[creative words]

Step up your game

A complete guide on videogame localization, its challenges and opportunities

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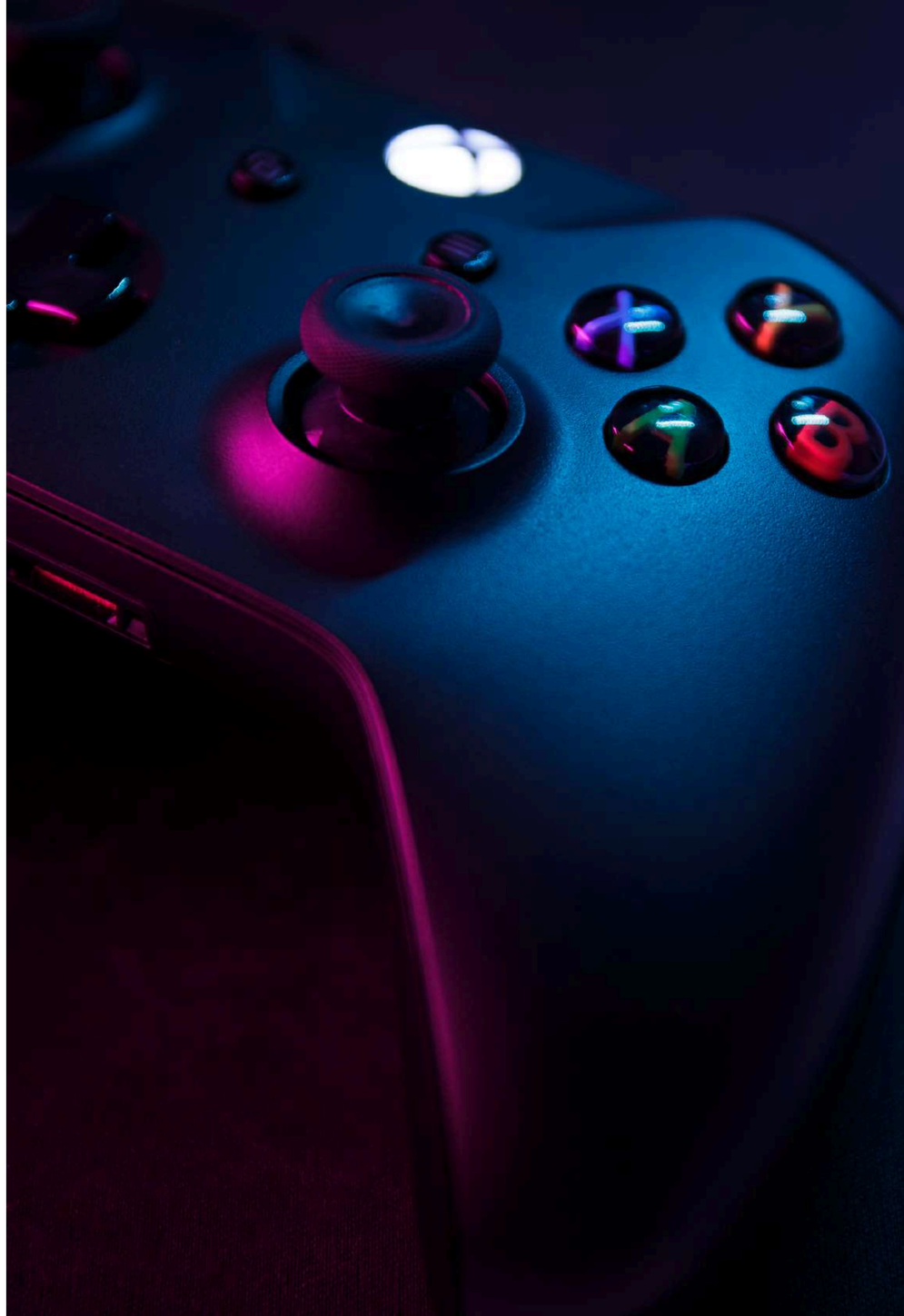

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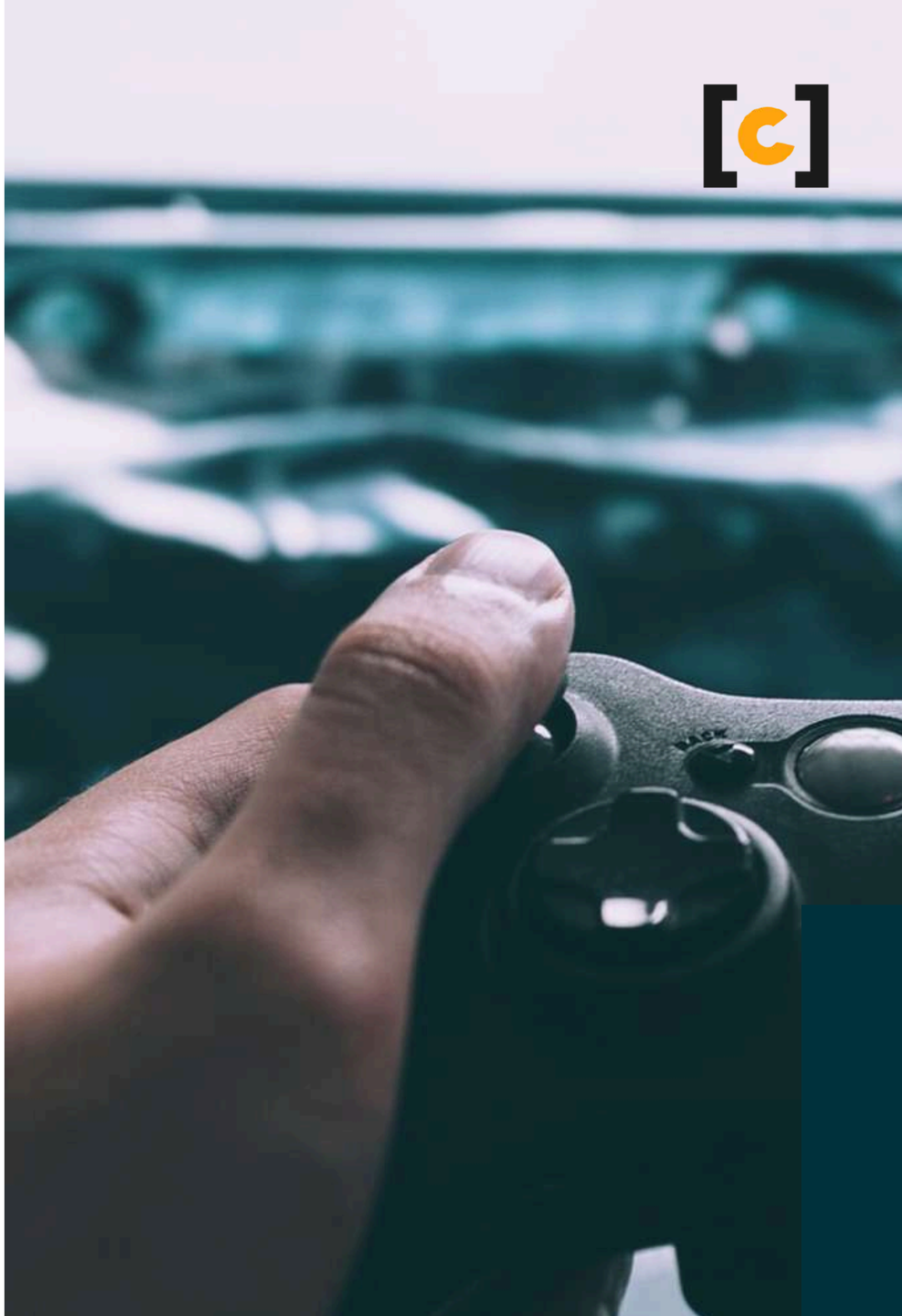
Are videogames big?

Yes. Yes they are. Everybody plays videogames. Well, a lot of people do. We're not in the 80's anymore. The stereotypical "nerdy" hobby has now gone global, undoubtedly helped by the rise of the mobile market. Videogames are a truly global phenomenon. People are not shy to apply the term blockbuster to the latest new title by AAA companies, and, on the other side of the coin smaller independent studios are finding fertile ground to thrive and to throw new, groundbreaking ideas into the mix. Some people still associate videogames with dusty, smoky rooms where a big machine emitting beeps and boops was surrounded by people frantically feeding it coins and trying to let a round yellow ball with a big mouth escape from ghosts represented by a handful of pixels.

Today some games go beyond the boundaries of 3D graphics, photorealism, music, sound design, VFX design, but also have a global reach, considered akin to real sports. These games offer a continuous flow of updates and additional components, thus keeping the game always fresh and balanced, thanks to developers who add content in an ongoing way.

There's an aspect that has gained increasing importance in the gaming industry, and it's the one that probably interests us more: the textual aspect. The quality of text in video games has skyrocketed, to the extent that great writers have poured into the gaming industry to lend their pen to these great products. And it's clear that where there's text, there's also translation.



According to Newzoo, 2.1 billion people play videogames in the world.Of these, 26,2 million people play videogames just in Italy.

The videogame industry is a 138 billion dollars affair, making it the biggest multimedia industry sector. That's right, it's worth more than movies

According to Nimdzi, game localization is a 330 million dollar market, projected to grow 30% by 2021. Keywords International and Pole to Win dominate the landscape.

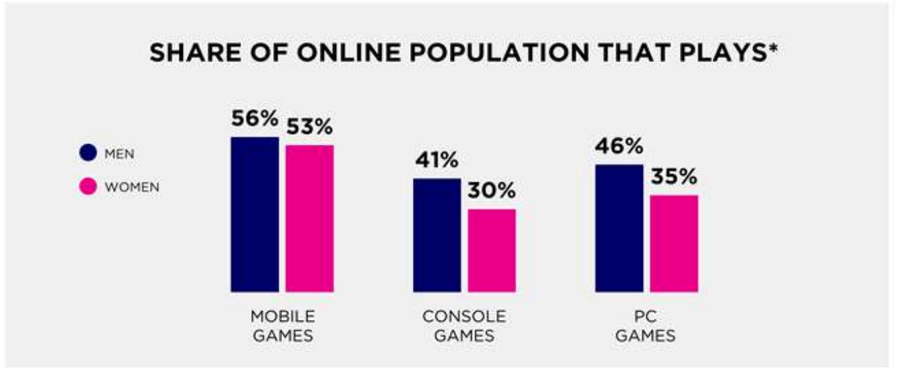
A little perspective: a game released in 1996, Crash Bandicoot, cost 1.6 million dollars to develop, while 2013's Grand Theft Auto V cost 265 million dollars. The latter went and generated 6 billion dollars in revenue, making it the most profitable standalone multimedia product ever.

Space Invaders (1978), had (we're being generous), ten written words, two of which were the now eponymous "Game Over". Today, games can reach astonishingly high word-counts. Baldur's Gate II (2001)'s script is more than 1.000.000 words long

Is videogame localization important?

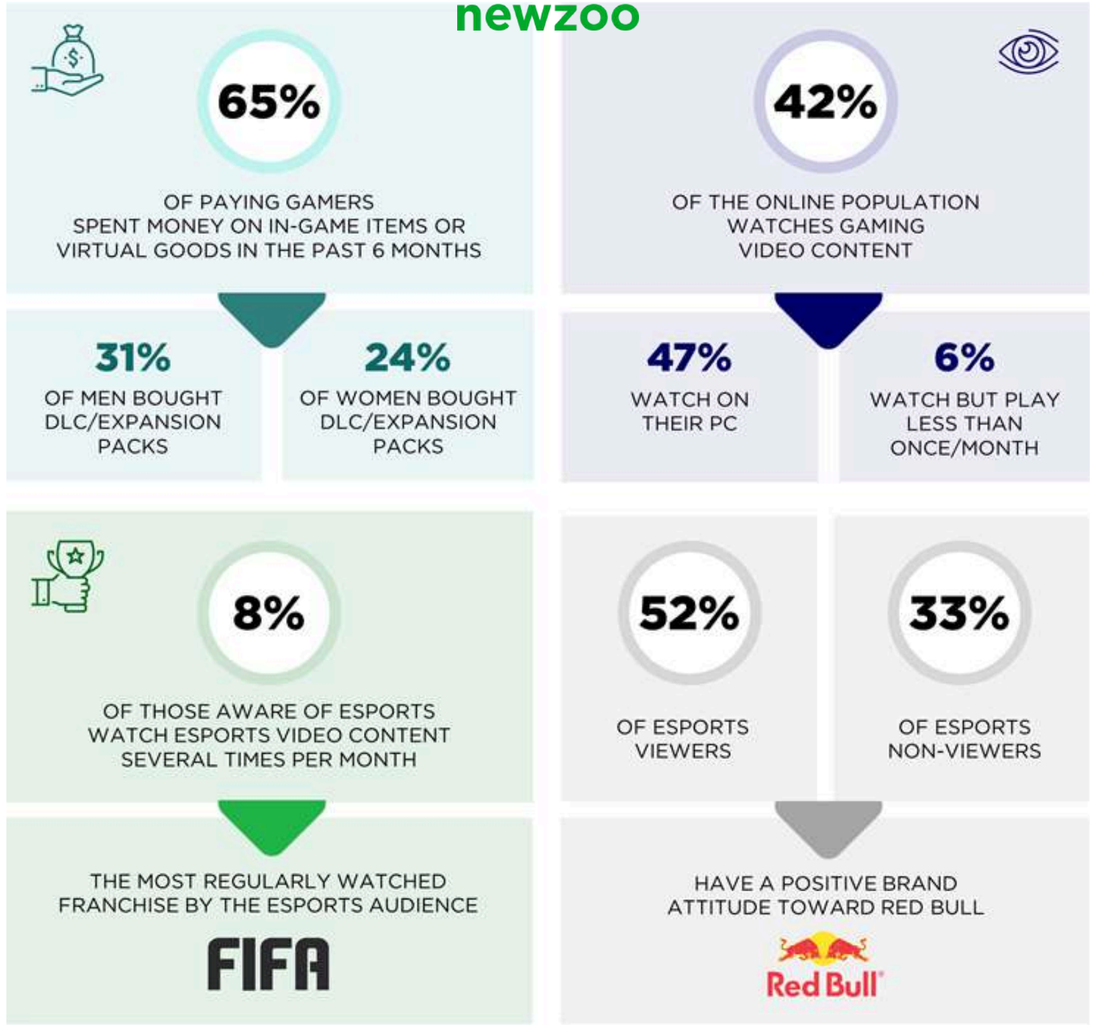
Yes. Yes it is. As you can probably guess, bringing your game to as many people as possible can't be a bad thing. As localizable elements in games got more and more prominent, localization rapidly came to be a necessity, to accommodate the larger scope that the videogame medium was striving to achieve. You may think that by now, everyone who is interested in playing videogames would know English. For sure, many people play videogames in English but it has been proven that people prefer to read, hear, watch content in their native language if they can help it . As we said, Italy has 26,2 million gamers. Why not cater to them in the best way possible?

Source: 2018 Global Games Market Report



It is very important to gauge whether a market would be receptive to a localized videogame, and nowadays data such as ROI is taken into consideration when deciding to localize a videogame for some markets.

What's certain is that the market will grow and there will be many opportunities to gain new players by localizing videogame content. Miguel Sepúlveda , from King, tells us that the next 1 billion on-line users that will come online in the next 10 years are coming from India, South America, Middle East, Southern Asia. In all these countries the English level is generally not as high as in other countries if we check the English Proficiency Index. for this reason good localized content will be important to grow in the segment. We asked Miguel how does King decide when and if to localize a game and he told us this:



Souce:2018 Games Consumer Insights

*At least once per month

When to localize a game

Whether we decide to localize a game for a certain market or not] is a combination of factors, the first one is the English proficiency level. The EPI gives us a good idea about how popular English is around the globe, this report helps us to understand countries with a higher English level and a lower level, then we need to look at how mature from a tech perspective the country is; the highest the penetration of the of mobile phones and the more sophisticated the networks are, the better it'll be for us to launch a game in that specific region and finally we can look at the wealth level of the country and the population (in millions). Looking at all these parameters simultaneously we will be in a good position to decide the right language coverage for our future blockbuster!

Miguel Sepulveda is a mobile game expert who works at King, a company famous for their Candy Crush Saga hit title.
He leads the globalization team, to ensure that the players have a pleasant gaming experience minimizing the language culture barriers.

A little success story

"A few years ago, before joining King I worked at EA, and I was very satisfied when I saw the successful localization program design to make Plant vs Zombies a success in China. This was done with a combination of actions such as culturalization (every single zombie, including the bosses, was thoroughly re-skinned to reflect influences from Chinese culture) and the inclusion of a free to play method with small payments to be able to progress in the game; that worked pretty well as Chinese players are keen to pay for a better gaming experience and a faster game progression.
It appears that, apart from localization, the added cultural elements (such as a new peach plant, a fruit that bears great importance in Chinese culture) made the game more palatable to Chinese players. This is what culturalization is all about, after all."

Why is game localization different?

Videogame localization is different from other forms of localization, in that it encompasses a lot of different text types and mediums, it has to consider software limitations while at the same time striving for creativity and cultural appropriacy. Game text can range from subtitles that will have to be a certain length or UI elements that have to fit in a small button, from endless lists of items that require speed and efficiency to be translated to rhymes, songs, puns or marketing material that require a genuine creative effort to be expressed in the target language in the best way possible. Let's have a quick look at some of the different kinds of assets that are usually found in a videogames:

A. In game text

UI, system messages, menu items, prompts Highly standardized and client-dependent: follow the guidelines! Limitations on character length: brevity is imperative! It can be highly creative text too: i.e. dialogue between two characters

B. Cutscenes

The texts that comprise the script of the game. Many of them have to be dubbed. The challenges that apply to audiovisual translation apply here too High degree of creativity required

C. Art

Graphical elements in the game that are part of the game itself (maps, billboards, graffiti...). They require technical and artistic skills to be localized. They are not always localized (it's time consuming), but if they are they result in a more immersive experience

D. Collaterals

They can range from EULA agreements, back of the box text, websites, marketing materials, newsletters. They require versatility and adaptability. The translator has to be proficient in different kinds of approach. Transcreation is usually a part of this part of the process (marketing materials)

The challenges

Elisabetta Corapi is Team Lead at Gameforge, a german game developer founded in 2003, specializing in MMORPGs and online gaming. Elisabetta, other than being a Team Lead, is still hands on with the process of translation itself inside the company".

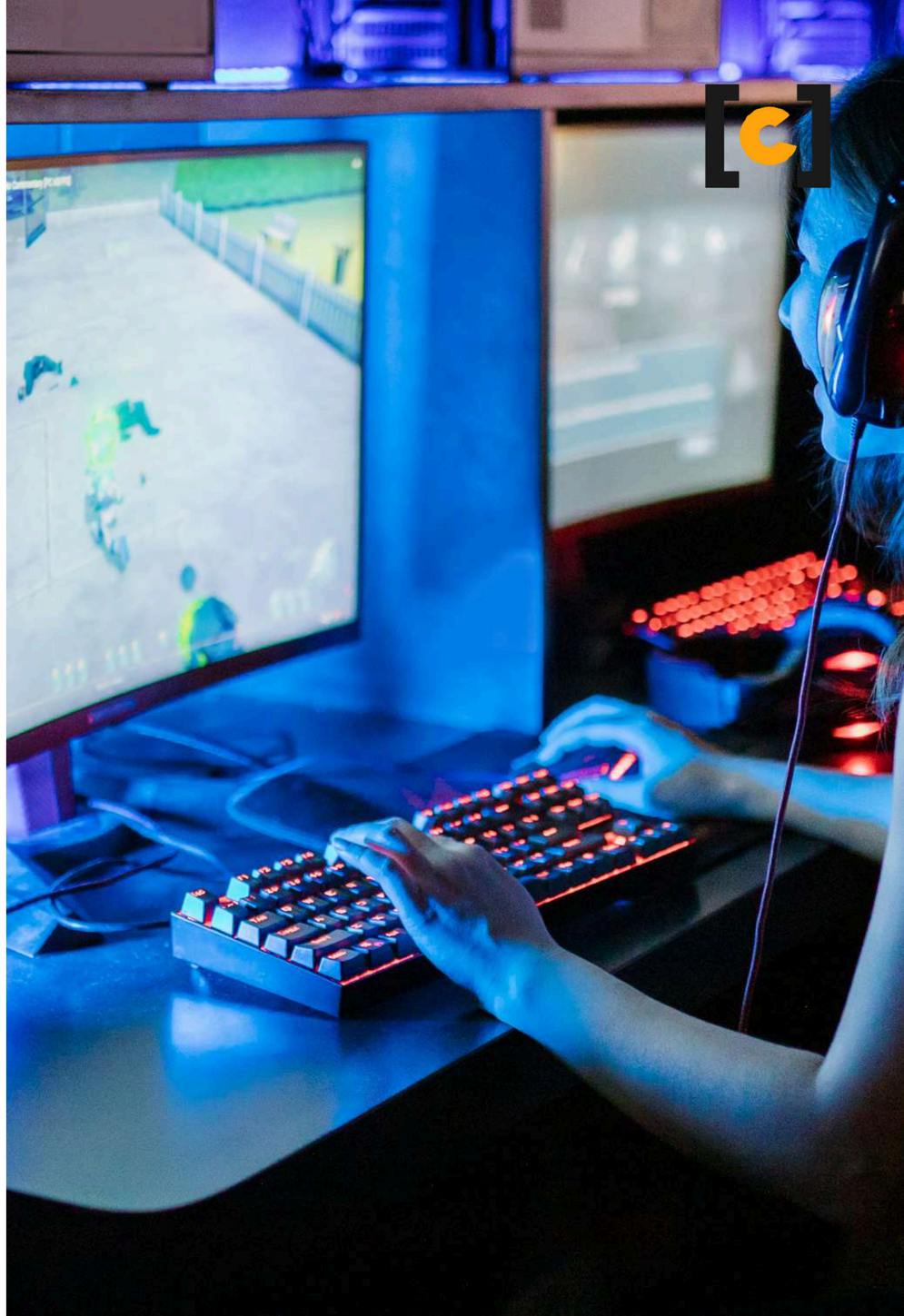
As you can see, videogame localization offers different kinds of challenges depending on the kind of text to be translated, it requires technical knowledge and cultural awareness. Let's hear from Elisabetta Corapi, Team Lead at Gameforge , what are the three biggest challenges that videogame localization brings to the table:

The cross between technical and linguistic factors

"Videogames are, by definition, highly creative and interactive. In spite of this, we should never forget that we are translating what is, essentially, software. In this light, game texts is what allows the game to work, or rather, to communicate and be understood by the player. It should be transparent and functional. Translators should never lose sight of the basic fact that most of a game's text is comprised of instructions, tutorials, goals, missions. It is evident that a text that cannot be understood or conveys a different meaning can make the experience miserable for the player, if not outright unplayable."

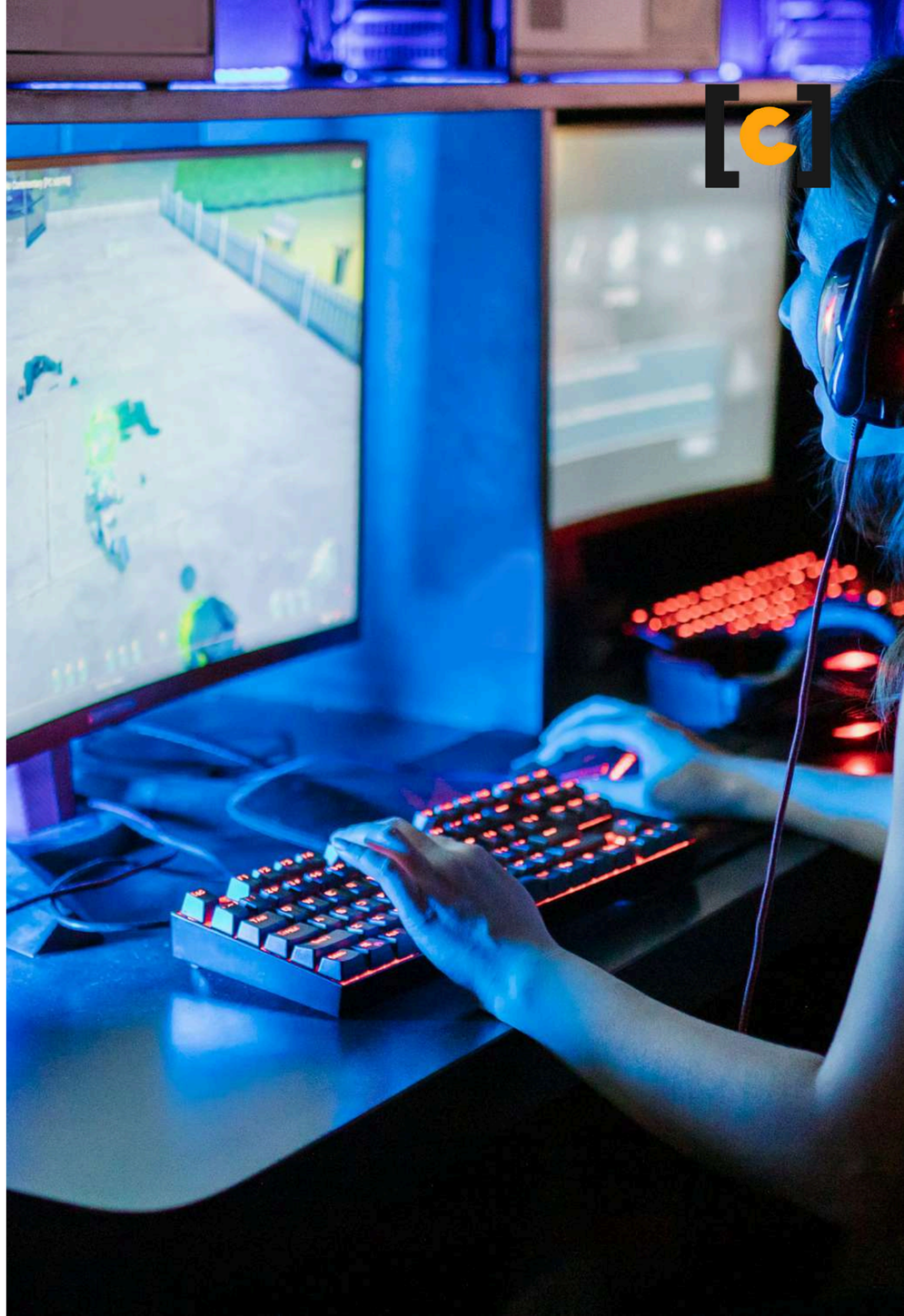
“How can the player do what he or she has to do if they misunderstand the text? This is the first basic aspect that a videogame translator has to consider. Many times, text strings are hard-coded, with character limitations set by developers. In cases such as this, creativity and brevity are fundamental, and functionality has to prevail. Another technical issue that crosses with linguistic factors is variables and placeholders.

Depending on the language, adjectives and nouns are gendered, and if this case has not been considered during development, the translator has to take this into account and choose a neutral solution to avoid mistakes and confusion. Moreover, if the game logic does not allow variables to be swapped, the translation will have to find a workaround to that, too. Text length limitation is also a factor in texts written in so-called HTC (Hard Time Constraint), i.e. texts that will be dubbed. In this case, the translator will have to work in a strictly allotted time window, and take into considerations pauses for effect for the voice actor to reproduce.”



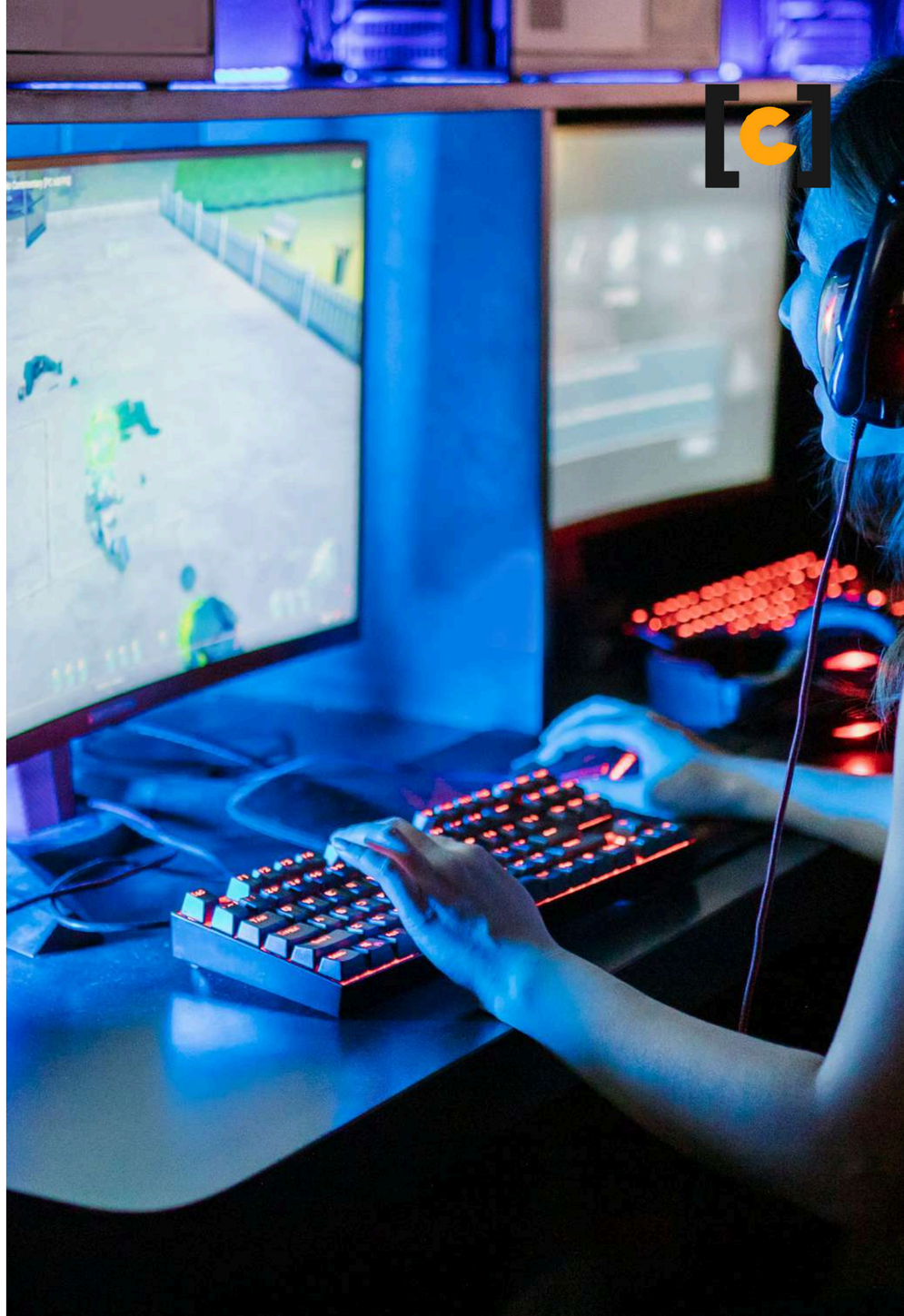
Lack of context

“Many times, a lack of context in what a translator has to localize can lead to misunderstandings and erroneous interpretation of the game text, with the result of compromising the game experience. A good translator will have the skills to understand most of the context in a text string (as an example, with careful perusing of string IDs, if they are sufficiently clear) and will have to be in a position to proactively ask for clarifications if something is not clear enough. Most of the time, the translator will not have the finished product in his or her hands prior to localize it, so they will have to possess the highest amount of information available: characters’ bios, names and genders, NPCs, images of items, monsters, as a way to generate context that will lay a foundation to provide a good localized product.”



Cultural aspects

“Language is a key component in videogames. As such, a successful videogame experience cannot shy away from taking into consideration the cultural factors that are brought about by language. Culturalization is one of the most significant aspects of game localization: the translator needs to know the source and target cultures so well that he or she can recognize idioms, colloquialisms, jokes, reference, and render them in a cultural code that can be understood by the target audience.”



"Another key aspect related to videogame culture is the community around them. The translator should know and possibly be a part of it to know and cater to the needs of the fans of the game they're translating. Especially in the case of hardcore gamers, the target audience is very engaged and passionate about their preferred videogames, and in many cases, if they deem the game in the target language not properly localized, they will be quick to switch back to English!

The translator should then be in the know about gaming lingo, terminology, but also about expectations and previous games in the same genre/series as the game they're working on. Many of the English terms and jargon used in games are so prevalent that many times they are simply adapted to the target language by the community, such as "farmare" and "skillare" in MMO games."

And some more challenges...

Luigi Di Domenico, from Fatshark Games, provided us with another point of view that works as a clear summary of the main issues and challenges that can come up in videogame localization:

Luigi di Domenico wears different hats at Fatshark. He's on the narrative team for an unannounced project, he's a producer on another title and he's Localization manager for the whole studio.

“Certainly restrictions in space and timing are a big factor to consider, and more often than not, translators are not always aware, they lack context, primarily because they don't have this kind of info - although I always try to give them as much background as possible so that they can do a good job. Speed of delivery is also another thing to consider - in my previous role we had weekly releases and it always took an incredible effort to coordinate with all the teams and build an efficient workstream, identify and solve problems, and deliver on time and on budget.

One last challenge would definitely be consistency: or the style you choose for your product: you want your game and the characters in your game to speak to the players in a specific way, create your style and keep it consistent throughout all the channels - website, press releases, marketing campaign and, obviously, the product itself - this is something I had to work on a lot in the past, where there was a concerted effort between copywriters, UX and localisation team.”

Who does the game translator need to be?

In the end, it is possible that the biggest challenge that videogame localization poses is that the text will have to be as natural as possible in the target language, and thus the translator needs not only to be able to make it so within the constraints and technical limitations, but also taking into consideration the whole gaming sphere as a community with its rules and quirks. The best case scenario is one in which the videogame localizer is a gamer him or herself (especially in a scenario of blind localization, i.e. translating without access to the assets); in this way they can provide a necessary perspective from inside this vast community and transfer their insight and knowledge into producing the best possible translation.

This is not the only key aspect that defines what skills and competences should a videogame translator possess, but it is certainly one which, while certainly not unique to this field, defines more clearly than others the role.

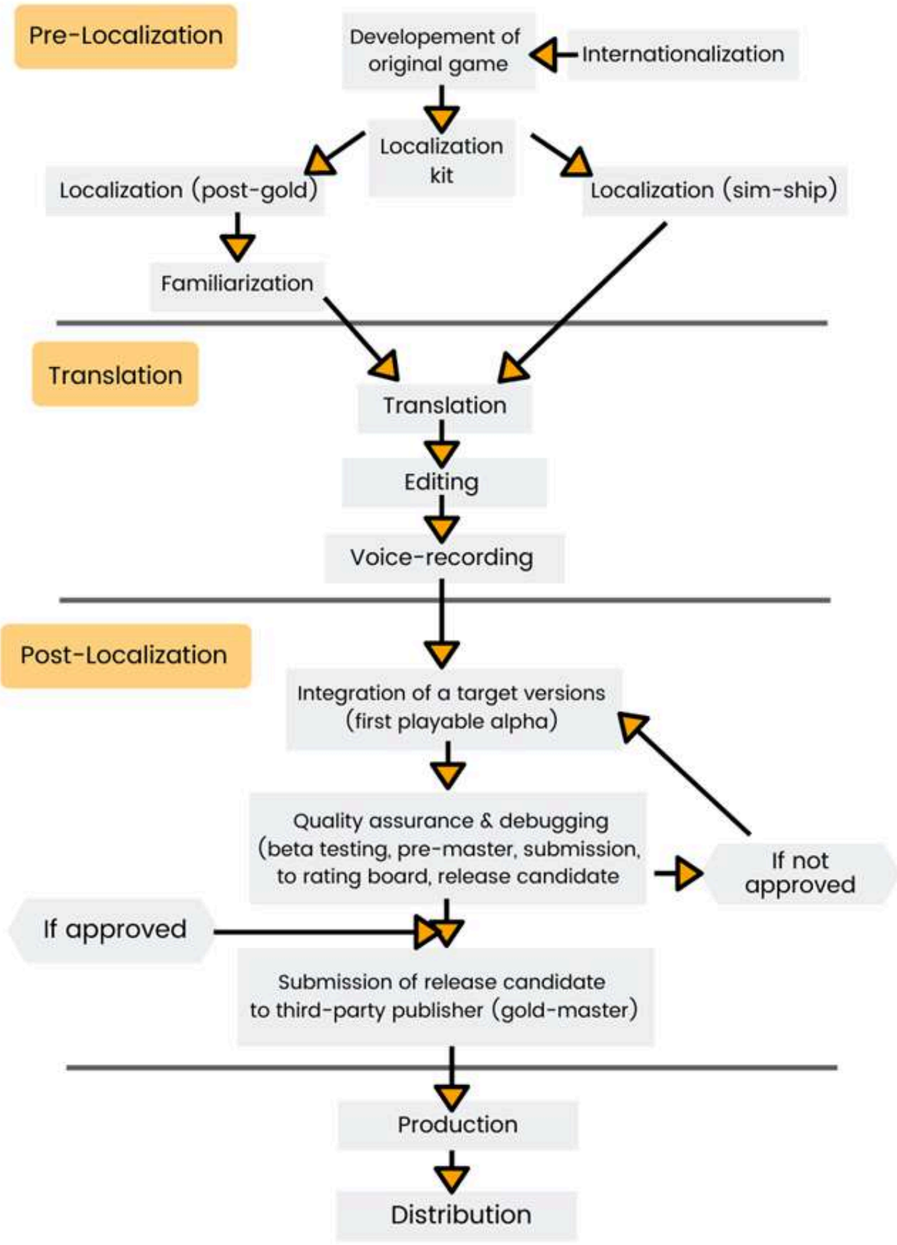
To summarize, we can break down the necessary skills of a videogame translator into these categories:

Cultural awareness	**Technological knowledge** of the instruments used to translate videogames, i.e. CAT Tools, but ideally also how coding a text into a videogame works, how tags and placeholders work and knowledge of the different file formats that a videogame text can appear in.	**Awareness of the terminology** and language that concerns videogame systems, technology and games themselves
Creativity	**Awareness of game culture** which differs from "cultural awareness" above because it relates to the culture space that games created, the communities, the events, the industry.	**Awareness of global pop culture,** because game culture is part of pop culture and it references it (and is referenced by it) constantly.

But how does it work?

Game localization has evolved in parallel with the needs and technological advancements of the gaming industry. The volumes of text to be translated in this day and age can be massive and the stream of work can be constant, especially in the case of the so called live games or Games as a Service (GaaS), a model that provides constant stream of updates, balance patches, that organically and continually change a single game. These factors notwithstanding, a game localization service can be provided in two main ways: in-house and outsourced. The former means that the game developer has an internal team devoted to the whole localization process for their game (even though sometimes parts of it can be outsourced), the latter happens when the localization process is carried out by a third party (such as us!). Both models are still extensively applied today, and the process itself is actually similar in both cases:

This diagram starts from a very significant process that for a few years has been getting traction in the industry, that is, internationalization. It is a necessity for big AAA titles that will be published worldwide.



It is essentially a process that ensures that even during development the need for localization is taken into consideration, i.e. the workflow will accommodate the necessities that will arise in localization from the very start of the game development cycle.

Some examples of this could be:

Ensuring that the text is not hard-coded into the game, so that it can be edited later or extracted to be processed into file formats that are compatible with CAT tools.

Using fonts that can display special characters such as the ones in Germanic languages or different alphabets altogether such as Cyrillic.

Using tags and placeholders in a way that accomodates differences in grammatical structures, such as gender and number.

Use text boxes with adjustable size, to accommodate more verbose languages (such as Italian!); this avoids trying to fit the text in a predetermined box and allows for more liberty during translation

After the translation and editing are completed, the next step is voice recording (if present). Then, quality assurance and debugging will produce the so called “gold master”, the version that will be printed (and nowadays, distributed digitally) and shipped. Cristina Anselmitells us about the differences between having an in-house translation team and an external one, pointing out the advantages and disadvantages of each approach:

Cristina Anselmi is Machine TranslationSpecialistat Electronic Arts. She takes care of everything related to MT and its implementation.

In house vs. outsourced

“At Electronic Arts we work only with external partners for all that concerns translation and post-editing, and this can have a lot of advantages, but some disadvantages as well. First of all, from a quality perspective, if the linguists are situated in the country of their mother tongue, they will be always up to date with the evolution of the language, and this will ensure a better quality.

Second, the time difference could represent an advantage in case translations need to be delivered overnight, in case something urgent comes in, although the same could be seen as an obstacle, as the deadlines need to be accommodated during our working hours (GMT) no matter what. Moreover, working with external partners, gives the possibility of having many different resources at disposal, especially according to the type of text. You can have specific legal translators, translators dedicated to certain projects and type of text, and this is definitely a plus for the final quality. On the other hand, having to work with external partners can be challenging in terms of communication and sharing information. I think the key to the best collaboration is considering external partners as team members, no matter their location.”

What about Machine Translation?

Notoriously, especially outside the translation industry (but even inside), there has been skepticism towards Machine Translation, with doubts about its quality and its usefulness in the translation of texts with a higher degree of creative content, such as videogames. Barring the fact that the advancements in the field of Neural Machine Translation (NMT) have brought us machine translated text that has a much higher quality than before, and that thanks to Machine Learning NMT engines will keep improving over continued use, we must not forget about post-editing, that is, the process of (human) editing a text that has been machine translated.

There are cases where volumes are so high that post-editing is a necessity, and it is a process that will speed up delivery while not forgoing quality. Especially in the case, say, of a mobile game with tons of data, names, and other elements that are suited for machine translation, it is definitely an advantage. Even in the case of more creative texts, though, companies are starting to warm up to it. Let's hear from an expert on the matter, Cristina Anselmi, Machine Translation Specialist at EA. As Machine Translation Specialist, Cristina takes care of everything related to MT and its implementation, from creating language models to preparing the data to train the engine. What does she think about the role of MT in the videogame localization industry?

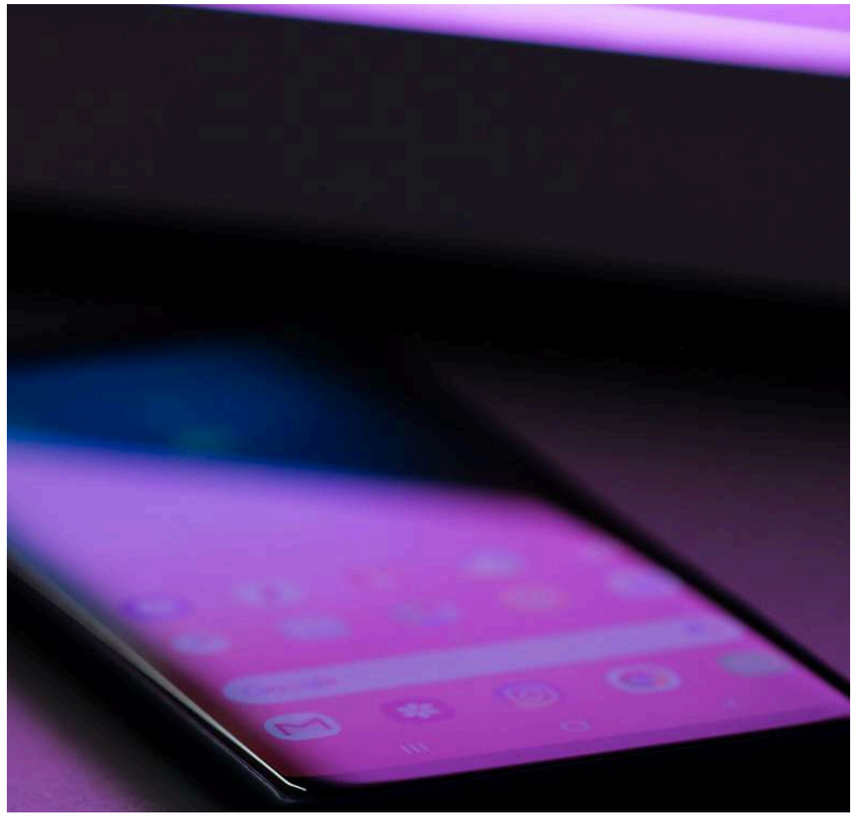
The role of MT in the industry

"I truly believe machine translation is the future of the industry, as it meets perfectly the need of continuous delivery and live localization. The gaming industry is changing, and it goes more and more into the direction of delivering content continuously, offering to players the possibility of obtaining not only daily content, but also enabling them more and more to interact with each other and create their own gaming experience. This fast-paced request wouldn't be achievable by relying only on human resources, but it needs to be enhanced by technology, and that's where machine translation comes into play."

The way I see it is that thanks to the help of MT, translators will be able to speed up their delivery time for those small tasks that don't require too much editing and where the level of originality is relatively low, to focus more on those that require more creativity and therefore provide an even better quality.
This is not something achievable from one day to another and the final aim is not to replace human resources, as the quality of MT is far from perfect at the moment, but having an open mind towards this change and provide support to increase the output quality will make it possible to achieve a good base to start from, instead of rejecting a change which will happen at some point, no matter what.

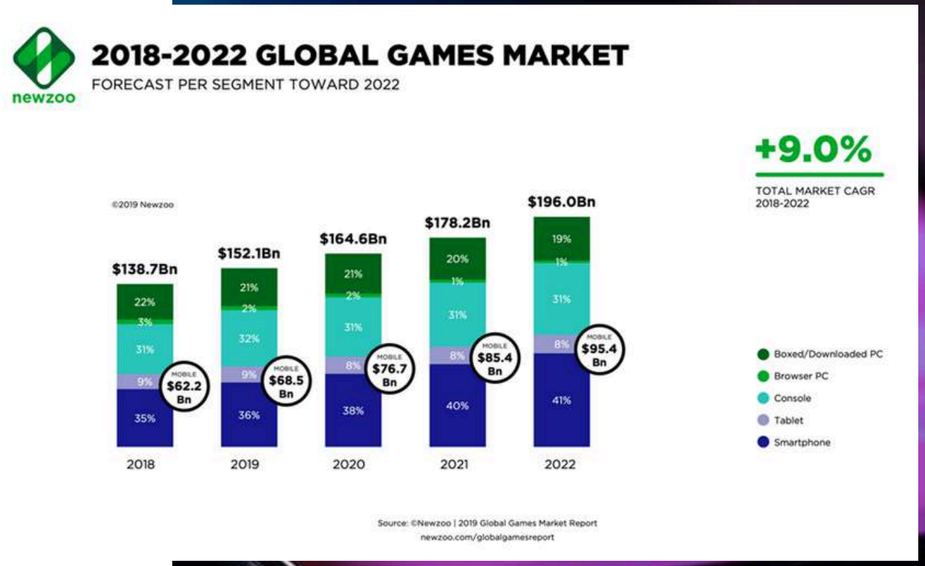
Going mobile

As previously mentioned, the advent of mobile gaming was the event that really opened the floodgates on videogame popularity, availability and awareness in mass culture. It was the step that made so that truly everyone started playing videogames, regardless of age, gender or previous experience with the medium. There are more and more mobile phones globally, and there are emerging markets, such as India, in which access to technology has been based on directly owning a mobile phone as a technology platform without having previously gone through other products such as a computer or a console. It is then clearly evident that the mobile market is a lucrative one, because opportunities to find new audiences are behind every corner.

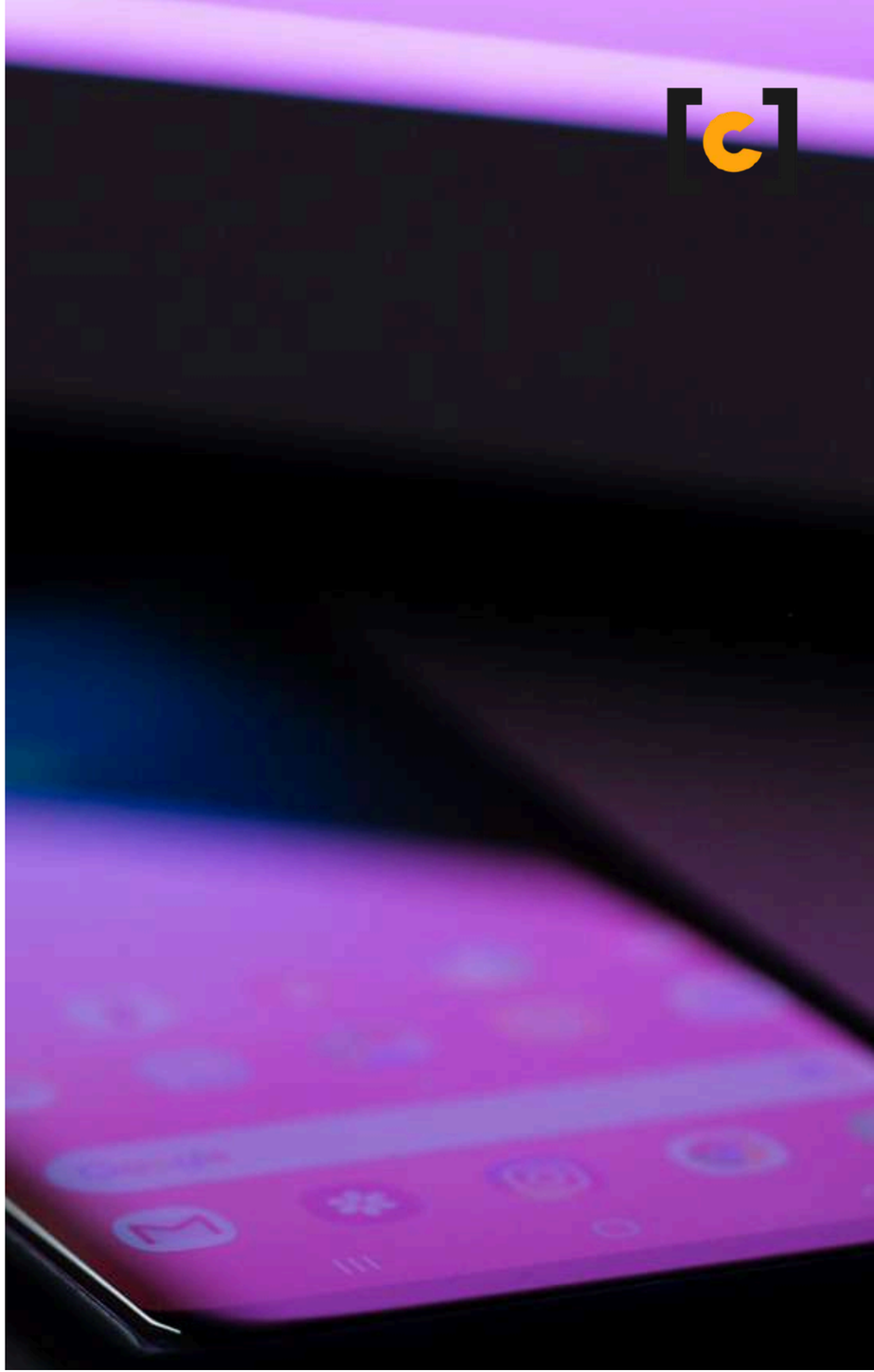


Miguel Sepulveda is a mobile game expert who works at King, a company famous for their Candy Crush Saga hit title. He leads the globalization team, to ensure that the players have a pleasant gaming experience minimizing the language culture barriers.

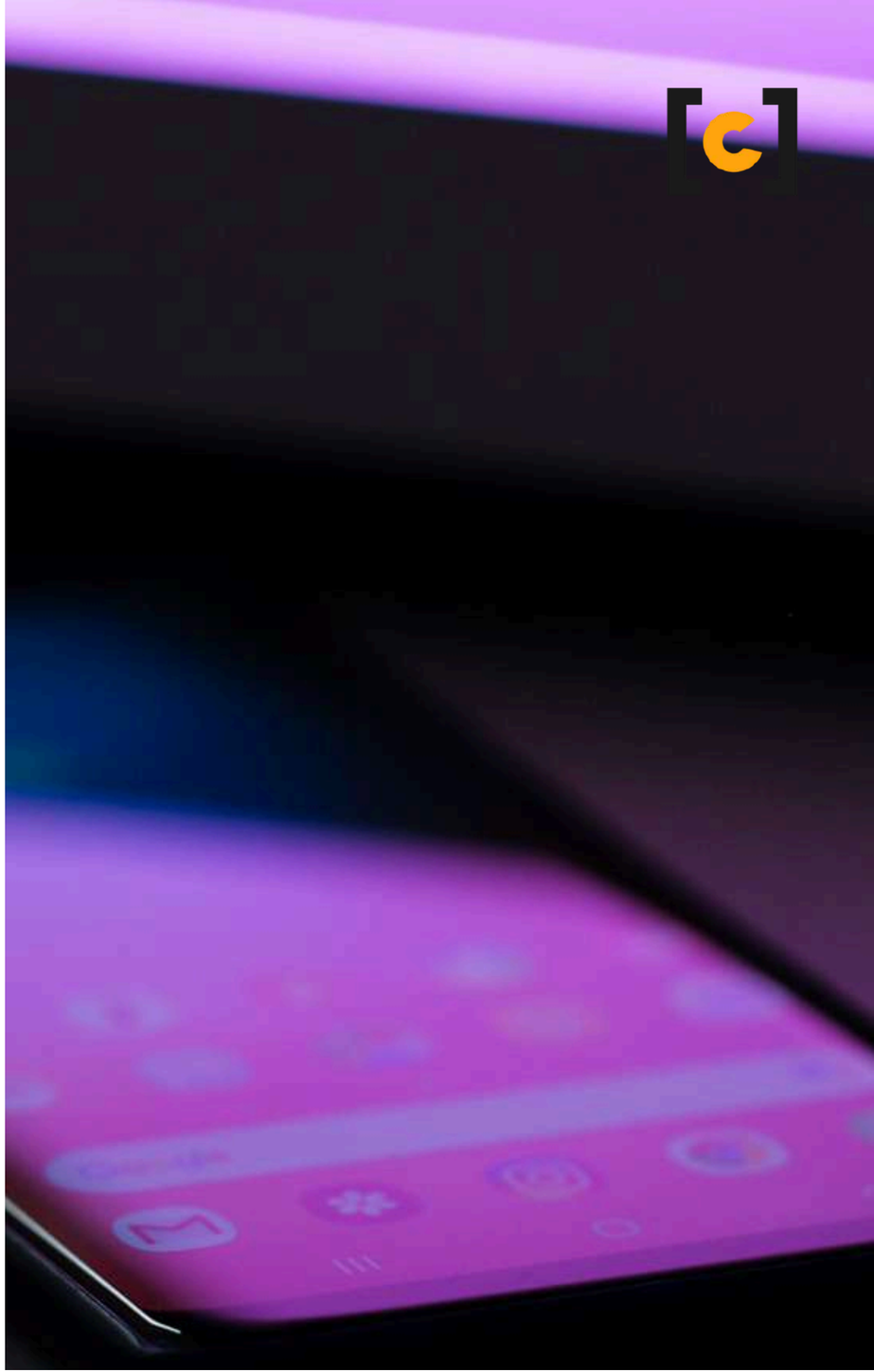
As you can see from this graph from Newzoo, the mobile market occupies a big chunk of the total games revenue, and it will continue to grow steadily. If we talk about localization, is there a different approach when translating a mobile game?
To explain the ins and outs of mobile game localization, we have once again Miguel from King, and who better than someone that works at one of the biggest mobile game companies to enlighten us a bit on the process?



“Localizing for a mobile phone is different from localizing a game for a console or PC. The simple fact that we play on an infinitely smaller screen than a television makes everything that has to do with UX best practices super important. The internationalization phase in a mobile videogame is key since it is the best antidote we have to avoid those ugly truncated texts that appear while we play.”



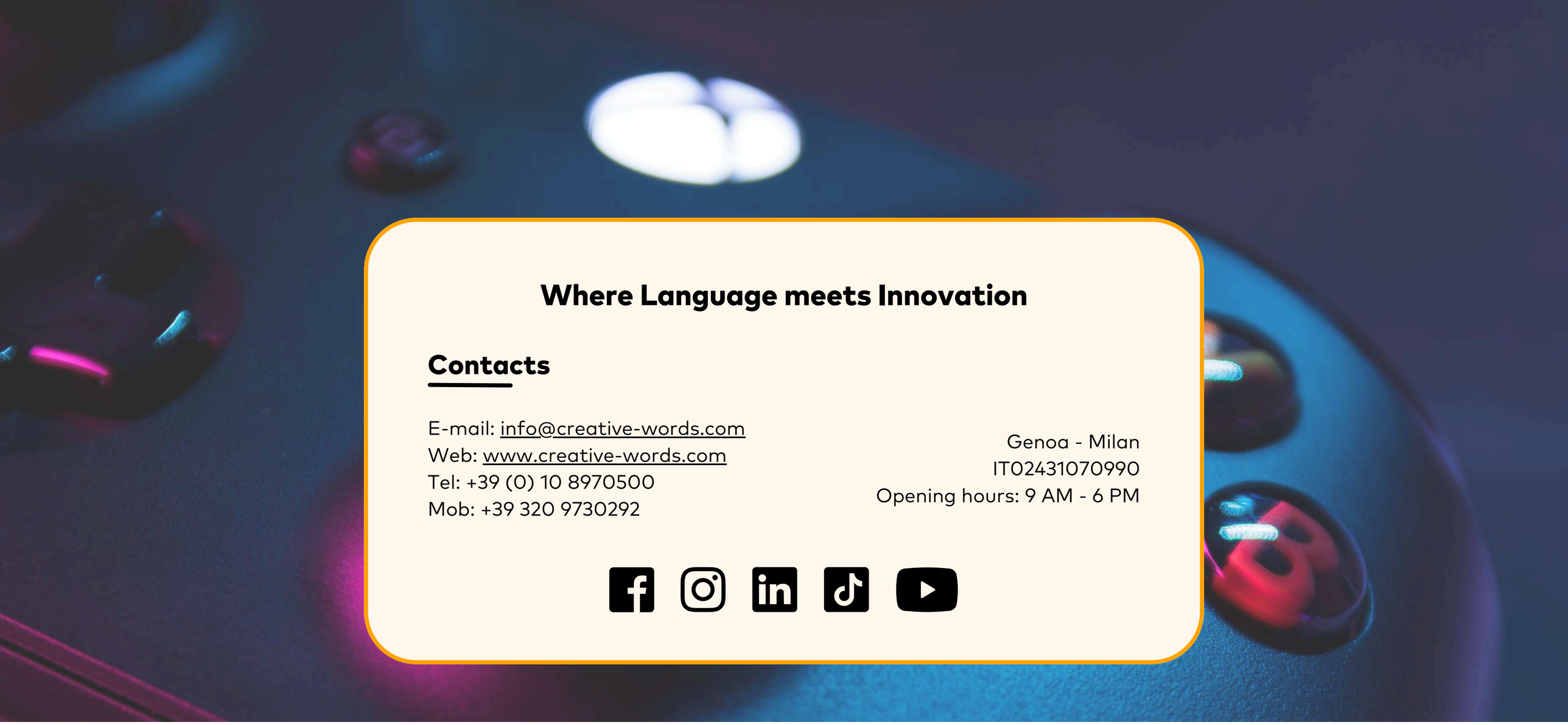
“Another clearly different aspect when we focus on the localization of a mobile game compared to a traditional game is the commercialization phase. That means, all the different tasks that we must carry out to have our game published for the main mobile app storefronts. We must think about which are screenshots we will send to these platforms so that our game stands out in the store vs the other thousands of games available there. We must think the keywords that we will use so our future players find our games, we must record short videos, but attractive enough to help our potential new players understand what goes to the game.
One of the most different aspects of a mobile game vs. a traditional AAA is that a mobile game has a high amount of weekly or even daily content updates into many languages (because the game is alive!) and that makes the LQA (Language Quality Assurance) process quite challenging since that usually is reducing the time available to do LQA.”



The game localization landascpae is ever-change and ripe with new developments and innovations. Mobile gaming, cloud gaming, virtual reality and Games ad Service are new and exciting directions that the industry is taking.

Localization must certainly follow suit. The industry is growing bigger and bigger and is constantly striving for greater quality and consistency in all areas. We hope that this overview helped understand a little bit more of this varied landascape and to grasp the advanteges (and the challenges!) that translating a videogame bring to the table.

If you need more, follow us on our website and our social media platforms. You can expect to find more tidbits and news about translation, localization and transcreation. In particular, keep an eye on our blog, where you will find in the coming months interesting articles not only about Game Localization but on all things translation, from management to relationships with clients, to the nitty-gritty of the craft itself. Stay tuned.



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