Sayonara, baby!

Diana Díaz Montón

The thin line between full (and good) localization and (not always so good) remakes

I have a confession to make: I get hooked easily on anything that is considered to be addictive: Coca-cola, chocolate, the Internet, videogames… even movies! I am the kind of person that can watch the same film 50 times and memorize the dialogue from beginning to end. One of those movies that I have seen several times is *Terminator II: Judgment Day*. It is funny that one of the most famous lines the entire Spanish audience still remembers is "Sayonara, baby!" And this is one of my favorite examples to explain localization.

In the original version, Schwarzenegger said "Hasta la vista, baby!" So here is my question, how do we translate "hasta la vista" into Spanish if it is already in Spanish? Well, you simply do not translate it. It has to be "localized," adapted and analyzed in context. This is a sentence written in Spanish in an English script. The adaptation into Spanish is perfect: While the translator has chosen a way to say goodbye in a language other than Spanish, it is still an expression familiar to Spaniards. "Sayonara" is to Spanish what "Hasta la vista" is to English.

Up until a few decades ago, movies were the main form of entertainment in the modern world. Today, videogames threaten to take their place. The spectacular systems from the 1970s have evolved into consoles, portable handhelds and mobile phones. Videogames are forever evolving and are omnipresent today. They have outshined the toys of our parents and, according to recent studies, the revolution has just begun. From the point of view of localization, there are a series of common elements between movies and videogames, although these are two completely different phenomena.

There is no doubt that Hollywood is the worldwide headquarters of the movie industry. American movies are watched everywhere, whether dubbed, subtitled or in plain English. Although most films bear the unmistakable "Made in USA" stamp, this is also a successful form of entertainment overseas. However, the American audience does not welcome foreign films so warmly. Japanese, French, Spanish and Italian productions rarely make it to North America. Then again, we are used to watching American remakes of foreign films. The French *3 hommes et un couffin* (Coline Serreau, 1983) was adapted to *Three men and a baby* (Leonard Nimoy, 1987). The Franco-Dutch production *Spoorloos*, directed by George Sluizer in 1988, and the Danish movie *Nattevagten*, directed by Ole Bornedal in 1994, became *The Vanishing* (1993) and *Nightwatch* (1997), respectively. *The Ring* (Gore Verbinski, 2002) is the remake of the Japanese box-office hit *Ringu* (Hideo Nakata, 1998). Last but not least, Alejandro Amenábar's *Abre los ojos* (1997) became Cameron Crowe's *Vanilla Sky* (2001), with Penelope Cruz starring in both the Spanish and US versions.
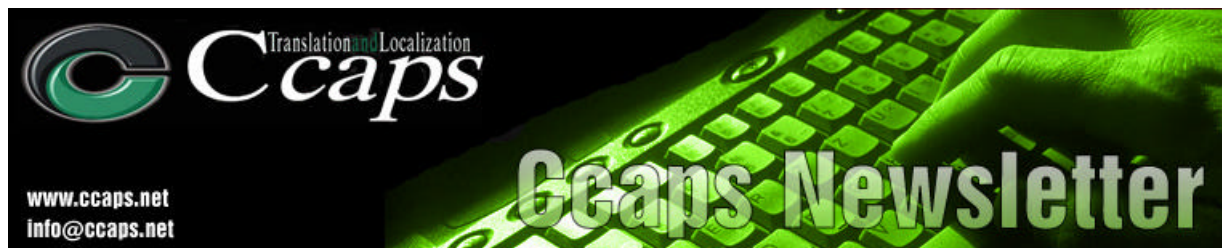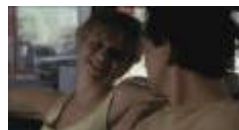
The reason why foreign films are not successful in North America goes beyond language. The film industry has a better chance of making more money by investing millions of dollars to create an entirely new movie based on that foreign flick with proven success beyond U.S. borders.
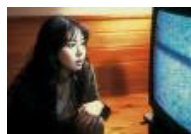
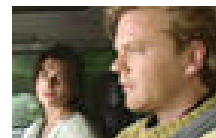| SOURCE MOVIE	"LOCALIZED" VERSION
3 hommes et un couffin	*Three Men and a Baby*
Spoorloos	*The Vanishing*
Ringu	*The Ring*

I will not defend or criticize this practice and I will not analyze whether the final product is better or worse than the original, but I have no doubt that this is localization on a grand scale, the biggest and finest example of localization. We are not dealing with the mere translation of a script for dubbing or subtitling. This is about gathering a new cast of American stars, choosing a new background that is more familiar to the public and altering the story to fit all those changes. The script is rewritten in a different language, with another style and approach. In the end, this is a product tailor made for the end consumer. However, there is nothing left of the original film but a mild aftertaste.
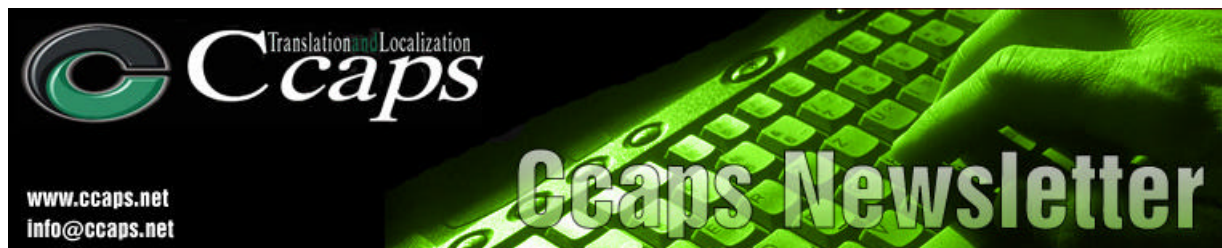
The videogame industry is predominantly American. This does not mean that North American products are better. Companies simply invest more money and, like any other form of entertainment, they export. And they do it in style. Similarly to the movie industry, developers and publishers have taken for granted that the rest of the world will welcome their games with open arms. However, it has not always been this way...

Videogames have evolved. They are no longer those simple programs like Pong or Pac Man, with nothing but dots, bars and simple-shaped spaceships. Now, they tell stories and feature images and sounds that look real. You can even watch baseball players breathe when they are standing at the plate! The possibilities are endless, the product becomes more complex and the player demands a localized product, one that comes ready in their language, with references to their culture and with characters, stories and jokes they can identify with.

Lara Croft between two screenshots from a Japanese game

The gamer turns on their computer, console or handheld system and whole new worlds unfold: fantastic stories, impossible challenges, fictional heroes that allow them to attain the fame and glory they cannot get in their daily life. The player becomes immersed in the action, and they live a parallel life. There have even been reports in the media in recent times of people committing crimes because their character was slighted in a Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG). In a product that demands such a commitment, so much concentration and promises such a huge experience, it is crucial that the environment be in their own language.
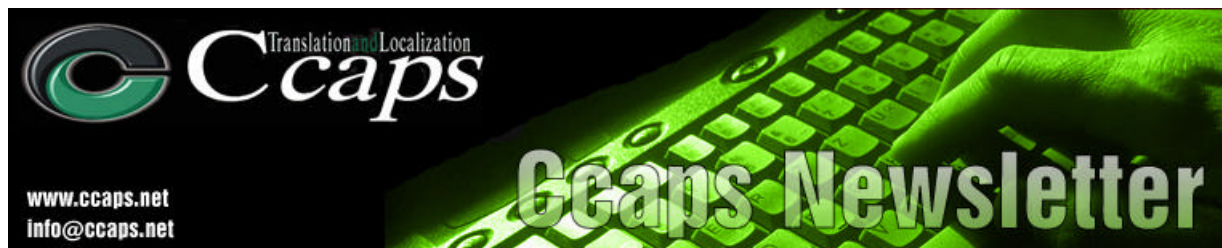
Most videogames are now localized into other languages, i.e. they are internationalized on a linguistic level: the in-game text, manuals, boxes and dialogues are translated. If we are lucky, the dialogues are well adapted, the cultural references are taken into account and substituted by expressions from the country and region, and the script is dubbed to give the product a more authentic finish.
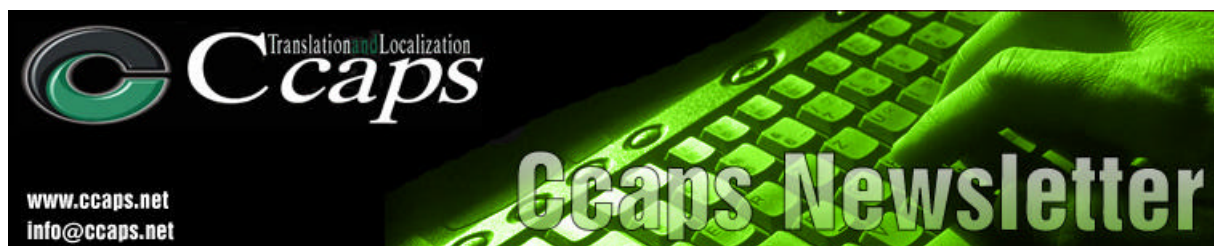
Videogames demand a more radical transformation similar to that of American movie remakes. When planned from early stages, it is not necessary to create two or more products that are completely different to target several markets. Rather, paying attention to several key issues is sufficient. There is little difference between making a movie from scratch and remaking a movie for your own audience. Even though you have the recipe, you still need to buy the ingredients and cook the pie. Adapting a game for several audiences entails having the flexibility to adjust the level of blood on the screen.

If the American spectator prefers to watch *The Ring* instead of *Ringu* because it feels more familiar, why should we think that a Japanese player will be happy in the shoes of the hero type that the North American industry force-feeds them?

Sanrio factory and Candy Candy next to Disney's Snow White and Warner Bros' Bugs Bunny illustrate the difference between famous Eastern and Western characters.

Just take a look at videogames developed in Korea and Japan and compare them with those from the United States: the differences are huge. The Asian public prefers more slender and stylish characters clearly inspired by Manga and Anime. They do not try to be realistic. They are more like wide-eyed "toys" with nice little faces. Even the bad guy is cute! American gamers love the muscle men, like Rambo and G.I. Joe, with tons of weapons and those voluptuous girls that invite the player to reach out and touch her curves (or something else). They look so real!

And not all differences are purely aesthetic. Violence and blood, coarse language, explicit images and nudity are not accepted in the same way everywhere. Where some might find speed thrilling and vibrant, others might get a headache. A complicated story with missions that demand lots of concentration can be a real challenge for some and pure boredom for others. Some players are happy to play alone at home, while others go to arcades to share the experience with friends and strangers. Some are more social and choose cooperative modes, while others are more competitive and always ready to challenge opponents. Some get into the head of the main character to get the experience and wisdom they do not have in real life while others only care about fame.

I mentioned earlier that the North American industry controlled the global market. However, this is more of a European idea that is not completely true, since Japan also has its share of the cake. True enough, we know about Nintendo, Sega, Capcom, etc., but when the player is playing, they are not always aware that the title in front of them is Japanese. If the game is in English, the consumer simply assumes that it is American, when in fact it has been localized from Japanese. Second, because Japanese developers have always tried to offer a "light" version of their product in order to succeed in North America and, therefore, the rest of the world. This is a product that has fewer cultural references and which is suitable for all audiences.

When we talk about differences between countries, it is clear that we mean more than just the difference in languages. We are also including differences in culture, mindsets and ways of thinking. For a game to succeed among a certain audience, translation is not enough. It is vital to study their taste, relationships and the way in which they communicate. The videogames that are localized and adapted, similarly to those movie remakes, tell the same story. They just have a different reality as a starting point, another approach, another background and are intended for a different audience.

The players who participate in this interesting industry (from both sides of the pond), eager to take their product to every corner of the planet will have to do their homework and surround themselves with a good localization team, one that is properly trained to tackle this fascinating task. After all, although we cannot foresee the future, it seems like we will be enjoying videogames for a long time to come.

Diana Díaz Montón started translating videogames in 1998 with an internship at EA Sports in Madrid. Since then, she has participated in the localization of hundreds of titles of all genres, for all platforms, from PC and PS2 to Gizmondo and mobile games. After working as a freelancer for major translation companies in Europe and North America, she now runs Wordlab Translation&Localisation Services, a company that specializes in videogame and software localization.