



LOCALIZATION WORLD CONFERENCE & EXHIBITS

Games Localization Round Table – Localization World (Monday, 9th June 2008, Berlin)

(www.localizationworld.com/lwber2008/programDescription.php#WS3)

The third edition of the “Game Localization Round Table” built on the success of the two previous events and was able to put on the table very complex issues like never before. Speakers from some of the most highly reputed developing and publishing companies delivered engaging presentations, and highlighted the multifaceted issues of the game localisation process, allowing for an exciting and constructive debate that seemed to hint towards the need for collaboration to establish best practice, and to find common solutions that may help streamline the ever-growing pressures of games localisation departments and companies around the world.

The morning started with an inspirational presentation by Andrea Ballista, who has worked in entertainment localization for more than 15 years and is one of the co-founders of Binari Sonori. He spoke of the importance of a user perspective approach when evaluating quality. Players, whatever their country of origin and the hours spent gaming, seem to have a very clear idea of the quality they expect in localised products, and they are quick to post their analysis and opinions on the Web within hours of the product being launch. The main concept proposed by Ballista, as an aid to measure quality in game localisation, was that of ‘suspension of disbelief’. There are many things that can spoil players’ immersion; functionality and graphic bugs are part of the usual suspects, but, for localised versions, cultural and linguistic bugs can be the ones that interrupt gamers’ enjoyment. It is not as easily said as done. Game localisation involves a lengthy and complex process that aims ultimately at producing as-good-as-the-original versions of the game. Putting together a few translated strings for the user interface and the manual would no longer do the job for most locales. However, the pressures of international simultaneous shipment and the unforeseen delays in the development of the game squeeze localisation teams between a belated handover and the set-in-stone sim-ship release day. While attendants belonged to different parts of the industry, it was agreed that early planning and observance of milestones would be important variables to solve this formula.

The second presentation was delivered by Vanessa Wood, localisation services manager for Sony Computer Entertainment Europe. The industry has started to realise that the non-English versions are bringing in as much (if not more) revenue, and are also improving their overall sales-per-unit figures equating to a better ROI. For SCEE it is standard to release new titles with a minimum of ten to sixteen languages for the sim-ship. Whether develop internally or externally, even a highly experienced, world-class company such as SCEE can feel the pressures of the growing non-English markets. A decade ago, only AAA titles would even attempt to release EFIGS (English, French, Italian, German, Spanish) in the

box, or create a downloadable patch. The sheer size of today's games and the variety of assets that need localising multiplied by the number of languages aimed for make for a colossal coordination effort that can only be managed and delivered on time with the expected quality if all parts of the team work in synch. One of the key facts mentioned by Wood was the quality and quantity of the information in 'the localisation kit'. Some developers do not seem to realise the importance of a good localisation kit and the difference it makes in the quality of localised versions. It really boils down to the better the information, the less linguistic bugs. Again, early planning built in the actual development of the game, and constant flow of information through a centralised, web-based application seemed to be the best way to keep localisation teams in different time zones constantly well informed and updated.

The morning session was closed by Ryan Warden, a trained programmer who has been involved with the BioWare localization team for the past four years. Warden focussed his presentation on the challenges in the localisation of RPGs and talked from the perspective of someone who understands coding and its possibilities. RPGs may have hundreds of NPCs, and millions of words to translate. Localising this type of game was always going to be a startling task whatever the context. Immersive storytelling and quality localisation have to go hand-in-hand so that players can enjoy products whatever their locale. The worst-case scenario is that bad localisation may confuse gamers who are further annoyed because they are not able to finish the game; but the best-case scenario is still negative, such as addressing a female player as a male one, because it destroys the suspension of disbelief previously mentioned. Warden suggested that probably, the best way forward would be finding common file formats, and a localisation framework so that asset management would be more manageable and transparent to those involved in the process. Warden was happy to share with the audience that they have managed to implement some of these changes at Bioware with a 'scrum' (agile) type of management system.

Seb Berthelsen, production manager for Square Enix in Europe, presented the issues and complexities involved in the translation and localisation of games when the original language of development is Japanese. Owning what is probably one of the longest running franchises in video game history, Square Enix has always delivered top-quality localised RPGs thanks to the hours of dedication of their translation teams and a rather unusual practice within the game industry. Translators are expected to play the original version until the end in order to understand the different storylines, and capture the whole feel of the game, especially for the US version. The North American version has often worked as a pivot language due to the difficulty in finding qualified translators of Japanese in the emerging locales. Although the pivot language solution is a long-established practice in many fields, it is not without problems, especially in video games, where US translators are given relatively more creative freedom than those in other languages. A further turn of the screw is when localisation teams are forced to work on non-finalised text because of development pressures and critical ship across territories. While there are no magic solutions, it was clear that these difficulties could only be overcome by embedding localisation early in the development process.

The last presentation was delivered by Michaela Bartelt, general manager for territory localisation for Electronic Arts Europe and Asia. She focused on the relevance of internationalising game code, i.e., the importance of educating everybody in the team about common game localisation issues, and how a few rules implemented early on in the development process would save a lot of time and money in the end. Bartelt highlighted that, in her opinion, it is essential that design and marketing teams, as well as engineers, understand the relevance of game localisation in today's marketplace. The internationalisation of game code has to be one of the true marks of a savvy and visionary developer, since it enables companies to easily generate localised versions, therefore allowing for their expansion into new locales. As she explained, this goes a lot further than simply using Unicode, implementing dates and measurements correctly, and all of those involved in creating video games would benefit from understanding these issues better. Bartelt concluded with an honest proposal inviting those present, and the industry in general, to collaborate in compiling a body of knowledge and writing a 'best practice' whitepaper that may help streamline internationalisation and localisation of video games.

Speakers and attendants were able to discuss in the open floor session all those questions that time constraints stop them from asking in earlier sessions. The round table seemed to be a very good way of allowing for a constructive debate and foster a sense of community amongst game localisation professionals. Organisers and participants remain committed to continue with this round table series and to take the debate to GDC events for the benefit of the industry in general and gamers in particular.

The next "Game Localisation Round Table" will take place on the 13th of October 2008 in Madison. www.localizationworld.com/lwmadison2008/cfp.php and with the support of IGDA's "Game Localization SIG" www.igda.org/wiki/Localization_SIG

The event is coordinated by Miguel Bernal, lecturer in media translation at Roehampton University London, with the help of a specialists' advisory board. For further information, please contact him directly at: m.bernal@roehampton.ac.uk