

Translating Cultural Memory in Video Games: Realism and Localization of *Chinese Parents*

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In translation studies, translation is conventionally perceived as the literal translation of textual content and localization indicates the adaptation of information from one context to the other through various multimodal channels. In memory studies, as the result of the “translational turn”, translation pertains broadly to the transfer, transmission, and traversal of memories crossing cultural boundaries, no matter whether they are physical or metaphorical.

Memory scholars have argued that the aesthetic media of memory such as literature, cinema, and museums can create and recreate the feeling and memory of the past, or present, and evoke the reflection of the future (Landsberg 2004; Van Dijck 2007; Erll 2008). In the Internet era, as “an affective medium that blends spectatorship and participation” (Rehak 2003), video games have the potential to embody the intention of game developers through aspects such as game narratives and mechanics that encapsulate the original memory embedded in the game and further evoke and (re)shape gamers’ memories. Internal and external cues, material conditions, and emotional states influence the perception, encoding, and retrieval of information, thereby shaping what individuals retain and remember as a reconstructed representation of the past in their present cognition (Markowitsch 2008; Schmidt 2008). Since Assmann (1995) redirected the focus of memory studies from social psychology to the medium as a conduit for cultural memory, various concepts such as travelling memory (Erll 2011), mediated memory (Van Dijck 2004), or prosthetic memory (Landsberg 2004) have been developed to understand the communication patterns of memory across diverse individuals, groups, nations and cultures.

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Memories are not static or fixed, but rather dynamic and fluid, incessantly “travelling” and “translating” across linguistic, social, and political borders (Erlil 2011).

Game localization generally refers to the adaptation of video games on multimodal aspects, such as the linguistic, cultural and technical domains (Mangiron 2021). Globalization, internationalization, localization and translation (GILT) situates language transfer within the broader frameworks, emphasizing the specific procedures essential for managing electronic content and the significance of localizing the interactivity of video games (O’Hagan 2005). For culturally infused Chinese realist games, which often encompass a shared memory framework and a reflection on Chinese reality, many items of cultural and memory specificity have been adjusted to cater to a diverse audience with varying cultural backgrounds; paradoxically, once the visual or acoustic display are revised to meet the local demand, the specific references and connotations inherent in the game may become nullified, which may even lead to ludonarrative dissonance (Edwards 2011; O’Hagan and Mangiron 2013; Dong and Mangiron 2018).

Building upon the aforementioned concepts, this paper aims to explore the discourse on the translation of cultural memory (Jünke 2023) and contextualize it within the medium specificity of video games and their localization practices. To fill in the research gap on how the memory dynamics translate and transmit in video game localization, we ask two questions: (1) How do video games carry memories; (2) How do these memories impact the gamers through language conversions by game localization?

We select one of the most famous Chinese realist indie games and its official English localized version: *Chinese Parents* (2018) developed by Moyuwan Games, as the research sample. *Chinese Parents* is a turn-based life simulation realist indie game developed by Beijing-based studio Moyuwan Games in 2018. It offers gamers the opportunity to immerse themselves in the developmental journey of an urban Chinese child from infancy to high school graduation.

Chinese Parents is selected because of its strong realist and commemorative elements, which make it a significant conduit for the transmission of popular cultural memories across different contexts (Zhong 2019; Chen et al. 2023). The game encourages gamers to improve the playable character’s grade in *Gaokao* (The Nationwide Unified Examination for Admissions to General Universities and Colleges of China) through a series of 48 minigames and events, for which gamers should strategically manage the attributes (e.g. IQ, EQ, memory, artistic ability), financial resources, and stress levels. Ironically, in the game, although *Gaokao* grades are correlated with university admissions, they do not necessarily predict future career achievements, thereby challenging the conventional principles of meritocracy.

Therefore, *Chinese Parents* is considered an important representative, capturing the feelings and experiences of a Chinese child growing up in a ludic way and evoking Chinese gamers’ reflection on it (Galloway 2004; Martin 2021; Göttsche et al. 2021; Luo 2022). The realism of the game is grounded in the translation - locating or relocating - of memories and their frameworks, encompassing diverse aspects such as game texts or images derived from the developers’ experiences and online case collection, gamers’ embodied experiences and performances within the game, as well

as the sharing and discussion of personal experiences in paratexts. Additionally, the game's distribution and dissemination to Anglophone communities renders it a promising subject for investigating game-mediated cultural memory in connection with localization practices.

In the full paper, first, we delve into theories on video game studies, memory studies and game localization studies, subsequently advocating for the inherent value in their convergence. Furthermore, we elucidate through a concrete case study of *Chinese Parents*, thereby facilitating a comprehensive understanding of the significance and potential limitations associated with game localization. The analysis also enhances comprehension regarding the production, circulation, and reception of game-mediated cultural memory in both Chinese and cross-cultural contexts. Last, we generate potential findings in response to our research questions.

The initial findings of this study suggest that, on the one hand, for the majority of Chinese gamers who are well-acquainted with the game's authentic backdrop and symbolic representations, *Chinese Parents* exemplifies certain collective memories in a specific period. However, the reception of gamers who lack relevant experiences or backgrounds in a certain period of Chinese history remains a subject of debate regarding their ability to comprehend the game content as intended. On the other hand, the localization of cultural realism lacks the transfer of critical analysis and reflection on the target's reality, wherein the original critical perspective is inherently embedded in the non-localized Chinese version. To name a few, some well-designed in-game in-jokes (e.g., images, sound effects, game mechanics) that employ satire or allusion towards Chinese reality can't be properly displayed and comprehended. To this end, gamers lacking an understanding of such criticism may simply consider the game as a dramatic display of exotic scenarios, behaviors, or activities. This indicates the complexity of transcultural memory in game localization.

In summary, within a representative Chinese realist game framework, this study aims to elucidate the interconnection of transcultural memory and game localization, thereby shedding new insights into this novel and underexplored domain.

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