

Localization of videogames from Russian and into Russian: common methods and usual problems

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From the early nineties and to modern times Russian videogames market keeps stably growing. Nowadays it occupies from 1.5 to 2 percent of the global market, according to Mail.ru Group statistics. Due to Russian language being the sixth most popular in the world and one of the official languages of United Nations, problem of translating videogames both from Russian and into Russian became crucial for developers in recent decades. In my research I'm going to cover the primary methods of videogame localization and show some most common problems translators usually face adapting Russian games for foreign public and adapting foreign games for Russian audience.

During my research I've examined a number of popular videogames based on their original language and available translated versions. Therefore, I've divided them into two groups. First one consists of videogames, originally made in English and then translated into Russian (Hearthstone, Watch Dogs, WarCraft 3, Portal 2). The second group of games, thereby, contains videogames, originally made in Russian and then translated into English (Everlasting Summer, S.T.A.L.K.E.R. Call of Pripjat, Beholder, and Metro: Redux). Both versions of those games were analyzed in order to find certain patterns localizers work by and spot common mistakes, if those were made.

The first stage of my work was reviewing the basic terminology that is related to the localization process. Therefore, video game localization itself is the preparation of video game software and hardware for sale in a new region or country [3]. It is important to admit, that although translating the text itself is a large part of localization, the process involves any changes made to a game. This can include altering art assets, creating new packaging and manuals, recording new audio, editing in-game textures and so on [2]. The main goal of the video game localization is the recreation of similar gaming experience among representatives of the target audience, despite their level of language proficiency and cultural experience. That is why translation is even made: developers want to be sure, that more people (not only native speakers of the original language) will be able to figure out how to play, understand the plot and emphasize the characters. High-quality localization means higher probability of commercial success of a particular game in a target region and, therefore, higher income for a developer.

Localization consists of three main methods: translation, transliteration and adaptation.

Translation is the communication of the meaning of a source-language text by means of an equivalent target-language text [5]. The key word here is «equivalent»: translated text should have the same (or as close as possible) meaning as the original one. There can be either word-for-word or sense-for-sense translation. Word-for-word translation is done by translating each word separately, choosing the closest synonyms for each individual one. In sense-for-sense translation, however, we should look on sentences as a whole and recreate their sense in context.

Transliteration is basically mapping from one system of writing into another, typically grapheme to grapheme. This is a specific instrument, used by translators when they encounter

proper nouns or neologisms: those can be either transliterated (written grapheme-to-grapheme in other language) or translated (if the name is «talking», has some sense in it).

Adaptation is a key method in localization process and, at the same time, the most difficult one. Its difficulty is in necessity to take into consideration cultural specificity of target audience [1]. There are situations, when certain phrase, joke or reference just doesn't have a direct analogue in other language and you need to adapt it: change on an equivalent to make understandable for a representative of a different culture.

Let us now cover the main types of work translators carry out face during localization process. Those can be roughly divided into four main categories:

1. Translation of words and phrases that do not depend on the context.
2. Translation of contextual words and phrases.
3. Translation of inequivalent vocabulary and neologisms.
4. Adaptation of specific cultural aspects.

Most of the in-game text belongs to the first category: words and phrases that do not depend on context [1]. Those are all kinds of short dialogue lines, written notes, interface elements, individual texts. Such phrases don't require translator to see what is going on in the game at the moment and usually can be translated without any problems. Those can occur, however, if the translator simply isn't skilled enough or is working in a rapid tempo.

The second category is more complicated. Sometimes certain phrases refer directly to a current in-game situation. That means, that it can be rather difficult for a translator to guess, how exactly he should translate a particular phrase [1]. It is easy to make a mistake, if translator doesn't have access to at least an explanation of what is going on in a scene the text is taken from.

Another category is associated with the proper adaptation of names, neologisms and other unique lexicon. The matter is, that any game is a unique universe, that has its own unique terms, proper names and other words [1], that we don't use in the real world. The most important thing for translator here is to decide, if he will either translate, transliterate or adapt each individual word or phrase. Sometimes it is also hard to predict, if there will be any wordplay or references based on a certain name, therefore, wrong choice of analogue at the beginning can ruin the scene later in the game.

The final category is associated with adaptation of specific cultural aspects. The matter is that a certain language is always the part of a certain culture, and any culture is unique. It means that some associations, cultural connections, traditions, that are common for representatives of one culture, can be incomprehensible for representative of another one. Therefore, if such aspects are found in a game, localizers have to change them to other, understandable for their culture analogues that should have the same meaning. It is often a nightmare for translator, even an experienced one. There is no universal formula for dealing with such problem, decisions vary a lot and depend on a particular phrase and translator's creativity. Sometimes you can just provide explanation via text clouds or hints, sometimes you have a perfectly fitting foreign analogue for a tricky phrase, but those are mostly exceptions, not the rule.

In summary, my research has shown that there is no fundamental difference between translation from English into Russian and translation from Russian into English. In both cases, localizers share exact same problems and use the exactly same methods to overcome them. Moreover, the biggest part of translational mistakes is made due to either lack of access to game materials or necessity to translate large amount of text in a short period of time, not because of unprofessionalism or negligence.

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