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PURSUING PASSAMAQUODDY-MALISEET LANGUAGE REVITALIZATION
THROUGH SONG

by

Sophia Crockett-Current

A Thesis Submitted to Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors
(New Media)

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ABSTRACT

Passamaquoddy-Maliseet is an Algonquin dialect spoken by the Passamaquoddy and Maliseet Indigenous Peoples in Maine and Canada. With an estimated 500 speakers, most of whom are over 60, it is highly endangered. There have been attempts to preserve Passamaquoddy-Maliseet that focused on direct translation through use of recorded interviews with Passamaquoddy People, namely the Passamaquoddy-Maliseet Language portal pmportal.org and Jesse Walter Fewkes' cylinder recordings of Passamaquoddy people in the 1890s Passamaquoddy People. However, this method is ineffective for revitalization; it did not help to establish new speakers, and due to Passamaquoddy-Maliseet's more context-based language structure, direct translation often destroys the original meaning. In an attempt to facilitate learning and subsequent revitalization of this language, a new avenue was explored that included the use of song accompanied by visuals as an engaging way to allow new speakers to familiarize themselves with the contextual complexities of the language. This method is based on the personal experience of native speakers, preliminary user testing in the USM Passamaquoddy-Maliseet language courses, as well as several studies showing the efficacy of music as an instructional tool. This method was applied with original Passamaquoddy-Maliseet songs recorded by the client group and an animation of one of the songs. The process of creating a comprehensive translation that did not misrepresent the source material added an unanticipated level of complexity and became one of the primary goals of the project.

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INTRODUCTION

In the United States, Indigenous languages are at a high risk of endangerment, with only about 175 of over 300 languages still spoken at all, with an estimated decline to 20 by 2050 if the current trajectory remains unchanged ^{Cohen 2010}. Prioritizing language preservation over revitalization makes sense on the surface, as it can be done only with existing speakers and does not rely on the continued interest of nascent speakers for an initiative's success. However, preservation of a culture, or in this instance an aspect of a culture, is only as complete as its contextual record. That is, preservation for the sake of preservation is ineffective to foster the continued use of a cultural aspect if the context is lost in translation. Therefore, if the interest is there, revitalization should be the preferred method to prevent language extinction.

Passamaquoddy-Maliseet is an Algonquin dialect spoken by the Passamaquoddy and Maliseet Indigenous Peoples in northern Maine and Canada. In total, there are only approximately 500 speakers of the language world-wide ^{ELP} with the majority of these speakers older than 60. However increased interest in revitalization due to the Language Keepers video project, pmportal.org and a Passamaquoddy-Maliseet language course being offered at the University of Southern Maine, has prompted the remaining fluent speakers to increase the use of their language.

Background

In the 1930s, St. Ann's Indian Mission School was opened in Motahkomikuk (Indian Township), and enrolled Passamaquoddy children from that town as well as

Sipayik (Pleasant Point)¹ Holladay, 2012. The students who attended that school were taught English by the Catholic nuns who worked there and forced to use it instead of their primary language Passamaquoddy-Maliseet, being beaten or hung on hooks if they did not use English Barnes et al, 2010. This abuse unsurprisingly had lasting effects, with the then children, now today's grandparents starting to use English as their primary language, not anticipating this resulting in decreasing fluency.

This form of abuse has since stopped, but the loss of native language persists and continues to get worse; parents are unable to teach their children because their parents did not learn it or were punished for using it. Prior approaches to slowing the decline of the language have focused more on preservation as opposed to revitalization, which often sacrifices spoken fluency as the work force of fluent speakers are focused on documentation rather than speaking and teaching others Dana-Sacco.

In September 2019 a cohort of Passamaquoddy women (Gail Dana-Sacco, Kendra Sockabasin, and Sandra Basset), referred to as 'the client group', approached Mike Scott looking for a capstone student to collaborate with on a project that looked to revitalize Passamaquoddy-Maliseet, not preserve it. Mike distributed the following email:

We are a group of three Indigenous women dedicated to reclaiming our Passamaquoddy language and increasing our fluency in the language through music. We are developing a repertoire of songs in Passamaquoddy and will soon begin sharing our music with others. Learning the songs is helping us to increase our Passamaquoddy fluency.

We are exploring ways to help others learn Passamaquoddy through song. We need to make the language easy and fun to learn. One idea is to animate songs that tell a story, so that learners can understand the

¹ These are anglicized versions of spoken words in Passamaquoddy. As such, these are only one example of how they may be spelled. This spelling comes from the cited article.

meaning through visualization rather than literal translation into English words. We could also explore give the learner control of recordings making it easy to repeat verses and phrases spoken in Passamaquoddy at will. Years of effort by many dedicated people have so far failed to produce new language speakers or to stop the decline of the language. We can use some help figuring out how to further develop language learning tools that rely on music, sound and visual interpretation, rather than the written word. We firmly believe that these innovative approaches will be required to increase interest and fluency in the Passamaquoddy language.

Talk soon...

Creating a visualization is a powerful way to communicate language without losing any associated context because the context can be conveyed through animation. The project proposed by the client group was inspired by the work of Allen J. Sockabasin, who authored two books (*Thanks to the Animals* and *An Upriver Passamaquoddy*) Sockabasin, 2014 and wrote many songs in Passamaquoddy-Maliseet as an attempt to teach the language.

APPROACH

Translation

As mentioned, the client group wished to avoid the written word in the animation. Passamaquoddy-Maliseet is not a written language, and translation of languages such as Passamaquoddy-Maliseet into English provides an interesting challenge: English follows a set structure of subject-verb-object, focusing on individual cause and effect relationships, whereas Passamaquoddy-Maliseet places more weight on dynamic relationships between people and the situation (i.e. the context). When translated, these relationships are broken down and restructured to follow the English hierarchy, resulting in preconceptions and bias of the translator having a profound effect on the final translation, and therefore new users' understanding of the language. An article Gail Dana-Sacco (Director Emerita of the Wabanaki Center at the University of Maine) wrote suggests that "[t]he translation of Indigenous languages is routinely done, ostensibly with the goal of preservation and language revitalization. It is in the act of translation that a subtle and pervasive extension of the colonization process occurs." Taking this into consideration, the presence of an English translation in the final product would be inappropriate and in direct conflict with the goal.

As much as it would have been preferable to work entirely in Passamaquoddy-Maliseet, I do not have any degree of fluency in the language, so a translation was necessary for the purposes of creating the animation. At first look this sounds like it should have been a quick project, as it was not at all the focus, but it took up the better

part of the first semester. The time investment that went into translating a four-minute song is a good example of the struggles of this sort of work. Figure 1, shown below, was only the first step in the translation process. Following this, there were multiple meetings

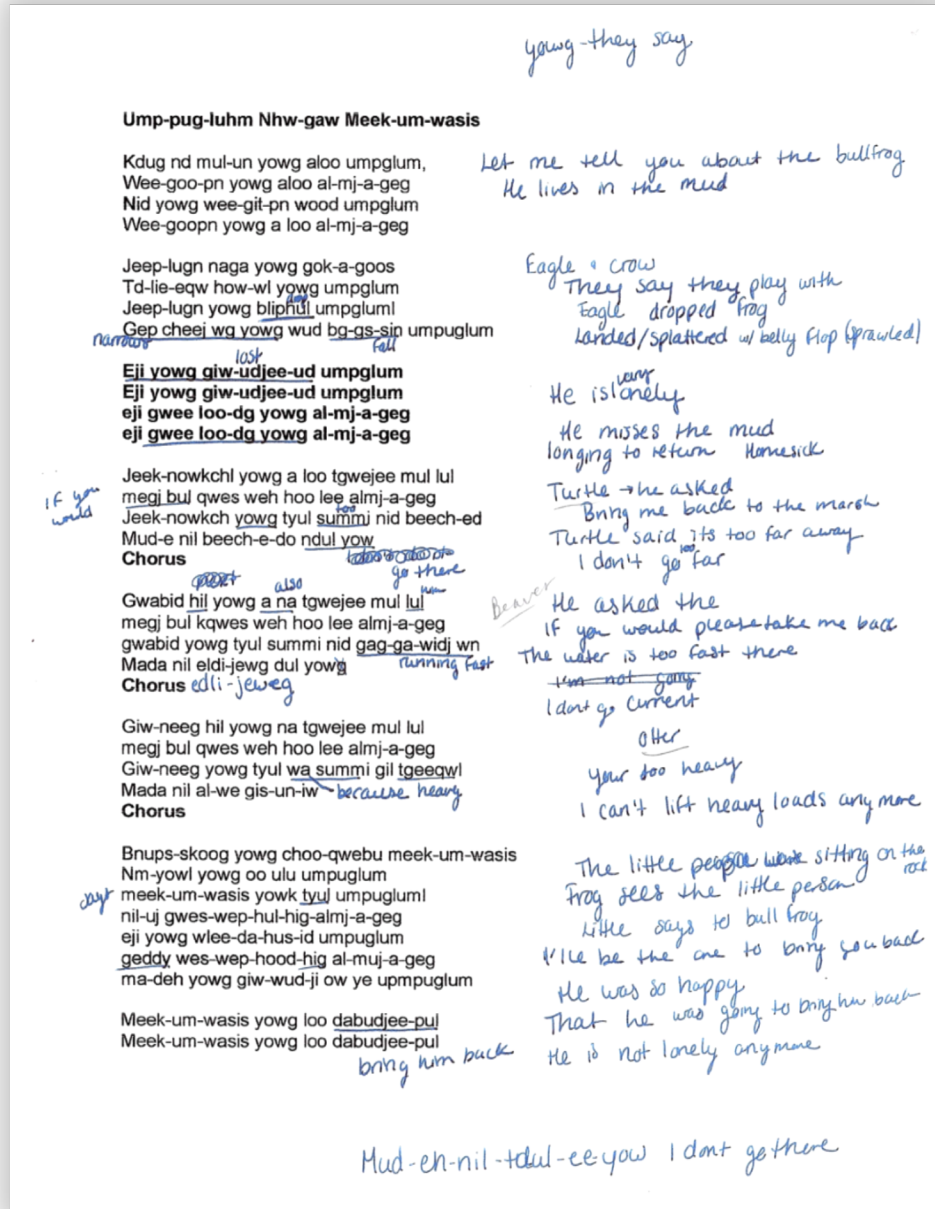


Figure 3: Initial translation from the client group

discussing specific words or characters and how the language affected how they should behave. For example, *al-mj-a-geg*: in the initial translation, this could be perceived to just mean ‘mud’; discussions with the client instead revealed it was more a description of the

texture and referred to the environment of the marsh. Additionally, there were several instances where a cultural understanding of a word or phrase was not translatable and had to be explained more in-depth. One such instance was the situation where the eagle and crow are throwing the bull frog back and forth. I had initially interpreted this to be a



Figure 4: Initial character designs for 'The animals that didn't help'

threatening, mean activity, but was informed in no uncertain terms that this was not the case, that it was meant to be playful, thoughtless perhaps, but in no way mean spirited.

Other instances were of a

more character-design variety. In the song, a 'turtle' is mentioned. As such, when I presented preliminary character sketches, I drew the type of turtle I was most familiar with in Maine lake environments: a painted turtle (Figure 2, top left). However, the type of turtle that was intended was a snapping turtle, warranting a redesign. The largest obstacle in translating this spoken story into pictures was the design of the *meek-um-wasis*, translated as 'little people'. According to the client group, there is no defined look for them, it is generally up to the individual to decide what they think a *meek-um-wasis* looks like. This decision would have a substantial effect on the visual style of the



Figure 3: Preliminary *Meek-um-wasis* designs

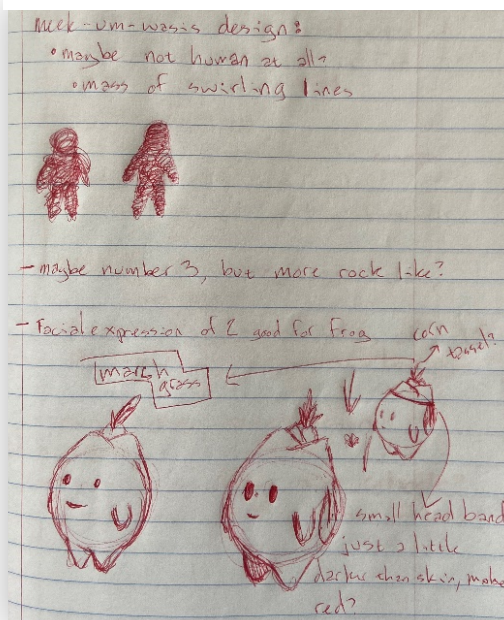


Figure 4: *Meek-um-wasis* design notes

animation, so there was a great deal of care taken with it. Once a draft image was complete and shared with the client group (see Figure 3), we discussed the proposed design choices, leading to the notes shown in Figure 4. With no set look for these being to draw from, I asked the client group to think about 1) if they wanted the *meek-um-wasis* to be male, female, or non-humanoid, 2) if they should be drawn in a detailed, more rendered style or a simplified one, and 3) what sort of colour scheme should be used. The following meeting solidified the more bulbous non-humanoid shape and added in that they should be made from the environs, namely

rock and marsh weeds, with a small feathered headband.

Underpinning this whole project was a process of learning how to design characters without imposing my own cultural lens over a product. As an artist with informal training in graphic and costume design, I have been taught again and again that one of my fundamental tools is colour. While not the primary focus, colour schemes can be used to set the overall tone of a piece by referencing cultural colour theory. To explain this through the lens of Western culture, imagine the following character: a small girl,

approximately eight years old. She is fond of Disney princess movies, ponies, Barbie, and her ballet classes. Knowing this, it would make sense to see this character wearing bright pastel colours, perhaps with a preference for pink; it would be jarring to see this character in blacks and reds. Conversely, black and red would not be amiss on a young adult character involved with the metal or goth subcultures. Different cultures have different connotations for colours, and when beginning the character design process for the animation, I had the assumption that Passamaquoddy-Maliseet would be no different. However, during my first meeting with the client group, when I asked if there were certain colours that were coded for different things like I was familiar with in mainstream Western colours. Gail said that as far as she was aware, there were no pre-conceived notions regarding colour; Passamaquoddy-Maliseet does not even have specific names for most colours (e.g., ‘yellow’ is roughly translated as ‘the colour of bile’). Losing this foundation of a colour library to rely on was surprising to say the least, and resulted in an additional ‘translation’ process of figuring out how to remove my own influences of how to use colour to avoid as much chance as possible of me altering the meaning of a story that I had no right to.

Story Boarding

Story boarding is a crucial component of the animation process. A story board acts as a visual version of a shot list in an animation, creating a common visual for clients and artists to refer to when discussing aspects of a project. It also facilitates the animation process itself by providing a reference to work from. This reference point makes it easier to move from one scene to the next because the animator does not have to keep all the

visuals straight in their head. Below (Figures 5-11) are the story boards that were presented to the client group, along with the shot list that they were drawn from. These story boards were drawn in my sketchbook, and planned for a hand drawn, more organic art style. As will be explained in the next section that did not end up being the case, but the story boards were still able to be used to inform the animation process.

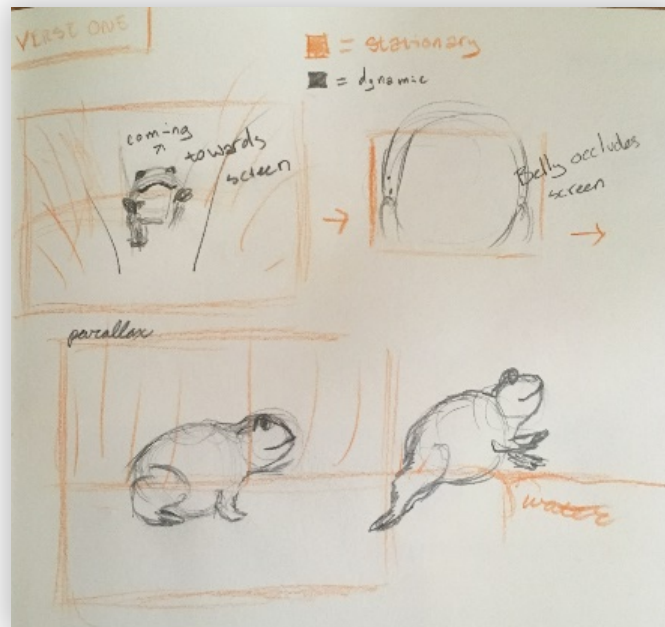


Figure 5: Story board for Verse One: Pan around Bullfrog at home, establishing where that is (in the marsh in Indian Township).

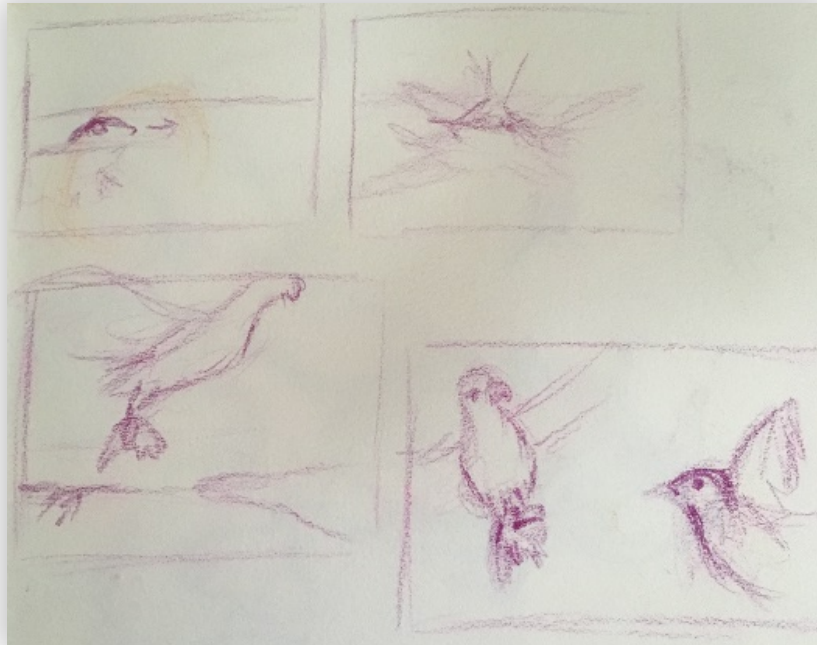


Figure 6: Story board 1 of 2 for Verse Two: Eagle and crow fly into view, scoop up Bullfrog.

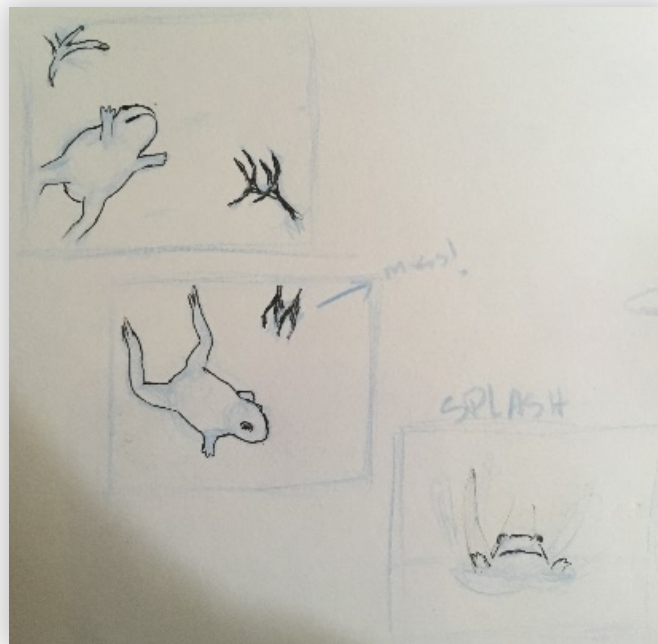


Figure 7: Story board 2 of 2 for Verse Two: Birds fly up, playing with Bullfrog as if he is a ball, travelling. At some point, Eagle fumbles the Bullfrog toss, and he tumbles down, belly flops into the narrows with a splash

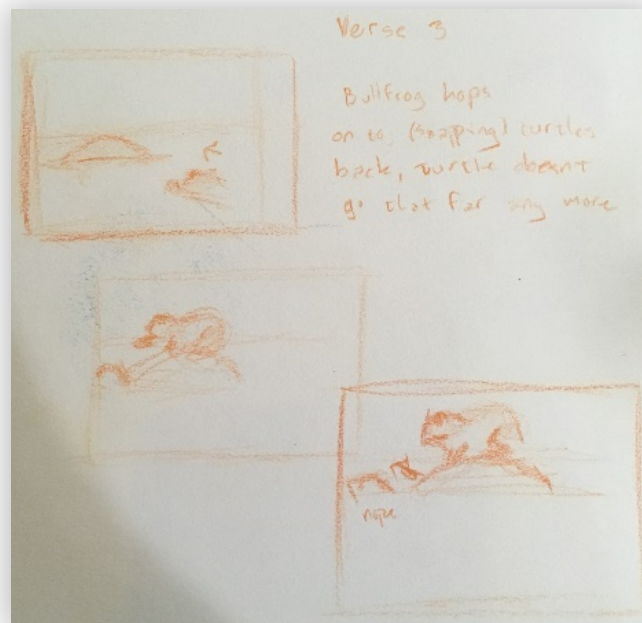


Figure 8: Story board for Verse Three: Bullfrog sees a snapping turtle (in the water), and goes and hops up onto its back, pointing towards the marsh.

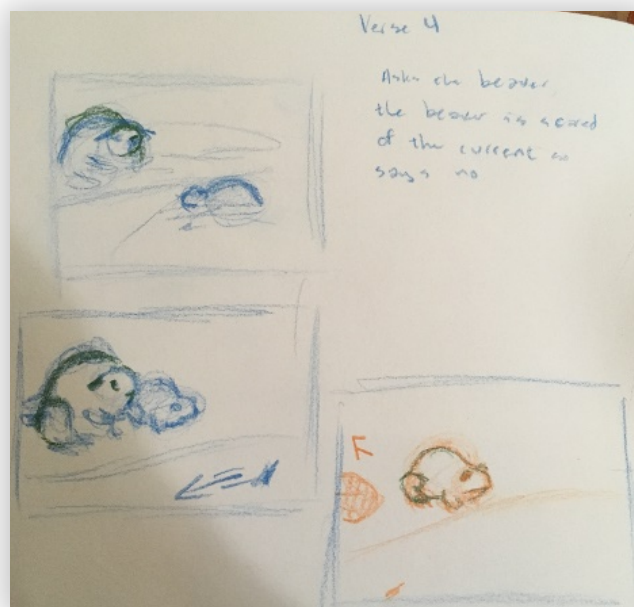


Figure 9: Story board for Verse Four: Bullfrog abandons the turtle in the shell and comes up next to beaver at the edge of the river, Points towards marsh. They both watch something move very quickly down the river, pulled by the current. The Beaver puffs up, a little scared and shakes its head, shuffles away

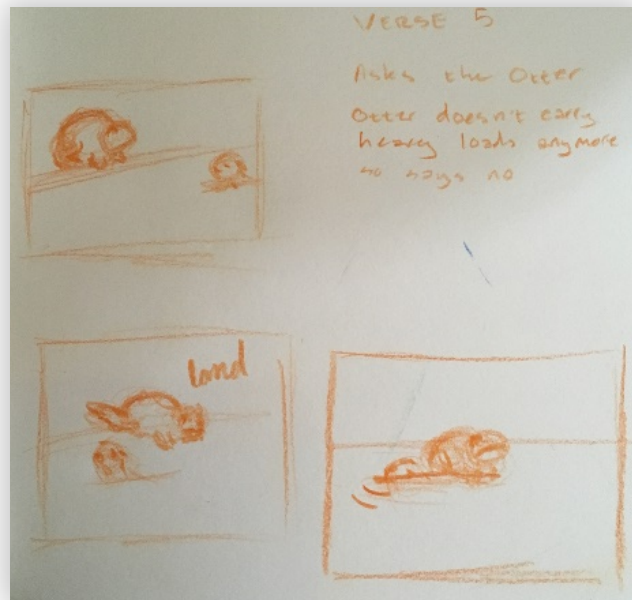


Figure 10: Story board for Verse Five: Bullfrog sees the otter in the water, gets its attention. When otter comes over, Bullfrog points towards the marsh and hops onto the otter. The otter immediately sinks, flailing, then pops up next to the Bullfrog, shaking its head, swims away.

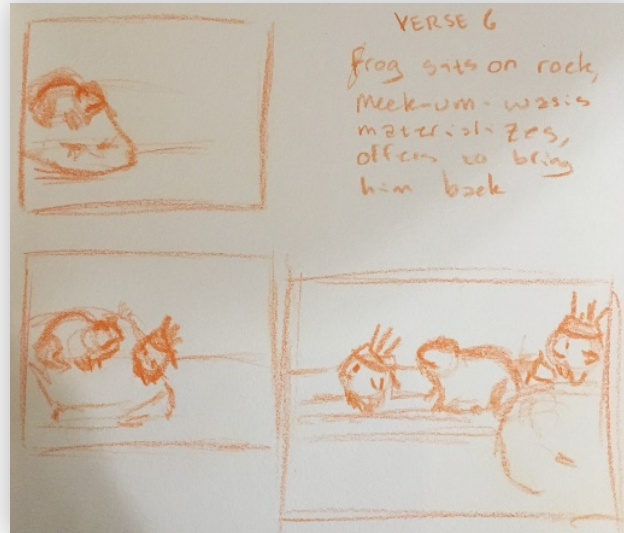


Figure 11: Story board for Verse Six: Getting out of the water, the Bullfrog settles down on a rock on the bank. A meek-um-wasis happens to be also occupying the rock, (very comfy, maybe sunning themselves?) who notices the Bullfrog. Meek-um-wasis slowly gets up and walks to the Bullfrog, pointing towards the marsh. Bullfrog points to the marsh, Meek-um-wasis nods. Pair start walking, joined by a pile of other meek-um-wasis, fades to black.

Animation

Initial plan. As stated, I initially thought I would be creating a looser style animation using a program called Adobe Animate (formerly Flash Animation) to draw each frame. I worked with this plan for most of January, starting with things like the list

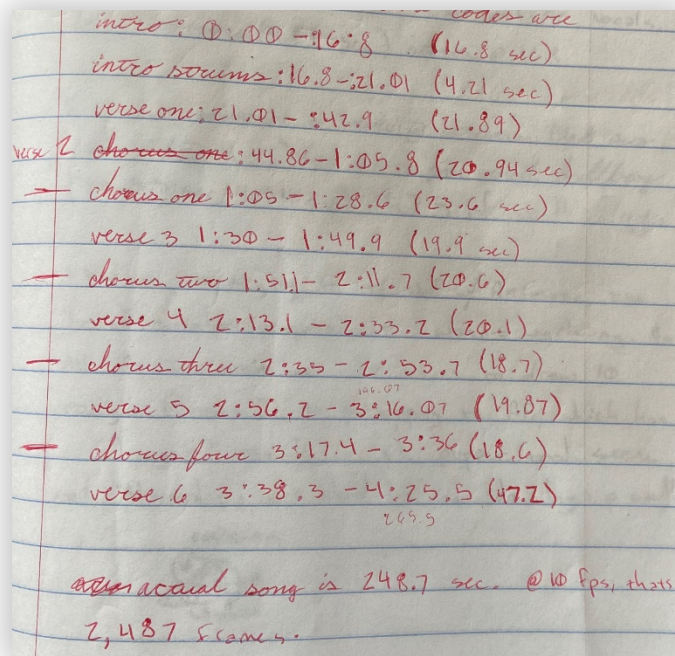


Figure 12: Notes of the duration of each verse

shown in Figure 12, which was counting the time that each verse took, and how many frames the animation would have to be, approximately 2,487 frames. This number came from the standard frame rates for different kinds of videos: for live action video or more

automated animation, the standard is between 24 and 29.97 frames per second, but for more traditional animation like stop motion or the frame-by-frame style I was using, the frame rate can be as low as 10 frames per second, which is what I was planning on. This seems like an insurmountable number, but I went into this process relatively confident in my ability to do it by the end of January, because the actual frames that would need to be drawn was 1,902 since the chorus could be repeated. However, translating the song proved to be more time consuming than expected by the client group or myself, and software and hardware complexities forced me to completely re-evaluate how to accomplish the video in order to get it done before the end of the year.

The New Workflow. After abandoning the frame-by-frame process, I moved to a more automated process: key frame animation. I was still using the Adobe suite, this time a mixture of Photoshop, After Effects, and Premiere Pro. Key frame animation uses puppets that are manipulated around the stage by marking their positions at specific points in space and time (called ‘key frames’), shown as the white spots in Figure 13. The

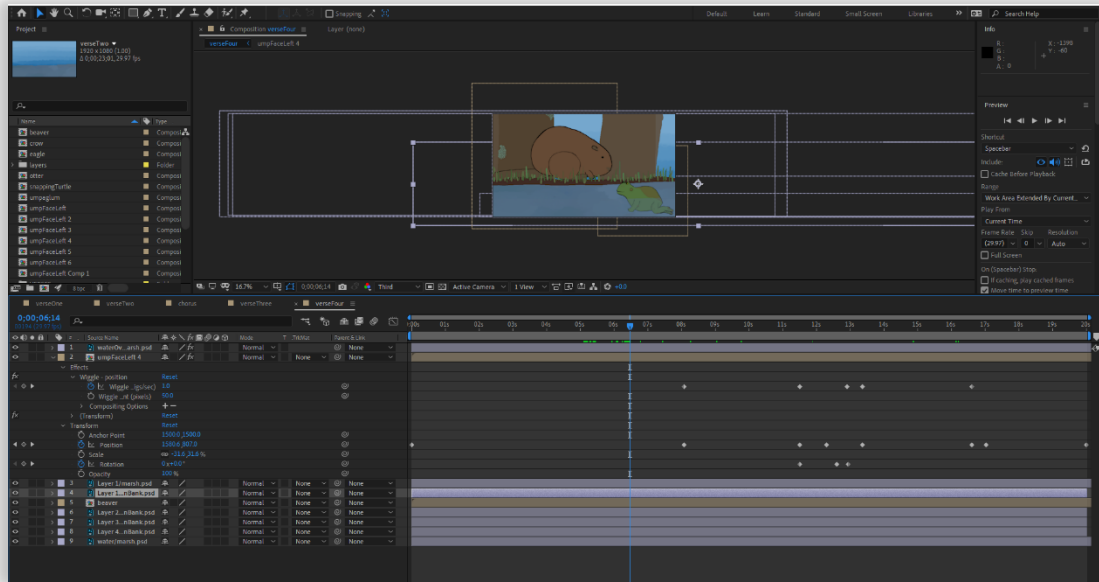


Figure 13: Screenshot of the After Effects project showing the key frames. motion from point to point is interpolated by the program, resulting in a very smooth animation. I made the puppets in Photoshop, with each body segment that I would need to move independently drawn on a separate layer (Figures 14 through 20).

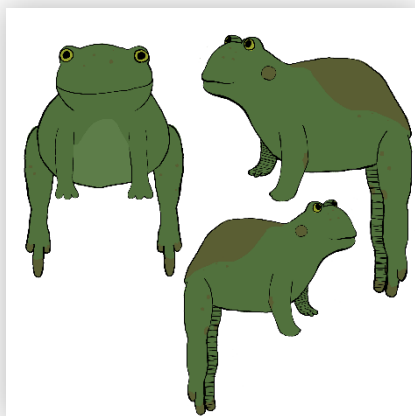


Figure 14: *Ump-pug-luhm* (Bullfrog)

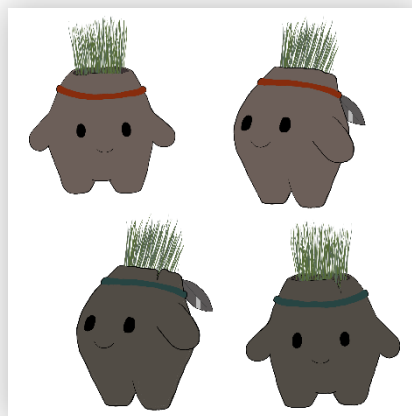


Figure 15: *Meek-um-wasis* puppet

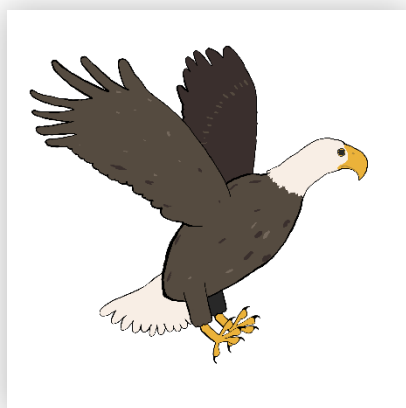


Figure 16: *Jeep-lugn* (eagle) puppet

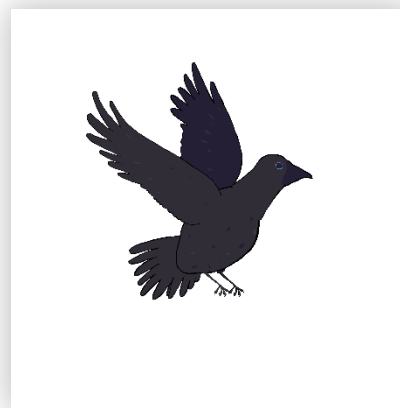


Figure 17: *Gok-a-goos* (crow) puppet



Figure 18: *Jeek-nowkchl*
(snapping turtle) puppet



Figure 19: *Gwabid* (beaver) puppet

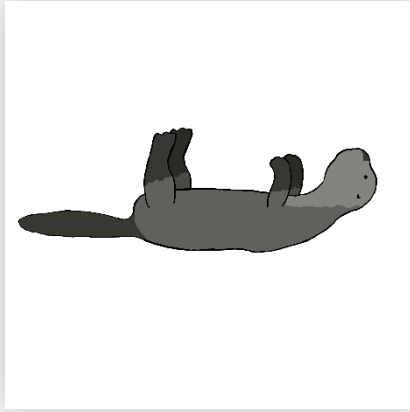


Figure 20: *Giv-neeg* (otter) puppet

the Adobe software that had made Adobe Animate nearly impossible to work with had also made a feature of Adobe After Effects significantly better. After Effects has a system called ‘puppet pins’ that creates a mesh around a given object (see Figure 21), and

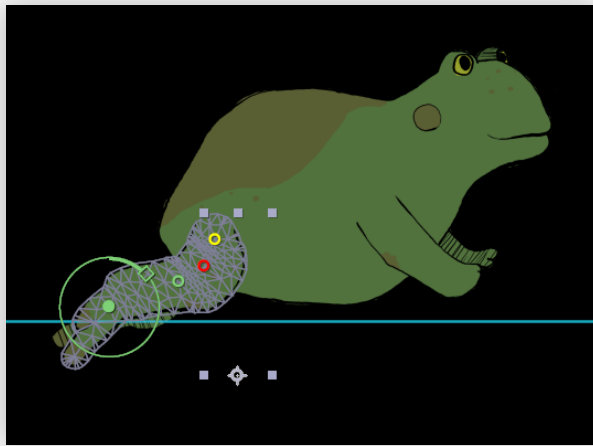


Figure 21: Puppet pins and mesh

animators can place manipulatable pins into the mesh to move parts of the object. Previously this was limited to simple linear translations (see yellow dot in Figure 21), but the update brought the ‘advanced puppet pin’ that allowed for a point to be rotated, moved, and scaled (see green dots in Figure 21). This tool was how all the detailed motion (such as leg kicking) in the animation was achieved, while the simpler movement was done using the basic transformation tools that apply to an entire object.

Each verse was done as its own smaller animation, called a composition. These compositions were then exported as video clips and added to an Adobe Premiere Pro project (Figure 22). This step was by far the simplest, as all that remained was to add the audio track provided by the client group and match up the video clips to the verses. Once

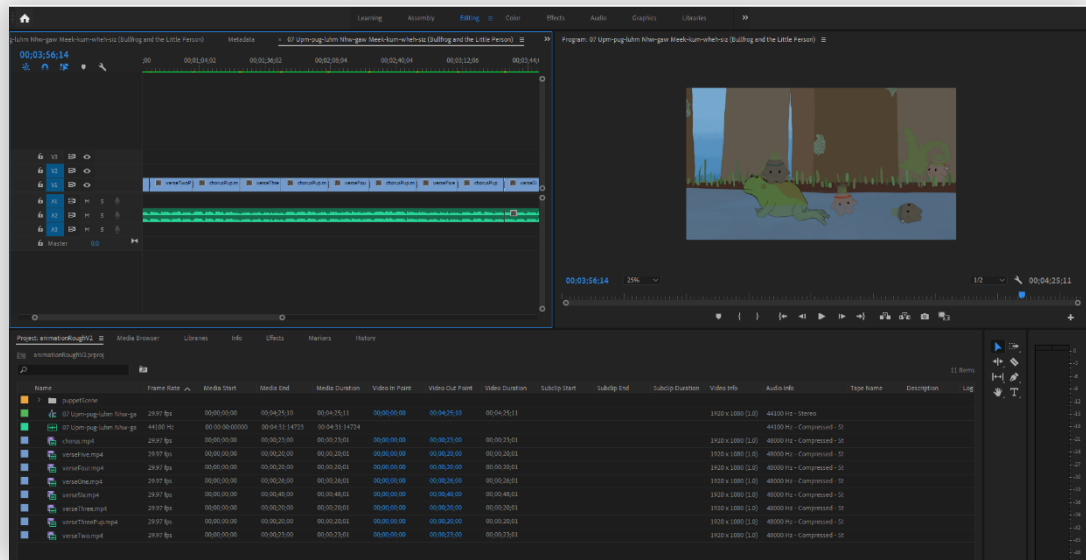


Figure 22: Screenshot of the Premiere Pro environment

this was done, I added dissolve transitions between the video clips to make the change less abrupt. The project was exported and then uploaded to Youtube, and this aspect of the project was complete. The final video can be found via the QR code ² in Figure 23.



Figure 23: QR code leading to the video made for this project

² QR code leads to the following link: <https://youtu.be/6UCIWJDq8nM>

PRESENTATION

The completed animation was shown to the Level Three Passamaquoddy class at the University of Southern Maine via Zoom. I was invited to view part of the class leading up to the presentation, and I was reminded of the process that the client group and I went through to generate the translation. The professor would say a word or phrase, and then would discuss the context in which he would encounter it, spending a couple minutes on something that would directly translate as ‘something’ and explaining that depending on the words around it, the meaning could shift entirely.

The class was receptive to the video and agreed that a lack of subtitles was a benefit because ‘when I think of a word, I imagine a picture, I don’t imagine reading. Having it move and show the story is the point’ (Paraphrase of the professor). They did suggest that having a transcription, but not the translation, available under the video could be helpful, so that was added to the description of the video.

CRITICAL ASSESSMENT

Hindsight is 20/20. Owing to the unique approach of incorporating animation with song, with regards to the Passamaquoddy-Maliseet dialect, this project was met with several challenges throughout the process. Now knowing how involved the translation process was, this project would have benefitted from being spaced out over the duration of three semesters. The first semester could have been spent on translation and background research, the second semester on the animation process, and the third semester would have been focused on user testing within the Passamaquoddy-Maliseet community to produce a story perhaps more representative of the community as a whole instead of the client group. User testing would have been conducted the same way as the in-class presentation we did, but repeated with different groups, and making edits over time as data was gathered. This produces an overall stronger product, and not finishing the animation in time to do this is something I regret.

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AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Sophia is from Acton, Maine. She was home schooled until high school, pouring most of her time and soul into various art projects and dreaming of working in theater. After being introduced to computer programming in high school she continued to the University of Maine where she joined the New Media program to be able to continue finding new and weird things to create, as well as the theater department as a quasi-costuming major. She hopes to be able to continue baffling employers and people with her disparate skill sets post-graduation.