Cultural Localization: Orientation and Disorientation in Japanese Video Games

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Resum: Què implica localitzar un videojoc japonès a una llengua europea? Mitjançant l'anàlisi d'alguns exemples de localització cultural, aquest article explora les possibilitats de l'adaptació dels videojocs i la feina multicompetencial del localitzador.

Paraules clau: videojocs japonesos, localització cultural, adaptació, transcreació, equivalència funcional, compensació en traducció

Resumen: ¿Qué implica la localización de un videojuego japonés a una lengua europea? A través del análisis de algunos ejemplos de localización cultural, este artículo explora las posibilidades de adaptación de los videojuegos y el trabajo multicompetencial del localizador.

Palabras clave: Videojuegos japoneses, localización cultural, adaptación, transcreación, equivalencia funcional, compensación en traducción

Abstract: What does it actually mean to localize a Japanese video game into a European language? Through the investigation of some cases of cultural localization, this essay will explore the potential of video game customization and the multifaceted work of the localizer.

Key words: Japanese video games, cultural localization, customization, transcreation, functional equivalence, compensating translation.

1. Introduction

Video game localization is the process of modifying an existing video game to make it accessible, usable and culturally suitable to a target audience (Payne, 2007). It is a multilayered process that requires localization staff to have many of the same skills as the original developers of the game, thus making programming expertise and linguistic and cultural knowledge alike necessary.

Apart from actual technical and organizational problems (issues related to compatibility of operating systems and adaptation of alphabets, conventions, formats, measures, interfaces and so forth), a challenging part of the process of localization of video games concerns the sphere of cultural localization; that is, the adaptation of visuals, sound and scripts conceived in one language by members of one culture to another language and another culture, in such a way that they seem at once fully consistent with the assumptions, values and other boundaries and outlooks of the second culture, and internally consistent within the semiotic strategies of the original video game text, visuals and sound. Assuming that the text of a video game thus consists primarily not of language but in fact of culture (verbal and non-verbal representation being, in effect, a vehicle of the social and moral background from which a video game is produced), the cultural localization of video games raises questions related to translatability, comprehension and loss of meaning, as well as to the possibility of establishing new identities in the indeterminate space of cultural translation.

2. When localization is desirable: the multifaceted work of the localizer

In video game localization, the cultural distance involved is remarkable when it comes to the localization of Japanese video games, a so-called "non-friendly localization language" (Chandler, 2005: 120-121). What does it actually mean to localize a Japanese video game into a European language? Is it possible or desirable to maintain a coherent and integral sense of the Japanese identity of the product? A game incorporates many signs of its origin, and it is not always straightforward to decide whether these themes can be localized and whether localization is desirable. In this essay, I will examine a few problematic cases of cultural localization of Japanese video games, in terms of visuals, voiceover and script, exploring the potential of their customization. An analysis of Japanese games will give an idea of how multifaceted the work of the localizer is. This work covers different fields of knowledge, from economic and commercial aspects (recognizing general dissimilarities between source and target cultures as regards ethics, morals and the age of players for whom a game is deemed suitable) to specific linguistic abilities and the capacity to conjecture the intended semantic effect of the original product.

2.1 Customization of the visual: readapting cultural signs and logos

A problematic issue in the cultural localization of Japanese video games is related to the depiction of characters, locations, explicit representations of sex, gestures and so forth. Leaving aside 'Hentai games', where sexual references are more than explicit, it is not uncommon to come across Japanese video games populated by characters wearing, for instance, accessories with a Chinese pattern perennially misinterpreted in Europe as a swastika, or terrifying leading characters humbly bowing or naively indicating themselves by touching their noses. Massive visual localization of Japanese video games would erode the exclusivist biases of a Japanese version (biases that are ascribed to cultures). However, there are cases in which visual localization is desirable or even necessary in order to adjust the game content based on the country targeted. In these cases, the localizer, apart from identifying cultural dissimilarities, is in charge of adapting the translation in terms of visual changes.

An example of customization efforts based on knowledge of geopolitical strategies is the substantial change introduced to the US and European versions of Miku, the female protagonist of the Japanese game 'Fatal Frame', released by Tecmo in 2001 (formerly known as 'Zero', Tecmo 2001). In the original version, Miku is a frightened seventeen-year-old girl wearing a school uniform. While Japanese gamers seem to prefer more child-like characters, in the US and Europe gamers prefer adult features. As this would have affected the success of the game, it was decided that, for the western audience, Miku should be in her early twenties, have western features and not be wearing the original Japanese school uniform, which made her look perhaps too young. In the localized releases, Miku wears a red shirt under her white blouse and, as shown in figure 1, her hair has been lightened, she has grown taller and her features are more realistic and westernized than the somewhat anime-styled Japanese version. Her

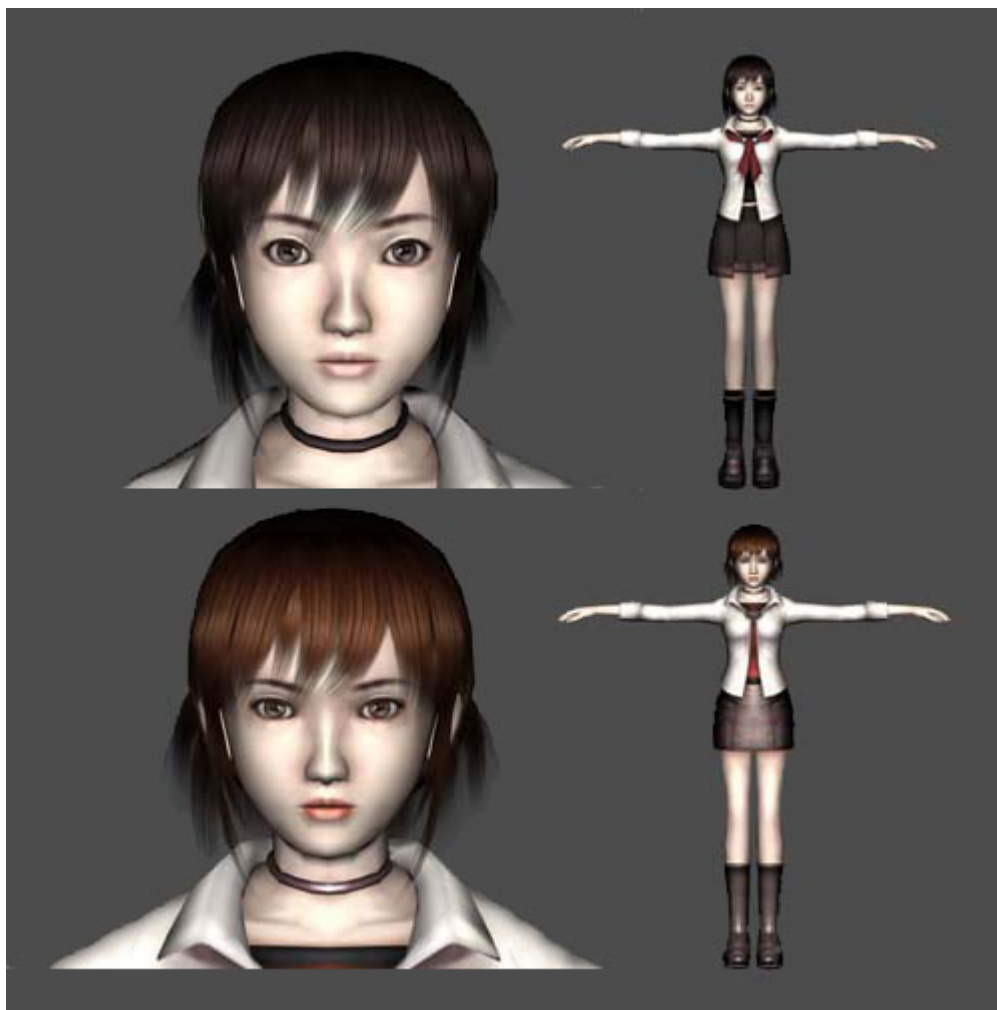speech also had to be restructured in the localized versions to sound more like that of a young adult.

Figure 1. Miku in the Japanese and the localised versions
Source: http://terror.snm hgkz.ch/mirrors/thegia/sites/www.thegia.com/news/0201/n11c.html

This cultural localization is an explicit example of cultural deterritorialization, as the 'native' culture of the video game has been deprived of its signs and logos and globalized in order to be more palatable for the American and European audience. This massive localization was possible firstly because when games are more story- than action-driven, as in the case of 'Fatal Frame', their customization is very challenging but also more rewarding in terms of copies sold; and secondly because developers conceived the game as 'exportable' and, thus, 'localizable' from the outset. The work of the localizer in this case consisted of identifying cultural dissimilarities and restructuring the script for the customized character.

There are some instances in which it is not possible or sufficiently rewarding to localize the visuals of a video game, for reasons of time or budget, and a "transcreation" or "a *quasi* absolute freedom to modify, omit, and even add any elements which they [game localizers] deem necessary to bring the game closer to the players and to convey the original feel of gameplay" (Mangiron and O'Hagan, 2006) would offer a different way forward, generating new hybrid forms of cultural interaction, as in the example that follows.

Soon after the opening FMV of 'Final Fantasy X' (Squaresoft 2001), the lead male character, Tidus, meets some blitzball fans before entering the stadium and kicking off a

blitzball match. While talking to two female fans, Tidus says that in the stadium he will lift his arms, with a gesture that is extremely vulgar and misleading. In France and Italy the reaction would not have been positive. Therefore, the European localizers asked the developers to replace it. However, even though they may have been culturally offensive, the visuals could not be changed. In order to avoid compromising the 'moral' quality of the game, a radical rewriting of the original text became a necessity with regard to the negotiation of the meaning.

American localization
Tidus: If I score a goal, I will do this. It means that it is dedicated to you!

The gesture, unacceptable in the 'real world', was thus negotiated and reinterpreted in the game world through its cultural localization.

2.2 Domestication and hybridization: acceptability of content and suitability of ratings

In other cases, it is exclusively the script (and not images) that needs to be localized in order for a game to be accepted by audiences in targeted countries. The issue is very complicated when it comes to Japanese video games, which are well known for being relatively 'loose' with regard to standards of acceptability of content. The problem of unacceptable cultural content and the fear that obscenity, pornography, anti-religious ideas and culturally subversive outlooks can be disseminated freely through video games are widespread in the US and in European countries. The questions of whether and how to censor or filter culturally unacceptable content are widely debated. Generally speaking, if game content is suitable for a universal or teen audience, it is likely to have no problems in being released in other countries. If game content is rated as suitable for mature audiences, there will be some issues to deal with when releasing it in other countries. However, this matter is not always as simple as it sounds. Localizers who translate a game script sentence by sentence might notice how different ethical and moral standards are in source and target countries, and point out the necessity to edit the game content in order to comply with restrictions in the relevant countries.

A clear example is the case of 'Paper Mario: The Thousand Year Door' (Nintendo 2004) and the group of antagonists called the Shadow Sirens. As shown in figure 2, the Shadow Sirens are three purple, shadowy sisters who work for Grodus over the course of the game. Their names (from left to right) are Marilyn, Beldam and Vivian. In the original Japanese version of the game, it appears that Vivian is transgender. Her secret is revealed by Marilyn, her ugly older sister, who calls her a 'man' during a quarrel, just to annoy her.

Figure 2. The Shadow Sirens
Source: http://images.google.com:80/imgres?imgurl=http://content.answers.com/main/
content/wp/en/thumb/5/52/180px-Shadow_sirens.jpg

Literal translation of the Japanese version
Vivian: "We'll defeat that Mario guy! 'Cause we are 'The three shadow sisters'!"
Marilyn: "How can you define us as 'The three shadow sisters'? You are a man! A MAN!"
Vivian: "Sorry, sister… It was my mistake… Sigh…"
Marilyn: "I'm sure it wasn't just a mistake. You deserve a punishment!"

The game was rated as suitable for those aged 3 and over in Japan, and it aimed to obtain the same rating in the US and Europe. After having noticed the problem, localizers changed the original text in an attempt to maintain a 'Japanese flavor' (an unusual inclination towards sexual references and a captivating intercourse among the three sisters) whilst avoiding mention of transgenderism. In the Japanese version, Vivian is actually mortified by her older sister's statement, which sounds more like slander than a naive reproach. The Italian localization created the following dialogue:

English translation of the Italian localization
Vivian: "We'll defeat that Mario guy! 'Cause we are 'The three shadow sisters'!"
Marilyn: "How can you define us as 'The three shadow sisters'? You are a man! A MAN!"
Vivian: "That's true, you are two sisters… But I am a woman too now, and I'm proud to have turned into a woman!"
Marilyn: "Hmph. And you surely think you are more beautiful than we are, huh? You deserve a punishment for that!"

The captivating intercourse between the two sisters remains, along with the sexual references, but the harshness of Marilyn's statement is transformed into an attempt to wound Vivian's pride because the former is jealous of the beauty of the latter. Furthermore, Vivian's humiliation in the original version is replaced by a strong sense of pride to be a woman.

An analogous case was found in the GBA game 'Mario & Luigi: Superstar Saga' (Nintendo 2003), which was rated as suitable for those aged 3 and over in Japan. During the epic, arriving in a strange new land, Mario and Luigi gather a huge collection of super alcoholic cocktails that, if mixed up and fermented in the right location, can produce the ultimate cocktail. As the game aimed to be rated as suitable for the same age group both in the US and in Europe, it was imperative for the localizers to forge a new interpretation of the items' structure, based on the responsibilities of cultural translation. In the American version the ultimate cocktail is not alcoholic, but just a 'cola', while in the European versions it is a bizarre blend of fictional ingredients.

The translatability of a video game is not only a matter of the most obvious linguistic differences between 'foreign' languages and 'foreign' cultures, but also extends to the boundaries between cultural values and marketing. Cultural localization is about unsettling, recombination, hybridization, 'cut and mix'; it is a process that stands between so-called reader-oriented or 'domesticating' translation and source-oriented or faithful translation. The cultural localization of video games involves the question of objectivity, neutrality and the transparency of the representation of the original version. Considering the categories of the 'true' and the 'authentic', it explores the limits of a video game as a cultural product and distances itself from a faithful representation and an accurate reproduction of cultures, attempting to achieve a series of hybridizations.

2.3 Loss and compensation: negotiating 'functional equivalents'

Cultural localization encourages localizers to search for hybridizations, but may they change the original text even when the product's customization is not required by the marketing department? How is a video game translation 'compensated' when a localizer is aware of the fact that in translating the original version, most of the original meaning will definitely be lost? Let us now consider some cases in which the localizer, in order to reproduce the same effect as intended by the original text, or in order to compensate for the loss of meaning from the original version, engages in partial rewriting.

At the beginning of 'The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker' (Nintendo 2003), Link, the male lead character of the popular Zelda series, is wandering around on Outset Island when he meets Masao, an NPC. Masao mows the lawn of the island with a scythe and suggests that Link find a sword, so he can also mow the lawn in order to find some Rupees hidden in it. The original Japanese lines for Masao were hilarious. Masao is an uneducated, simpleton peasant who speaks in a comical dialect from the southern islands of Japan. However, as it is preferable to avoid the use of dialects in video game localization, since they belong to the 'real' world, Masao's characterization would have been tremendously impoverished in the European versions, and he would have talked in the same way as any other peasant whom the player would have met in the numerous villages later on during the adventure. In a literal equivalent English translation, some of his lines would have been as follows:

Literal translation of the Japanese version
What's that? Today is your birthday? Well,
congrats, buddy! Are you that old already?
Wow! Time just flies right by, doesn't it?
You blink and POOF! There goes a year!
Why, I swear I just cut the grass in this
field the other day, but look at how tall
it's gotten already...

In-depth rewriting was essential in order to compensate for the loss of humor, even if it altered the source text. Masao was thus transformed into an uneducated, simpleton coiffeur, responsible for the 'hairstyle' of the grass of the island. He refers to grass as 'hair' and uses a

humorous hairdressing terminology (cutting, trimming, thinning, curling, etc.) in relation to the grass and his work. The lines above were thus translated as follows in the Italian version:

English translation of the Italian localization
Today is your birthday? Are you that old already?
I'll have to shave your beard too soon, then!
Wow! Time just flies right by, doesn't it?
Well, I'd better go and coiffure the lawn.
Look at how long it's gotten already…
And especially with such *highlights**!
*("*colpi di sole*" in Italian, which means both sunstroke and hair highlights)
If I didn't trim it every day, we'd live in a jungle!

Accepting a possible loss in localization also means accepting the possibility of adding to and improving a text during translation. A video game text cannot just lose meaning, fascination, humor and characterization; on the contrary, part of the work of the localizer should be to compensate for such loss. However, the extent of this compensation is not simply a matter of individual taste. The customization of the text can be considered appropriate only when it helps to maintain the underlying textual intention of the original source. In other words, the aim of localization is not to produce a literal equivalence of the original text, but rather to create the same effect in the game experience for the player as the original text sought to create. In fact, rather than 'equivalence of meanings', Umberto Eco defines such 'compensating translation' as a process geared to producing a 'functional equivalence' (Eco, 2003: 56, 62). A good localizer must generate the same effect to which the original aspires, offering an interpretive hypothesis as regards that effect and remaining faithful not to the text itself but to its intention. Therefore, "the decision about what a translation should reproduce becomes negotiable" (Eco, 2003: 56, 73).

3. Conclusion

This essay aimed to illustrate some practical aspects of the cultural localization of video games, both from a technical perspective (introducing some problematic visual representations that needed to be customized on the basis of the targeted countries) and from a linguistic perspective, highlighting the need for cultural knowledge among the skills required from a localizer.

Knowledge of language and of notational conventions are merely the first requirements for a localizer. Other skills include an understanding of game mechanics, game jargon and genre conventions, and, undoubtedly, the ability to interpret the effect that the original aims to produce in the mind of the player and to generate a functional equivalent.

In the light of the points discussed above, what does it mean, then, to localize a Japanese video game into a European language? If the localizer wants to be faithful to the original text and respects its intention, it will not be possible to maintain a coherent and integral sense of the Japanese identity of the video game itself. It is the very aspect of identity that is problematic. Localization should be understood as a general orientation; as a way of encountering content that has an origin, a place, and thus gives rise to a new experience of orientation and disorientation, new senses of placed and placeless identity. Given that the negotiation between two cultures generates an extremely intricate hybridization of cultures, in video games as well as in other media, the localizer plays an active – and hopefully self-aware and willing – part in this process.

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