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Creativity continuum in educating video game localizers

ABSTRACT

Creativity continuum in educating video game localizers

Even though creativity is undoubtedly the most crucial skill of video game localizers, game-specific texts display a remarkable variety and can be arranged on a continuum from the most standard to the most creative. With this in mind, three in-game text categories which undergo localization are postulated: the game world, the game mechanics and the game interface. The external game-related texts which accompany a given game, in turn, are divided into: marketing texts, informational texts and legal texts. These textual categories call for different translation approaches as part of the game localization process: creative, standard or mixed. Moreover, a distinction is made between creative and standard style as well as creative and standard terminology. Creative style is varied and original, whereas standard style is conventional and based on industry standards. Creative terminology contains unique game-specific terms, while standard terminology covers general gaming, platform and genre-related terms. The creative approach incorporates creative style and mostly creative terminology. The standard approach, understandably, encompasses standard style and mostly standard terminology. Last but not least, the mixed approach covers all possible combinations of creative and standard elements. The postulated classification of texts and corresponding approaches are directly linked to prospective game localizers' competencies and provide a basis for the proposed academic curriculum.

Keywords: game localization, creativity, creativity continuum, video game localization didactics, curriculum

1. Introduction

Creativity is unquestionably one of the key competencies of game localization specialists. As such it becomes the main object of scrutiny in translation tests

administered to prospective video game localizers. However, texts included in game localization projects tend to vary in the extent of creativity they elicit and ultimately necessitate. Beginner translators and students of translation studies may easily become overwhelmed by the textual diversity with which they are faced even when coping with samples of video game localization projects – be it in class or in translation tests that are commonly utilized in the industry. Fifteen years of professional video game localization experience and nine years of didactic work brought to this subject by the author of the present article, prove that a clear classification of texts from the point of view of the amount of required creativity may help to alleviate the challenge. The creativity continuum (Nawrocka 2023) is a proposal which considers various kinds of texts and respective translation approaches found in video game localization in an effort to organize them in a coherent and meaningful way. It also carries important practical implications for the training and self-education of game translators and reviewers.

2. The aims of video game localization

When considered from a contemporary standpoint video game localization is a unique domain of specialised translation since it draws on the modes of literary translation and software localization (Stempniewicz 2016) while introducing its distinctive traits. This has a direct correlation with the competencies required of translators – the translator is expected to excel in creative translation and – at the same time – tackle the more technical content with adherence to industry standards. However, rather than trying to combine these two disparate areas, it would seem beneficial to view video game localization on its own terms.

First of all, the aim that video game localization aspires to achieve is the best possible adaptation of the source product to the requirements and expectations of the target locale¹ (Nawrocka 2023). From an industry perspective video game localization is tightly linked to the Globalization, Internationalization, Localization and Translation (GILT) processes of which it is part (Esselink 2000: 2). The first of these processes, globalization, can be seen in terms of a business strategy aimed at the product gaining global reach (Esselink 2000: 4). The second, internationalization, is a technical process whose aim is to facilitate localization and prepare the product accordingly (Esselink 2000: 2). The next process, which is localization itself, aims to adapt the product for the target locale and goes beyond translation but includes it as one of its tasks (Esselink 2000: 3). Translation, the last of the GILT processes, is one of the tasks

1| Locale is the combination of region and language with its own technical settings.

of localization meant to provide an adequate linguistic version of the original product “with special attention paid to cultural nuance and style” (Esselink 2000: 4). The GILT processes can be seen as nested one within another – starting with globalization as the most inclusive level and ending with translation as the most internal process. Hence, from the perspective of the industry translation is treated as one of the tasks of localization.

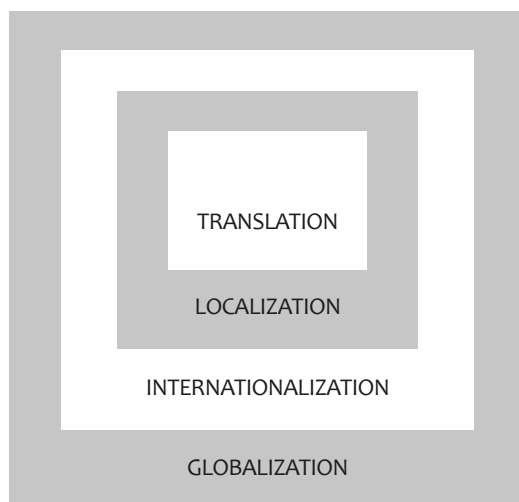


Figure 1: GILT. (Nawrocka 2023: 25; based on Jiménez-Crespo 2013)

From the perspective of translation studies, however, the situation is reversed as it is localization that is treated as merely one type among many kinds of translation. Hence, video game localization is a more subordinate category – either a subtype of localization or audiovisual translation (Bernal-Merino 2015). Furthermore, the aims of localization fit seamlessly with well-known target-oriented translation strategies such as dynamic equivalence (Nida 1964), covert translation (House 1997) and instrumental translation (Nord 2005). Dynamic equivalence aims to evoke the same effect on the receivers which is on par with the immersion² and the comparable entertainment goal of game localization. Video game localization can simultaneously be viewed in terms of covert/instrumental translation as the game localizer must be invisible (Venuti 1995) and the translation itself must hide the fact that it is indeed what it is. This is accomplished by creating the illusion of a new original: “a target

2| Immersion is the sensation of the player being immersed in the world depicted in a video game or being absorbed by virtual reality up to a point of becoming less sensitive to external stimuli (<https://www.gry-online.pl/slownik-gracza/immersja/ze17f>, accessed: 07.05.2025).

version that keeps the ‘look and feel’ of the original, yet passing itself off as the original” (Mangiron and O’Hagan 2006: 20). Video game localization can also benefit from the concept of skopos³: the skopos of game localization is an adaptation of the source game to the needs and expectations of the target audience so that it provides them with comparable entertainment while creating the impression of a new original (Nawrocka 2023). The latter, especially, pertains to the full localization⁴ of games, wherein, apart from translated texts, the game features full dubbing of the voiceover.

3. The classification of texts in video game localization

First of all, game-related texts, which undergo the process of localization, can be divided into internal and external texts⁵. Internal texts are ones that appear inside the game, whereas external texts accompany a given game. Internal texts can be further classified into the world, the mechanics and the interface of the game. External texts can be seen as comprising marketing, informational and legal texts. The classification can be illustrated as follows (see figure 2).

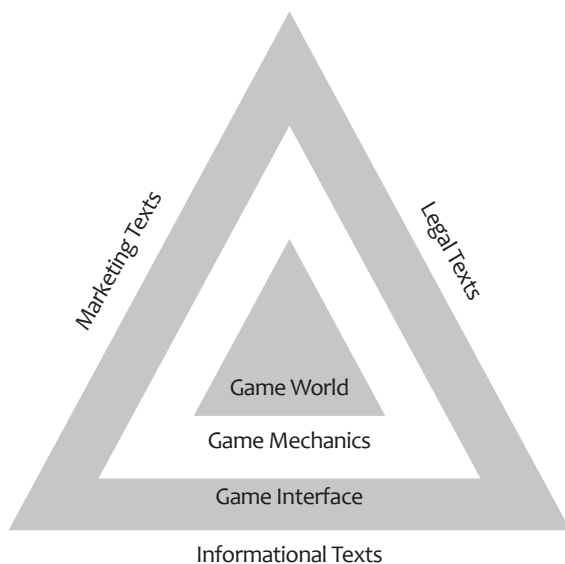


Figure 2: The classification of texts in video game localization (Nawrocka 2023: 42)

- 3| Skopos is the aim of the translation (Vermeer 2000).
- 4| The degrees of video game localization are: (1) no localization; (2) box and docs localization; (3) partial localization; (4) full localization (Chandler/O'Malley Deming 2012: 8–10).
- 5| An alternative video game text typology can be found in Mangiron and O'Hagan (2013: 155–158), who divide texts into diegetic and non-diegetic and then present further divisions.

The game world, which is the most internal layer, lies at the very heart of the game. These texts build the presented world of the game and their function is to enable immersion. Similarly to novels, they also contribute to the suspension of disbelief and are linked to the universe of the game. These are texts such as dialogs, the narrative, books, poems and diaries. The next category, the game mechanics, allows the player to experience the game world. Its function is to enable the gameplay. As such its character is largely dependent on the genre of the game though it usually contains texts such as in-game instructions and encyclopaedias, skills, spells as well as character and item statistics. The function of the next category – the game interface – is to facilitate controlling the game. It is the most external layer of the in-game texts. Its most important aspects are functionality and unobtrusiveness (Dietz 2006). The interface spans texts such as the menu and settings, dialog boxes as well as messages and questions to the player. External texts are placed outside of the nested triangles. Marketing texts comprise all kinds of advertisements and have a persuasive function. Informational texts are focused on the informative function. The last category, legal texts, includes texts whose function is instrumental (Nawrocka 2023).

4. Creativity continuum and translation approaches in video game localization

The presented categories of texts first and foremost differ in the amount of creativity they entail and thus can be arranged from the most standard to the most creative on the creativity continuum (see figure 3).

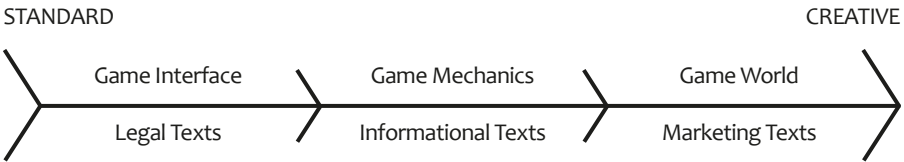


Figure 3: Text categories on the creativity continuum (Nawrocka 2023: 46)

The most creative of internal texts is the world of the game. As such it calls for proficiency in literary translation. The most standard of internal texts is the interface of the game. Its translation requires adherence to software and game localization standards. Game mechanics is placed in the middle since it may contain both standard and creative elements. Marketing texts are the most creative of external texts. Advertisements are written using a catchy, ‘out of the box’ style, which is why they call for creativity in translation. The most standard texts in the external class are legal texts. They require competence in translating legal

agreements. Informational texts, similarly to game mechanics, can contain both standard and creative aspects. Not surprisingly, standard texts require a standard approach in translation, while creative ones – a creative one. The text categories in-between call for a mixed approach, which can involve both standard and creative elements (Nawrocka 2023).



Figure 4: Translation approaches in video game localization (Nawrocka 2023: 49)

Furthermore, the approaches could be applied to style and terminology separately (Nawrocka 2023). Style is a specific way of applying language (Quinn 2006). It can concern the characteristics of language use of a particular author, school or genre (Baldick 2001). From a linguistic perspective, style can be considered in terms of graphology, phonology, lexicon, syntax, semantics and pragmatics (Verdonk 2006).

Creative style is original, fluent and varied (Nawrocka 2023). Its key feature is unconventionality. Literal translation is avoided for the sake of naturally sounding and neat expressions. This involves modifications on all textual levels: the semantic, syntactic and pragmatic one. It is a style characteristic for literary and persuasive texts belonging to the game world and marketing texts respectively. The opposite of that is standard style with its most prominent feature being conventionality (Nawrocka 2023). Literal translation is possible whenever it fulfils the requirement of grammaticality. In the case of the game interface, it is based on video game localization standards which are themselves derived from the standards of software localization. Equally, if not even more, conventional are legal texts, which additionally require expertise in legal translation, governed by its own set of rules (Nawrocka 2023).

Terminology comprises elements belonging to a specialized language (Schmitz 2006), which means that a term is a word or phrase with a special meaning in some area. Terms are used in specific pragmatic and discursive contexts and are recognizable by experts of a particular domain (Cabré 2010).

Creative terminology is created for a given game or series (Nawrocka 2023). These are all proper names of places and characters, but also terms which are generic, such as various items or concepts related to the game mechanics. As such creative terminology requires a great deal of creativity in translation, but it is nonetheless terminology, which means that it needs to be translated consistently throughout the game. Moreover, whenever external texts are translated the translator needs to adhere to the existing in-game translations of any creative terms.

If creative terms are the ones characteristic of a given game, then standard terms can be found in many games, especially of the same genre (Nawrocka 2023). By and large, standard terms can be seen as related to: either gaming in general, a particular platform or a particular genre of the game. Platform-related terminology is especially important since its proper rendition is one of the requirements the game needs to fulfil in order to be accepted for distribution by platform holders such as Microsoft (Xbox) and Sony (PlayStation). Consequently, the translation of standard terms requires general expertise in gaming, adherence to official platform terminology and competence in a particular genre (Nawrocka 2023).

The mixed approach, in turn, combines standard and creative styles, with standard and creative terminology in all possible configurations. For example, in-game encyclopaedias use creative style while containing standard terminology. On the other hand, external game manuals may use standard style but introduce some game-specific concepts using creative terminology (Nawrocka 2023: 49).

5. The curriculum

The example course⁶ would commence with an introduction outlining the methodology. A presentation of the text categories, the creativity continuum, the concept of creative and standard style and terminology as well as respective translation approaches would be a good place to start. Such an introduction could be followed by an exercise in recognizing text categories and identifying related translation approaches. The exercise could contain around 30 short excerpts from different games. As a follow-up, the students could be asked to translate one creative excerpt, one standard excerpt and one mixed excerpt, in order to experience first-hand the differences between the various approaches.

The suggested curriculum presented in the table below covers different types of texts belonging to all the categories with respective translation approaches. The proposed length of the excerpts for translation is 500–600 words, taking into account that the length of one class is 90 minutes. First, the students translate the texts as part of their homework and then, during the classes cooperate on a single version (displayed for everyone) in order to arrive at a desirable translation. The students take turns to read out the source and target text (usually one sentence) and comment whether the translation is acceptable or not and what corrections, if any, they would apply. Then the other students join the discussion and propose amendments. In this way, every student has a chance to actively participate in the class. Upon making a correction

6| Courses have been conducted by the author using the described formula.

one of the students applies the changes in real-time for everyone to see. This process is supervised by the teacher.

Table 1: The curriculum for an academic course on video game localization

Text class	Text category	Text type	Translation approach
Internal texts	1. Game world	1. Dialogs 2. Narrative 3. Poems, songs, rhymes 4. Places, lore 5. Races, monsters, characters, items	Creative
	2. Game mechanics	6. Tutorials, encyclopedias 7. Classes, professions 8. Skills, spells 9. Achievements	Mixed
	3. Game interface	10. Menu, Settings, messages, questions	Standard
External texts	4. Marketing text	11. Game adverts/ descriptions	Creative
	5. Informational text	12. Game manuals 13. Updates/patches, developer news	Mixed
	6. Legal text	14. EULA, Privacy Policy	Standard

Subsequently, the main part of the course starts with the game world as it is often the most extensive category, especially when coping with role-playing and action games. Moreover, starting with dialogs, narrative and poems/songs allows students to be introduced into the game localization domain by working on text types they will be most familiar with. These three categories require competence in literary translation which the students might have practiced in different translation courses. The other text types are the elements which build the game world: these are places, races, monsters, characters and items, as well as their descriptions. As such, they require a great amount of creativity, especially when translating the game’s creative terminology, comprising proper names and creative generic concepts. When working on this text category, it is also important to make the students aware of the ultimate function of the game world, which is player immersion.

Next in the curriculum is game mechanics. Here the students are introduced to translating the game’s mechanisms whose function is to enable the

gameplay. This is the category in which the students utilize their knowledge of a particular genre of the game. The first text type suggested to be included here covers the tutorials and encyclopaedias that appear inside the game. They can contain various hints and instructions as well as descriptions of various game-specific concepts. Classes and professions appear in various titles such as RPGs and action games. They are prominent whenever the player is allowed to create or choose their character. Skills and spells, whenever present, are of key importance to the gameplay since they define how the player conducts combat. Achievements, in turn, allow the players to track their progress in a particular title. As such, they are a good example of texts requiring the mixed approach to translation. This is because they comprise a catchy name that often features wordplay and allusions to pop culture, which needs to be translated very creatively, with a simple standard description of what has to be done to acquire them.

The last category of internal texts is the game interface. It is also the most standard kind of text in this class. The style of the interface is derived from software localization standards which can be found in the Polish Localization Styleguide (2024)⁷ compiled by Microsoft among others. Here the students' knowledge of gaming in general and of the particular genre is of crucial importance. The interfaces of different games tend to be similar and use similar standard terminology. This makes it easier for the players to navigate in a particular game. The key feature of the interface is functionality, which is something the students need to be made aware of. The interface comprises menus, settings and dialog boxes as well as some standard player messages and questions.

As far as external texts are concerned, the first category included in the curriculum are marketing texts. Special emphasis should be placed on their creative character: they are usually written using a neat, elegant style and may contain unconventional, catchy expressions which are to grab the players' attention. The competence required here is comparable to that of creative writing (Mangiron/O'Hagan 2013). The translator's responsibility in translating such texts is considerable since reading the advert often constitutes the first contact of the player with a given title based on which he or she makes a decision whether or not to buy and play it.

Informational texts covered in the curriculum include the game manual, updates/patches, and developer news. They require a good understanding of the particular title and genre since their function is informative. The game manual may contain descriptions of game-specific concepts as well as instructions, which is why it is a good example of the application of the mixed approach. Developer news may additionally display a marketing overtone.

7| <https://learn.microsoft.com/en-us/globalization/reference/microsoft-style-guides> (accessed: 04.08.2025).

The last category of the curriculum concerns legal texts. Legal texts display a considerable amount of standardization and are very formal (Mayoral Asensio 2003). A sample of the EULA or Privacy Policy may present the students with its characteristic legal style and terminological requirements. The approach to be practised here is definitely standard.

Thus, the greatest emphasis in the proposed curriculum is placed on the categories of the game world and the game mechanics since they constitute the core textual content of video games. Regarding creative texts, six text types have been suggested since creativity is the key competence and most sought-after trait of prospective video game localizers. At the same time, future translators need to be able to meet the requirements of standard texts such as the game interface and legal texts: two text types have been suggested in this domain. The ability to cope with mixed texts, wherein creative elements are intermingled with standard ones, is equally vital so six text types have been suggested in this area.

6. Conclusion

The presented academic course in video game localization focuses on covering all the major textual categories and respective translation approaches in a balanced and systematic way. The proposed curriculum is structured in such a manner as to enable students to practice the key competencies such as working on creative and mixed texts without omitting the other abilities which are also necessary, such as coping with standard texts.

As far as the creative approach is concerned, the students have an opportunity to work on their creativity, which is something that cannot be easily learned but can be practised, nonetheless. Making the students aware of the variety of ways such texts can be translated may also prove advantageous. Handling mixed texts is equally significant, as they are the most distinctive fragments exclusive to the gaming domain and require a proper understanding of the gameplay mechanics. The ability to distinguish their mixed creative and standard elements, for example, creative style and standard terminology or standard style and creative terminology, may be essential for achieving high quality in game localization.

In contrast to creativity, adhering to standards can be more easily learned but is also a vital skill: for example, when applying platform-specific terminology as part of compliance requirements. As opposed to creative texts, the translation of standard texts is much less individual – these texts will and should sound similar even if rendered by different translators. The ability to translate both highly unconventional creative texts and at the same time highly conventional standard texts, as well as mixed texts in which creative and

standard elements are intermingled, thus seems crucial for the success of the game localizer.

Last but not least, the proposed classification on which the curriculum is based exhibits certain simplification and the affiliation of texts with particular categories is not always clear-cut (e.g. items in games may be part of the game world and the game mechanics, some external texts may be simultaneously informative and persuasive). Moreover, the postulated translation approaches – creative, standard and mixed – are best seen in terms of dominant ones and treated as general guidelines rather than strictly applied rules.

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