

BY RICHARD MORGAN
ILLUSTRATION BY DAVID BONI



THE LOCAL VOCAL

Turning Japanese dreams into Western realities

Jessica Chavez is your videogame's fairy godmother. Not unlike those fairy tale miracle workers who turned pumpkins into carriages and wooden puppets into real boys, Chavez, 28, performs a kind of international electronic alchemy, transforming obscure Japanese videogames into Americanized products. From her perch at XSEED Games, in Torrance, Calif., she has localized the texts of such classics as *Half-Minute Hero* and *Fragile Dreams: Farewell Ruins of the Moon*. Basically, when it comes to non-blockbuster Japanese games, all your awesome are belong to her.

So what you do is technically called

"localization"? "Localization" is such a corporate-sounding word. It kind of makes the whole process sound boring or sterile. Luckily at my company everyone delights in adding a bit of silliness to the games, and we don't take ourselves too seriously. A good example from a past game was when we were finishing up *Retro Game Challenge* and the team was asked to submit some fake names for the in-game magazine. We were basically instructed to plumb the depths of our *Simpsons*, *Family Guy*, and lowbrow humor reservoirs for the names. I think one of mine, Don Keeballs, got used in the end.

I think the game I'm most proud of so far is *Half-Minute Hero*. Unlike other games where there's a strong story or the need to keep things at least a little serious, *HMH* was meant as a parody of RPGs from the get-go, and thus I was handed a Diet Coke and some twizzle sticks and told to go wild. I had soldiers yelling "Spooooon!" before they charged, I had the Knight in one level doing undisclosed things to a duck, and my personal favorite, I had the end game description of the main villain in the game read:

The Ultimate Evil Lord—*Mortal enemy of the Time Goddess. Made up of a thousand kittens glued together with jam.*

What's the process exactly? Well, the actual localization part of the process figures somewhere in the middle [of development], but it is the most lengthy part. Usually games get broken roughly into:

Interesting Japanese game is located → Office Evaluations → Securing Rights → Translation → Editing → QA (quality assurance: text and bug checks) → Mastering Up → Production → Store → A gamer's hot little hands.

Pretty complicated, huh? And, it depends on the game, but most RPGs are text heavy and will

take anywhere from 3-5 months to translate, edit and QA. To make all this work you need very specialized people. Our president, Jun Iwasaki usually makes trips to Japan to weed out potential games. Everyone plays whatever he brings back, our translator then tackles the text, and it shuffles between him and myself (the editor) for pretty much the rest of the schedule. Our manager oversees the technical bits and communicating with Japan and tries to make sure that I don't slip in too many *Monty Python* references. Then there are the marketing and PR guys and the long-suffering office intern. Our company has only eight people at the moment and every single one is crucial to releasing a game.

So how does someone get into this weird never-grow-up profession? I suppose I'd have to give what might sound like conflicting advice. First, I'd advise anyone who was interested to take risks and pursue the field with a kind of crazy abandon. The industry admires passion and that will get you far. Be creative in your approach. You don't really get into this industry in conventional ways and the kind of knowledge you need is pretty specialized. Study art at school, or English (for editors), or completely scare your family by going to a technical school that specializes in gaming careers. Go to Japan if you want to work on Japanese games or do QA testing as a part-time job.

But, I'd also advise caution. A career in the videogame industry sounds cool and fun, but it's also one of the most demanding jobs I've ever done, and I've done just about everything. You know what the main cause of people leaving the industry is? **Burnout**. Be you a tester, a programmer, a translator, or an editor, none are exempt from crunch time, and crunch time can be more brutal and unforgiving than you can imagine. So make sure that you're prepared for that. Make sure it's something you can accept in a job.

How does it compare to the work you did with graphic novels and comic books? Work-wise they're actually pretty comparable (from the editing side anyway). I learned the editing ropes from my days working at Tokyopop as a copy editor and pretty much everything I did with text there was applicable to what I do at XSEED now. In both fields you go through chapters and chapters of text at a time and sift out spelling mistakes, grammar issues, even graphic problems. There are limitations, such as space when fitting text within a word

bubble. The people are also equally awesome and strange. Comics and videogames seem to attract a weird bunch, and I mean that in a good way.

What are the space constraints like? It seems almost like haiku. You have no idea. Sometimes I have to cram very descriptive kanji (Japanese characters) into an eight-letter English word. For example, the kanji "黒騎士魔王ザイン" means "Black Knight Evil Lord Zain." Now, in Japanese that only takes up eight spaces. My job is to make it fit in eight in English as well.

This is why in videogames you sometimes see strange abbreviations or wording. The problem is the character limits. Often in localization, you're limited to the exact number [of characters] that they used in the Japanese version, despite the fact that English requires a lot more spaces to convey the same meaning. The funniest or most difficult one to date was in *Half-Minute Hero*. "魔王より強くなった!" (You are now stronger than the evil lord!) became:

YOU > EVIL

Strange, I know, but I want it on a T-shirt so bad!

Do people ever get mad that you tinkered too much with the original? My current game, *Lunar: Silver Star Harmony*, has been a lightning rod for extreme reactions, and I expect picketing near the office any day now. *Lunar: SSH* is the remake of a classic RPG that basically defined many people's gaming childhood, and our work on it has provoked a lot of strong feelings from fans of the series. Since it's a remake, a lot of the older fans hold the PlayStation version very dear in their hearts and it's hard for them to hear a different voice cast for the characters and to see and hear changes in the text. I think their fears will be put to rest once the game is released, but the lead-up until then has been very, uh, exciting. And colorful. And scary.

Forget defeating level bosses; how do you combat writer's block? I find that hitting the caffeine pretty hard and then running the stairs in our building usually does the trick. We're up on the 10th floor and just getting out of the seat and ungluing my eyes from the computer screen helps a lot. Other, less-healthy methods of getting rid of writer's block include ripping the heads off of the squeeze toys on my desk and lying under the conference table, which is frowned on. **KS**