

Translation of video games and films – a comparative analysis of selected technical problems

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Abstract

This article constitutes a comparative analysis of video games and films from the perspective of translation studies. Various modes of audiovisual translation are compared and scrutinized. First, the author's stance on the nature of video games and motion pictures is presented. Consequently, the general difference between these two types of texts is shown. Subsequently, the subject of the paper is narrowed, and the specific dissimilarities between the rendition of games and films are juxtaposed and supported with visual examples. The article shows that despite the fact that video games and films both belong to audiovisual translation, the differences between them can be considerable.

KEYWORDS: *video games, films, audiovisual translation, localization*

1. Introduction

Video games started to become globally popular at the beginning of the 21st century, and the demand for them has been growing ever since (Granell, 2011, p. 185). There are more and more players of all ages. In 2007 there were 7 million gamers in Poland, and in 2012 there will be *circa* 11.8 million (Kuipers, 2010, p. 77).

In 2012 the gaming industry earned as much as 38 billion EUR, and this growing tendency is predicted to continue (IDATE, 2010), which implies that an increasing number of top quality game translators will be required.

In this article, we conduct a comparative analysis of selected aspects of translation in video games and films. First, we investigate games as products and films as artifacts, and discuss what this dissimilarity means for translators. Subsequently, we proceed to the actual analysis of particular modes of translation, that is subtitles and dubbing. Where possible and appropriate, visual examples are provided. The article ends with conclusions and a proposal for a prospective study.

2. Video games as products

Before we delve into what Lev Grossman (2004) defines as “the world’s biggest phenomenon”, a few words ought to be said about the terminological instability concerning the very name of the subject of game researchers’ study (O’Hagan, 2007, p. 2). It appears that a great number of ludologists interchangeably utilize such names as “computer games” (Raessens, Goldstein, 2005), “electronic games”, “digital games” (Bryce & Rutter, 2006), and “videogames” (also “video games”, or “video-games”; Newman, 2004) in order to describe the same concept. The use of one name or another frequently seems to be somewhat arbitrary. In this article we shall adhere to the term “video games” due to the fact that it is consonant with the convention observed by localization industry professionals (cf. Chandler, 2005; Chandler & Deming, 2012), and thus we hope to limit the arbitrariness of our choice. Moreover, for the purposes of this article “video games” should be treated as a hypernym for games played on computers as well as on consoles, although this excludes games played on mobile phones, arcade machines, and the like.

When discussing video games, it is very difficult to avoid the ongoing debate on whether they should be regarded as art or entertainment. Although certain researchers (notably Jef Folkerts, 2011, and Henry Jenkins, 2005) promulgate the artistic nature of video games, we shall present our contribution to the foregoing discussion from the point of view of translation studies, focusing on games which are likely to be localized (i.e. excluding independent games which are hardly ever localized), and treating them as products to be purchased by consumers. Even the very definition of video games by Gonzalo Frasca (2001, p. 4) suggests that games are created for entertainment purposes. According to him, they are “[...] 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”. Miguel Á Bernal-Merino (2006, p. 28) points out that games do not have traditional authors like works of literature or films do, but instead they have a “shared authorship”, and Roger Ebert (2010) adds that no person has ever been able to cite a game which would be “worthy of comparison with the great poets, filmmakers [and] novelists [...]”. Following the above opinions and definition, it appears reasonable to state that, from the point of view of translation studies, video games constitute products manufactured to generate revenues – the same as cars, pens, or computers.

3. Films as artifacts

Although in the early years of cinema the prevailing opinion was that film did not constitute art (Prinz, 2007), Rudolf Arnheim (1957, p. 8) contends that film is similar to painting, music or literature in the respect that it is a medium that can be utilized to produce artistic results. For Jesse J. Prinz (2007), certain motion pictures intuitively qualify as art while others do not. He also believes that not only can independent films, created for highly sophisticated audiences, be conceived of as art, but certain films for mass audiences can as well (he mentions such directors as, inter alia, Hitchcock, Polański, and Renoir). Translation theorists and practitioners are also inclined to claim that films are art. Garcarz (2007, p. 227), for example, describes them as “artistic artifacts”. He asserts that films are texts generated by artistic discourse, and as such should be scrutinized by translation studies (p. 23). Although we share Arnheim’s and Prinz’s positions that not all films constitute art, not least the majority of the mainstream Hollywood productions, we also believe that there is no clear-cut demarcation line between those which do belong to the art category and those which do not. Consequently, from the point of view of translation studies, it is relatively safe to accept all motion pictures as forms of art (whether low- or high-art) and treat them accordingly.

4. Video games vs. films

Probably the greatest difference between video games and motion pictures has been delineated above. This dissimilarity appears to have salient implications for the art of text rendition, modes of translation notwithstanding. Video games, being products, are not designed in such a way as to convey certain significant ideas to the audience; on the contrary, they must be entertaining and bring profit to their producers. That is why game translators are allowed to change virtually everything (within reason) in a game in order for this product to sell better in

a local market. On the other hand, films, which are to some extent regarded as art, do not give their translators so much freedom, and any attempt at domesticating a motion picture may be criticized (exceptions usually include animated films which are dubbed in their entirety and whose storylines are neither based on facts nor set in the real-world places, e.g. *Shrek*, *Ice Age*, *Madagascar*, etc.)

Furthermore, it does not seem to be technically possible to interfere with a film as much as with a game. To give but one example, game developers can remove swastikas from a game set during World War II if the product is to be released onto the German market. This interference could prove equally useful with language problems. If we had to translate, into Polish, a scene where a protagonist kicks a bucket and dies, and another person comments on this, saying “He just kicked the bucket”, the game developers could substitute the bucket with a calendar, so that the scene could be humorous in Polish as well (“Kopnął w kalendarz”). Such interference in the structure of a game, only for the sake of language wits, might not be too cost-effective, but in video games it is possible whereas in films it is not.

Having discussed what relates to games and films in general, we shall proceed now to particular modes of film and game translation. Firstly, we shall analyze the crucial matters relating exclusively to film and game subtitling (i.e. character number, typeface and color, variables, etc.). These are not shared by dubbing or voice-over (in the case of films). Secondly, we shall investigate the problems of dubbing which, however, are also shared by subtitling (i.e. blind translation and non-linearity). Last but certainly not least, we shall briefly look into the issue of voice-over and explicate what is understood as voice-over in the video game localization industry. That explication will also constitute the rationale for placing voice-over within the dubbing section since the game industry considers the former to be an integral element of the latter.

4.1. Subtitles

Subtitling is the area which displays the greatest number of differences between video games and motion pictures, ranging from the number of permissible characters per subtitle line, through the use of colors, and even the acceptance of irrelevant verbiage.

Number of characters, lines, and text position

There appears to be no unanimity among audiovisual translation theorists and practitioners as to how many characters one subtitle line ought to comprise. Whereas Grażyna Adamowicz-Grzyb (2010, p. 16) claims that there are usually

from 35 to 38 characters, Arkadiusz Belczyk (2007, p. 13) opts for no more than 36–38 characters, and Fotios Karamitroglou (1998) allows for approximately 35 characters, specifying that it would be unreasonable to create a subtitle line of more than 40 characters. What is more, Adamowicz-Grzyb (2010, p. 16) contends that nowadays the human eye requires less time to process a particular communication due to the fact that we watch a considerable number of short, dynamic advertisements. It follows that a safe borderline for a subtitler is a maximum of 40 characters, and that is also our stance on the matter.

Although the character number is not completely agreed upon, the number of lines displayed at a time seems to be an uncontested matter. All of the above three authors state that audiovisual translators cannot create subtitles of more than two lines. Furthermore, both lines should normally be positioned at the bottom of the screen, where they will occupy an area of lesser importance to the viewer. There are, however, rare cases where subtitles are positioned towards the center of the screen or at the top; such a solution is advisable when the bottom part is occupied by already existing elements (e.g. burnt-in captions).



Fig. 1. Two lines of up to 40 characters of film subtitles positioned at the bottom of the screen (*A room with a view*, adapted from Belczyk, 2007)

The stringent standards of film subtitles do not seem to be reflected in game translation which, after all, may also be regarded as audiovisual. Carmen Mangiron and Minako O'Hagan (2006, p. 13) claim that the length of subtitles in video games is measured (in pixels). Nevertheless, we share the view of Jiří Petrů (2011, p. 70), who believes that not only do video game subtitles allow for a considerably greater number of characters, but also that more than two lines are acceptable. However, such a situation is not too frequent

because of the foregoing character-per-subtitle increase. In Petru's opinion, this is caused by the developers' and translators' desire to exactly mirror the spoken discourse. The author cites a Czech translator, who states that "A game isn't a film. The gamer can usually pause and play subtitles as needed. A film won't wait till you are finished. A game will." Moreover, Petru believes that video games do not possess real actors who can convey the game characters' true identity, and that is why translators tend to retain almost all irrelevant verbiage normally deleted from film subtitles. This can also be observed in intralingual game subtitles.

As far as text position in games is concerned, it seems that there is no established preference either. The subtitle lines appear at the top or the bottom of the screen. Nonetheless, there might be infrequent cases where they are displayed in the center.



Fig. 2. Three lines of more than 40 characters positioned at the bottom of the screen, irrelevant verbiage, suspension points, character's name marked yellow (*Arcania: Gothic 4*)

Typeface and text color

As to film typeface, Belczyk (2007, p. 15) is of the opinion that a font with no serifs (e.g. Arial) should be utilized. He states that serifs make it difficult for the viewers to quickly discern particular letters. Karamitroglou (1998) seconds Belczyk on this matter, adding that, apart from the Arial font, Helvetica is also a good choice.

Another issue of great import to film subtitles is their color. Whereas Belczyk (2007, p. 15) believes that subtitles are usually white (sometimes light yellow), Karamitroglou (1998) contends that they should be not only white, but

pale white as opposed to 'snow-white'. Flashy letters may be too exhausting for the viewers. The only exception is Japanese anime fansubbing, which uses different colors to identify various actors, or for karaoke singing (cf. Cintas and Sanchez, 2006).



Fig. 3. Yellow font, Arial (*Replikant*), **Fig. 4.** White font, Arial (*Thank you for smoking*)

As for video games, it appears that developers only make sure that the typeface is readable, and there is arguably no standard collection of typefaces that ought to be employed.

Yet another issue is the use of colors. Although film subtitles are either white or yellow, Mangiron and O'Hagan (2006, p. 13) assert that game developers utilize various colors, e.g. light blue or yellow, to highlight salient information, concerning for instance the names of vital places, or the names of game characters (see also Fig. 2).



Fig. 5. Vital information marked blue (*GTA San Andreas*)



Fig. 6. Subtitles for an in-game song, karaoke style, typeface with serifs (*The Bard's Tale*)

Variables

Variables in the video game industry are changeable, textual elements contingent upon players' input. They can constitute, for instance, names of gamers' avatars or factions. Rendering variables is one of the most distinctive features of video game translation, and is not encountered in any other type of audiovisual translation. Nonetheless, variables are also a vital part of software localization.

Video games, as a general rule, furnish their consumers with the possibility to enter their names, select genders and nationalities, and customize game avatars in a number of ways. Based on the initial input received from players, a game system displays various strings of text throughout the entire play. These customized strings are displayed in various combinations, at the beginning, end, or in the middle of a sentence, and thus we should realize that our translation ought to be flexible enough to accommodate all these situations (Bernal-Merino, 2007, p. 6). The issue of variables does not pose any difficulties for analytic languages, such as English, but it might constitute a significant obstacle in the case of synthetic languages, such as Polish, where morphology is of paramount importance.

An excellent example of this problem comes from Bernal-Merino (2007, p. 6), who discusses strategy games where different countries are at war with one another. When playing, gamers might see the game system display the following alert "/n nameofnation /n is attacking you!", where the 'nameofnation' part is replaced with a given country, say Germany. In this case, the actual message displayed on the screen takes the form of "Germany is attacking you!" In English, there is no difference between "England / Germany / France is attacking you!"; all these sentences are grammatical. In Polish, the sentences would initially take the form "Anglia / Niemcy / Francja atakuje!". Although the sentences "Anglia / Francja atakuje!" are correct, the third sentence is incorrect, and ought to be "Niemcy atakują!", and that is why game translators must sometimes rearrange sentences

syntactically so as to avoid potential problems. If it is impossible to satisfactorily rearrange elements within a sentence, they might need to resort to somewhat less naturally sounding renditions, such as “Agresor (/n nameofnation /n) atakuje!”. The final version of our example would then be “Agresor (Niemcy) atakuje!”.

What is more, video game translators must be aware of which parts of strings are translatable and which constitute the source code – which must not be altered, because doing this may cause serious problems (Kuipers, 2010, p. 83).

4.2. Subtitles and dubbing

In the previous section, we only discussed differences between game and film subtitles. Here we wish to tackle problems which are shared by subtitled and dubbed video games, and juxtapose them with subtitling and dubbing for the motion picture industry. It is also imperative that we should mention the most striking difference between game and film dubbing, namely that games can be either dubbed or lip-synchronized, whereas dubbing films immediately entails their lip-synchronization (Chandler & Deming, 2012, p. 344). Consequently, a dubbed game will have dialogues which are more or less of the same length as the original, although there might be no lip-synchronization.

‘Blind’ translation

Ryszard Chojnowski, a Polish game translator, claims that he does not like translating video games when he does not know their context (dubscore.pl, 2010). In film translation, it is almost impossible for translators not to know the context; not only do they have a visual image at their disposal, but they are also provided with dialogue scripts which contain important guidelines on the motion picture’s action.

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INT. HOSPITAL -- LATER

ZACK follows the SURGEON to a small waiting room nearby, as
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A livid MADDOCK turns on DANNY.

                MADDOCK
07:04:11 What the hell's gone down here,
           Danny?
07:04:12 Did you know about Durant pissing
           off to Australia? Huh?
07:04:16 That she was running some half-arsed
           operation on the sly?

                NOEL
           (beat, chipping in)
07:04:19 It was my fault, Sir.
07:04:20 She gave me a message I didn't
           pass...

MADDOCK'S eyes never leave DANNY.

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Fig. 7. A dialogue script with context-sensitive information, such as the place of action, participants’ emotions, etc. (*Orange Roughies*)

Frank Dietz (2007, p. 5) states that the common game industry practice is that translators never see the games they are rendering; either because they are not finished, or because publishers are afraid of piracy. How can we translate, then, if we do not even know who is speaking to whom? The solution to this problem might be the publisher's providing a wealth of background information, such as screenshots, game walkthroughs, game-related articles, and above all a properly prepared localization kit (lockit). Lockits contain, or should contain, all the necessary contextual information for a particular game (Mrzigod, 2012); they are typically in the form of excel spreadsheets.

	A	B	C	D	I	J	T
1	Global	Source	Type	Character	Text	Translation	Dialog ID
10	4156			Second	Someone got past the Scorcher? What risks does this pose for the Zone?		mar_csky_leader_intro3_dialog
11	4157			Second	Is there a real way to pass the Scorcher? Even a theoretical chance?		mar_csky_leader_intro3_dialog
12	4158			Second	What is the danger of such frequent emissions?		mar_csky_leader_intro3_dialog
13	4159			Second	Prevent the disaster? You're not even strong enough to fight off bandits.		mar_csky_leader_intro3_dialog
14	4160			Second	My head's spitting... and spinning too... Basically, I'm in real good shape.		mar_csky_leader_intro_dialog
15					OK... I remember leading an expedition through the swamps. Bunch of scientists. Then... the emission... That's it. Where am I, is this heaven? Then why does it look so much like the Zone?		
	4161			Second			mar_csky_leader_intro_dialog
16	4162			Second	Oh, I guess I got lucky then.		mar_csky_leader_intro_dialog
17	4163			Second	OK.		mar_csky_leader_tutorial_dialog
18	4164			Second	I remember bits and pieces.		mar_csky_leader_tutorial_dialog
19	4165			First	What are you doing here?		mar_csky_tactic_about_me_dialog

Fig. 8. An insufficient lockit (*S.T.A.L.K.E.R. – Clear Sky*, adapted from Petrů, 2011, p. 47)

	C	D	E	Source
1	SPEAKER	AUDIENCE	ENGLISH	CZECH
2	Mina Tang	Mina Tang	All right, Mike, if we're going after the vault first - head through the courtyard into the main building.	
3	Michael Thorton	Mina Tang	On it.	
4	Mina Tang	Michael Thorton	All right, Mike, if we're going after Brayko first - head through the courtyard, look for the guest house.	
5	Mina Tang	Mina Tang	All right, Mike, now for the vault - head through the courtyard, look for the entrance to the main building.	
6	Mina Tang	Michael Thorton	All right, Mike, now for Brayko - head through the courtyard, look for the entrance to the guest house.	
7	Michael Thorton	Mina Tang	(Looking at an incredible arcade) Oh man, you'll never guess where I am now.	
8	Mina Tang	Michael Thorton	Arcade, right?	
9	Michael Thorton	Mina Tang	[Surprised] Yeah - how'd you know?	
10	Mina Tang	Michael Thorton	(Knowingly) I recognize the sound of Galaxy Invaders. [Beat, a little to herself] I used to play that all the time in high school.	
11	Mina Tang	Michael Thorton	Uh oh.	
12	Michael Thorton	Mina Tang	What?	
13			They've locked down the room - I'll try to override the	

M11_C_HANDLER / M11_B_BRAYKO_PICKUPS / M11_B_BRAYKO_BOSS / M11_BANTER / M11_B01_BRAYKO_END / M10_D_S1

Fig. 9. A well-prepared lockit (*Alpha Protocol*, adapted from Petrů, 2011, p. 47)

In Fig. 8 we cannot discern who is talking to whom, what is the gender of the interlocutors, where the scene takes place, etc. Furthermore, the greatest problem with this lockit is the fact that the utterances are not ordered logically

as a dialogue, but listed alphabetically by the ‘Dialog ID’ column (Petrů, 2011, p. 47). Translators do not know in which order the lines appear in the game. On the other hand, the second lockit has its texts sorted logically by scenes. The ‘Speaker’ and ‘Audience’ columns help translators discern who is talking to whom. Moreover, the translators working on this product received additional materials which introduced the game’s protagonists and briefed the translators on the game’s mechanics (Petrů, 2011, p. 47).

Nonlinearity

Watching a film is done from the beginning to the end; one action follows another sequentially. That has far-reaching implications for film translators, for when they render one scene, it should only make sense in the context of the previous and the following scenes. Viewers have no control over the motion picture and have no impact on the action. A different situation can be observed in the case of video games, which are nonlinear. Players can navigate through the world of a game and thus create many stories in one product. For example, they can save the game world, but they can also destroy it, depending on their choices and style of playing. Of course, some games are more linear than others and allow gamers little deviation from the main storyline. However, in modern video games a certain degree of nonlinearity is a must, and that is why players are usually provided with a number of dialogue options to choose from. Dietz (2006, p. 124) believes that this situation greatly influences the process of translation because a piece of information given at a certain stage of play might have to suit a number of different contexts, and translators must take this possibility into account.



Fig. 10. Four dialogue options. Each must make sense in the current scene, and each will affect subsequent scenes in a different manner (*Dragon Age: Origins*)

Voiceover

Henrik Gottlieb (2005, p. 244) claims that film voiceover consists in one narrator's reading the entire dialogue and at the same time the original soundtrack being muted. On the other hand, Heather Chandler and Stephanie O'Malley Deming (2012, p. 346) contend that, in the video game industry, voiceover constitutes any spoken text uttered in the game. Furthermore, voiceover in the sense of the motion picture industry is never used in games. Consequently, we can venture to state that whereas in film rendition we have three modes of translation (subtitles, dubbing and voiceover), in video games there are only two (subtitles and dubbing).

5. Conclusions

Although both video games and films belong to audiovisual translation, there are great differences which allow us to distinguish these two types of text. While dubbing for films is very similar to dubbing for games (except for the lip-synchronization difference), subtitles display a considerable number of differences. What is more, good game translators, in addition to having excellent knowledge on the subject of a game, for example tanks utilized in World War II, should also possess knowledge concerning the specificity of video games. They should be acquainted not only with a particular genre of games, but also with the profile of those who play such games. Expertise in the vocabulary utilized by players is essential, for it will be players who ultimately appraise the game and its translation. Having said that, we have come to the conclusion that it may prove useful to closely scrutinize the profiles of video game translators because, to our knowledge, no such analysis has been conducted so far, and it would be useful in determining the game translators' basic abilities.

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Tłumaczenie gier wideo oraz filmów – analiza porównawcza wybranych problemów technicznych

Abstrakt

Artykuł stanowi analizę porównawczą wybranych problemów technicznych gier wideo oraz filmów z perspektywy badań nad przekładem. Przedstawione i przeanalizowane zostają różne typy tłumaczenia audiowizualnego. Początkowo autor przedstawia swoje stanowisko w sprawie natury gier wideo oraz filmów, a następnie wskazuje na ogólną różnicę pomiędzy tymi dwoma typami tekstów. Kolejnym krokiem jest zawężenie przedmiotu analizy i zestawienie poszczególnych różnic w tłumaczeniu gier i filmów, poparte ilustracjami. Artykuł pokazuje, iż pomimo tego, że zarówno gry wideo, jak i filmy można zaliczyć do tłumaczeń audiowizualnych, to jednak różnice w tego typu przekładach bywają znaczne.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: gry wideo, filmy, tłumaczenie audiowizualne, lokalizacja