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A St. Pete Goblin Doesn't Mix Words

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By Carl Schreck / The Moscow Times

ST. PETERSBURG -- Damn, shoot, darn, hell.

Watch the standard Russian translation of Guy Ritchie's 2001 crime caper "Snatch" and you'd think that these are the foulest words known to gangsters in London's criminal underworld.

But watch Dmitry Puchkov's Russian translation of the same film and you'll hear an array of expletives that would make a sailor blush. Puchkov even changed the Russian title -- "Bolshoi Kush," or "Big Score" -- to an extremely crude, if justifiably accurate, variant: "Spizdili."

While sex and violence are accepted components of Russian movies, profanity is still a major taboo. Puchkov's unique obscenity-laden translations of English-language movies have made him one of the hottest commodities on Russia's gigantic pirate movie market.

And though he has become something of a cult figure, few people know his real name.

He is known instead as Senior Police Detective Goblin, or just Goblin for short. A pirate DVD or video cassette with his "Special Version" stamp on it guarantees the viewer that no obscene language will be softened or lost in translation.

Puchkov's Internet handle derived from his six-year stint as a policeman. "Goblin is the name given to a policeman who is dangerous," he said in a recent interview.

Puchkov went on to achieve cult status among computer fanatics in the late 1990s as an authority on the computer game "Quake."

When his movie translations began floating around the Internet in 2001 and started appearing in video kiosks a year later, his work started gaining a wider audience.

"He's really fashionable right now," said Masha, a saleswoman at a video kiosk near the Vodny Stadion



Alexander Belenky / MT
Dmitry Puchkov, aka "Goblin," says his obscenity-laden translations of Hollywood films maintain the integrity of the original scripts.

metro station in northern Moscow. "People come by all day long asking if we have Goblin translations."

Puchkov started translating movies in 1995 because he didn't like the Russian versions of his favorite flicks. Since then, he has completed about 50 synchronized translations, primarily of crime, war and action movies, which are his favorite genres.

"My tastes are probably related to my army and police service," Puchkov said. "'Rambo' was the first Hollywood movie I ever watched during perestroika. I thought it was the greatest thing I'd ever seen back then."

The amount of time it takes Puchkov to dub a movie depends on the genre.

"If it's an action movie where they don't talk much, like 'Predator,' then the entire translation will be about eight pages, and that will take me about a day," Puchkov said. "If it's a movie like 'The Shawshank Redemption,' where everybody talks a lot, then it takes me about a week."

Puchkov's English-language education consists of translating Led Zeppelin lyrics by himself in school and a two-year course at the Dzerzhinsky Police House of Culture. When he encounters any slang or jargon, he consults friends in the United States via e-mail.

By far, the Goblin films most in demand are Puchkov's farcical translations of the first two "Lord of the Rings" films. He has translated the first film, "The Fellowship of the Ring," as "Bratva i Koltso," or "The Posse and the Ring," and the second film, "Two Towers," as "Dve Sorvanniye Bashni," or "Two Toppled Towers," a play on a Russian expression meaning to go crazy.

Puchkov sets J.R.R. Tolkien's tale in Russia and re-christens several characters with comical Russified names. For example, Frodo Baggins is renamed Fyodor Sumkin (from the Russian word sumka, or bag), and Gollum is renamed Goly, the Russian word for "naked."

The films feature some obscene banter, conversations about newly built McDonald's restaurants and a soundtrack including songs from Tatu and Zemfira, among others.

Puchkov's latest project is a translation of the Coen brothers' 1998 film "The Big Lebowski."

"It's taking me quite a while," Puchkov said. "There are a lot of things I don't understand in that movie."

Puchkov's use of profanity has earned him both praise and outrage from viewers.

"There are two groups: people who tell me how cool and great the translations are and people who are very angry about the swearing," he said.

Puchkov argued that no one is forced to watch his versions and that he's maintaining the integrity of the original script rather than simply being vulgar.

"There are certain jokes you don't tell your grandmother, and there are certain movies you don't let your children see. I'm just making the movie closer to what the director originally intended to create."

There are equally disparate opinions about Goblin translations in Puchkov's own household. Puchkov said his son, Yura, 22, laughs at the movies, while his wife, Natasha, 45, refuses to watch any of his translations except children's movies such as "Shrek."

"She really can't stand the expletives," Puchkov said.

Puchkov's career as a translator, however, may be in jeopardy -- not because of profanity, but because of intellectual property issues.

Konstantin Zemchenkov, who is familiar with Puchkov's work as the director of the Russian Anti-Piracy Organization, said Hollywood studios make deals with local companies for their film's distribution rights in Russia and that Puchkov should be held responsible for distributing pirated materials.

"It is without a doubt piracy," Zemchenkov said in a telephone interview. "He takes the legal translation of a movie and changes it around, giving the film a completely different character."

Puchkov asserted that he does not make any profits, saying he earns a living as the owner of a small grocery store.

"This is just a hobby for me," Puchkov said. "The real pirates are the people making huge amounts of money in video kiosks off of my name. They know the Goblin stamp means the movie will sell twice as many films."

Zemchenkov rejected Puchkov's claim. "He is without a doubt getting money from someone for his work," he said.

Puchkov conceded that his translating activities may come to an end soon, assuming a studio doesn't decide to hire him to translate the movies for which it has legal distribution rights. "They'll come after me in a year at the latest," he said.

As for the future of profanity in Russian movies, Puchkov predicted a later, but imminent, deadline.

"There will be swearing in Russian movies in about five years," he said, noting that in 1939, American audiences were scandalized when Clark Gable said the word "damn" in "Gone With the Wind."

"They fined the filmmaker for that," Puchkov said. "And now look at the language in Hollywood movies."