

SECTION

2**Planning Localizations****■ Introduction**

Simultaneous release (sim-ship) has become a necessary goal for game publishers because of the increase of game sales in the international markets. Massive Multiplayer Online (MMO) and Social Networking Games in which players from all countries participate require that simultaneous development happen. Additionally, marketing efforts have more impact on a worldwide release of a game, opposed to separately marketing each version when it ships.

In order to successfully develop and release localized games, an effective localization plan needs to be created. If developers plan in advance for localized versions, they can save production time and, ultimately, costs by releasing the localized versions simultaneously with the original source version.

This section provides detailed information on planning localizations from start to finish. Information is presented on scoping out the localization, organizing the production team, and working with external vendors in order to set up an efficient localization pipeline. Topics include:

- Determining the Scope of the Localization
- Creating Schedules, Budgets, and Staffing Plans
- Working with Localization Vendors
- Working with Translators

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Determining What to Localize

In this chapter:

- How Localizations Affect Sales
- Determining What to Localize
- Determining the Level of Localization
- Determining Which Languages Should Be Localized
- Estimating Development Costs
- Working with Localization Personnel

■ How Localizations Affect Sales

As international game markets grow, publishers are increasingly interested in localizing their games to capitalize on sales in these other territories. Europe alone has over 40 different countries and languages. However, localizing a single game into 40 different languages for the European market does not make much economic sense. It makes more sense for publishers to concentrate on creating localized versions that target the largest European markets.

The biggest European markets are the United Kingdom, France, and Germany. If the game is a high-profile title, publishers usually plan to produce fully localized French and German versions. Spain and Italy are rapidly growing PC and console game markets, and it is becoming more common to fully localize games in those languages as well. Additionally, most large publishers have sales and marketing offices based in these key countries to capitalize on the market for the localized versions.

Other big European markets for localizations are Scandinavia and Belgium, The Netherlands and Luxembourg (Benelux). When creating localized versions for Benelux or The Netherlands, publishers sometimes license out the distribution rights in these territories to third-party distributors who localize, distribute, and market the titles. These licensing deals are profitable for both the publisher and the third-party distributor.

If the localization is of high quality and has taken the local customs and differences of each country into account, the sales will be profitable. Gamers prefer to play a game in their native language because it is easier for them to become immersed in a game. Quality localizations give the impression that the game was tailored specifically to each territory, instead of just dumped into the distribution channel to make some money. Overall, creating localized versions can boost the overall sales of a game versus negatively impacting the sales of the source language version.

Shipping Localizations Simultaneously

Releasing the localized versions simultaneously (sim-ship) with the source language version is a goal most publishers and developers want to achieve with their game. This is very difficult to do, especially if advanced planning has not occurred. If the localized versions are released simultaneously with the source language version in a well-publicized worldwide release, game sales will benefit tremendously.

Additionally, shipping the localized versions simultaneously with the primary language version cuts down on “gray market” imports, primary language versions of the game that are “unofficially” available for sale in international territories via the Internet or via specialty retailers before the localized versions are distributed. These imports cut into the sales of the localized versions because gamers who have already bought the primary language version will not buy the localized version as well.

Another benefit of sim-ship is building a sense of community among gamers, especially for popular online titles. A gamer in Europe does not have to visit the forums and hear U.S. gamers discussing a game that will not be released for another month. The entire international community can simultaneously discuss the game since everyone will have the game at the same time it is available in the United States. Additionally, European and U.S. gamers can start playing online with each other from day one, which strengthens the sense of camaraderie in the online community.

Marketing and PR also get a boost from sim-ship. If U.S. marketing works in conjunction with international marketing, efforts can be consolidated and more publicity can be generated for the game as a whole. Together, they can build toward the game’s release date and turn it into an international event with simultaneous launch parties.

Special Circumstances

In France, localized versions are necessary by law. The Toubon law, enacted in August 1994, preserves the use of the French language in advertising and other products. This law was passed because there was concern that the English language was becoming more prevalent in France due to the influx of American movies and other forms of entertainment. This means all language assets in games must be localized into French in order for a game to be distributed in France.

While Germany is more lenient than France is about the language assets in the game, they do censor violence more heavily than other European countries. For example, before 2003, blood was not allowed to be shown at all in any games distributed in Germany. Developers worked around this by either removing the blood altogether or changing it to a different color such as green. This means that even if publishers decide to distribute an English version of a game in Germany, they might still have to alter the game in order to sell it.

■ Determining What to Localize

Publishers usually decide what games are localized into which languages based on financial viability. To do this, a publisher evaluates the time, money, and resources spent on the localization development versus the expected return on the investment in the game. In the case of large publishers, each international sales office might individually have the decision-making power to determine if a localized version of the game is needed for their region. In the case of a smaller publisher or developer, all localization decisions will most likely be handled by the head office with input from the development studio on estimated localization development costs.

To determine the likely profitability of the localizations, the publisher creates a profit and loss statement (P&L) for each proposed localization. A P&L, which measures the overall profit and loss of a game, is a spreadsheet that compares the development, marketing, packaging, and distribution costs for each localized version against the projected sales. If the projected sales numbers increase, the better chance there is of making a profit from the localization. For example, if it is determined that 20,000 German copies can be sold, the cost of the localization can be justified and the version will be likely be profitable. However, if it is predicted that only 3,000 copies will be sold, the profitability goes down and the localization might not make a profit. The P&L reflects this information and allows decisionmakers to determine whether German sales figures justify making a localized version.

The timing of the localization is also considered when making the final decision. Ideally, publishers want the localizations to ship simultaneously with the source language version in order to market a worldwide release of the game. This is not an impossible task if the development team has already planned this in pre-production. The sooner the localization tasks are integrated into the schedule, the easier it will be to achieve sim-ship of the localized versions.

In some cases, the publisher ships the European versions simultaneously with the English version and staggers the ship dates of the Japanese, Korean, Russian, and Hebrew versions. Since English, French, German, Italian, and Spanish localizations cover most of the United States, Europe, and South America, the publisher usually

wants to make sure that these versions are available by the game's initial ship date. In the cases of languages in more specialized regions, such as Russia and Korea, the publisher might make a licensing deal for a third party to localize the game and handle the distributions. These versions usually appear a few months after the initial ship date because the third-party licensors are fully responsible for translation, integration, and testing and cannot begin work until they get a localization closing kit based on final code and assets.

In addition to the development costs and release dates, the publisher considers other factors when determining what to localize. These factors include how the localized versions might affect the sales of the source language versions, which languages are localized, and the level of localization necessary for each. These factors affect the scope of the localization and thus the money, time, and resources required. The publisher might decide to release full French and German localizations and partial Spanish and Italian localizations, or to do full localizations for French, German, Spanish, and Italian. These decisions mainly depend on the investment the publisher wants to make for each localized version.

LOCALIZATION MANAGER INTERVIEW

Bénédicte Laborie, Localization Group Manager

Ubisoft[®]

At Ubisoft, the localization project managers work in partnership with the game-development teams to provide creative solutions in order to deliver high-quality multilingual products. We strive to provide the greatest gaming experience anywhere in the world for the best costs! To reach that objective, the localization project manager's challenges are to first, analyze, evaluate, and pretest pipelines, tools, organization, and the schedule so that all elements are compatible for localizing games in five to fifteen languages simultaneously; second, advise developers all along the course of the project so that all design, development, or schedule decisions are made with localization constraints in mind; third, schedule and budget the localizations; fourth, choose and manage the best translators, recording studios, testers, and so on (both cost-wise and quality-wise) to complete the best products.

The localization project manager uses some standard processes and tools in order to achieve his or her tasks.

Our localization resource database, which is administrated and maintained by our localization content quality manager, is a gold-mine of all assessed and available vendors suited for minimum quality up to AAA quality, anywhere in the world.

A challenge for the localization project manager is to make sure that the quality level of the translations and dubbing is up to the expected level of quality

as defined by our creative team. This is where our localization content quality manager steps in and supports our localization project manager in the process of editorial reviews, improved quality writing, and standard movie-dubbing practices.

In addition, our localization engineers support our localization project managers by helping dev teams build localized versions of their games, analyzing tools, pipelines and organization, advising best practices, providing tools and additional programming, supporting integration, and so on.

Localization services face many daily challenges including:

- Technical feasibility
- Schedule versus budget versus quality
- Sim-ship of multiple languages

These services are discussed as follows.

TECHNICAL FEASIBILITY

Video games are complex multimedia products and contrary to movies or TV programs for which localization is more technically and culturally simple, localizing video games is much more complex (and in some instances not possible).

The obstacles are numerous, including technical constraints, tight schedules, limited budgets, undefined localization processes, and cultural differences.

In addition to revising the engines, tools, processes, production pipelines, and schedules before attempting to localize a game, the design of the game's code base should also be examined well in advance of production in order to ensure the game can meet all the internationalization and localization requirements.

For example, the engine and fonts should support special characters for all countries where the game will be localized, UI boxes should be scalable to accommodate longer text, and dates and measurements should be adaptable to all countries standards.

Another example is that the production schedule should always account for the localization schedule in the whole process as early as possible, so that all versions can be shipped simultaneously.

A final example of a basic element that should be examined well in advance is translation kits. Who, within the localization business, hasn't had to deal with bizarre text files displaying code strings in the middle of the localizable data? There is no context, no pictures, no other references that provide specifics on what types of translations are needed. It is as if translators and actors were just telepathists who could decipher what is needed just by reading the words in the text files.

If the localization project manager is required to find alternative solutions to dealing with technical shortcomings, it indicates that the game was not initially planned to be an international and localizable product. Producers should then consider it their responsibility to produce games in many languages and not just look at localized versions as accessories to the English version. This requires that the localization project manager and localization engineers be integrated in the dev team from the start, much like any other lead.

SCHEDULE VERSUS BUDGET VERSUS QUALITY

The localization project manager's job is to continuously evaluate the localized versions and make decisions about how to best balance the localized content against the constraints of the project. Some games are clearly driven by schedule and/or budget, while some are driven by quality. However, while these priorities may be clear at the beginning, the decisions during long-term development are not that simple. Every day we have to question these priorities and decide when we put the budget first and when it is better to spend more money on better quality translations. What does it bring to the product if we use this translator instead of that one? For example, on our AAA games, the decision to spend more money to use movie-dubbing methods, instead of traditional video game dubbing methods, is straightforward.

SIM-SHIP

Sim-ship is a requirement for distribution of games all over the world, which adds another level of difficulty to the process. This is another difference with the movie industry (which tends to release international versions after the main version is released). Without sim-shipment, distribution in such countries as The Netherlands or Russia or someplace else may be useless because of piracy or even because of cultural issues. For example, in The Netherlands many people speak English, so if the Dutch game is not released at the same time as the English version, then there is a good chance that you have spent money on localizing a game that won't sell in the end.

Basically sim-ship releases are possible if the dev teams think in advance about how to comply with internationalization standards and requirements. This means that dev teams should plan well in advance for organizing the data production, maximizing production pipelines towards multi-language localization pipelines, planning necessary staff, automating asset integration, and creating a global production schedule including localization.

■ Determining the Level of Localization

The level of localization refers to how much of the game is localized and how much is left in the source language. As discussed in Chapter 1, there are several levels of localization:

- **No localization:** The game and packaging are not localized at all. The source language version is taken as is and distributed in the international territories.
- **“Box and docs” localization:** The game is not localized, but the packaging and manual are.
- **Partial localization:** The game is only partially localized. Usually, all the game text and the packaging are localized and the voiceovers are subtitled.
- **Full localization:** The game is fully localized, including voiceovers.

Ultimately, the level of localization depends on how much the publisher wants to invest. If the game is a high-profile title, it will most likely be fully localized into as many languages as possible. In addition, if the localizations can be released simultaneously, this increases the likelihood of doing full localizations.

The publisher will already have a level of localization in mind when figuring out how many localized units will be distributed. For example, if the game is not a high-profile title, the publisher might plan to only distribute fully localized versions for key territories such as France and Germany. For territories like Spain and Italy, the publisher might decide to distribute partial localizations. Some territories, like Finland and Norway, will have the “box and docs” localized, and territories such as Turkey and Egypt will just get the English version.

■ Determining Which Languages Should Be Localized

Publishers want to produce as many profitable localized versions as possible for each game and will depend on their developers to do the actual production work required for the localized versions. If the developer and publisher can together establish a reputation of creating quality localized versions, international gamers will often prefer to purchase and play these versions over the source language version.

Determining which languages should be localized can be difficult, since the expected sales of some localized versions might not justify the cost. As discussed earlier, publishers should use P&L reports to determine the profitability of each localization. Publishers usually localize the titles into French and German since these are the bigger European markets and each language can be expected to sell more than 10,000 units. Spanish and Italian versions are also developed if the projected unit sales point to a profitable localization; publishers usually need to sell a minimum of 5,000 units in these territories to recoup their localization costs.

As the international markets grow, the need for other languages to be localized grows as well. Ten years ago, it was rare to see localized versions of Polish, Hebrew, Japanese, and Korean. Today, these languages are commonly localized, either by the publisher or by third-party licensees.

Ideally, the decision of which languages to create should be made at least six months before their expected release or submission so that the developer has time to develop, test, and code release the localized versions. At this time, the developer is told which localized versions will be created and what level of localization will be required for each language. While waiting for the final decision on which languages will be localized, the developer can start organizing the localization production pipeline.

■ Estimating Development Costs

The developer will need to provide estimated development costs to the publisher that detail how much the localization will cost and how long it will take. These costs are factored into the P&L and are used to determine how profitable the localization will be.

The three areas to consider when creating the development estimate are the schedule, the budget, and the personnel resources needed. To accurately determine these items and create a complete estimate, the scope must define what can be localized in the game. This involves such tasks as determining how many words need to be translated, how many voiceovers need to be recorded, and how many art assets need to be localized. It is important to estimate the scope for full localization of all the language assets because this will provide a good guide for the maximum time, resources, and money that will be needed for localization. If doing a full localization is too costly, several alternatives can be considered. The publisher might request several estimates for each language, depending on how many alternatives are being considered.

Asset Overview Form

Figure 4.1 is an example of an asset overview form that can be used to estimate the number of assets to be translated. The developer fills in the requested information and then sends it to the translator for cost estimates. This form is a good starting point for collecting all the necessary information about the localizations. Since this form provides a general overview of the project and is filled out before the game assets are final, estimates will have to suffice. As the project progresses, more detailed information for each section along with the required supporting documentation for each set of assets can be provided.

This form includes five sections that deal with specific areas of the game assets that can be localized. Fill in the title, platform, and source code release date of the

Title	Platform	Source code release date	Target languages	Localization contact
TEXT ASSETS IN-GAME	quantity	delivered format	final received format	comments
number of words as in-game text strings				
number of text files to be modified				
ART ASSETS	quantity	delivered format	final received format	comments
number of words in images				
number of art files to be modified				
AUDIO ASSETS IN-GAME	quantity	delivered format	final received format	comments
number of words in script				
number of audio files to be modified				
number of main speakers				
number of supporting speakers				
Total time of voiceovers (min:sec)				
CINEMATIC ASSETS	quantity	delivered format	final received format	comments
number of words in script				
number of movies to be modified				
number of main speakers				
number of supporting speakers				
seconds performed as lip-sync				
Total time of cut-scenes (min:sec)				
PRINTED MATERIALS	quantity	delivered format	final received format	comments
Manual – number of words				
Manual – number of graphics to be modified				
Box – number of words				
Box – number of graphics to modify				
Keyboard ref. card – number of words				
Any other printed materials?				

FIGURE 4.1 Asset overview form.

game and include all of the development team contact information. If anyone has any questions about the localization on the project, he will know exactly who to contact for information. If there is a good idea of which languages will be localized, include that information as well.

The “Text Assets In-Game” section of the form details how many words of in-game text need to be translated. If the translator will be integrating the text files, there is space to include the number of files that need to be integrated. The “Art Assets” section details how many words need to be translated for the artwork and how many files have images that need to be altered. The “Audio Assets In-Game” section lists how many words of dialogue are in-game and how many speakers there are. The “Cinematic Assets” section provides information on the dialogue contained in pre-rendered cinematics. This includes how many words need to be translated, how many speakers are needed, and how much lip syncing there will be. The “Printed Materials” section contains information on how many words will be translated for the manual, box, and other printed materials. It also includes estimates for any graphics to be localized such as logos, game art, or screenshots.

This form is also a good place to include information about the format of the assets, both the format of how they are sent to the translator and the format in which the translator needs to return them. By including the information on this form, the translator will know if access to and training for particular software is needed such as proprietary text editors or image editors. Once this form is filled in, it can be used to calculate the translation costs for all of the assets. This form does not include additional development costs such as asset integration, functionality testing, or linguistic testing. It also does not account for the proposed budget, schedule, and staffing needed for each localization.

Other Development Variables

The size of the game and the scope of what needs to be localized will have a direct effect on the budget, schedule, and personnel needed to complete the localization. These additional development costs must be included when providing a complete estimate of development costs to the publisher.

Since the budget, schedule, and staffing are variables that are dependent on each other, the producer should be flexible when putting together a complete localization plan. For example, with a large budget, it is possible to complete a full localization with a team of eight people that ships the same time as the source language version. However, if the budget is limited, a partial localization handled by three people that ships two weeks after the source language version might be the best the developer can do.

All of this development information must be communicated to the publisher so a fully informed decision can be made on what games will be localized into

which languages. Ideally, once the publisher has this information, a decision can be made quickly and the developer can start pre-production on the localized versions.

If the publishers delay making a decision on the localized versions, developers can cover their bases by planning up front for full localizations of French, German, Italian, and Spanish. This way, developers are less likely to be caught off guard by a last-minute localization request. However, if the decision has not been finalized by the time the localizations must go into production, it is up to the developer to be persistent about contacting the publisher and getting a final decision.

■ Working with Localization Personnel

When publishers and developers are determining what languages to translate the game into, they also consider what localization personnel are needed to complete the work. What personnel to use depends on how the localization pipeline is set up and what localization resources are readily available to the developer. The development team can set up their working relationships in three ways:

- **Working directly with a translator:** Depending on the size of the game and the studio resources, the development team might work directly with a translator for each language. In this instance, the translators would be responsible solely for providing the correct translations of the text and voiceover scripts. The translators would not cast actors, record voiceover, or integrate any assets. They would not be expected to be familiar with software development tools, since they would provide the translated text in Microsoft® Word® or a similar format. This arrangement puts more of a burden on the development team since they have to plan and execute all the outstanding localization tasks such as integration, linguistic testing, and voiceover recording sessions.
- **Working with a localization coordinator:** A large publisher may assign a localization coordinator to work with the developer. This contact would be the main liaison between all the translators, sound people, and linguistic testers. He or she would coordinate voiceover recording sessions, linguistic testing, and any other necessary tasks. This arrangement splits the localization work between the development team and the localization contact's team.
- **Working with an external localization vendor:** This method is the least taxing on the development team since the external vendor can handle the entire localization. If working with an external vendor, it is important that all expectations be clearly defined. This arrangement costs extra money, but some costs are recouped by the time and money saved from not having the original development team complete the localization work.

■ Chapter Summary

As international markets continue to grow, localized versions can be very profitable for publishers, especially if the localizations are high quality. Several things are taken into consideration when determining what localizations will be produced for each game. These decisions are based on estimated profits versus development costs.

The developer will be asked to fill in an asset overview form to help the publisher estimate the scope and cost of the localization. This chapter presented a sample asset overview form and discussed the factors to consider when making decisions about which localizations will be developed.

The next chapter builds on this information and discusses how to set up a full localization plan. Details on budgets, schedules, and staffing plans with concrete examples are presented. The developer will learn about how these elements are dependant on each other and how to accurately plan for each.