

XL8 Becomes a Family

When it comes to localization, you can either “drain the swamp or kill one alligator.” That’s the philosophy of Globalware’s Chris Langewis.

“Only thirty percent of a localization job is actual translation,” says Chris Langewis, director of Globalware, who has learned from experience. “For the process of actually localizing source code, it is even lower — as little as ten percent. The bulk of the time is taken up by the management and the mechanics of the task. And testing the newly localized software.” With many years behind him in the software development world, Langewis is keenly aware of the nature of the product development cycle, and it stands him now in good stead in his efforts to promote Globalware’s XL8 line of translation tools.

Langewis became familiar with XL8 during a stint at the international division of Symantec. A particularly difficult chore for Symantec at the time was the localization of the popular Norton Utilities. Peter Norton (or more likely his colleagues) had developed large libraries of complex user-interface routines entire character-based windowing systems — and Langewis says it had been exceedingly laborious to localize this code. Before Langewis become involved, the international division of Symantec was shipping the localized Norton up to six months after the American release. Through proper process management with XL8, Symantec was able to ship French and German versions of Norton as little as three days after the us ship date. XL8’s ability to handle updates enabled Symantec to launch the localization process earlier in the development cycle of the original product; translation could actually occur in parallel with us development.

In brief, the original XL8 package, XL8 Code, is an integrated tool for isolating the text strings in programming code (C or other languages) and presenting them on-screen for a translator to translate. The program provides the necessary safeguards to ensure the surrounding source code does not get altered. In principle, if you recompile your code, you have a localized software package. But the reality, as Langewis knows all too well, is rarely that simple. Longer strings cause menus to get out of kilter. Keyboard shortcuts no longer work. And somewhere, someone has hard-coded the character set, causing accented characters to crash the system... The pseudo-translation mode of XL8 is designed especially for ferreting out just such problems.

It substitutes existing text strings with random strings of a predetermined expanded length which contain those potentially troublesome accented characters. It is intended as a way of testing the localizability of a program, and this is what quite a few companies use it for.

Probably the most valuable asset of XL8 is its ability to reuse previously translated strings. The program can scan previously translated materials (regardless of platform or file type) and fish out text strings which are the same or similar to those in the new material. According to Langewis, hit rates of thirty, even fifty percent are not uncommon.

“A major fact of life in software development is updates,” Langewis points out. “Typically, you start localizing a piece of software, and you get a new version dropped in your lap. That’s usually disastrous. But it happens all the time.” With intense pressure to get localized packages to market as quickly possible, companies simply cannot wait until the end of the development and testing cycle to start localizing software and translating the

documentation. XL8 tackles this situation head on by processing the updated source, translating it on the basis of the work previously done, and identifying anything that has changed. "What used to cost days," says Langewis, "now just takes a couple of keystrokes to dispatch." Previously, large delays were accepted or the localization process was delayed until the file was 'frozen,' either way costing real time to market, says Langewis. But that is no longer acceptable. He feels that a major failing of previous translation technology, from MT on down the line, has been "the lack of awareness of the underlying process."

XL8 was originally developed for internal purposes by the Los Angeles translation and localization company IDOC. Realizing the potential of the system as a product, IDOC began offering XL8 to third parties. But, as Langewis points out, there was an inherent internal conflict of interest for a localization company to be selling both localization services and localization tools.

As a result, a separate company, Globalware, was established to further develop and market XL8. Langewis emphasizes to potential customers in the localization world that Globalware is wholly independent from IDOC. "That was one of the conditions I made before I got involved," he states. IDOC remains a big user of XL8, but otherwise Globalware is on its own.

Langewis has been on the road a lot lately, both in Europe and in the US, where he has been visiting companies to promote XL8. In the past year, Globalware has been able to build up a clientele base among both software publishers and translation companies which specialize in software localization. While not everyone uses XL8 on a day-to-day basis, it is a package that many companies feel they need to be familiar with. However, one of the major obstacles Langewis faces in winning new customers among the software companies is the existence of tools already developed internally by these companies to tackle specific localization chores. Langewis acknowledges that the tools at companies like Lotus can be very good for the specific purpose they are designed for; they are optimized for a particular task. But he points out that they tend to address single facets of a problem; they do not offer a unified approach. "As soon as you move to a new platform, you have to start from scratch. Or, you might have a tool for menus," explains Langewis, "but not have one for help files. By being as generic as possible, XL8 sacrifices some of optimizations of these tailor made tools, but compensates by being able to handle the code sets of different operating systems, different programming languages, and so forth."

A major new development for Globalware has been the release at the beginning of 1994 of XL8 Help and XL8 Text, complementary packages to XL8 Code. XL8 Help is designed for managing the localization of help files; XL8 Text does the same for product documentation. "These new products work in tandem, offering the unique ability to share translations between all files, regardless of the document type," says Langewis. "When Help text is derived from the documentation (or vice versa) XL8 can automatically translate the help as a by-product of doing the help text. In particular, Windows help files, with their complex RTF formatting, are notoriously difficult to edit and translate, but XL8 Help preserves the formatting so that help files can be recompiled effortlessly. Langewis is aware that the market for a tool like XL8 Code is a small one; the new packages represent an important new direction for the company. If XL8 Text lives up to its promise, it could become a viable alternative to other translation management packages, although Eurolang (see page one) could pose stiff competition. However, one advantage of the XL8 approach is that you are not required to have the original program to edit the file.

XL8 extracts the text portion of a document, for example, leaving the formatting codes behind. The translator only needs the XL8 translation package rather than the complete system. For a Word document, this is hardly an advantage. On the other hand, few freelance translators have a copy of Framemaker installed on their PCs.

Prices: XL8 Code, XL8 Help, XL8 Text for Managers US\$2995 each; XL8 Translation Station US\$195. Globalware also

offers double-byte versions for Japanese (requires DOS/V)

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