

# **Game localisation as software-mediated cultural experience: Shedding light on the changing role of translation in intercultural communication in the digital age**

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## **Abstract**

In this rapidly technologising age translation as a professional practice has been undergoing formidable changes with the implication that there is a need to expand the disciplinary scope of translation studies. Taking the case of game localisation this article problematises the role of translation as intercultural communication by focusing on cultural elements of video games. Game localisation evolved in response to the game industry's need to distribute game software in territories other than the country of origin whereby adjusting games technically, linguistically and culturally to suit the requirement of the target market. Despite the importance of this cross-lingual and cross-cultural operation for the industry's success in the global market, game localisation remains an under reported area of research in translation studies. A critical analysis of game localisation as generating software-mediated cultural experience reveals intercultural communication issues due to the nature of modern digital games as technological and cultural artefacts. By combining translation studies perspectives and the theoretical framework of critical theory of technology, the author argues that game localisation is eliciting something new about the role of translation in forging intercultural communication in the digital age.

**Keywords:** translation, game localisation, software, culturalisation, intercultural communication, cultural turn, rewriting, critical theory of technology

## **1. Background - Translation in the digital age**

Video game localisation is a relatively new practice representative of translation in the digital age, applied to digital games. Simply put, it is a set of procedures involved in adjusting games technically, linguistically and culturally to a given market so as to distribute them in territories other than their countries of origin. The author takes the view that a digital game is primarily a piece of software coded to behave in a certain manner, hence game localisation is treated as a type of software localisation albeit with a number of unique characteristics. This article argues that cultural elements embedded in video games are manifest in a unique way in game localisation and pose a challenge to translation as facilitating intercultural communication. Implicit in this claim are underlying concerns about the widespread impact of technologisation on translation. This introduction sets the scene by broadly surveying the technological landscape of translation today. As Cronin illustrates, translation as a metaphor for converting one thing into another befits the very nature of digital technology, which provides "potentially limitless convertibility...or translatability" (Cronin 2012: 131). Once presented in digital format a product can be transformed into different manifestations, as in the case of software and its localised versions. Technologisation and increasingly porous national borders in online environments are also exposing the general public more regularly to translation, as a concept and as a product, through multilingual texts on the Internet and readily available solutions to language barriers with free online automatic translation via Machine Translation (MT). It is probable that this is

affecting public perceptions of translation, including the expectation that translation can be available at any time anywhere and for any products in any language. In this way technologisation is not only affecting professional translators, but also the general public who are increasingly deploying “translation apps” as a casual means to address increasing cross-lingual information and communication needs. Non-translators are thus inadvertently participating in the production of translation, typically via MT tools, and in some cases by actively contributing to translation crowdsourcing initiatives, i.e. calls for volunteers to help translate a given material along the same principle as Wikipedia. In this way “digital globalisation” (Folaron 2006) is shaping public perceptions of translation and technologisation of translation is having a profound and far-reaching impact.

Professional translation itself has been progressively facilitated by Computer-aided Translation (CAT), where the work of human translators is assisted by computer-based tools. In the digital era text in machine readable form has proliferated, thus making text amenable to manipulation by computers and facilitating smooth integration into CAT environments, into which MT systems are also increasingly incorporated. Another major trend affecting translation in the digital age is the recycling of text, for example, through repurposing text when identical fragments of text appear in different but related documents. The resultant instances of repetitions are, in turn, exploited by tools such as Translation Memory (TM) which leverage repetition within and across documents so that the translator no longer needs to translate identical or similar segments of text from scratch more than once. Text-recycling is promoted by CAT tools and their providers promise significant cost savings for translation service buyers and providers, and better translation consistency and quality. Translated texts are also recycled via corpus-based MT systems, trained with previously translated texts generated by humans or with post-edited MT output. However, unlike the rest of the software localisation sector, game localisation has until recently resisted CAT tools (O’Hagan and Mangiron 2013:142-143). This serves to highlight the fact that some characteristics of games may not be readily amenable to translation technology applications.

It is against this dynamic technological backdrop that this article examines game software as an object of translation in an attempt to explore the relationship between technology and culture as manifest in this relatively new translation practice. Game localisation encapsulates many characteristics of translation in the digital age and, in particular, the software-mediated cultural experience that games embody is useful for shedding light on the role of translation in facilitating intercultural communication. Games, especially mainstream console games, are designed for deeper levels of user engagement than utility software applications and generally come with more significant cultural issues (Edwards 2012). This identifies game localisation as a new site for translation practice and theory, in turn providing an impetus for translation studies to recognise emerging issues in translating in the digital age. The next section focuses on the impact of technology on software localisation, and introduces in more detail game localisation and the distinct characteristics that marks it out from software localisation. This provides the basis for discussion of intercultural issues specific to game localisation with examples that highlight the increasing need for “culturalisation” of games as crucial for the survival of games in a given region. Building on the need for culturalisation, the article then shifts its main focus to the complex web of intercultural communication factors involved in translating games, given the wide array of cultural dimensions present in video games. Critical theory of technology is used to scrutinise further the impact of technology on culture and to link it to the cultural turn in translation studies and the concept of rewriting (Lefevere 1992), to argue that game localisation provides a complex filtering mechanism both afforded by and dictated by technology. The conclusion summarises key arguments and considers future developments necessary for the discipline of translation studies more fully to address intercultural communication in the digital age.

## 2. Translating software - Software localisation and Game localisation

This section focuses on software localisation to contextualise intercultural communication issues as they arise in game localisation. Software as the object of translation epitomizes a digital age in which culture is mediated by technology, and highlights the need to interrogate the technology itself for “a deeper consideration of digital artefacts as cultural phenomena” (Crook 2013: 27). Translating software brings out cultural assumptions embedded in the original software and this is arguably one of the consequences of the technologisation of translation with digital technology.

### 2.1. *Software localisation*

Software localisation initially focused on business utility applications and has evolved today into a large scale industrial process to make software products available across different languages in global markets. The practice emerged in the 1980s in response to the globalisation of the computer industry and the requirement that computer software be available for each market in a suitable form to the end users (Esselink 2000). Most software used to be designed and developed in the US, i.e. with US English as the source language and culture. Folaron (2006: 198) thus describes the rationale for localisation as “to reflect the introduction of linguistic-cultural elements considered foreign to the initial source code, content and display in US/American English”. It became gradually apparent that US-centric assumptions in software affected localisation not only at the surface level of user interface (UI) but also at the deeper level of the design of the software itself (Kersten et al. 2002). According to the Localization Industry Standards Association (LISA in operation 1990-2011), the goal of software localisation is to deliver a product with the same or equivalent “look and feel” of a similar locally available product, and “the presentation... and also functionality of the product must be adapted to local conventions” (Fry 2003: 5). This gave rise to the increased scope for adaptation in localising software. Yet, the concept of “localisation” introduced by the industry to distinguish the practice from translation rarely convincingly identifies new dimensions in its definition. For example, localisation is often simply explained as “the translation and adaptation of a software or web product” (Esselink 2000: 1).

Localisation has generated specialist training needs, and dedicated training in universities, but serious theoretical exploration of the localisation domain remains limited in translation studies (Jiménez-Crespo 2013). This stems from the fact that while localisation involves distinct and new processes and justifies specific training, the concept itself is not clearly delineated from that of translation. While translation studies in the main have treated localisation more as a business model with little epistemic significance until recently (for further conceptualisation see Jiménez-Crespo 2013; O’Hagan and Mangiron 2013) the localisation industry has tended to equate translation with strictly linguistic operations (O’Hagan and Mangiron 2013:107-110). This mutual lack of engagement at a conceptual level has meant that the localisation industry has tended to hold on to a narrow view of translation and failed to recognize that translation is firmly mapped into both (inter)cultural and linguistic space in its theory and practice. Paradoxically, this restrictive notion of translation within the localisation industry may have highlighted the perception of game localisation as a broader concept than translation, able to accommodate the cultural dimensions of games. The increasing interest in the cultural implications of game localisation in the industry (Edwards 2012, 2014) can therefore ironically be traced to its generally limited understanding of translation as divorced from cultural considerations. From a translation studies perspective what is new is the way such issues manifest themselves in game software, making them worthy of scholarly investigation.

On a practical level, software localisation has introduced new processes, new tools, and new challenges. It involves distinctive activities, closely reflecting the specific nature of software: (1) project management; (2) translation and engineering of software; (3) translation, engineering and

testing of online help or web content; (4) translation and assembly of components and (5) functionality testing (Esselink 2000: 3). In particular, Esselink (2000: 2) refers to “internationalisation” as “a precursor to the localisation of a product” integrated as part of the product’s development cycle. This process has been identified as a significant new approach formalised by the localisation industry as a proactive solution to potential localisation issues (O’Hagan and Ashworth 2002; Pym 2010). Part of what is termed GILT (Globalisation, Internationalisation, Localisation and Translation) in the industry, internationalisation is designed to facilitate localisation without the need for reengineering by addressing any technical requirements (e.g. appropriate character encoding to accommodate target languages other than English) upstream rather than as an afterthought and also potential intercultural communication hitches (e.g. specific icon in user interface [UI] depicting an image unknown or even offensive in the target market). Issues such as truncations caused by the expansion of strings in the target language in relation to the pre-allocated space on screen are also best headed off early during this process. Neutralisation of certain culture-specific elements may likewise be part of internationalisation (Greenwood 1993), potentially at the risk of causing loss of the unique character of original products and promoting global sameness (Pym 2004: 37).

One of the characteristics of software localisation is a typical peep-hole approach to translation resulting from the way in which software is constructed. This imposes certain operational logistics in localisation workflow, and creates a situation where translation is often performed without context. Translators typically need to deal with text fragments and text which may also keep changing, as opposed to finished texts in their entirety as in other forms of translation. Subsequent QA testing is in place to capture functional as well as linguistic errors when translated strings are integrated into the software. The localisation industry’s limited perspective on translation seems to go hand in hand with such a peep-hole approach being accepted as unproblematic. The principle of standardisation is applied primarily to increase efficiency, although typically argued to be a quality control mechanism. This serves to confine human translators to a fixed narrow range of translation options further promoted by tools such as TM even though they may go against their natural tendency towards variability in translation. This restricted view of translation is likely to have stemmed from a common belief that translation does not involve considerations other than word for word rendition, separating it out from the more complex treatment of cultural issues. This is contrary to the view of translation as inherently complex and messy as recognised by translation scholars (Cronin 2003), and well familiar to translators. The next section discusses what is involved in translating game software.

## *2.2. Game localisation*

Game localisation was initially virtually excluded from core software localisation since the software industry was focused on business applications (Berry 2008: 66). However, the growth of the game industry prompted by the widespread popularity of games has more recently made it a key contributor to the localisation sector. While sharing many similarities to localisation of business software, game localisation involves unique aspects which are discussed in sub-sections as below (for a full discussion of the game localisation process, see e.g. Chandler and Deming 2012, O’Hagan and Mangiron 2013).

*2.2.1. Localisation model.* Localisation of business software has widely adopted a “simship” (simultaneous shipment) model in software releases where localised versions are published together with the original software. By comparison, in the post-gold model a localised version follows the release of the original product after an interval, as applied commonly by key Japanese publishers until recently. Western counterparts have largely moved to simship, with some exceptions for Asian language releases which may not be strictly simultaneous. This is likely to be due to additional

adjustments which are often necessary to overcome extensive cultural issues for the Asian markets, as we discuss in the next section. The simship model was originally introduced to maximise profit and deter piracy, but has also served to blur the distinction between the original and its translated versions. Each version is considered as a standalone product as each is created for a particular region with the original no longer necessarily occupying the sacred authoritative position. In a post-gold model later versions may become enhanced products, with region-specific features and general improvements putting right shortcomings of earlier releases. Enhanced characteristics are sometimes in evidence when a foreign locale becomes re-localised and re-imported into the country of origin of the game. Major Japanese publishers like Square Enix publish what is called “International” or “Final-mix” editions for certain titles, for example, where successful adaptations for the North American market are exploited to re-introduce the product back into Japan more or less as a new product with a curious mixture of English and Japanese deployed (O’Hagan 2009a).<sup>1</sup>

*2.2.2 Asset types.* The actual localisation operation divides the software into distinct entities termed assets. The range of assets is generally wider in games than in other utility software with the former often forming a more complex non-linear structure. In addition to various on-screen texts and user manuals game products also contain multimedia components as fully rendered movies termed cinematics or cut-scenes. Cinematic assets embedded in a game need to be subtitled and/or dubbed.<sup>2</sup> However, subtitles and voiceover (VO) in game localisation typically do not follow the conventions and norms established in Audiovisual Translation (AVT): the main difference is that subtitles for games are usually verbatim rather than shown in reduced form designed with users’ reading speed in mind. Also in contrast with typical AVT practices these assets may more often be translated on the basis of written scripts only i.e. without full video sequences being made available to translators. Furthermore the scripts given to translators may not even show the whole dialogue in sequence, but lists of lines for each speaking character with no reference to the interaction in which they occur, with resulting loss of critical context. The tendency for localisation to be performed without context and its subsequent impact on game localisation has led some authors to coin the term “blind localisations” (Dietz 2006: 132). Given the increasing complexity and volume of mainstream console games often involving more than a million words of translation, such a disconnected approach is not conducive to high quality finished products. In such work environments game literacy and a broad understanding of how game assets are structured and software strings are typically arranged within each asset are critical for translators (Dietz *ibid*), giving them a better chance to apply less risky translation solutions. However, negative implications of translating without context are gradually being recognised by game developers and publishers, as illustrated in new types of game localisation tools in which screenshots for given cut-scenes are made available (O’Hagan and Mangiron 2013: 143-147).

*2.2.3 Constraints on translation.* There are a number of constraints that are common to software localisation in general, such as space restrictions (i.e. translation needs to fit the pre-allocated space on screen). There are additional game-specific issues, including the need to adhere to official terminology mandated by the game console manufacturers who can reject games if translation does not conform to certain rules (for details see O’Hagan and Mangiron 2013: 140). Other game-specific constraints include country-specific age rating systems and possible censorship. Stricter rules are generally applied to games than to more established art forms such as cinema and literature. Likely reasons may be the interactive nature of games making in-game actions appear (to some) more purposeful, even in a simulated world (Apperley 2008: 225-226). The fact that video games are still not fully accepted as a wholly respectable form of entertainment and even less as a cultural form by society at large is another likely reason for some restrictions. These factors affect localisation and

highlight intercultural communication issues, as they are usually country (culture)-specific. What is deemed acceptable for a certain age group in certain countries may not reflect the norms applied in others, for example. Designed for entertainment, games tend to highlight the affective impact on end users (Juul 2005) and go beyond pure functionality. Mainstream video games are increasingly making use of rich narrative, for example, to better engage users irrespective of games genre (O'Hagan and Mangiron 2013). By comparison with other types of software, games are characterised by a higher degree of user immersion and interactivity, enabled by the increasingly sophisticated use of graphics, computer-generated animation and human as opposed to synthesised voices, combined with kinetic action by users via the game controller or their own body gestures (as most illustrative with Microsoft Kinect). Finally, the presence of gamer communities is something extremely important to the game industry which is eager to seek user feedback. In particular, increasingly committed users participate in broader game related activities, including critiquing and discussing translation online, and even performing their own translations known as fan translation or translation hacking (O'Hagan 2009b). More recently some indie game developers typically with low budgets began to use crowdsourcing to have their games localised at virtually no cost, as demonstrated by the game *Gone Home* (2013-) (Nordhagen 2014).

*2.2.4 Games as products designed for entertainment.* One of the key characteristics which affect game localisation is that the end purpose of the product is entertainment. This, in turn, shapes overall translation strategies. Such a purpose-driven orientation aligns game localisation to the functionalist approach to translation which prioritises the function of the translation in the target culture, driven by the *skopos* (purpose) of the translation. The functionalist framework helps explain in terms of the end goal common for all types of game products certain cases of radical deviation from the source text. However, such translation decisions could be due to game-specific constraints, some of which can be treated as part of a translation brief. For example, game translators are tied to compliance obligations such as adherence to game system related terminology, as mentioned earlier. Furthermore, translation decisions may also be influenced by the presence of critical and knowledgeable hardcore gamers and fans who are increasingly visible especially in today's instantaneous and global network of communication. Another unique dimension of game localisation is the prominence of Japanese as a source language particularly for console games, which reflects the historic key role played by Japanese game companies<sup>3</sup>. For Japanese games other Asian language versions tend to be translated directly from Japanese, but European versions are often translated using the English language locale as the source. This approach with English as a pivot-language raises translation issues due to the filter imposed by the English (typically the North American) version, with potentially significant impact, especially in terms of intercultural communication. However, these issues are currently under-reported in game localisation research with little empirical evidence of the consequences of such approaches.

Game localisation specific issues can thus be seen to stem from a number of factors due to games being: (i) cultural artefacts as well as technical products (O'Hagan and Mangiron 2013); (ii) primarily designed for entertainment purposes prioritising users' (affective) engagement (Juul 2005); (iii) part of a strong game culture that has both global and local elements (Dovey and Kennedy 2006); and (iv) a site for "fan work" (Burn 2006), most relevantly associated with the fan translation and crowdsourcing phenomena. These characteristics highlight the way in which translation of game products differs from translation of business software applications: the latter prioritises functional and pragmatic intentions of the product to ensure that end users are able to perform the task promised by

the given software. The nature of game products and inbuilt constraints call for appropriate translation strategies to deliver products which engage users in target markets in the same way as they would do users of original versions. In particular, the importance of the affective dimension of games highlights the role of translation as intercultural communication in a specific way, different from localisation of other types of products designed primarily for task-oriented purposes. The next section homes in on the increasingly discussed process of culturalisation as applied to game localisation, with a new twist.

### **3. Game localisation as culturalisation**

The elevation of video games as a pervasive form of global modern entertainment seeping into contemporary society highlights the significant role played by game localisation. It allows the original game experience to be shared by gamers the world over. Each regional version referred to as a “locale” signifies a combination of a region, language and character encoding (Esselink 2000: 1). This concept allows localised products to make the finer distinctions necessary within the same language group based on geographical regions. For example, the globally popular online game *World of Warcraft* (2004) is released in the two Chinese locales, Simplified and Traditional Chinese, as well as a Brazilian Portuguese version in addition to European Portuguese, indicating the publisher’s recognition of likely demand by users in these regions for the distinction. The concept of locale inherently serves to address intricate regional differences beyond the broad language group categorisation, while also accommodating local contexts and conventions which may be deeply embedded in broader socio-cultural traditions. Contrary to still persistent assumptions that games are trivial products of amusement devoid of any cultural significance, game localisation highlights a wide array of cultural issues, both stereotypical and more subtle, ingrained in original games. These include overt differences in local practices such as which side of the road cars are driven in car racing games, in cooking styles in cuisine-themed games or in the selection of questions in trivia quiz games or songs for sing-off games relevant to a region.

Less overt and yet deep-seated issues that highlight regional differences are levels of tolerance and acceptance relating to depictions of sex, violence and religions. For example, as noted in the previous section, the age ratings developed to protect under age gamers may reflect different local attitudes and have implications for localisation. They reveal that the sense of appropriateness of the game content for a given age group is not necessarily universal, reflected in different age ratings used in different regions (O’Hagan and Mangiron 2013: 217-231). Similarly, divergent views in terms of religion, ideological issues and other cultural taboos and conflicts in the eyes of the receiving countries could lead to parts of a game requiring changes, or the whole game being censored or banned. These issues are primarily cultural in nature and seek remedy in the process known as culturalisation. The game industry geopolitical specialist Kate Edwards (2012: 20) sees culturalisation as a separate, distinct operation from localisation, describing the concept as:

going a step further beyond localisation as it takes a deeper look into a game’s fundamental assumptions and content choices, and then gauges their viability in both the broad, multicultural marketplace as well as in specific geographic locales. Localisation helps gamers simply comprehend the game’s content (primarily through translation), but culturalisation helps gamers to potentially engage with the game’s content at a much deeper, more meaningful level.

In her interpretation Edwards treats culturalisation as a higher order operation designed to address what she calls “intercultural dissonance” (ibid: 26-27). Edwards also points out that potential cultural

issues can be exaggerated by media sensationalism and game-illiterate by-standers prone to inflating the slightest potential conflict out of context of the game world. At the same time, the motivation behind the discernible cultural provocation of some game developers is not always clear or justifiable.

The culturalisation of games could in turn be considered in terms of “repercussions” of the translated product. Chesterman (2007: 179-180) explains repercussions by reference to the effects on recipients of translation at the broader cultural level, with far-reaching implications such as “changes in norms and practices, changes in the perception of cultural stereotypes”. (Inter)cultural issues are an integral part of many different kinds of translation well explored in translation studies and yet the nature of modern video games sets the cultural agenda in a new light. What makes culturalisation even more complex is the co-existence of local game culture and its global counterpart. Both need to blend in the right balance to engage the gamer in the game world at an optimum level. The next sections discuss specific cases to illustrate what triggers culturalisation and actual approaches implemented.

### 3.1. *Gender and sexuality issues as a trigger for culturalisation*

For some time game studies scholars have been highlighting gender questions in games, ranging from a focus on the gender of gamers to that of game developers (e.g. Cassell and Jenkins 1998; Kafai et al. 2008), as well as game characters. While today’s game designers are generally expected to be more aware of such issues, hypersexualisation of female game characters persists in mainstream games and could affect intercultural communication through a locale. A debate about the game *Mirror’s Edge* (2008) concerned with its main Asian female protagonist Faith highlights such a conflict. The game’s Swedish designer had responded to frequent criticism of the hypersexualised image of female characters in games and deliberately opted for an “inclusive design” approach to avoid this bias (Tom Farrer cited in Totilo 2008). However, this intension was clearly lost with some Asian gamers as illustrated by the posting of a modified image of Faith reportedly on a Korean game messaging board triggering heated debate. The subsequently widely circulated modified image showed a preferred image of Faith from an Asian perspective, with a more curvaceous figure and bigger round eyes in contrast to the original athletic look of the character with stereotypical Asian facial features. What was interesting about this debate was Asian gamers questioning the credibility of the non-Asian game designer in designing an Asian character (Tang 2009). While claims that the game’s poor sales in the Chinese market were linked to this character design issue (ibid) are difficult to prove, this case clearly shows the intricacies of the balance between global and local perspectives. Such reactions among Asian gamers remind us of an earlier observation by Gee (2003: 11) that the gender debate in games is not as clear-cut as some scholars may claim it to be and that there is still much to learn about gaming culture in real life contexts. In this case the designer was acutely aware of inclusive game design as a global trend, which was thwarted at the local level of at least a certain cluster of gamers. Their response reinforces the purpose of games as entertainment rather than as a site for demonstrating political correctness, in turn confirming Gee’s earlier suspicion. Some of these issues may have been more implicit in a translation mainly of the written medium, but are now manifest in a highly explicit manner in games. As a medium of many layers and dimensions games leave the space wide open for culturalisation involving manipulation of the non-verbal as well as the verbal.

Another issue relating to gender and sexuality discussed in relation to games is the presence of transgender characters in Japanese games (Yahiro 2005), from high profile games such as *Paper Mario: The Thousand Year Door* (2004) and *Nier [NierReplicant and NierGestalt]* (2010) to less mainstream games such as *Persona 4* (2008) and *Catherine* (2011). Game characters represented as transgender are not infrequent and often affect localisation approaches in terms of age rating categories when these games are distributed in international markets. In some cases localised games may end up being rated higher than the category which was originally intended due to references to

transgenderism. In other cases micro adjustments are made at the level of translation of written texts in order to retain the same age rating category. For example, *Paper Mario* in which one of the Shadow Sirens Vivian is transgender was rated in Japan for the age category for 3-year-olds and higher. In the Italian version the reference to Vivian as a man in the original was accompanied by added explanations: “I am a woman too now, and I’m proud to have turned into a woman.” (back translated from Italian by Di Marco 2007: n.p.). While relatively minor changes in the translation were sufficient to achieve the same age ratings in this case they needed to be applied systematically. Above all, such adjustments must be informed by the cultural criteria affecting target market ratings requirements and the cultural flavour of the game world presented in the original game. With reference to the example of Vivian, Di Marco argues that Italian localisers “changed the original text in an attempt to maintain a ‘Japanese flavor’... whilst avoiding mention of transgenderism”. Further examples of toned-down depiction of transgenderism in localised versions are demonstrated by the mainstream J-RPG (Japanese Role Playing Game) twin titles *NierReplicant* (2010) and *NierGestalt* (2010). The character Kainé is presented in the Japanese original version as a hermaphrodite, with explicit physical male traits within a seemingly female appearance while the “extra bulge” is made less visible in the US version (Cooke 2010: 24). Such changes in the character design are not trivial in terms of cost and effort, and indicate a deliberate manipulation considered necessary and justified in game localisation. These examples highlight a broader intercultural communication concern often related to different societal attitudes towards gender and sexuality, and manifest explicitly in age ratings considerations and anticipated reception by end users in given markets.

### 3.2 Audio localisation as a culturalisation mechanism: regional dialects and humour

In game localisation the compelling effect on end users of the audio channel in adding realism to the game world is well exploited by audio localisation. Despite the cost implication, VO is increasingly used as full game localisation where regional dialects are deliberately applied to some game characters in localised versions. In the field of AVT, regional accents in original versions are known to pose a challenge as locating exact equivalents in the target language is rare, as observed by Díaz-Cintas and Remael (2007: 191): “The connotation of different target culture dialects will never be the same as those of the source culture dialects they replace”. A relatively recent case is the English language locale of *Ni no Kuni* (2011), a high profile J-RPG title, developed in collaboration with the internationally acclaimed Japanese animation studio Ghibli to combine visual appeal and an engaging narrative. In this particular game one of the key game characters, Sizuku [Drip], becomes Mr. Drippy in the English locale and speaks with a Welsh accent, as a counterpart to the Osaka accent in the original Japanese. As explained above, replacing the original regional accent with another in the target could be problematic whereas resorting to the standard language could lose the original flavour and connotations (Chaume 2012: 136-138). Contrary to AVT norms there seems to be increasing instances of localised games opting to employ language varieties designed to make games come alive. In the particular case of *Ni no Kuni* and its cheeky and charismatic character Drippy, the decision to go for a regional accent such as Welsh was taken deliberately to make the game stand out (Rushton 2013). The professionally executed VO in this game has reportedly been well-received by the market as conveying the distinct flavour of the character, confirming that carefully planned culturalisation pays off (ibid).

Another reason for the use of the audio channel as an effective localisation avenue relates to the translation of humour. Humour in games and game localisation is currently under researched (Mangiron 2010), despite the fact that it is a recognised element of the game structure endowed with different functions, ranging from gamer engagement to stress relief (Dormann and Biddle 2010). Audio localisation is often used to highlight humour, and the use of regional accents is justified for the particular function of conveying a comical feel also intended to soften intense gameplay.

However, humour can often be culture-specific and is therefore considered to be one of the most difficult elements to tackle for translators (Chiaro 2010). Accordingly, audio localisation combined with culture-specific humour poses a formidable challenge for translators. Nevertheless game localisation continues to exploit the audio channel, even in cases where the original script is presented only in written mode (O'Hagan and Mangiron 2013: 185). Such an approach would be an anomaly in AVT and illustrates unique ways in which game localisation is developing culturalisation approaches. With game localisation VO is exploited to engage users maximally in games, and this may be further facilitated by the deliberate selection of regional accents in re-voicing. It seems as if game localisation almost instinctively uses linguistic variations to recreate the look and feel desired for the game in the target market. The difference in the AVT and game localisation approaches points to the different goals sought for end products and to the inherent characteristics of each type of product, including the intended impact on users. AVT norms developed primarily as non-interactive content with the broader viewership of cinema or TV in mind, although both these media are changing today. By comparison, games are first and foremost aimed at users seeking interactive play and this in turn explains reservations among gamers about cinematics as the only non-interactive element of the interactive medium.

With its unique historical development independent of the mainstream localisation industry and AVT, game localisation has been forming its own norms, currently in a state of flux (O'Hagan and Mangiron 2013). Its non-conformity is also associated with the game industry's propensity to seek a novel approach and capitalise on the sense of being on the "fringe" of cultural forms as an edgy appeal to gamers. Media studies scholars such as Manovich (2001) and Flew (2008) see video games at the forefront of new media and are having a pervasive impact on new social practices (Flew *ibid*: 1-4). Given such new features of games and the context of their use, the practice of game localisation serves to shed light on the role of translation as an enabler of intercultural communication with new properties of new media representing the digital age. The next section focuses on theoretical questions which arise from the culturalisation dimension of translating games as artefacts imbuing technology and culture.

#### **4. Game localisation and technology-mediated cultural experience: theoretical questions**

The digital age and the spread of personal computers have made software an object of translation, giving rise to software localisation. This practice has resulted in a new clash of culture due to the difference between the US cultural assumptions embedded in (mainly US-centric) utility software and those of users in different cultures (Pesquet 1993), eventually leading to the solution through software internationalisation. This approach works on the principle of externalising culture-dependent elements of software separating them out from culture-independent elements so that the source product can be globalised by only changing the former. The approach made global simship distribution of software, including games, feasible and opened up new avenues through which to address the role of translation, under the label of localisation, as the enabler of intercultural communication in the specific technological environment of software. Furthermore game localisation has been adopting localisation-friendly game development (Chandler and Deming 2012) to ensure internationalisation is well integrated into the design of the game. However, this line of academic enquiry has not progressed beyond a few scholars seeking to theorise localisation. For example, Pym (2010:140) suggests the one-to-many distribution based on internationalisation forms a key concept in localisation with a potential outcome of "an increasing standardisation of culture" while at the same time localisation itself permitting "considerable cultural adaptation" in some instances. In order to shed more light on the changing role of translation in facilitating technology-mediated cultural

experience this section attempts to further scrutinise culturalisation within the process of game localisation by drawing on a theoretical foundation geared at understanding the relationship between culture and technology.

#### *4.1 Critical theory of technology*

Among the scant research engaged in a theoretical discussion of localisation is a study by Kersten et al. (2002) on the relationship between technology and culture. Focusing on business software localisation, they convincingly argue that the lack of cultural considerations in software localisation is highly problematic as it curtails the effectiveness of the software for the end-user. In particular, they are critical of the limited scope of internationalisation primarily applied in the User Interface (UI) layer, which ignores deeper cultural issues present in the “application core” such as the “models and procedures which are used to form messages, construct symbols, and create information and knowledge from data” (ibid: 91). Kersten et al. (2002) maintain that such insufficient cultural considerations stem from the dominant philosophical underpinnings based on reductionism and instrumental views: the reductionist perspective on culture treats its representation in software as limited to language and other symbols while the instrumental view of technology stresses the neutrality of software, hence assuming its ready adaptability to any culture. For Kersten et al. such underlying assumptions prevent the internationalisation process from being applied at a deeper level than the surface UI layer. To address the shortcomings of reductionist and instrumentalist philosophy, Kersten et al. propose substantive and critical perspectives of technology which treat software as culturally “not” neutral. The substantive view is concerned with the consequences of technology and sees technology as autonomous in creating a new culture that is separate from both the production (source) culture and the deployment (target) culture (Grimes and Feenberg 2013: 122). The critical theory of technology (CTT) holds that the source culture modifies the target culture by implanting values and norms of the former into the latter (Kersten et al. 2002: 91). Replacing the largely outmoded view based on instrumentalism that regards technology as neutral, CTT posits technologies cannot be separated from social contexts although their normative implications are acknowledged (Grimes and Feenberg 2013). CTT uses such concepts as the “formal bias” which refers to technology as a system which acts as normative processes with delegated values and interests and the “technical code” in reference to technological features reflecting values and interests that are inherent in the design of technology (Grimes and Feenberg 2013: 124). As such a CTT framework allows one to unpack cultural assumptions embedded in technology.

A key premise made by Kersten et al. (2002) was the limitation of the internationalisation process applied in utility software localisation, resulting from ignoring cultural differences and nuances contained in the application core, in turn affecting a given task facilitated by the software. On the basis of CTT they propose a deeper cultural consideration in addition to the UI layer adaptation whereby applying the business logic specific to a target culture that is different from the source culture counterpart (Kersten et al. 2002). Taking a lead from this earlier study to advocate a holistic view of culture in localisation, I attempt to apply CTT albeit in a limited manner to revisit game localisation which is already practicing extensive culturalisation at least for some mainstream console games.

#### *4.2 Game localisation analysed according to CTT and translation theories*

As already argued game localisation is different from utility software localisation in that game products call for deeper user engagement to retain the user’s suspension of disbelief. Furthermore the fact that major originating countries for console games are broadly divided between the US and Japan adds to different cultural contexts of the source products from the US dominated utility software sector. These factors seem to further highlight the importance of recognising the

cultural bias inherent in the design of software and a solution to be addressed by the localisation process. Even some earlier examples of localised games, such as the Japanese version of the US-origin game *Crash Bandicoot* (1996) illustrate the application of culturalisation which went well beyond the UI layer and into the game's technical code. The changes made included modifications in the main character design, the type of game music used as well as the addition of game hints to make the gameplay easier for younger players intended in the target market (Thayer and Kolko 2004). This was one of the first foreign games to succeed on the Japanese market, and the reason was indeed attributed to the detailed culturalisation approach taken to meet target market expectations (ibid). Similarly, the game content as a whole is sometimes adjusted in terms of local relevance in the target markets as in the case of quiz and singing contest games (e.g. *Buzz!*; *SingStar* series), giving rise to the use of the term "transcreation" (O'Hagan and Mangiron 2013). Without some of these adjustments games may be neither fully comprehensible nor even playable by target market gamers. In these situations the reductionist view or the neutrality perspective of culture in technology is not only debatable but also actively risky. However, in reality, not all game developers are fully culturally aware and from time to time localised games end up in recall or ban due to culturally inappropriate or offensive components (Edwards 2012, 2014). These instances amply demonstrate that the reductionist or neutrality assumptions of technology can seriously damage game-mediated cultural experience.

Localisation as an industrial process to globalise software came to highlight cultural differences associated with the use and the users of the given product, which is best illustrated in game software. Contrary to the restricted view in the localisation industry of translation purely as a linguistic operation translation studies have embraced broader cultural contexts in which to consider translation. Well over two decades ago a cultural turn was declared in translation studies (Bassnett and Lefevere 1990, Snell-Hornby 1990). In particular, this brought forth the consideration of power and manipulation shaping a translation. It applies to aspects of the operational challenges in the game localisation process discussed earlier, which can be traced not only to the nature of the software but also to the power relationships in terms of the key actors in the game industry, such as game developers, publishers and, in the case of console games, console manufacturers, exerting their influence over the localisation process both implicitly and explicitly. This allows a view that software localisation is a form of "rewriting" (Lefevere 1992) affected by a power struggle and is never an innocent practice. Although Lefevere originally discussed the concept in terms of literary system, such thinking seems to resonate with the main tenet of CTT in relation to cultural issues. CTT embraces and recognises the formal bias in software design itself and the need for deeper culturalisation for its transplantation in the target culture while accepting certain influences imposed by the technology upon users in the target market. From such a perspective culturalisation of games as part of game localisation is more than purely catering for cultural acceptance of the target user. It must be treated as a deliberate filtering mechanism enabling intercultural communication in a particular way often dictated by those in powerful positions in the industry developing games. In other words, the process of capturing the original game as a cultural experience is something carefully manipulated to convey the right kind of brand image in the target market and for the game's longer survival. Projecting a certain image and ensuring survival in the target market are critical functions fulfilled by translation as rewriting, as argued by Lefevere (1992).

In translation studies the departure from an equivalence-based linguistic-focus to a target-oriented functionalist approach proposed to treat translation as a cross-cultural communicative action (Holz-Mänttari 1984) and stressed the importance of the function of the translation in the target culture (Vermeer 1989/2000). In Vermeer's influential skopos theory the purpose of the translation is a driving factor behind translation decisions, stressing that the communicative function of the translation is the same as the function of the source text. However, to the extent that it is not possible

to divorce the translator's obligation to the source text completely from translational considerations Nord (1997, 2006) incorporated into skopos theory the notion of translator's loyalty as a moral principle as a party involved in a given communicative process, i.e. translation as a purposeful activity being to respect the interest of the author of the source text as well as considering the function of the translation in the target culture. Game localisation can be explained in the overall framework of skopos theory, prioritising its main aim as providing end users with entertainment. However, freedom to do so will be constrained in practice, contingent on a careful balance between the translator's moral duty to respect the source text (Alex O. Smith cited in O'Hagan and Mangiron 2013: 183-184) and other pressures exerted by the commissioner or patron (such as the game's publisher), which may or may not be explicit in the translation brief. In this way, the translator's agency is acted upon in a complex combination of factors. Accordingly the scope for adaptation is sometimes restrained and at other times maximally exploited.

Game localisation is driven primarily by commercial demand to serve specific markets, and enable gamers to play given games in their own language and other user-specific settings. The resulting transaction does not always mean full customisation but rather a trade-off on the necessary extent of culturalisation. In this practice a functionalist approach to translation is opportune, to the extent that the key goal of the final localised product is to prioritise the entertainment function in the target culture. Furthermore, localised games should ideally ensure that end users are engaged in a similar way with the target product as original users are with the original, which may be beyond the scope of skopos. On a technological level what Manovich (2000: 36) calls "variability" of software or "coded information" (Crook 2013) enables an infinite number of versions to be created by a change of the code, which in the case of game localisation creates an individual instantiation as a locale. These codes can theoretically be manipulated to achieve the end purpose. However, this has a caveat. The effect on gamers in the target market is only imagined through the lens of the insider in the context of commercial interest where culturalisation is applied in a very specific way. Furthermore, according to the analytical framework of CTT technologies are not culturally neutral and cultural assumptions are embedded in technology itself. The fact that CTT posits technologies in a deeply political plane may in turn help ameliorate the depoliticised view of translation within the localisation industry as pure and simple transcoding and highlight a complex role played by translation in bridging intercultural communication on a technological platform. This may also mean the need for an extension of skopos theory to bring it to the context of software technology and culture mediated by it.

## **5. Conclusion**

With increasing digitisation and the technologising of the world the function of translation as an enabler of intercultural communication is changing and transforming the scope of practice. A new theoretical basis is needed to discuss such changes. Game localisation involves far more than the mechanical transcoding, and poses deeper cultural challenges, some of which began to emerge with utility software localisation in the 1980s and 90s. In the console game sector mainstream localised games might sell in millions of units worldwide, and a single game often offers gamers in excess of 100 hours of gameplay during which they experience intercultural communication via interactive gameplay. Furthermore the recent popularity of casual games via mobile devices has grown exponentially with new players such as indie game developers entering into international markets. In this way, games are acting as a significant cultural interface. The cross-cultural dimension of games is beginning to be recognised by some game developers and publishers: one major game developer/publisher insists that no parts of the game specifications should go unaffected in the localisation process performed by expert translators (Honeywood, 2007) while crowd translated indie games are beginning to be rapidly distributed worldwide with a varying degree of sophistication.

Transformations via culturalisation are designed to immerse the end users maximally into the imagined game world by retaining a suspension of disbelief. Yet these manipulations are far from innocent in relation to serving the users' interest. While translation studies offer explanations about the complex interaction of influencing factors on translation, modern digital artefacts such as interactive digital games demand a further expansion of theoretical bases to analyse and embrace the fundamental shift unfolding in the way intercultural communication is mediated by translation on a technological platform. Combined with translation theories, perspectives based on the critical theory of technology elicit a deeper understanding of the impact of technology on technical, social and cultural environments (Grimes and Feenberg 2013), answering to Chesterman's "repercussions" of translation. By casting game localisation at the junction of technology and culture through these theoretical frameworks, it is possible to highlight the changing role of translation and the widening scope it is acquiring by new technological capabilities, as well as the constraints these create. Localisation of video games not only calls into question the boundary of what is understood to be translation but also the type of facilitation performed via a technological artefact for intercultural communication. By studying the way in which the practice of game localisation is creating technology-mediated cultural experience for gamers across cultures, further light will be shed on critical intercultural communication issues arising from the rapidly advancing digital age.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For example, such products may keep the cinematics revoiced in English and include fresh Japanese subtitles while all UI elements are put back in Japanese clearly intended for Japanese players.

<sup>2</sup> Dubbing is confusingly referred to as voiceover (VO) in the terminology of game localisation unlike in audiovisual translation (AVT) which distinguishes different forms of revoicing with voice over typically meaning cases where the original soundtrack is not fully removed and is audible. But this is not the case in game localisation.

<sup>3</sup> Such a claim needs to be balanced with the recent waning of the Japanese influence in the game industry in international contexts. Nevertheless Japan remains a major game consumer market, hence an intense target by game companies in terms of localising games for the Japanese market (see O'Hagan and Mangiron 2013).