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Localizing Chinese games for Southeast Asian markets: A multidimensional perspective

Abstract

This article explores how Chinese games are localized for Southeast Asia (SEA) markets. Based on the synthesized insights from practitioners and gamers, we identify gaps between localization in theory and in practice. The post-gold model is popular with Chinese game companies that usually do not consider localizing a game until it has attained domestic success. They tend to opt for full localization rather than “deep localization” (Bernal-Merino 2011) because adapting visuals and game mechanics is considered “icing on the cake”. Additionally, in our data, gamers seem to prefer foreignization over domestication, while practitioners combine both strategies to create a defamiliarizing gaming experience. Finally, the language diversity in SEA and the lingua franca status of English call for a nuanced understanding of *locale*. Hence, we suggest to differentiate three types of locales (presumed, practiced, and preferred) as a possible analytical framework to further theorize game localization from multiple perspectives of stakeholders.

Keywords: video games, game localization, gamers, Chinese games, Southeast Asia

1. Introduction

With eighty years of development and significant growth in the past two decades (Fernández-Costales 2016; Kent 2001), the video game industry has stood out as a momentous, profitable sector in the global entertainment industry. In 2019, the global video game industry generated revenue of \$152.1 billion, with a year-on-year increase of 9.6% (Newzoo 2019). These impressive figures would not have been possible without game localization—the practice of transforming a game into a form linguistically, culturally, and technically suitable for a target locale (O’Hagan and Mangiron 2013). As such, localization is important for a game to reach out to international markets and maximize its profits. According to the Developer Satisfaction Survey conducted by the International Game Developers Association in 2019 (Weststar et al. 2019), more than 80% of the game developers felt that it was “very important” or “somewhat important” to have a localized version of the game. For years, game localization business has pivoted around English and Japanese games, but Chinese games are catching up and expanding their overseas markets. In 2019, the total revenue of Chinese games amounted to 310.23 billion RMB (\$45 billion), of which 77.21 billion RMB (\$11.2 billion) was contributed by overseas markets (CNG 2019a), with Southeast Asia (SEA) as one of the fastest growing destinations (CNG 2019b). Existing studies on game localization have tended to focus on European and American markets, examining English games localized into FIGS (French, Italian, German and Spanish) or Japanese games localized into English plus FIGS (Mangiron 2017). Transcending this research tradition, the current study explores how Chinese games are localized for SEA markets, a region with more than 98.5 million game users (Statista 2020a)

and an estimated revenue of more than \$4.3 billion in 2019 (Fernandes 2019). Our study adopts a multidimensional perspective and synthesizes the insights from practitioners and gamers to identify gaps between localization in practice and in theory.

2. Game localization for the global and SEA markets

2.1 Models, levels, and strategies of game localization

Three issues are important for game localization: models, levels, and strategies, corresponding to the questions of *when*, *what*, and *how*. Detailed discussion is provided in the following three paragraphs.

Based on the time lapse between the release of an original game and its localized version, O'Hagan and Mangiron (2013) categorize game localization into two models: *sim-ship* (simultaneous shipment) and *post-gold*. In the sim-ship model, the original and localized games are simultaneously shipped. This model has been popular for games developed in North America and the UK and triple-A (i.e. major) titles in Japan. The post-gold model, on the other hand, refers to localizing a game only after the release of the original game. This model, despite months or even years of delay, is beneficial for game localizers to familiarize themselves with the original game before translation and improve the translation quality. Recent years have witnessed a gradual shift from the post-gold model to the sim-ship model (O'Hagan and Mangiron 2013). However, it remains unclear whether the sim-ship model is popular with games localized for less dominant markets like

SEA, in which gamers may differ from those in more dominant markets in terms of disposal incomes, consuming habits, and gaming expectations.

Another issue for game localization is about what game elements are localized. Chandler and Deming (2012, 8-10) categorize game localization into four levels: *no localization* (usually applied to small budget titles), *packaging and manual localization* (with the package, manual, and relevant documentations localized but the game language and code untouched), *partial localization* (with the in-game text translated but the voiceover file unchanged), and *full localization* (with all game assets translated). Furthermore, game companies can go beyond full localization and undergo “deep localization” (Bernal-Merino 2011) or what O’Hagan and Mangiron call “macro-level culturalization” (2013)—adapting “the visuals (graphics and character design), the game mechanics, and the storylines” (215). For instance, protagonists from a Chinese classic novel *Journey to the West* were added to the Australian game *Ski Safari* (2012) in the Chinese market, thus greatly contributing to the daily income of the game (Fong 2013). Although full localization and deep localization can boost game sales, they might be time-consuming and prohibitively expensive. Game companies need to keep a balance between the level of localization and the projected return on investment. As such, we want to understand the extent to which Chinese games are localized for SEA markets and how the decisions are made.

A third important issue for game localization is about translation strategies. Researchers have discussed various choices for localizers, such as transcreation (Mangiron and O’Hagan 2006) and cultural adaptation (Carlson and Corliss 2011; Dong and Mangiron 2018). A more commonly used categorization of translation strategies in game localization

is source-oriented or target-oriented, or to use Venuti's (1995) terms, *foreignization* and *domestication*. Foreignization preserves the foreign flavor of the original game. A successful example of this strategy is the Spanish version of *Assassins' Creed* (2007)—a number of Italian names, places, and certain expressions in the dialogues are preserved in the localized version (Fernández-Costales 2012, 395). On the other hand, domestication refers to reducing the foreign taste of the game to make it closer to target gamers and cultures. This strategy is often adopted by game translators to allow gamers to play the localized game like an original-local one (Mangiron and O'Hagan 2006). For instance, when *Super Smash Bros Brawl* (2008) was localized into different languages, translators made apt use of “colloquial expressions, jokes and puns in the target language” to domesticate the game (Fernández-Costales 2012, 396). These discussions, albeit meaningful, are usually offered from the perspective of scholars. It is necessary to conduct what Mangiron (2017, 85) calls “participant-oriented studies” to develop a fuller understanding of practitioners' and gamers' perceptions about game localization.

2.2 Participant-oriented research on game localization

Participant-oriented research values insights from various groups of stakeholders, including game developers, localizers and gamers. The very first paper on game localization from the perspective of translation was authored by Dietz (1999), a practitioner translating games for the German market. Ever since then, industry professionals have contributed to our understanding of game localization either as authors reflecting on the industry practice or as interviewees sharing their thoughts, comments, and concerns. For

instance, Scholand (2002), a professional localizer, discussed a number of important issues pertaining to game localization (such as game genres, terminologies, and registers). Chandler and Deming (2012) interviewed game developers, localization service vendors and producers to understand how game localization was planned and executed for European and Asian languages. More recently, O'Hagan and Chandler (2016) synthesized the insights from a game producer, a translation scholar, and a localizer to show how a multidimensional perspective can contribute to a deeper understanding within and between the industry and the academia. Clearly, these studies draw upon practitioners' knowledge, practices and perceptions to develop coherent theoretical accounts about game localization. However, the picture is not complete if we do not attend to an important group of stakeholders in the industry: gamers.

Gamers' preferences and perceptions are important for us to understand how localized games are expected and received. For instance, anecdotal evidence shows that some American gamers were disgruntled with localization changes that domesticated the otherwise foreign elements (Mandiberg 2017). Additionally, reception studies have been conducted on Dutch gamers (Geurts 2015), Spanish gamers (Fernández-Costales 2016; Gil Puerto 2017), French gamers (Ellefsen and Bernal-Merino 2018), and Iranian gamers (Khoshsaligheh and Ameri 2020). Based on the questionnaire results, these studies all point to similar findings: (a) gamers tend to favor original/English games over the localized versions, and (b) gamers prefer to have foreign elements preserved (i.e. foreignization strategies) to experience the original flavor. These studies seem to show that gamers' preferences and expectations might contradict the domestication strategies highlighted in the literature (Bernal-Merino 2015; O'Hagan and Mangiron 2013).

To address the potential gaps between localization in theory and in practice, combined insights from both practitioners and gamers are necessary. Thus far, participant-oriented studies have tended to focus on either practitioners or gamers. To obtain a fuller understanding of Chinese games localized for SEA markets, our study follows and expands O'Hagan and Chandler's (2016) multidimensional perspective and synthesizes insights from practitioners and gamers, albeit not in the same level of representativeness.

2.3 Research on game localization for SEA markets

While the numbers of gamers and game revenue are growing rapidly in SEA, research on game localization for SEA markets is scarce. To the best of our knowledge, we found two studies. Loh (2013) examined the interrelationship among global developers, local publishers and local players of Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) in Malaysia. The participants' interviews showed that localized MMORPGs were different from the international versions in terms of payment methods, taboos, and cultural idioms. Syafa'ati and Pujiyanti (2017) examined the semantic loss and gain by comparing the English (original) subtitles and the Indonesian (localized) subtitles in a visual novel game. Based on an interview with the game translator, they found that the translator tended to apply target-oriented strategies in order to make the localized game easy to be played and understood.

Given the limited number of studies on game localization in SEA markets, it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which the localization models, levels, and strategies developed from European and North American markets can be applied to markets involving less

dominant languages. This study attempts to address this gap by focusing on an under-represented source language (Chinese) and an under-represented region (SEA).

3. Research design

This study seeks to shed light on localizing Chinese games for SEA markets from the combined insights of practitioners and players. Specifically, the study was guided by two questions: (1) how are Chinese games localized for SEA markets in terms of localization models, levels, and strategies? (2) what are gamers’ expectations and preferences of localized games in Indonesia, as a top destination for Chinese games in SEA markets? To answer these questions, interviews and anonymous online surveys were conducted to collect insights from two practitioners and 105 gamers respectively in compliance with relevant ethical requirements. Informed consent was obtained from all the participants.

3.1 Interview

Through convenience sampling¹, Bonnie and Mike (pseudonyms) were interviewed. Bonnie works in one of the top game companies in China and has more than four years of experience in marketing localized games overseas (or in Bonnie’s terms, the *external* localization, see Section 4.1 for details). Mike is a localization project manager from an

¹ Convenience sampling is a non-probability sampling method that recruits participants “that are most easily accessible” (Saldanha and O’Brien 2014, 34)

international company specialized in game localization. He works at a branch office in South China and has managed more than a dozen projects, translating Chinese games into European languages (English, French, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Polish, etc.) and Asian languages (Japanese, Indonesian, Thai, Filipino, etc.). In Bonnie's terms, Mike is responsible for part of the *internal* localization (i.e. localization of game content, see Section 4.1 for details).

The interviews were semi-structured, focusing on issues about the market landscape, relations between SEA markets and global markets, localization processes and strategies for Chinese games in SEA markets. Other topics that emerged from the interviews included localization requirements from game companies and the power structure of various sectors of practitioners in the localization industry. The interviews were transcribed and the transcripts were read recursively for patterned responses and themes. The interview extracts cited in this article were translated from Chinese by the authors. We acknowledge the limited number of interviewees and thus do not aim for generalization of the localization industry in China. However, given the paucity of research on game localization in less dominant languages/markets, the interviewees' insights are meaningful so that we can begin to understand the dynamics of the *external* and *internal* localization processes, whereby Chinese games are localized for SEA markets. Additionally, to ensure the validity and reliability of the study, we combine the interviewees' insights with survey responses of gamers in the Indonesian market.

3.2 Survey

The survey focused on the Indonesian market for two reasons. First, it is the most populous country in SEA, which potentially has a large customer base for Chinese games. It is currently ranked #9 in the Global Revenue Ranking for mobile games (Statista 2020b). Second, as informed by Mike, Indonesian and Thai are the two most frequently requested languages when Chinese games are translated into SEA languages.

The survey consisted of 16 items of questions, mainly adapted from Khoshsaligheh and Ameri (2020). The first ten items were 5-point Likert scale questions (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). Four of them were about the respondents' language preferences in localized games. Five items were about the respondents' expectations of in-game texts and cultural adaptation in localized games. The last one was about their perception of localization quality of Chinese games in Indonesia (see Table 2 for the questions). The other six items were multiple-choice or short-answer questions designed to solicit demographic information about the respondents' gender, age, gaming habits, and gaming preferences. The survey was developed on the platform of Google.

In order to reach a wide range of respondents, the survey was sent as a web-based questionnaire via Facebook (a widely popular social networking platform in Indonesia) and posted on local game discussion boards. To obviate the possibility that language proficiency would skew the data, two versions of the survey (English and Indonesian) were distributed. They were sent to two different communities (i.e. one language version for one community, based on the language proficiency information provided by local informants familiar with the matter). The English one was available from 9 March to 16 March 2020, while the Indonesian one was available from 29 March to 22 April 2020. This was done to balance the number of participants from each language group. In total, 53 respondents took

the English version and 52 took the Indonesian version. We compared the response patterns between the two language versions and found no duplicate results. All the quantitative data were analyzed in the statistics software SPSS 23.0.

4. Results

4.1 Insights from the practitioners

Interestingly, both Bonnie and Mike use an industry lingo to describe Chinese games going abroad: *chu hai* (literally “out-ocean”, or semantically “go overseas”). In relation to the denotative and connotative meanings of “ocean”, Bonnie maintains that “the Southeast Asian markets are by no means a blue ocean.” Here, Bonnie refers to Kim and Mauborgne’s (2004) notion of a “blue ocean” as unexplored, emergent markets. To Bonnie, “Southeast Asian markets are full of competitions.” This is echoed by Mike, saying that there are “a large number of demands [for translating Chinese games into SEA languages], mostly into Indonesian and Thai.” As SEA markets are not the most profitable destinations in the global video game industry, one may wonder why competitions are fierce there. Bonnie makes two observations. First, for some games, it is important to have a large number of Daily Active Users. For instance, in an MOBA (Multiplayer Online Battle Arena) game, “if you wait for 10 minutes and still cannot team up with other players, you will not play it...so you want a huge customer base, even though some are non-paying players.” Second, it still makes economic sense to enter SEA markets: “Lucrative products are very hard to find

now...so some profits are better than none...When you have an English version at hand, you can release it in more than one region.”

This brings up the issue of language choice for Chinese games in SEA markets. Bonnie remarks that “usually they use the English version” because of the sheer variety of languages in SEA:

In Indonesia alone, there are about 700 languages...Consider this. You go through the same localization process for a lingua franca and a less common language, but you can reach more target customers with English.

Similarly, Mike remarks that “usually the clients would not release [one language version] for a specific locale. When the English version is finished, it is immediately released in multiple overseas markets, rather than in a specific locale.” He also recounts that

the clients do not propose different requirements for different languages. They just ask us to make a Chinese game into many language versions... In the last project, my team was asked to translate into seven languages...in another project, 13 languages.

Based on Bonnie’s and Mike’s comments, we notice that Chinese game companies want to nurture a wide customer base, so they opt for a lingua franca (i.e. English) or release multilingual versions for players to choose from, instead of limiting one language to one locale.

When localization efforts are discussed, Bonnie distinguishes “internal” and “external”, with the former focusing on “game content” and the latter “marketing activities.” She explains that her company “produces promotional materials in a specific language (e.g.

Indonesian)” but seldom makes changes about game characters and storylines for at least two reasons:

First, game developers might not be cooperative...Game coders think highly of themselves and are proud of their skillsets...Just like you have your own kid and someone is judging: “The kid is bad; need to change the kid’s hairdo, this and that.” You would say, “Why? I think my kid is perfect”...So our localization ideas might be at odds with game coders’ confidence in their products...Second, the extra investment might not bring about substantial profits...Before we decide to localize a game, we make an assessment of its potential success in the target locale. If it fails the assessment, we would not localize it at all...After it passes the assessment, even if localized game characters/themes are added, they are icing on the cake. The difference is like 80 and 100. If we don’t do it, we can still survive.

Bonnie’s observation about return on investment is corroborated by Mike:

our clients first release a game [in the domestic market]. When the game is good in terms of sales and revenue, [the game] would go abroad. If the revenue is bad, no localization plan will be considered.

Mike also believes that the primary reason for a localized game to succeed is “the quality of the original game, the gameplay.” He adds that localization efforts are often limited to translation of the in-game text because of a very tight schedule:

localization is not highly valued by game companies. They just want to publish their games as soon as possible. If localization is not on schedule, many subsequent arrangements will be delayed, such as placing advertisements and testing servers.

To help us understand how “tight” a schedule can be, Bonnie says that “the workload for a MMO game with 150,000 to 160,000 Chinese words is about 20 days (2-3 translators).” Mike refers to his recent project, in which 430,000 in-game Chinese words needed to be translated within 30 days by only four translators. This is more than double of what is reported in Chandler over a decade ago (2008, as cited in O’Hagan and Mangiron 2013): 30,000 words translated by a single translator within 20 days. The situation is compounded when less dominant languages are required by the clients. As Mike observes, “if the client requests both English and Thai and we are allowed ample time, the Chinese game will be first translated into English, and then from English to Thai.” This relay translation method is quite common in his company: “We partner with language service providers in local markets. Through them, we outsource [the translation tasks] to native speakers [of the less dominant languages].” However, if time is very limited, they cannot afford to wait for the English translation but have to find someone “to directly translate from Chinese to Thai.” Mike also shares some interesting experiences about the relay translation (Chinese-English-Indonesian) and how they end up with an Indonesian version containing both English and Indonesian:

an Indonesian translator prefers to keep all the names of NPC [non-player character] and monsters in English. We have mixed responses in our team. Some say it’s not okay to leave the English names untranslated, but some say okay because Indonesian players are good in English...Later on, our client specifically asks us to change the Indonesian names of [game] skills and equipment to English.

When the issue of dubbing is discussed, Bonnie explains that “some games only need three or four lines of dubbing...but many Chinese games that go abroad are RPGs that have

a lot of dialogues.” She adds that “if we decide to localize a game into English, we will hire native speakers to do the dubbing. The same practice goes to the Indonesian language.” Mike also concurs that his company “has received clients’ requests to do dubbing in Indonesian.”

Finally, we want to understand how localizers are positioned in the power structure as compared to other groups of practitioners. Bonnie notes that game coders are “at the top of the food chain...[localizers] are in the middle...at the bottom are companies responsible for outsourced products and services, such as advertising agencies.” Within localizers of game content, there are those “responsible for translating from one language to another...and those responsible for coming up with creative ideas for game characters and storylines...the translation part is quite trivial.” Bonnie’s differentiation is corroborated by Mike: “more often than not, we are only responsible for translation. We rarely think about localization ideas.” Like Bonnie, Mike thinks that their position is not high: “translation is not very important to many game companies.” Based on his experience of managing a dozen projects, he further summarizes that localization efforts that go beyond translating the in-game text are “too idealistic. As a matter of fact, many game companies will not think about making game changes (e.g. visuals) for a particular language version.”

4.2 Insights from gamers

Of the 105 Indonesian respondents, 66 (or 62.9%) were male and 34 (or 32.4%) were female, while 5 (or 4.8%) preferred not to specify their sex. More than half of the respondents were between 21 and 30 years old (51.4%), followed by those under 20

(23.8%). The average age was 25.0 (SD = 6.41), with 12 players declining to provide the information. This demographic pattern is similar to the one in North America, where 59% of the gamers are male and 59% of the gamers are under the age of 34 (ESA 2020).

As regards the time spent on playing video games, 63.8% of the respondents reported that they played fewer than 5 hours a week, along with 26.7% playing 6 to 10 hours, and 9.5% over 10 hours a week. This shows that the majority of respondents are not avid players. In the survey, the gamers were asked about their gaming platforms (multiple choices allowed): 89.5% of them reported playing games on mobile phones, 43.8% on computers, and 21.0% on consoles. The results hint at the prominence of mobile games in Indonesia, which echoes the figures reported by Fernandes (2019): over two-thirds (69.4%) of the game revenue in SEA come from mobile, compared to 22.3% from PC and 8.3% from consoles. Regarding the gamers' preferences of game types (multiple choices allowed), the majority (79.0%) of them opted for foreign original games, 43.8% for Indonesian-translated versions and 26.7% for Indonesian-original games. In an optional short-answer question, gamers were prompted to report their favorite games. Of the 95 responses, games from four countries accounted for a major share. Specifically, Chinese games were mentioned 24 times, followed by Japanese games (18 times), American games (18 times) and Korean Games (17 times). It appears that foreign games are more popular among the survey respondents.

The Indonesian gamers' expectations of localized games were examined through 10 items of 5-point Likert scale questions. The survey came with two language versions, so it was necessary to identify any significant difference between the two groups of responses before further analysis. As some of the data were not normally distributed, the English and

the Indonesian responses were compared by a Mann-Whitney test, the non-parametric equivalence to an independent-samples t-test (Larson-Hall 2010). As Table 1 shows, the two groups did not significantly differ from each other in their ratings ($p > 0.05$). It is thus reasonable to combine all the 105 responses for further analysis.

Table 1. Mann-Whitney test results of the English and the Indonesian responses

Item	English version M (SD)	Indonesian version M (SD)	<i>Z</i>	<i>p</i>
1	4.21 (0.84)	4.35 (0.81)	-0.88	0.38
2	2.25 (1.27)	2.17 (1.18)	-0.19	0.85
3	4.25 (1.07)	3.83 (1.23)	-1.91	0.06
4	3.23 (1.06)	3.50 (0.98)	-1.39	0.16
5	2.57 (1.33)	2.35 (1.25)	-0.88	0.38
6	4.25 (0.95)	3.98 (1.30)	-0.60	0.55
7	3.94 (1.11)	4.23 (1.05)	-1.62	0.11
8	3.13 (1.24)	2.85 (1.51)	-1.18	0.24
9	3.64 (1.24)	3.94 (1.11)	-1.21	0.23
10	3.68 (1.08)	4.06 (1.01)	-1.78	0.08

As shown in Table 2, more than 76% of respondents wanted more Chinese games to be translated into Indonesian (Item 1) and the majority of respondents did not want to play games in Chinese (Item 2). This seems to show a genuine demand for localized Chinese games in Indonesia. Interestingly, gamers preferred to play games in English, rather than in Chinese (Item 2) or in Indonesian (Item 3). This is probably because the translation quality of Chinese games is less than ideal (Item 4). Although Indonesia is a multilingual

country (with Indonesian as the single official language), only 20% of respondents would like to play games in Javanese or Sundanese (i.e. the first and second widely spoken non-official languages excluding Chinese varieties, see also Item 5 in Table 2). As for translation strategies, the gamers preferred a source-text oriented approach via foreignization (with the average ratings of Items 6 and 7 above 4) over a target-text oriented approach via domestication (with the average rating of Item 8 under 3). Finally, about 60% of the respondents thought that game menus and instructional booklets should be translated into Indonesian (Items 9 and 10).

Table 2. Gamers' expectations of localized video games

		Percentage of respondents rating 4 (agree) and 5 (strongly agree)		
Item	M	SD		
1. More Chinese games should be translated into Indonesian.	4.28	0.83		76.2
2. I'd prefer to play a video game in Chinese rather than in Indonesian.	2.21	1.22		12.4
3. I'd prefer to play a video game in English rather than in Indonesian.	4.04	1.17		67.6
4. The translation quality of Chinese games in Indonesian is good.	3.36	1.03		41.0
5. Games should be translated into more Indonesian local languages, such as Javanese and Sundanese.	2.46	1.29		20.0

6.	A game should be translated in a way that the original names of characters or equipment are kept with no change.	4.11	1.15	75.2
7.	A game should be translated in a way that original culture-specific items are kept with no change.	4.09	1.09	75.2
8.	A game should be translated in a way that it looks like an original game in Indonesian.	2.99	1.38	36.2
9.	Video game menus should be translated into Indonesian.	3.79	1.18	61.0
10.	An instructional booklet in Indonesian should come with the video game.	3.87	1.07	62.9

5. Discussion

The insights from the practitioners and gamers demonstrate that SEA markets are fraught with competitions and there are genuine demands for localized Chinese games in the region. Although SEA markets are not highly profitable, they are not negligible for Chinese game companies to maximize profits. As Bonnie points out, if you have an English version at hand, you can release it in SEA markets and the lingua franca status of English will bring you gamers (see Fernández-Costales 2016 for a similar observation). This is confirmed by the gamers in the survey, stating that they prefer to play games in English. On top of that, SEA gamers can contribute to maintaining a substantial number of Daily Active Users for massively multiplayer online games. This helps speed up the process of teaming up with

geographically dispersed players and increases the playability of games. Another interesting point related to the lingua franca status of English is the relay translation process described by Mike. In his company, when clients request English and SEA language versions, Chinese games are usually translated into English and then from English into SEA languages, unless time is limited and they have to translate directly from Chinese into SEA languages. This echoes Dodaro's (2015) description about "translating Japanese video games into English first and then...employing the latter as an intermediate text for subsequent localizations in other languages, generally European" (50). The method of relay translation might be one of the reasons why gamers in the survey think the translation quality of Chinese games is less than ideal.

In sum, SEA markets seem to be similar to other regions in terms of fierce competition of game localization and gamers' preferences to play in English. This might be caused by the role of English as the global language (Crystal 1997), players' increasing language competence (Fernández-Costales 2016), and scarce talents to directly translate between less common languages (Dodaro 2015). With these observations in mind, we now discuss the models, levels, and strategies when localizing Chinese games for SEA markets that may be (in)congruent with theoretical accounts developed mainly from North American and European markets.

5.1 Models of localization

As explained in Section 2.1, two models of localization are discussed in the literature: sim-ship and post-gold. Although the sim-ship model is popular in North America and

increasingly so in Japan (O'Hagan and Chandler 2016; O'Hagan and Mangiron 2013), Bonnie's and Mike's comments suggest that the post-gold model might be popular with Chinese games exported to overseas markets (including SEA markets). This is largely driven by economic considerations. Fernández-Costales (2017) reminds us that game "companies want to make money, and this is their ultimate motivation when developing and localizing games" (134). Chinese game companies might not have the budgets or clouts comparable to those of their global counterparts to do sim-ship. As Bonnie remarks, her company always makes a risk assessment before localizing a game for overseas markets to ensure return on investment. Mike notes that his clients consider to localize a game only after it makes profits in the domestic market. Bonnie's and Mike's observations are corroborated by the industry data. In 2019, the domestic market revenue of Chinese games was three times as large as the overseas market revenue (CNG 2019a). On the contrary, the domestic market size of Japanese games was about one tenth of the overseas market size (CESA 2019). This might explain why Japanese game companies rely on the sim-ship model to maximize revenue from overseas markets, while Chinese game companies use the post-gold model to serve the domestic market as their major source of revenue. The centrality of economic considerations seems at odds with what has been suggested in the literature, contending that the post-gold model tends to "value the quality of their video games well over the return on investment" (Dodaro 2015, 55). These contrasting views attest to the importance of understanding and contextualizing localization models from the perspective of practitioners in a particular market.

5.2 Levels of localization

When we try to decide on the level of localization of Chinese games in SEA markets, we are confronted with two conceptual difficulties. One has to do with language choice and the other with the notion of “locale”. Specifically, we want to figure out this question: if a Chinese company releases an English version in Indonesia, is this case counted as localization? To guide our analysis, we revisit the definition of game localization in the literature:

game localization 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 (O’Hagan and Mangiron 2013, 19, our emphasis).

Within the definition, we highlight two elements and measure our case against them. We reason that our case can be counted as localization: the English version is *suitable for sale* in Indonesia (as the survey results show that gamers prefer to play in English); and the Chinese game has been adapted to *a new set of user environments* (from Chinese to English). Although the language choice (i.e. English) for localization is less intuitive in our case (Indonesia), it seems to be favored by game companies (see Bonnie’s comments in Section 4.1) and gamers (see survey results in Section 4.2). The language choice seems counter-intuitive if a reductionist view of “locale” is adopted. By definition, a locale means “a specific combination of geographic region, language, and character encoding” (O’Hagan and Mangiron 2013, 8). Hence, a reductionist view of locale tends to map one geographic region to one presumed main language (Fernández-Costales 2017), as usually

expressed in country-language pairs (e.g. France-French, UK-English, and USA-English as three locales). From this monolingual perspective, Indonesian is the presumed language choice for game localization in Indonesia. However, such an essentialist view is increasingly challenged and unsettled by multilingualism that refuses to tie one language to one nation or vice versa. Thus, the notion of locale is by no means stable or static. We propose to distinguish three types of locales as a possible analytical framework to further theorize game localization from multiple perspectives of stakeholders: (a) a *presumed* locale (Indonesia-Indonesian) imagined from a monolingual perspective; (b) a *practiced* locale (Indonesia-Indonesian+English) enacted by game companies (recall Mike's experience of attending to a client's request to use English NPC names in an Indonesian language version); and (c) a *preferred* locale (Indonesia-English) as indicated by gamers in the survey. In some regions, these three types of locales might converge as in the case of English-US. However, in SEA markets, the variety of languages makes it highly possible that the three types of locales diverge. That might explain why Mike's clients want to produce a multilingual version so that gamers can choose from a list of languages and play the game in the language they desire. Therefore, when a Chinese game is rendered into an Indonesian version, an Indonesian version with English NPC names, an English version, or a multilingual version, these cases might all be counted as localization for the Indonesian market, adapting the game to different sets of locales.

After we establish that these versions are localized versions, we reason that they all achieve full localization, the highest level in Chandler and Deming's (2012) categorization (see Section 2.1 for details) because Bonnie and Mike recount that games are fully translated (including voiceover) for SEA markets. However, it is rare for Bonnie's

company and Mike's clients to undergo "deep localization" (Bernal-Merino 2011), such as adding extra characters and storylines for a region. Based on Bonnie's and Mike's comments, this is because these Chinese games companies decide to localize a game only after it makes profits in the domestic market and passes a risk assessment. Hence, game coders might be very reluctant to make changes to their proud productions and the extra effort may not bring about substantial return (at best "icing on the cake" in Bonnie's words). The post-gold model and the proven success in the domestic market have made game coders superior to localizers in a power hierarchy. This is in line with O'Hagan and Chandler's (2016) observation about "the somewhat secondary nature of localization from developers' perspectives" (314). That is why localizers' ideas of deep localization are usually undervalued, unless the most profitable destinations are concerned.

5.3 Translation strategies

In line with previous observations about translation strategies in game localization (e.g. Geurts 2015; Khoshsaligheh and Ameri 2020), our survey results show that Indonesian gamers seem to prefer foreignization over domestication. Taken together, these findings show that gamers' preference might contradict what localizers prioritize, as suggested in the literature:

Localization prioritizes the overall "look and feel" of the end product, which is expected to be similar to equivalent local products in the target culture, causing translation strategies to be oriented towards domestication (O'Hagan and Mangiron 2013, 159)

We would not dismiss domestication too quickly because the survey results reflect gamers' perceptions of the *idea* of foreignization and domestication, instead of *application* of these strategies. We posit that gamers want foreignness to be preserved (such as foreign names of game characters and culture-specific items) because they want a defamiliarizing gaming experience. If all foreign elements are domesticated and the game plays like an original-local one, the exotic appeal gets lost (Dodaro 2015; Fernández-Costales 2016). Our conjecture can be supported by the survey result (i.e. less than 40% of the respondents wanted the translated game to feel like an original game in Indonesian) and Mike's description about an Indonesian language version with English NPC names. The co-presence of two languages can make the gaming experience optimally defamiliarizing for gamers, but not too alienating to cause comprehension problems or too domesticating to be "one of those same old games". As we see it, foreignization and domestication should not be dichotomized. "[M]ore diversity may be required in the selection of translation strategies in order to meet users' demands and preferences" (Fernández-Costales 2016, 197-198). To this end, a fruitful avenue for future research will be experimental studies, in which participants play games in different conditions (e.g. with an increasing degree of foreignness). This experimental design would allow gamers to see foreignization strategies in action and decide whether the strategies contribute to or detract from their gaming experience.

6. Conclusion

Our study synthesizes the insights from practitioners and gamers about localizing Chinese games for SEA markets. We find that there are genuine demands of Chinese games in SEA markets, which are already fraught with competitions. We also identify several gaps among theoretical accounts, practitioners' observations, and gamers' perceptions. First, the language diversity in SEA and the lingua franca status of English call into question the one-language-for-one-locale presumption (e.g. Indonesian-Indonesia). Hence, we suggest to differentiate three types of locales: *presumed*, *practiced*, and *preferred*. Such differentiation offers a nuanced understanding of the convergent/divergent language choices presumed by monolinguals, practiced by localizers, and preferred by gamers. Second, the sim-ship model favored by English and Japanese game companies (O'Hagan and Mangiron 2013) might not be popular with Chinese game companies with the majority of revenue contributed by the domestic market. They usually localize games with proven domestic success and conduct risk assessments to ensure return on investment. Hence, they operate under a post-gold model driven more by economic considerations than quality concerns (contrary to what is suggested in Dodaro 2015). Third, although deep localization has been advocated in the literature (Bernal-Merino 2011), it might be "icing on the cake" for localizing Chinese games because practitioners believe that the key to overseas success is the quality of original games, i.e., the gameplay. The impressive domestic sales, the less powerful position occupied by localizers, and the tight release schedule they work on tend to make their ideas for deep localization undervalued by game coders. Finally, gamers' fondness of foreignization appears to be at odds with localizers' preference of domestication as suggested in the literature (O'Hagan and Mangiron 2013). To accommodate gamers' expectations, some Chinese game companies provide localized

versions with co-presence of two languages to defamiliarize the gaming experience and/or release multilingual versions in a region so that gamers can choose the language they want to play in. These findings point to the complex nature of game localization and the heuristic values of three types of locales (presumed, preferred, and practiced) as a possible framework to further theorize game localization from multiple perspectives of stakeholders. Additionally, continued dialogues and deeper cooperation among practitioners, gamers, and scholars are still needed to develop theoretical accounts that are more sensitive to contextual particularities. The current study on localizing Chinese games for SEA markets represents one step towards that direction.

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Gameography

Game title (publisher, year of first release)

Assassins' Creed (Ubisoft 2007)

Ski Safari (Defiant Development 2012)

Super Smash Bros Brawl (Nintendo 2008)