Video game localization: A contingency-based approach

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Game design, video game localization, translation, contingency, semiotics

Video game localization is young, both from an industrial and research point of view. Indeed, it was born in 1980 with Box N' Docs Localization (Chandler and Deeming, 2012) and has evolved into what we know today: an essential process to whomever would want to develop and sale video games (Ibid.). Indeed, nowadays, video games are quasi automatically translated and adapted for different locales (Ibid.). Because of its young age, this research field is said to be "market-driven" (O'Hagan, 2013), which means that market practices generally give the impulse to scientific studies. As a result, fundamental approaches still lack.

Video games are cultural in essence, but unfortunately, it is often considered as being a product to be sold first and foremost (Mandiberg, 2015). Since commercial considerations tend to take precedence over other aspects, cultural traces are often neutralized upstream so as not to risk financial losses (ibid.). Indeed, the main paradigm of video game localization lies in what we see as the "four cultural variables", that is, potential cultural differences that can lead to sale impeachments (Edwards, 2012). Localization practices, sale impeachment anecdotes and famous game designers' interviews resulted in the production of a narrative of best practices that are based on sometimes quixotic cultural differences that have an impact on the way video games are distributed (Carlson & Corliss, 2010). Notwithstanding their cultural consequences, the real impact of such practices still lacks scientific coverage, even though some studies seem to show that video game players' desires are at odds with current industrial localization conventions (Costales, 2015; Geurts, 2015 ; Ellefsen & Merino, 2018; Erbil, 2016).

Video games are great cultural carriers. Instead of considering cultural traces as translation errors, they could be considered as an opportunity to put players in contact with otherness (Houlmont, 2021; Mandiberg, 2015). To do so, it is essential to distance oneself from the current paradigm. In this presentation, I postulate a new focus for video game localization: contingency. As presented by Jacques Henriot, players need to experience contingency to adopt a playful posture (Henriot, 1969). But it is important to note that games are not contingent in essence, video games are medias, and contingency lies in the act of communication (ibid.). It is a result of a state of ignorance of the players (ibid.).

Contingency, or rather contingencies, may come in multiple forms, as Thomas Malaby noted (Malaby, 2007) in a general approach. During the localization process, localizers have to transfer and modify five types of contingencies: cultural, mechanical, semiotic, social and final (Houlmont, 2021). Inasmuch as they are at the core of the activity of playing and they lie in the act of communication, we can reasonably presume that video game localizers can affect the overall game design by transferring, altering and balancing contigencies' levels during the localization process. To do so, they use a variety of strategies. For example, I noted the presence of a strategy known as

compensation (Chuquet et Paillard, 1987) in translation studies. This translation technique enables the localizers to compensate for contingency losses. The tools I use to assess modification of contingencies' levels are semiotic ones, that is, structural, pragmatic and cognitive semiotics so as to consider this phenomenon in all its perspectives. Structural semiotics enables us to formalize the intersemiotic articulation of meaningful units (Hansen, to be published; (Barthes, 1964). Pragmatics, such as theorized by Roger Odin, enable us to determine the respective ensembles of constraints of production and reception spaces (Odin 2011). And cognitive semiotics highlight how contingencies' alterations affect abductive inference processes (Peirce 1998).

The work of video game localizers lies between a posture of reception and production. They are not developers *per se* and are too rarely part and parcel of the creation process, but they are not players either. Because of the very structure of the video game industry, localizers often do not have access to the contextual and technical information they need to localize a given game (Chandler and Deeming, 2012). This lack of information calls for localizers to be video game experts that can read between the lines of video game design. A change of paradigm in the localization field of research will provide us with a better insight into the medium and help professionals to anticipate intersemiotic dynamics.

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