

Pettini, S. (2022). We are the Others: Localising Italians for Italians in Video Games. *The Journal of Specialised Translation*, 38, 208-231. <https://doi.org/10.26034/cm.jostrans.2022.089>

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We are the Others: Localising Italians for Italians in Video Games

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ABSTRACT

In order to promote a debate on Otherness in multimedia interactive entertainment from the perspective of Game Localisation, this paper diachronically explores the linguistic and cultural representation of Italianness as Otherness in the original games and in their Italian localisations from the early stage of gaming in the 1980s to the late 2010s. Accordingly, through the analytical lenses of representation, localisation, of which translation is part, and culturalisation, this paper presents a pilot qualitative study of some of the most emblematic and popular Italian male characters in the last forty years, and contextualises it in the four stages of game localisation history to finally illustrate the influence technology has had on game design and localisation. Findings show that Italy and Italians have always been the object of international othering, occupying important roles originally envisioned as Others in game narratives of very different genres. However, the scope of characterisation and its linguistic and cultural dimension are deeply linked to the technological capacities of gaming platforms, which, through the history of multimedia interactive entertainment, have presented increasingly complex challenges and issues in the localisation, translation and culturalisation of Italians for Italians.

KEYWORDS

Representation, localisation, culturalisation, translation, other, otherness, Italy, Italianness, game characters, video games.

1. Introduction

Within the 2020-2021 “Inequalities and Racisms” series of lectures organised by the University of Salento, I was invited to participate in a debate titled “We are the Others” and dealing with audiovisual products. As usually happens when designing a paper or talk, this lecture’s title could not but influence my research and led me to reflect on those few but extremely meaningful words, which, as Pinchevski argues (2016: 65), are “marked by the irreducible difference between self [we] and other, between one’s way of being [our] and the way of another.” In this case, however, this complex divergence was framed as a convergence, and the ‘ourselves’ corresponded to the other.

Generally speaking, as Pinchevski explains (2016: 65), ‘other’ and ‘otherness’ are terms used in the Social Sciences and the Humanities to refer to “the radical difference of the other”, to designate “the property of distinctness”, the property of being other. In particular, according to Castree *et al.* (2013: 357), ‘other’ is a single person or a group of people who are perceived to be fundamentally different from oneself, usually in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, ‘otherness’ denotes the defining characteristics of the other and ‘othering’ is the process by which otherness is used to create “in- and out-groups within society and to justify the way in which Others are treated.”

Taking these meanings into consideration, some questions arose when decoding the title of the above-mentioned lecture: who are 'We'? And who perceives and defines us as Others? Or, from whom are we different?

With a view to contribute to the debate with a talk on game localisation, I decided to interpret the title literally and 'We are the Others' turned into 'Italianness as Otherness' which, in terms of linguistic and cultural representation, despite the remarkable number of Italian characters in the history of video games, is an understudied research area. Indeed, to my knowledge, little scholarly attention has been paid to the related general phenomenon of linguistic variation in game localisation (O'Hagan and Mangiron 2013: 165-167, 177) and the very few studies on the use of Italian regional accents in video games have shown that the addition of diatopic varieties, mainly from Central and Southern Italy, produces humorous effects based on a sociocultural characterisation which distorts the original one (Iaia 2014, 2015, 2016).

Against this background, from the perspective of Game Localisation (Bernal-Merino 2015, O'Hagan and Mangiron 2013), this paper aims to promote a debate on Otherness, and particularly on Italians as Others, in multimedia interactive entertainment and to diachronically explore their linguistic and cultural characterisation in the original game and in the Italian localisation. In other words, this paper aims to present a pilot qualitative study of the representation of Italians as foreign characters in video games and of the role, if any, localisation and translation have played in remediating the developers' interpretation of Italianness as Otherness.

For these purposes, Section 2 outlines the relationship between video games and Italy, while Section 3 describes the analytical lenses through which the study has been conducted, namely representation, localisation, of which translation is part, and culturalisation. Section 4 illustrates the methodological aspects of this research to describe its limitations and delimitations and to provide the background for Section 5, which presents the diachronic overview of Italian male characters in video games and contextualises it in the four stages of game localisation history, from the early 1980s to the late 2010s. Lastly, Section 6 discusses the results of this preliminary qualitative analysis and suggests potential venues for further research.

2. Video games and Italy

As Benoît-Carbone and Fassone claim (2020: 21), when investigating the relationship between video games and Italy, that is when examining Italy as an area of game consumption and production and as the object of national and international representation in video games, this country distinguishes itself by presenting a special form of strabismus.

On the one hand, Italy is, as are most Western nations, a country of players. According to the Italian Interactive Digital Entertainment Association (IDEA 2021a), 16.7 million Italians played video games in 2020, accounting for 38% of the population aged between 6 and 64. As regards gender, 56% of Italian gamers are male and 44% are female and as concerns the most significant age groups, 24% of players are aged between 15 and 24, 22% between 45 and 64, and 19% between 25 and 34 (IDEA 2021a). Moreover, in 2020, the Italian game market recorded €2.179 million in revenue, with a 21.9% increase compared to 2019, and 82% were generated by purchases of software, of which 43% includes console and PC games (IDEA 2021a).

In addition, according to Benoît-Carbone and Fassone (2020: 21), the relevance of video games in media and social discourse and the attention currently paid to these products in academia clearly evidence the development of a cultural *humus* in Italy. Some important initiatives mentioned by Benoît-Carbone and Fassone (2020: 21-22) include, among others, *GAME. The Italian Journal of Game Studies*, and the conferences organised in different Italian Universities by DIGRA Italia, which is the Italian section of the Digital Games Research Association. Indeed, as Gandolfi and Carbone (2021: 528) explain, in the last decades, video games in Italy have become increasingly mainstream media, thus inspiring and giving rise to various institutional and entrepreneurial projects, which contributed to clearly show that the Italian game market deserves scholarly attention.

On the other hand, Italy is still a country with a relatively small game production (Benoît-Carbone and Fassone 2020: 21-22). According to the IDEA's census (2021b), in 2020 in Italy there were about 160 game development companies, with over 1600 people employed in the industry especially in regions like Lombardy, Lazio, Emilia Romagna and Sicily (IDEA 2021b). Nevertheless, according to Benoît-Carbone and Fassone (2020: 22), today Italian video games cannot compete with those developed and published by other European countries, or by the USA and Japan, in terms of size and distribution, meaning that, in Gandolfi's words (2015: 305), "in the end, Italian creators and products remain marginal in the productive landscape of digital games."

Lastly, but more relevantly for this research, as Benoît-Carbone and Fassone remark (2020: 22), Italy occupies a prominent role in video games' narration. From the game adaptation of the *spaghetti western* genre in the game series *Red Dead* (Rockstar Games 2004–), to the homage paid to film celebrities in *Bud Spencer & Terence Hill: Slaps and Beans* (Buddy Productions 2017), and also to the parodic Italianness of Super Mario, the most popular game icon of all times, video games 'about' Italy represent a multilayered phenomenon worthy of attention and analysis from a variety of perspectives (Benoît-Carbone and Fassone 2020: 22). As Gandolfi illustrates (2015: 305), in the history of multimedia interactive

entertainment, video games have frequently portrayed Italy through characters and settings, sometimes exploiting the stereotypes and the artistic patrimony of this country with great success.

Italy's leading role in international game narration is the focus of this paper, which aims to diachronically overview the non-Italian representation of male Italians in video games from the 1980s to the 2010s. For this purpose, the following sections illustrate methodology-related aspects and clarify the concepts of representation, localisation and culturalisation, which are the lenses through which the analysis presented in Section 5 has been carried out.

3. Representation, localisation and culturalisation

Representation is one of the basic features that are common to all video games. As Egenfeldt-Nielsen *et al.* (2016: 46) argue, it "refers to games being about something else," subjectively representing a subset of reality, modelling external situations. Most games, however, do not attempt to be truly faithful simulations and many games, in fact, do not represent real-life situations. They "nevertheless represent something to the player," who can perceive his/her action as meaningful even though it makes no reference to the outside world (Egenfeldt-Nielsen *et al.* 2016: 46).

Representation is the way in which video games take aspects of reality (people, groups, places, objects, ideas) and recreate or construct them. Accordingly, it is a form of mediation and thus a process of interpretation, it is the way the game medium selects, constructs and anchors, meaning that it limits the number of possible interpretations of, a particular view of the world (Bennett *et al.* 2019: 154). In this sense, it is important to understand how games are constructed by developers and how they can be received by different audiences, because the image of the world found in games can shape the way players think about the world in general and about specific people, groups, and places in particular, with potential repercussions on how these groups and places are treated (Bennett *et al.* 2019: 154).

Beside representation, video games are entertainment: they are cultural forms "made to entertain" (Egenfeldt-Nielsen *et al.* 2016: 159). Yet, like other media, they can have different expressive functions, including artistic, political, social critique or intervention purposes which link games to broader cultural issues and highlight the importance of their "procedural characteristics" (Egenfeldt-Nielsen *et al.* 2016: 160).

Video games are indeed procedural media, which may express what Bogost (2007: ix) calls "procedural rhetoric," defined as "the art of persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions rather than the spoken word, writing, images, or moving pictures." Thus, what produces meaning

in games is not only how they look, but also what players can do in and with games (Egenfeldt-Nielsen *et al.* 2016: 161).

Relevant to meaning is also the fact that games are “ludonarrative” (Fulco 2004: 58), the interface between play and story. Game mechanics and storytelling fluidly interrelate and direct gameplay development by means of interactivity. Ludonarrative is therefore unscripted and gamer-determined (Fulco 2004: 58): players go through a fictional game world which progressively unfolds, and they are told the story they are determining, a “played out” narrative (Bateman 2006: xxvi) within the main pre-determined narrative. As Juul (2005) states, video games are “half-real” as they are both rules and fiction, and playing video games means interacting with real rules while simultaneously imagining a fictional world.

Nowadays, video games are a global mass consumption product, which is enjoyed by people of every age, gender, ethnicity, and language thanks to the process of game localisation. To understand the phenomenon, the notion of “locale” is fundamental (Esselink 2000: 1), with reference to a geographical area with distinguishing features such as language, units of currency, and character encoding, among others, which, however, do not always correspond to single countries or single languages. If, for example, Italian-Italy is one locale, as regards French, French-Canada is one locale while French-France is another, because, as Dunne (2014) explains, local market requirements are referred to using the hypernym ‘locale’ and expressed as language-country pair.

Localisation is a superordinate term which covers all the technical, cultural, and linguistic operations aimed to adapt a video game to the target locale where it will be distributed. Translation is thus only “one of the fundamental phases of the whole localisation process which also affects many and diverse extralinguistic contents”, as Pettini specifies (2022: 14). Indeed, localisation also covers activities such as the organisation of all game assets (audio, art, cinematics, and text), the integration of the same assets, including translations, into the game build, and finally several rounds of functionality and linguistic testing (Pettini 2022: 24-26). Within the localisation cycle, translation involves, and is meant here as, in Pettini’s words (2022: 14), “the process and the result of the interlinguistic and intercultural transfer of game texts from one original language/culture into other languages/cultures,” that is “the process and the result of the linguistic and cultural mediation of video games as texts.” In this sense, since entertainment is the purpose or *skopos* of video games globally, game translation is primarily driven by the *skopos* of entertaining the player of the translated game (O’Hagan and Mangiron 2013: 150). Accordingly, game translation requires a functionalist approach aimed at recreating the ‘look and feel’ or ‘fun factor’ of the original game experience (Mangiron and O’Hagan 2006, Bernal-Merino 2009). Localising the game experience means both guaranteeing functionality and enhancing players’ immersion into the game world, it means allowing players to both use the product and enjoy

the artifact, the artist creation (Bernal-Merino 2015: 103). In a word, game localisation, including translation, requires “playability” (Bernal-Merino 2015: 40), implying that any technical, cultural, and linguistic transformation is allowed in order to bring the game closer to the taste and/or expectations of the target locale. Consequently, the look of games and the way they are played can vary in different locales (Bernal-Merino 2015: 106-107). They are designed to go global and adapted to be local and, in this light, culture-related aspects are of special significance.

Culturalisation (Edwards 2011, 2012, 2014) is another crucial localisation phase which aims to favour players’ engagement with the game’s content at a deeper and more meaningful level or, conversely, it aims to avoid players’ disengagement for a potentially incongruent or even offensive piece of content, where ‘content’ is anything a player will see, hear, or read. As Edwards (2011: 21-23) explains, two main factors affecting cultural content must be evaluated (Edwards 2011: 21-23): first, the ‘context’, namely target players’ religion, ethnicity, location, social connections, economic status, educational background, political environment, etc.; secondly, what Edwards (2011: 22-23) terms the “geopolitical and cultural forces at play,” representing the four “broad categories of cultural aspects that most often generate conflict between the game’s context and local cultures.” They are, as Edwards argues (2011: 27), “history, religion, intercultural conflict and geopolitical friction” and usually represent areas of potential controversy, as the analysis of some characters in Section 5 will exemplify with reference to political ideology and history.

To identify potential cultural issues, Edwards (2012: 29) puts forward two concepts: “contextual proximity” and “contextual independence.” The former means that the more content elements resemble or are inspired by a real context, for example, by simulating or mimicking real-world locations, people, events, religions, nationalities, ethnicities, “the greater the potential for cultural sensitivity.” The second related concept which may help developers and/or localisation professionals to detect potential cultural issues is that of contextual independence which means that “content elements become more independent the less they require their original context for meaning” and thus, the decontextualised use of an element may prove to be potentially controversial (Edwards 2012: 29).

Lastly, concerning culturalisation, it is important to specify that, as the analysis will show, and as Edwards explains (2011: 22), since gamers’ main concern is the game fun factor, most backlash due to sensitive cultural issues comes from the unintended audience surrounding players: people who do not play games and often have a negative predisposition towards games, like players’ parents, the clergy, local lawmakers, etc. Moreover, controversy rarely affects the market because “ironically, the more backlash the unintended audience creates, the more interest gamers seem to take in the ‘controversial’ game title” (Edwards 2011: 22).

4. Methodology

As mentioned in the Introduction, this paper presents a preliminary diachronic and qualitative analysis of the linguistic and cultural characteristics of Italianness as Otherness in the original games and in their Italian localisations in the last forty years of the history of video games. It examines the original and localised representation of ten Italians featured as Others in video games, foregrounding their interpretation as 'foreign' characters from the early stage of gaming in the 1980s to the late 2010s. For this purpose, the diachronic perspective adopted in this research also outlines the history of game localisation and shows how technological progress has deeply affected video games' design and adaptation to foreign markets. Indeed, by tracing the development of gaming platforms, it is easy to understand how their technological capacities or limitations have shaped video games in terms of quantity and quality of text, graphics, and sound, consequently influencing both game development and localisation, whose progress includes the four stages examined in Section 5.

As regards their foreignness, although the concept of source culture in video games is open to question, since the game industry represents a hybrid cultural environment (see Consalvo 2006, Pettini 2022: 59-77), here 'foreign' means other than the culture of the game's developer and/or publisher company. All the games examined in this paper were developed and published by non-Italian corporations.

With respect to the criteria for including the Italian game characters in the analysis, in order to avoid bias in content selection, as suggested by Schmierbach (2009), I primarily used the most recent lists of the Top 10 Italian Video Game Characters compiled by two Italian specialised resources, namely the game magazine *Multiplayer* (Staccini 2019) and the game-themed YouTube channel *Playerinsidue* (Verri and Calvagna 2019). In this regard, it is important to mention that the two lists include more than ten characters each, because some games or series feature more than one Italian character, i.e., Mario and Luigi in the 'Mario' franchise (Nintendo 1981–) or Giana and Maria in *The Great Giana Sisters* game (Rainbow Arts 1987), and because the authors further develop the top 10 list, by deliberately mentioning other characters. Moreover, the two lists only partially coincide: only twelve characters are mentioned in both, out of a total of twenty-five instances.

On this basis, further selection has been made according to more relevant and medium-specific criteria in order to offer a wide sample of products representative of the gaming phenomenon for each period analysed. These criteria include: (a) production — games were developed and published by non-Italian companies, as explained above; (b) local distribution — games were officially distributed in Italy and translated by localisation professionals, as opposed to fan or amateur translation; (c) time of release — games were published in the four stages of game localisation history

identified by Bernal-Merino (2015: 157-175) and O'Hagan and Mangiron (2013: 46-63); (d) genre and sub-genre characteristics — games belong to different gameplay and narrative genres, ranging from arcade titles to action console games as for the gameplay mechanic, which also relates to games' variety in terms of platform, and from fantasy settings to real war-themed experiences as to the narrative component; (e) seriality — most games belong to long-running and popular game franchises; (f) audience — games present different age ratings, varying from titles suitable for children to games labelled "Mature" according to the US Entertainment Software Rating Board and, more relevantly given the focus on localisation, "18" according to the Pan-European Game Information system, widely known as PEGI; and (g) audience reception — reviews and global sales were also taken into account, with respect to their year of release and to their popularity in the history of video games.

However, due to space limitations and methodological considerations, it was deemed necessary to exclude Italian female characters and Mafia characters, since they require an in-depth separate examination. Given their complex sociocultural and sociolinguistic nature, these two major themes deserve more detailed studies presenting specific analytical approaches. In the examination of Italian characters in the Mafia games genre, special attention should be paid to investigate whether and how those "sociolinguistic mechanisms" which "replicate or challenge pre-existing values and beliefs commonly associated with the Italian Mafia" (Pitroso 2019: 46) are mediated in the original representation and in the localisation for the Italian audience. As concerns Italian women characters, a gender-critical perspective should be adopted to show, if any, the ideology behind the representation of womanhood and its evolution in the history of video games in the light of the increasing interest and engagement of female players (see Pettini 2018, 2020, 2021).

More relevantly, the multimedia representation of the ten Italian characters selected has been qualitatively analysed in the original game and in the Italian localisation. Thus, special attention has been paid to investigate the original and localised interpretation and mediation of their Italianness in the linguistic and cultural dimensions of their characterisation, as expressed via different but distinctive representational tools, including physical appearance, personality, narrative role, proper names, the use of Italian language in game texts, speech accents in dialogues, and more culture-related aspects of both verbal and non-verbal game content.

5. Italian characters in video games

This section describes the linguistic and cultural representation of Italianness as Otherness in multimedia interactive entertainment from the birth of gaming in the early 1980s to the latest phase of the 2010s. These stages have been identified by Bernal-Merino (2015: 157-175) and O'Hagan and Mangiron (2013: 46-63), whose works have been adapted in this paper

to develop the diachronic overview of Italian game characters presented in the following paragraphs.

5.1 The 1980s

The video games developed in the late 1970s and early 1980s, mostly arcade titles, included a few or no elements to be translated, being the first products “almost purely mechanical, i.e. simple and intuitive gameplay with very little in the form of instructions, storylines, or voices” (Bernal-Merino 2015: 158). Most games were thus distributed in their original version and trade took place mainly in English between the USA, Japan, and the United Kingdom. Accordingly, English terms such as ‘arcade’, ‘joystick’, ‘score’ and ‘game over’ were introduced into most languages during this period (Bernal-Merino 2015: 159). Nevertheless, even if games posed little or no language barriers, their international shipping already required some sort of localisation, especially for Japanese titles, thus offering a preview of what the phenomenon would mean in years to come. Actually, in order to make their games available to the enormous US market, Japanese publishers were the ones who started thinking about localisation earlier (Bernal-Merino 2015: 160). However, due to the technical limitations of early platforms, translating from Japanese usually required more screen space because Japanese text used to be stored in picture format, and therefore the original game had to be reprogrammed to fit the translated English text (Bernal-Merino 2015: 161). In this period, some computer-based American games were also localised into Japanese, but the process was limited to user manuals (Hasegawa cit. in O’Hagan and Mangiron 2013: 51). Overall, the early phase of game localisation was a trial-and-error era, in which developers had limited, if any, knowledge about localisation and there was also little control over the quality of translations, usually performed by developers’ friends or other non-professionals, meaning that localisation was an amateurish business (O’Hagan and Mangiron 2013: 51).

In the late 1980s, however, “box and docs” localisation, that is the translation of packaging and documentation, became standard practice (Bernal-Merino 2015: 164). Target languages were the dominant languages of Western Europe, that is the languages of the countries presenting a certain maturity of their national markets in terms of computer users, availability per capita income, and demand for new forms of entertainment. Thus, the ‘E-FIGS’ approach (English, French, Italian, German and Spanish) “quickly became the *de facto* minimum localisation standard” (Bernal-Merino 2015: 164, original emphasis). Moreover, the increase of game platforms capacity produced a proportional expansion of translatable assets and some developers started to include non-interactive cinematic sequences or cut-scenes, with narration provided through subtitle-like running text. There was no voice track, the only sound was computer-generated background music and some sound effects, while the texts scrolled from left to right in the lower half of the screen synchronised with

graphics, but subtitling conventions and typographic norms were completely ignored (O'Hagan and Mangiron 2013: 52).

In this early stage of gaming, a prime example of Italianness as Otherness can be observed in the arcade title *Donkey Kong* (Nintendo 1981) which, according to Dillon (2011: 43), was one of the first platform games featuring a jumping mechanic and narrating a simple but entertaining story by means of short cut-scenes. Although the concepts of authorship and auteurism are problematic in video games (Pettini 2015: 270-273), *Donkey Kong's* designer Shigeru Miyamoto is widely considered as an *auteur* in the industry, as one of those game designers who have achieved widespread recognition similar to high-profile film directors, "gaining something of a celebrity status" (O'Hagan and Mangiron 2013: 61). Going back to the game, as described by Dillon (2011: 43), the original Japanese protagonist was "a cute, short man with red and blue dress known as 'Jumpman the carpenter'", whose mission was to rescue his girlfriend The Lady from the iconic gorilla in the classic 'damsel in distress' narrative. As O'Hagan and Mangiron explain (2013: 49), "when Nintendo of America (NOA) decided to print the story of the game on the arcade cabinet for" *Donkey Kong*, the two characters' names were changed for the American release: Jumpman and The Lady became Mario and Pauline, or 'Polly', both allegedly inspired by real people linked to or working in the building leased by NOA at that time, which illustrates "how arbitrary some translation decisions actually were in the early stage of game localisation," as O'Hagan and Mangiron remark (2013: 49). In particular, Mario was inspired by the name of the landlord of NOA's building and Polly by the name of one employee's wife (Huddleston 2018). In sum, the most famous game character of all times was born and *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo 1985), which was the first title of the eminent Mario-themed game franchise, became one of the bestselling video games in history, internationally shipped by means of "box and docs" localisation from English into FIGS and Dutch (Bernal-Merino 2015: 163). The game, as the title suggests, actually features two brothers, Mario and Luigi, the latter is the younger, taller, and thinner one, who, since Mario is the undisputed leading character, simply serves as the deuteragonist of the 'Mario' series to finally offer a second player option.

Mario is the Italian-American chubby and moustached blue-collar hero we all know today, he is the plumber from Brooklyn who has appeared in hundreds of games and several movies and television series. Super Mario is a global icon, that is, in Ryan's words (2011: 5), "a world-beloved character with roots across three continents: Asian invention, American setting, European [origins and] name." Interestingly, as concerns the source culture, according to Smith (2016: 43), the Italian-American origin of the leading character in a Japanese video game is not coincidental, since, as a macro internationalisation strategy, in the 1980s the Japanese media industries tended to avoid Japaneseness and create 'culturally odourless' products for the global market.

As regards Mario's Italianness, it is worth mentioning that, according to Benoît-Carbone (2020: 185-186), it is actually difficult to be framed, because the Italian stereotypes which characterise Mario are so generic that he might be also perceived as Mexican or simply Latin and this makes Mario, in his opinion, a pseudo-Italian. Benoît-Carbone (2020: 185-186) argues that Mario is rather the result of a hybrid and transnational narration of Italianness, the result of narratives which shaped and voiced a character according to a set of non-specific ethnic features which gradually sedimented thanks to different filters and cultural contexts and, particularly, thanks to the interchange between Japanese and US creative industries.

Relevant to this research is the fact that, despite his worldwide popularity, Mario is an "almost totally blank" character (Ryan 2011: 5), one of the least developed protagonists in gaming history. As regards the linguistic representation of his otherness, as Collins explains (2013: 69), dialogues in Mario-themed games relied primarily on written text, with very few exclamatory voice clips. Indeed, Mario's vocal repertoire included a small number of words such as 'whoa!', 'whoo!', 'Luigi!' and 'Mamma Mia!' thus remaining mostly voiceless because, as Collins reveals (2013: 69) "the Mario franchise became popular before vocals were feasible for characters." As to Mario's verbal characterisation, Ryan (2011: 137) explains that "vocal actors learn to be broad" to mark personality and in this case dubbing an Italian plumber from Brooklyn meant, quite stereotypically, "a 'fuhgeddaboutit' type of voice."

It took fourteen years before Mario gained his iconic voice in *Mario's Game Gallery* (Interplay Entertainment 1995) and numerous actors were hired from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s to linguistically 'other' the world's most famous plumber (HSE 2018). As Ryan (2011: 137) claims, "Nintendo finally found the right actor to play Mario" with Charles Martinet, who also lends his voice to other characters, including Mario's brother Luigi. As opposed to other auditioners, Martinet captivated Nintendo's attention with his chipper falsetto and meat-a-ball accent, which also perfectly suited Mario's conversations about video games, Italian food, plumbing, family, etc., and thus "It's-a me, Mario! Wee-heee!" turned into the memorable line we all know today.

Another Italian character 'othered' by Japanese developers in the 1980s and selected for this overview is Pizza Pasta, an outstanding boxer from Naples who appears in the arcade version of *Punch-Out!!* (Nintendo 1984). Interestingly, as the game's creator Genyo Takeda and Nintendo's CEO at that time Satoru Iwata explain in an interview (cit. in Horowitz 2020: 109-110), with the US market in mind, the character's name playfully alludes to his power since, in their words, Pizza Pasta is sticky "like the way cheese on pizza is sticky."

5.2 The 1990s

In this decade, the game industry started to become increasingly professional, and translation was a *sine qua non*. As Bernal-Merino (2015: 164-165) argues, there was a shift from minimal “box and docs” translation to “partial localisation” for most big titles. Moreover, subtitling increased accessibility for the deaf and the hard-of-hearing gamer community. As concerns localisation levels, it seems worth explaining that partial localisation means that the in-game text, the packaging, and the manual are translated, but the original voice-over is only subtitled, as opposed to full localisation where audio is dubbed (Maxwell-Chandler and O’Malley-Deming 2012: 8-10). Indeed, since voice-over assets are the most expensive and time-consuming part to be localised, full localisation is usually reserved to big budget titles with healthy expected revenues.

Several Italian characters debuted across different game genres and narratives in this stage. The simplest representative of Italianness as Otherness in the early 1990s is Loris Biaggi, one of the six multicultural playable characters of the arcade sports title *Flying Power Disc* (Data East 1994), also known as *Windjammers*. As concerns representation, this character’s name is based on the famous motorcycle racers Loris Capirossi and Massimiliano Biaggi.

More pertinently with respect to localisation, it is in the late 1990s that an Italian Other stars in a narrative-driven title: Marco Bartoli, the main villain of the action-adventure platform title *Tomb Raider II* (Eidos Interactive 1997), whose playable protagonist is the iconic archaeologist-adventurer Lara Croft. The story of this second episode revolves around the mythical Dagger of Xian, a weapon which, according to legend, has the power of turning into a dragon the person who bravely plunges it into his/her heart, as happens to Bartoli in the final fight with Lara Croft. The dagger was hidden near the remains of the Chinese Great Wall by Tibet warrior monks to prevent the Chinese Emperor to use it to command his army and subjugate other peoples. Both the English archaeologist-adventurer Lara Croft and Marco Bartoli, who is obsessed with ancient lore, are searching for this famous weapon and this motivates their conflict throughout the episode.

Marco Bartoli is an Italian man from Venice who leads a criminal organisation called *Fiamma Nera* [Black Flame] and, as one of his blocky and overtly masculine followers tells Lara in a cut-scene, Bartoli considers himself as the chosen one, the person destined to kill himself with the mythical dagger and finally be worshipped.

Although, as fans observe (Tomb Raider Wiki), he “is the only main villain not to have a verbal confrontation with Lara” in the series, the linguistic and cultural representation of this character and of his henchmen is well-developed for that time. *Tomb Raider II* is indeed the first episode to be

fully localised and Italian characters are dubbed with a strong Italian accent in the original game, which contrasts with Lara's British aristocratic accent. Remarkably, to reproduce the original Otherness, a diatopic variety is introduced in the Italian localisation: Marco Bartoli and his minions all speak with a strong Sicilian accent, which is stereotypically associated with the Mafia. As Iaia argues (2015: 89), "the diatopic and diastratic variety of *Siciliano*—from Sicily—is generally adopted for those people connected with Mafia style organised crime syndicates," but its inclusion can also depend on ideological modifications to the original characterisation, which rely on target-culture conventions. As concerns Marco Bartoli, indeed, the association between him and *Siciliano* is completely arbitrary and out of context, since, as mentioned above, this character is from and lives in Venice, where one of Lara Croft's (the player) major missions against Bartoli is set.

Another relevant aspect of Italianness as Otherness in *Tomb Raider II* relates to culturalisation and particularly to the linguistic and extralinguistic meanings of the organisation led by Marco Bartoli, *Fiamma Nera*, which might be easily interpreted as an allusion to fascism by Italian people. First, this name contains *fiamma* [flame], which was the name and symbol of the neofascist Italian Social Movement and still is the name of a far-right political party, and it includes the colour word *nera* [black], where black has historically been linked to fascism and neofascism as a reference to Blackshirts, the armed squads of Italian Fascists under Benito Mussolini, who used to wear black shirts as part of their uniform. Secondly, the symbol of Bartoli's *Fiamma Nera* seems to combine the swastika symbol and the Celtic cross, both commonly used by neo-Nazis and neo-fascists as political ideology markers. Moreover, the design of Bartoli's henchmen, in terms of appearance, clothing and weapons, can be easily related to those of far-right extremists, thus contributing to make this content culturally sensitive.

5.3 The 2000s

In the early 2000s, the technological advances of game consoles made the localisation process more efficient and allowed for a bigger storage volume for text, also in audio and video formats. This progress had significant implications, since greater audio capacities allowed dialogue voice-over by means of human voices and the more sophisticated graphics, which portrayed game characters' facial expressions, required increasingly accurate lip-synching (Hasegawa cit. in O'Hagan and Mangiron 2013: 59). Consequently, the industry started to hire professional voice actors and audiovisual translation experts, together with programmers and other Information Technology specialists able to work on multiple language game versions. In the 2000s, indeed, with few exceptions, full localisation became standard in more and more languages for big-budget games.

In this stage, the most representative game character of Italianness as Otherness is Ezio Auditore from *Assassin's Creed II* (Ubisoft 2009), the

second major instalment of the widely popular action-adventure game franchise *Assassin's Creed* (2007–), whose plot follows the centuries-old struggle between two ancient secret societies: the Assassins, who fight for peace with free will, and the Knights Templar, who aim at establishing peace through control. In particular, in this episode, the protagonist of *Assassin's Creed* near-future science-fiction frame story Desmond Miles explores the genetic memories of his ancestor Ezio Auditore, a young nobleman and Assassin from the Renaissance-era Florence. Set between the late 15th century and the early 16th century, the game gave Italy high and global visibility (see Gandolfi 2015, Girina 2020) and the protagonist Ezio Auditore became one of the most popular characters of the franchise and of video games in general (Moore 2021).

According to Madden (2020: 277), born on 24 June 1459, Ezio Auditore is the younger son of Florentine aristocrats, his father is a banker and his mother is an able household manager and patroness of art. Ezio had the typical upbringing of a Florentine nobleman and served as an apprentice to the banker Giovanni Tornabuoni, the brother of the wife of the powerful Lorenzo de' Medici. Famous Italian people and noble families abound in *Assassin's Creed II*: Ezio is a great friend of renowned Italians of the time, such as Leonardo da Vinci and Niccolò Machiavelli, he is also the clandestine lover of Cristina Vespucci, cousin of the well-known Florentine navigator, and later the lover of Caterina Sforza, belonging to the dynasty which ruled Milan for almost a century.

Ezio's personality, as described by Madden (2020: 277), is that of a handsome, charming, and frivolous young aristocrat, who spent his time fighting rival gangs on Florence Ponte Vecchio, seducing young noblewomen, discovering secrets and running across roofs. His character is so well-developed that it might be difficult for a non-expert to distinguish fictional Ezio from a real young nobleman of that period. Moreover, details play an important role in making Ezio believable and relatable: his birthday coincides with the feast day of Florence's patron saint, his apprenticeship with Tornabuoni, his family's connections with Florentine powerful families, and his active participation in important Florentine events. As Madden observes (2020: 277), all these factors contribute to player's engagement, to their belief that they are playing a real, or at least very realistic, character. In other words, as Madden stresses (2020: 277), it is the way in which Ezio's life is embedded in his Florence what "contributes to the narrative's success and the player's own sense of realism."

From a representational point of view, Ezio perfectly embodies the stereotype of the Italian 'Don Giovanni': a great seducer and womaniser with a very libertine approach to sexuality. From a linguistic and translational perspective, it is worth observing that, in the English version, Ezio is voiced by a single and famous voice actor, namely Roger Craig Smith, in all his appearances, while in the Italian localisations Ezio has been voiced by two different actors: Renato Novara gives voice to a young Ezio

in *Assassin's Creed II* and *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood* (2010), while in the next chapter, *Assassin's Creed: Revelations* (2011), in which Ezio obviously appears aged, he was assigned the more mature voice of Diego Baldoín. Going back to the original English version, it is also worth mentioning the great research work done by Roger Craig Smith for developing Ezio's Italian accent. As he explains in an interview (Smith cit. in Thumb Culture 2016), the game's localisation team envisioned, and thus othered, Ezio Auditore with a standard Italian accent because, in their view, marking his speech with the Florentine variety would have produced an excessive foreignising effect on the English-speaking audience. Moreover, to enhance his performance, Smith attended pronunciation lessons with several specialised language coaches (cit. in Thumb Culture 2016), which testifies to the quality of characterisation in game localisation, especially in big-budget titles like *Assassin's Creed* games.

Nevertheless, as Fernández-Costales (2016: 184) observes as concerns the Spanish version, the *Assassin's Creed* saga clearly exemplifies foreignisation strategies at global level. Particularly, in *Assassin's Creed II* there is a strong tendency towards borrowing, since "an important amount of names, references, historical plots, and cultural components that are kept untranslated" (Fernández-Costales 2016: 184) in localisation, the most popular one being *Salute!* as an archaic form of greeting. In short, many expressions are deliberately left in Italian, spoken dialogues in cut-scenes are dubbed with a gentle Italian accent and these choices contribute to the culture-specific Italian flavour of the game (Fernández-Costales 2012: 395).

5.4 The 2010s

If the impact that technology has on game design and localisation is clear, it is easy to understand how immersive entertainment can be thanks to the latest generations of consoles. Nowadays, online connectivity, huge storage capacity for text, picture, music, motion-sensing controllers, etc., greatly enhance players' experience, whose linguistic and cultural dimension is tailored to their specific needs thanks to localisation. However, the more complex and sophisticated video games are, the greater the challenges localisation involves. Modern projects now include several hundred experts, each specialising in different aspects of the game such as sound, programming, animation, graphics, marketing, design, and production. As for localisation, the industry tends towards professionalisation: the success of video games paved the way for companies to specialise in this field during the first decade of the new millennium (Bernal-Merino 2015: 245). They are the so-called 'language service providers' or 'localisation vendors', such as the multinational group Keywords Studios, now leading the sector. A highly qualified workforce, together with better tools and cooperative strategies for team-working via web-enabled applications, is now increasing the speed and quality of the game localisation industry, whose objective nowadays is "enhanced" localisation (Bernal-Merino 2015: 157). The use of this

adjective aims to indicate “an enhancement of the game in relation to consumer expectation in a given locale” (Bernal-Merino 2015: 173), meaning that any changes potentially increasing players’ immersion and engagement, ranging from gameplay features to story preferences, should be considered and evaluated as appropriate to address a specific community or market.

Deep or enhanced localisation means offering “a product that caters directly to local tastes and sensitivities in a systematised way” (Bernal-Merino 2015: 173). This approach requires the integration of localisation in the process of game development, it entails the radical move of localisation from the post-production stage, which usually takes place after development, to the early creative and planning stages. In this sense, localisation becomes closely involved with the creation of a game that considers the target markets’ preferences from the beginning.

Translators may play a creative and more authorial role in this process, a role that, according to Bernal-Merino (2015: 173), “inevitably clashes with some of the traditionally accepted views of translation as a ‘true’ copy of the original.” Enhanced localisation means prioritising the target audiences’ expectations and, although this may imply significant changes to the original game, as Bernal-Merino specifies (2015: 174), this approach “should not be perceived as a mandate to modify everything, but rather as an awareness of the sensitivities and preferences of other cultures.” Therefore, enhanced localisation is increasingly common in the game industry, “the goal towards which the most experienced game developers and publishers are starting to work” (Bernal-Merino 2015: 174), because it is more beneficial for all involved.

One of the most famous Italian characters to debut in the 2010s is Dante Alighieri in the “hack ‘n’ slash” action video game *Dante’s Inferno* (Electronic Arts 2010), which represents a “re-mediation” (Bolter and Grusin 2000) or intersemiotic translation of the first *Cantica* of the Divine Comedy. As Pettini (2017) shows, in its journey from the stanzas of the poem to video game consoles, the adaptation of Dante Alighieri’s *Inferno* involved many and radical changes which deeply affected its storyline, characters, text and language. To translate literature into playability and make Dante the poet into an action hero, for example, developers re-imaged him as a powerful and merciless Third Crusade warrior. In respect to text and language, the 1867 translation of Dante Alighieri’s *Inferno* by the US poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was the source of inspiration for game writers, who tried to recreate the vernacular of mediaeval Italy in an accessible and abridged version. As concerns localisation, as usually happens in video games based on literature, the Italian translation of *Dante’s Inferno* the game has been profoundly influenced by the literary work, since, as Pettini (2017: 109-116) demonstrates, translators largely and successfully deviated from the game’s source text to engage intertextually with the original poem. Indeed, given the *skopos*-driven nature of game translation,

to transfer the look and feel of the game for the Italian target audience, translators produced “a digital imitative Dantesque experience both literally and literarily” (Pettini 2017: 116). First, they borrowed integral or partial quotations from the poem; secondly, they boasted their writing skills to create a literary-like style making phonological, morphological, lexical, and syntactic choices which clearly echo, and pay tribute to, the memorable words and lines of Dante Alighieri’s *Inferno* in order to finally enhance Italian players’ immersion in that interactive literary universe.

Another relevant example of Italianness as Otherness in the 2010s is Enzo, from the action game *Bayonetta* (Nintendo 2010), the first episode of the series titled after its witch protagonist, of which Enzo is the human abusive friend. In the game’s story, Enzo is an undertaker and informant who provides Bayonetta with crucial information for her missions. Enzo’s Italianness is expressed visually and aurally through his stereotypical appearance and voice. His body and style allude to the stereotypical Italian-American man with a deep coarse Brooklyn accent: a bit overweight, keeping his hair in a ponytail and having rather long sideburns, he wears a winter coat, a scarf, a suit underneath, gloves featuring many different rings which show his lust for money, a round hat and dark-lensed glasses. As to personality, Enzo is represented as a devoted family man and as a businessman always looking to increase his profits also with activities of doubtful legality. Enzo’s Italianness is voiced linguistically too, not only for his accent, but for the use of Italian words like *nonna* [grandmother], *inferno* [hell] and *grappa*, which are kept unaltered in the subtitles of this partially localised game, and of the memorable and polysemous “phrase *forget about it* (pronounced as [fə'gedabaud'it], with lengthening of the second syllable), commonly used in mafia films” (Parini 2019: 255, original emphasis), which unequivocally reminds the typical Italian gangster’s talk.

Claudio Serafino, from the Japanese fighting game *Tekken 7* (Bandai Namco 2015) is another Italian game character of this stage. As fans explain (Tekken Wiki), he is said to be the world’s strongest exorcist, leader of the secret organisation known as The Archers of Sirius which join the Tekken Force to defeat the main villain. Claudio Serafino is portrayed as a sarcastic and cocky beautiful man, lean and muscular, with blue eyes, black hair, and pale skin. His outfit is extremely elegant: a collared white coat adorned with gold lining and embroidering, white trousers, a grey-buttoned vest over a black undershirt, white gloves, and grey and white decorated loafers. As concerns localisation, this game presents interesting features related to multilingualism: each character speaks his/her language, including Japanese, English, and Italian in the case of Claudio Serafino, while subtitles are provided in the language of the localised version, e.g., English for the US game, which produces a remarkable foreignising effect.

The final character included in this overview of Italians as Others in video games is Luca Cocchiola, from the single-player campaign of *Battlefield 1* (Electronic Arts 2016), the fifteenth instalment of the war-themed shooting

game series *Battlefield* (2002–). The game is set in World War I and inspired by historical events. In particular, Luca Cocchiola is an Alpini soldier of the Italian Royal Army elite special force 'Arditi' and the playable protagonist of the fourth war story of the game, namely 'Avanti Savoia!', which takes place during the autumn of 1918 on Dolomites, in the Northern region of Veneto. The story is told in flashback: Luca Cocchiola is an aged war veteran who narrates his WWI experience to his daughter and unfolds the story of his twin brother, Matteo, who died in the decisive battle on Monte Grappa on their 21st birthday. Narration time exactly coincides with their birthday and, indeed, after long interactive sequences, where Luca (the player) fights several battles against the Austro-Hungarian forces in the Italian Alps, a final cutscene casts him wishing Matteo *buon compleanno* [happy birthday]. As to localisation, in the original English version, Luca is dubbed with a strong Italian accent which is completely neutralised in the Italian game, where his dialogue lines are performed in unmarked Italian.

As concerns culturalisation, since history is one of the 'big four' sensitive topics (Edwards 2011: 27), *Battlefield 1* provoked great controversy in Italy before the game was launched due to the WWI setting and, particularly, the 'Avanti Savoia!' war story. The most adverse backlash was expressed by the Italian Association of Alpini, who defined the developers' decision to transform a sacred place like Monte Grappa into a video game as disrespectful, inappropriate, and outrageous, an offence to the sacrifice of those tens of thousands of young people who fought and died to defend their homeland (Malgieri 2016). The controversy hit the headlines for some weeks until the game's launch, and when *Battlefield 1* was finally playable, backlash abated but criticism was redirected at historical accuracy.

6. Conclusions

Knowledge about the Other is central for understanding and defining our identity and representations of Otherness are pivotal resources for our self-representations. Video games continuously engage in the representational practice of othering people who diverge from those who, at a specific time and place, are seen as normal and hegemonic. The game industry is dominated by Japanese, North American, Chinese and, to a lesser extent, Western-Europe companies which regularly mediate and re-mediate a variety of Others globally. As Section 5 has shown, from the early stage of gaming in the 1980s to the late 2010s, Italy and Italians have often been the object of international othering, occupying important roles originally envisioned as Others in game narratives of very different genres. The scope of characterisation, and Italianness' linguistic and cultural dimension, is deeply influenced by the technological capacities of gaming platforms, which also affect localisation levels. The degree of linguistic accessibility of "box and docs" translation is incomparable with the immersiveness players are offered thanks to full or even enhanced localisation. However, the more advanced the localisation level is, the greater are the challenges: until the late 1990s translators dealt with very little, if any, text, mostly proper nouns

which, in line with the overall internationalisation strategy, were not even translated; conversely, today's professionals usually work on extremely text-heavy products made of a variety of translatable assets, each requiring specific skills.

As regards the localisation of Italianness as Otherness for Italians, the analysis shows that, as O'Hagan and Mangiron (2013: 177) observe, neutralisation is the most common and appropriate strategy, since local accents or dialects would not reflect the same connotations as the original. Most characters speaking with a marked Italian accent in the source game are given a standard Italian voice in the Italian localisation, while the Italian words and expressions enhancing Otherness' flavour in the original inevitably lose the intended characterisation value. Noteworthy in this regard is, on the one hand, Ezio Auditore's voice, purposefully unmarked in the source game not to alienate the international audience, and, on the other hand, the diatopic variety introduced for one character only, namely Marco Bartoli, which confirms the stereotypical association between Italian criminality and the Mafia in the Southern region of Sicily.

The diachronic overview presented in this paper suggests several venues for further research. First, it might be extended to other Others, in order to compare the representation, localisation and culturalisation of other nationalities or ethnicities for their respective locales. Secondly, the texts of each game mentioned in this paper might be analysed more in depth to focus on micro translation strategies. Lastly, as discussed in Section 4, two major themes deserve more detailed studies: Italian female characters from a gender-critical perspective and Italian characters in the Mafia games genre, with special attention to those "sociolinguistic mechanisms" which "replicate or challenge pre-existing values and beliefs commonly associated with the Italian Mafia" (Pitroso 2019: 46).

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- *Bud Spencer & Terence Hill: Slaps and Beans* (Buddy Productions 2017)
- *Dante's Inferno* (Electronic Arts 2010)
- *Donkey Kong* (Nintendo 1981)
- *Flying Power Disc* (Data East 1994)
- *Mario's Game Gallery* (Interplay Entertainment 1995)
- *Punch-Out!!* (Nintendo 1984)
- *Red Dead* series (Rockstar Games 2004–)
- *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo 1985)
- *Tekken 7* (Bandai Namco 2015)
- *The Great Giana Sisters* (Rainbow Arts 1987)
- *Tomb Raider II* (Eidos Interactive 1997)

Biography

Silvia Pettini is a Research Fellow in English Language and Translation Studies at Roma Tre University (Italy). Her main research interests include Game Localisation, Audiovisual Translation, Contrastive Linguistics and Online Lexicography. Among her most recent publications are *The Translation of Realia and Irrealia in Game Localization: Culture-Specificity between Realism and Fictionality* (Routledge, 2022), and papers in *MediAzioni, Lingue e Linguaggi*, and *Status Quaestionis*.



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