

## SEM50. Language uses and languaging users in video games

**50A 12 September 16:30-19:00, S7 Moro**

**50B 13 Sept h 8:30-11:00, S7 Moro**

### Convenors

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### Abstract

As a uniquely human trait, language plays a fundamental role in human-computer interaction and computer-mediated communication forms like gaming. Indeed, although video games are procedural and interactive media which must be played rather than simply read, watched, or listened to, they are essentially textual in nature, and their underlying rules and features are articulated semiotically, both verbally and non-verbally. To explore the functions and effects of language(s) in this global cultural phenomenon, this seminar welcomes papers discussing theoretically and/or empirically one (or more) of the following themes: the multilayered nature of video game discourse (Ensslin & Balteiro, 2019); natural languages and their varieties in the production, localization, and transmediation of game texts (Bernal-Merino, 2015; Pettini, 2022); the language of gender (Heritage, 2021); gamers' languaging online (Iaia, 2021); automatic/machine translation and gaming (Hansen & Houlmot, 2022); the nature of paratexts (Burwell & Miller, 2016) and constructed languages (Bell & Ryan, 2019) in game worlds.

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## SEM50. Papers

**50A 12 September 16:30-18:30, S7 Moro**

- *Language use and game affordances: "Doing toxicity" in Rocket League gaming interactions* (Federico Corradini, Università degli Studi di Modena e Reggio Emilia)
- *Player titles in online multiplayer video games: Is gender-inclusive localization considered?* (Anna Bevilacqua, Università degli Studi di Bologna)
- *The chivalry (II) of translanguaging: Multimodal communication and ELF uses in online gaming* (Giordano Lisi, Università del Salento)
- *iCivics for the DC Bar: An analysis of users' interactions and paratexts' features in law-related games* (Giuseppina Di Gregorio, Università di Catania)

## 50B 13 Sept h 8:30-11:00, S7 Moro

- *You are either with us or against us: Manipulating computer-mediated discourse in Orwellian video games* (Paolo D'Indinosante, Sapienza Università di Roma)
- *Translating Italian folklore in soulslike games: The case of Enotria: The Last Song* (Giovanni Raffa, Sapienza Università di Roma)
- *"Wow! Sei un eroe, amico!": A preliminary study on Anglicisms in video game dubbing* (Silvia Pettini, Università degli Studi Roma Tre)
- *Motivated transcreation. The role of critical analysis and media familiarity in game localization* (Pietro Luigi Iaia, Università del Salento)

## SEM50. Abstracts

### Player titles in online multiplayer video games: Is gender-inclusive localization considered?

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With 41% of female gamers, it could be argued that, in Italy, the gaming population is extending beyond the usual young male demographic (IIDEA, 2025). The language used in game texts is pivotal to analyze the constructed role of gender (Heritage, 2021), since it can foster women player's inclusion, especially in texts localized in a gendered language such as Italian. Although some game genres with character customization such as RPGs include choices of pronouns and consequent localization with dedicated tags (Pettini, 2021), online multiplayer games such as MOBAs and FPS have traditionally been male-dominated with a community that shows reluctance towards inclusion (Braithwaite, 2014) and sexualized "supporting" female characters. However, publishers and developers have started to take action towards inclusion even in the localization workflow, establishing dedicated teams such as the Gender Inclusive Taskforce for Localization in EA (Dadalto Schettino, 2021) and inclusive localization guidelines. In Italian, one of the preferred strategies used by professionals to avoid the traditional "generic masculine" seems to be gender neutrality (or de-gendering) by using, for example, epicene nouns or neutral periphrasis when gender customization tags are not available (Wabbit Translations, 2022). These solutions are sometimes criticized for making women even more invisible (Giusti, 2022), but still favored in translation technology (Savoldi et al., 2024) and other fields. Player or challenge titles, i.e. decorative texts displayed under a player's username, might be interesting to observe inclusive localization strategies due to the grammatical neutrality of English in epithets such as "Champion" or "Courageous", since in online multiplayer games such as League of Legends (2009), Valorant (2020) and Overwatch 2 (2022) – chosen as case studies for their popularity and longevity – the user gender is never specified or customized. This paper proposes to compare the Italian localization of these elements with the original English text, to survey a potential rise in sensitivity towards inclusive localization from a diachronic perspective.

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### **Language use and game affordances: “Doing toxicity” in Rocket League gaming interactions**

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Gaming culture, especially in online contexts, is regarded as featuring toxic, deviant practices (Paul, 2018) that are typically categorized in terms of sets of verbal and behavioral disruptive actions (Kowert, 2020). These actions can be performed in different settings, such as streams and actual gameplay, and what is considered “toxic” may change depending on the policies/rules of the platforms/games that try to limit inappropriate behavior (e.g. Graham & Dutt, 2019). Regardless of the attempts to curb toxicity, games’ rules and design can also be exploited by players to develop interactional practices, offering perspicuous examples of the interrelation of gamers’ language use and the socio-technical affordances of games to accomplish creative – albeit at times deviant – actions during naturally occurring gameplay (Reeves et al., 2017). This paper focuses on one such example of creative deviant practices: the interactional use of quick chats functions in the online game *Rocket League*, a fast-paced game where players compete in soccer matches using cars. As part of the game interface, *Rocket League* includes a written chat facility where pre-set messages can be sent to other players to communicate quickly, usually to praise game actions (e.g. “Nice shot!”, “What a save!”). However, players can also subvert the intended meaning and function of the game interface and verbal resources by using them repeatedly and ironically to mock and taunt opponents, launching sequences of deviant gameplaying where language, game action and game affordances are mobilized into “toxic” discourse. By applying multimodal conversation analysis to video streams of natural gameplay, the analysis illustrates the temporal, sequential organization of this type of toxic practice, as well as the reactions elicited. The analysis highlights how players creatively exploit the affordances of game design and language use to accomplish “toxicity” as socially organized and situated practice.

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### **You are either with us or against us: Manipulating computer-mediated discourse in Orwellian video games**

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While also shedding light on the literary-ludic representation of totalitarian regimes (D’Indinosante, 2024), this paper primarily seeks to contribute to the study of multimodal textuality in video games (Bogost, 2007; Ensslin, 2012; Hawreliak, 2018) by examining a literary-inspired series which, as I aim to demonstrate, heavily relies on the ideological manipulation of in-game computer-mediated discourse to produce meaning. Developed by a Hamburg-based indie company and clearly influenced by George Orwell’s popular dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Li, 2019), the *Orwell* video game series currently comprises two titles, *Keeping an Eye on You* (Osmotic Studios, 2016) and its midquel *Ignorance Is Strength* (Osmotic Studios, 2018), which may be described as narrative-driven choices-matter drag-and-drop political thrillers. These games, which remediate both synchronous and asynchronous forms of computer-mediated communication, not only thematise but also gamify human-computer (as well as interhuman) interactions. Essentially, the player, who assumes the role of an investigator operating a state-run surveillance system called ‘Orwell’, is tasked with identifying potential threats to the totalitarian regime governing The Nation by scrutinising the digital activities of (at least initially) unsuspecting citizens. My close reading of *Keeping an Eye on You* and *Ignorance Is Strength* intends to investigate how, to what extent and for what purposes player and non-player characters are allowed or expected to manipulate in-game computer-mediated discourse. To assess the aesthetic and ideological implications of the manipulation of linguistic signs by a variety of language users within the two titles in the *Orwell* series, my paper will place special emphasis on the multimodal emulation of features associated with different media, genres and text types and on the significant in-game consequences that the manipulation of computer-mediated discourse has on human characters.

By means of a detailed multimodal analysis of the interrelated verbal and non-verbal rhetorics that are simultaneously at work in *Keeping an Eye on You* and *Ignorance Is Strength*, I will identify and interpret the various ideological uses of in-game computer-mediated discourse, thus highlighting its fundamental role in the meaning-making process of the *Orwell* video games.

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## ***iCivics* for the DC Bar: An analysis of users' interactions and paratexts' features in law-related games**

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Legal translation entails several challenges when dealing with contexts that are shaped by different legal systems and cultural references, determining a form of inter-epistemic translation (Bennet & Neves, 2024). This is particularly true when entertainment products are taken into account, where translation is needed, in the form of both dubbing and subtitling, to reach foreign audiences. In fact, as argued by Sandrelli (2020), legal drama contributes to the popularisation of legal discourse and legal concepts, favouring the general public's comprehension, thus determining a re-formulation of specialist discourse (Calsamiglia & van Dijk, 2004).

Over the last 20 years, law-related or courtroom videogames have evolved, from elementary graphics and selection of issues to complex role-plays. In fact, it is possible to detect different typologies of products according to characters and contents, users' interaction, and levels of expertise. From the point of view of contents and characters, gamers have the possibility to consider two different groups of courtroom games: the former is represented by products that focus on fictional characters, such as *Devil's Attorney* and the successful series of *Ace Attorney* (that shows anime features); the latter allows users to interpret famous characters, as for example *Law and Order* detectives, since the game is an adaptation of the famous tv series. All these videogames can be played by users with a low level of expertise, who have the opportunity to interpret the role of an attorney or a detective (with few exceptions). A third group of products is represented by educational games, as those provided by *iCivics* platform and advertised by the DC Bar: these games encourage prospective attorneys or prosecutors to test their knowledge and their communicative skills, relying on users' specific competencies. In fact, in *Argument Wars*, students can argue a real Supreme Court case in pairs, while in *Do I Have a Right?* it is possible to run a firm of lawyers that specialize in constitutional law.

Since previous research has focused on the relationship between gaming and education/language learning (Gee & Hayes, 2011; Peterson, 2013), the present paper aims at investigating some *iCivics* products by adopting a multimodal semiotics approach (Hawreliak, 2019), in order to consider different multimodal configurations and users generated content to shed some light on how they contribute to the negotiation of meaning in the players' experiences, highlighting peculiar features of paratexts in terms of accessibility.

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## **Motivated transcreation. The role of critical analysis and media familiarity in game localization**

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This paper enquires into the contribution of the critical analysis of source texts and the familiarity with gaming to the achievement of pragmalinguistic equivalence in game localization. The latter has specific features and constraints, from the tendency to prefer the translators' "interpretative craft" (Bell, 2006) to produce transcreative renderings, to the search for the engagement of players (Schoneau-Fog, 2011) and their immersion in the game world (Bernal Merino, 2015), to the consideration of the software code when planning target texts. The video game *Lollipop Chainsaw* (LC, Warner Bros. Interactive, 2012) represents the case study due to its motivated humorous discourse. The adjective "motivated" entails that LC develops a sarcastic criticism towards the American socio-cultural values by means of medium-specific (Chandler & Deming, 2011) and intertextual references (Mangiron, 2018) to B-movies, horror movies, Pop music, Rock music, and gaming, addressing the experienced players who embody the implied recipients of the video game at issue. Yet, the familiarity with the media that are part of LC's textual world is vital when dealing with the source script as its localizers (Díaz Pérez, 2017), so as to access the complete illocutionary force and perlocutionary effects. This paper will comment on a number of Italian alternative reformulations of the selected corpus of LC's extracts presenting metatextual humour and intertextual references. The objects of investigation are the outcome of critical analyses of the denotative and connotative meanings of the chosen excerpts, which are meant to trigger appropriate inferencing on the part of localizers. The results illustrate that the transcreative renderings improve the balance between the adherence to the implied receivers' expectations, creativity and pragmalinguistic equivalence between source and target scripts when the critical analyses of original versions are integrated by familiarity with gaming.

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## **The chivalry (II) of translanguaging: Multimodal communication and ELF uses in online gaming**

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The linguistic landscape of online gaming communities remains an underexplored and yet rich domain for English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) study. Despite its consideration as a valuable source of empirical data (Pineda and Bosso, 2023), online gaming has often been overlooked in ELF research (Steinkuehler, 2004). In fact, the cooperative and competitive nature of gaming environments provides a fertile ground to investigate the transcultural communication practices (Baker 2022). This presentation focuses on *Chivalry 2*, a multiplayer medieval warfare game, whose player base seems to be part of a transient group using distinct jargon and register choices to interact.

A selected corpus of synchronous exchanges between gamers will be examined, in order to pinpoint the unique communication patterns within the in-game chat, as well as to explore the interactants' translanguaging strategies (Li, 2017). The latter are actualized by stylised expressions, game-specific lexicon, humour, and multimodal communication resources, whereby participants aim to transcend cultural and linguistic barriers (Bawa, 2018; Iaia, 2021). This study shall demonstrate that *Chivalry 2*'s chat can be defined as a dynamic space for linguistic innovation, where players negotiate meaning, construct social identities and foster in-group cohesion through language uses.

By bridging the gap between gaming studies and ELF research, the results will also contribute to a broader understanding of how English functions as a Lingua Franca in the digital spaces inhabited by intercultural players.

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## “Wow! Sei un eroe, amico!”: A preliminary study on Anglicisms in video game dubbing

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The cultural and linguistic anglicification of audiovisual production has attracted considerable academic attention in Translation Studies. In the past decades, many scholars have shown that the impact of the English language on the Italian language of dubbed films, tv series and, more recently, animation clearly manifests itself in Italian *dubbese* or *doppiaggese* via more or less identifiable traces of English, comprising both direct and indirect borrowings (Pulcini, 2023), which mostly depend on the technical constraints of this translation modality (see, among others, Minutella, 2021, 2022; Pavesi, 2018; Pavesi & Zanotti, 2023).

This paper aims to contribute to the debate promoted by this long and productive research line concentrating on multimedia interactive entertainment software. Indeed, despite the spread of video games in Italian society, very little scholarly attention has been paid to game dialogue (Domsch, 2017) and to the different constraints and types of synchronies of game dubbing (Mejías-Climent, 2021). Accordingly, this research presents a preliminary investigation into the translation of some of the interjections (ok, okay, wow, yeah), familiarisers (man, mate, buddy, dude, pal), calques, and translational routines examined in the cognate area of animation (Minutella, 2021), by quantitatively and qualitatively analysing a parallel English-Italian corpus of three fully-localised war-themed titles, including *Medal of Honor Warfighter* (Danger Close/Electronic Arts, 2012), *Battlefield 4* (DICE/Electronic Arts, 2013) and *Mass Effect 3* (BioWare/Electronic Arts, 2012), which have been selected to focus on the typical military lingo used by virtual soldiers (Patterson, 2015) in the popular shooting genre.

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### **Translating Italian folklore in soulslike games: the case of *Enotria: The Last Song***

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The textual configuration of videogames combines interaction in a multimodal setting with segmented and environmental narration, particularly so when a videogame aims to simultaneously tell a story and engage users with fast-paced action. As they feature a semiotically complex mix of narrative and interaction, videogame texts encompass challenges and peculiarities in their translation and localisation, particularly so when culture-specificity is considerably strong in the text. “Soul” games, commonly intended as a subgenre of videogames produced by FromSoftware, have been an inspiration for other publishers to develop their own games based on the “soul” formula, which consequently led to an intertextual web between the original *Soul* series and other original products (soul-like games). While soul games have been localised from Japanese into other languages, soul-like games have been produced in other countries and with diverse cultures as a starting point for development. *Enotria: The Last Song* (2024) is the first soul-like game developed in Italy and in Italian: the game combines the soul formula with Italian folkloristic elements based on *commedia dell’arte*, thus featuring renowned “masked types” from Italian theatre tradition in a dark, mythical setting. Since *Enotria* sees Italian as its original language for translation and localisation purposes, the interpolation of the soul formula with traditional Italian theatre turns the game into an ideal setting to discuss transmedia worldbuilding in the translation and localisation of videogames. The Italian screenplay of the text, which includes rhymed sections, visual-verbal references to the Italian landscape and modernised versions of the *maschere*, has been dubbed in both Italian and English, and subtitled into other languages. This paper therefore inquires into translation practice in videogames by addressing a rare instance: that of Italian being a source language rather than a target language in the translation process. The study addresses the English translation strategies employed in the text, focusing on the one hand on culture-specific elements of the game interface, on the other hand on dubbed narrative segments dubbed into English. Regarding the latter, the analysis focuses on utterances from characters like Pulcinella and Spaventa, which serve as introductions for the player and as a major milestone halfway through the game, respectively.

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