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Game Translation User Research: Groundwork, New Research, and Prospects

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Abstract

In this paper, we survey selected tenets of an emerging program in video game translation studies – Game Translation User Research (GTUR). Explicitly aligned with Games User Research (GUR), GTUR seeks to capture in a systematic way how translation feeds into the experience of video game users. Drawing on examples, we probe some of the relevant conceptual and terminological distinctions that contextualize the thematic issue this article introduces, featuring papers from an international lineup of scholars who showcase new user-centric video game translation research.

Keywords: reception studies, user experience, user-centric video game translation studies, video game users

1 Introduction

With the technological breakthroughs such as generative AI (Pym 2024), translation practice is increasingly seen as at the forefront of change. From the perspective of research, this consequently heralds the importance of studying reception and perception, as it promises to elucidate the shifting paradigms of translation. This is especially true for a medium inherently reliant on users – Multimedia Interactive Entertainment Software (MIES; cf. Bernal-Merino 2020).

The study of game localization consumption and game localization users is becoming ever more tangibly potent, with mounting examples of controversies around user expectations, linguacultural tensions, and what users perceive as the quality of the globally released product. One of the recent controversies to be studied as an example of this, with the view to finding ways to try and avoid such problems in the future, may be the one surrounding *Assassin's Creed: Shadows* [*AC:S*] (Ubisoft 2025; Takahashi 2024). Before its release, the company behind the game was repeatedly advised to adjust or expand playable character options in order to accommodate fans' concerns about Japanese historical depiction (cf. Tassi 2024). This game from the globally popular

Assassin's Creed [*AC*] series was trying to capitalize on the success of *Ghost of Tsushima* (Sucker Punch, 2020). The two games can be compared on the basis of their thematic and gameplay similarities but contrasted in terms of user feedback.

Ghost of Tsushima's [*GoT*] team was praised for its engagement with the Japanese socio-culture (Malmquist 2022; Slyter 2024), and the leads on the game development team were even made ambassadors by Tsushima's local authorities because of the tourism boost the game brought (Scullion 2021; Tsushima Tourist Office 2021). The creators of AC were aware of this success, as commented on by its lead producer Karl Onnée, and wanted to take advantage of such surge in public attention: "That game [*GoT*] went on to sell over a million copies in the country [Japan], and Ubisoft will be looking at that as an indicator of what's possible" (Dring 2024).

AC:S is also set in feudal Japan, and there are two playable characters: a Black male samurai and a Japanese female shinobi (ninja), unlike *GoT*, which has the traditional male warrior as the only playable character (Lada 2020). Before the launch of *AC:S*, the Japanese fandom voiced concerns over the perceived insensitivities of the playable characters and their historically inaccurate gameplay (Yin-Poole 2025). This forced the company to issue an official statement attempting to reassure the fan base (AC: Shadows Dev Team 2024; Jewett & Lemay-Comtois 2024).

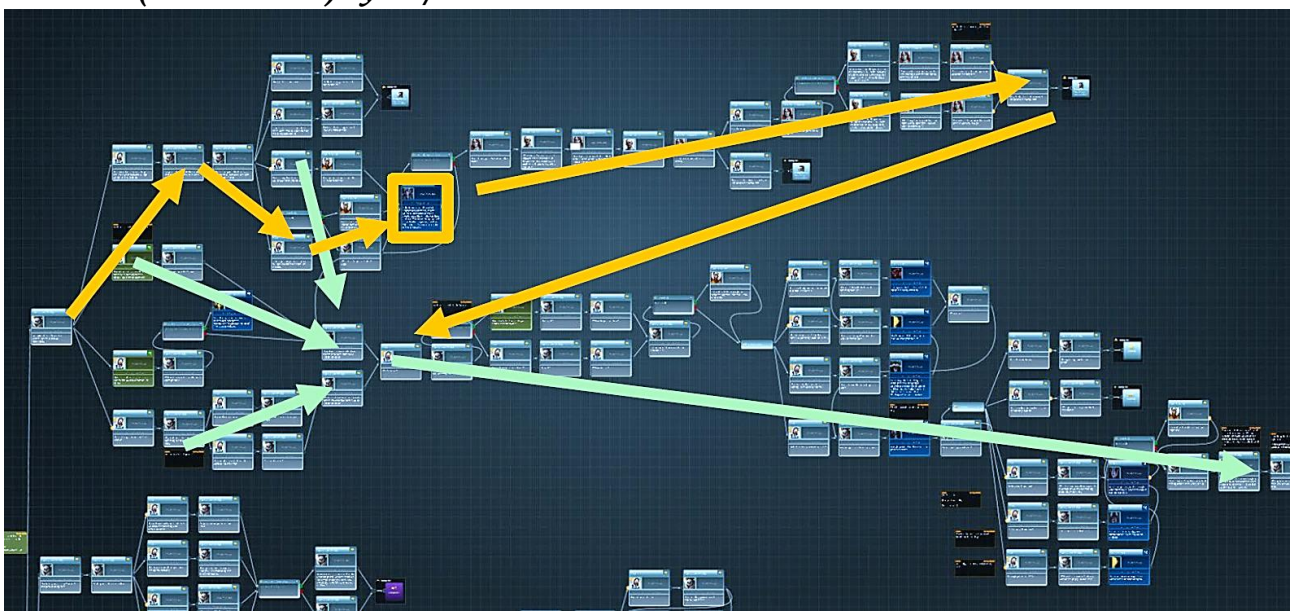
However, upon the release of *AC:S*, fans felt let down – both in Japan and worldwide – and were accused of politically motivated "hatred" (Totilo 2025). Players complained that, for a game about assassins, the samurai played more like a bruiser, which made the storytelling shallower and more ahistorical (Becher 2025; Steam Community Forum 2025; cf. Corless et al. 2025, minute 4:15). At the time of writing, the overall user evaluation of *AC:S* tends toward negative more so than in previous releases of the same series (Metacritic 2023, 2025a).

Moreover, fans felt vindicated when Sucker Punch released the more successful sequel, *Ghost of Yotei* (2025), with a female protagonist. This dispelled some of the previous allegations about bigoted criticisms of *AC:S* and showed that Japanese players appreciate cultural nuance. At the time of writing, the user score of *Ghost of Yotei* is 8.1 out of 10 (3,000 user ratings), whereas the user score of *AC:S* is 6.2 out of 10 (4,500 user ratings) (Metacritic 2025b, 2025a).

A "users-first" approach is also applicable in the context of localization. A good example is that of the Estonian studio ZA/UM and their game *Disco Elysium* (2019) [*DE*], a text-dense role-playing game (RPG). It "draws from a variety of influences and fields, and requires advanced literacy to be enjoyed fully" (Verdinelli 2021). Lauded for its introspective and politically loaded writing (Keenan 2021), *DE* posed a great challenge for localizers. They had to maintain the quirky dialogic functionality and manage localization quality assurance [LQA] amidst the COVID-19 pandemic (Verdinelli 2021).

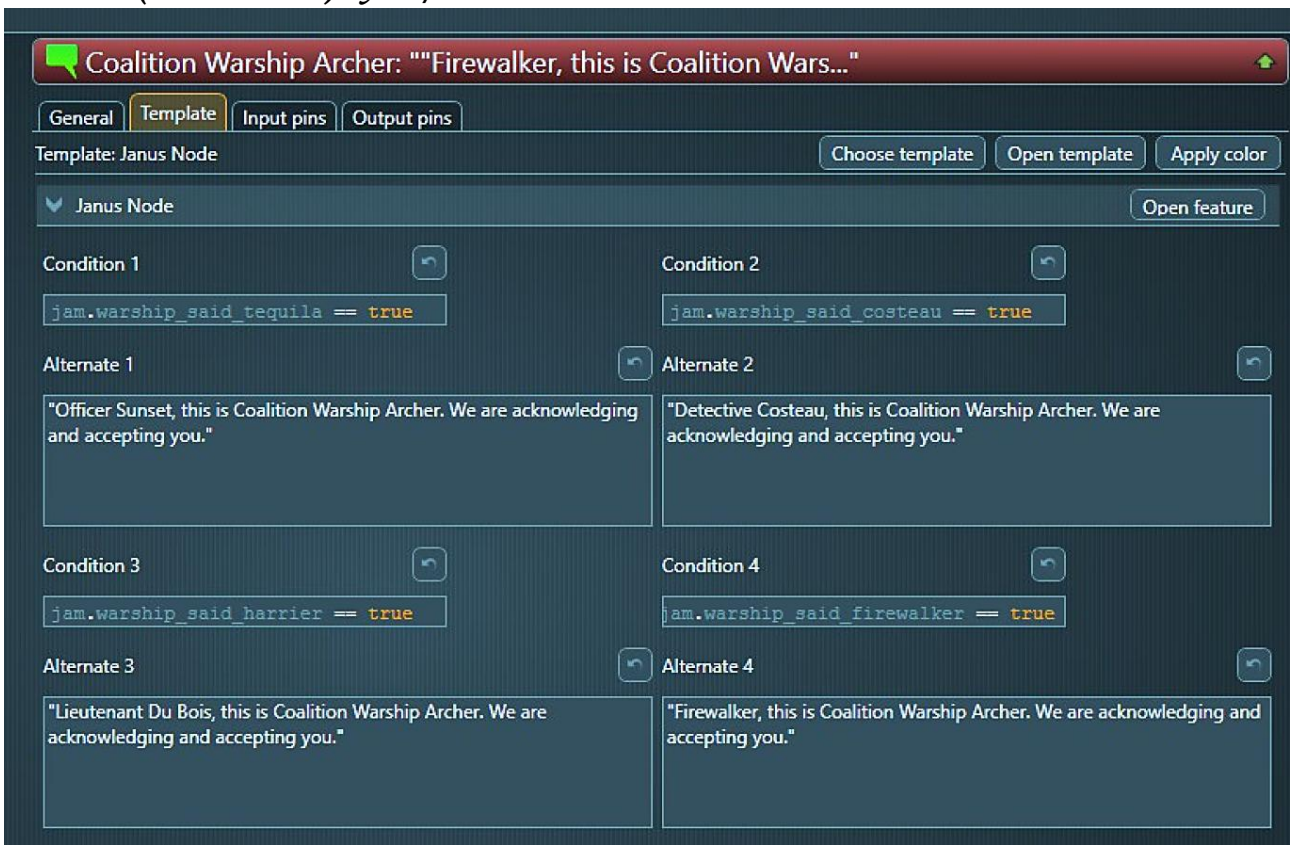
To cope with such demands, they were given access to the development tools "to see dialogues as flow diagrams, and check when or why a given string would appear" (cf. Figures 1 and 2). ZA/UM provided this access to localizers "along with lengthy and detailed reference documentation to bring forth more clarity about the game's lore and setting". Moreover, a process to collaborate with the LQA team was set up to playtest the results of translations (Verdinelli 2021).

Figure 1. ***Intricate hypertextual structure of Disco Elysium's narrative (ZA/UM 2019), as presented during "Disco Elysium: Meaningless Choices and Impractical Advice" (Keenan 2021) by ZA/UM at GDC 2021.***



(More information: https://gdcvault.com/play/1027048/-Disco-Elysium-Meaningless-Choices)

Figure 2. ***Segmentation tools visualizing Disco Elysium's dialogue options (ZA/UM 2019), as presented during "Disco Elysium: Meaningless Choices and Impractical Advice" (Keenan 2021) by ZA/UM at GDC 2021.***



(More information: https://gdcvault.com/play/1027048/-Disco-Elysium-Meaningless-Choices)

Most importantly, however, likely as a way to work toward – and later gauge – the international reception of the game, additional resources were allocated to solicit global audience feedback, aiming to "invite the game's high-engaged fan community to help with the process of a) deciding which languages to localize for, and b) the actual localization work itself" (Vedinelli 2021). The shared preferences of each player community unite them across countries (Bernal-Merino 2018).

This is evidenced by a 350-page-long discussion board on Steam, opened by the game producer to ask for feedback (*Dani ZA/UM* 2019). On that forum, the producer also acknowledges that a small studio like theirs may have limited capabilities compared to larger studios, but they wish to try their "best to translate the game as much as possible, where possible" (*Dani ZA/UM* 2019).

According to the translators, it worked "brilliantly," as "[t]he game's community had been really engaged in communication with the developers and active on online chat boards" (Verdinelli 2021). It was promising to see developers who listen to fans' feedback about the quality of gameplay for all locales. In other words, "the studio came across as less corporate and more approachable than other[s]" (Verdinelli 2021).

Unfortunately, the home version for Estonian players was not completed because the other 13 languages opened much larger markets (Kurvitz 2024, timestamp 40:39). Such a "Great Internationale" was promoted as something requiring "out of the box creative thinking" for this politically themed RPG (Verdinelli 2021). The best example was the Chinese versions, which replaced terms such as "communism" with the made-up word "康米主义" [kangmi zhuyi] (Messener 2020). This helped the game go under the radar of censorial forces (Zhang 2012), while still allowing players to feel immersed in its fictional setting.

The information era grants worldwide access to products and services, but also to users and behaviors in a "bidirectional" way. It is possible to harness its tools and apply them to game localization research. Within the new framework of digital humanities, this special issue stresses the new insights into translation and its users brought by live-ops metrics, metadata (cf. Corless et al. 2025, timestamp 3:00), and automatic sentiment analysis combined with traditional surveys, interviews, and focus groups.

This user-centered line of research is beneficial not only for scholars but also for developers, publishers, translators, and players. It combines the latest advances in industry and academia to bridge the so-called "skills gap" in order to create practice-based but data-focused professionals of tomorrow. With that in mind, this paper showcases possibilities and emphasizes real needs when it comes to implementing the GTUR program (Deckert et al. 2024). In doing so, we highlight the cooperative potential across disciplines to define and demonstrate applicability for industry research, mapping out plans for synergistic collaboration. In the following sections, we coalesce some of the fundamental areas in user-centric studies that can be taken up and adapted by researchers to set the course for further studies.

2 Conceptualizing GTUR

The wording in the name "Game Translation User Research," which stems directly from "Games User Research" (cf. Drachen et al. 2018), aims to balance inclusivity and brevity. It should be reiterated that each of the conceptual containers hinted at by the name GTUR represents its ambitions to encompass a vast array of phenomena. It is common to mention players (or users, more broadly) in translation and accessibility discussions, but relatively rarely have users actually been asked for input in video game translation research.

GTUR aims to expand on the ideas proposed by Suojanen et al. (2014) and to follow research and methodological paradigms shifting toward more systematic and empirical insights across disciplines relevant to game localization: language studies (e.g., Kortmann 2021), game studies (e.g., Mekler et al. 2014), psycholinguistics (e.g., Janda 2017), and translation studies (e.g., Mellinger 2022; Wu & Chen 2021).

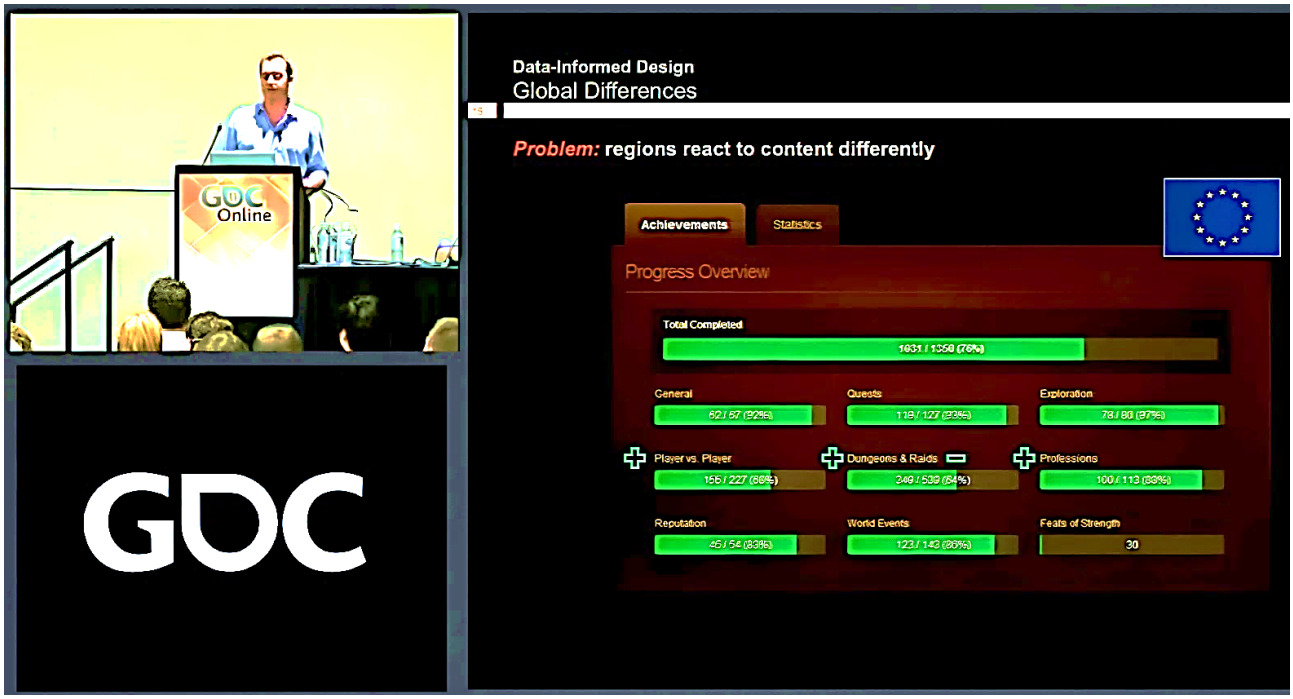
In the context of game localization research, and likely spurred by a series of important articles pointing to this niche (e.g., Mangiron 2017, 2018a, 2018b; O'Hagan 2009), the increase in data-driven work was observed as "a quantitative turn" by Ugo Ellefsen, echoing the convention of the cultural, sociological, and technological "turns" known in Translation and Interpreting Studies (cf. Pym 2009, p. 44). His observation was based on newer papers increasingly relying on interdisciplinary, measurable, and evidence-seeking sources of data, such as self-reports, biometrics, or corpora (Ellefsen, personal communication, November 24, 2025).

Evidently, this relatively loose idea of following the nascent "quantitative turn" in game localization research aligned with user-centric research and empirical reception studies. To that end, Ellefsen and Bernal-Merino (2018) explored the attitudes of gamers from different French-speaking locales (Belgium, France, Canada, and Switzerland) in relation to their language preferences and options while playing localized video games. Gathering this kind of information also benefits game industry decision-makers, who had already been incorporating it to complement return on investment (ROI) in their business analytics (cf. Figure 3; Ashe 2011, timestamp 21:56).

In that sense, GTUR refers to a far narrower and more defined program than the conceptual shifts captured within the phrase "quantitative turn". To illustrate, initiatives quantifying information from international companies and aiming to make relevant data more publicly accessible are better described using "the quantitative turn". Chiefly, the motivation for further popularizing this line of inquiry was indeed the drive to open and publicize data, whether large-scale or exploratory (Ellefsen, personal communication, November 24, 2025). Among other benefits, the idea was that it would allow scholars to more accurately substantiate their claims about localization practices in the gaming industry.

The same would apply to game accessibility research if end-users with sensory, cognitive, or motor needs can be conceptualized as a "locale" – not as a combination of language and country (as in, e.g., the Brazilian Portuguese locale), but of linguacultures and accessibility needs (cf. Cairns et al. 2025).

Figure 3. ***Example of analytics-informed design incorporating differences among locales, as discussed during "Data Mining and Machine Learning Applications in Blizzard Online Games" (Ashe 2011) by the Director of Business Intelligence & Risk at Blizzard Entertainment at GDC 2011.***



Let us break down the concepts of "Game Translation User Research" (Deckert & Hejduk 2025, pp. 4–10) by first focusing on the "User Research" part. Studying users understood as players, while perhaps the most intuitive for an interactive medium like entertainment software, does not have to be the only focal point embraced in GTUR (Deckert & Hejduk 2025, p. 5).

While interacting with gaming products of course constitutes the play itself – i.e., influencing the playthrough structured by the rules of play (Salen & Zimmerman 2004, pp. 58–61) – the levels at which users can interact with the artifact can be appreciated at other levels as well. For one, experiencing the consequences of intra-diegetic actions does not seem to necessitate directly participating in the game (cf. Chen 2022; Ameri 2025), as evidenced by the global multibillion-dollar esports market (Market.us 2025).

Just as with any other cultural artifact, viewing or reading about a game, or hearing about it from someone else, is also an important means of interlingual and intercultural communication about the product, its overall reception, its plot, characters, genres, user-oriented innovations, etc. This dimension of collectively interacting with the medium, exemplified by the push and pull between the work and its fandom, has been observed by Salen & Zimmerman (2004, p. 61) in relation to user activities separate from just playing the game.

Similarly, materially interacting with the medium (2004, p. 59) can perhaps be illustrated by merchandising and game paratexts in general, which can also be studied on a global scale and through the lens of translation and accessibility. Each of these dimensions (user experience, localization, player profiling, and data mining methodology) can be mediated by industry practices and shaped through user input.

User-generated content, "produsage," is the clearest example of this participatory culture, which also includes fan translation and commentary (cf. O'Hagan 2009, p. 107-108). Studying individuals and communities that come to use game translation and game accessibility can help to more holistically map out our understanding of the sociocultural, linguo-communicative, economic, and psycho-functional context.

Likewise, the use of the term "game" in GTUR pertains to many types of cultural artifacts with various mutually nonexclusive functions (cf. Bogost 2011), starting with more prototypically understood examples of multimedia interactive entertainment software – including various thematic (e.g., horror, fantasy), ludological (e.g., action JRPGs, visual novels), and industry (e.g., AAA, indie) genres (cf. Walk et al. 2017) – to more artistic interactive experiences (e.g., serious games and digital cultural heritage ludic software) or other media that border video games nomenclature or classifications (e.g., VR games, AR games, ARGs), but are connected by the medium's poetics – formal constituents (Salen & Zimmerman 2004, p. 80), such as ludic rules (Prajzner 2019, p. 22-23), within a system of representations – leading to the emergence of gameplay consisting of an artificial agonal engagement that requires player input to be resolved in a known and finite way.

The dimension of research, as part of the characteristics of GTUR, describes ways in which scholars can inquire about individual users or specific communities utilizing translation-mediated video game software. Academics and/or practitioners, through qualitative and/or quantitative methodological means, can seek theoretical and exploratory or empirical and confirmatory findings.

For instance, aggregating feedback and seeking troubleshooting solutions through methods such as (n)etnography could yield highly contextualized data from local game users, potentially leading to increased ecological validity of findings. The ethos of (n)ethnographic approaches is understood here as observing naturally occurring sociocultural phenomena in situ (in their autochthonous environments). This can be contrasted with bringing those studied phenomena into a more controlled setting (e.g., a laboratory), thus reducing randomness.

Laboratory research thrives at isolating a given phenomenon from some of the variables that would organically co-emerge, but it must consider whether its findings prove limited in applicability when confronted with less controlled, inherently more complex, real-world scenarios. (N)ethnographic endeavors, being typically deeply anchored in authentic contexts, could therefore be used for triangulation.

Further research should also look into providing scholars with the right tools to conduct studies, either by pointing to existing instruments (e.g., psychometrically validated questionnaires and scales), by finding ways in which their application could be improved (e.g., by developing adaptations/translations of psychometric scales into local languages), or by designing entirely new tools in the absence of adequate means to conduct certain types of GTUR.

Critically, we want to avoid shaping GTUR into just a means to an end, such as a mode for testing or assessing localizations. Of course, to an extent, it could be used for that purpose, from a functionalist perspective that "put[s] the purpose and the intended audience as the focus of the translation" (Ellefsen & Bernal-Merino 2018, p. 22). As a novel research lens, however, GTUR has the potential to fill a noticeable niche (O'Hagan 2009; Mangiron 2018b) without ambitions to redundantly rehash or untenably supplant other optics. Ideally, it could bring together related interest groups under a shared emphasis on real or prospective users.

From a study design perspective, GTUR is strategically positioned (Deckert & Hejduk 2025, p. 15) to look into the interplay between real practices (e.g., accessibility features), different users (e.g., deaf viewers of gaming livestreams), and their evaluations or practical outcomes (e.g., their cognitive load, in-game performance, representation in gaming discourses) via an organized framework.

In a user-centric study like that, the decisions, techniques, and products would be treated as independent variables or stimulus materials in a larger system of game-environmental parameters (cf. Deckert et al. 2024, p. 67). These parameters are then considered measurable through complementary methods with sufficient replicability.

Nonetheless, to situate this paper in the global ecosystem of gaming and the evolving body of research, we are intentionally assuming a broader approach. Our discussion aims to consider some aspects we speculate may be of interest to researchers. These factors include ethical considerations, industry frameworks, legal and sociopolitical constraints, and the conditions of international gamers.

This is why we highlight some research opportunities that would principally fall outside core GTUR but should contribute to its development – for example, how to systematize, streamline, and popularize our academic endeavors; how to formulate insights that are relevant and not disconnected from reality; and how to define quality in goods and services that customers can purchase.

Finally, in response to the fragmentation of research around gaming, we wish to reflect on cross-disciplinary methods for empirical and theoretical research, as well as on outlooks shared by academics and industry experts.

2.1 Concepts of Game-User communication in Academia

The choice of the term "translation" in the name for the "Research" of "Game Translation Users" has the potential to be controversial, but its superordinate nature favors the broad palette we are pointing towards. For one, accessibility is adjacent to game translation efforts while designating a set of different concepts. However, the terms are in many ways congruent with each other and difficult to separate, as exemplified in the label Audiovisual Translation & Media Accessibility (AVT & MA).

Importantly, scholars who wish to further user-centered and user base-oriented studies of games in global contexts and across linguistic or territorial-cultural boundaries might be skeptical about using the term "translation" to refer to practices that in the industry have come to be known as "localization." The following section attempts to clarify our train of thought regarding this. In order to unpack how GTUR conceptualized the research of the linguacultural transfer of games, we first offer an overview of the available terminology.

Although the designation "audiovisual translation" (AVT) does not refer to a specific strategy of translation but rather points to the translation of multimodal content (e.g., Kress & Van Leeuwen) that can go beyond words (for a more precise overview, see, e.g., Chaume 2004), it can help frame accurate terminology referring to the linguocultural transfer of VGs as complex polysemiotic and multimodal products (Bernal-Merino 2016).

Nonetheless, as Díaz-Cintas and Remael (2014, p. 9) write, critics of AVT have considered it in a different, more specific light: "[f]or some, this activity falls short of being a case of translation proper because of all the spatial and temporal limitations imposed by the medium itself which constrain the end result. They prefer to talk about adaptation." This term, translation proper, refers to Roman Jakobson's 1950s typology of written text translation.

Undoubtedly, written texts (and their translations) are among the principal vessels of human communication. However, the way the written word tends to be nobilitated among other forms may, perhaps unintentionally, underpin subtle restraint toward other codes and multimedia and, by extension, interactive entertainment (and their translations). Nevertheless, the study of polysemiotic communicative artifacts (linguistic, visual, acoustic, lyrical, haptic) and their translations can ultimately demonstrate that "an a priori selective approach towards culture often contributes to the consolidation of certain cultural tendencies, rather than to an adequate analysis" of its reality (Delabastita 1989, p. 193).

Although the aforementioned quotation from Dirk Delabastita (1989, p. 193) originally referred to film translation, we use it to highlight that, after many decades, this

observation now finds reflection in new forms of AVT, such as game localization, which adds interaction to the audiovisual media paradigm (López Redondo 2014).

With the globalization of illustrated media, motion pictures, and graphic novels, the work of translators goes well beyond words on a page. Linguistically speaking, VGs are multitextual software products (Mejías-Climent 2019; Maietti 2004), as they contain different types of texts, from narrative to dialogical, legal to technical, pedagogical, and promotional (cf. Levis 1997).

But being multimedia creations, these coexist with other asset types that encompass a wider semiotic palette (cf. Mejías-Climent 2021, pp. 3–13), such as visual (graphics, textures, and animations), acoustic (voices, sound effects, and music), and haptic (tactile feedback) information (Bernal-Merino 2016, p. 241). Although there are text-only games, most are multimodal creations (cf. Frasca 2001). This means that written words displayed on-screen work with images, sounds, haptics, and user behaviors to assemble the emergent spectacles available for recipients to experience and co-create.

Due to many factors – among them the complexity of VGs as experience-generating machines, executing programmable instructions live using the user's private hardware in multimodal conversation with human input (Bernal-Merino 2016) – the adaptation of these products for foreign markets has only recently been researched in Translation Studies, with conspicuous terminological variation. Among these terms there are adaptation, transcreation, rewriting, translation, and localization. Our description of the last of these items will be positioned in terms of its prominent use in the industry (cf. Bernal-Merino 2006, pp. 31-34).

Adaptation of media is a commonly used term to refer to a number of different practices. This poses one of the first problems encountered when using it to refer to a linguacultural transfer. So present is it in common everyday language and across a wide variety of contexts (Bastin 1993) that trying to attach a translation-related specialized meaning to it has the potential to confuse rather than clarify.

Moreover, the term adaptation seems to be preferred when the changes taking place are very pronounced, such as when a piece is transplanted from one medium into another – for example, taking inspiration from a novel to create a film or a VG, redirecting the source material through the benefits and constraints of new forms of expression.

Another term increasingly recurrent in academic and business contexts is transcreation. Transcreation was used in the advertising industry, and in that case, it involved the production of global marketing campaigns for different locales, including the casting and filming of celebrities who could be recognized in different territories (cf. Mazanko 2021; Kudła 2022, p. 136).

We note how it was initially employed in the realm of marketing, as this might partly shed light on its relation to the concepts of culturalization, domestication, and – as

some may feel the need to point out – even the subject of regional lockouts of multimedia and content revisions whereby the original authorial vision is expurgated or redacted (cf. self-censorship, a very complex topic that does not allow for simplistic answers; Merkle & Baer 2024).

Some scholars may also find the term problematic, as it could seem to presume that other translation practices tend to be less "creative" or inventive (cf. Bernal-Merino 2006, pp. 32-33), which may limit its usability in some circles. The need for creativity, one might argue, is guided by the constraints of the medium itself and limited by those financing the work, while societies and human fashions also favor some features over others, depending on the taste of the time and place.

Mangiron and O'Hagan (2006, p. 20) nevertheless defended this term by describing how well it applies to what takes place in game localization. They highlighted that localizers are often granted quasi-freedom to modify as they deem necessary to bring the game closer to players and to convey the sensations of the original gameplay. While certainly a valid point, it can beg the question of whether the same could not apply to what we still deem translations of literature in general, such as the Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the Greek comedies by Aristophanes, or the Spanish comic books by Ibáñez.

Transcreation could therefore constitute a type of terminological specialization that offers a translation-like service emphasizing creativity, as localizing teams are "generally granted carte blanche" to change elements of the original or even introduce new target-culture references, since "the goal of game localization is not simply to translate text but to translate experience" (Mangiron 2012, p. 3, cf. Bernal-Merino 2016, pp. 246–247).

This goes to the point of translators' invisibility, as users "enjoy a game as if it were an original designed for them" (Mangiron 2012, p. 3; cf. Kudła 2021, p. 533; cf. Bogucki 2013, p. 26). As an illustration, Mangiron and O'Hagan (2006) are credited with first proposing *transcreation* first to "conceptualize game translation as the transfer of the gameplay 'experience' from the source to the target text," based on the example of the user-centric translation of item names and the use of "regional accents in […] cut-scenes in the major Japanese RPG *Final Fantasy* series" (O'Hagan 2018, p. 152).

Chiefly, one weapon's name, originally bearing an idiom referring to the beauty of nature, was transcreated as "Painkiller." While lacking the original meaning, it instead functioned as an irony-driven fourth-wall break. The fourth wall is broken because users choosing to use this weapon "could skip painful grinds ['farming' game resources through repetition of gameplay exploits or game mechanics] and earn points more quickly" (O'Hagan 2018, p. 152).

A seemingly similar term, rewriting, is frequently found in the field of comparative literature (Lefevere 1985) and is sometimes applied to any interlingual transfer in which

major reinterpretation of a known fictional universe is involved. The idea behind it is that rewriting is not a copying act, for it adds qualities to the original that it claims to honor. Therefore, writers are not hide the fact that the source material comes from other times or places.

Rewriting may therefore suggest a reworking of the content to update it to new tastes or societal preferences. A criticism of this, however, might be that people regularly carry out this type of rewriting of foreign creations to increase local sales rather than to offer new quality. That is to say, translators are not exceptional in practicing this, especially as they strive to let customers enjoy their translated product. Examples may include animated productions based on traditional fairy tales, myths, and literary classics, as illustrated by the rewriting of *Sherlock Holmes* in Japanese games within the *Ace Attorney* series (Okabe 2019).

Arguably, as the Romans did with texts from classical Greece, a similar process has now reached an industrial, global scale. The features to be maintained or deemphasized, especially in game localization, are orchestrated by publishers, stakeholders, boards of directors, and even fans (cf. Wang & Zhang 2025), most obviously when they collectively select what to include within the numerous AVT-related procedures and technical constraints of their works.

Finally, we deduce that translation is the broadest term in scope (Munday 2009), referring to all types of linguacultural transfers, from before the Rosetta Stone to the present day, encompassing various procedures under the common aegis of disciplines such as Translation Studies or Audiovisual Translation. Although it is not as relevant a point here, and although interpreters and researchers of this professional practice might prefer not to conflate the two terms, it can also describe spoken mediation. For instance, the Polish language typically refers to interpretation as “oral translation” (*tłumaczenie ustne*).

Because of its seemingly all-encompassing nature, we can adopt translation as an inclusive demarcation. From a practical viewpoint, translation – as in GTUR – can also be understood as referring to a more abstract outlook on the relevant practices that allow the global use of multimodal interactive software, or as a more academia-oriented term, considering that game localization is already more widely adopted within the industry but not well understood in certain areas of linguistics (e.g., psycholinguistics) and translation disciplines (cf. Bernal-Merino 2006, pp. 31-32), within which GTUR also aims to gain traction.

2.2 Concepts of language access in the industry

There are potential incongruencies when it comes to naming conventions in industry and academia. The phrase *voice overs* may serve as an example of a specific matter of

contention in the dynamic between language service provision practices and AVT theory. In the industry, this term refers to audio recordings of voice acting in general, mostly to denote what might otherwise be called dubbing (cf. Strach 2023; Mrzigod 2021, p. 52).

Most games do not utilize voice-over in the film translation sense, although a few Polish localizations in the 2000s experimented with this idea. At the time, voice-over (*lektor* in Polish) was a popular choice for film translation in Poland and "other formerly communist countries that inherited voice over from the Soviet Union" (Bogucki 2010, p. 7; Szarkowska & Laskowska 2015, p. 182).

The solution whereby a single Polish non-diegetic voice was overlaid on top of the source-language diegetic dubbing was tried by a game localization distributor, CD Projekt, in several installments of the Ukrainian series *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* (GSC Game World 2007–2009) and the game *Stranglehold* (Midway & Tiger Hill 2007), an intermedial sequel to John Woo's 1992 film *Hard Boiled*. Yet overall, this practice has remained unadopted in Poland (cf. Kudła 2021; Kudła 2022). In the international and interdisciplinary academic discourse in which GTUR is most likely to propagate, the term "voice-overs" may at times still prove less than clear compared to the industry, wherein game localizers adapted that term even in countries where the voice-over is still used in filmic media.

In the context of creating a target text from a source text, consensus over whether translation is hypernymous to localization or vice versa has yet to be reached (Bernal-Merino 2014). The term *localization*, or L10N, is mostly used in the software industry, and it comes from the French noun *locale* (brought into English in the late eighteenth century). The term thus presents a useful addition to Translation Studies, as it asserts two variables at the same time: language and territory.

During the process of creating language versions or releases, files are labeled according to the ISO Language Code Table, with, for example, *es-AR* (Spanish from Argentina) distinguished from *es-ES* (Spanish from Spain). This system is particularly relevant for the current research, as it not only acknowledges the differences between speakers in separate countries but also internationalizes the coding and design of the software application so that it can easily accommodate all variations required for the global distribution of the product.

Likewise, game localization can be used to point to a more industry-oriented perspective. In L10N, businesses create workflows to sell products to particular target populations. Similarly, the associated legal framework and technical requirements for the successful deployment of localizations are not necessarily in place for some other translational phenomena that GTUR would not wish to disqualify from study – such as fan translations. Industry concepts are borne in mind when the term "translation" is used but, meaningfully, are not the sole focus.

Certain terminological incongruencies have largely crystallized and are mostly unanimously understood by users, scholars, and industry representatives. The term "game developers" (also "dev teams," etc.) refers to tech companies or studios creating ludic products – from the concept phase to completion and to maintenance or expansion post-launch. "Publishers," then, refers to entities specialized in distributing the product nationally or globally, physically or digitally, and offering services relevant to the product's intellectual property (IP), such as maintaining good relations with other companies and users.

Still, there may be some variation in how exactly the terms are used. There may be confusion regarding pieces of nomenclature that are superficially similar but have important underlying distinctions. For example, "rightsholders" may own the IP, whereas "stakeholders" are legal entities owning part of the product in shares or otherwise. There may be situations in which terminological ambiguity leads to equivocation.

Even beyond academic research contexts, it is not difficult to think of situations in which that could be undesirable. For instance, using the term "customers" or "clients" may be confusing, as they could refer either to the consumers of the gaming production (actual buyers, technology users) or, within localization pipelines, to the commissioner of translations.

Finally, there remains the question of who exactly is studied as the users of translated games – casual players, dedicated gamers, both, or a differently defined kaleidoscope of individuals? (cf. Ellefsen & Florentin 2024). Of course, in some cases, a certain level of ambiguity might be beneficial if it allows different figures to be grouped together in an adequately rationalized way.

To illustrate, the label "experts" might refer to academic researchers or scholars and authors, as well as practitioners working in industry. To that end, research inclined to descriptively elucidate the different uses of language (cf., e.g., Ellefsen & Florentin 2024; Mangiron 2018, p. 124) in relation to GTUR (and beyond it) could serve to strengthen the foundations and help manage polysemic vagueness by highlighting variability in possible ways of expression.

Equally, it would be prudent for research to take stock of the current state of video game language service provision (LSP) and the localization industry – the working conditions within LSP agencies, game publishers, and studios; the broader industry context of cooperation between LSPs, publishers, and development studios – especially in terms of the well-being and economic situation of game translation users and workers in LSP agencies, publishing companies, and game development studios.

As far as we are aware, there have been no major attempts to broadly research the economic distribution of revenue within the industry in the context of how much is

invested in and generated by LSPs, how much of that is related to ROI from game localizations, and how much of it is human-, MT-, or genAI-driven.

Moreover, shedding light on the general socio-technological situation of users across various territories, incorporating their socioeconomic situation and psychological well-being, may be useful not only for researchers but also for the industry and administrative institutions more broadly. Ultimately, to define the applicability of GTUR, researchers could also survey international user bases regarding the kinds of research questions they believe should be addressed through video game AVT research, or more broadly, which kinds of generalizable problems the community most wants to see addressed in the future.

Further defining the synergistic potential between academics and the "real world" of gaming – through studies probing the opinions of LSPs, publishers, and studios regarding GTUR, and the conditions that would make them more willing to examine the issues of game translation use(rs) – is worth considering.

Admittedly, there are at least two ways to approach this in practice. Consumers might be eager to voice their grievances with the gaming industry as a whole, possibly placing trust in researchers to address these concerns even if doing so goes beyond the capabilities of scholars studying translation specifically. One example that comes to mind is the recent success of *Stop Destroying Games*, a consumer-centered political campaign that, at the time of writing, has been formally signed by millions of concerned citizens, likely backed unofficially by many more (European Union 2025).

This campaign is an offshoot of *Stop Killing Games* (SKG 2025), a grassroots sociopolitical action spearheaded by an international kaleidoscope of online content creators, especially R. W. Scott (2021), arising from a relatively niche advocacy movement focused on game preservation, boycotting specific IP practices in the industry, and pushing toward digital ownership as a way for consumers to "start keeping games."

Tracking changes in similar customer demands and broader ideological trends could be further investigated from the perspective of GTUR, as long as research objectivity and academic independence can be maintained. Alternatively, such inherently politicized and far-reaching systemic concerns could be sidelined as matters outside the expertise of GTUR, at least for now.

Still, scholars opening a dialogue with game translation users to poll for specific problems and sentiments might receive responses not limited specifically to AVT & MA. Is it within the responsibilities of GTUR scholarship to investigate the interrelations between transnational and cross-sectional systemic issues in global gaming? It is difficult to state conclusively.

Certainly, however, seeking ways in which our findings could alleviate or mediate these matters would find a place on the agenda of scholars, as long as the impartiality of analyses is maintained, with efforts made to safeguard data collection and analysis against possible biases.

3 Introduction of the Special Issue

Localization is a topic both notorious and inescapable when it comes to contemporary global gaming. It should not be disregarded that even core parts of international gaming communities can show hesitation toward localization practices and are, to an extent, willing to put effort into providing their community with insight or solutions (O'Hagan 2017, pp. 194–195, 197; cf. O'Hagan 2009, p. 100; Ellefsen & Bernal-Merino 2018, p. 80).

Since the precursor of game translation reception studies in the form of a single English user of a Japanese VG (O'Hagan 2009), what we are calling GTUR here is slowly emerging as an initiative that promises to address numerous concerns in areas situated between various academic disciplines and practitioners in the global gaming industry. Taken together, GTUR promises to answer a number of questions – from scholars, experts, and customers (VG end-users) – regarding VGs, game users, and global gaming.

This special issue is oriented toward the study of individuals and communities who utilize game localization (Mejías-Climent 2021) and accessibility features (Larreina-Morales & Mangiron 2023, 2025). It specifically aims to advance AVT & MA research into the medium of Multimedia Interactive Entertainment Software (cf. Bernal-Merino 2020), incentivizing synergies with practitioners and industry representatives and taking a broadly transdisciplinary vantage point (cf., e.g., Muñoz & Halverson 2022) to connect with findings from media psychology, cognitive linguistics, information technology, communication, media and cultural studies, ergonomics and design, and law and ethics, combined with industry practices that can examine and thus coalesce into a more holistic understanding of game translation users.

This special issue seeks to actualize several aspects of game translation research that have remained underdeveloped, specifically exploring direct areas of controlled-environment user-centric research, such as laboratory reception studies, as well as netnographies, which can contrastively be used for more contextualized and naturalistic observations.

The first paper, studying how a localized version of a Chinese RPG entitled *Depersonalization* (Meow Nature 2019/2024) was received by translation users, is contributed by Jemma Louise Stafford – a PhD candidate and researcher at the University of Leeds who specializes in user reception and developer perception of

Chinese-English game localizations. Among other things, her paper explores the methodological utilities of employing two distinct types of analysis: organically occurring game reviews versus gameplay-stimulated interview data.

The contributor of this issue's second paper is Georgios Vasilikaris, a doctoral researcher at the University of Turku with a background as a translator, who works on determining the effects of developments in technology (such as GenAI and MT) on game localization from the perspective of end-users. His article analyzes *League of Legends'* Greek dialogue lines and how they are received by a number of local players. Drawing on findings from game studies, his qualitative analysis specifically examines potential interactions between translation and one of the most highly polemical facets of user experience – immersion in gameplay.

The third contribution to our issue constitutes another research advancement on both player immersion and the highest-demand contemporary game markets – English and Chinese. Authored by Dariush Robertson of Newcastle University, whose portfolio includes robust industry experience in AVT and game localization as well as academic insights into the interface between user bases and cultural exchange, this paper analyzes *Black Myth: Wukong*. The study presents users' perceptions of notable in-game texts, formulated through interviews with English-speaking players presented with a corpus of excerpts from the game's localization.

The final article in this special issue juxtaposes culturalization practices in the Persian-speaking locale with user expectations and preferences, as analyzed by Amir Arsalan Zoraqi and Movahede Sadat Mousavi – respectively from Ferdowsi University of Mashhad and Allameh Tabataba'i University. The scholars collected questionnaire data from a large sample of a few hundred participants across diverse profiles of gender and age. Importantly, additional facets of users were also accounted for to constitute an integral part of the study's correlational analysis, such as the depth of gaming experience participants had with interactive media, their attitudes toward censorship, and their preferences for non-interactive media.

The issue closes with a final section dedicated to recently published or upcoming relevant publications and projects, prepared by the *L10N Journal* Editorial Team (*L10N Journal* 2026).

The topics suggested for exploration in this special issue focused on the interplay between the experiences of users (including but not limited to players) and game translation (notably including game accessibility), while taking into account the unique characteristics of the studied users as a researchable variable in their own right. These three types of constructs – a triplet of GTUR facets (Deckert et al. 2024, p. 67) – can be studied either in isolation or in relation to one another, e.g., as three distinct categories of research variables, not unlike a design offshoot corresponding to the Stimulus–Organism–Response framework (cf., e.g., Bai et al. 2024).

This is reflected in the non-exhaustive selection of topics we prepared for this special issue (Bernal-Merino et al. 2024). Building on them in future work, research should be able to expand our understanding of the interplay between the production of localization, the users of such products, and their user experience (Deckert et al. 2024, p. 68). This would include studying the reception of real or hypothetical localizations as well as the perception of translation practices in general across diverse fan communities (cf. Ellefsen & Florentin 2024).

What can prove particularly productive is capturing various demographic and psychosocial perspectives while cooperating with practitioners to consider applicability as well as their stance and well-being. The resulting insight can help design and apply more robust and inclusive practices, for example to satisfy further personalization and accessibility needs (cf. Di Rosa et al. 2025).

Employing a greater range of methodologies would also help triangulate results across studies, and possibly even across languages, to glimpse more holistic findings about the impact of game localization on sociocultural levels (cf., e.g., Zorrakin-Goikoetxea 2024; Zhang 2012).

Finally, considering that the *Skopos* of game localization in academia has been established as the reproduction of gameplay experience in a way that would be satisfying to users regardless of their linguistic or cultural background (Bernal-Merino 2016, p. 249), "there are no large-scale studies confirming whether this hypothesis, which has become one of the pillars of game localization theory, holds true" (Mangiron 2017, p. 18).

The quality of translation itself may be operationalized by employing GTUR within studies that are not primarily oriented toward users – for example, by providing a somewhat stable functionalist basis for defining or quantifying "quality" and "reception" in translation.

The cooperative potential of studying game translation users across disciplines can also be fostered by launching user-centric research tools and resources that can be used beyond Translation Studies (cf., e.g., Hejduk et al., forthcoming), or by reaching out to psychometricians, game studies experts, and media or cultural scholars for academic collaboration or to reveal challenges that could be addressed through user-oriented studies.

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