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A Study on Translation Strategies for Character Development in Video Games: Taking Stardew Valley as an Example

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Abstract:

This study takes the independent video game Stardew Valley as an example to explore the strategies and effects of translating the original English character dialogue into Chinese, with a focus on how translation serves to recreate character personalities and localize cultural contexts. Guided by the theories of functional equivalence and pragmatic translation, the study selects five representative characters with distinct styles (Shane, Abigail, George, Emily, and Haley) from the game. Through a dialogue comparison analysis method, the study evaluates aspects such as tone, speech style, emotional expression, and cultural adaptation. The study found that translators retained the original personalities while adopting moderate stylistic adjustments and cultural softening strategies, achieving good functional equivalence. However, the simplification of language style for some characters also led to a dilution of their individuality. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of game character translation practices and provides case references for game localization work.

Keywords: game translation, character development, functional equivalence, pragmatic translation, Stardew Valley

1. Introduction

In recent years, with the globalization of the game industry, “characterization translation” in game localization has gradually attracted attention from the fields of linguistics and communication studies. Stardew Valley, as a simulation management game rich in character portrayal, owes its success not only to its system mechanics and art design but also to its villagers with authentic personalities. The goal of game translation is not only to convey information but also to recreate character personalities and maintain narrative style, enabling target-language players to establish emotional connections. This study approaches the topic from a translation strategy perspective, combining linguistic theory to analyze the Chinese translations of the game’s five main characters and evaluate their contributions and short-

comings in "character image construction."

2. Literature Review

2.1 Research on Game Localization

Game localization, as a cross-cultural translation and communication practice, has garnered increasing attention from the academic community in recent years. Overseas research began earlier and has produced abundant theoretical outcomes. O'Hagan and Mangiron (2013) first systematically constructed a theoretical framework for game localization in their pioneering work Game Localization: Translating for the Global Digital Entertainment Industry, proposing the principle of "ludological prioritization" and emphasizing the importance of maintaining the player experience in translation. Bernal-Merino (2015) further expanded this field in Translation and Localisation in Video Games, highlighting the multimodal characteristics and cultural complexity of game translation. Mangiron (2018) discussed challenges in localization practices, such as creative translation and cultural adaptation, in Game on! Burning Issues in Game Localization, providing direction for subsequent empirical research.

Systematic research on game translation in the domestic academic community started relatively late but has shown rapid development in recent years. Shi Jingyi (2018) explored translation strategies for culturally loaded items in online games from the perspective of functional equivalence theory; Li Dejun and He Qunfang (2017) combined functional purpose theory to emphasize the communicative goals of translation and the acceptability of target users; Chen Xufeng (2019) proposed a multi-level cultural adaptation translation model, systematically analyzing the mechanisms for handling cultural factors in game localization.

2.2 Research on Character Dialogue Translation

Among game text types, character dialogue is the most interactive and individualistic text form, and its translation strategies directly influence players' understanding of characters and emotional resonance. In film, television, and literary translation, research on dialogue language has already formed a relatively mature system. Ramos Pinto (2009) emphasized the importance of translating sociolects, stressing the need to preserve characters' identities, social class, and emotional characteristics in translation. Baños-Piñero and Chaume (2009) further introduced the concept of "prefabricated orality," revealing the patterns by which written texts mimic spoken language features, which holds reference value for understanding game dialogue language. Fernández Costales (2014) focuses on the challenges of reshaping character language styles during cultural adaptation.

Domestically, related research has also gradually expanded to game texts. Xu Jinghong and Zhang Ling (2016) analyze the perceptual differences among players when reading game texts based on reception aesthetics and propose that attention should be paid to the equivalence of language style and emotional transmission. Zhao Qiurong (2020) preliminarily explored the stylistic reproduction of character language in "The Translation of Game Dialogue Texts and Character Development," emphasizing the synchronous reconstruction of pragmatic functions and personality traits.

2.3 Research Combining Game Translation and Character Development

Research directly linking "translation" and "character construction" remains scarce, but some scholars have attempted to break new ground from different angles. Mangiron (2010) analyzed how humor translation influences character impressions in "The Importance of Not Being Earnest," pointing out that humor strategies have a constructive role in shaping game characters. Lepre (2014) analyzed the issue of reproducing character language tone in multilingual localization in "Divided by Language, United by Gameplay," emphasizing the balance between unified gameplay and cultural transmission. Dong and Mangiron (2018) further explore the specific impact of cultural adaptation on character acceptance in "Journey to the East," stressing that translators must understand the interactive mechanisms between cultural context and audience psychology.

In the Chinese context, research combining character development and translation began later. Lin Yuchen (2021) focuses on the impact of dialogue option translation on player cognition, marking the first attempt to link dialogue options with character image creation. Zhang Xinyue (2022) uses Genshin Impact as an example to explore strategic adjustments in cross-cultural dissemination of character images through multilingual translation, emphasizing the interaction between language style, cultural codes, and player cultural backgrounds.

2.4 Research Gaps and the Positioning of This Study

Based on existing research findings, while academia has achieved certain results in game localization, language style reproduction, and cultural translation, most studies have focused on macro-level textual analysis, technical

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translation, or terminology processing. Research on the textual type of character dialogue in games—which is context-dependent, stylistic, and individualistic—remains insufficient. Especially in exploring "how translation influences the reconstruction of character imagery," there is a lack of systematic, in-depth theoretical and empirical analysis.

Additionally, existing research has primarily focused on large-scale commercial games (such as The Witcher and Genshin Impact), with limited attention given to the nuanced and personalized character development in indie games. As a typical indie game, Stardew Valley's characters, though not driven by lengthy narratives, exhibit rich personalities through concise dialogue, presenting higher demands on translation strategies.

Therefore, this study selects Stardew Valley as a case study, focusing on the translation of representative NPC dialogues. From the perspectives of functional equivalence and pragmatic strategies, it explores how the translation can maintain linguistic naturalness while achieving the cross-cultural reproduction of character personalities, aiming to fill the gap in research on character dialogue translation.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Functional Equivalence Theory

Proposed by Eugene Nida, this theory asserts that the translation should evoke a response in the target audience that is similar to that of the original text. In game translation, functional equivalence emphasizes whether the language style and emotional impact of the characters are conveyed in a "natural and credible" manner, especially in colloquial contexts, where the translation must align with the sociolinguistic norms of the target language.

3.2 Pragmatic Translation Theory

Pragmatic translation focuses on the "implied meaning" and communicative purposes of language in actual communication, such as tone, sarcasm, and innuendo. For game characters, their language often carries strong "pragmatic intentions," such as arrogance, social anxiety, or self-defense. Whether the translator accurately understands and reproduces these intentions is a key criterion for evaluating the success of the translation.

4. Case Analysis

4.1 . Shane

Shane is a typical socially avoidant character, whose dialogue is characterized by "coldness," "hostility," and "rejection." For example:

Original text: "I hardly know you. Why are you talking to me?"

Translation: " 我和你完全不熟。你为什么要和我说话啊？ "

Original text: "What? What do you want? Go away."

Translation: " 什么？您想要什么？快走开。"

Original: "You again? How many times do I have to tell you to leave me alone?"

Translation: " 又是你？跟你说过多少次了，别来烦我！ "

The translation here is largely faithful to the original meaning, but there is a certain degree of stylistic softening. Although " 您 " is more in line with Chinese usage, it weakens Shane's hostility, and from a pragmatic perspective, slightly reduces the original text's level of rejection. However, expressions like " 快走开 " and " 别来烦我 " carry strong negative emotional connotations in Chinese, successfully achieving emotional equivalence. Overall, the translator has struck a balance between staying true to the character's personality and maintaining acceptability.

In terms of style, the original English sentence uses short, forceful phrases such as "go away," "leave me alone," and "you again." The Chinese translation reinforces the character's aggressiveness and sense of isolation through concise syntax, clear punctuation, and the use of the second person (e.g. " 又是你 ").

Under the theory of functional equivalence, this translation not only conveys the explicit meaning of the original text (rejection) but also reproduces the character's resistance to interaction (pragmatic implication), enabling Chinese readers to achieve equivalent understanding and emotional resonance at the pragmatic level, thereby successfully recreating the character's personality.

4.2 Abigail

Abigail's lines clearly reveal her young, lively, mischievous, and self-aware personality. For example:

Original text: "Oh man... I've been putting off my homework all weekend. Looks like I'll be pulling another all-nighter..."

Translation: " 哎哟 …… 一整个周末都没写作业。看来又要熬个通宵了 ……"

Original text: "An island this big has got to be hiding some buried treasure. Quick, get me a shovel! Relax, I'm just kidding."

Translation: “ 这么大的岛一定藏着什么宝贝。快 , 给我把铲子！哈哈 , 我就开个玩笑。”
Abigail’s lines feature typical American teenage expressions, such as “Oh man,” “pulling an all-nighter,” and “quick.” These colloquial phrases have been skillfully translated into “ 哎呦 ” “ 又要熬个通宵 ” and “ 快 ” which are closer to the Chinese teenage style, achieving functional equivalence. Especially translating “Relax” as “ 哈哈 ” not only recreates the girl’s lively and cheerful tone but also avoids the potential “translationese” that might arise in the Chinese context.

4.3 George

George is a typical “grumpy old man” character, whose lines are filled with complaints, sarcasm, and the worldly wisdom and bluntness of the elderly:
Original: “A feast for some stupid star? Humbug!”
Translation: “ 为天上的星星庆祝？有毛病！ ”
Original: “Looks like the young folks will have to do some extra weeding after this one... Heheh...”
Translation: “ 这场雨下完就要除草 , 年轻人有得好忙了 …… 嘿嘿 ……”
George’s expressions often carry sarcasm and biting wit. In the localization, phrases like “ 有毛病 ” and “ 有得好忙 ”—which carry regional and temporal connotations—along with the slightly crude language typical of the elderly, convey strong emotional tones and a colloquial style, achieving functional equivalence within the cultural context.
In the following dialogue:
Original text: “You know, I really have been a grumpy old man to everyone. But now I feel like I’m softening up like an old ripe fruit.”
Translation: “ 我以前是个脾气暴躁的老头子。但是现在我的脾气变得很好了。”
The simile “like an old ripe fruit” in the original sentence is omitted in the translation, softened to the result-oriented description “ 我的脾气变得很好了 ” While this loses some of the metaphorical flavor, it enhances acceptability and clarity, reflecting the pragmatic translation strategy of prioritizing the target audience.

4.4 Emily

Emily is a character full of spirituality who is concerned with nature and cosmic energy. For example:
Original text: “This world is full of spirits and magic...”
Translation: “ 这个世界充斥着幽灵与魔法 ……”
Original text: “I visualize the energy from this crystal garden flowing through my body.”
Translation: “ 我想象这座水晶花园中的能量流经我的身体。”
Emily’s language has a strong mystical tone and meditative rhetorical style, often using symbolic vocabulary (spirits, energy, flow) and perceptual verbs (visualize, believe). The Chinese translation often uses literal translation and conveys the same emotional state and conceptual level through the use of words such as “ 流经 ” “ 想象 ” and “ 心怀信念 ” achieving dual equivalence in both style and meaning.
However, in the following sentence:
Original: “Have faith... every day you’re taking one more step on the path of your destiny.”
Translation: “ 心怀信念 …… 每一天 , 你都向目标迈进了一步。”
The translator renders “path of your destiny” as “ 目标 ” making the meaning clearer but losing the original sense of fate and spiritual depth of “destiny’s path.” While Emily’s language translation style leans toward literal translation, some pragmatic nuances are weakened, affecting the recreation of her character’s charm.

4.5 Haley

Haley is a typical beautiful but shallow fashion girl whose speech often reflects narcissism, prejudice, and an obsession with appearance:
Original text: “Oh... you’re that new farmer… If it weren’t for those horrendous clothes, you might actually be cute.”
Translation: “ 噢 …… 你就是那个新来的农场姑娘 / 农夫吧？哈？嗯 …… 要不是你那身衣服 , 你应该还挺可爱的吧。”
Such dialogue retains the original text’s mix of playful teasing and subtle offense. By using the structure “ 要不是 …… 应该还 ……” the tone becomes more sarcastic, effectively conveying Haley’s coldness and vanity.
For example:
Original text: “Ew, you’re all dirty.”
Translation: “ 咦 , 你们好脏。”
The use of “ 咦 ” in Chinese reinforces the character’s disdainful tone, and the adverb ‘ 好 ’ in “ 你们好脏 ” enhances the subjectivity of the evaluation, perfectly reproducing the emotional pragmatic function of the original sentence.
Original text: “I do have over 1,000 skirts.”
Translation: “ 我估摸我现在得有 1000 多条裙子了。”
The term “ 估摸 ” has a colloquial flavor, aligning with Haley’s casual boastful tone, reflecting the pragmatic translation theory of equivalent subjective perspective of the speaker.

5. Summary

This study takes Stardew Valley as an example and combines functional equivalence and pragmatic translation

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theory to conduct an in-depth analysis of the Chinese-English dialogue of five typical NPC characters in the game. The study found that excellent game translation should not only focus on information accuracy but also emphasize the reproduction of character personalities and the localization of cultural contexts. Translators employed strategies such as register adjustment, pragmatic intent reconstruction, cultural adaptation, and rhetorical substitution to achieve a high degree of equivalence in conveying the original text's emotions, identity, and style.

However, it was also observed that in certain texts with complex pragmatic nuances or profound rhetorical implications, the translations exhibited a degree of "imagery weakening" or "linguistic flattening," suggesting that while striving for naturalness in the target language, we should also prioritize the faithful reproduction of the original text's stylistic nuances.

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