

Gender Indeterminacy in Translation: the Case of R. L. Stine's *Give Yourself Goosebumps* Gamebooks via Portuguese Translation*

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1. Gamebooks, Second-Person Narratives and Resulting Translation Problems

Gamebooks are not read as traditional novels, *i.e.* from start to finish – indeed, the reader starts off in the first pages but is quickly presented with a narrative choice in the form of a footnote. Depending on the choice made, the reader is then taken to a different page of the book and its respective outcome. Footnote instructions (along the lines of “If you choose the door on the left, turn to page x. If you choose the door on the right, turn to page y”) move the narrative forward and lead to different possible endings. A definition of gamebook that is both concise and encompassing is the one offered by Demian Katz, administrator of the international gamebook online database *gamebooks.org*: a gamebook is “any book in which the reader participates in the story by making choices which affect the course of the narrative”.

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("FAQ's" 1) According to Katz, there are three types of gamebooks: the role-playing game solitaire adventure, the rulebook guided solitaire adventure, and the branching plot novel. This article's primary focus will be on the latter: a type of book that requires the reader to make narrative-bound choices but that is, otherwise, much like a regular novel in both appearance and structure. (Katz, "FAQ's" 1)

According to Jeremy Douglass, author of *Command Lines: Aesthetics and Technique in Interactive Fiction and New Media*, gamebooks are a form of interactive fiction predominantly written in the second person. This type of address actively uses the imperative form and is "highly effective at eliciting immersion in a textual simulation, similar to the first-person camera in visual studies." (Douglass 32) Most literature written in a second-person perspective follows the conventions of what Douglass calls "intercepted communication" – this is the case of the epistolary novel, for instance. Gamebooks, however, apply the second-person perspective with the purpose of directly addressing the reader in a continuous manner and promoting first-person participation. (Douglass 141) In gamebooks, it is fairly typical to encounter passages such as "You are in a maze", which in turn, evoke in the reader a corresponding thought ("I am in a maze"). In Douglass' view, the second-person character provides the reader with an "inhabitable experience (...) for the purpose of the player's participation, identification or immersion." (Douglass 145)

Using gender-neutral language is one of the many possible strategies that provide readers with what Douglass calls an "inhabitable experience" – yet, although creating gender ambiguity at a linguistic level seems effective in allowing readers of any gender to easily slip into the main character's skin, according to Demian Katz, grammatical gender in gamebooks is "a complex situation". Firstly, one should rule out the books in which the player's character is specifically defined (like in the series *Lone Wolf, Endless Quest*, etc.), and then books that are aimed at a specific gender (such as some romance gamebooks written with a female audience in mind) – we are, then, left with gamebook series such as the popular *Choose Your Own Adventure* books, which

are almost completely gender neutral in their language.¹ However, it is important to point out that grammatical markings are not the only way through which readers can deduce the second-person character's gender within the text: there is an added layer of contextual cues that can influence their reading – and these can generate a diversity of interpretations, especially when the contextual information is inexplicit in nature and, therefore, relies on the readers' personal views on reinforced roles and stereotypes (*e.g.* women perceived as passive and submissive, men as active and adventurous, among many others). (Le Grange 4)

Furthermore, when it comes to gender, identification and notions of implied readership, many parallels can be drawn between the implied readers of gamebooks and the assumed target audiences in the video game industry, often the subject of heated debates regarding representation and identity. (Shaw 126) According to Adrienne Shaw, author of *Identity, Identification, and Media Representation in Video Game Play: An Audience Reception Study* (2010), there is a difference between identifying “with” and identifying “as” in the context of video game play: Shaw concluded that, although players are able to empathise with characters without necessarily having a concrete connection to them, identifying “as” a character, *i.e.* finding similarities between themselves and video game characters (in terms of gender, race, sexuality, body type, etc.), helps players further identify, or connect, “with” them. (Shaw 136)

When present in gamebooks, this linguistic gender neutrality, in conjunction with second-person narration, creates a particularly interesting translation problem – especially when rendering an English gamebook into a language heavily marked by grammatical gender (such as Portuguese). When intending to preserve the text's “inhabitability”, as defined by Douglass, the translator is presented with a choice: should a male or female form of address be used, based on what is linguistically and contextually implied in the text? Or is it preferable to avoid marking the reader's gender altogether? How does

1. Information collected during an email exchange with Demian Katz in October 2013.

such a decision impact the target text's style and immersive effect? And how does a translator's particular gender bias directly or indirectly influence his or her adoption of specific translation strategies? (Diachuk 47)

An interesting example of a mostly gender-neutral gamebook series is R. L. Stine's *Give Yourself Goosebumps*, a spin-off of the popular *Goosebumps* horror novels for children and young adults. In the present article, it is proposed that one of the many strategies allowing readers to immerse themselves completely in the narrative is that of maintaining (to some degree) a sense of gender neutrality when addressing or describing the reader/protagonist's character. It is also argued that when Anglophone source texts suggest gender ambiguity, Portuguese translators have to deliberately apply strategies when deciding whether or not ambiguity (when present) is to be kept in the target text. These source texts were written in the present tense and employed a second-person perspective – and although they may not be completely (and perhaps even intentionally) gender neutral, the close reading of their Portuguese translations revealed interesting insights on the strategies surrounding the translation of gender indeterminacy and how the translators' own gender identification influenced their interpretation of implied readership.

2. Children's Horror Literature: Rise in Popularity and Cross-Cultural Considerations

The *Children's Literature Review* calls R. L. Stine one of the most prolific children's authors of the twentieth century, (*Children's Literature Review* 1) the author reaching the height of his popularity in the mid-1990s with *Goosebumps* – a series of children's horror novels that, according to critic Silk Makowski, played a great role in the democratisation and juvenation of the horror genre. (Makowski 40) The *Children's Literature Review* calls Stine a controversial figure, mostly because some critics “decry that his novels – particularly his juvenile horror titles – pander to young readers' basest instincts and

instil poor reading habits", being even labelled "literary junk food" by some scholars that consider the series to have little to no literary merit. (*Children's Literature Review* 1) Critics such as Roderic McGillis have declared Stine's novels artificial, formulaic, predictable and repetitive, (McGillis 15) while other important figures in the area of children's literature studies (such as Perry Nodelman) have stated that, while not representing the best writing available to children, R. L. Stine's novels can still be praised for the way they keep the audience engaged and captivated by the narrative. (Nodelman 118)

Regardless of criticism and, to some extent, unfavourable adult reception, one fact still remains: R. L. Stine is considered the best-selling children's author in history, "outstripping even Stephen King's output in the adult international horror market." (Rijke 509) According to Victoria de Rijke's essay on children's literary horror tradition in the *International Companion to Children's Literature*, although owing much to traditional folklore (with fairy tales, for instance, being notoriously quite horrific in their origins), the emergence of the genre of children's horror is relatively recent, being heavily influenced by horror for adults and adopting many of its themes, tropes and characters. The height of adult horror books and films' popularity occurred in the 1990s, leading to a similarly steady rise in the horror trend for children's book publishers. (Rijke 506-508; McCort 14)

Despite the fact that horror fiction has an undeniable appeal to young readers and that it has been increasingly recognised as a healthy way for children and young adults to explore and gain power over negative emotions, such as loss and fear, (McCort 11-15) R. L. Stine's books were not well-received by parents and critics. In fact, the *Goosebumps* series is one of the most banned series for young American readers of all time, the American Library Association ranking them #94 on their Top 100 Banned/Challenged books between 2000 and 2009. (McCort 18) Stine's books were consistently met with negative reviews in the United States of America, many seeing them as "dangerous influences on the imaginations of young readers." (McCort 17) However, this "adult distaste" for Stine's horror novels "has done little to hinder [their] sale[s] and consumption"

– in fact, their popularity continues to grow, both in the United States and worldwide. (McCort 20)

The original *Goosebumps* novels were widely translated and published in Portugal in the 1990s and early 2000s, reaching record sales. (Morais 1) Although Stine's popularity during this period suggests the Portuguese market's undeniable interest in importing children's horror titles from abroad, the same cannot be said about the popularity of the horror genre as a whole. Translated books and publications aside, Portugal does not possess a significant literary tradition in publishing its own horror fiction, whether for a young or an adult audience. According to David Soares, acclaimed Portuguese comic book and horror fiction author, this is mainly due to two determining factors: the long-lasting effects of censorship and high illiteracy rates throughout Portuguese history. (Soares 1)

The censoring powers of the Catholic Church, particularly the Inquisition (abolished only in 1821), combined with several periods of severe State censorship, namely the impositions of *Real Mesa Censória* in the eighteenth century, (known, among other things, for the public burning of "immoral" and "scandalous" books) and of the *Estado Novo* dictatorship (censoring the press and all publications from 1926 until 1974), have had long-lasting effects on Portugal's literary and cultural tradition. (Soares 1; Rodrigues 34) Additionally, there is the fact that, by the end of the nineteenth century, illiteracy rates in Portugal were at a staggering 80%, when the corresponding English and German rates were at 1% and 0,50%, respectively. (Soares 1) Bearing this in mind, it comes as no surprise that the horror genre did not have the means to thrive in Portugal until the 1980s and 1990s, given how the genre is typically characterised by the grotesque, the monstrous and an exploration of "notions of pleasure, fear, nostalgia, repression and desire." (Rijke 516)

3. R. L. Stine's *Give Yourself Goosebumps* in Portuguese Translation, Implied Readership and the Observed Impact of Translators' Own Gender Identification

There are not many entries mentioning Portuguese gamebooks (or gamebooks translated into Portuguese) in Demian Katz's online database, which seems to imply that this literary sub-genre did not share the same degree of popularity in Portugal as in the USA or the UK. Nevertheless, there are some noteworthy examples to choose from, particularly in the children's literature category: such is the case of R. L. Stine's *Give Yourself Goosebumps* gamebooks (*Cria os Teus Próprios Arrepios* in Portuguese, published by Abril/Controljornal), of which five (out of a total 42) were translated into European Portuguese. According to their respective entry on *gamebooks.org*, R. L. Stine's gamebooks consist of "relatively straightforward branching-plot novels", even though some adventures are, in Katz's perspective, surprisingly sophisticated in terms of game design. (Katz, "Give Yourself" 1)

As previously stated, the second-person address used consistently throughout Stine's *Give Yourself Goosebumps* horror gamebooks creates a translation problem in target languages heavily marked by grammatical gender. In the same way that a children's book author has an implied reader in mind when writing, guiding his/her choice of words, themes and characters, a children's literature translator is also guided by his or her own personal readings and images of implied readership. (Oiiitinen 74) As will be made clear by the following paragraphs, choosing to either a) keep grammatical neutrality, or b) adopt a single form of address (the masculine), will reveal the translators' own gender bias and his or her views on who is going to read the target text – views which, in turn, could be affected by the translator's own gender identification. (Diachuk 48)

Translator Álvaro Fernandes provides the Portuguese reader with a highly gendered translation in his rendering of the gamebook source text *Tick Tock, You're Dead* (published by Scholastic in November 1995). In this story, the reader goes to the Museum of Natural History,

wanders into a strange room and manages to enter a time machine in the process; this gamebook has twenty-four bad endings and only four good ones. Translated in 1998 under the title *Viagem no Tempo*, the 135 page-long target text has a total of sixty pages containing gendered words in the masculine form, some even presenting more than one example; apart from adjectives and past participles used in reference to “you”, the reader, some adverbs were also gendered in their translation to Portuguese: for instance, “this person”, a gender-neutral expression used by another character in reference to the reader, was translated in the target text as “este tipo” (“this guy”), both demonstrative and noun marked by the grammatical masculine. (Stine, *Viagem* 15) The same applies to the noun “spy” when applied to the reader, translated in its masculine form, “espião”; (Stine, *Viagem* 15) other examples include past participles (“you’re dragged”, which is translated in its masculine form in the target text, “és levado”). (Stine, *Viagem* 25) It is relevant to point out that this source text is not as clear about the gender of the reader/protagonist as some other books in the *Give Yourself Goosebumps* series are. Firstly, there is no grammatical evidence in the source text defining the reader as either male or female – there are in fact no pronouns or possessives used in reference to the reader that suggest it. Secondly, the only contextual information through which the reader/protagonist’s gender could be made evident, namely when other characters interact with “you” (a man slapping you in the back, duelling with a knight in Medieval times), although falling into what is typically considered a masculine gender role, (Le Grange 4) is mostly open to interpretation.

However, there are other *Give Yourself Goosebumps* gamebooks that are more straightforward in characterising the gender of the reader/protagonist, at least in terms of contextual information. In *Night in Werewolf Woods* (published in 1996), for instance, the reader shares a tent with a boy named Todd while on a camping trip with their parents to Woods World, a vacationing resort haunted by werewolves and trolls. Apart from this specific detail, the clothes the reader is wearing are not a particular indicator (being a rather neutral trainers and sweatshirt combination), and a boy calls the reader/protagonist

a “dude”. Yet, these passages seemed to justify the translator’s decision to characterise the reader’s character grammatically as a male in fifty-five pages of the translated gamebook, which is 133 pages long in total. In Carlos da Silva’s translation of *Night in Werewolf Woods* (*Uma Noite na Floresta do Lobisomem*, 1998) there are several examples of his interpretation of implied readership. There are a few past participles that take a masculine form, such as “rebocado”, “sugado” and “lavado”. (Stine, *Noite* 113) The expression “swallowed you whole” is also gendered in the same passage through the use of the masculine form of the adjective “inteirinho”.

But perhaps the most representative case of highly gendered target language is the Portuguese translation of *Beware of the Purple Peanut Butter* (1996). In this gamebook, the reader finds a jar of peanut butter that magically shrinks whoever eats it – a story with only five good endings to choose from, and twenty-one bad ones. In *Cuidado com a Manteiga de Amendoim Púrpura!* (translated by Carlos da Silva in 1998), most of the information gathered on the reader/protagonist’s gender is essentially contextual: cousin Barney is constantly trying to beat “you” up (calling you a variety of names like “wimp” or “shrimp”) and “you” hate playing dollhouse with cousin Dora, which is not exactly clear-cut in defining the second-person protagonist as a boy. Nevertheless, this seemed to influence the translator’s interpretation, given the one hundred and seventy-one examples of adjectives, past participles and pronouns marked as masculine in the target text. Since the storyline is concerned with the reader/protagonist’s body shrinking and growing, there are numerous examples of the adjectives “big” and “small” throughout the gamebook. The most common Portuguese translated term for “big” is the gender-neutral “grande”, whereas the most common translation for “small” and its derivatives are always marked in the masculine form “pequeno” in Carlos da Silva’s target text. The same goes for all past participles, such as “esfomeado”, “disposto”, “apanhado”. (Stine, *Cuidado* 111) One may deduce that, if any gender neutrality is present, it is either coincidental or exists simply because the most direct translation of a given term was gender neutral in the first place.

Until this point, the three translations analysed have revealed the translators' (and/or possibly the editor's) preference for the grammatical masculine form in the marking of adjectives, past participles, articles and pronouns used in reference to the reader/protagonist's character. However, out of five *Give Yourself Goosebumps* gamebooks that were translated into Portuguese, two reveal a different translation strategy in achieving gender ambiguity. In these particular cases, the language used in reference to the reader, is, on the contrary, almost completely gender neutral, with some, but very few, exceptions – to this effect, the translator in question applied several strategies aimed at maintaining neutrality, including the use of the collective masculine, double forms and common nouns to replace gendered adjectives. (Abranches 18-22) Additionally, the information gathered upon the close reading of these particular target texts seems to point out that the effort in keeping the language gender neutral was intentional on the translator's part. It also seems relevant to highlight that the only two Portuguese target texts displaying this particular linguistic concern (namely, the translations of *Trapped in Bat Wing Hall* and *The Deadly Experiments of Dr. Eek*) were translated by a woman.

Trapped in Bat Wing Hall (published by Scholastic in 1995) follows a meeting of The Horror Club to which the reader was invited, taking place in a mansion that is said to be haunted. In *Sem Saída na Mansão Asa de Morcego* (1998), translator Alexandra Salgueiral only used grammatical masculine forms in two situations: one, when the reader is transformed into a bat, and two, when the target text itself determines the character's gender on a linguistic level. In the first instance, one of the other characters uses the pronoun "ele" ("him") in reference to the reader when the pronoun used in the target text is the gender neutral "it". It can be argued that this type of language may be excluded from the list of gendered terms used in reference to the reader/protagonist, because it applies the generic, neutral masculine (considered by some as an example of "false neutrality", given that this masculine form "encompasses" and includes the feminine). (Barreno 24; Abranches 11) (Stine, *Sem Saída* 82) Excluding this specific narrative metamorphosis, Alexandra Salgueiral only uses masculine

pronouns when the source text does so as well: there are only two pages in the English text in which a masculine pronoun is used by another character when referring to the reader. (Stine, *Sem Saída* 89) Other than this particular passage, there are no more references in the source text to the reader/protagonist's gender, aside from contextual information – which, as previously stated, can be subject to several degrees of interpretation. In *Trapped in Bat Wing Hall*, such contextual information is provided mainly through the way other characters interact with the reader/protagonist: for instance, a girl named Lauren smiles shyly in “your” direction, and a boy named Nick slaps “you” playfully on the back. Other than that, the translator avoided gendering adjectives, nouns and participles, and even went out of her way to keep the text gender neutral even when the solution sounded less fluent in the target text (such as in page 90, where “kid” takes the double form “miúdo ou miúda”, “boy or girl”, a couple of times). The same principle is applied throughout *As Mortíferas Experiências do Dr. Enguia* (1998) (*Deadly Experiments of Dr. Eek*, in the English version), made easier because the reader has a boy as a companion for most of the narrative, allowing for the collective masculine – which is gender neutral (Abranches 22) – to occur naturally.

4. Final Thoughts: Gender Indeterminacy in Translation and Cross-Cultural Readings of Non-Canonical Texts for Young Readers

As the present article has thus far demonstrated, R. L. Stine's *Give Yourself Goosebumps* gamebook series provides the reader with some information on the second-person protagonist's gender (or indeterminacy thereof). Some of these gamebooks offer some grammatical insight, but most of the gender-related information is gathered primarily through context. That can, in turn, cause some translation problems in the sense that the translator has to choose how to interpret the source text. Additionally, the second-person narrative raises the question of implied readership: is this book primarily intended for boys or girls? In this case study of the Portuguese translations of

the *Give Yourself Goosebumps* series, the target texts in question revealed two main translation strategies: the translator either chose to perceive the reader/protagonist's character as male or tried as much as possible to keep linguistic gender neutrality in the target text.

Both approaches to the subject are undeniably valid, since both provide the reader with an enjoyable solo adventure experience: in the former, the reader can slip into the skin of a given character, and in the latter, the reader can feel as if they are themselves, first-person participants – in other words, a lack of linguistic gender neutrality does not necessarily hinder the reader's ability to form a connection with the second-person protagonist. As aptly put by Adrienne Shaw, in reference to the process of player identification with characters in video games, “[it] is part of the process that forms identities, however, [that] does not mean that specific identities, like gender, race and sexuality, define identification with characters.” (Shaw 126) This falls in line with Demian Katz's final statement in our email interview: “It is actually fairly rare to find a text that is completely, and intentionally, gender neutral – but at the same time, the majority of gamebooks can be enjoyed in a gender-neutral way if the reader wishes to do so.”

Translators Álvaro Fernandes and Carlos da Silva presented the reader with target texts which were strongly marked by grammatical gender, possibly a result of their own interpretation of the information gathered through reading, or even of editorial constraints from the publishing house. Since these gamebooks did not expressly promote the immersion of the second-person reader in a first-person experience, Carlos da Silva and Álvaro Fernandes mostly refer to the reader/protagonist as male, as can be seen in the way the language is gendered in more than half of both target texts. A different approach to this issue appears in the target texts rendered into Portuguese by Alexandra Salgueiral, her translations being almost completely gender neutral. This discrepancy is made evident when comparing the overall number of pages in the translated texts where the masculine grammatical gender is present:

- Tick Tock, You're Dead!:* present in 60 pages (in a total of 135)
Night in Werewolf Woods: present in 55 pages (in a total of 133)
Beware of the Purple Peanut Butter: present in 171 pages (in a total of 135)
Trapped in Bat Wing Hall: present in 2 pages (in a total of 137)
The Deadly Experiments of Dr. Eek: not present (in a total of 130 pages)

With the information gathered on her translation strategies and solutions, it can be surmised that Salgueiral valued gender neutrality as a way to achieve an “inhabitable experience” for the reader (Douglass 145) over textual fluency, since some of her gender-neutral choices were kept despite sounding “strange” in the target language, especially when there were far more fluent (yet gendered) alternatives available. In fact, in addition to the domestication of proper names and places in most *Goosebumps* books, the strategies used by Salgueiral can be taken as just another translation strategy aiming to bring readers of all genders to the text and giving them the opportunity to feel as if they are being immersed in the story as a first-person agent or player. This approach could be justified by the fact that Salgueiral herself is a woman, and therefore more aware of the fact that young female readers would enjoy the possibility of identifying “as” the second-person protagonist, rather than merely “with” them. (Shaw 136) In fact, the idea that children’s horror books are mostly read by boys is no more than a stereotype, as shown by a 1996 survey conducted in the U.K. which revealed that R. L. Stine’s horror fiction had a far larger female audience among 11-16 year-olds. (Reynolds 9)

Goosebumps’ Portuguese publisher, company Abril/Controljornal, was taken over by Impresa Publishing, a branch of super holding company Impresa. To the detriment of this research paper, the *Give Yourself Goosebumps* translators’ contact information is, unfortunately, no longer in their archives. Without a personal interview, it is impossible to further ascertain the extent to which Alexandra Salgueiral, Álvaro Fernandes and Carlos da Silva’s personal interpretations and gender bias influenced their choice regarding grammatical gender neutrality. It should, however, be highlighted that, in the act of translating game-books from the *Goosebumps* series, notions of implied readership were

undoubtedly involved, since all translators shaped their target texts to serve their own notion of who might read them in the target system. Or, in the words of Liudmila Diachuk, “[g]ender identity is decisive for the translator’s choice of the final translation’s equivalent for a certain word, expression [and] grammatical construction (...).” (48)

If the act of translation results from the relationship between a source and target system, it is important to point out the implications that the systemic status of children’s literature within the literary polissystem has on the act of translation. As scholar Zohar Shavit has pointed out, the children’s literature translator allows his or herself bigger creative liberties in producing the target text, which is a direct consequence of the peripheral position occupied by children’s literature in the literary polissystem, always seen as inferior by other literary systems. (Shavit 61) It is possible that the Portuguese translators of the *Give Yourself Goosebumps* series had tight deadlines and had to work for low fees, since these gamebooks were (like their novel counterparts) very cheap and published in quick succession. At the height of their popularity, R. L. Stine’s *Goosebumps* novels sold around 400 million copies worldwide – in fact, they were extremely popular in the Portuguese market, with sales figures only rivalled by the popularity of the Harry Potter series. (Morais 1) However, despite Stine’s worldwide popularity among young readers, American critics still criticised the author’s body of work, calling it, among other colourful adjectives, “lurid” and “shock fiction” (West 39): as previously mentioned, *Goosebumps* is one of the most banned series for young American readers of all time. (McCort 18)

It goes without saying that status and reception are important factors to be considered, especially in a study of a translation of a non-canonical, children and young adult gamebook. The gendering of language in translation is just an example of the translator’s manipulation of the text, and results vary greatly from case to case in the *Give Yourself Goosebumps* target texts, most likely because translators were permitted even larger freedom to interpret the text – a freedom which increases the more a text is considered marginal. (Venuti 8; Oittiinen 161) In this case study, we may be in the presence of a case

of triple (or even quadruple) marginalization, not only due to the fact that *Goosebumps* gamebooks are inserted in the children and young adult literary system; that even in this system they are in no way perceived as canonical; (McCort 17-19) but, and above all, the fact that these books are a mix between a novel and a game.

Horror fiction for children is a hybrid genre, found at the intersection of many subjects and tropes, whether between ghost and vampire fiction or suspense, thriller and science fiction. (Rijke 509) R. L. Stine's horror gamebooks for young readers have, among other things, "provide[d] a playground in which children (and adults) can play at fear", (McCort 11) a fact which their Portuguese translators reflected upon with the goal of heightening (or simply allowing) an inhabitable experience as a second-person character. There is a multitude of aspects to be considered further in the academic study of gamebooks and their translations, and although there is certainly much more to be said, attempting to contribute to a broader discussion of the intricacies of the genre is, ultimately, all that really matters in

THE END.

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