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THE ART OF (NON)EXPERIMENTAL TRANSLATION OF ELECTRONIC LITERATURE ON THE (UN)REPEATABLE TRANSLATION OF *LOSS OF GRASP*¹

Abstract

The article focuses on *(Nie)panowanie*, the Polish translation of *Loss of Grasp* by Serge Bouchardon and Vincent Volckaert. The main part of the study consists of a detailed report of translator's work made in 2019 and her experience is compared with the experiences of translators of ten other language versions of the work. This study is accompanied by some more general reflection on problems of e-literature translation, especially in the context of experimental translation theory. Two main questions the author deals with are: should e-lit translation always be seen as an experimental one, and what does it, in practice, mean to translate interactive and multimedia work? The last part of the article offers a broader perspective on the field: reflections on trans-platform translation as a kind of digital literature preservation and on the problems of platform liability or programming obsolescence.

Keywords: Serge Bouchardon, Vincent Volckaert, *Loss of Grasp*, flash fiction, electronic literature translation, electronic literature

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Non-canonical(?) translations of the canon

This article will be devoted to the translation of *Déprise/Loss of Grasp* by Serge Bouchardon and Vincent Volckaert, a text that belongs to the world canon of e-literature (which was confirmed when *Loss of Grasp* was recognised as a runner up for the Robert Coover Award for a Work of Electronic Literature in 2020; in their decision, the jury stressed that this “intelligent and literary sophisticated interactive narrative” had already been translated into 10 languages,² which contributed significantly to the popularisation of electronic literature). Bouchardon’s story is composed of six scenes and takes the form of a first-person narrative which uses words, images and sound to give an account of a gradual transition from the narrator’s sense of full control over his life to the realisation that the opposite is in fact true. Thanks to the interactions involving (symbolic) repetition of some of the protagonist’s gestures by the reader, the latter also comes to experience the loss of grasp alluded to in the title, as in the last scene they discover that their confidence in having “power” over the text (including unrestricted interaction with it) is delusional.³ *Loss of Grasp*, as well as a wider spectrum of Bouchardon’s creative output, has already been analysed thoroughly, especially within the context of the need to keep refreshing poetics with respect to digital stories and the need to advance discussions (in which Bouchardon himself actively participates) concerning new rhetorical figures, including those that welcome and use readers’ gestures (see e.g. Bouchardon 2014; Bell, Ensslin 2021; Marques 2018; Meza 2017; Przybyszewska 2016; Szczęśna 2018). I therefore do not see the need to return to those issues in this article. Instead, I am interested in how the application of the rhetorical figures mentioned above, or the new-media shape of the text in general and the literary experience proposed by the authors, influenced my translation.

² At present, it is eleven languages.

³ It is worth emphasising here that this work is one of a whole range of texts which – using shared point of view/action, the device of co-focalisation and interactional metalepsis – build meanings by playing with giving to the readers – and taking from them – the possibility of interaction. Kalina Bertin’s *Manic VR* is another well-known example, in which the experience of losing the possibility to interact with the text which indeed imposed interaction just a while before, is an attempt to depict the state of mind of those suffering from bipolar disorder.

The considerations presented here will constitute a kind of “report”⁴ on my work on the Polish translation of *Déprise/Loss of Grasp* (*(Nie)panowanie* in Polish), completed in 2019. This account will include a comparison of my own experience with the conclusions of other translators of the same work, as well as an attempt at a broader reflection on the translation of e-texts. There are two key questions here. The first one is whether all e-literature translation should be regarded as experimental translation, and what such experimentality means. I am thinking here not just about the problematic nature of the term itself (cf. Brzostowska-Tereszkiewicz 2018), but also about whether it is only creative computing that we should focus on in the case of e-lit, or whether there is more to it. The other question concentrates on what the media heterogeneity of the translated text, its interactive nature or – more generally – its connection with the code really means for the translator. In other words, I want to reflect on how the translator’s work is influenced by the fact that translation of e-literary texts must also take into account images, movement, and interaction, and that a correct translation of the verbal layer of the literary content alone does not guarantee that the sense of such content will be conveyed (Bouchardon, Meza 2020; Marecki, Małecka 2016). It is not only the actual consequences of this (rightly emphasised) very specific characteristic, but also the question of whether it is unprecedented that will be important for me here.

The starting point for my deliberations in this article will concern arguments on the translation of electronic literature that have been formulated in recent years by e-literature researchers and authors who also translate such literature (including Bouchardon himself, who – together with Nohelia Meza – analysed the translations of *Déprise*).⁵ Many of these statements are, in my opinion, over-generalised or simplistic, whereas electronic literature is such a complex phenomenon that it is impossible to talk about a single translation strategy here (or lack thereof). For instance, I disapprove of the claim according to which the translator of e-literature is in a completely different situation compared to the translator of analogue word art. My objection is that in such a case, one clearly overlooked fact is that e-literature is not the only example of artistic communication not based exclusively on

⁴ I use his term here in the same sense as e.g. Piotr Marecki, following Nick Montfort’s concept (cf. Marecki, Małecka 2016: 2).

⁵ Most of them emphasise that the research field in this area of translation studies is still at a stage of intensive growth (Marecki, Montfort 2017: 87).

words which is – and has been – translated. In this respect, we should not forget avant-garde or concrete poetry, comic books, and other diverse varieties of visual prose. The experiences of those who translate such works – as well as that of translators of various types of audio-visual texts (which, due to the nature of digital communication, provide an ideal context for conversations about many e-literature texts) – should be an important point of reference in discussions about translating e-literature.⁶ Of course, I am going to emphasise here, echoing Edwin Gentzler’s remarks, the suitability of the transdisciplinary approach when it comes to the current challenges of translation studies,⁷ as well as the inadequacy of the traditional, “text-centric” translation theory for the ever-growing body of contemporary artistic texts,⁸ including, of course, e-literature. Treating such a variant of translation theory as the only point of reference results in simplifications that I shall discuss in this article.

Let us note here that if we take into account the postulates posited by the theorists of digital semiotics interested in the poetics of e-literary works (and thus Bouchardon himself), it turns out that the multimedia, interactive elements are components of the applied rhetorical figures. And just as reflections on translating a classical metaphor involves reflections on the semantic fields of the words that constitute it, so reflections on a digital (e.g. kinetic) metaphor should naturally take into account the new-media dimension of literary (!) communication⁹ (Søren Pold, Maria Mencia and Manuel Portela openly invite us to include the interface in the area of text semantics [Pold, Mencia, Portela 2018]). Similarly, translators of visual literature, avant-garde, concrete and sound poetry (including optophonetic poems) take into account the non-verbal aspects that are of key significance for the semantics of those

⁶ Aleksandra Małecka and Piotr Marecki, writing about the translation of Katarzyna Giełżyńska’s video-poems, point out how these texts are rooted in the tradition of diverse visual and audio-visual forms of communication, e.g. posters, concrete poetry, and advertisements (Marecki, Małecka 2016).

⁷ As he argues for including translation studies in more than one discipline, Gentzler stresses that it is not only verbal written texts that are translated, and that the reflection of translation studies should therefore embrace various areas of communication (Gentzler 2017: 1).

⁸ Brzostowska-Tereszkiewicz summarises it by stating that “experimental translation, which until recently was to be found on the margin of artistic translation practice, is now clearly moving towards its centre” (Brzostowska-Tereszkiewicz 2018: 79–80).

⁹ Natalia Fedorova and Nick Montfort put forward similar arguments, stating that translation of e-literature is the most intense method of reading a text and that it helps one understand how the code and the language co-create meanings (Fedorova, Montfort 2012).

works (see Brzostowska-Tereszkiewicz 2020). Taking this argument one step further, it could be stated that the translator of literature does not merely translate the verbal components of the text, but must also be sensitive to the matter of the book itself. Similarly, those who translate audio-visual content do not focus on the written word alone. The question is, however, whether these translators should always have to investigate the composition of the ink or the operation of the printing machine used in the process, the software behind the sound recorded, the bookbinding technique or – in the context of e-literature – the code of the work. Perhaps sometimes it is simply enough to be mindful and make sure that these elements continue to contribute efficiently to the meaning that is being communicated?

In discussions on the ability to take into careful consideration the code/platform of the translated text as one of the translator's (indispensable?) competencies (cf. e.g. Marecki, Montfort 2017), Bouchardon and Meza asked whether the translators working on *Déprise* were familiar with the very idea of e-literature. The case of *Loss of Grasp* clearly revealed a paradox here. For the translator of the Spanish version, work on the translation of *Déprise* was the first encounter with such a form of word art. Yet, it is hard not to consider *Perderse* a successful translation. Why? Because, unlike in generative or (some) conceptual works (Marecki and Mantfort worked mainly on translations of such pieces¹⁰), the form of interaction proposed in *Loss of Grasp* does not necessarily require the translator to examine the code. The mechanisms of interaction are visible in the effect of the text, and you do not need to check what is below the surface to come up with appropriate equivalents of verbal components that will work well in this interaction. This is evident in Scene 3, where the reader encounters a text with a double meaning, depending on how it is read. The situation is quite different from the case of translations of generative texts, where, indeed, you need to understand the essence of the algorithm in order to then translate not only the relevant “dictionaries” (collections of words used as a database for generating text), but also the algorithm itself, and sometimes even change its formula slightly – if only due to differences in grammar (cf. Górska-Olesińska, Pisarski 2018). In a word, paying attention to the code and platform is important for the translator insofar as it is actually dictated by the interaction inherent in the semantics of the text.

¹⁰ And they sometimes stressed that in the case of such multimedia forms as kinetic poetry “a different type of translation practice is involved” (Marecki, Montfort 2017: 87).

The third issue that I would like to address, at least marginally, is the argument, propounded by Montfort and Marecki, who state that while in traditional literature the translator remains invisible,¹¹ in the case of its electronic variant they often come to the foreground and become the “ambassador of the work”, explaining its mechanisms, and even the translation process itself (Marecki, Montfort 2017: 90). There is no point in arguing with the first part of this statement (cf. Venuti 2008), but the issue of “ambassadorship” requires some elaboration. Tamara Brzostowska-Tereszkiewicz emphasises the problematic nature of the situation in which “the only samples of coherent language of description and critique of experimental translation phenomena that are currently available to us are self-analyses and self-interpretations of the translators-experimenters themselves” (Brzostowska-Tereszkiewicz 2018: 80). In the same text, she describes the translation activity of the Małecka–Marecki duo as “self-critique and self-promotion” (Brzostowska-Tereszkiewicz 2018: 80).¹² And the danger of these two researchers being “ambassadors” for Polish translations of electronic (and experimental) literature lies in the suggestion that their activities embrace the entire arena of e-lit, and that the arguments they propose are universally applicable. And yet, as important and widely appreciated as their projects undoubtedly are, Małecka and Marecki are not the only experts in the field. For instance, there is Mariusz Pisarski, an internationally recognised Polish translator of e-literature (occasionally joining forces with Monika Górską-Olesińska), who engages not only in translating text generators, but also in different e-literature genres to Małecka and Marecki. What is more, there is a whole other area of genres that none of the translators referred to above have worked with. If only for this reason, it is hard not to oppose the overgeneralising diagnoses they posit – precisely as part of their “ambassadorship” – from which arises the notion that the translator of e-literature must always look into the code (cf. also Marecki, Montfort 2017), and that e-literature translation is always experimental. Małecka and Marecki, for example, claim that

¹¹ Małecka and Marecki also develop this concept in the context of audio-visual translation (Marecki, Małecka 2016).

¹² These researchers frequently stress that their activity is practice-based research which includes a series of actions, among them (self-)promotion. Cf.: “In these projects, we were responsible not only for translating the textual layer of the work, but also for adapting the code (in generative works), adapting the technical aspects of the publishing process, as well as engaging in PR and dissemination” (Marecki, Małecka 2016: 2).

there are no rules in translating electronic literature (...). In general, the translation of a digital work means translating not only the text, but also the code, and often the media or technological platform in whose framework the piece was created. [Digital – AP] translation is often as much an experiment as the original work itself (Marecki, Małecka 2016: 12).

It is difficult to wholly apply this sentence to my own experience with *Loss of Grasp*. At the same time, I am aware that the voice of the author of the text which is but a subjective account of translation work, someone without extensive translation experience, who is not a researcher focusing on the theory of translation, is also a kind of “auto-thematic and autobiographical translation-related narrative” (Brzostowska-Tereszkiewicz 2020: 11). However, it is not my goal to formulate general conclusions or to offer an in-depth theoretical analysis of the essence of e-lit translation, but rather to contribute to the growing discourse by emphasising certain problematic issues and generalisations related to this topic, the latter of course leading us nowhere. I welcome all additions and further contributions to the discussion started here and I hope that the problems I am signalling in this article will be taken up by more experienced researchers.

A biased report on a reduplicated experiment

In drafting this rather non-standard account of the translation of *Loss of Grasp*, my aim was not to have the last word on the subject. Instead, I aimed to highlight the key issues that would illustrate the problems stipulated in this article. It was important for me to take into consideration the experience of other translators, in particular to refer to the comments made by Ekaterina Erémina, author of the latest Russian translation of *Loss of Grasp* (her translation was not discussed by Bouchardon and Meza), because of the proximity between the languages in which we worked.¹³ I made references to subsequent scenes within the work in order to show how far its interactive nature influenced the translation process itself. My aim was to describe the translator’s work on (multiple!) translations of this text and reveal to what degree it was “experimental”, and to what extent it could make use of rather traditional solutions. I also intended to disclose whether the translator had to work with (or translate) the code.

¹³ In my discussions with this very translator, who is experienced in working with audio-visual texts, many of my hypotheses were confirmed.

In the case of Scene 1, interaction (the possibility of creating the “beautiful landscapes” mentioned in the text) occurs in relation to the visual elements and illustrates loosely the experience described in the narrative. Therefore, it did not condition in any way the wording of the short sentences displayed on the screen. In other words, the new-media shape of the work did not affect the translation process. In the case of this fragment, the textual layer available in the audio form (recordings that begin and end the scene, the scripts of which I received from Bouchardon) also required translation. Here, the cultural and situational context was important – the words used and the speaker’s tone had to be clearly reminiscent of a conversation with a call-centre or a telephonist. As my task was not only to translate the text itself, but also to provide relevant recordings,¹⁴ I paid a good deal of attention to “translating” what is unlikely to be relevant for a classical literary translation: the timbre of voice, and manner of articulation (the natural feel of communication was the priority here, and lexical choices were also subordinated to it). Thus, in this case, the translator’s task was much more aligned to working on translating a film, a theatre or radio play than to the translation of a traditional printed literary text.

The beginning of Scene 2, in which the reader discovers a portrait of the wife of the first-person narrator, was more of a regular translation challenge. In the course of interactive reading, the recipient reproduces symbolically (by gestures) the narrator’s act of getting to know the woman. Questions asked by the man (and then repeated many times by the interactor) turn into the visual material from which the portrait of the female protagonist is built and subsequently unveiled by the reader. Although the sentence fragments with which this image was “drawn” were an important component of the visual layer of the text (they needed to be of the right length and in the right colour, shaded in such a way that, overlapped, they could form the portrait), as a translator, I was not given any guidance as to the expected or desired phrase length. Thus, one could venture a guess that their precisely measured shape was not particularly significant for the algorithm. So again, the interactive nature of *Loss of Grasp* did not affect my work – the phrases in the code were replaced with translations by Bouchardon himself, whereas I simply checked that the sentences (in the initial phase) remained legible.

¹⁴ This type of translation is referred to by Małecka and Marecki – in the context of Giełżyńska’s texts – as “total” translation (Marecki, Małecka 2016).

It was not until the finale of that scene that I faced a real challenge which required me to reach for other translation strategies. The “alterations” (flatteries), word plays involving almost homonymous, but semantically different sentences, forced me to consider at length the phonetic dimension of the text and to reach for the tradition of sound and avant-garde poetry and the working methods employed by such translators.¹⁵ I was not alone in this experience, as it was both my own belief and that of other translators, that preserving the nature of the linguistic play was more important than a strictly literal translation of the source sentences. The following serves as an illustration of the translators’ struggle with this fragment: “Mogę cię zaprosić na drinka?” / “Czy nie za ciemna ta szminka?” (English “Can I get you another drink?” / “Caning gets you into the drink” and French “Puis-je vous offrir un autre verre?” / “Pigeon ouïr en Notre Père?”) or “Podoba mi się, jak się śmiejesz” / “Podoba mi się, jak siwiejesz” (English “I like the way you smile” / “I light the west aisle”, French “J’aime votre façon de sourire” / “Gêne, votre gaçon mourir?”). Diogo Marques (the translator of the Portuguese version) stressed that it was crucial for him to capture “that specific French humour present in all of Serge’s interactive fictions” (Bouchardon, Meza 2020: 12), and Asunción Alonso, the translator of the Spanish version, openly admitted that, in order to achieve the same “surprise effect” she saw in the source text, she “played quite freely with the phonetics” (Bouchardon, Meza 2020: 11). It was the same in my own case; while keeping the sense of the source sentences, in the case of “alterations” I focused on the phonetic expressiveness of those sets of phrases and was careful to achieve the ludic effect clearly perceptible in the original version, something that was in fact crucial for the narrative itself (the awkwardness of those “skewed” sentences, especially in the light of what the protagonist intended to say, reveals another dimension of losing or not having a grasp over one’s life, and also adds more essence to the love story as such).

Therefore, for most of the translators it was not familiarity with the code as such that proved to be of key importance in the work on this fragment, but their knowledge and understanding of the tradition of avant-garde literature.¹⁶ The only translator among those I have come to know who reached

¹⁵ Additionally, I had to find a person who would read out the text and prepare the audio files.

¹⁶ This is connected with the fact that for all its innovative character, *Loss of Grasp* can also be seen as a part of the e-lit trend that can clearly be read as a continuation of avant-

out to other such contexts was Valerie Bouchardon, who was in charge of the English version. As the author himself emphasises, the method she chose appears to be the result of many discussions they held. The artist's wife drew on her experience as a teacher of English, and applied her knowledge of the most frequent mistakes made by students (Bouchardon, Meza 2020: 12). What seems most interesting, however, is that she had reasons to choose a strategy that was not only different from those mentioned above, but also from the one she eventually decided to apply. This is because she was the only translator who knew that the “distorted” sentences in the French version originated as a machine effect,¹⁷ since they were created using special software for generating such “alterations” (Bouchardon, Meza 2020: 11). And yet, following discussions with her husband (!), she too decided to reproduce this playful linguistic element by means of deliberate, intentional and (humanly) creative actions, without resorting to any such software. Interestingly, Erémina, who worked on her translation after Bouchardon and Meza published their analyses (and was therefore aware of the strategy applied by the artist), admitted that she nevertheless “could not repeat this procedure due to technological issues” and instead also focused on phonetic games (she lists surrealism among her greatest inspirations).¹⁸

Until the publication of Bouchardon and Meza's analyses,¹⁹ none of the other translators were aware of the original intention. Moreover, Bouchardon did not suggest to any of the translators²⁰ the need to repeat a solution

garde literature: its new-media incarnation (cf. e.g. Glazier 2002, subject to an obvious caveat that *Loss of Grasp* is written in prose).

¹⁷ It might be worth stressing here that the “machine effect” (of the text) is present in more than one place in *Loss of Grasp*. For instance, the sentences that spring out from under the son's essay are machine-processed (Bouchardon subjected the audio files with translation to further processing as he wanted to obtain a slightly robotic sound). Interestingly, in the latest – Russian – translation, everything that the teenager says is processed, because the voice of the same person who asked the questions as the man a while earlier was used. In this case, digital processing made it possible to solve the problem of the unavailability of a professional voice-over artist due to pandemic-related restrictions (I obtained this piece of information in a private conversation with Meza).

¹⁸ I am citing this from my private correspondence with that translator from the beginning of 2021.

¹⁹ They were *de facto* made public during the ELO conference in 2020.

²⁰ Although I did discuss those fragments with Bouchardon as I worked on my translation, this issue never emerged in our conversations. As with other translators, I believed that I was going to reproduce the author's intention as well as the deliberate original linguistic playfulness. The translator of the Italian version even summarised it in this way (which I am quoting here, a bit tongue-in-cheek, from Bouchardon's paper): “I played with the sound of

used in the French version of the work; he simply assented to the departure from that strategy in the case of the English version, prompting one to ask: which language version, French or English, is in fact the first/source/original version of the work? The question is further complicated by the fact that some translators, including myself, with Bouchardon's consent,²¹ used the English-language version as the source text, mainly due to the fact that *Déprise* and *Loss of Grasp* were published simultaneously.²² The fact that the English version had been meticulously discussed with the author was also significant here.

One of the most difficult challenges for both myself and the Russian translator was Scene 3, in which the protagonist finds an ambiguous letter from his wife. The semantic ambivalence is illustrated here by the duality of the text itself, as it changes its meaning completely depending on the manner/direction of reading (i.e. guiding the cursor or, in the case of mobile screens,²³ unfolding the text with a gesture on the screen), even though it is composed of exactly the same lines. Various features of the Polish language brought about multiple difficulties in the translation process, as it was almost impossible to

the words in the <<alteration>>, as **Bouchardon did in the French version**" (Bouchardon, Meza 2020, p.11; bolded by AP).

²¹ From the beginning, this was one of my main issues, and one of the first questions I asked Bouchardon in the course of our preliminary talks about translation was whether such a situation was acceptable for him and if both these versions could be treated as the "source text"—precisely due to the special character of the English translation and the fact that they were both published at the same time. When I was working on the Polish translation, other language versions were already available, and therefore I could also (as I know both these languages very well) consult the Italian and Spanish translations (both based on the French text), as well as the Portuguese version (which was translated from English, just as in my case). I discussed any discrepancies found with Bouchardon. One example is the idiom used in Scene 4: "se cognant à l'occasion à quelques Zoïles", which V. Bouchardon omitted in her translation. Having consulted S. Bouchardon, I decided to reinstate it in the Polish version, thus making a departure from a strict adherence to the English language version. (There is in fact another fascinating aside here, as in the audio version, Roch Olesiński, an adolescent whose voice is heard in the recording, uses the correct form of the proper noun Zoil [male genitive: "Zoila"], while in the text that we read on the screen a feminine declined form ["Zoïle"] is displayed, as I wanted to render with such a mistake the unnaturalness of that phrase in a school essay).

²² I am inclined to treat this double publication as a model illustration of the problem of the language colonisation of e-literature. Such language domination of e-lit output in English was highlighted by Montfort and Marecki, when they discussed the *Renderings* project years ago (Marecki, Montfort 2017).

²³ As of the date of the publication of this article, the Polish language version was not available for touchscreens.

avoid the vision of having to change endings when the sequence of lines is reversed. Choosing a linguistic shape for these phrases that would allow them to enter into a dual semantic relationship with the surrounding lines without losing the meaning or natural speech flow, was a significant challenge (this was also clearly emphasised by Erémina). Neither of us had to look into the code (which determines in a manner that is comprehensible for the machine the relationship between the reader's movements and the sequence in which individual lines are to be displayed),²⁴ and our familiarity with the *versus cancrini* tradition and similar word plays was particularly helpful.²⁵

Work on the highly interactive Scene 4 involved classical, purely philological strategies of translation. The essay of the protagonist's son that is crucial for this scene is read out by a voice-over artist, whilst also being visible on the screen. It was a translation challenge primarily in terms of the style of the text. It should sound like a teenager's writing assignment, and many of the devices used served this very purpose (e.g. vocabulary balancing on the verge of sophisticated correctness, artificiality and colloquiality; syntax that sometimes imitates natural speech and sometimes gets overly complex; rhetorical questions that are representative of a school paper, not of a teenager's spoken language). In terms of style, it was also important to capture the difference between the "scholarly" succinctness of the essay

²⁴ If we adopted the concept that the translator must look into the code, an alternative solution would be to propose such a modification (a sort of "translation" of the code, in fact), that would make it possible to feed two versions of each line into the code and determine a condition that would have to be satisfied to display one of them. However, it is worth highlighting here that in such a case, certain qualities would undoubtedly become "lost in translation", namely the smooth flow between the lines. Therefore, applying the proven tradition seems to be a better solution here from the point of view of the accuracy and adequacy of the translation.

²⁵ In the Polish version, this fragment was translated as follows: „Wiem, że to dla Ciebie szok / Nasze uczucie / Zwyciężyło / Jakieś drobne nieporozumienie / Już nic nie znaczy / Wzajemne oczarowanie / Jest żywsze niż kiedykolwiek wcześniej / Poczucie obojętności / Zniknęło / Kochanie / Ja Cię Kocham / Od pierwszej chwili zastanawiałam się, jak możesz wierzyć, że / Nie chcę z Tobą dłużej zostać / Chciałabym, żeby wszyscy Twoi przyjaciele wiedzieli, że / »Przecież w każdym związku jest ktoś, kto cierpi, i ktoś, kto jest znudzony« / To kłamstwo / Wszystko, co do Ciebie czuję, to miłość”, and in the reversed version: „Wszystko, co do Ciebie czuję, to miłość / To kłamstwo, / »Przecież w każdym związku jest ktoś, kto cierpi, i ktoś, kto jest znudzony« / Chciałabym, żeby wszyscy Twoi przyjaciele wiedzieli, że / Nie chcę z Tobą dłużej zostać / Od pierwszej chwili zastanawiałam się, jak możesz wierzyć, że / Ja Cię Kocham / Kochanie / Zniknęło / Poczucie obojętności / Jest żywsze niż kiedykolwiek wcześniej / Wzajemne oczarowanie / Już nic nie znaczy / Jakieś drobne nieporozumienie / Zwyciężyło / Nasze uczucie / Wiem, że to dla Ciebie szok”.

and the cruel curtness of the sentences that later emerged from beneath it (thanks to interaction), hurting the narrator. Importantly, all decisions I had to make here concerned the traditional dimension of the text. Neither its audio-visual nature nor the pre-planned interactions influenced its verbal shape. It was Bouchardon who was in charge of fixing technological glitches, if any, related to the substitution of the verbal component (the modifications I suggested were always introduced after consultation, e.g. adjusting the tempo of unfolding the text to align it, at least approximately, with the voice-over).

Let me add here that Scene 5, which was crucial for many researchers focusing on the new rhetorical figures associated with interactivity (Alice Bell used it as an example when she described a variation of interactional metalepsis [Bell 2016]), was no more challenging from the translator's perspective than any regular text. The same is true of the final scene. In this case, I had to pay special attention to finding suitable equivalents for the synonymous terms related to control that appear one by one on the screen. The linguistic form of this fragment also determined the ultimate shape of the Polish title. It seemed important to me that in the source text (English, but not French) the same word was included in the title as the one which is never fully typed in the last scene, as it is interrupted by the end of the whole work. This is why, instead of the literal unambiguity implicit in the two-part English title and most of the translations that mimic it, I decided to introduce here a play on words, inspired by the French title²⁶ and based on a neologism.²⁷ Instead of the literal *Utrata panowania* (*Loss of Grasp*, meaning loss of control), I proposed *(Nie)panowanie* (*(Non)control*), which incorporates in the very fabric of the word both a crucial contradiction and semantic duplicity, as in concrete poetry. This decision, in consultation with and approved by Bouchardon, was also driven by the fact that the text is not only a story about the loss of grasp, but also about a smooth transition from the state of confidence in having that grasp to the realisation of its loss. Moreover, the very experience of being between these two extremes (or experiencing them in unison), is an important component of the story. I also found it crucial to render all possible levels of ambiguity of the state that is defined by synonyms in the text as having grasp/control/following

²⁶ *Déprise* denotes both “disappointment” and grasping to hold (*la prise*: a hook, catch) or an activity involving taking action (*prise* meaning action *d’assumer*, as in *prise en charge*) and in the prefixed negatives thereof.

²⁷ Even though the word *niepanowanie* is not listed in dictionaries, it is not perceived as a clear-cut neologism and sounds rather natural and understandable.

their own path. And in this situation, in my own case, my (un)awareness of the code did not influence the translation itself in any way (nor, for that matter, in the case of other translators).

It remains my hope that the method of translation work outlined here has helped illustrate the issues signalled in this article. I am convinced that in the case of *Déprise*, my working methodology (and also that of other translators), was determined by the very nature of the code, which I by no means disregarded. This also governed the shape of other translators' collaborations with Bouchardon. As in *Loss of Grasp* algorithms determine how we interact with various (also verbal) elements and when the text is displayed (and not just the final form of the text), it is possible to substitute in the code the language version of what is to be displayed on the screen / played as audio. This was Bouchardon's task (and it was also him who suggested this way of working). The next stage was to check that everything worked properly and make minor adjustments, if necessary. Throughout this process, there was little room, if any, for the translator to deal with the code.²⁸

Such a method of cooperation between the programmer-author and the translator would not work for all varieties of e-lit, for example most generative texts. However, it seems appropriate and useful for a number of e-lit works. Therefore, the translation of *Déprise* is repeatable not only in the sense that it has been made repeatedly (into many languages, in an analogous way, with similar results), but also because the translation strategy adopted there could also be applied to other texts. In 2015, when working on the translation of José Aburto Zolezzi's *Concepción del Dragón*, I did not even have access to the file with the code. At the same time, Łukasz Dróżdź, whose task was to enter the Polish version of the text into the code,²⁹ did not require from me any input into this code. Instead, he only needed the text files with 79 incarnations of the translated poem, which – in a sequence determined by an algorithm – were to appear on the screen.³⁰ For me, it was

²⁸ The situation became even more complicated due to the fact that as the text migrated between the platforms, the differences between the Flash version and the one in JavaScript would have to be taken into account, including the changes related to migrating from the PC version to the mobile one (these issues are briefly referred to by Bouchardon and Meza in their article).

²⁹ In this case, I collaborated both with the author (to consult the verbal layer) and the programmer, whose task was to enter the Polish version of the text into the code.

³⁰ The work, controlled by the reader who turned a knob, would fold and unfold from a little nucleus-like form to one filling the entire screen (the reader could trace its gradual coming into being, the eponymous conception).

enough to number the text files to reflect this sequence, which was crucial for the semantics of the text.

Let me emphasise again that this overview does not aim to offer a comprehensive or in-depth analysis of the problem – this would not only exceed the limitations of the article itself, but also my own competence as an inexperienced translator. However, it seems significant that even the *Déprise* translators with extensive experience (Erémina), made diagnoses that were identical to mine. Therefore, it is not only competence and experience that is at play here. Discussions on the translation of electronic literature are still a separate (and in a way inbred) stream of translational reflection.³¹ Perhaps, especially in the context of the increasing expansion of e-lit publications and the clear need for translation of the (not yet fully established) canon, it would be worth looking at this issue more broadly. I would also attach the greatest importance to the need to hold onto these considerations when researching digital textuality and literature comprising more than just verbal communication. It would also be important to recognise the diversity of e-literature forms and to abstain from insisting on finding one effective translation strategy for all of them, let alone insisting that there are “no rules” here, that such translation is always (and equally) experimental.

Inventiveness instead of archiving, or preserving e-literature as experimental translation

Bouchardon’s works, especially *Loss of Grasp*, offer an excellent opportunity to dwell for a moment on yet another dimension of e-literature translation, namely trans-platform translation. In their decision cited above, the Robert Coover Award jury stressed the significance of the fact that *Déprise* (originally developed in Flash and for PC), has been subjected to trans-platform translation twice,³² thanks to which it is still available to audiences. It is not my intention to elaborate in detail on that translation, made with the participation of Bouchardon, but I make reference to it here in order to highlight the fact that, as platforms/programmes become obsolete more and more quickly, this type of translation often becomes the only way of archiving, or preserving,

³¹ Panels or even conferences on this type of translation have been held for a number of years (e.g. *Translating E-Literature* that was organised in Paris in 2012 and then repeated regularly, or the annual panels devoted to translation at ELO conferences).

³² Firstly in 2018, it was translated into JavaScript, then – to a mobile application.

literary works. It is also becoming more and more common to find that the task of rescuing works created with outdated interfaces takes the form of a remodelling, creative re-creation, which Bouchardon and Bruno Bachimont included in the category of digital archiving as “reinvention” (Bachimont, Bouchardon 2009). Indeed, when deciding to implement these types of actions, it is necessary to, as it were, reinvent the texts anew (or at least the way they work). Thus, it is the trans-platform translation that truly can be said to be experimental translation, which in turn would be a topic for a separate article.

While it might appear that translators, or even researchers, of literature do not need to concern themselves with the matters discussed here, these are in fact crucial issues. Texts that are not translated into other platforms disappear, and it is not as easy as just going to a good library if you want to find them. Many of us have cruelly experienced this in the context of Flash, whose poetics practically shaped one of the stages in the history of e-literature. Alice Bell has recently referred to the scale of the problem most aptly, asking a simple question: “Imagine if we couldn’t archive Shakespeare or Dickens, or Mary Shelley. We would lose those works. We wouldn’t want to lose those works. We don’t want to lose these digital fiction works either.”³³ Bell made this comment when discussing *Digital Fiction Curios*, the project which she co-created and which allows us to reproduce in a VR environment the experience of reading selected works by Andy Campbell and Judi Alston³⁴ from nearly twenty years ago (developed in Flash and therefore unreadable today). Such works, created in the Dreaming Methods studio, which today can only be viewed as retro-curious, are not isolated cases.³⁵ If action is not taken to recover and preserve texts by Polish e-literature authors, a considerable (and important, even if rather artistically

³³ Bell uses the term “digital fiction” when she refers to electronic prose (and this is the category to which the works being “reinvented” in the project belong). However, it is worth remembering that many e-lit works created using Flash are poetry, also in Polish. Cf. *Digital Fiction Curios Preview Night* [documentation], <https://vimeo.com/384415417> [access: 05.01.2021].

³⁴ Such an experience may be considered in the context of playing retro games made with the use of this technology (cf. Grabarczyk 2020). In such projects, users are invited not only to experience the works themselves, but are also offered an introduction to each of those works, presented in an unconventional way.

³⁵ It is worth emphasising here that works on the archiving of those artists’ output originally developed in Flash are still in progress, while the works that have become VR-ready have received a new “reconstructed life” and are available again on the artists’ websites. In their new projects, the team behind *Digital Fiction Curios* focuses on the multi-platform compatibility of those reconstructions – the works are intended to be made available not only

poor in the opinion of some) slice of Polish e-lit will not so much go down in history, as it will (irretrievably?) sink into its gloomy waters. Moreover, this does not apply only to texts from the field of pure electronic literature. Let me remind you that Zenon Fajfer's liberature work *Ars Poetica* was published in Flash and as such is currently unavailable.³⁶ Therefore, ironically, the "death" of Flash strikes directly into that which was initially (although perhaps not eventually) considered to be in direct opposition to electronics. The situation is even more complicated by the fact that Fajfer himself, a model writer looking for his medium between platforms, also subjected his texts to a kind of trans-platform translation, of which *Ars Poetica* is actually a perfect example – it was first published (and interpreted) as an individual online manifesto text, and then included (as a part of *Primum Mobile*, in the CD version) in the volume titled *dwadzieścia jeden liter / ten letters*, constructed precisely at the interface between print and electronics and tackling the question of analogue interactivity and electronic enslavement in a fascinating way, whilst also highlighting the issue of wrongful stereotyping of literary platforms.³⁷ It is also worth bearing in mind that

for VR, but also for PCs, mobile devices, touchscreens (information obtained in a conversation with Alice Bell).

³⁶ Cf. Z. Fajfer, "Ars Poetica", *Techsty* 3, https://www.techsty.art.pl/magazyn3/fajfer/Ars_poetica_polish.html [access: 20.02.2021]. Even more ironically, this work was included in the third volume of *Electronic Literature Collection* (luckily, a video documenting the process of reading of the Polish version of this work was published on the project website, cf. Z. Fajfer, *Ars Poetica*, https://collection.eliterature.org/3/works/ars-poetica/Ars_poetica_polish.html [access: 20.02.2021]). The final touches to this article were made at exactly the same time as the work on archiving subsequent volumes of the Electronic Literature Collection as a part of Electronic Literature Lab's project of creating a new archive of e-literature was being completed (*The NEXT*, cf. <https://the-next.eliterature.org>). Once *The NEXT* premiered, *Ars Poetica* became available again, but only in that archive (<https://the-next.eliterature.org/works/732/7> [access: 9.06.2021]) and in the archived volumes of the collection mentioned above; on the website of the *Techsty* magazine, where it was originally published in 2007, the work is no longer available (https://www.techsty.art.pl/magazyn3/fajfer/Ars_poetica_english.html [access: 9.06.2021]). Interestingly, as these updates are being added here, even though *Ars Poetica* was "brought back to life," the project's page on the collection website still displayed a sticky note with information that the works are still pending, so as of February 2021 this piece could not be preserved with Ruffle, and therefore at the next stage plans are in place to recreate it using Conifer (cf. <https://collection.eliterature.org/3/work.html?work=ars-poetica> [access 9.06.2021]).

³⁷ An analysis of Fajfer's trans-platform translations (taking into account e.g. the relationships between *Ars Poetica*, *Primum Mobile* and the *dwadzieścia jeden liter* volume) is necessary and will definitely be of interest. Unfortunately, it goes beyond the framework of this article.

what falls victim to the lability of platforms, software and tools, are most frequently hybrid, trans-platform creations, for example augmented reality books, situated – like Fajfer’s volume – at the junction of the physical and the electronic (e.g. such esteemed projects as the *Between Page and Screen* by Amaranth Borsuk and Brad Bouse).

An effective conclusion to this article was brought about by a specific date which coincided with the date of the “killing” of Flash, namely New Year’s Eve 2020/2021. Researchers, authors and enthusiasts of e-literature from all over the world gathered together, making toasts to the Flash generation, during a Zoom meeting organised by Dene Grigar. The meeting participants witnessed yet another translation of *Loss of Grasp*, as the author re-wrote in a humorous, yet bitter way the opening scene of *Déprise*, hitting the bull’s eye of the problem referred to here. Wherever possible, original sentences were rephrased to include the word *flash*, sometimes evoking the name of the Adobe platform which was originally used to develop the work, sometimes playing with idioms and expressions based on the word “flicker”/“flash” – deeply ironic in this context... The bitter question emerging from these phraseological games – “Won’t my work just be a flash in the pan?” – aptly sums up the essence of the problems described here, while at the same time playing with the ironic (probably unintentionally at first) sense of the dying platform’s name. Unfortunately, without taking steps to archive, preserve, or document the works created using “old new technologies”, even the most canonical works will only stay with us for a brief period, and all their successes will, indeed, be a mere “flash in the pan”.³⁸ It is not even so much for future generations as for the researchers in the next decade that such works will turn out to be merely ghost-texts on which some may even have written academic papers or PhD dissertations or other theses, but which are already unverifiable, and which no longer spark any discussion.³⁹ Do such works not deserve proper preservation? Or, more specifically, good translations?

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³⁸ My personal example in this case was the translation of *Concepción del dragon*, made with the use of Flash.

³⁹ The danger of such a possibility is confirmed and evidenced by the ever-growing *Collection of E-Lit Works Affected by “The Lability of the Device”*, also referred to as *Collection of Mutant Electronic Literature*, being a part of the ELMCIP Electronic Literature Knowledge Database (curated by Patricia Tomaszek).

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