

An Interview about Community Localization in Slovakia

Milan Velecký

Faculty of Arts, Comenius University in Bratislava

velecky.milan@gmail.com

This interview was originally conducted in order to have a closer look at the situation in Slovakia regarding community localization – fan translation of video games – in a bachelor’s thesis in the spring of 2022. It was conducted by Milan Velecký, a student of the Translation Studies program at the Faculty of Arts of Comenius University in Bratislava. The respondent was Mário Csaplár, who is also known under the nickname “MixerX” on the www.lokalizacie.sk website and who has dedicated many years to community localization. His community localization of the Grand Theft Auto III video game by Rockstar Games was the subject of research.

How did you get into the localization of computer games?

I was playing a video game, specifically Grand Theft Auto III, and I was wondering if I could play it in a language that I completely understood. At that time, I didn’t know there was something like the localization of video games, so I googled to see if GTA could be played in another language. A Czech fan translation came up, so I tried it out. I didn’t like the fact that it was a Czech localization without diacritics. It was flawed; for instance, female characters spoke using the masculine gender and vice versa. It had errors resulting from inadequate testing, apparently with no proofreading. When I was looking for a better version, I found a Slovak localization. That was back in 2005 or 2006. I tried it out and discovered that it was a literal translation of the same Czech localization. I was outraged as it was quite lousy too. For example, the Czech version had this sentence: “*Čau, kotě!*”¹. The Slovak version had this one: “*Čau, koťa!*” And yet

¹ i.e., “Hey, baby!” in English

Velecký, Milan. 2022. Interview about community localization in Slovakia. In: L10N Journal. 1(2), p. 53–58.

the word “koťa” does not even exist in Slovak. Back then, the existence of such an activity caught my attention, and I thought that it could be done better and must be done better – with diacritics and in such way that would make sense. I also became interested in technical aspects, i.e., how could I add those diacritics there.

Did you study anything about translation theory or localization at the time?

Not at the time. When I completed my localization, I searched for a place where I could publish it. I found many online portals with unofficial video game localizations, where there was some kind of trend that “kids” who wanted to improve their language skills could work on these community localizations; for example, on the www.slovinciny.com website the age range of community localizers² ranged from fourteen to nineteen years around 2005. That was the situation, and so the translations reflected that. Over time, however, I became profoundly interested in the topic because I saw that what was being published on these websites at the time had the same drawbacks as the faulty fan translations that had prompted me to localize GTA III in the first place – they had a lot of semantic or grammatical errors. It was back then that I started to show that while fan translation is work that is done in one’s free time and in an amateur environment, it is still up to the author how much effort they put into it and what level of quality they want to achieve. I personally believe that a person can get to a certain level just by practice and carefully thinking about what they are doing, and having someone showing them the mistakes. As for a manual on how to do it, we have a core one. Then we also have term bases for each project, and we try to work systematically. It’s certainly on a higher level than before.

When you talk about “we”, who do you mean?

I speak for the entire team of the www.lokalizacie.sk website. There are currently about fifteen active members, and we now coordinate on project management and fulfillment.

² i.e., a person who localizes software

Back when you started, was this job done only by community localizers such as yourself?

There were also professional game localizations, but they were often on the same level as the community localizations – they were improvised. A Košice-based company named Kon Tiki released about twenty Slovak game localizations, and they even did the dubbing, but it was really on the same level as those amateur translations that I did not like. There were all sorts of mistakes. But this company did it officially. They had a license to make an official Slovak translation, and after that they exclusively distributed these video games in Slovakia.

How do video game publishers react to your activities? Have you ever contacted them directly?

Many just add the language to the game in some following update; others praise it by saying something like: “Alright, you can do it.” Nowadays some publishers even have signed contracts with these community localizers, I know that has happened in the Czech Republic. We cannot say that the publishers would try to stop us, but there have been cases where the company has spoken out against fan translation. They were not bothered by any other game modifications; it was literally only the translation that they prohibited. In this case, it’s tough luck for the localizer, they have to pull down their work. Fortunately, no one has ever contacted me with such a problem. There have also been attempts from our side to contact the publisher, but this usually ends up with the publisher telling us to publish it but that we should not expect any support from them. We have tried to ask several publishers for their support, at least in the form of some tool so that we would not have to produce localization tools ourselves, but they did not oblige. It’s an extra job for them. If someone can do it on their own, then they agree; but if they need to invest some extra time in it, the publishers would rather not do it. Most of the time, they just let us work.

Do you also have feedback from players?

Yes, it is quite frequent. It is desirable actually because the players are the consumers. And since this is not a revenue-producing activity, it is the recognition from the players which motivates the community localizers in their work. Most of the time, it’s something like: “Thank you very much. Thanks to you, I could fully understand the game and enjoy it.” Every time we get a message like that, I forward it to my colleagues in the team

and we're all very happy. I also try to ask the players if they could let us know how they like it. Any feedback is useful to us. Players also often contact us directly with a request of what to translate. But it doesn't always work that way, because for me to be motivated and to find time to localize a game, I need to enjoy the game too. If we receive many requests for a particular game, then it is noted and considered, but mostly we decide according to what we enjoy anyway.

Have you thought about becoming a professional localizer and making a living out of it?

That is not the goal of our group right now. It's not realistic for us to be doing this for a living. I have a job in the IT industry, so I don't think translating could earn me as much as what I'm doing now. We have people from many industries on the team: we have a chemist, a middle manager, and even a professional translator, who currently proof-reads for us. We also have a hotel manager. This is a wide range of people with their own careers who have a certain life, and this is basically just a hobby. But we do it professionally, at least from the perspective of project management and our own approach.

What other factors influence the choice of projects you localize?

First, it's the capacity we have as a team. However, it is very limited, so we must always think carefully if it's reasonable to go for it. We need to coordinate with the Czech localizers to see if by any chance they want to do it too. We cooperate with them because a duplicate project in such an environment makes no sense at all. We can have the ambition to translate anything, but primarily we have capacity limitations.

How challenging is the work of a community localizer from a technical perspective?

This is what discourages many from doing it in the first place. Back then it was necessary to look for various editing software: a different one for each game, and sometimes a game would require multiple ones. The localizer had to know what to open and how, and where to put what. When it comes to diacritics, Slovak diacritical signs were written into the game using other special characters, which the localizer often did not even have on their keyboard, so the whole thing was quite complicated. I have always been interested in this technical side. And since I saw that other colleagues had problems with it, I gradually invented various tools. It began with creating our own localization

tools, and today we're at a point where our localizers only work with Google Sheets. And that's it. All the projects we have are in Google Sheets – a separate one for each project. I prepare each game like this: a matching identifier so that I can pair the texts back into the game in the first column, then the column with the original language, and then the column (or columns) with translations. We then color cells after proofreading in green. Additionally, it's sorted by whether it's a text from a dialogue or a menu. I'm mostly doing the technical part today. This technical activity usually differs depending on the engine in which the game is programmed. Sometimes a problem might pop up, like in the sorting of the texts. The texts of the games that ran on Unreal Engine 4 were sorted in English alphabetically, without any key. That's a great obstacle for the localizer because they don't know the context and have no idea what means what. But even there, I managed to create a program that could sort the texts according to the background of the video, e.g., from a recording of the game on YouTube.

Do you think there would be enough work for a game localizer in Slovakia?

Unfortunately, I do not think that one could live off this work in Slovakia.

Would Slovak players prefer Slovak localizations instead of the original or English version?

I think so, but it needs to be achieved gradually, slowly, and patiently. Once Slovaks have the mindset, they want to play video games in Slovak and they want to consume audiovisual and multimedia software in Slovak too – and by that, I mean movies, books, and TV shows. At least with Slovak subtitles. If Slovaks could manage to raise this consciousness so that they would like something like this, then there would be more pressure and a larger demand for video game localizations in Slovak. More people would join our team, and we would translate more video games. People would have more opportunities to play video games in Slovak, and they would get more used to it. It's all very connected; people can't play in Slovak because Slovak localizations are unavailable, so they get used to playing in English or Czech. It then becomes a habit that is hard to get rid of. But if they had the opportunity to choose Slovak in each game, and if they have a good experience with Slovak localizations that are not disruptive, are contextually good, and fit well into the game, then they would desire to play more video games in Slovak. What we can see today is that many Slovak players prefer Czech localization

Velecký, Milan. 2022. Interview about community localization in Slovakia. In: L10N Journal. 1(2), p. 53–58.

over Slovak localization because of their own experience. That's why we are trying to show them what we do. We upload it to YouTube, and we want to show them that our localizations are good. Some players still wait for the Czech localization to come out either way, even if the Slovak version comes out earlier. Just out of habit.

The present author agrees with the respondent. At the end of the interview, we both saw that the situation in Slovakia concerning the localizations of video games was unsatisfactory and that both supply and demand were too small. At the same time, the solution to this situation may be to raise awareness about the existence of good Slovak community localizations. This was confirmed in the abovementioned thesis. The thesis included statistics which showed that Slovaks play video games no less often than Czechs or Poles, who often have their own language localization available on an official level. The only difference is the market size, which is much smaller in Slovakia than in the Czech Republic and Poland. A straightforward way to reverse the trend of not offering official localizations in Slovak is to increase the demand for Slovak localizations; however, this is a task for the community and players in discovering good Slovak localizations and demanding more of them.