Video games and children's books in translation

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ABSTRACT

The young and the not-so-young have enjoyed reading what we now call children's books for many decades. Be it a comic book or a novel, this type of literature often captivates us with its fantastic worlds and magical characters, but what happens to these popular books when they get turned into video games? The change of medium implies the reworking of the original source into a different format that will, ideally, combine the creative charm of the old content and the thrill of the new multimedia interactive technology in a way that is agreeable to both. Then, the difficulties of translating literature and entertainment software combine in the same product, raising a series of new issues to the localisation industry, language service professionals, and translation studies.

This article proposes an initial polysystem where video games and children's books can be studied for their creative value, and this is directly relevant to the degree of creativity and amount of research that the translation of these multimedia interactive entertainment software products for foreign locales require. Hopefully this will open new areas of research within translation studies.

KEYWORDS
Video games translation, children's literature, localisation, multimedia translation.

1. Introduction

Every art has rendered our most beloved stories and legends into different forms. From the oral traditions, to the written word, the painted canvas, and the sculpted rock; from the pages of a book to a ballet with a symphonic orchestra; from folklore to a versified tale, a picture book, a cartoon, or a feature film. Crosspollination between creative arts is commonplace, and new forms of expression and entertainment influence each other in the multidirectional flux of culture, (as explored in Bolter & Grusin 1999 among others). In the twenty-first century, the new medium is computer technology, and one of the strongest and most creative industries combining this technology with popular literature is the multimedia interactive entertainment software industry, most commonly known as the 'game industry'.

In summer 2005, the BBC's Audience Research Department undertook a research study on behalf of the New Media and Technology division amongst people between the ages of 6-65 in the UK. The results were published by the BBC in December 2005 under the title: "Gamers in the

UK. Digital play, digital lifestyles". This study shows that video game playing is far more commonplace than could perhaps be expected, even in the 25 to 65 age group. For the 6 to 25 band, video games are their most valued pastime together with watching TV, surfing the net and reading. The data presented in this research offers a good insight into how people utilise their spare time, and provides us with solid numerical reasons why academia should devote more attention to the study of video games.

People who have never played video games may have a rather simplistic idea of what video games are, and would almost certainly be shocked by the wide range of genres and themes that can be found in game stores. Not all video games are like card-clicking *Solitaire*, gruesome shooting *Doom,* merry platform jumping *Super Mario*, or popular dot-eating *Pac-Man*. In fact there are video game renditions of the most popular traditional games. *The Daily Mail* (2007: online) published a collection of fourteen pictures showing children playing with dolls, trains, toy guns, and stick-swords from the late 1800s to the early 1900s under the headline "And not a Playstation in Sight!". The interesting fact is that, not only do these games still exist in almost the same way, but they also have a virtual version, i.e. there is a video game that recreates similar game dynamics within a digital world. From a game of cops and robbers, to riding a bicycle, playing with dolls, or knights slaying dragons, most games have been recreated in a virtual environment for people to enjoy indoors entertainment as well as outdoors. Children's books have helped along the way with a wealth of texts that has allowed the video game industry to take those stories further by literally placing players in the shoes of their heroes. However, the link between these two types of creations, multimedia interactive entertainment software and printed publications for children and young adults, is more far-reaching and profound than the first tautological conclusion assumes, namely that the target audience seems to be the same one for both creative products. Video games and children's books share several characteristics such as an approach to translation than can be considered to be very similar. This article elaborates on why we must study video games as part of the polysystem of texts children enjoy, looks at the distinguishing features of games based on children's books, and discusses how the way the game industry approaches localisation is similar to that practice by the children's book publishing industry.

2. Children's world as a polysystem of texts

We all associate the term 'text' with words written on a page, but the way we use this very common noun in the twenty-first century is forcing us to reconsider our definition of what a 'text' is. It is possible that we need a different term (or terms) that can account for the linguistic content of picture books, films, and video games, but until someone coins a new one, we can say that all story-based creations are essentially texts, whether

they come in the shape of oral traditions, printed paper with or without pictures, or as part of an audiovisual product. The linguistic content in a text (from the Latin word *texere,* 'to weave'), can be understood as the threads in a textile that are carefully woven into a meaningful networked pattern of linguistic relationships, permeating all levels of language. Nevertheless, multimedia products transcend linguistic layers because they have the power to evoke and recreate different semiotic systems (images, sound, music, animations, etc.). This is particularly relevant to translators, since they have to find strategies and develop skills to render those polysemiotic texts into other languages. Mayoral (1988: 363) analyses texts in association with other communication media with regards to language transfer in these terms:

> We cannot translate the text without understanding how the other communicative elements add to or modify the meaning: and, on the other hand, the non-linguistic elements of the message not only constitute part of the meaning but also, on occasions, impose their own laws and conditions on the text.

Children are usually exposed to texts from a very early age, well before they have learned to read and even to talk. Texts are an essential part of their lives and they may come in a wide variety of formats: read-aloud picture books, action pop-up books, comic books, novels, and films, to name but a few. The end of the twentieth century has seen the birth and rise of video games which may combine most characteristics of previous textual products. I regard them all equally as texts because the medium carrying the story forward is language, although it may be accompanied by pictures or sounds. Texts are a means of communication and understanding the world around us. All cultures have utilised texts from the beginning of time to comprehend life and to challenge or even subvert our values through stories. These stories allow us to learn about the complexities of our cultures, often in an organised way, where the author present us with events in a way that reassures readers fostering understanding, or challenges them triggering revaluation of concepts. This is especially true about texts for children and young adults. Some of these books have been turned into video games generating a final product that combines literature, audiovisual media, and interactive functionality. I believe that, despite all the technical improvements and awesome eye-candy, good quality writing plays a great part in the success of many video games because it enhances gameplay and anchors players' immersion with good storytelling that give an extra dimension to the interactivity in the game. Yet, if the product of creative writing is not in the pages of a book but in a game, it seems unnatural and even outrageous to call it literature. The fact is that, from the translation point of view, very similar talents and skills are required to deal with both these products. This is why I defend the study of video games as a legitimate area of study in relation to books. Purists might find it insulting, but I don't think that literature can any longer be conceived as a unisystem but as a system where all types of texts converge in a complex literary

polysystem. Even-Zohar (1990:11) explains the intersecting quality of the literary polysystem in this way:

> The idea of structuredness and systemicity need no longer be identified with homogeneity, a semiotic system can be conceived of as a heterogeneous, open structure. It is, therefore, very rarely a unisystem but is, necessarily, a polysystem - a multiple system, a system of various systems which intersect with each other and partly overlap, using concurrently different options, yet functioning as one structured whole, whose members are interdependent.

All story-based creations are linked together by the literary polysystem. Most people, however, tend to associate literature with a rather limited number of authors (the classics) and formats (the book), and the subject may become contentious when discussing the inclusion of other creations in the literary category. Nobody will have any doubts about including authors such as Cervantes, Dante, Molière, Dostoyevsky, or Goethe in the literary canon. Nevertheless, literary standards change over time, as well as diversifying and merging with other styles and modes of expression. Actually, the way we understand literature today is rather new from a historical point of view. For many centuries, texts stood mostly on their own and were only meant to be listened to when performed or declaimed. Literature would have been read by a very selected few. This situation started to change slowly in the Renaissance when authors were encouraged to write in the vernacular as opposed to Latin and Greek. The invention of the printing press made it possible for multiple copies to reach a larger amount of people at a more competitive price. Reading started to become a favoured pastime amongst the peoples of Europe coinciding, not surprisingly, with the times of Dickens, Galdós, and Balzac. It must be said that reading continues to be a very popular activity in the twenty-first century.

Nowadays, the spread of literacy, and the cheapening of technology and raw materials have made possible an increase in the variety of texts and formats at our disposal, as well as in the number of readers demanding particular products to suit their interests and age group. The contentious issue about the lower literary status of books for children seems too prescriptive and confrontational to be beneficial. A more descriptive approach would help identify the characteristics of each text and where they belong, but it seems to be clear that "the behaviour of translation of children's literature is largely determined by the position of children's literature within the literary polysystem" (Shavit 2006: 25).

It is obvious that Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, for instance, cannot be analysed in the same manner as Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, nor Potter's *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* as Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. All of them are very different texts, and they belong to very different eras. Yet they are all products of creative writing and belong in literature studies. The same can be said about other literary creations whether they come accompanied by sound and image or not. Literature

has merged with other arts and, in doing so, has seen the birth and rapid growth of different genres within a new literary polysystem. A multidisciplinary approach is needed here to explore the diversification of the media by which literary creations can be delivered, i.e., text-only books, illustrated books, radio and film productions, and computer games.

Textual　　　Performed

Literary Polysystem

Illustrated　　　Interactive
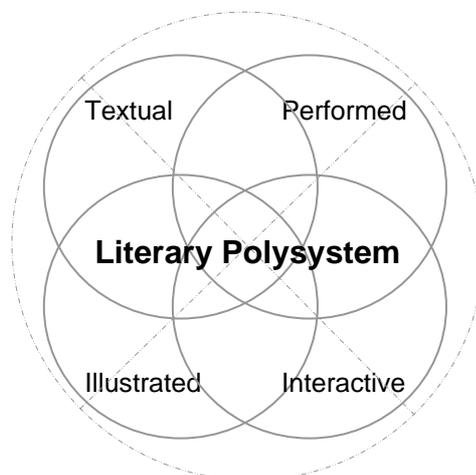
Most children's literature fans probably know that there are video games based on popular novels, such as those by J.K. Rowling or by J.R.R. Tolkien. As it happens with many blockbusters nowadays, the film, book and the game industry utilised the same advertising campaign to attract fans to the cinema and the shops capitalising on the effect of the hype generated. They can do this because they count on the fact that the preceding bookshop success of the same titles will guarantee the success of both the film and the video game, as well as an increase in book sales. As mentioned earlier, literature has always been a source of inspiration for other creative arts, and in this day and age, children can access the original books, the audio books, and the films, as well as the video game rendering of the story where they can join in the adventure.

The video game industry is offering products for a wide range of gaming platforms, mainly: computers (PC, Mac), desktop consoles (PlayStation 2 and 3, GameCube and Nintendo Wii, Xbox and 360), and handheld devices (Nintendo's GBA and DS, Sony's PSP, but also mobile phones and PDAs). For example, shortly after the publication of the novel *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire,* the audio book and the film were released. Video games based on the film were almost simultaneously made available for all major platforms. Some people might, all the same, be surprised to find that other authors such as Agatha Christie, Howard P. Lovecraft, Jules Verne, Robert E. Howard, and Miguel de Cervantes have also been turned into video games several times. The same applies to children's books such as Charles Perrault's *Cinderella*, Dr. Seuss' *The Cat in the Hat*, Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, Peyo's *The Smurfs*, and Francisco Ibáñez' *Mortadelo y Filemón* to name but a few. Children's books are in fact a vibrant and exciting source of continuous ideas. There are also video

games based on popular toys such as Lego building blocks, Barbie, Action Man, Transformers, or My Little Pony. The scope of video games is ever-growing and their applications are only starting to show.

It is somehow ironic that however 'modern' and 'cool' video games may appear, and even though there is great controversy about some particular titles, most games reinforce very traditional values of our society such as helping the needy, loyalty to friends and family, logical reasoning, and defending good versus evil. At the same time, game-like applications are being developed for educational purposes, combining the best teaching methods with multimedia information and instant feedback. There are very interesting video games such as *Re-Mission* (www.re-mission.net) specially designed for teenage cancer patients, which has proven to have a beneficial therapeutic effect on convalescent children because they learn about their condition and different methods of treatment while playing. The UN has funded the development and translation of several games such as *Food Force* (www.food-force.com) where players have to help solve the famine problem in the island of Sheylan while learning about this kind of humanitarian crisis. It is clear that video games have great potential in different areas of education and professional training as well as in entertainment.

The following section deals with how the game industry adapts children's literature, one of its most important sources.

3. Video games based on children's books

A big percentage of video games are based on an existing product i.e., they are based on a popular franchise such as *Harry Potter, The Hobbit, Eragon*, or *Sherlock Holmes*. The license ensures that the literary works on which they are based are not only respected but also followed closely, although some licenses are shared with, or obtained through, the film industry which makes some games more dependant on the feature film interpretation than on the original book. Game writers try to include lines and dialogue from the books. While it is impossible to utilise full paragraphs, the style is imitated with care in order to stay true to the original text and ensure fans' acceptance and enjoyment of the video game. However, players cannot be mere spectators. On the contrary, games are all about being involved in originating the story and carrying it forward to a happy cathartic ending. Therefore, video game designers and creative writers have to find a happy medium that contains the key features of the literary universe in question, but also allows players to participate as the protagonists in the story. Players are, therefore, in charge of taking the story forward in a variety of ways: activating devices, gathering information from other characters, solving puzzles, going from A to B, fighting, etc. The texts players have to read in the process are

normally in the style of the actual original books where the story and characters come from.

Games based on children's books have to follow very strict guidelines about what they can and cannot do with the license of a particular copyrighted product. Steve Parson, senior producer of Universal Interactive, said in an interview to Gamespot, (Gamespot 2005: online video clip) that the licensee contract that allowed them to make a game based on Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* stipulated that all team members involved in the development should have read the novel in the previous twelve months, as well as be able to pass a test on its contents. This guaranteed accuracy in the depiction of the world, as well as in the portrayal of characters. The text in the game is also taken very seriously, and players can see how close the game script and the novel run together. For example, before Frodo begins his journey, Gandalf tells him:

> But I don't think you need go alone. Not if you know of anyone you can trust, and who would be willing to go by your side - and that you would be willing to take into unknown perils. But if you look for a companion, be careful in choosing! And be careful of what you say, even to your closest friends! The enemy has many spies and many ways of hearing.
> (Tolkien 1995: 61)

The video game rendered that passage as:

> But you need not go alone, if there are any you can trust. But take care. The enemy has many spies.
> (*The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, WXP Inc./Black Label Games 2002)

It is obviously not the same text; The paragraph has been shortened to a third, and maybe the archaic phrasing has lost some of Tolkien's rich style, but there is enough of it to maintain players' suspension of disbelieve and allow them to interact with a virtual world based on the literary works of Tolkien. This is a topic that I will come back to in future articles, but for those interested there is some useful research in Aarseth (1997), Wardrip-Fruin and Harrigan (2004), Atkins & Krzywinska (2007), and Bernal-Merino (2008b).

There is still the issue of what books fall in the category of children's literature, and if *The Lord of the Rings* would be one of them. One of the biggest problem in this issue is probably the name tag 'children' and what age band it refers to. I take the prevailing legal age in Europe of 18 as the beginning of adulthood (Lathey 2006: 5), although I understand that this could be debated as well. Therefore toddlers, as well as school kids, adolescents, and teenagers up to seventeen would be included in the 'child' category. The debate can become rather complex but I would like to briefly explain my reasons for placing this novel within this group.

- Firstly, *The Lord of the Rings* was conceived as a sequel to *The Hobbit*, placing it already in the same spectrum. Certainly *The Lord of the Rings* is darker than *The Hobbit* (Tolkien 1937) but it is an attractive adventure novel that many people read for the first time in their teen years.
- Secondly, Tolkien wrote mostly for 'his' children which seems to point to the same age band.
- Fantasy stories are normally considered children material in our day and age (although it wasn't always like that as analysed in Shavit 2006: 27). The obvious reason is the recurrent appearance of imaginary creatures and magic, but mostly the rather clear-cut storylines they put forward. Although *The Lord of the Rings* is arguably more complex and sinister than *The Hobbit*, characters are almost unequivocally good or evil placing it within the children's category paradigm and style of writing.
- Then the question ramifies into free will and who has the right and authority to decide: Is children's literature what children read or what adults publish for them to read? I think we should resist the simplification prompted by our categorisation desires, and aim at a structure that allows for children and young adults that enjoy a rather eclectic and unforeseeable selection of books directly related to their individual taste and life experience.

Children's literature studies would benefit greatly by entering more multidisciplinary areas of research and encompassing not only book-type products aimed at children and young adults, but also any other publication enjoyed by them whether in printed, audiovisual, or interactive format. Adults may decide what children do at school, but they cannot preside over what children like. I propose the following table to illustrate the scope of what I believe belongs to children's literature:

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE (A Polysystem of Texts)	**Textual**	Fairy tales Short stories Novels Fables Folk tales
	Illustrated	Picture books Comic books Graphic novels
	Performed (or declaimed)	Nursery rhymes and poetry Playground songs Plays Children's films Radio plays Puppet theatre
		Audio books Read-aloud books

		Action pop-up books
	Interactive	Game books
		Video game scripts

3.1 Making a book playable

Creating a video game from the stories found in books is always a balancing act that has to be carefully planned. The main storylines and characters cannot be altered because it is the reason why players are going to buy the game in the first place, and this is the raw material from which to create a series of interactive stories that give an extra dimension to the gameplay. For example, at the beginning of the video game *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* Frodo has to carry out several tasks, such as: find a missing metal pin and return it to Ted the miller, fix the warning bell for the sheriff of Hobbiton, and give the Bag End key to Sam's father among other things. Most of these mini-quests are optional, but they help players immerse themselves in the story by interacting with characters and objects in Tolkien's literary universe.

The second thing that games based on books have to do is understand the roles that the different characters play in the story and portray them accurately in the game. In the afore-mentioned game, there are three playable characters: Frodo, Aragorn, and Gandalf. Each of them has a special part to play in the adventure, following the characters in the book. Therefore, Frodo is the skilful and silent scout (or thief), Aragorn is the brave and strong warrior, and Gandalf is the wise powerful wizard. They do not get involved in the adventure doing things in a way that would betray their personality as described in the novel. So, for example, Aragorn mini-quests are about fighting, while Gandalf's involve solving puzzles, and Frodo's obtaining objects without being noticed.

In this manner, the video game *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* manages to convey faithfully the first book of Tolkien's trilogy, including, for example, the hobbits' adventure with Tom Bombadil in the Old Forest and the Barrow Downs. In fact, it could be argued that the game is more accurate than the cartoon and film versions. Many of the fans that played this game did so because they had already read the books and enjoyed the fact that it had taken most of Tolkien's lore into account.

4. The translation of video games

The study of translation as an academic subject only really began in the past five decades, as Munday (2001: 5) reminds us. It was officially baptised as 'translation studies' by J.S. Holmes (1994: 67) in his 1972 paper entitled "The name and nature of translation studies", which was

not widely available until 1988. The study of translation began primarily through comparative literature and slowly spread on to other translational practices, such as legal translation, film translation, and software translation.

Although we have enjoyed children's books in translation for many decades, it only began receiving some attention from the academic world in 1976 through the IRSCL (International Research Society for Children's Literature). We still had to wait a few more years *for scholars in the field of translation studies to examine the particular challenges of translating for children* (Lathey 2006: 1). The publication of Lathey's reader on the translation of children's literature marks an important moment in the coming of age of this area of Translation Studies. One of the areas that remains untapped is the translation of multimedia interactive entertainment software, most commonly referred to in the industry as game localisation. (For the many parts of the translation of video games, see Bernal-Merino 2008a)

4.1 Alterations in localised versions

In the game industry, multilingual releases of video games at an international level are nowadays common practice. The global market demands products in the different vernaculars and video game developers have started to realise the boost this brings to their sales. One of the key factors in game localisation is that the nationality of the game (i.e. of the companies developing it) is not relevant, and players should feel the game was designed with them in mind regardless of their nationality. Chandler (2005: 25) states that "if games are developed with the global audience in mind" they "can be changed to appeal to a global audience", so for example, "if a car racing game is designed, the developer can plan to include cars from several different countries". From the translation point of view, localised versions have to maintain the same look and feel as the source language game, with all its playful and original characteristics. But cultural differences in customs and points of view may force changes in the localised versions (Bernal-Merino 2006: 22). Honeywood, Head of Localisation at Square Enix, explains (Edge Magazine 2006: 74):

> Sometimes planners are so impressed with changes to the translated version we propose, they give us extra information or add extra scenes into the game to improve the presentation of changes. It's more like we are planning the game together than translating.

But different times in history have seen different ways of using translation to suit the ideology in power and to uphold the conventions of the adopting culture. With the evolution of societies, the translation of literature for adults has gained a certain value, and modifications that used to be commonplace in previous stages are no longer regarded as acceptable, helping, therefore to maintain the integrity of the literary

works. This does not apply to some texts, such as children's literature (Shavit 1986:112), and video games are subject to alterations when translated (Mangiron and O'Hagan 2006: 15).

Although game industry rating boards are internal, and they can decide whether one game is or is not appropriate for a particular audience, video games can be banned from publication by the authorities. The most widely acknowledged rating boards are PEGI (Pan European Game Information) and ESRB (Entertainment Software Rating Board, for the US). Even though their guidelines are generally followed by game developers and approved by importing nations, each country may decide to change the rating of a particular game, or ban it completely unless modified. Different customs and laws mean that the same game may have a different rating or different content depending on the country of release.

Some of the changes are only geared towards enhancing players' enjoyment of the game. If fans in a country enjoy a particular feature, character, or type of storyline, these modifications may be incorporated in the localised versions of the game. The second reason to make alterations in the localised versions of a video game is cultural differences, from the adaptation of culturally specific nuances to the modification or deletion of characters. Skladanowski, Head of Translation for the Polish localisation company CD Project, states:

> Generally, the more liberties the creators of the game took while writing the text, the more leeway the translator has in rendering it in the target language, specially in humorous contexts. One example of this was during the translation of *Warcraft III* with its numerous references to American pop culture that weren't part of the game's main plot. They were in many cases supplanted by references to popular Polish movies, characters and events, no doubt contributing to the game's warm reception by local gamers.
> (2006 Edge Magazine: 80)

Differences in the localised versions of video games are, therefore, commonplace, but, as I will show in next section, there is one type of game where these rules cannot be applied.

4.2 The translation of games based on children's books

Video game renderings of popular books do not seem to enjoy the same *carte blanche* as other games, as far as the translation process is concerned. There are two basic reasons for this. First of all, if the deviations are too pronounced, it could be interpreted as an infringement of the licensee contract. But, most importantly, communities of fans around the world would be most disappointed and they could boycott the game by not buying it. The immediacy of the Internet grants players a considerable amount of power, simply by sharing information in blogs and chat-rooms. It is ultimately in everybody's interest to provide the best

rendition possible, which in many cases means that translators have to refer back to the original translation of the book in question.

In the Spanish translation of the previously mentioned video game, *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, all passages and names created by Tolkien's linguistic imagination followed the official copyrighted translation, a translation that was approved by the author himself, as we can read in his collection of letters compiled by Humphrey Carpenter and Christopher Tolkien and published in 1981 by Carpenter. Consequently, when they had to translate "All ready to set out for Buckland?" translators knew they had to use the same name used in the translation of the novel and wrote for the Spanish version: *¿Todo listo para irnos a Los Gamos?* [Is everything ready to set out for Buckland?].

In some cases, glossaries and TMs ('Translation Memories' such as the ones used in web and software localisation) prepared by the localisation company will be utilised by the team of translators and testers. Unfortunately, glossaries are not always available, and TMs may be slightly patchy, so translators may have to do some meticulous research work. It is not only the issue of using the right term, it is a question of applying similar lexical and syntactical choices, and maintaining the internal cohesion of the text. When Gandalf tells Frodo, "This is the One Ring to rule them all!", making a clear reference to the verses engraved inside of the ring, the Spanish translation chooses, *¡Éste es el Anillo Único que los gobierna a todos!*, being consistent with the ring inscription as well as with the novel.

The link with the first translation has to be close but still keep a certain degree of autonomy in the VG so that it is playable, but does not sound too distant from the novel. It is a balancing act, similar in a way to what happens in the subtitling of films. Translating a video game of an existing translated text relies on the artistry of good translators, and, quite often, on their research skills.

5. Conclusion

Video games have too big an impact on children and adults to be ignored by academia. It is clear that a multidisciplinary approach is necessary in order to be able to describe accurately the characteristics and function of each of its composing parts. Game-like applications can be used, and are being used for education and professional training, as well as for exploring literary worlds and texts in a way that was impossible only a few decades ago.

As multimedia story-based and story-making creations, video games can be studied from a literary point of view. Simultaneous multilingual releases also point towards the study of their translation with all the

linguistic and cultural issues that are bound to be problematic due to differences in the understanding of concepts such as fun, fairness, and so on.

It is clear that we live in an audiovisual society, and that translators have to adapt their skills to the new challenges. The translation of multimedia interactive products such as video games, cannot and should not follow concepts and norms developed for other types of text. New multidisciplinary approaches are needed if we want to understand this new translation practice.

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Biography

Miguel Á. Bernal-Merino was one of the first academics to start raising issues in game localisation and emphasizing the necessity of doing research into this topic in order to improve overall quality and turnover for the industry, as well as to incorporate game localisation in BA and MA Translation Studies degrees. Miguel is a member of the IGDA (International Game Developers Association), Vice-Chair of the Game Localization SIG, and he coordinates the 'Game Localization Round Table' within the 'Localization World' conference series, and is one of the advisors to the GDC'09 'Game Localisation Summit'. He is currently lecturing in media translation in London.