The (In)visible Agency of Video Game Localizers in Iran: A Case Study Approach

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Abstract

The sociological study of video games from the perspective of Translation Studies is a largely uncharted territory. The present study seeks to address this gap by shedding light on the (in)visible agency of video games translators. It achieves this through highlighting the concept of interactivity as the distinctive feature of video games. To this end, four Persian localized video games were selected as the corpus sample. The games were of different genres to account for the varying degrees of interactivity in game genres. Upon textual analysis, the cases of translators' (in)visible agency were identified and categorized. The findings suggest that video games translators exerted visible agency to clarify game references, increase comprehension, provide commentaries, and reflect on their translation strategies. Furthermore, translators' invisible agency was primarily directed at clarifying both verbal and non-verbal information encoded within the semiotic configuration of video games. These findings are discussed considering different game situations and hence varying levels of interactivity.

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1. Introduction

The localization industry has played a pivotal role in the mainstreaming of video games as one of the most popular mediums of entertainment (Bernal-Merino, 2015). A successful localization depends to a great extent upon aligning the product with the socio-cultural values of the target market (Bernal-Merino, 2015). To make a product acceptable in the target market, the translators are granted a quasi-absolute freedom to reproduce the experience of the players of the original game for target market players (O'Hagan, 2007). The act of exercising this freedom has been described as transcreation (Mangiron & O'Hagan, 2006).

Interest in the study of video games from a translation perspective was fueled by an initial surge of interest in the practice of game localization in the mid-2000s (O'Hagan & Mangiron, 2013). Replete with culture-specificity at various levels (Pettini, 2021), video games need to be studied from different perspectives. Thus far, research on game localization has focused on the challenges of translation (e.g., Bernal-Merino, 2008; Mangiron, 2007; Mangiron & O'Hagan, 2006), strategies for translating these interactive audiovisual products (e.g., Fernández-Costales, 2012; Mangiron & O'Hagan, 2006), and the reception of localized video games (e.g., Ellefsen & Bernal-Merino, 2016; Fernández-Costales, 2016; Khoshsaligheh & Ameri, 2020). However, outside of a few studies (e.g., Zhang, 2012; Khoshsaligheh & Ameri, 2017), the application of sociological approaches to the study of video games translation has been neglected. Video games translators have largely been ignored as well (O'Hagan & Mangiron, 2013).

Of the many sociological approaches to game localization, the (in)visibility of video games translators is of particular interest. As already stated, for a localized product to succeed it needs to provide target users with "the look and feel of locally-made products" (Fry, 2003, p. 5). To achieve this aim, translators are encouraged to seek equivalence at a functional level (Di Marco, 2007) so that the resulting translation is as distant as possible from translationese. This begs the question, what are the possible circumstances for the visibility of translators within the context of game localization, and to what extent do translators enjoy agency in practice? This particularly stands out when approached from the light of the practices followed throughout the localization process, on the one hand, and the role that interactivity plays in video games, on the other. The current exploratory research is an initial attempt to understand the cases unique to video games in which translators turn visible. Furthermore, upon identifying the relationship between the game situation and the level of interactivity characterizing it, the study outlines the practices that video games translators could employ to exert their agency either explicitly or implicitly.

In what follows, the practice of game localization in Iran is contextualized along with the relation between the very nature of this practice and translators' agency. Furthermore, the concept of interactivity has been discussed as it is the most striking and distinguishing feature of video games. After highlighting the theoretical aspects of the research and the adapted methodology, the results are presented based on the themes emerging from the analyzed games.

2. Literature review

2.1. Game localization in Iran

The popularity of video games has been on a steady rise around the world, and Iran is no exception. According to some reports, there are 32 million video game players in Iran (Digital Games Research Center, 2019), turning it into a potentially lucrative market. However, the Iranian market is often not a primary target for game developers. This could partly be due to the US sanctions on Iran, making game developing companies reluctant to offer services to Iranian users (France24, 2021). Furthermore, Iran's non-signing of the Universal Copyright Convention has led to increased software piracy in the country (Šisler, 2013). However, the lack of acknowledgement of copyright laws does not mean that intellectual property is totally ignored in Iran. If a domestic company is licensed by an owner company to distribute a product in the country, there are legal measures in place to prevent illegal distribution of that product by unauthorized sources (Ahmadi, 2015). If no official licensing has been obtained, the usual workflow for game distribution companies in Iran would be downloading the game online and selling online and physical copies (Ahmadi, 2015).

Against this backdrop, it is of little surprise that most video games are not officially localized for the Iranian market, which leaves the field open for fan localizers to localize their favorite games into Persian (Al-Batineh & Alawneh, 2021). Two groups of agents are involved in the localization of video games in Iran: state-authorized official organizations, and unofficial localization groups. State-authorized organizations are required to obtain a publication license prior to the public distribution of games (Iran Computer and Video Games Foundation, 2019). Each game is reviewed for congruency with a range of Iranian-Islamic ideologies. The games localized by unofficial localization groups are not distributed physically in the country, rather made available for online purchase. The latter approach has been growing consistently, with several new agents having entered the market in recent years.

The activities of official game localization companies in Iran have been researched as "professional video games localization" (e.g., Jooyaeian & Khoshsaligheh, 2021). At the other end of the spectrum lies "non-professional localization", broadly referring to the fan translation of video games (e.g., Khoshsaligheh & Ameri, 2017). The translation of video games can be done through dubbing or subtitling. Professional subtitling does not exist as a practice within the Iranian mediascape due to a lack of professional codes of conduct, formal training, or professional associations (Khoshsaligheh et al., 2020). However, some subtitling activities are compensated which is in contrast with the uncompensated nature of fan translation. Khoshsaligheh et al. (2020) put forward the term 'quasi-professional' subtitling to account for this near-professional status. By analogy, given the absence of formal training in game localization in Iran and the lack of established guidelines and codes of conduct, no claim of professional game localization can be made. To account for this type of professional activity done by non-professionals, the term 'quasi-professional' localization has been used in the present study.

2.2. Video games translation in practice

The localization of video games must be approached from a functional perspective, one that shifts the focus from linguistic equivalence towards equivalence at the level of text function (Pettini, 2021).

Skopos theory can be used to explain the function of game localization, namely "to convey a game play experience that is as close as possible to the equivalent of the original" (O'Hagan, 2007, p. 4). Given the shift from linguistic to functional equivalence, video games translators are often granted a carte blanche that allows them to make any alterations necessary to preserve the function of the translation (Mangiron & O'Hagan, 2006). This quasi-absolute freedom can contribute positively to the status of translators and their increased agency (O'Hagan & Mangiron, 2013). The genre of the game in question can limit the extent to which translators are allowed to draw on their creativity. As argued by Bernal-Merino (2007), games can be divided into two types based on the level of freedom assigned to translators: those that require more research than creativity (e.g., simulation games which are heavily technical), and those that require more creativity than research.

The same distinction has been made by Pettini (2021) who seeks to define the boundaries of translators' creativity based on the relationship between the game world and the real world. Game worlds can best be described when placed on a spectrum: those that sit more on the side of realism, and those that are rooted in a fantasy world (Pettini, 2021). Furthermore, the more popular a video game, the more care should go into its translation (Bernal-Merino, 2009). O'Hagan and Mangiron (2013) interviewed the translator of the *Final Fantasy* series to find out why some of the Japanese terms were not translated in the localized English version. As argued by the translator, "games in the *Final Fantasy* series often feature classic Japanese weapons from classic Japanese sources, like Murasame, and since these are part of the lore of the game, we transliterate those item names directly for the English version" (O'Hagan & Mangiron, 2013, p. 191). This clearly reflects how the game world can determine translators' decision-making as well as the freedom they enjoy while translating.

2.3. Video games translation and translators' agency

Translators' agency is an overlooked research area in game localization (Mangiron, 2017). The skopos of game localization presents translators with a carte blanche to tap into their creativity and produce a natural translation. In a Venutian sense (1995), this leads to translators' invisibility. If exercised appropriately, the agency of translators can turn them into powerful agents in the game localization process (O'Hagan & Mangiron, 2013), but ones that are nonetheless invisible due to the naturalizing translation approach typically adopted.

The term 'agency' has been approached in different ways in Translation Studies. Research on the topic has sought to analyze translators' agency both quantitatively (e.g., Paloposki, 2010) and qualitatively (e.g., Abdallah, 2010). The analysis can also be conducted at different scales. For instance, Abdallah (2010) seeks to analyze translators' agency within production networks through a longitudinal study of their workplace experiences. Another fruitful research avenue for studying translators' agency is focusing on the product of translation (Paloposki, 2010). This is the underlying methodological assumption of the present study. One of the ways to find instances of agency is tracking the translator's footprints in the translated product, in this case localized video games.

Translators' (in)visibility is one of the more widely explored topics within Translation Studies. The topic has generally been approached from two perspectives: translators' role and position in relation to the text, and translators' role in relation to clients/end-users (e.g., Dam & Korning Zethsen, 2008;

Liu, 2013). This suggests that the notion of (in)visibility can be interpreted in different ways. In line with the latter approach, Liu (2013) defines translators' visibility as "situations in which translators can directly communicate with clients and end-users" (p. 28). Forming the basis of the other view towards translators' (in)visibility, which is the one subscribed to in the present study, is the Venutian (1995) stance. Largely focused on translation into English, Venuti (1995) argues that the then prevalent perception of an acceptable translation, which was a natural sounding one, renders invisible the role of translators and gives readers the delusion that the text they are reading was originally written in their language. In Venuti's view (1995), translators' (in)visibility can be realized through two general translation strategies i.e., domestication and foreignization. Domestication is a natural translation approach which erases most traces of translators' intervention in the process of translation (Venuti, 1995, p. 5). Foreignization, on the other hand, retains the foreignness of the product and does not necessarily align the foreign text to the values and dominant ideologies of the target culture (Venuti, 1995).

The literature on translators' agency in game localization is extremely limited. Focusing their attention on non-professional translation of video games, Khoshsaligheh and Ameri (2017) sought to understand the approach of non-professional video game translators, the ways in which the non-professional subtitle becomes visible, and its unique technical and linguistic features. Given the scarcity of literature on the topic, Khoshsaligheh and Ameri's study is an important step in the right direction. However, it only focuses on the work of one fan translator and his subtitling of the video recording of the storyline of Uncharted 4: A Thief's End (2016). The non-professional translator was found to have gained visibility through means such as placing his voice on the game recording, adding explanations to subtitles using brackets, and adding commentaries to subtitles (both on the game itself and his own translation). Moreover, the study treats video games as non-interactive audiovisual products by taking the game outside the interactive context in which it takes place.

The present study is an attempt to contribute to the literature by addressing the shortcomings of past research.

2.4. Interactivity in video games

Video games are multimedia and multimodal interactive entertainment products, the translation of which is not unsimilar to the translation of children's books, productivity software, and non-interactive audiovisual products (Bernal-Merino, 2008). The most salient feature of video games compared to other audiovisual products is interactivity. Video game players are no longer passive spectators, rather they control the pace of the action and are actively engaged with the game (Bernal-Merino, 2006). The level of interactivity can change in different game situations. Game situations are "different moments within the game programming that entail different levels of interaction for the player as well as a particular audiovisual configuration" (Mejías-Climent, 2021, p. 20). Table 1 outlines the different game situations alongside their level of interactivity.

Table 1. Game situations and interactivity in video games (Mejías-Climent, 2021, p. 154)

Game situation	Level of interactivity
Game action	Full interaction
Tasks	Full, partial, or no
Dialogues	Full or partial interaction
Cinematics	No interaction

Presented as a spectrum ranging from full interaction to no interaction, game action refers to situations in which the player is fully interacting with the game, hence able to perform actions such as attacking, moving in the game world, and looking around. Characterized by zero interaction, on the other hand, are cinematics and cut-scenes (Mejías-Climent, 2021). Serving as a tool for developing the plot and characters, as well as providing background information for the game story, cut-scenes are movie-like cinematic sequences during which the player has almost no interaction with the game world (O'Hagan & Mangiron, 2013).

Table 2. Interactive game genres (Mejías-Climent, 2021)

Combat	**Simulation**
Shooter (firearms)	Resource management
Fight (physical contact)	Sports
Beat'em-up	**Strategy**
Hack and slash	**Rhythm**
Adventure	Dance
Action-adventure	Sing
RPG	**Educational**
Survival	Serious games
Platforms	**Competition and contest**
Graphic/conversational adventure	Games of luck
Racing	Bets
Puzzles and labyrinths	

In the middle of the spectrum are tasks and dialogues. Tasks differ in terms of their level of interactivity. Examples of such game situations are interactive in-game tutorials during which players are presented with instructions and can only perform what is stated in those instructions. Along the same lines, dialogues refer to conversational exchanges between the main character of the game and the non-playable characters (Mejías-Climent, 2021). The genre of the game in question can also determine interactivity. The gaming world is rapidly evolving, and new genres of video games are being developed regularly. Furthermore, a growing number of hybrid genres have come into existence (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2021). Basing her proposed classification on interactivity, Mejías-Climent (2021) identifies these game genres in Table 2.

Given the scarcity of the literature on translators' agency and visibility in game localization and the limited scope of existing research, the present study seeks to shed light on the visibility of translators' agency in the context of quasi-professional Persian game localization. More specifically, the study seeks to provide answers to the following research questions:

1) In what ways do video games translators exert their agency?
2) What are the cases in which video game translators gain visibility?
3) Is there a relationship between the visibility of translators' agency and the interactivity of the game situation?

It is hypothesized that the level of interactivity of the game situation in question predicts translators' visibility. In other words, the more interactive the game situation, the less visible the translator.

3. Theoretical framework

As argued by Paloposki (2010), translators' footprints (visibility) can be traced in the work they translate in the form of annotations that might appear as footnotes, typography, or text selection, among others. Closely tied to the concept of visibility, is translators' agency. The notion of agency came to the fore at the wake of the sociological turn in translation studies to account for different aspects. Sager (1994) defines an agent as someone who is "in an intermediary position between a translator and an end user of translation" (p. 321). Simeoni (1995) refers to an agent as a social presence that has a voice with a pen. This is the sense in which an agent is defined in Paloposki's work and indeed the present research. As highlighted by Paloposki (2010), translators' footprints and their decisions can become visible in the final product in the form of such annotations as footnotes (p. 89). Since the concern of the present study is video games and we are dealing with an audiovisual product, replicating Khoshsaligheh and Ameri (2017), instances of translators' visibility and agency are identified by looking at the annotations added by the translators to subtitles or other textual materials in the games.

4. Method

4.1. Corpus

Four Persian localized video games were included in the corpus sample: (1) *Sherlock Holmes: The Devil's Daughter* (2016), (2) *Life is Strange: Before the Storm* (2017), (3) *Devil May Cry 5* (2019), and (4) *Life is Strange: True Colors* (2021). All these games have been localized into Persian by

'Gamesub', a major unofficial game localization team. The rationale behind the selection of these games was to include different genres and hence different levels of interactivity.

4.2. Data collection procedure

Both the original English and Persian localized version of the selected games were played in their entirety by one of the researchers on a personal computer. The gameplay was recorded using Aiseesoft Game Recorder for further analysis. The recorded gameplays were replayed by the researchers with the sole focus of identifying instances that were relevant to the purposes of the current research. Screenshots were captured on both the Persian localized and the original versions.

4.3. Data analysis

The instances of translators' (in)visible agency were identified drawing on Paloposki (2010), and the game situation was ascertained using Mejías-Climent's taxonomy of game situations (2021). The model draws on interactivity as the most distinguishing feature of video games from other audiovisual entertainment media. Accordingly, the model was used to identify different game situations differentiated based on their interactivity. This was to determine the level of interactivity in each instance of translator agency. Table 3 presents the details of the corpus sample:

Table 3. Games constituting the corpus of the study

Title	Production year	Genre	Developing company	Localization group	Localization year
Sherlock Holmes: The Devil's Daughter	2016	Adventure mystery	Frogwares	Gamesub	2019
Life is Strange: Before the Storm	2017	Graphic adventure	Deck Nine	Gamesub	2018
Devil May Cry 5	2019	Action-adventure	Capcom	Gamesub	2020
Life is Strange: True Colors	2021	Graphic adventure	Deck Nine	Gamesub	2021

5. Findings

In this section, the instances of translators' (in)visible agency in the analyzed games will be presented alongside the corresponding game situations. Translators had gained (in)visibility with regards to the following cases: (1) game references: explaining the references existing both within the game world and the references existing outside of the imaginative game world; (2) comprehension: adding explanations or glosses to increase the comprehensibility of dialogues; (3) commentary: translators' own comments with regards to particular utterances/occurrences in the game; and (4) reflecting on translation strategies: translators commenting on/justifying their choice of translation strategies. The presented categories emerged on the basis of the findings. The first category i.e., game references was taken from Pettini (2021). The following section will provide a detailed account of each case.

5.1. Game references

Video games are complex software products that can tell stories and build connections through references to both within and outside the game world. Pettini (2021) highlights the different types of realia (real-world and existing) and irrealia (game world and non-existing) references incorporated in video games. Of interest to the current discussion are her concepts of metaludic intratextuality and intertextuality.

5.1.1. Metaludic intratextuality

Metaludic intratextuality refers to "the (textual) relationship between the game world of the single episode in the game series and other installments of the same series, other game worlds or the world of video games and gaming in general" (Pettini, 2021, p. 92). Video games have turned into a narrative genre (Carlquist, 2002), so video game translators need to understand and convey the references established between the game world and other game worlds (metaludic intratextuality) and those between the game world and the real world (intertextuality). Figure 1 shows an instance of translators' visible agency arising as a result of metaludic intratextuality in *Life is Strange: Before the Storm* (2017).
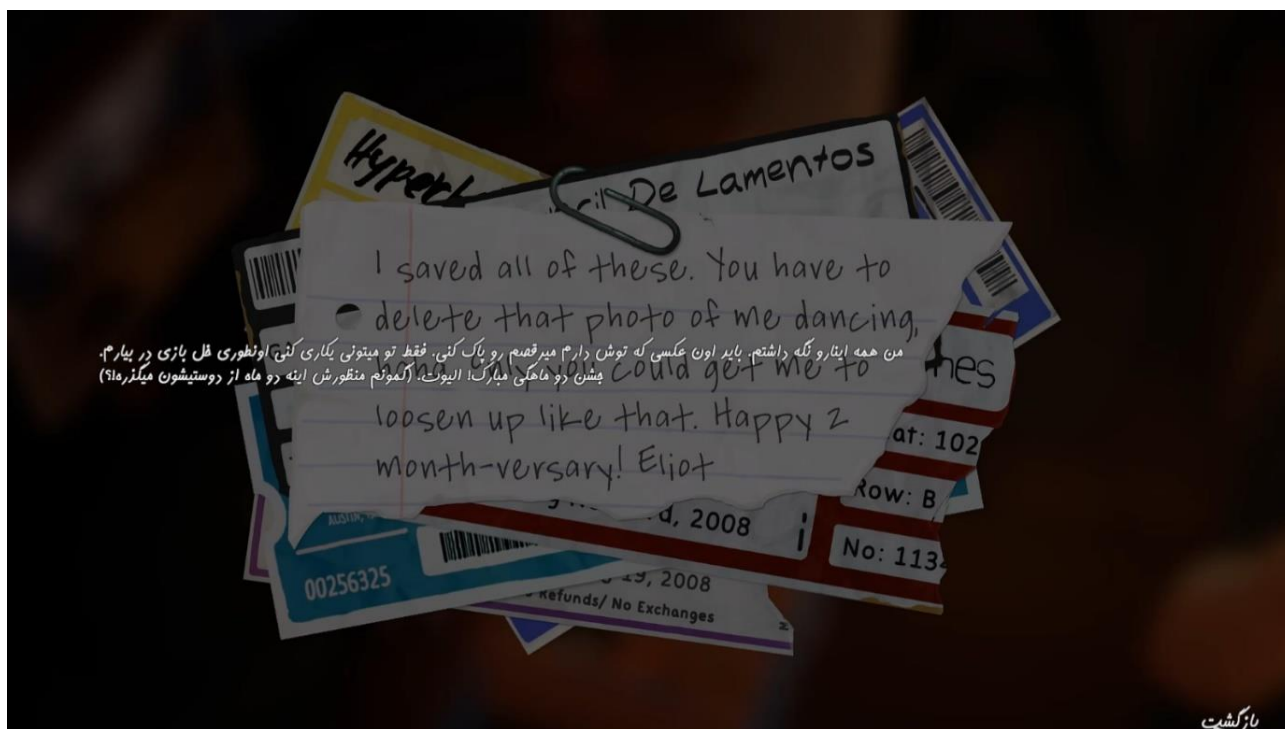

Figure 1. Translator's attempt to clarify a metaludic intratextual reference in *Life is Strange: Before the Storm* (2017)

As suggested in Figure 1, the translator has tried to clarify the metaludic reference established between the game world and the previous installments of the game. He has gained visibility by adding a sentence inside parentheses that reads "I suppose he means that they've been friends for two months?!", referring to the term "2 month-versary". In this case, even the translator does not seem to be certain about the reference, hence the words "I suppose" and the question and exclamation marks at the end.

In terms of game situation and level of interactivity, this instance can be categorized as a game task characterized by extreme partial interaction in that the player can only take one action, which is to press the 'return' button at the bottom of the screen.

5.1.2. Intertextuality

Intertextuality is concerned with "how game texts relate to and reference other texts [...] through different and more or less overt devices such as quotations and allusions, and how games meaningfully interweave them with aspects of their worlds" (Pettini, 2021, p. 92). It can cover the references made in the game world to other fictional or non-fictional works that exist in the real world. Figure 2 is an instance of intertextuality in *Life is Strange: Before the Storm* (2017) leading to translators' visibility.

Figure 2. Translators' visibility because of intertextuality in *Life is Strange: Before the Storm* (2017)

Figure 2 makes a reference to a quote from Shakespeare's play, *Macbeth*: "Sound and fury, signifying nothing". The translator sought to highlight this reference by adding a parenthesis reading "شکسپیر Shakespeare". Like the previous instance, the translator felt the need to clarify this intertextual reference. This dialogue appears in a cut-scene during which the player has no interaction with the game world. By adding "Shakespeare" to the end of this quote, the translator has not only become more visible, but he has also shown awareness of the cultural gap that might exist for his target audience (i.e., Persian-speaking players). This gesture can also indicate to the players that the translator is culturally competent hence more trustworthy. Figure 3 represents another instance of intertextual references in *Life is Strange: Before the Storm* (2017).
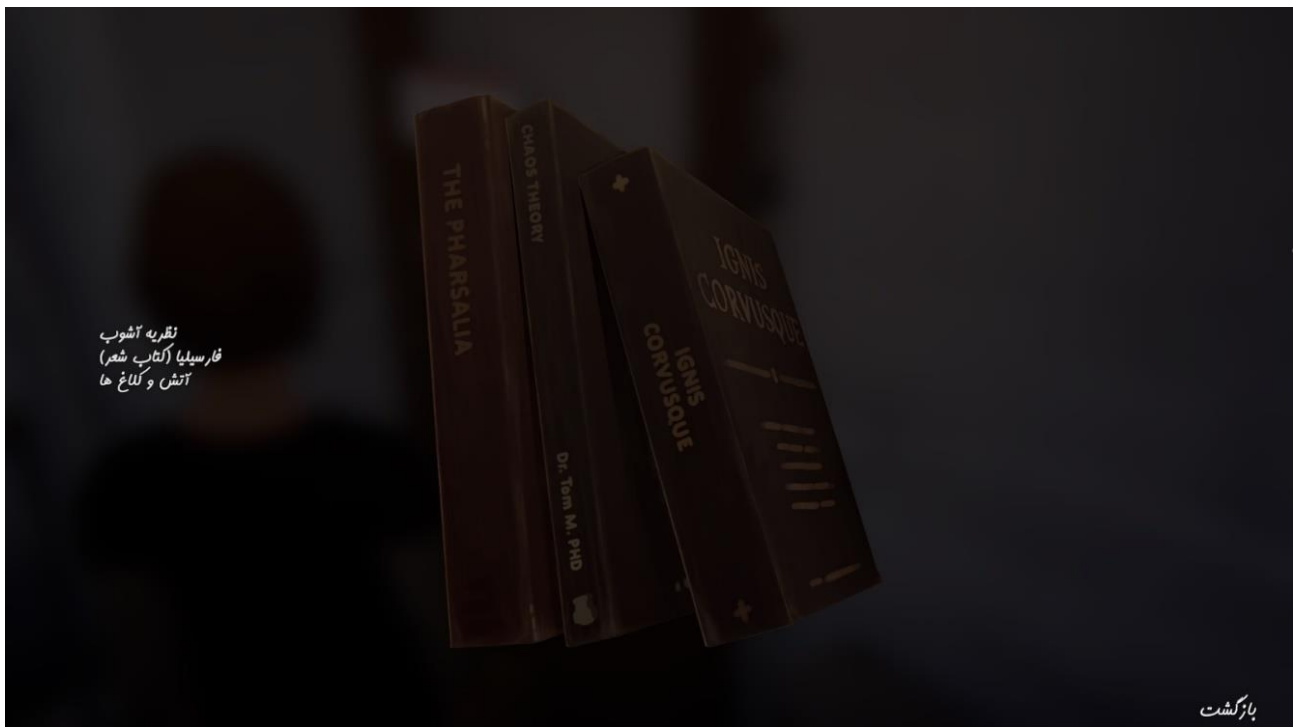
Figure 3. Translators' visibility because of intertextuality in *Life is Strange: Before the Storm* (2017)

In Figure 3, *The Pharsilia*, a Roman book of poetry, is on the shelf next to two other books. In the Persian localized version, the intertextual reference was highlighted by adding a parenthesis reading (کتاب شعر) "book of poetry". Here, the translator has concluded that the average player of the Persian localized version is not familiar with this book or its genre, so he made the link explicit.

5.2. Comprehension

In some cases, the translators gained visibility by trying to clarify ideas or wordplays. Figure 4 is an instance of this type of visibility in *Life is Strange: Before the Storm* (2017):
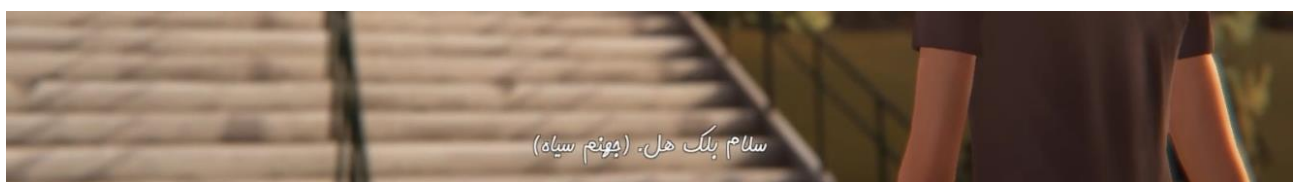

Figure 4. Translator's attempt to increase comprehension in *Life is Strange: Before the Storm* (2017)

As Figure 4 suggests, the main character of the game, Chloe Price, expresses contempt for her school through a wordplay. The name of the school is "Blackwell", but Chole calls it "BlackHell" to emphasize how grim and unpleasant the school is to her. She says "Hello, BlackHell". In the Persian localized version, the translator transferred the same word "بلک هل" (BlackHell) and added a parenthesis containing its literal translation in Persian. This dialogue appeared in one of the cut-scenes during which the player has no interaction with the game world.

In some other cases, the translators exercised invisible agency, for instance by attempting to increase comprehensibility without the explicit use of such devices as parenthesis. Figure 5 is an instance of translators' invisible agency in *Life is Strange: True Colors* (2021):
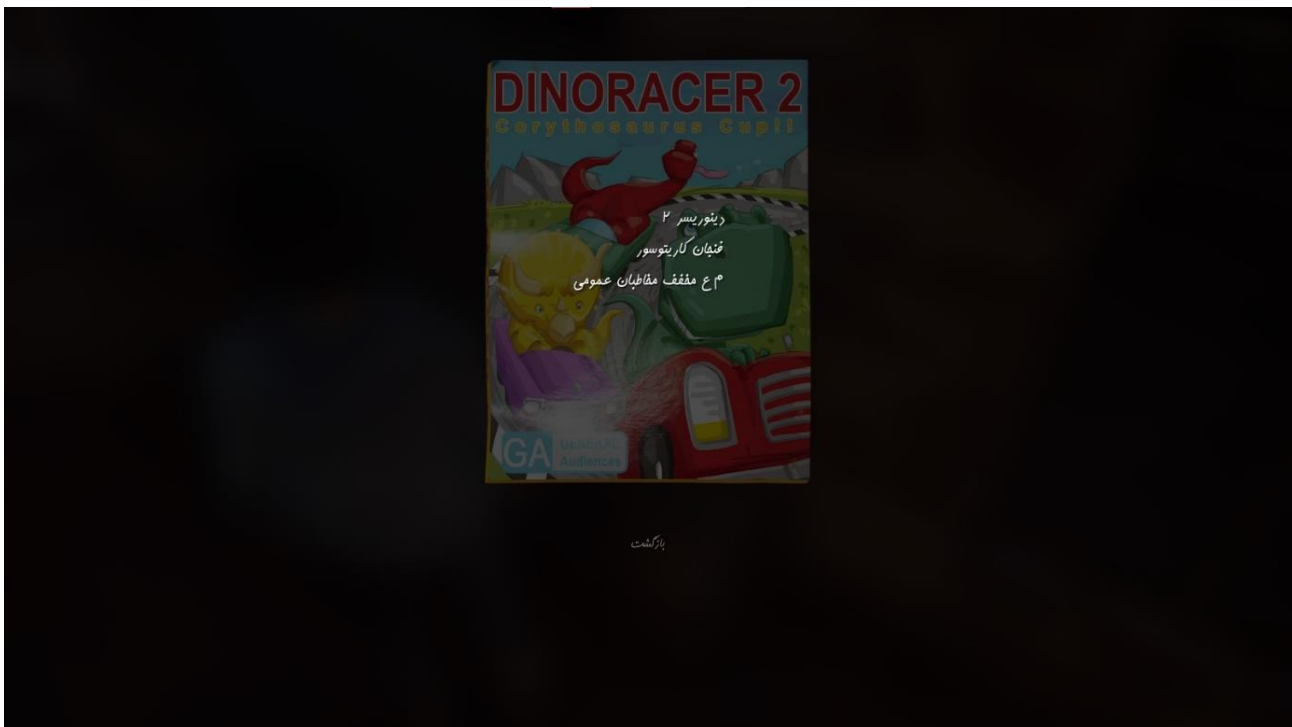

Figure 5. Translators' invisible agency for increasing comprehension in *Life is Strange: True Colors* (2021)

Figure 5 represents the cover of a video game in *Life is Strange: True Colors* (2021). Of interest here is the translation of the logo "GA: General Audience" inserted at the bottom left of the front cover. The original English version reads "GA: General Audience" while the Persian translation reads " ع م مخفف مخاطبان عمومی" (GA standing for General Audience). The translator added the phrase "standing for" instead of using colons. The addition of this word makes the text more comprehensible for the Persian-speaking player without making the translator visible. This instance might enhance comprehensibility, but it is unlikely to build trust between the players and the translator like it did in the Intertextuality example above. Whereas the last example saw the juxtaposition of an English phrase and its translation in Persian, this instance is more seamless in that the whole text is in Persian and the player is very unlikely to notice an intervention by the translator.

5.3. Commentary

In some cases, the translators had added their own commentary on the game, thus making themselves visible. Figure 6 represents an example of such case in *Life is Strange: Before the Storm* (2017):
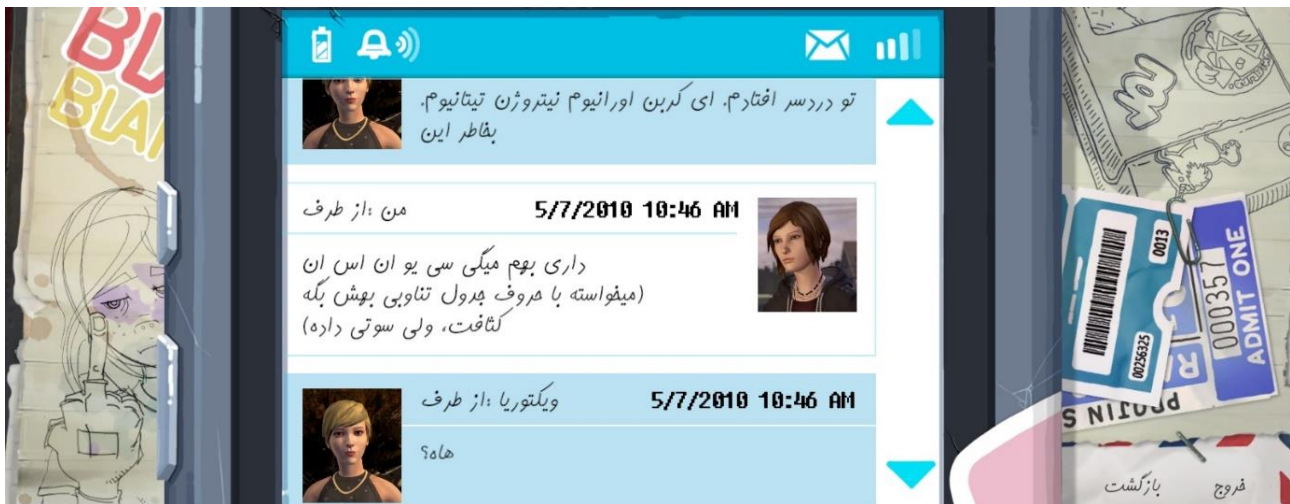
Figure 6. Translators' visibility by adding commentary

Figure 6 is part of a conversation between two schoolmates, Victoria Chase and Chloe Price. Victoria is angry at Chloe since Chloe gave her the wrong answer to a chemistry question and that very question had appeared in the exam. Here, Victoria is trying to insult Chloe using the elements of the periodic table. Figure 7 is the same conversation in English:
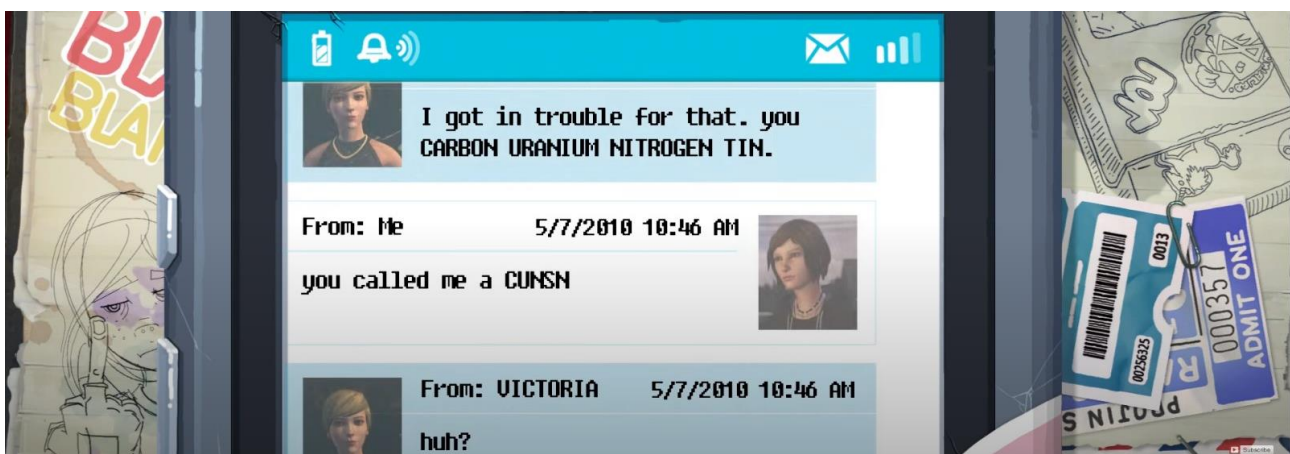

Figure 7. Translators' visibility by adding commentary

As seen in Figure 5, the translator transferred the same letters into Persian and added a parenthesis that represents two types of visible agency, namely comprehension and commentary. The text in the parenthesis reads "میخواسته با حروف جدول تناوبی بهش بگه کثافت، ولی سوتی داده" (She wanted to call her a cunt using the elements of the periodic table, but she's slipped up). The first part of this sentence is an instance of the translator's effort to increase comprehensibility by explicating, while the second part is the translator's own commentary on Victoria's failed attempt at insulting Chloe. This instance also represents extreme partial interaction since the player can either scroll up and down in the phone or press the 'return' button.

5.4. Reflecting on translation strategies

Another instance of visible agency is the translator's reflection on their translation solutions. In *Life is Strange: Before the Storm* (2017), players are shown a poem that Eliot, one of the non-playable characters, has written for Chloe. Figures 8 and 9 are screenshots of the English original and the Persian localized version, respectively.
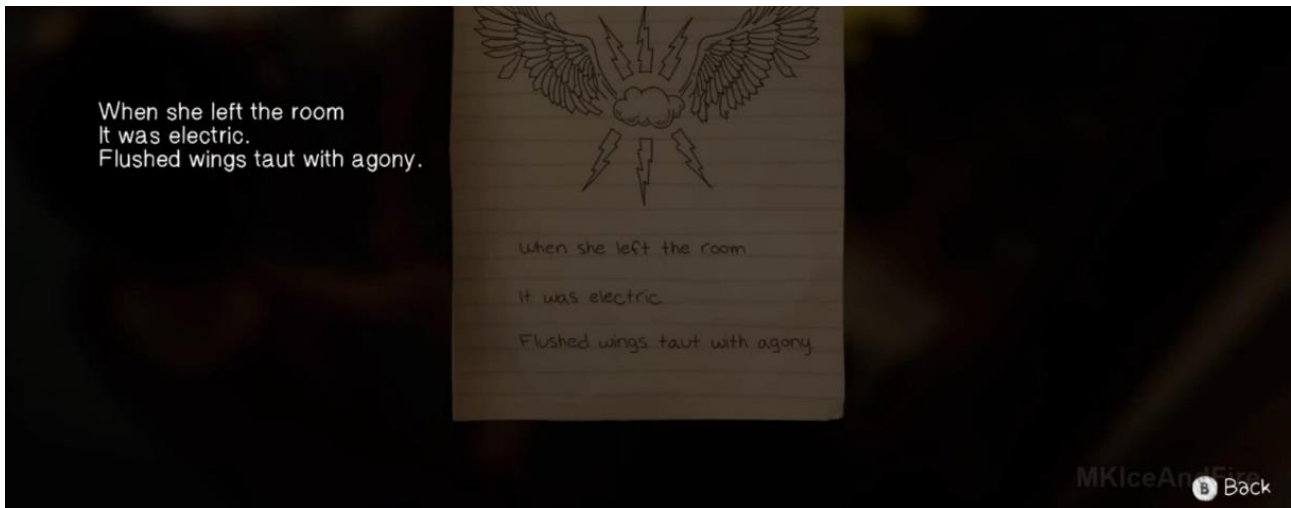

Figure 8. The original English version of *Life is Strange: Before the Storm* (2017)
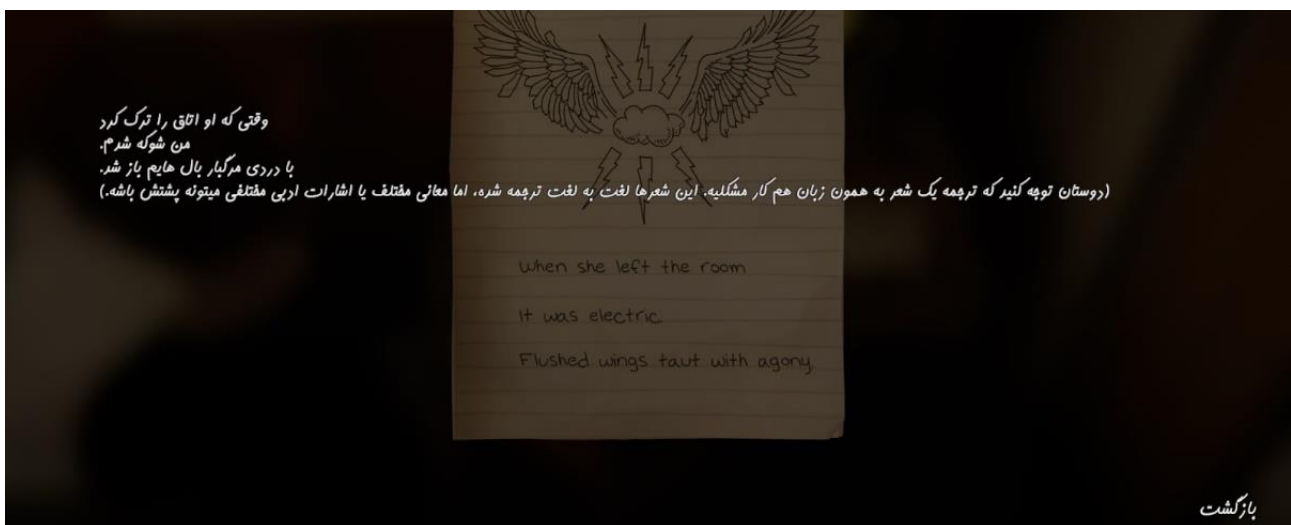

Figure 9. The Persian localized version of *Life is Strange: Before the Storm* (2017) on the translator's reflection on his translation strategy

In Figure 9, the translator produced a literal translation of the poem. The text in the parenthesis is addressed to the players and reads, "Guys, please bear in mind that translating poems even intralingually is difficult. These poems have been translated word-for-word, so some literary allusions might have been lost in translation.". Having opted for a literal translation approach, the translator is quick to point out the possibility of meaning loss. It seems like the translator's main objective is acknowledging the difficulty of translating poetry, but in doing that he has made himself more visible.

This game situation was also characterized by extreme partial interaction in which the player is limited to pressing the 'return' button once s/he reads the poem. When considered in the broader context of the game, acknowledging the difficulty of translation can lead to more trust in the translator. This is because the players get to see both sides of the translator, one that explicates and clarifies, but also one that is honest about the difficulties of translation and the meaning loss that might occur during the translation process.

Having presented the instances of (in)visibility in the analyzed games, the frequency of each instance across all the analyzed titles is presented in Table 4:

Table 4. The frequency of translators' agency in the analyzed titles

Title	Frequency	Game situation	Type of agency
Life is Strange: Before the Storm (2017)	9	Dialogue (2)	Comprehension (4)
		Task (4)	Game references (3)
		Cut-scene (3)	Reflecting on translation strategies (1)
			Commentary (1)
Life is Strange: True Colors (2021)	1	Task (1)	Comprehension (1)
Devil May Cry 5 (2019)	3	Task (3)	Comprehension (3)
Sherlock Holmes: The Devil's Daughter (2016)	0	---	---

6. Discussion

The present study sought to shed light on translators' (in)visible agency in Persian game localization. To this end, four Persian localized video games were analyzed in terms of instances of translators' agency, (in)visibility, and the relationship between level of interactivity and translators' agency.

The findings of the study can be discussed from a number of lenses. In terms of workflow, translators have often been described to conduct a kind of "blind localization" since they usually do not have the chance to play the game they are translating (Dietz, 2006, p. 132), although some are provided with screenshots of the game alongside the de-contextualized spreadsheets with which they work (Mangiron, 2021). These are some of the major limitations of the sim-ship model, which refers to cases where the different multilingual versions of a game are released simultaneously in different locales

(O'Hagan, 2016). However, the Persian localizers of the games in the current corpus did not face such restriction because the original game was already available. As suggested by the findings, the translators had gained visibility partly because of insufficient knowledge of metaludic intratextual references between the current episode of the game and its previous installments.

The main takeaway from the findings is that creativity followed by a naturalizing translation approach can reinforce the invisibility of translators. As suggested by Jooyaeian and Khoshsaligheh (2022), video games translation in Iran is marked by a lack of creativity on the translators' part. The findings of the current research testify to the same point. This sample of translators did not exercise the *carte blanche* entrusted upon them to produce a natural translation. They also opted for an intact transfer of poems, puns, and other figures of speech into Persian. Therefore, the translators felt it necessary to compensate for the multiple layers of meaning lost during the process of translation by adding commentaries, thus making themselves more visible. Approached from a functionalist perspective, this betrays an important goal of game localization which is to provide players with an authentic experience of the game world. From a Venutian standpoint (1995), the translators of the selected corpus of games gained visibility through exercising their agency. They made the translation process and product more visible at the cost of producing a less natural translation.

Viewing the corpus of the study from a contextual perspective can also provide important insights. Of the four games, the title localized into Persian the earliest was *Life is Strange: Before the Storm* (2017). Translated by one translator, *Life is Strange: Before the Storm* (2017) contained the highest frequency of visible agency. Moving forward, translators' visible agency was on a downward slope to the extent that no instances of visible agency were found in the Persian localized versions. However, more instances of invisible agency could be observed (e.g., in *Devil May Cry 5*, and *Life is Strange: True Colors*).

The present study contributes to the literature on agency in video games translation by accounting for interactivity, a notable feature of video games. All instances of translators' (in)visible agency occurred in situations with partial or zero interaction between the player and the game. In other words, the type of information presented in game situations characterized by zero interaction (cut-scenes) or partial interaction (game tasks) is different from those offered in other game situations (e.g., game action). As already highlighted, cut-scenes are the closest link between video games and non-interactive audiovisual products that serve as a tool for character/story development, among others (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2021). In cases where the translators gained visibility, the level of interaction was either extremely limited or zero. Little to no information was presented in fully interactive game situations where players are constantly exploring the game world.

The findings of this study have some implications for translation pedagogy. The range of areas in which game translators need to be competent seems to vary depending on the genre of the game in question. For instance, role-playing games (RPGs) usually require the translator to be competent in literary translation, among others (O'Hagan, 2019). In some cases, such as reflection on translation strategies, the translator's lack of competence in the translation of literary genre gave rise to his visibility. Most importantly, translators need to be encouraged to adopt a more creative approach to video game translation. In the sample of games analyzed in this study, translators had not made any notable use of transcreation. The creative approach to video game translation might result in less

visibility for translators, but it is likely to create a smoother and more enjoyable gaming experience for the players, which is considered the ultimate goal of video game localization.

7. Conclusion

The present study focused on shedding light on the agency of video game translators in the context of quasi-professional game localization in Iran. The findings went some way to addressing the three research questions outlined in the Methodology section. More specifically, the results revealed some of the ways in which Iranian video game translators exert their agency, as well as the connection between game situation and translators' agency. Visible agency was found to serve four broad purposes, namely explaining intratextual and intertextual game references, enhancing comprehension, providing commentary, and reflecting on translation strategies. This categorization is important because it shows the various purposes for which translators exert agency, which can in turn have some implications for translation pedagogy. We also discussed the potential of visible agency to strengthen players' trust in the translator, with some types of agencies more likely than others to achieve this. This study also uncovered several important connections between translator agency and the game situations in which it occurs, especially in relation to the level of interactivity. However, all of this should not be a cause to overlook the study's limitations. Firstly, only four games, each representing a game genre, were analyzed in this study. While the findings have provided important insights into video game translators' (in)visible agency in different game situations, they cannot be used to make generalizations about the correlation between translators' agency and interactivity. Also, all the games included in this corpus have been localized into Persian by the same translation group. This decision ensured a certain level of consistency and control across the sample, but it does mean that the observed translation strategies might be specific to the translator(s) tasked with localizing these games, and again this limits the generalizability of the findings. A possible way to overcome this limitation is to analyze video games translated into Persian by different translators.

Future research can analyze larger samples of games from a variety of genres to enhance generalizability. Also, comparisons between the visibility and agency of video game translators working in different language pairs could provide further evidence which can either support or reject the conclusions made in the present study. Another potential avenue for further research is to focus on the representations of translators' agency in video games from the same genre, having in mind the apparent connection between level of interactivity and (in)visible agency. This approach could not only lead to more robust conclusions, but it can also create opportunities for more case studies.

Disclosure statement

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