From Goombas to Gluskabe: Coding Culture into Super Mario Bros.

By Ashlee Bird

Gitelman's concept of the frivolity of dissecting the content of a medium without first examining the abilities and limitations of the medium itself has been present in almost every aspect of this week for me. However, as I began to think more about this ideology, I've realized that NAS actually tends to be skewed more towards the cultural/content end of the spectrum, probably to a fault. We discuss changes in education systems, but often ignore the fact that a large majority of Native students go to public high schools not on the reservation, and some of the changes that are seen as necessary are simply not achievable within that structure. So, the general suggestion is complete separation and establishment of Native governed institutions. However, Jack Forbes, the founder of the NAS department at UC Davis, wrote a 1998 essay entitled "Intellectual Self-Determination and Sovereignty: Implications for Native Studies and for Native Intellectuals," pushing back against the often overwhelming outcry for Natives to separate themselves from established academic institutions and rebuild the establishment from the ground up; by Natives, for Natives. However, Forbes' take encourages the utilization of the established university. As Forbes sees it, we will always have to function within the academy if we want to have any kind of influence upon it. Separating ourselves completely will not only be reinventing the wheel, but it will also further discourage any kind of instersectionality between Native Studies and Native communities and the rest of the academy, as well as isolating ourselves from valuable resources. Forbes believes that yes, the academy is flawed (and not just for Native studies) but

ultimately, it is the dominate system, and a successful one at that. Therefore, Forbes proposes integrating ourselves into the academy and adapting that structure to fit our own needs. Instead of breaking structures, we simply need to bend them. This is how I feel about video games. Yes, the structure has flaws. Games are made by straight white men for straight white men for the most part. However, the industry as a whole is a successful one that not only rivals the film industry, but is also capable of some incredible things. Therefore, we should be doing with the video game industry what Forbes suggests we do with the academy; working within it and bending structures to meet our own needs. Representation, it seems, is often limited by cultural roadblocks rather than technological ones and this ROM hacking project seeks to explore that.

Seeing themselves represented in media is incredibly important for Native youth, as Native people in the U.S. are one of the most invisible minority groups in popular culture. While there is something to be said for creating Native representation within a video game from the ground up with a brand new project (like *Never Alone*), there can also be an importance in taking a cultural icon such as *Super Mario Bros.* and reworking it into something that Native youth can see themselves in. Additionally, Forbes encourages intellectual self-determination for Native youth. Native practice often encourages work strictly for the community and that the individual is at the service of the community, but Forbes believes that one cannot truly do their best for the community until they achieve their individual true potential. ROM hacking can be a new outlet for Native youth. It can be a way to take an established institution and contribute to it in an intellectual and artistic way in order to make Native culture and positive representation available to Native youth and the world at large, as well as expanding upon the ways in which Native individuals can achieve their true potential while also contributing in a positive manner to their communities.

In my ROM hack of *Super Mario Bros.* for the NES, the overall goal I have is to replace Mario with the figure of Gluskabe, and Abenaki hero, and replace Bowser with his evil twin brother, Moulsem, the wolf. The goombas have been replaced with wolf prints, so that Gluskabe will be tracking Moulsem, not mindlessly killing animated minions. I used the tile editor to turn the goombas into wolf prints, as well as to transform the 1 up mushrooms into acorns, an item commonly collected by Abenaki to make hearty acorn stew. With the wolf prints, I also had to change the sprite animation so that when Gluskabe jumps on them, instead of shrinking as the goombas did, they instead just tumble off the screen. The reason for this was that the squished goomba is a separate animation which I was unable to find in the tile editor, so when the wolf prints were jumped on, they reverted back to a squished goomba. Additionally, I altered the code to change a lot of the text within the game. All of the title text has been translated into Abenaki. Mario is now "Sipsi", my last name translated. Unfortunately, there aren't enough text spaces for Gluskabe, and this is a problem that many Native languages will run into. Whether it be insufficient character spaces, limited amount of symbols or punctuation, or the fact that some languages will not have a word for all of the translatable words within the text, in my case the word "time" in the upper right hand corner. However, of the words I could translate, the Nintendo line below the game title has been changed to "Hello friend", one player is "1 playing" and 2 player is "two playing". World has been changed to "turtle" due to the turtle island Abenaki creation story. After 3 deaths, instead of "game over" the translation is "he dies". I also changed some of the colors within the game, such as the pipes, bushes, and bricks. While I had many successes, I did hit a few roadblocks.

Having only ever tried coding for the first time within this workshop, very few of the changes I made came as easy as I would've liked them to. The copyright symbol before the "kwai

nidoba" is unable to be removed. While Professor Lemieux did end up suggesting that I could try erasing it in the tile editor, it cannot be altered it in the code. If it is, the text below it, the line that originally reads "one player game" disappears. This game, therefore, is copyrighted down to the code, even if you were to make it invisible to the eye, the invisible marker of ownership would still be there. Furthermore, editing the "Super Mario Bros." in the main title screen is extremely difficult, and I have not yet found an efficient way to do so. The color palette of the game is also difficult to decipher within the tile editor program, and the color choices are limited. The sound is also limited, and were I to attempt to change the music into a culturally relevant song, I would not only be confined to the restricted sounds the NES can produce, but I would also have to delve into sound and music studies fields which I have very little experience in. Therefore, many things that seem simple, actually involve much more than just changing some numbers in the code.

Overall, this was an incredibly worthwhile experience, and I am continuing to work on the game. My goal is to have it be fully translated into Abenaki as well as to alter all of the character animations to achieve the character and story arch of Gluskabe and Moulsem. I believe that similar activities with Native youth could be a wonderful hands on workshop and a shining example of the kind of representation that can be created within the framework of something as iconic as *Super Mario Bros*.