Indirect translation in game localization as a method of global circulation of digital artefacts

A socio-economic perspective

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To contribute towards extending the scope of research on indirect translation, this article focuses on game localization as an overlooked site where this translation practice is relatively common. For major games developed in a language other than English (LOTE), the English version (locale) is often used as a pivot from which to generate other locales across different regions. This article investigates the motivations, challenges, and implications of the use of indirect translation in game localization through a case study of Square Enix – a major Japanese game developer/publisher that is among the pioneers of game localization. It reveals how indirect translation forms both a solution and a bottleneck for the global circulation of digital interactive products. The article uncovers the key factors behind the position of English as the default pivot language in localizing Japanese games and points to the possible future impact of the emergence of Asian markets, particularly the Chinese market, on the game localization ecosystem. The lens of indirect translation facilitates theorizing underexplored aspects of game localization as an economic activity situated in the digital terrain. By casting the apparent drawback of indirect translation in a socio-economic framework, the article presents the future scope of this research subfield in game localization.

Keywords: indirect translation, game localization, Japanese games, pivot language, economics, Square Enix, global circulation of games

1. Introduction

This article seeks to highlight the scope and nature of the use of indirect translation in game localization which enables digital games to cross linguistic and
socio-cultural borders and be distributed in the global marketplace (O’Hagan and Mangiron 2013, 13). Game localization involves translating and adapting games in relevant regional versions (locales) to ensure that they are technically, linguistically, and culturally adjusted for a given target territory. Indirect translation is commonly applied to games developed in a language other than English (LOTE) in order to localize them into multiple languages, with English typically serving as the pivot language. The multi-layer structure of games, the use of multimedia, and various business practices specific to the game industry (Chandler and Deming 2012) create new contexts for indirect translation, which remains under-researched particularly in the context of digital products (see Pięta 2017). Indirect translation represents multifarious phenomena (Li 2017), but fundamentally refers to any translated text that is not a direct translation from the original source text (Assis Rosa, Pięta, and Bueno Maia 2017, 115–116). This article adopts the open definition of indirect translation as “a translation of a translation” by Assis Rosa, Pięta, and Bueno Maia (2017, 120–121) who draw on Gambier (1994) to accommodate all its variants such as back translation, retranslation, and relay translation. Recent bibliometric studies, such as Pięta (2017), have provided evidence of the historical prevalence of indirect translation, and reveal that much of the research on indirect translation has been focused on the literary genre, leaving explorations of other areas “non-existent” in the literature (200). In fact, this topic has not received much attention within the domain of game localization itself (see Mangiron [2017] for a recent literature review on game localization research), and only brief mentions are made in relation to the localization of Japanese games (e.g., Mangiron 2004; O’Hagan 2009; Mangiron 2021) and, more recently, Chinese games. For example, Teo (2017) highlights how the English version of a Chinese game used as the pivot to generate other European language versions causes “loss in translation unless the translators understand the source language well enough to know the original content” (52). Another study by Wu and Chen (2020), which draws on game-user surveys in Indonesia, finds that “gamers think the lesser quality of Chinese games in Indonesian is due to the use of relay translation” (61). LocalizeDirect’s Game Localization Report (LocalizeDirect 2021, 15) in turn notes that while the most common practice for LOTE games is to use English as the pivot language, “developers can request direct translations […] to keep the translated content as close to the original as possible, reduce the risk of errors and start localization earlier, without having to wait for the bridge language translation.” Stakeholders in the game industry are aware of the ramifications of indirect translation and yet its continued use suggests the trade-off.

Against this backdrop, this article aims to provide a game localization perspective on indirect translation. The article attempts to extend the scope of research on indirect translation to game localization as an example of digital
translation practice which involves the nonlinear transformation of digital objects across locales for different regions. Section 2 discusses the underlying rationale for approaching the topic from a game localization perspective, and outlines the research questions and methodology. Section 3 discusses the specificities of game localization, while Section 4 presents a case study of the trajectory of localization approaches used in a major Japanese game series. This is followed by a discussion of the findings in Section 5. Section 6 summarizes the main findings and includes suggestions for future avenues of research on indirect translation in game localization.

2. Rationale, research questions, and methodology

Literature reviews of research on indirect translation (Assis Rosa, Pięta, and Bueno Maia 2017; St. André 2020) point to a tendency within translation studies to treat this phenomenon as a lesser form of translation, thus perpetuating the limited scholarly interest in this otherwise widespread practice. However, Washbourne (2013, 608) shows how a focus on indirect translation can shine light on translated literary works as intricate nonlinear narratives whose surrounding contexts provide new insights into translation. Following his lead, this article attempts to move beyond the undesirability of indirect translation based on the notion of translation loss (e.g., Teo 2017) and enquires into the contexts surrounding the use of indirect translation in game localization to explore what underlies its application. As a continuously evolving industry practice, game localization is treated as a dynamic ecosystem shaped by the interaction of multiple actors, evolving around the commercial goal of global circulation of games as digital objects. This study applies a socio-economic perspective, broadly guided by the argument of language and economics (Heilbron and Sapiro 2016; Pym 2017), to examine how translation decisions in game localization are intertwined with economic factors and how the inter-relations of actors affect the production, circulation, and consumption of games in technologized environments (Kerr 2017). This in turn serves to test the lens of indirect translation in theorizing underexplored aspects of game localization.

The main research question is why and how indirect translation occurs in game localization and with what effect. This question will be addressed through a contextual analysis of the interrelationship among the actors involved in the indirect translation of games. The article therefore investigates the nature and scope of the application of indirect translation in terms of (1) motivation, (2) challenges, and (3) implications, which in turn uncovers various factors affecting the dynamic ecosystem of game localization.
Given the variation in approaches to localization across different types of games by different game developers and publishers, this article focuses on Square Enix as a major Japanese game developer/publisher that has played a pioneering role in distributing games in the global market through localization (Consalvo 2006). Using a case study of the trajectory of localization approaches applied to its flagship games series, Final Fantasy, released between 1997 and 2016, the article attempts to elicit the array of factors that led to the use of indirect translation and its related practices. The selection of the particular game series and its developer/publisher is based on the fact that (1) the Final Fantasy series spans a sufficient period of time to observe the evolutionary process of localization; (2) Square Enix has contributed significantly to the development of the localization of Japanese games; and (3) such a process is discoverable to some extent through academic publications (e.g., Consalvo 2006; Mangiron and O’Hagan 2006; O’Hagan and Mangiron 2013) as well as other sources, ranging from reports on industry conference presentations to various fan works. When using online sources such as fan-generated content and certain industry-based information care is taken to verify accuracy by comparing the same information against other sources as well as checking with a localization practitioner informer where possible.

3. Game localization

This section provides the background to game localization, as relevant to the current discussion, and outlines how indirect translation is relatively common in this practice for LOTE games.

3.1 A brief historical overview of game localization

The emergence of game localization is connected to the birth of the game industry in the 1970s when, before the entry of Japanese companies in the 1980s, games produced in the US dominated the market (Kent 2001). Game localization was initially treated as a separate and secondary process to game development itself, and was largely left as an afterthought. The shortcoming in this approach, however, led to a framework to embrace localization during the early stages of product development under GILT (referring to globalization, internationalization, localization and translation). As a business procedure developed in the localization industry, GILT foregrounded localization and translation as part of the globalization process with a specific aim to manage time-sensitive product rollouts in an increasing range of target languages across different markets. The subsequent development of the game industry established English and Japanese as the
two main source languages for game localization, with the more recent addition of Chinese. Also, according to a 2020 Newzoo report (Wijman 2020), China is now the largest game-consuming market, ahead of the US, while the Asia-Pacific region makes up 48% of worldwide gaming revenue. However, mainland China remains a challenging market due to its approval system for foreign games by the National Press and Publication Administration (NPPA) which licensed only 97 imported games in 2020, of which 40% were Japanese games, in comparison to 1316 domestic games licensed (LocalizeDirect 2021, 8). The market movements affect the choice of target regions and languages, including the consideration of indirect translation. The top ten localization languages for English-language games are typically French, Italian, German and Spanish (FIGS), Russian, Brazilian Portuguese and Polish, as well as Chinese, Japanese and Korean (CJK). Asian game studios tend to have a two-tier system with the first tier translating directly from the source language into English and the second tier involving indirect translation from English (LocalizeDirect 2021, 16).

The use of English as the pivot language to translate into other languages is based on many factors, including the status of English as a lingua franca as well as the greater availability of translators who can translate in and out of English. Warburton (2016, 15–16) comments on the widespread use of English as a pivot language by language service providers in China, which she observes to be due to “economic reasons,” including the lack of translators qualified in the specific language pair or directionality. Similar explanations would apply to certain other non-English speaking countries, such as Japan, where indirect translation in game localization is often attributed to the lack of a human talent pool (O’Hagan and Mangiron 2013, 270).

3.2 Game localization industry practices and models

Game localization is, first and foremost, a business practice embracing a range of approaches, including the use of indirect translation. Game developers and publishers aim to ship multiple locales simultaneously with the original game (the sim-ship model). In the sim-ship model, localization begins before the original game is finalized in order to meet the tight production timeframes of concurrent releases of the game in different locales. This model aims to maximize profit across all key regions and also has the benefit of deterring piracy (Bernal-Merino 2015, 201). In contrast, in the post-gold model a game is first released in the home country and then, with a time gap, localized versions follow, often causing frustration among international fans, especially of Japanese games (Kohler 2005). Indirect translation is most common in the post-gold model in which the first localized version is typically in English and serves as the text for subsequent
locales (Slator 2019). While this model is common for Chinese games (Wu and Chen 2020) many mainstream Japanese games are shifting towards the sim-ship model. However, indirect translation is also used in sim-ship approaches as in the case of Final Fantasy XV (Square Enix 2016) (see Section 4.3). Indirect translation typically occurs with games developed in LOTE for which an English language version for North America (NA locale) tends to be used as the version from which other European locales are generated. For mainstream Japanese games, the NA locale in US English is usually considered as the top priority and hence released first (O’Hagan and Mangiron 2013).

Games are multimedia products with a nonlinear structure made up of various translatable elements (assets), typically consisting of in-game text assets (such as menu items and other onscreen texts), art assets (text embedded in graphics, which needs to be translated), audio and cinematic assets (movies within a game) as well as online materials for websites for marketing and promotions. It is worth highlighting how different audiovisual translation modes are used to demarcate different levels of localization, with full localization involving the revoicing of dialogues, which is known as voice over (VO) in game localization (O’Hagan and Mangiron 2013, 163–164). By comparison, partial localization only involves subtitling of the dialogue. Games are designed to engage and immerse users and for this reason VO is considered important and is used in the localization of games for major markets despite the cost and resource implications. This, in turn, gives rise to specific issues for indirect translation (see Section 4.2).

Another feature of game localization which is relevant to indirect translation is the distinction between US and UK/IR (Irish) English locales. This distinction involves both technical adjustments due to NTSC/PAL conversions required to meet country-specific television standards (Newman 2019) and adjustments arising from socio-cultural differences across these English-speaking regions, as sometimes seen in literary publishing or cinema releases. Game localization encompassing the conversion (typically) from the US to UK/IR locale will often keep the VO from the NA locale while non-voiced in-game textual assets may be subject to change (O’Hagan and Mangiron 2013, 130). This could be treated as a form of indirect translation, where the UK/IR locale is not made directly from the Japanese original, but rather from the NA locale. A case in point is a recall in the UK market of the Nintendo Wii game Mario Party 8 (Nintendo 2007): the expression ‘spastic’, which had been introduced in the NA locale was retained in the UK/IR version and drew user complaints when the game was released in the UK where this word is recognized as discriminatory (O’Hagan and Mangiron 2013, 178). One slippage in the US–UK localization thus resulted in the recall; however, it was quickly remedied and the product was redistributed in the UK/IR markets (ibid.). Cases such as this demonstrate a challenge associated with indirect
translation, especially in contexts where the same language yet a different locale is involved. As the Japanese game’s NA locale with US English was ported to the UK/IR locale it gave rise to what Pym considers risky translation decisions (Pym 2017, 364) that could affect the end-user trust and result in negative economic consequences. Similar, but even deeper, issues may arise when Traditional Chinese for Taiwan and Hong Kong markets is used as the pivot to localize into Simplified Chinese for mainland China, due to different regulatory environments which reflect socio-cultural and socio-political issues (Zhang and Chiu 2020).

Other examples of distinct approaches that relate to indirect translation are special editions of games based on NA locales translated back into Japanese, which some Japanese developers/publishers market as a separate edition of the initial game. These editions exploit the differences introduced to the NA locale during the localization process, plus some new game features and tweaks made for that locale (O’Hagan 2009). They demonstrate an example of applications of (variants of) indirect translation in generating new products, taking advantage of the relative malleability of games as digital artefacts, and thereby adding economic value (see Section 4.4).

3.3 Culturalization and fan participation in localization

During localization, a set of adjustments related to broad cultural factors are made, which include strategies that some authors call transcreation in reference to the creative deviation from the source (Mangiron and O’Hagan 2006, 11). These adjustments may collectively be regarded as “culturalization” (Edwards 2011, 21–22), which delves into a game’s viability in terms of “fundamental assumptions and content choices” designed for gamers to “engage with the game’s content at a much deeper, more meaningful level” rather than merely helping them comprehend the content of the game. Such strategies are typically applied in relation to depictions of religion, violence, sex, nudity, and disputed geopolitical issues, all of which could disengage the gamer. They may also be prompted by manipulations needed for region-specific rules for age ratings, censorship by the target country, and proactive market-driven adjustments to ensure market relevance, which range from game difficulty levels to gamer preferences such as background music (e.g., Carlson and Corliss 2011). Such broad adjustments in game localization further complicate the impact of indirect translation on end-users.

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1. This may occasionally happen with Japanese games for which there is currently higher demand to localize into Traditional Chinese than into Simplified Chinese and a greater pool of experienced localizers for the former, according to a major localization service provider informant who cannot provide specific data due to a non-disclosure agreement (NDA).
The widespread availability of online communication platforms has enabled end-users of localized games to be vocal and vigilant on issues related to localization, especially concerning culturalization. Such fan engagement with localization and translation issues has, in some cases, led to scrutiny by fans of changes made during localization (e.g., Morrow n.d. for FFXV fandom), and has highlighted, for example, discrepancies across locales and the timing of releases of different locales (Newman 2008). The presence of fans and other commentators on social media has had a significant impact on localization decision-making by game publishers and developers in terms of their planned approach to localization, with professional translators being caught in the middle (O’Hagan 2017). Game localization is increasingly subjected to an unpredictable path, with empowered fans serving as influential actors who pre-empt the localization process for certain controversial game content, in turn influencing the final localization approach (Mandiberg 2017). Indirect translation in game localization is arguably situated in a complex web of stakeholder interest, which includes end-users who have specific agendas as well as publishers/developers who seek profits and to protect the brand image.

4. Case study

The case study contextualizes the motivations, challenges, and implications of the use of indirect translation in the localization of Japanese games. It draws on a trajectory of localization approaches used at Square Enix for a long-running role playing game (RPG) series, Final Fantasy, the first of which was released in Japan in 1987. With specific attention to indirect translation, the main aim is to observe how the company’s localization approaches have evolved from the first title of this series localized into European versions, Final Fantasy VII (Square 1997), to the more recent Final Fantasy XV (Square Enix 2016), released as Square Enix’s first launch into ‘games as a service’ (see Section 5.3.2). Massively Multiplayer Online RPG (MMORPG) titles (i.e., Final Fantasy XI [2002] and Final Fantasy XIV [2013]) are excluded from the study, given their somewhat different requirements for localization. The analysis is given in chronological order and highlights relevant key developments in relation to indirect translation.

4.1 Early experience in European releases and the switch from indirect to direct translation

Final Fantasy VII (Square 1997) was the series’ first major success in international markets, and was Square Enix’s first European localization effort, with its localization into English (NA locale) used as the pivot into FIGS. Despite the com-
mmercial success of the game, the localization was widely criticized for its poor quality across all versions (see e.g., O’Hagan and Mangiron 2004, 58). The negative feedback included criticisms of the use of indirect translation to localize into the FIGS versions (ibid.). However, it is important to acknowledge the impact of technical constraints at the time on the quality of the localization: for example, translated texts had to be constantly shortened due to the limited ROM (read only memory) size available with the game designed for PlayStation using CD-ROM (Kohler 2005). The issue of character encoding systems used for Japanese, such as Shift-JIS, prevented the use of English spell-checkers when typing English, resulting in blatant spelling errors remaining undetected (Chrono Compendium n.d.). The poorly supported technical environment affected the localization quality of the NA locale, likely compounding the subsequent translation challenges into FIGS. In response to this feedback, Final Fantasy VIII (Square 1999) was localized directly from Japanese into English and FIGS, as was Final Fantasy IX (Square 2000). Richard Honeywood, who was in charge of localization at Square Enix, remarked: “We try to translate directly from Japanese to each language wherever possible, but we sometimes translate J->E, then E->FIGS” (Final Fantasy Compendium n.d.) and, “at the time [around 2000] we actually were translating directly from J->FIGS instead of going via English. It had taken us a lot of effort to find and train such translators, so we started to bring them in-house wherever possible.” (ibid.). This indicates that indirect translation was regarded as an unfavorable method for localization, although its subsequent use points to a lack of alternative options.

4.2 Revoicing requirements driving indirect translation

Final Fantasy X (Square Enix 2001), which was released on DVD for PlayStation 2, was, for the first time in the series, able to incorporate VO by human voice actors. After this, VO became a key feature of full localization. Although direct translation from Japanese took place for all localized versions for in-game texts, any voiced texts for cut-scenes and movies were subtitled based on the NA locale in English as the FIGS locales only contained the English VO. In reference to Final Fantasy X, Mangiron (2004) describes the process as a “a curious mix of localization approaches” where the menus, help messages, and in-game tutorials were directly translated from Japanese into FIGS, but the subtitles for the voiced scripts were from the English version. Having worked as part of the Spanish localization team, she explains that, despite the fact that the translators had access to the Japanese (in which they were proficient), they had to follow the English version “regardless of their agreement or disagreement” to avoid discrepancies between the voiced dialogue in English and the subtitles. A case in point is a main character’s line being
translated from りがとう arigato ‘thank you/appreciated’ to “I love you” in English, and from there into FIGS. The subsequent interview with the American translator Alexander O. Smith in the NA team explained this choice as culturally necessary in US cultural contexts, but it also served to meet lip-sync requirements for VO (Smith 2001, cited in O’Hagan and Mangiron 2013, 173–174, 192). However, Mangiron (2004) questions whether a different translation solution may have been found in FIGS if the translators had been permitted to work directly from Japanese. As discussed elsewhere (e.g., Mangiron and O’Hagan 2006), this translation and its impact through the use of NA locale as the pivot was given a mixed reception by fans.

4.3 Implications of sim-ship and localization-friendly game development for indirect translation

The next instalment of *Final Fantasy X-2* (Square Enix 2003) came shortly after Square had merged with Enix in 2003 to become Square Enix, and when a full localization department had been set up, which is suggestive of the economic significance of localization. In 2006, when *Final Fantasy XII* (Square Enix 2006) was released in Japan, Square Enix announced they would begin sim-shipping their games. As a consequence, the process involving indirect translation became even more problematic, as expressed by the Square Enix localization manager, Seb Berthelsen, at the 2008 *Game Localisation Round Table* (cited in Bernal-Merino 2015, 202). In 2008, the then president of Square Enix, Yoichi Wada, announced that sim-ship releases would become the standard for them, and that they intended to set up overseas studios to develop games in English (Tanaka 2008). However, the attempt by Square Enix to create “global games” in English has been largely unsuccessful (O’Hagan and Mangiron 2013, 330–331; Corriera 2014), even if the logic of language economics may have justified it as a way to avoid indirect translation and to make way for sim-ship.

*Final Fantasy XIII* (Square Enix 2009), which was released on the new gaming console, PlayStation 3, and Xbox 360, was localized while it was being developed to reduce the time between the release of the original and the localized versions (O’Hagan 2009; Cunningham 2012). The first official (Traditional) Chinese version was released for Taiwan with subtitles that were based on the Japanese VO, rather than on the English VO. *Final Fantasy XIII-2* (Square Enix 2011) was developed with the Square Enix localization and sound departments working together using newly developed in-house proprietary localization management tools. They better facilitated audio localization work with continually changing scripts and allowed the localizer to see the relevant scene for subtitles and VO (O’Hagan and Mangiron 2013, 146). These new arrangements enabled localizers to better under-
stand the surrounding contexts for otherwise isolated voice scripts that needed to be translated for cinematic assets. Given the demand of the increased volume of text and especially sim-ship requirements, including full localization incorporating VO, more systematic tracking of different strands of work became necessary.

*Final Fantasy XV* (Square Enix 2016) was publicized as Square Enix’s first sim-shipped *Final Fantasy* game in twelve languages, and, for the first time for Square Enix titles, included Latin American Spanish and Brazilian Portuguese versions. As shown in Figure 1, the game was voiced in Japanese as well as English, French, and German, which were all directly translated from Japanese, with the Korean and Chinese (Simplified and Traditional) subtitled versions based on the Japanese VO. The English voice scripts were used to subtitle into Italian, Russian, Brazilian Portuguese, and European Spanish, the latter of which was used to produce the subtitles for Latin American Spanish (Tobe 2018; Hasegawa 2019). Non-voiced text for Italian and European Spanish were directly translated from Japanese. Square Enix has credited part of this achievement to the latest in-house proprietary localization management tool, which allowed for the tracking of any changes made to source texts, such as scripts as well as other in-game texts, during the localization process and notifying translators of such changes (CEDEC 2017). This was particularly important for the production of indirectly translated languages, which would otherwise have been left with insufficient time as the last step in the sim-ship workflow (CEDEC 2017). Still, at Square Enix, there is a view that the challenge involved in localizing Japanese games stems from the fact that the source language is not English. For example, compared to ten or more languages regularly sim-shipped for games developed in English, Japanese games tend to be limited to between four and nine languages (Hasegawa 2019). This last issue is discussed further in Section 5.1.

### 4.4 Separate editions of games inspired by indirect translation

Derivative products from the NA locale, usually released, at least initially, only in the Japanese market as an ‘international edition’, are also relevant to the discussion. These are marketed as enhanced products with added gameplay features, and come with a “different look and feel with a touch of foreignness,” particularly conveyed through the English VO used for movies and showing changes made in

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2. Non-voiced assets were translated directly from Japanese into these languages.

3. The report from this conference does not provide any further details on the tool, called *Byblos*. Certain in-house information is not fully disclosed to the public and such inaccessibility of information is part of the challenge with game localization research, including NDAs (O’Hagan and Mangiron 2013, 269).
the NA locale for the Japanese audience (O’Hagan 2009, 160). For example, Final Fantasy X-2 International + Last Mission (Square Enix 2004a) is a version derived from the NA locale of Final Fantasy X-2 (Square Enix 2003) released in English. While retaining the in-game written text, including menus, items list, and non-voiced conversations in the original Japanese, the game contains voiced dialogue in English which is freshly translated into Japanese subtitles (Square Enix 2004b, 9). This edition was designed to give Japanese gamers a feel for the NA-release, which has a range of adaptations made to the voiced dialogue in the English translation, including humor added to the NA-release (see O’Hagan 2009, 159) and some enhanced gameplay elements. The publisher explains that part of the enjoyment of this edition is “to spot various changes in the movie scripts [made for
the NA locale] via Japanese subtitles” (Square Enix 2004b, 40). The International editions illustrate how the localization process itself generates “a creative act of communication” (Mangiron 2016, 194) where “Japanese players […] are aware that they are playing a translated and heavily adapted version of the original game that has been translated back into Japanese” (ibid.). Here, indirect translation can arguably be seen as a translation gain rather than a loss.

5. Discussion

Drawing on the case study discussed in Section 4, this section addresses the research questions by focusing on the motivation, challenges, and implications of the use of indirect translation in game localization.

5.1 Motivation

The initial use of the English NA locale as the pivot language to produce locales in FIGS resulted in poor reception of the localized versions by gamers, which the company quickly addressed by eliminating indirect translation in the localization of Final Fantasy VIII (Square 1999) and Final Fantasy IX (Square 2000); however, they reverted back to it in most subsequent titles. The use of English as the pivot is underpinned by its generally accepted status as a lingua franca and much greater availability of translators who can work into and from English than from one LOTE into another. Furthermore, prioritizing NA releases has enabled the company to serve the major English-speaking market first. However, the emergence of the mainland Chinese market as the largest game consumer may affect this language/region prioritization, especially if direct translation can be achieved from Japanese into Chinese, albeit having to address the well-known regulatory issues.

Another factor behind the still-common use of the English locale as the pivot language for the localization of Japanese games could possibly include “the perceived cultural distance,” with NA game culture considered “far more similar to its European counterpart than to game culture in Japan” (O’Hagan and Mangiron 2013, 234). Once the NA locale is generated, the extent of culturalization for FIGS is perceived to be less than when starting from the original Japanese game. With the new significant markets, such as China and other emerging Asian regions (Wu and Chen 2020, 50), the question of how cultural proximity affects language economics offers a worthy area of study in future. For example, Heilbron and Sapiro (2016, 382–383) consider linguistic and cultural proximity as something akin to “transportation costs in international trade”: “If languages (and therefore
cultures) are more similar [...] translation is less costly.” At the risk of being reductionist, language economics might suggest that if there is a sufficient pool of translators available to translate directly from Japanese into Chinese, then on the basis of cost benefits (Pym 2017), this could impact on the default use of the English NA locale as the pivot. Similarly, the logic of language economics might suggest that for Polish-made games, as in the case of major Polish publisher CD Projekt, it may be advantageous for localization to take place directly into certain Slavic languages, as a consequence of greater translator availability and the cost savings associated with linguistic and cultural proximity.

5.2 Challenges

Despite the international commercial success of Final Fantasy VII (Square 1997), the problems with localization were recognized by the company, leading them to train translators who could translate directly from Japanese and to set up a European office in London in 1998 to beef up European localization for marketing and quality assurance (Square Enix 2007). Nearly twenty years later, Final Fantasy XV (Square Enix 2016) was sim-shipped in twelve languages, but certain languages were still translated via English, as discussed in Section 4.3, including two major target languages, (European) Spanish and Italian. This illustrates the persistent problem of finding a suitable talent pool.

Another underlying factor is the introduction of VO in localizing games, in effect giving rise to the use of indirect translation as a way to serve less commercially important regions. Full localization with VO versus partial localization with subtitles led to some asymmetry across locales in terms of translation modes. The decision to provide VO had a major impact on the developer/publisher due to the cost, time, and resources required (O’Hagan and Mangiron 2013, 164). For exam-
ple, as demonstrated in Square Enix’s first title to implement VO, *Final Fantasy X* (Square Enix 2001), this created the added lip-sync requirements for the translation of close-up scenes. Furthermore, because other locales (i.e., FIGS) were only provided with subtitles which were based on the English VO of the NA locale, the translation decisions made for the English version influenced those for the subtitles into FIGS. This also affected the localization workflow as this process needs to happen relatively early in the project (O’Hagan and Mangiron 2013). In language economic terms, this serves to highlight that the market prioritization justifies the use of more expensive full localization for a good return on investment.

However, it is also important to understand that users have different preferences, as some international fans of Japanese games want to access the original VO in Japanese, whereas others may prefer English VO in the NA locale (see Mangiron 2021, 12–13). For example, the (Traditional) Chinese version of *Final Fantasy XIII* (Square Enix 2009) that targeted Taiwan contained Japanese VO with subtitles in (Traditional) Chinese, pointing to the user preference in that market. The selection of languages and the availability of VO and subtitles are often discussed in fan forums, including the way different combinations between VO and subtitles are managed through the region control via the language setting of the platform (e.g., PlayStation 4, Xbox One, Steam). Such user preferences are now increasingly captured in real-time by the game platform as user metrics, allowing the game companies to optimize their decision (Kerr 2017) (see Section 5.3.3).

5.3 Implications

5.3.1 Language factors

Industry statistics indicate rapid development of the Chinese market (Wu and Chen 2020, 50), adding (Simplified and Traditional) Chinese to the range of target languages. The initial release of Chinese versions by Square Enix targeted Taiwan: *Final Fantasy XIII* (Square Enix 2009) was made available in Traditional Chinese until 2016 when *Final Fantasy XV* (Square Enix 2016) was released both in Simplified and Traditional Chinese. In relation to the challenge posed by the lack of translator resources for certain language pairs, the Japanese–Chinese pair provides future potential to achieve direct translation, as there are reportedly more

these languages, the English lip animation was used for high-resolution movie scenes but other scenes were based on Japanese time- and sound-synced animation.

6. An example of a fan forum discussing such issues can be found at https://www.playstationtrophies.org/forum/topic/47771-ff-xiii-jap-voice-and-eng-sub/.
translators who cater for this combination than into certain European languages.\footnote{This assumption was confirmed by an industry source (who could not provide more specific data due to an NDA), on the basis of their translator databases at a game localization service provider.} Furthermore, considering the common roots of kanji characters between Japanese and Chinese in the context of localization-friendly Japanese game development, the foregrounding of Chinese localization at the onset in a GILT framework may influence certain original naming in Japanese, although this is anecdotal based on ad hoc cases. For example, there was speculation by Japanese gamers that \textit{Final Fantasy XIV} (Square Enix 2013) may have incorporated Chinese translation into the Japanese naming of a game character Chocobo, which was transliterated for the earlier titles written in katakana as \textit{チョコボ} Cho-ko-bo, but changed in this \textit{Final Fantasy} title into 馬鳥 Cho-ko-bo ‘horse bird’ – a descriptive term written in kanji and as used in the Traditional Chinese version. The latter makes sense to Japanese speakers although it raised the question of why the well-established name was suddenly changed. Square Enix later explained that it was to standardize naming conventions to better manage numerous names and also to opt for shorter alternatives for space saving (Square Enix Final Fantasy XIV Forum 2010).

Given that part of the rationale for the use of English as the pivot language was the dominance of the English-speaking market, this may change if the demand for Chinese-language coverage becomes equally extensive. With this, game publishers’ localization strategies may start to prioritize Chinese markets across the wider Asia–Pacific region, with Chinese becoming the de facto lingua franca in the region – albeit giving rise to challenges relating to state censorship in mainland China, regulated by the NPPA (Zhang and Chiu 2020).

5.3.2 \textit{Technological factors}

\textit{Final Fantasy XV} (Square Enix 2016) was the first title to fit the “games as a service” model (Kerr 2017, 126), indicating the shift from a sealed product to a product with a continuous flow of developments, which has implications for localization as the same game continues to evolve through downloadable content. True to this model, the Russian VO for \textit{Final Fantasy XV} was added on a subsequent PC release (the initial release was on PlayStation 4 and Xbox One), giving rise to two versions of Russian subtitles (one based on the English VO for the initial release and the subsequent Russian subtitles based on Russian VO). This illustrates the increasing importance of tighter localization management and version control, especially when involving indirect translation with modality changes between dubbed and subtitled versions. The discrepancy issues caused by using
the English voiced version made for the NA locale in the FIGS versions (with FIGS subtitles) rather than using the original Japanese VO could be exacerbated with later new releases of the game including additional VO and subtitles.

Advancing technologies for automatic lip-sync across languages provides another future avenue of development with economic implications. For example, Cyberpunk 2077 (CD Projekt Red 2020) incorporated automatic lip-sync technology based on machine learning and AI for the game’s VO into ten languages (FIGS, Brazilian Portuguese, Russian, Polish, Japanese, Chinese, and Korean) (Calvin 2020). Such possibilities suggest an economical option, but, as with any automation, they need to be assessed carefully as part of the overall localization strategy concerning which language combinations and modalities can be included in a given region. Furthermore, fan preferences form an important factor, as discussed next in Section 5.3.3.

5.3.3 User participation in localization

The game industry has historically enjoyed a close link to gamers as users. For example, for both Final Fantasy XIII (Square Enix 2009) and Final Fantasy XIII-2 (Square Enix 2011), user feedback was incorporated during their development phases. More importantly, such links between the publishers/developers and users are becoming denser with the move to the use of digital platforms and the digital circulation of games, reshaping the marketing and localization of games with gamer data metrics that facilitate “player monitoring, measurements and support” (Kerr 2017, 108). Although the scope of this article does not allow for a full discussion of the increasing use of gamer data, metrics, and algorithms, the collection of such data will likely inform localization decisions in future (for example, about the user preference for VO or subtitles), streamlining the most cost-effective localization in which indirect translation may be minimized.

In terms of users, there is also evidence of continued interest among certain game fans to investigate and theorize translation (Newman 2008; Altice 2015). For example, there is a growing knowledge-base created by fans who curate relevant sources of information on games, including localization and translation issues, ranging from wikis to forum pages. The gap in translator resources to achieve direct translation in game localization attracts ROM hacking (Altice 2020) by certain gamers who have a linguistic aptitude, are interested in localization issues, and can tackle highly technical challenges. The more recent approach used by Steam (a popular cloud-based global game distribution platform) to call for volunteer gamers to translate certain not yet localized games (Kerr 2017, 127–128) can be seen as a way to fill the gap for commercially less viable languages or less popular game titles by appealing directly to gamers who combine gaming and linguistic skillsets, albeit self-assessed. These crowdsourcing approaches could be worth investigating
further in connection with the use of fan resources to translate directly as an alternative to indirect translation in terms of quality and the impact on global game circulation.

As social media has become an organic feedback channel from users to game developers/publishers and localizers alike, it has promoted fan theorization of localization and translation (Newman 2008, 155). Such a response is often provoked by the ‘culturalization’ applied in the specific context of official game localization (Edwards 2011; Pyae 2018). Some gamers may take issue with the changes made, as they see it as self-censorship or profit-making attempts by the game companies to appease a wider audience (Mandiberg 2017). It is shown in game localization research on users (e.g., Wu and Chen 2020) that certain gamers prefer source-oriented translation, whereas fluent translation tailored to the target market is seen as an unwanted deviation, hence their insistence on the former through direct translation. Fast developing Southeast-Asian game markets where multilingualism exists, such as Indonesia, also challenge the one-on-one mapping of region and language in support of a multi-tiered approach based on gamer preference (Wu and Chen 2020). Research on indirect translation could be enriched by tapping into these gamer discourses about localization and translation to add a user perspective to the practice.

6. Conclusion

This article set out to address the research questions of why and how indirect translation occurs in the context of game localization and what the implications are for game localization. It did so by drawing on a case study of a high-profile Japanese game publisher/developer. From a socio-economic perspective, it uncovered the intricate motivations, challenges, and implications of indirect translation, involving different stakeholders amidst rapid technological change. While these actors recognize the merit of direct translation, indirect translation serves a pragmatic, predominantly economic, purpose in game localization. The case study shows the use of indirect translation to be part of the mechanism for Japanese companies to prioritize NA as their key market, while the lack of translators who can translate directly from Japanese into a LOTE has been a constant contributing factor. Furthermore, indirect translation has provided a method to generate revenue from derivative versions of games, such as ‘international editions’, to serve the same (Japanese) market twice, with Japanese as the source and the target language via heavily adapted English versions. The indirect translation focus illustrates, above all, the way in which market differentiation is made through the use of VO for priority markets and subtitles for other markets, with
the latter involving indirect translation from a fully localized version typically in English. From the perspective of language economics, interpreted in line with Pym (2017), indirect translation can be seen as adding a ‘transaction cost’ by creating the extra loop and even putting the final locales at risk, especially in the eyes of culturalization-averse users. At the same time, the historical success of Japanese games through localization (Consalvo 2006) is arguably the proof that indirect translation facilitates the global circulation of LOTE games and even provides the inspiration for niche secondary products for the domestic market.

The use of English as the pivot language relates to a recurring question of how to produce a ‘global game’. Experienced Japanese and other LOTE game producers continue to grapple with the choice between producing games in English, without needing indirect translation, and in Japanese or in another LOTE, likely requiring indirect translation. The assumption of cultural proximity by Japanese publishers and developers may have played a part in the historical use of indirect translation in generating FIGS versions from the NA locale in English, rather than directly from the original Japanese. Localization needs to tread carefully between local and global elements, on the one hand, and between the balance sheet and fan reception, on the other. The increasing prominence of Asian markets dictating key game languages could potentially lead to different language dynamics in influencing the game localization from one LOTE into another LOTE. In the context of the localization of Asian games circulated in Asia, this may lead to the reduced use of indirect translation, and a shifting away from English as the default pivot language. Also, a more nuanced understanding of cultural proximity may arise from user metrics which are eagerly collected by game developers and publishers alike to inform such decisions. Nevertheless, there remain considerable challenges ahead, such as multilingualism and region-specific requirements, as in the case of the NPPA which sometimes highlights the differences rather than the similarities between locales for Simplified Chinese and Traditional Chinese. Furthermore, the emerging AI-based technologies for automatic lip-sync in different languages may provide an economically viable avenue for costly VO production, making indirect translation less needed, and reshaping the ecosystem of game localization.

It is hoped that this article demonstrates the potential scope of research on indirect translation in addressing previously less theorized aspects of game localization. This will contribute to a better understanding of game localization practice, which has evolved rooted in the industry largely without the benefit of translation studies research.
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