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Localization playability: Users' perception in the English translation of the Chinese game "Depersonalization"

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Abstract

This article examines the role of the written word in the localization of *Depersonalization* (Meow Nature 2019/2024), a Chinese-developed role-playing game (RPG), and its broader implications for the localization of Chinese-developed RPGs from a player reception perspective. Using a novel approach of analyzing netnographic data from Steam reviews in tandem with post-hoc playtest interviews, this brief reception study explores how written elements (visual-verbal/visual-non-verbal) influence perceptions of localization. The findings indicate that while written elements contribute to player reception, it does not function independently but interacts with visual and auditory elements. Steam reviews highlight translation concerns more frequently than play tester interviews, suggesting differences between post-hoc reflection and in-actu gameplay experiences. Play testers primarily noted issues when their experience was disrupted or provoked humor, whereas Steam reviewers provided broader critiques. Applying cultural schema theory, this article argues that player expectations, shaped by prior gaming experiences and community discourse, significantly influence perceptions of localization quality. The research underscores the need for a holistic approach that considers both textual accuracy and multimodal coherence. Future research should examine how different game genres and player demographics shape localization reception and how online discourse influences perceptions of translation quality.

Keywords: GTUR, UCT, Videogames, Reception, Player experience

1 Introduction

This article introduces preliminary findings taken from a broader project that explores localization and reception in videogames and suggests potential avenues for further future investigation built upon these findings. However, the present article focuses exclusively on one of these titles, *Depersonalization* (2019/2024), as a single-case study. The other two games, while part of the larger research design, are not analyzed in detail

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here. This brief study aimed to explore the extent to which the written visual-verbal elements in the Chinese-English localization of *Depersonalization* influenced player perception of localization quality, and how in-acti playtester feedback and retrospective Steam reviews differed in reception to the localised visual-verbal, such as what it reveals about player expectations and community discourse.

Despite growing interest in Game Translation User Research (GTUR), there remains limited empirical investigation into how players perceive and receive in-game textual elements within the broader multimodal experience of gameplay, particularly in the context of Chinese-to-English (ZH-EN) localization. Reception research is scarce (Deckert & Hejduk, 2022; O'Hagan, 2016) and perception research equally so (Ellefsen & Bernal-Merino, 2018; Fernández Costales, 2016). Existing studies have relied on either retrospective user reviews (Hsu & O'Hagan, 2024) or controlled playtesting (O'Hagan, 2009), but without integrating both to compare in-acti and reflective feedback. Moreover, the impact of community-edited and machine-translated (MT) localization strategies on player reception is underexplored (Du & Liu, 2025), leaving a gap in understanding how non-professional translation practices shape user experience and expectations. This influence of translated text on player response in ZH-EN localization of video games is examined, with particular focus on the role of written text within the broader multimodal context of videogame design. By analyzing player responses to in-game textual elements, this article seeks to explore whether the written word is fundamental to the localization of the videogame *Depersonalization*, and potentially RPG genre titles more broadly, from the perspective of players engaging with ZH-EN videogames. In the context of this article, "written elements" refers to user-facing textual assets that appear during gameplay, including the content of dialogue boxes, item descriptions, menus, user-interface (UI) labels and narrative exposition. Such elements are typically visual-verbal and are central to how players interpret story, mechanics and gameworld logic.

This analysis is based on data gathered through observed videogame playtests, semi-structured post-hoc interviews, and netnographic reviews (player reviews of games on Steam online) of three Chinese-developed RPGs. While three games were included in the broader data collection process to provide contextual diversity, this article focuses specifically on *Depersonalization* as a single case study. This low budget indie game was chosen for in-depth analysis due to its unique localization trajectory, from amateur MT-assisted approach with community post-editing, to one of full professional revision, which offers a rich site for examining player reception of in-game text that changes but occurs in one consistent setting. The study presented players with the early access version of the game, presenting a unique opportunity to examine player reception to a non-professional, semi-crowd sourced translation approach to written elements in-game and its perceived impact on the players according to their feedback.

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This article focuses specifically on the written elements of *Depersonalization* (Meow Nature 2019/2024) within its introductory tutorial phase. The tutorial phase was selected to provide a relatively linear experience that introduces core mechanics and offers a representative snapshot of the broader gameplay experience. This approach aimed to give play testers an adequate introduction of the core gameplay loops and themes without requiring players to complete entire video games, thereby conserving time and reducing participant fatigue while still capturing key aspects of the overall experience.

Player feedback was analyzed both in-actu during gameplay and retrospectively through post-hoc interviews, supplemented by thematic analysis of Steam reviews. The study isolated self-reported reactions specifically related to the non-diegetic visual-verbal (such as explicit tutorial guidance) and visual-non-verbal elements (in-game lighting intended to draw player attention, cf. *game affordance signifiers* (Aslam and Brown, 2020) rather than assessing the full multimodal experience. By examining how players engage with written localization within this broader context, it seeks to determine the extent to which written elements influence their perception of perceived localization quality. While the findings presented here offer an initial exploration, they are not intended to generalize across all localised games or player demographics. Instead, they serve as a foundation for further research into the relationship between language, multimodality, and player reception. These findings do however provide an initial exploration into this question, laying the groundwork for further research into the interplay of language, culture, and multimodal elements in gaming.

Primarily a reception study, this research is positioned within GTUR. Therefore, a brief overview of existing GTUR in the context of Chinese game localization and video game localization more broadly is essential to highlight current trends in the field.

2 Key literature

2.1 Game Translation User Research (GTUR)

Game User Research (GUR) and GTUR are increasingly recognized within translation and game studies, particularly as usability is acknowledged as a key factor influencing player feedback. For a comprehensive overview of existing research in GTUR, Deckert, Hejduk, and Bernal-Merino (2024, 1-13) provide a detailed examination of current scholarship, identifying areas for further investigation. Their work explores the relationship between translation and its recipients, offering insights into methodologies for designing game reception studies. Deckert and Hejduk (2024, 2-20) further emphasize the growing significance of user-oriented research, particularly as video games continue to expand globally, engaging diverse cultural and linguistic

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audiences. GTUR aligns with UTC (Suojanen et al., 2014) as a user-centric paradigm in translation studies, as well as cognitive translation and interpreting studies (CTIS) (Muñoz-Martín, 2016; 2020) emphasizing translator and user processes that resonate with the aims of GTUR in recognizing player experience and reception-centric research. These frameworks directly inform this study, integrating observed playtesting and post-hoc interviews to capture immediate user (player) responses, linking multimodality and player norms (or schemata) to build on GTUR's emphasis on empirical user-centered methodologies to explore how localised written elements shape player perception in videogame localization.

While previous research has primarily adopted product- or process-oriented perspectives, Mangiron (2017, 85) highlights the need for participant-oriented studies that focus on the experiences of translators, developers, and localization vendors. Addressing this gap, Deckert et al. (2024, 1-2) advocate for integrating user feedback, usability studies, and empirical methodologies such as eye-tracking and biometric data collection. This aligns with Ellefsen and Bernal-Merino's (2018, 42–43) recommendations for the videogame industry, which include: (1) fostering greater community engagement by involving players in the development of best practices and establishing feedback loops to enhance localization quality; (2) standardizing localization practices in a manner similar to established film subtitling guidelines; and (3) enabling language customization (or "personalization"), allowing players to tailor their experience through options such as dubbing, subtitling, partial translation, or non-translation, in line with broader trends in game personalization.

2.2 Cultural Usability and Localization

Building on this user-centered approach, the concept of "cultural usability" further underscores the necessity of considering cultural factors in localization. While standardizing localization practices and incorporating player feedback are essential, cultural differences play a significant role in shaping user preferences and perceived usability, necessitating a more nuanced and context-sensitive approach to localization strategies. Suojanen, Koskinen, and Tuominen (2014) introduce "cultural usability", addressing the lack of cultural considerations in usability research. Drawing on Hofstede's Five Fundamental Dimensions (1980, 15–41), they argue that national culture alone is insufficient for localization, as regional, generational, and professional cultures also shape user preferences. This is supported by Frandsen-Thorlacius et al., whose study comparing Chinese ("Eastern") and Danish ("Western") players revealed cultural variations in perceived playability (as per Bernal-Merino, 2018) – Chinese players prioritized visual appeal and enjoyment, while Danish players valued efficiency and frustration-free interaction. From here, discussion refers to playability rather than usability to better reflect to nuance of videogame interactivity and shift away from the

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more general usability associated with software more broadly. Similarly, Sun (2009) highlights a disconnect between long-term localization strategies and playability, advocating for "user localization", which integrates end-users into the design process to improve localization performance and mitigate translator biases related to training, culture, and nationality. The significance of cultural playability becomes particularly evident when examining how localization choices impact player experience in practice.

2.3 Previous Studies on Player Reception and Translation

O'Hagan's (2008) exploratory study on the localised version of *Ico* (Team Ico, 2001) offers an early example of how cultural assumptions embedded in game design can shape, and at times hinder, player engagement with localised content. Adopting a situationalist perspective (Nielsen, Smith & Tosca 2008, 9-10), the study analyzed player experience, game system mechanics, and cultural influences in localization. Using play trajectory recordings, self-reported player logs, and post-hoc interviews, a single play tester - who had prior experience with the original Japanese version - identified cultural assumptions embedded in the game design that impacted the localised experience. Key issues included camera control, opening cutscenes implying unknown languages, and narrative closure techniques (O'Hagan 2008, 229). The tester initially misinterpreted subtitles as a hieroglyphic representation of Japanese audio, despite no Japanese audio being present (p. 223), indicating how prior gameplay shaped assumptions about localization choices. Conversely, haptic feedback (force feedback) features were reported as enhancing player immersion (p. 226). This study reinforces the importance of player-centered localization research.

While O'Hagan's (2008) study provided valuable insights into individual player experiences through controlled observation, its reliance on a single, familiar participant may provide rich empirical data but offers limited generalizability and may have introduced bias. More recent research addresses these constraints by using large-scale user-generated data to capture broader, more diverse perspectives. Expanding sample sizes enhances representativeness and reduces the influence of idiosyncrasies, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of localization reception across linguistic and cultural contexts.

Additionally, a larger scale, more diverse dataset allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of localization issues, reducing the influence of individual idiosyncrasies according to one or few players, instead accounting for regional, linguistic, and cultural variations in player reception. In this context, Hsu and O'Hagan (2024) examined how player feedback, particularly from online platforms, can serve as a meaningful tool for evaluating localization effectiveness. Focusing on Chinese-language games, recently Hsu and O'Hagan (2024) applied Livingston's (2018) Review Analysis methodology (RVA) and thematic analysis to examine *Detention* (Red Candle Games 2017). Analyzing

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Steam user reviews in Simplified Chinese, English, and Japanese, the study assessed player experiences and localization challenges, exploring the potential of user reviews as a player-focused localization research tool. Reviews were categorized under three themes: (1) linguistic translation, (2) cultural context, and (3) technical issues, and collected using a Python package. Findings revealed that only 68% (7,019) of the 10,342 reviews were written in the source or localised languages, indicating that review language does not necessarily reflect the game version played. Additionally, only 155 Japanese reviews were identified (Hsu et al. 2024, 10), likely due to Japan's relatively small PC gaming market.

Despite certain limitations, Steam user reviews are recognized as a highly ecologically valid data source, providing real-world insights for future game localization research within GUR. They also underscore the scarcity of research on player experiences across regions, despite GUR's aim to accommodate an increasingly diverse audience (Drachen, Mirza-Babaei & Nacke 2018, 3). Additionally, Steam review features, such as the option to select review language, remain largely underutilized in research (see Tong 2021) leaving a gap – whilst Steam offers rich, multilingual, and culturally-diverse player feedback, few studies systematically analyze this data to explore regional or linguistic variation in localization reception, a gap this article aims to begin to address.

Beyond their role in evaluating localization effectiveness, user reviews also provide insights into the broader impact of culturalization on gameplay experiences. Hsu et al. identify culturalization as a key factor influencing player reception yet note that translation-related challenges often remain ambiguous. While intended to enhance accessibility, culturalization can sometimes lead to content alterations that dilute the original artistic intent or misrepresent cultural elements (O'Hagan & Mangiron 2013, 211-215). Furthermore, Edwards (2012, 19-34) argues that excessive adaptation may result in intercultural dissonance, leading to a loss of authenticity, player disengagement, or unintended cultural bias.

O'Hagan (2016, 123-144) similarly calls attention to the lack of research on localised gameplay experiences, emphasizing the need for further empirical investigation to advance this emerging field. The progression of GUR and GTUR underscores a growing shift towards user-centered approaches in game localization. While traditional research has predominantly focused on product- and process-oriented perspectives, recent scholarship highlights the necessity of participant-focused methodologies that incorporate playability studies, cultural playability, and empirical data collection. The concept of "cultural playability" reinforces the critical role of cultural factors in localization strategies, demonstrating that national frameworks alone are insufficient in capturing the complexities of user preferences, which are also shaped by regional, generational, and professional influences. Empirical studies, such as those by O'Hagan (2008) and Hsu and O'Hagan (2024), illustrate the value of integrating player feedback

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and user-generated data to assess localization effectiveness. However, despite the increasing emphasis on community engagement, standardization, and personalization, significant challenges remain in balancing accessibility, authenticity, and cultural adaptation. The growing reliance on large-scale user data, such as Steam reviews, presents valuable opportunities for advancing research into player experiences across diverse linguistic and cultural contexts. Nevertheless, further investigation is required to fully understand the implications of culturalization in game localization, particularly in relation to its impact on player engagement, authenticity, and the preservation of artistic intent. Addressing these complexities is essential for refining localization practices and ensuring that games remain both culturally resonant and functionally accessible to global audiences. Through combining analysis of netnographic user-generated reviews with playtesting and interviews, this article offers breadth and depth in the exploration and understanding of player reception which has not yet been seen in GTUR. The triangulation of this data offers a holistic view of localization is experienced and received in context within the field of ZH-EN videogames – a field still under-researched. Having established the importance of cultural playability and player perceptions in localization, this article now examines how these theories apply in practice through an analysis of three Chinese RPGs.

3 Materials and Frameworks

3.1 Selection of Games for Analysis

Building on the literature review, which underscores the significance of user-centered approaches in video game localization, this section details the methodological framework employed in the study. Given the complexities of localization strategies and their impact on player experience, the selection of games was guided by a set of criteria designed to capture a range of budgetary, linguistic, and development considerations. By examining RPGs developed in mainland China with differing localization approaches and levels of financial investment, the study aims to assess how these factors influence player perceptions and engagement. The inclusion of both developer-defined and player-generated genre classifications further allows for an exploration of potential divergences between formal categorization and user reception. The methodological choices outlined in this section form part of a broader investigation into the relationship between localization quality, player expectations, and the evolving role of user feedback in shaping game translation practices.

Three games were selected for playtesting according to the following criteria:

1. Classified as RPGs according to tags.
2. Developed by Chinese teams in mainland China.

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3. Represented different development budgets (one high-budget title and two low-budget titles).
4. Employed differing localization approaches.
5. Had positive overall reviews on Steam or the Google Play Store.

Note that only *Depersonalization* is analyzed in this article. The inclusion of the other two titles (*Honkai Impact: Star Rail* and *Eastward*) served to provide contextual diversity in the overall study design but is not discussed in detail here.

A set of inclusion criteria was established to define what qualified as an RPG according to Steam platform tags or Google Play Store categories. In addition to genre labels assigned by developers, these platforms feature supplementary tags submitted by players. The inclusion of player-defined tags alongside developer-defined tags provides insight into player perspectives on genre classification and how games are perceived by users, potentially highlighting divergences between developer intention (formal classification) and player reception (user insight).

The selected games were developed by studios based in mainland China: miHoYo, based in Shanghai (with international operations handled by the Singapore-based subsidiary HoYoverse); Pixpil, also based in Shanghai; and Meow Nature, likewise based in Shanghai.

Budget was considered a selection factor to determine whether players would cite it as influencing their perception of localization quality. Furthermore, the study aimed to explore how, if at all, different approaches to localization might affect player responses and in situ experiences. The games selected for the study were characterized by largely positive ratings on both Steam and the Google Play Store, which were operationalized as a benchmark for player-perceived quality. These ratings not only indicated overall positive user engagement but also suggested a level of technical competence contributing to a well-received player experience (Livingstone et al., 2011, 4–5).

Honkai Impact: Star Rail (miHoYo, 2023) was selected as the high-budget title for analysis and featured full professional in-house translation, whereas the first low-budget indie title selected was *Eastward* (Pixpil, 2021), which handled localization through an agency using a contextual (WYSIWYG) tool. The second indie title chosen for the reception study was *Depersonalization* (Meow Nature, 2021/2024), which is the focus of this article. Initially, its localization approach relied primarily on amateur translation assisted by MT with minimal post-editing. The use of MT was later expanded to involve the player community through the Steam and Discord platforms, enabling players to suggest edits and translation corrections that developers could implement through crowdsourced efforts. However, this MT-based approach was eventually overhauled, with a localization professional hired through an agency

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reworking the textual elements. *Depersonalization* is available in two languages and includes audio-verbal dialogue options, although these are not enabled by default.

3.2 The primary material analyzed: *Depersonalization*

While the selected games provide a diverse basis for exploring localization strategies, understanding how various modes interact in shaping player experience is equally crucial. To fully assess the impact of localization, it is essential to consider not only linguistic strategies but also the broader multimodal nature of video games. Although this article primarily focuses on player responses to written elements, it is important to acknowledge that localization extends beyond textual translation, interacting with multiple semiotic modes that contribute to meaning-making and immersion (see Bernal-Merino, 2016, for more on semiotics and pragmatics in video game localization). Consequently, a multimodal analytical framework is necessary to account for how these elements function collectively within the game environment, shaping both comprehension and engagement (see Taylor, 2020, for a robust overview).

For the purposes of this brief article, the emphasis is placed on the indie game *Depersonalization*. This game is particularly well suited for investigating player reception due to its evolving translation history and its reliance on written elements to convey narrative, mechanics, and atmosphere. *Depersonalization* is an RPG with tabletop RPG elements, themed around the lore of twentieth-century Gothic author H. P. Lovecraft, and features motifs familiar to readers of Lovecraft and players of games such as *Call of Cthulhu* (e.g., the occult, ancient gods, and place names such as Innsmouth). By incorporating the Lovecraftian universe, the game's genre conventions and cultural references pose challenges for cross-cultural interpretation.

Developed by the Chinese indie studio Meow Nature, the game was initially released in early access in 2019. It was made available for purchase and play prior to being a fully finished product and was translated largely by a single amateur translator on the development team with MT assistance. Subsequently, players and members of the fan community were invited, via the Discord and Steam platforms, to suggest translations, edits, and corrections. However, as of early 2024, the translation was largely replaced by the work of a professional translator, and in August 2024 the game exited early access and was released as a complete title. According to a developer update shared on Steam on December 3, 2024, the English translation is still undergoing revisions (Meow Nature, 2024). This transition from crowdsourcing to full professional rewriting offers a rare opportunity to examine whether changes in localization strategy affect player reception, perception, and experience over time.

With its distinctive localization trajectory, heavy reliance on written elements, and thematic complexity, *Depersonalization* presents an ideal case study, aligning with the

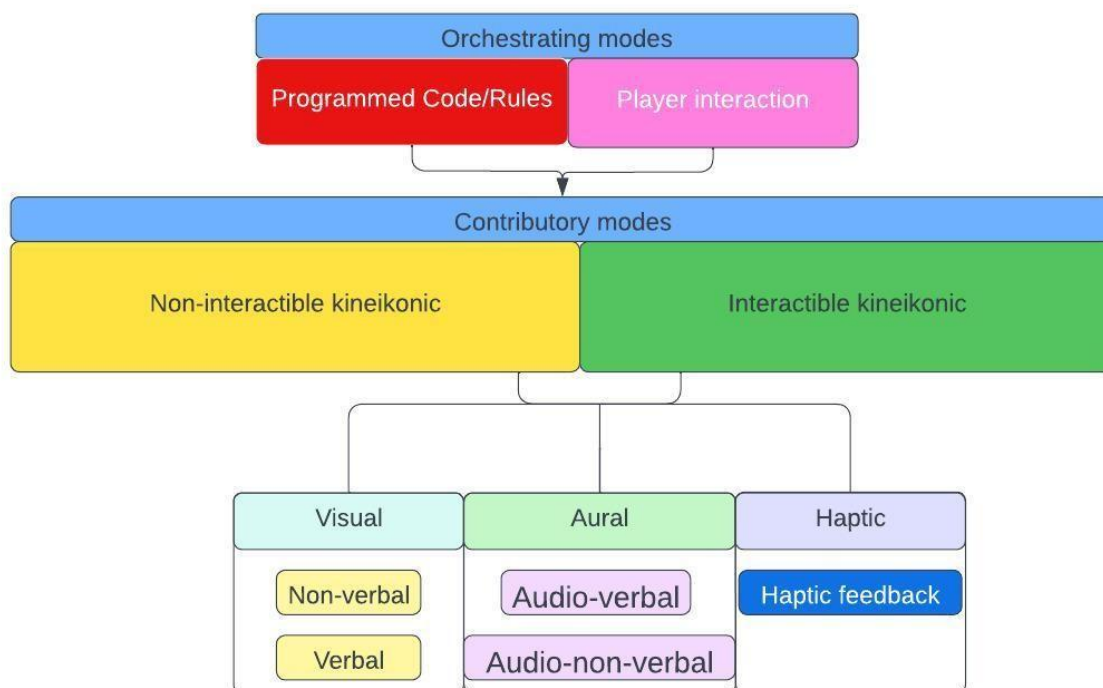
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broader aim of this research to contribute to GTUR through the combined use of netnography and interviews.

3.3. Multimodal Analytical Framework

As a text, videogames feature multiple semiotic modes that work together to make meaning. To undertake a multimodal approach to analysis, Burn's kineikonic mode (Burn & Parker 2003) was adapted in light of Zabalbeascoa (2008), Bolanos Garcia-Esribano (2024), O'Hagan & Mangiron's theory (2013) and terminology (Fig. 1). The kineikonic mode refers to the interplay of various modes, such as visuals, sound, and movement, working cohesively within a film, video, or, in this case, a video game, to construct meaning.

Figure 1. *Adapted kineikonic model implementing Zabalbeascoa, Bolanos Garcia-Esribano, O'Hagan & Mangiron's theory and terminology.*



To clarify the categorized modes in brief, see the provided summarizing Table 1.

Table 1. *Categorisation of audio-visual-haptic modes.*

	Audio	Visual	Haptic
Verbal	Words heard	Words read	
Non-verbal	Music, non-spoken sound (e.g. combat SFX, menu blips)	Non-dialogue words, pictures, screen image	

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Visual-nonverbal elements include user interface (UI) text, item names and descriptions, and narrative text that is descriptive rather than spoken by a character. The visualization of spoken dialogue and vocal sounds, such as laughter or screams, typically falls under visual-verbal elements. Audio-nonverbal elements describe sound effects, such as those occurring in combat scenarios, as well as music that plays throughout the game. Audio-verbal elements refer specifically to spoken sounds, such as dialogue exchanges or other verbal cues, including laughter or screams. Visual-verbal elements often accompany audio-verbal elements in the form of on-screen subtitles during dialogue exchanges that occur either in interactive gameplay scenes (such as speaking to an NPC) or in non-interactive cutscenes.

The haptic mode, sometimes referred to as "force feedback" or "rumble," is included to demonstrate its place within the model but was optional and did not factor into the playtesting, as playing the games on PC using a mouse and keyboard did not support this feature. *Depersonalization* was played without the AI voice option enabled and does not feature any haptic feedback system; therefore, the modes of interest are limited to visual-verbal, visual-nonverbal, and audio-nonverbal elements. This paper focuses exclusively on written text, namely visual-verbal and visual-nonverbal elements.

4 Methods

4.1 The Netnographic Data

While the adapted kineikonic model provides a structured framework for analyzing the multimodal nature of video games, it is equally important to examine how players engage with these elements in practice. Given that player perceptions are shaped not only by direct gameplay experiences but also by broader community discourse, netnographic data offer valuable insight into how localization choices influence player reception. By analyzing user-generated reviews from platforms such as Steam and the Google Play Store, it is possible to identify emergent themes in player feedback, shedding light on how localization strategies impact accessibility, immersion, and overall satisfaction.

Netnographic data offer insight into player experiences from the perspective of players advising other potential players, sharing information they consider relevant to prospective players' interests. Review data were scraped using Octoparse from publicly available reviews on Steam and the Google Play Store. From the available material, the most recent 500 reviews published between January 1, 2021, and December 31, 2024, were collected. From this dataset, 75 reviews from each game were selected using a random number generator to determine which data rows would be coded in NVivo for inductive reflexive thematic analysis, following the six-phase process outlined by

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Braun and Clarke (2006/2025, 77–101): familiarization, coding, initial theme development, theme review, theme refinement and definition, and write-up (originally introduced in 2006 and revised online at <https://www.thematicanalysis.net/doing-reflexive-ta>). Emergent themes are discussed in Section 5.2. Random sampling was used to account for significant differences in the number of available reviews across the three games. As *Depersonalization* is exclusively available on Steam, all reviews for this title were sourced from that platform.

4.2 The Play Tests

To further contextualize the findings from the netnographic analysis, it is essential to complement player-generated reviews with direct observations of player engagement during gameplay. All playtesters were provided with information sheets and signed consent forms in accordance with University of Leeds policy, and ethical approval to conduct the playtests was obtained in 2023. All data were anonymized using pseudonyms, and no participants' faces appear in any recordings.

While reviews offer retrospective reflections on localization quality and overall experience, playtesting provides an opportunity to examine immediate, in situ reactions to written elements within a controlled setting. By integrating these two approaches, this study seeks to develop a more comprehensive understanding of how localization strategies influence player immersion, comprehension, and satisfaction.

The games were playtested on a laptop using a keyboard and mouse by 11 anonymized volunteers (N = 11) who self-identified as fans of the RPG genre. Participants exhibited varying levels of familiarity with RPGs, ranging from those who primarily engaged with visual novel (VN) games – characterized by interactive storytelling with limited gameplay mechanics – to those with broader experience across RPG subgenres, including Japanese RPGs, Western RPGs, action RPGs, and computer RPGs. All playtesters were recruited from the Leeds area and comprised university students and local residents, all of whom were adults over the age of 18.

To ensure meaningful engagement with the written elements of the games, participants were required to declare their age, nationality, gender identity, and primary gaming language through a series of eight pre-play questions that initiated the interview process. While participants could indicate proficiency in additional languages, it was imperative that they possessed sufficient comprehension of English, particularly for engaging with dialogue and descriptive in-game text. Once play commenced, each participant was observed until reaching the end of the tutorial phase, at which point they were asked five standardized questions before moving on to the next game to be playtested. After completing play sessions for all games, participants were asked a further five questions, with opportunities for elaboration where the

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interviewer deemed additional exploration warranted. Upon completion of the playtest interviews, participants were debriefed on the full purpose of the study. Once all data were collected, they were coded in NVivo, first for general sentiment using NVivo's automatic sentiment coding tool and subsequently using an inductive reflexive approach to identify emerging trends, following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework (2006/2025).

4.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection methods included direct observation, audio and gameplay recordings, and laptop screen recordings captured during play sessions. Following gameplay, participants took part in semi-structured interviews to further explore their experiences. Interview questions were designed based on principles observed in GUR approaches (Kramarzewski & De Nucci, 2023, 305–321) and in line with established interview guidance (Gerson & Damask, 2020), and were initially piloted with two University of Leeds postgraduate student volunteers. Following the pilot, the interview content was refined to reduce length and streamline the process, enabling more meaningful responses that yielded richer and more insightful data. Interview audio recordings, captured using an external microphone, were transcribed with minimal cleanup in MS Word.

Additionally, instances of spontaneous verbal reactions were noted, as well as occurrences of incidental think-aloud protocols, in which players expressed thoughts, reactions, or opinions without researcher prompting. Think-aloud data were treated as in-act feedback and coded accordingly, with pre-play, in-act, and post hoc data separated into individual top-level codes. All collected data were inductively coded in NVivo, facilitating the identification of emergent themes for comparison with those derived from the netnographic data. Notably, emergent codes both diverged and converged across temporal stages, with playtesters and netnographic reviewers emphasizing largely shared issues alongside distinct idiosyncrasies. These patterns are discussed in detail in Section 5.

5 Results

5.1 Preliminary Data Overview

While playtesting provided insights into real-time player engagement with written elements, netnographic analysis offered a broader perspective through player reflections found in online reviews. These reviews highlight recurring themes and concerns that may not be captured in controlled gameplay sessions. By combining both

approaches, this study aims to identify patterns in how localization influences player perception, encompassing both immediate in-game reactions and retrospective assessments. The following section outlines the preliminary netnographic findings, with a focus on translation and localization-related discussions within player discourse. The netnographic data provide valuable insight into how existing players perceive the game and what information they believe potential players should be aware of.

An initial sentiment analysis conducted using NVivo's automatic sentiment coding tool identified 270 coded references: 52 were categorized as "very negative," 70 as "moderately negative," 96 as "moderately positive," and 52 as "very positive." This distribution offers a general overview of reviewer sentiment. For simplification, these categories were consolidated into "positive" and "negative" references, resulting in 148 positive comments and 122 negative comments, indicating a mixed overall sentiment. To illustrate key themes and contextualize the sentiment classification, and to ground theoretical claims in player language, selected excerpts from both playtests and Steam review feedback are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. *A selection of brief verbatim statements from the interviews and steam reviews.*

Excerpt	Description
[chuckle] Right, bread, I feel like that's the joy of life as well.	Interview excerpt (P8, Code: Amused by text)
I do remember now there was one part where the Chinese was still there and I was like 'oh, wow' [laugh].	Interview excerpt (P7, Code: Untranslated)
Text is flying all over the screen now. Going top left here, bottom right, it's, yeah.	Interview excerpt (P5, Code: Text presentation)
Is this really the joy of life? I do like food but like, that looks like bread he literally just picked off the ground, if it was fresh nice warm bread, that's entirely different.	Interview excerpt (P6, Code: Amused by text)
A "bandager"? What's a bandager? Is that supposed to be somebody with bandages on?	Interview excerpt (P3, Code: Coherency issues)
I wish I could recommend this game, but it's just difficult to get through in English.	Steam review excerpt (Code: Translation)

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There is some scuffed stuff and mistranslations (press cancel when asked to skip the prologue!)	Steam review excerpt (Code: LQA issues)
The horrible translation leaves me confused as to what is going on.	Steam review excerpt (Code: Coherency issues)
Translation needs work.	Steam review excerpt (Code: Unspecified inadequate)
It is clear it was not originally written in English and, although the English translation is serviceable, there are many grammatical and spelling errors. Moreover, there are several parts that lack translation entirely.	Steam review excerpt (Code: Translation errors; Untranslated)

5.2 Preliminary Netnographic Data

A key theme emerging from the reviews was the discussion of translation, which was particularly prominent in *Depersonalization*. Many reviewers explicitly noted the game's translated status, highlighting translation as a recurring issue, both positive and negative. This stands in contrast to the other two games, in which translation or localization concerns were rarely mentioned. Of the 75 reviews analyzed, 51 referred to issues related to translation, localization, or the use of English. A visual representation of these 51 instances, in the form of a word cloud, highlighted the five most frequent terms: (1) translation, (2) English, (3) game, (4) understand, and (5) text (Table 2).

Figure 2. *Word frequency of 51 instances of translation or use of English raised in Steam reviews.*



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While the word cloud visualization offers a useful snapshot of frequently mentioned terms, it also presents limitations. Isolated words, when removed from their original context, can obscure the nuance and intent behind player feedback. For example, terms such as "translation" or "fluency" may reflect praise, criticism, or neutral commentary, but this cannot be determined without examining the surrounding text, leading to a reductionist approach that risks oversimplification and misinterpretation. However, the word cloud remains a valuable tool for initial exploration, especially in large datasets. It helps quickly identify recurrent themes or focal points in user discourse, acting as a guide that draws attention to topics warranting further investigation and analysis. Future iterations of this study could benefit from analyzing larger segments of text to yield richer data with greater contextual salience.

Reviewers reported varying levels of impact on their gameplay experience due to issues with translation and the use of English. Some described the game as "difficult to get through in English" (sample ref. 6), while others considered the translation "rough at best, but passable" (sample ref. 7).

To categorize the impact of translation or English usage, player reviews were analyzed thematically, as shown in the table below. In some cases, players did not specify the exact issues with the translation, offering general comments such as "poor translation" or "translation needs work," leaving the nature of the problem implicit. These reviews were classified as "unspecified inadequate" for the purposes of analysis. In all cases, the codes were developed inductively and reflected the content of both the reviews and playtester comments.

The top three codes to emerge were Unspecified inadequate (21), Untranslated (11), and Coherency issues (11). Under "unspecified inadequate," players remarked on the translation in negative terms without providing specific justification, such as identifiable translation errors or text clipping that impeded readability. Based on feedback from other reviewers, it is plausible that these "unspecified inadequate" remarks reflect a sense of player frustration resulting from one or more issues with the written elements that were articulated more clearly by other reviewers, including unnatural phrasing, incoherent sentences, or narrative dissonance caused by written elements that conflicted with the wider in-game context.

These findings support GTUR's emphasis on the importance of user feedback in the evaluation of localization, highlighting how aggregated player sentiment, particularly regarding translation, can reveal recurrent playability concerns and cultural expectations. By foregrounding these patterns, the data reinforce the need for user-centered, empirical approaches to localization research that account for both the linguistic and experiential dimensions of gameplay.

5.3 Preliminary Interview Data

Data collected from player remarks, both during and after gameplay, provided valuable insights into in-act player experiences as well as post hoc reception feedback. Interviews conducted after gameplay included a set of standard questions, with additional clarifying questions posed when responses were vague or required further elaboration. Players were encouraged to speak freely, whether in a detailed or more focused manner, during the interviews. Observations of physical reactions, such as laughter, sighs, or gestures, were noted; however, the present analysis focuses exclusively on remarks related to written visual-verbal and visual-nonverbal content.

Preliminary data from playtesters' experiences of *Depersonalization* contrast with those of Steam reviewers. Notably, players interviewed after the tutorial phase of the game rarely mentioned issues related to English usage or the translation of written textual elements. Sentiment analysis of the interview data (excluding interviewer content), conducted in NVivo, revealed 61 "very negative" sentiments, 80 "moderately negative," 69 "moderately positive," and 41 "very positive." When simplified into broader categories of negative and positive sentiment, this yielded a total of 141 negative references and 110 positive references, indicating slightly more negative sentiment overall compared to the Steam review data.

However, comments specifically addressing language, English usage, or translation were less prevalent in the interviews. These issues were raised only 27 times, a marked decrease from the 51 mentions in the Steam review data. This resulted in a more diffuse set of terms for visualization. A word cloud derived from these 27 instances highlighted the following five most frequent terms: (1) Bread, (2) Life, (3) Chinese, (4) Dialogue, and (5) Feel (Fig. 3). Due to the limited number of instances, several terms appeared with equal frequency, including "Bread" and "Feel" (five occurrences each), and "Chinese," "Dialogue," and "Feel" (four occurrences each). An additional six terms also appeared four times: "Human," "Interactions," "Key," "Name," "Star," and "Translation." For the purposes of this article, the first five terms, as weighted by NVivo, are treated as the most prominent.

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deliberately, often in relation to expectations shaped by other games or by community discourse. This highlights a methodological limitation of playtesting: while it captures immediate, embodied responses, it may overlook evaluative or comparative insights that emerge in asynchronous online spaces that allow time for reflection.

Alternatively, this pattern may reflect the influence of community dynamics, whereby discussion within review spaces establishes translation as a salient issue. Once a reviewer comments on translation quality, subsequent reviewers may echo or expand upon this concern, perceiving it as expected or relevant. Playtesters, by contrast, lack this shared discursive context and therefore may not foreground translation issues prior to interview prompting. This possibility warrants further investigation in future research.

6 Discussion

6.1 Cultural Schema Theory and Player Expectations

While the role of written text in localization is context-dependent, the findings suggest that it becomes particularly salient when it disrupts immersion, causes confusion, or deviates from genre expectations, indicating that the written word does matter, especially when it fails to meet player assumptions. To explore this further, this article adopts a cultural schema approach. At first glance, Steam reviews contain more discussion of translation and the use of English in the game, with 51 mentions compared to just 27 in the playtester interviews. If importance is measured by the frequency of these mentions, one might conclude that playtesters are less inclined to comment on written text unless it provokes an immediate emotional response, such as laughter, or conflicts with their expectations, as observed in situ.

A notable finding is the classification of 23 instances as "unspecified inadequate," with 21 of these originating from Steam reviews and only two from post hoc interviews. The lack of clarification in these reviews regarding why the translation is deemed inadequate suggests that reviewers are likely guided by implicit expectations shaped by prior experience and cultural schemas. However, this vagueness may also reflect a broader lack of awareness among players regarding what translation or localization actually entails. Many players may not distinguish between linguistic, cultural, or technical issues, instead collapsing them into a generalized sense of "bad translation," as reflected in the "unspecified inadequate" code. This has implications for how non-expert users assess localization, as they often rely on surface-level cues such as awkward phrasing or perceived fluency rather than informed criteria. As a result, community norms surrounding what constitutes "good" or "bad" localization may be shaped more by expectation than by an understanding of the translation process. These

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implications warrant greater attention in GTUR, both to foreground player perception and to highlight the need for increased clarity and literacy around localization and its processes within gaming communities.

This observation invites an exploration of cultural schema theory as a framework for understanding these responses. Cultural schema theory posits that individuals' expectations and habits are shaped by the environments in which they were raised or influenced. DiMaggio (1997) refers to these as "default assumptions," unconscious beliefs that shape perceptions and interactions.

Originally proposed by Nishida (1999) in the context of intercultural communication, cultural schema theory is particularly useful for examining how players interpret written elements in video games. In this context, "culture" is not defined by national or racial identity, but by shared cultural frameworks within specific gaming genres or fan communities. This approach is especially applicable to Steam reviews, where critiques are often not elaborated upon, but where the content of the review serves an informative purpose, namely to guide or advise potential new players. In contrast, in-depth post hoc interviews provide an opportunity to probe participants' reasoning, offering richer detail and a more nuanced perspective.

Feedback from both reviewers and playtesters, particularly vague complaints about translation inadequacies, can be linked to these default assumptions, expectations that may seem self-evident to players, such as an implied expectation of native-level fluency in written elements, and that often serve as a catalyst for remarks on translation. For example, one playtester remarked that the dialogue "was a bit stilted", while another commented on a character name, "Star Key", stating that it was "a name that got translated literally, and probably shouldn't have been". These comments suggest that expectations regarding dialogue style and character-naming conventions were not met. Such responses reflect implicit expectations shaped by prior exposure to professionally localized RPGs.

However, playtesters often did not dwell on translation issues unless prompted. While some participants clearly recognized awkward phrasing and described it as "jarring", "machine translated", or "doesn't flow well", they frequently treated such moments as incidental. One playtester remarked post hoc that "some parts were perfectly fine, but then you have sometimes when they're like 'ah yes, it looks like we've been ambushed but they're being besieged', that doesn't sound right in English". Yet playtesters did not elaborate further unless prompted to do so. Another playtester stated that the written elements sometimes "felt a little stumbly [...] but it's just so normal in these kinds of things", indicating a degree of genre-based tolerance or desensitization. These responses suggest that while translation issues were noticed by playtesters, they were not always prioritized in act, particularly when gameplay or narrative remained engaging.

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In contrast, the Steam reviews, which were written retrospectively and with the intent of informing other potential players, were more likely to foreground localization concerns. Vague critiques such as "translation needs work" and "poor translation" likely stem from unmet genre-based assumptions about fluency and narrative immersion rooted in internalized genre norms. These norms inform players' assessments of localization, even when they cannot articulate specific issues.

The survey data further support this interpretation. While not directly related to visual-verbal elements, respondents asked to identify themes they associate with JRPGs repeatedly cited "massive swords," "exaggerated dialogue," and "anime-style character designs," demonstrating the presence of ingrained genre norms. Similarly, perceived localization failures were described in terms such as "awkward phrasing" and "clunky dialogue." These genre-informed schemata shape how players interpret and evaluate translated content, sometimes leading to negative assessments when localization strategies deviate from established norms.

Cultural schema theory underscores the significance of shared understanding within a cultural group. In this article, players' implicit expectations are informed by their prior experiences with video games. Players familiar with a particular genre or specific game mechanics will, according to cultural schema theory, naturally expect similar experiences. However, schemata are not static; they are flexible and can be reshaped through exposure to new experiences or differing perspectives (Shahghasemi, 2017).

6.2 The Role of Written Text in Localization Reception

How does this apply to the written word and the use of English in *Depersonalization*? In short, when players hold expectations shaped by prior genre experience, they are likely to react when those expectations are not met. These expectations may concern mechanics, user interfaces, aesthetic styles, or other elements aligned with established genre norms (Juul, 2005). When such expectations are violated, players may discontinue the game, refrain from recommending it, or share their dissatisfaction with others. These reactions, particularly prevalent in reviews, can influence potential players and shape their own cultural schemata. For example, although this remains a speculative hypothesis for future research, it is conceivable that a review highlighting issues with English usage may prompt other reviewers to comment on language themselves, creating a domino effect driven by perceived social norms. Similarly, players who encounter reviews mentioning language issues may become more sensitive to these concerns, thereby altering their own experience of the game.

This phenomenon is not merely descriptive but points to a broader mechanism: community discourse actively constructs and reinforces shared norms surrounding perceived localization "quality." In the playtest data, one participant discussing their

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taste in games noted awareness of character traits and localization quirks "mainly because a lot of my friends also play [...] I just get tempted and like, ah well, may as well join in." Another participant admitted that despite not playing certain video games themselves, they were familiar with characters and content through the opinions of other players. This suggests that expectations of video games in general, and localization in particular, are not formed in isolation but are shaped by community influence, both offline and online. In some cases, localization critique thus appears to be self-reinforcing. Once an issue is publicly raised, such as in a Steam review, it may gain traction not necessarily because it is inherently problematic, but because it resonates with shared genre-based assumptions. In this way, community feedback loops can amplify perceptions of localization problems (or praise), even when the underlying translation is technically accomplished.

Whilst not measuring the commercial impact of such discourse explicitly, there is precedent in the industry for community-driven backlash affecting game reception and sales. The Atlus title *Persona 5* is one example that faced significant criticism, so much so an entire website devoted to critique of the localization was published (but now defunct, *Persona Problems*, 2017) and videogame news websites shared critical articles (Lee, 2017; O'Donnell & O'Donnell, 2017) that actively shaped public perception and opinion. The case of *Persona 5* highlights how community-defined norms of localization can influence not only the individual player, but the wider market as a whole. In such a context, written elements transcend pure function, but become a site of cultural negotiation, where genre expectations, community discourse and localization approaches meet. Navigating this dynamic is essential to localization specialists, both in practical and research fields, if one is to meet the challenge of localization with the required sensitivity and finesse expected of both the player community and the broader videogame market.

7 Limitations

It is important to acknowledge certain limitations of this study.

7.1 Differences Between Steam Reviews and Play Testers

Unlike Steam reviewers, playtesters did not have the freedom to choose the games they played. As a result, the selected titles may not have aligned with their personal preferences. While playtesters self-identified as fans of RPGs, the genre itself encompasses a wide range of subcategories. Had participants been provided with descriptions of the games prior to the playtest, it is conceivable that some may have chosen not to engage with certain titles.

7.2 Sample Size Considerations

Additionally, the quantity of data collected from the two groups is not entirely comparable, an acknowledged limitation of this study. The dataset comprises 75 reviews in contrast to only 11 interview datasets. However, the interview data are arguably richer, offering deeper qualitative insights that, when fully explored, can yield more meaningful and nuanced findings.

7.3 Study Scope and Generalizability

Finally, this paper represents only a small portion of a broader PhD project, within which the role of language is just one facet of a much larger framework. This framework includes the consideration of situational context, in-game context, the impact of multimodal elements on player feedback, and the recognition of tropes and culture-specific nuances. As such, this article should be regarded as an initial exploration, providing a foundation for future research rather than a comprehensive study in itself.

8 Concluding Remarks

8.1 Summary of Key Findings

This article set out to examine whether the written word is fundamental to the localization of *Depersonalization*, and potentially to RPG titles more broadly, from the perspective of players engaging with ZH–EN video games. The findings suggest that while written elements (visual-verbal) contribute to player reception, they do not function in isolation, but rather as part of a broader multimodal framework informed by prior experience. Their salience increases when they disrupt immersion, elicit humor, or deviate from genre-based expectations and norms.

A key insight emerging from this study is the relevance of cultural schema theory in explaining how players interpret localization and, more specifically, how they evaluate its perceived "quality." Player expectations, shaped by prior exposure to established genre conventions and community discourse, serve as interpretive frameworks through which translation is judged. When localization aligns with these schemata, it often goes unnoticed. When it deviates, even subtly, it can become a focal point of critique. This is particularly evident in the prevalence of vague but negative feedback in Steam reviews, such as "poor localization" and "translation needs work." Such comments do not necessarily reflect erroneous translation, but rather a misalignment between player expectations and localization tone, fluency, or readability.

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Importantly, this article highlights how community discourse actively constructs and reinforces norms of perceived localization quality. Steam reviews, written retrospectively and shaped by social dynamics, appear to amplify concerns about language use, creating a feedback loop in which certain critiques become self-reinforcing. Playtesters, by contrast, rarely remarked on translation issues unless these directly interfered with their experience. Their feedback tended to be more specific and contextually grounded, for example when the description of bread as "the joy of life" elicited laughter. This contrast underscores the value of methodological triangulation. By combining netnography with in-acti and post hoc interviews, both the breadth and depth of player reception can be captured.

Methodologically, this study contributes to GTUR by demonstrating the value of integrating multiple data sources to explore how localization is received and evaluated. Theoretically, it advances the application of cultural schema theory within video game localization, illustrating how genre-informed expectations shape not only individual player responses but also broader collective norms within the gaming community. Although preliminary, this study offers a foundation for future reception research in video game localization, opening avenues for exploration across different genres, platforms of play, player demographics, and communities. Additionally, it raises questions that warrant further investigation into the role of community feedback as a mechanism for guiding localization practice and shaping perception. In conclusion, this article has presented one analytical approach and identified potential directions for further research through the lens of cultural schema theory. It ultimately suggests that the reception of written elements in video games is not merely a matter of linguistic accuracy, but a culturally and socially situated process embedded in the norms and discourses of the video gaming community.

8.2 Future Research Directions

This preliminary analysis has highlighted several critical questions: Do reviews contribute to reinforcing standards within the gaming community? Are playtesters' reactions to English usage shaped by their cultural schemata as video game enthusiasts? To what extent is the implicit expectation of the gaming experience influenced by knowledge of a game being a localized product? Finally, to what extent do mentions of translation in reviews perpetuate a self-reinforcing cycle?

Future research addressing these questions, particularly within the context of ZH-EN localized video games, is eagerly anticipated. As this field continues to gain academic attention, it remains rich with unresolved issues and untapped potential that warrant further exploration.

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