

Yasin Steiert & Afaf Steiert



The art of video game translation

Atari, SEGA, Pong and Nintendo consoles will all ring a bell to older readers. With them, at-home gaming was no longer limited to boards, cards and narrative gameplay; companies could engage players in a brand new world on any television available.

This evolution never slowed its pace, as it exponentially expanded from 64 bit games to 128 bit games and then morphed again with 3D maps and cross platform gaming. Eventually it burgeoned to the gaming world we see today, a multiplatform market extending from phones to augmented reality devices that consumers can now wear.

The majority of the video game market originates from two regions: North America and Japan. Though household titles such as *Call of Duty*, *World of Warcraft* and *Battlefield 4* are set up to have language packs for different parts of the world, mid title games still are unlikely to have a globalized target market due to inexperience. That trend is naturally changing with the economy of the industry. According to IT research firm Gartner, the global video game industry is expected to reach \$111 billion by 2015, up from \$93 billion in 2013. This economic pressure to compete at a global level will be pressed upon startup game companies, and is the primary reason why this innovative sector of translation should be well defined and conducted with a certain level of finesse.

The language within a game can differ greatly from the language used in the usual formal documents most translation companies are used to churning out on a daily basis. Take *Star Wars: Battlefront II*, for example. The game is set within its own universe and has many different words that either have a duality to their meaning only applicable within the plot, or a whole new meaning overall. For a translator, phrases such as *Black Nerf*, *Carbon Flush!* and *I'll be Kesseled* could be daunting to transition from the English language into any other language, not to mention localize to a specific region. Furthermore, games grant more freedom to the translator. Unlike a legal document where meaning and terminology are meant to remain as close to the original as possible, a game requires flexibility in the final output language. Creative writers have often invented their own words, with William Shakespeare being the most notable example – within his works, over 1,700 new words were created that are still in use today.

When working as a translator, on a video game, film or novel, you gain power to adapt certain sections with transcreation. The meaning lies not in the words and in the phrases, but in the entirety of the story being conveyed. This is not to insinuate that a translator is to recreate entire parts of video games in order to access the target demographic. However, the translator must draw upon the material provided and adapt it in a way that both the creator and the translator see fit for the new markets.

The translator can even serve as a consultant to the client. It is OK to tell the client if you think the plot requires some adaptation so that it can be released within a region. One of our own experiences within game translation led us to translating a role playing game (RPG). RPGs almost entirely rely on player interactivity and understanding of the plot in order to move forward within the game. It often works on a multi-plot question-based system, in which players encounter various scenarios and can choose to embark differently according to their answers. When translating the script into Arabic, it came to our attention that there were a number of sexually explicit questions that would not be understood or socially tolerated within the Middle Eastern market. In that instance, it is up to the translator to advise the client of the possibility of adaptation within the gameplay. The client was informed and understood that the nature of the narrative needed changing.

After localizing the plot, text and dialogue, gameplay immersion must be taken into account. Gameplay immersion relies heavily on the dialogue between characters and the symbolism applied within the game's universe. Mistakes such as the famous "Destroy the mother brain and the mechanical life vein," as seen in *Metroid* in its 1987 North American release, produce less than ideal immersion.

The crucial role that translation plays in how successful a video game will be is the reason it remains set so far apart from the rest of translation service activities. It requires a clear line of communication with both the developers and the translators in order to make sure that the original work remains intact. It utilizes techniques that most translators are not trained for, which is a good reason to find agencies with experience in the field. **M**

Yasin Steiert has been an intern at Afaf Translations since 2009 and is studying international relations at the American University of Sharjah. Afaf Steiert is president and cofounder of Afaf Translations. She works as a conference Arabic interpreter, voiceover and translator.

To offer your own Takeaway on a language-industry issue, send a contribution to editor@multilingual.com.