Crouching button, hidden typo: The reception of localised Chinese-developed videogames

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Abstract

As China's videogame industry expands and increasingly targets global audiences, Chinese-developed games have gained unprecedented international visibility. Once dominated by North American and Japanese studios, the global market is now led by China, with companies such as MiHoYo producing titles designed for worldwide consumption. As a relatively new major actor on the global stage, Chinese games are received through players' prior experiences, community discourse, and broader cultural perceptions. This study investigates how localisation shapes the reception of Chinese-developed videogames, and how it influences player perceptions of Chinese games.

Drawing on reception theory, cultural schemata, and user-centred translation approaches, the research examines: (1) how players perceive Chinese-developed titles; (2) how localisation strategies influence interpretation; (3) what preconceptions, if any, players hold; and (4) whether player interpretations align with intended source meanings. To analyse these dynamics, the study proposes an integrated framework combining user-centred translation, an adapted kineikonic model, and an adapted Motivation, Use, (self), Evaluation (MUsE) model to capture both immediate reactions and longer-term repercussions.

Using a mixed-methods design, the study triangulates data from an online survey, semi-structured post-hoc interviews, and netnographic reviews. A quasi-experimental playtest using three case-study onboarding tutorials randomly assigned participants to know either pre- or post-hoc whether the games were Chinese-developed, allowing observation of any perception shifts. Findings indicate that localisation aligned with genre norms and implied player models fostered immersion and positive schema adaptation. Conversely, untranslated text, awkward phrasing, and UI inconsistencies produced negative sentiment and, in some cases, play abandonment. Cultural markers, humour, and playability emerged as decisive factors in engagement.

This study addresses gaps in Chinese-English game localisation research and offers recommendations for culturally responsive, player-centred localisation practices, emphasising the importance of reception-driven strategies in an increasingly globalised gaming industry.

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Abbreviations

ARPG	Action role-playing game
AV	Audio-visual
AVT	Audiovisual translation
CAT	Computer assisted translation
COC	Call of Cthulhu
CRPG	Computer role-playing game
D&D	Dungeons and Dragons
DDR4	Double data rate 4
EEG	Electroencephalography
FMV	Full motion video
FPS	Frames per second
GUR	Games user research
HDD	Hard disk drive
HDMI	High-definition multimedia interface
H:SR	Honkai impact: Star rail
HUD	Head-up display
JRPG	Japanese role-playing game
LLM	Large language models
LQA	Language quality assurance
MMO(RPG)	Massively multiplayer online (role-playing game)
MT	Machine translation
MURR	Motivation-Use-Reaction-Repercussion
MUsE	Motivation-Use-(Self)-Evaluation
NES	Nintendo entertainment system
NMT	Neural machine translation
NPC	Non-playable character(/s)
OBS	Open broadcaster software
P#	Playtester (number)
PX	Player experience
QA	Quality assurance
RPG	Role-playing game
RQ	Research question(/s)

SFX	Sound effects
T(T)RPG	Tabletop role-playing game
TM	Translation memory
TS	Translation studies
UCT	User-centred translation
UGC	User-generated content
UGT	User-generated translation
UI	User interface
Ult	Ultimate attack
UTF-8	8-bit Unicode Transformation Format
UX	User experience
VN	Visual novel(/s)
WRPG	Western RPG
WYSIWYG	What you see is what you get
ZhRPG	Chinese role-playing game

Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Overview of Chinese-developed games in the global market

In 2023, Chinese-developed RPGs generated over $4 billion globally, reshaping the cultural map of gaming (Muhammad, 2023) to become ubiquitous digital artefacts that enjoy global popularity across a multitude of demographics. A worldwide phenomenon, the most prevalent videogames were historically produced by the US and Japan (Izushi and Aoyama, 2006, p. 1848). However, in recent years, the US has tussled for the largest market spot with China overtaking the US as the largest supplier in 2023 (Business Wire, 2023; Lukman, 2023). The global success of role-playing games (RPG), narrative-rich videogames in which players become immersed in a fantasy world, such as *Genshin Impact* (MiHoYo, 2020) and *Honkai Impact 3rd* (MiHoYo, 2018), have put Chinese developers centre stage, gaining more attention and branching into the Triple-A (or "AAA") market. Triple-A is an industry buzzword used to convey the fact that a game is high-budget and high profile, often developed or produced by larger, well-established US-based studios (such as Activision Blizzard or EA), and more recently with the global cross-platform release of action RPG (ARPG) title *Black Myth: Wukong* (Game Science, 2024), Chinese developers are joining the stage as producers of Triple-A games. This drive to expand into the gaming industry raises questions about how cultural identity and localisation strategies influence global player reception.

The domination of the US and Japan over the videogame industry has led to a generalised division of games produced in either region as "Western" and "Eastern," particularly within certain videogame genres. At the same time, the rapid technological advancement of videogame consoles and high-end gaming computers has created an exciting landscape for Chinese developers, who are now releasing more titles outside China with English-language localisations. However, this historic US-Japan cultural dominance in the videogame industry (Consalvo, 2007; Pelletier-Gagnon, 2011) has fostered entrenched norms and expectations among players. While these norms are not confined to English-speaking markets, the US as the largest producer and consumer of English-

language videogames for much of the industry's history has made the value of English-language player reception particularly significant, not least to ensure strong sales profits and positive brand recognition that ensures player retention (The Entertainment Software Association, 2024; O'Hagan and Mangiron, 2013).

As global markets have become increasingly important for developers outside established centres such as the US and Japan, this reception takes on added importance for emerging producers. This is especially visible in the growing role-playing game (RPG) sector in China, where many titles adopt stylistic features traditionally associated with Japanese RPGs (JRPGs). For instance, the aforementioned *Genshin Impact*, a hugely successful Chinese-developed RPG (ZhRPG) featuring full English localisation, is identified on major gaming platforms and in online videogame industry news articles as a JRPG. JRPG as a term is examined briefly in 1.2, and in more detail in Chapter 5, but ultimately, even if the term is used only to reflect a style that includes certain gameplay elements and design choices, it may initially lead to the obfuscation of the games' Chinese development team and have an impact on the cultural soft power the games generate. But why might developers do this, and why would players be affected by such a choice? Answering this question first requires an understanding of how players define the "RPG", "JRPG" and "ZhRPG" labels, and then an examination of existing player sentiment towards Chinese videogames and Chinese products more broadly. Despite extensive research on localisation workflows and cultural adaptation, little is known about how players respond to localised ZhRPGs, a gap this study addresses.

Localisation research has largely examined workflow, translation strategies and industry evolution rather than player reception. As Chinese-developed RPGs become more widespread in English language markets, questions are raised about how players categorise the games, how localisation shapes their interpretation, and whether existing expectations of genre, provenance or Chinese products have any influence on reception. These questions are investigated by examining how players using the English version perceive the localisation of ZhRPGs, how those perceptions relate to genre expectations and schema, and the extent to which player interpretation aligns with meaning derived from the "ideal player" (see Section 3.3.1). The full research questions are presented shortly in Section 1.4.

Whilst the videogame industry began in the US and arguably set the initial bar for standardisation in product formats (such as technical control schemes or paratexts such as manuals and adverts), influence from Japanese developers and Japanese system designations also filtered into the Chinese market in the 1980s and 1990s, with the infant Chinese game industry imbuing its own influence and culture into the market. At that time, Chinese developers and players created games that, whilst built upon other cultures' existing videogame norms, became cultural products of China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, and feature tropes specific to Chinese media, such as the 仙侠 *xianxia* Immortal Heroes and 武侠 *wuxia* Martial Heroes (high-fantasy and martial arts fantasy) genres. Owing to a degree of separation of the Taiwanese and mainland China markets punctuated by the mainland console ban in 2000, videogames developed exclusively by mainland Chinese developers warrant greater investigation. In a context in which internet cafes (or 网吧 *wang ba*) and, later, mobile phone gaming took the lead, the recent gaming industry in mainland China developed with much greater emphasis on games playable on smart-phones as a reported 70% (700 million players) of gamers now claim to use mobile phones (Statista, 2024), with PC coming in behind at a significantly lower 30%, and a mere 3% of players opting for console gaming.

As mobile gaming became commonplace worldwide, Chinese policies promoting game development and cultural export encouraged developers to embed Chinese cultural elements in titles designed for international audiences. These efforts were driven by national strategies aimed at boosting game production and foreign trade (The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2022a, 2022). These policies are supported by local government incentives and include tax breaks, infrastructure investment, and export facilitation, which position cities like Shanghai as industry hubs. State-backed companies such as Tencent have also been encouraged to acquire or partner with international studios, enabling Chinese-developed content to reach global players (Song and Zhang, 2025). Together, these measures reflect a deliberate effort to strengthen China's soft power (Nye, 2009) and economic presence in the global gaming industry, making the localisation of Chinese-developed games into English a critical area for research and future practice. Thus, the rapid

expansion of Chinese-developed games into global markets signals a fundamental shift in the cultural and economic dynamics of the videogame industry.

1.2 Genre clarifications: RPG, JRPG, ZhRPG

As China continues to dominate production and invest in high-budget titles aimed at international audiences, English localisation has become a critical gateway for global success owing to the significant Anglophone market. Understanding how players perceive these games, and how localisation strategies influence interpretation, is essential for developers seeking to compete in an increasingly international market; what those players think, and how their expectations have been shaped by decades of US- and Japan-led production, becomes a material factor in sales, retention, franchise viability and brand narratives. Moreover, as cultural hybridity (and at the extreme, homogenisation) and genre convergence increase, reception studies will play a pivotal role in shaping localisation practices that preserve cultural identity while meeting player expectations. This research therefore addresses not only a current gap in scholarship but also an emerging need for industry insights that will inform future localisation workflows and game design strategies globally.

As this study aims to avoid the pitfall of essentialism, that is, the reduction of complex and internally diverse populations to supposedly innate, stable, and universal cultural characteristics, it treats “Western” and “Eastern” as historically contingent discursive frames that have structured expectations in the industry and among players rather than stable cultural essences or politically defined margins. Where used, these two terms imply as much and are grounded in the specific historical contexts of the videogame industry. Similarly, “JRPG” and “ZhRPG” are employed analytically to refer to provenance and the stylised design features that have become associated with particular national production traditions. To explain these terms in more detail, the genre labels “RPG”, “JRPG” and “ZhRPG”, serve to signal to the nature of the games’ contents and mechanics to players. Furthermore, for clarity, the terms “translation” and “localisation” are used with different meanings in this thesis; “translation” refers to the more traditional literary act of rendering language A into language B, whilst

“localisation” refers to the context of translation that occurs within media such as software, videogames, and digital media. Owing to the differing nature of these tasks, these two labels have been chosen to give clear role separation and emphasise the translation as a written act, separate from interpreting’s oral practices. The contentious issue of localisation as a term is examined in more detail in Section 2.2.

Typically, an RPG is recognised as a narrative-driven videogame in which players embody a single protagonist or select group of playable protagonists in a fictional setting that commonly features a combat system and methods of improving character statistics or attributes (such as *The Witcher* (CD Projekt Red, 2007)*, Baldur’s Gate* (Bioware, 1998)*,* and *Elder Scrolls: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011)). The term RPG is used as a broad term and is a generic genre name with numerous sub-categories, but is sometimes used to imply WRPG, Western role-playing game (games typically made in US or Europe) more specifically; this study is employing the term in the generic sense. The term JRPG, Japanese role-playing game, is regarded by this study as a sub-genre of RPG comprised of all the features attributed to the RPG with the additional requisite that the videogame is made by a Japanese developer; JRPGs often feature additional markers such as distinct art styles, turn-based combat and character tropes popularised by Japanese media (such as *Final Fantasy* (Squaresoft,1987)*, Chrono Trigger* (Squaresoft, 1995), and *Persona* (Atlus, 1996)). Finally, the ZhRPG, Chinese role-playing game, also comprises all that the RPG genre comprises with the additional requisite that the game is made by a Chinese developer; ZhRPGs often feature turn-based combat systems and levelling systems that employ terminology derived from Daoist cultivation and Chinese mythology, and an aesthetics featuring stylised depictions of ancient Chinese architecture and dress, commonly found in the subgenres Immortal Heroes and Martial Heroes (such as *Sword & Fairy* (Softstar, 1995)*, GuJian* (Aurogon, 2010)*,* and *Where Winds Meet* (Everstone Studio, 2024)). The term ZhRPG is used rather than CRPG owing to the well-established existing acronym meaning “computer role playing game” (Barton and Stacks, 2019).

The three case study videogames selected for this thesis are ZhRPGs (determined by country of development alone) chosen for their overall positive player feedback in online forums and review sites and availability in English,

enabling discussion of how players categorise games, how those categories interact with localisation, and how cultural identity is mediated at the point of reception. With the understanding that cultural identity is mediated in some way at that point of reception (although the extent is unclear), it is necessary to examine the growth in global visibility of ZhRPGs and why this matters.

1.3 Cultural and political implications of ZhRPGs

The increase in visibility and heightened prominence of videogames developed by Chinese teams has both cultural and political implications, touched on briefly in Section 1.1. Globally successful ZhRPGs such as *Genshin Impact* contribute to cultural soft power by promoting narratives and aesthetics shaped by Chinese traditions to global audiences. Being interactive artefacts, players of ZhRPGs absorb the layered culturally-loaded messages and semiotics through repeated exposure and engagement delivered through the heavy narrative framework of the RPG genre. RPGs offer extended storylines that build narrative immersion, attachment to the characters in-game and a sense of familiarity with the in-game universe which further promotes long-lasting player-game relationships that lend to player retention. Thus, for players spending time in videogame environments steeped in Chinese mythologies, Daoist cultivation tropes, audio and visual motifs and philosophical themes, played and discussed in English-language spaces on and offline, these elements can become recognisable cultural resources.

This raises the question; why do JRPGs need to be examined in this study about ZhRPGs? Simply put, if ZhRPGs are broadly comprehended by players through the lens of JRPG familiarity, the games' country of origin may become unclear, reducing the extent to which its success is recognised as part of Chinese cultural output. Ultimately, the issue is both commercial and symbolic, because how players describe and understand these games influences who receives cultural recognition for them; if players believe the games are Japanese-made, China loses recognition for its success, potentially on a global scale. Additionally, as the games employ aesthetics and mechanics widely associated with JRPGs, the execution of such content is criticised and evaluated in terms such as "JRPG-alike", "real JRPGs" or "gacha" (games with lottery

systems), blending boldly Chinese characteristics into existing JRPG frameworks that transcend expectations of what it means to be an RPG, JRPG or ZhRPG; the complexity of genre becomes itself a site of meaning negotiation for players, and how well the game is received (and by extension, how successful it is as a product) is liable to be influenced by how well it aligns with player genre expectations. Recognising this negotiation is central for understanding reception outcomes.

In terms of political influence, there is no denying the impact of the Chinese government authorities in shaping the current videogame industry in China. As touched on briefly already, developers in China are incentivised to produce videogames for global audiences through tax breaks and assistance with exporting. Meanwhile, home-grown Chinese brands such as Tencent and NetEase partner with global brands such as Activision-Blizzard to extend market reach and enable global brand to operate within China since non-Chinese (and non-Chinese invested) companies cannot publish or operate online or mobile games in China; a Chinese partner company is essential for local publication (Pilarowski et al., 2022). The promotion of Chinese videogame developers and publishers, and high investment in this sector, has given rise to hugely successful studios responsible for internationally acclaimed live service games (Lilith Games, MiHoYo, Yostar) whose mobile-first games are available cross-platform in multiple languages. A recent push into triple-A videogames from Chinese developer GameScience (*Black Myth: Wukong*, 2024) marks a significant turn in ZhRPGs specifically; high-budget triple-A games are widely regarded are more prestigious than online or live-service titles, draw greater attention from media outlets and serve as a bar of excellence for what a developer can achieve in the eyes of players and investors (Nieborg, 2011). Simply, ZhRPGs are not a minor or local development; their growth is reshaping global gaming, disrupting established genre labels, and affecting audience perceptions of Chinese culture.

Having such clear cultural and economic weight, the perception of ZhRPGs is paramount to sales, making competent localisation key to positive player perceptions of ZhRPGs. A game perceived as “good” is by virtue likely to achieve higher sales figures and greater market saturation, boasting greater player retention and brand loyalty. Additionally, the influence of online and media

discourse on audience reach and title discovery are liable to be impacted by the labels assigned to the games (through tags such as those used on the Steam PC gaming platform) shaping the player base, encouraging or deterring some players because of proposed aesthetics or mechanics. Furthermore, English-language players, used to the status of English as lingua-franca who expect a certain level of linguistic fidelity as a result, are likely to vocalise any perceived misalignments or errors that impede the intended gameplay experience; thus the role of localisation into English becomes amplified in a player's assessment of a game. Players approach games with layered cultural schemata: "local" culture (such as nationality, upbringing, home life) and gamer-specific culture (such as genre norms, community standards, technical literacies). These schemata define what is salient, what is puzzling, and what is praiseworthy. Ultimately, players make sense of ZhRPGs through both their everyday cultural backgrounds and their gamer-specific expectations, shaping what they notice, question, or value. Misunderstandings can arise when Chinese mythologies, linguistic finesse, or hybrid mechanics deviate from their expectations of RPGs, JRPGs or ZhRPGs. Broader narratives about Chinese products shared in communities on and offline (such as quality assumptions or geopolitical sentiment) can also colour how these games are interpreted. Viewed together, these factors illustrate why it is important to examine how players using English localisations perceive ZhRPGs, and how localisation shapes that experience.

1.4 Structure of the thesis

This project investigates how players using the English-language versions of Chinese-developed roleplaying videogames (ZhRPGs) perceive them, and how localisation practices shape those perceptions. By collecting live playtest reactions and post-hoc reflections, this study collects and analyses vital empirical data currently missing from the field. Three ZhRPGs featuring different production values and localisation workflows are taken as case studies: *Honkai impact: Star rail (2023)* (high-budget production, professional localisation), *Eastward* (2021) (low-budget, professional localisation), and *Depersonalization* (2019) (low-budget, non-professional localisation and professional re-localisation). The study focuses primarily on the US and UK, as the largest of the

native-English language locales, and the largest of the primarily English-speaking markets (Fleck, 2025; Newzoo, 2025). At its core, the project examines how cultural schemata, genre expectations and localisation choices intersect during play, and how these interactions influence player understanding and evaluation of ZhRPGs. To address this, the study is guided by four research questions (RQs), each of which targets a distinct aspect of reception.

The first question establishes the baseline of reception:

RQ1. How do players perceive Chinese-developed videogames (ZhRPGs)?

Despite the rapid international growth of Chinese-developed videogames, empirical research documenting how English-language players actually talk about, categorise, and evaluate these games is absent. Understanding these perceptions is essential for interpreting how cultural identity and genre labels shape player expectations.

The second question draws on the assumption that localisation does not simply render text:

RQ2. How do localisation strategies used in English-language versions relate to player perceptions, particularly in light of source-design intent?

Localisation mediates tone, cultural references, and narrative coherence, thus this question examines whether localisation decisions and strategies (such as terminology and user interface (UI) design support or inhibit players' intended interpretation of the game.

Then, the third question serves to explore the nature and origin of such preconceptions:

RQ3. What pre-existing attitudes or preconceptions about Chinese videogames or Chinese products do players bring to play, and why?

It examines how they shape in-actu and post-hoc responses to ZhRPGs and whether player discourse surrounding Chinese-made products are tied to stereotypes about quality, geopolitical narratives, or prior experiences with Chinese videogames as they may colour perceptions before play even begins.

The final question links design, localisation, and reception:

RQ4. To what extent does player interpretation of in-game resources align with expected or intended interpretation derived from the ideal player?

To answer this question, the study compares how players actually interpret

narrative, aesthetic, and mechanics with how they were intended to function, assessing where alignment and misunderstandings occur through ideal player model derived assumptions, exchanges with the developers, and defined genre norms.

By foregrounding player reception, this study contributes to localisation research and offers insights into how cultural schemata shape interpretation, an area critical for global game development and increasingly important as Chinese-developed videogames circulate globally. To investigate the questions posed, this study adopts a mixed-method approach, combining an anonymous online survey, netnographic analysis of videogame user reviews, observed playtesting with think aloud protocol, and semi-structured post-hoc interviews to examine player perceptions and their relation to localisation strategies. An anonymous online survey invited player opinions about a selection of clips from RPGs, JRPGs and ZhRPGs, as well as gaining insight into how perceptions of the clips' content shaped their expectations about genre. Publicly available online review data from Steam and Google Play Store is scraped and thematically coded and analysed to capture natural, genuine player discourse. These data are complemented by first-hand insights gathered through playtesting three case study ZhRPGs, in which participants provide in-actu reactions through think-aloud protocol and engage in post-hoc interviews to elaborate on their experiences. All datasets are thematically analysed to provide a corpus of genuine player feedback and sentiment comprised of their subjective experiences in-actu and post-hoc reflections. As per Hsu and O'Hagan (2024, p.2), this approach aligns with Games User Research (GUR) by operationalising the players' experiences, "encompassing linguistic, cultural and technical aspects, as roughly corresponding to the dimensions of localization".

As videogames are multimodal artefacts, Burn's kineikonic mode (2013) is built upon to identify and categorise the channels through which players interact with the game world, clarifying which resources drive particular interpretations or reactions. Additionally, player motivation is examined using assumed player positions (e.g. derived through implied player models, elaborated on in Section 5.7) in tandem with playtest feedback to better determine how individual preferences shape responses to localised resources.

From a cultural perspective, players draw on both "local" culture (such as

norms determined by nationality, homelife, upbringing) and gamer-specific culture (such as genre conventions, community norms, technical literacies). These overlapping cultural schemata underpin how players evaluate narrative, aesthetic and mechanical features which become cemented into cultural schemata and are central to understanding player reception (see Section 2.2).

This introduction has foregrounded the study and is followed by an exploration of the existing literature (Chapter 2), covering fields such as reception theory, AVT reception and localisation. In Chapter 3 the key theoretical frameworks of user-centred translation (UCT) (Suojanen et al., 2014), Motivation-Usage-Evaluation model (Schultheiss, 2011), kineikonic mode (Burn, 2013), are all clarified and their operationalisation explained. Next, Chapter 4 explains the methodology, outlining the approaches to the survey, netnography and playtest, and providing replicable steps for a quasi-experimental approach to reception research. Chapter 5 provides an examination of the case studies *Honkai Impact: Star Rail* (2023), *Eastward* (2021) and *Depersonalization* (2019), followed by the key theoretical frameworks including user-centred translation (UCT) and multimodality. Chapter 6 and Chapter 7 explore and discuss, respectively, the non-interactive and interactive operative modes of videogames that players engage with and how those different resources interact with each other and with the player. Finally the thesis closes with concluding remarks summarising contributions, limitations, and directions for future research (Chapter 8).

Chapter 2 The literature

This chapter critically reviews existing literature on videogame localisation, drawing from reception theory, AVT, localisation broadly and then videogame localisation specifically. While previous research has examined localisation workflows, cultural adaptation, and accessibility, there remains a notable absence of studies that investigate how players interpret localised content through culturally embedded schemata. Existing reception studies in game localisation are acknowledged as scant, and none to date have addressed this question from a schema-based cognitive-cultural perspective, a perspective which posits audience interpretations are shaped by culturally informed mental frameworks through which individuals categorise, interpret, and evaluate experiences.

Drawing on empirical playtesting and netnographic analysis, this study introduces a new model that demonstrates how such schemata shape players' understanding of the multimodal resources that comprise Chinese-developed RPG videogames. The chapter begins by looking to game studies to introduce the importance of genre to highlight the role it plays in player expectations and how Chinese-developed games are reshaping these expectations (Section 2.1), and then outlining foundational theories in reception theory and translation reception to illustrate the major schools of thought in translation reception and how they have shaped the current reception landscape in AVT (Section 2.2). Next, empirical and experimental approaches in software and videogame localisation are highlighted to provide the current state of existing AVT reception and videogame reception research more specifically, examining localisation both as a concept and as a workflow (Section 2.3), concluding by identifying key gaps in Chinese-English (Zh-En) localisation research to position the contribution of this study (Section 2.4).

2.1 The importance of genre

This section examines how genre informs the localisation and reception of ZhRPGs. It begins by outlining how genre operates in videogames, then reviews major scholarly attempts at genre classification. It narrows to the RPG umbrella

term, detailing JRPG conventions and debates, before tracing the historical foundations of the ZhRPG tradition. It concludes by synthesising how these genre lineages shape player expectations and the interpretation of localised content, providing the basis for the turn to reception theory in the next section.

2.1.1 The role of genre and academic discourse

Before discussing the relationship between videogames and localisation, it is necessary to address genre in order to position Chinese-developed games within the broader player zeitgeist. Genre in videogames is a multifaceted concept that can refer to gameplay mechanics (e.g., shooter, fighter), visual style (e.g., anime, pixel art), production scale (e.g., high-budget, large studio team "triple-A/AAA", or low-budget, smaller studio team "indie"), and even platform (e.g., virtual reality, mobile). These genre classifications are not fixed and often overlap. Importantly, intended player experiences shape developer design choices, influencing resources such as graphics, music, user interface, menu structure, and degrees of interactivity. Understanding genre is therefore essential for analysing how players interpret and engage with localised content, particularly in culturally specific genres like ZhRPGs (Wolf, 2001; Căşvean, 2015; Zagal and Altizer, 2014; Zagal and Deterding, 2018; Zagal and Deterding, 2024).

Căşvean (2015) provides an overview of videogame theory genre discourse, introducing, critiquing and comparing taxonomies and frameworks for genre delineation, serving as a valuable starting point for recent scholarly discourse on the topic. Căşvean ultimately concludes that the industry favours a player-centric focus compared to the analytical focus of academia, leading to differing use of genre according to player or scholarly aims. For instance, genre in industry terms directs players and aids in playability, using mechanical familiarity (e.g. narrative or interaction style) as a helpful signpost for potential consumers. In contrast, academic scholarship emphasises that videogame genre is far more complex than a set of market-driven labels, as scholars argue that genre in games must be understood through deeper structures such as interactivity, player agency, and the sociocultural contexts that shape genre formation (Wolf,

2001; Aarseth, 2007; Lee et al., 2014; Clarke et al., 2017; Doherty et al., 2018; Zagal and Deterding, 2024).

In one of the earliest systems proposed, Wolf (2001) suggests an A-to-Z videogame categorisation system based on primary objectives, such as “utility”, “dodging”, or “education”. However, this approach does not account for more recently popular genres like massively multiplayer online games (MMOs) for which such categorisations are ill-suited or may even require multiple such labels due to their hybridity, sporting features and social elements that overlap multiple genres according to Wolf’s proposed taxonomy. Similarly, Aarseth et al. (2003) propose a system that accounts for the digital nature of videogames, comprised of meta-categories and related sub-categories (e.g. meta-categories: Space, Time; sub-categories: Perspective: Onmi-present/Vagrant, Pace: Realtime/Turn-based) that offer depth and flexibility to genre definitions. However, despite Wolf and Aarseth et al.’s suggestions, Clarke et al. (2017) note that even many years after his recommendation, most efforts to define videogame genres fail, as there is little agreement among scholars or fans on what constitutes a genre, highlighting that even genre studies could benefit from further reception research to find greater user-derived consensus. Lee et al. (2017) present a more detailed framework using 12 facets and 358 foci to classify games, while also acknowledging the limitations of such systems. However, although this model is intended to improve end-user clarity, it is better suited to academic purposes than those of a casual consumer seeking guidance owing to its focus on systematic classification and analytical depth.

Having established these broader debates in genre theory and classification, the discussion now narrows to the RPG umbrella, whose internal diversity presents distinctive challenges for analysis and localisation.

2.1.2 The RPG umbrella: definitions, complexity, and divergence

Whilst an RPG is generally qualified by certain inclusions (or “elements”, (Zagal and Altizer, 2014, p. 1)) it also faces the challenge of being a game form as well as a genre with many “faces” (Zagal and Deterding, 2024, p. 1), within which the definitions are varied and complex, ranging from “an improvised novel in which all the participants serve as authors” (Swan, 1990, p. 3), to the following:

> An RPG is a game, not a game system or product, but a game experience that that a player plays, in which the player portrays a character in a setting. Each player's portrayal of their character must include three components: immersion, experiencing the character; acting, performing in character; and gaming, obeying and manipulating rules and goals in character".
> (Simkins 2015, p. 56)

Numerous scholars have discussed the history of the genre, typically citing *Dungeons & Dragons* (Tactical Studies Rules, 1974) as the origin, offering overviews of how the genre has evolved from a table-top space, into the real and the digital contexts (Hitchens and Drachen, 2008; Hedge and Grouling, 2021; Zagal and Deterding, 2024). Fundamentally, Zagal and Deterding (2018) assert that the definition of an RPG is determined by socialisation and familiarity: "the reference set our intuition draws upon to check whether a given definition 'makes sense' or not […] is necessarily partial and biased towards that personal set of experience and taste" (p. 10), again reiterating the value of a user's lived experiences and schema (expectations derived from experience, see Section 2.2) in genre definitions and expectations.

RPGs can be further categorised according to differences in execution and gameplay design choices. While not strictly academic, but industry-derived, Pavlovic (2020) sub-divides RPG into action RPG (ARPG), computer RPG (CRPG), massively multiplayer online RPG (MMORPG), and tactical RPG (TRPG). These categorisations are not universally agreed upon, and Doherty et al. (2018) recommends reclassification of videogame genres by "aesthetics, control action, psychological effects of game attributes, and categorization by perceptual/attentional/cognitive enhancement" (2018, p. 3). The disagreement and discourse around definitions highlights the lack of uniformity not only across disciplines, but within the videogame sphere more broadly. These definitional tensions become especially salient in JRPGs, where debates over conventions, essentialism, and transnational "remixing" directly inform localisation and reception.

2.1.3 JRPG conventions

While the JRPG genre is presently loosely defined, it does offer a rich set of aesthetic and mechanical conventions that are often mirrored in ZhRPGs (Liu, 2023; Li and Li, 2023; Aroni, 2025; Brunskill, 2025) including stylised character designs, turn-based combat systems, and mythologically infused narratives.

Alexander Sutton's thesis (2025) examines the use of Christian Gnostic symbolism in the JRPG *Xenogears* (Squaresoft, 1998), showing how the game reinterprets religious texts to critique authoritarianism and materialism. In this work, he demonstrates how Japanese developers embed culturally specific religious narratives that may be decoded differently by Western audiences according to culture-specific schemata.

Academic discourse detailing the specifics of JRPG anatomies (such as the minutiae of character design, world design, plot themes etc.) is scarce. The most complete accounts are those of Hutchinson and Pelletier-Gagnon (2022) and Kalata (2021) which, combined, provide a comprehensive overview of the genre according to both scholarly and journalistic resources. According to both Schules et al. (2024) and Kalata (2021, p. 6), a JRPG typically comprises certain traits. For Koyama (2022, p. 25) those traits are:

1. Confinement to a world;
2. Defined characters;
3. Anime/cartoon style art;
4. Limited narrative choice, singular story;
5. Fantasy world.

Kalata (2021, p. 8) extends this list according to his personal experience in the industry as a game journalist:

1. An overworld divided into town and dungeon sections;
2. Separate screens where battles take place;
3. Typically turn-based [battles] executed via menu commands;
4. A focus on battle statistics in lieu of other RPG elements (e.g., charisma to influence conversation);

5. Unique character customisation systems;
6. Manga style artwork;
7. Strong soundtracks;
8. Linear storylines.

Whilst only descriptive, it complements Schules et al.'s (2024) less detailed list to provide greater insight based on industry data rather than academic contexts alone. Kalata also mentions anecdotal findings such as "dudes with spiky hair and big swords", "attack[ing] and dethron[ing] god" and a "distrust of organised religion" (2021, p. 23). However, Kalata concedes that the JRPG label "isn't really a binary" (2021, p. 7) and the title "Japanese RPG was (and will continue to be) argued over for a long time", in much the same vein as defining videogame genres more broadly.

Conversely, Consalvo (2016) asserts that attempts to define JRPGs risk essentialising a genre that is inherently fluid and shaped by transnational influences, as the genre is historically contingent and shaped by players, industry, and cultural discourse rather than a strictly defined characteristics (pp. 97-103). Koyama aligns with Consalvo's concerns over essentialism, agreeing that whilst JRPG once meant an RPG "developed in Japan", non-Japanese developers are now making games that "use JRPG-like artwork and command driven battle systems" (2022, p. 25), rendering the original meaning of the term redundant. Rather, Koyama defines JRPG as typically featuring command-based combat and anime-style visuals, with narratives split between character-driven storylines and dungeon-crawling gameplay inspired by the *Wizardry* (Sir-Tech, 1981) games.

Holleman (2015, 2018) contributes a brief history of JRPG as a genre (2018, p. 1-2) and gives a useful breakdown and examination of JRPG UIs, exploring how UI design contributes to the JRPG genre, but echoes Kalata (2021, p. 7) and Consalvo (2016, pp. 97-103) in asserting that the parameters of what qualifies a JRPG are a grey area and reinforces the notion that too much generalisation leads to essentialism. He concedes that whilst there is undoubtedly Japanese influence, being made in Japan is not necessarily a requirement, concurring with Koyama (2022, pp. 39-43). Whilst online videos and articles created by fans and connoisseurs answering this question are

numerous (Holleman, 2015, 2018; Landon, 2021; The Gaming Shelf, 2023; DJMMT, 2023), there is little academic literature that provides an authoritative consensus. This fluidity complicates comparative studies with ZhRPGs, as both genres borrow and "remix" global design conventions which may already be ingrained in players' schemata. To situate ZhRPGs within this landscape, the next subsection outlines the historical development of ZhRPGs and the industrial conditions that shaped player expectations.

2.1.4 Foundations of the ZhRPG

For the purposes of this study, it is also necessary to also draw on the origins of game development and to consider what delineates a Japanese role-playing game (JRPG) and a Chinese role-playing game (ZhRPG). Exploring the Chinese videogame industry, Feng and Liao (2015) describe the early stages of the industry of the late 1980s in which consoles such as the Japanese Nintendo Entertainment System (or Famicom/NES) were marketed to the Chinese consumers. Because their analysis offers key historical context for understanding the divergence between JRPG and ZhRPG traditions, Feng and Liao's study will be examined more closely.

Owing to the steep 130% import tax on foreign videogames, domestic products that could run the games made for those Japanese consoles were preferable, such as the dominant NES-clone Xiaobawang. Such expense fuelled the piracy market, as pirated consoles and games became commonplace, with pirated Japanese games forming the basis of reworked ("reskinned") translated games (or "ROM-hacks/Translation hacks") (Feng and Liao, pp. 121-126).

Taiwan contributed significantly to the development of PC games for the Chinese at this time, with the company Softstar releasing the first of successful franchise 仙剑奇侠 *xianjian qixia Sword & Fairy* (1995) which would go on to become one of the best-known names globally in ZhRPG videogames. Corroborated by Nakamura (2024), the Japanese game industry regarded the infant Chinese videogame market as an opportunity, with Koei Ltd arriving in 1989 and Tose in 1993 and initially embracing China for outsourcing production roles in locally established offices. Using Sony, Koei Tecmo and Square-Enix as case studies, Nakamura (2024, pp. 117-139) explores how, in those foundational

years, the Japanese industry officially entered China to establish itself within the young industry and train employees in a market that was currently new and lacked relevant expertise. Come the mid-90s, Ubisoft established its Shanghai offices which progressed from the typical porting of existing titles, to producing their own intellectual properties. Nakamura and Wirman (2021) and Nakamura (2024) evaluate China's early-stage videogame industry, labelling the period "chaotic formation" (Nakamura and Wirman, 2021, p. 276) described as a time when foreign ventures provided necessary training and development for local employees, as well the promotion of ethics in business practice and production. In Nakama and Wirman's words, were it "not for the companies learning from pirated games or foreign outsourcing, development knowledge in Greater China would have taken much longer to learn" (2021, p. 288), reiterating the impact of foreign entities, particularly the Japanese companies, in the Chinese videogame industry's development.

Thus, this setting in which largely Japanese bootlegs dominated the market, bolstered by an infant industry seeing formal investment from Japanese game development companies, served as the foundation of the Chinese videogame industry and in so doing, also served as the barometer by which Chinese gamers would form their genre expectations. Additionally, academic literature about Chinese videogames that are not online games has historically been sparse. Besides the authors cited above, English-language literature on the Chinese videogame industry is largely limited to online journalism (Young, 2026; Rodriguez, 2025) and business reports (The Netherlands Enterprise Agency, 2022; Lukman, 2025), making the need for better established frames such as those found in the culturally-proximate Japan highly relevant and beneficial, especially in terms of reception and localisation.

2.1.5 Sub-genre convergence and its implications for localisation

When ZhRPGs adopt similar tropes to those found in JRPGs, the reception may hinge on the degree of schema alignment, which is mediated by localisation strategies. Thus, JRPGs not only inform genre classification but also serve as a lens through which to examine cross-cultural reception dynamics in ZhRPGs. Thus, whilst these sources provide insight to fan mentality and expectation, there

is no concrete standard agreed upon by them or the videogame industry as to what constitutes a JRPG.

Many JRPG conventions are evident in ZhRPGs (Liu, 2023; Li and Li, 2023; Aroni, 2025; Brunskill, 2025). The presence of such conventions in tandem with the influence of Japanese videogame imports during the early stages of the Chinese game industry means that player schemata, understood as the experiential templates players use to recognise and judge genre, play an important role in how localised ZhRPGs are received. When ZhRPGs incorporate JRPG-esque features, audience reception may depend on how closely these features match players' existing expectations. Localisation strategies can influence this alignment through elements such as combat menus, UI conventions, narrative pacing, or the handling of mythological references, mediating how players encounter such content. For instance, combat menus and UI conventions can affect perceptions of usability and genre familiarity, while localisation choices concerning narrative pacing, dialogue, and mythological references shape the extent to which players recognise and interpret culturally rooted meanings.

At the same time, debates about essentialism and the international blending of genre conventions (Holleman, 2015, 2018; Consalvo, 2016; Koyama, 2022; Hutchinson and Pelletier-Gagnon, 2022; Kalata, 2021) caution against viewing either JRPGs or ZhRPGs as stable or uniform categories. These discussions have two practical implications for localisation. First, designers and localisers need to attend to familiar genre cues, such as interface features, feedback systems, and characteristic audiovisual styles, because these support comprehension and usability. Second, they must determine when to explain or adjust culturally specific elements, such as religious symbolism or historical references, so that their intended meaning is accessible to different audiences, as illustrated in Sutton's (2025) analysis of *Xenogears* (Squaresoft, 1998).

Whilst it is evident that academic literature exploring what defines JRPGs is scarce, it is also apparent that equivalent discussions on ZhRPGs (under any variation of the genre name), despite their growing global presence, lack even that much comparable scholarly attention with less academic discourse overall, raising questions about how genre conventions and cultural cues are not only received by non-Chinese players, but how they are regarded in wider media both

on and offline from sources (such as the journalistic). The matter of what constitutes a ZhRPG is explored further in Chapter 5. To begin unpacking these interpretive processes, the following section introduces reception theory as a framework for examining how audiences construct meaning from culturally specific game texts.

Given the importance of player schemata and expectations, the next section introduces reception theory as a framework for understanding how players make sense of culturally-specific content and contexts in videogames.

2.2 Reception theory and reception research

Reception theory places emphasis on the audience's role in creating and interpreting meaning, shifting focus away from a more traditional interest in authorial intent in the literary realm towards frameworks through which readers or users engage with texts (broadly defined). Closely related to reader-response criticism, it has traditionally been applied to classical literature, particularly Greek and Latin texts, and more recently adopted in media research, including film and videogames. In the context of game localisation, reception theory provides a valuable lens for understanding how player culture influences interpretation, often in ways that developers, especially those from different cultural backgrounds, may not anticipate.

A general overview of the more recent literature on reception theory (such as Machor and Goldstein, 2001; Martindale and Thomas, 2006; Willis, 2017) centres on textual interpretation. Its principles remain relevant, with foundational works from Jauss (1970; 1982), Iser (1974; 1978) and Holub (1984) being essential reading. Robert Holub's (1984) primer on reception theory and reception studies introduces key theorists including Jauss and Iser and clarifies the distinction between reception theory and reader-response theory. Reception theory emerged in West Germany during the 1960s and emphasises the historically and culturally conditioned "horizons of expectation" that shape interpretation, viewing reception as a collective, contextual process rather than a purely individual act (Holub, 1984, pp. 1, 57-60). Despite its focus on German literary texts, Holub's (1984) discussion of empirical methods in reception research is readily applicable to other media forms, including videogames.

In contrast, reader-response theory developed in Anglo-American circles and foregrounds the subjective dimension of reading, where meaning is driven by individual interpretation and shaped by the reader's personal experiences. Jauss's concept of the "horizon of expectations" (Jauss and Benzinger, 1970; Jauss, 1982) echoes Hall's notion of "mapped meanings" (1973) which are derived by socio-cultural contexts, although Holub notes that Jauss's terminology is not entirely original and is sometimes used interchangeably with similar concepts (Holub, 1984, p. 59). Additionally, reader-response criticism scholar Fish, whose "implied reader" model (1980) (not to be confused with Kovačič's "implied reader" model adapted by this study, see Section 5.7), also coined the term "interpretive communities" (p. 171). Much like Hall's "mapped meaning", Fish's "interpretive communities" echo Jauss's "horizon of expectations" as a reader group whose reception is shaped by their socio-cultural contexts; that those readers with similar contexts will interpret the text in a similar fashion, and that those from different contexts will interpret things differently.

However, Fish also highlights the author as part of this community, as the text is shaped by shared pre-existing genre conventions or expectations of the text to be read (1980, pp. 171-173). As a result, the reader is not solely responsible for meaning-making; intended interpretations are embedded in the text from its inception, guided by the norms of the author's cultural and literary context.

Reception and reader-response criticism highlight the role of socio-cultural factors in interpretation but overlook the cognitive processes behind meaning-making. Schema theory (Bartlett, 1932; Rumelhart, 1980; Nishida, 1999) addresses this gap by explaining how mental structures shaped by lived experience guide comprehension and decoding, ensuring that both cultural and psychological dimensions of reception are considered. Schema theory supports Nida's (2003) move towards the reader and places emphasis on reader reception (see Section 2.2.1), illustrating how prior knowledge guides comprehension and interpretation, echoing sentiments found in Hall's *Encoding/Decoding* (1973). Hall argues that media is interpreted through the viewer's own cultural norms and lived experience, or "maps of meaning", derived by how receivers decode information versus how creators encode media. Encoded media is derived from producers using dominant cultural concepts embedded with social norms and culturally contextual frameworks. Such

information is decoded from three different positionalities: (1) dominant-hegemonic (accepts intended meaning), (2) negotiated (partial acceptance with adaptation), and (3) oppositional (meaning rejected or interpreted with unintended meaning) (Hall, 1980, pp. 136-138). Ultimately, Hall posits that the receiver's context shapes their comprehension and that it is not guaranteed to align with the intention of the author, nor (contrary to Fish) to align with receivers of similar socio-cultural contexts as individual lived experiences influence reception and those experiences can be diverse even within relatively homogenous societies and groups. However, points made by videogame scholar Consalvo (2016; 2017) suggest Hall's framework alone may be ill-suited for videogame reception, due to its inability to account for the dynamic and participatory nature of gameplay, and the decentred nature of games as texts.

Schema theory functions as a toolkit for reception research, providing tools and terminology to analyse how players interpret videogame resources (character design, dialogue, and UI logic) through established genre conventions and cultural expectations. Crawford and Chaffin (1986, pp. 4-5) also note the adaptability of schemata, observing that exposure to novel or subversive content can lead to schema revision, which is particularly relevant in localisation studies where mismatches between source and target schemata may result in interpretive friction. However, Holliday (2011) critiques essentialist conceptions of cultures, implying limitations on the use of schema theory in light of its tendency to essentialise cultural frameworks. Cultural schema, as culturally embedded interpretive frameworks, serve to compensate for such essentialism (Shahghasemi, 2017; Nishida, 1999) by emphasising how individuals interpret media through maps which have been shaped by their social environment, language, and lived experiences; referring to these cultural schema informs individual reception and understanding. Whilst Nishida's work established the precedent that intercultural communication is a deeply cognitive process shaped by internalised cultural models, Shahghasemi extends this by arguing that culturally informed schemata are central to how audiences make sense of unfamiliar or foreign content, and that reception studies must account for the variability of these schemata across cultural groups.

Schema theory offers a useful lens for understanding how players construct meaning from localised content and how reception is shaped by cognitive and

cultural filters, thus it is applied selectively in this study for that purpose rather than as a formal component of the overarching theoretical framework. Its value lies in revealing the influence of cognitive and cultural schemata on player engagement, even though its application to interactive media and localisation remains underdeveloped. By drawing on schema theory (particularly cultural schemata) this study acknowledges its limited integration in existing research while leveraging its ability to illuminate the processes through which players interpret and engage with content. Reception theory's emphasis on user interpretation and cultural schemata provides the conceptual foundation for translation studies to move beyond linguistic fidelity and toward user experience. In game studies, reception theory helps bridge the gap between production and consumption, enabling exploration of how localised games are received and interpreted across different cultural contexts. Following this trajectory, this study's adoption of user-centred translation (UCT) within translation studies has come about, situating the study's use of UCT within broader developments in participatory media culture and underscoring the role of reception studies in assessing localisation outcomes.

2.2.1 Translation reception

Nida (1964/2003), Venuti (1995/2008), Lefevere (1992), and Chesterman (1998/2017) have all explored the tension between readability and cultural authenticity, but Nida (2003) was among the first translation scholars to foreground the receiver's role, asserting that without the receiver, a translation lacks purpose (p. 120). His concept of Dynamic Equivalence centres on meeting the receiver's expectations through familiar media, aiming to: (1) make sense; (2) convey the original's spirit and manner; (3) ensure natural expression; and (4) elicit a similar response. These principles align with reception aesthetics' (Jauss, 1970; 1982; Holub, 1984) emphasis on social and linguistic norms (or horizon of expectations) and emphasise the importance of providing a translation that the reader/user can relate to through evoked response, foregrounding the future importance of reception in translation contexts.

In contrast, Nord (2005/2018) provides a model for translation-oriented text analysis that hinges on text intention, employing a firm functionalist approach.

Accounting for audience reception, Nord suggests that extratextual factors (such as time period, sender nature, text transfer medium) and intratextual factors (such as subject matter, text composition, presuppositions) interact to influence reader interpretation. Skopos theory links textual analysis to communicative purpose, reinforcing the translator's responsibility to align decisions with intended function, an approach that continues to be influential in translator training, promoting transparency and structured decision-making. Furthermore, Nord (2018) emphasises the role of genre conventions in translation as inherently culture-specific. She argues that translators must be familiar with the norms associated with a text's genre, including measurement standards, numbering practices, and graphic conventions in technical writing, identifying such stylistic norms and conventions as factors that shape translation strategies (p. 51, 54).

In touching on the importance of function and genre-norms in translation strategies, Nord sets the theoretical undercurrent in which cultural norms play a significant role in determining approaches used to optimise audience reception, although it is worth noting that Nord's functionality-driven scholarship focuses on the role of static text, and the nature of a videogame (as a text) is fundamentally dynamic with many moving parts that contribute to making the whole. Despite this critique, the point about cultural norms shaping approaches to engagement is still relevant at the core level, even if the nature of the text complicates functional interpretations. Genre is discussed in more detail in Section 2.1.

Building on reception theory, Suojanen et al. (2014) proposes the "User-Centred Translation" (UCT) model. UCT operationalises audience interpretation through iterative feedback, mental modelling, and usability testing to improve translation workflows. Despite drawing on Hofstede's cultural dimensions (1980), Suojanen at al. also critique the essentialism of those cultural dimensions, promoting a more nuanced view of user diversity which UCT serves to account for. This critique is supported by Frandsen-Thorlacius et al. (2009)'s findings, their reception study revealing differing usability priorities between users of different regions (Chinese and Danish), findings which foregrounds the need for theoretical frameworks that capture the dynamic interplay between translation decisions and user responses.

The UCT model introduces tools such as intratextual reader positions,

audience design, and personas to define the “implied reader”, or in the case of games, the “implied player”, derived from Kovačič’s (1995) four dimensions of subtitle reception: socio-cultural, attitudinal, perceptual, and cognitive. Each of these dimensions influences how viewers decode and respond to translated audiovisual content, highlighting the complexity of reception in multimodal media. It also critiques essentialist views of culture (e.g., Hofstede, 1980), advocating for nuanced understandings of user diversity across regional, generational, and professional lines. The UCT model translates reception theory into practice, enabling empirical investigation of how users engage with translated content and how localisation strategies can be refined through feedback (see Section 3.2). The UCT model’s iterative, user-driven approach informs translation reception, which examines how users process, consume, and respond to translated texts. Suojanen et al. discuss “user localisation” (Sun, 2025), which prioritises the target user, asserting that localisation should involve both designers and users due to users’ cultural expertise (Suojanen et al., 2014, p.23). Sun’s model advocates for localisation by end users themselves, whereas Suojanen et al. do not require direct user review, instead emphasising receptivity to all feedback sources, noting the value of unsolicited input from both clients and users (Suojanen et al., 2014, p.6). They further introduce “cultural usability”, recognising that usability is influenced by cultural identities (generational, regional, and professional).

In recent scholarship, UCT has moved beyond theory into practice in several studies already across translator training (Suokas, 2019, 2020, 2022), MT evaluation (Gutiérrez Rubio, 2024), audiovisual translation (Tuominen, 2018) and has been proposed (but not yet implemented) for game localisation (Mielonen, 2023; Deckert et al., 2024; Deckert and Hejduk, 2024). Suokas’s studies (Suokas, 2019, 2020, 2022) applied UCT through personas, heuristic evaluation, and usability testing which were seen to improve translation quality and client communication in professional practice; in translator training, they fostered audience-oriented strategies; and in his dissertation, Suokas (2019) confirmed UCT’s adaptability across projects, teaching, and industry collaboration, bridging theory and practice. Professional training was enhanced through use of personas (2019), enabling translators to anticipate audience needs and tailor texts accordingly, whilst the heuristic evaluation provided a

structured way to identify usability issues with usability testing offering empirical feedback from users. Together these approaches shift the focus toward functionality and user experience, resulting in improved translations and clearer client communication.

Suokas also found that using UCT improved translator training (2020) by introducing practical usability methods that shifted learner focus from text-centric to audience-oriented strategies through use of personas; learners were taught how to model target users and anticipate their needs, complemented by heuristic evaluation which provided a structured approach to identify translation usability issues, with usability testing provided empirical user feedback. These methods encouraged a more systematic, user-focused mindset, helping trainees understand translation as a communicative act shaped by user experience rather than linguistic resources alone. Finally, consolidating their existing research in their doctoral thesis (2022), Suokas systematically applied UCT across translation projects, evaluation practices, translator education, and industry collaboration, demonstrating that UCT methods such as personas, heuristic evaluation, and usability testing could be adapted to different contexts. Overall, their use of UCT across these three projects affirms UCT's flexibility as well as its capacity to bridge theory and practice through iterative, user-driven processes.

Similarly, Gutiérrez Rubio's (2024) Spanish-language article employs a user-centred approach in MT assessment and highlights the importance of user perception in translation satisfaction. Employing Likert-scale judgements, translations of three Czech texts (technical, marketing and literary) produced by DeepL, Google Translate and ChatGPT, as well as by human translators, were assessed for satisfaction according to reader feedback. These texts were scored for fluency, grammatical correctness and usability; scoring found that whilst human translation was most satisfactory, MT outputs also received high levels of user satisfaction, resulting in an overall perception of MT quality as strong in key areas such as fluency and usability. Ultimately, this experiment in MT satisfaction goes some way to prove that MT outputs are achieving a level of user-accepted adequacy, reinforcing the premise set by user-centred evaluation approaches: that user acceptability and functional adequacy play a crucial role in

evaluating quality.

In terms of AVT, Tuominen (2025) revisits the UCT concept and adapts it to user-centred subtitling (UCS) aiming to consistently integrate audience perspectives throughout the subtitling process in much the same way user feedback feeds into UCT throughout an iterative cycle. Tuominen argues that current subtitling practice fails to account for broad viewership needs and that UCS aims to remedy the current issues in readability, timing, and efficacy.

Finally, UCT has only been implemented in one videogame-specific translation or localisation research, namely a Master's thesis (Mielonen, 2023) that explores the application of UCT in videogame localisation that tests UCT tools on two videogames (one English-Finnish, one Japanese-English). Through comparative analysis and usability testing, findings suggested that UCT can be successfully applied to game localisation with some adaptation, such as rethinking the concept of the implied reader for interactive media. Furthermore, UCT has been proposed as a beneficial tool for prioritising immersion, playability and usability over linguistic fidelity (Deckert et al., 2024; Deckert and Hejduk, 2024), critiquing traditional text-focused approaches in favour of player-centric evaluation frameworks. Whilst foundational theories (such as Nida and Nord) established the importance of purpose and audience, contemporary approaches (such as UCT, or user-*generated* translation (UGT) coined by O'Hagan (2009, p. 94)) respond to digital and multimodal realities, embedding translation within networks of users, technologies, and cultural flows. This shift also highlights the need for dynamism in videogame reception; marrying translation decisions and practice with the interactive nature of play and the outcomes of those marriages, observed in the literature of Section 2.3.3. In moving toward interactive and dynamic models of translation, Chesterman's causal framework offers a way to conceptualise how these processes generate concrete cognitive and cultural effects.

Chesterman's causal model (reaction, result, repercussion) (1998/2017) frames translation as a process that triggers cognitive, behavioural, and cultural effects (see Fig. 2.1).

Fig. 2.1. Diagram illustrating Chesterman's Three Rs as a sequence of cause-and-effect processes, showing how translation both shapes and is shaped by surrounding spheres (1998/2017).

In videogames, this manifests in player feedback on narrative coherence, characterisation, and genre alignment. Norms, translation briefs, and strategies shape the conditions under which translations are produced, while translations themselves generate effects. These effects (cognitive, behavioural, and cultural) are central to this study's reception model, which explores how translated media influence user perception and community discourse (see Section 3.4.1). Chesterman's "Three Rs" (reaction, result, repercussion; 1998/2017) which connect causality in translation with outcome shifts toward the end reader, aligning with user-centred approaches. Chesterman's causal model asserts that translations trigger an immediate reaction from the reader (cognitive or emotional) which leads to subsequent results in reader behaviour or engagement, which ultimately generates wider repercussions at the socio-cultural level. For instance, "reaction" denotes the user's immediate cognitive and emotional response (become tired or enlivened, experience joy or anger); "result" refers to behavioural outcomes, such as continued engagement or rejection (completing the text or putting it down); and "repercussion" captures broader cultural shifts, including evolving discourse and translation practices (recommending the text to others, changing one's perspectives as a result of the content). This model underscores the receiver's active role and the multifaceted impact of translation beyond linguistic transfer.

In contrast, several scholars explore diverse aspects of translation practice and theory that draw on user-*generated* translation, or UGT (crowd-sourcing and non-professional/fan) rather than user-*centred* translation, or UCT. Whilst conceptual, Perrino's (2009) article draws attention to the rise of user-generated translation in Web 2.0 environments (such as Wikipedia, open-source localisation and fan subtitling) and how such spaces foster participatory translation practices. Arguing that these virtual spaces enable non-professional translators to engage in practice driven by personal motivations reminiscent of those mentioned by Dombek (personal interest and ideological goals) but without the monetary motivation present in Dombek's study (2014), discussed further in the chapter. The growth of crowdsourced collaborative translation practice brings to the fore greater inclusion and democratisation but also raises concerns of inconsistent translation quality and the dubious ethics of unpaid labour. Perrino underscores UGT as a growing area, a sentiment corroborated by Pérez-González and Susam-Saraeva in their 2012 special issue of *The Translator*.

Pérez-González and Susam-Saraeva focus on participatory translation by non-professionals. Situating their discussions on non-professional collaborative translation in the context of Web 2.0, they echo Perrino's (2009) earlier work, describing the practice observed in crowdsourced and volunteer translation spaces as being driven by intrinsic ideological and social rewards rather than monetary, with emphasis on making content available to wider audiences. Again, the contentious ethical issues around unpaid labour are raised with Pérez-González and Susam-Saraeva calling for the field of translation studies to legitimise such participatory translation approaches.

It is necessary to address crowdsourced and non-professional translation because one of the case study games examined in this thesis initially incorporated crowdsourced localisation. Understanding how such production conditions can influence the characteristics of translated content, and consequently the ways in which players receive and interpret it, is therefore directly relevant to the aims of this research. The purpose of this subsection is not to provide a comprehensive account of crowdsourcing within Translation Studies, but rather to situate this project within relevant strands of work and to show where gaps remain, particularly in relation to reception.

Despite the prominence of crowdsourcing across several areas of translation practice, dedicated reception-oriented research is largely absent. In Wikipedia translation, early work by Désilets et al. (2006) examines how user-generated content is transferred between different language editions, followed by studies from Désilets (2007) and Huberdeau, Paquet and Désilets (2008) that map multilingual content dissemination, while Hautasaari (2013) investigates cross-language information flows and Jones (2021) synthesises translation practices in the platform's multilingual ecology.

In NGO-based volunteer translation, Baker (2006/2018, 2013) theorises voluntary translation as a form of collective political engagement, Boéri (2014) analyses the linguistic labour of volunteer interpreter-translators within activist networks, and Piróth and Baker (2020) critique Translators Without Borders as an example of platform-mediated humanitarian translation. In open-source localisation and fansubbing, Díaz-Cintas and Muñoz Sánchez (2006) provide the first systematic account of amateur subtitling workflows, Pérez-González (2007) examines fansubbing in the context of globalised media circulation, Muñoz Sánchez (2009) documents fan-led videogame localisation through rom-hacking, and Massidda (2015) offers the first monograph-length analysis of fansubbing communities.

Collectively, these studies focus on the organisation, motivations and collaborative practices of volunteer and community-driven translation, but none investigate how end users receive or interpret the resulting translations. Their contributions therefore remain centred on production-side dynamics rather than on reception.

This absence is also highlighted within Translation Studies more broadly. Jiménez-Crespo notes that although crowdsourcing has expanded across both industry settings and fan communities, the discipline has produced almost no empirical research on how users respond to such translations, identifying only a single focused study: Dombek's analysis of Facebook's volunteer translation system (2014, p. 218). This stands in contrast to the more established body of reception research in audiovisual translation. Crowdsourcing itself is not defined uniformly. Jiménez-Crespo observes that definitions vary across disciplines and that no single cross-disciplinary definition exists (2017, p. 12). The term is

commonly traced to Howe's combination of "crowd" and "outsourcing" (2017, p. 13). In this thesis, crowdsourcing refers to participatory online activity in which translation or editing tasks are performed voluntarily, with or without financial compensation. For definitional clarity, Jiménez-Crespo draws on work by Estellés and González (2012) and Brabham (2008, 2013), and distinguishes between translation crowdsourcing, understood as a top-down, solicited initiative, and online collaborative translation, which emerges bottom-up from self-organised communities.

The rise of crowdsourcing has also prompted reconsideration of several long-held assumptions in TS. Traditional links between professional training and translation expertise have been challenged by evidence that volunteers without formal qualifications can produce translations that meet community expectations (Jiménez-Crespo, 2017, p. 36). Concepts of translation quality have similarly shifted from fixed professional benchmarks toward dynamic, context-dependent models with tiered quality categories aligned to fit-for-purpose approaches (O'Brien, 2012; Jimenez-Crespo, 2013; Görög, 2014; Lommel et al., 2014). Crowdsourcing also redistributes agency: iterative revisions, voting mechanisms and rollback processes mean that responsibility is shared across platforms and contributors rather than resting with a single translator (Morera-Mesa, 2014), reflecting what Cronin describes as a move toward "plurisubjectivity of interactions" in translation (2012, p. 102). Ethical issues concerning responsibility, visibility and labour value are particularly pronounced in volunteer-driven contexts (Olohan, 2014; Dolmaya, 2011/2021), and have been explored extensively in fansubbing and scanlation scholarship, where copyright, derivative authorship and legitimacy remain contested (Pérez González, 2007; Bogucki, 2009).

Historically, crowdsourced translation has been strongly associated with Web 2.0 environments, including Wikipedia, apps and fan-subtitled television content (Jiménez-Crespo, 2017, p. 33). Volunteers are often motivated by personal interest, community affiliation or a desire to disseminate knowledge. Crowdsourcing also extends beyond entertainment. Organisations such as Translators Without Borders rely on volunteer translators to produce specialist humanitarian content (Jiménez-Crespo, 2017, p. 34), and volunteer-led

translation projects often provide low-cost solutions for charities and community organisations (O'Brien and Schäler, 2010, p.10). Additionally, these developments have also been conceptualised through user-generated translation (UGT), a term introduced by O'Hagan (2009) to describe translation practices undertaken by communities who engage in the creation and dissemination of multilingual content outside traditional professional frameworks.

Although this diverse body of scholarship demonstrates the breadth of research into crowdsourced and volunteer-based translation, reception remains almost entirely unexplored. Dombek's (2017) study offers the only analysis that directly examines user engagement with crowdsourced translations. Her findings show that translator motivation, platform design and lack of contextual guidance influence not only volunteer participation but also the quality and usability of the resulting translations, which can shape user interpretation. These dynamics matter for this thesis because users engage with translations that may display stylistic variation, inconsistent terminology or other artefacts of collaborative production (such as one of the titles in this study, *Depersonalization* (2019*)*), all of which can influence reception.

As this thesis moves toward audio-visual (AV) reception, it becomes necessary to consider how users process audiovisual cues and interface design. This leads to the domain of AVT reception, which offers established user-focused methodologies that are directly applicable to interactive media such as videogames.

2.2.2 Audiovisual translation (AVT) reception

AVT reception extends traditional translation reception by integrating multimodal semiotic cues: sound, image, and sometimes interactivity. Kovačič (1995), Gambier (2018, 2019), Di Giovanni and Gambier (2018), and Walker (2021b) emphasise the conceptual ambiguity of "reception" and distinguish between in-actu experience and reflective interpretation, underscoring the importance of context-sensitive methodologies.

Gambier (2018) foregrounds the reader's role in reception, drawing on Nida's shift toward the reader (1964) and the notion of reader as "reviewer". He also engages with Venuti's oppositional stance, where domestication and

foreignisation deliberately challenge reader expectations (2018, p. 13), and discusses relevance theory's emphasis on cognitive impact, echoing Jauss (1970; 1982), Holub (1984), and Lefevere (1992). Notably, Gambier (2018) asserts that "reception (an ambiguous concept) is not necessarily and always explicitly linked to the mental and cognitive operations of the translation process" (p. 45), highlighting its conceptual fluidity. This ambiguity complicates empirical design: without clear differentiation from user experience, studies risk conflating immediate gameplay impressions with post-hoc reflection, leading to inconsistent findings (Walker, 2021a). Walker agrees with Gambier that reception is "ambiguous", similarly calls for conceptual clarity, arguing instead that reception is a post-event occurrence, whereas experience comprises "moment-to-moment, in-actu impressions of a user to be investigated and charted live" (p. 492). In the context of videogames, this distinction enables more precise analysis of player engagement, separating real-time interaction from retrospective interpretation.

Whilst functionalist models such as Skopos theory (Reiss and Vermeer, 1978/2014) and Reiss's text typology (1971/2014) remain influential in AVT (Chen and Wang, 2019), these frameworks focus on translator intention to fulfil a presumed communicative purpose or goal, tailoring a translation to a particular audience or objective and their needs. However, translation choices and strategies are ultimately decided by the translator and are not informed by the input of the intended end user, or data that verifies how end users will engage with the translation. This gap spotlights the importance of user-centred methodologies in interactive contexts that cannot account for diverse user needs with such prescriptive models.

Research on subtitle reception and processing has increasingly drawn on cognitive and multimodal approaches and recently has seen greater inclusion of eye-tracking methods. Experimental approaches such as eye-tracking (Kruger, 2018; Sundstedt, 2012) are gaining prominence and in tandem with other frameworks can illuminate how viewers decode semiotic resources (such as, subtitles) in real time, providing concrete data on gaze patterns and attention shifts between visual resources. Sundstedt provides an exploratory look into eye-tracking and potential implementation in accessibility studies, which Kruger's more recent work builds on, providing a consolidated perspective drawing on a decade of eye-tracking research since. Perego's edited volume (2012)

consolidates these methodological advances in AVT eye-tracking research, offering a framework for analysing viewer attention and processing effort across diverse contexts and highlights the growing pool of research being conducted that employ eye-tracking in AVT. Additionally, Kruger and Doherty (2018) complement this, advocating for multimethod triangulation, combining online (eye-tracking, EEG etc.) and offline (questionnaires, surveys etc.) measures to capture the complexity of AVT reception, reinforcing the need for integrated approaches that bridge cognitive, behavioural, and experiential dimensions of subtitle processing.

Subtitles influence reception, demonstrated by research that highlights how issues such as high text density and poor timing can impact on comprehension and user experience. Künzli and Ehrensberger-Dow (2011) foreground the impact of experimental subtitling formats in film on audience comprehension through the use of non-standard, denser subtitles that could potentially have doubled required reading but ultimately showed limited impact on comprehension, highlighting the interplay between cognitive load and readability. Complementing this, Lång and Mäkisalo (2013) employ eye-tracking to demonstrate how poorly synchronised subtitles in television shows hinder comprehension. Participants were not always conscious of the disruption and so did not remark on any difficulties, but it is evident in the gaze data which recorded participants' gaze wandering more frequently and for prolonged periods. Subtitles in videogames can be present during any number of given sequences during interactive (in game dialogue) and non-interactive (full-motion video (FMV) cutscenes) states, where high text volumes and poor synchronicity (such as character lip movements observable in *H:SR* (2023)) compromise immersion and can negatively impact user comprehension; extremely important in games such as *Eastward* (2021) and *Depersonalization* (2019) which rely on dialogue box subtitles. Although relatively rare, videogame-specific reception studies have employed methods such as eye-tracking and player-response analysis to investigate subtitle processing and game-text reception (Mangiron, 2016; Kudła, 2023; Deckert and Hejduk, 2024), these studies are discussed in Section 2.3.3.

Furthermore, netnography (Kozinets, 2015, 2020a, 2020b) is being increasingly applied in AVT research as a valuable source of user-generated

data (Wang et al., 2025), encompassing online “interviews, data scraping, archival work, online observation, and active engagement with new forms of data collection, visualization, thematic analysis, and field-level rhetorical representation” (Kozinets, 2020a, p. 7). Kozinets details netnography and its place in research practice, highlighting its suitability and relevance in the study of all user-generated content found online. This approach is increasingly prominent in the internet age with review systems and metrics readily available online for willing participants (such as Metacritic) and features in this study. Such an approach allows for the collection of authentic user responses that, gathered as data, can guide and inform localisation approaches and strategies in videogames. Whilst the netnography can provide excellent insight into genuine player sentiment online, it offers no meaningful way to account for the motivations of the users, or what drives them to leave their reviews.

Schultheiss’s Motivation-Use-Evaluation (MUsE) framework (Schultheiss, 2011) provides a holistic reception model that links motivation, usage, and self-evaluation across gameplay cycles. It is readily adaptable to localisation research because it foregrounds how player traits and motivations shape use and subsequent appraisal in a prototype survey of persistent browser-based games. MUsE offers a scaffold for analysing how localisation choices influence actual player reception, an analytic lens developed further in the Framework section. Based on Heckhausen’s (2010/2018) theory of motivated action, it offers a holistic approach to understanding player motivations with some parameter flexibility and allows for the operationalisation of motivation, usage and evaluation, enabling clearer classification and collation of player experiences. This framework is further supported by Engeser and Rheinberg’s work on flow and engagement (2008) and Csikszentmihalyi’s (1988) work on flow and optimal experience, emphasising the importance of intrinsic motivation and seamless engagement in gameplay.

At time of writing no studies have used the MUsE model, although Schumann and Schultheiss collaborated on a related study (2009) that operationalised gratifications and capacities, which complements MUsE but does not explicitly apply it. In their study, Schumann and Schultheiss found that the relationship between gratification players sought from a genre compared to the gratification they obtained from a genre was weak. What players expected to experience

when playing a game genre (such as excitement, or social interaction) was not a strong indicator of their frequency of play (or “use”) of a genre. Rather, in-actu play experienced, and the player’s own skill level, had the greatest impact on player gratification, highlighting how engagement is driven more by actual in-game experience than by expectations shaped by genre. This approach aligns with the holistic approach adopted by MUsE and highlight the need for research to move towards dynamic, experience-driven models in reception, particularly demonstrating MUsE’s strengths for the study of multimodal complexity and player interaction. These models provide a robust foundation for understanding player behaviour and reception in videogame contexts.

2.3 Localisation and user-centred approaches

Localisation ensures cultural transfer is appropriately facilitated across locales, whilst also ensuring technical requirements are met where necessary. The term “localisation” is a contentious term with numerous academic and industry definitions that emphasise variously the linguistic and technical aspects, with the three main concepts and their associated abbreviations as (1) globalisation or G11n, (2) internationalisation or I18n, and (3) localisation or L10n. The now defunct LISA defined localisation as “taking a product and making it linguistically and culturally appropriate to the target locale (country/region and language) where it will be used and sold” (LISA et al., 2003). Whilst this definition covers the linguistic facet, no specific mention is made to the technical aspect. In contrast, Yunker’s definition of localisation as a “process of modifying a product for a specific locale” (2003) is broad in the extreme, not limited to software, the only link to the LISA definition being the mention of adaptation for a locale. In light of this, O’Hagan and Mangiron (2013, pp. 90-91) acknowledge the challenge in defining localisation, observing that the definition particulars change according to the position of the definer, arguing that LISA’s definition is too broad. Thus, by extension, the even vaguer Yunker definition is less useful in its extreme broadness. However, O’Hagan and Mangiron (2013) assert that localisation, in the context of videogames, is a process that combines software and AVT, that aims to deliver equivalent gameplay experiences across different markets globally and features elements such as transcreation practices in order

to retain the intended feel of the source content.

Pym offers a different angle, observing that experimenting with a rewrite of *Translation and Text Transfer* (1992/2010) for his later publication *The Moving Text* (2004) showed that simply replacing the word “translation” with “localisation” was inadequate, and the text had to be largely rewritten because a different ideological approach was required. Although no single definition of localisation is given, Pym observes that the term often refers to “work to sell ever more software in ever more languages” (p. 2), which aligns localisation closely with technical processes and echoes Schäler’s (1999) sentiments of localisation as industry “services and technologies for the management of multilinguality across the global information flow”. However, he further suggests that localisation can be understood more abstractly, such as in the retelling of a joke, and ultimately frames it as a workflow process driven by economic and distribution needs (p. 5) with less emphasis on the “feel” O’Hagan and Mangiron mention.

Jiménez-Crespo extends these discussions by defining localisation as involving “complex technological, textual, communicative and cognitive translational processes that introduce modifications to source interactive digital texts with the goal of rendering them usable in linguistic and sociocultural contexts other than those of production” (2013). His account foregrounds the digital, interactive nature of localisable artefacts, conceptualised across multiple semiotic modes. At the same time, he notes the difficulty of stabilising a definition when translation itself lacks a universally agreed-upon conceptual foundation, likening the attempt to “jumping into the void without a net” (p. 6). He further identifies scholarly “fuzziness” around the demarcation of localisation (2013, p. 30) but nonetheless distinguishes between localisation as a practical workflow (“applied”) and localisation as a translation modality (“pure”), a distinction represented in Fig. 2.2.

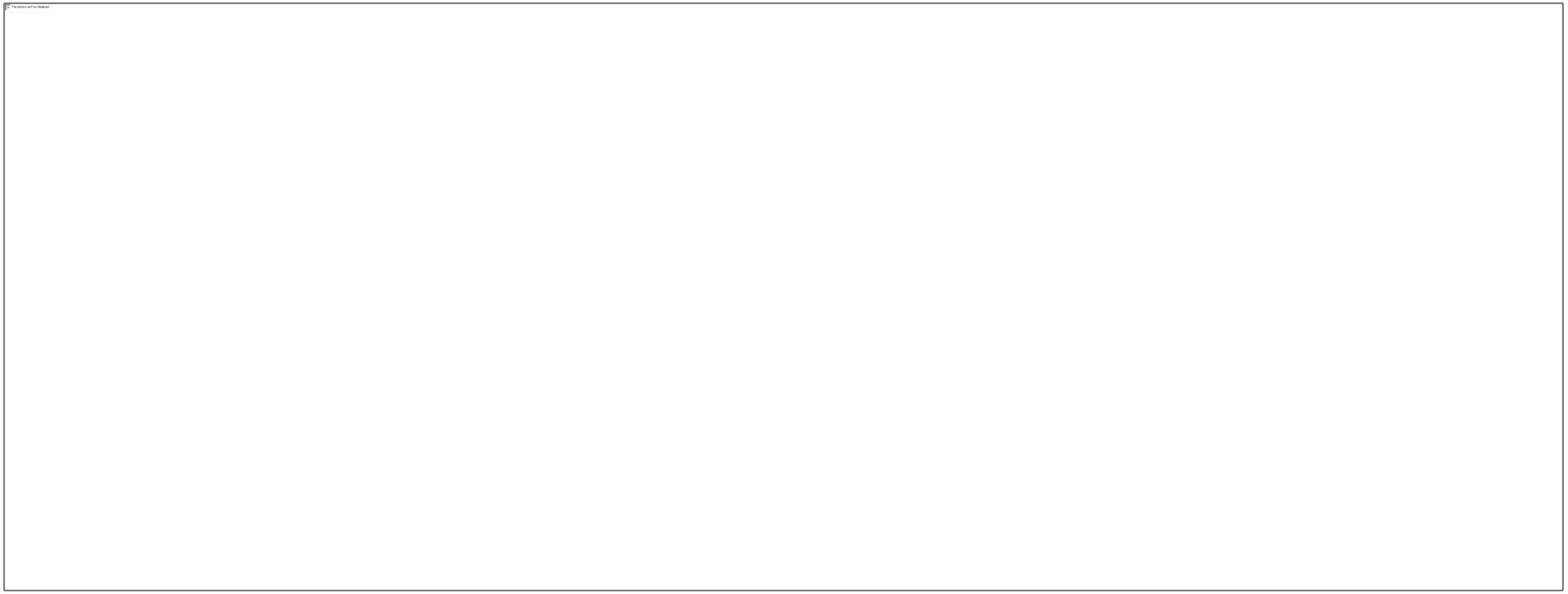


Fig. 2.2. Proposed map of localisation studies in Jiménez-Crespo, 2013, p. 38

Drawing on the etymological link to “locale” and localisation’s place within the GILT cycle, Jiménez-Crespo argues that early industry scholarship framed localisation as a culturally focused adaptive process that exceeded translation, while Translation Studies tended to approach it through a techno-centric lens. His own formulation treats localisation as a unified set of processes enabling interactive digital texts to be used by audiences who do not share the original linguistic and sociocultural context (Jiménez-Crespo, 2024, p. 21). He regards Dunne’s (2006) definition as the most comprehensive, as it incorporates locale, GILT processes, and the cultural, technical, and regulatory constraints shaping localisation workflows. However, he criticises Dunne’s reliance on the term “text” for narrowing the focus to “textual chains,” overlooking multimodal and multisemiotic interrelations (including linguistic, visual, aural, interactive, and kinetic) central to digital products (2024, p. 21). This perspective is echoed in part by O’Hagan and Mangiron, who specifically frame videogame localisation as a hybrid, multimodal, creativity-driven practice; part audiovisual translation, part software engineering. In their formulation, the relationship between localisation and translation constitutes a distinct analytical tension rather than a case of localisation being subsumed under translation as a single modality.

For Jiménez-Crespo, the essential features of localisation as a modality include its focus on digital content and interactivity, reliance on specialised tools and standards, and the collaborative management of large multilingual projects involving linguists, engineers, testers, and localisation managers (2024, p. 22). This distinction separates localisation as a socio-technical communicative practice from the workflow mechanisms that operationalise it. He acknowledges, however, an ongoing disciplinary divide: localisation as workflow versus localisation as modality. The former explains how localisation functions within structured GILT processes; the latter speaks to what localisation fundamentally is.

Not all scholars accept the modal view. Esselink (2000), Dunne (2006), and van Genabith (2009) primarily conceptualise localisation as a translation-adjacent process ecosystem, or “translation plus” (Jimenez-Crespo, 2013), incorporating engineering, QA, and iterative testing. Pym (2004),

meanwhile, frames localisation as a distribution-centred method shaped by market demand and production-pipeline efficiency (arguably in need of a greater application of humanity).

These varied perspectives demonstrate that localisation cannot be neatly contained within a single definition or disciplinary frame: it is simultaneously a workflow, a translation-adjacent modality, and a multimodal adaptation practice shaped by technological infrastructures and market imperatives. The persistence of conceptual ambiguity across the literature indicates that scholarly engagement with localisation remains an active and unsettled area of translation studies, inviting continued refinement of its theoretical contours.

Moving from this broad definitional landscape into a more structured analysis, the remainder of Section 2.3 observes how these debates materialise across three progressively narrower levels of inquiry. First, localisation is examined as a conceptual phenomenon in software contexts, clarifying how early perspectives laid the foundations for later theoretical developments (Section 2.3.1). Following that, attention turns to localisation as a workflow, mapping more prolific techno-centric and pragmatic perspectives (Section 2.3.2). Finally, existing scholarship examining usability, reception, and multimodal coherence in videogame localisation are investigated (Section 2.3.3); divided into experimental approaches (Section 2.3.3.1) and non-experimental approaches (Section 2.3.3.2), culminating in the topic of Chinese-English videogame localisation research (Section 2.3.3.3).

2.3.1 Concept of “localisation”

Building on the debates over definition above, this section focuses on localisation as a conceptual and cultural phenomenon within software contexts; that is, the localisation of computer programs and applications rather than the broader “multimedia” definition which encompasses a broader variety of source texts and modal channels such as websites and movies. This section aims to emphasise the importance of user-centred approaches and the import of meeting users on their level in order to suit user needs beyond the written word and into the realms of interactivity.

Greenwood (1993) undertakes a comparative analysis of cultural factors in

software design, demonstrating how localisation strategies in AVT must accommodate divergent user expectations across markets. Specifically, Greenwood recognises early on the role of “cultural differences”, observing that language is the most obvious aspect but not the only one (including characters, placement and reading direction), identifying date, time, numbers, UI, colour, sound, and the screen layout as important resources dictated by the target locale conventions, incidentally touching on multimodal semiotics (p. 8). Greenwood’s contributions to the discussion of culturally-informed conventions in localisation approaches is one of the earliest specific mentions of the role of culture in localisation and an early indicator of a future shift towards user-centred localisation. The late 90s saw a resurgence in the topic of “culture” in localisation, with scholars such as Bassnett and Lefevere (1995) driving this “cultural turn”. The theme of culture as an important facet of localisation expanded and elaborated on by both Leppihalme (1997) and Keniston (1997) who home in on the challenges initially touched on by Greenwood, further highlighting how the localisation of metaphors, symbols, and awareness of user expectations according to regional norms can influence and impact on audiences and are equally as important as the technical considerations, returning to a shift towards user-centric approaches in localisation practice that asserts a need for cultural sensitivity as well as technical expertise.

However, jumping forward in time briefly, despite the significant passage of time in authorship, the role of “culture” in localisation remains a contentious one in localisation literature. Ranzato (2020) quotes Keesing (1985, p. 215) on the matter; “Cultural translation will, I fear, remain inescapably problematic”. Although Ranzato is coming from an AVT position, the challenges of culture are present in any translation practice, and whilst not necessarily entirely comparable from a technical standpoint, the issues present from the linguistic and perspective are similar enough that it warrants mention. Ranzato suggests a taxonomy for the types of culture-derived referential challenges present (real-world references and intertextual references) and, particularly relevant to this study, is a need for greater research into non-verbal cultural markers that influence user perceptions (namely non-visual, non-verbal audio cues).

Together, these studies not only theorise localisation but also document its practical implementation, highlighting trends such as automation, next-

generation tools, and the growing demand for culturally adaptive solutions, the final point of which has arguably been addressed largely by Suojanen et al.'s UCT model (2014). The following subsection outlines how these conceptual debates are operationalised through industry-standard localisation workflows.

2.3.2 Localisation approaches and workflow

Alongside Greenwood's aforementioned contribution, Uren et al. (1993) introduce key practices and concepts in software localisation, stating that in software localisation, technical knowledge and linguistic knowledge are equally as important, and that a translated localised software product must possess functional equivalence. However, cultural considerations are subordinated to a predominant focus on pragmatic and technical dimensions. The text is intended to introduce major aspects of software localisation and production tasks, including multimodal semiotics (images and written text), technical differences across platforms (encoding) and operating systems (Windows, Mac, Linux), and standardisation. Informative, it is does intend to challenge perceptions or interrogate other existing literature of the time, instead serving as instructional.

In a similar vein, Esselink's (2000) oft-referenced handbook is primarily industry-orientated and aims to inform and guide readers on the practice and workflows involved in the distribution of software to other locales through localisation. The focus is on efficiency, engineering, and process management for the localisation of software applications, websites, UIs and digital documentation, aiming to outline standard operations for both the digital and physical (user manuals) elements of software localisation including internationalisation, file preparation, translation, engineering, and quality assurance. He later stresses that localisation "engineering" is what differentiates translation from localisation, highlighting that the "technical stuff" is what underscores the divide between the two (Esselink, 2002). Esselink's (2000) emphasis on the workflow management contrasts with O'Hagan and Mangiron (2013) and Bernal-Merino's (2015) perspective of localisation in Section 2.3, with limited concern for UX (user-experience) beyond the purely pragmatic workflow-based approach, aligning more firmly with Pym's (2004) economic and distribution-focused angle. These early handbooks predate the distinct field of

videogame localisation and highlight the focus on software localisation as a process driven by commerce, technical advancement and global distribution needs.

Functionality and interactivity are divorced of a need to please or entertain the end user, although a degree of comparative functionality is required between locale versions, and functionality-orientated quality assurance (QA) testing (Uren et al., 1993, p. 87; Esselink, 2000, p. 145) is introduced as an important part of the cycle. The presence of QA testing suggests recognition of the need for a form of usability testing and error fixing in order to produce a successful localised product, but these practices remained oriented toward functional correctness rather than experiential quality.

However, in contrast to the much-cited 2000 piece by Esselink, Esselink's most recent work (2025) departs from this early engineering-centred framing. While the first handbook focused on workflow efficiency and technical processes, his latest chapter presents software localisation as a UX-aware, context-driven, and collaborative endeavour integrated into agile development cycles. He emphasises the importance of contextual information, previews, linguistic-cosmetic QA, and user-centred design, signalling a shift from purely functional correctness toward experiential quality as a core localisation outcome.

Pym's (2004) discussion of localisation practice argues that placing too great an emphasis on automation and efficiency risks "dehumanising" translation, advocating for ethical approaches to workflows that emphasise teamwork and collaboration between partners, whilst in contrast, van Genabith (2009) promotes advancements in workflow evolution and technological innovation, such as implementing machine translation and community-sourced inputs that shape future outputs driven my user needs. Van Genabith briefly mentions the benefits of crowdsourced translation in localisation, such as reduced costs and highly motivated translators (p. 6), and noted that successful crowdsourced efforts requires access to translation aids (namely MT, translation memories (TM) and term management systems), but no consideration is given to ethical concerns highlighted by other scholars and practitioners, with all emphasis on terminology, tools and approaches likely to see greater adoption moving forward; crowdsourcing is reviewed in greater detail in 2.3.3.

Taking a step back, Dunne (2006) acknowledges the change of status localisation as a process has undergone, having transformed from a peripheral translation service into a necessary step essential to successful business. As with Uren et al. and Esselink, Dunne agrees that localisation is said to require adaptation for linguistic, cultural, and regulatory contexts, highlighting literature on the economical aspect and business driven nature of evolutions in localisation (p. 9). Furthermore, Dunne highlights the recurrent themes in literature of the time focused largely on the pragmatic commercial angle and drive for investment returns on digital content, calling for the need for greater terminological and practitioner approach unification, arguing that standardisation is needed as a core principle of successful localisation, again leaning into the role of functionality as a core facet.

Mazur (2008) also provides a conceptual framework grounded in observed industry practices (GILT), echoing Schäler's call for greater cohesion between the theoretical and practical, urging unified terminology in localisation across practice and training contexts. They argue that the localisation fields of industry and academia are divided by their lack of shared and agreed upon terminology, calling for a metalanguage that spans both in order to promote more fruitful discourse between the two, better bridging theory and concepts with practice (Mazur, 2007, p. 338). Mazur is critical of largely text-centric approaches to localisation and disagrees with scholarly views that localisation is ultimate a "fancy name for old phenomena" (p. 352), citing Nida's dynamic equivalence, Nord's instrumental translation, House's covert translation or Venuti's domestication. Highlighting such prevalent attitudes to localisation as translation plus engineering, Mazur emphasises the multimodal nature of localisation. They regard it as a field rather than one step of a distribution process; a field that considers target locale usability and not merely linguistic functionality, citing Esselink's observations on how translation has again become the focus of a localisation specialist, with engineering being less a part of the equation (2003). This perspective not only challenges reductive, text-centric models but also sets the stage for localisation to be recognised as a dynamic, user-oriented process as well as a potential specialist field of academic ("localisation studies").

Sandrini's (2008) overview of localisation principles and tools further enforces the importance of usability and the emphasis on pragmatism in software

localisation. They first clarify software as “all non-material components of an electronic system” which includes examples such as operating systems, compilers, hardware drivers, utilities and testing tools, databases, image manipulation, office application suites, desktop publishing, and games. Next, they clarifies that software localisation’s primary aim is to ensure ease of use for users of other locales (2008, p. 3) and identifies three primary stages of the localisation process: (1) preparing the programming code, (2) translating textual elements, and (3) testing the code. According to Sandrini’s description of the process, the translation step is purely to aid end user functionality and is part of a largely technical process that involves regional software adaptations, knowledge of coding languages, and project management skills (2008, p. 22). Although the localisation of software in Sandrini’s context appears to be a process driven by functionality, they mention “games” as a software to be localised, but makes no mention of any specific differences that game localisation might have versus software localisation (such as differing user motivations or additional outputs such as haptic feedback), likely owing to the instructional, informational nature of the article that invests time in clarifying the technical aspects of the process. However, they do touch on tools such as WYSIWYG editors and Trados TM manager and the value of such tools in maintaining term consistency, briefly introducing their usage such as tag editing and separating text in strings that requires translation (Sandrini, 2008, p. 19), reflecting the growing ubiquity and adoption of TM systems in localisation processes at that time.

In response to the academic discourse on software localisation, Jiménez-Crespo (2015) examines and critiques the QA practice models common at the time; namely, the industry’s approach is largely anecdotal and unlikely to provide sufficient validity and reliability (p. 61). He claims the error-based assessment approach has little to no consideration for adapting the localised content to suit the target locale in a fashion that promotes target locale usability (p. 60). Considering the emphasis on pragmatics and usability mentioned in the scholarship at the time, Jiménez-Crespo draws on Nord’s (1997/2018) skopos theory, arguing that the purpose and reception context of a target text are the markers of quality in localisation, asserting that “the function of the target text and the context of reception are the yardsticks to which all translation decisions

should be evaluated" (p. 65). Until this point, the scholarship focus has been on the overall distribution process and the technical aspects of software code adaptation, but now Jiménez-Crespo is honing in the QA practice specifically, raising the issue of poor consistency and standardisation that leads to a failure in target locale pragmatics. Calling for greater adoption of corpus-based evaluation in QA, he also advocates for more holistic assessment models that more comprehensively assess the suitability of the localised text rather than meeting an arbitrary criteria derived from grammatical and stylistic errors. The holistic approach called for is addressed by the UCT model, built precisely to be an iterative, holistic model that considers target locale usability beyond sentence level that is informed by target locale user feedback (see Section 2.2.1).

Practices such as fansubbing and crowdsourcing offer insights into reception and user expectations, as well as raising the issue of ethics. Díaz-Cintas and Muñoz Sánchez (2006) and Pérez-González (2007) both adopt descriptive and analytical approaches to fansubbing, examining its operational norms, linguistic strategies, and reception within online communities. These studies provide evidence of how amateur subtitling practices enhance accessibility and foster global media circulation, while simultaneously challenging conventional quality standards. Meanwhile, McDonough Dolmaya (2011) extends this to crowdsourced translation, drawing on case studies and platform data to interrogate ethical concerns around labour, quality assurance, and user engagement. Collectively, these works contribute to an evidence-based understanding of how grassroots translation practices reshape the ecology of AVT.

Come 2010, Schäler elaborates on the history of the localisation industry and cornerstones concept such as globalisation, internationalisation, localisation, translation (GILT) and workflows, criticising the lack of existing frameworks that account for technological mediation and user-oriented design in digital contexts. Providing an overview on the localisation process, he states that localisation practice was initially largely focused on adapting North American software for a handful of European locales (France, Italy, Germany, Spain, known as FIGS), and that those languages would extend to wider global locales in time. Again, the emphasis is on localisation as a business manoeuvre for the purposes of enabling wider distribution for greater software sales. However, Schäler explicitly

highlights multimodality, amplifying earlier scholarship from Esselink (2000), Dunne (2006) and Jiménez-Crespo (2009) who had addressed aspects of multimodality without naming it as such, reinforcing the importance of the presence of the different channels of input and output in localisation processes and the need to consider the challenges involved in adapting software for users of other locales. Referring to localisation as “the linguistic and cultural adaptation of digital content to the requirements and the locale of a foreign market” (2010b, p. 209), Schäler explicates the digital nature of the content despite localisation workflows unsuitable for addressing the real-time, participatory, and socially inclusive demands of modern digital content (p. 213).

Schäler concedes that as technological advancements occur and localisation becomes an increasingly digitised process featuring automations and assistive software, the line between “translation” and “localisation” has become more difficult to define. Discussing localisation as a process, he highlights the prominence of time-sensitivity and the need for efficiency, for which the “re-use” of translated strings and terms is pivotal, and the use of assistive software such as TMs and CAT tools have become essential. Additionally, he clarifies how the role of localisation has changed from “an afterthought” in development to a process that has gained importance enough to be a consideration from the outset of development (2010b, p. 211). As well as the shift towards localisation as a key role in development, he notes that despite the historic focus on business-driven efficiency and automation focus, the role of localisation in social and cultural contexts (such as multilingual emergency services) is broadening localisation research. Whilst not explicitly, Schäler appears to propose further research that shifts away from the pragmatic and profit-driven commercial motivations of much of the scholarship at the time, voicing his disappointment in how the most exciting new topics (namely crowdsourcing, collaborative translation, and wikifisation) are so quickly railroaded away from socially beneficial aims and into commercial monetisation.

Technical considerations are central to localisation but rarely is a full case study on the process available owing to limitations such as security risks and non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) cited by language service providers. Xia et al.’s (2013) unique study in partnership with State Street Corporation provides such an insider view. They undertook a study to internationalise and localise a

legacy (outdated) financial system comprising over five million lines of C/C++ code, which had previously lacked any provisions for multilingual support. This study provides a valuable opportunity to observe how the localisation pipeline operates in practice, including the extraction of hard-coded content, its translation, and the storage of translated resources for future use (2013, p. 222). To manage the complexity of this task, the authors developed the tools IRanker and I18nLocator; IRanker is a tool that prioritises source files for analysis by combining dependency analysis with the purpose-made PageRank algorithm to identify those of greatest importance, whilst I18nLocator automates code modifications for internationalisation by applying predefined transformation patterns (such as replacing character types, switching API calls, string macros and updating the database to handle Unicode) which are suitable for full automation (convertible) and flags more complex cases that require human QA for manual review (suspicious). Using an iterative process to QA and refine the results of localisation, Xie et al. not only demonstrate the value of automation tools and a documented example of legacy software localisation but also acknowledge the need for QA and iterative revisions that are a cornerstone of the UCT cycle (Suojanen et al., 2014, see Section 2.2.1).

As scholarship shifts away from engineering and puts a spotlight on the linguistic element of software localisation, Alsedais and Khatoon (2016) return to the importance of usability for users of non-Western regions. Of localisation, they state that “most of these methods have been developed in Western Europe and the United States and they consider the needs of only people inhabiting these places” (p. 7), referring to them as “Western culture”, which they claim is reflected in the human-computer interaction (HCI) norms found in such localisation. Three levels of mis-match caused by cultural differences are identified; (1) surface-level (such as language and interface layout), (2) infrastructure-level (such as technological constraints like global positioning system (GPS) reliability), and (3) fundamental-level (such as affordability, legal restrictions). Overlooking these three levels of mis-match leads to usability issues for users from cultures outside of Western-normative contexts, such as those of Arabic-, Urdu- and Chinese-language majority cultures. To avoid and minimise such problems from arising in localisations for those regions, Alsedais and Khatoon (2016) propose the use of ethnographic approaches to inform on

target locale and regional norms on both the linguistic and social level, filling gaps caused by an overly-direct localisation approach, advocating for the use of a framework akin to Hofstede's cultural dimensions (1980) and the ongoing recommendations of users at all stages of the process; an approach taken by Suojanen at al. (2014) (see Section 2.2.1). Whilst the article is lacking in technical specificity (such as specific platforms, media types) or hone on particular workflow practices, the emphasis on cultural usability that is guided by user feedback, culturally-informed norms, and iteratively improved echoes Suojanen et al.'s recommendations and reinforces the much earlier suggestions of scholars who argued for the consideration of culture and wider usability considerations in localisation approaches (Greenwood, 1993; Lappihalme, 1997; and Keniston, 1997).

Id-youss and Alsulaiman (2019) further add to the discourse of localising software into Arabic, exploring "linguistic inferiority"; that is, that the linguistic resources of some languages including Arabic are subject to less rigorous localisation efforts and standards than non-Arabic counterparts. Comparing the Arabic localised version of Skype video conferencing software against its French and English counterparts, Id-youss and Alsulaiman (2019) aim to highlight language-related problems associated and their challenges present in such software. Reflecting attitudes present in earlier localisation scholarship, they argue that the linguistic is subordinated to the technical, an attitude prevalent in scholarship of the 2000s in which the emphasis was on the pragmatic and commercial, and the linguistic was, at best, argued to be of equal importance to the technical.

They argue that the overly direct nature of translations found in the Arabic localisation of Skype underscores a need for linguistic appropriateness to ensure optimal usability as an exploration of the Arabic UI reveals systematic literalism and inconsistencies that cause usability friction (2019, p. 227). Examples are given of terms demonstrating meaning ambiguity, non-idiomatic usage and inconsistent hotkeys, which Id-youss and Alsulaiman state negatively impacts Arabic user usability as well as undermining the purpose and value of an Arabic localisation in the first instance; if such a localisation is so poor that its users would sooner use the French or English version, it is debatable how worthwhile it is to invest in such a sub-par localisation (2019, p. 231). They suggest that tight

deadlines that so not allow for adequate linguistic vetting may influence the resulting translations (2019, p. 230), and that QA workflows that categorise certain faults as “cosmetic” rather than “usability” also negatively impact on the Arabic version that is produced (2019, p. 223). It seems that despite an apparent shift in localisation discussion towards the linguistic and cultural, in the context of Arabic localisation, Id-youss and Alsulaiman feel “the reality [is] that linguistic matters in software localization testing are of secondary importance” and as such, urges localisers to collaborate with “experienced linguists, translators, and terminologists (for instance, ask them to perform peer reviews)”, echoing prior calls for greater standardisation in localisation workflows and culturally inclusive translation and localisation practice. Ultimately, the linguistic elements of localisation should not be relegated to a cosmetic concern, but rather a primary concern that has economical, commercial ramifications that can be assessed experimentally through user testing.

Most recently, Jiménez-Crespo (2024) has conceptualised localisation as “a separate and distinct translation modality” rather than purely a distribution tool. He asserts that if a product is digital and interactive (such as videogames, software and websites), rather than requiring translation, it requires localisation (p. 37). Echoing the sentiments of scholars above, Jiménez-Crespo asserts that localisation involves the integration of technological, cultural, usability, and accessibility concerns. However, he further asserts that the intended outcomes are guided by the expectations of the target audience (2024, p. 38). Furthermore, reminiscent of Nord’s (2005/2018) point about genre familiarity determining translation approaches, Jiménez-Crespo states that user expectations about structural, discursive, textual, interactive, or textual features are shaped by familiarity with a genre. Recent evolutions in localisation workflows have also been impacted by advancements in technology, such as the integration of neural machine translation (NMT), post-editing workflows, and generative large language models (LLMs) such as DeepL. He posits these recent developments in localisation practice have been widely accepted by professional practitioners and that such tools are broadly capable of producing highly fluent text, reviewing, style adaptation, and code generation adequately. However, the ethics of using NMTs and LLMs are not discussed in isolation but rather are framed within a wider concept of “green localisation” which calls for

practitioners to use such tools responsibly; minimise environmental impact and promote sustainable, socially responsible localisation practices (2024, p. 278). He aligns this with Cronin's (2017) call for "new ethics for translation technology" that critically evaluate resource implications and advocate greener alternatives.

In brief, localisation has historically been regarded largely as a technical process intended to act as a vehicle of global distribution for software. Despite featuring linguistic elements and early mentions of target culture considerations (Greenwood, 1993; Lappihalme, 1997; Keniston, 1997), those are largely subordinated to usability and pragmatics, with adaptations for cultural considerations or genre expectations gaining prominence later in academic discourse (Suojanen et al, 2014; Alsedais and Khatoon, 2016; Id-youss and Alsulaiman, 2019; Jiminez-Crespo, 2024). Contemporary scholarship positions localisation as a translation modality rather than a distribution method, integrating cultural sensitivity, genre awareness, and UX, reflecting a decisive move away from the technical pragmatism of earlier scholarship.

Whilst usability has remained at the forefront of localisation practice, the more recent developments such as LLM and NMT usage have raised new concerns about ethically responsible localisation practice. However, the adoption of these tools which enable faster turnaround while maintaining linguistic and stylistic quality whilst allowing iterative workflows through agile sprints in tandem with initiatives such as "green localisation" demonstrate how localisation practice aided by advances in technology have markedly shifted towards being firmly user-centred. As user feedback informing iterations of localisation output becomes a core step in localisation workflows, the emphasis on working with the intended user to generate content reflects further drives towards UCT approaches, whilst the push for greater automation does the opposite, placing production efficiencies and publisher concerns above those of the end user. However, workflow alone cannot account for reception; usability and user experience shape both the success and the meaning of localisation.

2.3.3 Videogame localisation

Referring to multimedia entertainment software or "MIES" (encompassing videogames, websites, applications and training resources (2015, p. 9), Bernal-

Merino asserts that localisation is a multidisciplinary process that adapts all linguistic, cultural, and technical elements (particularly regarding different gaming platforms, i.e. PlayStation, PC, XBox) of a product to make it suitable for a specific locale. Most importantly, Bernal-Merino echoes O'Hagan and Mangiron's (2013b) reference to "feel", highlighting the role of localisation on play experience and ensuring playability.

> Playability is therefore a crucial concept for the translation and localisation of video games because it affects not only the final feel of the product, but more importantly the players' actual enjoyment of the game experience. (Bernal-Merino, 2015, p. 40)

Consensus then is that localisation is a process that exceeds linguistic translation, involving the incorporation of the cultural, the technical and the multimodal. The inclusion of interactivity found in software has required an approach specific to and appropriate to videogames that places usability, playability and player experience at the core. However, the degree to which interactivity features prominently in definitions varied significantly, with LISA (2003) and Yunker (2003) making no mention of interactivity at all, whilst O'Hagan and Mangiron (2013) and Bernal-Merino prominently emphasise the need to preserve game feel, stressing playability as a criterion for successful videogame localisation. Pym (2004) is more concerned with the workflow and operations aspect rather than considering the product itself to be localised, whilst Jiménez-Crespo's (2013) acknowledgement of a lack of agreement over definitions of "translation" highlights the inherent challenge of defining the derivative practice of localisation, a sentiment Hermans (2013) echoes whilst providing a reasonably comprehensive run down of definitions up to time of writing, noting existing definitions rely on theoretical biases. Overall, the core principles of software localisation persist, but the unique semiotics and player-experience-centred challenges are pivotal to videogame localisation.

Moving on, the next section follows the literature as it examines the evolution of localisation practice developed in software adaptation, into the more relevant field of videogame localisation, blending multimodal semiotics with a need for user-centric playability considerations and the limitations of regional regulation that have come to shape common current practice.

Shifting the focus towards research in videogame localisation, Toh's (2017) multimodal reception framework (see Fig. 2.3), whilst not having a localisation focus, does provide concepts and a framework grounded in empirical research that are readily adapted to videogame localisation research (ludonarrative dissonance, ludonarrative resonance, ludonarrative relevance, ludonarrative irrelevance).

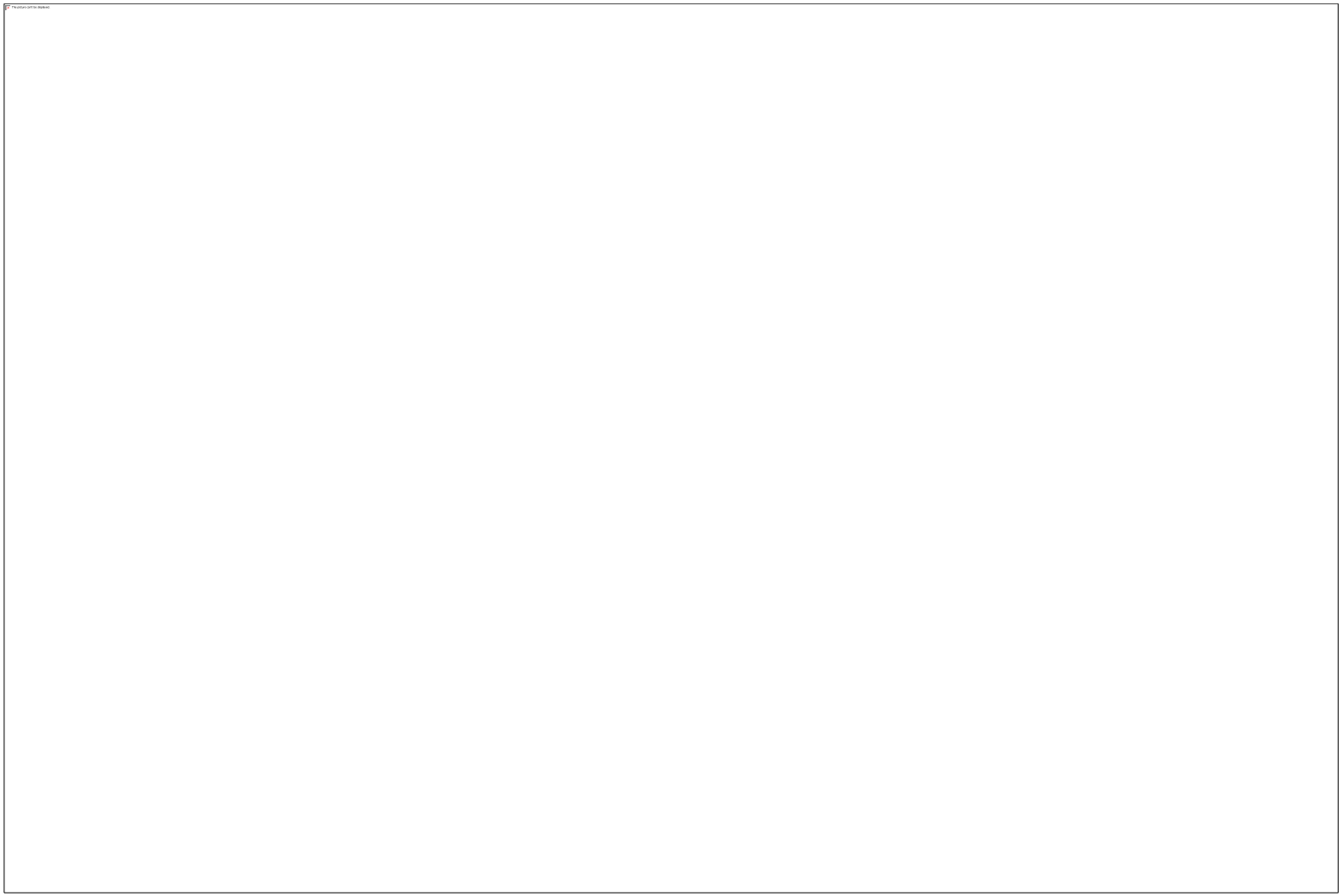


Fig. 2.3. Toh's multimodal ludonarrative model for videogame analysis (2017).

The model in Fig. 2.3 serves as an analytical tool to determine and operationalise player experiences within the interactive context of videogames. Her empirical study highlights how multimodal cues like visuals, text, and interaction create meaning for players, emphasising player agency and how meaning is co-constructed through both the game narrative and mechanics. However, as if often the case in current videogame reception studies, the participant pool was small and lacked diversity, adding to the need for future reception studies to draw from broader, more representative samples. This would allow for a more nuanced understanding of how players from diverse cultural backgrounds interpret and respond to localised content.

Foundational, industry-oriented accounts position localisation as a core development function requiring early integration, clear workflows, and technical preparedness (Esselink, 2000; 2008). Building on this, Chandler and O'Malley Deming (2011) systematised practice across pre-production, production, and testing, with pragmatic guidance on budgeting, vendor management, asset integration, and QA. Extending beyond language, Edwards (2016) introduced "culturalization" as proactive content risk assessment embedded from project inception rather than a late-stage fix. In parallel, DeLaHunt (2004) and Dietz (2007) highlighted the creative and cultural labour of adapting style and narrative, aligning game localisation with literary translation in terms of voice, register, and genre conventions. Collectively, these works, largely descriptive and practitioner-driven, established localisation as multidisciplinary, combining technical engineering with cultural and linguistic expertise.

Subsequent scholarship re-theorised videogame localisation as a socio-cultural and creative act. O'Hagan and Mangiron (2004), O'Hagan (2005, 2012, 2016), and Bernal-Merino (2015, 2016, 2020) framed localisation as multidimensional and "glocalised", involving co-creation between development teams and localisers to achieve affective and experiential alignment. In Bernal-Merino (2016), glocalisation denotes collaborative integration of local references, humour, and idiom without fracturing narrative coherence, while O'Hagan (2012, 2016) links glocalisation to transcreation and emotion engineering, arguing that high-quality localisations should elicit equivalent emotional responses from players of all locales rather than focusing on the rendering of words. This

emphasis resonates with the tradition of dynamic equivalence in translation studies (Nida, 1964).

A growing body of scholarship problematises the assumption of stable equivalence. Mandiberg (2009, 2012, 2015, 2017) discusses censorship and challenges the ideal of invisibility in videogame localisation, proposing the concept of the “trace” as an ethical and pedagogic value: residual cultural markers that remain visible in target versions and invite cross-cultural encounter rather than total domestication. Jayemanne (2009) situates localisation historically, showing how platform constraints and generational aesthetics, such as early text budgets, memory limits, and layout restrictions, complicated fidelity, while later technical affordances enabled fuller stylistic realisation. This angle echoes Lefevere’s (1992) critiques of dominant poetics of patronage (p. 35) whereby the poetics in question are norms determined by technical limitations; whilst Lefevere is critical of such dictatorial standards, they persist in game localisation via publisher (or “patron”) constraints, serving to shape reception and encouraging creativity within restricted translation (Mangiron and O’Hagan, 2006; Chandler and Deming, 2012). Taking this further, Schules (2012) demonstrates that localisation choices are ludically consequential, observing how shifts in pragmatics, instructions, and textual logic can disrupt gameplay, evidencing that translation in games is structural and intertwined with mechanics and rules, rather than a purely linguistic overlay. Together, these critiques reposition localisation as a transformative design intervention, not a neutral conduit for achieving an idealised, uniform equivalent effect.

Concurrently, research has turned decisively toward user-centred and accessibility-focused approaches in videogame localisation. Deckert and Hejduk (2022, 2024) foreground on-screen language usability, advocating inclusive design and empirical testing of readability, cognitive load, and interface clarity to ensure accessibility. Mejías-Climent (2018) stresses the interplay of multiple translatable layers, (text, audio, UI, interactivity) arguing that player experience should guide strategic choices more than abstract fidelity. Echoing the need to connect product and reception, Jiménez-Crespo (2017) calls for empirical audience research that examines how users actually engage with localised content rather than evaluating translations in isolation. Zhang (2025) consolidates this shift, positioning accessibility and adaptive strategies such as

scalable text, alternative modes, and localisation-aware UI as central to future practice. In aggregate, this strand reframes localisation as UX design with linguistic, cultural, and technical components, challenging older equivalence-first models.

The literature also clarifies the multimodal nature of game translation. Bernal-Merino (2015) distinguishes classical videogame translation from multichannel translation, emphasising that the absence of contextual cues can undermine coherence when textual equivalence alone is pursued (p. 49). This concern aligns with Adami and Ramos Pinto's (2019) co-text approach in AVT, which differentiates context, the broader social-semiotic environment of production, distribution, and reception, from co-text, the co-occurring multimodal signs accompanying a focal text (p. 73). In a highly multimodal medium like games, poor alignment between translated strings and visual or interactive frames misleads players and reduces comprehension. Bernal-Merino further observes that games braid channels (audio, visual, and textual), borrowing techniques from comics and film to heighten narrative impact (2015, p. 63). Yet wordplay and embedded graphics often constrain options, affecting engagement (p. 67). These insights support the move toward design-aware, context-rich localisation workflows.

Attention has increasingly turned to experimental methods in videogame localisation research, examined in more detail shortly in Section 2.3.3.1, in which Kudła (2021) is discussed as a leading name in videogame eye-tracking studies. In their chapter on experimental eye-tracking, Kudła (2024) identifies eye-tracking as a particularly valuable approach for videogame localisation research, arguing that it enables researchers to move beyond self-reported player feedback by examining how players visually engage with localised resources during gameplay, as well as demonstrating a further shift in the field towards reception studies and a focus on user-centred research. Equally, continuing to move beyond descriptive accounts of translation practice towards player-centred investigations of reception, usability, and user experience, studies by scholars such as Deckert and Hejduk (2024, see Section 2.3.3.1) examine how localisation choices affect player evaluations of gameplay and translated content, further reinforcing the growing importance of user-centred research and reception studies in videogames.

Finally, terminological debates (O'Hagan and Mangiron, 2013) reflect the field's maturation. The adequacy of localisation as regards videogame translation and transcreation is contested (p. 34), especially in new-media contexts where translation alone seems insufficient to capture asset replacement, UI refit, timing, and testing. They argue for situating game localisation within translation studies while acknowledging its growing association with accessibility, where accessibility encompasses linguistic legibility, playability, and UX (2013, p. 282), echoing user-centred translation approaches such as those proposed by Suojanen et al. Notably, Antonini's (2008) findings, that viewers often believe they grasp cultural references but fail to demonstrate understanding (p. 146), underscore persistent misinterpretation of symbolism, an issue acutely relevant to translated games where semiotic cues drive progression and worldbuilding.

In summary, the field has moved from workflow-centred, industry handbooks to theoretically and methodologically plural accounts that treat localisation as co-creative, glocalised, multimodal, and reception-dependent. The combined effect of historical platform constraints, ludic entanglement, and user-centred accessibility perspectives suggests that quality in game localisation is best conceived not as static equivalence but as context-calibrated experiential alignment, demonstrably tested with real players in the environments where games are played.

2.3.3.1 Experimental approaches

Experimental and quasi-experimental approaches in game localisation research remain rare, but recent studies illustrate their value in linking translation quality to user experience.

The earliest experimental study, Mangiron (2016b) gathered empirical data from players who played through a subtitled videogame sequence and gave feedback on their experiences. Concerned with how player perceive the subtitles and how those perceptions shaped player evaluation, several parameters were defined including subtitle presentation, justification, reading speed, one-liner versus two-liner, character identification and sound effects, with variables in the form of two styles of onomatopoeic SFX boxes. Post-hoc, players completed surveys alluding to their preferences and experiences with the subtitles, which

were taken in tandem with eye-tracking data collected during play to observe how different subtitles the affected viewing time and comprehension of both deaf and hearing players. The self-reported survey results were compared with the behavioural eye-tracking data to confirm or contest players' survey answers. Mangiron's study highlighted the importance of subtitle placement and presentation on impacting cognitive load given that the ludic nature of videogames requires a different approach to subtitling in film and TV, and that players voiced strong preferences around subtitle design, highlighting the importance of placement and style on player experience. Mangiron also notes the lack of existing standardisation or best practices around this emerging field.

Kudła (2021) employed a quasi-experimental survey design to explore Polish gamers' preferences and perceptions of localisation quality. While lacking the controlled conditions of a laboratory experiment, the study systematically compared user attitudes toward different localisation strategies, including full versus partial localisation. Results indicated a strong preference for full localisation, particularly dubbing, as a means of enhancing immersion, while highlighting dissatisfaction with inadequate cultural adaptation and translation errors. Although observational in nature, the comparative structure and reliance on empirical data position this study as quasi-experimental, offering actionable insights into user expectations and their implications for localisation practices.

More recently, Deckert and Hejduk (2024b) adopted a controlled experimental design to test whether subtitling accuracy influenced player satisfaction. Participants played the same game under two conditions: one with error-free Polish subtitles and another with deliberate typographic errors. Post-gameplay responses were measured using the GUESS-18 scale, which evaluates multiple dimensions of user experience. Findings revealed significant differences in usability and personal gratification scores, demonstrating that even minor linguistic deviations can negatively affect perceived playability and overall satisfaction. This controlled manipulation of subtitle quality within a consistent gameplay environment exemplifies a robust experimental framework.

Finally, in response to O'Hagan et al.'s (2015) call for more eye-tracking studies in game localisation research, Lan et al. (2025) conducted an eye-tracking study that examines how players process subtitled instructions in videogames. Their findings revealed that players extract textual cues selectively

and flexibly, guided by task relevance and multisensory input. Rather than reading subtitles linearly, players distinguished between word categories across modalities, using text as sporadic cues within a multimodal environment, supporting the emphasis on reception as a dynamic, context-sensitive process shaped by genre familiarity, mental modelling, and inter-individual variation. Such insights also reinforce the value of integrating eye-tracking into reception studies, particularly when triangulated with qualitative methods like interviews and think-aloud protocols.

2.3.3.2 Non-experimental approaches

Conceptual work frames localisation within digital translation theory. Cronin (2013) offers a theoretical discussion of translation in digital contexts, emphasising the interplay between technology, culture, and linguistic mediation, whilst Bernal-Merino (2016, 2018) provides conceptual and descriptive analyses of localisation as a globalised practice. Additionally, Mandiberg (2018) and Techawongstien (2024) contribute methodological proposals for studying participatory and socio-technical dimensions of game translation.

Industry-focused research addresses scalability and efficiency in localisation workflows. Thayer and Kolko's (2004) foundational process-oriented analysis of industry practices offers insights into production pipelines and organisational coordination in the importance of workflow efficacy whilst drawing attention to the challenges of videogame localisation in contrast to software localisation.

Arthur et al. (2010) conducted an applied empirical study on automated text generation for MMORPG localisation, demonstrating how rule-based and template-driven systems reduce turnaround times without compromising quality. Christou et al. (2011) document workflow optimisation in large-scale RPG localisation, analysing asset management, branching dialogue, and tool integration. They found improving workflow through better management of in-game assets (such as branching dialogue trees) reduced errors and expedited development processes, highlighting the benefits of task coordination to achieve best outcomes.

Surveys, questionnaires, and descriptive approaches are widely used in videogame localisation research and underpin the empirical orientation of the field. Reception studies increasingly rely on qualitative methods to capture

nuanced user experiences, but these approaches present specific challenges that merit brief consideration before moving on to the wider literature. While Saldanha and O'Brien (2013) advocate methodological triangulation to strengthen credibility through multiple data sources and perspectives, other scholars highlight potential pitfalls. For example, Gerson and Damaske (2020) stress that interview settings can influence participant comfort and disclosure, and Bogner and Landrock (2016) together with Mummolo and Peterson (2019) caution against social desirability and demand bias. These considerations underscore the need to critically examine the advantages and limitations of the methods employed, ensuring that the chosen approach accurately reflects player perceptions and expectations.

Following her own study, Mangiron (2018) highlights the "need for further research into subtitling in game localisation, including reception studies with users by means of interviews, questionnaires, and eye-tracking technology" (p. 291), further emphasising the need for greater scholarship in videogame localisation reception.

Adopting a quantitative survey-based methodology, Ellefsen and Bernal-Merino (2018) examine language preferences among Francophone gamers, demonstrating how linguistic and cultural expectations shape localisation strategies, and underscoring the need for localisation to be tailored to player preferences. Specifically, player feedback was taken from the Francophone regions of Belgium, France, Canada, Switzerland to determine localisation preferences. To the surprise of the authors, players from both Canada and France demonstrated a preference for playing games localised in English rather than French as many surveyed were not satisfied with the standard of French localisation, preferring instead to use English dubbing and subtitles. However, all players from every region preferred to play games using French if they were originally developed in French, suggesting that when games are developed in French, the standard of language and cultural inclusions is significantly better integrated and received by the Francophone audience. Poignantly, over half of those surveyed favoured language settings that complemented the context of the game world, such as use of Italian dubbing in games set in Italy, and in the same vein, a preference for localisation approaches that adopted foreignisation and retention of source-culture linguistic resources (places, names, cultural

references) with a vast majority of players being anti-censorship. Finally, most players agreed that localisation has an influence on usability, confirming sentiment shared by a number of localisation scholars and serving as an early indicator of sentiment likely to be seen in the results of this research project (Mangiron and O'Hagan, 2006; O'Hagan, 2007; Fernández Costales, 2012, 2014; Suojanen et al., 2014; Bernal-Merino, 2015, 2016; Mejías-Climent, 2021).

Similarly, through analysing officially localised Arabic games from 2005 to 2020 to determine the games' localisation degree, Al-Batineh and Alawneh (2022) employ structured questionnaires and descriptive statistics to investigate Arabic gamers' expectations and satisfaction with varying localisation levels to demonstrate demand for cultural adaptation and linguistic accuracy. This approach is reminiscent of Deckert and Hejduk's work (2024b), although lacking the experimental element; observing player-declared satisfaction with translations in-game of varying degrees of completeness. The questionnaires employed closed-ended questions to measure satisfaction levels with different localisation types (full localisation, partial localisation, and untranslated) and Likert-scale items, allowing players to self-declare preferences. No gameplay was observed, but players were largely in favour of partial localisation (localised UI, in-game text, cutscenes with subtitling). However, in terms of full localisation, a preference for dubbed audio lines to use Arabic local dialect (ALD) but to be accompanied by modern standard Arabic (MSA) subtitles, an interesting preference that would be regarded as intralingual and thus costly in practice. Beyond the player-derived feedback, they also identify a need for greater sub-categorisation within the existing "localisation levels" within localisation scholarship (Christou, McKearney, et al., 2011; Chandler and Deming, 2012; Bernal-Merino, 2016) to extend beyond the typical voiceover and subtitles. This study is particularly relevant to this thesis as it highlights a linguistic preference declared by player feedback that could be used to improve sentiment and reception towards games localised into Arabic, such as the preference for ALD dubbing with MSA subtitles.

Additionally, Mejías-Climent (2021) offers a descriptive analysis of usability and reception, arguing that well-executed localisation improves player comprehension of game mechanics, narrative flow, and overall immersion. Whilst findings show that players preferred foreignising approaches to

localisation, when it came to dubbing, details such as perceived natural language dialogue and lip-synchronisation were valued and had a positive influence on player reception; likewise, poorly executed dialogue and lip-synching had a negative impact. The impact of poorly executed dubbing is seen to lead to disengagement and dissatisfaction, reactions this research aims to document in relation to player experience. Such results strongly implying there is an inseparable link between usability and player reception reinforcing the notion already voiced by other scholars that player experience must be a guiding influence in localisation decisions to optimise player experience and minimise negative ludic repercussions during play (Schules, 2012; Bernal-Merino, 2015; Suojanen et al., 2014; Toh, 2017; Jiménez-Crespo, 2015). How and to what extent resources in game localisation (such as dubbing) influence and shape player experience and reception are cornerstones of this study.

Koscelníková (2021) provides insight into localisation affected by historical contexts, highlighting the developer preference for choosing to use Czech language for both the Czech and Slovakia regions despite linguistic and cultural distinctions between the two. Currently, much localisation discourse is in the context of regions and locales with both wider linguistic and cultural proximity, but in this paper, the countries examined are neighbouring, have mutually intelligible languages and were formerly one country (Czechoslovakia). Despite the shared historical context and mutually intelligible languages, legislation intended to ensure audiovisual media intended for the consumption of children (including videogames) is available in Slovak (p. 1), such practice is not typical as the videogame industry prefers to localise into Czech, which in itself is seen to be rare (p. 2). Despite not documenting player expectations through surveys or direct feedback from users, the sentiment is inferred through the consistent publication of games with Czech localisation despite the legislation, implying a greater demand for games localised with a strong cultural identity; the Czech localisations provide such an identity that is sought by the Slovakian player base that is not readily available in Slovak, despite legislative efforts. Briefly, this investigation suggests that cultural-linguistic proximity does not eliminate localisation challenges, as players still expect tailored experiences aligned with their identity.

Continuing the trend with localisation dissatisfaction, Khoshsaligheh and

Ameri (2020) provide further survey-derived insights into regional preferences, aiming to “profile Iranian video gamers and examine their gaming habits, opinions, preferences and experiences”. Much like the study conducted in this thesis, the authors consider the “3 Rs” (see Section 2.2.1), stating the third R, “repercussion”, as the concern of their research as it concerns the opinions and attitudes of players. The questionnaire included closed-ended and Likert-scale items to capture demographic profiles, gaming habits, satisfaction with Persian localisations, and preferences for localisation strategies. Surveyed players voiced considerable dissatisfaction with games localised into Persian, preferring instead to play games in the original language (primarily English) owing to perceived poor localisation, despite variable levels of English proficiency (p. 12).

To address the variable English proficiency issue, players watching Persian subtitled recorded footage of gameplay, and players performing their own ad-hoc translation with tools such as Google Translate, is cited as a potential aid for helping players navigate the game. Despite the preference for games in their original language seemingly driven by poor localisation, the authors highlight player-stated desire for high-quality, professionally localised games in Persian (p. 17). Once again, the theme of involving target players in the localisation process is brought to the fore, as the desire for adequate localisation that ensures smooth play, linguistic finesse and culturally-sensitive output is present in the findings, echoing the sentiments of the vast majority of localisation scholars cited thus far, such as Bernal-Merino, O’Hagan and Mangiron.

The earliest instance of purely netnographic videogame localisation research is Mänger’s (2017) Bachelor’s thesis. They adopt a quasi-experimental approach and analyse the face-camera reactions and commentary of players who uploaded “Let’s play” videos of themselves playing the game *Life is Strange* (Dontnod, 2015) to the video platform Youtube. The recorded live response analysis Mänder employs is reminiscent of player experience as defined by Walker (2021) but does not make mention of facial expression analysis (FEA), a technique he advocates in his research. While lacking detail, it is the only strictly netnographic study in videogame reception currently and provides useful methodological insight on netnographic video data usage.

Brückner et al. (2018) use grounded theory and a netnographic approach to compare how Japanese and German players evaluate JRPGs, showing that

cultural background shapes game perception. By analysing user-generated reviews in English, German, and Japanese, they identify culturally significant topics and lexical patterns suggesting review culture and language influence the nature of reviews written but ultimately acknowledge the study's limited scope and call for larger scale research. Their approach is echoed by Steam's recently implemented language-specific review system. In this system, players are shown reviews in their preferred language first (Chalk, 2025), a change made in light of knowledge a game may receive significantly different average ratings depending on the language (and by extension, culture) of the reviewer and reader, reinforcing Brückner et al.'s (2018) findings that player evaluation reflects how cultural-linguistic framing affects game ratings. Netnographic reception studies into videogames are currently sparse.

Already visible in the findings just discussed, cultural adaptation is a central theme in videogame localisation scholarship. Di Marco (2007) and Ng (2010) undertake qualitative case studies to explore cultural dissonance and organisational strategies in Japanese and Hong Kong markets, evidencing the need for context-sensitive approaches beyond literal translation. Fernández-Costales (Fernández Costales, 2012, 2016), and Mangiron (2004; 2015; 2016a; 2016b), alongside Mangiron and O'Hagan (2013a; 2013b), provide descriptive and comparative analyses of translation strategies, subtitling practices, and player reception, contributing to a taxonomy of localisation techniques and highlighting the impact of readability and timing on user engagement. O'Hagan (2005, 2009) extends this discussion to globalisation and cultural flows, situating localisation within broader transnational dynamics. Equally, fan-led and community sourced localisation practices have attracted increasing scholarly attention, as touched on briefly in Section 2.2.1. Muñoz-Sánchez (2009b) offers a case study of community-driven translation hacking, while Al-Batineh and Alawneh (2022) and Al-Batineh (2024) trace the historical evolution of participatory localisation through ethnographic and survey-based approaches. Afzali and Zahiri (2022) apply netnography to Iranian gaming communities, revealing socio-cultural expectations underpinning community translation. Techawongstien (2024) advances this area by proposing ethnographic methodologies for studying participatory ecosystems, while Mandiberg (2017, 2021) situates fan practices within broader debates on digital labour and cultural

production. Similarly, O'Hagan (2018) draws attention to fan "delocalisation" practices, driven by fan communities to oppose censorship practices. O'Hagan rallies in favour of transparency between publishers and consumers regarding regional changes, encouraging industry cooperation with fan communities in localisation practice to ensure greater trust, and thus better reception, between both parties.

Addressing the perspective of challenges for localisers derived from community-generated language, Strong (2018) uses linguistic analysis, textual comparison, and survey data from French-speaking MMORPG players to examine how gamer-generated language affects localisation considerations, highlighting the need to balance expectations with culturally-derived contextually-appropriate terminology. Employing linguistic analysis, En-Fr textual comparison and player survey, Strong identified inconsistencies in between the English and French versions of *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard, 2004), built a corpus of terminology and gathered data on player opinions and expectations of localisation. Terms based on the English source included pragmatic terminology ("away from keyboard", AFK), combat acronyms ("area of effect", AOE), and creative wordplay ("gnombliteration") often found in achievement titles. Ingrained terminology such acronyms and abbreviations (such as AOE, Debuff) largely remains in English, whilst approaches such as partial adaptation and contextual translation are used to render French terms that best reflect the flavour or form of the source English. Most importantly to this thesis is the inclusion of player feedback; Strong asserts that MMOs rely on player feedback to iteratively improve their game (Strong, 2018, p. 281) and, echoing sentiments of scholars such as Suojanen et al. (2015) and Ellefsen and Bernal-Merino (2021), if linguistic development followed changes akin to those of in-game character class balancing or UI adjustments, such player-derived terminology could (possibly should?) be included in-game to the betterment of player experience, claiming that "ignoring the linguistic innovation that takes place during gamer exchanges limits the localised text" (Strong, 2018, p. 281).

Eichner (2014) described gameplay "as a communicative act, embedded in the sociocultural scope of everyday life", emphasising influential sociocultural factors highlighted by Hall, whilst Mangiron (2015) describes a need to strike the right balance in videogame translation to ensure adequate localisation both in

terms of familiarity and functionality for the target user group, listing internationalisation strategies from Japanese games companies that ensure players have a confusion-free gaming experience. Edwards (2011) discusses "culturisation", stating that culture and content in videogames are intrinsically linked, since it is "difficult for a game designer in one locale to be aware of and account for the issues that could cause problems in another locale", reinforcing the notion that culture and societal norms guide design choices that may not necessarily be interpreted as intended by an user group of a different societal and geopolitical background than the designer.

2.3.3.3 Chinese-English videogame localisation

Despite the global rise of Chinese-developed games, scholarly attention to Zh-En videogame localisation remains limited. Whilst scholars such as Toftedahl et al. (2016) and Engström et al. (2020) have begun exploring game development in Chinese contexts in relation to Scandinavia, they have only recently begun to examine localisation. Toftedahl et el. (2025) compare development and localisation practice between China and Sweden, observing how localisation is embedded within broader production processes and that cultural differences, player expectations, and market knowledge shape how games are adapted for international audiences. However, it does not contribute to the specific sphere of Zh-En localisation-centred research.

Presently, only a handful of studies address the Zh-En language pairing specifically, underscoring a pressing need for more research, particularly from user-oriented and reception-focused perspectives. Mentioned briefly already, Xiaochun Zhang has been a prominent name in videogame localisation research, alongside Carme Mangiron, Minako O'Hagan, and Miguel Bernal-Merino. However, in terms of Zh-En videogame localisation specifically, Zhang is currently the most prominent name in this underexplored field.

Although her more recent work demonstrates a significant broadening of scope beyond the China-specific lens that characterised earlier works, Xiaochun Zhang has been prolific in the study of AVT in the context of China and Chinese media translation and localisation. Her new chapter in the Routledge Handbook of the Translation Industry (Walker and Lambert, 2025) positions game localisation within a globalised, US$184-billion industry and addresses

workflows, automation, QA systems, and labour practices that apply internationally rather than regionally.

Looking back at her earliest research, she examined the censorship and localisation practices of *World of Warcraft* (2004) in China (2008), determining the nature of localisation for Chinese audiences to be guided by the political and cultural climate rather than wholly linguistic concerns such as fidelity (p. 47). Censorship was found in interactive features such as global chat with filtered words and topics, and quest dialogues being changed, as well as taboo visuals such as skeletons or religious symbols being redesigned or removed entirely (p. 50), underscoring localisation as a process requiring cultural sensitivity that is subject to influence beyond the agency of the translator themselves.

Zhang (2009) later draws attention to China's shift from consumer to producer, branching out into the global videogame market, localising online videogames for non-Chinese consumption (p. 41). The number of game studios and partnerships with Western developers and publishers illustrates a growing push into the global market citing initiatives and economic incentives encouraging Chinese companies to expand globally (p. 43), with foreign English speakers employed to improve local staff English levels to foster an international culture in Chinese game developer studios (p. 43). Localisation practices are seen to be becoming a more proactive practice rather than the reactive phase of development to comply with censorship or other local compliance rules they were initially, although neutralisation of Chinese source terminology is observed to cater to the target market (p. 45).

Zhang then introduced the potential of videogames as education vehicles in China with an emphasis on localisation design (2010b). Historically, videogames in China have had a negative reputation as "spiritual opium", but with the gradual shift in attitude towards videogames in China, educators have been more eager to explore the potential for videogames as educational tools (p. 46). The study highlights that despite shifting attitudes towards games, few parents would be willing to allow their children to study with such tools, and few children would regard it enjoyable long-term, illustrating the challenges of long-ingrained cultural disdain for the videogame medium and the difficulties of maintaining prolonged engagement for young audiences (p. 49).

Later that same year, Zhang discusses the evolution and challenges of

localising gaming terminology in China (2010a). Due to the fast-paced nature of internet slang and in-game terminology, localisation must keep up with new words “made up on the spot” (p. 42). The nature of such terms, including homophones (粉丝 *fensi* Fans/Vermicelli), acronyms (NMD, BT) and references to current events (打酱油 *dajiangyou,* I don’t care/Buy soy sauce), provide challenges to translators that require cultural awareness, stating that players are keenly aware of fashionable words and slang and will be attuned to its usage (p. 45), again highlighting the importance of player reception to language use (and its timeliness) in localisation strategies.

She also highlights the value of in-game currencies and commodities within digital games and how this new terminology presents real-world localisation challenges (2011). For instance, items in some videogames, especially online games, have real world value linked to unique player identities (such as usernames or ID numbers) requires translators to adapt in-game currencies and commodities to cultural expectations, with considerations such as “the naming of the currencies” being thematically appropriate to the type of world setting (such as fantasy or reality) (p. 39). Zhang asserts the culturally-bound nature of assets and their link to player preferences, citing the particularly powerful influence of numeric values on Chinese players and the impact they can have on player-game interactions, or the use of certain animals as pets which may be regarded inappropriate according to local norms (p. 39).

Having touched on censorship in videogame localisation practice in earlier articles, Zhang further explores how Chinese censorship practices impact on localisation approaches (2012). Driven by legal mandates, cultural norms, and political sensitivities, Chinese censorship dictates the approaches and strategies adopted by translators largely overseen by the General Administration of Press and Publication (GAPP) and the Ministry of Culture (MOC) bodies (p. 340). Zhang illuminates issues of process transparency, and the lack thereof, in how best to manage and apply necessary censorship in online videogames with many existing guidelines needing an update to account for the specificities of the videogame medium (p. 342). Additionally, topics deemed politically sensitive such as references to Taiwan or Tibet as well as anything blacklisted under Item 7 of Article 25 of the Regulations on Publication Administration, forbidding the

release of content “inciting pornography, gambling, violence or instigating a crime” (p. 344), as well as visual or narrative content in contention with local sensibilities such as skeletons or mentions of Mao Zedong (p. 346-347). Vague guidelines and lack of transparency lead developers to self-censor to avoid encountering delays in publication and release, again emphasising the need for keen cultural awareness of target locales in order to avoid potential pitfalls caused by the absence of a comprehensive, clear submission framework.

Continuing her extensive examination of Chinese AVT, Zhang (2013) provides an introduction to the grassroots practice of fan-made subtitling (fan-subbing) of shows and film in China. Whilst a shift away from videogames, the article highlights non-processional fan-driven localisation practice driven by censorship laws, import restrictions and demand for global media within China (p. 30). Zhang states that the majority of fan-subbers are typically young, well-educated individuals from developed regions of China and overseas who volunteer to “promote cultural communication” and to improve their own language skills (p. 32). The act of fan-subbing is regarded as a target-audience-orientated endeavour, sometimes featuring glosses and remarks intended to provide additional context for viewers. Multiple versions of a fan-subbed program or film can exist (normal version and 吐槽 *tu cao* version), employing different translation approaches and strategies allowing viewers to engage with the fan-subber’s remarks on challenges or idiosyncrasies of the dialogue (such as handling the topic of sex) that lead to their translation approaches (p. 33). As well as being a user-centred process, Zhang remarks that other scholars such as Díaz Cintas and Muñoz Sánchez have noticed some conventions initially found in fansubbing have become commercial practice (p. 36). The commercial adoption of audience-orientated practices found in fan-subbing in tandem with the creative approaches to addressing taboo issues often found in 吐槽 *tu cao* versions of fan-subbed shows and films further reinforces the value of placing audiences at the centre of localisation strategies, as advocated for by so many scholars cited thus far.

In collaboration with Dingkun Wang, Zhang continued exploring censorship with an examination of how subtitling can influence and subvert political messages (2016), at which time she began to pivot from localisation towards

accessibility more broadly, proposing audio-description for videogame accessibility (Mangiron and Zhang, 2016) which would become a prominent topic as she further proposed new roles in industry to accommodate greater accessibility needs (Zhang, 2019) and called for the “gamification” of audio-description training (Zhang, 2021). More recently, she explored audio description in videogames with Mangiron (Zhang and Mangiron, 2025). Shifting away from more general localisation reception to the importance of a more specific, single-semiotic resource, accessibility has recently become an emerging area in videogame scholarship. Zhang and Mangiron (2025) consider the player experience with a focus on the hard-of-hearing players reliant on audio subtitling and descriptions. Examining the audio-descriptions featured in *Before I Forget* (2020), the English and Spanish scripts are compared, wherein the translation from English to Spanish is determined to be quicker and cheaper than a full re-write of the script for the Spanish audience, despite such re-writes offering greater depth for the intended audience. Much as localisation has been regarded as an industry after-thought, Zhang and Mangiron highlight the similar state of accessibility features, relegated to a post-production afterthought that deserves consideration and implementation during development.

Returning to the topic of videogame localisation with Song, Zhang (2025) critiques the use of pivot translation in Japanese game localisation, arguing that strategies aimed at cultural neutrality embodied in the mukokuseki “culturally odourless” approach (Iwabuchi, 2002, p. 24) can erase original identities and embed ideological biases. Through the prioritisation of the English version of *Dark Souls 3* (FromSoft, 2016), Song and Zhang posit the English version is made to look to be the original version rather than a localisation of the Japanese version. They suggest this approach reflects a deliberate move toward “culturally odourless” products for global markets at the expense of source linguistic resources, but players of the Chinese version of the game felt the localisation quality, actually derived from the Japanese, was rendered from the English version, leading to displeasure levelled at the localisers (Song and Zhang, pp. 163-167).

Conversely, players who recognised the Chinese to be derived from the Japanese source had greater appreciation of the enhanced proximity to the source language (Song and Zhang, p. 682), highlighting the importance of player

perceptions and expectations in reception. Additionally, for players with a level of English comprehension playing other language versions, discrepancies between the English dubbing track and their preferred non-English subtitles can upset multimodal coherence, suggesting in such cases, use of the English audio and subtitles despite loss of linguistic finesse for the player may be a worthwhile trade-off that improves play. Overall, Zhang and Song argue that such “born-translated” practices driven by globalisation raises concerns about cultural homogenisation and promotes imbedded Western-centric norms and values in game localisation.

Despite the breadth of these contributions, several gaps remain. Although earlier studies touch on technological mediation primarily through censorship or fan-subbing contexts, Zhang now provides a far more systemic examination of the technological infrastructures driving contemporary localisation, including AI-driven workflows, cloud-based platforms, and automated QA systems. Although Zhang has not yet conducted any empirical user-experience studies as a solo investigator, she has strengthened her position on the centrality of player reception, immersion, and experiential quality in her theoretical framing of game localisation.

She posits that the role of localisation is to support intended immersion through the preservation of semiotic resources that “convey information about a game’s environment, characters, and objects” to promote such experiences (Zhang, 2025, p. 143). Importantly, Zhang clearly conceptualises QA as core to localisation quality, emphasising iterative linguistic testing, functional gameplay QA, multimodal consistency checks, and the role of player feedback in ensuring immersive experiences, approaching quality as an industrial, user-centred process (p. 150).

At time of writing, only one study exists that employs an experimental approach, authored by Dodi Chen (2025). Chen triangulates data, taking her practice as method to provide an autoethnographic account in which she is both the researcher and the source of data, as well as bolstering her research with netnographic data taken from another livestreamer (Mizhisheng), reinforced by two semi-structured interviews and a comparative analysis of official videogame localisations. Through her engagement with real-time localisation practice as a

livestream content creator, and her audience interaction both through spoken dialogue and integrated on-screen commentary (弹幕 *danmu*, bullet subtitles, addressed in detail by Lu et al., 2025), Chen takes a novel approach to localisation in the digital online space, presenting localisation as a dynamic process that encompasses immediate iterative re-evaluation through audience feedback and also accounts for videogame multimodality. Additionally, the input from Mizhisheng's streams and interview, in tandem with a localisation manager interview, provide perspectives from peers and industry professionals that enhance and contrast with Chen's own autoethnographic findings.

In positioning localisation as dynamic and fast-paced in such a space, Chen challenges existing approaches in localisation scholarship in which emphasis is placed on long iterative cycles and pre-planned approaches dictated by models such as market-driven personas, instead receiving instant feedback from viewers in a livestream context that allows for fast-paced, two-way localisation mediation that benefits both the localiser's practice and also the audience reception. The importance of such feedback and performativity is enhanced by the limitations of livestreaming platforms; major platforms such as Twitch and Bilibili serve global audiences and have their own rules and regulations regarding stream content, to which Chen highlights the need to self-censor and work to the limitations these platforms set, in essence regarding the platforms as a publisher with their own authorities and permissions that must be adhered to within the creative live localisation process. By foregrounding the immediacy, interactivity, and performativity of live localisation, Chen's experimental study not only reframes localisation as a dynamic, co-creative act but also sets the stage for a broader discussion of experimental approaches that seek to capture localisation in practice across diverse media and contexts. Unfortunately, this study, at time of writing, is the only experimental approach to Zh-En videogame localisation available and signals the urgent need for greater experimental and quasi-experimental approaches in this field.

Shifting the focus to empirical research, there is significantly more empirical research in localisation as a whole, and this is reflected in the Zh-En localisation area, too. Foundational contributions from Ying-Chia Lin (2006, 2011) approach localisation primarily from an industry perspective. While both focus on English to Chinese localisation. Lin (2006, 2011) provides one of the few studies on

Taiwanese localisation practices, using the concept of “glocalization” to frame her analysis. Her mixed-method approach, which includes interviews with EA staff, document analysis and observation of player engagement such as modding, offers a nuanced view of how localisation extended beyond translation to include visual design, marketing and community participatory practices. Yet, Lin’s focus on EA titles constrains her findings to genres with relatively low narrative complexity, and her discussion of player agency does not fully theorise the power dynamics between global publishers and local communities. Both studies assume localisation as a producer-driven process, and even though Lin (2011, p. 118) discusses modding practice in terms of fans adding content to the game, it is framed as augmenting existing official translation rather than a fan re-translation or re-localisation. This approach leaving gaps in understanding fan-driven localisation and player reception, and the owing to the infancy of AI tools at the time of the article, there is no accounting for the potential role of currently emerging technologies such as AI-assisted workflows. These limitations demonstrate the space available to expand on research that examines not only Zh-En localisation, but also English-Chinese localisation flows, expanding out to transmedia adaptation and interactive narrative design within global gaming cultures.

More recently, Dakai Wei and Maude Bonenfant (2024) investigated the phenomenon of fan translation in China through a qualitative case study of Deeptrans, a community dedicated to translating foreign games for Chinese players. The study situates fan translation within the historical context of China’s 2005 console ban and the withdrawal of foreign companies from official localisation, which created space for grassroots initiatives. Using archival analysis of documents produced during Deeptrans’s translation of the game *X4: Foundations* (Egosoft, 2018), the authors examine organisational dynamics, collaborative practices and technological tools employed by the group. Their findings reveal that Deeptrans operates as a community of practice, characterised by informal hierarchies, distributed leadership and knowledge-sharing through regular interaction, relying on CAT tools and collaborative discussions to overcome challenges, transforming individual expertise into a shared repertoire. They corroborate user-driven localisation theory by confirming participatory agency and collaborative knowledge-sharing, while extending it

through evidence of structured organisation and semi-professional workflows. It contrasts with modding-focused participatory practices by positioning fan translation as a substitute for official localisation, revealing its counter-hegemonic role in widening access, and expanding the discourse beyond industry-led localisation to include grassroots agency and community-driven workflows.

Finally, the most recent contribution to Zh-En videogame localisation is Dariush Robertson's monograph (2025) which investigates the approaches taken to translation and localisation of culture-specific items (or CSIs) in the localisation of a Chinese martial-arts fantasy (*wuxia*) role-playing game into English, addressing both linguistic strategies and socio-cultural reasoning. Using a controlled case study design, he worked with professional localisation teams to translate a simulated representative text, enabling full access to translation materials and localiser decision-making processes. The analysis combines Toury's theory of norms (1980, 2012) to identify patterns in translation behaviour with Bourdieu's concept of habitus (1977) to explain why translators adopt certain approaches.

Robertson categorises strategies into normative cultural approaches (source-culture-adequate versus target-culture-acceptable) shaped by four types of socio-cultural reasoning: source culture centric, target culture centric, industry centric and game centric. He further explores how transmediality and interactivity influence translation choices by analysing how translation decisions for CSIs are influenced by the game's multimodal nature and player interaction, arguing that CSIs are not isolated linguistic units but embedded within text, visuals, audio and gameplay mechanics, meaning translators must consider how these modes work together to maintain narrative coherence and immersion. Robertson's findings highlighted that translators tended to prefer using established norms and approaches when handling CSIs, their choices being systematic and based on practical experience. This also revealed tension between fidelity to source culture and accessibility for target audiences, as usability and close translation did not always align and lead to friction. However, it also contributes to advancements in understanding how and to what extent socio-cultural factors guide professional practice in Zh-En game localisation.

Conversely, this is a practice-oriented study designed to inform industry and

localisation professionals, offering actionable insights into decision-making processes and strategy selection. While user experience and playability are considered conceptually through game-centric reasoning, these factors are not empirically tested, leaving reception studies outside the scope of the research. However, given how sparse the current literature on Zh-En videogame localisation is at present time, Robertson's contribution is significant and benefits not only localisation practitioners, but may inform future user-orientated research along the same vein.

The literature on Zh-En videogame localisation is fragmented and underdeveloped. A theme is evident from the works of Lin, Zhang, Wei and Bonenfant, and Robertson, namely on producer-driven processes and regulatory frameworks. However, there is limited attention to multimodality and interactivity, despite the complex semiotic layers of videogames. Moreover, there is a near total absence of empirical reception research, leaving unanswered how players interpret, negotiate, and respond to localised content in practice. Most studies emphasise production concerns (censorship, terminology, workflows) while neglecting how players decode and respond to localised content. The multimodal nature of games, combined with cultural symbolism and genre hybridity, demands reception studies that account for schema adaptation, player agency, and in-actu engagement.

Without such research, localisation risks misalignment with user expectations, reducing immersion and accessibility in what is becoming an increasingly globalised, internationalised landscape. It is in light of this gap that this study aims to advance understanding from the user perspective, by foregrounding player interpretation as a culturally situated, dynamic process. Drawing on reception theory, schema theory, and UCT, it aims to explore how players decode characterisation, UI logic, and genre conventions in localised ZhRPGs. By integrating netnographic data and playtesting insights, it contributes a novel framework for understanding localisation reception in transnational videogame contexts which prioritises the user and reflects the complexity of interactive media.

2.4 Rationale for this study

This literature review has touched on the absence of meaningful genre-based examinations of Chinese-developed videogames, whilst also proving that localisation studies are a growing pool. However, the reception of localised products, especially videogames, and even more so Chinese-developed videogames, are few in number and include only one experimental contribution. Thus, this study responds to a clear knowledge gap in current scholarship; existing work foregrounds production, censorship, or workflows, but player reception remains under-theorised and virtually unstudied.

The existing literature clearly echoes sentiments of localisation as a process with users at the heart, yet so few studies have placed users at the core of the study to explore how they interpret videogame content, especially when that content is delivered through localised translation processes. The size of the Zh-En videogame research pool is reflective of a wider lack of Zh-En translation research that is not touched on here but is a recurrent theme that highlights the need for further translation research in this language pairing. Despite the academic calls for more research, reception studies are still scant, yet the importance of end-user reception has never been more important for an industry that continues to grow and offers consumers ever greater resources for engaging with translated content, be it through MT, via AI subtitling, grassroots fan-translation, or user-generated content.

While reception theory, schema theory, and UCT have been variously applied to literature and AVT, their integration into videogame localisation, particularly in the context of ZhRPGs, remains underexplored. Existing studies of games localised into English have tended to focus on Japanese games as they have historically been a dominant presence in the global videogame industry. This market climate has resulted in the unique cultural and semiotic localisation challenges posed by Chinese-developed games being largely overlooked, clearly demonstrated by the limited examples discussed. Consequently, multimodal cohesion, schema adaptation, and the implied player model remain under-theorised not only in Zh-En videogame localisation, but in localisation research more generally.

Moreover, whilst experimental approaches are countable on one hand, the

few empirical studies that exist in game localisation rarely account for multimodal cohesion, schema adaptation, or the implied player model as operationalised through actual gameplay. This study addresses these gaps by integrating reception theory, schema theory, and UCT into videogame localisation research. Through empirical playtesting and netnographic analysis, it proposes a model that captures how and to what extent culturally embedded schemata shape player interpretation of multimodal resources, affect engagement and influence perceived localisation quality. This contribution responds to broader calls for experimental approaches and reception studies in AVT, offering insights that extend beyond Zh-En localisation to inform global practice and advance reception-based localisation research.

Chapter 3 Theoretical framework

3.1 Principles of multimodality in videogames

This chapter presents the theoretical framework supporting the study. It begins in Section 3.1 with a cursory introduction to the kineikonic mode framework and its adaptation for this study, followed by Section 3.2 with an overview of User-Centred Translation (UCT, Suojanen et al., 2014), establishing the usability- and reception-oriented principles that guide the analysis of localised game content. Section 3.3 introduces the implied player model and explains how it is adapted and applied within this research. Section 3.4 then discusses motivation and player-experience theories, including MUsE and flow, to contextualise how players engage with multimodal game features. These provide the conceptual grounding for the methodological and analytical chapters that follow. Integral to these frameworks are cultural schemata and schema alignment (Section 2.2), which shape how players interpret games and the extent to which their interpretation corresponds to meanings derived in localisation by localisers.

3.1.1 The principles of multimodality in the audio-visual context

This study adopts a multimodal perspective grounded primarily in social semiotic multimodality as developed by Kress (2010) and Kress and Van Leeuwen (2002, 2010). Their work builds on Halliday's systemic functional linguistics (1978) by adopting its view of meaning as a system of socially motivated choices organised around "metafunctions", but extends it by applying these principles to all semiotic modes, not language alone. Briefly, metafunctions fit three categories: (1) ideational, (2) interpersonal, and (3) textual, which are fundamental functions of language that reflect how we use language to represent experience, enact social relationships, and organise text.

Kress and van Leeuwen argue that images, colour, layout, sound, and gesture possess their own structured systems and meaning potentials, which realise representational, interactive, and compositional meanings in mode-specific ways. Meaning, therefore, is distributed across and emerges from the interaction of multiple semiotic resources rather than being fully encoded in

linguistic form and does not arise solely from individual modes or resources, but also from how they interact together.

In this framework, a “mode” is a socially and culturally organised semiotic system with historically stabilised conventions and affordances, which enable particular kinds of meaning-making; a “resource” refers to the material realisation of meaning within a mode (such as typography, colour, camera movement). Following this approach, modes are thus composed of semiotic resources, and resources may be analysed at further levels of granularity depending on the analytical aim. Throughout the chapter, “resource” is used consistently to refer to the smallest functionally meaningful unit, whereas “mode” refers to the broader semiotic system (such as visual, aural, haptic).

Kress and Van Leeuwen offer a framework for understanding how meaning emerges through the interaction of multiple semiotic modes and their resources In their account, “discourse” (2001, p. 4) refers to socially constructed knowledge of aspects of reality, which is multimodally realised across sound, image, movement, layout, and other semiotic resources”. They position communication as multimodal by nature, explaining how various signals borne of sound, sight, movement and space, work together to create coherent messages. One key concept is that of “grammar”, which allows for systematic analysis of resources, describing rule-governed patterns by which a mode can create meaning. It is not prescriptive, but rather offers typicalities that help to explain how configurations, combinations and design across modes create meaning. Modal affordances, another key concept, explain what a mode is adept at, such as colour affording mood and emphasis.

They conceptualise “modes” as “semiotic resources which allow the simultaneous realisation of discourses and types of (inter)action” (2001, p. 21), including language, colour, gesture and music. These resources operate within the material forms that realise them (“media” or “medium”). Modality is established as a practical, socially situated phenomenon from which meaning emerges from combinations of modes, and that a central principle of analysing meaning-making artefacts is the considering the ways in which particular modes are combined.

According to Kress and Van Leeuwen then, meaning is socially shaped, strategically designed, and multimodally realised. Videogames are AV artefacts

and comprise multiple modes and various resources that players can operate and engage with. Quoting O'Hagan,

> Video games comprise interactive elements in text and graphics, multimodal user input mechanisms, and in some cases also include non-interactive audiovisual elements in the form of pre-rendered movies. (2007, p. 2)

Additionally, with the inclusion of voiced audio dialogue in more recent years, subtitling has become an additional consideration when discussing the channels that comprise a videogame (Mangiron and O'Hagan, 2006). O'Hagan further clarifies "video games combine on a technical platform semiotic systems which are embodied visually (text and graphics) and aurally (dialogues, songs and other environmental sounds), sometimes augmented with force-feedback sensations" (O'Hagan, 2009, p. 2013), (force-feedback also known as "haptic feedback" (O'Hagan and Mangiron, 2013, p. 55).

Zabalbeascoa categorises translated AV products into four succinct categories: (1) audio-verbal (words uttered), (2) audio-nonverbal (all other sounds), (3) visual-verbal (writing), (4) visual-non-verbal (all other visual signs), highlighting the importance of each mode as complementary and equal in importance in meaning-making (2008, pp. 21-37). Although Zabalbeascoa does not work within multimodal theory and refers to "codes" rather than "modes", his categorisation of audio/visual and verbal/non-verbal codes remains useful for identifying the types of semiotic material that appear in AV products. In this study, his terminology is adopted solely as a descriptive taxonomy, providing concise labels for audiovisual resources without implying a multimodal theoretical foundation.

So, according to Zabalbeascoa, O'Hagan, and Mangiron, it can be agreed that as AV products, videogames comprise several complementary semiotic modes that combine to create an overall experience. Additionally, O'Hagan (2007, p. 3) notes videogames are ludic artefacts designed for play and depending on the videogame genre, there may also be features that are present in some genres that are not in others, such as the absence of full-motion video (FMV) sequences or spoken dialogue. Additionally, unlike O'Hagan and Mangiron, Zabalbeascoa writes in terms of film, thus his four categories do not

account for a physical interaction with the medium through physical means, such as haptic feedback received through the control pad. O'Hagan recognises that haptic feedback is a semiotic channel but acknowledges that it is only present "sometimes". Of the games used in this study, only *H:SR* (2023) supports haptic feedback.

3.1.2 Introducing the kineikonic mode

While to Zabalbeascoa, O'Hagan, and Mangiron establish what modes and resources are present in games, Burn's (2013) kineikonic model provides a framework for understanding how these modes are orchestrated in time and space. Although Burn developed the kineikonic model primarily for the analysis of film and animation, its conceptualisation of "orchestrating" and "contributory" modes can be extended to videogames due to the shared temporal and spatial logic of multimodal composition.

To aid in the presentation and clarification of the modes and resources present in videogames and how they work together (orchestration), the study borrows from Burn's "kineikonic mode" (2013, p. 2). Burn and Parker proposed "the kineikonic mode", a portmanteau of the Greek words for "to move" (kine) and "image" (eikon) (Parker and Burn, 2003), aiming to provide a means of providing multimodal analysis to film. In borrowing from this model, the research can concisely articulate the primary orchestrating modes and contributory modes that comprise a functioning videogame and examine to varying degrees of granularity the role and influence of those modes.

The kineikonic model aims to illustrate the primary modes present in moving images and identify the contributory factors that feed into them. Initially, the model was intended for use in filmic studies, deriving from film analysis as an extension or evolution of theatre (2013, p. 2). Burn describes theatre as a multimodal art form that comprises semiotic systems that integrates spoken word, dramatised action, gesture and facial expression, lighting, symbolic objects, and representations of architecture (2013, p. 1). Burn divides these systems into two categories of "framing device": the spacial (spatial), and the temporal. Within the theatre these spacial articles are the stage, and the temporal are the breaks and pauses, scenes and acts, which serve to alert the

audience to shifts in time, location, theme, and narrative (2013, p. 1). This study regards the spacial as a screen or a monitor (or any viewing device including a smart phone), on which the player can observe, much like an audience watching theatre, whilst the temporal is reflected in periods of play, gameplay chapters, or changing scenes as the player explores (such as the name of an area changes on an in-game map).

Within the combined framing devices, further resources act in complementary fashion to form the greater whole as Burn states, “the turn-taking of dramatic dialogue; the shifts of time and place indicated in stage directions; the framing of modes of address” contribute to the overall framing structure. Building on top of this basis in theatre, Burn identifies his two primary categories of filmic mode: the primary “orchestrating modes” (the overarching framing systems in space and time), and the complementary “contributory modes” (Movement, Lighting, Costume, Objects, Sets) (2013, p. 2). The primary contributory modes are defined as “Embodied”, “Auditory” and “Visual”. These modes are loosely aligned to the human senses of sight, sound and touch. “Auditory” is concerned with resources that the player can hear, “Visual” alludes to resources that can be seen, and “Embodied” refers to the actions, motions or costume choices of a character avatar, for example.

In Fig. 3.1, Burn provides an example of the kineikonic model featuring the overarching orchestrating modes (2013, p. 8), the complementary contributory modes, and the smaller, granular channels within those contributory modes, the “meta-modes”. Meta-modes are essentially multimodal resources. Through the dissection of the modes in this way, it is possible to analyse and observe on increasingly micro levels a mode and its resources, and how those components not only interplay to create a whole, but how an audience receives and perceives them both as a unique contributory resource and a part of larger whole.

Burn has historically employed the kineikonic model to analyse videogames, citing a need to analyse games from both ludic and narrative perspectives. However, his research aimed to find the educational value in videogames with an emphasis on the analysis of what games can offer children, how they engage with them, or why to include games in an educational curriculum (2018), and not in consideration of translation or localisation. What is particularly relevant for this study is Burn’s distinction; he quantifies videogames as comprised of kineikonic

mode that is (1) interactive and (2) non-interactive (Burn and Parker, 2003, p. 48).

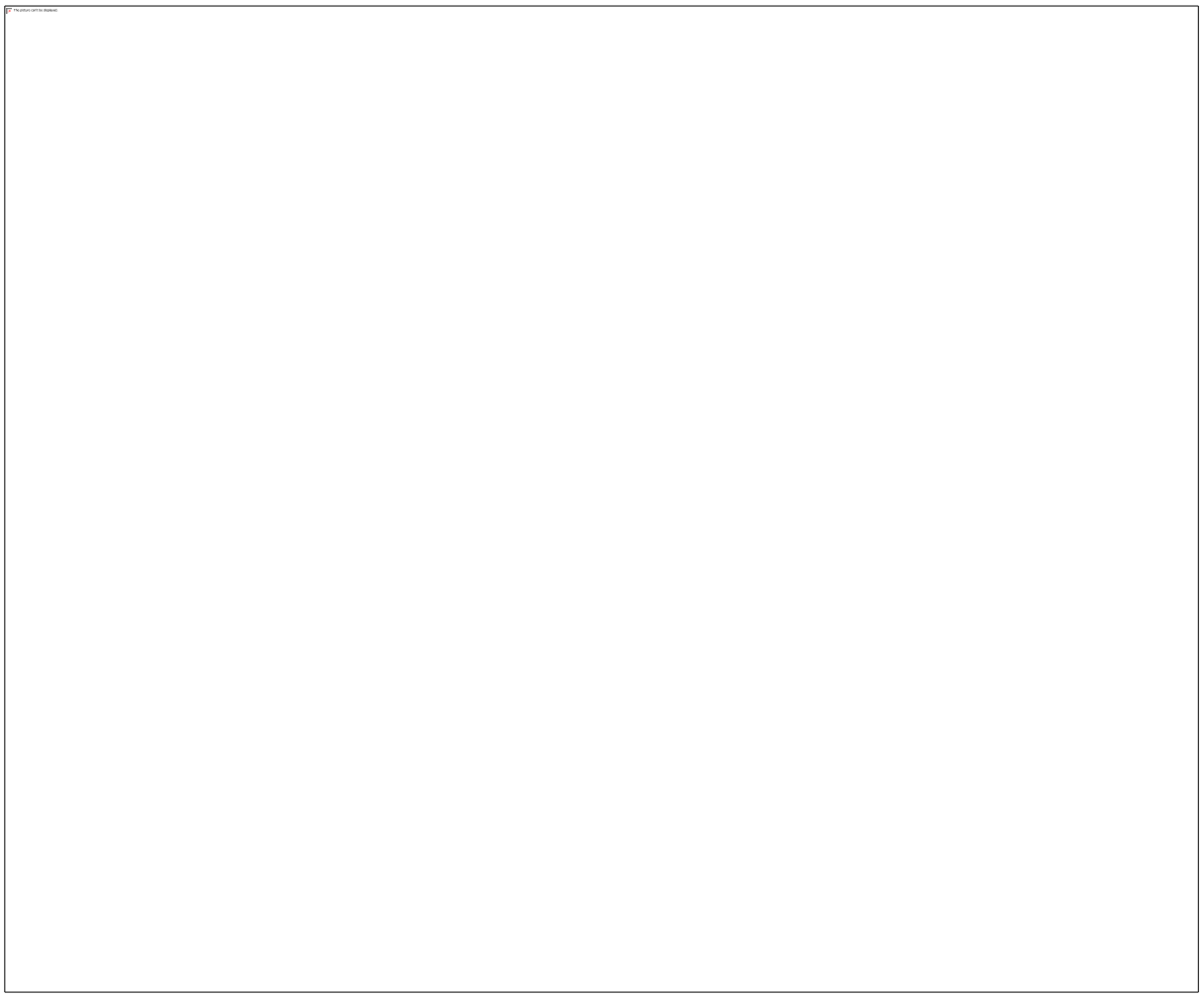


Fig. 3.1. Burn's Kineikonic mode (2013) framework featuring the more granular meta-modal resources.

More specifically, the interactive resources require user input in order to form part of a feedback loop, ensuring an input receives feedback. On the other hand, non-interactive resources require players to read and interpret the on-screen information, but no further user input (2003), such as FMV cutscenes. This distinction becomes particularly relevant for localisation, since translated resources often interact differently depending on whether players are actively controlling or passively observing them.

Taking the literature of Burn (2013), Zabalbeascoa (2008), O'Hagan (2009), and O'Hagan and Mangiron (2013), a model was produced that allows for the

clarification and analysis of the modal channels in the videogames used in this study.

Fig. 3.2. Adapted kineikonic model implementing Zabalbeascoa and O'Hagan and Mangiron's theory and terminology.

By incorporating the terminology and theory of Zabalbeascoa (2008) (use of the terms audio-verbal, audio-nonverbal, visual-verbal, visual-non-verbal) and O'Hagan and Mangiron (2013) (categorisation inclusions of the visual as text and graphics, aural as dialogues, songs and environmental sounds, and force-feedback sensations called "haptic feedback") into Burn's kineikonic model (2013), it is possible to clearly demarcate the overarching modes of a videogame that are both interactable and not, as well as offering three clear types of contributory channel: visual, aural, and haptic. Visual refers to that which is seen, aural refers to that which is heard, and haptic refers to physical feedback received by the player from the game, usually through a control pad.

Notable is that the use of meta-modes, which are termed "resources" in this thesis in keeping with Kress (2010) and Kress and Van Leeuwen (2010), can readily be included at a more granular level of the modified model, categorising further contributory resources (such as clothing or gesture) into the contributory

sub-categories or visual, aural and haptic. However, as this study is not undertaking an in-depth multimodal analysis, it was felt a more generalised approach with less micro-level resources was more appropriate. However, in a future study in which multimodal analysis is the primary method, the implementation and inclusion of such granular resources would be beneficial.

Returning to applying the model, in applying this adapted kineikonic model to videogames, the orchestrating modes are interpreted as the game code (or "rules") and player interaction, which together structure the temporal and spatial unfolding of play. While the status of "rules" as a distinct mechanic remains a subject of debate (2024), that topic is beyond the scope of this study discussion and it is not engaged with, but it is acknowledged that rules are fundamental to a game's operation. To summarise, quoting Schell,

> [rules] define the space, the timing, the objects, the actions, the consequences of the actions, the constraints on the actions, and the goals (Schell, 2020, p.184).

The three contributory modes (visual, aural, haptic) are complementary and whilst not always equally necessary (such as videogames with no visual-verbal text), they act together to create a cohesive experience that becomes the videogame. To clarify how the contributory modes may be divided into channels, and to make explicit the verbal/non-verbal subdivisions used in localisation workflows, **Error! Reference source not found.** presents terminology adapted from Zabalbeascoa (2008, p. 25).

Table 3.1. Four components of videogame-based audio-visual text plus haptic mode

	Audio	**Visual**	**Haptic**
Verbal	Words heard	Words read	-
Non-verbal	Music, non-spoken sound	Pictures, screen image	Force feedback, vibration

While the distinction between verbal and non-verbal resources is not central to multimodal theory, it is retained here for two reasons. First, in localisation practice, verbal and non-verbal materials are typically handled by different

specialists, which has implications for workflow and analysis. Second, this distinction facilitates comparability with AVT literature such as Zabalbeascoa (2008) and with industry-facing categorisations used by O'Hagan and Mangiron (2013). However, the analysis does not privilege verbal resources; instead, verbal/non-verbal is treated as a descriptive subdivision within each mode and not a hierarchy.

Haptics is treated as a contributory mode only when it plays a meaningful, functional role in gameplay. It is included demonstratively owing to its increased presence in modern videogames with almost 2500 recorded instances on PC alone (PC Gaming Wiki, n.d.). Although haptic feedback is not present in the devices used in this study, its conceptual inclusion reflects its increasing relevance in contemporary game design.

Building on the multimodal principles outlined above, the study considers these "intermodal relations" when they appear, such as complementarity between modes, redundancy across them, or dissonance where one mode contradicts another. This is particularly relevant to localisation, where changes to a translated resource may alter its relationship with visual, auditory, or interactive cues. Simply, the adapted kineikonic model, combined with a social semiotic understanding of modes and resources, provides a coherent framework for analysing videogames as multimodal artefacts and for examining how localisation decisions shape player experience.

Having established the theoretical foundations and the adapted kineikonic framework used in this study, the following section outlines how this framework is operationalised in the analysis of the localisation data.

3.1.3 Implementing the kineikonic in videogame analysis

In adapting the kineikonic model, terminology has been harmonised with social semiotic multimodality and explicitly integrated the verbal/non-verbal distinction derived from Zabalbeascoa. This allows the model to function both as a multimodal analytical framework and as a localisation-oriented taxonomy.

During the localisation analysis, the resources can be divided into categories for targeted analysis by segmenting the AV and written textual resources of a videogame into mode-based categories (such as audio-verbal, visual-verbal)

using the adapted kineikonic model. This allows for a structured semiotic analysis of how each component functions in translation. The categories are defined using the model's contributory modes (visual, aural, haptic) and then broken down further into verbal/non-verbal channels. Each element is analysed to identify challenges in localisation and how it supports or disrupts genre conventions. For example, in an RPG, a culturally specific idiom in a visual-verbal dialogue box is categorised under visual-verbal. The translation is evaluated against player expectations informed by the ”implied player” (see Section 3.3) model to assess if localisation alters reception.

During the playtests, the resources and their interactions, in conjunction with player interactions, can be recorded, which validates (or not) the findings from the localisation analysis through observing how players interact with the game and its multimodal resources in real-time. The screen recordings capture play sessions, including player reactions and verbal comments in which researchers can monitor how players engage with interactive resources (such as menu navigation, dialogue options), noting hesitation, confusion, or ease. For example, a player may express frustration navigating a complex inventory system due to mistranslated menu labels, whereupon this reaction is logged for assessment of the semiotic impact of that translation on usability.

Finally, examining the post-hoc interviews and netnographic data, the presence of the resources and the impressions they leave with players can be extrapolated and analysed. This captures player reflections after gameplay, offering insight into long-term impressions (“repercussions”, see Section 3.4.4) and overall localisation success from the user perspective. The interview transcripts and community reviews are inductively coded for themes that allude to player experiences such as confusion, enjoyment, or perceived cultural misalignment. These data are mapped against the modes to evaluate which resources most influenced perception. For instance, players interviewed post-hoc may remark on voice acting (audio-verbal) making characters feel more authentic, implying this resource positively influenced narrative immersion and may be worth prioritising when considering localisation strategies.

Overall, the adapted kineikonic model allows for targeted semiotic analysis at every stage of the process. Building on the analysis of semiotic modes during gameplay, the following section turns to player reception frameworks, using an

adapted version of the MUsE model to explore how players perceive, react to, and are influenced by localisation choices across both immediate gameplay and longer-term community engagement.

Ultimately, the adapted model facilitates a structured approach to analysing videogames as multimodal artefacts, grounded in established theory but sensitive to the specific requirements of localisation research. With the adapted kineikonic framework established in Section 3.1, the chapter now turns to UCT in Section 3.2, which expands the theoretical foundation by introducing usability- and reception-oriented principles relevant to the analysis of localised game content.

3.2 Principles of UCT

3.2.1 User-centred translation model

Usability is not the primary concern of this study but has a notable influence on player feedback. Suojanen at al. (2014) produced a robust monograph on UCT in which they discuss how the term came about and present a model demonstrating its usage. Within this monograph, cultural norms are a recognised factor in user (player) experience, which Suojanen et al. refer to as “cultural usability”. The concept of “cultural usability” was born from the gap in existing usability research in which cultural issues were largely overlooked (Suojanen et al. 2014, p. 19), likely owing to the complexity of culture and human behaviour.

Suojanen asserts “cultural usability” should address both the product itself and the development process in terms of information systems, emphasising cultural differences in “meanings, norms or values” (Suojanen et al., 2014, p. 19) and the ways in which users participate in the design and evaluation processes. Research into cultural analysis has been built on the work of Hofstede and his “Five Fundamental Dimensions” (power distance, collectivism vs individualism, femininity vs. masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, and long- vs. short-term orientation) (Hofstede, 1980), but has been criticised for focusing on nationality, essentialism and a certain generalisation that lacks consideration of professional culture, smaller-scale community culture (such as social clubs) and individuals

with culturally diverse backgrounds (Suojanen et al., 2014). To quote Suojanen et al.,

> national culture is only one cultural affiliation among many, as we are also affected by our regional, ethnic, generational, gender-based and professional cultures, and many others. (2014, p. 20)

Thus, it is not enough to make localisation choices according to generalisations based on a target audience nationality. Frandsen-Thorlacius et al. (2009) prove this notion in their usability study in which Chinese ("Eastern") and Danish ("Western") participants were surveyed about usability aspects. Frandsen-Thorlacius et al. found that Chinese respondents placed more importance on visual appearance, satisfaction and fun, whilst Danish respondents favoured effectiveness, efficiency, and the absence of frustration. However, the study focused only on a general national identity aspect in "culture" and respondents had only seven rating choices (from "not important" to "very important") by which to voice a preference with no room to justify or elaborate on those ratings. Nonetheless, it still offered a preliminary insight into how culture (broadly) influences user usability preferences. Ultimately, Frandsen-Thorlacius et al. prove that perceived usability is affected to an extent by cultural background.

3.2.2 UCT and videogame localisation

Suojanen et al. point out that different cultural backgrounds between observer and user (player) could influence test results, distorting both (game) design and the localisation process (Suojanen et al., 2014, p. 20). To that end, Suojanen et al. assert that user-centred translation aims to find further distinctions in culture than at the national or linguistic level, highlighting tech-savvy individuals versus lay users and their differing degrees of user aptitude and attitudes, and that definitions of usability at the foundation level are influenced by culture (Suojanen et al., 2014).

Highlighting research by Sun (2025), which evidenced a disconnect between long-term localisation strategy and resulting usability for end-users ("developer localisation"), there is a call for a shift in localisation culture itself towards the intended target audience and their cultural contexts, proposing "user localisation"

(Suojanen et al., 2014, p. 23). This proposed approach includes end-users in the design process, which results in faster responses to user issues, and improved localisation performance. Such an approach could also diminish the potential impact of translation choices brought about by biases (the translator's own biases, professional training, cultural, national) that occur in localisation practice (Suojanen et al., 2014, p. 24).

It is important to acknowledge industrial constraints on such an approach, however. Limited budgets, development time constraints and the continued view that localisation is purely a post-production task prior to circulation all act to undermine and limit the efficacy of UCT principles in practice. This gap that persists between development cycle and localisation process, as a separate entity rather than an embedded system, can lead to design decisions that do not gel fully with player interpretation once play occurs, highlighting the increasing importance of UCT approaches and player perspectives during development rather than as an afterthought.

Suojanen et al., (2014) also touch on the importance of empathy in translation and localisation as a key skill in UX, or in the context of video game localisation research, player experience (PX) (O'Hagan and Mangiron, 2013). They define user experience as a matter of "aesthetics, fun and pleasure that define users' emotions" (Suojanen et al., 2014, p. 25).

Taking on board these considerations, Suojanen et al. define user-centred translation (UCT) thus:

> In user-centred translation, information about users is gathered iteratively throughout the process and through different methods, and this information is used to create a usable translation. (2014, p. 4)

UCT is essential to grounding localisation as a user (player)-driven process fundamental to the approach of this study.

3.3 The implied player

The process described in UCT is in line with the "user localisation" approach that Sun advocates (2005), with translations (or localisations) being adapted iteratively following each cycle (an "iteration") of the model (see Fig. 3.3), through which a series of processes are followed to inform translation decisions

and adaptations that eventually result in a finished translation. The model contains the following steps: an inner circle, translation need, specification, mental models, heuristic evaluation and usability testing, post-mortem, reception research and feedback for future translation processes. Fig. 3.3 explains each element and its process in brief.

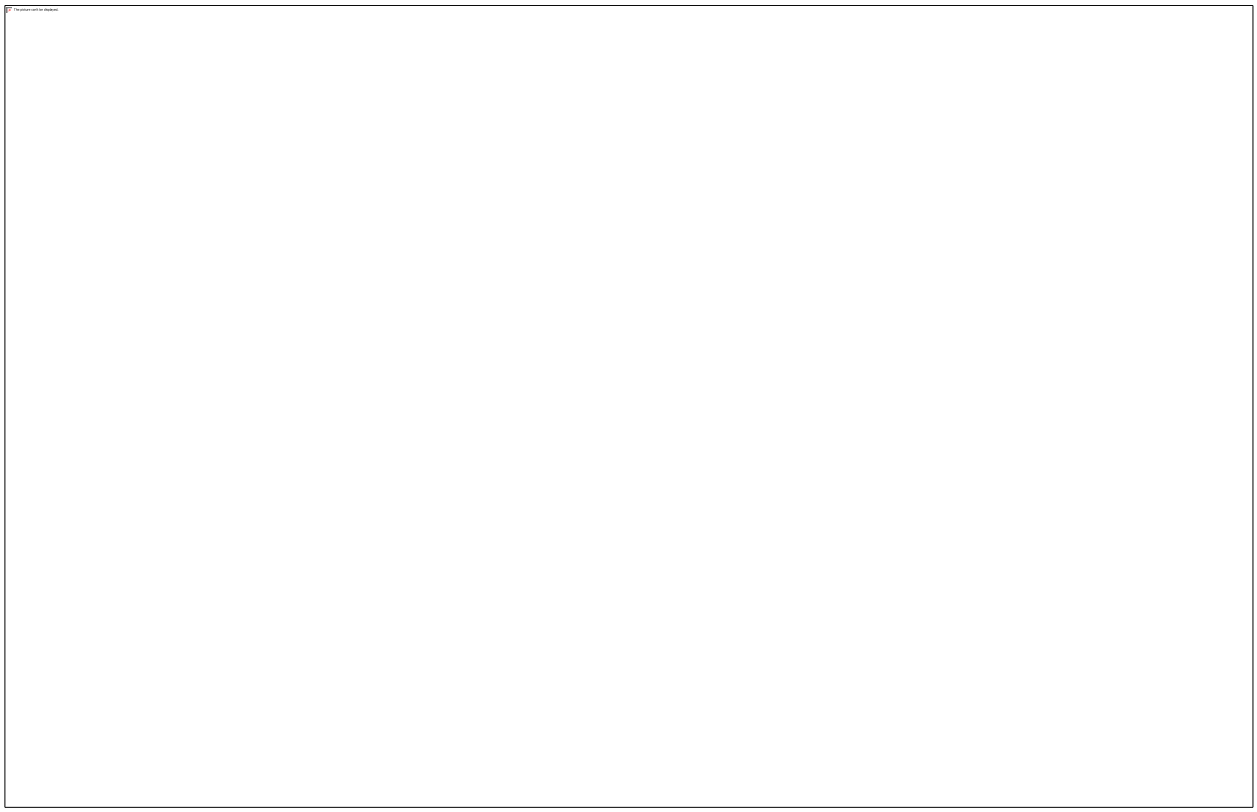


Fig. 3.3. The user-centred translation (UCT) process starting at "translation need" and iterating in multiple cycles until the end point of "final translation" (Suojanen, Koskinen, and Tuominen, 2015).

Table 3.2: Steps of an iteration (cycle) of UCT.

Inner circle	"Selecting and updating translation strategies" accompanies the upper section of the model, and "translation and revision" accompanies the lower section of the model (Fig. 3.3). A continuous loop of translation strategies that are regularly updated and revised according to prior projects and knowledge produced during the current project.
Exterior cycle	The evaluation step of the iterative process, where user feedback and usability findings are analysed and fed back into subsequent revisions and future projects.
Translation need	Ensure the target users are defined and described and that translation strategies align with users' needs in order to meet their needs and expectations.
Specification	Written specifications provided to stakeholders to ensure mutual understanding of the translation's aims; stakeholders ensure the usability of the translation and which UCT methods to use and when to use them. The desired quality level and the agreed measurements to assess the translation are noted. The translation is assessed against the specification and where it meets predetermined usability goals.
Mental models	Methods such as intratextual reader position analysis, audience design, and the development of personas are employed to create mental models from knowledge of intended users defined during Specification.
Heuristic evaluation and usability testing	During the translation process, usability is continuously re-assessed and strategies revised, followed by re-evaluation through heuristic testing (evaluation based on predefined guidelines). Testing is undertaken by intended end-users who are observed. Observation aims to emphasise early-stage adjustments.
Post-mortem	After completing a translation cycle, the project team conducts a post-mortem analysis, evaluating the final text and the process, including negotiation, mental model accuracy, and usability evaluation. This analysis provides Feedback (final stage of the cycle) to refine tools and methods for future iterative cycles.
Reception research	Reception studies assess how readers (or players) interpret the translations and which strategies are most effective and acceptable. The findings inform future UCT processes by gathering solicited/unsolicited feedback from specific users from clients and end users.
Feedback for future translation processes	Feedback is informed by a combination of the post-mortem and reception research phases.

The model is framed by an inner circle in which the upper section is associated with selecting and updating translation strategies, while the lower section corresponds to the phases of translation and revision (see Fig. 3.3). At the core of the model lies a continuous, iterative loop in which translation strategies are regularly updated and adapted based on insights from previous projects and knowledge generated throughout the current one.

As summarised in Figure 3.3, UCT progresses through a cyclical sequence of identifying user needs, defining project specifications, developing user models, and evaluating translation usability through iterative testing and feedback. Throughout the process, translation strategies are refined in response to both usability evaluation and reception data, with insights from each project informing subsequent translation cycles.

In brief, besides the product developer, translators and their practice are at the core of the cycle, with the process being driven by end-users. Through end user involvement in the translation process by engaging with their reception and feedback, the project team can improve on future translation approaches and optimise processes and tools being employed during translation. Suojanen et al. (2015) also point out that recent trends in crowd-sourcing translations could lead to an adapted model, user-generative translation (UGT) which refers to harnessing Web 2.0 services and tools to create multilingual online content with the help of volunteer translators (O'Hagan, 2009). However, Suojanen et al. stress that UCT and UGT are not equivalent, and that even if volunteers are involved in UCT, UCT is driven by professional translators and their decisions whilst UGT is the “most extreme” manifestation of UCT (Suojanen et al., 2015, p. 7).

Mental Models are central to my framework and warrant explanation, their importance recognised by Suojanen et al. (2015, p. 61), since it is imperative the end user of a translation be identified in order to appropriately cater to their needs. These mental models are informed by cultural schemata (outlined in Section 2.2) which provides the cognitive basis through which players interpret genre, localisation, and in-game semiotic resources. Suojanen et al. opted to employ three tools for the construction of mental models: intratextual reader positions, audience design and personas. Intratextual reader positions are a text-based analysis tool and refer to the ways in a text shapes and influences the role or perspective of the reader (user) within its own structure, within which Suojanen et al. employ the term “implied reader”, taken from literary theory (Herman and Vervaeck, 2019), to define their positionality. The “implied reader” is defined as,

> hypothetical readers to whom writers target their texts or whom a researcher can construct from the text through textual analysis. (p. 63)

Ultimately, for Suojanen et al. the “implied reader” is a hypothetical construct of ideals and assumptions that is intended to act is a general representation of a user group according to the images found within the text. Suojanen touches on other intratextual reader positions to highlight the similarities and differences in approach, but does not advocate for one over another, but highlights the ease

with which they can be applied to UCT practice.

3.3.1 From implied reader to implied player

For the purposes of this project, the modified term “implied player” is adopted to better represent the nature of the texts in this study. The implied player, much like the implied reader, is defined and shaped by the content of a videogame and should be regarded as the blueprint of an ideal player (or group of players) the game is intended to suit. Alternatively, to reword Herman et al.’s (2005) definition, hypothetical players to whom *developers* target their *games* or whom a researcher can construct from the *game* through textual analysis.

Audience design focuses on reception context and is described by Suojanen et al. as “recipient-oriented communication design”, drawing on the scholarship of Bell (1984) and Hatim and Mason (1990) that supposes authors or “speakers” adapt their words to their target audiences. Bell proposes that audiences, or more specifically “recipients of speech”, fit into five categories: (1) “addressees”, those to whom messages are directly aimed, (2) “auditors”, those whom the speaker knows and accepts are hearing the messages but who are messages are not specifically aimed, (3) “overhearers”, those whom the speaker is aware of but who are not taken into account, (4) “eavesdroppers”, those whom the speaker does not know are hearing the message, and (5) “referees”, those with whom the speaker identifies, or who the speaker particularly respects and seeks out the favour of.

As Suojanen et al. point out, only those who understand the language of the message can be its “addressees” or “eavesdroppers”, but in the age of online translation tools such as Google Translate, these limitations are less of an issue. In terms of my study, the categories can be aligned and operationalised according to localisations within the RPG videogame community, where the localiser functions as the immediate speaker to the target audience. The auditor role is held by those involved in the reviewing, managing, and approving of localisation processes, namely project managers, localisation leads and QA teams who monitor, review and revise the content, but are not the intended recipients of the localisation. Bell’s model did not take the nature of localisation’s mediated communication into consideration, and whilst the developer is the

source of the message, it is the localisation specialists that stand in for the developer as immediate communicators with the target audience, rendering the source content suitable for the target language and culture.

Table 3.3: Bell's five categories in terms localised games within the videogame community

Addressees	The specific target RPG player base.
Auditors	Project managers, localisation leads and QA teams
Overhearers	Videogame players of other genres.
Eavesdroppers	People circumstantially subjected to the RPG videogame, either through advertising, individual conversation online or in-person, or in communities outside of the videogame community environment.
Referees	Vocal RPG genre fans, community managers or social media celebrities, videogame and translation award committees.

Suojanen et al. (2015) point out that, in literary translation, cases of the Auditors proving more important than the “addressees” can be found in instances such as children’s literature. In the case of children’s literature, the parent (“auditor”) makes the decision to purchase the book, thus the book must also appeal to the parent and their needs before those of the child (“addressee”) (Suojanen et al., 2015, p. 69). Equally, the same can be said of certain cross-sections of videogames, namely those intended for young children, although the playtest in this study includes participants aged 18 and over only, thus minors are not a key consideration as all “addressees” are adults who make purchasing decisions for themselves. However, the categories of auditor, overhearer, eavesdropper and referee are all potential sources of reviews about a game and capable of sharing opinions online and offline according to their various exposure to the game. Corroborating Suojanen et al. are various websites aimed at parents like Mumsnet and Common Sense Media in which parents discuss products and media (including videogames) in terms of suitability for their children.

Ultimately, audience design allows for developers to consider the primary target audience and its peripheries, and the way in which they interact favourably with intended outcomes for the developer (such as more sales, winning awards, community praise). These categories and concepts of audience design feed into the UCT cycle mental model (see Fig. 3.4), allowing for approach and tool choices in translation to be made according to whom is being addressed and to what end.

Personas are the final tool employed by Suojanen at al. for the formulation of a presumed ideal user. Personas represent the needs and characteristics of real users, the aim of which is to better inform the design process according to real, concrete player information that has been empirically gathered as opposed to that of the "implied reader" which is determined through the text itself. Quoting Suojanen et al.,

> the designer can find a connection to the user: a persona has a name, background, personality and often even a physical appearance (e.g. a photograph). (2015, p.70).

Personas can also be constructed in some cases by the translator or localiser themselves, according to their own informed experiences. However, it is generally advisable to have multiple personas in order to better account for a range of desired audience profiles (Suojanen et al., 2015, p. 70). Equally, too many Personas could be detrimental and result in dissatisfaction from one or more groups represented by a persona if compromises are not made. In such a situation, the translator or localiser (or developer overseeing the translation choices) must decide which persona(s) to prioritise, and thus, which translation strategies to employ.

In this study, whilst survey data serves to inform the needs of the players in their own words (determining translation needs and expectations from the games more broadly), players participating in the playtest served to inform the "personas" present in this study as they represent real individuals with documented, voiced preferences that can form more complete pictures of the player a game's localisation is being tailored towards.

3.3.2 Operationalising the Implied Player

By combining these three concepts (implied reader, audience design, personas), Suojanen et al. create a valuable cycle that complements the translation process (shown in Fig. 3.4 and discussed in more detail shortly). The model includes Coney's taxonomy of readers (Coney, 1992, pp. 58-63). The taxonomy rooted in Coney's "rhetorical participants" theory features five reader roles determined by the roles they assume during the act of reading, which results in shifts of reader

position according to their chosen active role. The reader is operationalised as a “player” in the case of this study.

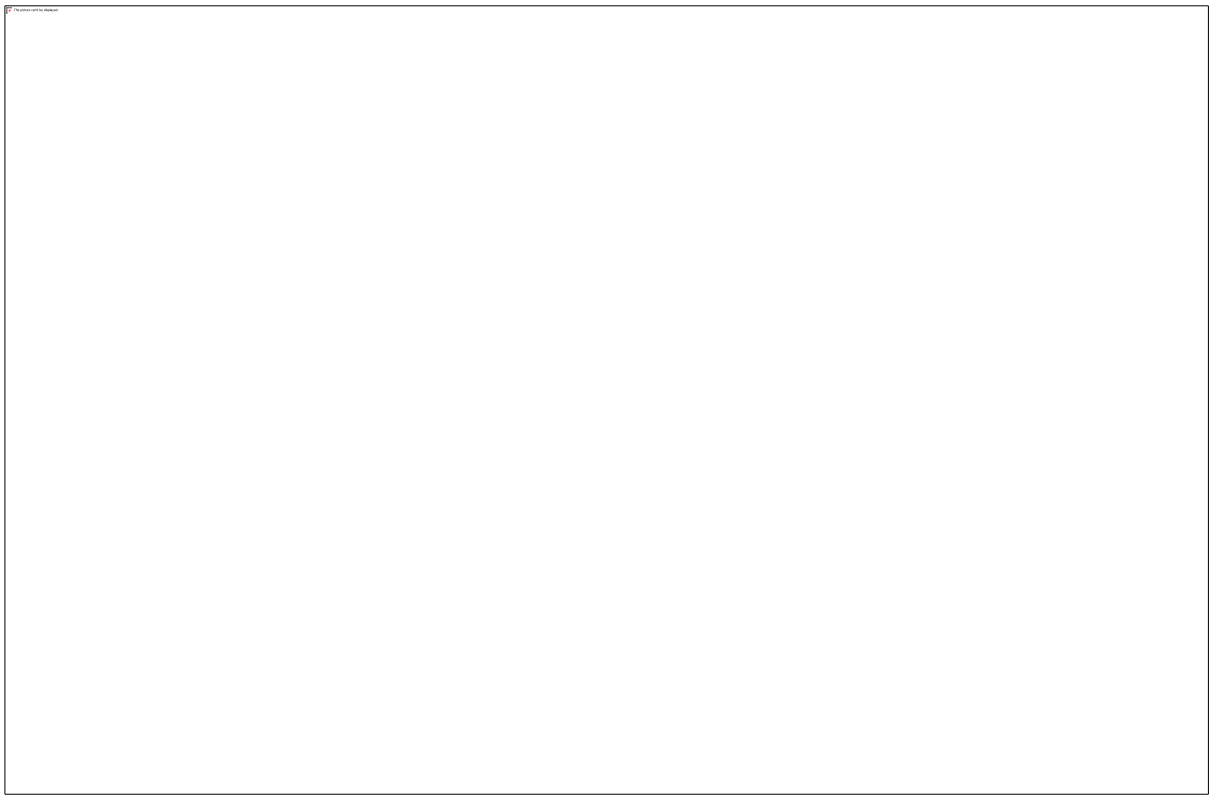


Fig. 3.4. Mental models informing stages of the cycle in UCT.

Whilst much of the background theory is rooted in literary translation, the UCT cycle is readily adaptable to AV and videogame translation through its interchangeable audiences via the medium of mental models. The taxonomy comprises five reader roles ((1) reader as receiver of information; (2) reader as user, (3) reader as decoder, (4) reader as professional colleague, and (5) reader as maker of meaning), those reader roles’ needs and the writer’s (translator/localiser’s) approach to meet those needs. Coney acknowledged that not every reader wants the same takeaway from a text, and that requires a writer to anticipate various needs according to reader requirements (and to an extent, their expectations of a text). A reader as receiver of information is a passive entity without existing knowledge, they need the writer to provide detailed information that can fill a knowledge gap; the writer achieves this by providing clear, concise and beneficial information for the reader. In this position, the writer bears the full communicative burden and must anticipate potential

misunderstandings and eliminate unnecessary complexity.

However, the reader as user is an individual with a specific aim, actively seeking a result to a specific aim, such as constructing a table (unlike the passive reader as receiver). The reader as user wants accessible, user-friendly guidance delivered unambiguously with clear instructions, thus the writer must employ direct, technical but easily-digestible instructions. In contrast, the reader as decoder is experienced in their field and familiar with jargon and methodological norms, they are reading to reinforce or bolster existing expert knowledge that further elevates their identity as an expert in their topic. Writers for these readers use specialist technical language (including acronyms), jargon terms and language that presumes existing familiarity with the material that offers no superfluous explanation that the reader as receiver or reader as user would need to comprehend such a text.

Next, the reader as professional colleague shares a field with the writer, such as an academic writing for an academic journal. These readers are operating within the community in a regulatory role, ensuring standards are maintained with a focus on the presentation of the text, such as the structures, methods and terminology employed. In this instance, the writer and reader are on the same “level”, with the writer producing a text for an audience familiar with the concepts and norms of the field, they are sharing understanding, ideas, aiming to encourage dialogue with peers and fostering a sense of community.

Finally, the reader as maker of meaning. This name could be argued as unhelpful since there are scholars (especially those in reception theory, see 2.2) who argue that all readers are makers of meaning. However, in Coney’s taxonomy, this role is the most active reader role, a reader who takes the writer’s work and shapes it with their own, personal direct input. Examples of such texts include abstract poetry or literary texts that invites readers to draw their own conclusions, but more broadly (and relevant to this study) it also applies to interactive texts such as videogames in which a reader has a direct impact on the content through engagement. For such a reader, a writer must create a text that invited engagement from the reader, designed and authored specifically for the intent of reader interaction that encourages an exchange of ideas or discussions about the writer’s text.

Through the model seen in Fig. 3.4, the mental models can be employed in

different phases of the translation process and inform the approaches and tools to be used. In the case of my study, it is possible for the reader (player) to fulfil more than one of the categorised roles at any given time owing to the interactive nature of videogames. For example, a player may be receiving information from the game relating to the story, whilst also being in the role of user as an active player taking instruction from the game in how to play, whilst also writing articles and guides for the community, enhancing and sharing their own experience and knowledge in the role of both decoder and "professional" colleague as a knowledgeable fan.

The first phase of the cycle is (1) a source text analysis focused on reader position, using the implied reader and Coney's taxonomy to create a picture of the intended reader/user, followed by (2) drawing up the specifications and undertaking user research with the aid of project-relevant personas created based on information the source text analysis. Next, (3) audience design is employed to determine the most appropriate translation strategies, which culminates in the (4) final translation, assessed against the implied reader and taxonomies to provide feedback to iterate and improve on future projects. Suojanen et al. advocate for this cycle as usable in every-day translation contexts (2014, p. 73) as the various mental model methods can be fruitfully employed together to create useful, meaningful tools, whilst still being mindful of the potential for a degree of reductivity and over-simplification of presumed end-users.

Employing the iterative UCT cycle in tandem with mental models enables a structured, multi-phase analysis of the three videogame source texts. This process begins with the construction of the "implied player" through intratextual analysis, followed by the identification of user needs and the delineation of player personas based on data gathered from post-hoc interviews (see Section 5.7). These mental models, comprising the implied player, audience design, and personas, not only provide insight into the expectations and preferences of the target audience but also inform the localisation analysis by aligning translation strategies with user-centred considerations. The UCT cycle operationalises this approach by offering a systematic framework for localisation, integrating continuous feedback and empirical testing through stages such as specification, mental modelling, usability testing, and post-mortem evaluation. For example,

the implied player is extrapolated from the game's textual and genre features; personas are developed from real player data; and audience design helps differentiate between user groups (e.g., core fans versus peripheral audiences), ensuring that localisation choices resonate with those most engaged with the game. These elements allow for the evaluation of existing localisation choices in light of actual player expectations, bridging theoretical analysis with actual player experience.

To complement this user-centred foundation, the next section examines the multimodal nature of videogames, drawing on the adapted kineikonic model to analyse how audio-visual, haptic and interactive modes and resources can contribute to player experience.

3.4 Adapting MUsE: Motivation and player experience

3.4.1 The MURR Model

The adaptation of MUsE through the replacement of the terms "result" and "consequence" is proposed, with their reception-specific counterparts described in (Section 2.2.1), "reaction" and "repercussion", to better reflect Gambier (Di Giovanni and Gambier, 2018) and Chesterman's (1998) translation reception theory and place emphasis squarely on the causal nature of the (multimodal) translation during "usage" and its consequences (the 2Rs).

Fig. 3.5 provides an example of this adapted model in use, with hypothetical player characteristics, motivations, usage purposes, and the reactions and repercussions of usage.

Fig. 3.5. Example flow of the MURR model.

In this example, “person” is operationalised in much the same way as Schultheiss’ iteration, by collecting demographic information from players at point of play test recruitment to provide a general picture of their key characteristics such as gender, age and nationality. Demographic data could similarly be collected an online survey as the first questions. A presumed ideal player, the “implied player”, is embedded within the “motivation” phase of the model, discussed in the following paragraph. Unlike Schultheiss’ research, this research does not investigate the relationship between personality traits and predefined motivations and usages.

3.4.2 Motivation

“Motivation” refers to the player-identified rationale for engaging with a game, the “why” reason for engaging. In this study, “motivation” is predefined in accordance with the recruitment criteria for playtesters, who are required to self-identify as fans of the RPG genre and possess a familiarity of its conventions, thus meeting the criteria of “implied player”. It assumes players share a common set of motivations reflective of the "implied player" defined in Section 3.3, grounded in established genre norms. Inductive thematic analysis of the survey data makes it possible to characterise a stereotypical RPG game fan, or “implied player”, for the purposes of this study.

Whilst the localisation analysis (see Chapter 5) illuminates divergence and convergence within expected RPG genre norms, online survey respondents (see Section 4.4) will either corroborate or disagree according to their own expectations and preferences. The survey data (see 4.4) and localisation analysis (see Chapter 5) serve to identify what players expect of an RPG and create the “implied player”. This shared motivation framework is applied consistently throughout the project, based on these key norms. However, in the evaluation of subsequent playthroughs (where players revisit the same game having played it before), motivation becomes more fluid and may evolve to reflect new or shifting player objectives. “Motivation” can be inferred by undertaking a localisation analysis of each game to provide detailed insights into textual challenges (all in-game written verbal and written non-verbal text), audio-

visual challenges (non-verbal audio, visuals), interaction challenges (controls, handling) and cultural challenges (semiotics with culture-specific implications).

3.4.3 Usage

"Usage" refers to what a player gets out of playing and the benefits of playing the game. It is the active play phase of the game, or in-actu engagement, that leads to intrinsic and extrinsic consequences (reactions and repercussions). It ultimately clarifies in-actu approaches to play and to what end (e.g. player reports enjoying exploring the map, resulting in "usage" being quantified as "exploration" and "enjoyment"), and how usage can be impeded. During in-actu play, players are observed and their behaviours in-game recorded through screen recording software in order to observe and note certain behaviours or reactions. In addition to the screen recording, any incidental think-aloud protocol (i.e. verbalising opinions on in-game resources, complaints/praise and eliciting sounds of delight or displeasure) occurring as a direct result of play are also noted.

Additionally, the recordings may pick up instances of unusual or unintended play methods, or periods of extended time spent on one of more interactions that are unintentional, such as getting lost in a map. By recording the frequency of instances of positive and negative reactions, and the nature of those issues (such as control scheme, textual, mechanical), it is possible to better understand the extent to which players' expectations regarding handling are met, and how. In both cases, prominent in-actu screenshots and noted physical-verbal reactions are subject to semiotic analysis of signs, context and interpretation of in-game resources. This approach aims to explore, for example, whether the game meets player expectations during interaction whether the control schemes align with what the player anticipates and whether the icons are intuitive and coherent.

3.4.4 Reaction and repercussion

Finally, the consequences defined as "reaction" and "repercussion" as clarified in **Error! Reference source not found.**, shed light on the intrinsic and extrinsic results of playing the translated video game. See **Error! Reference source not**

found. for a summary of these concepts.

Table 3.4: MURR "at-a-glance" breakdown.

Person	Player
Motivation	Player-identified motives, the "why" reason for playing
Usage	What player gets out of playing, benefits of play
Reaction	[intrinsic] Inner voice, intangible; immediate thoughts, knee-jerk emotional responses (manifested as think-aloud protocol)
Repercussion	[extrinsic] Responses leading to something tangible; longer-term, wider-reaching ramifications

"Reaction" is operationalised through a combination of interview data and observed physical responses during play. Post-hoc questions address intrinsic rewards, such as satisfaction or enjoyment, with players self-reporting these experiences. Observational notes and records further detail instances of visible emotional reactions. Such insights make it possible to consider the ways in which localisation strategies and techniques identified in the localisation analyses relate to player perceptions.

"Repercussion" is also operationalised through interview data with an emphasis on questions referring to extrinsic reward (such as community renown), emphasising consequences reaching beyond the limitations of in-game, such as recommending the game to friends, sharing it with an online community or playtesters reporting the intention to continue playing the game in their own time. This helps to establish player perceptions of English-language-localised versions of Chinese-developed role-playing games.

Described in the same terms as **Error! Reference source not found.**, **Error! Reference source not found.** clarifies used terminology in terms of their contributory factors and the gathered data that contributes to them. As seen in **Error! Reference source not found.**, the online survey largely informs "motivation", whilst the playtest data feeds into "usage", "reaction" and "repercussion", with both the survey and playtest demographic information informing person.

Table 3.5: Clarification of Motivation, Use, Reaction, Repercussion (MURR) model phase contributories.

		Methodology	Data/Analysis
Person	Age + gender + nationality.	Online survey, Section 4.1; Playtest, Section 4.2.1	Online survey, Section 4.4.1; Playtest, Section 4.4.2
Motivation	Survey-defined stereotypical player + localisation analysis.	Online survey, Section 4.1	Online survey, Section 4.4.1
Usage	Interactions during play period + player self-reported negative/positive experiences.	Playtest, Section 4.2.1	Playtest, Section 4.4.2; Chapter 6; Chapter 7
Reaction	In-actu emotive reaction + player query responses.	Playtest, Section 4.2.1	Playtest, Section 4.4.2; Chapter 6; Chapter 7
Repercussion	Post-hoc player planned action/inaction.	Playtest, Section 4.4.2; Chapter 6; Chapter 7	Playtest, Section 4.4.2; Chapter 6; Chapter 7

Combined with the adapted kineikonic model and the user-centred translation (Suojanen et al., 2014) models, the thesis aims to produce player feedback that informs on genre norms, player expectations, in-situ player experiences and post-hoc player reception in order to form a well-rounded picture of player reception to localised ZhRPGs, and to what extent player perceptions correspond to expectations of Chinese-developed RPGs.

In short, MURR allows for the simple breakdown and “extraction” of player reception, and the actions players are likely to take following play experiences (consequences) that can influence the wider gaming community’s expectations and perceptions. It demonstrates how the consequences of player reception (“reaction” and “repercussion”) may create a ripple effect that influences individual player’s interests (such as developing interests in the game-world lore) and ripples out to influence other potential players (through reviews and community discussion), further emphasising the importance of the localisation to player reception.

3.5 In summary

The UCT model establishes player expectations by defining the implied player and analysing cultural usability in localisation. The adapted kineikonic model

then examines how multimodal resources (visual, aural, haptic) interact with the translation to shape player experience during gameplay. Finally, the MURR model captures real-time reactions (emotion, comprehension, usability) and long-term repercussions (community discussions, replayability, recommendations), providing a holistic representation of player reception. Together, these three systems predict, observe, and measure how localisation influences player perception, engagement, and post-play actions, ensuring a data-driven evaluation of reception (see Fig. 3.6). Localisation analysis of three videogames is conducted to produce an “implied player”.

During a localisation analysis that is grounded in UCT principles, the “implied player” will serve to inform the translation choices and localisation practices expected of the three case study games. A play test of the three case study games yields player personas that provide further basis for the formation of mental models that inform desirable localisation outcomes according to player preference and expectation. Additionally, the adapted kineikonic mode model provides the categories of resources to be observed both in isolation and in tandem with other modes to explore the nature of the experience created for the player. The modes will be examined in consideration of cultural norms, both at a fan-community level (based on survey data, netnographic data and interview data) and national level (socioeconomic norms), and on a local level according to feedback from play testers.

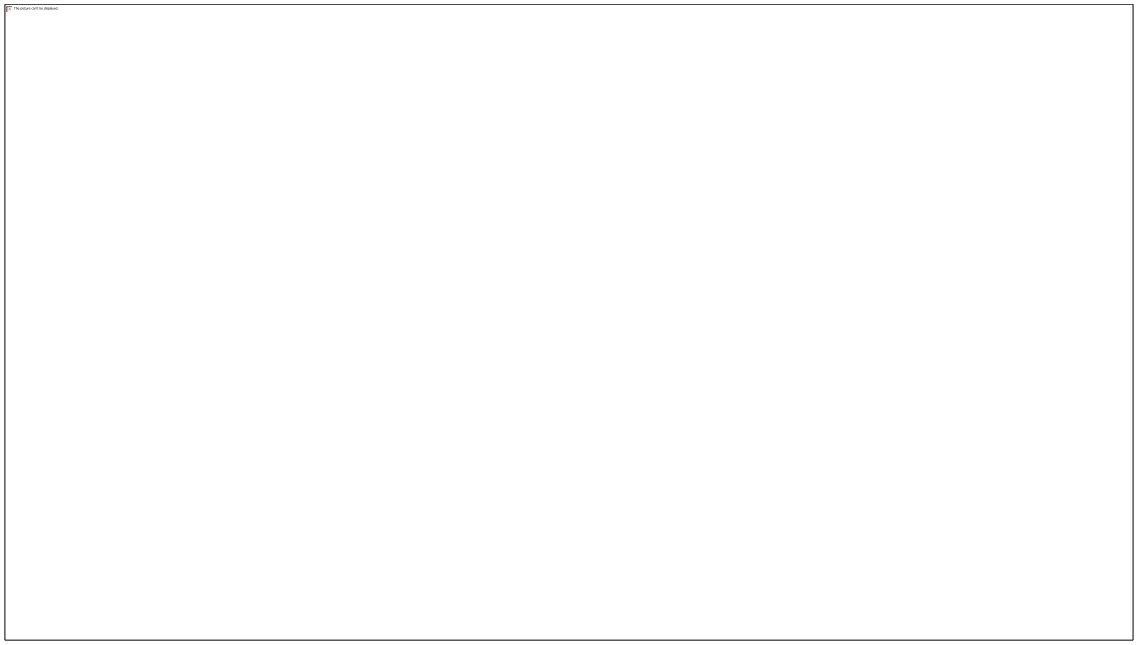


Fig. 3.6. Interplay between the UTC framework, kineikonic model and MURR model in this study.

In short, the adapted kineikonic model shall accompany the entire process in examining the features of videogame modes and their interactions with each other and the players, assisting in the answering of every research question.

Meanwhile, the UCT model provides allows for the exploration of possible localisation approaches observed in the localisation analysis, as well as providing guidance that informs my “implied player” necessary to facilitate an idealised localisation goal in respect of both the kineikonic modes identified within the games and the expectations of the target audience for the purpose of determining in what ways localisation strategies and techniques identified in three case studies correlate with player perception. Elements of the MURR model work to answer multiple questions.

The question of player perceptions of English-language-localised versions of Chinese-developed role-playing games (RQ1) is addressed through resulting declared player intended pending actions (or conscious inactions) post-hoc. These self-declared actions will be documented to determine the likelihood of extrinsic repercussions e.g. wider implications for the broader community, such as reviews or word-of-mouth promotion to friends, as per Bell’s “recipients of speech”. Whilst RQ2 is answered in tandem with the UTC approach, where the UTC model addresses the implied player and expectations, the Consequence

Type: Reaction further informs expectations and perceptions in a context of live play, allowing for the direct observation of player expectation versus player experience recordable in the moment, and how it contributes or detracts from the implied player model created by the UTC process, as well as providing data on player personal intrinsic repercussions, such as enjoyment of the game, or interest in the developer. Furthermore, the matter of how player perceptions correspond to any pre-existing expectations and attitudes of Chinese-made products (RQ3) is also handled by the motivation field of the MURR model. As explained in more detail in Section 4.4, both survey data and post-hoc interview data is thematically coded in Nvivo15 to provide insight into what players think of Chinese-made games and Chinese-made products more broadly. Finally, the extent to which player interpretation of in-game resources aligns with expected interpretation derived from the ideal player (RQ4) is answered through the Usage segment of the MURR model, whereby recorded footage is analysed for semiotic signs that may not be received by the users as is intended, as well as through observed remarks from players in-situ and during the post-hoc playtest interview that alludes to their play style choices, intention behind playing the game, and any positive or negative self-reported statements during play.

Chapter 4 Methodology

This chapter outlines the study's qualitative research design. Ethical approval was granted on 6 October 2023 by the University of Leeds Research Ethics Committee (reference FAHC 22-128, see Appendix 1). A qualitative research approach was used, drawing on multiple data sources to generate rich empirical material and enable triangulation, addressing a methodological gap current extent in videogame localisation reception studies. Alongside surveys and controlled playtesting, netnography was included to capture unsolicited community discourse surrounding the case-study games. This allows the study to triangulate structured, in-person qualitative data with large-scale, naturally occurring reception data drawn from gaming communities.

This strategy strengthened the study's validity by revealing both convergences and divergences across sources. In line with Saldanha and O'Brien's (2013, p. 38) argument that triangulation is essential for research credibility, the study employed a combination of methods, data types, and theoretical perspectives to enhance the robustness of the findings. While quantitative research typically emphasises validity and replicability, qualitative approaches prioritise credibility and warrantability. These approaches acknowledge the existence of multiple realities and underscore the need for researcher reflexivity, a perspective particularly relevant to this study. Although Saldanha and O'Brien advocate methodological diversity, they argue that qualitative approaches are particularly appropriate when the aim is to understand emergent cause-and-effect relationships in depth rather than to measure or predict them statistically.

Online data collection enabled access to a broader and more diverse respondent pool but lacked the structure and immediacy of in-person methods. The unobserved nature of participation introduced the possibility of external influences, such as input from peers or online sources. In contrast, offline (in-person) playtesting allowed for direct observation of participants' real-time reactions and the collection of post-hoc feedback, yielding deeper qualitative insights. However, the intensive nature of this data limited participant numbers and increased the complexity of analysis. By combining both methods, the study

balanced high-volume, lower-detail data with low-volume, richly detailed insights, resulting in a more comprehensive and representative understanding of player experiences. This methodological diversity also addressed a significant empirical gap in the literature, as empirical research on English-localised, Chinese-developed videogames remains limited (see Chapter 2).

Expanding the dataset not only strengthened the rigour of this study but also contributed a valuable foundation for future research. The online surveys captured player expectations and genre conventions, particularly mechanical and audio-visual resources, as well as perceptions of Chinese-developed RPGs. In contrast, the playtests offered novel insights into player attitudes toward gameplay and localisation within a semi-controlled setting. This enabled the collection of live feedback, which was analysed alongside unobserved netnographic data to identify thematic consistencies, discrepancies, and areas for further exploration. A simplified breakdown of the data pipeline in relation to the RQs can be seen here (see Fig. 4.1), with a complete explanation of the pipeline at the end of this chapter (see Fig. 4.).

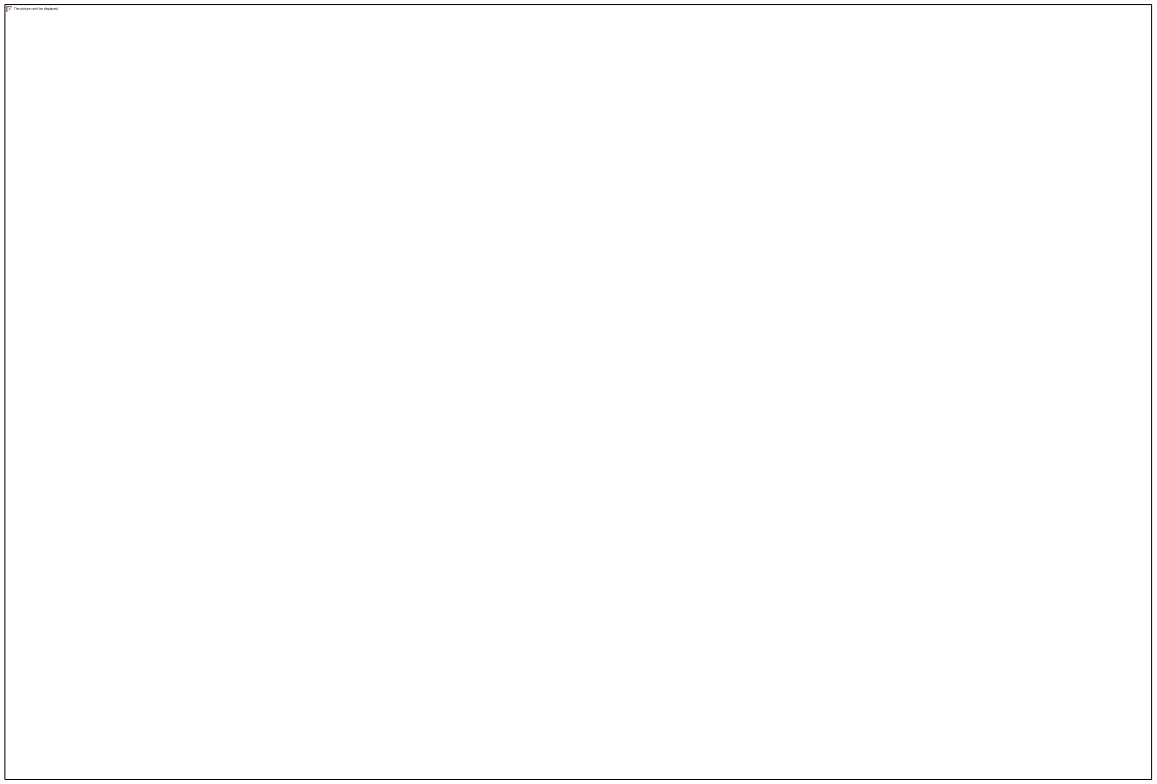


Fig. 4.1. Simplified illustration of RQs in relation to data-gathering instruments.

The study comprised one anonymous online survey and a split cohort of anonymised, observed in-person playtests followed by semi-structured interviews. The playtest phase employed a quasi-experimental design. Qualitative data from both the surveys and playtests were triangulated with netnographic data from platforms such as Steam and the Google Play Store, as well as with existing literature. The complete dataset was analysed using an inductive thematic approach to explore how, and to what extent, localisation influenced player reception and perception. A simplified flow diagram illustrates the timings of each element of data collection, starting with the overall design, pilots, finalised instruments, and triangulation (see Fig. 4.2).

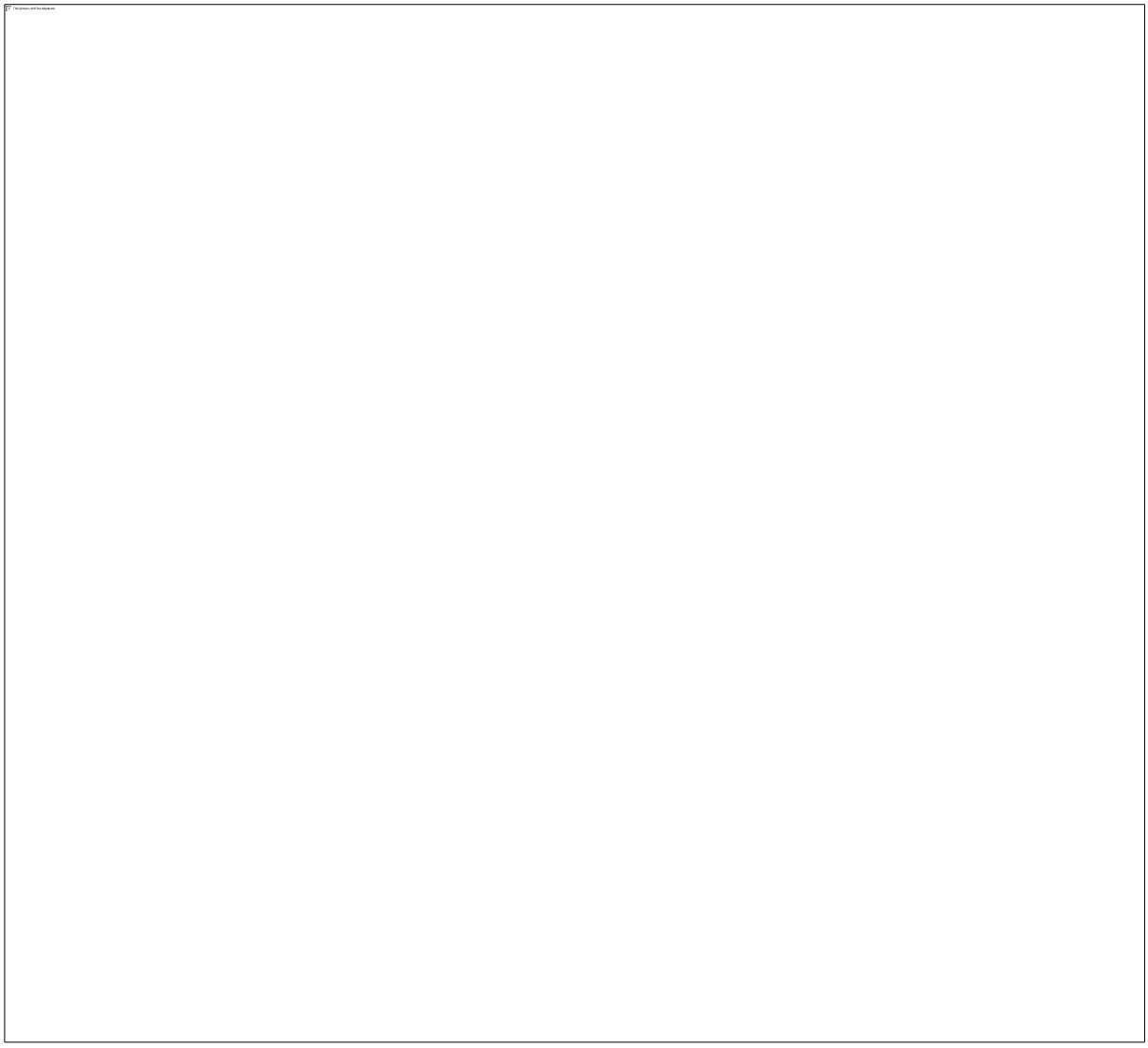


Fig. 4.2. Flow diagram of data instrument design and implementation.

The survey data and post-hoc interviews provided direct feedback from players regarding their existing perceptions and expectations of the RPG genre more broadly. In the context of the playtests, this feedback also highlighted any changes to perceptions following the playtest, thereby effectively addressing the first research question. Moreover, the insights gathered informed the textual analysis of the three case study games, particularly through an examination of player comments on linguistic and cultural resources emphasised by localisation approaches.

The survey offered an open, unmoderated space for players to express their opinions freely, without the fear of judgement that might arise in more structured settings. The anonymity granted through online handles, coupled with the absence of interviewer pressure, fostered a safe environment for honest and unfiltered feedback. The netnographic data, however, was derived from a context of social and community interaction, where many players seek to demonstrate their expertise, contribute to the community as fans, or assert their identity as noteworthy members through their public posts. In contrast, the post-hoc interviews provided an opportunity to probe participants on specific points they raised, facilitating a more in-depth investigation of their perceptions, expectations, receptions, and any underlying biases. This approach proves particularly valuable in addressing all research questions, with a specific emphasis on player perceptions and how they correspond to any pre-existing expectations and attitudes around Chinese-made products.

Additionally, by utilising a split cohort of players, trends could more readily observed, such as if attitudes were noticeably more positive or negative towards the titles following playtesting, further informing research question three. Finally, by comparing gameplay analyses with existing literature, netnographic data and recorded player feedback, the matter of how player interpretations align with expected interpretation can be better answered in terms of expectation against actuality.

With the methodological rationale established, Section 4.1 details the participant recruitment procedures and demographic considerations. Following on, the next section introduces the playtest (Section 4.2) starting with an explanation of participant recruitment and demographics (Section 4.2.1), leading

into clarification of the tools and software used to conduct the experiment (Section 4.2.2) and a description of the protocol for the purposes of replication (Section 4.2.3). In Section 4.2.4, the data pre-processing workflow is explained and finally, Section 4.2.5 presents the stimuli used in the playtest (that is, the three case study games). Section 4.2 essentially details the observed in-person playtesting and semi-structured interviews that yielded detailed, reflective accounts of player experience during and following gameplay. The subsequent section, Section 4.3, provides a shorter overview on netnographic data collection and the sampling strategy is introduced. The netnographic data captured organic community discourse through online reviews. Finally, the data handling section (Section 4.4) is divided into survey data (Section 4.4.1), playtest data (Section 4.4.2), and netnographic data (Section 4.4.3) which outlines transcription, thematic coding and triangulation of these data sources.

4.1 Survey design

The online survey aimed to gather information about player expectations of RPG games and their associated norms, the results of which informed the post-hoc interview questions. Surveys were created with Microsoft Forms and disseminated online through the Steam forums, Reddit, X (Twitter) and Facebook. Participants were presented with an information page and asked to agree to consent and terms (see Appendix 2). If consent was given, the participant began the survey, answering a combination of multiple choice and open-ended questions. Participants could choose to withdraw from the survey at any time without giving explanation.

The survey consisted of 31 questions (see Appendix 3) incorporating video clips with audio from five distinct video games that, based on genre analysis and existing literature (see Chapter 2 and Chapter 5), meet the criteria for RPG (broadly) and the JRPG sub-genre. The data collected aimed to clarify player expectations and conventions within the RPG genre and its derivative JRPG sub-genre from the perspective of players themselves, including whether players regarded the JRPG sub-genre a separate genre or otherwise, before concluding in exploring player expectations of Chinese RPGs (ZhRPGs).

Due consideration must be given to social desirability bias (bias that occurs

when participants want to conceal their true experiences for the sake of coming across as a “better” person), potentially impacting participant choices in survey answers, particularly when the questions are of a sensitive nature (Graeff, 2005). Furthermore, participants may show a tendency towards demand bias (bias that occurs when participants believe they know what the survey is about), which may impede data reliability (Bogner and Landrock, 2016; Mummolo and Peterson, 2019). Whilst this is more likely to impact on face-to-face interaction (the playtest), due to the open-ended nature of many of the survey questions, participants may be keen to express their views from a perspective of social issues prevalent in the games industry or gaming community at the current time. Insights gathered from the survey directly informed the structure and content of the playtest and subsequent interviews, allowing for deeper exploration of observed attitudes.

Survey participants were volunteers recruited through social media (Facebook, Twitter/X), online forums (Reddit, PC Gamer, Steam), University of Leeds mailing lists (LCS PGR, History PGR, English PGR, FAHACS PGR, Music PGR, Media PGR, PCI PGR and PRHS postgraduates, Discord channels (LUU cosy games society, LUU Nintendo and Pokémon society, LUU eSports and videogame society) and a local area Discord channel (Leeds gamer girls), as well as snowball recruitment. The survey was accessible from 16 January 2024 until 16 February 2024. Once the survey period concluded, the survey data were coded and organised in NVivo (see 4.4.2).

Participants needed to identify as having played at least one videogame in their lifetime and be aware of RPG videogames and their conventions with recruitment calls specifying a call for “fans of RPG videogames”. Potential respondents clicking on the link to the survey would land on an information page that served to explain the basis of the project, the purpose of the data being gathered and that consent for its usage could be withdrawn at any time by email; following this was a consent question, to which responding “I disagree” would exit the survey, and responding “I agree” would begin the survey, screening out anyone who did not wish to continue with immediate effect.

Of the 75 respondents, 50 identified as male (66.7%), 16 identified as female (21.3%), 7 as non-binary (9.3%) and 2 preferred not to say (2.7%). Additionally, the majority of respondents fell in the age 18-24 category (n=34, 45.3%) and age

25-34 category (n=23, 30.7%), whilst ages 35-44 accounted for 17.7% (n=21.3), and just one (1) respondent for the age groups 45-54 and 55-64 accounting for 1.3% of respondents each. Lastly, demographic nationalities were largely British, totalling 54.7% of respondents (n=41). Chinese followed with 10.7% (n=8) of respondents, then the “Other” self-defined category which included Libya, Denmark, Trinidad and Tobago, Denmark and India, accounting for 6.7% in total (n=5). American and Spanish respondents both accounted for 4% (n=3) each. Irish, French, German, Spanish, Canadian and Italian were all equally weighted at 2.7% (n=2) each. One participant conflated race and nationality, entering an invalid response (“white”) accounting for 1.3% (n=1).

Survey participants observed videoclips of not exceeding five minutes each, featuring full audio from a selection of videogames that meet the criteria for RPG and JRPG (see Appendix 3).

4.2 The playtest

As with the survey, consideration must be given to the possible influence of social desirability bias and demand bias potentially colouring participant feedback (Bogner and Landrock, 2016; Mummolo and Peterson, 2019). Such biases pose a greater risk in the playtest than in the survey owing to the physical presence of the interviewer, potentially putting pressure on participants to present themselves in a particular light.

However, whilst the survey captures self-reported expectations of RPG conventions and attitudes towards Chinese-developed games, the playtest gives insights and an opportunity to scrutinise genuine in-actu player experience that reveals negotiation, interpretation and organic responses to localised multimodal content during active engagement with videogames. The playtest is the primary site of investigating player reception, linking the expectations declared by players with the observed actuality of engagement with the games.

The quasi-experimental procedure combined observed gameplay, spontaneous think-aloud remarks, and post-hoc semi-structured interviews, intended to generate rich qualitative data that captures both immediate emotive reactions and cognitive processes and reflective responses that come after play. Triangulated with the survey and the netnographic data, the playtest

contributions to the testing of convergence, divergence and contextual nuance in play reception.

4.2.1 Recruitment and participants

An initial pilot test of one participant was conducted to test the technical set-up, tutorial section timings and efficacy of interview questions. As a result, the interview questions were fine-tuned and timings recorded to enable potential recruits' knowledge of the time commitment needed in advance of enrolment as a participant. The final data does not include the pilot test participant.

Playtest participants were unpaid volunteers recruited locally through the University of Leeds mailing lists and society emails (LCS PGR, History PGR, English PGR, FAHACS PGR, Music PGR, Media PGR, PCI PGR and PRHS postgraduates; LUU anime & manga society, LUU DiceSoc, LUU eSports society), University of Leeds' societies Discord channels (LUU cosy games society, LUU Nintendo and Pokémon society, LUU eSports and videogame society) and a local area Discord channel (Leeds gamer girls), as well as physical poster advertisements placed in three local gaming cafés and bars (Pixel Bar, Geek Retreat and Chance and Counters). Participants were required to be competent in the English language, identifying as relying mostly or solely on the use of English in videogames (see Appendix 4 and Appendix 5). Recruitment required in-person attendance at the University of Leeds campus in either Lyddon Terrace or the Parkinson Building depending on date of each playtest. Potential participants were given an information sheet and consent form and the University's research participant privacy notice for their information before committing to participate (see Appendix 6 and Appendix 7). Upon agreeing to participate, the participant chose an available time and date that suited their schedule to conduct the observed playtest.

Recruited participants consisted of 7 (64%) females and 4 (36%) males of British, Kenyan, Chinese and American nationality, of which two participants self-identified as dual heritage (American-Chinese and British-Chinese) with an age range of 20-45 years old. Participants all had some experience with videogames, and in terms of RPG genre specifically, familiarity ranged from "know of but haven't played" to "played at least 100 RPGs". Participants were randomly

divided into two cohorts that played through the tutorial phase of three Chinese-developed localised RPG videogames. One cohort was told that the games they played were Chinese-developed prior to play; the other cohort was told after the playtest. Splitting the cohort allowed for the observation of any marked differences in attitudes to the titles either before play, or after play, enabling a better-balanced representation of player sentiment.

4.2.2 Apparatus

Playtests took place in purpose-booked seminar rooms equipped with computers on-site at University of Leeds in 20 Lyddon Terrace (room 2.02a) and the Parkinson Building (room 2.16) (see Fig. 4.). Entry was exclusively restricted to participants and the researcher to minimise disturbance.

Fig. 4.3. Top: 20 Lyddon terrace, room 2.02a interior. Bottom: Parkinson building, room 2.16 interior.

A specialist gaming laptop computer was used to conduct the playtest and launch the games. The laptop was a PC Specialist brand Optimus Series laptop, featuring a 15.6” full-HD 144Hz 45% NTSC LED Widescreen monitor, an Intel® Core™ i7 Eight Core Processor 10870H (2.2GHz), 8GB of DDR4 RAM, and an NVIDIA® GeForce® RTX 2060 6.0GB graphics card. Available internal HDD space was approximately 300GB, thus for recording purposes, a further external 1TB HDD was used to provide extra file storage space in anticipation of large raw video and audio files. The laptop had the three games and recording software, OBS (Open Broadcaster Software), pre-installed for use once playtesting commenced. OBS only recorded the player’s screen and game audio, not player voice audio. Owing to the invasive noise created by the laptop’s interior cooling fans when the games were running, an external microphone with higher quality audio detection and background noise cancellation was deemed preferable.

With subsequent audio and video recording synchronisation in mind, the laptop was connected to the seminar rooms’ wall-mounted screen via HMDI cable. The screens used to observe play were 55” Panasonic TH-55LFE8-IR interactive wall-mounted displays, with accompanying audio playing through wall-mounted speakers connected directly to the screens, volume set to 65. Two Zoom 2n-4k Handy Video Recorders were set up; one facing the Panasonic screen, recording the video and audio simultaneously, the other placed beside the laptop with the camera off, near the participant to pick up participant utterings and interview exchanges (hereafter the “microphone”). The camera recording audio and play footage was set to “Tele” field of view, 1080p resolution at 30FPS, lo-cut audio filtering of 120Hz, manually set autogain of 10 and audio output at 48kHz WAV format. The microphone was set to lo-cut filtering of 120Hz, manually set autogain of eight and audio output at 48kHz WAV format.

The microphone was positioned beside the laptop, approximately 30cm from participants. Recorded audio and video were moved from the camera and microphone and saved onto an external hard drive. The video was then run through VLC media player software to create smaller MP4 and MP3 versions of the video and audio respectively for the purpose of easy upload to OneDrive for backup.

4.2.3 Protocol

In the post-hoc playtest interview, participants were presented with an information sheet providing study information and a consent form (see Appendix 6 and Appendix 7). Participants were advised that they could withdraw from the playtest prior to participation. If the participant gave their consent and wished to proceed with the study, they signed the consent form and were stationed at the laptop with the videogames for playtesting pre-installed and open broadcast software (OBS) set up ready to screen record. If the participant was in the cohort being told the games were Chinese-developed prior to play, those participants were told explicitly that they would be playtesting Chinese-developed videogames once they were seated to play and any response was noted by the researcher with pen and paper. Video and audio recording of participant in-actu was initiated in tandem with commencement of play, and analogue notations of occurrences (such as gestures or facial expressions) were made with pen and paper. Play duration lasted approximately 45 minutes, 30 minutes and 15 minutes respectively per title, totalling 1.5 hours of play time, although this duration varied according to the participant's interactions and competency with each game.

Following play of each title, participants were asked to answer four questions about that specific game which were recorded (see Appendix 8), taking note of any comments or body language/expressions in relation to the questions asked. If warranted, follow-up questions for further explication or elaboration were asked, either immediately or once all three games had been played and the playtest was concluding. Participants were free to answer as they pleased with no limitation to answer length. Concluding play, the semi-structured post-hoc interview took place, with interviews not expected to exceed 45 minutes, taking total participant time commitment expected to average at 2.25 hours. If the participant was in the cohort being told the games were Chinese-developed post-hoc, after all interview questions had been asked those participants were told explicitly that they had been playtesting Chinese-developed videogames and any response was noted. Participants played through the designated tutorial phase of three games; *Eastward* (2021), *Depersonalization* (2019) and *Honkai Impact: Star Rail* (hereafter *H:SR*; 2023).

Once the interview concluded in full, OBS, the camera and the microphone were turned off, and any additional participants comments that were not recorded but deemed relevant to the data collection were manually noted down with pen and paper (and referred back to when required during analysis).

4.2.4 Data pre-processing

Prior to data analysis, audio-visual material gathered during the playtest was pre-processed to ensure consistency and functionality, prior to any qualitative coding processes. The raw video files recorded via OBS and the Zoom 2n-4k video cameras were transferred onto an external hard drive for secure storage. Each file was labelled following a systematic, standardised naming convention comprised of “P” for participant, and a numeral (such as P1, P2) to easily and anonymously identify each participant and ensure traceability.

All raw files were converted; audio files from .wav into .MP3, and video files from .MOV into .MP4 using VLC Media Player to facilitate the file type conversion. Initially, the MP3 files were imported into Sonocent for the purpose of transcription, however, limitations of the software made apparent by an inability to decipher various global accents and layered sounds lead to the abandonment of Sonocent in favour of manually transcribing the audio files in MS Word. The audio was lightly cleaned in-line with an intelligent verbatim transcription approach to streamline conversation without reduction in content or sentiment. Notable events such as laughter or dramatic facial expressions were retained within square brackets.

Once finalised, transcriptions were imported into NVivo as individual files following the same naming convention as the audio files and video footage (P#) ready for thematic coding (see 4.4.2).

4.2.5 Stimuli

Participants played through the designated tutorial phase of three games; *Eastward* (Pixpil, 2021), Depersonalization (MeowNature, 2019) and *Honkai: Star Rail* (hereafter *H:SR*; MiHoYo, 2023). In *H:SR* (2023), the tutorial phase begins when the opening cutscene plays and concludes with the cutscene that

plays at the end of the first boss fight, taking approximately 45 minutes. For *Eastward* (2021), the tutorial phase begins when the opening cutscene concludes and ends when the character called Sam says she will “see you tomorrow!”, taking approximately twenty minutes. Finally, the *Depersonalization* (2019) tutorial phase begins when the player selects “Confirm” after being asked whether they want to enter the tutorial and then take control of the character named Star Key, concluding when the character Anan wakes up in his dormitory, with the entire sequence taking approximately fifteen minutes. Immediately after completing each game’s tutorial section, participants answered 5 questions. These questions asked players for something they liked, disliked, if they wanted to mention anything specific and whether they would play the games again and why (see Appendix 8). They then took part in a semi-structured interview once all three tutorial phases had been completed, conversation covering topics such as the characters and game world, music and sound, mechanical interactions and whether they would revisit the games played in the playtest (see Appendix 8).

The tutorial phase directly presented players with localised content, delivered through various semiotic modes via combined interactive audio-visual resources in-game. The playtest participants were presented with the in-game resources including user interface, characters, operational settings, music, audio cues and menus, as dictated by the game developer’s design. The tutorial phase guided participants to take specific actions and employ specific approaches to gameplay.

Hence, the stimuli were three interactive multimedia artefacts that included visual and auditory resources. Players needed to engage with the in-game interactive content such as navigate menus, maps, interact with non-playable characters (NPCs), environmental articles, and partake in combat in accordance with tutorial phase instructions (both explicit and implied, examples shown in Fig. 4.4, Fig. 4.5 and Fig. 4.66).

4.2.5.1 *H:SR* (2023) tutorial phase

The tutorial phase in *H:SR* (2023) begins with an FMV that leads into a didactic experience in which the player takes control of one character (Kafka) and is introduced to core mechanics such as move, sprint, and interact with environmental object. The player is guided through a series of rooms and

corridors, interacting with objects that trigger a prompt such as panels that open doors, items such as books and screens that give world-building context. The player is also introduced to the turn-based combat system, didactically intrusted on how to performs attacks and abilities by pressing certain keyboard keys or using the mouse to click certain icons, with some accompanying explanatory tooltip-style text boxes to feed the player simple instructions.

Other characters are introduced with selectable dialogue choices, allowing the player to decide on the tone of the avatar's speech (for example, of three choices, one is polite, one is rude, one is indifferent) teaching the player that, at times, they can make decisions about how narrative discourse plays out. This is followed by an explanation of arranging character team composition and switching controlled character outside of combat. Basic game-world lore threads are introduced, such as various deities and organisations which are tied into a levelling system. The levelling system features upgrade materials and passive ability cards which are introduced through the narrative and players are guided through an instance of levelling up a character using aforementioned levelling materials, as well as equipping and utilising beneficial cards. The tutorial concludes with a boss monster fight that tests the players knowledge of the combat systems that have been introduced during the tutorial phase.

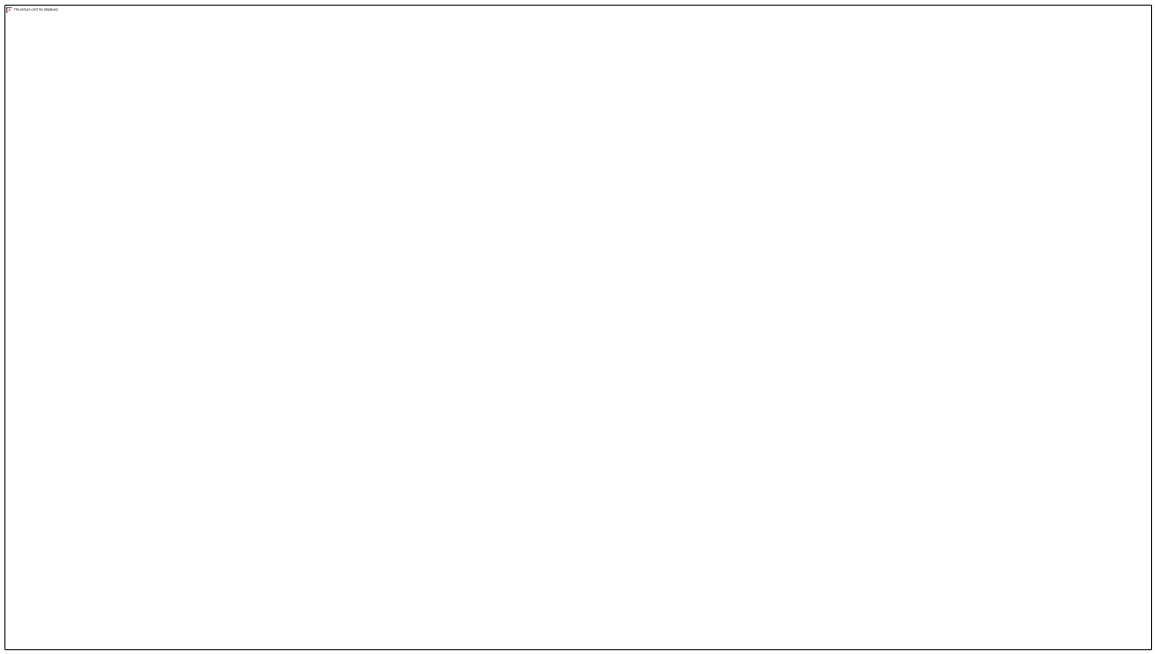


Fig. 4.4. Honkai Impact: Star Rail (MiHoYo, 2023) combat scene UI icons and menus. Screenshot captured by the author.

4.2.5.2 *Eastward* (2021) tutorial phase

The *Eastward* (2021) tutorial phase begins with a cutscene that introduces the prologue. Players take control of the main character (John) following a seamless in-game cutscene transition. Interactable objects show a prompt when approached to indicate they can be interacted with cueing the player to use a specific keyboard key or mouse button click to engage with the interactable, such as the Save Fridge (an exclamation mark icon) or doors (an enter key icon). The player can open the map or the inventory at any time after taking control of John, but the game does not explicitly tell them this. Objects in the environment allude to traversable areas, such as lamps beside tunnels that lead to other screens, or signs with arrows to make it clear a player can move in a specific direction.

Houses can be entered and exploration can lead to the discovery of boxes that when opened, contain lootable items the player can use. All items go into an inventory which the player is not explicitly taught to open, again requiring the player to experiment and learn through exploration and trial and error. The player follows a narrative thread to go to work in the mine, is introduced to further NPCs and is asked to assist in killing slugs, however, the player must complete a puzzle first to unlock the door to the mine and to open a cupboard that contains bombs. Through responding to prompts, the player connects cables to accommodate power flow and unlock the mine door as well as reach the bomb supply cupboard, allowing the player to proceed with the slug killing mission. Successfully completing the puzzles triggers an animation and a soundbite that affirms to the player they have completed an objective.

In the mine, the player wields a frying pan weapon but no explanation is given of how to use it, forcing the player to experiment with controls and find out for themselves. The UI is minimal, the health of the player character presented as hearts (in the roaming UI) or John’s avatar with hearts (in the combat UI) which deplete with damage taken. Exploring the caves and killing the slugs, areas cleared are illuminated by a lamp that conveys their completion to the player. Extra mechanics are introduced, first in the form of a slug with an extra damaging state (electrocution) and then how to drop a bomb to damage both monsters and environmental resources such as destructible nests. Exploring the caves may reward players with extra items and destructible walls are alluded to

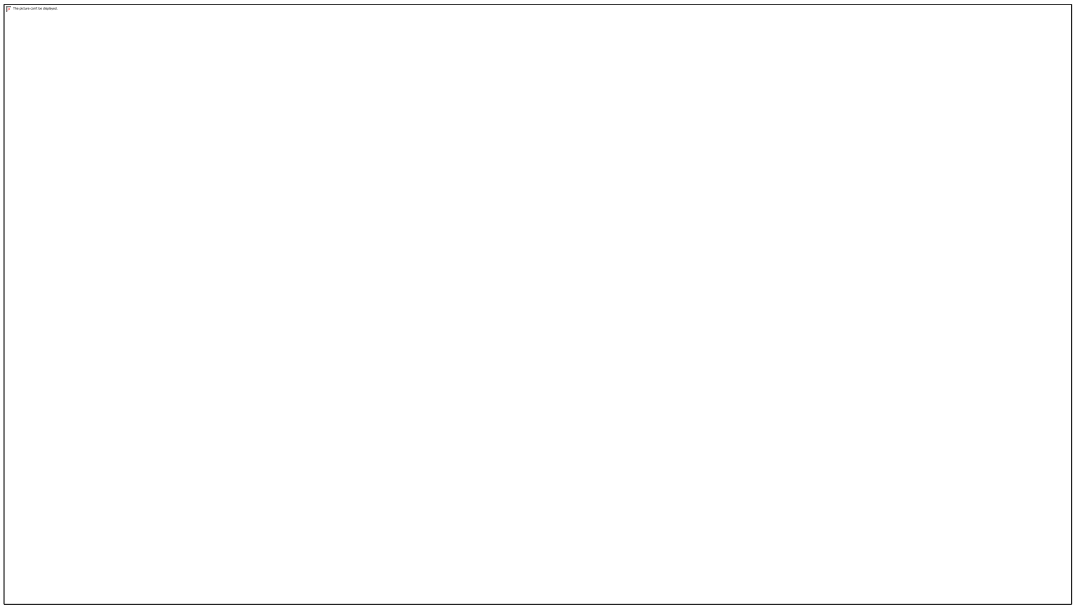
with cracks, but the game does not directly inform the player of these possible interactions.

Upon rescuing an NPC (Dr Boguta), the player is given a food article to eat which, when eaten, will restore health. The game does not directly inform the player of this, they player must learn by consuming the item, thus introducing the existence of healing consumables. Once the slugs and nests are all defeated, the player returns to the starting point of the quest and a brief in-game cutscene plays out introducing the boss of the mine and moving the narrative along leading the player to leave the mine, triggering another in-game cutscene with children NPCs. The children NPCs introduce the player to a minigame stylised like a late-80s-early-90s era turn-based JRPG (such as the first *Dragon Quest* or *Final Fantasy*) called *Earth Born*. The NPCs guide the player through the combat mechanics (such as attack, magic, flee), explaining which abilities to use and when, although use of exactly which keyboard or mouse controls to achieve this is not given. Once the minigame concludes, the Pixball minigame rewards are introduced and the tutorial section ends with the children NPCs saying goodbye and leaving the screen.

Fig. 4.5. *Eastward* (2021) roaming user interface (UI) and in-game sign-posting, the wall-light implying user accessibility for traversal without explicit instruction.

4.2.5.3 *Depersonalization* (2019) tutorial phase

Finally, Depersonalization (2019) has a slightly different tutorial approach, with a committed (but not entirely complete at the start of the playtest period) tutorial zone for teaching fundamental mechanics, and a prologue for executing those mechanics and gameplay familiarisation.



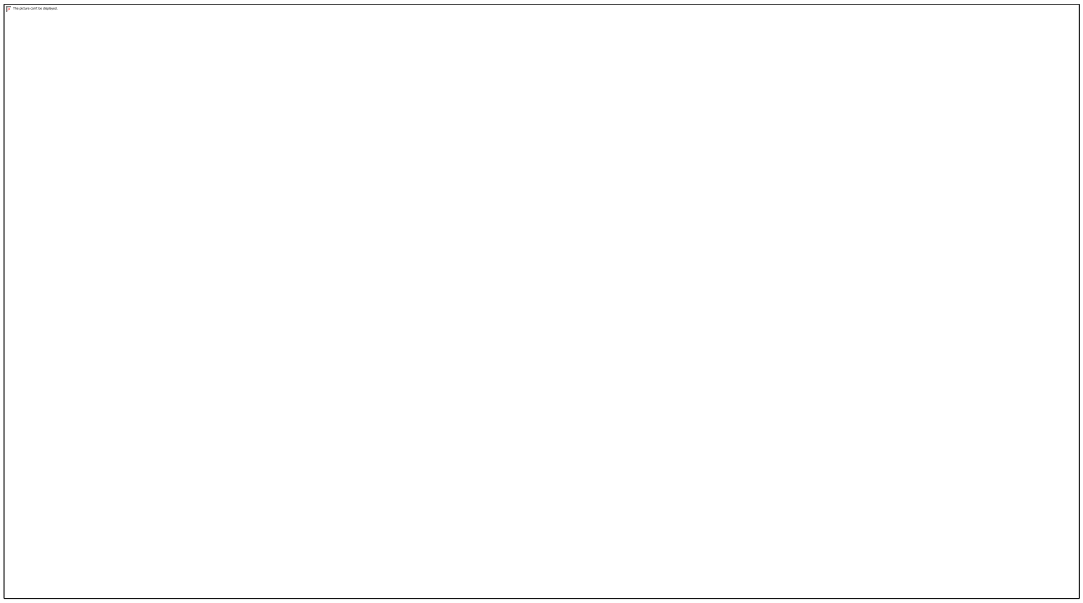


**Fig. 4.6. Top: The mechanics tutorial zone in *Depersonalization* (2019);
Middle: Tutorial zone list stating it is under development;
Bottom: The prologue tutorial menu in *Depersonalization* (2019).
Screenshot captured by the author.**

The mechanics tutorial is delivered in three parts: basic operation, character interaction, and combat (under development). Beginning the basic operation tutorial transitions with a brief introduction to the world that implies your character is newly born and needs to learn how to exist in the real world. Instructions are delivered through a combination of tool tips and an NPC (Tawil) to your player character (Star Key). The tooltips give didactic guidance, introducing how to move, open inventories and eat, although the player is also able to access any of the menus without instruction if they figure out how. Successfully completing a given task results in the continuation of prompts and dialogue.

Top left is the player character avatar featuring coloured bars signifying health and sanity, although this has not yet been explained to the player. Approaching the food, a proximity prompt triggers confirming how to pick it up using the keyboard key “F”, at which point it enters the bags in the inventory. Tawil instructs the player to open the bags, take the bread and eat it. The player is also informed that food is a healing consumable, and that various healing consumable exist that recover various (unspecified) ailments. UI icons are

present, typically featuring a relevant simplistic image reflective of the name of the menu section is leads to, such as a cog for the settings, a left-facing arrow indicating “back to previous screen”, and a satchel for bags.

Once the player has consumed bread and healed, they are given some poetic dialogue about life and emotions before being instructed to leave the room by approaching the newly spawned door and interacting with it. Trying to interact with it reveals the door to be locked, triggering dialogue from Tawil that spawns in a cabinet and is accompanied by the instructions to hold “C” which highlights interactable objects within a room. Following this, the player interacts with the cabinet and Tawil explains a “check” is needed, introducing the concept of checks; a partially luck-based odds system. The checks feature a unique UI with a 1-100 numeric value scale. The game does not explain these values or how they work at this point.

The check succeeds and Star Key find the door key, at which point the player can move to the door, interact with it and leave. Concluding this first tutorial zone, a prompt featuring two choices triggers, asking the player whether they wish to continue to another specific tutorial or not; it is not clear at this point what will happen if the player chooses not to continue with the tutorial zones, but in the interest of ensuring players in the playtest all experience (largely) the same content, playtesters will be told to continue and not exit.

Choosing to continue takes players to a book-like menu with two further options. Selecting the next option, character interaction, transitions the player to the next tutorial zone. The player character is instructed to speak with an NPC in order to get the key to the room they are both locked in, and to thus escape the room. As with objects thus far, getting close to the NPC triggers the prompt to press “F” to interact, opening dialogue which calms the NPC. Another check is triggered as Star Key must “steal” from the NPC, and success results in acquiring the key, enabling the player to unlock the door and let the NPC leave the room. Tawil informs the player they now understand the rules of the world and can leave.

Again, leaving the area takes the player to the book-like tutorial selection, which was not initially completed. The combat tutorial, once implemented, introduced a D&D-style system in which the player chooses an attack, magic or ability to use, which executes simultaneously with the monster in combat.

Approaching the monster on the screen triggers a prompt informing the player that they can leave this until later if they prefer, with options to continue (“Fight”) or exit (“Not now”). Several pop ups tell the player they have gained abilities before the first round of combat starts. Instructions for this tutorial zone are delivered by Tawil and explain attacks, weaknesses, status effects and how to throw items from the inventory.

The enemy’s next move is indicated above its head by various icons, whilst any status effects are below its feet. Hovering the mouse over the icons will create a temporary tooltip that clarifies what the icons signify, but the player is not explicitly told this. The UI is much busier than the roaming UI and features layers of subheadings, such as examples under “attack”: “unarmed attack”, “subdue”, “sacrificial strike”. Tooltips on the left of the screen explained different damage and effects caused by using the various attacks, accompanied by a percentage that implied attach landing success chance (although that was not clarified by the tutorial). Tawil guides the player through combat, instructing them on which abilities to use in order to keep up with changing status and weaknesses and introducing mechanics such as counterattacks, and eventually the monster is defeated. Players can choose to ignore Tawil’s guidance, making the fight take longer as the monster is only weak to her specified attack types in order to familiarise the player with different tools at their disposal. Concluding the tutorial Tawil tells the player they now understand the rules and laws of this world and that this “plane” has served its purpose, signifying the completion of the tutorial zones. However, Tawl does allude to potential future additions to the tutorial zones such as “traits” or “occupation” to better flesh out understanding of those systems in the onboarding process.

Moving onto the next section of the tutorial phase, the prologue. The prologue begins with a largely static image of Tawil providing some exposition, setting the tone of the game. A transition of bubbles in space takes the player to a screen describing a scene of a child placing flowers in a vase for his bedridden mother. The scene opens and dialogue between the mother (Grace) and her son (Anan) takes place, in which he is told to go to his grandpa’s office to pass on a message. Once this dialogue concludes, a full-screen menu triggers giving the player itemised, written explanations of various mechanics of play, such as “basic controls”, “dice checks” and “weapon type”. Clicking on each of these

opens a details explanation, sometimes accompanied with pictures, of each element. The game does not explicitly inform the player that this is the case, the player is expected to find out for themselves. Above the controls and mechanics listings are three other selectable menus: “audio options”, “operation instructions”, and “key settings”. “Operation instructions” is the menu the player is currently seeing, evidenced by being highlighted white, but none of these three are explained and the player must select them to verify their purposes.

Approaching interactable objects in the room triggers the interact prompt allowing the player to freely explore and loot or deposit any item they find or that exists within their bags slot. Many articles in the rooms and the corridor are interactable, such as a candle which can be taken and used to set the carpet on fire, and a painting which can be inspected to open a secret passage. The player is free to explore as much as they like. While exploring, the same character UI from the tutorial zone segments are present in the top left, showing Anan’s avatar and status bars.

Upon reaching the grandpa character’s room, an in-game cutscene triggers featuring narrative exposition that concludes the tutorial phase, and transitions to a new screen to introduce the player to a new chapter of the story.

4.3 Netnography

Netnography is a key component of this study and contributes to the current lack of user-generated data in Zh-En videogame localisation research and aims to enrich the reception-focus of this study and help demonstrate how localisation choices manifest in long-term player discourse and community knowledge-building.

Following this rationale, netnographic data were collected using Octoparse to provide a snapshot of genuine, real-world player responses (repercussions) to the case study games. Whilst the survey and playtest data are designed specifically for the project and offer answers to questions directly posed, the netnographic review data is organic, uninfluenced by the study. The data comprises details that players themselves feel worthy of the attention of other potential players such as experienced frustrations, praiseworthy highlights, interpretations shaped by genre norms and a player’s cultural norms.

Netnographic data were collected using Octoparse data scraping software from reviews of the three case study videogames played by the playtest participants, sourced from Steam Reviews in the Steam digital gaming platform and the online Google Play Store. Platform-specific workflows were created in Octoparse to extract the required fields: for Steam, these comprised the review text, date, user handle, recommendation status, and developer replies; for the Google Play Store, the extracted fields were the review text, date, user handle, and 1-5 star rating. The scraping workflow was piloted and refined to ensure consistent capture of dynamically loaded elements such as infinite scroll and pagination.

No demographic information was available due to the public nature of the dataset, and the only identifiers retained were anonymous user handles.

To account for variations in the volume of reviews in English available for each game (at time of scrape: *H:SR* = ~370,000 (exact number unavailable), *Eastward* = 1257, *Depersonalization* = 146), a sampling approach was adopted. The most recent 500 reviews for reach game were considered (all of the reviews, in the case of *Depersonalization* (2019)), encompassing all data available from 1st January 2021 to 31st December 2024, ensuring that the dataset remained comparable across games despite unequal review quantities while still offering necessary breadth for thematic and sentiment analysis. Of those 500, 75 were chosen at random using a random number generator, of which those 75 would form the final sample.

Each review typically consisted of a short to medium-length text segment, accompanied by a platform-specific player sentiment indicator (Steam: recommended/not recommended; Google Play: 1-5 stars) (there was no strictly “neutral” classification).

4.4 Data handling

Survey data, playtest interviews, and in-actu feedback were initially transcribed using an intelligent verbatim approach in the Sonocent software (as mentioned in Section 4.2.4), but then completed by hand when Sonocent proved unsuitable, and coded using NVivo (methods clarified in 4.4.1, 4.4.2, 4.4.3). The dataset incorporates netnographic data collected from Steam and the Google Play Store,

providing additional context from community discussions and enabling triangulation during the analysis stage. Thematic coding and sentiment analysis were used to investigate how localisation impacted player perceptions. The combined data were analysed inductively to explore convergence and divergence across methods, particularly addressing research questions regarding expectations, attitudes, and perceived localisation effects.

These reviews were sentence-by-sentence sentiment coded with Nvivo15's autocode function. The autocode function scans every sentence for linguistic markers associated with evaluative polarity (positive/negative adjective, adverbs, construction) and assigns a sentiment value to each (Mortelsen, 2024; Lumivero, 2025). NVivo's default output present in four categories (very positive, positive, negative, very negative) which were merged into just two simplified overarching categories (positive and negative) to allow for consistent binary coding framework across the dataset. Autocoding is not a perfect system, and although no formal accuracy test was conducted, a proportion of the auto-coded segments were reviewed during dataset familiarisation to assess acceptability in light of content that might confound the system such as sarcasm (Mortelsen, 2024). This informal sense-check suggested that NVivo's sentiment assignments aligned with researcher judgement, especially once collapsed into two polarity categories. Given that sentiment analysis only played a supporting rather in the methodology, this level of verification was deemed adequate.

Following automatic sentiment coding, data was then inductively coded in accordance with emergent themes to identify prominent issues according to community feedback; ratings of 1-3 stars represent neutral-to-negative experiences (that is to say, not positive), while 4-5 represent positive experiences. Grouping them this way follows common practices in customer experience analytics and better aligns with how users mentally interpret star ratings (Sauro and Lewis, 2012).

Table 4.1: Autocoded sentiment and user-declared recommendations and ratings visualised as values and percentages.

Game title	Positive Nvivo references	Negative Nvivo references	Recommended/ >3 star rating	Not recommended / ≥3 star rating
H:SR	42 (60%)	28 (40%)	56 (75%)	19 (25%)
Eastward	152 (53%)	136 (47%)	59 (78%)	16 (21%)
Depersonalization	148 (55%)	122 (45%)	61 (81%)	14 (19%)

After initial inductive coding, the initial codes were examined for patterns across the entire code set to determine how individual codes clustered conceptually. Following Braun and Clarke's (2017, 2022) guidance on generating themes, codes were not only counted but also compared for conceptual similarity, co-occurrence, and relational overlap within the datasets. Analysis of *H:SR* (2023) reviews yielded 25 codes, all of which were top-level owing to the brevity of many of the reviews (**Error! Reference source not found.**).

Table 4.2: H:SR (2023) review codes in order of frequency from most to least.

Code	References
Fun, enjoyment, praise for the game	41
Requests to developers	18
Game performance	15
Gameplay mechanics, systems	14
Narrative, plot, story	13
Characters, character design	13
Combat	8
Graphics and design general	8
Informing or instructing reader/wider community	6
Powercreep, new character release impact	5
Promoting or praising developer	5
Criticise other games, game industry	4
Too much effort, boring	4
Negatives about gacha games	4
Rewards, incentives, accomplishment	2
Feelings of missing out, wider social reach	2
Updating review after initial post	2
Time	1
Music, sound	1
Player voices ignored, disrespect	1
Inappropriate content, religious conflict	1
Unspecified complaint	1
Critical of or mocking other players	1
Individual significance, special event	1

The same approach was taken to the *Eastward* (2021) and *Depersonalization* (2019) sample reviews (for full results see Appendix). *Eastward* (2021) totalled 43 top-level codes (the top three: (1, n=46) Narrative, plot, story; (2, n=40) Informing or instructing readers; (3, n=36) Praise for game, fun, enjoyment) whilst *Depersonalization* (2019) totalled 41 top-level codes (the top three: (1, n=64) Translation, localisation; (2, n=42) Citing inspiration for game/content reminiscent of other media; (3, n=38) Informing or instructing readers).

Codes were tabulated and summed to determine implied importance according to examined reviewer feedback. Nvivo15 references across all three

review data sets totalled 1094. *H:SR* (2023) comprised the least at 186, *Eastward* (2021) comprised 423 and *Depersonalization* (2019) comprised 485. Coded references were tabulated and iteratively reviewed to identify groups that consistently appeared together or addressed similar underlying concepts, resulting in five overarching themes. Codes that were overly broad or ambiguous were re-examined and, where needed, split or re-named for clarity. The finalised overarching themes resulted in five stream-lined categories: (1) Narrative and Characters, (2) Gameplay Experience and Systems, (3) Visual and Audio Design, (4) Player Engagement and Sentiment and (5) Cultural and Social Context. Full datasets can be found in the supplementary material. Observation of all three sets of coded data viewed together provided key netnographic data themes which could be compared to and aligned with data taken from the survey and the playtest. Additionally, the remarks raised by reviewers in the netnographic data is compared against playtester feedback about each of three games in Chapter 6 and Chapter 7.

4.4.1 Survey data

Responses were vetted to ensure that all survey questions were answered, and respondents who left surveys partially incomplete or filled out the answers with inappropriate/insincere answers were removed (n=7), leaving 75 valid survey participants.

Data coding of the open-text questions resulted in a total of 78 codes containing 2635 references. Closed-ended questions about clips watched in the survey (Q 9, 13, 17, 21, 25; see Appendix 8) asked participants whether they believed a game to be of the genre category “JRPG” or “RPG” or “Other”, and to select from a list which of a series of features informed their decision. The features selected were coded into relevant categories: “RPG Necessities”, “JRPG Necessities”, and “Other”. As the largest values, the following **Error! Reference source not found.** illustrates the weighting of the RPG and JRPG values according to the closed-question responses received. Percentages given are out of 865 overall mentions.

Table 4.3. RPG and JRPG majority feedback and the frequency of in-game characteristics attributed to those genres/sub-genres.

In-game characteristic	RPG	JRPG
Character design (including costume, props, etc)	58 (6.7%)	162 (18.7%)
Poses/Dynamic movement	18 (2.1%)	68 (7.9%)
User interface (UI) & Menus	31 (3.6%)	99 (11.4%)
Music	18 (2.1%)	48 (5.6%)
World setting (country, time period, etc.)	29 (3.4%)	52 (6.0%)
Environmental design (the in-game stage))	46 (5.3%)	81 (9.4%)
Character dialogue	27 (3.1%)	102 (11.8%)
None	18 (2.1%)	8 (0.9%)

Where players opted to choose “Other”, participant-defined categories were entered into an open text box where they were collected and collated into a second table (see **Error! Reference source not found.**). Again, the percentages are determined as a percent of the total 191 of given replies to “Other”.

Table 4.4. Player-determined 'Other' genres and their attributed characteristics

In-game characteristic	OTHER: ARPG	OTHER: Action-adventure	OTHER: Soulslike	OTHER: Boss fighting game	OTHER: MMORPG	OTHER: MOBA	OTHER: C/ZRPG	OTHER: CHINA ARPG	OTHER: SIM	OTHER: Anime	OTHER: 3PS	OTHER: Unspecified
Character design (including costume, props, etc)	5 (2.6%)	1 (0.5%)	2 (1.1%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (1.1%)	0 (0.0%)	16 (8.4%)	1 (0.5%)	1 (0.5%)	1 (0.5%)	0 (0.0%)	6 (3.1%)
Poses/Dynamic movement	16 (8.4%)	0 (0.0%)	4 (2.1%)	5 (2.6%)	2 (1.1%)	0 (0.0%)	5 (2.6%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.5%)	1 (0.5%)	1 (0.5%)	4 (2.1%)
User interface (UI) & Menus	15 (7.9%)	2 (1.1%)	3 (1.6%)	5 (2.6%)	1 (0.5%)	1 (0.5%)	3 (1.6%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.5%)	1 (0.5%)	4 (2.1%)
Music	2 (1.1%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.5%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.5%)	0 (0.0%)	5 (2.6%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.5%)	1 (0.5%)	0 (0.0%)	3 (1.6%)
World setting (country, time period, etc.)	1 (0.5%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.5%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.5%)	0 (0.0%)	5 (2.6%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.5%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (1.1%)
Environmental design (the literal stage of the scene shown)	6 (3.1%)	1 (0.5%)	2 (1.1%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (1.1%)	1 (0.5%)	5 (2.6%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.5%)	1 (0.5%)	6 (3.1%)
Character dialogue	2 (1.1%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.5%)	0 (0.0%)	9 (4.7%)	1 (0.5%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.5%)	1 (0.5%)	4 (2.1%)
None	0 (0.0%)	3 (1.6%)	1 (0.5%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.5%)	2 (1.1%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	5 (2.6%)

Having quantified terms, an overall exact word frequency query was conducted in Nvivo15 of the open-ended questions (Q 12, 16, 20, 24, 28) to give a broader sense of participant sentiment towards genre characteristics according to their feedback. An initial frequency analysis of the most frequent 1000 exact terms yielded a high number of results with negligible values including irrelevant terms that were added to the stop list.

Following this initial step, final results were drawn from the most frequent 50 exact terms to limit noise in the data and produce a stronger set of key themes. Stop words were excluded (NVivo's default settings plus "including", "shown", "literal", "games" and "game") and terms of less than two letters. Of the 50 most frequent terms, the word cloud clearly illustrated three terms repeated with greatest frequency: Character (12119/6.1%), Design (11739/5.9%) and Costume (6419/3.2%).

Fig. 4.7. 50 most frequent terms derived from open-ended questions about in-game characteristics.

Frequent words helped to inform overarching themes as a wider part of the thematic analysis. Finally, the data was further coded using an applied inductive thematic analysis approach (outlined by Clarke and Braun, 2017, 2022), observing the recurring terms and points raised within the feedback, providing the topics for analysis via the evaluative "consequences" element of the MURR framework (see Section 3.4.1).

Themes that emerged from the inductive approach were coded in terms of genre perception and genre expectation with codes being latterly organised by reference content values. For example, the top-level code "JRPG Perceptions" yielded 19 child codes, the most referenced being "Character design, costume,

hair, names” at 46 references, the second-most referenced child code being “On-screen text, UI” with 18 references. The full list of codes can be seen in **Error! Reference source not found.**.

Table 4.5: JRPG Perceptions 21 child codes.

“JRPG Perceptions” child codes	Refs.
Character design, costume, hair, name	46
On-screen text, UI	18
Character dialogue, speech	17
Combat, skill mechanics, weapons or fighting	16
Visual aesthetics, graphics general	16
Character movement, animations	15
Music, sound	14
Settings, themes, environment	13
Story, plot	13
Number of characters available or in-play	5
Localisation, translation	5
Examples of specific other games	4
Levelling, abilities, attributes	2
Immersion, engagement	2
Magic, mysticism	1
Pop culture	1
Currency, tokens, trade	1
Camera	1
Language settings	1

Equally, RPG Perceptions top-level code also yielded 21 child codes, the most references in “Combat, skillset, weapons or fighting” followed by “Character design, costume, hair” as the second-most referenced code, tied with “Settings, themes, environments” (see **Error! Reference source not found.**).

Table 4.6: RPG Perceptions 21 child codes.

"RPG Perceptions" child codes	Refs.
Combat, skillset, weapons or fighting	17
Character design, costume, hair	14
Settings, themes, environments	13
On-screen text, UI	11
Visual aesthetics, graphics general	10
Character dialogue, speech	6
Music, sound	4
Specific RPG example given	3
Language settings	3
Camera	2
Character movement, animations	2
Developer nationality	2
Game feel	2
Immersion, engagement	2
Levelling, abilities, attributes	2
Story, plot	2
Localisation, translation	1
Playable characters	1
Player actions, choices	1
Player playstyle	1
Quality of games produced by the West	1

The same process of inductive coding was applied throughout the survey data, and the results are elaborated on in Chapter 6 and Chapter 7. The most common themes were deemed the basis for outlining what "RPG", "JRPG" and "ZhRPG" are defined by for the purposes of this study, in accordance with the prevailing participant sentiments and perceptions.

4.4.2 Playtest data

Data gathered during playtesting included recorded gameplay footage, game audio, spoken player feedback, and interview responses, with all spoken content transcribed prior to analysis. Additional analogue notes recoded with pen and paper were taken of participants' reactions (such as gestures or facial expressions) unseen by the cameras which were added into the transcriptions in

the form of notes inside square brackets. Following interview conclusion, recordings were transcribed manually transcribed into Word documents. All game save data was deleted entirely once playtesting ended for each participant. Each participant was assigned an individual folder in which all data pertaining to their playtest was stored with an assigned identifier in the format of "P" followed by a numerical value.

A total of 79011 words were transcribed from a total of 11 participant playtester interviews and coded in NVivo15, initially for sentiment. Separate Word documents for each transcript were created in which the interviewer dialogue was removed and where clarification of interviewee answers required it, partial wording from the question was included in the response inside square brackets to indicate additional context. Additionally, any off-topic discussion was removed to prevent skewing the sentiment analysis.

Having prepared the data, automated sentence-by-sentence sentiment analysis was conducted in NVivo15 for all 11 playtester transcripts collectively using the autocode wizard's sentiment coding. Sentiment data were categorised ranging from "Very negative" to "Very positive" (neutral was not an option). Transcriptions were initially analysed for overarching sentiment towards the games, rather than sentiment specific to each of the three titles as the focus of the study was more on general sentiment towards ZhRPGs more broadly. For the purposes of visual clarity, sentiments were grouped into broader categories comprising 427 positive references and 498 negative references (see Fig. 4. and **Error! Reference source not found.**), which are discussed in details in Chapter 6 and Chapter 7.

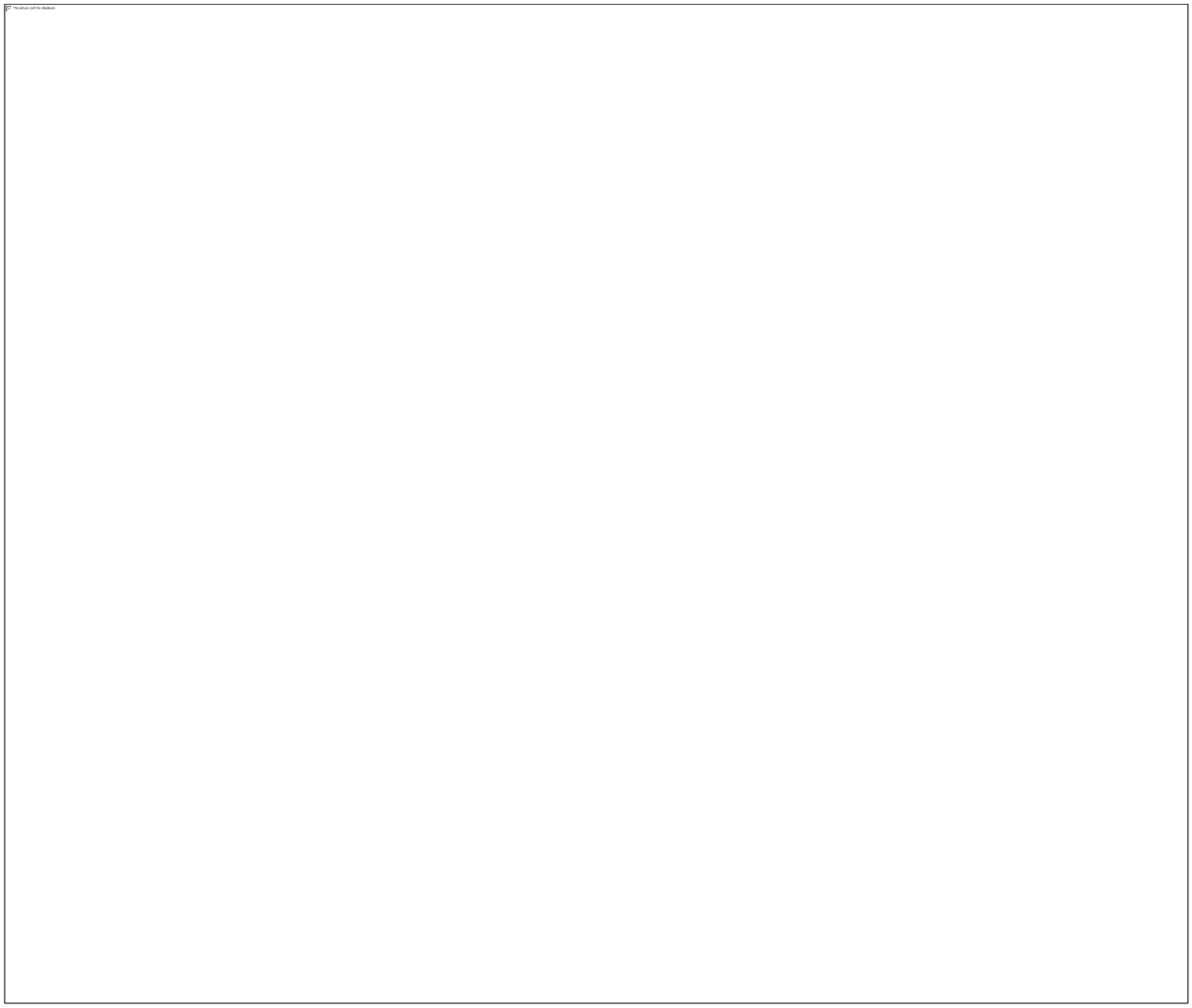


Fig. 4.8. Graph of Automated Sentiment Analysis of playtest data conducted within Nvivo15.

Table 4.7: Generalisation of Positive and Negative sentiments into two categories and the overarching sentiment for each transcript.

Playtester Transcript	Told games are Chinese	Negative Sentiment	Positive Sentiment	Key Points
P1 Transcript	Yes	22	20	More negative, generally balanced
P2 Transcript	Yes	16	15	More positive, generally balanced
P3 Transcript	No	80	65	More negative
P4 Transcript	Yes	25	30	More positive, generally balanced
P5 Transcript	No	70	35	More negative
P6 Transcript	No	105	87	More negative, generally balanced
P7 Transcript	No	18	25	More positive, generally balanced
P8 Transcript	Yes	44	70	More positive
P9 Transcript	No	111	104	More negative, generally balanced
P10 Transcript	Yes	22	15	More negative, generally balanced
P11 Transcript	No	11	13	More positive, generally balanced

Following general sentiment analysis, inductive coding was undertaken using NVivo15, with three distinct temporal gameplay states serving as the top-level code categories: pre-play, in-actu, and post-hoc. Within these pre-defined categories, each of the three videogames was listed as a child code: *H:SR* (2023), *Eastward* (2021), and *Depersonalization* (2019). Within these categories, inductively derived codes emerged that differed marginally between games depending on player feedback and game structure. Pre-play remarks accounting for nine references, in-actu segments accounting for 444 references, and post-hoc interviews comprising the largest volume with 778 references.

Individual playtester data were also coded under “Demographic”, producing five codes with 121 references in total. Demographic data taken from the 11 playtesters were used as the basis of personas for the purpose of considering player needs and expectations in the UCT audience design process, elaborated on later in this section. Playtester interview data formed the basis of the wider reception study; the role of modes and their impressions in the form of playtester Reaction and Repercussion were highlighted through use of the MURR framework. This captures player reflections after gameplay, offering insight into long-term impressions (repercussions) and overall localisation success from the user perspective, explored in Chapter 6 and Chapter 7.

Playtest data was first examined holistically by game across all play states (pre-play, in-actu, post-hoc). Following thematic coding, the resultant codes were reviewed for conceptual overlap that could be grouped into broader categories, those broader groups then summed into total instances to provide an overall summary of values in order of descending frequency, saved in excel sheet format. See **Error! Reference source not found.** and **Error! Reference source not found.** for examples. This approach generated a clearer, more organised overview of the dataset and allowed the analysis to represent broader thematic patterns rather than a large number of narrowly defined, overly-similar codes.

Table 4.8. Example of consolidated, summed codes according to game. Example given here is Depersonalization (2019).

REFERENCE TOTALS: *DEPERSONALIZATION*	
Player satisfaction	53
Characters	41
Written text or dialogue	24
Narrative	24
Music, SFX	23
Mechanics	22
Aesthetic	21
Gameplay	20
Game world	18
Controls	12
Written text	11
Player reasoning	9
Character design, art	8
Tutorial	7
Graphics	7
UI	6
Hindrances	5
Navigation	3
Immersion	3
Social	3
Colour	3
Dev software	1
Music	1
Concern for other players	1
Speech	1
Developer nationality	1
Genre	1

Following the consolidation of single game data, codes were grouped and summed across all three games according to play state (pre-play, in-actu, post-hoc) across all three games added together. **Error! Reference source not found.** illustrates this process by showing the consolidated pre-play codes and reference totals aggregated across all three games, making it possible to identify which topics emerged with greatest frequency prior to playtests commencing.

Table 4.9. Example of consolidated, summed codes according to game state illustrating aggregated total codes and references in the Pre-play state.

CONSOLIDATED PRE-PLAY	
Code	**Frequency**
Developer *(+ Developer nationality)*	3 *(2 + 1)*
Player knowledge	2
Characters	1
Art style	1
Genre	1
Music	1

Tabulating the data in this way allowed for easy visualisation of high numerical values that suggested themes and topics most prevalent in playtester data. Such an approach allowed for easier observation whether the prominence of themes (e.g. “Characters”) shifted according to different play state (from pre-play, to in-actu, and post-hoc). For stream-lining data presentation, codes with highest frequency of references dictated key themes, whilst lower-frequency codes were considered complementary (e.g. “Controls” as a primary theme, complemented by ” Navigation” as complementary). Evaluating the frequency of topics across games and states provided overall themes for analysis and discussion. Overarching themes were reduced to five to minimise noise and facilitate discussion.

The most prominent themes emerging for each game were as follows:

1. *H:SR*: Character and Narrative; Gameplay and Control Experience; Aesthetic and Audio Immersion; Cultural Representation and Social Perception; Player Satisfaction and Contextual Expectations.
2. *Eastward*: Gameplay Systems; Narrative and Characters; Audio-visual Aesthetics; Cultural Framing and Worldbuilding; Social and Emotional Responses.
3. *Depersonalization*: Player Satisfaction and Immersion; Characters and Narrative; Audio-visual Presentation; Gameplay Mechanics and Controls; Game World and Reasoning.

The most prominent themes emerging for each game state were as follows:

1. Pre-play: Game World and Cultural Context; Characters and Narrative; Audio-Visual Presentation.
2. In-Actu: Characters, Narrative and Social Context; Gameplay, Mechanics and Controls; Audio-Visual Presentation and UI; Game World and Exploration; Player Experience and Perception.
3. Post-hoc: Gameplay Systems and Mechanics; Characters, Narrative, and Player Choices; Player Satisfaction and Social Impact; Audio-Visual Presentation and UI; Game World, Culture, and Development Context.

Pre-play themes number only three owing to limited data in that game state (playtesters had little to say prior to initiating play). Five core themes that emerged in both game specific and game state themes were: (1) Characters and Narrative, (2) Gameplay/Mechanics/Controls, (3) Audio-Visual Presentation, (4) Game World and Cultural Context, and (5) Player Satisfaction/Experience. These themes are examined against the themes emerging from the playtest data in the Chapter 6, and Chapter 7.

Elaborating on the creation of player Personas required for UCT audience design, player data collected from playtesters that demarcates age, gender, nationality and familiarity with the RPG genre serves to inform the personas, supplemented by empirical data provided by playtesters during the interviews. Two entirely fictitious personas were created from playtester data, including one familiar with RPGs broadly, and one specifically familiar with ZhRPGs, seen below in **Error! Reference source not found.** and **Error! Reference source not found.**. These two personas represent distinct player types, demonstrating the diversity of player needs, expectations, and preferences regarding localisation and genre conventions. One persona is designed to reflect familiarity with Chinese-developed games, providing a targeted lens for interpreting culturally specific responses. The other is representative of an experience Anglophone player without significant familiarity with China or Chinese games but has significant familiarity with games produced in the USA and Japan. These two personas highlight the different expectations, playstyles, and cultural

influences that can shape player experiences and preferences, illustrating divergence and convergence between the two.

These personas were not intended to represent demographic groups as such, but were analytically constructed from recurring patterns identified in participant demographics, gaming histories, language use, and responses during the playtesting and interviews. In accordance with audience design, they were developed to represent a singular model comprised of player characteristics repeatedly associated with interpretive behaviours and expectations. Thus, they function as heuristic models of likely player positions akin to the “implied player” or ideal player, rather than representations of actual users. Nationality alone was not determinative. Instead, the personas demonstrate familiarity with certain gaming cultures, genres, and linguistic practices, reflecting this study's position that player reception is shaped by prior experiences and cultural schemata rather than nationality, thus Persona 1’s Chinese identity is not their defining characteristic. As English often functions as a lingua franca in global game markets, many players engage with English localisations regardless of their first language. In both this study and professional localisation contexts, personas provide a practical audience-design tool that helps identify how different player groups may interpret localised content, highlighting potential schema misalignments and informing decisions intended to improve player comprehension, immersion, and engagement beyond the source culture context.

Table 4.10. Persona 1, player familiar with ZhRPGs and mobile games who plays games in languages other than English.

	Persona 1: Familiar with Chinese Games
Name:	Boyang Zhang
Age:	25
Gender:	Female
Education:	MA student, English literature
Nationality:	Chinese
Gaming Experience:	Primarily plays visual novels and RPGs. Familiar with RPG genre but has played only a few RPGs. Comfortable with controllers rather than keyboard and mouse. Has played games like *Persona 5* (Atlus) and *Final Fantasy* (SquareEnix). Likes pixel art and story-driven games but not necessarily mainstream or well-known RPG franchises. Exposure to Chinese mobile games like *Genshin Impact* (MiHoYo) and familiar with Xianxia-style RPGs. Prefers games with simpler UI and less complexity. Interested in games with narrative elements but may skip non-essential story parts. Plays games in English, Mandarin Chinese and Japanese.
Gaming Preferences:	Enjoys story-rich games, especially visual novels and pixel-art style games. Has moderate RPG experience, not deeply into complex systems. Likely to be a casual gamer with interest in Asian-style games.
Relevant Data found in transcripts:	P1, P2, P4, P6, and P7 transcripts all feature female Chinese players familiar with RPGs and Chinese games. P6 specifically references playing MiHoYo games and Chinese mobile games.

Table 4.11. Persona 2, player familiar with RPGs that plays games in English only.

	Player Persona 2: Experienced Western RPG Gamer
Name:	James Smith
Age:	29
Gender:	Male
Education:	PhD student, Engineering
Nationality:	British
Gaming Experience:	Extensive experience with RPGs, including Western RPG franchises like *Skyrim* (Bethesda), *Fallout* (Bethesda), *Baldur's Gate 3* (Larian). Has played 10-20 RPGs or more, including modding (custom-made game modifications) activity. Familiar with PC and console gaming, switching between platforms like PS3, PS4, PC. Familiar with PC and console gaming, switching between platforms like PS3, PS4, PC. Prefers RPGs with complex mechanics, character customization, and tactical combat. Enjoys games with deep narrative and strategic gameplay. Plays both single-player and multiplayer, with interest in sci-fi and action genres. Avoids microtransactions, prefers full-price games. Plays games only in English.
Gaming Preferences:	Likes immersive storylines and character-driven experiences. Enjoys tactical and tabletop-inspired combat systems. Interested in both classic and modern RPGs, including JRPGs (such as *Octopath Traveler* (SquareEnix)). Plays a variety of genres but RPG remains core interest.
Relevant Data found in transcripts:	P5, P8, P9 transcripts provide insights into this kind of player: male, British, experienced with RPGs, modding, and complex gameplay. P8 specifically mentions liking *Baldur's Gate 3* and tabletop-style combat.

Having collated the netnographic data and the emergent themes from the playtest data, the overall themes/topics were consolidated for closer examination in the discussion chapters. These prominent themes have been parsed into two upcoming chapters; the non-interactive (Chapter 6) comprising the themes narrative and characters, visual and (written) audio representation, and cultural and world context; and, the interactive (Chapter 7) comprising the themes gameplay, systems, and mechanics, and player experience and engagement.

A flowchart of the overall pipeline illustrating design and data collection of each data source can be seen here (see Fig. 4.):

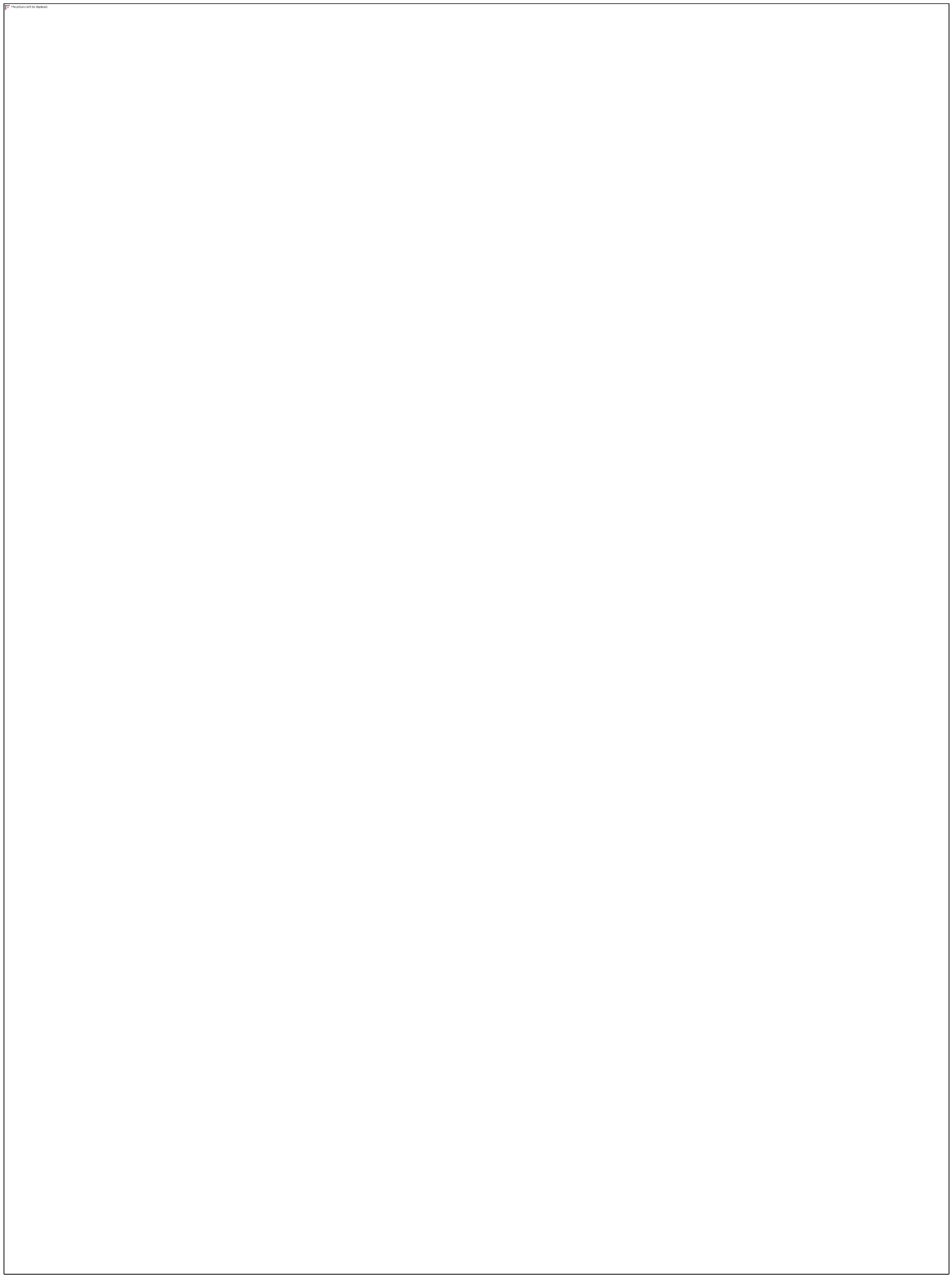


Fig. 4.9. Data collection flowchart illustrating the sources and methods of data gathered.

4.4.3 Netnographic data

Once extracted, all gathered netnographic data were exported in CSV format, converted into Excel format and stored securely on OneDrive. A light cleaning process was then applied to remove entries containing only emojis, single-word comments (e.g., “good,” “trash”), or unintentional duplicated user posts. The Excel document containing the reviews was then imported into NVivo for qualitative analysis. An inductive thematic coding process was applied to the dataset, with each review coded line-by-line to identify recurring ideas, evaluative statements, and references (such as comments on gameplay, localisation, narrative). Once initial codes were generated, they were reviewed for conceptual overlap and consolidated into broader thematic categories to reduce redundancy and allow patterns to be examined at a higher level of abstraction. The frequencies of individual codes within each merged category were totalled to provide an overall indication of how often particular issues, sentiments, or experiences were mentioned across the dataset. This process enabled the identification of dominant trends in organically produced player feedback and facilitated comparison with findings from the survey and playtest datasets.

Anonymised datasets are provided (see supplementary material) to illustrate the typical structure and linguistic characteristics of scraped data. Ratings were also collected to observe alignment between sentiment coding and user-declared positive or negative sentiment (see **Error! Reference source not found.**). Values are also presented with percentages to allow for clearer at-a-glance comprehension. The aim of the netnographic data was to capture the long-term player reactions and repercussions to localised videogames, helping to map such reactions against the modes present in the videogames to evaluate which resources most influence player perception.

In summary, the systematic handling of netnographic data, survey responses, playtest interview transcripts, and gameplay observations ensures a robust and transparent foundation for analysis. The integration of sentiment analysis and inductive thematic coding has yielded a rich and nuanced dataset, reflective of both in-actu reactive and post-hoc reflective player perspectives. Chapter 6 and Chapter 7 presents the analyses derived from these insights, exploring how

player feedback intersects with localisation strategies and genre expectations to address the study’s core research questions.

Chapter 5 The three games and the implied player

This section examines the Chinese source and English target versions of the tutorial phase of the three chosen case study ZhRPGs: *Honkai Impact: Star Rail* (*H:SR* (2023)*,* triple-A budget), *Eastward* (2021) (indie budget, professional localisation)and *Depersonalization* (2019) (indie budget, non-professional localisation/professional re-localisation), highlighting key challenges across semiotic channels.

As outlined in Chapter 5, these three games form the core case studies for the playtest phase and subsequent semi-structured interviews. Therefore, it is necessary to dedicate a full chapter to examining their tutorial phases since, not only is the tutorial the portion of the game that participants will directly engage with, but it is the section of play the developers will have polished most highly as the onboarding process of the game (Benvenuti et al., 2023). Analysing the content of these tutorials allows for scrutiny of the localisation strategies used, the semiotic resources mobilised across channels, and the broader production contexts that shape the player experience. Unlike the empirical data collection methods outlined in Chapter 4, this chapter adopts a descriptive comparative analysis of source and target game content. The purpose is not to evaluate localisation quality against a prescriptive standard, but to identify and describe localisation choices, semiotic resources, and potential sites of interpretive friction that may later shape player reception. Where comparison with the Chinese source text is necessary, DeepL is used as an analytical aid owing to its bold claims as the “World's Most Accurate Translator” (DeepL, 2026). The resulting translations are not treated as authoritative substitutes for the source text, but as reference points that allow for the observation of localisation decisions.

5.1 Introducing the three case studies: the rationale

Each of the chosen ZhRPGs was selected according to limited criteria; (1) developed by Chinese companies based in mainland China, (2) different production budgets, (3) Chinese-English localisation, and (4) largely positive online player reviews. These criteria were intended to ensure relevance to the study's focus on Chinese-developed games while capturing variation in

production context and localisation practice, whilst also minimising the influence of factors such as poor critical reception or non-English target markets.

The first title, *H:SR* (2023), developed by Shanghai-based MiHoYo/Hoyoverse, qualifies as a triple-A (or AAA) game. In a light-hearted shorthand, Yu and Hong (2024) remark that means "*A* lot of time; *A* lot of money; *A* lot of resources" (emphasis added, 2024, p. 89), reflective of the high production and market value of such games. Although there is no official disclosure of production cost from the developer, *H:SR* (2023) has a high production budget evidenced by the production pipeline, the estimated expenses of a sizable staff needed to support long-term live-service content, cross-platform development and features in-game that flag high-end production values such as dubbing, FMV cinematics, and fully original musical scores; all typical features of a triple-A title in the contemporary videogame industry. As both developer and publisher, MiHoYo has full control over localisation of the game and employs qualified translation professionals to localise it into 13 different languages (see Section 5.3). *H:SR* (2023) is available on PC (HoYoPlay), mobile (Google Play Store), and PlayStation (PlayStation Store), but the reviews assessed for selection are exclusively the Google Play Store reviews, scored 4.2 out of 5 stars at time of data collection (January 2025).

Eastward (2021) is developed by Shanghai-based Pixpil and is an indie game; "indie" being a commonly used etymologically-derived term in videogames that is an abbreviation for "independent". The term is not without contention as Garda and Grabarczyk (2016) suggest the term does not have a single definition but rather alludes to three different types of independence (financial independence (developer-investor), creative independence (developer-audience), and publishing independence (developer-publisher) (p. 1)). However, for the purpose of this thesis, "indie" signifies a developer that typically has a small team size, has limited resources (low budget) and has either no publisher, or a publisher with little or no involvement in the production of the game (Fiadotau, 2018). In *Eastward*'s (2021) case, the publisher has limited involvement but was responsible for sourcing the localisation professional who used a what-you-see-is-what-you-get (WYSIWYG) translation context assistance tool (see translated email between Jemma Stafford and Oran, 16 March 2023 in Appendix). *Eastward* (2021) is available on PC (Steam) and Nintendo Switch (Nintendo

eShop) with review scores taken from Steam at time of data collection (January 2025) being “very positive” (on a scale of overwhelmingly negative, very negative, mostly negative, mixed, positive, very positive and overwhelmingly positive). Steam scores are derived percentages from total positive submitted user reviews (Steam Support, n.d.).

Depersonalization (2019) is an indie game developed by MeowNature and although professing to be China-based, a specific town or city location is not confirmed (although their publisher, Gamera Games, is Shanghai-based). This low budget indie game has a unique localisation trajectory, starting out with a non-professional MT-assisted approach with community crowd-sourced content and post-editing, to one of full professional revision, offering a rich site for examining player reception of changing content within one game’s ecosystem. The developer themselves initially sourced a non-professional localiser, whereupon they further invited players to submit corrections and changes to the translation. However, with the v1.5.49 update, the game began being updated with full professional re-localisation arranged by their publisher, Gamera Games. The game is exclusively a PC game (Steam) and review ratings were “very positive” at time of data collection (January 2025).With this context established, it is therefore pertinent to highlight the role of the tutorial phase as the player’s first structured encounter with the games. The importance of the tutorial phase cannot be overstated. It serves as the onboarding process, aiming to teach players the basic mechanics of operation while also drawing them into the gameplay loops and narrative that propels the RPG forward (Benvenuti et al., 2023).

If the tutorial fails to meet any of these core objectives, the likelihood of player disengagement increases, often resulting in lacklustre experiences and negative repercussions. The tutorial phase in a videogame is a critical component of player onboarding, engagement, and retention. While its primary function is to teach players how to interact with the game’s mechanics and systems, it also sets the tone, introduces aesthetic and thematic elements, and fosters emotional investment. Tutorials introduce players to mechanics, which are the foundational rules and interactions that define gameplay. Sicart (2008) defines mechanics as “methods invoked by agents, designed for interaction with the game state,” while Järvinen (2007) categorises them into primary (core actions required for in-game

progression), secondary (support mechanics such as crafting or inventory management), and contextual types (trigger only under special circumstances, such as proximity-triggered prompts).

White (2014) identifies two main tutorial types: didactic, which rely on direct instruction, and exploratory, which encourage learning through trial and error. The choice between which of these approaches is adopted by developers depends on genre norms and player expectations. Kramarzewski and De Nucci (2023) argue that tutorials should blend seamlessly into gameplay, offering goal clarity, feedback, and a gradual introduction of new features and mechanics. They outline three teaching strategies: in-game (such as beginner's training), indirect (such as environmental cues), and external (such as manuals or online wikipedias).

A well-designed tutorial is equally crucial for cultivating immersion and sustained engagement, the conditions under which Csikszentmihalyi's (1991) "flow" state emerges. In this state, players become so deeply focused that external time and space effectively disappear. This state of optimal experience requires a balance between challenge and skill. If the tutorial is too difficult or too vague, players can become anxious or bored and abandon the game, a result of disrupted flow (Chen, 2007). Tutorials also need to manage cognitive load effectively. Overloading players with information can lead to frustration, whereas careful pacing and the use of multimodal inputs enhances learning (White, 2014). This aligns with the cognitive theory of multimedia learning (Mayer, 2009), which suggests that combining visual, auditory, and interactive elements improve retention.

Tutorials also reinforce or challenge player schemata; the mental models built from prior gaming experiences. DiMaggio (1997) and Wood et al. (2018) describe these as cultural schemata that shape how players interpret and respond to game content. A tutorial that aligns with or gently subverts these expectations can enhance immersion and satisfaction. From a localisation perspective, the tutorial phase holds particular significance as it is typically the first segment of a game that new players encounter. As such, it is often the most polished, rigorously refined, and extensively playtested portion of the game (Brownwell, 2024; Benvenuti et al., 2023). This makes it a critical showcase for developers, offering an opportunity to present the highest standard of gameplay,

localisation quality, and user experience. Ideally, the tutorial serves as a compelling introduction that encourages continued engagement.

5.2 Introducing the tutorial phases and their teaching approaches

Briefly, the tutorial phase of each game forms the temporal and spatial domain that defines the playtest. In *H:SR* (2023) - the first case study game - the tutorial phase begins when the player first logs in and the opening cutscene plays and concludes with the cutscene that plays at the end of the first boss fight (**Error! Reference source not found.**). The sequence takes approximately 45 minutes to complete, although the duration varies depending on player preferences (as is the case with all three case studies).

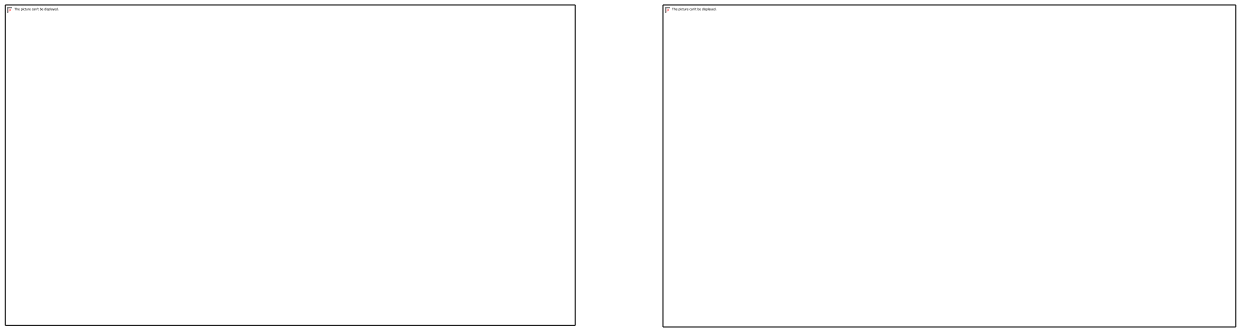


Fig. 5.1. Left to right: Start of *H:SR* (2023) tutorial phase; End of *H:SR* (2023) tutorial phase.

The tutorial in *H:SR* (2023) exemplifies White's (2014) didactic tutorial type, relying heavily on direct instruction through voiceovers, UI prompts, and scripted sequences. This aligns with Kramarzewski and De Nucci's (2023) in-game teaching strategy, in which players are guided through mechanics via structured gameplay rather than external resources. The mechanics introduced, such as turn-based combat and character switching, fall under Järvinen's (2007) classification of primary mechanics, as they form the core of the gameplay experience. These are presented with goal clarity and feedback, supporting Kramarzewski and De Nucci's emphasis on seamless integration and gradual complexity.

In the second case study, *Eastward* (2021), the start of the tutorial phase is marked by the moment the player finishes watching the opening cutscene and is required to interact with the on-screen visual-verbal dialogue on-screen to

progress. It concludes when the character Sam says she will “see you tomorrow!” (see Fig. 5.1), with the entire sequence taking approximately twenty minutes.

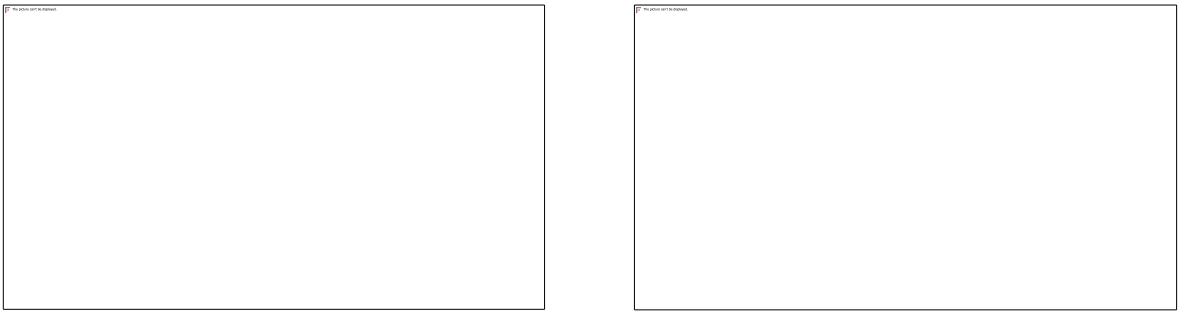


Fig. 5.1. Left to right: Start of the *Eastward* (2021) tutorial phase; End of *Eastward* (2021) tutorial phase.

Eastward’s (2021) tutorial phase reflects White’s (2014) exploratory tutorial type, encouraging players to learn through trial and error rather than explicit instruction. This reflects Kramarzewski and De Nucci’s (2023) indirect teaching strategy, where environmental cues and character interactions guide player learning. The mechanics introduced, such as puzzle-solving and item interaction, are often secondary or contextual in Järvinen’s (2007) terms, embedded within narrative and aesthetic resources rather than isolated gameplay systems. This approach supports genre expectations for retro-style RPGs, where discovery and immersion are central to player engagement.

Finally, in *Depersonalization* (2019), the tutorial phase begins when the player selects “Confirm” after being asked whether they want to enter the tutorial and then take control of the character named Star Key. The phase concludes when the character Anan wakes up in his dormitory, with the entire sequence taking approximately fifteen minutes (Fig. 5.2).

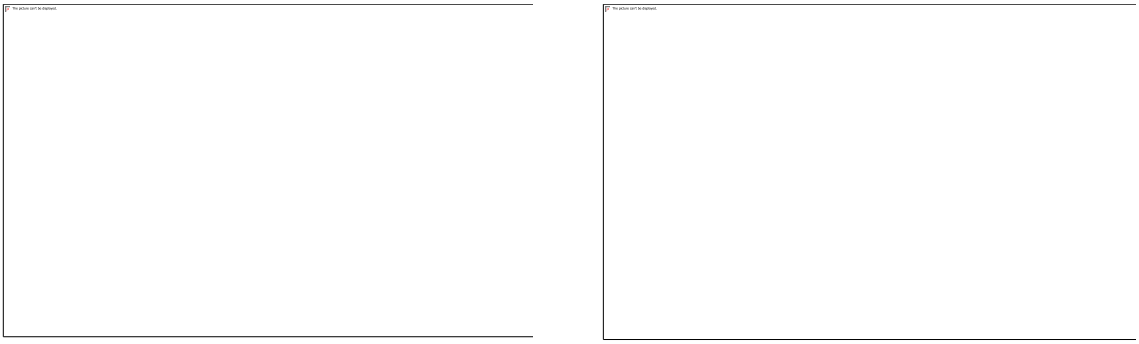


Fig. 5.2. Left to right: The start of *Depersonalization*'s (2019) tutorial phase; End of *Depersonalization* (2019) tutorial phase.

Depersonalization's (2019) tutorial phase presents a hybrid of White's (2014) didactic and exploratory models, offering an optional entry point and minimal guidance (since the tutorial can be skipped) in line with Kramarzewski and De Nucci's (2023) external teaching strategy, where players may rely on community resources or wikis to understand mechanics. The tutorial introduces contextual mechanics (Järvinen, 2007), such as narrative triggers and mood-setting interactions, which are less about system mastery and more about thematic immersion.

These three games are examined in closer detail throughout the remainder of this chapter and form the basis of discussions emergent from playtest data discussed in Chapter 6 and Chapter 7.

5.3 Localisation approaches: *H:SR* (2023)*, Eastward* (2021) and *Depersonalization* (2019)

Starting with *H:SR* (2023), the highest budget game in the study, official information regarding MiHoYo's localisation practices remained limited, and direct enquiries via email were unanswered. As a result, examination of the game's resources and localisation strategies drew on MiHoYo's Chinese and English websites and third-party literature. To appeal to a global audience, MiHoYo claimed to take inspiration from real-world cultures, designing in-game regions that evoked settings such as medieval Europe and Ancient China. This cultural influence was conveyed through costume design, environmental aesthetics, and musical composition, contributing to a diverse and globally resonant game world (Hoyoverse/MiHoYo 2024).

H:SR (2023) aligns with Walkowitz's concept of "born translated" (2015) in which a cultural work is created with global multilingual circulation from the outset, with global localisation embedded at the start of development. This resulted in iconography and language tailored for cross-cultural accessibility and ease of comprehension, reflecting game development featuring design that anticipated international audiences from the start of the development cycle. Visuals, UI and audio were intentionally chosen to easily bridge linguistic and cultural contexts, with the game released in thirteen languages, including full dubbing in Chinese, Japanese, English, and Korean. Reflecting its international orientation, MiHoYo employs a decentralised remote network of localisers based worldwide, prioritising native speakers of the target language, a common practice regarded by Newmark as the only "natural" means of accurately and most effectively translating, lest it result in "many people's hilarity" (1988, p. 3). However, scholars such as Mandiberg (2015) and Venuti (1995) may disagree with such a position, as trace evidence of the source culture (such as through unidiomatic phrasing) arguing instead that it highlights the identity of the text and that privileging of native-speaker fluency assumes that naturalness should be the dominant measure of translation quality, overlooking how "fluency" may erase markers of cultural origin.

Recruitment posts on LinkedIn indicate that localisation personnel are hired based on minimum criteria, including a bachelor's degree, native-level fluency in at least one target language, deep familiarity with anime and gaming cultures, and strong awareness of local player preferences (Fig. 5.3).

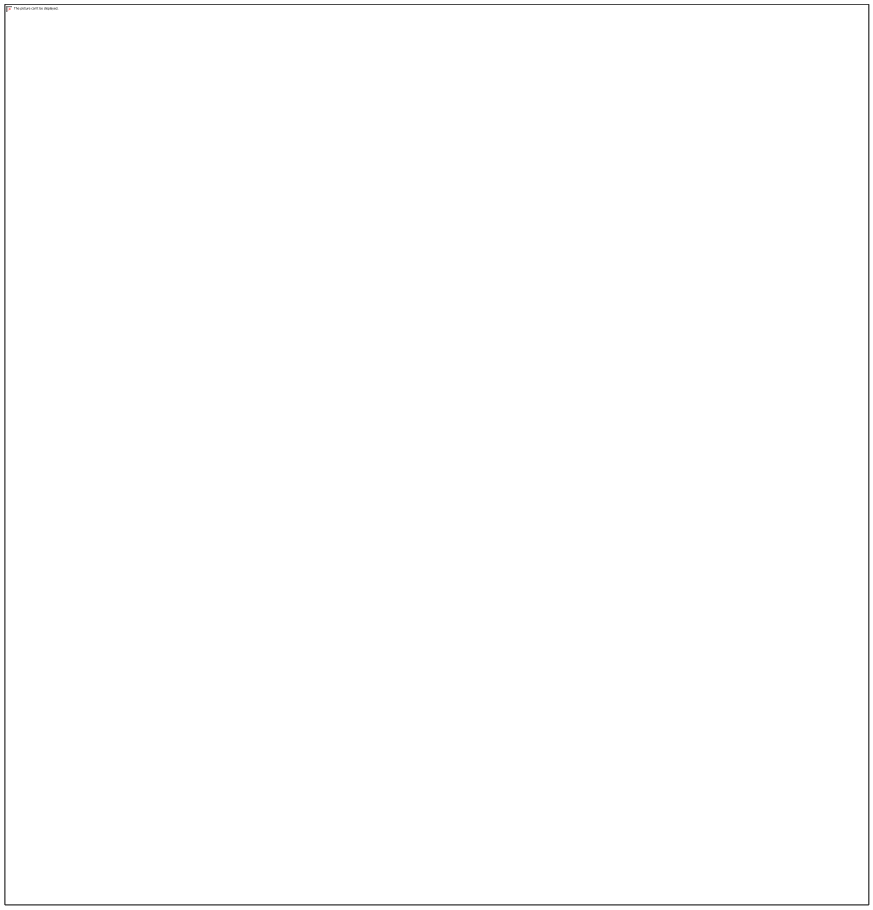


Fig. 5.3. MiHoYo recruitment requirements for Zh-En localisers advertised on LinkedIn, 2022.

The use of internal style guides to ensure consistency cannot be unconfirmed from either the job description of available company literature online, and localisation quality assurance (LQA) processes are unknown for the same reasons.

Because the localisation approach is unclear and the workflow cannot be assumed, the use of MT translations will feature in the assessment of the three games' content throughout this chapter to provide an extra evaluative angle and to help determine whether MT is likely to have been used in the workflow, as well as serving as a comparative tool to evaluate human localisation techniques. MT provides both a diagnostic baseline and serves as a comparative tool. If MT output closely resembles the final in-game text, it may signal the presence of MT-assisted output or MTPE approaches, whilst juxtaposing *H:SR*'s (2023) published renderings with MT outputs makes it easier to identify departures from literal translation that highlights human decision-making (Castilho et al., 2017).

Eastward (2021) was an indie title developed by the small Shanghai-based team Pixpil. Development took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, which required the development team to shift to remote operations. In an email correspondence (Oran, 2023, see Appendix 9), the developer confirmed that the game was designed from the outset with English localisation in mind, making it, in essence, a “born-translated” title. Like *H:SR* (2023), *Eastward* (2021) was simultaneously released in both Chinese and English, with localisation occurring in parallel with development. The localisation was handled by a professional localiser sourced through the agency One Sky (credited) and supported by Pixpil’s in-house “What You See Is What You Get” (WYSIWYG) tool. This tool allowed the localiser to view scenes and translations in real time, with additional context provided by the development team through video clips to support accurate and context-sensitive translation (Fig. 5.4).

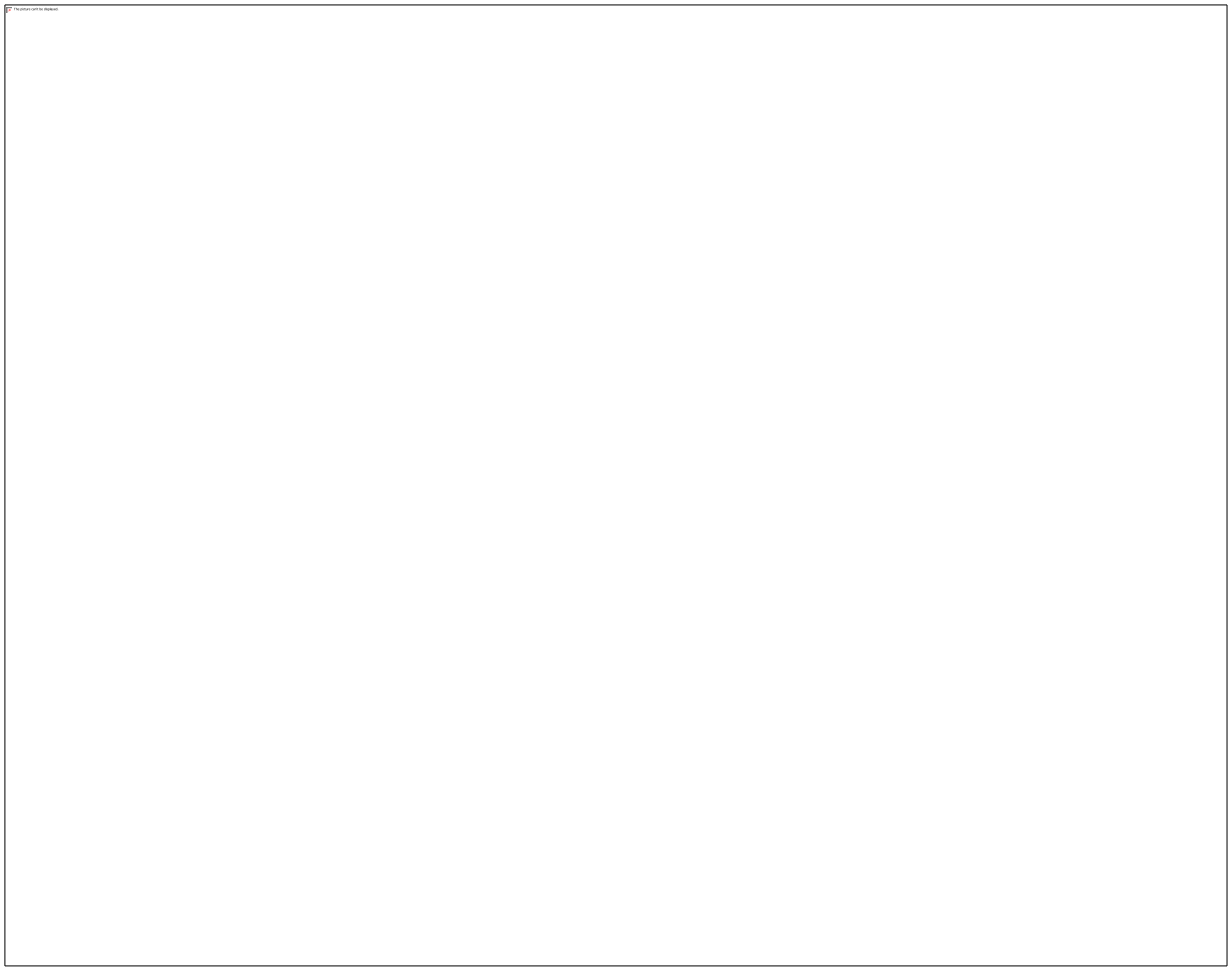


Fig. 5.4. Screenshot of the WYSIWYG tool created and used by Pixpil in the localisation of *Eastward* (2021), provided courtesy of Pixpil.

The developers themselves did not have direct input in selecting their localisation professional, but they did provide requirements for the localiser's expertise, stating that knowledge of videogames was essential and the ability to rewrite humorous sequences was of paramount importance (see translated email between Jemma Stafford and Oran, 16 March 2023 in Appendix 9). Although the localiser is credited, it was not possible to contact them directly to confirm their use of computer-assisted translation (CAT) tools or other assistive software, or to determine whether they followed any guidelines or pre-determined principles from the developer. However, the use of the WYSIWYG tool likely reduces the need for a separate localisation quality assurance (LQA) process, as it allows the localiser to address truncation issues directly. Nevertheless, this does not eliminate the need for broader localisation quality assurance processes, particularly those relating to linguistic quality, consistency, and independent review. It is not known whether a style guide was used, and no mention of one was made, nor was there any mention of a second reviewer ("second pair of eyes").

Depersonalization (2019) is the lowest-budget game among the case studies and underwent a notable shift in its localisation approach during the quasi-experimental playtesting period. Initially, the English version (present in v1.5.32) relied on a non-professional translation produced by a developer's family member, which was supplemented by crowd-sourced proofreading and revisions via a public Discord channel and the Steam forum during its Early Access phase (*Depersonalization* Discord channel, 2019). This version was later re-localised by a professional localiser ahead of the game's full release (present in v1.5.49). The retranslation presents an unusual issue and an opportunity from a research standpoint with the existence of two different English versions of the game. While the present study focuses on player reception of the available localised versions, a systematic comparison of the original localisation and subsequent professional retranslation could provide further insight into how retranslation influences player reception, but is beyond the scope of this present study.

According to correspondence with the developer (CocoLa, 2023, see Appendix 10), English localisation had been planned from the outset of development, as was the case with *H:SR* (2023) and *Eastward* (2021), but unlike those titles, it followed the Chinese release and did not launch simultaneously.

The retranslation of the initial English version was managed by the publisher, Gamera Games, who selected localisers based on their familiarity with videogames, prior localisation experience, and knowledge of the table-top roleplaying game (TTRPG) *Call of Cthulhu* (Chaosium, 1981) (email correspondence between Jemma Stafford and CocoLa, 22 March 2023, see Appendix 10). While localisers were able to request additional context, no formal style guides were provided. Although the developer did not confirm the use of machine translation, its involvement could not be definitively ruled out as they neither confirmed nor denied its inclusion.

5.4 The struggle of equivalent effect

This section provides an overview of localisation challenges and potential approaches observed in the tutorial phases, structured according to their two contributory modes: the interactive and the non-interactive (see Chapter 3). Additionally, observations are compared with feedback from the P1 survey, which informed this study by highlighting player expectations of RPGs. To conclude the overview, the "ideal player" is identified based on the content observed in accordance with Suojanen et al.'s framework (2014) (see Chapter 3).

As noted in Section 5.3, the analyses presented in this section will draw on MT outputs. These outputs will serve as a point of comparison that helps determine whether MT is likely to have been used in the workflow, as well as serving as a comparative tool to evaluate human localisation techniques.

When comparing the official localisation to MT outputs, the challenges faced in translation become even more apparent. MT renderings often default to literal or overly generalising translations, which can strip away the intertextual nuance and thematic resonance of the original causing tonal shift or even incoherence. However, MT can still offer a useful baseline, especially when references are globally recognisable or when the original phrasing is straightforward. In such cases, MT may produce surprisingly accurate results that require minimal adjustment. It is possible to navigate these challenges by carefully selecting references that are broadly familiar across both source and target cultures, enabling relatively direct localisation without sacrificing narrative coherence or

immersion. This approach highlights the importance of human oversight in preserving the layered embedded meanings present in the visual-verbal, something that MT alone cannot consistently achieve.

5.4.1 The challenges of pop-culture

Because pop-culture-rich games rely heavily on intertextuality, genre conventions, and multimodal storytelling, localisation must account for how pop-cultural meaning is constructed visually, verbally, and aurally. The following section examines how pop-culture references and pop-culture-derived genres (science fiction, Lovecraftian horror, Japanese anime-esque aesthetics) create specific translation challenges across visual-verbal, visual non-verbal, audio-verbal and narratively embedded resources.

The visual-verbal and visual non-verbal resources must complement each other, as well as the accompanying audio-verbal and audio-non-verbal components, to ensure a cohesive and immersive player experience. Beginning with the visual resources, visual-verbal resources are prominent in *H:SR* (2023), a game characterised by its dialogue-heavy and text-rich design. Voiced dialogue is addressed separately in the audio-verbal section. Character dialogue presents a unique challenge because each character's distinct personality is conveyed through both audio and visual channels. Localisers must ensure that the tone of the dialogue, as part of the visual-verbal content, aligns not only with the spoken word but also with the character's visual design, which constitutes visual non-verbal content. Although *H:SR* (2023) is set in a science fiction universe, the tutorial phase notably avoids jargon associated with major Western science fiction franchises such as *Star Trek*. None of the initial playable characters are directly involved in the technical operations of the space station and therefore do not discuss it in detail. This reduces the need for specialised terminology.

Furthermore, science fiction tropes and terminology common in Chinese media may differ from those familiar to Western audiences (terms such as 天宫 *tian gong*, Heavenly Palace; 恒星文明 *hengxin wenming*, Star-Level Civilisation; tropes such as collective heroism/communal aspiration, colossal engineering projects (Zhou, 2024; Hu et al., 2024;Lyu, 2025), so if such elements are present

in the source, they pose a challenge for localisers because genre expectations and tonal conventions may not align. This challenge is mirrored in *Depersonalization* (2019); a game rooted in Lovecraftian horror. The game's setting, character design, and narrative tone rely heavily on references to H. P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos (Lowell, 2004), thus, to maintain immersion, localisers must be familiar with Lovecraftian language and symbolism, such as Cthulhu, gothic horror and occult themes. Lovecraftian references form a major subset of Western horror pop-culture; failure to localise them sensitively damages genre recognisability, thus, without sensitivity to thematically appropriate language and symbolism, the localisation risks undermining the narrative's intended atmosphere.

Similarly, *Eastward* (2021) is rich in references to popular Japanese-culture and draws heavily on classic JRPGs and Anime tropes (Kalata, 2021) (e.g. Studio Ghibli aesthetics such as those of *Spirited Away* (2001) or *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004), whimsical environment design, specific character archetypes and combat reminiscent of the retro Nintendo games *Legend of Zelda* and *Earthbound*) with numerous visual-verbal cues requiring in-depth knowledge of both in order to adequately address the Japanese-culture-rich Chinese source content. In all three cases, genre-specific knowledge and thematic fluency are vital to successful localisation. Localisers must navigate not only linguistic accuracy but also cultural resonance, ensuring that the visual-verbal and visual-non-verbal resources work in tandem to support immersion. Failure to do so risks alienating players, disrupting narrative coherence, and diminishing the overall gameplay experience.

Item and object naming within the science fiction setting of *H:SR* (2023) adds a further layer of complexity. Many of these names are not only genre-specific, but also rich with pop-culture references, requiring both familiarity with the source material and strong transcreation skills. For example, a room filled with stored items is described as containing "Curios" (奇物 *qiwu*, remarkable things), a term that evokes rarity and intrigue. However, many of these so-called curios double as direct references to well-known pop-culture artifacts. This intertextuality demands careful linguistic and cultural adaptation to preserve narrative coherence and thematic depth. *H:SR* (2023) navigates this challenge by selecting references that are widely recognisable across both source and

target cultures, allowing for relatively direct localisation without sacrificing meaning or immersion (see **Error! Reference source not found.**).

Table 5.1. Examples of visual-verbal articles, in-game items, and their ST-TT renderings found in *H:SR* (2023).

Official Target English	Source Chinese	Literal translation
Crackup Conch	螺中笑声	Laughter inside the conch
Total Eclipse of the Heart	心之全蚀	Total eclipse of the heart
Door to A New World	新世界大门	Great gate to a new world

These examples demonstrate the need for pop-culture knowledge, sci-fi genre knowledge and clever wordplay: “crack-up conch” being humorous (an ironic name), “Total eclipse of the heart” being a song title (Tyler, 1983), and "Door to a New World” referencing the dystopian sci-fi novel Brave New World (Huxley, 1932). Pop-culture references are also prominent in *Eastward* (2021), although in the tutorial phase alone, are limited to character likenesses and names (such as Miruku Miyazaki, referencing Studio Ghibli’s honorary chairman Hayao Miyazaki), as well as a reference to another videogame that serves as inspiration for an in-game minigame (*Dragon Quest*), skirting both the visual-verbal and visual-non-verbal. Name localisation is discussed later in the chapter (see Section 5.4.6).

In *Depersonalization* (2019), pop-culture references are not present, with exception to the game’s direct influence *Call of Cthulhu* (Chaosium, 1981; Lowell, 2004; Lovecraft, 2016;), not straying from the thematically consistent mentions of eerie occurrences and gothic American settings. The only notable pop-culture reference that is explicitly visual-verbal in the tutorial phase is the mention of Dunwich, a fictional locational that features prominently in the H.P. Lovecraft work, The Dunwich Horror (1929), which was rendered directly from one of two established Chinese transliterations 邓威奇 *dengweiqi* or 邓维奇 *dengweiqi* (see Fig. 5.5). With the exception of this term, no further visual-verbal pop culture references required localisation attention in *Depersonalization* (2019).

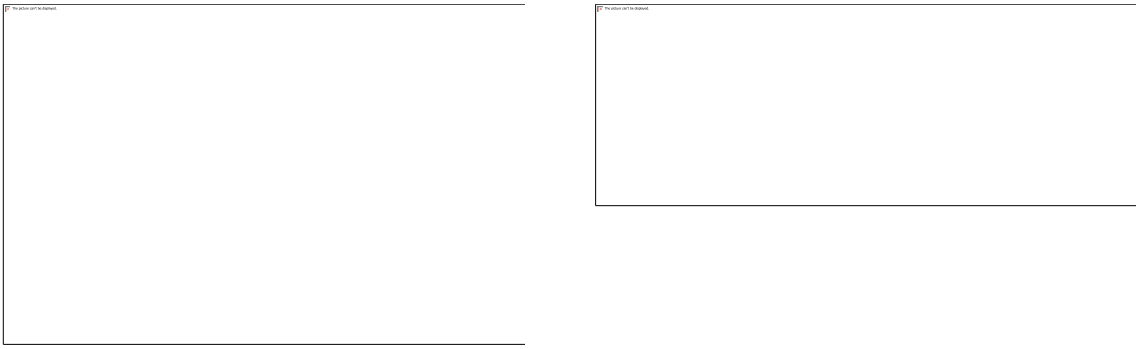


Fig. 5.5. Left to right: English version mention of Dunwich and Chinese version mention of Dunwich, a location associated with Lovecraftian lore.

However, as a game featuring crowd-sourced translation, the translations found in *Depersonalization* (2019) initially could not be attributed to one single workflow or methodology, and thus comparisons with MT are again made to help assess the likelihood with which such tools were employed as part of the process. Even though pop-culture references in *Depersonalization* (2019) are minimal, the task of preserving thematic and atmospheric nuance remains central; when comparing the official localisation to MT outputs, the challenges faced in translation become even more apparent because the need to preserve the atmospheric nuance largely delivered through subtle intertextual cues and tone is a distinct challenge. Maintaining narrative mood, cultural allusion, and genre-specific resonance becomes particularly visible when comparing the official localisation to MT outputs.

MT renderings often default to literal or overly generalising translations, which can strip away the intertextual nuance and thematic resonance of the original causing tonal shift or even incoherence (Zagood et al., 2021). However, the use of MT generally speaking can still offer a useful baseline, especially when references are globally recognisable or when the original phrasing is straightforward; in such cases, it may produce surprisingly accurate results that require minimal adjustment. The MT used for comparisons in this case is the neural machine translation (NMT) tool DeepL, which is claimed by its developer DeepL SE to wield “unmatched translation quality” that is “human-like” (DeepL SE, 2026). It is possible to navigate these challenges by carefully selecting references that are broadly familiar across both source and target cultures, enabling relatively direct localisation that retains much of the source text

structures and phraseology without sacrificing narrative coherence or immersion.

This approach highlights the importance of human oversight in preserving the layered embedded meanings present in the visual-verbal, something MT alone cannot consistently achieve. As Zagood et al. (2017) observe, MT is "unable to identify cultural items and consequently mistranslate them", a limitation that directly impacts culturally embedded or intertextual resources.

5.4.2 The challenges of publishing regulations

H:SR (2023) dialogue features lines that deviate slightly from the source in terms of register, likely owing to the game featuring on multiple platforms that have their own strict censorship rules regarding age ratings (see **Error! Reference source not found.**).

Table 5.2. Visual-verbal translation comparisons of a line spoken by Silver Wolf demonstrating a tonal shift.

Source Chinese	替人擦屁股可不是我的工作。你说对不对，卡芙卡?
Published translation	Cleaning up other people's mess isn't in my job description... y'know, Kafka?
DeepL MT (November 2024)	It's not my job to wipe people's asses for them. Don't you think so, Kafka?
Alternative translation	It's not my job to clean up your shit, you know, Kafka?

The term 屁股 *pigu*, literally "buttocks", is central to the expression's crudeness in the source dialogue. The original line explicitly states that wiping another person's backside is not Silver Wolf's responsibility, reinforced by the rhetorical tag "你说对不对" *ni shuo duibudui?* "Don't you agree?". The published localisation omits direct references to the body part, instead opting for a euphemistic metaphor ("cleaning up mess"), preserving the speaker's assertive tone while avoiding profanity. Worth noting is that the alternative rendering has been informed by visual cues, namely the character design and demeanour that contributed to the overall characterisation of Silver Wolf, something which the localiser of the published rendering may not necessarily have had access to and could have influenced translation choices.

However, employing less profane options is also an approach that aligns with broader localisation trends and reflects age rating constraints as *H:SR* (2023) is rated 12+ by Pan European Game Information (PEGI) and Teen by

Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB). PEGI 12 ratings allow for "violence of a slightly more graphic nature towards fantasy characters or non-realistic violence towards human-like characters would fall in this age category. Sexual innuendo or sexual posturing can be present, while any bad language in this category must be mild" (Pan European Game Information, n.d.), and ESRB Teen ratings states content "is generally suitable for ages 13 and up. May contain violence, suggestive themes, crude humour, minimal blood, simulated gambling and/or infrequent use of strong language" (Entertainment Software Rating Board, n.d.). As well as these broad age rating systems, platforms such as Steam, PlayStation Network and Xbox Live have further stipulations that may contrast with these PEGI/ESRB ratings and be even more restrictive and extends beyond the use of age ratings.

Valve's Steam Direct (Steam, 2025) outlines specific categories of prohibited content, such as "hate speech," "sexually explicit images of real people," "patently offensive or intended to shock or disgust viewers," malware, and applications involving cryptocurrency or non-fungible tokens (NFTs). It also conducts a pre-release review to ensure that submitted builds are functioning correctly and are not "doing anything harmful."

The Xbox is a Microsoft product and thus subject to Microsoft's publicly available Microsoft Store Policies (Microsoft, 2025) which also apply to the Xbox Store, requiring all products to meet defined certification standards. These policies include detailed Content Policies covering areas such as offensive, adult, and illegal content, gambling, child safety, and user-generated content, alongside Xbox-specific requirements that are enforced during certification, such as XR-018 governing the moderation of user-generated content.

For PlayStation, Sony's consumer-facing legal terms indicate that additional "Usage Terms" govern access to PSN and PlayStation Store services and must be accepted by developers (PlayStation, 2025). These terms operate alongside partner-restricted submission policies made available through the PlayStation Partners programme and are supported by broader platform safety enforcement measures that function in conjunction with regional rating systems. In contrast, the alternative rendering disregards potential publisher restrictions and retains the confrontational force of the original through the use of stronger language ("clean up your shit"), a choice informed by contextual factors such as Silver

Wolf's posture, demeanour, and the visual framing of the scene (e.g. sitting casually on top of a desk, chewing bubble gum). However, whilst a player has the benefit of seeing the dialogue in context, it is not clear whether the localiser does, their decision-making limited by the context available to them at the time (which may have been a mere list of strings in an MS Excel sheet in the case of *H:SR* (2023)). The DeepL output, while more literal and lacking stylistic refinement, more accurately reflects the original register and tone than the published version. However, it does not account for rating restrictions or maintain stylistic cohesion. Notably, the official translation replaces the full stop （。）found in the Chinese source with an ellipse, aligning with English prosodic conventions and signalling the continuity of speech across fragmented lines.

5.4.3 The challenges of tone

Eastward (2021) presents a tonal shift in a brief exchange between the NPC character Chage, a miner, and the playable character John, who is also a miner, in which the Chinese source is relatively neutral but the English target adds extra information that aims to resonate with specific audiences and serves to develop characterisations. Use of "//" indicates a new line or new dialogue box during conversation.

Table 5.3. Comparison of Chage dialogue that undergoes a tonal shift in translation.

Source	Target	Literal
哦——看看是谁来了。// 约翰，你的手表还是那么准啊。	Well, well, well. John's here! // Mr. Punctuality as always. // Your watch musta been carved by the God 'a time himself!	Oh, look who's arrived! // John, your watch is still so accurate.

Observed in this example (**Error! Reference source not found.**) is the addition of an extra clause in English which emphasises the nature of the Chinese source whilst using a target rendering that adds colloquial, regional flavour. Additionally, in the absence of dubbed lines, the localiser has seen an opportunity to build character through marked written speech; Chage not only uses colloquial language but also speaks with an implied accent reminiscent of certain states of the USA (including Kentucky, Alabama, West Virginia) that are strongly associated with mining. As well as the changes to punctuation, namely the

omission of dashes (“——”) in favour of repetition (“well, well, well”), the additional clause is a humorous, sarcastic expression that expresses the sense of frequency with which John barely makes it to work on time whilst also alluding to the familiarity between Chage and John in a way that is playful and builds Chage as a character.

This approach is likely to resonate well with target audiences who appreciate the character banter but could also be regarded as an over-translation that has slightly strayed from the source by adding additional content that was not originally there. In short, the tone has shifted to one that feels less like a slight and more like friendly banter through the addition of an extra clause and marked speech. The theme of marked written speech is recurrent in *Eastward* (2021), posing an ongoing challenge to a localiser.

Shifting focus to *Depersonalization* (2019), tonal shifts typically happen because of overly literal renderings of the source Chinese. Unlike *H:SR* (2023) and *Eastward* (2021), these shifts are unlikely to be intentional, for either age-rating or characterisation purposes. As *Depersonalization* (2019) underwent an update during the study (see Section 5.3), both versions have been provided. However, owing to the game’s intention as an homage to Lovecraftian horror, the localisation strategies aim to align with it tonally, often resulting in verbose translation that unintentionally shifts the tone away from the mysterious and into the discordant. MT has been used to provide back translations here to illustrate the literalness of the English translation, which presents as such that the source Chinese could be read as a literal translation of an English source (**Error! Reference source not found.**).

Table 5.4. Comparison of an excerpt from Depersonalization (2019) that demonstrates textual proximity in translation and differences between two official renderings.

Source	Target	Literal	MT back translation from target (November 2024)
你在本能的驱使下吃了面前的食物 一种满足的感觉从你身体中蔓延开来，虚弱感消失了 随之而来的是心灵中传递过来的温暖能力 你感受到了，这边是生命的喜悦	(V1) Driven by instinct, you eat the food in front of you. A sense of satisfaction and warmth spreads through your body, and the feeling of weakness disappears. Following this is a warm energy conveyed to your soul. You feel it, this is the joy of life.	You ate the food in front of you, driven by instinct. A feeling of satisfaction spreads from within your body, feelings of weakness disappeared. What followed was a feeling of warm energy transmitted to [your] soul. You felt it, this here is the joy of living.	（V1）受本能驱使，你吃下眼前的食物。 一种满足感与温暖感蔓延至全身，疲惫感随之消散。 随后，一股温暖的能量传递至你的灵魂。 你感受到了，这就是生命的喜悦。
你在本能的驱使下吃了面前的食物 一种满足的感觉从你身体中蔓延开来，虚弱感消失了 随之而来的是心灵中传递过来的温暖能力 你感受到了，这边是生命的喜悦	(V2) Driven by instinct, you eat the food in front of you. A sense of satisfaction spreads through your body, and the feeling of weakness disappears. Following this is a warm energy conveyed to your soul. You feel it, this is the joy of life.	You ate the food in front of you, driven by instinct. A feeling of satisfaction spreads from within your body, feelings of weakness disappeared. What followed was a feeling of warm energy transmitted to [your] soul. You felt it, this is the joy of living.	受本能驱使，你吃下眼前的食物。 一种满足感在体内蔓延，疲惫感随之消散。 随后，一股温暖的能量传递至你的灵魂。 你感受到了，这就是生命的喜悦。

There are numerous points to be made about this brief excerpt. Firstly, the source does not employ any punctuation at all, instead opting for a new line with each sentence, whilst the target does include additional punctuation.

Secondly, the source Chinese and target English, evidenced by the back translation, are remarkably similar; the target structure and syntax mirrors the source and the language used in the source is reflected quite directly in the target. However, the Chinese source reads poetically, the absence of punctuation reminiscent of classic literature and prose, lending a sense of high register, a sense that is somewhat lost owing to the direct nature of the rendering in English. The language in use, whilst verbose in English, is sound in the Chinese and reads ornately, reflective of being an homage to H.P. Lovecraft as an American literati. Notably, the final line may include a typo in the Chinese, or is intended as a stylistic choice: the use of “边” *bian* “side” (in the line “你感受到了，这边是生命的喜悦” *ni ganshoudao le, zhe bian shi shengming de xile,* “You felt

it, this is the joy of living"), is not typical of standard Mandarin, referring to a space or domain, and may have been intended to evoke a sense of "spacial-self", but is likely a typing error. Usually, "就" *jiu* would be used in such a construction to indicate emphasis ("*this* is the joy of living").

Additionally, the phrasing "温暖能力" (*wennuan nengli,* warming/warmth) is awkward in Chinese but could feasibly read as a turn of phrase intended to evoke Lovecraft and otherwordly literature, reading like a translation intentionally, reminiscent of Brownlie's "non-fluent" translation (2010). Whilst in the Chinese this reads seemingly like translated English (using a high-register, foreignising style), to an English audience the phrasing is grammatically sound but verbose and outlandish, the closeness to the Chinese source revealing itself as awkwardness that is intended to match the profundity of the source but can instead come across as trite and absurd.

Use of literal phrasing "following this" (随之而来 *suizheerlai*) mirrors the source grammar structure but fails to flow with narrative finesse in the English, just as the use of literal rendering "the feeling of weakness" (虚弱感 *xuruogan*) is grammatically sound but loses poeticism in the English rendering. Additionally, in the context of the situation, the player character has eaten bread, the typical American or European player who regularly eats bread is arguably not going to be as impressed as the game wants them to be, finding the consumption of bread equivalent to "the joy of life" quite overblown and too philosophical for the situation. Ultimately, these nuances highlight the delicate balance between fidelity and fluency in translation, where preserving poetic intent can sometimes clash with natural target-language expression.

5.4.4 The challenges of over-specificity

Another tonal shift that lends to reading as awkward and overwrought in the target is this tonal divergence stemming from a dialogue involving physical injury in *H:SR* (2023) (**Error! Reference source not found.**).

Table 5.5. Overly literal translation in the pursuit of perceived fidelity.

Source Chinese	不要自责。你伤了腿和惯用手，藏身在这里避开与军团正面交锋，这个判断十分冷静。
Published translation	Don't be too hard on yourself. Your leg and dominant hand were injured. It was a wise decision to hide here and avoid a head-on encounter with the Legion.
DeepL MT (November 2024)	Do not blame yourself. You hurt your leg and your usual hand, and the judgment to hide here to avoid a head-on confrontation with the Legion was very cool.
Alternative translation	Don't blame yourself. You sustained injuries to your arm and leg. Staying hidden here to avoid facing off with the Legion was sensible.

The source emphasises 惯用手 *guanyongshou*, "dominant hand", a detail less significant in English unless directly tied to gameplay. Retaining this information may align with fidelity to the source, but in English narrative conventions, such a specific term is likely to be generalised through "suitable and effective translation strategies to reduce the reading barriers caused by semantic gaps to readers" (Niu et al., 2024, p. 60). The published rendering softens the directive 不要自责 *buyaozifu,* "don't blame yourself", into a more empathetic "don't be too hard on yourself".

Meanwhile, the MT system again misconstrues the intent of the term in the rendering of 冷静 *lengjing,* "calm", resulting in awkward phrasing such as "the judgment to hide here to avoid a head-on confrontation with the Legion was very cool" which is grammatically correct but pragmatically jarring and ambiguous. Referring to the decision as "cool" somewhat changes the meaning (although granted it was a humorous change, implying either the player's behaviour was admirable, or literally cold in temperature, in both cases somewhat absurd in English).

5.4.5 The challenges of ambiguity

As the discussion begins to shift toward the visual-non-verbal, it is important to note that translation ambiguity can be intensified when such cues are absent, even though the following example still centres primarily on the visual-verbal. A more complex example of the translation ambiguities localisers face appears in the following item description, in which it is not clear what the purpose of the item described is in the immediate moment of explanation (see **Error! Reference source not found.**).

Table 5.6. Example of an in-game article translation that lacks clear visual non-verbal parity resulting in ambiguity in the reader's interpretation of the official rendering.

Source Chinese	奇物编号211「视野盲区」：一个简单的偏折光场，让区域里的事物不容易引起注意，但只要别的东西不在显眼，它就露陷了。
Published translation	Item number 211, “Blind Spot”: A simple light-deflecting field. It allows an object in its field to pass unnoticed, but if a different item ceases to be obvious, the object gets revealed.
DeepL MT (November 2024)	Curiosity Number 211 “Blind Area of Vision”: a simple field of deflected light that makes things in the area less noticeable, but as soon as something else isn't being conspicuous, it reveals itself.
Alternative translation	Curio 211, “Blind Spot”: A simple reflective field that makes an object inside it hard to detect, provided there’s something more eye-catching in there, too. Otherwise, the object is revealed.

While all renderings retain a similar syntactic structure to the Chinese source, none provide an entirely salient account of the object’s function, and visual-non-verbal clues for the player that might clarify the intent of the description are lacking, the object described not being shown until sometime after the explanation, causing a disconnect between the visual-verbal and the visual-non-verbal. The official translation closely follows the source’s word order, but what can arguably be perceived as source fidelity may come at the expense of reader clarity. The published translation introduces further ambiguity through the expression “pass unnoticed”, suggesting invisibility upon entry rather than the intended inconspicuousness while present. The source phrase 不容易引起注意 *bu rongyi yinqi zhuyi,* “not easy to attract notice”, emphasises subtle presence rather than absence. A more transparent rendering such as “go unnoticed” may convey the intended object ability more clearly. From this example of subtle emphasis, we can now move to a broader consideration of how the implicit itself is translated.

5.4.6 The challenges of the implicit and names

Finally, an example of making explicit the implicit can be seen in an FMV sequence at the end of the tutorial, where paratactic Chinese narration is rendered into hypotactic English. Hypotaxis (Lian, 1993 cited in Yue Ma, 2021; Chen, 2022) refers to the use of explicit grammatical markers to show relationships between ideas (e.g. conjunctions, subordination), while parataxis relies on placing clauses or phrases side by side without such markers, leaving

connections implied rather than stated. This shift illustrates the translator or localiser's effort to clarify logical relationships that are only implied in the source text, aligning with common strategies in Chinese-English translation to accommodate English's preference for syntactic explicitness (see **Error! Reference source not found.**).

Table 5.7. Alternative rendering demonstrates an English translation that better matches the tone of the source rather than expressing greater closeness to the source phrasing.

Source Chinese	喂喂喂 // 打不过就群殴. . . 是不是玩不一起?
Published translation	*Hey, sore losers! // You can't just gang up on us!*
DeepL MT (November 2024)	Hey, hey, hey // If you can't beat them, beat them up... Are we not playing together?
Alternative translation	*What?! You can't win, so you bring friends?!*

Here, the published translation omits the second clause in favour of using punchier phrasing, likely for brevity and impact. The alternative version retains a nod to the source's reference to "not playing together" (玩不一起 *wanbuyichi*) but truncates the second fragment for rhetorical immediacy. MT outputs again struggle with contextual nuance, rendering 打不过 *dabuguo,* "be no match for", literally and misapplying syntax in a way that disrupts urgency and tone, as well as misconstruing the ellipses as a full separation of fragments, causing the two clauses to be treated as separate phrases. Overall, the English dialogue in my rendering is natural and free of "translationese" (Gellerstam, 1986) and avoids awkward structures typical of overly literal translation.

Shifting focus to names and nouns, character names in *H:SR* (2023) are localised using a variety of strategies. Some names are phonetically transliterated, such as 卡芙卡 *kafuka*, Kafka, others are directly translated, like 银狼 *yinlang*, Silver Wolf, and some retain their Mandarin pronunciation in pinyin form, such as 丹恒 *danheng,* Dan Heng. A notable exception is 姬子 *jizi*, Himeko, whose name in the English version adopts a Japanese pronunciation, diverging from the Mandarin used in the source which is unusual in itself as Chinese girls' names do not use the 子 *zi/ko* character, implying the intention of Japanese pronunciation as a default.

Speculatively, this choice may reflect a marketing strategy aimed at appealing to global audiences familiar with JRPGs and Anime aesthetics. In this way, the choice to adopt Japanese phonology signals a strategic alignment with genre conventions and international reach. Yet this comes at a cost; the meaning embedded in the Chinese name is lost when pinyin is preserved instead. For instance, Dan Heng is comprised of 丹 *dan* cinnabar, and 恒 *heng* permanence, but also these characters have a deeper meaning. In Daoism, 丹 *dan* alludes to immortality as cinnabar powder was historically used in the creation of longevity concoctions (Pregadio, 2025), whilst 恒 *heng* is one of the trigrams of the ancient philosophical divination text *Yijing* 易经, or *Book of Changes*, further tying it to Daoism and specific cultural references that infer information about the character in the source language. In keeping the name as a direct transliteration through the use of pinyin, the Mandarin pronunciation is kept, but the deeper meaning and allusions to Daoism are obscured to players who lack familiarity with Daoist concepts.

Nominative determinism is common in Chinese culture, with names conferred on people intended to imbue them with certain traits or steer their lives in a particular direction (Watson, 1986), names in many Chinese works function in much the same way and act as narrative cues, world-building devices, or characterisation tools, and removing them creates breaks this semiotic function, flattening rich culturally-loaded conceptual layers.

In *Eastward* (2021), character name localisation demonstrates a more dynamic and culturally adaptive approach. While some names follow traditional or well-established transliteration patterns, such as 约翰 *yuehan*, John, and 珊 *shan*, Sam, others reflect creative reinterpretation (**Error! Reference source not found.**):

Table 5.8. Examples of Eastward (2021) character names and localisation strategies identified in their rendering.

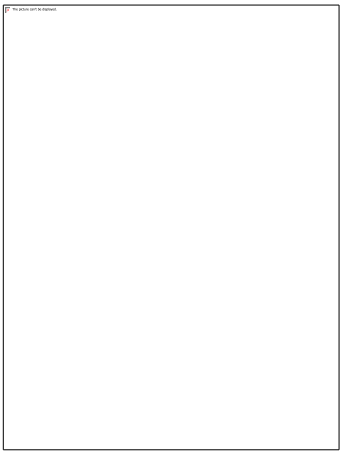
Source	Target	Localisation strategy
约翰 *yuehan*	John	Traditional direct transliteration of John
勇 *yong*	Yohn	Phonetic name, similarity to John to capitalise on visual-non-verbal humour
格拉斯 *gelasi*	Four-Eyes	Sense for sense translation, using slang for glasses wearers

珊 *shan*	Sam	Phonetic transliteration

For instance, the name 格拉斯 *gelasi*, Four-Eyes is a sense-for-sense translation that replaces the literal “Glass” (referring to the glasses he wears) with a common Anglophone slang term for glasses wearers, preserving the humorous tone of the original. Focusing on Yohn, his source name emphasises irony, the term “勇” (*yong*) meaning “brave,” which is in direct contrast to John’s role as a brave, protector role.

Additionally, Yohn’s name in the source exemplifies a phonetic strategy that leverages visual-non-verbal humour that is more important to the receiver in the target language; in the source, the names Yong and Yuehan lack the same phonetic similarity found in the source, but instead, the source leverages wordplay as 勇 *yong,* brave, shares a homophone with 用 *yong*, use, not only providing the ironic lack of bravery, but also plays on the character’s uselessness, implying Yohn is not useful, proven by the situation that unfolds in the tutorial phase involving the slugs that he cannot help with.

Visually, the character’s design closely resembles John’s, yet his personality is cowardly and unpleasant, contrasting with the bravery implied by his name. The phonetic rhyme between John and Yohn reinforces this contrast, implying that Yohn is effectively a poor imitation of John, and the localisation succeeds in capturing the source’s ironic humour, an effect which would be difficult to achieve without access to the game’s visual content. (Fig. 5.6).



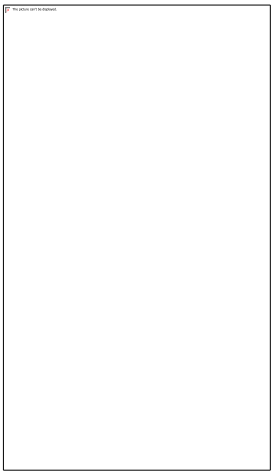


Fig. 5.6. Left to right: character sprites of Yohn and John, illustrating similar colour palates (green, brown, blue) and costume design featuring jeans, a three-sectioned long-sleeved jacket and unkempt dark hair and facial hair.

Sam's name, derived from 珊 *shan*, maintains phonetic proximity but loses semantic depth. The original term refers to coral, symbolising value, and rarity, which aligns with Sam's visual design and narrative role as a discovered treasure. This nuance is absent in the English rendering, illustrating a trade-off between phonetic fidelity and semantic preservation.

H:SR (2023) occasionally risks dissonance between visual-verbal and visual-non-verbal resources. Silver Wolf's name evokes a gamer handle, consistent with her aesthetic, yet her speech is utilitarian and lacks any wolf-related motifs. Her silver hair is the only visual link to the name, and there are no behavioural cues (such as howling or clawing) to reinforce the metaphor. This suggests a direct translation strategy relying on universal gamer culture associations rather than contextual alignment. One line delivered during her ultimate attack ("战斗体验该优化了" *zhandou tiyan gai youhua le*, "This combat needs optimizing"*)*, is technically accurate but lacks resonance with English gamer jargon. Phrases like "Let's buff up" might have more effectively captured the tone as Silver Wolf is a character presented as a gamer-hacker likely to use such terminology (Fig. 5.7 shows official artwork splash image featuring her gamer-girl aesthetic). From a localisation professional's perspective, the term "optimization" (优化 youhua) is common in software documentation and may inadvertently signal a technical register, creating a mismatch with the character's visual and narrative presentation.

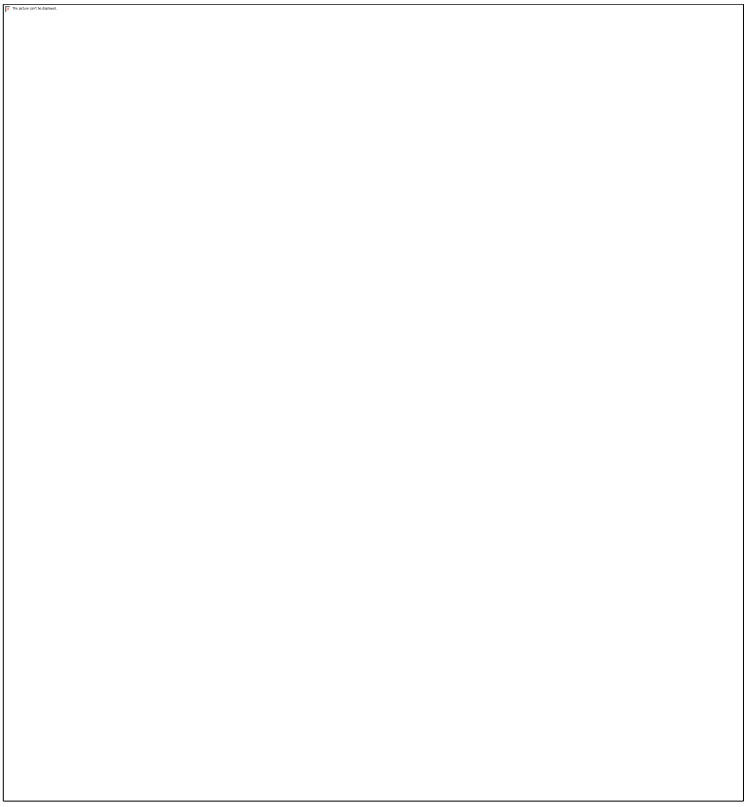


Fig. 5.7. Silver Wolf official artwork splash image featuring her gamer-girl aesthetic.

In *Depersonalization* (2019), the localisation of character names is more uniform. The tutorial phase features a small cast, and all names are rendered using direct transliteration, as demonstrated in **Error! Reference source not found.**.

Table 5.9. All character names in the Depersonalization (2019) tutorial and the identified localisation approach used in their rendering.

Source name	Target name	Localisation strategy
塔维尔 *taweier*, 星之钥 *xingzhiyao*, 葛蕾丝 *geleisi,* 亚南 *yanan*, 乔治·霍华德 *qiaozhi huohuade*	Tawil, Star Key, Grace, Anan, George Howard	Direct transliteration from source into target, including the use of existing widely used English names.

Grace and George are established Anglophone names, while Tawil and Anan (亚南 *yanan*) are transliterated with minimal adaptation. Star Key (星之钥 *xingzhiyao*) is a literal translation of “Key of Stars,” but the English rendering lacks the elevated literary tone of the original and risks sounding awkward, failing to evoke the esoteric atmosphere typical of Lovecraftian fiction. A more naturalised alternative, such as “Stellar Key” or the recognisable Anglophone

name “Starkey” might have better preserved the genre’s stylistic expectations. The names are largely aligned with what one might expect from a game set in Lovecraftian America, matching the character designs in terms of typical American style garb reminiscent of the Edwardian era (Fig. 5.8). The men wear shirts, jackets and trousers, and the child wears a shirt and shorts. The two women in the tutorial, Tawil and Grace, cannot be seen from the shoulders down.

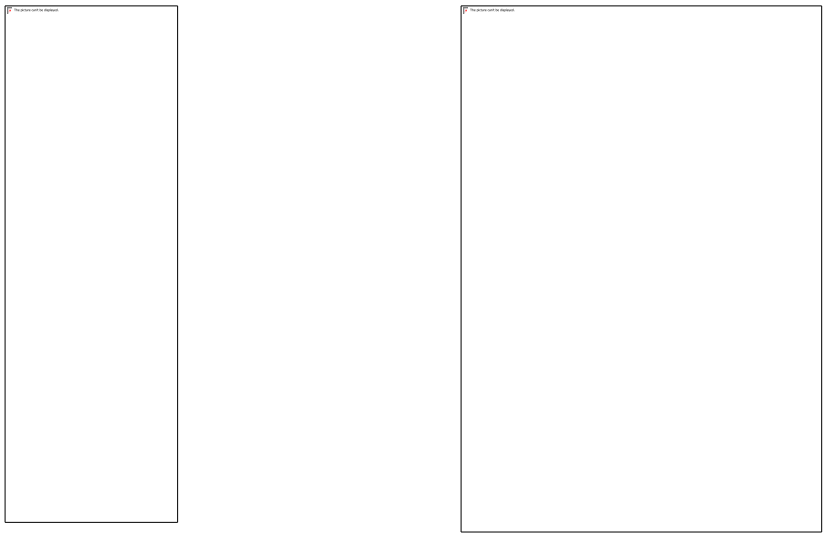


Fig. 5.8. Examples of typical Edwardian era American men's dress featuring hats, shirts and tie, trousers, waist jackets and overcoats, carrying walking canes (Holland, 2008; Ward, 1892).

5.4.7 The challenges of symbolism

Beyond menus and subtitles, character design plays a role in cross-cultural reception. Whilst *Depersonalization* (2019) and *Eastward* (2021) feature a variety of characters, none are as loaded with culturally-specific references as those of *H:SR* (2023), likely owing to the low-resolution nature of those two games’ character sprites. *H:SR*’s (2023) characters are 3D and highly detailed, as well as visually distinct to evoke real-world cultural aesthetics, increasing the localisation burden to ensure appropriateness.

Character designs, particularly those featuring culturally embedded motifs such as Chinese characters (writing), require careful alignment with translated text to maintain coherence. Thus, the localisation specialist must navigate cultural sensitivities, raising concerns, such as overly-revealing costumes, which

may be normative in one region but objectionable in another; however, raising such concerns does not guarantee developer or publisher action. Despite these challenges, *H:SR*'s (2023) costume designs clearly foreground cultural motifs intended to resonate with a diverse global audience (Fig. 5.9 shows Dan Heng's (left) costume incorporates Chinese-inspired motifs while Gepard's (right) armour draws more strongly on European fantasy traditions).

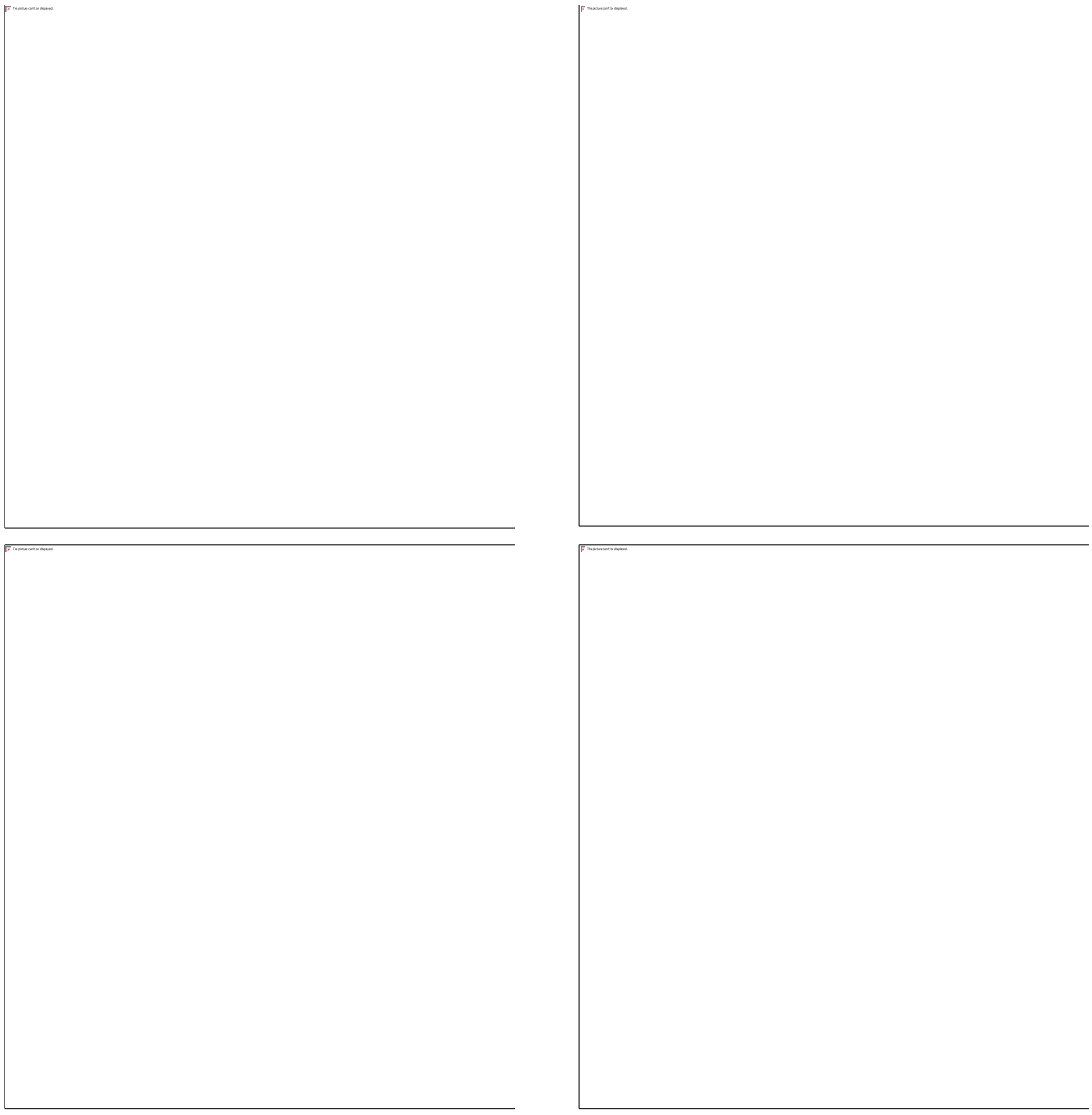


Fig. 5.9. Example character designs of characters found in *H:SR* (2023), from top left to bottom right: Dan Heng, Gepard, March 7th, Herta.

As a character steeped in Chinese cultural references, Dan Heng's design draws on historical and fantastical aesthetics. His costume recalls genuine Chinese

garments alongside traditional aesthetics found in boldly Chinese Immortal Heroes and Martial Heroes game genre styles, incorporating flowing robes, cloud and dragon motifs, and brush calligraphy (Fig. 5.9). The splash art reinforces these themes through brushstroke effects and the Daoist yinyang symbol featuring his weapon, a spear, and scenery reminiscent of trees and clouds found in classical Chinese ink paintings, divergent from tradition in its use of full colour rather than solely black ink (Fig. 5.10).

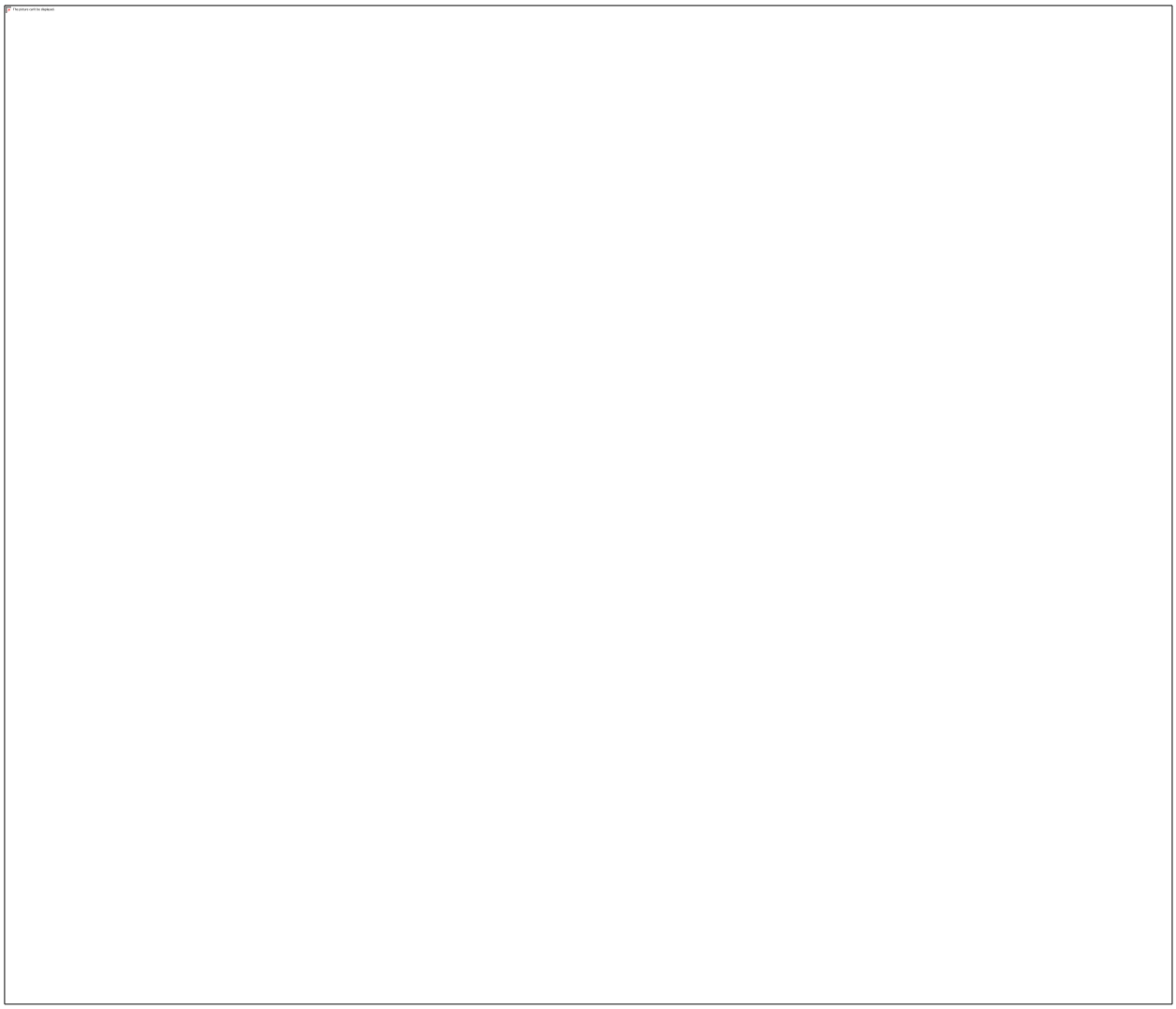


Fig. 5.10. Official Dan Heng character flash art.

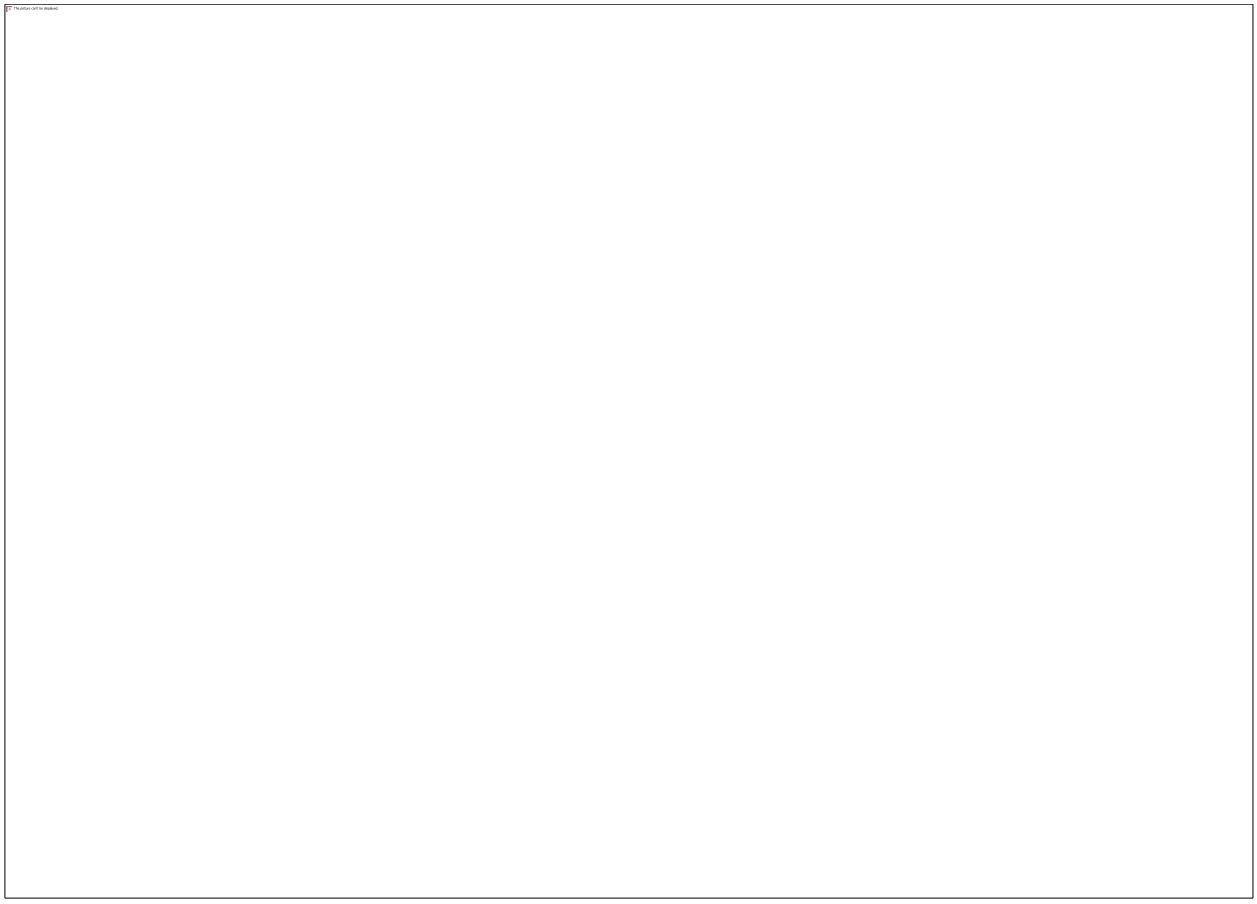
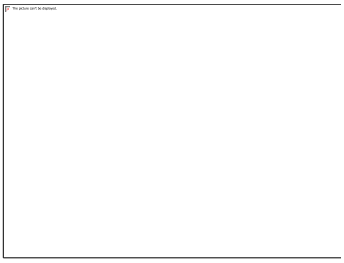


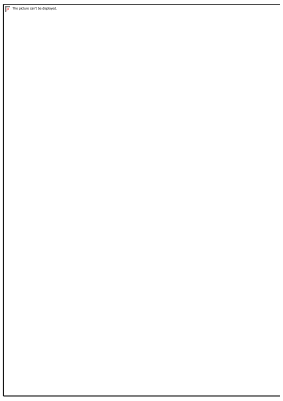
Fig. 5.11. Dan Heng character in-game model showing costume from all angles illustrating elements of Chinese military and scholarly reference (MiHoyo, 2023).

Closer inspection of the in-game model (Fig. 5.11) reveals: a red seal (印章 *yinzhang)*, auspicious cloud patterns on boots (祥云 *xiangyun*), a dragon motif (龙 *long*), decorative spaulders (肩吞 *jiantun*), a single-arm vambrace (臂鞴 *bigou/* 臂甲 *bijia*), large jade-like beads (玉 *yu*), Qing-era style black boots with white soles (乌衣鞋子 *wuyixiezi*; 千层底 *qiancengdi*), and script inspired by cursive-style hanzi (草书 *caoshu*) on the coat (see Appendix 11).

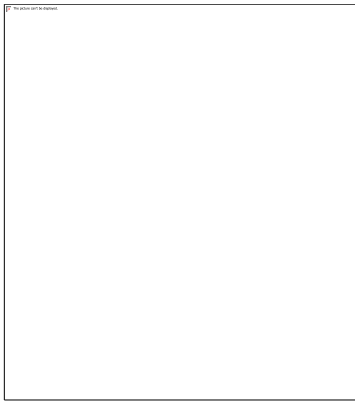
Notably, the vambrace looks less like those of Chinese historic use, and more akin to those found in Japanese suits of armour (Fig. 5.12). Archery was prominent historically in Chinese warfare as well as becoming a practice associated with Confucianism (Chao et al., 2023), thus hand covers seen in Japanese vambraces (*tekko)* were eschewed to allow fingers freedom to ease of bow and arrow use.



bigou 臂韝/*bijia* 臂甲
Han era bronze vambrace



籠手手甲 *kote tekko*
vambrace with
gauntlet



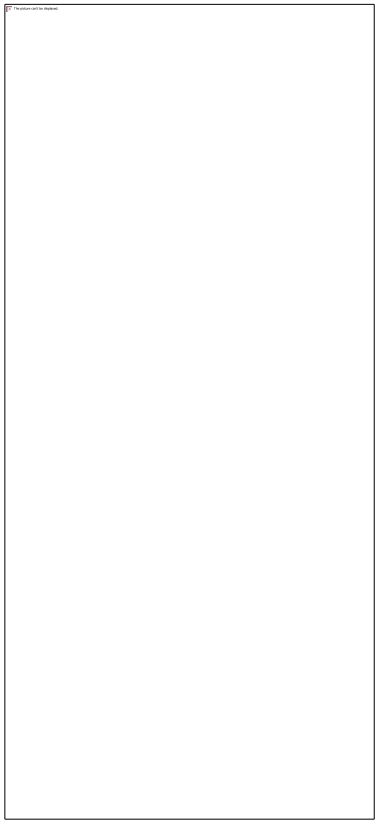
Dan Heng character model
vambrace with gauntlet

Fig. 5.12. Comparison Japanese vambrace (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, n.d.) and gauntlet (Left) with a Han era vambrace (National Museum of China, n.d.) and the gauntlet found in Dan Heng's costume (MiHoyo, 2023) (Right).

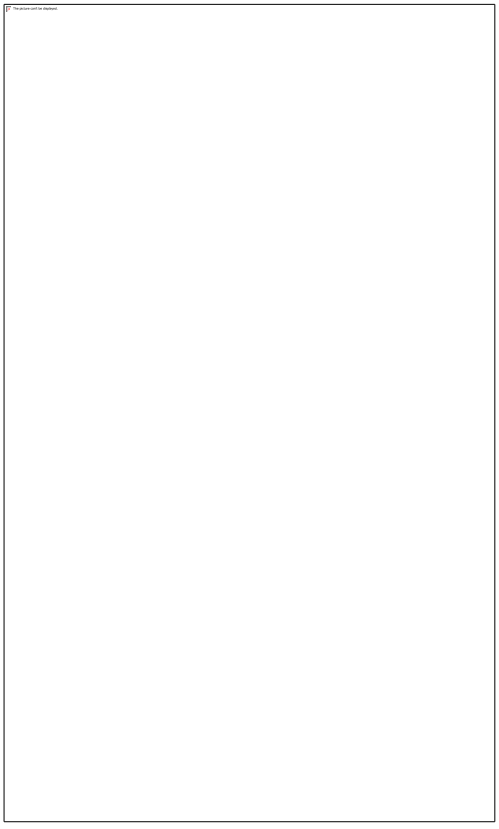
Clouds and dragon imagery are widely recognised as motifs prevalent found on Chinese textiles dating back to the Han Dynasty (206-2020 BCE) (Welch, 2008), but the garments referenced by the character clothing designs may be less so. The jade beads evoke Buddhist prayer malas and carry multiple meanings: a valued material in Chinese culture since the Neolithic period, an indicator of social status, and a Daoist symbol linking the human and spirit worlds, protecting the body from decay after death, and serving as the spiritual sustenance that grants immortality (Laufer, 1912; Cartwright, 2017). Jade is a robust, long-lasting material that, in the Chinese context, has been historically associated with mystical evil-warding powers, and considered as a metaphor for longevity, wisdom and purity. 璧 *bi,* Jade disks were used as ritual offerings since the Neolithic period and were identifiers of social status throughout China's dynastic history (Laufer and Field Museum of Natural History, 1912; Rawson et al., 1995).

The long coat is referential to the long gowns found in numerous roles of office and military in Chinese history, such as the decorative ceremonial uniforms of Qing dynasty (1644-1911 AD) palace guard officers (Laufer, 1912), and the 深衣 *shenyi* or "deep clothing" (Hua, 2011) worn by scholars that dates back to the Zhou dynasty (1046 BC-256 AD). For example, Fig. 5.13 illustrates the similarities between Dan Heng's costume and Ming scholarly garments,

particularly the long robe garment and colour arrangement. The cultural import of the *shenyi* is such that it features as a chapter in the 礼记 *Liji* Book of Rights, the garment's construction described as a determinant of balance and regulation which the wearer should embody.



Ceremonial uniform of Qing dynasty palace guard officer (1736-1795)



Ming scholar wearing shenyi 深衣.

Fig. 5.13. Left: Ceremonial palace guard uniform (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, n.b.); Right: Reconstruction of Ming era scholarly garb (National Museum of Beijing exhibition, n.b.). Both can be seen as inspiration found in Dan Heng's costume.

The ceremonial armour also aligns with his in-game combat path, "The Hunt," whose emblem features a deer head and arrows, reflecting Qing guard equipment including quivers and bows (Laufer, 1912, p. 287) (Fig. 5.155).

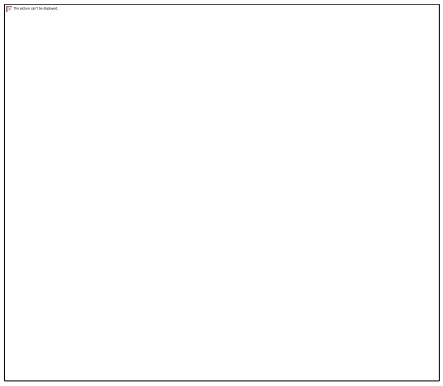


Fig. 5.14. Emblem of The Hunt combat path featuring the silhouette of a deer head and four arrows associated with the act of game hunting.

In Chinese traditional practices, colour plays an important role in life and luck with prominence on 五行 *wuxing,* the Five Elements (wood, fire, earth, metal and water) with significant ties to Daoism, being fundamental to cosmology and feng shui (Vollmer, 1980; Bogushevskaya, 2016; Pregadio, 2025). Additionally, in terms of Daoist alchemy, 五行 *wuxing*, the Five Elements, is employed to understand and find balance, a recurring theme in aspects of Dan Heng's character design. Importantly, the topic of *wuxing* extends beyond the scope of this project, so only the barest of essentials are mentioned here to illustrate points being made, aware it is at risk of being reductionist.

The Five Elements align with five cardinal colours: wood is 青 *qing,* blue-green (sometimes cyan), fire is 赤 *chi,* red, earth is 黄 *huang,* yellow, metal is 白 *bai,* white, and water is 黑 *hei,* black. Dan Heng's coat is half white (metal) and half cyan (wood), which corresponds to New *Yin* and New *Yang* in terms of *wuxing* Phases which represent the potential of states to transform into the other (e.g. the moment *Yin* changes into *Yang*); that is to say, a perfect balance of the two elements. Also, the elements wood and metal represent opposing directions, with wood representing East and metal representing West, again implying his position of balance between the two and as a walking manifestation of Daoist harmony. Additionally, wood and cyan are associated with the wind, reflected in Dan Heng's wind-based attacks, and the celestial creature the Azure Dragon, the colour blue and the motif of dragons present in his costume design.

Although not prominent, the costume features hints of 黄金 *huangjin*, gold , with yellow being associated with the most supreme power (such as 皇帝

huangdi, the Yellow Emperor, the mythical entity held to be responsible for the creation of China according to the 史记 *Shiji,* Records of the Grand Historian (circa 100BCE)) as a nod to Dan Heng's powers. Finally, the presence of black shirt and boots that also contrast with the white of the jacket; the contrast between the black of his shirt and the white of his coat serve as a visual representation of the Yinyang symbol of Daoism, again alluding the evenness, balance and eternalness intended in his characterisation. Revisiting the use of white briefly, the colour white in many Western cultures is prominently associated with purity and cleanliness, generally positive attributes (Michel Pastoureau and Jody Gladding, 2023), whilst to an East Asian audience, the colour white has traditionally been a feature of funeral garb (Wang, 2013) and in much the same way the colour black is worn at funerals and in situations calling for solemnity and seriousness (such as the working office environment), players familiar with the source culture will likely associate the white of Dan Heng's costume with an allusion to solemnity and seriousness, linking the colour white with less gleeful occasions than weddings.

Lastly, examining the facial features, Dan Heng has pale skin, which is associated with preferred beauty standards in China, both in contemporary standards (Zhang, 2012) and evidenced in poetry dating back to the 11th century BC (诗经 *Shijing*, *the Book of Odes,* "肤如凝脂" *piruningzhi*, "skin like congealed fat", an allusion to being smooth and white). Being paler was regarded as more beautiful through association with noble classes that did not labour in the fields, carrying the additional association of social refinement. This white skin in contrast to his black hair may also be another Yinyang allusion. When examined closely, Dan Heng's eyes feature red coloured makeup. This red makeup serves two purposes: (1) a literal reference to his name 丹 *dan* which reads not only as cinnabar, but also vermillion, a shade of red, and; (2) a reference to 赤 *chi*, red reflective of the fire element, masculinity and good fortune in *wuxing*.

The imagery present requires knowledge of Chinese customs, such as the typical practice of ancient pieces of poetry in China to feature multiple red seals, one of which is typically the author and further seals which denote subsequent owners of the piece (Fölster, 2016) observable in Fig. 5.15. It was common for collectors of art and books and use seals to mark ownership as well as a method

of authenticating paintings, the practice dating back to the 6th century (Fölster, 2016).

Fig. 5.15. Examples of seals taken from Fölster (2016, p. 26). Left: Print (Kangxi, 1662-1722) of the "Selected Writings by Tao An"; Right: Manuscript (Qing, 1644-1911) of the "Literary Treasures of the Hanlin Academy".

Equally, knowledge of military uniform and scholarly garb found commonly in Chinese history are more likely to be familiar to players hailing from the source culture, but could be lost outside of those constraints; players from other regions unfamiliar with otherwise "common knowledge" missing out on character-building information given through costume details. Thus, the localiser's challenge is to convey the same sense of richness and profundity granted by the character design that is readily understood by the Chinese player base through the only channel they have impact on; the character's dialogue. Localisation is needed to help bring meaning and depth to otherwise meaningless imagery whilst retaining

the distinctly Chinese influences of the source material. Conversely, presenting so much visual richness to an unfamiliar audience presents the potential player with an opportunity to learn, should the character be well-received enough; even if the visual clues are not coherent to a player, if the localiser has helped to bridge gaps in visual schema through extra information delivered through other modes, such as the spoken dialogue, the player may yet endeavour to learn more about the features of the character design they do not understand, adding to the localiser's role not only as localisation specialist, but also as cultural guide or even educator.

5.5 Taking control: technical challenges

The interactive resources play less of a role than the more apparent visual resources present in the non-interactive. In the context of video games, interactive resources often play a secondary role to visual resources in non-interactive sequences because players are not actively engaged in making choices or performing actions during these moments. Their attention is naturally drawn to the visual storytelling, such as environmental design, character animation, and cinematic framing, which are crafted to evoke emotion and convey narrative more directly. This passive mode of engagement allows developers to guide the player's experience with greater control, using visual cues to deliver impact without relying on gameplay mechanics. As a result, while interactivity is central, it is often the visual resources of the non-interactive that shape players' emotional responses and leave lasting impressions (Frome, 2019; Mortensen and Jørgensen, 2020). Despite their secondary role in these moments, interactive resources remain essential to the medium.

Transitions from mobile to PC, such as that of *H:SR* (2023), also introduce technical localisation challenges, particularly in control schemes and interface ergonomics, such as gesture inputs that require redesigning because recognition, cultural meaning, and ergonomics differ between locales and gaming platforms (Bernal-Merino, 2016). Additionally, different gaming platforms have different targeting models, accuracy, and timing (Cockburn et al., 2012; Bi et al., 2013; Bi et al., 2024), so UI and control layouts must be changed when

porting.

5.5.1 Honkai Impact: Star Rail (2023)

Firstly, in the case of *H:SR* (2023), in order to make the PC port as accessible as possible, the localisation features multiple key bindings that suit a range of players, accounting for the needs and preferences of a diverse player group. Originally designed for touch-based input, *H:SR*'s (2023) mobile interface relied on intuitive gestures such as taps and drags. On PC, these interactions are reinterpreted through mouse and keyboard input, requiring a redesign of interface layout and control logic to accommodate platform-specific expectations. Despite the tutorial informing players of the controls, control schemes that are slightly different but exist as long-established norms are included and players used to standardised bindings will have no trouble immediately engaging with the game.

Whilst some minor differences in those standardised mappings exist (such as "F" rather than "E" for interactions) experienced players are unlikely to struggle and can adapt quickly. Standard conventions in PC gaming typically assign movement to the WASD keys, with interaction mapped to either "E" or "F", jump to "Space", and sprint to "Shift". These conventions are not arbitrary but are shaped by ergonomic principles and cognitive accessibility, with effective control design considering hand limitations and accessibility tiers, placing frequent actions within reach of the thumb and index fingers, which are the most dexterous and responsive (Dotsenko, 2017). This principle is supported by Fitts' Law (1954), which posits that the ease of access to a control is inversely proportional to its distance and size, thus keys such as Q, E, R, and F are often used for contextual actions due to their proximity to the movement keys.

Moreover, the localisation process must account for regional keyboard layouts and input expectations, which may vary across linguistic and cultural contexts, although the key bindings for the PC version of both the Chinese and English language releases of *H:SR* (2023) are shared, with only minor labelling changes and no functionality change. However, even with *H:SR*'s (2023) didactic tutorialisation, new players unused to the combination of mouse and keyboard usage may find operating the camera and moving simultaneously difficult as it

lacks the same intuitiveness found in the mobile version.

Conversely, all three games employ 8-bit Unicode Transformation Format, or "UTF-8 encoding" (which represents over 140,000 global writing system symbols) ensuring the same underlying technical text handling across regions. Unique to Chinese mainland versions of videogames is the need to comply with government standards on character usage, all Chinese characters in the product must be present in and conform to the GB18030 standards determined and revised by 国家市场监督管理总局 *guojia shichang jiandu guanli zongju* the State Administration for Market Regulation and the Standardization Administration of the People's Republic of China 国家标准化管理委员会 *guojia biaozhunhua guanli weiyuanhui*, and referred to by 国家新闻出版署 *guojia xinwen chubanshe* the National Press and Publication Administration (State Administration for Market Regulation and Standardization Administration of the People's Republic of China, 2023), a condition not imposed on releases outside the Chinese mainland.

5.5.2 Eastward (2021)

In *Eastward* (2021), the control scheme is tailored to PC with the expectation that players use a control pad, but does account for use of the keyboard and mouse as a less optimal scheme. Furthermore, the game lacks robust support for control remapping, which poses accessibility challenges for players using non-standard input devices or keyboard layouts. As with *H:SR* (2023), the English and Chinese releases use the same key bindings functionally, with only minor labelling differences between regions.

Eastward (2021) employs a pixel-art interface with fixed-size text boxes, which could result in text truncation or awkward line breaks when localised into languages with longer word forms or different syntactic structures, although this is not a concern for the English localisation. Although Pixpil's proprietary WYSIWYG tool allows localisers to preview scenes with context, it may not fully simulate dynamic UI states since it does not show how the game's menus and buttons change during actual gameplay.

As scholars including Bernal-Merino (2015) and O'Hagan and Mangiron (2013) explain, videogames are interactive and multimodal systems, localisation

issues such as text truncation or button misalignment may go unnoticed when relying on static previews or non-interactive tools; these problems only emerge during live gameplay as the interface changes, limiting the effectiveness of such tools in detecting layout issues.

5.5.3 Depersonalization (2019)

Depersonalization (2019) exhibits similar issues, though they are more pronounced due to the game's lower production budget and reliance on community-driven localisation. The key bindings of both the Chinese and English releases are identical, with only the labelling changing between versions, just as exhibited in *H:SR* (2023) and *Eastward* (2021). However, in some instances, control labels remain untranslated in the English version, indicating incomplete localisation of UI facets tied to input, suggesting a lack of integration between localisation and interface design, which can alienate players unfamiliar with the source language. UI issues are exacerbated by formatting inconsistencies, such as irregular font sizes and truncation, which detract from the visual clarity and aesthetic cohesion of the interface (Fig. 5.16).

Fig. 5.16. Examples of text truncation and inconsistency in front sizes caused by space limitations.

The initial reliance on crowdsourced edits further contributed to a fragmented localisation experience found in earlier versions (pre-1.3 versions) of the game that undermined usability and narrative immersion.

Collectively, these technical localisation challenges highlight the importance of integrating localisation considerations into the early stages of UI and control scheme design. Without such integration, even well-translated content may fail to deliver a coherent and accessible experience, particularly for players navigating unfamiliar input conventions or linguistic structures.

5.6 Localisation challenges in summary

Across the three case study games, localisation strategies varied in their effectiveness - determined by examining accuracy and coherency of the visual-verbal and cohesion with the visual-non-verbal resources, and how it aligns with the source content, genre expectations, and intended player experience - particularly in the translation of dialogue and the integration of visual resources.

Eastward (2021) demonstrated a high degree of cultural adaptation and humour, leveraging visual cues and phonetic play to enhance characterisation. In contrast, *H:SR* (2023) employed a mixture of strategies that occasionally resulted in mismatches between character names, visual design, and dialogue tone. *Depersonalization* (2019) prioritised consistency and genre fidelity, yet this came at the expense of literary nuance and stylistic fluency. These differences in approach also revealed broader accessibility concerns. In *H:SR* (2023), not all spoken content was subtitled, especially during combat and idle animations. While this may have been a design choice intended to reduce visual clutter on mobile platforms, it inadvertently excluded players who rely on text for comprehension, including those who are deaf, hard of hearing, or unfamiliar with the voice language (Lobna, 2024).

Rather than implying a deliberate assumption about players' audio access, this omission may instead reflect an oversight or a gap in internal accessibility policy. Notably, established international accessibility standards (such as the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines, the European EN 301 549 standard, and U.S. Section 508) explicitly require that essential audio information be available

in perceivable text form, underscoring that the lack of subtitles constitutes a deviation from widely recognized best practices. By contrast, *Eastward* (2021) and *Depersonalization* (2019) subtitled all meaningful utterances, excluding only non-verbal combat sounds. This inclusive strategy supported broader accessibility and ensured narrative coherence across diverse player demographics. The challenges of localisation extended beyond dialogue to the integration of visual-verbal and visual-non-verbal resources, particularly during the tutorial phases.

In *H:SR* (2023), visual-verbal components such as dialogue boxes, tooltips, head-up display (HUD) prompts, and subtitles were central to teaching gameplay mechanics and advancing narrative. These resources were often colour-coded and contextually placed to guide player interaction, with key terms highlighted in orange and instructions framed in green. However, the absence of subtitles for certain audio lines and the substitution of culturally specific terms (e.g., “Curios”) with more generic alternatives risked weakening the connection between visual and verbal layers of meaning. Visual-non-verbal resources, including character design, UI layout, icons, and environmental cues, were intricately tied to gameplay and narrative delivery. Interactable objects were marked with floating icons or spark effects, and tutorial progression was reinforced through consistent iconography and screen prompts.

Character designs had to stay closely aligned with the translated text to preserve coherence, while the English localisation’s use of domesticated or softened language to meet target-audience expectations sometimes reduced specificity or cultural nuance. In *Depersonalization* (2019), the integration of visual-verbal and visual-non-verbal resources was further complicated by literal translations and limited contextual information. Additionally, character dialogue often clashed with visual presentation, undermining narrative coherence (evidenced by playtester feedback in Chapter 6). The game’s anime-inspired art style and Lovecraftian themes demanded genre-specific sensitivity, yet inconsistencies in tone and terminology disrupted immersion. UI resources exhibited formatting issues such as inconsistent font sizes, truncation, and unclear iconography, detracting from the visual clarity and aesthetic uniformity present in the Chinese version. These problems were exacerbated by the absence of a style guide and reliance on crowdsourced edits, resulting in a

fragmented localisation that struggled to unify textual and visual components. Together, these observations underscore the importance of balancing cultural resonance, accessibility, and visual coherence to ensure a consistent user experience across diverse audiences.

5.7 The implied player

The concept of the “implied player”, adapted from narratology’s “implied reader” (as discussed by Herman et al. (2013) and rooted in Wolfgang Iser’s “ideal reader” (1974), refers to the conceptual participant for whom a videogame is designed. This player is expected to engage meaningfully with the game’s content, interpret its structure, and respond to its mechanics and aesthetics in ways that align with the game’s assumptions about player knowledge, experience, and cultural background. The implied player is not a real individual but a theoretically constructed role that the game invites someone to occupy.

Additionally, the implied player construct has been adopted to designate an alignment with Suojanen et al.’s (2015) UCT model, emphasising cognitive, affective, and usability dimensions. For example, tutorial design and dialogue localisation often presuppose a player who is familiar with genre conventions (cognitive), emotionally responsive to characterisation (affective), and capable of navigating layered UI systems (usability). In this study, the implied player is constructed not only through examination of the games themselves, but also through the expectations and interpretive habits revealed in the P1 survey discussed in Section 4.4.1 that culminates in a player-oriented genre analysis. This survey explored how players associate specific traits with RPG and JRPG genres, then inquired as to their expectations of Chinese-developed games. The feedback provided offered insight into the kinds of players the games are implicitly addressing. For instance, participants frequently associated JRPGs with a distinct set of stylistic and mechanical conventions. These included exaggerated character design, anime-inspired aesthetics, and exaggerated dialogue. Such traits were often considered more important than the nationality of the developer.

Many respondents argued that JRPG classification should be based on visual and structural style rather than the country where the game was made. For

example, one participant noted that “JRPGs can still be JRPGs without having to be made by a Japanese dev,” while another stated that “the ‘J’ represents a particular style that’s understandably broader every day.” This perspective was strongly supported by the data: 735 unique references in the survey mentioned genre traits such as character design, UI layout, turn-based combat, and anime-style visuals as central to JRPG classification. In contrast, only 172 references cited developer nationality. This suggests that the implied player is someone who recognises and interprets genre through visual and narrative cues like dynamic poses, stylised interfaces, and melodramatic character arcs, rather than through the developer’s geographic origin.

Furthermore, the survey showed that visual resources such as character design, including hair and weapons, were major factors in genre classification. These traits accounted for 21.4% of respondent references for RPGs and 23.1% for JRPGs. This suggests that the implied player is someone who recognizes and values these visual cues as essential to genre identity. Additionally, dynamic poses and movement were mentioned nearly twice as often in association with JRPGs (14.8%) compared to RPGs (8.7%), indicating that the implied player is expected to interpret genre through stylistic and kinetic features.

The survey also revealed ambiguity around the term “JRPG.” Some participants viewed it as outdated or unclear, while others debated whether it referred to a game’s country of origin or a set of stylistic conventions. This confusion highlights the importance of cultural context in shaping player expectations and further informs the profile of the implied player. The ambiguity around JRPG classification also revealed a tension between formal genre features and cultural assumptions. Some players insisted that only games developed in Japan should be considered JRPGs. Others believed that any game adopting the genre’s visual and mechanical language, such as turn-based combat, party-based systems, and anime-style character design, could qualify regardless of where it was made. The disparity in how often players referenced style compared to nationality supports this divide. This suggests that the implied player is not only someone who recognises these conventions but also someone who engages with the broader cultural discourse that surrounds them. The player is expected to interpret genre through a lens shaped by both aesthetic familiarity and evolving global genre boundaries. Additionally, at the end of the

survey, participants were informed that the games they had seen were developed in China.

Of the 79 participants, 17.7% expressed surprise at this revelation. Their reactions often stemmed from the games' strong alignment with JRPG aesthetics, which they typically associated with Japanese developers, reflecting deeper assumptions about the cultural and industrial origins of games that strongly emulate such aesthetics. The anime-esque character design features, such as costume and hair, in tandem with UI design and music felt familiar to players as a signifier of Japanese origin. Such a response implies player genre perceptions and their assumptions about cultural provenance are closely linked.

In contrast, expectations of Chinese-developed RPGs were significantly more varied. Whilst 79.8% were not surprised by the revelation of the games' provenance, many cited recognisable cultural resources such as traditional Chinese clothing, language, or mythological references as markers of cultural identification. Additionally, eight references specifically noted that the stylistic and mechanical qualities of Chinese games had been shaped by influence from the Japanese and Korean game industries. These participants described Chinese studios as drawing from the strengths of their regional neighbours to refine their own design practices and appeal to global audiences. Importantly, 24 participants (30.4%) explicitly stated that they expected similarities to JRPGs or Japanese media in their expectations of Chinese-made RPGs, linking this expectation to the influence of regional game industries and shared aesthetic conventions with neighbouring game markets such as Japan and South Korea. These expectations included anime-inspired character designs, turn-based combat systems, and narrative structures reminiscent of Japanese storytelling. This suggests the implied player is someone whose schemata associates imagery found in Chinese-developed RPGs with a genre framework shaped by familiarity with JRPG conventions. It further supports the idea that the implied player interprets genre and origin through aesthetic and cultural signifiers rather than through explicit knowledge of a game's production context. Before knowing the games were Chinese (categorised in ZhRPG Perceptions), participants often described the content as resembling JRPGs, citing anime-inspired character designs, turn-based combat, stylised UI, and melodramatic dialogue which they associated with the JRPG genre. These perceptions were based on visual and

mechanical cues alone, without knowledge of the games' origin. After being informed the games were Chinese (categorised in ZhRPG Expectations), some participants expressed surprise, while others noted that the similarities to JRPGs were expected. Ultimately, these responses suggest the players approach ZhRPGs through a genre framework already informed by familiarity with JRPG conventions, interpreting the mechanics and aesthetics through this existing tangential knowledge rather than directly informed knowledge of the games' development.

Moreover, an equal number of respondents voiced the expectation that Chinese-developed RPGs would feature culturally specific elements such as traditional clothing, Chinese writing, and settings rooted in Chinese mythology (n=24, 30%), drawing a link between developed culture and game setting, suggesting that to some players a game setting can only be reflective of the developer's country of origin. These expectations help define the implied player as someone who is attuned to these cultural signifiers and capable of recognising them as part of the genre experience. In short, alignment between recorded P1 participant perception and expectation suggests that ZhRPGs are designed with a player in mind who is fluent in JRPG conventions and receptive to their adaptation within a Chinese cultural framework which must be reflected in the implied player. The survey feedback is therefore fundamental to the formation and assessment of the implied player, providing empirical evidence of how real players interpret genre, aesthetics, and mechanics, which makes it possible to identify the design choices that games make in order to appeal to these expectations. By comparing these expectations with the content of the games' tutorial phases, we can assess how effectively each game constructs and communicates with its implied player. Thus, the implied player profiles for *H:SR* (2023), *Eastward* (2021), and *Depersonalization* (2019) reflect distinct interpretive roles that align with the genre expectations and aesthetic associations revealed in the P1 survey. These profiles are not speculative but are grounded in both the content of the games' tutorial phases and the ways in which players conceptualised RPGs and JRPGs, particularly in relation to visual design, narrative structure, and gameplay mechanics.

For *H:SR* (2023), the implied player is genre-savvy and familiar with turn-based combat, monetised lottery systems (commonly referred to as "gacha"),

and anime aesthetics. This profile corresponds with survey findings that identified character design as the most frequently referenced feature for both RPGs (21.4%) and JRPGs (23.1%). Dynamic movement was also more strongly associated with JRPGs (14.8%) than RPGs (8.7%), reinforcing the idea that the implied player is expected to interpret genre through visual and kinetic cues. The game's cinematic storytelling and layered UI suggest a player who is emotionally invested in character relationships and lore, and who is comfortable navigating complex menu systems. These traits align with the survey's "JRPG Perceptions" codes, where "Character design, costume, hair, names" and "On-screen text, UI" were among the most referenced categories. The game's emphasis on collectables and character progression further supports a profile of a player who enjoys customisation and completionist playstyles. The inclusion of voice dubbing implies a player seeking immersive engagement, consistent with feedback that highlights the importance of sound and characterisation in genre identification. Finally, *H:SR*'s (2023) "born-translated" development model presupposes an implied player who expects seamless cross-cultural accessibility, genre-consistent localisation, and polished multilingual presentation, aligning with the expectations of a globally literate, anime-savvy audience familiar with anime tropes and narrative-rich RPGs.

In comparison, *Eastward* (2021) constructs an implied player who is narrative-focused, appreciates pixel art, and engages with emotional and thematic depth. The slower pace and emphasis on visual storytelling imply a player who values metaphor and subtlety. This profile aligns with survey responses that emphasised cultural nuance and visual coherence, particularly in the "JRPG Perceptions" codes related to "Settings, themes, environment" and "Character dialogue." Pixpil's use of a WYSIWYG localisation tool reflects an expectation of an implied player who values textual and spatial consistency, supporting contextual coherence by allowing the localiser to synchronise dialogue with visual resources in real time and preserve narrative alignment. The game's resemblance to Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) and Super Nintendo Entertainment System (SNES) era visuals likely appeals to players with nostalgic connections to retro aesthetics, a sentiment echoed by the references in-game to '90s JRPGs and Japanese media. The inclusion of signs in English, Chinese, and Japanese contributes to the world-building and retro JRPG aesthetic,

without necessarily requiring players to read or understand these scripts but builds atmosphere and a sense of nostalgia. The presence of numerous NPCs and hidden items alludes to an implied player who is rewarded by exploration and detailed engagement with the game world and optimally is familiar with tropes found in older games such as cracked walls being breakable.

Depersonalization (2019) presents a distinctly different implied player. This player is introspective, comfortable with ambiguity, and drawn to psychological horror and surrealism. Although the game features anime-inspired pixel art, its low-resolution presentation suggests a player who appreciates minimalist aesthetics and is familiar with anime culture. The absence of conventional feedback loops and the emphasis on mood and tone imply a player who prioritises interpretive engagement over mechanical gratification. This profile reflects the survey's indication of genre fluidity and the desire among some participants for experiences that challenge traditional definitions. The codes referencing "Story, plot," "Magic, mysticism," and "Immersion, engagement" support this interpretive role. The option to install player-made modules suggests a player who is open to diverse narrative experiences and tolerant of inconsistencies between official and user-generated content. Although the evolving localisation of the English version could imply a player who is flexible with language quality and more concerned with atmosphere and gameplay than linguistic precision, the shift from amateur to professional localisation reflects a recalibration of assumptions about the implied player's tolerance for linguistic quality, suggesting a move toward accommodating players who expect greater narrative clarity and stylistic cohesion and a more demanding implied player.

Table 5.10. Summarised characteristics of the implied player construct for H:SR (2023), Eastward (2021) and Depersonalization (2019).

H:SR	Genre-savvy, anime-literate, familiar with gacha mechanics and turn-based combat; expects polished localisation, layered UI, and immersive narrative engagement.
Eastward	Narrative-focused, attentive to visual and textual coherence; appreciates retro aesthetics, emotional depth, and culturally nuanced humour.
Depersonalization	Introspective, tolerant of ambiguity and stylistic inconsistency; values atmosphere over precision and is open to experimental or community-driven content.

In all three cases, the implied player is shaped by both the internal logic of the game and the external expectations revealed through survey feedback. The survey provided an empirical foundation for identifying player assumptions embedded in game design, offering a more nuanced understanding of how genre, aesthetics, and cultural context contribute to the construction of the implied player. Ultimately, considering the unique qualities of these three games, the overall implied player construct in this study is a culturally literate and genre-aware individual who engages deeply with narrative, aesthetics, and mechanics. The player is familiar with conventions such as turn-based combat and character progression, appreciates both high-fidelity anime visuals and minimalist pixel art, and values emotional and thematic depth in storytelling. They are comfortable navigating complex systems, including lottery (gacha) mechanics and layered UIs, while also being open to ambiguity, non-linear narratives, and experimental gameplay. The player is sensitive to cultural nuance, responsive to visual and textual coherence, and willing to explore diverse modes of engagement, from nostalgic references to psychological introspection.

Table 5.11. Summarised characteristics of the implied player construct for this study based on the collective content of all three games.

Overall implied player	Genre-aware, culturally literate, emotionally engaged; navigates complex systems, appreciates diverse aesthetics, and embraces narrative and mechanical experimentation

Chapter 6 What players see and feel: the non-interactive

This chapter focuses on the non-interactive dimension with an emphasis on how narrative and characterisation, visual and audio representation, and cultural and world context shape player reception. Drawing on mental modelling (UCT), reaction and repercussion (MURR), and visual-verbal/audio-verbal vs. visual-non-verbal/audio-non-verbal (the adapted kineikonic model, see Chapter 5), this analysis examines how non-interactive elements contribute to meaning-making and player engagement using schema theory, reception theory, and UCT as interpretive lenses. The discussion is organised around five overarching themes identified across netnographic and playtester data, with particular attention on the ways in which localisation strategies align with or challenge players' pre-existing schemata.

The chapter is presented as one primary overarching theme section ("the non-interactive"), under which there are four subheadings that comprise the whole. Section 6.2 examines translation and visual-verbal elements, focusing on how players respond to dialogue, cues embedded in written text, characterisation and environments, as well as exploring alignment and dissonance between player expectations and localisation strategies. Next, section 6.3 turns to the visual-verbal voice, examining how written voices shape player impressions or character identity and cultural authenticity, with particular attention to how tone and delivery support or disrupt immersion. Lastly, section 6.4 considers visual-non-verbal dimension, comprising broader themes of cultural framing and representation and how non-interactive design choices can reinforce or challenge genre norms and cultural schemata. The chapter closes with concluding remarks in section 6.5. Together, the sections explore how non-interactive features influence player reception and foreground the subsequent chapter on the interactive.

6.1 Seeing the story: narrative, visuals, and cultural context

This chapter explores three key themes that emerged from the survey and playtest data: (1) narrative and characters, (2) visual and (written) audio representation, and (3) cultural and world context, which are explored throughout

the chapter. These themes reflect player perceptions of in-game elements that are largely independent of player input or game mechanics. In other words, they represent the narrative content within the broader concept of ludo-narrative.

In brief, a trend emerged in which localisation and translation issues were largely unremarked on, but some perceived cultural elements of characterisation, particularly issues around gender and sexualisation, proved prominent and are explored in Section 6.2.

6.2 Visual-verbal: how translation impacts player experience

This section examines how some players respond to translated dialogue and how their reactions reflect broader perceptions of localisation quality and cultural familiarity. Building on this, and drawing from the UCT model's usability testing, the study investigates how players perceive fluency and quality in English localisation. Overall, playtest participants comment most frequently on the plot and on characters, particularly aspects of character dialogue and design.

The cohort of playtesters was split, with half being informed that the games were Chinese-developed prior to play, while the other half were only told after play had concluded. Playtesters were highly responsive to the visual-verbal elements, frequently commenting on them, and were vocal when they perceived dissonance. This dissonance arose either from a conflict between presented visual-non-verbal and visual-verbal elements with other in-game factors, or from a clash with their personal expectations and social norms. As demonstrated throughout this chapter, playtester remarks often reflect how their mental models align or conflict with the localisation strategies used, particularly when the game developers' source culture is initially obscured and later revealed. Focusing specifically on the visual-verbal, localisation approaches were largely unremarked upon by playtesters, with only a few specific comments directly or indirectly critiquing content perceived as translated.

Generally, playtesters who were told the games were Chinese prior to play had little to say about translation or localisation of the visual-verbal. In contrast, those who were not informed until after playtesting tended to react during gameplay and elaborate further in post-hoc interviews. Using the reaction and repercussion framework adapted from Chesterman and Gambier, reaction is

defined as an immediate emotional response during gameplay, and a repercussion as a post-hoc reflection shaped by broader cultural assumptions with wider-reaching, longer-lasting impact on the player. This distinction helps clarify how player feedback reveals both transient affective states versus more enduring interpretive judgments about localisation quality and narrative coherence.

6.2.1 Unspecifiable awkwardness in *H:SR* (2023)

Beginning with feedback from *H:SR* (2023), perceived localisation or translation issues were not necessarily identified as such by the playtesters. Instead, they were more often described as instances of awkward phrasing. In both cases, the playtesters remarked that they could not pinpoint an exact problem, but something about the dialogue felt slightly off or unnatural.

> “They felt like, not translation errors, per se, but things that probably didn’t translate as well to English, things that felt a little stumbly.” (P9)

“There’s a lot of Silver Wolf sentences that are just very oddly choppy and it’s not like leet [elite] gamer speak or whatever aesthetic they’re going for with Silver Wolf, it’s clearly translated that way from Chinese or Japanese.” (P6)Although P9 was unable to identify specific errors, they commented on a general sense of awkwardness in the phrasing. P6 also noted moments of awkwardness in character dialogue and speculated about the source language of the translation. At one point, P6 suggested that machine translation may have been used to produce the content they encountered in-game, which they felt explained the awkwardness they experienced.

> “It doesn’t flow very well […] [like] it’s machine translated, like you took it, you put it into let’s say, google translate, and then you cleaned it up a bit.” (P6)

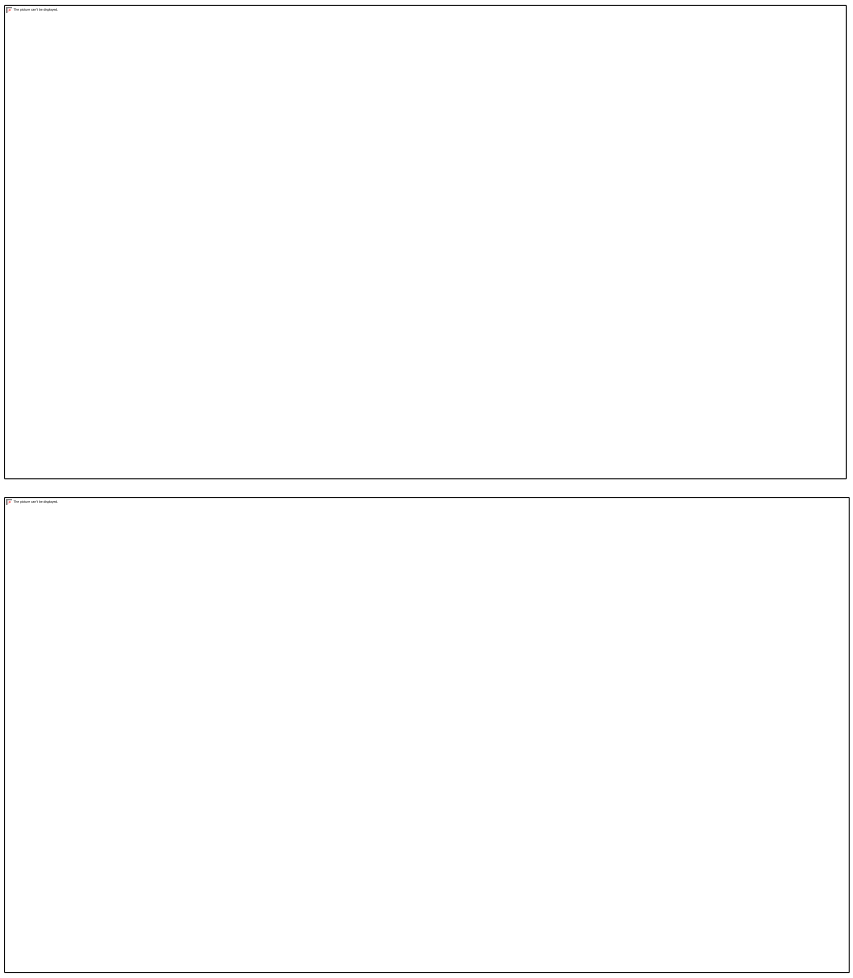


Fig. 6.1. The scene P6 referenced as possibly being post-edited MT.

This perceived misalignment, expressed as vague feelings of “off-ness”, tie into player schemata, reflecting a clash between expected language usage and the usage presented in-game. In the case of P6, it reads as if “post-edited MT” based on their own experiences as a regular consumer of machine-translated literature, which have strongly shaped their expectation horizons and by extension, their schemata, in terms of what MT rendered content looks like, echoing the theories of both Jauss (1973) and Nishida (1999). Additionally, such a response resonates with Hall (1973) and Zagal and Deterding’s (2018) assertion that something’s familiarity is necessarily dictated by socialisation (life) and familiarity (experience), being “biased towards that personal set of experience and taste”. Feeling the text reads as if translated also points towards the dialogue harbouring “translationese” features (Gellerstam, 1986) and demonstrates UX penalties as a result of “noisy text” (Deckert and Hejduk,

2024).

The use of personas that account for consumers of such material may have accounted for such a reading and is an argument for their implementation in an iterative UCT approach to rendering the dialogue perceived as awkward, being aware of a persona's predicted negative reaction-cum-repercussion prior to publishing, or as a reactionary measure in response to genuine player feedback after the fact.

When compared to the netnographic data for *H:SR* (2023), virtually no detailed commentary emerged regarding localisation or translation. Mentions of the visual-verbal elements were generally limited to vague expressions of praise or displeasure, as demonstrated here.

"The story is not great and doesn't make sense."

"The storyline is engaging and makes me want to know more."

While such remarks may convey a general sense of positivity or negativity, the lack of detail leaves little room for interpretation, only alluding to potential longer-term repercussion through statements suggesting discontent ("story makes no sense") or pleasurable engagement ("engaging and want to know more") beyond the act of writing a review. It is unclear what exactly "doesn't make sense" or why the "story is engaging."

Overall, *H:SR* (2023) reviewers did not express any explicit complaints about localisation or translation, implying that they did not perceive any such issues, the translation or localisation approaches lead to an experience that aligned well enough with their expectations and schemata that any perceived misaligns were so minor as to be overlooked.

6.2.2 Seamless and surprising *Eastward* (2021)

Moving on from *H:SR* (2023), when playtesters were queried about *Eastward* (2021), those who already knew the game was Chinese-developed did not remark on localisation or translation, but those who did not know until playtesting concluded responded to the translation aspect positively and even with surprise, leading to positive repercussions in the ways they thought about Chinese-

developed games, altering their schemata.

> “That translation was very smooth, and I didn’t even notice that it was, if you told me it was made in America I would’ve said ‘ah yes indeed’” (P6)

> “The dialogue in Eastward is translated to English? Wow, that’s impressive, they did a good job!” (P11)

> “[Eastward] really really surprised me for a lot of reasons […] it seemed to be coded to a very specific place in America and a very specific dialect, which can come from the translation of course, but even the visual language was very specific to that very specific part of America, […] I would not expect that to come through a Chinese-made game.” (P9)

Generally speaking, the playtesters did not feel there were any localisation issues, as none of them remarked on it negatively at any point, alluding to strong alignment with linguistic expectations in their schemata and reflects positively on the approach taken by the localiser. In fact, they were broadly impressed by the visual-verbal subtitling, which, despite the absence of voice dubbing, blended well with the overall aesthetic. This well-executed blend of elements lead to a shift in expectation horizons (Jauss, 1973), the localisation’s fluency disrupting player expectations of Chinese-developed games, leading to surprise when the game’s Chinese origin was revealed. These reactions suggest that successful localisation strategies can effectively obscure a game's origin, shaping player perception through culturally resonant language and design choices.

Furthermore, P9 stated that “visual language” influenced their interpretation, drawing on their perspective as a professional graphic designer to explain how it subverted their expectations, resonating with Nishida’s (1999) assertion that existing schemata are deployed when players must make sense (decode) new content, relying on existing knowledge. The schemata deployed did not link with expectation or recognisable experience with Chinese-developed games, leading to surprise and a change in schemata. P9 also touched on cultural expectations, which are examined in Sections 6.3 and 7.1.1. Generally speaking, P9’s surprise evidences successful cultural usability measures as the player was impressed by the seamless integration of in-game semiotics; the interplay of visual-verbal subtitling and visual-non-verbal design, explained through kineikonic orchestration, created a cohesive semiotic ensemble that reinforced P9’s genre

expectations, the subversion of which lead to positive repercussions that caused a change in their schemata, resonating with the concept of causal translation (Chesterman, 1998).

As with earlier remarks on translation awkwardness in *H:SR* (2023), these responses reinforce the broader trend of playtesters identifying subtle dissonances in the linguistic elements that blend or clash with other in-game semiotics without always attributing them directly to (or recognising them as) localisation concerns.

6.2.3 Translation frustration in *Depersonalization* (2019)

Before turning to culture-specific perceptions, the perceived localisation and translation challenges present in *Depersonalization* (2019) are examined. Compared to the other games, issues related to translation and localisation were more prominent in *Depersonalization* (2019) feedback, a result of visual-verbal legibility strongly affecting player comprehension in ways that resulted in significant repercussions. Playtesters raised concerns specifically regarding the visual-verbal elements, citing difficulties with readability, comprehension, and the presence of untranslated text (Perego, 2012; Lång et al., 2013; Kruger and Doherty, 2018; Deckert and Hejduk, 2024). These observations suggest that the localisation strategies employed in *Depersonalization* (2019) may have disrupted the intended player experience, particularly where linguistic clarity and accessibility were compromised.

> “A ‘bandager’? What’s a bandager? Is that supposed to be somebody with bandages on?” (P3)
>
> “‘You’ve been such a good care taking care of me’. That’s not good translation.” (P9)
>
> “There’s, like, Chinese characters all over the place.” (P7)

Remarks on specific terms, such as “bandager” (P3) and the grammar mistakes (P9) again resonate with unwieldy translations (Gellarstam, 1986) causing disruption to the player in-actu. In particular, the use of such literal translation in videogame localisation has been critiqued when it impairs playability (O’Hagan

and Mangiron, 2013; Bernal-Merino, 2015), and P3's strong negative reaction reinforces this perspective.

Furthermore, such readability and coverage lapses (Perego, 2012; Kruger and Doherty, 2018) indicate a cultural usability shortfall in which the visual-verbal does not resonate with the player's schemata, prompting reactions (confusion, re-reads) that lead to repercussions (abandonment/deferral). These responses align with UCT's mental modelling phase and Nishida's schemata theory, stipulating that players rely on existing knowledge to interpret unfamiliar content as players depended on their prior experience that informed their expectation horizons to interpret unfamiliar semiotic signs. Equally, the disruptive untranslated text (P7) presents players with a significant co-textual integration failing (Adami et al., 2020), but is an issue easily remedied with robust quality assurance practices and would likely be detected through iterative heuristic evaluation, further enhancing the argument for the use of UCT.

When localisation did not meet player expectation horizons, both usability and immersion declined, and whilst immersion is not strictly measurable, it is evidenced by observed player responses and ease with which playtesters interacted with the games, inferable from in-actu reactions (repair moves, rereads, hesitation) and task success (cf. Kruger and Doherty, 2018), with repercussions captured post-hoc. Ultimately, whilst the localiser valued literalness in translation, P3, the addressee (Bell, 1984) expected a norm of idiomatic, native-level fluency in the game dialogue (Toury, 2012), and when that was not present, a breakdown in cultural usability became evident and P3 reacted negatively. In this case, UCT protocols and audience design considerations were clearly under-leveraged leading to disruption, dissatisfaction, and negative repercussion. These disruptions underscore how localisation missteps reinforce negative preconceptions about Chinese-developed games as misspellings, incorrect grammar, and untranslated characters had a significant impact on the player experience, with playtesters commenting on them both during in-actu and in post-hoc.

For those who were informed beforehand that the game had been made by a Chinese developer, feedback on narrative-specific visual-verbal elements focused almost entirely on story dialogue, particularly characterisation and

difficulties understanding instructions during the combat tutorial. In contrast, playtesters who were told from the outset that the game was Chinese did not comment on localisation or translation. Instead, they appeared to concentrate more on the interactive aspects of the game, which are discussed further in Chapter 7. Worth mention is the implication that informing the playtesters of the games' origins may have inadvertently primed them (Bogner and Landrock, 2016; Mummolo and Peterson, 2019), leading them to shape their answers according to expectations about the perceived importance of the games' origins when told. In priming half of the cohort in such a way, the usage element of the MURR model when in-actu has seemingly shifted, moving away from linguistic emphasis (such as reading dialogue) to a mechanical emphasis (such as combat controls). Briefly, origin priming appears to have changed the model parameters, consistent with reception's context-sensitivity (Gambier, 2018) and audience-design effects (Bell, 1984).

Strongly reflecting this pattern, the netnographic data shows that comments relating to localisation and translation are concentrated exclusively in reviews of *Depersonalization* (2019). Initially, the reviews for *Depersonalization* (2019) appear largely critical, their comments echo the concerns raised by playtesters and include issues such as difficulty understanding the text, untranslated Chinese content, and awkward phrasing. Some reviewers also noted that the language resembled raw machine translation output, echoing playtester sentiment.

> "The translation made it a bit difficult to understand what's going on."
>
> "The english [sic] translation is rough at best currently but passable for it's [sic] current state, there are some areas that aren't translated."
>
> "I cannot get into the story because of the huge amount of grammatical errors […] It reads like Google translate, which isn't good […] I'm putting this game on hold. Once they hire some competent English translators and editors, the game will be in a really nice spot."

Particularly in the final example, such reactions reflect a breakdown in UCT, showing how poor localisation disrupted both comprehension and immersion. This disruption led to a repercussion, where a reviewer alluded to a lack of

professionalism and described an experience that discouraged further play. However, in contrast, the sentiment analysis of *Depersonalization*'s (2019) netnographic data (see Fig. 6.2) itself leans towards the positive.

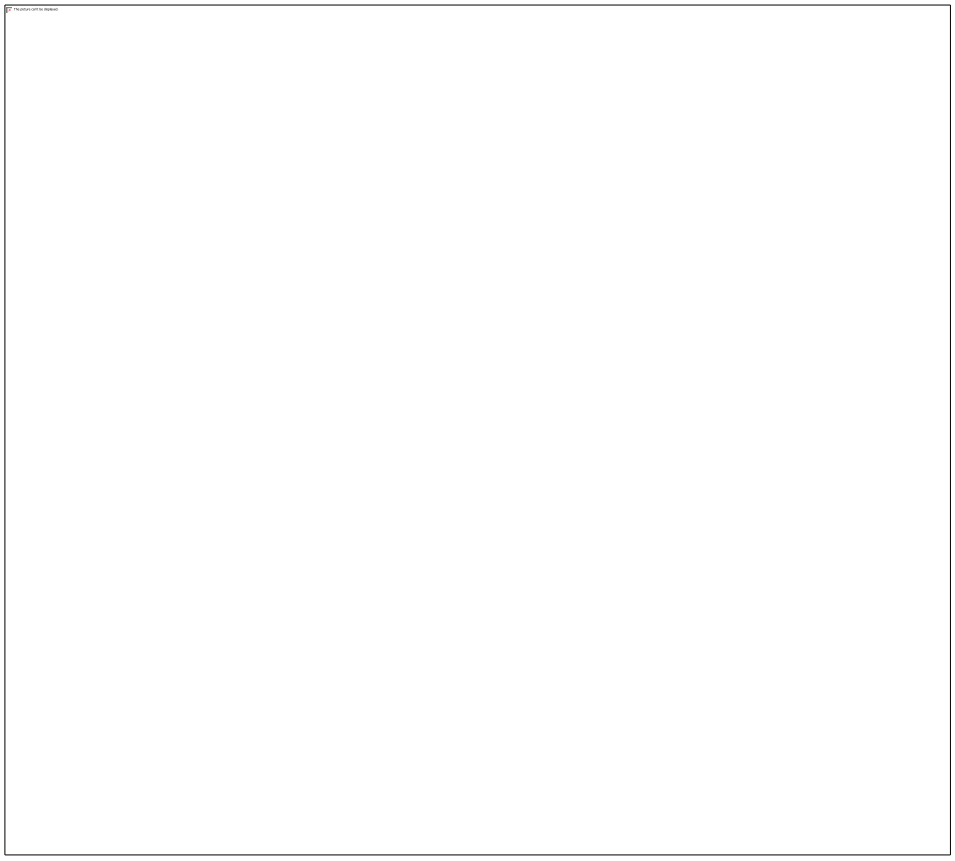


Fig. 6.2. Auto-coded sentiment analysis of *Depersonalization* (2019) illustrating an overall positive sentiment.

Despite the apparent criticism of the localisation, some reviewers demonstrate significant tolerance of these perceived shortcomings due to the game's "incomplete" status as an "early access" title, a label present on Steam which functions as a paratext signalling that the game is in a state of iterative development. Reviewers explicitly acknowledge this fact.

> "Translation is incomplete. BUT it is a problem the devs are working on."

> "Storytelling is cool, though very heavily held back due to a poor translation (though I can handle it, buyer beware). They are working on improving it."

Reviewers appear supportive or sympathetic toward the developer, a phenomenon unique to the review data for *Depersonalization* (2019). This occasionally manifests in expressions of excitement for future content, participation in content creation, or a stated intention to revisit the game once the translation had been improved.

> "The developer is working on this function to allow players to upload their own screenplay, so it's exciting that we maybe [sic] able to play more projects/modules in the future. (I want to contribute artworks and stuff […])"

> "You can tell it's got a lot of passion behind it, and I'm interested in where it's going to go."

> "If the devs continue building up on it this will be an amazing game."

> "The message, style and impact of the narrative are still strong, and I believe the stories will become even more impactful and immersive in the future once they are properly translated."

Acknowledgement that the game is still in development and a willingness to be actively involved in the creation of UGC resonates with the iterative themes of UCT and echoes player participatory practice; players as co-creators and usability testers. Unsolicited player feedback delivered through the Steam review system feeds into iterative cycles, just as UCT advocates. This participatory stance aligns with netnographic research on gaming communities (Kozinets, 2020a), where players assume co-creative roles rather than passive consumer positions, similarly documented in fan and grassroots localisation (Wei and Bonenfant, 2024; Mandiberg, 2018), where tolerance for provisional quality is normalised by shared responsibility for improvement.

Ultimately, the greater tolerance for the localisation in-game at the time of review is derived from player understanding that improvement is to come, the product is unfinished, and the finished product will be one informed by the reviewer's own contributions. Thus, the "early access" label reframes translation flaws as temporary usability issues rather than permanent defects, sustaining engagement through the promise of future refinement. In MURR terms, this context mediates the causal chain: negative reactions (confusion, awkward phrasing) coexist with positive repercussions (intent to revisit, recommend, or

even contribute content). Reviewers' statements ("I want to contribute artworks and stuff") exemplify this shift from consumer to collaborator, reinforcing Kozinets' (2020a) observation that participatory cultures blur the line between production and reception. That this shift is possible puts a spotlight on the context and socio-technical affordances around game development, emphasising that reception is shaped not only by linguistic fidelity but by the affordances of platform, paratext, and community norms.

Playtesters were informed that *Depersonalization* (2019) was in an early access state and were therefore equally as aware as reviewers of the potential for future content changes. However, none of the playtesters commented on this early access state in relation to localisation or possible future improvements to the game, further highlighting the importance of the link between reviewer and iterative cycle; the playtesters had no sense of connection to the future of the game as that demonstrated by the reviewers. One playtester, P11, offered a possible explanation for why the reviews of *Depersonalization* (2019) consistently mentioned localisation and translation, elaborating on their own expectations in association with Chinese-developed videogames and highlighting how pre-existing cultural schemata shape evaluation before the games have even been played.

> "I think it's a bit of a stereotype that, like, in my mind the western games are better designed, and the Chinese ones are a bit buggy." (P11)

This feedback highlights how translation decisions can disrupt player immersion and reinforce negative assumptions about the source culture, where interpretation is filtered through prior experience and cultural assumptions (Jauss, 1973; Rumelhart, 1980; Nishida, 1999). P11's remarks on Chinese game design may contribute further justification why reviewers of *Depersonalization* (2019) placed such strong emphasis on translation, and if so, this emphasis was likely not isolated. Edwards (2011) describes this as a problem of "culturisation," where design choices rooted in one sociocultural context fail to anticipate interpretive norms in another, creating friction that extends beyond language. Similarly, Lefevere (1992) warns that dominant aesthetic norms can marginalise unfamiliar cultural voices, shaping player perceptions according to unilateral

industry standards; in the context of videogames, these norms privilege Western and Japanese production standards, positioning Chinese-developed titles as "other" and subject to heightened scrutiny. These concepts help explain why some players, like P11, express scepticism or lower expectations when engaging with Chinese-developed titles, even in the absence of overt flaws. Such cases reinforce the argument for implementing UCT protocols, in which cultural usability is not the only concern, but iterative processes should aim to counteract any negative preconceptions through the alignment of implied player's mental models and genre expectations, taking Consalvo's (2016) concerns about essentialism and geopolitical bias into consideration. Aligning with causal translation theory (Chesterman, 1998), dismissing or overlooking these concerns can result in the reinforcement of negative perceptions, such as those held by P11, in which translation shortcomings are regarded evidence of design inferiority and influence in-actu reactions (heightened sensitivity to errors) and long-term repercussions (reluctance to play Chinese-developed games). UCT and audience design can be used in tandem to counteract harmful stereotypes by working together to align player experience with cultural expectation in a way that shifts away from reductive binaries (American games = high quality vs. Chinese games = low quality). In short, P11's remark evidences a Motivation bias that culturisation can amplify (Edwards, 2011), reinforcing dominant aesthetic norms (Lefevere, 1992) unless cultural usability is intentionally engineered (Suojanen et al., 2014).

6.2.4 Why it matters: theoretical reflections

Localisation of visual-verbal elements demonstrably impacts and influences both playtester and reviewer feedback, even though there are some minor differences in the nature of their remarks. Evident is Toh's ludo-narrative resonance (2023) in P9's feedback, the player feeling affinity and experiencing greater immersion owing to the localisation approach and eye-dialect well synthesised with the games environments and aesthetics. Equally, P11's remarks reaffirm the importance of aligning localisation strategies with genre norms and the mental models of the target audience, as emphasised in UCT's specification and mental modelling phases (Suojanen et al., 2015).

The contrasting responses to perceived translation quality, ranging from the seamless integration noted in *Eastward* (2021) (P5, P9, P11) to the untranslated content in *Depersonalization* (2019) (P3, P6, P7), underscores the value of the heuristic evaluation and iterative feedback process in usability testing and reception phases of UCT in determining cultural usability. These responses also highlighted players' existing perceptions of localised Chinese-developed videogames. The iterative process enabled localisation choices that better supported player immersion, grounded in mental models shaped by player personas or implied players. Additionally, these findings also reflect Nishida (1999), where players decode content through culturally embedded schemata, demonstrated by P9's identification of and affinity for *Eastward*'s (2021) regional American themes, which closely aligned with the localiser's intended implied player model.

In contrast, P5's disbelief that the game was Chinese-developed reflects successful audience design (Bell, 1984) that transcends national and cultural boundaries. These reflections illustrate how localisation strategies could either reinforce or challenge player expectations, shaping reception through alignment or misalignment with genre norms.

Conversely, the negative responses to *Depersonalization* (2019) evoke Toh's ludo-narrative dissonance (2023), the untranslated text and awkward phrasing disrupting immersion, disrupting the intended onboarding experience, and creating interpretive friction that undermines usability and player agency, emphasising the need for robust specification and heuristic evaluation found in UCT. Whilst this mismatch may have resulted from inexperienced localisation practitioners and should not be attributed solely to flawed audience design (Stafford, 2025), the negative reactions (confusion, frustration) cause negative repercussions (Chesterman, 1998). Whether positive or critical, the responses reveal how localisation strategies, such as dynamic equivalence and implied player design, not only reflect existing player perceptions of Chinese-developed games but can shape player expectations and reception, both good and bad, through (mis)alignment with genre norms and cultural cues. The range of responses demonstrates how localisation strategies could either support or challenge players' interpretive frameworks, and affirms Chesterman's assertion that localisation is not a neutral transfer but a causal process (1998) by which

strategies influence interpretation and community discourse, particularly when cultural semiotics are ambiguous or poorly integrated.

6.3 The visual-verbal: talking my language

Moving beyond localisation and translation, this section explores the visual-verbal cues that playtesters and reviewers highlight in their feedback. It examines how players interpret these cues, particularly when they diverge from genre norms or cultural expectations. The visual-verbal elements triggered various in-actu reactions, including confusion, frustration, and amusement, which often developed into post-hoc repercussions. According to the MURR model, a reaction occurs in-actu as an immediate emotional response, while a repercussion is a post-hoc reflection that carries longer-term consequences. These consequences can shape player perceptions and may even extend beyond the individual player. Whilst 6.2 focused on the translation and localisation issues players raised, the visual-verbal elements in 6.3 are assessed more broadly in the context of the game setting, using the frameworks of MURR and UCT.

This approach allowed for a structured evaluation of how player expectations and perceptions aligned to influence reception through in-actu reactions and longer-term post-hoc repercussions, as described by the MURR model. It highlights the ways in which players interpret in-game cues based on their familiarity with genre conventions and cultural schemata.

6.3.1 Gold text and genre cues: knowing or reacting

In *H:SR* (2023), the gold-coloured text, a type of intratextual subtitle that provides additional context, elicited mixed reactions from playtesters, ranging from confusion to humour. Here are examples of those intratextual subtitles eliciting player reactions.

> “I’m really curious about these extra translation notes, I don’t know why they’re necessary.” (P9: Confusion)

> “Hmm?” (non-verbal curiosity, gesturing at the text with the mouse pointer) (P7: Curiosity, confusion)

“The gold text of doom!” (P5: Humour)

Playtesters of *H:SR* (2023) that recognised the purpose of the gold text as highlighting important information were likely familiar with the traditional computer role-playing game (CRPG) or visual novel (VN) genres. In those genres, the practice is commonplace, used for drawing attention to terms players should remember. Sometimes, those highlighted terms can be clicked with the mouse to reveal additional in-game information. Such information supports world-building and appears as tooltips or entries in glossaries that may include localiser’s notes, especially when explaining cultural references.

As evidenced by the quoted examples, P7 and P9 appear to lack such familiarity in their schemata, which leads to reactions marked by confusion and curiosity, despite P9 referring to the subtitles as “translation notes”, erroneously equating them with localiser annotations found commonly in translated literature. The absence of the necessary interpretative frame causes a breakdown in comprehension, leading the visual-verbal cues to fail to transmit a coherent message to players unfamiliar with VN and CRPG conventions (Nishida, 1999; Rumelhart, 1980; Jauss, 1973).

In contrast, P6, who is familiar with MiHoYo’s franchises and is a self-declared avid RPG fan with over ten titles played, understands the purpose of the gold text and reacts positively during play, finding the gold text’s presence both humorous and familiar. In such cases, cultural schemata related to MiHoYo’s established design practices serve to bridge the information gap, or a broader knowledge of common conventions in the CRPG or VN sub-genres may have served a similar function. This positive reaction highlights a strong alignment with the implied player model and how genre familiarity serves to bridge gaps in cultural usability (Suojanen at al., 2014). The difference in reaction between P6 and P9 can be blamed on poor onboarding strategies; effective onboarding should anticipate players without prior exposure to such conventions. Poor onboarding can be remedied with UCT approaches, through the application of mental models and audience design, such considerations can be taken into account prior to a game’s release or a localisation being published live.

In brief, confusion surrounding the gold text illustrates how unfamiliar visual-verbal cues disrupt comprehension when not reinforced by genre familiarity or

immediate in-game clarification, an issue easily mitigated through more culturally attuned onboarding practices. However, these reactions were brief and seemingly did not result in negative repercussions since playtesters did not comment on it at all post-hoc.

Equally, amused in-actu reactions caused by perceived visual-verbal absurdity were observed in *Depersonalization* (2019). This was particularly evident in the early tutorial when the game introduced the hunger mechanic by giving players bread to consume. Upon consumption, the player is informed, “This is the joy of life.” (Fig. 6.).

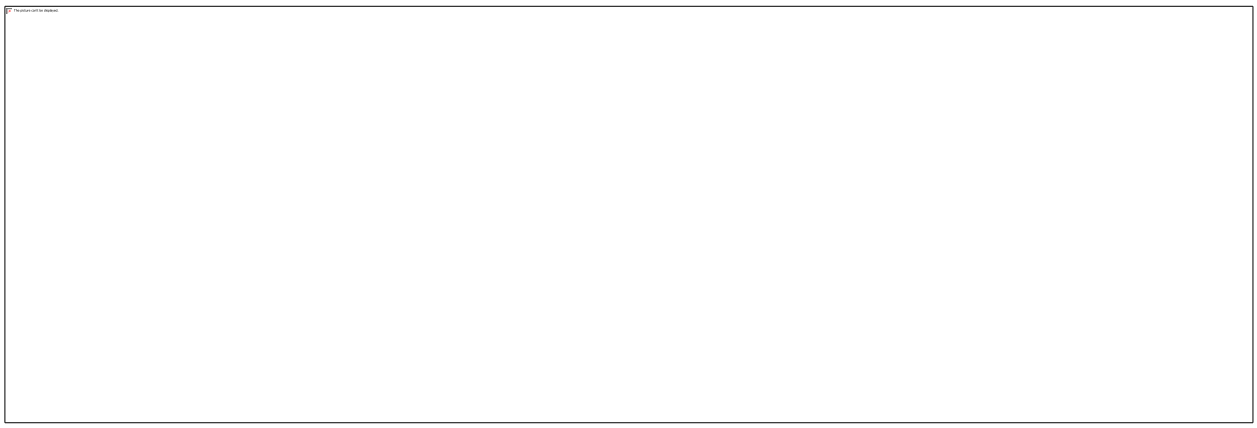


Fig. 6.3. Screenshot taken from *Depersonalization* (2019) containing text that some playtesters reacted to, highlighted in a red box.

> “[chuckle] Right, bread, I feel like that’s the joy of life as well.” (P8)
>
> “Is this really the joy of life? I do like food but like, that looks like bread he literally just picked off the ground.” (P6)
>
> “The joy of life! I mean, I do like bread.” (P3)
>
> “Life is not suffering, life is bread!” (P9)

The phrase “This is the joy of life” triggered laughter rather than immersion, an unintended repercussion that reinforces Gambier’s (2018) observation that reception is context-sensitive and unpredictable. These examples demonstrate situations in which visual-verbal elements elicited reactions in relative isolation from the wider context of the game and its complementary modes. This results in an unintended positive repercussion, as the player recalls the experience fondly

after the fact. In contrast to the relatively harmless, brief reactions triggered by intratextual subtitles and unintentional absurdity, playtesters responded to a visual-verbal sequence during *Eastward*'s (2021) introduction that led to a negative repercussion linked to gender stereotypes. During *Eastward*'s (2021) opening sequence, a fantasy story is introduced featuring a crying princess in a tower, which was reacted to negatively by P1, P3, and P9. Their responses raised concerns about tone and gender, serving as an early indication of broader issues related to gender representation that became more prominent throughout the dataset. These reactions reflect schema activation around long-standing JRPG tropes (Kalata, 2021) and highlight a failure of audience design to anticipate sensitivity to gendered roles, and although the narrative later subverts this trope, initial impressions persisted, illustrating how early cues shape interpretive trajectories.

> "Oh, surprise surprise, princess in a tower." (P3)
>
> "Didn't like the 'rescue the princess'. […] It's just the little girl has no function in this game, just to rescue her." (P1)
>
> "Of course she did nothing but cry" (P9)

Both P3 and P9 reacted in-actu, and further remarked on perceived issues of stereotypical gender roles in *Eastward* (2021),

> "Ah dear god. Husband bad, so funny, sitcom humour." (P9)
>
> "Oh, so she's going to be playing a mage, of course make the girl a healer." (P9)

P9 reacted to both a joke and a minigame. The first reaction is triggered by a joke in which a female character remarks on her husband's uselessness, while the second occurs during the minigame tutorial where Sammy is instructed to play the mage role. P9 perceived both situations negatively, responding with sarcasm in the first instance and with disappointment in the second. These responses suggest that P9 has previously encountered similar stereotypes, has internalised them within their gaming-related schema, and disapproves of them.

The stereotype of girls being assigned healer or support roles in videogames is a long-established trope within the gaming community, and P9's disappointed reaction reflects a recognition and rejection of this pattern. Such genre expectations, especially those shaped by JRPG conventions (Hutchinson and Pelletier-Gagnon, 2022; Kalata, 2021), are seen to influence interpretations of characters and themes in all three games to varying degrees. For instance, critiques of female characters in healer roles, as expressed by P9, reflects Kalata's (2021) observations about long-standing tropes in Japanese games. This suggests that ZhRPGs adopting similar aesthetics may inadvertently inherit those pre-existing stereotypes present in some players' minds, along with the player associations that accompany them.

In the case of *Eastward* (2021), perceptions of gender roles were largely limited to the content of character dialogue. In the example given (p.216), playtesters only knew that Sammy was playing the role of mage because she was told to do so by another child, which revealed her role in the minigame. Similarly, the playtesters who initially reacted negatively to the opening lines about the princess in the castle, erroneously believed they were being introduced to the main plot of *Eastward* (2021)*;* this belief was quickly subverted when it was revealed that the dialogue belongs to the minigame the children were playing. Despite this subversion, P1 later expressed that, although they enjoyed their time with *Eastward* (2021), they still felt that Sammy ("the girl") was essentially just a princess in a castle, serving no purpose beyond being rescued, which they found objectionable, repeating the sentiment that initial trajectory (and thus, expectation horizon) had been set by the opening dialogue and negatively influenced the player; a negative repercussion.

Collectively, these examples confirm that visual-verbal design choices, whether intratextual subtitles or narrative framing, operate within a multimodal system but are decoded through culturally embedded schemata. When localisation strategies neglect cultural usability and iterative heuristic evaluation, they risk causing unintended reactions that influence player perception, even when not escalating into lasting negative repercussions. Moving on, characters and characterisation emerged as a particularly poignant topic, which is now explored in greater depth.

6.3.2 Resonating with visual-verbal voice: accents and attitudes in *Eastward* (2021)

While this section focuses on written dialogue, characterisation is also shaped by the audio-verbal, examined in Chapter 7, where player responses to character dubbing in *H:SR* (2023) demonstrate how tone and delivery influence perceptions of character identity. Focusing on the visual-verbal now, some playtesters referred to character speech when discussing their perceptions of personality. Unlike *H:SR* (2023), both *Eastward* (2021) and *Depersonalization* (2019) rely on written dialogue and visual cues to convey character traits. Having already addressed much of *Depersonalization*'s (2019) visual-verbal content in relation to player remarks about translation, the focus here shifts to *Eastward* (2021). A distinctive feature of *Eastward* (2021) is its use of intentionally misspelled or non-standard spellings (or "eye dialect", Hodson, 2014) to evoke an American accent. Only two playtesters commented on this, and their observations varied in depth.

> "I thought that was just a typo." (P3)

> "They were written in a very specific way to sound like they were from middle-America, Appalachian-y kind of accent, because I did notice they didn't go full southern and didn't say 'y'all' you know? They didn't go that bad, [puts on accent] 'oh butter my biscuits, bless my grits', they didn't go that far. So it was very specifically targeted to a very specific American accent." (P9)

Whilst P3 dismisses this stylistic choice as a perceived error, the misinterpretation illustrating a schema gap, P9 (a US native) recognised it as regional variation and commented on it in detail. P9 not only recognises the accents but also draws on their own regional background to relate to the speech patterns. Combined with their interpretation of the character designs and the mining town setting, this allowed them to construct an overall impression that closely resembled their own hometown.

> "The character designs […] were very distinct in a way I recognised, because I grew up in New England and I was around a lot of working-class, blue-collar men […] so I recognised it and thought 'awww, it reminds me'. […] This is the memory it feels to be of someone who grew

up in that blue collar environment, maybe even in that part of America, […] very tied to someone's memory in a very specific way." (P9)

These remarks support the MURR model's emphasis on how emotional reactions during play can evolve into longer-term interpretive shifts after the fact, or repercussions, particularly when localisation aligns with personal or cultural familiarity. Bernal-Merino's (2015) concept of "multichannel translation" is exemplified in *Eastward* (2021), as the combination of regional accents and visual iconography produce a culturally resonant effect for specific playtesters, as the interplay of text and image produces excellent synergy to align localisation with the implied player's cultural frame. This also echoes Ramos Pinto's (2016) findings that recreating linguistic variation can enhance character interpretation, especially in the absence of other modes such as dubbing, as evidenced by P9, who felt personally affected. Player reactions to stylised dialogue reveals how linguistic variation can enhance characterisation and evoke cultural familiarity, even in the absence of voice acting.

While several playtesters commented on characters and their designs in more detail, only P9 responded to the use of the stylised eye dialect in the character dialogue. Owing to the use of eye dialect in tandem with other semiotic signs (such as character designs, environmental design), P9 was surprised to learn that the game was developed in China. This highlights how localisation strategies such as accented written speech influences player sentiment by appealing on a cultural level rather than a purely linguistic one.

Researcher: Ok, so that said, every single one of these games is Chinese-made.
P9: Really?!
Researcher: Yes. […] Does that surprise you for any particular reason?
P9: Yes, very much so! […] The middle game [Eastward], definitely.
Researcher: So you said not so much the first one [H:SR] because you had some experience of it? But definitely the second one [Eastward]?
P9: Yes. The second one really really surprised me for a lot of the reasons that we discussed earlier where it seemed to be coded to a very specific place in America and a very specific dialect which can come from the translation of course but even the visual language, was very specific to that very specific part of America and, Chinese blue collar working class is very very very different than American, and I would not expect that to come through a Chinese-made game.

None of the other playtesters reported a sense of familiarity comparable to that experienced by P9. Although some of the other participants are also from the United States, they did not share P9's regional background and therefore did not relate to the experience in the same way. This arguably positions P9 as closely aligned with the localiser's ideal player model, as P9's cultural and linguistic context allowed them to fully engage with the intended nuances of the localisation. Additionally, P9 explicitly acknowledged that their experience of *Eastward* (2021) did not align with their expectations of Chinese-developed games. This directly diverged from their existing schemata and perceptions, leading to positive repercussions that reshaped their understanding. However, other remarks about *Eastward* (2021) also touched on culture-specific elements, though these were audio-based and are therefore discussed in Section 7.1.1.

Conversely, another playtester, P5, who is British, had a strong and surprised reaction upon learning that *Eastward* (2021) was Chinese-developed. Unlike P9, whose response was shaped by lived experience and cultural familiarity, P5's reaction stems from their association of the game with *Stardew Valley*, a title with which they are familiar. This comparison influenced their expectations and shaped their interpretation of *Eastward*'s (2021) origins.

> P5: [Eastward] wasn't Chinese, Chucklefish isn't Chinese, is it? […] That's not Chinese... [voiced shock] that's Stardew Valley! Stardew valley's not Chinese! […] It's not a Chinese game.
> Researcher: It is! Why do you think it's not?
> P5: Because it wasn't bad localisation, at least from what I could tell.

Here, P5 returns to the earlier point that localisation of visual-verbal elements plays a significant role in shaping player experience. However, they did not comment on this aspect during play, as they did not perceive any issues. To further reinforce their belief that the game was not Chinese-developed, they note that *Eastward* (2021) strongly reminds them of *Stardew Valley* (2016), a game they are fond of, developed by American indie solo developer ConcernedApe, and published by British publisher Chucklefish. The combination of familiar, cosy visual-non-verbal aesthetics and fluid visual-verbal dialogue triggered ludo-narrative resonance (Toh, 2023) which led them to conclude that *Eastward* (2021) could not possibly be Chinese-developed, resulting in a surprised positive

reaction that became a positive repercussion.

Reflecting on Suojanen et al.'s (2015) UCT framework, remarks on localisation and translation mirrored usability testing cycles, where awkward phrasing and untranslated text (particularly in *Depersonalization* (2019)*)* signified a break in the mental modelling phase. In contrast, the smooth cultural adaptation perceived by players of *Eastward* (2021) reflects a successful implementation of covert translation (House, 1977), where meaning and tone appear to be preserved across languages to such an extent that the translation is rendered "invisible" to players, reinforcing UCT's principle that usability and naturalness in localisation serve to foster player immersion.

It is important to note that the source language is standardised Mandarin Chinese, and the localiser made the deliberate choice to localise the characters using accents or dialects that were not present in the original. The absence of regional variation in the Chinese source reflects linguistic standardisation policy in mainland Chinese literature and digital media (State Administration for Market Regulation and Standardization Administration of the People's Republic of China, 2023), but the decision of the localiser to render the localisation with eye dialect indicates a strategic choice that prioritises functional and cultural equivalence over formal fidelity to achieve a naturalised player experience and an implied player model that aligned with American target tastes, a strategy that directly impacts on ludo-narrative resonance, cultural usability and reactions/repercussions.

6.3.3 Who it is made for: implied player and personas

This section illustrates how localisation choices can resonate with specific cultural backgrounds, shaping player engagement through familiarity and surprise. Playtester responses also reflect the construction of mental models, particularly through the lens of the implied player. P9, for instance, appears to match the intended ideal player for *Eastward* (2021), identifying strongly with its visual and dialectical cues tied to a specific region in America. This reflects the success of a localisation strategy aligned with a clearly defined audience, in this case, a North American audience familiar with the Appalachian region. Conversely, confusion or surprise from other participants, particularly regarding

gender roles or localisation quality, suggests a misalignment between the implied player embedded in the game's design and the actual mental models of the playtester. These divergences highlight the importance of incorporating audience design as early as possible, and more explicitly in future localisation specifications.

Player reactions, such as the surprise expressed at *Eastward*'s (2021) American dialects and Chinese development team, illustrate Jauss' (1982) "horizon of expectations" in which localisation aligned so closely with expected Western-made videogame storytelling that it masked the game's true origin. This finding affirms Hall's (1973) encoding/decoding model as playtesters reconstructed meaning through their own sociocultural lenses. Having now touched on how a player's personal culture can make a significant difference to individual reception, the topic shifts away from the visual-verbal to examine the visual-non-verbal in more detail. Specifically, in Section 6.4 the character element is explored in greater detail.

6.4 Visual-non-verbal: character and environment as narrative tools

This aspect of the visual non-verbal was the second most prominent topic to emerge from the data. Character design appears to inform playtesters' understanding of character personalities, even in the absence of dialogue, as seen in the notable case of P9. At times, character design functions more effectively as a narrative tool than the visual-verbal elements, with playtesters drawing conclusions based on costume and animations. In some cases, perceptions of character identity are further shaped by another visual non-verbal element, the environment, which is discussed in more detail in Section 6.4.2. In this section, the mental models outlined in UCT are drawn on to explore how visual-non-verbal features of character and environmental design influences player assumptions. Audio-verbal features mentioned by playtesters are examined further in Section 7.1.1.

6.4.1 Familiar faces: recognising archetypes in character design

Depersonalization (2019), despite featuring the fewest characters and arguably the most abstract art style among the playtested games, presented a consistent

image to playtesters. The game uses low-poly sprites with only three movement animation frames, yet this minimalism does not appear to limit player perceptions. Although one playtester comments on the strangeness of the sprites seemingly having "no back side" (P2), the limited sprite art still conveyed meaning. For example, playtesters associate the grandfather character and the initial playable character with magic, and when asked to elaborate, their reasoning is primarily based on character design features. This suggests that even with minimal animation, visual non-verbal cues play a significant role in shaping player interpretation.

> “Grandfather is pretty generic, for like a magic grandpa […] He has all the usually things, long white hair, sunken blue eyes, he’s wearing a cloak, he’s holding a staff that’s longer than him, […] it kind of feels like ‘ah yes here we have generic fantasy old man one’ and then the beard as well, […] this indeed is a magic user, this is Gandalf reimagined for the 15 millionth time.” (P6)

> “Grandad seems like a magician […] The robes, the spell he cast, probably. I mean, he was in a room with a glowing door, surrounded by books, a lot of wizarding.” (P8)

> “Might be because I have watched too much TRPG (tabletop roleplaying game) replay videos […] The male character design at the very beginning is sort of a typical one, a typical magician in the TRPG world […] I think the younger version of Anan, as typical as fits my imagination of how, what the magician looks like when he’s young.” (P4)

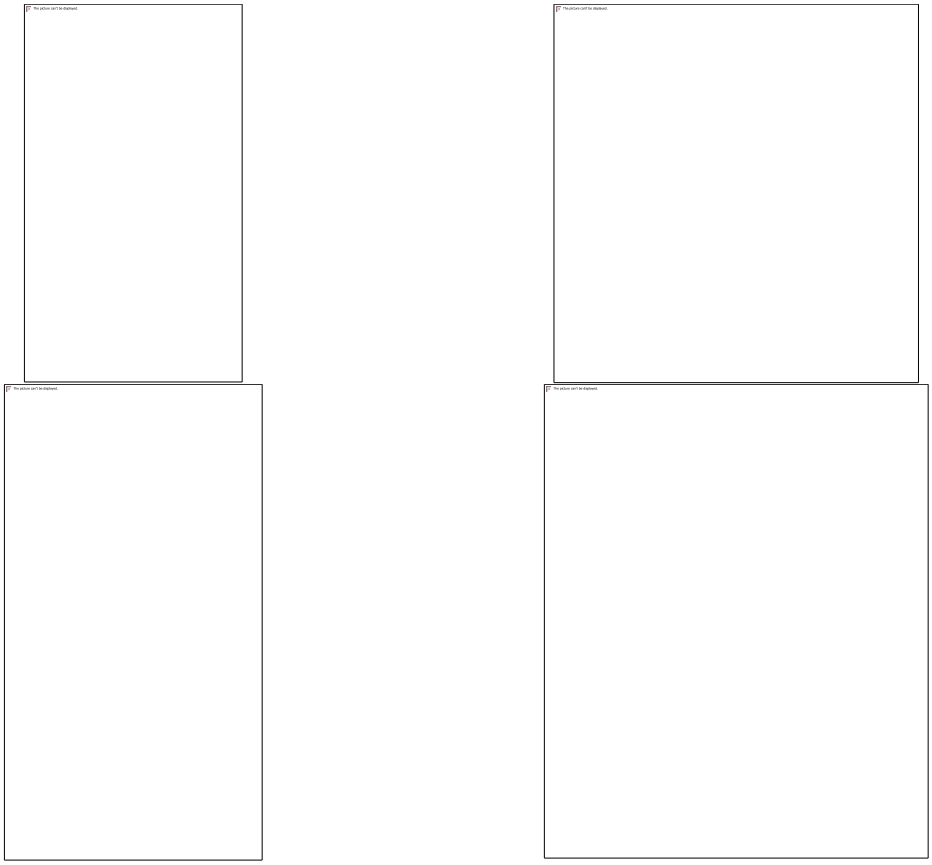


Fig. 6.4. Anan as presented to the player in form of the playable sprite (top left) and the character UI avatar (top right); Grandfather as presented to the player as an NPC sprite (bottom left) and a UI avatar (bottom right).

Notably, the descriptions have a degree of commonality: both mention a cloak and magic use. P8 directly references Gandalf, a wizard appearing in *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien), as a point of reference, whilst P4 not only mentioned magic but also highlighted their existing knowledge based on tropes commonly found in TTRPGs.

Additionally, P8 reported having extensive experience with the RPG genre, claiming to have played more than twenty RPG videogames. This phenomenon is not unique to *Depersonalization* (2019), as player perceptions based on character design are also observed in both *Eastward* (2021) and *H:SR* (2023) and are explored later in this Section. *Eastward* (2021), like *Depersonalization* (2019), features a low-detail pixel art style during gameplay, although it opens with a fully animated 2D cut-scene. This sequence did not appear again in the portion played by the participants, but it may have influenced their expectations for the game's content.

Playtester feedback on character designs in *Eastward* (2021) placed greater emphasis on the characters' interpersonal relationships rather than solely on visual-non-verbal elements such as costume. Comments on character design often focus on costume and overall characterisation as narrative tools. Due to the limitations of the art style, character designs are highly stylised and exaggerated, similar to the depiction of the grandfather character in *Depersonalization* (2019).

> "I liked the art style and the setting as well, it was more like chill, you're out in the country, you're not like special, not like heroes either, you're kind of just people, it feels more human. Just people hanging around." (P11)

> "I guess they were all like, miners. They all seemed to be old guys in dungarees and stuff." (P3)

> "Unique characters, each one is supposed to portray specific things like the big boss is supposed to be a complete prat." (P5)

> "Sam is just wearing a huge sweater, and when you look at like the other kids, the other kids are wearing proper tops and bottoms or shirt and trousers which implies Sam's been with John for a very short period of time, I guess? Or John just doesn't have enough money to buy clothes." (P6)

Observable in these instances are the ways playtesters, presented with limited visual-non-verbal information in the form of archetypal character design, interpret and decode character information through existing schemata. This is evidenced by player references to Gandalf and links to TTRPG experience, evoking the adapted kineikonic model in which costume and props operate as visual-non-verbal resources that compensate for limited (or absent) semiotics, enabling meaning-making through symbolic cues informed by schemata. As Burn (2013) suggests, these visual cues function as meaning-making, evidenced by the character design in *Depersonalization* (2019) and *Eastward* (2021) operating as visual-non-verbal devices proven to evoke player assumptions about character economic status (such as John is poor) and personality (such as the boss is "a prat") without visual-verbal dialogue weighing in heavily.

6.4.2 Environmental cues and where they live

P11 comments on the characters of *Eastward* (2021) as part of the broader aesthetic, concluding that they appeared to be country folk rather than heroes, and P3 suggests that the dungarees were a memorable trait associated with being a miner. More specifically, P6 points out that the ill-fitting sweater worn by Sam might be a hand-me-down from John, leading them to make assumptions about the characters' shared history and economic situation. Additionally, likely due to the lower fidelity art styles of both *Eastward* (2021) and *Depersonalization* (2019), playtesters referred to environmental details that further shaped their impressions of the characters and their backgrounds.

> "They're meant to be like aristocratic; they live in a castle." (P11)
>
> "I seem like a rich kid, living in a castle." (P8)
>
> "I think there is going to be some discussion or reflection on humanity and probably the connection between individuals, because it teaches you how to be alive being from the very beginning." (P10)

In these examples, the schemata of playtesters P8 and P11 trigger, drawing a link between wealth or aristocracy and living in a castle, whilst P10 made a more abstract link between being taught to eat bread in the tutorial with being taught how to live as a human being. Conversely, P10 also felt the art style in *Depersonalization* (2019) impeded their experience because rather than providing narrative clues, the simplistic pixel art style detracted from the seemingly serious, heavy themes of the game, suggesting a misalignment between player expectation horizon and developer determined implied player. For P10, the dissonance between visual presentation and perceived heavy psychological themes in-game was disruptive, breaking immersion and a factor in a negative repercussion, further advocating for the use of audience design and personas in producing a cohesive gameplay experience.

> "Honestly [I didn't like] the drawing style, but that's totally up to personal preference. As for me with this complicated storyline that showcases this simple style set […], if [the art style] shows very sophisticated, very detailed, I would assume it's going to be some mysterious or highly

> complex thing, whereas this contrast between the display and the content. Or maybe that is what the game designer aimed for?" (P10)

Owing to this mismatch, P10 stated that they would not return to the game in the future, a negative repercussion. Despite the negative repercussion, they added that they "would recommend to others if I know they're into this kind of horror game" (P10). This indicates that, although *Depersonalization* (2019) did not meet their personal preferences, they did not perceive the game as poor quality, reflecting a positive repercussion despite their own disengagement. When evaluating the netnographic data for comparative remarks, reviewer responses to the art style, character design, and environmental elements in *Depersonalization* (2019) were broadly positive.

> "The art direction is GREAT. I love the sprites for the characters, and the monsters are Lovecraftian [sic] horrors."

> "Combined with a lighting effect and background it delivers just about information to feel engage into the story."

> "The pixel art is exquisite and the art direction is consistent throughout."

Despite the contrast cited between the simplistic art style and the complex story by P10, netnographic reviewer data generally disagrees and praises the effects, aesthetics, and atmosphere the game delivers. Beyond character design and environmental cues, UI iconography also plays a role in shaping player interpretation. For example, P5's confusion over star-shaped icons in *H:SR* (2023) illustrates how visual symbols are interpreted through genre-specific schemata. This semiotic dissonance is discussed further in Chapter 7 in the context of interactivity and usability.

6.4.3 Colour and confusion: semiotic misalignment in UI design

P3 misinterpreted the outcome of a successful roll due to the use of red text, which they culturally associate with failure, leading to confusion during gameplay about how the function operated.

> “This confuses me, because ‘result needed: success’ is in red, and I pressed go again the other time because I thought it was failed.” (P3)

This misinterpretation derives from P3’s schemata, culturally embedded norms guiding how they decode the meaning of articles coloured red. Expectation horizons further explain how entrenched associations (red = failure) clash with source-culture norms, creating interpretive friction. For instance, in P3’s (a British national) culture, red is embedded in schemata as a signal of negative outcomes, such as a wrong answer in schoolwork (the dreaded *red pen*!), leading them to interpret red text as an indication of failure. In contrast, red frequently denotes good fortune in many East Asian cultures, exemplified by red envelopes used for giving monetary gifts on special occasions and celebrations. As developers from such a region, namely China, the Chinese development team was less likely to associate red with fault when used to signify success, and consequently, a localiser hailing from a similar culture may also overlook such a semiotic misstep. The use of red to indicate success, likely inherited from the source culture, results in a semiotic clash that disrupts interactivity due to misalignment between player schemata and source culture norms. This issue could be readily mitigated through UCT protocols and a rigorous QA process that takes overall semiotics into consideration rather than any the linguistic facet.

P3’s confusion during gameplay led to unnecessary repetition of actions and reduced confidence in the system’s feedback mechanisms. Although the issue stemmed from visual-verbal and visual-non-verbal elements, its impact on interactivity and player experience proved more significant than the elements themselves, thereby constituting a playability concern. It caused not only immediate reactions but also longer-term repercussions, the playtester recognising a mismatch between their expectations regarding colour and the game’s design, diminishing P3’s enjoyment and ultimately contributing to their decision not to return to the game. Conversely, playtesters familiar with TTRPGs found *Depersonalization*’s (2019) combat system easier to follow, indicating that alignment with genre norms, even across media and in spite of some culturally-conflicting semiotic signs, can mitigate localisation friction.

These cases illustrate how genre familiarity and prior gaming experience shape player interpretations of localised mechanics and UI elements. When

localisation failed to reflect player expectations, confusion or disengagement occur, leading to negative repercussions. This reinforces the importance of culturally responsive design that aligns with player schemata.

6.4.4 Implications of art style: going East

Depersonalization (2019) and *Eastward* (2021) are both indie games featuring pixel art, a stark contrast to the highly detailed full-3D models in *H:SR* (2023). As with *Depersonalization* (2019) and *Eastward* (2021), the character designs are a visual-non-verbal component that double as narrative tools. The game features an anime art style and, unique to *H:SR* (2023), fully voiced audio dubbing. Playtesters identified the art style to varying degrees, echoing Kalata's (2021) observations on the stylised character tropes commonly associated with Japanese RPGs, such as exaggerated facial features, distinctive hairstyles, and elaborate costumes, referring to the art style as "typical Asian cartoon character" (P4), "anime or Asian characters" (P3), "anime flair" (P5), "looks very anime" (P7), although explanations detailing the specifics of why they felt that way were limited. P3 elaborated on these perceived characteristics, demonstrating a vivid perception informed by schemata, describing "narrow, pointy-chinned, big eyes, white skin […] all very young, and they've got no lips", key features of the anime-esque character design. Similarly, P11's cultural schemata informed by a childhood in Hong Kong, felt the character designs reminded them of cartoons they watched as a child, whilst P7 pointed to identifying characteristics they believed to be style defining, stating "their hair, clothing design, everything!" as markers of the visual style, again echoing sentiments about character designs typically associated with the JRPG genre found in the initial genre-defining survey (see Section 5.7).

These identifications often relied on culturally coded visual cues, revealing how players interpret character design through the lens of perceived national origin and genre norms. Yet, the lack of concrete answers as to *what* makes something anime could be owing to mainstream media prevalence; it has become familiar enough that habitual gamers are likely to recognise it but be unable to explain why, or be able describe which isolated features they believe qualify it. Furthermore, P6 describes how, to them, colour plays an important role

in characterisation, clarifying how each character's personality is reflected in their colour palette, such as their description of the character named "March 7th" (see Fig. 6.).

> "Her two-tones hair, and exactly her general colour palette, because it's like a really nice and bright and it's supposed to be because she's really nice and friendly as well." (P6)

P7 echoed that colourful sentiment in-actu when encountering March 7th for the first time in the game,

> "Those are some garbs! I like that, she looks like a butterfly! It's sweet." (P7)

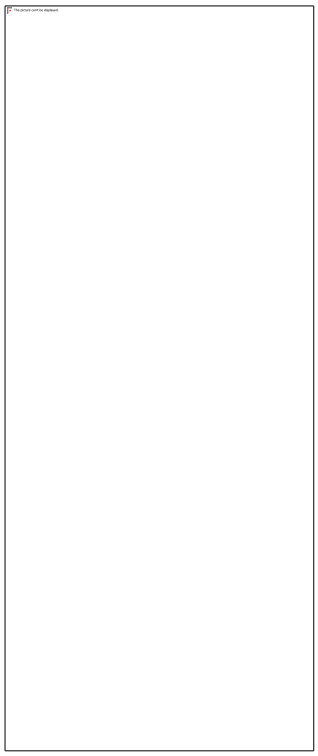


Fig. 6.5. Official front-facing model image of March 7th.

Within Burn's (2013) adapted kineikonic model, colour and costume function as visual-non-verbal resources that communicate personality traits, as evidenced by P6's interpretation of March 7th's bright palette as signalling friendliness; for P6, bright colours resonate with their cultural schemata and informs their snap judgement of March 7th despite having little background information about the character. Equally, P7 reacts positively upon meeting March 7th, impressed by

her costume design that reminds them of a “butterfly”, suggesting a link in their schemata between the costume and delicate features associated with a butterfly. Further impressing the importance of colour in the characters, P6 describes how the colour palette of the main character reflects who they are supposed to be, reflecting the use of costume design as a narrative tool.

> “[You can] understand their inspirations exactly from what they are wearing. So like, you can see you don’t really get much from the Trailblazer except that they look cool, and that’s understandable because you’re supposed to be playing as the Trailblazer so they have like a neutral palette and a hint of gold, or in the case of the female trailblazer with the hint of blue, so they’re supposed to be neutral palates, neutral whatever, and then their colour is also supposed to remind you of the stellaron which was literally pushed into us [the main character] at the beginning of the tutorial.” (P6)

In P6’s interpretation, the main character’s design reflects their backstory as a neutral entity that the player can embody. The use of yellow-gold tones in the costume is seen as a visual cue indicating the presence of the item called “the Stellaron” within the character’s body. As observed in both P6 and P7’s responses to March 7th’s colour palette, audience design has been used effectively here as localisation approaches have anticipated player schemata to ensure narrative coherence through without the need for explicit visual-verbal confirmation, conveying information readily decoded by players about March 7th’s personality through only her costume, before she has had time to be further characterised through dialogue.

P6 also describes their perception of Dan Heng as Chinese, based on elements of his costume design in combination with his name.

> “With Dan Heng we have his name and then if you […] see his coat, and he actually had er, what is it, pinyin? It’s not pinyin, the kanji, I don’t know how to say it in Chinese, but we essentially had kanji down-kanji is essentially Chinese characters-two rows of kanji on his cloak. I don’t understand them but now that implies, from that and his name. So his name is Chinese, the characters on his [coat] are essentially Chinese characters, if he was named something like Hotaru or Hikari or something of the sort, and he had the same characters, I’d be like ‘ah yes this is Japanese’ but this is ‘Dan Heng’ so this is obviously Chinese […] and the last one is he has black hair.” (P6)

P6 drew on their schemata to identify writing on Dan Heng's coat that they recognised as either Chinese or Japanese. This, combined with their familiarity with Chinese and Japanese names and a general perception that many Chinese people have black hair, led them to conclude that Dan Heng is Chinese.

Notably, *H:SR* (2023) is the only game in which playtesters mentioned character names as a potential indicator of either character or developer nationality. Both *Eastward* (2021) and *Depersonalization* (2019) feature a mix of names that sound European or American, such as Chuck, John, and George, and East Asian, such as Anan and Tanaka. With the exception of P9's comment on "Star Key," names were not otherwise remarked upon. P6 was not alone in their assessment of characters in *H:SR* (2023). P9, although less confident than P6, reached a similar conclusion through the following process:

> Researcher: One thing you touched on was you commented on Dan Heng being "Asian coded" and having cloud theming, can you elaborate?
> P9: Sure, so it's a little thing I noticed, he has a name that is more Asian-coded. Um, I'm using vague language because I don't want to say something too out of line. Nothing is offensive but I also don't know, but, he seemed to have a narrower eye style than the other characters, a name that was more Asian-coded, more Asian-coded dress, like it looked closer to some traditional dress.
> Researcher: When you say traditional dress and Asia, Asia is a very big place, can you be more specific?
> P9: I would guess China? Were I to guess? I don't know enough to really know, but that's the vibe I got.
> Researcher: And do you think there's any significance in the clouds?
> P: Probably, but I don't think I know it. Like it's probably significant to someone but not me.

P9 was asked to describe what was meant by "Asian-coding," which they explained as a way of identifying someone as having traits associated with a particular identity, without making explicit claims. This is similar to referring to a character as "gay-coded" when the character is not canonically gay but is perceived by audiences to exhibit traits commonly associated with gay individuals. This process of attributing identity through perceived traits aligns with schema theory and reflects how characters are interpreted through pre-existing mental models (Boutyline and Soter, 2021). That is to say, P9 may have been drawing on shared "cultural schemas", "socially shared representations that people deploy automatically when interpreting incomplete information" (Boutyline

and Soter, 2021, p.728), associating certain traits with an imagined perception of "Asian-ness", drawing on culturally shared assumptions about what Asian identities look like without any explicit confirmation.

P9 appeared concerned about sounding rude or potentially racist during the interview and therefore uses intentionally vague language to avoid giving a negative impression (indicative of social desirability bias, as per Graeff, 2005, p. 411). Importantly, P9 identifies Dan Heng's name and clothing as key factors in their interpretation of his character, concluding that he is most likely Chinese, though they carefully hedge their response to avoid causing offence. P9 also notes the presence of a cloud motif in Dan Heng's design, which they believe may hold cultural significance. This assumption was based on prior experience with another videogame that features a character visually similar to Dan Heng. Although P9 did not know the exact meaning of the motif, they recognise it as potentially important.

> "That character also had a narrower eye style, more traditional dress, her hair up in a style that reminded me of the Three Kingdom's look, her name was Luna, so it was a similar connection." (P9)

In both the case of P9 and P6, existing experience informs their interpretations, their attributions of "Chineseness" or "Asian coding" to Dan Heng's features demonstrate semiotic inference under uncertainty, but informed by schemata guided by adjacent experience.

For P6, this knowledge came from prior familiarity with MiHoYo and Japanese media; for P9, it is experience of another videogame that features a similarly presented character and possibly some awareness of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, which they briefly mentioned but did not elaborate on. What is clear in both cases is that character facial features and clothing play a leading role in how they form conclusions about identity. Both P6 and P9 evaluated visual-verbal elements (jacket inscription, the name "Dan Heng") and visual-non-verbal elements (costume design, hair colour, eye shape) into a culturally coherent concept, conducting schema-driven decoding that informed them of Dan Heng's supposed cultural background and characterisation influences. Additionally, absences or gaps in schemata are compensated in the

decoding process by other semiotics, for example, incoherence of the pseudo-Chinese characters on Dan Heng's jacket are compensated by the familiarity of other costume elements (hair, eyes, costume motifs). Based on the responses from P9 and P6 regarding Dan Heng, neither fully match the profile of the implied player, but together they come close. P6 has a history of engaging with the developer's games and expresses a fondness for consuming machine-translated East Asian media, which gives them a degree of familiarity with the Chinese elements in Dan Heng's characterisation.

P9, on the other hand, encountered similar cultural imagery through a separate interest in fashion, leading them to engage with a game that features clothing and motifs with strong Chinese cultural ties. Although the significance of these visual elements was not fully understood by P9, it still informed their mental process. The decision by the developer and localiser to retain Sinitic iconography, such as the inscription inspired by Chinese writing on Dan Heng's jacket, suggests a deliberate audience design choice, targeting an implied player who can either recognise the cues (or be invited into the cultural frame by other in-game world-building content), thereby prioritising cultural usability over strict formal fidelity. This approach implies that the intended audience for Dan Heng includes either players with in-depth knowledge of Chinese culture, as envisioned by the implied player, or players with other interests who may develop an appreciation for the cultural elements through exposure. This kind of positive repercussion has the potential to reshape a player's existing schemata and genre expectations and may even broaden their interests beyond the boundaries of the game itself. These interpretations also reflect the mental modelling phase described in UCT, as players construct meaning from visual cues based on how those cues align with their own genre-based expectations.

The role of the implied player is clearly significant here, as both P6 and P9 demonstrate how semiotics reinforced anticipated genre norms, but the use of heuristic evaluation is necessary in the localisation process to prevent the association with certain elements (Chinese/Japanese inscriptions, hair colour, motif design) from devolving into base essentialism (Consalvo, 2016). A heuristic approach ensures players are given the necessary tools and context (in-game lore, paratexts) to guide interpretation beyond surface-level supposition.

Analytically speaking, Dan Heng's "Chineseness" is the product of multimodal

orchestration decoded through schema-guided reception and tested against UCT's audience design and cultural-usability criteria. Whether this yields resonance or dissonance depends on how coherently the cues align with the player's expectation horizons.

6.4.5 Gendered presentation: stereotypes

Characters having much more detailed costumes in *H:SR* (2023) provided playtesters with more visual-non-verbal information to draw on, with playtester P10 directly remarking that "somehow their costume displays part of their personality", highlighting how character design is an important narrative tool to some playtesters. The prominence of character designs leading to significant feedback from playtesters again raises the issue of gender roles, and more explicitly, sexualisation (explored in Section 6.4.6). Such reactions underscore how localisation choices around character design reinforce or challenge culturally-specific gender expectations, and how those choices are interpreted through the lens of the player's own cultural framework. Player feedback on gendered character design reveals how the visual-non-verbal can reinforce or challenge cultural stereotypes, influencing reception and emotional responses. Prominently, character gender and their presentation were criticised by several playtesters,

> "A lot of female characters get frying pans as weapons like Rapunzel and Princess Peach, because it's a domestic thing." (P9, Eastward (2021))

> "I really don't like the gender and bringing some stereotypes into it […] the cute girl lost the key, and not that vigorous, not that reliable, I don't like this setting." (P1, H:SR (2023))

> "I feel like the female character always like talking but male character just like, hidden character they don't really talk they just fight." (P2, H:SR (2023))

In these initial examples, playtesters highlight character traits that they link to gender: a female character having a frying pan to use in combat, or female characters who are unreliable or talkative whilst the male characters are silent but violent. Gender was mentioned briefly earlier when touching on player

reactions, during which playtester reactions to the opening dialogue of *Eastward* (2021) were shared. Some playtesters reacted negatively, seemingly associating princesses, towers and crying with a negative stereotype of female characterisation. These reactions and responses reflect long-standing tropes within JRPGs and anime-adjacent narratives outlined by Kalata (2021, pp. 4-8) such as damsel roles, girls as healers, and exaggerated femininity. Brückner et al. (2019) also highlight how culturally specific character roles and design conventions shape reception differently across regional audiences and consequently, schemata.

Vitally, the developer must have intended this response, immediately subverting the expectations of the player once the dialogue ended and the scene moved on, with the localiser using language reminiscent of a perceived "typical damsel in distress" story to evoke the appropriate reaction from the playtesters. Some playtesters reading the dialogue reacted with laughter when the scene transitioned, reinforcing the notion of developer and localiser intentionality. Within *Eastward* (2021), the topic of gender roles is limited to remarks on the aforementioned opening dialogue and P9's observations about the frying pan and making "the girl a healer", building on earlier reactions to gendered tropes in *Eastward*'s (2021) opening, reinforcing how visual and narrative cues shape player perceptions of gender roles across games. However, in *H:SR* (2023), playtesters are noticeably more vocal and reactive to character designs.

6.4.6 Gendered presentation: female sexualisation

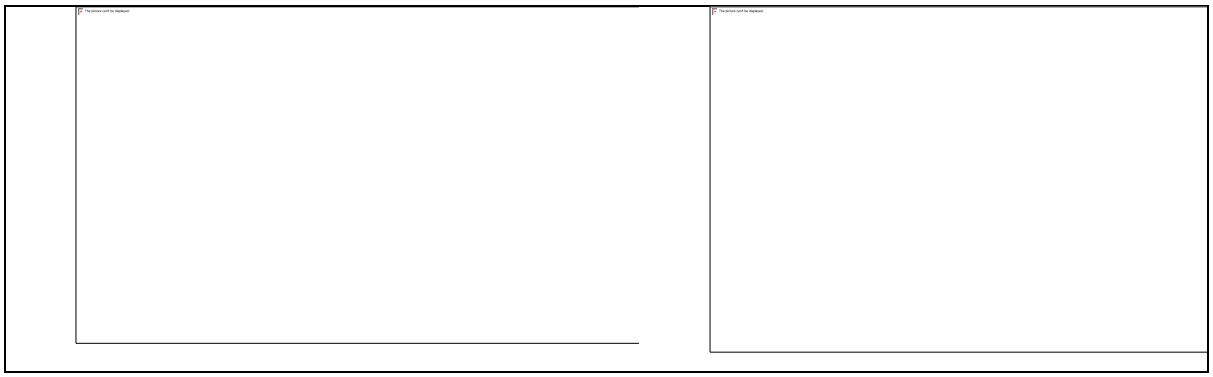
This subsection explores how character sexualisation is perceived across cultural contexts and how those perceptions shape player engagement and critique. Focusing on characters in terms of the visual-non-verbal in *H:SR* (2023), a trend emerged (unseen in either of the other titles); playtesters remarked pointedly on female character presentation. That is not to say the male character designs were not remarked on, but were so to a lesser degree. Not all feedback was negative as discussed shortly (p. 246), but for now the focus is on the negative remarks. Firstly, drawing attention to the in-actu reactions that occurred to female characters in *H:SR* (2023):

“(Kafka standing, breasts centre screen) They chose that angle on purpose.” (P9)

“(referring to Silver Wolf) Maybe they’ve got a pair of trousers for her.” (P3)

“The power of cuteness?! Gross! I understand that’s a cultural thing, a culture that I don’t fully understand but, eww... Like, I understand that’s not as problematic to other folks as it would be, as I’m reading it right now.” (P9)

Table 6.1. The screen at the moment playtesters remarked in-actu, from left to right P9 and P3.



To complement these example reactions, here are some remarks post-hoc.

“The first couple of female characters, their costumes were kind of exaggerated or put emphasis on the upper body. […] I would say it shows as a little sexual, as its understandable for marketing or promoting, but it can be offensive to some players that are sensitive about this kind of issue.” (P10)

“[Silver Wolf] looks cool, but this is very much what a man would think a gamer girl wears and probably wore outside, etcetera etcetera. Which, I don’t hate her design, but I look at it and I’m very much, ‘ah yes, male gaze here’.” (P5)

“I did notice a lot of sexualisation which I understand might be read a little differently from someone of a different culture but I noticed that immediately. The camera really hangs around the ladies’ curves and really makes you notice [chuckles].” (P9)

“I still chose the female [playable protagonist], but I still don’t like the kind of fragile, innocent appearance.” (P1)

> “I don’t like the sexualisation of the female characters, when the game first started you saw boobs, then more boobs, and right away there’s another female character introduced and here’s the boob shot.” (P3)

Firstly, playtester remarks are not echoed by the netnographic data; none of the sampled reviews of *H:SR* (2023) mention character sexualisation (although mentions of favourite characters are present, “Saturday is the best character!”). But playtesters comment on this quite strongly, with five playtesters (45%) remarking explicitly on female sexualisation. Equally, there are no mentions of sexualisation in either playtester feedback or netnographic data taken from *Eastward* (2021) or *Depersonalization* (2019); this phenomenon is unique to *H:SR* (2023). In comparison, remarks on male character designs are typically more neutral in tone, remarking on characterisation or personality, or how they contrast with the female designs, and are less critical of their outward appearances.

> “[Dan Heng], I don’t like his description, like, he’s a cold, reserved man, male, it’s bad.” (P1)

> “Yeah, the way [Dan Heng] dressed seems more serious, formal, and the one with light hair, the boy, his voice and the way he dressed seemed younger, and also as I said, how their costume showcase their personality.” (P10)

> “The boys are quite androgynous. The characters are all narrow, pointy-chinned, big eyes, white skin […] I quite like the male character’s costumes, but mainly because, you know, they actually were wearing clothes [laugh].” (P3)

P1 points out that part of their assessment of Dan Heng is derived from reading his character backstory in the menus, their opinion being guided by the lore rather than by his physical appearance, whilst P10 and P3 took cues from the male characters’ clothing and features and drew quite divergent conclusions. P10 observes Dan Heng and Arlan’s clothing suggests their age or seniority, whilst P3 feels the men are all androgynous-looking and likes their costumes because they are not revealing, unlike the female character costumes.

Playtesters reference female characters’ curves and clothing styles on multiple occasions, remarking on how a character needs more clothes, or how

the camera emphasises their physique in a manner unseen with male characters. Notably, P9 vocalised both in-actu and post-hoc their belief that such sexualisation might be “read a little differently from someone of a different culture”, demonstrating an awareness of different expectations, whilst also making it clear that they do not conform to this standard with their initial negative in-actu reaction (“The power of cute? Gross!”).

Furthermore, and arguably more poignant, is the notion that something about *H:SR*’s (2023) character designs warranted P9’s comments about other cultures finding it acceptable, implying that they believe the game hails from another culture where such designs are commonplace. This demonstrated link between culture and sexualisation is recurrent as seen in the quoted remarks above, but as explored now, they were not entirely negative. Playtester feedback about the female characters also contains positive feedback:

> “The female characters, […] yeah, the two female characters in my team, when they’re very cool and I beat the enemies, I feel so, ah! Super into that and I think, ‘that’s great’!” (P1)

> “The one with the guns [Kafka], seeing she’s going to be a good villain […] I liked her design and she was more of the bad ass thing, so yeah, gets things done.” (P5)

> “I’ve only got good things to say about that [character designs]. It’s all just designed to be very over the top, but in a way that is nice to look at; it’s all very bright, and just anime-esque. I like the intricacies in the characters, like accessories.” (P7)

Despite the volume of negative remarks about sexualisation, not all playtesters commented on it (55% did not comment), and in contrast they were positive in their assessments. P1 remarked on how they enjoyed controlling Kafka and Silver Wolf at the start of the tutorial and refers to them as “cool”, going on to describe using them to win fights as empowering, making them feel good. P5 specifies the positive impression Kafka left on them, describing her as a villain despite the game never explicitly stating this to the player. Finally, P7 only had praise for the character designs, taking special interest in costume intricacies such as accessories. The character designs in these instances resonate very differently with each player.

Whilst some playtesters are struck by sexualisation and feel it is a problem (45%), other playtesters (55%) are impressed by the designs and feel the characterisation through costume is strong and meaningful. In the case of P5, the design conveys Kafka is a villainous character without explicit narrative confirmation. P7's remarks on the art style being "anime" and "over the top" demonstrate a link in their schemata between exaggerated features and the anime art style, a sentiment echoed by P5 who, as touched on earlier, felt the character designs and sexualisation were exaggerated because the game "is Japanese" and possesses "anime flair".

Conversely, when evaluating the positive responses, there is one case in which those responses reflect a positivity towards the character design for being more "toned down" than the playtester expected. In the case of P5, a playtester with 18 years of gaming experience (citing their first console as a PS3, released in 2007) and a firm RPG fan (claiming to have played between 10 and 20 games), the sexualisation evoked an unexpected response. The player believed the game to be Japanese because of the anime art style and equates that with sexualisation.

> "I'm assuming it's going to be a lot more sexualised because it's obviously going to be a Japanese video game […] it didn't seem as bad as I thought it did, because some other games are just way worse than that […] it didn't go all the way out, […] making it so sexually explicit." (P5)

The fact they perceive the game to be Japanese set their expectations for sexualisation, and during play they found the level of sexualisation to be lower than expected based on experiences of other games with similar aesthetic approaches. P5 was not aware the game was Chinese-developed until play concluded, to which they reacted with surprise.

> "I had kind of a thing where it wasn't full anime but felt Japanese so that explains it, it was Chinese." (P5)

Hearing the game was not Japanese but was Chinese changes their estimation of the game. They are surprised the game is Chinese, but pleasantly surprised, affirming the notion that Chinese-developed games with anime aesthetics are

less egregiously sexualised than their Japanese counterparts. This response evokes feedback from P9, who made a point about “certain cultures” not having an issue with character sexualisation (Devčić and Sabol, 2024; Robinson, 2021; Salenius, 2023), and when evaluated against the remarks made by P5, heightens the likelihood that P9’s “certain cultures” comment alludes to Japan.

At this point, the discussion must shift away from the visual elements and touch briefly on the audio-verbal. Only *H:SR* (2023) features audio-verbal dubbing and it resulted in feedback that complements the above remarks on characterisation. Whilst sexualisation is a topic prominent broadly, character voices in *H:SR* (2023) highlight two primary issues: (1) the voices aid in construction of a player’s impression of the character, and (2) the character March 7th is often singled out for comment. Clearly demonstrated here is the significance of co-textual design (Adami et al., 2020), exemplified in reactions to *H:SR*’s (2023) intratextual subtitles and character designs, as meaning emerges not only from the content of character dialogue or narrative lines, but its interplay with visuals, genre familiarity and the nature of the audio-verbal content, namely March 7th’s voice.

The audio elements are discussed in-depth in Section 7.1. In brief, the data alludes to character and environment design shaping player assumptions about characters and their roles and personalities, revealing how visual cues serve as narrative tools and trigger culturally informed interpretations that stem from player schemata.

6.5 What was learned from what players saw and felt

This chapter has demonstrated how non-interactive elements shaped player interpretation and reception through alignment or divergence from expectations. It is necessary to address the limited references to the netnographic data in this chapter. Despite sample collection and coding (found in the Appendix), data depth was lacking, although netnographic insights have been referenced where relevant and continue to be so in Chapter 7. *Depersonalization* (2019) reviewers wrote the most comprehensive reviews overall, but the content of the game had changed across the playtest duration, meaning not all reviewers were responding to the exact same gameplay experience. Nevertheless, the reviews

are thoughtful and highly informative.

In contrast, the brief and shallow nature of *H:SR* (2023) reviews tend to focus on general praise or functionality issues, often directed at the developers. Despite these limitations, sentiment analysis suggests that all three games were received positively overall. In agreement with the broadly positive sentiment of playtesters, *Eastward* (2021) stands out as significantly more positive than both *H:SR* (2023) and *Depersonalization* (2019). Due to the lack of detail in *H:SR* (2023) reviews, it can only be speculated based on recurring themes in the netnography, that the positive sentiment stemmed from simple enjoyment, with 22% of reviews (n=41) praising the game or describing it as fun. In contrast, as discussed in Section 6.2.3, the majority of references in *Depersonalization* (2019) reviews focus on translation and localisation (n=64, 13%), a topic that did not appear in reviews of *Eastward* or *H:SR* (2023). For *Eastward* (2021), reviewer focus was nearly evenly split between plot and narrative (n=46, 10 percent) and efforts to inform or guide potential players (n=40, 9 percent). Across all three games, reviewers primarily aim to communicate how enjoyable the experience was, often with the intention of informing other players or the developers. These post-hoc reflections serve as repercussions that can shape the expectations and schemata of future players.

To summarise, this chapter explored how non-interactive elements shaped player perceptions. Across all modes, responses were strongly influenced by individual cultural schemata, genre familiarity, and expectations rooted in character design, most prominently observable in playtester data. Whilst overt translation errors were uncommon, player-perceived tonal misalignment, gender representation, and culturally specific cues triggered strong reactions, both positive and negative, particularly when they diverged from genre expectations or mental models.

Player perceptions of localisation were shown to depend not only on the visual-verbal, but also on visual-non-verbal elements such as costume and setting, and on audio-verbal and non-verbal features including voices, music, and sound effects (SFX). The contrast between playtester feedback and netnographic reviews further suggested that in-actu gameplay evoked significantly stronger emotional responses than those formed post-hoc. One notable observation from the playtester data was the prominence of P9, who

contributed significantly more feedback than other participants.

Poignantly, playtesters demonstrated the flexibility and malleability of players' socially and experientially informed schemata (Shahghasemi, 2017). This was evidenced by P5, P9, and P11, who expressed assumptions about Chinese-developed games that shifted positively following play experiences that aligned with their genre expectations or evoked personal cultural familiarity. These shifts, from initial surprise or scepticism to appreciation, exemplify schema adaptation (Crawford and Chaffin, 1986) and how reaction can lead to repercussion, reinforcing or entirely rewriting cultural schemata. More broadly, these insights contribute to understanding how player interpretation corresponds with intended meaning.

The UCT model helped identify mismatches between expected and received content, the MURR model clarified the emotional and reflective dimensions of reception, and the kineikonic model illuminated how multimodal elements contribute to meaning-making. Together, these findings established a foundation for understanding how localisation choices shaped player reception, either by reinforcing or disrupting expectations. The analysis directly addressed the study's research questions by demonstrating how non-interactive localisation strategies influenced player perception and reception in Chinese-developed games. It also examined the role of pre-existing schemata and genre familiarity in mediating interpretation. Furthermore, the chapter considered how localisation practices either aligned with or challenged culturally embedded norms.

The next chapter shifts focus to the interactive dimension, exploring how gameplay mechanics and interface design further contributed to reception and meaning-making in localised Chinese-developed titles.

Chapter 7 What players feel and engage with: the interactive

Building on the analysis of non-interactive elements presented in Chapter 6, this chapter examines how interactive components, including control schemes, UI navigation, and audio feedback, shapes player reception. The frameworks of UCT, MURR, and the kineikonic model continue to inform the analysis, with particular attention given to the ways in which interactivity mediates cultural interpretation and usability.

As with Chapter 6, thematic analysis is conducted to identify emergent themes in playtester data, the coded data categorised into either interactive or non-interactive elements. This chapter examines the interactive dimension, which consists of two primary theme groups: (1) gameplay, systems, and mechanics, and (2) player experience and engagement. The interactive is central to understanding how players engage with localised Chinese-developed RPGs. It reflects the “ludo” aspect of ludo-narrativity, emphasising player interaction with the game through implemented systems and mechanics, including control schemes and feedback loops.

The analysis explores how these interactive elements shape player reception and perception and investigate the extent to which localisation mediates these experiences in culturally specific ways. Building on the research questions and objectives outlined in Section 1.4, this chapter offers insight into the intersection of interactivity and localisation in shaping player interpretation and engagement. Specifically, it examines how features such as control schemes, audio feedback, and UI design, influenced player reception of localised Chinese-developed games, and how localisation strategies align with, or diverged from, player expectations and genre familiarity. As noted in the previous chapter, netnographic data provided a useful contrast to the playtester data analysed in this chapter. Although less detailed, it is referenced where appropriate to support the findings.

7.1 Audio feedback and player interpretation

7.1.1 Audio-verbal cues

The audio-verbal and audio-non-verbal elements in videogames operate as integral components of the interactive feedback loop. These elements provide real-time responses to player input and shape the evolving nature of gameplay. Player reactions to character voices demonstrates how vocal tone and delivery influence perceptions of personality and cultural identity, subtly revealing the impact of localisation choices on player reception. Audio-verbal content appears exclusively in *H:SR* (2023), making it the sole focus of this section.

7.1.2 Voice performance in characterisation

During the tutorial phase of *H:SR* (2023), characters engaged in audio-verbal dialogue through narrative conversations and combat barks (audio-verbal voice lines that accompany attacks). Playtesters noticed and responded to these elements in various ways. P4 highlighted the significance of appealing audio-verbal dubbing.

> “If there’s voices that I feel uncomfortable with, I will read the sentence and not really listen to it, but if I like it I really like it, I’ll listen to the voices.” (P4)

For P4, discomfort with character voices led her to disregard the dubbing entirely, opting instead to rely on subtitles. This response carried potentially significant negative implications for player experience, as it disrupted immersion and reduced engagement with the game's narrative. When audio-verbal elements became intolerable, playing without them risked losing key aspects of characterisation and storytelling. Such behaviour echoes Kruger et al.’s recent study (2018), finding that players in multimodal gaming contexts extracted textual cues selectively, guided by task relevance and cognitive preferences. In more extreme cases, such dissatisfaction could prompt a player to abandon the game altogether. Audio-verbal cues, such as dialogue and combat barks worked not only to inform the player of actual in-game plot but also complemented the characterisation in a way playtesters noticed and reacted to in-actu.

7.1.3 Gendered vocal stereotypes and player reactions

March 7th was especially incendiary as her voice elicited significant playtester reactions, as evidenced:

> "This female character [March 7th] here makes me think of Mini Mouse. It's her voice, real childlike, squeaky voice, you know?" (P3)
>
> "March you should really ask this question, this is a question you need to ask, I could be suspicious!" (P6)
>
> "[Laugh] What?! (Mimicking March 7th's voice) 'You're annoying!' Speak for yourself, darlin'." (P9)

P3, P6, and P9 all responded to March 7th's lines during gameplay. While P6 expresses concern that March 7th is not being thorough enough in her enquiries, P3 and P9 focus on her voice, reacting to it on multiple occasions.

> "Let's level up your voice!", "That [March 7th's combat barks] gets very tiresome.", "Ok, she is really annoying! Can we dump her somewhere?" (P3)
>
> "(Mimicking March 7th's voice) 'Watch this! 5HP!'", "(Mimicking March 7th's voice) 'Hehehe cute!'" (P9)

P3 expresses clear disapproval, while P9 chooses to mock March 7th's voice through mimicry. Although these two playtesters were vocal during gameplay, others waited until the post-hoc interview to share their opinions about the character voices.

> "I really don't like the appearances of the characters in the first game, both genders too stereotyped, the voice, the clothes and the settings also, it's very binary." (P1)
>
> "I don't really like some female voices of the characters, because like, I don't really know how to describe it but, it's like little girls?" (P4)
>
> "They had tried to give the characters voices a quality to tell you what kind of character they were, so Kafka has this low and you know 'hmm' voice, it's very sinister you know? She does all these bad things, and you know because she talks this way. And then you have March who talks up here

like this because she's so cute and adorable! […] Dan Heng, he speaks very evenly and very properly, […] he's very steady and […] very even, very flat, doesn't get upset very often." (P9)

"The boy [Arlan], his voice and the way he dressed seemed younger." (P10)

P1, P4, P9, and P10 all comment on character voices and their personal interpretations of them. P1 stands out for offering a broader critique, noting that the voices contribute to an overall impression that led them to dislike the characters.

Focusing more specifically on vocal qualities, P10 refers to the character Arlan, who is voiced by a woman, and observes that his voice combined with his clothing suggests he is young in age. This illustrates a direct association between voice and perceived age. Similarly, P4 also links voice to age, expressing a dislike for certain female character voices because they sounded like "little girls." This sentiment is echoed by P3, who describes March 7th as sounding like "Mini Mouse," a high-pitched female character associated with Disney and children's entertainment.

P9, who was highly critical of March 7th during gameplay, later explains in detail how character voices shaped their interpretations. They attribute March 7th's high-pitched voice to her perceived "cuteness," while describing Kafka as a "bad girl" whose deeper cadence signals a more malign nature. P9 also comments on Dan Heng, noting that his even tone suggests a calm temperament and a lack of emotional volatility. This perception of emotional restraint is echoed by other playtesters. P1 expresses dissatisfaction with what they see as a stereotypical portrayal of a cold male character, while P7 remarks that Dan Heng has "no personality." Similarly, P2 observes that male characters spoke infrequently, a pattern that not only reflects the trope of the strong, silent male figure common in Western media (Wood, 1994) but also echoed similar stereotypes found in East Asian media (Louie, 2012). These portrayals prompted negative responses from several playtesters. These remarks illustrate how vocal performance and characterisation intersect with culturally embedded expectations surrounding gender and tone. They reveal how localisation choices

can either reinforce or challenge players' existing schemata, particularly in relation to gender representation and emotional expression.

These findings echoed earlier observations on gendered character design discussed in Section 6.4.5, reinforcing the idea that both visual and vocal cues play a significant role in shaping player perceptions of cultural and gender norms. However, it is important to acknowledge that players were not necessarily responding to voice alone; interpretations were likely influenced by visual cues. The first assumptions made about a character based on voice were seemingly reinforced by the character's appearance and design. For instance, P10's assumption that Arlan sounded young aligns with his youthful design. Equally, P4's and P3's comparisons to "little girls" and "Mini Mouse", regardless of how much they personally disliked it, aligns well with the characters' cute, childlike visual styling, reflecting how voice dubbing works in tandem with visual design to create a coherent, identifiable character identity.

7.1.4 Influential positive voice associations

Coming back to March 7th, despite the disapproving comments on her voice, playtesters are able to build a strong impression of her personality owing to her voice in conjunction with her visual-non-verbal cues, primarily her costume. For instance, P7 is complimentary about March 7th's design early on, citing her similarity to a "butterfly", and later speaks positively of her "bird-brained" behavioural traits as endearing, whilst another playtester, P1, speaks damningly of this trait as stereotypical young girl unreliability. Equally, P5 felt March 7th is the only character they can relate to in *H:SR* (2023) and that she reminds them of someone.

> "I was listening to her dialogue thinking I know their voice from somewhere. She really reminds me of someone but I can't think who". (P5)

It is perhaps unsurprising that the only character with whom the P5 felt a sense of connection is the one whose voice evoked a personal memory, once again drawing on established experiential schemata. Such an experience leads to a positive repercussion in which P5 developed a positive view of March 7th.

Character voices reminding playtesters of other character voices was also observed with P9, both in-actu and post-hoc. Again, the emphasis was on the character Dan Heng, P9 reacting in-actu that they recognised his voice and cited where they believed it to be from (a studio Ghibli film, an assumption which was incidentally incorrect).

The in-actu responses to March 7th's voice evoked strong reactions that reinforce lasting post-hoc sentiments. For instance, P5 associates her voice with someone familiar, building on existing familiarity and demonstrating how such recognition can shape long-term engagement and emotional connection with the game. While voice familiarity observed with P5 and P7 is not the central focus of this analysis, it highlights how familiar vocal qualities might influence a player's overall impression of a game and presents a valuable avenue for future research. More broadly, several playtesters drew on existing knowledge, referencing videogame tropes, game industry memes, and gamer-community discourse, an area explored further in Chapter 7.

In summary, playtester reactions reveal how audio-verbal elements shape perceptions of character personality, gender roles, and cultural identity, while also reflecting their underlying cultural expectations around gender and tone.

7.2 Audio-non-verbal cues

The discussion now shifts from audio-verbal to audio-non-verbal elements. All three games feature non-verbal audio in the form of sound effects, such as menu interactions and combat noises, as well as background music. Emotional responses to these elements reveal how non-verbal audio cues contribute to immersion and narrative interpretation. In some cases, these cues align with culturally embedded expectations, while in others they create a sense of dissonance.

7.2.1 Awareness of music as exceptionalness

Beginning with feedback on *H:SR* (2023) and considering the significant volume of discussion surrounding its audio-verbal elements, responses from playtesters were mixed.

> “[I] didn’t pay much attention […] it’s not distracting.” (P10)

> “The background music, generally, generally I think it’s good but it’s nothing very special, or nothing very bad.” (P4)

> “I liked the music in this one. It was upbeat.” (P5)

> “I think they, MiHoYo, do a pretty good job with their music so. There wasn’t like, anything specific at the moment.” (P7)

Broadly speaking, every playtester expresses an opinion about the music, but only P5 responds with clear enthusiasm. In all other cases, responses are neutral and appear to have little or no impact on the overall play experience. This stands in stark contrast to the more visceral and emotionally charged reactions elicited by the audio-verbal content in *H:SR* (2023). A further contrast emerges in the feedback on music and sound effects in the indie titles, *Eastward* (2021) and *Depersonalization* (2019). Whilst playtesters find the audio-non-verbal of *H:SR* (2023) to be inoffensive and largely unremarkable, responses to non-verbal audio in the games without audio-verbal content are more pronounced.

Focusing first on music, *Depersonalization* (2019) is the only game in which playtesters specifically comment on music as an emotive tool. P1 describes the music as immersive and comforting, whereas P10 finds it unsettling but acknowledges that it effectively drives the narrative.

> “The music is very comforting”, “The music helps me to immerse in the game.” (P1)

> “Music will be the main focus through the process, but if anything, I think it only adds to the sense of creepiness.” (P10)

Equally affected by the music, P2 feels the music enhances the storytelling by magnifying the player’s emotions.

> “I think the music is good, because it’s not like a music makes you notice a lot, but it matches with the feeling when you play.” (P2)

This emphasis on emotion appears repeatedly across the cohort, with themes of sadness and melancholy frequently associated with the music in

Depersonalization (2019). Most playtesters (n=8, 73%) made comments linking the soundtrack to these emotional tones. According to the kineikonic model, auditory modes such as music and sound effects serve as primary channels that shape narrative tone and emotional resonance. The emotional responses to *Depersonalization*'s (2019) ambient soundtrack illustrate how audio design contributes to immersion and meaning-making during gameplay.

> "I think it really suited the game. It was very mystical, I guess, which suited the vibes, very calming." (P7)

> "It was more solemn, like sad, it wasn't upbeat and definitely a lot slower, felt a lot like, like wintery music almost." (P11)

P7 previously mentioned themes of magic and wizards when discussing *Depersonalization* (2019) (Chapter 6*)*, and later describes the music as "mystical," aligning with their broader interpretation of the game's themes. P11 makes a more abstract association, linking the solemn slowness of the music to the season of winter. This connection may have stemmed from their schemata, particularly in reference to one of their favourite games, *Stardew Valley*, in which the winter season music is more subdued, reflecting the absence of growth on the player's farm.

Not all playtesters are equally affected by the music, however. Post-hoc, P3, P4, and P5 did not find it memorable and were unable to recall what they had heard. In contrast, the music in *Depersonalization* (2019) receives strong praise in the netnographic data, with reviewers who mention it doing so in highly positive terms.

> "Banger soundtrack."

> "The soundtrack is amazing!"

> "The music choices are great."

However, the reviewers do not provide any explanation or elaboration on why the music is positively received, leaving readers to infer the reasons for themselves. In contrast, the netnographic data for *H:SR* (2023) includes only a

single mention of music, and this reference appears not in isolation but as part of a broadly positive review of the game as a whole.

> "Music, art, and animation is amazing, and so is the voice acting."

Such brief feedback is typical in the case of *H:SR* (2023) and is not explored in depth, though it was briefly addressed in Chapter 6.

7.2.2 Guiding player emotion through audio-environmental alignment

Returning to music, unlike the other two games, *Eastward*'s (2021) music and sound effects prompted both in-actu reactions and post-hoc elaborations from playtesters. Similar to the responses to *Depersonalization*'s (2019) soundtrack, there is a clear emphasis on engagement and emotional impact with a majority mentioning music in relation to mood or tone (n=7, 64%).

> "The music keeps you engaged." (P6)

> "The music in it was more chill." (P5)

> "Especially entering different areas, I was like 'oh that's cool', and the music really matched the vibes of the areas." (P7)

P5 describes the music in *Eastward* (2021) as "chill," noting that it helps set the tone of the game. P6 remarks that the music kept them engaged throughout their play session. P7 offers more detail, observing that the music changes when the character moves between zones, such as leaving the town and entering the mines, feeling that the music matches the atmosphere of each area appropriately. Playtesters consistently emphasise the importance of alignment between music and environmental narrative. This point is reinforced by P9, who comments that the music in *Eastward* (2021) sometimes feels misaligned when considered alongside the rest of the game's content.

> "The music surprised me from the very first part of the game, even the opening cutscene […] it was very electronic and inorganic, and for the setting of the game I played, I would expect something more traditional instruments […] I was not expecting Daft Punk at all." (P9)

Despite P9's enthusiastic response to the visual-verbal in *Eastward* (2021), the audio-non-verbal components do not meet their expectations. They describe the music as mismatched with the setting and reference the electronic music duo Daft Punk, known for synthetic dance music such as "Robot rock", to clarify their perspective. This divergence highlights the challenges of audio design in localisation, particularly in relation to music and sound. While the visual-verbal aligns with P9's expectations, the music is deemed out of place and disruptive, underscoring the importance of maintaining cohesion across different modes. More broadly, however, the music in *Eastward* (2021) was well-received by other playtesters. For example, P4 shares,

> "I really like it [the music]! […] When the background music changes, I know there is some kind of thing will happen, because different kinds of things they have linked to different background music, so I can directly know what will happen next." (P4)

P4 explains that the changing music helps them follow the story and anticipate new developments in the plot. They also associate shifts in music with changes in game state (such as between roaming the world and being in combat). This view echoes sentiments expressed about the music in *Depersonalization* (2019), where playtesters praised its appropriateness to the setting, with P10 describing it as the "main focus through the [storytelling] process."

In contrast, reviews mentioning *Eastward*'s (2021) music in the netnographic data (n=22) are similar to those of *Depersonalization* (2019), being generally positive although brief and lacking in specific detail.

> "The soundtrack is really cool."

> "The final-fight musical accompaniments are very much a (as the kids may or may no longer) say; a bop."

> "The sound design perfect for every stage."

Only the final reviewer in the sample specifies that the music was "perfect" for each stage, suggesting that the soundtrack felt appropriate to the scenes in their view. However, as shown by the two reviewers mentioned prior, even though the

overall feedback was positive, with only two out of 22 comments being negative (9%), there is no clear explanation given to support these sentiments. These findings highlight how audio-non-verbal elements contribute to emotional immersion and narrative coherence. They also show how mismatches between auditory and visual modes can disrupt player expectations, with feedback sounds and music regarded as appropriate to a scene standing out, once again emphasising the importance of maintaining multimodal cohesion in localisation strategies.

7.2.3 Importance of audio feedback loops

Shifting the focus toward sound effects, a key trend emerged from *Eastward* (2021) that had not been observed in feedback for the other games. When asked about music and sound effects, playtesters respond to *Depersonalization* (2019) and *H:SR* (2023) in similar ways. While the music is important to some, the sound effects are largely dismissed. At most, playtesters state that the sound effects are unremarkable.

> "Nothing made a sound where I was like 'why is it doing that?' That was all normal." (P9, H:SR (2023))

Playtesters exhibit in-actu reactions to audio cues, particularly those paired with specific animations, and in both of the two instances, they respond positively, expressing delight through non-verbal vocalisations that were difficult to transcribe. The first example involves an audio-non-verbal cue triggered when a player receives a reward or solved a puzzle, usually accompanied by an animation of the character holding up an item. Roughly half of the playtesters remarked on *Eastward*'s (2021) SFX (n=6, 55%), more than any other game (*Depersonalization* n=3, 27%; *H:SR* n=1, 9%).

> "I really like this one! Feels rewarding when they collect things and there's the sound." (P4)

> "You do a tiny dance it's like 'yay'! And so John is like 'yay' and you're also like 'yay'! So that was also like a tiny happy 'dadada dadaaa!' kind of vibe. You now have a weapon! You now have a key!" (P6)

> “As for the sounds, I think I said a lot that it reminded me of Zelda, I think that’s like in our cultural lexicon at this point, that that is a ‘you found a thing’ sound.” (P9)

P4 and P6 respond emotively, with P4 describing the sound cue as personally rewarding. P6 expresses a similar sense of reward but elaborates further, explaining how the combination of sound and animation convey joy in the on-screen characters, which was then experienced by the player.

In contrast, P9 remarks that the sounds remind them of those in another videogame, *The Legend of Zelda*, and suggests that this familiarity stems from the sounds being part of what they call the “cultural lexicon.” Although P9 did not specify which cultural context they were referring to, their sentiment is loosely echoed by P7.

> “The rest of the sounds were all very familiar, like, when you play a lot of games, there’s a lot of sounds that like you hear across all games, […] picking up hearts, landing a hit with a slug, they all have very familiar sounds. Not ones I can really describe, but they make me go, ‘I know what's just happened, because I’ve played videogames’.” (P7)

P7 demonstrates their prior knowledge of videogames, which informs their expectations regarding the sound effects typically present in the games they have historically played. They remark that the sounds were generally “familiar”, a sentiment that P9 also expresses. Several playtesters also commented on the sound of the frying pan during combat, with both P3 and P6 conveying positive impressions.

> “It’s responsive, right, when you whack something.” (P3)

> “Very well executed frying pan sounds.” (P6)

P3 emphasises the feedback produced by the audio cue, while P6 initially praises the sound effects before suggesting that, although the sound is effective, its character did not fully align with their expectations of how hitting a slime with a frying pan should sound. This discrepancy creates a mental mismatch.

> “What it is, is that doesn’t sound like what I’d think is hitting a slug-what is it, a slime-it just feels like a [knocks on table] […] At the back of my head I’m thinking if I’m wielding a frying pan, is this really how it would sound?” (P6)

Due to a lack of knowledge about what hitting a slime would realistically sound like, or a lack of comparable experience, P6 finds the non-verbal audio cue accompanying the frying pan strike unsatisfactory and underwhelming, demonstrating the imagined impact by tapping on the microphone to produce a dull thud. Although P6 is initially impressed by the pan’s SFX, extended use and exposure leads to diminished enthusiasm, resulting in a negative reassessment of the audio’s perceived fidelity.

7.2.4 Culture-specific nostalgia

Unlike other themes, culture-specific nostalgia was mentioned by only two participants, but its mention warrants brief discussion as both remarks are linked to a single audio cue that highlights how culturally-specific auditory cues can result in different player interpretations.

Moving forward, *Eastward* (2021) features one additional distinctive SFX: two playtesters, one in-actu and one post-hoc, commented on the sound of the bell. P11 remarks in-actu that they recognise the bell’s sound from their childhood in Hong Kong.

> “I actually grew up in Hong Kong and the sound they use for the bell is the same one they used at my kindergarten, like at the end of the day it would be that same chime.” (P11)

Meanwhile, P9 recognises the sound but, rather than attributing it to any culturally specific association, believes it had been played at a slower tempo to evoke an emotional response.

> “Oh it’s the Windsor Chimes. They slowed it down, it’s really creepy and atmospheric that way. Creepy. Because your brain knows that’s a symbol of time and like, that’s the sound a clock makes, but they slow it down and make it extra creepy.” (P9)

Although the audio cue is no slower than usual (in-game recording compared to recordings of the opening four notes of the Westminster chimes confirm this, lasting 4 seconds), P9's belief that the bell chimes are altered reflects a perception that slowed chimes signify something unsettling or negative.

Yet in contrast, P11 recognises the cue as familiar and non-threatening, associating it with the bell used at their kindergarten in Hong Kong, signalling the beginning and end of the day. These divergent interpretations of audio semiotics highlight the significance of cultural schemata, reinforcing the idea that translation is a causal process (Chesterman, 1998/2000). This is exemplified by P11's nostalgic response to the cue, in contrast to P9's perception of tonal dissonance.

7.3 Controls and navigation

Control schemes serve as a litmus test for usability and familiarity, revealing how prior gaming experience informs expectations and how localisation needs to accommodate diverse player habits. As arguably the primary interactive element in gameplay, forging the link between the player and the actions in-game, controls and player expectations of those controls are pivotal.

A majority of playtesters described themselves as experienced gamers having played at least five RPGs (n=7, 64%) and being familiar with the genre tropes. However, this familiarity did not necessarily extend to the control schemes, character operation, and menu navigation, proven to be an obstacle at times. All playtested videogames employed keyboard and mouse control schemes, which were familiar to some but not all, particularly those more accustomed to console controllers or mobile interfaces. Although UI icons are visual-non-verbal in nature, their specific function as interactive elements warrants their inclusion in Section 7.4.

7.3.1 Knowledge is power: genre familiarity and control intuition

The significance of computer-derived keyboard and mouse controls is examined first. When playtesters were asked about their experiences with using the controls and navigating the game environment, a clear pattern emerged. Approximately half the playtesters (n=6, 55%) report little to no difficulty with

movement and basic operation. This is demonstrated through several exchanges concerning *Eastward* (2021), a game which does not explicitly instruct players on navigation.

> Researcher: Did you find movement was straightforward, and how to move was obvious?
> P11: Yeah.
> Researcher: Even though the game never told you how?
> P11: [laugh] No, no, I just realised that.
> Researcher: So how did you know what the controls were?
> P11: Just like, the schema I have from playing other videogames, I'm used to using WASD and kind of just assume it.

> Researcher: Was it obvious to you what the control scheme would be?
> P5: Yeah it was, same as anything isn't it. Simple. […] I thought it were [sic] simple but I've been playing games for umpteen years.

> P7: I feel like for me personally, it wasn't too difficult, but I've played my fair share of games before so I already had a vague idea of what I should be doing. But like, for a new player who'd never played games before, I feel like it might be difficult.
> Researcher: Can you give an example of why you think that?
> P7: Because first of all, I don't think it ever taught you the controls, you'd have to look it up for yourself. From being a gamer, I just naturally went to WASD and interaction and all that stuff I pretty much guessed and went around figured it out.

These comments reflect how genre familiarity shapes player expectations and how intuitive design aligns with their mental models, even in the absence of explicit instruction.

P11, P5, and P7 describe the control schemes as simple despite the lack of didactic guidance. They explain that their existing knowledge of videogames, or "being a gamer," (P7) leads them to expect certain key bindings and enables them to perform basic operations with ease. This, again, demonstrates how prior experience influences their expectations of control schemes and aligns with their mental models without explicit instruction being required. In such cases, the norms of PC platform play appear to transcend genre-specific boundaries, reinforcing existing schemata about PC control schemes. These norms became expectations that the Chinese-developed games conformed to.

However, the feedback was not unanimous. Some playtesters, reflecting post-hoc, note divergences from their expectations. A few express preferences rooted

in individual experience, such as P8, who comments on operative controls that not aligning with their personal habits.

> "I wanted 'E' to be interact, but again, that's [shrugs]. I will say 'TAB' is inventory rather than 'E', but that's fine, again it was something I could've got into the flow of." (P8)

P7 echoes P8,

> "[…] The 'E' binding was to talk and also open your weapons, so I kept opening my weapons at the end of every conversation. That was annoying!" (P7)

P7 expresses dissatisfaction with two different interactions being mapped to the same key, which diminishes their enjoyment of conversations and leads to negative reactions. P8 also acknowledges a misalignment between the control scheme and their internal schemata; for P8, the "Tab" key was expected to open the player inventory, which was not the case in *Eastward* (2021), resulting in mild annoyance. However, they indicate a willingness to adapt if they decide to continue playing the game in future. P8 raises a similar point about subverted expectations when playing *H:SR* (2023), further illustrating how individual experience shapes perceptions of control design.

> "I always go for 'E' for interact rather than 'F', but that's about it. […] I think it was all pretty standard. Initially when it said sprint was right click that was a bit off for me, but I tried using 'Shift' and it worked [laugh]! So in the end it was fine!" (P8)

P8 observes that their preferred or expected key binding has been subverted, yet the game ultimately aligns with their control preferences in an unexpected way. Although the tutorial presents one system, the game also supports an alternative input scheme that matches P8's existing PC gaming habits.

In contrast, the playtesters who found the controls simple are also those raised in the global West, namely the USA and Europe, where PC keymappings are largely standardised. Whilst the influence of imported games to China has encouraged the wide use of standards such as WASD for movement, cases of

non-uniformity in keymappings are not uncommon (see **Error! Reference source not found.**).

Table 7.1. Examples of common action key bindings in popular Chinese videogames.

Game title	Jump key	Dodge key	Item use key	Lock-on key
Black Myth: Wu Kong **(Game Science, 2024)**	CTRL	SPACE	Q	MIDDLE MOUSE
Naraka: Bladepoint **(24 Entertainment)**	SPACE	SHIFT	4	~
Sword & Fairy 7 **(SoftStarlight)**	SPACE	ALT	R	TAB
Gujian 3 **(Aurogon Info & Tech, 2018)**	SPACE	ALT	R	TAB

This suggests that the developers had anticipated control scheme expectations and implemented overlapping systems to accommodate diverse preferences, but seemingly only those of the majority Western market expectations. Such design choices indicate an awareness of broader genre and platform norms outside of mainland China, potentially shaped by localisation strategies aimed at aligning control experiences with widely accepted Western PC standards. As a result, P8 responds positively, expressing satisfaction at not needing to learn a new control scheme and reinforces their longstanding expectations. P6 also explicitly praises the control scheme in *H:SR* (2023), describing it as intuitive and familiar, which enables them to navigate with ease and confidence.

> "You had a 'Q', you had an 'E', and then you have the arrow keys or if you don't use arrow keys you can use WASD, so front, side, side, back, very intuitive, very easy to use." (P6)

In contrast, P9 found the controls counter-intuitive and expresses frustration with the inconsistency between their expectations of inputs and the actual control mappings.

> "You would expect there to be like one primary […] activation key, 'Enter' or 'Space' or 'Click'; you pick one, and it seemed to have all three going at all times. And it seemed a little counter intuitive that I had to switch from using two hands on the keyboard with WASD and Enter and Space, then switching to keyboard and mouse [to fight]. It was really counter intuitive." (P9)

These moments of confusion and adaptation highlight how playtesters construct new schemata in response to unfamiliar systems, offering insight into how design and localisation intersect to support or hinder player learning. This observation aligns with UCT's emphasis on mental modelling, illustrating how players rely on prior experience to interpret unfamiliar systems. When not aligned with player schemata, the result was often frustration and usability issues. These contrasting interpretations underscore how players' prior expectations directly influence their perceptions of usability. While P6's experience aligns with familiar PC controls, P9 encounters a breakdown in coherence, suggesting that the input design is not effectively communicated. P9 remarks not only on the confusion caused by navigating what they perceived as three competing but equally valid control schemes, but also on their use of both hands for keyboard navigation while switching to the mouse during combat. These overlapping systems impose unnecessary cognitive load and lead to negative reactions and repercussions.

7.3.2 Tutorialisation and schemata: Learning curves

In one notable case, P2, a self-identified console gamer unfamiliar with keyboard control schemes, demonstrates the formation of new schemata through play. Their experience of mastering character movement in *H:SR* (2023) directly informs and improves their ability to navigate *Eastward* (2021), clearly illustrating knowledge acquisition and transference.

> Researcher: […] Did you think the controls were easy to understand and use?
> P2: I would say the first game teach [sic] me how to turn around and find the direction, but I guess without the first one I would feel completely miserable, especially at the beginning - I didn't realise I needed to take control.

This example of incremental learning demonstrates new schema formation, the playtester, having previously played most games with a console controller, gained knowledge that made future experiences easier to navigate; a positive repercussion that may lead to their playing further PC-based games in future. However, roughly half the playtesters (n=5, 45%) expressed frustration when

Eastward (2021) assumed familiarity with mouse and keyboard control schemes (particularly during combat) revealing a mismatch between player expectations and the game's exploratory tutorial style.

> "I'm just not good with those controls […] I just found that difficult." (P3)

> "The controls [chuckles]! You found out I didn't work out how to use the pan until I played some and used the mouse and then found click […] So I'm trying to find how to use it on the keyboard and pressed every button and none of them worked! Because the situation is the game directly puts you into a situation where there is all enemies around you but you don't know how to attack the enemies. Really annoying, because the only thing you can do is to try every button and find none of them work and then die." (P4)

> "How am I supposed to attack?! Like, even if you've not, what is it, even if some things hand-hold a little is fine, but at least tell me how to attack!" (P6)

These comments reflect a misalignment between the intended interpretation that players will intuitively understand or readily discover combat mechanics and the actual player experience. Although playtesters with limited keyboard and mouse experience are not especially vocal in their frustration during gameplay, the recordings clearly capture ongoing struggles with navigation and targeting. In *H:SR* (2023), camera positioning emerges as a particular challenge. P1, P2, P3, and P4 (n=4, 36%) are hindered by the camera, frequently getting stuck on scenery and struggling with navigation. However, none of them attribute these difficulties to the camera itself. Instead, they cite issues with character movement.

> "[I struggled with] how the character runs, because I'm not really familiar with this control mode, how to make the character run faster." (P4)

In P4's historic gaming experience, camera operations were not problematic because of the absence of manual camera control components. This also reveals a subtle mismatch between design intention and player interpretation, highlighting the importance of culturally attuned localisation strategies in user interface design. Certain in-game elements, such as camera and combat

controls, are either misinterpreted or not recognised by P4 as distinct design components, possibly due to gaps in onboarding and tutorialisation. This divergence between design intent and player interpretation underscores a core challenge encountered by some playtesters: ensuring that the player experience aligns with the developer's anticipated understanding of mechanics and systems.

7.3.3 Click-click: input preferences and interface logic

P2 encountered an instance during gameplay where the tutorial instructs them to press a number key to switch characters. However, the on-screen information is unclear, prompting them to seek assistance in order to proceed.

> P2: Sorry, do you know how can I switch to that one?
> Researcher: Press the number two.
> P2: Ah, okay. Yep.

When asked during the post-hoc interview if there is anything they disliked about *H:SR* (2023), they clarified why that situation confounded them.

> Researcher: Is there anything you really didn't like?
> P2: I think it's the way it teaches you how to like, use different ways of controlling things, but it might be me because I'm not familiar with computer, because I always play with controller, not computer. But, for example, I asked you how I switch the character because that '2' feels to me like the second tip or something like that."

P2 acknowledges their unfamiliarity with PC control schemes, as they typically use a control pad for gaming. This may partly explain the missed expectation to use number keys for character switching. However, P2 notes that seeing the number "2" displayed on screen leads them to interpret it as a second instructional tip rather than a key binding. This implies that, within P2's schemata, circled numbers are associated with instructional tips or in-game advice. As a result, they do not associate the number with character switching, which causes a confused and negative reaction (Fig. 7.1).

Conversely, it is possible (but purely hypothetical) the use of encircled numbers can be traces back to the original mobile device mapping in which the circle is suggestive of the roundness of a fingertip tapping the screen.

Fig. 7.1. Left: The number key (highlighted in red) displayed in a tip box instructing players to switch character; Right: playable character avatars with circular number key icons illustrating which number keys to press to control the related character.

The number key icons in *H:SR* (2023) received mixed responses, with P2 not being an isolated case. Although the number keys used during combat also trigger character abilities, mirroring their function during roaming, and are introduced through tutorialisation, no playtesters were observed using the number keys in combat. Instead, all players chose to hover over abilities with the mouse and click to activate them. This behaviour persisted regardless of player experience level or engagement with the tutorial, suggesting that mouse interactions were preferable over keyboard input for activation.

The visual representation of circled letters and numbers in the tutorial may have contributed to a misalignment between intended controls and player expectations. For example, although players initially follow tutorial prompts to use certain key bindings, all subsequent prompts are ignored in favour of mouse-based interaction with the UI. This preference for mouse interaction over key bindings was consistent across all three games in the study, with players abandoning standardised key bindings upon discovering the mouse could perform the same functions. This approach reflects the habits of players familiar with mouse and keyboard setups but also points to a potential localisation

oversight: an assumption that players will adopt key bindings when using the mouse proved a more intuitive choice. Additionally, relying on a single method of interacting with the user interface is more likely to be familiar to players with established mobile gaming habits, where mobile games commonly employ tap-and-drag inputs guided by finger movement (Cockburn et al., 2012). Mismatches between intended control schemes and player expectations reveal how deeply ingrained platform-specific habits and cultural norms shapes usability. These mismatches also demonstrate that localisation must include interface logic and input conventions familiar to the target audience.

Playtesters exploring *H:SR*'s (2023) menus consistently reported frustrations that reflect a subversion of their expectations. A key point of contention was the requirement to press "Left Alt" to activate the mouse pointer for menu navigation, an interaction that diverges from both PC gaming conventions and mobile-native intuitiveness. This issue mirrors earlier frustrations with UI iconography and control mapping, suggesting a broader pattern of misalignment between localisation strategies and player expectations.

> "To get back to the controls, the 'Alt' to show your mouse so you can select things on screen is interesting, but kind of unnecessary." (P8)

> "I forgot I was supposed to be pressing the 'Alt' and what was it, you were supposed to be, hold the left alt and mouse together so you can like, select? […] So that's kind of really awkward. Not as intuitive as a mobile which is just 'click-click'" (P6)

> "Some of the controls were a little weird, like I didn't like the holding 'Left alt' thing with the cursor. That was odd to me. […] It also makes me worry that in future there'll be something for right alt and then you'll have to manage both!" (P9)

These comments suggests that the localisation strategy employed, particularly in adapting mobile-native UIs to the PC platform, does not fully account for platform-specific user expectations. While P8 and P9 viewed the requirement to press the "Left Alt" key as unnecessary and awkward, with P9 even expressing concern about whether the "Right Alt" key might eventually serve a purpose, P6 explicitly compares it unfavourably to the simplicity of mobile platform interaction. This comparison highlights a broader perception that the PC port introduced friction into the gameplay experience, potentially discouraging continued

engagement. P8 and P9's remarks further suggested that, had they been playing the mobile version of the game, their experience would likely have been superior.

Issues with controls extended beyond navigation. Combat controls presented challenges for some playtesters, particularly in relation to the use of ultimate attacks (or Ult(s)), with approximately half of the playtesters (n=5, 45%) failing to trigger them despite having met the criteria. While P10 consciously avoided using them due to a cautious playstyle, others, such as P11, simply forgot, likely due to the layout of the user interface. The ultimate attack icon was positioned on the left side of the screen, separated from the cluster of other skills and abilities on the right (Fig. 7.2).

Fig. 7.2. Highlighted in yellow on the left: the Ultimate attack icon; Highlighted in yellow on the right: Standard attack icons.

This spatial separation disrupts player expectations regarding interface grouping and contributes to the feature being overlooked. The frustrations expressed suggests that localisation strategies did not fully account for culturally specific expectations related to input mapping, reading habits, and interface conventions. This assertion is reinforced by playtester remarks.

> “I just kind of forgot to [use the Ultimate attacks]. […] Oh and the other reason is they didn’t put the placement very well, like the Ultimates are on one side and your abilities are on the other, so I’d look at my abilities and go “I’ve got these two” and just kind of, yeah.” (P11)

> “There were other things [buttons] underneath that I didn’t use. […] I would expect then for all the attack stuff to be in one place on the screen. That [on the left] was my health and whether I was targeted or not, and this over on the righthand side is everything to do with combat.” (P3)

Iconography and interface design are interpreted through genre-specific schemata, and when expectations are subverted, playtesters need to renegotiate meaning in real time. Although only P3 and P11 explicitly comment on the UI layout (n=2, 18%), P1 and P2 also fail to activate ultimate attack ability, suggesting a broader issue with how the interface communicates functionality. Despite their difficulties, P1 did not comment on combat controls. However, P2 remarks that combat reminds them of a turn-based RPG, specifically *Persona 5* (Atlus, 2016), underscoring the influence of culturally informed schemata in shaping perceptions of interface design.

P3 and P11’s remarks indicate that they expect all combat-related icons to be grouped together in one area of the screen. Because this expectation was not met, a significant feature of the combat system was largely overlooked, resulting in a diminished gameplay experience and negative repercussions. These findings suggested a misalignment between localisation strategies and cultural expectations regarding input mapping and reading direction.

Notably, no inverse issues were observed among participants from right-to-left reading cultures, either during gameplay or in retrospective commentary. This may imply that players default to Western-normative interface expectations in RPGs regardless of their native reading habits, a tendency likely reinforced by the fact that videogame UIs are predominantly standardised around a left-to-right reading direction (Turunen, 2017; Al-Batineh, 2024). Given the limited number of responses on this topic, further exploration of this phenomenon was beyond the scope of the present study but could be pursued in future research.

7.4 Blurring the line: experience as repercussion

7.4.1 UI: iconography and semiotic mismatch

P5 is unique in their remarks about combat in *H:SR* (2023), explicitly linking their confusion to the visual and non-verbal elements of the UI. Their difficulty in interpreting ability icons reveals a misalignment between the intended meaning of these elements and their own expectations, which are shaped by prior gaming experiences and genre norms.

> P5: It's because any icon for any move can be anything, […] it's like a star-thing, but does that mean you're gonna use magic or does that mean you're going to actually defend something? So is it every defensive move is like a star?
> Researcher: No.
> P5: Ah, ok, that's that thing out of the window then.
> Researcher: All of the icons are unique.
> P5: Yeah, so then you have to literally look at every single one.

P5 struggled to recall which abilities had which effects, assuming that specific ability types, such as defensive skills, would be indicated by icon shapes like the star shape they mention. These expectations of symbolic consistency reflect a schema common in Western RPGs, where iconography tends to follow established conventions. Because each character has unique icons and lack visual consistency, P5 is unable to remember which character possesses which abilities. This leads to confusion and disengagement, as P5 did not wish to memorise individual icons in order to understand the combat system. UI icons in the combat phase are functionally important to player experience and overall playability, and similar issues were observed in *Depersonalization* (2019), particularly in terms of visibility and functionality. This issue also reflects broader semiotic interpretation, discussed under visual-non-verbal elements (see Section 7.4.1).

Due to irreversible software updates that occurred during data collection (see Section 4.4.2), only six playtesters experienced the combat mechanics in *Depersonalization* (2019). Prior to P5's session, the game did not yet feature a combat phase in the tutorial. However, most playtesters who did engage with the combat tutorial struggle to interpret UI icons and visual-verbal cues, such as buff and debuff indicators and tutorial tips. Most fail to read and act on the cues

located above and below the monster, which leads to prolonged combat phases and increased frustration (see Fig. 7.3). The exception is P7, who engaged deeply with all available information, suggesting that comprehension was possible but not intuitive.

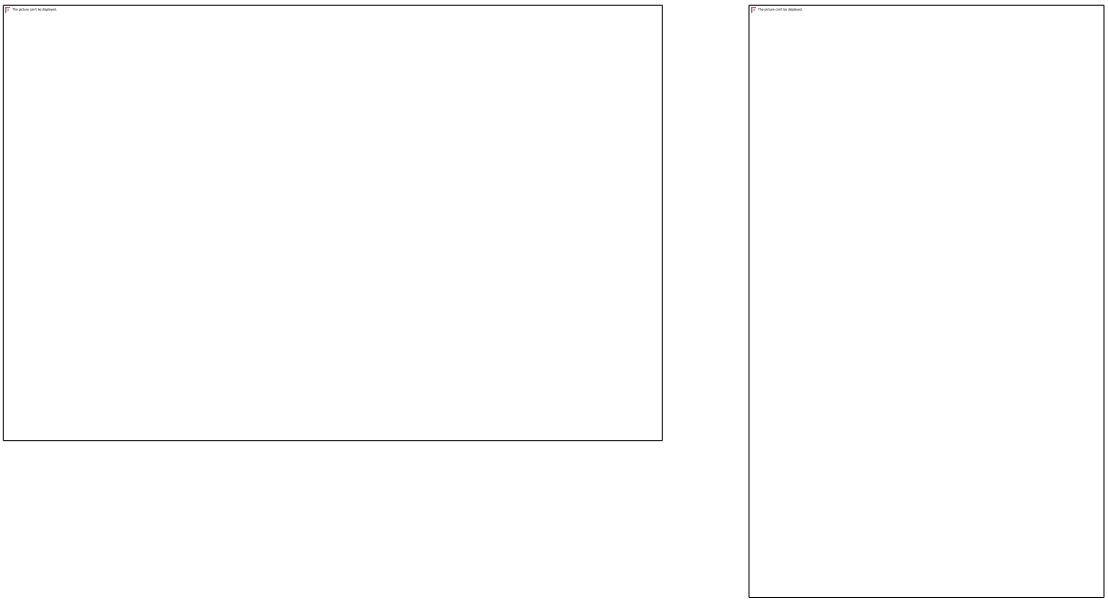


Fig. 7.3. Left: Tawil's guidance for the player during the combat tutorial. Right: Monster in *Depersonalization*'s (2019) combat tutorial, buff/debuff effects highlighted in red.

Information delivered through visual-verbal means, specifically Tawil's written guidance on the left side of the screen in combination with the UI icons positioned above and below the monster, result in a functionality failure and a breakdown in interactivity. The instructions are not understood clearly by most playtesters engaging with the combat tutorial (n=5, 45%). While this breakdown could be interpreted as a failure of game design, particularly in onboarding and UI salience, it also raises important questions about localisation. For example, source text that is rendered too literally can fail to convey intended instructions and lack clarity. The ambiguity surrounding where responsibility lies underscores the intrinsic link between localisation and design. If either fails to adequately accommodate player expectations or cultural schemata, the resulting interactive experience is likely to be poor. This presents a further argument for integrated usability testing which may prevent such confusion.

A similar localisation issue emerged during the dice-rolling mechanics in *Depersonalization* (2019), in which visual-verbal cues about roll success did not align with player expectations, causing them confusion. The semiotic implications of colour use, such as the red text in *Depersonalization* (2019), were addressed in Section 6.4.3, where the cultural interpretation of visual cues was examined in greater detail.

7.4.2 Functionality failures: blame the developers?

Divergences between post-hoc feedback and netnographic reviews indicate that interpretive friction is generally unnoticed unless it disrupts gameplay, raising questions about the visibility of localisation within player discourse. For example, analysis of netnographic review data reveals significant variation in commentary on controls and UI across the three games, often diverging from concerns raised by playtesters. *H:SR* (2023) reviewers primarily focus on technical performance and optimisation, directing their comments toward developers with requests for improved stability or compatibility. References to combat are typically vague, described as either “well done” or “braindead turn-based,” reflecting both positive and negative reactions but offering limited insight into how players interpret or engage with the system.

Notably, requests to developers numbered quite highly in *H:SR* (2023) reviews (n=18, approx. 10% of total reviews), significantly outnumbering mentions of combat (n=8) or control schemes (n=0). This indicates that for many players, localisation and UI design remain unremarkable unless they impede functionality or disrupt gameplay. The brevity of *H:SR* (2023) reviews make it difficult to assess whether specific aspects of combat were perceived as enjoyable or burdensome, rendering them less comparable to the more detailed feedback provided by playtesters. In contrast, review data for *Eastward* (2021) follows a similar pattern, with only two mentions of controls: one positive remark regarding simplicity, and one complaint about a functionality failure during play.

“The controls are pretty simple which is nice.”

“During one combat encounter, the aim function just stopped working.”

The second complaint highlights a functionality breakdown that negatively affects the player's experience. More broadly, however, the netnographic data did not reveal any specific UI elements or instances of unexpected semiotic dissonance. Instead, reviewers concentrate on *Eastward*'s (2021) overall playability and narrative appeal. Unlike *H:SR* (2023) reviews, which are often directed toward developers, *Eastward* (2021) reviewers tend to address potential players, offering recommendations and drawing comparisons to nostalgic gaming experiences.

> "Oh, the dialogues, you are going to have a lot of fun with the small interactions between the characters in the game."
>
> "It's reminiscent of older RPG pixel games. If you're from the SNES era like I am, you'll absolutely love this."
>
> "I 100% recommend for people looking for a casual game to play!"

The divergence between playtester and netnographic feedback reflects MURR's distinction between in-actu reactions and post-hoc repercussions. Structured interviews reveal interpretive friction that reviews often overlook. The contrast between review and playtester data highlight a key difference in how distinct audiences engage with localised content. Playtesters frequently comment on control schemes, layout, and tutorial clarity, a tendency towards negative-leaning in-actu responses. Reviewers, by contrast, focus more on overall immersion and alignment with genre conventions. This divergence suggests that interpretation of in-game elements often went unmentioned upon in reviews unless it causes significant disruption to gameplay.

Player satisfaction emerged as a dominant theme across all three games, numbering 207 total references, with a skew towards the negative. As discussed in Chapter 6, recurring issues in playtester feedback included perceived sexualisation, gender stereotypes, unsatisfactory UI design, and unclear translation, all of which contributed to negative repercussions. Although some players accepted these issues as genre norms, those topics were entirely absent from the review data, suggesting that such concerns may be more visible in structured interview environments than in public discourse.

As regards *Depersonalization* (2019), both playtester feedback and reviewer

comments mention translation issues, noting that unclear instructions hindered the player experience. This demonstrates that localisation becomes a focal point of criticism when player expectations are not met, particularly when conveying gameplay-critical information such as tutorialisation.

Regarding developers, mentions in reviews are not limited to player requests, although these comprise the majority of references to developers (n=29). A smaller number of reviewers comment on the developers directly, with both positive (n=9) and negative (n=6) remarks. The positive comments are typically generic, with players expressing praise for the developers.

> "Keep the peak up hsr devs, THANK YOU SO MUCH" (H:SR review)
>
> "Great job hoyoverse!" (H:SR review)
>
> "Thumbs up devs! Great work making it like this!" (Depersonalization review)

However, one *Eastward* (2021) reviewer uses the public Steam platform to contextualise the game's development.

> "There's some flaws, mostly things that become a bit apparent when you realize this was started by 3 guys in China - a fact quickly forgotten - who managed to get a small studio going. And their studio was in a Shopping Mall when the Pandemic hit. It's a bit of a miracle that they finished."

This review introduces a cultural framing that is absent from all the other reviews and playtester feedback. By making the developer's nationality central to the comment, the reviewer actively shapes reader perceptions of Chinese developers as resilient underdogs in the context of facing challenges during Covid-era China. This underdog narrative contributes to positive sentiment that extends beyond the scope of localisation alone.

However, the reviewer's assumption that the game's origin was "a fact quickly forgotten" is not supported elsewhere in the data. Only playtesters aware that the game is Chinese-developed comment on its origin. Further remarks on Chinese games and Chinese game development were explored in Section 7.4.3. Reviewers use their platform not only to promote the game to other players but also to praise the game under the assumption that the developers themselves

will read such comments. There also appears to be an underlying belief that sharing positive feedback reflects well on the company's reputation, representing a positive repercussion.

Compared to negative reviews on *Eastward* (2021) and *Depersonalization* (2019) that largely remark on the linguistic and the functional (mainly controls), negative reviews for *H:SR* (2023) feature defamatory or hostile comments about the developers.

"I don't like hoyo as a company."

"I won't support a company full of pedophiles [sic]."

While disliking a company is not unlawful, the reviewer did not provide any reasons or justifications for their stance. Similarly, the second remark contained unsubstantiated claims that, if proven true, could call the company's reputation into question. In both cases, the absence of evidence suggests a personal vendetta by the reviewer, intended to cause harm but ultimately lacking foundation. Such behaviour is consistent with review-bombing (Cantone, Tomaselli and Mazzeo, 2025), where a game receives a surge of negative reviews for reasons not directly related to the game itself. These reviews often emerge from broader issues involving the company or developer and become a form of activism or boycotting, aimed at damaging the developer's reputation. Although this phenomenon can not be explored in further detail here, its presence in the data warranted mention for transparency and to illustrate the diverse ways in which reviews can function as powerful repercussions.

7.4.3 Japan, China, other? Cultural expectations

On the topic of powerful repercussions, it is important to address remarks made by playtesters about China and Chinese games. Playtesters were asked about their expectations of Chinese videogames during the post-hoc interview. By coincidence, the playtesting cohort included four Chinese nationals (P1, P2, P4, P10) and two mixed-heritage Chinese participants (P7, P11), one of whom spent their early life in Hong Kong, in total comprising roughly half of the cohort. P11, an American-Chinese participant, recognised culturally significant audio cues in

Eastward (2021) that reminded them of their childhood in Hong Kong. However, despite admitting to having this game on their Steam Wishlist (meaning they already knew of it and want to buy it) they do not initially identify the game as Chinese-developed. Their expectations of Chinese-developed games are shaped partly by personal experience and partly by negative stereotypes, anticipating technical inferiority, stilted animations, and rigid character models.

> "Chinese games don't have very fluid character models; the sprites don't stand out from one another".

They acknowledge that these views are likely influenced by associating game design with "Westerners, because it's like a much bigger industry here" (P11), and by broader assumptions about China as a "developing country" (P11). This reflects how pre-existing attitudes shape perceptions of quality and origin, even among players with cultural ties to the country of origin. Similarly, P2 notes that aside from the school bell audio cue in *Eastward* (2021), there is little they feel to be distinctly Chinese. They describe game styles in binary terms, stating, "I would just say that there's one type of game that's Western, and one other that is Eastern" (P2), simplifying the distinction to "Western" versus "Eastern". They feel "Eastern" games are most often associated with Japanese aesthetics due to Japan's "vibrant and developed gaming industry, so it perhaps represents a portion of Asian gaming culture" (P2). P10 echoes this sentiment after the recording session, documented in researcher notes, stating that *Eastward* (2021) and *Depersonalization* (2019) felt more like imitations of Japanese or American games.

P10 expects Chinese-developed games to include traditional Chinese themes or symbolism, such as those found in *H:SR* (2023), and believes that Chinese players can intuitively distinguish between authentic and externally produced representations of Chinese culture. Equally focused on traditional Chinese themes and symbolism, P7, a British-born Chinese participant, expects Chinese-developed games to reflect Immortal Heroes or Martial Heroes genres and to be set in recognisably Chinese environments, possibly featuring cameos by famous Chinese personalities such as the historic general from *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (Luo Guanzhong, 14th Century), Zhuge Liang, or the monkey king

from *Journey to the West* (Wu Cheng'en, 16th Century), Wu Kong. Reflecting on the games playtested, P7 remarks that were they not told *Eastward* (2021) was Chinese-developed, they could not have guessed. Their awareness of *H:SR*'s (2023) Chinese origin stems from prior exposure to MiHoYo, but without that knowledge, they would have assumed the game to be Japanese, linking the anime art style to the perceived country of origin.

> "Especially Eastward, if I didn't know it was Chinese-made I wouldn't have guessed it was. If I didn't know Honkai [H:SR] was from MiHoYo I might've thought it was Japanese. Like, the character design is very anime […] I was expecting stuff like that [*xianxia/wuxia* setting] from most Chinese games, so this was quite different from what I expected." (P11)

Despite the subversion of their expectations, reactions are largely positive and inclined to result in positive repercussions. P1, although not commenting on specific cultural factors influencing their expectations of Chinese-developed games, comments on what they perceive to be an unexpected internal influence of such games. They cite classmates who regularly play titles developed by MiHoYo, suggesting a growing familiarity and acceptance of Chinese games within their peer group.

> "Even some of my Thailand classmates, they are also playing this Chinese game company produced these kinds of games. I didn't realise the Chinese games are so influential in the world" (P1)

As demonstrated in this case, P1 expresses surprise at the reach Chinese games appear to have, indicating that their expectations regarding the global influence of Chinese game development has been subverted. Reflecting on feedback from participants with Chinese heritage, the games playtested did not align with their expectations in terms of symbolism or semiotic messaging, as shaped by their cultural schemata. These participants entered the playtests with culturally rooted expectations informed by personal experience, media exposure, and broader perceptions of national gaming industries. Their expectations include visual markers associated with China, traditional cultural motifs, and clear genre associations such as *wuxia* or *xianxia*. These elements are largely absent from the games playtested, particularly in *Eastward* (2021), which many participants felt more closely resembled Western aesthetics.

Nevertheless, subversion often led to reassessment rather than rejection. While participants such as P7 and P11 initially struggle to identify the games as Chinese-developed, their reactions are not negative. Instead, they express surprise and admiration for the perceived quality and fluidity of the games. For some, including P1, this prompts a newfound awareness of the global impact of Chinese games, representing a positive repercussion. The main reason for these subverted expectations appears to lie in the evolving and hybridised nature of China's gaming output. Developers, increasingly global in ambition and style, adopt cross-cultural aesthetics that challenge conventional assumptions about national identity in game design.

Among non-Chinese participants, similar patterns emerged. P5 expresses surprise that *Eastward* (2021) is Chinese-developed, citing the perceived high quality of localisation as evidence to the contrary. This implies a perceived link between localisation quality and developer origin, dispelling a perception P5 held that Chinese-developed games are poorly localised. P6 and P9 also comment on linguistic quirks present across all three games, suggesting that players reliant on English are more attuned to perceived translation issues. These translation issues are largely unremarked upon by the Chinese-heritage participants. However, one British participant, P3, explicitly links character design to cultural expectations, noting the use of light skin tones and associating this with perceived problematic beauty standards in some Asian cultures.

> "The use of light skin colour for the characters. Sadly, it seems to be a common cultural belief in some Asian countries that lighter skin is 'better' or 'more attractive'" (P3)

Perceptions of gender representation and visual style reveal key differences between Chinese-heritage participants and non-Chinese participants, particularly in how they interpret the origins and cultural identity of the games. Chinese-heritage playtesters tend to describe character designs using neutral or descriptive language, referring to female characters as "pretty" or "feminine" and male characters as "cold" or "serious." In contrast, non-Chinese playtesters are more critical, explicitly identifying gender roles and sexualisation as problematic. P3, P5, P6, and P9 (36% of playtesters) all remark on the presentation of female characters, linking these observations to assumptions about the game's country

or culture of origin. Notably, non-Chinese respondents are more specific in their expectations of the games' origins based on art style. They readily associate the Anime art style of *H:SR* (2023) with Japan and link this style to perceived sexualisation. Regardless of playtester heritage, cultural identity and community knowledge shape how participants interpret and share their perceptions of the games. These interpretations are influenced by broader discourse surrounding localised content as well as individual expectations.

> "If I know it's going to be an anime art style then as above, characters with lighter skin, and pointy chins, big eyes, spiky hair and for female characters, scanty clothes showing big breasts." (P3)

> "I don't know many games that are like, anime-based, but are western." "I'm assuming it's going to be a lot more sexualised because it's obviously going to be a Japanese videogame." (P5)

Despite asserting that they did not know how to differentiate an RPG from a JRPG or a ZhRPG, P8 states their association of Anime with Japan rather than China, revealing a link in their schemata between Japan and Anime without referencing sexualisation. When considering what non-Chinese playtesters perceive to be Chinese and what they expect from Chinese-developed games, the feedback reflected limited cohesion. Only P3 explicitly suggests "Chinese writing" as an expectation, which is not explicitly related to character design or Anime aesthetics.

Generally, non-Chinese participants do not express explicit or conscious expectations; their in-actu reactions to specific content provides more insight into their assumptions than direct questioning. In contrast, Chinese-heritage participants enter the playtests with culturally embedded expectations tied to traditional iconography, symbolism, and genre norms. Non-Chinese participants tend to hold vaguer, less conscious expectations, often informed by globalised assumptions about East Asian media, particularly Japanese media. Their surprise at learning *Eastward* (2021) is Chinese-developed stems primarily from the game's polished localisation (P5), perceived alignment with Japanese Anime aesthetics (P5, P8), and the absence of overt cultural markers associated with China (P7, P10).

Subversions of expectation are most pronounced in areas such as translation

quality and character sexualisation, with participants P3 and P5 equating the Anime art style with Japanese origin and sexualisation. Unlike Chinese-heritage participants who actively sought semiotic cues rooted in traditional Chinese symbolism, non-Chinese playtesters respond more readily to linguistic features, design tropes, and surface aesthetics. These reactions reveal expectations shaped by limited exposure to Chinese games and a tendency to conflate "Asian" styles with Japanese output. The key difference lies in the origin of their expectations: Chinese participants drew from cultural familiarity, while non-Chinese responses are informed by mediated stereotypes and global popular culture. Yet in both groups, Chinese and non-Chinese, the subversion of expectations does not result in negative judgments but instead prompts reflection and an enhanced appreciation of the perceived quality and stylistic hybridity present in contemporary Chinese game development.

Moving on, Chapter 8 synthesises the findings from both the non-interactive and the interactive dimensions, evaluating how localisation strategies may be refined to better support diverse global audiences. It draws together the theoretical and empirical insights developed throughout the study to reflect on broader implications for localisation practice and future research.

Chapter 8 Conclusion

Having discussed the findings of the data, this chapter draws the research strands together and brings the project to a close. The aim of this project was to examine the ways in which players perceive Chinese-developed RPGs with English localisations, observing how players negotiate the cultural cues conveyed through the games' multimodal semiotic systems. Four questions were explored:

1. What are player perceptions of English-language-localised versions of Chinese-developed role-playing games?
2. In what ways do localisation strategies and techniques identified in three case studies correlate with player perception?
3. How do player perceptions correspond to any pre-existing expectations and attitudes of Chinese-made products?
4. To what extent does player interpretation of in-game elements align with expected interpretation derived from the ideal player?

Employing the combination of the Motivation-Use-Reaction-Repercussion (MURR) model and the user-centred translation (UCT) framework, with the modified kineikonic mode framework as a guideline for semiotic channels, the project examined player reception of the interactive and the non-interactive aspects of three localised Chinese videogame case studies. The results revealed that player engagement and sentiment is shaped by the overall multimodal experience, relying on the visual, the audio and the mechanical in tandem. The aim was to conduct a nuanced study informed by genuine player feedback on how localisation is a multimodal process that is shaped by players and cultural contexts, which also provides insight into how developers can anticipate and improve on localisation approaches for more diverse, global audiences.

This chapter explicates the key findings, synthesises the overall data and examines how multimodality influences player engagement and sentiment, both in terms of reactions and repercussions. Additionally, the examination of

personas and the value they bring to audience design as well as their shortcomings are stated. The personas serve as heuristic tools for synthesising culturally driven reactions and exploring how localisation strategies intersect with player schemata, as well as offering a practical lens through which to assess audience design and anticipate reception outcomes, hence their placement in the conclusion chapter rather than the discussion chapters. The following sections consolidate these insights, relate them to the literature, and outline implications for theory, practice, and future research.

8.1 Multimodality matters

In bringing together both the non-interactive and interactive strands, it becomes clear that player perception is not wholly shaped by any single facet of the game experience, but by the cumulative layering of narrative framing, aesthetic presentation, mechanical interaction, and cultural familiarity. This aligns with Jiménez-Crespo's (2024) assertion that videogames are "unitary single texts" composed of multimodal elements comprised of the textual, aural, visual, and interactive (p. 8) and Toh's sentiment that player experiences are personally contextual (Toh, 2017) assertions that contextual factors in players' daily lives shape their interaction and reception with videogame content. From visual-verbal misalignments to control scheme frustrations, from gendered character tropes to UI usability, moments of dissonance often stemmed less from overt localisation choices and more from the subtle gaps between expectation and experience. For example, one playtester noted a sense of dissonance between *Eastward*'s (2021) environmental design and its music, which led to disengagement, demonstrating a clear instance of multimodal misalignment that reflects the type of schema disruption described in schema theory (Nishida, 1999; Smith, 2022, p. 20). Schema theory posits that players bring culturally and experientially-shaped mental models to their interpretation of game content. When these schemata are disrupted, such as through unfamiliar control paradigms or incongruent audio-visual cues, players may experience cognitive dissonance or disengagement (White, 2014; Kramarzewski and Nucci, 2023).

Equally, when those elements aligned, such as in *Eastward*'s (2021) visual-narrative cohesion or *Depersonalization*'s (2019) atmosphere-building audio,

playtesters reported surprise, delight, and emotional resonance, and reviewers praised the game. These moments of ludo narrative resonance (Toh, 2017) illustrate how successful localisation operates across multiple semiotic channels. This approach echoes the multimodal translation frameworks proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) and further elaborated by Burn (2013) in his kineikonic mode analysis, ultimately adding weight to the assertion that the interplay of semiotics resources is vital not only to the reception of the game cross-culture, but also ensures appropriate translation of the comprehensive play experience, not merely the visual verbal. The findings across both the non-interactive and the interactive dimensions affirm that localisation is not merely a linguistic task but a multimodal, culturally situated process (Mangiron, 2012; Jiménez-Crespo, 2024). The ways in which players interpret and engage with the localised content depends on how those channels resonate with the player's existing schemata.

8.2 Personas as reflections of player bases

Building on the broader thematic categories that emerged from the data, attention now turns to a more detailed analysis of the playtesters' individual responses by presenting two composite personas derived from the playtester cohort. These fictional personas serve to illustrate how player identities, shaped by cultural background, gaming history, and personal values, mediate reception and interpretation. This approach is grounded in reception theory, particularly the notion of the "horizon of expectations" (Jauss, 1982; Holub, 1984), which suggests that interpretation is guided by the reader's or player's prior experiences and cultural context. Mapping the data to these profiles enables a more nuanced understanding of the factors contributing to the success or failure of specific localisation strategies, and highlights implications for audience design in future localisation practices (Suojanen et al., 2014; Brückner et al., 2019).

The personas, dubbed "Zhang Boyang" and "James Smith", were initially introduced in Section 5.7, and are used analytically within the MURR model to explore how motivation, usage, reaction, and repercussion vary across players with different cultural backgrounds and gaming histories.

Personas (1) function as a synthesis tool to distil complex culturally-driven reactions and repercussions into stream-lined representative profiles, (2) serve

as a heuristic device for exploring how localisation strategies intersect with player schemata, and (3) are a means of bridging the gap between individual feedback and that of the wider audience, aligning with MURR's emphasis on repercussion, and UCT's focus on the user (player).

Despite being inherently reductive, they are not intended to capture or represent the full spectrum of player experiences, and are instead intended to highlight recurrent patterns emergent across cultural and experiential boarders, as well as helping to illustrate how localisation strategies intersect with player schemata, offering guidance in future audience design. The personas demonstrate how players with cultural variation and different expectations, preferences and experiences respond to the localised Chinese games.

Based on the MURR model, player personas and their expected responses according to their culturally-ingrained expectations and preferences are provided in **Error! Reference source not found.**.

Table 8.1. Personas explored under the MURR model.

MURR Element	Boyang Zhang. F. 25yo. Chinese.	James Smith. M. 29yo. British.
Motivation	Implied player, plus idiosyncrasies: Casual-midcore RPG player, narrative-focused, aesthetic- and culture-driven.	Implied player, plus idiosyncrasies: Hardcore RPG player, seeks mastery, immersion, and narrative complexity.
Usage	Aesthetic and emotional engagement, story enjoyment, usage undermined by complex UI.	Exploration and system probing, usage undermined by shallow mechanics and localisation choices.
Reaction	Warm to *Eastward*, mildly positive to *H:SR*, confused and frustrated by *Depersonalization*'s complexity.	Negative to *H:SR*, mildly positive towards *Eastward*, disappointed with *Depersonalization*'s localisation but impressed combat complexity.
Repercussion	Will seek similar narrative, emotional, culturally familiar games, avoids dense systems, may discuss games with friends locally.	Avoids lottery-style and general mobile RPGs, demands complex, well-localised experiences in future, will be vocal in their community about experiences.

These two personas were created to reflect two dominant interpretative positions observed in the data; one is culturally close to the source material, the other is distant. This binary is analytically useful for highlighting how localisation strategies resonate differently depending on the player's cultural background, genre familiarity and expectations. Practically, the personas serve to illustrate

how developers and localisers might anticipate reception outcomes and choose strategies and approaches accordingly.

8.2.1 Boyang: the casual gamer influenced by aesthetics

Starting with Boyang Zhang, they are a constructed persona representative of a Chinese national with moderate RPG experience and familiarity with visual novels and Asian-developed games who can be anticipated to experience Chinese-localised RPGs with a degree of cultural and linguistic fluency that facilitates both recognition and appreciation of culturally specific content. As with the real-life participants P1, P2, P4, and P7, Zhang identifies and responds positively to traditional narrative motifs, character archetypes, and symbolic references present in the games, particularly in *H:SR* (2023) and *Eastward* (2021). Their existing experience of MiHoYo games and pixel-art visual storytelling aligns them closely with the observed preferences of participants who noted the familiarity of visual style and thematic structure in these games. Given their multilingual capacity (Mandarin Chinese, English, and Japanese), Boyang also possesses flexibility in navigating language settings, reducing the likelihood of linguistic disconnect and allowing them to draw interpretive value from either the original or localised text and audio with relative ease.

Akin to the Chinese participants, Boyang's experience features a higher tolerance for localisation inconsistencies provided they do not significantly impede narrative delivery, as well as a stronger emotional engagement with character development and worldbuilding when culturally familiar tropes are invoked (e.g. the school bell in *Eastward* (2021), Chinese stamp seals present in *H:SR* (2023)). Participants such as P2 and P4 were comfortable with names, expressions, and character designs that drew from Chinese cultural contexts and Boyang, similarly, would demonstrate empathy towards developer intent and a willingness to interpret ambiguous design choices through a culturally grounded lens. Their narrative orientation and preference for aesthetic and emotional coherence over mechanical complexity positions them as a player likely to derive satisfaction from games such as *Eastward* (2021), which was consistently described by participants as visually compelling and emotionally resonant.

However, Boyang may also encounter points of friction consistent with those

experienced by P1 and P7, particularly in response to *Depersonalization* (2019). While they may find the thematic ambition of the game engaging, their preference for streamlined UI and intuitive controls suggests that the game's abstract presentation and less conventional tutorial structure would pose a barrier to smooth engagement. Like the participants in question, Boyang may report moments of confusion or disorientation arising from unclear signposting or overly complex menu systems, impeding their ability to derive meaningful play benefits. Furthermore, although they demonstrate a strong preference for narrative, their tendency to disengage from verbose or overly expository content, particularly if not tightly integrated with gameplay flow, may lead them to skip or skim sections perceived as non-essential, limiting the depth of their engagement. Additionally, they are likely to respond favourably to culturally familiar narrative and aesthetics, particularly in *H:SR* (2023) and *Eastward* (2021), while expressing frustration towards abstract systems or dense UI as seen in *Depersonalization* (2019). Their experiences reinforce the importance of cultural and linguistic familiarity in shaping positive reception, while also highlighting how gameplay design and interface complexity can inhibit usage regardless of cultural alignment.

8.2.2 James: the serious gamer concerned with mechanics

In contrast is the second persona, James Smith, representing a British national with extensive experience with so-called Western RPGs and a preference for complex mechanics, tactical combat, invisible translation and localisation that is driven by systemic mastery and immersive narrative coherence. Their gameplay orientation is shaped by long-term engagement with games such as *Baldur's Gate 3*, *Skyrim*, and *Fallout*, and they express a preference for games that offer deep character customisation, strategic depth, and narrative choice.

When assessed against the responses of participants P5, P8, and P9, who have a similar background, James's anticipated reactions and playstyle expectations align closely with observed patterns in the data. They would be expected to approach the three games with a critical evaluative stance, particularly in relation to mechanical complexity and localisation fidelity. Their usage of each game would be framed by an attempt to interrogate systems and

assess narrative credibility, with a strong emphasis on immersion and in-universe consistency. However, as with participants P5, P8 and P9, James would find *H:SR* (2023) lacking in mechanical depth, perceiving its turn-based combat as formulaic and its monetisation model (gacha) as antithetical to their preference for complete experiences. Their reaction would likely mirror that of P9, who dismissed *H:SR* (2023) as very stylish but shallow, “a lot of icing but not a lot of cake”, noting that visual polish could not compensate for perceived systemic shallowness. Similarly, while James may initially respond positively to the aesthetic of *Eastward* (2021), particularly its pixel-art style and environmental storytelling as an experienced gamer, their engagement is likely to wane owing to their perceptions of lacking narrative complexity and a lack of strategic challenge. P8 noted *Eastward*'s (2021) visual strength but criticised its emotional tone as simplistic, reflecting a similar evaluation, and James would likely disengage if pacing slowed or player agency felt minimal. In this sense, *Eastward* (2021) may be viewed by James as appealing on the surface, but ultimately unfulfilling in terms of core RPG expectations.

Depersonalization (2019), by contrast, might initially attract James due to its thematic ambition and experimental narrative framing, as P9 acknowledged the potential of the game’s psychological complexity and tactical layering. However, as was evident in feedback from both P8 and P9, *Depersonalization* (2019) suffers from inconsistent localisation and a UI design that obfuscates its deeper systems, likely to cause disruption to James, who values clean, idiomatic English and logical UIs. The frequent mention by participants of unclear menu navigation and a lack of guidance in combat mechanics suggests that James’s usage of the *Depersonalization* (2019) would be impeded not by lack of interest, but by instead by poor execution of core design elements, particularly localisation and UI clarity. Such experiences would likely lead to a negative repercussion as James’s experience would be marred by a scepticism toward Chinese-developed RPGs, that they will not meet their expectations for genre depth and linguistic polish. As was observed among participants P5 and P9, their reaction would be to hold ZhRPGs to the same standards as high-budget Western-developed games, particularly in terms of gameplay depth, localisation quality, and narrative maturity. Their repercussion, then, would likely be a cautious or even dismissive stance toward future engagement with similar titles unless

demonstrable improvements in these areas were evident.

Ultimately, while James may acknowledge the visual or conceptual appeal of the games, their emphasis on systemic mastery, coherent worldbuilding, and localisation excellence would limit their receptiveness to games that do not meet these core criteria. The comparison of these personas to their corresponding participant groups reveals a high degree of alignment in terms of motivation and usage, particularly when considering cultural familiarity, genre alignment, and localisation expectations.

8.2.3 Persona model oversights

Zhang Boyang, reflecting the profile of several Chinese participants, demonstrates strong identification with narrative-driven, visually distinctive, and culturally resonant games such as *Eastward* (2021) and *Honkai: Star Rail* (2021). Their preference for accessible systems and emotional storytelling reflects similar patterns among P1, P2, and P4, while their aversion to complexity echoes P7's frustration with *Depersonalization* (2019). Likewise, James Smith shows considerable overlap with British participants such as P5, P8, and P9 in their emphasis on mechanical depth, tactical complexity, and fluent localisation. Their anticipated rejection of *Honkai: Star Rail* and tentative interest in *Depersonalization* (2019) corresponds closely to the real playtester feedback. It is pertinent to note that these personas do not aim to capture the full diversity of player experience.

Whilst this study readily acknowledges that reducing a diverse cohort of playtesters down into two personas risks oversimplification, it is a deliberate, strategic choice. Such simplification allows for clearer comparison and contrast that supports actionable insights for localisation practice, with room to expand and diversify typological inclusions, such as genre literacy, platform familiarity. Ultimately, whilst not perfect, the personas used in this study provided an accessible means of exploring localisation success and failure.

One notable divergence in playtester responses and persona profiles lies in what was omitted: neither persona reflects any awareness or critique of sexualised character design or gender representation, despite multiple references to this issue in the playtester data. Participants, especially P3 and P9,

expressed discomfort or fatigue with overt sexualisation in *H:SR* (2023), referencing issues such as the design of female characters, costuming, and the performative aspects of femininity. The absence of these reflections in either Zhang or James's profiles suggests a critical blind spot in persona construction. From a localisation and design perspective, this omission becomes significant when viewed through the lens of UCT, which emphasises the importance of incorporating user expectations, values, and cultural frameworks into translation decisions. This does not necessarily imply a fundamental redesign of the game or its characters are necessary, rather, it highlights the need for localisation considerations to be integrated earlier in the production workflow, namely during the character and narrative design phases and to better integrate reported socio-cultural critiques, such as discomfort with sexualisation in character design, to ensure localisation strategies are appropriately audience inclusive.

Where early integration is not possible, post-production localisation can still play a critical role in mitigating dissonance through adaptations to contributory modes that better align with target audience expectations. Ignoring or excluding concerns around gender representation risks producing a partial or skewed view of the user experience, which may lead to localisation strategies that fail to address player discomfort or ethical expectations across markets. A more holistic application of UCT model would require such concerns be recognised not only in translation choices, but also persona development and audience modelling, ensuring that implicit ideological and aesthetic tensions are not only recognised but addressed through culturally responsive localisation.

8.3 Revisiting the research questions

Having evaluated the data and highlighted key developments emerging from the research data, this section consolidates the findings to directly answer the research questions posed by this study.

8.3.1 RQ1: What are player perceptions of English-language-localised versions of Chinese-developed role-playing games?

Across all data sources, players judged the three titles primarily through genre-style cues and the overall play experience, rather than the developer's nationality. In the survey, character design and stylised UI/poses dominated classification judgements, with 21.4% (RPG) vs 23.1% (JRPG) of references tied to character design and 14.8% vs 8.7% to dynamic poses, while only 172 references (compared to 735 for style/mechanics) invoked developer nationality. Surprise about origin was limited; only 17.7% of those surveyed expressed surprise, whereas 79.8% were unsurprised, citing visible cultural motifs as expected.

In-actu playtest data reinforced this schema-driven pattern. When players encountered the games without prior origin disclosure, their immediate reactions focused on visual coherence, combat flow, and narrative tone. Positive affect spikes were observed during moments where visual-verbal cues aligned with mechanics (*Eastward*'s (2021) humorous dialogue paired with expressive sprites), while friction arose when UI phrasing or item descriptions conflicted with on-screen visuals (*H:SR*'s (2023) Curio 211 wording). Even when country of development was revealed post-hoc, most participants reported little change in enjoyment, with half of playtesters remarking the games exceeded their expectations.

Netnographic sentiment found in reviews also aligned with this emphasis on experience. Reviewer recommendations remained high for *Eastward* (2021) (78% positive), *Depersonalization* (2019) (81% positive), and *H:SR* (2023) (75% positive), with reviews foregrounding fun, plot, and characterisation rather than country of development "origin" debates. Where nationality was mentioned, it typically appeared as a curiosity or a positive marker of diversity, not as a determinant of quality.

In brief, players perceive these games through schema-imbedded genre signals and multimodal polish. Developer origin matters little unless various multimodal cues clash or are misaligned with player expectations, such as when linguistic tone or UI design disrupts the genre-specific schema players anticipate.

8.3.2 RQ2: In what ways do localisation strategies and techniques identified in three case studies correlate with player perception?

Players praised localisation choices that preserved genre-congruent tone, functional clarity, and multimodal coherence, and criticised strategies that changed register, caused translationese or mechanical misalignment.

Tone management emerged as a high-impact variable in all three games. Sense-for-sense naming and idiomatic English dialogue, as seen in *Eastward* (2021), reinforced character identity and humour, producing immediate engagement and later praise for “voice” and “charm”. In contrast, *Depersonalization*’s (2019) literal phrasing and syntactic mirroring felt stiff and formal, prompting rereads during play and post-hoc comments about “awkward” translation. When English register aligns with genre and scene rhythm, players react positively, and when it diverges, friction is attributed to “the translation”. UI text and item descriptions illustrate the link between strategy and perception. UI text and item descriptions demonstrate that clear tutorial wording paired with appropriate iconography supported ease of play, while ambiguous phrasing caused confusion. Players largely regarded these issues as minor, confirming that usability text matters most during active decision-making (such as deciding which item to equip, which ability to use, or how to navigate a mechanic). Self-censorship observed in *H:SR* (2023) softened expressions to meet platform requirements seemingly without breaking player immersion, whilst retaining characterisation through audiovisual cohesion. Additionally, despite missing combat bark subtitles, player experience was not obviously diminished. Whilst subtitling is rarely explicitly remarked on, players do associate subtitle consistency (such as lip sync and visual-audio aligning with visual-verbal) with overall polish.

Overall, localisation strategies correlate with player perception through their ability to sustain multimodal alignment and genre schemata. Choices that deliver idiomatic tone, concise and clear UI text, and coherent subtitle timing are rewarded both in-actu and post-hoc, while literalism and misaligned cues create friction.

8.3.3 RQ3: How do player perceptions correspond to any pre-existing expectations and attitudes of Chinese-made products?

Perceptions largely align with pre-existing genre-derived expectations rather than country-of-origin beliefs. Before origin disclosure, participants primarily classified the games through existing RPG schemata more than semiotics suggestive of a nationality or culture. After disclosure, players largely reported little attitudinal change (generally towards the positive when reported) indicating that origin knowledge generally modulates interpretation rather than determining it.

Survey responses demonstrate a clear schema-first orientation. Visual traits dominated classification judgements, with character design and dynamic poses carrying the heaviest weight in both RPG and JRPG categories, while nationality was referenced comparatively infrequently. On origin revelation, the majority were not surprised, often citing recognisable Chinese cultural motifs that they had already inferred from visuals. Almost a third of respondents explicitly expected ZhRPGs to resemble JRPGs or Japanese media, anticipating anime-style character designs, turn-based combat, and familiar narrative structures associated with JRPGs in their schemata. The split-cohort playtests show that telling players the games were Chinese either before or after play did not trigger categorical rejection or sudden preference swings. Instead, origin adjusted interpretive frames. When this knowledge was disclosed early, players were more attentive to Chinese cultural signifiers (costume, mythic motifs) and more tolerant of translation choices; when disclosed later, comments focused on the moment-to-moment experience and multimodal finesse rather than origin.

In both cases, schema-consistent delivery (tone, UI clarity, visual coherence) determined player interpretation and influenced whether players enjoyed the experience. Netnographic data highlights that mentions of the games' Chinese origins appear mainly as contextual asides or positive diversity markers, not as quality determinants. Where origin becomes salient, it is typically in threads about recognisable cultural aesthetics and positive sentiment towards developers, rather than blanket acceptance or rejection based solely on country of origin. Pre-existing attitudes toward "Chinese-made" games are broadly filtered through genre schemata and multimodal execution, with only a few remarks about expectations being negative whilst the majority are positive and, in the case of playtester data, negative remarks were limited to almost entirely to

Depersonalization (2019), driven by a combination of translation and mechanical friction.

Overall, player perceptions correspond to pre-existing expectations by default through genre. Country of origin shapes the lens but does not ensure or fix player opinion of a game unless multimodal semiotics clash with their RPG-associated schemata that many participants bring to play.

8.3.4 RQ4: To what extent does player interpretation of in-game elements align with expected interpretation derived from the ideal player?

Interpretation generally aligns when multimodal semiotics align with player schemata, friction emerging when text implies meanings that the visuals and controls do not confirm, or when register and phrasing are misaligned with the genre frame. Combined data analysis shows that interpretation improves when localisation aligns with players' genre expectations, and that strong responses and reactions during play are strongest when text, visuals, audio, and mechanics work together. Across titles, alignment improves when culturally embedded motifs are legible to players and are echoed by the textual layer, as in *H:SR*'s (2023) recognisable Chinese cultural cues, where costume, script, and iconography inform interpretation and are stabilised by coherent localised text.

Starting with *Eastward* (2021), the playtester feedback illustrated that idiomatic phrasing and pixel-art style animations in resulted in positive reactions that appropriately realised the intended aims of the source semiotics, recognisable as homages to older style RPG and JRPG videogames; particularly the minigame which some playtesters recognised explicitly as a classic turn-based JRPG-style combat system. Narrative-wise, the only potential misalignment of interpretation came when several testers reacted negatively to the crying princess in the introduction, reading it as a stereotyped set-up; whilst the interpretation as a fairytale story opener may have been correct, the reactions strongly suggest an unintended interpretation that caused anger. Equally, the music was largely interpreted as intended, successfully occupying its role as a narrative tool to set the tone of a given moment or environment. Character designs conveyed intended messages well, with playtesters recognising elements such as economic status or nature of employment based

on clothing, as well as comprehending emotional responses according to character animations. Environmental design was overall well-received but alignment with intended interpretation was mixed with not all playtesters understanding the implied location of the setting in-game owing to limitations of the art style despite deliberate usage of colour and lighting in design. However, challenges with control scheme expectations and map navigation fell particularly short, on failing to align with a number of players' schemata and failing to communicate the intended usage aims. Combat controls failed to be realised based solely on genre information causing frustration which was not at all intended.

In *Depersonalization* (2019), whilst the initial opening incorrectly implied to several playtesters that the game would be heavily anime-esque, the music was correctly interpreted as the primary narrative driver, setting the tone and informing the players to the nature of the occult setting. Notably, two playtesters remarked that the music could lead to negative emotions, which may not have been intentional. The environments were minimal and required little interpretation, the majority of playtesters correctly identifying the setting as a castle or manor building, but not always connecting the visual-non-verbal elements to occult symbolism, missing out on environmental storytelling cues. Character designs were understood well, with playtesters recognising character archetypes based on design, meeting with intended interpretation.

In terms of text specifically, *Depersonalization* (2019) presented playtesters with the most challenges, leading playtesters to confusion and vexation rather than the intended sense of profundity. Equally, interactions intended to give the player freedom to interact with the environments failed to be interpreted entirely correctly by all playtesters, some missing interactable elements and others finding certain interactions humorous, breaking immersion. The friction between environmental assets, music and stilted writing interfere with the intended interpretation. The interpretative friction continues as the UI presents inconsistent font sizes, truncation, and unclear iconography, which detracted from clarity and cohesion, inhibiting most playtesters from properly understanding the combat system which led players to choose abilities almost randomly to bring the encounter to an end.

Finally, *H:SR* (2023) had the strongest visual style which was largely

interpreted as intended. The space station environment was mostly recognised, with playtesters remarking on the barren, corridor-like nature of the setting, also suggesting it could be a laboratory or a generic sci-fi setting. The character designs were the most complex of the three games, with playtesters identifying a strong anime art style (some interpreting that explicitly as Japanese) and characters with unique personalities that are expressed by their designs and colour palates. In particular, some playtesters correctly identified links to a perceived “Chineseness” in the character Dan Heng through costume design, symbols and iconography appearing on outfit and in his splash animations, and through his overall colour palate. However, despite this acknowledgement, deeper comprehension of the symbolism and culturally-specific historic context of those character design elements did not surface in the feedback.

On the other hand, another character, March 7th, was interpreted correctly as a bubbly young woman, informed by her light pink and blue colour palate, short dress and cute accessories. However, voice dubbing worked to reinforce interpretation of character personalities (both positively and negatively) which impacted on interpretation, particularly in March 7th’s case, where her voice prevented her being interpreted as a sweet, bubbly young woman and instead, resulted in her being interpreted as annoying, dense, and cliché. Silver Fox was also subject to similar interpretative stumbling blocks as her costume made some playtesters see her as a sexy gamer-girl stereotype (reinforced by videogame iconography in her splash art) rather than a capable, sassy computer hacker. Where music was concerned, when the music was noticed by playtesters, the change between standard combat and boss battle music was remarked on, but largely the music unremarked on and unnoticeable.

Finally, in terms of controls and UI, several testers struggled with camera positioning and simultaneous movement/aim when roaming, struggling to commit the controls to memory through the tutorialisation and indicating onboarding gaps. Icons that were remarked on made sense, such as the hand icon at collectable objects, and players correctly inferred the interactable nature of items beneath the icon. However, combat icons were not interpreted so readily, and post-hoc some players admitted to not truly understanding the icons or what they did, simply following the tutorial instructions and selecting abilities at random in the final fight of the tutorial to finish the segment.

In short, (1) players generally perceived Chinese-developed games positively when localisation aligned with genre norms and multimodal cues; (2) localisation strategies influenced reception most when they preserved cultural nuance while ensuring clarity and usability; (3) preconceptions about Chinese games were mixed, but many players expected JRPG-like aesthetics and mechanics, which shaped interpretation; and (4) player interpretation aligned with intended meaning when text, visuals, and interactive elements worked cohesively.

8.4 Unexplored themes: future research topics

This section identifies themes that emerged from the data but, while worthy of further exploration, remained beyond the scope of this study. These include themes of social currency (8.4.1) and the gender and sexual identity of players (8.4.2).

8.4.1 Social currency: social capital and community expertise

The overall total mentions of existing game knowledge that both serve as a reference point for players and as a demonstration of player experience in terms of “community worldliness” were significant, numbering a combined total of 127 references (of 1867 total, approximately 7%), a blend of lived experience and referential knowledge. As observed earlier in the chapter, such experiences act as a mirror and help form a player’s schemata, enabling them to make sense of the games they play and their composite audio-visual elements. Additionally, both playtesters and reviewers were keen to demonstrate their existing knowledge of the game industry and pop culture to the wider community through reviews and, in the case of playtesters, to the researcher during post-hoc interviews. This knowledge is used not only as a reference point for comparing current gameplay experiences but also as a means of demonstrating social currency within the community. While the social currency aspect is not a focus of this study, it warrants further exploration in future research projects with the scope to accommodate it. Playtesters made remarks that pointed to its relevance, such as playing games specifically because their friends do (P7) and referencing personal online communities (P9). Some playtesters, much like some reviewers, were keen to acknowledge that “some people” might not enjoy

the games or might struggle with certain features, demonstrating a clear concern for others and an awareness of the broader player community.

8.4.2 Relating on a deeper level: player identity and emotional resonance

P1 and P9 raise the topic of sexuality and how it shapes their experiences. P1 openly discussed their LGBT identity and notes that the freedom to explore in *Eastward* (2021) appeals to them due to their sensibilities as a member of the LGBT community. They also remark that this influenced their ability to connect with the playable characters, expressing discomfort with the binary gender choices in *H:SR* (2023) and difficulty relating to the male protagonist in *Depersonalization* (2019), feeling unable to connect with such characterisations.

Meanwhile, P9 comments specifically on *H:SR* (2023), identifying two cutscenes in which a character moves in close to another character as feeling "bisexual." They observe that the protagonist's gender, whether male or female, has no impact on the animated motions in the cutscene, leading to the impression that the game implies character bisexuality, as either gender can be placed in a suggestive situation with another character. Although not recorded, P9 mentioned after recording had concluded that they openly identify as bisexual. While the topic of player sexuality is worthy of further exploration, it was beyond the scope of this study.

Finally, on a more general note, the recurring association of anime-style visuals with Japanese-developed games, together with the observed dynamics of playtester engagement and response, suggests that the influence of globalisation and cultural convergence on player perception in globally marketed games merits deeper examination.

8.5 What was learnt from how players felt and engaged

This chapter demonstrated that the interactive elements were not experienced uniformly but were interpreted through the lens of prior knowledge (Bartlett and Kintsch, 1995; Rumelhart, 1980), cultural background (Nishida, 1999; Shahghasemi, 2017), and genre expectations (Hall, 1973; Jauss, 1982; Holub, 1984). These findings directly informed the study's research questions by showing how localisation strategies shaped, supported, or disrupted player

engagement with Chinese-developed games. Control schemes, UI navigation, and combat mechanics were all interactive elements that revealed a complex interplay between design intent and player interpretation, reinforcing the importance of schema theory in the audience design process. This interplay helped to explain how players made sense of unfamiliar systems and how misalignment between the expected and the actual could generate frustration and disengagement. Equally, when intuitive design aligned with genre familiarity and cultural resonance, players responded positively, sometimes resulting in positive repercussions. Such instances of ludo-narrative cohesion underscored the value of multimodal localisation, in which all contributory modes must be considered together.

The application of MURR and UCT throughout this chapter illuminated how player motivation, usage, and reaction converged to produce long-term repercussions, whether positive or negative, that impacted not only the immediate player but could also influence the wider audience. These ramifications highlighted the need for localisation strategies that consider not only linguistic accuracy but also cultural and mechanical alignment with diverse player bases and their varied expectations, which may coexist within a single genre.

The findings in this chapter illustrated how interactivity mediated player engagement with localised Chinese-developed games, with particular emphasis on control schemes, UI design, and audio feedback. Also highlighted were mismatches between design intent and player schemata that disrupted usability and immersion, reinforcing the need for culturally responsive localisation strategies that encourage positive repercussions and strengthen positive perceptions.

8.6 Limitations

For transparency, it was anticipated that the netnographic data would lean toward the informative (“the text has been composed with the intention of passing on news, knowledge, views, etc” Reiss and Vermeer, 2014, p.182) as reviews by their very nature are intended to reach out to potential new players and lack the guidance of interview questions and as such, it was expected that in

some cases the review data would be barely mentioned as certain topics are barely, or not at all, present in the netnographic data. However, the netnography is representative of repercussions and a key indicator of issues players felt strongly enough about to share with the wider community. Overall, sentiment analyses of all three games showed that playtesters leaned towards an overall negative sentiment, whilst sentiment analyses of the review data was positive overall.

Purely incidentally but worthy of mention, the majority of playtesters told the games were Chinese-developed prior to play happened to be of Chinese nationality themselves (including diasporic), which may have influenced the results as certain references, aesthetics or embedded cultural information will not have been remarkable to them and thus they would not have felt it necessary to discuss. Additionally, whether cultural or simply a matter of personality differences between playtesters, some playtesters were considerably more vocal than others in their feedback, resulting in a degree of imbalance in the responses. Typically, the non-diasporic Chinese participants required greater guidance and more follow-up questioning for answers that were richer in depth, whilst the English and American participants were more prone to think-aloud protocol and openly discussing their experience in-actu and post-hoc without researcher prompting. In particular, the American participant P9 offered significant detailed and reflective commentary that provided valuable insight into the interpretive processes under study which highlighted the importance of participant engagement in qualitative research.

However, the prominence of one voice also served to obscure the feedback of less forthcoming participants and as a such, future studies would certainly benefit from a larger, more diverse groups of playtesters to ensure richer and more representative data to prevent minorities of highly vocal participants from dominating the discourse. Additionally, the inclusion of more in-depth, guided interview questions could help support participants who may need additional structure or encouragement to articulate their experiences fully.

8.7 The long-reaching influence of repercussion

The discussion across Chapter 6 and Chapter 7 has shown that the ways in which players respond to Chinese-developed RPGs depend on more than just how the games are translated. Player reactions are shaped by their cultural background, expectations from the genre, and how the game's design and story match what they are used to. Localisation is not just about translating words. It is about ensuring the game "feels right" to players from different cultures, across all parts of the experience, including visuals, sound, story, and gameplay (Jiménez-Crespo, 2024; Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001).

One of the most prominent findings is the role of repercussion, the final stage in the MURR model. For non-Chinese players, positive repercussion was especially important in changing their views about Chinese games, such as how many were surprised by how polished and culturally rich *Eastward* (2021) felt, which lead to a shift in their expectations and a more positive view of Chinese-developed games. These moments of surprise and enjoyment are powerful, helping to break down stereotypes and build trust in Chinese games, challenging existing horizons of expectation and causing a shift in perception through exposure to aesthetics (media) that were previously ingrained with a different set of expectations (Hall, 1973; Jauss, 1982; Edwards, 2011). On the other hand, *Depersonalization*'s (2019) visible localisation issues were seen to confirm some players' negative expectations. These issues disrupted the schemata players had about how games should work resulting in potential disengagement from the games or the forming of a negative opinion about the game and, by extension, about Chinese games more broadly. Additionally, while the netnographic reviews often focussed on general enjoyment or support for the developers, the playtester feedback typically gave more detailed feedback that touched on topics not found in the netnography, primarily gender stereotypes and sexualisation.

These value-based considerations and socioculturally-driven preferences can be overlooked in standard persona models that have an emphasis on marketing, tending to focus on surface-level traits like age or gaming habits. This absence of facets of individuals that recognise a person's deeply-ingrained sociocultural and nuanced identity shows a gap in approaches to persona usage, overlooking the deeper, nuanced aspects of identity that shaped the playtesters' responses. Important issues like discomfort with sexualised characters or frustration with unclear instructions are often left out, even though they strongly affect how

players feel about a game.

Overall, the discussion and personas demonstrate that localisation should be seen as a full design process inclusive of language, visuals, sound, and gameplay, needing to match the expectations and values of the players. For Chinese developers aiming to reach a global audience, this means going beyond just translating the text into English; it means thinking carefully about how the game will be received by different types of players. Equally, consideration for existing expectations of specific art styles being exclusively associated with specific countries within the Western player perception presents further avenue for study. When localisation is well-executed, it can lead to positive repercussions, not only improving how players feel about a game, but also helping to build a better reputation for Chinese-developed games in general.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Completed ethics application

University Research Ethics Committee - application for ethical review

Please email your completed application form along with any relevant supporting documents to ResearchEthics@leeds.ac.uk (or to FMHUniEthics@leeds.ac.uk if you are based in the Faculty of Medicine and Health) at least 6 weeks before the research/ fieldwork is due to start. Dentistry and Psychology applicants should follow their School's procedures for submitting an application.

Ethics reference (leave blank if unknown)	Student number (if a student application)	Grant reference (if externally funded)	Module code (if applicable)
	201017797		

Faculty or School Research Ethics Committee to review the application (put a 'X' next to your choice)	x	Arts, Humanities and Cultures (AHC)
		Biological Science (BIOSCI)
		Business, Environment and Social Sciences (AREA)
		FS&N, Engineering and Physical Sciences (MEEC)
		School of Dentistry (DREC)
		School of Healthcare (SHREC)
		School of Medicine (SoMREC)
		School of Psychology (SoPREC)

Indicate what type of ethical review you are applying for:	x	Student project (PhD, Masters or Undergraduate)
		Staff project (externally or internally funded)

Section 1: Basic project details			
1.1 Research title	Crouching Button, Hidden Typo: Reception of Chinese videogames translated into English		
1.2 Research start date (dd/mm/yy)	Proposed fieldwork start date (dd/mm/yy)	Proposed fieldwork end date (dd/mm/yy)	Research end date (dd/mm/yy)
01/10/2022	01/06/2023	30/10/2024	01/07/2025

		1.3 I confirm that I have read and understood the current version of the University of Leeds Research Ethics Policy. *The Policy is available at* *http://ris.leeds.ac.uk/ResearchEthicsPolicies*.
		1.4 I confirm that I have read and understood the current version of the University of Leeds Research Data Management Policy. *The policy is available at* *https://library.leeds.ac.uk/info/14062/research_data_management/68/research_data_management_policy*.
		1.5 I confirm that research participants will be provided with a copy of the Privacy Notice for Research. *Guidance is available at* *https://dataprotection.leeds.ac.uk/information-for-researchers*.
		1.6 I confirm that I have read and understood the current version of the University of Leeds Information Protection Policy. *The policy is available at* *http://it.leeds.ac.uk/info/116/policies/249/information_protection_policy*

	x	1.7 I confirm that NHS Health Research Authority (HRA) ethical review is not required for this project. *Refer to http://ris.leeds.ac.uk/NHSethicalreview for guidance in identifying circumstances which require NHS review*
		x 1.8 Will the research involve NHS staff recruited as potential research participants (by virtue of their professional role) or NHS premises/ facilities? *Please note: If yes, HRA approval, NHS R&D management permission or local management permission may also be needed.* *Refer to http://ris.leeds.ac.uk/NHSethicalreview.*

Section 2: Contact details	
2.1 Name of applicant	Jemma Louise Stafford
2.2 Position (eg PI, Co-I, RA, student)	Student
2.3 Department/ School	AHC
2.4 Faculty	LCS
2.5 Work address (usually at the University of Leeds)	University of Leeds, Woodhouse, Leeds LS2 9JT
2.6 Telephone number	07508764134
2.7 University of Leeds email address	mljls@leeds.ac.uk

Section 3: Summary of the research

3.1 In plain English provide a brief summary of the aims and objectives of the research. The summary should briefly describe
the background to the research and why it is important,
the questions it will answer and potential benefits,
the study design and methods.
Your answers should be easily understood by someone who is not experienced in the field you are researching, (eg a member of the public) - otherwise it may be returned to you. Where technical terms are used they should be explained. Any acronyms not generally known should be described in full. (max 750 words)

The aim of the research overall is to determine the reception of Chinese videogames translated into English on their end users. Currently, there are no reception studies in this field, and studies in this field are lacking in general.
It will answer the following questions:
What is the perceived quality of Chinese-made games being released in English.
Does the quality of localisation on display in Chinese-made Role-Playing Games have a negative impact on experience of players?
How and to what extent does the quality of localised elements in Chinese developed videogames influence user sentiment towards China?
Do pre-conceived notions of 'made in China' quality influence player attitudes towards the games?
How can player experience research inform localisation of ZH-EN games in future?
Determining user-expectations in relation to outward design will be required to determine a level of intention by developers, and to determine whether user expectations are influenced by the designs, further tying-in to how external media influences the way users experience the game. The result could lead to greater understanding of the player experience in translation and open further avenues for study within this field. The research requires human participants online to complete two online surveys and a playtest. The surveys will be anonymised, collecting only personal data on gender, age and nationality and nothing identifiable.

~~This~~ A phase 1 survey is required to put together a framework for a larger phase 2 reception study. The framework is intended to provide a guideline by which games can be identified as user-expected-Japanese or user-expected-Chinese, in accordance with a series of parameters determined by respondents in their survey feedback. The phase 1 survey should not take participants longer than 45 minutes, a pilot survey suggested a typical taker time of 25 minutes.

A combination of new data gathered through the phase 2 survey~~s~~ about player ~~experience~~ reception of games translated from Chinese into English will be gathered through surveys determining expectation and reception, and through the triangulation of netnographic data available freely online in public forums.

The final major stage of the research intends to invite participants for the phase 3 ~~a~~ playtest of a selection of titles in order to interview them about their experience. Interviewing will take place following play, and should not exceed 30 minutes. Data recorded for transcription will be transcribed for reference during analysis of player reception and experience of actual play. Playesters will be recruited through Leeds University channels to ensure participants can attend in-person for a playtest held on campus in a privately booked room. The playtesters will need to give feedback on their experience playing unfamiliar games. They will be assigned numbers in documentation; no names or sensitive data will be recorded. Playtests will be a minimum of

30 minutes per game, with a maximum of 3 games to be played. Transcriptions will be stored on the One Drive with the audio files.

Participants will agree to a consent form, and informed they can refuse to participate at any time of their own will with no reasoning required.

3.2 In plain English provide a brief summary of the study design. The summary should briefly describe
the research methods,
how participants will be involved,
how the methods used relate to current debates about the ethical involvement of participants in your field,
if the project involves personal data (ie data where it might be possible to identify individuals), how this data will be obtained and how it will be used.
(max 750 words)

~~Initially~~Phase 1 survey: create framework with an online survey containing images taken from videogames will be presented to participants. The data will then be gathered, checked for repeating themes and terminology, and used to create a standard by which games may be judged as JRPGs in accordance with participant expectations. Example questions include:
Based on this image, what genre would you guess it belongs to and why?
What do you infer about the characters within the image, and why? For example, clothing, poses, etc.
Are there any characteristics that stand out to you? This can be any facet of the image.
A minimum of 30 participants is intended, but more would be preferred.
The results should provide a guideline of expectations for videogames of Japanese and Chinse development respectively and generate a terminology list of user-determined common phrases associated with each that can be analysed for positive and negative expressions and tone. Terms collected can be further broken into quantitative data by which a consensus can be determined according to positive and negative expectations in relation to games developed by Japanese or Chinese developers according to users, offering a measure of player attitudes in general to games developed according to development source.
Phase 2 survey: Use phase 1 framework ~~created~~ to produce a ~~second~~ reception survey that inquires more deeply into user experience, perceptions and bias, through similar means used in the initial survey – collate responses and analyse for themes, repeated terms and any correlation therein.
A minimum of 50 participants is intended, but more preferred.
The data gathered in the phase 2 survey will be player reception survey. Example questions:
What genre would you expect the game shown in this image to be?
Thinking of games made in China, what 3 words would you choose to describe your opinions on them?
Thinking of games made in Japan, what 3 words would you choose to describe your opinions of them?
Phase 3: Playtesting of two groups of participants will be undertaken by participants for a 30 minutes per game played, up to a maximum of 90 minutes. Following which the players will be questioned about their experiences and asked about their interpretation and perceptions of the games played, with emphasis on cultural comprehension, multimodal translation and overall player satisfaction. One group of testers will be told the games are Chinese prior to playing. Example questions:

1. When playing, did you encounter any difficulties in understanding how to control the character?
2. Did the language used fit the scene?
3. Would you recommend this game? Why/why not?

A minimum of 10 participants is intended, but more preferred

Playtest interview data will be recorded through audio software and transcribed for referencing as anonymised qualitative data. In all cases, data will be fully anonymised, only information pertaining to gender, age and nationality being gathered. Participants can withdraw at any time without giving reason, and all data gathered with be stored safely on the University of Leeds OneDrive server. All data gathered will be used to answer the questions posed by the reception study.

Data gathered from P2 and P3 will be supplemented by netnographic data gathered from public forums online.

3.3 Where will the research be undertaken?	Surveys: Online, BOS and/or Microsoft Forms Playtesting: On University of Leeds campus in a private book room with computer facilities
3.4 Who is funding the research?	No funding

NB: If this research will be financially supported by the US Department of Health and Human Services or any of its divisions, agencies or programmes please ensure the additional funder requirements are complied with. Further guidance is available at http://ris.leeds.ac.uk/FWAcompliance and you may also contact your FRIO for advice.

Section 4: Research data and impact

You may find the following guidance helpful:

Research data management guidance

Advice on planning your research project

Dealing with issues relating to confidentiality and anonymisation

Funder requirements and University of Leeds Research Data Management Policy

4.1 What is the data source? (Indicate with an 'X' all that apply)

x	New data collected for this research
	Data previously collected for other research
	Data previously collected for non-research purposes

x	Data already in the public domain
	Other, please state: _____.
4.2 How will the data be collected? (Indicate with an 'X)	
x	Through one-to-one research interviews
	Through focus groups
x	Self-completion (eg questionnaires, diaries)
	Through observation
	Through autoethnographic research
x	Through experiments/ user-testing involving participants
	From external research collaborators
	Other, please state: _____.
4.3 How will you make your research data available to others in line with: the University's, funding bodies' and publishers' policies on making the results of publically funded research publically available (in compliance with UK data protection legislation)? (max 200 words)	
Once the research is complete, all non-sensitive data will be shared openly. All data shared will omit identifiable participant data, including names, email addresses and phone numbers, ensuring anonymity. Non-sensitive data will be shared on repositories such as Research Gate and Open Research Repository, as well as aiming to publish findings with fully anonymised data.	
4.4 How do you intend to share the research data, both within and outside the research team? (Indicate with an 'X)	
	Depositing in a specialist data centre or archive
x	Submitting to a journal to support a publication
x	Depositing in a self-archiving system or an institutional repository

	Dissemination via a project or institutional website
	Informal peer-to-peer exchange
	No plans to report or disseminate the data
	Other, please state: _____.
4.5 How do you intend to report and disseminate the results of the study? (Indicate with an 'X)	
x	Peer reviewed journals
	Internal report
x	Conference presentation
x	Publication on website
	Other publication
	Submission to regulatory authorities
	No plans to report or disseminate the results
	Other, please state: _____.
4.6 Give details of the expected impact of the research. Further guidance is available at https://www.ukri.org/innovation/excellence-with-impact. (max 200 words)	
The framework will provide an entirely new measure by which those working in the field of Chinese videogames can assess player expectations in relation to the design features and aesthetics of a game that has Chinese and/or Japanese characteristics. The research overall will be the first of its kind, adding to the limited pool of reception studies on Chinese videogames in translation, as well as providing insight into player experience and how Chinese videogames are received and interpreted by players.	

Section 5: Protocols		
Which protocols will be complied with? (Indicate with an 'X'). There may be circumstances where it makes sense not to comply with a protocol, this is fine but should be clarified in your application.	x	Protocol on the protection, anonymisation and sharing of research data
	x	Informed consent protocol
		Verbal consent protocol
		Protocol on the reimbursement of research participants
		Low risk observation protocol

Section 6: Additional ethical issues	
6.1 Indicate with an 'X' in the left-hand column whether the research involves any of the following:	
	6.1.1. Discussion of sensitive topics, or topics that could be considered sensitive
	6.1.2. Prolonged or frequent participant involvement
	6.1.3. Potential for adverse environmental impact
	6.1.4. The possibility of harm to participants or others (including the researcher(s))
	6.1.5. Participants taking part in the research without their knowledge and consent (eg covert observation of people in non-public places)
	6.1.6. The use of drugs, placebos or invasive, intrusive or potentially harmful procedures of any kind
	6.1.7. Food substances or drinks being given to participants (other than refreshments)

	6.1.8. Vitamins or any related substances being given to participants
	6.1.9. Acellular blood, urine or tissue samples obtained from participants (ie no NHS requirement)
x	6.1.10. Members of the public in a research capacity (participant research)
	6.1.11. Participants who are particularly vulnerable (eg children, people with learning disabilities, offenders)
	6.1.12. People who are unable to give their own informed consent
	6.1.13. Researcher(s) in a position of authority over participants, eg as employers, lecturers, teachers or family members
	6.1.14. Financial inducements (other than reasonable expenses and compensation for time) being offered to participants
	6.1.15. Cooperation of an intermediary to gain access to research participants or material (eg head teachers, prison governors, chief executives)
	6.1.16. Potential conflicts of interest
	6.1.17. Internet participants or other visual/ vocal methods where participants may be identified
	6.1.18. Scope for incidental findings, ie unplanned additional findings or concerns for the safety or wellbeing of participants.
	6.1.19. The sharing of data or confidential information beyond the initial consent given
	6.1.20. Translators or interpreters
	6.1.21. Research conducted outside the UK
	6.1.22. An international collaborator
	6.1.23. The transfer of data outside the European Economic Area
	6.1.24. Third parties collecting data
	6.1.25. Other ethical clearances or permissions

6.2 For the ethical issues indicated in 6.1 provide details of any additional ethical issues the research may involve and explain how these issues will be addressed. (max 200 words)
All data gathered is to be anonymised, no identifiable data will be collected and participants may withdraw at will without needing reason or giving notice.

Section 7: Recruitment and consent process For guidance refer to http://ris.leeds.ac.uk/InvolvingResearchParticipants and the research ethics protocols.
7.1 State approximately how much data and/ or how many participants are going to be involved.
A minimum of 30 participants for the framework phase 1 survey, preferably more. A minimum of 50 participants for the phase 2 reception survey, preferably more. A minimum of 10 play testers for the phase 3 playtest, preferably more.
7.2 How was that number of participants decided upon? (max 200 words) *Please note: The number of participants should be sufficient to achieve worthwhile results but should not be so high as to involve unnecessary recruitment and burdens for participants. This is especially pertinent in research which involves an element of risk. Describe here how many participants will be recruited, and whether this will be enough to answer the research question. If you have received formal statistical advice then please indicate so here, and describe that advice.*
The nature of the questions is holistic, many users will have their own opinions and so it is important to recruit as many participants as possible to ensure a large enough pool of data that there ought to be some shared consensus among them.
7.3 How are the participants and/ or data going to be selected? How will you ensure an appropriately convened sample group in order to meet the aims of the research? List the inclusion and exclusion criterial. Give details for

subgroups separately, if appropriate. How will any potential pitfalls, for example dual roles or potential for coercion, be addressed? (max 300 words)
~~There are no exclusions for the online surveys.~~ Participants must be proficient in English, but no regional limitation will be in place to allow for inclusion of any participant who plays videogames using the English language setting. The ~~framework~~ phase 1 and phase 2 reception surveys shall be linked on a number of online platforms, including social media (Twitter, Facebook, etc) and popular platforms such as Reddit and Steam. The aim is to have the widest possible response from a wide range of participants in order to find the strongest consistent line of feedback. Playtesters may be excluded if identified as having played any of the games provided for testing, as this may result in bias. Owing to the popularity of some Chinese-developed titles, they will be omitted from the playtest ensuring minimum impact. There is a possibility this restriction will harm recruitment.
7.4 For each type of methodology, describe the process by which you will obtain and document freely given informed consent for the collection, use and reuse of the research data. Explain the storage arrangements for the signed consent forms. *Guidance is available at http://ris.leeds.ac.uk/InvolvingResearchParticipants.* *The relevant documents (information sheet and consent form) need to be attached to the end of this application. If you are not using an information sheet and/ or seeking written consent, please provide an explanation.*
Preceding the surveys will be an information page explaining the process and aims of the survey, following which will be a consent request box that users must tick in order to give consent. Without giving consent, they cannot fill out the survey. Play testers will need to sign a consent form prior to the playtest. Signed physical consent forms will be stored securely locally at the University of Leeds.
7.5 Describe the arrangements for withdrawal from participation and withdrawal of data/ tissue. *Please note: It should be made clear to participants in advance*

if there is a point after which they will not be able to withdraw their data. See also http://ris.leeds.ac.uk/ResearchDataManagement. (max 200 words)
Survey participants can withdraw at any time without giving any reason with verbal or written notification to the project lead (Jemma Stafford). Playtest participants may only withdraw prior to playtesting, providing a minimum of 48 hour's notice to allow for additional recruitment. Participants who have completed the playtest may request to have their data deleted and withdrawn after completion.
7.6 Provide details of any incentives you are going to use and explain their purpose. (max 200 words) *Please note: Payment of participants should be ethically justified. The FREC will wish to be reassured that research participants are not being paid for taking risks or that payments are set at a level which would unduly influence participants. A clear statement should be included in the participant information sheet setting out the position on reimbursement of any expense incurred.*
There are no financial incentives for phase 1 and phase 2, but a summary of findings will be offered to interested participants. If recruitment proves troublesome for the playtest, financial incentives will be considered through available Leeds PGR student research grants.

Section 8: Data protection, confidentiality and anonymisation *Guidance is available at http://ris.leeds.ac.uk/ConfidentialityAnonymisation*	
8.1 How identifiable will the participants be? (Indicate with an 'X').	
	Fully identifiable
x	Identity of subject protected by code numbers/ pseudonyms
x	Fully anonymised
	Anonymised but potentially identifiable
	Data only in aggregated form
	Other

8.2 Describe the measures you will take to deal with issues of anonymity. (max 200 words)
No personal data besides gender, age group and nationality will be gathered. Playtesters will be assigned numbers by which they shall be referred to.
8.3 Describe the measures you will take to deal with issues of confidentiality, including any limits to confidentiality. (Please note that research data which appears in reports or other publications is not confidential, even if it is fully anonymised. For a fuller explanation see http://ris.leeds.ac.uk/ConfidentialityAnonymisation). (max 300 words)
There are no limitations on confidentiality. All data is sharable and does not need encrypting.
8.4 Who will have access to the research data apart from the research team (eg translators, authorities)? (max 100 words)
Myself and my supervisors.
8.5 Describe the process you will use to ensure the compliance of third parties with ethical standards. (max 100 words)
All third parties must adhere to the necessary protocols outlined by the University of Leeds.
8.6 Where and in what format(s) will research data, consent forms and administrative records be retained? (max 200 words) *Please note: Mention hard copies as well as electronic data. Electronic data should be stored securely and appropriately and in accordance with the University of Leeds Data Protection Policy available at http://www.leeds.ac.uk/secretariat/data_protection_code_of_practice.html.*

All data will be stored electronically in word and PDF format on the secure University of Leeds OneDrive server. Any audio data will be transcribed as word files, the audio files themselves will be saved as MP3 and WAV files, stored on OneDrive.
8.7 If online surveys are to be used, where will the responses be stored? (max 200 words) *Refer to: https://leeds.service-now.com/it?id=kb_article&sys_id=febb731d0ff2f20089d7f55be1050e48 and http://ris.leeds.ac.uk/SecuringResearchData for guidance.*
All data will be stored on the secure University of Leeds OneDrive server.
8.8 Give details and outline the measures you will take to assess and to mitigate any foreseeable risks (other than those already mentioned) to the participants, the researchers, the University of Leeds or anyone else involved in the research? (max 300 words)
There are no foreseeable risks.

Section 9: Other ethical issues		
Yes	No	(Indicate with an 'X')
	x	9.1 Is a health and safety risk assessment required for the project? *Please note: Risk assessments are a University requirement for all fieldwork taking place off campus. The risk assessment forms and further guidance on planning for fieldwork in a variety of settings can be found on the University's Health & Safety website along with further information about risk*

		assessment: http://www.leeds.ac.uk/safety/fieldwork/index.htm. Contact your Faculty Health and Safety Manager for further advice. See also http://ris.leeds.ac.uk/HealthAndSafetyAdvice.
	x	9.2 Is a Disclosure and Barring Service check required for the researcher? *Please note: It is the researcher's responsibility to check whether a DBS check is required and to obtain one if it is needed.*
9.3 Any other relevant information		
9.4 Provide details of any ethical issues on which you would like to ask the Committee's advice.		

Section 10: Further details for student projects (complete if applicable) Your supervisor is required to provide email confirmation that they have read, edited and agree with the form above. It is a good idea to involve your supervisor as much as possible with your application. If you are unsure how to answer any of the questions do ask your supervisors for advice.			
10.1 Qualification working towards (indicate with an 'X')			
	Bachelor's degree	Module code:	
	Master's degree (including PgCert, PgDip)		
x	Research degree (ie PhD)		
10.2 Primary supervisor's contact details			

Name (title, first name, last name)	Dr Callum Walker
Department/ School/ Institute	LCS, AHC
Telephone number	
University of Leeds email address	C.M.Walker@leeds.ac.uk
10.3 Second supervisor's contact details	
Name (title, first name, last name)	Dr Martin Ward
Department/ School/ Institute	LCS, AHC
Telephone number	
University of Leeds email address	M.S.Ward@leeds.ac.uk

Yes	No	10.4 To be completed by the student's supervisor
X		The topic merits further research
X		I believe that the student has the skills to carry out the research

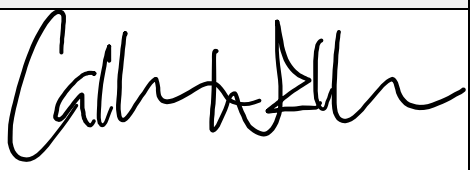
Section 11: Other members of the research team (complete if applicable)	
Name (title, first name, last name)	Dr Sara Ramos Pinto
Role (eg PI, Co-I)	Third Supervisor
Department/ School/ Institute	LCS, AHC
Telephone number	
University of Leeds email address	S.RamosPinto@leeds.ac.uk

Name (title, first name, last name)	
Role (eg PI, Co-I)	
Department/ School/ Institute	
Telephone number	
University of Leeds email address	
Name (title, first name, last name)	
Role (eg PI, Co-I)	
Department/ School/ Institute	
Telephone number	
University of Leeds email address	

Section 12: Supporting documents		
Indicate with an 'X' which supporting documents have been included with your application. Wherever possible the research title on consent forms, information sheets, other supporting documentation and this application should be consistent. The title should make clear (where appropriate) what the research is about. There may be instances where a different title is desirable on information to participants (for example – in projects which necessarily involve an element of deception or if giving the title might skew the results of the research). It is not imperative that the titles are consistent, or detailed, but where possible then they should be. Supporting documents should be saved with a meaningful file name and		Information sheet(s) *Please note: Include different versions for different groups of participants eg for children and adults if applicable. Refer to http://ris.leeds.ac.uk/InvolvingResearchParticipants for guidance in producing participant information sheets.*
		Consent form(s) *Please note: Include different versions for different groups of participants eg for children and adults if applicable. Refer to http://ris.leeds.ac.uk/InvolvingResearchParticipants for guidance in producing participant consent forms.*
		Recruitment materials *Please note: Eg poster, email etc used to invite people to participate in your research project.*
		Letter/ email seeking permission from host/ gatekeeper
		Questionnaire/ interview questions
		Health and safety risk assessment, if needed *Please note: Risk assessments are a University requirement for all fieldwork taking place off campus. The risk*

version control, eg *'Participant_Info_Sheet_v1'* or *'Parent_Consent_From_v2'*. Refer to the examples at http://ris.leeds.ac.uk/InvolvingResearchParticipants.		*assessment forms and further guidance on planning for fieldwork in a variety of settings can be found on the University's Health & Safety website along with further information about risk assessment: http://wsh.leeds.ac.uk/wsh/site_map. Contact your Faculty Health and Safety Manager for further advice. Also refer to http://ris.leeds.ac.uk/HealthAndSafetyAdvice.*
		Data Protection Impact Assessment, if needed *Refer to http://www.leeds.ac.uk/secretariat/documents/dpia.pdf for guidance.*
		Data management plan *Refer to https://library.leeds.ac.uk/info/14062/research_data_management/62/data_management_planning*

Section 13: Sharing information for training purposes		
Yes	No	(Indicate with an 'X')
x		I would be content for information in the application to be used for research ethics and research data management training purposes within the University of Leeds. All personal identifiers and references to researchers, funders and research units would be removed.

Section 14: Declaration		
The information in this form is accurate to the best of my knowledge and belief and I take full responsibility for it. I undertake to abide by the University's ethical and health & safety policies and guidelines, and the ethical principles underlying good practice guidelines appropriate to my discipline. If the research is approved I undertake to adhere to the study protocol, the terms of this application and any conditions set out by the Research Ethics Committee. I undertake to ensure that all members of the research team are aware of the ethical issues and the contents of this application form. I undertake to seek an ethical opinion from the REC before implementing any amendments to the protocol. I undertake to submit progress/ end of project reports if required. I am aware of my responsibility to be up to date and comply with the requirements of the law and relevant guidelines relating to security and confidentiality of personal data. I understand that research records/ data may be subject to inspection for audit purposes if required in future. I understand that personal data about me as a researcher in this application will be held by the relevant FRECs and that this will be managed according to the principles established in the Data Protection Act.		
	Applicant	Student's supervisor (if applicable)
Signature		
Name	Jemma Louise Stafford	Callum Walker
Date	26/04/2023	26/04/2023

Appendix 2: Online survey participant information

Information for Participants

You are being invited to participate in research investigating reception of translated videogames. This study is being conducted by Jemma Louise Stafford, a PhD student at the University of Leeds, UK.

Before agreeing to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take some time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Should you have any questions or would like more information, please feel free to contact the researcher.

What is the purpose of the project?

This is the first in a three-part study investigating player reception of a videogame genre. This first part aims to gather feedback from gamers as to their expectations and perceptions when it comes to the RPG (role-playing game) genre of videogames. The data gathered will directly inform the subsequent part of the study.

Do I have to take part?

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. If you do decide to take part, you will be asked to give your consent by agreeing to the terms specified, but you can still withdraw at any time without giving a reason by informing the lead researcher. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to.

What do I have to do?

The questionnaire contains a total of 36 questions (some of which are optional) about your thoughts and expectations of a particular genre of videogames. There are 5 clips of approximately 5 minutes in length that feature an example of

gameplay, followed by questions to be answered in your own words. This should take approximately 25-45 minutes to complete depending how much detail you wish to provide in your answers.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for participants on this part of the study, but a summary of findings will be offered to those for whom it interests once the research has concluded. All data in this research contributes to a never-before investigated field of research, and will be of considerable benefit to the field of audiovisual translation (AVT) and videogame studies.

Are there any risks? How will the data be used, disseminated, and stored?

We believe there are no known risks associated with this research study; however, as with any online related activity the risk of a breach is always possible. We will make sure that your participation in this study will remain confidential, and only anonymised data will be published. We will minimise any risks by storing all data in the University of Leeds servers.

All the contact information that we collect about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential and will be stored separately from the research data. Only the researcher Jemma Louise Stafford will have access to this data and no link will ever be made between the data collected and you personally. Given the importance of research data for the future, the data collected during the course of the project might be used for additional or subsequent research in an anonymised format in future.

Further information is available via the University of Leeds Privacy Notice.

This survey will close on February 11th 2024.

Researcher contact details

Name: Miss Jemma Louise Stafford

Supervisors: Dr Callum Walker, Dr Martin Ward & Dr Sara Ramos Pinto

Title: Languages, Cultures and Societies PhD student, University of Leeds

Email: mljls@leeds.ac.uk

Appendix 3: Online survey consent and survey questions

1. By filling out this survey, the participant agrees to the following:
I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet explaining the above research project and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project.
I understand that the data collected from me may be stored and used in relevant future research in an anonymised form, and all data will be destroyed 5 years from acquisition.
I understand that relevant sections of the data collected during the study may be looked at by individuals from the University of Leeds where it is relevant to my taking part in this research.
I agree to take part in the above research project and will inform the lead researcher should my contact details change. *
I agree
I disagree

2. Gender: *
Male
Female
Non-binary
Prefer not to say

3. Age *
Under 18
18-24
25-34
35-44
45-54
55-64
64 and older

4. Nationality: *

5. Would be willing to be contacted for follow-up surveys or interviews: *

Yes

No

If yes, provide email address:

6. Please answer the following questions about your gaming habits:

Approximately how many hours per week do you play videogames? *

Never

0-4 hours per week

5-9 hours per week

10-14 hours per week

15-19 hours per week

20+ hours per week

7. Which of the following videogame genres have you heard of, if any? *

Action

Adventure

Roleplaying Game (RPG)

Visual Novel (VN)

First-person Shooter (FPS)

Multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA)

Massively multiplayer online game (MMO)

Survival

Realtime strategy game (RTS)

Japanese roleplaying game (JRPG)

Chinese roleplaying game (ZRPG)

Fighter (Beat ‘em up)

Platformer

Puzzle

None

8. Which of the following genres do you play most regularly, if any? *

Action

Adventure

Roleplaying Game (RPG)
Visual Novel (VN)
First-person Shooter (FPS)
Multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA)
Massively multiplayer online game (MMO)
Survival
Realtime strategy game (RTS)
Japanese roleplaying game (JRPG)
Chinese roleplaying game (ZRPG)
Fighter (Beat ‘em up)
Platformer
Puzzle None

You are going to be presented with some pictures from a selection of games. Please select answer the questions about the images.

9. Based on this image, what videogame genre would you guess it belongs to and why? *

10. What do you infer about the characters within the image, and why? For example, what do their clothing, poses, etc. suggest to you about them?

What details attract your attention?

Character design (including costume, props, etc)

Environmental design (the literal stage of the scene shown)

Colour schemes

Setting (country, time period, etc.)

Lighting

Pose

Movement None

Why do these characteristics specifically stand out to you? *

11. Based on this image, what videogame genre would you guess it belongs to and why? *

12. What details attract your attention?

Character design (including costume, props, etc)

Environmental design (the literal stage of the scene shown)

Colour schemes

Setting (country, time period, etc.)

Lighting

Pose

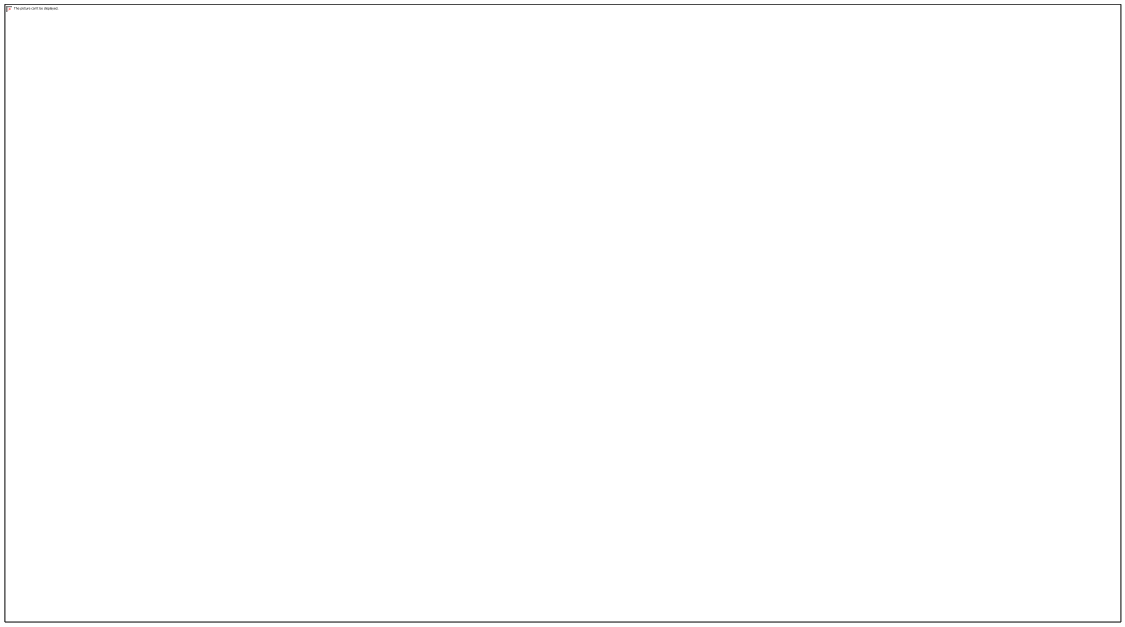
Movement
None

13. Why do these characteristics stand out to you? *

14. Based on this image, what videogame genre would you guess it belongs to and why? *

15. What details attract your attention?
Character design (including costume, props, etc)
Environmental design (the literal stage of the scene shown)
Colour schemes
Setting (country, time period, etc.)
Lighting
Pose
Movement
None

16. Based on this image, what videogame genre would you guess it belongs to and why? *



What details attract your attention?

Character design (including costume, props, etc)

Environmental design (the literal stage of the scene shown)

Colour schemes

Setting (country, time period, etc.)

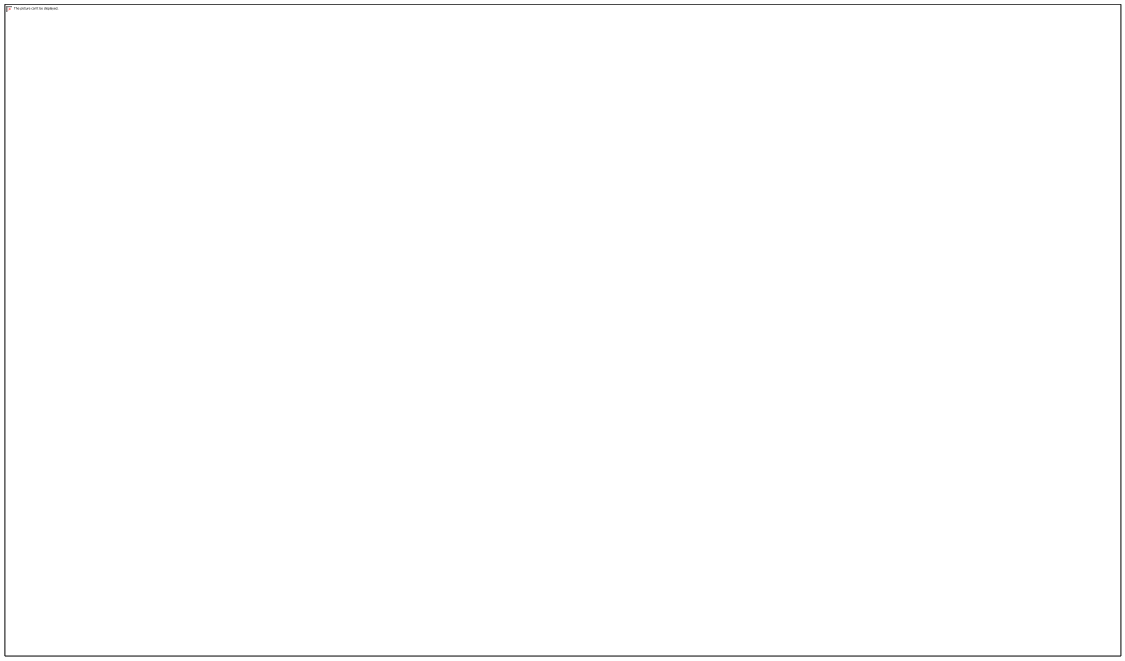
Lighting

Pose

Movement

None

17. Based on this image, what videogame genre would you guess it belongs to and why? *



18. What details attract your attention?

Character design (including costume, props, etc)

Environmental design (the literal stage of the scene shown)

Colour schemes

Setting (country, time period, etc.)

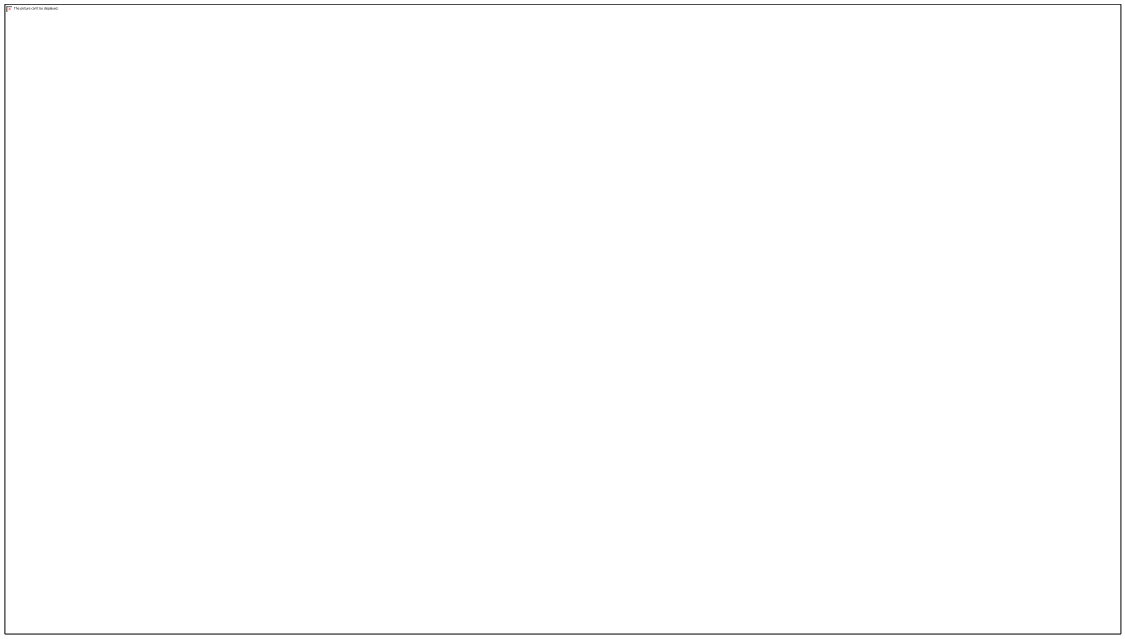
Lighting

Pose

Movement

None

19. Based on this image, what videogame genre would you guess it belongs to and why? *



20. What details attract your attention?

Character design (including costume, props, etc)

Environmental design (the literal stage of the scene shown)

Colour schemes

Setting (country, time period, etc.)

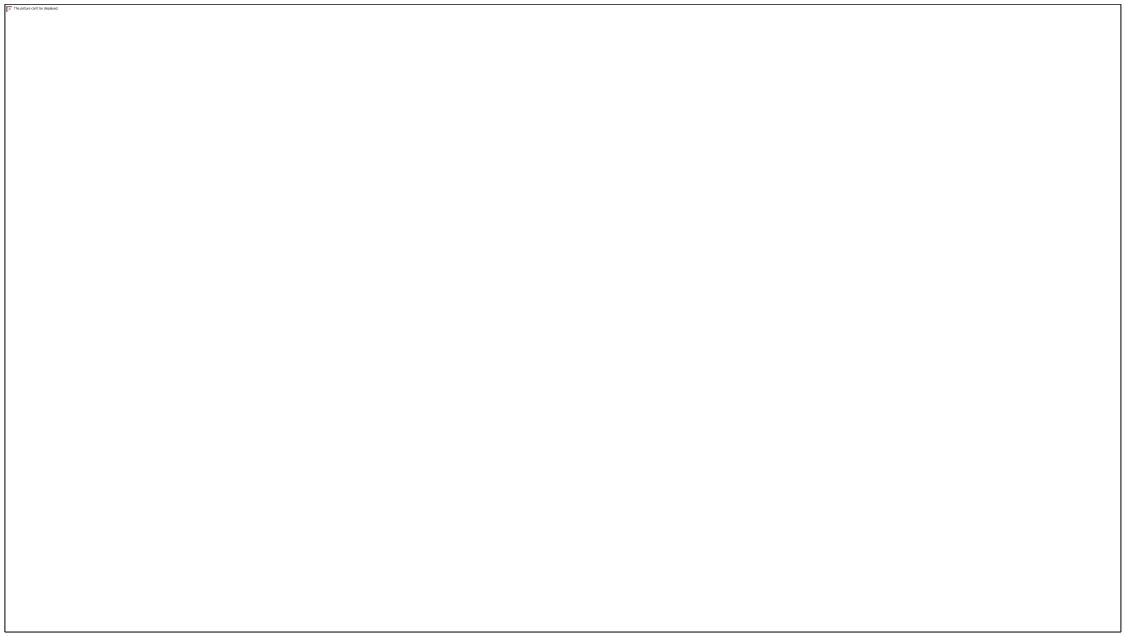
Lighting

Pose

Movement

None

21. Based on this image, what videogame genre would you guess it belongs to and why?



22. What details attract your attention?

Character design (including costume, props, etc)

Environmental design (the literal stage of the scene shown)

Colour schemes

Setting (country, time period, etc.)

Lighting

Pose

Movement

None

This section would like your thoughts on specific genre norms within JRPGs. A norm is something you expect to see/find in a particular situation.

23. Thinking about Japanese roleplaying games (JRPG), what key features, if any, do you expect?

24. Thinking specifically about the character design in JRPGs, what characteristics or tropes, if any, would you expect?

25. In some cases, videogames for sale on platforms such as Steam are classified as JRPG but are not made by Japanese developers – in such cases, would you disagree with the classification? Why?
*

26. Are there any cases you know of in which a game has or has not been classified as a JRPG, but you would suggest it should or should not be classified as one? If so, which game(s)? *

Please look at the following images and answer the questions.

27. How would you describe the art style? What particular features or characteristics stand out?

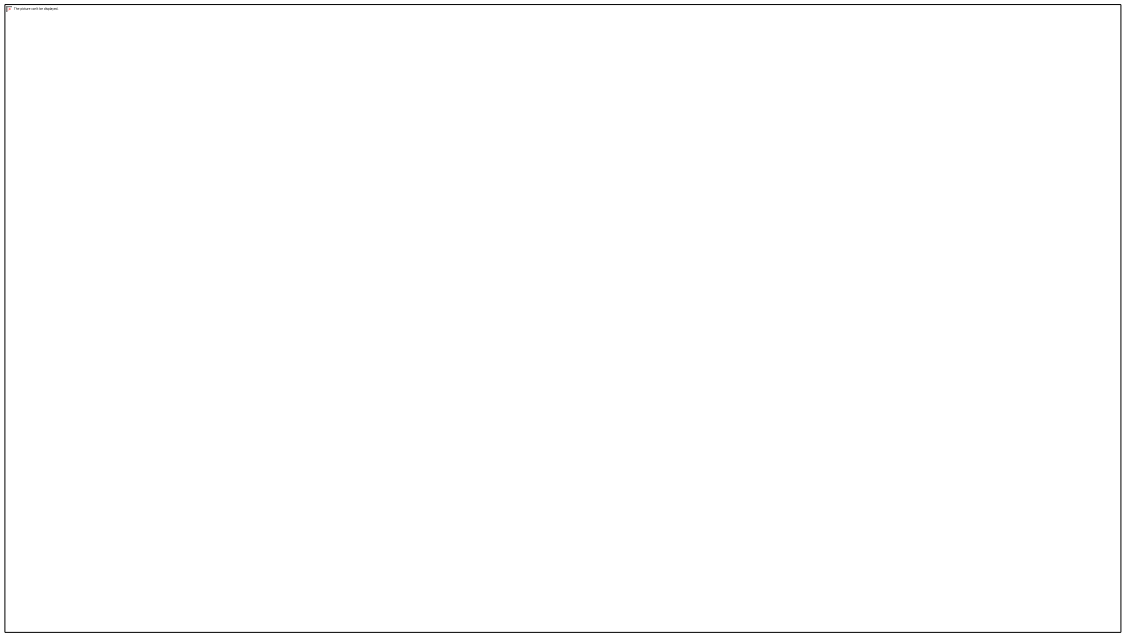
28. Reflecting on the image you've just seen, which statements would you agree with?

Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly

agr ee	a gr e e

The art style belongs to a specific country
The art style belongs to a specific genre of art
The art style belongs to a specific genre of game
The art style is ubiquitous/has no specific ‘owner’
The art style only fits in specific settings
The art style has links to a specific culture

29. How would you describe the art style? What particular features or characteristics stand out?



30. Reflecting on the image you’ve just seen, which statements would you agree with?

Stro ngly disa gree	Some what disag ree	Neither agree nor	Some what agree	St ro n gl

	disagree	agree
The art style belongs to a specific country		
The art style belongs to a specific genre of art		
The art style belongs to a specific genre of game		
The art style is ubiquitous/has no specific ‘owner’		
The art style only fits in specific settings		
The art style has links to a specific culture		

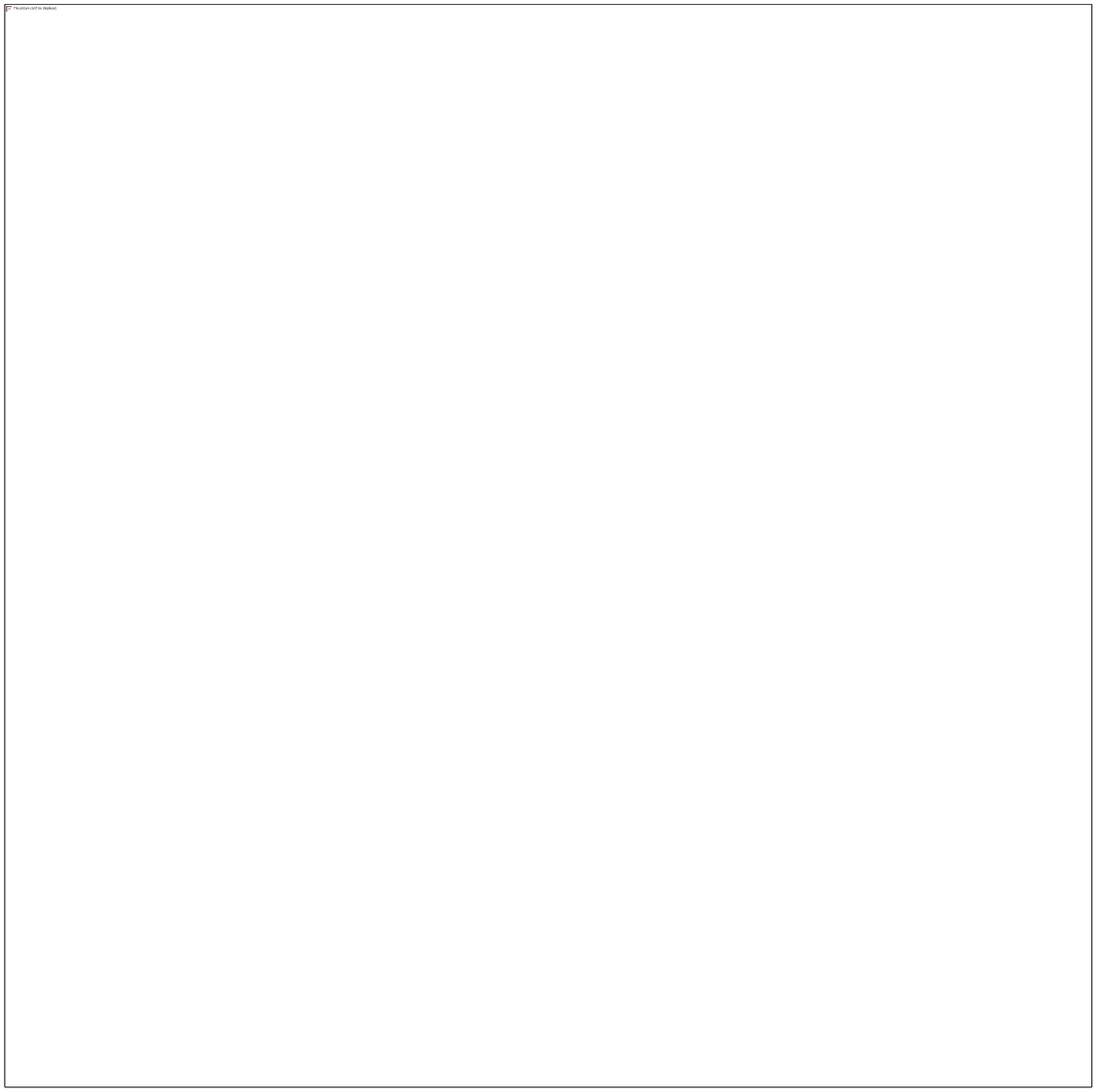
31. How would you describe the art style? What particular features or characteristics stand out?

32. Reflecting on the image you’ve just seen, which statements would you agree with?

		Neither agree nor disagree		Strongly agree
Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree		Somewhat agree	

The art style belongs to a specific country
The art style belongs to a specific genre of art
The art style belongs to a specific genre of game
The art style is ubiquitous/has no specific ‘owner’
The art style only fits in specific settings
The art style has links to a specific culture

33. How would you describe the art style? What particular features or characteristics stand out?



34. Reflecting on the image you've just seen, which statements would you agree with?

		Neither agree nor disagree		Strongly agree
Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree		Somewhat agree	

The art style belongs to a specific country
The art style belongs to a specific genre of art
The art style belongs to a specific genre of game
The art style is ubiquitous/has no specific ‘owner’
The art style only fits in specific settings
The art style has links to a specific culture

The five images shown to you in the previous section are from games that have been produced by Chinese developers.

28. Is this information unexpected? *
Yes
No

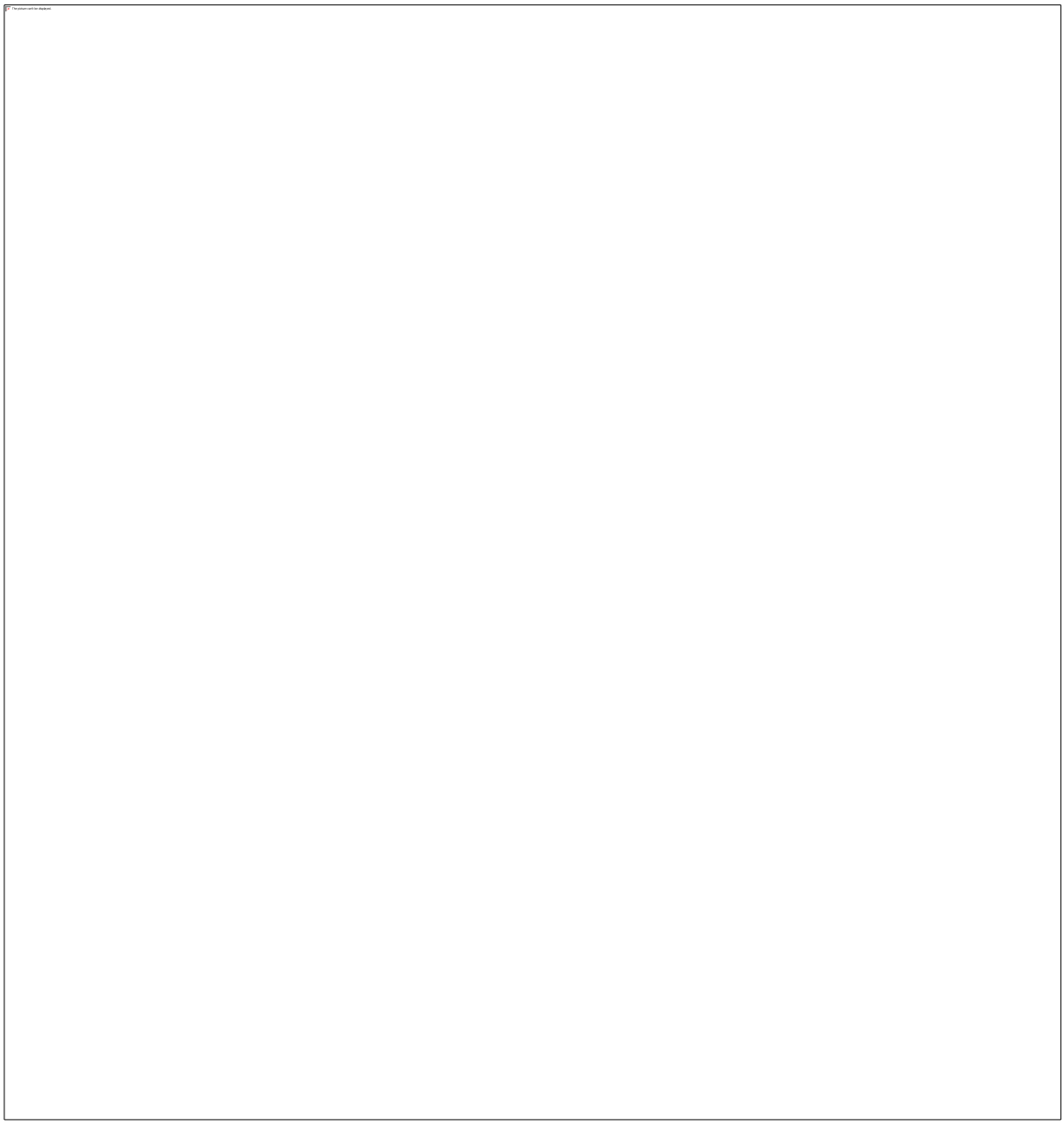
29. Please elaborate on why this was/was not unexpected: *

30. What expectations do you have of character designs in games made by Chinese developers, and why?

31. What expectations do you have of gameplay features in games made by Chinese developers, and why?

32. Finally, do you have any further comments or clarifications you wish to share about the topics discussed in this survey? For example, elaborating on your opinions about the artwork or game genres?

Appendix 4: Playtest recruitment poster and dates



DATES AVAILABLE: (Cookies provided!)

23TH APRIL @ 3PM	24TH APRIL @ 3PM	25TH APRIL @ 3PM

21ST MAY @ 1PM	24TH MAY @ 1PM	31ST MAY @ 1PM
22ND MAY @ 1PM	29TH MAY @ 1PM	
23RD MAY @ 1PM	30TH MAY @ 1PM	

Appendix 5: Playtest recruitment emails

Hello!

I've previously reached out to you about my research in video game localisation and am now reaching out again to plead for your society's aid!

A vital part of my research is due to take place towards the end of April - a playtest. I am looking for participants willing to play the opening beats of 3 different RPG titles, all participants will be anonymous and only your vocal feedback and play footage will be recorded.

These playtests will be conducted one on one with me present, in a private room with my laptop, hooked up to audio and play-footage recording equipment, but participants will be left largely to their own devices during play. There will be a few questions following play but nothing exhaustive! My priority is gathering playtest data. The playtest will take around 1-2 hours depending on how quickly participants get through the determined tutorial phases, and of course there are complementary biscuits on me!

I appreciate I am asking for around 2 hours of participant time, so would suggest only students who are resident in Leeds (or on campus) reach out to take part. If you feel this is of interest, or you know anyone who it will interest, I implore you to share my email address (mljls@leeds.ac.uk) and have them contact me directly for availability enquiries and to sign up to take part.

Many thanks and best wishes,
Jemma

Thank you for your interest in this world-first video game localisation research!

The aims of this playtest are to gather qualitative data from playtesting pertaining to 3 different role-playing games (RPG) in the form of synchronous audio recording and gameplay footage.

Participants will be required sign a consent form and then play a designated tutorial phase of 3 different RPG titles taking approximately 1-2 hours depending on personal play speed. All data will be fully anonymised and the playtest will take place on campus in a private room. Participants are required to be available during April for in-person attendance. A full study information sheet is available on request.

If you or someone you know would like to participate, please contact the lead researcher, Jemma Louise Stafford, via email: mljls@leeds.ac.uk

Appendix 6: Research participant privacy notice

Purpose of this Notice

This Notice explains how and why the University uses personal data for research; what
individual rights are afforded under the Data Protection Act 2018 (DPA) and who to contact with any queries or concerns.

All research projects are different. This information is intended to supplement the specific information you will have been provided with when asked to participate in one of our research projects. The project specify information will provide details on how and why we will process your personal data, who will have access to it, any automated decision-making that affects you and for how long we will retain your personal data.

Why do we process personal data?

As a publically funded organisation we undertake scientific research which is in the public interest. The DPA requires us to have a legal basis for this processing; we rely upon “the performance of a task carried out in the public interest” as our lawful basis for processing personal data, and on “archiving in the public interest, scientific or historical research purposes, or statistical purposes” as our additional lawful basis for processing special category personal data (that which reveals racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs, trade union membership, genetic or biometric data, and data concerning health, sex life or sexual orientation).

How do we follow data protection principles?

 We have lawful bases for processing personal and special category data.

 Data are used fairly and transparently; we will make it clear to individuals what their data will be used for, how it will be handled and what their rights are.

 We only collect and use personal data for our research, for research in the public interest, or to support the work of our organisation.

 We only collect the minimum amount of personal data which we need for our purposes.

 We take steps to ensure that the personal data we hold is accurate.

 We keep your personal data in an identifiable format for the minimum time required.

 We take steps to ensure that your data is held securely.
 We keep a record of our processing activities.

What do we do with personal data?

Research data can be a very valuable resource for improving public services and our understanding of the societies we live in. One way we can get the most benefit from this work is to make the data available, usually when the research has finished, to other researchers. Sometimes these researchers will be based outside the European Union. We will only ever share research data with organisations that can guarantee to store it securely.

We will never sell your personal data, and any data shared cannot be used to contact individuals. The project specific information will include more detail about how your data will be used.

Your rights as a data subject

Because we use personals data to support scientific research on the public interest, individuals participating in research do not have the same rights regarding their personal data as they would in other situations. This means that the following rights are limited for individuals who participate, or have participated in, a research project:

 The right to access the data we hold about you.
 The right to rectify the data we hold about you.
 The right to have the data we hold about you erased.
 The right to restrict how we process your data.
 The right to data portability.
 The right to object to us processing the data we hold about you.

Data security

We have put in place security measures to prevent your personal data from being accidentally lost, used or accessed in an unauthorised way and will notify you and any applicable regulator of a suspected breach where we are legally required to do so.

Retention periods

We will only retain your identifiable personal information for as long as necessary to fulfil the purposes we collected it for; we may then retain your data in anonymised or pseudonymised format.

To determine the appropriate retention period for personal data we consider the amount, nature, and sensitivity of the personal data, the potential risk of harm from unauthorised use or disclosure, the purposes for which we process your personal data and whether we can achieve those purposes through other means, and the applicable legal requirements.

Additional notices and guidance/policies

The University has also published separate policies and guidance which may be applicable to you in addition to other privacy notices:

Current staff privacy notice

Current students privacy notice

The Research and Innovation Service website has other relevant policies and guidance.

Communication

In the first instance please contact the researcher who your initial contact was with. You may also contact the Data Protection Officer for further information (see contact details
below). Please see the Information Commissioner's website for further information on the law. You have a right to complain to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) about the way in which we process your personal data. Please see the ICO's website.

Concerns and contact details

If you have any concerns with regard to the way your personal data is being processed or have a query with regard to this Notice, please contact our Data Protection Officer (Alice Temple: A.C.Temple@leeds.ac.uk). Our general postal address is University of Leeds, Leeds LS2 9JT, UK.

Our postal address for data protection issues is University of Leeds Secretariat, Room 11.72 EC Stoner Building, Leeds, LS2 9JT. Our telephone number is +44 (0)113 2431751.

Our data controller registration number provided by the Information Commissioner's Office is Z553814X.

This notice was last updated on 20 February 2019.

Appendix 7: Playtest participant information sheet and consent

Project: Crouching Button, Hidden Typo: A study into player reception of role-playing video games translated and localised into English.

You are being invited to participate in research investigating reception of translated videogames. This study is being conducted by Jemma Louise Stafford, a PhD student at the University of Leeds, UK.
Before agreeing to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take some time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Should you have any questions or would like more information, please feel free to contact the researcher.

What is the purpose of the project?
The purpose of this playtest is to gather synchronous audio and visual footage of play to document player reception and feedback to three different English-localised role-playing games. Data gathered will be analysed to contribute to reception research of English-localised video games.

Do I have to take part?
Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. If you do decide to take part, you will be asked to give your consent by agreeing to the terms specified, but you can still withdraw without any reason given – we ask only for at least 48 hours' notice if you choose not to participate to allow for further recruitment.

What do I have to do?
The playtest requires participants to play a defined opening period of play defined as ‘the tutorial phase’. The test includes three different role-playing games, the titles of which will be divulged upon arrival to participate. Participants will play through each of the three tutorial phases whilst audio and play-footage are recorded – the participant will not be in camera at all, all data and footage will be fully anonymous. Playtesting will take between 1-2 hours depending on

personal play. Playtesting will take place in a private room with the lead researcher present to ensure equipment set-up is sound.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for participants on this part of the study, it is world-first research that examines video games, multimodality and localisation and hopes to further reception studies in this field.

Participants will be asked if they wish to leave an email address for future contact in case they would be interested in any further participation in subsequent research contributing to this project.

Are there any risks? How will the data be used, disseminated, and stored?

We believe there are no known risks associated with this research study; however, as with any online related activity the risk of a breach is always possible. We will make sure that your participation in this study will remain confidential, and only anonymised data will be published. We will minimise any risks by storing all data in the University of Leeds servers.

All the contact information that we collect about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential and will be stored separately from the research data. Only the lead researcher, Jemma Louise Stafford, will have access to this data and no link will ever be made between the data collected and you personally. Given the importance of research data for the future, the data collected during the course of the project might be used for additional or subsequent research in an anonymised format in future.

Further information is available via the University of Leeds Privacy Notice.

Researcher contact details

Name: Miss Jemma Louise Stafford
Supervisors: Dr Callum Walker, Dr Martin Ward & Dr Sara Ramos Pinto
Title: Languages, Cultures and Societies PhD student, University of Leeds
Email: mljls@leeds.ac.uk

Consent to participate in this study

Please select YES or NO to give consent to the following statements:

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet explaining the above research project and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project. [y/n]

2. I understand that the data collected from me may be stored and used in relevant future research in an anonymised form. [y/n]

3. I understand that relevant sections of the data collected during the study may be looked at by individuals from the University of Leeds where it is relevant to my taking part in this research. [y/n]

4. I agree to take part in the above research project and will inform the lead researcher should my contact details change. [y/n]

Appendix 8: Pixpil developer email exchange

Where necessary, translations provided in blue.

1. **March 14th 2023. Jemma Stafford, mljls@leeds.ac.uk**

   Good morning from sunny (but very cold) England!

   My name is Jemma Stafford, a Languages, Cultures and Societies PhD student attending the University of Leeds, UK.

   I am undertaking a reception study for my PhD, the aim of which is to determine how players of Chinese-developed games translated into English interpret and experience the games in translation. The ultimate aim is, besides opening further avenues of study in the Chinese-English videogame field, to determine how players perceptions impact their experience, and how expectations impact the way they engage with the games - the results of such findings could be used by developers such as yourself to further enhance the player experience.

   I would like to include Eastward in this study. I wondered if you might be able to advise me of who to speak with regarding including it in my study? It is important that I follow due ethical process and obtain permission to use the titles for publishable research purposes.

   I am more than happy to give full details of the study should it be requested, as well as the names and contact details of my supervisors for reference.

   I look forward to your response!

   Many thanks,

   Jemma Stafford

2. **March 15th 2023. Pixpil, info@pixpil.com.**

   Hi, Jemma

   Thank you for the interests in the game. I'm looping in Oran who is the writer of the game and also the coordinator for the translation. You can just talk to him about your study.

   Of course, it's totally fine for you to include Eastward in your study.

   Have a nice day!

3. **March 15th 2023. Oran, oraninoran@gmail.com.**

   Hi, Jemma

   I'm Oran. It's an honor for us to be chosen in your study. Unfortunately, due to the contruct with the localization company, we are not able to contect direct with the translator.

   But as the coorinator for the translation I do have something to share for all these work. Such as how we chose the translator, the problem we met , the whole work flow and especally, the tool we built for localization.

   Please tell me which part are your interested in, that we can start to share with you.

   Many thanks

   Oran

4. **15th March 2023. Jemma Stafford, mljis@leeds.ac.uk.**

   Good afternoon Oran,

   just FYI, I happen to my a ZH-EN videogame translator myself, so we can converse in whatever language you prefer! 🙂

   The study will involve two surveys and a playtest of anonymised individuals both online and in-person, there is nothing you need to do directly besides granting me permission to use your game in the research 🙂

   In terms of details about the process, I appreciate there are often confidentiality restrictions and DNAs in place when it comes to dealing with internal affairs (I've been subjected to plenty myself!) and will not ask anything of you that could infringe upon you or your team's personal security.

   I do, however, just have a few questions for you regarding the development of Eastward, if you ae happy to answer? You do not need to answer if you feel it will cause any problems for you or your team - these questions are very general:

   1. Did you plan localisation of the game at the start of the development process?:

   2. How did you decide on the style of the game, including art, music and the overall feel?:

3. How did you choose a translation partner (please specify if they are a freelancer or an agency):
4. What tools, if any, (MemoQ, Trados, Memsource etc.) have you used for making this game?:
5. What were your influences, both artistically and technically, in the design of the game?:
6. Finally, what is your studio's brand identity/feeling?:

Many thanks again for speaking with me!
Jemma

5. **March 16th 2023. Oran, oraninoran@gmail.com.**

Good Morning Jemma,
Glad to hear you, and glad to share what we have done in the past 5 years. I think I should answer the questions in Chines. Because my English may cause some misunderstanding.
1. Did you plan localisation of the game at the start of the development process?
英文版的本地化，在Eastward

制作之初，便在计划之中。而且在接受到玩家和发行商的鼓励和反馈之后，我们

加入了更多的语言版本。现在Eastward 拥有了英日德法西多个语言版本。

As far as localisation goes, we had always planned an English version from the outset. However, upon receiving player and publisher encouragement and criticism, we added more language options. Now, Eastward is available in English, Japanese, German, and Spanish.
2. How did you decide on the style of the game, including art, music and the overall feel?
这个有些复杂，可能我来回答不太合适。很多东西在制作中不断变化的。但可以

确定的是，对我们来说美术是一切的开始，我们也把它坚持到了最后。音乐上Joel

Corelitz

先生似乎完全明白我们需要什么，他永远可以带来惊人的内容和新的启发。

This a little complicated, so my answer might not be ideal. A lot of things changed during development, but one thing is certain – for us, everything began with the art, and we held fast to that right until the end. Joel Corelitz handled our music, and he seemed to totally get what we needed, his content always surprising and inspiring us.

3. How did you choose a translation partner (please specify if they are a freelancer or an agency):

我们是通过翻译公司找到了我们译员，至于我们的译员是freelancer还是agency，这涉及到他与翻译公司的协议，我们也不便了解。也多亏跟我们合作的翻译公司，他们满足了我们提出的一些任性要求。包括，希望译员能有一定的游戏经历等等。另外，很重要的是能把中文里幽默的桥段，转化甚至用英语的方式重写。

We contacted a translation company to find our translator, although whether they were a freelancer or an agency, that's between the translator and company, we don't really know about that. Thanks to the translation company, all our needs were satisfactorily met, which included things like our desire for a translator with videogame experience. Most importantly, the translator needed to be able to take funny Chinese tropes and transfer it into appropriate English phrasing.

4. What tools, if any, (MemoQ, Trados, Memsource etc.) have you used for making this game?:

我们参考过很多现有翻译工具，但他们似乎不能满足我们全部的要求。鉴于Eastward很重视在画面上的表演，所以行文上，会更类似漫画或者动画。带来的结果是，实际的表演和内容的上下文同样重要。所以我们最后决定开发了自己的翻译工具，其中有两个我们最自满的功能。视频和游戏跳转。（因为更换了电脑，下面的截图中，人物的头像没能正确显示。）

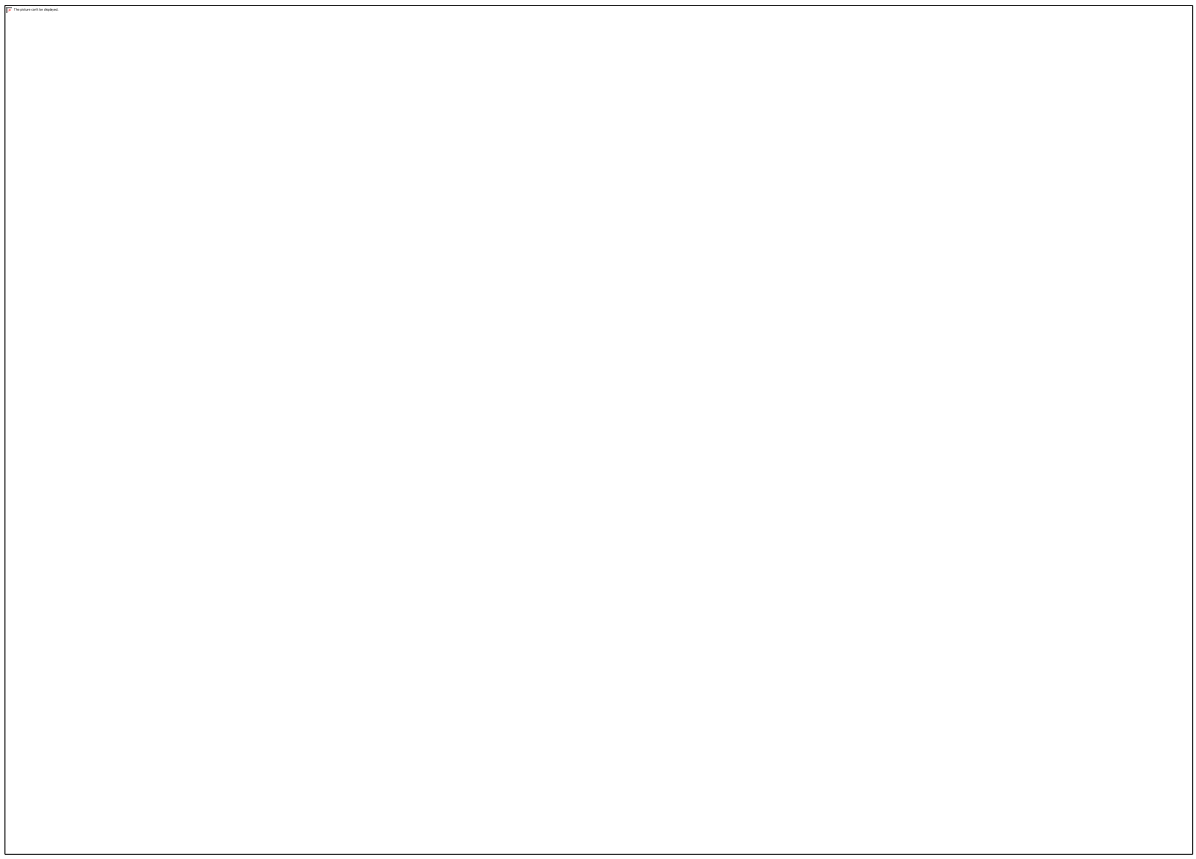
We checked out a few translation tools, but none of them really suited our needs. With Eastward's emphasis on the visuals, the narrative style is more akin to comics or animation, the result being that presentation and content are equally

important. So, in the end we resorted to creating our own translation tool, featuring the two functions that we are most proud of – video to game linking [possibly also 'ludo-narrative hopping']. (Because of changing computer, the avatar shown in the picture below doesn't display correctly).

我们最初考虑的是加入截图功能，这样译员可以了解到，台词发生当下的情境。

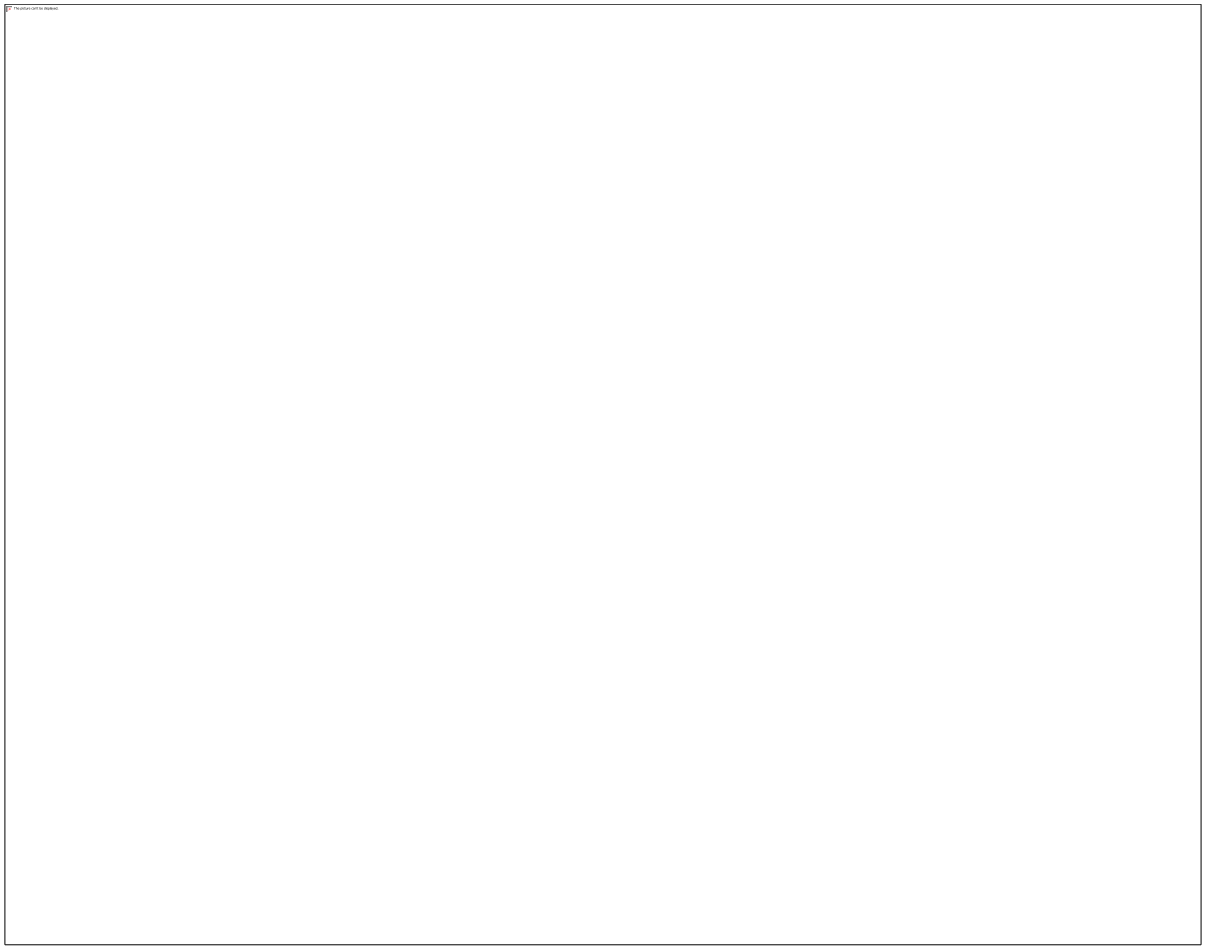
但我们认为还有改进的空间。

Our earliest thought was to include a screenshot function, that way the translator could understand the situational context of what's happening. But, we realised we could do better.



于是我们加入了视频功能。译员通过点击可以直接播放台词发生前后的全部表演内容。

Thus, we added a video function. The translator could click and watch the entire scene play out with the lined before and after included.



最后，有的台词在游玩而非中间，所以我们加入了跳转功能，让译员可以从台词跳转到游戏中，直接体验台词发生的全部环境。

Finally, the lines that occur in game rather then cutscenes. We added a link function, allowing the translator to link to the content in-game from the dialogue, directly experiencing the full scene that's unfolding.

当然也非常感谢我们译员，因为这样做本地化，会比以往花费更多的时间。

Of course, we are extremely grateful to our translator because to localise like this took them an incredibly long time.

5. What were your influences, both artistically and technically, in the design of the game?:

就游戏来说，Legend of Zelda， Mother serier 是对我重要的启发。另外我们都是Miyazaki Hayao 的动画的忠实观众。

In terms of videogames, Legend of Zelda, the Mother series, those were my biggest inspirations. Besides that, we're all huge Hayao Miyazaki devotees.

6. Finally, what is your studio's brand identity/feeling?

这个也许不适合由我来解释。但是我们对作品的希望一直是真诚和有温度的。

This probably isn't best explained by me, but our wish for our creations is to always be heartfelt and cozy.

Hope my answers will help in your research.

Oran

6. **October 9th 2023. Jemma Stafford, mljls@leeds.ac.uk.**

Oran: 好久不见！Long time no see!

I hope you are well! My research is under way and I have a question about your localisation approach 🙂

Firstly, thank you for the original screenshots and explanations, they have been incredibly helpful! I want to ask, did you also provide a style guide to ensure translation consistency? And if so, would you be happy to share it with me as a reference material? I appreciate if this is not possible, I do wish to cause you any headaches!

Of course, you are welcome to reply in Chinese - my reading is significantly better than my writing! 😊

此致敬礼Best wishes

Jemma 雅雅 Yaya

7. **October 10th 2023. Oran, oraninoran@gmail.com.**

Sorry for my poor English. The style guide, did you mean the form of the dialog and other string (such as the length), or the way charactor talk?

8. **October 10th 2023. Jemma Stafford, mljls@leeds.ac.uk.**

You have nothing to apologise for! You can use Chinese if it is easier more comfortable!

The style guide advises on rules such as:

- Character accents (if any)
- Register of speech (is it very formal or very casual)

- How numbers are to be presented (for example, are they written as full words (one two three four), or arabic numerals (1234), or roman numerals (I, II, III, IV) etc)
- Do certain fonts, punctuation and spacing need to be used, and if so, where and how
- In dialogue boxes, are there character limits and if so, what are they

  Essentially, just rules to ensure the presentation of the game is consistent 😊

  Regards

  Jemma Yaya

9. October 10th 2023. Oran, oraninoran@gmail.com .

   请允许我使用中文回答。

   Please allow me to answer in Chinese.

   1、2 我们的游戏表演都是用脚本的方式编辑的。如下图，

   1 and 2; Our cutscenes are all edited through scripting, like in the example below:

   我们会在台词后加入注释，这些注释会出现再翻译工具中，作为译员的参考。图中的“rem 再次同雄住互动”是提示情景的作用，“//钱屋的赌博机”是对于对话的提示。

We add explanations after the lines, and these explanations then show up in the translation tool for the translator to refer to. In the image, “rem再次同雄住互动” [rem interact with bear again] triggers the scene, and “//钱屋的赌博机” [The Coin Palace gambling machine] triggers the conversation.

最后在翻译工具中是这样的。

Ultimately, it’s like this in the translation tool.

从结果上来说这个功能还是非常实用有效的。

This feature was incredibly effective.

3、数字如果出现在文本中，具体如何使用我们完全交给译员决定。如果是UI中的数字，我们会给出确定的格式。

3. If a number appears in the text, we leave it up to the translator to decide how to handle it, but if it’s a number in the UI, we’ll give a defined format.

4、这一点我们也基本交给译员做判断，不过翻译公司会在交稿之前进行QA。另外，我们的发行商也为我们请了LQA 的公司，来保证翻译的准确和质量。

4. We basically leave this to the translator’s judgment, but the translation agency does the QA before delivery. our publisher also engaged an LQA company to ensure translation accuracy and quality.

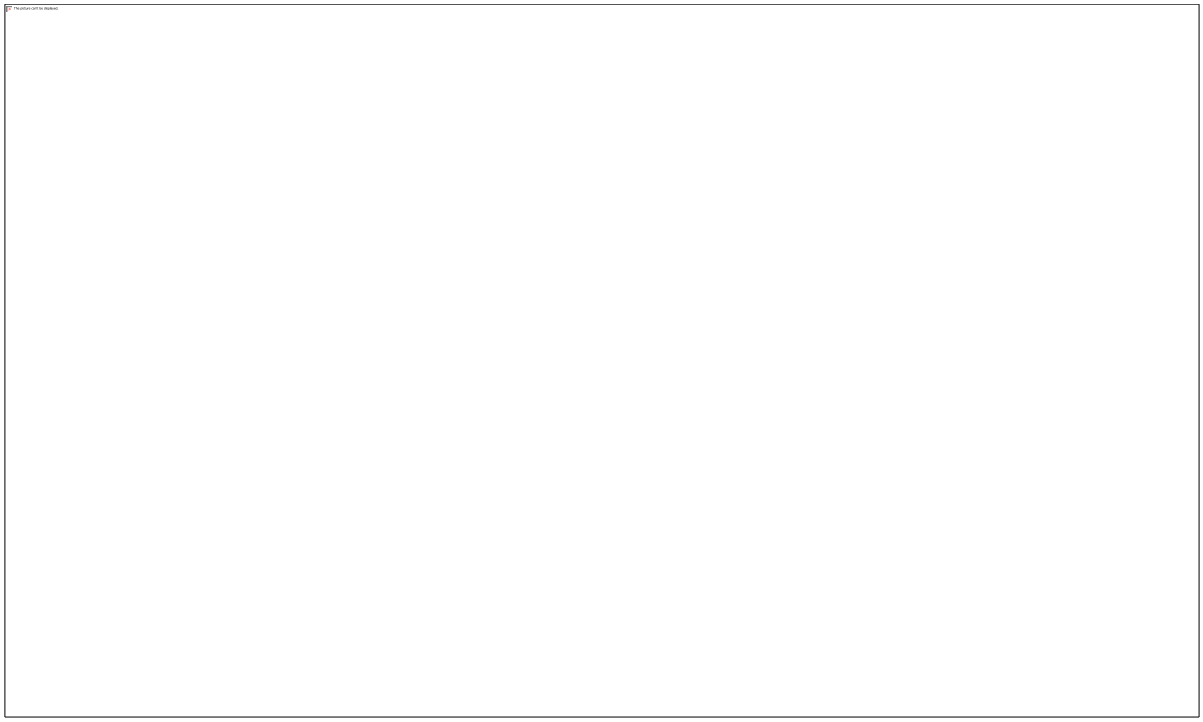
5、character limits

的问题，得益于翻译工具的预览功能，译员可以直接查看翻译后文本在游戏中的呈现想过。所以这一点可以由他们自行调整。

5. Regarding character limits, thanks to the translation tool's preview feature, the translator can directly see how the translated text looks in-game, so they can tweak it accordingly.

上次可能没有给你完整的图片，下图是我们翻译工具完整的样子。有些我没有提到的功能应该也能看到。

I might not have shown you the complete image last time, but below is what our translation tool looks like in full. You should be able to see some features that weren't included.



希望我的回答能帮到你。

I hope my answers help you.

祝你研究顺利！

Wishing you the best with your research!

Appendix 9: MeowNature developer email exchange

Where necessary, translations provided in blue.

1. **March 17th 2023. Jemma Stafford, mljls@leeds.ac.uk.**

   Good morning from chilly England!

   My name is Jemma Stafford, a Languages, Cultures and Societies PhD student attending the University of Leeds, UK, and also an active Chinese-English videogame translator. Following our chat on Discord (ivoryfall#3427), I'm emailing you with more details 🙂

   I am undertaking a reception study for my PhD, the aim of which is to determine how players of Chinese-developed games translated into English interpret and experience the games in translation. The ultimate aim is, besides opening further avenues of study in the Chinese-English videogame field, to determine how players perceptions impact their experience, and how expectations impact the way they engage with the games - the results of such findings could be used by developers such as yourself to further enhance the player experience.

   I would like to include Depersonalization in this study. I wondered if you might be able to advise me of who to speak with regarding including it in my study? As these are major IPs, it is important that I follow due ethical process and obtain permission to use the titles for publishable research purposes.

   I am more than happy to give the names and contact details of my supervisors for reference.

   If it is of no trouble, I would like to ask that you answer these questions - you can answer in either English or Chinese, both are fine! 🙂

   1. Did you plan localisation of the game at the start of the development process?:

   2. How did you decide on the style of the game, including art, music and the overall feel?:

   3. How did you choose a translation partner (please specify if they are a freelancer or an agency):

   4. What tools, if any, (MemoQ, Trados, Memsource etc.) have you used for making this game?:

5. What were your influences, both artistically and technically, in the design of the game?:

6. Finally, what is your studio's brand identity/feeling?:

I look forward to your response!

Many thanks,

Jemma Stafford

2. **March 21st 2023. CocoLa Wang, cocola03@gameragame.com.**

Hi Jemma,

Sorry for the late reply, I just recoverd from a bad cold.

About what you said, just like what I said on Discord, we are very glad to see that we can help you. But, there's one thing that I have to check multiple times: **Is your thesis for commercial use？** Because I see you say "use the titles for publishable research purposes."

And about the questions you ask:

Did you plan localisation of the game at the start of the development process?:

1. 在开发过程的一开始，您就计划了游戏的本地化吗？：

是的，我们一开始就计划要做本地化，因为要上架Steam的话，除了中文外，最直接的就是英文。所以即使是最初的最初版本，在没有翻译支持的时候，我们让一个工作室的成员的家人帮我们做翻译工作，而现在他已经成为了工作室的一员。

Yes, we planned localisation at the start. Because of wanting to put it on Steam, we wanted it in English as well as Chinese. Even our earliest iteration, when we didn’t have a translator, we had a studio colleague’s family member help us with translation – they have since become a member of the studio proper.

How did you decide on the style of the game, including art, music and the overall feel?:

3. 你是如何决定游戏的风格，包括艺术、音乐和整体感觉的？：

这个我比较随感觉，很多时候工作的时候都没有遵循方式方法（虽然最后可以通过问题总结出来一套方法论，比如场景要冷暖结合呀，音乐不能过于吵盖过文字呀）。

I followed my feelings, oftentimes when working there isn't a strict approach I adhere to (although I ultimately through problem-solving a method comes about, such as balancing warmth or coolness in a scene, or ensuring the music doesn't drown out the text).

但我有一个标签，上面会写着"我想要的东西是什么"，"我不想要的东西是什么"，"玩家会喜欢什么"，每次陷入矛盾的时候就会去抛开所有的思考去感受现有的内容是不是符合这个的。当然更多的时候都是去直接感觉——

这是不是我想要的东西。

But, I have a label: "something I want", "something I don't want", and "something players may want". Every time I hit a dilemma I throw out everything and turn to my feelings on whether the content aligns with what's already in place. Of course, most of the time I just go with my gut – do I want this or not?

How did you choose a translation partner (please specify if they are a freelancer or an agency):

3. 您是如何选择翻译合作伙伴的（请说明他们是自由职业者还是代理机构）：

我们的翻译工作是交由我们的发行伙伴来挑选的。主要看中同类型题材下，有没有相关的翻译作品经验，由于创作者本身无法精通多个语言，所以翻译的好坏其实是由使用该语言的玩家来评估的。

Our translation partner is selected by the publisher. Most important is familiarity with genre conventions and whether they have relevant translation experience with similar products. Since the developers can't master multiple languages, assessment of translation quality falls to the players using those languages through their comments.

What tools, if any, (MemoQ, Trados, Memsource etc.) have you used for making this game?:

4. 什么工具，如果有的话，（MemoQ，Trados，Memsource等）做这个游戏的时候你用了这些吗？：

很可惜我们没有的…… 只是使用了excel

I'm afraid we don't have any of those… we only used [Microsoft] excel.

What were your influences, both artistically and technically, in the design of the game?:

5. 在游戏的设计过程中，你在艺术上和技术上都受到了哪些影响？：

我本身是技术出身，所以在设计过程中会先去考虑可实行性，受到影响技术最多的是玩家的需求，他们总会提出让游戏更完美的想法，但我们实现起来前，会觉得自己无所不能，什么都能做，但一不容易就导致项目开发周期变长。

I personally came from a technical background, so my first consideration is feasibility, but player requests have the greatest impact on the design process. They [the players] are always suggesting ways to perfect the game, and before we realise those ideas, we feel like we can do anything and can't be stopped! But the reality is that develop times get longer.

而美术层面上，受到最大的影响其实来自于开发成本，我们选择像素的原因一方面是一个精通像素的人可以做完整个游戏美术上的所有东西，所以成本限制决定了艺术表现的天花板，就像目前我们的特效其实也是来源于特效资源包。

As for the art aspect, the greatest influence is actually development costs. We chose pixel art style because one proficient pixel artist can handle the entire game's art assets, so our expense limitations were the ceiling that decided the art style, and equally our current special effects are all from an existing special effects resource pack.

Finally, what is your studio's brand identity/feeling?:

6. 最后，w你的工作室的品牌标识/感觉是什么？：

人法地、地法天、天法道、道法自然。所以喵法自然工作室的主要核心就是做自己想做的事情，做我们认为对的事情，做自然而然的事情。

Man is modelled on Earth, Earth is modelled on Heaven, Heaven is modelled on the Way, and the Way is modelled on Nature. Thus, at the core of MeowNature Studio is doing what we want, doing what we believe is right, and doing what comes naturally.

但直接翻译名字后，其实会失去这层含义，但MeowNature看起来也挺可爱的不是吗。

But, after directly translating the name, it actually loses a degree of meaning, but doesn't "MeowNature" look cute?[1]

If you have any questions about the answers and if there are something that you can't understand clearly, please don't hesitate to let me know~

Good luck for your thesis!

Best,

CocoLa

4. **March 24th 2023. Jemma Stafford, mljls@leeds.ac.uk.**

Hi CocoLa,

Thank you so much for your response!

I am sincerely very grateful for your input and look forward to sharing the completed research with you in the future! I hope we can work together again 🙂

Many thanks and best wishes,

Jemma

5. **March 24th 2023. Jemma Stafford, mljls@leeds.ac.uk.**

Good evening CocoLa,

I just realised I forgot to actually answer your one question:

No, the thesis is not for commercial use, it may be published in academic journals but will be of no monetary benefit to anyone.

I hope that answers your question! If you need anything else, please let me know!:)

[1] 喵法自然 officially rendered MeowNature, but is more accurately realised as the "The Nature of Meowism", an allusion to Daoism reflected in the company's Yinyang logo.

Best,

Jemma

6. **March 24th 2023. CocoLa Wang, cocola03@gameragame.com.**

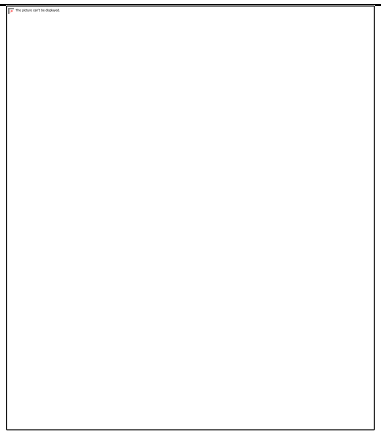
   Hi Jemma,

   Thanks for the reply! We're very happy to see that our games can help you.

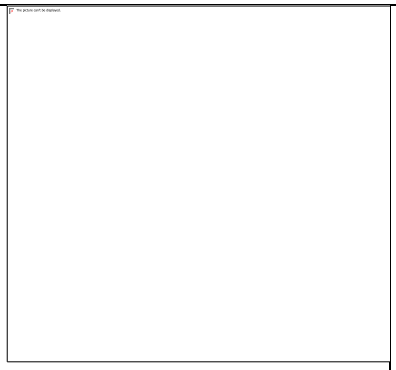
   Best,

   CocoLa

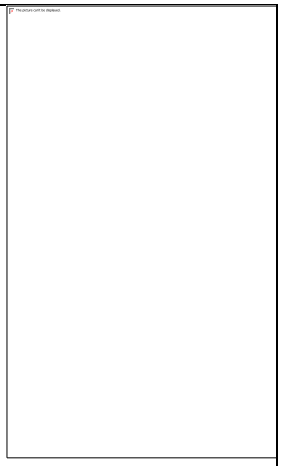
Appendix 10: Referential sources of Chinese culture found in Dan Heng's costume design.



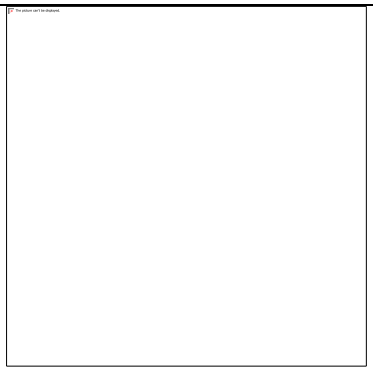
1. 印章 *yinzhang* stamp seal



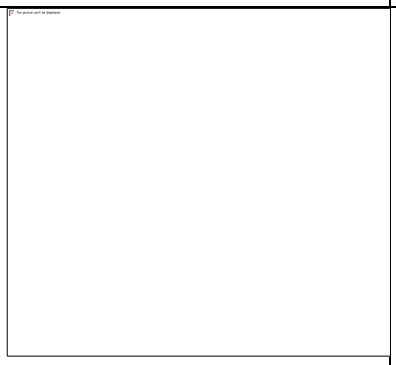
2. 祥云 *xiangyun* auspicious clouds



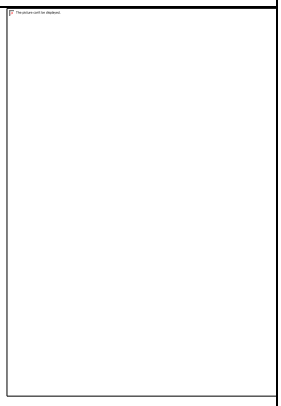
3. 龙 *long* dragon



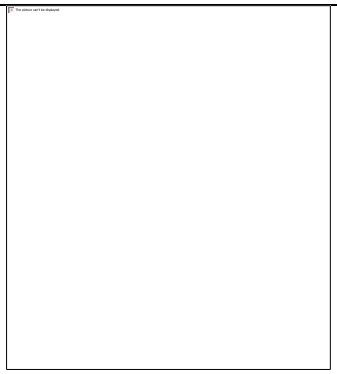
4. 肩吞 *jiantun* decorative spaulder



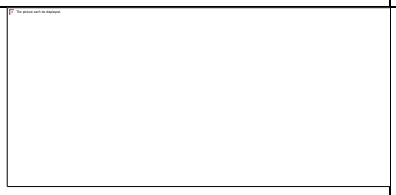
5. 臂鞴 *bigou* vambrace



6. 玉 *yu* jade spheres



7. Men’s Qing era black footwear



8. Example of cursive script, Ming poem Prose on Snow 雪赋 *xuefu*