

Beyond Translation: A Thorough Analysis of the Arabic Localisation of *The Witcher 3*

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a thorough evaluation of the Arabic localisation of The Witcher 3, a well-known video game in the Arab world. It analyses three game assets including the User Interface (UI), cinematics and voice-overs. To this end, the researcher collected two multimodal corpora of screenshots and video recordings taken from the actual video game. The data was analysed in two stages. The first stage involved categorizing the content of the two corpora into two main groups: UI and cinematics. The second stage included linguistic, technical, and cultural analysis of the collected screenshots and video recordings. It was revealed that the game was successfully localised from a linguist perspective but failed culturally and technically. Several taboo visuals and themes were kept in the Arabic video game, which violates the norms of the target culture. On a technical level, the UI and the menus in the Arabic version of the game were not designed to accommodate Arabic right-to-left (RTL) UI orientation, which resulted in several layout issues hindering the gaming experience. This study contributes to current research on Arabic video game localisation and provides useful information to video game developers and Arabic localisers.

Keywords: Arabic Videogame localisation; The Witcher 3; Videogame localisation quality; Video game translation

INTRODUCTION

Video games are interactive multimedia products that “[combine] words, images and sound and whose main objective is to entertain” (Mangiron, 2007, p 307). The widespread popularity of video games has created a demand for localised versions, driven both by cultural interest and the significant potential for profit in the global market. The enabling and driving force for this growth, besides technological advancement, is localisation. Localisation is the adaptation of software products, including video games, to target languages and cultures. This practice emerged in the late 1970s when American software companies turned their attention to international markets such as France, Germany, and Japan (Jiménez-Crespo, 2013, p. 8). Localising video games is a complex process that involves a linguistic, technical, and cultural adaptation of the different parts of the interactive multimedia product (Mejías-Climent, 2021, p. 84; Chaume, 2018, p. 94) to meet the expectations and norms of target markets and locales. This involves transferring video game textual elements, such as dialogue and menus, into target languages (linguistic localisation) and manipulating graphics and visuals, such as character clothing or symbols, to be culturally appropriate or resonate with the target audience (cultural adaptation), all while providing target players with a similar gameplay experience “equivalent to that felt by the players of the original version” (Mangiron & O’Hagan, 2006, p. 15).

When a video game is localised, several elements are considered in the translation and localisation processes. These elements are known as localisable assets, which include the game’s packing, manuals, advertisement material, User Interface (UI), audio and cinematics. Video game developers vary in their approaches to localising their games into target languages. Some video

game companies adopt the “boxes and docs” localisation approach, which involves translating the game’s packing, manuals and advertisement material only (Bernal-Merino, 2015, 109). Other developers partially localise their games in target markets by focusing on certain assets, such as the UI or cutscenes. Some developers opt for full localisation, translating all aspects of the game for the target market. The choice of localisation level is usually governed by several factors, such as localisation budget, target market and technical limitations. Some developers allocate a limited budget to the localisation of their games, which limits the number of localised assets. Partial localisation is also used as a strategy by video game developers to test the reception of a specific video game in a new market.

Technical limitations inherent to a game's original design can constrain localisation efforts. In this regard, Al-Batineh and Alawneh (2022) point out that developers design some video games that support Western, left-to-right (LTR) languages. When such games are localised into right-to-left (RTL) languages, such as Arabic, technical problems emerge preventing the developers from applying the localisation to all video game assets in the target language. A case in point is the localisation of Ubisoft’s *Assassin's Creed* (2014, 2015, 2017). In these games, subtitles are only provided for voice-overs and cutscenes, without localising the UI or in-game texts (Al-Batineh & Alawneh, 2022, p. 7). Localising video games into Arabic has always been a challenge to video game developers for technical, linguistic and cultural reasons (Alotaibi & Tuhaitah, 2021, p. 36). On a linguistic level, Arabic video game UI terminology tend to be longer than their English counterparts. Culturally, Arab culture differs from Western culture as the latter is predominantly conservative, where modesty is highly valued and Islamic teachings often govern cultural norms (Al-Batineh (2021), Al-Ajarmeh and Al-Adwan (2022)). For instance, taboos in society, such as sex outside of marriage and alcohol consumption, are rooted in Islamic principles, where they are considered sins and are forbidden. Such notions are found in video games and not localising them properly would result in banning the game in the Arab world and would give gamers a disruptive gaming experience. This would negatively impact game sales and gamer’s enjoyment as several gamers would not feel comfortable playing video games that violate their cultural norms. Cultural variations might necessitate alterations in content to resonate with Arabic audiences and adhere to regional norms and values. For example, certain character outfits or storylines could be modified to be more in line with Arabic cultural values. These alterations need to be done thoughtfully, however, to avoid the risk of homogenizing or oversimplifying a rich and diverse culture. Respecting cultural nuances is essential for a localised game's successful reception. Technically, the Arabic script needs special treatment when applying Arabic translation to a video game. This includes text orientation, RTL menu orientation and bidirectionality. This technical aspect is vital as it involves adapting the game's interface to facilitate intuitive navigation for Arabic-speaking players. Al-Batineh (2021) highlights instances where failure to adequately address these technical issues resulted in poor localisation, rendering the game nearly unplayable¹ for Arabic-speaking audiences and leading to financial losses for the developers.

Video game localisation is an emerging field within Arabic translation studies. A limited number of scholarly attempts have discussed video game localisation in the Arabic context. The notion of localisation quality has rarely been discussed or has been approached from a purely linguistic perspective. To address this gap, the present paper adopts a descriptive approach to provide a comprehensive evaluation of the Arabic localisation of *The Witcher 3* (2015), one of the most well-known role-playing games (RPGs) of all time. *The Witcher 3* (2015) contains about 100

¹ In the context of game localisation, the term "unplayable" refers to a scenario where the players find it extremely difficult or impossible to engage with the game in a meaningful way due to localisation issues.

hours of single-game play (Holmes, 2017, p. 148) and huge in-game texts featuring “around 450,000 voice-acted words—roughly equivalent to four books—that had to be managed for consistency and continuity” (Solarski, 2017, p. 54).

The present paper analyses the in-game localisation assets including the UI and cutscenes. It examines how different assets have been localised into Arabic by analysing its linguistic, visual, cultural, and technical aspects. The data includes two multimodal corpora of screenshots and video recordings taken from the actual Arabic and English versions of the game. The Witcher 3 includes themes such as alcoholism, violence, sex, and profanity. In the game's Western origin, these themes create realistic narratives and reflect societal issues. However, in the Arab world, these themes are generally considered taboo due to cultural and religious values that emphasise modesty and prohibit behaviours such as alcohol consumption and extramarital relations. Such themes must be properly localised to be accessed by Arab gamers and to pass the approval of the audio-visual authorities in the Arab world. This includes not only translation but also the adaptation of content to avoid cultural taboos while maintaining the narrative essence.

Localisation into Arabic involves not only linguistic and cultural adaptation but also substantial technical alterations to ensure that text displays correctly and integrates seamlessly within the game's interface and design. This paper's technical analysis will focus on how the Arabic text was handled and processed in different parts of the game and how developers navigated the technical hurdles of handling Arabic script, directionality, and fonts in the localised version. Failure to adequately address these technical challenges can result in text that is difficult to read or navigate, negatively affecting the player's experience.

The significance of this paper lies in its meticulous analysis of the Arabic localisation of The Witcher 3, examining this complex process from three distinct perspectives: linguistic, cultural, and technical. It sheds light on the challenges and nuances involved in translating and adapting a game for the Arabic-speaking audience. It provides insights for game developers and localisers who are targeting the Arabic market, as it offers a deeper understanding of the intricacies of Arabic language and culture. In an increasingly globalised gaming industry, it is imperative to recognise and cater to the diverse preferences and sensitivities of different cultural groups. By ensuring high standards of localisation that are attentive to linguistic accuracy, cultural relevance, and technical precision, developers can create more immersive and respectful gaming experiences for Arabic-speaking audiences. Ultimately, this research contributes to the broader discourse on game localisation and serves as a guiding resource for enhancing the quality of video games in the Arabic market.

LOCALISING RPG GAMES INTO ARABIC

RPGs are video games focusing on plot, character interaction, customization, and progression (Christou, McKearney & Warden, 2011, p. 40). They are among the most popular video game genres in the Arab world and have been accepted by Arab gamers when localised (Tamatem 2019). RPGs include thousands of translated words and several localised cutscenes and visual elements. The cutscenes and cinematic assets of the video game often include dialogue that cannot be voiced over or subtitled. The size and complexity of RPGs present significant challenges in localisation. Some RPGs include hundreds of thousands of words. For instance, *Dragon Age: Origins* (2009) contained more than one million words and about 56,000 lines of recorded voice-over audio (Christou, McKearney & Warden, 2011, p. 40). Localisers often work from spreadsheets without

access to the game itself, making RPG localisation error-prone and necessitating thorough evaluation to improve practices. Arabic video game localisation evaluation has garnered little attention in scholarly circles.

Little focus has been placed on the localisation of RPGs. One of the first attempts to analyse Arabic localised RPG games was conducted by Abu Kishek (2016). She analysed two RPG games that were localised into Arabic: *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* (2015) and *Tomb Raider* (2013). Abu Kishek (2016) focused on the linguistic transfer of the textual assets of the said games into Arabic. The data analysis involved the Arabic version of the menus, in-game texts and subtitles. Abu Kishek (2016) identified linguistic issues in these games and successes in avoiding culturally inappropriate expressions. Furthermore, Al-Batineh (2021) provided another perspective by exploring cultural, linguistic, and technical issues in Arabic video game localisation through an analysis of twenty-eight games. Al-Batineh, highlighted several cases of video games that were banned in the Arab world due to their inclusion of taboo themes such as alcoholism, violence, sex, and profanity. His study marks an advancement over Abu Kishek's work by encompassing a broader range of games and delving into technical issues. Nonetheless it falls short in providing a comprehensive analysis of a detailed case study evaluating Arabic localisation attempts. Another interesting dimension is the community-driven 'translation hacking' initiatives highlighted by Al-Batineh and Alawneh (2021). While this development indicates a demand for better localisation, the study does not explore the quality or impact of these amateur translations. One important aspect touched upon by Al-Batineh and Alawneh (2021) is the efforts made by Arab gamers themselves to overcome language barriers through community-driven initiatives. This bottom-up approach indicates a gap in the market and a demand for better localisation practices. However, the study does not delve into the quality of these community-driven translations or discuss the potential for these amateur efforts to contribute to or enhance professional localisation practices.

Recently, Al-Batineh and Alawneh (2022) conducted a comprehensive study of the majority of videogames that have been officially localised, i.e. localisation is done or authorised by the original game developers or publishers, into Arabic (between 2005—2020) in an attempt to chart developers' interest in the Arabic video games market and to reveal the practices they follow when localising their video games into Arabic. The data includes several RPGs, which have been partially and fully localised into Arabic. Their study also involves surveying Arab gamers to reveal their preferences concerning the practices of localisation in the Arabic video game market. The analysis of the collected video games shows an increase in the number of localised video games in the last decade. It also shows different localisation practices adopted by video game developers to localise their games into Arabic. Notably, the study includes a survey component assessing Arab gamers' preferences regarding localisation practices. While their investigation is comprehensive in terms of the data collected, it could be argued that it falls short in deeply examining the implications of the localisation choices and their impact on gamers' reception and cultural identity. Furthermore, the study does not explore in detail the potential cultural conflicts arising from the localisation process.

Previous studies on RPG localisation quality have largely been limited in scope, often with a narrow focus on particular aspects such as linguistic transfer, while occasionally addressing cultural or technical issues. However, these studies have generally not provided a holistic view that considers the interplay between different aspects of localisation. More research is needed to provide a deeper analysis of Arabic localised RPGs. This deeper analysis involves examining not just the surface-level content but also the underlying cultural, linguistic, and technical aspects of the game, taking into account how these elements collectively contribute to the overall gaming

experience. This is crucial for informing and guiding the localisation strategies of video game developers who either have already released games with Arabic localisation or are planning to do so in the future. This paper fills this gap by evaluating the Arabic localisation of *The Witcher 3* (2015). It begins by providing an overview of the quality of the localised UI, then discusses in-game text including instructions and tips and addresses the subtitling of the voice-overs and cutscenes. Moreover, it incorporates a critical lens towards localisation choices, and their implications, thereby offering insights that can serve as valuable input for best practices in the field. The following section discusses the data collection and analysis.

METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a qualitative and descriptive approach and considers the target video game as a point of departure for data collection and analysis. The English video game is used as a reference to examine the localisation of the textual and non-textual elements into Arabic. The researcher collected the data from the Arabic and English versions of *The Witcher 3*, which was downloaded from the United Arab Emirates Xbox Store on January 4, 2021. To collect the data, the researcher played the whole video game in Arabic and navigated all UI items in the game, such as menus, screen instructions and inventory screens and watched and recorded all cutscenes and cinematics. About 705 screenshots and 240 screen recordings were captured from both the Arabic and English versions of the video game. Screenshots were selected based on criteria focusing on text or visual elements relevant to localisation analysis. As for the screen recordings, they were chosen if they included dialogue or scenes that significantly contributed to the storyline or gameplay experience. Redundant or repeated elements were excluded from the analysis.

Data analysis was conducted in two stages, categorizing screenshots and screen recordings into UI and cinematics. The UI elements include the main menu, which is the first thing gamers will see when starting a game. It includes options that help players change the settings of the game such as interface language, volume level, difficulty level and others. UI elements also include inventory screens displaying character collectibles like weapons, food, and maps (See Figure 1). The second group includes cinematic assets, which focus on all lip- and non-lip-synch voice-overs included in the cutscenes and their Arabic subtitles (See Figure 2 and 3).



FIGURE 1. Inventory Window Screenshot, Taken by the Researcher



FIGURE 2. Screenshot of a Subtitle of Lip-Synced Voice-Over, Taken by the Researcher



FIGURE 3. Screenshot of a Subtitle of Non-Lip-Synced Voice-Over, Taken by the Researcher

The second stage of the analysis involves linguistic, technical and cultural analysis of the collected screenshots to reveal the extent to which the Arabic version is ‘successful’. By ‘successful,’ this paper refers to the extent to which the localisation is linguistically, culturally, and technically proficient in conveying the intended information and narrative to the player while maintaining the gameplay experience. Linguistically successful localisation ensures that translations are accurate, idiomatic, and reflect the appropriate style and tone of the source content. Culturally successful localisation entails that the content is adapted to be contextually appropriate, taking into account cultural norms, sensitivities, and preferences of the target audience. Technically successful localisation addresses aspects like text directionality, and user interface adaptation to ensure that the game is fully functional and accessible in the target language.

The analysis is built on the notion of “user-centered” and “functional” localisation of video games. In user-centered localisation, the needs and preferences of the end-users, in this case, the players, are taken into account. This approach prioritises ensuring that the localised content is

accessible, engaging, and tailored to the user’s cultural and linguistic expectations. It involves adapting game elements not just for language, but also for usability, making sure that players in the target market can interact with the game efficiently and effectively. This paper adopts O’Hagan and Mangiron’s (2013) taxonomy of a story-oriented console game text focusing on the function of each video game asset in the target language. Table 1 features the analysed game assets and their function as well as their translation priorities and strategies as proposed by O’Hagan and Mangiron (2013).

TABLE 1. Video game assets and their function and translation

Asset	Function and Translation Priorities
User Interface (UI)	UI has an informative function. It mostly includes short texts or text fragments that are used to navigate video game settings and gameplay options. When translated, space constraints and the function of UI items should be a priority (O’Hagan & Mangiron, 2013, p. 155). In rendering these assets into other languages, the translation should be pragmatic and functional to address space constraints. Translators should provide solutions to overcome space constraints and also “to reflect an edgy feel often imbued in in-game text in terms of expressions and naming of certain items” (O’Hagan & Mangiron 2013, p. 155.).
Audio and Cinematic Assets	They are usually revoiced or subtitled in the target language. They have an informative and expressive function “to provide a clue or a backstory in a dramatized manner” (O’Hagan & Mangiron 2013, p. 156). In rendering this asset into other languages, the translator should prioritize lip-synchronization and space constraints. The translation should be fluent and flow naturally in TL with the correct register and style (O’Hagan & Mangiron, 2013, p. 156).

Mangiron (2021, p. 3) argues that video game localisation is “a type of functional and user-centered translation, where priority is given to the players and their gameplay experience... the *skopos* or main brief of game localisation is to provide a version that allows target players to experience the game as if it had been originally developed for them”. Linguistically, the collected data is analysed from the *skopos* theory perspective focusing on the function of the source text and its function in the TT. Technically, the analysis touches upon localisation technical issues, such as the orientation UI, in-game texts and subtitling conventions. Lastly, the collected data will be analysed from a cultural perspective. This involves considering the appropriateness of graphics, cutscenes, and language included in the voice-over and cutscenes. Specifically, O’Hagan and Mangiron’s (2013) framework addresses the cultural dimension through the expressive function of audio and cinematic assets, ensuring that these assets convey culturally appropriate messages and emotions in the target language. As for the framework that defines the cultural perspective, this study incorporates the notion of culturalization as described by O’Hagan and Mangiron (2013), which involves adapting the content to be in harmony with the cultural norms and values of the target audience. This can encompass modifying characters, dialogues, symbols, and visuals so that they resonate with the target culture while not alienating or offending the players. The following section presents data analysis and findings. Due to space constraints, a limited number of examples are presented from the collected data.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section is divided into three main parts. The first and second parts provide a linguistic and technical analysis of *The Witcher 3* UI, including the main menu and inventory screens, while the third part analyses the localisation of cutscenes into Arabic from linguistic, cultural and technical perspectives.

ARABIC MAIN MENU

LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS

Upon game launch, players are presented with an English main menu with four options: *Continue*, *New Game*, *Load Game* and *Options*. Within the *Options* tab, gamers select their language preference, which triggers a language change for the entire menu, in this case, Arabic. The Arabic translation of the menu is straightforward; the translation reflects the function of each item in the source menu (See Table 2).

TABLE 2. Main Menu in English and Arabic

Menu Item	Arabic Translation
Continue	استمرار
New Game	لعبة جديدة
Load Game	تحميل اللعبة
Options	خيارات

Each menu item includes a sub-menu with options to control a specific element in the game, such as difficulty level, controller, video and audio settings. The function of the menu items was preserved in the Arabic version with a focus on each term's pragmatic meaning. For instance, the translation of the Gameplay sub-menu, which includes four options reflecting the difficulty level of the gameplay, goes beyond the lexical items included in the English version (see Table 3). The translator provided an Arabic translation that reflects the pragmatic meaning of each level and also includes terms that are widely used in Arabic video games.

TABLE 3. Gameplay Menu in English and Arabic

English Gameplay Menu	Arabic Menu	Back translation
JUST THE STORY!	المستوى السهل!	Easy Level
STORY AND SWORD!	المستوى المتوسط!	Intermediate Level
BLOOD AND BROKEN BONES	المستوى الصعب!	Difficult Level
DEATH MARCH	المستوى بالغ الصعوبة!	Extremely Difficult Level

Literal translation could cause confusion, affecting the game experience since these settings control gameplay. Analyzing Arabic and English sub-menus reveals Arabic translations are longer; more words were required due to the length of Arabic target terms. Clear examples include the translation of *gameplay* إعدادات اللعب, *Controller* وحدة التحكم, *credits* القائمون على اللعبة, *On-screen Tutorials* رسائل توجيهية على الشاشة, *Automatic Camera Centering* وضع الكاميرا في المركز تلقائياً into Arabic. The Arabic versions of these English menu items are longer, and they cannot be reduced. In this regard, Chandler and Deming (2012, p. 24) point out that “[t]raditionally, the translated text is about 20% to 30% larger than source language text, so if the UI is designed strictly for a specific

language, the translated text in the UI will either be cut off or overlap in areas”. This is also reported by Al-Batineh (2021), who investigates issues in Arabic video game localisation.

The Arabic translation of the acronyms included in the main menu also took more space, as acronyms² are usually translated into their full form in Arabic. For instance, *NPC Chatter* was translated to Arabic using nine words, which requires three times the space of the source item (see Table 4 for more examples). The full form in Arabic is indeed problematic space-wise; however, leaving the acronym in the source language would make it difficult for some Arab gamers to understand the meaning of the acronym.

TABLE 4. Arabic Translation of Some Acronyms Taken from The Witcher 3

Source	Length in Words (Characters)	Target	Length in Words (Characters)
HUD	1 (3)	وحدة العرض الرأسي	3 (17)
Rescale HUD	2 (11)	إعادة مقياس العرض المساعد	4 (25)
NPC Chatter	2 (8)	عرض المحادثات بين الشخصيات التي لا يتحكم فيها اللاعب	9 (52)
GUI	1 (3)	واجهة المستخدم الرسومية	3 (23)

To clarify the meaning of Arabic menu items, the translator added extra word(s) to the translated term. For example, the Arabic translation of *Language, Video, Master Volume and Music Volume* is expressed in fewer words as *صوت الموسيقى، الصوت الرئيسي، الفيديو، اللغة* respectively. However, the translation of these terms was more explicit (see Table 5).

TABLE 5. Settings Menu in The Witcher 3

Source	Length in words	Target	Length in words
Language	1	ضبط اللغة	2
Video	1	إعدادات الفيديو	2
Master Volume	2	مستوى الصوت الرئيسي	3
Music Volume	2	مستوى صوت الموسيقى	3

If technically possible, adding more Arabic terms for explicitation purposes is a good strategy to achieve a functional translation of the menu items. Explicitation is used as a strategy to make the Arabic translation more natural and easier to understand. Explicitation refers to spelling out embedded meaning in the source language and making the target sentence “self-sufficient” and “[expressing] what is understood” (Vinay & Darbelnet, 1995, p. 170). However, this strategy can negatively impact the layout of the menu, especially if the game does not support expansion to accommodate the Arabic translation. Linguistically, the menu appears as if the game were originally designed in Arabic, which is one of the goals of video game localisation.

TECHNICAL ANALYSIS

Technically, the Witcher 3's interface was designed for potential language expansions. The menu fits Arabic translations without visible overlap or cutoff. The layout and the orientation of the menu are, however, Western; in other words, the menu is localised on the left-hand side of the screen. This phenomenon is termed as “technical foreignisation” by Al-Mazrooa (2018). Technical

² They are strictly used in media where some acronyms were borrowed into Arabic such as *OPEC, NATO and AFP* and are now part of the Modern Standard Arabic (Husni & Newman, p.2013).

foreignisation refers to the incorporation of technical elements from the source culture into the localised product, without adapting them to the conventions of the target culture. In this case, it reflects the retention of the Western layout orientation in the Arabic localised version. This term is crucial in understanding the technical aspects of localisation, as it points out the possible disconnect between the localised content and the native user's expectations and conventions. In the context of the study, it aids in evaluating the effectiveness of the localisation efforts, particularly in making the game interface and menus culturally compatible and user-friendly for Arabic-speaking players. While these Arabic localization issues don't affect the menu's linguistic function, they do impact the game's look and feel.

INVENTORY SCREEN

LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS

Navigating all inventory screen items and menus revealed that the Arabic localisation of the UI is clearly expressed and creative. The localisers tried to provide explicit translation by rewriting the UI and menu items in Arabic. Table 6 provide examples to show how the explicitation strategy translates several in-game items, including inventory items, map keys and gear descriptions. The translator provided a functional translation that is similar to the game world and at the same time flows naturally as if the game were originally developed in Arabic.

TABLE 6. Sample from the inventory screen items in The Witcher 3

English Menu Item	Arabic Translation	Back Translation
Minimap	عرض الخريطة المصغرة	Display minimized map
Equipped	تم التزود بالعنصر	Item has been equipped
Brewing	صنع المركبات السحرية	Creating magical brews

In the above examples, two menu items were translated by spelling out their functions. *Minimap* is a UI item that allows the player to display a *minimap* of the *game world*. This term was translated into Arabic as *عرض الخريطة المصغرة* (lit. 'Display minimised map'). The same strategy was used to render Equipped and Brewing. The Arabic translation took up more space in the game. As previously mentioned, the game menu items were designed to accommodate more words. Linguistically, the rendition of the English in-game menu was, to a great extent, successful in reflecting the function source menu items.

INVENTORY SCREEN: TECHNICAL ANALYSIS

Arabic is an RTL language, but game companies often overlook RTL text and menu orientation. Applying Arabic localisation to a game that has been designed to handle LTR languages would cause problems when merging Arabic text with the game's UI items such as images, icons and buttons. The Arabic version retained the original English layout of the inventory screen. This led to several issues in the Arabic localisation that impacted the arrangement and readability of information on the screen. Figure 4 shows an example of a sword in the Crafting tab, providing important information for gameplay.



FIGURE 4: Inventory in English. A screenshot taken by the researcher



FIGURE 5: Inventory in Arabic. A screenshot taken by the researcher

Using the English UI shell for the Arabic localised version has resulted in a flipped interface where information is presented incorrectly. In Figure 4, for instance, the English description of GRANDMASTER FELINE SILVER SWORD reads as:

[plus, or minus sign] [Number%] description [red down, or green up arrow] [Number%]

The same arrangement is used in the Arab version (Figure 5) and since Arabic is read from RTL, the information is from an opposite perspective. Consider the example in Table 7.

TABLE 7. String with Mirrored Variables in Arabic

String	[plus, or minus sign]	[Number%]	description	[red down, or green up arrow]	[Number%]
English Example		+0 %	Attack power versus Elementa	∇	- 10%
Arabic Localisation		+0 %	الهجوم ضد الوحوش العنصرية	∇	- 10%
Arabic back Localisation		∇ - 10%	Attack power versus Elementa		+0 %

The English string in Table 7 means that when it comes to fighting “Elementa,” the sword that the player uses is 10% less powerful than the one in the inventory. It adds 0% power. The Arabic version presents this information the other way around: it says the sword that the player is using adds -10% power and is 0% more powerful than the sword that the player is equipped with. In such cases, the player is faced with a line of text and numbers, and he/she has to rearrange information to make sense of the text and numbers. This is found in several places on the inventory screen. However, such localisation problems impact playability and immersion in the game. Arab gamers would spend more time making sense of the descriptions of the menu items. In addition, the wrong Arabic layout could shake the player's trust in the translation.

THE LOCALISATION OF CUTSCENES INTO ARABIC

Most video games now use in-game cinematics or cutscenes to bolster the storyline, character development, and player immersion (Bernal-Merino 2015, 280). Cutscenes are usually subtitled and/or dubbed when localised into other languages. Localisation can also involve modifying the original video for cultural adaptation (O'Hagan & Mangiron 2013, p. 169). *The Witcher 3* relies heavily on cutscenes and dialogue between characters. Most quests in the game are based on conversation between Geralt (The Witcher) and other characters in the game. Based on the conversation, the player has to make a decision and complete the quest. The process of translating and adapting such in-game localisation assets is crucial to the game. This section assesses how the cutscenes and conversations were technically, linguistically, and culturally adapted in the Arabic version.

CUTSCENES: LINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE

In most cases, the translation of the conversation flows naturally as if the texts were originally written in Arabic, except for the names of characters and places, which were mostly borrowed. The translators incorporated Arabic literary features and idiomatic expressions, enriching the source's dramatic and narrative aspects. In this regard, Mangiron (2012, p. 3) notes that “the use of correct and idiomatic language is crucial in facilitating players’ engagement with a game.” Similarly, Sharifi (2016) stresses the importance of producing an idiomatic, domesticated and transparent translation in the target video game. The Arabic translation of the examples in Table 8 shows the translator’s creativity in writing the target subtitles.

TABLE 8. Sample of English Subtitles and their Arabic Translation

English	Arabic
Sub1: King of Beggars truly did reward Geralt handsomely <u>for the services rendered</u> to his subordinate.	قام ملك المتسولين بمنح (جبرالت) جائزة قيمة نظير الخدمات التي أسداها للأشخاص التابعين له.
Sub 2: Geralt is <u>hardly an ace gambler</u> . He has had a few <u>good runs</u> in dice poker tournaments, true, but these were always local affairs against opponents <u>whose skill level left much to be desired</u> .	لم يكن (جبرالت) مقامراً بالمعنى الحرفي للكلمة. لقد حظي بعدة انتصارات في بطولات لعب البوكر، هذا صحيح، ولكن لم تكن هذه الانتصارات سوى فرصاً محلية ضد خصوم متوسطي المستوى.
Sub 3: Mercenaries are usually the ones getting paid for killing things. This time, however, <u>the shoe was on the other foot</u> ...	عادةً ما يتخذ المرتزقة أجراً على القتل. ولكن انقلب الحال في هذه المرة...
Sub 4: A tournament in the world's greatest metropolis— <u>now that was a horse of an entirely different color</u> .	ولكن لو تحدثنا عن بطولة في أعظم مدن العالم، فهذه قصة مختلفة كلية.

The Arabic translations of the three examples maintain the meaning of the source language and provide a fluent and idiomatic Arabic version. For instance, *have honor* and *for the services rendered* are translated as *بأشخاص مشرفين* and *نضير الخدمات التي اسداها* (Sub 1) create an idiomatic Arabic text that flows naturally. Similarly, the underlined parts in Sub 2 were rendered into Arabic with excellent Arabic counterparts. Translators departed from the literal meaning of the English text and created an idiomatic Arabic translation that provides a functional meaning to the English text. The translators also provided excellent renditions of English idiomatic expressions. For

example, *a horse of an entirely different color* (Sub 3) and *the shoe was on the other foot* (Sub 4) were translated into Arabic idiomatic expressions.

Generally, the Arabic subtitles were translated. Arabic idiomatic language was used in the cutscenes; they facilitate understanding of the ideas and the story of the video game and create subtitles that flow naturally as though the conversations were originally written in Arabic. Thus, the translator succeeded in achieving the purpose of localisation by creating a fluent rendition with the correct register and style.

CUTSCENES: CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

There are several themes in *The Witcher 3* that contravene cultural and religious norms of the Arab world. These include sex scenes, naked women, alcohol, brothels and prostitution. In this regard, Al-Batineh (2021, p. 61) notes that “Arab culture is very conservative regarding sexuality, alcohol, and profanity... Several games have been banned in Arab countries for featuring content that subverts the cultural norms and traditions of Arab culture” (61). *The Witcher 3* was banned in many Arab nations, including Saudi Arabia, a significant market for Arabic localized video games.

The English version includes cutscenes with nudity. For instance, The game opens with a cutscene of Geralt in a bathtub with a naked woman. The game also features prostitution and brothels. Players can visit brothels and have sex with different prostitutes. These cutscenes and themes were kept in the Arabic localised game. This content contradicts and violates Arab culture and traditions. To reduce the effects of these themes, women in the Arabic localised version were dressed in underwear. The data analysis also reveals that the cutscenes include graphics that do not comply with the cultural norm of several countries in the Arab world. For instance, the game includes drawings of naked women, either in brothels or as tattoos on the bodies of some characters. These drawings were left unchanged in the Arabic version.

Another taboo in the game is alcohol. The Arabic version of the game included a controversial quest where the player must drink alcohol to complete a quest that includes defeating one of the game’s characters, “The Maestro.” If the player refuses to drink alcohol, “the Maestro” refuses to fight, consequently, the player does not complete the quest and the status of this quest remains pending in the “quests list.” Several gamers would be uncomfortable drinking alcohol, as it is a taboo in the Arab world and forbidden by Islam, the religion of most gamers in the Arab world. Retaining such quests in the Arabic version would create a disruptive gaming experience for Arab gamers as the “interactive nature of video games means that players are protagonists, primordial agents within the game world and as such, they are more sensitive to nuances than they would be when reading a book or watching a film (Bernal-Merino, 2019). Al-Batineh (2023) examines the translation of alcoholic beverages in the video game "*The Witcher 3*. The findings indicate that the Arabic version of the game diminishes the negative connotations associated with the drinks by providing translations that obscure the specific type of beverage and instead offer a more general translation.

The visual and thematic taboos in *The Witcher 3* were not properly localised. Such themes should be adapted to meet the cultural norms of the target market. This should not be perceived as “censorship but market adaptation” (Bernal-Merino, 2020, p. 311). A successful example of adapting visuals and themes to the Arab culture is provided by Al-Ajarmeh and Al-Adwan's (2022, p. 78) analysis of *Arafiesta*, a localised version of *Fiesta Online*, where several taboo themes, visuals and side quests were adjusted to adhere to Arab cultural norms.

When it comes to culturally sensitive conversations and profanity in the game, the situation should be handled differently. In translating cutscenes, caution must be taken regarding the translation of taboos into Arabic. Table 9 presents some examples taken from different cutscenes.

TABLE 9. Sample of English Subtitles with taboos and their Arabic Translation

English source	Arabic translation	Back translation of the underlined part
Used to be an arrow'd come flying towards your <u>arse</u> every two steps, now it's dead quiet.	كنا قد سئمنا من هجوم السهام على رؤوسنا كلما خطونا خطوة، لكن الهدوء قد ساد الآن.heads...
<u>Ye whale dick!</u>	<u>اللعة عليك أيها الأحمق!</u>	Damn, you fool.
<u>Son of a whore!</u>	<u>يا لهذا اللعين!</u>	Damned one!
<u>Ploughing syphilitic son of a poxy whore.</u> I lost the first map I prepared for Professor Atimstein in a game of Gwent.	اللعة، لقد أضعت الخريطة الأولى التي أعدتها للأستاذ (أتيمشتاين) في لعبة (جوينت).	Damn!

Most taboo words were translated into Arab gamers regard as acceptable respecting the target culture and producing a functional translation that reflects the function of the profane expression. For instance, the translation of *arse* into *heads* is smart; it not only provides a functional translation of the English word but also expresses the idea in an idiomatic way. Similarly, *Ye whale dick!*, *Son of a whore!* and *Ploughing syphilitic son of a poxy whore* were translated into their functional meaning. Linguistically, the Arabic translation of taboos in *The Witcher 3* is largely acceptable and functional. This strategy has been an established practice and norm in Arabic audiovisual translation, in general, as reported by Sabtan (2022).

CUTSCENES: TECHNICAL PERSPECTIVE

The technical issues in subtitles include font type, colour, and size, and length of subtitles, among other things that affected the readability of subtitles and, consequently, the playability of the game. Subtitles provide written translations at the bottom of the screen of the voice-overs or dialogues in cutscenes. Three main issues are found in the Arabic subtitles of *The Witcher 3*: small font, long subtitles and lack of subtitling conventions. It may be difficult to read long subtitles in Arabic letters are connected and each letter has several shapes based on its position in the word. Also, Arabic includes diacritic markers, which determine the meaning of the word. Including long Arabic subtitles would reading of the subtitles difficult, consequently impacting the gaming experience.

Segmentation issues are also spotted in long subtitles where subtitles appear before they are a character speaks. In some quests, several pieces of information are included in one long subtitle, which ruins the element of suspense in the cutscenes. For instance, when a character is speaking and his dialogue includes significant pauses, the Arabic subtitle displays the entire dialogue without considering the importance of dramatic pauses in the cutscene.



FIGURE 6. Screenshot of a long subtitle with small Arabic font taken by the researcher

Other technical aspects of Arabic subtitles in *The Witcher 3* are related to font size and subtitling conventions. Regarding font size, the subtitles are displayed in small fonts, which hinders readability, especially on small screens (See example in Figure 6). In some video games, players can change the font size of subtitles; this is useful for gamers in general and those that may have problems with their sight, in particular. An analysis of the Arabic subtitles revealed inconsistencies in the use of subtitling conventions. This includes the inconsistent use of brackets for proper names, ellipses, or double dashes to denote hesitation and pauses.

Conventions regarding subtitles to texts on images were also inconsistent. Shop names and wall advertisements, for instance, were subtitled as if they were part of regular subtitles for dialogue; no punctuation marks are used to denote that the gamer is reading the translation of the text on the screen. This is problematic, especially for deaf gamers since it might be confused with dialogue subtitles. It is worth mentioning that there are no Arabic subtitling conventions regarding localising audio-visual material generally and games specifically; however, consistent use of conventions is important in AVT.

CONCLUSION

This paper aimed at analysing the localisation and translation of the main localisable assets in *The Witcher 3*. The analysis covered linguistic, technical, and cultural aspects. It was revealed that the linguistic assets of the game, such as UI and menus, were translated into fluent Arabic, fulfilling the function of the source asset. The translator(s) utilised explicitation to provide a clear translation. Linguistically, this method improves readability and enhances comprehension. However, technically, such practice might not be applicable in certain scenarios where some menu items have a restricted number of characters. In such cases, translators should be creative to overcome space constraints and, at the same time, produce a functional translation that reflects the source menu item.

The analysis of the audio and cinematic assets revealed that the translation of the dialogues and voice-over into Arabic is fluent and reflects the dramatic function of the source. The subtitles were also adapted to the Arab culture by tuning down several taboo words and references. However, several cinematic assets include themes that violate Arab culture and religion. These assets were not localised into Arabic, which may make some gamers uncomfortable playing some quests in the game. Localising cinematic assets is not only about providing a fluent translation of the voice-overs and dialogues, but also about “modifying the visuals, the storyline, the gameplay mechanics (rules), or even the music of the game so that the localised version meets the target players’ expectations” (Mangiron 2021, p. 3). From a technical perspective, the Arabic subtitles are long, and the font is small. These two technical issues, as discussed above, impact the gaming experience and impact the dramatic function of cutscenes on some occasions.

Linguistically, *The Witcher 3* was successfully localised into Arabic but failed culturally and technically. On a cultural level, several taboo visuals, themes, and sensitive content were retained in the Arabic video game, violating the norms of the target culture. Technically, the UI and the menus in the Arabic version of the game were not designed to accommodate Arabic RTL UI orientation. The technical issues found in the game might be attributed to the lack of a proper internationalization strategy to ensure that the technical and cultural adaptation and localisation of the game into other languages and cultures are effectively implemented. It is also worth noting that some video game developers are aware of the issues confronting the localisation of video games into Arabic. However, they adopt what is called “fit-for-purpose localisation,” where the focus of the localisation process is placed on the transfer of the linguistic content into the target language and “if the video game is functional and playable in the target language, other layouts and cosmetic issues can be ignored, especially if fixing them requires extensive time, money and effort” (Al-Batineh, 2021, p. 55).

This study underscores the need for a comprehensive approach to localising video games into Arabic, encompassing linguistic accuracy, cultural sensitivity, and technical considerations. The findings imply that to cater effectively to the Arabic-speaking market, developers and translators should adopt a holistic strategy that respects cultural norms and values while ensuring technical adaptations, such as user interface design, align with audience expectations. Furthermore, it is recommended that game developers engage in collaboration with native Arabic speakers and cultural consultants during the localisation process to ensure cultural sensitivity and authenticity. User testing with the target audience is crucial to identify and address potential issues before release. Future research could explore players' perceptions and experiences of playing localised games, deepening our understanding of the impact on user satisfaction. This could help in formulating more effective strategies for game localisation, especially in culturally diverse markets such as the Arabic-speaking world.

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