

The Forgotten Translator: An Analysis of the Final Fantasy VII Translation

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## Tiivistelmä

*Final Fantasy VII* on japanilaisen videopeliyritys Squaren Japanissa vuonna 1997 julkaissut videopeli. Kyseinen peli, kuten monet muut 1990-luvun lopulla julkaistut videopelit, on tunnettu sen oudoista, hämmentävistä tai ristiriitaisista englanninkielisistä käännöksistään. Pelin käännöksistä käydään edelleen keskustelua pelin fanien keskuudessa, sillä tietyt osat käännöksestä eivät joko onnistuneet välittämään samaa viestiä kuin japanilainen lähdeteksti, tai käännösten välittämä viestiä on selkeästi muutettu pelisarjan myöhemmissä osissa. Hyödynän tutkielmassa Chandlerin ja Demingin *The Game Localization Handbookia* (2012) ja Vilceanun *An Introduction to Translator Studies* -katsausta (2021), sekä kvalitatiivista, kuvailevaa käännöstutkimuksen lähestymistapaa. Tarkastelen alkuperäisen japanilaisen käsikirjoituksen sekä englanninkielisen käännöksen välisiä ongelmallisia kohtia, ja käsitelen käännöksen tarkkuutta. Lisäksi tutkin, miten englanninkielistä käännöstä on myöhemmissä peleissä muutettu tai korjattu. Tutkielman tulokset viittaavat siihen, että pelin kääntäjille ei annettu tarpeeksi tukea tai pelimateriaalia käännösprojektin aikana. Kääntäjät joutuivat tekemään päätöksiä lähdetekstin pohjalta, ja osa kääntäjien valinnoista päätyivät vaikuttamaan pelikokemukseen negatiivisesti.

## Abstract

*Final Fantasy VII* is a video game released by Square in Japan in 1997. The game, like many others released in the late 90s, is known for its odd, confusing, or contradicting translation and transliteration choices. Some moments in the English translation have been the subject of debate among fans of the game, as the translation either fails to deliver the message of the source text or is retconned in a later addition to the series. With the help of Chandler and Deming's *The Game Localization Handbook* (2012) and Vilceanu's review of *An Introduction to Translator Studies* (2021), this thesis employs a qualitative, descriptive Translation Studies approach to examine the problematic parts between the original Japanese script and the English translation and to address the accuracy of the translation. The thesis also compares how the same information was delivered in later additions to the series. The results of the thesis imply that the translators were not given enough support or context during the translation project. The translators had to make decisions based on the source text, and some of their choices negatively impacted the playing experience.

# 1. Introduction

*Final Fantasy VII* (referred to as FFVII) received great popularity after its release in 1997 and gained instant success and praise for its ground-breaking cinematics, story, and characters, as well as gameplay that allowed for countless ways to equip and utilize party members. The story has since grown through games, novels, and a movie, as well as the Remake Project that began in 2020 with *Final Fantasy VII Remake* (referred to as Remake), a reimagining of the original story with updated graphics, voice acting and new gameplay mechanics. For a game as highly regarded as FFVII, there is a lot of discussion concerning the quality of its original international translation. An example of these discussions is a Reddit thread titled “Why is the Final Fantasy 7 translation considered bad?” which was posted in 2018 under the username “Juugetsu” and so far, has 104 comments offering examples of awkward or funny translations, with the most recent comment posted in July of 2022 (Juugetsu, 2018).

Remake introduced the story of FFVII to a newer, younger audience. As the Remake Project is planned to release in three parts, before the release of part one (Remake) and while waiting for part two (*Rebirth*), many have replayed the 1997 game or played it for the first time to experience the original story. Those new to the game were also introduced to the English translation for PC, PlayStation 4, and other consoles, which, while updated from the 1997 version, still had some strange dialogue left in it. Based on discussions from different forums, such as GameFAQ, Reddit, and Final Fantasy VII Wiki, fans of the games have strong opinions on the original translation and changes made to it, and some fans have even re-translated the 1997 game and created “mods”, modified version of the game with “fixed” dialogue.

As one of many who were introduced to Final Fantasy VII and its compilation during its current resurfacing, I will examine some of the translation choices made in the English translation, analyse why they may confuse new players, and if possible, compare how the following instalments reworked, changed, or ignored the original translation. I will introduce the main story of the game and the materials that will be used in the analysis. I will also research the translators of the PlayStation and PC’s international version. I will analyse three cases where the translation has in some way failed to deliver the message of the original script. The thesis will conclude with the findings of the analysis.

## 2. Research Materials

Before introducing the materials, I will provide a short synopsis of FFVII's plot and characters.

### 2.1 Final Fantasy VII: The plot and main characters

*In Midgar, a city controlled by the mega-conglomerate Shinra. Inc., the No. 1 Mako Reactor has been blown up by a rebel group, AVALANCHE. AVALANCHE was secretly formed to wage a rebellion against Shinra. Inc., an organization which is absorbing Mako energy, destroying the natural resources of the planet. Cloud, a former member of Shinra's elite combat force, SOLDIER, was involved with the bombing of the Mako Reactor. Can Cloud and AVALANCHE protect the planet from the huge, formidable enemy, Shinra. Inc.? (Square, 1997a, p. 2)*

The main character of FFVII, Cloud, is joined by six party members: Barret, the leader of the eco-terrorist group AVALANCHE; Tifa, another member of AVALANCHE and Cloud's childhood friend; Aerith, the last remaining Cetra; Red XIII, a Shinra test subject; Cait Sith, a robot cat/fortune-telling machine; and Cid, a pilot and mechanic. There are also two hidden characters in the game, who may join the party if the player makes the right choices. These characters are the great ninja Yuffie, and another ex-Shinra employee, Vincent, who, like Red XIII, went through terrible experimentation in the hands of Shinra's head scientist.

While taking down Mako Reactors, Cloud finds out that the elite SOLDIER, Sephiroth, who Cloud witnessed die five years prior when Cloud and Tifa's hometown burned down, has somehow returned, gone rogue, and is now planning to destroy the planet. The party begins their hunt for Sephiroth while trying to keep Shinra off their tail, and as they begin to uncover the truth about Sephiroth, a mysterious "Calamity from the Skies", and the events that unfolded five years ago, Cloud struggles to understand why the truth does not seem to align with his memories.

### 2.2 Scripts, dialogue, and their translations

The material analysed in the thesis will include scripts from Final Fantasy VII (1997) and dialogue from Remake (2020). References will be made to two 'collections' that add to the story and universe of FFVII. The first of these collections is the Compilation of Final Fantasy VII, which encompasses three games and a movie. The other collection is the Final Fantasy VII Remake Project (not to be confused with the game, Remake). The Remake Project will include the three-part re-imagining of FFVII, and at least one DLC (downloadable content) game. By winter 2022, the Remake Project includes the first part of the project and one DLC, with the second part planned to release in winter 2023/spring 2024. Notable releases in the Final Fantasy VII series, and their release years are listed in Figure 1.

Year	Title [version]	Collection
1997	Final Fantasy VII [PlayStation]	-
1998	Final Fantasy VII [PC]	-
2005	Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children [movie]	Compilation of Final Fantasy VII
2006	Dirge of Cerberus –Final Fantasy VII- [PlayStation 2]	
2007	Before Crisis –Final Fantasy VII- [mobile]	
2008	Crisis Core –Final Fantasy VII- [PlayStation Portable]	
2020	Final Fantasy VII Remake [PlayStation 4]	Final Fantasy VII Remake Project
2021	Final Fantasy VII Remake Intergrade [PlayStation 5]	
2023/2024	Final Fantasy VII Rebirth	
-	<i>Untitled Third part of Remake Project</i>	

Figure 1 List of release years, titles, and collections

Final Fantasy VII is a Japanese role-playing game (JRPG). Many JRPGs include a lot of on-screen text instead of voiced lines, which makes them interesting for translators. In JRPGs the player identifies themselves with the playable character and is sometimes allowed to influence the character by way of naming them, changing their appearance, or choosing their playstyle (e.g., choosing magical attack styles over physical, or investing in speech or sneaking skills over strength and speed). In FFVII, the player is given an opportunity to rename each member of the party as they join, and a maximum of three characters can be included in the party at one time. The naming screen shows their pre-set names, which in manuals and later instalments are solidified as their canonical names. The player will also make some choices in the game which will affect how other characters view them. Choosing specific dialogue options or picking certain members for your party at crucial story moments can add or take away ‘affinity points’ from members of the party. These points are never shown or explained to the player, and the point-assigning system can only be found in the code of the game. This means that the player is not aware of which choices affect which character and must rely on their instincts when they make their choices. Unlike some modern games, these choices do not ultimately affect the plot or lead to different endings, only how a few fixed moments appear in the game.

While Final Fantasy VII is the seventh instalment in the Final Fantasy series, its story is not related to previous or following games whose titles have different numbers. For example, Final Fantasy VI and Final Fantasy VII do not take place in the same in-game universe and their story and plot are

not connected, but Final Fantasy X and Final Fantasy X-2 are connected titles, as the game was released in two parts. For clarity and brevity, the 'Final Fantasy VII' part of compilation titles will be omitted when referred to in this thesis and shorter titles like Crisis Core or Remake will be used to address specific games.

The materials will be limited to moments in the game that are in some way recreated in other games in the Compilation or Remake Project, to have new scripts or dialogue as a comparison. The materials will avoid story-heavy moments or excessive spoilers for FFVII, the Compilation or the Remake Project. The materials will also be limited to translations that are present in both the PSX version (1997d) and updated PC version (1998), that fixed typing errors, such as "No, way!" to "No way!". I will not analyse differences in translations where the way a character speaks implies a different tone or personality e.g., in Japanese the character comes across as cool and professional, and in English aloof and cold. Many of the characters in FFVII have tonal differences in the way they speak and the vocabulary they use between the source and target language but including those cases would stretch the scope of the thesis too much. I will also exclude analysis of cases where the 'infamous' translation is an honest mistake or typing error, such as "This guy are sick".

It should also be noted that Remake is a reimagining of the original FFVII and not a scene-by-scene identical game. Remake also makes changes and adds to the original story and thus it cannot be claimed to be either faithful or unfaithful to the original story of FFVII. Without giving too much of the plot away, the Remake Project begins the same way as FFVII; however, some characters might know more about the story than they did before. Remake's changes to the story are considered in the analysis which will only include content that is clearly referencing dialogue or a moment from the original game.

### **2.3 The Translators of Final Fantasy VII**

The PC version of Final Fantasy VII's end credits credit the localization to Michael Baskett and the technical translation to Aiko Ito and David Jones. The PlayStation version also credits Baskett as the Product Development Coordinator. Technical translation involves the translation of texts related to technological subjects or specific scientific or technological information. In video game translation, this could mean for example the translation of different menus. Having translations for these specific areas is useful because in a series such as Final Fantasy, some item and attack names are kept consistent in all games, so that players do not have to learn different names for familiar items, such as "Potion" or "Ether", in every game. According to Richard Honeywood, who worked as localization director, lead translator, and localization engineer at Square between 1997-2007, the

translation was left to one man, Michael Baskett of Squaresoft USA, with some external help from Japanese nationals at Square, but no editors or quality assurance: “We didn’t have editors and the full review and checking processes we have now.” (Fenlon, 2011). On IMDb, Michael Baskett is credited as the writer of the English screenplay (*Fainaru Fantaji VII (Video Game 1997) - Full Cast & Crew*, n.d.), but not as the translator of the international release. IMDb’s sources for the credits are not listed on the site.

Seth Luisi, then U.S. producer for SCEA (Sony Computer Entertainment of America), said in another interview before the release of the game, that approximately 50 people were working on FFVII’s U.S. translation (Davis, 1997). Luisi claimed that the translation process had begun in November 1996 and would be ready for the game’s release in September 1997 (Davis, 1997). If Baskett was truly working on the translation alone, that would leave him 11 months to translate roughly 130,000 words of dialogue.

Mangiron (2004, pp. 2–3) explains that at Square, at least in 2004, the Final Fantasy series’ games were localized by two translators per language, and the two-person teams could agree to style guidelines and any issue’s resolution individually. All teams shared a project manager, who coordinated between them. How the number of translators went from 50 in 1996-1997 to two per target language in 2004, and how reliable the interview with Honeywood is, is unclear. The game itself credits only Michael Baskett for the localization, but since there is conflicting information on the number of translators this thesis will refer to translators as plural.



### 3. Challenges in video game translation

This thesis uses a qualitative, descriptive Translation Studies approach on the analysis and comparison between the Japanese source text and English translation, as well as later overwrites or reworkings of that translation. To help with the analysis, I will refer to some of the best practices for working with game translators as listed in *The Game Localization Handbook* (Chandler & Deming, 2012) and attempt to hypothesize how some of the controversial or confusing translations came to be. I will also briefly introduce the writing system of Japanese, and how Japanese may behave as a source language.

#### 3.1 Best practices for working with game translators

*Translators are often told that they have to make sure to maintain the “fun factor” of the original video game, --, but when most of them have not been given a chance to see the text in its original context, let alone experience the fun in the game, it is quite an achievement that many localizations manage to reach the desired level of quality and to immerse the international playerhood.*

(Chandler & Deming, 2012, p. 107)

*The Game Localization Handbook* (2012) gives examples of the best practices when it comes to working and communicating with the translators of a videogame. The Handbook offers best practices in video game translation and in this thesis, I will be bringing up two of them and consider how following those practices would have been useful for the translation process of *Final Fantasy VII*.

The first best practice relates to *creativity*. According to the Handbook, creativity is generally not the issue when it comes to translation. A competent translator can suggest solutions for what kind of trivia or fantasy naming systems could be featured in the translation, and what solutions there are for handling culturally sensitive material. The translator should not have to rely on their creativity, however, especially in the case of video games where a lot of information is delivered through auditory or visual means. The best practice in terms of creativity is: “If the full game is not available, evangelize your game to the translators and provide them with all the information you can so they can understand the game and its context” (Chandler & Deming, 2012, p. 109).

The second practice to consider concerns *team translation*. As established before, the number of translators in *FFVII*'s translation projects is unclear. Whether the translation was the effort of one or fifty translators, the best practice offered in the Handbook is worth noting: “Provide your translators with as much audio/visual data as possible (gameplay, writer interviews, etc.) and hold video conference calls to review each section of the game” (Chandler & Deming, 2012, p. 112). It should

be considered that video conference calls may have been impossible during FFVII's translation in 1996 and 1997, but a translation project the size of FFVII would require multiple reviews between translators and managers.

Both best practices introduced highlight the importance of context that the translator should have access to. Interpreting any text without context is challenging and working with only spreadsheets without being able to contact anyone for contextual support leaves the translation open to misunderstandings. Even when following the advice of the Handbook's best practices, the success of the translation boils down to complete and well-organized information. Mangiron (2004, p.2) agrees with the Handbook (2012) and states that game distributors were in the past responsible for localization and handed scripts to agencies or translators to localize without offering them a copy of the game or any information on the content of the game. She points out that this practice had a very negative impact on quality, which companies like Nintendo and Square have over time corrected and improved (2004, p.2).

In the 1980s and 1990s, translations from Japanese games were only made once and if the game had reached great popularity in Japan. Games with a lot of text were generally not prioritized for international markets but FFVII had the advantage of belonging to an already popular game series. Different age ratings between Japan and the U.S. also brought extra work for localization because Japanese games made many references to subjects that were not considered appropriate for the U.S., like religion, alcohol, violence, and vulgarity (Mangiron, 2021, p. 5).

After video games entered the digital age, the translation process changed dramatically from how it was done, for example for Final Fantasy VII. Games are released digitally and at the same time around the world, which requires all translations to be finished by the same date, and translations are done during the times when voice actors are being recorded. Sometimes, a translation has even affected the original script. Manigron (2021, p. 8) gives an example of this: the translator of Bayonetta (2009) worked closely with the director of the Japanese version of the game. The translator asked to use Enochian, "the language of angels", which was invented in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, for moments when the main character summons demons. The syntax that the translator created for the English translation worked so well that the director rewrote the Japanese lines completely to use the same made-up language.

### **3.2 The complexities of a translation project**

In translation studies, the translator and translation can be approached through many different theories and perspectives. In her review of *An Introduction to Translator Studies* by Attila Imre,

Vilceanu summarizes the current field of translation studies as a “clash of theories”, where translation can be conceptualized as “communication, translation as text or code interpretation, etc.” (2021, p. 180). Vilceanu brings up the complexity of the profession of translators and how few reliable statistics there are concerning all the different ways and forms of translation, as well as the competence translators need: modern translators require skills in IT, decision-making, communication, language, terminology management, project management, cultural understanding, and in the case of free-lance translators, marketing, and self-advertising skills (2021, p. 181). Video game translators require additional knowledge of the dialogue engines each game employs and the basic mechanics of how text and dialogue function and are displayed. Mangiron (2004, pp. 2–3) even considers video game localization as an analogy to software localization, as games must be adapted to the conventions of the target culture, just like software programs. To Mangiron the priority of the localization is for the game to feel as if it was originally made in the player's language.

The review of *An Introduction to Translator Studies* (2021) brings up two significant details that will be important to the conclusion of the thesis. First, Vilceanu agrees with the author that instead of a *translation* we should refer to a *translation project*. In the case of a video game, book, movie, or any collection of texts that must be interpreted and translated from the source language to the target language, there exists a process that must be adapted for each project. The translator is the “cultural mediator undertaking domestication and localization while downsizing the source text” (Vilceanu, 2021, p. 180). Secondly, the translator can have two roles when it comes to management: An active role, where they must manage themselves and the translation, and a passive role where an unspecified agent, such as the employer or company, manages the translator (Vilceanu, 2021, p. 180). While the translator relies on the materials they get from the employer, it should be made clear that the translator is ultimately responsible for the quality of the translation (Imre, 2020, p. 84).

### **3.3 Limitations in Japanese-English translation**

Japanese writing consists of four different scripts: kanji, hiragana, katakana and romaji (Roman alphabet). Hiragana, katakana and romaji are phonetic scripts that do not have meaning out of context (Robertson, 2020, p. 609). Hiragana and katakana both have the same 46 basic syllables, and they are used in different settings (Robertson, 2020, p. 609). Kanji is a morphosyllabic script, where characters represent both sound and meaning (Robertson, 2020, p. 609).

Different kanji can represent the same sound but with different meanings (Figure 2), with a small difference in intonation, which is in many cases only distinguishable to those who speak it as their first language. These scripts follow standardized applications in Japan and are used to break up sentence elements: hiragana is used for grammar structures or phonetically spelling Japanese words, while katakana is mainly used for new or loan words and foreign names.

Kanji	Hiragana	Katakana	Rōmaji	English
橋	はし	ハシ	hashi	Bridge
箸				Chopsticks
端				Tip; point, beginning; start

Figure 2 Example of Japanese homonyms and the four Japanese scripts

Because of kanji, written Japanese takes very little space, and when translating from Japanese to English, the character count will grow significantly: ‘音楽鑑賞’ (ongakukanshou) takes four characters, while its English translation ‘the appreciation of music’ takes 25, including spaces. In videogame translation and in dialogue-heavy RPGs like FFVII this can become an issue when the character limit prevents translators from accurately conveying the original text. In FFVII specifically, the text is displayed in dialogue boxes which are positioned all over the screen depending on where characters happen to be during the dialogue. Dialogue boxes tend to only be large enough to fit the original Japanese text to not waste space or cover the characters.

Japanese often relies on context, and distinctions between singular and plural are especially vague. There are ways to emphasize when something is plural, but when speaking and writing, those ways are only used when no context is available. For example, the kanji for ‘one person’ and ‘people’ in Japanese is 人 (hito), but if the writer wanted to emphasize that they are pointing to multiple people instead of one person, they could add the so-called “repeater kanji”, 々 (noma) to write 人々 (hitobito), ‘people’. There are also pluralizing suffixes, 達 (tachi), がた (gata), and ら (ra), which work in specific cases but tend to only be used when no visual or auditory context is available.

## 4. Analysis

In the analysis, I will examine three moments or concepts in the game that are often brought up in fan forum discussions, and where the discussions were clearly divided between two opinions. In all selected materials the translation has led to either confusion or irritation i.e., had consequences for the player or affected the gaming experience. I will compare the Japanese script (1997c) to the English translation (1997d;1998) of FFVII, and the English translation to games that followed FFVII.

### 4.1 A Battle against the Guard Scorpion and a piece of dangerous dialogue

The first case involves a battle early in the game, where the English translation has ignored an important piece of grammar. The translation choice can potentially cause the player to lose the fight. A bomb has been set in the Mako Reactor, and the party needs to get out, before it explodes. The player is introduced to the struggle with the English translation during their first “boss fight”, a fight where they face a formidable foe blocking the way that they cannot run from. After a set number of attacks against Cloud and Barret, the mechanical scorpion raises its stinger as if in preparation for something. A dialogue box appears, and Cloud tells Barret to “Attack when its tail’s up!”. Because of the turn-based combat system, depending on how the player has been choosing attacks during the fight and what speed their battle settings have been set to, the attack gauge may be full, and the player can ready an attack before the dialogue has moved on. Cloud follows the urgent call to attack with “It’s going to counterattack with its laser.” The player is left to watch as the party attacks and the scorpion immediately delivers a devastating counter blow with its tail laser. On their next turn, the player must spend their actions on reviving or healing party members instead of attacking the enemy. To find out what went wrong, I will compare the original Japanese script with the English translation (Figure 3) and how dialogue is displayed during battle.

	Japanese (1997c)	English (1997d;1998)
Line 1	クラウド「バレット、気をつけろ」	Cloud “Barret, be careful!”
Line 2	「しっぽをあげている間に攻撃すると	“Attack while its tail’s up!
Line 3	レーザーで反撃してくるぞ」	It’s gonna counterattack with its laser.”

Figure 3 Cloud’s lines during the battle in the original Japanese script and English translation

In both the Japanese and International releases, Cloud’s dialogue is divided into three dialogue boxes (as they are divided into three lines in Figure 3), with a few seconds between switching from one line to the next. If the player’s attack-gauge is full, selecting ‘attack’ also takes only a few

seconds, and can be done before the dialogue has moved on. It should be noted that an action, once selected, cannot be aborted.

The translators have overlooked a big grammatical structure in the second line, と (to), which in this case is the particle “if; when”. A literal translation for the second line of 「しっぽをあげている間に攻撃すると」 would be “during the tail lifting **if** attacked”. The sentence structure is visualised in Figure 4. A more natural translation could be “**If** you attack when the tail is up”, which clearly implies that the sentence is not finished, and more information is to come. Instead, the English translation has opted for “Attack while its tail is up!”, which, apart from missing the end quote, looks and sounds like a full sentence, with the exclamation mark adding urgency and giving the impression of an order. The intention of the dialogue during this battle is to teach the player to defend during crucial moments. The Japanese dialogue succeeds in this, by telling the player that if they attack now, the boss will counterattack, therefore the right action would be to either defend or do nothing. The English translation fails in delivering the same message and instead leaves the player feeling like they were tricked.

Japanese	しっぽ + を	あげている	間に	攻撃する	と
English	tail + object marking particle	lifting, raising	during	to attack	if

Figure 4 Visualisation of the sentence structure in Cloud’s second line

Remake recreates the scene with the same first boss at the beginning of the game, but this time, instead of teaching how to defend, the encounter is used to teach the player to take advantage of cover in the environment. Remake does not rely on dialogue boxes and is instead fully voiced with optional subtitles. During the battle, rubble falls into the battlefield, and as the scorpion readies its tail, Cloud once again calls out to Barret and the player, and the following conversation takes place:

Cloud: *Watch the tail! You don’t want to be hit by that laser!*

Barret: *Huh!? So, whadda we do!?*

Cloud: *Don’t get hit! Take cover behind that debris!*

(Remake 2020)

The attack-counterattack-gimmick is no longer present, and instead, the fight has the player look for cover before the scorpion eventually attacks. The game gives very clear instructions to the player, and with the party on one side of the battlefield, and potential cover set between them and the boss,

the player has little chance of making any mistakes. The lesson of finding cover becomes important in another battle towards the end of Remake, where another boss with a deadly laser attack is trying to prevent the party from progressing.

There are a few options as to why the translation failed in FFVII in this case. One option is that the translators did not know the battle would not pause for the dialogue, and that the player could continue attacking before all of Cloud's lines were delivered. This option does not address why they chose to split the full sentence into "*attack now!*" and "*it'll counterattack!*". Another option would be that it was an honest mistake made by a translator in a rush. Had the translators had an opportunity to play through the boss fight or at least see gameplay of it, they would have had a clearer idea of how to translate it and could have used different syntax. A simple mistake feels a less likely reason, however, considering how vastly different the translation of the second line is from the original.

This piece of translation hints towards the fact that FFVII's translators did not have access to the game: "a great deal of information and communication nuances is unwritten but implicit in the visuals, the audio, and the gameplay" (Chandler & Deming, 2012, p. 109). Having access to the first battle, or video material of it, would have quickly highlighted the misleading translation and allowed them to translate the moment properly.

#### **4.2 The Flower Girl's name**

This case focuses on one of the main characters and party members in the game. The localisation of the character's name went through a change between FFVII and later games, which confused players. Early in the game, players are introduced to a flower girl from the slums beneath the city. In the 1997 international release, the young woman's pre-set name is **Aeris**. Aeris is a sweet and light-hearted character, and a descendant of the Cetra, a race of people who were deeply connected to the Planet itself, and who travelled the Planet before its current inhabitants. Aeris' role in the story is perhaps the most impactful and a key moment with her character could still be considered one of the most memorable moments in videogame history. Fans of FFVII were both thrilled and confused when she made a guest appearance in another Square game, *Kingdom Hearts* (2002) and introduced herself as **Aerith**. Her name has since been transliterated and pronounced as Aerith in all following games, including *Crisis Core* (2008) and *Remake* (2020). The name change has since been a point of discourse between fans. Some think her name should have remained Aeris, arguing that the pronunciation of 'Aerith' is clumsy and less feminine and that players of the original game

already know her as Aeris. Others believe that ‘Aeris’ was a mistake in transliteration and that Aerith is the correct localization of the Japanese spelling.

Most names in the Japanese release of FFVII are written with katakana, to imply that they are foreign, and not traditional Japanese names. Aerith’s name in the game’s Japanese release was ‘エアリス’ (e-a-ri-su), which led to her name being transliterated as Aeris. ‘Aeris’, however, is not the only way to transliterate the name. Because there is no kana character for the ‘th’ sound, when it comes to loan words and foreign names a common practice is to substitute ‘th’ with the ‘su’, ス kana. The translators were clearly aware of this substitution practice because they have used it in the very same game, with another character. The main antagonist of FFVII is Sephiroth, whose name in Japanese is written ‘セフィロス’ (se-fi-ro-su). All spellings are listed in Figure 5. During the game’s early development, the two characters were planned to be siblings, which might have led to their similar character design and Japanese naming conventions. The idea was scrapped during development; thus, their similarities could have gone unnoticed by the translator. Without getting confirmation from developers and character designers, the name could be transliterated both ways.

Katakana (1997c)	Romaji	English (1997d;1998)	Post FFVII
エアリス	Eairisu	Aeris	Aerith
セフィロス	Sefirosu	Sephiroth	Sephiroth

Figure 5 Spellings of Aerith and Sephiroth’s names in the original Japanese and English translation

The English manual calls her Aeris (Square, 1997a), as does the Finnish guidebook (Cassady et al., 1997), but if we look at the Japanese manual that came with the Japanese release, we find that the Latin text spelling of her name is Aerith (Square, 1997b, p. 6). According to the Final Fantasy Wiki, in the Final Fantasy VII Official Establishment File (p.20), her name in romaji is also Aerith. The file was published six days prior to the game’s release in Japan. An early concept design for her character by Tetsuya Nomura has the name ‘Earith’ written side by side with the standard Japanese spelling. Richard Honeywood, localization director at Square, mentions in an interview that her name was meant to be a combination of the words ‘air’ and ‘earth’, as she has a strong connection to the planet. Honeywood describes the issue as follows:



... “Aeris” was supposed to be a mixture of Air+Earth, so perhaps a spelling more like “Earith” would have brought that connotation across in English better? On the other hand, “Barret” came from “Bullet” in Japanese, but it probably wouldn’t have been wise to stick to the Japanese naming here. Either way, the translators couldn’t ask and receive this kind of information in a timely fashion back then in order to make informed decisions. They just did the best they could. (Fenlon, 2011)

Based on concept art, interviews, the Japanese manual, and the Official Establishment File, as well as the fact that the character’s name has been Aerith in every appearance after the 2002 Square game *Kingdom Hearts*, followed by *Advent Children*, *Dirge of Cerberus*, *Crisis Core* and *Remake*, it seems clear that Square had always intended to call her Aerith. It seems that the only reason she was called Aeris in FFVII is that once again the translators had no materials or communication with the writers and developers and were left to rely on their creativity and transliterate her name as they saw best.

#### **4.3 Unto her promised land shall we one day return – ambiguities in the script**

The origins of the Cetra, also called Ancients in the game, were a source of confusion in the international release of the game. The Cetra were a humanoid race of people that preceded “normal” humans. They had a deep connection with the Planet itself, and they could speak to and shape the Planet. In the game’s universe, the Ancients are mostly forgotten, and Aerith, a half-Ancient, is the only known descendant left on the Planet. The only in-game information given on the Ancients consists of Aerith’s and Sephiroth’s brief explanations, as well as videotapes left behind by Aerith’s parents. The videotapes do not delve into the origins of the Cetra, so the only sources in the game are Aerith, whose knowledge comes from her mother (a Cetra), and Sephiroth, who researched the topic after finding clues that he may be a Cetra as well. The source of confusion for players was that Aerith and Sephiroth seem to contradict each other.

In the prisons of the Shinra building, Tifa asks Aerith about the Promised Land, which president Shinra is looking for, and what it has to do with the Cetra and Aerith. Aerith does not know much, only what her mother had told her before passing away. In her dialogue in Figure 6, Aerith repeats her mother’s words (square brackets), which include the line “the Cetra were born from the Planet”, implying that the race has always been tied to the planet they are currently on.

	Japanese (1997c)	English (1997d;1998)
	Aerith	Aerith

Line 1	「わたし、知ってるのは……」	“All I know is…”
Line 2	『セトラの民、星より生まれ 星と語り、 星を開く』	[The Cetra were born from the Planet, speak with the planet, and unlock the Planet.]
Line 3	「えっと……それから……」	“And……then…”
Line 4	『セトラの民、約束の地へ帰る。至上の幸 福、星が与えし定め地の地』	[The Cetra will return to the Promised Land.]

Figure 6 Aerith’s lines concerning the Cetra from the Japanese script and English translation

There are two things to note in Aerith’s line. 星より生まれ (hoshiyori umare) translates indeed to “born of the planet”, but 星 (hoshi) could mean either star, planet or heavenly body, and could be either singular or plural. The game makes a clear distinction between ‘planet’ and ‘land’, as the kanji 星 (hoshi) is consistently used for ‘planet’, as 大地 (daichi) is for ‘land’. As explained earlier in the thesis, because of the ambiguity of some kanji, it could be just as well argued that Aerith spoke of ‘stars’ or ‘planets’ as plural. The second point of interest is the phrase 星を開く (hoshi o hiraku), translated in the game as “unlock the planet”, which we will return to when examining Sephiroth’s lines.

After the party has left the city of Midgar, they regroup in the town of Kalm, where Cloud shares more information through a flashback from five years prior. The flashback includes a scene in the basement of an old Shinra mansion, where the war hero Sephiroth finds research that suggests he was scientifically created in Shinra’s laboratories from cells of the excavated remains of an Ancient called Jenova. Believing that Shinra has lied to him, and is holding his mother for their experimentations, Sephiroth is enraged. While accusing Cloud and the rest of humanity of being traitors, he tells Cloud about the Ancients (Figure 7). According to Sephiroth the Ancients migrated to a planet, settled it, and then moved on<sup>1</sup>. This explanation is the one that has given some players the impression that the Ancients travelled in space from one planet to the next.

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<sup>1</sup> FFVII establishes that some of the research Sephiroth discovered before turning on Cloud had been forged and possibly left there on purpose for him to find; later in the game, Cloud and the party find evidence that reveals Jenova’s true identity and Sephiroth’s real mother, contradicting the research Sephiroth had found in the basement. None of the evidence however mention where the Ancients came from, so whether Sephiroth was wrong or not is unclear.

	Japanese (1997c)	English (1997d;1998)
	Sephiroth	Sephiroth
Line 1	「この星はもともとセトラのものだった。」	“This Planet originally belonged to the Cetra.
Line 2	セトラは旅をする民族。	Cetra was a itinerant race.
Line 3	旅をして、星を開き、そしてまた旅 ……」	They would migrate in, settle the Planet, then move on.”

Figure 7 Sephiroth's lines concerning the Cetra from the Japanese script and English translation (Misspellings in the game have been kept in the dialogue)

The Japanese dialogue refers to the Planet once again with the kanji 星 (hoshi), ‘star’, ‘planet’ (usually not the Earth) or ‘heavenly body’. Sephiroth’s third line is interesting, because the translation takes some liberties, as well as ignores Aerith’s lines from earlier in the game. In Japanese, Sephiroth uses the verb 旅をして (tabi o shite) ‘travelled’, or ‘journeyed’. Sephiroth also uses the same phrasing Aerith did, 星を開き (hoshi o hiraki), but this time, instead of ‘unlocking’ it is translated as ‘settling’. The verb 開く (hiraku) has many different meanings in Japanese, e.g., ‘to open, to unseal, to bloom, to set up, to found (a dynasty or country)’. ‘Settle’ is not among the translations provided at least in modern dictionaries, so why the translators chose it specifically is unclear. A more literal translation of the third line of Sephiroth’s dialogue could be “[They] journeyed, set up/established the planet, and then journeyed again”. The line is vague even in the Japanese source text.

Other instalments to the series mostly avoid the topic of the Cetra. *Crisis Core* features the same scene with Sephiroth in 2008, but for unknown reasons left out the part of the speech where he mentions the content presented in Figure 7. In Remake a full cutscene was carved out for introducing the Cetra, much earlier in the game than in FFVII. The following exposition is given to the party in the Shinra building:

*In the distant past, our planet was home to a people we call the Ancients. --. We [Cetra] who are born of the planet, with her we speak. Her flesh we shape. Unto her promised land shall we one day return. By her loving grace and providence may we take our place in paradise.*

(Remake 2020)

Remake, however, ends before the flashback scene and Sephiroth's own explanation, so we have yet to find out if his lines have been altered since FFVII. This case is interesting because Sephiroth's opinion seems to generally be considered an error in the translation, both in forum discussions and in Wiki articles, even though nothing in the source text or later installations directly prove it. Ultimately, whether it was a translation issue due to the ambiguity of the kanji used for 'planet', the indecision of the developers and writers of the game, or an intended twist with Sephiroth being misled by false information, the true origins of the Cetra are not clear, based on the translations or content of the games, at least until the second part of the Remake Project is released. For now, the subject is open to the player's interpretation, and the English translation holds no notable errors or misinterpretations, despite the general opinion leaning towards Aerith's explanation.

## 5. Conclusion

In this thesis I have introduced the main characters and story of Final Fantasy VII and the games I have collected my materials from, as well as researched the translation project and its translators. I have analysed three translation cases where fans of the game have been left confused and compared the scripts of FFXVII to the games that came after it.

The English translation of Final Fantasy VII could objectively be considered bad. The number of different threads online of international players who look for answers for moments analysed in this thesis makes it clear that the translation did not deliver the story the same way that the Japanese release did. Some fans have even gone so far to modify and re-translate the game to “fix” its problems. Some issues of the translation that were not discussed in this thesis, including the clunky, disconnected, or robotic dialogue, and the many typing errors and misplaced lines of dialogue the 1997 international release had, were mostly fixed in the 1998 PC release. The translation comes across as rushed and unpolished, and considering the way Manigron (2004) described past translation processes for video games, there are high chances that that was exactly the case. While different sources provide disparate information about the number and identities of the translators, the findings of this thesis point to the real issue in the translation, which was not the translators, but the practices they had to employ.

The Japanese language as source text can cause problems in videogame translation with its density and use of different scripts, homonyms, and morphology, but a proper quality assurance process would have caught most mistakes that made their way into the game. The analysis shows that the problem the translators faced was the lack of context, management, and support from SCEA and Square. As opposed to the best practices concerning creativity and team translation in *The Game Localization Handbook* (Chandler & Deming, 2012), the translators did not have access to the game, footage of the gameplay, or even a direct line of contact with someone who knew details of the gameplay and story. The translators were forced to rely on active management on a translation project, whose scope would have required supporting passive management. Left to make decisions that had the potential to alter the characters, story, and gameplay, the translators produced content that may have negatively affected the experience that international players had.

Final Fantasy VII’s translation was on par with other games that were released in the late 1990s. The Remake Project brought back both old and new discussions concerning the original translation, and how it appears to players now, at a time when quality and attention to detail are more and more important in video game development. Game engines, like the Unreal 5 -engine, are being improved

to achieve photorealism in gameplay, and aspects like voice acting and translation are dealt with more care and preparation, with increased quality assurance and management. This thesis puts into perspective the practices that were used in video game translation in the late 1990s and the ones used today. Additional research could be done on the translation project of Final Fantasy VII Remake and what kind of changes have occurred in video game translation between FFVII and Remake. When it comes to “mistakes”, like Aerith’s name, or the Cetra-problem, the player is entitled to their opinion; some players appreciate the original game as it is, separately from the Compilation and Remake Project, while others take each new installation to the series as canonical additions to the story 1997’s Final Fantasy VII.

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