





# PAVEL TOKAREV

CEO of Inlingo

Our team is constantly in touch with people who are pushing the game industry forward. They comprise professionals from the most varied areas of game development — from developers to marketing managers. For me, one of the points of doing business is to have the opportunity to talk to different experts, pose interesting questions, and get a better understanding of your field. That is why we have gathered together all the valuable experiences that the subjects of our interviews have shared with us in the book **Inlingo Talks**.

For me, it is important to shine a light not just on founders, who are already in the public eye, but also on less prominent professionals. In this book, you will find interviews with specialists who are not always receiving ovations at major events, but who every day help their team to grow and develop the game industry. You will meet composers, localizers, and project managers, who will tell you about their work and share their expertise based on many years of experience.

Thanks to all our interviewees for their trust. Special thanks to the team that worked on organizing the interviews and creating this book — Arina Gridneva and Levon Oganessian.

Enjoy the book!



# FAWZI MESMAR

Head of Design at DICE

*«A game designer's job is not to come up with ideas, but to make other people's ideas work»*

We talked with Fawzi Mesmar and learned why game remakes are so popular, what is taught in college gaming departments around the world, how game designers come up with ideas, and why you sometimes have to let them go.

**We interviewed Fawzi in December, 2020.**



***«It was 40 degrees [Celsius] outside, but it must have been 50 where we were making the game»***

**— Fawzi, how did you get into gamedev?**

— Making games is something I've wanted to do since I was a kid. Ever since I played Space Invaders, I was completely infatuated with that world. In fact, I remember them asking us in kindergarten what we wanted to do when we grew up, and all the other kids in class wanted to be astronauts or pilots, and I said I wanted to make games in Japan. So, I've known what I wanted to do ever since I was a very young kid.

**— How did you get into game design?**

— I think the first time I discovered what game design actually meant was when I would finish games, write strategy guides in my school notebooks, and then give them to the other kids in class to help them finish the games. Around 1996, I was writing a strategy guide for the first Resident Evil, and I was tracing the mansion, like drawing maps in my notebooks. And then it hit me that somebody actually drew this from their imagination. Somebody actually imagined this, put it on paper, and then made it a reality. And I thought, "This is what game design is, and I definitely want to do this."

**— And you started studying it?**

— In my first years of college, a group of friends and I were studying Japanese together as a hobby, and we were all talking about how we wanted to make games. There weren't any gamedev schools or anything like that in Jordan, where I'm from. There wasn't any game development happening in the Middle East really at that time, so those guys and I decided, "Alright, we want to make a game." We wanted to make a game on the Game Boy Advance. That's how our journey in gamedev started. Basically, we rented a tiny space, like 40 square meters [430

square feet — Ed.], and we brought in furniture from home. You know, those plastic chairs and tables that people usually put in the backyard.

It was ten people on four computers in a very tiny space, above a baker's shop as well. It was 40 degrees [Celsius; 100 degrees Fahrenheit — Ed.] outside, but it must have been 50 [120 degrees Fahrenheit — Ed.] where we were doing this thing. It was very cheap to rent that place for obvious reasons.

Most of us were studying computer science at the time, but I also had music as a hobby. So, I was writing the music for the game as well. That annoyed a lot of people because we didn't exactly have a music room or any insulation, and others were trying to focus while I was strumming. It was a very tiny demo that we put together at the time. But another thing that was really difficult is we did not have any access to devkits for the Game Boy Advance. We ended up hacking commercial units to make the games, and we made a gigantic 2-megabyte game, of which I had 300 kilobytes for the sound and music.



That's how it started. It was completely indie before indie was a thing, I guess. I started programming and doing music, but the guys on my team were telling me, "You're such a wiseass, always talking about how things should be. Why don't you also design the game, because we're too busy building it?" I've been a game designer ever since. I haven't done anything else in 17 years now.

## ***«There are now dedicated game development schools that focus on teaching how to make games»***

— You've worked in game development in seven countries. Could you tell us if there are major differences in the way gamedev and work in general are approached around the world?

— There are a lot of similarities, like people's infatuation with games, how passionate they are about the medium, and how they devour pop culture. That is what I like about going to game development conferences. You walk in, there are people from all over the world, and they all have everything in common. Almost everybody there is unanimously inspired by games to some extent when they were growing up, and they started to make games because they wanted to inspire others as well.

There's a talk I actually do quite frequently at conferences in which I talk about the difference in management styles, because I've been a manager of design teams in the Middle East, the West, and the Far East. The biggest differences are in the work culture and how organization happens.



In Middle Eastern companies, the management style is a little bit more traditional and autocratic. It is very hierarchical, and the management style is more about leadership enforcing or instilling strong visions that then trickle down. The manager needs to be this expert that has all the answers all the time, and people come to them for guidance.

In Japan, it's quite different. There's a culture of harmony in which people need to come together in their decision-making. There's huge respect for people being able to do their jobs the proper way. The game director gets a lot of respect and obedience from the game teams. In general, in Japan, there's a culture of loyalty to the company, so most people spend their entire career at the same company, and they dedicate their lives and resources to make sure that the company is always doing its best in terms of competitive edge. While overwork is a very common thing in the game industry everywhere, in Japan it's part of the culture. Many people there see their calling in life as working a lot.

In Europe and Western countries in general, there are regional differences. The German management style, for example, is quite different from the Swedish style and the New Zealand style. But, in general, there is a lot of trust in teams to be able to perform their jobs the best they can. They apply more agile methodologies to their way of thinking, motivational theories, and all that.

**— Companies from post-Soviet countries often incorporate their regional aesthetic into their games, like S.T.A.L.K.E.R. or Metro. Do you think we're going to see games using the local aesthetic and atmosphere of MENA countries?**

— Games that are developed in and coming out in the Middle East are very much inspired by the local culture. You see a lot of games that have desert environments or Bedouin culture showing up. There's a game that was released on PS4 — I think it's called Unearthed — that was based on a lot of Middle Eastern cultures.

I think that's great because that's the unique voice that these regions can bring to the gaming scene, like the Japanese gaming industry has been very strong and relies a lot on Japanese culture and exporting concepts like ninjas and samurais. We've seen similar things in the West as well with games inspired by locations and areas around the world.

I think game development in the Middle East now is definitely on the rise, but it's still in its very early stages. We are yet to see big-budget global hits come out of the region in a way that will help export a lot of this knowledge. But, for me, that's only a matter of time. It's all about rallying together around a concept and getting the funding to be able to ship some of those projects all the way to completion.

Bigger publishers are now looking into localization into Arabic for a lot of the big games for the Middle Eastern region, so there is consumerism going on over there. It's only a matter of time before a development team strikes gold.

**— Speaking of Arabic, you've written a book on game design in Arabic. Is it more or less All You Have to Know as a Game Designer?**

— Pretty much. I released that book two years ago, and it's 400 pages of my experience in game design. That knowledge never existed in Arabic before; you had to learn another language to get that information. I ended up importing books about game design back when I still didn't know what I was doing. I needed to understand if I was on the right track. I just wanted to pay it forward so other people could get information in their native tongue.

I even wrote a chapter about how to get a job in the industry, like how I did it and many different ways that you can do it.

**— The gaming industry has existed for more than 50 years, and there are still, to my knowledge, no major designated game schools. There are different departments where you can learn how to do game design, but there is no one place to go if you want to make games. Why?**

— I think that's changing, actually. Over my career, as I traveled around the world, I did see a bit of that at first, when there'd be design or game design departments as part of design studies in general. But then I've also started seeing dedicated game development schools popping up. I've taught in a bunch of them, like Media Design School in New Zealand, the Berlin Games Academy, and Futuregames in Stockholm.

There are now dedicated game development schools that focus on teaching how to make games. They bring in experienced people from the industry to translate their experience back to the students, and, most importantly, a lot of these schools have very strong connections with game development companies. We used to rely on game development schools to hire interns and get them into the industry. So, actually, now they're a very viable way to get into game development.

The students that I teach study development design, and some schools include art as well. A graduate from these schools comes out knowing Unreal, Unity, or both, they've taken game design courses, and they've worked in teams and produced at least four game projects. They have more knowledge than I had at the start of my career.

**— Do you think in ten years when gamedev schools are more established, people will go to them to study, or will there still be more self-taught developers?**

— I think it really gives you a bigger shortcut. Back in the day, all developers were self-taught, and it was very difficult to break into the industry, so very few people got in. Every time you speak to somebody about how they got into the industry, they have a very interesting story about a huge coincidence or somebody knowing somebody. It's never a straightforward case of "I was qualified, I applied, and then I got the job."

This is because game development requires a very specific set of skills. There are a lot of deep specifications, and the only way for you to know them is by doing them. I could probably get five

game designers in the room, and they'd all have different ideas about what game design is or what kind of qualifications you need. Getting that kind of knowledge and experience in a school would really help you get your foot in the door.

Most companies have internship programs. At DICE, we get interns from schools regularly. Back in the day, we had to fish for people. We'd be like, "There's this person on this forum that seems to be really interested in this very tiny section of our game. Maybe you could bring them in?" It wasn't a systematic approach. Schools and education are really making that better.

— If you're a young person that wants to get into gamedev, you should look for game schools — they will help.

— It's one of the things I really recommend. If you're interested in game development, I would definitely recommend going with computer science. It always helps, and if everything else fails, hey, you're a programmer — you can get a job anywhere.

But, in general, if you want to get into the game industry, you gotta make games, whether you make them on your own, you make them within an online team, you do game jams, or you do mods. The only way to get experience in making games is by making them yourself. The more you can demonstrate that you've been making games, the easier it becomes for you to get into the industry.

***«Modern games involve more 'hand-holding' because there's a lot of competition»***

— You've worked on AAA titles, mobile games, and flash games. What would be the main differences in regard to game design?

— Players are taught gameplay aspects and are engaged the same way in both console and mobile games. The same principles apply, but the number of mechanics, their functionality, and the complexity change.

— I think there are some major differences in the way tutorials work in mobile and traditional games. Mobile games tell you to tap here only, but in *Half-Life 2* a Combine officer throws a can on the ground.

— Yeah. Because the circumstances around the two games are quite different. So, for example, in a mobile game, there's a smaller level of investment. It's probably free, you did not pay much for it, and there's a lot of competition on mobile. Most of the time, when you're choosing to play a mobile game, you're waiting for something. You think, "I have some time to kill." So, your attention span is quite limited: "I'm gonna check this out, and if it doesn't impress me within the first two minutes, I'm out. I'll just delete it and find something else."

Whereas for a console game, you pay a good sum of money to get that game. And if you are playing on PC, you need some time to set everything up. By the time you plug in this game, your mindset is, "I want to sit down and dedicate all my attention to this thing because I put a lot of money into it and I'm gonna give it an hour or two, or even more, to see if I like it or not." That's a luxury that mobile designers don't have, so they need to make sure that the person understands what they are trying to convey in the best way.

And eventually you will see traditional gaming applying a similar kind of technique in their game tutorials as well. The best tutorials, even in traditional games, are the ones you get without having to open stuff or read online. Back when you could only afford one game a month in traditional games, there wasn't that much choice, even though there was a lot of competition. If you didn't understand the game, you asked the kids in class, you bought magazines. And now you hear a lot about how modern games involve more "hand-holding." It's because there's a lot of competition out there, and if they don't explain what they're trying to do, they will lose you as a player. They need to be improving their tutorials, even in the bigger games.

— Why do you think remakes are so popular? Is it just players



**being nostalgic and companies knowing that people will love it because the average gamer is getting older every year?**

— There's a bit more to it. I definitely think nostalgia is a strong factor; we can see that in a lot of reboots in movies. If you loved The Lion King as a kid, you'll probably want to see the new one now.

But you've got to keep in mind that there are generations of gamers that grew up with our current internet culture, and they're familiar with a lot of the stuff that we take as the standard for gamer culture, but they've never got the chance to experience it themselves. It's hard to be on the internet without seeing spoilers about Final Fantasy, and now they're getting the opportunity to experience that for the first time. So, some of them are like, "I wanna see what the fuss is all about."

Similar thing with Shadow of the Colossus. The remake came out on PlayStation 4 a couple of years ago and, for the people that played at that time, it's like a bona fide classic. But not everybody got the chance to experience it properly, right? It allows a new generation of people to experience the game. There are other games that are dear to my heart that I used to enjoy quite a bit, but I'm not gonna go and find a CRT TV now and hook up my own Super Nintendo or PlayStation. I won't play with a corded controller and see if they still have a memory card somewhere just to enjoy Metal Gear or GoldenEye.

They were great for their time, but I still want to enjoy them now. I remember earlier they released PlayStation Classics on PlayStation, and some of those games did not really hold up as we remember. The remakes or the HD revamps bring those classic experiences to our standard today. We play them as we remember them, but that's not exactly how they were, and I think that's great.

***«The best way to make ideas more unique is to make them closer to you»***

## — How do you and your team come up with new gaming ideas?

— Something I teach quite a bit to my students is inspiration always comes from personal experience. It can be what we consume as media: music, movies, comic books. You may notice that a lot of game developers probably have a lot of similar sources of inspiration. I don't know a single game designer that hasn't at one point in their career gone, "Oh, I had this great game idea, and then PUBG came out," and it was exactly the same idea. And PUBG is inspired by a Battle Royale series of books.

When artists create a very imaginative character, that character is most likely inspired by a bunch of real-life characters that they see. They are mixed together or deformed into a humanoid fish or something like that.

The best way to make ideas more unique is to make them closer to you. The personal experiences that you've had from your perspective will create more originality and uniqueness in your ideas. Miyamoto famously used to go out, run around Kyoto as a child, and look down pipes on the sides of buildings. He used to think, "I wonder what the other side is gonna be like if I go into that pipe. On the other side, I might come out in a different world entirely," and you know that obviously made its way into Mario eventually.

There are a lot of these details that evoke emotion. Identifying them later is the source of inspiration, and that's where new ideas come from. When I work with teams that want to come up with original things, I urge them to think that way.

There's a common misconception that your job as a game designer is to come up with ideas, but in fact, our job is to make other people's ideas work.

## — So, who comes up with the ideas then?

— They can come from anywhere. You can read a comment on a YouTube video where somebody goes, "Oh man, it would be

great if that weapon did this.” And you go, “Hmm, that’s a good idea, but if we did that, it might screw up the balance in some other ways, but we can do it if we do this, this, and that,” and all of a sudden that idea makes its way into the game.

So, we identified that the idea exists, we identified the potential of the idea, and we identified all the problems that idea might cause, and then we solve these issues to fit that idea — that’s a game designers’ job.



— I’m sure it’s happened when you’re working on a game mechanic and thinking, “Wow, this is gonna be amazing,” but then you implement it and it doesn’t work. What are the main criteria to identify when, although development was fun, you shouldn’t implement a feature?

— I always tell my team that we need to prototype those ideas that we are uncertain of before we build them. Going straight into building things is when we get those unpleasant surprises like, “We thought that idea was great, but it’s not working at all, and we are in the middle of development and now everything’s on fire.”

We want to avoid those circumstances as much as possible by trying to prototype that idea as early as possible. First, we need to identify what the things we need to prototype are, how we

make sure that we find a quick and dirty way to see if this thing works or not, and, if it doesn't work, it's fine. Failure is a good result coming out of this, so we can scrap it and come up with something else.

My solution is that we always prototype and we never fall in love with our own ideas. If something is not working, we should definitely cut it, regardless of how much time or how many resources we invested. If we invested a lot of time in something but it's not working for the benefit of the game, that thing has to go.

## ***«There will be new types of games that we are yet to imagine»***

— Sometimes games are viewed as a creation of one person, like a game by Sam Lake, Neil Druckmann, or Kojima. Is it valid to give one person so much credit for game development, considering teams now involve thousands of people?

— I think there are two facets to this. Proclaiming that one person is responsible for shipping an entire game is absolutely ridiculous. The creative directors are often thanking their teams for their work and effort — it's a group effort. With a bigger-sized game, there's no way that one person will know every single detail about how every tiny aspect of the game is being developed at the same time. There's just too much going on for one person to be able to keep track of all that together.

However, there is always the aspect of a vision holder in a game. In a lot of game companies, there will be a creative director who is in charge of rallying the team around a vision. Because when game projects expand in size, there'll be a lot more people, and with a lot more people, there'll be a lot more opinions. And sometimes there'll be two decisions that sound just as good, and it'll be hard to move forward without somebody saying, "We're going this way instead of that way," and that's where creative directors really come into place.

So, saying that Kojima shipped the game on his own is obviously ridiculous, but saying that Kojima was not responsible for the vision of his creations is also ridiculous. He is, by all definitions, among the main reasons why the creative output of his studio has a very similar taste, tone, and feel and all that. He also collaborates with a lot of the same people, so that helps a lot with their creation. We need to appreciate both the leadership and the hundreds, if not thousands, of people involved in the creation of amazing games.

**— In recent years, there were a lot of games with what I would call non-traditional gameplay loops. If 15 years ago you came out with a walking simulator, people would be like, “Yeah, but where is the game?” And nowadays, it’s kind of okay to make a game without gameplay. Do you enjoy playing games like that?**

— I enjoy playing any kind of video game, and I enjoy game developers that are challenging or expanding the notion of what a video game is supposed to be. And what we’ve seen throughout the years is that there has been a lot of people pushing the envelope about what a game should be. I remember there was a period back in the day when games were not supposed to be about stories, right? People used to say, “I want to just play the game; if I wanted to watch a story, I’d watch a movie.” You don’t normally hear that anymore because gaming as a medium has the ability to deliver emotions and experiences in a way that other mediums just cannot.

**— Do you think there are unique genres that have not been developed yet?**

— I’m confident that there will be more and more new types of games that we are yet to imagine, and that’s the beauty of it. We are only bound by our imagination, inspiration, and the new different perspectives that are gonna come from different parts of the world to amaze and excite us. There can be things coming out at any time.

Dota was originally a mod to Starcraft before it moved to Warcraft 3 and became Dota as we know it. That started an entirely new

genre that came out of the blue, and that's a genre that has been going strong for over a decade at this point. Now, within Dota there was a mod that came out last year called Auto Chess that has now become a genre, and there are many games out there to play it. It's basically you making choices but the game plays itself. And that challenges a lot of what people would say is traditionally a game, but there's so much depth that it became really popular.

Minecraft was one of those games as well. Minecraft challenged the traditional expectation of a game to have a start and an end, to give you a set of objectives, and to tell you what you need to do one step at a time. It also changed the attitude towards graphics at a time when people wanted everything to be HD. Here's the most popular game in the world right now, and it doesn't aspire to anything that we would deem traditional.

**— The modding community used to be more prevalent in a lot of games, but in the last couple of years we've seen less room for modders. How crucial do you think modders are to pushing the industry further and adding new ideas?**

— I think back in the day modding was one of the few ways to come up with new ideas because it's basically the democratization of game-making.

It's not just the developer that makes games now, as everybody can be a developer through the set of tools that are going in. It's kind of sad that developers are moving away from modding in some ways, but I can understand that because modern technologies are moving away from a lot of the tools that allow modders to work the way they want to work.

There are also all sorts of copyright concerns and people using modding in wrong ways, let's say, that are definitely delivering negative experiences to other players. So, there is a downside of modding that is unfortunately one of the reasons communities are becoming a little bit more careful about it.

However, we are more focused on user-generated content than ever before, and a lot of games are giving tools to users to be able to create their own experiences. I've already mentioned Minecraft, for example, which allows a lot of creativity, as does the Mario Maker series or even Dreams recently released on PlayStation.



# P.T. ADAMCZYK

Senior Composer at CD Projekt RED

*«The appropriate use of silence is important»*

The Inlingo team talked to the Senior Composer at CD Projekt RED who created the Gwent and Cyberpunk 2077 soundtracks. We found out how the work on compositions begins, how composers submerge themselves in the atmosphere of a project, and why the lack of a melody can tell a player more than its presence.

We interviewed P.T. Adamczyk in October, 2021.



## **«I don't like writing without a concept»**

### **— When and how did you enter the world of music?**

— Well, I think I've been playing around with music for my whole life, actually. When I was 6, I discovered Metallica. My parents sent me to piano lessons, but I didn't really want to go because there was no keyboard player in Metallica. My biggest passion at the time was drums. I've been drumming since I was eight years old, but I actually got a proper drum set when I was thirteen and started taking drum lessons. Then I started to play in local bands from Warsaw, but it never occurred to me that I could become a composer and make a career of it.

It usually felt like people who do games or movies or whatever were already famous in the industry. So they are, let's say, a local indie band, they have a big record, and then they are asked to write something for a big project. It took me some time to figure out that it's not always like that. I was a session drummer, and I met a lot of people who were doing advertising. So I started writing jingles and stuff like that, and that led me to thinking that I would like to write more music for movies.

### **— Did you manage to achieve this?**

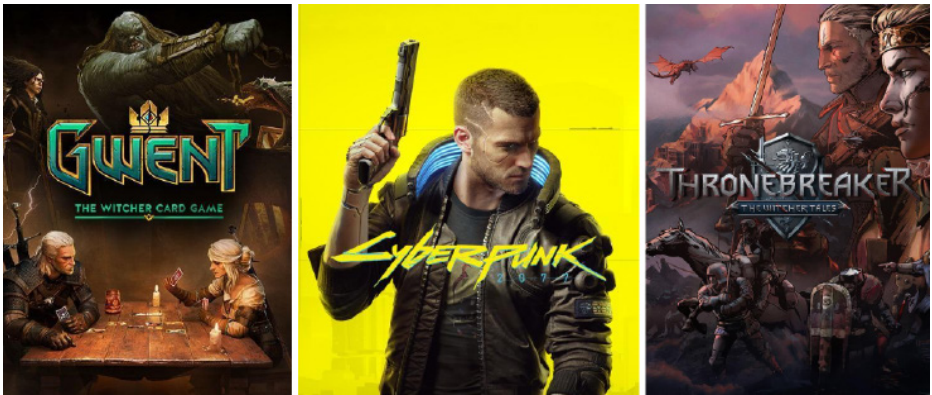
— I started getting interested in film music and the way it is created. Then I got accepted to the USC scoring program, which was a huge deal for me. I actually spent two years just preparing for this whole thing, and then I went to LA for two years and completed this program.

I spent the next year just working in the industry doing all sorts of jobs, like music programming, ghostwriting, orchestrating, arranging, you name it. And then I came across Marcin Przybyłowicz's post that there is a new slot for a composer over at CDPR, so I applied and I got the gig.

### **— Were you interested in video games before this, or was this a new area for you?**

— I was familiar with CD Projekt RED since they were a small publisher working on RPGs, which I was really into back then. It also felt much more interesting for me because this is a newer medium and people were around my age. There were a bunch of new studios here in Poland, and there seemed to be a lot of need for people with my kind of skill set, so it felt like working with video games was possible. It's not an ivory tower like it feels a lot of times with feature films, the process is more democratic.

I had the pleasure of studying with Garry Schyman at USC in Los Angeles for a whole year. This guy's music really impressed me, and I thought that I can probably never land a movie or a TV show where this kind of music is required, but I can probably land a game where I can write some really freaky music. A lot of things came together in the end.



CDPR projects which P.T. worked on.

**— You used to write music for yourself and this was your hobby. What is the difference between the creation of a game soundtrack and the creation of your own track or album?**

— Actually, I have just started working on a side project of mine that is not related to games at all, which is why I understand the question well. The main difference is when you first start working — when you work with games, you have a specific genre, timings, and other limitations. When you have boundaries, it is actually a

great way to kick-start the creative process with clear deadlines that mean you can't look for inspiration for too long.

When you write something or do something creative for yourself, I think those questions need to be answered by yourself. "What are you really trying to say?" "How are you going to write something to fit this scene?" "What kind of music are you going to write?" You have more doubts and engage in more soul-searching.

I believe that making your own music is creatively more challenging, but scoring games and movies is much more difficult technically. And I think it also requires a lot more craft than making records.

### **— When there is no inspiration, do track length limitations and deadlines motivate you or make you nervous?**

— Sometimes, when you are writing a cue, and it's coming together nicely, and you are happy with what you have, and then you look at the clock, and it's two minutes and thirty seconds instead of three minutes and thirty seconds... You will really feel like it's not going to be a very musical thing to just start another idea in the same track, so you have to figure out how you're going to rearrange or permute what you already have into the cue. So that may be frustrating, but I think it actually helps me with creativity. I like it when the amount of minutes to write for a track is clear because then I can figure out if I have a month, two months, six months, whatever. I can kind of plan my work and try not to burn out.

To be honest, I don't like writing without a concept, because it starts to seem to me that the DAW of choice, whether it's Logic or Ableton, dictates what I have to do. It feels much better when I have an understanding and a plan in my head and then try to just realize that with the computer. That is why the more of the details I have at the start, the easier and more interesting it is to work. It's not something that stops the creative flow, I actually think it boosts it more often than not.

## ***«It wouldn't be wise to just leave previous experience behind»***

### **— Does someone need special skills of some kind to do your job and write music for games?**

— If you work in-house, you have to be aware of the technical possibilities and limitations of your audio engine and the musical design of the project. The process of working on one composition or another depends on the purpose of the composition. If the tracks are interactive and they react to a person's actions, then you might not be able to play with the tempo of the melody. But other than that, I don't think there is a required skill set. You have to know how to use a computer and know one or two things about mixing and what to use, so it sounds good.

I think games are so varied right now that there is literally a place for every style and interpretation. So a score like Garry Schyman's for BioShock is different to Mick Gordon's Doom soundtrack, but they fit their projects, and they are all under this umbrella term of video game music.

### **— Are there game genres for which it is easier or harder to write music?**

— Well, I think RPGs are definitely one of the toughest genres, especially story-driven open-world RPGs, where you want to cover as many choices and consequences as possible, so you need to write a lot of music and create a lot of assets. Those games are usually very long, so you also have to think about how to make music interesting and make it do its job after the sixty-hour mark.

However, it would be fair to say that every project has its own challenges. I think that nailing a musical style for the project is equally difficult whether you are doing a puzzle game or an RPG blockbuster. Nailing the vibe is crucial and always difficult, and it

can take from one to several days. It also depends on the length of the game. With Cyberpunk, it was not easy at all: you try to add a lot of details, but then you look at your spreadsheet and see that you have fifty more cues to write.

To be honest, I would love to work on a game like Uncharted — a thirty-hour experience that's kind of linear, when you have those arenas, and then you move on to cinematic segments. This is really a dream of ours. We would implement the s\*\*t out of this game!

**— You have mostly worked on science fiction RPGs, but if the team comes to you with a Witcher-style horror game, how easy would you find it to switch styles?**

— Every project is like a diagram. In one circle you have what the project needs, and in another circle is your musical taste. The main thing is to find the part where they overlap and try to explore the overlap. So I think there isn't a genre of game or music where I wouldn't be able to find something interesting to play with. Whichever project the team decides to work on, I will simply work towards it.

**— When you write a piece, you try to draw the player into the atmosphere of a particular scene or level. So how do you get yourself into the right mood when you start working?**

— The process is always different, but I think the one constant is that I try to find instruments that would give me the sound that I think works for the project and a particular scene. In the case of Cyberpunk it was those boutique modular synthesizers, analog grooveboxes, and unusual stuff like that which is unlike classic keyboard or MIDI controllers. They were great at conveying the atmosphere of cyberware, so this music felt appropriate for the game.

In the other project that I finished recently, I had this idea that I would really love to have a very aggressive string trio, so I wrote everything either in unison or three voices. And I don't know why

that happened, I just thought that it might be an interesting way to start writing and began to compose. I think the first step for me is finding the right instruments. I heard screenwriters say: “If you have good characters in your story, they will lead you and tell you what you need to do.” Instruments are the same as characters for me. If you pick your instruments correctly, then I think you’re on a good path.

**— Does that mean that it is the tools you use that lead you in the right direction?**

— When you say it like that, it sounds like a limiting and weird process, but you are basically correct about that. Especially when you work with performers, you can’t write something they can’t physically recreate. It is also important to keep in mind the physical capabilities of the instrument that you choose: its range, tempo, the placement of the notes within it. If you know those things, they inform you of what you can do with those instruments.

For instance, take the Folktek Mescaline that we used quite a lot in Cyberpunk — it was ridiculously difficult to tune. It has eleven oscillators [modules that produce sound — Ed.] that you can tune to different notes. So we tried to find a way to play chords or motifs with those eleven notes in every octave. There are also eleven fixed pitches there. Anything like that will change the way you write and even change what you do as an end goal. So, instruments are really, really important, and the main thing is that they are a fun way to start a project.

**— When you play one of The Witcher expansions, you go to Toussaint. You can immediately feel a completely different atmosphere, something in the spirit of Italy. When you start working on a project, do you watch films with a similar atmosphere, or does someone come up to you and tell you, “Basically, that’s what it’s supposed to sound like here?”**

— When we release a new expansion for Gwent [a card game in The Witcher universe — Ed.], we regularly use characters or places that weren’t covered before in The Witcher games.

Ofir is mentioned in one of the game expansions, but we never really took the player there, so there is no soundtrack for this place. The task was simple: making Gwent music but with notes that would reference Ofir for the player. We took the Gwent main theme and played it in a more “Middle Eastern” sort of scale but kept the shape of the melody, so that it would give you the effect of being both familiar and sort of exotic at the same time.

When you are working on an established IP, it’s always good to go back to certain things, instruments and movements that have been used before. The Witcher 3 had some of the melodies played on the kemenche [a bowed string instrument similar to a lute — Ed.], and I try not to let anyone forget that. We have this whole library of sounds which were used earlier that we recorded, and I always go back to those because it is the very essence of the music that the people associate with The Witcher.

It wouldn’t be wise to just leave previous experience behind. Try to evolve the music and put it into the new elements instead of trying to reinvent it. These projects are being updated constantly, so who knows how the music will sound in ten years. Maybe the melodies in Gwent will be very different from The Witcher 3, even though the kemenche is still there.

**— How closely do you work with the development team when you decide on the sound of a particular part of the project?**

— One of the reasons I like working for CD Projekt RED is that the music team connects very closely with the development team. Sometimes we work on features together, consult each other, and sometimes we put our ideas forward through music. This is only possible because we are inside one studio and we have the ability to talk to our colleagues. I think it would be really different if there was one audio or music lead working with a bunch of freelancers at CD Projekt RED. The main parts would have to have been decided and simply sent by email, such as the concept art or level playthroughs.

We are in one studio, and we feel like we are part of a united team. It helps to maintain camaraderie. The feeling of being part of a big project, seeing your own contribution. You know you were there when this music wasn't even written, but when the idea of this kind of music was conceived. It's a great feeling, so it's really good to be part of a team.

## ***«You don't need to bring out the orchestra for every new moment in the game»***

### **— What references do you get to start working on music? Do you get illustrations or musical sketches?**

— The thing that triggers me the most are the video playthroughs of a certain level. Even if it is very rough, there are no textures, and every character is T-posing. There is something about going through a level or a quest that for me is much more informative than just looking at very nice concept art. Actually, most of the time I won't start writing until I have the level playthrough videos because I need that to start working with actual assets and not just pieces of music.

### **— So you basically need a playable build?**

— With CDPR games, we start as early as possible at the alpha and pre-alpha stages. It can have only assets that are going to be replaced, like blocks, but the movement of the game world is very important to me. It also helps that I can have a discussion with either the game director or story director about the game as a whole. They lay down the story for you to start thinking about themes and ways you could link a particular scene to a character. The short version of this is that the foundation for starting work is a brief overview of the story and actual gameplay footage, even though it is very rough at that stage.

### **— It seems that music can both immerse the player in the atmosphere of the game and tell the story by itself. How do you achieve this fusion?**



— I would say that one of the most important lessons that we learned during Cyberpunk is that repetition of musical themes and repetition of musical colors create continuity throughout the story. And the second lesson I personally learned is that by doing that and having those repeating segments, you don't always need to go very emotional to achieve a very profound effect. During our GDC presentation, I said that sometimes you don't need to put a hat on a hat as the player has already played for 40 hours and they've had numerous interactions with the character. Sometimes just playing a few notes of this character's theme is enough to awaken the connection that the player has with this character. You don't need to bring out the orchestra and play a big melody. You just need to push the player in the right direction, and the game will do the work for you.

Sometimes I get messages on Twitter about the end credit music in Cyberpunk. People are interested in the track that plays during the phone calls. I wouldn't say it's a very emotional piece. It's something that was actually three motifs from different life paths I put together in one piece that could sum up the entire journey. People tend to tell me that this is very emotional, and I thank them for that, but it wasn't actually deliberately written with that concept in mind. I used what was in the game from the very beginning, played it back, and this resulted in these very emotional conversations which are a proper ending to the story.

The Witcher 3 was notorious for having the music on all the time, and that's something Marcin really wanted to change in the design of Cyberpunk, and he was really keen about learning to use the silence. So that's why we don't really have an exploration and combat system in the game like most other games have. We actually embrace the fact that silence or quiet moments are necessary. Our sound designers did a great job with ambiences, so we didn't feel the need to cover the audio spectrum the whole time. That means that the third lesson was using silence appropriately.

**— Is there some way to check how quickly players get tired of music in large-scale games?**

— There is a great benefit to coming up with custom scoring for the different moments in the game. This is the benefit you get when you do that. You're not going to have a piece of music stuck in a loop for ten hours. Player fatigue is a huge thing. We try to battle it constantly by using longer and more variable assets, splitting the assets into segments, and having them playback in random order.

We try to do whatever we can to keep players interested and focused. However, I did sometimes get feedback from older players who grew up in a slightly different era of games, and they sometimes ask me why the music isn't looping. And it is looped, but it's looped creatively.

I know there is a group of players who wouldn't mind an endless 30-second piece playing in a loop, but I think the majority would get tired of it. Imagine if I'm stuck on a boss battle, and I play it for the thirtieth time, and I hear this thirty-second loop on and on. It is kind of painful to go through that. So we try to do whatever we can to basically have the music still feel fresh and relevant, and still add to the experience even after fifty hours of playing.

### **— When you first started working on Cyberpunk, what musical goals did you set for yourself with your teammates?**

— I joined the team in 2017. Marcin already knew that he wanted to break the usual expectations, leave those 80s synths behind and move into the 90s at last, making this decade the starting point for the writing process. And I was super into that because I am a big fan of Warp Records. I remember thinking, "Wow. This is an amazing opportunity to do something freaky like that and have this be in the game."

In the end, we decided to use those 90s references and make music that feels edgy, dangerous, but at the same time fun. And I like using dance music idioms because it adds a level of recklessness. It also tied in nicely with the Cyberpunk motto, with style over substance, that your actions in Night City have

to be loud and flamboyant. Those things created this need for me to make something that would not overshadow the dialogue between characters but punch through when it's time to shine. That was something we strived for.

## ***«We felt the pressure on our shoulders when we were working on Cyberpunk»***

We had the rare opportunity of having two in-house composers working on a single project together. They can simply implement assets instead of having to send them to someone and wait for feedback. You wouldn't have this opportunity in every company. So we spotted every single quest, watched all the playthrough videos, and then figured out the cues we needed to write. We did not want the same pieces to play during the exploration of the world, so it was a very cinematic approach to every quest. It may sound very simple when I say it now six months after the release, but it took us a lot of time to find the right sound. It would have been easy to copy some other cyberpunk media, but trying to find our own way into this world was an obstacle. There was also the fact that the game was so hyped, and we felt the pressure on our shoulders. So all those things took a lot of work, and we are actually very proud of our approach to the music, especially with the quests. I think we did a good job there.

**— The music that is performed by the fictional Samurai band was a very difficult challenge. It had to be futuristic for the players and retro for the characters in the game. How did you solve this puzzle?**

— We didn't really try to be futuristic with the music because Samurai had split up in 2019 according to the game's plot, which is already in the past for us. The main thing was to understand who Johnny Silverhand [a game character who leads Samurai in the Cyberpunk world — Ed.] is and to understand his ideology. Looking at his experience, we started thinking, "Well, this guy probably is not the same character that was in the original Cyberpunk role-playing game." Because there he was almost

like an 80s glam rocker who spends the nights in the studio, a mix of Eddie Van Halen and Vince Neil from Mötley Crüe. We wanted him to be a guy who records everything with the first take and says “Good enough!”

We felt that he needed to be a little more down-to-earth. Music was just a means to an end goal of a revolution, so who cares what mic he used or what strings were on the guitar. So that led us to the thought that Samurai should feel like a garage band. They recorded in some sh\*tty studio, and this record happened to be big, and everybody loves them now.

There’s no way to even say how lucky we were to have the Refused gentlemen with us and have them portray Samurai. We had an opportunity to depict real musicians with street cred on our hands. Working with them was amazing, and the street cred thing added another layer to the characters of Samurai. There were interesting parallels between them and Refused, the fact that they broke up and the fact they were heavily political. There was no question whether we were moving in the right direction.



Johnny Silverhand.

— You created music for completely different genres and settings: for Gwent, for Thronebreaker, and for Cyberpunk. The question might be obvious, but how different are the instruments you use?

— The instruments and approach to composing are very different. That's because in Gwent, I work with acoustic instruments, and you have to think very carefully about how you're going to write for them, even if you are just using samples. You need to be aware of the possibilities and of the canon, let's call it that, of what is played on those instruments. And with something like Cyberpunk it's way more sound design-y and way more based on textures rather than tunes. Cyberpunk had a few main melodies, but mostly it had very short motifs that could be repeated in many cues.

When I started working on Cyberpunk, I was just grabbing my instruments and recording something without even thinking about what I am recording. I was trying to get familiar with the instruments. So I would just press record in the morning and press stop in the evening, and spend the next day just editing what I've recorded. Most of the stuff was terrible, but there were a few bits that felt cool. And then I would grab another instrument and do the same thing. I think I have like sixty gigabytes of Cyberpunk samples. I don't think this would be possible to do the same with acoustic music, as it sounds better when it is more defined. I think electronic music in general is much more reactive, and it is like the work of a sculptor or the creation of a collage.

With acoustic music, it works out best when you already have a melody, but you ask the performer to play it in their own way, to add some special articulations and emotions which are not there when recording from a score. I often did this when working on Gwent, saying, "Okay, let's improvise, but let's only improvise based on this melody. So you can't take notes out. You can add a few notes, but the shape of the tune always has to be the same." You only give a performer a complete structure. I didn't do that once and did not like the result. It was really difficult to find the

right place for these recordings as they seemed unnatural and not interesting enough.

**— Are there differences between writing music for a particular part of the game and the project as a whole?**

— We always start with the main musical themes of the game because they will inform other cues and they are the cornerstones of the music in the game. We can build stuff around them. Like the track that's now called "Rebel Path" that I did for Johnny Silverhand and which had a working title of "Rebel Theme."

When I was working on it, I knew I was doing it for Johnny Silverhand, which is why I added components that would fit him that were aggressive and punchy. We later needed to have a motif which would be used in an emotional scene with the same character. So I basically wrote that track before the quest playthroughs came.

Sometimes you have to write something against what you already did and sometimes you think, "Okay. What's the order in which the players are going to play through those quests? Could it change?" And you start thinking about all those possibilities, but you always keep in mind the key set pieces, and you try to cover them first because they are the most difficult. And if you manage to write the right music for them, the rest will also fall into place.

**— The Witcher shows the uniqueness of Eastern Europe, while the borders are more washed out between the different cultures in Cyberpunk. What do you find easier to work with, when there is a single source of inspiration, or when there are several?**

— The difficulty and the fun in Cyberpunk is that a lot of things can work and can work relatively well, and that's a question of the right balance of those ingredients. When we were outsourcing the music from the radio we often thought, "Well. It doesn't really work on the rap station, but it would work really well on the

downtempo station.” Because if you did something that felt off in one moment, it could work in another place. I was constantly checking whether I’m hitting the right notes at the right time because you can go over the top with the music or deliberately make it ambient. And those approaches, although radically different, could work to a degree.

The foundation of the music for The Witcher universe was Eastern European, Middle Eastern and Central Asian melodies, and there is even a slight influence from North African music. But we are not specific — we are not musicologists. The Witcher universe to me is like folk metal without distorted guitars and without drums, but with period instruments that suit the era. There is also the use of an orchestra which adds weight and size to the whole thing.

But every time I was working on Gwent or Thronebreaker tracks, I always thought, “Let’s imagine that we have a band of five players somewhere in Vizima, but they are playing Metallica riffs.” We use period instruments from the Middle Ages, but play something modern with a fresh approach to harmony and sound. Because if we are to use them the way they are intended to be used, I don’t think we could make them work in the game.



# MICKY NEILSON

Writer at Frost Giant Studios

*«Everything in a screenplay has a purpose, no scene or dialogue is wasted»*

The Inlingo team talked to Micky Neilson to find out how the writers manage to keep the virtual worlds living for decades, whether to leave the key points of the story in notes, and how to create a story that will be loved by millions of players.

**We interviewed Micky in March, 2021.**



## ***«Horror finds its way into the things that I'm writing»***

**— You're an experienced talented writer, and you've created stories for both books and video games. When did you become passionate about storytelling?**

— It started when I was a kid. I spent a lot of time with my dad, he told me stories that he made up and those stories sparked my own imagination and led me to think about distant worlds and fantastical creatures. It was all in my brain but I already knew that I wanted to tell stories. I had a book when I was like 10 years old and I looked at the cover to try and see who was responsible for telling the story because that's what I wanted to do.

I actually looked at the publisher's name; it was like Whitman Publishing, and I told my dad that I want to be Whitman and what I really meant was I wanted to be the author.

So, I messed it up, but I ended up running the publishing department at Blizzard years later anyway. So it all kind of worked out.

**— Do you remember the first real story you've created in writing?**

— I had a lot of ideas when I was young but the first concept that evolved into a coherent narrative was a story about a Franciscan monk in the 1400s who goes to a remote monastery in the Pyrenees.

This monastery spends most of its day in shadows and the monk finds out that the entire monastery has been taken over by vampires.

There's another version of that story where the monks were transcribing old scriptures and summoned a demon that ran rampant throughout the monastery. So you can see there was a

theme there. I've always loved horror movies and horror stories of all kinds. So horror kind of finds its way into the things that I'm writing.

### — Who's your favorite horror writer?

— Definitely, Stephen King and, you know, everybody says that, but there's a good reason for it.

He writes unforgettable characters and he's an idea guy, he can just come up with ideas all day long. It's like he's a bottomless well of great ideas. Even when he's taking something that's been done to death like vampires in Salem's Lot, he manages to put a spin on it that makes it feel exciting.

I'm a huge fan of Dean Koontz, he's a close number two in there, but Stephen King's at the top

### — Your work in the industry is related to storytelling but you initially joined Blizzard as an artist. How did it happen?

— A guy named Sam Didier was my best friend when I was a teenager. He went by the name Samwise. He and I were ushers at AMC Orange, and he would always draw barbarians and dragons on the back of the schedule book. I was an artist too, and I was drawing the same kinds of things, so we got close and became really good friends.

Shortly after that, I went into the army for a while but got out on a medical discharge because of a truck accident. I was talking to Sam while I was in the army and he had gotten a job at a very small video game company called Silicon & Synapse. At the time, the company was, I think, like 12 people. He kept telling me about it and said, "Hey, I'm doing artwork for video games and this is a lot of fun, maybe this is something that you would want to try?"

And so I did. I went to the offices and he would let me use his computer at nighttime to learn not 3D art but computer art in general. It's different from pencil, pen, ink, or acrylic. There's a

whole new set of rules that you need to kind of understand and it takes a lot of practice. I practiced that for a few months and then took an art test where I was asked to draw a creature, a human, and a structure. So I got the job based on that and started doing artwork.



One of the first games by Silicon & Synapse. Image Credit: Blizzard.

### — And then you switched to writing?

— The first thing I worked on was the Justice League Task Force, I was helping to animate characters like The Flash and Green Arrow. That's how I got started in that company; of course, Silicon & Synapse eventually became Blizzard. We started working on Warcraft and eventually went on to Starcraft.

I was working on storylines, I was editing scripts, I was doing dialogue. When you're at a small company like that, everybody does a little bit of everything and so I was already kind of dipping my toes in the water as far as the story is concerned and I tried to do that as much as I could.

Eventually, years later I transitioned from two-dimensional art to 3D, and around that time, Chris Metzen created a brand-new

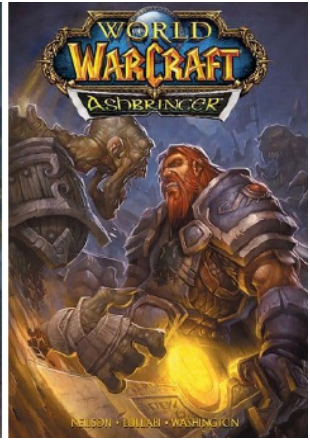
department that he called Creative Development, which was basically intended to oversee the stories for all the different IPs that we were working on: Warcraft, Starcraft, Diablo. He asked me if I wanted to be a part of that and I started working there. For six months, I continued doing the 3D art and working on the story at the same time. I hedged my bets because I didn't know if it was going to be successful. After six months, I felt comfortable enough to switch to the story stuff completely, but I still worked on art in my free time.



Original Warcraft, debuted in 1994. Image Credit: Blizzard.

The first thing I did was oversee the WoW comic book. We did that with DC Comics, a label called WildStorm at the time. So from there I just kept working on story content, novels, short stories, and things like that. Writing my own stuff but also doing creative editing on other people's stories.

***«In World of Warcraft, the story is unfolding all around the player»***



Original Warcraft, debuted in 1994. Image Credit: Blizzard.

— You’ve mentioned working on storytelling in games and comics in the WoW universe and other IPs by Blizzard. What would you say are the main differences between narrative in literature and video games?

— It depends on what kind of a game you’re talking about. Say, a first-person shooter versus an MMO, the stories are going to be different. For Overwatch, for instance, there’s not a lot of narrative content that’s conveyed to the player in the game. Games like that really rely on the ancillary products: stories and comic books. Whereas in World of Warcraft, the story is unfolding all around you and so it very much is a big part of the game itself.

Another significant difference for a video game is player choice. In a movie, you have a story that’s unfolding sequentially, the viewer is just there watching, you’re along for the ride. Whereas with a lot of video games, you can choose what your character is going to do. You can go down one path versus another path and you can have branching storylines and dialogue. The story to a certain extent is a little bit more in the hands of the player when you have a game that allows you to go hang out and fish all day or have a garden.

A similar kind of thing happens with a game like Minecraft. It’s just an open world, and you can do what you want to do, but

even in a game like that, the story is still taking place around you and that's done through the environment. Even if it's a platformer game like Crash Bandicoot, the story is always going to be reinforced through art, through VO, sound effects and music, and through NPC characters that you interact with.

**— You've said that the story always happens around the player. Do you think if, say, I go fishing instead of completing my main quest, can this be considered part of the narrative within the game's universe?**

— If the player wants to, then why not. In World of Warcraft, you can kind of check out from the story if you want. If you don't want to be bothered and all you want to do is just go and fish, you can do that.

Now, the game is alive and is happening all the time 24/7. So the world is always existing around you and the story is always unfolding around you. And it is a little bit different for a group of players going on a raid or someone improving their fishing skills. I think if you want to go and just do your own thing and you don't necessarily care about the story, you should be able to do that.

Freedom would be the main feature for an MMO. Yet, you know, there are so many different types of games, so it entirely depends on the game.

**— What would you call a secret to writing a great engaging story? What should be done to engage the players until the very finale?**

— The rules would differ depending on the medium and depending on the genre, but with any story you're telling whether it's a game, a book, or a movie, you need compelling characters. You need to keep the player or the viewer in suspense, guessing, asking questions, anticipating greater things to come. Above all, you have to enjoy the ride, you should care about the main characters, whether they live or die. There should be points in the story that surprise you.

And on a deeper level, truly great storytelling contains subtext. It explores universal themes, it confronts moral dilemmas, and it asks difficult questions while forcing each of us to answer those questions for ourselves.

**— There's a lot of talk about how video games are finally reaching that level of cinema and books in terms of the seriousness of the topics covered. Should games go deep into philosophical questions?**

— I think if you're a game developer, that's one of the choices that you need to make right up front. If it's a platformer game, it's not going to have a deep storyline and you don't want it to because it needs to be fast. The player just needs to be running through that world collecting items and going through the progression of the game. That's going to be a lot different from something like an MMO where you might get really, really deep into the storyline. A game like WoW has more of an epic storyline. But you can certainly have stories that are much more grounded. Even in a first-person shooter, it's possible and I think that's one of the choices you have to make.

Developers should decide how many stories they want in their game. Some people are going to listen to all of the NPC dialogue, but others don't care. They honestly just want to go level up and get items, not spend time with the story. In WoW, the developers deliberately chose the path of a well-developed story, the player can plunge into it if they want, or skip it.

If it's going to be a narrative-heavy game, there's nothing wrong with that, I think. It just needs to be promoted that way and the player needs to know what they're getting into.

**— What stages do you need to go through when you prepare a story not from scratch, but work on a large expansion for an existing storyline?**

— In my experience, game designers created the storylines and the quests with the creative director. This is where I would come in.



The game designers would come to me with a list of characters and send me a short description of the gameplay, a document describing what the player will do. Now I need to think over the details of the story: all the lines of enemies, bosses, NPCs, taunts, and everything that characters say when they take damage or die. We did it like that for Burning Crusade, Cataclysm, Wrath of the Lich King. I was also the voice director so I would audition the actors, select the talent, and then do the voice directing sessions, which was an interesting and fascinating part of my life as a storyteller.

To be able to come up with the words that the characters are saying and then select the actors who would actually say those words was a lot of fun.



Blizzard's Creative Development Publishing Team ran by Micky as Publishing Lead.

— **When writing, do you usually know how this or that character should sound?**

— Yeah, I can hear the voice inside my head, but you know, sometimes actors will surprise you. You'll hear a voice you weren't picturing and realize it sounds amazing. You didn't even think about that, but that sounds great. But most of the time, I have a pretty clear idea of what it is that I want to hear from the actor, and then it's just a matter of finding that.



— **Let's say you have two very talented voice actors. Do you have any criteria on how to choose between them?**

— Voice actors are a very interesting community. In California, there was a group that we would work with again and again, and they're so good. They're excellent actors but their voices sound great on top of that. When choosing, I know we've got five big creature voices. I also know that there are three or four actors who can do those voices, each in their own way.

**«Sometimes you get into things like retconning»**

— **WoW is played by people all around the world, how to create content that is well received by players of different cultures?**

— You don't want to offend another culture. It's important to listen to feedback and to try and do something to address concerns if you can.

You need to do the homework, the research and talk to the necessary people to try and prevent surprises. When I was writing a graphic novel that featured Japanese culture very heavily, I used to call the Japanese Cultural Center in Seattle. I spoke to them and just asked a lot of questions.

— **You think taking inspiration from other cultures helps you as a writer? Perhaps it would be easier to write something neutral so as not to offend anyone?**

— It can be helpful for writers to have cultural touchstones because if you say, "Oh, this video game race is going to be very much like Vikings," then everybody knows what you're talking about. You can come up with some name for this race and say, "Oh well, they're kind of barbaric, but they're travelers and they have proud traditions." If you say that to a room of 10 people, they're going to have 10 different ideas of what that race could be. Whereas if you say "Vikings," everyone has pretty much the same picture.

I think that's the danger of just going completely neutral in the earliest stages. Even in your descriptions, you should still have some touchstones of something that everybody understands, like when you say "This race is a lot like ancient Romans."

Certain things you want to avoid in those instances are obviously stereotypes, and I think the stereotypes are where you start getting into the territory of something being offensive. You know you could say that this character is Hispanic or this character is Asian, but if you start getting into stereotypes, then you're potentially running into a lot of problems.

— Many teams today are trying to convey story and lore in their projects indirectly through item descriptions or notes. Does it help to see the gameplay in a new light or does it ruin the plot for less attentive people?

— Item descriptions exist to add flavor, they shouldn't be there to convey important story elements. Notes, descriptions, and things like that exist to round out the world and make it feel more lived in. They provide detail for the people who want to take the time and immerse themselves in that level of detail. Nevertheless, the plot should be coherent and logical for those players who do not want to read the descriptions. They shouldn't be missing out on anything important. So, for someone who's designing a game, I would say it's important to make sure that all of that content like item descriptions, NPC dialogue, and other details do not communicate important story points. They should all just be supporting story points that add to the overall immersion.

There is an exception for games containing a mystery. And in order to solve the mystery, you have to read through all these different things. You have to read all that stuff because that is integral to the story.

— A lot of projects in the modern industry are developed as services, including MMORPGs. New plotlines appear from time to time, complementing existing stories. How can we design them in a way that does not conflict with previous global updates?

— One thing that I think is very important is you have to have some kind of a repository for existing lore. Say, you've got your base MMO that's establishing a story, and then you're going to have all of these expansions that are adding to that story.

If you have a narrative based on some history, and you expand it every few months, then sooner or later what's going to happen is developers will get to a point where they don't know the story themselves anymore. The story has gotten away from everybody.

At Blizzard, we had people critical in helping maintain the vision of the story, they were the lore people. They are like a real-world historian who can tell you every fact about Ancient Rome, well we had our historians who could tell you every fact about Warcraft and its 10,000 years of history. When the game designers had questions, they could go to the historians to find out if they could do that or if it's already been done.

And then obviously sometimes you get into things like retconning. You need to keep track of all of that history that you're building as you go.

Another note on that is that you can end up with parts of a game called Snapshots, and what I mean by that is pieces that are valid only at a specific point in time. New players can play the fresh addition, but at the same time, they return to the previous points too where the story is already outdated because the plot has moved on.

You have to make a choice whether to constantly go back and change old events in the story in order to connect them with the rest of the world or to just leave everything as it is and call it a snapshot. It doesn't matter what the key points were in the previous part, they only refer to a specific point in time and place.

***«Every element of the game is helping to tell the story»***

## — Do you think that there is a limit to the number of stories that can be told within a universe?

— Say you're starting up a game studio and you want to create a brand-new story. One of the things that you need to take into account is the longevity of your concept. How many stories up front you could potentially tell in a universe like that. If you've limited yourself to very specific characters in a very specific time period, for instance, then you might want to consider ways that allow you to expand beyond that. You're going to need something to break out of that sandbox you're in.

The trick is always to keep things fresh while remaining true to the spirit of what made the IP successful in the first place. A lot of TV shows will struggle with this problem because they become victims of their own success. They get renewed for another season, but they haven't necessarily mapped out what the storyline is going to be for that new season. There's no magic formula for it, but it's important to have a vision and to maintain that vision throughout. You'll get some shows that go off in left field, and sometimes it doesn't even feel like the same TV show anymore.

With some choices, they go as far as saying: "We're going to switch it up, it's going to be totally different!" Well, different may not work because if it feels too different, then people aren't responding to what made them fall in love with that show in the first place. I would encourage writers to always go back to the original whether it's a game, a TV show, season one, or whatever it is. Ask yourself: "What were the ingredients that made that a success? What did the fans respond to and what was it about that story that made you as the writer passionate?" Because your passion and your love for this world that you've created and for these characters that you've created are going to come across in the content. It's so important not just to try and make sure that the viewers and the players are invested, but you as the writer need to be invested. As you move forward, you should be as excited about season 7 or the 15th expansion as the fans are. If you can do that, I think you're in a good place.

— **Were you as engaged later as the years went by?**

— Yeah, I was. A lot of that was because there are always new characters to explore. Especially with a game like WoW, it's like pockets of this world that feel fresh and new. This was one of the company's strengths.

— **Stories are told not only through text or dialogue. What details allow you to immerse the player in the world even before the NPCs start to talk?**

— One example I look at is screenwriting. When you're writing a screenplay, one of the things that you learn is that nothing is wasted. No scene is wasted, no dialogue is wasted, everything in that screenplay has a purpose because you only have a certain number of pages to tell the story.

Games are similar: every element of the game is helping to tell the story. Everything from the environment to the color palette, to the aesthetic design, the shape language, all of these things are helping to tell the story. A lot of it happens without the player even realizing necessarily that it's happening, but all of these elements come together to create this illusion that you are walking through or playing through an entirely different world or universe.

— **When you walk on the train station in Half-Life 2, you see all the totalitarian environment. As a writer, are you the one that comes up with that description, or does the visual artist just run into the room and yell: "I have a great design for totalitarian train stations!", so now you accommodate?**

— You know, it depends. If we're talking about video games specifically, it all depends on the developers. For example, Toys for Bob, developers of Crash Bandicoot 4 asked their artists: "What great ideas inside the Crash Bandicoot universe can we implement? What do you think would be the coolest, most fun environments for Crash Bandicoot to play through? Go nuts." Gave them complete freedom and only then began working on the story based on the environments.

In that case, the environments came first, the artists were building this world, and then it was up to the writer to make all of that gel. That's not always the way it goes. Oftentimes you'll have the writer come in having a very clear idea or a vision of what the universe is going to be. And one of the things that you'll do as a writer when you're coming on to a new game is you'll create a world bible. The world bible is giving you the history of that world and it's giving you a lot of these details.

So you're saying, "A hundred years ago, there was this great war and this race fought against that race." You're adding all of that detail so then the designers, the artists, everybody who's working on the game can use that as a guide. So maybe a level that they're creating will have a poster that says something about that war that took place a hundred years ago.

To me, it's incredibly important that the designers have freedom. So the story that you're creating isn't meant to restrict the game design and the art. If an artist comes up with a cool idea, the writer should always look for a way to incorporate that. The best idea wins is what we'll often say and, as a writer coming on to a new project, I subscribe to that theory. I want to know what the designers and developers are excited about, what are they passionate about. My job is to tell a story that gives them the freedom to pursue those passions.

**— Do we need to somehow overcome the ludonarrative dissonance, or do we just embrace it? How to create a sense of uniqueness in an MMORPG where everybody is a hero?**

— I think it's important that the player always feels like the hero or if it's a different kind of story, the villain. We ran into trouble when I was running the publishing team at Blizzard. We did the WoW comic and we had King Wrynn as a major character. There was this whole storyline around King Wrynn going back and doing things that the player had done in the game. So a lot of people reading the comic actually got mad about it because they said, "Well, no, wait a minute, King Wrynn didn't do that. I did that!"

Yeah, of course, millions of players did that, they all felt pride and they all felt ownership of having gone through those quests. They're spending hours and hours to get to the end, to get the items, to beat the boss.

It wasn't our intention to make players feel that way. That was a lesson that we learned, and we took that lesson and carried it forward when we did other comic books or stories.

**— Say, there are goblins that are pillaging the village and the NPCs are like: "Oh no! They're so fierce and evil." But you're too overpowered for this quest and you go in, you destroy them. So there is this dissonance because you've been told that it is almost impossible and you just kill everybody in a second or two. How to fix this?**

— That sounds like a game balancing question that the designers need to go through. That's where QA comes in. You've got these people who are playing the same level over and over trying to break it, finding out all the bugs. And then the game designers react to that feedback and make changes. So that you don't get a situation where you take a high-level character and run around in a lower-level zone being way overpowered. Yes, you can do that, but that's not what the game is designed for necessarily.

Yet again, it's part of the freedom of the game. If you want to go and do that, you can. But it's bad design if you're progressing along with the storyline and you feel completely overpowered.



# MARIA LESK

Localization Director at Daedalic Entertainment

*“Never skip LQA. That’s a bad idea.”*

Inlingo team has talked to Maria and learned why localization should be discussed early in development, how to react to subjective feedback from players, and what to do if your localization budget is nil.

We interviewed Maria in December, 2020.



## ***«There is a person answering questions from players»***

### **— When did you first get interested in games?**

— It happened when I was a kid, like many others. I have an older brother, and I ended up playing with his consoles way more than he did. We had an Amiga and a PlayStation One and then we got a PC relatively late compared to all my friends, but the world of PC gaming captivated me once and for all. So, in the end, my parents decided to buy me the games, not my brother.

### **— Do you remember the games you first got into?**

— On the Amiga there were the older games that I never understood because they were all in English. But there was one game called Swap — a very simple puzzle.

### **— Did you ever think back then that your work would be connected to game industry?**

— I never figured I would work in this industry one day because I simply never really knew which jobs there were apart from the obvious ones like programming and art. As a kid I never really had like this big dream job that I aspired to have one day. And I majored in Media and Communications and English and American Studies.

### **— English and American Studies probably helps you with localization right now, but what about Media and Communication?**

— We covered a lot of aspects of media, but games were never really a big part of my studies. I think it became more relevant after I left with a lot of younger professors. That's why I majorly focused on film. I still got to write my thesis on film and game topics, so that was cool. And, of course, English Studies helps me every day. It makes me a linguist, and now I work with languages.

— **Daedalic is your first workplace after university. How did you get there?**

— I think back then I knew someone at Daedalic and I felt safe to send an application. Although I never had game companies on my radar. That application was for something completely different. It was for a marketing position because my studies included a couple of lectures on marketing.

— **You first started working in customer support. What is the hardest thing when working with tickets from players?**

— Oh, working with customers is a very specific field, you know, everybody's different. I think what challenged me the most is when it started to get very technical. Like when I had the feeling that I'm offering IT support for their PCs instead of just helping with our games, and that's not really my domain.

Also, for Daedalic the position that I was in was completely new. We didn't have customer support before that — they created this position for me during the job interview. I think the workload rose exponentially with every game we released. It was amazingly overwhelming for the first years, I worked so much, and there were so many tickets. In those couple of years, I was able to make some crucial changes in the customer support experience. Now it's a smooth-running process.



The Daedalic ensemble, acting all serious.

I took it really seriously, not a lot of people do that. Most companies don't do their own customer support, but at Daedalic there is a person answering these emails. I think a lot of people recognize that and like it.

## ***«The base language needs to be perfect»***

I help with lockits, pipelines, and schedules. I manage the entire translation into multiple languages, and I also help with voice-over. Providing teams with all information, moving on to casting, scheduling recordings. Finally, if I have the time, I also translate, proofread, and do LQA for German texts. It's actually a lot of fun for me.

### **— So, what's the favorite part in all of your duties?**

— Well, the part that I've just mentioned — I really enjoy working with texts. For my particular position and the position that I'm in, I really enjoy working with so many different teams. Because every game is different, every team works differently. And usually in development you work on one game for months or years more likely. So, I get to work on a lot of different games at the same time, which is of course overwhelming, but it's also the challenge I enjoy.

### **— At what stage does your localization team get involved in the development?**

— Ideally, we get involved as early as possible so that we are at the table right from the beginning. The reality is the complete opposite. We get involved extremely late, and mostly localization is being pushed to the end of the development period, and then they show up with a million words and twenty languages to translate.

### **— That is a common problem for different companies. Do you think there is a way to persuade the decision makers to start working on localization earlier?**

— Well, if you find a way, please let me know. Since we are working with external partners a lot, I just can't barge in and say, "Are you working on localization already?" I wrote a document with errors to avoid and everything they need to check before starting. Of course, I can never check if developers actually take everything into account.

I want to stress the importance of localization as a lot of people underestimate it. It's my job to tell them to take care of it early on. When it's a project in our own development, it's easier for me, I can go there and say, "Let's talk about it early, I have a lot of experience, get me on the table." But it's always difficult because there are so many priorities and localization mistakenly never seems to be one of it.

**— You've mentioned a set of advice for development companies to prepare the game for localization. Can you share some of them?**

— To start with, the base language needs to be perfect. If the game is written in English, invest in a good proofreading because that's the language that every other language will use as a base. Never underestimate the time and work localization takes. But also, don't be afraid of it, so don't push it back too far. Get involved in it now. Plan a good lockit because that's the base for everything. If there are mistakes in there, they're gonna be there for a while.

When you start working with texts, set the goals you want to reach and then test your fonts. If you know you're gonna include Asian languages, include dummy texts and make sure all the symbols are properly displayed and look nice.

It's super important for the programmers to code with localization in mind. Remember there is going to be a localization one day, and if your text boxes don't scale, it's gonna be a problem. German might not fit where English does, and also there are languages with different line break rules. When coding, keep in mind that it's not just for the one thing you can see right now but for many

different languages. Also, never ever skip LQA. That's a bad idea. Never hard code text into your game. We've had a lot of like painted texts in our first games. They are a pain to localize. It's very important for Chinese, for example, because it cannot have any English words left. If there is a newspaper article that you cannot translate, well, that's too bad.

Also, never change texts once localization is in process. It's a given, but it's really hard to do.



Maria at Gamescom 2019, meeting with their translator Maxi Lange.

— That's a good list. I've seen a lot of smaller teams that are just starting to work with localization. They are kind of overwhelmed with all the things that occur.

— Oh, there is also one good tip that a lot of people might not know, and that's to have one dedicated localization person in your team, from the technical side. Because it's often a topic that gets thrown around a lot and nobody feels responsible for integrating texts or doing all these things that I've just mentioned. Having a specialist people can go to helps a lot because I've seen some teams that are just like, "No no no, I'm not responsible for this, you do that." It's not gonna work out. It has to be a responsibility that has to go to someone.

## **«Once you launch a game, the sales are the most important thing»**

**— How does Daedalic choose languages for localization? Do you analyze similar projects, or do you have a set of languages like EFIGS plus Asian and that's it?**

— Yeah, we do have this set of languages, but deciding on languages for a new project is mostly an executive decision by my CEO because he simply knows best which games are popular in which countries. While we have that set of languages that we try to apply to as many games as we can, but it's 13 languages, so when there is a very high word count, we, of course, have to cut some of those.

I remember when we were working on our game The Pillars of the Earth based on Ken Follett's book, we tried to find out in which countries the book or the movie was a success. The game has a lot of words, so we tried to especially focus on that group of countries that actually enjoy it and like the story.

**— I know that some companies release the game in English, in different markets, and then they see where the game gets more popular. And only afterwards they add those languages. Do you think that's a valid strategy?**

— I think every strategy is valid because, in the end, it's a gambling game. You cannot predict the future. Such approach might help certain companies. It could also mean that you lose a lot of players right at the beginning because, as we know, once you launch a game, the sales are the most important thing and a lot of people won't buy games that are not localized into their languages. They won't ever give it a second chance because there are so many games out there. So, having a game localized into many languages could mean the survival of the game, but again, it's like predicting the future. Localization is super expensive, which is not fully understood, and Daedalic invests a lot into localization. We have 13 main languages. We hardly



ever cut back and we think of it as an investment. I hope it's something the player base is grateful for.

But yeah, as I said, I think every strategy is valid. Sometimes I see very popular games being released only in English and I think, "Wow, that's a decision right there." Maybe it helps them to save money and then concentrate on other important aspects of the game.

— **Daedalic has always been releasing games with a lot of focus on narrative. What's the hardest part when localizing a game with strong story?**

— It's crucial for the translators to find the right tone. Especially if you have a big story like with The Pillars of the Earth. We have to use translators who are familiar with the work, with the tone, with the characters. I think it needs translators who are good writers and have good command of the language. But for Daedalic it's not just about background. We have very quirky humor, and that was important to find people who can work with that. They have to not only tell a good story in their language but also transfer that humor. Most freelance translators that we work with are super experienced in story driven games. It's important to find the right people.



At Daedalic they take good care of platypuses.

— This is an old question, but what's Daedalic's approach on working with freelancers, having your in-house department of translators or working with vendors?

— We usually depend on freelance translators that we've worked with for many years and have well-established relationships with. I really enjoy working with them, actually. There are people who get every single one of our games. We usually work on several projects simultaneously.

Last year we released a lot of early access titles which require constant attention like every two months, every other week. At times like these we sometimes use agencies that are able to pull off big workloads and a lot of target languages at the same time, but that's basically an emergency situation.

— Localization almost hardly ever gets as good as the source text, even when it's close to perfect, there is always criticism from players. How do you tell what criticism is valid and what is just subjective ideas?



Daedalic booth at the 2019 Pax West.



— It's, actually, a good question because I think it's a very fine line sometimes. In general, I take feedback seriously and I often share it with my translators and ask them if they think it's valid. I don't speak every language, so I trust their judgement.

I think what a lot of people forget is that translation is a form of creative writing and it has a spectrum. So, player feedback often comes down to personal taste. The "I would have done it differently, so I hate this, and here's my suggestion." Of course, every translator has the right to say, "Nah, I won't implement that, it's my name in the credits, it's my work, I'm not changing it." There are just too many opinions out there, and you cannot heed everyone.

When I read negative reviews saying "poor translation", what should I do with that? You have to find out what exactly is the problem, is there actually something wrong, or is it just a subjective opinion. Other times, there are things that my translators incorporate, like if there is a typo, something that is technically wrong like a wrong text at the wrong place. This happens, and it's amazing when players spot that.

**— Do you think companies that work with niche genres that are popular among smaller subset of players should add as many languages as possible because the player base is potentially very small? Or it's a good reason to save money and just release it in two or three languages and see what's going to happen?**

— It's a tricky question because, in the end, it comes down to budget. You are to decide if you can afford adding 10 languages. We know what it's like to release niche games that don't get a lot of attention, and yeah, maybe you have two-three players who are very grateful that you offered their language, but it's not what gets you the money back, I've seen it before.

I think for smaller companies and niche games that are still beloved it's a good idea to ask the community if they are interested in doing the translation for a smaller coin or maybe for free. Fan translations are a great way to save money and

also bond with the community. In that case you won't have to worry about the cost and about it being top quality because it's a community effort and people know who made it.

I've seen it do a lot of good things, especially for early access games or smaller teams that cannot afford localization.

### — What is your workday like?

— My work day just comes as it comes, like you have to take care of everything that is like time-critical because of time zones before lunch and everything else after lunch.

When there's no pandemic going on I commute to work, go into the office like at 9:30, check my mails, check my calendar, check all my messengers, reply to emails, have meetings that could easily also be emails. And then have lunch, and then it's basically the same thing in the afternoon. In the evenings I try to get home and not continue working from there.



With Brazilian tandem partner, Bianca, Maria participated in an all-female gamedev exchange program, organized by the Goethe Institute Sao Paulo.

— **How do you spend your free time?**

— Games, obviously. Working out, sports. Wasting time on social media, spending time with my boyfriend, friends, not during the pandemic, of course.

— **Let's switch to the rapid-fire round. What are you playing right now?**

— Right now, I'm playing ReCore and Life is Strange 2.

— **Top 3 movies?**

— The Grand Budapest Hotel, Mad Max: Fury Road, and Almost Famous. Three very different movies.

— **What games or a game in your opinion have the best German localization?**

— I don't play games in German. I can only say which Daedalic game has the best German localization, and that would be The Pillars of the Earth or Die Säulen der Erde, which is the German title.

— **Final question. Deponia or Elysium?**

— Oh, it's easy. Elysium.

— **Come on, there is no soul there.**

— Yeah, well. I like clean water. I think it's a big privilege, so I like it.



# JAMES SCHALL

Director of Publishing at Secret Mode

*«It's the people that come up with trends that have the biggest success»*

The Inlingo team talked to James Schall, Director of Publishing at Secret Mode. We explored the fate of hard copies of games in a digital world, what trends to expect in the game industry in the near future, and how publishers choose the projects that will go on to rapidly dominate the market.

We interviewed James in July, 2021.

## ***«Behind the scenes in the game shop, it's a really messy, terrible place»***

**— You began as a sales assistant in a Virgin Games store, then went to Amazon, and then worked for a long time at Sega. When did you become interested in the games industry, and how did you end up in game dev?**

— I remember the very early memory of playing Pong at home and having it on television. And then my dad got me a Spectrum for Christmas with Atic Atac, which became a very dear game for me. Video games were my thing and it was kind of a hobby. I would often go into an arcade and just wander around looking at all the cabinets and the art, the noises. And game shops were really a thing for me where I'd go in and look at all the box art and they fascinated me.

I tried to program, and I wasn't any good at programming. I could probably make my name go on the screen and rotate it a little bit, but that was about it. And I had no idea that you could ever do anything with video games. So, I went off on a different path, and I was at college doing a course in Marine Biology. And one of the jobs I wanted was to go and photograph whales in the Antarctic. That became a big interest for me, and then I started talking to organizations about going ahead and doing that. It would have cost me thousands. It's not a job that you earn money from, it's a job you raise money to go and do. I thought, "well that doesn't really work." And there was nothing else I could really do at college.

**— And then you got back into video games?**

— I wandered through the streets of my hometown in Oxford, thinking, "What am I going to do next?" I walked past a games shop, Virgin Games Center, and they had a piece of paper on the window: "Saturday Job". I went in and introduced myself and the guy was like, "Look, I just employed someone, but he hasn't

turned up. Do you want an interview now?" I hadn't prepared a CV or anything, but I agreed.

It is one of those lucky things that just happen. Of course, behind the scenes in a game shop is a really messy, terrible place. We spoke about "Kickoff 2" for about an hour and then about football because he was a big football fan; he was a big Arsenal fan. From there that was it: I was then earning money from video games. Someone would come into the store and say "Hey I really like this game 'Streets of Rage' on the Megadrive, what else is there?" You'd be able to say, "Oh, there's 'Final Fight' or 'Double Dragon' or have you tried this new 'Street Fighter' thing?"



James working at Virgin Games Centre. Source: James' personal archive.

It became very easy for me to convince people to buy video games, because there's an industry here and I kind of knew about video games, this was my skill. And as I've worked through in my career, I began to understand how games sell, why people like them, why people don't like them, why games fail, why companies fail, why things don't work. Everywhere I've been, be it Amazon, be it Sega, I've always maintained this closeness with the consumer, and you have to. You can't lose sight of the customer and the player. It is something that got

me going from day one. And I still know the store manager to this day. He's someone I've kept in touch with as my first manager in the games industry.

**— What experience did you get working for major companies like Amazon and Sega?**

— Amazon has kind of an efficiency about how you communicate. And spending a lot of time on actually finishing a task. So, it's very important to finish a good idea, as opposed to constantly talking about things. Never being afraid of challenging the norm is something I found at Amazon as well. It's always about challenging the norm. Whether people at Amazon found that a useful skill is for them to argue.

I was at Sega during the era when the company stopped positioning itself as a console-only platform. And we found a lot of success on various platforms there, but it wasn't something that strategically we went out to do. Then Sega transformed itself from a physical publisher into a digital publisher. Digital sales were getting stronger, so the team I was building focused on them.

I've learned so much more about the games industry as a whole to make, I would say, better informed decisions. I've understood where my gut instinct comes from and was able to really factor in how one's mind is making these decisions.

**— At Sega you were Vice President for Digital Distribution. How do you see the future for classic physical copies, bearing in mind that sales of digital products continue to gain momentum?**

— It's going to be down to the strength of the retailers, and discoverability, and how things are sold, and what the value of that is. Because you could do a deal that puts 50,000 games in a supermarket, but then how much do you have to spend to sell those 50,000 copies? How many copies are gonna potentially sit there at the supermarkets collecting dust? How easy is it to get a reproduction run if they sell out, you know?



Sadly, the thing with video games is that there is no strength in physical retail anymore. It's really moving away from individual retailers to platforms, be it Steam, be it Humble Bundle, be it EGS, Xbox, Playstation, Nintendo, Google, or Amazon. These are now the sales platforms where you're looking at different ways for your opportunities and your content.

Within Secret Mode, the publishing group that I'm running now, I don't think we'll have physical versions of many games. We'll have collector's editions, and I think that's a thing. It's like the music industry, right? Your twelve inches have come back because they're collectable and people like them. The Evercade is a really nice little console which has got a physical view there, but it's more of a retro limited run for people who want to see that kind of thing.



Collector's edition of Doom for PS4 by Limited Run, including a physical copy of the game on a disk. Source: [limitedrun.com](https://limitedrun.com).

***«When we dictate to players that they've got to go to your store to buy your game, we've lost»***



## — Would you say that physical copies are just for collectors now?

— There's still an audience out there globally who need access to video games, and want to be able to get them either cheaply or in a more efficient way than they can get a hold of them digitally. And that loop has to be connected up.

In the big markets like France, the UK, Germany, and the US there are still physical versions out there, but they're predominantly for consoles that still have strength in physical, like the Switch. Some of the bigger publishers are not removing themselves from physical.

## — If everything is moving towards the predominance of digital distribution, could you explain some of the cons of that format for developers?

— There are cons, and I would say the big one is discoverability. Back in, let's say, the mid-90s, games wouldn't stay on shelves very long. They would probably have four to six weeks' life cycle before they would be returned. And each game store could only carry about 600 games. So, the choice for the customer wasn't so big, but they could certainly spend an hour in the game store finding the game that they wanted.

There are probably more games released daily on Steam now than there were released in one week with all formats back in the 90s. So, there's a lot more noise that gets in the way of making your game visible. You constantly think about tools that would help the game to get noticed.

## — What about the pros?

— Although there's so much choice, the game you brought out in 2014 might make more money now than in 2014. Because it's not old. It's still there, it's relevant, people are playing it. We generally don't have the big popularity spikes although some games still have the eagerness around a release date. There's

still players who are going to wait because they want to see what the reviews are like or may want to see some DLCs, or what the content is like long-term.

So, people make different choices and it's down to different resources. Money isn't the only resource that's important, there's also time. How much time do our customers and players have for playing all these games? Do we need to look at that when constantly throwing 80-90 plus hour games onto people? I don't have that time as a gamer anymore.

I certainly have this sense of oh, I really wanna play this but should I because I can't complete it. And there are a lot of players who like playing expansive RPGs over hundreds and hundreds of hours. I myself have sunk thousands of hours into things like Football Manager, and PUBG, and Total War across the years. You don't really realize the time you've spent in them because it's not a specific story. But the time resource is just as important as money on that front.

**— How true is it that when you buy a digital copy of a game on Steam or another store, you don't become the owner of the game, you just get the right to use it?**

— So the whole ownership and digital rights thing, I get it, the fact that I've got a box in my hand which I own, right? I've got many games upstairs in my kind of little shrine that I've got and I own. However, I don't know if they work. Does my Commodore still work? [A home computer launched in 1982 — Ed.]

It's the same thing with movies. We're moving from, «Do I want to have access to the 400 DVDs I used to own?» Or do I just want to look at the maybe 30 films that are on Netflix? Or a hundred films that are on Amazon? Or whatever my local TV provider's showing? But they might not be the particular film that I might want to watch at that particular moment in time.

As industries move forward we need to get much better in terms of content. And this is the point around digital rights. You've

purchased the rights for that piece of content and it's going to take something very weird for that to be removed from you. I can't think of a single instance of a game being removed from Steam or any of the platforms where someone has actively owned it.

**— I'm not sure if this is a good example, and I'm not sure if it still holds, but I was trying to find Need for Speed: ProStreet in digital format, and it wasn't anywhere. Does that mean the only way to buy it legally is to find a physical copy?**

— But then there'll be a reason why that game's not available. They've not just made it not available because they want to be mean. It's probably not available because, for example, there may be some licensing within the game for music. So, one of the things you would get as a publisher is we published this game ten years ago and the rights for the music have expired. Do we want to keep this game available for sale? Because if we do, we need to pay a thousand dollars to the artist. And if you look at the sales, we haven't sold more than ten copies of this game in two years. So we can't do that, the game is going to have to be removed. And there may be other things like the game may have been coded in Windows Vista, and it's got a technical issue which means it now doesn't launch on modern PCs. So, we can't keep it up for sale, because there's going to be a bunch of people who will buy it and not be able to use it. I think every publisher is allowing their games to be made available where it's possible. There's a whole load of work that needs to be done to take an old game — even a game that's ten years old — and put it on Steam, or GoG, or whatever.

It's not like going, «Here's the game code, off you go and buy it.» There's a whole bunch of work that needs to be done, so not only does it take time for these developers to work on that, but also to figure out who owns the rights to this game, who's the IP holder — there's all these questions that make up the viability of just making games exist. Now, the copy of Need for Speed that you found physically was made five years ago. So, it was paid for, the money was done, it exists, it is out there. Whereas,

what you're looking at now with the digital version is something that's pretty much up-to-date.

— **What's your opinion on region locks? For example, someone buys a game in Russia and then can't launch it in America, because the game's cheaper for Russian users. Is that fair?**

— Region locks is a conversation that needs to go on. As we're working in a global marketplace, you have to kind of understand, why should Russian customers buy cheaper than someone in Czechia, Slovakia, or Poland? Why should Turkey be priced differently? And you certainly can't charge different prices within Europe. So should there be one price for everybody, or should we try and adjust it?

But then there have to be restrictions because the businesses around the edges utilize some of those currency exchanges. It's like if you didn't have a region key, for Russia for example, I would imagine the Russian price would be much higher. You could have a global key, a global price, say it's \$10 everywhere. And then what happens in two days' time when the Argentine Peso jumps up, and it's now \$20 in Argentina? And then let's say the Swiss Franc tumbles, and it's now only \$5 in Switzerland. It can be a really confusing, complicated mess.

And I do understand that there are individuals who want to buy a game in their country and get on a plane and play it when they arrive at the other end. Those individuals kind of fall outside of the norm and what digital rights were made for. I know a lot of people want to play with VPNs and use VPNs when it comes to Netflix, because they want a different range of content. But it doesn't go to the reason why Netflix has had to do a region lock. It's not because they don't want somebody to get the content. It's because there's a financial and legal reason why they can't. I'm absolutely convinced that content providers want to give users as much content as they possibly can. But the point about the rights issue is it can be seen as negative, and you can get a lot of negative sentiment around it.

— More and more companies are trying to open their own stores. In recent years we've had Origin, then Uplay [Ubisoft Connect since October 2020 — Ed.], and finally Epic Games Store. What's the reason for this trend? And how will it affect players and developers in the future?

— If you look at how cinema transitioned to television, then transitioned to video rental, then transitioned to buy-to-own, then DVD, then download, all of these transitions have been done because we've made the journey for the user, the player, the viewer more efficient and better.

Why are stores appearing and why is everybody trying to get their own piece? It's because they're not getting great discoverability, or they want a bigger share than everybody else. They don't feel their games are getting as much exposure as everybody else. So, you go ahead and create your own store. But why does the player need to come to you?

I don't think players will choose to buy a game from one retailer over another because they think the developer is making more money from it. While these stores are all good for their individual owners and good for the games, they should be good for the players as well. Steam, the Playstation store, Switch, Games Pass — these are now really good, efficient, and popular stores. I've seen over the last fifteen years, people say to me, «Yeah we're setting up a new company, and we're going to be the new Steam.» Great, what makes you different?

Steam is huge. They've got amazing customers, amazing technology. I'm sure lots of people don't like Steam, but that's not a reason to choose. It's those companies that have tried to do something for the benefit of the players who usually succeed. There is a drive to do all these things: you want to control your market, you want to talk to the customers directly. But what does the player want? We want to make more money, so please come buy it from here, or do we want this journey to be different?

It's for the player to choose. We have to give them a choice. When

we dictate to players that they've got to go to your store to buy your game, we've lost. Because you're removing choice, and players want choice. There will be a transition within the games industry to new technologies, but one driven by efficiency and making the player happy.

**— You've said that there's the potential for new technologies. Do you think game streaming can be such a technology? Can games be more like Netflix, or is it just a dream?**

— Well, from a technology point of view, nothing is impossible. I've said my first experience was Pong. But nowadays technology has advanced so much that we don't know what the limits are. So, with streaming, if you can fix latency and if you can improve a lot of the bandwidth, then yeah. Let's look at it from the PC point of view. And I'm developing my game, and I've worked my game on 10 different PCs in my QA department, but 10% of my player base still can't play the game. If you're streaming, it's just off one piece of hardware, and that hardware can be optimized for that code. So everybody's going to get the best experience, the best graphics, the latest patch — no one's waiting. I can access the latest builds instantly. I don't have any limitations on my RAM, I've got nothing stored locally, so there are no issues with that.

But how do you monetize streaming when it comes to AAA games? I don't think you can. A movie will go through a number of iterations: it'll have a cinematic release, you'd get TV deals, you'd get your Netflix deal. Some movies will be so successful that they will pay for their production at the cinema, others may become profitable when they go onto TV. They get repeat viewings and repeat fees. With games we don't have that. If we went for streaming straight away, that's in a subscription service. So you as a user would be paying ten dollars, say. Is that going to pay enough for a AAA game such as GTA or Call of Duty? It's probably not.

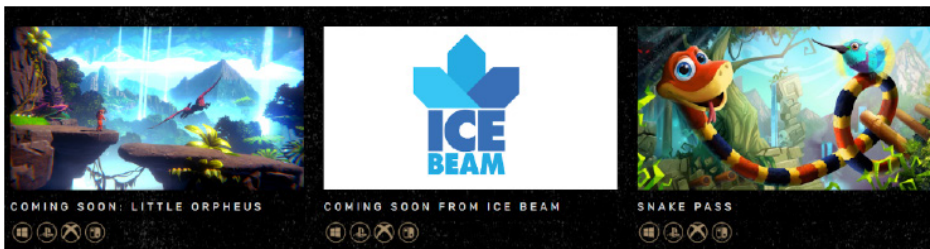
The core creation of that world is going to be so expensive, I need to make sure that it gets physically paid for and banked. Is that going to happen in the streaming world? I think it's going to be a collection of things. I think we'll still have download-to-own

for many years to come, but alongside some sort of streaming technologies. So, you will see your Xbox Game Passes, PS Now, maybe Steam. There'll be a technology that you or I haven't thought of that's going to be invented in the next five years. It will change the world and the way everything is. That's what we have to think. So you have to be ready to kind of transition.

— Steam appeared almost 20 years ago, and changed the world of PC gaming as far as I can tell. While with consoles, we've only seen no-disc versions this generation, with PS5 and Xbox Series. What's the reason behind this delay?

— Video game retailers in the late 2000s removed PCs from their stores. They stopped stocking it. They gave up on them far too early, so the transition to digital copies happened really quickly. And consoles seem to have been taking longer, but it's both of them taking what the natural progression is. So, if the video game stores had backed PC for longer, you would now see a lot more physical copies for PCs.

It's also because of things like gifting. Switch is a really good example of parents continuing to buy physical copies of games. Do you want to buy someone a digital code or do you want to go into a store and buy a nice little box that you can wrap up and give a little boy or girl for Christmas? Right, so the transition is happening. Gifting is one area that we as a digital world need to get better at, because at the moment there's not really a solution other than sending an email. Which is fine, and gifts are huge parts of those businesses, but it's still not that physical thing.



Games published by Secret Mode. Source: official website of Secret Mode.

## ***«We want to look at games that were already released and give them a bump up»***

**— You recently took charge of the new publishing studio Secret Mode. What are you planning to start with in a broad sense?**

— Well, we formed Secret Mode in the middle of the pandemic, which really was not easy. We had to think of the name, think of the logo, think of the core values, and hire a bunch of staff, and then come up with a plan on what we were going to do. And I'm really proud of the team that we've been able to do that. We've been able to focus on what our core values are, which is looking for really strong gameplay elements, quality, things that are a little bit different from the norm — games that we would all like to play.

We've got a core group of six individuals. We look at the inbound games that we get, and whether we like the opportunities. It's got to be something that we all like. And it's very much harking back to some of the ways publishers were run in the mid-80s and mid-90s. It's all about what is the vision of this publisher, mixed with the new nimbleness of the digital world. What can we unlearn in the way publishing has been done in order to be a successful publisher in the modern world? What are the things we can challenge and change to make sure we're not only treating our players fairly, but also our developer partners fairly? We want everybody to really enjoy their experience of working or buying a game from us.

**— What would be those things you need to unlearn to remain a successful publisher?**

— Video game releases around the world tend to happen just before the weekend. And they tend to happen just before the weekend because we needed to get all the video game boxes into the shop for a Saturday, because that's when everybody went shopping. And we have to charge \$39.99 because everyone else charges \$39.99, and that's the way it's always done. So the price is \$39.99 whether it's 8 or 50 hours of gameplay.



These are the kinds of things that we need to challenge and unlearn. Is there an opportunity to publish a game for a couple of dollars, which has an hour of gameplay? Is that a thing? It might not be. But if it's a really good experience, what's your asking price? Could we launch games at different times of the week and different times of the weekend, to maybe reach out when all of our players are online? Maybe that's something that's best. So it's kind of asking the questions about what's best for our players, and trying to figure that out.

I'm not afraid of publishing games that people don't like. What I will be frustrated with is if we publish games where there's an excuse not to like them, like the UI doesn't work or the game doesn't have Vsync or Ultrawide, or the controllers are a bit off, or the physics of the character don't feel right. You know, there's no excuse. Video game development is hard, but the player doesn't know the terrible journey you had, and they're just going to give you their honest opinion. And don't be so upset about someone telling you you've done a bad job. Listen to them saying you've done a bad job and see if you can fix it.

### — What kind of projects are always welcome at Secret Mode?

— It's one of those things with a bit of secret sauce and a bit of a wink. I don't want to see games that continue to plagiarize and copy other things. And I'd say there's two things that I'm really interested in. First is games that were released a long time ago but did nothing. There's so much content on Steam that something fantastic can be released yet players haven't discovered it. So we want to look at games that were already released and give those games a bump up. Maybe we can sort out some new content or patch fixes to make the project popular. Things that could be perceived as being cool or that could be perceived as being really family-orientated, so really spread out.

Something else I'm really interested in as a kind of genre is culturally proud content. What I mean by that is games that are developed with a location in mind that are not afraid of that location. Culture is one of the few things we can get very

passionate about without it being seen as negative in the grand scheme of globalization and us wanting to live and cooperate with each other. There is so much divisiveness around right now, but through art, music, films and video games, we can still share our culture with each other. I really love and welcome such things.

A game that's a platformer or a shooter, but we've changed the location because we feel that'll be better for Western audiences — no. I want to see a game that has come from that region and drips with the cultural pride of that region. And if it's not done in an insulting way, that can be a unique highlight of the project. There are so many amazing examples of developers around the world, who've created these experiences from their heart.

### — What if a project doesn't interest you?

— We opened our doors on the 11th of March, and we've received over 190 pitches now. It's been amazing getting involved with these pitches, just taking our time to go through them. We want to respect every single pitch, to give it time. Even if it looks like the most basic student effort, is there something in here that we might miss?

And then, it's important for us to have the right dialogue with the developers, to be able to call the developer up, which is something we are really trying to do. And I'm really pushing myself that, when we reject a game, we talk to everyone in-person. We want to look them in the eye and say, «We aren't going to progress with your game, but thank you very much for thinking of us.» Not just because we want to deal with them in the future, but because it's going to help their journey. We'll be able to give them some feedback on why we didn't like their game.

And at times that could be heartbreaking, because for someone it might be: «This is my future. This is the thing that's gonna get me paid to allow me to buy a house, and this was my vision that I've worked on for two years, but you've rejected me.» But being decent enough is to stand up to that person and say, «Yeah, we're not gonna work on your game, but this is why.» And

then that might give them an idea that will help them make a change in their project, or just stand tall anyway and go ahead.

And I want to see every single game that has been pitched to us released. But I haven't got the resources to do every single one, so we have to pass on them. There are thousands of movie ideas that don't get made and, sadly, there are a lot of game ideas that don't get made.

### — What's most important for Secret Mode: gameplay or the developer's artistic vision?

— Gameplay. It has to be gameplay. It's like there are so many different genres of music and you think about the way music has matured: back in the 50s there was rock'n'roll, and then in the 60s it was a bit more hippy, then it turned into prog rock, then we had disco, then we had punk. However, now there's just music. You can get hip-hop, you can get rock, you can get punk rock, all of these things exist. They're not done by age.

Video Game technology was our limiter: 8-bit, 16-bit, 32-bit. But we're going to get to the point where it's just games, and a pixel game is just as engrossing as super high-res 4K. The story just needs to be immersive. The gameplay and all of these things add to the element.

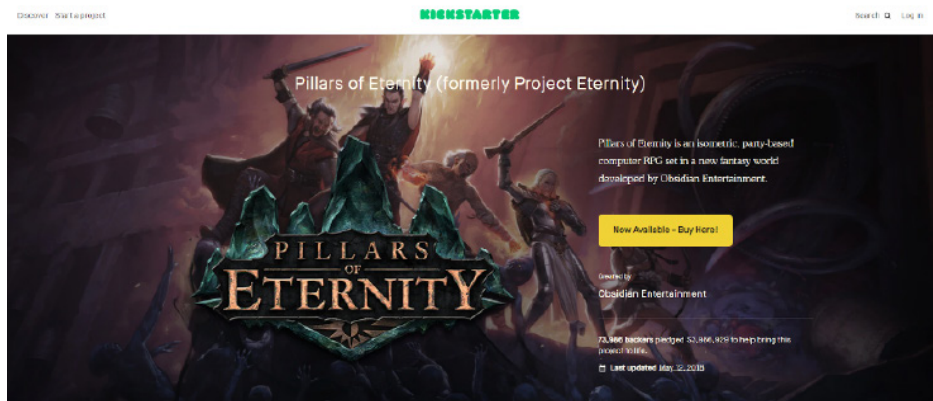
So you take Grand Theft Auto: can Grand Theft Auto be remade in a 16-bit homage? Well, it kind of was. That's how it started, and the technology has progressed. The visual style can add, and it can be a point of difference, but it can't just be, «Oh, we've got this game which looks this way» if there is nothing substantive behind it.

### — What should developers focus on during a pitch to interest Secret Mode?

— Make sure your core game loop is fully explained. I've seen quite a few pitches that, even after you've read them and had the developer talk to you about them, you still can't really figure

out what the game is. So, storyboard, pre-production, make things up to show the game. Rather than leaving it to people's imaginations. Because sometimes your concept is so wacky, people don't get it.

Really helpful game pitches have little gifs in, which show the core game loop. It's not giving us the full playable, because obviously it's not there, there's still a lot of work that needs to be done. But those things to really make your game idea come out on the page are super important.



One of the popular games which got crowdfunding on Kickstarter: Pillars of Eternity by Obsidian Entertainment. Source: Kickstarter.

— **Developers now, even individuals, can go on Kickstarter or another crowdfunding platform to launch their project. Do we really need publishers?**

— I've had many conversations with developers who've said exactly that, and this is in the last ten years. So there are a few developers who have had success in their game, and they don't need publishers. They put their game up on Steam and everything lined up: the game lined up, the launch lined up, the community lined up, the marketing lined up. They've had fantastic success, and that's great, but they may struggle with game two. I've seen that a lot, that the second game doesn't do anything. And then they'll try with the third game, and then by

the fourth game, all of the profits made from game one have run out. It's very difficult to get that kind of continuation.

You need to maximize your opportunity and that's what a publisher will bring. Not only on the commercial side, but also on the marketing side, the development side, and generally from the strategic side. All this experience and wealth of knowledge and understanding. You're more likely to have success if you have backing. Not just from dev funding, but also from being part of a bigger family.

In this world where lots of people make games, it's very difficult to make yourself stand out efficiently and cost-effectively. So, the percentage that people would pass on to a publisher, they're probably spending on a service somewhere else. It's about maximizing your opportunity. And anybody who wants to go off and self-publish — I mean good luck, go for it! I absolutely think they could well be the next big success, but it's hard, it's super hard. Many of the folks I speak to who've done that — they do want to come join forces and speak to publishers.

### **— If a developer has created a game and burned out, what can a publisher do to help them?**

— First, there's creative input. We can turn new eyes on your project bringing you a new spark of creativity. We can take your game, and partner up with another developer who's got a massive passion for it and has spent hours playing it. So you may be creatively dry, but there's a developer over here who's got a ton of ideas. There's that kind of alignment.

And we can then build a team that goes and continues to work on the game and reports in to you, while you go and do other things. There's lots of opportunities for publishers to help with that kind of dev support, commercial support. If you're a publisher who's got five million players you can talk to, that's five million players it's cost-effective for you to put your game in front of. So there are lots of different reasons for working with publishers.

## — So, how do you see Secret Mode in 5–10 years?

— We're creating a fun, inclusive, and joyous place to work. I want that to be for all of my leadership team and all of the people that work for them. All of us are gamers, but we all come from different backgrounds. It's really important to have diversity within the organization. We like to challenge each other as to why you like this game and why you like that game. And our core values will remain at the top. It's all about that really cool, smart, different thing, and that's what we're going to be.

Now in terms of where the growth is, we've got our plans. We see ourselves working on maybe 50% games from within Sumo Group, 50% of games coming externally. We're also not going to push ourselves. There's no point signing 100 games when you can't give those games the kind of focus they need. It's really important to manage those expectations. So, we'll continue to drive for growth, but in a really measured and projected way.

## — Do you think the industry will move more towards multiplayer or single-player games?

— I think Jedi: Fallen Order was a great example that a singleplayer game could thrive. And, you know, Fall Guys comes out as a multiplayer and thrives. We get too focused on genre, when we need to make games that people like. Our team usually tries to think about the future of a certain game or about the presence of modern elements of the gameplay in it.

Secret Mode is going to launch whatever feels right for the game. If there is a great single-player experience, is there a way of making a multiplayer experience that's respectful to the story and to the game world? If there isn't, then it stays singleplayer. Do we create a multiplayer experience without a singleplayer addon? It feels like you need to bring people into the game in the single-player mode, be it a tutorial or however. Gaming trends have come and gone. And people who chase them are always behind the curve. It's the people that come up with trends that have the biggest success.

## ***«We are starting to remember things from the past, and this brings people huge profits»***

— Many companies, especially the big ones, are trying to make successful game-services for players, rather than creating complete projects. They create this huge build up, that they're going to fill with content later. Do you think it's worth investing in projects like this?

— It's about the potential, so you should always build your game to the first successful version or whatever that is. If the game can exist as it is, then great. Don't build the game, and say, «This is the new E-sport,» right? It'll become an E-sport if it's good enough and if players like it. It's the same kind of thing with the service stuff: you need to take advantage of the opportunity and ensure the flow of finance, but at the same time be respectful to the player. I would be challenged to create a \$50 download-to-own game that has a season pass where people have to pay \$20 every six months. That doesn't feel right to me.

However, a game that costs \$10 or \$15 and has a \$10 or \$15 season pass might work. But everything depends on the game itself. Get to that kind of thing that you would be happy with your players experiencing and playing, and then learn from your players. I've worked on a lot of games, and users play them quite differently. People love modding stuff, sometimes they do things you as a developer weren't even imagining. I'm a really big supporter of Steam Workshop, and I love the creativity that it brings.

One piece of advice I give folks is to come up with maybe two or three gameplay styles, and then also have this sandbox area, where you let the players evolve it. Maybe there's something in there you haven't even thought of that we can come back to. Now, in terms of what's the best plan, it's probably to have your game, and maybe two pieces of additional content, be that paid DLC or F2P. After that, do not plan a thing. Have it in your mind, but see what your players do first of all.

— So at the development stage it's not worth looking too far into the future, is that right?

— I remember a conversation I had many years ago with a really well-known game developer, and he'd just turned on some achievements. I think it was either on Xbox or Playstation, or maybe even Steam. Anyway, this data enabled him to see that less than one percent of the players who bought his game, and it was a very successful game, ever got to the final boss in the final level. That final boss cost him months and months of dev time, and honing time, and value, but no one ever saw it — the game was too hard, people didn't get to it.

And that then opens up this big question: if we were spending \$300 million on a movie, would we be expecting people to not see the last ten minutes? Would you still spend that kind of money on filming? Is there a way of doing things that we can give people smaller experiences at a lower price that don't cost the developers years of their time?

Game creation and game development is going to become easier with loads of tools and with assets and things like that. The opportunity for us to port stuff is going to become less reliant on proprietary engines, so we may be able to get really interesting short game experiences for a lower price. If a game like that did sell a couple of million copies, and you've got loads of really excited fans, you could say, «OK, let's bring more content.» That's respectful to the player base.

— What trends in terms of game mechanics may appear in the industry in the next couple of years?

— I don't think you can name a particular gameplay style, because there's so many different gameplay styles that have got great audiences. I think you'll see two things happening though. One is a streaming technology that allows audiences to interact with games as they're being streamed. I think that is going to be much more to the fore.



And then I think retro is very important. I've done a lot of research on retro going right back, and in the '80's the 1950's were very retro — everybody was looking at Flash Gordon and rock'n'roll. Then you saw video games becoming retro, and the first was Pong coming back. And we had little collections within television, then we had Spectrum collections, then we had Commodore, Amiga, ST and 16-bit Mega Drive.

We are starting to remember things from the past, and this brings people huge profits. Right now we're starting to see a return to ugly, jagged polygons. Things we saw when we were younger, the original Wipe Out, the original Ridge Racer, Tomb Raider, Silent Hill, Resident Evil, those styles of games. Because when you're hitting your thirties, you want that thing of calling back to when you were a kid. And that will continue: right now it's the end of the 80s, and soon the 2000s will be retro. I've got employees who'll say, «I remember playing this game with my dad on his Xbox 360.» And that's nuts to think that that was their childhood experience.

**— So, if you're a 30-year-old developer, you should be looking back to your childhood?**

— What did you like? Homage it, you know? Can you tell the story you want to tell by using chunky, jagged polygons? We've had the 16-bit era, and we've got pixels all over the place, and they're beautiful. But there is something sad about a return to those, because those of us who were too old for that to be retro just saw it as a progression in graphics. Whereas that was someone's first experience of video games. They've got a very different opinion of it than the rest of us.



# MIGUEL SEPULVEDA

Global localization manager at King

*«Language is of vital importance for creating emotional connections»*

The Inlingo team talked to Miguel Sepulveda about the development of the localization industry, the consequences of bad translation, and successful examples of cultural adaptation in games and movies.

**We interviewed Miguel in October, 2019.**

## **«In the translation field, everyone can assess your work»**

**— You make great efforts for the importance of localization to be recognized by everyone. Can you share some results with us?**

— I think our biggest achievement is that, for some people, localization has stopped being of secondary importance. It wasn't easy. When working in a company, services and quality control teams like ours are often located at the end of the working process. That's exactly what I saw when I started working at King. And one of my achievements has become the fact that we're now involved in the work from the very beginning.

Changes happen gradually and require persistence. More and more often, people have started thinking, "Oh, maybe we should involve those guys already? Or ask them for feedback on how our user interface looks and functions?" Those are the results we've achieved. People have also started contacting me personally, at events, or by email.

For me, it's like a marathon. And it's very difficult to get people to really understand what exactly we do. You have to remind them all the time. And you need a lot of patience.

**— Is it possible to say that changes in the localization field have moved in a positive direction? For example, are people beginning to understand what cultural adaptation means?**

— I've been in the field for more than 25 years. That's definitely the case. Of course, there are some problems, but it's strikingly different from the situation in, say, the 1990s or the mid-2000s. Now everything is completely different — there's more information, more expertise. There are lots of tools that we couldn't even have dreamed of before. Now there are whole universities and courses devoted to localization. Just last week, I was in Milan, at an event at the technical translation school, which even has a masters in the subject. So, yes, things are

undoubtedly getting better, but we still have work to do. I believe that in the end we will get what we want.

— Every game developer knows that graphics and gameplay are important. Why was it so hard for people to understand the importance of localization? After all, games have always been international — they were published all over the world, and there's nothing new about the idea.

— First, you need a clear picture of the results we get by investing in localization. If you localize your game, then a certain number of people will buy it, and you'll get revenue from that. If you don't localize your game, people will still buy it, and you'll still get revenue, but not in the same amount. The hardest thing here is to establish that difference. And that's what I work on at King — performing A/B testing. In reality, it's not that simple. A/B testing a game only with English and a localized version actually requires comparison at completely different levels. So that may be one of the main reasons. It's not clear how much localization contributes to success.

The second problem, from my point of view, is oversimplification. And that's connected to the fact that the people are native speakers. You consider yourself a professional just because you speak that language. I know a little Spanish, and although I'm not a linguist, I could translate something. Of course, there are lots of translators who could do that much better, but I can argue and say, "I don't think the translation's all that good. If I were you, I'd translate it like this..." And, when you think about it, that doesn't happen in other fields. If I go to the doctor and he tells me something, I just believe him. Because he's a doctor, and I'm not. But if two people speak Russian differently, which of them is right? If you're a Java developer, there's nothing I can say to you. But if you're a Java developer and Spanish, then you can question my translation.

In the translation field, everyone can assess your work, and that's a particular disadvantage. But at the same time, it is to some extent fair. The person may not be a linguist, but it's them that

are going to play the game. They're our target. In some ways it's important to get feedback from them and pay attention to it. The problem isn't that it's wrong, but that it creates major difficulties.

## **«Everything is connected with building emotional connections with the user»**

**— In one of your posts, you mentioned that poor quality can destroy if not your career, then the reputation of a game company. Do you have any examples of times when poor localization or translation affected a company's reputation?**

— There was a situation like that in our affiliate company, Activision. We weren't directly connected with the work, but a problem occurred with one of the games. One of the characters had a flag on his arm that quite unintentionally looked like a Nazi one. Then a post on Twitter flew around really fast saying, "This game from this company is Nazi propaganda and promotes Nazi values." Obviously, that wasn't true, it was an accident. Something happened to look like something else. It was just a coincidence, but it caused problems. These days, rumors can quickly go viral, and many people won't believe that it was unintentional. Some will say, "I don't believe you. You're promoting those values because it's a game about battles, fights and shooting."

Things like that are sometimes useful. Our team, our clients, language partners, and studios can in the future try to identify problematic areas before the product reaches the market. Besides that, I've seen a couple of examples in marketing. Problems often occur with the names of products — makes of cars, for example. If you have a Nissan Whatsit, a Renault Thingamajig, and an Audi Whatever, and it turns out that word is offensive in one country, then you're definitely going to have problems. You're immediately limiting your profits in a specific market.

Historically, there have been plenty of cases of unfortunate product names or translations of slogans. For example, take the failures in promoting McDonald's and KFC in China. People who

don't work in localization often don't recognize that little things can have great importance. In the end, everything is connected with building emotional connections with the user. And if they break because of poor wording, that's a failure.



In 2017, McDonald's changed its name in China to Jingongmen, and people were unhappy. Photo: Reuters.

— Is it always possible to solve problems like the one with the flag in advance? Only a very meticulous and experienced person could see something like that and predict that it would cause a scandal.

— Yes, that's true, but even so I think that checks and testing like that are necessary. In the case of games, at least one vital step is to check the cultural acceptance of the game's name in different countries. You talk to your linguist and say, "Hey, can you check these 22 markets to make sure it doesn't sound strange?" That's what you can and should do.

The same is true for the names of characters, because if a name sounds cool in one language, but wrong in Brazilian Portuguese, then we're going to have lots of memes and problems in that specific country. You're right that checking doesn't solve 100% of problems, but at least, it improves your chances of avoiding a mistake. In the end, if we miss something, then all that we can do is apologize, correct it, and move on.

## ***«When we're dealing with mobile games, processes have to work much faster»***

— Before King, you worked at EA. Can you tell us how the work is different, especially in the localization department, at King compared with a classic AAA studio? Are there major differences?

— Yes, and there are lots of them. We're not just comparing a game with a half a million words and a game with 5,000 words. We're comparing games with voice acting and sound effects with games that only have music. For now, only console games have cinematics — they don't feature in mobile games yet. Although I think they will in the future, since phones are getting bigger and better. They're like small consoles. Big-name publishers working in the traditional field are still inclined to use the typical cascade approach. This is where the process goes step-by-step: translation, editing, QA. With mobile games, on the other hand, localization is becoming a flexible and ongoing process.

If you want to be flexible, you need to adjust to the weekly release of content. And that requires a different approach than launching one FIFA or NHL title per year. A few iterations take two weeks as opposed to one year. It calls for completely different tools, because when we work with mobile games, we need to get in touch with the client more frequently. This cuts the number of steps between the developer creating the content and sending it off to get translated. The role of the middleman should be minimized. Otherwise, we simply won't have time to work using the agile method. The volumes are different too, of course. Games like World of Warcraft have a million words. When processing such a huge volume, communication with the client and quality control need to be approached in completely different ways.

So, the basic principles are the same in one sense, but when we're dealing with mobile games, processes have to work much faster. And attitudes have to be different, too. You can say, "We'll do it like this now, and it doesn't matter that it's not perfect,



because we'll fix it in the next cycle." And that's fine. It's more about constant improvement than the traditional months-long attempts to make things perfect. Naturally, there will still be some fixes to make even with this approach, but the level of pressure is completely different when compared to the agile method.



Games like EA's FIFA use the traditional localization process, and they normally have more in-game texts © 2019 Electronic Arts Inc.



Games such as Candy Crush, with a flexible development process, require a different approach to localization. © King.com Limited 2011-2019.



## *«Seeing a good localization means a lot to me»*

— Do you think that traditional AAA games will change? Games as a service are becoming more and more popular, and large projects are becoming more and more like mobile games with constant updates.

— They'll change, but as of yet we're not sure in what way. Now we have two new players on the field — Apple and Google — and they've created a subscription model. You pay 5 euros for a subscription, like with Netflix and other streaming services, and you just play the game. This is notably different from the traditional model, where you buy one game for 50–70 euros. Or from mobile formats, where you buy something for 2–5 euros as many times as you like, or play for free, but with the option to speed up the process by purchasing assistants, like we see with King. It's still unclear which of these options will work best.

I think that the console model is the most difficult to support. It takes many years to create a new AAA game, and it's very difficult for the publishers to make new large-scale projects. As for blockbuster titles, we've had the same games over the past five to ten years; their main aspects barely change — another game just appears every now and then. The success rate in such cases is very small, so companies are trying to make a change by switching to the mobile model.

Consumers' attitudes are changing. Before, it was totally normal to buy a new video game for 50–60 euros. Things are different today. I'm not saying that people don't buy games like that anymore, but now it would have to be a special game or a special occasion. Like for Christmas or as a gift, but it didn't used to be like that. This makes life harder for traditional game companies. Things are easier with mobile games — you just download something, give it a whirl, and if you like it, you carry on investing money into it. I think this is a wiser and more promising model. However, I'm curious to see what Google and Apple's subscription model will bring to the industry, because that's still very much under question.

— Have you ever been playing a game in your down time, not for work, and then started to notice some hiccups? Have you ever said, “The localization’s bad,” or “There’s a chunk of text in the wrong place?”

— Yes, unfortunately. And that’s a problem, because you can’t switch off your brain when you work in that very sphere. You just analyze everything automatically, so that’s what happens. Sometimes you see some mistake or other in a localization and think to yourself, “Oh, my god, I need to screenshot that and save it to my collection of legendary mistakes.” On the other hand, seeing a good localization means a lot to me. It works both ways.

## ***«It’s important to give translators early access to the game»***

— You talked about the importance of styleguides and glossaries. How else can game companies prepare their projects for freelancers or their own localization departments? How can you make localizers’ lives easier and get the best finished product?

— As far as styleguides are concerned, one of the most important things is to stay flexible and understand that it’s a living document that needs updating constantly. Fairly often, I see that it’s made at the beginning and then left to gather dust. This is a problem, because you need to update it depending on what you find out — especially if you’re using the agile method. If we launch content every two weeks and monitor the players’ reactions, we need to constantly update the styleguide. There are plenty of cases where the styleguide is created at the start and then is practically never changed.

It’s also vital to give the translators or consultants the opportunity to play the game itself or an early iteration of it. Because otherwise, they’re going in blind. Even when we have all the details and tons of context, that may not be enough. That’s why it’s very important to provide access to the game at different stages.

Another good practice is to invite the translators to the office for a day. While we're there together, we show them what we currently have — like betas and test versions. We share everything. We also say what the client is expecting from us and guarantee that everybody understands exactly what these expectations are comprised of. And that's very important when it comes to the style being used in the game, because it should change from project to project. We make sure everyone understands "how this character is going to speak," we want their personality, characteristics, and adjectives used to correspond to a specific example.

Involving the translators in all aspects, allowing them to ask questions, access the project at early stages, and providing up-to-date documentation — all of this should ensure that the translators will be able to do their job well. They are often located far away, so they need this kind of interaction with the project. Otherwise, they won't be able to provide the necessary quality or the required style.

## ***«The localization and gaming industries are still very young»***

— That's probably even more important when it comes to voiceover work, right? Inviting people, setting out the context, and explaining what you need from them.

— Yes, agreements need to be made at the beginning of every project. This brings us to the importance of making a checklist that needs to be checked before development starts. This list will be different for every team. But it's very important to say, "Okay, at this stage we need to discuss internationalization. Here we need to discuss platform support. And here we need to discuss this, that, and the other." And include all those requirements in the lockit at the very start. That way, everyone will understand each other's expectations.

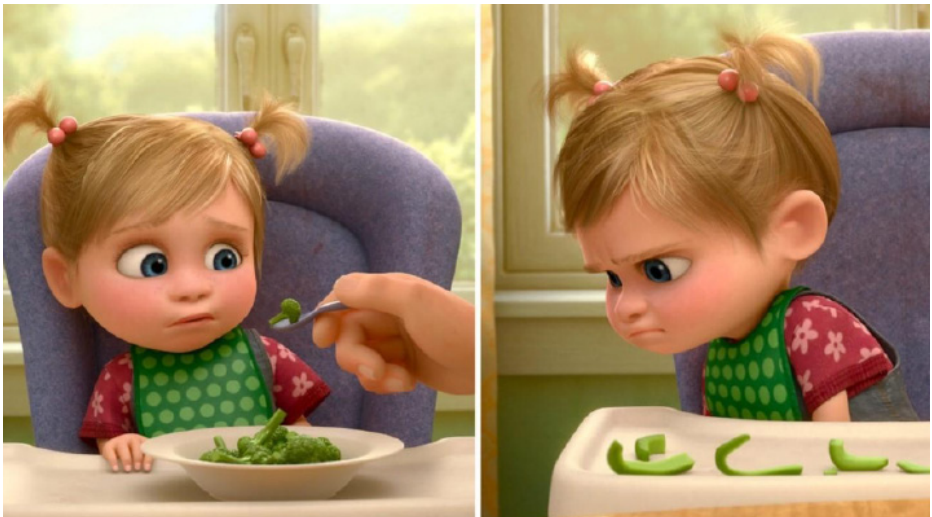
— One of your posts says that game developers should bear localization in mind even when writing the script. Should, let's

**say, Quentin Tarantino, have thought about all the languages his movies would be translated into before writing his scripts? Can that influence the quality of a project?**

— I think there's a risk of going overboard and adapting too much, to the point that we risk losing the original meaning. So, obviously, it's wise to maintain a balance. Failing that, we'd play on all the cultural cliches, which is something we need to avoid doing. And to prevent this, we need real professionals and content creators who recognize what's too much and what's too little.

I think we can use Dreamworks or Pixar as an example. They find a way: their movies are culturally analyzed to a certain extent, but not excessively. And one of my favorite examples is also from one of my favorite movies: *Inside Out*.

There's a scene about disgusting food. In the Spanish version, the father tries to feed the little girl some broccoli, but she doesn't want it. The scene made it crystal clear: Broccoli is bad. In the Japanese version, they swapped broccoli for green beans, because Japanese children actually really love broccoli and eat it a lot.



A fantastic adaptation of *Inside Out* for the Japanese market. The European version is on the left, and the Japanese on the right. © 2015 Disney · Pixar. All rights reserved.

Now we have multiple versions of one movie, and that's just amazing. I mean, if I'm watching a movie and the screenwriters want me to feel disgusted, that's hardly going to work if I see the whole country's favorite food. Dreamworks, Pixar, and Disney are great at this and do it very precisely. I think they're an example that we in the gaming industry can look up to.

**— Movies have become way more exclusive, but the gaming industry is still lagging behind, right?**

— Yes, and that's related to what I said at the start — the localization and gaming industries are still very young in comparison with the movie business. We're comparing 30 years of experience with over 150. Those are clearly very different things. That's why, when you asked whether I could see any changes, I said that I already can. But the truth is, it's probably still changing, and changing fast.

***«You connect to a game thanks to the combination of the language, music, design, graphics, and characters»***

**— Are there any situations where localization really isn't that important? Do you have any examples of when it's justifiable and appropriate to start working on a localization later?**

— I think that's possible for titles with very easy gameplay and without much in the way of a tutorial. Take shooters, for example — this genre has more-or-less simple and understandable gameplay. You shoot, kill people, and get your hands on more powerful weaponry. That's not a perfect example, because shooters can have a plot, but in terms of gameplay there are a few titles where it's pretty easy to understand how to play without needing to read many hints or instructions.

In these cases, if the publisher doesn't have the time or money to translate the project into other languages, they can just use English, and it might work. It all depends on the genre. Some

games have a lot of guides and training, like in projects centered around building up a farm, hotel, village, or empire. If you don't take the time to translate them, you'll lose out on the audience in countries where almost no English is spoken.

This will always depend on how much time a non-English speaking player is willing to spend thinking, "Okay, what am I supposed to do now? I know this word and that one, but I don't get what this means." They're not going to play this game, because it turns entertainment into work, and nobody likes that. So, it depends on the genre of the game and how well English is spoken in the country in question.

— In Russia, for example, even super-casual games wouldn't be as popular if they were left untranslated. It's a major psychological barrier for people who don't speak English.

— Exactly. I've got another example. Perhaps you remember Flappy Bird. You just move the bird, and that's it. You don't need to understand anything.



The home screen in Flappy Bird — the image of the game's mechanic makes things clear without a translation. © Flappy Bird.

But it's not like that in other games. Sometimes, you get majorly attached to a game. And that's thanks to the combination of the language, music, design, graphics, and characters. Language is of vital importance for creating emotional connections. Language may be the most human thing there is, don't you think? You're unlikely to manage without it. A game should be cool enough that you can forget about language and fill in that gap yourself somehow.

**— Do you know any examples of a localization turning out to be better than the original? You can talk about movies as well as games.**

— If we're talking about movies, then I really like Shrek. I saw it in the theater in Spanish first, and then it was added to Netflix, and I watched it in English. And I honestly think that the Spanish version is better. The way they voiced Puss in Boots in Spanish is amazing — it even surpasses the performance of Antonio Banderas, who voices him in the original version.

When it comes to video games, I play quite a lot of games made by our competitors, such as Supercell. I'm a big fan of the Spanish translation of Clash Royale. I don't know whether it's better than the English version, because that's subjective, but I just like the descriptions of the cards — they're funny and accurate.

The Supercell team did a great job on the adaptation, because I can clearly see that this is more than just a translation. When they describe the Wizard, or P.E.K.K.A, or other cards' skills, it's very well-done. So, they have my respect. They did a good job.



# MARTIN TEICHMANN

Lead Environment Artist  
at Postcard Game Studio

*«A great looking environment  
can't make up for bad  
playability»*

The Inlingo team talked to Martin Teichmann, Lead Environment Artist at Postcard Game Studio. We learned what game environments are made of, what details in the environment help you find the right way, and how to create a world that you want to explore again and again.

**We interviewed Martin in November, 2022.**



## **«Working with the latest tech makes me rethink workflows»**

**— Environmental artists are in demand in the film industry, why did you choose games? How did you get into the game industry?**

— The big difference for me is the interactive aspect of games. It is great to create an environment, knowing the player can explore it in their way. I can tell stories and hide easter eggs in different ways than that's possible in movies. Technical limitations can be frustrating and difficult to overcome, but, on the other hand, it's a very interesting aspect of games. It's a very technology driven industry. That appeals to the technician, engineering side of me as well as the artist in me.

**— You were a Sr. Dungeon Artist at Blizzard. Can you tell us more about what you were working on back there?**

— As a Sr. Dungeon Artist, it was my responsibility to create the Dungeon artwork for Diablo 4. In Diablo 4 Dungeons are procedurally generated out of bespoke tiles. Each of these tiles have to be built and made sure they tile seamlessly together. My main focus was a “world building”. That means I used assets and materials created by the team and built each dungeon tile required for a Dungeon set.

**— You are a Lead Environment Artist at Postcard Game Studio right now. Can you tell us more about what you do now and if your role is different from what you did at Blizzard?**

— Sure thing. Postcard Game Studio is a brand-new startup in Irvine CA. As a Lead Environment Artist, my role is not so much to contribute to the game assets anymore but to enable my team to do so in a most efficient way. Even though I am still involved in asset creation and world building, my new role now includes hiring, attending meetings, giving feedback, and representing the environment teams needs and ideas to upper management and other departments.

— **Postcard Game Studio has united industry veterans that worked on staples of the action and shooter genres. Is it a sort of return to the roots for you? From Dungeons of Diablo back to vast action environments?**

— It does feel a bit back to the roots indeed. Early in my career, I was working on the Crysis franchise, and now I am back working on first person shooter. It feels familiar but also very different as we want to explore a unique art style for our game. Also working with the latest tech makes me rethink workflows and requirements for tools and asset building. That said: each genre, game, or art style comes with its own set of challenges, pros, and cons. I feel like I am growing and learning each time.

HALO

D E S T I N Y

UNCHARTED

THE LAST OF US

HORIZON

G H O S T  
OF TSUSHIMA

OVERWATCH

Prior to the founding of Postcard Game Studio, all board members worked on staples of the industry.

— **You’ve worked on Crysis, Arkham Knight, Uncharted, and TLOU2. What would you call the most challenging project in your career?**

— Each of the named projects came with their own unique challenges, and I am proud to be part of each of them. Also, these projects span from my early career to my more experienced years in the game industry.

To pick one project, I would pick Uncharted: The Lost Legacy. It’s a great project built in a very short amount of time. My task

for the project grew to be presented to the press early on. There was a lot of pressure to hit milestones and also to raise the visual quality as high as possible.

## ***«Art shouldn't be in the way of gameplay»***

### **— For those who don't know, what is a game environment, and what key features a good game environment has?**

— You can basically count everything that the player can explore, navigate, and traverse as a game environment. It is literally the world the player experiences. An environment is built out of dozens or hundreds of small objects (assets). Depending on scope, style, and type of a game there are a number of different expert roles that all contribute to creating a world. Props artists, lighting artists, world builders, material artists, designers, and so on. Even characters can be part of the world — the environment.

A good game environment is not only good looking and run in a decent frame rate on your console or PC. It also helps the player navigate through the world, makes sure the gameplay is as smooth and rewarding as possible, and helps tell the story of the game.

### **— What's the difference between creating a 3D-scene and a game environment?**

— That is more a question of definition. A 3D-scene can be a game environment while a game environment can be a 3D-scene. A game environment can also be a 2D painting or isometric pixel art. A 3D-scene could be a car sitting on a turntable and not really provide any room for a player to navigate.

### **— Who and when chooses the appropriate environment style for a project?**

— To choose the right style for a project is a very important aspect of the early face of game development. While there are

examples where games change their style and look drastically throughout the development, it is generally very important to decide early on what the game should look like.

The wrong art style can change the tone of a game's story and ultimately ruin the mood and impact of the narrative. Imagine The Last of Us in a very colorful cartoon look. While that might be an interesting idea, it would be a very different game.

Choosing the art style is the job of the game director and the art director. It is important that the art supports the gameplay and the story of a game. In my opinion, it can't be viewed as a secondary or detached aspect of a game.



Environments of The Last of Us Part II build the atmosphere of a down to earth post-apocalyptic world, with zombies.

— Are there any genres or settings where the quality of environment art would be more important than, say, character art? Why?

— Games that come to mind are Journey and Dear Esther. Both games, especially Dear Esther, put the environment forward as the main “character”. The player is driven by the beautiful

environment and motivated to explore to find out more about the world. The environment itself reveals its story by exploring it. The examples above are maybe the obvious choice as there is an entire genre of the “walking simulator”. But that proves how strongly a narrative can be told by a great environment art. Or to be more precise: a great environment art that works perfectly in sync with the story.

**— Where do environment artists get inspiration from? What to use as a reference if the object you are building has never existed before?**

— I love photo books. It’s a fantastic source of inspiration. Traveling is great as well. Everything you see and experience can give you inspiration. Of course, movies, games, and ArtStation are great as well.

If the object or the environment I want to create does not exist, it probably is inspired by something that exists. A futuristic spaceship may borrow elements from insects or real airplanes. An experienced artist can grab elements of existing elements to create something new and unique out of these elements.

**— Can you break down what hero assets, modular assets, props, and vista assets are? Is there usually specialization (like, go to Jane, she’s the best at creating hero assets), or do you have to be a master of all?**

— Hero assets are the centerpiece assets of a scene. A remarkable object of interest that draws attention. Usually these are especially detailed and take a good amount of time to plan and design the look.

Modular assets are sets of assets that can be used to create larger structures or objects that are usually made out of repeated elements. Buildings are generally made by modular assets. For example, a wall asset, a door asset, a window asset, and so on. These should fit together seamlessly, and this require some planning.

Props are all smaller or medium objects you would find in an environment: tables, trash bins, barrels, and so on. Each of them can work by itself and add fidelity, storytelling, and detail to the environment.

Vista assets are background assets that are not seen closeup. Imagine a faraway rock or a castle on top of a mountain out of a player's reach. These assets are made less detailed to save time and performance. Usually, they only have to work from certain camera perspectives and, therefore, can be nicely optimized and arranged.

There is a high level of specialization in most environment art teams. There are experts for props, vistas, and so on. The asset pipeline is complex and grows more complex as games and game environments get more and more detailed. Specialization is highly necessary.

### **— What are the main limitations environment artists have to deal with when working on a level?**

— The main limitation, besides performance, is the design. As an environment artist, you want to make sure that the art is not in the way of the gameplay and the player. There is almost nothing as frustrating as getting stuck or “dying” in a game because the art was limiting your movements or simply was not clear in showing the player where to go.

It is very important to work closely together with level and game designers to make sure the players experience is as best as possible. Compromise is necessary when working with design. “Gameplay first” is a phrase often quoted. And it is true. Even a great looking environment can't make up for bad playability.

### **— How to make sure your beautiful environments don't hinder gameplay? Who keeps track of that, and who do you discuss it with?**

— That aspect of environment art also plays closely together with readability and playability of an environment. Where to

put noisy detail and where it's better to keep an area clean and easy to understand is not only an art direction decision. The environment serves the purpose to guide the player and leads the player through levels as designed.

If a level or game designer wants the player to get stuck in a room in order to solve a puzzle, the environment artist can hide the actual exit in the art more. In contrast to an action scene where the game wants the player to quickly run through an area. Here the artist needs to make sure the player can easily read the environment and find the exit.

Playtests and a fresh pair of eyes is the best advice to balance the details to a level. Playtests will show parts of the environment not clear to the player. And a fresh pair of eyes of a colleague can point to areas that lack detail or are too oversaturated.

## ***«It is very easy to get 'blind' for your work»***

— **Uncharted 4 and Lost Legacy are very similar, but Lost Legacy expanded open world segments of the series. Later we saw a large open world segment in TLOU 2. What would be the main difference between working with open world areas and linear levels?**

— In open world segments it's harder to control the player's experience. The player can go left instead of right and get a different experience and pacing. It is more likely that a player can miss an area or simply get lost in a large open area. On the other hand, there is way more freedom, and the player feels his decisions actually make a difference.

It always matters what the game designer wants the player to experience. For the environment art production there is mostly performance and player guidance that concerns. Of course, an open environment may also require just more space to be arted up. Linear games are easier to plan and to build as the designer and artist can predict where the player would go or look.

— Back in the early 2000s you could always tell which door on the level was part of the background and which one was actually interactive by looking at its level of detail. Nowadays, even background objects are highly detailed. What techniques do you use to guide the player through the level?

— Most common techniques are lighting, color, and shape language. The human eye is drawn to high contrast and to bright spots. This can be used to create areas of interest to subconsciously guide the player. Colors can do a similar trick. Orange or white highlighted edges may indicate a spot to climb. Shapes can tell the player the area is dangerous or not accessible. Spiky sharp shapes may indicate a combat area or a trap.



Brighter relief ice on walls and ledges communicates to the player that the area is interactive.

Round objects may show that the area is safe or it is simply not a climbable wall. All of these elements can be used to slowly teach the player the language of the game. If a bright flickering light usually indicates the exit of a level, the player learns and starts looking out for this light to find the next level.

— How to organize the work on environments effectively so that not to get stuck on polishing one single corner in a dungeon?



— It is best to start working on the environment from rough, big shapes and details down to more and more refined art. Starting with the basic size of a room, adding windows and furniture in the next step, and adding all small details like outlets, trims, books last. It allows to do quick changes early. Let's say the room is too small, or it needs to have more windows. It also creates early on a good representation of the environment and gameplay space.

Usually, I would then start a small area and bring it to a close to final art quality. That is best to get a good idea and feel how the rest of the level will look like. From there on it is best to add more and more detail throughout the level without getting too carried away in just one area.

**— Do you tend to work on different levels simultaneously, or do you focus on one environment until completion?**

— In game development there are usually several tasks assigned to an artist. It all depends on the studio, of course. I personally tend to work in passes if the schedule allows this. I would work on one environment till a certain level or quality, switch to another assignment and do the same there. Just so I can switch back to my first environment and bring it to the next quality level.

It is very easy to get “blind” for your work. To build a game environment to final quality can take years. To keep a fresh eye and be able to spot errors or unfinished areas more easily, it's best to step away for a bit and come back with new ideas.

**— How to tell good stories through the environment? Do you work with narrative designers on this usually, or do you have creative freedom to tell little stories on a level?**

— When I start working on an environment, there is usually a rough story about this place existing. From there on it is a collaboration between designers, narrative designers, and artists to create the environment supporting the story intended for this location. Not every environment has the same needs for

storytelling. Some environments are combat places, others are puzzle rooms, or they can be story and exploration areas.

In detail, there is a lot of room for the artist to fill the environment with story elements that help tell the overall narrative of the game and the specific level. For instance: If an environment contains several apartments and shop interiors to explore for the player, that is a great opportunity for you as an artist to tell small stories within these spaces. What shop is it, what happened here before the player entered, who lived in this apartment, etc. Narrative and Design may have blocked these spaces roughly. But they need to be filled with art and details. That's where the environment artist jumps in.

**— Work of an environment artist seems to be strongly tied with the work of a level designer. Can you describe this cooperation when creating a dungeon, for example?**

— First Design would create a blockout for the level or the dungeon. Designers also playtest these spaces to make sure it is fun and serves the purpose within the game. Is it a story bit or a boss fight? These questions are answered by the designer before the level is handed over to the artist. From there on the artist is adding details, textures, and so on. At the same time, Art and Design stay in close connection. I would show my progress to the designer to make sure that all of the needed requirements for gameplay are met. If I have an idea that involves bigger changes to layout, that must be discussed to avoid any complications. As mentioned earlier, gameplay is first. A beautiful level that plays bad or simply does not match the gameplay needs just won't work.

**— How do you deal with criticism during your work or after release? How do you know that the feedback is valid?**

— Every feedback is valid as long as it is constructive. My job is to soak the feedback in, think about it, compile a list of actions I want to do, and change the things I find worth changing. Art Direction requests are met as they have their eye on the overall look of the game and view the project as a whole, while as an

is a very opinionated field. Everybody knows what looks good for them. It is a matter of experience to filter the feedback that actually improves the quality rather than just make a change to please a specific taste.

## **«I love to create worlds»**

**— Your team at Blizzard consisted of around 15 artists. How big is your current team, and how is your workday organized?**

— The entire Art team includes 5 Environment Artists on side, including me. Plus, we have two Concept Artists working remotely for us. We like to keep the structure very flat and open. All ideas are welcome. As we super early in exploring the style and look of our game, we experiment a lot and keep tasks as open as we can to give flexibility and creative freedom to the team.

**— As a Lead Artist, do you spend most of your work days helping your teammates improve their pieces, or do you still work on creating your own assets from scratch?**

— My daily job mostly consists of attending meetings, giving feedback and direction to the team, and currently also setting up the foundations for the environment art pipeline. Naming conventions, folder structure, tools, etc.

Luckily that's more or less around half of my day, so I do have time doing assets or world building. But ideally, I make myself available to my team and other departments for feedback, directions, and idea brainstorming.

**— What is the most exciting part in the work of an environment artist? What do you enjoy the most in your job?**

— I love to create worlds and tell stories inside them. It is the subtle tones that we add to a world and make it come alive. It is great to watch a “letsplay” of someone playing through the level I helped to build. Where do they go or look, what do they find.



# NIKA BENDER

Live Service Producer at Dice

*«If you want to attract female talent into gamedev you need games made by women for women»*

We talked to Nika Bender and found out how she fell in love with gaming at the age of six, what difficulties arise when you make games for younger kids and teenagers at the same time, and how to battle perfectionism with the fine art of “good enough.”

**We interviewed Nika in December, 2020.**

## ***«When I grew up, I realized I was a gamer my whole life»***

**— We know that you studied in Dubrovnik, Croatia, and then all of a sudden you went to Sweden. Why so? What happened?**

— I actually met my current husband who wanted to go to Sweden. We met during our bachelor studies in Dubrovnik, and I wanted to see the world and experience countries, cultures, and different ways of living. So, when he said he would like to pursue a master's degree in Sweden, I replied that I wanted to leave Croatia as well. We both got accepted at master's studies at Stockholm University, in Journalism, Media, and Communication. And that's how I actually ended up in Sweden.

**— Well, I did not expect that, I was thinking about some personal journey and you always dreaming of Sweden.**

— Actually, not really. But that's the joy of life. Sometimes you just make those random jumps, and they turn out to be the best decisions in your life. Like, for me, it was one of the best decisions in my life to move to Sweden. That's one thing I've learned in life: you always have to be brave.

**— Speaking of bravery. If I'm not mistaken, you got into gamedev through being a volunteer moderator. How did it become a reality for you?**

— I had been a forum moderator since my teens. I was always very structured, so I loved making sure that everything is in order, everyone is following the rules. I liked helping people.

Imagine, you are an introvert, who discovered the internet. And then you hang out on forums with other people that have the same interests, and that's your social interaction. At that time there was an explosion of Facebook games, and I was on Playfish forums because I was playing Pet Society. It was me

and my husband, we have a history together. And both of us applied to be a moderator.

It was a very sweet time, and I met so many amazing people from all over the world. We're still in touch over social media with this moderator group. It has now been 12 years ago. When I moved to Sweden, we sent Christmas cards to each other. So, I have Christmas cards from all over the world like South America, Europe, the US, and Australia. It was a wonderful experience!

### — Do you miss being a moderator?

— It's more of a nostalgia than anything else, I would say. I miss the people, it was a really wonderful community. Back then, I was studying and working at an internet café. So, I was on the computer the whole day, more or less. I would be hanging out on the forum, we would chat, we had a common interest, and it was fun.

### — Were you already interested in video games at that time? How big were the gaming industry and video games in your life back then?

— I wouldn't even call it a gaming industry, but when I grew up, I realized I was a gamer my whole life. At the beginning of the 90s, my dad had one of the first PCs at work back then in Yugoslavia, and I would go to his office and play this game called Alley Cat. It was this super old pixelated game. I would always go with him to the office, so I could play this cat game. Actually, that was the first game I'd played. Then it was my neighbor's Gameboy, and then I got this copy of an Atari that had Nintendo games.

### — In Russia, if that's what you're talking about, it's called Dendy.

— It could be. My parents brought it to me because I was begging them both to buy it, and I played it all the time. Only recently when someone was talking about Atari I realized my console was just a copy. Most of the games I knew were unknown to the owners of "real" Atari.

So, I mean, I've been playing games and loving it since I was 6 years old. When I grew up, we had some LAN parties: Quake 3 and, yeah, Counter-Strike. And it just kept going.

**— Your bachelor's degree from Dubrovnik is in Journalism and PR. Would you say your degree helps in your current work or your previous work in Star Stable in any way?**

— I would say it helped me in my work because I worked with customer relations, so the basics and the foundations of communication helped a lot. I would say also knowing and understanding the basics of public relations and public speech helped a lot. Every day I find some things that I learned back in my studies, and I wouldn't even think I would use them in the way that I use them now. Such as critical thinking. We worked a lot on, for instance, investigative journalism. One of the really good takeaways from those studies was focusing on important things, like the core. That is what's called Five W's. You need to understand who, what, when, where, and why.

***«I didn't know that you could work in the gaming industry for a living»***

**— What was the first role in the proper game development you had? Where did you start?**

— It was at Stardoll. I was a customer relations manager covering most of the ex-Yugoslavian countries by handling translation and localization to Croatian. There was customer support, moderation, some PR, marketing, campaign management, and email marketing, so I was doing a lot but just for one market. Then I worked as a product owner in another company...

**— How did you get your first position? Were you, like, looking for a job in the gaming industry?**

— Back then, I didn't know that you could work in the gaming industry for a living. It was one year after I moved to Sweden and

I just finished the first year of my master's degree. I realized that it's not really my thing. I was looking to try different things, so I applied for a position at Stardoll and got the job. I loved it, and I stayed there for two and a half years, working part-time. Because the market wasn't as big enough to work full-time.

— You also worked at a lot of IT startups. So, comparing all the game companies and startups, what was the one job you enjoyed most?

— It's still working with the game production. That's where I found myself finally. All these different things were kind of tryouts. I would try it out, it'd be fun for a year, and then I would get bored. Once I started working in game production as a product owner, I didn't really have a need to try anything. That's how I knew, "Okay, this is it."



Nika in the Star Stable office.



## — You got into Star Stable in 2015. How did that happen?

— One day I received a phone call from a recruiter asking me if I have ever heard about Star Stable. And the thing is, I had, as I'd been following them even when I was in Stardoll because they were both targeting a similar audience. It was the only other company in Stockholm that was making games for girls, and it was about horses. And I'm one of those girls that dreamt about having a horse and being a horse whisperer my whole life.

So when I got that call, I was so excited. I think the recruiter didn't really expect me to say, "Yes, of course, I heard about this, please do tell me more." I joined the team and was with them for almost five years. However, I left back in February.

## ***«There is a lot of money in live service games»***

## — That's recent. And now you are going to work with Dice.

— Yes, I'm joining the new team at Dice.

## — Can you share what you will be doing?

— I can because, I think, by the time we publish this interview I will be already working there. I joined their live Battlefield team as a live service producer.

After five years at Star Stable, I can call them my second family, but I needed to jump again into something completely different to be able to grow even more. When I got connected to Dice and learned that they're looking for producers to join their live service team on Battlefield, I realized that was perfect because it's so different, and I'm excited to, like, kind of start learning new things. I got very comfortable at Star Stable after many years, but when I feel comfortable, I get too restless, which is a sign that we need to shake things up again.

**— From your experience, what challenges will the MMO market have in 2020 with all the games becoming live services? It's harder and harder, I think, for MMO games to have their own place.**

— I mean, the MMOs need to turn into live services if they wanna continue living. And one of the reasons for that is that the core of MMO games is the online aspect, the social aspect. In order to monetize the game and continue with retention, you need to give the reasons for people to come back continuously. And that means you need to continuously be working on the game.

I would say Start Stable is alive, they've been an MMO and a live service game for nine years now and show that that is the way to go. And if you look at any other MMO game that turns into a live service game, it's still alive and around. So, I think that is the challenge unless you have experience working on continuous releases. It is a different production experience than when you work for years on a game, release it, and then you're pretty much done with it.

With this, you're never done, and there's always the next deadline. You need to understand when it's the best time to release new content, what type of content, how much you should put into each of the releases to get the most value for the effort that you're putting in. Because there's always the next thing.

**— Do you think the live service thing is to stay? Because I'm seeing a lot of players used to the waterfall type of games that are ready and that's it. Do you think that's going away for good?**

— No, I think you'll have both types of players, I think we will definitely continue having games such as Cyberpunk or Witcher 3. There's still a strong market for that, but there's also a strong market for live service games. So, I think we'll continue having both, and it will depend. The smarter studios that know who their players are will know which type of game they should release.

— I can see how agile projects bring a lot more money to a company. If you look through several years, you see that, for example, *The Witcher* came out, made some money, and that's it.

— Well, that changed a lot now after they got the Netflix show. Which says a lot about the product's marketing. There is a lot of money in live service games, which is why they are so pushed by the business owners. I would say it is also a more business way of thinking because that is what brings the most money for the amount of effort that's put in. But as a gamer myself, I strongly believe that the developer should build the games for the players. And that's why I think we're gonna have both. Because I still think about more traditional games, that there's still a market for them, there is a strong market. I think *Cyberpunk*, for instance, is pretty much the next big thing that everyone's waiting for. All those players will show us how big that market is.

***«I think things will change once we have more and more girls gaming»***



— Let's get back to Star Stable. From my perspective, Star Stable is doing a great job engaging girls. What do you think we should do as an industry to attract more women to game development and gaming in general?

— Well, one thing that I realized in working with Star Stable — we didn't have any need to attract female talent. We actually got a lot of job applications, and most of our applications were coming from women.

And another thing that I realized is the importance of the product. Star Stable is a game for girls made by girls. If you want to attract female talent and get more women in gaming, you need games made by women for women.

— I've been playing multiplayer games for quite some time. And every time I see a girl join some kind of a match or a game, there are these sarcastic comments and questions like, "Are you really a girl? What are you doing here?" Is there a way that we can battle these hardcore players' attitude of seeing women playing video games as something awkward or strange, or even being aggressive?

— I've been experiencing that my whole life. There've been a lot of movements about it on social media, a lot of very smart women talking about the same issue. What I've seen so far, it's about education, it's about how we teach our sons and our brothers. I mean, that kind of attitude isn't coming from nowhere.

Yeah, you can tell that person that's not okay. But if they don't see it and don't understand why that is not okay, then nothing will change. I think things will change once we have more and more girls gaming. The way I personally deal with it is I usually ignore it. I mean, it's not nice, but I usually ignore it or make fun of it. I'm like, "I don't have a really high opinion about you, so I'm just gonna troll you back." That was my fun thing when I was playing League of Legends. I was really bad at LoL, but it was really fun to make them even madder.

— It's just weird to me because I don't think you see that in other mediums. Like, I haven't experienced somebody saying, "Oh, you're a girl, so you can't enjoy the movie I'm about to watch." So, the gaming industry is kind of more sexist in a way.

— I guess it depends on the culture, I know I have a different experience and, for instance, in Sweden in the LAN parties I'd often been the only girl among the boys, but they loved it. I was never discouraged apart from my parents who were more traditional and thought that gaming was a waste of time and not for girls. But when it comes to my friends, everyone was super supportive.

I see the same toxicity on Twitter, on Instagram, on Facebook. I guess it, of course, depends on which games you play. But generally, my experience hasn't been that bad, or maybe I don't care what stupid people think. There are "block" and "ignore" after all.

— Yeah, we all get our share of toxicity online. One of the things that is a little bit related to the toxicity, Star Stable's target audience is younger kids, right?

— Yes.

***«It is difficult to cater to both 8-year-old and 18-year-old gamers»***

— You've worked on monetization for a long time. How do you monetize a game where you have to work with a younger audience that can't legally pay?

— Well, that's the thing. If you have a game that targets kids under 13, in most of the countries you need to have certain compliances. So, for instance, Star Stable is both COPPA- and GDPR-compliant. COPPA is for the US, GDPR is for the EU. This means in some regions, if you are under 13, your parent needs to approve your

registration. Moreover, this means your parent will receive emails about your account and will be doing all the payments. That's the first thing you need to investigate if you're creating a game for such an audience and if you're going to monetize that game. We devised a monetization model that's very unique. I haven't seen it anywhere. Star Stable is not free-to-play. Star Stable is free-to-try, so there is a certain trial period when you have access to a small part of the map, some quests, and a horse; you pretty much try out the game and see if you want to purchase it or not. I mean, some of the players keep playing, but we were never a free-to-play game. So, as it is a premium game, you can purchase your — what we call — premium membership, and you get some premium Star Coins and Star Rider status.

You can buy it as a subscription. And you can also buy it once, so you just purchase it as a one-time charge game pretty much. Every week you get an allowance of premium currency, which means you can save the money to buy the next cool horse that you want. You can buy the premium currency, but you don't have to.

This monetization model is working really great for Star Stable. I think it's a very fair model for both kids and their parents. I also know that our customer support team is really considerate if there are any issues when it comes to payments. We handle that right away, as we understand that our audience is younger kids. So, if we get contacted by parents, we cooperate and try to solve their issues right away.

**— When advertising, do you target the kids or their parents that are the real payers?**

— We use email and social media such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. The thing is, it's all about the wording. I was at Stardoll when Stardoll got fined by the Swedish Consumer Agency for using too aggressive wording while it was targeting kids. So, there are certain rules that you have to adhere to. You need to avoid all “buy now,” and any aggressiveness in your sales communication if you are working with kids.

So when I joined Star Stable, the first thing to do was actually to look at the communication and to make sure that we're not using any aggressive communication, that there is no "buy now," there is no timer or limit, whatsoever. Of course, these restrictions are hard for people working in sales, but if you're working with younger audiences, ads must be more informative. Like, "Hey, this is the offer, you know when it starts, when it ends, this is the price, go here for more information." That's the way to communicate the offers and campaigns to the players that are underage.

**— Judging by the trailers and info online, Star Stable is both for elementary school kids and teenagers? A five-year age gap is not a big deal for me now, but when I was six, it was like most of my life. So how do you make the game appealing for such a wide age range?**

— I would say that's an everyday struggle at Star Stable. Most players are between eight and eighteen years old. Which is quite a wide range. And of course, we have a lot of players that've been with us for a while. We actually have players that have been with us for eight years, and their needs changed. So, the players are staying with us, and they're growing up with us.

**— Like with Harry Potter.**

— Yep, but we still cater to a certain audience, and it is difficult to cater to both 8-year-olds and 18-year-olds. We are trying to make content that is understandable for younger kids, but also appealing to young adults. At the beginning of 2019 in one of my projects, we introduced the death of one of the NPCs, and we also tried using the game as a media to teach you to handle grief and death of someone close to you. And that's a topic that an eight-year-old can still play and maybe not fully understand but still be interested in it. But an eighteen-year-old can maybe find some help in it and learn to handle grief if they experience it. When I worked at Star Stable, that was an everyday challenge.

**— So, you have to be educational and fun at the same time.**

— Yes. And be careful, in a way, because Star Stable is heavily based on the text. So, there're a lot of quests and a lot of text. You must make it understandable for a 10-year-old but fun and interesting for an 18-year-old. Sometimes we are not able to cater to everyone, sometimes we focus on a certain group, and we actually want to give something to them, and sometimes we do try to cover everyone.

— **“Only join this quest if you are 17?”**

— Well, this affects gameplay. It is tricky for us to understand the level of difficulty when it comes to gameplay because it may be a 10-year-old who finds it way too difficult and then a 17-year-old will be like, “Oh my God, it's actually challenging.” It is a struggle. It does require, you know, testing things out and trying to find the balance.

— **When working on testing, do you actually involve kids, or are there adults trying to think like younger kids?**

— I would say the amazing people that I worked with at Star Stable just create things that they consider fun, nice, and pretty. When it comes to big new things that we're not really sure about, we do invite players into our office to do some playtesting before things go live. This allows us to see their reactions, get some feedback, and see if we need to adjust something.

Sometimes we don't have time, so we try to use the agile approach. We try to build and release an MVP, get feedback, and try to understand how players received it. If we have certain questions, we try to get answers from them. It really depends on the project.

— **Back in February 2020, you gave a speech at the Things Conference saying, “Perfection is overrated,” and that it's better to use the “good enough” approach. What made you adopt this idea?**

— This pretty much came from reflecting on my previous experience. One thing I noticed working with a lot of passionate



people is that they tend to make things perfect, which is not always good. So, I tried to find a way to explain that being good enough is not a bad thing.

We just have a wrong perception of this concept. That was the starting point. And then, you know, I continued building upon it and explaining why, and how, and what I do with it, but that's where it came from.

— **So, actual experience made you think that this isn't working?**

— Yes, actually it comes from failing. Failings are great because you learn new things every time. So this actually came from a number of my personal failures and the failures that I've seen around me and I was a part of. So I wanted to share that you don't have to be a perfectionist and that maybe there is another way to do things, and it works better for everyone.

— **So, I don't think this would be a lie if I said that crunches are commonplace in the gaming industry right now. Do you think that "good enough" philosophy can somehow help game developers to avoid that where possible?**

— That's actually one of my points in the "good enough" talk. It helped us at Star Stable, we didn't have crunches. We had weekly updates every Wednesday, with a new content update. In the past, when I was a product owner, there we had no crunches.

— **Some people are filing job applications to Star Stable right now.**

— That's great. That place has my highest recommendations, it's a wonderful place to work at, and it has wonderful people. Of course, there are stressful situations because there's a deadline and you can't get behind schedule, but I don't remember any crunches. And one of the reasons was the "good enough" approach.

The core thing is to understand, "what do we need to do, and what is the minimum that will help us get there?" We are a live

service product with weekly updates. It doesn't make a lot of sense for us to put a lot of effort into something. It's better to make something good, and it might be enough.

We are trying to answer the question, "What are we going to give to the players?" and trying to find a smart way to make that. That's pretty much how we make a discussion in the "good enough" mode. But it's also important to have a clear vision and a clear direction because that helps teams a lot.

**— How do you define the state of "good enoughness"? Is there a point where you run into the office and yell, "Enough! The horse is good"?**

— You need to have actual criteria. You need to know what the requirements are for you to reach the goal. For instance, with the horses, we worked a lot to improve our pipeline and to understand how we can balance the value versus effort.

So, for instance, we decided that this horse costs a certain amount of money, and that means there has to be a certain quality standard and it needs to include certain things. If that's done, this horse is now good enough. But prior to that, you must have everything defined, so you sit down, talk about it, and know what makes the horse good. You need to understand what your goal is.

**— This feels easy to understand, but difficult to do. At some point, you need to just stop.**

— Actually, it's pretty simple once you have the mindset. It takes some practice, but it's worth it.

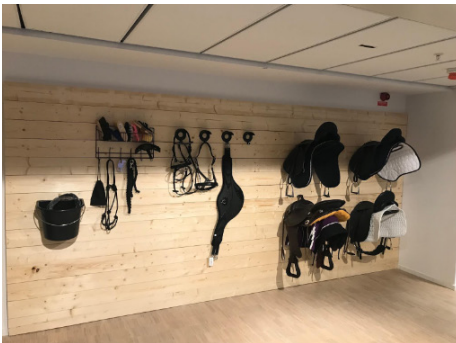
**— There are projects where the gamers are like, "Oh, why are the textures not ideal? The grass was better two years ago." Maybe you've seen some videos comparing GTA V to GTA IV. The players are really nitpicky when it comes to bigger titles. Would that approach work for big projects?**

— Of course. Because in the case that you mentioned, the goal would not be to make any grass. The goal would be to make grass of this particular quality. And you'll reach it. The project size doesn't matter, it's about the way of thinking.

If you know your players care about certain things, for instance, in the Star Stable we have a lot of expectations on the horses, so there is a certain quality requirement we can't go below. If your players have certain expectations, you need to meet them. That is "good enough" because that is the minimum we need to do to actually reach our goal. It is up to the person who defines the goals to set them up. And if you're good at what you do, you will know your players' expectations.

The good enough is not to do the minimum. It's to find the necessary minimum and realize if you really have to spend this extra ten hours on polishing that grass or if the current state is what's actually good for the players. Maybe it's time to focus on something else they need to see.

— **What professional media do you read to keep updated on the innovations within the industry?**



Star Stable's office.



***«Once you go down crazy cat lady road, you just need more»***

— Well, I'm mostly using Twitter, that's kind of like my newsfeed for a lot of things. I follow Gamasutra and Game Industry Biz, but again Twitter is my main news feed. Waking up and seeing what's new is my morning ritual.

**— Do you use any time management tools in your everyday work?**

— We work with Jira. I would say it's a major one for game development. Sometimes I'm using post-its, notebooks, Google. For personal use, there's Trello as well as Microsoft to-do lists. It's something that I'm used to, my favorites.

**— Does it not become harder to keep track of all the time management tools?**

— Well, that's the thing. I've been trying to find a perfect solution. I've tried to use Google task list and I tried Trello for work. I tried doing post-its, I tried doing that notebook list, and Evernote, but I haven't yet found the best solution.

**— How do you spend your free time?**

— Watching Netflix, cooking, and cats.

**— The last show you've watched on Netflix that you really enjoyed?**

— Oh, I am currently watching Altered Carbon. Haven't finished it yet, but I can say that the second season is not as good as the first one.

**— What are you playing right now?**

— I'm trying to finish Ori and the Will of the Wisps with, like, having everything at a hundred percent. I'm on the last chapter of the Ultimate Edition. And I've been playing Battlefield 5, The Outer Worlds, and to be honest, Star Stable.

— You've mentioned your cats. Did you know that in Russia every third household has a cat?

— I had no idea. Good to know.

— How many cats do you have?

— I have two for now. They are my little flowers. The older one is Sakura, and the younger one is Dahlia. Sakura is a Japanese word for cherry blossom flower. And Dahlia is, well, a dahlia flower. We didn't name them, by the way. We got them with those names, and they just matched, so we kept them. And hopefully, they'll get two brothers soonish; we will see.

— Four cats is a lot.

— Well, once you go down crazy cat lady road, you just need more.



This is Sakura.



# XAVIER MAROT

Head of Line Production at Focus Home

*«Quality over quantity»*

We talked to Xavier and found out how game development has changed over time, how Focus Home chooses projects to work on, and what publishers appreciate in translators the most.

**We interviewed Xavier in December, 2020. The views and opinions expressed in this interview are those of Xavier Marot and do not necessarily represent the views of Focus Home Interactive.**

## **«We really try to find developers with original ideas»**

**— Xavier, you're the head of line production at Focus Home. For those like me, who don't know: how does working in line production differ from the tasks that gamedev producers usually handle?**

— It's quite different, actually. When you work with a game development studio, some producers deal with the artists, coders, designers and day-to-day tasks involved in making a game. At Focus, we handle the publishing side of things, so our goal is to support the dev studio and help them create the game. We need a main point of contact who coordinates and manages everyone involved in making the game, like Localization Managers, QA testers, Business, and Marketing. That's the task of the line production team, which is the team I manage. We're here to speak for the dev studio at Focus and for everyone else involved. So it's kind of different. It's really two jobs.

**— How many tasks do you usually have per day?**

— It depends on the day, but a line producer might get builds that they have to evaluate and give feedback on. They might also get some text that needs to be translated, or requests from the marketing team. They'll have to ask the business team what language we're using for the game. So there are a lot of tasks every day. There's also communication with the studio: calls, Skype, Skype video calls, and stuff like that. Meetings, also, to report to top management on progress made on the game. So it varies over the course of production. We don't have the same tasks during preproduction that we do in production, or post-production, or for life support of the game. So again, a lot of different tasks. In my team, line producers and associate line producers usually work on two projects at the same time, so they also have to juggle priorities.

**— I also have some questions about production at Focus Home. Unlike other publishers, Focus Home works with games**



**in different genres, like Vampyr, Farming Simulator, and Insurgency. How does Focus Home choose projects to work on?**

— We have an acquisition team made up of people from the marketing, editorial, business, and production teams. They evaluate the projects that come in. At Focus, we work with developers who bring their own ideas. We don't contact a developer and say "Okay, we want to make this game, please do it for us." We really try to find developers with original ideas, and we're here to help them and support them throughout the production process. That's our philosophy at Focus.



Right now, we're really focusing on quality over quantity. We're trying to find... as you said, we aren't really focusing on one specific genre. All we want is something different, something original, something that will appeal to gamers and make a difference in the video game world.

**— So if any developers are reading this interview, they could come to your company with their original ideas and ask you about the possibility of working together.**

— Absolutely. And in fact, we do get a lot of requests from different developers.



— I can imagine.

— I think we evaluate something like three hundred projects per year. So it's a lot. A lot of work for the evaluation team. But yeah, you're right, absolutely. We are looking for developers.

**«Players are more and more demanding...»**

— A lot of people say game development is becoming more and more complex. For example, back in the day, a team of ten people could make a AAA project, which would be impossible nowadays. Are there parts of game development that have gotten easier?

— Good question. I'm not sure that anything is actually getting easier. I think that players are more and more demanding in terms of the visual quality of gameplay — their expectations are much higher than in the past. We also have more powerful devices to use, and better hardware, which means we really need to raise the bar in order to give players a good experience. One thing that's getting easier is that I think the video game industry is getting more streamlined. It is getting more and more efficient. So we now have companies, like yours, that really take care of localization, and now we have better processes and better tools to use, things that make it a bit easier. These days, for instance, we have editors like Unreal Engine or Unity that didn't exist thirty years ago. People used to have to make their own engine before they could start making games. That's no longer the case. At the same time, the market is growing and competition is increasing. You really need to stand out to stay alive. So, yes. You have more tools to use, but in the end I think it's more complicated.

— Could you talk a little bit about your Magic Projects Web Tool? I've heard of it.

— Oh! Yeah, that's right. I didn't expect that question. It's a tool that I made on my own for one of my previous companies, Magic

Pockets. At that time, I was working in a dev studio as a producer. When you work in production, you know exactly what your needs are. At some point, I realized that I couldn't find a tool that really fit my needs.

— **Do your colleagues use this tool at Focus Home?**

— Not at Focus, because at Focus we're really more on the publishing side. It's not a tool that fits what publishers do. As we discussed, being a producer on the dev side is different from being one on the publishing side. So we don't use it at Focus, but some other development companies do still use it. It's free and open-source, so it's really made for everyone. It's intended to make producers' lives easier.

— **Also, I read your production notes on your LinkedIn page, which seem quite useful. Are you planning to continue writing about the process of game development and producing?**

— I'd love to. I'd love to. Whenever I have some free time, I try to compile notes. I think it's great that people can share their own experience with everyone. The open source philosophy is the same. So, yes, if I can, I'll continue writing them.

***«We're working on something like 25 or 30 games at the same time»***

— **How does working in a major development studio affect your gaming experience as a player? If you notice an issue with the localization or the voiceover, does it make it impossible for you to play like a normal player?**

— When you play a game, eventually you'll notice something that makes you think, "Oh, okay, they probably did that because they were short on time," or "Oh, they were smart enough to save some money or effort on this." Or you might just think, "I

wouldn't have done it that way." So yeah, it's complicated, but I think once you get into the game, you always manage to find your "real player" mindset. If you really enjoy a game, you'll just forget about work and really get immersed in it. Most of the time that's the mark of a good game. One that you can just enjoy as a player while forgetting about your own experience.

### — As a player, what games do you prefer to play?

— I used to be a huge RPG gamer. I play less now that I have kids. That always makes things more complicated. I hope I'll be able to play more when they get a bit older.

### — Play with them?

— Play with them, absolutely. I was a big fan of RPGs, action, platformers. I played a lot of them when I was younger. Now I mostly play on mobile: Clash Royale, Clash of Clans. Actually, recently I've been playing a little Shenmue 3. That was a recent thing. But again, you know, it's a nostalgic game. I was able to get it and play it a bit.



Screenshot from Shenmue 3.

— And what is your favorite Focus Home game project — I mean both to work on and to play?

— That's like choosing between your children. It's really difficult. Right now we're working on something like 25 or 30 games at the same time. So we have a lot of games that are all very different, and really, I couldn't pick one. The great thing about working at Focus is working with so many different projects and different teams that are all unique. So it's always enjoyable. Different methods, different problems, and stuff like that. Working on all these projects is really, really great. I'm really blessed to work on so many interesting projects.

***«We appreciate when a translator asks questions»***

— I wanted to ask about the way Focus Home handles localization tasks. Do you have different localization teams for particular projects?

— Yes. Localization management at Focus is handled by the line production team of line producers and associate line producers. We work with different localization companies. The line producer or associate line producer is the main point of contact for the localization company once we've signed a contract. They deal with coordination between the development studio, the localization manager, and Focus. That's specifically for game localization. We also have a marketing team that deals with localization for things like community posts and trailers, and they have their own contacts for localization. When it comes to games, localization is all handled by line producers. When we start the localization process, usually around the alpha stage, once we have a strong and solid localization kit, the line producers initiate the process. They send localization kits in different batches, get the translation, pass it to the developers, make a build, test it... And then there's also LQA to work on. Overall, they make sure the quality of the translation is truly top notch.

## **— Another popular question. Vendors, freelancers, or inhouse localization?**

— We don't have in-house localization, but we do prefer working with vendors who employ in-house translators. We believe it's very important to have people that are prepared to join the project, focus on the project, and really care about the quality that they provide. Usually, from what we've seen, it's a bit better when the vendors have in-house translators.

## **— When working on projects, is there anything game developers have to deal with that localization vendors and freelancers never think about?**

— It's always difficult, because when you get the localization kit, it's full of small sentences that are sometimes out of context. It can be difficult for translators to really make sure that they're translating correctly. So what we really appreciate is when the translator tries to understand and asks the dev studio questions, when they're proactive about that. Also if they play the game at some point, to make sure the translation is correct and fits into the game well, into the particular game context. Unfortunately, we're usually short on time. But that's something we really like, to have that level of communication and make sure that everyone thinks, "Okay, I'm doing the right thing for the game." And that they understand, just understand the game. Sometimes it's just a matter of understanding: what's the setting of the game, what's the mood, the general mood, to help them out.

## **— So it's very important for translators to get involved in the project, in order to understand how to make it better for the players.**

— Yeah. That's something that we really appreciate.

## **— Can you think of any examples of projects where the localization or translation turned out to be better than the original? Not necessarily games, maybe literature, or movies.**

— No, I haven't come across any. I know some authors write in a language that's not their native language, like in French, for instance. But it's really difficult. I remember the original creator of the Simpsons thought that the French voices were really great, almost better than the English ones, even. So that's one instance. But I'm not sure, maybe he says that about every translation of The Simpsons as a way to be polite. But that's one example I can think of.



***«My first experience with video games was really through my sister»***

**— Some final questions about you. If you had to compare success to fruit, what fruit would it be?**

— I'd have to think about what fruit, but it would be a fruit you really have to take care of. To make sure it grows properly, that you pick it at the right time. Timing would be really important. Because to me, that's what makes a good project. A project that you need to care about — not a project that just happens on its own and everything's okay, no. Good projects are ones that

you need to get hands-on with. And you have to release it at the right time of the year, because competition makes things difficult. So we'd have to find a fruit that fits that description.

— **Maybe an orange?**

— Maybe an orange. But that's kind of... It could be an orange, or maybe a cherry.

— **A cherry. Success is a cherry! Okay. Given that you have a lot of tasks to do every day, what do you do to recharge?**

— Exercise. I think that's really important. Recently I've been riding my bike to the office. Even though it takes more energy when you bike to work, you feel more energized. So that's one good thing. I really think everyone should do sports, be at the right activity level, and obviously, sleep well. But when you get back home and you have children to take care of, usually you have no choice but to sleep well at night, because you're just so tired.

— **Yeah, I understand. Speaking of sports, I saw on your website that you used to play tennis?**

— Table tennis, actually.

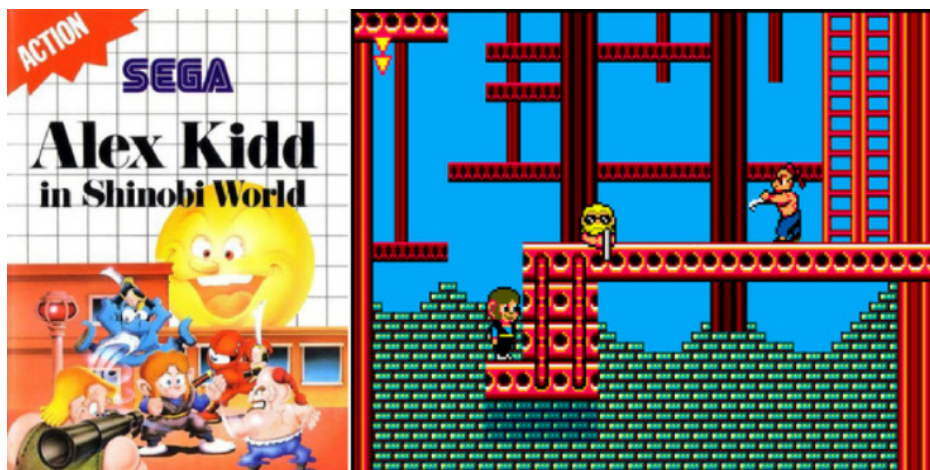
— **Table tennis! Do you still play table tennis?**

— I don't anymore, but whenever I have the chance, I try to. Because I really enjoy it. I played for a long time.

— **Do you remember the first video game you played?**

— Yes. I have an older sister, and she got a Master System. We have the same mother, but not the same father, and her father bought her a Master System. At first it was only at his house, so all my sister could do was explain the game to me — I couldn't play it, because we didn't have it at our house. The game was Alex Kidd in Shinobi World.





So my first experience with video games was really through my sister telling me about this game. In my mind, it was something magical! Everything she was describing, I was like: “Oh! That’s crazy!” Eventually she brought the console to our house, and I was able to play it for myself, to discover it. That was the beginning of my long history with video games.

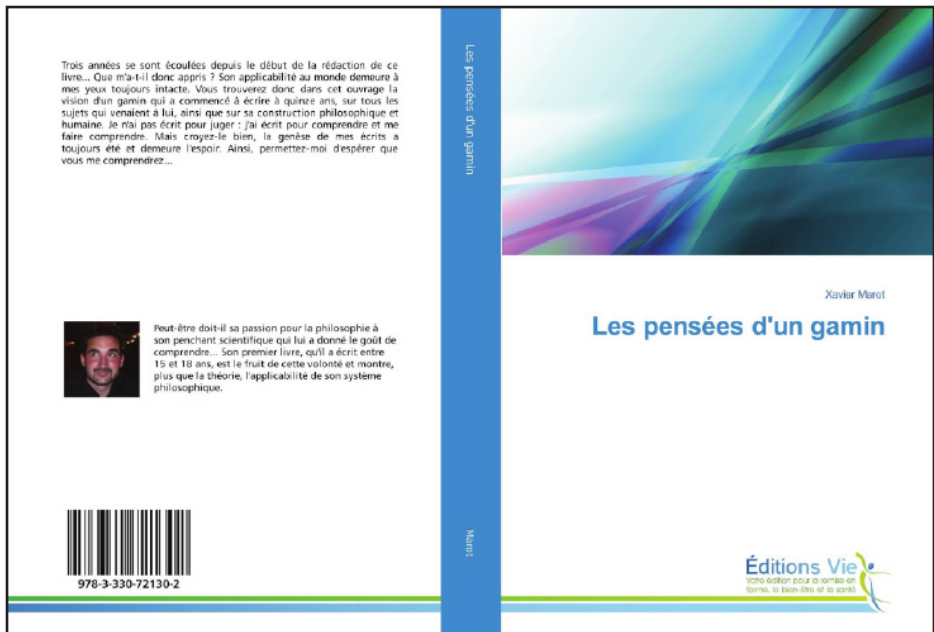
— **When did you decide that you wanted to work in the game industry?**

— I was quite young, actually. I was around 11 or 12. At some point, I just thought, “Okay, that’s what I want to do!” I was gaming a lot at the time, and I decided that was what I wanted to do. Everyone around me was like, “You’re still young, you’ll see, you still have time to decide.” But since I’m really stubborn, I stuck to my idea. I grew up and took the proper courses and studied to finally get into the video game industry.

— **Besides games, you are also interested in philosophy, as I recall. You’ve even written a book called *Les pensées d’un gamin*. When did you write this book?**

— Between the ages of 15 and 18, actually. I was really keen on philosophy as well as video games, and I really wanted to work in video games to try and combine the two.





I think that video games are a good medium for people to try out different ideas and confront systems. Video games also involve creating a system. You create your own rules, your own world. So, lots of connections with philosophy. But at that time, I wasn't working in the game industry, so writing a book and creating my own philosophy system was a means to fulfill my own desire to create a system.

— In the future, are you planning to write anything else based on your actual experience working with games?

— I'd love to. I like writing. I'm not saying I'm a good writer, but I like writing. You've seen my notes on my LinkedIn. So it's really a matter of finding free time to be able to do that. But yes, I would like to, definitely.



# IVAN BUCHTA

Creative Director at Bohemia Interactive

*«The game needs to be challenging and offer players freedom»*

Ivan Buchtá has been working at Bohemia Interactive for 14 years and has held the position of creative director for 10 of them. We talked to Ivan and found out how they create realistic military conflicts in Arma, why they give priority to long gaming sessions, and why they put a real T-72 tank in one of their offices.

**We interviewed Ivan in December, 2020.**

## **«The first hours in the office felt more like a nightmare»**

### **— When were you first introduced to gaming?**

— It was in the late 1980s, when I was about 9 years old. My uncle let me play some games on his Atari 800XL with a small black-and-white TV screen.

### **— Can you remember the first video game you played?**

— River Raid on Atari.

### **— When did you realize that you want a career in the game industry?**

— It was probably when Marek Španěl, Bohemia Interactive's CEO, offered me a job in early 2006. Until then, games and some modest modding work I did were either for fun or as side projects. Although I was pretty invested into this hobby, I never thought I would possess any special skills which would make me able to work on video games.

### **— Your major was Environmental Sciences. How does your education help you do your job?**

— The curriculum was very broad, ranging from natural sciences to psychology or basics of urbanism, with some extra subjects like law or geoinformatics. While this sounds like a weird mashup, it's a perfect overview for making an authentic game, allowing me to understand various aspects of the real world. With such knowledge, abstracting the reality into a video game environment is much easier. Besides, the university studies gave me the general "tools" to find, sort, and interpret information, which helps a lot in research or whenever we need to learn something specific in detail.

### **— If possible, can you share how you got into Bohemia?**

— Soon after the release of Operation Flashpoint in 2001, I was active in its modding community. Eventually, I became part of the ČSLA (Czechoslovak People's Army) Mod team, a small but dedicated assembly of Czech and Slovak mod-makers. Around 2005, we started working on a desert terrain inspired by Iraq, which caught the eye of David Lagettie, who led the development of Virtual Battlespace 1 (VBS1, a serious game based on OFP) in Bohemia Interactive's Australian office. We were invited to participate in the development of Terrain Pack 3, a terrain-based expansion, and I employed some basic geoinformatics techniques in making TP3's "As Samawah" terrain. This caught interest of Marek Španěl, who I briefly met in autumn 2005, and then, in 2006, he offered me the role of environment designer.

### — What was your first day at work there like?

— I started working at Bohemia Interactive's office on the outskirts of Mníšek pod Brdy, a small town south of Prague. There was a pond on the location and a forest right behind the company grounds, and the office itself looked like a chalet from a 1980s James Bond movie taking place in the Alps. Being able to work there after a few years of following the studio and modding their game was a dream come true. However, the first hours in the office felt more like a nightmare: at that time, the whole team was crunching on a demo of Game 2 (which was intended to be a perfect do-it-all successor of Operation Flashpoint) for E3, and I was expected to set up my PC and immediately start contributing to the build. I had some knowledge of the previous versions of terrain tools and data formats, but the concept of versioning (the company used SourceSafe at that time) was completely alien to me, as well as some internal communication and task tracking tools. Eventually, colleagues helped out, and I learned quickly, but it was a real "baptism of fire."

— The Arma series always tried to be as close to the real life as possible and follow the realities of modern military conflicts. Were there any real-life conflicts that served as an inspiration for your team when working on the recent titles in the series?

— The Arma team has always focused on general research of military forces from specific eras rather than on a particular conflict, based on our momentary needs. In Arma 2, we looked into contemporary armies of the period in general rather than trying to depict a historical conflict, but for the background, we drew some inspiration from the conflict in former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. The development of Arma 2's expansion Operation Arrowhead was certainly influenced by the footage and imagery from the recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

**— Your games have a ton of real-world weapons and military hardware. How do you manage to make weapons behave realistically? Does your team have access to military-grade equipment?**

— We have always obtained the majority of our references from publicly available internet sources, with rare chances to try some firearms or see some older military vehicles. We also have a small collection of disabled Cold War-era firearms and gear and a T-72 in one of the offices, which all serve as general references for our artists and designers.

**— Arma has a rather steep learning curve. The sessions are long, and understanding all the mechanics and gameplay features takes time. Can you tell us a bit about your playerbase? Who are your projects for?**

— Obviously, Arma can be understood as a niche game for people willing to invest time and effort, rewarding patience and creativity — Arma can certainly offer a lot to a mature audience. On the other hand, I believe one does not have to put a terrible effort into the game to be rewarded. Now that the latest installment of the series has been out for seven years, there's a welcoming community as well as a lot of content providing an introduction to various aspects of the game.

***«We would certainly like to offer a future Arma to the console audience»***



— **Considering the previous question. How could one attract new players to projects out of the realm of mainstream and casual gaming?**

— We do our best to offer long-term value: there are vast environments and endless possibilities to set up various situations, which always end up a bit different thanks to the non-deterministic nature of events in Arma. Add the terabytes of user-made content to play through, and you're set for years of entertainment. Indeed, the plethora of options players have in the game is reflected in a steeper learning curve, and I'm sure this is one of the areas in which improvement would be appreciated by many of our players. On the other hand, we won't sacrifice the challenge itself: modern combat as we try to depict it is not an action movie experience; it has to stay gritty.

— **With each new installment or a DLC, Arma gets new features or changes, making the mechanics deeper. Can you tell us more on the way creative process is organized? How do you come up with mechanics or details to add?**

— A lot of these features were in the team's backlogs practically since the beginning of the development, and although I was not directly involved in making most of them, they followed the pattern of bringing the general rule set for everyone for free and premium assets (e.g., weapons or vehicles) to the DLC owners. Arma has always been developed as a comprehensive simulation game covering the combined operations of infantry, ground

vehicles, aircraft, or surface vessels. In Arma 3, we tried to cover the most attractive areas we found feasible to create, and there've been a lot of internal discussions about the content of each DLC. In general, we'd start by picking one of the considered topics, e.g., tanks or sniper rifles. After that, the team came up with a set of ideas for new content and rules, considering how the new additions would enrich the rule set or enhance the gameplay.

**— When working on game mechanics, do you build them on the gaming experience or real military action? Do you first come up with a mechanic and then try to add on realistic elements, or do you go through, let's say, military videos and then decide what could become a good game mechanic?**

— It's usually the latter. We try to understand which real-life military operations or procedures might work within the game's scope, and see whether we could deliver them in a form which would not complicate the matters for players, would work in multiplayer and could be performed by the game's AI.

**— Arma was always a PC title. Is it related to technical or input complexity, that is more suitable for computers, or is it more about hardcore audience playing mainly on PC?**

— The Arma series has been powered by the proprietary Real Virtuality engine. Despite the years of development that brought us several generations of Real Virtuality, the engine has retained technical limitations which make it impossible to run on consoles. Of course, the fairly complex controls would also be rather hard to simplify for the controller without taking some important controls from the player, especially after the Arma 3's DLC-related enhancements.

**— Is Bohemia planning to release Arma games on consoles in the future? Considering DayZ successfully went beyond PC.**

— We've offered DayZ to our console community because it was technically possible thanks to our new and still in development Enfusion technology. And of course, it would be nice to offer



console players the Arma experience in the future as well. It may be a challenging but important lesson for us developers to create such a complex experience without overwhelming players by the complexity of controls. Making a console Arma may teach us to create a game that would be truly “easy to learn but hard to master.” We’ll see what opportunities will be there for the future Arma on consoles because it’s a complex thing.



— One of the main tendencies in the modern gaming industry is the shift towards mobile. Do you think hardcore projects and series akin to Arma should react to it somehow? Is there a way to adapt to the new reality?

— I believe Arma shall stay true to its heritage and keep delivering interesting experiences to people interested in it, and we shall focus on improving what we do well and what’s been appreciated by our audience. There’s a lot we can do within the range of our original concept of a tactical military game, and we have a firm vision for the features to come. Staying original and faithful to our players and community is probably a good business plan for a franchise as specific as Arma.



Of course, Bohemia Interactive has already explored the mobile world; it just requires different games made by different people. I am happy to say that our mobile team succeeded in making several remarkable titles, and we can be particularly proud of MiniDayZ.

**— 2019 was a rather good year for Bohemia. What are the reasons for this growing interest?**

— In 2019, Bohemia Interactive released major updates and DLCs for all of its titles, which certainly boosted people's interest. Also, DayZ was released on consoles, which on its own was a huge success.

**— Arma and DayZ are conceptually different, yet they still work with similar mechanics. How different is the creative process behind these games?**

— The similarity is probably due to the common technical solution: DayZ started as a modification of Arma 2, and even in standalone DayZ, there was a lot of continuity and similarity due to the shared Real Virtuality engine. Also, I daresay both games share the “design DNA”: combat is made to be challenging and unsparing, and there's considerable depth to the core game mechanisms: tactics and combat rules in Arma and survival rules in DayZ.

The creative process was very different, though: perhaps it could be described as either a “horizontal” or “vertical” approach to making a game. Arma games depict various facets of an armed conflict of varied scale; therefore, we have always approached it as a content-heavy platform catering to various ways of use by its players, providing them with a wide range of simple features and huge numbers of assets and plentiful opportunities. DayZ started as a very condensed experience with few well interacting features and a very limited scope of assets, focusing solely on perfecting its single game mode.

***«The events in Arma scenarios may evolve by themselves»***

**— It is fairly obvious that there are almost no games like Arma. Most similar projects with a focus on realism still shift towards shorter multiplayer matches. What future do you think hardcore military sims have? What would the ideal end goal for the genre be?**

— Most other military simulation games focus on various different aspects of war, e.g., infantry, or aerial combat, or a particular vehicle type, perfecting their trade. Arma, on the other hand, is a very broad platform focusing on the authenticity of an armed conflict, attempting to depict tactical situations arising from the simultaneous use of various weapon platforms, vehicles, and even tactics employed on its battlefields. With the freedom, large worlds, and broader feature scope of Arma, players can also be put into non-combat situations with authentic context, e.g., just driving a truck with supplies to a distant base, which makes it even more unique compared to most other tactical military games.

In general, the future of hardcore military simulations will be in using the available resources to increase the scale and fidelity of the experience. In the case of Arma, it would be a detailed and interactive game world with a more persistent environment and more non-combat rules and interactions.

**— I think you've seen people comparing Arma to Squad. What would be the main differences in regard to game design?**

— Arma still shows its RTS roots, attempting to depict combat with vehicles in larger areas, populating the battlefield by vast numbers of AI units. The events in Arma scenarios thus don't need to depend on players' actions and may evolve by themselves based on predetermined plans and AI routines. Squad is a great example of a game focusing on certain aspects of combat, perfecting the rules and features to match its environment scale and player counts. As far as I know, it's driven by the desire to deliver an authentic infantry combat experience in adversarial multiplayer scenarios, which are naturally evolving around the actions of players.



— Arma players sometimes start conversations on PTSD on the game's subreddit. Many veteran gamers say that realistic military sims allow them to get the sense of brotherhood or camaraderie without the negative feelings. Did that, dare I say, therapeutic effect appeared on its own or was it somehow planned? Are you working on additional mechanics that help the players communicate in game and build stronger connections in the community?

— When Operation Flashpoint was released, nobody at Bohemia Interactive expected it could be used for such serious purposes, and there was no intention to reach beyond the field of entertainment. However, the game was meant to be an authentic war game from the very start, and it succeeded in picturing combat in an authentic way and with deeper context, which has been appreciated not just in PTSD therapy, but also in military training. Both of these non-entertainment applications have always been the domain of Bohemia Interactive Simulations, an independent company with different owners since 2012, who have been developing Virtual Battlespace, the military training spin-off of the original Operation Flashpoint, since 2001.

— How do you and your team come up with new ideas? Do you play similar games from other devs for inspiration? What feature did you recently see and think, “Ah, this would be cool to add?”

— There are many passionate people at Bohemia Interactive, constantly bringing up various ideas. Be it military history fans, airsoft players, or sim gamers, most of them also actively play Arma and are aware of the scope and vision of the game. Playing other games is important as well, but we also watch movies or read books. Of course, all the ideas are thoroughly assessed, considering feasibility, influence of gameplay, or fit to the momentary setting. We also want to remain true to good old Flashpoint's heritage of being challenging and offering freedom and meaningful consequences to players' actions.

## ***«Copying reality mindlessly would probably end in disaster rather than a game worth playing»***

**— What do Creative Directors in AAA companies usually do? What does a typical workday of a Creative Director in Bohemia Interactive look like?**

— As far as I know, the label may describe completely different roles in various companies or even teams, with particular team setup and a Creative Director's personality and skill set. I cannot speak for other companies or teams, but as far as my role is concerned, it's partly the solidification of vision, partly intense work on a game's setting and narrative in its broadest sense, and of course, the responsibility for a game's "look and feel."

Given this fairly broad area, my day can be anything from meeting people or playing a game we work on to field trips. My common "office day" usually starts at 6:30 am by handling daily communication, checking out latest builds or more creative tasks, as the offices are fairly calm in the mornings. Then, the first round of meeting people and talking is around 10 am, followed by an early lunch, after which it's either more meetings or some more work, which often includes checking out various parts of the game as part of the production process. I leave the office rather early to be with my family, and in the evenings, I usually end up handling emergent tasks, chatting with colleagues or

friends, and playing games. In any case, I am trying to stay in touch with the game and its development team as much as possible, in order to know the state of the product and provide a good service to my colleagues.

— There is a rather famous quote by Soren Johnson (GD of Civilization), “Given the opportunity, players will optimize the fun out of a game.” Do you agree? How does this apply to Arma and DayZ?

— I certainly do! My colleague Karel Mořický, author of Arma 3's in-game 3D scenario editor and Zeus DLC, once said that Arma is “a game as entertaining as its player,” and I can only agree. Both Arma and DayZ are meant to facilitate player freedom and provide interesting emergent situations, but the “optimization by players” does not end with the experience itself. Both our flagship games are fairly easy to modify, and we provide deliberate support to these community activities: the community can use the same tools we have, there are sample data available under community-friendly licenses.

— Development of such titles as Arma involves hundreds of people, and good and quick communication is, to my mind, one of the key elements of success. How do you maintain communication between different departments in Bohemia while working on your projects?

— There's a good unified infrastructure for documentation, task tracking, and chatting available across the offices, allowing us to collaborate efficiently. Talking in person or via online video calls is regarded as vital, and we try to constantly revise and improve the communication in the company, inspiring people to handle the daily communication diligently and with initiative. Transparency is also an important thing to maintain, as with so many people involved in making a single huge product, everyone needs to be aware of the main changes. On the other hand, we try to avoid meetings for the sake of meetings or letting too many opinions into a discussion, as things like this tend to hinder or stop the development.

**— A lot of popular games are seen as auteur projects. People say “a Hideo Kojima game” or “a Peter Molyneux game.” What do you think about such a perception of collaborative art?**

— It’s a strong way of branding, especially when it comes to the few legendary developers around. I think there’s merit in realizing the contribution of strong bearers of vision to the “face” of a final product. I can fully understand Hideo Kojima’s statement about his personal attention to every detail of *Death Stranding* making it “a Hideo Kojima game,” but there are many other people like him with the same degree of centralized subjective control over “their” games, they just chose not to make their personality a part of their game’s brand. As far as our games are concerned, we are Bohemia Interactive, and we understand that nothing would be possible without the concerted effort of the whole team.

**— Why are there so many remasters and remakes nowadays, and why do you think a lot of them are so successful?**

— While I generally prefer to experience new things in games, I don’t mind playing a good remake of an old game I enjoyed in the past — many older games are still worth playing today. Of course, there’s also business involved, and not a bad one: a game with a strong brand and proven concept remade to current standards has a good chance to impress new audiences due to its timeless qualities and contemporary industry standard solutions (e.g., in UX or art), and a team doing such a remake operates on safe ground, following the known recipe.

I bet there are also remakes made out of passion, and it would be my case if I’d have the chance to pick. There are two old Czech shooter games I adore and would love to see remade: *Vietcong* and *Hidden & Dangerous 2*.

**— In the last few years, we’ve seen a few games released as a service with the detailed roadmap for the upcoming years that were later abandoned because the player base turned out to be too small. How to ensure that the service-like model would add to the experience and not drive players away?**

— There's probably no obvious correct answer, otherwise we probably wouldn't see many of such games failing. Along with the necessary qualities of the game itself, I believe good marketing and a good attitude towards customers are among the key prerequisites. Also, every game probably needs a dash of luck to succeed on the market.

***«There are many Cold War-era conflicts that would be interesting to depict in an Arma»***

— Let's go beyond the shooter genre for a second. Why do you think realistic or simulative games are limited to a number of comfortable genres? Like vehicle or occupation sims. Where are realistic GTAs and Hitmans? Can there be ultrarealistic RPG simulators?

— These are two worlds offering completely different kind of entertainment to a completely different target audience. Some people want to create, take their time, build something; on the other hand, there are players who want fast-paced action, destruction, a different kind of fantasy they want to live through in their game. Employing realism in video games is certainly tempting, and reality with its depth and complexity has always been a great inspiration to me, but copying it mindlessly and literally would probably end in disaster rather than a game worth playing.



# MARTIN KULLBERG

Head of Talent Acquisition  
at Paradox Interactive

*«Soft skills have more of an impact on your performance than knowledge»*

We talked to Martin Kullberg and discussed how to find the best specialists, what to put into your resume, and why questions like “Where do you see yourself in 5 years?” are a waste of time.

**We interviewed Martin in May, 2021.**



## **«We want to make sure that we actually do talent acquisition, not just wait»**

**— Martin, you're the head of talent acquisition at Paradox. Can you tell us how you ended up in the gaming industry?**

— I'd say it was completely by chance. I've always been a gamer, but I had no idea that you can work with the stuff that I do within games. It had never crossed my mind, but obviously game studios and publishers have to hire. This was back in 2015. I was living in Norway, but I wanted to come back to Sweden and I was just looking for jobs. The advertisement for an HR recruitment specialist popped up on my feed and I applied. And you know, the rest... the rest is history, as they say. So it wasn't a long-held dream or passion of mine. It just happened and I'm very glad.

**— So you never planned to work in the game industry and still ended up at Paradox as the head of talent acquisition. Could you tell us what's the difference between talent acquisition and recruitment?**

— I think it's always tricky with words like this. But I'd say recruitment is a little bit more reactive. It's about placing roles as they come up to the recruiter or recruitment department.

The opposite of that will be proactive. You are looking at not only when roles get approved, but you're actually trying to look ahead. What's going to happen in the next 12 or 24 months? The further ahead we can plan, the better, obviously. The most important part is that you try to figure out and stay ahead of the curve because that gives you time to plan and to come up with strategies around that growth. So the more time you give yourself, the fewer mistakes you're going to make, and the better the people you're going to end up hiring.

**— Do you have a talent acquisition strategy?**

— We want to make sure that we actually do talent acquisition. We're not reactive, we are proactive. That's, I'd say, one part of it.

That sort of mentality has to be tied to actions and actually result in something. And that means planning a lot more while making sure that we have a common idea with the organization.

First, we've got to understand the goal of the business and come up with strategies on how to reach those goals in terms of people. You need to have a good idea of the situation in the company, ask the main questions: What are the most important things for moving forward? What are the most important roles, disciplines, skills? Where are we going to struggle?

In short, our strategy can be described as follows: to spend the most time on the things that are the most impactful for the business, on the things that are going to be the most difficult. And then, for some areas, it can be okay to do traditional recruitment. We've got to realize where we can get the most return on investment in terms of our time and money, and build the recruitment strategies around that.

**— You are trying to be proactive, meaning to hire the right people before there is a need for them?**

— It can be that. Let's imagine we're planning our work for the next year. We have a better grasp of the games we're going to make and thus the workforce we need to achieve those goals. Say we need 10 programmers, 5 designers, and 5 testers.

Now we need to answer a few more questions. What seniority level are we talking about here? How are we building this team? If we're going to need 10 senior programmers, then we need to start building this pipeline now. If the design team needs junior specialists, maybe the path we need to go down here is internships.

**— Is there anything unique about talent acquisition in gaming, or is it about the same everywhere?**

— I have only worked at one company in the game industry, but I'd say people are passionate about work in this sphere. We tend to fill a lot of roles just by candidates applying for them. But that's

not always the case. Unless you have a super-strong brand and you're world-renowned, it can be a hassle and a struggle.

We're so fortunate that people reach out to us and apply to us and tell us: "We're dying to work at Paradox. We're dying to work in the game industry." That's the part that stands out. Other than that, I'd say it's not that different. You still have to make the same kind of decisions, you need to be diligent and plan things out.

## ***«There's always a risk of being duped»***

**— When dealing with a reactive strategy, what should the job description be like to attract the right people?**

— We are trying to think of what is important for candidates, what they want to read. It's important to know how they digest information. But we're obviously very dependent on our managers, who know the craft really well. We give a lot of ownership to them to use the toolbox that we have provided to them. With its help, they create a good job description, and if something doesn't work, then we decide how it can be improved.

I think there is only one secret — try to make it less boring. Instead of a list with hundreds of requirements, you need to provide more information about the work itself. Give the candidate a complete picture of what is to be done and be sure to pay attention to the problems and challenges. If everything is a bullet point, nothing is a bullet point. That's why you need to mix it up a bit. I think you need to spend more time on a job description than you think you do, but it's worth the investment of time.

Try different methods and compare them, but the most important thing is to stay consistent and look at the job description from the candidate's point of view.

**— What are the dos and don'ts of having a good resume?**

— This is about the perspective of the person reading the resume. I have an opinion, but that can differ a lot from another

recruiter's opinion. But there are obviously some basics that I think you can find pretty much everywhere. Like, try to tailor it based on the job description. Make sure you highlight what you think the recipient might want to read.

The purpose of the first documentation is very black and white. Does this person have the basic qualification? Yes or no? Different companies and different individuals do this on different levels. We don't want to make too many assumptions based on that kind of information, because there's only so much you can get out of it.

If we need someone who has five years of experience, that's a question you can answer yes or no. But in your CV you can't really show stuff that is more tied to soft skills. That's something that we have to explore in the interview. After a dialogue, there is less of a risk of falling into the trap of looking at someone's name or origin and making a decision that is not relevant to the person's performance. That is why resumes and cover letters are going out of fashion, they're not very strong at predicting future performance anyway.

**— Okay, so let's assume we've successfully passed the CV part. How many interviews are there usually between applying for a job and getting hired at Paradox?**

— So we evaluate mainly two things throughout the process, one is role fit. Do you have the competencies, skills, behaviors tied to the role? And that can look different if you're a programmer or if you're a producer, of course. And then there's cultural fit. It's about behaviors and attitudes that we think are important regardless of which role you have at Paradox. There is usually only one cultural interview, but in other ways, the process may be different.

I'd say you are probably looking at 3 to 4 interviews. We always try to cut out the fat and leave only the most important stages. Managers should always think "What is the purpose of having this step? Does this candidate really need to meet that

stakeholder? What are we evaluating here?” There is a balance, of course. Sometimes having an additional interview can be the right call, but we always need to think about what it adds.

If you want to do some reading on this subject, I recommend looking into what Google did a couple of years ago. Because they have a lot more data. They used to have a ton of interviews, but at one point realized that from the fifth interview they don't add enough information to make it worthwhile. I think modernizing this based on statistics is cool. We don't have that kind of data yet, but we can try to think about it at least.

— **Who usually takes the lead during the interviews? Are those the heads of departments you're hiring for or is it still TA or HR maybe?**

— So the responsibility for evaluating the role fit part is with the hiring manager. It's their responsibility to find out whether this person is qualified or not. I think it's really good to involve teams as long as you give people the right kind of training and tools. It shouldn't look like the candidate is being introduced to the team and they are just chatting. Yes, that can be a nice conversation, but you need to do a proper interview, evaluate the right things.

And then we do the cultural interview ourselves, and the manager is not in there. They just need to read the evaluation afterward.

— **Should TA managers watch something like Lie to Me or House MD to know how to notice different face changes during an interview?**

— No, I don't think so. It's really important that you acknowledge that the interview is hard. That it's difficult. What we need to do is rather to start. Okay, First, we've got to think “So, what do we need for this role? What are the competences and behaviors we want to evaluate here?” And then we make sure that we construct interview questions that actually measure that. That's why it's important to not only settle for knowledge and information but ask about particular situations. Because you can always charm

yourself out of a hypothetical situation. But lying about real stuff that has happened is getting more and more difficult the deeper you go. It's about that. So, you can watch those shows for entertainment I suppose. But I don't think you need it.

Ask enough questions to have a really good idea of this person's performance, how they handle the situation, how they behave. Obviously, there's always a risk of being duped. But the more thorough you are, the more difficult it's going to be for that person to tell anything but the truth.

## ***«If candidates have to guess what you're looking for, it's unfair»***

### **— Should questions be unique to each candidate?**

— No, they shouldn't. Again, you should control what outcome you're looking for here. Depending on the answers, you could ask follow-up questions to understand their situations. But really what we want to get out of this is answers that can make it easier to compare candidates.

For example, we're looking for someone who is very structured, who can build the structure. So we want to compare candidate A to B to C to see who performed the strongest here. So tailored questions should be limited to follow-up questions if we don't understand something. In general, the goal is to make it very comparable.

### **— How to avoid cliché questions everybody knows about?**

— If you are well prepared, you won't have many of the cliché questions, like "What is your greatest strength?" In that case, you give them a chance to control the narrative and say anything. But that's unfair to them as well because they're going to guess what we're looking for. It is better to actually tell them what we're looking for and have them try to answer that.

Make a list of questions ahead of time to make your life easier. You can think of it as a funnel where you start up top with a very broad question and then you go down to more specific ones. This approach helps to delve into the details.

**— So if we have two very similar candidates, but one has better soft skills, and the other is more of an expert in their field. Which one would you choose?**

— I would translate soft skills here to behaviors. And I think the right kind of behaviors often have more of an impact on your performance than knowledge because the knowledge you can learn. It is very good when you have qualities and habits that are suitable for a particular position or work in general.

You might be behind at first, but I think you're going to outgrow the specialist quite soon. If you're stronger in the behaviors tied to the role, that's important for the role.

**— What are the red flags during an interview? Should you trust your gut even if you think something's wrong?**

— Let's say that we want to measure something in particular here. If we're checking collaboration skills, it's rather easy to see red flags there. We all have an idea of behavior that is less good for teamwork.

If we think that something is off, but don't know why, I'd say we are probably making a mistake here. So in that case, it's important not to assume things. You tell me something, you give me 90% of the story, and then I fill in the rest of 10% based on my biases and my ideas. And that could be either good or bad for you, that depends. In cases like this, I'd say we need to go back and make sure that we figure out what the rest of the 10% was if it's important to our decision. It's always awkward to go back and say, "So we talked about this and I realized that I didn't quite fully understand." But I'd say it's better to do that rather than guess because then we're going to make a decision that might be wrong.

## «Honesty is the best policy»

### — Are there any secrets to getting a good job offer?

— What we try to do is to talk about it as early as possible. We don't want to end up in a situation when we spend time on both sides and then realize at the end that it was in vain. But it depends on the company. The company might have very clear guidelines on salary policy. And in that case, it's probably going to be more difficult for you as a candidate to influence what you can get. If the manager is in a position where they want to solve a problem, they might be inclined to get you more pay if you haggle.

I'd say your biggest chance is with smaller companies. They can give you a higher offer than they intended. So it never hurts to go higher in the beginning because if we have that transparent conversation, we should be able to let you know if that's going to be possible, and then you can always adjust and say, "Okay I've given it some thought and, you know, I'm probably going to be able to go at this level."

When I am interested in a candidate, then we try to find a solution that suits both parties, fits into the company's policies and guidelines. It is unfortunate when we've been clear about our expectations and what we can do, and then you realize that it's not really what you are looking for.

Honesty is the best policy. Being clear with what you want early on is good, it works. When we talk about the compensation, the candidate might say, "I don't want to sell myself too short, you know. I don't want to be at risk of saying a number while you were thinking of a higher number." But, you know, it's not our goal to get you as cheap as possible, our goal is to get you on a level that works long term. If we get you in too low, that's going to create problems especially if we know that you're worth more than this.

We want to make sure we pay what's right, not the lowest amount possible. Otherwise, the person might get upset and



say, “I found out that other employees get more, although we are performing at the same level.” Of course, you can always make these mistakes in evaluating candidates. If this happens regularly and on purpose, then you are guaranteed to find yourself in a situation where people are unhappy with what they’re paid, which means they can leave at any time.

### — When should a candidate decline a job offer?

— I think this depends a lot on the context, and even the country. I’d encourage anyone to ask questions. There might be things that look weird or very good or just things that you don’t understand. And even if you feel that you want to throw yourself at the opportunity, make sure that you ask questions. So that we don’t misunderstand each other and end up in an uncomfortable situation afterwards. I’m sure everyone in the same position as me would be happy to spend some time to answer those questions. Plus, we’ve gotten those a million times before so it’s not too much of an effort to answer them.

You know, there are no dumb questions here. I wouldn’t be surprised if you looked at our offer and didn’t understand certain parts of it. Contracts are complex and context is important. If the company you’re engaged at is reluctant to at least explain the offer, then that would probably be concerning. This may be company policy, but it looks suspicious.

### — What are your thoughts on hunting talent from other companies?

— Sometimes you have certain markets where it’s a small community. The culture might be that you don’t poach talent from other companies within that little fish pond. Then you need to adapt to that.

Say we acquire a studio in a country where we might not know that much about the game industry. Then we need to investigate the market before we start. But if we know the market and we know that this happens, then we can start attracting talent.

I think hunting talent is okay, we just need to remember that those decisions are made voluntarily. If this is accepted in the industry, then it's a good way to be proactive and build talent pools with potential candidates. Maybe they are not interested now, being in the middle of a project they want to finish. But who knows what happens next?

**— You've mentioned internships among talent acquisition strategies. Are there any internships within Paradox?**

— We've done quite a few with art when the art department has grown. But if I look ahead of our current plans, thinking of different teams we are building in terms of seniority, it's not going to be too much. Historically and looking ahead, we haven't done it too much. A couple of people each year.

But it's better to talk about this and look at internal and external data to see what the company plans are. Maybe the growth that we are going for here is not going to be possible without finding balance by bringing more junior people in. And that's our role as acquisition specialists.

**— What should an intern do to be selected? Do you need to have a large portfolio?**

— The game industry is quite good in this regard. It is possible to have a portfolio without having professional experience as an artist. If I'm talking about Paradox specifically, you might gain experience modding our games. You can ease your way into a content design role, a game design role.

Same if you're a programmer, you can put a lot of stuff in your GitHub and show it to us. And, obviously, you always have to consider what you put in there because you want that to reflect who you are. But you can also take a little bit more of a chance having something in there rather than nothing. You can showcase what you've got. That is not as easy in some other industries.

**— How likely are interns to get a full-time job at Paradox after the internship is over?**

— It should be the goal. If we have an internship, it should be because we think there's room for someone to come in. Obviously, we could be charitable and just give people experience and then let them go to somewhere else. But to be completely honest, that's not a good investment on our side.

So if you're going through an internship and you're doing well, you should be hired at the end of it. Again, looking back, we haven't had that many interns, but most of them tend to get an offer at the end of it. And that's how it should be from our perspective and the candidate's.

**— When it comes to building the workplace, is the modern work campus approach the only way in IT? Should companies try to give more room to employees to spend time and relax?**

— That's an interesting question. Especially now with the pandemic and remote work. You have to acknowledge that some people want to spend their free time with colleagues, they want to be at the office playing pool or playing video games afterwards. And we definitely have a culture where that happens. But you also have to acknowledge that not everyone is going to be like that. Some people want to clock in, stay super-focused during the day, and then you clock out and that's it. And there should be room for both.

This is about culture and attitude to me. You can't push people and demand that they spend all their free time at work — not everyone will like this. This is not only tied to personality. You go through different cycles. At one point in life, you want to spend time with your co-workers and that's your social life. But at some point in time, you might get a family, and then it changes. And if we signal that that's not okay, that you only get certain opportunities if you hang around for Tuesday beers, that can be dangerous, I think.

**— How do your colleagues deal with stress? And is crunching an issue at Paradox?**

— I wouldn't say it's an issue. And maybe this is a reflection of Sweden's working culture. So throughout the years that I've been at Paradox, I've known a few cases where we had crunch for a very limited time. Not anything crazy. Our ambition is to never plan for failure or crunch. If it happens, we need to reflect: what went wrong? Why did we fail in planning here?

But stress can be a whole different matter because you can be stressed anyway. Even if you're not crunching. And that can be more difficult to get a handle on. Especially now when you're working remotely and digitally. There are fewer boundaries, you might pick up your computer and work later in the evening just because you can. And I think for us that's more dangerous than crunch in a sense. Because crunch is something you can measure and see, but stress is more hidden.

It's important for all our managers to make sure that they are communicating, that they see their employees. We try to make sure that there are ways to catch this and to support both our managers and employees when it happens. I think it's super interesting if we're talking about the game industry. What's unique to it is you're building a product that is so visible. And while I'm not making the games myself, I feel it too. If a game doesn't perform, if it gets poor reviews, that has to be very stressful. That's something that you need to factor in as well as how that impacts you.

We're a company that in both good and bad times stays very close to our community. Sometimes you may be reading too much and put too much on yourself. And that's probably not going to happen if you are a company making nails or whatever.

**— Can you tell us how Paradox is structured? Are the teams more project-based or split into departments?**

— In general, the teams are quite small because the projects are quite small. This is not a 400-member AAA behemoth. The teams are quite slim and that is a strength. If you're not making those huge games, anyway.

As we grow, and as we learn, it's going back and forth. Teams tend to be of different sizes, but in general, we try to keep it small because then you have a lot of ownership for each individual. The bigger you tend to get, the more red tape and bureaucracy there is and the work slows down.

**— What's the best thing for you about being a part of Paradox?**

— One thing is that we're making games. Often you can try something that is still not out. And there are wonderful people working here. Geeks have a lot of cool interests that they're happy to share.

And the ambition is to always make bigger and better games. For many employees, including me, each year is not like the previous one. Nothing stands still and that gives you a lot of room for growth.

**— Any tips for potential candidates wanting to join your company?**

— To listen to everything else I've said previously. And you can just go check out the available jobs, see if you are qualified for any of them, and then apply. And if you think you might not be, you can always take the chance and do it anyway.

If there's nothing on there that you think is interesting right now or you think "I want to work in design but there's nothing there right now," you can always connect to an area that you think is interesting, it's super quick and simple. And then when a job is published within that area, you'll get a notification. So you can sort of stay passive and then decide to get active if you want to later.



# TAMARA TIRJAK

Senior Localization Manager  
at Frontier Developments

*«Our goal is to publish a  
great game that will be well  
received all over the world»*

We talked to Tamara Tirjak and found out when it's best to start working on localization, what's the point of adding an artificial language to your game, and in what way having a proprietary game engine helps with translation.

**We interviewed Tamara in December, 2020.**

## ***«When NASA announced the discovery of TRAPPIST-1, our game already had a very similar system»***

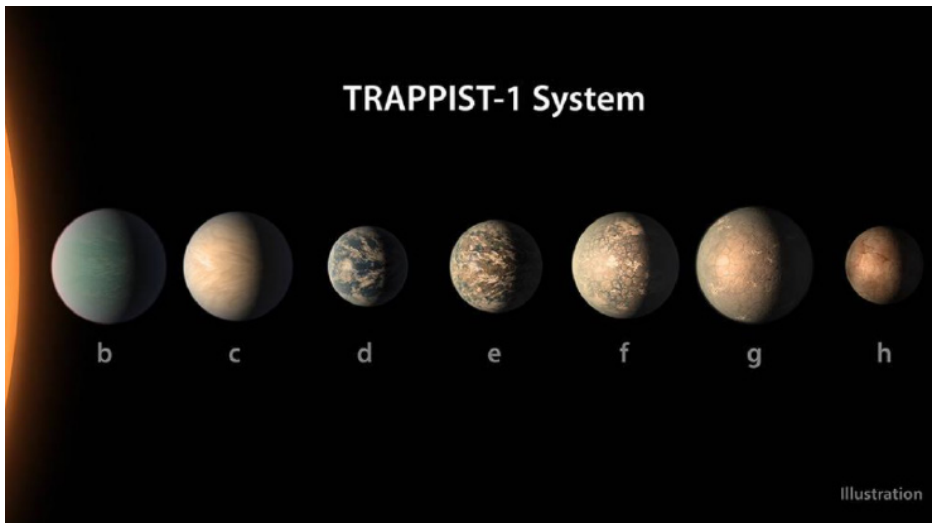
— Frontier Developments works with the proprietary game engine Cobra that's been evolving since 1988. Why, do you think, Frontier spent time and resources on developing their own engine when there were ready-made solutions?

— Back in 1988 there were no commercial engines available to support making the games Frontier wanted to make. Unreal was only introduced in 1998, and Unity did not come around until 2005. Therefore, Frontier had to create a unique engine for our unique games; an engine that can be scaled and customized as needed, in order to achieve the outstanding gameplay and visualization we endeavor to deliver to our players. By having our own internal engine team, we can develop custom tools and add new engine features as needed, and we do not need to wait for a commercial engine team to consider and develop our feature request. We can stay focused since our own games drive our engine development, and we can optimize Cobra to the specific tasks it needs to perform, be it simulating park visitors and zoo animals, or rendering star systems.

Let me share a fascinating story about the Stellar Forge, the part of Cobra which is being used to create the world where Elite Dangerous takes place, by generating roughly 400 billion star systems in the Milky Way galaxy, using available astronomical data, and filling in the gaps using predictive calculations. This simulation has turned out to be so realistic that when NASA announced the discovery of TRAPPIST-1 in 2017, our game already had a very similar system with seven planets nearly at the same location!

— A lot of game companies struggle with implementing localized files because of their game engines. How do Cobra's resource management systems work with lockits? Would you say in-game texts are conveniently systemized?

— Text resources are handled separately from the code in a convenient and flexible xml or txt format. A huge advantage of having internal build engineers and tools programmers is that they can create bespoke solutions for us to improve our work processes. For example, we have recently developed and implemented a localization asset management system that allows us to sort and filter text strings, add metatags and comments, and, of course, track their status in the workflow. This system has streamlined the communication between the people who create, review, translate, and test the text in our games. Of course, this system is also able to work with the voice files of the recorded dialogs. We coordinate hundreds of voice lines and thousands of text lines across multiple languages, so we need a robust system to know what has been finalized, what is currently in progress, and what needs rework because it has become out of date.



This is what TRAPPIST-1 looks according to NASA. You can check their assumptions in [Elite Dangerous](#).

***«It is crucial to have an international mindset throughout the development process»***



**— What kind of tasks can be currently automated with the technologies Frontier uses? How do you and your department work with the game engine?**

— The string database mentioned above is connected to our memoQ server, which is Frontier's CAT tool of choice. This means that once we select the lines for the next translation batch and press Export, they appear in memoQ within a minute or so, and we are but one click away from sending them straight to our outsource translation team or start working with them in-house.

The localization team works directly with the game build and assets; we can check out and run our own local game builds to verify the new translations in context before committing them to the repository.

**— A lot of localization evangelists nowadays talk about having an international mindset when developing a game and even thinking about internationalization and localization when creating the narrative side of the game. What's Frontier's approach?**

— I absolutely agree. If a developer aspires to market their game globally, it is crucial to have an international mindset throughout the development process; not just in the narrative, but also in the visuals, environments, UI design, everything.

The localization team at Frontier is well integrated into the production teams from quite an early stage, which means that we can provide input about the localizability and potential cultural implications, and this also gives us visibility, encouraging the production teams to proactively reach out to us, as they frequently do, if they have any concerns about the global appeal.

**— At what stage of game development would it be ideal to involve the localization department? Some companies only wake up so to say, when the game is already in beta or even after release.**

— It depends on the length of the development cycle and the size and complexity of the game, but I believe that the beta is rather late. I would normally prefer to have the translations already in the game for the beta if that is possible at all. It is a great opportunity to gather some player feedback not just about the translation itself but to gauge the reception of the game outside the English-speaking territories. Even if the actual translation work does not start before the game enters alpha, it is important to include the internal localization specialists in the loop much earlier than that, because we can help make sure that the UI design, the narrative, the environment, and the items are culturally appropriate and relevant to our global player base, and we can also prevent design decisions causing globalization problems further down the line, when they are costlier to fix. Of course, I understand that we are in quite a privileged position at Frontier, where the production and publishing teams are under the same roof, and this can be much more challenging for a development studio to loop in the localization experts working for their publisher, often in a different country!



Frontier projects.

— Have you ever had to change the gameplay features because of the feedback your localization department gave to the game designers?

— There is a precedent for renaming or changing the appearance of an item, and parts of the UI were also adjusted to accommodate our feedback. There has not been any need for changing gameplay features because localization is involved in any major design decisions that can have international or cultural implications, so we can normally prevent problematic features from being developed in the first place.

## ***«I am a firm believer in continuous feedback»***

— From your experience, how to build transparent communication between the localization vendors (if they are in the equation), the internal localization department, and other teams within the company?

— First of all, I believe in seeing each other as human beings. IM, emails, and calls are great and efficient to get the job at hand done, but a chat in the tea kitchen or having lunch together can go such a long way in making this online process work!

I was hired by Frontier in 2015 to build up their localization department and workflows from scratch, and a very important part of that process was to establish myself as “that nice girl with a big smile who is always helpful even if I need something to be translated a day before release. She is very knowledgeable about languages and culture, and she is very enthusiastic to share her passion with anyone who cares to listen.” My team has been growing since then, but we still work on cultivating this image to build trust with the rest of the internal teams. After all, this is our shared goal to create games that will enjoy global success, so the least we can do is help each other in this endeavor.

As for the vendors, I feel it is important to meet face to face, if only once for the project kick-off or during industry events. I like to treat them as “remote team members” and share with them our plans, intentions, and challenges, and I am also a firm believer in continuous feedback about their work to strengthen our partnership and align them to our goal: to publish a great game that will be well received all over the world.

**— When choosing new localization vendors, companies often rely on minuscule test tasks. How representative is an average test job in your opinion?**

— It depends on how well the test is put together, whether it is representative of the actual game, and if it tests the translation skills that will be the most relevant for high-quality delivery. A test will obviously never be able to fully imitate the production scenario where the translator would have access to extensive documentation, maybe even a game build to check for context, and they would have a chance to clarify their doubts with the client. For a test translation, the linguist might not even be told the title or genre of the game yet! But these tests are definitely useful to have a quantitative score to have a somewhat objective comparison of the candidates and to be able to justify your outsourcing decision.

Even with these limitations, I still find test translations a very useful tool in assessing how well my potential partner deals with placeholder tags, transcreation, puns, or technical and scientific text, based on my project's needs. I also invite them to add comments to each line, and I am very happy to see translators adding proof of their research, a justification of their word choice, or taking note of a doubt that they would have queried in a real-life situation. For me, a translation test goes beyond testing simply linguistic skills; I also want to get an impression of their work standards and attitude.

**— How do you measure quality? What's your stance on quantitative analysis of translation?**

— As a linguist myself, I understand that the goodness of a translated text is a highly subjective matter. But as a manager of a world-class studio, I also understand the need for data-driven decisions. If I am asked to justify our outsourcing decisions, I need to be able to present hard data to prove that our partners handed in the best test translation, and they continue to perform to our expectations.

On a day-to-day basis, we use linguistic QA to regularly provide feedback to the translators and improve the quality of our games. We have recently set up our own customized LQA model to make sure we measure and score things that matter to us, and by doing this we also wanted to develop a system that is fair to the translators and does not set up unreasonable expectations.

**— What is, in your opinion, last decade's greatest innovation in the localization industry?**

— It will have to be neural machine translation, even though I think we expected this technology to be more disruptive than it has actually turned out to be, at least up to this point in time. For now, its use in our own segment, video game localization, has been limited, at least in the sense of using it to support the work of translators. However, there are interesting use cases in our industry where NMT removes the language barrier in real-time communication within the player community or facilitates communication between the publisher and their global player base.

I also know of some very promising NMT projects, so I expect this technology to start having a bigger impact on our translation work very soon.

**— What would you consider today's biggest challenge in the localization industry?**

— The shift to continuous localization due to the “games as a service” approach. This means that developers are constantly injecting new features and content into their live games or live products, as this has become a tendency for software developers in general, not only game studios. The release cycles can vary between a few days to a few months, but the result is the same: we no longer have the luxury of the good old days of the waterfall method to wait until the previous process step is finished before starting ours — now everything has to happen at the same time, and the handoffs have become smaller and more frequent. This puts extreme pressure on every single actor in the value chain to reduce their overhead and admin time and costs to stay

competitive. Little wonder that automation, hands-off project management, and lean production have been the hottest topics in the industry lately.

## **«Value of localization is very difficult to measure»**

— A glaring issue with localization. How to measure the value of localizing the project to certain languages? Does adding more languages significantly broaden the playerbase?

— There are various ways to estimate the value added by localization, but this is very difficult to measure; for that we would need sterile, lab-like scenarios, to carefully tweak individual variables, and this is rarely possible in video game publishing.

One of the basic metrics to monitor is the return on investment, which compares, let's say, the Italian localization costs to the revenues coming from Italy. The next question to answer is whether your players in Italy actually play in Italian, and most publishers would have in-game telemetry to measure and answer that.

And finally, my favorite question: would these players still buy our game and accept to play in English if we had not localized it? This can sometimes be measured by an A/B comparison if your portfolio has two similar games, but one was translated into Italian, while the other was not. Given that their performance was similar in every other market, you can compare your Italian sales and hope to see that the one that was localized sold x times as many copies as the one that was not.

— Who's in charge of choosing new markets and languages at Frontier Developments? What kind of metrics are you using to assess the attractiveness of certain markets?

— This is a shared decision across multiple disciplines. We identify target markets by looking at things like: Is this genre

popular in this country? How big is the market there for this platform? Do we see any growth opportunities? Do our target players expect the game to be localized, or are they happy to play in English? Are there any technical challenges or cultural limitations that would increase the effort required (e.g. we would have to implement support for a right-to-left language or need substantial modifications to get it approved for publishing), and is it still worth it?



## ***«Synthesized voices will not replace real voice talent»***

**— What CAT tools does your department use? What would be your personal choice? How effective are in your opinion cloud-based CAT tools?**

— Our tool of choice is memoQ, which is a perfect fit for the complexity of our operations. I love the automation features and its versatility in handling practically any file format I throw at it, even if preparing the filter for it requires some basic knowledge of regular expressions, for example.

In general, I am very fond of tools that facilitate online collaboration; I consider them indispensable in today's agile development environment. The demand for this synchronicity

is even more pressing in the world of mobile games, where the development cycles tend to be even shorter than ours.

But as with every online tool, security must come first! We are working in a highly confidential environment, where a data leak can be devastating. I feel that many IT professionals still prefer to host online tools on premises rather than putting them out into the cloud, even if this solution presents the question of how to open the ports for our outsource partners to access our online server securely.

**— How does Frontier use text-to-speech in development? What kind of companies could benefit from implementing a similar system?**

— At the moment, we use it as a placeholder for voice-over lines to test and iterate on the dialogs before the final lines are recorded and delivered by the recording studios, and previously we used it to deliver GalNet Audio, an in-game news service of Elite Dangerous.

Most of the easily available synthesized voices sound quite robotic, which perfectly fits our use cases. However, there are companies out there that have achieved very impressive results to add emotions and richer intonation. I can totally see these becoming a viable option for things like background chatter or crowd walla in the near future, but they will not replace real voice talent to deliver the superb performance that we have become used to in the narrative of AAA titles.

**— Other than adding a certain level of depth to the lore, what other problems GalNet Audio solves?**

— The design intent behind GalNet Audio and the in-game knowledge base, the “Codex,” was that we wanted to deliver a richer narrative and a more immersive experience of the Elite universe to the players but without requiring them to read all that text. This enabled players to fly around space and listen to the news in the meantime, without needing to take time off from playing.



The two major inhibiting factors to using recording studios were not just the cost but also the short lead times. Since these articles were often written as a reaction to in-world events, they sometimes had to go live within 24 hours. This already made translation tight, let alone having to arrange a recording studio. TTS offered an ideal solution to both of these challenges, and the synthesized voice fits the lore of a space game perfectly. The localization team now takes care of the TTS conversion internally for all our supported languages (UK English, German, French, EU Spanish, Russian, Brazilian Portuguese), making sure that it sounds good, and the terms specific to the Elite Dangerous universe, such as the names of star systems, stations, personalities, and brands, are pronounced correctly in every language.

## ***«I am very intrigued by the connection between the culture and the language»***

— Frontier Developments created a fictional language for Planet Coaster and Planet Zoo called Planco. Planco is based on English but has its own unique vocabulary. Your colleague James Stant talks about Planco in great detail in the 2017 article published on Gamasutra. How was the idea of adding a fictional language first introduced?

— When our audio team was investigating the best approach for creating the way the crowd should sound in Planet Coaster, they looked at various options. Simple “Ooooh,” “Aaah,” and “Grrrrr” sounds did not give the park visitors enough depth, when they are at the heart of the simulation, and the players should genuinely care about them and try to make them happy. Using English, and localizing it to all our supported languages, was also dismissed because we wanted the game to be location agnostic; Planet Coaster is meant to be a separate universe in its own right. Also, hearing the same line repeatedly in a language you understand leads to “audio fatigue” much quicker than if you do not understand it.

So James came up with the idea to create our own language, which fits the atmosphere of the game and gives personality, depth, and authenticity to our crowd.

**— You’ve helped to compile the Planco Dictionary, have you worked with constructed languages before Frontier Developments?**

— This was definitely a first for me, and I really enjoyed the challenge. We currently use a tool called Polyglot to manage our ever-growing glossary. Polyglot was developed by Draque Thompson specifically to assist people who want to start building their own constructed language. The same glossary is also plugged into memoQ, so if we need anything translated, memoQ can work as a simple but smart translation engine from English into Planco, and deliver the new dialog lines in Planco along with the pronunciation, in a matter of seconds.

**— What are your impressions from working on constructed languages? Would you be interested in creating another artificial language for a different project?**

— What language geek could possibly say “no” to this question? I am very intrigued by the connection between the culture and the language, and how the way of thinking manifests in the way a language is structured, the words they use, and the general approach to communication. At some point in my life, I would love to be presented with a race or a fictitious nation, with a detailed explanation of their background, history, and traditions, and then asked to figure out the language these people would speak.

**— How did you take into account the release on foreign markets? How did you make sure that a dictionary of 7000 words is not offensive in any language your games are released in?**

— We are lucky that Frontier’s staff is very diverse, and we have most major languages represented internally. Once the crowd voice-over has all been recorded, we asked our colleagues to

listen to all the lines to spot things that might be inappropriate in their language, and we did end up removing a handful of lines, but all in all, they were pretty innocent.

— **What is your favorite word?**

— Huh, that's a tough one! I love "allyooma" (roller coaster), "faieyva" (forever), and "hasswuuf" (hotdog). And then there is that whole song about the "wippy tentifu" (happy octopus) from the Whirly Rig ride.

**«There are cultures that we are more cautious about»**

— **From your experience, what should be done to prepare your project for multicultural release?**

— For a game that is culturally appropriate and relevant, you need people in the development teams who are sensitized to things like cultural and gender issues. The more diverse the team is, the more this attitude will develop naturally. They need to be able to voice concerns and raise questions if they have doubts about any element of the game. Then you also need experts, either somebody within the studio or an external expert who is trained and experienced enough to address these concerns and answer these questions.

— **Is there any language you especially concentrated on while localizing your projects? Why?**

— We tend to treat each language equally, but there are definitely cultures that we are more cautious about. When reviewing our in-game content, we want to make sure we handle East Asia sensitively, as those territories are a huge market for games, and you definitely do not want to offend your future customers! We are also particularly mindful of South Asian and Arabic territories, African tribal culture, and the indigenous people of the Americas. They might not be our main target market, but

a respectful representation of global cultures and preventing cultural (mis)appropriation are important to us.

**— Have you ever had to change something in translations because of the feedback given by the community?**

— At Frontier, we take pride in listening to our community and being approachable to our players. This is especially true for Elite Dangerous, where the original Spanish and Portuguese translation of the game was done as a community initiative, and although the updates are no longer handled by them, they still reach out to us if they spot an error in the translation. We do keep our feelers out to pick up issues raised by our community. Not all of them get implemented in the end, but they all get discussed and considered.

**— Can you remember a case when the missteps in culturalization led to some controversy?**

— My favorite incident happened after we released Planet Coaster back in 2016. There are various shops that the players can place in their theme park, one of them being Monsieur Frites, a stall selling French fries with a handful of different condiments. The day after the release, we received a bug logged by a French player saying something along the lines of: “I understand that you are a British developer, and you would normally put vinegar on your fries (yuck!), but if you create a French-themed shop in your game, then it should be mayo.” We now offer curry sauce, ketchup, mayonnaise, vinegar, and others to accommodate the varied taste of our theme park guests and players!

**— How many people are in your department? What’s the structure of your department?**

— As the Senior Localization Manager, I am in charge of overseeing all aspects of localization. My team has three (soon four) localization coordinators who are in charge of the day-to-day tasks of managing handoffs and handbacks to and from our external partners, finding and fixing localization bugs, and

meeting the deadlines of our release schedules. We also have two localization testers performing language checks internally and coordinating our outsourced test runs.



Vinegar or mayo? This stall now offers various condiments to suit the global tastes.

***«I have one eye on localization, and one on the game industry»***

**— What does your typical workday look like?**

— The typical tasks are carried out by the rest of the team, whatever escalated to me tends to be atypical and non-trivial. As we are still a small team, I wear many hats as the senior localization specialist. I work with the producers to agree on high-level timelines and budgets; take care of the administrative tasks related to tracking our tasks, costs, and invoices; attend tons of meetings; work with the engineers or IT on developing or purchasing new tools to improve our work practices; write

memoQ file filters, batch files and anything else required for process automation; select vendors; hire new team members; motivate my current team, and help them grow professionally. But I am not complaining, it is precisely this diversity that makes me love my field. When you are a localization manager, you are a bit of a linguist, a bit of an engineer, a bit of a business strategist, and a bit of a team lead.

**— How do you stay updated on the things happening in the world of localization? What magazines or websites do you read?**

— I tend to have one eye on localization, and one on the game industry, as I try to stay up-to-date with both of them.

For localization, I am subscribed to the Multilingual Magazine and enjoy listening to the Globally Speaking podcast while cycling to work. I also love Miguel Sepulveda's "yolocalizo" blog, he has a lot of interesting insight to share about the various aspects of our profession.

I also follow Slator, Nimdzi Insights, and Common Sense Advisory for the latest news and research results in the industry. When it comes to games, I tend to have a look at Gamesindustry.biz every day, and I follow Gamasutra.

Apart from these two areas, I am nowadays interested in global marketing and have recently discovered a podcast called "The Worldly Marketer," which I enjoy very much, and I read a lot of books on culture, mainly on cultural dimensions and cultural intelligence. I should try to find a good podcast for that too. Spring is coming, time to spend more time on my bicycle!

**— What conferences are worth attending, when the pandemic is over?**

— Just like with my media consumption, I try to share my time between events focusing on localization and game development. I have been a regular attendee of memoQfest since 2010 or so, I simply love the atmosphere of the event, and there are very

knowledgeable people there to share ideas with. And of course, it is the perfect medium to stay up-to-date with the latest memoQ features and to have a say in the direction the tool takes because the developers are very open to feedback from their user base.

In the last 3 years, I also attended the Game Quality Forum Global, where I led the interactive workshop on the localization track. This event features video game industry professionals from the world of QA, Localization, Player Support, and Community Management, and I find this event a great opportunity to learn from my peers in the field.

I also attended DevCom 2018 and Game Connection 2019 as a speaker, and I head down to sunny Brighton almost every year for Develop.



# HENDRICK LESSER

President of the European Games  
Developer Federation

*«If you have the muscles,  
go into offensive mode»*

We talked to Hendrik Lesser, President of the EGDF, and discussed what problems European developers are facing, how the Federation can help them right now, and how the industry will change as soon as the pandemic is over.

**We interviewed Hendrik in December, 2020.**



## **«Games will rule the world, and I want to be part of it»**

**— Hendrik, your entire life is closely tied to the game industry. When did you first get into gaming?**

— When I was four years old. At least that's what I remember. That was 39 years ago. I guess I loved it from the first second. I sucked up everything I could lay my hands on. I organized copying rings, traveled to new neighborhoods in Munich to meet people to exchange and play games with, etc. Games have been a major part of my life ever since.

**— Back then, did you think that your work would be connected to games?**

— Sure. To a certain degree, it always has been. If you organize copying rings, make lists for everybody of what they would want for Christmas, do events for people to check out new games, etc., that is already working, or even a calling. My parents keep telling me that I told them during primary school that games will rule the world, and I want to be part of it.

**— What genres were your favorites?**

— I always loved strategy games in particular and RPGs. But as a teenager, I made it a habit to also play genres I didn't love to know what's going on. A colleague once gave me a t-shirt with a quote of mine: "I run the company the way I play Civilization. I win the endgame" (in multiplayer, of course). My message being that games shaped my thinking overall, so I kind of deeply love gaming in all its shapes and forms.

**— When did you realize that you don't just want to play games, but actually work on them? How did you make that happen? What was your first job in the industry?**

— As mentioned, organizing access to games. This was never for

money, but rather to be able to get more nerd stuff, as in better hardware, more games, comics, anime (that I then rented out), etc. My first “real” job was working in a game store for nearly three years when I was at school. I loved it! I also worked as an online games journalist, writing reviews, during my time at university. Then my first proper job was as an intern, becoming a product manager at Take 2 Interactive in Munich basically weeks before we released GTA 3! And crazily enough, I worked on it for language/violence QA, and this was basically my first game credit. Let’s say I got lucky.

## **«GTA 3 was my first game credit»**

— From 2005 to 2011, you were a lecturer at different organizations like Mediadesign Hochschule, Games Academy, and Quantm. What were your responsibilities, and what were the lectures about?

— I actually still am. I never quit teaching. I still hold a chair for production at S4G and teach here and there at other educational institutions, including public universities. My responsibilities are from giving lectures to shaping the whole discipline. I was part of a small team that introduced the first German production track many years ago. My main topics are leadership, strategy, production, business development, terms & legal, and everything like that.

— How was that experience helpful to you?

— As a teacher, you learn a lot yourself. This is why I still do it and expanded it into startup coaching (for non-gaming), which I’ve been doing for 7–8 years pro bono. I also never stopped learning myself. Reading books, attending classes, attending a peer review club, etc., keep me alive and learning.

## **«There were cool developers that didn’t see this as a business»**

— Since 2005 you have been the CEO (and the founder) of Remote Control Productions, a company that defines itself as a production house. What kind of problems are you solving?

— A lot of development studios want to focus on development, so we take care of the rest — administrative tasks, financing, HR, etc. Then we do most of the business development, guiding strategy, and the understanding of the quest also being a business, as well as creating an ecosystem around the studios like Gamify Now! (our gamification agency), Attract Mode (our marketing agency), and so on. Basically, we help developers stay alive and climb the ladder of cool projects without dying in the process.

— When did you realize that the industry could find a company like Remote Control Productions useful?

— That was as early as during my Take 2 days. Especially in Germany, there were some cool developers, but many didn't see this as a business. It was obvious there was a lack of that perspective and also ambition.

— If I'm a European developer, in what ways can RCP help me?

— We help you thrive, survive, and synergize. We become a true partner to your company, allowing you to stay as independent as possible, while we help you fulfill your dreams as a game creator. We ideally help you along the path of sustainability, matching your passion with business properly, and becoming the best version of yourself. By the way, this is not only an offer for European developers.

— How did you get into the EGDF? Was that your goal, or did it just happen?

— I was always interested in politics (I even studied it a bit once, along with philosophy), so being engaged in the politics of our industry came naturally to me. At some point, one of my friends and mentors, Malte Behrmann, who was the executive secretary of

the EGDF at that time, called me and said, “It’s time.” After a while on the board, I became president, which happened three to four years ago. Overall now, I’ve been on the board for nearly eight years.

## ***«Finding an industry-friendly common ground is not always easy»***

**— What kinds of tasks are handled by EGDF, and how did they change during this global crisis?**

— Our main focus is lobbying for our causes as an industry with a strong developer/entrepreneur perspective in Brussels for proper regulation. Very often it’s about preventing stuff from happening. Very abstract and invisible — it’s great to talk about it. At the moment, we need to bring people together, do some background research on what’s happening, make that visible, and finally guide the members of our association in all kinds of topics, especially in a crisis like this.

**— What are the most common issues European developers have to deal with? How do you help them?**

— Access to funding is always an issue. Therefore, we lobbied for games as culture and then lobbied to get subsidies. It only took 5–10–15 years, depending on the trickle-down from the supranational level to the countries. We achieved being included in MEDIA and other programs. We also help with the fundamental rules on conducting business, making sure these are suitable for SMEs, which most game companies are, and so on.

**— Can you tell us about the hardest case you’ve encountered while working for the EGDF?**

— Attacks on funding from other industry players and interests. Obviously, the debate about F2P/loot boxes and their inner workings. This is a specifically hard case since some parts of our industry are not necessarily knowledgeable about this in detail, but have strong opinions about it nonetheless. So

finding an industry-friendly common ground is not always easy.

— **Are there any problems or issues that the Federation still struggles to solve? What “pain” is the Federation feeling?**

— The F2P debate already mentioned, all kinds of regulatory issues like geo-blocking, the problems with using images of buildings in a game for free or having to pay (and thus all kinds of copyright topics), and how to increase awareness of our work and the organization itself. The EGDF has been instrumental for the industry in Europe, and 99% of developers have never heard of it or don't know what it does.

— **What makes European gamedev different from the industry in the US, Asia, or ex-Soviet countries?**

— Ex-Soviet? We count Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus as Europe, to be honest. Asia is obviously very mobile, and gamedev is kind of “new” in China, with only 10–15 years of history but crazy growth. The US has always been strong in all matters, including the spending power of the players. Europe is very diverse and is also strong and mature with regard to the area of indie games, for example. Europe understands games really as culture and art. This is the reason why we have great developers who make awesome games that don't need to be AAA.

***«If we do not meet people for months to do biz dev, we will have a problem in the future»***

— **You are organizing an online conference on May 13 and 14 that is going to help European devs keep working, find investors, and move the industry forward. When did you realize that this event is necessary? Maybe there was a particular case that led to this decision?**

— I came up with it roughly four weeks ago. I thought about the challenges for us as the RCP family, and the obvious one was not

today but the day after tomorrow. If we do not meet people for months to do biz dev, we will have a problem in the future. Then I realized that this affects everyone, so I brought together several players like the EGDF, RCP, and Reboot to make this an event for way more developers than just us in the RCP family.

— **What do I need to do as a developer, publisher, or investor to get the most out of this conference?**

— Come up with a great profile in the MeetToMatch system. The reason for a publisher or investor to talk to you should be clear from your profile. Prepare well for the calls and have great material to show. Sharing and bragging about it on social media beforehand also help you stand out when they see your invite in the matchmaking system.

— **Do you think the game industry and IT in general will go back to real-life events after all of this?**

— To a certain degree, yes. But we will never go back fully.

— **What do you think about doing events in VR?**

— I don't think we are really there yet, but let's see about the first event, doing this at scale, and how it works. We will also check out the event that our friends at Xsolla are doing, which is in a metaverse.

***«Enjoy the adventure as much as possible while still taking it seriously»***

— **What new issues are game companies facing during this crisis? What has hit or will hit the industry the hardest?**

— Meeting in person to make deals, adding new people to the team and interviewing them properly, leadership adjustments for remote leadership, and some other topics like security for your team. At the moment revenues are stable or even increasing,

but if this goes on for many, many months, this could change if the spending power of some regions really shifts for the worse.

**— What can help us deal with the issues that have arisen during this crisis?**

— Mindfulness, strategic thinking, sticking together, and exchanging best practices with fellow devs. Bolster your cash position if you can and stay frosty. If you have the muscles, go into offensive mode and enjoy the adventure as much as possible while still taking it seriously.

**— How much do you think the European game industry will change after the pandemic?**

— Let's see. Ideally, we will have a better transition into the new normal than the way we went into the crisis. We will see how spending from players, publishers, and investors will develop. I wish for our landscape to be even more diverse, strong at its core, and able to make awesome games that are played and loved by people from all around the world.

**— What lessons can the industry learn from the current situation?**

— Stay sharp, plan for the future, don't expose yourself to risk too much, and walk together. Also, that all your plans from Q4 last year are probably not applicable anymore — so embrace change now and always.

**— How badly, in your opinion, will the workflow in game companies change over time? Maybe there will be some new job positions or processes that will have appeared because of the new work environment?**

— So far, so good. We lost some productivity overall, but some disciplines and people could even increase productivity. So, as always, we evolve fast, and I bet there will be new positions in the future.



# JAVIER BARNES

Senior Product Manager at Tilting Point

*«The acceptance of  
smartphone games  
is a matter of time»*

Creating a really good game that millions will love is only half the battle. The second half is to competently monetize the project and make it profitable. We talked with Javier about the future of mobile games, working methods of monetization, and tricks that will help keep players in the project for years.

**We interviewed Javier in June, 2021.**



## ***«The most important thing in our field is the ability to learn as you go»***

**— You've been working in mobile game development since 2010. How did you get into this sphere?**

— It was a lucky break. Shortly before graduating college, I did a master's in AI design. I really wanted to develop AI that played poker and I wanted to get rich that way. At the same time, I saw a position at Gameloft. They were looking for a junior designer. So I went there. I had done some modding before, like really amateur stuff. During the interview, they were asking if I knew more high-end stuff, and I said "Yeah, yeah, sure," and then I started studying really, really fast.

I have a degree in economics, and when I got the job, the whole free-to-play model was just starting. Thanks to my knowledge, I grasped a lot of things on the fly, many concepts were clear to me. That's how I became specialized in this area.

**— So education directly helps you in your work?**

— Yes. Although, to be honest, the range of skills of a game designer changes every three to four years. The most important thing in our field is the ability to learn as you go. I remember that ten years ago, a mobile game designer did not need to understand marketing. Now I would advise everyone to study not only game design itself but also monetization, game economics, user acquisition.

Perhaps in three years, it will be impossible to imagine a game designer who does not understand blockchain or any other cool recent technology. Advice to every designer out there: learn to acquire new skills as you go.

**— You have worked at large European mobile gaming companies, like Gameloft, Socialpoint, and now Tilting Point.**

## How different is the approach to developing and publishing in those companies?

— There's a huge difference between Socialpoint and Gameloft. Both companies are from Europe, but Gameloft is more international. I have worked on projects in Barcelona, Chengdu, and even Montreal. It is a huge organization with five thousand employees where it is impossible to know everyone by name. That is why many processes are slower there. If you need to change the workflow, create a new department, or try out an idea, there is a proper procedure for that. However, on the bright side, there is an opportunity to accumulate experience and knowledge from many areas and countries.

It's different at Socialpoint. They have kept the approach from the days when they were a start-up. When I worked there, the company had only 400-500 people, so I knew most of the employees personally. Thanks to this, the team is more agile and there is less red tape. Any idea can be quickly tested, you just need a couple of colleagues to try something out.

## — And what about Tilting Point? As far as I know, you are collaborating with developers all over the world. At what project stage is it best to start collaborating with a developer team?

— I have been in the company for only a few months, so my opinion is only a point of view of someone from the outside. However, over the past six months, I have interacted a lot with indie developers, and my advice is not to wait for the release, contact Tilting Point as soon as possible. The sooner we start working together, the better. At the same time, it does not matter at what stage of development you are now. Even a very promising project may struggle on release if your market knowledge is insufficient.

Tilting Point will check your project and help you understand if there's room for growth. Our team will assess your business prospects, and if the project is promising, we can help to promote it and invest in your team. You will get useful tips and advice on

what needs to be done to make the game a success. That is why I suggest not delaying and reaching out sooner. Even if your metrics and profit margins are good as is, maybe you'll need to increase the number of downloads, and we can help.

Tilting Point has extensive experience in bringing games to market. There have been cases of a tenfold increase in profits, so come at any time, even if you are in the late stages of development. Many companies find it difficult to understand whether the metrics will grow and the investments will pay off. If you are on a tight budget or have no money at all, contact Tilting Point. We have a decent capital for investment, and we are ready to use it if your project is promising.



Projects that Tilting Point has worked on. Source: Tilting Point.

— **What do you think the game should be for Tilting Point to want to publish it?**

— You can't tell right away. The company has a portfolio strategy, but we still work with a huge number of projects. Tilting Point has published 4X strategies, narrative-driven projects, and casual games like SpongeBob. The company's portfolio is very diverse, so the game doesn't have to fit into any strict genre. It is much more important that a good team is working on the project. If

the game is made by professionals, then your product clearly deserves attention. I think this is the main criterion for Tilting Point.

**— Today mobile is one of the fastest-growing segments of the game industry. At the same time, many gamers treat mobile games with disdain and do not take them seriously. Do you think mobile games will ever be on par with larger PC or console titles?**

— All this reminds me of a scenario when TV started to become more of a respected medium. I'm talking about the time before HBO, Netflix, and other big quality production channels. Back then the actors from television had little chance of growing to the level of cinema, so film actors would never ruin their reputation by doing something on TV. Today, the boundaries between these areas have blurred.

The mobile industry is now in a transition phase and, in my opinion, the acceptance of games for smartphones is just a matter of time. Many developers are moving from AAA projects to smartphones. For example, Valve's Dota Underlords can now be played on both PC and smartphone. It has its own range of challenges, but the developers managed to do it.

Many large companies have realized that it is possible to make money on mobile games. Thanks to their efforts, the negative attitude towards projects for smartphones is decreasing, and more and more cross-platform games are emerging. Much less often they move from mobile development to creating projects for PCs and consoles, scaling from a smartphone to a computer is much more difficult. However, Tilting Point has a couple of examples. For example, Warhammer: Chaos & Conquest is a mobile-first game, although it can be purchased on Steam.

**— Do you think there will be a market for mobile games ported to PC or console unchanged?**

— It all depends on the game. Mobile projects have many features that make them difficult to port to other platforms. They

are more focused on tactile interaction, so they are difficult to adapt for a computer. Even porting console games to a mobile device is not an easy task. Take mobile Fortnite for example, where you constantly feel like you're missing a mouse or a controller. Likewise, I cannot imagine how to play Clash Royale on a computer with a mouse, you will have to completely change the game, your degree of precision is different, and you can make a lot more actions per minute with a mouse.

Obviously, you'll need to change a lot of gameplay aspects when porting a mobile game to PC. On the phone, the game sessions should be shorter, and it is very difficult to lengthen them for the computer. The matches will have to stretch out for an hour or an hour and a half, which is quite normal for a computer game and too long for mobile projects. Porting mobile games has a chain of obstacles and challenges. Although I suppose it is relatively easy to port turn-based games to other platforms.

It seems to me that computers and consoles are, in a sense, the past. I don't think the future is going to be PC and console. Many larger projects are adopting mobile game characteristics. Maybe I'm wrong, but it seems to me that we are seeing one of the last generations of consoles. In 5 or 10 years, they will transform into something new and will cease to exist the way we now know. Stadia is a thing now, and while it is not working properly, I am confident that this technology is the future. Hardly anyone would want to spend an outrageous amount of money on building a cool gaming PC or to get a PlayStation 5 when they can have the same power of hardware on a smaller thing or just on a cloudbased service. Perhaps soon it will be enough for us to have a TV to play games.

**— You've mentioned shorter play sessions on mobile. What helps to keep the player in a mobile game, given that we only have 5-10 minutes to immerse ourselves in the story and grab their attention?**

— When it comes to mobile projects and free-to-play games in particular, you have much less time to get a new player

interested. There are only a couple of minutes in which you have to do everything to make the user fall in love with the game. A very small percentage of people who have downloaded the game and played once will give it a second chance. They log in and, in case they don't like it, delete the application forever, so the first minutes of the game are the most important thing.

It is important that the game is marketable. Often, a game is advertised in a way that does not match its spirit. For example, a passive project is presented as an action game, and a role-playing game as a sports one. In this case, convincing the player to stay after the first session is even more difficult. Now you need to not only interest the person but also take into account that they had different expectations. You don't need to make the challenge harder than it is by bringing players who are not your target audience. Even if it's lowering the CPI, you should be very, very careful and remember that at the end of the day, it must be profitable.

Also, don't forget about emotional attachment, and I'm not talking about the narrative component. Do not force the players to read the texts from the very beginning. Many developers think, "So, we came up with this kick-ass story. As soon as the player downloads the game, we will spend a couple of minutes introducing them to the plot," but I do not recommend doing that. You can make them care about the story only if they were interested in it even before downloading the game, like if it is a project based on Game of Thrones.

In other cases, it is better to allow the player to make meaningful decisions early on, to choose the culture or civilization to play with. When the player clicks on Vikings or Samurai and enters a name, an emotional attachment is formed. Remember Pokémon, where the first thing you had to do was choose your Pokémon? Developers make such decisions for a reason, it helps to keep the players invested.

I also advise you to explain the mechanics of the game from the very beginning. It is important to remember that the players

should have fun at any time. Make sure that even during the tutorial players are invested. Learning things should not make people want to quit everything. It is good if the players can explore the game themselves and gradually digest the information.

Some might say, “But what about 4X games? Everything is different there!” Yet, games of such genres are usually played by people who are used to receiving detailed instructions. And here it is important to understand your audience.



This is what a simplified UI looks like in mobile Fortnite. The developers have enlarged the elements on the screen for a more comfortable experience. Source: Epic Games.

### — How to continue to hold attention, taking into account short play sessions?

— We must take into account that different games require different levels of attention. In projects like 4X strategy games, animal breeding games, or economic simulations, your focus will be lower because you are aiming for a long-term goal. And in Clash Royale a match lasts two minutes, and you will be completely focused on it.

My advice is to automate as many mechanical and repetitive actions as possible. For example, the player doesn't have to tap on every building to get gold, make one button that will collect all money. During the game session, the player should only perform meaningful actions.

— **Mobile games have a shorter development cycle than projects on PC and console. It's hard to imagine a mobile game with a development cycle of 8 years. What mechanics are important to implement in mobile games within that shorter development cycle?**

— I can't agree that the mobile game development cycle is shorter. In a sense, it is much longer than for games on other devices. Of course, in mobile we don't usually have projects that are 8 years in development, but there are projects that have been worked on for two years, and then they have lived for more than five years. If you think about it, this is a huge development cycle. In addition, unlike for top-tier AAA projects, in mobile games, the concept of world launch does not matter as much. Games as a service live for a very long time because they are never completely finished: something new has to be added all the time, and the game evolves over time.

For me, the primary focus should be on retention. If you have a great project and people spend a lot of time on it, but it is not monetized, it's okay, you can do it later. It is much worse if your game is monetized and brings a lot of income, but the players do not stay in it for a long time. Over time, potential players will run out, and the business will quickly decline.

— **And how do you keep the players for a long time?**

— It is important to understand how much time a person spends in the game, how much the game hooked them, whether they will continue to play in the future — all these translate into retention. People are willing to pay for what they like, you just need to present them with the right offer. In free-to-play monetization, it is very difficult to get people to pay for what they don't care about.

You should not introduce any features into the game if they do not directly increase the enjoyment from the game. For example, you can't improve player engagement by simply adding a system of daily goals to the project. It shouldn't be like, "Come into the



game every day and get a reward.” Each objective should increase the engagement. You need to give players an opportunity to discover new aspects of the game that they would not have learned about otherwise. Daily goals are there to ensure that players become familiar with all the features and systems that make the game fun.

In my experience, daily objectives and similar things usually do not increase the player’s loyalty in the early stages of the game — you can add them later. In the beginning, you probably want to focus on stuff that really changes the identity of the game and therefore is able to affect the engagement of people.

**— You have rightly noted that the development cycle for a mobile game can be very long. What signs indicate that the project has outlived its time? Can a game as a service ever become outdated if it can be completely redone?**

— I worked with both new games and projects that have been on the market for more than five years, for example, with Monster Legends. I have never seen cases when the game has completely outlived its time — it never happens. However, there are genres that are not easy to revive. Like racing games where graphics are very important, and it is almost impossible to come back if they are outdated.

Games can be divided into two groups: young and mature. New games have a fresh audience that does not know the game yet, which means a high level of organic downloads and CPI. In old projects, these metrics only decrease — the majority of potential players have already played the game at least once. These games have depleted the market’s resources and are now surviving on paid downloads because the readily available audience has run out. Now they need to dig deeper to get to the oil.

In both cases, the strategy for further work would be different. Of course, you want to invest resources in new games and increase their growth, but old projects also require attention because the quality of the players is decreasing. By that I do not mean that

these are bad people, but they no longer have a genuine interest in the product. Then you have to invest more in marketing in order to interest those who are only half-interested in the project. I advise in such cases to stick to a strategy that aims to bring back old players who are already familiar with the game.

Think of cool new features to make players say, “Yeah, it’s different now, and I want to play again. This update changed everything completely.” The World of Warcraft expansions are a great example. Most of those who are interested in this project have already played it. Of course, new users are coming, but most WoW players are people who have known the project for a long time.

With expansions, Blizzard manages to reawaken players who come back for new experiences, even if they last played a few years ago. The developers beat the record for the number of daily active users when the Shadowlands expansion was released. I think part of the reason was not because they accessed a lot of new people, but rather because they were able to reengage a lot of players that have completely forgotten about World of Warcraft.

**— One of the most difficult aspects of developing a mobile project is creating an unobtrusive and balanced monetization system. Can you identify the basic principles of good monetization?**

— I think the core idea about monetization is that people pay because they love the game. If the product has no value for the player, then they will never buy it. Of course, depending on the genre and the audience, engagement can take different shapes, but for me the key principle is that the players should be delighted with the game.

Second, people need to care, and their care has to be taxed in some way. If you do not want players to turn their backs on you and are dramatically reducing prices, then do not be surprised that there will be no profit from monetization. The Fortnite model is not applicable to every game as it is played all over

the world, so the number of active users and the profit is huge. Developers can generate huge amounts of money with a very lenient approach to monetization, but this model is difficult to replicate in the mobile games market. Consider, for example, Riot Games, which lost money when they tried to do the same: they failed when releasing Legends of Runeterra, failed when monetizing TFT, and failed to monetize Wild Rift at all.

On the other hand, monetization cannot be too hard. If it's so strict that it turns players away from your game or seriously affects engagement, you will get hurt. Also, you will quickly alienate players if your monetization is too much in the face, the game will simply push players away because people will not have time to start caring. You need to understand your genre because some of them allow you to use more aggressive monetization, and this will be accepted. With 4X you will get away with a lot of stuff that is simply unacceptable in mid-core games for teenagers. Look for a middle ground: don't hold back too much, but don't push too hard. When it comes to balancing, you need to listen to the players and test everything. Make sure you balance the income and outcome of resources.

When it comes to pricing, I suggest keeping an eye on the prices of your competitors. When you are making a racing game, the prices of cars should be comparable to cars in other projects. At the same time, you can play it smart if the game design allows you to use cars in a different way. I can think of Racing Rivals, where the cost of a supercar is much lower than in Asphalt 9, Real Racing 3, or any other game. Part of the reason is that in Racing Rivals you risk with the car itself, you can lose it to other players. Its value is not that permanent, so the price is lower. Another example is CSR 2, where the cost of car upgrades is so great that they can even give you a supercar for free. Now you have a Ferrari, but you will spend so much time and money on upgrades that it is hardly a gift at all.

— We found a mini-conference debunking myths about monetization. It was mentioned there that one of the most popular myths is that players do not tolerate a combination of

## **in-game purchases and ads. If this is really a myth, then how to create a competent combined monetization model?**

— If you use modern approaches to monetization and advertising, then the players will not perceive them negatively. Most of my career has been in games that combine advertising monetization with IAP monetization. These are projects in which most of the money comes from in-game purchases, and advertising is 20-30% extra on top of that. In these situations, at least in my experience, players are positive about advertising because it allows them to get content that is really valuable.

In Monster Legends, for example, all of our LiveOps was driven by advertising. We had what was called Monsterwood (like Hollywood), and players could watch ads to get rewards. During happy hours, all gifts at Monsterwood were doubled. Players logged in at that particular time to watch the ad, and I've never heard people complain about it. They actually enjoy it. I think you can get more engagement by providing players with interesting ways to interact with ads. I have always considered this to be a positive thing.

Advertising does not work when it interferes with the game and does not provide any benefits. In this case, the players think, "You're kind of blocking me from experiencing the game." This is not a very smart way to use ads. It is best to use them in such a way that the players feel good when they watch ads. In many clickers, you watch ads in order to double the rewards or add a timer that will increase your rewards while active. Thanks to such things, people are satisfied with the ad viewing. I think this is the proper, smart way to do advertising.

I've noticed that in-app purchases are perceived negatively when they hard-block certain things. For example, you create content that can only be accessed by spending real money or a lot of time. I believe that in such situations, advertising is the solution to the problem. You can use incentive rewards for viewing ads so that non-paying players can also access premium content. So yeah, I certify, the thesis that you voiced is really a myth. I have not seen negative feedback on the combination of incentivized

ads and in-app purchases. I have seen it perceived negatively when either blocking the experience or when ads give no valuable rewards to players.

## ***«Advertising does not work when it interferes with the game»***



This is what Monsterwood looks like in Monster Legends: you can watch ads, complete tasks, and take part in surveys for rewards. Source: Reddit.

— Some people believe that the bulk of monetization mechanics is predatory. Can you tell us, do any of those really deserve this designation?

— Such mechanics definitely exist in mobile games, and their criticism seems to be fair. Much of the word “predatory” comes from the fact that in the past, mobile games were indeed more aggressive than they are now — there is a tendency towards

softening. However, monetization in mobile projects is still more aggressive than in games for PC and consoles.

The mechanic with the greatest ability to become predatory is loot boxes. But I would say that boosters in Magic: The Gathering are the same loot boxes, but no one comes up to me and says, “Yo man, MTG cards, you know, they’re so expensive.” This is largely due to the fact that the value of the product received is equal to the money spent, but this is not always the case in other projects. Sometimes you can invest a lot of money, open a loot box, and get garbage or an item from a completely different category than you actually wanted. It is important that the value of the content is equal to the value of the loot box. Otherwise, this mechanic may get into the predatory area.



Dusting screen in Hearthstone. Source: BlizzPlanet Hearthstone.

According to many regulations, it is no longer possible to hide the probability of items dropping from the players, but the problem is that the probabilities themselves can be used in different ways. When something drops with a 10% probability, there are two scenarios: an item drops every 10 rolls, or you get a 10% chance with each roll — that is, you will have to make way more attempts. The impression you give to the players in these two

cases is different. So my advice is to try to adjust the randomness so that there is a mandatory good roll every once in a while.

It is also important that there is no garbage in the loot boxes. And there should be a system in the game that allows you to transform an unnecessary item into one that is of value — like in Hearthstone. Even if you come across useless cards, you can turn them into Dust, which will allow you to craft a more valuable item. These mechanics help balance the loot boxes and make them less predatory. However, each case should be looked at individually.

**— How to correctly determine the price and value of the most affordable in-game purchase? Does it depend on the genre and setting or something else?**

— I have an article about this in my blog, and I recommend everyone to read it. If you are unsure about the cost of an in-game purchase, I would suggest that you analyze your competitors. You just go and see what your main competitors are putting at the lower price, and then you try to use your head. But as a tip: you probably shouldn't set too low of a price. I think the optimal range is \$1.99 to \$4.99 depending on how aggressive your game is.

The lowest prices should be reserved for special offers that can be limited in time. It will work better here and will help out players who are not ready to spend a lot of money.

And yes, another way is to do A/B tests. If your game is Fortnite, then you probably won't be able to use this trick because people will notice it, but in less-known casual projects it will work. Of course, there is no need to lower or increase prices for players who have already seen the older ones. But you can check prices on new people. Key tip: keep an eye on what your competitors are doing and try to find a better option.

**— What do you think about discounts on IAP in free games? How to reduce the cost so that it does not seem random?**



— First of all, you can't have a game without discounts. But the real quest is to introduce them without destroying the in-game economy. Organize everything in a way that players don't say, "Okay, I will only spend money when there are discounts." And to do this, it is important to know the real value of every item in the game.

If something costs, say, \$100 and you make a 25% discount, then players will think that this item is actually worth \$75. It is important not to make this huge 75% discounts even during the hottest sale, it will ruin everything. My advice would be to keep track of all the discounts that you give on items, what is a good one, what is a very good one, and where is the point where you should never go.

On the other hand, discounts should be associated with exclusivity, and that can be achieved in three ways. First: maybe you don't need to make a discount for everyone, select a specific user group. For example, I want less-paying users to invest in the game, which means that I will reduce the price of a 1.99 item to 0.99 for example. This will not affect revenue from users who pay a lot, so this discount needs to be targeted.



Halloween Special Offer in Monster Legends by Social Point. Source: YouTube / NextGenPaknot.



The second way to establish exclusivity is to tie discounts to specific moments. For example, every time a player reaches a new level you offer something new that will come in handy at this specific moment. It is important that this discount is displayed only once — this will create a sense of exclusivity.

And the third way: tie the discount to things that happen in real time like holidays or seasons. For example, if today is St. Patrick's Day, make a unique offer for this day. Players will understand that the offer is limited, and it will work. Conversely, if you don't make an offer on, say, New Year's Eve or Black Friday, it will piss players off. So you have an unwritten agreement with players that discounts come at a specific time and have a specific value that players can count on.

**— Why do companies usually offer 6-packs of IAPs? You have an article in your blog on how to have a great 6-pack of IAPs. Why do companies settle to this amount?**

— It is time-tested, and people are satisfied. And, probably, if you remove some of them, there will be no great benefit. In addition, you can compare the cost of six different packs with each other, it's convenient.

Six is a good number because you can set up a convenient pattern. Usually, there is a starting item for \$4.99, then something in between, and finally the most valuable one. If you remove some of the packs, the jumps between them become very aggressive, you go from \$9.99 to \$100. This difference will encourage players to choose a cheaper option.

And if you have too many packs, it will be more difficult for players to compare them with each other. Lots of choices disincentivize players because the decision becomes too complex, this has been tested. Six-packs are kind of a sweet spot: there are enough for meaningful comparison, but there are not enough to make the decisions too hard.



# EMMA BULLEN

Director of New Global Markets at Hyper Hippo

*«Success depends on the quality of the game and its fit for the market»*

The Inlingo team talked to Emma Bullen, Director of New Global Markets at Hyper Hippo. We learned the reasons behind the success of their key projects, what metrics are important to consider before entering a new market, and how to gain the trust of players from all over the world.

**We interviewed Emma in September, 2022.**

## ***«We publish all languages at once to take advantage of that marketing lift»***

**— Emma, you're the Director of New Global Markets at Hyper Hippo. What does that involve? Is it any different from being a Marketing Director?**

— The New Global Markets group at Hyper Hippo leads the expansion of Hyper Hippo games into new markets. Essentially, we accelerate the efforts of our current games into new regions that have the potential to perform. I partner with different discipline leads, including Mark Polcyn, our Marketing Director. Our day-to-day work involves localizing our existing portfolio and marketing campaigns, as well as experimenting with transcreated marketing efforts, running optimizing global pricing programs, and looking for global partners. We're a small group that has been operating for just over a year, and we have a lot of work ahead of us. Now that we've set up the groundwork (the processes that didn't exist this time last year), we can get started on global expansion in earnest.

**— How does the experience you gained working at Disney help with your current role?**

— Disney Club Penguin initially hired me to culturalize the game for the British audience (a strategy that shifted during the first week I joined the team), so you might say I've come full circle. When I led Club Penguin's Editorial Department, part of my role was to work closely with the internal localization teams, making sure that the voice and tone were consistent across all languages. I worked closely with the internal localization teams to deliver content in five different languages and built up a good understanding of the children's market in Brazil, France, Germany, Russia, and Argentina and how each team marketed and sold memberships in each region. My biggest takeaways from my time at Disney were the ability to work with remote teams and the importance of building relationships from a distance. That's become a very useful skill now that I work in a distributed workforce.



At Disney, Emma worked on Club Penguin — the first-ever MMO experience for many people.

— How much has the process of analyzing potential markets changed over the course of your career? Are there more evaluation criteria these days?

— The fundamentals are the same; you go where the audience is. At Club Penguin, the first market we entered was Brazil because we had a huge audience there who asked us to localize the game for them. Today, that's just one piece of the puzzle. I want to know much more about the audience — do they respond to the game's theme and mechanics? How might we monetize in their region? How much transcreation or culturalization work might be expected both for in-game and marketing efforts? Thanks to companies like Statista and Sensor Tower, we have a wealth of statistical data to project growth in target markets and competitive research. That sort of data didn't exist when I first started my career, and it has become a vital part of our market selection process.

— Let's say that I've made a game. How can I find the market where it will be most successful? Generally speaking, what does this success depend on?

— Generally speaking, success depends on the quality of the game and its fit for the market. That comes before any effort you put into researching market entry and putting marketing effort behind it. Does your audience want to play your game, are they responding well to it, and is the team excited? Once you're sure of this, then you can start looking for markets where your genre performs particularly well and consider what you might need to do to enter that market. For some audiences, like Japan and South Korea, to be successful, you may need to find partnerships to help you culturalize your game and reach the right people on the right platforms.

**— Okay, suppose we did our evaluations and chose a specific market. What steps need to be taken before new players can finally see our project?**

— When it's a case of simple localization/transcreation, our team will work to ensure that a localization system exists within a game from day one, that a content management system is implemented to house our localization strings, and that fonts are chosen and special characters work within the game. We will open up small markets for KPI testing before we start on any localization work to see how the audience responds to the game.

Before we send any copy to a localization vendor, we make sure that we have style guides, design documentation, and anything else that will add context. There's often some back-and-forth between the vendor and the studio at this point. If a game's title needs to be changed for the market, there is some work done at this stage to decide on a regional title and secure it for use.

Once a project has been localized, and that localization has been implemented, we'll send it through localization quality assurance (LQA) testing, and this typically happens during our Soft Launch period. Meanwhile, we'll be working on getting all of our Marketing assets ready. We start with the same User Acquisition and App Marketplace assets as our North American products, localized for our target markets. Once we launch, we go through a process of creating transcreated assets for certain

markets, where the store assets vary. When it's time for global launch, we publish all languages at once to take advantage of that marketing lift.

— **How do you choose which markets to focus on? Do you evaluate a given project's prospects by metrics, or do you listen to players who are requesting, for instance, an Italian localization?**

— One of Hyper Hippo's values is being player first, so yes, we do listen to players who are requesting localization, particularly when a lot of them are asking for it. Metrics are really important to consider too. We typically start by looking at projected downloads and revenue generation for the genre of game we're targeting and then take into account factors such as ease of localization, political stability, smartphone usage, and data consumption.

***«We aim to include and celebrate all our players»***

— **One of Hyper Hippo's most popular projects is AdVenture Capitalist. It's a capitalism simulator in which players develop their own businesses and earn millions. What's the secret to this project's success?**

— AdVenture Capitalist has a universal theme that's aspirational — who doesn't want to be filthy rich? The game itself has an easy to-win idle mechanic, with engaging graphics and a ridiculously catchy theme tune. One of the things that I think Hyper Hippo does differently is extending the experience outside of the game with community support and narrative. Our Player Experience team and our Social and Content teams are always working to serve and engage the player. It's not one element but all of these things working together that make it successful.

— **The settings of Hyper Hippo games are very different from one another, and players find themselves in satirical communist, capitalist, and fantasy worlds. Is the choice of**



the setting in your projects more of a creative decision, or is it tied to globalization, and each market gets its own setting?

— With AdVenture Capitalist and AdVenture Communist, our game settings were primarily creative decisions, but as the studio grows, we're starting to make choices based on universal themes. We still have a lot to learn, but we aim to include and celebrate all our players, no matter what culture they hail from.



Popular clicker games by Hyper Hippo.

— Are there any plans at Hyper Hippo to branch out into new genres that you haven't tried yet? If yes, then why those ones specifically? If not, then why? Is it because you have found your niche?

— Throughout Hyper Hippo's history, many of our most successful ideas have come from people working on those "what if" and "I don't know why, but this is fun" ideas. We've recently set up

Innovate Out Loud — a program that runs once a quarter within the studio for a week at a time. This is a chance for the team to work on their creative passion projects, which includes branching out into new genres. I wouldn't describe idle as a genre, it's more of a mechanic, but we do set genres and market objects for our innovation projects based on market/competitive research, and provide that information to people, should they choose to use their Innovation Week time to explore new game options.

## ***«One reported issue can represent a lot of players»***

### **— What criteria do you use to evaluate the quality of localization at Hyper Hippo?**

— Our localization goes through thorough quality assurance testing to ensure that it serves its target audience. Our team makes sure that the content is localized and no strings are missing, that the localization has the same meaning as the original text, that it is consistent and grammatically accurate, that any potential cultural issues are caught — such as humor fails, that the layout is right, the font is appropriate, and special characters are working.

We're extremely lucky to have an international team working at Hyper Hippo, so we can ask for an internal review of localization quality. We also work with our partners at Google who provide excellent and actionable feedback.

### **— Do your criteria match up with those of your players? How can you tell whether players are getting the best possible experience?**

— One thing I love about our players is that they will generally tell us if they're not getting the best experience. Our amazing Player Experience team has built a high level of trust with our players by responding promptly and personally to player feedback, so our players trust that their perspectives will be listened to and



considered. We've recently launched a new game, Vacation Tycoon, and our Player Experience team is keeping a very close eye on reviews and community channels, like Discord and Reddit. The Development team prioritizes bug fixes that impact the experience and uses player feedback to make improvements over time, such as making the language selection easier to find or tweaking the balance of the game. We know that not everyone will write a review, so one reported issue can represent a lot of players.



The new project by Hyper Hippo Entertainment gives you a chance to become a Vacation Tycoon.

— **What's the best way to work with players' feedback in local markets? How do you isolate the necessary information in fans' reviews?**

— We use Sensor Tower to review App Store and Google Play feedback. The tool uses Google Translate to help us quickly review player feedback and tags terms to help us quickly see what players like and dislike, which helps identify how many users are reporting similar issues. I always really appreciate it when someone leaves a review — it brings us much closer to our audience.

— **Some mobile game studios often completely overhaul the entire setting of a project for a new market, and the end result**

**is a totally different game. Do you like that approach, or is it better to try to stick as close to the original idea as possible?**

— It really depends on which market you're entering. Sticking to the original idea is an approach that I'd favor for complementary cultures, but I would consider a complete overhaul for markets such as Asia. India, for example, is a market with high potential for mobile games, but the themes of our portfolio may not resonate with that market. Not only that, but we'd need to consider how the region makes their payments — if they favor in-app purchases or watching ads, what the minimum/maximum specs of phones are available, if they're used to playing the game, etc.

**— You're an ambassador for Women in Games. What does the organization do?**

— Women in Games (WIG) is a not-for-profit organization that encourages women to join the game industry. Approximately 50% of gamers are women, but we only make up 22% of the game industry workforce and only 16% of women are represented in executive teams. We have a long way to go to achieving parity.

**— Tell us your story — how did you become a part of Women in Games?**

— I've worked in the game industry for the larger part of my career, and I remember one day seeing a tweet that asked people to tag amazing women they knew in the game industry. I realized a lot of the women I'd worked with at the BBC and Disney were now in different job sectors, and that realization shocked and disappointed me. I think I signed up on their website that evening.

**— What difficulties have you faced working in the game industry, and how did they impact you?**

— Like most women, I've experienced being spoken over in a meeting or being underestimated in terms of my capabilities. In the past, I've changed roles when I hit what I'd describe as a glass ceiling. In my current role, I'm learning to speak up for myself and

to keep pushing for what I think is right. I'm also learning to ask for help and support, and resting rather than quitting. It's making a huge difference.

## ***«I'm learning to speak up for myself and to keep pushing for what I think is right»***

**— How does Women in Games help women in the industry feel more comfortable and confident on an everyday basis?**

— Comfort and confidence are built through the Women in Games social media channels and events. The WIG Facebook and Discord groups are great places to network with other women in the game industry and get details about in-person and virtual events. There are different parts of the Women in Games group that put on events to help you overcome challenges such as applying for different jobs, focusing on your mental health, sharing different roles that they're hiring for in their studio, and what games they're currently playing.

**— Abortion rights for women have been struck down in the USA. Not all gaming companies have expressed support for women, and some didn't comment on this issue at all. Given the new circumstances, what, in your opinion, should game studios do to help women feel safe?**

— In my personal opinion, abortion rights impact your employees no matter what gender they are. Often trans, queer, and intersex people are missed from the conversation, so I think the first step is inclusivity. I think it's less important that gaming companies express support publicly than it is for them to support their teams internally.

Creating a feeling of psychological safety in the workplace involves talking about challenging issues and listening to your team. I think it's especially important to prioritize mental health during these challenging times, so we need to be raising the profile of employee assistance programs. It's okay to get angry, but we need to put on our oxygen masks first.



# MURAD MUSAKAEV

Producer at Tactile Games

*«My job is searching for tools  
that will cause my team the  
least amount of distress»*

The Inlingo team spoke with Murad Musakaev, Producer at Tactile Games. We learned what working in court has in common with project management, what team a good producer plays for, and why delicious buns are just as important as successful games.

**We interviewed Murad in July, 2022.**

## **«Compared to government agencies, game dev wins out, no question»**

### **— How did you end up going from the field of law to game development?**

— Actually, it's not as dramatic of a change as it may seem. It was a smooth transition. I started working in the courts because I was educated as a lawyer, and I had basically always wanted to do that. In my last few years there, I served as a senior judicial assistant, which is kind of like a project manager. You have to manage the work of the regular assistants, plan the schedule, and determine which of them will work with which judge. This experience came in handy later. But, after working in the courts for five years, I got a bit disillusioned with the system and became interested in trying a more creative profession.

Before that, being creative was like a hobby: I made music, wrote stories, and played games all my life. I have extensive experience with games, which now helps me in my daily work as a producer because it's all applicable one way or another. It's just that I didn't think it was possible to make a real living in games before. And when I was at this crossroads in my career, I met a former classmate who happened to be opening a mobile game dev company. Back then, it was called Fahrenheit Lab — now it's Full HP. And he invited me on board, as a lawyer initially, to handle copyright issues. But, as often happens at small companies, I ended up playing several roles: I handled legal concerns, project management, and business development, which involved talking to our partners. Eventually, I decided that, of all the possible options for career advancement, I was most interested in overseeing projects, planning, and management.

### **— How different is working in game development from your experience in the courts?**

— The court has more strict rules. And often you have to follow them not because it's better for the process or it's the right way to do things, but because that's just how it is. You do still come

across that in the game industry too, but generally, it has a more flexible attitude. Compared to government agencies, game dev wins out, no question.



This is how my first cabinet in the court looked like, tables covered with lawsuits.

In the courts, the conventional categories of «client» and «contractor» are much more regulated because how you interact with the judges and how you interact with citizens are two completely different universes. But in the game industry, you'd talk to a player more or less the same way you talk to your art director because there isn't a strict hierarchy. That said, the experience I got in government agencies communicating with people from different backgrounds and of different ages is a really big help in my everyday work in the game industry.

In some situations, a problem is really easy to solve: you just have to go to someone who can solve it and talk to them. But sometimes you need an intermediary to do that, someone who will hold you by the hand, lead you along, and help you find common ground. That's who a producer is. And being a mediator who can help people to develop a shared understanding is what I learned in the courts.



## ***«It's very hard to be a good producer with an inflated ego»***

### **— What duties does a game producer's job consist of?**

— It's different in different companies. In some places, the producer is a one-man band who has to be able to program, make analytical requests, and also know game design. Sometimes, however, it's more of an economic position where you handle resources, teams, and planning their budget. But generally speaking, a producer is a problem-solver: you have to identify problems, the pain points of your project, and deal with them on a daily basis.

In my case, the job boils down to searching for management tools and rituals that will cause my team the least amount of distress. That's the foundation that the demands of different teams and companies build on. Let's say, for example, I had to dive into the analytics at Tactile to test hypotheses about how users behave under certain conditions. If you know basic SQL, you can weed through ten crazy theories to find the one that actually resembles the truth. Then you take that to a professional data analyst and go deeper with testing to find out why, for example, your retention fell.

On the whole, as a producer, you look at product issues from your own vantage point and examine pain points within a team — you operate things both internally and externally.

### **— So, is a producer's job more about the product or the team?**

— It depends on the team's needs. In some companies, there is no producer. There's the project manager and the product owner. Broadly speaking, the project manager deals only with processes, and the product owner deals only with the product. A producer is somewhere in the middle, a combination of these positions, plus a little more.

For example, in my previous company, there was no game director or product owner. There were a CEO with his vision and

game designers for each game. And my job was more about processes than the product. I had some ideas and comments about the product, but they were minimal for the most part. I was more involved with meetings, exchange of experience, and team building.

At Tactile, we have the position of game director. They completely shape the vision for a project and come to the producer with creative proposals like, «This week, let's do an episode where our heroes go into space.» And you try to balance resources and the time you'll be able to do that in, as well as put these creative ideas into a defined framework. In other words, at Tactile, the game director deals more with content, while the producer deals more with form. But, once again, it all comes down to processes.

### — Does a producer need to know everything that's going on in the company?

— My previous company had 30 employees. Tactile has 300. And the difference in how many tasks you can take on was immediately obvious. At Tactile, there are two main big games, a whole smattering of smaller ones, and a few projects in development. It's extremely hard to keep it all under control.

We have a head of production who handles high-level problems and delegates what's happening with projects to the producers. So, the head of production doesn't always have to delve deeper. On the other hand, as the producer of Penny & Flo, I have a general idea of what's going on with Lily's Garden and occasionally take part in some broader processes. But if my job was to fully maintain both these games, I wouldn't have time to give them the attention they need. And the quality of my work would suffer as a result.

At larger companies, especially in the AAA industry, the situation can be the reverse: there's sometimes almost one producer for every employee. This turns into micromanagement. There should be a common-sense balance based on what's useful for the project. When you're in charge of a lot of stuff, it doesn't allow



you to notice the little details, but they are crucial to making the product better. It's when we miss the little details that we fall short.



Areas are one of the game aspects that the Penny & Flo team is very proud of.

— **When you're working on Penny & Flo, do you need to know what each member of the team is doing?**

— Ideally, I need to have a general idea of what stage each employee is at. Because, when you're discussing processes in different teams or for a project in general, if there's a bottleneck somewhere, it tends to come down to two or three people communicating.

Again, the Penny & Flo team isn't the biggest at Tactile — we have almost 40 people, not including the teams that are outside of Denmark. With that amount of people, it's possible to keep an eye on them and have a general idea of what they're doing. But if my team had 100 people, it would be much more difficult. In that case, I'd need additional points of contact — team leads or senior specialists.

— **How do you know if a game producer is managing their work and doing a good job?**

— No sprint is the same as the previous one. In other words, you can't compare them directly. However, you can compare a team's productivity in different sprints. That's the first measuring stick. The second is a project's KPIs. If, over a particular period of time, you managed to improve a game's metrics through producer process-related decisions while using the same amount of resources, then good job. But the credit goes to not just the producer, but the whole team. And therein lies the cornerstone of this job: it's very hard to be a good producer with an inflated ego. Because, most of the time, your achievements stay under the radar, behind the scenes. Everything that happens on stage is the work of the team. I guess it's like the film industry: you rarely remember who produced a film, but you know the director and who played the lead role. But, again, there was a lot of work behind it.

## ***«Any minute you save is a good thing»***

— **How has COVID changed a producer's job? Has it made it more difficult? Or maybe the opposite: has it made some things easier?**

— There have been changes, of course. I think it's been a great experience, very useful, because even without COVID, many companies have offices in different countries. The entire situation forced humanity to fine-tune working online. And I think that benefited distributed teams like ours. We found tools that help us work together in a more active and visible way. Three years ago, let's say, I couldn't have imagined that four people could work on an online whiteboard simultaneously and brainstorm in a format like that. But now it just feels natural.

However, I still think that working together in person, when the entire team is in front of you, is much more effective, simply because my job is mostly about communication and response speed. Plus, more ideas emerge in an office. There's a lot of "work-adjacent" communication there: when you ride in the elevator together, go to lunch, or wait for the coffee to brew, you

talk about something. Those conversations sometimes give rise to very interesting ideas that then turn into something bigger. In the virtual workflow, I miss that, and I still haven't come up with a way to reproduce it online. Somewhere there are probably geniuses who are already doing it.



Areas are one of the game aspects that the Penny & Flo team is very proud of.

***«I've never considered mobile games garbage, not in the past and not now»***

**— You were involved with mobile games before this job, and you still are. How do you organize the work for mobile games?**

— Often, it's several processes that build on one another. My previous company made shooters without a storyline. The new content for them all had the theme of "more in-game purchases": more weapons and skins, more maps, and new game modes. It wasn't as time-sensitive as the storylines that we release at Tactile, where a new episode comes out every week. Lily's Garden has been doing this for four years now, and Penny & Flo for two years. That doesn't mean that every week we're thinking, "Alright, and

what about next week?" The work proceeds in layers, in several parallel stages that are planned in advance.

**— So, for games like Penny & Flo, the narrative plays a pretty important role, right?**

— Yes, we're very proud of our narrative. We believe that, compared to many games, ours is rather strong. I can't say our competitors are writing trash and we're making a masterpiece, because that's not the case. I know many great games of the same genre on the market. But we touch on more hot-button social issues in our storylines at Tactile. They may reach a smaller audience, but our players end up being more engaged as a result. If you look at our positive reviews in the app stores, around 80% of them mention our stories in one way or another. People love them.

**— Still, building an endless process seems a little frightening.**

— The process itself is almost entirely built on analytics. It's important to keep audience demand in mind — how often they need new content. Experience has shown that releasing stories even once a week is not often enough for our players. That's why we try to add events such as tournaments in the middle of the week. But even releasing a new episode on Wednesday or Friday can play out in different ways. Because players consume a story over a certain amount of time, and what day they finish it on also matters. In other words, first you release an episode any which way, and then you collect data about it, optimize it, collect data again, and after that it's an automatic process. Release something, collect data, see the mistakes, start a new stage. That's the only way to do it.

**— Then the launch of every new season gets more and more seamless?**

— Right. I joined Penny & Flo after the soft launch at the start of the first season. The second season started in July 2021, and the third in early May 2022. The transitions really did get smoother and smoother. And we saw great improvements in

both transferring processes from one game director to another and preproduction for a season. Big intervals of time help you see how the production quality of a season grew, even though the number of people on the team stayed the same or was even reduced. Accordingly, if you manage to earn the same amount of money with fewer people, that's a very good indicator of a producer, in particular, doing great work.

— Penny & Flo was recently nominated for a game award. Can you tell us more about that?

— Penny & Flo was nominated for the best game with live support by the Danish Producers' Association in competition for the Spilprisen prize. But we didn't win. But this prize is aimed at larger platforms, and when you're nominated in the same category as AAA games, it's obvious who they're going to pick.

#### BEST LIVE GAME 2022



DEEP ROCK GALACTIC  
GHOST SHIP GAMES



KING OF RETAIL  
FREAKING GAMES



PENNY & FLO: FINDING HOME  
TACTILE GAMES

With conferences and nominations in general, when you mix the mobile and computer game industries, mobile suffers the most. Everyone who does business in the computer game industry treats mobile games as inferior, especially content consumers. "Mobile games aren't real games," even though they make up a huge part of the market. But the tide is changing, which is nice. I've never considered mobile games garbage, not in the past and not now, so I'm very glad people are starting to understand that too.

Now the line between the mobile market and the desktop and console market is growing increasingly blurred. More and

more companies are paying attention to mobile games and bringing well-known franchises into this market. Sony recently announced that half its games will be released on mobile platforms and PC by 2023, whereas previously they were only available on PlayStation. Microsoft created a great solution with Project xCloud, which allows you to play Xbox games on your phone. That's really exciting. If five years ago someone had told me that would be possible, I would've thought they were nuts.

— **Some people think the classic, giant traditional game companies can't do anything on the mobile market. What would you say to that?**

— You can look at the success of Call of Duty: Mobile and say that's not true. The mobile adaptation of EVE Online that NetEase and CCP released has performed well, and the same can be said of Call of Duty and Crash Bandicoot. Apex Legends Mobile came out recently, and while it's too early to draw conclusions, the initial reviews have been good. I played it and liked it. I play the "older" version a lot, and the mobile one is very well done. It's colorful, it's easy to play, and the controls are awesome.

***«In Europe, a producer at a mobile studio is like a baker or a carpenter»***

— **What new trends have you noticed in the mobile market?**

— The latest trend is cryptocurrency and NFTs. It's especially relevant when you think about recent global events and how Russian players can't pay by bank card internationally. They're not going to take over the world in the next year or two, at least not until someone offers an actually worthwhile way to use NFTs and crypto — for players, not just for businesses.

Also, after Epic Games' lawsuit against Apple, alternative mobile app stores are actively promoting themselves, getting in touch with developers, and making partnership offers. But I don't think any of them will go global.



## — What's the most difficult part of your job right now?

— The hardest thing right now is working with the department that makes the levels or areas with rooms that you decorate. At the moment, we are actively working on improving the area production, together with the new art director. The visual style and our internal processes are changing, and now I'm trying to make this transition as painless as possible for the team and as effective as possible for the project. Everything changed right in the middle of a season — that's just how it worked out. As a result, we need to tweak our processes as carefully as possible, so there isn't a negative impact on the team or players.

## — Are you more on the side of the stakeholders or the team here? Which side do you play for, in other words?

— That's the nice thing about game dev compared to my court experience: I don't have to make a choice like that here. Everyone who's part of the game's development, by default, is on one side, and the players, or content consumers, are on the other. Within a team that's producing content, there shouldn't be any "sides." If there are, that's a problem with the process that the producer needs to fix. So, I don't take anyone's side. I'm trying to find a balance between interests.

## — You worked in the Russian game industry for a while and then ended up at a Danish company. Are there any big differences in the processes or the approach to work?

— Maybe it's subjective, but I have the impression that, in Russia, game dev considers itself a special caste. When I talk to Russian developers, I often get the impression that game dev is above everyone, IT comes next, and then everyone else is at the bottom. And IT specialists think the opposite, that they're on top.

But here, a producer or developer at a mobile studio is like a baker or a carpenter. They're just another profession. And that creates a more comfortable work environment, at least for me. Because I don't feel like the people who've come to work for the

company treat game development as something extraordinary. It's clear that they are awesome specialists who make great games, but it doesn't mean that they are better than the baker who also makes a great product — they've got amazing buns and their own bakery.

**— Did you have a hard time adjusting to work in a different country?**

— Surprisingly, no. Tactile cares about its employees and helps them cut through red tape, and everything's as painless as possible. I moved with my wife. First, I came, and some time later, she followed with our dog. And Tactile helped not just me, but her and the dog too. It's definitely touching because you can see that the company isn't apathetic — they really are interested in you joining the company and feeling as comfortable here as possible. This makes you want to extend this feeling to everyone who comes to the company and show it through the processes that are in place: "Guys, I hear your feedback, and I want to create a more comfortable environment for you. Let's do it together."

**— Is it also the producer's job to make sure their team doesn't burn out?**



One of the recent Friday bars.



— We have regular development talks with everyone on the team. They discuss what has gone well and what they want to achieve in the next three to six months. This is where they give signals: for example, an employee is tired of the art style, doesn't like working with this game director, or just feels like doing something new. As a producer, I also periodically meet one-on-one with my team. It's a long but very important process. It allows you to see where there's a misunderstanding or dissatisfaction bubbling up and respond to it before the person comes to you themselves and says, "Man, I can't work on this project anymore. Move me somewhere else." When people see this kind of approach, they are more open and inclined to share.

We've had cases where people changed positions because they no longer enjoyed what they were doing. They wanted to find themselves doing something else. In that situation, Tactile makes accommodations. There's no point keeping someone in a position if they're not happy there, because it doesn't do anyone any good — not the employee, and not the company.

**— Let's say you wake up a year from now and realize being a producer isn't making you happy. What would you want to do?**

— Well, I did once wake up like that and realize that law wasn't making me happy, so I've been in that place before. So far, I enjoy being a producer. But I still love to write. I used to do it as a hobby in my pre-game dev days and still do on occasion. So, I'd say narrative design would also be interesting.

**— Would you be interested in moving from mobile games to traditional game development?**

— I talk a lot with people who work in traditional game dev, and they all say it's different from mobile. Many say it's not different in a good way. However, I would still be interested because I've played traditional games for most of my life. For me, they have a romantic mystique. As a specialist, I'm interested in looking at games from all possible viewpoints.



# YANA KHOROSHAVINA

Lead Project Manager at Elephant Games

*«When I arrived at the company, I started teaching people how to relax»*

The Inlingo team chatted to Yana and discovered how a love for management can help you find job in game development, what triggers employee burnout, and why company culture is pretty much the most important factor in major successes.

We interviewed Yana in January, 2023.

## **«To get into IT, you don't have to be an egghead»**

**— You've been managing teams for almost five years, first at a studio developing mobile apps for business, and now at Elephant Games. How did you discover that you like helping people to organize their work?**

— It's been a long journey. I'd look back not just at the last five years but over an even longer period. To be honest, all I've been doing my whole life is managing people. It all began in my hometown, Yoshkar-Ola. I worked at a children's camp, and in due course I reached the position of assistant director. I had around 70 people under me: animators, cleaners, cooks, and supervisors. Basically, I was responsible for the life of the camp year-round.

In 2016, I hit a ceiling and realized that I wanted to follow a different path. I was drawn to the field of IT. The people there are completely different, more open, and involved in creating revolutionary projects that change the world. I just went on Google, did a search for "IT companies Yoshkar-Ola," and chose the ones that seemed interesting. At that time, I didn't know of the existence of HeadHunter, so I wrote to the directors of the companies on VK.

I got a response from the guys from Omega R, a mobile development company. I passed the interview, they showed me the office, gave me a test task, and hired me as a PR assistant. I worked in their team for around a year and realized that PR wasn't quite for me. I want to influence people, to manage and create a product, not to write texts about conferences. When you lead a team, set up processes, work with great people, and see how their eyes light up — there's nothing that compares with that feeling.

**— So, you started looking for another job?**

— I considered staying at the same company, but they didn't have the right vacancy open. So, I went on HeadHunter and started

responding to ads. One of them was a management role at White Tiger Soft, another mobile developer. But the guys looked at my resume and didn't answer. To be honest, that upset me. I looked on social media and found the guy who was checking the ads, and I DMed him: "Anton, I responded to the vacancy, but you didn't answer. I have a lot of management experience, I've already worked in IT, and I've taken courses. Maybe you could take a look at my resume?" He answered that he'd made my resume a high priority and he'd write soon.

When I came to the interview, Anton admitted that he didn't know how to assess a manager. I didn't understand either. It wasn't like we were starting a revolution, was it? In the end, they hired me. I think my persistence played a role in that. After my DM, he didn't have any other options. Anton taught me a lot. White Tiger Soft was where all the principles of management that I have were established. I also raised my game a lot on the technical side, which turned out to be particularly difficult. By education, I'm a teacher, psychologist, and director. Now I had to study things that I'd never heard of before.



One of the parties at White Tiger Soft.

After around three years, I hit a ceiling again and started looking for how I could move forward. That's how I came across a vacancy for a PR assistant at Elephant Games. I'd applied to join their team before as a manager more than once, but I didn't have enough experience, so they rejected me immediately. This time, I decided to grab at any vacancy, and once I got settled in, to prove myself and try again to get some management role.

I was really lucky at the interview — the HR director turned out to be great and immediately understood that the vacancy wasn't for me. He said, "We're making a mistake here. You're definitely not a PR assistant, it's management that fires you. Give me some time, and I'll see what I can do." A month later, they called me and offered me two jobs: one in a technical role and the other in management. Of course, I took the second one.

I think that when people read this story, they'll think, "That's real assertiveness." And in fact, they're right. To get into IT, you don't have to be an egghead or have a technical way of thinking. I just really wanted to work in this field, and everything came together.

**— You've worked in companies in different areas — in mobile business apps and games. How is working with game developers different from the rest of IT?**

— Mobile development is more about business, and games are about art and creativity. There's a lot more soul in game dev. For example, we've been putting out the Grim Tales project for more than 10 years. It's a family story that's always developing. People come to work for us who've grown up on our games, which is just crazy and really motivates me.

One time, I got an offer to be a character in one of our projects for Halloween. They took my picture and photobashed it — they retouched it and created a guard with my face. Another example: we have a game coming out soon with cats, so as references we sent in our pets. The process of creating these games really inspires me.

— When it comes to people who manage teams, you can get the impression that they're some kind of control freak. How much truth is there in that?

— It depends on the company culture. A good manager doesn't sit with a machine gun watching everyone, they set up processes that can work without them. In fact, it's even better if they do work without them. If you can't do that, then you can't scale up your business and organize even a small team of 10 people.

A manager always has something to optimize, but if you're always thinking about that, you can get buried in it and burn out. It's important to have self-control. Sometimes I realize that I need to put the brakes on and work on something else. You can't just work on one skill all the time, it's better to have several.

— You make a huge number of games — for PC, for mobile, and for consoles. How many people work on all of that?

— Specifically on premium hidden object projects, around 120-150 people. And in total the company has roughly 180 employees. We have a separate group for porting — they bring PC games to other platforms. Plus, there are several games that are under development, and there's a separate team that works on them.

## **«Creativity is organized madness»**

— What criteria determine the effectiveness of a team?

— Effectiveness strongly depends on the manager. If, for example, the manager regularly turns up late, then how can they ask the team to have due respect for deadlines? There's an expression, "The pack copies the leader." That's the basis of everything: a manager should be an example that people try to live up to. And if we're talking about the team, then it's vital to monitor the individual time management of each employee. It's a long process. When I arrived at the company, I started teaching people how to relax. They were surprised: "What's this about?"

A manager should be working 24/7.” But in time they managed to get rid of that prejudice.

To make sure the team is focused, we use a system of sprint work. People have to understand where they’re going and why. And transparency in all processes is also important. When you’re driving in fog, you drive slowly because you can’t see anything. It’s important to turn on your fog lights, and we do that through calls with plans for the year ahead. The team has to understand what’s going on in the company to move forward with confidence.

And, of course, we put a lot of emphasis on the value aspect — what kind of team we are, and what things are important to us. In the end, that also influences the effectiveness of employees.

**— In any team, there are times when something goes wrong — a suddenly shortened deadline, for example. How do you cope with stressful situations like that, ensuring the team remains motivated and delivers great results?**

— It’s very important to focus on the cause of the problem: how did that situation with the seriously shortened deadline come about? Most probably, somewhere else something wasn’t completed properly, or on the contrary, was worked on for too long, and now there’s not enough time. It’s important to motivate the team to overcome the difficulty but also in the aftermath to get to the bottom of causes and correct the deficiencies. Shortened deadlines should be the exception, not the rule. A spring can be squashed for a long time, but one day it’s going to pop.

As a rule, team motivation is needed at the moment when deadlines are discussed. At the start of the Knight Cats project, we had only two artists. The rest were hired in the process. I motivated the team with the idea that two people make a big army. We can try and show everyone that doing the task with this team in this time is absolutely possible. During calls, we set the goal of not falling behind other teams. We may be house cats, but in our hearts we’re real lions and winners.





With colleagues from Elephant Games.

It was a difficult task, but those two artists achieved great results and demonstrated amazing speed. Furthermore, they managed to relax and be energized by their success. Our goal was to show that everything is possible and it's up to us.

### — What time-management methods do you use with your teams at Elephant Games?

— We advise people to keep track of their time themselves. Managers don't get on your back and monitor how much you're working. The only thing we have is that in ClickUp [a service for teamwork — Ed.] there's a time tracker — when someone accepts a task, they put the timer on. This isn't needed for recordkeeping, it's so that we ourselves can see how much time is spent on any stage of work. If it's too much, then we can adjust the processes.

Sometimes, we call up managers and ask them our favorite question: "So, how's it going?" And if someone's working more than necessary, that means there's a problem. We try to reconfigure these issues together, and the extra hours worked are compensated in the schedule. For example, we move the start of the work day from 09:00 to 10:00. Sometimes, somebody doesn't know our pipeline. They don't have enough experience



or even the desire to work on a specific task. There's always a trigger for missed deadlines.

**— How do you set up interactions in a team in a way that means employees' creativity doesn't interfere with keeping deadlines?**

— Establish a framework. Creativity is organized madness. People have to understand that they have deadlines. The most important is to get the main part of the tasks done, and if everything's OK with timing, then you can look at additional stuff. When we were doing Knight Cats, we came up against the problem of excessive creativity. It was a new game and, of course, everyone loves cats. The guys kept wanting to improve something or redraw it, but on the stream, we could see that there was no need for more polishing — only the artists themselves would notice it. We'd be spending extra time, but the players wouldn't appreciate it.

If we have doubts about further work, we always discuss it with the leads. They've been working in the company for a long time, and they know whether it's worth spending so much time on a specific issue. And, if the attack of excessive creativity happens with the lead, then the PM will stop them, for example, by reminding them that deadlines are impending.

**— What does your average working day look like?**

— I've been working remotely for the last eighteen months. My day starts with coffee and a croissant, then I sit down to work. We have a flexible schedule, but for me the most convenient time is between 09:00 and 18:00. The first thing I do is conduct interviews and mentor all the leads and project managers. Then come the dailies — we go over the tasks and see what's already done and where there have been problems. Then I tune into other managers' calls and make notes on what they need to adjust in their working communication. For example, I write feedback if someone has expressed doubt and they haven't noticed. Then we discuss those issues.

After that, I turn to my free-to-play project, and we assign tasks. That's quite fast because I've set a different working model from the one we use for our premium HO games. Also, I have one-to-one meetings with leads and project managers, as well as calls about new functionality. As we're currently transferring to Unity, I take a look at how development is going and whether or not everything's working on the management side.

When the team's work is all set, I turn to business thinking. I think about what else can be improved and how to increase productivity. Furthermore, a team is a living organism that sometimes experiences problems — somebody needs help, someone else needs support. It's an endless process.



With colleagues from Elephant Games.

— Now, due to the pandemic and the high number of relocations, remote work is at its peak. Do you have any advice for remote employees on how to organize their work?

— For me, remote work is the absolute best format. The main thing is not to take on too much. I don't work more than eight hours a day, and I always take a lunch break. I can use the

time to take a walk and change my surroundings. Sometimes, I don't fill up the fridge on purpose, so I have another reason to go out for lunch. In any case, I don't cook at home, because I don't know how to. I spend the time I free up on my education. Right now, as well as working, I'm getting my MBA.

Also at lunch, I may watch a film or read a book to distract myself from work. Sometimes that's just essential. One time I had a difficult call with a programmer, who turned out to be utterly disappointed in life — everything was miserable and depressing. I managed to give the guy some support and get him in the mood to work, but after the call I needed some time to get myself back up again. On that lunch break, I watched Comedy Club for 40 minutes. At times like that, you realize that an hour for lunch is just essential.

After six, I stop working and I turn off notifications. If someone writes to me, then I only answer them the following morning. Nothing bad has ever happened in those hours. When there's an important release, I can work later, but then I'll start working at noon on the following day. I like that the company's schedule is flexible. It helps to conserve resources.

**— For many people, working from home is a major stress that can lead to burnout. How do you deal with that?**

— When I say that I work from home and that it's awesome, lots of people are surprised I haven't burned out yet. But I think burnout has a few causes. The first is when somebody is in the wrong place and feels pressure because of it. The second is unclear goals. The employee just doesn't know what they're working towards. I sometimes discuss this subject with friends. They tell me they often don't understand why they're completing a task and what benefit it brings to the company. They don't see the result, and they think their boss is wasting time. That's how doubts appear that lead to burnout.

And, of course, your schedule is also very important. If I worked non-stop, then I'd definitely start going out of my mind. That's

simple physiology — your body gets tired, and it needs rest. If you work too much, even in a job that you love, then sooner or later it'll get harder to do even the simplest tasks. You can't keep going in that state for long.

**— A team's results depend on the condition of every member. How do you make sure that nobody's experiencing burnout and everybody's ready to keep giving their all to their work?**

— It's important to pay attention to body language and microexpressions, which is why in our company everyone has to have their camera on for calls. That's a part of the culture that began with me. I did student comedy competitions for seven years, so humor is an integral part of my communication style. When I arrived at the company and I tried to make jokes on calls, I didn't feel any reaction because I couldn't see people. So, I said, "I don't understand if my jokes are funny right now or not. Maybe you could turn on your cameras?" Gradually the guys all started doing it.

If someone's getting behind in their tasks, doesn't turn on their camera, and isn't talking, then you start to suspect something's wrong. Right now, I'm writing a small set of instructions called PM Sense, where I explain how you can calculate everything in advance. For example, in a one-to-one that takes place once a month, the manager should always ask, "How are you doing?" The question isn't just about work, it's about your life too. When you do that, you can't help but notice any doubts or worries that might be there.

If we can sense that someone is burning out, we immediately give them a call and find out what's up. If they need a break, we give it to them. And there are times when it's necessary to change their field or their team. We had a girl who worked faultlessly and always had the biggest smile, but one day we found out that she adored drawing. In games, we normally use photobashing, but she wanted to create something from scratch. So, for one of our projects, we created a video that was entirely drawn by hand. That really influenced her efficacy in the future — she enjoyed

herself and got inspiration. And for us, it's really nice to know that in one of our games there's a cool video like that.

## **«We try to ask about things you won't read on a resume»**

**— I have the feeling that teams work better when they communicate about more than just work. Is that really true, and what activities can help bring people together?**

— In our case, nobody chats at the office, because we simply don't have one — everyone works remotely. Eighteen months ago, I got the sense that the guys were missing out on everyday communication, so I came up with Chat About Life calls. At the time, that didn't exist anywhere else. We just got together and discussed everything except work. In the beginning, we had them once a week, but then we realized that we'd already told each other a lot, so we started to have them once every two weeks or once a month. It turned out to be a great idea: the team members can chat with each other freely, and we get to know them better.

Sometimes we play our competitors' games together. As a rule, we alternate that event with Chat About Life calls to keep a balance. And, in addition to that, the company organizes mass online games. It's one thing when you're in the circle of your small team, and quite another when the whole company is taking part in an activity and you can get to know everyone. Sometimes, people from different teams visit each other's streams. Sometimes I invite the guys from one team onto planning calls with another team, so they can share experience and get motivated.

**— When a team is already working well, it can be difficult for new members to fit in quickly. What's the most painless way of onboarding new people to a well-functioning machine?**

— We don't have any problems with new people. We set up team processes to ensure that everybody understands that new

people bring us expertise from outside. This is a little chick you can rear, and when they become a bird, they will do something cool for you. If a team has the right focus and values, there won't be any problems with new people.

### **— What else do you look at when you're interviewing potential team members?**

— We have a whole checklist for how to conduct calls and which questions to ask. We try to ask what hobbies they have, so they'll tell us about things you won't read on a resume. Openness and communicative competence are important. They're qualities that help someone fit comfortably into a team. We always check whether or not the candidate shares our goals and values. If the whole team loves and plays our games, and the new member just wants to complete their tasks and rejects everything else, there will be a conflict of interests and it will affect the work.

A positive outlook on life, initiative, and the ability to take on responsibility for your actions are all important. It's also really valuable when someone knows how to be grateful. People often tell me that I'm an ambassador for that skill. When the guys give us feedback, we say, "Thank you for your work." I actively implement that culture because gratitude has a major effect on people. The HR director and I compare metrics, and we see positive feedback from employees who have something to compare it to. This is a huge area of work that we've only dealt with 20-30% of.

### **— What are the things that trip somebody up at interview and put you off them?**

— I'm put off when somebody only talks about money. I agree that salary is a serious issue, but getting pleasure from what you do is no less important. If somebody is only thinking about raising their pay grade in six months, then another company can offer them more money at any moment, and they'll leave. It's important for values to be built not just on finances. We have a lot of employees who have been working at Elephant Games since it was founded, and a similar number who quit the company but

then came back again. Apart from the financial aspect, we have a load of advantages that other companies can't offer.

### — How has the company changed since you've been working there?

— When I arrived, Elephant Games had a different working model. There were five offices: in Yoshkar-Ola, Cheboksary, Kazan, Samara, and Penza. Everyone went to the office and often worked long hours. When we were offline, you could go up to any employee and ask them a question. Discussion in the kitchen or the smoking room played the role that Chat About Life does now. And in the evenings, the guys went to play PlayStation together. Obviously, when the pandemic started, the previous working model proved ineffective. The employees dispersed to their homes, and all our processes had to be set up again.

I turned out to be the first manager who was hired from outside. A little later, we got a great Head of PM. We took to each other like two beads that ought to be on the same necklace, and we started to implement a new working model. We introduced calls, changed the planning process, and promoted an individual approach to each employee. We've achieved a lot, and there's still a lot to do.

Of course, not everyone is capable of adapting, and then we have to say goodbye to them.

Nonetheless, it's important that an employee should never be dismissed unexpectedly. The basis of our culture is openness. We discuss difficulties, try to solve them, and only in extreme situations do we talk about leaving. If somebody has potential and they want to be part of the team, then everything will be fine.

Furthermore, the owners of the company often communicate with their employees. The guys can see that they're real people who care about what's happening. The managers and leads work individually with each person. It's an approach that you don't often find in other companies. It's a culture that can't help but be attractive.



# NATALIE GLADKAYA

Localization Director at Plarium

*«Good lockits and  
style guides save a lot of time»*

We spoke with Natalia Gladkaya and learned how the localization office at Plarium works, how to work with games as a service, and why translators should already be thinking about retooling for post-editing.

**We interviewed Natalia in November, 2021.**



## «The game environment is quite specific and has lots of restrictions»

### — Did you play video games as a child, Natalia?

— Like a typical kid of the nineties, I started with more mass pop culture — translations of literature and films. I was interested in languages, so when I read serious works of fiction in translation, I couldn't help but think: "If only I could read this in the original and understand the work that goes into conveying the same ideas in other languages."

My interest in games started with console games — first we hunted ducks (editor's note — reference to the game Duck Hunt), then we moved to FIFA and Heroes of Might and Magic. I think that's a pretty average trajectory for the beginning of the 2000s. Video games were also translated from the beginning. The games had varying quality and reputations because of their localizations. For example, GTA: San Andreas became a meme because of its Russian translation done by pirates.

I never planned to merge my profession with game localization — I was more interested in technical translation and fiction. Games were just a hobby, but then they intersected with career opportunities and I thought: "Why not?"



## — How did you first get into the game industry as a professional?

— I joined Plarium in 2011. Back then, the company wasn't anything like it is now. It was more like a fast-growing start-up, and that worked to my advantage. I had a linguistics background, but I had never worked with game applications and had a very poor understanding of the development process. The company's starting positions allowed me to get on the team as a translator and proofreader.

## — Are there any challenges linguists encounter in the game industry that they wouldn't in other fields?

— Absolutely. The game environment is quite specific and has lots of restrictions.

For example, there are strict requirements for a text's readability and the number of characters. The game interface isn't big, so you need to convey as much information as possible but say it in an accessible and efficient way. Every industry has standards, but in this case, they change depending on the type of game, its genre, its area, and its target audience. It took me a long time to get used to that.

Any translation should take into account its target audience, but that is particularly important in the game environment. It's one thing to just create content but another thing entirely to make sure it suits its target audience and doesn't create dissonance — that is, it doesn't diverge from the game experience and the player's expectations.

Production requirements are always updating. When I started working, out of inexperience I thought we just launch a game on Facebook and then work off that framework, since all the processes are already established. That was partially true, but not entirely: product features vary greatly, and our approach to each project depends a lot on them.

## — When does the localization team enter the development process?

— We did a lot of experimenting with operating formats and tried to understand when the right moment was to start the process. It's best to integrate localization with development as early as possible. It's pointless to start too early — that's like painting walls that aren't even built yet. A product can change a lot during development, so we have to find the sweet spot and start at the right moment. It can save a lot of time and energy.

We spent four years forming the team's operating standards, and we realized that we needed to start working with content at least during layout creation. At that point we understand approximately how a game will look and what kind of experience we want to give to the player. We know what to let them figure out on their own, and where to show our hand.

**— Is the localization office included in the decision-making stage when it's still too early to start working but a game's primary features are determined?**

— We are very much tied to marketing and are brought in when the decision is made about which markets a product will target. We establish a list of languages, do additional research, and make a decision. However, the basic list of languages changes frequently during the discussion. Some markets can wait, but we try to access others right away to capture a new audience.

**— Do you have any criteria for assessing the prospects of this or that market?**

— Of course, we have such criteria. We look at general demographics — a country's population. If the product is designed for mobile platforms, we find out what percentage of the population uses cell phones, which device models are most popular, average screen time, and which projects have been the most successful there. We basically try to gather as much publicly available statistical data as possible.

We also try to accent cultural and linguistic features—for instance, how anglicized the market is. In the Netherlands, for example,

everyone speaks their native language and uses digital products in Dutch, but their game market is practically unlocalized. It's the same story with foreign shows — they watch them in the original language or sometimes with subtitles because most people there have a good command of English. So, that begs the question: is it worth localizing a product there in Dutch?

Every business decides that for itself, but we consider this a situation where translation to the native language is not necessary. On the other hand, in Portugal, English is not really used commonly, so the audience won't be able to fully enjoy an unlocalized product. From this viewpoint, having Portuguese in our games is more essential than Dutch.

## ***«We try to integrate freelancers into the development process»***

**— Does localizing for new markets allow you to attract not only new players but a wealthier audience?**

— We don't have any data suggesting that a well-off audience was attracted specifically because of localization. We can assume that it indirectly helps increase the audience and bring users to a game who are ready to pay for it, but we haven't been able to track a pattern or graph it. It's hard to be exact here.

**— How does Plarium choose translators: do you work with an in-house team, vendors, or freelancers?**

— We use a hybrid system — each language and market requires an individualized approach. Most often we use freelancers who are selected based on certain criteria including whether they have an interest in games and possess industry knowledge. That's not always the deciding factor, but it's a major plus for bringing freelancers on board in a project. We try to integrate freelancers into the development process as much as possible. Games as a service (GaaS) are an ever-changing product, so it's very important

for our specialists to have a certain level of understanding and flexibility.

However, not all markets and languages work that way — in some cases, we look for vendors. Most often they are small companies that specialize either only in localization or in a wider range of services. Whatever the case, it's important for us to integrate people into the process, whether they're freelancers, small studios, or large vendors.

Specialists need to know exactly what is required of them. We facilitate that by regularly updating the style guides and instructions we send to translators. If you're creating a GaaS that is constantly developing and gaining new mechanics, don't forget to update the guides.

### **— And who handles style guides and glossaries — an in-house team or proven freelancers?**

— At the beginning we compose a basic style guide internally with general localization recommendations and requirements. Then we deploy specialists in certain languages to review the style guide, make changes, and offer recommendations. For example, they say: "This joke won't work in Germany — German humor is very different from the humor of other central European countries. Let's come up with something else."

### **— How do you select project managers? Is each of them attached to a specific project or is it a team of super experts that work on everything at once?**

— At first we tried to train universal localization managers, but we found that, because of the large number of projects and their long lifespans, it wasn't very easy to transfer managers from one project to another. The processes are similar, but they're still all different in some way, so we try to operate so that every localization manager is responsible for their own project. In some cases, a manager might have several projects — it all depends on their scale. Sometimes we know that a certain specialist

handles military strategy games best, so we choose them for such projects. We assemble our translator team in the same way. Again, we come back to the style guides and streamlining work with linguists because that way we can use the same translators to work on most games. It would be strange if the same specialists received entirely different requests from managers, so we try to find a universal formula to apply to different projects. However, that process can change depending on the specifics of each game.

## ***«Sometimes changes after release can backfire»***

**— If you plan to release a game on the German market, but a localization manager doesn't speak that language, would they be assigned to that project?**

— Speaking the language we're localizing into helps, but speaking English and understanding project management are the priorities here. If we know we're launching a game on the German market but we don't have a localization manager who speaks German, we will not change the current manager. In the end, we have German translators.

At the same time, it's important to understand the features of the market you're working with. We compose style guides in universal English, but we still pay attention to the wording and periodically change them depending on the mentality or business culture of a certain country. Our amazing team of Spanish translators might go above and beyond, and then watch a video on YouTube and write to us: "Check out how this dude balanced your characters from the player's perspective — your game designers should take a look."

Most of the time having a dynamic and warm relationship with the team is a pleasant bonus. Business relationships take years to build, and it doesn't matter whether the team is made up of

vendors or freelancers. We try to establish long-term relationships with people, which helps us understand one another on future projects because we get used to each other. Business processes harmonize, and it gets easier to find a common language with time.

**— The defining feature of the GaaS model is the updates never end. How do you make sure the localization process works smoothly?**

— This process requires constant work because the demand for GaaS is relatively high, and competition is growing — whoever captures the audience first and holds its attention wins. The trend has been towards speeding up the process and increasing its effectiveness and optimization. We must strike a balance that allows us to make something cool and refined, while not delaying the product.

If you are able to maintain around-the-clock localization support, that's great, but you have to understand that that requires a whole lot of resources. It's always desirable to speed up quality translation, but there is a minimum time requirement for translation and LQA. Sometimes you want to skip LQA, especially for smaller updates. That is always very tempting in GaaS since you can fix mistakes in production, but it doesn't always work in our favor.

Most bugs really can be fixed without waiting for the next patch, but sometimes changes after release can backfire. For example, if we introduced a character who was not very well localized, but players are already used to their name. There might be a better option, but the character is already active, and changing anything might confuse players. This raises the question: is it worth changing the localization and retraining players or should you just let the name become a meme in your gaming community and move on?

In general, the less time there is between releases, the more time you need to spend, however strange it may sound, on contextual support — the localization kit, for instance. The more

information we can provide linguists at the beginning, the faster they will be able to produce high-quality localization. That way, if we didn't have time to test a certain language, there is less of a chance that something goes wrong. Good lockits and style guides save a lot of time during LQA.

**— Let's say we have a project that is several years old with a set team working on it — a translator, proofreader, and tester. What happens if the translator suddenly gets sick and can't work?**

— It's best to be in touch with all the specialists, even those working remotely, in real time. Then we decide: taking into account the current situation, can we wait or do we need to act right now?

We can engage a translator from another project or ask the proofreader for help. If the LQA tester speaks the source language, they can try to produce a sample version without final approval. I know some companies use machine translation, roll it out in the game, and only then use a native speaker to edit it. We've never used that strategy ourselves, but if your engine is well trained and produces an adequate version, it could work. That is, as long as it isn't a Google Translate translation, which, although it's improving, still can't produce appropriate quality for a game release.

As for machine translation, we use it for pseudolocalization in the initial stages of project development. We generate sample content to make sure fonts and various technical elements are displaying correctly. We stay in touch with our colleagues in the industry, and some would say that you can save a lot on localization services if you use machine translation correctly, followed by editing. Our team isn't there yet — it's our impression that automatic translations create a lot of additional work. I think engines aren't ready to replace real people yet.

**— Do you think what everyone is afraid of will happen in five to ten years — that machines will replace people and translation will turn into post-editing?**



— I can't say about five years, but I would place a small bet on that happening in the next decade. There's already a lot of promising technology that is used to train engines in real time — you edit a segment and the engine uses that data entry in the future, not by auto-filling or concordance, but by using semantic analysis, if I can call it that. The first steps have already been taken in that direction. That doesn't mean translators will be out of a job and sit at home while neural networks do everything. It's still too early to think about — everything depends on the type of text, so human editing will still be necessary.

### — Which CAT tool do you use at Plarium?

— We use Memsource, which was made by Czech developers. We chose it because it's the simplest and most intuitive of all the CAT tools — it's the easiest one to figure out. If you compare Trados and Memsource, for example, Trados has a lot more functions, but it requires a lot of per-linguist and per-project customization. We have a large, spread-out team, so we use a simpler option. It's especially great that Memsource seamlessly works with any other CAT tool. I mean, our freelancers, for example, can work with another tool that they are more familiar with and convert it to Memsource with the click of a button.

It was also important to us that our CAT tool connected with our own product, allowing us to load text into a game. Memsource can do that.

### — What project management tools do you use?

— We use Jira and everything that connects to it — Gantt and Kanban. Localization, management, and development are really closely related in our case, so all of our boards are integrated into one main project.

Jira is a universal tracker for us. It's convenient for entering statistics, project planning, and monitoring task completion. We also use good old Google Sheets, no one has come up with a better or clearer option.

## — How do you plan out your workday?

— In the morning I handle emails and planning. Before quarantine, we used the stand-up format where everyone gathered in a circle and discussed projects or shared news. The afternoon is when we start on current tasks and the more hardcore process. Around 7 PM someone always writes: “Guys, we have this really urgent task here” or “I have a great idea.” That’s usually the end of the day.

Everything also depends on the development cycle: if we’re at the very beginning of it, everything is more orderly, but as we approach release, the process gets more chaotic. I feel like that’s true in any area.

## ***«Team battles of giant robots in an arena — what could be better?»***

## — If there was only one Plarium game left and it wasn’t Raid, what would you play?

— I’d say Mech Arena, despite the fact that I’m not good at PvP shooters, especially as a mobile app. It’s a cool, captivating, and very dynamic project. Team battles of giant robots in an arena — what could be better? If not Raid, then Mech Arena.

## — What professional media do you read to stay up to date on the industry? It can be game dev or linguistics.

— Game dev is pretty easy — I read the most popular English publications: Game Informer, IGN, Polygon. I like the Russian publication DTF, but that’s a mix of films, games, and pop culture in general. But it has customizable sections. I check out DTF pretty frequently for feedback on Russian localizations. It’s helpful to read it because it changes your perception of a project and you see how end users view it. It’s a pretty interesting life hack to improve service quality.

As for linguistics, it's harder for me to name individual resources and portals because they are most often broken up into categories. Some look at localization topics through the lens of marketing and others through community management. LinkedIn has communities of localization managers from various companies. They share experience and help create an atmosphere for networking — you can always find someone else who has encountered the same problems. Besides that, you can ask them about a specific market so you know, at least in general terms, what to expect.



# NICK CITKOŘ

Localization Producer at Paradox Interactive

**«Not every native speaker is capable of becoming a good translator»**

In his eight years in gamedev, Nick Citkoř has worked on a huge range of projects, from multiplayer online games to global historical strategy. Now he is a localization producer at Paradox Interactive and helps to launch projects in new markets.

Inlingo team talked to him about what gets in the way of localizing a game, how to assess the effectiveness of localization, and why translators really don't have to be native speakers.

**We interviewed Nick in January, 2023.**

## ***«I like it when I can improve something myself»***

**— You started off as a translator for a finance company and then got into game localization. How did you manage to make the jump between the two fields?**

— I always wanted to work in game development. I graduated from university, started looking for my first job, and applied at the same time for two positions, one at Wargaming and the other at the auditors Ernst & Young. By the time the Wargaming team sent me a test translation, I was already at the penultimate stage of interviews with Ernst & Young. I decided not to risk it, chose EY, and worked there for two years. Then I saw a vacancy at Wargaming again and thought, “Hmm, I should probably give it another try.” My second attempt was more successful.

**— Was it difficult to switch to gaming?**

— There was a lot of new stuff to learn — completely different tools, a different approach, different materials. At Ernst & Young, for example, we used translation databases a lot. Translation Memory is a real help when you need to translate a 100-page report, twenty pages of which are set formulas. There’s no point in translating them again, you just pull whole phrases from the database. But you can’t blindly trust databases, and that’s why we would check everything a thousand times over.

Working at Ernst & Young taught me to be hyper-attentive, because a single wrong figure in auditing for a big corporation can be very expensive. That experience has come in really useful. I still check my work with maximum care. I think that sometimes it’s even worth printing out your text so that you can see it on paper — that changes your perspective.

**— So, how did you end up moving from Wargaming to Paradox Interactive? Was it a conscious decision, or did the opportunity just arise?**

— There was one more step before Paradox Interactive — from Wargaming, I moved to the Belarusian company Vizor Games. Most of what they do is mobile games, but I worked in the department developing an experimental game for PC and consoles. I was hired as a localization manager, and I worked in the company for around a year and a half. By that time, I realized that I wanted to consider other opportunities.

I went on LinkedIn, and I saw the vacancy for a localization producer at Paradox. I was familiar with the company from my time at Wargaming, as we were competitors. Wargaming was developing the remaster of Master of Orion, while Paradox brought out Stellaris. We kept an eye on each other to see what the differences and similarities between the games were.

When I was choosing a new job, I thought that localizing Paradox's projects would be interesting. Their games are huge and really difficult. Now I can tell you I wasn't wrong — it's really not easy here, but it is awesome. There are lots of factors that need to be taken into account and lots of opportunities for optimization. I really like it when I can improve something myself.

**— Wargaming and Paradox make quite different games. Does genre have a big influence on the localization process and on your work specifically?**

— A very big influence. There are lots of fundamental details in Paradox games — the names of countries, parties, regions, units, etc. And everything works to scripts: when some action happens in the game, all that information is inserted into the text. This process often leads to complications, because these fundamental names have to agree in all languages.

The second issue is the events that happen in the game depending on your actions or in relatively random order. There are also loads of them, and they use substitution: the values are taken from the game, but the text is more literary here. So the translator has a little more room to maneuver.

## — How do you solve the problem of agreement?

— The system is complicated, and it doesn't work perfectly. We rely on the expertise of our localization staff. Our vendors put a lot of effort into teaching translators to customize scripts so that they work in the required languages. Of course, this means extra work for the translators, but for now it's the only way. Otherwise, the texts would be wooden.

We do get mistakes with custom scripts and agreements, but overall the texts are fairly lively. And we achieve this thanks, among other things, to the work of our main localization partner and several former and current mod makers that help us with localization scripting. Their team does a huge amount of work, and we're massively grateful to them.

## — What languages are the hardest in that respect?

— Of the ones that we support: Polish and Russian. Apart from them — French, Spanish, and German. If, let's say, the gender of a ruler changes, then we need customization to correct the endings of the verbs and the articles. We do that with the help of a script: the translator has to write the values of the variables in separate files, which are then processed in the game. It's a really complicated system, and we're looking for options to optimize all that.

## — How can that be done?

— There are two possibilities. The first is to come up with a grammatical engine ourselves for all the languages we are going to support. We'd look at all the problems that could arise in the particular languages: genders, cases, support of plurals, changes to parts of the clause depending on what variable is substituted. And then we'd work out how the engine could solve all that.

The second option is to go for a pre-existing solution. There's a huge choice. For the most straightforward example, we have the noun "ax" in English, so we write the translation "hache" in French. We note that it's feminine and singular. In that case, the

adjectives and articles that agree with “hache” will automatically be put in the feminine singular form.

Besides, it's important to look at the particular game. If the game is linear, there aren't many characters, and you can count the variables on your fingers, then it's unlikely you'll need to invent a grammatical engine of your own. However, if the project comprises millions of possibilities and a huge number of alternative plot developments, it's worth considering.

**— You've also developed custom tools that have allowed you to cut localization expenses. Can you tell us how that works?**

— I didn't do it all by myself. As part of my job, I've been lucky enough to come across some wonderful people in the localization industry. We came up with cool ideas together and had a chance to implement some of them. We've often collaborated when someone spoke up about an inconvenience — together, we've worked out how to deal with it. That's often how extra optimizations are devised.

When I was working at Wargaming, we had a project which often published announcements about discounts on specific types of goods. Every time, we worked to the standard plan: we were sent an announcement, we forwarded it to the translators, and we localized it. Over time, it became clear there was a pattern to the announcements — five introductory phrases and a list of goods that changed.

We wondered what the point was in localizing the introductory part every time if we could standardize it so that it was always the same. Then the goods could be taken from the database and the values substituted in different localizations. In other words, the source announcement arrives, the required values are pulled up, the description comes from the database, and everything's ready for publication. We made sure the localization came to the content, and not the other way around.

**— You've paid a lot of attention to setting up the processes of localization. Can you tell us what errors are most often made?**



— The fundamental mistake is short-sightedness. When a game is being developed, it's rare for anyone to think about it being localized into other languages. Sometimes, it's only once the project is 70-80% ready that people realize. By that time, going back to the start and trying to introduce internationalization is really painful. In that case, the localization is bound not to be perfect or even reasonably good. There will obviously be fundamental flaws in it that can't later be corrected. That's exactly why lots of people prefer to have nothing to do with it.

The second mistake is that lots of people don't consider the differences between alphabets. Several times, I've come across the problem of auto-capitalization in Turkish. They have two "i" letters, one with the dot and one without. So, if you don't think about it in advance, you'll end up with the wrong letter in lots of places. That has to be corrected at the level of code and fonts. You get the same thing with different figure and date formats. In an ideal world, those issues should be on your mind before the code is written, because correcting them with text methods later is basically impossible.

***«There has to be someone in the highlevel management who understands the importance of localization»***

**— In your opinion, when's the ideal time to think about localization?**

— I'd say at the very start of working on the text and the interface. When you decide what the game's going to look like and make the first playable. By then, you already have texts and elements of the interface, and that means you can get a localization expert and ask them to tell you what it's worth paying attention to, so that you can avoid problems later with launching into other language markets. Any good loc manager or producer has a guide with a list of important issues for internationalization. It's very important to keep these in mind during development.

**— Let's say I'm a localization producer. Who do I need to approach to ensure that localization is being considered as early as possible? And how do I convince them?**

— It's a difficult area, and it's probably one of the biggest problems in the localization field. Ideally, the developers contact the loc producer, rather than the other way around. There has to be someone in the high-level management who understands the importance of localization and is ready to stand up for it with you. If everybody thinks it's fast, simple, and basically of secondary importance, convincing them otherwise will be difficult.

You can try to convince them diplomatically and present information about similar projects. For example, by showing how project X grew after it was localized into other languages and how much revenue it brought. If that method doesn't work, you can come back to the question when you hit a bump and say, "We did this, and now we have this problem. The players have noticed it, and they're really unhappy about it." That may be when they realize that localization isn't as insignificant as they thought before.

But in a perfect world, of course, you don't end up in that situation. When I start on a project, I try at the very beginning of the work to talk to the leads of all departments connected with localization. That includes UI, narrative design, content design, and sometimes art too, marketing and support — basically, all the departments where there are letters and languages. I try to understand from the conversation how they work and whether or not I can fit in comfortably. Or whether we'll have to raze everything to the ground and try to build it all up from scratch.

**— So, if you manage to convince your colleagues, how do you set up a localization process that will run throughout development?**

— Now there are lots of cool tools in localization that allow you to do everything very early on. There are TMs and CAT tools that integrate with the tools for interface design and lots of other game development systems.

At this stage, you can already produce draft localizations and show what the text will look like in different languages. Then the team will understand that here on this button that we're planning to put ten symbols on, in Chinese there'll just be one character. So what do we do? After that, you just have to come up with options: to make the button dynamic or limit it according to the minimum length.

I was discussing a case like that just recently with my colleagues: what to do with a button that would have four characters on it in Chinese and 52 symbols in German. We came to the decision that it could be scaled up and down to a defined level.

## **«With translators, there are two extremes»**

**— I'll ask what's probably the hardest question for someone working in localization: how do you judge its effectiveness?**

— If anybody knows the exact answer to that question, please write to me [laughs]. I've spent a lot of time thinking about that. How do you measure the effect of localization on success in isolation? To be honest, I don't know. You can, of course, say that if there was no localization, fewer people in that market would've bought the game and it would've brought you less revenue. But how much less, you don't know.

If a game was launched in a market without localization, and the localization was subsequently added, then we can make an evaluation. We can see that before localization there were 1,000 players in the region, and afterward there are 10,000. And if nothing else changed, then you say that the localization earned 9,000 players. But that doesn't happen often. Lots of people prefer to launch localizations as part of a content update, and in that case you can't accurately discern what caused the increase in players.

**— What if you do a soft launch without localization and only add it afterward?**

— It's better to launch everything at once. True, we won't be able to evaluate how much the localization brings us, but at least we won't lose our player base because we didn't localize the game into their language in time.

If, after the launch, you get a growth in players in an unexpected region, however, it's worth adding localization post factum. For example, we launch a game and we see that activity is suddenly on the up in Türkiye, Italy, or Poland. If the game's not too big and the budget allows, why wouldn't you do a localization?

**— Does it happen with Paradox that you decide to add a new language pair?**

— Yes, but for us in particular, adding a new language after a huge amount of DLCs is really hard. There are already a million words in the game, and that means a new localization will cost a lot of money and take ages. Is it really worth it? Not always.

**— In your experience, is it better to hire freelance translators or LSP studios?**

— At Paradox, we use LSPs and freelancers. Of course, it's always more convenient to work with a team, especially when your resources are limited. If we have just one producer for four projects, it's unlikely they'll be able to manage ten individual translators per project. What they need is one contact person they can communicate with about any issues. That almost certainly means an LSP. Sometimes it happens that the individual translators who've been working with us for a long time join an LSP team and coordinate the work on their side.

LSPs are really good for particular tasks — for example, for working on marketing materials that don't require any super-specific knowledge. If we're talking about localizing a whole game, however, then I prefer working with individual translators. You can collaborate with them directly and onboard them yourself. That way, I know that they're almost certainly more involved in the process and I can rely on them. However, there are LSPs that

go above and beyond for your product, so it's very situational.

**— So you mean it's a question of trust?**

— Yes, I think so. Of course, there are risks — the well-known “bus factor.” If someone gets run over by a bus, what next? But in that case, you need to have other translators or localization agencies in mind that can take over in an emergency. That's not so hard to organize.

**— And what makes a good translator for you?**

— It's somebody who knows the language perfectly and has a real feel for it. Furthermore, they understand the cultural specifics of the countries where the language is spoken. For example, we had a Japanese guy who lived in the States for most of his life but still retained close ties with Japan and was an excellent translator.

Whether or not a translator is a native speaker isn't really that important. I'm not prejudiced against people who aren't natives. If you've learned a language to proficiency, can explain yourself perfectly in it, write and translate, then you're welcome. I worked with a narrative designer who was Russian but wrote amazing lore texts in English. For me, that was yet another confirmation that it's not essential to be a native. Furthermore, not every native speaker is capable of becoming a good translator.

**— Are there any criteria that stop you from choosing a translator?**

— Soft skills. I mean, if somebody translates perfectly, but it's not possible to communicate with them normally, then we're probably not going to work together. For example, if they're toxic and don't know how to ask questions or answer promptly without being passive-aggressive.

**— So a good translator shouldn't be afraid to ask questions?**

— With translators, there are two extremes. The first is when you ask questions as soon as they pop into your head. Then you

translate six more strings or take a look at the commentary and you find the answer. The other extreme is when you don't have questions at all. The translator says, "It's all good, I understand everything, I'll do it all." And then they miss all the context, which they should've asked about.

For me, the ideal translator spends a reasonable amount of time contemplating the challenge in front of them before involving you, but if they don't manage, they won't be shy to ask a question.

## ***«In historical games, the most important thing is neutrality»***

### **— What else is important to be a good translator?**

— Another thing is you have to know what tools there are on the market and how to use them. It's preferable if you have experience working with one or more tools. It's essential for translators working in game localization. From my experience, I can say that once you know one CAT tool, you can get a hang of any other fairly quickly — a week is more than enough. Furthermore, you need to know where to look up translations, synonyms, and word usage.

And your aggregate general knowledge about a language is very important too. You need to understand how real people would say what you're trying to express. Essentially, you can find that out in any work of literature. I think it's very important that a translator is reasonably well-read and has a good feel for the language. That's necessary to ensure their phrases aren't wooden or calques.

Moreover, you need to stay up-to-date with the contemporary context and keep your finger on the pulse of current affairs. Sometimes you have to avoid sore spots that weren't all that important a couple of months ago.

### **— What about how you organize work so that translators always submit on time but don't burn out in the process?**

— Now we're trying to diversify work on projects in a way that means there are no overlaps. By which I mean that a translator who is working on two projects doesn't get batches from both simultaneously. With our LSP, we agree that there are teams on standby, ready for specific projects that they always work on.

As for me, I try to always ask for a roadmap. Then I can estimate when we'll be receiving batches and share the information with the LSP in advance. That way, it's easier for them to plan the workload for their localization providers.

If we can see that there's a giant batch coming, then we'll try to warn them immediately, "Guys, we'll soon be flooded with work for two months. Get ready and get some other people involved. The word count will be huge."

**— Let's say we've done a localization and even performed LQA, but something went wrong. What's the right way to approach a debriefing? What do you focus on?**

— First of all, there are standard metrics — for example, the number of errors in a specific number of words. Then you need to pay attention to user feedback. If I've been sent a report or I can see that there's some scandal on the Spanish-language forum, I need to find out why people are unhappy.

There's one more important element, and that's feedback from the developer. They may tell us we've uploaded a file that overwrote the previous one. The previous one was already updated and that lead to problems. If issues like that come back from the development team, you have to take them into account and think about how to avoid them in the future.

**— Do player surveys really help? Because you go to Steam Reviews, for example, and you'll find a lot of unconstructive criticism.**

— That's true [laughs]. But you can formulate the surveys so that players have to write what exactly they don't like. You split

the questions into specific areas: are they happy with the style, the grammar, the spelling, the font? That way, the player can evaluate lots of different linguistic areas. But I'm sure there are some respondents who put ones everywhere.

In theory, you can send a follow-up asking for more detailed information and examples. You can give them some in-game benefits to compensate them for their time. Also, if you can see that everything's okay in all the other languages, but you're getting a hundred negative reviews about the style of one, that's something to take to the editor or LQA tester. You need to find out why it's happening.

## **«Paradox is for people who like thoughtful games»**

### **— Are there player communities that are particularly sensitive to localization errors?**

— Anyone can make a typo, that's not really a serious issue. It's far worse when you develop a game and you don't understand the cultural specifics of the markets you're planning to sell it in. If there's content in the game that's considered unacceptable in some countries, that's an enormous problem that can alienate your audience.

We track reviews for evidence of problems like that, so that if something does go wrong, we can correct it as fast as possible. But in most cases, we try to avoid mishaps in advance. Cases when something got into a game that nobody knew or thought about are very rare.

### **— But how do you avoid that in Paradox games? For example, the Hundred Years' War is perceived differently in England and in France.**

— The main thing is to stay as neutral as possible. By which I mean that you should avoid any value judgments and convey



the course of events as accurately as possible. Just the facts. In terms of historical realism, I think that's the best approach.

You have to bear in mind that in different countries there are different rules about what can be shown in a game. For example, with regard to symbols, flags, and other elements. That definitely needs to be considered.

**— What about if a game isn't very well received when it's launched, partly because of the localization? Is there any point in correcting errors?**

— That depends on sales plans. If you want to support the game further, then you absolutely have to fix the problem areas, otherwise, the players will just stop playing. If the game is unreadable and it's impossible to play it, then people won't care about DLCs and updates.

If the aim was to hype the game and get as much cash as you can in the first week, then you don't have to correct anything. You just say, "Sorry, we'll definitely take your concerns into account in the future, thank you for your constructive feedback." I mean, I'm not a fan of that approach, of course. It looks like a scam.

I want everything to look good. All deficiencies should be put right. At Paradox, we pay a lot of attention to community feedback, not just in regard to localization but also with events and scripts. We work with the player feedback that we get from our forums and convert it into Jira tickets, which are immediately assigned for work. That's great, I really like that approach.

**— Paradox recently released Victoria 3, which sold a whole 500,000 copies in the first few weeks. What do you attribute that to?**

— Lots of players wanted to see what the sequel of Victoria 2 was like. There are players who love the grand strategy games (GSG) genre, and they try to play everything in it. For them, it was interesting to see how Victoria 3 was different from other grand strategy games.

## — Did any difficulties arise during the localization process?

— Naturally. The example I gave about Turkish and the different letters “ı” is a problem that arose during the localization of Victoria. We sorted out the Unicode and the support for those symbols, as well as the fonts — one of them was a custom font that had been developed especially for Victoria.

It’s also the first Paradox product that has support for Turkish from the outset. Victoria became fairly successful in Türkiye, and our colleagues said that the Turkish players were very happy.

## — What’s your favorite Paradox project? Do you actually play the games that you work on?

— If we’re talking about the GSG genre, then my favorite project is Stellaris because I was already following it when I worked at Wargaming. As a result, I started to play it and spent quite a lot of time on it.

I also really like Paradox’s approach to publishing other games that weren’t developed by us. We try to find games that fit the company’s culture. By that I meant that they’re not mass market, they’re reasonably niche products that require you to sit, think, and strategize. They’re projects for people who like thoughtful games.

I didn’t use to know that some games were released by Paradox. I played Mount & Blade for hundreds of hours and only afterward realized, “Hey, it’s Paradox! Well, okay.” And there are lots of other really good products: Shadowrun, Pillars of Eternity, Tyranny.

## — What recent games have impressed you?

— I used to only play on PC — I never had a console. For that reason, I missed a lot of exclusives that only came out on PS. Now that I’ve bought a PS5, I decided to play the first God of War because it’s an amazing game and I really enjoyed watching walkthroughs back in the day. Recently I’ve finished Ragnarok — a great sequel!

And in general, I've played so many hours in a huge number of games. My personal preference is for story-driven games, ones that have a really good plot. For me, that's The Witcher, RDR, etc. Sometimes they're open-world, sometimes they're linear, but the main thing is that they have a good story that really resonates.

I love "talking simulators" from Telltale, Don't Nod, and Quantic Dream, as well as turn-based games, so I'm really looking forward to Baldur's Gate 3 and the sequel to The Wolf Among Us. I'm also going to play our own Age of Wonders 4 and The Lamplighters League!



# ANASTASIYA NIKOLAEVA

Localization Director  
at G5 Entertainment Group

***«We treat localization  
as an investment»***

Inlingo's CEO Pavel Tokarev spoke to Anastasiya Nikolaeva. We found out how the localization process is set up at G5 Entertainment Group, what criteria the team uses to choose suppliers, and what will change in the industry in the near future.

**We interviewed Anastasiya in September, 2019.**

## ***«The most difficult thing about my job is persuading everybody to adopt new methods»***

**— How did you start in the industry, and how has your career developed?**

— Let's start at the beginning. In 2011, I began my career as a QA tester for G5 Entertainment. I really liked testing and I planned to build my career in that area, but in 2013 I was assigned to streamline the system that we used to work with our outsourced team of localization testers.

After that, all work related to localization gradually started to get transferred to me. Now my job title is Localization Director, and I do everything in the company that's connected with localization, from management of internal and outsourced employees to development strategy across all areas of localization.

**— So that means that in eight years you managed to go from being a regular employee to managing the department. Can you tell us what difficulties you encountered along the way?**

— All my work involves changing established processes at some point. The most difficult thing about my job is persuading everybody to adopt new methods. People get used to working in a certain way, and even if their way isn't the easiest or most efficient way, they are rarely eager to change things.

An obvious example is introducing a CAT program for localization managers. At some point, everyone got used to sending Excel files back and forth, so it was difficult to convince people to learn a new program and prove to them that their old method wasn't efficient.

**— In my experience, I've found that if I approach an established team of ten people to introduce changes, I can manage to get five of them onto my side, and the rest either have to be fired or they leave of their own accord. How do you deal with this?**

— I try to be careful in my approach to situations like that: I find the people who will support me, and I try to rely on them as I introduce changes. We get the department together for a general meeting, and those guys talk about what they've done and the results they achieved — it's like internal PR for whatever solutions may be unpopular at that particular time. Then I record those solutions in case studies and make them available to everyone.

— **So you always use “white magic”?**

— Yes, I try to. But you do sometimes get situations where employees really can't deal with the changes, and that's when we part ways.



Hidden City, a hidden object game developed by G5E.

## ***«The localization manager can influence the development process»***

— **Tell me about the company today and about the projects you manage?**

— I work for G5 Entertainment Group. It's a Swedish publisher and developer of casual free-to-play games for smartphones and tablets. We develop games for Apple, Google, Amazon, and Windows platforms.

Our games are intended for the whole family. They have simple rules that are easy for experienced players and novices alike to understand. Our portfolio includes: Hidden City®, Mahjong Journey®, Survivors: The Quest®, The Secret Society®, Pirates & Pearls®, and Twin Moons®.

**— You said that localization for some projects is done in-house, and for others it is outsourced to agencies. How did you decide on this approach?**

— That's not quite right. Previously, we outsourced the localization of all our projects to agencies. Then, at some point, we started getting negative feedback on several localizations from users and journalists. At first, we passed this feedback on to the translators and corrected specific problems, but our efforts didn't improve the overall quality of the translations. So we decided that the problem must be the agency, and we found another one. But the same thing happened.

As a result, we came to the conclusion that for some languages we needed to hire freelance translators independently. Now we are continuing to expand our base of freelancers, primarily in languages where we want to improve localization quality.

**— Which languages did the agencies have trouble with? And what exactly were the problems?**

— It was always Asian languages. They were full of every kind of mistake imaginable, and it turned out the translations weren't being done by native speakers.

**— What is the structure of your localization department?**

— I lead a department of 15 localization managers, and they each work on a specific project. For some projects, there's a considerable volume of work, and in those cases several managers are involved simultaneously.

The localization manager plays an active role in a project's

development and can influence the development process. For example, they can say that one mock-up or other needs to be changed to avoid localization problems. The manager also directs a team of translators and localization testers.

**— What translation management and quality control programs do you use?**

— We use one of the CAT programs, and we do our QA checks there as well, with custom settings. Basically, we do all our different types of work in one program.

**— What services do you use for task management on projects?**

— We have a task tracker where we list tasks and a Gantt chart where we plan all the work. Everything is shared between projects, and then the data is collected in one overall chart.

**— Was it difficult to segway from planning by hand to a Gantt chart?**

— Transferring to a new system is always a cumbersome process. The chart helps us make the right decisions when choosing contractors for each project, and everyone understands that. If anyone sees mistakes made by someone else, then they just say something.

**— In your opinion, is localization more of an expense or an investment?**

— We treat localization as an investment. We have a standard cost list for localization. If there are any doubts about the profitability of a language, then we investigate the viability of supporting it and make a decision on whether to continue working with it or not. When we're trying out new localizations, we calculate their profitability at the beginning.

**— What period do you normally set when calculating profitability?**



— A minimum of six months. A year is ideal because several events with different profitability can happen in the course of a year.

## **«The localization manager can influence the development process»**

### **— What pluses and minuses do you see in working on localization in-house versus working with freelancers?**

— Unfortunately, I don't have any experience of working in-house. I've only worked with freelancers. The pluses are as follows:

First is the quality. The translation of a game is a creative process, and you can't do it if you don't like the game. We had a case where a translator messed up badly in every way, from deadlines to quality, even though we were very happy with his work on another project. We asked him directly what the problem was, and it turned out that he didn't like the most recent game, but played the previous game frequently with his wife and even organized mini-competitions. That was when we understood that it's very important to take the translator's tastes into account, as it has a significant effect on the quality of their work.

The second plus is that working with freelancers is cheaper than working with agencies because you cut out all the incidental expenses of running the agency.

However, we have one translator who has extremely high rates even when compared to agencies and, amazingly, her schedule is always full. She has stable statistics of zero errors per 1,000 words. The testers never even have suggestions for improvements to her texts. Furthermore, she offers advice on how best to adapt games to the market, she plays all our games and all our competitors' games, and she knows what games in the same genre are popular now in her region. She also regularly suggests corrections based on her user experience. For that level of work, we're happy to pay more.

### — So, those are the pluses. Are there any minuses?

— There are certain risks when you work with freelancers, of course. But any potential risks can be dealt with. Working with freelancers means we need a larger staff of in-house localization managers. And as well as our numbers, we also had to raise the requirements for our staff.

You also need to have a backup list of freelancers, as your main ones might go on vacation or get sick. We have a calendar where we keep track of vacations and public holidays — international and local — in every country where we employ freelancers.

### — What do you consider the minimum percentage of backup providers you need for each language pair to maintain stable operations?

— You need a minimum of half the total number as backup, in other words, five backups for every ten freelancers.

### — Do you ever run into the problem where a freelancer “deteriorates” if you don’t work with them for some time? If so, what do you do about it?

— In addition to an assigned localization manager, we also have an assigned team of translators and testers. If we notice that one regular provider has started to make mistakes, then we immediately look in our database to see who we can transfer the project to.

### — What criteria do you use to select localization providers?

— There’s a range of formal criteria: provision of all required services, ability to work with our software, the right price range, experience in our game genre, and the right quality of work. If a provider meets all the preliminary criteria, then we test them “in battle,” if you will. We check how well they adhere to deadlines, their attention to detail, their capacity for working overtime and on holidays, and basically their ability to fit into our systems well.

## — Could you say a few words about each of the criteria?

- **Provision of all required services.** I don't see any point in working with an LQA provider who can only provide services in some languages.
- **Work experience in our genre.** If a translator hasn't worked with hidden object games before, then we have to spend a lot of time explaining nuances, which is why we work with people who have already translated games in the genre.
- **Attention to detail.** As part of the test assignment, we provide a pool of documents that we ask the provider to study. Going by the results of the assignment, we can see whether or not the candidate has familiarized themselves with the documents. If they haven't looked at them at all, then we won't work with them because we don't write those rules to make the provider's life more difficult — we do it to make our staff's lives easier.
- **Consistency.** We place a great deal of weight on the plot of our games, so it's important for us that the texts for new updates are translated in accordance with the existing context. We prepare accompanying documentation — a glossary, style guide, and game build. If the mistakes we find show that a translator hasn't used the reference materials, then we probably won't work with them any further.
- **Adherence to deadlines.** Our games have events scheduled for specific holidays, and we can't move them. That's why it's very important for us that providers complete assignments by the stipulated deadlines. We had one translator who finished a project just a few hours before giving birth. The nurses literally had to wrest the computer out of her hands. That's an extreme situation, of course, but the level of commitment it shows is just incredible.

**— Was the translator from Japan, by any chance? The level of commitment that people have to their work there often leads to career burnout.**

— Yes, she was Japanese. They even have a word for the situation where people just disappear for a while. Not because they're irresponsible, but because they're burnt out from working. Karoshi (Japanese: 過労死), a Japanese term meaning death from overwork. Japan is one of a handful of countries that collect statistics specifically about Karoshi. The main medical causes of Karoshi are stress-related strokes and heart attacks.

**— What do you advise localization providers do to immerse themselves in the world of a project?**

— The most important thing is to play the game you're working on. You can't do a good translation if you don't see the product. Apart from that, it's important to play competitors' games. That's why our providers have most likely played other, similar games and are used to the specific terminology, names, etc. A player can get used to the fact that a booster is an object that helps you complete a level, but they may not actually understand the meaning of the word "booster." For us, it's very important to lower the barriers to entry into the game and reduce the number of new words at the start, thus helping the player get drawn into the game.

We also welcome deeper immersion, by which I mean getting even more familiar with the game world and the setting of the game. We recently released a game about Ancient Rome, and all of us had to refresh knowledge of that period in history.

**— Is there a minimum barrier to entry? How many hours does a translator need to play?**

— I can't give you a rough estimate, but I can say it has to be enough for them to get an understanding of the main content. Of course, some games don't have a plot, but they still normally have some kind of tutorial that you need to complete.

## **«The localization industry is moving toward in-house developers»**

**— What's the future of the localization industry? What services will be in demand in the near future?**

— Localization really isn't just translation, it's working with the developers so that the game is as financially successful as possible in the target market.

That's the responsibility and the motivation of the people working within the company, who are really immersed in the project. I've yet to see any manager from an agency who's thinking along the lines of: "What can we do to help our client earn more money in this or that market?"

I think that the localization industry is moving toward in-house developers. Over time, more and more game producers will get personally involved in the search for translators or use the same freelancers on a regular basis. There will be an additional role for MLVs (multi-language vendors) — localization consulting. In other words, developing processes and finding providers for game producers.

In any case, there will still be companies that outsource their localization services, but achieving a high-quality product will be very difficult with this method.

**— Sometimes I wake up thinking, "What if Google learns to localize?" What do you think, will machine translation be able to replace human translators in the next 5–10 years?**

— There are different types of text. For UI texts, help pages, and FAQs, automated translation techniques are already widely used. However, I sincerely doubt that will ever work for creative texts. It is an art, after all. You need to convey character through dialogue and engage the user in the story. I don't yet see a way to do that with machine translation.

— Thanks for the reassurance. Anastasiya, I understand that you have a massive workload — 15 people in your department and around 100 freelance translators. Could you tell us your approach to staff management and to your personal time management?

— I can't say that I'm good at managing my own time — here we are talking on a Saturday evening, for example. But I think that if you recognize a problem, it's much easier to solve it.

Last year, I recognized that because I was not getting enough sleep, my brain was just spending half the day wondering where the next cup of coffee was coming from. I tried to make myself go to bed earlier, but there was always something super-important to do. Then I thought that I should plan some things for the early morning, but getting up at 6 a.m. just to read a book wasn't easy. Then at around the same time I decided I wanted to learn Japanese, and the only teacher I could find was in a different time zone. We scheduled lessons for 6 a.m., and that helped me get used to getting up early. It was extremely difficult, but I'm proud that I managed to do it.

— You once sent me some recommendations on correspondence. Could you list three of the biggest mistakes that you come across in letters from freelancers?

— Being over-formal. It's not like we're working for Gazprom, and emails of the "I would hereby like to inform you" or "My Dear Ms. Nikolaeva" variety sound very strange in the casual world of gamedev. To be honest, I don't remember exactly what I sent you. It was probably Ilyakhov's book Pishi, Sokrashchai ["Write and Shorten"], which I recommend to everyone.

— Do you really still get messages like that? Ones addressed to "My Dear Ms. Nikolaeva"?

— It does happen. I think that people in general are reading less and less. So, even in games, we need to work out how to get

everything we want to say across in as few words as possible. I don't think that users play games to read text.

— **Last question. Could you tell us what three qualities you value most in your employees?**

— I like working with people who are engaged in their profession and who want to develop within their industry. I value honesty and directness in employees, as well as an unorthodox approach to routine assignments.



# SARAH MÜLLER

Head of Localization at Gameforge

*«Translators need to channel their skills towards editing»*

Gameforge was founded in 2003 and released their first game — the space-themed simulator OGame. The company now distributes dozens of games translated into more than 50 languages. The Inlingo team spoke to Head of Localization Sarah Müller, who's been part of the company for 17 years now. We discovered how AI is affecting the translation process, what's in store for indie developers over the next few years, and how the localization department developed at Gameforge.

**We interviewed Sarah in April, 2023.**



## **«There's a massive amount of user content in the industry»**

**— You've been working at Gameforge for almost 17 years. How did it all start?**

— Before working at Gameforge, I played OGame, and was a member of the project's voluntary gaming team. I later went to university in Karlsruhe, where our company actually happens to be headquartered, and began looking for a part-time job. I applied for the position of community-manager as a student job, and they hired me.

**— How has the company changed over the past 17 years?**

— The biggest change has been the company's growth. There were 20 employees on the payroll 17 years ago, but now there are around 300 people working at our company. Apart from that, I think another important stage was launching the Metin2, NosTale, AION, Elsword and Ikariam projects. It's been over 10 years since they were launched, but they're still popular with gamers to this day.

If we're talking about new achievements, then it's got to be localizing Swords of Legends Online. It was a mammoth task: the translation of around 3 million words into 3 languages within tight deadlines. The large volume of information and tough deadlines weren't the only challenges, we also had to coordinate the work of payroll employees and freelancers. We did it, and gave gamers the gift of quality content that immersed them in the wonderful world of SOLO.

**— In an industry where young people are inclined to change jobs every couple of years, staying in one company for such a long time seems fairly unusual. What keeps you working at Gameforge?**

— One of the main reasons is people. There's a very close-knit team at our company. We love working together, overcoming

each new obstacle that comes our way. Each of us is genuinely inspired by what we do. And not only is this passion a source of motivation, it also tends to be contagious.

Challenging tasks are another source of motivation for me. We have a lot of work and face challenges every day, but we can even get great satisfaction out of them. Developers and games are constantly changing, so even after 17 years, I'm still facing new problems and learning new things.



SOLO — action MMORPG from Gameforge. Source: Steam.

— **Gameforge started with client-and browser-based games, then transitioned to mobile games, and has recently begun working with indie game developers. Which projects do you think you'll be working with 5 years from now?**

— Creating the IndieForge label showed us that the indie sector is growing and evolving (ed. IndieForge is a division of Gameforge that supports small independent game studios from across the globe). We were caught up in a MMORPG mania of sorts for a while, but we've been exploring the indie sphere for the last few years. Our team discovered a number of fascinating indie games, and we wanted to help bring them to the market. We're likely

to continue working with this particular sector over the coming years. There's a massive amount of user content in the industry — this trend is only set to increase.

We continue to support some of our classic MMO games and their global communities, but Gameforge is growing and changing in parallel. We now have a whole New Games team dedicated to new projects. Some of them are still being kept secret, but we'll be making a couple of interesting announcements in the coming months.

***«If a developer wants their game to be successful, they need to think about the global market»***

**— You started out as a community manager, but then turned your attention to localization. Why?**

— When I arrived at Gameforge, there was no special person or department responsible for localization. The community managers themselves had to manage the translation of games into their native languages — typically English or German. When we had a volunteer who was prepared to complete the translation of one game or another, a relevant manager would be assigned to oversee their work.

The company grew over time, as did the volume of translation required. The global community broadened, and so did the number of languages that projects needed to be translated into. My boss at the time suggested broadening the structure of our studio and creating a localization department. I took on all the organizational matters: tools, processes, staff, and vendors. That's how an entire department was built from scratch at Gameforge.

**— A couple of years ago, you told Slator that one of the biggest problems in your job is getting developers to understand what exactly localization involves. We often hear industry experts say that developers underestimate the importance of localization.**

## Is it possible to say the situation has improved somehow over the years?

— Some teams now understand what localization is and which points are important for the process to run smoothly. These are generally developers who didn't think about adapting a project for different regions at first, but learned the hard way by then having to correct their own mistakes.

This task is now made easier by engines like Unity and Unreal with built-in translation dashboards — they help a little. However, some things still need to be repeated time and time again — that we need more context, and that the automatic conversion of lowercase letters into uppercase may not be appropriate for certain languages.

It gets even more interesting when changes are made to the game, e.g., gender markers. But we can solve these kinds of problems fairly quickly and effectively thanks to our vast experience.

## — Why should developers in particular think about how their game will be localized?

— It all depends on business objectives. If a developer wants their game to be successful, they need to think about the global market, not about the requirements of one specific country or even one region. It's very important to deliver content in the languages of potential users, which will significantly increase the project's popularity. English has become a lingua franca of sorts, but researchers still believe people are more than likely to spend time and money on a project which has been localized for their countries.

## — At this stage, are the developers working with you at Gameforge beginning to plan localization? Could you tell us what developers do to make your job easier?

— For new products developed at Gameforge, we provide a list of requirements — it should be taken into account from the very

first stages of work. It becomes a well-honed process over time: when new functions appear or changes are planned, developers already know what they should do that's important.

When it comes to translating products offered by third-party developers, it all depends on how soon in the development stage we receive the product, and how much experience the developer has of localization. We take meeting the client's requirements and deadlines very seriously. It's absolutely crucial to adapt to the other company's workflow — it's very often different from our own.

**— How do you tell a good translation of a game from a bad one? Can an excellent translator from a different field quickly adapt to game localization?**

— A good translator of games should have a deep linguistic knowledge of both the source- and target-language they work with. They should take an interest in the products they translate, and should also be familiar with gaming terminology.

Apart from that, they should have an idea of the technical side of the text reflected in the game — tags, formatting and variables. They need to be careful with these elements so that they appear correctly in the translation. Amongst other things, a general understanding of gaming mechanics will help them find the appropriate terms for skills, characteristics and other details.

A translator from a different industry can pivot to game localization if they possess all the above, and can quickly pick up gaming terminology. Sometimes a creative approach can be even more important than just a good translation.

**— With the arrival of machine translation post-editing (MTPE), do you think the role of editors is becoming more important?**

— We still need people to achieve high quality, but their role is gradually changing. Translators need to pivot their skills towards editing, familiarize themselves with new technologies, and learn how to use them.

— How can you make localization high-quality and fast? Do you have some sort of secret?

— I think everyone has their own secrets. One of them is a team of translators with a proven track record who can ensure high quality even when deadlines are tight. Another thing that helps achieve a result is having experienced localization managers monitor the workflow and answer all the questions.

One factor of no small importance is having the right tools and good skills to work with them. I recommend getting familiar with continuous localization, and running quality assessment throughout the entire course of the project, not just at the end.

— Does Gameforge use any machine translation in the localization process?

— In certain cases we do that, but only for documentation which isn't intended for the user. The technologies available at present still aren't good enough to grasp the context and style of the source text. When using machine translation, problems also arise with variables — ones like {1}, {2}, {3}. They're often used in sentences to replace relevant numbers, names, and named items. But variables can even occasionally cause problems for translators.

— Some experts say AI will change localization in the next 5 years, while others predict faster changes. In your view, what should we expect?

— I'm confident AI will begin to be used for translation sooner or later. When exactly? I don't know the answer to that. But we should always be prepared for changes. Experts should already be studying post-editing methods and ways to interact with systems such as ChatGPT, in order to get the best results in the shortest possible time frame.

***«AI is just a means of creating a lot of content in a very short space of time»***

**— Do you believe ChatGPT will change the way game studios or the creators of games work with localization forever?**

— I believe a lot of things will soon be reworked and adapted for new technologies. The use of AI is just a means of creating a lot of content in a very short space of time. It could lead to an increase in the number of indie games with plots that no longer need to be created by a huge team.

We tested AI for our objectives and found it still can't be used as the starting point to create content for games and marketing purposes — only as a supplement.

**— Developers have begun integrating AI dialog generators into their projects to make dialogs with non-game characters more captivating. If this trend catches on, how will it affect the localization process?**

— If that happens, the part of localization that still uses humans will be no more. If AI is already there, why try to extract it from the game in order to translate it and then reintroduce it back into the game? Developers want to use it to translate content directly. But they're unaware of the problems AI can lead to.

We're now encountering cases time and time again, where machine translation can't understand the precise meaning or intention in the source language. Even the most advanced technology needs to be checked by a human, as robots aren't constantly immersed in the culture, traditions or the history of another country. It's important to keep all of this in mind during localization.

**— Have you made any mistakes entering new markets? Tell us what can go wrong.**

— It's usually small mistakes. For instance, cultural issues which hadn't crossed our minds before can always crop up. Thanks to reviews from the community team, we can spot them and make changes which take the nuances of a language into account or use the appropriate terms.

In rare cases there are also problems with the text — sometimes it gets cut if it's too long. On even rarer occasions, the meaning of a word in the source language can be drastically different from the one that ends up in the game — that happens if the meaning of the word can change depending on the context.

Certain games still in the trial stages have featured funny translations by AI, e.g., the word «wrap» in the source language was changed to «burrito» in the target language. That's exactly why in our case, the text undergoes multiple levels of translation, editing, import, export and correction before ending up in the game.

**— The game industry is on the rise in Middle Eastern and North African countries. In your experience, what are the biggest problems when translating games into Arabic?**

— Arabic is written and read from right to left. This is one of the biggest problems in and of itself — not only do you need to have the appropriate translations, you also need to adapt the game by changing the whole user interface and icons.

Apart from that, problems can also arise with cultural adaptation. The content shouldn't mention short skirts or alcohol. These points are hard to change. We sometimes edited visuals where the developers thought it was possible. In other cases, we were only able to change the wording to avoid delaying the game's launch.

***«The geography of game launches is only set to expand»***

**— And what's the situation with the game industry in India? How can game developers and publishers reach audiences there, where people speak so many different languages?**

— As the head of a Western publisher, we're primarily oriented towards audiences in Europe, North America and Latin America. This mainly has to do with licensing, as our partner developers



often have publishers in other regions, including MENA (ed. Middle East and North Africa). If a developer comes along in the future who'd like us to launch their game in India, there's nothing to stop us from doing that.

We're very aware of India's size and potential as a market, and also have great respect for Indian people and culture. We're happy when we see the Indian media discussing some of our games and updates. I'm sure it's only the tip of the iceberg — we see what's written and published in European languages.

Gamers in India are known to be highly proficient in English. We hope they'll be able to enjoy a taster of some of our games. Many of them are free — you can play for a couple of hours to see whether it's worth continuing.

**— Are there any other developing markets where more localization efforts will be needed in the coming years?**

— As Western publishers, we sometimes transcend our regional boundaries out of interest, and publish games in Brazil, China and Japan. We have various ideas when it comes to MENA, but I can't share them publicly at this stage.

As far as the overall game industry is concerned... My sincere hope is that the geography of game launches is only set to expand. We live in times of globalization with an increasingly competent workforce, and the quality of tools is increasing, so the future looks very promising. I hope we can continue bringing people together with the help of video games and entertainment.

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