

LIONBRIDGE



FROM TRANSLATION TO CULTURALIZATION

The Past, Present, and Future of Video Game Localization

Video game localization is so much more than the words you see and the voices you hear.

Though the early days of Games localization saw little more than simple translation, the industry has evolved to produce nuanced and relatable localizations that bring together players from **all over the world**.

Reflecting on the past 30 years, the difference in localization quality is striking. Take, for instance, Shenmue, a Sega classic and the spiritual foundation of the now beloved Yakuza series.



Released in 2000, Shenmue came at a time when developers understood the immense earning potential of localization, but not so much how to go about it.

Demand was high — the industry saw a more than 100% revenue increase during the previous decade and dedicated games localization companies were popping up by the dozens. However, despite major improvements to translation technology, there remained a general lack of awareness surrounding the complexities of narrative localization.



"Kiss off" is an obscure phrase meaning "to dismiss rudely and abruptly." Though it's recognized as an authentic piece of US and Canadian slang, it's relatively obscure and a pretty lukewarm insult for a proper gangster.

Shenmue was one of the first games to have a multi-million-dollar localization budget, but like its many predecessors, it faced a plethora of problems. Unchecked translations, off-character voicing, and muddled recordings were only the beginning — the absence of specialized linguists led to **comically bad dialogue**. One such line, "Kiss off twit!" is still quoted by cult fans of the series to this day.

Shenmue II, which was developed alongside the original and released in 2001, faced similar

localization challenges. Though its charm is partly due to its dodgy voice acting, the English dub of Shenmue II has spawned several internet memes that showcase just how dire the state of Games localization was at that time.

As Shenmue localization coordinator Jeremy Blaustein put it **in an interview with GameSetWatch**, things were "much more of a disaster than you even know."



Compare that with the 2015 hit Yakuza 0, and the industry's evolution is immediately evident.

Also published by Sega, Yakuza 0 was (and still is) a global phenomenon, receiving critical acclaim worldwide and selling over 2 million copies on Steam alone.

As you may have guessed, much of Yakuza 0's success is due to its masterful localization. Not only were its translations correct, but natural, drawing from regional pop culture references, slang, and even **cultural interplay** between Japanese media and the Western countries who've adopted it.

With its witty adaptations, stellar voice acting, and meticulous balance of the foreign and familiar, Yakuza 0 can be thought of as the gold standard for video game localization, but its genius goes far deeper than that.

WHAT IS CULTURALIZATION?

For many gamers, Yakuza 0 and other narrative-heavy games released in the late 2010s were their first glimpse into an emerging concept in video game localization. Navigating cultural nuances, geopolitical sensitivities, and the effects of an increasingly connected world has become its own discipline — one that many publishers, developers, and language service providers laud as the future of localization.

Enter: Culturalization.

"You can think of it like this," says Eva Herreros, Director of Content Quality at Lionbridge Games. "Translation is to change one language into another, and nothing more. It's the first step in breaking that wall of non-comprehension. Localization is to make the game more engaging for local audiences by tailoring it to their worldview, utilizing things like pop culture references, slang and certain audio-visual elements. Localization ensures flow, consistency, and polish to produce a more natural and native-like output. But translation and localization aren't enough to truly bridge the gap — this is where culturalization comes in."

Culturalization is the process of melding creative content to the context of the target culture.

"You're taking the original intent, internalizing it, reframing it, and presenting it to the audience in a way that preserves the message and purpose while accounting for cultural norms and societal values," says Herreros.



3 LEVELS OF LINGUISTIC ADAPTATION

Differentiating between translation, localization, and culturalization is important because each process addresses distinct aspects of adapting content for a global audience.



TRANSLATION

Focuses on linguistic accuracy of a target language.
(i.e., correctly conveying source message)



LOCALIZATION

Broadens the scope to adapt to the linguistic and regional preferences of a target audience. Mainly focuses on ensuring translations are properly tailored to the target market (not to be confused with the target audience, which is more specific). Includes things like:

- » Script Adaptation *(e.g., shortening dialogue to fit in a text box or match the pacing of a cutscene)*
- » UI Reformatting *(e.g., text direction, terminology, color palette, etc.)*
- » Numeric Formatting *(i.e., dates, currency, units/measurement, etc.)*
- » Name Localization *(e.g., weapons, spells, locations, characters, etc.)*
- » Tonal Checks *(e.g., honorifics, formality, etc.)*



CULTURALIZATION

Digs deep to deliver an immersive, culturally resonant experience by aligning with the cultural norms, societal values, and geopolitical sensitivities of a target audience. This is the only level of linguistic adaptation that addresses players at a personal and emotional level. Includes things like:

- » Narrative Adaptation *(e.g., changing an in-game event to avoid parallels to a real-life historical event, etc.)*
- » Character Adaptation *(e.g., changing a character's age, backstory, clothing, etc.)*
- » Gameplay Mechanic Adaptation *(e.g., pay-to-win formulas, difficulty level, pacing, etc.)*
- » Additional Context *(e.g., adding in-game notes, expanded item descriptions, altered dialogue, etc.)*
- » Geopolitical Review *(e.g., navigating topics such as gender non-conforming language, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, politics, religion, etc. in different regions)*

Though textual transformation is at the core of any globalization strategy, culturalization elevates the gaming experience by putting the player at the center. From the early days of a game's development, it's important to be conscious of how certain game mechanics, storylines, and characters will be perceived across different target cultures. Developers, localization teams, and publishers alike should be able to identify elements that might introduce tension and understand how to resolve them.

"You're digging really deep here," says Ji Shin, Narrative Design Lead at Lionbridge Games. "Think past the subtitles, the voiceover, the UI, and even weapon and name translations. That's all part of translation and localization. Now, Think about the narrative. Think about subtle audio and visual cues. Think about gameplay — the player's objective, challenges, and rewards — and ask yourself, 'how does all of this connect with the geopolitical aspects of the target culture? What about religion? Legality? Current and historical events?'"

A game might undergo significant changes in the cultural review process, and this is to be expected. However, culturalization isn't about changing things willy-nilly.

"One of the trickiest aspects of culturalization is striking a balance between foreign and familiar," explains Baptistin le Blanc, Lionbridge Games' Director of European Content Delivery. "For example, we might retain a game's original place names, character names, or cultural references but provide context or explanations where needed so the target audience can understand and appreciate these elements. In this way, we aim to create an experience that feels native and familiar while still preserving the game's original charm and intent."

Consider a character dubbed The Black Warrior. An American might wonder, 'Is their armor black? Is their insignia black? Is their skin dark? Are they bad?' Not many Western players would think positively of this character based solely on that name. In Hindu culture, black can even symbolize pure evil. However, it's an auspicious color in many East Asian countries and could signify strength or power.

A culturalization team would work to uncover the developers' original intent and find a way to convey that in a way that makes sense to the target audience, either by localizing the name or providing context around its meaning (or reworking an insensitive character — using dark skin to signify evil? Yikes!).

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— Baptistin le Blanc, Lionbridge Games,
Director of European Content Delivery

WHY IS CULTURALIZATION IMPORTANT?

You may think that culturalization is the cherry on top of a globalization sundae, but that's simply not the case. While localization experts work to make a game fluid and engaging, culturalization experts establish a foundation of respect between publishers and players, upon which a resonant experience can be built. In other words, culturalization lays the groundwork so that the adapted content can be appreciated and enjoyed.

Despite the common perception that it's "just pandering" and "doesn't really matter," culturalization is vital for capturing and retaining player attention. A well-thought-out approach to world building and culture is what sets apart good games from great ones.

"Like any healthy relationship, the pact between devs and players requires some level of respect and understanding. How can you expect someone to enjoy your game when they're confused or offended? No matter how well you've "translated" things, good writing won't stick if it feels foreign or tone-deaf," Shin emphasizes. "Getting the atmosphere right helps to ensure that your game stands the test of time."

Games can be used to promote diversity and inclusivity. They are a great window into the lives of others and allow us to explore concepts we might bring back to the real world. Achieving an authentic representation of the human experience is paramount to a game's success.

Culturalization helps foster these highly resonant experiences. It allows players to connect more deeply with content and elicits a heightened emotional response. This experience is what turns casual players into lifelong fans and creates a strong sense of community — and this community is a massive asset. Players who feel valued are more likely to purchase merch, advocate for your game, and try your other titles.



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Director of Content Quality

“Emotions act as a hook. As you identify with characters and their stories, these feelings become an anchor, keeping you immersed. If a game is inclusive and respectful, you are more likely to get a sense of community and connect with other players, while at the same time learning and growing from them and from the game itself. It always feels good to be welcomed, seen, heard, and appreciated,” says Herreros.

It should come as no surprise that culturalization also promotes market penetration. The ‘**Can’t Read, Won’t Buy**’ phenomenon has picked up a lot of steam in the past decade. It’s well-known that implementing a localization strategy can increase revenue, but culturalization can ensure you get the best return on your localization investment. By creating a rich, respectful, and inviting atmosphere, you can expand your target audience and avoid turning off players who would have otherwise enjoyed your game.

When done right, culturalization can also allow an IP to branch out into different forms of media, including movies, television series, books, and more.

When recreating a universe in another medium, the source material — the game, in this case — needs to be potent and consistent. This will result in the offshoots having higher quality, stronger emotional impact, and of course, more loyal fans.

Herreros notes, “In a sea of games, standing out from the crowd is key. Games that go the extra mile to be inclusive and relatable to different cultures can really grab players’ attention and give a game a real edge over the competition. Personally, I also believe it’s the right thing to do.”

However, top-notch culturalization doesn’t just enhance the player experience. In addition to its being inclusive, culturalization means steering clear of offenses or cultural gaffes that can land the game in hot water. It can help avoid bad publicity, revenue loss, reputation damage, and even legal consequences that can come from a lack of sensitivity.

THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM: DEI (DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION)

We won't beat around the bush. DEI has been, and likely will remain, a controversial topic in the gaming sphere for quite some time. It's a nuanced subject and one that's been twisted and turned countless times. But while buzzwords like "woke" and "ESG" cloud the discussion, there's one key concept that cuts through the noise: alienation.

Imagine booting up your new favorite game after a long day at school or work. You've just started the newest arc in the main story, where a new area has been unlocked. You're exploring the beautiful and foreign world, swept away by its rich colors, novel architecture, and enchanting soundscape.

And then a beloved side character — one you thought was your ally — makes a fat joke.

What's even worse is the lack of repercussion or even acknowledgment of said remark. You're no longer immersed in the game, instead left to ponder why, in this unearthly setting, weight would even be a concern. In a world of wings, tails, and scales, why would the writers choose to have a character say *that*? It's a cliché example, no doubt, but one that many can relate to.

"Games can have sensitive content. Nobody's trying to censor anything here," says Shin. "But you've got to ask yourself how every element of your game affects every player's experience. What does this line of dialogue mean in the context of the game? Does it contribute to the story in a meaningful way? Does it make sense for this character to be saying that? If you find something that calls out a specific demographic in a tone-deaf or unnecessary way, it's a no-go."



ONLY
38%

of all gamers report believing major video game companies think about people like them when designing games.
[Source: *Glaad*]



1 IN 5

active gamers identifies as LGBTQ.
[Source: *Glaad*]



MORE THAN
2 IN 3

Black, Hispanic, Asian, and Pacific Americans play video games.
[Source: *ESA*]



53%

of all gamers feel that developers have a responsibility to make gaming and gaming spaces more inclusive.
[Source: *Glaad*]



HALF

of all gamers **identify as female**.
[Source: *Statista*]



44%

of gamers report having experienced or witnessed racism and hate speech on gaming platforms.
[Source: *Preply*]

While there's much discussion around adding representation to games and championing allyship, the first step toward healthy diversity in video games is often overlooked.

"Many see DEI initiatives as a way to seem more 'progressive.' It becomes a race to cram in as many PoC, LGBTQIA+, female, or disabled characters as you possibly can. But while representation is important, that's a disingenuous and ultimately harmful way to approach diversity," says Shin.

Players can see your intent through the way you execute diversity. If only the bare minimum has been done to include a "diverse" character, it'll be obvious from the get-go. Moreover, it can backfire — big time.

Take, for example, a disabled character... whose disability makes no sense. The way their condition is portrayed in-game is overplayed, unrealistic,

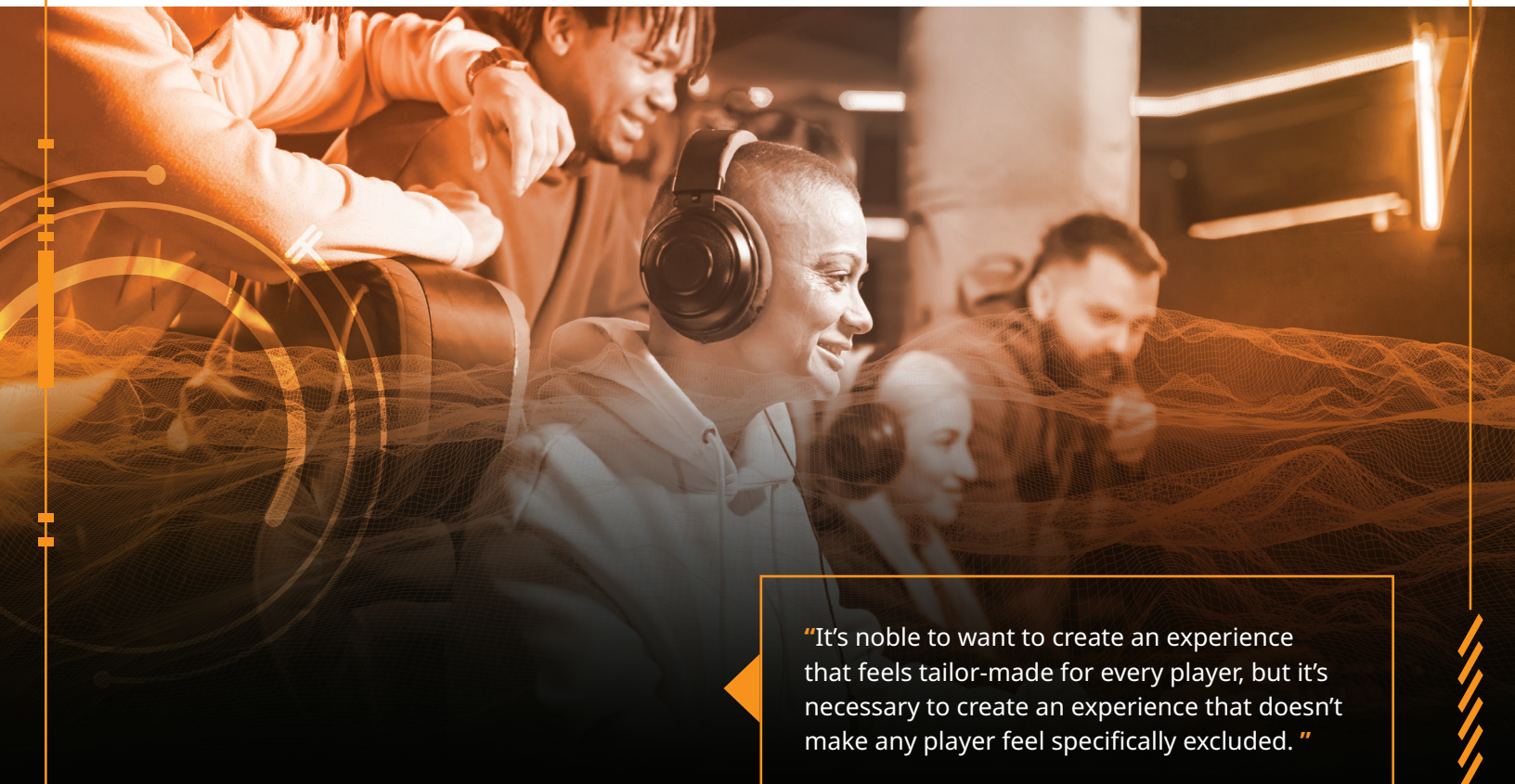
and inconsistent. Worse yet, consider a protagonist who suffers a debilitating injury, only for said injury to somehow, magically, vanish without a trace.

That's not a win for the disabled community. The blatant lack of basic research and effort only serves to rub salt in an already-open wound.

"It boils down to not alienating your audience. Throw away the belief that something isn't worth doing if it doesn't make a profit. This is worth doing because it's right." says Shin.

It's noble to want to create an experience that feels tailor-made for every player, but it's *necessary* to create an experience that doesn't make *any* player feel specifically excluded.

Make sure that your world, its characters, and the way they interact in context don't make your players feel unvalued, offended, or outcast.



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HOW DOES CULTURALIZATION WORK?

Culturalization is a meticulous process that requires a deep understanding of both the source and target cultures, as well as the creative vision.

It must be implemented from a game's inception, as it involves even the most basic building blocks of a game. Every part of the production and globalization process, from narrative and character design to audio and localization testing, is impacted by culturalization.

Things like a customizable character's name or gender representation are even reflected in the game's code.

However, there is a general structure for culturalization projects, comprising an analysis phase followed by adaptation and quality assurance testing.

Le Blanc explains Lionbridge Games' process below:

- » **First**, our team analyzes the game in its original context, ensuring we have a deep understanding of its story, characters, themes, and cultural nuances.
- » **Next**, we work closely with local cultural consultants and linguists who have in-depth knowledge of the target culture. They guide us in adapting the game's content. During this phase, we maintain close contact with the developer/publisher to ensure we're not detracting from the game's original intent. Tools such as character matrices, language style guides, and regional DEI protocol help our translators and narrative teams remain faithful to the cultural vision of the game.
- » **Finally**, we conduct extensive quality assurance tests to ensure that the localized game aligns with the original's intent and authenticity.

Exposing this process might seem like a business risk, but as le Blanc explains, just because you have the formula doesn't mean you have the means to solve the equation.

"This knowledge alone isn't enough to provide top-notch culturalization. You need the right experience, talent, infrastructure, and workflows to make things work. Exposing our process poses no threat to our business. In fact, we think this topic should be more widely understood, and we're happy to share our expertise. Easy access to information about the culturalization process not only encourages industry-wide growth but also empowers developers and publishers to make more informed choices when looking for partners."



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HOW CAN DEVELOPERS AND PUBLISHERS FIND LOCALIZATION AND CULTURALIZATION SUPPORT?

Ensuring immersion at every level is no small feat. It requires an intimate understanding of not just the target language, but the target culture. Moreover, understanding culturalization is only half the battle; the other is finding the resources to get it done, and done well. The good news is, there are plenty of video game localization companies in today's world. However, it's important to remember that not every vendor is equipped to deliver an in-depth cultural review.

Developers and Publishers should look for localization companies that have:

- » Extensive experience
- » Global infrastructure
- » Local presence in your target regions
- » Qualified linguists and translators

- » Talent with vetted geopolitical review and diversity and inclusion skills
- » Dedicated project management teams
- » Dedicated content and narrative design teams
- » Strong relationships with subject matter experts and NGOs
- » Data-backed processes and tools
- » End-to-end methodology, from development to post-launch

Another crucial factor in choosing a partner is a good sense of humility. Culturalization teams must be experienced and humble enough to know when external resources are required. Inexperienced localization companies don't know what they don't know, nor do they have the connections to reach out for the right, qualified help. Finding a provider that meets the above criteria will significantly improve the quality of your localized content.

Culturalization will undoubtedly have a profound impact on the Games industry moving forward. It's a concept that goes beyond language to accommodate a more global and diverse audience.

As games localization companies continue to provide more native-like gaming experiences, we'll likely (and hopefully) see a more inclusive industry across the globe. In essence, culturalization implies a future where games are not just translated or localized but truly globalized.



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ABOUT LIONBRIDGE GAMES

We are passionate gamers with a mission to deliver great gaming experience to players all around the world. Lionbridge Games was created by a group of dedicated gamers in 2013 at the largest globalization company in the world. We formed a team focused on game services built on the underpinning of Lionbridge's global infrastructure, enabling us to create a new approach to game services: truly global and technology-led at the core.



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