

## Translation and/as Interface

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### Abstract

This article argues that game translation - in contrast to the dominant industry view of game translation as simply a means of expanding a game's market, or the academic discourse within game studies that makes no note of different linguistic versions - should be understood and treated as a type of interface. Connecting Nick Montfort and Ian Bogost's five-layer platform studies model for understanding games with J. David Bolter and Diane Gromala's discussion of interface as a design principle that can be reflective and/or transparent, this article contends that translation spans multiple layers of the game from the code to the experience as an interface between the world, players and games that can be transparent, reflective, or both. By repositioning translation as an expansive and necessarily complex interface that enables or disables particular player experiences, the game studies community can move toward better understanding the space of translation in games and the broader importance of translation to gaming.

### Author Keywords

Translation; localization; digital games; platform studies; design; interface

### Translation and Interface

Translation, which facilitates the movement of texts over borders and between languages as both a functional and political act, is all but ignored in game studies.<sup>1</sup> While some attempts have been made to theorize game localization, the specific industry practice that combines linguistic alteration with audio, graphical and ludic modifications, as a separate entity (Bernal-Merino, 2006; Consalvo, 2006; Dietz, 2006; Edwards, 2006; Mangiron, 2006; O'Hagan and Mangiron, 2004), neither translation nor localization has been given much consideration in game studies. The field has yet to agree on whether playing a game is a necessary element of studying games, so questions like 'which version is it necessary to play?' are not often asked. This article is an attempt to think through two questions: first, why is translation not considered in game studies; and second, how can translation and questions around it become of more importance to the field? To answer these questions, this article discusses translation in a general sense, considers game ontology as way to understand why there is no place for translation at present in game studies literature, and utilizes Nick Montfort and Ian Bogost's (2009) 5-layered platform studies as a model where translation could fit. Translation can be understood as an interface, both in terms of Montfort and Bogost's Interface Layer, as translation exists as a mediating layer between game and player, and through J. David Bolter and Diane Gromala's (2003) work on new media

interface design, which argues that different interfaces enable different user experiences. By approaching translation as an interface that enables a particular player experience, translation's significance can be more easily accessed by the general field of game studies and not simply by those studying the practice of game localization.

### **The Place of Translation...**

Translation's place is in question. Thinking of the translation of games in linguistic terms, it is a post-production task that alters the strings of linguistic text from one language to another. Thinking about translation in commodity terms, it facilitates the spread of a product between markets. Thinking about translation in terms of the game localization industry, it is a part of design and development, and includes planned file structures and alterations of audio, graphic and game play mechanics all so that the player does not notice that the game was translated. Thinking about translation in narrative terms, it is mostly a benign element that (if the translation is not poor) should not change the meaning of the game. And, thinking about translation in ludological terms, it hardly matters. While translation's place and importance in these different discourses varies, there is one similarity: translation tends toward invisibility. Mirroring developments in American literary translation over the 20th century (Venuti, 2008), game translation has increasingly become unremarked upon (but not unremarkable). The following section seeks to explain the idea of transparent translation, and how it has found a home in games and game studies.

#### ***...In the production and consumption of games***

As Heather Chandler (2005, 2009) has documented, the translation of games, understood as 'localization' by the game industry, has existed at many points of the production cycle, and it has extended to changing differing amounts of the original game. The earliest games in the standard game studies canon were not translated in a linguistic sense. *Tennis for Two* (1958) and *Spacewar!* (1962) were considered outside language; they were demonstrations of technology which was considered universal, so there was no need for translation (Burnham, 2003). As games moved out of tech labs and into arcades and homes, translation occurred post-production and barely involved the original production and development teams. For example, in the 1970s to early 1980s, game translation was simply the creation of a new box with the inclusion of a translated sheet of instructions to aid the user in deciphering the game (Hasegawa, 2009). This early mode of translation, labeled both *non-localization* and *box-and-docs translation*, was never particularly visible within the United States due to the discursive prevalence of English, particularly within the larger video game industry. It can, however, be seen around the world in the example of *Space Invaders* (1978) where the various English terms within the game such as "ready player 1" and "score" are not modified, but the instructions on the arcade box are translated. *Super Mario Bros.* (1985) is another example where the box and manual were translated into German, French, Spanish, Italian and Dutch to be sold throughout Europe, but the game itself was in English (Bernal-Merino, 2011). Finally, a recent example is the Madden NFL series: because American football is much less popular in Japan than in the United States, *Madden NFL 11* (2011) only received a box-and-docs translation for its Japanese translation. Obviously, box-and-docs translation still exists in certain locations, especially those locations with weaker linguistic and monetary empires (generally, not English speaking countries, but ironically this includes China where gray or black market Japanese imports are common), or

where the return on investment can only justify a translated manual and box.

*Non-localization* has generally given way to *partial localizations* and *full localizations*, both of which alter coded assets including in-game text, audio, graphics and gameplay. Partial localizations maintain some in-game features, but change others: menus and titles are switched from one language to another, audio and video may or may not be altered, but subtitles will probably be included if the spoken dialogue is not dubbed over (Dietz, 2006). *DrakeRider* (2012) for iOS is an example of partial localization. The written dialogue and game menus have both been changed from Japanese to English. However, the spoken dialogue and opening screen both remain in Japanese, and are given English subtitles. There is no checklist of changed features that must be marked off for partial-localization, rather, what does and does not change is dependent upon cost where more changes if the return on investment is likely.

‘Partial’ localization indicates a sliding scale from ‘non’ to ‘full.’ If changing nothing is one side of the scale, the other side of the scale is when a game is entirely changed. *Osu! Tatakae! Ouendan* (2005) (押忍! 闘え! 応援団 – “hey/push, fight, cheer squad”) is one of the most complete localizations made. *Osu! Tatakae! Ouendan!* is a music response game that involves listening to a song and using the Nintendo DS’s stylus to tap out beats on the DS’s touch screen. The songs are all popular Japanese pop songs, and the story that plays before and during any given song involves somebody pleading for support from the cheer squad (the player then provides this support by tapping correctly). All of the graphics, all of the story, all of the songs, and all of the text were completely re-created when it was localized from Japanese into *Elite Beat Agents* (2006), which was sold in North America, Europe and Australia. The latter game is unrecognizable as the same game: the cheer squad is graphically replaced by a group of elite agents going around the world helping people, the story for each individual song is changed, and the songs themselves are altered to American pop songs. In fact, *Elite Beat Agents* is generally considered a sequel (on Wikipedia and Gamefaqs, for example), not a translation. However, it is a perfect example of what happens with the process of localization, in that it fully alters every asset within the game to the target-locales’ (assumed) preference of secret agents and not cheer squads.<sup>ii</sup>

While *Elite Beat Agents* is a good example of fully realized localization, most contemporary titles are “fully-localized” into English with most, *but not all*, of the digital assets changed. *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney* (2001) and *Yakuza 3* (2010) are two good examples of the different tactics that can be taken in the localization of ‘Japanese’ elements into English. While the former almost entirely replaces the ‘foreign’ Japan with a ‘local’ United States, the latter strategically maintains many Japanese elements, but eliminates certain gameplay elements that are perceived to be too foreign.

Capcom’s *Gyakuten Saiban* (2001) (逆転裁判 – “reversal courtroom”), featuring Naruhodo Ryuichi’s courtroom adventures in Japan are fully localized into *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney* (2005), which features the eponymous Phoenix Wright, a Los Angeles lawyer. The changes made in the game are extensive - translation of dialogue alters the place of action from Japan to the United States and replaces various ‘foreign’ elements, such as one character’s repeated desire to eat miso ramen, into ‘local’ elements, like a desire to eat burgers. The courtroom phrases (igi ari, matta, kurae), which are both visible as a graphic on the screen and audible whenever a

lawyer exclaims them, are replaced with English audio (Objection, Hold it, Take that). And finally, diegetic graphical assets that include some sort of linguistic link to Japan, such as a park name that is in Japanese, or an image of a newspaper with lines of text going from top to bottom, are altered so that the game appears to be ‘American.’ While much of the game is altered and the storyline is rendered local, it is not completely changed like in *Elite Beat Agents*, and none of the gameplay is altered or removed. In contrast, the localization of Sega’s *Ryu ga Gotoku 3* (2009) (龍が如く 3 – “like a dragon 3”) into *Yakuza 3* (2010) is particularly infamous for its removal of various gameplay elements that were ‘too’ Japanese. Removed elements include: Shogi, a Japanese game similar to chess; Mahjong, the tile game played throughout Asia; a Japanese history trivia mini-game; and a hostess club section of the game. While it is possible to argue that each of these elements could be acceptable to the American audience (Shogi, Mahjong), or could be altered to fit with local expectations (history trivia game, hostess club), the point is that Sega chose the strategy of simply eliminating gameplay elements that they considered too foreign. The three above examples of full localization (*Elite Beat Agents*, *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney*, and *Yakuza 3*) have different translation strategies that lead to both the alteration of different types of assets, and to differing extents of asset alteration. However, each is more extensive than the previous translational types of non-localization and partial localization.

As the extent of localization practices increased in the late 1990s and early 2000s (from ‘non’ to ‘partial’ to ‘full’ localizations), the position (temporally and in importance) of translation in the production cycle changed (Chandler, 2005, 2009; Esselink, 2000; Hasegawa, 2009). The increasingly common strategy of simultaneous global shipment necessitated that all translations are complete in time for the game to ship around the world in the same day or week. This changed position in the production cycle necessitates pre-planning for nested file structures that include more than one language, and more leeway was given to translators. Since these changes began in the early 2000s, translation has grown in importance to the industry so that more money might be spent to ensure a better product and better sales in the target location. The current status of translation is that almost every large game is extensively localized.

Despite its rising importance to the game industry, translation has increasingly become invisible to the playing audience. Certainly, some translation mistakes from the early years have found their way onto the Internet as memes. These include “a winner is you” from *Pro Wrestling* (1986/1987), “I am Error” from *Legend of Zelda II: Link’s Adventure* (1987), and the legendary “all your base” from *Zero Wing* (1991/1992). However, other than these celebrated gaffs, translation usually goes unmentioned and unnoticed, particularly within the North American, English-speaking audience. To the game industry, a celebrated and successful translation is one that can pass itself off as an original (Frederiksen, 2012; Gregaman, 2012).

This discursive invisibility of translation in the production and consumption of games mirrors the discursive invisibility, or transparency, of translation in literary translation. Translation theorist Lawrence Venuti (2008) argues that the work of the translator, and the fact of translation itself have increasingly become invisible in popular modern American literary discourse. According to Venuti’s analysis of popular book publishing discourse, translation is difficult and complex, and is therefore rendered invisible for easy reading. For ease of consumption, books are translated with a fluent and domesticating translation style. The popular translation style is fluent, as it is easily read; it is domesticating, because it renders foreign elements in domestic terms. To the

book publishing industry, this type of invisible translation is preferred because it seems to attract more readers and makes more money. For Venuti, invisible translation renders invisible foreign ways of writing, thinking, and being, thereby shielding Americans from interactions with foreign cultures or people on foreign grounds. According to Venuti, this is a scandal of translation, as it “encourages uncritical consumption of hegemonic values while maintaining current asymmetries in cross-cultural exchange” (Venuti, 1998, p. 188). While Venuti’s argument for ethically right ways to translate at particular historical moments is beyond the scope of this article, his focus on the invisibility of translation is important for the present discussion in two ways: First, because the literary translator’s invisibility parallels the current invisibility of game translation in both popular consumer practice and game studies discourse (within the North American context); Second, because rendering translation visible has been an important and successful focus of critical theory and cultural studies particularly since the 1980s.

Venuti's critique of the discursive invisibility of translation within the publishing industry and popular discourse is contemporaneous with numerous late 20th century theoretical writings that examine power structures through text. This discourse includes post-structural, post-colonial, and feminist writings on translation and power (Derrida, 1979, 1985; Niranjana, 1992; Pratt, 1992). Such classic works have led the way to more recently influential discourse on circulation and flows that unpack the intersections, mobility and friction of people and commodities in the late capitalist world (Gaonkar & Povinelli, 2003; Lee & LiPuma, 2002; Tsing 2005). Both generations of academic and theoretical works have approached texts and translation as key tools for understanding the complex mechanics of consumption, social interaction and power. Important lessons of this discourse are that translation can both produce and reinforce particular power structures, and that studying translation is a means of understanding (and changing) the cultural interactions that result from these power structures. Despite translation becoming important to academic disciplines and fields like comparative literature, cultural studies and even cinema studies, where the discussion of subtitles and dubbing to discuss both reception and cultural interaction is extensive (Nornes, 2007; Shohat & Stam, 2003), it has been ignored within the relatively newer field of game studies. This article engages the concept of translation as a means of understanding how games exist within particular socio-cultural contexts and how those socio-cultural contexts relate to each other through similar, but sometimes very different translated versions of games.

Game localization practices (which are multi/international, but in many ways American-centric due to the historical importance of English as a pivot language<sup>iii</sup> for the software localization process) share the discursive invisibility of literary publishing. Even as the game industry spends more and more money on localizations that alter extensive linguistic, audio, visual and even ludic elements of games, the industry argues that different localizations are essentially the same thing. For example, despite extensive differences between *Ryu ga Gotoku 3* and *Yakuza 3*, the industry claims the two are the same game. To the game industry and localization sub-industry, the essence of any game is the experience of playing it, and as long as the experience is the same, the game is the same. As game localization theorists Carmen Mangiron and Minako O’Hagan (2006) write:

[T]he skopos of game localization is to produce a target version that keeps the ‘look and feel’ of the original... the feeling of the original ‘gameplay experience’ needs to

be preserved in the localized version so that all players share the same enjoyment regardless of their language of choice (p. 20).

Sidestepping (for the moment) the difficulties of actually figuring out whether an experience can ever be the same phenomenologically and theoretically, the goal of localization is to translate so that the experience of play is equally ‘fun,’ where any and all alterations toward the goal of making it ‘fun’ are acceptable. Despite being extensively altered, the localizations of *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney* and *Yakuza 3* are treated as essentially the same text as their Japanese counterparts in writings on the games (Chiapini, 2010; Gouskos, 2005). Even when their alterations are remarked upon, it is merely to indicate that the alterations do not significantly change the core, or essence, of the games (Consalvo, 2009; Neigher, 2010). Due to this extensive discursive invisibility, to the general playing audience translation and the differences between localizations can be, and are, ignored.<sup>iv</sup>

### ...In game studies

Similar to the way that translation is rendered invisible in the production and consumption of games, the study of games typically excludes translation. The exclusion of ‘minor’ elements like translation stems from the early effort within game studies to determine the core, or essence of games. The search for an essence of games is apparent in Jesper Juul’s (2005) classic game model,<sup>v</sup> which he creates by summarizing several older definitions of play:

A game is a rule-based system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels emotionally attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are negotiable (p. 36).

The problem with Juul’s classic game model is that it focuses on rules to the point of ignoring supporting elements. In Juul’s final analysis, “the rest of the world” has almost entirely been ignored as an “optional” element (p. 41). The problem with Juul’s ludological ontology — or Huizinga’s (1955), Caillois’ (2001), Salen & Zimmerman’s (2003) or many other theorists’ definitions of play or games — is that it tends to focus on the object to the detriment of context. Context and location are important and cannot be dismissed so easily. As Mary Flanagan (2007) writes, “while the phenomenon of play is universal, the experience of play is intrinsically tied to location and culture” (p. 3). While the ‘essence’ may be there, it is not particularly essential to games per se. Alexander Galloway (2006) demonstrates this well through his analysis of ‘realism’ in games. He writes:

[V]ideo games absolutely cannot be excised from the social contexts in which they are played. To put it bluntly, a typical American youth playing *Special Force* is most likely not experiencing realism, whereas realism is indeed possible for a young Palestinian gamer playing *Special Force* in the occupied territories (p. 84).

The importance of ‘location and culture’ to games, as well as their relationship to translation, can be further demonstrated through *Scrabble*. It follows nearly all of the requirements of Juul’s classic game model including strict rules, negotiable outcomes, valorization of winning, and so

on. However, the game (original rules) is completely attached to English, because the letters have point determinations based on ease of use (in English) and the scarcity of each letter is based on its common usage (again, in English). While French *Scrabble* certainly exists, the tile distribution is altered to fit with the frequency of individual letters in French. The movement from English to French necessitated core changes including an increase from 100 to 102 letters, and a redistribution of letter points. A movement to Japanese would require even more significant alterations. In Japanese, were you to simply combine characters as if reading a Romanized spelling of Japanese words, there would not be enough vowels; even if all of the letter pieces were replaced with hiragana characters, there would be far too many homonyms to make a meaningfully difficult game. Japanese *Scrabble* might be possible, but it would need to be created by changing a great deal of the game. Furthermore, the game of *Scrabble* necessarily changes over time as words are added or subtracted from the official dictionary. *Scrabble* is bounded in a located space and time with a particular linguistic context, and it changes as it moves between contexts. Like any game, *Scrabble* is best understood not by some clean essence, but as a complex intersection of many different elements including the particular location and culture in which it exists at any given moment, and its particular translation.

The remainder of this article will create a space for translation in game studies, and then show what can be gained from focusing on translation. Similar to how the late 20th century post-structural and post-colonial attention to translation and power led to more detailed understandings of the global circulations of people and things, a call for game studies to look at translation can lead to a better, more granular understanding of the way that particular versions of games are consumed in particular locations, how modified versions are able to travel around the world, and how people interact while playing different versions of the game because of, as well as despite, these alterations.

### Platform Studies

Montfort and Bogost's (2009) five-layer model of Platform Studies is a framework that holds promise for broader inclusion of what constitutes a game. It is within this framework that translation can find a home within game studies. The Platform Studies model has five layers, each on top of the other (see *Figure 1*). The *Platform* is the bottom and as the base it is the most important. The second layer is *Game Code*. Code is the computer language in which the game is written, which is dependent upon the platform and enables certain types of game forms. The third layer, *Game Form* is both the rules and story, or the 'form' and 'content'. Game form is dependent upon both platform and code. Fourth is *Interface*, which can be either haptic or visual: it can be both the controllers that the player uses to interface with the platform, and the Graphical User Interface (GUI) or Heads Up Display (HUD) displayed on the screen that allow the player to interpret the game form. The fifth and top layer is *Reception and Operation*, which denotes both the ways that a player plays the game, and the general reviews and reception of the game more broadly.

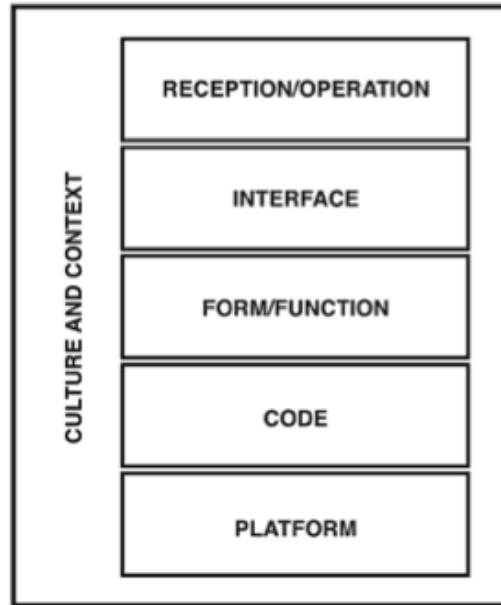


Figure 1: Montfort and Bogost's 5 layer platform studies model diagram with surrounding culture and context (2009, p. 146)

As Montfort notes in an earlier conceptualization of platform studies (2006), the five-layer model modifies Lars Konzack's (2002) seven-layer model by moving the socio-culture layer from the top layer to a surrounding position.<sup>vi</sup> Each of the five layers - platform, game code, game form, interface, and reception/operation - is surrounded by *Culture and Context*. While each layer acts on its surrounding layers, and social and cultural context has much more importance than in Konzack's original model, Montfort and Bogost's model is primarily a way to look at games where platform, and not software, is the key concept. The platform layer is both the determinant layer and the most important. What is rather surprising is how the layers get increasingly blurry near the top: Form includes both rules and content; Interface includes both controllers and GUI; and Reception and Operation is a bit of everything outside of the game. What is helpful about the Platform Studies model is the blurriness of the top layers, which allows the insertion of other concepts.

Because of the blurriness of the form, interface, and reception and operation layers, translation could be enacted in any of them. The code and form are the most obvious sites of translation — coded assets that add up to the game form are what game localization alters (written and spoken dialogue, graphics, and gameplay). However, a formal conceptualization of translation as alteration of the game code and game form (layer 3) does not acknowledge the full importance of translation for players' reception and operation (layer 5), or how a particular assumption of cultural contexts leads to particular alterations. Because translation works between the game and its different receptions, translation is best placed into the fourth layer (interface), as it can extend into and affect the layers above and below. Certainly the form is translated through altering coded assets, but different translations, as different types of interfaces, allow access to altered forms, and effect the reception and operation in different ways.



*Kingdom Hearts* (2002) is a good example of how different translations can enable different experiences (Mandiberg, 2009). A co-production between Disney's gaming division, Buena Vista Games, and the Japanese video game production and distribution company Square-Enix, *Kingdom Hearts* utilizes characters from both companies' intellectual property lineups in a story that involves the player traveling between worlds and closing off others' access to those different worlds. The game was primarily developed in Japan, and the Japanese version was released in March of 2002. The original game's graphical interface highlights the standard (if slightly alienating) fluctuation between different languages and writing styles that are visible on a daily basis within Japan — Japanese in *kanji*, *hiragana*, and *katakana*, and foreign words including English in *romaji*.<sup>viii</sup> In contrast to this linguistic (and cultural) fluctuation, the English translation that was released in September of 2002 puts everything into a standard, familiar English. Finally, a third version of the game titled *Kingdom Hearts: Final Mix* was released in Japan on December of 2002. The Final Mix integrates elements of the North American localization including the spoken English dialogue forcing the Japanese player to interface with spoken English that will render the game even more 'foreign' than the usual linguistic fluctuation. A monolingual Japanese-speaking player that encounters the game will have a different experience playing the original Japanese version than playing the Final Mix version of the game. While both of these versions force the monolingual Japanese speaking player to interface with the game through a linguistic mixture, the second version is *more* of a mixture, hence the subtitle, Final Mix. In contrast, both of these experiences are different from the monolingual English-speaking player's encounter with the English translation that limits mixture to the corporate hodgepodge of Disney and Square-Enix characters within the story.

All three of experiences of playing *Kingdom Hearts* are slightly different due to the particular translational interface the player encounters, and they each reveal a slightly different game form. The differences between these experiences, how the different experiences reveal things about their respective Japanese and North American realms of reception and operation, and how players who receive one or the other then go on to interact in a larger culture of fans of that singular game (or franchise/intellectual property) are all important, but they can only be approached through acknowledging translation as worthy of study. Luckily, room can easily be made in the Platform Studies model if we consider translation as a part of the interface layer in a way that extends to, is effected by, and effects the above and below layers (as the Platform Studies model allows).

### ***Extending the interface layer***

For Montfort and Bogost the interface has two parts: first, it is the way the game's layers of information are communicated to the user through a (primarily) graphical overlay; second, the interface is also the control scheme, the Wiimote or Kinect and their phenomenological appeal compared to the gamepad or joystick. Both graphical (software) and control (hardware) interfaces serve to link the player and the game. They are "how" one sees, hears and plays the game. In other words, these interfaces translate from the game to player (GUI), and from the player to game (controller).

In an effort to extend Montfort and Bogost's interface and link it with translation, one might simply look for how 'tairyoku' [body strength] is translated to 'health' or is simply 'HP' in all versions; or one might discuss how the Playstation's X button signals [yes] (check, correct) in

North America, but it signals [no] (batsu, wrong) in Japan. The former would follow a graphical (software) approach to interface, and the latter would follow a control (hardware) approach to interface. Unfortunately, the translation of software and hardware interfaces, while instructive, does not fully capture the concept of the interface for games, as it does not lead up to the national, regional or market areas of reception and operation. Instead, this article calls for understanding translation as a third type of interface within the interface layer. The translational interface enables a particular reception and operation that influences, and is influenced by, culture and context be it the player's racial, national, religious subjectivity, or the game's regional market (North American, Japan, Europe, etc).

To return to the *Kingdom Hearts* example, the two different 'translations' (English and Final Mix) each enable a different experience of play that is dependent upon their respective cultures and contexts. While the English translation of the Japanese original removes the thematic of mixture, which both makes the translation invisible and allows the game to sell within the North American context, the Final Mix translation of the English version further mixes the game, making translation highly visible, which works in a particular way in the Japanese context. It is only by directly analyzing how reception and operation is enabled by the translational interface that game studies as a field can approach *Kingdom Hearts*' game form, its place in different national, regional, and market sites of consumption, and how it exists as a global commodity that passes between these different sites of reception and operation. Unfortunately, while the blurriness of the platform studies model's layers allows the inclusion of translation into the interface layer, the blurriness does not help with unpacking the particulars of the different translation interfaces. To approach how we can look understand translation as an interface we can now turn to interface design.

### Windows and Mirrors

In order to understand how translation, as part of the interface layer, helps connect the game, player and world, it is helpful to look at the different interface design possibilities. By connecting Montfort and Bogost's interface layer with Bolter and Gromala's work on interface design of digital artifacts, it is possible to see the different types of 'translation interfaces,' and how they matter.

In their book, *Windows and Mirrors* (2003), digital humanities theorist J. David Bolter and SIGGRAPH director Diane Gromala discuss the interface of digital artifacts. In contrast to the current generation of interface designers and HCI theorists who argue for 'transparent' interfaces that allow the user to see through to the content of an artwork or application, Bolter and Gromala indicate that there are two trends within design interfaces that do two equally important things. These two trends are the invisible window and the reflective mirror.<sup>viii</sup> The first design trend, the invisible window, is where we see through the interface to the content. The window-like interface is prized in recent digital artifacts, and designers try to make computer applications and other artifacts as 'clear,' 'natural,' and easily accessible as possible. One of the clearest examples of this trend is Apple's design initiative that tries to enable non-expert users to easily activate the hardware and navigate the operating system and various applications. Most iOS applications have multiple language localizations included with the software, but these are hidden to the user; the application loads the localization that matches whatever language the device OS is currently

using. The second trend, the mirror-like interface, reflects how the interface works with and on users. Instead of focusing on the content behind the interface (or through the window), the user focuses on how the interface affects the experience. The opposite example from Apple's window-like design trend is, of course, Linux, which forces/allows the user to carefully customize everything. While this process is infinitely more difficult, it enables far greater customization and manipulation of the experience, and through the difficult process of learning the system users become experts. According to Bolter and Gromala good interfaces must oscillate between the two trends, window and mirror, thereby helping the user to understand both the content and the experience.

By integrating Montfort and Bogost's *interface layer* with Bolter and Gromala's *interface design*, it is possible to examine the graphical and control interfaces of games as both windows and mirrors. The interface does not simply connect the player and the game, it connects the player and game *in different ways*. The form (story/rules) of the game leads toward certain options of interface, and these tend toward being either like a window or like a mirror. A PvP First Person Shooter (FPS) tends toward a window-like GUI with easily read information that allows quick decisions and competitive play. In contrast, a slow Role Playing Game (RPG) can have layers of dense GUI, opaque and mirror-like so that the user spends large amounts of time making decisions in non-game time, personalizing the gameplay experience toward their playstyle. However, just like with interface design, the graphical and control interfaces are not limited to being either window-like or mirror-like: interfaces can oscillate between both.

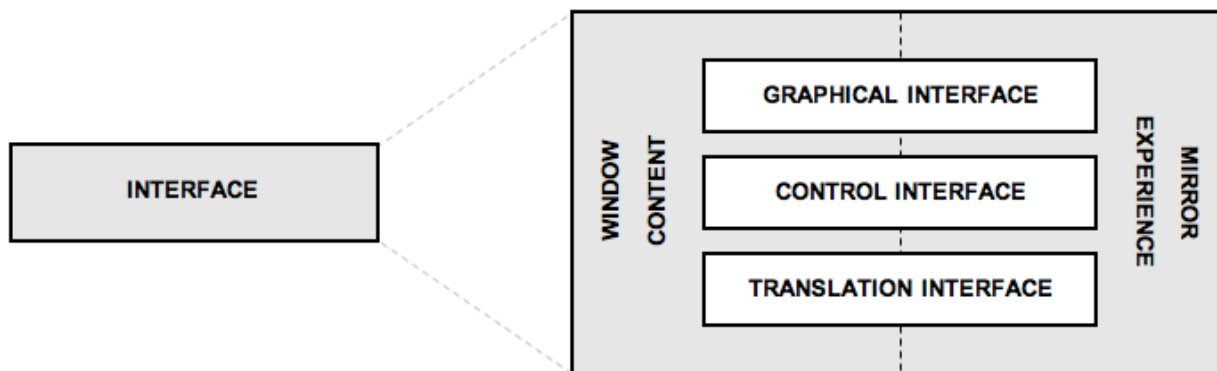


Figure 2: An expansion of Montfort and Bogost's interface layer that integrates Bolter and Gromala's interface trends with graphical, control and translation interfaces

A Wii sword game like *Red Steel 2* (2010) tries to give an immediate sense of using a sword to play the game: the control interface is window-like in that it opens up to the content of the game, but is reflective in that it depends on the user's ability to swing the Wiimote properly. Similarly, during the Psycho Mantis battle in *Metal Gear Solid* (1998), the user must physically remove the gamepad from the first player input slot and put it into the second player slot; only by rendering the otherwise seamlessly transparent control interface and façade of the game completely opaque can the player proceed further. Finally, a Real Time Strategy (RTS) game like *Starcraft* (1998) utilizes both window and mirror in that the mouse can be used to repeatedly click a unit until reactions of annoyance, like the Vulture unit's "What the hell do you want?" are directed at the user (mirror), but pro level players use keyboard shortcuts to bypass both the graphical layer and

unit details in order to reach a competitive level of ‘actions per minute’ (window). Both window-like and mirror-like graphic and control interfaces exist within games, and they enable and disable certain possibilities.

Recent games that allow the user to switch between 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> person viewpoints is yet another example of the fluctuation between window-like and mirror-like graphical interfaces. Whereas earlier games like *Half-Life* (1998) and *Tomb Raider II* (1998) took one viewpoint and stayed with it (1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> person perspectives respectively), modern games like *The Witcher* (2007) allow the user to switch between viewpoints to experience the game in multiple ways. Neither type of graphical interface between the game and player is ‘better.’ Rather, the oscillation between window and mirror, content and experience, enables different types of experiences, and by extending Bolter and Gromala’s work it is possible to see that the fluctuation between these different experiences makes for memorable, fun and successful games.

### Translation As Interface

Bolter and Gromala’s claim that good interfaces must oscillate between window and mirror can be extended to include translational interfaces by arguing that a translation (as an interface) can oscillate between being window-like, by granting access to the content of the game, and mirror-like, by enabling particular experiences. However, as translation as an interface is both that which connects different cultural groups, or locales, that play the game and that which connects the player and the game, a translational interface does not simply entertain the player by providing a fun experience. Rather, it can also enable one player to see *another player’s experience*.

As previously stated, the goal of localization is to translate a game’s “look and feel” (Mangiron & O’Hagan, 2006) so that a user in the target locale can have a similar experience as a user in the source locale. Unfortunately, localization’s goal of a ‘similarly fun experience’ is different from the ‘experience’ that can be enabled by Bolter and Gromala’s mirror-like interface.

To be clear, these concepts do not fully congeal. The window, which leads to ‘content’ for Bolter and Gromala, leads to ‘fun experience’ for localization. In contrast, the mirror leads to ‘experience’ for Bolter and Gromala. The issue is that for the game industry (as well as the game studies discourse as discussed earlier) the core, or essence, of a game is the fun experience, the play, and the story, but not the particular way that the game is played by any local player. As such, the ‘experience’ that localization aims to make similar is merely an ideal(ized) experience of fun. Unlike this clean, fun experience, the experience that Bolter and Gromala aim for is a much dirtier one that is soiled in the particulars of a particular culture and context. Thus, we return to Galloway’s (2006) claim that “video games absolutely cannot be excised from the social contexts in which they are played” (p. 84). However, while games absolutely cannot be excised from their social contexts, they are translated from one context to another on a daily basis. Thus, an American player might be unable to directly experience social realism from playing *Special Force*, but they *should* be able to understand that the Palestinian gamer is experiencing social realism when playing a translation of *Special Force*.

The localization industry attempts to create this ‘similar experience’ by forcing together content

and experience in order to reduce the text to a singular experience of fun. However, the experience is not singular (we all experience a game slightly differently), the experience is not the same as the content, and it is not limited to entertainment. To finish using Galloway's *Special Force* example, any window-like translation that forces together content and experience by focusing on the fun of play would necessarily make it impossible for the North American gamer to understand that the Palestinian is experiencing social realism. But, if the translation were to be mirror-like it would be possible for the American gamer to understand the particulars of how a particular culture and context affects how *Social Force* is experienced. Whether this could happen through an abusive translation like subtitling that forces the viewer to engage with the foreign information (Nornes, 2007) or some other method is both unknown, and as yet untried. What is generally missing from localized games is access into the particular political and cultural importance to the foreign playing audience; the foreign particulars are localized to local particulars. This happens because what is locally important in terms of politics and culture is not necessarily what is important somewhere else, so in order to create a legible, fun experience (that can also sell well in the domestic market) localization either alters or recreates the foreign content into locally legible content. Unfortunately, this practice of localization limits the possibility of translation as an interface between cultures and simplifies the way that translation interfaces between players and games. Even though it tries to make gameplay a better, more entertaining experience, localization does the disservice to the player when it disables the possibility of understanding the foreign player's particular engagement with a game.

Returning to a previous example, *Kingdom Hearts* is a mish-mash of two multi-national companies' characters into a diegesis that is about border crossing and border sealing. Such a back and forth between freedom of movement and halted mobility is reinforced by the Japanese linguistics and its place within Japanese history over the past few centuries (Sakai, 1997). While the English maintains the diegetic issues with mobility and borders in that the player must enact the same closing of doors, the English speaking player does not experience the same linguistic mixture that would remind her of the way borders and mobility are an issue of the real political world. Thus, the translation has, in fact, reduced the complex Japanese experience of the game that combines fun with real world politics into a simple North American experience that is mostly fun. In addition to the original mirror-like interface that came with the original Japanese version, the Final Mix re-translation truly mixes things up by adding a secondary mirror-like element to the translation in that the player not only sees the original mixture, but must see what she looks like through the eyes of the English translator whenever she hears the characters speak in English. Unlike the highly window-like English translation that replaces the Japanese cultural mixture, the Final Mix re-translation enables both a window-like and mirror-like experiences.

A translation should enable a game to move between languages and markets, and certainly, it should also enable a similarly entertaining experience for the player. However, a translational interface could also enable access to the original cultural content so that players may interact with that culture on its own terms by allowing a player to witness a hint of the experience of playing that game as a player in another context.<sup>ix</sup> In games, translation (or localization) is best understood as an interface between both the player and the game, and between different players in different places; the translation is what connects different communities that play the same game, and the strategies that connect those different people are important. As has been demonstrated extensively in critical theory, comparative literature and cinema studies, translation

is a way that structures of power are both produced and go on to delimit the possibilities of lived experience and cultural interaction. Engaging with translation as a concept and process is a way to both understand and take apart those limiting structures.

Viewing translation as a type of interface that combines Montfort and Bogost's interface layer and Bolter and Gromala's interface types, I argue that translation is not simply a functional practice, or an ignorable preference, but a matter of importance for both games and game studies as translation delimits the reception of the game and constructs the methods in which players see and interact with others around the world. An acknowledgement of how different structures of power and lived experiences are created by the different types of translation could lead to more nuanced understanding of automatically loaded professional localizations, and painfully installed fan produced translations; British English translations and American English translations; box-and-docs translations, partial localizations and full localizations. As different interfaces, each of these translation types enables and disables different types interaction with a game, and structures a different a reception and operation. By studying translation as an interface it is possible to begin to understand just how much translation matters to both an understanding of the game form itself, and the game's relationship to power structures, cultural interaction and flow.

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<sup>i</sup> The term 'translation' is used in a more general sense throughout this article; 'localization' is used specifically to refer to the industry practice of localizing games.

<sup>ii</sup> While the changes made are 'assumed' to be preferred by the target locale, these preferences can and do change. At best these preferences are a guess based on the beliefs of the localizers and the publisher paying for the localization.

<sup>iii</sup> A pivot language is a middle language through which translations travel to get to other, lesser-spoken languages. In the case of video games, many translations go through English to reach European languages. This is partially due to the paucity of available translators that can translate from Japanese as compared to the wealth of translators available to translate from English.

<sup>iv</sup> Even when playing online with players using other localizations the differences between these versions is hidden thanks to client-side application settings. Client-side settings can determine the gore level represented by the application; similarly, client-side settings can determine the localized language, graphics and other assets called upon by the application. Thus, despite the considerable differences between regional localizations of the multiplayer game *Starcraft II* (Barnes 2012), players cannot see the differences between versions during online play with people using other localizations.

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<sup>v</sup> To be clear, Juul names this the “classic game model” because it is visible in what are now considered the ‘classic’ video games primarily of the 1970s and 1980s. Writing in the early 2000s, Juul’s argument itself is not ‘classic.’

<sup>vi</sup> Konzack’s seven layers are: Hardware, Program Code, Functionality, Gameplay, Meaning, Referentiality, and Socio-Culture.

<sup>vii</sup> Japanese text generally uses four different scripts, kanji, hiragana, katakana, and romaji. Kanji (漢字) are logographic signs that use Chinese characters with either adapted Chinese pronunciation, or local Japanese readings of the characters. Both hiragana (ひらがな) and katakana (カタカナ) were originally simplified methods of drawing kanji, but they were reconfigured as a means of separating the domestic and foreign in the 18<sup>th</sup> century where hiragana were the local, or national, and katakana was foreign (Sakai 2009). Finally, romaji, or roman characters, is the 26-letter Roman alphabet, which is used similarly to katakana, but provoke an even greater foreign flavor.

<sup>viii</sup> There are certain similarities between Bolter and Gromala’s window and mirror, and Bolter and Richard Grusin’s (1999) earlier work on Remediation, where every ‘new media’ remediates older media in either hypermediate or immediate ways. While remediation is a key precursor concept to Bolter and Gromala’s work in that the mirror-like interface is related to hypermediation and the window-like interface is related to immediate access, understanding remediation as a theory is unnecessary for understanding the argument of the current article.

<sup>ix</sup> It should be cautioned that the author is not suggesting that a translation gives an unmediated, clear, or otherwise unsteretyped access to the foreign culture. However, just as various translation theorists have argued that there is ethical value in engaging with the foreign through translation (Bermann and Wood 2005; Venuti 1998, 2008), so too does it have value here.