

Creativity and playability in the localisation of video games

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Creativity is one of the most highly debated topics in translation not only because of how it relates to authorship but also because of the unavoidable cultural ramifications and the business implications for all the parties involved. Identifying the parameters within which creative translation operates in entertainment media requires a complex process that comprises a large amount of variables beyond the linguistic ones. Semiotics is suggested as a robust analytical tool to study the layering of meaning-making in entertainment products, in other words, their polysemioticity. Multimedia interactive entertainment software (MIES), a. k. a. video games, adds levels of complexity never seen before in translation due to their functional requirements. In order to identify the features that separate other entertainment products from MIES, this article analyses also the translation of novels, comics and films. The concept of playability is utilised as a way of isolating the pragmatic challenges of video game localisation.

Keywords: creativity, playability, translation, game localisation, co-creation, shared-authorship

1 Introduction

Creativity in translation can only be judged following the specific criteria of the product and the task in hand which includes a large amount of variables such as source text, receiving culture, expected readership, client specifications, etc. When referring to the translation of entertainment media such as comics, films and video games, creativity is vital and simplistic approaches that ignore co-creation are likely to produce lacklustre products for receivers around the world. In multimedia interactive entertainment software (MIES), linguistic, visual, acoustic and tactile signs are intertwined to create unique playing experiences for players in their main target market. However, this closely-knit polysemiotic world may result in many loose ends when only some of the signs in the different semiotic layers involved are considered for localisation (Bernal-Merino 2016b). The implication for creators and players is that the game “does not achieve unicity in all languages, it does not become a super-sign for an unparalleled playing experience because the cohesiveness between and amongst the layers of semiosis is disjointed or completely broken” (ibid., 249). Some may recite the facile refrain about how meaning is necessarily ‘lost in translation’ and even more so in creative texts but, as we will explore in this article, it does not have to be the case as internationally popular products such as *Game of*

Thrones (2011-present), *The Bridge* (2011-2015), *Asterix* (1959-present), *Pokémon* (1996-present), and *Tomb Raider* (1996-present) show.

Part of the challenge in the translation of multimedia entertainment arises from the commercial imperative to maintain the illusion that a product remains the same. Yet, given that the localisation process requires a varied team of professionals focused on each of their target locales, each localised version is necessarily different. A compelling creation is akin a well-formulated theory, a persuasive vision of an imagined world, a captivating organisation of known and unknown characteristics. Co-creation and shared-authorship within the framework of glocalisation (Bernal-Merino 2016a) can reduce the mistakes of the previous decades (Chandler and Deming 2012). In the new framework, the initial creators (writers, designers, actors, etc.) become the leaders of the worldwide project because they forge such creation for their own community. Localisers, then, are the author-followers that ‘apply the same theory’ to flesh out for their culturo-linguistic community an equally absorbing world. In the current age of global simultaneous shipment (sim-ship) of video games, this is even more the case because companies with worldwide ambitions must execute production and localisation in parallel (Bernal-Merino 2015). Whereas the sim-ship model can be less attainable for other industries, leading MIES companies are making it their main strategy in order to outperform competitors, not only

for global market supremacy but also for survival. This focus places creativity in localisation at the centre of the equation for the game industry.

When creativeness is mentioned in translation debates, there is often a degree of fear because it seems to imply that translators have to take illicit liberties with the source text. There is also an element of confusion about how creativity relates to authorship and the intersection between authorship and copyright, so it is worth clarifying these concepts before we progress. The translation of creative products cannot be achieved without matching the creative flows found in such products. Therefore, creativity is an indicator of authorship; the terms imply each other and target texts benefit from the creative minds of both authors and translators. The issue about copyright and royalties is a legal one and it remains in the hands of the business entities that negotiate the commission. It does not question the creativity of translators ontologically. In other words, while it is clear that translators depend on an initial product in order to translate, it is equally evident that authors depend on talented translators in order to exploit foreign markets. Authors and publishers would gladly eliminate this step if they could, but selling multimedia entertainment products abroad requires more gifted authorship than selling goods such as pens. This is due to the fact that recreational products are polysemiotic artefacts. They are designed to trigger emotions through a symphony of signs. These multichannel signs are the ones that need to be orchestrated by creators and localisers. Game

companies apply different localisation practices depending on budgets, local legislation and the notoriety of the talent involved, but the ontological relationship between authors and translators needs to be horizontal to make the sim-ship model work. The business relationship, however, tends to be subservient because it is the copyright-holder who establishes legal rights and pecuniary gains (Sadek 2012). In the entertainment industries, copyright, royalties and global exploitation rights reside neither with authors nor with translators but with the parent companies which enable creative ventures (by providing financial sponsoring, project management and worldwide distribution channels).

This *modus operandi* is the norm in all industries. No one queries the name of the engineer of their smartphones or whether Calvin Klein is designing every item that can be found in the shops bearing his name. Creators have often been helped by others to reach more clients both at home and abroad, as it is the case with Michelangelo Buonarroti, Auguste Rodin, Francisco de Goya or Andy Warhol; many of their acclaimed works of art were partially realised by anonymous helpers in their workshops. The case of translation is perhaps more pronounced because the original text needs to be fully reimagined through the lens of another culturo-linguistic community. Although every single word may change, publishers will insist to the new readers that it is the very same product. The sale pitch can only

be an untruth if taken literally but, in international commerce, like in game localisation, nothing should be understood or translated literally.

The translation of multichannel entertainment has been dealt with to some degree by several authors. Here is a short selection: video games (O'Hagan and Mangiron 2013; Bernal-Merino 2015), children's literature (Klinberg 1986; Lathey 2006), picture books (O'Sullivan 1999; González Vera 2011), comics (Zanettin 2008), news (Bielsa and Bassnett 2008), magazines (Choy 1996), films (Díaz-Cintas and Remael 2007; Chaume 2012), pop videos (Hewitt 2000; Kaindl 2005), opera (Gorlée 2005), stage plays (Anderman 2005) and theme park attractions (Clavé 2007). There are several factors that over the years have kept the focus of TS in the corner of text-only analysis: the medium (research is almost exclusively presented in text-only formats); the history (research in TS started within the disciplines of bible studies); the object of study (sacred texts and literature have been at the core of TS); reproduction rights (polysemiotic products are often inaccessible for analysis due to reproduction fees). Text analysis is beneficial but not sufficient when it comes to multimedia creations because, as all the previous scholars note, meaning is derived from all elements. Audiovisual translations research has rightly place an emphasis on the multimodality of the task. In video game localisation, semiotic and pragmatic tools (Bernal-Merino 2016b) seem to be the most efficient at identifying the complexities of multimedia interactive entertainment. Such

complexities correlate with the activation of cross-sensory neural networks in the brain that help construct meaning but this is a topic for another article.

Every work of genius originates its own reality striking a delicate balance between known and unknown elements. Similarly, in translation, such equilibrium is achieved combining domestication and foreignisation strategies (Eco 1979 and 2004). Translators assess the source text and render it in the way that better fits new readers (Iser 1980). In video games, each linguistic item, image, sound or interaction create an experience that can further immerse or disengage receivers. Players of foreign creations agree to a tacit contract of sorts and trust publishers to employ professionals who can project the original vision through a different lens because they themselves are not proficient enough to access foreign creations.

The following section presents relevant examples from different entertainment industries in order to ascertain the translatability of highly creative products and to set the stage for what creative video game localisation adds to the equation.

2. The translation of creative products

Although this is not an article on terminology, it is worth addressing briefly the terminological dimension of creativity in TS. As seen in the previous section, the translation of entertainment has dealt with different creative products as objects of study and from several scholarly perspectives. The result has been a proliferation of terminology seeking to encapsulate the peculiarities of translating such creative products. Terms such as localisation, transcreation, adaptation, rewriting, transadaptation, and semiotranslation contribute to paint a more comprehensive picture of translation practices. Unfortunately, the overlap between the terms creates a confusion that does not benefit TS theory. A good example is ‘transcreation’. This term is used in the translation of advertising, stage dramas, video games and comic books, and it is inconsistently applied to changes in texts, characters, stories, visuals, music and functionality (Bernal-Merino 2015; Chaume 2012). Authors highlight different aspects as the main feature of transcreation: the creativity of the source text, the multimodality of the creation, the creative nature of the product and the channels affected by changes. This is problematic. In the coming years, TS theory should be able to clarify translation practises across the whole spectrum (literature, comic books, cinema, musical theatre, science, technology, law, etc.), and propose the most appropriate terminology for each reality. In this article, translation refers to text changes between

languages and localisation refers to product changes from the business viewpoint of production and distribution. Translation is seen as part of the industrial process of product localisation (Esselink 2000). Looking at the wider picture, it seems appropriate to consider the perspective of authors before we talk about translators and their task.

Most authors understand that translation is an artistic endeavour and they tend to have clear parameters on what translators can and cannot do with their creations. Tolkien, Oxford Don, author and a translator himself, constantly wrote to the publisher of his novels to guide translators on their task:

That this is an ‘imaginary’ world does not give him any right to remodel it according to his fancy, even if he could in a few months create a new coherent structure which it took me years to work out. [...]. I will not have any more *Hompen* (in which I was not consulted), nor any *Hobbel* or what not. Elves, Dwarves, Trolls, yes: they are mere modern equivalents of the correct terms. But *hobbit* and *orc* are of that world, and they must stay, whether they sound Dutch or not. (Carpenter and Tolkien 1995, 250)

Apart from exerting his power as an author, he makes a valid point about the translation of neologisms that applies to names, branding and even copyright. Some linguistic items belong so deeply in the imagined-world or have already spread throughout fan bases that translation can be detrimental. This is the case of internationally known names such as Asterix, Superman, Don Quixote or Siddharta. Tolkien did however believe that creative translation is always possible, and it is down to the translator to turn it into a

success. In another letter, he wrote about his own translation into modern

English of the 14th C. poem *Perle*:

I never agreed to the view of scholars that the metrical form was almost impossibly difficult to write in, and quite impossible to render in modern English. NO scholars (or, nowadays, poets) have any experience in composing themselves in exacting meters. I made up a few stanzas in the meter to show that composition in it was not at any rate 'impossible' (though the result might today be thought bad). (Carpenter and Tolkien 1995, 317)

Bilingual writer-translators have no doubts regarding the translatability of their creative texts: "I believe that the translation of my own work fully captures and recreates its original vitality and artistry", wrote Chinese-Australian poet Yu (2012, 3). The fact that authors can make such statement implies that the translatability of creative texts is achievable and that it can match vigour and skilfulness. Yet having two originals can produce theoretical and ontological oxymora, as well as some legal issues unless the concept of original can be made more pliable and in line with our complex reality. According to Sherman and Bently (1999, 12), the modern concept of copyright law in Great Britain came about after the popularisation of printing press technology and with the introduction of the Statute of Anne in 1710. The notion of original is not only an economic and a legal issue, it also has a theoretical dimension that Translation Studies and Comparative Literature Studies still struggle with (Walsh Hokenson and Munson 2014). Interestingly, there is a long list of authors like Yu who have self-translated such as: Samuel Beckett, Rabindranath Tagore, Vladimir Nabokov, Rosario

Ferré and John Donne. When asking about creativity in translation, what they did may be of great value to guide today's professional practice. For example, for *Happy days* (Beckett 1961), the playwright created a character called Winnie who employs many cultural clichés. For his self-translation into French, which Beckett entitled *Oh les beaux jours* (Beckett 1962), he aimed at both functional and stylistic correspondence: where in English Winnie uses Shakespeare, Milton, Herrick, Gray, and the King James' Bible, in French he refers to Racine, Hugo, Verlaine, and the French Bible. In his creative judgement, the assumptions about Winnie brought to bear by the content of those words are more important than said words for the success of the play with the new audience.

Since no author can be knowledgeable about all other languages and cultures, their role expands into becoming leaders of the global project, and so they must enlighten translators to facilitate the rendition of the nuances. This is why Günter Grass, German Nobel Prize winner in literature in 1999, used to meet with his translators (Briegleb 2013). Professor K. Winston, in charge of the English version said:

It's a pretty special thing when translators can sit down with the author for several days and hear from him directly what they should pay attention to, what was in his mind when he wrote certain passages, and what historical, political, literary, or other background they may need in order to get the translation right. (Drake 2013)

When the translation of creative products is not understood, and the right talent is not recruited in each country, errors are likely to occur. A good

example was the bringing of Asterix, the comic book, to the UK. *Astérix le Gaulois* (Uderzo and Goscinny 1961) was published in France as an album after its success in the comic publication *Pilote*. The English branch of *Valiant* decided to exploit such success in the UK in 1963, but they made some ‘amendments’ because they were concerned that English readers might not understand the French humour. For example, Asterix became “Little Fred, the Ancient Brit with Bags of Grit” and Obelix was renamed as “Big Ed” (Gravett 2012). As well as changing most other names, the album was shortened and dully rewritten in Standard English. It failed. In 1965, *Ranger*, another comic book publisher, tried retelling the seventh Asterix album “*Le Combat des chefs*” (Uderzo and Goscinny 1966) as a British story. In this occasion, the title read “Britons Never, Never, Never Shall Be Slaves!” echoing the British patriotic song “Rule Britannia” by Thomson and Arne (1740). The protagonists became “Beric”, the hero of G. A. Henty’s novel *Beric the Briton* (1893) and “Doric”, son of Boadicea (the Celtic Queen) (Gravett 2012). Despite the nationalistic twists, English readers did not engage with it. By 1969, Asterix was a success in several European countries and it was then that Brockhampton Press with translators D. Hockridge and A. Bell made a success of *Asterix the Gaul*. Nowadays, the thirty-six Asterix albums have been translated into one hundred and eleven languages; there are nine cartoons, four live action films, one theme park and one hundred licenses (asterix.com 2016). The global success of such idiosyncratic comic bursting with humour, cultural and historical references

(Zanettin 2008) can be explained through co-creation, where authors and translators collaborate in order to synch their vision of the universe created. Translator Anthea Bell said in an interview that she would often visit Goscinny “in Paris to discuss what to do” (Rowland 2010). This collaboration to achieve quality translations is evidenced in all albums judging by the continuous global success. In the eighth album, *Astérix chez les Bretons* (Uderzo and Goscinny 1966), for example, Obelix is inebriated and happily signing from the top of a cart full of wine barrels. The following three translations match the folkloric origin of the French tune: (Important note: all examples are reproduced verbatim)

French: ILS ONT DES TONNEAUX RONDS, VIVE LA BRETAGNE...

ILS ONT DES TONNEAUX RONDS, VIVENT LES BRETONS !

German: Trink, trink, Asterix trink... Laß doch die Sorgen zu Haus...
Trink, trink, Asterix trink, das ist der beeste Schmaus!

English: HA HA HA HEE HEE HEE LITTLE BROWN CASHK DON'T I
LOVE THEE

Spanish: ¡EL VINO QUE TIENE BRETAÑA NO ES BLANCO... NI ES
TINTO NI TIENE COLOOOORRR!

In a way, it is the creation itself that determines what is possible in the intersection of the original work and the new culture-linguistic target. Once the source material and its characters are fully understood, they come alive in the mind of translators as they did in the mind of the authors, and so receivers can similarly enjoy the creation. In the words of French Nobel Prize winner in literature of 1947, André Gide:

Le mauvais romancier construit ses personnages ; il les dirige et les fait parler. Le vrai romancier les écoute et les regarde agir ; il les

entend parler dès avant que de les connaître, et c'est d'après ce qu'il leur entend dire qu'il comprend peu à peu qui ils sont. [...] J'ai écrit le premier dialogue entre Olivier et Bernard et les scènes entre Passavant et Vincent, sans du tout savoir ce que je ferais de ces personnages, ni qui ils étaient. Ils se sont imposés à moi, quoi que j'en aie. (Gide 1926, 552)

[The bad novelist builds his characters; he directs them and makes them speak. The true novelist listens to them and watches them act; He hears them speaking before he knows them, and it is according to what he hears from them that he understands little by little who they are. [...] I wrote the first dialogue between Olivier and Bernard and the scenes between Passavant and Vincent, without knowing what I would do with these characters, or who they were. Whatever I have, they have imposed it on me. (My back-translation)]

Audiovisual entertainment adds sound and moving images which constraints translation further but does not change the core strategy of co-creation. For North American film companies, the appeal of international markets started as early as the 1920s. With the advent of 'the talkies', the cinema industry tried shooting several language versions at the same time. Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy released many films performing their lines in several languages and filmed new shots when written language appeared onscreen, such as in *The Laurel-Hardy Murder Case* (1930). The heavy American accent of their performances in Spanish and German, for example, added to the humorous effect, but the technique was not applicable to most other genres. It increased production time and costs, so the model was not kept for long. Foreign studios started to offer lip-synchronised translations and the dubbing industry was born (Chaume 2012).

While dubbing changed the dialogue, images, music and sound effects often remained unchanged. In order to engage further with viewers globally, the cinema industry is now modifying films visually with the help of CGI technology. For example, in *Up* (2009) some of the text-containing images of Ellie’s adventure book were digitally re-rendered for French and German. In *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014), the protagonist’s to-do list was modified for many territories to include some culturally relevant details. Here is six parallel examples for comparison:

US	UK & Ireland	Australia
I Love Lucy (Television)	TV Show - Sherlock	AC/DC
Moon Landing	Moon Landing	Space Travel
Berlin Wall (Up + Down)	The Beatles	Steve Irwin
Steve Jobs (Apple)	World Cup Final (1966)	Skippy the Bush Kangaroo
Disco	Sean Connery	Tim Tams
Thai Food	Thai Food	Thai Food
Star Wars/Trek	Star Wars/Trek	Star Wars/Trek
Nirvana (Band)	Nirvana (Band)	Nirvana (Band)
Rocky (Rocky II?)	Rocky (Rocky II?)	Rocky (Rocky II?)
Troubleman (Soundtrack)	Troubleman (Soundtrack)	Troubleman (Soundtrack)
Germany	Spain	Latin America
Currywurst	Rafa Nadal	Chilean Miners' Rescue
Moon Landing	Chupa Chups	Maradona's Hand of God
Berlin Wall up + down	Héroes del Silencio	Shakira
Oktoberfest	1978 Constitution	Neri Vela (1st Mexican Astronaut)
Disco	Camilo José Cela	Octavio Paz (Nobel Winner)
Thai Food	Thai Food	Thai Food
Star Wars/Trek	Star Wars/Trek	Star Wars/Trek
Nirvana (Band)	Nirvana (Band)	Nirvana (Band)
Rocky (Rocky II?)	Rocky (Rocky II?)	Rocky (Rocky II?)
Troubleman (Soundtrack)	Troubleman (Soundtrack)	Troubleman

		(Soundtrack)
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The table above is perhaps the clearest illustration of how, for the entertainment industries, creativity is directly linked to selling and all strategies are employed to woo clients. The cartoonists who created Captain America in the forties, Simon and Kirby, never did such things themselves for they were focused on the US market alone. The internationalisation of entertainment media prior to distribution is a recent development enabled by new technologies and the maturity of many international markets. Glocalisation in the game industry is the business strategy which integrates the local within the global in all aspects of design and usability. It incorporates the creative input of partners from each locale while maintaining a cohesive IP (Intellectual Property) and brand across territories. Companies such as Walt Disney Pictures illustrate how to maintain the integrity and semiotic unicity of IPs across culturo-linguistic boundaries. They articulate the translation and localisation of their products around the original creative team through co-creation and recognise that the text is not the only element which needs to be artistically re-rendered. Examples of this are musical films such as *The Lion King* (1994) and *Frozen* (2013), both of which released their soundtracks in many languages and are commercially profitable as music. The team at Disney's Character Voices International follows a set of principles formulated by J. Cutting with their first full length animated film *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937). The

core strategy was verbalised by R. Dempsey, managers of the *Mulan* (1998)

international team:

We are fortunate enough to have some of the finest translators and lyricists around the world who take the English version of our films and adapt it to their local cultures. They understand the local sensitivities as well as the comedy of the region, so that they can really take the script and take it to that culture so that they can relate to it the way we relate to it in the United States. (Dempsey et al. 1998)

The emphasis is to guarantee the consistency not only of what is being said or sung but also of the characters' voices and their full range of expressions. In order to accomplish that, each of their worldwide offices casts their local characters and then sends the auditions to Burbank, Los Angeles. "By having that one central hub, we are able to make sure that every character around the world has a consistent voice." (ibid.)

It is worth remembering that the co-creation process is constantly utilised in all original productions, where experienced artists are recruited to flesh out a vision. For instance, Phil Collins declared when interviewed about his involvement in Disney's animated picture *Tarzan* (1999) that they would just tell him that they needed songs about the conflicting feelings of the protagonist. So he would work on his ideas and write songs such as "Two worlds, one family" and "Son of man" (Collins et al. 1999). Subsequently, composer Mark Mancina orchestrated the songs adding variations to blend it with the different sequences in the film where it would be used. Finally, Collins declared that it was fantastic to work "with a team

of very bright people” (ibid.) and admits that he learnt a great deal with this project, also because he sang his songs in several languages. Here are the first three verses of “Son of man” as sang by Collins for the movie:

English: Oh, the power to be strong / and the wisdom to be wise / all these things will come to you in time.

French: Tout le pouvoir d'être fort / Et la sagesse d'être sage / Un jour tu auras tout ça en toi.

German: Oh, das Wissen macht dich stark / gibt dir Kraft, du selbst zu sein / alles andere lernst du mit der Zeit.

Spanish: En la fuerza está el poder / en el sabio está el saber / con el tiempo todo llegará.

Some may pick on how the word choices are more or less literal between versions but Disney's strategy focuses on the product as a whole where words, voices, music, animations, performance, etc. play complementary parts. The translation of songs in musical films needs 'singability' (Franzon, 2008) but such translations are only a part of a polysemiotic entertainment product that requires the harmonious combination of many talented individuals in different artistic domains. The statements by Dempsey, Miller, Collins, and Mancina as well as Tolkien, Beckett, Yu, Gide and Bell illustrate that there is always co-creation to realise original versions as well as to craft translated ones. In global corporations, all versions are nowadays centrally-managed to maintain the consistency of the work of art. Their statements also show that the creative products are constantly being translated with success despite the added constraints of polysemiotic creations. Many of the challenges are the same in the localisation of video

games but some develop deeper complexities as the following section will explain.

3. Playability in video game localisation

In many cases, the creativity employed in the localisation of video games seem to display little difference with that utilised in literature, comics or films for they all rely mostly on language. As can be seen in the following example from *The Witcher III: Wild Hunt* (2015) with neologisms and archaisms:

English:

Vesemir- [...] At the very least, you want to be able to tell a ghoul from an alghoul!

Ciri- By markings, like unto the panthera tigris that in Zerrikania dwells and by the sickly paleness of its visage.

German:

Vesemir- [...] Du solltest zumindest wissen, wodurch Ghule sich von Alghulen unterscheiden ...

Ciri- [...] durch Zeichnungen ähnlich des in Serrikanien heimischen Panthera tigris sowie durch die kranke Blässe des Gesichts.

Spanish:

Vesemir- [...] Como mínimo deberías poder distinguir un ghul de un alghul.

Ciri- Por sus rayas, como las del panthera tigris que vive en Zerrikania, y por la enfermiza palidez de su rostro.

There is, however, a significant difference. The information is there to amuse players but it is also necessary to educate them on what to do in the

game, hence ‘playability’ (Bernal-Merino 2016b) becomes an essential concept to measure the quality of the localisation. The conversation between the game-machine and players should not break down. In other entertainment media, inaccuracies can be perhaps overlooked in order to continue enjoying the product. In MIES, the same inaccuracies may lead to a bad playing experience due to the pragmatic implications (ibid.) as this section will explain. But first, it is important to illustrate that video games, as cultural products, display multimodal translation challenges just as complex as those seen in the previous section.

Cultural references and intertextuality are as present in video games as in other entertainment media. For example, the “Master of Evolution” card in *Hearthstone* (2014-present), an online collectible card video game, has the following clue-joke for players: “Will be really useful in the new ‘Hearthémon’ game”. Using such card transforms a friendly minion into a stronger one, referring to the internationally popular *Pokémon* games by Nintendo (1996-present). The blended word ‘Hearthémon’ is a neologism that was maintained in all localised versions because both *Hearthstone* and *Pokémon* are well-known trademarks to players around the world.

Character idiosyncrasies and accents are common in video games as well. In *Overwatch* (2016), a multiplayer first-person shooter, characters are a motley crew of creatures designed to have international appeal but with some country-specific features. The female character Mercy, for example, is

meant to be from a futuristic Zürich. In the German version, the localisation team decided to add a Swiss accent as well as current Zürich expressions expanding on the nuances that could be expressed in the English version. This is a good example of shared-authorship, integrating nuances relevant for each locale and extending the reach of the concept beyond the natural boundaries of its initial creative team.

Songs are also common in games as background music (*Gran Turismo* series, 1997-2013), as karaoke scripts (*SingStar* Series, 2004-present), as rhythm to dancing routines (*Dance Central* Series, 2010-2014), as comic relief (*The Bard's Tale*, 2004) or as a lyrical contribution to the main story (*The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, 2015). International hits from the music industry rarely need translation for there is value added by the established popularity of singers. The original songs found in video games face the same translational complexities as those in novels (*The Hobbit*, 1937), comics (*Astérix chez les Bretons*, 1966), operas (*The Magic Flute*, 2010), musicals (*Das Phantom der Oper*, 1988), cartoons (*The Princess and the Frog*, 2009) or films (*My Fair Lady* 1964). As an example, below is Priscilla's "Wolven Storm" from *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015), a poetic composition, lip-synched also in the localised versions that ties the backstory of the lady-singer to Geralt of Rivia, the character controlled by the player.

Polish: Na szlak moich blizn poprowadź palec./ By nasze drogi spleść gwiazdom na przekór. / Otwórz te rany, a potem zalecz, / Aż w zawily losu ułożą się wzór.

English: These scars long have yearned for your tender caress / To bind our fortunes, damn what the stars own / Rend my heart open, then your love profess / A winding, weaving fate to which we both atone.

French: Le long de mes plaies, fais glisser tes mains. / Pour défier les étoiles et mêler nos voies. / Rouvre ces blessures, et regarde-moi : / Mon corps meurtri est le canevas du destin.

German: Am Pfad meiner Narben ruht deine Hand. / Den Sternen zuwider, in Ewigkeit verbunden / Öffne die Wunde, und heil' sie wieder. / Bis sich unser's Schicksals wirres Muster bildet.

Whereas the meter and rhyme has not been equally reproduced, the way the performance delivers the tune is engaging and congenial to the game story in these versions.

Censorship can also be part of localisation in both E-rated and mature games for different reasons. In *Animal Crossing* (2015), a game rated for all children, “Gracie” (a fashionista Giraffe) and “Saharah” (a carpet-selling camel) were changed from ‘effeminate males’ in the Japanese version to female characters in the US and EU versions. Similarly, in *Wolfenstein: The New Order* (2014), a first-person shooter for adults, all Nazi reference were replaced by an imaginary ‘regime’ so symbols where changed and text was rewritten for the German version due to the law of the land:

US English: The Nazis are shooting down our planes.

German: Die Regime-Truppen schießen unsere Flugzeuge ab.

The translation of neologisms, wordplay, humour, lyricism, intertextuality, cultural references, and historical events affect all entertainment media companies with global ambitions. There are only three characteristics that distinguish video games from other entertainment products: the sim-ship release model, the centralised modularity of MIES, and the imperative of playability. These will be explained in the following paragraphs.

The development costs of triple A video game titles are so high that being successful in many countries and beating copycats with rapid global releases are business priorities; video games are highly perishable entertainment products. This creates the sim-ship imperative which forces game companies to create workflows that allow for concurrent production and localisation. The second differentiator is the centralised modularity of MIES which enables small changes and parallel working, i. e., each programmatic routine can be altered without disturbing the others. This is essential to allow for country and user customisation. Finally, the third aspect that distinguishes game localisation from other translation practices is that game localisation requires a focus on playability due to the interactive nature of the game-machine (Bernal-Merino 2016b). Without the functional, pragmatic consideration, playing may stop due to misunderstandings. Poor localisation confuses players who cannot carry out actions that the game requires them to do. In this context, all versions are treated in the same way

during linguistic play-testing because each of them is the original for its target market.

The business imperative to surpass competitors and distribute globally pushes companies to also do varieties of the same language, such as European and Latin American Spanish (*Diablo III*, 2012-present) or US and UK English (*Hearthstone*, 2014). *Scribblenauts* (2009-present), a word-writing puzzle game, was localised from US into UK English, so ‘eggplant’ became ‘aubergine’, ‘binky’ turned into ‘dummy’, ‘pants’ changed into ‘trousers’ and so on. This was seen as essential for young non-US players who were unable to complete the game before the release of the UK version. Linguistically speaking, this may seem similar to the changes made in the American edition of the *Harry Potter* books, but the pragmatic dimension is different. Without integrating ‘playability’ in the localisation workflow, the game causes players to fail which may mean that the product itself fails outside of its main market.

William Barnes, head of localisation services at Blizzard Entertainment, stated at the GDC Localization Summit that “English is not a special case! English is just another language!” (Barnes et al. 2013). He continued by saying that “[as] localisation professionals, we need to think beyond just translation, and start acting as the voice of global interests within our team” (ibid.). In order to achieve this, the workflow changed from mono- to bi-directional so that the communication between designers,

writers, programmers and localisation teams across countries is constant. Bashkim Leka, Head of Localisation at ArenaNet, shares this vision and strategy confirming that they “check centrally that, for the English original and the localisation languages, all steps are carried out in exactly the same way” (Leka et al. 2014). Playability is maintained because the entertainment value of games depends greatly on helping players to make the right decisions, regardless of the language they are using.

Another good example of this are riddles. Although riddles in video games may appear the same as those in books or films, the need to focus on playability changes the emphasis for they can stop the conversation between the game-machine and players. The puzzles in *Batman Arkham City* (2011) focus on language alone. After a question by the Riddler, there are several words split in two and radially arranged into two six-spoke wheels with segments of different words, for example:

English: Hit me hard and I will crack but you’ll never stop me from staring back. What am I? = MIR + ROR

Spanish: Golpéame fuerte y me quebraré, pero nunca harás que deje de mirarte. ¿Qué soy? = ESP + EJO

German: Wenn du mich schlägst, dann geh ich zu Bruch, doch anstarren kann ich dich trotzdem noch. Was bin ich? = SPIE + GEL

Players have to choose between the possible options (up to six), but Riddler’s enigmas are voluntary in this video game. We find more complex, polysemiotic examples in *Assassin’s Creed: Unity* (2014) with the enigmas of Nostradamus. In these riddles, players have to pick up the clues that will

take them to the right location within the three-dimensional virtual world in order to unlock each secret glyph.

Lowly sinners, as each we are, Aspire to the domed heav'ns. Fickle fate points beyond, Where a supine city Beckons.	Pobres pecadores, cada uno de nosotros que aspiramos a la bóveda celestial. Más allá, las volubles señales del destino, donde una ciudad indolente nos llama.
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In this case, the glyph is by the weather-vane on the top of a domed building somewhat far from the house where the riddle was discovered. Side-quests like these may not be essential to finish the main game but they help add points that grant access to more features and adventures. It is understandably frustrating for players not to be able to complete such quests because of a localisation that did not integrate playability.

Other riddles do stop the game until solved and require accurate agreement amongst linguistic, graphic and acoustic assets, which places a higher demand on localisation due to the imperative of playability. A classic example of the need for playability in localisation can be found in *Monkey Island 2: LeChuck's Revenge* (1991). The player has to guess that in order to enter the house of Rum Rogers, he must hypnotise a piano-playing monkey by putting a banana in its metronome. Then use the animal as a 'monkey wrench' (US English for 'spanner'), which enables him to close the pipe that feeds the waterfall covering the underground passage to the house. The association of ideas failed to work for many players in the UK. A more

recent example can be found in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015), reproduced below in two versions, as part of the quest named “Magic Lamp. Wandering in the Dark”. In this case, players need to interact with four separate statues in the right sequence in order to open a hidden passageway. Players can identify the sculptures by paying close attention to their appearance and the propositional logic of the following poetic riddle:

English:

Four guardians, four flames, standing proud in line.
The first to light his fire dared not march on the end.
The second, beside the First, played a woeful lament.
The Third kept close to his faithful beast.
The Fourth marched not beside the First,
yet like the second, played a tune.
And thus they stood o’er their queen,
who slept beneath the flickering stars.

Spanish:

Cuatro guardianes, cuatro llamas, formando orgullosos en fila.
El primero que prendió su llama no se atrevió a caminar último.
El segundo, al lado el primero, tocaba un triste lamento.
El tercero se mantenía cerca de su fiel bestia.
El cuarto no marchaba junto al primero,
pero al igual que el segundo, tocaba una canción.
Y así se erguían sobre su reina,
que dormía bajo las titilantes estrellas.

Another type of content requires creation from scratch. Crosignani and Ravetto (2011) explain how their localisation company co-created the various versions of the popular quiz show game *Buzz!* (2005-2010). They had to invent related but culturally relevant questions for each of the locales following the spirit of the English original. Below are the four locale-specific versions of a question about popular TV culture:

English	Shep, Petra and Goldie were dogs that featured in which TV show?	Blue Peter, Top Gear, The Young Ones, Emmerdale
Italian	In quale programma televisivo sono apparsi i cani Joe e Cocker?	Striscia la notizia, Affari tuoi, Uno Mattina, Quelli che il calcio
Finnish	Mikä TV-sarja on Ransukoiran koti?	Pikku Kakkonen, Pyjambanaanit, Simpsonit, Emmerdale
Spanish	¿Cómo se llama el gato de Lisa Simpson?	Bola de nieve, Ayudante de Santa Claus, Brian, Garfield

Finally, publishers of triple A titles have developed grammar engines and adaptive translation tools to help them with the automatically-generated strings that make the dialogic interactivity of video games possible. Such software tools include rules to conjugate verbs, decline nouns, pronouns and adjectives, etc. Translators become programmers employing a metalanguage (Heimburg 2006) to complement -the information that may not be present in one grammar but is necessary in another language. Such metadata and linguistic variables allow the game engine to create correct phrasing ‘on-the-fly’ avoiding retranslation which saves time and money in localisation projects. For example, there are glossaries with detailed metadata such as “Kriegerinnen = {nf}{apl}” which stand for ‘noun-feminine’ and ‘accusative-plural’ in German. These variables are used in combination with macros by translators to handle the many adaptable strings that appear in-game, for example when NPCs (non-playing characters) talk about players and their teams. Since players choices are unknown the ([*target*]) will adapt to each of their choices. Here is a short example in five languages:

English	French	German	Spanish
Surko has captured #a([*target*]).	Surko a capturé #un([*target*]).	Surko hat #einen([*target*]) verhaftet.	Surko ha capturado #un([*target*]).

(“fighter”, for example, yields various options depending on the **gender** and **number** in each target language)

Surko has captured a fighter.	Surko a capturé un lutteur.	Surko hat einen Krieger verhaftet.	Surko ha capturado un luchador.
Surko has captured some fighters.	Surko a capturé une lutteuse.	Surko hat eine Kriegerin verhaftet.	Surko ha capturado una luchadora.
	Surko a capturé des lutteurs.	Surko hat einige Krieger verhaftet.	Surko ha capturado unos luchadores.
	Surko a capturé des lutteuses.	Surko hat einige Kriegerinnen verhaftet.	Surko ha capturado unas luchadoras.

In conclusion, given the aforementioned examples, the main difference in creative game localisation is the one that can interrupt play; therefore playability needs to be factored in to guarantee that players can enjoy the game without throwing a ‘monkey wrench’ in the works.

Conclusion

This article combines translation examples from various multimedia entertainment industries in order to identify similarities and differences between them and video game localisation. The concept of co-creation,

commonly used by entertainment industries, is utilised to draw parallels with the contribution of translators to the success of such products abroad. The self-translating authors and the global success of the creations reviewed in this article evidence that localising highly creative products is not only possible but a regular affair in the entertainment industries. Polysemiotic consistency contributes to the precision of localisation and allows for compensation mechanisms because the information available on each semiotic layer can be brought to bear differently while adequately to the content of the game. Video games uniquely add the pragmatic effects of interactivity to the polysemioticity found in entertainment media. The playability of games should not change from one language version to another, i. e., the conversation between the game-machine and players should not break down because of poor localisation. Video game creators and localisers co-create enjoyable versions in order to achieve semiotic unicity and equivalent playability.

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