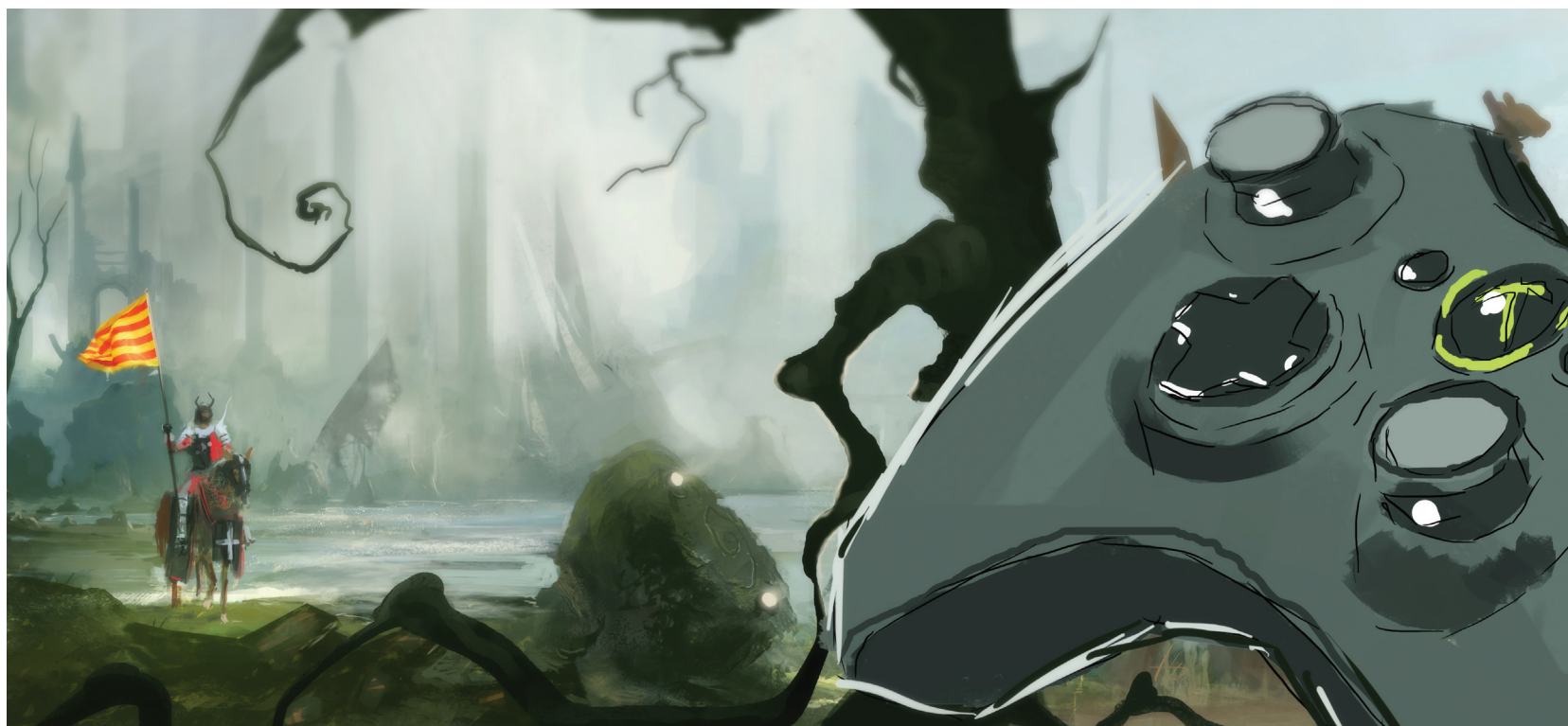


The quiet



In January this year, Barcelona-based audiovisual company The Box put out an unusual call: 600 Catalan speakers were urgently needed to take part in a voice recognition project headed by American digital technology giant Nuance. Within hours, hundreds of people had responded. “It was spectacular,” recalls Daniel Mumbru, The Box assistant manager. “People were phoning us even from out of the country, saying that they were studying abroad or on a business trip but were perfectly prepared to fly back. We thought it would be tough to find so many participants at short notice, but on the first day alone we had 1,400 names, committed out of love for their language.”

Catalan may be unknown to those who have never visited Catalunya, mysterious even to those who have, but it is a language that has been dearly and fiercely defended for centuries. Tales of repression by the likes of King Felipe V and General Franco, we’ve heard them all, but what is particularly rousing is that, despite such efforts, the language has had a unique habit of reviving within the bloom of culture. Even when officially outlawed in the 18th century, it remained and prospered as the language of litera-

ture. It flourished during the 19th-century Catalan *Renaixença* (Renaissance) as a medium for art, theatre and scientific theory. And today, it is finding its way into digital technology and, in particular, into the world’s most lucrative, influential entertainment culture: video gaming.

It is perhaps surprising that what was once considered a niche hobby has rapidly matured into worldwide mainstream entertainment. And yet, with massive advances in computer technology and the spike of internet usage over the past 30 years, it was perhaps only natural that video game technology would share in the prosperity, becoming more impressive by the game and increasingly accessible to a wider audience. In Catalunya alone, government statistics from 2010 show that an estimated 22.7 percent of the population play video games regularly, with the Catalan game industry’s annual turnover at around €11 million. But this Generalitat report was carried out before the Catalan game industry eclipsed its cinema counterpart in terms of sales, guaranteeing that the figures of video game consumption are now significantly higher.

Consider this recent example: last October, one of the biggest private studios in Catalunya, Ubisoft Barcelona, made history by

revolution

Recent trends in digital entertainment suggest Catalan is breaking into the mainstream. By Kate Busby



Illustration by Alexander

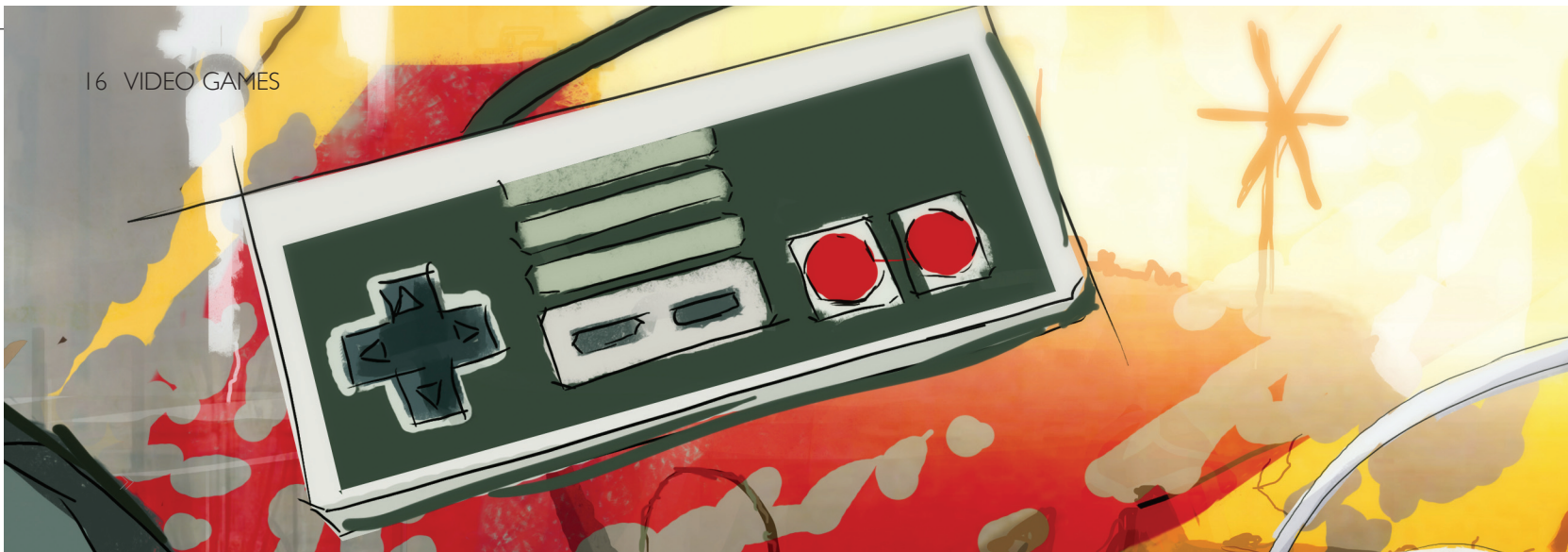
translating bestseller console game *The Adventures of Tintin: Secret of the Unicorn* into Catalan. The decision to translate or ‘localise’ such a popular game into a minority language was the first of its kind: not only did it send ecstatic sparks flying in the Catalan media, it also showed a remarkable openness on the part of the project’s Japan-based developer Nintendo to the Catalan community’s linguistic sensibilities.

Then, on the same day *Tintin* was launched, the video game journalists from newspaper *Ara* launched a campaign on Twitter with the hashtag #VolemVideojocsEnCatala (‘We Want Video Games in Catalan’). The tag was dutifully copied, pasted and re-posted by thousands of Tweeters supporting the rally and on October 20th, 2011—the day Muammar Gaddafi died—it was ranked number three globally on the list of most circulated Twitter conversations. The outcome of the campaign stunned even its instigators and proved an eye-opener for both Catalunya’s game industry and anyone else watching. Hot on the heels of this success came another significant revelation, that Catalan is the eighth most used language in the world on blogs, according to the recent survey *InformeCAT 2012* by language association Plataforma per

la Llengua.

And yet, even in the face of this astonishing evidence, most studios in Catalunya are still stalling when it comes to localising video games in Catalan. Market forces naturally have a huge role to play, but at times, such an emphasis can lead to absurdities: for instance, the driving game *Wheelman* was set in a virtual version of Barcelona, whose local characters speak Mexican Spanish to appeal to the game’s principal market in the Americas; then there is *Medes Island*, an educational game referencing Catalan history, that was available to buy in Catalunya, but only available for use in English and Castilian.

Mario Nakov, Barcelona product manager of California-based Digital Chocolate, explains: “The first difficulty of justifying a Catalan translation of a game is that everyone in Catalunya understands Spanish. The reality is that huge markets dictate the direction and emphasis of a game and, for the moment, Catalan is not considered a priority for translation.” Liam Patton, vice-president of sales for Digital Legends Entertainment has a slightly different take on the issue: “In Spain, it would seem that our sales of video games for iPhone are mostly in Catalunya, but the viabil- >



ity of a Catalan localisation stops when most of our clients, who are based abroad, see it as an extra cost.”

The words ‘extra cost’ are something of a death knell for projects developed during a financial crisis, particularly since, in the case of video game localisation, there is a need for not just translators, but a whole team of voice actors, graphic designers and programmers to make it happen. And yet, the translation of a game into a language that is not widely spoken invariably sparks a positive response in its targeted audience. When American studio Electronic Arts released the first Polish translation of football game *FIFA*, sales in Poland jumped by 500 percent. Why is this? “If it’s in their own language, players really feel the game is theirs,” explains Carme Mangiron, game localisation specialist from Barcelona’s Universitat Autònoma. “The point of translating a video game into another language is more than allowing the audience to understand what’s going on; it’s also about creating a highly accessible and immersive experience. In fact, translators are encouraged to change any words and phrases of the original to create the impression that the translated game has actually been made in that language to begin with.”

The ownership that a localisation can offer clearly inspires customer loyalty, which gives studios reason to keep up the good work. But it still does not fully explain the importance of localising products in Catalan, when all Catalan gamers can in fact understand Castilian. “It’s for the simple reason that, as a consumer, I want the power to choose,” says journalist Gina Tost from Radio Catalunya’s video game show *Generació Digital*. “Catalunya is a bilingual culture. Both Spanish and Catalan are spoken actively in everyday life. So when I buy a video game, I want to be able to say, ‘I feel like playing it in Catalan today’ and not, as is the case a lot of the time, see that one of my mother tongues has been excluded or treated as less important.” And given that it has been almost 30 years since the standardisation of Catalunya’s education system in Catalan, increasing numbers of young people are likely to choose for their entertainment to be in the language with which they are most familiar, if the option is there.

In spite of concerns that change might come slowly, there are already signs that Catalan speakers may be mere months away from having greater accessibility as video game consumers. *Tintin*

has proven something of an ice-breaker: Ubisoft are already working on another big game that will be localised in Catalan and released this autumn. Smaller Catalunya-based studios such as Karibu Games recognise the market potential for such localisations and are currently proposing a series of sports games for mobile phones with a Catalan language option. And the Generalitat—in addition to creating the Institut Català de les Empreses Culturals (ICEC) with a four-year plan

to support the development of video games in Catalan—has recently set aside localisation funding as an incentive for studios to recognise their Catalan-speaking clientele and widen accessibility. Indeed, the government has long been supporters of the cause, publishing a Catalan video game *El Guillem de Berguedà* as early as 1985 when the industry as a whole was still extremely small.

The growing inclusion of Catalan in the most lucrative global entertainment sector suggests that, against all odds, Catalan is receiving credence in the global mainstream as a first language, equal to that of Castilian, chal-

lenging its projection as ‘a minority language’ and somehow less important. Although politically correct, the implications associated with a ‘minority language’ arguably perpetuate the Auberger Espanole syndrome, in which foreign students show up for a gap year in Barcelona to improve their Castilian unprepared for the complex linguistic reality of the region. “We should really take care of our languages,” argues academic Oscar Garcia Pañella of the Media Dome at La Salle Barcelona. “If the issue was gastronomy, we would be proud to learn about and preserve all the different cuisines. Should it be any different for languages? The reality is that Spain has been a multicultural and multilingual country for centuries.”

It is clear that foreign companies such as Nuance and Nintendo are getting something right. They are two of few non-Catalan enterprises who appear to recognise Catalunya as bilingual, and are prepared to develop products here that work on the principle of inclusivity. It is undeniable that the increasing mobility of information has encouraged Catalans to use digital technology in a majority language like Castilian, but is equally true that minority languages that have young blood, businesses and governmental forces on their side tend to be alive and kicking. And Catalan has all three in full force. ■

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