# NEVER ALONE (KISIMA INŊITCHUŊA): POSSIBILITIES FOR PARTICIPATORY GAME DESIGN

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Since August 2014, anyone with even a marginal interest in games has been made painfully aware of some very loud, very annoying, and very angry individuals who have made it their mission to clear up a few things about games using the hashtag #Gamergate. Games, these people whine, do not have politics. Games, they opine, are simply about fun (and fun, in this case, is defined by them); *Gone Home* and *Depression Quest* are *not* games. Gaming journalism, critique, and research, they shout, should not be "biased" or reflect the concerns of "social justice warriors" (SJWs). Gaming culture, their actions suggest, is for men and boys – specifically, young, cisgendered, straight, white males (Dewey, 2014; McCormick, 2014). For many of us, watching #Gamergate unfold has been an unsettling confirmation of what we've already known for a long time: some within the gaming community do not want us to play and make games. We struggle with what that might mean, and more importantly, how to change it. And so we call for more diverse representation within games (and in the gaming industry).

But simply calling for "more representation" of women and

marginalized individuals to solve the problems #Gamergate painfully brought to the fore is not sufficient. As Adrienne Shaw (2014) argues, women, people of color, and gender/sexual minorities *are* playing games despite their current lack of diversity and many do not necessarily even need to feel "see themselves" in their characters to enjoy them. Encouraging diversity in games is not simply about just including more female characters or people of color as playable avatars. It is about a fundamental shift in gaming culture, one that does not presume a class of people called "gamers" (no other medium inspires a class of individuals who call themselves by the names of that medium as a cultural marker; there are no "filmers" or "interneters") (Alexander, 2014; Shaw, 2013). Shifting the culture of gaming requires an opening up in many ways: in terms of genres, characterization, mechanics, *and* representation. And, while encouraging individuals to make the kind of games they would like to play is one way to challenge the status quo, it does not address the very real barriers that may prevent someone from participating in this way (Wiggins, 2014). Instead, we might also consider how shifting design practices could encourage game designers to tell the stories of diverse communities and to tell them well.

During the height of the #Gamergate frenzy, a small but important game, *Never Alone* (*Kisima Inηitchuηa*), was released. It suggested new possibilities for what gaming and game design could be. Created by Upper One Games (an indigenously-owned offshoot of the Cook Inlet Tribal Council) and E-Line Media, *Never Alone* represents the first of what is meant to be a series of "World Games" that will be created by the merged partnership (Upper One Games, 2014b). "World Games" are described as a new genre of videogames, "…that draw fully upon the richness of unique cultures to create complex and fascinating game worlds for a global audience" (Upper One Games, 2014a). *Never Alone* uses stories from the Iñupiat as its narrative focus. It tells a story about a young Inupiaq girl (Nuna) and an arctic fox as

they try to find the source of an "eternal blizzard" wreaking havoc on her home – but includes a number of different stories from Native Alaskan folklore along the way. While the narrative may be unfamiliar, gameplay relies on relatively standard puzzle-platformer mechanics. What makes *Never Alone* unique is its not only artistic style (which is also directly inspired by indigenous Alaskan culture) and environmental design, but also its inclusion of unlockable live-action segments ("Cultural Insights") that explain aspects of the Iñupiat culture and the design process by which the game was developed. And so to play the game is to have some encounter with the world (both the "real" and the "imaginary") from which Nuna comes.

*Never Alone* functions as an implicit critique of the current state of gaming culture in two ways. First, by taking the Iñupiat people and their stories as a focal point, it highlights the lack of representation (and particularly, non-stereotypical representations) of indigenous people in games (Leonard, 2006; Williams, Martins, Consalvo, & Ivory, 2009). Second, by having Iñupiat community members as partners within the game development process, *Never Alone* invites a new way of thinking about how games can be made. It foregrounds the game design process as an iterative, collaborative effort (which, while the reality of most studios, is not reflected in much of the literature written about game design).(1) And because the game foregrounds co-productive nature of the design process, it also shifts the relationship between designer and audience. It suggests an invitation to greater understanding of both the designers' intentions and the stories they are trying to tell. By extension, it implies that games can be created that responsibly and ethically represent marginalized cultures. At the same time, *Never Alone* is not a stale, misinformed attempt at edutainment. It is a genuinely fun game, and some of the ways in which it plays with the standard puzzle-platformer genre are inventive.

While there are many ways in which *Never Alone* could be read (as a cultural artifact for example, or as an example of indigenous

storytelling), it is the ways in which the game reflects a different, more explicitly collaborative approach to design that is the focus of this article.(2) First, I describe elements of the game's design and how gameplay reflect aspects of Iñupiat culture. Second, I discuss participatory design and its relationship to video games. I argue that approaches such as participatory design might shift the problematic aspects of gaming culture into something more inclusive and welcoming to all of us.

### Gameplay: You are never alone

A core aspect of *Never Alone*'s gameplay is the symbiotic relationship between Nuna and the fox that befriends her. As Nuna, you are starkly aware of your limitations in the harsh Arctic environment. For the first part of the game, your only option when facing a threat like an angry polar bear is to run. And run you do (Figure 1).
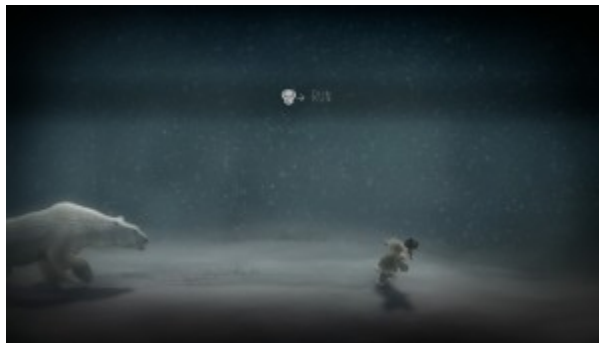


*Figure 6. Nuna on the run from a hungry polar bear.*

But you also find yourself looking back constantly, checking to see if the bear has gotten any closer. As a player, I was immediately confronted by my own inadequacies from the first scene. How would I survive this kind of blizzard? What would I do for food? For shelter? Would I even been able to run in the deep snow or jump over floating icebergs fast enough to outpace a hungry polar bear like Nuna? The answer was decidedly, "No." In short, as a player I had no choice but to confront my complete

cluelessness when it came to what I would do in the Alaskan wilderness.

But this is not a game about the individual. It is abundantly clear from the first scene that even Nuna will not survive for long if she only has her wits to protect her, no matter how well prepared she is for the harsh environment. And, it is at this moment that a cute white Arctic fox enters the scene. As a player, I had a hard time not letting out an audible "Aww" as soon I saw him darting out of the background to save Nuna. But the game told me I had work to do – the ravenous polar bear was still dangerously close. Switching between the fox and Nuna (you can also play the game cooperatively, which makes some portions a bit easier to time), I drew the polar bear's attention away from Nuna and ran in the opposite direction, causing the bear to fall into the icy waters between icebergs (Figure 2).



*Figure 7. The fox saving Nuna as usual.*

Breathing a sigh of relief (both as Nuna and as myself) I examined the fox a bit more closely. His fluffy, bright white fur and dark eyes stood in contrast to both the pale blues of the snowy background and Nuna (who is clad in a bulky, fur-lined brown coat).

In keeping with the game's emphasis on the importance of community as a tool for survival, the two have complementary abilities. Playing as the fox you can jump further, scramble up

walls and toss ropes down so that Nuna can climb them, and control nature spirits that function as platforms in the game (more on this later). The fox's smaller size also allows the player access to spaces that are too small for Nuna to get into. On the other hand, Nuna can move crates to access points otherwise out-of-reach and use a bola against obstacles blocking their progress. Moving between playing the Nuna and the fox is easy enough (a one-button action on the PS4), and I often found myself switching between them for no reason. As the fox, I would jump and leap forward, and then run back to make sure the AI-controlled Nuna was safely following. I found myself playing a kind of game of tag, switching back and forth between Nuna and the fox and then circling back around to the other character to make sure they were safely getting past whatever obstacles the game presented.

At other times, I would time a jump incorrectly, and end up dying. Although the game gracefully restarts you at the most recent checkpoint, you must hear Nuna give a wailing cry if you die while playing the fox. Likewise, if you die while playing as Nuna, the fox whimpers in pain. It is heartbreaking. No matter how many times I died playing *Never Alone* (and I died a lot), I never got over how emotionally hard it was to think about either Nuna or the fox being apart (Figure 3). This resonated for other players as well; comments on Steam's message boards prior to release often included some variation of the question, "This looks like a great game, but does the fox die?" (omegacat, 2014).

*Figure 8. Oh the cuteness! Nuna and the fox (cutscene).*

But it is not just the fox that helps Nuna. There is the Owl Man who provides Nuna with her only weapon (a bola) after she returns his drum to him from the Little People (see Figure 4).



"Because I have been watching over you.

*Figure 9. Cutscene after which the Owl Man gives Nuna her only weapon in the game – a bola.*

However, the game is also clear about the relative ineffectiveness of the bola against many threats: while you can easily destroy large sheets of ice to further your progress, using the bola as a weapon against most enemies (such as polar bears or the Manslayer who destroys Nuna's village), is ineffective.

Nature spirits also help Nuna and the fox throughout the game. There are the sorrowful loon spirits who create transparent platforms on which Nuna can stand and (with the

fox's help) move to cross wide bodies of water or access tall ice piles. There are schools of fish spirits that save Nuna and the fox from drowning (Figure 5).



*Figure 10. A school of fish spirits help Nuna and the fox cross a large expanse of icy water.*

In later scenes, large tree spirits become moveable platforms that allow Nuna to progress further. Playing the game solo becomes tricky here; a number of times, I had difficulty switching between Nuna and the fox quickly enough to avoid dying. When I co-op'd the game later with a friend, these sections were easier. This might be, as some reviewers note, a design flaw (Hindes, 2014; Juba, 2014). Or, it could also be read as a subtle nod to the game's emphasis on the importance of community and cooperation.

At the same time, the natural world is not without its significant challenges. At one point, the game's hazy daytime environment darkens to night as you enter an abandoned coastal village, and the aurora borealis appears. At first, I simply stopped moving, watching these spirits swirl and swoop towards me (as Nuna), admiring their stunning, otherworldly beauty. I quickly learned, however, that these lights were not the friendly loon spirits offering me a ride over the game's uneven terrain. Instead, these anthropomorphized versions of the Northern Lights had arms that would scoop Nuna up, carrying me off-screen into

certain death – punishment, the game's narration notes, for not following the elders' wisdom (Figure 6). This too became a particularly frustrating section to solo, because even if I were able to get Nuna out of harm's way, my fox would often jump right into their arms. As with other aspects of the game, I could not help but reflect on the duality of the environment in which Nuna and the fox inhabit. It is both welcoming and harshly unforgiving, chaotic and predictable. It seems, in other words, intensely human and alien all at once.



*Figure 11. The Northern Lights, ready to swoop Nuna and the fox away.*

The game's chapters are separated by moments of audio narration that offer greater context to Nuna's journey, and are visually depicted using animation influenced by Native Alaskan folk art. These line-based drawings are rendered on a simple background, and they stand in stark contrast to the lush backdrop that characterizes the game's environmental design. The muted grey-blues that characterize the snowy scenes in which Nuna and the fox must brace against blizzard winds (or, alternatively, harness them to jump across wide crevasses) stand in contrast to the sepia-colored scrimshaw art which set the scene for each playable segment (Figure 7). In an AMA (ask-me-anything) session on Reddit's /r/indiegaming subreddit, art

director Dima Veryovka articulated the game's unique art direction and how it connected to traditional Iñupiat art, writing,

The overall goal was to create this game with a very atmospheric, soft looking feel that captures Arctic beauty. *Never Alone* was rendered using a lot of pastel, desaturated colors, which helped us create very moody, dreamlike visuals, while still portraying an authentic and believable Arctic world. The characters, themselves, were inspired by Arctic dolls. We tried to give them a very authentic hand crafted feel to make them look like somebody had sewn them using fur, skin and ivory. (IndieGamingMods, 2014)

I found it impossible not to be overwhelmed and completely enchanted by the beauty of *Never Alone*. Likewise, reviews of the game were united in the accolades they heaped on the art direction and environmental design, with outlets like *Kill Screen* calling it a "diorama of nature" (Carmichael, 2014).



*Figure 12. An example of the game's scrimshaw art featuring Inupiatun narration and English subtitles.*

The game's sound design is also subtle but effective. Nuna's boots make a satisfying crunching sound in the deep snow. The sound of the wind is a constant presence in most scenes, but gets louder right before it blows against Nuna and her fox, offering an auditory signal to the player that she must get ready to brace against the wind or face being blown backwards. In scenes

involving water, the sounds of waves lapping and icebergs crushing up against one another replace the sounds of Nuna's footsteps. Gentle, if somber, ambient music accompanies some narration and playable segments. These all work together to make for an immersive environment in which Nuna and the fox must use their wits to survive.

As I mentioned in the introduction, while representation alone may not solve gaming's diversity problem, I would be remiss in not discussing how remarkable *Never Alone* is in not only including Native Alaskan voices, but making them primary. Even the trailer on the game's website features a voiceover from James Nageak, a male Iñupiaq, articulating the importance of storytelling to the Iñupiat community over cut-scenes and gameplay. At one point the subtitles read, "But what good are old stories if the wisdom they contain is not shared? That's why we're making this game." I was struck by its acknowledgement of the game's overarching purpose – to share and preserve aspects of the Iñupiat culture – as well as how directly it addresses the collaborative nature of the game's design process. As the trailer foreshadows, voiceovers throughout *Never Alone* are also in Inupiatun and subtitled into English. Thus, the game highlights both the importance of storytelling as a way of conveying Iñupiat values and simulates the experience that one might have listening to this story as it was originally told by elders.

Previews, reviews, and commentaries about the game also highlight the collaboration between the Cook Inlet Tribal Council and E-Line Media, making it unlikely that a player would not have some awareness of the unique circumstances of the game's creation. This kind of explicit discussion of the game's design also suggests two possible audiences. For the Iñupiat community and other Alaskan Natives, the game is an artifact of cultural heritage as it preserves and retells stories for a new generation (Oppenneer, 2014; Tannous, 2014). But the "Cultural Insights" segments also provide additional context for other players – explaining fundamental aspects of Iñupiat life for those

who may be unfamiliar with it. Regardless of who is playing, it is clear that the goal of the game is to reflect the Iñupiat experience accurately, rather than to simply appropriate Native culture and repackage it for a non-Native audience.

## Participatory design and games

*Never Alone*'s gameplay is a direct result of its design process by which it was created – one that upends the design approach most of the mainstream gaming industry relies upon. In Richard Rouse's (2004) foundational design text, for example, starting points for brainstorming game ideas include gameplay, technology, and story. Noticeably absent from this list is the "user" or audience or those communities inspiring the story being told.(3) Instead, fun, enjoyment, and challenge become primary concerns. Implied in this approach is that "fun" is in the eye of the beholder – in other words, game designers often use themselves as a barometer for what is fun. This often serves as an unspoken proxy for determining the game's audience: people like those who are creating it. If autobiographical design (Neustaedter & Sengers, 2012) becomes a primary tool by which game designers create games, then the stories they tell will often reflect the relatively limited diversity of the mainstream gaming industry. And, as others have noted, the lack of traditional user-focused approaches, which might work to address the shortcomings of autobiographical design, also echoes the relative paucity of interactions between the HCI (human-computer interaction) and game design communities (Jørgensen, 2004). This may be in part due to a mismatch between traditional HCI approaches and the uniqueness of the gaming medium (Barr, Noble, & Biddle, 2007).

While not explicitly mentioned by the game's developers, *Never Alone*'s approach to design – deep and long-term engagement with the Iñupiat community around how to tell the Kunuuksaayuka (eternal blizzard) story, continual consultation with elders like Minnie Gray, whose father originally told the story, and Iñupiat artisans to ensure that both the narrative and

artistic style were appropriate – is reminiscent of participatory design approaches used in other settings (Oppenneer, 2014). Participatory design (PD) was originally developed as a result of Scandinavian codetermination laws that emphasized the need for labor to be actively involved in the design and deployment of workplace technologies (Ehn, 1992; Spinuzzi, 2005). While it is often viewed as a loose approach to design that simply includes user participation in the design process, when robustly employed PD focuses on users' tacit knowledge as an object of inquiry and shifts the designer-user relationship so that designers are facilitators, rather than "dictators" of the design process (Spinuzzi, 2005). Thus, PD is an explicitly political, pluralistic approach to design.

Participatory design as a methodology and epistemic approach has found the most traction in the worlds of CSCW (computer-supported cooperative work) and HCI, but most video game design outside of the educational/serious games realm rarely incorporates PD as it is framed here. This is not to suggest, however, that the audience is not consulted or considered during the gaming design process. Modders, for example, participate explicitly in a kind of co-design with game developers (Postigo, 2010). Likewise, fan communities often have important input into the design process, offering feedback on new features, serving as beta testers, offering user support, etc. through gaming forums or through direct communication with game designers (Duncan, 2011). And game studies scholars have noted the way that certain social network games remain in "perpetual beta," effectively enlisting users as uncredited co-designers (Jacobs & Sihvonen, 2011).

That being said, few games are as explicit and transparent about the ways in which non-designers participate in game creation as *Never Alone* is. For example, *Never Alone's* lead designer Grant Roberts emphasized that collaboration was a fundamental principle of the project, noting, "we had no interest in making a game like this if we couldn't directly collaborate

with the Alaska Native community. It wasn't enough to just get someone from Alaska to sign off on the game, or for us to just lock our doors and emerge years later with a finished product that may or may not reflect the values of the culture" (IndieGamingMods, 2014). In addition for the potential benefits such an approach might offer a community hoping to preserve its cultural heritage and share it with a broader audience, participatory design can also offer developers and designers a new infusion of creative energy. As Sean Vesce, a creative director for E-Line articulated, "'Being able to get out of our cubes, which are typically a bunch of white guys talking about a fictional fantasy world, to be able to go into a community, learn more about a culture and then try to infuse their values and mythologies into a game that's fun and entertaining as well as thoughtful was something that seemed like an amazing challenge to us'" (de Matos, 2014). Both sets of comments imply that the *Never Alone* developers are well aware of the gaming industry's whitewashed reputation and the way it limits the kinds of stories told and player experiences on offer. And Roberts' comments suggest that merely telling the stories of Alaskan Native communities was not enough; the game required a deep collaborative environment in which the design would be driven by those whose stories were being told.

The results of such a design approach become obvious during gameplay. There is the emphasis on Iñupiat life: their stories, the gifts and challenges the Arctic environment presents, and their shared values – particularly the importance of interdependence, rather than independence (Tannous, 2014). Even the choice of placing a girl at the center of the game, a potentially controversial decision, was one not out-of-character for the Iñupiat. Researchers have noted that the Iñupiat do not maintain "…European notions of femininity or women's work…" and that, "…women's relationship to hunting is not necessarily limited to the standard roles, and traditionally, women's standard roles are not considered secondary or auxiliary to the role of animal

slayer" (Cuomo, Eisner, & Hinkel, 2008, p. 7). While the original tale of the Kunuuksaayuka featured a young man at its center, the development team in interviews noted that Iñupiat stories feature all kinds of individuals and downplay specific character traits to focus the listener's attention to the values and knowledge the story is conveying (Holthouse, 2014; Oppenneer, 2014). Likewise, Nuna is portrayed as fundamentally capable of overcoming the many challenges she faces – with help, of course.

### Implications

*Never Alone* works as both a cultural artifact and an introduction to the Iñupiat community, values, and stories for non-Native audiences. Its success lies in not trading in superficial stereotypes and is a direct consequence of the collaborative nature in which the game was designed. However, the entire notion of a "world games" genre using participatory design requires a willingness of developers to engage with communities over what can be a long period of time (a commodity in short supply in larger gaming studios). Importantly, it also requires outside communities to be willing to engage with game developers – to share their knowledge and stories, as well as participate fully in the design process. While *Never Alone* was received well by most reviewers and fans who appreciated the game's unique narrative and the story behind how it was made, I wonder what the response would have been were it an AAA title produced by a major studio. Would it have been characterized as further "proof" of an SJW agenda within gaming by #Gamergate? Is *Never Alone* deemed acceptable because it is a low-key indie game that is unlikely to be noticed by those who decry the increasing diversity within games as merely an attempt to be "politically correct"?

As Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter (2009) argue, games are often exploitative tools of imperialist and hegemonic forces; they are, in their words, games of Empire. But they are also potential sites of resistance, and effective ones at that. *Never Alone* is one such game. It is not that the gameplay itself is

particularly inventive or that its goals are particularly grandiose (in fact, its success, I would argue, is due to its subtle, quiet impact), but that it places at its center a community whose culture is relatively unknown and marginalized in contemporary American culture. But even more than that is *Never Alone*'s inversion of the typical received design process and that it telegraphs this fact to players. Instead of positioning the developer/designer as sole dictator of a fictional universe, it suggests that designers can also be students of culture; they can learn from and be guided by those whose stories and experiences they are telling. They can engage and do so honestly and from a place of empathy. And perhaps by modeling this idea – by being willing to listen and learn instead of speak and tell – game designers will help sow the seeds of broader change within gaming culture. Opening up the design process by using participatory design techniques might be one way to start.

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(1)   Many game design texts discursively position the designer

as a kind of "god" of the world in which s/he is creating, downplaying the reality that game design often involves large interdisciplinary teams of individuals, each of whom is responsible for only a small fraction of the player experience.

(2)    I felt some trepidation writing a piece about a game that portrays a culture so unlike my own knowing that I could not possibly explain what this game might mean for the Iñupiat community or other Native or First Nations individuals who share Nuna's cultural heritage. I have chosen to focus on the unique design approach used to create the game, and let others from within the community analyze and critique *Never Alone* as a cultural text.

(3)   I am not suggesting that Rouse does not consider the user/audience unimportant; in fact, the first chapter of his text specifically addresses user needs and desires as being at the center of game design. However, Rouse emphasizes that both technology and gameplay usually take center stage.