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THE JOURNAL OF INTERCULTURAL
MEDIATION AND COMMUNICATION

Narrativity in Translation

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Louder than Words:
Videogame Localisation as Narrative (Re)telling

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Abstract

In recent years, the videogame industry has become increasingly lucrative, overtaking many traditional entertainment market sectors such as film and music in value (BBC 2019), and has continued to grow thanks to an ever-expanding international gaming community. The need of many videogame companies to attract more international players has subsequently stimulated the development of videogame localisation (Lires 2019). Although the increasing availability of localised games has attracted more global audiences, there have been growing concerns about the quality of videogame localisation (Chandler 2012). Many researchers have identified the preservation of players' gameplay experience as an important criterion for videogame localisation quality (O'Hagan 2007; Bernal-Merino 2018; Mangiron & O'Hagan 2006; Mangiron 2018); however, what gameplay experience actually entails remains unsolved (Mangiron 2018). Despite the once-heated debate between ludology and narratology (Murray 2005; Clearwater 2011; Mateas & Stern 2005; Aarseth 2004; Jenkins 2004), narrative has gradually emerged as a vital element of successful game design. This article argues that because narrative can be perceived in most games, it should be given greater consideration in videogame localisation. Drawing on case studies and a series of interviews carried out with different stakeholders related to the videogame industry (including videogame players, videogame developers, narrative designers, and videogame localisers), this article explores the unique relationship between narrative and videogames, and the influence such a relationship has on localisation approaches. Through insights derived from videogame industry professionals, this article ultimately provides a distinct approach to narrative in translation that highlights the translator's role in creating and (re)narrating texts in cyber-storytelling.

Keywords
Videogames, videogame localisation, player experience, localisation quality, narrative

1. Introduction

In 1962, *Spacewar!* was developed and soon became the first videogame played at multiple computer installations. Almost sixty years later, the videogame industry has become more lucrative than video and music industries combined, generating a total revenue of $180.3 (USD) billion in 2021 (Newzoo, 2021; BBC, 2019). Behind the jaw-dropping profits are more than three billion players, an ever-growing international community (Newzoo, 2021). For many videogame

companies, attracting global players is key to their business model, and many have realised the necessity to provide different language versions for local markets. Videogame localisation thus lies at the heart of the market. With statistics showing that roughly 50% of the industry's revenue has come from localised versions (Lires, 2019), videogame localisation has gradually evolved into a practice of increasing importance.

This tremendous growth aside, quality issues seem to haunt videogame localisation. Scholars have noted that some players would prefer the original game despite the availability of a localised version, criticising the latter as an "afterthought" due to the prevalence of translation mistakes (Chandler & Deming, 2012: 3). An article[1] written by an experienced Chinese localiser underlined the continued relevance of debates around quality in today's localisation practices. Games such as *Bloodstained: Ritual of the Night* (ArtPlay, 2019) have been discussed, with emphasis on their worrying localisation quality in contrast to their immense popularity[2]. In a similar vein, the official Simplified Chinese version, finally available in *The Elder Scrolls Online* (Bethesda, 2014) at the end of 2022 caused a massive backlash against the game developer. While many new Chinese players were still eager to take this new opportunity and jump into the game, the majority of the Chinese players were unhappy about the game's localisation quality, as exemplified by a player's comment quoted below:

> **使用官中反而不利于理解文字内容，真是太神奇了。**
>
> (It's actually harder to understand the contents of texts after using the official Chinese version. How amazing.)[3]

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[1] See "**游戏本地化，到底为什么做不好？**" ("Why does game localisation always fail to achieve satisfying results?"). Available at: https://www.gcores.com/articles/113692 [Accessed: 28 August 2019]

[2] Although it is hard to provide a specific sale number of the game in Chinese market, the developer of *Bloodstained: Ritual of the Night* has confirmed that the game has sold more than 1 million copies globally across all major gaming platforms (Available at: https://playbloodstained.com/one-million-milestone-and-development-roadmap/ [Accessed: 7 November 2022]). The developer also confirmed that the Nintendo Switch version of the game contributed the most to the total sale number, with North America accounting for more than 50% of the sales, followed by Japan then China (Available at: https://nintendoeverything.com/bloodstained-ritual-of-the-night-creator-says-sales-on-switch-were-well-above-expectations/ [Accessed: 7 November 2022]).

[3] Comment taken from Steam. Available at: https://steamcommunity.com/profiles/76561198069903170/recommended/306130/ [Accessed: 13 December 2022].

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This resulted in an increase of negative reviews from Chinese players on the major online game distribution platform, Steam, forcing the game developer to issue an apology to Chinese players[4].

The lingering concern over quality prompts a re-thinking of videogame localisation approaches. As a videogame enthusiast, I have always noticed the presence of narratives in videogames and their influence on gameplay experience; however, I am also aware that this presence and influence are not yet fully reflected in videogame localisation research. This article thus sets out to explore the potential benefits of considering narrative in localisation practice, arguing that videogame localisation can achieve better quality when regarded as (re)telling of videogame stories. My journey will start with reviewing the notion of narrativity, before analysing videogames as a storytelling medium. Challenges in current videogame localisation research will then be addressed, followed by principles to consider when (re)telling game stories in localisation practice. To aid my quest, I will provide case studies of several localised games, focusing both on well-accepted examples, as well as widely-debated ones.

My exploratory journey will further be powered by interview data collected for this project. The thriving videogame industry is a subject of constant change, which urges researchers to continually update their knowledge of the field. Interviews have proven to be particularly effective for this project, especially with its advantage of providing me a privileged access to a person's thoughts and opinions about a particular subject, as argued by Saldanha & O' Brien (2014: 169). The interviews conducted for this project have been designed as semi-structured ones. Some general questions on the interviewees' understanding of game narratives are proposed first to set the parameters. Specific questions then follow to learn more about the interviewees' practical experience with their particular roles in the game development cycle. Such a design gives me a certain degree of control to ensure the relevance of the data collected to the main topic of this project, while allowing new inputs from practitioners to remind me of aspects that may be previously neglected. Limited in time and budget, this project has opted for Internet interviews in order to reach a wider population. Interviewees can choose to have the interviews through online video calls or via email. If choosing the latter, interviewees are further encouraged to complete the interview asynchronously, by writing down answers to a list of questions provided beforehand. Through such

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[4] More detailed reports of the localisation problem of *The Elder Scrolls Online* as well as the reaction from Bethesda can be found in: "老滚OL中文版的'动感婆婆',到底是不是机翻?" ("The 'Lively Grandma' in *ESOL* Chinese Version, Is That aA Machine Translation or Not?") Available at: https://www.yystv.cn/p/10090 [Accessed: 15 November 2022]; and "贝塞斯达回应《上古卷轴 OL》中文翻译问题，称会尽快解决" ("Bethesda Responds to Chinese Translation Issue in *The Elder Scrolls Online*, Promising a Speedy Resolution") Available at: https://www.gcores.com/articles/158449 [Accessed: 15 November 2022].

an approach, the interviewees are allowed more flexibility to consider their answers thoroughly and at their own pace, which further increases the quality of data collected and the response rate. As for the interviewee cohort, this project has reached out so far to a group of thirteen, mainly videogame players, developers, narrative designers and videogame localisers. The aim is to understand in more depth about gameplay experience, game design principles, game localisation strategies, as well as the role narrative may play in all these aspects. Narrative designers are of particular interest to this project. Although their titles and responsibilities may vary in different companies or for different projects, narrative designers are generally understood as those who work with other departments in game design to organise and integrate the story into the game according to the rules, or rather, game mechanics, designs and any other assets, such as the characters, objects, sound effects, maps and, environments (Heussner *et al.*, 2015: 2). The insights provided by narrative designers thus promise to be enlightening, especially considering their intimate relationship with and constant focus on videogame storytelling. As this project is still ongoing, more interviews are expected to be conducted; up to now, this project has received answers from two videogame players (hereafter referred to as VP(a) and VP(b), one videogame developer (VD(a)), six narrative designers (ND(a) to ND(f)) and four videogame localisers (VL(a) to VL(d)). Among the interview cohort, VP(a)—a university lecturer—and VP(b)—a fiction writer—are videogame enthusiasts who play videogames in spare time. VD(a) and ND(a) is one person with two hats, who works in a small indie game team[5]. As the team only has two people, VD(a)/ND(a) is in charge of both writing game stories, and designing game mechanics. ND(b), who is a fiction writer, focuses primarily on writing descriptive texts for in-game items; ND(c) is the creative director of an award-winning studio which works on artistic projects ranging from mixed-reality immersive entertainment, videogames to experiential design. ND(d) founded an indie game studio with a particular interest in narrative, whose project has received a double BAFTA nomination. ND(e) has contributed to the success of many 3A titles[6], who has also written several blogs on designing videogame narratives. ND(f) is the main story writer in a semi-professional studio with a limited budget of no more than 30,000 USD, which specialises in producing visual novels.

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[5] Indie game, short for "independent game", often refers to videogames developed by individuals or small development team, usually without the financiial and technical support of a large game publisher, in contrast to 3A games (see footnote 6).

[6] 3A titles: In the videogame industry, AAA (sometimes written as triple-A) titles often refer to games produced and distributed by a mid-sized or major publisher. These games typically have higher development and marketing budgets than other tiers of games. *Red Dead Redemption 2* (Rockstar Games 2018), for example, is reported to have a development and marketing budget between $370 million and $540 million.

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As for videogame localisers, VL(a) is in charge of localisation in an indie game studio that focuses mainly on narrative-driven games; VL(b) is a freelance localiser who has worked on various mobile and indie games; VL(c) is a member of a fan localisation group, who has worked on a series of visual novels; and VL(d) used to work in crowd-sourced localisation projects to translate some Japanese videogames into English. As stakeholders in the videogame industry, their professional perspectives are essential to guiding this research.

2. The Shape-shifting Sword: Narrativity as a Fuzzy Concept

Exploring videogame localisation as (re)telling of videogame stories brings with it the need for a careful consideration of the notion of "narrativity". However, narrativity as a scholarly concept is hard to define. As Abbott (2014: 588) rightly argues, narrativity is a term more closely attuned to the "fuzziness" of narrative itself; it "suggests connotatively a felt feeling", which "may not be entirely definable or may be subject to gradations". While such terminological instability may foreshadow some difficulties in applying narrativity in practical analyses, it also grants the term a certain degree of versatility. Three main definitions of narrativity have emerged as most relevant to this article's discussion of localisation as (re)telling. These are: narrativity as a built-in feature of narrative; narrativity as a conscious story-constructing effort, and narrativity as a narrative-producing ability.

At the risk of over-simplification, the first two definitions of narrativity can both be seen as derived from heavily text-based narrative genres such as novels. When understood as a built-in feature of narrative, narrativity may be defined as what makes a text feel/read like a narrative. Such a perspective often entails scholars equating narrativity with a set of defining conditions that will set narrative texts apart from non-narrative ones (Abbott, 2014: 593), or conditions that make some texts "more narrative than others…and 'tell a better story'" (Prince, 1982: 145). Prince has further identified that the differences in narrativity are essentially "related to the exploitation and underlining of features that are specific to or characteristic of narrative" (Prince, 1982: 146). In this sense, narrativity is fundamentally a product of the interaction(s) of various textual specifics, which is then "felt" by a reader situated outside. Such a "feeling" process resonates with a constructivist view of narrativity, which refers to "the process by which [a reader] actively constructs a story from the fictional data provided by any narrative medium" (Scholes, 1982: 60). Distinguishing narration from narrative and story, Scholes argues that each text type entails particular features in its presentation: a narration with "sufficient coherence" and ability to "detach from the flux of cultural exchange" becomes a narrative; and a narrative with "a degree of completeness" or "a special kind of pointedness or teleology" becomes a story (Scholes, 1982: 59 – 60). Where a text is located in this continuum between narration and story then largely depends on the interaction between certain

structural features in textual presentation and the reader's perception. Perceiving a story thus means the reader actively constructing said story under the guidance of its form, engaging with the story-telling or story-indicating clues in such form, be it expressive patterning or semantic contents.

These two definitions of narrativity provide a gateway to explore storytelling in videogames, albeit with certain limitations. As a built-in feature, narrativity is relevant to understanding the storytelling ability of videogames, especially why some games feel more like "stories" than others. As a conscious story-constructing effort, narrativity is invaluable in underscoring the active role of the reader, laying the foundation for understanding how players may perceive videogame narratives. The limitations of these definitions, perhaps, come when the intimacy betweenbewteen games and the player is in question. Text-based narrativity nevertheless situates a reader outside a text. The player's role is essentially "to discover" certain textual features, rather than "discovering", meaning that the reader's story-constructing activities may have limited influence on the actual narrative itself. In contrast, videogames require a player's presence and inputs. When videogames become the text in question, narratives no longer exist independently from players (readers), but can only come into being through players' interactions. In this sense, players can be regarded as co-creators in videogame storytelling, simultaneously constructing, acting out the game story, and essentially becoming part of it.

While the first two definitions shed some light on videogames as a storytelling medium, the third definition, derived from a sociological standpoint, speaks more directly to this article's focus on videogame localisation. Baker draws on social and communication theory and elaborates a definition of narrative to encapsulate the underlying principles by which we experience the world, and public or personal "stories" we subscribe to guide our behaviour (Baker, 2006: 9; 19). For Baker, it makes little sense to separate a "story" from the perspective from which it is told, as if the story were independent and "point-of-viewless"; instead, one should recognise the ever-present perspective behind every storytelling that ties the narrated tightly with the narration, making every story a narrative (Baker, 2006; 17). Narrative, in this sense, does not merely represent the reality objectively, but also constitutes it under the influence of personal perspectives (Baker, 2006; 17).

Narrativity then takes on a new role in Baker's discussion. Although she refrains from explaining the concept in concrete terms, Baker seems to suggest that narrativity can be understood as one's ability to (re)produce narratives, to (re)tell stories. In a translation context, Baker points out that translators/interpreters can be seen as playing an active role in promoting, elaborating, resisting or renewing certain narratives, which will in turn influence the target audience's perception of said narratives (Baker, 2006). While Baker's discussion concerns primarily translation/interpretation in a politicisedpoliticalised context, it indicates a possibility to move away from regarding videogame localisation simply as linguistic

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transfer, but as a (re)telling of videogame narrative, which can be a powerful tool to help localisers make appropriate translation decisions.

This section has provided a sketch of three main understandings of narrativity, i.e., narrativity as a built-in feature of narrative; narrativity as a conscious story-constructing effort, and narrativity as a narrative-producing ability. Following this terminological clarification, the next section is devoted to analysing videogames specifically as a storytelling medium, drawing on both narrativity and interview data collected for this project.

3. The Mystic Realm: Videogames as a Storytelling Medium

The notion of narrative used to be a thorn in the side of videogame research. A school of scholars who dedicate their works to ludology—the study of games—have held a quite strong position against studying videogames from a narratological perspective. Many ludologists claim that gameplay is paramount in the videogame medium and interactive gameplay should therefore be held to be more important than story (Clearwater, 2011: 29). In their purest forms, they argue, videogames should have nothing to do with narratives (Mateas & Stern, 2005). Narratives, with their predetermined and predestined nature, are fundamentally incompatible with videogames, and will only be disrupted by or diminish players' agency (Mateas & Stern, 2005). Even when facing games with more conscious attempts at storytelling, some ludologists still dismiss such efforts as "disguising" stories as games with poor results (Aarseth, 2004: 368). They believe that "stories are hostage to the game environment, even if they are perceived as the dominant factor", and that "the games can never achieve their ambitions of storytelling". Instead, videogames should "engage and motivate their users by other means than those that narrative use" (Aarseth, 2004: 368).

The fierce yet sterile "ludology vs. narratology" debate eventually exhausts parties inside and outside academia. A challenge to the ludologists' stance is the results of a survey by Lebowitz & Klug (2011: 272 - 273), which suggests that game stories are in fact a powerful force behind players' buying decision and a determining factor in their gameplay enjoyment. When interviewed for this project, two videogame players with years of gameplay experience have also underlined the importance of narrative to their gameplay experience:

> VP(a):
> Gameplay is always important, but it certainly varies by genre and the experience I am looking for…if I'm looking for a more immersive experience (rare nowadays), story is paramount—RDR2 [*Red Dead Redemptions 2*], *the Witcher* [series], for instance, drew me in with the setting, context, etc.

VP(b):

I generally value strong narrative cores in games, including interesting well-rounded characters and compelling worldbuilding.

Narrative is the most important thing to me, more so than the gameplay elements, which I do want to serve the plot sensibly at least.

As Murray (2005) has rightly argued, the conversation between ludology and narratology needs to be reframed. When Jenkins claims that "the experience of playing games can never be simply reduced to the experience of a story" (Jenkins, 2004), one can argue further that it should never be reduced to pure interactions with game mechanics either. One should realise that narrative and gameplay do not form an either/or question: while videogames are not subset of stories, objects exist that have qualities of both games and stories (Murray, 2005). The question regarding videogames as a storytelling medium should therefore not focus on its own legitimacy, but an awareness that videogames can tell stories, and they tell them in their own unique way.

Two aspects of the claim above demand further clarification: how videogames can become a medium to "host" stories, and what unique ways they are using in terms of storytelling. Marie-Laure Ryan's understanding of narrative texts as "storyworlds" sheds some light on the first question. Storyworlds are mental constructions of the text recipients projected by texts; storyworlds rely on narrative contents such as characters, objects, changes of states, and goals or causal relations to come into existence (Ryan, 2004: 8 – 9). Reading a text can thus be thought as "worldbuilding" or "worldexploring". Such a view is not hard to find in videogame play: in *BioShock* (Irrational Games, 2007), for example, players are, in a way, "teleported" to an underwater city, Rapture. Players' gameplay is then guided by and limited to the virtual space of Rapture. As Krzywinska (2002: 21) has argued, games are organised around the traversal of space, and in order to master a game, players need to actively investigate and navigate the game space. It may therefore be reasonable to assume that videogames make use of such virtual spaces to become a medium to "host" narratives. Drawing on theme park design strategies, Carson points out that one of the design secrets is to infuse story elements into the physical space a guest walks or rides through (Carson, 2000); similarly, Worch & Smith also suggest "staging player-space with environmental properties that can be interpreted as a meaningful whole, furthering the narrative of the game" (Worch & Smith, 2010). In this sense, a videogame tells a story by dispersing narrative clues across its virtual space, waiting to be picked up by players. In *BioShock*, once entering Rapture, players are immediately greeted by wrecked shops and city areas, blood stains and mutilated corpses, while listening to audio messages from or left behind by Rapture inhabitants. Immediately, a narrative has been set around the players, with clues infused into various aspects—visual, audio and motion. Note that these clues are not necessarily contributing to one linear story, but more to

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providing an all-encompassing notion, a "big picture" of "what is going on" in the game space (Carson, 2000). In the case of *BioShock*, for instance, it is the general theme of Rapture's downfall. Through the narrative clues such as ruins and corpses, players have a feeling that something must have gone wrong in the city.

Referring back to Prince's definition, these narrative clues give *BioShock* its narrativity, hinting at possible stories that may or may have happen(ed) in the game. *BioShock* makes considerable use of texts to convey its story with character dialogues and audio transcriptions, such as audio logs left behind by previous inhabitants, which players can pick up during their gameplay. Note, however, that texts, despite being the primary concern of localisation, should only be considered as one type of narrative clues in a videogame. Indeed, "a purely linguistic model may seriously impede descriptions of [media-like video games] that rely on a series of nonverbal skills" (Grodal, 2004: 133). The narrative of *BioShock* can hardly be established without atmospheric constructs such as visual images and music, and it is only when the multi-channel narrative clues work together that a videogame can tell a more immersive story.

Videogames, storytelling-wise, can thus be understood as worlds full of narrative clues, which resonates with Scholes's discussion of narrativity as fictional data being actively perceived by readers to construct a narrative. It is then worth discussing how a game narrative is told **to** an audience, as narrative clues still need to be picked up to become a story fully. Despite their polarised position, ludologists have pointed out the importance of gameplay, suggesting interactivity as an intrinsic factor that defines videogames. As Worch & Smith (2010) has claimed, "environmental storytelling relies on the player to associate disparate elements and interpret as a meaningful whole"; in other words, without players' active engagement with narrative clues, a game story will remain only as a possibility in a storyworld. Such reliance on players' interaction distinguishes videogames from "traditional" storytelling media such as novels. A novel's story will proceed even without readers applying cognitive skills (reading/thinking), but a videogame story will not develop without players' active participation (Grodal, 2004: 139). The relationship between narrative and its audience is thus more intimate in videogames—or, one can argue, that players possess a stronger narrativity in constructing videogame stories. While in Scholes's discussion, readers are still situated outside a text, perceiving or observing a self-complete narrative entity, players are invited and required to be inside the storyworld of a videogame.

The intimacy between players and a videogame foreshadows the ludologists' suspicions that narrative and videogame are incompatible as players' playing may disrupt the storyworld, thus hindering the conveyance of the game narrative. However, the players' intimacy entails a deeper connotation that may provide some answers. Narrative designer (e), who has worked for many 3A (triple-A) titles points out that

People play games for different reasons… Ultimately though, a players' desire is to see the game respond to their choices and playing styles.

Following this understanding of what players want during their gameplays, many designers strive to weave gameplay mechanics together with game narrative. ND(e) continues, explaining that

Writers and narrative designers work to incorporate this responsiveness into the game's storyline and world by providing a context for the rules game designers have established. In my current work, I provide context and backstory to the world and characters to game designers, which inform their design ideas and vice versa. This way, I ensure that most of what a player "does" in a game, the gameplay verbs (run, jump, shoot, explore) make sense in the story and world.

Such a design approach has resonated with many other narrative designers, working on games of varying scales and of different genres:

ND(a):
Something I feel it is [sic really important in the first place is sis to make the gameplay elements feel like a part of the story… In our own game, we were extremely careful to make sure that all the puzzles we introduced were consistent with the characters' motivations and objectives, even to the point of making sure that it felt like the **characters** themselves did not "know" they were solving a puzzle or what they had to do certain things in order to "progress" (emphasis by the interviewee).

ND(c):
Generally whenever a piece of narrative can have a level of interaction for players to experience it through, it is convey[ed] more successfully in games.

ND(d):
My personal focus over the last decade has been on unity of narrative and mechanics—not because that's better, although you'll find enthusiasts arguing it's the True Way, but because I find it personally, artistically interesting.

ND(f):
Decision making could be considered the sole gameplay mechanic in a visual novel, meaning that the player is forced to engage with it simply in order to keep playing. In the broader field of video games though, letting the player make decisions that impact the course of the narrative can sometimes be one of the biggest selling points of a game.

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It seems that these narrative designers tend to make use of narrative to make sense of game rules, to bind together other design elements (visual arts, soundtracks, items, environments, etc.), or to make gameplay elements feel like part of the game story. In *BioShock*, players control the protagonist, Jack, who can use guns as well as plasmids—a form of superhuman abilities. Shooting, whether it is bullets or magic-like projectiles, can thus be considered as the player's main interactive means in the game, which are justified by the game narrative. Jack is revealed to be the main character's illegitimate son, genetically modified into someone who is able to carry out assassination missions when needed. Plasmids are mutagenic serums developed and produced in Rapture. They are powered by ADAM, a substance players can collect from genetically modified children, Little Sisters. The fact that incredible technological advancement such as plasmids is achieved through horrendous experiments on people even children is further tied to the overall narrative setting of *BioShock*. The game takes place in an Objectivism[7]-governed Rapture, where progression is not hindered by—to use the in-game character, Andrew Ryan's words—"petty morality". Such a dystopian setting again justifies the player's freedom to shoot and kill and even harvest ADAM for their goals at the cost of the Little Sisters' lives. From this simple account of *BioShock*, one may see the difficulties in untangling gameplay mechanics (shooting) from the game's narrative setting (Objectivist Rapture). Players' actions in a game are not or should not be a superimposed element on top of a game narrative, but rather a constituting component of it. A player's gameplay is not simply "to discover" narrative clues, but to interact with them while being one of said clues him or herself, together completing the narrative of a game. In this sense, the player-narrative relationship is particularly intimate. Players are not only inside the story, but also part of it.

Videogames can thus be considered as a storytelling medium in the following ways: they generate storyworlds full of narrative clues for potential stories, and players are required to jump into such worlds and become part of them to construct game narratives. Note that contextualising gameplay with game narratives may not always result in a seamless combination. Some games, such as *BioShock*, are more likely to leave players the impression of "experiencing a story",

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[7] Objectivism: Objectivism is often seen as a philosophical system developed by Russian-American author Ayn Rand (1905 – 1982), most notably in her novels *The Fountainhead* (1943) and *Atlas Shrugged* (1957). The main doctrines of Objectivism include ethical egoism and individualism, believing that an action is morally right if it promotes the self-interest of the agent, and a political system is just if it properly respects the rights and interests of the individual. Objectivism is also in favour of laissez-faire capitalism.
BioShock is often regarded as deeply influenced by Rand's philosophical thoughts. The downfall of Rapture, a city founded mainly to allow people to chase their personal goals in any way and by any means possible, is often seen as a criticism of Objectivism. A more detailed discussion of the relationship between *BioShock* and Rand's works can be found here: https://www.gamedeveloper.com/disciplines/video-games-from-a-critical-distance---an-evaluation-of-bioshock-s-criticism-of-ayn-rand-s-philosophy-of-objectivism [Accessed: November 15, 2022].

while some others, notably puzzle games, sports games or music games (Lebowitz & Klug, 2011) may appear to be heavier in interactions with game mechanics. Prince, when defining narrativity, has argued that "a passage where signs of the narrated (referring to events) are more numerous than signs of the narrating (referring to the representation of events and its context) should have a higher degree of narrativity" (Prince, 1982: 146). If one designates narrative clues in a videogame as referring to game events (audio files logs revealing the nature of plasmids) and player interaction as narrating (players control Jack to fire plasmids), it may be fair to argue that in some games, more attention is directed to game mechanics with less reference to game narrative to make sense of such mechanics, resulting in a diminishing narrativity. It is important to bear the differences in narrativity in mind, as this can have an impact on the localisation process.

Despite the once awkward position in scholarly debate, narrative is no longer an outcast in videogame design, and videogames can be considered as a storytelling medium but with their own unique storytelling methods. Videogames evoke storyworlds infused with narrative clues, and players are required to traverse these worlds to construct narratives through interaction. Moreover, player interaction is not separate from the game narrative, but part of it. In a way, when it comes to videogame storytelling, players are simultaneously narrating and being narrated to. The uniqueness of videogames as a storytelling medium, makes them a key case study for videogame localisation practice, as the next section will discuss in detail.

4. The Multi-headed Dragon: Videogame Localisation as Narrative (Re)telling

The emphasis on player interactivity as a defining feature of videogames leads many scholars to argue that videogame localisation is expected to "convey a game play experience that is as close as possible to the equivalent of the original" (O'Hagan, 2007) and to "maintain the illusion that a product remains the same" (Bernal-Merino, 2018: 103). These scholars argue that, despite the inevitable linguistic change in the localisation process, the end result should have the "look and feel" of the original, and should "allow the players to experience the game as if it were originally developed in their own language", providing "enjoyment equivalent to that felt by the players of the original version" (Mangiron & O'Hagan, 2006: 14 – 15). However, there is scant research on player reception of videogame localisation to support this approach. As Mangiron (2018: 129) has argued, while the industry and scholars have regarded the preservation of interactive gameplay experience as the main tenets for videogame localisation practice, no studies have proven whether this is actually the case. Mangiron further points out that more effort needs to be put into investigating how players actually perceive a game (Mangiron, 2018: 129). There is, therefore, a risk that academia and the industry have reached a premature conclusion without actually consulting player needs.

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Although it is beyond this article's reach to fully investigate player gameplay experience, it may be able to shed some light on this matter by regarding videogames as a storytelling medium. As has been argued in the previous section, player interactions with games through game mechanics are contextualised or given a sense by game narratives, which become an integral component of the game. By interacting with games, players are simultaneously narrating, acting out game narratives through their actions. One may then reach a conclusion that gameplay experience can be considered—at least to a certain extent—as a narrative experience. Playing is, in a way, experiencing game stories, telling them through interaction.

The preservation of gameplay experience proposed by localisation scholars can then be examined under a new light. Some localisers interviewed for this project have highlighted their focus on (re)creating narrative experience for local players in their workflows:

> VL(a):
> The game's original story was written by our main game creator, then it was passed on to our script writer. The whole game script was written in English first then passed onto me. I translated English into Japanese and passed that to our localizer, a Japanese novelist. She rewrote and polished it and finished the whole Japanese script. There were no changes [in the localisation process] according to budget, time or technology, however, considering that our game focuses heavily on story, getting the English script's tone and characters right was essential. That was the reason why we hired a localizer after the translation finished, which, I think, is different from other company's processesprocess.
>
> …the preservation of story is of upmost importance for a narrative game. Each section of text must reflect the narrative intention of the original script.
>
> VL(b):
> I would say that I always strive to make the translated text sound as natural as possible, as if it had been originally written in French, while of course preserving the original essence and story of the game. I don't want the French players to be repelled by a translation that's too literal or doesn't convey the game's tone and message well enough.
>
> When the French player get to play the games I have translated, I want them to feel deeply immersed by the narrative and the words I have carefully chosen. The translation shouldn't feel flat or lifeless.
> I carefully preserve the game's story in all my translations, all the while making my text coherent for a French audience.

These accounts from localisation practitioners underlines again the strong bond between gameplay experience and narrative experience. More importantly, these

accounts portray localisers making a clear effort to find effective strategies, in order to (re)present the original game narratives to their local players. Videogame localisation, in this sense, can be understood as localisers making conscious use of narrativity to (re)tell videogame narratives.

When discussing narrativity as a narrative (re)producing force, Baker identifies various features of narrativity that may influence translators and /interpreters. Following a similar path and listing concrete features for localisers to manipulate may, however, seem simplistic, as the complexity of storyworlds and the novelty of videogames as a storytelling medium indicates that there is still much to explore. With the hope to attract more scholarly input in the future, this article proposes two initial principles to consider when regarding videogame localisation as (re)telling of videogame narratives: coherence and clarity.

As discussed in the previous section, narrative clues in videogames are not limited to texts, but can also be found in various in-game aspects, from the artwork, sound effects, to character and environment design. Conversely, one can understand texts as contributing to a game's narrative through their interrelationships with other narrative clues. Although localisers are mostly concerned with translating texts, it is important for them to grasp or retain such interrelationships so that narrative clues can still come together to form a coherent narrative in the localised versions. Coherence can be at play in light of various factors, both within (interior) and outside (exterior) the game's storyworld. Interior factors primarily concern what players will be interacting within a storyworld. This may include inhabitants of a storyworld, textual materials (written or spoken), and items that players can make use of. Items can be tangible, such as an in-game first-aid kit, or intangible, such as magic or skills, especially those that are specific and fundamental to the establishment of that particular storyworld. Interior factors can be considered as the fabric of a storyworld. They constitute the structure of the storyworld, and are, in turn, given a specific narrative sense by the storyworld. The nature of a storyworld when localised into another language then depends on how these factors are (re)presented through localisation. If the (re)presentation of these factors are coherent with that in the original storyworld, the narrative experience is more likely to be preserved for local players.

Exterior factors, on the other hand, can be understood as inspirations drawn from real life to build a game's storyworld, or "assemblages" a game plugs into (see: Mukherjee, 2015). Exterior factors can be hard to quantify given the breadth they can cover. For *BioShock*, for instance, this could be its setting in 1940s America (historical; geographical), its governing Objectivism (philosophical), its general dystopian setting (literary), even its cold, mechanical Art Deco visual style (art). Assemblages will not always have an impact—at least, not always explicitly—on localisation, but localisation is nevertheless constrained by the parameters set by the various assemblages a game plugs into. It is thus important for localisers to regard these external factors as constant references.

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A careful consideration of coherence, both of interior and exterior factors, can often improve localisation quality, while neglecting the coherence can confuse players, and even invite criticism. *Persona 3* (Atlus, 2006), a fantasy game featuring highschoolers battling menacing monsters, has seen the localisers carefully considering strategies to (re)present the original storyworld coherently. An in-game character, Mitsuru Kirijo, is a well-educated third-year student, who is also the heir to her family business: a multinational business company. To emphasise her background as well as her social status, the original Japanese designers gave her a code-switching characteristic—she sometimes speaks English in a Japanese sentence. Such a habit is faithfully reflected in the English version of the game, with localisers playing with a similar cultural stereotype, letting Mitsuru use French words occasionally. When the game enters its battle phase, players can often unleash a palette of magic powers, each with a name specifically designed for the fictional storyworld of the game, such as 'Agi' for fire, and 'Garu' for wind[8]. The only localisation here was to provide English transliterations for the original Katakana[9]. If translated into the more comprehensible 'Fire' or 'Wind,' these skill names would inevitably lose their particularities and narrative value in the game's storyworld. *Persona 3* builds its narrative in a fantasy setting, while taking inspiration from various mythologies in the real world. A non-translation strategy for the skill names not only strengthens the game's fantasy elements, underlining the "otherworld-ness" of the skills, but also highlights the assemblage (mythology) the game plugs into as intended by its designers.

In contrast to *Persona 3*, *Total War: Three Kingdoms* (Creative Assembly, 2019), originally developed in English, has once suffered from various localisation issues in its Simplified Chinese version, and the less-than-satisfying localisation quality led to fierce criticism from players[10]. One particular example concerning the incoherence of both interior and exterior factors is the translation of the following: "Are you going to stun them with your handsome looks?". This particular line is often heard when a general mocks his rival as being all looks but no use on the battlefield. The original translation for this insult into Simplified

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[8] The true rationale behind these names for magic powers is a topic often discussed among players. One speculation is that the game developers coined these specific terms based on words from different languages, which either have similar meanings or share some connections to relevant mythologies. The fire power, 'Agi,' is said to be based on the Sanskrit word, *Agni*, which means 'fire.' 'Garu,' on the other hand, may be related to Garuda, a giant bird in Hindu mythology. A particular discussion can be found here: https://gamefaqs.gamespot.com/boards/945498-shin-megami-tensei-persona-4/49457155 [Accessed: 25 October 2022]

[9] Agi, for instance, is written in the original Japanese version of the game as アギ (pronounced as A-Gi). The English localisation is simply the transliteration of the original Japanese Katakana.

[10] There are many posts concerning this matter on Chinese forums such as Baidu Tieba. See, for example, the Creative Assembly staff member post: 'Mandate of Heaven 汉化问题汇总' ('Gathering issues regarding the Chinese localization for *Mandate of Heaven*'). Available at: http://c.tieba.baidu.com/p/6426157398?fr=good [Accessed: 23 March, 2020]

Chinese reads 你打算用你英俊的外表眩晕他们吗？, which is a literal, word-to-word translation of the English text. However, this translation turned out to be quite problematic, especially due to its disruption of the game. The storyworld of *Three Kingdoms* is primarily inspired by and based in the Three Kingdom period in ancient China (exterior, historical factor factor: history), when Classical Chinese was largely in use. A general (interior factor: character) in this specific storyworld brings out certain traits (authoritative and confident) often associated with such a figure in history. An insult in battle, uttered by this general (interior factor: textual material), then, is not only expected to convey the tone and "feel" based on the general's characteristics, but also to conform to the habit of using Classical Chinese in Ancient China. The Simplified Chinese translation quoted above is problematic precisely because it disrespects the game narrative as intended by developers. We see a army general from Ancient China not only shouting in modern Chinese, but also using nonsensical words that produce a comical rather than warlike effect for Chinese speakers nowadays. The issue was later resolved with a revised translation:

油头粉面，可堪何用？ [Handsome looks and all, what use are they?], which, with its two quick, successive four-character expressions, successfully recreates the "feel" of Classical Chinese and the firm, crisp tone of an authoritative general. This localisation is then able to maintain the coherence of the original storyworld, so that Chinese players can enjoy the game without their narrative experience being disrupted.

While coherence concerns primarily narrative clues in a storyworld, clarity points more to players' interaction. As Bernal-Merino rightly notes, information in videogames "is there to amuse players but it is also necessary to educate them on what to do in the game" (2018: 119 – 120). Texts thus often have a guiding role in player gameplay: texts in game menus can be seen as "thresholds" a player needs to cross to access the game's storyworld, while instructive texts with gameplay tips or objectives lead the player through that world. Consequently, these texts must be clearly understood. Localisers need to ensure that players can pick up core information and progress in the game despite the rapid rhythm of their gameplay. In *Total War: Warhammer II (Creative Assembly, 2017)*, players are given a "Master" option in Sound Setting, which allows them to adjust the volume of all the sounds in the game in one go. However, this option was originally translated as 宗主, an in-game term related to the diplomacy mechanics of the game[11], which would only

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[11] 宗主 is the translation of "Master" when it is used as an in-game term. In *Warhammer II*, players play as the leader of a faction against many other factions. In addition to directly declaring wars, the game also allows players to interact with other factions through diplomatic channels. If one faction has lost most of its territory, as well as military and diplomatic power, players may have the option to force the faction to become their Vassal. The player-controlled faction is then referred to as the "Master faction" or simply "Master" for the conquered faction.

confuse players who are looking for a quick set-up before starting the game. Similarly, when the Simplified Chinese version of *The Elder Scrolls Online* first presented "Credits" (as in "the credits of a film") as 点数 ("credits" as scores/points earned) in its setting menu, Chinese players who wanted to know more about the game designers only felt baffled and confused. Importantly though, instructive texts regarding gameplay tips or objectives are often coated in narrative clues, which resonates again with how players' actions are contextualised by game narrative. This narrative coating of instructive texts often appears during players' actual gameplay, which requires a localiser's specific attention. The inconsistent transliteration of the continent named "Tamriel", into both 泰姆瑞尔 and 塔玛瑞尔 (note the difference between the two Chinese characters 泰姆 and 塔玛) throughout *The Elder Scrolls Online* not only disorients Chinese players in gameplay, especially when they are asked to complete certain missions in this fictional land, but also dislocates them from the supposedly-coherent storyworld. It is therefore important to consider coherence and clarity not as mutually independent but interrelated. Localised texts should always be able to guide player interaction and provide narrative clues for such interaction to make sense, so that gameplay can become storytelling at the same time.

As mentioned previously, narrativity differs from game to game, which may have an impact on which principles to prioritise in localisation practice. Admittedly, some games feel less like narratives, and more like pure interactions with game mechanics. However, it can be argued that such interactions themselves form a self-referential story, which can encompass players' emotional responses to gameplay (joy, frustration, anger, etc.), or their socialising experience surrounding gameplay. Such self-referential stories are most observable in games such as *Tetris* (Pajitnov, 1984), *Pong* (Atari, 1972) and chess. Narrative Designer (e) explains that:

> ND(e):
> In these games [*Tetris*, *Pong* and chess], the rules are clear and players can choose how they play the game (their strategy) but they don't need to be told a story to enjoy it.

She then points out that the lack of a pre-scripted story does not necessarily mean a total absence of storytelling potential in these games, despite the fact that narrative designers like herself will only have limited contribution to the game narrative construction:

> ND(e):
> Some would argue these games have a natural "story" or drama inside of them, but there is no narrative specialist involved in their creation.

Self-referential game stories can co-exist with pre-scripted game narratives—and can even outshine them sometimes, as Videogame Pplayer (a) has illustrated:

VP(a):
I play games like *The Division 2* and *Far Cry* with friends and the story— and indeed everything else— is secondary to the social aspect of chatting via headset. In that context, the game is almost a background activity.

A veteran player may also recall the experience when they concentrate so much on beating a game level that they stop noticing the game story. A self-referential game story concerns more "what happens outside a game", but its very existence is nonetheless deeply rooted in the game itself, since no emotional or social experience can derive without players playing the game in the first place. It may therefore be reasonable to argue that clarity is still relevant in (re)telling self-referential stories; even though localisers cannot control the emergence of such stories, they should still provide the possible ground for them to thrive. It may also be reasonable to point out that there is no fixed hierarchy between clarity and coherence. Which principle is more dominant in a particular localisation process is determined, in part, by the narrativity of the game to be localised. For games such as *Tetris*, where a player may focus more on getting through a level or outperforming other players, clarity may appear to be more relevant. When it comes to story-rich games such as *BioShock* and *The Elder Scrolls Online*, a satisfying localisation quality can only be achieved when coherence is given ample consideration, as a player is more likely looking for a touching narrative experience in addition to the joy from purely interacting with game mechanics.

5. The Hero Marches on: Conclusion

This article, inspired by three main interpretations of the notion "narrativity", has begun to explore the possibility of regarding videogame localisation as (re)telling of videogame narratives for better localisation quality. Taking into consideration the once heated scholarly debate in this area, this article demonstrates that a videogame can be regarded as a storytelling medium with its ability to evoke storyworlds infused with narrative clues, and its reliance on players' active interactions for narrative construction. The uniqueness of videogame storytelling pushes this article to argue that gameplay experience, which scholars have insisted game localisation should preserve, can be interpreted as a narrative experience, leading to two initial principles in localisers' (re)telling of game narratives: coherence and clarity. Localised games should preserve the interrelationships between texts and other narrative clues in the original game story, while allowing to players to traverse the storyworld through their interactions, thus achieving a satisfying storytelling experience.

The promising future that narrative can bring to videogame localisation requires more diligence to some lingering issues. Following the arguments presented here, it seems only natural that localisers should have a full picture of

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game narratives before localising. However, four out of the six narrative designers interviewed for this project has limited to no experience working with localisers, pointing to a much-needed call for a change in game development/localisation workflow. A second issue arises from Videogame Player (a)'s response, when he tried to explain whether he had ever felt that his gameplay experience was affected by localisation:

> VP(a):
> Yes, on occasion. *Monster Hunter World* and the *Fire Emblem* series come to mind immediately. Sometimes there were slightly clunky uses of English, though this seems like part of the "charm" of playing a localised game.

VP(a)'s answer seems to suggest that the potential localisation issues can actually add some exotic appeal to some games that were not originally developed in English, making the gameplay experience more enjoyable. Echoing Mangiron's urge to understand players' needs more (2018: 129), such an enigmatic response towards clumsy translations, demands a continuing examination or re-examination of the very notion of "localisation quality". The videogame is constantly evolving, with its narrative potential still to be fully uncovered. It is certainly worth more scholarly effort to fill in the gaps in current research and to explore uncharted territories. The story must—and will—go on.

Acknowledgements

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