demands for translations via online petitions aimed at the manufacturers and distributors.

There is currently a campaign to get *Okami* (Capcom/EA) translated into Spanish, with a petition that reads: "Many of us have shown a lack of interest in buying the game after reading the sad news [that it will not be translated into Spanish], since we will not be able to enjoy the game as it deserves to be enjoyed." If the campaign is not successful, it clearly won't be long before the amateurs get to work.