

# explorations



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## **Challenges in video game localization: An integrated perspective**

**Abstract.** Video games are currently one of the fastest evolving media that have risen from obscurity and conquered mainstream culture in less than fifty years. In 2012, its revenue was estimated at about 78 billion US dollars globally, which places digital games at the forefront of popular entertainment<sup>1</sup>. This turning point in the history of the video game industry can be attributed to two primary factors: firstly, to the overall development of the video game concept and secondly to the increase in the cultural value of interactive entertainment. None of this would, however, come to fruition if not for the development of the specific translation techniques that allowed the industry to reach out to a global audience (Bernal-Merino 2007). This paper examines some of the characteristics of video game localization from a linguistic and cultural standpoint, focusing on the relevance of context (Newmark 1991) and lexicalization patterns in translation (Talmy 2001). It also explores the role of transcreation in interactive entertainment software and analyses how the strictly technical limitations of the medium impact the overall result of the translation process (Mangiron and O'Hagan 2006; Chandler 2005; Bernal-Merino 2007). Using as a case study the highly successful yet notorious for its flawed translation series, *Call of Duty*, examples are given to illustrate the challenges translators face in video game localization.

**Key words.** Video games, software localization, transcreation, interactive entertainment in Poland, cultural approach

### **1. Introduction – video games in mainstream culture**

The last two decades have witnessed a widespread popularization of video games that gave rise to a new, highly productive industry. Gradual changes in business policies and cultural patterns, i.e. the rise of casual gaming popularized by Nintendo and by social networking sites

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<sup>1</sup> Source: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/06/01/us-videogameshow-e3-show-factbox-idUSBRE8501IN20120601> Accessed October 15, 2013.

such as Facebook (by offering access to online games, e.g. *FarmVille*), have altered the face of interactive entertainment<sup>2</sup>. The gaming community ceased to be a hermetic environment, opening to a wider and more demographically diverse public. In fact, recent market research indicates that games are bought mostly by adults (the average age of a gamer being 30 years of age in the US) and are almost equally popular with both sexes<sup>3</sup>. Greater public interest allowed video games to enter popular culture and gradually lifted the stigma of infantilism associated with gaming enthusiasts (Newman 2004).

This change in cultural consciousness can be observed in the increasing convergence between video games and other media: bookshops offer a wide range of novels expanding the digital worlds or developing on the exploits of their characters and the Internet is rampant with fan art. Even the film industry seems to make cautious attempts at adapting video games into movies, for instance with the upcoming high-budget productions based on two popular video game series, namely *World of Warcraft* and *Mass Effect*<sup>4</sup> (video game inspired movies are still considered a high-risk investment probably due to Uwe Boll's infamous movie adaptations of numerous video games, such as *BloodRayne*, *Postal* or *In the Name of the King: A Dungeon Siege Tale*, which estranged both the movie critics and the gamers from the genre).

## **2. Interactive entertainment and translation studies**

As the growth of the interactive entertainment software started to gain momentum, it was only natural for the industry to maximize its profits by entering foreign markets. Initially, this

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<sup>2</sup> For the purpose of this paper, the terms 'interactive entertainment software' digital games' and 'video games' are considered synonymous.

<sup>3</sup> Source: *2012 Sales, Demographic and Usage Data: Essential Facts about the Computer and Video Game Industry*. Entertainment Software Association, 2012. Accessed July 20, 2012. [http://www.theesa.com/facts/pdfs/ESA\\_EF\\_2012.pdf](http://www.theesa.com/facts/pdfs/ESA_EF_2012.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Source: *Warcraft Movie to Start Filming in January 2014*. Accessed September 24, 2013. <http://uk.ign.com/articles/2013/08/29/world-of-warcraft-movie-to-start-filming-in-january-2014> and *Mass Effect Movie five or six years away, says producer*. Accessed September 24, 2013. <http://www.gamespot.com/news/mass-effect-movie-five-or-six-years-away-says-producer-6413871>

could be done without any major changes to the product, as the early digital games such as *Space Invaders* or *Pong*, were based on very simple, intuitive gameplay mechanics and rarely used language at any point beyond the starting menus; however, with the increasing sophistication of the video game concept, it became apparent that seamless transfer from source culture to target culture is no longer an option – video games have evolved into complex narratives that rely heavily on language and other cultural cues. Most of the new game releases (especially the AAA, high-budget productions) are heavily story-driven, thus presenting plenty of material for translation in various forms and modalities, e.g. strings of text, dialogues (either spoken or written) or in-game cinematics (Bernal-Merino 2007). Moreover, breaking with the stereotypical image of video games has considerably expanded the casual gaming community, which now poses a profit-promising gap in the markets of many countries, attracting video game developers. To reach the majority of the potential buyers the products had to be easily accessible, even for people who had little or no previous experience with gaming. Therefore, to provide an equal experience for all game users, regardless of their linguistic or cultural background, translation had to be incorporated into the game development process. With a new type of translator coming ‘into play’, one equipped with language tools and the knowledge of the video game conventions, a new area of specialization emerged (Bernal-Merino 2007).

But what makes video game translation so unique that it has given rise to a sub-field in translation studies? As noted by Bernal-Merino (2007), video game translation does not differ fundamentally from other types of audio-visual translation. It seems to be comprised of issues from other areas that have already been studied quite extensively: translation of subtitles, dubbing and software localization. However, video game translation proves to be more than simply the sum of its parts, as the conjunction of the aforementioned modalities can create an array of obstacles and challenges not found in any other genre. Furthermore, video games

allow the recipient to actively interact with its various elements, thus their localization focuses on recreating the original feel of the gameplay more than in any other comparable audio-visual medium (Bernal-Merino 2006). Therefore, the body of this paper is devoted to analyzing the characteristics of video game translation, highlighting some of the linguistic and technical problems that are most prominent in this medium. However, to provide a comprehensive view of all the challenges, this paper will also approach video game localization from a new angle, embedding it in the broader cultural context and attempting to demonstrate how the expectations of the gaming community can impact translation. All of the issues discussed herein are based on personal observations (made while actually playing the games mentioned in the paper) and on the official statements of Licomp Empik Multimedia (LEM), the Polish distributor of *Call of Duty: Black Ops*, issued in response to the negative public reception of the localized version of the game.<sup>5</sup>

### **3. Defining video games from a historical and cultural perspective**

The translation issues in video games cannot be properly addressed until the medium itself is defined. Recalling Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, we may conclude that enclosing the essence of the category GAME within the frames of a traditional definition is not feasible, as there is no single set of features that holds true for all games (Wittgenstein 1953). In this respect, the concept of video game, which *de facto* constitutes a member of the broader category GAME, is even more complex. As Mark Wolf (2007) points out, contrary to other sub-types of games, e.g. card games or board games, the relation between the two major parts of the concept, that is 'game', understood in Wittgenstein's terms, and 'video', signifying the reliance on visual media, is not inherently transparent (Wolf 2007, 3). For instance, can interactive audio books or text-based games (such as *Midkemia Online*, a text-interface role-

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<sup>5</sup> Source *LEM odpowiada na nasz tekst o błędach w tłumaczeniu CoD: Black Ops*. Accessed September 24, 2013 <http://gamezilla.komputerswiat.pl/newsy/2010/45/lem-odpowiada-na-nasz-tekst-o-bledach-w-tlumaczeniu-cod-black-ops> .

playing game) be still considered video games even though there is no apparent visual component to them?

James Newman (quoting from Howland 1998) lists five basic attributes that characterize video games: graphics, sound, interface, gameplay and story. However, a simple set of technical parameters does not accurately capture the core idea of all the products that can be intuitively labeled as video games, not to mention all the different genres within the category itself (Newman 2004, 11). Interactive entertainment software displays diversity uncommon to any other type of audio-visual material, as video games incorporate a wide range of overlapping conventions. A number of typical game genres can be distinguished, such as shooting games, which involve fast-paced action and are focused on the immediate consequences of the player's actions; strategy games, which require considerably more planning on the part of the player; racing games; or role-playing games, which concentrate on developing the virtual characters and progressing through the story. Nonetheless, this distinction is purely arbitrary, as modern games are highly eclectic, combining elements from various genres. A great example of such intermingling of radically different styles is *Borderlands*, a game that altered the conventional image of a rather stable genre of shooting games by adding to it gameplay elements typical of role-playing games. Furthermore, although the evolution of video games spans over a relatively short period of time (compared to other media), it seems virtually impossible to mark a specific point in history that can be identified as its point of origin. Traditionally, the beginnings of video games are traced back to the creation of *Spacewar!* in 1962 by Steve Russel, Martin Graetz and Wayne Wiitan. However, because *Spacewar!* was not available to the general public, the era of video games in different accounts the did not duly begin until the so called golden age of arcade video games that took off in the late 1970s.

Newman (2004), most certainly aware of the inherent difficulties in integrating the technical, cultural and historical factors into a coherent definition, suggests avoiding this confounding issue, as it is not essential for further research. Newman's (2004) solution to the ontological problem of video games may perhaps suffice for the study of the medium itself; however, in game localization a working definition is required to identify the particular translation challenges of the analyzed medium. Therefore, to account for the vast variety in video games, this paper adopts a more culturally oriented definition that runs close to Wolf's understanding of the matter: "the idea of a video game has become something more conceptual and less tied to a specific imaging technology, at least in its popular usage" (2007:5). Moreover, by applying the logic of Wittgenstein's (1953) argument to the concept of VIDEO GAME, the problem of providing a number of attributes shared by all its members is eliminated. Instead of treating the five elements of video games mentioned by Newman (2004) as necessary and sufficient, we may envision them as parts of a conceptual chain or, as Wittgenstein puts it, a family resemblance model, which presupposes that all video games are interconnected by crisscrossing networks of the said properties. Hence, this paper examines video games as cultural artifacts in the broadest sense, encompassing all of the fringe genres, as they still can be related to the general concept.

#### **4. The status of the interactive entertainment industry in Poland**

In Poland, the game industry is less developed as compared with the USA. It is still making its first steps on the market, thus providing an excellent opportunity to study the development of video games and the aspect crucial for this paper, namely the process of video game localization. Many foreign developers are somewhat reluctant to invest money in publishing and advertising their products in the eastern part of Europe, mainly due to a high level of online piracy, as they tend to claim. However, the problem goes much deeper, taking its roots

in the cultural perspective predominant in Poland: video games are still considered an inferior medium and a form of entertainment suitable only for children. Beyond that, video games are perceived as a wasteful activity, which may lead to adult gaming enthusiasts being socially ostracized. Additionally, the industry copes with a problem of fear mongering. Video games involving virtual violence are frequently assumed to be the cause of increased real-life aggression in children and teenagers, an argument that has already been refuted, but simply refuses to fade away, clinging to anecdotal evidence and correlation rather than causation (cf. Radford 2005; Jones 2002).

The element of video game development that suffers the most due to this hostile cultural environment is translation, as the growth of casual gaming community has been stifled. Furthermore, digital games used to be addressed to a very narrow but devoted group of recipients who, for lack of other choice, had to become accustomed to games being released in the original, not translated version. In fact, this had a powerful transformative influence on the culture of gaming in Poland. Even now, there seems to be major tendency within the gaming community to prefer no localization to poor localization, and voices of dissent appear at the slightest sign of inadequate translation, a phenomenon that seems to be typical exclusively to the game industry. Hence, when video games took off in Poland, the localization practice was basically non-existent and distribution with no in-game translation discouraged the casual game users. Therefore, a need for new translation strategies has arisen, or to be precise – for the act of localization, that is, adaptation of the game to the linguistic and cultural reality of the target consumer (Chandler 2005, 3).

## **5. Localization vs. translation**

Although the terms *localization* and *translation* are used in this paper interchangeably, it is imperative to note that the relation between these processes is, in fact, much more complex

(Pym 2008). According to the Localization Industry Standard Association, localization is “the process of modifying products or services to account for differences in distinct markets” (Fry 2003, 13). From this perspective, translation seems to fall into the scope of localization, which itself constitutes a substantially broader endeavor. Thus, localizing a video game may involve making technically or culturally motivated changes that go beyond its textual structure, such as modifying the game code to accommodate the graphical discrepancies between source language and target languages (e.g. font types) or even adjusting the game’s marketing strategies. In this understanding, however, localization stresses only the end product, without taking any standpoint on the source text or the relation between the source text and the target text. Furthermore, it does not objectively model how the video game industry operates, disregarding the fact that due to simultaneous shipment the localization process frequently has to run parallel to game development and that the localizers rarely have access to the game itself. Therefore, despite the broader scope of localization, the entire process is usually limited to translation of the linguistic material, and even then it may, as observed by Frank Dietz (2007, 4), “come as an afterthought”. This becomes particularly prominent in countries such as Poland, where the standard localization practice is basically non-existent. To single out only the challenges relevant from the perspective of this study, localization will be identified with translation and understood in most general terms as the adaptation of the game to the linguistic and cultural reality of the target consumer (Chandler 2005, 3). For the sake of clarity, the analyzed challenges are divided into three major categories: linguistic challenges, technical challenges and culture-specific challenges.

## **6. Linguistic and technical challenges in video game localization**

The complex cultural environment, along with the industry-specific technical issues, has brought several translational problems into being. Their solution has a major impact on the



overall reception of the translation, as in the case of the infamous localizations of the *Call of Duty* series, especially *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* and *Call of Duty: Black Ops*, which plainly fail to address the problematic issues, thus serving as an excellent material for a case study. *Call of Duty* is a long-standing series of first-person shooting games, first published in 2003 by Activision. The player is placed in control of a soldier who, depending on the particular part of the series, is flung into the heat of battle of the Second World War or more modern battlefields, e.g. in the Middle-East or in the Brazilian favela.

Contrary to Carmen Mangiron and Minako O'Hagan's (2006) claim, not only role-playing games can constitute an adequate material for translation studies. Modern video games have changed dramatically over the last two decades, growing in complexity and aspiring to a fully fledged medium. The main aspect of the transformation of the video game concept is narrativization: all games, regardless of the conventions they follow, are based on a narrative frame, the purpose of which is to immerse the player in the virtual world and provide a richer experience. In this respect, shooting games seem to have gone an especially long way, starting with very simple productions concentrated solely on game mechanics, such as *Wolfenstein 3D* or *Doom*. As a prime example of a shooting game, the *Call of Duty* series is still faithful to its humble origins, focusing mainly on creating a realistic simulation of the battlefield conditions; nonetheless, the game goes beyond the stereotypical conception of the genre and strives to bond the player emotionally with its characters through narration.

### **6.1 Creativity in translation**

According to Mangiron and O'Hagan (2006), one of the greatest challenges in video game localization, and paradoxically also one of its greatest merits, is creativity. Translators of video games enjoy a level of liberty uncommon to any other medium, as interactive software is strongly oriented on re-creating a similar game experience for all players, allowing for other

levels of equivalence to be downplayed solely for this purpose. Thus, the game localizer is given creative license to: “includ[e] new cultural references, jokes, or any other element they deem necessary to preserve the game experience and to produce a fresh and engaging translation” (Mangiron and O’Hagan 2006, 15).

Dialects constitute a classic example of translation material that cannot be addressed using the traditional idea of equivalence. In many cases, the target language version has to be created basically from scratch, shifting the balance between translation, which concentrates on conveying the same information, and transcreation, which adapts the material to evoke a similar response in the target language. For instance, in *Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War II*, a tribal race of green skinned humanoids called ‘Orks’ communicate using a dialect stylized to be a more brutish sounding variant of English, in some respects also resembling Cockney. In the Polish localization, radically different linguistic measures have been employed, with some of the subtle reference being lost in the process, yet preserving the distinctive feel of the dialect that complements the original idea of the game designer:

(1a) We found dem powah stations, boss. Should give us da juice weez need to finish ‘em up.

(1b) Znaleźli my tom stacje zasilania, szefie. Bendziem mieli dość prądu by to skończyć.

Other source text elements that frequently call for transcreation are slang and profanity. In *Bulletstorm*, a shooting game with a somewhat crude sense of humor, the characters’ dialogue lines are riddled with curse words and slang expressions, often used in a very creative way, as presented in example 2a. The target language version in 2b, although straying from the

meaning of the source text, certainly managed to capture its mood and its emotional load, and thus was positively received by the community<sup>6</sup>.

(2a) Now, you festering assholes, either make with one sweet and sloppy apology or I will fuck up your lives.

(2b) Dlatego teraz, czopy doodbytnicze, grzecznie i z języczkiem mnie przeprosicie albo wam łby upierdolę.

However, single lexical items that cannot be omitted or compensated in other parts of the text, such as neologisms or pseudo-technical terms seem to be the most problematic instances of transcreation. For example, in *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, an action role-playing game set in the near future, individuals that alter their bodies with biotic prosthetics and upgrade their brains with computer chips are called ‘aug’s’ (a clipped form of ‘augmented humans’). To deal with this problem the translator decided to focus on a different aspect of the social phenomenon portrayed in the game, rendering the term as *druciarze*. Nonetheless, it fitted well into the overall vision of the world presented in the game, and was well-accepted by the critics and the gamers alike.<sup>7</sup>

Failure to recognize elements requiring transcreation may lead to renderings which do not properly convey the original meaning or even hinder the understanding of the entire item, for instance, ‘vertical gameplay’ found in the description of one of the maps in *Call of Duty: Black Ops* was literally translated as *rozgrywka pionowa*. In the target language, the provided equivalent strongly suggests that no other dimensions than the vertical one will be involved in

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<sup>6</sup> Source: *Jak wypada polskie tłumaczenie Bulletstorma?* Accessed September 25, 2013. <http://gamezilla.komputerswiat.pl/newsy/2011/8/jak-wypada-polskie-tlumaczenie-bulletstorma>

<sup>7</sup> Source: *Deus Ex: Human Revolution (Deus Ex: Bunt Ludzkości) – recenzja*. Accessed September 25, 2013 [http://polygamia.pl/Polygamia/1,97394,10153498,Deus\\_Ex\\_Human\\_Revolution\\_\\_Deus\\_Ex\\_Bunt\\_Ludzkosci\\_.html?order=najfajniejsze\\_odwrotnie](http://polygamia.pl/Polygamia/1,97394,10153498,Deus_Ex_Human_Revolution__Deus_Ex_Bunt_Ludzkosci_.html?order=najfajniejsze_odwrotnie)

the gameplay, which is not what was originally intended. Similar misunderstanding arises with the term ‘objective gameplay’, which was translated as *rozgrywka celowa*. Although in this case the intended meaning is reluctantly peering from behind the target language equivalent, it is completely dwarfed by another, more humorous interpretation. In this context, *celowa* might also mean ‘purposeful’, creating the impression that other types of gameplay might lack any purpose whatsoever.

Translating an item requiring transcreation with standard procedures may also lead to a semantically and culturally impoverished equivalent by, for instance removing some extratextual references. One such example can be found in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*, in which one of the missions the player undertakes is titled ‘Joint Ops’. The caption is framed in a picture of cannabis leaves, which clearly points to the slang meaning of *joint*, i.e. a rolled marijuana cigarette, and the entire phrase becomes a meaningful play on words; unfortunately this reference is lost in the translated version (*Wspólne Operacje*), leaving the player somewhat confused as to the relation between the presented text and the image. This particular example also points to another burning issue in video game localization, namely the significance of contextual information.

## **6.2 Context-related issues**

The most glaring mistakes in localization are a result of misinterpretation caused by insufficient contextual information. The relevance of context in translation cannot be underestimated – every meaningful utterance is construed in relation to a linguistic, social and cultural context. Without the necessary background knowledge, the translator is prone to lexical or grammatical ambiguity, basically working in the dark when dealing with, for instance, homonymy or deixis. To solve this problem, the translator assigned to a particular project is provided with a localization kit, which in theory should contain all the contextual

data, assets or tools he or she might require to dispel any context-related doubts (Chandler 2005, 277). Usually however, the localization kit is nothing more than the bare text-to-be-translated, due to financial limitations and the simultaneous shipment deadlines, as the game development process is always highly time-constrained. Hence, receiving a copy of the game as reference for translation is more of a notable exception, rather than a standard practice. A more detailed description of the technical aspects of the localization process is provided by O'Hagan and Mangiron (2004). As a consequence, many discrepancies between the translation and the actual game experience may appear, just to consider a set of simple examples:

(3) The *tank* will explode if you place a C4 detonator on it.

(4) He saw the *bow* on the table.

Without any additional information it is virtually impossible to successfully deal with lexical items presented above in italics, as several meanings fit into the context (In 3, a container or a vehicle? In example 4, a weapon or musical equipment?). Lack of situational context can lead also to a number of complications in other sociolinguistic aspects: translation of humor (as briefly mentioned in the previous section with the 'Joint-Ops' example), choosing a specific register or level of politeness and finally assigning proper gender markings. English seems to be a fairly neutral language, as it rarely distinguishes morphologically between gender and the English pronouns are not overtly marked for politeness. On the other hand, nouns in Polish are explicit in their grammatical gender. Moreover, the choice of the case inflection pattern is also dependant on the gender of the noun; therefore, not knowing the gender of the game character or its relations with other characters may lead to "wooden", unisex expressions that sound rather awkward when used abundantly (such as the use of passive voice in Polish). A

most vivid example demonstrating this issue appears in *Mass Effect 2*, a role-playing game in which the main character could be either male or female, depending on the player's choice at the beginning of the game. While in English this did not require any alterations to the in-game texts, the Polish localization often uses passive constructions and has lost the morphological case on the character's name, causing somewhat unnatural sounding expressions:

(5a) Shepard wasn't here then.

(5b) <sup>?</sup>Shepard nie było wtedy tutaj.

If the character is female, then the presented version seems correct, but with male characters, the genitive inflected *Sheparda* ('Shepard-GEN') would sound much more natural. Gender may also become a problem in translation of verbs into Polish. In the most extreme case, when the game does not specify the character's gender but employs a first-person narrative style (for example for the purpose of suspense), the translator is forced to make an arbitrary decision, as verbs in Polish are overtly marked for gender (*kupiłem* vs. *kupiłam* / 'I bought-MASC' vs. 'I bought-FEM'), immediately revealing the identity of the speaker.

Context awareness is also crucial, when determining what register should be used in the specific sections of the game. Confusion between formal and informal (or neutral) language may provide the recipient with the wrong information about the social context of the utterance. For instance, the term *notification*, used in *Modern Warfare 2* in-game messages, was rendered in the Polish localization as *powiadomienie*, while the less formal *komunikat* could have appeared instead, a term commonly used in software localization and certainly familiar to game users, who frequently use other computer interfaces. *Powiadomienie* was clearly introduced as novel in this context, hence bringing along its typical, legal connotations and creating an unintended humorous effect. This example demonstrates the violation of yet

another fundamental rule in the translation practice, namely: if an item has already been translated and has become conventionalized, adhere to that equivalent.

### 6.3 Hard-coding and string automatization

Apart from the *bona fide* linguistic issues, the video game translators also have to adjust their translation strategies to the technical aspect of the medium, that is, to how the text is arranged within the game's programming code. The translation material in video games is not continuous, but rather fragmented, as the events on screen depend on the player's actions. Many of these segments are hard-coded, meaning that there is a limited number of characters that can be typed into a particular space (Bernal-Merino 2007; Mangiron and O'Hagan 2006). This poses a fundamental problem when translating, as other languages are characterized by different structural features. Even though, according to the Leonard Talmy's (2001) notion of lexicalized patterns, both English and Polish are classified as satellite-framed languages, there are certain discrepancies in the way they represent motion. Consider the following example:

(6a) He *hobbled out* of the room.

(6b) *Wyszedł z pokoju kuśtykając.*

In 6a, the English verb conflates manner with motion, while in the target translation this has to be rendered by means of an adverbial. Additionally, in language typology English falls into the spectrum of isolating rather than synthetic languages. Therefore, it seems to be more concise and more rigidly structured than Polish. This notion is most visible in such linguistic phenomena as zero derivation:

(7a) He *knifed* that guy!

(7b) *Dźgnął go nożem!*

Due to the inherent differences in word length and grammatical structures, the translator in *Call of Duty: Black Ops* was forced to make uneasy compromises between the possible equivalents and frequently had to clip word endings and use abbreviations (original punctuation):

(8a) TEAM DEATHMATCH

(8b) DM DRUŻYNOWY

The programmers also tend to exploit the scarce inflectional morphology and the fixed word order in English by automatizing certain pieces of texts appearing in video games with automatic punctuation or variable structures:

X Y grenade.

X= {take, throw, drop}

Y= {a, the, Ø}

Every word in such an automatized string is drawn from a pre-specified list, therefore leaving hardly any leeway for the translator to interact with the syntactic structure of the source text. In most cases, these technical obstacles cannot be easily surmounted, as it would require some sections of the game to be reprogrammed. Successful translation is dependant purely on the flexibility and efficiency of the code, thus being frequently reduced to finding the most graphically and syntactically similar, not necessarily the most natural, ways of expressing the same idea in the target language and the source language. In the localization of *Call of Duty:*



*Black Ops*, the elements automated and hard-coded for English required the dropping of case markings, resulting in such ungrammatical translations as:

(9a) Get 10 frag grenade kills.

(9b) \*Zdobądź 10 granat odłamkowy zabić.

Some translations initially seem acceptable, yet in fact evoke a radically different, at times even absurd, image. In the following example the error occurred most probably because the translator had to conform to the number of characters / words of the original, resulting in an awkward rendition of the phrase ‘crouched position’:

(10a) Kill 15 enemies from a crouched position.

(10b) <sup>?</sup>Zabij 15 wrogów z pozycji przysiadu.

More recent examples can also be found in *Halo 4*, a shooting game released in 2012, which clearly demonstrates that hard-coding still constitutes a problematic issue. For instance, when referring to the team division in multiplayer mode, the Polish localization disrupts the player’s experience using poor grammar:

(11a) You are in blue.

(11b) \*Jesteś w niebieska.

## **7. Culture-specific challenges in video game localization**

To fully account for all intricacies of context relevance in localization, it is imperative to recognize video games as cultural artifacts. Even though the publishers may encourage

internationalization in the development process (i.e. a design that allows adaptation of the software to different languages and regions without any engineering changes<sup>8</sup>) video games still bear a certain level of culture specificity, due to the use of language. As stated by Peter Newmark, cultural knowledge contributes significantly to the understanding of a text, as ultimately “[l]anguage is a substantial but partial reflection of a culture” (Newmark 1991, 73). Therefore, the translator’s role is not limited to the transfer of information structure; to provide an accurate and comprehensive understanding of the source text in the target culture, the translator is obliged to mediate between different cultural elements using shared human experience (Newmark 1991, 74). Due to the great variety of video game genres and their highly eclectic nature, the cultural context in localization may extend to the existing body of other translated texts in different modalities, such as books, graphic novels or movies. Disregarding the cultural context may impact the reception of the product, undermining the primary aim to create a similar experience for all players and estranging the established fan-base (Mangiron and O’Hagan 2006).

Interestingly enough, it seems that one of the most significant problems associated with video game translation lies not in the games themselves, but rather in the mindset of their recipients. Throughout the years, Polish game users were accustomed to very scarce localizing or no localizing at all, absorbing and familiarizing the English game terminology they were exposed to, especially the one connected with multiplayer modes, as communication is crucial for team play. Hence, many foreign lexical items have been incorporated into the gamer slang and popularized by internet communities. Gradually, they started taking a life of their own in the target language, following its linguistic conventions and becoming recognized terms among people playing video games. Examples of game users

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<sup>8</sup> Source: <http://www.w3.org/International/questions/qa-i18n.en> Accessed October 20, 2013.

choosing original versions over localizations can also be found in other cultures, which may suggest that this is a more widespread tendency (Chandler 2005, 3).

Thus, as the video game translation market expands, the translator faces a seemingly irresolvable problem of dealing with such lexical items. The general practice so far was to leave them unchanged in the source language, thus meeting the expectations of a significant part of the gaming community. Currently, however, many developers insist that the borrowings be properly translated, as this strategy is perceived as releasing a deficient product that is not fully adapted to the target culture. The other reason behind this kind of translational pressure is the change taking place within the gaming community. The divide between the hardcore game users, who have been a part of the industry since its very beginnings and the casual game users, who perceive games as a form of rather occasional entertainment, is being slowly bridged. The casual game users are constantly growing in numbers and becoming a more and more influential group of potential buyers, which is not acquainted with the specific game nomenclature though. Therefore, if the developers want to maximize their profits, they have to address this issue by releasing games that are not only professionally translated, but also adapted in such a way that they are easily accessible to the broadest possible audience.

### **7.1 Familiarized lexical items – *killing spree* and *kill***

Despite the translator's efforts, familiarized lexical items almost always sound grotesque to the ears of the players accustomed to the original terminology, mainly because coining an entirely new term may often introduce ambiguity and unwanted connotations in the target language. One such phrase is, for instance, *killing spree*, which is used to describe a player who scores several points for defeating players of the opposing team, usually three or five, in an unbroken chain. In the translation of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* it is rendered as *ciąg eliminacji* ('a chain of elimination'), which did not incite much enthusiasm in the game users

and was simply ignored in favor of the familiarized term. However, another attempt to translate the same term in *Call of Duty: Black Ops* as *seria ofiar* ('a series of victims' or 'a series of donations') was widely ridiculed in the gaming community because of its awkwardness and apparent ambiguity, especially when it appeared in the description of the so-called player perks, where it approached the borders of the macabre (*zrzut losowej seri ofiar*, i.e. literally a 'drop of a random series of victims'). Even the most basic terms in the multiplayer mode of the *Call of Duty* series, and most shooting games for that matter, often prove to be a source of controversy. For instance, the term *to kill*, which in the context of the game mechanics refers to scoring a point for the team by defeating a player of the opposing team, in translation to Polish receives some rather disturbing, unintended connotations. The target language equivalent (in nominal form *zabójstwo*) highlights the more sinister elements of the killing frame that are more visible in such English words as *assassination* or *murder*. In fact, the use of the English verb *to kill* in multiplayer shooting games seems to have evolved and is currently devoid of the typical 'put to death' sense (which is listed as top-most in the Oxford English Dictionary, 1989). This is also apparent in the morphology of the word, which has undergone a functional shift and currently can also take a nominal form, for example in compounds *double kill*, *kill streak* or in phrases such as *to get a kill*. Further evidence for this assumption come from the Polish gaming slang itself, as in the familiarized terms the unwanted semantic components are absent (or downplayed)<sup>9</sup>. The motivation for this semantic shift seems to be quite obvious: certainly, killing an enemy in an equal fight on the battlefield would rather not be deemed as murder per se, not to mention the fact that the link between actual killing and video game violence is somewhat arbitrary. The notion of

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<sup>9</sup> This effect seems to be closely linked to the emotional aspect of some words and lack of thereof in their L2 equivalents, as reported by language learners. Although the effect is more pronounced in the case of using profanity in a foreign language (L2 course words seem to not have the same impact as the native ones, e.g. see Dewaele 2010) it may be applied also to other, highly emotionally marked words, such as *zabijać*. Polish gamers may opt for the familiarized terms due to a conflict between a neutral context and a highly emotionally marked word. Nonetheless, further empirical investigation of this hypothesis is required.

familiarized terms and their role in the localization process certainly call for further research; this however, goes beyond the scope of this paper.

## **8. Conclusions**

The aim of this paper was to present video games as a valid material for academic study, stressing the role of localization in the interactive entertainment industry. With the expansion of video games to foreign markets, translation has become an integral part of the game development process. However, in many countries such as Poland, where video games have not yet entered mainstream culture, the localization practice is still to be established.

By analyzing the shortcomings of the *Call of Duty* series, along with a host of other examples, I attempted to highlight some of the most burning issues in video game localization that clearly demonstrate a need for a new area of specialization with its unique translation strategies. Nonetheless, the challenges discussed herein constitute merely the tip of an iceberg, and they extend far beyond the scope of this preliminary study. Contrary to the disparaging view of the industry, video game localization is not a simplistic form of audio-visual translation. It is an immensely complex endeavor that integrates linguistic, technical and cultural issues, each of which would require an in-depth analysis on its own. Due to the limitations of space, however, the problems signaled in this paper require further research.

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