

Intertextuality and Cultural Specifics in Video Game Localization

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Abstract

Intertextuality is a common occurrence in video games that adds to a player's experience. As games are naturally influenced by their country and culture of origin, it would be difficult to find a completely acultural video game with no cultural references whatsoever (or one that references no kind of popular culture.) Through the present author's own observations and case studies based on her own experiences as a player, this article aims to describe different kinds of intertextuality and cultural references and the ways translators have approached specific cases using transcreation. The overall idea of transcreation and issues of intertextuality in Slovakia are also discussed.

Keywords: video games, localization, intertextuality, culture, transcreation

Introduction

Like fiction and audiovisual works, video games exist in a broader context and not in a vacuum. As Mangiron and O'Hagan (2013) point out, direct references, innuendos, quotes, jokes, and related interpretations of pre-existing works are common in video games. Although they may not be noticed by every player, they are an important part of the gaming experience. Video games are also directly influenced by the culture and environment of their origin, and these factors should be taken into account when localizing. Culture can also be closely related to the intertextuality used in the product (Bernal-Merino 2013). In this article, both are understood as two inseparable parts of the text. Intertextuality refers to the property or state of a text resulting from the connection of two or more texts.

Intertextuality and cultural specifics constitute just one of many problems translators face when localizing video games (Mangiron & O’Hagan 2013). Localization has many specific features such as variable units, spatial constraints, text fragmentation, and a lack of materials (Kabát 2019), but specific video games also add the issue of intertextuality. This may seem as something not very important when it comes to translation, but it is an important part of the final product for players and developers. In some games, it also functions as part of the game mechanics that affect the rest of the game. According to Mangiron (2006), a translator needs a deeper knowledge of popular and broader culture, in addition to traditional language and translation skills, creativity, and ingenuity.

This article presents a brief introduction to issues and types of intertextuality, cultural allusions, and solutions in the localization process. Most of the presented research comes from video games that the present author played in English and in Slovak as well as from her own research into the field. Notes regarding the examples were taken during gameplay and were verified in the guides to specific games when necessary. When selecting these video games, the texts of video games of different genres and origins were included in the research sample to illustrate the diversity and versatility of this issue. The solutions are approached from the perspective of the translator and from that of players and fans, who are the target group of the product. Cases where the translators have enriched the original text and added allusions will also be pointed out, and the problems that may arise in the Slovak video game market will be outlined.

1 Video games as part of multimedia franchises

One feature of video games is that they are portable between different media and platforms, resulting in several interconnected texts (Mangiron & O’Hagan 2013). This is how interconnected video game series are created. A large number of video games also arise from existing series present in other genres of entertainment. They then become part of a multimedia franchise, so their content is available as books, movies, board games, and audio recordings. The target audience of these video games are fans of the series (McCarthy, Curran, & Byron 2005), who are interested in new content from their favorite series and are well acquainted with it. The *Harry Potter* book series expanded into films and video games. Unlike books and films, video games offer players the opportunity to actively engage in and change the story to a certain extent. Compared to original video games, video game adaptations of other works must also consider this aspect, which is largely determined by the original work. A translator of video games as

adaptations of a book series must consider three things in localization: the follow-up to other media from the series, coherence with existing translations of these media, and the rules laid down by this fictional world when translating new phenomena. They cannot depart from the already established rules of the fictional world. They must adhere to established names and realities, and their translation must also follow previous translations. A Slovak translator of *Harry Potter*, for instance, cannot translate Gryffindor as anything other than *Chrabromil* because this is the established translation in books and in films; however, this is not always easy if there are several translations, or if translations are difficult to access, such as in the case of older works (e.g., Slovak translations of books from Terry Pratchett's *Discworld* series from 1983–2015). Another problem may be a situation where the linked texts from one series have not been translated into the target language, so there is nothing to follow up on. The translator should consider that their solutions can affect all future translations and may become the source for the rest of the series.

If the translator does not notice the allusions, or is unaware of them, perhaps insignificant yet funny moments that the developers put into the game can be lost. This is the case in the *Pokémon Diamond* (2006), *Pokémon Pearl* (2006), and *Pokémon Platinum* (2008) video games. In the Japanese original of *Pokémon Platinum*, there were several characters named after the characters from the *Pokémon* films; however, the English localization gave them new names that did not match their film equivalent. One such character is Hitomi, who in *Pokémon: Destiny Deoxys* (2004) was named Rebecca in the English version of the film. In the video games in English, she appeared as Jamie, even though the Japanese version of the game used Hitomi instead and mentioned her signature tactic of using a computer to analyze battles just like in the film. In the remade versions of the video games (*Pokémon Brilliant Diamond* and *Pokémon Shining Pearl* [2021]), she reappears as Jamie; the translators preferred to follow up on earlier games rather than allude to the movie. Fans noticed this discrepancy after the release of the original video games and called it a mistake on online forums. Similar “sins” in the eyes of fans can have a negative impact on the overall reception of the resulting product, and translators should avoid them.

2 Video games and allusions to other types of texts

As games can refer to other genres belonging to one series, they can also have innuendos that at first glance appear to be random and unrelated (Mangiron & O'Hagan 2013). Many video games also refer to media other than movies, series, or books. These

references are called “Easter eggs,” and they are various jokes or utterances that the player must carefully look for in the game world because they are not always obvious. As a term, “Easter eggs” refer to the tradition of looking for hidden eggs during Easter. The term was then used in the video game community, including in Slovakia. In other cases, however, these links are more straightforward and complement the colorfulness of the game or help a knowledgeable player understand the subtext of the storyline, i.e., ideas that are not explicitly expressed in the text of the video game. The presented discussion of the *NieR* (2010) and *Assassin’s Creed II* (2009) video games is mostly based on the present author’s observations during gameplay and from the related films and books.

Intertextual allusions can be found in some games from the *NieR* series (2010–present). *NieR* originally came out in Japan as a video game in two versions: *NieR Replicant* (2010) on the PlayStation 3 and *NieR Gestalt* (2010) on the Xbox 360. In addition to the title, the versions differ in certain details of the characters, but the story is the same. In the United States and Europe, only the *NieR Gestalt* version was released (under the name *NieR*). In 2021, a remake of *Replicant* was released under the name *NieR Replicant ver.1.22474487139*. The name *NieR Replicant* refers to the popular sci-fi movie *Blade Runner* (1982). *Blade Runner* originated as the film adaptation of the book *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), but the term “replicant” was first used in the film. A replicant is a type of a humanoid android which is indistinguishable from a living person. One of the main ideas of the film is the question of humanity and when the artificial humanoid becomes human. Indeed, where is the boundary between man and artificial intelligence? The film depicts a detective who is introduced to the viewer as a human, but during the film both the character himself and the viewer begin to doubt this. The film ends inconclusively, leaving it up to the viewer whether they think that the main character is a person or a replicant.

NieR was inspired by the idea of the replicant as well as the film more broadly. In the *NieR* video game, replicants are artificially created clones of people; the culmination of the game shows that the main character, who is first introduced as a human, is actually a replicant, as are pretty much all the other characters. The video game also deals with the idea of humanity and existence. A player who has seen *Blade Runner* will not miss either the allusion in the title or the similar theme, so the intertextual innuendo in the title becomes an important link to another series with which the game shares the ideas and themes present in the storyline. When localizing this video game, it would be useful to discover whether and how the term “replicant” in the film has been translated into

the target language and to adjust the text in the game so it matches the translation used in the film. In story-driven games, the connection of these two series can also help the player form an idea of certain details that the video game will place in the subtext instead of showing or explaining directly.

A less striking reference to *Blade Runner* is found in the book *NieR: Automata* (2017), which was created as a retelling of the *NieR* sequel; it came out in Japanese and in English. While the video game itself does not directly refer to the *Blade Runner* movie, the book *NieR: Automata: Long Story Short* in the Japanese online store Square Enix uses a subtitle that can be translated into English as *While Androids Dream of the Glory of Mankind, Do Machines Dream of Mankind?* This blatant allusion to the book *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), however, disappeared from all foreign stores in English, thus breaking the link of the new part of the *NieR* series with *Blade Runner*.

Another less important intertextual reference is a line of Shaun's character in *Assassin's Creed III* (2012), where he directly quotes the phrase "In another moment, down went Alice after it, never once considering how in the world she was to get out again" from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Carroll 1865). This is just a funny allusion, which is not strictly necessary to preserve in translation; however, the French localization preserved the allusion and used the already existing translation of the replica from the book: "Un instant après, Alice était à la poursuite du Lapin dans le terrier, sans songer comment elle en sortirait." This also fits into the context in the game, as the character tells this replica at the entrance to a temple from which he may no longer return.

Allusions to other types of texts from books, films, or other works are common, but many times they act only as hidden jokes to amuse players. Sometimes, however, they are an important part of the video game, and if the translator does not transfer it in the localization, the work would be substantially impoverished. Many such allusions are specific to the country or language area where the video game originally came out, like the folklore characters in the *Chocobo Racing* (1999) game. In the original Japanese version, and on the track "Hungry Land," heroes disguise themselves as the boy folklore character Momotaró and his companion Kidji (literally translatable as Pheasant). Children are the target audience of the game, so it was necessary to localize this allusion, which would only be clear to Japanese fans. In the United States, the video game was released a few months later with the name "Hungry Land" changed to "Gingerbread Land" and Momotaró and Kidji changed to Hansel and Gretel (Mangiron & O'Hagan 2013) from the well-known fairy tale. (It is known in Slovak as *Perníková chalúpka* with the main characters being Janko and Marienka.) Thanks to the gingerbread house, the

connection with food has been preserved; the fairy tale is so well-known that the allusion can be understood by American and European players. The connection with the fairytale theme has also been preserved, so the video game can keep the attention of the child player.

3 Intertextuality within a single video game series

A lot of video games are part of larger long-running series, so it is fairly common for individual games to refer to each other. It can be seen that consistency can be preserved in the source language, probably because each part of a particular video game series is often published by the same studio; developers have the background and the ability to communicate with other team members. Problems can arise with localization because the translator needs to be familiar with the other video games in the series, and their localization in the target language, in order to capture all these links and correctly transfer them to the resulting product. A good example is *The Elder Scrolls* series (1994–present), where references to previous games often appear in the form of characters, objects, dialogues, and task names. In *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011), Lucien Lechance returns as a ghost; originally, he was an unplayable character in *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* (2006). The game also mentions the Keening dagger, which was used in the main storyline of *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* (2002). During one task, a character mentions a king named Lysandus, who appeared in *The Elder Scrolls II: Daggerfall* (1996). These are just a few of the huge number of allusions *The Elder Scrolls* has been using since the second game of the series. None of them directly affect the storyline or gameplay, but it is important to keep the translation consistent during localization so that intertextuality remains preserved. A player who played the video games in their original version would notice discrepancies in localization, and those playing the games for the first time would miss the allusions that are intertwined in the timeline and storyline of all video games of the series.

4 Transcreation as part of video game localization

There is no universal consensus on the definition of transcreation, especially in the context of the localization of video games. Although someone may consider it to be a synonym for translation as such, it is not another kind of translation but rather a procedure that may or may not occur in translation. Bernal-Merino (2013) states that the concept of transcreation directly permits a complete replacement of text or innuendos which

are too culturally specific to the target market; with these fundamental changes, the final product becomes more approachable for the target audience. This process of a complete creative rewriting of the text in order to preserve its original intent is a frequent and necessary phenomenon in video game localization. It is fairly common for video games to create new ideas and sometimes new fictional languages. Occasionally, this newly emerged terminology refers to pre-existing cultural phenomena. It is then necessary to be creative and far-sighted enough to ensure that in the localized (or transcreated) product, the player understands what the new fictitious term means and is not confused.

Such a case of necessary transcreation can be recorded in the video game *Final Fantasy X-2* (2003), where translators changed the original Japanese name of the Kaminari Heigen Live concert (in English, “a live concert on thunder plains”; loosely in Slovak, *koncert na hromových planinách*) to Yunapalooza. While in Japan the word “live” is commonly used to refer to a musical performance or a concert, such a name is rare in the United States. Yunapalooza creates a whole new term that combines the famous Lollapalooza music festival and the name of the main character Yuna (Mangiron & O’Hagan 2013). The translators have creatively kept the original association with a musical performance while linking it with the familiar name of a character from the world of video games that fits into the plot.

5 Intertextuality and cultural specifics as part of video game mechanics

While in many video games, allusions and innuendos work as funny jokes that will not impactfully affect the storyline and progress of the game, there are also video games that require the player to be familiar with various literary works and cultural facts. The obvious genre of these video games are educational and puzzle video games. For this article, the *Persona* (1996–2020) video game series can serve as an example. All the games mentioned in this section were played in both Japanese and English, and the specific examples mentioned were recorded directly during gameplay. Some specific Japanese examples were also drawn from two guidebooks to these games: *Persona 3 Official Perfect Guide* (Author Collective 2006) and *Persona 4 Official Perfect Guide* (Author Collective 2008).

Persona is a Japanese series that originated as a by-product of the *Shin Megami Tensei* (1987–present) video game series. In these video games, the player gets acquainted with

the characters in a high school environment and can progress the storyline and fight with the help of creatures called “persona.” Since the third video game in the series, *Persona 3*, a new school exam system has also emerged. A player in the role of a pupil must answer questions from teachers and get points for his character’s parameters. The teachers decide how well a player can get to know specific characters, which helps them fight or change the end of the story line. In addition to general questions from geography, biology, or history, questions about specific works or authors appear. In *Persona 3* (2006), translators had to change several questions because in the Japanese version there were questions regarding the meaning of English expressions. The question “What kind of idiom means ‘good luck!’?” (the answer is “Break a leg!”) was localized as the question “How would you translate the word ‘pan’ into English?” (the answer is “bread”). Here it may seem that it was simply enough to exchange the languages used, but the translators also had to come up with a question for the same character which would be simple enough for an ordinary player who probably does not know Japanese. The translators decided not to replace some questions related to certain cultural elements or people with English or globally known equivalents, but rather keep them targeted specifically at Japanese culture. One such question was “How is Murasaki Shikibu recognized in the world?” (the answer is “the Global Heritage Pavilion”), but an average player probably does not even know that Murasaki Shikibu was a Japanese writer. The question in the game is preceded by a brief speech by the teacher who mentions her literary work and that she is depicted on a Japanese banknote, giving the player at least some idea that she was an important writer. Thanks to these short explanations, it is unnecessary to change these questions for the player; since the game takes place in Japan, the original version is more natural.

The translators of *Persona 4* (2008) loosened the localization up even more and left most of the questions in these tests unchanged. Where necessary, they came up with new questions that brought the aspect of intertextuality into the game. Some linguistic questions like “Which bird is used in English to call someone a ‘coward?’” (the answer is “chicken”), which are banal for English-speaking players, remained unchanged, but a question regarding polite Japanese language was altered. They inserted a reference to a particular work of a Japanese author with the question “How many parts does Murakami’s *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* have?” (the answer is “Three”), thus changing the focus of the question from language to literature while keeping a connection with Japan and simplifying the question for an ordinary player, given that Murakami is a world-famous writer.

The present author compared these examples of localization in *Persona 3* (2006) and *Persona 4* (2008) with the localization of the *Final Fantasy X-2* (2003). It can be seen that the localization of intertextual allusions, and localization overall, depends very much on the context. Naming the concert in *Final Fantasy X-2* did not work as an important part of the world or the story, and it was unnecessary to leave it in its original version, but it gave translators enough freedom to create a new term. In the *Persona* series, questions aimed at Japanese culture make sense in the context of a Japanese high school, completing the atmosphere and the reality where the video game takes place. The tests in the *Persona* series form an important part of the plot and game mechanics, so it was necessary to find a balance between a general knowledge of Japan and specific matters that were unsuitable for players without a deeper knowledge of Japan and that needed to be replaced.

6 Adding intertextuality in localization

During the localization of a game, there may be cases when developers do not include allusions or innuendos into the original text but where the translator may add them thanks to the context and thus enrich the text. One example is the *Super Mario Bros. 3* video game (1988). The fourth video game from the *Super Mario* series (1985–present) in the Japanese original only offered the player a simple thanks for rebuilding peace in the world after completing the game. During localization into English, the translators used the opportunity to add a funny innuendo with the line “Thank you! But our princess is in another castle! ... Just kidding. Ha ha! Bye bye.” The joke refers to previous *Super Mario* video games which often used the quote “The princess is in another castle” (Mangiron & O’Hagan 2013). This makes the end of the game in the English localization funnier and more personal for fans of the series and more creative than the generic replica about saving the world. It adds character to the video game, enriches it with intertextuality, and consolidates its status as a continuation of the series.

This phenomenon can be seen to a much greater extent in the *Final Fantasy XIV* video game (2013), which is specific because it belongs to the MMORPG genre and thus means it is an online game for many players and with its own community, jargon, customs, and etiquette (Jøn 2010). It regularly receives updates and new content, increasing the amount of text and storylines that follow each other. The translators are also given more opportunities for the intertextual enrichment of the video game. This is also specific because, although it is a Japanese video game, its English version is developed alongside the Japanese one (simultaneous shipment). Also, the localization team is

actively involved in the development of the video game. Translators have a unique opportunity to influence the world and storyline of the video game directly in development and creatively change their language versions to sound richer while not disturbing the player by violating the rules of the environment or creating inappropriate allusions that would drastically change the storyline or the personalities of the characters. *Final Fantasy XIV* is a video game from a series with a long tradition (1987–present), and it often refers to previous *Final Fantasy* editions through the storyline, characters, and places. Translators need to be well acquainted with the other video games in the series and their localizations to remain coherent. These links can also be found in the Japanese version. The English version is often much looser regarding references to popular culture, which the Japanese version uses to a much lesser extent. These are mainly the names of major and minor tasks, items, and the FATE system, which represent the timed battles that players find in the video game world. They do not drastically interfere with the main storyline, nor are they needed to advance it, and they do not cause an interference even when referring to modern popular culture in this fantasy world. They often refer to films, TV series, other video games, books, music, online jokes, and idioms. Examples from several quests include *It's Always Sunny in Vylbrand*, with the title referring to the TV series *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* (2005); *Grapevine of Wrath*, which refers to the novel *Grapes of Wrath* (1939); *An Offer We Can't Refuse*, which refers to a well-known quote from the film *The Godfather* (1972): “I’m gonna make him an offer he can’t refuse.” There is also a quest titled *How to Feed Your Dragon*, which refers to the TV series *How to Train Your Dragon* (2003).

In the Japanese text, none of these quests had these references to popular culture, or they only included wordplay without using intertextuality. In localization, all of them fit into the context and make the text more interesting for people who know and understand the allusions. They do not feel too forced either; in the video game’s tasks, such names are the exception rather than the rule. According to a list made by fans on the *Gamer Escape* page, there are 198 side quests that use pop culture allusions. Occasionally, such allusions can be found in the names of characters or in dialogue; in a battle with worms, one character shouts “Tonight we dine on worm!” This refers to a scene from the film *300* (2006) where the main character shouts “Tonight we dine in hell!” There is also a character named Hearth Maul, who parodies Darth Maul from the *Star Wars* series (1977). The text of the video game is then much more vivid and original than if it were only directly localized, and the English version gets an identity which is not directly dependent on the Japanese one.

7 Intertextuality in the Slovak context

The examples mentioned above confirm that intertextuality is a frequently used element in video games, be it done by developers or translators. But what does this mean in Slovakia? This is a country where only a small number of video games are localized and the science of video game localization is at its very beginning (Koscelníková 2019). What if translators do not have enough material to lean on? Allusions to historical and folklore characters and movies and series should be handled by a professional translator without impoverishing the text. This can be done by transcreating, using an existing translation, or inventing a new innuendo in another part of the video game. Clearly, video games often refer to other video games, or video games from their own series, and that is where a problem arises. Because of the low number of video games officially localized in Slovakia (Koscelníková 2019), the translator does not have enough auxiliary materials and must rely either on their own knowledge or undertake time-consuming research on the internet. In extreme cases, they could be inspired by fan translations that dominate the unofficial Slovak market (Koscelníková 2019), but these may have errors. Literal translations should be avoided because the resulting product would not seem professional.

If the translator invents a new intertextual allusion because the referenced video game has not been translated for the Slovak market, this will set a localization precedent. The video game *Super Lucky's Tale* (2017) refers to the *Super Mario* series with a quote “This clover is in another castle,” which is a reference to the well-known phrase “The princess is in another castle.” Not a single video game from the *Super Mario* series has been officially localized into Slovak, and therefore there is no equivalent to this replica. Here, the translator has a choice: either create their own localization (and potentially indirectly influence the future translation of another game series) or use an unofficial localization from fans. In the official Slovak localization of the game, the replica is localized as *Štvorlístok, ktorý hľadáš, je v inom hrade ...* (The clover you are looking for is in another castle.) Another problem could be allusions that the translator does not know about because the mentioned work never came out in Slovakia and they did not hear about it. Here fan forums and sites like *Fandom*, where players often collect and create lists of all allusions, be it to other works or cultural allusions, can help. This is often possible only with well-known video games with a large fan base, and not for smaller, lesser-known games from independent developers. In Slovakia, there are not enough academic resources, manuals, or textbooks to offer help; however, the first and only Slovak textbook to deal with localization does mention video games (Kabát 2022) and could help the

translator. By contrast, there are many scholars involved in video game localization research abroad, such as Bernal-Merino, O'Hagan, and Mangiron. If a Slovak translator is given the opportunity to localize a video game into Slovak, they will have a more difficult time doing so compared to colleagues abroad due to the lack of credible materials in the form of already localized video games or academic texts. They could miss or unconsciously incorrectly translate the cases mentioned in this article.

Conclusion

Intertextuality in video games can be diverse. Several types of intertextuality have been summarized alongside cultural specifics and their solutions; however, this is a small sample compared to the total number of examples in video games in general. This article has presented some allusions to other types of texts that might be culturally specific and allusions within one series; it has also discussed possible problems and solutions. Transcreation is an important procedure for video game localization. Its importance was highlighted in terms of how it affects progress in the game; however, transcreation itself still requires further research and discussion because of its unclear definition, which is where there is potential in the context of video game localization.

During localization, translation procedures and solutions depend on the context. There is no single universal solution for every problem, but it can be seen from the examples presented here that a clever team of translators can find a good solution for different situations and enrich the text with intertextuality when given the opportunity to do so. It would be beneficial to observe these and other solutions in other language combinations and compare them. Slovakia is lagging far behind in video game localization compared to many other countries. Slovak translators also have a disadvantage in the case of intertextuality; they can deal with it only if the tradition of video game localization in both theory and practice is gradually expanded domestically so that they can have the necessary background and knowledge for their work.

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