JoSTrans
The Journal of Specialised Translation

Towards a cross-cultural game design: an explorative study in understanding the player experience of a localised Japanese video game

Minako O'Hagan, School of Applied Language and Intercultural Studies, Centre for Translation and Textual Studies, Dublin City University, Ireland.

ABSTRACT

Video games have grown into a global industry today with games routinely localised into an increasing range of languages. Despite the quality control processes in game localisation, target players often find localised games to be lackluster, as if they were an afterthought. Given the generally accepted view of games as a cultural product, the cause for lackluster player perceptions may be linked to cultural assumptions embedded in the original game design itself. Using a pilot empirical study to gain access to the player experience of a localised Japanese video game *Ico*, this paper seeks to examine such cultural influences in game design affecting the overall game play experience of localised games. A play trajectory, a game log and a player interview provide rich data for a qualitative analysis, pointing to potential areas of cultural impact in game design, affecting the player experience of the localised game. The study suggests that a similar empirical method focusing on the player can be developed into a potentially productive approach informing a cross-cultural game design.

KEYWORDS

Video game localisation, cross-cultural game design, Japanese games, empirical study, cultural product

1. Background to localisation

Despite the fact that video games have grown into a global industry (Chandler, 2005) the process of *game localisation* remains relatively little known beyond the closed circle of stakeholders in a similar manner as the localisation sector on the whole (Dunne, 2006:1). Localisation is an essential process to enable video games to be playable in different markets, referred to as *territories* in the game industry, than the country of origin. Today's video games are essentially a piece of software and thus game localisation

shares many commonalities with software localisation. The need for 'localisation' beyond translation arose due to the shift to an electronic medium in which the text subject to translation is couched. To turn software from one language version to another calls for extra technical processes such as extraction and reintegration of text fragments (known as "strings") and testing to ensure that the localised software functions properly and all linguistic conversions fit both semantically and in the space allocated. Localisation entails adapting products in electronic form to make them "linguistically and culturally appropriate for a particular local market" (Esselink, 1998:2). The adaptive inclination is particularly pronounced with game localisation, given its purpose as a means of entertainment with the ultimate goal of localisation being to recreate a pleasurable player experience. Localised versions may have newly added features which were not in their original games. This makes localisation a functionalist translation practice (Nord, 1997) which prioritises the expected function of the translated text at the receiving end, making the fidelity to the source text less relevant.

Prior studies on game localisation (Mangiron & O'Hagan, 2006; O'Hagan & Mangiron, 2004) have found that translation of game texts, as compared with other types of texts, tends to allow the translator the most liberty, driven by the skopos of game translation to convey the maximum entertainment value of the game for target players. Considerable translator freedom afforded in translating games is in turn described as 'transcreation' (Mangiron & O'Hagan, ibid). However, the effectiveness of such strategies can only be assessed according to the player experience of the localised game. On the basis of her experience in the industry, Chandler (2005:4) observes that "international versions [of games] are often perceived as lackluster among gamers" who may opt to play the original version despite the language barrier because the latter provides "a better quality of overall game play experience". The importance of the text reception at the receiving end in game localisation then naturally leads to a research question addressing the player perception of a localised game. Gaining access to the player's experience of localised games will help assess if the localised game was able to convey the game play experience equivalent to the original game. While many game developments incorporate a form of player input through beta testing, focus group sessions etc to ensure that the game has the intended impact on the user, player

reaction is usually not part of formal testing for localised games above and beyond the aspects captured by functional and linguistic testing.

Given the increasing recognition of localisation as a vital concern for the game industry which relies on international sales (Langdell 2006:201)[1], the focus of the study on player reception seems well justified with the practical goal to provide useful information to the game industry as well as localisers and translators. Being an industry-led rather than research-based practice, game localisation has developed so far largely independent of the wisdom of TS research and even of its closest cousin software localisation (O'Hagan 2007). Implicit in the goal of this paper is also to demonstrate that translation studies (TS) research has much to offer in improving the practice of game localisation, on the one hand, and, on the other, that the field of TS will benefit by turning more attention to this relatively new research domain.

2. Introduction to Research Domain

Modern video games are complex digital systems designed to provide the player with compelling immersive experiences by the use of cutting-edge technology. Today's video games combine on a technical platform semiotic systems which are embodied visually (text and graphics) and aurally (dialogues, songs and other environmental sounds), sometimes augmented with force-feedback sensations available through the controller, all of which contribute to the player's game play experience. Video games therefore create a polysemiotic and multimodal environment where the player interacts with the game system via different communication channels. Furthermore, the view of video games as a cultural product (e.g. Jenkins, 2006) makes video games an especially relevant and worthy topic of investigation in the context of TS given the pertinent interest in the treatment of culture in translation. In an attempt to understand the perceived quality of a localised game by the end-player, this article investigates the player experience empirically with a special focus on embedded cultural assumptions in Japanese video games. A literature survey on game localisation with TS perspectives suggests that cultural issues are well highlighted but rarely from the particular point of view of game design as indicated below.

Game localisation is a new area of research in TS only just beginning to attract some attention from TS scholars[2] who have so far approached the topic most commonly by focusing on practical dimensions to highlight translation issues specific to this genre. Dietz (2006) compares game localisation to software localisation and highlights unique translation challenges which arise from the specific medium of video games with practical advice to translators using actual examples from different US-originating games as the source. Citing Trainor (2003), Dietz (ibid: 9) stresses the need for "culturalization" of games whereby they are "adapted to account for certain cultural conventions and preferences", in turn linking these cultural issues to the ratings requirements of receiving countries which may reflect different cultural values typically on the topics of sex, violence and religion. Mangiron (2006) highlights localisation quality and the issue of translator competence from the point of view of translator training. She (ibid: 313-314) stresses the importance of cultural awareness as one of the key competence areas of game translators by citing various examples of explicit cultural adaptations undertaken in different games. Langdell (2006)'s advice on localisation is expressed in the context of developing games with localisation in mind with a practical focus to elicit pitfalls leading to unsuccessful localisation. Langdell (ibid: 206) stresses the fact that good localisation is "far more than just selecting the best words to replace the language of the original game design" and maintains "[g]ames are being adapted to entertain completely different cultures". Similarly, cultural differences between the origin of the game and its target territories are stressed in O'Hagan & Mangiron (2004) and Mangiron & O'Hagan (2006) who conducted a case study of the Japanese Role Playing Game (RPG) *Final Fantasy* series to describe the localisation process and examine translation strategies applied in translating these games. Illustrating the impact of cultural differences in characterisation of the main characters in the game, they discuss the implication of translation strategies, which cannot always be privileging the target market, given a certain fan base that seeks the signature mark of the original culture in Japanese games. Similarly, focusing on localisation of Japanese video games, Di Marco (2007) homes in on the topic of "cultural localization", describing the nature of the task as "hybridization of cultures" pulled between the authentic representation of the cultural values embedded in the original and their domestication to orient them towards the target reader. The end result is a complex negotiation of cultures where paradoxically a faithful rendition alone of the

original will not maintain "a coherent and integral sense of the Japanese identity of the video game itself". According to Iwabuchi's terms (2002) used in the context of analysing the globalisation process of Japanese popular culture the dominant domestication approach in game localisation can be called "odorless" with few traces of the cultural origin of the original and the opposite foreignisation approach as "fragrant" leaving the original flavour. The reality, as described by Di Marco, is never clear cut between the two opposing strategies.

While not placed in a TS framework per se, Yahiro's substantial game study (Yahiro, 2005) compared some 20 Nintendo RPG titles between the originals and their localised versions released for North America. In his study Yahiro set out to investigate particular ideological stances implicit in Japanese video games by studying their localised versions for North America. Yashiro's approach was to deduce such characteristics on the basis of types of changes made in the localised versions which are expected to signal the target market's dominant ideological position, and thus can be contrasted with those in the original Japanese versions. Yahiro found that the most conspicuous changes were made in religious, sexual, racial and other references concerning moral stances. These concur with findings from other studies on Japanese video games (e.g. Di Marco 2007; Kohler 2005) which highlight these aspects as cultural markers often subject to drastic changes in localised versions for other territories. The present study will not focus on the issue of the treatment in translation of culture-specific references in game texts which are relatively well explored, but will rather target less explicit cultural issues nevertheless inherent within game design as a whole. Comparing US-origin and Japanese-origin game design philosophies, Kalata (2007) asserts "[e]very area of a game is heavily influenced by the culture that produced it". Written from an industry perspective in the context of promoting good practices in game localisation and production, Chandler (2005) provides a comprehensive description of the entire process involved in game localisation where the reference to cultural issues recurs. Chandler (ibid) stresses the importance of developing games with localisation in mind, which represents the trend in software localisation where localisation is moving upstream rather than added downstream (O'Hagan 2004). Of particular relevance to the present paper is her reference to cross-cultural game design which seeks to "design games that appeal to a wide variety of cultures" (Chandler ibid: 26). Chandler maintains that academic studies with

cultural focuses are yet to deliver practical advice to game designers. Taking up the challenge of cross-cultural game design in the context of Chandler, the present paper sets out to address the question by exploring a player experience of a localised Japanese game with special attention to certain cultural characteristics or assumptions embedded in the game design of Japanese games which could impact on the player experience.

Having explained the focus of the present study and the background, the next section discusses issues concerning research methodologies, followed by the issue of experiment design to respond to the research question addressed in this paper.

3. Methodological issues for empirical game localisation studies

Researchers embarking on a study of game localisation soon realise that obtaining direct access to information from game developers and publishers can be extremely difficult due to confidentiality issues relating to commercially-sensitive information. This explains the fact that many game localisation studies are undertaken by practitioner-researchers who have (or had) direct access to in-house information although non-disclosure rules may prevent them from freely publishing all the information to which they may be privy. For researchers in the field, the Internet is the obvious source of up-to-date information where there is an increasing volume of commentaries on game localisation available with a varying depth of analysis, including first hand accounts by players discussing their experience of playing games as well as game reviews by specialist magazines. Furthermore games themselves may include a bonus DVD with interviews with key parties involved in the game development and localisation as in the case of *Final Fantasy XII International* (2007). In addition, online 'walkthroughs' which are commonly called 'cheats' provide a step by step guide as to how to play the game while many games have associated publications in print such as game strategy guides with often detailed explanation about the game. While drawing on these available resources, the present study followed the path of an empirical study by setting up a subject playing a localised game and recording the game play trajectory. This was partly to deal with the question of validity and trustworthiness of data acquired through secondary sources and partly to explore a productive

empirical method. The researcher also decided to play the original Japanese game whose localised English language version was used in the experiment. In discussing methodological issues in game studies, Aarseth (2003:4) maintains that: "informed game scholarship must involve play, just like scholars of film and literature experience the works first hand, as well as through secondary sources." True to this advice, the insight gained from the first hand experience by the researcher actually playing the game was invaluable in formulating the overall research design.

Part of the inspiration for a player-focused empirical study came from a large scale study conducted at the International Centre for Computer Games and Virtual Entertainment (IC CAVE) at the University of Abertay, in Scotland (Heavens, 2004). With the aim to build a profile of Japanese gameplaying behaviours, the researchers at IC CAVE have carried out several experiments, including a comparison between a group of Japanese teenagers and their Scottish counterparts. The details of their findings are not available but certain marked differences have been reported such as community-building tendencies through cooperation with Japanese players whereas competition was the priority among Scottish players when playing a car racing game (ibid:63). The study by Yahiro (2005) in turn focused on games rather than players where he chose 22 Japanese RPG titles and studied both the original and the localised versions by recording the game play on video tape and transcribing both versions in order to identify changes made in the localised versions. These larger scale empirical studies will be able to provide direct hard data, allowing a degree of generalisation power but heavily impose significant resources on the part of the researcher.

The practical issue of available resources and the time factor made a study to such an extent out of the question for the present investigation. Instead, a small-scale pilot study was aimed at conducting an analysis mainly of a qualitative nature using the traditional interview method as well as observations of the game play through recordings of the play trajectory and player hand movements on the controller and utterances by the player, limiting the data to one player and one game. The main focus was to capture a game play experience in terms of overall game play quality which may be affected by different cultural assumptions embedded in the game design. One of the main design differences between Japanese and Western games which Kalata (2007) elaborates lies in the freedom given to the player.

Kalata observes that Japanese game design tries to invite the player into the designer's view of the world whereas Western game designers let the player define their own way of playing (albeit within limits). Similarly, a report (Heavens 2004:65) on the game study conducted at the afore-mentioned IC CAVE on cultural comparisons of player behaviours between the UK and Japan highlighted that the latter find "sprawling worlds that offer almost unlimited freedom offputting" whereas the opposite is true with the UK counterparts.

The next challenge in research design was the selection of a game to meet a number of conditions. Given the constraints of time and resources, the decision was made to choose a Japanese game localised into an English language version with a relatively short play time around 10 hours. In order to further eliminate variables, it was decided to choose a game of fairly simple design and with a limited amount of text[3]. A game with emotional impacts was also sought as such games may be more likely to highlight certain cultural differences in game design and the player reception.   Based on these considerations, the Japanese PlayStation 2 game *Ico* (2001) was selected and its English language localised version released in PAL regions[4] was used in the experiment. The typical game play time was expected to be around 10 hours with few dialogues and texts as well as little use of music although the game design was claimed to be superior and innovative, winning various international awards (Byron et al 2006). The following provides some relevant background to this game in relation to the experiment.

Background to *Ico*
Ico was published by Sony Computer Entertainment for PlayStation2 in 2001. It is classified as an adventure game with a broad range of puzzles for problem solving combined with a battle system. It was developed by the Japanese game designer Fumito Ueda and the game was localised into English for North American and PAL versions which cover Europe as well as Australasian regions.   This title is known as one of the most artistic games with subtle use of lighting while little music and few dialogues provide an acute focus on the ambience and the relationship which develops through largely nonverbal means between the two main characters (Byron, et al, 2006).

It is an atmospheric game and mostly set within a dilapidated gothic castle where the main protagonist Ico, a young boy born with horns, meets his subsequent companion Yorda whose movements are driven by AI program. While feeble and reliant on Ico, Yorda has some magical power which Ico needs to use to their advantage. The main gameplay involves problem-solving by way of exploring the game space and negotiating various objects with the final goal being to escape the castle. The unique feature of the game is the bonding which develops between Ico (the player) and Yorda. This is done explicitly by Ico having to hold Yorda's hand, keeping her close by or calling her whenever possible to stop her being taken away by evil spirits who Ico needs to fight from time to time. Ico and Yorda (and her Mother the evil Queen) do not share the same language and both speak unknown tongues, thus creating the sense of otherness even to Japanese players. The opening cut-scene (movie) does not provide a full back story but the manual of the game explains the storyline to some extent. The goal of the game is a successful escape from the haunted castle controlled by the Queen and this is only possible if Ico and Yorda cooperate.

The following section further elaborates on the design of the experiment.

4. The experiment design

Nielsen, Smith & Tosca (2008:9-10) classifies four major types of game study analysis according to whether the focus is placed on Game, Player, Culture or Ontology (see Table1). The overall goal of the present study makes its essential focus on the player but it was also necessary to examine the game system itself to properly analyse the experience of the player. Furthermore, its interest in cultural influence in the game design in the context of localisation made culture in a broad sense an inescapable element in analysis. While it takes an integrated approach of the formalist and the situationalist with three areas of focus, the study fits in the general orientation of the situationalist perspectives which seek to analyse and describe "specific events or social practices" with less interest in "all-encompassing statements that do not take context and variation into account" (Nielsen et al ibid:11). The present study used methodologies primarily based on observation via recording of play trajectory as well as the player game log and interviews to gain access to the player experience.

Type of Analysis	Common Methodologies	Theoretical Inspiration	Common Interest
Game	Textual analysis	Comparative literature, film studies	Design choices, meaning
Player	Observation, interviews, surveys	Sociology, ethnography, cultural studies	Use of games, game communities
Culture	Interviews, textual analysis	Cultural studies, sociology	Games as cultural objects, games as part of the media ecology
Ontology	Philosophical enquiry	Various	Logical/philosophical foundations of games and gaming

Table1: Main Types of Game Analysis (Nielsen, Smith & Tosca, 2008:10)

(*the shading is mine for relevance to the present study)

The scope of the present study made it only possible to set up a preliminary empirical study with one player but integrating different types of analysis focused on the player experience, the game system and cultural issues as relevant to localisation.   This shaped the overall research approach, in turn informing the experiment design. As mentioned earlier, the researcher first played the original Japanese version of the game, which facilitated the understanding of the game system as well as possible avenues of focus. The game system was analysed further on the basis of secondary information[5] garnered from online sources such as official game reviews from the game publisher's website and other reliable sources, the official game strategy book for the original Japanese version (Softbank, 2002) and the manuals of the original game and the localised version. The following section elaborates the experiment set-up designed to explore the player experience.

4.1. Experiment[6]

An experiment was set up using a localised Japanese game with a player (hereafter referred to as the Player) who is a native speaker of English which was the game's localised language. The Player selected for the study

represents the male casual game player population. He is in his twenties with some prior exposure to Japanese-made video games but without any expert knowledge about them or the localisation process. The experiment aimed to gather experiential information from the Player, collecting the play trajectory and also recording the Player's hand movements with the controller as well as any autonomous utterances made by the Player during the play. The initial plan to apply Think Aloud Protocol (TAP) whereby getting the Player to share his inner thoughts was discarded after an initial trial as this was deemed by the Player as too distracting to his focus on playing the game. The equipment involved in the experiment was: Sony PlayStation2 console (PAL version to play the English language localised game), TV monitor, DVD recorder linked to the console and video camera linked to PC. Various media conversion software was subsequently used to convert the captured play trajectory data into the manageable compressed format for portability of data and also to synchronise the separately collected video image and audio data of the Player's hand movements and any autonomous utterances made by him. After each pause/break, the Player was asked to fill in a game log for which a template with specified categories had been supplied by the researcher. The Player also responded to retrospective interviews conducted both face-to-face and via e-mail. The Player was asked to follow the experiment procedure set out in the experiment protocol to retain validity of the data, ensuring the need to fill in the log after certain saving points of the game and also to switch on the video camera as well as the DVD recording button just before starting to play the game and switch off these recording devices each time the Player decided to pause the game. The experiment started on the 4th of July and was completed on the 8th of July 2008 with the total play time of 11.5 hours which fell within the expected time range.

5. Analysis of game play

After the experiment the researcher read the game log entries (referenced herein as numbers 1-16 when citing Player comments) and watched several times the play trajectory which was synchronised with the video capture of the payer's hands as well as his vocal utterances covering the entire play time. This was followed by retrospective interviews to clarify some of the log information or ask additional questions. There were a number of issues

raised from the Player experience data which can be linked to broad cultural issues in the original game design, as discussed below.

5.1 Freedom of play

The first characteristic of this game to hit the player is its vast architectural space which the player has to explore to advance the game. While the game space provides a certain degree of freedom on the player's manoeuvres *Ico* is designed with semi-controlled camera angles, a point commented on by the Player. The game log frequently mentioned that the Player had to get used to fixed camera angles and his frustration caused by the lack of control of the perspectives. Such reception can be linked to the prior findings that contrary to Western games, Japanese games tend to leave less freedom to the players with pre-determined camera angles to "make sure the player sees what the developer wants them to experience" (Kobayashi cited in Kalata, 2007). *Ico* uses semi-automatic camera angles with some freedom for the players to control default angles in certain places of the game. The game play trajectory in the experiment clearly demonstrated the Player constantly attempting to use the camera control to the maximum in order to survey a wider sphere of the scene to formulate his strategy for the next move. As another example of a tight control exerted in Japanese game design, Kalata also mentions the use of specific game save points often designed into Japanese games, allowing the players to save the game thus far in certain locations (i.e. until reaching such points the game cannot be saved). This was the case with *Ico*, although the Player did not mention this feature in his log or retrospective interview.
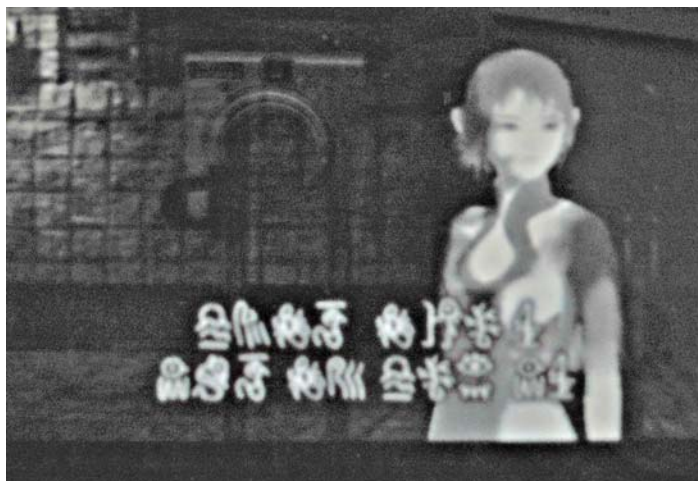
5.2 Language

One of the unique aspects of the game world created in *Ico* includes the use of artificially created languages spoken by characters in the game. Ico and Yorda each speaks a different language where Ico's speech appears with English subtitles in the localised English version (whereas in the original version Japanese subtitles are used) with the subtitles for the dialogue by Yorda and her mother the Queen in gibberish (see screen shot in figure 1 for the example of   Yorda's script). This is an aspect which confused the Player who wrote in his log:

> Met Yorda's mother, and was a little confused about the subtitles that sometimes were

used for both her and Yorda, from what I could make out, the dialog appeared to be in Japanese but the subtitles were some crazy hieroglyphic type characters. I'm not sure whether it is intentional or not but the audio on all the dialog seems really quiet as if it has been turned down so you have to read the subtitles. (Game Log 5)

As evident in this log entry and confirmed by the subsequent interview, the Player had wrongly assumed that the dialogues he was hearing were in Japanese. In fact, there is no explicit explanation either in the game or the English manual about the mysterious languages the characters speak, although the original Japanese manual mentions the setting to be in "an unknown place and unknown times", implying unknown languages[7] being used. For Japanese players it is immediately obvious that the dialogues are not in Japanese whereas this design confused the Player who is not familiar with the Japanese language. An interview (Ico – Q&A, 2008) with the developing team reveals that the reason for deliberately creating the language barrier between Ico and Yorda was technically motivated. Since Yourda is driven by a computer program, the extent to which her responces in natural language speech could be made to correspond appropriately to inputs from players would have been limited. This in turn was compensated by and led to rich nonverbal communication between the two such as holding hands and calling out.

©Sony Computer Entertainment Inc.

Figure 1: Yorda's unknown language subtitled in gibberish (screenshot from the *Ico* game trajectory file)

5.3 Back story

The confusion over the language relates to another comment made by the Player during the retrospective interview about insufficient back story provided within the game. The Player admitted that he had not read the manual before starting the game but commented: "I would've liked to have seen a lot more background info incorporated into the game at the start, not just in the manual". Many modern games use cut-scenes which are movies inserted within games to provide a back story or to advance the plot in the game, but the Player felt that the opening cut-scene in *Ico* did not provide sufficient information. This also suggests an increasing reliance by players on the function of cut-scenes to explain the story and the tendency of the players not bothering to read the manual perhaps at least until they get stuck in the game.

5.4 Interface

Unlike the standard interface of games in the genre, *Ico* does not use onscreen text display of inventory, health status etc, which according to the Player puzzled him at first and sent him searching in the options menu for a setting before he realised that there was meant to be no such display. He admitted in the retrospective interview that he came to like this feature, saying: "it gave the game a more realistic feeling, it allowed me to connect fully with the game without the distraction of health levels, timers and maps etc". So, in this case the unusual interface design was well received by the Player.

5.5 Graphics

Koher (2005) recognises the early influences by Japanese game design on the prominent use of cinematic elements. While *Ico* takes a less flashy approach to the use of graphics compared to some other modern Japanese games such as *FinalFantasy* series graphics in *Ico* are nevertheless sophisticated and subtle in order to create the impression of surrealist painting as demonstrated in the box art of the Japanese and PAL versions[8] designed after the painting by Giorgio de Chirico (Byron et al 2006: 110). While the use of soft graphics may have been effective in creating a certain atmosphere, the Player raised the issue of blurry graphics hindering the accuracy of controlling actions of the characters. The Player commented: "… the blurry/soft graphics are beginning to get a little tough on the eyes. Some

objects and pathways are quite hard to distinguish" (Game Log 9). This was mentioned again in the retrospective interview as "the poor graphics in some areas of the game made it really frustrating...". From the developer's perspective, however, this was a deliberate design decision where 30fps (half the usual frame rate per second) was used for the animation speed to create a soft misty atmosphere and particularly to avoid Ico and Yorda's hand holding actions from looking too vivid (Softbank, 2002: 84).

5.6 AI design

The companion character Yorda was driven by AI program and the players learn her behaviour patterns over the course of the game. The Player's log shows the frequent references of "rescuing/protecting Yorda" as the most compelling and exciting aspect of the game and he mentioned that the AI design behind Yorda made a big impact on him emotionally as he commented in the retrospective interview:

> For a large portion of the game, Yorda frustrated the hell out of me – wandering off, not wanting to jump gaps and taking her time, but when spirits appeared I would completely switch into protective mode of her, more than just protecting her for the sake of having to in order to complete the game, I would actually get worked up fighting off the spirits and angry if they captured her.

The relationship between Yorda and the protagonist Ico controlled by the player indeed forms a key and the unique feature of this game which is essentially "boy meets girl". Fumito Ueda, the game's Japanese designer, said that he "wanted to explore this theme of boy-meets-girl because of its universality", and he "decided upon its visual representation by hand holding…" (cited in Byron et al, 2006:115). As one of the most compelling design features of the game, the relationship between the AI-controlled Yorda and Ico controlled by the player is further elaborated in the next section.

5.7 Force-feedback

In addition to graphics and audio to immerse the players, this game also provides force-feedback via jolts through the controller activated by certain actions of players. The Player mentioned the impact of such force feedback

during the retrospective interview by saying that: "It definitely impacted on the game and I think more so on the atmosphere than gameplay" and that "the force-feedback definitely added to the excitement levels - the long rumble as a doorway opens up". Further comments made on force-feedback by the Player suggests that the use of this sensorial channel definitely contributed to the overall experience in particular to build up bonding with Yorda as he remarked: "I thought the slight vibration when you took Yorda's hand to be a nice touch" and:

> I really liked it when Yorda would jump across a gap and not quite make it and Ico would grab her hand and help her up. I thought the force-feedback here was also very effective - a little jolt as she grabbed Ico's hand, it made it very realistic.

The analysis of the game log, the retrospective interview as well as the viewing of play trajectory provided an insight into the experience of playing the localised version of *Ico* as perceived by the Player. One key feature of this game – the bonding between Ico and Yorda is discussed further in the following section in an attempt to elicit any culture specific assumptions perhaps influencing the game design.

6. Cultural differences in the emotional appeal of a localised game

The Player log and the interview clearly indicated that an attachment had developed during the game between the Player and Yorda.   The bonding of the two characters through the journey was the intended key point of the game as evident in various interviews given by Ueda (Byron et al, 2006; Softbank, 2002) as well as in terms of comments from Japanese players (see Ico Review, n.d.).   An interview with the *Ico* production team reveals the feedback received from Japanese players showed that they would not run holding Yorda's hand because it felt as if Yorda's arm was about to come off (Softbank, 2002: 85). This was obviously not expected by the game development team. This Japanese player feedback also made a contrast with the play trajectory of the Player, showing his Ico happily running, pulling along Yorda. In the retrospective interview the Player made the following comment in response to this reaction by Japanese players and explained his take as:

> Now that's something that's really interesting because I noticed that too *but* I thought the complete opposite of what they thought! I felt Yorda should run to keep up with

Ico not the other way around; he was the one doing all the work to get them both out of the castle after all. I liked that he could lead her around, reading my log you might pick up that Yorda's slowness was the cause of a lot of my frustration while playing. Without the ability to grab her arm to hurry her up I can imagine it would have been a lot more frustrating… From memory, I think there was a bit [of] force-feedback on the controller too when you pulled on Yorda's arm too hard, I think I chose to block this out and ignore it.)

While log entries by the Player showed his general protective attitude towards Yorda the emotional reaction in the Player performance as captured in the play trajectory reveals a slightly different way the game was played in relation to the companionship with Yorda's character. Further, the play trajectory also showed that the Player left Yorda alone a lot and not holding her hand even when they were close by during the course of the game while he went off investigating solutions to escape the castle. Leaving her behind on her own could have risked her being taken away by the spirits although forming a strategy for escaping was also needed. Although generalisation is not possible, these observations hint at subtle influences perhaps of cultural differences on the player's part, eliciting different responses to the same game design and ultimately creating different playing experiences. It will also be a matter of personal preference, but gaining feedback of this nature from an actual player in the given territory could bring out something which may not have occurred to or been intended by the game designer in the context of localising games into different territory versions. In particular, emotional responses may best reveal cultural influences. The voice recording of the Player was initially intended to facilitate the data on emotional impacts of the game on the Player, but it showed very few utterances made by the Player. In one of the retrospective interviews, the Player related the lack of vocal reactions to the nature of the game and also to the social context of the set up of the play environment. In this experiment the Player played the game alone without the presence of his friends in the same room. This suggested that the wider environment in which the game is played affects the way emotion may be expressed, and in turn possibly the game play experience by game players. However, any detailed analysis in the wider social setting was beyond the scope of this study although such a factor is relevant in the design of experiments.

While expressing the pleasure of playing this particular game, the Player

made a few comments on his disappointment with the ending of the game as he wrote in his log :

> I was left feeling like it didn't really finish properly; what I would have like to have seen was what happened to Ico and Yorda further on down the track or at least a happy ending. It was also confusing as to what happened to Yorda and how she went from a shadow spirit back to her normal self on the beach. (Game Log 16)

Similarly in the retrospective interview, the Player mentioned:

> When Yorda is taken away by her mother in the final stage I felt surprisingly attached to her and the final bit of the game was left feeling quite lonely.   Also, I felt this again at the end when Yorda pushed me off on the boat and I thought she was going to stay, when the credits rolled I was left feeling frustrated and then even with the extra scene where I found her on the beach, I still felt a little short changed. I wanted to know more about what happened after! Also, I had no idea about what Yorda's story was and how her and her mother fit into the story.

The last part of the comments could be related back to the insufficient explanation of the back story to some extent. But more importantly such expectations may be culturally-based. According to the Ico Review (n.d.) on the Japanese PS2Game Dounado site which shows the survey results of 417 voters who each posted brief review comments, many among the voters who rated the game highly (over 80% rated 4 or 5 out of 5 for the overall satisfaction of the game) remarked on the superb ending which appealed strongly to their emotion. This suggests that the negative reaction to the ending perceived by the Player was not evident with many Japanese players who played the original game.

7. Conclusions

This study set out to gain access to the reception of a localised game through an experiment with the subject player playing the localised version of the Japanese video game *Ico*. The purpose behind this empirical study was to draw out the player experience to build evidence towards understanding cultural influences in game design and ultimately to be able to inform the game industry regarding cross-cultural game design. The experiment design

suffered a major weakness in terms of the representativeness of the data due to the focus on one player and one game although some attempts were made to address this issue such as the selection of the player with an average player profile rather than that of a hard-core gamer. Despite this drawback the qualitative approach taken through the use of play trajectory and the interview enabled the researcher to carry out an in-depth within-subject analysis and elicit player perceptions of the localised game in a number of aspects, which in turn could inform future game design. The hand movement data and the voice recording collected were of little relevance in the end to this study, but could be useful for studying different types of games and consoles such as *Wii* which has a uniquely designed wireless motion-detecting controller. The study also suggests that given the diversity of games and personal preferences, the formalist approach seeking to find general laws may have limitations in the context of informing game localisation strategies.

With its recognised shortcomings, the pilot provided enough encouragement that a larger scale project following a similar methodological approach as used in this study, especially with cooperation from the game industry, could prove extremely productive in obtaining more generalisable data with the caveat that individual tastes are likely to differ even within one territory. The pilot study suggests potential areas where cultural assumptions embedded within the game design could have hampered the player experience of the localised version of the game *Ico*. These include: (1) the level of freedom being granted to the player in terms of the camera angle control; (2) use of the opening cut-scenes in providing the back story, including ways to imply the unknown languages being spoken by the characters; (3) narrative technique to tie up the story at the end.   However, most importantly the study indicated compelling evidence of the successful design feature of this game by the use of nonverbal means in creating a universal emotional appeal across cultural barriers. This may suggest a focus on rich nonverbal communication as one direction of future cross-cultural game design strategy.

The study points to the potential benefit of involving test players from the territories into which the game is intended to be localised, ideally at an early stage of game development, so the feedback could be usefully implemented into the final game design. By gaining insight into multicultural experiential

feedback video games may be able to attain the next higher level of excellence with a truly universal appeal.

Acknowledgment

Notes

 Vanessa Wood from Sony Computer Entertainment Europe asserts that most games are today localised into 15 different languages with opening of new territories (Games Localization Round Table, June, 2008).

[2] However, such a state of affairs is not surprising, given that the recognition of video games as an academic discipline is new: as the editor of the then newly formed game studies journal Espen Aaseth (2001:1) considered 2001 as the inauguration year of computer game studies.

[3] To give some indication of text size of certain games, text-intensive online game platforms such as Massively Multiplayer Online RPGs (MMORPGs) are expanding in size with the text exceeding 350,000 words which are subject to translation (Heimburg, 2006:138).

[4] Version information is significant in game research as different localised versions could have different features. In the case of *Ico*, the North American version (NTSC) was released in September 2001 ahead of the original Japanese version which came out in December 2001 for marketing reasons. The NA version was known to be rushed with some missing elements compared with the Japanese original and subsequent PAL versions released in March 2002, so the experiment used a PAL release which was developed based on the fully-fledged Japanese version.

[5] The publication *Ico: Una favola dell'era digitale [The fairy tale for the digital age]* by Ben Mottershead was published in 2007 in Italian and was not accessible to this researcher. Novelisation of the game by the Japanese SiFi writer Miyuki Miyabe followed in 2004, which is frequently mentioned by fans of the game and was read by the researcher.

[6] Ethical approval was obtained from the home institution for the empirical study presented here, which involved observing a human subject, thus making such an approval necessary.

[7] The play with artificial languages appears in other Japanese games such as *FinalFantasy* series where a particular tribe speaks its own language. These often form part of game play whereby advancing play levels the players may be able to unravel once mysterious languages.

References

- **Aarseth, Espen** (2001). "Computer game studies, year one." *Game Studies*, retrieved 15 May 2005 from: http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/editorial.html (consulted 23.07.2008)

- **Byron, Simon**, Curran, Ste & David McCarthy. (2006). *Game On! From Pong to Oblivion: The 50 greatest videogames of all time*. London: Headline Publishing Group.

- **Chandler, Heather** (2005). *The Game Localization Handbook*. Massachusetts: Charles River Media.

- **Diez, Frank** (2006). "Issues in localizing computer games." In Dunne, K. (ed), *Perspectives on Localization*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing, 121-134.

- **Dunne,   Kieran**   (ed.)   (2006).   *Perspectives   on   Localization*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing.

Di Marco, Francesca (2007). Cultural Localization: Orientation and Disorientation in Japanese Video Games**.** In Mangiron, C. (ed.), *Tradumàtica* 05 *Localització de videojocs*. On line at: http://www.fti.uab.es/tradumatica/revista/ (consulted 25.08.2008)

- **Esselink,   Bert**   (1998).   *A   Practical   Guide   to   Software   Localization*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing.

- **Heavens, A.** (2004). "Different Strokes". *Edge*, Issue 133, 62-66.

- **Heimburg, Eric** (2006). Localizing MMORPGs. In Dunne, K. (ed),. *Perspectives on Localization*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing, 135-151.

- **Ico – Q & A** with Fumito Ueda and Kenji Kaido, (2008). Available at http://blog.tigmagazine.com/2008/08/15/ico-qa-with-fumito-ueda-and-kenji-kaido/ (consulted 30.08.2008)

- **Ico   Review** (n.d.). Available at http://www.joko.jp/ps2/review/ti104.html (consulted 30.08.2008)

- **Iwabuchi, Koichi** (2002). *Recentering Globalization: Power Culture and Japanese Transnationalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

- **Jenkins, Henry** (2006). *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: NYU Press.

- **Kalata, Kurt** (2007). Clash of the Cultures: The difference s between Western and   Japanese   game   design   philosophies.   Available   at

http://www.1up.com/do/feature?pager.offset=0&cId=3155815 (consulted 28.08. 2008)

- **Kohler, Chris** (2005). *Power Up: How Japanese video games gave the world an extra life*. Indiana: BradyGames.

- **Langdell, Tim** (2006). Beware of the Localization. In Bateman, C (ed), *Game Writing: Narrative Skills for Videogames*. Hingham Massachusetts: Charles River Media, 201-208.

- **Mangiron, Carmen** (2006). Video Games Localisation: Posing New Challenges to the Translator. *Perspectives: Studies in Translatology*, Vol. 14:4, 306-323.

- **Mangiron, Carmen** and Minako O'Hagan (2006).   Game Localisation: Unleashing Imagination with "Restricted Translation". In Diaz-Cintas, Orero, Remael (eds.) *the Journal of Specialised Translation*. Issue 06, 10-21. Available at http://www.jostrans.org/issue06/art_ohagan.php#abstract   (consulted 28.08.2008)

- **Nielson, Simon Egenfeldt**, Smith, Jonas Heide & Susana Pajares Tosca (2008). *Understanding Video Games: The Essential Introduction*. New York and London: Routledge.

- **Nord, Christiane** (1997). *Translating as a Purposeful Activity. Functionalist Approaches Explained*, Manchester, St. Jerome.

- **O'Hagan, Minako** (2004). Conceptualizing the future of translation with localization. In *the International Journal of Localization*. Limerick: LRC, University of Limerick,15-22.

— (2007). Video games as a new domain for translation research: From translating text to translating experience. In Mangiron, C. (ed.), *Tradumàtica 05 Localització de videojocs*. Available at: http://www.fti.uab.es/tradumatica/revista/ (consulted 25.08.2008)

- **O'Hagan, Minako** and Carmen Mangiron (2004). "Games localisation: when *Arigato* gets lost in translation". *New Zealand Game Developers Conference Proceedings*. Otago: University of Otago, 57-62.

- **Softbank** (2002). *Ico: Official Guide Book*. Tokyo: Softbank.

- **Trainor, Helen** (2003). "Games localization: production and testing". *Multilingual Computing & Technology* 14 (5),17-20.

- **Yahiro, Shigeki** (2005). *Terebi game kaishakuron josetsu: Assemblage* [Towards Theory of Video Games: Assemblage]. Tokyo: Gendaishokan

Biography

Minako O'Hagan is Senior Lecturer in the School of Applied Language and Intercultural Studies and a member of the Centre for Translation and Textual Studies at Dublin City University. Her research interest includes computer-aided translation, virtual reality, localisation and globalisation of Japanese popular culture, including anime and video games. She is the author of *The Coming Industry of Teletranslation* (O'Hagan 1996) and co-author of *Translation-mediated Communication in a Digital World* (O'Hagan and Ashworth 2002).
E-mail: minako.ohagan@dcu.ie