



THE FOREST SONG

Bokmal Interview

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Reporter:

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Interviewees:

Sean Vesce, Co-Founder / Development Director

Dima Veryovka, Co-Founder / Creative Director

Jonathan Gregoire, Lead Game Designer

1. It must be not a simple task to turn a piece of classic literature into a video-game. Please, tell us a bit about this process! What's the hardest part of it?

Adaptations are daunting challenges regardless of the media you are bridging or source material you've chosen to adapt. Successful adaptations must, in equal measures, respect the original source material and author intent, respect the strengths and limitations of the medium you adapting the work to all while offering a fresh interpretation of the work so that it speaks to new audiences.

Our process for adapting Lisova Pisnya began when we were first introduced to an excellent English translation of the drama written by Percival Cundy

<http://bit.ly/23eeNFb>). Cundy's translation is highly regarded - a faithful and beautiful translation which manages to retain the poetic nuance of Ukrainka's original work. Over the course of many readings we began to uncover the central themes and plot points, a clear picture of the characters - their motivation and progression, and formed opinions about Ukrainka's intentions. In addition to the original, the team had a lot of fun immersing ourselves in various film and television adaptations of the drama through time. This was especially interesting to see how others artists had adapted the work for popular mediums of their time.

With the amazing support of our folklore advisors at Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv we began to formulate a deep understanding of the work and its relevance to Ukrainians.

On the other side of the adaptation process is the work we do to formulate our aspirations for the kind of game we want to make -- what mechanics, emotions and actions we want players to experience and what themes and messages we want to communicate.

From there it's a constant iterative process in identifying which elements from the source material and our design aspirations are naturally compatible, which need modification to achieve our common intent while respecting the source material and which elements are just incompatible.

In the case of adapting *Lisova Pisnya*, the most challenging part for us has been the added requirement of developing a clear understanding of Ukrainian history, traditions and culture to deepen our context for Ukrainka's beautiful drama. This was a challenge even for our Creative Director, Dima Veryovka, who grew up in Odessa but lamented the fact that he hadn't spent enough time learning about the richness of his traditional Ukrainian culture. So for all of us it's been an amazing journey.

2. What other Ukrainian books (except for the "Forest Song") were you considering as a foundation for the game? Why did you choose the "Forest Song" and not something else?

We were introduced to many Ukrainian works, but when we were introduced to Lisova Pisnya we fell in love the drama and began to envision a game based on the world and characters. We were attracted to the fact that the story speaks to people on so many different levels -- is it a drama about love? About our connection to nature and the supernatural? Is it a cautionary tale about the consequences of turning one's back on the responsibility of stewardship of the land? Is it a parable about following your true passions? It's about all of these things and more.

We came to understand that Ukrainka herself was influenced by the traditions and mythologies rooted in Ukraine's deep ethnic past. Having previously worked on the Never Alone project which explored Alaska Native mythology, this aspect of the work was deeply moving and inspiring to us.

Like many Ukrainians Dima studied Lisova Pisnya in his early education but the rest of the American team had never even heard of Lesya Ukrainka! When we read it for the first time, it was like discovering a rare gemstone - it was hard to believe that something so beautiful existed that was right under our noses. We quickly realized that a videogame adaptation of Lisova Pisnya could be a powerful tool to invite a global audience to share and celebrate the richness of this classic Ukrainian story while at the same time revitalizing the work for Ukrainians to rediscover.

3. From the description of the "Forest Song" on your site it seems that the game will be less about platforming and more about puzzles. What will be the main gameplay differences between "Never Alone" and "Forest Song"?

As we started conceptual development on The Forest Song, we realized we had much different aspirations for the mechanics and style of play than we had during Never Alone and quickly landed on creating a First Person Adventure. The Forest Song is naturally a much more immersive experience that encourages deeper player choice, creative problem solving and a higher degree of replayability. The game inspires players to learn about a new culture in a much more experiential way. In the Forest Song we have designed cultural elements directly into the scenario and mechanics

design such that achieving the game goals means you are intrinsically learning and practicing cultural traditions and values. While we still plan to include Cultural Insights (short non-interactive videos in which members of the community share information with players in their own voice), we are working hard to embed these lessons directly into the gameplay.

4. In the description you mention a magic flute that can manipulate time. Will there be several possible paths or several possible endings to the game?

While it's too early to share details about this, we are exploring designs to allow players to make critical choices and experience the outcome of those decisions. We are really interested in concept of reflecting on the events in one's life and pondering how things might be different if we made different choices. In the context of Lisova Pisnya, we've spent many hours debating what would have happened to Lukash had he acted differently at key points in the drama.

5. Do you believe a Ukrainian-culture-inspired game can gather as many players as "Never Alone"?

We believe that games inspired by World Culture appeal to a very wide audience if they are great games at their core. We also happen to believe that many players are looking for more than just pure entertainment from their game experiences. Because of the wide diversity of players these days we see vast audiences seeking to have both their reflexes and intellect challenged.

In terms of Ukrainian culture, we see an opportunity with The Forest Song to help spark curiosity in Slavic culture. As we've come to discover through our first cultural expedition to Western Ukraine there are so many beautiful things to discover about Slavic mythology, traditional spirituality, rites and rituals and history. It's a shame that for many people outside of this region, their only context is through the lens of modern news media whose depiction of the people of this region is narrowly defined by ongoing political and social challenges. We hope that through a video game we can expand people's understanding and appreciation for the cultural richness of this region.

6. Perhaps it would be a little bit strange question. Will there be a Ukrainian-language version of your next game?

For Never Alone we made a conscious decision to go against conventional marketing wisdom and present the game in the Alaska Native Iñupiaq language. This bet paid off as evidenced by how deeply the game affected such a large audience. We plan to present The Forest Song in Ukrainian language with subtitles in as many languages as we can possibly localize the game as possible. In our mind, there is no more immersive and beautiful way to experience an adaptation of Lisova Pisnya than in its original language.

7. It is getting obvious that your studio is into making games about not-so-well-known cultures of the world. What cultures are you going to explore after the "Forest Song"?

It has been a real privilege to be able to work on games like we have the past few years. These types of games afford us the unique opportunity to collaborate with amazing people around to world and leverage our craft in helping bring their knowledge and experiences to life in game form. We would love to be able to do this kind of work for many years and have alot of dreams about future projects. At the moment we are squarely focused on ensuring that The Forest Song exceeds the expectations of players, so for now our future plans are just dreams!

8. We saw the success of The Witcher series as well as relatively successful Thea The Awakening, and now you are working on the Forest Song. Do you think gaming community is getting more interested in Eastern European mythology? Can this become a trend?

If there is any clear trends it's that gaming is a worldwide phenomenon, that players are hungry for more and more diversity in experiences and are active in finding games with novel messages, play mechanics and inspirational sources. We meet gamers and game developers from every walk of life, age, culture, race, socio-economic background -- so it's easy to see that diversity reflected in the games that are being developed.

Our creative motivation for adapting Lisova Pisnya was definitely not about chasing trends, but about a genuine excitement for Ukrainka's incredible work of literature that reflects a people who have a lot to share with the rest of the world.

9. When is your game going to be ready? Please, give at least some general info (this year/next year?).

It's too early to say just yet, but you can rest assured that we have some incredible game developers and cultural advisors working hard to realize this vision. We're currently in pre-production focused on refining the game's design and playable expressions of the game and will continue to make announcements and updates via www.colabeestudios.com and facebook.com/colabees.