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Cultus

THE JOURNAL OF INTERCULTURAL
MEDIATION AND COMMUNICATION

ICONESOFT EDIZIONI - GRUPPO RADIVO HOLDING
BOLOGNA - ITALY

Registrazione al Tribunale di Terni
n. 11 del 24.09.2007

Direttore Responsabile Agostino Quero
Editore Iconesoft Edizioni – Radivo Holding

Anno
ISSN 2035-3111
e-ISSN 2035-2948

Policy: double-blind peer review

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via Bizzarri 9 Calderara di Reno – 40012 (Bologna)

CULTUS

the Journal of Intercultural Mediation and Communication

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BOLOGNA

Alexander Preymak interviewed by David Katan

DK: Hello Alexander Preymak, and welcome to Cultus. Let's start with some basics. From your website we gather you are a “Russian video game translator, localisation tester, and type designer”. From English into Russian or other languages?

AP: From English to Russian. I rarely do Russian into English because my command of spoken English is fine. But to translate in a good way and to make it look like a work of a native is difficult! I tried, back in the day, but I didn't like the results and so I just stick with the Russian. So, English into Russian.

DK: Would you say your understanding of the translation profession in Russia is similar to what it is in any other country?

AP: First of all, I believe my experience is relevant only to videogames and only to the indie sector. The smaller games, not big projects like God of War, that series of action ‘hack and slash’ games about a Spartan warrior gone rogue trying to wipe out the whole pantheon of Greek gods for killing his family, or “Gears of War”, third-person shooter video games which focus on the conflict between humanity and subterranean reptilian hominids ...

DK: And the difference between these?

AP: So, basically there are different stages of game development: first come big AAA projects. Like "blockbuster" films. And then we descend into smaller projects, such as indie games, those who create games on their own, outside of any professional studio and they pay for the game themselves. We have some publishers now, sure, but it all started like an independent scene because people got sick of the big publishers, and they wanted to do something on their own. Now even indie is a big industry as well, but it is also a way smaller than those blockbuster games.

DK: What do you call yourself? What's on your business card? On your website it says "English/Russian video game translator".

AP: Yeah, that's how I call myself basically. That's what I do.

DK: I need to ask you first: is there a difference between game translation and game localization?

AP: Well, it depends on how you want to put it. Most of the time it is called localization in our business. Because during the translation process, you have to overcome some difficulties. Some things are just not too relatable in the target language. So, you have to work around them, you have to adapt them. Most of the time it's easy, but sometimes you have to do some additional things. For example, the game Thimbleweed Park is a strictly American-centred game. They use different things that we don't have in our language. For example, people who talk with different accents. We don't have accents in the Russian language.

DK: None?

AP: No. We have a pronunciation, something like variance.

DK: You can tell if somebody is from one region or one area?

AP: We can say that, but we don't see those as accents. They are not that definite.

DK: Right.

AP: So yeah, speaking about the Thimbleweed Park there were three characters who were talking in different American accents, like they were adding some suffixes to their words. I had to look through it and I had to invent my own suffixes to go with that, to accommodate the feeling, to just give the Russian players the same feeling as the English ones will be getting. That's localization. I had to invent it for it to work.

DK: So, what do you mean we didn't have it before?

AP: Those speech patterns. We don't have such things. It's strange. Something like linguistic agents. But with a suffix that lets you know it's an accent, we don't have this association.

DK: Not even in the original American?

AP: Not in the original American. It is a parody.

DK: So, it was invented.

AP: Yeah, it was invented but it was invented for the audience who was aware of that speech pattern, so Russians for example wouldn't understand that. They would say, what is that? we don't have it. We don't like it. So, I had to adapt.

DK: We are talking about subtitles.

AP: Yeah sure. Because small games don't have the budgets for recordings and that's why they mostly do in subtitles.

DK: So, who is commissioning you? Take me through that. Generally, who are the people you work with who are giving you these projects?

AP: It all started in 2013. I just started contacting developers via email, it was the easiest way.

DK: American developers?

AP: All around the world actually. The first big developer was Revolution Software and it's based in the UK. My first big project was Broken Sword 5, one of their big games. Basically, I work with people from all over the world. I've worked with Korean developers as well.

DK: So, you have to advertise yourself? Knocking on the doors of the developers in Britain saying “I’ll subtitle into Russian”.

AP: You can just say “I translate” into Russian because when you say translate, they understand what you are going to do because it is a general term. Yeah.

DK: And the general response was great? Or you had to push? How does that work when you are the one knocking on the door?

AP: The times back then, seven years ago, were pretty different. I had to write a lot of cold emails and they were just lying there waiting for people to read them and never to reply. But some of them replied and that’s how I got my first clients. One of the interesting cases is that of the director of Revolution Software, Charles Cecil. He was on Facebook back then and I just wrote to him in direct messages asking whether I could translate their new game. He replied and gave me his work email and we continued from there. When I completed the job and advertised it on my social networks then I started to grow somehow. I started to go to the developers saying “well I had this big gig and I can now do better”. That’s how I’m still in the business. I’m just constantly advertising myself to people. But I’m not doing it in order to get more projects or money. Of course, that’s the case, but I could say I’m in love with the industry, I’m very passionate about it and I’m always trying to advertise myself as a person who cares about games he translates. I believe that’s the first major point here. I just don’t do it for money or for exposure. Those are perks as well. I do it because I love the people I work with and I know most of them in person now. We’ve met during conventions before the pandemic. It’s a pretty lively industry where people know each other, care about each other. If you are good to people, on a general level, and you are friends with them like not for profit, just friends, it’s all starting to work in a good way. That’s what I believe.

DK: So, you’ve made your first contact, and Charles Cecil was clearly somebody who is open to this sort of thing. I noticed on the website he thanked you very much for doing exactly this sort of thing I’m

interested in, this translation *plus*. He talks about cultural issues and that's what caught my attention. I quote his words: "going beyond the job contracted to offer advice on cultural and other issues". Brilliant.

AP: If I remember correctly, there were some Russian related topics in the game. For example, there was an oligarch who was living in London, the usual stuff. They used some old Cyrillic letters on the typewriter. I looked through it, as I am a professional historian as well and I have some knowledge about this; and Broken Sword 5 is more about history, it's about the mediaeval Cathars. That was really my field of expertise. So, I was able to get all the right terms for localisation to make all sound well from an historical point of view too.

DK: You said this was a case of localization. You already had a Russian oligarch in this series, what happened to him? Did he become American or remain Russian?

AP: No. I just looked over the things they had in Russian, some bits. For example, those old Russian letters on the typewriter and I checked whether they were right to accommodate the atmosphere of the game. Not to sound cliché and not to look like a cliché because it's easy to make such mistakes. I helped them to get the meaning, so Russian players won't be confused. It was a graphical issue, like graphics of the game, like having the right sort of books on the shelf or something like that.

DK: And you gave them feedback where it was useful for the simulation of the game.

AP: It was up to them to use my feedback, but they really appreciated it. And I also helped to choose the fonts for the localisation. I chose the most similar Russian fonts. Because games always have fonts to go with text and some games use different fonts and some developers also create their own fonts to accommodate the feeling. Like if the game is a cartoon game, they use a cartoonish font. If the

game is a serious game, or maybe a horror game they use a horror stylized font. Something like that.

DK: For all the subtitling? All the way through? You use maybe a gothic style for the horror?

AP: Yeah, sure. I can do that now.

DK: But. So just for me to understand. In the video game in the original language obviously there will be no fonts because we are not subtitling. So, you're talking about the fonts for subtitling not fonts on the screen itself.

AP: All the fonts. Sometimes games use a lot of fonts.

DK: Give me an example. As you can see, I'm a little bit not into video games.

AP: If we go back to Thimbleweed Park, a game on my website, a game by Ron Gilbert, one of the famous game designers. They used different fonts. Like 8 fonts. For each part of the game. Otherwise, the main font is for dialogues.

My job here, apart from translating, is to make the similar looking subtitles, like in a stylish manner. To recreate with a similar font but with Cyrillic letters. Sometimes, most of the time, it really matters for representation, because Russian players will complain if the subtitles don't fit the style of the game. It will look off. Players don't like that. They are very vocal about it.

DK: If you go back to a different environment, traditional subtitling in film, very rarely I think you would have this discussion. Because subtitles in film would stick to a pretty standard pattern. They wouldn't go for "oh it's a foreign film or gothic" they wouldn't go for childish if it's a child speaking. But in video games that's fine. You do.

AP: I believe that's the main difference. Yeah. In films you just use a regular font like Arial, Times New Roman or something like that. It depends on the publisher for sure. They just don't pay much attention to it because it should be readable.

DK: Which system do you think is better?

AP: It's a different approach.

DK: Exactly.

AP: In films you just need to have subtitles. But in video games it's more from an artistic perspective because video games are complex works of art if you put it this way.

DK: So are films.

AP: Yes. But games, the main difference between films and video games is that a player for example is also the main actor of the process.

DK: So much more active involvement.

AP: Yes. And that's how you have to be more involved. With the help of all the artistic features that you can have: different fonts, voiceovers, graphics, music...

DK: What you say is fascinating because you could say exactly the same to a Stanley Kubrick or almost any film director who wants their audience to get totally involved, providing those extra layers of music, colour and so on. But the directors (except for Kubrick) don't think about the fact that when a film is shown to a foreign audience, not only will they lose the meaning and everything else, but the subtitling won't be used creatively in the way you're explaining that it is in video games. The subtitling could increase the involvement.

AP: I totally agree with that, because I watched some English movies here in Russia in theatres. Speaking about Stanley Kubrick, they were

showing “The Space Odyssey” two years ago on a big screen in IMAX. So I went, and of course it was in English with standard Russian subtitles. And that’s ok for a movie. They’re big, easy to read with a good font and that’s enough. But video games also have a lot of text apart from subtitles for speech. They have menus for options, for choosing different things that pop on the screen or tutorial messages and such. It all should be helping people to get into the game. That’s why they’re using different artistic ways of writing text. If you just put it on a regular font in a horror game that just won’t work. You have to go a step forward to make it more stylish and fancier.

DK: I get that for what’s on the screen. But what you are saying is with video games also the subtitling is part of the whole thing. This is something that I’m very interested in. What I did not know is that in video games the subtitling itself is also part of the effect. For the films it is not. It’s separate. It’s hidden, *below* the screen.

AP: Yeah, I’m talking about titles *on* the screen. Of course, there will always be subtitles for English too, for the deaf and the hard of hearing, and for anyone else who would benefit from reading in English. It all depends on the type of game or what the developer says. In games, dialogue subtitles often either pop up above the character speaking or in a separate tab with their portrait. Sometimes it’s just a line below the screen like classic film subtitles.

For example, I’m testing a video game now where characters don’t speak but they do use a variety of animated texts. So, we see bubbles, like in comics; and the text in those bubbles is animated. So, if a character wants to stress the point on some words, this word gets bigger, enlarged or distorted depending on the situation or on the way the character is saying this word. That’s a different approach and I really like it.

DK: When you first started knocking on doors and talking about what you do, the general response to your ideas of adapting for example the font and so on was collaborative? There was an element of surprise or this was “great, fantastic”?

AP: Most of the time people are up for the idea of adaptation, they are open to positive changes because small developers *do* care about their players. They know they are making the games for people to enjoy; and of course, if they have the chance to include something extra thing, to go that extra mile to accommodate different groups of players, for example the Russian players, the French players etc., they will do it if they have the budget for it and the time. These are two crucial factors. Of course, if you ask people to give you a chance to be included in a game you also give them your rates for it. An hourly rate or a rate for something extra. If they have time and money for it, they will agree. Most of the time of course they agree because I always explain to them how that would benefit a game to make more impact on the Russian players. So yes, in my experience developers are very responsive to this sort of intervention. I had one gig when a developer didn't want to include any change of font because he didn't know how to change the fonts in the game. But that was a very rare occasion. So, we had to stick with the same font. You just can't do anything if the developer doesn't know how to incorporate the change. You can help them if you know how to, but at the time I didn't know how to modify the font either. That was maybe my one negative experience in my line of work for all these seven years. That's rare as you can see.

DK: Were you able to ask for more money as a result of the extra work regarding fonts or did you just absorb this extra work?

AP: Now when I approach a developer or a publisher with the project I always say "so here are my general rates for a work, if you want extra here are my rates for extra work" like for a font or something else. We can do it all just in a bundle and I can give you a discount if you don't have enough money for it. I'm always flexible, that's my main point. I know how hard it is to make a video game for any developer because I know a lot of them personally, on a personal level. I know that some of them really struggle with a lot of things. So, I'm trying to be as approachable and flexible as I can be. I just give them a general feel on my translation approach, and maybe what you call the translation *plus*, and what I can do for this amount

of money. If they don't have enough money and I feel and I know that my services will benefit them I may create a new font for free, sure. Yes. If I like the developer and if we have chemistry or something like that.

DK: I'm getting the idea that in general the people you work with are very happy to go the extra mile, to pay for the extra. And that was very much from the very first day? I'm beginning to understand that in general you began saying "I will translate and I can also collaborate, cooperate. There's an extra benefit". That explanation of the translation *plus* was built in at the very beginning or did it develop as a result of looking at the translations you were doing, and noticing that you were getting more involved and doing more than just "translating the text".

AP: I believe the second way is truer to me. When I started, I was very young, I was fresh. I had to learn during the process of developing as a translator. My first degree is History and English. So, I have the basics of linguistics, sure. My second degree was in Art and Animation. That's how I learnt how to create fonts and all the artistic stuff. That all combined I believe gave me the possibility to advertise myself. But I had to learn, I had to adapt, I had to understand how the market works, what people want, what players want. Now I know what I want to offer people. I started offering the whole bundle maybe three to four years ago. That's when I was sure and able to handle it all. Plus, it's not always translation, it's always testing.

DK: So, a real translation *plus*...

AP: ... you translate the game and then you have to test it. You have to test your text, for all kinds of stuff like bugs or how the game works with your translation in general; how the characters talk to each other. You see, I translate mostly adventure games where texts and dialogues are crucial. So, it's all dialogues. Most of the time it's just like playing, or rather reading, a book. When you click on dialogue options or actions your character can perform, you listen to

the options or the character explaining. And, of course, your in-game character talks with the other characters. So mostly dialogues. It's a form of literary translation so yes, I try to approach it as if I was translating a novel. I have never translated real literature, but I have a friend who is a university professor of English literature here in my town and he still translates so I always have a source of experience to ask for counselling and advice.

DK: When you present the bill, would this testing be a separate item, that would be clearly marked as a separate item or it's not that clear. Do they realise they are getting a better service?

AP: That's tricky here. Because as I mentioned before not all the small developers have a lot of money. Most of the time the budget is very strict. I'm speaking from my own experience, when you offer your rates for work for me it also includes testing. Whenever you translate a video game, the general approach will always be like one or two playthroughs to catch all the mistakes, to correct all the bugs. Of course, if it's an extra mile I can say "I can test more extensively if you pay me for this as well". My general testing services are included in my translation price. My extra hours for fonts are included in my extra price for fonts and other artistic related texts.

DK: Is there a particular software that you use?

AP: There are several programs for that. I use the one called Font Forge. It's an open-source program.

DK: Okay. That's just for the fonts. And then when you are actually working on the video game translation or localisation and you're changing the fonts and you're actually writing in Russian you are not using Word. Are you using a subtitling software or is it video game software?

AP: It is actually pretty simple. I stick to the retro things. Speaking about small games, we mostly work on spreadsheets because game engines, like the software for games, use spreadsheets to export and

import text into the game. So, most of the time it's just an online document, a Google sheet.

DK: Oh, so you don't integrate.

AP: No, I don't integrate. I rarely integrate. There is a clear separation between me and the developer. They send me all the files, even the font files if they want me to change them to insert Russian characters into it. And I use my program, like a spreadsheet. Some translators use automated tools for translation, CAT tools. I don't use them, I used them once, but I didn't like it that much because I try to approach every single project as a new one - without any suggested translation - to gain all the extra knowledge from the game itself, for me as a professional.

DK: So not even Google Translate?

AP: No, I don't use Google Translate. It's easier to translate yourself than to put it on Google Translate and edit it. I've been there, trust me. You can't make it all sound authentic. I know that some big companies who are making blockbusters are starting to use DeepL for games like football simulators where you have to translate a lot of specific terms and there's not a lot of actual human speech. So, in that case maybe that would help. They still would run it all through editors because the human factor is crucial. People are not going anywhere, I hope, in the foreseeable future. My Russian colleagues and other translators I've worked with from other languages don't trust all of this either. Because for example, speaking about games every single game has its own text, like a book. Authors just pour themselves into the pages, they fill it with emotions and all other things they want to direct to the reader or player.

DK: So, what do you use?

AP: I have my basics, my monolingual and bilingual dictionaries, and some style guides, glossaries, plotlines or specific character references that the developers send, so that I already have a general understanding of the game. But most of the time the programmes I

use are spreadsheets like Word, Excel or the program the developer wants me to work with. It's easy to work with them, they are very similar.

DK: So, you don't work with subtitling software?

AP: Yes. I have worked with subtitles once, but not for a developer. Speaking about video games, it's the developer who does all the work for you. Sometimes they can automate the process. For example, they can send you a build of a game - a build is a working version of the game - and they can give you access to it so you can upload your text on the go. So, you translate and upload it, then you check it in the game and make changes if necessary.

DK: Okay. So, you don't work with what's on the screen because you wouldn't be able to do that. Basically, it's the text that you're given and you work with the text and you change font there.

AP: I work with things on screen when I test the game. So, I play the game with my text in it and make screenshots of mistakes, of inconsistencies and such and then I correct my files according to the screens I got from the game.

DK: Sounds like a very long job.

AP: Yeah, sometimes it takes hours. Most of the adventure games, maybe from five to ten hours to complete - and that's if you know how to play it! But then, if you have to stop the game, to check everything thoroughly, it takes more time. Not weeks but some days. That's another part of the job. You just finish your translation, you send it to the developer, they put it on the game. Then they give you access to the Russian version and you test it. This is a good and simple way of testing, most of the time.

DK: Very interesting!

AP: Now I'm testing the game I mentioned with cartoonish pop ups. Someone else did the translation and I was hired to test it for cultural

difficulties and such things. It is a very interesting game and contains a lot of teen slang. The developer wanted me to check that the translation worked ok. The translation was done by an agency, not by a freelancer like me, so they wanted to go this extra mile and so they hired me as an independent expert to look over it and to fix some aspects if I saw the necessity. The translation was pretty good, it rendered a lot of things in a good way, there are a lot of good solutions. But still, I had to fix some context-related things because clearly neither the original translator nor the developer had played the game - so I'm doing it for them. I'm just correcting some phrasings, some words we don't often use in Russian. I always ask developers whether I should change anything. They believe in my expertise, but I'm always trying to receive feedback before I change anything because I'm not a game developer. And I respect that. So, I'm trying to be as respectful as I can to another person's work. That can be described as localisation, too. My job is to make sure that those things in English sound as good in Russian. The players have to understand it.

DK: What do you do if something isn't very obvious, but is a very American way of doing things or a European way of saying something. Do you look for a Russian equivalent? Or do you want to keep the foreign to let your gamers know the game is set in an American, European, English environment?

AP: That's the main difficulty of localisation. For example, I translated a game called Kentucky Route Zero. It is about America, and it could be described as, how they say, the Southern Gothic genre, a mixture of southern United States and Gothic, and it has a lot of magical realism in it. It is a very well written game, and it is taught at the universities as a good example of video game narrative. It's about American problems. It's about gentrification, building a lot of new houses, not accommodating the old ones. The thing is it's a very American game if you look at it from one angle, but it is really a universal theme when you dig into it. My purpose was to translate it to get Russian players to understand that behind this façade of these purely American problems, there are some very regular ones

for all of humanity. So that's the thing. I had to open this door with my translation. Of course, I have a very talented editor, she is my saviour, we've been working together for four years now. She helped me a lot because she's not just Russian, she's studied the language and is a great writer, a professional poet. So, in some ways she knows Russian way better than me and that's a crucial factor too. You have to know your language intimately if you want to translate it.

DK: Well, that's an important point but my students aren't always aware of that.

AP: They should. My goal was to make it sound Russian but not to lose the American flavour if you know what I mean. So, players need to understand that they are not in Russia right now.

DK: So, you don't take them back into Russia. You let them go to America, feel the difference, but at the same time it's global.

AP: I use Russian words, I use Russian phrasings but here in Russia we also have a tradition on how to render things for readers, listeners or players just to know that they are not in Russia. The way we translate street names is different for English or American. We always use transliteration so it will sound American but in Russian letters. We use methods we have developed throughout the history of translation. The idea is to get people into this area, into this bubble of American things. Also, it must be accessible for Russians. So, they wouldn't get lost. They would hear some words that would sound American. They will understand that they're not in Russia, but in Kentucky. I believe I did well. I've read some reviews and it's rare that people say something about 'translation'. That's the best you can get from them - to not notice that it is a translation. I'm really proud of it. It's a huge toil. It took me three years to translate. The game consisted of five different accents and five interludes, and they were all very different. They also had an interlude which is actually a staged play and I had to adapt this as well.

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DK: Well, you have been wonderfully generous with your time and I really appreciate this.

AP: Thanks for having me.