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Cultural Transfer in Video Games

In spite of the frequent calls for internationalization, video game developers do not seem to be willing to create titles completely devoid of cultural references. As a matter of fact, it might be even impossible to produce an utterly acultural product. For this reason, whenever a video game is planned to be published in a different market, it might have to undergo cultural alterations for this target market recipients to understand and accept it. This is especially the case when the source and target markets are far apart as far as their cultural conventions are concerned. This article discusses the culture-related problems encountered by video game localization teams and the solutions utilized.

Keywords: video games, culture, localization, culturalization, translation.

Kultureller Transfer in Video-Spielen

Trotz der immer stärker werdenden Tendenz zur Internationalisierung bedienen sich Spieleentwickler ungern der Titel, die keine kulturellen Bezüge aufweisen. Eigentlich wäre das Schaffen eines solchen Produkts unmöglich. Aus diesem Grunde müssen in einem Spiel, das auf einem anderen Markt herausgegeben wird, unterschiedliche kulturelle Änderungen vorgenommen werden, damit das Spiel von Rezipienten verstanden und angenommen wird. Dieses Problem ist insbesondere am Beispiel von Märkten sichtbar, die kulturell voneinander weit entfernt sind. Deshalb werden in diesem Beitrag Fragen erörtert, die mit kulturellen Bezügen verbunden sind und die im Prozess der Lokalisierung vorkommen, sowie Lösungen diskutiert, die in diesem Bereich auftreten.

Schlüsselwörter: Video-Spiele, Kultur, Lokalisierung, Kulturalisierung, Translation, Inkorporierung.

Author: Mateusz Sajna, The Philological School of Higher Edication in Wrocław, ul. Sienkiewicza 32, 50-355 Wrocław, Poland, e-mail: mateusz.sajna@gmail.com

1. Introduction

The video game industry can be regarded as one of the fastest growing industries in the world. In 2010 its income amounted to EUR 38 billion (IDATE 2010), and it is predicted that it will be almost twice as much in 2017, reaching the amount of USD 70 billion (Sajna 2016:24). Oddly enough, the subject of video games does not inspire too much interest in the academic milieu. What is even more surprising is that the problem of video game localization in general or translation in particular (these two are not synonymous, as will be shown later) has been discussed with even less intensity than other game studies issues, for example, the educational facets of these entertainment products. To the best of my knowledge, the only publications devoted almost solely to the translation aspect of video games are O'Hagan and Mangiron (2013), Bernal-Merino (2015) and Sajna (2016). There is also Chandler and Deming (2012), although it does not delve too much into game translation as the authors are interested in the broader term of localization.

Video games appear to have a more and more important place in our life. They compete for our leisure time with, amongst others, television, books and the press. What is more, it can be seen based on the example of the American market that games have already surpassed the press, music or radio as far as the generated income is concerned (Bobrowski et al 2015:6). Since the numbers generated by video games and the growth rate of this market are so impressive, and since localization can account for 30 to 50% of a publisher's game earnings (Chandler & Deming 2012:304), it seems imperative to thoroughly scrutinize every aspect of transferring those entertainment products to various locales¹, which sometimes differ greatly not only in terms of language utilized, but also cultural conventions observed. Moreover, Bobrowski et al. (2015:6) suggest that by 2017 there will be approximately 2.2 billion players worldwide (almost 1/3 of the entire world population), thus there seem to be more than enough reasons for making, localizing and studying video games.

2. What are video games?

As stated above, video games are a worldwide phenomenon. Grossman (2004) even believes that they have become "the world's biggest cult phenomenon". It is worth looking into the very nature of video games. It might come in handy in the subsequent parts of this paper and explicate some of the mechanisms of cultural transfer observed in the video game industry.

A number of scholars have tried to describe video games, and consequently there are many definitions of the concept. Frasca (2001:4) believes video games to be "[...] any forms of computer-based entertainment software, either textual or image-based, using any electronic platform such as personal computers or consoles and involving one or multiple players in a physical or networked environment". Esposito (2005) describes them as "[...] game[s] which we play thanks to audiovisual apparatus and which can be based on a story". And for Zimmerman (2004) they constitute "[...] a voluntary interactive activity, in which one or more players follow rules that constrain their behavior, enacting an artificial conflict that ends in a quantifiable outcome". O'Hagan (2005:2) states that it is of great import to understand that video games' goal is to provide entertainment. Sajna (2016:20) discusses another aspect of video games, namely that they are stories created so that "the player feels emotionally attached to the outcome" (Juul 2005:23).

The foregoing definitions and opinions having been presented, it seems reasonable to explain how video games are perceived in this article. From my point of view, they are "interactive software *products* created for entertainment purposes, which are played on any suitable electronic platforms, such as personal computers and consoles, and which are normally based on a story" (Sajna 2016:21). This definition should also be helpful when discussing game localization and translation.

¹Locale is not simply a language, but a particular variation of a language (e.g. Catalan as opposed to regular Spanish). What is more, local conventions regarding, among other things, currency, time settings, numbers or symbolic color coding ought to be taken into account as well (Pym 2004:2).

2.1. Localization versus translation

The following section will be devoted to an issue of paramount importance, namely the relationship between video game localization and translation. It appears that the differentiation between those two notions might be a problematic question.

The arcade game "Pack-Man" (Namco), whose original transliteration was "Puck-Man", constitutes one of the first attempts at introducing a video game to an international audience outside of the country of its origin. The title of that game needed to be altered to prevent English-speaking gamers from tampering with the initial letter in "Puck", arriving possibly at the indecent word "Fuck". Moreover, the monikers of the game's ghosts were also changed and became "Blinky", "Pinky", "Inky", and "Clyde" in the English version (O'Hagan and Mangiron 2013:49-51). The question that arises at this juncture is whether the aforementioned alterations were connected with translation or localization decisions? Chandler and Deming (2012:4) provide a localization definition which reads that it is the process of translating the language assets of a video game into various languages. However, such a definition of localization does not seem to provide any differentiation between localization and translation, so why use two terms if it is the same phenomenon? I believe that Chandler and Deming are alluding to what Bernal-Merino (2006:32) calls "linguistic localization" as opposed to "game localization". The latter involves other processes whose purpose is to adapt a particular title to a particular locale. This is corroborated in the definition provided by the Localization Industry Standards Association (LISA), which reads that "localization involves taking a product and making it linguistically [which is the typical translational component – MS] and culturally appropriate to the target locale (country/region and language) where it will be used and sold (Esselink 2000:3)". It can be seen on the basis of this definition that translation constitutes part of localization, which also encompasses other processes aimed at introducing a particular game to the target recipient markets (Sajna 2015:107).

Moreover, Esselink (2000:2) contends that translation has usually been only one of the actions performed in a project which was to transfer material from one language into another. The remaining ones are terminology research, editing, proofreading, and page layout. It is likely to encounter all of the issues presented by Esselink in video game localization projects. For example, there might be problems connected with the requirements of the rating board of a particular country. In such a situation localizers are supposed to change some aspects of the game for it to be allowed in this country.

Chandler and Deming (2012:8) claim that there are four variations of localization. The first one is "no localization", and it means that publishers do not require the assistance of any translators, do not translate any materials, and release the game in its original language and packaging to the target markets. Not only could there be difficulties with target players not comprehending the game's language, but culture-related issues might also come into play. Another type of localizing games is "packaging and manual"

localization", which is usually called "box and docs". In this case, the "insides" of the game remain intact, and the supporting documents are translated. The third localization variant is called "partial localization", which means that only in-game texts are translated, and the voiceover² remains in the original. Nowadays, the voiceover files are usually subtitled. The last type of game localization is called "full localization". Here, texts, voiceover, and additional materials are translated.

It has been mentioned hereinabove that "no localization" might pose culture-related problems. However, these types of issues are so common in today's localization industry that it goes without saying that the industry needs individuals, usually these are translators, who know the target language culture like the backs of their own hands.

3. Culture

It is very difficult to define and comprehend the concept of culture. Williams (1983:87) even believes that culture is "one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language". He dedicates six pages to his discussion of the notion of culture, its etymology and transformation throughout the centuries. Barker (2012:42) claims that culture revolves around shared meanings which are not created by individual people but rather by collectives. "To say that two people belong to the same culture is to say that they interpret the world in roughly the same ways and can express themselves, their thoughts and feelings about the world, in ways which will be understood by each other. Thus culture depends on its participants interpreting meaningfully what is happening around them, and 'making sense' of the world, in broadly similar ways" (Hall 1997:2).

Since the concept of culture is a prevalent motif of this paper, it seems worth attempting to define the elusive nature of culture and, for this purpose, I shall adopt the above-cited definition. What is more, culture appears to be the reason why the world is a place of great diversity, and why people can be so distinct from one another. This distinctiveness might be in danger because of the more and more widely-utilized internationalization, which might be both a great boon for translators and a lethal opponent for cultures.

3.1 Internationalization versus culture

The Localization Industry Standards Association (2005) proposed a definition whereby "internationalization is the process of generalizing a product so that it can handle multiple languages and cultural conventions without the need for redesign". Thus an internationalized video game would be a game that could be localized without introducing any changes to the design of the product (Chandler and Deming 2012:344). Chandler and Deming (2012:7) claim that the principle of internationalization entails limiting culture-specific terms (e.g. names of stars popular in the source culture) if

² "Any spoken dialogue heard in a game" (Chandler and Deming 2012:346).

they are not vital to the storyline or gameplay. Furthermore, they suggest that generic references be utilized in place of specific names whenever possible, because a person, phenomenon or object famous in the source culture might be completely unknown in the target market culture. Video games should remain as culturally neutral as possible, thus making it less noticeable for target market players that the product was not developed primarily with them in mind. An internationalized game is likely to be easier to localize, which is important when taking into account the tight deadlines of the video game industry and the simultaneous shipment practice³. On the one hand, internationalization greatly helps translators, making the product easier to understand. Consequently, they have fewer difficulties rendering the text, and the translation quality should be better. On the other hand, internationalization might make the product less interesting and bland. What is more, it might cause what Pym (2004:37) calls "the death of cultural difference". Fortunately, it is not really possible and sometimes undesirable (cf. O'Hagan and Mangiron 2013:174) to completely delete all cultural references, and translators who come across such culture-specific terms appear to have to choices: they can either domesticate the game or incline towards foreignization.

3.2. Domestication and foreignization in video games

It is a well-known fact that translation is suspended between two poles: domestication and foreignization. Eco (2003:100) claims that "to choose a target- or source-oriented direction is [...] a matter of negotiation to be decided at every sentence". This corroborates the fact that a categorical bias towards one or the other is normally almost unattainable because translators battle the culture-clash duel in their minds from the beginning until the very end of the translation process. Nonetheless, video game translators appear much more inclined to modify culture-specific elements so that games can be perceived as originally produced for the target audience (see, for example, Bernal-Merino 2006:29 and 2009:244, Diaz Monton 2007, Di Marco 2007:4–6, Mangiron and O'Hagan 2006:15, or Petrů 2011:81–82).

Mrzigod (2012) contends that it is the publisher (usually an international one) who decides about domesticating or foreignizing culture-specific elements. Obviously, in some games, for example those set in the real or historical world, it is highly undesirable to alter cultural references because this could misrepresent the reality and, consequently, could discourage players. Składanowski, Head of Translation for the Polish former game localization company CD Projekt, asserts that "[g]enerally, the more liberties the creators of the game took while writing the text, the more leeway the translator has in rendering it in the target language, specially [sic] in humorous contexts. One example of this was during the translation of Warcraft III with its

³ "Simultaneous shipment – releasing a program simultaneously in several languages" (Dietz 2002).

numerous references to American pop culture that weren't part of the game's main plot. They were in many cases supplanted by references to popular Polish movies, characters and events, no doubt contributing to the game's warm reception by local gamers" (Edge Magazine 2006:80).

Bernal-Merino (2006:29) describes video games products developed for "tailored entertainment". Gamers create their characters, select the game's difficulty level, adjust the settings, play in the single player mode or with others in the multiplayer mode, etc. In Bernal-Merino's (ibid.) opinion, it is not a problem that game localizations pretend to be originals, and video games publishers wish their products to be perceived by target market recipients as if originally developed for them. Consumers are accustomed to translated texts so much that they do not ponder if they are translations or originals. Translation "is reality, and [...] translated texts function as originals in their own right" (ibid.). Mangiron and O'Hagan (2006:15) even believe that game translators are granted carte blanche "to modify, adapt, and remove" any culture-specific references or language puns that may be incomprehensible in the target culture. What is more, in the pursuit of not only preserving the gameplay experience but also improving it, localizers are usually permitted and encouraged to introduce new cultural references to the source culture, source-language jokes, and other elements. What is an exception for other translation types seems to be a rule in game localization, highlighting the target language culture over the source language one.

4. Culturalization

Di Marco (2007:2) believes that culturalization, or cultural localization as she calls it, is: "adaptation of visuals, sound and scripts conceived in one language by members of one culture to another language and another culture, in such a way that they seem at once fully consistent with the assumptions, values and other boundaries and outlooks of the second culture, and internally consistent within the semiotic strategies of the original video game text, visuals and sound".

Mangiron (2008) adds a very important aspect of video games to the definition, saying that culturalization is "the adaptation of the cultural content of a game to be able to market it successfully internationally". It is video games' potential to be sold globally that drives the need for localization and culturalization in the first place. O'Hagan and Mangiron (2013:215) state that the need for culturalization arises if "[...] any elements, verbal and nonverbal, of an original video game [...] are deemed obscure, offensive, difficult to grasp by the target audience, or perceived as not tailored to them because of some cultural incongruity".

The International Game Developers Association and Game Localization Special Interest Group (2012:1–2) points out the four most common elements that could cause conflict between the game content and the target locale culture:

- a) History this covers the question of historical accuracy. "Many cultures are extremely protective of [or sensitive to MS] their historical legacy and origins, so any alternate or inaccurate history can yield strong, emotional backlash".
- b) Religion and belief systems games must not offend the receiving market players' beliefs.
- c) Ethnicity and cultural friction this is a broad category that covers mainly "the use of ethnic and/or cultural stereotypes and the perception of inclusion and exclusion with a negative bias towards a specific group".
- d) Geopolitical imaginations this covers the political issue of territorial affiliation. "This involves a situation where the government claims certain territories and they expect those territories to be shown as integrated with their nation, whether it's on a functional map or in the world of a video game (hence the term "geopolitical imagination," as the depiction they're demanding doesn't reflect reality)".

For the purposes of this paper I have divided culturalization into linguistic culturalization and non-linguistic, or, to put it differently, technical culturalization.

4.1. Linguistic culturalization

Linguistic culturalization has been known at least since ancient Rome, when Romans intentionally deprived Greek texts of cultural references and even added allusions to Roman culture to their translations into Latin (Venuti 2005:240). Even though it all might have commenced a couple of thousand years ago, linguistic culturalization has been a valid notion ever since. Video game translation, seemingly so distant from the translation of Greek texts into Latin, also utilizes linguistic culturalization to a vast extent. Game publishers, when explicating what they wish their game to look or feel like in the target language, frequently encourage translators to include target language jokes and puns, references to the target culture, and generally to bring the game as close to the target recipient as possible without, of course, distorting the world in which a given title is set. After all, if the game is set in the Wild West, it is not likely to contain too many elements from outside the United States, thus making it hardly possible for translators to make it more, for example, Polish or Chinese.

One of the greatest examples of linguistic culturalization is the FIFA franchise, in which the original commentators are replaced by the commentators known in the receiving market. In the case of Polish, FIFA is commentated on by Dariusz Szpakowski. He is known for uttering, in the heat of providing live football match commentary, various sayings, sometimes quite peculiar or nonsensical, which in time become entrenched in the minds of Polish football fans. That is exactly what the FIFA localization team decided to take advantage of. Instead of simply rendering the original texts, they utilized Szpakowski's famous sayings, thus making the Polish players feel even more at home.

Another famous example of linguistic culturalization in Poland is the case of Diablo III. The game had been criticized so heavily by Polish priest Piotr Natanek (he even used to mispronounce it, probably unintentionally, as Diabolo) that he became an object of Internet memes. The translators decided to make use of that situation and give a wink to the players, and rendered one of the staves as "Pastorał Nathanka" whose backtranslation is "Nathanek's Crozier" (the original name was "Wormwood"). They slightly changed the priest's name, probably for legal reasons, but Polish Diablo fans knew straight away who the name of this item alludes to.

Not only do video games utilize what has been used for thousands of years, but they have also added to it a new dimension – non-linguistic culturalization.

4.2. Non-linguistic culturalization

As mentioned above, translation constitutes only one component, albeit vital, of video game localization. It seems obvious that video games consists not only of texts, but also, and maybe predominantly, images. Non-linguistic culturalization is concerned with all aspects of the non-textual layers of video games. The following examples should make it clear what non-linguistic culturalization is.

One of the greatest challenges is the localization of Japanese games for Europe / America and the other way around. It is caused by the dissimilarity of the source and target cultures. In western games there is more violence and blood than in Japanese ones. These, on the other hand, are more inclined towards presenting sexual references (O'Hagan and Mangiron 2013:207). An example of this problem, illustrated by Di Marco (2007:2–3), is "Fatal Frame" (Tecmo). The original Japanese version features a young, frightened, high-school student, Miku, wearing a school uniform. This is caused by the fact that Japanese players prefer young characters. However, this is not the case in the West, where more adult-like avatars are preferable. For this reason, Miku underwent a number of changes in the localized version of the game. Her clothes stopped indicating that she was a school student. She became taller and more westernized. What is more, she started to speak in a more adult-like manner to reflect the fact that she was a grown-up.

Another example, provided by O'Hagan and Mangiron (2013:210), is Final Fantasy VIII (Square Soft). One of the game's characters wears a garment with a swastika symbol on it, which stands for good luck in Buddhism. The problem is that in Europe it is perceived as a Nazi symbol. For this very reason the localization team proposed altering it so as to avoid any release problems, especially in Germany, where the Unterhaltungssoftware SelbstKontrolle, the German ratings body, is very sensitive to the portrayal of such elements.

Fallout 3 (Bethesda), on the other hand, had localization problems when their game was to be released to the Japanese market (ibid.:227). In one of the quests, which was called "Power of the Atom", the player could use a nuclear bomb to destroy an entire

area. Since, after WWII, the Japanese are very sensitive to such elements, this quest was removed from the game. Moreover, the weapon name "Fat-Man" was also changed on account of the real-life counterpart, that is the nuclear bomb which exploded over Nagasaki. The developer also limited the amount of blood displayed to cater for the tastes of the target market recipients.

Last but not least, I wish to present a case in which cultural issues turned out to be insurmountable. Microsoft decided to cancel the release of the aforementioned Fallout 3 in India for its Xbox 360 platform due to the fact that the game featured deformed, two-headed cows called Brahmin. Players could even kill those animals, and it is known that Hindus worship the Brahman, which is a breed of cattle. Not only are the names very similar, but the in-game cows were also quite similar to the Brahman. The game, if published without any alterations, could have seriously offended Indian players (Wikipedians 2011:55). Could this problem have been avoided? Probably, if only potential cultural issues had been more thoroughly scrutinized at the development stage.

5. Conclusions

As can be seen on the basis of the above article, video games are nowadays global products of a highly malleable nature which must change in accordance with which market the game is to be published in. Not only are game developers obliged to take into account various sensitive issues such as politics, history, violence, sexuality or religious beliefs, but they also must pay very close attention to a particular market's gaming culture and preferences. What suits European gamers might not necessarily be suitable for Asian ones. It is most difficult to localize games into very dissimilar cultures, but sometimes even an attempt to bring some titles made by European teams to other European countries could prove difficult. For this very reason Honeywood, cited in O'Hagan and Mangiron (2013:214), states that "you don't just need good translators - you need cultural experts". After all, video games cannot be devoid of culture. It seems impossible to make a completely acultural game because the ideas for those entertainment products come from people who have been raised in particular communities and cultures, and whose minds have been "contaminated" by them. And even if it were possible to produce such games, they could be rather lackluster, because it seems to be this cultural spice that contributes to the overall gameplay of a particular title.

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