

Adventures in English: The Challenges of Localising Comedy

Mark Estdale
Founder, OMUK
@3571



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My name is Mark Estdale, I'm the founder of OMUK, a production company that specialises in all aspects of casting and voice recording for video games. We're currently working on Horizon: Zero Dawn and Telltale's Game of Thrones series. As a high proportion of our clients are international, where English is not their native language, we often get referred to as localisers.

In the 20 years since we started we've seen the commitment to quality in localisation grow, as more and more companies realise the financial advantages of producing good localisations. The biggest challenge for many developers has been in adapting production to be localisation friendly. And as localising comedy is notoriously difficult it is one area that clearly reveals where problems may lie.

This talk is about localising comedy.

But before I get going I want to thank Dan Connors and Kevin Bruner from Telltale Games, Poki and Carsten from Daedalic and Jan Theysen, and Critter from King Art for trusting their comedy adventure games to us and providing the material I needed for this talk.

Overview

- Challenges of translating comedy
- Telltale Games
- Deponia
- Book of Unwritten Tales 2
- Questions



I'm going to look at some of the general challenges of translating comedy and will look at how our approach to localising comedy has evolved to address them.

Working with Telltale Games emphasised the power of collaboration and attention to detail. I'm going to cover how these things lead to an evolution in our work localising the Deponia series and the Book of Unwritten Tales titles.

Black **Burlesque** **Caricature**
Blunder **Blue** **Screwball** **Ironic**
Abstract **Stand-Up** **Farce** **Puns**
Sit Com **Parody** **Slapstick**
Hyperbolic **Satire** **Gallows**
Situational **Mordant** **Deadpan**
Nonsensism **Rom Com**
Highbrow **Juvenile** **Word Play**

Comedy can be broken down into lots of different genres: slapstick, wordplay, farce, deadpan, the list goes on and on. But for the sake of simplicity I'm going to focus the biggest challenges.



Last year, an Australian news anchor was interviewing the Dalai Lama with the aid of an interpreter. He decided to open the exchange with a classic Dalai Lama joke.

This clip illustrates the core issues perfectly. There are huge risks in getting humour to cross borders. A great gag in one culture can fall flat in another.

Culture is a barrier even when the same language is involved. UK TV shows like *The Office* and *Shameless* were redone for the US audience. Interestingly the US version of *The Office* got better the more it evolved away from staying true to the original UK version.



One form of humour that does cross borders is visual humour. There is universal appeal. Charlie Chaplin, Laurel and Hardy, Mr. Bean all globe trot with ease. They avoid the biggest barrier of language.

When words are involved it gets tougher.



STEP LADDER

Translating verbal humour can be difficult, and in some instances, impossible. The humour in puns or wordplay generally come from exploiting the multiple meanings of similar sounding words. These similarities frequently don't exist between languages. Here the English pun is based on a play of the word step-father with step-ladder.



STEP LADDER



Trittleiter

In German the corresponding words make this word-play impossible when translated.



Monkey Island 2



A while ago I was speaking with an adventure game developer about some really odd puzzles he had in his game. Like most adventure gamers he was influenced by Lucas Arts. In our discussion he talked about Monkey Island 2, He said in his defence “If you think my puzzles are weird what about Guybrush having to have sex with a monkey to stop a waterfall.”

At the time I had no idea what the he was talking about so I checked it out.

The funny thing is he thought the puzzle really cool even though he completely missed the simple American wordplay.

If you’re unfamiliar with MI2 - Guybrush needs to close a valve to turn off the waterfall. In Britain a spanner does the job, but in the US it’s a Monkey Wrench. Hence the monkey. A classic visual gag.

While the humour in the writing had been missed it didn’t really matter that much and the playing experience wasn’t lost.



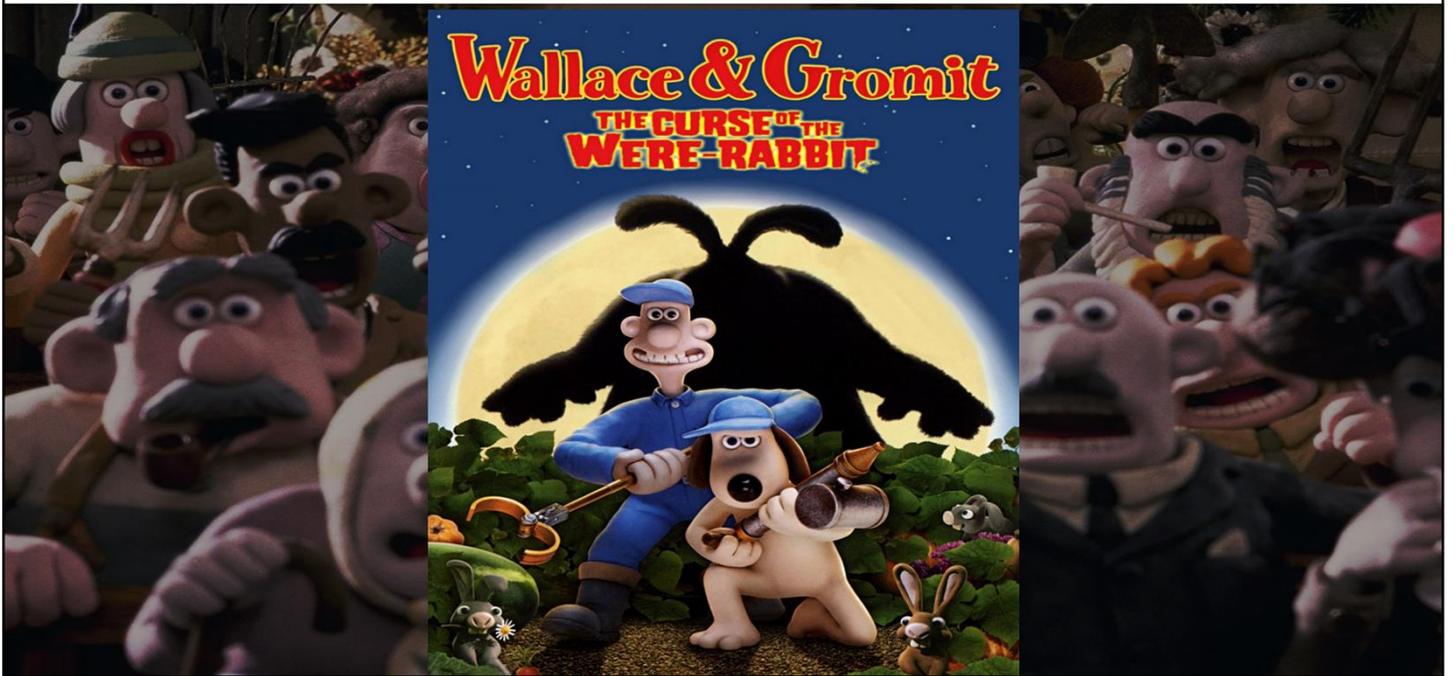
The Great Vegetable Plot



Another example of words not localising was the classic Aardman Animation: “The Great Vegetable Plot”.

Audience research in America threw up two problems: vegetables were a not a good topic with American kids, and Americans didn’t understand the wordplay on plot (which in the UK is both a plan and a place where you plant vegetables).

And so the title was changed and “The Curse of the Were-Rabbit” was born.



I was actually hired by Frontier Developments to cast and record voices for “The Curse of the Were-Rabbit” game. It was a great production to work on but best of all it helped open the door for me to go on a grand adventure with Telltale Games.



Wallace & Gromit's Grand Adventures



Wallace & Gromit is quintessentially a very British comedy, it's gentle and character driven. It relies on the subtle relationships between the characters. In an interview last year, Wallace & Gromit's creator Nick Park said "With clay, you can create character out of tiny nuances." Telltale understood this completely and their team worked in close collaboration with Aardman. Their challenge was to keep true to the spirit of the original animations, and getting the interactions and nuances right was key.

At the time I had started to develop tools to enable an approach to dialogue recording that I would come to call game immersive voice recording. The focus of the tools is to provide the actors with game context needed to immerse themselves in the game during recording. When I discussed what I was doing with Telltale they agreed to use the tools for the recordings. They recognised that the tools would help them get the subtle and connected performances that were key for Wallace & Gromit



Wallace & Gromit's Grand Adventures



Telltale's approach to the script was a ruthless and collaborative attention to detail. The writing is everything to them. Every word had to justify its existence. The fundamental question was always: does the word add to the scene? If it added nothing then it was either changed or removed. This carefulness about the intention and impact of the words made a big impression.

Although this was not a localisation project, we saw clearly how powerful Telltale's collaborative attention to detail would be for localisation. So we started looking at ways to integrate their approach for translators so we could get game immersive translation.



When we were first brought in to work on the Deponia series we were just hired to cast and record the English voices as the text had already been translated from German.

One of the things that became clear to us as we read the script was that the translation had been completed without the full context of the game. The translators had worked from the script alone. Although this is common practice it does lead to errors and a loss of subtlety. Some of the dialogue lacked incisiveness and some of Poki's word plays were literally lost in translation.

As part of our game immersive approach we wanted the assets to give us context to help fix the issues. Daedalic were able to give us as many game assets as we wanted, screen shots, character images, and artwork and a build of the game, also Poki came and joined us in the studio for the recordings and together we reshaped the script in session. So we were able to work to context and fix many of the problems.



Character	German	Final translation
Rufus	Was ist das für ein Kratzen?	What's that scratching noise?
Rufus	Kommt es etwa da aus dem Kasten?	Is that coming from behind the hatch?
Postbot	Das sind die Ersatzpostkatzen, die da kratzen.	Yes, it's the postal-service-replacement-cats' scratches you catch.
Rufus	Das Kratzen in dem Kasten kommt von Ersatzpostkatzen?	The scratching from behind the hatch matches that of postal-service-replacement-cats exactly.
Postbot	Es ist der Ersatzpostkatzenkasten.	It's the unlatched postal-service-replacement-cats-hatch.
Rufus	Ah, ich beginne zu verstehen.	<i>There was a really funny joke here in the German version.</i>
Rufus	Es ist ein Spannbettlaken!	<i>Unfortunately it got lost in translation.</i>

There were times in Deponia where it was simply not possible to literally translate the joke. So instead we tried to maintain the essence of the scene and found different ways to be funny.

Unknown to us, the way we were fixing the translation would have gained strong approval from some of the most prominent translation academics.

In his book “Is that a fish in your ear?” Professor David Bellos discusses what he calls the “myth of literal translation”. He argues that the key to translating comedy “lies NOT in preserving the literal text of the original but instead ABANDON the idea of perfect fidelity and try to find humour that rings some of the same bells as the original.”

Without knowledge of the context it would have been impossible to improve the English

A lack of context shackles you to the literal



When you don't have context you are shackled to the literal. It is obvious but it is one thing that is frequently overlooked when localising games.

Using the context of a scene you can deal with any conflicts caused by word-play by focusing instead on preserving the momentum of a scene.

Abandon the literal – context sets you free



In the end, we only changed about 25% of the Deponia script. In doing so we had moved away from the literal translation of the game and gave prominence to maintaining the intent of the characters and developing the relationships between characters.



While Deponia was a ‘fix in the mix’ production, with Book of Unwritten Tales 2 we took it on from scratch.

However the script was huge and the deadline was very tight so we needed three translators.

Taking the lesson we had learnt from Telltale about the power of collaboration we decided to experiment with the dream writing model of the writers room.

The Writers Room is proven when it comes to comedy writing, just think of some of the biggest comedy shows in the last few decades: Saturday Night Live, Friends, The Simpsons – they all wrote collaboratively round table. So we decided to try it out for translation.

Instead of giving the translators each chunks of script to work on we allocated them each one of the 3 payable characters to champion.

Our next step was to get as much context as possible. KingArt let us have their prototype builds, artwork, audio and supporting documents.

We then got the translators to play through the game before they started translating.



We then asked the translators to work ‘round table’ on every scene, keeping to intent rather than being restrained by fidelity to the original script.

Although time was tight we knew that familiarity with the game would cut down the need for QA time. No guesswork and consequent bugs, and a reduced need for asking questions and waiting for answers.

The comedy in BoUT was like Deponia, and Wallace & Gromit. The charm of the game hangs on the relationships between characters. Finally we made sure there was utter clarity with the characters.

The characters were cast and had a voice before translation began. This helped the translators write the character’s dialogue in their voice.

Nate the hapless American Hero



Ivo the Elf very English

And for Wilber – Welsh was perfect

Creating cultural differences between the characters helped with making the humour work. All the other characters were thought out in a similar way. From the Yorkshire Pirate, to the Birmingham politician with her annoying American daughter.

The characters themselves, and the situations they were in were enough for the comedy. This gave us greater freedom to be creative with the script.

The translators bought into this vision and together they worked through every scene, discussing the language and outcomes. They avoided the literal.

Here's just one example with Wilber



This scene is just one example of abandoning the literal.

Wilber wants to get across a lake and he is set a series of 3 frustrating puzzles to complete before he gets the information he needs to cross the lake. He completes the puzzles and now get's the information he needs.

The actual scene caused a heated debate in the studio as it was flagged as a mistranslation.

The response to Wilber's "It doesn't look like ice" in German is:



Original German:

“Weil es hier unten völlig windstill ist! Ohne Wellen und Blasen im Eis sieht gefrorenes Wasser aus wie... Wasser.”

Literal translation:

“Because it’s deadly calm down here! Without waves or bubbles in the ice, frozen water looks like... water.”

Now the German worked in German, but the literal translation didn’t work in English. It was too wordy and we thought a funnier line would be a simple shrug off.

Focussing on the intention, and NOT the literal, is about preserving the momentum and tension in a scene above all else. So the original 19 word sentence in German was eventually translated as one word:

So?



This change would not have been possible without knowing the context of the scene. The context brings meaning to the moment and makes it possible to escape the literal.

Knowing the purpose means you can keep to purpose. And knowing what's going on in any moment leaves you free to discover the humour. To do this you need **CONTEXT**.

It is context empowers comedy to cross borders as it means the literal can be abandoned.



Conclusion

- Abandon the literal
- Attention to detail
- Develop characters and their relationships
- Collaborate and share
- Context is king

In conclusion, the keys to successfully localising comedy lie in putting fidelity to the intention of a scene above fidelity to the words that create it.

Attention to detail will help you faithfully capture the essence and intention of a scene.

Develop your characters and the relationships between them. These are fundamental to comedy in any situation.

Working collaboratively is actually fun and inspiring and it helps give depth to the characters and breathes life into both the script and the comedy.

As developers, share as much as you can as this helps everyone understand the context and make the writing and the performance work. This may mean adapting your pipelines but the impact will be significant.

It is context that makes it possible to escape from a literal translation. Without it you have only the words to work from.

Finally, its worth noting that this holds true for all aspects of localisation and voice recording, not just localising comedy.



Questions?

Mark Estdale
@3571
mark@omuk.com

