

Buying Skins: Cultural Intermediaries and the localisation of Australian Games

James Keogh

University of Wollongong
Northfields Ave, Wollongong
NSW 2522
0423 674 812
jamesk7395@gmail.com

Keywords

Game studies, cultural intermediaries, localisation, independent games.

INTRODUCTION

This paper investigates the emergence of China's burgeoning cultural sectors and some of the key processes by which audio-visual content is transformed through contributions from a range of national and transnational actors. Specifically, it explores how digital game 'localisers' are intersecting economic and cultural fields in unprecedented ways, mediating between well-established cultural policy demands and a bevy of new commercial industry opportunities and networks of stakeholders. Through the lens of Bourdieusian field theory, particularly from *Distinct* (1984) – which remains highly relevant today, this research analyses how such 'cultural intermediaries' are contributing to the transformation of economic capital and evolving consumer tastes and needs. At once, the expertise of these localisers lies outside of the skillset and capabilities of the local Australian digital game labour market, while also providing knowledge in the field of cultural production, distribution, and consumption of Australian games for the lucrative Chinese market.

Utilising field observations and textual analysis of original and localised mobile games, this paper analyses the range of localisation practices and network relationships sought by Australian gaming developers to penetrate China's gaming market and to navigate the State's esoteric censorship procedures. Gaining new understandings of these professionals and their practices will provide original insights into both the field of cultural production and how Australian content is adapted and geared for both Chinese and transnational audiences. Not only will this assist to elucidate the relevant power institutions at play and how they are transforming, but it will also reveal the dynamic relationships involving a network of actors that are facilitating transnational media and cultural flows.

How then does a Western-gaming developer bring a game to the Chinese market? As previously addressed by Dong and Mangiron (2018), language translations are just only a single tool in a localiser's arsenal. Taste-makers must also consider specific cultural tastes, nuances, and mechanisms of the target consumer - all whilst navigating a complex and volatile censorship procedure.

Proceedings of DiGRA Australia 2020

© 2020 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

A decade ago, Brisbane studio Halfbrick saw over 200 million downloads and unprecedented success in China with its mobile hit *Fruit Ninja* (2010) after partnering with a Chinese publisher. The publisher, iDreamSky Technology, was a cheat code to unlock unparalleled potential in the Chinese market. Now, Austrade offers studios direct opportunities for Australian studios through the China Joy bootcamp to establish relationships with Chinese publishing partners. Such partners offer their expertise in localisation services, local knowledge of China's strict censorship protocol, and foreign distribution channels. They are what French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu describes as cultural intermediaries – actors within a complex network who frame cultural products for the always-trending tastes of consumers. To understand the potential for Australian independent games within this phenomenal consumer domain, we must determine *how* Chinese consumers come to like and purchase such media and cultural products. The key to investigating the 'how' is through these intermediaries, situated at the intersection of the cultural and economic fields.

This paper examines the multiple processes undertaken by game localisers to adapt and distribute digital gaming content in China through the lens of Bourdieu's cultural intermediaries and cultural production. This discourse builds upon recent studies in Australia game production and cultural fields (Keogh 2019) by focusing upon the target consumer market, relevant power institutions and networks of actors in cultural production. This research will be of use to stakeholders in the Australian independent gaming industry by highlighting the process taken in adapting a cultural product and framing it towards a market for commercial and critical success.

BIO

James Keogh is a M.Phil student at the University of Wollongong in the Faculty of Law, Humanities and the Arts. His research thesis explores practices in trans-local game production and consumption, with a focus on video game localisation.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bourdieu, P 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press

Dong, L & Manigron, C 2018. 'Journey to the East: Cultural Adaptation of video games for the Chinese Market', *The Journal of Specialised Translation*, 29, 149 – 168.

Keogh, B 2019. 'The cultural field of video game production in Australia.', *Games and Culture*, (In Press).

Halfbrick. 2010. *Fruit Ninja*. Brisbane, Queensland, Australia: iDreamSky.