Video games as a new domain for translation research: From translating text to translating experience

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Resum: Els videojocs han crescut fins a convertir-se en una indústria d'entreteniment global. Aquesta globalitat no s'hauria aconseguit sense els esforços de transferència lingüística que fan que els jocs, independentment de l'origen que tinguin, arribin als jugadors en la seva llengua i contextos culturals. Malgrat la importància crucial que té la traducció, el seu valor no es té en compte en els estudis sobre videojocs, ni tampoc en els estudis de la traducció. Posant un èmfasi especial en la multidimensionalitat i en la multimodalitat dels videojocs, aquest treball defensa que la recerca sobre videojocs des de la perspectiva dels estudis de la traducció no sols serà profitosa per a la indústria dels jocs sinó també per als mateixos estudis de traducció, atès que obre noves vies de recerca.

Paraules clau: videojoc, localització, traducció, multimèdia, multidimensionalitat, multimodalitat

Resumen: Los videojuegos han crecido hasta convertirse en una industria de entretenimiento global. Esta globalidad no se hubiera conseguido sin los esfuerzos de transferencia lingüística que hacen que los juegos, independientemente del origen que tengan, lleguen a los jugadores en su lengua y contextos culturales. A pesar de la importancia crucial que tiene la traducción, su valor no se tiene en cuenta en los estudios sobre videojuegos, ni tampoco en los estudios de la traducción. Haciendo hincapié en la multidimensionalidad y en la multimodalidad de los videojuegos, este trabajo defiende que la investigación sobre videojuegos desde la perspectiva de los estudios de la traducción no solo será provechosa para la industria de los juegos sino también para los propios estudios de la traducción, puesto que abre nuevas vías de investigación.

Palabras clave: videojuego, localización, traducción, multimedia, multidimensionalidad, multimodalidad

Abstract: Video games have grown to form a global entertainment industry today. Their global status could not have been achieved without language transfer efforts that make games, irrespective of their origin, accessible to players in their own language and cultural contexts. Despite translation playing such a vital role, its significance is largely ignored in games studies, while video games remain underexplored in translation studies (TS). Focusing on the multidimensionality and multimodality of video games, this paper argues that the domain of video games as a target for research in TS can serve not only the games industry but also the TS discipline by opening up a number of new research avenues.

1. Introduction

Video games have grown to be a global entertainment industry considered now to be the world's biggest cult phenomenon (Grossman, 1994). Their global status could not have been achieved without language transfer efforts that make games, irrespective of their origin, accessible to players in their own language and cultural contexts. Despite translation playing such a vital role in this growing industry, its significance is largely ignored in games studies, while video games remain similarly underexplored in translation studies (TS). One reason is the notion that video games are an area of research currently being established in academia (Newman, 2004; Wolf and Perron, 2003). In fact, there seems as yet to be no agreement even on terminology among games researchers, who variously use "computer games" (Raessens and Goldstein [eds], 2005), "electronic games" and "digital games" (Bruce and Rutter [eds], 2006), as well as the orthographic variant "videogames" (Newman, 2004) of the term "video games" (Wolf and Perron [eds], 2003)[i], to refer to the very object of their research. This paper adheres to "video game", in accordance with the convention in the localisation industry, as in Chandler (2005). Such terminological instability can be seen as a sign of the dynamic nature of this technology-driven domain, as well as a reflection of the domain's multidimensionality, allowing for diverse perspectives, as recognised by games researchers (Aarseth, 2003:1). Depending on one's point of view, modern video games can be seen as interactive software, narratives, digital art, virtual reality or multimedia entertainment, as well as from many other perspectives, forming an interdisciplinary area of research.

Variations notwithstanding, all the terms in question refer to the same concept of computer-based entertainment software played on an electronic platform (Franca, 2001:4), which highlights a characteristic of today's video games as computer applications designed for interactive entertainment. New generation game consoles, such as *PlayStation3* and *Xbox360*, integrate some of the latest digital technologies with increased processing power and memory capacities, also allowing for a seamless online mode, thus blurring the distinction between a game console and a high-end computer. The close association between a video game and a computer is important to understanding the process involved in converting a game developed in one country to make it playable in another. The recognition of video games as pieces of software justifies referring to the whole language transfer process applied to a video game as games localisation (Chandler, 2005). Localisation practices came into being in the 1980s in response to specific needs arising from the globalisation of the computer industry and computer software in particular (Esselink, 2000), where translation alone was not sufficient to convert computer software developed in one country into a form suitable to be released in another market. Software localisation involves engineering processes to make adjustments to the software itself, in addition to text-based translation. Similarly, to make a Japanese video game available in Europe, not only do words have to be translated into a target language but the translated text also needs to be integrated into the software. In turn, the software as a whole needs to be adjusted to local user environments in order to function properly.

Games localisation emerged in response to the needs of the market and the resultant industry practices continue to develop without any insight from translation research. Prior research on games localisation (O'Hagan, 2004; O'Hagan & Mangiron, 2004) suggests that the games industry operates with no clear understanding of norms of games localisation. However, the increasingly sophisticated and complex games domain will clearly benefit from focused studies, such as on localisation and translation strategies in relation to user reception. Video games comprise interactive elements in text and graphics, as well as multimodal user input mechanisms, and in some cases also include non-interactive audiovisual elements in the form of pre-rendered movies. From the point of view of the text typology, video games involve new hybrid content. This, together with potential commercial benefits, offers persuasive motives for conducting translation research into the area of video games. This paper argues the case for

doing so in an attempt to promote the domain of video games as a worthwhile target for translation research, with suggestions for a number of specific lines of investigation.

2. Video games in the context of TS research

This section provides a brief overview of video games in the context of TS research interests and thus does not pretend to be an exhaustive introduction to the domain itself. Video games can be divided up according to the different platforms on which they are played, including recent developments of games on mobile phones. Games can also be played in online modes, which present a totally different paradigm from the isolated offline mode in terms of interactivity and game dynamics. Games are categorised into different genres, such as action, adventure, simulation, role-playing games (RPGs), first-person shooters (FPSs), racing, sports, strategy, etc. The category is relevant to translation in that some genres, such as RPGs, tend to involve more text and are heavily narrative-driven, and hence have more implications for translation (Mangiron, 2004). Genres and platforms also matter in terms of preferences in different markets, and thus are relevant to the localisation of games. For example, US players favour sports and action games, whereas in Europe games with interesting rules appeal (Sankei Shinbun, 14 March 2007). PC-based online RPGs are well developed and extremely popular in Korea and China, while console-based offline RPGs are popular among Japanese players, who seek unique world views and complex stories.

Regardless of genre, games are normally structured into different levels, where a player progresses to higher and more challenging levels over time, on the basis of trial and error on the part of the player and feedback received from the game system. There is a certain predictable pattern in each genre, recognised by the player. The localisation task is facilitated by the translator having a clear understanding of such universal features, especially when the original and its localised versions are to be shipped simultaneously in a localisation mode known as simship, for which localisation has to be carried out without the source text in its complete form and in the absence of co-text or context (Bernal-Merino, 2006). According to industry sources (O'Hagan, 2005), in such cases translators can only rely on their intuition, based on prior knowledge and familiarity with the game domain. Investigation into the role played by the translator's domain knowledge will form a potential area of translation research with implications for translator training (O'Hagan, ibid).

Video games belong to an area of development significantly influenced by technological innovation, and there is a considerable difference between earlier generation games and today's games, as chronicled in detail elsewhere (Herz, 1997; Poole, 2000). A diachronic approach in games research will be fruitful in tracing how games localisation practices have evolved in relation to the characteristics of games at a given point in time. For example, the release of *PlayStation2* in 2000 introduced the capacity to incorporate recorded human voices into games, replacing text boxes and mechanical computer-generated sounds, and leading to the application of dubbing mode in localised games (Mangiron, 2004). As this example illustrates, the increasing sophistication of game machines and games themselves is driving new modes of translation. Another area of relevant development is online games, which often incorporate chat among players while the game is being played. This implies a need for simultaneous translation of text chat and chat based on speech, as online games have no regard for linguistic boundaries. This raises the scope for research into the application of dedicated natural language processing systems.

By definition, video games provide an interactive environment. Such interaction typically takes place through the buttons and the levers on the game controller. More recent games also allow player input via speech and handwriting, as in the case of many game titles designed for *Nintendo DS*. Released in 2006, the *Nintendo Wii* game console is an example of development that incorporates a new modality into hardware, by introducing a wireless magic wand concept for the handheld game controller, which detects the player's hand motion and rotation in three

dimensions. In this way, new generation video game consoles are enhancing the multimodal aspect by hard-wiring new modalities into the game machine itself. The study of the multimodality of game interaction in a localised game could provide another new avenue of research, bringing in somatic considerations that seem to be lacking in translation studies, as discussed by a number of researchers (Melby 1995 ;O'Hagan & Ashworth, 2002; Robinson, 2003). This can also be linked to the issue of the design of a game's interface in terms of the concept of affordances, for example, which are considered to be a measure of a superior game (Masuyama, 2001:130).

3. Localising for an equivalent game play experience

Recent trends in actual games research recognise the need to include perspectives based on ludology (studies on games and play) (Frasca, 1999/2000), in addition to a more traditional, narrative-driven approach, reminding researchers of the ultimate purpose of video games as a pleasure-giving medium. This, in turn, constitutes *skopos* in the context of translation and is something that the games localiser needs to bear in mind, as the *raison d'être* of the end product. With games localisation, the translator is expected to convey a game play experience that is as close as possible to the equivalent of the original. Furthermore, unlike other entertainment genres, such as literature, cinema or theatre, modern video games constitute a technologically constructed multimodal space that renders itself to various adjustments beyond textual components during localisation. It is these technical characteristics that give rise to the fundamentally different scope entailed by games localisation as a mode of language transfer, compared with translation practices applied in other, more traditional entertainment genres.

The following case illustrates the extent of the adaptive approach that games localisation is prepared to take in order to recreate the pleasure provided by a given game for a target market. The popular Japanese dating simulation game series *Tokimeki Memorial* by Konami sold 2.3 million units in the Japanese domestic market and is a top-selling game within the genre (Sankei Shinbun, 2007). Set in a Japanese high school, the game allows a player to simulate a high school student's experience of becoming involved in relationships. While the nature of the game and the content are considered to be culture-specific, the game developed a certain overseas following despite lacking an official translation (Levi, 2006). The official localised version, which is to be released during 2007 under the title *Brooktown High: Senior Year Hands-on*, retained only the theme of dating simulation from the original, while everything else had to completely change as a consequence of market feedback conducted in the US (Sankei Shinbun, ibid). The process took one and a half years to complete, including redesigning the originally anime-influenced style of graphics for characters and making it less esoteric to suit the North American market. The fact that this particular game genre did not previously exist in North America also seems to have contributed to the need for drastic adaptation, despite some fans having embraced the Japanese game in its original form. Given the cultural differences between Japanese high school life and its American counterpart, fundamental changes could well be expected. Whether the game *Brooktown High* can still be called a localised version, given that it retains almost no trace of the original, is open to debate. On the other hand, the approach taken is in line with the basic principle of localisation, which suggests that localised products should have the "look and feel" of the equivalent local product in the target market (Fry, 2003). As shown in this example, games localisation can involve adjustments that go far beyond the textual components of the verbal message and sometimes requires a completely liberal transformation approach.

There are other cases of games localisation where ideological stance and games rating systems in the receiving culture drive the decision for various changes to be made during localisation. Yahiro's study[ii] (2005) compared some 20 original Japanese Nintendo RPG titles and their American localised versions published between 1989 and 1996. The study found that areas of change involving graphics and text were mainly concerned with: (1) religious expressions; (2) sexual content; (3) discriminatory expressions against minority groups; and (4) alcohol and food-related references. For example, in the religious category, the graphical changes included the absence of crosses on graves, in church or on a coffin in an original Japanese game. Under the sexual category, a female character's bikini was substituted with a

less revealing outfit. Meanwhile, graphics showing the sign of a sake house were altered to show that of a tea house. This study also gave an example of a significant change in the style of the graphics on the packaging of *Dragon Warrior* by Enix, as well as *Breath of Fire II* by Capcom (Yahiro, ibid:11). These instances demonstrate how games localisation delves into detailed adjustments beyond textual manipulations, taking into account how one culture may be indifferent to certain issues in the context of games, while the same issues could be taken seriously in another culture. This, in turn, can have implications for censorship and age rating considerations.

Prior studies on the internationally successful Japanese RPG *Final Fantasy* (FF) series (Mangiron & O'Hagan, 2006: O'Hagan, 2005) have found that localised games show an adaptive approach with strong domestication tendencies when it comes to the treatment of jokes, plays on words, linguistic varieties and lyrics of theme songs. Mangiron & O'Hagan (ibid) suggest the term transcreation to describe the greater freedom of the games localiser compared with any other modes of translation. However, the case studies on FF (O'Hagan & Mangiron, 2004) also found that aspects concerning the traits of main characters require a foreignisation approach where overseas fans expect a distinctive original flavour to be retained. Furthermore, the FF series also added new game features in localised versions, demonstrating the extra dimension arising from games localisation from the point of view of ludology.

Given the characteristics of modern video games, the technical dimension of a game also influences the sense of pleasure and, thus, game play. For example, the conversion between PAL and NTSC in the process of localisation is known to cause a delay in response time from the game control to the screen in some localised games, which is likely to reduce game play pleasure in the localised version. Modern video games form a technological environment that affords various interactions between the game and the player through the game's interface. Games localisation therefore requires the consideration of both technical and socio-cultural aspects in an effort to transfer the game play experience arising from the multiple dimensions and modality of a game. By using a conceptual tool such as the theory of affordance (Gibson, 1979), such a technology-driven approach to games localisation will be equally productive and innovative in terms of understanding human-machine interactions. The examples discussed above illustrate how a popular game in one country is not necessarily appreciated in its original form by a player in another country. Furthermore, because of the nature of game media, localisation considerations go beyond the level of verbal text and extend into the technical structure of the game, as well as a wider range of socio-cultural issues.

4. Conclusions and implications

Modern games, such as the internationally successful Japanese RPG FF series, combine compelling graphics, a detailed storyline, character designs, theme songs, environmental sounds and a sophisticated game system to immerse the player in the game world. Interactivity takes place through the game controller in a virtual space represented on screen through text, graphics and sounds. Recreation of the game experience in a localised version therefore demands consideration of all these aspects. While software localisation in general has a focus on preserving the functionality of the product, games localisation is also concerned with the experience of game play, where artistic and creative dimensions are of paramount significance (Darolle, 2004). This latter notion appears to have led to games localisation marking its own path, largely independently from software localisation. Games localisers seem to emphasise the fact that each and every game is different and demands an individualised approach to localisation, which makes standardisation extremely difficult to apply (Darolle, ibid). This is precisely where translation research could contribute by substantiating or countering such claims made by industry experts.

Multidimensionality and multimodality make modern video games a complex entity to study, but at the same time provide a number of new directions for TS research, as explored in this paper. It has been argued that the dynamically evolving domain of video games forms a promising area of new research in TS, as it poses new challenges for the study of translation. The games localisation sector currently operates using intuition developed from experiential evidence rather than on the basis of reliable hard data from research findings. The games industry as a whole will clearly benefit from insights gained from focused research on localisation and

translation, and translation studies itself will be rewarded with the new approaches and perspectives likely to result from the fresh challenges posed by this new domain of research into video games.

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i By way of approximate indications of the use of terminology, in May 2007 the Google Scholar search showed the following number of hits: video games (33,300); computer games (31,800); electronic games (4,600); digital games (1,370).
ii Yahiro notes (2005:29-30) that he chose game titles published in the period before the Computer Entertainment Rating Organization (CERO) in Japan published the guideline for ratings for video games in July 1997, and also mostly before the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) was established in 1994.