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## An Analysis of the Ethnographic Significance of the Iñupiaq Video Game Never Alone (Kisima Ingitchuna)

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COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

AN ANALYSIS OF THE  
ETHNOGRAPHIC SIGNIFICANCE OF THE IÑUPIAQ  
VIDEO GAME *NEVER ALONE* (KISIMA INGITCHUNA)

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*Dedicated to everyone who made this a story to remember*

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## ABSTRACT

In 2014 the Iñupiaq Native American tribe of Alaska published *Never Alone*, a video game that adapts a traditional folktale into a cooperative puzzle platformer. The game is an assertion of sovereignty for the Iñupiaq people as a powerful form of self-representation in media after centuries of others speaking for them, an assertion of economic agency beyond their own borders, and as a decolonization of their youth's education. It has also served to create important hubs for the community, both inside and online. The game is an important piece of media within the culture, Indigenous media studies, and pedagogical techniques within video games.

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### Introduction

In 2014 the Iñupiaq Nation of Cook Inlet released *Never Alone*, a video game that adapts a traditional folktale to single and multiplayer puzzle platforming. The game was meant to be an educational tool for teaching Iñupiaq culture to youth in the community, a correction to their absent and inaccurate representation in media, and an avenue for the tribal government to generate income. It has since gone on to achieve not only critical acclaim and commercial success, but also profound influence in both Iñupiaq culture and Indigenous media studies. Every step of *Never Alone*'s creation is significant, from its conception, to its production, to its release and reception. Every stage shows the Iñupiaq people's agency, industry and media savvy, and an overall desire to create positive change within their community<sup>1</sup>.

This project saw not only the creation of a game meant to teach the Iñupiaq culture inside and out of the community, but also the creation of a new company, business partnerships, and global, wide reaching hubs that connect those interested in learning about Iñupiaq culture. My analysis of *Never Alone* brings together various views of Indigenous sovereignty as a framework for understanding the impact and significance of the video game. As in all Indigenous media studies, this study cannot merely focus on textual analysis of the finished product, but must examine the production and post-production process and how each ties back in to each other and the culture as a whole, as well as the individuals involved in the text's creation. In this thesis I

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<sup>1</sup> To clarify, since some literature treats "Iñupiaq" and "Iñupiat" interchangeably, I wished to define my usage. Iñupiaq denotes either individuals or the language, while Iñupiat is used for multiple people (MacLean 2014:109) In this thesis I use "Iñupiaq" when applying the word as an adjective, such as "the Iñupiaq people."

argue that *Never Alone* represents an assertion of Iñupiaq visual, economic, and cultural sovereignty as this Native nation navigates the spheres of business, education, and social reform in ways that shaped and will continue to shape both their own culture and the world around them.

I approached this topic with four questions guiding my research. 1) What is *Never Alone*'s significance to both Iñupiaq culture and Indigenous media studies? 2) How have historical forces in the Iñupiaq people's past led to the game's creation and shaped the production process? 3) What does the game reveal about the Iñupiaq individuals and cultural framework influencing the creation of it? 4) What continued impact is the game poised to have and what future directions in research can explore those impacts?

## **Methodology**

For this project I focused on three research approaches. The first was historical and archival research through the university library and other databases. The second was textual analysis of the game itself. The third was analysis of the Cultural Insight videos produced for the game. All three were intermingled for each section of this thesis. I have attempted to blend these three approaches as best suits each chapter. I will present a brief literature review later in this chapter to cover the material that I used as background reading before starting my analysis of the game.

The majority of my preparatory reading was collected from library research, article databases, and modern periodicals. This included the history of Alaska's colonization, Indigenous media studies theory, educational technique, and Iñupiaq ethnographic information. These were useful for the theoretical approaches I will discuss below, as well as providing the historic and ethnographic context necessary to approach this material with a sufficiently wide view.

I went on to utilize a number of online and magazine articles primarily used for quotes from interviews with influential figures in the game's design. This included members of Upper One Games, E-Line Media, and the Cook Inlet Tribal Council. These also proved useful for tracking more nebulous facts and figures, especially in Upper One and E-Line Media's business transactions. Their last use was to study how the mainstream gaming news sources covered, discussed, and represented the game. These were primarily used in Chapter 2, as the quotes offered the most insight into how the game was conceived, planned, and made.

The second portion of my research was textual analysis of the game itself. This was primarily from my own experiences playing it, but did include watching playthroughs shared through the game's official YouTube channel to study alternate playstyles. I did not take advantage of the multiplayer aspect. I felt playing with someone of my choosing might have skewed the experience enough to affect my interpretation. Likewise I could not guarantee enough knowledge on a randomly assigned teammate to sufficiently analyze how they would influence my experience. Thus my descriptions are of playing alongside the game's AI programming for the non-player controlled character. This research is mostly contained to Chapter Three, which is my textual analysis of the game itself.

I also made use of textual analysis from "Never Alone: Resources and References," where several Indigenous scholars cited throughout this paper posted essays discussing the game. Some of this information was utilized as part of my first source, while others provided an Indigenous perspective on the game that, as a non-Native person, I lack. Above all this reinforced the game's importance as self-representation after many generations of being either underrepresented or misrepresented in global media.

This section is the closest I came to fieldwork in the course of this study. I did not travel to Cook Inlet or engage in any direct person-to-person interactions. However, in playing *Never Alone*, I was immersed in a virtual world created by the Iñupiat people, one built on their folklore, imagery, cosmology, and beliefs, which I would argue still offers personal experience comparable to more traditional definitions of fieldwork. While engaging with the world of *Never Alone* I looked for many of the same traits and features examined in typical ethnography. I also thought of myself as engaging with the people who had created this world for me to interact with rather than the world itself. Any lessons or information I learned I saw not as something I had happened upon, but as something that had been placed there for me to find. To quote Tom Boellstorff when describing his fieldwork in the online game *Second Life*,

It might seem controversial to claim one can conduct research entirely inside a virtual world, since persons in them spend most of their time in the actual world and because virtual worlds reference and respond to the actual world in many ways. However [...], studying virtual worlds “in their own terms” is not only feasible but crucial to developing research methods that keep up with the realities of technological change. Most virtual worlds now have tens of thousands of participants, if not more, and the vast majority interact only in the virtual world. The forms of social action and meaning-making that take place do so within the virtual world, and there is a dire need for methods and theories that take this into account (Boellstorff 2008:4-5).

My work took place primarily in a virtual setting, but a virtual setting made by people as a digital location for other people to interact. The very concept of the game was to overcome physical distance through technology, to create a place where people at any place on Earth could immerse themselves in a world of Iñupiaq design.

I would go on to argue that there are understandings of this game I could only internalize through personal experience. For example, about half way through the game, just as a level ends, Nuna and Fox have to travel along paths separated by a thin wall of ice. As the edge of the

screen appears and it seems that the level is over, the Manslayer appears. He demands Nuna give him her bola (a throwing weapon gifted to her by a powerful spirit), and when she refuses, he seizes Fox, studies him for a few seconds, then brutally snaps his neck before tossing him down the ravine. Watching this scene without any control would have still been heart wrenching. However, being immersed in that scene, I felt as though there was something I needed to do. I frantically tried every button, and when Fox's lifeless body fell from sight, I felt as though I had personally failed. I was actively concerned about how I would be able to go any further when he had been so instrumental to everything that had come before. I did not think about how game mechanics dictated I would be able to progress in some way; my outside knowledge of game design came secondary to the emotions of that experience. In the moment it offered "a mode of understanding those aspects of culture that are beyond the cognitive" (Ginsburg 1985:237). And therein lies my point, that personal experience and history completely shifts how a person interprets *Never Alone*, which is why I incorporated it so heavily into my analysis. To quote Barbara Myerhoff's view on the role of the ethnographer, "If I can, in my work as an anthropologist, make it clear who they are, what they feel, and pass that through me and out into the world, then my work is done" (Littman 1985). My goal is to provide not just facts, but the appropriate emotional information and humanity to explain how they are all connected. As my own perceptions are my instruments in this research, I have to provide a comprehensive explanation of them, one that is not completely limited to the objective.

The final method was analyzing the Cultural Insight videos produced for the game. I count these as separate from my textual analysis due to their availability on YouTube; their genre and aesthetic differences from the game proper's computer animated style; and their addressing somewhat different content than the game itself. Each film is viewable on its own, or the films

can be seen in conjunction with the game. The first viewing method is what solidified my decision to analyze them separately; as they can be viewed on their own, separate from the larger text of the game, I felt they also should in part be studied on their own. In the second instance they typically connect to the most recent part of the story, either to offer more information or context, to ensure the player gains the understanding the developers intended. I also examined this framing, assuming it would be the more frequent method viewers encountered the videos. These proved useful for initial ethnographic perspectives of the Iñupiaq people, analyzing the historical context leading up to the game, closer reading of the motivations throughout the planning and creation of the game, and their explanations of specific aspects of the game's story, imagery, and themes.

I went on to transcribe the Cultural Insight videos while analyzing them. They are provided in full in Appendix B. As they offer valuable ethnographic data from the emic perspective, I thought it worth doing what I could to help them achieve wider circulation. My hope is that being provided in text form will encourage future research into not just *Never Alone*, but the Iñupiaq people in general, to consult and cite these films.

### **Iñupiaq Culture**

The Iñupiaq culture is one rich in tradition, community values, folklore, and above all an adaptability necessary to survive in an Arctic environment. Many of their cultural traits focus on the need to help each other survive, both through teaching and cooperation. Oral narratives assert Iñupiaq presence in these lands for approximately 14,000 years (CIRI 2018). Originally, their livelihood relied mainly on hunting, gathering and fishing (Jolles 2006:239). These provided both food and the raw materials for most of their material culture. There are approximately 13,500 Iñupiaq people currently living in Alaska ("Iñupiaq" 2007).

Storytelling is an essential part of passing down knowledge and culture between generations. As Amy Fredeen states, “Storytelling for the Iñupiaq people is very important, because it not only created that sense of community, but as a way to pass on wisdom to the next generation” (“It Would be Really Nice to Hear a Story” 2014). Cordelia Qiqnaaq goes on to say:

There was a reason behind the stories that were told, because they held a traditional knowledge. They held things that we might need to know in life. Whether it was about how to find food, or how to survive, or it was about well-being, and the importance of connecting with people, and being a good member of the community.

Storytelling goes beyond entertainment for the Iñupiaq people; there are frequently both morals and survival information contained in oral narratives. Stories are directly instructive: listeners can become future storytellers. The transmission of storytelling includes imparting useful memory devices that help users remember and retell. These are passed to each listener, who in turn may use them when they too go from audience to storyteller.

Changing and modifying stories as needed, such as needing to modify this folktale for a new medium, is not anything new to Iñupiaq storytelling. As David Gaertner notes,

In the way that it extends tradition into innovation by simply forefronting the latter in the fundamental structure of the game, *Never Alone* is a thrilling example of the dynamic, fluid, and living presence of Indigenous storytelling in contemporary spaces and storytellers’ abilities to shift and adapt traditional narratives in new contexts and mediums without sacrificing meaning or faithfulness to the past. Audra Simpson writes, ‘tradition is profoundly contemporary’ (2014). *Never Alone* not only confirms Simpson’s assertion, but also demonstrates how tradition pushes at the boundary between the present and the future and challenges how we think about technology and modernity (Gaertner, 2016).

Sharing of resources and avoiding of competition are major Iñupiaq cultural values. Food and other goods are not something to be hoarded individually, but shared by basis of need. As Amy Fredeen states, “This isn’t just about one individual surviving, or one family surviving, it’s



about the whole community” (“Subsistence Lifestyle” 2015). Competition is seen as not just immoral, but is in fact considered a threat to the whole community’s survival. “If our people didn’t share in, you know, the old days, we wouldn’t have survived in this harsh, you know, climate, environment” (Qaiyaan Harcharek, “Sharing for Survival”, 2016). This is less a placing of the collective above the individual and more viewing no individual as able to survive long without the help of the collective.

Iñupiaq people feel an intense connection to their homelands, one which has been threatened, in part by climate change. “We’re very much aware of the climate change, and it’s been, for many years, even before climatologists were noticing this change, Inuit were already saying, ‘Sila alannuqtuq’; ‘Our climate is changing’” (Ronald Aniqsuaq, “No More Thick Ice”, 2015). Receding coastlines have already forced resettlement away from traditional lands, as well as changed geographical features that play prominently in Iñupiaq cosmology (Sakakibara 2008:456). “A story about an eroding homeland is thus a reflection on a changing place, and a changing identity with, and uncertainty about, that place the Iñupiaq experienced” (Sakakibara 2008:462). These changes have been felt prominently in the last decades, and lead to even greater concern for preserving and passing down the central pillars of their culture.

### **Context in Native American History**

Since Russian colonization in 1784, Alaska Natives have endured relentless attempts to force them to assimilate and abandon their identities. Under the Russian government fur traders and later the Russian Orthodox Church were given administrative control of the region, including control over the mandatory schooling of Indigenous youth (Darnell and Hoëm, 1996). The schools run by fur trading companies focused on teaching middle management and clerical duties, with the express purpose of students going on to work in the Russian-American

Company's fur trade. Russian Orthodox schools offered a more generalized education, but one that was heavily Western in its values. Both the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian-American company saw Indigenous knowledge as unable to help Alaska Natives survive life in colonized Alaska and pictured themselves a civilizing influence.

From Russia's sale of the Alaskan Territory to the United States in 1867 to 1877, the United States government largely entrusted education to missionaries, who shared Russian views that Indigenous knowledge could not provide a stable livelihood, and further insisted that conversion was essential to salvation (Darnell and Hoëm, 1996). School administration changed hands multiple times, with Alaska Native children facing increasingly paternalistic curricula that included lectures on basic hygiene, until the Meriam Report of 1926 led to the Bureau of Indian Affairs inducting children into residential schools. These schools forcibly separated children from their parents by miles, then did everything in their power to make them indistinguishable from white American children. Speaking any language besides English was a capital offense, one sometimes met with intense physical abuse (La Belle and Smith 2005:4). Most teachers could not communicate with students, as they only spoke English and had no knowledge of Indigenous culture or practices (Hobart 1970:125).

As in the beginning, residential schools focused on vocational training ('Culture' Discarded by Indians' School, 1937). More general topics such as mathematics and writing were removed from the curriculum apart from that which tied directly into the jobs the children were being taught to do; anything non specialized was seen as useless to their futures. What was perhaps the most devastating in the long term was that these schools planned for the children to enter the American workforce and never return to their traditional homes or communities. Most children were indeed unable to reintegrate into their former homes, and thus had to seek lives

elsewhere (Darnell and Höem 1996). This was designed to and greatly successful in disrupting the intergenerational passage of culture among Iñupiaq in Alaska.

In 1952, Congress passed the Johnson-O'Malley Act, which transferred the administration of BIA boarding schools to the Alaskan state government's control, diminishing the more organized and directed efforts to make Native children assimilate into American culture (Barnhardt 2001:13). Even as the administering body shifted, these schools remained the only option for most Native parents to meet the state-required education of their children until the 1970's, meaning Indigenous children were still separated from their home and family by great distances for years at a time.

In 1971, the United States government passed the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) (Pevar 1983:300-301). This federal law was designed to prevent any future land claims by compensating Native groups with \$962.5 million and 40 million acres of land (. To distribute the land and money evenly to individual people, the law also incorporated villages under Alaska state law, making the corporations the governing bodies of the collected tribes. Both this economic arrangement and system of government make Alaska Native groups unique among Native Americans, as this was the only region to subject to these regulations.

In 1972 multiple native families brought a lawsuit forward alleging that Alaska had racially positioned rural schools closer to white communities, and thus forced Native children to enroll in Bureau of Indian Affairs boarding schools (Hirshberg 2008:6). In response, the Alaskan government passed the 1976 *Tobeluk v. Lind* consent decree, requiring more rural high schools to be built close to Native populations. This accelerated already declining residential school attendance, as Indigenous parents now had more options for their children's education. With

more local schools, Indigenous educators were also better able to secure teaching jobs in their communities.

There is far more history at play in the need for and creation of *Never Alone* than can be fully presented in a paper of this length. However, it is important to acknowledge the historical trauma facing the Iñupiaq people who have endured two separate governments working to undermine their Indigenous identity and fighting to maintain the legal right to raise their own children. While I cannot provide the entire historical background that led to both a need for Indigenous media such as *Never Alone* and the remarkable resilience of the Iñupiaq people that saw it through to completion, I do hope to provide some sense of what the game and its creators are speaking back to.

### **Theoretical Approaches**

Within anthropology, the subfield of Indigenous media provides the foundation for the analysis in my thesis. For this I primarily used the works of Faye Ginsburg, Lila Abu-Lughod, and Kristin Dowell. These works offered insight into not only how to examine the finished product, but also provided guidance in how to consider the creation processes as equally important. As Dowell argues (Dowell 2013:122):

Filmmaking is a collaborative process that often entails mobilizing not only financial resources and equipment but also social labor to bring various skills and talents to the project. In many cases this means calling on the involvement of family members to complete the project. In this way Aboriginal media is more than simply expressive of Aboriginal stories; it also nurtures Aboriginal kinship and is deeply embedded in Aboriginal social life.

While this quote speaks to film, it holds equally true to the process of creating a video game. A project of this size requires coordination, teamwork, and uniting behind a common goal. *Never*

*Alone* offers information about Iñupiaq folklore, values, and practices, but its creation reveals Iñupiaq agency, business and media acumen, motivations, and sovereignty.

On top of the role the sovereignty of self-representation plays in Indigenous media studies, I went on to include other perspectives on sovereignty. Here I primarily made use of Reyna Ramirez's *Native Hubs* (2007) and Jessica Cattelino's *High Stakes* (2008). Ramirez's work analyzes the role hubs play in maintaining connections between Indigenous individuals and their homelands when physically separated, which proves appropriate considering *Never Alone*'s role in that as a digitally accessible media. She argues:

The hub offers a mechanism to support Native notions of culture, community, identity, and belonging away from tribal land bases. Moreover, it describes a Native [person]'s notion of urban and reservation mobility, and it suggests a political vision for social change (Ramirez 2007:1)

In essence a hub can serve as almost an embassy, where people living in diaspora can make connections with others in their same position as well as maintain relations with their traditional homeland and its people.

Cattelino's work studies the role money plays in assertions of Native sovereignty. I draw on this framework to analyze the business side of the project. Controlling one's own income allows for the self-sufficiency necessary for sovereignty, allows for greater control over which relations to form and which paths to pursue. Where her work was particularly relevant was the relationship between Upper One Games ,the Iñupiaq video game studio formed for this project, and E-Line Media, the established developer they partnered with. She developed the concept of sovereign interdependency, where an institution, group, or country exerts sovereignty by forming into relationships with other groups and countries. These relationships come to make both reliant on the other, giving both a reason to see the other succeed, as one's successes are generally the

other's as well. The influence these relationships provide offers both sovereignty and stability. In terms of this project, Upper One and E-Line relied on each other's knowledge to create the project as they wanted. Both companies needed the other and were well aware of that, which is what drove them to commit wholeheartedly to this collaborative partnership.

Regarding the Cultural Insight videos – the informational clips that cut away from the action inside the game -- , I relied on the scholarship of ethnographic film scholars Karl Heider, Jay Ruby, and David MacDougall. This work shed insight on the relationships between tribal members, their corporate/ representative body, and the established developers. The general terminology was also useful for studying the shots, editing, and other basic film techniques used.

With *Never Alone*'s intention as an educational tool for Indigenous youth, it seemed prudent to examine how it helps to decolonize education. As discussed above, Alaska Native children have been subjected to colonial education for centuries, facing educators who set out to strip them of their culture and make them assimilate into the workforce as menial laborers. Thus the game's pedagogy not only had to be effective, it had to teach in a way that would redress this painful history.

James Paul Gee provided the theory on both generalized gaming pedagogy and the specific educational applications of video games. His work not only examined the role games can play in more effectively teaching content to interested players, but also provides a roadmap for understanding how learning together through gameplay can foster a sense of community among young people (Gee 2008:22). This assertion allowed me to apply Ramirez's descriptions of hubs: the videogame is an online gathering place that can support Indigenous culture – whether players are physically located on their sovereign lands or not.

## Conclusion

*Never Alone* is important to the Iñupiaq people because it speaks to their past, present, and future. It serves to help overcome the damage inflicted by American and Russian residential schools and other programs designed to disrupt the intergenerational transfer of culture. It addresses the current crisis of dislocation, depression, and high suicide rates Indigenous youth face by reassuring them of their place of belonging and intrinsic value. It looks to the future, both in finding new ways to share old information and adjusting to global changes to help the Iñupiaq culture carry on. It stands as a prominent milestone within efforts to exert their Indigenous sovereignty.

Its importance to anthropology lays in these same points. It not only is a wealth of ethnographic information, but an expression of sovereignty in multiple areas worth examining from an ethnographic perspective. It is a response to colonial dispossession and a rejection of further disempowerment. It is an assertion of survival and cultural endurance. This thesis provides a glimpse into a media innovation that has enduring and ongoing impact in its origin community, among its members living far away from their homelands, and beyond.

While this thesis cannot cover the enormity of this project, especially considering the numerous and complex ways in which its impact is still reverberating, I do hope to reveal the significance it holds both to the Iñupiaq community and to anthropology. Both the game's own value as a source of ethnographic information and what its production says about the Iñupiaq people involved offer the fields of visual anthropology and Indigenous media studies a range of ideas and topics that deserve to be delved into far deeper than a single master's thesis allows for.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **THE MAKING OF *NEVER ALONE***

#### **Introduction**

*Never Alone* is the result of the Iñupiaq people and the Cook Inlet Tribal Council exerting both their visual sovereignty to correct how they have been mis- and underrepresented in media, as well as their economic sovereignty to participate in the global videogame market. Their efforts not only impacted their community but the international mediascape and economy. This was accomplished through business acumen, nuanced understanding of videogames as a media, and a decisive approach to improving social relations.

#### **Birth of Upper One Games**

*Never Alone* sprung from a lunch conversation about whether the Cook Inlet Tribal Council (CITC) was effectively connecting with Iñupiaq youth (White 2015:52). Many were finding themselves moving away from traditional Iñupiaq lands, due in part to economic pressures and global warming decreasing how much of their traditional territory is above water (March 2015). This disrupted transmission of both Iñupiaq culture and language from one generation to the next, with more tribal elders choosing to remain rather than relocate.

This sense of disconnection was seen as connected to part larger issues facing Iñupiaq teenagers. Compared to teenagers of other cultures, Iñupiaq teens have higher rates of children dropping out of school, drug use, and suicide (Takahashi 2015). The CITC attributed this in part to a lacking sense of belonging to both their traditional culture and the larger world around them. They were not only concerned with their culture continuing, but the wellbeing of Iñupiaq youth.

As with any attempt to create change through government action, the matter of funds was a chief concern. While the CITC is a not-for-profit organization, it does rely on CITC Enterprises



Inc. to help finance its programs and efforts (White 2015:54). The CITC had been looking to diversify their income streams for some time, in order to gain more financial autonomy. Decades of colonial interference had disrupted their ability to be financial independent, leading to some reliance on federal funding and grants from the United States government (Darnell and Höems 1996). The need to secure money directly controlled by the CITC rather than funds divvied out by the government in order to finance their own social programs was a pressing concern, one which, if successful, this proposed project stood to answer.

Upper One Games was formed as a subsidiary of CITC Enterprises Inc., the for-profit wing of the not-for-profit Cook Inlet Tribal Council (CITC) (White 2015:53). It was developed by Pita Benz, vice president of enterprise for CITC, who suggested a video game as a solution to the sense of disconnect among Iñupiaq youth. She originally expected Gloria O'Neill, president and chief executive of CITC, to reject the concept, and was surprised to instead be given both permission and resources to follow her idea. O'Neill saw the idea as both innovative and potentially lucrative. As she said at the DICE Summit, a premiere gaming event at Las Vegas, "My number one job is to make money. My number two goal is to make an impact" (Takahashi 2015). O'Neill believed the venture's strength lay in not having to bring in Iñupiaq youth, but instead going to them. "We saw video games as a way to connect to our youth in a place where they're already at," said Amy Fredeen, vice president and chief financial officer of CITC, to Upworthy in an interview (March 2015). As Naithan Legace observes, Iñupiaq youth "face situations of despair, unemployment, and suicide, but also, interestingly enough, seek video games for escape and a way out of some of the worlds in which they live" (2016). This approach saw technology as a means to continue passing on traditional knowledge and stories through new

means that overcame the issues presented by a dispersed population. As Cleo Reece, a Cree filmmaker operating in Vancouver observed of self-representation in media,

That's what we're trying to portray, our own image in our own way rather than somebody else's take on us. We're doing it ourselves! We're producing our own images (Dowell 2014:xi).

The project hoped to overcome physical distance through technology, to reach out to at-risk youth and help them feel reconnected with their heritage.

With O'Neill's vote of confidence, Benz formed Upper One Games to start their project (White 2015: 52-54). The first hurdle was no one on Benz's team had any experience coding video games. After researching existing companies, Benz reached out to E-Line Media, a company that had experience building games designed to accompany primary school curriculums. E-Line dispatched a team of twelve to meet with Upper One members. "What was funny is they actually came up and tried to talk us out of it," says Fereen (March 2015). E-Line cautioned that video games are risky ventures for most companies, and as a nonprofit, the CITC had more limited resources to funnel into it. Upper One members persisted and convinced E-Line to sign on with them through their belief that, if the project was successful, any risk they assumed along the way would prove worthwhile.

Upper One wanted to make it incredibly clear they were partnering with E-Line, not commissioning them. As Sean Vesce, E-Line's creative director, quotes Ishmael Hope from their first meeting,

[Ishmael] was the one that came out right at the outset and said, 'Hey, look, if you guys are thinking that you're gonna come up here once in a while and make your game down in Seattle, and check in with us once in a while to see if you're on the right track, there's a long list of films and books and other kinds of artists that have come up to try that, and they have all failed. If you want to succeed at this, if you want to make something that not only excites people outside Alaska but makes people inside Alaska

proud, you're going to have to involve us in a very direct way, through the entire development.' That really set the tone with us, in the way that we engaged with the community from that point forward (Scimeca 2015).

The two companies initially set to work analyzing what games already portrayed Native Americans and disappointed by what they found. "It ran the gamut from being terrible stereotypes to just appropriation. Some of them were really almost obscene," Fredeen recalled (March 2015). These were the sparse representations they had, otherwise finding themselves absent from the media. When they were represented it was either as minor characters made from amalgamated cultural signifiers from different, unrelated groups or as one-dimensional antagonists that tended to reinforce negative stereotypes of Iñupiaq/Native people. The most common tendency was to merge traits and imagery from different Native cultures as though they were interchangeable, displaying a complete ignorance for what any of what they portrayed meant. The discussion grew to include not only transmitting culture, but giving Iñupiaq children someone they could look up to and see themselves in.

The game's story adapts one from Iñupiaq folklorist Robert Cleveland's *Unipchaanich imagluktugmiut = Stories of the Black River People*, which for many Iñupiaq folktales was the first time they were written down<sup>2</sup>. In the original story the protagonist was a young boy rather than Nuna, the young girl the developers wrote. Changing the gender of the game's protagonist from that of the source material falls in line with the game's larger goal of allowing Native

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Nasruk Cleveland was born near the end of the 19th century and was one of the most prolific and powerful storytellers in Iñupiat history. He spent most of his life living along the Black River in Alaska where he was skilled in the art of subsisting off the land. During his youth (the late 1800s and early 1900s), Robert spent countless hours in the *qargi*; it was in these community houses with Elders that he began to learn classic Iñupiaq stories and develop the storytelling skills that distinguished him as one of the leading masters of the oral storytelling tradition. (<http://neveralongame.com/kunuuksaayuka2/>, accessed April 20, 2018).

American gamers to see themselves within the larger genre of video games. In 2011 Elizabeth LaPenseé found that Native Americans were underrepresented in video games by 90% (2011). The developers thought that this metric was even worse for Native American women, who have even less representation than men in games (“Why a Girl?” 2014). As E-Line Media’s creative director Sean Vesce said when interviewed,

We ended up with the Iñupiaq girl over a male character, primarily because we felt the girl hero has been underrepresented in video games and to have a girl character that was powerful and could overcome something as harsh as that environment was something that we felt would add to the canon of the games. Many of us actually have daughters, so the idea of creating something that would inspire them... was important (Lyons 2014).

This stemmed from the project’s goal of helping Indigenous youth see themselves as an active part of the world. As discussed in Chapter 3, Nuna identifies a problem facing her community and takes brave action to try and change it. With women typically portrayed in media as lacking the agency to create as much change as men, this change was seen as a step toward making media less patriarchal, in addition to Eurocentric.

While E-Line saw the decision as something that ultimately would not turn off their perceived main demographic of teenage boys, what they did not realize was how much it would actually encourage gamers to purchase *Never Alone*. Despite many seeing videogames as something primarily consumed by young males, women make up around 41% percent of the market (Entertainment Software Association 2017:7). Being both undermarketed to on top of being largely both underrepresented and misrepresented in video games, *Never Alone* actually stood to gain customers by making the story’s protagonist female.

Changing the protagonist’s gender went on to not only help amend lacking representation of women in video games, while also addressing colonialism’s long-standing misrepresentations

of Indigenous women. “Dominant media has historically misrepresented women and Indigenous peoples, and this can be traced to the prevalence of media producers as male and white; therefore, ideologies of patriarchy and racism have permeated mass media” (Murphy 2017). This has included diminishing Indigenous women’s agency, something readily overturned by making the story’s driving character female. Nuna not only singlehandedly saves her village from starvation, she proves able to change the weather of the entire area. She exerts more agency in the narrative than any other character, even the ice giant that is able to send her entire world into turmoil. Through selfless bravery and cooperating with the natural world around her, Nuna presents herself as a strong, able character, one the developers hoped players would see themselves in and be reassured of their own agency.

Adapting media to respond to a problem is not a new approach on its own. As a video game, *Never Alone* takes this adaptation of Iñupiaq culture and enables the developers to personalize how each consumer views the work. Faye Ginsburg argues:

[...] marginalized people worldwide are employing a variety of media to assert their cultural and political presence. They are using their work to mediate boundaries of time, space and language across historically-produced social ruptures, and to construct identities and narratives that link past, present, and future. While such media have had some influence on teaching and scholarship in the academy, their more profound impact has been in the building and expansion of a whole range of supportive cultural institutions through which alterNative media forms have become more visible and even fashionable since the 1980’s (1994a:8)

When arguing for fashionableness, a videogame would have a greater appeal to a younger demographic. The material is largely the same but was reformatted in order to best appeal and interact with Iñupiaq youth, the group Upper One sought to help. The medium was chosen to fit the audience, and thus ensure the best chances of a wide distribution among those the developers saw as needing the most help.

## Cultural Ambassadors



Fig. 1) Several of the Cultural Ambassadors (<http://neveralonegame.com/game>, accessed November 19, 2017)

Part of creating the game involved assembling a team of 16 official Iñupiaq cultural ambassadors, on top of other consultants and cultural experts not specifically part of that team (“Our Team” 2016). (Figure 1) This includes anthropologists, linguists, folklorists, artists, and elders, many of whom either teach or have taught in the community, at resource centers, or universities. These individuals were entrusted to ensure *Never Alone* appropriately represented Iñupiaq culture by offering explanation and development of the topics the game discusses. In order to do so, they decided the best people to represent them were themselves.

James (Mumigan) Nageak served as the game’s narrator. His is the only voice the player hears, allowing him to situate the entire story as a legend that was passed to him as he is passing it to the player; as he starts the game, “I will tell you a very old story. I heard it from Nasruk when I was very young.” This makes the game not just a story, but in a way his story. He also is able to speak the Iñupiaq language with authority, having grown up using it primarily apart from earning his Associate’s Degree at Sheldon Jackson College (“Our Team” 2016). Nageak, having

worked as a linguistic educator at University of Alaska Fairbanks and as the voice of Iñupiaq Rosetta Stone, saw *Never Alone* as a means to help both teach and foster an interest in the Iñupiaq language. “I believe that through this game, somebody might get interested in the language. It could give them a spark of the possibilities in the Iñupiaq language- in any language. You have to learn a new physiology of how sounds are made to learn a new language. *Never Alone* could make someone want to do that.” The game was not meant to be a player’s sole interaction with Iñupiaq culture, but one that would encourage further interaction. In terms of non-Native players, it could serve as an entry point, one to give them a basic framework from which to continue researching the culture. For Iñupiaq players it offers a way to re-immense in their culture if they feel separated by either physical or more abstract barriers.

This team of cultural ambassadors stands as a more visible symbol of the larger significance of *Never Alone*. Forming both this team and Upper One Games makes *Never Alone* into a community hub for the Iñupiaq, one where people can bond over the shared goals of preserving their culture and presenting it as they choose to both their youth and to the world at large. It also connects them to those that would try and seek out the knowledge by establishing a connection that did not exist before. As Renya Ramirez says of hubs’ relation to Indigenous groups, “the hub suggest how landless Native Americans maintain a sense of connection to their tribal homelands and urban spaces through participation in cultural circuits and maintenance of social networks, as well as shared activity with other Native Americans in the city and on the reservation” (2007:3). This was not an accidental side effect of producing *Never Alone*, but a result that was part of Upper One’s mission statement. Iñupiaq youth physically disconnected from their traditional territory were seen as the most at risk. The game was meant to serve as a

way to connect with their culture and interact with other physically distant players through the multiplayer feature.

Choosing the term “Ambassador” is a very politically minded decision. It reveals these cultural experts are aware of the role they play in both reaching out to Indigenous people that are physically separated from their traditional lands, as well as their role representing Iñupiaq culture to the outside world. Rather than choose a more scholarly term such as “experts” or “teachers,” they chose a term that not only denoted their knowledge, but also the distinctive political status as citizens of a Native nation. The cultural and political status signified by the term “cultural ambassador” indicates their ability to present Iñupiaq knowledge and storytelling in a way that fosters beneficial relationships between the Iñupiaq people and the rest of the world. As ambassadors, they also come from the community they represent. They are Iñupiaq people speaking for themselves and their own culture rather than someone else speaking for them. The title exerts their right to be their own representatives, of which the player is reminded in every video they watch.

### **Sovereignty**

The Cultural Ambassadors’ films were just one part in the widespread assertion of sovereignty throughout this project. *Never Alone*’s production represents a number of different expressions of the Iñupiat people’s sovereignty. The financial and business decisions, the efforts to correct their misrepresentation and exclusion from global media, and their steering of their culture’s destiny through social reform are all powerful moves in their own right. When combined together, *Never Alone* presents a milestone in their culture’s history.

Part of *Never Alone*’s production design did include a desire to make money, but this decision was based on achieving more independence, not a basic desire for individual profit.



Generating enough revenue to support both this and future ventures was meant to decrease reliance on federal support and grants (White 2015:52). The game was seen as a way of diversifying their income, and thus as a possible means of subsidizing not only the game, but future projects. That they were able to not only fund this highly ambitious project but also purchase a controlling share in their partner company to better ensure future enterprises displays a high degree of economic sovereignty, enough to influence the global market.

When analyzing Seminole casinos, Jessica Cattelino developed the idea of interdependency between groups, communities and even nations as an expression of sovereignty.

No modern sovereign exercises absolute sovereignty, and, in this, Indigenous sovereigns are no exception. What is important is playing a role, influencing other groups that in turn influence the Seminole. There is not always even influence between the two, but that is because there rarely is in any other intersovereign relationship. "...the interdependency of tribes and settler sovereigns- especially the ways that settler states have been shaped in relation to Indigenous peoples- often is obscured and forestalled by uneven power grids. Of course, intersovereign relations between nation-states are similarly uneven and power-laden, as illustrated by international debt relations." (Cattelino 2008:162-163)

Upper One needed E-Line to accomplish their goal, as quoted earlier this is a fact Fereen readily admits. However, their relationship soon made E-Line reliant on Upper One in order to make a game that did not disrespect or misrepresent Iñupiaq culture. Both needed the other's knowledge to succeed, and thus both had a vested interest in helping the other.

As discussed above, the Cultural Ambassadors played a major role in the expression of sovereignty over representation. The material covered was hand-selected by the Iñupiaq cultural ambassadors working on the project, along with Iñupiaq youth leaders who consulted with the main team ("Home" 2016). Iñupiaq creative directors also directed the shots, wrote the copy, suggested the environmental footage to film, and in some cases provided their own anecdotes as

subjects for the videos (Hope 2014). Shooting itself involved outsider collaboration with Shep Films and Talking Circle, both to film the interviews and collect the environmental footage.

It is undeniable that the editing room is where the authorship of the film is articulated and revealed. Thus, that the Iñupiaq did not solely edit the film, but utilized Shep Films and Talking Circle for some of the videography, may be seen as surrendering some of their control over the final work (Hope 2014). However, the Iñupiaq cultural ambassadors had final say over the material; considering the goal of the work, it is unlikely any piece they felt was not in line with their message would have been approved for inclusion in the game. We can infer that the ambassadors saw the films as faithfully speaking on Iñupiaq culture, and thus in line with their vision.

I argue that what is most important about the production are the segments that are readily apparent to the viewer. Every speaker in the videos is Iñupiaq, reading information they or their colleagues wrote; they are the faces of their own cultural analysis. They do not shore up the theories or bullet points of an outside academic, they are their own academics, explaining their own culture not just with the authority of having lived it, but by being leading figures in their respective fields. Linguists and anthropologists number among the cultural ambassadors, all of whom have years of experience already teaching this material (“Cultural Ambassadors” 2016). These are the people speaking to the players; these are the people serving as the voice of Iñupiaq culture.

When studying supposed collaborative ethnographic films, Jay Ruby devised a set of criteria to determine exactly how the power dynamics of film play out. As a project between two studios *Never Alone* represents a slightly more complicated endeavor, but Ruby’s criteria do offer an interesting perspective.

“For a production to be truly collaborative, the parties involved must be equal in their competencies or have achieved an equitable division of labor. Involvement in the decision-making process must occur at all significant junctures. Before a film can be judged as a successful collaboration, the mechanics of the production must be understood. Is the collaboration to be found at all stages of production? Have the filmmakers trained the subjects in technical and artistic production skills, or are the subjects merely “subject-area specialists” who gauge the accuracy of the information and pass upon the political and moral correctness of the finished work? Who had the idea for the film in the first place? Who raised and controls the funds? Who operates the equipment? Who is professionally concerned with the completion of the film? Who organizes and controls the distribution?” (2000:208).

To address Ruby’s point by point, there was not equal involvement at all junctures of the decision-making process; Upper One Media and by extension the Cook Inlet Tribal Council made many of the final calls, with most decisions made among themselves (“Never Alone: The Making of” 2016). E-Line was consulted for some training, but in other aspects the Iñupiaq developers were knowledgeable enough on their own (White 2015:53). The idea itself is completely Iñupiaq, as it was a response by the tribal government to a problem it perceived. The corporate side of the tribal council invested their own savings into the game, going so far as to create Upper One Games specifically for this purpose. Equipment is more collaborative than other aspects, with E-Line having more control there than any other area. E-Line had professional investment in the game’s reception, but not nearly as much as Upper One, who by definition had their entire professional reputation riding on their first production. Distribution to some degree was equal, but the Iñupiaq developers have been far more engaged in circulating and promoting the game.

To return to Cattellino’s idea of sovereign interdependence, unequal power exchanges do not preclude both sides from having agency in their interactions. Despite the influence Upper One had in this partnership, E-Line still possessed the knowledge

necessary to produce the game itself. Neither could make a complete project without the other, there is no denying that. Here I merely wish to assert that Upper One was not merely offering cultural information but taking an active role throughout production.

On the other side of ethnographic film analysis, Karl Heider may argue that the films could suffer from not only filmmaker and anthropologist, being the same person, but also being the cultural member depicted (2006: 114). However, this issue is sidestepped by the cultural ambassadors working as a team; whereas Heider recommends filmmaker and anthropologist be two separate people, the entire team serves in both roles, allowing them to approach the issue of reflexivity and representation from multiple angles at once and ensure a more cohesive, accurate work.

As their partnership has continued, the Iñupiaq have come to exercise more influence in their partnership with E-Line. The CITC now owns 38% of E-Line, and O'Neil has become its executive chair (Takahashi 2015). Upper One and E-Line currently look to continue their work developing games that will correct misrepresentation of Native groups in the media, a goal one would obviously see more of Upper One in than E-Line before their meeting.

The ways the game and Cultural Insights were released also have helped it reach a much wider audience than it might have otherwise. The game was released as an online download for the Playstation 3 and 4, the Xbox 1, and the Wii U, covering the three main gaming consoles, as well as for Windows, Apple, and Linux computers. The game even saw later release as a phone application. In short, Upper One and E-Line made the game available to as many gamers as they possibly could. Releasing the game as an online download rather than on disc allowed it to be sold for \$15 rather than the standard \$60, making it also much more affordable than most games.

Both of these coupled together greatly reduced any obstacles a player could have to getting the game, giving them a much wider audience than industry standards of restricting games to a single console or format would have allowed.

What is important about the wide accessibility of *Never Alone* around the world is how it stands to make the game most people's first impression of the Iñupiaq. The number of awards it has received both reflects how public it has already become and stands to help its recognizability continue (Takahashi 2015). In short, the game can serve to bring the Iñupiaq people to the attention of others who might never have heard of them otherwise. It is not just representing their cultural ways of life, but their political status as an Indigenous people, due to the Cultural Insight videos. Those further develop the impression the game makes, ensuring the player takes away not only one of their folktales, but other aspects of their material and social culture as well. In short, representing their culture as they would have it represented demonstrates Iñupiaq sovereignty. Ensuring that their preferred method of representation is the most accessible and widespread version demonstrates their ingenuity and desire to have the farthest reach possible.

## **Conclusion**

*Never Alone*, like all media, can reveal much about the situation and minds that created it. As a response by a collective of concerned educators, businesspeople, developers, programmers, and community leaders to a mass of social problems facing both their youth and culture as a whole, it represents a multitude of approaches, goals, and ideologies. What is perhaps most important is everything *Never Alone* represents, both inside and out of the Iñupiaq community.

It represents the economic sovereignty and skill of the Iñupiaq people. To create an entire video game developer firm to address a community problem is a remarkable feat. They displayed

sovereign interdependency, operating within the modern economy and exercising influence over both another company and an industry overall in defiance of stereotypical views of tribal traditionalism and what defines Native authenticity. That the game came to exist on its own is a testament to Iñupiaq economic sovereignty; that it has since become profitable not only reveals business acumen but enables further diversification and development of their economy.

It represents a pivotal hub that has formed in the Iñupiaq community. It not only provides a venue for educators concerned about continuing to pass down Iñupiaq traditions and knowledge to come together and exchange techniques, goals, and ideas, but also serves to connect them to those who would seek out that knowledge and may not otherwise have the means to do so. That Upper One and E-Line plan to continue their partnership into future projects means this decision could influence the Iñupiaq culture for many years.

It represents the Iñupiaq people claiming their visual sovereignty, both within the larger global mediascape and among themselves. The game is not just an expression of their stories and cultures to outsiders, but their way of correcting their misrepresentation in the media to ensure the Iñupiaq people are able to see themselves in the media they consume.

At the moment it is unclear what long-lasting influences *Never Alone*'s production might have on the Iñupiaq culture. However, one cannot underestimate the importance of the relationships and connections that production established, nor the incredible potential of this new situation to create rich and reverberating change.

## CHAPTER 3

### TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

#### Introduction

As a videogame, *Never Alone* offers a great opportunity to exert sovereignty, due to how it interacts with the consumer. Unlike other forms of media, such as film or music, where the consumer primarily observes and listens, in a video game the consumer interacts. They do not just see the world media producers create, they enter it, and interact in ways prompted by the structure created by the game designers. The player is unable to do anything the designers did not program for them to be able to do, yet there is a sense of control, a feeling of agency within this world that creates a stronger emotional and mental investment.

One of the distinctive features of *Never Alone* as a videogame, in contrast to other forms of media, are the interactive elements presented to the audience. This increased degree of connection with the audience allows the Iñupiaq people to exert their visual and cultural sovereignty more so than they otherwise could have. As Warren Cairou observes,

One of the crucial elements of oral stories, as they are performed, is that they are fundamentally relational: they exist in a relationship between teller and audience, which enables the creation of a particular type of community[...] I don't believe that video games can entirely *replace* storytelling as a means of cultural transmission and resurgence, but I do think they can supplement the work of oral stories in many ways, and I feel they can do so through their staging of the player's performance within the game. What is labeled as the 'interactivity' of gaming is, for me, very similar to the relational aspects of storytelling (2016).

The participation of the player here somewhat recreates this relationship that would be harder to establish as cohesively were *Never Alone* in a different form of media.

This advantage is needed in order to effectively reach the player as a student. Conveying the message the developers set out to share requires heavy reconditioning of how the player

views the Iñupiaq culture in relation to western versions of history and education. While post-colonial theory argues that colonization is over, the developers seem to subscribe to decolonization theory's stance that its impacts are still well ingrained in the modern landscape and require concerted effort to overcome (Sandri 2015:78).

## **Story**

*Never Alone* starts in completely blackness. Then, an elderly soft voice begins to speak, calling roughly sketched black lines on brown squares to life. The figures move jerkily, quickly, with stiff joints and fixed expressions, like crude puppets acting out the narrator's story to the best of their limited ability. Their rigid movements could almost be attributed to the hunger the player learns has come from a blizzard stopping all hunting, replacing what may have been critique for the animation with sympathy for the characters. A new figure, introduced as Nuna, enters the screen, where the player is told she has set out to. Then, the real game cuts in. Brown and black are replaced with vibrant blues, greens, whites, and grays, twisting into the windblown Alaskan landscape. The camera pans to the lower left of the screen, where Nuna, a young girl far more human in appearance than the figures illustrated before, enters. And thus, the game begins.

The environment plays an enormous role in the story. Not only does it serve as the driving force of Nuna's quest, but it can prove both her greatest obstacle and her greatest ally. The spirits that make up so much of the journey are portrayed as part of the environment, hanging like stalactites, living in the trees, and part of the wind, in line with Iñupiaq tradition. (Figure 2) The game is quick to point this out, with Ishmael Angalook Hope stating "Everything has a spirit. There's a consciousness to everything. Everything is alive" ("Everything is Alive"



2015).



Fig. 2) Nuna in an Blizzard (<http://neveralonegame.com/game>, accessed November 19, 2017)

There are few places that Fox can travel that do not reveal multiple spirits, hidden from sight until the right moment. This is not a sugar-coated view, as not everything is friendly toward Nuna. The deceased children that make up the northern lights are quick to abduct Fox or Nuna, carrying them off to a fate that leaves the other character shivering with fear. Aside from one level, merely touching the water is an instant death sentence for either of them, even after Fox is already a spirit. The environment almost makes up a separate sphere from that of the Iñupiaq, one the player must learn to coexist with in order to survive Alaska's harsh conditions.

The game environment's spiritual nature serves to explain part of Iñupiaq cosmology in a straightforward, easy to understand fashion. With spirits both the most noticeable part of every scene they are in and invariably the key to solving the more difficult puzzles, the player is incapable of progressing without becoming aware of how present and active environmental spirits are in this world. Such a technique is needed to overcome centuries of missionaries

portraying Indigenous spirituality as lesser or invalid. “When missionaries met Indigenous people of the world, the first thing they claimed to notice was the spiritual poverty of the people. The missionaries embarked upon a project of decolonization by continually eroding and destroying all vestiges of the Indigenous people’s spirituality (Shahjahan et. al. 2009:62).” Spirits played no major role in Robert Cleveland’s version of the story, so their addition here serves a different purpose than faithfulness to the narrative (Cleveland 1980:101-104). The developers instead took the opportunity their environment-reliant puzzles offered them and added cosmological aspects. “Through story telling we can highlight how knowledge production in the academy reinforces colonial and neo-colonial relation and the considerable implications of these struggles over knowledge for claims of Indigenusness, agency, and resistance in community activities and academic pursuits focused on cultural vitalization and self-determination” (Iseke-Barnes 2003:218). This sort of detail that develops the Iñupiaq environment without necessarily furthering the narrative keeps the game from presenting the material as a folktale and factoids about the culture and ensures it is a rich portrayal connected to the larger world of Iñupiaq life. Aspects of the story are frequently expanded upon by Cultural Insight videos. Ones that tie directly into major plot points typically are unlocked after a loading screen or by an easily reached owl immediately after. Sometimes this serves to show how the points of the narrative stem from experiences of the cultural ambassadors, such as Brower (Tigitquuraq) Frantz’s story about being stranded on an ice floe as Nuna is, and Ronald Brower’s (Aniqsuaq) story of growing up with a fox that was the model for Fox (“Stranded” 2015; “Arctic Fox” 2015). Others serve to make the player think about the game. When the polar bear seemingly falls to its death after a prolonged chase, the player might easily feel a sense of satisfaction in the death of this perceived antagonist. Immediately after there is an easily found

owl that unlocks “A Girl and Her Nanuk,” which tells of cultural ambassador Fannie Kuutuuq Akpik’s brother killing an attacking polar bear in self-defense, who is still horrified to learn it was a mother (2015). This was serious enough he had to present himself to the council, which decreed he would raise the cub until it could live on its own. The player has no idea if the bear is a parent and has to question any sense of pride in the bear’s death. At least from personal experience this lead to an unexpected sense of relief to learn later that the bear survived.

The Manslayer’s defeat is not similarly undercut. Instead that is expanded on much further, to explain the symbolic significance of the player defeating him. As Amy Fredeen explains, “The Manslayer is really used as a way to say ‘Don’t act only for yourself, always hold the community in your heart’” (“The Manslayer” 2015). The Manslayer is introduced as someone willing to chase off a tribe and burn down a village in a selfish search for material goods; his selfishness puts the entire tribe at risk. He goes so far as to snap Fox’s neck to blackmail Nuna for the bola. When Nuna and Fox defeat him, they also enter into the traditional roles of the trope. “And what this humble person will represent, who faces that Manslayer, is a return to order. A return to true living in the community.” Without the video immediately after, the player might have seen themselves simply as having killed a monster. Instead they are able to truly appreciate their role in a recurring narrative about reinstating cooperative living over selfish pursuits.

All of these moments ensure the player takes away what the Cultural Ambassadors want them to learn. The aspects that stem from the Ambassadors’ experiences show the player that these stories are not all fiction but derived from personal experiences and historical examples told so that the player may learn from others. Videos meant to make the player re-examine how the game made them think about the spirits or polar bear present nuanced views rather than black

and white morality. In short, they ensure the Cultural Ambassadors' teachings are not so widely open to interpretation to risk some players internalizing an unintended message, but are instead delivered in a clear, straightforward manner.

## **Imagery**

*Never Alone's* imagery further develops the messages conveyed through the narrative by incorporating the player's baser senses.

The visual style of the game was deeply inspired by Alaska Native art and artists, to me by looking at that and absorbing the way they work with the materials gave me the ideas for how to create the world for this game. A very soft, very beautiful world. What success looks like, to me, as an Alaska Native, is we create a video game where the community feels proud of it, that our young people can look at themselves and say, "That's my culture" (Diam Veryovka, "Behind the Scenes", 2014).

The imagery was meant to not just represent Iñupiaq art styles, but to immerse the player within an Iñupiaq worldview. This extends the self-representation expressed in *Never Alone* by going beyond representing themselves as a people to representing how they view the entire world.

The use of scrimshaw imagery connects the game and thus the player to the traditional use of scrimshaw in oral tradition, emphasizing the historic authority of the material. The ethereal nature of the spirits in *Never Alone* furthers their role as already discussed above. Both here take full advantage of the medium's possibilities to have as deep an impact on the player as possible, and thus aid the Iñupiaq developers in the assertion of their sovereignty when covering this material.

In Iñupiaq storytelling, scrimshaws historically have been used as aides, offering illustrations of key points in a story that the orator then expands on through their narration. They serve as illustrations, with several key points summarized as images carved into ivory or bone.

Crafting a scrimshaw is an involved process, implying a higher degree of the importance for the stories deemed worth recording on ivory tusks.

“An elder or the person who carved it would literally be able to read the scrimshaw story. They’re like reading a book, in a way. A lot of the storytelling traditions would be things that after the storytelling was done, you’d just rely on the next person telling it. And so the scrimshaw is a very important way for Alaskan Native people to record their history.”- Amy Fredeen and Ronald Aniqsuaq Brower Sr. (“Scrimshaw” 2015)

This connection to a major tool of Iñupiaq oral history shows how the game is not something new so much as an adaptation of teaching methods stretching back thousands of years.



Fig. 3) Scrimshaw Cutscene (<http://neveralonegame.com/game>, accessed November 19, 2017)

The game's cutscenes (video segments throughout the story where the player watches for narrative information rather than actively plays) are animated as dynamic scrimshaws, with figures made entirely black against a brown background. (Figure 3) When moving between scenes the camera pans right, notably going over the line separating the two squares. The animation is jerky and repetitive, more like a stiff marionette than an animation. Overall the sharp lines, quick movement, and heavy narration conflict sharply with the game proper's blurred edges, more muted colors, fluid movement, and periods of long quiet. Yet the two aesthetics merge in a way that feels more complimentary than clashing, allowing the player to move between active participant and passive viewer easily as needed.

This situating within the larger practice of oral history through scrimshaws is driven home by the third Cultural Insight of the game, *Scrimshaws*. The video shows real life artifacts alongside images of the cutscene the player just watched. This is then kept from implying a progression from physical to digital scrimshaws through footage of a new one being carved, showing they are still part of the cultural landscape, and the in-game examples are merely a new form, not a replacement. What is particularly interesting is when the game unlocks the video. The first two Cultural Insights are unlocked simply by the player starting the game, before even clicking "Play". *Scrimshaws* is unlocked after clicking "Play" and watching the first cutscene, but before the player ever has control over Nuna. This shows the designers wanted to first experience a scrimshaw before having it explained, but also thought the player understanding it too important to have them take any action first.

The scrimshaw imagery of the cutscenes is incorporated into the main gameplay through the spirits. They appear the same in both, both through their stylized look and jerkier movement than in the game proper. This adds an otherworldly feel to them, as well as reminds the player of

the game's larger connections. That most of the spirits are positioned on top of objects animated in the game proper's style and drawn in vibrant white and green makes them stand out more than anything else in the game. (Figure 4) In contrast, how they fade in and out as Fox moves closer and further gives them a far more ethereal quality.



Fig. 4) Spirit of the Aurora Borealis(<http://neveralonegame.com/game>, accessed November 19, 2017)

This stylization ties into the Iñupiaq cosmological view of spirits and helps to explain it to and visualize it for the player in a more effective way than abstract discussion may allow. They are all around yet not always visible; they help, harm, or are neutral, depending on both their inclination and the player's interactions with them. The player learns that they are not a cure-all for their problems in the game, nor are they a constant threat. They are forces to be respected and minded, which, if done properly, can make an enormous difference in the player's experience.

## Gameplay

*Never Alone*'s gameplay is a powerful tool for situating the player within the exact mindset the Iñupiaq developers wish for them to take. It teaches the player Iñupiaq ways of problem solving and looking at the world by making them requirements in order to make any progress. It also frames the Cultural Insight videos' information as valuable, in order to not only make the player respect the material they address but become an active part of seeking it out for themselves.

First and foremost the gameplay demands cooperation. Almost every puzzle requires both Nuna and Fox to work in tandem. Most puzzles have components that call on Nuna and Fox's special skills. Nuna is able to use her bola, a set of strings weighted with rocks typically thrown to entangle birds and knock them out of the sky, to open new paths for Fox, who is able to climb higher, make connections with spirits, and after his death at the hands of the Manslayer, fly to harder to reach areas and exercise direct control over spirits. Despite his abilities strengthening after death, Fox is still dependent on Nuna to use her bola.

Not only do the puzzles require both characters to bring their skills to bear, but as the game progresses the degree of coordination required increases. Initially the path presents a puzzle that only Fox can solve, then one only Nuna can do, and so forth. After that come two step puzzles, then multistep where the player must swap back and forth. This last type is further complicated by multiple chase sequences with the polar bear, the Manslayer, and the ice giant. In the first chase with the polar bear Fox is the only one the player need control, and in the first Manslayer chase only Nuna is needed. After that each chase demands greater cooperation between them to clear each hurdle in time to not be caught and killed.



This interdependence is established as soon as the player has control; the game begins with a polar bear pursuing Nuna, whose only option is to run. Nuna is saved by the character Fox jumping out and striking the bear, and in turn Nuna saves both herself and Fox once the bear gets its bearings back. The next few puzzles are primarily solved by Fox, as Nuna does not get her pivotal bola until halfway through the second level. Thus, Nuna is presented as a protagonist who requires help from those that care about her as a way to succeed.

For single players, the game creates an early sense of dependence on others. By placing the player in control of Nuna first, they can see themselves as her and Fox as a companion, rather than the other way around. The player immediately sees themselves in a situation where they are unable to survive on their own. This continues throughout the first chapter of the game, as the puzzles focus much more on Fox's abilities, Nuna's greater weight being able to shift unstable platforms the only real skill she uses. Speaking personally, at first it seemed that Fox would be the only character able to handle puzzles, despite having initially connected with Nuna. After getting the bola, it felt comforting to be able to give back to Fox after initially having less to offer in terms of skillset.

The game not only does everything to encourage cooperation, but to discourage competitiveness. Ultimately, it is impossible for one character to succeed without the other. The single screen gradually pans out the further apart Nuna and Fox get, and will eventually stop, trapping both from moving too far from the other. This means that it is physically impossible within the game for one to reach the end of the level without the other. This couples with how if Fox travels too far from a spirit it disappears, meaning if Nuna is standing on it she is dropped and possibly killed. If one character dies, both lose, and are reset to the last checkpoint. The game also makes either player dying very dramatic, with the surviving character dropping to the

ground in abject despair. Thus, anything that is uncooperative, not even competitive, very quickly leads to both players failing. As Amy Fredeen explains, “This isn’t just about one individual surviving, or one family surviving, it’s about the whole community.” (“Subsistence Lifestyle” 2015). This video comes slightly into the game, where the player may have begun to forget the initial impetus for Nuna’s journey. They are reminded that not only do Fox and Nuna need each other to survive, Nuna’s village is counting on her to end this blizzard to stop them from starving. Working together in the name of mutually assured survival is a major theme of the game.

As a multiplayer game, this complete lack of competition is particularly noteworthy. Most multiplayer games released in the last few decades involve some mechanic that allows one player to be declared better than the other. Even when both cooperate games typically include a point system or assign ranks at the end of each level to show which teammate accomplished more. Others allow for one player to continue if the other dies during the level, not allowing the less successful player to rejoin the game until their teammate completes the level or also dies and starts again with them. *Never Alone* rejects all of these. Success is defined by achieving the team goal of both characters making it to the end.

Compared to most other multiplayer games, *Never Alone* takes a very different approach to how they expect players to interact. Point systems are highly common, and typically award points individually rather than collectively. These can stem from collecting items throughout the level, how many enemies each player kills, or other activities based on the specific genre. Many will even go so far as to rank the players at the end of each level, which by nature decrees a best and a worst. Taken further, the internet has allowed games that provide scores to create global rankings, which measure the player against all others. Some games have items a player can find

and carry with them to help throughout the rest of the game, and many only produce one such item, leading players to struggle for who gains the advantage by getting to it first. On the furthest end are games that incorporate mechanics that encourage what is known as “griefing,” or purposefully annoying and inconveniencing other players. These can include mechanics that allow players to squabble, sometimes resulting in one of their characters dying or losing resources that then go to the player that “wins” the struggle. These are mechanics that are specifically included for this purpose as features.

A game that came out around the same time was 2013’s *Super Mario 3D World*, which had similar puzzle platformer mechanics and multiplayer elements, making it an apt comparison. While there were some puzzles that required teamwork, it was not as the main problem-solving method it was in *Never Alone*. Most puzzles were solved individually, with each player having to complete the entire path on their own skill. There was also not as strong a sense of needing each other, as one player could die with no profound impact on the others. The player that died would be transported back to the rest of the group after a period of time, meaning their teammates may not even notice. Each instance of a powerup did dispense enough items for each player, but it would be possible for some to move the screen and cause others to miss the item as it left the frame. Ultimately the game almost presents itself as a race, with each player encouraged to finish as quickly as possible to gain the most points, and thus be ranked the victor. As deaths took away points, manipulating platforms and other mechanics to cause one’s teammates to fall could help another player raise their rank in the team. Thus, while both *Super Mario 3D World* and *Never Alone* could be filed under the same genre, they are completely different games.

All of these provide a stark contrast to the gameplay of *Never Alone*. The lack of any quantitative data prevents any individual measuring to declare one player better than another.

The only unlockable items in the game are the Cultural Insight videos, which are a shared resource, rather than one players have to fight for. The only mechanic a player could use to “grief” another is to have Fox move too far from Nuna when she is standing on a spirit, causing her to fall and die. What keeps this from being grieving is that the player controlling Fox immediately loses themselves and finds themselves in the same place as Nuna’s player. Harming another player is literally harming themselves in the process, and thus defeats the purpose. *Never Alone* does not create an atmosphere that encourages competition or measuring oneself against others, but one of using teamwork to achieve together or not at all.

Teaching cooperation by requiring the player to learn this approach in order to progress in a sense is an extreme expression of Iñupiaq sovereignty. They create a scenario where the only means to succeed is to accept their method of problem solving as the most effective. “In the current neo-liberalist climate, assimilationist ideology in Indigenous education is articulated in terms of “what works” and “best practice” in terms of dominant cultural notions of educational successes” (Cross-Townsend 2011:71). Here there is a very clear definition of success, that of completing the puzzle and progressing to the next section, and a definite right way to do succeed.

The game is not particularly punishing for failure. Dying simply sets both players back to the last puzzle successfully cleared, which is typically no more than forty seconds or so away from where the player died. The game will even reset that far into the level if the player goes away for a time and comes back, meaning the player is not forced to keep playing longer than they wish simply to not lose their progress. This approach serves to keep players from feeling too discouraged, and thus encourages them to stay engaged and try again until they get it right. The player can immediately think through how what they did before was incorrect and adjust their strategy, rather than have to try and remember after redoing all the preceding parts of the level.

## Native and Non-Native Player Experiences

Despite it being the same source material, the experiences of Indigenous and non-Indigenous players can span a wide range throughout the course of the game. The game has reached far beyond the Iñupiaq community in terms of player base, and thus we must take both Indigenous and non-Indigenous players into account.

For Indigenous players, the importance of seeing Iñupiaq culture represented in a work of modern media cannot be understated. As stated earlier, most representations of Native Americans either are amalgamations of multiple tribes' imagery or one-dimensional, so to have a representation based on traditional folklore and exerting agency is an almost unseen occurrence (Lietz 2017). It represents not just a correction to decades of misrepresentation, but a correction made by the very people misrepresented. It is a seizing of control, an exertion of agency over their own representation.

For non-Indigenous players, *Never Alone* adopts an old storytelling technique to avoid the potential pitfalls of a player assuming the role of an Iñupiaq character.

I believe that the creators of *Never Alone* are aware of this potential problem, but they have structured the game in a way that works to prevent glib cultural appropriation or objectification. This is particularly important in the stereotype-saturated world of video gaming, where racist caricatures of Indigenous people are still common fare. The method the game's creators use to prevent this kind of misuse of their game is one that I have witnessed in many storytelling sessions where the audience is made up of people from diverse backgrounds. In such cases, the storytellers work to create a sense of community by welcoming different audience members into the circle and by tailoring the story so that all members of the audience can gain something from the experience. The relational aspect of storytelling is itself a way of preventing appropriation because it shows audience members that they are connected to the community through the story and therefore they have a responsibility to treat the story with respect (Cariou 2016).

The player is continually reminded this is an Iñupiaq story by the Cultural Insight videos, which routinely dissect traditional themes and tropes of their stories. They are invited to take part in the performance of this story but are made fully aware it ultimately belongs to the Iñupiaq people.

## **Pedagogy**

As a videogame, *Never Alone* has distinct possibilities for impact on their audience, including the ability to utilize gaming pedagogy. One might compare a video with no audience interaction to a lecture, and *Never Alone* to a class exercise, one that can offer somewhat more individualized impact. This includes framing the Cultural Insight videos as prizes to encourage audience appreciation, as well as teaching Iñupiaq problem solving styles that the player can not only understand, but come away having practical applications for them. Both utilize emerging pedagogical techniques in the fields of decolonizing education and pedagogical gaming.

In order to effectively teach its players, *Never Alone* must first assert the sovereign ability of the Iñupiaq people to teach their own culture, as well as establish Iñupiaq knowledge as equally valid as Western subjects. A prevailing concern when non-Native educators teach Indigenous students is a belief that without sufficient knowledge to assimilate into dominant culture, they will not be able to survive as adults (Cross-Townsend 2011:68). “Indigenous people’s survival is perceived as dependent on the wholesale assimilation into the dominant or “superior” culture and language, where the economic and social dominant culture objectives of education override any Indigenous cultural, linguistic, social, or human rights imperatives.” As studied in Chapter 1, this view has prevailed throughout the Iñupiaq people’s whole experience with colonization. Both Russian and American governments worked to place Indigenous culture as secondary to their own, both in the minds of those they colonized and their own citizens (Darnell and Höems 1996). In order to overcome this longstanding mindset, Upper One and E-

Line took multiple steps to make the player first aware and then confident of the Cultural Ambassadors' and other team member's sovereign right to teach the material, their expertise in the field, and the importance of the information to the player's future.

The game immediately starts this by placing itself within the larger Iñupiaq tradition of oral culture and history. As James Nageak (Mumigan) tells the player at the game's start, "For thousands of years we told stories from one generation to the next" ("Never Alone – E3 2014 Trailer" 2014). This emphasizes that while the format of *Never Alone* may represent a new form of transmitting this information, the information itself predates countless institutions, governments, and boundaries.

It is also important to realize that there are no non-Iñupiaq voices presenting the information to the player. Not that outside voices are incapable of presenting the information, but they are not necessary; the Cultural Ambassadors are more than capable of presenting the information to the player on their own. This demonstrates the agency of the Ambassadors to both understand and represent themselves. For Iñupiaq players, there is also the importance of this degree of representation among their educators. It emphasizes how many wide ranges of study Iñupiaq community members have training in and can offer information on. There has been a long-standing issue of government educators having little to no Indigenous people among their ranks when teaching in largely Indigenous areas, which has greatly impacted a sense of disconnect with course goals and syllabi material (Hobart, 1970:125). This overhaul's import cannot be underemphasized, as it not only is an assertion of Iñupiaq educator's sovereignty, but a reassurance to Iñupiaq of their own sovereignty to later teach the material themselves.

The multiple steps *Never Alone* takes to encourage cooperation over competition are not exactly an overhaul of videogame traditions, but instead assembling them in such a way to

change the player's perspective and thought process. Puzzles are the most direct form of problem solving in video games, and the player is expected to directly respond with approaches valued by the Iñupiaq people. The player has to think through how the game designers would encourage them to handle the problem, adapt these general ideas to their specific situation, then, assuming they are successful, go forward with positive reinforcement encouraging them to apply this same method to future problems (Gee 2008:25). When the game is successful it not only has the player apply these approaches to puzzles they encounter later in the game, but in real-life issues.

The significance of *Never Alone* teaching cooperation and valuing community goal achievement over individual metrics of success is its carryover into everyday life. This occurs both on an individual level and, for those connected by the game, at a group level. The game provides players “distinctive experiences, and ways of interpreting and using those experiences, for achieving goals and solving problems” (Gee 2008:22). The game serves as a shared experience, both to players and to community members involved in the game's production. As experiences become communal they become more ingrained, with individuals reinforcing the ideas learned between themselves.

“Model learning theory tend to stress the social and cultural [...] The reason for this is that the elements of good learning experiences- namely goals, interpretations, practice, explanations, debriefing, and feedback- have to come from someplace. In fact, they usually flow from participation in, or apprenticeship to, a social group, or what are sometimes called “communities of practice” or affiliation groups. [...] What we might call a “social identity” is crucial for learning.” (Gee 2008:22).

With multiplayer especially, but even with those connected through message boards on the game, there is a sense of community among those who play the game that fosters this sense of social group that has been proven so beneficial to learning and the desire to continue learning.



That all the in-game narration is delivered in the Iñupiaq language works to assert it as just as valid as English or any other language. When Alaskan Native children were sent to residential schools, one of the first steps taken was to quash any use of their own languages and replace it with Russian or English (Darnell and Höem, 1996). After already separating the children from their home communities, these harsh measures greatly threatened the language's ability to persist. Maintaining the Iñupiaq language has required concerted effort from the community, made more difficult by nagging doubts as to whether the language was useful outside of specific scenarios ("Cultural Ambassadors" 2016). Here Iñupiaq is presented as not just default, but the only option.

After the player is assured of Iñupiaq's validity as a language, they are then encouraged to learn it through the language immersion set up by the gameplay. As the only spoken language the player is exposed to during the game, they feel a sense of disconnect that can best be addressed by trying to follow along and learn (Foster 2017). The technique is one actively used by the linguists and language teachers among the cultural ambassadors, who for some time have had to devise new methods of teaching their language ("Cultural Ambassadors" 2014).

The ethnographic videos are in English, not Iñupiaq, which reflects the different goal of the films in regard to the rest of the composition ("Cultural Insight Collection" 2016). The narrative is fairly simple to follow, and narration is infrequent enough the player is not constantly translating while also solving puzzles. The videos cover more detailed concepts, such as beliefs, values, cosmologies, community structures, which are not as suited for entry-level Iñupiaq learners to hear in another language. Thus, the player is not set up for a failure that could discourage them. It also prevents miscommunication that could occur with the game's non-Native audience that also has access.

That only simple phrases rather than abstract concepts are said in Iñupiaq reflects that the game is meant to teach the language to those with little to no experience speaking it. Perhaps this is most easily seen after pointing out how the game can act like a child's picture book, illustrating what the player may not otherwise understand. The language is easier to understand when framed in a context, one that the player is an active part in, and thus more likely to internalize.

As discussed earlier, the game is not in any way punishing of failure, as that would prove counterintuitive to effective teaching. The player is certainly made aware of what their failure means for Nuna and Fox each time, but this is less meant to be punitive toward the player as it is to simply show the results of their actions. No matter how dire the player's mistakes make things for the two, within five seconds both are back, healthy and right where they were before. The player can try and fail as many times as they need to in order to learn how to progress, which returns to how being a game allows *Never Alone* to more effectively reach its audience. Were it a film, with a preset speed to move through its material, it would not allow the player the ability to stay on points they do not understand for as long as they need.

To a lesser extent this also applies to how the Cultural Insight videos are formatted in the game. The player receives prompts to return to the video menu at every loading screen, the second a new video is unlocked, and even needs to bypass watching the videos to reach the other options when accessing the pause menu. After watching the films, the player is first given the option to re-watch, and then their first option is to select another film. One could almost interpret the game as more eager to have the player watch than to play. When coupled with the brief nature of each video individually, it becomes clear the player is meant to re-watch as many times as needed to gain a full understanding of the topic covered.

After establishing the Cultural Ambassadors as equipped to teach the information, the game goes on to further emphasize the value of the information contained in the Cultural Insight videos by framing them as something unlocked through successful and creative gameplay, the developers frame them, and the information they contain, as a reward. The videos are not freely given, but something the player has to earn, has to prove themselves worthy of seeing. It is possible to end the game without having unlocked all of the videos, meaning that the player can set themselves apart as a master of the game by rising above the minimum requirements. By making the videos a prize, the player internalizes the information as valuable (Gee 2003:64). They not only place greater import on the information they have, they develop a desire to unlock more, as the game definitely points out the videos they have yet to unlock at each level. The player learns that the more effort they put in, the more they unlock, and thus are encouraged to put in increasingly higher effort for increasingly higher rewards (Gee 2003:65). This in part comes from “the amplification of input principle. When systems operate according to this principle, they give, for a little input, a lot of output. [...] In a video game, you press some buttons in the real world and a whole interactive virtual world comes to life. Amplification of input is highly motivational to learning” (Gee 2003:64). After starting out unaware of the information, they grow to see it as their secondary goal. They become active in their own learning, wanting the cultural ambassadors to teach them.

A number of the films are seen with a much more detailed view when connected to the game. Most of the topics addressed tie directly into the story; for example, the hunting bolo is a pivotal mechanic in the game, one that the player frequently uses, making the video explaining its real world importance something the player can directly relate to their own experience. The player themselves might not have ever thrown a bolo, but through the game they feel they have

some sense of it, giving them a personal connection to the material. “The learner comes to know that he or she has the *capacity*, at some level, to take on the virtual identity as a real world identity” (Gee 2003:66). The player may come to internalize what they have done in *Never Alone* as real world possibilities for themselves, and thus pursue avenues of learning in the real world they may not have otherwise.

The videos are all also available through the game’s official YouTube Channel (“Cultural Insight Collection” 2014). They are separated into the twenty-nine separate topics and make up most of the videos original to the channel, with only seven others posted. The videos are not edited for the different format; the content not only remains the same, but there is no title card or end card. In a sense one can have the exact same experience watching the specific video that a player unlocking it in the game could have.

The difference between the videos being framed by the game and framed by YouTube is how viewers will come into contact with them. Those actively searching for the information by definition already value it enough to go looking for it. They do not require the video game to frame the videos in a way that encourages their interest and viewership. Thus, to add challenges to their pursuit of the information is not only without the benefit seen in other audiences, it would be actively detrimental to their desire to learn. If the Iñupiaq developers’ main goal was profit, there obviously would be more to make by not making their product available to both freely view and share with others. However, if their goal is to disseminate the information as widely as possible, making it both free and available on one of the most popular and globally accessible video streaming sites is an incredibly effective choice.

In essence the game serves to remediate the videos by placing them in a context that amplifies their effect. The YouTube uploads can be seen as the default versions, straight-forward

ethnographic information divided into easily consumed segments. The game realizes that this only suits those who would find the information of their own volition and, in an attempt to expand the amount of consumers, remediates them in a format that increases the demand for them (Bolter and Grusin 2002:54).

## **Conclusion**

*Never Alone* makes full use of the medium of videogames to assert the sovereignty to teach their culture and history, as well as to teach its players their culture, worldview, problem-solving style, and view of the individual in regard to the collective whole. It transforms the more traditional form of ethnographic film into rewards the audience seeks out and internalizes better through its short Cultural Insight videos.

In short, through a very brief game *Never Alone* accomplishes a number of goals, which its digital formats allow it to do on a global scale. The importance of *Never Alone* to the Iñupiaq's position on the world stage cannot be overstated. As their title suggests it transforms cultural leaders into ambassadors that serve as the face of their culture both to Iñupiaq people and to outsiders who may not otherwise have heard of the culture, much less had any interaction with it.

## CHAPTER 4

### CONCLUSION

This game was the first I had ever heard of the Iñupiaq people. If my mentor Dr. Dowell had not showed me the trailer for *Never Alone*, I do not know if I would have ever learned about their culture, history, or their individual hopes for the future. My first experience, which shaped each subsequent interaction, was one that occurred on their terms. They entered my worldview not as historical figures, or as part of a larger narrative on Native Americans, but as a force of their own, operating and creating change in the here and now. Iñupiaq self-representation is what steered this entire thesis, as it should have. Controlling representation is controlling the conversation. Here the Iñupiaq people rejected the concept of others speaking for them, and spoke for themselves. How they view themselves shaped my view of them, which went on to influence my readings of how others interpreted their culture. Reading residential school administrators' and missionaries' claims that the Iñupiaq were on a straight path to dying out without outside intervention, I found myself thinking back to how long they had survived in as stark an environment as Alaska for millennia. American officials' reports on the inability of the Iñupiaq people to govern themselves only made me think to how they have handled their schools, finances, and social programs. While these are older views of people no longer in control, they still have influences felt in the present, influences that projects such as these not only speak back to, but outright refute. I do not think I would have agreed with such overt racism even had they been my first exposure to the Iñupiaq people, but I would not have understood just how wrong they were otherwise.

In terms of the game's importance to the Iñupiaq people, *Never Alone* has changed their place in the world, both internally and externally. They are now positioned to continue making

video games that assert their sovereignty and bring Indigenous people into an international mediascape. They modified their economy and social structure to change as time required, and now stand better poised to face what the future may bring. Above all they have announced their presence on the global stage, an announcement that may become increasingly difficult to ignore.

There is also the assurance of agency that comes from having completed such an ambitious project, both to those involved and to Iñupiaq people who saw members of their own culture achieve their goals. As Maize Longboat (Mohawk) observes,

As an Indigenous gamer myself, I recognize the need for the work that this game does to exist in other communities and it fills me with joy knowing that this is only one of the very significant first steps in getting more Indigenous storytellings into the hands of gamers worldwide. I also recognize the value in now having something tangible that the Iñupiaq community can take back to their youth to spark opportunities for education the next generation that will immerse themselves in and learn from video game narratives (Longboat 2016).

There was no luck involved in creating *Never Alone*, no chance of fate that simply allowed it to happen. It came from the hard work of people dedicated to seeing it through, who created entire companies, formed business partnerships, pushed through mergers, and entered a business they had no prior experience in to near immediate commercial and critical success. Having achieved so highly and created this strong framework, there is no reason to doubt they could continue this bold success with other projects.

The game created change in the Iñupiaq community before it was ever released. The creation of an entirely new studio for this project redirected CITC's business ventures at the outset of the project, and continually proved more profitable than expected. Bringing together the Cultural Ambassadors created a hub within the community for those interested in the wellbeing of Iñupiaq youth and the continuance of their culture and tradition to come together and devise new approaches and ideas. Starting their venture even earned them outside attention before the

game was complete, with members of the video game community learning of their culture and business interests.

In terms of Indigenous media studies, there is also a high degree of influence. When the field was first founded it primarily focused on film and television. As technology and media have evolved in that time, it has been important for all forms of media studies to keep pace, Indigenous media studies included. With videogames proving an ever-growing area for Indigenous media, it is important that projects such as these receive the scholarly attention they deserve.

As much as my research delved into the text itself, it also offered valuable insight into the motivations and techniques of the people who created it. The Cultural Ambassadors and figures of the CITC involved in this project left their influence on the work, both intentionally and unintentionally. Each decision made was heavily guided by their initial goals, both in terms of the game itself and how it was presented and disseminated.

In terms of the continuing impact, that may be both the easiest and most complicated to answer. This project created a number of jobs within the community that in turn impacted the global videogame economy. With approximately 4,000 downloads just through Steam, a download center for computer games, it has presented Iñupiaq culture to non-Native people the world over, in the format the Iñupiaq people themselves chose. The game has also seen distribution among Native players, who are able to both interact with each other through a new format, as well as see themselves better represented in a medium they may have felt excluded from before. As Michelle Lietz, an Indigenous scholar, states,

[...] I wish I'd had a video game like *Never Alone* when I was a child. To me, *Never Alone* feels like a celebration of the perseverance of indigenous culture. [...] I have great hope that indigenous peoples creating such modern representations of their



cultures will contribute to a greater understanding of the fact that that culture and the people are not relics of the past (2017).

Being able to see oneself represented in media allows one to feel validated and affirms the visibility and presence of Indigenous people.

### **Future Research**

Having come out in late 2014, *Never Alone* has yet to reach its full impact. It continues to foster debate within and outside of the community, both scholarly and otherwise, on top of continuing to have economic impacts. I believe there is more ethnographic research to be done if both *Never Alone* and Upper One are to be understood at more than the cursory level that this research has allowed.

The most obvious future research is to continue following Upper One Games. With the CITC now owning a majority share of E-Line Media and an Iñupiaq CEO on the board, both companies stand well positioned to pursue Upper One's goal of making more video games centered on Indigenous cultures. As the first fully Native American video game studio Upper One is continually charting new territory, which on its own deserves further study. If their following works prove as significant as their first, there is all the more reason to continue studying their work.

The game is also still being discussed and purchased, meaning that it's direct influence is not fully over. Following up in the future to see how it has continued affecting the Iñupiaq economy, social structure, and pedagogical techniques would provide a fuller picture of this topic. Interviewing those involved with the project to see how successful they view the game now could prove fruitful, particularly if there have been any changes to their approach in response to their views on it.

Finally, I would suggest follow up research with those involved in the project, as well as interviewing Iñupiaq gamers on how the game has influenced them. Most interviews with those involved in the project occurred very close to the game's release; I expect now these same people would have far more to say, now that the game has had more time to impact both their lives and the lives of the community as a whole. Gaining diverse, nuanced and complex emic perspectives on this game can only benefit this research.

## **Conclusion**

*Never Alone* would be ethnographically important if it existed in a vacuum. Removed from its historical context, the machinations and negotiations that lead to its conception, development, and completion, its assertions of Iñupiaq sovereignty to the world at large several times over, and its lasting influence both inside and out of the Iñupiaq culture, it would still demand our attention. The game is a wealth of information on folklore, methods of problem solving, community values and behavior, cosmology, religion, and so much more.

That on top of all the insight *Never Alone* offers it represents a response to both history and current affairs that mobilized resources, scholars, artists, and business people, who went on to not only complete an impressive piece of media, but help steer the future of the Iñupiaq people, elevates the importance of this endeavor to levels I still do not feel I have conveyed to the fullest. This game saw the creation of an entirely new company, not to mention conscious changes to social structure and an establishment of resources with a large capacity to create change.

At the most basic level *Never Alone* is a striking piece of media, one that speaks to the long, rich history of the Iñupiaq people. Every layer deeper goes further into the motivations and inspirations behind it, into the impacts it has both already created and stands to continue into the

future. What this project represents to the Iñupiaq people should be what it represents both to anthropology and to the world; namely, that in the face of injustice, ignorance, and efforts to completely remove all traces of a Indigenous identity, a number of impassioned, dedicated people came together to create real change, change that stands to help steer them and their children into a better future of their own design.

## APPENDIX A

### GAMING TERMS GLOSSARY

Co-op: Short for “co-optional”; when there is the option within a game for one or multiple players

Cutscene: A video in the game that conveys the story. Typically play between chapters or in the middle to signify important plot points. In most instances the player is not in control of the character during these.

Griefing: purposefully annoying another player by either inconveniencing them or doing their character harm.

Multi-player: having more than one player involved in the game at a time. This can be cooperative or competitive, as well as in person or established through the internet.

Platformer: A game where the main mechanic involves jumping from one platform to the next, typically with the player moving continually up or to the right.

Playthrough: video typically posted on online of someone playing a videogame. The main point of these is entertainment.

Puzzle-platformer: a platformer that also incorporates puzzles. These can include backtracking through multiple routes, having to figure out how to change the environment to one’s advantage, or having to quickly navigate due to time constraints.

Unlockable: when an aspect of the game is not immediately presented to the player, but achieved through either meeting certain requirements or finding objects hidden throughout the game.

Walkthrough: a video typically posted on streaming websites that shows a player playing the game, normally to completion. Some are only game footage without commentary, others offer advice, and others have comedic color commentary. The main goal of these is to serve as a guide for viewers to then complete the game on their own.

## APPENDIX B

### CULTURAL INSIGHT VIDEO TRANSCRIPTS

#### A Living Culture

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nprBURIFjug&list=PL0lkN9cj4Tx2icnwh7ui9YJ\\_ASbdo\\_hkv](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nprBURIFjug&list=PL0lkN9cj4Tx2icnwh7ui9YJ_ASbdo_hkv)

December 10, 2014

Amy Fredeen: One of the things I think a lot of people need to understand is, we aren't a museum piece. The Iñupiat people are a living people, and a living culture. Even though we're in northern Alaska, which covers this vast area from Nome, all the way over to the Canadian border, is that there's this extreme value of interconnectedness and interdependence.

Ishmael (Angaluuk): It's a hunting society, a gathering society from thousands of years.

Ronald (Aniqsuaq): This is what creates our culture.

Ishmael (Angaluuk): That special relationship between humans, and the natural world, and the animals, and that it teaches you how to have a, a society that doesn't do too much harm to the world.

Jana (Pausauraq): Love and respect: for nature, for one another, for elders, a very, very fundamental value. Key to, key to life.

Cordelia (Qignaaq): Our values are something that bind us all: the importance of sharing with one another. The importance of spirituality and the connection to the land, our traditions, how we hunt, sharing of stories and songs and dances.

Aggie (Patik): I am Iñupiaq. I am from the Arctic Ocean.

Leo (Oktollik): Iñupiaguruṇa. I am Iñupiaq.

Aggie (Patik): It's very important to me. It's who I am as a person.

Leo (Oktollik): And we're very proud of who we are, and we want to continue that.

#### It Would Be Really Nice to Hear a Story

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bx2vGgCyT0M&index=2&list=PL0lkN9cj4Tx2icnwh7ui9YJ\\_ASbdo\\_hkv](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bx2vGgCyT0M&index=2&list=PL0lkN9cj4Tx2icnwh7ui9YJ_ASbdo_hkv)

December 10, 2014

Ishmael (Angaluuk): It'd be busy, busy, busy, all through the day. You'd get up and you'd just go right to work, you know, right to work.

Ronald (Aniqsuaq): There's always something to do. There's never any idle time. The only idle time we had was after we eat, before we go to bed.

Ishmael (Angaluuk): One of the older people would be relaxing, laying down there, and saying, "You know, it'd be really nice to hear a story." And then, just organically, someone would just start telling a story.

Amy Fredeen: Storytelling for the Iñupiaq people is very important, because it not only created that sense of community, but as a way to pass on wisdom to the next generation.

Ishmael (Angaluuk): It was like TV, you know. It was just like, it was as good as any movie you've ever seen, and the storyteller told it so clearly that it was just as powerful as any of the greatest movie blockbusters you've ever seen.

Cordelia (Qignaag): There was a reason behind the stories that were told, because they held a traditional knowledge. They held things that we might need to know in life. Whether it was about how to find food, or how to survive, or it was about well-being, and the importance of connecting with people, and being a good member of the community. Ishmael (Angaluuk): We all do stories. We all live in stories. We all tell stories to our friends, and they need to be told. They need to be heard

### **Scrimshaw**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jptTphGx8sY&index=3&list=PL0lkN9cj4Tx2icnwh7ui9YJ\\_ASbdo\\_hkv](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jptTphGx8sY&index=3&list=PL0lkN9cj4Tx2icnwh7ui9YJ_ASbdo_hkv)

December 30, 2014

Amy Fredeen: So scrimshaw is this really beautiful method of art that's done either on baleen or ivory, and traditionally, it was used to tell stories.

Ronald (Aniqsuaq): Each etching is telling a story of some event: caribou hunting was taking place, this is what was going on, war began around this time. And so it sort of gives you a timeline of history through etching.

Amy Fredeen: An elder or the person who carved it would literally be able to read the scrimshaw story.

Ronald (Aniqsuaq): They're like reading a book, in a way.

Amy Fredeen: A lot of the storytelling traditions would be things that after the storytelling was done, you'd just rely on the next person telling it. And so the scrimshaw is a very important way for Alaskan Native people to record their history

### **Arctic Fox**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DQDHrK1NdfE&index=4&list=PL0lkN9cj4Tx2icnwh7ui9YJ\\_ASbdo\\_hkv](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DQDHrK1NdfE&index=4&list=PL0lkN9cj4Tx2icnwh7ui9YJ_ASbdo_hkv)

January 8, 2015

Ronald (Aniqsuaq): When I was growing up my grandpa had a pet white fox. If you are a good friend with a fox, when there is danger around, they try to keep you from getting into trouble. They'd pull tricks here and there. Foxes are like spoiled little kids in a way. When you'd let her out, she'd go prancing up in the snow and jumping in the air. I knew she was happy then. Come running up at me and jump on my chest, lock me backwards, lick my face, and I'd try not to let it. So that was my memory of my grandpa's pet fox.

### **Caribou Skin Clothing Was the Best**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iwxxxWINMEM&index=5&list=PL0lkN9cj4Tx2icnwh7ui9YJ\\_ASbdo\\_hkv](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iwxxxWINMEM&index=5&list=PL0lkN9cj4Tx2icnwh7ui9YJ_ASbdo_hkv)

January 14, 2015

Fannie (Kuutuuq): Caribou was... it provided for us in many ways.

Ronald (Aniqsuaq): Our clothing in those days was made of caribou skin.

Fannie (Kuutuuq): I grew up wearing caribou pants, mittens, caribou skin mattress, blankets.

Ronald (Aniqsuaq): Some people had boots that were made with wolf leggings, sealskin sole bottoms. Baleen was shaved to make insoles. They kept us quite dry and warm as well. But the caribou skin clothing was the best. We would get as many yearlings as we could for our outer clothing. And for heavy winter, we would get caribou in February or March because the hair was the longest and their skin was the thickest, and we would use those for our winter gear. With that stuff on, you could sleep outside in fifty below, and it wouldn't bother you a bit.

### **Silla Has a Soul**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uvj80I\\_oeq4&index=6&list=PL0lkN9cj4Tx2icnwh7ui9YJ\\_ASbdo\\_hkv](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uvj80I_oeq4&index=6&list=PL0lkN9cj4Tx2icnwh7ui9YJ_ASbdo_hkv)

January 21, 2015

Fannie (Kuutuuq): Sila is the weather. It also means the atmosphere. Here's the nuna, or the land [rubs her hands together], and it's anything from the land into the moon, the sun, the stars. That's sila.

Jana (Pausauraq): It's very spiritual, and we have a relationship with sila. Sila has a soul in the same way we do as people in the same way animals do.

Amy Fredeen: I think spirit helpers in and of themselves are really about how we're connected with things, and so maybe that there is a spirit helper that shows themselves as a bird, to show you the way home. Or maybe a spirit helper that actually decides to show themselves with the face and body of a man, instead of their animal form. And so I think one of the things that's hard to understand is that it's not one way of seeing things. It's one way of knowing you're connected to everything.

Fannie (Kuutuq): We've always had that spirituality of everything around us.

Jana (Pausauraq): It's the interaction you have with the air you breathe, the ocean that you gather resources from, the rivers from which you gather fish, the tundra from which you pick berries, the animals that give themselves. It's all of that.

### **The Trapping Trail**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QvuRq7RybQE&index=7&list=PL0lkN9cj4Tx2icnwh7ui9YJ\\_ASbdo\\_hkv](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QvuRq7RybQE&index=7&list=PL0lkN9cj4Tx2icnwh7ui9YJ_ASbdo_hkv)

January 29, 2015

Ronald (Aniqsuaq): In the winter, when we were traveling, we didn't build sod houses, we built snow houses. In Canada, they call them igloo, but here in Alaska, we call them apuyyaq. We do a day of travel, and then we'd make an apuyyaq. The next day my father would set traps, and spend the day there, rest the dogs, give them something to eat, and then the following day, we'd continue to the next place. We'd go to my dad's sister, who had a house at Tupaagruk. They had a small sod house over there. We didn't have to do anything. We'd just visit with them and my dad and his sister were glad to see each other, and they'd talk away while us kids played outside or go to sleep. By the time we'd get back to our home, my father would leave us with our aunt or with my grandmother. And then he'd start on his trips, and go check his trap line. We were not into 8-to-5 kind of time, you know. We were in a totally different time. We were on ecological time.



## **The Heartbeat of the Community**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VOAMbAZn3Zc&index=8&list=PL0lkN9cj4Tx2icnwh7ui9YJ\\_ASbdo\\_hkv](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VOAMbAZn3Zc&index=8&list=PL0lkN9cj4Tx2icnwh7ui9YJ_ASbdo_hkv)

February 4, 2015

Cordelia (Qignaaq): Drum is something that's common to all cultures in Alaska. All cultures have a drum that may have some stylistic differences, or differences in the materials that it's made, but it's still in recognition of life and vitality. And the drum mirrors the heartbeat, and when you continue drumming, soon it will be in line with your heartbeat, and that's what it's supposed to be: the heartbeat of the community, and it symbolizes vitality. And it's the most tremendous feeling, to be in a room, and to have one long row of all the drummers, and to have that feeling of unity, everyone beating in harmony. The drumbeat in unison is the most beautiful feeling.

James (Mumigan): [begins singing and drumming, edited behind Cordelia]

Cordelia (Qignaaq): And to know that you're connected, you're on the land you're connected to, even if you grew up outside the community, that which is in you comes from this area. And it's the greatest feeling.

James (Mumigan): [continues singing and drumming at an increasingly fast pace, until the drumstick snaps] Man I went at it and look what happens. [laughs]

## **Bola**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=utYU6Rm4oM&list=PL0lkN9cj4Tx2icnwh7ui9YJ\\_ASbdo\\_hkv&index=9](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=utYU6Rm4oM&list=PL0lkN9cj4Tx2icnwh7ui9YJ_ASbdo_hkv&index=9)

June 9, 2015

Ronald (Aniqsuaq): The bola is what we call kilauqitawinmium. And the kilauqitawinmium is made out of braided sinew, tied on to some heavy bone which you could twirl, in my case we were catching ducks.

James (Mumigan): When we were out whaling, sometimes the ducks start flying. And they're good for duck hunting. You know, if you're in a whaling crew, you can't make too much noise, so you can't use a shotgun for killing some duck soup. Handy, you know? So bola was really a

handy weapon to use for catching ducks. You know, the ducks fly and you throw it, it tangles up the bird and down they go.

### **Little People**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JXAYVXxcuV0&index=10&list=PL0lkN9cj4Tx2icnwh7ui9YJ\\_ASbdo\\_hkv](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JXAYVXxcuV0&index=10&list=PL0lkN9cj4Tx2icnwh7ui9YJ_ASbdo_hkv)

May 9, 2015

Ishmael (Angaluuk): They're just like other people. They just happen to be very small, and extremely strong.

Amy Fredeen. These are stories that are common throughout Alaska, and it's normally that people are the size from your elbow to the tips of your fingers, and they possess superhuman strength. So they may be tiny, but they can carry a whole caribou.

Ishmael (Angaluuk): And if you go up north, and you talk to a number of the people in the community, they'll talk about having seen the little people.

Anna Nageak: There's a place at home that we know, but we don't profess it to anybody.

Ishmael (Angaluuk): But it's not like the bogeyman.

Amy Fredeen: They can be mischievous, they can be ornery, or they can be helpers.

Ishmael (Angaluuk): And every now and then, we might have the opportunity to see them, especially if they want us to see them.

Amy Fredeen: The fact that it's across Alaska really tells you something about our history, and how we interacted with nature around us.

### **Stranded**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p-HvHQsKtp8&list=PL0lkN9cj4Tx2icnwh7ui9YJ\\_ASbdo\\_hkv&index=11](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p-HvHQsKtp8&list=PL0lkN9cj4Tx2icnwh7ui9YJ_ASbdo_hkv&index=11)

March 19, 2015

Brower (Tigitquaraq): The scariest I've ever been, I was 12 years old. We floated out on a piece of ice while we were duck hunting. It was a bluebird day, just clear blue skies. And there was three of us: myself, my brother, and my dad. Next thing you know we see this dark, dark

shadow on the ice. We look and it goes behind us. So we all jumped up, started running. We got back to the ridge there, the ice had fractured, cracked, and broke off, and we were floating away, we were drifting. It was close enough to where my dad would have made it. He stopped and he thought about throwing us across. And, if one of us was on the other side we would be split up, so he stopped, and he just so happened to have a cellphone on him. 911 didn't pick up. That's the worst feeling in the world right there. 911 did not pick up. So he left a message because they record their calls. Once he had relayed that information his cellphone died. That was the scariest moment I've ever had in my life. We were floating away and I thought we were left for dead. He kept calm during this situation. He's bringing out everything positive in this case. You know, I'm crying, my brother is freaking out. It went from clear blue to dense, dense fog. Within a couple hours, we hear the chopper flying around, so they must have gotten our message. We thought we were saved and then the chopper sound went away... So we lit some of the sled on fire. It's plastic, we thought black smoke in the fog would create some kind of marker. Chopper pilot had mentioned, when we got rescued, you could see a glow in the fog. And he slowed down there and sure enough as soon as he slowed down, we got within visual. That was definitely the scariest moment of my life, was floating away and not knowing what the outcome was going to be.

### **No More Thick Ice**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P6P0TMQMIDk&list=PL0lkN9cj4Tx2icnwh7ui9YJ\\_ASbd\\_o\\_hkv&index=12](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P6P0TMQMIDk&list=PL0lkN9cj4Tx2icnwh7ui9YJ_ASbd_o_hkv&index=12)

March 24, 2015

Ronald (Aniqsuaq): We're very much aware of the climate change, and it's been, for many year, even before climatologists were noticing this change, Inuit were already saying, "Sila alannuqtuq"; "Our climate is changing."

Anna Nageak: If the heat is going the way it is right now, for us it's going to be pretty bad.

Different birds are coming, and they're coming earlier, and sometimes the rain is more than what we want, because when there's more rain we know it's going to melt the permafrost.

Ronald (Aniqsuaq): In my time as a young whaler, when I was 9 years old, we were hunting from ice that was about 25 feet thick. And there's giant icebergs already floating, coming by, that

was the first signs of a change in climate. Ice that never broke before was now moving. Now, here it is 50 years later, we're hunting whale from ice that's 18 inches thick. There's no more thick ice.

Brower (Tigitquuraq): It's creating a malfunction in our whaling season, is what it is. Actually more than that, all seasons in general.

Anna Nageak: I think we are more scientists than more people will realize. We have more knowledge of those things than people will ever know.

### **A Girl and Her Nanuk**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tO1EuXZC4yc&list=PL0lkN9cj4Tx2icnwh7ui9YJ\\_ASbdo\\_hkv&index=13](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tO1EuXZC4yc&list=PL0lkN9cj4Tx2icnwh7ui9YJ_ASbdo_hkv&index=13)

June 9 2015

Fannie (Kuutuug): My brother was out seal hunting. He got attacked from behind, and managed to grab his knife and save himself, when came to realize, "Oh, no, it's a mother." We've always known traditionally that we avoid killing a mother. It's always been sacred to us to protect them. He had to present himself to the council, and so he was given the job to mother the baby, and we kept it. It got so big it went over the barricade one day and got to the dog food, and that was the indication that, "Uh, oh, Brother better go teach it how to survive on its own." So he did. I really got attached to the bear because I more or less grew up with it. And some days, when Brother took him walking, once in a great while, he would put me on the bear and I would ride on it like a horse. And just, I was just the happiest little girl in the world.

### **Animal Spirits**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GvKsr-fMofw&index=14&list=PL0lkN9cj4Tx2icnwh7ui9YJ\\_ASbdo\\_hkv](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GvKsr-fMofw&index=14&list=PL0lkN9cj4Tx2icnwh7ui9YJ_ASbdo_hkv)

June 9, 2015

Ishmael (Angaluuk): We are taught that there is no hierarchy. It's not everything else, and then man, you know, humans on top, and they're separate from everything. We're taught that everything is equal, and that all the animals have a human form or can be seen in a human form.

And so they have just as much, or more intelligence, you know, in fact have a lot to teach people. And so that's how these transformations can happen. It's if the animal wants you to see it in its human form. There's a story where a man comes up to an ice hole, and then realizes there's another man in his parka that's got stuck in the net, you know, and he's just stuck like that. "Oh can you let me out? Please help me!" You know, and so then he lets the man out, but then realizes that was actually a seal. That was a seal man. And just because that seal wanted that help, that seal allowed itself to be seen in human form.

### **Everything is Alive**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fB4jBF0HBDQ&index=15&list=PL0lkN9cj4Tx2icnwh7ui9YJ\\_ASbdo\\_hkv](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fB4jBF0HBDQ&index=15&list=PL0lkN9cj4Tx2icnwh7ui9YJ_ASbdo_hkv)

April 7 2015

Ishmael (Angaluuk): We spend all our time out in nature. You get very intimate with the world, and over time, if you're living that life, you start to sense that everything has a spirit, there's a consciousness in everything. Everything is alive. If everything is alive, then we want to respect it. And if we're going to use it, we want to use it respectfully.

Tommy Nageak: What I try to tell my nephews and nieces, you know, you love to hunt? You have to take care of the animals that you catch. Preparing the food and eating the food that you catch.

Anna Nageak: Water provides you, the ice brings you life. It provides all those things that you need to be a part of your life.

Joseph (Sagviyuaq): That was something I grew up with. I grew up respecting animals, I grew up respecting the land, and that, to me, that is why we as Iñupiaq, as Iñupiaq culture, as Iñupiaq people, is why we're so successful.

### **King Island**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LOLWh0VM4S8&index=16&list=PL0lkN9cj4Tx2icnwh7ui9YJ\\_ASbdo\\_hkv](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LOLWh0VM4S8&index=16&list=PL0lkN9cj4Tx2icnwh7ui9YJ_ASbdo_hkv)

April 21, 2015

Ronald (Aniqsuaq): Big Diomedé, Little Diomedé, and King Island. And in those three islands are the stepping stones to get to America.

Amy Fredeen: So King Island is this absolutely beautiful place off the coast of Alaska. So if you can imagine being on this really kind of rocky island that kind of shoots up from the water to these cliffs. And then all of a sudden you see these stilts and then you look up and there are these houses.

Ronald (Aniqsuaq): They were built on the cliff high up because of the ice. Being an island in the Bering Sea you have ice that's being pushed by the winds onto the island, so it's going to pile up fifty, sixty feet high. Structures are still there today and people have returned to King Island. It's a growing community as the people return back to their island.

### **Northern Lights**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HLdtgIEA5ig&index=17&list=PL0lkN9cj4Tx2icnwh7ui9YJ\\_ASbdo\\_hkv](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HLdtgIEA5ig&index=17&list=PL0lkN9cj4Tx2icnwh7ui9YJ_ASbdo_hkv)

June 9, 2015

Ishmael (Angaluuk): When I was young, my mom, whenever the Northern Lights came out, she'd just whistle.

Anna Nageak: [Whistles] Boy they come alive. Just keep whistling and that aurora will... just like, you know, you can almost hear it.

Ishmael (Angaluuk): And then she explained to me a bit later, that those were children. Children who've passed away when they're children. You don't want to draw them in too much, you know, is what she said, because then they can play football with your head. Play eskimo football. And that's what they want to do. They're always playing, those children up there.

Anna Nageak: Don't play out without your hood on. If you don't have your hood on, the aurora person is going to come down and chop your head off and play ball with your head.

Ishmael (Angaluuk): It wasn't like they were trying to do bad, you know, or it was like a scary story or anything like that. It was just, that's how it was. That's what it was.

## **The Month of Night**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fxaCD8W4mGQ&list=PL0lkN9cj4Tx2icnwh7ui9YJ\\_ASbd\\_o\\_hkv&index=18](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fxaCD8W4mGQ&list=PL0lkN9cj4Tx2icnwh7ui9YJ_ASbd_o_hkv&index=18)

April 28, 2015

Ronald (Aniqsuaq): In the month of November, there's no sun, so during that dark time, we travel by the light of the moon. It's quite different, everything was silver and black. Toward the horizon, we could see where caribou are because their body heat, flowing upward, and we could see it glowing in the moonlight against a dark horizon, where there's no stars. If somebody yelled, you could know who yelled from where the sound came from, but specifically for the cloud of their breath went up, and it glowed in the moonlight. So that was a good time to travel. It was very surrealistic and so things that were dark objects looked very close and white objects looked very far.

## **Rebirth and Naming**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0L1twQx6EH4&list=PL0lkN9cj4Tx2icnwh7ui9YJ\\_ASbd\\_o\\_hkv&index=19](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0L1twQx6EH4&list=PL0lkN9cj4Tx2icnwh7ui9YJ_ASbd_o_hkv&index=19)

May 5, 2015

Ronald (Aniqsuaq): We have our timi, the body, which returns to nuna, the Earth, and we have atiq, who is our name, that has been passed down to us over the generations. The spirit of our atiq lives on, so long as man remembers that name. It would be hard to describe what happens after death. The feeling is that when our anniqaruq returns to sila, then that may be reborn if the name is passed on to a new child, who can then retain some of the memories of the original name.

Cordelia (Qignaaq): And so it's not uncommon for grown-ups or adults to meet a child who has the same name maybe as their grandmother and say, "Hi, Aaka," which means Grandma, or "Hi, Aapa," or "Hi, Little Mom," or "Hi, Little Dad," because it's a traditional belief that their soul is continuing on.

Ronald (Aniqsuaq): Humans are renewed and replenished over time just like our plants. Every year, flowers are born and bloom, and they die. Next year, they are born again.

## **Subsistence Lifestyle**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T0PGbwh0t\\_g&list=PL0lkN9cj4Tx2icnwh7ui9YJ\\_ASbdo\\_hkv&index=20](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T0PGbwh0t_g&list=PL0lkN9cj4Tx2icnwh7ui9YJ_ASbdo_hkv&index=20)

April 14, 2015

Amy Fredeen: In Arctic Alaska, hunting is a really important part of life. It's not just about going and shooting something, it's about going and putting food on the table. But more importantly, you know, subsistence hunting isn't just about the insular family unit. It's about feeding the whole community, and I think that's one of the beautiful things about subsistence hunting in Alaska is that people go out and they'll go get, you know, fish, or they'll get a caribou, and they'll get, you know, seals and whales. And one of the first things they'll do is they'll say, "Oh, I need to take this to the elders." This isn't just about one individual surviving, or one family surviving, it's about the whole community. Fannie (Kuutuuq): We didn't just go out and kill and butcher and put it in the freezer. It's like a ritual that I learned from my parents.

Jana (Pausauraq): It's all about relationship. I don't know, I think there's a lot of camaraderie involved, and just being out on the land, being out on the ocean, it's like getting back in tune.

Fannie (Kuutuuq): I'd rather be out there. To me, once I go out there, it's the world that I learned from.

## **Reading the Weather**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EmSrR-UtBTM&list=PL0lkN9cj4Tx2icnwh7ui9YJ\\_ASbdo\\_hkv&index=21](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EmSrR-UtBTM&list=PL0lkN9cj4Tx2icnwh7ui9YJ_ASbdo_hkv&index=21)

May 19, 2015

Ronald (Aniqsuaq): With regard to the environment, the blizzards have been one of the key elements that have impacted the survival of people, especially in the hard winter. We know a blizzard is coming when the moon is starting to get fuzzy. We also look at the stars. When the stars are twinkling fast, we know a storm is approaching. We look to the clouds in the sky to give us the direction the storm is coming from. We learn these as children, by observing weather on a daily basis.



## **Kunuksaayuka**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZEPRn9z4tx4&index=22&list=PL0lkN9cj4Tx2icnwh7ui9YJ\\_ASbdo\\_hkv](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZEPRn9z4tx4&index=22&list=PL0lkN9cj4Tx2icnwh7ui9YJ_ASbdo_hkv)

May 26, 2015

Ishmael (Angaluuk): With the story of Kunuksaayuka, told by Robert Cleveland, it's just a masterwork. It's a well-known story among the Iñupiaq people, and in our case of producing a video game that really reflects on Indigenous heritage, it captures the imagination, and it's something that you have a very specific kind of task to do. If there's a blizzard, you know, and it's just a non-stop blizzard that is overpowering the people. And there's one man that wants to figure it out, and in our case of the story, it's a girl that wants to find the source of the blizzard. The "blizzard man," it's like that is the physical embodiment of an element of nature. And so there's a person that needs to go up and take away the adze that's chipping away at the snow. Amy Fredeen: In that community, the person least experienced is the one who stands up and makes a difference.

Cordelia (Qignaag): Humility is something that we value, and where that comes from is the idea that you are not the biggest in the world. When you live in an extreme environment like where the Inuit reside, you are at the whim of the environment, of the climate, of the animals. You can be as prepared as you can, you know, by learning from your elders, but you know, you're not the biggest force in the world.

## **The Manslayer**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tm3inJCr5dA&list=PL0lkN9cj4Tx2icnwh7ui9YJ\\_ASbdo\\_hkv&index=23](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tm3inJCr5dA&list=PL0lkN9cj4Tx2icnwh7ui9YJ_ASbdo_hkv&index=23)

May 12, 2015

Amy Fredeen: The recurring type of character in Iñupiaq stories is the Manslayer, and the Manslayer is kind of this bad guy. And I think really what's at risk when the Manslayer comes into the story is the livelihood of individuals and the whole community, and so the Manslayer is

really used as a way to say, “Don’t act only for yourself. Always hold the community in your heart.” Often times in these stories, there is one person that will stand up.

Ishmael (Angaluuk): And what this humble person will represent, who faces that Manslayer, is a return to order, a return to true living in the community. And it just takes that one person. It could just be that one person that can help to change everything. Because everyone wants to live a good life. Everyone wants to have a good community.

### **Behind the Scenes**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8yefBjvyTYM&index=24&list=PL0lkN9cj4Tx2icnwh7ui9YJ\\_ASbdo\\_hkv](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8yefBjvyTYM&index=24&list=PL0lkN9cj4Tx2icnwh7ui9YJ_ASbdo_hkv)

November 15, 2014

Jana (Pausauraq): With the passing of each elder, they take with them lots of pieces of information, of knowledge that perhaps none of us will ever know. Changes have come so fast, and we’ve become so ingrained in Western media, we’re not producing our own to present who we are and how we view the world from our perspective.

Joseph (Sagviyuaq): Even today there are some kids that have never been on a caribou hunt. They’ve never had certain foods. Never been out on the ocean. Our people are so rich in culture, it’s hard to believe that your own kind are lacking of.

Jana (Pausauraq): That it’s just absolutely critical that we do anything and everything to reclaim those parts of our past that have seemed to have gone by the wayside.

Joseph (Sagviyuaq): That’s... that’s a huge challenge.

Sean Vesce: *Never Alone* is a video game. It’s a game that’s been created in deep partnership with the Iñupiaq community, and it’s an invitation for player around the world to explore amazing values, history, and storytelling tradition of the Iñupiaq culture.

Alan Gershenfeld: All over the world, there are cultures that are just not represented in video games, and many of these cultures have very powerful mythologies and stories that have survived thousands and thousands of years. They’re really one generation guiding another through their wisdom, through the power of storytelling. The idea that we extend storytelling into player-driven storytelling, into computer and video games, is a very powerful idea for how to keep this great tradition alive, and further it into the next century.

Gloria O'Neill: We've been able to bring our community into the development and production process, where we're bringing elders, storytellers, young people, linguists from our community to be a part of the process of developing the game from beginning to end.

Michael Angst: The opportunity not to make a game about a community, but to make a game with a community, and to have a fusion of voices in a way that hasn't really been done extensively in this medium.

Diam Veryovka: The visual style of the game was deeply inspired by Alaska Native art and artists, to me by looking at that and absorbing the way they work with the materials gave me the ideas for how to create the world for this game. A very soft, very beautiful world.

What success looks like, to me, as an Alaska Native, is we create a video game where the community feels proud of it, that our young people can look at themselves and say, "That's my culture."

Joseph (Sagviyuaq): There's a connection from my generation to the next generation, to my kids' generation, and this game is gonna take it to the next level.

Ishmael (Angaluuk): The people have done the work, they've done the research, they've spent time with elders, they went out to the communities, and maybe this is one of the first times ever that Indigenous stories can really be seen.

Ronald (Aniqsuaq): I knew this was gonna come some day, but to use it as a tool to teach, that's something else, and that's something that I can say that I'm proud of being part of. I couldn't be any happier

## **Ice Story**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=seJ35kuKbv0&list=PL0lkN9cj4Tx2icnwh7ui9YJ\\_ASbdo\\_hkv&index=25](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=seJ35kuKbv0&list=PL0lkN9cj4Tx2icnwh7ui9YJ_ASbdo_hkv&index=25)

October 24, 2014

Leo (Oktollik): No, after school, once in a while I'd go to visit my friend. His grandfather was real old, and bedridden, and then my friend goes to his Aapa, you know, his grandfather, and say, "Tell us a story." Guy wouldn't say anything for a while, for a long time, and then he'd say "Ok, [from this point Leo swaps to Iñupiaq, transcript is of video subtitles] A long time ago, a man woke up in the morning, he got ready and went out on top of his house and looked around to see

how the weather was. Arriga! It was really good weather, the sun was shining, there was no wind. Since there was no wind, he went back in his house and put together his hunting gear, his back pack, his rifle, and went out and started walking toward the ice. It was good weather, the sun was shining. Walking like that, going far out onto the ice, looking for polar bears and seals. Walking like that, he felt a light wind. Being aware of the light wind, pretty soon the wind became stronger. Wind started, and it became stronger down there on the ice. Pretty soon the ice began to break up. The waves got bigger with the stronger wind. When he came upon a ‘puktaa’, a round iceberg, he began to run on the edges, running on the edge of that iceberg. After running, he sat down in the middle of the iceberg. He sat down and took off on the iceberg! He was going against the waves and the wind, sitting like that [leaning back], moving with the iceberg, he hit the land locked ice. Stepping over, he started walking home. That is all.”

### **Living Through Changes**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YiCNPfFgtD8&index=26&list=PL0lkN9cj4Tx2icnwh7ui9YJ\\_ASbdo\\_hkv](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YiCNPfFgtD8&index=26&list=PL0lkN9cj4Tx2icnwh7ui9YJ_ASbdo_hkv)

October 31, 2014

Ronald (Aniqsuaq): When I first saw a lightbulb it was in the evening. I ran home thinking the house was on fire, and when I ran in there, “What’s the matter with you?” You know? “I thought the house was burning!” We got a new light. I touched it, and it burned my hand. And that was my introduction to lightbulbs. And then, around the same time we were getting new clothing. The change of clothing was I think somewhat traumatic for us, because we never had such cold-feeling clothes. Wind would just go right through them. I was also scared of the first time I was told to sleep on a bed. My bed was made out of two caribou skins, it was like a sleeping bag. I could just crawl in there and go to sleep. But here we were introduced to pillows and blankets. And boy those blankets were terrible. When we’d move around they’d wrap on us, and it was like a ghost was creeping up on us and trying to take us, and we’d scream and wake up everybody. They’d come running over and yank those blankets off us. “Quit having a nightmare.” [Laughs] So we went through all these little kinds of changes.

## **Life on the North Slope**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dPRPxiDk\\_hg&index=27&list=PL0lkN9cj4Tx2icnwh7ui9YJ\\_ASbdo\\_hkv](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dPRPxiDk_hg&index=27&list=PL0lkN9cj4Tx2icnwh7ui9YJ_ASbdo_hkv)

November 7, 2014

Jana (Pausauraq): I was born and raised here, and I've raised my family here, and I have grandchildren here, and I think we're gonna be here a long time in terms of future generations.

Brower (Tigitquaraq): It's a lot different than growing up in a city. Everybody knew everybody, and we all work together. When you go to school you know all the kids, and they're all your relatives. Just growing up here I think we had a good, close connection to the community and working together in general. Whaling, goose hunting, seal hunting, it's definitely different here than anywhere else in the world.

Tommy Nageak: It's home. You know, I'm not gonna find no whale meat or seal meat at Fred Meyer's or Safeway, you know. That's the things that I need to eat. Congested cities I probably can handle for a few months, but I don't know if I'd want to live there. I love going outdoors hunting, peace and quiet.

Qaiyaan Harcharek: Well one it's home, it's Inupiaq way of life, it's who I am. I went out for college, and all I wanted to do was be home. I was missing going out whaling, I was missing going out hunting. And not only that, I wasn't around our language, I wasn't around our people.

Fannie (Kuutuug): Because it's who I am. It's who we are. I shipped out to finish my high school, but I came back. I don't think I will ever up and move somewhere else. I'm always gonna be here.

## **John Wayne**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BnCjlyVeKA4&list=PL0lkN9cj4Tx2icnwh7ui9YJ\\_ASbdo\\_hkv&index=28](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BnCjlyVeKA4&list=PL0lkN9cj4Tx2icnwh7ui9YJ_ASbdo_hkv&index=28)

November 4, 2014

Ronald (Aniqsuaq): And then in '64 we had our first TV. My aunt Hilda Webber came in from Point Hope with her husband and they were staying with us. First time we were watching cowboy and Indian movies, and guess who's in the scene? John Wayne. And John Wayne was

shooting, picking off these Indians. They're fighting, they keep shooting the Indians. None of the white people got shot, but the Indians always got shot, and we noticed that. The good guys had white hats, the bad guys had black hats, so we'd know which ones were the good guys and the bad guys. But here comes this Indian, with a knife in his mouth, and then another knife in his right hand. So he takes the knife with his left, and he's gonna jump on John Wayne. And my auntie's screaming at John Wayne, "[Speaking Iñupiaq]," and she threw her husband's bunny boot at the Indian, and poof, the TV blew up. It was just a big puff of white smoke. That was the end of our TV days.

### **Sharing for Survival**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AbduHat3HzE&index=29&list=PL0lkN9cj4Tx2icnwh7ui9YJ\\_ASbdo\\_hkv](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AbduHat3HzE&index=29&list=PL0lkN9cj4Tx2icnwh7ui9YJ_ASbdo_hkv)

July 21, 2016

Jana (Pausauraq): I think most central to the ideology of the Iñupiaq is the idea of sharing.

Qaiyaan Harcharek: Being able to feed the community, feed others. That's why we hunt, you know. In the old days that's what you needed to survive, you know?

Cordelia (Qignaaq): Sharing is important because it's how the community survives together; collectively.

Joseph (Sagviyuaq): We just give. That's how I grew up. That's the way I'm always gonna be. Because of who we are, we always think about other people first.

Qaiyaan Harcharek: If our people didn't share in, you know, the old days, we wouldn't have survived in this harsh, you know, climate, environment.

### **Never Alone - Iñupiaq Perspectives - Ron Brower, Sr.**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gTEtK2fwKIE> 2/15/17

Ron Brower, Sr.: Making the video game will be a very important tool. Especially in our community, where our younger generation are into Xbox. That would be a great way of transferring some of our historic knowledge to the younger generation, because they're hearing bits of our story, bits of the culture has been passed on to my generation but that has not reached

over to the younger Xbox generation. I think this would give them an insight as to the way Inuit think. We think quite differently because of the, our isolation and the kind of beliefs and self-sufficiency that we develop. I think it is important how to be independent and how to think outside of the box kind of thing and how to be innovative. If it can do that then it will have done its job as a video game.

## APPENDIX C

### *NEVER ALONE* CAST OF CHARACTERS

**Nuna:** the protagonist of the game, who sets out to stop the blizzard keeping her tribe from hunting. The only human character portrayed outside of the scrimshaw cutscenes.

**Fox:** the second playable character. Fox is able to reach areas Nuna cannot, as well as convince spirits to help her. After the Manslayer snaps his neck, Fox reveals his spirit form, that of a young boy wearing a fox fur hood, who is able to further connect with the spirits.

**Manslayer:** a monstrous figure capable of throwing balls of fire that has no regard for human life. He tears Nuna's village apart in search of the bola, then relentlessly pursues her after learning she has it. He is defeated by Nuna and Fox in his spirit form.

**Owl Man:** a powerful and helpful spirit that controls the owls the player must find to unlock the Cultural Insight videos. After Nuna and Fox recover his drum from the Little People, he repays Nuna with the bola.

**Ice Giant:** the cause of the blizzard preventing Nuna's tribe from hunting. Nuna climbs his body and steals his the adze he uses to scrape away at a mountain and cause the storm. He pursues her and demands his adze back, but is ultimately relieved it is no longer his burden.



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## **BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH**

Peter Williams graduated Florida State University in 2015 with Bachelor's degrees in Anthropology and Creative Writing. In 2016 he enrolled in the Master's program at Florida State University to earn a Masters of the Arts in Anthropology, with a focus in cultural anthropology. His focus was on Indigenous media studies, specifically those of the Iñupiaq tribe, which he was mentored in by Dr. Kristin Dowell. Research while a graduate student included metadata analysis of primary documents for several archaeological sites.