

VIDEO GAME LOCALIZATION

Lost in Translation

In order for video games to be sold in as many countries as possible, they must be translated or localized. A tricky job, because the text file of a game often has no logical structure at first glance – but hundreds of pages.

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(Marcel Weyers working in a café in Melbourne. Photo: [Torsten Sohrmann](#))

Marcel Weyers often proceeds as if he were putting together a puzzle piece by piece: What could belong to the main menu, what to the options, what to the start button? Recently, for example, he was sent a single file with 80,000 words; in a Word document that would be about 180 pages – without structure.

“I didn’t know which text snippet belonged where, what were dialogues and what were hints for players – or just code fragments,” he says. It’s not uncommon in his profession for a project to seem somewhat enigmatic at first: the 28-year-old translates or localizes video games from English into German and vice versa.

Weyers usually works as a freelancer and on his own, so the games he works on are smaller than the well-known games for consoles like PlayStation or Xbox, which large teams work on for months, sometimes with dozens of translators. So far, he has localized around 150 games with up to 350,000 words, mainly adventure games, dating sims and visual novels. His [portfolio](#) includes titles such as Demetrios, Gibbous - A Cthulhu Adventure or installments of the Story of Seasons series, formerly known as Harvest Moon.

Video game localization is the term used because it’s about more than just translating. *“I have to be careful to adapt the language to the country, for example with proper names or brand products,”* explains Weyers. Meaning changing a Hardee’s into a Burger King and a Kleenex into a Tempo. *“The*

goal is for the player not to notice that the game has been translated, but to think that it has been written in German.”

It gets complicated when it comes to humor, which functions differently from language to language. *“Cat puns sometimes give me a headache,”* admits Weyers. If whole passages have to be rewritten, this is called transcreation in technical jargon. Sentences in English are often shorter than in German, so that the translated text suddenly overlaps with the menu button. If you can't save enough characters, the developer has to make room if necessary.

Short deadlines

The 28-year-old works mostly under time pressure and with short deadlines. Only rarely can he test a game himself before localization or even play it through several times. He usually researches videos, trailers, and pictures on the Internet – simply everything that already exists. If he then searches through a huge text file, he may have seen something somewhere on a screenshot and can assign it more quickly. Every now and then, developers send comments as well.

The localization of a game, however, is usually lower on the priority list of the studios. Weyers has already made the experience: *“The game is released, that's when the idea comes up to quickly translate it into five languages.”* While the developers had spent years developing the game, the time required for localization is often underestimated.

Nevertheless, it is important for his job to be an enthusiastic player himself, says the expert. You're familiar with game mechanics and procedures and know typical terms from menus and options. Very good language skills and a confident feeling for the language are, of course, part of the basics. In his own words, Weyers translates *“relatively freely”* and hardly uses CAT tools, so-called translation programs – and if he does, then MemoQ. Its translation memory recognizes, for example, whether something has already been translated and can be transferred.

Weyers came to his job with the learning-by-doing principle both through playing and his interest in literature and languages. Back in school, he already read books and played games in English. While studying German and English with a focus on literature at Justus Liebig University in Giessen, he was already translating video games for friends into German. *“That just picked up pace on the side,”* he says.

Record: 15,000 words per day

Weyers specializes in visual novels, which are very text-heavy games. The genre comes from Japan and was unknown here for a long time. It's still more of a niche. Weyers discovered the first visual novels on the net in 2010, liked them and built up his portfolio with them. *“My translations were among the first in German,”* he says. Developers became aware of him and wrote to him. To this day, he has little competition in this field.

Meanwhile, there are already several agencies for video game localization. Weyers is also regularly supplied with orders by a number of them. He doesn't strive for a permanent position, rather he wants to be independent and combine work and travel. After his studies, he spent a year working and traveling in New Zealand. He is currently in Australia, writing a book on video game localization and giving a lecture at the PAX Aus gaming fair in Melbourne on October 12, 2019. At the time of the interview with Golem.de, he was in Tasmania and translated the adventure game Brok by the French indie studio Cowcat Games, a project with about 140,000 words. At the end of December, he will return to Dresden for the time being and travel to Japan in 2020.

On average, Weyers spends between one and four weeks working on the localization of a game. *“On a good day”* he translates around 10,000 words, *“my record is 15,000”*. He estimates his average speed at 5,000 to 7,000 words per day. Born in Limburg, he learned to write quickly during his training as a foreign language secretary – *“that helps me now”*. Because the faster, the better the fee. He says ten cents per word are *“good earnings”*. That means converted: A fixed translator can achieve maximum daily rates of 1,000 to 1,500 euros.

The games that Weyers localizes come from the USA, Great Britain, and Australia, but increasingly also from Russia, Poland or Romania and have already been translated into English there. This is not always a good thing: *“It is often difficult to turn a bad translation into English into a good one into German,”* he says. And while the person who has localized a video game well is usually never mentioned, *“hell breaks loose if the translation is bad.”*