**Globally Speaking**

**Podcast 84 Transcript**

**Around-the-clock Innovation**

**Featuring Ultan O’Broin**

Michael I’m Michael Stevens.

Renato I’m Renato Beninatto.

Michael And today on Globally Speaking, we’re taking a fresh look at innovation in localization.

Ultan My name is Ultan O'Broin. I was born and in around the time of Sergeant Pepper’s LP release date. I am a user experience professional. I’m working in the fintech industry at the moment, but have a background in Silicon Valley, in Europe, with some of the big ones, but also some startups.

I’ve been heavily involved in localization. Some of you may know me as @localization on Twitter. I’ve been involved in MultiLingual Magazine and I have a big interest in conversational computing, NLP, innovation, creativity and, surprise, surprise, for an Irish person, storytelling.

Michael So, we’re going to be able to get all of our questions answered around innovation and get some good stories out of our conversation.

Ultan Well, I shall certainly try my best. You know, it’s an unfolding story, but let’s give it a go.

Michael Let’s first talk about the rapid change of innovation, the timeline. You’ve been working at this for a while; what’s the difference you’re seeing now, that companies are facing in getting innovation done?

Ultan Well, there are several. I mean, one of the big ones is the pace of innovation has accelerated, and of course this is driven by the Cloud and accumulation of huge amounts of data. People are just not able to, you know, process this information quickly enough. And we have seen new inventions, new chips, new AI models and so on, but those are, you know, what I call to be pixel-level problems—you know, you can throw technology at it.

But the real problem, I think, is there’s a lack of creative or innovative design thinking, literacy, in the community. We don’t have enough participation by real people doing real jobs in real places. It’s still dominated by, shall we say, geeks, and this myth of Silicon Valley being the center of everything that’s brilliant and nowhere else matters.

Renato The center of innovation and brilliance is the pub around the corner where you live, right?

Ultan That would be a major place of, shall we say, ideation. Doesn’t feel too good in the morning sometimes, but here’s how I define innovation: it’s a relationship between people and things that have a story that’s going to solve a problem, okay? And without a story, it’s nothing, you know? Innovation right now is just PowerPoint, creativity is just TED Talk; without a story it doesn’t come to life, you know?

You’ve got to be able to communicate that. You’ve got to be able to work with people, speak their language. Look at blockchain. What does that stuff even mean? You know, mining, bitcoin, GAS, DAP, is it any wonder it hasn’t taken off? It’s really…this ability to relate to people.

Renato This is why brought up the pub. I mean, it’s…

Ultan Yeah.

Renato It’s where you find your humanity and even geeks go to the pub and try to have normal conversations over there.

Ultan You’re right, I mean, it’s wherever people meet, wherever ideas collide, something great will come out of it. But unless you have the relationship with other people, innovation and technology is just a hammer in search of a nail. What is the job to be done here with this? What’s the value add? How do I communicate it?

It’s all pretty much common sense. It’s being able to regard people as humans. I hate that word ‘user,’ particularly in the space I work in—only two industries or activities, shall we say, use this term ‘user’: one is high tech and the other is illegal drugs.

Michael Right, a drug dealer.

Ultan Yeah, nobody’s a user; they’re a mother, they’re a soccer player, they’re a cyclist, they’re an accountant, they’re a translator. They’ve got something to do, they’ve a role to play, you know, but they’re not users, and I can tell you who definitely are *not* the users: the people who usually build the technology we have to interact with on a daily basis. You know, the IT department or the marketing department.

Michael Your definition of a story is a little bit different than how people may hear that, because I think there are a lot of ideas that are coming out of Silicon Valley. There are a lot of ideas that are getting funded right now, but the concept of story when you talk about it is a layer deeper than just an idea.

Ultan That’s true. I mean, the story is the communication of the journey. What are we trying to do here? What’s in it for you? Why should you be interested? And at the core of it is an empathy for the kind of challenges or the problems, the pains and the gains that people really feel.

Unfortunately, this term ‘storytelling’ has been conflated with making up stories. So, if you watch “Silicon Valley” on HBO, it’s like, ‘we all want to make the world a better place.’ Yeah, you do—like hell! You know, you just want to be acquired and make a lot of money.

So, there’s a lot of ideas out there that are just not solving any problems, and because they’re not grounded in any kind of human-centered approach, any ethnography, they’ve never taken a walk in a user’s shoes. They’re not solving anything.

Renato I remember the last time we met, you had four watches on your wrists. I know you’re a runner and you had like an Apple watch, a Fitbit, a Google or Android something, and you were comparing these tools. And I remember when I asked you if they gave you the same information, you said, “Oh hell no, they’re all different!”

[Laughter]

So, what is the role of this ever-present technology? You talk about design thinking and user-centric approach, human-centered approach, which is the core of design thinking. You start with the user and not with the idea.

Ultan Yeah, you start by observing real people doing real things. I mean, it goes back to Jane Goodall and her work with chimpanzees in the late 1960s. One day she saw a chimpanzee get a stick and scrape some ants out of a hole in the ground, and there you go, there’s technology, that’s innovation, and we use exactly the same techniques: watch what people do, not so much listen to what they say. That’s what is missing, you know.

Renato But who does it right? You’re a very critical person, you look at the world with cynical eyes. What has impressed you? You’re not an easy person to impress.

Ultan No. First of all, I’m only wearing three watches at the moment.

[Laughter]

Ultan I’ll tell you what I like, I like really simple things and I like things that reflect the way I work. So even stuff like Intuit’s SnapTax. I’m a US citizen; I still file taxes. You can, you know, do it all through your mobile phone. It’s almost like it sucks up the ink into the phone. You can photograph your W2 and you get a 10-44.

Simple stuff like how sales people really work, sales reps on the road. They’ll come into a meeting or they’ll come into Starbucks and they’ve got their laptop and their iPhone and, you know, iPad, but they’ve also got a notebook and a pen. And they’re able to talk to people and they write things down because it helps them remember, it prompts them later.

What would impress me there is if somebody comes up with a solution whereby they can get, you know, voice-recorded memo, or a photograph of the business card or of the notes I’ve just made in my notebook, and got that into the Cloud. I like really simple things like that.

I like the fact you can take Apple airpods out and put them in and they turn on. You don’t have look up a PhD thesis on what Bluetooth is. I like the fact Hipmunk, which is a travel booking online service, gives you a pain threshold: this is going to be painful for you to take this route, but it will be cheap. That really impresses me. I love the fact as a vegan that Beyond Meat burgers now have a version of a burger that bleeds—it’s beetroot juice—because it resonates with me, you know.

Renato So, there are things that still woo you.

Ultan Yeah, there are. Any technology that automates what I hate doing and augments what I love to do, I’m there. You know, so people talk about AI, “Oh AI will be the next Rembrandt, it’ll be the next Beatles,” and I’ll say no, no, no. The job of AI is to help Rembrandt take out the trash so that I can be Rembrandt for real. I got time to be creative, I got time to be innovative, and have time to enjoy life.

Efficiency, satisfaction and effectiveness are the three things you look for and you measure. But really for me, you know, great usability means being able to go home early. You know, being able to play with your kids at 2pm in the afternoon because you can get your work done quickly. It means that, you know, you’re going to come into the office the next day and not live in fear of the overnight cleaners having removed the Post-Its from your laptop because you just can’t remember how to get back into the system or how the thing works.

You know, it’s just abstracting away the pain and just letting you get on with your life. I don’t get many ‘a-ha’ moments or ‘wow’ moments, but occasionally you do. Those are a delight, you know. And they change over time—what was delightful yesterday is now an expectation.

Renato Yeah.

Ultan Twenty-five years ago, if you went into a hotel and had free Wi-Fi, you’d say, “Wow, I don’t have to get a coupon and sign up for this.” Travel used to be a big deal. Now it’s like getting the bus, right? It’s an expectation. It’s like hell; it’s not a delight.

Michael But, it’s tickets for tens of dollars rather than hundreds or thousands of dollars.

Ultan Exactly, but it’s an expectation! What are they competing with there? They’re not competing with, you know, a flight on Concorde. They’re competing with Skype or digital communications. They’re making it easy for people to get around to visit and it’s a fascinating model.

I’ve been doing transatlantic flights for decades, and now it’s like almost a chore. Somebody make this better—I mean, why haven’t planes got faster? They still fly at six to seven hundred miles an hour. You know, just put more people on them.

This notion of a community of practice is intriguing to me. It’s something…I’m doing a master’s degree in innovation, creativity and leadership, and the one thing that keeps coming up is people just don’t know how to get started. Like, where do I start? How do I innovate? You’ve got to almost fake it until you make it. You’ve got to act your way into innovating. You’ll never innovate your way into making something brilliant, you know. You’ve got to go at it and try things. Just try.

Renato The future is going to follow a straight line in a certain direction, and that’s what you can expect. And the reality is, when you look at a trend line, it’s not really one line, it’s a cone that goes out in many directions, because innovation and change is happening at the same time in so many things.

We are in a special spot here in the localization industry because we touch so many areas of knowledge and technology, but the reality is that what is happening in the automotive industry is disruptive. What is happening in software is disrupting. What is happening in communications is disruptive. But all these disruptions are going at different speeds. The nature of innovation and change has become more widespread than linear.

Ultan Change is all around us. Actually, you know, we’ve always been in a state of change, and workers have always been knowledge workers, but the rate of change now and the scope at which we encounter innovation is just quite staggering.

Unfortunately, we are still blinded by the science, so to speak, and very much think of it as digital, but in fact it’s not. It’s all around us, how we relate to each other. This has been going on for, you know, as long as I have been alive. It’s just now so fast and so difficult to predict. I have a 14-year-old son and people say to me, you know, “What does he want to be when he grows up?” and I’m like, “I have…I’ve no idea.” I don’t worry about it.

Michael It doesn’t exist.

Ultan It doesn’t, because he will probably do a job that right now does not exist, and he won’t even think of it as a job. Why sweat it, you know? I mean, I ended up in user experience, a term I still cannot explain to my mother, but I know it when I feel it. But if you said to me 20 years ago, you know, when I started out in Microsoft as the localization PM for Windows 3.1 that you’ll end up observing how insurance brokers in Hong Kong go about their daily business and then be able to design a solution for them, [had] I known that was going to be called ‘user experience,’ I’d be like, what? It’s just mind-blowing and that’s I think what’s great about it. If you have a mindset that is free from fear, you can really harness it. But I think there’s a lot of fear out here.

Michael So, when you step back from the localization industry, would you describe it as innovative?

Ultan Yes, I do. I mean, fundamentally, at its heart is the relationship between people. The localization industry as you know it now is very different to what it was, you know, 20-30 years ago, and like, how it goes about its business, how it goes about making money. Unless they were still making connections between people and connecting people and technology, you know, it just wouldn’t exist.

It’s a really healthy, thriving industry. For me, localization is actually kind of my first steps into user experience. Localization basically is user experience, right? It’s being able to reflect how people actually communicate, whether it’s digitally or whatever.

But very often, it’s kind of got sidetracked into conflating innovation with tech. So, you know, I see a lot of various companies, which shall remain nameless—one of them was trying to take on Oracle in the customer relation space at one point, which I thought was rather comical—that’s their core competency: the ability, being able to put relationships between people together all over the world to solve problems, to communicate and so on. We’ve been sidetracked by crazy debates about technology and so on. But I think localization is still fascinating to me. It’s fundamentally about how, you know, people live and work and can you communicate that story?

Michael Yeah, and you have differing views. Like there’s one person on this call who would say that, especially language service providers, the main service they provide is project management, where…

Ultain Yeah…

Michael …where others say user experience is important and language happens to be a dynamic of that user experience. And so, there’s a debate around who we are and what purpose we’re serving.

Ultan Not just in localization, but I think generally, yeah. A couple of my friends are still very active in the industry and, you know, when I talk to them, it’s like I might as well be talking to somebody in Silicon Valley, you know—talking about AI and NLP and NL and deep neural networks and all this kind of stuff—and I think they’ve kind of got sidetracked a little bit about it. Very often, the language industry, too, is very hard on itself and doesn’t see possibilities that are out there.

My favorite argument is the one about, you know, Google Translate: it’s like “Oh you know, it will take all our jobs, don’t use Google Translate to do this, that or the other, you know, efficiency…you know, you’ll end up in trouble.” But really, like, what is the alternative to Google Translate? It’s not a professional translator. It’s not a professional language service. It’s no communication at all. So, what is the job to be done there? It’s not trying to replace you. It’s maybe trying to do heavy lifting somewhere or enabling people to establish relationships.

So, you know, I use Google Translate all the time. But what you do is you can machine translate code and use it as pseudo-translation and figure out the dynamics of the UI. How much is this text going to expand when it’s in, you know, German or whatever? So, they miss that, and there’s also this obsession with perfection.

I now live in, you know, so-called Agile, Scrum worlds, okay, where it’s “done”—that concept does not exist. It’s when it’s “ready” now, okay, because they’ll always say the design is done when the problem goes away. Another problem comes along, okay.

So, it’s “ready” is where, you know, it’s fit for purpose; somebody can use this. Somebody can get something done. I’ve seen so many projects derailed, and so many arguments and so much lost ROI because somebody did not like a particular term. Not that it was wrong, not that it stopped anybody from using it, but they didn’t like it. Now, I understand language evolves, but really, why are we here? You know, if you’re in the industry, like, you’re solving a problem, you’re trying to get people to do things. You know, this is not an academic exercise in linguistic brilliance.

Michael So, if you could put up a billboard that the leaders in localization could look at for inspiration to innovate, what would that billboard say?

Ultan “What is the job to be done here?” I’m a big fan of Clay Christensen and his job-to-be-done approach from, you know, Harvard Business School. You might have heard of it but…

Michael The innovator’s dilemma and…

Ultan The innovator’s dilemma but also, like, what problem are you trying to solve?

Michael Right, the milkshake example.

Ultan The milkshake example, the classic milkshake example…

Michael Yeah. For those of our listeners who haven’t heard it…

Ultan Yeah, for people who don’t know, it’s like, why do people buy milkshakes at drive-in takeaways? And people have all kinds of theories. Yeah, because, you know, it won’t spill and, there’s a cup holder already in the car and all this kind of stuff. Or they’re hungry and they couldn’t get breakfast…actually they’re just doing it because they’re bored. They want to be entertained. They didn’t want to fall asleep. So, what are they competing with? They’re competing with Kai Ryssdal on…

Renato NPR.

Ultan KBBP, NPR. I mean that’s…that’s the milkshake’s competition! It’s not between Burger King and McDonalds. Who are Skype competing with? Probably competing with Ryanair, actually.

Renato Yeah.

Ultan What I would say to a billboard is: take a look around and just try it. Take a walk in their shoes.

Renato It’s a challenge for several LSPs. They are trying to tell what they do instead of understanding what problem the client is trying to solve. The client isn’t trying to translate a document. He’s trying to communicate with a buyer in another country. He wants to sell more, or he wants to avoid customer service complaints.

Ultan They want some ROI, they want to increase productivity, they want to hire more people, they want to sell more product. That’s why they’re going to localization providers. It’s not so that they can be a case study on a language service provider’s website or eventually get invited to Localization World. No, I mean, these are real problems.

I mean, they’re not always business problems. I mean, I remember talking to Andrew Bredenkamp from Acrolinx. They help you write better, communicate better, and I said, like, “What’s driving you here? Is it the technology thing?” He says, “No, it’s the fact that we now communicate with people in sub-Sahara Africa: basically, ‘don’t defecate in drinking water because it’s dangerous,’ in simple terms. And I know the localization industry has been very proactive in this, in tech for good as well.

People want to communicate for a reason, but it’s not for the sake of it. Language services, it’s a service-based industry, and people will go elsewhere if that service is not being met. It’s as simple as that. If there’s no ROI and there’s no satisfaction, nobody’s going to buy your product.

Renato You’ve worked with localization, you’ve worked with user experience, user interface. You work with innovation, with creativity, with storytelling. What is the project that you’re most proud of having done?

Ultan The project I’m most proud of having done? Probably something like doing a Russian-language version of Microsoft DOS and releasing it from Ireland, and working with a Russian engineer and a Russian translator onsite. We just had a great relationship going together and we just did it. And we had all kinds of constraints. This was just after the Wall came down and Cold War still very much in people’s minds.

I have a couple of patents out there from the US PTO that I’m very proud of. I’m very proud of the fact that I helped people make things easier in work. If you go to Urban Dictionary, there’s a term in there called crapplication, and the official definition of it is: it’s a preloaded application on your PC that they give you in work and you have to use it, but it’s crap.

It’s a really great definition. I’m proud of trying to take crapplications out of circulation. People get their job done quickly, painlessly. More recently, I’ve been involved in the creation of chatbots that have helped that. I’m very proud of that.

If you said to me what’s the thing you’re proudest of most, it was somebody came up to me once in one of my previous employers and said, “We saw your presentation and we saw your storytelling, and we were so impressed that we’re joining your company. We’re leaving and we’re starting next week,” and I was like, wow.

Renato You convinced somebody to join.

Ultan Yeah, convinced somebody to join, to change their mind.

Renato Final question, as a runner with the three watches that you have on your arms right now, which one do you recommend I buy?

Ultan I recommend you buy the most expensive one which is the [laughter]…it’s the industry standard, it’s the Garmin Finex 5XS. Actually, there’s a new one out but it’s fabulous. It does what it is supposed to do and the UX is brilliant. Let me give you one example. Try using an Apple watch for running in Ireland in the rain. You can’t. Your touch-sensitive thing goes. The rain in Ireland is so heavy, it acts as a force function and the watch thinks it’s a gesture.

This Garmin has big chunky buttons on it, so when you’re freezing cold and wet…there’s a great t-shirt you might have seen in marathons or runs, Renato, it’s like: If I collapse and die, the first thing you do is you go to my Garmin and you stop it.

[Laughter]

Michael Mhm.

Ultan Now, like, I defy anybody to stop an Apple watch in one click, you know, and send that information to the Cloud. Garmin is great. Suunto, who are Finnish, are fabulous as well. But I have a preference for Garmin. They also have good APIs; you can do integrations and all kinds of funky stuff.

I’ve got all kinds of watches. I even have the STEP-iT, the McDonalds activity tracker, which I wore in the Dublin marathon as a joke.

Michael It was more accurate than the Apple watch?

Ultan No, it collapsed.

[Laughter]

Ultan It was given out in Happy Meals in the US and Canada, and it was withdrawn by McDonalds after two weeks because there was a danger of it burning people.

Michael Oh no!

Ultan Which, ironically, Intel then themselves fell into that trap and had to withdraw the Basis Peak, which is probably the best activity tracker ever to arise, but did exactly the same thing as the McDonald’s STEP-iT watch, so it was taken off the market.

Just keep trying stuff. Be fearless. Be brave. Nobody’s getting out of here alive. We have a short time and the graveyard is full of indispensable people.

Renato On that note, thank you so much Ultan.

**End of conversation**