

Reset and Redefine: *Never Alone (Kisima Ingitchuna)* and the Rise of Indigenous Games

“One of 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, there is this extreme value of interconnectedness and interdependence.”

—Amy Fredeen (Iñupiat),
 “A Living People: A Living Culture” Cultural Insight,
Never Alone (Kisima Ingitchuna), 2014

Indigenous storytelling within video games forces players to immerse themselves within ancestral worlds that have existed since time immemorial. Coming straight from community members, youth and elders alike, the videogame landscape has witnessed an explosion of Indigenous-centred narratives in games produced over the last decade. *Never Alone (Kisima Ingitchuna)* (2014) is but one example of Indigenous storytelling in videogames, but it is certainly a visually stunning and narratively riveting piece of oral tradition. As an integral part of the fluid social landscapes that make up Turtle Island, Indigenous communities are proving to be frontrunners within the development and execution of the ground-breaking digital experiences that videogaming provides its players. *Never Alone* is a two-player cooperative, 3D platformer¹ video game published by the Indigenous owned and operated Upper One Games, a subsidiary of E-Line Media. Released on 18 November 2014 to the Steam Store for both Windows and Mac OS X operating systems, *Never Alone* is a game developed in collaboration with the Iñupiat, an Indigenous peoples native to what is now known as northern Alaska. Close to 40 Iñupiat elders, storytellers, and community members contributed to the development of the piece, which is as much a game for entertainment as it is a tool for teaching and learning. This review sets out to unpack the narrative and presentation of *Never Alone* to give rich cultural context into Iñupiat life. The game insists on showing players how the Iñupiat of Cook Inlet are choosing to promote their distinct cultural expressions through self-representation and self-articulation for the benefit of all members of their community. As both a video game and representative documentary of Iñupiat lifeworlds, *Never Alone* demonstrates the potential that videogames hold in creating digital spaces for redefining damaging Indigenous stereotypes found in gaming narratives and resetting the cross-cultural capacities of videogaming as a medium of social sharing and adventure.

Redefining Indigeneity through Storytelling in *Never Alone*

On its ice-covered surface, the virtual setting and narrative of *Never Alone* could be considered by many to be quite ordinary: marketed with an easily-understood plotline that features a hero on an adventure with their trusted (and very cute) companion. However, the game disrupts its own marketed simplicity even before you take your first steps as the narrative’s heroine, Nuna. *Never Alone* opens with a simple menu that prompts players to begin their journey with the option of watching the first two of twenty-four “Cultural Insights” available for viewing as part of the game. Titled “A Living People, a Living Culture” and “It Would Be Really Nice to Hear a Story” respectively, these Cultural Insights of *Never Alone* centre the voices and reflections of Iñupiat community members to communicate their culture’s reliance on their traditional knowledge of the interconnectedness of humanity’s relationship to the natural

world. These Insights show the prevalence of storytelling and the ongoing transmission of Iñupiat cultural knowledge through oral tradition. The story of Nuna and Fox are foundational to how the community sees themselves. Right away, players are strongly encouraged to engage with a video game in a way that does not only require them to simply run and jump through the challenges presented by the game design itself, but to also watch and engage with a living Iñupiat community.

When players first enter the game world, they are first greeted by the melodic voice of Iñupiat storyteller and narrator, Leo Oktolik, who begins the narrative in the traditional language of his community though a cut scene where he shares: “I will tell you a very old story. I heard it from Nasruk when I was very young” (Walkthrough Part 1, 0:18-0:26). From this acknowledgement of the story’s retelling, players are introduced to Nuna, the narrative’s protagonist, who sets off to find the cause of a supernatural blizzard that has plunged her community into immobility and despair. Nuna is faced with the brutal challenges of the Alaskan Arctic and when hope is all but lost she is rescued by Fox; both characters become each other’s companion and most treasured friend during the first stages of their adventure. Because both Nuna and Fox are meant to each be played by a different player with their own set of controls, players learn very early that the relationship between Nuna and Fox is a truly reciprocal one. There are several key elements to the game mechanics that point to the concept of reciprocity that is shared by Iñupiat cultural traditions and highlighted through the previous Cultural Insights. Each playable character has a unique skillset that requires players (playing both solo and cooperatively) to value both characters equally. Nuna harnesses the power of a Bola, one of the traditional hunting weapons of the Iñupiat people, to open pathways so that the two may progress. The nimble-bodied Fox is able to scale tall obstacles that Nuna is unable to climb herself by using his claws in order to reach higher places and open alternate routes for Nuna to follow. This key concept of interconnectedness is one that I wish to highlight in both *Never Alone*’s narrative and its mechanics because the game’s story immerses players within the characters’ relationship, while also requiring players to control both characters equally in order to progress. Players of *Never Alone* are encouraged to balance Nuna and Fox’s heroic identities while also coordinating the character’s puzzle-solving abilities.

Much like the two characters’ reciprocal interdependence on one another extends to the presentations of player success within the narrative, so too are they seen through the possibilities for player failure in the game’s practical sense. The Alaskan Arctic setting is shown to be as hauntingly beautiful as it is perilous for Nuna and Fox, as one wrong move and a chilly gust of the Arctic winds can easily sweep the characters to their demise. Upon failure resulting in either of the characters’ death, players are forced to start the segment over again until they get it right and are able to successfully move on. Because both characters must be played to each of their strengths to compensate for their individual weaknesses, the life of the human protagonist, Nuna, cannot be valued more than the life of Fox due to his status as a representative of the animal world. *Never Alone* blurs the lines of what is commonly understood in Western renderings of the natural world order, as Fox cannot be read of as a one-dimensional character whose only purpose within the story is to serve the bidding of his “master” and solve puzzles so that she can move on with her quest. There is no master-slave narrative within *Never Alone*, only the love for life in all of its forms. The game makes sure to spotlight the exceptional actions of the seemingly ordinary

characters of Nuna and Fox who persevere onward when constantly faced with near certain death.



Nuna and Fox meet for the first time (Upper One Games LLC, 2014).

It is important to note the prevalence of the more-than-physical world within the story and game mechanics of *Never Alone*. Once Nuna and Fox set out on their journey to put an end to the eternal blizzard in order to ensure the survival of their community, players are introduced to the various spirits that appear throughout the narrative. Some of these spectral characters within the game are “helping spirits” that take on the visual identity associated with several beings like loons and trees, who then help Nuna and Fox to access pathways they would not normally be able to reach on their own. Fox acts as a liaison between the physical world of humanity and the spirit world that seamlessly co-exist in the breathtaking visual graphics of *Never Alone*. As a storytelling element of the narrative specifically, the idea that Fox acts as a physical bridge between Nuna and the spirits themselves is openly presented by the voice of the game’s storyteller, stating that “the girl understood that helping spirits are among us. Being different, that fox revealed to the girl just how beautiful those helpers were” (Walkthrough Part 1, 6:54-7:04). *Never Alone* also upholds the relevance of the spiritual world in a practical sense when players control Fox, as they must learn how to lead many of the helping spirits in different directions so that Nuna may actually reach them herself. The spirits that do appear in the game are also not one-dimensional in their relationships to Fox and Nuna. During one sequence of the game, players are presented with the challenge of dodging the Northern Lights which are depicted as green, phantom-like spirits that swoop down from the sky and snatch up the heroes if players are not careful enough to observe their movement patterns. Furthermore, it is eventually revealed that the unrelenting blizzard that is plaguing their community is being caused by the smashing and shoveling work of a giant ice man: a supernatural figure that signifies yet another representation of the cross-over between physical and spiritual worlds. Not only are players introduced to the Iñupiat cultural traditions that conceive of the human and the animal worlds as sharing complete interdependence with one another, but they are also shown the all-pervasiveness and diversity of spirituality that exists in Arctic landscapes as seen through the game’s portrayal of the Northern Lights and the giant ice man. The game’s narrative requires

players to engage with a certain kind of worldview that the Iñupiat conceptualize through oral traditions that form the very foundation of their Arctic lifeworld.

Extending my summary and analysis of *Never Alone* from the specific to the general, the game does a commendable job at breaking down typical or common tropes often found within adventure narratives; especially in the medium of mainstream video games and other interactive media. Although the game may be marketed as such a narrative, Nuna cannot be so simply understood as prototypical hero in this story. For one, she is female, and an incredibly young one at that, appearing to be no more than twelve years old. This sharply contrasts the various adventure-hero identities that players are used to connecting with in other games in the platformer genre. Nintendo's *Super Mario Brothers*, being the most well-known example of a platform game, centres the narrative on working-class, mature men (Mario and his brother/sidekick Luigi) who are out to save a kidnapped princess from a one-dimensional villain character. Nintendo's Mario character, and the platform games he is featured in, set the bar for independently-published titles like *Never Alone*. In contrast to *Mario* however, *Never Alone*'s protagonist Nuna is not only a young girl, but also a woman of colour from northern Alaska who lives a life that is centred on upholding the well-being of her personal community as well as the balance of the natural world to which she and her family are connected with. The reasoning behind her choice to embark on a perilous adventure into the Arctic tundra is not to find a potential lover, but as a necessary responsibility to keeping the physical and spiritual worlds from falling out of balance. Unlike many other typical adventure narratives similar to *Super Mario Brothers*, the story and game mechanics of *Never Alone* also rely on the cooperative utilization of two playable characters' skills in order to complete the game. This foundational component of the game, along with the often-occurring Cultural Insights throughout, strongly encourage players to critically engage with Iñupiat values, gender systems, and worldviews to deconstruct and intervene from within the framework of videogaming as a genre. More of this kind of work is sorely needed in a genre that has been geared toward a white, hetero-patriarchal mainstream culture since video games were popularized in the late 1980s. Nuna and Fox are truly exceptional characters, communicating in many ways including their physical actions, facial expressions, and vocal explanations. Their unbreakable bond is something tangible that all players are able to experience for themselves, in one way or another.

Resetting Cultural Contact Zones with Indigenous Game-Making

By no means does *Never Alone* as experiential and consumable media exist within a vacuum of relevancy that stays strict to the Iñupiat of Cook Inlet. As a contemporary method of passing down oral tradition within Iñupiat communities, it is also a globally-commercialized game. The game's global influence is clearly shown in the multitude of reviews by game critics and the distribution of its license to buyers from all over the world. Renisa Mawani's writings on the racially-diverse and heterogeneous "Contact Zone" of British Columbia in her book titled *Colonial Proximities: Crossracial Encounters and Juridical Truths in British Columbia, 1871-1921* can help to further unpack what it means to now have an Indigenous-made video game that exists to be accessed and critiqued by a mainstream gaming audience. In her conception, the colonial contact zone acts "as a space of racial intermixture – a place where Europeans, aboriginal peoples, and racial migrants came into frequent contact" in conceptual and physical geographies (Mawani 5). Cyberspace occupies a somewhat paradoxical position in Mawani's conception of what a contact zone is, as it is neither solely a conceptual framework or a physical

location that can be touched barring server infrastructure. The digital seems to exist as if from nothing. It appears to just be there, on your computer monitor. This all-new digital contact zone that *Never Alone* belongs to is created in the digital marketplace where the game is sold, as well as in its physical grounding in the North Alaskan roots of Iñupiat oral tradition. Furthermore, Mawani asserts that contact zones also exist “as a variegated site that was generative of multiple racial identities” (Mawani 5). Knowing that video games have held presences within Indigenous communities since they were first marketed to public consumers, it is important to note that the intercultural aspect of videogaming has also existed through portrayals of culture within those games. These kinds of cross-cultural connections are incredibly relevant when trying to understand the history of video gaming in Indigenous communities today, as Indigenous people are also engaging with video game narratives that communicate stereotypical representations of Indigenous cultures as monolithic and undeveloped. What happens when the opposite occurs and the Indigenous voices contained within video games, like they are in *Never Alone*, engage with players that are not only from Iñupiat communities, but from all over the world? Cultural contact zones found within video games are now being reformed in order to centre Indigenous voices in a way that has been done only limitedly thus far; giving us a glimpse of what is yet to come for Indigenous gaming as a genre.

Analyzing the digital platform where *Never Alone* is both marketed and reviewed helps to conceptualize the ongoing formation of digital contact zones sparked by Indigenous-made games. The Steam Store is an online marketplace that carries over sixty-four hundred different video games and is the primary platform for Windows and Mac OS X users to purchase a digital copy of *Never Alone*. Steam lists that the game carries sixteen supported languages (for the game’s interface and subtitles) that range from French to Japanese, and Swedish to Korean. With such a wealth of supported languages, the story of Nuna and Fox is being featured on a truly international and multicultural platform. Additionally, eighty-four percent of over two thousand user reviews of the game left positive recommendations about their experience playing it. As the user “Burn” states in their review of *Never Alone* on the Steam Store:

At first I complained ‘this isn't a game, it's a short documentary,’ but once I finished the game I joyfully realized ‘this isn't a game, it's a short documentary.’ There should be more educational games like this on the market! Stop the dragon slaying, mercenary heroes, revenge and love stories and give me more games about real people, their lives and their culture (“Burn” 2015)

Albeit one-dimensional in its analysis of *Never Alone* as strictly an “educational game,” user Burn highlights something that many other reviewers, both positive and negative, fail to address in their criticisms about their experience with the game. Statements like those made by user “ForestLily418” who states: “I was so excited when my friend bought me this game... However, I cannot recommend this game as it is hardly what I'd call playable. The glitches are rampant and the controls are terrible,” and user “vladeck2204” who echoes “[b]eautiful idea let down by unresponsive controls. At one point the game turns from pure enjoyment to pure frustration,” simply focusing on the game’s mechanical shortcomings and not on the exceptional narrative of the game itself (ForestLily418 2015) (vladeck2204 2015). When talking about the global culture of videogaming today, it is so important to consider the reception that games get in a multinational market. With an eighty-four percent positivity score, *Never Alone* succeeds in

immersing the living culture of the Iñupiat directly into the homes of gamers from all over the world.



Both Nuna and Fox evade the Northern Lights together (Upper One Games LLC, 2014).

So why is there so much praise for a game that has its fair share of mechanical bugs and a simple story? Although *Never Alone* is indeed gorgeous in its visual effects and riveting in its various educational aspects, the game helps to break down real life barriers that tropes of Indigenous peoples have created and that have existed in video game narratives since their popularization. As of right now, the centres for video game development and creation for mainstream consumers exist in metropolitan Japan and the continental United States. Like the popular depictions of “Indians” through the medium of film and Hollywood culture, damaging and stereotypical portrayals of Indigenous peoples, primarily young women, have contributed to building a tumultuous history in mainstream video game culture. The most infamous of these games was published by Mistique in 1982, entitled *Custer’s Revenge*, where “the goal of the game is to guide the mostly naked general and his erect penis through an onslaught of arrows toward a Native American woman named Revenge who is tied to a post on the far side of the screen” to “even up an old score” by raping her (Shaw 20-21). As conceptually heinous and unacceptable as this so-called “game” is, *Custer’s Revenge* serves as an example of the lengths that global video game culture has had to come in the past several decades. Certainly, the climate of Indigenous presences in video gaming has steadily become more representative of actual living and breathing Indigenous communities by featuring Indigenous identities as the protagonists of blockbuster titles such as Ubisoft’s *Assassin’s Creed III* (2012) and Sucker Punch’s *inFamous: Second Son* (2014), but the overall trend of these one-dimensional, masculine heroes in gaming does nothing but tokenize their identities as simple plot devices. Through the active work of Indigenous-lead production companies like Upper One Games, video games that centre the voices of Indigenous peoples and their cultures move past what is portrayed by mainstream gaming companies to show precisely how Indigenous communities are actively engaging with new media to further their own peoples’ needs and interests. Prevalent examples of the important work that is currently being done by Indigenous game designers include games like *Otsì: Rise of the Kanien’kehá:ka Legends* (2009), a first-person perspective game with a Mohawk protagonist that was developed by students at the Kahnawake Survival School, as well as Minority Media’s

empathy game² titled *Spirits of Spring* (2014) that tells the story of an Indigenous boy's journey to take a stand against bullying. Still, *Never Alone* separates itself by featuring the young, female protagonist character of Nuna. The game is one of the most recent, movement-leading examples of how Indigenous communities are currently deconstructing the mainstream gaming industry's negative stereotypes to serve their own purposes of cultural revitalization, intra-community education for younger generations, and the re-education of the global gaming public.

As we have previously found through the close reading and subsequent analysis of *Never Alone*, it is hard to define its scope of influence as both an aesthetically amazing, visually-based video game and a documentary through its inclusion of the Cultural Insights portion of the project. It seems as though both aspects have had varying impacts on the gaming community in that the documentary-style Cultural Insights are trivialized as a backdrop to the artistic quality of the in-game narrative, imagery, and characters. I propose that this sort of mental separation between player reactions to the game are problematic because it fails to see that *Never Alone* is truly interconnected in its entirety. If this game is truly meant to bring about an increased global awareness of Indigenous cultures from Indigenous peoples themselves, the playable game and the Cultural Insights cannot be judged separately. Ludology and Narratology are relatively new academic fields that engage with the contention of mechanics and narrative within videogaming.³ Harsha Walia's writings on art as activism in her book *Undoing Border Imperialism* rings true for this particular debate, as *Never Alone* as a whole can be thought of as one of the "creative tactics" she credits as holding incredible power in social justice movements (Walia 177). Walia notes that "moving beyond the regurgitation of dogma or circulation of petitions, the tactics of vibrant social movements have included flash mobs, murals, performance, art, social media," and other forms of nuanced creative work (Walia 177). Considering the fact that the Iñupiat community has utilized the video game medium, foreign to Indigenous community practices in many ways, their desire to represent themselves within a genre that has done so much to erase Indigenous peoples as a whole communicates how *Never Alone* has the capability of subverting dominant narratives in meaningful ways. As it is stated on the publishing company's website itself:

At Upper One Games, we weave timeless, living stories into dynamic, engaging and fun games that encourage discovery and exploration. We are confident our products will excite, inspire and connect people throughout the world (Upper One Games 2014).

Certainly, the purpose that *Never Alone* has been meant to serve is embodied by the company's statement. But as a piece of visual, interactive, educational, and narrative art, *Never Alone* also exists as a creative tactic for Iñupiat activist work to be upheld in rewriting the script of damaging Indigenous representations in video games.

Indigenous communities only just beginning to explore the potential for video games to communicate their teachings, worldviews, and issues relating to the concept of Indigenous authenticity within this digital medium are often questioned. If Indigenous literature has difficulty being duly recognized within a global canon, how can forms of digital storytelling within video games like *Never Alone* be fully recognized as Indigenous knowledge? Much like the debates of Indigenous authenticity within literary discourse as exemplified by Jace Weaver

(Cherokee), Craig Womack (Creek-Cherokee), and Robert Warrior (Osage) in their book titled *American Indian Literary Nationalism*, the written works of Indigenous peoples continue to be discredited of their relevancy in expanding the global literary canon. I see much of the same rhetoric happening in the production of *Never Alone* in its contributions to the canon of videogaming today and the boundaries its presentation oversteps in the preexisting definition of what Indigenous peoples are supposed to look like when confined to a simple portrayal within a video game. The remarks of Simon J. Ortiz (Acoma Pueblo) in the closing chapter of the book deconstructs the idea of authenticity in Indigenous literary expression as follows:

Along with their native languages, Indian women and men have carried on their lives and expressions through the use of the newer languages... it is entirely possible for people to retain and maintain their lives through the use of any language. There is not a question of authenticity here; rather, it is the way that Indian people have creatively responded to forced colonization. And this response has been one of resistance (Ortiz 257).



The two heroes brave the frigid arctic waters (Upper One Games LLC, 2014).

Parallels between literary and video game discourses are certainly bridged by the presentation of oral history that is a living part of *Never Alone*'s Iñupiat community. Not only is the story of Nuna and Fox relevant in representing Indigenous peoples on their own terms for their own motives, the entirety of *Never Alone* serves as a foundational building block in cementing Indigenous presences within video gaming on the terms of Indigenous communities themselves. The discussion of Indigenous literary nationalism can be applied to further encompass Indigenous oral histories that are not relegated to a sequence of words on paper. *Never Alone* does its storytelling through the actions, expressions, and exclamations of the story's characters alongside the game's breathtaking visuals, soundscape, narration, and Cultural Insights strategically placed throughout. More spaces can and must be made for Indigenous communities to engage and experiment in creative media to tell their stories for the world to hear.

Reimagining Indigenous Futures in Videogaming

Never Alone (Kisima Ingitchuna) is a game that holds a very near and dear place to my heart. It is my hope that I have been able to communicate some of the most significant aspects of its narrative as Iñupiat oral tradition through my close reading and analysis, as well as its presentation as a globally-marketed video game through my additional reflections on its position within the discourse of Indigenous videogaming. As an Indigenous gamer myself, I recognize the need for games like this 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 Iñupiat community can take back to their youth to spark opportunities for educating the next generation that will immerse themselves in and learn from video game narratives. Growing up, I was only able to access the stereotypical portrayals of Indigenous peoples through mainstream video games while also being heavily influenced by American and Japanese cultural motifs found within those games. Through a recent discussion with a colleague I was asked the following question that has stuck in my mind ever since: “What would you think of this game if you played it growing up?” I wish that I could have an answer to that right now, but all I know is what I am aware of in the here and now. What I know is that the significance of *Never Alone* in its ability to carry on Indigenous knowledge through a digital medium is an invitation for further cross-cultural sharing between Indigenous game creators and players from all walks of life. There is profound power that has only recently become unlocked through the work of communities like the Iñupiat of Northern Alaska; allowing more potential for cultural education, cultural tolerance, and cultural revitalization.

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Notes

¹ A platformer (or platform game) is a genre of video game which requires players to guide an avatar along suspended platforms, over obstacles, or both to advance within the game. Learn more about platformers here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Platform_game

² Empathy games are an emerging genre of videogame storytelling that works to elicit empathic reactions from their players. This type of videogame almost always employs rules that do not empower the player, making in-game choices matter. Learn more about empathy games here: <http://www.iac.gatech.edu/news-events/stories/2015/5/empathy-big-thing-video-games/407491>

³ Narratology refers to both the theory and the study of narrative and narrative structure and the ways that these affect our perception. Learn more about narratology here: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Narratology>. Ludology is a discipline that deals with the critical study of games and gaming. More specifically, it focuses on game design, players, and their role in society and culture. Learn more about ludology here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Game_studies

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