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Never Alone
A study of articulations of indigenous religion in the video game
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Abstract

This thesis explores the many ways indigenous religion is articulated, performed and translated in the video game *Never Alone - Kisima Inŋitchuŋa* (2014). The video game was among the first of its kind – being made in a close collaboration with an indigenous group, and published by the first indigenous owned video game company in the U.S.A. At launch, *Never Alone* gathered attention from traditional media in both North America and in Europe, and the game reached a global audience. *Never Alone* tells a story based on Inupiat storytelling, and Cultural Ambassadors gives the player an insight into Inupiat culture and tradition.

Never Alone balances on the edge between the conventions of the video game medium and its genres, and of indigenous tradition and religion. This thesis examines how vocabularies that can be related to 'indigenous religion' are used and translated by in *Never Alone*, and how these vocabularies relate to a globalizing discourse on indigenous religion. This thesis also explores how the medium of video games facilitates new ways of reclaiming traditions and articulating indigenous religion.

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Cover photo: Screenshot from *Never Alone (Kisima Inŋitchuŋa)* – E-Line Media/Upper One Games (2014)

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

Nuna wipes away the tears from her face with the sleeve of her caribou parka. The snow is falling around her and the wind makes the snow dance across the landscape, clouding the nature, erasing the shapes. The colour pallet of blue, black, grey and white blends together, leaving a bleak and inhospitable impression of the surroundings. The sombre tones from a piano are playing. An arctic fox is lying lifeless in the snow next to the young girl. Nuna is mourning her friend, but she needs to keep moving. Kneeling over the fox, she starts covering up the little body with the surrounding snow. The girl bows her head and whispers something the player cannot hear. Suddenly, a warm glow of light hits her face. Nuna looks up. The arctic fox is floating in the air in front of her, curled up like a ball. It stretches out its arms, pulls its face back and reveals a boy's face. Now, dressed in a white parka with a hood shaped like a Fox's head, the arctic fox has taken human shape. He spins around in the air in front of a surprised Nuna. White sparkling particles of light surround his body as he floats higher and higher into the sky. The sombre piano music turns more hopeful and mysterious in character, and transforms into an ambient soundscape that interprets and mimics the sounds of the arctic nature.

The cut scene ends. The player is now again in control of Nuna and Fox. The voice of the Narrator is heard speaking in Inupiatun. The voice is that of an old man. Translated into English text on the screen, it says: "The fox was reborn into a new form. Or was it who he really was this whole time?" The player moves Nuna and Fox forward through the landscape, which is now a forest of leafless trees, covered in snow. A message pops up on the screen in white letters: *Hold A to fly faster (Fox)*. We can hear the sound of an owl, and a few meters in front of Nuna and Fox, an owl sits on a branch of a tree. When the player approaches, the owl flies away and a message that show that the player has unlocked a new video of "cultural insights" appears on the screen: *Press = to watch "Animal Spirits"*. Nuna climbs up a tree that is blocking her way forward, and as Fox approaches one of the branches above Nuna, the spirit of the tree is awakened. The branch is now glowing white, and it reveals the shape of a spirit. Another message appears on the screen: *Hold X interact with spirits (Fox)*. The player can now interact with the spirit in the tree as Fox, and make the branches move to help Nuna climb the obstacles. Fox floats through the air, interacting with the spirits to help Nuna on her way, and as the two of them moves higher up the tree, the voice of the Narrator is again heard,

and the English translation appears in text on the screen: "Floating high above the forest floor, Fox continued to reveal the beauty of the helping spirits."

In the correlated short documentary film, the cultural insight called "Animal spirits", we can see pictures of the arctic landscape of northern Alaska, the wildlife, and conceptual artwork from the video game. Atmospheric piano music is playing in the background while an inupiat man named Ishmael Angaluuk talks in English about how the Inupiat people relate to animals. The man is wearing a traditional inupiat summer parka over his shirt, and he looks away from the camera while talking. "We are taught that everything is equal and that all the animals have a human form, or can be seen in a human form. So they have just as much or more intelligence. In fact, have a lot to teach people."

1.1. Introduction and research question

The scene, and the documentary film clip painted out above, is from the video game *Never Alone,* or *Kisima Inŋitchuŋa* in Inupiatun, from 2014. *Never Alone* is a video game made by the Alaska based video game company Upper One Games, which is the first indigenous-owned game company in the United States. The game is based on the traditional Inupiat tale *Kunuuksaayuka,* as the inupiat storyteller Robert Nasruk Cleveland recorded it in the book *Stories of the Black River People.* When released, *Never Alone* gathered local, national and even international publicity, for being one of the first video games to be developed in a close collaboration with an indigenous group, and for being a game where representatives of the indigenous people themselves were able to tell their stories.

The video game industry, alongside other popular cultural industries such as the movie industry, have a long history of inaccurate and stereotypical portrayals of indigenous peoples and their cultures, based on prejudices, fear, and a general lack of knowledge. In the realm of video games, representations of indigenous people have been based on generic stereotypes like the fearless warrior, the fierce barbarian, or the wise mystic. Indigenous cultures that are massively different have been jammed together, forming pan-indigenous stereotype of 'primitive' people stuck in a forgotten past. Indigenous people have in general been massively underrepresented in video games. In a study of representations of gender, race and age in video games from 2009 where the researchers looked at the 150 best-selling games in a year in the USA, Native Americans were the least represented out of any group, never appearing as lead characters (Williams, Martins, Consalvo, Ivory 2009).

In the light of this history of representations of indigeneity in video games, *Never Alone* is an interesting object of study, because it breaks with what has been the norm in one of the biggest entertainment industries in the world. In *Never Alone* the formerly passive objects are now active cultural subjects, using the medium of video games to tell their own stories, on their own terms.

Never Alone can be seen as part of a broader movement of reclaiming of identity and culture among Alaska Natives, especially among the younger generation, and among Native people in the U.S. in general. In this thesis I aim to study the self-representations in *Never Alone*, and the ways in which they relate to religion and indigeneity. What claims, expressions and depictions can be found in the video game, and what scales do they relate to? Are the articulations of indigenous religion presented on a local, national or global scale?

My main research question for this thesis is as follows:

- In what ways are indigeneity and religion articulated, performed and translated in the video game *Never Alone* (2014)?

Secondary questions:

- What religious and indigenous vocabularies are being used?

Talking about religious and indigenous vocabularies, I am referring to the use of language, practices and aesthetics that can be connected in one way or another with religion and indigeneity. I will be studying what specific words and terms are being used, and how sound, music, visual imagery and also gameplay are being used to present and depict religion and indigeneity.

- In what ways does the video game as a medium contribute and facilitate the reclaiming of traditions of the past - and articulations of indigenous religion?

1.2. Theory

To explore the empirical data material in this thesis, I am applying the theoretical framework suggested by the American historian and anthropologist James Clifford, as presented in his book *Returns. Becoming indigenous in the twenty-first century* (2013). A similar theoretical framework is applied by the research group *Indigenous Religion(s): Local grounds, global networks* at the department of religious studies at the University of Tromsø, which this thesis also draws influence from.

To avoid getting tangled in a discussion on authenticity, essentialism and invention when studying representations of indigenous culture[1], Clifford suggests using the analytical terms of *articulation*, *performance* and *translation* as "a theoretical toolkit for thinking nonreductively about social and cultural change" (Clifford 2013:45). These three terms: articulation, performance and translation, are "terms of process", and therefore they "do not lend themselves to systematization" (Clifford 2013:45).

1.2.1. Articulation

Articulation in this context refers to the hooking up and unhooking of different elements – political, social, economic, and cultural. Clifford's approach to this term draws from Stuart Hall's theory of articulation. The theory suggests that history and the transformation of culture is an on-going process that is constantly changing, and being created in the present space between dichotomies. Clifford describes the articulated tradition as a collective "voice" (Clifford 2013:60), where hinging of opposite positions and disparate elements are taking place. "In articulation theory, the whole question of authenticity is secondary", states Clifford (2013:61). Culture, tradition and identity are dynamic and therefore "communities can and must reconfigure themselves, drawing selectively on remembered pasts" (Clifford 3013:62). Liudmila Nikanorova describes her understanding of Clifford's articulation theory in her doctoral thesis *Religion and indigeneity at Yhyakh* as a theory that "encourages the researcher to stay attentive to the pre-established concepts that one meets along the way during research" (Nikanorova 2019:13).

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[1] There have been considerable disputes in academic circles surrounding the debate of invention of tradition, authenticity and identity, which in some cases have lead to rigid standoffs between native and non-native scholars. Greg Johnson gives a short overview of the dispute of identity and authenticity in the academic milieu on Hawai'i and how to move forward as a non-native scholar in his article *Authenticity, Invention, Articulation: Theorizing Contemporary Hawaiian Traditions from the Outside.*

1.2.2. Performance

The next analytical tool is the concept of performance. According to Clifford, performance is an act of reflexivity: "Cultural subjects discover themselves and make themselves legible for powerful audiences that dispose of attractive resources and coercive power" (Clifford 2013:47). The performer and audience are in a circular relationship, where the performer identifies and is self-aware in relation to her audience. Because of this emergence of self-awareness in relation to different audiences, the performer adjusts its acts to the context. It will not be helpful to see these different performances as being calculated and invented, but rather as an expression of reflected self-consciousness (Nikanorova 2019:15).

Performances are "bounded acts, intended for an audience, and theatrical in the sense of being conscious and reflected (Kraft et al 2020:10)". A performance can be small scale, or for a large audience, it can be formal or improvised, it can be on a scene or off it. This thesis explores performance of indigeneity in a video game – in the form of documentaries and of video game characters – and it explores how the game enables the player to perform indigeneity and indigenous religion.

1.2.3. Translation

Translation is the third tool in Clifford's analytical toolkit. In this thesis my working languages are English and Norwegian, but big parts of my material are in Inupiatun, a language I do not speak or understand myself. I therefore have to rely upon translations into English and Norwegian. Sometimes the participants in the video game translate between Inupiatun and English themselves, other times the player has to rely on subtitles. Translation is not the same as transmission, states Clifford (2013). Translation is an uneven process; there will always be misunderstandings, loss and altering of meaning. Some things will disappear and new things will come into being. The process of translation is always subjective in character; it is never neutral, and when working in the intersection of two (or three) very different languages, it is important to keep this in mind. "The metaphor/theory of translation keeps us focused on cultural truths that are continuously 'carried across', transformed and reinvented in practice" (Clifford 2013:47).

Translations can be done in multiple directions, Bjørn Ola Tafjord shows in his writing on the Bribris in Talamanca – a word or a concept can be translated towards or away from a specific domain (Tafjord 2017a). Tafjord shows that the Bribris translate words in a

direction that is most beneficial and helpful for them in a given context. A word can for example be translated away from the domain of religion, and towards the domain of indigeneity, and he proposes that this directionality of the translations depends on historical and political situations and contexts. The translation of something or someone into specific domains is done on a continuum – there is a scale of translation. Tafjord writes in his article Modes of Indigenizing:

> In other words, special vocabularies—alongside special repertoires of symbols, gestures, and other actions—are available for anyone who wants to represent or frame particular practices, practitioners, objects, and ideas as more or less indigenous and more or less religious, and thereby as strongly or loosely associated with an indigenous religion.
>
> Tafjord 2019:317

In this thesis I am working with words and categories that might be problematic or hard to translate. Words and categories carry with them different expectations of meaning into different contexts. When using academic categories like *religion* and *indigeneity*, it is of importance to consider the effects of applying these concepts onto a culture and a language that are at times ontologically and epistemologically very different from my own. These categories have their own connotations and history of usage, and they might lead the researcher to put their own pre-established notions onto what they are studying. In this thesis, however, I do not just translate - I study translations. This thesis explores how words, expressions and vocabularies can be translated towards and away from different domains, and how translations can be scaled upwards and downwards, from big to small, from local to global.

1.2.4. Indigenous religion

In my research question I use the words 'indigenous' and 'religion' together as the concept of 'indigenous religion'. My understanding and use of 'indigenous religion' in this thesis is leaning on the approaches and understanding outlined by the INREL research project (2017, 2020), and by Clifford (2013). In the book *Handbook of Indigenous Religion(s)* Kraft and Johnson from the INREL research project explains their approach to *indigenous religion* as a "globalizing discourse, consisting of notions of an indigenous *we* and a flexible, but fairly

standardised, vocabulary of assumed similarities (Kraft & Johnson, 2017:4)." These similarities, Kraft and Johnson propose, is harmony with, and care for nature; healing and holism; antiquity and spirituality; shamanism and animism; and claims to connectedness with land through ancestors and the cosmos itself. Clifford (2013) introduces the concept of *indigènitude* to describe these assumed similarities. "*Indigènitude* is sustained through media-disseminated images, including shared symbolic repertoire ('the sacred', 'Mother Earth', 'shamanism', 'sovereignty', the wisdom of 'elders', stewardship of 'the land'). These can laps into self-stereotyping" Clifford (2013:16) claims.

The INREL research project proposes in their book *Indigenous religion(s): Local grounds, global networks* that there are specific "acts, words, gestures, material objects, and assemblages that recur in the globalising discursive formation (Kraft et al 2020:186)", and these are essential for recognising something as being 'indigenous' and 'religious'. When only one of these elements appears it is not enough to recognise something as indigenous religion, but when coming together "they constitute a dynamic pool of resources, comprised by connected inventories, repertoires, and vocabularies, that through various assemblies enable articulations of indigenous religion (Kraft et al 2020:187)." In this thesis I explore the different repertoires and vocabularies that can be recognisable as 'indigenous' or 'religious' in the video game, and I examine at what level these vocabularies/repertoires correspond with a globalizing discourse on indigenous religion.

1.3. Relevance and previous research

Never Alone, as previously mentioned, is one of a very few video games that have been made in close collaboration with an indigenous group, and with a declared goal of transmitting and spreading knowledge about a native group's culture. There has been very little academic research in the intersection between the disciplines of video game studies, religious studies and indigenous studies, and I hope my contribution with this thesis can help fill this gap. My thesis will also contribute to the ongoing research project at the University of Tromsø titled *Indigenous Religion(s): Local grounds, global networks,* where my thesis can contribute with a perspective on indigenous religion in Alaska, and on indigenous religion in a popular cultural medium.

The history of video games is short, only going back a few decades to the 1950's. The history of video games as an object for academic studies is even shorter. In the 1990's, the

first academic research on video games took shape, and it was not until the 2000's that some video game researchers started to focus on religion in video games (Campbell; Grieve 2014). Most of the research on religion and video game has focused on them as a tool for religious learning, or on religion as a tool in storytelling in commercial video games. In recent years, there is a growing body of research focusing on the connections between video games and the sacred, and on video games as religion.

The cross section between indigenous studies and video game studies is also a fairly unexplored territory. The American scholar and video game designer Elizabeth LaPensée, who herself is of Anishinaabe and Métis decent, is one of the leading voices in this field. LaPensée has, among other things, written about depictions of indigenous people in commercial and independent video games, and she has advocated that indigenous games can be a useful tool for indigenous sovereignty and cultural expression (LaPensée 2016, 2020).

Never Alone has not only gained interest from the media, but also from academic circles. In her master's thesis from San Francisco State University, Margarida D.C. Downhour does a thorough analysis of *Never Alone*, where she focuses on storytelling and identities in the video game (Downhour 2016). In the article "Playing the Digital Quargi" Katherine Meloche argues that *Never Alone* is an adaptation of arctic games/sports culture, translated into a modern medium, and she analyses how *Never Alone* reinterprets the values and social structures in these traditional games (Meloche 2017). In his article "Gaming together" from 2017, Max Bledstein uses *Never Alone* as a case study where he demonstrates how video games can be a medium for meaningful cultural exchange (Bledstein 2017).

1.4. Method and material

The data material for my research project has come from very different types of sources, which has required different methodological approaches. The video game has been my main course of material, while the fieldwork I conducted in Alaska was done to get a wider understanding of the Alaskan context, and my material from the fieldwork has not been the main focus in this thesis.

1.4.1. The video game

The most prominent data material I have used in my analyses has come from the video game itself. I have played through the video game two times. To play through the video game from start to finish will take somewhere between two and four hours, depending on how quick the player is to solve the puzzles, and if they watch through all the unlockable Cultural Insights along the way. The first time I played through it, I played it from start to finish, just experiencing it as a commercial product of entertainment. I knew a bit about the game before playing it; I knew that it was made in a close collaboration with representatives of the Inupiat people, but I deliberately played through it without too much prior knowledge. This is the way most consumers would consume and experience a video game. Before my second playthrough I read up on my subject of interest and I did a short fieldwork in Alaska. When I played through the game the second time I then sat with quite a lot of prior knowledge on the subject. This time I took notes while playing, and I used a more analytical approach, asking myself questions throughout the game.

After my second play through of the game I used "Let's play" videos of the game found on YouTube. A "Let's play" is a play through of the game captured on video by another player, which makes it much easier to analyse the game in greater detail. The use of these videos made it possible for me to stop at things of interest and to rewind, looking at things over again when needed. A video game is an interactive media. The player is physically doing tasks to complete the story of the game; the mechanics is an imported and integrated part of the experience of playing. When playing a video game these mechanics both gives to the experience, but can also take focus away from details in the game world and storytelling. That is why I have found it helpful to play through the game myself, but also see videos of other people playing. I have established the hands on experience of the game, and I have been able to study the game from the outside, which made me notice details I had not seen when I played it for myself.

With the help of *Let's play* videos of *Never Alone*, I have done transcriptions of the documentary videos found in the game. I have transcribed the videos to make them easier to analyse. After transcribing the videos I have been able to analyse them as text; looking at patterns of word usage and expressions, and taking notes of claims uttered by the people in the documentaries. I have gone through the text and highlighted words of interest with different colours representing different categories. This has made it a lot easier to see patterns.

15

To collect data from the video game itself I have been working out of an idea of an aesthetic vocabulary, approaching the game's aesthetics the same way as I have approached the oral utterances in the documentaries. Instead of taking note of repeating words and expressions, I have been looking for patterns of aesthetic utterances of religiosity and/or spirituality.

In the process of analysing *Never Alone*, I have been drawing on my own contextual knowledge about video games. Throughout my life I have played a lot of video games on many different platforms and in many different genres. Through my interest in video games and video game culture through many years, I have come to acquire substantial knowledge about the media of video games and the culture around it. My contextual knowledge of video games gives me a wider understanding of the different genres of games, and conversions of video games, which has helped me in my analysis. Drawing on my contextual knowledge, I have been able to compare the use of different elements in *Never Alone* with the genre conventions of video games, which has given me the opportunity to find elements that stand out as distinct to *Never Alone*. The ability to recognise the genre conventions used in the game would probably have been a harder task to do for someone without the same level of contextual knowledge.

1.4.2. Fieldwork

The summer of 2018 I travelled to Anchorage, Alaska to carry out a smaller fieldwork for my research project. During my stay, which lasted seventeen days, I got to know a lot more about Alaska and its native peoples. Just visiting the state and talking with native Alaskans gave me new perspectives of what it means to be indigenous in Alaska, and the circumstances they live in. My fieldwork was mostly done to get a better understanding of the context of Alaska natives in Alaska. My fieldwork did not make me an expert on this topic, and I merely started a process of getting to know Alaska, its history and its peoples. The majority of the material I gathered from my field research has been used for background and context, and not for deeper analysis.

Throughout my stay in Anchorage I wrote a fieldwork journal. During daytime I had with me a small notebook, taking notes of my experiences, observations, impressions and my emotions related to the experiences. In the evening I used my notes to write a longer, more substantial journal entry for the day. I also used a camera to take pictures during my stay. These tools have helped me in my data collection, but just as important, they have been of

great value for understanding my own position when analysing the material from my fieldwork. By noting my own impressions and feelings, and taking notes of my surroundings, the way people talked and so on, have made me aware of how my interpretations may have been affected by different factors around me. These factors can be things such as my mood, my first impressions, good or bad experiences with someone or something etc. Chilisa writes about why it is important for researchers doing qualitative studies to keep a fieldwork journal: "The researcher is the main data collection instrument. The researcher also analyses, interprets, and reports the findings. It is important, therefore, that the researcher's thoughts, feelings, frustrations, fears, concerns, problems, and ideas are recorded throughout the study (Chilisa 2012:168)."

During my stay I did interviews with two people from Cook Inlet Tribal Council (CITC), the CEO of the organization, Gloria O'Neill, and Eric Watson, CITC Liaison. The interviews took place at the CITC's offices, and I had arranged an appointment to meet with O'Neill. The interview with Watson was not planned. After interviewing O'Neill, she called in Watson, saying he might be a person of interest for my research. Both interviews were conducted as semi-structured interviews, which are "[…] focused interviews that have questions contained in an interview guide (Chilisa 2012:205)." Before the interviews I had made an interview guide, containing the questions I wanted to ask. I wanted to do semi-structured interviews, because this gives the informants a lot of flexibility to talk about the proposed subject without straining them too much, and still have the opportunity to keep the focus on what is relevant to my research. My interview guide was tailored especially to my interview with Gloria O'Neill, based on my knowledge of her position in the organization. I therefore had some difficulties implementing the same interview guide to the interview with Eric Watson, who I knew nothing about and was not prepared for. The interview with Watson therefore became more unstructured than the one with O'Neill. Both interviews were recorded on a voice recorder. After finishing my fieldwork in Alaska, I then used the voice recordings to transcribe the interviews into text.

To learn more about the indigenous landscape of Alaska in general, and the Inupiat people in particular, I visited two museums, three libraries and a cultural centre during my stay in Anchorage. When visiting the Smithsonian Arctic Studies Center at Anchorage Museum and Alaska Heritage Museum, I made notes of what I saw, and of my own reactions and impressions. I also took many pictures, so I could study the exhibitions again to a greater degree when I was back home from my fieldwork. When visiting the museum library at Anchorage Museum, I got help from the librarians to find relevant literature about the Inupiat,

and here I found the book where the *Kunuuksaayuka* story is written down. With the exception of this book, most of the literature I found in the libraries in Anchorage that was of relevance to my project, was literature that I also have come across in my library searches back home.

During my stay in Anchorage I visited a cultural centre called Alaska Native Heritage Center. The heritage centre is an institution whose aim is to promote active observance of Alaska Native cultures and traditions, and the centre hosts study programs for native youth. More than a museum, it's a place where the visitors can engage and interact with the cultures from the past and the present. There are hourly performances of indigenous cultural expressions, like dance and drumming sessions and display of Alaska native games. There are also introductions held about the Alaska native cultures storytelling. After every session there is a séance where the visitors can meet the performers and ask questions. Beside the on-stage performances, the Heritage Center also has a village site, where you can find life-size traditional native dwellings. These dwellings represent the 11 major cultural groups of Alaska, and every site has a cultural host, who shows the visitors around, tells stories and answers questions. Many of the people working at the Heritage Center during the summer season are native youth, who through a program at the Heritage Centre are invited to learn about their native culture as a part of their High School education.

I had read up a bit before visiting Alaska Native Heritage Centre, but I had not prepared anything special before going. I carried my notebook and pen, and my phone, with which I could capture pictures and videos. I attended a dance session that showed traditional Inupiat and Yupik dances, accompanied by drumming and singing. I also attended a showcase of traditional native sports and games. I captured some videos of both of these sessions on my phone. After the sessions I walked around at the centre, trying to get in touch with some of the youth working there. I had not planned any interviews, but I got in touch with some native youth who worked at the centre and I had informal chats with them. In these informal conversations I asked about the video game and about their thoughts around it. After the conversations I wrote down some keywords. Most of the conversations were short, but I had a long conversation with a young Yupik/Inupiat man who sold jewellery he made himself at the Heritage Centre, and who knew a lot about the game. When talking to him, I asked if he was comfortable with me taking some note while he talked, and if I could use some of it in my thesis if I found it relevant, which he agreed to.

1.4.3. Ethical Concerns and my position

As a researcher, you are in a position to describe, label, condemn and praise your subject of research (Chilisa 2012). To do research is to be in a position of power, and that is why the researcher has to be aware of their role, and to think about the processes and outcome of their study. This has been especially important because my research is revolving around questions regarding indigenous people. My research deals with religion, which might also be a sensitive subject for people. Religion and indigeneity is directly related to people's identity, and as a researcher, you are stepping into an intimate sphere of people's lives. I have to the best of my abilities tried to approach my material, the Inupiat culture, and the people I met during my field research with humility, curiosity and respect.

While doing my fieldwork, I was always very aware of my position as an outsider, and as a researcher. When talking with people in relation to my work, I would tell them about my research and that I was visiting Alaska in the role as a researcher. When engaging in conversations, I would always ask for permission to take notes, and ask for permission to use my notes and refer to our conversation in my thesis. I also offered to send my thesis to the people I met and interviewed when the project was over.

When working on this project, it has in many ways been from the point of view of an outsider. I have come to learn alot about a people and a place that I did not have much pre-established knowledge about when I first started the project. I am myself a Norwegian, I do not speak the Inupiat language, I am not of indigenous descent, and I had never set a foot in the U.S. before I started my fieldwork. I have however for many years lived in Tromsø – a context where indigenous people and indigenous people's rights are prominent in people's consciousness, and in both political, religious, and secular discourses.

Being an outsider comes with advantages and disadvantages. As an outsider I did not have to deal with the role of duality, where you are both studying a culture and being a part of the culture at the same time, which in some ways may have made me less susceptible to pre-judge my subject of study. The biggest disadvantage for me as an outsider was that I did not know the Inupiat language. Even though most Inupiat people know English well, and the video game narration was translated with English subtitles, it would definitely have been of value to my research, and to me on a personal level. Because of the hard assimilation politics carried out over decades, many Inupiat, most significantly the younger generation, has lost their language. Being able to speak the language would have been respectful in regards to the people, their culture, and the history of oppression they have been through.

Although I was an outsider in relation to the Inupiat people, I am not an outsider in relation to video games. I identify as a gamer, and gaming culture is a big part of my everyday life. I started playing video games at a very young age, and since then it has been a prominent part of my life. To me, video games are entertainment – an escape from everyday life, but video games are also art – a place where I can have profound interactive experiences I can not find anywhere else. Video games to me are a place to connect socially with other people from other parts of the world, a place to learn about different cultures and different people, and a place to learn new skills and problem solving. When working with my material it has been from the point of view of a gamer and as a student of religious studies.

1.5. Structure of this thesis

This thesis is divided into six chapters. In chapter one I give an introduction to the topic of this thesis, outline my research question, give an overview over the theoretical and methodological approaches used in this thesis, and outline previous research on this topic. Chapter two presents a contextual background about the Inupiat people, their history and culture, and it presents the Inupiat video game *Never Alone*. Chapter three to five contains my analysis. In Chapter three I write about the many ways *Never Alone* can be seen as an attempt to rebuild connections between people, the community, the spiritual world, and nature. In chapter four I do an analysis of the articulations of spirits and spirituality in the game, and look at similarities between articulations in N*ever Alone* and in other video games. In chapter five I do a close examination of the drum as a register that can be related to indigenous religion. I look at how the drum is used in *Never Alone*, in other video games, and at Alaska Native heritage Center, and how this use is a part of a globalizing discourse. Chapter six contains a summary of the findings, and concluding thoughts.

2. Inupiat: The people, their history, and *Never Alone*

In this chapter I will present a short overview over the indigenous landscape of Alaska, the Inupiat people, and the modern history of Alaska. I will also go into more detail on the video game *Never Alone* and the people behind it.

2.1. Mapping the indigenous landscape of Alaska

With a landmass of approximately 1,7 million square kilometres, Alaska is by far the largest state of the United States of America, twice the size of the second largest state of Texas. Though the largest state in size, Alaska has the third lowest population of the U.S. states, with an estimate of about 739.800 inhabitants (United State Census Bureau 2017), which makes it the most sparsely populated state in the U.S.A. Most of the population in Alaska live in and around the state's urban centres on the southern coast, with about half of the population residing in Anchorage and the nearby Matanuska Valley (Haycox 2002). It was estimated in 2005 that about 106.000, or approximately 16 % out of the total population were Alaska natives. Most of Alaska's indigenous population resides in over 225 native villages in remote locations spread across the state, but there is also estimated that about 20% of Alaska natives reside in the state's largest city, Anchorage (Haycox 2002).

The indigenous peoples of Alaska are not a single, homogeneous group. Alaska is entangled with many different cultures, languages and indigenous groups, which makes mapping the indigenous landscape of Alaska quite a difficult task. How to differentiate and group the different indigenous communities together to make a clear picture of the indigenous landscape is controversial. It is common to divide the indigenous people of Alaska into six groups, based on broad linguistic and cultural similarities: Unangan/Aleut, Sugpiaq/Alutiiq, Yupiit, Inupiat, Athabascan, and Tlingit and Haida. However, this does not necessarily reflect how the indigenous groups have defined themselves, nor does it represent tribal or political units (Langdon 2014).

Figure 1. Map of Alaska

2.2. Inupiat

In arctic Alaska, north of the Arctic Circle, from Brook Range in the south to the Arctic Ocean in the north, and from the Canadian border in the east to Norton Sound and the Bering Strait in the west, we find a vast area, which traditionally has been occupied by *Inupiatun* speaking groups of people.[2] These groups of Inupiatun speaking people are called Inupiat, *Inupiat,* meaning "The Real People" (Kingston 2004). Inupiat are closely related to other Inuit groups located in the circumpolar north, from Alaska through Canada and to Greenland.

The Inupiat people of Alaska can be divided into five units, or regional groupings, based on patterns of social interactions between the different groups. These units, or regional groups, which came together through proximity, intermarriage and kinship, are the Norton Sound/Seward Peninsula people, Bering Straits people, Kotzebue Sound people, North Alaska Costal people, and Interior North Alaska people (Langdon 2014). Because of the variations in landscape and climate in the vast region of arctic Alaska, the inupiat communities have adapted to their unique requirements in their local environments, which has led to large differences in specialisation, culture and livelihood between the different regional units and the local communities.

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[2] Inupiatun is a language in the Eskimo-Aleut language family

The inupiat people have traditionally lived in hunting-gathering communities, following cyclical patterns determined by the shifting seasons, although the local differences have been substantial. The interior Inupiat often referred to in Inupiatun as *Nunamiut* (*People of the Land*), have traditionally been living as semi-nomadic people, hunting Caribou and Grizzly Bears, and other land mammals or birds, moving their settlements with the migration of the Caribou packs. In contrast, the costal Inupiat, *Tareumiut* (*People of the Sea*), have traditionally lived in sedentary communities, and have adapted to their coastal environment, with hunting of the big sea mammals such as Whales, Seals and Walrus as a cornerstone for the survival of their communities.

2.3. A brief history

The colonisation of Alaska began in the 1740s with Russian fur hunters who saw the opportunity of profiting from Alaska's wildlife. The Russians presence in Alaska was predominantly centred in the southern parts of the territory, and therefore did not have a big impact on the Inupiat people living in the northern parts of Alaska (Haycox 2002). It was not until the 1850s, when American whalers began utilizing the Alaskan waters for large commercial whaling expeditions that the Inupiat people came into greater contact with the colonists. This contact would eventually impact the Inupiat people's traditional lifestyle to a great degree. The massive commercial whaling operations along the northern coast of Alaska took an enormous toll on the whale population, which in turn led to food shortages and hunger among the Inupiat, because whale meat was one of their main sources of food, and hunting a major part of their livelihood. The American colonists also brought with them a huge amount of trading goods, which led to the collapse of the Inupiat people's traditional trade networks. The Inupiat therefore became gradually more dependent on trade with the Americans. Among other goods, the American traders brought with them alcohol, and introduced it to the Inupiat people. The loss of livelihood and the collapse of their trading networks, led some inupiat people into alcoholism and misery. The Americans also brought with them diseases previously unknown to the inupiat people, such as Smallpox, Measles and Influenza, which led to major epidemics with many fatalities and the loss of entire communities.

In 1876, the USA purchased Alaska from Russia for the sum of 7,2 million dollars. In the wake of this colonial business the organized proselytising activities towards the inupiat people began (Haycox 2002). The goal for the missionaries was to convert the Inupiat people

to what they considered to be humane, Christianity, and thereby restore a moral society among the inupiat, which they regarded as corrupted by whalers and traders. Several Christian denominations wanted to proselytize in the northern parts of Alaska, and to avoid competition several Christian denominations started collaborating to divide the arctic Alaska into regions for proselytizing, where the different denominations could work without the competition from the other churches. The areas north of the Brook Range were given to the Episcopal Church and the Presbyterian Church. The Kotzebue region in the northwest was given to the Friends Church (The Quakers), in the Unalakleet region the Swedish Evangelical Mission Church was dominating, while the Seward Peninsula to the northeast was divided between the Norwegian Evangelical Church, the Congregational Church and the Methodist Church (Chance 1990). It is still possible to see traces of this divide in northern Alaska today.

The first missionaries arrived at the North Slope in 1890, and shortly after their arrival, the missionaries got involved in different sectors of the local communities they settled in. The missionaries opened schools and basic health services, and later hospitals. They also helped with supervision of the caribou packs, which the state had granted the inupiat people to give them a new livelihood after the collapse of the whaling population. A few of the missionaries also managed to learn Inupiatun and became familiar with the Inupiat customs and culture. All these factors may have contributed to the rapid conversion to Christianity among the Inupiat (Chance 1990). By 1910 most Inupiat people were Christians (Burch 2013).

The Anthropologist Ernest S. Burch Jr. argues that a process of syncretism drove the successful missionary effort of Arctic Alaska (Burch 2013). In the cultural encounter between Christianity and the Inupiat's worldview, traditions were fused together, and Christian interpretations were added to Inupiat beliefs and traditions, even on those that seemingly differed sharply from each other. In this process, many of the Inupiat's beliefs and traditions carried on, but took new shape, or were given new meaning. Today, older Inupiat festivals have been brought into the practice of Christianity. Whaling rituals (like the Nalukataq festival) that used to be an integral part of Inupiat religious observance, and are still an important part of Inupiat tradition and daily life, now begins with Christian prayers and blessings (Stern 2010). When Christmas is celebrated in Utqiagvik, people gather for church service and a feast on Christmas Eve, followed with social gatherings of drumming and dancing, and competitive games at the community centre on Christmas Day, which lasts through all of Christmas and ends on New Years Day (Stern 2010).[3]

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[3] Utqiavik is the Inupiatun name (now official name) of the town formerly known as Barrow, situated on Alaska's North Slope.

In the early years of the 1900's, the missionaries in Arctic Alaska established several schools, and soon schools became mandatory. The mandatory schools had a huge impact on the Inupiat social and cultural life; the seasonal migrations by the whole family were no longer possible, and year-round settlements were established. Schools also became the primary education institution for youth, which used to be the role of the family (Chance 1990). Following the politics of assimilation, the practice of taking children from their homes and sending them to schools around the country was common from the 1940's to the 1970's. Inupiat children were discouraged from speaking Inupiatun in schools, and today, as a result of the hard assimilation politics by the federal authorities at the time, many younger Inupiat no longer speak their Native language.

In 1971 the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (widely know as ANCSA) was signed. This act was made to settle the claims to land in Alaska, after the transitioning from territory to statehood in 1958. The new status of statehood made the federal government start to transfer lands to the new state; land that until then had been seen as public domain, and had been in use by Alaska's native population for subsistence activities. The rapid transfer of land worried the Native leaders throughout the state, who feared they would lose control over land and resources. During the 1960's, a land-claim movement emerged among Alaska's native people, and when a large oil field was discovered at Prudhoe Bay on Alaska's North Slope in 1968, the questions on rights to land became even more prominent. Native leaders judged, out of fear of ending up with a reservation system like those in the lower 48 states, that to obtain clear title to about 10% of Alaska would be worth the price of giving up the rest (Clifford 2013). The oil industry, which feared a long battle over the rights to land in courts, supported the land-claim act, and the U.S. congress finally concluded a deal, signing ANCSA in 1971.

The neoliberal vision of ANCSA was to privatize native lands in corporate forms (Clifford 2013). Large development corporations were established at a regional level to control land and funding; their primary task to make money and distribute it to the shareholders, who were predominantly Alaska Natives, belonging to a defined group. The corporations were responsible for employing Alaska Natives, and to support projects within the sectors of health, education and cultural renewal (Clifford 2013). ANCSA has always been controversial, very complex and at times heavily criticised, and it has been accused of being a long-term form of assimilation; forcing Alaska Natives to participate in the national economy and capitalism.

During the period of land claims in the 1960's and 70's, a movement of native ethnic consciousness was growing in Alaska and among the Inupiat, influenced by the civil rights

movement and the pan-Indian movements on the continent (Ikuta, 2007). For the Inupiat people, ANCSA have played a big part in the revitalisation process of Inupiat culture and identity since the settlement act took shape (Ikuta, 2007). With ANCSA, the Inupiat people were granted ownership over the oil-rich land of Alaska's North Slope, "providing them with enormous power and wealth" (Ikuta 2007:346). The Inupiat land was soon consolidated into North Slope Borough, and with the extended powers of tax collection, education, planning and zoning they now had, the Borough soon found itself accumulating huge amounts of tax revenue from the oil industry, which again has supported the revitalisation process of language, culture and identity among the Inupiat.

2.4. The video game

Never Alone (Inupiatun: *Kisima Inŋitchuŋa)* is the game developer Upper One Games' first, and till now only game.[4] Upper One Games was established in 2012 by CITC Enterprise Inc., a for-profit subsidiary of Cook Inlet Tribal Council (commonly known as CITC) (Upper One Games n.d.), a non-profit organization working to better the lives of Alaska native people in and around the city of Anchorage. CITC works in several different fields; among these are education and work employment, child and family support, and recovery and re-entry services related to substance abuse (CITC n.d.).

Having over a longer period of time received financial support from the US government, CITC found themselves in a position where they had to re-think their financial situation. The President and CEO of CITC, Gloria O'Neil, said in an interview with the British newspaper *The Guardian* that the organization wanted to make an investment for the future: "How could we use technology? And we asked ourselves at the time, what is the greatest asset of our people? And we said, our culture and our stories" (Parkinson 2014). This was when the idea of making a video game came into being. The result was the establishment of Upper One Games in 2012. Upper One Games joined forces with E-Line Media for co-development and co-publishing of *Never Alone*, and later, in 2014, the two companies merged and are now planning to further expand the "world games" initiative under the brand of Upper One Games (Upper One Games n.d.).

Never Alone was released November 18th 2014 for PC, Xbox One and PlayStation 4, and has later also been released for Nintendo WiiU, PlayStation 3, Apple OS X and Nvidia

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[4] *Upper one* is a common term for the state of Alaska by local Alaskans, in contrast to the *lower 48*, which refers to the contiguous continental states of the USA.

Shield. In June 2016, a version of the game optimized for tablets and smartphones was released under the name *Never Alone: Ki* (Upper One Games 2016). On July 29th 2015 a DLC[5] was released for the game. The DLC was called "Foxtales", and tells a new story, but with the same protagonists.

Never Alone is the first game that has been developed in a close collaboration with the Inupiat people of Alaska, and one out of few video games worldwide that has been made in collaboration with an indigenous group. More than 40 Elders, community members and storytellers of indigenous background contributed to the development, Upper One Games state on their web page (Upper One Games n.d.). The video game is based on a traditional Inupiat story called *Kunuuksaayuka*, as it is told by Robert Nasruk Cleveland and collected in the book *Stories of the Black River People*. Though based on *Kunuuksaayuka*, the game has changed some details of the story, and it has mixed into it different other Alaska native stories.

In *Never Alone* you play as the Inupiat girl *Nuna* who goes out on a journey to find the source of a devastating blizzard that threatens to destroy her home village. Nuna gets help from her friend *Fox*, an Arctic Fox, which she meets along the way. Fox can call upon spirits in their environments to help them, and Nuna and Fox must work together to overcome the treacherous nature around them. They must fight Polar Bears, blizzards and other natural phenomena, and they meet mythical creatures and figures such as the Manslayer and Little People. On their journey they are aided and guided by the spirits in nature. At the end of the game, Nuna and Fox find the source of the blizzard: a giant man is chipping away on the ice until it is loose, and then shovels it off the ground. Every time he shovels, the wind comes and blows the snow in the direction of Nuna's home. Nuna grabs the giant's adze, and runs away with it. She smashes it against a rock so the giant can no longer use it, and her village is saved.

Never Alone is a puzzle-platform game, where the objective of the game is to move the game characters from point A to point B. To get from point A to point B the player has to solve puzzles. In *Never Alone* these puzzles are usually environmental, which means that the player ha to find a way to get to point B by jumping, climbing, pushing and pulling objects, and switch between the two characters who have different abilities. To progress in the story

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[5] DLC stands for *downloadable content*. A DLC is additional content created for a game by the official game studio. The DLC is usually sold as a separate unit from the original game, and is distributed through the Internet and can be downloaded and added to the game. There are several different types of downloadable content for a video game, such as cosmetic content for the in-game characters, new storylines or new game modes or objectives. What type of DLC is available highly depends on the genre of the video game in question.

and to finish the game, the player must successfully solve all the puzzles. *Never Alone* is a side-scrolling game; this means that the gameplay action is viewed in only two dimensions from a single side-view camera angle. The player can only move the in-game characters left and right or up and down. To complete the game, playing it from the start till the end credits should take the player somewhere between two and four hours, depending on how many retries the player needs, and how fast the player is able to solve the puzzles.

Throughout the game the player can unlock something called "Cultural Insight". These are short documentary movies where Inupiat talk about different topics related to what happens in the game. These short films have to be unlocked in-game by doing story progression, but the films can be accessed at any time from the main menu, as soon as they are unlocked. There are 24 short movies to unlock in *Never Alone*. The short films range from about one to three minutes in length, and together they last for about 32 minutes. In the cultural insights Inupiat people talk about Inupiat culture and lifestyle in the past and the present. The films are shot as documentaries: the Inupiat talking is captured in portrait, and the narration is accompanied with music, landscape footages, conceptual art from the game developers and old pictures. Most of the interviews are done in English, with some words and sentences uttered in Inupiatun.

The game's story is narrated to the player in Inupiatun, and the in-game characters do not speak themselves. The narration of the game, and the cultural insights are texted, and the player can choose between 16 different languages for this text. Among the languages the game is translated into we find English, Spanish, Korean, Chinese, Russian and Norwegian. The language can be easily changed from the game's main menus.

At release in 2014, Upper One Games received much praise for their work on *Never Alone*, receiving accolades including the British Academy Award for Best Debut game, and Game of the Year and Most Significant Impact awards from the Games for Change organization. From games journalists, the reviews were mixed, ranging from very positive to average. On the website Metacritic, *Never Alone* scores 72 out of a 100 points based on the average score retrieved from 30 different reviews from different games media (Metacritic n.d.). The game was praised for its storytelling, its aesthetics, and its message, but was also criticized for lacking in interesting game mechanics and puzzles, and for having a poorly developed A.I (artificial intelligence). In a review on the web page about popular culture called *AvClub*, the reviewer says:

It some times feels like this cultural connection came at the cost of some of the finer play details, however. Jumping feels imprecise, and some times it's not clear where Nuna and Fox have to go until they've died a few times in the attempt. […] These concerns would sink a game that was just telling a story into mediocrity. But Never Alone is not just telling a story – it is connecting the player to a culture.

Keiser 2014[6]

That the game from a game mechanical point of view has its flaws, and is repetitive, but that the overall impact it gives the player through storytelling, aesthetics, and the possibility to connect with a different culture makes it worth playing seems to be a common thread in reviews of the video game.

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[6] URL: https://games.avclub.com/never-alone-is-a-warm-welcome-to-alaska-native-folklore-1798274621

3. Rebuilding connections

The rebuilding of connections stands out as an overarching theme of *Never Alone*. In this chapter I will explore some of the ways in which this theme is articulated, in regard to the past, the community, between people, and with nature, and through a focus on religion and indigeneity.

The set up of this chapter is chronological. The different subchapters are based on themes that have emerged as I have played through the video game, and the games scenes described come in chronological order. Within the different subchapters, I occasionally refer to and describe other scenes from different parts of the game, which is not chronological. I do this to show similarities within the game, and to give examples that I can use to build my arguments.

Starting out, I explore the title 'Cultural ambassador' that Upper One Games have chosen to give the informants in the video game, both those on and off camera. I will look at what messages are being sent by using this title. I compare their role to the role of the diplomat, and I explore how the cultural ambassadors fill this role.

I will then go on to look at how *Never Alone* remediates old storytelling techniques in the new medium of video games, and how *Never Alone* is offering ways of connecting to the past for a new generation indigenous youth.

In the subchapters *The Manslayer – disconnections* and *Respect for nature* I explore how the video game revolves around the themes of climate change and the importance of respecting nature around us, and I look at how these themes are articulated both in word and in game mechanics.

In the next subchapter, titled *Reconstructing indigenous women in video games,* I do a thorough examination of how indigenous women have been portrayed in video games in general, and I show how the portrayal of Nuna can be seen as a reconstruction of the established conventions.

In the final section of this chapter, I do an analysis of how the Cultural Ambassadors talk about their traditions and culture, and how the same theme can be scaled upwards and downwards, depending on who is speaking and what they are trying to convey to their audience.

3.1. Cultural Ambassadors

When starting up the video game the player is met with a start screen. It shows the title "Kisima Inŋitchuŋa" in white letters on a background featuring a small hut in a raging blizzard, the landscape coloured in tones of black, blue-green and white. You can hear the howling wind and simple tones from a piano. The title fades away, and the English title "Never Alone" appears with the same font. The game's main menu appears when the player presses a button, and from this menu the player can choose to start a new game, load an old one, select a chapter, or choose from and watch the cultural insights that have been unlocked in the game.

Once the player chooses to start a new game, she is taken to a new screen with the following text in capital letters: "The Iñupiat are an Alaska Native People who have thrived for thousands of years in one of the most formidable environments on Earth." Underneath there is a black and white photography of a smiling Inupiat girl, her face encompassed with the fur from a caribou parka. Under the picture it says "Learn more about the Iñupiat through unlockable 'Cultural Insights'." Now the player can press A on the controller to continue.[7]

In *Never Alone* the player meets different people talking about Inupiat culture, traditions, and daily life in the form of short documentary films called *Cultural Insights*. These individuals are Inupiat people who have been chosen to represent the Inupiat community, and they have been working closely with the game development team. These individuals, sixteen in all, have been given the title 'Cultural Ambassadors'. The cultural ambassadors are a mixed group of Inupiat people from different communities, and of different age, and gender. Some of them come from a long lienage of Inupiat people. Others are of mixed ethnicity. Some have lived most of their life in Arctic Alaska in Inupiat communities, while others have been brought up in communities in other parts of the state, and in in more urban areas. On the official Internet page for *Never Alone*, there is a section called "Our Team" showing a picture and a short biography about the Cultural Ambassadors, giving a little more insight into the people involved in the project of making the game.

The label of 'cultural ambassador' is not used when the individuals appear in the mini-documentaries; instead they are referred to by their first name, and their Inupiat name. The label is only used in the end credits, where it says "Inupiaq cultural ambassadors",

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[7] My play through of the video game has been on an Xbox One, and in this thesis I use the Xbox One controllers button layout when I refer to what buttons the game tells the player to use. This will look different in the game if the game is played on another system, like a PlayStation 4, which uses a different type of controller, or a PC that uses a keyboard.

followed by a list of people contributing, both on and off camera. The same label was used in the promotion of the game and in the conversations surrounding it.

A label such as 'cultural ambassador' carries with it some weight. The word 'ambassador' normally refers to a person who "represents, speaks for, or advertises a particular organization, group of people, activity, or brand" (Cambridge Dictionary n.d.). A cultural ambassador can then be understood as an individual who is representing their culture, a person who speaks on behalf of it. Labelling the informants in the video game Cultural ambassadors, I would argue, is giving more weight and power behind the claims they are uttering.

Usage of the word 'ambassador' about the participants and informants to the video game is interesting. The word 'ambassador' is closely linked with the word 'diplomacy', and the words 'ambassador' and 'diplomat' can to some degree be used interchangeably. Diplomacy can be defined as "the ways states communicate, negotiate and relate to each other" (Hauge, Neumann 2011:11).[8] The role of a diplomat is to help develop a strong and mutually friendly relationship between different stats and actors, to avoid conflicts and full out wars. Diplomacy is used to create economic alliances, and to safeguard borders and national security. When working as intended, diplomacy brings different people, from different cultures, societies and communities together to create a space where meaningful conversations can be held on a global level. (Hauge, Neumann 2011)

The Cultural Ambassadors perform a role, and they know that what they say is potentially reaching a global audience. In a way you could say that the cultural ambassadors in *Never Alone* are acting like diplomats – what it means to be Inupiat is being negotiated in the cross section of different perspectives from different Inupiat with different backgrounds. The Cultural Ambassadors are also negotiating with the audience to form a dialog that can possibly help establishing friendships and alliances that can help tear down suspicions and opposites.

On one level, the cultural ambassadors are a group speaking on behalf of the Inupiat people, but on another level, they are a group of individuals with a mixed background speaking for themselves, from their own perspectives. In the history of colonial representations of indigenous people, deprivation of individuality has been common; the experience of the individual has been overlooked in favour of the imagined, often essentialized experiences of the group. The cultural ambassadors are all Inupiat and they are

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[8] The quote is translated from Norwegian to English by the author of this thesis.

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all individuals, and the message they convey is that there are many ways to be Inupiat, and by doing so they invite players of very different backgrounds to take part in the gaming experience. Even though the game is rooted in local stories and in the experiences of one indigenous people, it speaks to a broad audience – it speaks to the Inupiat, to the Native Peoples of Alaska, and to the whole world.

3.2. Playing together: creating connections through remediation and play

The voice of an Iñupiat man says: "I will tell you a very old story, I heard it from Nasruk when I was very young.." The man speaks in Inupiatun; he's voice is accompanied by an English translation in text. Then an animated cutscene starts.[9] The man starts telling the story about the game's protagonist, a young girl who lived with her family in a place "far from here". One day a terrible blizzard starts, and it never stops, threatening the survival of the village. The girl decides to leave her village to find the source of the blizzard. While the narrator is speaking, the cutscene playing in the background shows the girl and her family, hunting for ducks, caribous and seals. The art style of the cutscene resembles scrimshaw: the art of carving into ivory and baleen, an art form common to Inupiat culture.

Figure 2. From cutscene in *Never Alone*

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[9] A cutscene is a sequence within a video game that is not interactive. It is a short scene that the player cannot control. A cutscene is often used as a break in the gameplay to develop the story, like showing conversations, showing the players actions, introducing new gameplay elements to the player etc. A cutscene is usually pre-rendered computer graphics that are streamed from a video file.

In a Cultural Insight that unlocks after the first cutscene, we get to know more about the art of scrimshaw, in a mini-documentary that is simply called *Scrimshaw*. Amy Fredeen and Ronald Aniqusuq explain that scrimshaw was traditionally used as a tool to tell stories, and to document wars and hunting trips. Scrimshaw "gives you a timeline of history through etching", Ronald explains, "they are like reading a book". In the online article *How Should I Play These?: Media and Remediation in Never Alone* (2016) David Gaertner writes about how *Never Alone* uses traditional Inupiaq stories and storytelling and then draws them into the modern media of video games, a process known as remediation. The video game frames scrimshaw as a very important part of the Inupiaq culture by focusing on it in a dedicated documentary, where the cultural ambassadors give weight to these claims. The video game remediates scrimshaw by using this very distinct art style in some chosen cutscenes in the game, like in the prologue and in the epilogue. The old tradition takes on a new form in a new medium. *Never Alone* could have gone the route of being a game following established aesthetics and genre conventions of western video games, but as Gaertner writes:

> Never Alone evokes visual sovereignty by establishing the core of its gameplay
> not on the back of Western video games and the side-scroller tradition, but out of
> Iñupiaq aesthetics and storytelling practices found in scrimshaw.
> Gaertner, 2016[10]

By remediating and implementing traditional Inupiaq aesthetics and storytelling into the modern video game, the game looks both backwards and forwards in time, drawing on the old traditions to describe what it is to be Inupiaq today. *Never Alone* is also reimagining what a video game is by exploring a new way to use the medium. By coalescing the relatively old genre of documentary filmmaking with the relatively new medium of video games, *Never Alone* is creating a game that speaks to both the older generations and the younger.

After the prologue, the player is put in control of the playable character and protagonist Nuna, who immediately has to escape a deadly attack from a furious Polar bear. While the player is fleeing for her life, simple symbols and messages are showing up on the screen, teaching the player how to perform certain actions needed to progress, like moving left or right and jumping over obstacles. This part of a game is commonly known as a tutorial,

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[10] URL: https://ilsaneveralone.wordpress.com/2016/05/21/how-should-i-play-these-media-and-remediation-in-never-alone/

and is found in most modern games. In *Never Alone* the tutorial is in real time, the player learns how to do the different actions needed in the specific circumstances as the story progresses.

Nuna soon gets outrun by the polar bear, and is trapped. This is when the player gets introduced to the other protagonist of the game, Fox. The polar fox jumps in to rescue Nuna and the player is now given agency over Fox, and has to outsmart the polar bear by making the bear walk on thin ice and fall in the dark cold sea water. Fox saves Nuna, and the two of them continue on the journey together.

Figure 3. Fox saves Nuna

Never Alone can either be played as a single player game, or with two people side by side in local co-op mode, if you have two sets of controllers. If the game is played with two people, one player has agency over Nuna, and the other will be playing Fox. If a single player plays the game, she can switch between the two protagonists by pressing a button on the controller. Nuna and Fox have different abilities in the game. Nuna can push or pull heavy objects, climb ladders and ropes, and she can throw her Bola, a weapon that is introduced later in the game. Fox can crawl into small spaces, climb up tall structures and interact with spirits in the environment. The player(s) have to combine the two protagonists' unique abilities to solve the environmental puzzles in the game.

Although *Never Alone* can be played as a single player game, and that is also how I myself have played it, the game has been made with the intention of being a cooperative experience, and the developers have talked about this aspect of *Never Alone* in interviews

with the media before the release of the game. Alan Gershenfeld, founder of E-Line Media, the publisher of *Never Alone*, said in an interview with *The Guardian*:

> The dream would be that parents play with their children. […] People think video games have disconnected youth from their heritage, from their storytelling and their culture. But why not use this incredibly powerful medium to fire imagination and reconnect youth with other cultures, with their own cultures and with their elders?
>
> Parkinson 2014[11]

During my fieldwork at the Alaska Native Heritage Centre in Anchorage I engaged in a conversation with a young man of Yupik and Inupiat heritage, probably in his twenties. The young man had a small sales booth, consisting of a table covered in a cloth, where he was selling handcrafted jewellery he himself had made out of walrus tusks and whalebones. He told me he had played the game, and though he normally did not enjoy playing video games much, he really loved playing *Never Alone*. He told me that he could not wait to see his younger cousin again, so he could show him the game and the two of them could play it together. There were many Inupiat stories he recognised in the video game, and he wanted to share his experience of Inupiat storytelling in *Never Alone* with his younger family members. To me, this speaks as an example of how powerful the medium of video games can be to tell stories, and to create meaningful experiences, and connections, just like Parkinson proposed.

The theme of interdependence and the importance of the community is a common thread throughout the game, something that is reflected in the game title. The protagonist Nuna is never alone, she always has Fox by her side and they have to rely on each other's strengths and work together to save her village from the devastating blizzard. The spirits in nature are all around them, always willing to help if needed. "She would have died had she been alone. Oh my, she was lucky to be alive", the narrator tells us when the bear has been defeated.

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[11] URL: https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/sep/29/never-alone-alaskas-indigenous-game-never-alone-teaches-cooperation-through-stories

3.3. The Manslayer - disconnections

Nuna is devastated. While being away from her village, a terrible man has arrived. Nuna and Fox arrive back at the village to witness this terrible man terrorizing those who live there and destroying everything in his path, in his search for something special. At this time, the player does not know who this man is or what he is looking for. It is later revealed that he is known as the Manslayer, and he will be a recurring character throughout the game, always coming after Nuna and Fox. The object he is looking for is later revealed to be a magical bola, a throwing weapon used in bird hunting. When Nuna arrives, her people are gone, and giant Loon spirits appear in the sky, mourning the girl's loss.[12]

In a Cultural insight later in the game, titled "The Manslayer" the player learns more about this character. The Manslayer is a reoccurring antagonistic character in Inupiat storytelling, described as "bad guy" by Amy in the Cultural insight. Amy continues:

> And I think really what's at risk when the Manslayer comes into the story, is the livelihood of the 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'.

The importance of the community and a selfless way of living makes a lot of sense considering the harsh climate and environment the Inupiat traditionally lived under, and which many still do. To be able to survive, the community had to rely on each other, and sharing was important. Individuals acting only for themselves, not the community, one can imagine, would be a danger for the community as a whole. As Joseph Sagviyuaq says in *Sharing for survival*, "We just give. That's how I grew up. That's the way I'm always going to be. Because of who we are we always think about other people first."

"At the end of her village, the pair stumbled upon the terrible man!" the narrator reads. Nuna's village is on fire. Black smoke mixes with the white snow and covers the landscape in grey haze; the flames give the surroundings an ominous glow. The Manslayer sees the pair and sets off after them. The Manslayer commands them to stop, and the sight of Nuna's bola makes him even angrier: it is the Bola he has been searching for all along. Nuna and Fox run

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[12] Loons are a group of aquatic birds that can be found in the northern hemisphar: from nothern Europe, across Russia and Northern Amercia. They are known to be excelent divers and swimmers.

for their lives, while the Manslayer throws balls of fire towards them, creating spikes of ice that block their path. Nuna uses her Bola to smash ice and clear their way towards safety.

Whenever the Manslayer is present in the video game, something is wrong. As mentioned above, the Manslayer is a character that is seen as a threat to the community and to the livelihood of the individual, but I would argue that the Manslayer in this setting can also be read as a manifestation of the harm the modern human and the modern western society does to nature and the Inupiat traditional way of living. The Manslayer is burning down the villages, destroying the communities, and making the people flee. The flames are melting the snow, creating obstacles for our heroes. In another encounter in a forest later on in the game, the Manslayer is using all his destructive powers to get his hands on Nuna's Bola, setting fire to the trees, and causing havoc around them. One can argue that modern society with its focus on continually growing profits that do not care about the destruction and exploitation of nature or people, and the feeling of disconnection to the natural world and to other people as a result, is mirrored in this character. In the game, the player manages to defeat the Manslayer once and for all, and as Ishmael describes it, there is a "return to true living, in the community. And it just takes that one person. It can just be that one person that can help to change everything."

Figure 4. Nuna and Fox battles the Manslayer

Being chased by the Manslayer, Nuna and Fox reach the open sea. Suddenly the ice they stand on breaks off and carries them away from the Manslayer: the pair escape, but they are now adrift on the stormy ocean. After some time, the pair reaches thick ice. "But it was no cause for celebration", the narrator tells us, "the ice was unpredictable". Suddenly, the polar bear is back, chasing them over the ice. Again, the two manage to outsmart the polar bear and escape. "If you outsmart a polar bear, there is no time to relax. A hungry bear will not give up easily!" Nuna and Fox are safe, and the Cultural Insight *No more thick ice* is unlocked. In this mini-documentary Ronald and Anna talks about how the climate change impact the lives of the Inupiaq people.

In this Cultural Insight, Ronald and Anna are sharing their concerns regarding climate change and how it will affect the Inupiat way of living. The permafrost is melting, the bird comes earlier each year, and new species are coming, Anna tells us. Roland says that the ice they used to hunt on 50 years ago was 25 feet thick; now the ice is only 18 inches thick. These changes will affect all ways of life for the Inupiat; it creates an imbalance in all their seasonal activities. Ronald express that the Inupiat already knew about the changes to the climate, a long time before it was regarded as common knowledge:

> We are very much aware of the climate change, and its' been for many years, even before climatologists were noticing this change, Inuit were already saying: "Siḷa alaŋŋuqtuq". Our climate is changing.
> - Ronald Aniqsuaq

Anna Nageak has a similar statement, where she says "I think we are more scientist than more people will realise. We have more knowledge of those things than people will ever know". The threats of climate change is an overarching theme in *Never Alone*. The climate and nature is out of balance; an unrelenting snowstorm is ruining for the villagers' ability to hunt and gather food. The polar bear Nuna and Fox meet several times throughout the game, is hungry, and as the narrator says "a hungry bear will not give up easily". Shortage of food makes the bear come after them time and time again. In another scene of the game, Nuna and Fox have to run and jump from moving blocks of ice that could potentially crush them. "The land was strange. It moved in a most unusual way", the narrator says. Then we have the Manslayer. As mentioned above, the Manslayer is destroying and burning down everything around him.

3.4. Respect for nature

> We spend all our time out in nature. You get very intimate with the world. And over time, if you are 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, then we want to respect it. And if we're going to use it, we will use it respectfully.
>
> - Ishmael Angaluuk in the Cultural Insight *Everything is Alive*

A central theme that stood out to me when I was playing through *Never Alone*, and that seems even clearer to me after working with this thesis, is the respect and connectedness to nature and the importance of living as one with the nature and environment around you. In the above quote by Ishmael Angaluuk he emphasises that the Inupiat way of living, which is a subsistence lifestyle that relies heavily on the nature around them, results in a special connectedness to nature itself. To the Inupiat, Ishmael claims, everything has a spirit and a conciseness, and everything is alive. The notion that the world around us is alive gives the Inupiat a reason to treat it respectfully. The word 'respect' is used a few times in regards to nature in the Cultural Insights. "I grew up respecting the animals. I grew up respecting the land", the Cultural ambassador Joseph Sagviyuaq says, while Jana Pausauraq utters: "Love and respect. For nature, for one another, for elders. Very, very fundamental value."

The respect for the natural world around them, for the nature and the animals the Cultural Ambassadors talk about in the Cultural Insights is paralleled in the gameplay. Nuna, Fox and the player have to respect the elements and the nature around them. When the gusts of the wind and snow become too strong, Nuna and Fox have to brace themselves by lying down on the snow. But even though the raging storm is seen as a threat to the village and its people, Nuna and Fox can also harness it. They brace against the winds when it blows towards them, but when the direction of the wind turns, and the wind is at their back, they can harness the energy of the wind to jump across gaps they would not have been able to cross otherwise. This is used as a mechanic in the video game. You don't try to overcome or defeat the natural elements – you play along with them.

In one part of the game, the player has to get Nuna and Fox safely across the rooftops and ruins of an old coastal village; the old shacks and houses are standing on tall poles, and a fall from them will be fatal for the two. It is night time. "The Northern Lights cast an eerie

41

glow on the village below" the narrator says and continues: "the Aurora itself came swooping down from the sky in search of those not adhering to the Elder's wisdom." Now, Nuna and Fox have to traverse the rooftops without getting hit by the Northern Lights that are dancing in circles, at times blocking their passage. If the Aurora hits the pair, they get carried away and 'die', leaving the player to do the level over again. The Aurora is anthropomorphic: it has eyes, a mouth with teeth, and hands stretched forwards. Related to this game level, there is a Cultural Insight called *Northern Lights*. Ishmael Angaluuk tells us that he learned from his mother that the Northern Lights are actually children who passed away when they were young. He continues:

> You don't want to draw them in too much, you know, is what she said. Because then, they could play football with your head. Play Eskimo football, and that's what they want to do. They're always playing, those children up there. […] It wasn't like they were trying to do bad, you know, or it wasn't like a scary story or anything like that. It was just.. that's how it was, that's what it was.

The Cultural Insight helps balance the impression the player gets when encountering the Northern Lights. As a game mechanic, the Northern Lights will make the playable character die, and the player will have to retry if the Aurora catches it. In this regard, the Northern Lights can be seen as an enemy in relation to the gameplay. Yet, we learn that the children in the Aurora are not bad. They are playing, just like the players of *Never Alone*. Again, the environmental threats, though at times dangerous and fatal, are not portrayed as being bad. The player and the characters have to respect it for what it is, not try to fight it.
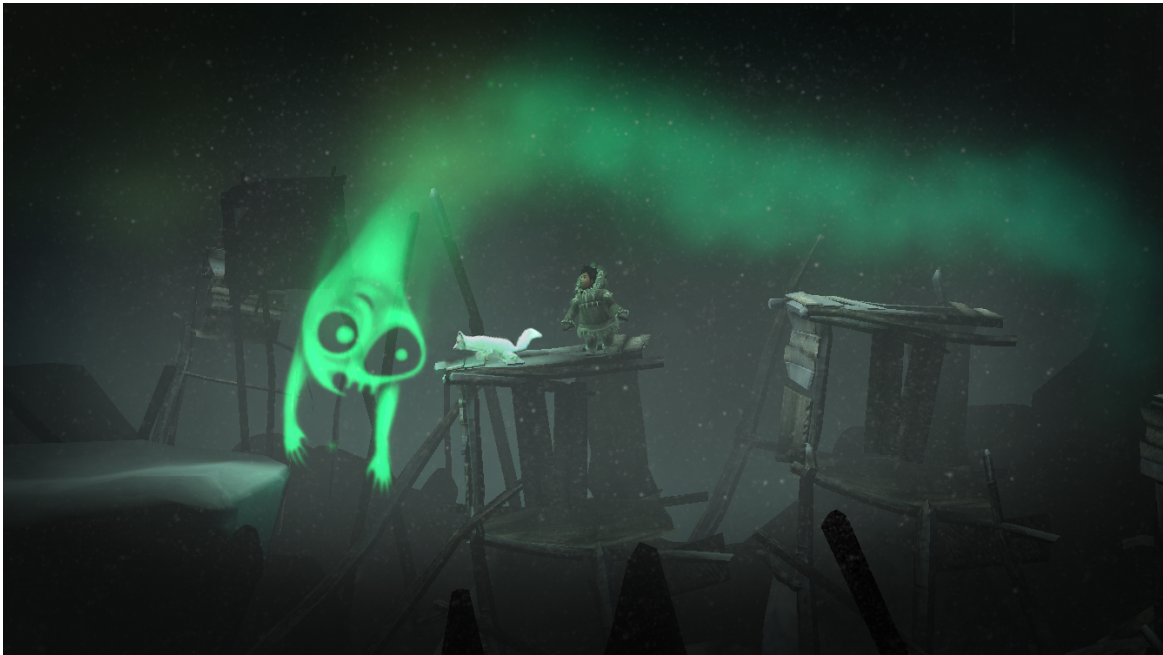
Figure 5. Northern Lights

Another example of how the respect for nature and the animals is replicated in the gameplay is how Nuna and Fox act in response to dangerous threats like the Polar Bear. Many video games, especially in the adventure-game or RPG (role-playing game) genres, have a mechanic where they have one or multiple weapons or magical abilities they can use to protect themselves and to fight their way through hordes of deadly enemies. *Never Alone*'s approach is a bit different. Nuna has a Bola, which she receives for helping the Owl man find his drum. A Cultural Insight explains that the bola was used to hunt ducks, but Nuna never uses it in this manner. Nuna and Fox never kill anything. They use their wit to outsmart their opponents. In the example of the Polar bear, there is a real threat to our heroes' lives, but they do not kill the bear. They escape by using the tools and wisdom they have at their disposal. Several of the Cultural ambassadors emphasise the importance of not killing animals unless it is necessary for the community. "We've always known traditionally to avoid killing a mother. That's always been sacred to us, to protect them" Fannie states in the Cultural Insight *A girl & her Nanuq*. In this insight she tells the story about when her brother killed a Polar Bear mother by accident when they were young. In another Cultural Insight, she says: "We didn't just go out and kill and butcher and put in the freezer. It's like a ritual that I learned from my parents". Echoing Ishmael's statement from earlier, because everything is alive and everything has a spirit, the Inupiat have to respect nature. This also translates to how the

player and the playable characters have to respect nature and their surroundings in the video game.

3.5. Deconstructing and rearticulating the indigenous woman in video games

Nuna is willing to risk everything to help her community as she sets out on a potentially dangerous mission through the treacherous environment of the Arctic. In the story *Kunuuksaayuka* as told by Robert Nasruk Cleveland, which the video game is based on, the hero is a boy who goes by the name Kunuuksaayuka. In a blog post on the official website of *Never Alone*, the development team explains why they chose to change the gender of the protagonist in the original story from a boy to a girl:

> The team really wanted to create a strong, resourceful, smart, brave character who could be a great role model for girls. Great female characters have historically been woefully under-represented in video games and the team wanted to help change that – particularly since many have young daughters themselves.
>
> Upper One Games 2014[13]

As the development team rightfully states on the game's webpage, great female characters have been lacking in the history of video games. The representations have often been over-sexualised. The characters have been lacking depth, and they have been massively under-represented in leading roles (Williams; Martins; Consalvo; Ivory, 2009). However, female characters are gradually gaining a stronger position, with more games showing female perspectives and casting females in leading roles, making the women in video games more varied and giving them more personality.

3.5.1. Portrayals of Indigenous women in video games

The stated wish to contribute to a change in how female characters are represented in video games, is understandable in the gloomy lights of how indigenous women in particular have been depicted throughout the history of video games. In 1982, the game Custer's Revenge (Mystique) was released, which by many is still considered as one of the most offensive video

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[13] URL: http://neveralonegame.com/why-a-girl/

games ever made. The game depicts a character based on American civil war commander General George Custer repeatedly raping a Native American woman tied to a pole. The Native woman is named Revenge, giving the title of the video game an objectifying double meaning. After massive protests by Native American communities and the feminist movement, further sales of Custer's Revenge were stopped (Fabius, 2014).

Custer's Revenge stands out as the most extreme example in gaming history, but it is far from the only video game where indigenous women have been objectified and sexualised. In Banjo-Tooie (Rare, 2000), a cartoony looking adventure platform game targeting a young audience, the player meets the character Humba Wumba, a highly stereotyped indigenous woman. Huma Wumba is a shaman. She is big-breasted and dressed in a tight, revealing dress and moccasins, and she has long, black, braided hair, decorated with a feather headband. Her very existence in the game is in the role of a shaman who has the powers to transform Banjo and Tooie into different things, to help them solve the environmental puzzles in the game. Humba Wumba cannot speak English properly. Her voice lines that are written in text on screen is a broken form of English, with lines like "You have glowbo, want to give to Humba?" and "Magic ready, jump in Wumba pool". In later iterations in the Banjo-Kazooie series, which the game Banjo-Tooie is a part of, Humba Wumba does get an aesthetical rework, but not necessarily for the better. She is still a one-dimensional character. Her appearance has been changed: she is now wearing cowboy boots, shorts and a flannel shirt, showing her belly, and she is still wearing a feather headband.

In the Shadow Hearts series (Nautilus), we find another portrayal of an indigenous woman. Shania is Native American female shaman who with the help of spirits can transform into different shapes. Shana is depicted like an independent and cold woman, who rarely displays any emotions, leaning towards the stereotype of the "Silent Indian". Shania's appearance is very sexualised, wearing a cropped top, hot pants, and high heels. She is also wearing a feathered headband, and she is wielding a tomahawk, further playing on the established stereotypes.

Another example of the sexualisation of indigenous women in video games is from Darkwatch (High Moon Studios), a first person shooter from 2005. In Darkwatch the player plays as a vampire named Jericho, who during the game's story gets to know two female characters. One of these female characters is a white, blond woman named Cassidy Sharp, in the role as the 'good' protagonist. Her evil, or at best morally ambiguous, counterpart is a Native American shaman named Tala. At the end of the game, the player and Jericho have to choose which one of the women he wants to side with. Tala is hyper-sexualised, appearing in

revealing clothes, and participating in sexual activities in a cutscene with the game's playable character Jericho. At release, the promotional campaign of Darkwatch focused on the sex appeal of its female characters, especially Tala, who was pictured naked in a special edition of the magazine Playboy, only wearing the feathers in her hair (Adams 2012).

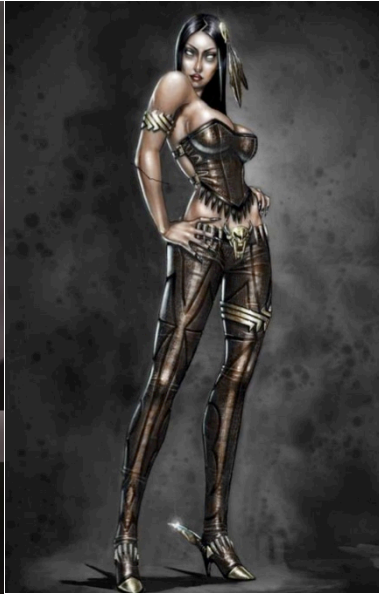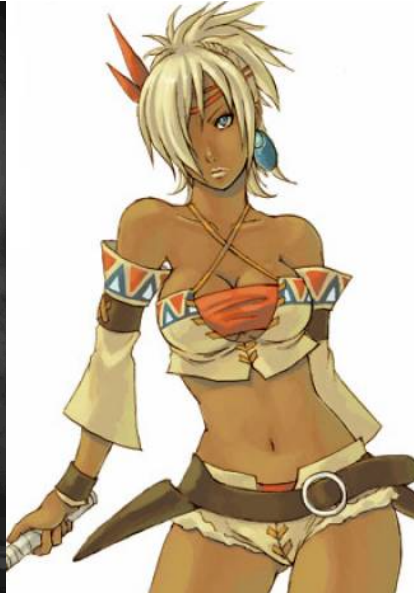Fig. 6. Humba Wumba   Fig. 7. Tala   Fig. 8. Shania

With these games and portrayals in mind, Upper One Games' choice of changing the gender of the hero in the story *Kunuuksaayuka* is easy to understand. Nuna contrasts greatly with these earlier portrayals of indigenous women. Nuna is a character whose appearance is not central at all; it is the attributes of her personality that are highlighted as important. She is brave, wise, and humble. She has a drive to do the right thing. She has respect for the world, the people and animals around her, and she is selfless, demonstrated through her willingness to put her family and community before herself. The character does not lean into the stereotypes of the wise and silent native. This is a normal girl who laughs, plays, cries and shows fear.

3.5.2. The white saviour

In *Never Alone*, Nuna, an Inupiat girl is our hero. She goes out of her way to fix the situation her community finds themselves in, with no help from any outsiders. This stands in contrast to a style of narrative that has been quite common in western popular culture, both in movies and in video games: the white saviour narrative. The white saviour narrative is a cinematic

trope or genre that is recognizable by the presence of a white outsider who rescue non-white minorities and foreigners from poverty, slavery, and suffering, and leads them into battle to fight for their dignity and survival (Hughey 2014).

An example of a video game where the narrative follows the trope of the white saviour is *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* (Eidos-Montréal), a game that was published as recently as in 2018. In Shadow of the Tomb Raider, the player plays as the character Lara Croft, an English, highly intelligent and athletic archaeologist. In the game, Lara and her friend Jonah have dedicated themselves to stop a paramilitary organisation called Trinity. Their quest to stop Trinity takes them into the Peruvian jungles where they find the hidden city of Paititi, and here they find themselves in a situation where they have to stop a Mayan apocalypse that has been unleashed.

In Paititi, Lara helps the Natives with big and small problems. She becomes the right-hand woman of the queen of Paititi, and she has to rescue both the queen and the queen's son. After the Queen gets killed, Lara takes her place on the throne to undergo a sacred ritual the queen has spent all her life preparing for. Lara succeeds the ritual with little to no efforts at all. In the game's side missions, Lara helps Paititi's Native populations with all kinds of problems. She shares her knowledge with the native community, which is responding with gratitude. In one scene, for example, Lara brings a native man some herbs, telling him she has found the herb his wife needs, ignoring the fact that a man who has lived his whole life the Peruvian jungle probably would have much more knowledge of the matter than an outsider.

Lara, although probably meant to be seen as a protagonist whose intentions and moral are good, and a character that is trying her best to help, and fight for the survival of a people, ends up looking like white saviour. The people of Paititi seem almost helpless without her. The natives in the game exist to help her on her quests.

In *Never Alone* there is no white saviour. Nuna does what needs to be done. She has all the abilities and knowledge she needs, but also the humility to seek help when she is not able to do something on her own. The impression I get of Nuna after playing *Never Alone* is a positive and compassionate one. Nuna is a total reconstruction of the conventional portrayals of the indigenous women in video games.

Figure 9. Concept art of Nuna

3.6. Little People

In this subchapter I want to give an example and a short analysis of how the Cultural Ambassadors translate and scale some of their traditions from a local level to a pan-Alaskan level. By translating their stories and traditions to be about Alaska Natives, not just Inupiat, they tie connections and build alliances.

After meeting the Owl man, Nuna and Fox set out to find his missing drum. Soon we can once again hear the strange laughter of the little people, and it becomes clear for them and the player that the little people have stolen the Owl man's drum and taken it underground. Nuna and Fox now have to outsmart the little people to get the drum back. When they go into the underground tunnels, the cultural insight "Little People" is unlocked.

In this cultural insight, Amy Fredeen, Ishmael Angaluuk and Anna Nageak, three of the cultural ambassadors, talk about the Little People and their role in Inupiat stories. The documentary cuts between the different people talking and concept art from the production of the video game. Ishmael is a man probably in his late 30's or early 40's. He has his long black hair in a ponytail and he is wearing a summer parka. Amy is a woman about the same age as Ishmael, and she is wearing everyday clothes and a necklace. Anna is an older Inupiat woman; just like Amy she is wearing everyday clothes and what looks like handcrafted earrings.

Figure 10. Concept art used in "Little People"

The interview in "Little people" goes like this:

> Ishmael: They are just like other people, they just happened to be very small. And extremely strong.
>
> Amy: These are stories that are common throughout Alaska. Normally the people are in the size of your elbow to the tip of your fingers. And they possess superhuman strength. So they may be tiny, but they can carry a whole caribou.
>
> Ishmael: 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: There's a place at home that we know, but we don't profess it to anybody.
>
> Ishmael: But it's not like the boogieman.
>
> Amy: They can be mischievous, they can be ornery, or they can be helpers.
>
> Ishmael: We might have the opportunity to see them, especially if they want us to see them.
>
> Amy: The fact that it's across Alaska really tells you something about our history and how we interacted with nature around us.

Amy starts off her part of the interview by stating that the stories about Little people are common throughout Alaska; she sees the similarities between the different indigenous groups of Alaska, and addresses it. She continues by describing the properties of Little people, before she again scales these stories to be about something bigger than just the Inupiat, but to be

49

stories of pan-Alaskan indigeneity. The stories about little people become a discourse on the history of indigenous survival in Alaska. The "we" she uses is not only referring to Inupiat: it is referring to Alaska Natives. In comparison, Ishmael and Anna's approach to the stories are on a more local scale. Ishmael's talk about going up north and talking to members of the community about the Little people is locally rooted. The "we" is the people in the north, the Inupiat. Anna is specifically talking about a place that is local, her home, and the "we" seems to be the members of her own community.

The 'we' in *Never Alone* is scaled both upwards and downwards; the traditions and stories presented are locally rooted, but at times they are expressed as common to, and important for all Alaska natives. When using language that is both on a local and national scale, the ambassadors can build valuable connections and alliances with other Alaska natives, which again can be important for rebuilding and reclaiming of native identity and culture on a national level, making Alaska natives both seen and heard in political discourses.

3.7. Chapter Summary

My aim in this chapter has been to show the different ways the theme of connectedness and rebuilding of connections are being articulated in *Never Alone* – how it is expressed and in what ways is *Never Alone* using this theme to say something about indigeneity and indigenous religion.

In the first subchapter I explored the title 'Cultural ambassadors', which the video game uses about their informants, and the people interviewed in the Cultural Insights. The informants are playing a role as ambassadors on behalf of the Inupiat people, and in this role they can establish friendships and alliances that can help tear down suspicions and opposites. The ambassadors negotiate what it means to be Inupiat and a Native. This happens in the cross section of different perspectives from different Inupiat with different backgrounds.

In the subchapter *Playing together: creating connections through remediation and play* I explored how *Never Alone* remediates Inupiat storytelling by using the art form of scrimshaw in the video game. The game tells its story by drawing on indigenous aesthetics and storytelling techniques, instead of relying on the conventions of western video games. The remediation of the scrimshaw and indigenous storytelling brings old traditions and a new medium together, forming a platform for the younger generations of Inupiat people to explore and connect with their Inupiat heritage, and opens up a space where both young and old can

participate. The game gives the player an opportunity to perform a culture, which hardly can be done in the same way with other media. Through play; a transformation is happening where the player transforms from being herself into being someone else - an Inupiat girl named Nuna. By implementing the possibility to play the game coop, *Never Alone* opens up the space for connecting with others through play, and to share the experience.

In the subchapter *The Manslayer - disconnections* I argued that the character Manslayer that is present it the video game, can be interpreted as being a manifestation and a critique of the disconnection from a traditional way of living, from the community, and from nature, caused by the modern society's focus on individualism and the continuous growth of capitalism. The Manslayer is representing the loss of connections that were once present. Nuna defeats the Manslayer, bringing the world back into balance.

I argue that respect for nature and everything in it is one of the most prominent themes in the video game. The Inupiat, have a special relationship and connection with nature. In *Never Alone* nature is articulated as being alive – everything in it has a spirit and a consciousness. Articulating that nature is alive and conscious gives the Inupiat a strong argument to respect and take care of it, and justifies the Inupiat's traditional way of living. This is translated into the game mechanics, where the player has to respect and play with the spiritual nature around her.

I have also explored how *Never Alone* reconstructs the picture of the indigenous woman in video games, avoiding the stereotypes of the conventions of video games to create a playable character that indigenous people can recognise themselves in. Nuna is a hero we have barely seen in any video game before. She inherent all the qualities of the Inupiat people that the Cultural ambassadors utter as important.

In the last subchapter I did a short analysis of how the Cultural Ambassadors at times, depending on who is speaking, and what topic they are talking about, are scaling local traditions into something Pan-Alaskan. I show how the 'we' they use can be an Inupiat 'we', or it can mean Alaska Natives. When the ambassadors translate and scale their traditions to be Pan-Alaskan, they are reaching and making connections and alliances with other Alaska Natives.

4. Articulations of spirits and spirituality

> I think spirit helpers in and of themselves are really about how we are connected
> to things […]. And so I think one of the things that are hard to understand is that
> it's not one way of seeing things, it's one way of knowing that you are connected
> to everything.
>
> - Amy Fredeen in *Siḷa has a soul*

This chapter explores articulations of spirits and spirituality in *Never Alone*. In *A Handbook of Indigenous Religion(s)* Kraft and Johnson highlights 'spirituality' as a part of the standardised vocabulary, and one of the assumed similarities of indigenous religions (Kraft & Johnson, 2017). I want to explore how this vocabulary is used in the game.

In the first section of this chapter titled *Siḷa has a soul* I will explore the uses of the word 'spirituality' in *Never Alone*. Why has this specific word been chosen to describe the things we see and hear the Inupiat talk about on the screen, and what messages are being conveyed by using this specific vocabulary. I will also look at how words and concepts are translated away from or towards a domain of religion. For this part of the chapter, I have chosen to focus mainly on one scene in the game, and its related Cultural Insight. I will use this scene and short documentary as a base for my analyses, and then use other examples from other parts of the game to build up my arguments. The scene I describe is set quite early on in the game, where Nuna and Fox just have started their adventures together, and the Cultural Insight *Siḷa has a soul* is unlocked during play of this scene.

In the second part of this chapter, titled *Spirits in Never Alone and in other video games,* I will do a more thorough analysis of how spirits are articulated by looking at aesthetical choices done to portray the spirits. I will look at how music and sound is used, and what visual choices have been made, and I will explore how spirits are introduced as a game mechanic. In this part I will also delve deeper into the topic of articulations of spirits in video games in general, to explore if *Never Alone* is following a genre convention within the medium of video games.

4.1. Siḷa has a soul

Early on in the game, after Fox tricks the polar bear and saves Nuna, Fox and Nuna team up and set out on their adventure together. The player(s) steers Nuna and Fox across the snow covered tundra: they slide down slopes, braces against the harsh wind, jumps over frozen rivers, and crawls up ice covered hillsides. The wind is howling around them. The landscape, although completely covered in snow, has shades of pink, yellow and blue amongst all the white and grey. Nuna and Fox approaches the top of a steep cliff that falls vertically down in the dark sea water, and the narrator says:

> The girl understood
> that helping spirits are among us
> Being different, that fox
> revealed to the girl
> Just how beautiful those helpers were.

Just as the pair reaches the edge of the cliff, a sound is heard, almost like a breath, and a white silhouette appears in the air in front of them. The silhouette has long thin arms stretched out towards Nuna and Fox. Its shape has some similarities with a fish. White, glowing particles float in the air around it, and the same particles float around Fox, showing that Fox in some way has a connection with the being. This is a helping spirit. These spirits follow Nuna and Fox throughout the game, and this scene, as just described, is where the player is introduced to them and their game mechanics for the first time.

The helping spirits take many forms: some resemble a stream of fish or a bird, others resemble trees, and others again resemble mythical creatures. They are always depicted as white, glowing silhouettes surrounded by glowing particles; the sound they make when appearing is airy and celestial, their overall appearance is ethereal and out of this world. Sometimes, the helping spirits do not appear in their full form, but instead as a white glowing ball that has to be activated by a throw of Nuna's magical Bola.

As the narrator states, Fox is not an ordinary polar fox: he can communicate and interact with the spirits around in nature. For the player(s), this means that Fox is the one who guides the spirits to the right locations at the right time, so that the spirit is in reach of Nuna to jump or latch on to. Fox then needs to guide the spirit to a location where Nuna can get off safely, and from where she can continue her journey. This back and forth interaction with

54

Nuna's physical abilities and Fox's abilities to both get into small spaces, climb up walls and summon the helping spirits, is at the heart of *Never Alone's* gameplay.

Figure 11. Nuna and Fox meet the spirits

Even though the helping spirits may seem otherworldly to the player, Nuna does not react to them in any way when they first appear in the game. The player soon learns that Nuna's lack of reaction makes sense in the Inupiat worldview. "The girl understood that there are helping spirits among us", the narrator states. When meeting the helping spirits for the first time, the cultural insight "Siḷa has a soul" is unlocked, describing the inupiat worldview of Siḷa and helping spirits, giving the player deeper insight.

"Siḷa is the weather. It also means the atmosphere. Here is the Nuna, or the land, and its anything from the land into the moon, the sun, the stars. That's Siḷa", states Fanny Kuutuuq, an older Inupiat woman with curly grey hair and glasses, dressed in a red sweater, while she gesticulates with her hands to exemplify what she means. The documentary cuts to footage of Arctic Alaskan landscapes, before we see a middle-aged woman with long black hair dressed in casual clothes, named Jana Pausauraq. "It's very spiritual, we have a relationship with Siḷa. Siḷa has a soul, in the same way we do as people, in the same way as animals do." Fanny continues: "We've always had that spirituality of everything around us". In these statements, both Fanny and Jana use a religious vocabulary; words such as *soul* and *spirituality* are words that can be recognised as belonging to the domain of religion.

In *Siḷa has a soul*, the cultural ambassadors describe their understanding of Siḷa to the player. When Fanny translates the word, she describes Siḷa as the weather or the atmosphere, but also as everything around us, from the land to the moon and stars. Her translation of the concept is here towards the secular, rather than towards religion. A similar translation is found in a later cultural insight titled *No more thick ice*, where Ronald Aniqsuaq, an older inupiat man, is talking about the effects of climate change on the Inupiat people, Ronald states: "We're very much aware of the climate change, and its been, for many years, even before climatologists were noticing the change, Inuit were saying 'Siḷa alaŋŋuqtuq'. Our climate is changing." Ronald translates 'Siḷa' to mean climate. By translating 'siḷa' into 'climate', 'Siḷa' fits into a vocabulary that is used in science and in academic writing on the matter of climate change, giving the Inupiat's 'traditional knowledge' more credibility.

Fanny, in *Siḷa has a soul,* later goes on to say that the Inupiat always have had a spirituality of everything around them, and by doing this, the word 'siḷa' is translated into the domain of religion. The title of the cultural insight, *Siḷa has a soul,* can in this context be interpreted as being part of a vocabulary of religion. It is also, however, possible to think that the word 'soul' is being used in a more metaphorical way. The word does not necessarily have to be used in a religious context; one can for example say, "This room is the soul of the house", where 'soul' is used to describe something as essential or most important. Words such as 'soul' can be translated away from, and toward religion, and maybe sometimes both at the same time. Jana says that siḷa is very spiritual, that it has a soul in the same ways as humans and animals do. This is a good example of how a word or concepts can be translated into different domains in different circumstances and in different contexts. In *Siḷa has a soul*, 'siḷa' is translated towards a domain of religion, while in *No more thick ice* it is translated away from it, and into a domain of science.

In another Cultural Insight titled *Rebirth & naming*, the Cultural Ambassadors talk about the Inupiat worldview of the rebirth of the human spirit. The soul of a person who is deceased can live on through the passing of his/her name to the younger generation. "The spirit of our *atiq* lives on as long as man remembers that name," we learn from Ronald Aniqsuaq. "it's a traditional belief that their soul is continuing on", the young woman Cordelia tells us. Cordelia describes this worldview as 'traditional belief', not as a religious belief or as Inupiat religion.

It is interesting, although not surprising, to find that the word *religion* is not uttered in any way in the video game by the narrator nor the cultural ambassadors. Instead, the word *spirituality* is used. *Spiritual* or *spirituality* is used three times, while the word *spirit* is used

five times throughout the cultural insights. This displacement of 'religion' in favour of 'spirituality' in *Never Alone* aligns with Siv Ellen Kraft's findings in her research on discourses on indigenous religion in U.N. publications in her article *U.N.- Discourses on Indigenous Religion* (2017). Kraft writes that the word *religion* is consistently excluded from *indigeneity* in U.N. publications, and the few times the word is used in relation to indigeneity, it is either with reference to particular religions among distinct indigenous people, or to hostile outsiders, that the latter being more common than the first (Kraft 2017). Religion is presented as something that comes from the outside, something foreign and imposed on indigenous people.

The notion of the word 'religion' as something foreign to indigenous people is not just found in discourses on indigenous religion in U.N. publications. Bjørn Ola Tafjord, who has done extensive fieldwork among the Bribris, an indigenous group in Talamanca, writes about how the Bribris understands the word 'religion' in his article Scales, translations, and siding effects: Uses of 'indígenea' and 'religión' in Talamanca and beyond (2017b). The majority of the Bribris, Tafjord writes, insists that 'religión' is something that is not 'indígenea', and the majority uses 'religión' only when referencing sets of teachings and practices introduced by foreigners, while their own histories and practices are talked about as tradiciones indígenas, (Tafjord 2017b).

As shown by Kraft and Tafjord, religion is often seen as something foreign to indigenous people, something that has come from the outside, and this might be a reason for the lack of use of the word in *Never Alone*. The practices and beliefs described in the game are not called 'indigenous religion' by the ambassadors themselves, but rather 'spirituality'. That does not mean that indigenous people do not have a religion. In a survey from 2014 made by Pew Research Center on religious and public life among people in the different states of the U.S.A, 62% of adults in Alaska identifies as Christians, 6% identifies as belonging to another religion, and 31% identifies as religious "nones" (Pew Research Center 2014). As this statistic shows, a big part of the people in Alaska identifies as religious, and the majority identifies as Christians. Christianity is, in regards to it Trinitarian doctrine, what is known as an exclusive religion. Exclusivism is a stand on truth claims that leans on the Aristotelian concept of truth, that there can only be one truth and not many. This eminently leads to a regard of all other religious claims as being false (Marbaniang 2007). When knowing that a big part of the indigenous communities in Alaska identifies as Christian, and when we know that the truth claims of Trinitarian Christianity is exclusive, there are reasons to argue that using the word 'religion' about the traditions and believes that are being

presented in *Never Alone* would collide with a lot of indigenous peoples identity as Christians. Instead of talking about religion, the cultural ambassadors of *Never Alone* use words like 'spirituality', 'tradition' and 'traditional belief'.

4.2. Spirits in *Never Alone* and in other video games

Spirits are not unfamiliar to gamers; if you have ever played a video game, chances are that you have come across spirits in one way or another. When talking about spirits, I here refer to non-physical entities. In the world of video games, spirits can be found in many shapes and forms – in the shape of animals, humans or as mythical creatures, they can be material or immaterial, or they can be found as an abstract concept. There are helping spirits, evil spirits, guardian spirits, wisps, ghosts and probably many other types to be found. Sometimes the spirit guides the player, and the player relies on their supernatural powers, sometimes the spirits are to be defeated, and in some cases, the player is playing as a spirit.

Based on my own experience as a person who has played a lot of video games in different genres over a timespan of almost three decades, I would argue that certain conventions have been established for how to depict spirits, and *Never Alone* adheres to these.[14] I would argue that *Never Alone* leans on an already established and well known formula of how spirits and the spiritual world is depicted in video games, and how this is used as a mechanic in the game.

4.2.1. Visuals

From an aesthetic point of view, there are a few things that stand out when spirits or things related to the spiritual world are being presented in a game. To make spirits stand out within the parameters of the game world, they are often depicted as glowing and/or transparent. This glowing and transparent quality contrasts the 'material' game world. When 'good' spirits are being presented, the colours often used are white, gold, and light shades of blue, green and

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[14] The observations and analyses I have done in this subchapter is based on my own findings, and my own knowledge of -, and experiences with video games. When working on my thesis I have done several attempts to find relevant literature on the topic of portrayals of spirits in video games, and the use of spirits as a game mechanic, but there seems to be a lack of studies done on this exact topic.

However, my findings regarding spirits as game mechanic do align with those of the game studies scholar Kevin Schut in his article *They Kill Mystery: The mechanistic bias of video game representations of religion and spirituality* (2014), where he argues that the representations of religion and spirituality in video game is mechanical in nature, because the medium itself has is biased; it works within a set system of rules and game mechanics.

yellow, while 'bad' spirits more often are depicted using the colours red and purple, or as black smoke, but with the same transparent and glowing quality.

In the role-playing video game *The Elders Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011) there is a mission called 'Kyne's Sacred Trial' where the player is sent out to hunt down several guardian spirits, as a test to prove herself as a worthy hunter in the eyes of the deity Kyne. The spirits are shaped like different animals, but their appearance is white and translucent. This way of depicting spirits is found in several games.

Another similar example is the light spirits found in the Japanese developed video game *The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess* (Nintendo EAD, 2006). The hero Link is sent out to help retrieve the light that has been stolen from the land of Hyrule, and thereby restore the power of the Spirits of Light that watch over the land. In this game, the spirits are also in the form of animals, they are translucent, and give of an otherworldly glow of light. They stand out from their surroundings; their tall stature, and the light emanating from them sets a stark contrast to a Hyrule that is covered in twilight.

Fig. 12. Guardian spirit in *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*   Fig. 13 Spirit of Light from *Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess*

The spirits in *Never Alone*, as mentioned earlier, are white and glowing, at places almost transparent, with no distinct outlines. They remind me of clouds, they are floating in air, and their form is almost dissolving into nothingness. This makes them seem like something in between the material and the immaterial. There are sparkling particles surrounding them. In the scene of the video game where Fox transforms himself into a spirit

in the shape of a boy with a polar fox parka, his appearance has the same characteristics as the other spirits in the game – white and glowing with sparkling particles surrounding him.

Figure 14. Fox in his spirit form

4.2.2. Music and sounds

A second common trait to the representation of spirits in video games is that the spirits are usually accompanied by distinct music and/or sounds. Together with the visual representation of the spirits, the sounds and music accompanying frame or mark the spirits as different from the rest of the game world. When the player comes into contact with a spirit in a game, it is not unusual that the music changes character. The music can be ambient or prominent, but it often has a sacral and ethereal quality, characterised by a use of musical instruments like wind chimes, vocals, piano and strings.

In the open world adventure game *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the wild* (Nintendo EPD, 2017), the protagonist Link can come into contact with three elemental spirits in the shape of dragons. Throughout the game, the music is sparse; the game relies mostly on silence, the sounds of the environment and of simple piano chords now and then. This changes when you approach one of the spirits: suddenly, the piano ramps up, playing a rapid movement over a major second, and a traditional Japanese string instrument starts playing a slow melody over the movement of the piano. The sound of the wind also gets stronger. This sudden burst of music gives a feeling of vitality and life, and makes this encounter stand out as something exceptional and very different from the rest of the in-game experiences.

In *Never Alone*, when the player comes into contact with a spirit, it makes a distinct sound. The sound is airy, almost like a breath, but also growly. When listening closely to the sounds, you can hear distinct overtones resonate in the background.[15] These overtones gradually, almost inaudibly, change from one to another, giving a feeling of floating movement with no distinct pulse. It is also possible to recognise the sound of a voice singing long tones in the background. Brendan Hogan, sound designer on *Never Alone* writes on the games web page how he made these sounds: "There are three different hovering sounds all made from recordings of my voice, my breath and me whistling processed with convolution reverb, Reaktor effects. This sound provided a great ambient other-worldly presence […]" (Hogan 2014)

4.2.3. Game mechanics

The spirits are a vital part of the storytelling in *Never Alone*, but just as importantly, they are a crucial part of a repertoire of game mechanics. Game mechanics are "systems of interactions between the player and the game" (Rubin, 2010), and can be defined as "the rules and procedures that guide the player and the game response to the player's moves or actions" (Boller, 2013:17). In *Never Alone*, the player has agency over Nuna and Fox, and can interact with the environment around them. As mentioned earlier, Nuna and Fox have different abilities and ways to interact with their surroundings; Nuna for example throws her Bola and Fox can climb up walls. Fox also has the abilities to summon and interact with spirits. In *Never Alone*, the spirits help the player to manoeuvre through the harsh environment of the arctic by interacting with them as if they were physical objects. Nuna and Fox can climb, walk and jump on them to reach places otherwise impossible to get to. From a mechanical point of view, the spirits are in the game to provide the player with platforms to traverse the landscape, which is a core mechanic in a platform game.

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[15] Overtones are a concept found in music theory that is used to refer to any frequency above the fundamental frequency of a sound. Music is based upon the physical laws of sound-waves, and this law shows that every tone and sound have a relation to another. These relations of tones are measurable by mathematics. Every tone or sound generates a series of overtones that stretches upwards indefinitely. All of the tones that are generates by a fundamental frequency follows a certain mathematical pattern, that will always be the same. A whole series of overtones together with its fundamental tone is called *harmonics*.
Some musical instruments, like the piano, have a construction, which makes all the overtones present, as far up as the ear can hear. In some instruments, again because of their construction, some of the overtones might be lacking or are very dim, while others are much stronger. These differences in the harmonics, gives every instruments their own particular pallet of sound. (Cowell & Nicholls 1996).

In a scene about two-thirds through *Never Alone*, Nuna and Fox again try to escape the Manslayer, but in vain; the Manslayer gets hold of Fox. Nuna watches in dread as the Manslayer snaps Fox's neck and throws him off a cliff. The spirit platform Nuna stands on disappears, and they both fall. In the next scene, we find Nuna sitting in the snow, crying over Fox's dead body, when suddenly a warm light hits her face. Arising from Fox's body, a boy dressed in parka with the hood resembling a polar fox floats in mid air. Fox has become a spirit. The player can now switch between playing as Nuna and playing as the animal spirit of Fox. The new shape brings a new mechanic to the game: Fox can fly. The ability to fly gives the game more space to play with what kind of puzzle solving it can do, and how platforms are laid out, which makes the game less repetitive.

When looking at video games in general, there are many ways spirits can be used as a game mechanic. Let me give some examples. One way of incorporating spirits into the game mechanics is to make the player herself *be* the spirit, by casting a spirit as the game's playable character. Several games have done this in one way or another. In *Ghost Trick: Phantom Detective* (Capcom 2010) for the handheld gaming platform Nintendo DS, the game's protagonist is the recently deceased Sissel. The player takes control of Sissel's ghost to solve the mystery of who he was when he was still alive, and who killed him. Being a ghost, the player has the abilities to perform different ghost tricks, helping him to solve puzzles, and navigate the game world. The player can swap between the Land of the Living, and the Ghost World, where in the first one the time flows normally, and in the latter the time has stopped. Both *Ghost Trick: Phantom Detective* and *Never Alone* use spirits to justify the introduction of a specific game mechanic. By introducing spirits, the developers introduce an otherworldly element to the game, giving space for the possibility that otherworldly things can happen. If Nuna in *Never Alone* were suddenly given the ability to fly, this would break with the narrative and the setting of the game, which, although based on a traditional story, is set to represent a present living culture. A disconnection between the game mechanics (what the player does in the game) and the narrative (what the game tells you) in a video game is called a ludo-narrative dissonance (Seraphine 2016). By giving the special, otherworldly abilities in a game to a spirit (an otherworldly entity) instead of a human being, the game can steer away from a ludo-narrative dissonance.

Other ways spirits can be used in a game is for guidance and help, and as means to gain powers to overcome enemies or obstacles. *The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword* (Nintendo 2011) is an example where a spirit is used for guidance and help. In this game, the playable character Link has a companion called Fi, a spirit residing inside the Goddess Sword,

forged by the Goddess of Hylia. Fi's role in the game is to act like a navigator for Link. On their journey, she aids Link and the player by providing them information about different areas and enemies of the game, and she works like a mediator between the Goddess of Hylia and Link. Instead of giving the player textboxes with information to read, or commands and symbols on the screen telling the player what to do, where to go and how to do a certain task, which is a common way of carrying information across to the player, the game developers give these tasks to a companion in the shape of a spirit.

In many games, the playable character can call upon the guidance and help of the spirits to gain extraordinary powers to defeat enemies or other players. In these scenarios, the spirit(s) can work through the player characters to grant them immense physical or psychic powers and abilities. In the team based online FPS game *Overwatch* (Blizzard Entertainment 2014) the player can choose from over thirty different heroes to play, all of which inhabits their own unique abilities and backstories. In a match of *Overwatch*, two teams with six heroes on each team, fight to win over the enemy team by shooting them and by capturing the objectives. Every hero has one 'ultimate ability' that will charge up during play. In *Overwatch* we meet the characters Genji Shimada, a cyborg ninja, and his brother Hanzo Shimada, a bowman and assassin. Genji and Hanzo both have the abilities to summon the spirit dragons, which give them immense powers that can swipe down enemies around them. When the player activates Genji or Hanzo's ultimate ability, the hero will call out a phrase before he unleashes the power of the spirit. Genji will call out "The Dragon becomes me!" when the 'ultimate ability' is activated, and then he pulls out his katana. A green dragon spirit appears as he swings his blade, giving him superior physical damage output to his enemies and the ability to move around much quicker, until his 'ultimate ability' runs out.

Another video game figure that uses spirit powers to summon strength and abilities to win over his enemies in battle is the character Nightwolf from the Mortal Kombat series. Nightwolf is a Native American historian, and shaman who uses the powers of The Great Spirit to help him fight his opponents in this online fighting game. In battle, Nightwolf can enhance his tomahawk with green spiritual energy, and he can use this same energy to summon bows and arrows. In *Mortal Kombat 11* (NetherRealm Studios, 2019), the most recent game in the franchise, Nightwolf also has the ability to summon his spirit animals: a bear, a wolf, and an eagle, which all grant him special bonuses in fight.

Figure 15. Genji from *Overwatch*   Figure 16. Nightwolf from the *Mortal Kombat* series

4.3. Chapter Summary

In this chapter I have explored articulations of spirit(s) and spirituality in *Never Alone*. In the first part of this chapter titled *Siḷa has a soul* I looked at how the Cultural Ambassadors talks about spirit(s) and spirituality, and how they are using a vocabulary that in many ways can be seen as belonging to a domain of religion, although they never use the word 'religion' about it themselves. Even though *Never Alone* avoid the word 'religion' (intentionally or not), it uses a vocabulary that is strongly associated with the domain of religion, with words like 'spirit(s)', 'spirituality', 'sacred', 'rebirth' and 'soul', and expressions like 'consciousness in everything' and 'everything is alive'. I argued that using a vocabulary such as 'spirituality' and 'traditional belief' instead of 'indigenous religion' might be seen as less offensive for people who identifies as being Christians, and that the openness of the word 'spirituality' can create a space where revitalisation of traditions can be combined with a Christian identity.

I have shown how translation of words and concepts in *Never Alone* can be directional, depending on the context and the message that is being conveyed. I give an example of how the Cultural Ambassadors translate the word 'Siḷa' both towards, and away from the domain of religion, depending on the context it is used, and depending on what message the ambassadors wants to convey in that specific context. As Clifford writes, Translation is not the same as transmission - translation is an uneven process (2013), it is always subjective and never neutral.

In the second part of this chapter, I have explored how spirits are being portrayed in *Never Alone*, focusing on aesthetical choices made by the game developers, and what role the spirits have as a gameplay mechanic. I have shown that *Never Alone* in many ways borrows and leans on an already established game genre convention, when it comes to how spirits are

portrayed, and how they are used in video games. Aesthetically, *Never Alone* draws on the game genre conventions of depicting spirits as transparent and glowing, accompanied by an ethereal soundtrack, but at the same time *Never Alone* also draws on Inupiat aesthetics, making them stand out. *Never Alone* also follows the conventions of how spirits are used for help and guidance through gameplay.

Never Alone is manoeuvring in a space between the conventions of its medium, and of indigenous religion. Video games are entertainment - it is a commercial product for which the consumer has a set of expectations. The game has to perform this role and give the consumer what they want and what they expect, and at the same time the game must try to be true to Inupiat culture and tradition. *Never Alone* is performing indigenous religion by enabling the player to play with a culture's religious symbols and belief system. In one way the player too is performing indigenous religion through play. The player is practising religion, and turning it into something real and living, regardless of what motivations the player has when playing the game.

5. The drum

In this chapter I will explore how the drum is articulated as an indigenous marker and as a symbol of Inupiat indigeneity and spirituality in *Never Alone*. The drum is an important part of the narrative in *Never Alone*, and during my fieldwork in Alaska, I found that the drum as a symbol of the Inupiaq people goes beyond the context of the video game. I will therefore also explore if the articulations of the drum in *Never Alone* is similar to how it is being articulated in other video games, and how – if at all – the drum in *Never Alone* relates to a global discourse on indigenous religion.

First, I will use a scene from the video game and a related Cultural insight from the video game as the basis for my analysis, focusing on the drum as a symbol of an Inupiaq indigeneity and spirituality. I will explore how the drum is used as a tool for storytelling and gameplay in the game mechanics, and I will look at how the drum is articulated by the Cultural Ambassadors in the Cultural Insights.

Second, I will present and describe some of my observations and findings during my fieldwork at Alaska Native Heritage Center in Anchorage, Alaska. I will examine how the drum was used as an indigenous marker for the Inupiat people at the centre, and how the drum is articulated as something belonging to 'indigeneity' and 'religion'

After presenting my findings at the heritage centre, I will go on to examine the drum as a marker, and as a part of a vocabulary recognised as indigenous religion on a global scale, and if the articulations of the drum in *Never Alone* echoes the articulations we find in a global discourse on indigenous religion. In this subchapter I will also explore how the drum is used in video games in general as a marker of indigeneity and indigenous religion, and if this can tell us something about the drum and its relation to indigeneity on a global level. I will examine if there are commonalities and genre conventions to be found in how the drum is used, and if so, how they resemble the use in *Never Alone*.

5.1. The heartbeat of the community

Nuna and Fox continue on their journey. Soon we can hear the sound of laughter, as small strange creatures suddenly appear and run across in the foreground of the screen, just to disappear in the bushes as suddenly as they appeared. "Strange little people appeared from the

underground", the narrator tells us. After crossing some obstacles with the help from helping spirits coming down from the sky in the form of giant Looms, Nuna and Fox stumble across an old man sitting by himself by a campfire amidst the unrelenting blizzard. The man is dressed in a caribou parka and he is smoking a scrimshaw decorated pipe; his eyes big and red, just like the owl that sits in the background of his little camp. The narrator reads:

> "Come here granddaughter"
> said the owl man.
> "How does he know me?"
> thought the girl.
> "Because I have been watching over you.
> If I only had my drum,
> I could help you find the one who
> did this to your village."

The girl and the fox set out to find the old man's drum, and a cultural insight titled "The heartbeat of the community" is unlocked. Nuna and Fox soon discover that the strange Little People have stolen the drum, and taken it to their underground tunnels. The pair has to solve puzzles, out smart the Little People and get the drum back. At their return to the Owl man, he gives Nuna the magical Bola as a token of his gratitude. This section of the game ends with Nuna and Fox leaving while the Owl man plays his drums and chants.

The Owl man is a peculiar character in *Never Alone*. It is not clear to the player who he is or what he is; only that he is helpful and wise. His features are something in between a man and a bird. It is never stated in the game, but the fact that his appearance is animal-like, and that he seems to be a solitary man with the powers of seeing and knowing, makes him look like an *Angatquq*. An Angatquq was an individual (in most cases a male, but in some cases also a female) in the Inupiat community whose powers to affect their surroundings were stronger than those of the ordinary Inupiat (although all Inupiat had the power at some level to affect their surroundings by keeping taboos and doing rituals, and through the use of talismans, songs and naming) (Chance 1990). The Angatquq was seen as an important character in the Inupiat community, and their powers of healing, seeing into the future, controlling nature and being in contact with the spiritual world gave him/her authority. The Angatquq was known for having a *Tuungaq*, or something resembling a 'helping spirit', which took the shape of an animal and could be called for in a time of need. This was something that the common Inupiat did not have

access to. It was also said that the angatquq could transform himself into the shape of the animal the Tuungaq presented itself as (Chance 1990).

The drum only appears as a 'physical' object in the game world in the scenes relating to the Owl man. The connection between the drum and the Owl man puts the drum in a setting where it is not only a musical instrument, because we now know that the Owl man is an individual with exceptional powers. The Owl man states "If I only had my drum, I could help you find the one who did this to your village", implying that his drum is connected to his abilities of seeing and knowing. This might imply that the drum itself is special, that the drum has otherworldly powers, or that the drum is an artefact which the Owl man can channel his power through during rituals.

Figure 17. Nuna return the Owl man's drum

In *Never Alone* the drum plays an important part, and one can say that the drum is used in three different ways: 1) it is used to evolve the storyline, 2) it is used as a motivator, and 3) it is used as an aesthetic tool.

The outline of the storyline in *Never Alone* is quite straightforward: there is an unrelenting blizzard putting the livelihood of Nuna's village at risk, and wanting to help her village, Nuna sets out to find the source of the blizzard and hopefully put a stop to it. Underway on her journey, several things happen, making the storyline evolve on a micro level, although the overarching story stays the same. On their journey, the protagonists meet the Owl man, calling them over to him. The Owl man has lost his drum, and he needs it back. Here, one can say that the drum is used to develop the story on a micro level. The player later learns that Nuna gets a magical Bola in return for helping the Owl man. This Bola is crucial in the game, as it works as a primary weapon and tool to interact with the game world.

In a video game the player needs a motivation to go out and do the tasks the game wants her to do. On a big scale, the main motivator for the player of *Never Alone* is to find the source of the blizzard, and to save Nuna's village. The drum works as a motivator on a smaller scale, in a particular scene of the game; the player has to find the drum, and to do so, the player will have to solve several environmental puzzles, and outsmart the Little People. The drum gives the player a reason to trail off the main objective in the game (which is to find the source of the storm) to do other tasks. The linear nature of *Never Alone* does not really give the player any choice in the matter of helping the Owl man retrieve his drum; the objective is already set, and the player has to help him to progress in the game, but the drum gives the player a reason to do so.

The third use of the drum is as an aesthetic tool. In *Never Alone*, the music is in general sparse (except for in the Cultural Insights); the music sounds airy and floating, with no clear pulse and rhythm, and relying on sounds from nature, giving an impression of a dreamlike state. In contrast, when Nuna and Fox find themselves in a dangerous situation, the music ramps up and becomes dramatic: drums beating in a rhythmic pattern, giving a feeling of urgency and danger, making me think of war drums. In some way, the sound of the drums gives me a feeling of going far back in time to a distant past.

In the Cultural Insight *The Heartbeat of the Community* which unlocks when the player first meets the Owl man, a young woman, called Cordelia 'Quignaaq' is talking about the importance of the drum in Inupiat culture. Cordelia is probably in her twenties. She is dressed in what looks like a summer parka with flower patterns, and in her hair she has a decoration that looks like is made out of caribou skin and fur. "Drum is something that's common to all cultures in Alaska," is her opening quote, while there is shown a montage of old footages of Inupiat people sitting in a line playing drums, children as well as adults dancing traditional dances to the drum beat, most of them in traditional clothing, dancing alone and in groups. The footage is from different occasions; some are clearly captured during the winter, and some during the summer. There is no sound on the videos; instead sombre piano music is playing in the background. She continues: "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" Cordelia claims. She is not only talking about the drum as something particular for the Inupiat culture, the drum has a much more important role: it is a symbol of Alaskan indigeneity. Cordelia continues:

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. And to know that you are 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.

For Cordelia, the drum is so much more than a musical instrument. The drum becomes a symbol of her identity as an Alaska native, and the beating of the drums in unison is helping her connect with her roots, her culture and her community. Cordelia uses a vocabulary that can be found in many discourses on indigeneity and indigenous religion. The language she uses is personal, but at the same time she is scaling upwards – her 'you' is a globalized indigenous 'you'. The connection to the land becomes crucial to Cordelia's identity as indigenous, and the importance of connectedness to ancestral land is a common theme in the global discourse on indigeneity.

"The heartbeat of the community" ends with a short drum session by James Mumigan. James is an older man, dressed in a blue shirt; around his neck he is wearing a traditional necklace made out of what looks like bones and claws. He sings and drums in front of a white background, making the séance look very modern and professional. The contrast between the old footage and the very professional video of James, dressed in both modern and traditional clothes, gives an impression of continuity. This is not something that used to be; it is a living culture.

Figure 18. James Mumigan playing and singing in "The heartbeat of the community".

5.2. Alaska Native Heritage Centre

During my trip to Alaska, I visited Alaska Native Heritage Center in Anchorage, where I did a smaller fieldwork. The heritage centre is not a normal museum, focusing on displays of collections from the past. At the Alaska Native Heritage Center the visitors get to know the Native cultures of Alaska through encounters with the people themselves. Through performances and interaction, the centre is a hub for cultural exchange and education. The centre is run solely by Alaska Natives, and it is Elders of the different indigenous communities that approve the programs at the centre.

The first thing I noticed, just as I arrived at the parking lot outside the cultural centre, was big, colourful banners hanging from the light posts. Each banner had its own colour, and each one was showing a different symbol with the name of an indigenous group at the bottom. One of the banners was coloured orange, with the words 'Inupiaq & St. Lawrence Island Yupik' written in yellow letters at the bottom of the banner. The symbol on the banner was a drum with a drumstick lying across it; the drum was coloured in yellow and black. All the different indigenous groups represented at the heritage centre had its own banner like this, with a symbol representing that specific group, and the drum was the symbol chosen to represent the Inupiat people. This symbol depicting the drum kept showing up all across the heritage centre, when the Inupiat people were in focus. It could be found on placards giving historical background about the Inupiat, on the signs next to artefacts that were displayed, and on quotes from Inupiat people.
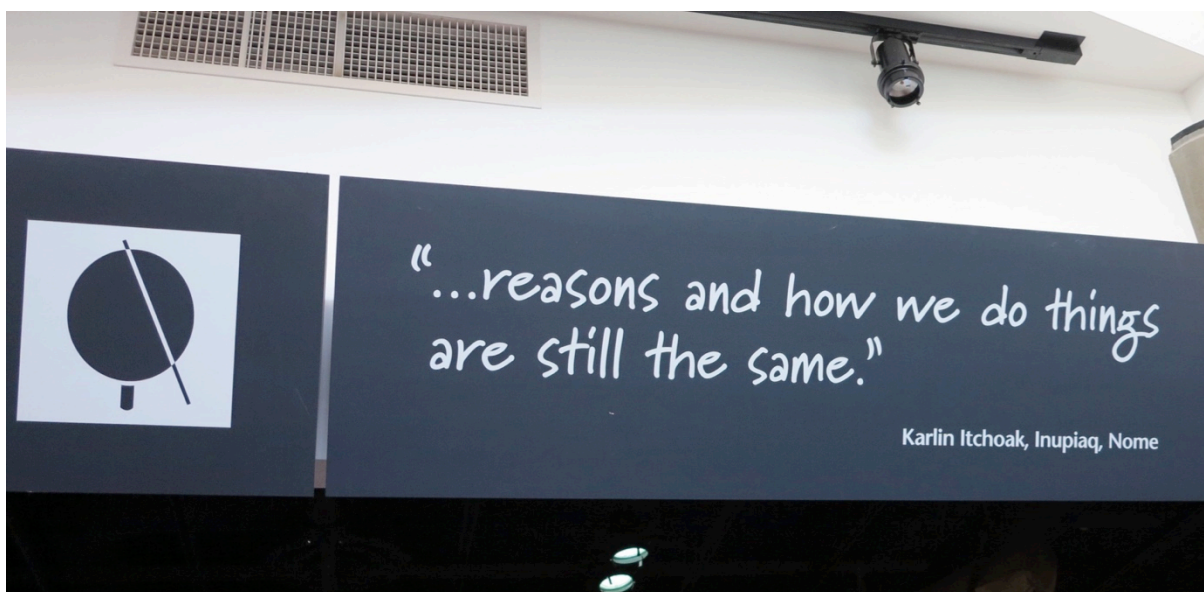
Figure 19. Sign displayed at Alaska Native Heritage Center

When buying my ticket at the entrance of the heritage centre, I received a visitors' guide from the woman in the ticket booth. This brochure contained a map of the heritage centre, and gave a time schedule of the different activities and lectures throughout the day at the centre. The visitors' guide also showed a map of Alaska, where the different regions were coloured in the same colours as found on the banners outside the entrance to the centre. Next to the map there was a list of "Ten universal values", and after, there was a short description about each symbol on the map. Under the headline "Inupiaq & St. Lawrence Island Yupik" it said:

> 'The first thing we do when we all get together is sing… the Sauyaq brings us all together.' The Sauyaq or Drum is used at all gatherings and ceremonies. In some Inupiaq dialects the word for 'skin' of the drum also means 'future eye' relating to the 'eye of awareness'.
>
> From *Visitors' guide*, Alaska Native Heritage Center (2018)

In this text on the visitors' guide, the heritage centre emphasizes the importance of the drum in the Inupiaq culture. The drum brings the people and the community together, and it is central in the ordinary daily life, but also in the ceremonial life. In the last sentence, the heritage centre highlights that the word for drum is related with the concept of the "eye of awareness". The eye of awareness, also known as *ellam iinga*, is commonly depicted as a circle with a dot in the middle in Yupik iconography, and scholars like Fienup-Riordan, who is known for her extensive work as a anthropologist studying Yupik culture in Alaska, has interpreted this motif to be linked with spiritual vision and transformation (Fienup-Riordan 2007). By connecting the drum to the Yupik 'eye of awareness', the visitor's guide gives the drum a new layer of meaning. With Tafjord's reflections on directionality of translation in mind (as I have written about in chapter one), one could say that the drum is translated towards a domain of religion.

Located in the main building, right next to the ticket booth and the information desk, there was a circular open space with a small stage, called 'gathering place' in the visitor's guide. Here, different activities and workshops took place throughout the day. On the stage, a map of Alaska, similar to the one that was in the visitor's guide, with colour-coded indigenous regions, decorated the wall. During my visit, I attended two dance sessions and one session where they displayed native games. Each session lasted approximately twenty minutes, and

after a short break, the session was followed by a 'meet and greet' with the dance group, and the athletes.

Out of the two dance performances I attended, there was one displaying Inupiat traditional dances, and one displaying Yupik traditional dances. In both sessions, there were young women and men in their late teens (together with two older instructors) dancing, playing drums and chanting, dressed in clothes inspired by traditional clothing from their respective indigenous group. The dancers danced in unison to the rhythm, while a row of drummers sat behind them, drumming and chanting. The drums the drummers used were fairly similar to the one the Owl man uses in *Never Alone,* and identical to the one the Cultural Ambassador James Mumigan plays in *The heartbeat of the community* – a wooden framed drum, covered in a thin membrane with a handle at the bottom. This type of drum is found in many Inuit cultures across Alaska, Canada and Greenland. Although the Owl man's drum does not have a handle at the bottom, rather a handle across the backside of it, the overall shape, and the technique of playing was the same – a technique where they hit with the drumstick from underneath the drum, instead of from the top.

It struck me during my visit at the heritage centre, that the drum had a significant role in the display of Alaska native culture in general, and Inupiat culture in particular. The symbol of the drum was found all over the centre, when Inupiat people were in focus in the exhibitions. The sound of the drums brought the visitors at the centre together in the gathering place to watch the performance happen on stage. The drum was very visible at the centre, and was used for performance and as a marker. The heritage centre is a place for exchange of cultural heritage – there were many tourists visiting the centre, both from Alaska, from the lower 48 states, and from abroad. In this meeting between the Natives Alaskans and the visitors, the Native Alaskans performed roles as mediators of their culture and heritage, just like the Cultural Ambassadors do in *Never Alone*. What they displayed at the centre was planned and rehearsed, and the Inupiat had chosen the drum as their main symbol and artifact. By emphasising the importance of the drum through signs, performance, and by in generally being a visible element at the heritage centre, the centre both contributed and strengthened the connection between the drum and 'indigeneity'. Likewise, by using a vocabulary that articulated the drum as an artefact used in ceremonial settings, and making a connection between the drum and the Eye of awareness, the heritage centre evoked recognition of the drum as being related to 'indigenous religion'.

Figure 20. Replica of a traditional Inupiat dwelling   Figure 21. Whale bones at the Inupiat village site

During my visit at the heritage centre I engaged in informal conversations with the people working there, especially youth, where I asked them questions in relation to *Never Alone*. Did they know of the game? What did they think about playing a video game where their culture was being represented? I was a bit surprised that many of the people I talked to at the centre had not heard about *Never Alone*, including many of the younger people I talked to, considering the video game's position as being the first of its kind in the United States. I also got the impression that several of the people I talked with who did not know of the game were not particularly interested in learning about it either. There might still be an assumption among people that video games are toys, and therefore not of importance.

After the performance of Inupiat dances, I took part in a 'meet and greet' on stage, where the audience could come up and talk with the performers individually, and ask questions. One of the performers was a woman in her forties who played the drum during the dance session. During our short conversation, I asked her about *Never Alone*, and what she knew about the video game. The woman answered that she knew of it well, because her daughter, who was twelve years old, had played it. On my question if she thought the video game was well known among the Native population in Alaska, she hesitated at first. Then she answered that she thinks the video game got more publicity in Alaska, and a bigger reputation, first after *Never Alone* received attention from the media in the lower 48 states.

5.3. The drum in a globalizing discourse on indigenous religion

In this subchapter I will explore how the drum is articulated in a globalizing discourse on indigenous religion, and if there are any similarities with how the drum is being articulated in *Never Alone.* First I will look at how the cultural ambassadors draw on a globalizing discourse when they talk about the drum in the video game, then I will go on to look at the use of the drum in other video games.

5.3.1. Heartbeat of Mother Earth

In "The heartbeat of the community" a connection is made between the beating of the heart and the beating of the drum. As Cordelia explains, "the drumming mirrors the heartbeat, and when you continue drumming soon it will be in line with your heartbeat." This connection is not only made in *Never Alone,* but can be found in many discourses on indigeneity, especially in a North American context. On the webpages of the Canadian non-profit stake-holder organization Indigenous Tourism BC who works towards a "continued growth of a sustainable, authentic and culturally rich Indigenous tourism industry in British Columbia" (Indigenous Tourism BC a, 2020), there is a short article under the tab "Arts and Culture" called *The drum: Heartbeat of our indigenous cultures.* (Indigenous Tourism BC b, 2020). This article focuses on the importance of the drum for present day indigenous Canadians as a tool for communication and connection between people, and the drum as a way to pass on traditional knowledge. The way they describe the role of the drum in their indigenous communities, echoes the way Cordelia talks about the drum as vital in how she connects with her Inupiat community and heritage.

A similar way of talking about the drum was present among the demonstrations against the Dakota Access Pipeline at the Standing Rock Sioux reservation in North Dakota in 2016-17, where indigenous people from large parts of the world took part. In her article *Indigenous Religion(s) – In the making and on the move – Sámi activism from Alta to Standing Rock* (2020) Kraft describes how three Sámi women who took part in the demonstrations were welcomed at the site, and how they took part in the ceremonies. After a ceremony of gift giving, one of the women performed a yoik called "We speak earth", accompanied by the beats of a Sámi (shaman) drum. The women described the beating of the drum as the heartbeat of Mother Earth.

The drum, I would argue, has become a prominent symbol of indigeneity and indigenous religion on a global scale. This is especially true on the scale of North American

discourses, but not exclusively. The protests at Standing Rock were an arena where the drum was present and visible for a global audience. The protests were not just local, it became a part of the global discourse on indigenous people's rights, where the protesters spoke in the name of a global indigenous 'we'. An interesting part of the demonstrations was its ritual aspects. Here, drums were extensively used, and chanting and drumming became a visible and integral part of the protests (Kraft & Johnson 2018, Kraft 2020).

5.3.2. The drum as an indigenous marker in other video games

I have come to notice that there are two ways the drum is often used in video games to mark something or someone as being indigenous, or in some way being associated with indigeneity. The drum is either 1) used as a part of the soundtrack of the game, or it is 2) used as a prop or a coulisse.

In the game *Turok: Dinosaur Hunter* (Iguana Entertainment 1997) released on the Nintendo 64 and on Microsoft Windows in 1997, the player plays as Turok, a Native American warrior, whose objective is to stop the evil Campaigner, from conquering the universe. As the oldest male in his generation of the clan, he is destined to protect the barrier between the Earth and the timeless world know as the Lost Land, and Turok have to singlehandedly fight the Campaigner's armies of aliens, natives, and beasts. The game is a first person shooter (FPS), where Turok uses a range of different guns to stop the Campaigner and his armies.

Being a game from the mid 90's, Turok: Dinosaur Hunters soundtrack is very simple, using computer generated sounds to make the music. Throughout the game, the drum plays the main part in the soundtrack. Several different types of drum sounds are being used, and the pace of the rhythmical drumbeat follows along with, and complements what happens in the game. The drums in the soundtrack give a sense of simplicity, a feeling of going back in time.

Another example of the use of the drum in the soundtrack to mark something as being related to indigeneity is in the video game *Prey* (Human Head Studios, 2006). In this Sci-fi FPS game, the player plays as the Cherokee Domasi "Tommy" Tawodi, a mechanic and former U.S. soldier who gets abducted aboard an alien spaceship together with his girlfriend and grandfather. Tommy must try to overcome the aliens, save his loved ones, and save the Earth, which is under threat of being destroyed by the aliens. Being a Cherokee, Tommy's heritage allows him to detatch his spirit from his physical body, allowing the spirit to roam freely for a short amount of time. When the player uses this ability, the aesthetics of the game changes. Everything is still seen from a first person point of view, but the surroundings change colour:

the dark, gritty surroundings turns white with a tint of blue, and the player and Tommy can now see symbols and objectives they could not see in his normal state. The music changes too: the beating of a drum can be heard together with a male voice chanting. Tommy is connected to his Cherokee heritage when using this ability, and the game mirrors it in the use of music, with the simple rhythmical beats of the drum.

The earlier mentioned video game Banjo-Tooie (Rare, 2000) also uses the drum as a central part of the soundtrack when Banjo and Tooie visit Humba Wumba in her wigwam. The soundtrack inside the wigwam is a computer generated drum and flute, mimicking a Native American music style.

Another way of using the drum as an aesthetical marker of indigeneity is simply to use it as a prop or a coulisse; as a background element or a tool in the scene of a game. An example of this is from the video game *Brave: A Warrior's Tale* (Collision Studios, 2009), where the drum is a part of the scenic depiction of an imagined Native American village. Brave: A Warrior's Tale is a cartoon styled action-adventure game where you play as Native boy named Brave who is embarking on a journey to find a legendary Shaman and to save his village. Brave's village is depicted as a small gathering of tipi's, with a campfire in the middle. Around the campfire, there are drums lying on the ground. These drums do not have a purpose except for being a part of the display of the native village. They are solely used as a tool in the building of the scene. *Brave: A Warrior's Tale,* which is worth nothing, also gives in to a whole spectre of pan-Indian stereotypes, and received mostly negative reviews when it launched.

Another game using the drum as a prop inside the game world is *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask* (Nintendo EAD, 2000). In the game, you again play as the hero named Link, who has to save the land of Hyrule from destruction, and to do so the hero has to use different magical masks to transform into different beings. One of the beings he can turn into is known as Goron. The Goron Tribe are a race of rock people who reside in and are the native people of the mountains of Hyrule. Although fictional, depictions of the Gorons are not unlike how native people are displayed in many of the previously mentioned games. The Gorons are an ancient humanoid people who have inhabited the lands long before the kingdom of Hyrule was established. They live with a close connection to nature, they worship a deity referred to as "Mountain Goddess", and their social structures are based around the knowledge and wisdom of Elders. In *Majora's Mask*, Link has an ocarina with magical powers, which the player has to use to solve puzzles and progress in the game. When Link puts on the Goron Mask that transforms him into the shape of a Goron, his ocarina changes with him, and transforms into a set of drums. The player can then play songs with the use of the drums.

Figure 22. Goron Link from *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask*

As I have shown here, several video games use the drum as an aesthetical tool to highlight something as being related to indigeneity. In *Never Alone*, the cultural ambassadors explain that the drum is an important part of their culture, of their communal life, and of being indigenous. They explain to the player why the drum has an important role in the game. But why does there seem to be a more general connection between indigeneity and the drum in video games, as I have just explored? I have come to think of two reasons why this might be.

First, a very big part of the video game industry is North American; many of the biggest games and developers are from the United States and from Canada. When portraying indigenous people in games, I would think the developers use imagery and aesthetics that is already known to them. If they do research on an indigenous group to use it as reference for portrayal of indigeneity in a game, it is likely that they will look towards indigenous groups in Northern America to find inspiration. Among many Northern American native peoples, the drum is a common musical instrument used alongside with other percussion instruments and singing (Levine 2020).

My second reason to think that the drum might be used as an indigenous marker is that the drum, in many contexts, belongs to an established vocabulary of "indigeneity". The INREL group (2020) proposes there are registers and vocabularies that, when articulated together, can make something recognisable as indigenous or religious. Materials and artefacts can do so, and the drum is one of the examples they mention. (Kraft et al 2020). Once established as a marker of indigeneity, drums "travel light". The drum is humankind's first musical instrument, as far

as we know, with its roots spanning back thousands of years (Dean 2012). The drum is a simple instrument: you only need to hit something that will resonate, either with your hands or with a stick. The drum has been used in different cultures across the world since as far back as we can remember. The simplicity of form, together with the notion of the drum as something that has existed since time immemorial, makes it fit well with the narrative that indigenous people have a special connection to the past and forgotten times.

5.4. Chapter Summary

My aim in this chapter was to explore how the drum is being articulated as an indigenous marker and as a symbol of Inupiat indigeneity and spirituality in *Never Alone*. I have argued that the drum is a part of a vocabulary that in the right context can be recognised as 'indigenous religion', and that this way of articulating the drum is found in *Never Alone*. In the video game, the drum as an artefact evokes indigenous religion because it is connected with a mysterious, animal-looking man who has the power of seeing and knowing. The drum on its own may not have evoked indigenous religion, but in this specific context it does.

In the Cultural Insight *The heartbeat of the community* the drum is represented as common to all Native people of Alaska – the Cultural Ambassador uses a vocabulary that can be found in a globalizing discourses on indigeneity and indigenous religion. The Cultural Ambassador describes the drum as a tool to help her connect to her community, to her culture, and to ancestral land, and the drum becomes a symbol of her indigenous identity. In the subchapter *The drum in a globalizing discourse on indigenous religion* I suggested that a similar vocabulary can also be found in a globalizing discourse on indigenous religion. I argue that the drum in many ways has become a symbol of indigeneity on a global scale.

I have argued that the use of the drum at Alaska Native Heritage Center both contributed and strengthened the connections between the drum and 'indigeneity', and the drum and 'indigenous religion'. Through performances, and a general visibility of the drum as a sign of the Inupiat people, and the fact that the visitor's guide uses a language that referred to religious practices and beliefs, the heritage centre strengthened these connections by performing it for a global audience.

In the last subchapter I gave examples of how the drum is used as a marker of indigeneity, and often in relation to indigenous religion, in video games. The use of the drum in relation to 'indigenous' in video games is following established conventions of the medium,

and the drum, I argue, is used as an aesthetical tool to make a connection to indigeneity when an indigenous person or culture is being portrayed. I argue that the use of the drum as an indigenous marker in video games tells us something about the general perception among people, that the drum, if the context is right, is a part of a vocabulary that evokes a recognition of 'indigeneity' and of 'indigenous religion'.

6. Summary and concluding thoughts

This thesis has aimed to explore how the video game *Never Alone* (2014), made in a close collaboration with the Inupiat people in Alaska, articulates and presents indigenous religion. My observations and analysis has been based primarily on the material the video game itself presents, and additionally on the fieldwork I did during a trip to Alaska in the summer of 2018. Working on this thesis, I have drawn on my experiences as a gamer. For over three decades gaming has been an important part of my life, and this has given me contextual knowledge that has been useful in my analysis. When analysing my material I have applied the theoretical toolkit of *articulation, performance* and *translation* as presented by Clifford (2013). I have approached *indigenous religion* as a "globalizing discourse, consisting of notions of an indigenous *we* and a flexible, but fairly standardised, vocabulary of assumed similarities (Kraft & Johnson 2017:4)". In this final chapter I will summarize my findings and add final reflections.

In what ways are indigeneity and religion articulated, performed and translated in the video game Never Alone (2014)?
Articulations of indigenous religion happen in several ways in *Never Alone*: it happens verbally through the use of specific words and expression, and it happens nonverbally through visual and audible aesthetics, and through gameplay and game mechanics. On a verbal level, indigenous religion is articulated by the Cultural Ambassadors in the Cultural Insights, and by the narrator in the video game. A vocabulary that can be related to, and be recognised as indigenous religion, is used when the Inupiat talks about their connection to nature and the world around them, when they talk about their connections to the community and ancestral land, and when they talk about their connection to traditions. Vocabularies that are recognizable as indigenous religion such as 'spirits', 'spirituality', 'interconnectedness', 'rebirth' and 'consciousness in everything' plays a central role, and these vocabularies intertwine with the performance and reclaiming of Inupiat culture and identity the game facilitates and presents.

It is especially in relation to nature a vocabulary of indigenous religion is used. The Inupiat ambassadors and the game mechanics articulate nature as being alive. Nature is spiritual, and it has a consciousness. Siḷa is spiritual – Siḷa has a soul. Nature is portrayed as strong, and as fundamental for life, and it needs to be respected. These religious (spiritual)

traditions and beliefs are displayed as wise and necessary for survival of their people, and they are presented as an important part of being Inupiat. They are presented as a source of pride, and even as a recourse for the world, and for the survival of humankind in the face of global warming and climate change.

Nonverbally, indigenous religion is articulated through a repertoire of aesthetics. In the game, spirits are portrayed as white, glowing, ethereal helpers. They are portrayed in ways that follow genre conventions of video games, but they also draw on aesthetics from Inupiat culture. Nature is portrayed as animistic – the natural phenomenon like the Northern Lights is anthropomorphised, and the waters and trees have spirits in them.

Both the game itself and the player performs indigeneity and indigenous religion. The Cultural Ambassadors play the role as mediators and diplomats of Inupiat identity, culture, and religion, with the player as their audience. These articulations are negotiated between the different actors in the game. The Cultural Ambassadors are all representatives of the same indigenous group, but they are also individuals with their distinct experiences, thoughts, and hopes. Collectively, their voices constitute indigeneity, and what comes forth as indigenous religion in the Cultural Insights is negotiated between the different ambassadors, and the player who takes part.

The player performs indigeneity and indigenous religion through the act of playing. When put in the role as an Inupiat girl in *Never Alone*, the player is transformed into this game character. Through gameplay, the player is performing indigenous religion in the game: the player interacts with spirits and otherworldly beings in Inupiat worldview, and pays respect to the spirituality of nature by keeping the taboos, and avoiding doing harm to the nature and animals around her.

What indigenous and religious vocabularies are being used?
Never Alone uses a variety of vocabularies that, when the context is right, can be recognised as 'indigenous', 'religious', and as 'indigenous religion'. These vocabularies can be found as uttered words and expression (spirits, spirituality, rebirth, nature, connections to the land, the beating of the drum, community, wisdom of Elders), as artefacts (drum, parka, bola, whale bone pipe), and as art and aesthetics (scrimshaw, song, drumming). In chapter four and five, I showed how spirits and the drum are both a part of a vocabulary that is recognisable as 'indigenous religion' when they are put in the right context, and both of these vocabularies have a prominent place in the game.

The vocabularies used in *Never Alone* scales upwards and downwards: sometimes they are local, sometimes global, and at other times they are both. The drum, as an example, will be recognizable as an important part of Inupiat culture to someone who is familiar with it. At the same time, the drum can be scaled upwards and translated to a category of global indigeneity and indigenous religion. The vocabularies can also be translated towards or away from a domain of religion. Depending on the topic at hand, on who speaks, and of what is of importance for the speaker to convey, the vocabularies can in some context be recognisable as religious, and in other contexts as secular. At times the vocabularies are more ambivalent, and can free floating.

In what ways does the video game as a medium contribute and facilitate the reclaiming of traditions of the past - and articulations of indigenous religion?

Never Alone borrows from the conventions of the medium of video games, but creates new ways of articulating Inupiat indigeneity and indigenous religion by coalescing Inupiat storytelling and aesthetic with the established conventions of the medium. This balancing act between the old and the new, between the established conventions of video games, and the traditional Inupiat worldview and way of life, characterises *Never Alone*. It facilitates new ways to learn, practice, perform, stage, and bring to life old traditions. The video game creates space for these traditions to come alive and be seen, a space where they are reclaimed and can be shown to the world. At the same time, the medium of video games can be ambivalent – the boundaries between what is secular and what is religious are not always clear. The action of *playing* can be fun and playful, but *play* can also be serious. One can say that performing rituals, in a religious setting, is a form of serious play where the player plays a role and follows a script, not unlike what one does when playing a video game. In a video game, however, the player does not need to take a stance on whether the play is playful or serious. She does not have to know if what she plays with is secular or religious. This makes *Never Alone* more including and potentially less provoking.

Video game as a medium gives the player a unique chance to take part in a culture and learn from it through performance and play. This can take place no matter where in the world one is situated; video games can be played anywhere and at any time. Video games can be a way for a younger generation of indigenous people residing in urban areas outside of their traditional land to connect with their heritage, land and culture through play. It can be a way to help becoming indigenous, or to find new ways of being indigenous. Video games have the ability to situate a person in a specific cultural and religious context, and let the player

experience and explore these contexts on their own, but within the borders and framework set by the game and its developers.

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