

The Localisation of Japanese Video Games: Striking the Right Balance¹

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Abstract

Over the course of the last three decades the entertainment software industry has become a multibillion dollar industry and a worldwide phenomenon. The United States and Japan have traditionally been the main players in this industry, which owes part of its global success to internationalisation and the associated localisation processes. Due to the cultural distance between Japan and Western countries, Japanese games often undergo extensive cultural adaptation in order to market them successfully in those territories. This paper analyses the localisation of Japanese console games. After presenting a brief overview of the history of the localisation of Japanese games it describes the main internationalisation strategies adopted by Japanese developers and publishers. It also explores the main localisation strategies applied to Japanese games, i.e. domesticating or exoticising, exploring the cultural adaptation processes to which some Japanese games have been subject, and examines how critics and players reacted to the localised versions. Finally, it concludes with a reflection on the extent to which Japanese games should be culturally adapted for their international release in order to strike the right balance between domesticating and exoticising strategies taking into account different factors, such as the genre of the game, the gaming preferences of the target players, and the intended audience.

Keywords: video games, cultural adaptation, localization strategies

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Introduction

The interactive entertainment software industry, popularly known as the *video game industry*, is a multibillion dollar industry that generated an estimated consumer spend on game content of USA \$15.6 billion in 2010, including new and used boxed games, game rentals, subscriptions, game downloads, social network games, and mobile game applications (NPD, 2011). Video games have become an integral element of global pop culture and a preferred leisure activity for many, with over 95 million adult gamers in Europe (GameVision, 2010), and 68% of North American households playing games regularly (ESA, 2009). The USA and Japan have traditionally been the main players in this industry, which owes a significant element of its success to GILT (globalisation, internationalisation, localisation and translation) processes that have allowed gamers around the world to play and enjoy the same games as though they had been originally developed specifically for them. Despite the fact that most video games are developed in English or Japanese, they are marketed and sold around the world and generate up to 50% of their revenue from international sales (Chandler, 2006).

This paper focuses on the localisation of Japanese console games. After describing the main features of game localisation and presenting a brief history of the localisation of Japanese games, the paper describes the internationalisation strategies currently adopted by Japanese developers and publishers. It presents a number of examples of the type of cultural adaptation and rewriting that Japanese games typically undergo and analyses how some of the localised games were received in the target territories. The creative nature of this type of localisation is highlighted and the paper concludes with a reflection on the different approaches to localisation of Japanese games, domesticating or exoticising, and the need to strike the right balance taking several factors into account, such as the game genre, the preferences of the target players and the intended audience.

Main features of game localisation

Video games are technically complex interactive, multimedia and multimodal products designed to entertain, unlike utility software applications that are designed to assist in specific tasks. Games are considered cultural artefacts due to their cinema quality graphics and their universal narrative themes (Jenkins, 2006), which brings them closer in nature to other audiovisual products, such as movies. Video games are also designed to demand a high level of user interactivity. When playing games, players interact as agents with the game, adopting a participatory role that goes beyond that of mere spectator of a movie, which is a passive experience in terms of tangible user input. Game designers seek to foster the development of an affective link between the player and the game, in order to make game play more engaging and to facilitate the player's immersion in the game world.

Video games are made up of different assets, namely: a) in-game or onscreen text, such as the user interface (UI); b) audio assets; c) cinematic assets; d) art assets, and e) the manual and packaging (Chandler, 2005). Therefore they contain different text types, such as menus, help and system messages, narrative and descriptive passages, a script for dubbing and/or subtitling, and printed instruction manuals. Some games, such as flight simulators, also contain specialised terminology as well as technical instructions and tutorials.

Game localisation consists of adapting a game technically, linguistically and culturally in order to sell it successfully in other territories, and it involves complex technical, linguistic, cultural, legal and marketing processes. From a commercial perspective, if the business case for investing in localisation is clearly established, developers and publishers localise their games into different languages in order to reach the broadest possible audience thereby maximising their return on investment. From a translation studies perspective, game localisation is a functional type of translation, the objective of which is to provide the target players with a similar game play experience to that of the players of the original. Therefore, the goal of game localisation is not simply to translate text but to translate experience (Di Marco, 2007; O'Hagan, 2007; Ashcraft, 2010). Ideally, players should enjoy a game as if it were an original designed for them. The obvious difficulty in measuring the success or otherwise of this activity highlights the need for comparative intercultural reception studies in this area². In game localisation, translators focus on the user, known as *player* or *gamer*, terms that highlight the ludic nature of games, and facilitate the immersion and enjoyment of the game. Localisation can encompass the modification of any element of the original product to adapt it to the target market. In the case of video games, any asset —in-game text, art assets, audio and cinematic assets, game mechanics³, etc.— can be adapted, and translators are generally granted *carte blanche* to modify or recreate any element of the original that they deem necessary or indeed include new references to the target culture in their translations. This creative freedom has been referred to as *transcreation* (Mangiron & O'Hagan, 2006), highlighting the creative element that is part of the translator's remit.

With regards to language, the use of correct and idiomatic language is crucial in facilitating players' engagement with a game. A game containing spelling and grammatical mistakes gives a poor impression and can negatively affect immersion in the game. It can also send the message that the developers and publisher did not care about the target players enough to invest in good, quality localisation. This can also have a negative impact on game sales of the localised version, given the

² Currently there only exists one study of the reception of a localised Japanese game, carried out by O'Hagan (2009b), who is currently working on a project concerning the comparison of the reception of Japanese games and their localised versions.

³ The term *game mechanics* describes the system of rules that governs game play in a video game.

rapid flow of ‘word-of-mouth’ information between players facilitated by the Internet and the abundant fan forum sites.

Brief History of the Localisation of Japanese Games

Japan has played an important role in the game industry ever since the beginning, both as a producer of hardware —by companies such as SEGA⁴ and Nintendo from the late 1970s and Sony from the mid 1990s— and video game software. There are several renowned Japanese developers and publishers, such as Capcom, Konami, Namco Bandai Games⁵, Square-Enix⁶, Taito Corporation, and Tecmo Koei⁷. However, only a fraction of Japanese games is localised into other languages, while the rest is exclusively used at national level⁸ (Game Investor Consulting, 2007). Only games that are expected to be well received abroad are localised. In particular, most Japanese games belonging to genres that are not popular outside Japan, such as dating simulation games, visual novels and *hentai* (adult content) games are not released outside of Japan because the sales expectations abroad would not compensate the investment required to localise them.

The first Japanese video games were arcade games designed for coin operated machines. They were originally released in Japan and in the event that they became popular they were subsequently licensed and exported to the United States, such as happened in the case of shooter game *Periscope*⁹ (1968) and the renowned *Space Invaders* (1978). Those games contained small amounts of text, such as “START”, “PLAY”, “SCORE”, “NEW GAME”, etc., which was usually written in English in the original and therefore did not require a translation.

⁴ SEGA withdrew from the console manufacturing arena in the year 2001 to focus on the development and publishing of game software, which continues to date.

⁵ Namco Bandai Games is the result of the merger of game developer and publisher Namco with toy and game producer and distributor Bandai Games in 2005.

⁶ Square-Enix was formed in 2003 when two of the biggest Japanese RPG developers and publishers, Square and Enix merged.

⁷ Tecmo Koei was formed in 2009 after Japanese game developers and publishers Tecmo and Koei merged.

⁸ The non-localisation of some Japanese titles lead to the emergence of fan translation of Japanese games in the late 1990s, a practice that is common today that grants access to Japanese games to fans outside Japan who cannot speak Japanese language. It is beyond the scope of this paper to analyse the phenomenon of game fan translation, but for more information, see, for example, Díaz Cintas & Muñoz Sánchez (2006) or Muñoz Sánchez (2009).

⁹ When games are cited for the first time, the year of original release is indicated in the body of the text. In the Games section at the end of this paper, the name of the developer, followed by the name or names of the publishers, if different, are also stated. The symbol “~” after the year of release indicates that the series is still ongoing.



Figure 1. Screenshot of *Space Invaders* (© Taito)

(Source: <http://www.vgmuseum.com/arcade.htm>)

The arcade game *Pac-Man* (1980) can be considered the first Japanese video game to be localised into English. Its original title was *Puck-Man*, a derivation of the onomatopoeia *パクパク* (*paku-paku*), which in turn is derived from the verb *たべる* (*taberu*, “to eat”), with the meaning of “to munch”. However, the United States publisher, Midway, decided to change the name from *Puck-Man* to *Pack-Man* because they feared vandalism and the possibility that the *P* could become an *F* in the arcade machines (Kohler, 2005; O’Hagan and Mangiron, forthcoming). The United States title was then adopted for the international release of the game and for subsequent releases in Japan. Another important change to *Pac-Man* at a textual level was the adaptation of the names of the ghosts who chase the main character, which appeared in Romanised Japanese in the original version. The names were adapted for the United States version in order to make them more meaningful and appealing (Kohler, 2005; O’Hagan and Mangiron, forthcoming). The original ghosts were: *Oikake*, *Machibuse*, *Kimagure*, and *Otoboke*, names that reflect their personality and that could roughly be translated as “Chaser”, “Ambusher”, “Moody”, and “Silly”. These were translated for the United States version as “Shadow”, “Speedy”, “Bashful” and “Pokey”. In addition, the original ghosts also had the nicknames of *Akabei* (“Red”), *Pinky*, *Aosuke* (“Blue”) and *Guzuta* (“Slow”), which became “Blinky”, “Pinky”, “Inky” and “Clyde”. This is the first instance in which the localised version of a Japanese game lead to a change in the original one, a phenomenon that is not uncommon when localising Japanese games, but that is generally not often observed in other types of translation, where the relation of equivalence between source and target text is unidirectional.

The trend to modify Japanese video games for the North American market in order to ensure their success continued in the 1980s and 1990s. In the arcade game *Donkey Kong* (1981), the main character, called ‘Jump-Man’, became ‘Mario’ in the United States version, which happened to be the name of the Nintendo of America (NOA) offices’ landlord at that time. During the localisation process NOA felt that the original name was not “catchy enough in English” (Kohler, 2005: 46). As happened with *Pac-Man*, the change for the United States version lead to a change in subsequent

Japanese games featured by the same character, Mario, who subsequently became one of the best known and most iconic video game characters of all time.

As far as home console games are concerned, the early games had in-game text in English and the manual in Japanese, which was then translated into English. As console cartridges increased their data storage capacity in the mid 1980s, Japanese games started to be written in Japanese and localised in-house into English for the North American market. Only games that were successful in Japan were released abroad, and localisation was generally an afterthought, which meant that once games were localised they had to be reprogrammed to include the English text (Kohler, 2005). At this time the quality of the localisation was not the primary focus and it was often done by non-native speakers and as a result the localised versions contained many grammatical and stylistic mistakes. For example, the game *Ghosts 'n Goblins* (1985) contains several typographical errors, grammatical mistakes and unidiomatic sentences, such as “This room is an illusion and is a trap devisut [sic] by Satan. Go ahead dauntlessly! Make rapid progres [sic]!” and “Congraturation [sic] This story is happy end. Thank you”. Other examples can be found in games from that period, such as *Zero Wing* (1989). One particular sentence “All your base are belong to us” has generated a cult following amongst fans and is now proudly displayed on T-shirts, mugs, mouse pads, etc.

A number of games from this early period were re-released in recent years for the Nintendo DS platform, and the English translations were corrected and updated, as nowadays Japanese publishers stress the importance of high quality localisation. Interestingly, however, when *Final Fantasy IV* (1991) was re-released in 2008, publisher Square-Enix decided to keep the sentence “You spoony bard!” as a translation for the Japanese “貴様!” (*kisama*), a rude and disrespectful way to say “you”. This translation had been originally criticised because it lacked idiomacity, but it then became well-known mainly due to its comic effect.

The launch of the PlayStation in 1994, which used CD-ROM as storage medium, allowed an increase in the volume of text and the quality of graphics in games. English continued to be the main language into which Japanese games were localised until the late 1990s and the beginning of the next decade, when some of the major Japanese developers and publishers started to localise their games into French, Italian, German, and Spanish (FIGS), albeit English was often used as a pivot language. *Final Fantasy VII* (1997) was the first game of this best-selling role playing game (RPG) series that was localised into European languages using the English translation as a pivot. However, the localisation into the various languages was harshly criticised due to its poor quality. As an example, in the Spanish version, the term *Party*, which referred to the player’s team, was translated as “Fiesta” and the message “Change party members” as “Cambiar miembros de la fiesta”. There were also

terminological inconsistencies related to object names and character names, overlapping text on screen, and truncations. The following screenshot illustrates some of these problems, such as the inconsistent spelling of one of the characters, Sephiroth vs. Sefirot; the truncation of “Lista de habilid”, which should be “habilidades”, and the bad layout of the screen on the top right hand side, where text is hidden by some icons.



Figure 2. Screenshot of the Spanish version of *Final Fantasy VII* (© Square)

(Source: <http://www.xkstation.com/vamosajugar/ff7/ff7.php>)

As a result, developer and publisher Square switched to the in-house localisation model in order to more closely manage the localisation of the following instalments of the *FF* saga, translating directly from Japanese when possible (O’Hagan & Mangiron, 2004).

The release of the PlayStation 2 in 2000 had a considerable impact on localisation, as for the first time the game dialogue from the script could be recorded by human actors, bringing games closer to movies and introducing audiovisual translation practices, such as dubbing and subtitling, to the field of game localisation.

Nowadays, Japanese developers and publishers are fully aware of the importance of the quality of their localisations in order to be able to sell their games successfully to Western markets. They do not simply want their games translated into English, they want them “written in English, free of stiff translation constraints” (Ashcraft, 2010, p. 13). In particular, Square-Enix’s approach to localisation has been widely praised by game critics and scholars for producing some of the best Japanese to English localisation (Consalvo, 2006; Parish, 2007), a remarkable achievement considering the poor quality of their first localisations.

A number of Japanese publishers, such as Square-Enix, Nintendo and Capcom, combine the in-house and out-sourcing models, while others outsource all of the translation related tasks to trusted third

party localisation vendors, such as Sony Computer Entertainment, and subsequently perform the quality assurance and testing process themselves (Wood, 2009). The in-house localisation model consists of gathering a project team of translators (both in-house translators and freelancers when required) within the premises of the developer or publisher, where they are managed by the localisation coordinator and have access to the original game, even if it is still under development. Translators are allowed to familiarise themselves with the game prior to its translation and are able to check it for contextual information as required. In Capcom, in addition to the localisers, the editor looks at the finished translation and polishes it in order to make it sound more natural in English (Gay, 2007).

The outsourcing model consists of handing over the translation, the quality assurance or the full localisation to a specialised vendor. Japanese publishers usually provide localisation vendors with detailed game related information —walkthroughs, cheats, information about the plot and characters, screenshots of the game, and glossaries— and sometimes even a playable copy of the game or some clips of it in the event it is still under development (Ashcraft, 2010). Non-Japanese publishers, on the other hand, often do not provide localisers with significant background and contextual information. Some of them send spreadsheets containing text strings without detailed context information, a practice known in the game localisation industry as *blind localisation* (Bernal Mérimo, 2008; Dietz, 2006, 2007), which can be the cause of numerous errors due to the lack of contextual information.

Internationalisation Strategies for Japanese Video Games

Japanese games have traditionally been very popular in North America and Europe, and their success can be partly linked to the globalisation and internationalisation strategies adopted by Japanese gaming companies. Broadly speaking, four main design strategies seem to be applied to the design of Japanese games in terms of internationalisation:

1) Designing games with a setting outside Japan

Japanese developers often set their games in the USA, such as the *Dead Rising* (2006~) and the *Resident Evil* series (1996~). The games usually do not contain references to Japanese culture because they are designed with an international audience in mind.

2) Designing games that exploit the popular image of Japanese culture in the West

This can be considered a form of self-exoticism, by means of which Japanese companies develop games that emphasise their “otherness” to appeal to foreign audiences. Game series such as *Onimusha*

(2001-2006), *Tenchu* (1998~) and *Ninja Gaiden* (1988~) rely on the Japanese archetypes of ninja and samurai as a key selling point. The game *Okami* (2006), which narrates how the Japanese goddess Amaterasu saved the land in the form of a white wolf, is another example of a game marked by its Japaneseness that was successful in North America and Europe. This indicates that Japanese games marked by their Japaneseness can also appeal to the international audience if the game play is engaging and immersive and their cultural content is accessible for the target players.

3) *Designing culturally neutral or “odourless” games*

According to media and cultural studies expert Koichi Iwabuchi (2002), the success of contemporary Japanese cultural products, such as manga —Japanese comics—, anime and video games, stems from the fact that they have been purposefully designed in a *mukokuseki* fashion —literally meaning “without nationality, stateless”— i.e. culturally neutral or “odourless”, thereby concealing or toning down the traces of Japanese culture in order to make their products more appealing to a Western audience. In the case of video games, this can be achieved by setting them in imaginary worlds, as is the case for most RPGs of the *Dragon Quest* (1986~), *Final Fantasy* (1987~) and *The Legend of Zelda* (1986~) series. However, even Japanese games designed to be culturally neutral may require the adaptation of some content, as they are likely to reflect to some extent the cultural values and habits of their creators. One of the cultural aspects that often requires attention when localising a Japanese game is the body language of the characters. In *Final Fantasy XI* (Square, 2002) there is a cinematic scene where an Elvaan prince sneezes while his men are gossiping about him. This is based on the Japanese folk belief that you sneeze while someone is talking about you behind your back and as such this visual reference has a comic function in the original. However, the reference would not be understood in the localised versions, so United States localisers tried to make it understandable and funny to their audience by also making it known that a characteristic of the Elvaan people is that they sneeze when somebody is gossiping about them (Edge Online, 2006).

4) *Designing games that deliberately mix elements of Japanese and United States culture*

The global game industry is characterised by the way in which it intermixes Japanese and United States culture in their games “to a degree unseen in other media industries” (Consalvo, 2006, p. 120). As an example, Consalvo mentions the case of the Japanese RPG *Final Fantasy X* (2001), where Tidus, the male protagonist, looks like a Western surfer while Yuna, his female counterpart, wears a kimono and behaves in a very Japanese way. This hybridisation is in fact also palpable in a number of games developed outside Japan, which include anime-style character design, as in the Wiiware game *Zombie panic in Wonderland*, developed by the Spanish company Akaoni Studio, which became a hit in Japan. United States developed game *Oni* (2001) also uses anime-style art and themes and is set in

Japan, despite the fact that the game play is similar to the game play of a typical United States third-person shooter. Another interesting example of the hybridisation of games can be found in the international version of the *Final Fantasy* games released by Square-Enix. This version is only released in Japan and it is largely based on the North American version, although it contains a number of additions, such as bonus mini-games or new cinematic scenes. The international version is localised from English back into Japanese and contains the United States audio voiceover, which is subtitled into Japanese. It is very popular in Japan, as it allows Japanese players to experience the game as non-Japanese players do, and to see what the main differences between the two versions are and what view of their culture is portrayed in the localised game. From a translation studies perspective, this is a rather unique occurrence that enables a dynamic cultural exchange between source and target text and cultures, which is richer than the traditionally unidirectional exchange traditionally assumed.

Cultural Adaptation and Transcreation of Japanese Video Games

This section focuses on the process of cultural adaptation, including transcreation, to which certain Japanese games have been subject. Cultural adaptation is a crucial stage of any localisation process, particularly if cultural issues have not been considered during the internationalisation process, and it can take place both at macro and micro level (O'Hagan & Mangiron, 2009).

Macro level adaptation

Modifications at macro level are often related to marketing strategies and can affect any aspect of game design, such as the game mechanics, the level of difficulty, the visuals, the story line, the script, and the title. For example, in the North American version of *Chocobo Racing* (1999), after assessing the feedback from a United States focus group, the level of difficulty was reduced by strategically placing guard rails on the race course to prevent falls (Edge Online, 2006), thus reducing the level of difficulty for target players.

Marketing concerns also led to the application of censorship to Japanese games in the early days of the video game localisation industry. During the mid 1980s and the early 1990s, Nintendo of America (NOA) was particularly renowned for its censorship practices. Most Japanese games released in North America underwent a thorough check for religious references, nudity, presence of alcohol or tobacco, violence, and bad language (Nintendo's Censorship, n.d.). Some examples of the modifications made by NOA include covering a nude statue in *Super Castlevania 4* (1991), removing red crosses from hospital signs in the game *Earthbound* (1994) and changing the name of a Russian character in *Punch Out!* (1984) from Vodka Drunkensky to Soda Popinsky (Nintendo's Censorship, n.d.). This over-

paternalistic attitude was due to the fact that Nintendo's target audience in the United States at the time was children. With the establishment of the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) in the USA in 1994, game companies could, for the first time, target their games to different age groups, which eventually led to the relaxation and almost disappearance of the censoring practices of NOA (Nintendo's Censorship, n.d.).

Adapting the game's box art is another marketing tool that is often used as part of the internationalisation process. As there are many games on shop shelves, an eye-catching cover can make the difference and act as a selling point in its own right, particularly for casual gamers.

Macro level adaptation is also used for games originally designed for the Japanese market which have not been internationalised and have been subsequently localised because they became a best seller in Japan. This was the case of the simulation game *Animal Crossing* (2001), in which players assume the role of a new kid in town. The game was originally full of Japanese cultural references, such as holidays, clothing, and furniture depicting the Japanese way of life. Its cultural content was comprehensively adapted to United States culture, including the game visuals, which were redesigned to portray the American lifestyle, including a barbecue, a stage coach, a wagon wheel and a cow skull with horns (Nutt, 2008). The localised North American version was so successful that it was retranslated back into Japanese and marketed in Japan with all the United States content as *Animal Crossing Plus* (2003), where it was also a hit. This is another example of the flexibility and dynamic nature of current game localisation practices for Japanese games.

Another game that was remade for its North American release is the 2006 version of the dating simulation game *Tokimeki Memorial* (1994). The game became very popular in Japan and also achieved some popularity overseas despite the fact that it had not been localised (O'Hagan, 2007). For this reason, Konami decided to release the game in North America, being the first Japanese dating simulation game to be addressed to a mass audience in that territory. The dating theme was preserved, but all the game visuals were redesigned and the story was rewritten to adapt it to United States High School life. The title was also changed to *Brooktown High: Senior Year* (2007).



Figure 3. Screenshots of *Tokimeki Memorial* (left) and *Brooktown High* (right)

(© Konami)

(Sources: <http://robert1986.blog82.fc2.com/blog-entry-655.html> and <http://uk.psp.ign.com/articles/791/791371p1.html>)

Despite the extensive redesign, the game was considered mediocre by game review sites, such as *Gamespot* and *IGN*. Gamers and reviewers criticised the character design and stated that they would have preferred it if the original game had been simply translated, as opposed to the complete remake [see for example, the comments by Bayley (2007), Nargrakhan (2010)]. It should be highlighted that while a remake is usually not considered a translation in the proper sense, it does fit in with the localisation paradigm, as localisation envisages the modification of *any* aspect of the original product that needs to be changed. However, the internationalisation and localisation approaches adopted in this instance were not successful, as the United States version did not provide a similar game play experience to the players, who found it boring and aesthetically unappealing. Judging from gamers' comments, a more exoticising strategy highlighting the Japaneseness of the game and targeted at fans of Japanese culture would have been more effective, considering that the dating simulation genre is not particularly popular in the United States. Schäler (2006:44) refers to this type of exoticising localisation as “reversed localisation”, which he defines as intentionally keeping or even introducing the exotic, strange or unfamiliar in the localised versions of a product in order to make it more interesting and appealing for the target audience.

Although macro level adaptation is ultimately the decision of the developer or the publisher, if localisers come across a cultural issue that needs to be addressed at a macro level, such as a character's design or body language, the issue should be reported to the localisation coordinator, who will liaise with the publisher, stating the issue and suggesting possible solutions. It is then the publisher's decision to make the necessary changes.

Micro level adaptation

Micro level adaptation is performed at a textual level by translators during the translation phase. Different territories have different cultural values and expectations, which are influenced by their history, ethnicity, political system, habits, traditions, as well as religious and moral values. When localising between distant cultures, such as Japan and the United States, the cultural gap between the original and target audiences is significant and, consequently, humour, cultural references, and intertextual allusions often need to be modified. When the culture-specific elements present in a Japanese game are confusing, obscure, offensive, or simply not as funny as intended for target players, it is advisable to neutralise, adapt or omit them, taking into account their function in the game and aiming to achieve a similar function in the target version with an appropriate target culture reference.

For example, in the game *Chocobo Racing*, Japanese folktale characters Momotaro and Kiji, who would be very familiar to Japanese players, were replaced by Hansel and Gretel in the North American version in order to bring the game closer to United States players by using a similar intertextual reference in the target culture (Parish, 2007).

The *Phoenix Wright* series (2001-2007), which describes the start of a young lawyer's career and his first legal battles, contains many references to Japanese pop culture that were adapted to United States pop culture. The localisation team included new jokes and United States cultural references, which were appreciated by critics and target players alike, who praised the localisation because it was "not simply translating the text, but adding surprisingly biting, tongue-in-cheek jokes, and unexpected pop culture references" (Yoon, 2007). In this case, a domesticating strategy was effective and appealed to target players albeit it is a visual novel-type adventure video game, a genre that is not particularly popular in the United States. This may indicate that the quality of the localisation is also a key factor in the success of a game belonging to a genre traditionally not popular in the target territories, although more research would be needed to confirm this hypothesis.

Another issue often requiring attention when translating Japanese games is the use of humour based on sexual innuendo. Compared to some Western cultures, Japanese culture has a relatively unselfconscious attitude towards references to sex, homosexuality and transgenderism, which are often used to add a humoristic touch in manga, anime, and video games. However, this type of humour is often not deemed acceptable for young audiences in North America and Europe. As a result, such references have to be adapted or removed to avoid the risk of obtaining a different rating for an older age group in the target territories, which would imply a reduction in the potential market size. As an example, in *Final Fantasy XII* (2006) there is a secondary character, a thief member of the

Seeq race, who is a transgender character in the Japanese original but became a female in the North American and the European versions.

Transcreation

As already mentioned, when localising Japanese games, localisers are usually granted creative freedom, which they tend to exercise beyond the boundaries of ‘pure’ translation and enter the realm of transcreation by including new target cultural references and humour in the localised versions (Mangiron & O’Hagan, 2006). Examples of transcreation can be found in the early attempts at video game translation, for instance in *Super Mario Bros. 3* (1988), at the conclusion of the game, when Mario rescues the Princess, she thanks him with the message: “ありがとう！ やっと きのこのせかいに へいわが もどりました。おしまっ！” (*Arigato! Yatto kinokonosekai ni heiwa ga modorimashita. Oshimai!*, “Thank you! Peace has finally been restored at the Mushroom world. The End!”). This was translated as “Thank you! But our Princess is in another castle! ...Just kidding. Ha ha ha! Bye bye.” This was a joke from the translators, based on the fact that this is the message that Mario receives when he clears a level and has to continue his search for the Princess (Kohler, 2005; O’Hagan & Mangiron, forthcoming). United States localisers decided to translate this final message creatively, departing from the original and injecting some humour into the translation to make the game more enjoyable for their target audience. The trend to transcreate and increase the humour content in localised Japanese games is also present in the *Final Fantasy* series (see Mangiron & O’Hagan, 2006; Mangiron, 2010), and it seems to be aligned with the higher occurrence of humour in United States films and informal conversations as outlined in a study by Japanese scholar Takekuro (2006).

Another transcreation technique often used by United States localisers translating from Japanese is the introduction of accents and idiolects absent from the original version for characterisation purposes (Mangiron & O’Hagan, 2006). For example, in *Final Fantasy X* (2001), one of the main characters, Wakka, who does not speak with any particular accent in the Japanese original, was characterised as a Hawaiian in the United States version as this characterisation suited his looks and the fact that he lives on an island. When intervening like this, translators are not simply translating the source text, they are creatively adding new target culture elements to it in order to make it more appealing for their audience, an unusual phenomenon in other types of translation.

Nonetheless, transcreation is not always well received by target players. In the Spanish version of the simulation RPG *Little King Story* (2009), localisers decided to use some colloquial expressions which were popularised by a Spanish comedian, Chiquito de la Calzada, in the mid 1990s. They also

introduced references to the political and economic situation in Spain, applying a transcreating and domesticating approach to their translation. The general reaction of Spanish gamers was negative, as they found that after repeated exposure to the game the humorous expressions became boring and they felt it was strange to hear them in a game set in an imaginary world that is aesthetically very Japanese¹⁰. Similarly to what happened with *Brooktown High*, an excessive degree of domestication had a negative impact on Spanish players, as it interrupted their willing suspension of disbelief thereby affecting negatively their game play experience. For this reason, when localising Japanese games, it is important to strike a balance between domesticating and exoticising approaches, considering factors such as the game genre, the gaming culture, the ratings system and the cultural values of the target players.

Conclusion

Japan has traditionally been one of the key players of the video game industry, and their global success can be attributed to a great extent to the GILT practices adopted by Japanese developers and publishers. To date, barring a number of exceptions, the predominant internationalisation strategy for Japanese games has consisted of designing culturally odourless products or products that carefully intermix Japanese elements —mainly the aesthetics— with United States elements. In spite of this, many Japanese games still contain some traces of Japanese culture, which are often adapted, neutralised or removed during the localisation process applying a domesticating translation strategy. Modifications can be made both at macro level (game design: visuals, story line, game mechanics) and micro level (script) in order to make Japanese games more appealing for international audiences.

From a translation studies perspective, the brief of games localisation is to create a localised version that provides a similar game play experience to target players, engages them and facilitates their immersion in the game. To this end, localisers of Japanese games are granted freedom to modify, rewrite and even add new content and target culture references in the localised versions, becoming co-authors and unleashing their creativity.

However, an extreme domestication approach is not always necessarily the best strategy, as has been shown in the cases of the United States version of *Tokimeki Memorial* and the Spanish version of *Little King Story*, the reception of which was not good because players would have preferred a more exoticising approach, that is a reverse localisation that preserved some of the Japaneseness of the original. For this reason, when localising a Japanese game it is advisable to aim at striving for a

¹⁰ See, for example, the comments at <http://ellaberintodegalious.blogspot.com/2009/10/little-kings-story.html>; <http://akihabarablues.com/2009/08/30/%C2%BFquien-ha-aprobado-la-traduccion-de-little-kings-story/> and <http://www.elpixelilustre.com/2010/01/analisis-little-kings-story.html>.

balance between a domesticating approach and an exoticising approach, considering the features and genre of the game, as well as the audience to which it is addressed. An excessively domesticating approach may not be successful if it does not appeal to the target audience and breaks their suspension of disbelief. While it is advisable to adapt those cultural elements that can negatively affect the comprehension and enjoyment of a game by target players, preserving elements from Japanese culture that give colour to the localised version may also be appealing to target players and can contribute to the success of a game in the target territories, as in the case of games such as *Okami*. In Schäler's (2006: 45) words,

If employed wisely, keeping the strange and sometimes challenging — rather than trying to hide it — presents an opportunity to consumers of digital content to learn more about the origin of this content, about the cultural and linguistic context it was created in.

Translation studies and the game industry as a whole would undoubtedly benefit from further research into game localisation, a highly creative, customisable and collaborative type of translation, where localisers are often part-authors, especially when translating from Japanese. Future comparative intercultural reception studies will provide useful information to developers and publishers about how their games are received in target territories, providing them with information about how the reception could be improved. From the game companies' perspective, this could potentially lead to larger sales in target territories, and from players' perspective it could provide a more immersive and satisfactory gaming experience. The game is not over yet.

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