

The Localization of Digital Games: A Case Study in China

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the challenges that game localization is confronting. By focusing on China, the paper explores the uniquenesses of digital games and proposes a three-dimension model for evaluating and improving game localization. These three dimensions include In-Game Environment, External Environment, and Users. The paper analyzes both successful and failed foreign games in China in connection with the three-dimension approach. It argues that these three dimensions are highly influential and they should be considered throughout the whole game design process.

Keywords

Digital games, localization, China

As computers and the Internet become widespread around the globe, more game companies are globalizing products. Digital gaming technology crosses physical borders and provides a cross-cultural platform for game companies and players.

This paper addresses a series of challenges facing game localization. Building upon previous work that demonstrates how game localization is different from localizing other software, this paper outlines three dimensions of games and gaming that complicate localization efforts. These three dimensions are related to the role played by games as commercial and cultural products.

This paper focuses on China in order to provide a concrete model of these dimensions at work. The goal of this paper is to help game designers and marketers better understand and improve digital game localization. As one of the largest markets, China has become a popular arena for foreign digital games. While many foreign games are successfully localized to the Chinese market, failures continue to occur in many games and in various ways.

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Digital games are unique in three aspects. First, they are a cultural product, and as such they reflect specific cultures, genres, and viewpoints. The storyline and tasks embedded are influenced by the cultural background of the designers. In addition, the external environment of games is unique. There are cultural, legal, and political contexts within which game play takes place. Finally, digital games' target audience is not composed of just typical consumers, but cultural consumers. Digital games attract users from everywhere in the world and players bring expectations and judgment into the gaming experience. In a word, the localization of digital games is related to various facets and layers, both inside the game, and out in the real world.

The paper analyzes successful and failed foreign games in China in order to propose a three dimensional approach in evaluating and improving digital game localization.

Dimension 1: In-Game Environment. In this dimension, we consider a number of factors embedded in the game. These include storyline, game play, engagement, and interface.

Dimension 2: External Environment. When digital games are localized in another country, a number of external factors need to be considered, such as social issues, political issues, legal issues, ideological issues, etc.

Dimension 3: Users. Gamers form a bridge between the in-game environment and the external environment. The dimension of users requires us to consider the cultural background of players, their conventions, their game-playing contexts, their attitudes and habits towards games, and the role of games in their everyday life.

These three dimensions are measured using a variety of data sources for this case study. Dimension 1 is addressed via content analysis of a selected set of games marketed in China. Dimension 2 is addressed via secondary news sources, a review of regulations, and online gaming discussions in China. Dimension 3 is approached via secondary literature and primary interview/survey data.

Overall, localization is a complicated procedure; moreover, it is one that needs to be addressed throughout the game design process, and with attention paid to these three dimensions.

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