

Difficulties of
Game
Localization in
Iran

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Abstract

The present study is a case study which investigates the game localization quality by analyzing translational errors of a certain localized computer game and enquires about the gameplay experience from a group of adult gamers of the same computer game to field-test the results. The research question of the present study is as follows:

1. Does the present game localization in Iran preserve the linguistic aspects of the gameplay experience of the original version of the game?
2. If not, then would it be better if the games were left unlocalized?

202 cases of utterances were extracted from the source text (English game) and compared to their translations to find the errors; then a questionnaire was distributed among 30 participants who filled it out based on their personal experience of the both game versions to see how they responded to the localized version with regards to its translation.

The findings of this study proved the low standards for the localization of the current game but were deemed insufficient to answer the more general questions of the research.

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List of Abbreviations

| | |
|---------|--|
| CAT | Computer-aided translation |
| ESA | Entertainment Software Association |
| FF | Final Fantasy |
| FPS | First Person Shooter |
| GILT | Globalization, Internationalization, Localization, and Translation |
| GUI | General User Interface |
| LISA | Localization Industry Standards Association |
| MT | Machine Translation |
| QA | Quality Assurance |
| RPG | Role Play Game |
| Simship | Simultaneous Shipment |
| TM | Translation Memory |
| TS | Translation Studies |
| UI | User Interface |
| VO | Voiceover |

Chapter One

Introduction

1.1 Overview

Computer games, or as some would call them video games, are a major part of what nowadays forms the lives of children, youth, and many adults of this generation. The first computer game ever released was called *Spacewar*; a game designed to work on a mainframe computer in 1962. The game itself consisted of 2 spaceships (shown by a few large pixels of the screen) at war with one another with a limited supply of fuel and missiles. Since that year the computer industry has gone through unimaginable changes and with the advent of new technology, new games have also emerged. The interest in games grew so much that some platforms were produced only for gaming. The technological advances brought in new features such as dialogues and conversations through captions on the screen which much later were accompanied or even totally replaced by voice. Of the different genres of games *RPGs* (Role Playing Games) and *Adventures* are more than others dependent upon stories, hence more conversations, voice-overs and written parts. No one can deny the wide appeal video games have had and still have over the growing children. On the other hand, the content children are exposed to needs to be controlled in order for them to culturally develop. In this regard it seems reasonable that the content of the games be translated as much as possible into our own language. Another view says that it is necessary for everybody to learn of the foreign cultures in their respective languages, and games provide an excellent chance for this end. This study aims at finding out which view is more applicable to the current state of affairs in Iran and therefore more plausible given that the game localization industry is expanding rapidly. Besides, one cannot deny the fact that the non-English versions are bringing in huge profits more than ever. The present study attempts to address a number of the

many-faced issues pertaining to the process of game localization. It so appears that, game localization departments and companies in Iran do not make use of common solutions to streamline the challenges posed by game localization.

1.2 Background of the Problem

Although most games are produced in Japanese or English, the ever-growing need for bigger markets and the globalization of the dominant popular cultures has led the developers to think about how to find ways into potential markets of other countries through *Game Localization*. This phenomenon, which is a subcategory of *Software Localization*, is the translating of the entire game content into the language(s) of the potential markets. Among the Japanese games the *Final Fantasy* series, *Resident Evil* series and *Metal Gear Solid* series have become most popular in world markets and this is owing to game localization through which the language of the game has become English. The opposite direction has also been active, where games developed in English have been translated into major European Languages (German, French, Spanish, and Italian). Unfortunately for the less used languages like Persian, the procedure has to be done completely locally and without the supervision of either the game developers or any authorized organizations. Whether this unauthorized localization process keeps the original “look and feel” to the game or not, still remains to be a matter of question.

Purely electronic games did not appear until the late 1960s. In fact, the history of video games is closely linked to the history of computers themselves (Graham, 1982, p. 36), since the same electronic computers that were made in the 1940s in order to crack enemy codes and track the position of planes from radar reports in WW-II were also used to program the very first games.

After Steve Russell created *Spacewar* in 1961 on a PDP-1 minicomputer, the potential of this technology sparked many people's imaginations. Nutting Associates released Bushnell's *Computer Space*, the first video arcade game in 1971, and, a year later, Atari released *Pong*, the first TV game. In 1976, Mattel made the first hand-held electronic game with its own electronic display (Graham, 1982, p. 37). The foundations of modern gaming had been laid.

Although video games were originally developed and consumed by the US and Japan, these video games would sometimes reach other countries in their American English or Japanese versions. However, it was not until the mid 1990s that entertainment software companies started to consider the possibilities of making fully translated versions for other countries. This multilingual effort has taken the benefits of the entertainment software industry into the billions.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

The main goal of game localization is to preserve the gameplay experience for the target players, keeping the same "look and feel" of the original. The responsibility of the localizer is to produce a version allowing the target player to experience the game as it were originally developed in their language and to provide enjoyment on a par with that felt by the players of the original game. The appointed localizers though free to make all the necessary cultural and referential changes, have a hard time doing their job; whereas the unauthorized ones simply ruin the whole "look and feel" due to facts such as unawareness of the terminology and register, of the kind of humor present in the game, of the use of puns, etc. Most regrettably this case is common in Iran largely due to the general incompetence of so-called localizers. As such, not only is the

gameplay lost but the actual cultural values of the game are put into a state of confusion. Therefore no cultural improvement is attained as the ultimate goal of localization should be. It so appears that empirical studies needs to be done in order to determine the feasibility of localization attempts in Iran and to see whether under the current circumstances where the efforts of different localizers are confused and non-unified it would be better if the games were left untranslated so that, at least, the original cultural elements and gameplay experience are preserved.

1.4 Significance of the Study

Recently, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance has paid much attention to game industry in Iran and aside from those in charge who desire to completely abolish the whole computer game entity, there are people working on game localization in an attempt to control the content of games and localize them for the Iranian gamer. This started with strict limitations of which games were allowed to be played in video arcades (better known as *Gamenets*) and continued with encouraging and later obliging different Iranian software distribution groups to localize the games overlooking the important fact that without a comprehensive and unified supervision, their attempts are doomed to fail. The result of this study is fruitful in bringing into surface the factors that are of greatest significance and yet have been entirely neglected and, hopefully, save the billions of Rials currently spent in vain.

Immersive storytelling and quality localization have to go hand-in-hand so that players can enjoy products whatever their locale. The worst case scenario is that bad localization may confuse gamers who are further annoyed because they are not able to finish the game. Even in the best

cases players are dissatisfied due to inaccuracies and/or inconsistencies. Finding common file formats, and a localization framework would probably be the best way forward so that asset management would be more manageable and transparent to those involved in the process (for instance, some of these changes have been implemented at game developing company *Bioware* with a ‘scrum’ (agile) type of management system).

1.5 Purpose of the Study

Video games involve interactive elements in text and graphics, not to mention multimodal user input mechanisms. In some cases they also contain non-interactive audiovisual elements in the form of pre-rendered movies. The viewpoints pertinent to text typology reveal that video games include new hybrid content. This, together with potential commercial benefits, offers persuasive motives for conducting translation research into the domain of video games (O’Hagan, 2007).

As stated earlier, much attention has recently been given to game industry in Iran which mostly is active in localization of games rather than making new ones from scratch. This study tries to substantiate the uselessness of the ongoing efforts. It could be useful to those interested in contributing to the localization of games by revealing the present-time hardships and the almost impossible task ahead of them resulting from those hardships. The researcher, thus, makes an effort to answer the questions in 1.6.

1.6 Research Question

1. Does the present game localization trend in Iran preserve the linguistic aspects of the gameplay experience of the original version?
2. If not, then considering the main function of games, would it be better if the games were left unlocalized?

1.7 Research Hypothesis

1. The present game localization trend in Iran does not help preserve the gameplay experience of the original version of the game.
2. It would be better if the games were left unlocalized so that they could fulfill their main function.

1.8 Theoretical Framework

Successful localization is highly dependent on whether the intended function of the localized product is fulfilled or not. According to O'Hagan (2005) translational strategies for games could be explained from the functionalist viewpoint with the game's goal (*skopos*) of recreating the original gameplay experience in a new version.

As a result, the theoretical framework selected for the present study is Vermeer's Skopos Theory. In 1970's Vermeer proposed the term *skopos* to highlight the significance of the 'purpose' of translation and the translational action. This theory deals with a source text-based translational action. The purpose of the translation is the focal point in the Skopos Theory. Thus, the translational methods and strategies are highly influenced by the same *skopos* that is aimed at

fulfilling an intended function. The translator, in turn, is required to devote constant attention to the intended target text function throughout the process of translating. Reis and Vermeer (1984, p. 119) introduce the following basic rules of the Skopos Theory (cited in Munday, 2001, pp. 78-9):

- 1) A target text is determined by its skopos
- 2) A target text is an offer of information in a target culture and target language concerning an offer of information in a source culture and source language.
- 3) A target text does not initiate an offer of information in a clearly reversible way
- 4) A target text must enjoy internal coherence
- 5) A target text must be coherent with the source text
- 6) The five aforementioned rules stand in a hierarchical order and the skopos rule predominates them all.

A game is localized to be used by a group of target culture game players. Thus, its purpose is to create the same game play experience for the target culture users, as they would have gone through had they played the original version. Needless to say, the intended function, the skopos, is the most crucial factor when dealing with game localization.

1.9 Methodology

Localization is more than mere translation. When a translation takes place between two distant languages like English into Persian, the text needs to be adapted in order to sound natural. Although some fields of translation impose very strict limitations on how the content may be

adapted, other fields are different. The most important goal is creating texts that sound perfect in the target language. A mere translation is not enough. That is, it must sound natural to a native speaker.

To achieve the purpose of this study, the game *Post Mortem*, which belongs to the genre of adventures, was chosen. Hurtado's (1995) method based on error analysis has been used to discover translational errors. Translational errors are deemed to be inappropriate renderings which affect the understanding of the source text. The following categorization has been used to identify the type of the error:

- 1) *Contresens*
- 2) *Faux sens*
- 3) *Nonsens*
- 4) Addition
- 5) Omission
- 6) Unresolved extralinguistic references
- 7) Loss of meaning
- 8) Inappropriate linguistic variation (register, style, dialect, etc.).

Inadequate renderings which affect the transmission of the main function of the source text were marked to be further evaluated. The main function of any game is to create as-good-as-the-original gameplay experience and encourage the player to actually finish the game rather than refusing to do so due to poor localization and translation.

1.10 Definition of Key Terms

GILT: refers to a group of interdependent processes that require contextualization to be clearly understood. The processes include Globalization, Internationalization, Localization, and Translation.

Globalization: the process of conducting business globally, i.e., of selling in international markets.

Internationalization: certain steps performed in advance to make localization easier (*localization-enablement*).

Localization: The processes by which digital content and products developed in one locale (defined in terms of geographical area, language and culture) are adapted for sale and use in another locale.

Software localization: changing software programs to meet the requirements of target markets (locales) and be sold in global markets.

Game localization: the process of translating a video game (help, manual, interface, and game content) into different languages.

Videogame: an interactive multimedia form of entertainment played using a special console and TV.

Video game developer: a software developer who creates video games.

Game play experience: the feeling (of enjoyment) and/or thought that the gameplay evokes in the player.