

# Translation Challenges in English to French Video Game Localization

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## Research Podcast Script

### Short Biography of Interview Participants

#### **Carme Mangiron**

Carme is a leading researcher in the field of video game localization. She holds a PhD in Translation Studies, has years of experience localizing games, and has authored several works on the topic. She is currently a lecturer at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona.

#### **Alice Ray**

Alice is an English-to-French translator and a Translation Studies researcher, focusing on the translation of science fiction terminology. She has a doctorate in Translation Studies and currently works at the Université d'Orléans.

#### **Lucie Prunier**

Lucie has over a decade of experience in the video game industry. She has translated numerous games from Japanese and English into French and later worked as a localization project manager. She is currently the Executive Technical Producer at DON'T NOD.

#### **Lucile Danilov**

Lucile has been a freelance English-to-French game translator and localization consultant for several years. As well as translating and consulting, she has also built a strong audience through her website *Loc'd and Loaded*, where she frequently writes about topics related to localization and translation.

#### **Anonymous Localizer**

The Anonymous Localizer has extensive experience localizing games into French. Additional information has been omitted to protect their identity.

## KEY

**N:** Narrator (Matilda Lailey)

**LD:** Lucile Danilov

**AR:** Alice Ray

**LP:** Lucie Prunier

**CM:** Carme Mangiron

**Z:** Anonymous participant

**N:** games. Maybe you've spent hours getting lost in the experiences they offer. If not, you definitely know someone who has. The video game industry is booming and becoming increasingly global, with games being developed in countries all over the world. But when someone picks up a video game that was initially created in a different country, how often do they think about the effort that went into adapting the game into their language? Not many have heard of video game localizers, but so many of us benefit from their work every day.

**N:** My name is Matilda Lailey, and with the help of some interviewees, I'll be critically exploring the specific challenges that come with localizing video games, with a focus on localizing games from English to French. We'll also consider potential solutions to these difficulties, and how the relationship between localization, academia, and the gaming industry could help (or hinder) video game localizers' efforts.

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**N:** So, what exactly is video game localization? Localization is the process of taking software produced in one region of the world and adapting it for use elsewhere. This is a contentious term, as many question whether localization is a sub-type of translation, whether translation is one part of localization, or whether the two are completely interchangeable.

**N:** Many of the interviewees see the two as synonyms. Even those working as 'localizers', such as Lucile Danilov, may not consider this separate to the role of 'translator':

**LD:** As far as I'm concerned, localization *is* translation. You can't translate without localizing. Well, you can if you want to produce shoddy work... And you can't localize without translating.

**N:** However, there is value in using 'localization' as a unique term to show the specificities of working with software, as opposed to another medium, as researcher Alice Ray explains:

**AR:** Personally, I use localization. I think it's a great term, a great concept to describe the fact that you need to adapt all the linguistic, the language assets of the game. So, not

only the content of the game, but also the menus, the documentation, the guidelines, etc.

**N:** That said, localizer-turned-producer Lucie Prunier makes an interesting point about how separating the two terms may be misinterpreting what ‘translation’ really encompasses:

**LP:** I think people make a difference between translation and localization ‘cause they think that translation is just word to word and localization is adapting. But there is no such thing as translating word to word without adapting to the culture. So, it seems very redundant that the word localization was created, to me. To me, it’s a business word, to be honest. It’s an unnecessary specification of translation.

**N:** Taking all sides into consideration, I’ll be referring to the process of adapting games for other regions as ‘localization’, to emphasise the particularities of working with software, and will use ‘translation’ when speaking more generally about adapting text. The interviewees use terms as they wish to, based on the distinctions they personally draw between the two.

**N:** This debate around terminology has existed for as long as research into localization has. Why has academia still not settled on clear definitions of these terms? It may be because video game localization as an academic area doesn’t really receive much attention. Let’s dive into our first topic.

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**N:** The quest to facilitate the process of video game localization in the gaming industry has been hindered by an unfortunate lack of research. Researcher Carme Mangiron touched upon the stigmatization of video games in academia, and how this prevents game localization from receiving as much analysis as it should:

**CM:** I’ve got it through my career, is this a serious research topic? It’s because of that and because it’s quite new and because it’s associated with children, with nerds, with people who waste their time playing games as opposed to reading high literature. Basically, it’s like lowbrow culture.

**N:** This stigma is particularly visible in Translation Studies. Articles only began appearing on the topic in the early 2000s, despite games having been popular for many years at that point. Even today, game localization takes up a small percentage of journal articles and conference talks. I searched the database of *Meta*, a well-known scholarly journal about translation, and in the 214 issues available, I could find only two articles on game localization.

**N:** Those who *do* wish to research it face many hurdles, such as spending their own time and money playing and transcribing a game if they wish to use it as a primary source. They are also hampered by a lack of transparency from others in the industry:

**CM:** It’s a very cagey industry. It’s very difficult to get data. It’s very difficult to get corpus to analyze. It’s very difficult to talk to developers, the NDAs and all that.

**N:** It is surprising that the gaming industry doesn't actively facilitate further research, given that they would only benefit from improved localization practice:

**CM:** If you talk money and figures, it generates, y'know, much more revenue than the box office, the music, the book industries. The more research we have, the better for the industry as well. Even if it's just in, y'know, pure economic terms, which is what the video game industry is more interested in.

**N:** Alice shares a different perspective on the value of studying game localization:

**AR:** Yeah, I think Translations Studies can really help understand the connection between language and technology and highlight the subtleties of the media, and it'll be a great approach also to understand our relationship, the role of video games in our life. You know, how we translate something tells a lot about how we consider the thing in our daily life.

**N:** Thankfully, there finally seems to be a shift happening, with more people growing interested in the topic. Carme shares her experience at a recent conference:

**CM:** I was in the scientific committee, and I proofread, y'know, I reviewed eight papers, and I think this is extraordinary for a mainstream conference.

**N:** Hopefully this trend continues, and we'll see the position of video game localization, and video games in general, further legitimized in academia.

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**N:** Let's now explore some specific challenges when localizing video games.

**N:** Video games, as coded pieces of software, are bound by space restrictions in ways other media are not. If a translator translates a 1,000-page English novel into French, the final result doesn't have to also be 1,000 pages. In a game, there's a set number of characters allocated to displaying a line of dialogue, or text in a menu, for example. The localizer can't go over this limit. Anything larger won't fit the game's coding. This means localizers often must abandon their first-choice translation for something shorter:

**CM:** You have to sacrifice naturalness. Maybe use an abbreviation or something like that, or more telegraphic language. So sometimes they have to translate, y'know, battle messages. And I tell them, "36 characters" and they say, "have 38, is it... because it's really nice, is that okay?" I say, "no, 36, because if you use 38 it might, y'know, come off screen". Y'know, you have to respect the character limitations. So often you have to choose the second best.

**N:** Space restrictions also make certain translation techniques harder to employ, such as translation by addition; if something implicit in the source text wouldn't be clear to someone from the target culture, a translator can expand on the text in their translation to provide clarification. One localizer explains how this can be done easily in a novel, but not a game:

**Z:** The Harry Potter series – in France, we don't have the concept of a head boy or prefect. So, in the books, the original translator, he made up a whole dialogue about this. Ron's telling Harry "My brother's a prefect," and in French Harry was like, "What's that?" and Ron's like "Don't you know? It's blah blah blah." Because it's a book, he had the luxury of doing that. Whereas in a game, it really needs to be coded that at *this* point *this* character talks. If you wanted to do something like this, you'd really have to do it in the same speech bubble from the start.

**N:** How does this specifically affect English and French? French often needs more words than English to communicate the same idea. For instance, something that English can convey with adjectives may need a relative clause in French:

**AR:** For example, I think it's in the Dead Space menu. You've got this expression 'Single Press Quicktime Event'. In French, it's a nightmare to translate, because we can't say the same thing with so many modifiers. We will use, y'know, relative clauses for example. So, it extends the sentence so much. You've got to reduce the text.

**N:** Researchers have explored how space restrictions limit a localizer's translation choices, such as Annelies Van Oers, who wrote that game menus particularly limit creativity, even excluding menus from her research material as they wouldn't be interesting. However, space restrictions in menus actually allowed Carme to be extremely creative:

**CM:** I think we had that in Final Fantasy 8, the icons etc. We didn't have enough room to explain everything that we had to explain, so then we asked them, could we use icons, for example? Cause that would be visually... So sometimes, y'know, you might need to look for different strategies or resources to make sure that the players know what they have to do and they can play seamlessly.

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**N:** Localizers must contend with time restrictions too, for example, due to 'sim-ship' or 'simultaneous shipping', which refers to the release of all localized versions of a game at the same time as the original version. There are two ways to achieve this: the first involves localizers beginning their work at the end of the development phase, when most of the original text is basically finalized.

**N:** In this situation, the localizer may have little time between receiving the text and the deadline for submitting their translation, as if the original text has been mostly finalized, it's likely the game's release date is near. This quick turnaround is less than ideal:

**AR:** In an ideal world translation takes time. And I think in video game localization, translators don't have enough time to translate. When you translate video games, you need to be creative because unique words, imaginary words. It takes time.

**N:** However, Lucie suggests why studios may hold back on giving localizers the text until late in the development process:

**LP:** Making games is very difficult. They're very time-consuming. They're very expensive, and so you have to be careful with, y'know, how you use your time and prioritize things. You can't send to localization text that's not finished, 'cause it's money wasted, essentially. You need to be sure that the text's not gonna change anymore. So, y'know, you need to send it quite late in the game essentially, 'cause it's more important to you that the actual original text is finished than having it localized.

**N:** The second way to achieve sim-ship involves localizers working alongside the development, translating text as and when they are given it. This comes with downsides:

**CM:** It just implies that it's much harder to localize it because it's subject to constant change. Now, this bit that was so hard to translate, they take it, they change it, sometimes they forget to send you the new update.

**N:** As mentioned, this approach isn't cost-effective, however major companies continue using it. Blizzard, in a talk about *StarCraft II*'s localization, stated there are about 650,000 words in the final game, but they estimate over twice as many were translated in total, because around half of that content was altered during development. This isn't a productive use of the company's money or the localizer's time. It's demoralizing to work hard on a translation just for it to not make the final game:

**LP:** I actually translated a pirate game, in fact, from English to French. I was very proud of what I did, 'cause it was a very funny game, and I really spent a long time to try and do it justice. And I remember out of curiosity, I looked at the French reviews of the game, and all of them said some of the French makes no sense. And I was so disheartened, and I thought, how is that possible? But I saw the sentence, and the sentence was not something I wrote. I knew the game by heart, I was like, this is not me. They've probably lost some of the translation, and they used Google Translate, or they did something that means that now the sentence makes no sense.

**N:** This is a major risk of not dedicating enough time to localization in the overall development-to-release timeline; should an error happen that corrupts the localized text, there's no time left to have the localizer redo their work, leading to shoehorned solutions such as using Google Translate. Bearing in mind the drawbacks of both localizing at the end of development and localizing alongside development, game companies would benefit from ensuring they allocate dedicated localization time to the development process rather than tacking it on at the end or making localizers work alongside a changing text. This dedicated time would ideally be late enough that the majority of the text is finished but early enough that there is adequate time for the localizer to do their job to a high degree of quality.

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**N:** When I asked what the main challenges in video game localization were, the same thing kept coming up:

**CM:** The lack of context.

**LD:** The lack of context.

**AR:** A lack of context.

**N:** Common practice in the industry has localizers receive spreadsheets containing ‘strings’, which are decontextualized phrases or words to be translated. It could be a line of dialogue, a menu option, a weapon name, or in the worst case, just a word:

**LD:** Then you end up with a single cell that says “Will,” and you wonder if it’s referring to a verb, a name, or a testament.

**N:** Localizers often have no idea where in the game this string appears, whose dialogue it is, what it’s referring to, which poses major problems, particularly when localizing from English to French:

**LD:** Another challenge comes from the fact that English has no distinction between imperative and infinitive forms: so, you’ll end up with strings like “clear the area 5 times,” and you’re not always sure which form is most appropriate depending on where this string appears.

**N:** Another issue is deciding whether to translate the pronoun ‘you’ as ‘tu,’ the singular and informal form, or ‘vous,’ the plural and formal form. In the series *Mass Effect*, all characters address each other with ‘vous,’ which seems inappropriate for dialogue between lovers or close friends. This alienated some francophone fans, such as one particularly agitated fan who wrote a forum post entitled “stop calling me ‘vous!’” But the localizer likely had no information about dynamics between characters, and erred on the side of caution, using the formal ‘vous’ by default.

**N:** Homonyms are also particularly susceptible to mistranslation due to lack of context:

**Z:** You had this video game called *Sea of Thieves*, and a lot of people talked about that because on the very first screen, you would see ‘Microsoft presents *Sea of Thieves*’, but in French it said ‘Microsoft’ and then *presents*, the word for, like, a gift. So, it was ‘Microsoft Cadeaux *Sea of Thieves*’. I think it’s quite likely that the person who translated that didn’t have any context. So, you’d just have one cell which says ‘presents.’ And if you don’t know, you’re like ‘oh, is it like a birthday thing?’

**N:** Despite string-based translation risking a loss of context, the interactivity inherent in video games makes it near impossible to provide localizers with one cohesive, chronological text to translate. In many games the player chooses in what order to do missions or has conversations with multiple possible outcomes. Often there is no way to know when the player will encounter a certain part of the text, and which other strings they have/haven’t encountered up to that point. As scholar Anthony Pym said, “When texts are regularly *produced* in a non-linear way, and *used* in a non-linear way, it comes as no surprise that they are *translated* in a non-linear way.” Here we see the merit of using spreadsheets and strings as a system by which localizers and developers alike can access and organize specific sections of a branching, fluctuating text.

**N:** So, what should the solution be, if providing a chronological and complete text is impossible, but the lack of context in string-based translation is unideal? Lucie provides a suggestion:

**LP:** Every time someone asks me, what do you think we should do to help localization it's, and it sounds so basic, it's please give the translators the build of your games.

**N:** It's vital the localizer can experience the game's mechanics, so they can understand exactly where in the game their translated text will go, be it as a part of a menu, a status effect, or a dialogue option:

**LP:** So, y'know, because you only translate the text that you see. You can just imagine what you're, what the world and the images that will be, y'know, seen while you actually have the text shown will be. Then if I have the build, I can, y'know, make my own, make my own opinion as to what's best in French.

**N:** Often larger game studios do communicate openly with their in-house localizers and make pre-release builds available. However, freelance localizers usually only get the decontextualized strings. Despite many expressing a need for build access, Lucie sheds light on why studios may not provide them:

**LP:** A lot of money and interest could be lost if that build was actually hacked. So, you're very precious about sending builds outside of your studio, so that I completely understand. Working right now at a game studio, I can tell you we do not send builds to people on their personal computers, it's just so dangerous, you can't do that.

**N:** So, current practice regarding builds isn't suitable for freelance localizers' needs, however the reason behind said practice is understandable. Lucie suggests a possible middle ground:

**LP:** I have sometimes gotten videos, which is quite helpful. I think it's a nice little, y'know, compromise, if you will. And I've had cases like that where I had snippets of videos and devs were really good about, y'know, answering questions.

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**N:** Moving to more linguistic issues, Lucie highlights a potential pitfall when working with French:

**LD:** Unlike English, French is a highly gendered language: everything from nouns to adjectives to verbs are either feminine or masculine, which makes translation extra difficult in games that tend to use placeholders to save up on space and resources.

**N:** The 'placeholders' Lucie is referring to are often called 'variables.' Lucie gives a typical example of a variable:

**LP:** Say, for example, in an RPG, you open a treasure chest and it says, 'you got X.' Y'know, there's no harmonized way of translating that into French. It's a difficult thing to translate, contrary to what you might think, because 'you got X,' it depends on the gender and the plural, and it's horrible to translate.

**N:** Variables aren't just an issue for gender and plurality, but also for other syntactical features of French. For instance, to show possession, you use the word 'de,' such as 'la robe de Marie' for 'Marie's dress.' However, when the following noun begins with a vowel, 'de' becomes 'd,' such as 'la robe d'Amélie.' This is called elision. Lucile shared one way localizers can problem-solve around this issue:

**LD:** I once had to deal with possessive markers that wouldn't work in French, so I decided to change the nouns altogether.

**N:** Lucile sent me a Twitter thread where she discussed localizing a game, *Meow Tower*, from English to French. In the original English, the variable string to denote the cat characters' bedrooms was 'O's room,' where 'O' is replaced by the cat's name. However, Lucile couldn't translate this as 'la chambre de O,' because some cats' names began with vowels, so required 'd' rather than 'de.' To solve this, Lucile renamed cats whose names began with vowels, taking the opportunity to be creative while retaining the spirit of the original as much as possible; for example, renaming the cat 'Arthur' as 'Sherlock,' keeping the Arthur Conan Doyle reference.

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**N:** Recently, French has been welcoming more anglicisms into its repertoire. However, the increased use of English words in French can create confusion for a localizer:

**LP:** I think it can be very deceiving in the sense that sometimes you might actually rely too much on the fact that they're sister languages, and I think the fact they're so close makes it harder because sometimes you, y'know, when you translate you get into both mindsets of, y'know, English and French at the same time and you start writing in French, but actually, it looks literally like English and so it doesn't look like natural French.

**N:** But anglicisms cannot always be completely avoided. Sometimes the English is genuinely the most frequently used word in French for that concept:

**AR:** Blaster, for example, the term 'blaster' was used for the first time, I don't know when, long time ago. It's now used in many, many science-fiction works. So, when you're a translator, you need to know, y'know, the megatexts, macrotxts. We use blaster in French, and it'll be weird not to use blaster.

**N:** This 'megatext' is hugely important. The localizer must be aware of terms consistently used across a particular genre, such as 'blaster' in science-fiction, or 'poultice' in fantasy. Even if a French equivalent exists, a francophone familiar with that genre may find it strange to see the French instead of the English they are used to. In fact, a good localizer must understand common gaming terminology, regardless of genre:

**LP:** I actually remember because I discussed with my mother, who's not a gamer, and she didn't understand the word 'party'. I said, no, it's not a party as in somewhere, an event where you go to have drinks with friends. In the context of an RPG, a party means a group of characters that are going on an adventure.

**N:** Many games are sci-fi or fantasy, which means they contain many neologisms, or ‘invented words,’ such as the name of a fictional chemical or species. Sometimes the localizer literally translates these, such as the region ‘Skyrim’ from the *Elder Scrolls* series becoming ‘Bordeciel’ in French, literally ‘rimsky.’ Often, the simplest solution is to keep the term the same, as when invented words have little to no etymological/cultural ties they can work passably in most languages. The localizer must be careful to do their research if opting for this method:

**Z:** Sometimes the creators want a fantasy word to be the same in all languages. But again, what sounds good in one language can sound like an insult in another one. So, like, you have to see with the other languages if that’s okay or not.

**N:** In the *Mass Effect* series, most alien species’ names are identical in both English and French, with one exception: the Salarians were renamed ‘Galariens’ in French. Why? Salarian in French could be understood as either ‘dirty to nothing’ or ‘dirty Aryan.’ Both are potentially offensive, which is probably why it was changed.

**N:** As for scientific neologisms, to sound realistic, they must be anchored in the players’ knowledge of what makes a scientific term. Alice researches the translation of sci-fi neologisms:

**AR:** You need to create a plausible term, which can be, y’know, incorporated in our lexicon, in our future lexicon, or in an alien lexicon. Because you’ve got this link between our knowledge, our planets, our cultures, and the world of science-fiction.

**N:** To achieve this, the localizer must respect the etymology of both cultures’ scientific terms to create a plausible translation:

**AR:** If you translate the words, y’know, in entomology you will need to use a lot of Latin and Greek elements, for example. So, you need to understand, well, this is a term from that field, so I’ll be using that kind of pattern.

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**N:** Now that we’ve discussed some of the challenges video game localizers face, we can see while many are linguistic, some occur because others in the industry don’t give enough context, time, or consideration to localizers. Game companies *must* pay attention when localizers express their needs. After all, it’s thanks to localizers that companies can profit in multiple countries. They must engage in dialogue with localizers, so at the very least compromises can be found, whether it be providing videos instead of builds, more transparency during development, or investing in Quality Assurance to catch errors that slip through.

**N:** These are hardly new suggestions, however. Academics have been discussing how the industry can facilitate localization since the mid-2000s, yet it appears nothing has changed. It seems many game companies aren’t paying attention to existing research, which hammers home the need for video game localization to receive more academic attention. If there’s more concrete research, the industry may be more likely to take

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note. Now that we're finally seeing more interest in the topic, let's hope things continue in the same direction.

**N:** With that, we come to the end. We've spoken lots about challenges, but more than anything I hope we've shed light on these talented, creative, underappreciated individuals who persevere against those challenges just to ensure video games, ensure *art*, is accessible around the world. The adventures in games are created by the writers, but localizers open the door for us all to experience them.

**N:** Thank you to the interviewees. And thank *you* for listening.