(Un)known Polish places. Strategies of foreignization and domestication in Polish video games

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ABSTRACT
The aim of this paper is to analyze how Polish video games' creators use different strategies of localization to promote their products worldwide and appeal to the global audiences. The two strategies proposed here are based on the concepts of foreignization and domestication, the two terms derived from the translation studies (Venuti 1995). In the context of videogame's translation and localization – understood as adaptation of cultural, linguistic or technical elements of the game to the needs of particular, national markets (Flanagan 2017, Gacek 2019, Mangiron 2018) – foreignization refers to the strategy of translation that intends to keep the look and the atmosphere of the source material's culture, by preserving some of the elements (like myth, songs or easter eggs) without adapting them to the target locale. Meanwhile, domestication focuses on bringing the text to local audiences as close as possible, using the language or cultural references typical for a given market (Fernández Costales 2012).

What is proposed in this presentation, is the application of terms foreignization and domestication to the strategies used by game designers on the production level to make their products internationally accepted or distinct from other titles on the market. Domestication then, would refer here to creators' decision of "globalizing" the game, making the content more welcoming for international audiences, by standardization of the gameplay, visual choices, or story elements. Meanwhile, foreignization (or "self-exoticism," Mangiron 2012; or "reverse localization" Schäler 2005) would be applied to creators' decision of preserving the local, non-typical for international audience elements, including usage of concrete places, languages, or historical references, typical for less-known culture, to propose something new and distinct in the global

market. In case of Polish game development, the paradigmatic example is the *Witcher* series, where part two (*Assassins of Kings*, CD Project Red 2011), released after the surprising international success of *The Witcher* (CD Project Red 2007), was trying to dissolve the regional flavor in more generic Anglo-Saxon aesthetics heavily influenced by British *Warhammer Fantasy* franchise. Meanwhile, the third game in the series (*Wild Hunt*, CD Project Red 2015) deliberately derives from internationally less-known Slavic culture.

Based on the three video games, created by Polish studios explicitly for the global audience – *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter* (The Astronauts 2014), *Observer* (Bloober Team 2017), *The Medium* (Bloober Team 2021) – the aim of this study is to present examples of given strategies, and analyze how they may influence international appeal and how they are perceived by the local, Polish audience. *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter* is a story-driven mystery game heavily based on players' exploration of the fictional Red Creek Valley located in Wisconsin in the United States. It domesticated characters' names and tropes presented in the story as they are mainly inspired by 20th century Anglo-Saxon popular literature (e.g., works of Reymond Chandler and H.P. Lovecraft), but at the same time the whole setting was created by scanning photographs of Giant Mountains located in Poland. A similar, but slightly different case of psychological horror, *The Medium*, tells the story of a Polish family and presents well-known for Polish audience locations from Kraków, such as Mariacki Church or Cracovia Hotel. However, the game was originally written in English and uses hybrid name spelling (only first names are translated to English, while surnames remain in their original wording, e.g., Marianne Rekowicz or Henry Wilk). As stated by the creators, the usage of English language, as well as borrowing themes from global horror imaginary, allowed them to present a more universal experience for the players (Krobová et. al. 2022). *Observer* is another example of psychological horror game set in Kraków, introducing polish detective Daniel Lazarski as a main character. Due to its futuristic setting, it is more difficult to identify main inspirations for the game landscapes, however post-soviet blocks of flats and pre-war tenement houses, recognizable for Polish players, can be found during the exploration. Additionally, *Observer's* narrative is heavily influenced by another internationally recognizable genre: cyberpunk, and its canonical texts, such as *Blade Runner* or *Ghost in the Shell*.

Through analysis of production, content and reception of given games, the main aim of this paper is to study the tension between the local culture and globalized digital game market and describe possible strategies applied by developers. When in 2020 approximately 97% of revenues of Polish studios were generated by foreign gamers (Krampus-Sapielak et. al. 2021), domestication and adjustment for international audience seem crucial, despite criticism of local audience. At the same time foreignization and preservation of locality helps to distinguish the title on the market by presenting something new, or by evoking "strangeness and foreignness" important for the horror titles (Krobová et. al. 2022).

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