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The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy. – Martin Luther King jr

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Posted:  
Wednesday, March 09,  
2011 13:17 GMT

**Post #218867**

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### Ethan Ham



Member

[Posts: 7](#)  
Joined: Monday, August  
09, 2010  
Location: United States

### Translation as artwork

I just premiered an artwork called *Les Belles Infidèles* which consists of a short story that has been translated and retranslated by more than 40 translators into 15 languages. Almost all the translators were found using TranslatorsCafe.

The project is an exploration of the story's compounding mutation as the translators attempt to make it work in different languages and cultures. The term "les belles infidèles" comes from a 17th century quip by Gilles Ménage in which he compared a set of translations to an acquaintance of his: beautiful but unfaithful. The phrase has come to express the tension between making a translation seem natural in the target language versus keeping it as close as possible to the original text.

The project's source code is available under a GNU Affero General Public License and the original short story (written specifically for the project by Benjamin Rosenbaum) can be used under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 license.

Les Belles Infidèles is a 2011 commission of New Radio and Performing Arts, Inc. for its Turbulence website. The work was also supported in part by a grant from The City University of New York PSC-CUNY Research Award Program.

You can visit the project at <http://www.turbulence.org/Works/belles>

[Edited by Ethan Ham on Wednesday, March 09, 2011 13:18]

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Posted:  
Wednesday, March 09,  
2011 14:37 GMT

**Post #218875**—in reply to #218867

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### Nanna Mercer

### RE: Translation as artwork

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Mother tongues: *English, Danish*  
 Joined: Saturday, February 12, 2005  
 Location: Denmark

Ethan,  
 Congratulations!

I skimmed quickly through two English translations. Lovely! A very interesting concept.

Thanks for sharing it, Ethan.

Nanna

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Posted: Wednesday, March 09, 2011 15:54 GMT

**Post #218888**—in reply to #218875

+0 -0

**df**

**RE: Translation as artwork**



Mother tongue: *French*  
 Joined: Sunday, October 31, 2004  
 Location: France

Very interesting, and enlightening, exercise. I only looked at the French and English versions.

The second and last French version (tier 3 only and derived from a Japanese intermediate version) is already very... "creative", to say the least!

As for the final English version, it looks like a perfect illustration of the motto "Traduttore traditore", way beyond a "belle infidèle"! Or else the final outcome of the Telephone/Whisper down the lane game!

Imagine what that does when you extrapolate the exercise to an instruction manual for medical equipment or safety systems in a nuclear power plant... translated from French into Chinese, then Romanian and from there into English and onward into Spanish or Finnish, and sometimes even back to square one into French (and not necessarily by native speakers or competent translators along the chain)! The big difference is that in the case of your project, the final results are virtual, fun but harmless... I'm of course exaggerating for rhetorical purposes, but just 2 tiers can be enough to create a disaster! - This is a demonstration of a lesson to be learned and food for thought for us (non-literary) translators and for our clients.

Thanks for sharing, Ethan. I assume the translators in the tiers N+2 were working "blind", i.e. only from a previous translation, and had not seen the original English text?

df

[Edited by df on Wednesday, March 09, 2011 19:39]

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Posted: Wednesday, March 09, 2011 16:12 GMT

**Post #218890**—in reply to #218888

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**Ethan Ham**



Member

[Posts: 7](#)

Joined: Monday, August 09, 2010

Location: United States

**RE: Translation as artwork**

Thanks for the comments!

You're correct, each translator only had access to the translation prior to their own. I also avoided letting translators know that they were part of a game of "telephone" (though of course many realized that they were not working with the original text).

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Posted:  
Friday, March 11,  
2011 16:28 GMT

**Post #219034**—in reply to [#218867](#)

[+0](#) [-0](#)

**Volker Morbach**  
TC Master



Member

Mother tongue: *German*

[Posts: 7](#)

Joined: Sunday, March 01, 2009

Location: China

**RE: Translation as artwork**

(still not sure what to make of this, the translations read surprisingly well...)

Reading through the project's description this sentence struck me as odd.

"About the project". quote:

"The project is an exploration of the story's compounding mutation as the translators attempt to make it work in different languages and cultures."

I don't think that's the right way to put it. Most of the translators didn't even get to read the story. They read another (e.g. the translated) story.

@ df : I don't think this text can be compared to any non-literary text. It has far too many artistic features. It's not written to be "understood". It's written to be imagined and interpreted. It's also not written to clearly state things. Quite the contrary.

So I don't think we have to be overly concerned about nuclear power plants being closed down and shipped out to all kinds of different countries ^^

one small thing:

There is a small mistake in the tree diagram. You mixed up the headers for 简体 and 繁体. 繁体字 (traditional) should read 繁体字 (simplified) and 简化字 (another term for "simplified") should read 繁体字 (traditional), the text when clicking on the 繁体字 header is using 简体字 (and vice versa).

[Edited by Volker Morbach on Friday, March 11, 2011 17:05]

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Posted:

Friday, March 11,  
2011 17:03 GMT

+0 -0

**Ethan Ham**

**RE: Translation as artwork**



Thanks for the correction--I'll fix that right away!

Member

Posts: 7  
Joined: Monday, August  
09, 2010  
Location: United States

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