White paper

Creative QA in Games

It's hard to localise games well. We all know this, and a lot of us have experienced the irritating effects of bad localisation. The problem with translation is that it sometimes fails to deliver the full game experience in another language. Unless your translators are avid gamers, and are truly bicultural as well as bilingual, there can be issues of style or locale. Beyond this, most translators are not trained creative writers, and games translation can sometimes require a great deal of original content. Dialogue, in particular, is something that requires a lot of skill and training to write.

So what is the ideal answer, and how can quality assurance help?

Quality Assurance turned creative

Many games publishers and developers employ a QA process, and for AAA titles, putting something out without full QA would be unthinkable. Both linguistic and functional quality checks are made, with language tested in-place, and menus and correct language selections confirmed.

The issue here is that few LQA processes will allow for major stylistic changes at what is usually a post-sign-off, in-game stage. If a character is coming across badly, for example, and their dialogue needs to be changed, the chances are that in-game quality assurance will be too late a stage to pick up on this, and that any testers will not see it as their role to query in this way.

A few examples serve to highlight this.

Grammar-busting…

The first Ghostbusters game, based on the original 1984 Hollywood movie, appeared during the mid 1980s. Though the game was initially developed in America by Activision, a later version for the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) was created by Japanese developer Bits Laboratory with more challenging action sequences. It also featured a new ending, which had the following (misspelled) text displayed against a black screen: "Conglaturation!!! You have completed a great game. And proved the justice of our culture. Now go and rest our heroes!".

If someone had thought to give this text a creative overhaul, the result might have been something more natural, such as: "Fantastic!!!! You've destroyed Zuul and saved the world. Now you can take a well-deserved rest… until the next ghost starts causing trouble…" And perhaps it could have been overlaid onto the final image of the Staypuft Marshmallow Man oozing all over the streets of New York, to give it a little more style.

Clumsy translation aside, sticking too faithfully to the tone of original material at the expense of the target (different) culture can produce problems too. Xenogears, an RPG, first appeared in Japan in early 1998, and was translated and launched for the US market the following autumn. The premise revolves around a young man, Fei, and his companions who are striving to reveal the truth behind shadowy, cabalistic entities which are trying to take over their world.

The game received critical acclaim for storyline, gameplay, characters as well as its themes which alluded to, amongst others, Jungian and Freudian philosophies. Taking on board the subject matter and its influences, the original tone of the text and dialogue of the game had some problems with translation. For example, these lines appear in the first US version: "Power is explosive beauty! Power is overflowing stuff! Fly young people! At the Battling Arena!". Rather too metaphysical in tone for a battle cry, it is not entirely at odds with the formal tone of the game, but it sounds peculiar in English, is overwritten, a little nonsensical, and makes the gamer stop and think when they should be immersing themselves in the game.

Ideally, the Xenogears text would require a fairly drastic re-write. A talented copywriter could weigh up just how much the text should be changed, without taking it too far from the original. The LQA stage is too late to modify lines like these, and a standard LQA test might pass this as basically comprehensible.

So the answer, for us, is to include an extra stage for situations like the above: a full, creative review of the content to give it all the natural flow and style of a game written afresh in that language.

Translation by gamers; review by more gamers

The ideal translator for a game is always going to be a gamer, and when a title has become popular in its original language, there is often an opportunity to choose translators who play the game already and know its workings well. These translators will be able to provide the most accurate translation. Sometimes that needs an extra step to turn it into a naturalistic, stylish version of the game that will give the gamer the best possible experience, however.

This is where creative review takes over. It is based on the translated version of the text, and uses copywriters instead of translators. These writers are not bilingual: they are experts in their own, singular language, and should have been copywriting for some time.

The ideal situation is to employ a team of copywriters who are also gamers, and this is something that we do at Alpha, keeping them on-tap for any project. But clearly, these copywriters are not going to know **the game itself** if it has yet to be translated into their native language.

This is where communication between the translator and the copywriter is key. Instant messages and a well-structured querying system allow the copywriter to work out specific in-game content and context, giving them confidence to be really creative with their work.

It's clear that having a Localisation Service Provider who can offer a translator who is a fan of the game, and a copywriter who is an expert in their language, is a win-win for any publisher or developer. But not all LSPs offer both parts of this service, and in this instance, it is worth pushing for free communication between the relevant parties. And game studios themselves can provide a great deal of insight and knowledge to help at each stage of the process, so insisting on open communication and a stream of queries is always going to be the right approach.

Handing over for standard QA

None of the above is to undermine the necessity for high-quality in-game QA. There is no replacement for seeing phrases in context, or for ensuring that the right language is being called throughout the game. A great testing process is vital to ensure that a game goes down well with its audience.

A high-quality QA process passes on fantastically-written content for testing, and lets testing do its bit. But reviewers and translators alike should still be available for queries during the final stage. It is only by creating open, swift flows of communication that the end-product can be guaranteed as highest-quality.

Found that interesting?

If you're not already signed up to our newsletter, email marketing@thisisalpha.com to receive lots more great articles that will help you on your journey to going global.