GAMES WITHOUT BORDERS: THE CULTURAL DIMENSION OF GAME LOCALISATION[1]

Juegos sin fronteras: La dimensión cultural de la localización de videojuegos

Carme MANGIRON
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
cmangiron@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: From its humble origins in the 1970s, the software entertainment industry has grown into a worldwide phenomenon and a multibillion-dollar industry. Its success is, to a great extent, attributable to localisation practices, which help game companies maximize their return on investment by reaching the widest possible audience. Game localisation strives to reproduce the gameplay experience of the original game and elicit a similar response on target players, fostering an emotional connection between them and the game, thus facilitating their immersion. In order to produce a good quality localised version, it is crucial to take into account not only technical and linguistic issues, but also cultural issues affecting game localisation practices. After describing what game localisation entails and exploring the concepts of emotional and ludological localisation, this paper discusses the cultural dimension of this emerging type of translation. It describes current cultural adaptation practices in games and explores the sociocultural factors affecting game localisation. By providing a number of examples, it analyses the wide scope of cultural adaptation, also known as culturalisation and cultural localisation, inherent to game localisation. Finally, this paper reflects on the need to strike a balance between domestication and foreignisation, depending on the global translation strategy, the intended target audience and the genre of the game.

Key words: game localisation, cultural adaptation, culturalisation, cultural localisation, emotional localisation, ludological localisation.

RESUMEN: La industria del *software* de entretenimiento se ha convertido en un fenómeno global. Su éxito se debe en buena parte a los procesos de localización, que ayudan a las empresas a maximizar su inversión al permitirles llegar a un público lo más amplio posible. El objetivo de la localización de videojuegos es reproducir la experiencia de juego del original y obtener un efecto similar en los jugadores meta, fomentando la creación de una conexión emocional entre ellos y el juego y facilitando su inmersión en él. Para producir una versión localizada de calidad, es crucial tener en cuenta no solo los aspectos lingüísticos y técnicos, sino también los aspectos culturales. Tras describir en qué consiste la localización de videojuegos y explorar los conceptos de *localización emotiva* y *ludológica*, este artículo se centra en la dimensión cultural de la traducción de videojuegos. Describe las prácticas de adaptación cultural; se exploran los factores socioculturales que influyen en esta modalidad emergente y se proporcionan diversos ejemplos para ilustrar los diferentes grados de adaptación cultural posibles, conocida también como *culturalización* y *localización cultural*. Por último, se reflexiona sobre la necesidad de encontrar el equilibrio entre la domesticación y la exotización, en función de la estrategia de traducción global, la audiencia meta y el género del juego.

Palabras clave: localización de videojuegos, adaptación cultural, culturalización, localización cultural, localización emotiva, localización ludológica.

1. INTRODUCTION

Video games have become an integral element of global pop culture and a preferred leisure activity for many millions worldwide. The main reason why people play games is because they are "entertaining" (ISFE 2012), and 43% of U.S. game players "believe that computer and video games give them most value for their money, compared with DVDs, music or going out to the movies" (ESA 2013: 3). Video games can provide endless hours of entertainment and their interactive nature allows players to become part of the story and face complex challenges in order to advance in the game. Thus, the entertainment and interactive value of games is paramount. It distinguishes them from typical business software applications, which are interactive but not recreational, as well as from other entertainment products, such as films or books. In such media, the user traditionally acquires a more passive role in terms of decision making, problem solving, and actively contributing to the development of the story.

Fast advances in game technology have enabled the development of high-quality role-playing games (RPG) and adventure games with cinematic and audio assets that have brought them to the point where they can almost be described as interactive movies. However, game development costs are also rising and games for the new generation consoles, Xbox One and PlayStation 4, can cost up to $60 million to develop (Kotaku 2014). The escalating cost of game development has led developers to turn their eyes to international markets to try to reach the widest possible audience and maximize their return on investment. Some games can generate up to 50% of their revenue from international sales (Chandler n. d.), so localisation is crucial to marketing a game successfully in other territories.

Due to the interactive and affective nature of video games as a medium, and their ultimate objective of providing an immersive and entertaining experience, successful localisation must not only embrace linguistic and technical aspects, but also cultural aspects. After providing a brief description of what game localisation entails and presenting the concepts of *emotional* and *ludological localisation*, this paper will focus on the cultural dimension of game localisation, exploring its wide scope for cultural adaptation, also known as *culturalisation* and *cultural localisation*. The main extratextual sociocultural factors that can influence the translators' work and the localisation process will be analysed, such as cultural values and expectations; linguistic variation; territory-specific requirements, ratings and censorship, and different gaming culture and gameplay expectations. Such issues should ideally be considered when determining the global localisation strategy of a title for a particular territory, together with other factors such as the genre, the intended audience and how similar localised games have been received in the target market. Different games can require a different degree of cultural adaptation in order to be successful in the target market and extreme cultural adaptation may sometimes hinder players' immersion[2] in the game.

2. WHAT IS GAME LOCALISATION?

Localisation is a type of translation that came to the forefront in the 1980s with the global expansion of the computer industry. The term originally

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2 The term *immersion* refers to the degree to which an individual feels absorbed by or engrossed in a particular experience (Witmer and Singer 1998: 227). It is a key concept in game development and game studies, as it is considered that for a game to be successful it has to be immersive.

referred to "the full translation and engineering of a software application" (Esselink 2000: 1), but since the rapid expansion of the Internet and the World Wide Web from the 1990s, localisation is also used to refer to the "translation and adaptation of web-based applications and database-driven websites" (Esselink 2000:1). More recently the term *localisation* has been used to describe the translation and adaptation of multimedia products and video games, the translation of which also needs to be embedded in software (see for example Mangiron and O'Hagan 2006: 11 and Bernal-Merino 2006: 29).

Game localisation consists of making a game suitable to be sold in other territories, and it involves complex technical, linguistic, cultural, legal and marketing processes. Games are made up of different assets, such as the in-game or on-screen text, the audio and cinematic assets, the art assets and the manual and packaging (Chandler 2005: 49). They usually contain different text-types, such as menus, help and system messages in the user interface, literary passages, a script for dubbing and/or subtitling, the box and instruction manuals. Some games, such as flight simulators and sports games, also contain specialised terminology and quite technical texts. For this reason, game localisation sits at the crossroads of software localisation, audiovisual translation, technical translation and literary translation. While it shares some features in common with all these types of translation, it is also clearly different from all of them, becoming an interesting subject of study from a translation studies perspective in its own right.

Game localisation is tightly linked to marketing strategies, and there are different levels of localisation, which developers determine taking into account factors such as the market size, the previous performance of similar games, the investment required and the potential revenue (Chandler 2005: 49). These levels of localization are:

a) Box and docs: this localisation strategy involves only translating the text in the box, manual and printed documentation for countries where little revenue is expected or where the original language of the game is widely understood.

b) Partial localisation: the in-game text is translated, but the audio files are left in the original language with subtitles, when time and budgetary constraints may apply.

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c) Full localisation: translating all the text and all the audio files, providing a dubbed version in the target language and, occasionally, also intralingual subtitles.

Full localisation is reserved for triple AAA titles, that is, high budget titles that are expected to sell well in the target territories. It is often available for countries where dubbing is the preferred form of audiovisual translation, *i.e.* France, Italy, Germany and Spain. Japanese titles are often fully translated into English, and then the English version is used as a pivot for the French, Italian, German and Spanish versions. In addition, developers are increasingly localising their products into other languages, such as Polish, Russian and Chinese (O'Hagan and Mangiron 2013: 16).

Whilst the main reasons behind localisation are obviously commercial in nature, the main goal of game localisation is to create a functional localised version with a similar look and feel as the original game that produces a similar effect on target players, as if it were a game originally developed for them (Mangiron and O'Hagan 2006: 14). Hence, it has been argued that due to the interactive nature of games, localising them successfully goes beyond simply translating text and aims at translating experience (O'Hagan 2007: 4). Other authors also highlight the importance of a localisation process that tries to ensure that players of the localised versions are also able to connect with the game at an emotional and affective level. For example, industry specialist Díaz Montón (2010) uses the expression "emotional localisation" to refer to a good quality localisation that facilitates target players' immersion in the game. Lepre (2014: 112) talks about "ludological localisation" to refer to an approach to localising games with a view to providing the same game experience to target players, even if this implies changing the story, the setting or the sound track of the game, to name but a few. O'Hagan (2010) and O'Hagan and Mangiron (2013: 314) also apply the term *kansei*[3] ("affective") or *emotion engineering*, which has also been used in game studies (see Bura 2008; Dormann and Biddle 2010; Orero *et al.* 2010), to localisation, highlighting the importance of understanding players' emotional experience and trying to replicate it for target players.

This functional view of localisation, which focuses on the gameplay experience, provides a wide scope for adaptation in the target versions. There-

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3 The term *kansei* ("emotional", "affective") *engineering* was coined by Nagamachi in the early 1970s to refer to product design that takes into account potential users' feelings and needs.

fore, developers are often willing to modify not only textual assets, but also the visuals, the music or even an aspect related to game mechanics –the system of rules in the game– in order to guarantee that their game will fit into the target market tastes and expectations, and as a result, sell well. At linguistic and textual levels, the use of natural and idiomatic language is paramount, as a game containing typographic and grammatical mistakes, as well as truncations and overlaps, creates a poor impression and fails to establish a connection with the players. This can negatively affect the target players' immersion in the game and lead to its abandonment due to frustration. A bad translation can even make a game unplayable, due to what Dietz (2006: 125) calls a "linguistic plot-stopper", which he defines as "a translation error that prevents the player of the localised version from finishing a mission or even the entire game". This was the case of the German version of the game *Torin's Passage* (1995), where there was a task in which players had to assemble audio crystals to pronounce a sentence correctly, but the localised version did not work because the German translation used a different word order. To overcome this, the publisher had to include a note in the game box explaining how to overcome successfully this particular task in order to be able to continue with the game (Dietz 2006: 215).

A bad localisation can also send the message that the developer and the publisher did not care about the target players enough to invest in quality localisation. This can have a negative impact on game sales of the localised version, given the fast flow of information between players facilitated by social media and specifically the abundant fan forum sites. For example, the Japanese visual novel-type adventure game *Lux-Pain* (2009) has been harshly criticised because of its bad localisation. The review from the popular gaming site *GameSpot* stated: "With nonsensical dialogue muddling the complex plot, *Lux-Pain* shows how an entire experience can be ruined by poor localisation" (Shau 2009: online). Somebody reading this type of review is not likely to buy the game, which again highlights the importance of localisation.

3. THE CULTURAL DIMENSION OF GAME LOCALISATION

The issue of culture[4] in the game industry is complex, due to the transnational nature of many game companies, as well as the status of games as

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4 There are abundant and varied definitions of the term *culture* from the point of view of different academic disciplines, such as anthropology and sociology. For this paper, a working definition of *culture* as the set of beliefs, values and norms shared by a group of individuals that differentiates them from other groups has been adopted.

elements of global pop culture designed for providing international audiences with hours of entertainment. Originally, games were designed for a specific territory, mainly Japan or North America, and localisation was an afterthought (Chandler 2005: 4; O'Hagan and Mangiron 2013: 51), usually once the game had become a hit in the original country and there were good prospects for success abroad. With the increasing popularity of games, developers are now paying more attention to the localisation of their games and the expectations and requirements of the target territories at a much earlier stage of the game design and development process.

The degree of cultural adaptation that a game may require during the localisation process can vary depending on the genre. Sport games, puzzles and platform games usually require little adaptation, as they do not contain much text. Other genres, such as music and quiz games, are designed with internationalisation in mind, in a way that the structure and mechanics of the game remain the same, but the content is replaced for each local version. This is the case of the *SingStar* series, which has versions exclusive for different territories, such as *SingStar Mecano* (2009) in Spain, *SingStar Deutsch Rock Pop* (2006) in Germany, and *SingStar Italian Greatest Hits* (2008). On the other hand, narrative driven games, such as adventure games and RPGs, are text-rich and usually require a higher degree of adaptation. This is due to the fact that as cultural artefacts, games reflect, to a greater or lesser extent, the values and beliefs of the individuals who create them. In addition, games are usually developed with a particular audience in mind and contain overt or covert cultural references to that specific culture. For games set on specific places and times, such as *Okami* (2002), based on Japanese mythology, or the *Wolfenstein* series (1981 to date), set in World War II, most references to the culture portrayed in the game are kept to provide some flavour of the original culture, unless they pose comprehension problems or raise any sensitive issues for the target territories.

It should also be highlighted that a number of games intermix Japanese and U.S.A. culture traits to an extent unseen in other media industries (Consalvo 2006: 118), as in the Japanese RPG *Final Fantasy X* (2001), where Tidus, the male protagonist, looks like a Western surfer, while Yuna, the main female character, wears a kimono and behaves in a very Japanese way. This hybridization is also present in a number of games developed outside Japan, which include *manga* and *anime*-style character design, such as the Wiiware game *Zombie Panic in Wonderland* (2010), developed by the Spanish company Akaoni Studio, which became a big hit in Japan. USA-developed *Oni* (2001) is heavily inspired by the Japanese *anime Ghost in the shell* (1995).

Another interesting example of the hybridization of games is found in the international version of Square-Enix's *Final Fantasy* series (Mangiron 2012: 10; O'Hagan & Mangiron 2013: 189). The international version, only released in Japan, is based on the North American version, although it contains some bonus-content, such as mini-games or additional cinematic scenes. It is localised from English back into Japanese and contains the English audio, which is subtitled into Japanese. This version allows Japanese players to experience the main differences between the original and the English localised version, and offers them a glimpse of the process of cultural adaptation that takes place in game localisation. From a translation studies perspective, this is rather unique, as the target text, which has been extensively adapted linguistically and culturally to suit the needs and expectations of the target culture, becomes the source text, and the original audience becomes the target audience of the new source text. Translators' invisibility, in Venutian terms (1995), is broken, and Japanese players of the international version are aware that they are playing a translated and heavily adapted version of the original game that has been translated back into Japanese. It is precisely this hybridization that makes the international version appealing and so successful. The whole process illustrates a dynamic cultural exchange between source and target text and cultures, richer than the traditionally unidirectional exchange, which embraces translation and adaptation positively as a creative act of communication.

As regards the treatment of culture-specific content, the degree to which a game will be culturally adapted and customized for the target audiences depends on the genre of the game, the overall translation strategy and the intended audience. This process is known as *cultural localisation* (Di Marco 2007: 2; Mangiron 2008) and *culturalisation* (Chandler 2005: 11; Dietz 2006: 121; Edwards 2008: 26). Adaptation can take place at micro (textual) level, but also at macro level, including the game visuals, the music or the game mechanics (O'Hagan and Mangiron 2013: 215). At textual level, if translators come across a "culture bump",[5] that is, any cultural oddities, or use of humour that target players are not likely to understand or may find offensive, they can deal with it directly. If it is an issue affecting the game at macro level, such as a potentially offensive gesture or image, it is notified to the localisation coordinator, who then liaises with the development team to suggest a change for the localised

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5 The term *culture bump* was coined by Leppihalme (1997) to describe a situation in which individuals feel strange or uncomfortable when interacting with another culture.

version. Such changes may be implemented or not, depending on time, budgetary constraints and the seriousness of the issue.

Undoubtedly, cultural adaptation is an important part of the localisation process and can be key to fostering an emotional localisation that will in turn reproduce the intended gameplay experience and facilitate players' immersion in the game. If there are any cultural oddities in the game or any content that target players do not understand or find offensive this is likely to break their willing suspension of disbelief and impact negatively on the reception (and sales) of that game in a given territory. However, as game developers cannot be expected to be intimately familiar with the culture of all the territories where their game will be published, it is always possible that controversial issues regarding sex, gender, and religion, amongst others, remain in the localised versions. For this reason, translators' traditional role as cultural mediators is also crucial in game localisation, as they may detect potentially problematic cultural elements that have been overlooked by the development team, such as those issues presented in the next section.

4. SOCIOCULTURAL FACTORS AFFECTING GAME LOCALISATION

There are several extratextual sociocultural factors that may affect the localisation and the reception of a game in a given territory. Ideally such issues should be taken into account from the design and development stage of a game, although in reality this is often not the case, and cultural adjustment takes place during the localisation process. The main cultural issues requiring attention when localising a game for different territories are: a) cultural values and expectations; b) linguistic variation; c) territory-specific requirements, legal issues, ratings, and censorship; and d) gaming culture and gameplay expectations.

4.1. CULTURAL VALUES AND EXPECTATIONS

Gamers in different territories have different cultural values and expectations, depending on their history, ethnicity, political system, habits, traditions, religious and moral values. The use of currency, symbols, icons, and colours may also differ. For example, in the localised versions of the simulation game *Tomodachi Life* (2013), Japanese yen became US dollars for North America and Euro for Europe, and in the game *Twinkle Stars Sprites* (1998) Japanese *natto* (fermented soy beans) became "sweet tacos" for the North American version. When the culture-specific elements are confusing, obscure, offensive,

or simply not funny for target players, it is advisable to manipulate them, taking into account their function in the game and always striving to achieve a similar effect on target players as the original. Cultural references that may be offensive for a target community are likely to have a negative impact on the reception of the game or even lead to an official ban, as in the case of the fighting game *Kakuto Chojin: Back Alley Brutal* (2002), which was originally banned in Muslim countries because it contained an audio track with the vocal chanting of some verses of the Qur'an (Edwards 2008: 27).

Humour is very culture-dependent, and it is often used in game design for characterization purposes and to facilitate players' immersion in the game by providing comic relief. Humour based on play-on-words and linguistic deviance often needs to be rewritten in order to achieve the desired effect on target players. If humour is based on a visual element, developers may be willing to modify the visuals of the game in order to make the joke appropriate for the target players. As an example, in *Mario & Luigi: Partners in Time* (2005), there is a scene, typical of Japanese slapstick comedy, where a washtub falls through the ceiling landing on top of someone below, who is thereby rendered unconscious. The translators thought that this recurrent joke in Japan would not be understood by U.S.A. players, so the washtub was replaced with a bucket in the North American version (Schreier 2014). Intertextual allusions may also need to be dealt with, particularly if target players are not going to understand or recognize them. For example, in the French version of the U.S.A. game *Grim Fandango* (1998), in a scene where a clown is making balloons with shapes, a reference to American poet Robert Frost was replaced with a reference to Captain Haddock, from the *Tintin* comic series, an allusion that would be widely understood in French-speaking territories.

4.2. LINGUISTIC VARIATION

The use of dialects for characterisation purposes also needs to be addressed in game localisation. While geographical dialects are generally neutralised in translation, due to the fact that the pragmatic information they convey and the associations they raise are culturally marked and do not travel when translated, in game localisation the trend has been to replace a particular accent by a different one from the target culture. This is the case for the secondary character Ruby, in *Final Fantasy IX* (2000), who spoke with an Osaka accent in the Japanese original, and was localised for the Castilian Spanish version with an Argentinean accent. Occasionally, localisers may take the liberty

of introducing local accents in the target version where the original version was not marked, for characterization purposes and to bring the game closer to the target players. This is the case in the North American version of *Final Fantasy X* (2001), where one of the characters speaks with a Cockney accent and another with a Jamaican accent, although they both spoke in standard Japanese in the original. The introduction of new dialects is often found in the localisation of Japanese games, and it is an example of the creativity applied by game translators to produce a target version that feels like an original for target players (see Mangiron and O'Hagan 2006: 14).

Another example of cultural adaptation related to linguistic variation, idiolect in this case, can be found in the Spanish translation of Japanese RPG *Little King Story* (2009), where the translator used some expressions typical of Chiquito de la Calzada, a Spanish comedian who was very popular in the mid-1990s and who based his humour to a large extent on invented words and expressions. The localised version was controversial, as many Spanish critics and gamers found that the use of such marked language, which not only alluded to Spanish culture, but more specifically to this comedian, was not appropriate for the Japanese *kawaii* (cute) aesthetics of the original. They also found this sort of humour tiresome, as it appeared constantly in the game (García 2011: 15). In this case, it seems that the extreme adaptation impacted on the gameplay experience and broke the suspension of disbelief, and therefore the immersion in the game, of an important number of target players.

The tradition of replacing dialects originated in the early stages of game localisation, when game dialogue was presented in text boxes on the screen, and therefore translators had practically unlimited freedom to change them. Since the advent of the sixth generation consoles –which allowed games to include audio tracks and brought audiovisual translation practices such as dubbing and subtitling into game localisation–, the replacement of dialects is limited to games which do not contain audio for dialogues, such as games for handheld platforms, or dubbed games, where translators have more freedom. For games that are only partially localised and are only subtitled into the target language, the use of dialects is usually avoided, due to the presence of the original language in the audio track. Characterization is pursued instead with the use of lexical choices and catch phrases.

An additional aspect of localisation in the case of languages spoken in different territories is the decision regarding what linguistic variation to use; for example, British English versus American English or Castilian Spanish versus Latin

American Spanish. When developers started to localise their games into Spanish at the end of the 1990s, games were only translated into Castilian Spanish, but in recent years the trend has been to localise games either into International Spanish or have two versions, one for Castilian Spanish and another one for Latin American Spanish, such as in the popular Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG) *World of Warcraft* (2004-to date). International Spanish is a neutral version that is "comprehensible for all Spanish-speaking countries, does not use words that are offensive anywhere, and can be widely understood according to RAE (Real Academia de la Lengua Española) standards" (Gutiérrez 2014). On the other hand, Latin American Spanish is "comprehensible for all Spanish-speaking countries in the Americas, does not use words that are offensive in any of them, and can be understood by any Spanish speaker in this territory" (Gutiérrez 2014). The International version is largely based on Castilian Spanish, but neutralised so that it is understood by all Spanish speakers. As a result, the language in the game is not as idiomatic and can feel somehow alien to the players. In addition, there is the issue of what accent to use for the dubbed version, as gamers based in Spain usually do not like playing games that have been dubbed into Latin American (LA) Spanish. The same is true for Latin American gamers, who often prefer to play the original version of a game rather than playing the version dubbed into Castilian Spanish (Skoog 2013: online). For this reason, developers are increasingly providing two Spanish versions: Castilian and LA Spanish. This industry trend is reflected in the LocJam[6] international game localisation competition, where there are two different categories for Spanish – one for Castilian and one for LA Spanish.

However, the issue is far more complex than just releasing two Spanish versions, as Latin America is a vast territory with a number of varieties of Spanish quite different even amongst themselves, particularly in terms of colloquial language and slang. Mexican is often used as the base for the LA version, although terms perceived as too local are usually neutralised. This, again, results in a lacklustre neutral version nobody identifies with as it lacks a natural character. For this reason, Gutiérrez (2014) claims that rather than having a colourless neutral version, offering versions in different varieties of LA Spanish would prove more appealing to gamers, and may thus, be more profitable for developers in the long term.

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6 LocJam is a a non-profit video game translation competition organised yearly since 2014 by Team GLOC, the Localisation Special Interest Group of the International Game Developers Association (IGDA) and the IGDA Japan Chapter. For more information, see http://www.locjam.org/.

4.3. TERRITORY-SPECIFIC REQUIREMENTS, RATINGS AND CENSORSHIP

Territory-specific requirements, such as branding issues, local legislation, the existence of game regulatory bodies, censorship, and different rating systems can affect the localisation of a game. Rating bodies, such as PEGI (Pan European Game Information) in Europe and the ESRB (Entertainment Software Rating Board) in North America, are voluntary associations of developers, publishers and distributors of games established to rate games in order to inform buyers of their content in terms of the level of violence, profanity, and sexual innuendo, among others. Their main objective is to provide information so that parents can make an informed choice and buy games suitable for their children. Different countries have different values and moral standards that are reflected in the ratings system they use. Elements that would be acceptable in one culture may be offensive in another, or they would only be suitable for an older audience. Japan, for example, has a much looser attitude towards references to sex and transgenderism, which often feature in *manga*, *anime* and video games addressed to the general public, in order to add a humoristic touch. However, these types of references are often deemed not acceptable for young audiences in North America and Europe. As a result, the rating needs to be changed or the reference has to be modified, the latter being the better option to keep the target audience as wide as possible for the localised game.

Germany, Australia, New Zealand and China are some of the countries with stricter control and censorship over the content of games. In Germany, the Unterhaltungssoftware Selbstkontrolle (USK) reviews all games submitted to them to confirm they do not contain any violence, gore, profanity or Nazi symbols (Chandler 2005: 32-33). Often games have to be cut or edited in order to release them in the German market. For example, the localised German version of the online game *Team Fortress 2* (2007) omits the images of blood and the body parts scattered liberally through the original version, which are replaced by hamburgers, metal springs, etc. Interestingly, however, German players objected to this toned down version and created a "blood patch," which can be installed to restore the blood and gore levels of the original version (Lundin 2009: 50). By doing this, target players are appropriating the target text and undoing some of the modifications made to the original version due to legal territory-specific requirements and censorship. China also has strict regulations about content prohibited in video games, and any content "endangering the unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity of the state" is forbidden (Zhang 2008: 48). For example, the game *Battlefield 4* (2013) was banned in

China because the Chinese Government felt it discredited their national image and endangered national security (Parrish 2013: online).

Another legal and territory-specific requirement that impacts on game localisation is licensing, particularly for games belonging to transmedia franchises, where all the different products are expected be consistent in terms of story, look and feel, and terminology. This is the case of video games based on books and movies, such as *The Lord of the Rings* or the *Harry Potter* series, where translators are expected to know the original product thoroughly so that their translation is consistent with it and fulfil target fans' expectations (Bernal-Merino 2009: 244-245). According to Fernández-Costales, the translation of such games presents a tension between the usual freedom granted to translators "to adapt the content to the target locale and a sense of loyalty and faithfulness towards the original source text (a novel, a film, or a comic book)" (2014: 231). In the case of languages spoken in different territories, such as Spanish, the issue is further constrained, as the video games need to conform to the terminology and the naming conventions of each region, which often differ. Such issues need to be carefully considered when localising games subject to licensing, as the scope for cultural adaptation is more restricted due to licensing issues.

4.4. DIFFERENT GAMING CULTURE AND GAMEPLAY EXPECTATIONS

Gamers in different territories have different gaming culture, expectations and aesthetics, which are considered by marketing departments when assessing whether to localise a given game and deciding the extent to which it needs to be adapted for the target culture. Knowing the profile of the target market and the more popular genres in it is useful to assess whether a game can be successful and also to determine if it will require any cultural adaptation. If we take Japan and North America as an example, broadly speaking, traditionally Japanese gamers tend to prefer genres, such as sims (simulation games), strategy games, and RPGs. They also favour action and adventure games played from a third person perspective and with elaborate narratives. North American players, on the other hand, usually prefer sports games, action games and shooters, particularly first-person shooters (FPS) (Kent 2004: online). A look at the yearly top game charts by platform in Japan and North America for the year 2014 (*VGChartz*, n. d.), confirms Japanese players' preference for RPG and simulation games, and the North American preference for action and adventure games and shooters.

In addition, there are some genres that are practically culture-specific, such as dating sims and visual novels, which are text-rich, involve minimal gameplay and use *anime*-style graphics. These genres are very popular in Japan, but not in North America and Europe, although there are a few exceptions, such as the Nintendo DS game *Phoenix Wright* series (2005-2007), which describes the start of a young lawyer's career and his first cases. One of the main driving forces behind the success of this game in the U.S.A. was its high quality localisation, made by Alexander O. Smith, a renowned literary and game translator. The game contained many references to Japanese pop culture that were adapted to U.S.A. pop culture, and included new jokes and cultural references, which were appreciated by critics and target players. Reviewers praised the localisation with statements such as "[t]he Phoenix Wright design definitely excels thanks to the excellent writing of Capcom's North American localisation team" (Harris 2007: online).

Despite the success of the *Phoenix Wright* series in North America, which is largely attributed to the fact that it was heavily adapted for the target culture, extreme adaptation, or *over-localisation* in Skoog's terms (2013: online), is not always the best localisation strategy. When *Tokimeki Memorial* (1994), one of the best-selling dating sims in Japan, set in a Japanese high school, was re-released in 2006 for the PSP, it became an instant hit in Japan and developed some following overseas despite the fact that it had not been translated (O'Hagan 2007: 4). For this reason, after carrying out some marketing research with focus groups in the U.S.A., developer and publisher Konami decided to localise the game for Western markets, keeping the dating theme but adapting all the visuals and rewriting all cultural references to adapt the game to American High School life (O'Hagan 2007: 4). It was sold in North America as *Brooktown High: Senior Year* (2007), and despite the intense adaptation efforts and the market research carried out before its release, the game was considered "mediocre" by most game review sites, such as *Gamespot* and *IGN*, due to its repetitiveness, boring dialogues and gameplay. In addition, it would appear that the process of cultural adaptation went a step too far, as most gamers and reviewers criticised the characters' design and expressed a preference for the original one, as summarized in this reviewer's view: "the current art for dating sim *Brooktown High* is unattractive (...) Kinda makes me wish Konami just translated *Tokimeki Memorial* and brought that out here rather than this" (Bailey 2007: online). If the game had kept some of its original Japanese features, such as the character design, it may have appealed more to U.S.A. gamers, particularly those familiar with the original version. The char-

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acters' redesign in *Brooktown High* is probably related to the general aesthetic preference of U.S.A. players for more adult-like characters, while Japanese gamers like more stylised, cute, *anime*-like characters (Trainor 2003: 18; Pruett 2005: 4). However, in this occasion, the over-localisation strategy did not work, and a more foreignising approach, which introduced some colour of Japanese culture in the translated game, would probably have achieved a better reception, at least by those gamers familiar with the genre or those interested in Japanese culture.

This seems to indicate that when dealing with the cultural content of a game, complete cultural adaptation and rewriting of the original game is not always necessary, nor advisable. Sometimes cultural elements can remain untouched in the localised versions if they do not pose any comprehension problems or raise any culturally sensitive issues in the target versions. References to the source culture can be used to provide a certain exotic taste of the original culture that target players may find appealing or may even expect, since in the era of the web 2.0, where information travels and is exchanged fast, gamers are likely to be aware that a game has been developed in a particular country and may be expecting some original cultural flavour.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper focussed on the cultural dimension of game localisation and highlighted the importance of cultural adaptation in order to facilitate the development of an affective link between the target player and the localised game, what is known as *emotional* or *ludological localisation*, an area that still remains relatively unexplored in Translation Studies. If a game contains cultural oddities or culturally offensive content, it may break gamers' willing suspension of disbelief and their emotional connection with the game, disrupting their immersion. Although a domesticating approach is usually favoured in game localisation, extreme cultural adaptation, or over-localisation, can also hinder immersion. It may, for example, annoy players that a game with a specific Japanese aesthetic has characters that speak in a local dialect constantly making allusions to the target culture, making the game too local and incongruous, and diluting the original flavour and appeal of the game.

For this reason, a careful analysis of the cultural dimension of a game, including both textual and extratextual factors, can help the localisation team determine to what extent culturalisation should take place. Different games

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require different translation strategies, depending on their genre and intended target audience. Translation studies can contribute to a more effective and systematic analysis of the cultural content of games with a comprehensive survey of current cultural adaptation techniques used in game localisation. This would provide guidance as to which global translation strategy is the most appropriate for different game genres and would help assess the degree to which target audiences prefer domesticating or foreignising versions of games for different game genres. In addition, reception studies involving gamers from original and target cultures are needed in order to assess how players from different cultural backgrounds interact with a game and develop an affective link with it, in order to compare their gameplay experience. Such studies could use tools such as questionnaires, interviews, eye-tracking technology –which would allow following players' eye movements–, and electrophysiological measures, such as heart rate and galvanic skin response, in order to obtain both qualitative and quantitative data about reception and immersion. Further research in this field could benefit the game industry by providing them with solid data and guidelines that can contribute to their success in global markets by meeting the preferences of the target territories and providing an immersive gameplay experience for all players around the word, truly providing games without frontiers.

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