Local heroes

In a perfect world, there would be no language barrier. Designers, programmers and the localisation team would work together to make localisation easy, and there would be no deadlines or budgets. This is not a perfect world, admits **Markus Ludolf** of Partnertrans, but a good localisation firm can make you feel like you're living in one...

Here in the real world, localisation usually starts very late during development. 'What's the problem?' you ask. 'What is so difficult about translating a few texts and doing some voice recordings?'

Localisation is much more than translating and recording. Lara will be British forever and Mario will always be an Italian plumber, but what about all the characters who never reach such heights? A good localisation team makes sure that your 'John Doe' becomes his equivalent for the target languages, and that one who sounds like Robert De Niro gets that kind of voice in every target country. It ensures that your dialogues have the same feeling after translation, without preserving idioms or jokes that only make sense in the country of origin. Most of all, a good localisation team will be instrumental in getting approval from the respective hardware manufacturer.

The problem is that localisation usually starts very late in development. The upside is that most assets are finished. The downside is that the localisation has to adapt to decisions that the designers and programmers have already made. The consequences become apparent in the work of any decent localisation team.

Decent sounding text does not just automatically fit the space available – text tends to increase in length when translated from English to French, German or Spanish. At the same time, it is impossible to change the screen layout to accommodate longer text, which becomes a critical issue when the problem affects the TRC messages with fixed terminology and translations defined by the hardware manufacturers. Obviously, these are required to even receive approval.

Similar problems occur when dealing with voices and videos. Pre-rendered video will only allow for dialogue lines of a certain length, and that's probably not enough for the localised lines. Ditto for time-synced dialogue. Even elements that are not restrained by space or time might raise difficulties. Texts and voices that are concatenated might be fine in the original version, but grammatical differences between different languages can lead to a mess when parts of the texts need to be moved to different positions, or the text needs to cover two or more different genders

TAKE ACTION EARLY

Integrating these considerations into the game design early on will save you work, time and money later. Failure to address those issues early almost always leads to a loss in quality.

Now you're thinking, 'Most of the work is up to me?' No, a good localisation team will be able to help with most of this, although some of them will put their helpfulness on the tab. But finding solutions should never be a one-way street. Everybody appreciates help and localisation teams are no different.

If you have documents detailing the restrictions applying to your assets, let them know about them. If you can easily change some of those restrictions, let them know. A preliminary version of the game never hurts either. Developers are usually hesitant about giving away versions and the reasons for this are very apparent. But there is nothing like playing a version to understand the game and make the localisation work.

Another problem is – surprise, surprise – time. A heavy emphasis on the development of the original version, increasingly shortened development cycles, and the growing importance of simultaneous release dates all mean less time for localisation. Ten years ago, localisation was allocated four to six months. Today it's usually

LOCALISATION: CHECK THESE CHECKLISTS

IN THE INITIAL PHASE, ENSURE...
- The game supports foreign language character sets (accents, special characters and maybe Asian characters)
- The game can handle more text than was in the original
- Concatenated text and/or audio has been avoided wherever possible
- The resources for localisation are easily extracted and that no text is hard-coded
- All hotkeys can easily be replaced

BEFORE LOCALISATION...
- Make sure the assets are final and available to the localisation team
- Proprietary tools required for text and audio processing should be available and documented
- Lip-sync audio requiring special adaptation must documented
- Concatenated text/audio that requires special attention in translation and recording must be documented
- Ensure that the scope of the work and team responsibilities are clear:
  How many words are there in the in-games, the scripts, paper parts and supplemental texts?
  How many voice files, characters, cut scenes?
  How many graphics are to be edited?
  How many movies are to be dubbed?
  What kind of audio post-processing is required?
  Who will do which of the tasks listed above?

IN THE QA PHASE, CHECK THAT...
- The paper parts already proofed in the layout are checked against the actual in-games.
- Cheats and walkthroughs are available for the linguistic game testing.
- Time requirements for the hardware manufacturer approval phase have been taken into account.
- It has been clearly defined who will fix which bugs and the necessary assets are available.

done in two months – despite game sizes growing ever larger. This means high pressure work and seamless communication, best addressed by having one person dedicated to the localisation process on the developer's side who proactively takes part by supplying all necessary materials and offering feedback. We've found having such a 'localisation co-ordinator' to be very effective.

Often smaller development teams can't spare a person to do the job, and the workload must be handed down to the producer or a designer. These people are then very busy – particularly at the start of the process – sorting out all the queries and questions that are normal for the initial phase of localisation. The main focus at this stage of localisation should be for the game content and other materials to be sorted out and evaluated for workload and priority.

It's not just a matter of using limited time well. With development getting increasingly complicated, costs are rising while the budgets allocated to localisation are often growing smaller. Again,

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SECTORLOCALISATION

PLATFORM ISSUES

When it comes to localisation, each of the game platforms has some specific factors that need to be taken into account...

HANDHELDS
- Limited screen space usually demands a strict control of text lengths
- Supply the font used in the game and the original text in its final formatting to minimise localisation errors
- The QA phase is usually short if these issues are taken into account, but pay special attention to any specific terminology required for successful approval

PS2, XBOX, GC
- Little or no opportunity for fixing problems after release, so pay special attention to linguistic QA and allocate additional time
- All hardware manufacturers require a special terminology that varies even between the platforms of a single manufacturer
- Multi-language versions heavy on audio/video might suffer from limited storage space. Determine early how much space there is and chose an audio format accordingly

PC
- Has the least restrictions, and fixes for localisation glitches can often be easily integrated in a patch
- Games heavy on audio or video might suffer from limited storage space. Again, choose an appropriate audio format early on

this necessitates effectively planning. As a rule of thumb, well-planned and mutually coordinated localisation requires one pass at translation, one recording session and two passes of linguistic QA. But if assets are changed after being given to the localisation team, the costs will automatically increase, because the translated text now has to be re-translated and the audio may need to be re-recorded. If those changes are not being clearly communicated to the localisation team, the costs will grow further, because the localisation team themselves will have to then find out where the text has changed. This is a waste of time and money.

MAKE EVERY EURO YOU CAN

'Okay, got it,' you say. 'But why should I bother? Our game will sell well enough in the US and UK alone'.

Naturally the US and UK represent extremely important markets, but neglecting the non-English-speaking territories equates to throwing money away. Germany, for example, is the second largest single market for games. It's also a market that is accustomed to high-quality localisation due to the tradition of fully dubbed movies. In Germany, the difference between good and bad localisation spells a difference in sales of between 30 to 50 per cent. To some extent this is also true for France, Italy and Spain.

Why hesitate to make extra money and an ever better name for yourself? When gamers know that the localised games of a certain developer are worth playing – because nothing is lost in translation – they will buy future products. It won't necessarily matter if it's an AAA-title or only a C-title. The name will stand for good quality.

Other related areas such as voice production, linguistic QA, legal issues and evaluating whether content is unsuitable or unattractive in different countries could easily fill an issue of *Develop*. All demand expertise beyond the capabilities of a simple translation agency. Movie dubbing would never be handled by a simple translator, and an industry that long since surpassed the revenues made by Hollywood should demand nothing less.

So when you're thinking about localisation, ask yourself this question: 'Do I want a localised version that sells or do I want to see my money go to waste with a poorly localised version?' Choose wisely, as your decision might be final.

■ **www.partnertrans.com**

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