

The Localization of Online Games: Taking the “League of Legends” as an Example

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Abstract: This paper reveals the significance of localizing online games by exploring the classification, current status and future development of the “League of Legends” (LOL), which is one of the most heated and commercially successful online games all over the world. LOL, which is a typical representative of the current online games, is a hybrid of website and system. Today, with its global popularity, commercial benefits and booming status in electronic sports, it has already witnessed and experienced localization and globalization. Currently, to serve the players from different countries, there are more than 30 game servers in 9 different regions. Each server has already been localized to adapt to the local language and culture. In this paper, the Chinese server is selected as an example to be compared with the American server (the original server), thus analyzing LOL’s localization from the perspective of characters’ names and representative lines. Moreover, this paper also highlights the possible trends for further localization and globalization of the LOL and other online games, which include improvements of game servers and the chat window. In all, the industry of online games is witnessing the process of localization and globalization. Both linguistically and technically, this industry should be and can be further revised and improved for better user experiences and business purpose.

Keywords: Localization, Globalization, Online games, “League of Legends”, Improvement.

1. Introduction

With tremendous amount of players and increasing global influences, the industry of online games is witnessing the process of localization and globalization. Localization, was set to serve more customers all over the world, originated from more than 40 years ago and could be understood as the translation of the source material (Pirrone & D’Ulizia p.1). According to Gresham and Severan’s research, the global gaming industry in 2023, saying that after a slight decline in 2022, the gaming industry will return to “modest growth” of 4.4% in 2023, with global revenue expected to reach \$223.1 billion (p.3). And by 2030, the global gaming industry’s annual revenue is estimated to reach \$301.2 billion, with 3.8 billion active players worldwide (Gresham & Severan p.3). The “League of Legends” (LOL), which is one of most players and game servers all over the world, can be drawn as a typical example of the online games with largest global market share (QuestMobile Research, 2024). However, successful and potential as the online game localization might be, player experience and negative in-game behavior are popular topics for research while linguistic problems especially the cross-platform localization issues have been little discussed. Therefore, it is of great significance to analyze the status of online game localization as well as its developing trend in the future. This paper mainly examines the translation of major characters’ names and lines in the LOL, which can indicate the level of localization from the cultural and linguistic perspective. Through the systemic analysis of localization, the developing trend of online games’ localization can be detected, which can better satisfy the needs of players all over the world.

2. Literature Review

According to many scholars’ arguments, the fundamental motivation for developing localization lies in the economic benefits. As shown in Cheng’s (2000) paper, the primary purpose of localization is to commercialize software and

websites (29-42). Online games, which are typical mixture of both, not only require players to log on downloaded software, but also require them to refer to the latest news and walkthroughs on official websites and various BBS. To attract more players and to create more profits, the localization of online games is thus developing rapidly, among which LOL is one of the most successful one. According to SuperData Research’s (2024) data, LOL ranks top in the MMO worldwide revenue for 2023 (p. 2). LOL’s success does not only cover its huge financial profits in the sales of virtual goods, the vast number of players has also shown great cultural exchanges, including the popularization of game terminologies and the booming status of the electronic sports. To serve players of different geological and cultural background, the designer company of LOL, Riot Games, cooperates with local companies on operations and management, thus catering to the needs and preferences of local players. Tencent, the operator of LOL in China Mainland, launches the game server of China after localizing the original version in the US. At the same time, every game patch that is provided by the Riot Games will get localized to provide better services to the Chinese players. According to the research of SuperData (2015), Tencent has already become the “dominating force” in the online game industry in China in recent years, which is deeply connected to the booming status of LOL (p. 1). Based on the “TENCENT ANNOUNCES 2024 THIRD QUARTER RESULTS”, Tencent “delivered robust revenue growth in our games business” (p.1 2024) and LOL along with other online games make the major contribution to value-added profits (p.2). Apparently, the global success of LOL is not only deeply connected to the original design of Riot Games, but is also related to the perfect strategies and practices of localization.

With the existing prosperity of online games’ localization, there merely exist limited researches on the recent development. In Mangiron and O’Hagan’s article (2006), it explores game localization from the perspective of translation process and discusses the necessity of “unleashing

imagination” during this process (pp. 10-21). However, limited by data and technology, Mangiron and O’Hagan could merely focus on the localization of video games, which does not involve a key element of today’s online games, namely the Internet (pp. 10-21). Hence, it lacks in-depth researches of the internet-based services and products, which are the core of online games. As for in Mangiron and O’Hagan’s new book in 2013, online games are drawn into the research targets with “theoretical frameworks available in translation studies, while also drawing on games studies as appropriate” (p. 25). However, this book mainly focuses on Japanese games, which are not the most popular or influential games in the current market. What’s more, the greater China region and South Korea are the dominant online game markets in today’s East Asia. In other words, the researches into the localization of Japanese online games may not reflect the essence of typical and mainstream issue of today’s online games. In Brown-Hoekstra’s (2014) paper, theory background, namely the connection between transcreation and localization, gets further analyzed, but there is no exact example of online games to illustrate it (pp. 38-40). As for in W. Zhang’s work, the theory of transcreation is specifically applied to analyze its contribution to the localization of games (pp. 165-166). In the other corresponding researches, although typical online games or mainstream markets are covered, analyses are not profound or intensive enough. For example, in Cui’s (2013) paper, it mainly reviews the history of China’s localization market (pp. 20-24). Comparatively, in Zhang’s (2012) paper, the localization of games is merely analyzed from the perspective of censorship (pp. 338-350). In Li and Chang’s (2012) paper, detailed researches and analyses are taken to deal with a video game, PVZ, which does not relate to Internet or current players’ preference. As for in the two papers of M. Zhang and W. Zhang (2013) and of Wang (2015), limited examples are quoted from many different games, which do not get thorough analyses either (pp. 88-90; 143-144).

Therefore, it is also of great significance to present this paper to analyze the current status and future development of LOL’s localization in the Chinese market.

3. Current Status of LOL’s Localization

To serve game players all over the world, LOL altogether sets game servers in 9 different regions, including the US, the Europe, China Mainland, Taiwan Region, South Korea, the Southeast Asia, Australia, the South America and Japan (which is still under construction). Except China Mainland has more than 20 game servers and the Europe has 2 game servers, there is only one game server in other regions respectively. Servers in different regions are displaying and operated in local languages. Players are also allowed to log on the game servers in different regions. For example, many Chinese players enjoy logging on the US server, even if they are forced to tolerate the English environment. Apart from these regular servers, which are designed to cater to common amateurs, there are also competition servers especially for those professional gamers. Corresponding international e-sports games of LOL are held worldwide, attracting massive attention of fans all over the world. In recent years, the operation of LOL also crosses different platforms: PC, mobile devices, mini programs and e-sport channels. Because of the professionalization and globalization of the e-sports, more

professional game servers are set to provide training environment for gamers while issues of localization have not been improved simultaneously.

Therefore, the localization of LOL in China market has already become a giant issue for stakeholders and for user experiences on account of the large population of game players in China Mainland. In this context, this paper explores the current status of LOL’s localization in China Mainland from the translation of characters’ names and representative lines.

3.1 Characters’ Names

There are altogether 128 characters in LOL so far. In the context of LOL, characters are connected to the skills and functions that the player can use in the whole round of combating. Since LOL is a typical massively multi-player online game, players can choose campaign mode to combat with other players individually or in groups. While combating with other players, the first step is to select from characters that the system randomly provide for players. In LOL, all the characters are known as champions, and different champions are of different characteristics. All the champions are given unique names, skills, functions, cultural background and missions. The number and skills of champions keep updating, thus adding interests to the development of the game. The special setting of champions is one of the key reasons that keep it attractive and interesting to players, which also contributes to the Chinese name of LOL, “英雄联盟 (the league of champions)” instead of “联盟传说 (the league of legends).”

After reviewing the localization of all the champions’ names, some translating conventions can be found. Since the names of all champions consist of two parts, the titles and the exact names, different translating methods can be found in these two parts. In terms of titles, most of them are translated into four-character Chinese titles, which does not only convey the original meaning in English, but also highlight skills or functions of these champions. Translating features can be summarized as domesticating and transcreating.

Domesticating. Domesticating translation refers to obeying the mainstream cultural and lingual conventions of local languages while translating the source materials. Among all the Chinese version of champions’ titles, the majorities are translated under traditional Chinese aesthetics. First of all, various original titles are translated and simplified into four Chinese characters. This is a typical characteristic of Chinese idioms. In the traditional Chinese literary form, four-character expressions are connected to grace and literariness.

Second, more literary characters are preferred in the Chinese translation. For example, “之” instead of “的” is widely used to present the meaning of “of.” “The River King” is translated into “河流之王,” “the Spear of Vengeance” into “复仇之矛,” and “the Missing Link” into “迷失之牙” (Tencent Games). Compared with “的,” “之” is more widely used in Classical Chinese. Apart from “of,” many other Chinese titles can further illustrate the literariness of the localization. “The Sad Mummy” is localized as “殇之木乃伊,” “the Void Walker”

as “虚空行者” (Tencent Games). Apparently, compared with the Chinese version, the original names are much more plain. The selection of literary styles does not only cater to the Chinese preference, but also meet the requirements of titles' elegance.

Third, cultural background is taken into consideration. As mentioned above, the China Mainland is the most profitable market. So many champions are specially designed to entertain the Chinese players by Riot Games. For example, “the Monkey King” and “the Blind Monk” are especially presented to celebrate the establishment of Chinese game servers. The localization of these two titles thus follows the Chinese conventions, rather than create some new titles.

Transcreating. As stated in Brown-Hoesktra (2014), transcreation refers to the localizing process with the business purpose as priority, which does not demand the absolute exactness (p. 38). Among the Chinese titles, most of them may not be exactly the same to the original titles, but the meanings and the features get intensified with the transcreation. For instance, “the Armordillo,” which is kind of beast in the legend, is localized as “皮甲龙龟” (Tencent Games). Apparently, there is equivalent Chinese translation of Armordillo, but Tencent Games chooses to translate it into “皮甲龙龟.” It does not relate to the original version, but it reflects its audio image and skills of this champion. Although it does not meet the linguistic expectation, it serves better for user experience.

Besides the examples of absolute inconsistency with the source materials, most titles are translated to partly related to the original meaning. For example, “the Grand Duelist” is localized as “无双剑姬,” while “the Tidal Trickster” as “潮汐海灵” (Tencent Games). Apparently, the Chinese titles are the intensified version of the original titles, which may lay emphasis on certain characteristics of the champion. The grand duelist is translated as “无双(unrivaled),” and duelist becoming the sword woman. As for trickster, which should be translated as “骗子,” is localized as the “elf in the ocean.” Obviously, the Chinese translation is easier to understand and memorize the features of champions, which can better adapt to the market's requirements.

As for the localization of exact names, most of names mainly comply with tradition of name translation, with the transliteration playing the leading role. From Annie, Diana, to Vladimir, most of these names are translated into the existing Chinese version of “安妮,” “戴安娜,” and “弗拉基米尔.” These names have already featured the gender difference with corresponding Chinese character component. At the same time, several less-common names receive some special treatments, which can be summarized as simplification.

Simplification. Simplification refers to neglecting the complexity of the original names and mainly focusing on the body part of the original names. Some names are omitted with the profession or title. Dr. Mundo is translated as “蒙多,” which omits the meaning of doctor. Master Yi is also translated without the meaning of master. The omitting of occupation title in Chinese version may reflect the different tradition towards occupation tile between Chinese and

western culture. At the same time, it may be also a good way to avoid providing duplicate titles, thus confusing the Chinese players.

Moreover, while translating some English names with special meanings, Tencent Games chooses to simplify the English version into the function of name, ignoring the meaning behind the names. The names of Twisted Fate and Twitch are vivid examples. The localization of these two names may bother the translators to choose from transliteration and literal translation of the original meaning. After referring to the current version of LOL, it is apparent that Tencent Games chooses to translate them into “崔斯特” and “图奇,” which are merely based on the pronunciation. The literal meanings of these words are simplified, thus clarifying the appellation function of these two names and avoiding confusing Chinese players.

Therefore, the localization of characters' full names is accord with Chinese conventions, which provides better experiences for Chinese players. The user experience is given the priority when localizing the source text. As new champions are updated continuously, the quality of translation and localization can be ensured.

3.2 Representative Lines

Representative lines refer to the dialogues that display on the screen automatically when game players take corresponding operations. It mainly consists of two categories, actions and dialogues.

Actions. Representative lines of actions refer to the lines relating to the nature of operation, which include Attack Damage, Ability Power, Tank, etc. These lines appear on the screen when players send directions to their champions. The official translation version of these terminologies is based on the literal meanings, which are shown on the system of LOL. However, on the official websites, official BBS and other platforms of LOL, these representative lines are always localized as the abbreviation of these terminologies, such as AD, AP and T. These abbreviations are first invented and used by Chinese and South Korean players in professional e-sports games, which can save much time in fierce competitions. Because of the popularity of e-sports in China, the abbreviating version wins more appraisal than the literal translation in the system. What's more, because of the strong influence of LOL, the terminologies of AD, AP and T can be even used in daily life to describe certain situations. For example, AD is used to describe the winter in North China, while AP is used to describe the winter in South China.

In other words, the localization of representative lines can be modified by massive players, and even be coined into terminologies in daily life.

Dialogues. Dialogues refer to the unique lines that champions may utter under specific situations. According to the original design of Riot Games, champions are living creatures in the legend. Hence, different champions are of distinctive features, personalities and backgrounds. Through the lines and dialogue uttered by the champions, unique characteristics of champions are also exposed to game players. Therefore, it is

of great significance to maintain the characteristics of original version in the Chinese translation.

As shown in the Tencent Games, most translations are accord with the characteristics of champions and specific situations. For example, in the lines of Alistar, the Minotaur, his unique personalities of candidness and bravery are presented. "You must follow!" is translated into "你必须跟着俺," "Now I am angry" into "俺很生气, 后果很严重," and "To greener pastures" into "俺好像看见了, 更绿的牧场" (Tencent Games). The pronoun of "俺" is more widely used by farmers in North China, which can reveal the candid personality of Alistar. "后果很严重" which is added in the Chinese to supplement the line of "now I am angry," can further elaborate the unique characteristic of this champion. Similarly, Cassiopeia's lines are translated to present her elegant and powerful image. At the same time, domesticating is also applied in the translation. "No mercy" is translated into "杀无赦," which is originated from Chinese poet, Zongyuan Liu's article. This translation does not only convey the original meaning and emotion of "no mercy," but also combine the Chinese idioms to enrich its cultural content.

Therefore, the localization of representative lines is supposed to convey the original meaning of source text and take the local culture and user experience into consideration.

4. Future Development of LOL's Localization

With the most players all over the world, LOL does not merely play the role of entertainment any more. It is also of strong influences on financial, cultural and e-sports industry. To maintain its popularity and to attract more participants, LOL also keeps updating and upgrading to meet more various and specific requirements. Although the localization of LOL is satisfactory to most players, it is possible for Riot Games and Tencent Games to further improve the localization from the perspective of game servers and chat window. In this way, more players can be involved and better services can be provided.

4.1 Game Servers

Today, LOL's game servers are spread worldwide to provide services for global players. Although the localization in different regions can meet most players' expectations, some problems can be further improved.

For the common players, the updating of game patches can be further accelerated, especially for the non-US game servers. In terms of the localization of LOL, Riot Games, the designing company chooses to cooperate with local companies on the operation in local markets. Tencent Games, the cooperator in the China Mainland market, is only allowed to localize materials that Riot Games provides. However, decided by the characteristics of online games, LOL is doomed to have many game patches to further modify its functions and operations. Some new champions are also upgraded now and then. It takes time for the Riot Games to design and test in the US market, while it also takes time for the Tencent Games to localize and test in the China Mainland market. What's more, because of the censorship in China

Mainland, it takes more time for some new champions or functions to get approved. All above elements lead to the current status that most non-US game servers have to wait longer for the upgrading of game servers. It is expected that the localization process can be in advance. Similar to the case of "the Monkey King," the operator in local market can involve in the designing process, which can provide more purely localized services to game players and overcome the issue of censorship in essence.

As for professional players, the localization of LOL should become more globalized. Currently, the global e-sports games are usually held in the game server of South Korea or of the Europe. It is mainly due to the tiny differences of champions in different game servers. Although the operators in different regions are supposed to consult Riot Games when undergoing the localization, some differences are still inevitable. For amateurs, these disparities do not bother at all, but for professional players, every move and act matter in international games. Since the localization of games is to achieve the goal of globalization to a certain degree, it is necessary to set an exact regulation on the localization of LOL, thus elevating the user experience to a higher standard.

4.2 Chat Window

Chat window in LOL is similar to most current chat software. The future development of it should mainly focus on the cross-lingual communication services, which will play an important role in the future localization and globalization of LOL. Although most amateur LOL players may play in the local game servers, some of them still enjoy communicating with foreign players and combating with them. However, language barrier is still the top issue for those players to overcome on account of the group work in LOL.

Actually, in the context of combating or partnering, most communicative sentences between rivals or between partners are of similar meaning. The intentions of most communication can be summarized to limited categories. In other words, the language barrier can be solved technically. The author believes that with the computer-aided translation, situation can be much better in the near future. First of all, TMs inserts enough translation memory and terminologies to the project. Second, technicians program a keyword-detecting device, which can automatically find the meaning of the sentences. Third, after tests in different context, it is possible to welcome a simultaneous translating chat window for LOL. With the help of this new tool, the future localization and globalization of LOL is destined to welcome new prosperity.

5. Conclusion

Localization, which can be understood as translation for business purpose, is targeted at certain communities or consumers. As for the localization of online games, it is meant to serve more players all over the world. With taking the business purpose to the priority, user experiences are the top concern for the localization. The current status of LOL's localization demonstrates the mainstream operations of companies, namely the combination of conventions, users' preferences and popular expressions playing the dominant role in localization. As for the future development of online

games' localization, user experiences and ultimate goal of globalization should be top issue.

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