Station to Station
Game localization services

Game localization walkthrough: A basic guide to start the localization process off with the right foot

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Hey there!

I hope you're doing great.

If you're reading this, then you're probably looking to localize your game, or at least you got curious enough to see what the gist of localization is all about. Either way, I'm thrilled to present to you this game localization walkthrough, which I believe will pave the way to a successful start to the localization of your game, and hopefully spare you some pains here and there during the process.

These best practices and basic guidelines are mostly based on my own experience and some of my colleagues, and what experience dictates is that many game developers do not consider localization as a priority, or at least not until it's too late. If this is your case (and I really hope it's not!), then allow me to begin with a brief description of what game localization is and what it entails to illustrate how much of a priority it really is.

Game localization

Video game localization is a detailed, step-by-step process by which a game is adapted to a particular region. It requires plenty of linguistic, cultural and technical care, which aims not only to achieve legibility, but also to recreate a similar experience to that of the original in taste and flavor. In this way, players around the world can play their favorite game in their own language and engage with the game's content at a more meaningful level.

The localization of a game encompasses various language-related steps, namely the translation of in-game texts, scripts, UIs, web content, subtitles, user manuals, marketing material and everything else. However, translation is not the only step required in preparing content for other cultures, for accomplishing readability is just one of many stumbling blocks to overcome in the path to localization success. Technical and cultural complexities, such as language variants, character limitations, bugs, cultural references, regionalisms, folklore, idioms, etc., are also a force to be reckoned with, and any game localization specialist worth their salt can attest to this firsthand.

As such, you can imagine this process is neither quick nor simple. But don't worry, for as tough as it may sound, it's not an impossible task. Furthermore, translators are your allies! Think of translators not as a means to an end, but rather as colleagues who are integral to your team, and maintain an open channel of communication with them. Mutual collaboration between your linguist friends will lay the foundations for the project's success, so I encourage you to face this challenge together!

And now, without further ado, let's get started with the game localization walkthrough. I hope the following instructions and recommendations lead you to victory!

Planning

This may come as a complete no-brainer, but if you want to start off on the right foot, plan your project with localization in mind, and plan it carefully. Gather the resources you'll require, such as staff, budget, and deadlines, decide which countries or regions you plan to localize your game for, do intelligent, thorough research on demographics and markets, and determine what the translation will entail, i.e. what will you need to localize and what not.

Design and implement your localization strategy, so once you have everything organized you can jump right to the next phase, which will require you to perform some technical tweaks to your game code.

Internationalization

Internationalization is the process that makes a game localization-friendly. It takes place before the localization phase begins, so translators aren't involved here. This means the task of getting a game ready for localization relies on the developer.

The internationalization process is quite straightforward, and if you do it right, you'll save yourself and your team a lot of headaches going forward. Below you'll find 3 tips that I strongly suggest you follow:

1. Leave enough space for longer texts

When translating from one language to another, the length of the translated text can be longer than the source language, and if your game has small windows for texts, translators will probably find it difficult to make their translations fit within such a reduced space. Sure, we can always resort to alternative solutions, but sometimes these workarounds may sound awkward and feel unnatural. In order to prevent this, make sure to leave enough space and create bigger windows for menus, dialogues and other UI elements to allow translations to fit well.

Picked up shotgun shells.

Recogiste cartuchos de escopeta.

Recogiste cartuchos de escopeta.
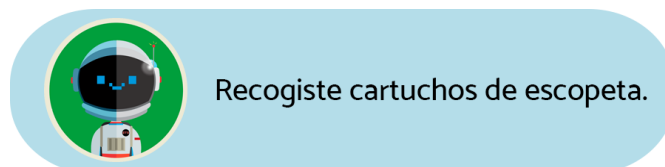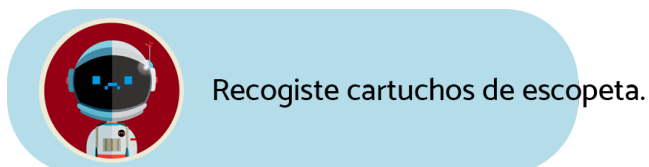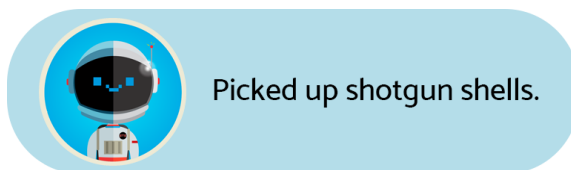
Example of an overflowing text. Make bigger windows to avoid this issue.

2. Use a variable width font

Some fonts come with a fixed width, which means all characters have the same size. The letter I, for example, can take up as much space as the letter M, and as you can imagine, the more space any character takes up, the less space the translators have to insert their translations. However, if you choose a variable width font, each character will have its own size, meaning the letter I from the previous example will be much narrower than the letter M. In this way, you'll be saving a lot of space for the translated texts.

You found a secret.

Descubriste un secre

Descubriste un secreto.
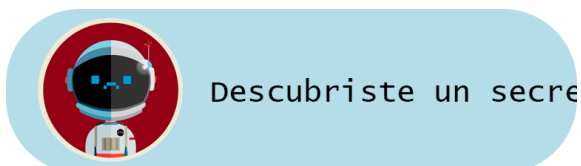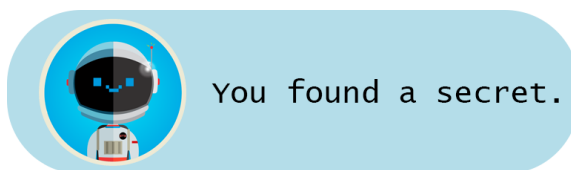
Example of a truncated text using a fixed width font. Use a variable width font to solve this issue.

3. Use a font that supports all special characters from the beginning

Whether or not you're thinking of localizing your game, the best thing to do is to use a font that supports special characters from the very beginning. Suppose you decide to localize your game weeks or even months after launch, and one of the languages you'd like to localize it into is Spanish. You'll have to deal with graphic accent marks (á, é, í, ó, ú) and the letter ñ. If the font you chose doesn't support these and other characters, then you're in for trouble, as you'll have to change it, and after you do, this new font's width will change the character limitation as well, meaning you'll have to review some of your previous texts to make sure they all fit.

Sorry, I'm running late.

PerdÃ3n, aÃ°n no lleguÃ©.

Perdón, aún no llegué.
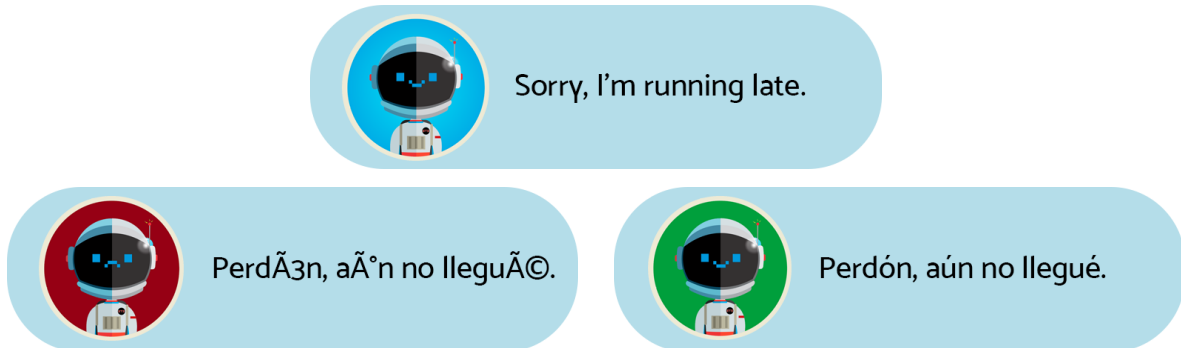
Example of a text displaying some errors. Use a font that supports all special characters to avoid this issue.

Bonus: Gender and number variables

English grammar is very rich in many ways, teeming with its own set of quirks and singularities. However, this uniqueness isn't exclusive nor limited to English.

Grammatical rules vary a great deal between one language and another. For instance, nouns in Spanish can be either singular or plural. But, unlike in English, adjectives in Spanish can also be singular or plural. Also, Spanish nouns and adjectives can be either masculine or feminine.

Consequently, in Spanish, adjectives must agree with the nouns they refer to in both number and gender. And when it comes to localization, this is a can of worms you don't want to mess with.

Let's say you decide to provide a list of nouns and adjectives for the players, or teams of players, to describe themselves, and demographics show both male and female players are really into your game. To illustrate this, take a look at the following example:
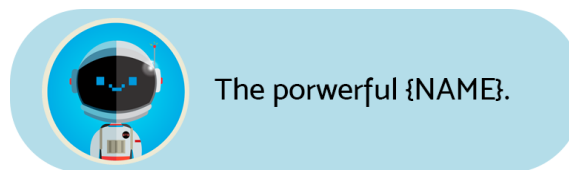
The porwerful {NAME}.

When translated into Spanish, "The powerful {NAME}" can be either "El poderoso {NAME}" (male, singular) or "La poderosa {NAME}" (female, singular), or even "Los poderosos {NAME}" (male, plural) or "Las poderosas {NAME}" (female, plural).

In this case, a possible solution would be to add variables that will replace the definitive article "the" and the adjective "powerful" to allow players and teams to choose the correspondent gender and number that best suits their description:

‹variable-article› ‹variable-adjective› {NAME}.

As stated above, this is just one example, and only one among many, designed to convey that translation isn't just about translating words. Grammar can be very tricky, and if you'd like you or your friendly translator to survive this grammatical ordeal, it'd probably be for the best if you apply a gender and number variable to your code.

Alright, you have a winning way, so keep it! Your game is properly internationalized, but before the localization phase begins, you need to prepare the localization kit.

Localization kit

The localization kit, or lockit for short, is a group of different resource files, organized in a folder structure, which contain the necessary information for the proper localization of a game.

As an example, a basic folder structure would be composed of the following:

Source files, which are the files that contain the text you want to localize into other languages. The file format is up to you, but normally they're Excel files, which should at least include an ID column for every string, a notes or context column, the source language column, and a column for each language you want the game localized into.

	A	B	C	D	E	F
1	ID	English	Notes/Context	Spanish (LATAM)	Italian	French
2	vo_dialogue_01	My head aches and I can't remember anything.		Se me parte la cabeza y no me acuerdo de nada.		
3	vo_dialogue_02	You… You look familiar, but…	The main character finds a man lying unconscious in the street.	Creo… que te conozco, pero…		
4	vo_dialogue_03	Stop!	The main character yells at a boy who just ran away.	¡Pará!		
5	vo_dialogue_04	Hello?! Can you hear me?! Who are you?! What are you doing?! Answer me!	The main character asks these questions loudly to a little girl he sees over a computer monitor in a security room.	¡Ey! ¡¿Me escuchás? ¡¿Quién sos?! ¡¿Qué hacés acá?! ¡Contestame!		
6	vo_dialogue_05	Wait!	The main character tells two children to wait for him.	¡Esperen!		

Example of an Excel file that contains columns for the ID, source text, context information, and translations.

Style guide, which is a document that provides guidelines for the way you want your game to be presented. The style guide must include vital information about your game, grammatical and linguistic instructions, and technical requirements, among other knowledge and insights that can be useful during the translation process.

Reference materials, which include useful and contextual information about your game. You can add here the game's history and lore, character bios, scenario descriptions, etc. Even better, include screenshots and gameplay videos, and any other piece of visual information that may come in handy to help the translators understand what the source text is referring to.

Glossary, which is a list of terms with the definitions and translations for those terms. Glossaries are of major importance not only to keep consistency among relevant terms all throughout the translation, but also to retain this same consistency in the translation of a game that is a new installment in an established series.

Translated files, which are the source files with their corresponding translations. Once you receive these, make sure to save them separately in order to avoid mixing the delivered translations with other files. In this regard, I'd recommend that you also create a folder for reviewed files and final files.

Review

The walkthrough is over! But before moving on to the next stage, let's do a quick review of the topics we just covered:

Plan your project. As mentioned, the localization of a game is not a straightforward effort, so do not consider it as an afterthought and instead plan it from day one, allowing sufficient time to build and conceive an effective localization strategy.

Internationalize your game. Remember to make sure to leave enough space for longer texts, use a variable width font, and choose a font that supports all special characters from the very beginning. If possible, apply gender and number variables to your code.

Prepare a localization kit. Don't forget to include reference materials and any relevant info to help the translators understand what your game is about. Context is vital when it comes to game localization, and if you provide your translators with as much information about your game as possible, the impact on the quality of their translations will likely be more than positive.

Game over! Continue?

Congratulations! You reached the end of the road and achieved the oh-so-coveted Gameloc Essentials achievement! I hope you enjoyed reading this guide as much as I enjoyed writing it, but mostly I hope its content will help you turn this rather intricate journey into a smooth, pleasant ride. Localization is the road to success and localizing your game will open the door to yet another, greater achievement: a wider audience.

If you want your fantasy worlds, witty comments, and clever storyline to appeal to the Latin American Spanish gaming community, then I'm here for you. Get in touch and let's raise your loc stats high!

Thank you for playing!