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Is literal translation an appropriate solution in localization? – a case study

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Abstract

The following article explores the concept of video game localization, considering one of the possible translation techniques – literal translation (Vinay and Darbelent, 2000). The process of localization is a result of the growth of the game industry and players' demand for access to uninterrupted gameplay. It has forced the entire gaming market to consider adapting its product to different regions and large audiences (Esselink, 2000), which underscores the mandatory place of this process at the game development stage.

Keywords: video game localization, literal translation, Polish translation, proper names, English translation

It can be stated that localization is closely related to audiovisual translation, or rather, that it uses knowledge and concepts from audiovisual translation (Mangiron & O'Hagan, 2006). However, the practices used in the two processes are not identical. Localization represents a broader range of issues, concepts and problems, as it involves adapting the content presented to the linguistic, cultural and functional requirements of the region, for specific audiences (Mangiron & O'Hagan, 2006), emphasizing the functional value of the translated product.

Localization has a key role in making a game accessible to the market. It allows players from different languages and cultural backgrounds to enjoy playing the purchased product seamlessly. It ensures a full and smooth reception of the content. Games strive for natural reception, which preserves playability (Tirosh, 2020). However, the translation is only one stage of the process (Alvarenga, 2019). In addition, making the product compliant with legal requirements is an important aspect of localization that enables the game publisher to introduce the product to more markets, potentially increasing its revenue (Esselink, 2000).

Games are interactive products that belong to the so-called "entertainment software" (Bernal-Merino, 2007). The peculiarity of this type of software is that it involves an incredible need for adaptation of content, programming and the natural reception of entertainment. An additional aspect of dealing with games is that because they are software, they can be subject to updates and a series continuation may emerge. Moreover, in all cases of games, the player themselves intervenes in the gameplay, which involves ensuring natural interaction between the player and the presented game world. It requires a great deal of creativity from the translator, as well as considerable knowledge of the game, software and language (Mleczak, 2021).

In the presented paper, attention is drawn to the appropriateness of using the literal translation technique (Vinay and Darbelent, 2000), since the choice of method ensures a sufficient or poor understanding of the content. The literal translation is treated very reluctantly and with many reservations. In this method, the translator relies on translating words and structures from the source language into the target language. In the case of this study, the issue considered is that of proper names, which are often compound nouns. The caveat, however, is that the literal translation technique may not take into account the cultural or linguistic differences or the meaning nuances of the nouns concerned, leading to potential awkwardness, inconsistency and failure to meet basic localization goals.

The provided analysis is based on the English version of *Horizon Forbidden West* (Year, further referred to as HFW) game and its Polish translation. It is a sequel to the first part, which continues the story of Aloy's journey. The gameplay consists in the exploration of the open world and defeating enemies, so knowing their names is crucial for smooth and efficient navigation through the game world. What's more, the game contains many elements that emphasize the complexity of the localization process. First, it is a AAA game, which implies higher quality expectations, assuming it has a large production budget. Next, as a role-playing game (RPG), it contains a lot of content to be localized, such as dialogues, character names, and plots. In addition, the game is subject to full localization, meaning that all on-screen and off-screen elements are pre-translated and adapted to the target audience (Chandler & O'Malley Deming, 2011). Therefore, the multitude of information, text and localization options in this case seems to be virtually unlimited. The final element that increases the variety of options is the storyline. This is a game designed in a post-apocalyptic fantasy world entirely invented by the developers. Consequently, the translators had to rely heavily on their intellect and creativity since there were no previous reliable sources they could use.

The following study analyzed 43 proper names of the machines appearing in the HFW game. The survey included 9 names from the initially analyzed examples because the differences and similarities between the original English version and the Polish translation were the most surprising, and the so-called "machines" are the most important elements in this game. Their names appear constantly in missions, names of

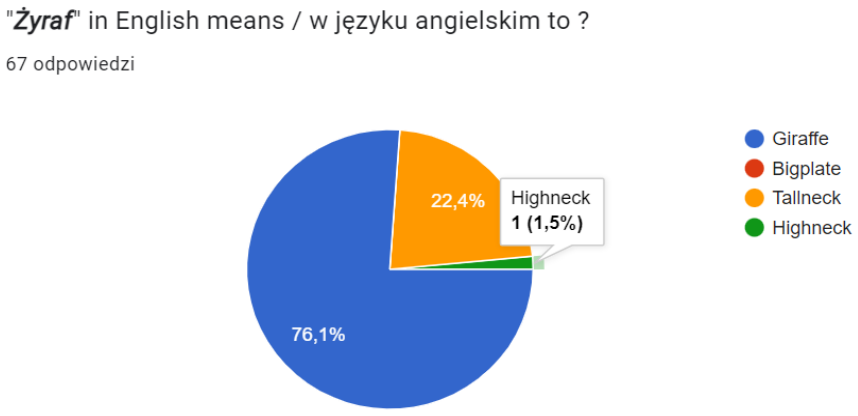
objects, areas, components, parts, etc. Therefore, understanding them is crucial to understanding the game. Based on them, it was possible to conclude how the process of translating the game was carried out in this language pair.

The questionnaire was available online from July 6, 2023, to July 31, 2023, on Facebook survey groups and gaming-related groups. The questionnaire included 3 questions on translation from Polish to English, followed by 3 questions in reverse order. Respondents always received only 1 correct answer, the others were made up or incorrect. Next was a section of open questions, which was optional because it required respondents to write their own opinions about a particular translation. There were 4 questions in this section, each of which related to an important translation problem, focusing on the respondent's assessment of his or her ease in understanding a particular equivalent in a second language. These were questions focused on reflection from a pragmatic point of view. A total of 67 responses and opinions were submitted.

The participants in the study were not from a specific group. They were not categorized by age, gender or background. The only questions asked to the respondents before completing the survey were those related to their language skills (Polish/English) and knowledge of the game. Because the survey was shared mainly on Facebook groups, both those dedicated to the game itself and surveys in general, potential respondents could be very diverse. The first thing we can deduce from the answers given by the respondents is that virtually 100% of them indicated that their native language is Polish. Next, 54% indicated intermediate English proficiency, and 33% indicated advanced English proficiency. This indicates that Poles with generally good English language skills took part in the survey. The second piece of information that may affect the analysis is the respondents' familiarity with the game, with 87% of them not knowing the game or not having played it before.

The first part of the survey consisted in selecting the most likely version of the original name (from the Polish translation into English) of the given machine name.

Figure 1 – ***Żyraf. Survey results, copyrighted by Ewa Holik, personal photo***



In the first diagram, the example was based on the word *Żyraf*. In Polish, the name of this machine is based on its similarity to the animal *Żyrafa*, in English *Giraffe*. Therefore, it is logical that most of the answers chosen by Polish native-speaking people consist of a literal translation of this word into English. However, it is worth noting that the original name of this machine is in English. So, it is possible that if the respondents knew about this information they would consider other options. The second most popular option was *Tallneck* which is the correct equivalent and original name of the machine. In English, the name focuses not on what the machine resembles, but on what its most visible feature is. In this case, it's a long neck (in Polish the name would probably be *Długoszyj*). The other proposed translations also drew attention to the characteristics of the machine – either again to the neck or to the head.

Photo 1 – ***Appearance of the machine, Żyraf. The commercial art, copyrighted by Sony Interactive Entertainment Europe***

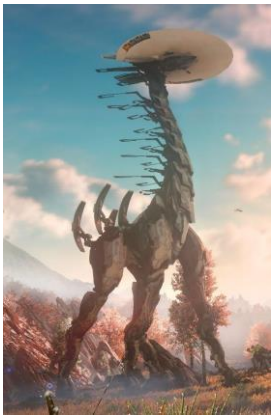
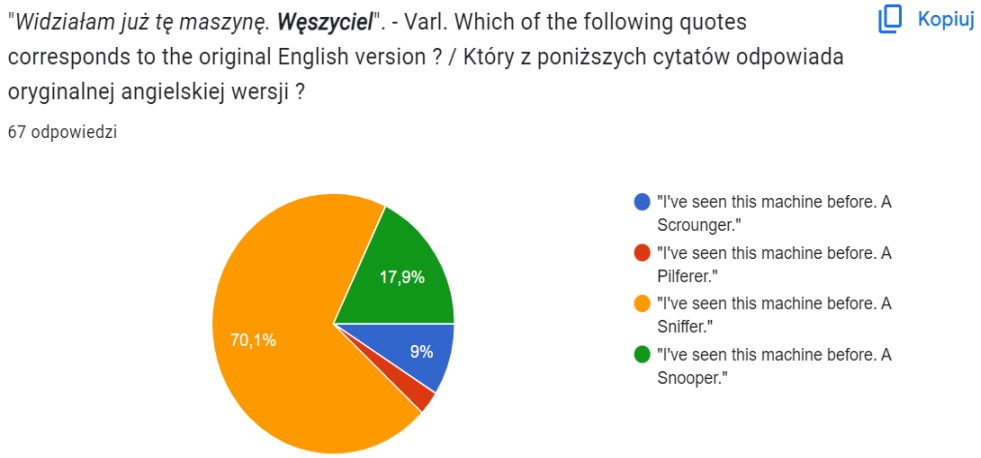


Figure 2 – ***Węszyciel. Survey results, copyrighted by Ewa Holik, personal photo***



The second diagram shows the same way of thinking repeated by the majority of respondents – a literal translation of *Węszyciel* to *Sniffer* seems to be the most logical, and it's not surprising since the rest of the translations require either knowledge of the English version of the game or a rich English vocabulary. If we focused on the Polish word *Węszyciel* – we would see that in this word the verb *węszyć* (in English *to sniff*) has

been transformed into a noun. However, the developers envisaged a different name in the original English version. The name of this machine has been based on its 'functioning'. The correct name is *Scrounger*, which comes from the verb *to scrounge*, which means 'someone who tries to get things, especially money or food, by asking for them instead of buying them or working for them'. Here we see the complexity of the meaning of this one verb, which was later suffixed with *-er* to make a noun. In Polish, this verb could be translated as *naciągać, sępić* which at first glance has nothing to do with the chosen Polish translation which is most likely based on the association that the machine resembles a sniffing dog in the way it moves and looks. We can, therefore, note that the Polish translation is based on the association of the visible physical features of the machine with animals, while the English version alludes to the machine's way of obtaining resources, as it preys on machine residues.

Photo 2 – ***Appearance of the machine, Węszyciel. photo from the book published by Future Press. Sony Interactive Entertainment Europe and Guerrilla Games license***

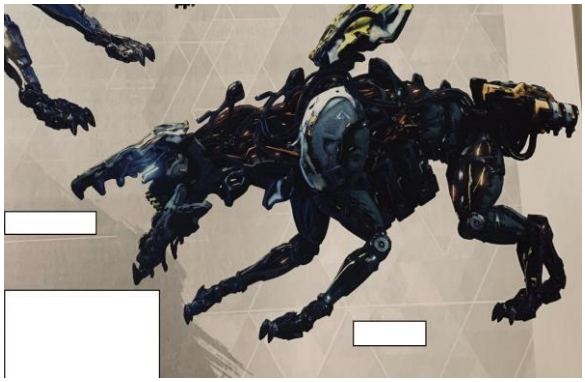
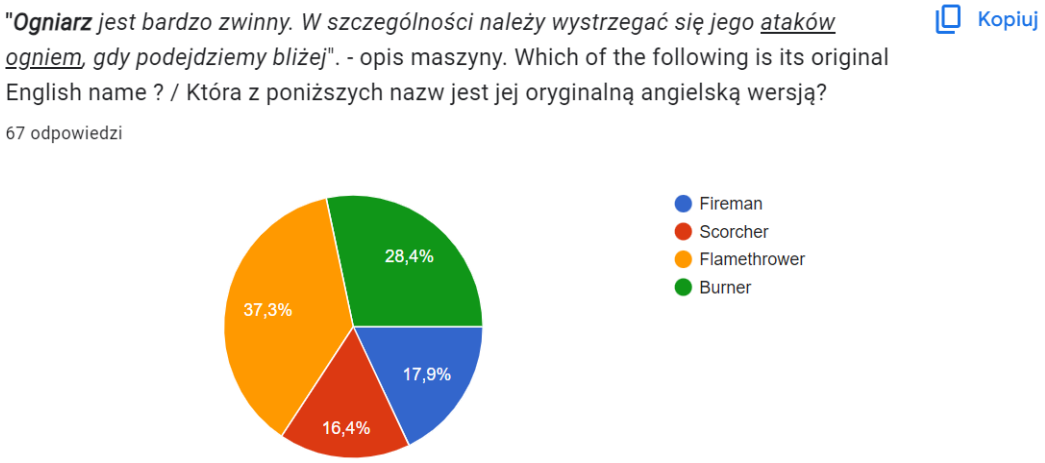


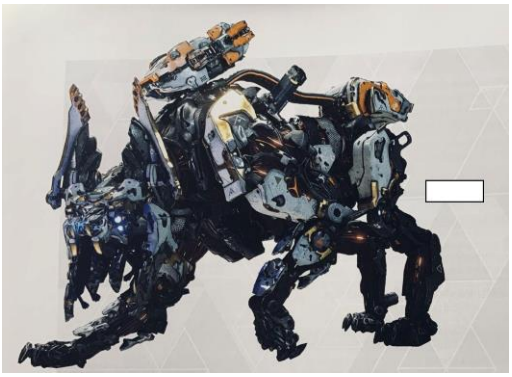
Figure 3 – ***Ogniarz. Survey results, copyrighted by Ewa Holik, personal photo***



The next question caused more difficulties for the respondents as many proposed translated names contain words that are basic in English and are associated with the Polish translation of the word *Ogniarz*, which contains the word *Ogień*, in English – *Fire*. In the fragment of the description of the machine placed in the question, the words

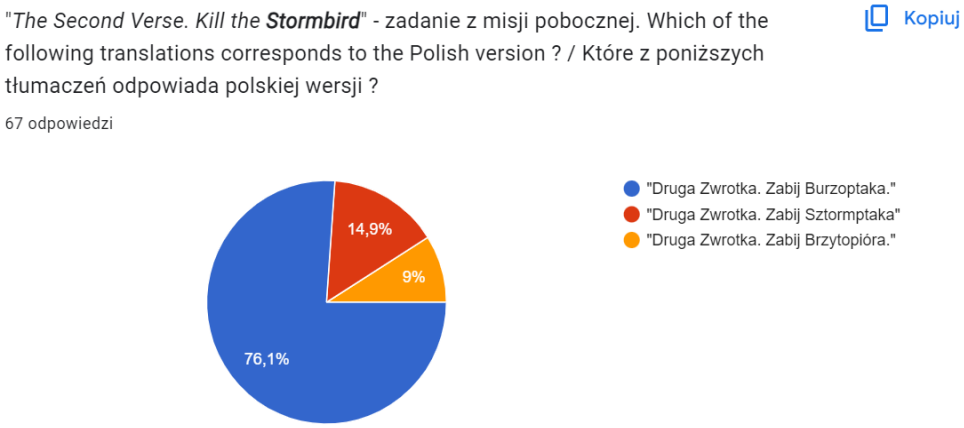
'ataków ogniem' (which means 'fire attacks') were underlined to show the combat operation of the machine. Hence, most of the respondents decided to choose the name *Flamethrower* as the original one. Then based on the association – if the machine attacks with fire, it burns, the name *Burner* ranked second. However, once again the original was based on a more complex basis. The correct answer to this question was – *Scorcher*, a word based on the verb *to scorch* (in Polish, *przypalać*) which means 'to burn a surface as to change its color and texture'. It follows that in the original the name of the machine shows its dangerous feature and the method of attack, however, this feature is shown as a possible consequence, but not the final result of the attack. It is a nuance based on a distinction between *to burn* (*spalić*) and *to scorch* (*przypalić*). Where, according to the dictionary definition, *to scorch* (*przypalić*) means 'partially burnt'. In the Polish translation, this nuance was omitted, focusing on emphasizing the connection of the machine with fire based on the method of its attack.

Photo 3 – ***Appearance of the machine, Ogniarz. photo from the book published by Future Press. Sony Interactive Entertainment Europe and Guerrilla Games license***



In the second part of the survey, the questions concerned a potential translation into Polish from the original English version.

Figure 4 – ***Burzoptak. Survey results, copyrighted by Ewa Holik, personal photo***



In this question, most of the respondents guessed what was the real translation of the name of the machine – *Burzoptak*, because in the Polish version the words *Storm*, and *Bird* were accordingly translated into *Burza* and *Ptak* using the literal translation method. This underlines that the respondents continued to follow the principle of word-for-word translation. The other two proposed options were either based on sound similarity – *Storm* as *Sztorm* or using a name that exists in the game – *Brzytwopiór* – but refers to a different machine, whose original name is *Skydrifter*.

Photo 4 – ***Appearance of the machine, Burzoptak. photo from the book published by Future Press. Sony Interactive Entertainment Europe and Guerrilla Games license***

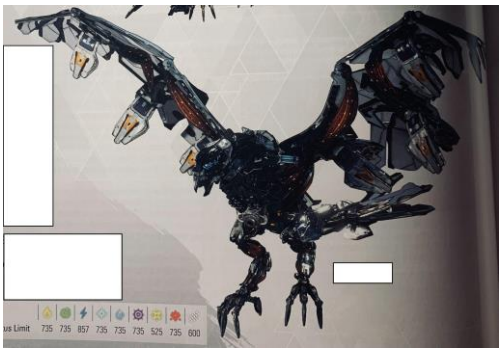
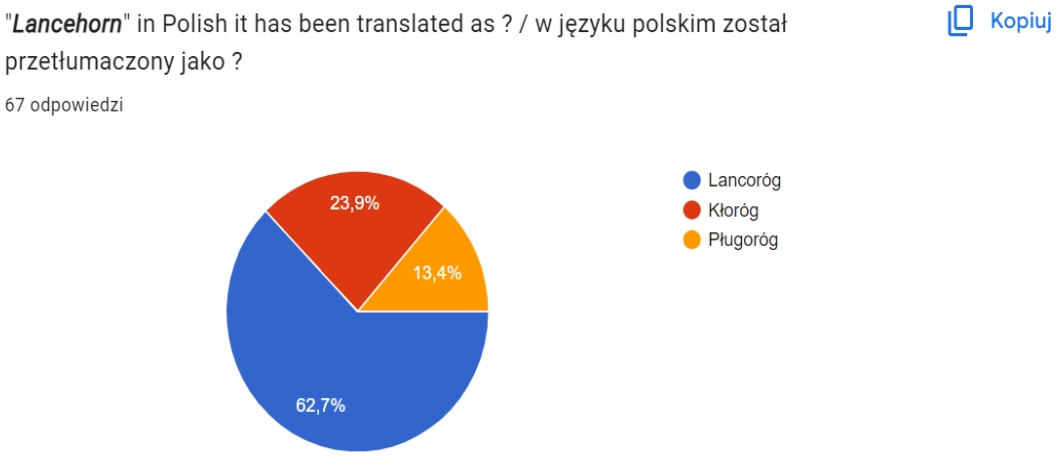


Figure 5 – ***Lancoróg. Survey results, copyrighted by Ewa Holik, personal photo***



To this question, again, the majority of respondents answered correctly. This time the Polish translation is based on the similarity of the form, sound and meaning of the translation. *Lancehorn* was translated into *Lancoróg* where *lance*, means *lanca* (here comes the question of inflexion in Polish, into *Lanco-*), and *horn* into *róg* literally. In both cases, the name refers to the physical appearance of the machine. The other two false propositions refer to different machines that exist in the game and look very similar to this one (*Kłoróg*, originally called *Fanghorn*, and *Pługoróg* – *Plowhorn*).

Photo 5 – ***Appearance of the machine, Lancoróg. photo from the book published by Future Press. Sony Interactive Entertainment Europe and Guerrilla Games license***

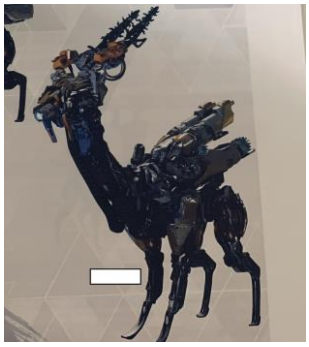
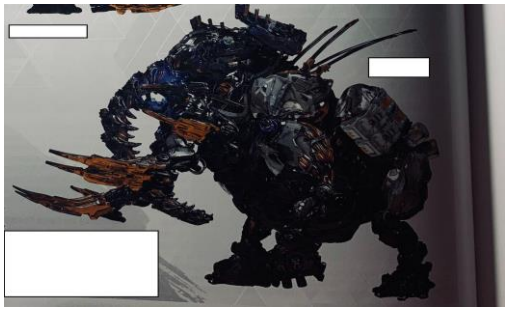


Figure 6 – ***Mumakieł. Survey results, copyrighted by Ewa Holik, personal photo***

Respondents had the biggest problem with this question being translated from English into Polish. It's hard to figure out why the translators made a different decision than most of the respondents. The correct translation into Polish is *Mumakieł*. In this question, the proposed answers did not address the English words or name of the machine at all. The English name might be too complicated lexically because *Tremor* means *Drżenie* and *Tusk* means *Kieł* (only for elephant-like animals). It makes the name too complex and based on one characteristic feature of the machine. That's why, analyzing the reasoning of Polish translators who have completely abandoned the literal translation, the people responding were given a hint that they must focus on the appearance of the machine. The only thing translators decided to keep from the original name is the fact that the machine has 'tusks', so in the two proposed names, there's *Kieł* in it (*Tusk*). Following, it was obvious that the first thought that came to people's minds was *Mammoth*, in Polish *Mamut*. Hence, a false translation of *Mamukieł* was proposed. For most of the respondents, as well as for the author, this translation seemed the most optimal. However, the translators decided to replace *Mamu-* with *Muma-* by switching places of 'A' and 'U'. It can be considered as an artistic procedure to make the name sound more 'mysterious'. The second proposed name, *Behemot*, refers to a fictional creature that resembles a mammoth in appearance. For those familiar with the story, this translation also seemed logical.

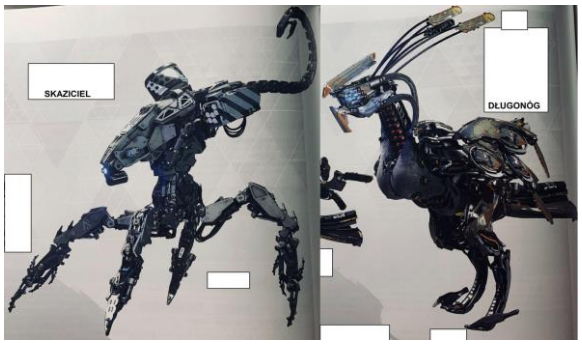
Photo 6 – ***Appearance of the machine, Mumakieł. Photo from the book published by Future Press. Sony Interactive Entertainment Europe and Guerrilla Games license***



Following the analysis, the sections of optional *open questions* were created. These results served as a confirmation of the 'way of thinking' of the majority of the respondents. Looking at the photos of machines, the respondents were asked about their capacity to explain the decisions of the translators, the ease of the name presented, why they think that the given name was used, etc.

First question: Which machine name is easier to understand/imagine its characteristics *Długonóg* or *Skaziciel*?

Photo 7 – ***Appearance of the machines, Długonóg, Skaziciel. photo from the book published by Future Press. Sony Interactive Entertainment Europe and Guerrilla Games license***



This question was to see how a Polish-speaking person would perceive the name based on the machine's appearance. In the case of the *Skaziciel* machine, I did not see any similarities in appearance – and as we noted earlier when translating from Polish to English – when there was no direct translation between words, and English words seemed more difficult, than the translators decided to base the machine name on the external features of its appearance. However, in this case, both *Skaziciel* (*Corruptor*) and *Długonóg* (*Longleg*) are words directly translated from the English language. Previously, this method was automatically chosen by the respondents – as an intuitive form of translation, but this example shows that it is not always the best solution. The vast majority of respondents who decided to answer this question indicated that, in their opinion, *Długonóg* is more related to the appearance of the machine. This underscores the fact that associating a name with its appearance feature is a good strategy for

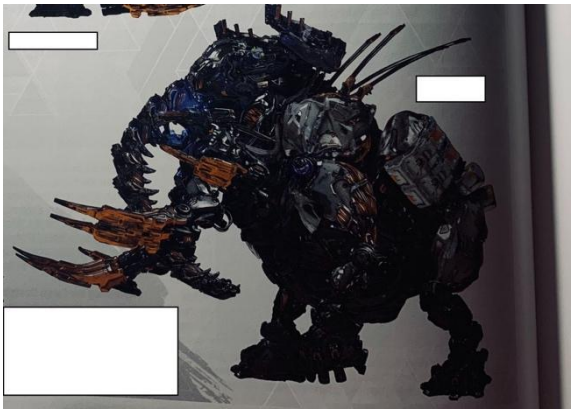
depicting creatures. Especially about imaginary worlds. This is a good point if we want to focus on the strategy of portraying reality through language. However, there have also been many comments that the name *Długonóg* well describes the characteristics of some machines, but not the one later seen in the attached image. According to the respondents, this machine has far too short legs to be called that way. Analyzing the answers of people for whom the name *Skaziciel* better reflects the machine's appearance, they emphasize its features and functionality. From this name, we can learn more about its operation – what to expect in a fight that, sublimely, this name will be more helpful for a player.

Second question: Which translation do you think is more 'logical' *Długonóg* (*Longleg*) or *Skaziciel* (*Corruptor*)?

The next question is a continuation of the first one but now we focus on the linguistic aspect. Again in this ranking, *Długonóg* was voted for more due to the simple and visible application of the literal translation method. The ease of the words used may contribute to this – in the word *Longleg*, rather, both of these words appear at an early stage of language learning. In addition, it is a combined word consisting of two words, so their translation into the target language is very visible. *Skaziciel* is considered less intuitive in this regard as well. Taking into account all the information about this pair of words – by far the majority of respondents consider *Longleg* to be more intuitive and better translated. However, with the great reservation that the very name of this machine is not appropriate in their opinion.

Third question: Are you able to justify the translators' decision to translate the English name *Tremortusk* into *Mumakieł* in Polish?

Photo 8 – ***Appearance of the machine, Mumakieł. photo from the book published by Future Press. Sony Interactive Entertainment Europe and Guerrilla Games license***

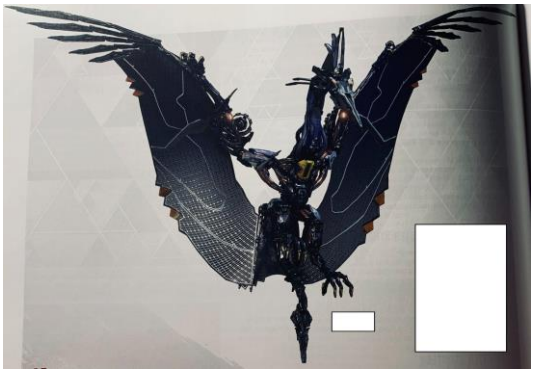


This question was asked out of pure curiosity because of struggles with explaining the process that took place during the creation of this word. Most of the respondents also

could not indicate where the Polish name of the machine came from. The relationship between *Tusk* and *Kieł* was well noticed by them, however, most of the respondents had a problem with the word '*Muma-*'. An interesting observation of some of them was the search for the origin of this prefix from the combination of the words *'Mummy'* + *'Mammoth'* because based on the appearance, this is how the animal looked to them. Or, guessing that maybe it's an old way of pronouncing some old-origin word. However, the decision taken by translators was liked by the respondents because they found it shocking. Many respondents suggested that the fact of translating this name as *Mumakieł* and not *Mamukieł* makes the sound of the name more pleasant to the ear and more mysterious.

Fourth question: Are you able to justify the translators' decision to translate the English name "*Sunwing*" into "*Solarptak*" in Polish?

Photo 8 – ***Appearance of the machine, Solarptak. photo from the book published by Future Press. Sony Interactive Entertainment Europe and Guerrilla Games license***



The last question was much easier to rearrange the occurring dependencies. Although in Polish the translators did not decide to translate a given word directly, they logically focused on assigning elements to a greater or lesser extent with the meaning of words and the appearance of the machine. So we see that the word *Sun*, *Słońce* in Polish, was translated into *solar-*, which is a direct reference to the Latin word – *solaris*, from *sol,* meaning *Sun*, then from Middle English – *solar*. This prefix is often used contemporarily to show a close affiliation and function depending on the sun. Then *wing*, *skrzydło* in Polish, was translated into *ptak* (*bird*). The translators decided, instead of using the part that belongs to the animal – which is the *wing*, to simply specify what kind of animal it is – *bird*. In this case, it was easier for the respondents to see on what grounds the translators' associations were based. The first part of the word *solar-* seemed more justified, as many respondents emphasized, because it is a prefix used in Polish and gives the machine an exotic character. As to the use of *bird* instead of *wing* – not everyone provided any justification, noting the incomprehensibility of the substitution of words. In general, the English name was more appreciated due to its more fluent pronunciation, whereas in the Polish name, the respondents found a certain 'difficulty'.

Summarizing the analyzed examples and the results of the survey, we see that it was important for most respondents to translate directly from one language to another when finding suitable translations. This is especially true in the case of compound words. It follows that for the majority to communicate with players around the world – it is best to base localization on a literal translation strategy. However, the question that localizers need to ask themselves is about the eternal conundrum – are we talking about communication or artistic aesthetics? "It depends on the game," the answer would be. However, the research shows that if HFW were to become an online game, it would be impossible to connect Polish- and English-speaking players in one game, as this would cause many difficulties or communication would be completely impossible.

Then, we see that respondents did better at translating from English to Polish than the other way around. This result depends on the machine names chosen, but it still underscores the fact that when the English name was easier – using basic English words – the translator was not tempted to reach for more complicated translations. It shows that there is certainly a lot of creativity in translation, and in particular we see a tendency to avoid direct translation when English machine words are more complicated.

The last observation is that most of the respondents were guided by words – they wanted to find the perfect translation, not localization. And that's fine, it wasn't their task. It confirms that localization is more than just translating words. The complete omission of word relationships causes some inconvenience for the audience because going beyond words prevents them from guessing the meaning. At this point, we can stop and simply try to discuss an important feature of the game: utility. But this is just such a small point. Coming back to localization gives the created world individuality and naturalness in the given target language (Czech, 2013). All this is done by going beyond words, looking at the context, use and representation of words. It is important to evaluate what we would like to achieve by choosing a localization strategy. For us as players, sometimes being understood is a more valuable feature than a creative character name in our language.

Answering questions about whether literal translation is a good strategy – it depends on the needs of the game, but it should not be denounced. If the game is single-player, a large dose of creativity will not change the way players communicate. It will only surprise players when they discover translations that add value to the gameplay. However, the question of applying this method to multiplayer games, where communication is of great importance, is puzzling. Maybe it wouldn't be good if every name was direct, but at least it could be associated with a character the same way in both languages. So that players speaking other languages could guess which character the translation stands for.

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Gameography

Horizon Forbidden West (2022) [Game]. Guerrilla Games.

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She lives in Gliwice, Poland and graduated from the University of Silesia's Faculty of Humanities in Sosnowiec with a Bachelor's degree, specializing in linguistics. Currently, she is pursuing her Master's degree at Sorbonne Université in Paris. She chose linguistics because languages have always been her passion and she wanted to enrich her knowledge of them. She believes that learning about how languages work helped her to open up more to the world and gave her the opportunity to see it from a different perspective. During her studies, she became very interested in the topic of game translation, as she spent plenty of time with them as a teenager. She would like to continue getting experience in this field, so she has decided to work on their analysis in terms of linguistic elements, combining her childhood passion with what she loves.