Quasi-medieval register in video games – a translator's perspective

Mateusz Sajna

Abstract

Video games are becoming more and more popular. Among the available titles there are a considerable number of games whose visual layer is reminiscent of the Middle Ages. The following paper is a case study of the video game Dragon Age: Origins and aims to investigate how video game translators proceed when faced with a game set in quasi-medieval times. Such games display a distinctive type of register and it is very interesting to see how translators render them. It is assumed that the results of this study can be extrapolated to other video games as well.

Keywords: video game translation, video games, medieval register.

1. Introduction

There are a number of video games whose register appears to border on the Middle Ages because the games themselves are set in medieval or quasi-medieval times, featuring castles, monarchs, wizards, witchcraft, knights, dragons, orcs, etc. However, the language of such entertainment products cannot utterly faithfully mirror the lexis and grammar used in those days because present-day players might have trouble understanding it.

As a general rule, we do not seem to utilize any type of medieval register on a daily basis, and translators, as well as recipients of their texts, are highly likely to have no or minimal knowledge of Medieval or Old Polish (a similar situation might be observed in the case of other languages, for instance, English, where intralingual[1] translation had to be employed to bring Shakespearean works closer to contemporary native speakers of that language). The matter that I wish to raise at this juncture relates to the manners in which translators deal with texts of video games set in medieval/quasi-medieval times. On the one hand, it seems that they are obliged to translate in such a way that the contemporary players understand their texts with ease and without unnecessarily discontinuing the game and resorting to specialist dictionaries in order to look an unknown lexical item up. On the other hand, though, gamers find themselves in a castle, casting spells, or flying dragons, and the register ought to be somehow adjusted to these situations and settings.

The thesis I venture to put forward here is that video game translators, when dealing with quasi-medieval register, employ less frequently utilized lexemes to convey the impression of remoteness in time, thus meeting the criteria of producing understandable translation that is also adapted to the world of a particular title. Thanks to the utilization of such a translation technique there is no distinct clash between the lexical and visual layers of the game. Needless to say, not all rarely used lexemes can be utilized in the abovementioned manner; they must reflect the times depicted on the screen.

2. Video games in medieval/quasi-medieval settings

Role Playing Games, that is games where players are in direct control of their avatars, earn experience points, and with the use thereof develop their characters, seem to constitute the

majority of games set in quasi-medieval times. The storyline of such games is very frequently studded with elements belonging to the fantasy or science-fiction genres (Sajna 2014: 24). Let us take the Elder Scrolls franchise[2] as an example. The player can choose their avatar from a number of different races: humans, elves, orcs, khajiit (feline-like race), etc. The game features wizardry in the form of various spells, magical items or creatures. The architecture is very often typical of the Middle Ages: there are castles, ancient temples, craftsmen's workshops, etc. The enemies that the player can encounter during their adventures range from ordinary bandits to fantasy foes such as dragons or vampires. In order to battle those opponents, the player has at their disposal all manner of means: from cold steel to ranged weapons to the aforementioned spells. This appears to certainly make for a good medieval/quasi-medieval setting with a pinch of fantasy seasoning.

There are also video games which do not feature this supernatural element, and focus solely on medieval-like characteristics such as knights, castles, damsels in distress, swords, jousting, etc. Kingdom Come: Deliverance might serve here as a good example, if not published yet.

Another group with a vast number of games set in medieval/quasi-medieval times is comprised of strategy games in which the player is the leader of an army/nation, is responsible for collecting certain resources, growing in strength and eventually defeating their opponents. Strategy and tactics are core features of such games (Sajna 2014: 24). A good example of such games is the Stronghold franchise. Here the player is in charge of building their own fortress, gathering wood, stone and other resources, recruiting an army, and finally battling the opposing lord or king. There are no magical means to winning, only cold steel, machines of war, knights, etc. There are also strategy games which are set in quasi-medieval settings and do additionally have fantasy components, such as the Warcraft series.

The last group of titles connected with medieval/quasi-medieval times is made up of combinations of the two above-mentioned genres. Examples include the Heroes of Might and Magic, and the Mount and Blade franchises.

The lexical layer of all of the foregoing games is unique to the genres and sub-genres to which they belong. As a matter of fact, it can be argued that every genre/sub-genre contains its own distinctive lexical elements.

3. Register in video game translation[3]

The language of video games, as well as books or movies, displays great diversity. Different lexical items are used in a highly realistic flight simulator, where players can control aircraft utilized during World War II, a different register is employed in a football game, and different again in a role playing game whose action takes place in medieval/quasi-medieval times and setting, or an imagined, unreal world. These three examples would feature technical register, sports register, and pseudo-medieval register, or fantasy register. Video games are unusual in the fact that one product might incorporate more than one register; it is not necessary to choose three different titles to experience three different language variations.

Petrů (2011: 65) contends that the lexis of video games can take different forms, for example, subtitles of cinematics[4] (similar to subtitles in movie translation), long dialogues and/or descriptions (literary translation), encyclopedic passages (non-literary texts), game instructions, a game interface which contains buttons, menus, *etc.* (software translation),

hardware technical settings (technical translation), as well as songs and poetry. These are not the only types of register that can be found in video games. There are also manuals, boxes, internet websites, advertisements, and legal agreements between publishers and players. Accepting a game translation project means being prepared to handle all of that within a single title.

There are also Massively-Multiplayer Online Games[5], which appear not to be too dissimilar to regular games in terms of the lexical items utilized, although their registers display a number of distinctive features. First, these games usually have no box, nor manuals, and no translation problems connected therewith. Second, over the past years MMOG players have developed their own distinctive vocabulary, which must be tackled very carefully by translators. These lexical items are usually widespread in their English form. There is no commonly accepted translation, and consequently translators appear to have two solutions: either they leave the English lexemes intact (or adapt them to the phonological rules of the Polish language), or employ the translations already accepted by the player community, that is fan translations.

4. Dragon Age: Origins – case study

The Dragon Age franchise is a series of role playing games set in quasi-medieval times and featuring castles, dragons, witchcraft, knights, etc. Dragon Age: Origins is the first installment of the franchise. Here, the player, fighting as a mage, warrior, or rogue, must unite the kingdom of Ferelden and save it from a looming invasion by the so-called darkspawn – humanoid, demonic creatures having their abode in deep, underground tunnels which spread throughout the entire continent. In order to analyze the game, I have scrutinized over 360 000 words of English in-game texts, from which 122 examples were procured. The number of examples would be considerably higher if it were not for the fact that very similar cases were recorded only once, and thus, if 'room' was translated as 'komnata' in a number of instances, I treated it as one example. The analysis was conducted in the following way: if an interesting lexeme was noticed, its most obvious translation was checked in Wielki słownik PWN-Oxford (The Great English-Polish Polish English Dictionary PWN-Oxford) (2006) and compared with the translation provided by the Polish translators of Dragon Age: Origins. The next step in the process was to check the two translations against Słownik frekwencyjny języka polskiego (A frequency dictionary of Polish) (Kazojć 2011) to see if the translators of Dragon Age employed lexemes which are less frequent in the Polish language in order to convey the impression of remoteness in time.

(1)   Source Text: <u>Pride's End</u>
         Translation: <u>Kres Pychy</u>
         Back-translation: <u>Vainglory's/Excessive Pride's End</u>

In the above example there are actually two lexemes which were not translated with the use of their readily available dictionary counterparts. Upon entering 'pride' in the PWN-Oxford dictionary, the first entry that can be seen is 'duma'. The frequency dictionary reports 1493 instances of 'duma', while there are only 413 instances of 'pycha'. When it comes to the other lexical item of (1), the PWN-Oxford dictionary suggests that its most frequent translation is 'koniec', which was reported 22 353 times in the frequency dictionary. On the

other hand, there are merely 1798 instances of 'kres'. 'Pride's End' is a proper name in the world of the game, and it is used to denote a small cave in Sundermount. It appears that video game translators, when dealing with proper names, usually tend to steer clear of the most obvious solutions in favor of less evident and frequent renditions. This tendency seems to be found in the work of almost all video game translators, not only those translating games set in quasi-medieval times.

(2)   ST: If you see that <u>sodding</u> bastard, bring him here. I want to hear exactly what he's promised, right from his lying mouth.
T: Jeśli spotkasz gdzieś tego <u>chędożonego</u> łobuza, sprowadź go tutaj. Chcę usłyszeć z jego kłamliwych ust, co ci dokładnie obiecał.
BT: If you see that [<u>sodding</u>] rogue anywhere, bring him here. I want to hear right from his lying mouth what he's promised you.

Back-translating the Polish version of (2) is a considerable challenge because the adjective 'chędożonego' has been derived from the verb 'chędożyć', which people of yore used when talking about a man and which meant 'to have sexual intercourse'. A contemporary, if more vulgar, version of 'chędożonego' would obviously be 'fucking'. Having searched for the translation of 'sodding' in the PWN-Oxford dictionary, I found only one entry which was 'pieprzony'. The frequency dictionary displayed 543 instances of 'pieprzony' and only 7 instances of 'chędożony'. I would venture to suggest that the translator might have read some books by Andrzej Sapkowski (most notably The Witcher Saga) or played The Witcher games, because it is this author that tends to extensively utilize the lexeme 'chędożony' in his writing.

(3)   ST: One of the tavern <u>girls</u>, Nella, agreed to lie with me. I even paid for a room.
T: Jedna z karczemnych <u>dziewek</u>, Nella, zgodziła się ze mną przespać. Nawet opłaciłem już pokój.
BT: One of the tavern <u>wenches</u>, Nella, agreed to sleep with me. I have even already paid for a room.

The dictionary entry for 'girl' provides a number of translations. However, the first one is 'dziewczynka' (a little girl), and right after that there is 'dziewczyna' (a girl). Since the piece of conversation from (3) is on the subject of having carnal knowledge of that girl, it is fairly safe to assume that 'dziewczyna' would be the right, readily available translation. The frequency dictionary notes 22 472 instances of that lexeme, whereas there are only 370 instances of 'dziewka'. In the context of this analysis it is quite surprising that the translator decided to render 'room' with the help of the readily available 'pokój' (13 365 instances) and not 'izba' (622 instances). ('komnata' [599 instances], mentioned at the beginning of this section, would not make a good translation in this context because it refers to a luxury chamber in a castle or palace).

(4)   ST: I'd have <u>figured</u> he rooked some noble. He's sure not a burglar.
T: <u>Miarkowałem</u>, że naciągnął jakiegoś szlachcica. Rabuś z niego żaden.
BT: I'd have <u>gathered</u> he rooked some noble. He's no robber.

The most readily available translation for the verb 'to figure' is 'myśleć', and the frequency dictionary reports 12 295 instances of this lexeme. On the other hand, the lexical item employed by the translator has been reported in a considerably lower number of instances, that is 43.

(5) ST: Viddathari are of the Qun. This <u>offense</u> will have an answer.
T: Viddathari wyznają Qun. Ten <u>afront</u> nie zostanie bez odpowiedzi.
BT: Viddathari believe in the Qun. This <u>affront</u> will not be unanswered.

Having searched for the noun 'offense' in the PWN-Oxford dictionary, I found that the most readily available translation offered there is 'obraza', which is reported by the frequency dictionary to have 225 instances. However, it appears that a more suitable translation in this context might be 'zniewaga', as in the fixed phrase 'ta zniewaga krwi wymaga' (literally: 'this offence calls for blood', which means 'this offence calls for revenge') found in a well-known work by the Polish writer Aleksander Fredro, 'The Revenge'. The frequency dictionary provides information on 118 instances of 'zniewaga' and 95 instances of 'afront'. Nevertheless, it ought to be taken into account that 'The Revenge' was conceived at the beginning of the 1830s. Be that as it may, the dictionary translation has been reported twice as many times as 'afront' or 'zniewaga' in the frequency dictionary.

(6) ST: You could <u>muck about</u> with demons and blood magic to your heart's content if it didn't endanger Kirkwall.
T: Mogłabyś <u>swawolić</u> z demonami i bawić się magią krwi, ile dusza zapragnie, gdyby to tylko nie zagrażało Kirkwall.
BT: You could <u>frolic</u> with demons and play with blood magic to your heart's content if it only didn't endanger Kirkwall.

Upon seeking the phrase in question from (6) in the PWN-Oxford dictionary, I learned that it offers 'wygłupiać się' as the most readily available translation. It could also provide the translator with 'bawić się', which seems to be just as good a translation or even better. There are 175 instances of 'wygłupiać' and 2588 instances of 'bawić' in the frequency dictionary. On the other hand, it displays only 12 instances of 'swawolić'.

As can be seen, in all of the above-presented examples the translator opted for a lexeme which is utilized less frequently than a lexical item readily available in the bilingual PWN-Oxford dictionary.

5. Conclusions

Could it be considered a mistake if the translator had decided to employ 'koniec dumy', 'pieprzonego', 'dziewczyna', 'myśleć', 'obraza', and 'wygłupiać się' instead of 'kres pychy', 'chędożonego', 'dziewka', 'miarkować', 'afront', and 'swawolić', respectively? In their respective contexts the lexical items proposed by the PWN-Oxford dictionary would probably not look out of place. Nevertheless, the translator appears to have resolved to utilize more infrequent lexemes in order to convey the remoteness in time of the language used in those video games set in quasi-medieval times. After all, the language of a medieval knight,

king or blacksmith must have been different than the language utilized by contemporary people, whether they be university professors, students, or builders.

To sum up, as can be seen from the example of the scrutinized video game, translators seem to intersperse texts of video games whose action takes place in a medieval or quasi-medieval setting with less frequently utilized lexemes, sometimes even archaic, in order for the language of a particular game to be consonant with what can be seen on-screen. Not only does it not hinder the reception of that product, but it might also add a great deal of value to the gameplay[6]. However, there are two important caveats that must be mentioned at this juncture. Firstly, translators ought to restrain themselves from adding too many infrequently used lexemes because this could make their translations incomprehensible to an average player (that is probably one of the main reasons why such games are not written entirely in medieval English, Polish, etc.). Secondly, it is absolutely vital that translators should not employ any linguistic anachronisms in their translations, even though such lexical items might be judged by the frequency dictionary as infrequent, because they might and probably would prevent players from being engrossed in a particular title. After all, a knight speaking like a contemporary teenager is quite likely to cause a clash between the aural and visual layers, unless it is a deliberate move on the part of game developers.

Notes:
[1] A term coined by Jacobson (1959: 114) denoting translation within a language. For example, when we wish to render "Beowulf" into modern English so that the contemporary English reader can enjoy it to the fullest.
[2] "A set of games, often with similar names, that share one or more key characters, settings or styles of play. Used interchangeably with series." (Thomas et al. 2007: 30)
[3] Based on Sajna 2014.
[4] Pre-rendered or in-game films which constitute part of the gameplay experience. They are usually used to push the game's story forward. (Chandler and Deming 2012: 343)
[5] "Any game featuring a large number of players interacting in a persistent world through online communication with other players." (Thomas et al. 2007: 73)
[6] "The experience of interacting with a game." (Thomas et al. 2007: 33)

References
CHANDLER, H. M. and DEMING O'MALLEY, S. 2012. *The Game Localization Handbook. Second Edition.* Massachusetts: Jones & Bartelett Learning.

JAKOBSON, R. 1959. On Linguistic Aspects of Translation. In BROWER, R. A. *On Translation.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959, pp. 232-39.

KAZOJĆ, J. 2011. *Słownik frekwencyjny języka polskiego V.05.2011.* Available at: <http://www.slowniki.org.pl/lista-frekwencyjna.pdf>.

PETRU, J. 2011. *Video Game Translation in the Czech Republic - from Fan Era to Professionalism.* Masaryk University. Brno (unpublished M.A. thesis).

SAJNA, M. 2014. *Cognitive Semantics and the Translation of Video Games.* University of Wrocław (unpublished PhD dissertation).

THOMAS, D. *et al.* 2007. *The Videogame Style Guide and Reference Manual.* Available at: <http://www.gamestyleguide.com/VideoGameStyleGuideeBook.pdf>.

Wielki słownik PWN-OXFORD. 2006. [CD-ROM]. Warszawa: pwn.pl Sp. z o.o.

Mateusz Sajna
Philological School of Higher Education in Wrocław
Sienkiewicza 32, 50-335 Wrocław, Poland
e-mail: mateusz.sajna@gmail.com