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## **Journey to the East: Cultural adaptation of video games for the Chinese market**

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### **ABSTRACT**

With the era of globalisation, China has become one of the most important video game markets in the world. To enter the Chinese market, culture adjustments are often made to video games in order to meet the needs and expectations of Chinese gamers. After briefly describing the characteristics of the Chinese game market, this article will focus on the process of cultural adaptation that games undergo when they are localised into Chinese, focusing on game-related aspects such as number format, food-related terminology, myths and legends, songs, the use of colours, character design, and game mechanics, as well as sociocultural, economic and political issues such as gaming habits and censorship. A number of examples are provided to illustrate how the above-mentioned aspects may affect the success of a foreign game in the Chinese market. The article concludes by highlighting the importance of cultural adaptation in game localisation into Chinese and outlining future research avenues.

### **KEYWORDS**

Video games, game localisation, cultural adaptation, culturalisation, China.

## **1. Introduction**

Video games have become one of the most popular forms of entertainment in the world and one of the most lucrative creative industries, with revenue from the game industry reaching over 99.6 billion USD in 2016 (Newzoo 2016a), more than doubling that of the global movie box office, which generated revenue of 38.6 billion USD in the same year (Motion Picture Association of America 2016). With globalisation of the game industry, China has become the largest market in the world for video game publishing, dethroning the United States, which, prior to China's ascendancy, had been the market that generated most revenue in the world (Newzoo 2016a). According to the Game Publishers Association Publications Committee, revenue from the Chinese game market reached 27 billion USD (167 billion Yuan) in 2016 (GPC 2016). There are almost 560 million gamers in China, and 36% of them spend money on games (Newzoo 2016b). Mobile games were the most popular among Chinese gamers in 2016 (49.5%), followed by online games (35.2%). China is a country with densely populated cities and people often take advantage of the time they spend queuing or in public transport to play mobile games (CNNIC 2015: 104). Console games are not as popular as in other countries primarily because they were banned from 2000 to 2014, but it is estimated that the console game market has great potential, and that revenue from consoles and Smart TV games will rise to three billion USD by 2019 (Niko Partners 2015).

As such, the Chinese market presents a major opportunity for foreign game producers. However, localisation has considerable cost implications, and the

decision to localise a game for a given market is “driven by the assumption that localizing a game will increase the overall profitability of the project through increased sales in markets other than the Anglo-Saxon speaking countries” (Bartelt-Krantz 2011: 85). Therefore, in order to maximise the return of investment (ROI) in the Chinese market, developers and publishers tend to localise games so that they meet Chinese gamers' needs and expectations and become commercially successful.

This article focuses on the cultural dimension of game localisation into Chinese, a topic that has received little academic attention to date, as most of the literature focuses on the translation of Japanese games into English or English games into European languages (see, for example, O'Hagan and Mangiron 2013, and Bernal Merino 2015). Firstly, the article presents the concepts of “cultural adaptation,” “cultural localisation” (Di Marco 2007), and “culturalization” (Edwards 2011). Then, a number of distinct factors – number format, food-related terminology, myths and legends, songs, the use of colours, game mechanics, gaming habits, and censorship – that are usually taken into consideration when localising a game for the Chinese market are presented and illustrated with examples from published games. The article concludes highlighting the important role that cultural adaptation plays in game localisation for the Chinese market and outlining future research avenues.

## **2. The cultural dimension of game localisation**

Game localisation is an emerging type of translation that has increasingly gathered scholarly attention within the field of Translation Studies. One of the first definitions of game localisation was provided by Chandler (2005: 4), who describes it as “the actual process of translating the language assets in a game into another language,” focusing on the translation process. O'Hagan and Mangiron provide a more detailed definition that not only includes the translation process, but also the users:

game localisation refers to all the many and varied processes involved in transforming game software developed in one country into a form suitable for sale in target territories, according to a new set of user environments with specific linguistic, cultural, and technical implications. (2013: 19)

Game localisation places its focus on the users, as game companies want players to feel that the game has been developed for them by providing them with a similar gameplay experience to that of the original players (Mangiron and O'Hagan 2006: 20; Bernal-Merino 2009: 243; Fernández Costales 2014: 235). Therefore, it is a user-centred type of translation<sup>1</sup> that can be framed within functionalist paradigms of translation, whereby the translation process is shaped by the intended purpose or function of the target text (Nord 1997). In the case of video games, the main function of the translation is to entertain the players. Therefore, if the localised version of a game contains cultural oddities, that is, elements that can be difficult

to understand or offensive to the target players, their gameplay experience may be affected negatively. This, in turn, is likely to hinder their immersion in the game and may contribute to the lack of commercial success of the game in the target market. Furthermore, games can be affected by social, economic, ideological and political factors in the target country (Edwards 2011; O'Hagan and Mangiron 2013; Bernal-Merino 2015). For these reasons, cultural adaptation, also known as *cultural localisation* (Di Marco 2007), and *culturalisation*, the term often used in the industry, is an essential part of the game localisation process.

Di Marco defines cultural localisation as

the adaptation of visuals, sound and scripts conceived in one language by members of one culture to another language and another culture, in such a way that they seem at once fully consistent with the assumptions, values and other boundaries and outlooks of the second culture, and internally consistent within the semiotic strategies of the original video game text, visuals and sound. (2007: 2)

Her definition highlights the importance of meeting the target culture expectations while respecting the semiotic strategies of the original game in order to provide a similar gameplay experience. For Edwards, culturalisation implies going "a step further beyond localisation, as it takes a deeper look into a game's fundamental assumptions and content choices, and then gauges the viability in both the broad, multicultural marketplace, as well as in specific geographic locales" (2011: 20). While it is a moot point whether culturalisation goes beyond localisation or it is encompassed in the broader game localisation processes, it is undoubtedly one of the key components of any localisation process. In fact, cultural adaptation is one of the aspects that according to the localisation industry discourse makes localisation somewhat different from translation (Jiménez-Crespo 2013: 14-17), as it provides users with translations that have been highly adapted to their cultural context. The need to assess the cultural content of a game and adapt it, if necessary, becomes even more important for territories such as China, where complex sociopolitical factors, such as censorship, also come into play.

Cultural adaptation can take place at two levels: macro and micro level (O'Hagan and Mangiron 2013: 215). At macro level it can affect the overall design of the game, such as the game mechanics, graphics, character design, and the story line. Adaptation at micro level refers to textual changes made to the in-game text, the script and dialogues, the text in graphics, and printed materials (O'Hagan and Mangiron 2013: 215). In addition, the level of cultural adaptation will depend on the overall localisation strategy adopted by developers and publishers, mainly domestication or foreignisation in Venutian terms (1995), as well as the game theme and genre. In the case of video games, domestication is likely to make Chinese players feel they are playing a game developed in their mother tongue, while foreignisation allows them to experience the foreign flavour of a game. If the localisation strategy tends towards foreignisation,

cultural references of the original game are usually maintained, generating an exotic feeling and presenting a foreign culture to the players. Conversely, if the main localisation strategy is domestication, the game content is generally adapted. In any case, when localising a game it is important to take into account the target culture and avoid offending target players. In particular, in China, special attention needs to be paid to the policy of censorship, because there are no age ratings of video games and censorship is very strict.

### **3. Cultural adaptation in video game localisation into Chinese**

In this section we discuss the main cultural aspects that are usually taken into account when localising games for the Chinese market, both at micro level –number format, food-related terminology, myths and legends, songs–, and at macro level –use of colours, character design, game mechanics. Sociocultural, economic and political factors, such as gaming habits and censorship, are also discussed, as they cannot be overlooked when planning to release a game for the Chinese market because they can have an impact on the ROI. Several examples of published games will be provided in order to illustrate how the above-mentioned factors can impact on the reception and the sales of a localised game in China.

#### **3.1 Number format**

Number systems vary according to different cultures. Just like in the United States and the United Kingdom, in China commas are used as thousands separators and points as decimal separators, while other countries, like Spain, do it the other way around. In addition, China uses the character *qian* (千) to represent a thousand, *wan* (万) to represent ten thousand, and *yi* (亿) to represent one hundred million. It should be noted that there are no literal equivalents in English or Spanish for the Chinese characters *yi* and *wan*, which may give rise to localisation problems, as in Blizzard's *Diablo III* (2012), a MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game) published in China in 2015. In the original version, the number referencing the amount of damage to a character during a battle was shown with the English abbreviations K and M, representing a thousand and a million respectively (3DM GAME 2016a). Soon, Chinese players complained that the Chinese version kept the English number formats, to which they were not accustomed. The official club for players of *Diablo III* (2012) called a vote, in which 6,379 players participated. The result showed that 87.8% of the players thought the number format for damage should use the Chinese characters *yi* and *wan* (3DM GAME 2016b). The localisation team responded by explaining why they had chosen the English format. *Yi* is a numerical unit greater than M (million). To show the same amount of damage, for example, 100 *yi*, the equivalent using the English format would be 1000 M, and they thought that the visual effect of the “larger” number would generate more satisfaction for players (3DM GAME 2016b). However, in the

end the English format was changed to the Chinese one in order to satisfy the demands of the target players.

### 3.2 Food-related terminology

Many games contain gastronomic references. Especially in MMORPG, food often has a healing effect, which is an important factor for gameplay. Sometimes, the food name from the original version is culturally adapted to typical Chinese dishes to bring the game closer to the audience. For example, *Don't Starve* (2013), developed by Canadian company Klei Entertainment, is an action and adventure game containing numerous gastronomic references that were adapted, as some dishes would not have been recognised by Chinese gamers, and this could therefore impact negatively on their gameplay experience. Next, we present some of the Chinese translations of the original dishes.

Original version	Chinese version	Description
Meatball	<i>Hongsao shizitou</i> (红烧狮子头) Literal translation: lion's head	<i>Hongsao shizitou</i> is a famous Huaiyang dish consisting of a large meatball cooked in vegetable broth.
Turkey Dinner	<i>Baiqieji</i> (白切鸡) Literal translation: white sliced chicken	Turkey is a typical meal in Canada while <i>baiqieji</i> is a typical dish of chicken of the Guangdong province in China.
Pierogi	<i>Dongbei shuijiao</i> (东北水饺) Literal translation: Northeast dumpling	<i>Pierogi</i> is a popular dumpling in Eastern Europe, while the dumpling most famous in China is the Northeast dumpling.
Meaty Stew	<i>Fotiaoqiang</i> (佛跳墙) Literal translation: Buddha jumps over the wall	<i>Fotiaoqiang</i> is a typical recipe of the Fujian province that includes many ingredients such as ginseng, mushrooms, bamboo shoots, etc.
Honey Nuggets	<i>Gongbaojiding</i> (宫保鸡丁) Known as <i>Kung Pao Chicken</i>	<i>Kung Pao Chicken</i> is a classic dish of the Sichuan province in China including chicken and chili.
Kabobs	<i>Gurouxianglian</i> (骨肉相连) Literal translation: Meat attached to the bone	Although kabobs refers to meat on a skewer, <i>gurouxianglian</i> is generally used to describe a very close relationship, like the relationship between bone and meat. Currently, it is a product of Kentucky Fried Chicken in China, the main ingredients of which are chicken breast and chicken cartilage.

**Table 1. Food-related terminology in *Don't Starve* (2013).**

It should be mentioned that most of the original English meals have a general equivalent in the Chinese language, for example, *kabobs* can be translated as “kaorouchuan” (烤肉串; English: skewer), and *meatball* as “rouwanzi” (肉丸子; English: meatball). However, the translators chose to use Chinese dishes in order to give a more local “flavour” to the game, as the whole gameplay is based around food. In some occasions this was not possible, as the original meals were invented. In those cases, translators opted for providing creative translations that would be appealing and funny to target players. For example, in the original version there is a dish called Wet Goop. It is a virtual food that does not exist in the real world and it refers to any badly prepared food that has no healing effect and is only fit to be served as food for pigs. It was translated into Chinese as *aide weidao* (爱的味道; English: taste of love), adding a humorous wink to the target players.

### 3.3 Myths and legends

Games with themes of Chinese myths and legends, usually related to Buddhism, are very popular in China and are supported by the Government, as they consider them an effective means to spread Chinese culture (Zhao 2014). However, the localisation into Chinese of games containing foreign myths and legends can require changes to the original plot or storyline, as the Western legends would be unknown to many target players. This is the case of the MMORPG *Kingdoms of Camelot* (2009), by US developer Kabam. *Kingdoms of Camelot* is based on the legend of King Arthur, a well-known figure in European literature. However, the legend is not very well known by Chinese consumers. According to Kabam's director of operations, in order to localise the game for the Chinese market they replaced King Arthur's story with the Chinese legend of the Three Kingdoms, widely known by the general Chinese public (Takahashi 2014).

Rewriting the storyline of a game is a laborious and expensive endeavour, but it can be very profitable, as in the case of the Australian game *Ski Safari* (2012), originally released for the iOS platform. According to Fong, CEO of Yodo1 (游道易), the Chinese publisher of the game, after the game was released without being localised, its average daily income was only 420 yuan (about 70 USD) (Chen 2013). Then, when they decided to localise the game text, the daily income rose to 8,400 yuan (about 1,400 USD), that is, 20 times higher than before (Chen 2013). Following this success, Yodo1 decided to release a new version for the Chinese market, the “West Journey” version, where a new storyline was added that requires that the game protagonist, Sven, escapes with Sun Wukong, Tang Sanzang, and Zhu Bajie, characters in the Chinese classic novel *Journey to the West*.<sup>2</sup> This modification made the daily income reach 90,000 yuan (about 15,000 USD) and compared with the original, not localised version, it had increased by almost 210 times (Chen 2013). This example illustrates the importance cultural adaptation can have in game localisation into Chinese in terms of

ROI, as well as the benefits of collaborating with Chinese publishers who are aware of the local market needs and expectations.

### 3.4 Songs

Music is an important element in games, as it can contribute to an enhanced gaming experience and to increase players' immersion (Zhang and Fu 2015). Songs in localised games can be provided in the target language and sung by local artists if the game is fully localised (and therefore dubbed), or they can remain in the original language with target language subtitles. The process of translating a song to be sung in the target language is a complex one, which according to Sam Mullen, producer of the Japanese rhythm game *Hatsune Miku: Project Diva F 2<sup>nd</sup>* (2014), can be described as *translyricisation*. Translyricisation involves taking a song, rebuilding the lyrics into a different language and lining them up so they can be sung with the original tune (Ray 2014). Translyricisation not only requires that "the lyrics make sense, [...but also that] all translations have to be faithful to the tone and intention of the original songwriter" (Ray 2014).

Translating lyrics into Chinese is complicated, as Chinese songs often rhyme, that is, the final sound or the last vowels of each line of a song have to be similar. Generally speaking, to get the correspondence in the sounds, translators usually have to use other words, which often change the original meaning of the song, so it almost becomes a different song. Therefore, the challenge is how to respect the meaning of the original lyrics and at the same time make the song rhyme in Chinese. For example, the lyrics of the song "Where the wind sleeps", the theme song of the Korean game *Blade & Soul* (2012) (Chinese name : 剑灵), were localised for the Mandarin and the Taiwanese versions. This song was sung in Chinese with the original melody, but the lyrics were translated differently for the Chinese and the Taiwanese versions because the game was licensed by two different companies. In the Chinese version, the song was called *Suifengershi* (随风而逝, Gone with the wind), while the Taiwanese version was named *Yihezhi* (一河之隔, Divided by a river). The original Korean version does not rhyme, but both the Chinese and the Taiwanese versions rhyme with the vowel "i". In addition, the lyrics of both translated versions of the song are different to each other as well as being different to the original version. However, all of these lyrics express sadness and can transmit approximately the same emotions to the respective target players, because the tragic background story behind them remains the same.

Keeping the original song and subtitling the lyrics is another common method of song localisation in games, as it is less time consuming and less costly. Also, from the point of view of the translation, the need for rhyme is not as pressing, as the main objective is to reproduce the meaning of the song and generate the same feeling as the original. In summary, the translation and adaptation of game songs has become a new trend in game



localisation into Chinese because gamers want to know the meaning of the lyrics. Further research with users would be needed in order to establish whether Chinese players prefer songs to be dubbed or subtitled, and how these different translation modes may affect their gameplay experience and immersion, as well as the commercial success of the game.

### 3.5 Use of colours

Colours can have different meanings in different cultures (Zhao 2014). In the United States and Europe, red is often considered an aggressive colour that makes people think of blood and fire (Zhao 2014). For example, the prohibition/stop signs are in red. It is a colour that makes people think of danger. However, in China, red is considered a happy colour, which is used in special festivals such as the Chinese New Year (Zhao 2014). In the Chinese stock market, red represents an increase and green represents a decrease, while in other countries it is the opposite. Furthermore, white is a typical colour for Western wedding dresses, but in China, white is the colour used for traditional funerals. Due to these cultural differences in the perception of colours, it is common to see colour adjustments in games localised into Chinese. For example, in the Chinese version of *Angry Birds 2* (2015), the main colour of the log-in user interface is red, while in the US version it is light blue. In addition, a series of Chinese graphic elements, such as a Chinese hat, fireworks, firecrackers, and *yuanbao* (a type of gold coin used in ancient times that nowadays has become the symbol of fortune and wealth) were also added to the user interface to make the game more local, and thus, more appealing to target players.

### 3.6 Character design

Another important issue to be considered when localising video games is character representation. For example, the image of the dragon in Western and Eastern cultures is perceived quite differently. In Western tales, the dragon is often drawn like a dinosaur. It is a wild and fierce, fire-spitting monster (Zhao 2014). In Eastern cultures, however, the dragon has a positive image. It is usually a symbol of power and good luck, so when we talk about a game with dragons, the Chinese would not imagine the same kind of dragon perceived in Western society (Zhao 2014).

In addition, the canon of beauty is also closely related to cultural values. For example, the story of Mulan is well-known in China, so everyone expects her to be beautiful and brave. However, most Chinese do not believe that the image of Mulan designed by Disney is beautiful from an Asian point of view (Zhao 2014), as the concept of beauty is different. For this reason, occasionally the graphics of a game are redesigned for Asian markets. For example, when localising the multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) game *Heroes of Newerth* (2010) into Chinese, many of the images of the heroes in the original game were redesigned taking into account the different canon

of beauty between Chinese and Western players. Arachna is one of these heroes whose image was completely modified by the localisation team. In the original version, she is a ferocious and disgusting humanoid spider who has no facial features while in the Chinese version she was redesigned as a beautiful and charming character.

It is also worth mentioning that sometimes the characters of foreign video games are adapted to or replaced with famous Chinese characters to attract target players. An example is found in the 3D RPG (role-playing game) Korean mobile game *Hello Hero* (2013). In the Chinese version, the game contained a series of characters from *Journey to the West* including Sun Wukong, Zhu Bajie, and Tang Sanzang. For marketing purposes, the image of Sun Wukong was used as the logo of the game in the Apple store in China, so that potential players perceived the game as a local game and were more inclined to try it out. Another example is found in the mobile game *Temple Run 2* (2013), which achieved great success in China. This game was localised and published by iDreamsky Games (乐逗游戏), an experienced Chinese game company that has localised well-known games such as *Temple Run* (2011), *Fruit Ninja* (2010), *Subway Surfers* (2012), and *Monument Valley* (2014). In the Chinese version of *Temple Run 2*, they added two Chinese characters, Yip Man (叶问) and Chunli (春丽), as well as Nian, a monster in Chinese mythology that players can purchase to ride on.

### 3.7 Game mechanics

Game mechanics are the procedures and rules of a game. They describe the goal of the game, how players can and cannot achieve the goal and indeed what happens when they try (Schell 2014: 41). Due to the interactive nature of games and the importance of facilitating players' immersion, adjustments to game mechanics can be made during the localisation process (Carlson and Corliss 2010: 66). Usually the modification of game mechanics is related to marketing strategies, and any changes to gameplay mechanics are designed to meet the preferences and gaming styles of the target territory. Game companies have realised that Chinese players are, for example, more interested in collecting coins, upgrading skills and "levelling up" than actually fighting (China Daily 2016). Consequently, to help Chinese gamers maintain their motivation and keep engaged with the game, developers can redesign the core gameplay to minimise the amount of time characters have to spend fighting in order to advance (Di Christopher 2016). For example, *Marvel: Contest of Champions* (2014) (Chinese name: 漫威格斗) is a mobile fighting game developed by Kabam. According to Wakeford, CEO of Kabam, they realised that Chinese players like to progress quickly with minimum fighting effort, so when localising the game for the Chinese market they created a quick-fight system with which players can autoplay the fighting scenes, which in effect allows them to bypass the fighting element of the game. This contrasts with

Western markets, where the fighting is considered one of the most fun and appealing aspects of these type of games (Sinclair 2016).

### 3.8 Gaming habits

China is an example of a collectivist society (Bieliński 2013: 35). In China people belong to “in-groups” that take care of them in exchange for loyalty. For this reason, Chinese players usually prefer multiplayer team games (Bieliński 2013: 35). This may explain why *Happy Farm* (2009), a multiplayer social network game, was so popular in China. Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that China has a communication system fully independent of global social media. The main search engine in China is not Google, but Baidu. Facebook, Youtube and Twitter are not available in mainland China. The available social media are QQ, WeChat, Renren, and Sina blog, among others. In addition, electronic payment via WeChat and Zhifubao (equivalent to Chinese PayPal) is widely accepted. Therefore, it is advisable to connect localised video games with Chinese social networks and to use a suitable payment system when introducing them in the Chinese market.

Another important sociocultural factor to be taken into account is the psychology of consumption of Chinese players. Recently, the concept of *tuhao* has become common in China. The buzzword *tuhao* (土豪) can be translated as “newly rich, upstart or rural rich”, but it is often used ironically, as not all the *tuhao* are genuinely wealthy in financial terms. The term also refers to gamers who are not rich but want to pretend they are. In the virtual world, *tuhao* would typically buy weapons or clothes (called *skins* in some games) to show-off their social status to fellow players. As such, the localisation team can add a VIP system offering special rewards, such as weapons or skins, for these types of players in the Chinese version, a practice that would be frowned upon by Western players. Western gamers, despite the ingrained consumer culture, do not tend to support the concept of paying money to gain a competitive advantage over other players. It is however a regular practice in China (Borowy 2016: 45).

Another gaming feature of Chinese players is that they tend to quit games easily (Gao 2015). For this reason, when localising into Chinese, most publishers add the daily activity “log-in reward” (Gao 2015). It is an activity that gives you money or virtual objects if you enter the game on consecutive days. For example, the first day you enter the game you might get one diamond, the second day you might get five diamonds, and the seventh day you will get a hundred diamonds. If you miss a day, your reward will be reversed back to the day one level. This type of activity aims to encourage the loyalty of players who would otherwise quickly abandon games. Although such activities are not exclusive to the Chinese market, it is the common option chosen by most publishers when launching their game in China. For example, the Chinese versions of *Angry Birds 2* (2015), *Boom*

*Beach* (2014), and *Monster Strike* (2013), among others, have added this type feature in order to incentivise Chinese players' loyalty to their game.

It is also worth noting that the most popular video games in China are those that can be accessed for free and only charge players for the special items and add-ons, such as weapons or extra lives for characters. For example, *Monument Valley* (2014) and *Cut the Rope 2* (2014) were paid games in the original market, but they were changed into free games when they were localised for the Chinese market, gaining great popularity.

Many companies have realised that their game should be free in order to succeed in China, but some of them have chosen to charge more for in-game props<sup>3</sup> to compensate the economic cost of making their game freely available. An example is found in *Plants vs. Zombies 2* (2013), a US tower defence game. Like most video games in China, this game is free. However, the difficulty of the Chinese version is three times higher than that of the English version and the price of the items in the game is twice that of the original (NetEase 2013). Many Chinese players stated it was almost impossible to pass the first level without buying at least one special item in the game (NetEase 2013). In the original English version, there are six props that have to be purchased to complete the game successfully, and most of the props can be freely obtained during the game. However, in the Chinese version the number of props that needed to be purchased in order to complete the game increased to thirteen. Because of the 5-star reputation of *Plants vs. Zombies 1* in China, when the second version entered the Chinese market, it soon hit the top of the popularity charts. In just seven hours it rose to the top of the list of free game apps (NetEase 2013). Nevertheless, gamers were disappointed with this new version due to the high amount of props needed and the evaluation of the game quickly fell from 5 stars to 2 stars (NetEase 2013). As a player stated in a forum, "the game has already lost its essential: being fun and become a digging tool for gold" [sic] (Rodeo, cited in Kung 2013). Compared to *Plants vs. Zombies 2*, *Plants vs. Zombies 1* was a resounding success in China because its difficulty was lower and fewer paid props were required to succeed. In addition, the game content in *Plants vs. Zombies 1* was thoroughly adapted to the Chinese market by releasing the *Plants vs. Zombies: Great Wall* edition and the *Journey to the West* editions (Kun 2013).

### 3.9 Censorship

Video games are subject to stricter censorship than other media, possibly due to their interactive nature and the fact that children often have access to games not appropriate to their age (O'Hagan and Mangiron 2013: 228). In China, there is no rating system for video games, which means that all games are potentially accessible to all users, including children. Thus, censorship of the content of video games is very strictly applied.

The “Interim Provisions on the Administration of Internet Culture”, published by the Ministry of Culture of People’s Republic of China (2011), lists the following contents which are forbidden to publish:

- 1) Those opposing the basic principles established in the Constitution;
- 2) Those endangering the unification, sovereignty and territorial integrity of the State;
- 3) Those divulging secrets of the State, harming national security, or impairing the honour and interests of the State;
- 4) Those inciting the enmity, discrimination of nationalities, jeopardizing the unity among the various ethnic groups, or violating the customs and habits of minority nationalities;
- 5) Those spreading cults or superstitions;
- 6) Those disturbing social order and destroying social stability;
- 7) Those inciting pornography, gambling, violence or instigating a crime;
- 8) Those insulting or libelling others, violating the lawful rights and interests of others;
- or
- 9) Those endangering social moralities or fine national cultural traditions;
- 10) Other contents which are prohibited by laws and administrative regulations or by the state (Zhang 2012: 344).

Many video games have been banned in China due to items 2 and 7. In other words, censorship is very strict with respect to pornography, violence, gambling, political issues, and misinterpretation of historical facts (Zhang 2012: 344-346). For example, *Command and Conquer: Generals* (2003) was banned because there is a mission that consists of blowing the *Three Gorges Dam* (三峡) and *Tian'anmen* (天安门), the famous monument in Beijing, which has significant political significance in China (3DM GAME 2013). The game *Football Manager* (2005) was banned because it referenced Tibet, Taiwan, and Hongkong as independent countries (Sheng and Chen 2005).

Zhang also states that although the legislation indicates what kinds of content are prohibited, certain provisions are very vague (Zhang 2012: 344). For example, there is no clear definition of what social moralities are and what can be considered a fine national cultural tradition (Zhang 2012: 344). The vague content of these provisions has increased the difficulty in game localisation. In order to facilitate the approval of localised games, the China Audio-Video and Digital Publishing Association (2016) published the “Standard for Mobile Games” (Version 2016) that can be used as a guide for developers and operators when they design games for the Chinese market. However, this standard is only for smart devices. PCs and other game platforms are not included, although it can also be used as a general guideline for such platforms. It is the first version and it can be assumed that there will be more versions in the future, as they are actively encouraging developers and publishers to explain the problems they encounter when applying this standard. The standard addresses in detail almost all prohibited content that Zhang (2012) had pointed out as previously vague. It even regulates that pornographic content includes references to homosexuality. According to this standard, the contents which may be affected by censorship include, but are not limited to, language, the

storyline, the user interface, the map of China, character representation, accessories, music and sound, functional tasks, instructions, and advertising. It also requests publishers to include a “health warning”<sup>4</sup> in an obvious place at the game startup interface (GAPP 2003).

According to O’Hagan and Mangiron (2013: 224), developers and publishers usually have two options when faced with the problem of censorship: “a) to withdraw a game and not release it in that particular country, or b) to edit the objectionable content or remove it from the game”. For example, Japanese *hentai* games are erotic games, which are not allowed to enter the Chinese market due to the rules regarding pornography. For other game types, developers usually edit the content or take into account the Chinese censorship policy from the early design and development stage of the game. In China, a verb has recently appeared to describe the changes made to games in order to avoid censorship, called *hexie* (和谐, “harmonise”). It is originally a noun in Chinese (“harmony”), but today, when it is used as a verb, it means to make changes for reasons of censorship. It can be used to refer to movies, video games, and the Internet, among others. For example, 18% of the contents of *Diablo III* (2012) were modified because they contained images of blood and violence (3DM Game 2015). The red blood in the game became black, the exposed bones of a human skeleton were covered up with flesh, and the bloody wounds in the bodies of the characters were removed.

Another example can be found in the Korean MMORPG *Blade & Soul* (2012) (Chinese name: 剑灵), which is rated 17+ in Korea for having a low level of pornographic content. Chinese company Tencent has the license for distributing this game in China and they decided to change a number of elements in the costumes of female characters. The clothes were redesigned to cover their chest, buttocks, and legs, which are nude in the original version. In addition, in the Chinese version, the motion effects of the breast physics<sup>5</sup> were removed. However, it should be highlighted that there are many patches made by game websites, such as Duowan.com, Crsky.com and Sinagames.com, which are available for players who wish to play with the graphics of the original version. These websites also detail how to download and install the “anti-*hexie*” patches. Gamers, especially male gamers, often comment in the websites that they really appreciate that they can experience the original flavour of game thanks to such patches.<sup>6</sup> It should also be mentioned that in China there are many volunteer translation communities of video games and other audiovisual products. Fan translators usually have more freedom regarding the localisation of the cultural content and are able to provide players with uncensored versions and patches, as their work is not subject to censorship from the Government and is not dependent on the balance between market forces and the needs of the target players. Due to the scope of this paper, we will not analyse the phenomenon of fan translation of video games in China, but it is undoubtedly an area that merits further research.

## **4. Conclusion**

China has become one of the main video game consumers in the world and is, as such, a very attractive market for foreign game developers. When localising a game for the Chinese market, a domestication approach is often taken and a strong emphasis is usually placed on cultural adaptation. In this article we discussed different cultural aspects that are often taken into account when localising a game and adapting it for the Chinese market. Cultural adaptation can take place at both micro-level, that is, textual level, for example, number format, food-related terminology, myths and legends, and songs, and at macro level, affecting the design of the game, such as the use of colours, character design, and game mechanics. Additionally, sociocultural, economic, and political factors, such as gaming habits and censorship, also have an impact on localisation practices and should be taken into account when developing a game that will be released in the Chinese market in order to maximise the ROI.

While the degree of cultural adaptation often depends on budget, time constraints and the expected ROI, the examples provided in this paper indicate that including elements of local culture and adapting game mechanics and the monetisation model to Chinese players' preferences can make the game more appealing for the Chinese audience. This would in turn indicate that domestication and cultural adaptation can contribute to the success of a video game in the Chinese market. However, more research is needed regarding the main localisation strategies applied by game developers for the Chinese market. For example, it would be interesting to analyse the link between particular localisation strategies and the commercial performance of a game. Reception studies with Chinese gamers would also be necessary to identify their preferences and habits regarding localisation strategies and the degree of culturalisation required for different games, depending on their genre and theme. Finally, when localising a game for the Chinese market, special attention should be paid to censorship and, in particular, issues regarding territory, violence, and sexual content, as such content is prohibited by government policy and can lead to the banning of the game. Players' reaction to censorship and fan translation of censored or unlocalised games also requires further scholarly attention. In conclusion, the cultural dimension of game localisation into Chinese is complex, but it is advisable to take it into consideration when deciding the best localisation strategies for the Chinese market in order to ensure a successful journey to the East.

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<sup>1</sup> The term *user-centred translation* was coined by Suojanen, Koskinen and Tuominen (2014) to emphasise the central role of the user in the translation process.

<sup>2</sup> *Journey to the West* is a classical novel of Chinese literature which contains abundant references to Taoism, Buddhism and Chinese folk legends. Sun Wukong is a fictional monkey king who has superpowers, Zhu Bajie is a monster who looks like a combination of a human and a pig, and Tang Sanzang is a Buddhist monk. Sun Wukong and Zhu Bajie are apprentices of monk Tang Sanzang and they protect him and help him to bring Buddhist texts to India.

<sup>3</sup> *Props* is an abbreviation for *properties*. In a video game context, props are objects that can be collected or obtained by players. They can be useful or harmful to the gamer or they may have no effect and just be related to the completion of a task or a mission in the game.

<sup>4</sup> The warning reads as follows: "Reject video games with vulgar content, reject pirated video games. Protect yourself, beware of scams. Playing games moderately benefits our brain, being addicted to video games damages our health. Arrange a reasonable playing schedule; enjoy a healthy life" (authors' translation).

<sup>5</sup> Breast physics refers to breast behaviour when the female characters move.

<sup>6</sup> Such statements can be found in the comment area of the web or blogs of Sina games, Zol games, Duowan games, etc., where the *anti-hexie* patch is released. See for example: <http://bbs.duowan.com/thread-35558078-1-1.html> (多玩剑灵论坛).