

JAPANESE VIDEO GAMES IN ENGLISH TRANSLATION: A STUDY OF CONTEMPORARY SUBTITLING PRACTICES

Matteo Fabbretti*
Ritsumekain University

ABSTRACT: This article examines the ongoing development of translation norms in the field of Japanese popular culture texts, focusing on the translation of Japanese video games into English. In the first part, the article describes particular translation norms that have emerged in the field, before presenting a case study of the translation of the Japanese video game series *Yakuza* in order to illustrate how video game companies have begun to successfully integrate fan-translation norms into commercial products.

KEYWORDS: Video game translation, Video game subtitling, Translation into ELF, Fan translation

1. Introduction

Writing in 2007 on the topic of “bridge concepts in translation sociology”, Andrew Chesterman argued in favour of “causality” as one such bridge concept that could be useful in bringing together disparate ways of studying translation (Chesterman, 2007, p. 174). Drawing upon an earlier article by Anthony Pym (2006), Chesterman proposes four main causes of translation: material causes, including the source text and the target language and the technology involved in translation; cultural causes such as translation norms and expectations; social causes such as the translator’s aim and the client’s requirements; and finally cognitive causes such as the translator’s mind and body (Chesterman, 2007, p. 175). Chesterman illustrates how these four causes can be brought together with a simple example:

In terms of a simple causal chain, for instance, we could say: this translation is like this, it contains these particular features, because of the decisions that this translator took; the translator worked like that partly because of the nature of the source text, the client’s instructions and the ridiculously short deadline; the client specified these conditions because of the norms governing translation work of this kind in this society at this time, which are themselves determined e.g. by commercial values (Chesterman, 2007, p. 175).

My aim in this article is to provide a causal explanation for a recent development in the field of Japanese video game translation. To put it simply, I am interested in the way some recent Japanese video games were published outside of Japan with both English and Japanese voice tracks, and the option to select between two different sets of English language subtitles to accompany the different voice track. I will describe the main differences between these two sets of English subtitles and try to provide a causal explanation as to why a Japanese video game publisher may have started this practice. I will first describe the textual features of the texts I am interested in. Then, I will attempt to provide an explanation for the presence of these textual features by drawing on extra-textual sources, such as translators’ testimonies and fan opinions.

* mattfabb@hotmail.com

2. Language policy in Japanese video games

Video game development is a fast-moving field at the cutting edge of technology, where innovation seems to take place at a faster pace than other field of cultural production. One such development in recent years is the way Japanese video game firms have started to include multiple voice tracks with their games. The focus here in particular is on those games that include both Japanese and English voice tracks.

The practice of adding (or not removing) Japanese voice tracks in video games translated into English is a relatively recent development. Up until the seventh generation of console games, that is to say, from around 2006 until 2012, the process of video game localisation usually meant that Japanese video games translated into English would simply replace the original Japanese voice tracks with English voice tracks. This may have been due to disc storage issues, as multiple voice track may have been too large to fit within the capacity of a single CD or DVD (Bernal-Merino, 2015, p. 102). In other words, there may have been constraints of a material nature.

With the advent of the eighth generation of video games consoles (PlayStation 4, Xbox One, etc.) in 2012, faster internet speed and increased storage capacity made it easier to overcome these material constraints, so video game firms began to ship their products with different foreign language included in the same product, or alternatively began to allow for users to download additional voice tracks of their choice directly to the consoles data storage devices (hard disk drives). One such example was the game *Persona 5* (Atlus, 2017) published by the Japanese video game company Sega, which allowed users the option of downloading the Japanese voice tracks for free as additional DLC (downloadable content) after the game had already shipped, thereby removing the problem of having to compress large audio files in order to fit them into a digital optical disc storage format.¹

Why would Japanese video game firms offer such an option? The evidence points toward cultural causes; on the one hand, a share of the English-speaking gaming community is critical of the removal of Japanese voice tracks from Japanese games.² Simply put, some fans seemed to enjoy listening to the voices of Japanese voice actors, just as some moviegoers prefer subtitles to dubbing (O'Sullivan, 2011, p. 104). Others simply dislike the way English voices sound when dubbing Japanese videogames (Schreier, 2012). In the past, the discontent on the part of fans gave rise to a unique fan translation³ practice

¹ The free Japanese language DLC can be downloaded from Sony PlayStation store: https://store.playstation.com/en-us/product/UP2611-CUSA05877_00-ADDCONTENT000022/ (Accessed: 19 August 2021).

² See for example the website: The Undubbing FAQ (Accessed: 19 August 2021).

³ The term 'fan translation' is used here to describe non-commercial, amateur translation practices. In other words, professional translation is remunerated and considered a source of livelihood, while fan translation is not. Although translation scholars have noted that "non-professional translators and interpreters have played a very important role in facilitating economic, commercial, cultural and religious exchanges throughout history" (Pym, 2000, in Pérez-González and Susam-Saraeva, 2012, p. 151), I refrain from using the term 'non-professional' here because it may give the impression that only inexperienced translators are involved in amateur translation practices, which may not be always the case; professional translators may also be involved in translation activism and other similarly non-remunerated practices.

called 'undubbing', where English voice tracks were replaced with the original Japanese voices, sometimes also accompanied by English subtitles created by fans for those players who preferred Japanese voice acting but had no Japanese language ability (Eisenbeis, 2013).

Although undubbed video games are made available to download for free, Japanese firms may have understood the existence of such practices as an attempt to respond to the wishes of a part of the gaming community abroad, and, rather than ignoring these expectations or actively fighting them, they sought to meet them by including the option to choose how games could be experienced, either dubbed by English voice actors or retaining the Japanese voices accompanied by English language subtitles. This flexibility and readiness to meet users' expectations is perhaps a distinguishing characteristic of video game production, as game firms tend to see themselves as creating products and services to meet the expectations of their customers (Bernal-Merino, 2015, p. 104) and have historically been characterized by the close collaboration with players (Czarnota, 2016, p. 3).

The inclusion of selectable Japanese voice tracks solved a problem, but in turn introduced new issues. To explain it simply, video game translation often requires the adoption of creative strategies, which O'Hagan and Mangiron describe as akin to 'transcreation' (O'Hagan and Mangiron, 2013, p. 190), that is to say, considerable adaptation is often necessary to meet the cultural and legal requirements of different countries. The problem emerges when players are faced with discrepancies between subtitles and voiceovers; for example, when Japanese voice tracks use one name to refer to a character depicted on screen, while the English subtitles use a different one for the same character.

One example of this kind of discrepancy can be found in the game *Xenoblade Chronicles 2* (Monolith Soft, 2017) published by Nintendo for the Nintendo Switch console. In this game, one of the main characters is an artificial being that has two distinct personalities, represented in the game by fire and light. In the Japanese version of the game, the names of these two personalities reflects their personalities and designs: Homura (literally 'flame', 'blaze') is warm and wears red, while Hikari (literally 'light') is cold and wears white/green colours (Figure 1). In order to preserve these design elements, the English version of *Xenoblade Chronicles 2* adapted their names, translating Homura as Pyra (from 'pyre', thereby recalling the fire element) and Hikari as Mythra (from Mithra, the angelic divinity of light in ancient Indo-Iranian mythology). These solutions are clever and elegant in themselves. The problem, however, emerges when players of the English version are faced with the discrepancies that the game introduces when Japanese voices refer to these characters as Homura/Hikari while the corresponding English subtitles refer to them as Pyra/Mythra (Rogers, 2017).



Figure 1. Homura and Hikari (Doolan, 2020).

This problem is acknowledged by players, critics and Japanese developers. For example, Ollie Barder, writing in 2018 about the imminent western release of the game *Dragon Quest XI* for the Nintendo Switch console (Square Enix, 2019), wondered whether the game would include Japanese voices alongside the English ones, and if so, whether the subtitles would include the original Japanese names: “while I respect that attention to detail a great deal, I am still hoping that if the Japanese voices are included on the Western Switch release of the game that the subtitles will be updated to match that” (Barder, 2018). This expectation was not unknown to Square-Enix, the Japanese publisher of *Dragon Quest XI*, because when the game was finally released for Nintendo Switch in September 2019, the option to choose between Japanese and English voices was present. However, an in-game notice was also inserted to warn players that, depending on the choice of language setting, discrepancies between the voiced lines and subtitles may be present (Figure 2).

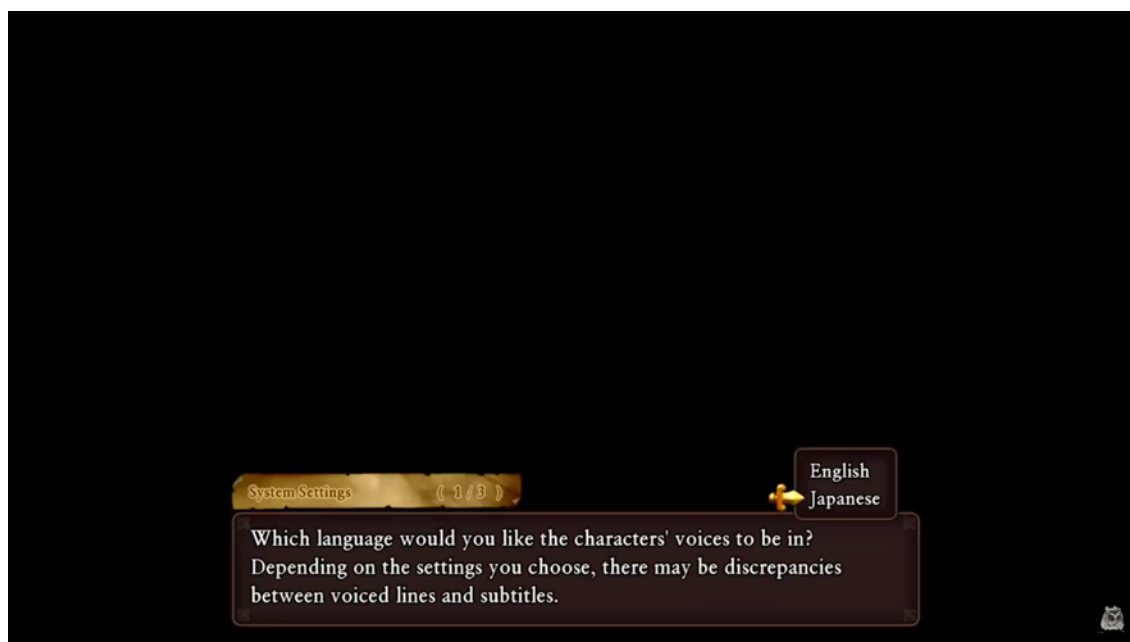


Figure 2. Dragon Quest XI (2019), language settings.

In other words, the inclusion of Japanese voice tracks brings to video games the same element of vulnerability that affects other forms of subtitling; As Carol O’Sullivan noted, subtitling juxtaposes source text and target text, so that “viewers are enabled, and feel entitled, to comment on the translation solutions adopted” (O’Sullivan, 2011, p. 103). In our model of causation, this feedback could be seen simply as an effect of translation; however, for O’Sullivan the problem is that such vulnerability may constrain and devalue the work of translators because viewers often perceive subtitles as unfaithful (O’Sullivan, 2011, p. 103). How can this problem be solved? I will present here the example of how the Japanese firm Sega dealt with this problem, taking as a case study the game series *Yakuza* and its spin-off game *Judgment*.

3. Translating *Yakuza*

Yakuza, known in Japan as *Ryū ga Gotoku* (龍が如く, literally ‘Like a Dragon’) is an action-adventure video game series developed and published by Sega Corporation (Sega hereafter). The series include eight main games (*Yakuza 0* to *7*) and a number of spin-offs. The *Yakuza* games are primarily set in a fictional recreation of Tokyo, inspired in particular by the actual entertainment district of Tokyo known as Kabukichō. The main storyline spanning from *Yakuza 0* to *6* features as the main playable character Kazuma Kiryu, a reformed member of the Japanese crime syndicate (the Yakuza, also known in Japan as *gokudō* (極道, literally "the extreme path").

The games in the *Yakuza* series draw heavily from the popular genre of Japanese crime drama known as Yakuza films. While Kiryu is associated with the leaders of the Yakuza, the storyline often centres on his efforts to leave the crime syndicate behind, and the games have been praised for their nuanced portrait of masculinity (Stuart, 2020). The

gameplay of the *Yakuza* games has the players engaged in a number of activities in an open-world setting, including fighting against groups of street thugs, carrying out side missions and mini-games, eating and drinking at various restaurants and bars, and so on.

Despite its eventual success, the creation of the first *Yakuza* game was initially considered a risk. As a result of internal restructuring within Sega in the mid-2000s, the game director, Toshihiro Nagoshi, was promoted to an executive position and tasked with the creation of new games. In interviews, Nagoshi explained that he and his team would often brainstorm new ideas while drinking casually in bars around Kabukichō, and this district at the heart of Yakuza activities became the inspiration for the new game.

Sega, however, initially rejected Nagoshi's game proposal as it lacked broader appeal, as it explicitly targeted the shrinking audience of adult Japanese male players (Hester, 2021). It was only through Nagoshi's persistence and the backing of Sega's chief executive at the time that the first *Yakuza* title was eventually released in Japan in December 2005, unexpectedly gaining a favourable response from Japanese critics and players alike.

In the West, the *Yakuza* games gained broader popularity with the release of *Yakuza 0* in 2017 (Hester, 2021), but, for the purpose of this article, it is the reception of the first *Yakuza* game abroad (Sega, 2006) that is particularly significant. The first *Yakuza* game was released internationally in September 2006 but, despite receiving full English voiceovers by a cast of famous actors, including Mark Hamill of *Star Wars* fame and Michael Madsen (Constantine, 2010), the game failed to gain critical and commercial success. Following the poor reception of the first *Yakuza*, Sega would not create English voice overs for another *Yakuza* game until the release of the spin-off game *Judgment* (known as *Judge Eyes* in Japan) in June 2019 (Sega, 2019).

Starting with the release of *Yakuza 2* in September 2008, Sega began releasing its games in North America and Europe with only Japanese voice tracks, accompanied by English subtitles. The games released in this format include *Yakuza 3* (Sega, 2010), *Yakuza 4* (Sega, 2011), *Yakuza 5* (Sega, 2015), *Yakuza 0* (Sega, 2017), and *Yakuza 6* (Sega, 2018). Here I will illustrate with an example how the translation team at Sega translated the *Yakuza* games into English.

The example I draw here is taken from an early scene in *Yakuza 0*. *Yakuza 0* is an origin story, as the zero in the title indicates. The game is set in Japan in the 1980s and narrates the story of Kiryu before the events of the first *Yakuza* game. Because the game strives to create a sense of cultural and historical authenticity, characters in the game do not communicate through mobile phones, but instead rely on pagers (also known in Japan as 'pocket bells') to send numerical combinations to each other. These codes can be said to represent actual Japanese culture specific items, as Japanese people through the 1980s and 90s had in fact invented some clever number combinations to exchange messages, using the different ways the same numeral forms can be read in Japanese (Kyoto, 2018).

In a scene close to the beginning of the game, Kiryu receives a message on his pager that reads '724106' (figure 3). In this context, the number 7 (in Japanese, 'nana' or 'shichi') stands for the phoneme 'na'; the number 2 (ni) stands for the phoneme 'ni'; the number 4

(yon or shi) stands for the phoneme 'shi'; the number 10 (jū) stands for the English 'ten', here shortened to 'te'; the number 6 (roku) stands for the phoneme 'ru'. Taken together, this can be read 'nani shiteru' (なにしてる), which in English can be translated roughly as 'what are you doing?' (Koichi, 2011).

The image in Figure 3 is drawn from an official video published on the Sega of America YouTube channel (SegaAmerica, 2017, 5:13). In a series of videos Sega's localization producers Scott Strichart and Sam Mullen, the individuals responsible for the translation of the *Yakuza* games into English, played through various games in the series and comment on their translation choices. In the particular example taken in consideration here, Strichart and Mullen discuss the translation of the code explained above. As can be seen in the image, the translators have added two lines of subtitles to the original Japanese text (in the Japanese ST, no explanation whatsoever is added, the screen simply shows the numbers on the screen as they are).



Figure 3. *Yakuza 0* (2017).

The English subtitles read:

Kiryu: (724106, huh? That's code for "whatcha up to?" ... I'm waiting for your slow ass to show up).

Commenting in the video about the subtitles above, Strichart ask Mullen to explain why the number 724106 equals 'what are you up to' (SegaAmerica, 2017, 5:13). Mullen explains that they had worked really hard, and tried all kinds of ways, to explain to the reader the context of what the numbers actually meant; they had actually spelled out an explanation and put it in the game but were not satisfied with the result (SegaAmerica, 2017, 5:37).

Mullen then continues with an explanation of the Japanese word play, similar to the one provided above.

What can we learn about the translation of *Yakuza 0* from the example above? First of all, the addition of subtitles to the scene seems to make Kiryu more talkative than he is in the Japanese source text. This is because the subtitles sought to present the new information diegetically, meaning that they are meant to represent the actual speech or thoughts of the in-game character (rather than being presented as an explicit intervention on the part of the translators from outside the game-world). This is in contrast to the way Kiryu is depicted in the source text, as in Japanese Kiryu does not talk much, and his sentences are rather short (Johnston, 2019). A related second point is about the words used in the subtitles – especially ‘whatcha up to’ (instead of ‘what are you up to’) and ‘slow ass’. Here the use of informal speech, slang, and vulgar terms could be understood as a deliberate attempt to draw intertextually from the speech style of characters featured in the ‘hardboiled’ literary genre, popularised in North America with the novels of authors like Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett, among others, a style that Dennis Porter defined as a “vernacular heightened and burnished to the level of street-wise poetry” (Porter, 2003, p. 105).

Finally, a point about the unexplained cultural reference: despite providing a great amount of additional flavour to the scene on screen, the subtitles on screen do not actually explain the meaning of the numerical code, so it is not clear why the number 724106 translates as ‘what are you up to’; this is to say that the situation seems to require a different translation strategy, and perhaps the exchange between Strichart and Mullen in the video can be interpreted as an implicit admission of this issue. In other respects, the translation of *Yakuza* games clearly displays an orientation toward the source text: names of Japanese food items are usually transliterated into English; Japanese signage (in the streets and inside shops, for example) are simply presented with their Japanese characters (known as kanji), Japanese honorific suffixes such as -san, -kun, -chan, and so forth (see Fabbretti, 2017, p. 464) are commonly retained in the English subtitles, among many other examples.⁴

In short, here the translators seem to have drawn a distinction between source-oriented translation strategies that allow the target text to retain elements of Japanese language and culture that are presented diegetically, as part of the game world, and translation strategies that would add non-diegetic elements that may read as translation notes inserted directly in the body of the target text. Note, however, that the translators were comfortable in adding explanations in the form of paratextual material separate from the main body of the target text (in the shape of a video commentary) that interested fans could experience separately. In other words, the translators’ ability to intervene directly in the game text may have been constrained by an established translation norm.

⁴ Strichart (2019) explained that “The English dub's goal was never to Westernize the game, but to make Japan more accessible. No matter the language, the setting doesn't change”.

4. Translating Judgment

As we have seen in the previous section, Sega created a series of games set in a fictional representation of Japan and, while these games were well received by their domestic audience, they initially struggled to gain popularity abroad beyond a fan base of dedicated players. This situation changed with the positive critical and commercial success of *Yakuza 0*, which was rated an overall metascore of 85 on the popular review aggregation website *Metacritic* (2017). The next game in the franchise, *Yakuza 6*, released in the West in 2018, was equally well received with a metascore of 83 (*Metacritic*, 2018).

With the conclusion of the saga of Kiryu in *Yakuza 6*, the developers at Sega decided it was time for a new protagonist. This resulted in the creation of a spin-off game entitled *Judgment*, set in the same fictional world of *Yakuza*, featuring this time an ex-lawyer turned private investigator named Takayuki Yagami (whose face is based on the real life popular Japanese singer and actor Takuya Kimura, who also provided the voice acting for Yagami). The story of *Judgment* follows Yagami as he investigates a serial murder case involving the Japanese crime syndicate and a mysterious killer. The game was released for the PlayStation 4 in Japan in December 2018 and worldwide in June 2019 (Sega, 2018, 2019).

For the purpose of this article, the most notable feature of *Judgment* is that it signals the start of a new translation strategy by Sega. In short, the Western version of *Judgment* was released with the option to select either English voice acting (a first for the series) or the original Japanese voices. Additionally, the two different language options were accompanied by different subtitle tracks. The image in Figure 4 illustrates the text that accompanied the subtitle menu for the Japanese voice option, warning that “subtitles were written specifically to accommodate the Japanese audio track and do not match the English dialog”.



Figure 4. *Judgment* (2019), English subtitles option.

What do these options mean in practice? In what follows, I will present some examples that illustrate key differences between the two sets of subtitles, drawing a comparison between the same in-game scenes played once with English voices and English subtitles (EN/EN) and again with Japanese voices and English subtitles (JP/EN).

To begin with, there are some similarities: both the EN/EN and JP/EN versions make use of Japanese nouns. For example, in the scene depicted in Figure 5 below, Yagami is talking to his investigative partner Masaharu Kaito. In the Japanese source text (*Judge Eyes*, Sega, 2018), Yagami says:



Figure 5. *Judge Eyes* (2019).

Yagami: また源田先生んところに行ってみるわ
なんか仕事ないかって

Yagami: **Mata genda-sensei n toko ni itte miru wa. Nanka shigoto nai katte**
(Gloss translation: I am going to see Genda-sensei again. To ask if there is any work)

Which both versions translate as:

Yagami: **Anyway. I'm gonna swing by Genda-sensei's place, to see if he's got any work.**

As can be seen from the example above, both translations retain Japanese honorifics: the noun 'sensei' (先生, literally, 'born earlier'), used in Japanese to refer to or address teachers, doctors, politicians, lawyers and other authority figures, is used here as an honorific suffix in reference to the owner of the law firm for which Yagami worked as a lawyer. Throughout the game, both versions retain the use of Japanese honorific suffixes such as -san, -chan, -kun, and so on. In this sense, both translations are similar to what we have already seen in *Yakuza* games.

The following examples will illustrate some of the key differences between the two versions. The image in Figure 6 below is taken from *Judge Eyes* (Sega, 2018). In this scene, Yagami and Kato are investigating a murder scene. Yagami is looking for clues that may lead to the 'Mole' ('mogura' in Japanese), the individual responsible for a series of gruesome murders. In the following exchange, Kaito remarks that the police would have already investigated the crime scene:



Figure 6. *Judge Eyes* (2018).

Kaito: なあ 警察だってモグラは探したはずだぜ？

Kaito: Naa **keisatu datte mogura wa sagashita hazudaze?**

(Gloss translation: [hey/say/look], hasn't the police already searched for the Mole?)

Which the EN/EN subtitles translated as:

Kaito: **Hold up a sec. The cops already did their whole song and dance searchin' for the Mole.**

And the JP/EN subtitles translated as:

Kaito: **Look. The cops did their own investigation for the Mole.**

Kaito is a former member of the Yakuza, and in Japanese his words and speech patterns are associated with men's gendered language, which is perceived as rough and vulgar (for example, the informal 'da' in place of the copula 'desu', and the sentence-final particle 'ze'). As the example shows, the English voices and subtitles insert the idiomatic expression 'the whole song and dance' to Kaito's question, probably with the intention of suggesting a degree of scepticism on the part of Kaito about the ability of the police. The abbreviated expression 'searchin' (instead of 'searching'), retains also helps retaining a degree of informality in English. However, the same passage in the JP/EN version is

substantially different. Here Kaito's language is neutral and avoids the use of idiomatic expressions. In another exchange between Yagami and Masamichi Shintani, of the senior lawyers at Genda's office, Shintani calls Yagami on the phone in order to arrange a meeting to discuss the details of a case they are working on. The image in Figure 7 illustrates the exchange in the Japanese version of the game (Sega, 2018):



Figure 7. *Judge Eyes* (2018).

Shintani: 新谷だ 今 中道通りまで来てる

Shintani: **Shintani da. Ima, Nakamichi douri made kiteru.**

(Gloss translation: Its Shintani. I am on Nakamichi street)

Shintani : ミジョーレって喫茶店があるな? そこで待ってる

Shintai: **Mijore tte kissaten ga aruna? soko de matteru**

(Gloss translation: There is a café called Mijore, I am waiting there)

In the EN/EN version, this is how the English subtitles translate the above passage:

Shintani: **Morning sunshine. I'm on Nakamichi Street.**

Shintani: **You know Mijore, little café, killer coffee? C'mere.**

And in the JP/EN version of the game, the same passage is translated into English as:

Shintani: **It's Shintani. I'm on Nakamichi Street.**

Shintani: **You know Mijore, the little café? I'll wait for you there.**

As in the previous example, the English voices and accompanying subtitles add a degree of informality and colourful expressions ('morning sunshine', 'killer coffee', 'c'mere') that are not present in the Japanese source text, while the English subtitles for the Japanese voice

tracks seem to keep things neutral, as far as possible. The above comparisons are just two examples to illustrate the main translational differences between the two sets of subtitles in *Judgment*. The analysis here is not meant to cover every aspect of the text, as this is a game that can be played for hundreds of hours, and which contains far too many examples to be exhaustively analysed in the space provided here.

However, for the purpose of drawing a provisional hypothesis about the translation strategies adopted by the translators at Sega, these brief comparisons may help illustrate the point I wish to make here. In short, I want to suggest here that the EN/EN version of the game (with English voice tracks accompanied by English subtitles) follows closely the translation strategies that were established in the *Yakuza* games. In practice, the overall purpose of these strategies seems to be the creation of a target text that, like the *Yakuza* games, that allows players to draw intertextually from their knowledge of American hardboiled crime fiction.

This is an understandable goal because *Judgment* as a text in some ways already seems to draw from this tradition of hardboiled private investigators, and for the players familiar with the conventions of this literary genre, there is an undeniable pleasure in experiencing it anew, with an interactive, contemporary medium⁵. In functional terms, the purpose of this version, therefore, could be seen as the creation of target text that could easily find its place alongside a well-established and prestigious domestic literary tradition.

What about the JP/EN version? I want to suggest that this version does not share the same purpose. In other words, this is a translation not created for an audience already familiar with the literary style of American hardboiled fiction. Here I would like to suggest a way of conceptualising this version of the game by drawing a theoretical connection to the idea of translation into English as a Lingua Franca (ELF).

To put it simply, translation into ELF could be understood as translation into English for an audience of speakers that do not necessarily share the same cultural background. Julianne House has argued that, unlike the English spoken by native speakers, ELF does not rely on “culturally-embedded, typically English forms such as idioms or other routinized phrases full of insider cultural-historical references invariably based on national tradition, convention or class” (House, 2013, p. 281). In terms of translation aim, therefore, a translation into English as a Lingua Franca would not assume a priori that readers share the same ‘cultural-historical references’ of native English speakers, based on a shared literary tradition (such as the tradition of hardboiled crime fiction popularised in North America), and therefore would not experience the same intertextual pleasure of native English-speaking players.

In other words, American culture-specific references and idioms would not have the desired effect on ELF-speaking audiences and potentially, even lessen the experience for these readers. It is in this sense that I believe that the JP/EN subtitles in *Judgment* can be

⁵ A popular video game streamer on YouTube, CohhCarnage, commented while playing *Judgment*: “oh my god these lines! I love it. It’s like a film noir” (CohhCarnage, 2019, 0:32).

theorised as 'ELF subtitles' (in contrast to just 'English subtitles'). I also want to suggest here a possible link between the ELF subtitles of *Judgment* and the broader practices of translation into ELF that are currently emerging in the field of fan translation of Japanese cultural products into English.

This is a broad field of amateur translation that already counts on extensive body of texts and established ways of doing translation, particularly in the field of amateur manga translation into English for an international audience. As suggested in Fabbretti (2017), fan translators have long been adapting their translation practices to meet the needs of an international readership; fan-translated texts are shared freely on the internet, which means that they can be accessed from anywhere in the world, regardless of national or regional boundaries. This, in practice, means that fan-translated Japanese texts for an international readership in general tend to avoid informal expressions, slang, culture-specific dialects, swear words and foul language, and so on. In other words, the translators at Sega may have been able to draw from these established fan-translation practices in order to develop an alternative subtitle track for the Japanese voices in *Judgment* in a way that would meet the expectations of those fans who prefer to experience the game with Japanese voices.

As for causal explanations, in the following section I will examine the rationale provided by Strichart for the creation of an alternative set of subtitles to accompany the Japanese voices in *Judgment*. So far, this article has examined various probable causes that may have played a part in the recent developments in the field of video game translation. The probable causes suggested so far were of a material nature (technology, financial considerations, etc.), cultural (translation norms, expectations) and social (the function of translation). In this part of the article, I would like to consider the human element within the question of causation, what Chesterman and Pym called the efficient cause. After all, as Chesterman argued:

[...] all external causes of translations, or particular features in translations, only exert a causal force by virtue of their being channelled or filtered through the translator's mind. Cultural and sociological pressures and values, norms and instructions, only have an effect on the target text via the individual translator's cognition, since the text itself is only produced by the translator's agency (Chesterman, 2007, p. 76).

In the context of this article, I will refer here to the evidence available about the influence of Scott Strichart, the localization producer at Sega of America responsible for the translation of the *Yakuza* and *Judgment* games. Strichart was interviewed by the video game specialised press, and I was also able to ask him some questions directly. I report here a summary of his statements about his role in introducing the idea of having two sets of subtitles to accompany the global release of *Judgment*.

Explaining the idea behind the English subtitles for the Japanese voice tracks, Strichart reportedly said:

“You just get that authentic, Yakuza-level experience without us pushing it too far into English [...] [Fans of *Yakuza* games in the West] have been playing in Japanese for so long. It wasn't right to say, 'well now that we have English audio, that's now the priority language'. Both have their unique experience.” (Scarpinito, 2019, n.p.).

As the above quote indicates, Strichart's role within Sega seems to involve a degree of mediation between players' expectations and the development team in Japan. Strichart released numerous interviews before the international release of *Judgment* and was in this sense part of Sega's promotion effort, but he is based in the US at the offices of Sega of America, therefore somewhat removed from the Japanese side. This distance may have benefitted Strichart's independence from the development team. In his statements, Strichart seems to clearly understand the importance of creating different experiences for different type of players, but did the Japanese side understand this as well? According to Strichart, they did not, at least initially. Strichart recounts:

I want one English subtitle track that mirror what the English actors are saying, but I want a second English subtitle track that would accompany the Japanese audio. Can we do that?” I asked a room full of Japanese developers via teleconference. A moment of silence passed that felt like an eternity. There was clearly some confusion. “We can probably do that, but... why? (Strichart, 2019)

In the same article, Strichart explains how he managed to convince the developers to let him translate the game twice. He did so by showing examples of other media that did the same, for example movies and anime. One of the difficulties that he faced is that compared to movies and animation, videos games contain a lot more lines of text to translate, so the idea of translating the same game twice was harder to justify. However, the process was simplified to an extent: instead of creating two separate versions, Strichart explained:

We took a base translation and then pushed it out into two different directions for Japanese audio and English audio [...]. The English script was written for actors to perform it, with more of a focus on making sure it sounded like things people would actually say in English. Sometimes, the two versions are totally the same! Others, it's totally different. (Strichart, 2019).

I contacted Strichart on LinkedIn, in our correspondence, he seemed very satisfied with the end result. *Judgment* received generally positive critical reviews (Metacritic, 2019) and its sales in the West exceeded Sega's expectations. The critical and commercial success can therefore be seen as justifying Strichart's effort to create two distinct players' experiences. The success of *Judgment* also allowed Strichart to repeat the same process with the latest *Yakuza* game (*Yakuza: Like a Dragon*, Sega, 2020) and the upcoming *Judgment* sequel (*Lost Judgment*, Sega, 2021).

Would the additional subtitle track have been possible without Strichart's effort? I do not believe so. When Strichart pitched the idea to the Japanese developers, Sega rightly questioned what the return on the investment would be, since allocating the resources to

translating the game twice, as well as the extra work required for quality assurance, in practice meant adding an extra language to the process (2020, pers. comm., 15 January).

Strichart made the case for the integration of two English subtitle tracks by explaining that if Sega only released one set of subtitles, they would risk alienating their core fans and could be criticised for removing an existing option. In this sense, the effort to revoice the game could have been perceived negatively as an attempt to reach the mass market at the expense of the fans who had supported the company through the less prosperous times (2020, pers. comm., 15 January).

In other words, I believe that this is a clear example of how translators can be efficient causes of translation, not just with regards to the actual process of translation, but also, as illustrated above, by pitching proposals to patrons and institutions, by crafting convincing reasons for adopting a particular translation strategy, by knowing and understanding the expectations of their audiences, and by promoting their translations through interviews and commentaries.

5. Conclusion

One of the original aims of the discipline of translation studies, as set out by James St. Holmes (Holmes, 2000, p. 176) was to describe phenomena and to establish general principles to explain and predict translation. Andrew Chesterman (2007) and Anthony Pym (2006) have argued that translation theory is rather more adept at observing translation than explaining it. In this article, I have sought to explain the causes of recent developments in the field of video game translation drawing from different sources of causation, including material, cultural and social causes, as well as human causes. In this concluding part of the article, I would like to attempt a prediction. As we have seen, the practice of creating two sets of English subtitles to accompany different voice tracks is relatively new in the field of video games and, so far, only Sega has been releasing games in this way. How likely is this practice to become more common in the future?

In my opinion, given the evidence available, Japanese videogame firms tend to be rather risk-averse and would take a dim view of the extra work, time and resources required to offer such option in games. They would question what the return on investment would be for carrying out the extra work. Simply adding Japanese voice tracks is a relatively cost-efficient option to satisfy the fans who prefer experiencing games that way but adding an extra subtitle track would be a costlier proposition.

What may make a difference going forward is how this extra option may come to be understood in the near future. It may remain an oddity, with Sega remaining the only company offering such an extravagant extra. Or, it may come to be considered a tool of digital accessibility, in the same way that subtitles for the deaf and hard-of-hearing (SDH) are. In this second scenario, I believe that Japanese firms will be compelled to at least match the perceived value of competing products.

The ultimate aim of Japanese video game firms like Sega is the creation of economic value, generating profit for their shareholders (SegaSammy Holdings Integrated Report,

2020). For these firms, then, it would be a matter of balancing the increased costs of creating an additional language option with the potential value that such option may add to their video game products. From this point of view, I believe that Japanese firms are not bound to a particular language ideology and have no intrinsic preferences in term of translation orientation. Rather, their aim is to generate value for their customer and shareholders. In other words, if players will come to expect ELF subtitles as part of a video game product, firms will surely find a way to provide this option, like Sega is already doing.

Furthermore, if additional ELF subtitles become the new norm, it may be the case that not offering this option may become the riskier proposition. I believe that, particularly in the case of games that are explicitly set in a fictional recreation of Japan like *Yakuza* and *Judgment*, fans and critics could make their expectations heard loudly, so there would be pressure on developers to meet these expectations. Other firms that do not create such games may not experience the same pressure. If, however, the current popularity of Japanese culture and media on the international stage continues, game developers may be tempted to offer similar products, trying to appeal to the general prestige that Japanese cultural products seem to enjoy at present.

I believe that as long as ELF subtitles do not replace 'native English' subtitles, offering the choice of selecting different translation orientations will become more popular in the future. The factors constraining this option may perhaps be material, financial, or simply dictated by constraints in planning and logistics; but firms will strive to meet the expectations of players as much as they can, simply as a way to increase customer satisfaction and eventually improve the sale of their products.

To conclude, I will also add here a note about the possibility of video game translation coming to affect other fields of translation. I have suggested above that translation into ELF is already a reality in the field of amateur translation. In a sense, Sega's innovation can be understood as the integration of fan translation practices into a commercial product. How likely are these practices to influence other fields of translation as well? From the evidence I was able to gather in my research, other commercial fields of translation from Japanese such as English manga publishing, despite having largely transitioned to a digital distribution format, do not yet offer a choice between translation orientations. This may be one of the reasons why amateur manga translation continues to flourish outside the commercial field. If Sega's practices become more widely accepted, we may see the introduction of similar options in other related fields of translation in the future. These developments are ongoing, so future research may be able to confirm, or refute my predictions.

REFERENCES

- Barder, O. (2018) '*Dragon quest XI S' on the switch gets a new trailer showing off its japanese voice cast* [online]. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/olliebarder/2018/12/23/dragon-quest-xi-s-on-the-switch-gets-a-new-trailer-showing-off-its-japanese-voice-cast/?sh=4b29d05b6925> (Accessed: 17 August 2021)

- Fabbretti, M. - A study of contemporary subtitling practices
Translation Matters, 4(1), 2022, pp. 66-85, DOI: https://doi.org/10.21747/21844585/tm4_1a5
- Bernal-Merino, M.Á. (2015) *Translation and localisation in video games: Making entertainment software global*. New York: Routledge.
- Chesterman, A. (2007) 'Bridge concepts in translation sociology', in Wolf, M. and Fukari, A. (eds.), *Constructing a sociology of translation* (Vol. 74). John Benjamins Publishing, pp. 171-186.
- CohhCarnage (2019) *let's play judgment with cohhcarnage (early key from SEGA) - Episode 2*. Upload Jun 20 [online]. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9llsvOogB7s&list=PLN39y5i_H0FkP4jgf3Fpzq9szY8QyD3Jc&t=31s (Accessed: 18 August 2021).
- Constantine, J. (2010) *Tokyo beat down: the story of Yakuza* [online]. Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20160525140414/http://www.1up.com/features/story-yakuza-franchise> (Accessed: 17 August 2021).
- Czarnota, J. (2016) *Co-creation, innovation and new service development: the case of the videogames industry*. University of Manchester.
- Doolan, L. (2020) Xenoblade chronicles 2 character designer celebrates third anniversary with some new artwork. Nintendolife [online]. Available at: https://www.nintendolife.com/news/2020/12/xenoblade_chronicles_2_character_designer_celebrates_third_anniversary_with_some_new_artwork__ (Accessed: 20 August 2021).
- Dragon Quest XI S: Echoes of an elusive age* (2019) Nintendo Switch [Game]. Square Enix: El Segundo, CA.
- Eisenbeis, R. (2013) Hacking the japanese voices back into the games [online]. Available online at: <https://kotaku.com/hacking-the-japanese-voices-back-into-the-games-5989361> (Accessed: 17 August 2021).
- Fabbretti, M. (2017) 'Manga scanlation for an international readership: the role of English as a lingua franca', *The Translator*, 23(4), pp. 456-473 [online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13556509.2017.1385938>
- Hester, B. (2021) *Yakuza's creator on his life, career, and why sega should've fired him in the '90s*. Gameinformer [online]. Available at: <https://www.gameinformer.com/2021/03/03/yakuzas-creator-on-his-life-career-and-why-sega-shouldve-fired-him-in-the-90s>. (Accessed: 19 August 2021).
- Holmes, J. S. (2000). 'The name and nature of translation studies', in Venuti, L. (ed.). *The Translation Studies Reader*. London: Routledge, pp.172-185.
- House, J. (2013) 'English as a lingua franca and translation', *The Interpreter and Translator Trainer*, 7 (2), pp. 279-298 [online]. Available at: [doi:10.1080/13556509.2013.10798855](https://doi.org/10.1080/13556509.2013.10798855)
- Johnston, L. (2019). *Exile sekai interviews yakuza creator Yoshihiro Nagoshi (Part 1) – The Image of Yakuza* [online]. Available at: <https://www.otaquest.com/toshihiro-nagoshi-interview-part-one/> (Accessed: 20 August 2021).
- Judge Eyes* (2018) PlayStation 4 [Game]. Sega Corporation: Tokyo
- Judgment* (2019) PlayStation 4 [Game]. Sega Europe: London
- Koichi (2011) *Goroawase: Japanese numbers wordplay* [online]. Available at: <https://www.tofugu.com/japanese/goroawase-japanese-numbers-wordplay/> (Accessed: 18 August 2021).
- Kyodo, Staff Report (2018) Turning the page on an era: Pager services to end in Japan after 50 years. *Japan Times* [online]. Available at:

<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2018/12/03/business/tech/pager-services-end-japan-50-years/> (Accessed: 18 August 2021).

Metacritic (2017) *Yakuza 0* [online]. Available at: https://www.metacritic.com/game/playstation-4/yakuza-0_ (Accessed: 18 August 2021).

Metacritic (2018) *Yakuza 6: the song of life* [online]. Available at: <https://www.metacritic.com/game/playstation-4/yakuza-6-the-song-of-life> (Accessed: 18 August 2021).

Metacritic (2019) *Judgment* [online]. Available at: <https://www.metacritic.com/game/playstation-4/judgment> (Accessed: 18 August 2021).

O'Hagan, M. and Mangiron, C. (2013) *Game localization*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

O'Sullivan, C. (2011) *Translating popular film*. Springer.

Pérez-González, L. and Susam-Saraeva, Ş (2012) Non-professionals translating and interpreting: Participatory and engaged perspectives. *The Translator*, 18(2), pp.149-165.

Persona 5 (2016) PlayStation 4 [Game]. Deep Silver: Höfen

Porter, D. (2003) 'The private eye', in Priestman, M. (ed.) *The Cambridge companion to crime fiction*. Cambridge University Press, pp.95-113.

Pym, A. (2006) 'On the social and the cultural in translation studies', in Pym, A., Shlesinger, M. and Jettmarova, Z. (eds.), *Sociocultural aspects of translating and interpreting* (Vol. 67). John Benjamins Publishing.

Rogers, T. (2017) 'Xenoblade chronicles 2 is pretty darn different in Japanese', *Kotaku*, 12 August [online]. Available at: <https://kotaku.com/xenoblade-chronicles-2-is-pretty-darn-different-in-japa-1821131255> (Accessed: 20 August 2021).

Scarpinito, R. (2019) 'Localizing judgment: go big or go home', *TechRaptor*, June 24 [online]. Available online: <https://techraptor.net/gaming/guides/localizing-judgment-go-big-or-go-home> (Accessed: 8 July 2022).

Schreier, J. 2012. *It's time for JRPGs to get rid of english voice acting* [online]. Available at: <https://kotaku.com/its-time-for-jrpgs-to-get-rid-of-english-voice-acting-5941179>. (Accessed: 20 August 2021)

SegaAmerica (2017) *The yakuza adventures of Scott and Sam | Oct. 6, 2017*. Upload: 9 October [online]. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_0a8aBYcwo&t=337s (Accessed: 18 August 2021).

SegaSammy Holdings integrated report 2020 [online]. Available at: https://www.segasammy.co.jp/english/ir/library/pdf/printing_annual/2020/al2020_e_all.pdf (Accessed: 10 August 2021).

Strichart S. (2019) [Twitter]. 1 May [online]. Available at: <https://twitter.com/triggerredd/status/1123276012245082113> (Accessed: 18 August 2021).

Stuart, K. (2020) 'Once more with feelings: How Yakuza: Like a Dragon reinvents middle-aged men in video games'. *The Guardian*. 23 Nov [online]. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/games/2020/nov/23/yakuza-like-a-dragon-reinvents-middle-aged-men-video-games> (Accessed: 19 August 2021).

The Undubbing FAQ (2008-2015) [online]. Available at: <https://www.undubbing.com/faq> (Accessed: 19 August 2021)

Fabbretti, M. - A study of contemporary subtitling practices
Translation Matters, 4(1), 2022, pp. 66-85, DOI: https://doi.org/10.21747/21844585/tm4_1a5

Yakuza (2006) PlayStation 2 [Game]. Sega Europe: London
Yakuza 2 (2008) PlayStation 2 [Game]. Sega Europe: London
Yakuza 3 (2010) PlayStation 3 [Game]. Sega Europe: London
Yakuza 4 (2011) PlayStation 3 [Game]. Sega Europe: London
Yakuza 5 (2015) PlayStation 4 [Game]. Sega Europe: London
Yakuza 0 (2017) PlayStation 4 [Game]. Sega Europe: London
Yakuza 6 (2018) PlayStation 4 [Game]. Sega Europe: London
Yakuza: Like a Dragon (2020) PlayStation 4. [Game]. Sega Europe: London

Acknowledgements: This project was supported by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science and the Grant-in-Aid for JSPS Fellows, Project No. 18F18728.

About the author: Matteo Fabbretti teaches translation theory at Ritsumeikan University in Kyoto and at Kobe City University of Foreign Studies, Kobe. His research interests include manga and video game translation, fan translation phenomena and translation into English as a lingua franca. He is currently investigating the field of business translation in Japan.