

Playing in the Digital Qargi: Iñupiat Gaming and Isuma in *Kisima Inŋitchuŋa*¹

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Never Alone was released in 2014 as a collaborative project between Upper One Games, the first Indigenous-owned game development company in the US, and Cook Inlet Tribal Council, in Anchorage, Alaska. The project began after the council contacted the company to develop a storytelling game that honours Iñupiaq values and would center Iñupiat, the language of Iñupiaq peoples (“Interview Series: Ishmael Hope”).² The Cook Inlet Tribal Council and Upper One Games base the game on the oral story “Kuunuksayuka” from *Unipchaanich imaŋluktugmiut: Stories of the Black River People* by Robert Nasruk Cleveland. “Kuunuksayuka” tells the story of a young boy who finds the source of an unrelenting blizzard impacting his community (“The Story of Kuuuksaayuka (Part One)”). *Never Alone* adapts the story to a puzzle-platform game where Nuna, an Iñupiat girl, and her Arctic fox companion have to navigate the sea ice, encounter friendly and threatening beings, and overcome obstacles in order to find the source of the storm. As Nuna and Fox progress, they unlock “Cultural Insights,” which are short videos where Elders and community members explain key cultural concepts that relate to the task that Nuna and Fox are currently facing.

The response to *Never Alone* as an interactive form of storytelling is compelling and attends to the ways “Kuunuksayuka” is conscientiously reimagined (Gaertner n.pag.). In his blog post entitled “How Should I Play These?: Media and Remediation in *Never Alone*,” New Media scholar David Gaertner considers the innovative use of technology to adapt the story as an act of remediation, which “makes *Never Alone* legible as uniquely Iñupiaq storytelling” (Gaertner n.pag.). Gaertner states that “it deconstructs the tradition/innovation binary and brings video games to bear... as an important extension of Iñupiaq culture” (Gaertner n.pag.). He highlights the inclusion of “‘old’ forms of Western media,” like the use of documentary shorts, and the use of “elements of Iñupiaq culture,” like the aesthetics of scrimshaw art, as forms of remediation that honours the continuance of storytelling practices (Gaertner n.pag.). This act of remediation mitigates the community’s anxiety over adapting the story to a game form that asserts visual

sovereignty (Gaertner n.pag.). While Gaertner carefully delineates remediation’s alliance with Inuit storytelling and song practices, I would like to extend his examination to argue that *Never Alone* is an adaptation of gaming culture in the Arctic. It is not a direct adaptation or remediation of a particular traditional game, but a continuance of values and relationships to people and to place that is performed through play. Adaptability is an ongoing traditional value that informs Inuit self-determination (Martin, 2012 100) and *Never Alone* engages with the politics of self-determination by adapting traditional gaming values to a digital form. In so doing, it also participates in the changing landscape of game development by taking control of how—and on what terms—Inuit are represented in popular culture.³ *Never Alone* reinterprets the values, experiences, and social structure of traditional Inuit competition for Iñupiaq communities. Iñupiaq self-determination is extended to a global audience through the shift to digital gaming technologies. Therefore, I will discuss the nuances of Inuit sovereignty and self-determination, *Never Alone* as an adaptation of gaming traditions, and an analysis of the game’s challenge to settler-colonial claims to the Arctic.

Aulatsigunnarniq: Playing at the borders of Inuit self-determination

Sovereignty or self-determination in the Northern Circumpolar is multiple and layered. Iñupiaq are Inuit peoples within the United States; however, the Inuit homelands encompass the majority of the Northern Circumpolar (Martin, *Stories* 12). Inuit have many languages and dialects within this diverse geographical landscape and must engage with the enforced governance of several settler-colonial states including Denmark, Russia, Canada, and the United States. The differences are stark even in North America between the Canadian and the United States’ governments. While the creation of Nunavut in 1999 through the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement enabled Inuit to engage in a territorial governmental representation (“QTC Final Report” 36), Iñupiaq in Alaska are one of many Alaska Native Regional Corporations formed through the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) in 1971 (“ANCSA Regional and Language Map”).

Inuit political representatives united across international borders in the late-Twentieth century to protect Inuit interests. The Inuit Circumpolar Conference, now known as the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC), first met in Barrow, Alaska in June 1977 (Martin, *Stories* 13). “A Circumpolar Inuit Declaration on Sovereignty in the Arctic” was signed by the chair of the ICC

and representatives from Alaska, Canada, Greenland and Chukotka in April 2009, which positioned sovereignty as a mode to assert Inuit's ongoing right to self-determination within and across various settler states ("A Circumpolar Inuit Declaration on Sovereignty in the Arctic"). The ICC wished to unite the voices of Inuit to advocate for their rights at a national and international level (Martin, *Stories* 14). Partnership and collaboration are founding principles for Inuit identity, which seeks to position Inuit as valuable and indispensable participants on the international political scene. Though they state that sovereignty in the Arctic is "evolving," the ICC indicts the ongoing erasure of Inuit self-determination and interests by settler states ("A Circumpolar Inuit Declaration on Sovereignty in the Arctic"). Inuit nationhood in the late 20th and early 21st centuries relies on the flexibility and adaptability of Inuit self-determination to position Inuit peoples as indispensable "active partners" in debates about resource extraction and global warming ("A Circumpolar Inuit Declaration on Sovereignty in the Arctic"). Inuit self-determination relies on ongoing knowledge and experience, which is redeployed within international political debates to ensure Inuit interests.

Inuit concepts of traditional self-determination disrupt southerner's paternalistic control. In contrast with settler states, Inuit definitions of sovereignty do not include imposing strict borders. In her article, "Inummarik: Self-Sovereignty in Classic Inuit Thought" Inuk author Rachel Qitsualik states that Inuit have asserted sovereignty for millennia (27). She uses the term "aulatsigunnarniq" to describe sovereignty, which translates to "the ability to make things move" (26-7).⁴ The literal meaning of the term conceives of sovereignty as an ongoing relationship with Nuna, the Land, and does not include the use of strict borders. Unlike settler-colonial states who rely on fixed borders to assert claims over land, borders are not useful to Inuit who must travel across large expanses of land when hunting migrating herds (26-7). Traditional self-determination continues in another form in the present through the ICC, in which Inuit political representatives in the ICC strategically erase imposed borders to create a unified political voice throughout the Northern Circumpolar.

Traditional self-determination is conceptually complex and layered. Inuit self-determination as expressed through "aulatsigunnarniq" entails that individuals develop their isuma, or mental awareness and intelligence. Anyone who has earned mental maturity by listening to and acting upon the wisdom of Elders will have their autonomy respected (Martin, *Stories* 55). Anthropologist Jean Briggs, explains that

People who have *isuma* demonstrate this fact by conforming voluntarily, by obeying their ‘leader’ willingly when told to do a task and with increasing maturity by foreseeing the needs and wishes of others...At the same time, they will strongly resist, by passive withdrawal or polite circumvention, any encroachment on their legitimate areas of privacy and self-determination. (quoted in Martin, *Stories* 56)

Keavy Martin observes that “[t]he social protocols built around this concept thus strike a delicate balance between respecting personal autonomy and heeding the advice of those in a position to offer it” (56). Inuit sovereignty as expressed through “aulatsigunnarniq” continues to navigate personal and collective responsibilities. Yet, honouring those responsibilities is difficult within a complex social structure that includes Nuna, the sentient land, animals, and more-than-human beings (Qitsualik 27). Qitsualik explains that humans must help facilitate a harmonious relationship with a sentient land or face the dire consequences of failing ones on-going responsibilities (27). The “ability to make things move” gestures towards self-determination’s complex balance between mature thought, individual respect, and collective responsibility within a multilayered cosmology.

Games play a central role in the social fabric of Inuit daily lives. In pre-Settlement life, communities hold celebrations in a large qaggiq (pl. qaggiit), or a large snow house, often at the center of camp (Bennett and Rowley 227; 239).⁵ This gathering space is used for work, or “for dancing, feasting, and playing games” (239). The games played within the qaggiq are easily played in enclosed spaces, though rules and particular aspects of traditional games would differ between regions and communities. Some games are for entertainment and help establish good relationships, celebrate seasonal feasts, or mark a particularly successful hunting season.⁶ For example, wrestling or jumping games in which players must jump several feet in the air to kick a target are physically strenuous, technically precise and condition the players for the physical demands that hunting requires (Auksaq). Players are also aware that games help maintain good relationships within a complex cosmological structure and that playing specific games at seasonal hunting grounds help ensure an upcoming hunting season’s success (Bennett and Rowley 396). Other times, tests of strength, such as boxing, fisticuffs or song competitions, are used to settle disagreements between individuals or help reestablish social harmony between visiting communities (133-4). Though these games are related to the practical nature of living a subsistence lifestyle, traditional Inuit games also embody a holistic understanding of living well

in the Arctic, and reflect the dynamism of Inuit self-determination in which individuals learn from experience and exercise mental awareness to maintain healthful relationships to community and employ the wisdom of others within a complex cosmology.

Aulatsigunnarniq, or the ability to change quickly for the continuance and well-being of all, illustrates the perspective needed to understand Inuit self-determination, yet the “ability to make things move” also addresses the mental and physical dynamism needed for Inuit games. One must be physically and mentally agile to win. I argue that we can read *Never Alone* as a digital expression of aulatsigunnarniq, because it literally creates movement on the screen with video animation. Nuna and Fox traverse the screen as they jump over obstacles, resist the wind’s force, and swim waterways. However, it is the player—or players—that compel Nuna and Fox’s movements. It would be easy to assume that the player is the ultimate sovereign who can control their subjects at will. Yet, the game undermines colonial concepts of domination by reminding the player of their overlapping responsibilities to the characters, to community, and to the land. The following section will explore the game’s ability to shift the player’s understanding to play according to Iñupiaq game values. As a digital form of competition, adapting aulatsigunnarniq requires a player to recognize their broader responsibilities to win.

“A recognition of life and vitality”: gaming conventions across the Northern Circumpolar

Never Alone does not require that players physically jump, run, or move their bodies like traditional games. Instead, its structure mimics foundational values and social relations that contextualize Inuit games found in a qargi (the community house). Ishmael (Angaluuk) Hope, a writer and storyteller for the game, states that turning “Kuunuksayuka” into a video game “elevate[s] and celebrate[s]” Cleveland as a world-class storyteller (“Our Team”). The adaptation perpetuates “[p]ieces of the old-time nourishment of the qargi, the community house... The joy of the feast of wisdom lingers, and this video game offers a tasty morsel, enough to know and to remember what we’ve been hungering for this whole time” (“Our Team”). I am interested in Hope’s comparison of the game to “the qargi, the community house” that offers nourishment, well-being, and joy for the entire community. I believe that the game creates a digital qargi, through its structure to evoke the rich social context in which games are played. For instance, the digital qargi encourages players to also foster relationships in their own lives. When two players engage in co-op mode to play Nuna and Fox together, they are invited to make community by

playing the game and learning in the same space, thereby evoking the social dynamics of a qargi. As we have seen from the previous section, qargi’s, or qaggiq in Inuktitut, form the social and material context for traditional games. A qargi’s ability to transform into a place to work, hold feasts, welcome visitors and play games highlights the ways *Never Alone* is not simply a site for a competition to play out, but also a space in which relationships are fostered, strengthened and delineated. The evocation of a qargi with *Never Alone* elicits the richness of relations through gameplay, yet it is also important to note that the qargi is flexible on Iñupiat terms.

The game’s overarching structure is similar to a multipurpose qargi. *Never Alone* brings many voices together through the game’s structural elements. The game allows a player to play both characters by toggling through each task or play in a two player mode with a friend. The game includes short documentary films, or “Cultural Insights,” that are unlocked when a task is completed or when an owl is found in the scenery. Cultural Insights explain elements and figures directly depicted in the game such as the Northern lights or the Manslayer, an iconic figure in many Iñupiaq oral stories. They also explore topics that directly affect Iñupiaq communities, such as subsistence living, the value of sharing, or the ways global warming impacts the community’s relationship with the land (*Never Alone*). As a digital qargi, *Never Alone* is a space for learning, for play and perhaps a space to foster relationships. The game emphasizes the complexity of community within Iñupiaq knowledge systems as well as the responsibility that these relationships entail.

The Cultural Insight “The Heartbeat of the Community” evokes the richness of community in the qargi (*Never Alone*). Fox and Nuna have just met the Owl Man who asks the pair to retrieve his stolen drum. If they return the drum, the Owl Man promises to help her find the one who has destroyed her village. Once Nuna and Fox set off on their mission, the Cultural Insight is unlocked (*Never Alone*). The video focuses on the importance of the drum to Iñupiaq people and broadly to other Indigenous peoples in Alaska (*Never Alone*). Cultural Ambassador Cordelia Qignaaq says that the drum is “a recognition of life and vitality” for the community (*Never Alone*). The explanation of the drum’s importance to connect communities contextualizes the Owl Man’s desire to retrieve his drum and echoes Nuna’s obligation to try to restore order to her community. Through the drum, Nuna, Fox and Owl Man’s mutual communal responsibilities to each other and the land connect.

“The Heartbeat of the Community” includes direct performance of drumming to the

camera to compellingly create a qargi space. The video shows old footage of feasts with drummers and dancers in celebration. Yet the video ends with James Mumigan, an Iñupiaq Cultural Ambassador and a voiceover actor for the game, performing a drum song directly to the camera (*Never Alone*). The song lasts for only twenty seconds, but Mumigan sings and drums with such enthusiasm that his drumming stick breaks. As he finishes the song, Mumigan looks at his now broken drumming stick and to the floor where a piece has landed and jokes “[m]an, I went at it and look what happens” (*Never Alone*). The incident makes Mumigan and the filming crew erupt in delighted laughter and reveals a moment of spontaneity in an otherwise planned shoot (*Never Alone*). Mumigan’s performance engages the player within the broader context in which socially fulfilling games should be played. Games exist alongside singing, drumming, and laughter, which signifies the “life and vitality” of the community (*Never Alone*). Mumigan’s performance also seems to be creating a qargi space for the video game itself, in which games are engaged in a complex web of responsibilities and relationships. The qargi is multipurpose and it appears that *Never Alone*, with its inclusion of community speakers, Elders, songs, and games, is formulating a digital qargi.

The digital qargi also demands a reflection on the bonds and responsibilities fostered through the game’s narrative and gameplay. The game’s title echoes the qargi’s focus on uniting community. *Kisima Inñitchuᅇa* translates to “I am never alone” and seems to question the strength of relationships through trials and distance. Within the game, Fox always accompanies Nuna and helps her through many challenges. Nuna and Fox also interact with spiritual beings on the land and a sentient arctic landscape. Nuna is, therefore, “never alone” even if it appears that she is the only human. An array of beings and relationships surround and accompany her throughout her journey. Yet, the absence of Nuna’s human community is the game’s narrative focus. Nuna must leave her community in order to find the source of the blizzard that torments them and affects their ability to hunt. She may *be* separated from her human relatives, but the love she has for her community compels her to move forward. “Community” within this game space is much more flexible as it unites kinship networks between the land, animal and more-than-human beings, the spirit world, and humans. I find the kinship networks and ongoing responsibilities to community that Nuna practices fascinating and question how the game might compel non-Inuit to consider their responsibilities to the North or may be a way for Inuit in the South to maintain relationships through play. These concerns are taken up in the article’s final

section.

“But the girl wondered...”: Representing and Testing Isuma in *Never Alone*

Arctic games test physical endurance and help prepare individuals for the physical exertion of living a traditional subsistence lifestyle. However, what tests the protagonists or the player(s) in *Never Alone*? Nuna certainly uses every physical skill she has learned as a young person: she must run quickly, navigate ice, aim accurately with her bola, but the player is also certainly using a particular kind of skill. *They* are not moving their bodies to prepare for activities on the land. Instead of physical trials, I argue that *Never Alone* is testing the player’s isuma, mental strength, flexibility, and endurance. Jean Briggs explains that isuma:

Refers to consciousness, thought, reason, memory, will... Saying that a person has *isuma* is equivalent to saying that he or she exercises good judgment, reason, and emotional control at all times... The possession of *isuma* entails a person to be *treated as an autonomous, that is, self-governing, individual whose decisions and behaviour should not be directed, in any ways, outside the limits of the role requirements to which one is expected to conform.* (Quoted in Martin, *Stories* 55)

The ability to be a “self-governing” person who understands the complex relationships between themselves and all beings on the land demonstrates self-determination in the Arctic that supports Inuit knowledge systems. As a game that moves its challenge from the physical to the mental, *Never Alone* forces the player to exercise their mental abilities instead of their physical skills. The player’s mind must be adaptive enough to succeed in Nuna’s world.

Never Alone’s premise certainly engages with many aspects of isuma including maturity, cleverness and understanding. Nuna searches for the source of the storm, must overcome obstacles, and form good relationships with animals and more-than-human beings. Nuna interacts with more and more beings on the land throughout the game and she must judge whether they can either help or harm her. For example, the Owl Man asks for Nuna and Fox’s help and she must outsmart the meddlesome Little People who have stolen his drum (*Never Alone*). This premise demonstrates an awareness of the ways Nuna’s actions affect multiple people beyond herself and her community. Players must also learn how to cooperate well with others whether they are working with fellow players or an AI. Players must also learn how to foster cooperation between Fox and Nuna. For instance, players who try at first to leave Fox

behind will soon realize that they cannot succeed if they try to only help Nuna. I myself tried to make Nuna abandon Fox at the beginning of the game, because he seemed too slow. But after being mauled repeatedly during my first encounter with a polar bear, I realized that I needed to collaborate with Fox to outsmart the bear and escape. Clearly, I identified with Nuna because she is a human character, and I assumed she would be the dominant figure, while I relegated Fox, an animal, as simply a cute sidekick. I assumed human superiority and I did not at first recognize the importance of collaboration. Fox's cleverness and ability to interact with the spirit world is essential to Nuna's, and, by extension, the player's success. The player must be sure that both characters continue to help each other if they are to succeed for the good of the community.

The game's ambiguity forces players to develop their *isuma*. The keystrokes to jump, run, and climb are straightforward, yet there is very little instruction on how to overcome obstacles, know where spirits are hiding, or how Nuna and Fox should work together for any particular task. Everything must be learned through trial and error, much to the players' possible frustration. The minimal instruction forces players to learn from first-hand experience and develop the mental skills and fortitude to think independently. Players learn quickly that refusing to collaborate with those around them results in Nuna and Fox's failure and death, as I learned through my own mistakes. Though it is not immediately clear, privileging Nuna as the primary player because she is human cuts players off from engaging with the spirit world. Without Fox, the spirits that carry Nuna and Fox over chasms and ice walls remain invisible. Yet by playing Nuna and Fox in collaboration and practicing patience, players can reflect on their actions, demonstrate maturity and selflessness and hone their *isuma* through experience.

The game's divergence from traditional platformer levels and lifecycles erases clear markers for success and it is this structural ambiguity that further challenges players' *isuma*. There is no "game over" option to tell players when they should stop playing or to inform them of the level reached. Players will fail indefinitely until they succeed at their present challenge. This design choice is in stark contrast to earlier platformers that depend on marked or tiered levels to mark progression and limited lifecycles to distinguish successful players from their competitors. *Never Alone* chooses to test players to continually try to learn from their mistakes, reflect on their actions, and change their approach. Dying several dozen times in a row—as was my experience—could make players angry at the game itself. Though I did not stop playing, I can imagine that many players may have become frustrated and walked away thinking that the

game is flawed. But players who do this are not developing their isuma and are emotionally immature. The game does offer a “pause” function, like many traditional platformers, and it is invaluable for players who need time to reflect during the game’s long duration. Often, I would pause the game when overcome by frustration and failure and use that time to reflect on my action to consider a change in approach to succeed.

The game’s demand to persevere in spite of failure is embedded in its very structure and presents failure and death not as a punishment, but as an opportunity to develop knowledge and hone skills through practice. The demand on one’s mental fortitude reflects isuma’s demand for maturity and self-control of one’s emotions (Martin, *Stories* 55). Moreover, the game treats its players as autonomous beings. It honours their sovereignty. It does not interfere in the players’ constant failure by ending the game after a certain number of losses, and it does not dictate directly how a game should proceed. Instead, it presents unlimited amounts of space for practice and embeds “Cultural Insights” of Elders and more knowledgeable community members from whom wise players can learn. *Never Alone* wants its players to succeed, but players must change their approach and develop their isuma to have the maturity to apply the wisdom of others.

The order of challenges embeds learning from experience as a foundational value for the game’s design. For example, Nuna and Fox’s encounter with the Manslayer is similar to a previous polar bear den challenge where Nuna and Fox have to dodge the bear’s attacks. In the Manslayer encounter, they are trapped in the trees as Manslayer tosses fire at them from the ice (*Never Alone*). As the fire burns the branches, Nuna uses her bola to break the branches to crash through the ice. If a player is successful at dodging his charges, then they will eventually overcome the Manslayer when he falls through the ice and drowns. This challenge is similar to the earlier obstacle in which Nuna and Fox entice a polar bear to charge them (*Never Alone*). By dodging the bear’s attacks, the player forces the bear to eventually break a hole in the ice wall creating an opportunity for Fox and Nuna to escape the bear’s den. In both obstacles, Nuna and Fox must work together to use their opponents’ strength against them. However, unlike the polar bear who is protecting his den, the Manslayer is a threatening figure that decimates Nuna’s village and wants her bola, one of the only tools she has on her person (*Never Alone*). Manslayer is threatening beyond Nuna’s ability to survive on her mission. In the accompanying Cultural Insight, Amy Fredeen explains that in Iñupiaq stories, the Manslayer “risks the livelihood of individuals and the whole community. And so, the Manslayer is a way to say, ‘Don’t act only for

yourself. Always hold the community in your heart” (*Never Alone*). It is imperative that Nuna and Fox mature as the stakes of each obstacle intensifies. By remembering the tactics used against the bear and the similar design of previous obstacles, players can use past experience to overcome present challenges.

Obstacles are structured for players to “exercise good judgment, reason, and emotional control at all times” (Martin, *Stories* 55); however, some obstacles are premised on the *failure* to use isuma as a warning for stubborn players. Throughout *Never Alone*, Nuna confronts several polar bear challenges, which I read as her ongoing underestimation of the bear’s intelligence and strength. As a child, Nuna may have limited experience engaging with polar bears by herself, yet that inexperience leads her to mistake the extent to which a bear will go to pursue its prey. The game opens with a polar bear attack, which the narrator calls a moment of “real danger” (*Never Alone*). As Nuna runs away, Fox appears and players can lure the polar bear onto thin ice, trapping it in water. This action allows the players to flee as the narrator remarks that, “she is lucky to be alive” (*Never Alone*). The first polar bear attack highlights the extreme consequences of engaging with the land with little experience. The polar bear encounter sets off a chain of events in which bear attacks are frequent dangers. I am inclined to read it as a singular bear who is intent on not losing its prey (*Never Alone*). When a second bear attack occurs after Nuna and Fox walk on thick ice from the water, a bear follows close behind from the sea already angry intending to attack (*Never Alone*). The recurrence of the bear following its prey through any obstacle demonstrates the ways inexperience may result in ongoing dangers in a landscape that requires both mental and physical strength and knowledge.

The recurrence of the polar bear is a palpable consequence to inattention and inexperience. However, the game also situates the polar bear within Inuit traditional knowledge. Polar bears are not senseless animals. In *Inuit Qaujimaningit Nanurnut: Inuit Knowledge of Polar Bears*, hunters and trappers in Gjoa Haven, Nunavut explain that polar bears are the only animal beings that possesses isuma and so “as polar bears were understood to be omniscient,” they had to be respected (75). Polar bears are autonomous intelligent beings who can strategize attacks on unsuspecting prey, have awareness of humans and seek revenge (82). The bear is certainly clever and demonstrates a keen knowledge of the landscape and anticipates its prey’s movements. As the bear emerges from the sea and ambushes Nuna and Fox again and again, the polar bear is enacting a knowledge of human beings from past experience that allows it to

anticipate Nuna’s travels and the best way to surprise her. The narrator explains the importance of respecting a bear’s isuma, “If you outsmart a polar bear there is no time to relax. A hungry bear will not give up easily!” (*Never Alone*). The narrator’s warning foreshadows that Nuna and Fox’s escape is temporary because a pursuer will persevere through momentary failure when they are driven by hunger and intelligence.

The game’s focus on the polar bear’s cunning and Nuna’s ongoing failure to anticipate its actions enables the game to formulate obstacles around traditional Inuit understandings of polar bears. These obstacles are not simply thrilling experiences where players must overcome a harsh landscape. Instead, the obstacles seem to complicate Inuit and arctic animal relationships. The bear, though fearsome, is not framed as a malicious creature. The narrator contextualizes the polar bear’s actions as driven by hunger and not by a love of killing. The third obstacle with the polar bear illustrates the games’ prioritization of Inuit values and relationships to arctic animals. As Nuna and Fox “stumble” into the polar bear’s den, the narrator states that, “[The bear] was not happy to discover uninvited guests” (*Never Alone*). By describing Nuna and Fox as “guests,” even comically, the narrator is positioning the bear, fox and girl as possible relations under better circumstances. Though the bear attacks them several times over the progression of the game—as was my experience—Nuna and Fox succeed by distracting the bear together and enticing it to charge at the ice-ledge they are standing on. Nuna and Fox are lucky to escape, but the polar bear den obstacle questions the ways good relationships based on respect, even between hunter and prey, should be followed.

“we are not a museum piece”: Navigating Cyber-territories and Colonial Glitches

The following section will discuss the connection between games and Inuit politics that continually shift to respond to the present need of Inuit. *Never Alone* echoes the assertion of Inuit self-determination through remediating organized traditional sports. Circumpolar Arctic Games competitions emerged in tandem with an articulation of Inuit Nationhood through the ICC in the 1970s.⁷ These international competitions allow Inuit to unite from across the circumpolar in an act of friendly competition that asserts their knowledge and experience in the Northern Circumpolar. The competitions also combat settler-states’ denial of Inuit self-determination and push back against governmental control of circumpolar territories.

Never Alone echoes the Arctic games competitions’ global reach by explicitly marketing

the game to a global market. The creators call *Never Alone*, the first “in an exciting new genre of “World Games” that draw fully upon the richness of unique cultures to create complex and fascinating game worlds for a global audience” (“Crafted in Partnership”). This statement echoes the circumpolar games’ desires to foster a global interaction on Inuit terms, yet it does so by moving competition from the physical domain to digital territory.⁸ The game is available to purchase digitally through all major game consoles and operating systems. It, therefore, invites players from around the globe to enter the digital qargi as it is adaptive and malleable to any device. The game’s engagement with a global audience surreptitiously undermines common assumptions of competition made by qallunaat,⁹ or non-Inuit, worldviews. Instead of creating a game that relies on the dynamics of dominance, the removal of life, or a disconnection from responsibilities to place, *Never Alone* grounds a global audience in a game that relies on collaboration and the values of Iñupiaq people. In so doing, the game practices aulatsigunnarniq as a decolonizing manoeuvre by purposely ignoring colonial borders that cross-cut the globe and reaches beyond international borders to foster relationships on Iñupiaq terms. The focus on a global audience could obscure the needs and intent of the Iñupiat community who commissioned and co-produced the game. Nevertheless, intentionally reaching out to a global audience enables the creators to choose the ways they represent themselves or their creations while also ensuring that the community benefits economically from a global market (Gaertner n.p.). *Never Alone* is conscious of the ways in which it is widely available, yet it prioritizes the importance of affirming the interests and relationships of Iñupiaq communities through gaming.

As a digital game that reaches out beyond Iñupiaq borders, *Never Alone* critiques settler claims to the Arctic. Asserting sovereignty through games and competition could mirror the colonial power dynamics of fighting over land and territory. That is certainly a qallunaat view of competition. However, in Allen Auksaq’s documentary “Stories from Our Land Vol. 2,” Inuk athlete Johnny Issaluk explains that games are a way to welcome visitors within arctic communities (Auksaq). I find this form of welcoming fascinating as it engages sports and games within the practice of fostering good relations. Competition, therefore, is a subtle way to assert self-determination, because in playing a game, guests are firmly aware of the host’s rules and must play by them to win. Competition in this sense is a playful form of sovereignty that untangles competition from domination. This is evident through *Never Alone*’s evocation of isuma where the player must shift their understanding to win. Yet the polar bear den challenge is

one of the most explicit commentaries on settler colonialism in the Arctic. If we recall the scenario, the bear is angry at Nuna’s and Fox’s rudeness as they stumble into its den unannounced. It then charges the pair, who must dodge its attacks (*Never Alone*). The bear’s den has become a space of occupation where Nuna and Fox transgress the bear’s territory. Reading the obstacle through a settler colonial lens highlights the importance of respecting the wishes of a host as the bear den becomes a metaphor for the occupation of land. Consequently, the game asks its players to be respectful guests that listen to the advice and wishes offered by their hosts. *Never Alone* invites players to become guests in a friendly form of competition within a digital territory.

Public reaction to *Never Alone* has been polarizing and negative critiques of the game design carries an undercurrent of colonizing rhetoric. While *Wired* writer Matt Peckham and *Kotaku* reviewer Evan Narcisse praise the game for its stunning animation, endearing characters, and engaging storytelling to teach players about Iñupiaq culture respectfully (Peckham n.p.; Narcisse n.p.), Daniel Hinds at *Gamespot* heavily criticizes the game’s simple nature and allegedly “glitchy” gameplay (Hinds n.p.). Hinds describes the glitches as “unresponsive controls,” “slow and unwieldy” movement, and controls that lack “precise timing,” which leads to the characters’ death and the player’s failure (Hinds n.p.). The latter criticism troubles me because its simple nature and technical issues are the primary criticisms (Hinds n.p.). Such a criticism echoes colonial discourses because it implies that Iñupiaq people, while good storytellers, are less sophisticated game-developers for digital games. Yet, Katarina Soukup argues that Inuit have readily embraced technologies from the South and adapted them quickly to best serve their needs, which creates a “contemporary aesthetic that is rarely understood or valued—since the outside world prefers the classic symbols of ancient/traditional Inuit culture associated with Otherness” (n.p.). I have never experienced any “glitchiness” myself and so the criticism seems to uncomfortably echo stereotypes that Inuit, while simple and kind, are not accustomed to the “sophisticated” technologies from the South. Perhaps the “glitchiness” critique is produced through the discomfort that Southern players feel when their understanding of Northern peoples is challenged. Southern players choose to critique the game’s alleged failings instead of pausing to reflect on their own responsibilities that are raised in the game.

I believe, however, that the glitchiness critique reveals the ways technological inequalities in the Arctic is a means of colonial control. Internet access is exorbitantly expensive

in the Arctic where schools, businesses and homes cannot afford the high premiums for dial-up internet (Nix n.p.). Broadband internet access is not available in Northern Alaska or on many Native American reservations creating a “digital divide” along colonial axis (Tveten n.p.). In “Inuit Cyberspace: The Struggle for Access for Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit,” Alexander, Adamson, Daborn, Houston, and Tootoo state that the lack of internet access in the North is akin to settler-colonial removal from digital territories, because Indigenous peoples in the North cannot “both draw upon *and* contribute to the digital world” (241). *Never Alone* pushes back against digital exclusion. It was produced in conjunction with E-Line Media, a company from the South, precisely because creating the game’s high quality graphics in the North would be economically unwise and enabled digital self-sufficiency by controlling how they are represented. While I am skeptical of criticism that focuses so narrowly on the game’s supposed glitches, such critique does require a frank conversation about affordable internet access and available digital training throughout the Arctic.

Conclusion

As a settler from southern Canada, my familiarity with Inuit literature and politics has influenced my experience playing the game. Yet, Inuit traditional knowledge states that knowledge is gained experientially within a community-land-based context (“What is Traditional Knowledge?”). While I have experiential knowledge of Inuit communities through travel, such direct knowledge is insufficient and overshadowed by my clear reliance on texts. Though this article is a process of reading a “text,” *Never Alone* is a participatory narrative that invites players into a readable experience. In “The Sovereign Obscurity of Inuit Literature,” Keavy Martin has similarly reflected on the limits of the English language to describe the variety of stories and songs in Inuktitut. While Inuit traditional knowledge privileges experience, Martin states that much of Inuit literature’s strength is its opaqueness, which resists being legible to outsiders (20). She states, “[I]terature, in other words, is a term that asks readers, listeners, and viewers to pay particular attention to the *way* in which information is conveyed—whether it be written, spoken, carved, or sung” (20). Literary texts, whether they are carvings, songs, written, or digital texts have the capacity to command the attention of an outside audience though they are created primarily for an insider audience (21). In the case of *Never Alone*, we can think of it as a game based on traditional gaming dynamics, which allows outsiders to join in the game.

Non-Inuit players or players who are unfamiliar with the Northern circumpolar may find the game conceptually challenging. Yet, my experience of *Never Alone* as a digital qargi may seem false to Iñupiaq communities who could read the game quite differently and my argument may not resonate with the entirety of the Inuit homelands across the circumpolar. However, I think understanding the game from an Inuit-specific context challenges settler/southerner players who believe that they understand Iñupiaq culture and communities *already*. If their isuma is challenged, even non-Iñupiaq players who successfully complete the game may realize that they do not know Iñupiaq communities at all. Once they decide to enter the digital qargi, players must recognize that the qargi is a space for work and labour as well as for play and should prepare for the work that awaits.

In closing, I would like to reflect on a passage from Ken Buck’s “Northern Games,” an NFB documentary about the 1980 Northern Games in Arviat, Nunavut. An unnamed speaker observes,

All of these games fit into a one-life story, and it’s hard to explain. Hard to explain. Our style of sports is to be good at every little thing and if somebody beat you, you just go over there and shake his hand. This is somebody better than you. That’s our style of sport. You gotta be thinking all the time, every part of your body, even your mind. Lotta times, if a guy moves slow, if he’s a quick thinker, he don’t have to move fast. (Buck)

The comment certainly focuses on the importance that humility and maturity plays in competition. These values foster relationships with visitors from across the Arctic and seem to reflect the ways games are being deployed to unite Inuit. The observation that these games and their importance is “Hard to explain” is certainly appropriate for *Never Alone*. The expansiveness of *Never Alone* fits the digital game within the “one-life story” of traditional games. However, players unfamiliar with Inuit knowledge frameworks cannot easily explain the ways in which *Never Alone*’s adapted story, obstacles, and Cultural Insights fit together. It requires players to think deeply about their relationships and responsibilities to Inuit as *Never Alone* encourages players to be “quick thinkers” within the digital qargi.

Notes

¹ This paper is developed from a panel organized by David Gaertner for the Indigenous Literary Studies Association's 2016 conference. I would like to thank David Gaertner, Warren Cariou, Maize Longboat, and Naithan Lagace for their own compelling examinations of *Never Alone*. A version of the conference paper was published on our panel's blog (Meloche n.pag.). I would also like to thank colleague Brandon Kerfoot for his ongoing conversations about Inuit literature and the significance of polar bears to the game's design and Gregory Blomquist for reading an earlier version of this article.

² Throughout the article, "Iñupiaq" refers to Inuit from the North Slope region in Alaska. "Iñupiat" is singular, while "Iñupiaq" is plural. "Inuit" is used within the broader context of Inuit peoples throughout the Northern Circumpolar. The singular of "Inuit" is "Inuk."

³ Naithan Lagace and Maize Longboat both contextualize their analysis of *Never Alone* within a longer history of Indigenous representative self-determination in videogames in their blog posts "Never Alone and the Impact of digital Indigenous Storytelling" and "Never Alone: Rendering Digital Gaming Spaces Open for Indigenization" respectively (Lagace n.pag.; Longboat n.pag.).

⁴ It should be noted that knowledge is localized and a variety of languages and dialects across the circumpolar means that terms and knowledge may differ from region to region and even between communities. Though I cite Inuit scholars who use Inuktitut terms, terms to describe sovereignty exist in Iñupiat as well, which are not addressed in this article. I hope to reflect on the game's engagement with broader notions of Inuit self-determination by drawing the game into conversation with Inuit scholars in Nunavut.

⁵ A community house is called a "qargi" in Iñupiat and serves a similar purpose as qaggiq in Nunavut.

⁶ For studies on traditional Iñupiaq and Inuit games, see *Application of a Theory of Games to the Transitional Eskimo Culture* by Robert Glassford or *Inuit (Eskimo) Games* by F.H. Eger. Johnny Issaluk wrote *Games of Survival: Traditional Inuit Games for Elementary Students* as a guidebook for Inuit children to practice traditional games in schools.

⁷ The development of a united Inuit political voice with the ICC emerged in tandem to game organizations like the Arctic Winter Games, established in 1969 ("Background of the Arctic Winter Games."), and the Northern Games, established in 1970 ("History and Philosophy"). The Arctic Winter Games bring together athletes from across the circumpolar to play winter sports as well as traditional Inuit and Dene games. Events like the One and Two-Foot High Kick, the Alaska High Kick and the One-Arm Reach all demonstrate the importance of endurance, flexibility, agility and strength (Auksaq). These are foundational values for not only subsistence lifestyle, but also the continuance of Inuit self-determination. Arctic games have emerged as a way to express Inuit nationhood as it brings together peoples from across the circumpolar that asserts values of "cultural awareness and understanding," "fairplay," and "personal [and] community development" through competition ("Arctic Winter Games: Role & Purpose of the Games").

⁸ *Never Alone* is part of the growing movement of Indigenous games that use Indigenous knowledge systems as a foundation and pushes back against popular stereotypes. In so doing, these games dismantle demeaning depictions of Indigenous people and assert sovereignty in the digital sphere. Games like *Qalupalik* by Pinnguaq Technology Inc., *Spirits of Spring* by Minority Media and *Invaders* by Elizabeth LaPensée use game platforms to imagine Indigenous futures as complex continuations of kinship ties and relationships to place and storytelling (MUSKRAT

Magazine).

⁹ “Qallunaat” is the Inuktitut word for “white person” or non-Inuit. Inuk author Mini Aodla Freeman explains that “qallunaat” has a richer meaning in which, “the word implies humans who pamper or fuss with nature, of materialistic habit. Avaricious people” (*Life Among the Qallunaat* 2015, 86). Of importance for this article, “qallunaat” describes a worldview that is often in conflict with the interests of Inuit. “Southerner” is used as an alternative term and describes those living south of Inuit territories.

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