An Exploration of the Localization and Popularization of Visual Novels

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Visual novels are one of the most unique innovations from Japan in the video game industry. With such a diverse set of means including soundtracks, animated models, lively and reactive scene changes, and more at its disposal, the visual novel can tell a unique story in a more dynamic and interactive way than traditional novels. One notable detail about visual novels is that they originated in Japan, yet they can be found in almost every country. The growing popularity of visual novels outside of Japan is not so trivial to explain. While the great variety of genres for visual novels certainly contributes to the medium's overall popularity by offering a type of novel all kinds of players may enjoy, it is even more interesting that every language has its own nuances practically and linguistically which would make direct translations of the games from Japanese rather boring. However, through the process of localization, directors of the game may introduce a great story, perhaps even a new culture, to a more global audience. This work will critically examine and expose weaknesses with traditional localization methods while analyzing the encounter foreign culture in visual novels, then ultimately proposes a fundamental change in the approach to localization from lazy consumption to active engagement and education to increase cross-cultural awareness.

The primary mode of analysis for this essay will be the first three installments of the 逆転裁判 (*gyakuten saiban*) series also known as *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney Trilogy*. *Phoenix Wright*, as it will be henceforth referred, is an episodic lawyer drama where the player is told a story from the perspective of rookie defense attorney Phoenix Wright (なるほど隆一 *Naruhodo Ryuichi* in the Japanese version) who is tasked each episode with defending the honor and demonstrating the innocence of his clients through intense, witty courtroom "battle" scenes. The game features comedic elements

throughout the narrative. It is considered a “kinetic” novel since the game’s plot does not change based on any of the player’s choices. This is as opposed to the style of “branching narrative” where endings to the game are decided directly by player choices. This game is the ideal choice for analysis because it contains a conveniently large set of examples which can help propel discussion and because the first game in the trilogy is remarkably different from the second two with respect to localization.

First, it is important to state that it was never clear how successful *Phoenix Wright* would be. According to Mandiberg (2015, p.121), Capcom was punished for mistakenly presuming the English localization would be by selling out “immediately” from only a couple thousand copies printed. From this, it is not infeasible to think that there was not a lot of faith that localizations in the early 2000s would do well. Given the stark differences between the Japanese language and many other world languages, especially the written script, it should be obvious that localizing a Japanese game into any language presents a strong challenge even after ignoring any cultural differences. Therefore, licensing companies to have games like *Phoenix Wright* localized into other languages was something of a radical notion which would require much convincing (Bicova, 2019, p.26).

The end result was impressive; there was no indication in the first installment of the *Phoenix Wright* series that the game was originally from some other country and culture. I have finished the entire trilogy in only English, but I know some of the original content. However, most notably the

localization team had changed all of the names, some evidence, the jokes, and even the setting of the game to remove all "traces" of the original culture in the game that would cause players some inconvenient sense of discomfort which are called 違和感 (*iwakan*) (Mandiberg, 2015, pp.114-115). Mandiberg gives many examples of such *iwakan* from simple character designs or features to overwhelmingly Japanese settings in future games (Mackey, 2015). For example, Mike Meekins (Figure 1) is a police officer, but his uniform and mannerism is distinctly Japanese. There is Japanese kanji on an armband that the police from Los Angeles, where the English localized version takes place, do not wear. While minor, it would certainly make a player more confused than the facemask Phoenix Wright is seen wearing in the third game, as Mandiberg would excessively cite. While this might not particularly interest most players enough that they feel compelled to learn more about the culture behind the game, it would likely be less possible to ignore a core element of the game, the 大江戸戦士トノサマン (*oedo senshi tonosaman*) or "Steel Samurai." As it is a critical element to the gameplay and narrative, changing it at all would have cost too much (Mandiberg, 2015, p.120). In this case, it might become likely that players may learn about Samurai inadvertently by how the game presents the character, or they will find information on their own terms. This, Mandiberg argues, is the benefit of *iwakan* (2015, p.115).

For the purposes of this essay, *iwakan* are only beneficial if there is reason to think they would directly increase the popularity of the visual novel. The pending

question pertains to the extent to which having elements of the original culture of the game would decrease receptivity outside of the culture of origin. Since the obvious goal of a game is to entertain an audience, then it should logically follow that localizers should seek to maximize "entertainment value" through the process of "transcreation" (O'Hagan, 2009, p.152), which is the creative process through which localizers seek to make the object game as enjoyable and rewarding as possible to play for target audiences. As evidenced by *Phoenix Wright*'s localization, there is little effort or desire to teach or acknowledge the original culture; the professional approach will be to take the route that will most likely optimize the amount of revenue made (Mandiberg, 2015, p.123) likely with immersion as a correlate. However, this process comes from the flawed premise that players are unwilling to experience external cultures, learn new things, or even have existing knowledge of the game's original culture in the first place, yet even in 2015 Mandiberg had observed that ramen has become enough of a commonplace food in at least North America where the English version of *Phoenix Wright* is marketed that any mention of ramen would not be changed into hamburgers if the game were localized today (Mandiberg, 2015, p.128). However, I would agree with Mandiberg that preventing *iwakan* is not always mandatory. It is problematic to assume that running into culture elements that do not align with one's own is an uncomfortable experience. Cultural adaptation expert Michael Winkelman asserts that after a little bit of effort, getting to know a new culture could be a rewarding experience (1994, p.122). Therefore, not only could the gameplay of the visual novel have unique elements to draw players in, but it may also add entertainment value to give players an opportunity to learn something about the original culture.

There is a comfortable threshold we must stay within so that the experience does not become too uncomfortable or unplayable; it is no use to literally translate idiomatic expressions from language to language, but little “traces” of the original culture could lend itself well to an increased rate of globalization. As localizing directors, they have the freedom to fit the script with the scene to facilitate the player’s understanding of the novel. Though it may make sense to say that the responsibility of deciding which cultural incongruencies to intentionally include in their final product would fall onto the director, it is not asking much more of these leaders since they already tend to change quite a bit of content to give players the optimal experience. I propose that instead of changing content into something that would fit the current snapshot of what the target culture would accept without a second thought, add content that supplements the original culture to help introduce the audience into the foreign atmosphere. Good translations and localizations require that the director of the project know the relevant details of the object language, popular culture references, and trivia about the original country which means that it should be possible for the director to spend their energy working on ways to encourage intercultural awareness as opposed to using clever tricks to make the delivery of the narrative as easy as possible for consumers.

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