

Let's-a translate a video game! Ft. Raymond Wu

Another really interesting area of translation is video games, not only because (almost) all of us love video games, but also because a correct, appealing, and well-rendered translation contributes significantly to the video gamer's experience and, even, to the image of the company producing the game.

In fact, a poorly translated video game will be experienced by thousands, if not tens of thousands of people, who will, partly based on the poor quality of the translation, form a negative impression of the product, damaging its credibility.

Just to get into the details of this area of translation, I decided to interview Raymond, a video game translator for more than a year.

**So, Raymond, welcome! Thank you for your time. Tell us right away: how did you and why did you start translating, specifically, video games?**

Thank you for having me Gabriele. It's my pleasure to be a guest at your interview. My story of being a video game localizer is kinda interesting. I majored in English literature at my university and graduated in 2021. I tried to land a job as a translator for any company in the local city, and I really did, but the pay was not so good and I was more of an assistant rather than a sheer linguist, so I understood it was not what I wanted.

Prior to my graduation, my mentor suggested I get myself some translation projects as a part-time job and revealed to me the truth that I didn't have to stick to my in-house work alone. Therefore, I sent my CV to many linguistic companies in my country and beyond but for more than half a year, nobody offered me even an opportunity to do a translation test. They just told me that they were looking for candidates with experience to help with them immediately.

In early 2022, finally I got some replies from a few agencies and did some translation tests for them. Unsurprisingly, I failed most of these tests, but I still managed to pass tests on literature, marketing, and video games. It's still a piece of pretty good news to me back then. Literature was my favorite field and I did spend quite some time studying and practicing literature translation, but the thing is that there were and still are very few, if not none, demands for literature translation talents around the world, and the pay is very pathetic, not even enough to cover my subsistence needs.

Video game is an ideal field as it's in need of a huge amount of talent (thanks to that, many companies were willing to offer an opportunity to spring chickens like me) and pays better than other sectors, so I just thought, "well, if I can stand out among others in this 'game', why not? I have played a lot of games, anyway." Later I got compliments from linguistic companies and game devs or publishers. Some devs even decided to work with a company after seeing my translation sample for them. I felt rather proud that time. Since then I have specialized in video game localization and have developed QA testing as an extra bonus for myself.

**What was the project you worked on? What kind of atmosphere and audience did the video game have? And what were the main difficulties you encountered working on translation?**

I have worked on quite a lot of game titles and even franchises, such as Earth: Revival and Lies of P, yet due to the strict NDA, I can't disclose much, especially since some of them are still under development. I also got credits for some games. One of them was released in August 2023. When I saw my name gradually rolled up on the screen, I felt a strong sense of belonging, as though this game was part of my life. To game localizers like me, what matters is not only the salary we get but the credit we earn. It's a recognition and respect for what we have done. We read between the lines, take infinite pains, work our hearts out, and make light of hardships, to fit what was designed with another language and culture in the target market.

Video games are products, though they are virtual. People design, produce, and develop them, and sell them for profits, so it's still a business action. The sale performance of a product depends on two sides: the product itself (such as the quality, price, function, and aesthetic style), and its consumers (or players, in terms of video games). People of one or two generations ahead of me hold that video games are children's stuff, like animation and cartoons. However, the fact is you can find video game players at any age, from any nation, and of any gender. In a word, video game has a broad audience. The reason behind it is very simple: everyone needs spiritual satisfaction, and games, as entertainment, provide first-hand yet virtual gratification at a very acceptable cost. (For example, players don't really have to fight against horrible monsters in reality, but they can slay these evil creatures in the virtual world to be crowned as a hero.)

The huge amount of gamers and the spiritual satisfaction essence grant the game industry a booming atmosphere. In 2023, the total revenue generated by the game industry equals the sum of the music and film industry (around \$184.0 billion, according to Newzoo's statistics). While promising as the market is, competition is unimaginably tough, even almost a rat race. The game industry underwent a massive layoff a few months ago, partly because of technological advancements like artificial intelligence. It put a powerful volatile note to the whole industry. So basically, a promising future, yet cutthroat competition and an everchanging environment, make the major atmosphere over the whole industry.

Translation is not an easy thing but the main difficulty I have now is not from the work itself, but beyond the work. It seems to many people that translation is easy work as long as you are bilingual or multilingual, or they can just use a machine translation tool's help. I'm not criticizing it because it's quite normal that people outside the field can't fully understand what industry insiders are doing. Take myself as an example, I don't know how Elon Musk designed his SpaceX rockets, so I can only imagine it's about lighting up some fuel to push a long white box to outer space. But it's definitely more than that, so is the translation. I will not dwell on the definition and process of translation, but the lack of respect is harming everyone in and beyond the industry. Could you imagine that after how much you have labored to develop a game, it eventually gets ruined by poorly handled localization, resulting in dismal sales and disappointing players should could have been your diehard fans? Take The Elder Scrolls Online as an example. It's indeed an excellent game. I myself am a huge fan of this franchise (I'm still playing The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim), but unfortunately, its terrible translation sparks almost all Simplified Chinese players' complaints and mocking. Many of them even refunded the game and left rather negative comments around the Internet world. I believe the game dev didn't want this but the whole workflow was a mess: the game dev hires a linguistic company to localize the game into different languages, but the company outsourced it to other smaller agencies. Then these agencies took in terrible linguists at an insulting rate (say 0.015 USD per source word, even less). Who's going to pay for this wrongdoing? Players.

Therefore, in a word, the main difficulty I have encountered and am still suffering from is the lack of regularity and respect, which results from people's misunderstanding of the translation. I believe there is still a long way to go to right the wrong.

**Is there anything that you have to pay particular attention to while tackling the translation of a video game?**

There are a lot of things that deserve game localizers' particular attention, such as the culture, religious, and political taboos, target players, style guide, context, and so on. The one I attach special importance to is the query sheet. "Taboos" are too serious to be neglected; "target players" may be too ambiguous to be defined, and "context" plus with "style guide" are too fundamental to be left out (localizers should read the context and style guide to deliver accurate and consistent translation). The query sheet allows linguists to ask for help not only from the game dev but also from localizers and reviewers from other language teams. I always check the query sheet from time to time. Very often the problem that bothers me has already been logged and answered in the sheet. I also share my opinions when I see questions to which I may have the answer.

**Were there in particular one or more phrases or words that you translated that you remember and are most proud of that you would like to share?**

Definitely! I'd love to share some examples from the projects that I have recently worked on:

EN – ZHCN:

This is an age of chaos and discord. The Empires have been at war since the beginning of history with no signs of truce. An armored figure stands over your body and slowly pulls a dirk.

时代动荡，战乱频发。自古以来，列国纷争不断，止戈之期无望。一人身穿铠甲，踩在你的身上，缓缓抽出匕首。

ZHCN – EN:

长夜漫漫，星火相伴。蜡炬成灰泪已干。

Long night, starlight, the candle burns out right, and my tears dry.

**Overall, how did you enjoy the experience? Was this project more fun or more tiring?**

Fun and tiring, haha. Localization is mind-twisting for sure, and I'm kinda paranoid, so I tend to read what I write over and over again, trying to be perfect. Such a personality puts much stress on me. But when I see the game I localized hits the market and earns admiration from players, I feel the effort I made, disregarding how much it is, has paid off. I once spent a whole hour watching a game's credit for multiple times. It was last August when a title I worked on was released, I was watching the scrolling credit and my girlfriend was sitting next to me with her eyes wide open to catch the first trace of my name. Eventually the word "Raymond Wu" crawled its way up to the screen, she jumped for joy and kept saying "So cool, you are so good! I know it! The best translator in the world!" I took a screenshot and shared it with my mentor, as

though I was saying: “your student finally made something.” He didn’t say much but I could tell that he felt rather proud of me. That’s also a spiritual satisfaction, even a noble one. It writes off the pain I take and grants an ultimate respect to my dignity.

Here I wholeheartedly endorse and recommend Sound in Words, a linguistic company offering video game localization and voiceover service in Argentina. The co-founder & localization director Julia Fiugeroa as well as project managers such as Nelson, Jorge, and Eugenia always try to put us in the game credit and offer decent rates. I firmly believe if a company respects freelancers like me, it’s definitely more than trustworthy to game devs, publishers, and other clients.

**To aspiring video game translators, and future translators in general, is there any advice you would like to give?**

I’m not going to lecture anybody anything about how to be a good translator whatsoever, haha. To me, translation or localization is just a skill, and to master a skill, one just needs to keep practicing and reflecting. It’s not a racket science or trail-blazing crusade, and I believe newcomers can easily find many insights from veteran linguists other than me. (On the other hand, I don’t think I’m now capable enough to offer any so-called advice.)

While I do wanna give some encouragement: to translators, ask for good rates and credits, because you deserve them; to linguistic agencies, charge for good price, pay your vendors decently, and try to get the credit for your PMs and localizers, because you and vendors are in the same camp; to game devs, invest your resources to localization, not only because your finely developed game deserves gamers all over the world, but also for the very reason that you can earn money from players in other nations.

As Mother Teresa said: “Not all of us can do great things. But we can do small things with great love.” Let’s begin with doing small things and move to a bigger cause together. What you guys are doing, disregarding how tiny it may be, means a lot to the whole industry.

Well, I thank you for your time and your answers, and I hope it was an interesting read 😊