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## History of video game localization in Poland

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### ABSTRACT

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The primary focus of the present article is the development of practices aimed at creating new language versions of video games in Poland. The historical outline concentrates on various forms that video game localization practices took throughout the years and juxtaposes them with global localization trends. Firstly, the initial attempts in the 1980s are discussed. Some of those projects were just adaptations of video games developed outside Poland and were not officially called localizations.

Next, the first official distributing companies in Poland of the 1990s are described. The topic of gaming magazine articles which in the final decade of 20<sup>th</sup> century resembled user manuals is also discussed. Then the focus is on the first official localizations involving voice acting. After that, the process of illegal video game localization in Poland is discussed with the multifarious forms it took, the manners of combatting this phenomenon and a variety of examples. Later the turn of the centuries is depicted. This period witnessed numerous successful Polish localizations, which were prepared with considerable attachment to the quality of translation.

The first decade of 21<sup>st</sup> century was the time when most Polish localization companies were established. The change of localization approach at the beginning of the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is discussed further. The 2010s provided more examples for partial localizations. The possible reasons for such an approach are also provided. However, these were also the times of a constantly growing number of English localizations of games developed in Poland. Subsequently, the discrepancy between the localizations commissioned by larger and independent companies are compared. Finally, the developments of the early 2020s are shown.

**Keywords:** video game localization, video games in Poland, localization into Polish, video game distribution

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## Introduction

The history of video game localization is inseparably linked with the development of the medium. It was possible to broaden the scope of practices aimed at creating new language versions of video games because their popularity as a form of entertainment was gradually increasing in different regions. Moreover, technical development introduced new communication channels to this medium, and more and more elements required modification for various target markets.

The history of video games has been outlined and discussed in several scientific (Wolf 2008; Kirkpatrick 2015; Nicoll 2019) and popular science works (Herz 1997; Kent 2001; Donovan 2010; Mańkowski 2010; Kosman 2015), which focused on the localization process to a limited extent.

Video game localization history has also been studied within several monographs focused mostly on other aspects of video game localization (e.g., O'Hagan & Mangiron 2013; Bernal-Merino 2015; Kudła 2020), from the perspective of dubbing (Mejías-Climent 2021) or with reference to single markets (e.g. in Brazil by Souza 2012; in Slovakia by Koscelníková 2021). One article devoted to a more general outline of video game localization history (Bernal-Merino 2011) for obvious reasons does not include the developments of the 2010s. Moreover, Mandiberg (2021) looks for traces of localization and locality in the earliest video game projects of the 1950s and 1960s. However, to the best of the author's knowledge, no scientific work was devoted solely to the history and development of video game localization in Poland. Consequently, the present article is aimed at depicting the growth of such practices. The presentation is based on a literature review of books, articles, and videos devoted to video games in Poland (including many online sources). The sources were selected using several online catalogues and databases and utilizing key words in Polish and English referring to Polish video games, Polish video game history, and video game localization in Poland. Multiple wordings and lengths of the phrases were utilized (e.g., Polish gamers also refer to video game localization as "tłumaczenie gier" – "game translation", "polskie wersje gier" – "Polish versions of games" or "spolszczenie gier" "game Polonization"). In the case of works which were devoted mostly to other aspects of video games, the content list or abstract/synopsis was reviewed to check whether a particular work refers to video game localization in Poland. Additionally, some remarks are based on the author's experience and knowledge as a gamer and localization practitioner.

### 1. 1980s

The first commercial video games released in the 1970s and the early 1980s involved negligible amount of text (usually not more than a dozen words) and their gameplay was so uncomplicated that they provided satisfactory game experience

in the original language version regardless of the distribution region. Originally also games by Japanese developers were released in English due to the limited capabilities of programming systems (O'Hagan/Mangiron 2013: 49; Bernal-Merino 2015: 159–160). According to O'Hagan/Mangiron (2013: 23) and Bernal-Merino (2015: 160) the first official video game localization was creating an American English version of the Japanese game *Pac-Man* (Namco: 1980). In this particular case only the spelling of the title and the names of the four ghost antagonists were changed.

Over the 1980s technical development rendered video games more varied and complex. Consequently, the amount of text used in them noticeably increased. Localization of linguistic and non-linguistic elements of the game became necessary, as they played a growing role in the gamer immersion (the feeling of belonging to the game's world) and understanding the game requirements (Bernal-Merino 2015: 1).

When it comes to 8-bit computers available in Poland at that time, the capacity of compact cassettes considerably limited the amount of text that could be included in the game. Consequently, the character count of the localized version text needed to be as similar to the original one as possible, which meant that in some languages the ability to concisely convey the original message was crucial for the quality of the localization (Kohler 2004: 226; O'Hagan/Mangiron 2013: 55).

Chojnowski (2020) points out that Polish computer magazines such as *Bajtek* and *Komputer*, which started to be issued in the mid-1980s, popularized the use of Polish equivalents of English terms in computer terminology and raised the computer users' awareness of the necessity to translate some of the elements of programs into Polish. Special issues of such magazines often involved manuals for foreign games translated from the original box editions. In the 1980s copying programmes and video games at computer fairs was a common practice in Poland as the notion of piracy was introduced to the Polish law only by the Copyright Act of 4<sup>th</sup> July 1994. Often games were copied into the client's own cassette and the service point possessed no single original copy of the game, so the manual was missing. According to Chojnowski (2020), such practices could be referred to as the earliest localization-like efforts in Poland. Sometimes, however, other sellers offered also Polish translations of user manuals for such games as separate products at computer fairs.

The account of the history of video games in Poland by Kosman (2015: 36) suggests that the first project which could be perceived as video game localization was a text strategy game *Taipan* (Jaysoft, 1983) and its Polish version *Tajpan* released in 1984 by Jerzy Rajzer. However, regardless of the noticeable resemblance to the American game, Jerzy Rajzer claims that the game is his own invention. Kosman (2015: 37) acknowledges that there were several similar endeavors where games in Polish were strongly inspired with Western titles. Nonetheless, due to

uncomplicated structure most of such projects were created from scratch and resembled but not copied their prototypes such as *Space Invaders* (Taito 1978) or *Pac Man* (Namco 1980).

In 1986, a year after Atari computers became legally available in People's Republic of Poland (exclusively in the hard-currency shops called *Pewex*), Maciej Pinkwart, who had no previous hardware or software job experience, established a company called *Tatrasoft* (Chojnowski 2020). It was one of the so-called computer studios, companies offering translation versions of software. However, unlike other such companies, *Tatrasoft* offered programs and games at a considerably lower price due to the permission of the Atari owner to sell the copied pieces of software with the logo of the company. Most of the time, the games localized by *Tatrasoft* did not include much text. However, the company specialized also in translating game manuals. As the company was officially registered, such texts had to undergo censorship inspection. For that reason, often the manuals were creative references to the original ones rather than their translations, especially in the case of games concerning the Cold War, e.g., *Green Beret* (Konami 1986).

The first game which was officially localized into Polish was an adventure game *The Trap Door* (Piranha Software 1986) for the ZX Spectrum computer translated by Leszek Gołębiowski and published in 1987 by Krajowe Wydawnictwa Czasopism (KWCz) and Redakcja Programów Komputerowych (Kosman 2015: 46; Chojnowski 2020). Chojnowski (2020) adds that all the in-game text was translated into Polish and as some Polish letters and diacritics were missing on ZX Spectrum, they had to be drawn graphically by the localizer. As the cooperation between KWCz (which was established by several journalists of the *Komputer* magazine) and Macmillan Software Ltd. (the British publisher of the game) continued, this localization was quickly followed by *Oddział Cobra* (*Strike Force Cobra*, Piranha Software 1986; cf. Chojnowski 2020). This game involved much less text as it was an action game, but all of it as well as the cover of the game were fully localized into Polish.

Due to the political and economic considerations such partnerships between companies from Western countries and the ones from the Eastern Bloc were extremely rare. The situation changed in 1989 and the fall of communism in Poland, which allowed more global trade exchange.

## 2. 1990s

The 1990s witnessed an abrupt development of the free market and the video game industry in Poland. Chojnowski (2021) notices that the first legal distributors of Western software were established in Poland in the late 1980s – *Mirage Media* (1988), *LK Avalon* (1989) and *Optimus BIS* (1989). Krawczyk (2015: 21–22) and Chojnowski (2021) enumerate the first Polish distributors in the 1990s:

*MarkSoft* (1990), *IPS Computer Group* (1991), *Techland* (1991, now it is a solely development company), *Bauer* (1991), *CD Projekt* (1994, which later gave rise to the *CD Projekt RED* development company), *Play-publishing* (1994), *Licomp* (1994, in 1997 turned into *Licomp Empik Multimedia* or *LEM*). This was a noticeable change of approach after a period of legal video game piracy. Chojnowski (2021) underlines that initially only original language versions of the legal copies were sold, but starting from the emergence of *IPS*, localizing covers and manuals became a standard in Poland.

The first legal text localization in the 1990s was published by *IPS* in 1994. The Polish version of the strategy game *Syndykat* (*Syndicate*, Bullfrog Productions 1993) was available on an additional floppy disk due to the limited capacity of the storage drive only the cover; manual and in-game text were also localized (Chojnowski 2021). In fact, this had been the first game officially localized into Polish in seven years (since 1987).

Chojnowski (2021) points out that the 1990s were also the time when numerous gaming magazines were established and popularized Polish language versions. The first of them was *Top Secret* in 1990, which evolved from *Bajtek*, followed by *Secret Service*, *Gry Komputerowe*, *Computer Game Studio*, *Gambler*, or *CD Action* (established 1996 and the only one still existent). Apart from reviewing the games and focusing on the game walkthroughs, which dominated in magazines later, the articles there often explained the controls and game screen of particular titles, as most of the games were still released exclusively with English in-game text (Chojnowski 2021). In fact, in such a case they performed the function of user manuals. Although Chojnowski (2021) underlines that this happened only with games which had no official Polish language version distributed, some games with official Polish manuals were also described in such a manner, which reflects the predilection of many users for buying illegal copies.

The video game industry was revolutionized by the implementation of the CD-ROM as the data storage in 1993 for computers – adventure games *Myst* (Brøderbund 1993) and *The 7th Guest* (Trilobyte 1993) used them for the first time, and in 1994 for consoles – Sony *Play Station* was the first console to feature a CD drive. The exponential increase of capacity (650 MB vs. 256 kB in the case of a floppy disk) enabled the games to be much more complex, when it comes to both the plot and the variety of files used. The development of 3D computer graphics and soundcards in the second half of the decade enabled video games to use more realistic object models and implement real voice recordings. This step undoubtedly increased the importance of dialogues and the one of full and careful localization of all the elements of the game (O'Hagan/Mangiron 2013: 55; Bernal-Merino 2015: 166).

According to Chojnowski (2021), the first game localized into Polish which featured voice acting was the PC version of *Legendary Kyrandii: Ręka Losu* published

in 1995 by *IPS* (originally *The Legend of Kyrandia: Hand of Fate*, Westwood Studios: 1993). However, the voice acting was limited there only to the story narrator. In fact, the game was not a financial success in Poland so the following instalment (*The Legend of Kyrandia: Malcolm's Revenge*, Westwood Studios 1996) was not localized into Polish at all. The first Polish video game localization featuring a multiple actor voice acting was *Ace Ventura*, a cartoon-comedy adventure game, developed by a British studio *7th Level* and distributed in 1997 by *CD Projekt* (Jankowski 2018).

Another model of video game distribution which grew popular in the 1990s due to the increasing capabilities of internet connections were shareware games. In such titles the user had a free-of-charge access to the initial level or episode of the game, and in order to unlock the full game the user had to pay. Chojnowski (2021) states that most such games were at least partially localized into Polish.

Similarly, to the global video game market (cf. O'Hagan/Mangiron 2013: 56–57; Bernal-Merino 2015: 166), at the beginning of the decade there were no companies specialized in localization in Poland, while the distributors and developers most often cooperated with groups of freelance translators, who often after some time became members of the in-house teams (cf. Chojnowski 2021; Mrzigod 2021: 10–11). Both authors mention that the communication between the distributor/publisher and the localizer was carried out by traditional mail and the materials were sent as photocopies of the game cover and manual. In fact, the strategy of creating localization departments in developing or distributing companies remained a global standard until the early 2000s (O'Hagan/Mangiron 2013: 180), as it ensured smooth communication.

In the mid-1990s, localization of the in-game text gradually became a standard globally (Bernal-Merino 2015: 165), while in Poland the growing competition on the market also made such a scope of localization increasingly popular. However, Chojnowski (2021) remarks that unlike in other genres, e.g., adventure games, in many strategy games localized into Polish in the 1990s, such as *Kolonizacja* (*Colonization*, MicroProse 1994) and *Hannibal* (Starbyte 1992) localized by *IPS* and *Mirage* respectively, both released in Poland in 1995, there were no Polish diacritics in the text.

Interestingly enough, the English-Polish direction was not the only one offered by Polish localizers. Chojnowski (2021) notices that most probably the first Polish video game localized into English was an adventure game *Teenagent* (Metropolis Software 1994). The game involved many puns and cultural references which, in his opinion, were rendered rather satisfactorily.

Nonetheless, not every localization into Polish was perfect at that time. One of the pitfalls awaiting the localizers were the mechanisms automatically creating sentences or phrases from single- or several-word translation segments. Chojnowski (2021) mentions that such algorithms (called *concatenation*) were not

taken into account, e.g., *Heroes of Might and Magic II* (New World Computing 1996) localized by *Mirage*. Many sentences and structures did not look natural, as nouns or adjectives were not declined (they were all in the nominative case forms). Consequently, this game was later re-localized by *CD Projekt*.

Over the 1990s global video game companies implemented the E-FIGS localization model (Bernal-Merino 2015: 188). The acronym stands for the languages into which video games were localized since the late 1980s: English, French, Italian, German, Spanish. Such set of language versions was preferred, as it allowed the company to reach the majority of large European markets and some countries from other regions, e.g., Latin America.

This tendency shows that the Polish market was of minor interest for Western developers. Sometimes official localizations into Polish were considerably delayed or non-existent. Moreover, video games were unaffordable for an average computer user in Poland. Consequently, a considerable black market for such goods existed. Illegal traders rapidly noticed that users were looking for localized games as well. Araszkievicz (2015), Stodolny (2017) and Chojnowski (2021) point out that such localizations were referred to as *bazarowe spolszczenia* (*bazaar Polish versions*). Such localizations were sold at many local markets, the largest such places in Warsaw included the computer fair at Wolumen 53 street, now non-existent weekend fair in the primary school at Grzybowska street and *Jarmark Europa* – the market at the 10<sup>th</sup>-Anniversary Stadium (Stadion Dziesięciolecia – now replaced by The National Stadium). They always involved in-game text and voice acting even if the original Polish versions featured only localized cover and user manual. Sometimes they were available at such places even several weeks after the release of the English version. However, the quality of such Polish versions was rather doubtful. All the characters (including women) were almost always voiced by a single actor, a man who spoke with evident Russian features of pronunciation. The texts and dialogues of such localizations contained numerous vocabulary and stylistic issues, while their grammatical and syntactic structures were strongly influenced by Russian, Ukrainian or Belorussian. The titles which were localized this way included the first four instalments of the *Tomb Raider* series (Core Design 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999), *Age of Empires I* and *II* (Microsoft Studios 1997, 1999), the five opening instalments of the *Grand Theft Auto* saga (Rockstar 1997, 1999, 2001, 2002, 2004 excluding *GTA IV* and *GTA V*), *Commandos: Behind Enemy Lines* (Pyro Studios 1998), *Half-Life* (Valve 1998), *Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six* (Red Storm 1998), *Legacy of Kain: Soul Reaver* (Crystal Dynamics 1999), *Driver* (Ubisoft 1999), *Driver 2: Back on the Streets* (Ubisoft 2000), *Command & Conquer: Red Alert 2* (Electronic Arts 2000), *Max Payne* (Remedy Entertainment 2001), *Commandos 2: Men of Courage* (Pyro Studios 2001), *Spider-Man* (Activision Blizzard 2001), *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault* (Electronic Arts 2002), *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (Electronic Arts 2001), *Harry Potter and the*

*Chamber of Secrets* (Electronic Arts 2002), *Harry Potter: Quidditch World Cup* (Electronic Arts 2003), *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (Electronic Arts 2004) and many others. The phenomenon was fiercely combatted by legal game distributors and eradicated in the second half of the 2000s. It took a much larger scale e.g., in the Soviet Union and Russian (cf. Kudła 2019).

Acquiring illegal copies might have been a likely manner of purchasing games, as games for Amiga computers, which were very popular in Poland at that time, and gaming consoles were distributed without localization (even the cover and manual were left in English, cf. Chojnowski 2021). He adds that console games started to be localized into Polish only in the early 2000s.

Chojnowski (2021) also notices that in 1998 an Austrian-German distributing company *TopWare* entered the Polish market. It offered high quality Polish localizations at a much more affordable price (usually approximately three times cheaper than the average price in the market, 49 zloty vs around 150 zloty). This additionally placed a pressure on both legal and illegal localizers to revise the price of the games sold.

*CD Projekt* started localizing video games in 1996 and gradually became the largest distributing company in Poland at the turn of the centuries (Chojnowski 2021). This was caused not only by the quantity of games localized and frequently offering full localization, but also by the attachment to the quality of their Polish versions of video games. A breakthrough for both the company and Polish localization industry came in 1999. In May, only half a year after the release of the original version, the role-playing game *Baldur's Gate: Wrota Baldura* (BioWare 1998) was published. The title was released on five CDs and included 1500 standardized pages (1800 characters each) of text. Moreover, it offered a full voice acting with a star cast, including famous actors: Piotr Fronczewski, Jan Kobuszewski, Krzysztof Kowalewski, Gabriela Kownacka, Marian Opania, and Wiktor Zborowski. The game is recalled fondly by the Polish gamer community due to the liveliness and natural character of the dialogues and other language elements. Firstly, one of the six translators working on the Polish localization was a fantasy writer Jacek Piekara. Moreover, due to the modification to the source code of the game implemented by the programmers cooperating with *CD Projekt* the sentences created automatically by the game algorithms were both grammatically, syntactically, and logically correct (cf. Jankowski 2018).

### 3. 2000S

The first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century brought more technological developments which also influenced the localization process. Both computer and console game developers started utilizing the DVD-ROM as the storage drive (approx. seven times larger than the CD-ROM). Moreover, the average capacity of hard drives

used in computers also increased. Consequently, the number of materials to be localized within one title (text, graphic elements, voice recordings) increased considerably (O'Hagan/Mangiron 2013: 58). Further development in 3D computer graphics made the representation of human faces much more realistic and popularized movie-like video cut-scenes in all video game genres, while both globally and in Poland the full localization (including voice acting) of the most anticipated titles became a standard. Consequently, apart from choosing the appropriate length of voice recordings more and more often it was also necessary to synchronize them with the lip movements of the game character.

The importance of full localization was more and more noticeable, as only it provided the user with the most satisfying level of immersion. Distributors stated regularly cooperating with recording studios and voice actors. As a consequence, the costs of a state-of-the-art localization grew considerably. Owing to this tendency the distributors started to divide target markets into ones featuring full and partial (subtitled) localization according to the forecasted popularity of a particular game at the end of the decade (O'Hagan/Mangiron 2013: 17). In some cases, the partial localizations featured regional variants of global languages, e.g., Latin-American Spanish or Brazilian Portuguese (Bernal-Merino 2015: 188). The importance of localization quality also caused the appearance and growth of separate localization testing companies in the 2000s.

The distributors in the Polish market were sparing no effort to ensure the high quality of their localizations in the 2000s. This was evidenced by the financial success of text localizations of games earlier distributed in the English version, e.g. *Diablo* (Blizzard North 1996), *Fallout* (Interplay 1997), *Fallout 2* (Black Isle Studios 1998); as well as newly released *Diablo II* (Blizzard North 2000), *Icwind Dale* (Black Isle Studios 2000), *Gothic* (Piranha Bytes 2001), *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* (Bethesda 2002), *Neverwinter Nights* (BioWare 2002) *Gothic II* (Piranha Bytes 2002), *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (BioWare 2003), *Sacred* (Ascaron Software 2004), *Jade Empire* (BioWare 2005), *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* (Bethesda Game Studios: 2006), *Gothic 3* (Piranha Bytes: 2006), *Neverwinter Nights 2* (Obsidian Entertainment: 2006), or *Mass Effect* (BioWare: 2007). All these localizations featured carefully and naturally sounding texts, especially dialogues, as well as professional voice acting.

The localization of *Diablo II*, a role-playing game full of intertextual and cultural references, was a steppingstone for the first localization company in Poland, *Albion Localizations*. The firm was established in 1998 by Ryszard Chojnowski, who also had been working on localizations for *CD Projekt* since 1996 and now is known as the host of a gaming-related radio broadcast *Gryśław* and YouTube channel *Ryśław*. In the 2000s two other Polish video game localization companies, *Roboto* (2002) and *QLOC* (2009), were established. Currently the three firms are offering a full spectrum of localization practices: translating and modifying

the in-game contents, recording sound effects and voice acting and localization testing.

Due to growing budgets of Polish video game distributors, it was possible to hire renowned film and theatre actors, as well as more and more recognisable dubbing actors known from successful animations of that period. The effect of Polish localization was also noticed by the Western developers. According to the Canadian developer Electronic Arts, the fact that the game FIFA 2004 (EA Sports 2003) featured a fully localized Polish in-game text led to a fivefold increase in sales as compared with the previous instalment of the game in Poland (Steussy 2010). The following part, FIFA 2005 (EA Sports 2004) as all the following ones, involved a full match commentary by famous football commentators Dariusz Szpakowski and Włodzimierz Szaranowicz.

Another method of making the game more appealing to users representing particular markets was product endorsement (Bernal-Merino 2015: 168). Celebrities more and more often not only participated in the voice acting but also in advertising the game. A practice to place local football stars at the cover of the local version of FIFA series was initiated in Poland by the game FIFA 08 (EA Sports 2007).

Near the end of the decade a new distributing strategy became a standard for video games. *Sim-ship* or simultaneous shipment entailed releasing the game in all its language versions on the same day globally (O'Hagan/Mangiron 2013: 60). This has had implications for localizers, as they have to work on a product which is still being developed. As it is noted by Chandler (2005: 46–47) simultaneous shipment might have been implemented in order to limit illegal distribution practices (including pirate localization), which partially stemmed from the difference between the original and localized version release dates. After neglecting developing markets, the developers noticed that they do not generate income comparable to the popularity of their products there. In Poland, such endeavors were supported by Polish legal distributors who offered their localization at more affordable prices (sometimes even around 20 zloty, cf. Jankowski 2018). Improved protective measures often forced the pirate localizers to implement their voice acting next to the original one. The phenomenon became marginal in Poland at the beginning of the second half of the 2000s.

One unusual case when it comes to Polish official localizations was the game *Bad Day LA* (American McGee 2006). Initially it was available in Poland only in the September issue (2006) of the gaming magazine *CD-Action*. Interestingly, the publisher of the magazine, *Bauer*, also gained the distribution rights of the game and its localization was performed by the journalists of *CD-Action*. This was possible as the game was a parody of blockbuster disaster and action films and involved much black humor. The Polish version featured no voice acting. However, an additional humorous element there consisted in rendering all the

swearwords in the dialogues by using minced oaths and archaic curses, such as *motyla noga* or *niech to dunder świśnie*. Later the game with this localization was also available at shops.

Janusz Mrzigod (2021: 62–63), who has been localizing video games into Polish since 1993, points out that the quality of many game localizations in Poland started to drop noticeably around the year 2002. He links it with the tendency for many game distributors and publishers to shut localization departments and outsource the preparation of Polish language versions. Mrzigod (2021: 62) underlines that the translation agencies which were used in such cases lacked sufficient experience in localization and a database of translators proficient in this type of translation. For that reason, they often hired localization companies established by the former employees of localization departments to provide a satisfactory service level. Consequently, Polish versions were created by either translators inexperienced in video game localization or translators who had no direct contact with the developer/distributor. In such a case, the communication regarding any questions or doubts was much more difficult than in the previous in-house model, as it involved sometimes three or four intermediaries (Mrzigod 2021: 63). Consequently, more and more specialized localization companies started to emerge also around the world. The first such entity was *Xloc* from North Carolina (USA) in 2004. The competition between such companies led to decreasing the localization costs incurred by the developer (O'Hagan/Mangiron 2013: 59).

Due to the growing number of language versions in the second half of the decade (AAA<sup>1</sup> titles were released in more than a dozen ones) possible target markets stated to be considered at the early stages of game development in a practice referred to as internationalization (O'Hagan/Mangiron 2013: 57–59). Localization started to be truly regarded as an integral part of the game development process, e.g., the programmers began implementing solutions which enabled using the morphological, syntactic patterns or script coding characteristic of languages other than English in the game source code.

#### 4. 2010s, 2020s and Future Perspectives

Bernal-Merino (2015: 215) claims that the two oldest video game markets (the American and Japanese ones) have reached their growth peak and stopped growing in value. Owing to this, now the profit growth of the largest gaming companies is generated by markets where video games are localized. In the 2010s many large companies decided to release their games in more than twenty language versions, including approximately a dozen full localizations. Consequently, at

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1| Most anticipated games with multi-million budgets released by the largest companies and characterized by the high quality of almost every aspect of the video game.

present, localization projects for the AAA titles may involve hundreds of people with a specific division of tasks (O'Hagan/Mangiron 2013: 61). Apart from translators they involve sound specialists, programmers, animation technicians, graphic artists, and marketing specialists.

The Polish game *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt RED: 2015), which was internationally acclaimed and received hundreds of awards (including the *2015 Game of the Year Award*), involved 2000 pages of text and 40 000 dialogue lines. Depending on how much of the world the user would like to explore the walkthrough may take approx. 50 hours (the main plot), 100 hours (completing all the side quests), or 150 hours (playing the game with both expansions with their own storylines). This shows the constantly growing amount of text that localizers currently have to cope with. The localization of that game into English was also praised for successfully rendering numerous cultural references from the Polish version. In fact, the developers claimed that both language versions were created simultaneously.

At the turn of the decades massively multiplayer online games (MMOG) promoted international communication of millions of users. These games were at least partially localized and in order for the players to communicate they provide interesting solutions, e.g., *DOTA 2* (Valve: 2013) offers a chat wheel where the user can choose one of the most commonly used phrases or commands and it will be shown to all the team participants in their native languages.

After the financial success of the game *The Witcher* (CD Projekt RED: 2007) in the previous decade (globally more than a million copies were sold), more and more Polish video games were recognized outside Poland in the 2010s. This led to a more and more frequent localization of such titles into English and other languages. The studios which managed to gain worldwide acclaim were: 11 bit studios with the titles *This War of Mine* (2014), *BeatCop* (2017) and *Frostpunk* (2018); Jutsu Games – *911 Operator* (2017); Techland with the *Call of Juarez* (2006–), *Dead Island* (2011–) and *Dying Light* (2015–) series; The Astronauts who created *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter* (2014).

More and more Polish translation agencies (e.g., *Diuna* or *Translax*) also started offering localization services next to other translation modes in the 2010s.

Mrzigod (2021: 64) points out that localization agencies which have been established by translators experienced in video game localization at the end of the 2000s and the beginning of the 2010s were granted again most trust by distributors, which brought the localization quality back to the level known at the beginning of the 2000s. However, while considering the quality of some Polish versions of video games, he is pessimistic about the general state of localization in Poland after 2010 (Mrzigod 2021: 65). In his opinion, the AAA titles are localized decently, while Polish versions of many indie and almost all browser and mobile games are of poor quality (Mrzigod 2021: 66). According to him, this is caused by

maximising the profit that the game generates at the cost of localization quality and user experience. Mrzigod (2021: 67) states that not only large corporations but also numerous indie companies are often obsessed with cost reduction. Such developers often prefer to underpay the localizers or utilize unprocessed machine translation results, as in fact in most cases “poor localization is better than none” (Mrzigod 2021: 67). Pepe (2022: 338) points out that the small independent companies gained much popularity in the 2010s due to the emergence of online distribution platforms which provided distribution channels for more niche titles. The reason for such firms to abstain from localizing their products might also be the limited amount of money at their disposal. However, not all indie developers act in such a manner. Some of them would ask their users whether they would like to play the game in their native language (O’Hagan/Mangiron 2013: 308). If the answer is affirmative and the independent company does not have sufficient financing, it may choose a strategy called crowdsourcing. The word (as a blend of *crowd* and *outsourcing*) refers to the practice where a part of the process is commissioned to the dedicated fan community (O’Hagan/Mangiron 2013: 304). The joint effort of the large group of committed users (materials are published on a cloud server) may lead to localizing the full game within one year or even several months. This strategy became growingly popular at the turn of the decades and has been utilized by many indie companies (Bernal-Merino 2015: 213).

Even though full localization has become the standard, Bernal-Merino (2015: 171) points out that distributors more and more frequently take into account the financial forecasts for individual markets. This is a noticeable tendency especially among Japanese developers. The acclaimed adventure game *Life is Strange* (Square-Enix: 2015) was localized exclusively into English, French, Italian, Spanish and Brazilian Portuguese although only the first version involved voice acting. On the Polish market the game was distributed by *Cenega*. The cover of the box edition was untranslated (in English) and the distributor placed on it only a sticker with its contact details. The same happened in the case of the game *Resident Evil: Village* (Capcom: 2021) which featured no voice acting and no in-game text in Polish although the Polish fans of this series petitioned to the Japanese company to introduce at least Polish subtitles in the game (the hashtag #PolishFansStillAlive was used). Regardless of the protest Capcom claimed that the sales forecasts for the title were unsatisfactory and involved no localization.

The 2010s witnessed a noticeable tendency for many distributors to turn from full localizations (including voice acting) to text localizations in Poland. It happened also in a game series where some instalments featured full localization. In the *Mass Effect* series (BioWare: 2007, 2010, 2012, 2017), the first two titles involved full Polish voice acting, while the games *Mass Effect 3* and *Mass Effect Andromeda* involved only the Polish subtitles and in-game text. The publishers claimed that this step was taken due to the high English proficiency level

in Poland (cf. Czech 2013: 19). According to Wikliński (2011) the distributor surveyed the users on their attitudes towards a partially localized upcoming third instalment. As many as 45.7% of the surveyed were happy, 39.7% did not approve of the decision, while 14.6% were indifferent. Although more respondents approved the decision the comparable percentage of the dissatisfied users should not have been neglected.

Czech (2013: 19–20) claims that a group of players who are very vocal at online forums might have influenced the decision of distributors. According to him, many dedicated users express their preference to original language versions of video games and prefer unlocalized game to a one which is localized poorly (Czech 2013: 9). This is also visible in their jargon where numerous Anglicisms exist.

Another reason might be the noticeable dissatisfaction of a vast part of online users with the quality of the Polish voice acting in the 2010s. According to Dębowski et al. (2016) in a noticeable number of Polish full localizations the voice acting does not fully convey the character of the scene, as due to the lack of contextual knowledge the actors either exaggerate or excessively tune down their emotional expression (e.g., *Heavy Rain*, Quantic Dream: 2010; *Mass Effect 2*, BioWare: 2010; or *Killzone*, Guerrilla Games: 2013). Moreover, in some cases, well-known actors have no experience in voice acting and are not convincing impersonators of the main characters (e.g., Janusz Gajos in *Hopkins FBI*, MP Entertainment: 2000; Robert Gonera in *Alone in the Dark*, Eden Games: 2008; or Joanna Jabłczyńska in *Battlefield 4*, EA: 2013). Consequently, due to spoiling the immersion, the product endorsement had a reverse effect in some productions.

However, the most probable explanation for such a trend in recent years would be financial considerations. Many authors, e.g., O'Hagan/Mangiron (2013: 111) or Bernal-Merino (2015: 172) underline that hiring professional actors to record the game dialogues constitute the most expensive element of localization. Consequently, distributors might abstain from full Polish localization due to cost reduction.

The 2020s, apart from the release of the 9<sup>th</sup> generation of consoles and the pandemic which limited the entertainment choices to home activities, also witnessed the release of a considerably advertised and anticipated Polish game, *Cyberpunk 2077* (CD Projekt RED 2020). Regardless of the unfulfilled expectations and numerous bugs that the game contained at its release, it was rather successful with regard to localization. The title featured ten full localizations (Brazilian Portuguese, Chinese, English, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Polish, Russian and Spanish) and eight subtitle localizations (Arabic, Czech, Hungarian, Korean, Latin American Spanish, Thai, Traditional Chinese, and Turkish). Additionally, the full localizations involved an improved face scanning algorithm developed with a start-up JALI which generated the facial animation on the basis of a voice

recording utilized at a particular fragment (Edwards/Landreth/Popławski 2020). A similar solution was used in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, however, it was not as detailed and included less articulation elements.

Some games are localized only partially into Polish nowadays. However, with *Sony Interactive Entertainment* upholding its decision to localize its future PlayStation exclusive titles fully into Polish, and the Polish language being among the top ten most demeaned ones in video game localization (Mirkovic 2021), the following decades would most probably be a time of further developments in Polish language versions of video games.

## Conclusions

Similarly to video game development, the growth of video game localization processes, both globally and in Poland, took several decades to evolve from simply translating the game cover and manual to becoming an integral part of all the stages of creating a new game. Although due to the geopolitical constraints of the Iron Curtain some global developments in the Polish video game localization practices were delayed, in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century carefully crafted full Polish language versions of video games became a standard.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, the localization was usually offered either as a separate product (e.g., a printed manual or a guide in a computer magazine) or an illegal copy of the game due to high software prices and the lack of investments of Western game companies in Poland. Official Polish video game versions were also released in the final decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (the first appearing in 1986) but were either not widely available or they were considerably delayed as compared to the global release dates. The late 1990s and early 2000s witnessed a rapid growth of legal video game distributors in Poland. Numerous games featuring full Polish language versions at that time were characterized by a thoughtful approach to translating dialogues, humor and cultural references as well as quality subtitling and voice acting. The quality of some official Polish versions decreased in the late 2000s and the 2010s due to cost savings and restructuring the localization process and is still not a priority for most independent and browser game developers. However, many enterprises distributing and creating games in Poland are concerned with providing their users with pleasurable localizations. The Polish video game developers currently face the same challenges as the most influential companies of the industry, e.g., they need to carefully choose the scope of localization of their productions, which more and more often reach global audiences. This was shown by the recent game by Techland – *Dying Light 2 Stay Human* (Techland 2022) – which received generally favorable reviews, but whose rating at the *Metacritic* website fell dramatically as a result of Italian gamers showing their strong dissatisfaction with the game lacking Italian voice acting (Mazanko 2022).

The present account of video game localization history in Poland is most probably not absolutely comprehensive as despite the careful selection of sources, some facts might have been omitted during the analysis. However, it constitutes a basic guide to Polish video game localization practices for industry professionals and a basis for further research for translation-studies scholars. Due to spatial limitations of an article form, the text does not focus on fan-made video game localizations into Polish, which may constitute an avenue for further research. Additionally, more focus in the future research could be placed on the relationships between various entities responsible for creating video game localizations both into and from Polish.

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### The list of video games mentioned in the article

[*Title of the game* (Developer’s name/Publisher’s name): Release date.]

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*911 Operator* (Jutsu Games/PlayWay): 2017.

*Ace Ventura* (7th Level/Bomico Entertainment Software): 1997.

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*Bad Day LA* (American McGee/Enlight Software): 2006).

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*Battlefield 4*, (Electronic Arts/Electronic Arts): 2013.

*Beat Cop* (Pixel Crow/11 bit studios): 2017.

*Call of Juarez* (Techland/Ubisoft): 2006.

*Colonization* (MicroProse/MPS Labs): 1994.

*Command & Conquer: Red Alert 2* (Electronic Arts/Electronic Arts): 2000.

*Commandos: Behind Enemy Lines* (Pyro Studios/Eidos Interactive): 1998.

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*Cyberpunk 2077* (CD Projekt RED/CD Projekt): 2020.  
*Dead Island* (Techland/Deep Silver): 2011.  
*Diablo* (Blizzard North/Blizzard Entertainment): 1996.  
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*DOTA 2* (Valve/Valve): 2013.  
*Driver* (Ubisoft/Reflections Interactive): 1999).  
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*Dying Light* (Techland/Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment): 2015.  
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*Fallout* (Interplay/Interplay): 1997.  
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*Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (Electronic Arts/Electronic Arts): 2001.  
*Harry Potter: Quidditch World Cup* (Electronic Arts/Electronic Arts): 2003.  
*Heavy Rain* (Quantic Dream/Sony Computer Entertainment): 2010.  
*Heroes of Might and Magic II* (New World Computing/The 3DO Company): 1996.  
*Hopkins FBI* (MP Entertainment/Cryo Interactive): 2000.  
*Icwind Dale* (Black Isle Studios/Interplay): 2000.  
*Jade Empire* (BioWare/Microsoft Corporation): 2005.  
*Killzone* (Guerrilla Games/Sony Computer Entertainment): 2013.  
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*Tomb Raider III* (Core Design/Eidos Interactive): 1998.  
*Tomb Raider: The Last Revelation* (Core Design/Eidos Interactive): 1999.  
*The Trap Door* (Piranha Software/Spinnaker Software): 1986.  
*The Vanishing of Ethan Carter* (The Astronauts/The Astronauts): 2014.  
*The Witcher* (CD Projekt RED/Atari): 2007.  
*The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt RED/CD Projekt): 2015.

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