

1 A New Area within Translation Studies

Multimedia interactive entertainment software, most commonly referred to as video games, first became popular through gaming arcades in the United States and Canada (in the early 1970s), and Japan (in the late 1970s), with unforgettable titles such as *Pong* (Atari 1972), *Space Invaders* (Taito 1978), and *Pac-Man* (Namco 1979), and quickly spread to other countries such as Germany, France and Spain during the following decade. High-level computing was still in its early stages, and due to the fact that it was mostly a US invention, the information displayed on screen was written in English. This was also because most games were initially developed in the US and for the US–Canada markets, which was the first one and remains the largest to date. Penny arcades, which had existed since the beginning of the twentieth century, began to bring these new games in most cities, and youngsters poured into funfairs all over the developed (and developing) world in order to play the latest coin-operated interactive games, undeterred by the foreign words on screen. Luckily for fans, these **arcade games** (as the good old classic titles are now called) used to have rather simple mechanics, and most players could learn to play them, despite their poor or non-existent knowledge of English.

Things have changed dramatically, and nowadays video games are a multi-billion dollar industry catering for home entertainment markets, as well as **arcades**, portable devices and online players. It is no longer an option to offer English- or Japanese-only games, because growing competition amongst the big player in the industry (**PlayStation**, Nintendo, Microsoft, Activision, Electronic Arts . . .) means that the market share is increasing for the providers who are more in touch with consumers around the world and their needs. Although it is still possible to find games that have intuitive mechanics and easy control schemes, the game experience is not only concerned with mere button mashing but rather with the immersion of the player in the game world, however briefly, and this requires the skill and art of translation. Video games have become far too complex for international fans to guess what they are supposed to do to derive the rules from the game, beat it and enjoy it without appropriate translation. Most video games, even those that are predominantly action-based, have long manuals,

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complex controls, and rich story lines with many characters, so as to engage players and encourage gamers to keep on playing, to buy the next instalment of the series, to download the expansion packs, and to watch out for future releases by the same developer or publisher. *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard 2004–14), for instance, is an immensely popular MMORPG that can only be played online after paying a monthly fee. This game has more than 7.7 million subscribers (Brendan 2013: online) worldwide and it allows for thousands of gamers playing together and interacting with each other at any one time.

The game publishing industry is slowly realising the crucial part that the localisation of multimedia interactive entertainment software, a.k.a. game localisation, plays in boosting sales globally, opening new markets and expanding franchises. Nonetheless, some companies (developers and publishers) still seem to be unable to fully integrate best localisation planning and practices into their workflow, and academics conducting research in this field are also thin on the ground which does not help to improve the situation. The reasons include a mixture of the financial and the notional, and arguably include the misjudgement of the importance of even basic translation and its impact as a factor in conveying the feel of the game, enhancing players' appreciation of the product, as well as increasing their loyalty to the brand. In the current industry landscape, most game developers and publishers need to outsource the translation of their products to single- or multi-language service providers specialising in the localisation of utility software, websites, desktop publishing, voiceover recordings and video games. These companies can also offer advice on **platform** compliance standards, country-specific age ratings, legal frameworks, and similar information that is important for the reception of the product in each of the target cultures. It is important to note at this point, that game translation is not the same as game localisation, the latter being a business term that encompasses several industry processes other than translation. These issues will be covered throughout the book and are the focus of Section 3.3.

With regards to language specialists, the video game industry requires a translation professional with an array of skills rather different from other areas of the established language transfer profession. The translator of video games needs to have good computer skills in order to work with different file formats and software packages, as well as to be able to translate a wide variety of textual types ranging from the promotional to the technical, the creative, the didactic and the literary. Although these skills may not in themselves be new to the field of translation, their convergence is unusual and it deserves to be studied separately and on its own merits. In this monograph, the localisation of multimedia interactive entertainment software, and the industry to which it is linked are analysed, because it has prompted the emergence of a new professional practice, a practice which could conceivably result in a change in the perception of translation in the

twenty-first century with regards to traditional views on equivalence, creativity, authorship.

Needless to say that, until very recently, there has been no specific professional or academic training for this type of translation, although some higher education institutions have started to offer short courses and modules as part of their programmes. However, the game development, publishing and localisation industries are still somewhat reluctant to allow academics into their professional circles due to time pressures and fears of a confidentiality breach, or simply due to lack of understanding of how collaboration might help them to streamline processes and to enhance overall best-practice. One of the signs of this lack of foresight is the fact that some game publishers and localisation companies are still very keen to employ untrained students with 'some' language skills, hoping to obtain maximum quality and productivity with minimum investment. These high expectations are rarely met and player forums are quick to denounce the deficient quality of translation only a few hours after international release dates. On the bright side, the game industry at large has witnessed some positive changes in recent years with the celebration of events such as the annual GDC game Localization Summit, where decision-makers are finally starting to realise the rather obvious idea that, if the language quality of the original, normally English or Japanese, is important for storytelling and player immersion, the same applies to all other language versions, if nothing else because it multiplies their ROI.

1.1 ABOUT VIDEO GAMES

People unacquainted with video games may still hold the notion that they are essentially trivial and have no particular merit as a subject of academic research, least of all within Translation Studies. The reality is that by the end of the 1990s, video games had become a full-fledged entertainment industry, challenging the pre-eminence of the film, music and book industries. The increase in sales and in the time portion citizens dedicated to video games prompted the development of Game Studies with the creation of leading research centres such as the Center for Computer Games Research at the University of Copenhagen; the publication of specialised journals such as *Game Studies* and *Games and Culture*; the application of interactivity to educational resources; and study into the health risks associated with gaming, side by side with the healthy application of fitness games. The fact that ludic activities can be found in all cultures, regardless of their technological advancement or their geographical location, qualifies games in general, and video games in particular, as a truly fascinating matter for study. Ludic phenomena are plentiful; most children, and a growing proportion of adults, play some kind of game on a daily basis, be it a fully fledged football match, a game of solitaire on the computer, or a quick *sudoku* on the way to work. If we think of all the games with which we

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are familiar, we will soon realise that they permeate many activities and situations, from card games, board games, and ball games, to quiz games, miming and signing games, sports games and drinking games, with a long etcetera. But as it had happened with previous mass entertainment products such as films (Díaz-Cintas 2009), they need to be localised in order to truly conquer foreign markets.

Although there are games for only one player, most games tend to be inclusive and are designed for two or more participants. Sutton-Smith (1997: 214), an academic who has studied play as an essential concomitant to learning, considers that “play is difficult to understand because it is ambiguous”, it has different roles and rules depending on a variety of aspects such as its function, form, and history. From Sutton-Smith’s (*ibid.*) point of view these ambiguities are “instigated by the seven rhetorics of play: progress, fate, power, identity, imaginary, self, frivolity”. In his discussion on the nature of games, the author includes aspects of adult life, such as power, productivity, and social progression as components of play that children practise from a very early age in their games. The applicability of these seven rhetorics in our day-to-day lives varies, but there is little doubt as to their influence in our social performance, since they help us to test and develop our skills in a safe environment. In the more concrete arena of video games, they have not only highlighted differences in preference, in terms of the themes and entertainment activities they focus on, but they have also emphasised the way in which language is entirely intertwined with the game experience as a whole through instructions, terminology and the expressions of emotion attached to participating in the game. Thanks to technological advances in this field, video games are able to bring to the fore the social aspect of play, enhanced by game engines that enable communication across national frontiers and time zones via the almost compulsory online playing option for most games in this day and age.

1.2 ABOUT THE GOALS OF THIS MONOGRAPH

Despite their prominence in society, there has been a lack of academic studies in the field of video games, especially from a cross-cultural and linguistic point of view. The fact that games have suffered from a certain stigmatisation in the academic world until quite recently means that the research in the area is scarce and still has to develop considerably. Although in the present book ludic activity as a broad area of study is discussed, the main objective of this research is to focus on a rapidly growing digital sub-field of games, video games, and on the linguistic and cultural adaptation to the requirements of importing countries. The main three aims are to investigate the game localisation industrial process, to map professional practice in order to detail the challenges localisation companies have to face when working for the multimedia interactive entertainment software industry, and to

discuss the implications of this new practice for Translation Studies and translator training.

Owing to an awareness of the lack of an encompassing body of works functioning as a solid base for an in-depth investigation of video game localisation within the wider field of Translation Studies, the foundations of the present research have been laid by empirically mapping the many differentiating features that set aside game translation as a new sector within language services, which also requires a new professional profile. Bearing in mind the many areas of knowledge involved in the process of transferring video games from one culture to another, my approach is multidisciplinary by necessity, in that it constitutes an attempt to explain the various multifaceted issues involved. Admittedly, in this study, less attention has been devoted to production or financial issues than to translational ones. I believe this to be at the core of the challenges in game translation, but industry processes have been carefully interwoven with all explanations in order to illustrate how closely they are all linked, and how essential it is for the industry to take all these matters into consideration, and view them as a whole. Bearing all these points in mind, the aims of this book are:

- To bring the translation and localisation of video games into the academic spotlight by mapping current game localisation professional practices from the various viewpoints of the stakeholders involved in the process: developers, publishers, translators and linguistic testers.
- To raise awareness among academics concerning game localisation processes and to position the translation of video games firmly as a discipline within the field of Translation Studies, with the ultimate goal of encouraging its inclusion in translation curricula across universities.
- To investigate how some concepts of existing TS theory fit the translation of multimedia interactive entertainment software, a.k.a. video games, in order to check their applicability and suggest possible adjustments.
- To inform the game developer and publishing companies about the benefits of internationalising their game design bearing languages and cultures in mind, not only as a requirement of global markets, but as an enhancing feature that helps video game products grow creatively and produce stronger worldwide brands.

1.3 ABOUT THE STRUCTURE OF THIS MONOGRAPH

In addition to this introductory chapter, this book is made up of six more titled as follows: “Games, Markets and Translation”; “The Translation of Multichannel Texts”; “The Translation of Video Games”; “The Industrial Process of Game Localisation”; “Training”; “Conclusion and Way

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Forward.” The content of each chapter is briefly summarised in the following paragraphs.

A thorough review of the penetration of multimedia interactive entertainment software (MIES) in today’s culture is presented in Chapter 2, from the top-ranking AAA games to casual gaming growing thanks to social networks and the smartphone market. The use of the terminology connected with this type of leisure products is explored, as well as the way in which video games have gained mainstream recognition in recent years, through award institutions such as BAFTA, is highlighted.

The issues that arise when having to translate the various types of multi-channel products encountered in the market are discussed in Chapter 3, and the way in which each of them relates to the translation of video games is analysed. The texts examined include literature and comic books, subtitled and dubbed films, as well as websites and utility software. Finally, terms such as ‘localisation’, ‘adaptation’ and ‘transcreation’ are analysed in an effort to find out how useful and appropriate they are to refer to the translation of various texts found in video games, since no unique, differentiating characteristics have been found that clearly require a depart from translation. Following the ‘audiovisual translation’ naming example recognising the difference between text-only products and multichannel products, TMIES (translation of multimedia interactive entertainment software) is proposed as a way of qualifying video games and their distinctive core features.

Chapter 4 is devoted to the analysis of the translatable assets that make up video games and their translation into various languages in order to illustrate the many challenges found in TMIES. This chapter is divided into three main sections that deal with the wide **multitextual** variety encountered within each game, the unique characteristics of multimedia interactive entertainment products, and the technical and creative challenges facing translators in order to maintain players’ immersion by applying the concept of playability to their translation strategy. Essential video game elements such as story-building interactivity, the fragmentation of the ST for create interactivity, the management of linguistic variables and algorithms and the localisation of voice commands and gestures, are given as clear indicators of the uniqueness of this professional practice and area of translation research.

Chapter 5 focuses on the industrial issues surrounding the localisation of video games for different locales. Although some of the topics analysed in this chapter are neither strictly linguistic nor translational, it is important to understand how the game localisation industry works because it directly influences processes, tools, translators and linguistic testers and, therefore, has a significant impact on the game, as well as in the translation profession. This chapter has been divided into thirteen sections dealing with: the development of game localisation as an industry, localisation within the game development process, the impact of national age rating board classifications, the localisation options open to the game industry, the **asset kits**

enabling localisation, the complex process of linguistic play-testing for final quality assurance, the obstacles for quality translation stemming from the way the game industry works, the added constraints imposed by the simultaneous shipment of all the language versions, the inadequacy of most tools used in game localisation projects, the make-up of the game localisation job market, the longstanding activity of players' game translation, some strategies from the software localisation that can benefit the game industry and the initiative to create a document championing the standardisation of processes for better game translation and localisation.

The current situation relating to the training of translators for the game localisation industry is dealt with in Chapter 6. The efforts currently being made by universities and private companies are analysed, and a number of recommendations concerning a closer collaboration of stakeholders in order to obtain better results for trainees, professionals, companies and consumers are put forward. Finally, I suggest ways in which higher education institutions can integrate game translation modules in their programmes and curricula considering and planning around some of the challenges.

Chapter 7 offers a summary of the main points discussed in this monograph and the conclusion to a long period of combining research, publishing, promotion, consulting and teaching of the translation and localisation of multimedia interactive entertainment software.

Each chapter finishes with a 'research projects' section suggesting several topics and questions that are meant to point towards issues that are worth studying and mediating about before progressing further. They can also be taken as ideas to initiate professional debates and full-fledged scholarly dissertations.

This monograph includes several lists of references and resources, not only scholarly books and journals, but also industry reports, game press and newspaper articles, as well as official webpages for games and companies. The final part consists of three appendixes. Appendix 1 is a full glossary including the definitions of the most frequent terms and acronyms used in the industry and in this research. Appendix 2 includes an extensive list of valuable additional resources and websites relating to video game events and industry bodies, translation and localisation sources, tools for project management, translation and bug-reporting and training programmes which are offered both by higher education researchers and industry professionals. Appendix 3 shows a short sample of game code used to contextualise the issues analysed in Chapter 4.

RESEARCH PROJECTS

1. Study the first and the latest reports on the video game industry by ISFE or ESA. Reflect on how the profile of players has evolved, and how gaming has become more a common leisure activity in other countries. What is the role of localisation for this industry?

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2. Think about the following areas in the translation profession and find the commonalities and differences between them and video game localisation based on your own experience and impressions:
 - 2a. Sacred texts
 - 2b. Scientific texts
 - 2c. Literary texts
 - 2d. Promotional texts
 - 2e. Audiovisual texts
 - 2f. Illustrated texts (comics)
3. What has the role of translation been for the communities interested in the texts listed in question 2?