

“Eat Your Hamburgers, Apollo”: A Survey of Japanese Video Game Localization Methods and Challenges

By Derek Heemsbergen

During the process of video game “localization,” text and audiovisual material is translated and recontextualized for a foreign audience. This article analyzes the localization process, beginning with a brief history of the video game and its current position in the global digital entertainment industry, before moving on to a discussion of the overarching idea behind localization. The various textual typologies (or text styles/genres) of video games are explored, followed by an exploration of several approaches to the localization process, including literal translation, “transcreation,” and “blending,” among other elements. The article then narrows its focus with a discussion of challenges that are specific to Japanese-to-English localization, including difficulties with cultural contexts, acceptability contexts, and orthographical character limits in game code. It concludes with a brief discussion of the best practices for game localization moving forward.

Beginning with the 1972 debut of the first home video game console,¹ computer games have become a cornerstone of the global digital entertainment industry. Thanks to advancements in online technology and the ubiquity of smartphones, video games are enjoyed by more than 1.2 billion people worldwide — 17 percent of the world’s population.² Shattered is the once-popular notion that games are nothing more than a series of bits and beeps held together by a few lines of code. More people are gaming than ever, and games themselves have expanded to encompass a wide variety of genres, styles, and experiences. Modern game development is a progressively extravagant venture; so-called “AAA” game studios have production budgets that rival major film studios, the most expensive to date hovering around \$250 million including marketing costs.³ The global game industry was projected to reach \$70 billion in revenue by 2015.⁴

-
1. Minako O’Hagan and Carmen Mangiron, *Game Localization: Translating for the Global Digital Entertainment Industry*. John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2013, accessed April 21, 2016, <http://lib.mylibrary.com.ezproxy4.library.arizona.edu/ProductDetail.aspx?id=508894>.
 2. “2013 State of Online Gaming Report,” *Spilgames.com*, 2013, accessed April 21, 2016, <http://www.spilgames.com/press/2013-state-online-gaming-report-released-spil-games/>.
 3. John Funk, “How Much Did Modern Warfare 2 Cost to Make?” *The Escapist*, November 19, 2009, accessed April 20, 2016, <http://www.escapistmagazine.com/news/view/96227-How-Much-Did-Modern-Warfare-2-Cost-to-Make>.
 4. Timothy L. Wilson and Peter Zackariasson, *The Video Game Industry: Formation, Present State, and Future*. Routledge, 2012, accessed April 16, 2016, <http://lib.mylibrary.com.ezproxy4.library.arizona.edu/ProductDetail.aspx?id=389815>.

As games continue to grow in popularity and financial backing, so too do they grow in complexity. In recent years, there has been a shift toward gaming as a vehicle for storytelling. Modern games are robust and increasingly cinematic, surpassing some novels in terms of textual volume. Chief among these are games within the role-playing genre, inspired by *Dungeons & Dragons* and pioneered by titles like *Final Fantasy*, *Dragon Quest*, and *Ultima*. Role-playing games reign supreme as the most popular genre in Japan, the country that gave birth to Nintendo and continues to be the second largest presence in the industry worldwide.⁵ Of the ten top-selling games in the United States in the first quarter of 2013, seven were Japanese in origin.⁶ These games, rich with Japanese text and graphical elements, necessitate translation into English before making a Western debut. It is here that the idea of “localization” takes shape: one-to-one translations are both impossible due to linguistic idiosyncrasies and impractical due to cultural differences between regions. Translators must not only accurately represent a game’s original writing, but also make critical decisions about how to recontextualize uniquely Japanese themes for a non-Japanese audience.

Anime, another popular product of Japanese culture, poses similar challenges to the prospective translator. Anime predates video games by some fifty-five years,⁷ but the two mediums run parallel in that they require translators to traverse the same pathways of cultural negotiation as part of the localization process. If we are to accept anime scholar Susan Napier’s assertion that anime is *mukokuseki*,⁸ or “without nationality,” in spite of its Japanese identity, we can similarly argue that Japanese video games fall under the same category. Both are products of Japan with global appeal, but they still require a negotiation of Japanese “cultural odor” (a term coined by author Koichi Iwabuchi to describe the “imprint” a culture leaves on its exports)⁹ by English translators in order to make them comprehensible

-
5. Minako O’Hagan, “Manga, Anime and Video Games: Globalizing Japanese Cultural Production,” *Perspectives* (2007): 242-247, doi: 10.1080/09076760708669041.
 6. Jennifer Dewinter from Mark J.P. Wolf, *Video Games Around the World*. MIT Press, 2015: 319-344.
 7. Linda Sieg, “Japan finds films by early anime pioneers,” *Reuters*, March 27, 2008, accessed April 21, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-japan-anime-pioneers-idUST23069120080327>.
 8. Susan Napier, *Anime from Akira to Howl’s Moving Castle: Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2001, accessed April 22, 2016, <http://site.ebrary.com.ezproxy4.library.arizona.edu/lib/arizona/detail.action?docID=10023002>.
 9. Annie Manion, “Global Samurai,” *Japan Railway & Transport Review* 45 (2006): 46-47, accessed May 1, 2016, <http://www.jrtr.net/jrtr45/ap.html>.

and evaluable in a Western context. It follows that game translation needs to be approached not only with attention to language itself, but with a mindset that is conscientious of cross-cultural differences if it is to be wholly successful.

In this article, the discourse surrounding game localization is explored, beginning with a broad view before focusing on unique challenges that arise in Japanese-to-English translation. Taking this analysis into consideration, the paper concludes with a discussion of the best practices for game localization moving forward.

What is Game Localization?

It is useful to begin with a macro-level discussion of game localization theory that caters to a universal context. The emergent field of game studies encompasses a variety of interdisciplinary research interests, from in-depth dissection of game programming and design elements to narrative analysis and beyond. Game scholars, as well as organizations like the Digital Games Research Association (DIGRA),¹⁰ formed in 2002, dedicate themselves to unpacking the myriad components that constitute “games” to discern what makes them not only entertaining, but meaningful in a broader (often psychosocial) capacity. At present, localization remains an understudied area within this field, due in part to a paucity of scholarly works on the subject in Japan.

A notable feature of game localization observed in prior studies¹¹ is the influence of “entertainment value” on translation strategies. In order to maximize this nebulous and subjective concept, the translator is licensed considerable freedom within this space to interpret and produce text that may or may not align semantically with the original script. This process can be more accurately described as “transcreation,”¹² due to the creative nature of the translator’s work. Differences exist in the degree of liberty given to the translators according to individual game publishers’ internal policies, but most acknowledge the importance of recontextualization as part of the creative process. The game’s translator and

-
10. Minako O’Hagan, “Putting Pleasure First: Localizing Japanese Video Games,” *TTR: Traduction, Terminologie, Rédaction* 22, no. 1 (2009): 147-165, doi: 10.7202/044785ar.
 11. Carmen Mangiron Hevian, “Video Games Localisation: Posing New Challenges to the Translator,” *Perspectives* 14, no. 4 (2007): 306-323, doi: 10.1080/09076760708669046.
 12. Minako O’Hagan, “Manga, Anime and Video Games,” 242-247.

its original writer are two sides of the same coin; they are both artists who make conscious decisions about what they intend to convey through their writing with a particular audience in mind.

The end goal of video game localization, one could argue, is to provide the same gameplay experience for an international audience, regardless of their language and cultural background. If language was an insignificant factor, developers could sell their games in an un-translated state abroad without repercussion (and indeed, some consumers do intentionally seek foreign-language games, but typically only those that are domestically unavailable and text-minimal). But language is significant: to fully engage the player, modern games demand comprehension of their functional systems as well as their narratives, all of which is traditionally delivered to some degree via language, visual cues notwithstanding. Inattention, to this end, results in text that is unintelligible, unintentionally humorous, or a mixture of the two.^{13,14} More fundamentally, poor localization represents a failure to communicate with the player. It might be more accurate to say that the true goal of localization is to create comprehensible and evaluable contexts within the limited scope of each game.

Why Make Changes When Adapting for a Particular Audience?

Successful localization utilizes a mixture of domestication and foreignization strategies;¹⁵ ideally, it makes the game enjoyable and evaluable in the target language while preserving its “essence.” Essence is a difficult thing to quantify, but it more or less equates to a game’s identity — the core components that make each game a unique experience in its own right.

Edits are frequently made during localization to account for extralinguistic differences between a game’s country of origin and its target market. Video games, much like films, occupy a space somewhere between art and commercial product. Embedded somewhere in these works of fiction are ideological pieces of

13. Gergo Vas, “The Funniest (And Worst) English In Classic Japanese Video Games,” *Kotaku*, February 1, 2013, accessed April 14, 2016, <http://kotaku.com/5980508/the-funniest-and-worst-english-in-classic-japanese-video-games>.

14. Robert Zak, “15 Hilarious Translation Fails in Video Games,” *WhatCulture.com*, November 14, 2015, Accessed April 14, 2016, <http://whatculture.com/gaming/15-hilarious-translation-fails-in-vid-eo-games>.

15. Minako O’Hagan, “Putting Pleasure First,” 147-165.

their creators, which are in turn influenced by their respective environments, life experiences, and most importantly for this discussion, cultures. It is the localizer's job to assess how these cultural influences should be framed or recontextualized to make a game palatable for an international audience. Cultural references include benign representations, like depictions of social rituals, to more contentious themes like the sexualization of minors — which will be discussed at length later in this paper.

Market viability is a factor as well; aside from the creative quandaries posed by the localization process, publishers must also be aware of what thematic material might be objectionable in a given market. The Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB), a non-profit body established in 1994 by the Entertainment Software Association, assigns a content rating to most commercially available games in North America. These ratings range from “Early Childhood” to “Adults Only,” the latter reserved for games that include “prolonged scenes of intense violence, graphic sexual content and/or gambling with real currency” (ESRB). An “Adults Only” rating effectively prevents a game from being sold at retail or distributed by Sony, Nintendo, and Microsoft for their respective consoles¹⁶ For this reason, most localization involves the removal or alteration of elements that might earn an “Adults Only” rating in North America, even if those elements were judged to be appropriate abroad.

Genres and Textual Typologies

The current discourse on game localization accounts for several different translation strategies. But before a translator can choose a strategy, they must answer the following question: does each game genre require a different approach based on its textual typology, or mode of presenting text to the player? ¹⁷ As previously mentioned, modern games span a wide variety of styles. Genres such as puzzle and first-person shooter (FPS) tend to be the most action- or function-oriented. These games typically feature a brief tutorial phase, where the user is instructed how to play through text, in addition to visual and audio cues. Using

16. Ben Kuchera, “Why the Adults Only rating may be pointless and harmful to games as an art form,” *Polygon*, February 10, 2014, accessed April 12, 2016, <http://www.polygon.com/2014/2/10/5362502/adults-only-rating-pointless-and-harmful-games-as-art-form>.

17. Alberto Fernández Costales, “Exploring Translation Strategies in Video Game Localisation,” *MONTI: Monografías de traducción e interpretación* 4 (2012): 385-408, accessed April 28, 2016, <http://hdl.handle.net/10045/26956>.

this knowledge as a base, the player continues the game using their own skill and intuition. The role-playing game (RPG) and visual novel genres, on the other hand, are far more voluminous in terms of translatable assets. The primary aim of these games is to deliver a narrative primarily through written language. The player must constantly read and comprehend text, lest they become confused or unable to progress through the game.

This might seem to make a case for selecting a translation strategy based on genre, but the reality is that modern games are not easy to demarcate into clear categories. Developers are increasingly hybridizing their games by implementing a mix of features typically associated with disparate genres. Today we have puzzle RPGs (e.g. *Puzzle Quest*, *Puzzle & Dragons*), musical shooters (e.g. *Rez*, *Child of Eden*), and tactical pinball games (e.g. *Odama*, *Rollers of the Realm*). In particular, RPG elements are beginning to creep into most genres; it is increasingly rare to see an FPS (e.g. *Destiny*, *Borderlands*) that does not transparently feature avatar customization or a conflict system, resolved in part by numerical values and dice rolls. Instead of translating according to genre, it might be more prudent to take a case-by-case approach that is sensitive to context.

Translation Strategies

The most straightforward approach to localization is literal translation, an approach employed since the earliest days of game development. It is suitable for games that are less reliant on language, or have technical terminology that needs to be rendered as closely as possible to its original form. This is the case for simulation and sports titles, for example, as they have specialized terminology that relates to technical jargon (e.g. names of mechanical parts in *Train Simulator*) or rules/scorekeeping, respectively.

Another option, and the one most frequently selected in localization, is the aforementioned process of transcreation. With this approach, the translator is allowed some degree of freedom in selecting analogous representations for language that might be awkward or difficult to parse if translated literally. Transcreation is what allows for creative changes to proper nouns in a game's script, or even to its title. For example, the *Legend of Heroes* series, a popular line of Japanese RPGs, has seven games to date that follow the naming format of "Eiyuu Densetsu: [word] no Kiseki." The most recent game in the series is known as 閃の軌跡 (*Sen no Kiseki*) in Japan.

Translated literally, it means something like “Trails of the Flash,” but it was localized as “Trails of Cold Steel” in North America. Alliterations and other forms of wordplay are often subject to transcreation as well: in the racing game *Mario Kart Wii*, players can select a vehicle called the “Dolphin Dasher” in English, which was rendered as “Velocidelfín” in the Spanish version of the game.¹⁸ Transcreation, as noted previously, requires a negotiation of domestication and foreignization strategies as the translator decides what to alter and what to reinvent. It should be noted that transcreation can also involve strategic omission of certain game elements.

The most involved approach to translation is “blending,” or rewriting a game’s narrative for a target culture. While contentious and subject to a translator’s judgment, this is a viable strategy when attempting to translate a story that requires extensive knowledge of a given culture for it to be comprehensible. It can involve replacement of original visual assets, characters, story beats, and other narrative aspects. One example of blending is the English localization of Korean Massively Multiplayer Online RPG (MMORPG) *Legend of Darkness*. The original version of the game was created with a Korean audience in mind, catering to their preferences in terms of visual style and social environment. The localization team chose to effectively revamp its atmosphere and narrative in order to suit U.S. audiences, renaming the game *Dark Ages* in the process. One user, Richard Aioshi, describes it as such:

... the game is not merely a localization produced by implementing the English language. Instead, it replaces its forebear’s gritty lawlessness with a distinctive emphasis on role-playing, intricate political systems and organized religions, intertwining them with elements of Gaelic and Lovecraftian horror.¹⁹

In this case, blending created an opportunity for a game to succeed in a market that might otherwise have rejected it.

A non-translation strategy is sometimes viable in part or in whole. Non-translation is often entwined with tradition, such as the longstanding Japanese naming conventions of special moves in the *Street Fighter* series.²⁰ Translators may also choose to leave mythological references intact regardless of target language, like the

18. Alberto Fernández Costales, “Exploring Translation Strategies in Video Game Localisation,” 385-408.

19. Beth E. Kolko and Alexander Thayer, “Localization of Digital Games: The Process of Blending for the Global Games Market,” *Technical Communication* 51, no. 4 (2004): 477-488, accessed April 26, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy4.library.arizona.edu/stable/43092358>.

20. Alberto Fernández Costales, “Exploring Translation Strategies in Video Game Localisation,” 385-408.

names of the myriad demons and spirits in the polytheistic universe of *Shin Megami Tensei*—which, incidentally, was popularized in North America under its original Japanese name, 真 • 女神転生 (*Shin Megami Tensei*), rather than “True Goddess Reincarnation.” Non-translation, at odds with blending, is a method for preserving the original “flavor” of certain culturally-bound characteristics possessed by a game.

A final element that does not fit into any of the above categories is the translator’s responsibility to be aware of meta-textual references.²¹ As video games continue to grow as a creative medium, they leave behind a legacy of celebrated stories and characters; the long-running *The Legend of Zelda* series celebrated its thirtieth anniversary in February 2016, for instance.²² As game franchises expand, so do the repositories of lore and terminology that are unique to each universe. Translation that draws upon knowledge of these established conventions is effective in meeting the expectations of seasoned consumers.

Localization occasionally involves other functional alterations to a game, such as increasing or decreasing its difficulty level to suit a given market.²³ These considerations, while deserving of further inquiry, are beyond the scope of this paper.

What Challenges are Specific to Localization of Japanese Games? Cultural Contexts

The first key area that prompts creative changes in localization relates to the navigation of cultural contexts that have the potential to bewilder a foreign audience. Many games made in Japan feature distinctly Japanese themes and references that need to be unpacked as a part of the localization process. A game might be set in a Japanese high school, where students make constant reference to hierarchical relationships (*Persona 4*), or base its narrative premise around a fantastical version of the idol industry, which turns young pop musicians into commercial products (*Tokyo Mirage Sessions*). Perhaps a game’s fictional religion draws upon aspects of Shintoism (Yuna’s rite of “sending” in *Final Fantasy X*), or its setting is an alternate-

21. Ibid.

22. Mike Epstein, “10 Video Games That Are Going to Make You Feel Old In 2016,” *Digital Trends*, January 12, 2016, accessed May 1, 2016, <http://www.digitaltrends.com/gaming/video-game-anniversaries-2016/>.

23. Rebecca Carlson and Jonathan Corliss, “Imagined Commodities: Video Game Localization and Mythologies of Cultural Difference,” *Games and Culture* 6, no. 1 (2011): 61-82, accessed April 13, 2016, doi: 10.1177/1555412010377322

world version of a real-life Japanese locale (the streets of Shibuya in *The World Ends With You*). The Western player is unlikely to approach these references with the same familiarity as the Japanese player, so the translator must decide how to reframe them for maximum intelligibility and entertainment value.

In the 1990s, when the video game industry was taking tentative steps towards its adolescence, there was a prevailing attitude that dichotomized the American and Japanese markets into entirely separate, seemingly incompatible, cultural spheres. Anything deemed “too Japanese” was a risk, and publishers went to great lengths in their efforts to Westernize games. A notable example was the original localization of *Revelations: Persona* in 1996. An interview with former Atlus marketing manager Gail Salamanca reveals the company’s concerns at the time. “The localization staff was really concerned about the game being too Japanese and alienating Western consumers,” Salamanca said. “So a majority of the references to Japan and Japanese culture were either altered or changed.”²⁴ The game, set in a Japanese high school, followed a group of characters who fight against demonic forces by summoning supernatural manifestations of their personalities called “Personas.” However, the American version of the game expunges much of what makes it identifiably Japanese by Westernizing the names of characters and the places they visit. One character, Masao “Mark” Inaba, even had his ethnicity changed from Japanese to African-American.²⁵ The game was later retranslated and re-released in 2009. The new localization, informed by a shift in Western attitudes towards Japanese culture, reverted the altered elements to their original forms. In this case, blending has given way to a transcreational localization approach. We can see evidence of this evolution in translation strategy within that same series by examining *Persona 4*, released in 2008. Similar to its predecessors, *Persona 4* is set in a fictional Japanese high school and follows a group of super-powered teenagers as they solve a supernatural murder mystery. Many elements of the game’s setting are unmistakably bound to its culture: as the game’s protagonist, the player studies

24. Kimberley Wallace, “Perfecting Persona: How Atlus USA Bloomed,” *Game Informer*, September 17, 2013, accessed April 20, 2016, <http://www.gameinformer.com/b/features/archive/2013/09/17/perfecting-persona-how-atlus-usa-bloomed.aspx?PageIndex=2>.

25. Jeriaska, “Interview: Atlus Talks Translating Shin Megami Tensei,” *Gamasutra*, August 13, 2009, accessed April 20, 2016, http://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/115731/Interview_Atlus_Talks_Translating_Shin_Megami_Tensei_Persona_for_PSP.php.

for exams, works a part-time job folding *origami* cranes, and watches fireworks at a *tanabata* festival. But instead of shying away from its inherent Japaneseness, the localization team chose to embrace the game's identity. Honorifics such as *senpai* are retained in the English script, as well as references to Japanese food, social rituals, and places. Far from alienating its American audience, the game was a resounding success, winning a plethora of awards and going on to spawn a number of spin-off titles.²⁶

We can observe a similar phenomenon by examining the *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney* series. Released in 2005, *Phoenix Wright* stars a lawyer of the same name who defends seemingly un-defendable clients who have been convicted of murder. The proceedings are often humorous and rely heavily on puns, cultural references, and other comical situations to amuse the player. The Japanese version of the game clearly establishes that it is set in Japan, but the American version was altered to situate the action in Los Angeles — a notion that is increasingly implausible, as the series now spans six main entries and three spin-offs that are heavily steeped in Japanese culture.²⁷ Its obvious Japanese-ness, dismantled and at odds with an English script that says otherwise, is frequently satirized by fans.²⁸ In spite of this, the series has generally been well received,²⁹ and shows that a domestication approach is viable in some contexts.

Acceptability Contexts

There exists a different standard in Japanese culture for acceptability of themes that relate to sexuality, violence, and religion. A derisive attitude towards homosexuality, common in Japan, is met with consternation by an increasingly large segment of the American population. Conversely, exploitation of Christian imagery was considered taboo in Japan-developed video games released in America throughout the 1990s. These societal attitudes, subject to change over time, inform the decisions translators make when localizing games for an American audience.

26. Kimberley Wallace, "Perfecting Persona."

27. Bob Mackey, "Expert Witness: An Interview with Alex Smith, the Writer Behind Ace Attorney's English Debut," *USGamer*, June 23, 2015, accessed April 24, 2016, <http://www.usgamer.net/articles/expert-witness-an-interview-with-alex-smith-the-writer-behind-ace-attorneys-english-debut>.

28. Katie Tiedrich, "Culture Schlock," *Awkward Zombie*, December 9, 2013, accessed April 12, 2016, <http://www.awkwardzombie.com/index.php?comic=120913>.

29. Bob Mackey, "Expert Witness."

Sexuality in gaming is a sensitive topic, and one that has historically been subject to censure by conservative critics. In 2008, a Fox News anchor went so far as to falsely accuse sci-fi RPG *Mass Effect* of being a “sex simulator,” creating a short-lived “Sexbox” scandal that solidified the topic’s contentiousness.³⁰ Cameron Lee, a producer at *Mass Effect* developer Bioware, argues that expression of sexuality in games need not be so stigmatized, calling it a mode of fantasy fulfillment:

Your fantasies may be different to mine in terms of gender, sexuality, race, class, how you look, all these things,” Lee stated at Gamescom in Germany. “We’re not going to force you to be a fixed character, that you have to be this male guy that runs through the world and looks a certain way, walks a certain way.”³¹

While sex is similarly taboo in Japan, the country has a far more lenient attitude towards one particularly problematic mode of engaging in sexual fantasy: the sexualization of minors. Japan’s manga (comic) industry, which generates around \$3.6 billion in sales annually,³² is replete with material that features young girls engaged in sexually explicit acts. Japan was also the last country in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to outlaw possession of child pornography, which did not happen until 2014.

While mainstream video games are by and large free of explicit sexual material, highly eroticized female characters are frequently depicted in Japanese video games. This phenomenon has its roots in the rising popularity of *moe*. *Moe*, “a neologism used to describe a euphoric response to fantasy characters of representations of them,”³³ is an attribute possessed by “pure,” innocent-looking girls who elicit a feeling of adoration and protectiveness from their admirers. There is debate over whether *moe* can be conflated with *lolicon*, or lolita complex — a sexual interest in young girls as they are depicted in manga — but games are undeniably featuring *moe* characters as a selling point in the modern market.

30. Seth Schiesel, “Author Faults a Game, and Gamers Flame Back,” *The New York Times*, January 26, 2008, accessed April 16, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/26/arts/television/26mass.html>.

31. Rhuaridh Marr, “Bioware Producer: Gender and Sexuality in Games Shouldn’t be an Issue,” *MetroWeekly*, August 15, 2014, accessed April 16, 2016, <http://www.metroweekly.com/2014/08/bioware-producer-gender-and-sexuality-in-games-shouldnt-be-an-issue/>.

32. James Fletcher, “Why hasn’t Japan banned child-porn comics?” *BBC News*, January 7, 2016, accessed April 16, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-30698640>.

33. Patrick W. Galbraith, “Moe: Exploring virtual potential in post-millennial Japan,” *Electronic Journal of Contemporary Japanese Studies* 9, no. 3, October 31, 2009, accessed April 16, 2016, <http://www.japanesestudies.org.uk/articles/2009/Galbraith.html>.

A number of recent high profile video games have featured young looking, stereotypically moe characters in provocative clothing, which has prompted some localization teams to tone down their overt sexuality before releasing the games in North America. *Xenoblade Chronicles X*, a sci-fi RPG in which the player works to colonize an alien world after humanity is forced to flee from Earth, features a character named Lin Lee Koo. Lin Lee is thirteen-years-old in the Japanese version, but her age was increased to fifteen for the North American release. Furthermore, the player can customize her appearance with a number of outfits, one of which is a two-piece bathing suit that reveals the underside of her breasts, as well as much of her pubic area. In the international version of the game, this swimsuit was replaced with a more conservative tank top and shorts.³⁴ The Japanese version of *Xenoblade Chronicles X* also features a character creation tool with an option to control the size of the player character's breasts. This was removed for the North American release.³⁵ *Bravely Default*, an RPG featuring four heroes on a quest to revitalize their dying world, received similar treatment in 2014. The Japanese version includes revealing swimsuits for two of the main female characters, both of whom are underage teenagers. The North American release features slightly more conservative swimsuits and raises both girls' ages to eighteen.³⁶ In both of these cases, the de-sexualization of the characters in question speaks less of a righteous impulse to deny consumers unedited material, and more of an awareness of the inappropriate nature of sexualized minors in Western culture.

Homosexuality is another taboo topic in Japan that is generally represented in media with less dignity than it is in North America. As Western culture moves to normalize homosexuality as a valid lifestyle, Japanese culture continues to repress it or conflate it with being transgender.³⁷ Same-sex attraction was the punchline of a joke in *Fire Emblem Fates*, a strategy RPG that contains ancillary relationship-

34. Tom Phillips, "Nintendo Censors Skimpy Xenoblade Chronicles X Costumes in West," *Eurogamer*, February 11, 2015, accessed April 16, 2016, <http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2015-11-02-nintendo-censors-skimpy-xenoblade-chronicles-x-costumes-in-west-report>.

35. Martin Robinson, "Xenoblade Chronicles X's English Version Ditches Breast Slider," *Eurogamer*. November 16, 2015, accessed April 16, 2016, <http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2015-11-16-xenoblade-chronicles-xs-english-version-ditches-breast-slider>.

36. Luke Karmali, "Bravely Default Censored for Western Release," *IGN*, January 3, 2014, accessed April 16, 2016, <http://www.ign.com/articles/2014/01/03/bravely-default-censored-for-western-release>.

37. Mark J. McLelland, "Male Homosexuality and Popular Culture in Modern Japan," *Intersections* 1, no. 3, January 2000, accessed April 25, 2016, <http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue3/mcllland2.html>.

building elements. The player can pair characters together and utilize their affinities for one another as a tactical advantage in battle. One such female character, Soleil, indicates an exclusive interest in other women. However, the player, if controlling a male character, can give Soleil a magic potion that causes her to see men as women. This tricks Soleil into falling in love with the player character, and the two enter into a relationship.³⁸ This scene was rewritten in the North American version of the game for its potential interpretation as a parallel for gay conversion therapy, or even rape by way of removing Soleil's ability to consent. The localized version retains Soleil's affection for women, but characterizes her as ostensibly pansexual.³⁹ This revision sparked a flurry of outrage and discourse, with critics lambasting Nintendo for policing the content of their games.⁴⁰ An alternate take by localization editor Nich Maragos, who worked on *Fire Emblem Fates*, is that games should be striving for inclusivity and listening to marginalized voices.⁴¹ While this localization received a mixed response, it proves that cultural attitudes towards this subject do indeed differ and are of worthy consideration during the translation process.

Religious imagery was especially susceptible to censorship in the early days of localization. Nintendo has a history of avoiding religious subject matter, and even included a relevant clause in its policy for game developers in 1988, forbidding "symbols that are related to any type of racial, religious, nationalistic, or ethnic group, such as crosses, pentagrams, God, Gods (Roman mythological gods are acceptable), Satan, hell, [and] Buddha."⁴² The company removed crosses from games like *Castlevania* and *Earthbound*, while churches in *Dragon Warrior* were secularized into "clinics." One game, *ActRaiser*, put the players in the role of God, who walks the earth in the form of a human warrior in order to vanquish demons. The English

38. Nathan Grayson, "Nintendo Removes Controversial Scene From English Version Of Fire Emblem Fates," *Kotaku*, January 21, 2016, accessed April 16, 2016, <http://kotaku.com/nintendo-removes-controversial-scene-from-english-versi-1754349779>.

39. Xkan, "Fire Emblem Fates: Soleil's Localized Support Conversation (Full)," *Kantopia*, February 17, 2016, accessed April 16, 2016, <https://kantopia.wordpress.com/2016/02/17/fire-emblem-fates-soleils-localized-support-conversation-full/>.

40. Erik Kain, "'Fire Emblem Fates' and The Curious Case Of Localization," *Forbes*, February 29, 2016, accessed April 16, 2016, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/erikkain/2016/02/29/fire-emblem-fates-and-the-curious-case-of-localization-gone-terribly-wrong/>.

41. "Nich Maragos - #roomforeveryone," *YouTube*, November 5, 2014, accessed April 16, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dRyG5_HSSy4.

42. John Markley, "A Look at the Religious Censorship in Nintendo of America's Games," *The Escapist*, November 23, 2015, accessed April 17, 2016, <http://www.escapistmagazine.com/articles/view/>

version of the game changes God into a more spiritually ambiguous being known as “the Master.”⁴³ Nintendo required these alterations in an effort to maintain a family-friendly, non-denominational image. The Nintendo of today is more permissive: *Shin Megami Tensei IV*, the latest title in a series rife with religious imagery, arrived unedited in North America and enjoyed considerable commercial success.⁴⁴ Religion appears to be an area that requires less localization than others in the current market.

Character Limits

Japanese-to-English localization is profoundly affected by orthographical differences between the two languages. A challenge manifests on two fronts: first, the software itself must permit conversion of double-byte encoded characters (used in Japanese script) to single-byte English characters.⁴⁵ This means that text boxes must be expandable in order to accommodate the spatial needs of wider English letters. Second, and more important where translation is concerned, is the need for localized text to fit into these strict spatial limitations. This challenge is evident in a widely-publicized image comparing the character count of the *Legend of Heroes* game series to the Wheel of Time book series. The creator of the image provided an example sentence, “エメラスの発見により高度な文明が誕生” (*emerasu no hakken ni yori koudona bunmei ga tanjou*), translated as “with the discovery of Emelas, an advanced civilization was born.”⁴⁶ The Japanese text contains eighteen characters; in comparison, the English text requires sixty-three characters — three and a half times as many as the Japanese — to communicate the same idea. Localization must employ a transcreational approach in order to fit English text into existing space, as the localization team did for weapon and armor names in *Final Fantasy X*,⁴⁷ or engineer a solution that creates additional room.

features/15045-Nintendo-of-America-Used-Religious-Censorship-to-Avoid-Controver.

43. Mike Fahey, “Losing Our Religion,” *Kotaku*, April 5, 2010, accessed April 17, 2016, <http://kotaku.com/5509744/losing-our-religion>.
44. Sal Romano, “Shin Megami Tensei IV sales top 600,000,” *Gematsu*, July 26, 2015, accessed April 17, 2016, <http://gematsu.com/2015/07/shin-megami-tensei-iv-sales-top-600000>.
45. Carmen Mangiron Hevian, “Video Games Localisation,” 306-323.
46. @endlesshistory, “This is what happens when I lose my temper and I’m super...” *Twitpic*, December 28, 2012, accessed April 12, 2016, <http://twitpic.com/bq5of9>.
47. Alberto Fernández Costales, “Exploring Translation Strategies in Video Game Localisation,” 385-408.

What are the Best Practices for Game Localization?

Given the current discourse on the subject, some conclusions can be reached regarding the best practices for game localization. First, the hybrid nature of the modern video game rejects genre-based translation as a viable approach. Instead, localization should use a context-sensitive approach that accounts for cultural differences, character limits, and, when appropriate, varying standards of acceptability for contentious material. This is not to say that translators should be given *carte blanche* to censor material that they find objectionable; rather, their translation should be done with an awareness of the social progress being made in their target market. There is a fine line between compromising an artist's original vision and recognizing potentially problematic thematic material that must be negotiated on a case-by-case basis. This lends credence to veteran localization editor Nich Maragos' assertion that localization can only benefit from incorporating more inclusive practices.

In regard to literal translation, problems arise when this approach is used for games that tell complex stories, depict foreign cultures, or otherwise necessitate creativity on the part of the translator. Meaning is lost when cultural references are translated without an awareness of the target audience's familiarity with those concepts. Humor in particular is poorly served by literal translation, as jokes require an understanding of how linguistic and social norms are being flouted in a given context to land effectively. Furthermore, because we live in an increasingly globalized world, it is less necessary to make changes that erase cultural idiosyncrasies. A mixture of domestication and foreignization strategies is advocated to preserve the "flavor" of distinctly Japanese material, while making it approachable for Western audiences; the localization of *Persona 4* is an excellent example of this approach. It is also extremely valuable for the localizer to possess knowledge of meta-textual references. Extensive familiarity with existing lore assists the translator in maximizing consistency between games in the same series, as well as helps them make decisions about how to approach difficult themes by using context in tandem with their knowledge as a guide. Meta-textual knowledge also includes an awareness of existing conventions, such as non-translation of specific terms where appropriate, that ensures players' expectations are met.

While the author has made best efforts to be exhaustive in his research, the limited scope of this article must be acknowledged. Future research could take sales data into account to look for trends that might be affected by localization choices. This article focuses on localization of Japanese games for the Western market; the opposite perspective, of Western games in the Japanese market, is worth examining to see what differences exist in Japanese localization practices and acceptability standards. Finally, future research should examine differences in the localization process between the United States and other English-speaking cultures, such as Europe and Australia.

Author Biography

A native of Tucson, Arizona, Derek Heemsbergen graduated from the University of Arizona in spring 2016 with a B.A. in both linguistics and East Asian studies with an emphasis on Japanese cultural studies. His key areas of research interest include the intersection of language, gender, and identity, as well as the emerging field of video game studies. He has been critiquing video games in a professional capacity for over six years at online gaming publication RPGFan.com, and recently began working in the industry as a localization editor.