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## Stuttering humour in *Portal 2*: subtitling stand-up inspired jokes in videogame dialogue

[La sfida dell'umorismo in *Portal 2*: sottotitolare le battute ispirate  
allo stand-up nei dialoghi dei videogiochi]

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### ABSTRACT

**IT** *Portal 2* (2011) è stato un successo nel mondo dei videogiochi e si è trasformato in un beniamino della critica nel corso degli anni. La premessa di un'ambientazione fantascientifica distopica e tragica è stata abilmente abbinata a personaggi carismatici e divertenti. Tra questi, Wheatley si distingue per essere l'unico personaggio di lingua britannica e il personaggio comico più costante nel corso del gioco. Considerando il successo del doppiatore di Wheatley e della sua carriera di cabarettista, i legami e le influenze tra il mondo della stand-up comedy e i contenuti umoristici dei videogiochi sono da considerarsi una tappa importante per lo sviluppo del settore. Concentrandosi su *Portal 2* come caso di studio, questo studio affronta la struttura testuale dell'umorismo nel videogioco attraverso una teoria originale sulla struttura delle battute nella stand-up comedy, seguita da osservazioni qualitative sul videogioco, sul suo sottotitolaggio in italiano e sul valore della maiuscola come strumento di sottotitolazione ai fini della traduzione dell'umorismo.

**Parole chiave:** umorismo, videogiochi, stand-up comedy

**EN** *Portal 2* (2011) was a success in the videogame world and turned into a critical darling across the years. The premise of a dystopian and tragic futuristic sci-fi setting was craftly paired with charismatic and humorous characters. Among those, Wheatley stands out both as the only British-speaking character and the most consistent comic relief throughout the game. Considering the success of Wheatley's voice actor, as well as his stand-up career, the links and influences between the stand-up comedy world and the humorous content in videogames are to be considered a relevant stage for the development of the field. By focusing on *Portal 2* as a case study, this study addresses the textual structure of humour delivery in the videogame through original theory on joke structure in stand-up comedy, following through with qualitative observations on the videogame, its Italian subtitling, and the value of capitalisation as a subtitling tool for the purpose of humour translation.

**Keywords:** humor, video games, stand-up comedy

## 1. Introduction

Despite its status as an unsurmountable feat for translators having been rendered an obsolete concept, the translation of humour is still to be considered a daunting task. In recent years, the ubiquitousness of humorous content across different literary genres, audiovisual texts and media as highlighted the necessity for academic advancement in the field. While comedy films and sit-coms have received noteworthy scholarly attention (for example Bucaria & Barra, 2016, Dore, 2019), videogames and their translation are a topic of rising interest in research, and present peculiar circumstances on the matter of humour and their translation, as a direct consequence of their polysemiotic and multimodal configuration. Humour in videogames has been addressed in a handful of different studies, with perspectives ranging from audiovisual translation to humour studies, communication, and language learning: the value of humour in videogames has been noted to present the player with “a different aspect of “realism” that has been undervalued in game design” (Dormann & Biddle, 2007, p. 250), and Gallagher (2020) has inquired on humour as a device for transgressive, progressive or satirical empowerment within videogames and the videogame industry. On the field of translation and localization, Mangiron (2010) examined the localization strategies in the Italian rendition of two instalments in the Final Fantasy franchise, commenting on how humour undertakes functions of entertainment, engagement, and characterization in videoludic texts (p. 103). While Mangiron praised the translation of humour in her case study, Lepre (2014) stressed the delicacy of the task of humour translation in videogames when humour and gameplay are closely linked. The issue of translating humour in audiovisual text of any kind lies within the compounding of numerous restrictions, hurdles, and constraints, converging on the same text simultaneously and combining with each other. In fact, on humour translation, Martínez Sierra and Zabalbeascoa (2017) stated that “the challenge of translating humour lies in compounding all of the inescapable difficulties and demands that are characteristic of any translator’s job plus having to take on the complex nature of humour, in its perception and in its (re)production” (p. 10). Similarly, on the topic of videogame translation, Bernal Merino (2015) affirmed how these issues, already existing in other media and text types, are “compounded by the degree of interactivity required” (p. 140). This compounding is reflected in the dual nature of the videoludic text, which acts as both a product designed for mass consumption and an artistic team creation (Bernal Merino, 2006). Consequently, videogames present inherent peculiarities in translation practice, such as a textual non-linearity (Pettini, 2022, p. 40): the entirety of the textual material of the videogame is segmented and presented to the player according to linguistic cues, commands or specific in-game actions. This means that on top of being interactive and audiovisual, videoludic texts are also a non-linear, ever-evolving receptacle of cross-genre, cross-textual contamination, and when humour is added to the equation the translator is presented with a complicated and multi-layered text to address. The 2011 videogame *Portal 2*, in light of the aforementioned considerations, is an ideal candidate to observe how the translation of a humorous videoludic text has been handled. Considering the character of Wheatley in the videogame is voiced by the British stand-up comedian Stephen Merchant, the videogame prompts discussion on whether stand-up comedy influences have impacted the videogame and its textual structure, and how in turn this is reflected in the translation of the text and its subtitling.

As *Portal 2* has been subtitled rather than dubbed, this study will comment the possible reasons of this choice, before introducing the textual functions of jokes in stand-up comedy and their implementation in the videogame. Consequently, upon making some observations on key differences between subtitling norms in videogames compared to filmic medias, a qualitative analysis of key translated excerpts from the videogame will be presented to assess whether humour is retained in the Italian

subtitling. Ultimately, the study discusses the use of capitalisation in the subtitling of humour in the case study and its possible benefits.

## **2. *Portal 2* and its professional ties to stand-up comedy**

In 2011, Valve released *Portal 2*, the much-awaited sequel to one of the studio's major success titles *Portal*. The plot of the two instalments of the franchise is set in a somewhat dystopic sci-fi facility, Aperture, in which numerous secret experiments on human test subjects take place. The testing rooms, which represent the main gameplay elements via environmental puzzles, are navigated by the player via a Portal Gun, the technology Aperture has been working on. The darker features of this mysterious paramilitary facility are made explicit by the presence of GLaDOS (Generic Lifeform and Disk Operating System), a diabolic and manipulative super-intelligent computer, destroyed by Chell (the non-speaking first person protagonist of the franchise) at the end of *Portal*. In *Portal 2*, after failing her escape following the defeat of GLaDOS, Chell is woken up from a cryogenic sleep by Wheatley (the Intelligence Dampening Sphere) in order to escape, as its power has been depleted. Wheatley guides Chell through the old testing chambers and helps her find a portal gun, before inadvertently reactivating GLaDOS. The player will then find a way to neutralize GLaDOS again, before being betrayed by Wheatley, who decides to install itself on GLaDOS' stand and gain full control of the facility, revealing itself as the true antagonist. Carrying around GLaDOS, now in a much reduced form and kept awake only by a potato-powered battery, Chell makes a truce with her former archnemesis in order to defeat Wheatley, restoring GLaDOS' power and ultimately succeeding in her escape.

The sci-fi setting and somewhat gloomy depiction of human experimentation is lightened up through the game by the constant use of dry humour, dark-themed jokes and the funny yet stupid actions and comments of Wheatley. The humorous elements are not only present as a form of comic relief but are also characterising elements: GLaDOS' name can be easily interpreted as a clever wordplay based on DOS, a common computer acronym for a disk reader, fused with the name Gladys in a clever portmanteau that characterizes the antagonist. GLaDOS speaks with a synthetic, text-to-speech artificial female voice, connotating her character with coldness and amorality and leading to humorous, contradictive utterances. A similar strategy is employed by giving artificially crafted voices to security turrets and announcers, but the most consistent humorous content in the game is provided by Wheatley's unintelligent and often nonsensical commentary. In turn, as Wheatley accompanies Chell during half of the game and becomes her opponent in the remaining half, the lines uttered by the robot occupy most of the videogame total dialogue, making him the primary vessel for humour in the game and the focus of this study.

If GLaDOS represents, in a way, a machine embodying the worst emotions of humanity in the form of a cruel, manipulative and cold-blooded mass murderer, Wheatley represents the worst of mankind in a different, more pitiful sense: in spite of being a highly sophisticated robotic sphere, Wheatley is ignorant and fastidious, peculiarly dumb, prudish and cowardly. This is no coincidence: as remarked by GLaDOS herself, Wheatley is the product of the most intelligent minds of the century joined together in building the stupidest robot ever in order to subdue GLaDOS. Furthermore, and building from the contrast between Wheatley and GLaDOS as representing two polar opposites of "bad humanity", Wheatley is the only character that features a human voice (Stephen Merchant) without any additional effects to resemble a robot. In an interview with videogame magazine *Polygon* (Brown, 2011), developer Eric Wolpaw has described the development and inspirations behind the character of Wheatley. Interestingly, Wolpaw and Falsik admitted being particularly fond of Merchant as a British comedian and

having been inspired by the dry wit of British sitcoms and comedy programmes – particularly with Merchant’s performance in *Extras* (2005-2007, Gervais, Merchant).

The videogame developers did not expect they would manage to get Stephen Merchant as a voice actor for Wheatley, but in a surprising turn of event the comedian accepted the job.

As a professional comedian, Stephen Merchant began his career as a stand-up performer before rising to success thanks to his collaboration with Ricky Gervais in writing the screenplay of celebrated sitcoms *The Office* (2001-2003) and *Extras*, which halted his stand-up career until 2011, the year in which he returned to the stage with a stand-up comedy tour titled *Hello Ladies* (2011), which was later adapted into a homonymous limited TV series produced by HBO (2013-2014). The chronological connection between Merchant’s return to stand-up and his success beyond British borders thanks to his voice acting performance in *Portal 2* are noteworthy in hypothesizing connections between humorous features and techniques of stand-up and their permeation in other texts such as videogames.

In fact, Wheatley and the narrative structure of *Portal 2* share certain similarities with stand-up monologues that can already be pinpointed at face value. Players engage with the game as Chell in first-person perspective and without ever engaging in dialogue, only listening to Wheatley in what feels like a pretend-conversation without ever having the chance to engage or talk back. Wheatley speaks as if Chell is replying and participating, though she never is, thus structuring most of Wheatley’s dialogue in similar fashion to contemporary stand-up comedy practice. Noticeably, Wheatley is also the only human-like voice in the entire game, speaks with a fast-paced informal register (much like performers in stand-up) and showcases a characteristic Bristolian accent. Furthermore, a considerable portion of the jokes delivered throughout the videogame revolve around controversial themes that are often addressed in stand-up, such as religion, the existence of God, heavy topics such as death, murder and fatal illnesses, and context-based jokes in which Wheatley undertakes the role of a working class office employee – all topics and themes that belong to abrasive stand-up performances and have proliferated in other audiovisual products in recent years (Bucaria 2017, p. 438). Different comedy genres influence each other as a direct consequence of professional comedians working on different kinds of humorous texts in the entertainment industry, and stand-up performances – being both a starting point and a victory lap in the career of several comedians – can in turn influence the style and delivery of humour even in videogames. In this sense, Wheatley represents the influence of stand-up humour on other texts in a two-fold manner: on the one hand, the influence of stand-up practice on Merchant’s style and in turn on his delivery as a voice actor; on the other hand, as an influence on the game developers in envisioning Wheatley as a character.

### 3. Joke function in stand-up and *Portal 2*

Of course, profiling the professional connections between the performer and the character portrayed is effective in highlighting how the production of one genre of humorous text influences another, yet some considerations on the structure and function of stand-up jokes is necessary to appropriately identify which features in the videogame are inherited – directly or indirectly – from stand-up comedy performances, and in turn isolate relevant excerpts from the corpus to observe their subtitling.

Contemporary stand-up practice famously revolves around colloquially-styled monologues acted as if improvised and natural, in spite of being written and rehearsed beforehand. The feature of stand-up comedy that makes it immediately recognizable to an audience is usually the conformation of the setting: the comedian stands (hence the name) alone on stage and proceeds to tell stories, recount personal experiences, manifest personal ideologies or discuss news or recent events, to provide the audience with sufficient material to understand and appreciate the jokes. The structure of a joke has often been

discussed in research, for example in the General Theory of Verbal Humour (Attardo, 2017) which illustrates the six knowledge resources involved in a joke. Among those, Script Opposition, deriving directly from Raskin's Semantic Script Theory of Humour (1985), has been employed as criterion for joke detection in the corpus. Its relevance for the present purpose lies in how, by reminiscing the player/reader/viewer of two coinciding and conflicting scripts, the text produces an incongruity which will be cognitively resolved with humorous effect, allowing to isolate specific excerpts based on relevance for the focus of the study. Taxonomies such as the one proposed by Martínez Sierra (2008), in spite of their relevance in the field, have not been employed in the analysis, as this study focuses on the significance of humorous utterances rather than on specific types of humour, and the stand-up influence is investigated based on joke function within the text rather than on joke type.

Since stand-up comedy employs a narrative flow to introduce the climax of a joke, script opposition as a singular criterion allows to purposefully isolate specific, relevant excerpts within the corpus. In accordance with the concept of act of humour as proposed by Nash (1985, p. 9), a humorous utterance or a joke consists of a *genus* (an origin of the joke, a derivation from culture, institution etc.), a *verbal packaging* (a characteristic sentence design and progression indicating the humorous intention) and a *locus* (a point of discharge of humour in language). For the matter at hand, the jokes analysed in the further sections have been selected and commented based on the aforementioned concepts both in the English version and the Italian subtitling, as the verbal packaging aligns with the *build-up* of the joke and the locus with its conclusion (or punchline), and therefore with script opposition. Additionally, jokes are analysed and selected based on overlap with joke functions in stand-up being employed by the videogame.

The topics addressed (and alternated) in stand-up comedy, and thus determining at least partially the scripts involved, can range from light-hearted matters to more serious and socially concerned subjects, in line with stand-up comedy's reputation as a platform of advocacy for social change. Performers will therefore sequence several topics through a full-length performance in apparently seamless fashion via accurately positioned jokes, which are meant to be both humorous and cohesive. These, called hooking and chaining jokes (Raffa, 2022), respectively connect or transition between topics, and serve as coherence and cohesion devices respectively. Hooking and chaining jokes usually connect the two topics by including: a) nouns, idioms or semantic elements of the punchline; b) the anecdote for the previous and/or subsequent build-up; c) reflections, general statements, recollections, crowd interaction, etc. (ibid., p. 150). The way these humorous textual devices can find a counterpart in videogame presupposes a change in their function of cohesion and coherence. Chaining jokes are of neglectable presence in *Portal 2* and, arguably, in videogames, due to how, compared to stand-up performances (in which body language and spoken monologues are the main tools available), videogames have an array of different tools at their disposal to manage the flow of both narrative and gameplay (such as the interactive element, cutscenes, menus, etc.). Furthermore, the textual non-linearity of videogames erases the need for jokes as cohesion devices: while in stand-up comedy the monologue needs chaining jokes in order to maintain a modicum of linearity, rather than being a disjointed stream of jokes on different, unrelated topics, videogames mostly cater to their need of overall coherence.

In *Portal 2*, noticeably, the function of hooking jokes is fused with the gameplay – a direct result of involuntary transposition to a different medium – mainly because of how story and plot in videogames unfold, as the jokes help conveying additional information about the world, the plot of the videogame and the nature of its characters. Humour is part of the videogame because it is employed to help the player backtrack to previous sections or previously mentioned gameplay elements, it effectively characterizes the personality of Wheatley and GLaDOS as well as highlighting their relationship, and it aids the overall narrative by diluting its dark undertone for the enjoyment of the player. To effectively

backtrack, hooking jokes, which de facto are new, funny takes on scripts involved in previous jokes, help players by cognitively foregrounding said scripts and thus reminding them of fundamental gameplay aspects, plot devices or already visited areas that needs further exploration. In turn, these humorous acts require attention because of the numerous aspects of the text they impact in translation, that of narrative, characterisation, gameplay, and text coherence.

#### 4. Analysing subtitled jokes in *Portal 2*

Translating humour is already a complicated matter, and in the case of videogames it is hindered by the inherent features of humour, the technical configuration of the videogame and the formal requirements of subtitling and dubbing practices. With regard to the translation of videogames, especially if compared to other medias that have gained more traction and popularity in academia, such as movies and TV series, it is worth mentioning that videogames tend to lean towards subtitling practice as the output of interlingual transfer in the majority of cases, regardless of the overall preference of a given country for a specific translation output. This is imputable to several factors, all dependent on circumstances surrounding the videogame industry rather than translation practice, and depending highly on budget and sale prediction, which influence company approach to international distribution (Bernal Merino 2016, p. 207). As this decision determines the level of localisation of the released product and consequently the depth of the localisation and translation effort made, low-budget games or games that do not foresee impacting the market significantly resort to more economic and less budget-tolling solution for international distribution such as subtitling.

In compliance with the simultaneous shipment (sim-ship) model (O'Hagan & Mangiron, 2006), which presupposes a simultaneous release of the product in multiple language at the same time, dubbing is mostly relegated to high-budget games. This is significant to the matter at hand because it implies that the humorous content has to be subtitled in other languages in most cases and thus has to comply with the restrictions (spatial, temporal, technical, formal) inherent to subtitling practice. Subtitling norms in videogames observe different restrictions and constraints compared to filmic media: as profiled by Mangiron (2013), some of the relevant formatting and translation differences in videogame subtitling include fonts of variable size, less emphasis on the reduction of content in subtitles, disregard and lack of preservation of grammatical blocks, and a design with aesthetic qualities. The latter, which has received particular attention in filmic medias (Nornes 1999, McClarty 2014), is much more noticeable in videogames for several reasons, ranging from the medium possessing the necessary technical prowess and pliability to incorporate subtitles in non-canonical positions as well as striving to give tools and information to the player without breaking immersion, and can be potentially the most noticeable difference with filmic subtitling, since aesthetics are usually sacrificed in the name of readability, which is of paramount importance (Díaz Cintas & Remael 2020, pp. 99-100). Of course, in these scenarios, humour intensely complicates the subtitling of the videogame, although one specific subtitling norm in videogames, that of capitalisation, can be particularly useful for humour subtitling (Tables 2 and 3). In the following table, each row represents a single subtitle, with a backtranslation for non-Italian speakers.

Table 1

English transcription	Italian subtitling	English backtranslation
<p>Most test subjects do experience some cognitive deterioration after a few months in suspension. Now you've been under for... quite a lot longer, and it's not out of the question that you might have a very minor case of serious brain damage.</p> <p>But don't be alarmed, alright? Although, if you do feel alarm, try to hold onto that feeling because that is the proper reaction to being told you have brain damage.</p>	<p>Dopo alcuni mesi in sospensione, la maggior parte dei soggetti rileva un deterioramento cognitivo. Tu sei rimasta sotto per... parecchio tempo di più, perciò non è da escludere un lievissimo caso di danno cerebrale grave. Non allarmarti. Tuttavia, se ti senti allarmata, è un buon segno: è la reazione corretta quando qualcuno ti dice che hai un danno cerebrale esteso.</p>	<p>After some months in suspension, the majority of subjects detects a cognitive deterioration. You have stayed under for... a lot time more, so it is not to exclude a very mild case of serious brain damage. Don't be alarmed. However, if you feel alarmed, it's a good sign: it's the correct reaction when someone tells you you have extended brain damage.</p>

The excerpts in Table 1 are taken from the first 20 minutes of the game and are the very first words uttered by Wheatley upon awakening Chell from her cryogenic slumber. Right from the start, *Portal 2* foregrounds its dark sense of humour with jokes on the brain condition of the character. The incongruity that leads to experience humour is positioned at the end of the first subtitle, expressed via the juxtaposition of “very minor” and “serious” in the sentence “very minor case of serious brain damage”, and, of course, the joke is aided by being contextualized with a heavy topic such as cerebral injuries. In the second subtitle, Wheatley makes additionally funny comments while attempting to reassure the protagonist by being pedantic about their possible cognitive deterioration. The humour is dark and concentrated on serious topics and doesn't make use of wordplay or other language-specific (and -reliant) joke structures. The Italian subtitling resorts to a mostly literal translation, which maintains the humour (and the joke) but not without some imprecisions: “rimasta sotto” is a very literal translation of “been under” and its meaning is made understandable only by the rest of the sentence giving enough context to the player/reader. In the second subtitle, “don't be alarmed” has been rendered with “non sentirti allarmata”; while the Italian version still retains sense and does not alter the content of the sentence significantly, it undermines Wheatley's characterization as an informal speaker compared to the other, more sophisticated robotic characters in the game, as the Italian “allarmarsi” is of a somewhat higher register.

Table 2

English transcription	Italian subtitling	English backtranslation
Oh, brilliant. You DID [sic] find a portal gun! You know what? It just goes to show: people with brain damage are the real heroes in the end aren't they? At the end of the day. Brave.	Oh, fantastico. Hai trovato una pistola spara-portal! Vuoi sapere una cosa? Questo dimostra che le persone con danni cerebrali alla fine sono I veri eroi, no? Alla fine. Sei stata coraggiosa.	Oh, fantastic. You found a portal-shooting gun! Do you want to know something? This demonstrates that people with brain damage in the end are the real heroes, no? In the end. You have been brave.

Once the player starts exploring the facility, prompted by Wheatley, they start looking for the portal gun, the key tool to navigate the game and solve the numerous environmental puzzles that prevent Chell and Wheatley from escaping. Upon finding it, the player reconvenes with Wheatley, who utters the surprised and pseudo-inspirational comment presented as excerpt in Table 2. The Italian subtitling does not present capitalisation, which is usually avoided in films et similia, but highly encouraged in videogames to add emphasis, and is here used to convey the poorly hid sense of surprise of Wheatley in finding out Chell has managed to find the gun, which would otherwise be lost or very hard to detect without the capitalisation. The main joke, “people with brain damage are the real heroes in the end”, is rooted in the mocking of inspirational quotes and, much like the previous example, in the desacralization of serious topics. Nevertheless, the translation of this specific passage is much more nuanced because of its highly idiomatic structure, with the Italian version resorting to poor choices in translating some of the most exquisitely colloquial segments of the utterance. “At the end of the day” is translated as “alla fine”, losing its idiomatic connotation and its status as a turn of phrase. More importantly, “brave”, which acts as a very colloquial standalone comment, is very poorly translated into a fundamentally literal periphrasis (“sei stata coraggiosa”), thus hindering humour delivery as well as the almost-slang and informal features of Wheatley’s style (which highlight his stupidity, as the entire conversation feels quite out of place given the circumstances of the videogame). The result is an Italian subtitle with a crowded verbal packaging for the joke and a missed second punchline in the last sentence. Still, the reference to brain damage can be considered an instance of hooking, as the joke reutilizes the ‘serious injury’ script in a new, different setting: by hooking back to the brain damage topic, the humour in the videogame effectively adds coherence to the narrative by restating the possible damage one may experience in the facility as well as reinforcing the general sense of humour of *Portal 2*. Furthermore, hooking strategies based on insults and brain injury are used throughout the videogame to address both the main character – with condescendence, mostly – as well as “bullying” the player. Grewell, McAllister & Ruggill (2015) have highlighted the way in which humour in the *Portal* franchise is gamified as a result of its ubiquity in the text and its intertwinement with the environmental puzzle. The authors remarked how fatphobic jokes, black humour, and insult comedy at the expense of the protagonist are transposed to the player as well, aided by the first person in-game perspective: “the ridicule dares the player, motivating her or him to keep pressing onwards” (p. 342). It naturally follows that if humour is so closely linked to the gameplay and the characterization of Wheatley, translating humour with precision and efficacy is to be prioritized in texts like *Portal 2*, even more so considering that Wheatley’s voicelines occupy the vast majority of in-game dialogue.



It is in fact via different humorous pieces of dialogue that Wheatley is fully fleshed out as a character. His funny utterances highlight his lack of intelligence, his cowardice, and his contradictive perception of humanness. Wheatley acts prudish whenever he needs to plug itself in a port, asking the player to turn around, or else he will not proceed, heavily reminiscing the player of excessive and shameful modesty during very intimate acts, contradicted by the sheer computer-like quality of the operation. Furthermore, in spite of its robotic nature, he is quite afraid of death, adding another layer of human-robot incongruity to *Portal 2*'s humour identity.

Table 3

English transcription	Italian subtitling	English backtranslation
Okay, listen, let me lay something on you here. It's pretty heavy. They told me NEVER NEVER EVER [sic] to disengage myself from my Management Rail. Or I would DIE [sic]. But we're out of options here. So... get ready to catch me, alright, on the off chance that I'm not dead the moment I pop off this thing.	Ok, ascolta, lascia che ti dica una cosa. È davvero dura. Mi hanno detto di non staccarmi MAI, MAI, MAI [sic] dalla rotaia. Altrimenti, MORIRÒ. Ma abbiamo esaurito le altre opzioni. Perciò... per favore, preparati a prendermi al volo, nell'ipotesi che io non muoia nell'istante in cui mi staccherò da questo affare.	Ok, listen, let me tell you something. It's really hard. They told me to NEVER EVER detach myself from my rail. Or else, I WILL DIE. But we have exhausted the other options. SO... please, prepare yourself to catch me at flight, in the hypothesis that I don't die in the instant in which I detach myself from this thing.

The excerpt in Table 3 is one of several instances in which Wheatley states its terror about death. The first detail of interest, for the sake of humour detection and translation, is that Wheatley talks about death in a very human way: he doesn't discuss termination, malfunction or being turned off, but behaves akin a man hanging from a cliff. Differently from Table 2, the capitalisation has been maintained in the Italian subtitles with good results in attempting to maintain inflections and oral emphasis, albeit some creative additions are arguably unnecessary if not detrimental to the characterization of Wheatley. In particular, "pretty heavy" does not really translate well as "davvero dura", because Wheatley is informing the player that the topic is serious and somewhat dark, while the Italian subtitling refers to situations that are hard to overcome rather than introducing bad news. The nuance between the English voiceline and its Italian subtitle is made more evident by how the sentences are sequenced and the impact of the introductory disclaimer on Wheatley's explanation. The addition of "per favore" ("please") in the last sentence, as well as the omission of "alright", contributes to Wheatley sounding more polite and pleading in the Italian version, in spite of such personality traits being highly contradictive with Wheatley's character. Still, his panic about his ultimate demise is reinforced in the subtitle through the use of efficient capitalisation, to add corresponding emphasis in the written transcription and translation of the dialogue.

Capitalisation in videogame subtitling and on-screen text is particularly effective as a mean to emphasise certain elements of the sentence, such as during an introductory segment or a tutorial: the fully capitalised word or sentence stands out to signal the player of its importance. Similarly, capitalisation in subtitling humour can be useful in highlighting elements that are key to the successful delivery of a joke, emphasising the locus of the joke, or to reflect a particular emphasis from speech to written text. Of

course, humour translation is often hindered by the presence of culturally significant and hard to translate elements, or the involvement of linguistic features hard to convey without resorting to more creative and flexible solutions, which depend on the interpretation of the translators (Iaia 2014). In the case of *Portal 2*, the intense focus on worldbuilding and the narrative being directly intertwined with it results in humour that is mostly contextual or makes use of in-game reference (thus referencing its own culture system), and therefore eases the translator's task from the point of view of cross-cultural references, but the working conditions of the translator as well as the configuration of the medium are the ones that impose constraints on the translation process. Nevertheless, due to subtitling practice still retaining a (lower) reductive nature in videogames just like in movies and other filmic medias (Díaz Cintas & Remael, 2020), capitalisation can act as an efficient countermeasure to maintain humour in subtitling in spite of having to comply with reduced sentence length. Still, a portion of Wheatley's aforementioned features is inevitably lost, and the full characterization of the character fails to deliver in multiple instances upon close observation. Additionally, the tendency in the videogame to translate most (if not all) of the content verbatim has an ulterior impact on the rendition and localization of characterizing dialogue, not to mention on the transfer of humour across languages. Overall, the subtitling of the videogame suffers from many of the superficialities that plague the quality of professional translation at industrial level, such as overly literal translation and little attention to register changes or character identity. Similarly, humour is often hindered in its discharge in the Italian rendition of the videogame by crowded verbal packaging and excessively faithful transposition of the sentence. Nevertheless, the translation is aided by the fact that humour in *Portal 2* is strongly topical and contextual rather than intrinsically linguistic (i.e., centred on wordplay).

## 5. Conclusions

Unfortunately, the choice of subtitling *Portal 2* ultimately hinders the rendition of Wheatley, as an orally-coded character that delivers multiple jokes that are difficult to transpose in interlingual subtitling due to the numerous constraints impacting the medium (subtitling conventions, company decision, humour). Texts like *Portal 2* inevitably prioritise a fun factor of sort: a focus on personal entertainment, engagement and characterization via humour that can be sometimes controversial but still pique the interest of players and viewers. Furthermore, *Portal 2* showcases the extent to which (even if nuanced) comedy genres (such as stand-up) can reverberate in other, even if radically different, types of texts such as videogames, both from the perspective of themes addressed as well as the perspective of jokes that are textually significant for the overall product: the controversial funny element that stand-up comedy often applies to serious topics such as death, religion and illness is comfortably transposed in the less realistic setting of the videogame, and techniques of textual coherence within the humorous text of stand-up monologues are reprised and readapted in the videogame for text-specific purposes. The way in which humour is fully fused with gameplay and narrative in *Portal 2*, thus actively participating in world-building, characterization, narrative and gameplay showcases how humour in videogames can actually go further than epitomizing the human component and the entertaining aspect of the text. In turn, the multifaceted and pervasive nature of humour in such media requires in-depth evaluation in the context of translation, lest the final result presents a mismatch in the rendition of humour, with implications on other aspects of the text. On the other hand, and in spite of the difficulties that the videoludic text presents when it comes to subtitling practice, videogame translation offers solutions that could be relevant if applied to filmic medias, such as capitalisation (which helps conveying oral-specific emphasis in humorous utterances and aids the subtitle without increasing its length), but are otherwise deemed anti-normative

for contemporary standards of subtitling practice. Nevertheless, “it should be possible to harmonise linguistic and ludic principles with best practices in subtitling so that some of the shortcomings [...] can be addressed” (Bernal Merino, 2015, p.73). Of course, as this study adopted a qualitative approach, further research is needed to support its claims on a more general level, and applications on different videogames with different professional context is required to further profile the extent to which capitalisation represents an advantage even for non-videoludic subtitling.

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## **Bionote**

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