

“A Game 10,000 Years in the Making”.  
*Never Alone / Kisima Ingitchuna*  
and Adaptation as a Future-Oriented Technology

**Abstract:** Inuit adaptation technologies, which have been in place for thousands of years, provide unique insight into the burgeoning field of Indigenous video game studies by advancing sovereign articulations of technology in digital space. Grounded in the principles of *ikiaqtaq*, an adaptation of a song, *Never Alone / Kisima Ingitchuna* (2014), extends and nuances how Indigenous stories translate into video games by foregrounding community sustainability and cultural flexibility. Addressing *Iñupiaq* video game development specifically, this essay demonstrates how *ikiaqtaq*, as demonstrated in *Never Alone*, generates the conditions for sovereign storytelling in the digital.

Keywords: *adaptation, video games, Never Alone, screen sovereignty, Iñupiaq, Inuit technology*

Over thousands of years, Alaska Natives have lived and worked together in challenging environments, learning and passing down knowledge, skills and values that have kept communities viable and self-sufficient over time. It is truly a game 10,000 years in the making.<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Introduction

Inuit adaptation technologies, which have been in use for thousands of years, provide unique insight into the burgeoning field of Indigenous video game studies by advancing sovereign articulations of technology in digital space. Grounded in the principles of *ikiaqtaq*, “a song that has been adapted”,<sup>2</sup> *Never Alone / Kisima Ingitchuna*<sup>3</sup> extends and nuances how Indigenous stories translate into video games, foregrounding community sustainability and cultural flexibility. *Never Alone* is, at once, an eloquent extension of traditional Inuit storytelling and a nuanced articulation of new media. The combination highlights how Indigenous peoples are mobilizing “technologies such as creation stories and ceremony” in future-oriented spaces.<sup>4</sup> Working across multiple texts – oral, written, and playable versions of *Never Alone* (or “*Kunuksaayuka*”) – I argue that the concept of *ikiaqtaq* contributes to our ability “to re-vision the intellectual history of technology”<sup>5</sup> and with it the critical intersections of new media and Indigenous studies.

I foreground *Never Alone* as a case study for this work because it provides significant insight into a uniquely Indigenous process of adaptation. Janet Bushnell, Jonathan Tomhave, and Tylor Prather suggest that *Never Alone*, is “an exemplar of an Indigenous game”.<sup>6</sup> Categorized as an “atmospheric

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<sup>1</sup> Centre for Games and Impact, “Never Alone. Parent Guide” (n.d.), [www.gamesandimpact.org](http://www.gamesandimpact.org), accessed 9 November 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Keavy Martin, *Stories in Another Skin. Approaches to Inuit Literature* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2012), 101.

<sup>3</sup> *Never Alone. Kisima Ingitchuna* (Upper One Games, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> Lou Cornum, “The Space NDN’s Star Map”, in Sophie McCall et al., *Read, Listen, Tell. Stories from Turtle Island* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier U.P., 2017), 384.

<sup>5</sup> Angela Haas, “Wampum as Hypertext. An American Indian Intellectual Tradition of Multimedia Theory and Practice”, *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, 19.4 (2007), 78.

<sup>6</sup> Jeanette Bushnell et al, “How Do You Say Watermelon?”, *Transmotion*, 3.1 (2017), 56.

puzzle platformer”,<sup>7</sup> *Never Alone* tells the story of a young girl named Nuna who travels across a harsh Arctic landscape with her pet fox to stop a never-ending blizzard. Indigenous literature and technology scholars have devoted significant thought to the game, including multiple essays in a special gaming issue of *Transmotion*, edited by Elizabeth LaPensée.<sup>8</sup> Inger Lise Damli Lohne,<sup>9</sup> Peter Keogh Williams,<sup>10</sup> and Kandace Hawley<sup>11</sup> have published entire theses on the game. In short, *Never Alone* has a demonstrated impact in the academic world across various fields and disciplines. However, the existent literature all, in one way or another, looks at *Never Alone* through a cultural or ethnographic lens. This essay, in turn, approaches the game through technology — namely, the Iñupiaq storytelling technologies that make a home for traditional narrative in the often-inhospitable spaces of video games. This turn to the technological, which emphasizes Indigenous resilience and ingenuity, further clarifies *Never Alone*’s contribution to the burgeoning Indigenous video game market. Via a technological reading of *Never Alone* located in the contexts of Iñupiaq storytelling and Indigenous literary studies, I illustrate how Indigenous developers are re-homing traditional stories in the digital through community-specific adaptation techniques.<sup>12</sup>

The theorization offered in this essay is a small contribution to a larger field of study that is carving space for Indigenous video game development. I am a white settler academic, trained primarily as a literary scholar, who studies new media and digital storytelling from social justice perspectives. I also make video games with and for Indigenous communities using small game engines such as Twine and Bitsy to create platforms for community-based storytelling. Maize Longboat (Kanien’kehá:ka) is a key collaborator in this work, helping me and my students to think critically about “Indigenous-led creation”.<sup>13</sup> He also leads in-depth workshops with my students on do-it-yourself video game development using open-source tools. I also have the good fortune to collaborate with Jazmine Horne (Stó:lō), Sharon Desnomie (Stó:lō), Heather Ramsey and the Stó:lō Xwexwílmexw Government (SXG) on *Kw’i:ts’téleq: The Video Game*. Written by Horne in consultation with Stó:lō youth, *Kw’i:ts’téleq* adapts a series of comic books Stó:lō about governance into playable challenges set across six communities.<sup>14</sup> SXG’s objective in creating the game was to produce a knowledge dissemination tool that would extend the reach of the comic book and engage a broader Stó:lō audience, including youth, during the final stages of their treaty negotiations with Canadian government. My team, which operates out of CEDaR, the new media lab that Daisy Rosenblum and I co-direct, supports the SXG team by supplying the labour and digital infrastructure to adapt the storytelling into Twine, a narrative-based video game platform. Via regular Zoom meetings, user tests, and trips to visit the youth group and tour the community, the CEDaR and SXG teams come together to adapt, test, and revise a game that meets the needs of the community, both in its story and in its mechanics. The game and the research produced around it is shared with SXG through a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that clearly identifies both as SXG’s intellectual property. My team is accountable first and foremost to the community, but the relationship is reciprocal. As

<sup>7</sup> “Never Alone”, [www.neveralongame.com](http://www.neveralongame.com), accessed 9 November 2022.

<sup>8</sup> *Transmotion*, 3.1 (2017).

<sup>9</sup> Inger Lise Damli Lohne, “*Never Alone*. A Study of Articulations of Indigenous Religion in the Video Game”, (UiT The Arctic University of Norway, 2020).

<sup>10</sup> Peter Keogh Williams, “An Analysis of the Ethnographic Significance of the Iñupiaq Video Game *Never Alone* (*Kisima Ingitchuna*)” (Florida State University, 2018).

<sup>11</sup> Kandace Hawley, “Videogames as a Platform for Learning. Self-Case Study. The Videogame *Never Alone*” (University of Oulu, 2016).

<sup>12</sup> In this article, “Iñupiaq” refers to Inuit people from the North Slope region in Alaska. “Iñupiat” is singular; “Iñupiaq” is plural. I use “Inuit” to refer to the broader context of Indigenous peoples across the Northern Circumpolar.

<sup>13</sup> Maize Longboat, “Terra Nova. Enacting Videogame Development through Indigenous-Led Creation” (Montreal: Concordia University, 2019).

<sup>14</sup> You can see the *Kw’i:ts’téleq* comic books here: [www.sxta.bc.ca/comic/](http://www.sxta.bc.ca/comic/), accessed 9 November 2022. Read more about the video game in the *Stó:lō Signal Magazine*, 2.1, <https://www.sxta.bc.ca/multimedia/magazine>, accessed 9 November 2022.

researchers, we benefit from publishing materials, with SXG’s consent, that show other communities how to scope, develop, and test their own games.

The projects I work on with Longboat and SXG projects are relational endeavours, built out of Agile development processes that foreground multiple rounds of feedback, discussion, iteration, and community engagement.<sup>15</sup> As a result of the cultural and financial successes of *Never Alone*, video games are no longer a fringe media for Indigenous storytelling. As I will demonstrate below, they have the potential to bolster cultural resurgence and galvanize community. The communities and Indigenous developers I work with are compelled by the ways in which games function as gathering sites, that is as baskets that can hold and connect multiple assets (audio, visual, text, etc.) and perspectives on those assets. Since the publication of his book in 2020, I have more recently begun to build a theory of digital gathering based on Richard Van Camp’s articulation of the idea. Van Camp (Tł̓chq̓ Dene) is instructive in how he frames gathering as both a verb and a noun, and therefore as a relational interface (as opposed to the more traditional academic process of “collecting,” which is often unidirectional and extractive). In *Gathering*, Van Camp writes about the power of bringing people and stories together as a means for initiating healing and cultural resurgence: “Through our stories and traditions and languages we are reclaiming ourselves, coming together, gathering, and gaining strength through our love and connection – remembering and recalling our stories and passing them on for medicine and strength and love and healing”.<sup>16</sup>

In the video game work I do with community, I strive to follow Van Camp’s methodology to foreground cultural sovereignty and accountability, both in the game itself and in the development practices we build around it. As a verb, ‘gathering’ is the collective act of assembling stories, memories, songs, language, photographs, artwork, etc., that are needed to build the content of a video game: its setting, characters, mechanics, quests, visuals, audio, etc. As a noun, however, ‘a gathering’ is the sense of community and collaboration that is built around and nourished through a game’s development. In her discussion of Indigenous filmmaking, Kristin Dowell refers to gathering as a social relationship galvanized through “the act of production”.<sup>17</sup>

For Dowell, Indigenous screen sovereignty, the articulation of community-specific knowledge, traditions, and politics into film, is always in excess to the content. Sovereignty is articulated in the content of a film, but it is enacted in the Indigenous-led creation that produces that film. Gathering around a media project, be it a film or a video game, is, therefore, an active process negotiated out of off-screen relationships, maker sensibilities, and thoughtful engagement of protocol and governance. In developing community-based video games that centre gathering, we use accessible, low-tech content platforms, such as Miro and Figma that allow collaborators to collect assets in communal spaces. We then use those spaces as the gathering sites for team meetings and collaborative prototyping. Starting a new community-based video game development project means identifying and establishing processes that onboard that community as developers. That means developing clear and easy-to-use systems based on iterative development driven by collaborative feedback. Because storytelling should be the focus, technology is useful only inasmuch as it safely and effectively gathers stories and storytellers. Agile processes and digital collaboration tools make the development processes transparent and invite ongoing feedback and discussion. Since game development is an active process of determining or adapting the story, the relationships through which we negotiate those gathering processes become foundational to the game itself.

<sup>15</sup> Rebecca Pope-Ruark, *Agile Faculty. Practical Strategies for Managing Research, Service, and Teaching* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 57-72.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Van Camp, *Gathering. Richard Van Camp on the Joy of Storytelling* (Regina: University of Regina Press, 2021), 76.

<sup>17</sup> Kristin Dowell, *Sovereign Screens. Aboriginal Media on the Canadian West Coast* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017), 2.

Adaptation, which I argue is a future-oriented storytelling technology, offers an exciting and dynamic space to further a conversation in which Indigenous communities are gathering stories in video games. Building on work established in Indigenous literatures, I foreground the ingenuity of Indigenous storytelling by illustrating not only the significance of Indigenous adaptation into the digital, but, stretching back 10,000 years, the technological proficiency implied in Indigenous *foresight* for this adaptation. That is to say, Indigenous storytelling often projects into the future by building space for the next generation of storytellers – and storytelling platforms – into the mechanics of the original narrative. As such, Indigenous adaptation is a dynamic integration of traditional wisdom and the techno-social present, folding past and present, tradition and innovation, storyteller and story gatherer in unique and impactful ways, which, as I demonstrate below, extend and sustain Indigenous sovereignty and ingenuity.

## 2. Adaptation and Inuit Games

My focus here is on adaptation — mainly how it functions as a method of iterating traditional Inuit stories in video game formats. *Never Alone* is the activation site for this analysis. However, the method I draw on for reading the game is grounded in Indigenous literary studies, particularly the existent work on Inuit literatures. According to Keavy Martin, author of *Stories in a New Skin: Approaches to Inuit Literature*, “Inuit storytelling traditions...have much to say about the challenges and potentials of adaptation”.<sup>18</sup> The adaptation of stories, as they are shared and retold within and across communities (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous), is directly connected to the Inuit way of life, which, within an often-unforgiving climate, demands versatility and the ability to change quickly and efficiently. Igloolik writer Rachel A. Qitsualik suggests that “Inuit are the embodiment of adaptability itself, and other peoples who direct eyes towards the Arctic ... would do well to emulate such plasticity”.<sup>19</sup> The necessity of adaptation in the circumpolar north resonates in the Inuktitut word *aulatsigunnarniq*: “the ability to change quickly for the continuance and well-being of all”.<sup>20</sup> *Aulatsigunnarniq* also translates into cultural outputs. Inuit stories and songs readily “adapt to new contexts” as the situation demands, illustrating the dynamism and resiliency of narratives with thousands of years of history behind them.<sup>21</sup> While the original structure of a story may feature particular characters, settings, and plots, future tellers of that same story may shift and revise certain elements around the core narrative to meet the needs and contexts in which the story is being (re)told. Hence the title of Martin’s monograph, “stories in a new skin”: while the skeleton of the story remains constant, the “skin” that stretches over it is dynamic and versatile.

It is this survivance, the ability to flex, iterate, and flourish within demanding conditions, that makes Inuit storytelling such a rich and fertile space for outlining a theory of adaptation as it applies to Indigenous video games. Indeed, the skin metaphor deployed by Martin is particularly germane to video game contexts. Skinning a game means changing its look and feel without worrying about the code and infrastructure that affords it. Since skinning is not aimed at a game’s engine, and therefore does not require hard coding, developers often mobilized it as an entry point for community-based digital storytelling. For example, the development team at Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace (AbTeC), which runs a long-standing video game workshop called *Skins*, uses the metaphor of skinning as an invitation for Indigenous communities “to embrace computer technology as a means of

<sup>18</sup> Martin, *Stories in Another Skin*, 24.

<sup>19</sup> Cited in Martin, *Stories in Another Skin*, 25.

<sup>20</sup> Katherine Meloche, “Playing in the Digital Qargi. Iñupiat Gaming and Isuma in *Kisima Injitchuᖃ*”, *Transmotion*, 3.1 (2017), 2.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

creative expression and production, not just consumption”.<sup>22</sup> In an unpublished interview I conducted with former *Skins* Associate Director, Maize Longboat, he establishes the logic of skinning, as adaptation, in Indigenous systems of renewal and revitalization. Speaking to his experience translating community stories into video games in his time with AbTeC, Longboat highlights how adaptation facilitates meaning-making and traditional knowledge transmission:

You see how an old way of doing things could potentially fit into a new way of doing things, as well as the transformation that might happen in between. It’s always really exciting because I feel like the more ways we can tell stories, the more potential there is for people to understand them and for us to understand them too.<sup>23</sup>

AbTeC and Longboat illustrate how skinning, adapting Indigenous stories for digital media, can be mobilized as a relational technology deployed to facilitate community engagement. As a mediation point, skinning therefore provides a fertile space through which video games can productively articulate (and blur) intersections of old and new, digital and analogue, oral and written, etc. In adapting an old story into a new platform, storytellers (and story facilitators) work in reciprocity with existing narratives, both giving new life to a story while simultaneously receiving life from it (in the form of cultural continuity and connection with ancestors). As a material representation of this process, the act of skinning stories for video games provides an activation site from which to consider the mechanics of adaptation further. While developers might anchor the core materials of an Indigenous video game in history and tradition, that grounding does not preclude the potential for adaptation, which can be, simultaneously and without paradox, dynamic *and* static, rooted *and* transportable. In other words, to be grounded in tradition does not mean to be locked in tradition. According to Lou Cornum, “dynamic traditions, themselves a type of advanced technology, help [Indigenous peoples] to understand how to foster the kind of relationships that make futures possible”.<sup>24</sup>

This all said, despite the possibility afforded by concepts of adaptation, it is not something to be taken up without vigilance. Martin, for instance, carefully balances the centrality of adaptation in Inuit storytelling against the perennial threat of colonial appropriation, which Niigaan Sinclair aptly defines as “theft based on power and privilege”.<sup>25</sup> It should come as no surprise that appropriation is no less of a risk in video game environments than it is anywhere else in the colonial terrain. Hector Postigo even goes so far as to argue that appropriation is built directly into Western video game culture.<sup>26</sup> Indigenous communities and developers are acutely aware of the extractive potential of digital technologies and the risks embedded in adapting traditional knowledge and stories into digital forums.<sup>27</sup> Appropriation of, for example, Indigenous stories, traditional knowledge, artwork, and more, threatens the culture and livelihood of Indigenous peoples and is an issue to be taken extremely seriously. The First Nations Information Governance Centre (FNIGC) and the Global Indigenous Data Alliance (GIDA) provide guidance for considering and mitigating this threat. Indigenous literature scholars connect the threat of appropriation to the decontextualization of words and artwork, which renders living pieces of culture “monumentalized, static, transhistorical,” prohibiting adaptation and

<sup>22</sup> Jason Lewis and Skawennati, “Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace”, *Cultural Survival Quarterly*, 29.2 (2005).

<sup>23</sup> Maize Longboat, Personal Correspondence, November 2020.

<sup>24</sup> Lou Cornum, “The Space NDN’s Starmap”, 368.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Jennifer Brant, “Cultural Appropriation of Indigenous Peoples in Canada”, *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca., accessed 9 November 2022.

<sup>26</sup> Hector Postigo, “Video Game Appropriation through Modifications. Attitudes Concerning Intellectual Property among Modders and Fans”, *Convergence. The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 14.1 (2008), 59.

<sup>27</sup> Tahu Kukutai and John Taylor, “Data Sovereignty for Indigenous Peoples. Current Practice and Future Needs”, *Indigenous Data Sovereignty: Towards an Agenda* (Acton: ANU Press, 2016), 2-4.

future-oriented thinking.<sup>28</sup> Vincent Schilling, for instance, illustrates how video games such as *Civilization VI*, *Oregon Trail*, and *Red Dead Redemption* decontextualize Indigenous history and historical actors (such as Cree leader, Pihtokahanapiwiyyin in *Civilization VI*) in ways that perpetuate racist stereotypes and serve colonial interests.<sup>29</sup>

A large body of Indigenous studies literature traces the boundaries of adaptation as a theoretical concept. For example, from a socio-political perspective, David Garneau identifies the need for Indigenous-only storytelling spaces as “irreconcilable spaces of Aboriginality”.<sup>30</sup> That is, storytelling spaces in which *only* Indigenous peoples should be welcome. LaPensée notes that there are certain stories in Indigenous nations that *should not* be shared outside of the community or that can *only* be shared at particular times and with particular people, adaptation notwithstanding.<sup>31</sup> In other words, just because some stories are suited to adaptation outside of their communities of origin does not mean those same principles can be applied across all communities and all stories equally and without careful consideration.

To be clear, I am not in any way arguing that appropriation can be beneficial for Indigenous peoples. Nor am I suggesting that non-Indigenous developers should start adapting more Indigenous stories into video games. At the centre of appropriation is a foundational mechanic of settler colonialism: the redistribution of social and financial benefits mobilized through the theft of Indigenous knowledge. Rather, what I hope to make clear at the onset of this essay is the distinct delineation between appropriation and adaptation. Appropriation is the violent erasure of Indigenous agency, “the separation of the creation from the original authors”.<sup>32</sup> Adaptation, however, as I will illustrate in what follows, centres Indigenous agency and resilience. While both concepts imply translation and movement, adaptation, as I am defining it, is driven *by* specific Indigenous communities and peoples, *for* those specific communities and peoples.

The distinction between appropriation and adaptation is significant when applied to what Angela Haas identifies as the “open frontier” of digital space: “where individual rights take precedent over community benefit and alliance building”.<sup>33</sup> Indigenous technology scholars, such as Haas and Marisa Duarte illustrate that despite the colonial ideologies that haunt digital infrastructure, Indigenous knowledge, properly stewarded, can flourish in those spaces, and even bolster tribal sovereignty. According to Duarte, Indigenous technology studies must hold up “the inherent sovereignty of Native peoples choosing to use ICTs and build the infrastructure for it across their sacred lands toward their own tribal goals”, even when, and perhaps particularly when, “non-tribal critics, including Indigenous scholars, decry such efforts as a perpetuation of corporate colonialism, neoliberalism, technological hegemony, and other such challenging allegations”.<sup>34</sup> In other words, assuming that technology and digital spaces are always appropriative may elide Indigenous agency. Adapting a traditional story for gameplay in, for example, a Unity game engine, does not necessarily mean that the platform will subsume the content. That does not mean that digital spaces should go unexamined: “careful

<sup>28</sup> Sophie McCall, “I Can Only Sing This Song to Someone Who Understands It. Community Filmmaking and the Politics of Partial Translation in Atanarjuat, the Fast Runner”, *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 83.83 (2004), 4.

<sup>29</sup> Vince Schilling, “Oregon Trail to Assassin’s Creed. Right and Wrong Native American Portrayals in Video Games”, *Indian Country Today*, [www.indiancountrytoday.com](http://www.indiancountrytoday.com), accessed 9 November 2022.

<sup>30</sup> David Garneau, “Imaginary Spaces of Conciliation and Reconciliation. Art, Curation, and Healing”, in Dylan Robinson and Keavy Martin, eds., *Arts of Engagement. Taking Aesthetic Action In and Beyond the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*, (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier U.P., 2016), 33.

<sup>31</sup> Elizabeth Lapensée, “Games as Enduring Presence”, *PUBLIC*, 54 (2016), 179.

<sup>32</sup> Sócrates Vasquez and Avexnim Cojtí, “Cultural Appropriation. Another Form of Extractivism of Indigenous Communities” in *Cultural Survival*, [www.culturalsurvival.org](http://www.culturalsurvival.org), accessed 9 November 2022.

<sup>33</sup> Haas, 93.

<sup>34</sup> Marisa Elena Duarte, *Network Sovereignty. Building the Internet Across Indian Country*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017), 134.



investigation of the impacts of digital systems is about articulating the boundaries around these systems”, both in terms of what they can, and what they cannot, contribute to tribal sovereignty.<sup>35</sup> It does mean, however, that critics must be ready to acknowledge the existence of Indigenous sovereignty in digital spaces. Foregrounding these sovereignties as they persist and even flourish in “inhospitable” digital climates, including the often toxic and colonial environments of video games, can be a means of amplifying and expanding the ways in which Indigenous peoples are applying technology toward retaining their values, relational structures, and storytelling protocols.

### 3. Ikiaqtaq and *Never Alone*

*Never Alone* is a collaboration between the Cook Island Tribal Council (CITC), their production company, Upper One Games, and E-Line Media, a progressive gaming company that emphasizes positive social impact in the game design and development processes. The game was released to massive critical acclaim, winning “Best Debut Game” at the 2015 BAFTA Games Awards as well as “Game of the Year” and “Most Significant Impact” at the 2015 Games for Change Awards. In their analysis, Bushell, Tomhave, and Prather identify *Never Alone* as “an exemplar of an Indigenous game”<sup>36</sup> because of the survivance through which the developers assert Iñupiat presence in the digital. That is to say, Inuit storytelling does not just survive in the digital space of a video game; it flourishes. It does so to such a degree that we should consider the impact Indigenous stories might have on video games as a medium, rather than emphasizing, as the media tends to, the impact that the medium has on Indigenous stories.<sup>37</sup>

*Never Alone* tells the story of a young Iñupiat girl, Nuna, and her friend and companion, an Arctic fox. Across eight chapters, gamers direct the two characters (at times toggling back and forth between them, or, if playing in two-player mode, working collaboratively) to solve puzzles, leap gaps, and escape angry polar bears. They do so to save Nuna’s community from a seemingly never-ending snowstorm that is preventing them from hunting. A significant portion of the game’s mechanics are built to foreground Nuna’s relationships with the land. She must commune with fox and carefully engage helping spirits in order to navigate the difficult environment. The player too is encouraged to learn more about Iñupiat territory. As they progress, they collect “cultural insights,” which are hidden throughout the levels. The cultural insights contain short documentary films on Iñupiat land, language, and culture. Nuna’s connection to her community, which sets the stakes for her journey, held alongside the relationships that she (and the player) must negotiate with the land and spirits, render this game a nuanced exploration in reciprocity and place-based learning.

However, holding all of this together (narrative, mechanics, community orientation), is an overarching mechanic of adaptation. That is because *Never Alone* is not a new story; rather, it is an ikiaqtaq. Ikiaqtaq means, “a song that has been adapted”.<sup>38</sup> Or, as Igloodik elder Emile Imaruittuq articulates it, “it’s another person’s song I am using but I am creating my own words”.<sup>39</sup> To put that differently, while many traditional Inuit songs maintain an identifiable narrative structure throughout multiple iterations, ikiaqtaq provides the possibility, to use Martin’s metaphor, for the story to perennially shed and cultivate new skins according to the time, place, and context it is told. In this sense, the processes of ikiaqtaq are decidedly malleable, which allows a given story to move

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>36</sup> Jeanette Bushnell, “How Do You Say Watermelon?”, 56.

<sup>37</sup> Jesse Matheson, “The Rise of Indigenous Storytelling in Games” in IGN Entertainment (January 15, 2015). [www.ign.com](http://www.ign.com), accessed 9 November 2022.

<sup>38</sup> Martin, *Stories in Another Skin*, 101.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 97.

comfortably through time, media, and space while remaining firmly connected to its community and a lineage of storytellers.

*Never Alone* is an *ikiaqtaq* of the Iñupiaq *unikkaaqtuat* (traditional song) “Kunuksaayuka,” first published in 1980 in the collection *Unipchaanich imagluktugmiut: Stories of the Black River People*. “Kunuksaayuka” and all of the stories in *Unipchaanich imagluktugmiut* are transcribed from earlier recordings of Iñupiat master storyteller Robert Nasruk Cleveland, who told them to the geographer Don Charles Foote in the 1960s. Foote selected pieces from the recordings to be translated into English for *Human Geographical Studies in Northwestern Arctic Alaska: The Point Hope and Upper Kobuk River Projects*, and the recordings themselves were archived. In 1979, Ruth (Tatqaviñ) Ramoth-Sampson and Angeline (Ipiilik) Newlin worked with Minnie Gray, Cleveland’s daughter, to transcribe all Foote’s tapes and publish them as part of the Iñupiaq literature collection in Upper Kobok, thus repatriating the stories into the community.<sup>40</sup> For most Iñupiaq people, *Stories of the Black River People* represented the first time that “Kunuksaayuka,” and many other stories, were written down, providing new points of access to traditional stories for a broader swath of the community. However, as a piece of oral storytelling, “Kunuksaayuka” stretches back, as the epigram I open this essay with suggests, 10,000 years.<sup>41</sup>

The balance between fidelity and adaptation, tradition and innovation, as it takes shape in the process of *ikiaqtaq*, is intricate, nuanced, and grounded in community praxis. It is significant, for instance, that Cleveland is the primary storytelling source for the *Never Alone* source text. Cleveland was a master storyteller trained in the narrative traditions of his people. He “spent countless hours in the qargi; it was in these community houses with Elders that he began to learn classic Iñupiaq stories and develop the storytelling skills that distinguished him as one of the leading masters of the oral storytelling tradition”.<sup>42</sup> Cleveland’s role in the community not only establishes “Kunuksaayuka,” within a long and sophisticated tradition of Iñupiat storytelling, it also threads a tradition of *ikiaqtaq* back from *Never Alone* to *Unipchaanich imagluktugmiut* and thus into the centuries-old tradition of Inuit storytelling that grounds the game solidly in community.

An Inuit storyteller’s relationship to their stories is vital because *ikiaqtaq* builds the history of the oration of the story into the story itself. In this sense, while the process of *ikiaqtaq* adapts, it also extends and makes visible the circuitry of its telling by foregrounding that lineage in its retelling: “the importance of naming a song’s history: namely, the identity of the song’s composer (or adaptor)” is a fundamental part of how that song, or story, is shared and passed on, from person to person, community to community, and generation to generation.<sup>43</sup> Peter Irniq further explains that the individual deploying *ikiaqtaq* in a given situation “must acknowledge [the lineage of the song], perhaps by saying ‘pisiruna ikaqtaq qanurlikiaq aturnialirivara’ – ‘how am I going to use this *ikiaqtaq*?’”.<sup>44</sup> In other words, by drawing previous tellers into new iterations, storytellers bear witness to and extend what Lawrence Kaplan identifies as a long-established process of “oral copywriting”.<sup>45</sup> However, this process also blurs the line between form and content in provocative ways. Previous tellers are incorporated into the story, tracing out a history and a genealogy that, in turn, becomes *part* of the story itself. In the language that Alexander Galloway uses in his analysis of video games, the

<sup>40</sup> Tupou L. Pulu, “Introduction”, *Unipchaanich Imagluktugmiut. Stories of the Black River People*, National Bilingual Materials Development Center, (1980), iv.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> “Never Alone - The Story of Kunuksaayuka (Conclusion)”, *Never Alone*, (October 2014), [www.neveralongame.com](http://www.neveralongame.com), accessed 9 November 2022.

<sup>43</sup> Martin, *Stories in Another Skin*, 97.

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in Martin, *Stories in Another Skin*, 97.

<sup>45</sup> Lawrence D. Kaplan and Deanna Paniataaq Kingston, “Introduction to Iñupiaq Narratives”, *Words of the Real People. Alaska Native Literature in Translation* (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2007), 137.



lineage of the story, including Cleveland himself, therefore becomes part of the diegetic composition of *Never Alone*: “the game’s total world of narrative action”.<sup>46</sup>

*Never Alone* takes up the tradition of *ikiaqtaq* directly, building Cleveland and the lineage of “Kunuksaayuka” into the video game’s design and narrative. James Mumigan Nageak, an Iñupiat Elder and language teacher, narrates *Never Alone* by following *ikiaqtaq* protocols, weaving Cleveland (Nasruk), as the storyteller from whom the story is obtained, into the fabric of the game. Nageak begins *Never Alone* by telling the audience, “I will tell you a very old story. I heard it from Nasruk when I was very young”.<sup>47</sup> Flashing forward to the conclusion, the game closes with a second acknowledgement of Cleveland, solidifying the storyteller’s presence as part of the story. In the final piece of narration before the credits, Nageak once again asserts that “I have heard Nasruk tell the story that way”.<sup>48</sup> Tracing Nageak’s telling back to Cleveland (which one can also do through the game’s secondary materials),<sup>49</sup> we can see that Cleveland similarly ends and begins his telling of “Kunuksaayuka” by acknowledging the relations that told him the story: “I have heard my grandparents tell the story of Kunuksaayuka that way”.<sup>50</sup> In acknowledging Cleveland in the final punctuation of *Never Alone*, Nageak and Upper One Game honour a centuries-old tradition of *ikiaqtaq*, which remediates the previous storyteller into the game while tracing out the lineage of Iñupiat storytelling. Acknowledged at both the introduction and conclusion of *Never Alone*, Cleveland’s presence thus shepherds and contains the digital iteration, gently holding the content of the game within a set of cultural bookends, which millennia of Inuit storytelling have forged.

Reading *Never Alone* alongside “Kunuksaayuka” illuminates *ikiaqtaq* as a means of articulating cultural continuity. Doing so also helps to illuminate the systems of reciprocal exchange that sustain and nourish the community’s relationships to their stories. Already, in the movement from the long history of Iñupiat oral storytelling, to Cleveland, to Foote, to Ramoth-Sampson, Newlin, Grey, and, eventually, to *Never Alone*, we see *ikiaqtaq* at work in “Kunuksaayuka”. As the story moves from Cleveland to Foote and from Foote into the south and the pages of academic journals, it remains a uniquely Iñupiat narrative – because it is built with the technology of *ikiaqtaq* as an intimate and robust component of its internal structure. There is more to thinking *ikiaqtaq* as a technology then. According to Martin, not all items move or are shared in the same way in Inuit culture. Martin, for instance, distinguishes between hard and soft objects, the former being knives or guns, or something that could cause death, and the latter being meat or stories. Soft items are open to sharing and adaptation, not only within the community but with outsiders. In support of this claim, Martin refers to Knud Rasmussen, the Greenlandic–Danish polar explorer, sometimes known as the father of “Inuitology,” who made his own *ikiaqtaq* out of Inuit songs via the extensive ethnographic research he did in those communities. What is most important to note in Rasmussen’s adaptations are the technologies of exchange implicit to the stories’ movement, which work symbiotically with the narrator.

Foregrounding Inuit narrative resilience, Martin argues that these stories were not appropriated by Rasmussen, at least not in the sense that we generally understand that word as a diminishment. Instead, in their circular movement away from and back to the community, the stories Rasmussen was working with always already operated according to *ikiaqtaq* technology, which emphasizes reciprocity and community sustainability. According to Uqsuralik Ottokie, Inuit people are “told not to be stingy...

<sup>46</sup> Alexander Galloway, *Gaming. Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 2006), 7.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> See “The Story of Kunuksaayuka,” [www.neveralonegame.com](http://www.neveralonegame.com), accessed 9 November 2022.

<sup>50</sup> Robert Cleveland, *Unipchaanich Imagluktugmiut: Stories of the Black River People*, trans. by Ruth (Tatqaviñ) Ramoth-Sampson et al. (Anchorage: National Bilingual Materials Development Center, 1980), 101.

Don't keep it to yourself. If you are generous it comes back, and it will be a bigger amount".<sup>51</sup> In the sense that Ottokie outlines, sharing stories – much like sharing food and other “soft” objects – provides for a future-oriented system of nourishment and sustainability in which “ownership” is far less important than the health, well-being and continuance of the community. Emphasizing the imminent return of good relations (“it *will* be a bigger amount”), Ottokie makes plain how Inuit storytellers share stories with an eye toward the seventh generation and the possibility those stories hold as what Karyn Recollet calls “futurity bundles”.<sup>52</sup> In the ways in which these stories eventually returned to the community, they fulfilled a cycle, independent of Rasmussen, that confirmed their resiliency and community-sustaining attributes. In this sense, *ikiaqtaq* “keeps the songs in the service of the community – even if that means sending them away from time to time”.<sup>53</sup>

When considered through the processes of *ikiaqtaq*, a technology which functions not only as a means to transmit content and mechanics across generations but as a system of reciprocal sustenance, *Never Alone* can more concretely be linked to long-standing systems of well-being that are built into Iñupiat storytelling practices. CITC President and CEO Gloria O'Neill identifies this sustainability as the “double bottom line”<sup>54</sup> of Upper One games, which means, equally, that *Never Alone* needed to generate profits for the Iñupiaq community while supporting and proliferating Iñupiaq knowledge, both within and outside of the community. Far beyond the capitalist/neoliberal usage of “the bottom line”, which uses the financial balance sheet as the primary guiding principle, here the phrase is shorthand for cultural resurgence. O'Neill illustrates how *Never Alone*, as an extension of Iñupiaq culture and stories, supports the community materially: putting food on the table, while simultaneously reasserting the power and potential of their long-standing storytelling traditions. Sending the story away, into digital contexts, and gaming consoles worldwide, it came back with very generous returns, much beyond the balance sheet. Importantly, those returns were not just financial: they were also cultural. In an interview with the *Guardian*, O'Neill outlines the Cook Island Tribal Council's (CITC) decision to invest in video games:

The board said: “we want you to make an investment, we want you to develop a double bottom line company, making money first and making impact second” ... So, we looked at everything from traditional real estate to funeral homes. We also wanted to be bold and be courageous, so we started thinking about how CITC could become more progressive. 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. It was one thing, however, for CITC to identify that the native Alaskan community's strongest asset was its long history of storytelling. But how to turn that into something that made money to help support the community in the future, while also sharing it with others? The answer, CITC decided, was to build video games.<sup>55</sup>

By identifying storytelling as a community asset and video games as a medium by which to proliferate and benefit from that asset, the CITC underwrote their fiscal security with the cultural integrity that sustained the Iñupiaq people for thousands of years. This is screen sovereignty in action: self-determined representation mobilized as the basis for community sustainability. And the double bottom line model worked. Thanks to the success of *Never Alone*, Upper One built a reputation as a significant

<sup>51</sup> Quoted in Martin, *Stories in Another Skin*, 103.

<sup>52</sup> Karyn Recollet, “Choreographies of the Fall. Futurity Bundles & Landing When Future Falls Are Immanent”, *Theatre*, 49.3 (2019), 89.

<sup>53</sup> Martin, *Stories in Another Skin*, 114.

<sup>54</sup> Jane Parkinson, “Alaska's Indigenous Game *Never Alone* Teaches Co-Operation through Stories”, *The Guardian*, Monday 29 September 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/sep/29/never-alone-alaskas-indigenous-game-never-alone-teaches-cooperation-through-stories>, accessed 9 November 2022.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

player in the rising genre of “world games”, video games that “bring carefully-selected stories from indigenous cultures from around the planet to life in compelling, innovative ways”.<sup>56</sup> The Iñupiaq community, which, according to Amy Fredeen, the CITC CFO, included “everybody from eighty-five-year-old elders who live most of the year in remote villages to kids in Barrow High School” found new points of connection to community-specific systems of knowledge exchange passed down for thousands of years.<sup>57</sup> The Iñupiaq community also saw an influx of capital thanks to sales on the gaming platform Steam as well as mainstream gaming consoles and platforms like Xbox, and later iOS and Android, tapping directly into an indie gaming industry that was, at the time, reporting \$7 billion in sales.<sup>58</sup> When Fredeen told the *New Yorker* that Iñupiaq stories “can travel”,<sup>59</sup> it is therefore quite possible that she was not simply referring to the ready uptake of *Never Alone* into global culture (a unidirectional movement) but rather to the circular paths that Iñupiaq storytelling technologies mobilize, to support and sustain their relations in travelling away *and* returning home.

#### 4. Conclusion

Video game platforms are novel sites for reconfiguring historical narratives towards those which promote Indigenous sovereignty. Ikiqtaq, as *Never Alone* takes it up, is a future-oriented storytelling technology. In the sense that Inuit storytellers build stories so that they will flourish in their retellings (and thus in Inuit futurities), ‘tradition’ does not mean ‘stagnant’ nor even ‘historical’. Instead, the Inuit adaptation processes are relational — sharing and reciprocity are built directly into the story’s structure. Through adaptation, or, more specifically, ikiqtaq, Upper One Games realizes a model for Indigenous technologies anchored in cultural sovereignty and centuries-old storytelling practices. “A game 10,000 years in the making” is not just a clever tagline. *Never Alone*, and “Kunuksaayuka” for that matter, flourish in contemporary spaces because of the robust Inuit narrative technologies that make the movement of a story across time, space, and media not only possible but fluid, sophisticated, and materially advantageous. Drawing directly from centuries of Inuit storytelling, The CITC and Upper One Games underwrite the adaptation of “Kunuksaayuka” into digital space via community-specific models of cultural continuity and economic sustainability. *Never Alone* should therefore not only be celebrated for its content, which is remarkable, but for the innovation that the CITC and Upper One Games have made in Indigenous game design as an *extension* of community storytelling praxis: ikiqtaq.

Framed through adaptation, the research takeaways from *Never Alone* lay potentially foundational infrastructure for future Indigenous game development and analysis. The game teaches us about Iñupiaq culture, land, and language, certainly. Even further, however, it clears a formidable path for the future development of Indigenous games, as articulated through the gathering of traditional stories, protocols, and history. *Never Alone* makes its own space within the genre of video games by adapting the medium to resonate with Iñupiaq technology. Of course, ikiqtaq is not something that can be lifted out of Inuit contexts and mobilized in any Indigenous community. However, it does model a very successful, localized storytelling process that illustrates the potential for Indigenous *sovereignty* in video games. As more and more communities find the technological means to express their own sovereignties in digital space, video games, and other new media, will play increasingly important roles as sociopolitical tools. *Never Alone* is possible because of thousands of years of Indigenous

<sup>56</sup> “Never Alone. World Games”, [www.neveralonegame.com](http://www.neveralonegame.com), accessed 9 November 2022.

<sup>57</sup> Simon Parkin, “Could a Video Game Help to Preserve Inuit Culture?”, *The New Yorker* (2014), [www.newyorker.com](http://www.newyorker.com), accessed 9 November 2022.

<sup>58</sup> Mike Dunham, “Game Changer”. First Native-Produced Video Game *Never Alone* Brings Culture to the Console”, *Anchorage Daily News*, [www.adn.com](http://www.adn.com), accessed 9 November 2022.

<sup>59</sup> Quoted in Parkin, “Could a Video Game Help”.

adaptive ingenuity. We are only just beginning to see that type of ingenuity surface in Indigenous video games. As scholars of Indigenous new media and Indigenous technologies, I hope that inspires us to read, play, and develop these games in conversation with the larger field of Indigenous literatures, and Indigenous studies.