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Translation (is) Not Localization: Language in Gaming

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ABSTRACT
In this paper, I elaborate in the difference between the concepts of localization and translation and how they relate to the movement, distribution, and understanding of different versions of the Square-Enix game *Kingdom Hearts*.

Categories and Subject Descriptors
J.5 [**Computer Applications**]: Arts and Humanities – *language translation*

General Terms
Languages, Theory

Keywords
Kingdom Hearts, Disney, Square-Enix, gaming, Japan, translation, new media, software studies

1. INTRODUCTION
Kingdom Hearts is an action role playing game co-produced between Buena Vista Games, Disney's gaming division, and Square-Enix, a top Japanese video game production and distribution company. Allegedly, the idea for *Kingdom Hearts* came from a random elevator encounter when the two companies were using space in the same office building, sparking a mutual development between the companies. The game uses certain Disney properties, but was developed primarily by Square-Enix and first released in Japan on March 28, 2002.

Kingdom Hearts begins as Sora (the main player character) and his friends Riku and Kairi are torn from their home paradise, Destiny Islands. Sora finds himself a refugee in Traverse Town and quickly teams up with Disney characters Donald and Goofy. Through the helpful back story from Merlin, Squall/Leon, Yuffie and Aeris, Sora and you, the player, soon understand your threefold goal: to find Riku and Kairi, to find the King (implied, but specifically not noted as Mickey Mouse), and to seal the individual world doors so the darkness (Heartless) cannot continue to assault the world order. You travel from one Disney themed world to the next following these three goals. Major aspects of the Kingdom Hearts franchise are the ideas of mobility, development and modernity, especially in regards to the particular relationship between the United States (Disney) and Japan (Square-Enix).

Both formally and thematically the games are about transnational, multinational, international and global issues, so it should come as no surprise that translation is a major issue within the franchise. In this analysis I will first elaborate the different versions, iterations or translations of the game that I am examining.[1] Secondly, I will go over the opposing ideas of localization and translation. Third, I will argue why it is important to look at game versions as translations instead of localizations. Essentially, I am making the argument that games must be seen as political as well as entertainment texts.

2. THE GAMES
The Japanese version of *Kingdom Hearts* was released on March 28, 2002. Many of the voice actors from the source games and movies reprise their roles within the game. Because of this intentioned casting of voice actors there is a unity between game and movie in the franchise. The game itself features an impressive amount of katakana, from the Disney characters to the majority of the in-game menus.[2] While such a predominance of katakana is not unique for Japanese games in general or Square-Enix games in particular, it stands out in a game about transnationalism.[3] While the majority of the menus, abilities and equipment are in katakana there are a few things within the game that are in hiragana. One subset of items, shards and fragments used to synthesize new items, are written in hiragana/kanji.[4] Additionally, only one place name is written in Japanese: Castle Oblivion, referred to in all places other than the splash screen as *boukyaku no shiro*. The concept of memory whenever it is expressed within the franchise's Japanese version remains in Japanese.

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[1] The likely official terms would be that the Japanese and North American releases are 'localizations' and the Final Mix is a version. In contrast, I am deliberately being unclear about which word I am using to label the three games as such a label essentially both opens and closes certain avenues of discourse.

[2] The Japanese language uses two syllaberies (hiragana, katakana) and a character system (kanji). Local words are represented in a combination of kanji (Chinese characters - themselves foreign, but now considered local) and hiragana. Katakana is used to represent foreign words, phrases and even ideas.

[3] Similarly, but opposite, overt kanji usage stands out in a game that is primarily about 'Japan.' Capcom's *Onimusha* is an example of this, as is Squaresoft's *Final Fantasy X*, which was considered the Final Fantasy series' 'return to Asia.'

[4] Mithril stays in katakana, but the rest is hiragana.

The North American version was released on September 17, 2002 roughly seven months after the Japanese release had become a surprising hit. Similar to the Japanese version the North American version solicits the help of the same voice actors that originally voiced the Disney or Square-Enix characters for the English language versions of the movies and games. As for the different linguistic scripts, they are unabashedly translated directly. The katakana words are romanized and the hiragana/kanji is translated rendering equal what was in the Japanese version a disjunctive element. The North American version adds a few additional boss encounters including one with fan favorite Sephiroth from *Final Fantasy VII*. Lastly, while the Japanese version maintains a conspicuous absence of Mickey, by never mentioning his name directly and only depicting him in the closing moments, the English version goes a step beyond and explicitly calls him King Mickey. Mickey's role is limited in *Kingdom Hearts* due to Disney's insecurities of using the Mickey Mouse property [11]. However, the popularity and likely already planned sequel, justified the inclusion of Mickey's name in the English release. That said, it is not until Mickey chastises Riku in the closing moments of *Chain of Memories* that the Japanese version specifically includes the famous Disney character's name.

Lastly, *Kingdom Hearts: Final Mix* was released in Japan a few months after the North American version on December 26, 2002. Final Mix is a Japan exclusive release (due to region encoding and local sales) that follows a similar formula to other extended Square-Enix releases that have alternatively been called International Editions. Final Mix takes the Japanese game, including menus, dialogue and original subtitles, but overwrites the Japanese voices with the North American version's English voice track. In addition to the voice changes the Final Mix adds the boss fights added into the North American version as well as an additional encounter with a cloaked Nobody and a new secret ending, both of which tease the upcoming sequel *Kingdom Hearts II*, and a host of other fixes, tweaks and extras. Because the Final Mix version uses the English voices, it creates a disruption of continuity between the original Japanese versions of the Final Fantasy games and Disney movies and the *Kingdom Hearts* franchise. It identifies the English version's voices as authentic, but simultaneously ventriloquates the original Japanese unspoken dialogue and subtitles.[5] The 'International Edition' is problematic artifact by itself, but in the case of *Kingdom Hearts*'s 'Final Mix' it is even more interesting as international is equated to 'mixture.'

3. LOCALIZATION AND TRANSLATION

Localization and translation are different actions not because of what they do, but because of what they claim to do: they both move a text from one context to another, but they do so with different intentions and claims. Whereas translation is a process buried in difference and an essential concept of misunderstanding and lack of perfection, localization is based in an idea of similarity and equality of meaning.

Localization is the term used by companies when altering a product to fit within a particular target context. Originally, localization was meant to alter very minor elements such as date stamps or power levels, things considered outside linguistic or national difference. Under such a guise localization is a means of fitting a product into a market in such a way that its foreignness does not detract from its sales. However, it was quickly linked with the much more problematic linguistic translational elements so that the intricacies of language and difference are wiped out under a guise of selling a product. The English version of *Kingdom Hearts* is a localization, but then again, according to the industry's understanding of the term, so is the Japanese version. With the concept of localization there is no authentic version even if there is a first created version. This concept of localization fits disturbingly well with Lev Manovich's concept of new media as variable [7]. One way to extend this understanding is to see the kernel that does not change, the layer that avoids localization, as the universal element.[6] This unchanged, universal element becomes the core of the medium, and vice versa it becomes universal because it is considered the core of the medium. The two layers that do not change are the code and the action. However, that the code is in roman characters is problematic, as is the idea of universal action. I will return to the idea of non-universal action later, but to touch upon the problem of code and language: code based in a single language (English) privileges that language and those people who use it to the detriment of those who do not.

Translation is the movement of a text from one mode to another. Typically, the term translation refers to the alteration of a text from one language to another, primarily so that it may cross cultural and linguistic borders. While translation ideally ends in perfect transmission and transition, practice and theory of the past millennia note the impossibility of perfect translation.[7] Because there are different layers of text, context, and reader it is impossible to reproduce all of them, thereby eliminating the ability to create a perfect translation. That said, translations do and must take place in a world of difference where texts move between places, and what must instead be focused on is not the ideal, but the actual. What must be understood are the choices (unintentional or deliberate) that lead to particular translations. What must be understood are the reasons that fidelity to the sense or word is chosen, why linguistic, paradigmatic, stylistic or textual equivalence is followed, why domesticating or foreignizing style is adhered to. Translation is never universal or neutral, and any occasion where such universality or neutrality is put up as a standard must be attacked as something hiding an ulterior agenda, or simply false. All translation works within the political, whether it does so knowingly/willingly or not. Thus, with a game, when using the word translation we must understand why certain things are changed, not what ultimate universal is protected and raised high as the key kernel.

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[5] The concept of ventriloquation comes from Bakhtin through Wertsch [16].

[6] While the Software Studies (Hardware, System BIOS, OS, Application) layer model might seem more appropriate for a paper related to Software Studies, its divisions are unwieldy for my purposes. As such, I am using as analogy a modification of the layer approaches to understanding the internet, which posit physical, link, internet protocol, transport protocol, application and content layers [4] [10].

[7] Some theorists whose work leads to the understanding of translation as necessary, but inevitable failure are Cicero, Saint Jerome, John Dryden, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Walter Benjamin, Anton Popovich, Jacques Derrida and Lawrence Venuti [1] [2] [3] [14] [15].

To understand either what changes or what remains the same it is necessary to look at the various layers of a game: infrastructural, hardware (machine), software (code), action, and content. I skip infrastructural and begin with the hardware.[8] *Kingdom Hearts* plays on the Playstation 2 console, which uses region encoded DVDs. At the level of hardware there is a completely formal difference that is introduced, which renders unintelligible foreign hardware. Official crossing of platforms and regions cannot exist legitimately even if they can be modded illegitimately. This forces localization of software regardless of whether the audience wishes to encounter the foreign on its own terms or not. The next layer is the software, the application or code written on the DVD itself. This largely stays the same between localized versions. That which is different is not the code, but the specific files that the code calls up. This unchanging nature of the code attributes it with an aura of universality despite the fact that the hardware renders it foreign.

Finally, we get to the layers that most consider to be gaming itself: the action/play, the story/narrative, and the various levels of perceptual simulation/representation. While parts of the content layer do change in localization the gameplay does not. Action/play is the essentially maintained aspect of a game. Because play/action is considered universal it is not changed in localization; because play/action is not localized it is considered universal. Of course, this is a tautological reasoning. There is no reason to assume that the play aspect is universal as those that would not sell are simply not localized: *densha de go!*, a popular Japanese train simulation, is no more or less ludically universal and yet it is not sold in the United States and none of its many versions has ever been localized. A better understanding of the issue of ludic universality would note the difference in difficulty of altering each of these levels due to the formal qualities of each. Hardware is quite common in the porting of games from one platform to another even if it is costly, time consuming and sometimes unsuccessful (PS3, XBox, PC, Macintosh); software alteration happens in updates, but is considered a version of the same program; action is difficult to change and in the eventuality of its being altered it is generally considered a completely different game (*Warcraft III* tower defense mods, or *Wolfenstein RPG*); representational content, of which language is one part, is time consuming, but it is done, especially in the current phenomenon of gaming remakes (*Tomb Raider Anniversary*, *Secret of Monkey Island*).

Next are the layers of representation, which are subject to the most localization. So far, the visual and audio ranges are the only senses subject to major implementation and therefore alteration.[9] It is here that the localization and translation within gaming exclusively focus.

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[8] Infrastructural differences in distribution and ability to use hardware exist, but within the United States and Japan, which I am focusing on here, such differences are minimal.

[9] The tactile is increasingly represented as a sense since the advent of early vibration controllers and now by chairs meant to aid deaf subjects in feeling sound, but is not yet considered a major element of gaming. However, the meaning of physical touch when/if it is implemented might well be a major watershed moment to difference and translation.

Audio representation can be separated into three different subfields: diegetic noise, nondiegetic soundtrack and spoken language. Possibly because of the way they are created and inserted into the game and possibly because of an implied universality sound effects are largely unchanged despite non-universal qualities (the sound of cicadas is a well known symbol of summer in Japan, but means nothing in the United States and examples go on). Originally no localization occurred with music, but increasingly local soundtracks have been created. *Kingdom Hearts* is a complicated example as there are various types of music. The majority of the music comes from previous sources such as Disney movies and Final Fantasy games. Another, smaller portion was created for the Square-Enix worlds, such as the Traverse Town and Destiny Island themes. Both of these groups of music carry over between versions. A third part is Utada Hikaru's theme songs, which exist in both English and Japanese versions, both created and sung by the artist herself. Ironically, much of the same liminality of the story and production is reproduced in the American School in Japan educated bilingual elite singer. Finally, the spoken dialogue is fully re-recorded and replaces the same spots on the disc. The English and Japanese localizations simply have independent language tracks. One reason for this is that the large data size of audio files prevents expansive language options, especially when games were on multiple CDs. However, technological progress including the advent of DVDs and Blu-ray discs means that size is no longer a real limitation. *Kingdom Hearts II: Final Mix+* contains both English and Japanese audio tracks on the single disc. However, the Japanese language is only playable in the theater mode that unlocks upon completion of the game. Despite the data being on the disc, the option is not given to choose between the English and Japanese audio dialogue mandating a normative English.

The visual representational/simulational level similarly has various parts including characters, and written linguistic information, which includes nondiegetic written dialogue, interface, menus, splash screens and diegetic signs, words and icons. Within *Kingdom Hearts* the characters remain visually unchanged, however green, zombie blood replacing human blood and additional swathes of clothing onto half naked characters are both examples of localization censorship. Final Mix changes the colors of various enemy characters, but this cosmetic difference remains unexplained and is further confused when the sequels all revert back to the initial coloration. The various types of diegetic information, such as the words on the sea salt ice cream in *Kingdom Hearts: 358/2 Days*, or the kanji on the Shinra logo from *Final Fantasy VII*, tend to elude translation and as such are often avoided in production in lieu of icons or symbols. Mickey's head, the crown, the Heartless emblem and the Nobody cross are all such untranslated diegetic elements within Kingdom Hearts that are slightly more acceptable simply because there is no single place from which they are more understandable. However, even these elements are non-universal. Finally, probably the most noticeable localized elements are the nondiegetic ones such as interface, menus and the parts within the menu system.

Between the Japanese and North American localizations *Kingdom Heart*'s interface has some elements such as HP and MP that go untranslated as they start in roman characters. Words in hiragana such as *kougeki*, *mahou* and *shoukan* are all translated to the English equivalents attack, magic and summon; *aitemu* in katakana dissimilarly turns to item. Similarly, the menus are translated to direct equivalents whether it is *soubi* and *kettei*,

which are in hiragana, or *abiriti*, which is in katakana. The Japanese is given a standard straight translation into English and the Final Mix version maintains (reverts back to) the Japanese interface and menus. However, the issue is that there is a difference between *mahou* and *aitemu*: the translation does not fully interact with the original linguistic difference between katakana and hiragana that exists in Japanese. And my claim is not only that the relationship in Japanese between katakana and hiragana plays out in *Kingdom Hearts*, but also that such linguistic difference, which does exist in games, is entirely elided in the justification of localization.

4. CHANGE AND SIMILARITY

According to Manovich one aspect of new media is its variability. The essential aspect of this variability is its code that makes it adaptable, translatable, or transmediatable. The relative ease with which one may switch, alter, or re-code the text leads directly into the idea of seeing new media texts as variable and not definitively linked between source and target, new and old. However, this assumes there is some core that remains to make it a variable of the same thing. One may assume that the key element of games is their ludic quality. While localization only minutely alters the code of a game, any switching is justified using the concept of fidelity. The age-old debate within translation is whether a translation should be faithful to sense or word, both considered to be essential qualities of the text. However, unlike literature, gaming localization does not have a split in its object of faithfulness, it is action or nothing. Such fidelity is easily protected in translations of games as the levels of hardware and such need not be changed to localize the text. In fact fidelity only creeps up as a problem with sequels when it is a fidelity to the previous game's ludic qualities that becomes an issue.

The problem is that play is no more universal than language and this problem of universality simply works to hide the ideological trappings that go along with any localized game. Universality is a problem not because it is not a happy eventuality, but because it is claimed in non-universal moments thereby hiding the very biased elements. The universality of the visual was much claimed in the heyday of silent films [6]. The claims held that anybody could understand films as visual elements such as two elderly people kissing, people walking out of a factory or a myth about the civil war were considered understandable to any audience regardless of sex, class, race or nationality simply because there were no linguistically differentiating elements. Such visual universality is as problematic as any type of linguistic universality, just as it is as problematic as any action based universality.

One way to understand action as non-universal is to see it through the idea of subjective realism as described by Alexander Galloway. Even though action might objectively be the same, the subjective interaction is always different. Thus, an FPS that trains young combatants with gritty 'realism' is different in Hezbollah and US Army territory [5]. It is also wrong on a level of difference within and between any texts as there can never be direct equivalence of all layers of a text whether it is due to language, time, class or any other changing element. There is never full equivalence.

5. IMPOSSIBILITY OF TRANSLATION

There are various translational issues that help show the existence of translation and the impossibility of perfect equivalence. These consist of minor alterations that create a jarring moment such as jokes, dubbing, and censorship.

Certain jokes make little sense or are simply untranslated as they are a particular trope in only one of the languages. When Sora, Donald and Goofy are swallowed by the giant whale Monstro Goofy jokingly reports the weather. In Japanese he gives the weather as cloudy with various things raining; In English he says to expect showers for today's weather, and then when a gummi block falls on his head, he adds, "heavy showers." Similarly, whereas Tigger improperly spells his name "tee eye double gu err" following through the misspelling trope between Owl (wol) and the rest of the characters in 100 Acre Woods, the Japanese Tigger simply spells his name T I G G E R, which is to say, correctly. This is the fundamental problem of translation rearing its head in gaming: fidelity/equivalence to sense or word. The joke exists in one language and doesn't in the other, so it can either be translated by formal equivalence (translate the unfunny joke) or translated in sense (change the joke but make it funny).

Secondly, action and word synchronization, itself a problem since the advent of dubbing in cinema, is also a problem in gaming.[10] Either sentence/information order must be abandoned or the heightened emotion that links an action and a single world must be altered. A simple example is at the end of *Kingdom Hearts* where Goofy and Donald say, open the door to light. The versions switch the word order to match the language and thereby switch the visual focus of the scene from door to light: the Japanese focuses on the door and the English focuses on the light. Such order switches are common to the point of banality in translation. However, what is interesting is that language in gaming is of such low level importance that the character-line association is switched: Donald and Goofy switch lines between versions.

Finally, some elements are censored in the English version. In *Kingdom Hearts II* when Will Turner attempts to prevent re-capture he points a gun to his head and threatens to blow his brains out. This prevents Barbossa from taking action, but not the Heartless that quickly surprise and capture him from behind. The North American version removes his threat of suicide, perhaps to maintain a lower age rating in the gun prone North American continent as opposed to the gun forbidden Japanese archipelago. Of course, that this threatened suicide also happens in the source movie further confuses the issue.

These are all minor issues that point out the impossibility of perfect translation, but there are also issues that are much more important, which the localizations of *Kingdom Hearts* both hide and rely upon to impart meaning. The first is the issue of katakana and equivalence, and the second is that of transnationalism and action.

6. LOCALIZATION'S FAILURE

There are two places in *Kingdom Hearts* where equivalence truly does not hold between the different versions. The first is the previously mentioned relative internationalism of the Japanese version seen in the difference between katakana and hiragana/kanji, which is removed in the domesticating process of

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[10] It should be noted that this repeats problematic aspects of translating between languages with different linguistic structures: SOV, SVO, etc.

North American localization that follows through with the most simple consideration of linguistic equivalence. The second is at the level of action where the gamer's actions as the character Sora hold different meaning depending on the gamer's own context be it upper or lower class, Japanese or American.

The Japanese version of Kingdom Hearts has certain words in katakana and certain words in hiragana/kanji. This foreign/local separation of the game is quite deliberate as other games do remain primarily in the domestic, hiragana/kanji register, or move even more considerably into the foreign register. The North American English version translates everything to a direct linguistic equivalence whether that be the move from *la vie en rose* to Divine Rose, *raionhaato* to Lionheart or *sugisari omoide* to Oblivion.[11] The first invokes the French from which Beauty and the Beast came, the second English and the historical figure of Richard the Lionheart, and the third Japanese and memory. The difference in language creates a dichotomy between local Japanese and foreign international that is erased in terms of language in the North American version.

Localization focuses on linguistic equivalence, and ignores the thematic difference that would require more consideration of the need for paradigmatic equivalence. However, localizations still claim to be reworked so that they can produce the same experience in different locations and contexts. Localization says nothing about politics as it is solely related to entertainment and leisure.

One of the basic problems of the mixture of localization and new media variability is the advocated universality of the unvaried elements. *Kingdom Hearts* is about sealing worlds and cutting off mobility from those characters and elements deemed unworthy of such transnational mobility. It is a surface allegory of the needs of Westphalian sovereignty and the desire for mobility in a modern system. However, below that surface allegory is the player as keybearer's active interference in the world structures by meddling and sealing the worlds. All sovereigns, the Queen of Hearts, the mayor of Halloween Town, King Triton, are rendered inept and unable to rule without the player's interference, defined as 'meddling' quite early in the game during a humorous exchange between Donald and Goofy.[12] By working alongside Goofy and Donald, and by following the path of Mickey the player not only disrupt ideas of individual sovereignty, but also reproduce 20th century development theory concepts that posit the superiority and natural dominance of Western modernity and those states labeled modern [9]. Such actions propel the player to take on a specific historical side. This side goes unlocalized as it is active allegory, not change-worthy representation, and is elided by the equivalent translation.

All throughout the Japanese version the player is surrounded by themes related to transnationalism and difference. Beginning with the co-productive creation by Disney and Square-Enix, continuing to the narrative and ludic elements of sealing worlds and interfering with worlds, which echoes the historical situation of the closed Tokugawa period, and ending with the linguistic interreaction between katakana and hiragana/kanji, *Kingdom Hearts* is about transnationalism [8] [13]. However, it is not an easy global interaction. Rather, it teeters between support and opposition to both global capitalist modernity and premodern innocence. In this way it is a distinctly Japanese production dwelling in context specific historical and nostalgic tropes.

Whereas the *Kingdom Hearts* Japanese version problematizes internationalism throughout, the North American localization elides such troubled internationalism by taking away the linguistic mixture and assuming ludic universalism. The localization pushes the exact opposite meaning as the allegory. Not only does the North American player reprise the United States' 20th century role by intervening in the life, politic and reality of other worlds, but also he or she remains untroubled by the linguistic elements that are erased during localization. Finally, *Kingdom Hearts: Final Mix* is exactly that, a final *mixture* of complicated internationalism. By adding the English language track, which ventriloquates understandable Japanese subtitles onto English dialogue, it further complicates the concepts of internationalism and global capitalism that the English localization removes.

7. TRANSLATION, NOT LOCALIZATION

Localization assumes a linguistic innocence that rarely, if ever, exists. It ignores the elements that make a game different for different audiences and instead attempts to make it the same. Because games are considered purely leisure, such alteration is considered unproblematic. The important aspect is not that the same experience happens, but that the same game is played. In contrast, a translation dwells in the translation and specifically that which is not or cannot be translated. Game versions must be understood not as localizations, but as translations in order to bring out these ideas of difference.

Kingdom Hearts' aspects of difference and transnationalism are partially rendered invisible in the North American localization due to the process and intent of localization. Were the process of moving the text from one context to another considered a political, and not simply mechanical or neutral act, which is to say, a translation and not a localization, it might arrive at its new context with the same detailed, but non-universal elements that made it something particular in its other site. In the case of games, localization renders them leisurely legible, but translation might render them powerful.

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[11] It is interesting that both *boukyaku* and *sugisari omoide* are translated into oblivion. The former is literally oblivion or forgetfulness, while the latter is memories that have left. Again, memory is overtly special within the Japanese context compared to its more covert importance seen in the tie between American innocence, memory and forgetfulness [12].

[12] *Kingdom Hearts II* expands this group of incapable rulers to include *Mulan*'s emperor and *The Lion King*'s Simba.

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