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To reclaim the voice – Inuit representation in the video
game *Never Alone (Kisima Ingitchuna)*

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Abstract

In the context of new media, communities that have historically experienced oppression and consequently been deprived of their right to self-determination can regain their voice. Artists, through media such as computer games, have the chance to tell their stories and show their culture and identity to the world. The subject of this thesis is an analysis of the computer game *Never Alone* (*Kisima Innitchuna*) operating as a channel for the creation of self-identity and the transmission of cultural representation. The aim of the study is to examine what cultural representation is created through this game as well as to identify the aesthetic, mechanical and narrative means through which the game constructs a cultural representation.

The game is the result of a collaboration between Upper One Games studio and the non-profit Cook Inlet Tribal Council (CITC), which represents the Inupiat community – one of the Inuit communities living in the area of modern Alaska.

The analysis is based on a qualitative research approach and uses the method of narrative game design which is an approach that treats storyline, game mechanics and player interaction as interrelated systems of meaning. In order to create a more detailed model for the analysis, it was narrowed down using the analytical tools of Roland Barthes (visual semiotics), Ian Bogost (procedural rhetoric) and Henry Jenkins (storytelling). Together they provide an interpretative framework that enables the researcher to read the cultural content contained in the structure of the game in greater depth.

The theoretical basis is provided by Stuart Hall's concepts of cultural representation and Homi K. Bhabha's *third space*, which allows the game to be understood as a space for negotiating meanings and hybridising identities.

The analysis covers three main areas: the visual layer, the game mechanics and, building on the previous two elements, a narrative analysis. The game, through all these elements, communicates the key values of Inupiat culture – such as collaboration, value of community, harmony, respect for the environment and spirituality. It thus stands in opposition to the mainstream, postcolonial representation that portrays Inuit peoples as primitive and lacking a deeper culture. This representation is not limited to only the plot layer – it is rooted in the structure of the game, the logic of character collaboration and the design of the game environment as a story space.

The conclusions of the study indicate that *Never Alone* is an example of a conscious and engaged cultural project in which the game medium serves not only as entertainment, but also as a tool for the transmission of indigenous knowledge and a demonstration of cultural identity affirmation and intercultural dialogue. Through these elements, the game creates a representation of the Inuit based on their elaborate culture, spirituality, values such as community, respect and cooperation, and portrays them as a people actively changing and influencing their lives and surroundings, while emphasising their strong connection to nature and their harmonic relationship with the non-material world.

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1.Introduction

The first section of this study will focus on outlining the historical context surrounding the colonization of Alaska by both Russia and the United States. This framework then will serve as a foundational basis for examining the mainstream representations of the Inuit peoples, as well as exploring the origins and development of the video game *Never Alone*. Next, I will provide an overview of its creation process. This will include an examination of its core gameplay mechanics as well as the plot. I will then move on to describe the international response to this game, in order to conclude with a formulation of the problem and its rationale.

1.1 Colonization of Inuit peoples in Alaska - Historical Aspects

Today's perceptions of Inuit are still largely shaped by colonialism. As Chandonnet (2015) notes, *the contemporary challenges of Inuit people are a direct legacy of colonisation, which left lasting marks on their communities* (p. 102). Not only did colonialism impose new social and political structures, but it also repositioned Inuit within value systems and norms that were alien to them, often ignoring their traditional ways of life and knowledge (Chandonnet, 2015). The importance of these processes is also highlighted by other scholars, including McGrath (2011), who emphasises that colonial interventions changed the way Inuit are perceived by both other societies and themselves. Similarly, Tester and Kulchyski (1994) add, pointing out that state policies towards Inuit were closely linked to attempts to assimilate and control them by changing their social and cultural frames of reference. As a starting point for this thesis, I therefore take a brief explanation of the genesis of current perceptions of the Inuit and their struggle to reclaim their own voice in a historical context.

1.1.1 Russian Colonization

The beginning of the long process of Inuit colonization in Alaska was the Russian expeditions in the XVIII century. Russian expansion into Alaska began with Vitus Bering's expedition in 1741. The Russians quickly established trading settlements such as Kodiak (1784) and Novoarchangelsk (present-day Sitka, 1799), which became centers of the fur trade. Russian colonization was based on the exploitation of natural resources, mainly sea otter fur, which led to a significant reduction in their population (Forsyth, 1992).

As Lydia Black (2004) points out, in the Russian perspective, the territory of Alaska was perceived as a potential resource for a way to gather more wealth rather than as a location for permanent settlement. The relationship between the Russians and the Inuit was mostly based on coercion and

exploitation. (p. 45). Indigenous people were often forced to work in Russian trade factories, which resulted in the destabilization of their traditional social structures (Black, 2004). Additionally, as Fienup-Riordan (1990) points out, Russian colonization also introduced new diseases that decimated the Inuit population, weakening their ability to resist the colonizer.

According to a study by Forsyth (1992), the Russian colonisation of Alaska was a component of a more extensive phenomenon of imperial expansion, characterized by the exploitation of resources and the marginalization of indigenous populations (p. 67). As stated later in the same work, Russians also introduced a taxation system that forced the Inuit to pay tribute in the form of furs, which further burdened their economy (p. 83)

1.1.2 US Colonization

In 1867, Russia sold Alaska to the United States for \$7.2 million (in the currency of the time). This transaction, known as *the Alaska Purchase*, marked the beginning of a new era of colonization. (Smith, 1999). The American administration introduced a policy of assimilation of indigenous peoples, which had quite far-reaching consequences for the Inuit.

Smith (1999) highlights the fact that American policy towards Alaska Natives was dominated by the idea of *civilizing* them through education and the new religion, which was Christianity. Missionary schools, such as those run by the Orthodox and Protestant churches, aimed to eliminate traditional Inuit beliefs and practices. As Case (2008) notes, education in colonial times was a tool for assimilation and Westernization, and not the way to strengthen the indigenous communities.

According to a study by Haycox (2002), *the US administration viewed Alaska as a “wild territory” that needed to be civilized through the introduction of Western institutions and values*. This policy was part of a wider colonial process that was characterized by the marginalization of indigenous peoples across the American continent.

1.2 Impact of Colonization on the Inuit Peoples

The colonization of Alaska brought significant changes to Inuit culture and social structure. Traditional practices, such as whaling, were disrupted by the introduction of new technologies and regulations that limited the ability to operate traditional forms of economy (Burch, 1988). New natural resource regulations imposed by colonial governments affected the Inuit's ability to maintain self-sufficiency, forcing them to adapt to new economic conditions (Krupnik, 2002).

Fienup-Riordan (1990) notes that colonization led to the fragmentation of Inuit communities, which resulted in weakening of their ability to maintain traditional cultural practices. This fragmentation manifested itself in the breakdown of former clan structures and the gradual disappearance of local forms of social organization (Kaplan, 1993, p. 89). The impact of colonization also manifested itself in changes in ways of life – the settlement of the Inuit in permanent settlements and changes in the ways in which they obtained food and tools significantly affected their daily functioning (Condon, 1996, p. 132).

The introduction of Christianity and Western values led to a profound erosion of traditional shamanic beliefs and practices in Inuit communities. As Kaplan (1993) points out, missionaries often viewed Inuit spirituality as pagan and shamanic activities and as a manifestation of darkness that needed to be eradicated and replaced with Christian teachings (p. 134). This process of religious colonisation not only weakened traditional religion but also had a significant impact on the social role structure associated with spirituality and orally transmitted indigenous knowledge. Graburn (2004) notes that missionaries actively depreciated local spiritual authorities, which contributed to the marginalisation of shamans, who for generations had acted as intermediaries between the spiritual and physical worlds (p. 211). Their place in many communities began to be taken by Christian priests, whose authority was based on external, colonial religious structures (Laugrand & Oosten, 2010, p. 167).

One of the most influential tools of this process were missionary schools, established mainly in Alaska and northern Canada. They were a key element of the colonial assimilation strategy, which aimed to transform Inuit into *citizens* fitting into the Western cultural model. The use of indigenous languages was banned in these schools, leading to their gradual disappearance, especially among the younger generations (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2005). Language change was not only a communicative tool, but also part of a deeper cultural identity transformation, cutting children off from their traditions, values and ways of understanding the world (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2005).

As McCall (2011) notes, this process also led to a rejection of traditional forms of education, based on the intergenerational transmission of knowledge by elders, in favour of a Western, formalised model of teaching (p. 204). In addition to their educational role, mission schools also became sites of physical and psychological violence, the effects of which are still felt in many communities today. Fienup-Riordan (2000) points out the long-lasting trauma left by systematic disciplinary

actions and symbolic violence, which aimed to break Inuit cultural resistance and fully internalise Western norms (p. 214).

At the same time, changes in the social structure, such as the introduction of the money economy, have undermined traditional Inuit social and economic roles (Stern, 2013, p. 93). Historically, the Inuit economy was based on the communal sharing of resources and the interdependence of community members (Brody, 2001, p. 56). However, the introduction of a market economy forced a transformation of traditional forms of exchange and meant that many Inuit had to adapt to the new rules of earning, often through employment in the fishing, fur or tourism industries (Damas, 2002, p. 78).

According to a study by Krupnik and Chlenov (2013), the process of colonisation resulted in significant changes in Inuit social structure, including the loss of traditional leadership roles and the weakening of social ties (p. 45). Leaders, who in traditional communities played a key role in decision-making, mediation and organising collective life, gradually lost their position to representatives of the colonial administration, often unfamiliar with local realities and culture. This process led not only to the marginalisation of indigenous authorities, but also to the erosion of local forms of self-governance (Kupnik and Chlenov, 2013). As Dorais (2005) notes, colonial systems of governance replaced traditional mechanisms of social responsibility and community action with unified bureaucratic models that were often unsuited to the realities of Arctic communities.

The weakening of social ties was multidimensional. It manifested itself, among other things, in a loosening of traditional family structures, an increase in individualism and changes in child-rearing practices (Krupnik and Chlenov, 2013). Tester and McNicoll (2006) point out that the forced settlement of Inuit in permanent settlements and the introduction of compulsory education in boarding schools had a huge impact on interrupting the intergenerational transmission of knowledge and values. Children separated from their families often lost contact with their mother tongue and traditional social norms, which in turn exacerbated the crisis of identity and belonging (Tester and McNicoll, 2006).

Furthermore, as Kirmayer and co-authors (2009) note, colonial interventions not only affected social relationships, but also contributed to the deterioration of Inuit mental health, largely related to the disintegration of communities and the disappearance of traditional forms of social support. Such structural and cultural changes had a long-term impact on the functioning of communities, undermining their ability to self-organise and maintain social cohesion.

1.3 Today's perception of Inuit peoples internationally and identity issues

The colonization of Alaska has not only affected the Inuit community internally, but it also in a big part shaped the way they are perceived and portrayed in mainstream culture. Edward Said (1978), in his work *Orientalism*, drew attention to the way in which the West creates simplistic, exotic and often stereotypical images of colonized cultures to emphasize its superiority. In the context of the Alaskan Inuit, one can speak of that phenomenon, as for decades they were portrayed as *primitive* northerners, dependent on nature and lacking *civilised* social structures (Bravo, 2009, p. 54).

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, colonial narratives portrayed the Inuit as a closed, almost savage community, which served to justify policies of assimilation and their subjugation to Western governments (Sandlos, 2007, p. 109). In popular media and travel literature, the Inuit have often been portrayed as exotic *others* whose lives are limited to hunting and survival in extreme conditions (Harper, 2010, p. 76).

The signs of this colonial narrative can still be seen today, although it is gradually changing. Today, Inuit communities are trying to regain control of their own representation, both in art and media. Films such as *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* (2001), directed by Inuit filmmakers, present their history from an insider's perspective, defying the stereotypes that have dominated over the years (Evans, 2002, p. 112).

Today, also Alaskan Inuit are trying to reclaim their cultural identity, which has been partially erased because of colonisation as well as globalisation. Over the centuries, assimilation policies, the introduction of the Western education system and the marginalisation of the Inuit culture and traditions have led to the loss of many traditional practices and values (Fienup-Riordan, 2000, p. 214). Today, older generations of Inuit are making efforts to pass on their culture to younger generations, although this is a challenge in a world dominated by technology and global influences (Dorais, 2010, p. 133).

Colonization resulted in many of Alaska's indigenous peoples being forced to abandon their traditional lifestyles and adapt to Western social norms. Mission and state schools, that were mentioned before, prohibited the use of indigenous languages and the cultivation of indigenous beliefs and practices (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2005, p. 45). As a result, younger generations of Inuit often grew up disconnected from their own cultural roots, and their identities were shaped more by Western than Inuit influences (McCall, 2011, p. 204).

Additionally, due to globalization, many young Inuit, especially those raised in urban areas, are experiencing difficulties in maintaining strong ties to tradition. Access to the internet, social media and Western cultural patterns means that Inuit culture is competing with global trends (Karetak et al., 2017, p. 89). This phenomenon, known as *hybrid culture*, can result in young Inuit not always feeling fully part of either the Western world or the traditional Inuit community (Tester and Kulchyski, 1994, p. 229).

It can be concluded that the struggle to reclaim Inuit cultural identity is still ongoing, and the future of Inuit depends on the ability of younger generations to balance tradition and modernity. One of the communities that face these problems and try to find solution to them is Iñupiaq.

1.4 The Iñupiaq community and regaining identity

The Iñupiaq are a community living in northern Alaska. Their language – Iñupiatun, plays a key role in maintaining their cultural identity. The language, which is a part of the Eskimo-Aleutian language family, is in danger of extinction, so there are numerous initiatives to save it, such as language courses and the creation of educational resources (Duffy, 1997). In their culture, the Inuit particularly emphasise the transmission of traditions through language, including stories of ancestors, nature and spirits, which is fundamental to their identity and connection to the past (Fienup-Riordan, 2000).

Another aspect that plays quite an important role in maintaining their culture is art. This includes techniques like carvings, embroidery and clothing making. Their works often depict animals, ghostly figures and scenes of daily life, reflecting both the spirituality and practicality of everyday life in the Arctic (Duffy, 1997). The more contemporary artwork combines tradition with modern means of expression, such as photography and film, as well as digitalization, enabling the Iñupiaq to communicate their culture to the wider world (Fienup-Riordan, 2000).

One of the activities designed to encourage young Inuit people to develop a sense of self-identity and to become more familiar with their culture was the creation of the game *Never Alone (Kisima Ingitchuna)*.

1.5 *Never Alone* – Intercultural collaboration

Never Alone (originally *Kisima Ingitchuna*) is a computer game that was developed in 2014 by Upper One Games in collaboration with representatives of the Inuit community of Alaska (members

from introduced above Iñupiaq community). The game is a platformer in which the player, together with the main characters, traverses the winter landscape of the Arctic and solves puzzles.

The development process for the game was complex and relied on close collaboration with representatives of the Iñupiaq, who were active participants in every stage of production. As mentioned earlier, the game was developed by Upper One Games, which is an independent studio that was founded by the Cook Inlet Tribal Council (CITC). CITC is a non-profit organization dedicated to supporting Alaska Native communities. Through this collaboration, *Never Alone* has become one of the projects where representatives of the Indigenous community play a key role in creating the image and narrative.

In 2011, CITC, supported by Upper One Games, began work on the game with the goal of not only creating a compelling production in a global context, but also preserving and promoting Inuit traditions and history. The initial aim was to create a game that would encourage young Inuit people to cultivate their traditions and uphold their beliefs, but also a game that would attract players from different parts of the world, while remaining true to Inuit traditions and beliefs, communicating them to players in a way that was authentic and respectful of their culture. As one of the developers stated: *our goal was to create a game that was more than just fun. We wanted it to be a space where we tell stories about us, about our history, about our heritage* (CITC, 2014).

1.6 *Never Alone* – Main Mechanics and the Plot

The game's plot is based on one of the traditional myths of the Iñupiat – *Kunuksaayuka*. The plot of the myth tells the story of a boy who embarks on a dangerous expedition to solve the mystery of a constantly falling snowstorm. In the game, the main character instead of a boy is a girl – Nuna, who together with her friend – Fox is trying to get to the source of the eternal snowstorm. The player sees the whole story from an observer's point of view.

The game's spoken narration is always in the Alaskan Inupiaq language, but subtitles in other languages are available, making the game accessible to both Inuit and non-Inuit players.

The game is built in such a way that it can be played simultaneously by either two players – in this case one of them plays the character of Nuna with the keyboard, while the other plays the fox using the controller – or the game can be played alone, changing which character player currently controls with the keyboard/controller. In this work, the analysis will be conducted from the perspective of

the single player, as that's how the game was being accessed while gathering the material for analysis.

The main motif in the plot is Nuna's journey to the source of the eternal snowstorm. At the beginning of the game, the player sees that the girl's village has been destroyed by the snowstorm and accompanies her to find out what happened and how to prevent it from happening further. Player also meets Nuna's companion –Fox, who embarks on the journey with the girl and helps her solve the puzzles and guides her throughout the spiritual world.

During the journey, Nuna and Fox have to face many puzzles that require the cooperation of both characters. Fox is able to communicate with the spiritual world and use his ability to pass through narrow spaces, while Nuna uses her dexterity and cunning to break through obstacles in his path. Over time, they discover that the snowstorm is not just a natural effect but has to do with supernatural forces that are linked to ghosts and mystical forces of nature.

The main characters also encounter creatures that are part of local Inupiat culture, such as spirits who help Nuna through difficult times, but also present challenges that she must overcome. Among these beings is the Blizzard Man, who becomes one of the main antagonists.

The culmination point of the game is the discovery of the true source of the snowstorm. The cause of the snowstorm is the consequences of the actions of Blizzard Man, who unwittingly caused the snowstorm by digging up the snow with a shovel. Nuna's final battle is to defeat the giant by taking the shovel away from him and hiding it, thus ending the danger and bringing peace to the village and the girl's family.

At the end of the game, Nuna, with the cooperation of Fox and the help of the spirits, solves the final riddle of the storm and restores balance to her world. The ice melts and the snowstorm stops, giving a chance for a new beginning.

At the end of the game, Nuna bids farewell to the Fox, who flies off to heaven, ending his earthly journey and finally merging with the spirit world. After this, the girl returns to the village and is welcomed by other members from her community. This scene is followed by the closing credits.

1.7 International perception of the game

Never Alone has received a positive reception on the international stage, with the international review website Metacritic assigning it an average score of 72 out of 100 based on the assessments of 30 reviewers (Metacritic, 2017 accessed on 06.02.2025). The breakdown of this rating into more

precise categories reveals that players have appreciated the game's unique narrative approach, which introduces users to Inuit culture and mythology. The reviews also point out that the visual aesthetics and soundtrack of the game effectively captured the atmosphere of the Arctic world, which further enriched the player's experience (Metacritic, 2017 accessed on 06.02.2025).

The game has been warmly received also by the gaming community on the Steam platform (which is currently one of the biggest and most popular gaming platforms). Based on 5,560 user reviews, 81% of them rated the game positively, which classifies it as 'Very Positive' in the rating (Steam, data from 10.02.2025, access on 10.02.2025).

The game's widespread availability on various platforms, including mentioned above Steam, PlayStation 4, Xbox One, and subsequently Nintendo Switch, has led to its accessibility to a broader audience. *Never Alone* was also translated into over 20 languages, such as English, Italian, German, French, Spanish, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, Danish, Dutch, Finnish, Norwegian, Polish, Swedish, Simplified Chinese, and Russian (Steam, data from 10.02.2025, access on 10.02.2025).

The game's merits have garnered recognition within the video game industry. In 2015, *Never Alone* was awarded BAFTA in the debut category and was recognised by Games for Change for its social and educational impact (Steam Store Page, accessed on 10.02.2025).

According to data from SteamDB, the game reached its highest number of simultaneous players at 3482 on 24 February 2016. The number of owners of the game on Steam is estimated to be between 500,000 and 1,000,000 users (SteamDB, accessed on 10.02.2025).

Those figures show that while the game has not reached the status of a huge commercial hit, it has gained international recognition for its cultural and educational value, standing out from other games and gaining a fan base both among Inuit communities and internationally.

1.8 Problem Formulation and Reasons for Study

In the context of contemporary media, including video games, the growing interest in indigenous cultures raises the question of how they are portrayed and represented in mainstream culture. *Never Alone (Kisima Ingitchuna)* is one of the few examples of a video game that was created in collaboration with the indigenous Inuit community, offering the possibility of the authentic representation of their history and mythology. Although the game has not achieved a great global success and recognition, it stands out from other productions due to its collaboration with

representatives of this group, which gives it a unique character. The analysis of *Never Alone* in the context of Inuit representation is important because the game not only introduces this peoples and culture to a wider audience, but also challenges the mainstream, often simplistic and stereotypical image of an indigenous minority.

The research problem focuses on the question of **How the game *Never Alone* constructs a representation of Inuit people, and how tools and techniques are used to create this representation.**

The analysis of *Never Alone* can be considered relevant to the study of minority representations in popular culture. Edward Said, in his work *Orientalism* (1978), highlights how dominant narratives in the media can exploit images of indigenous communities, making them objects of external projection rather than subjects with autonomous voices. In the context of *Never Alone*, it is worth considering whether the game effectively gives Inuit peoples the space to represent and tell their own story, avoiding simplification and misrepresentation. Homi Bhabha (1994) draws attention to the *cultural hybridity* that can lead to the creation of new and complex representations. In *Never Alone*, one can see an attempt to go beyond traditional representations of indigenous peoples, combining traditional elements with modern technologies.

It is also worth referring to the theory of Richard Dyer (1997), whose work *The Matter of Images* analyses how the media shape images of minorities and marginalised groups. Dyer notes that the way cultures and identities are portrayed in the media is fundamental to the creation of social hierarchies and the perpetuation of stereotypes. In this context, examining the representation of Inuit in *Never Alone* is not only a matter of game analysis, but also a broad social process in which minorities attempt to regain control of their culture's image in pop culture.

Computer games are also a relatively new medium for the transmission of information and values, and the topic of Inuit communities is not one that is discussed quite often as a topic of games itself, but also in the context of the research that is done on games. Therefore, the analysis of *Never Alone* is important as it opens the door to further research on this topic and introduces readers to this subject area, popularizing at the same time the game that gave voice to the Inuit community and allows them to create their own not influenced by colonialism representation on the international stage.

2. Literature Review

The second chapter of this work will focus on literature review – it will describe the themes of cultural representation in games, and more specifically, the representation and presence of Inuit themselves in video games.

2.1 Cultural Representation in Video Games

The issue of cultural representation in video games, despite being quite a new research field, has been the subject of numerous academic debates, with researchers analysing both the ways in which minorities are portrayed and the impact of these representations on public perceptions of different groups. Stewart Hall in his work *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (1997), mentions that media, including video games, function not only as reflections of reality, but also as instruments in the construction of meaning. In this context, it is important to consider whether video games actually reflect real cultures or just reproduce stereotypes that can lead to prejudice.

Researchers such as Adrienne Shaw (2015) in *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture*, highlight that video games often either do not include representation of marginalized groups at all or present them in a simplistic way. This includes indigenous communities as well as other ethnic minorities, who are often reduced to exotic, static images with no agency of their own (Shaw, 2015). Shaw argues that representation in games is not just about the inclusion of a particular group as a character in the game world, but also about who controls the narrative and how the culture is represented from the perspective of members of that community (Shaw, 2015).

Ian Bogost (2007) in *Persuasive Games: the Expressive Power of Videogames* points out that videogames have the unique potential to communicate the cultural meanings through gameplay mechanics, not just through story or visuals. Unlike films or literature, games allow the player to interact with the presented world, which can lead to a deeper understanding of a culture.

At the same time though, as Lisa Nakamura (2006) notes in *Cybertyping and the Work of Race in the Age of Digital Reproduction*, the problem is that the video game industry is still dominated by Western narratives and ways of thinking, which often leads to a superficial representation of cultures outside the dominant societies. Nakamura points out that *digital production often reproduces colonial structures in which indigenous communities remain invisible as creators and*

their culture is commercialised and simplified for audiences outside their communities (Nakamura, 2006, p. 924).

The question of cultural representation in games also has a political dimension. As Kishonna Gray (2020) in *Intersectional Tech: Black Users in Digital Gaming*, argues that the way in which minorities are represented in digital media directly affects their position in society and their access to cultural spaces. Gray points out that positive, authentic representation in games serves as a means of resisting exclusion and challenging systemic stereotypes (Gray, 2020). At the same time, the absence or misrepresentation of minority groups reinforces hegemonic power structures and perpetuates historical prejudices (Gray, 2020). This statement can be supported by Stuart Hall's (1997) stance in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, that media representations are not neutral reflections of reality, but rather sites of ideological struggle that shape how different groups are perceived and positioned within society.

2.2 Inuit Peoples in Video Games

The representation of the Inuit peoples in video games is a topic that is rarely explored in depth in the context of broader research on the representation of indigenous cultures in digital media. The majority of games that refer to Inuit are often limited to superficial themes such as the Arctic environment, survival in extreme conditions or stereotypical portrayals. Researchers working on the representation of Indigenous cultures in video games, such as Elizabeth LaPensée (2016), have noted that games often utilize Inuit cultural elements as an exotic backdrop without engaging in a more profound exploration of their history, traditions, or contemporary realities.

An often theme in games that make reference to Inuit is the portrayal of the Arctic environment as *empty* or *wild*, presented as a territory to be explored by external protagonists, without focusing on Inuit peoples. This tendency has been identified by Adrienne Shaw (2015) as part of a wider phenomenon in popular culture, where Indigenous lands are perceived as spaces to be appropriated, rather than as territories inhabited by communities with their own history and culture. Another illustration of this phenomenon is observed in *Rise of the Tomb Raider* (2015), where the Inuit-inspired community is portrayed as a marginal element within the game's narrative, primarily functioning as a source of assistance for the main character, which is Lara Croft. This portrayal has been the subject of criticism, with detractors arguing that it perpetuates stereotypes and lacks a deeper engagement with Inuit culture (Shaw, 2015).

Souvik Mukherjee (2020) also highlight the problem of the lack of Indigenous voices in the game development process. Mukherjee argues that without the direct involvement of Inuit in game development, their representation remains superficial and is often based on outdated stereotypes. In games such as *Lost Planet* (2006) and *The Long Dark* (2017), the Arctic environment is used just as a survival mechanic, but players are not able to notice any reference to Inuit culture as a developed and building their own culture community in the game.

In conclusion, the representation of Inuit in video games remains an area that needs more attention from both researchers and game developers. As LaPensée (2016) notes, authentic representation of Indigenous cultures requires not only the avoidance of stereotypes, but also the active involvement of Indigenous developers in the game development process. Without this, games will continue to reproduce colonial narratives, marginalising the voices of Inuit and other Indigenous communities (LaPensée2016). Therefore, it may be considered important to explore how the game *Never Alone*, which was developed in collaboration with Inuit, shows their representation.

3. Theory

This chapter will present the theoretical framework for the work. The section will begin by presenting the concept of cultural representation in Stewart Halls approach, before moving on to Homi Bhabha's notion of cultural translation. Then the chapter will conclude by defining what narrative game design is by citing the concepts and definitions of several researchers in order to sum them up and draw out the common points that unite these definitions.

3.1 Cultural Representation

One of the main terms that this work will focus on is cultural representation. Cultural representation is defined as the process by which meanings are created, negotiated and fixed in social space through language, images and symbols (Hall, 1997). According to the same researcher and his work, representation is not a neutral reflection of reality, but rather an active mechanism of meaning construction that influences the way in which individuals perceive the world and social relationships (Hall, 1997). Hall's theory of representation posits the notion that reality does not exist in isolation from its representation. That means that the meaning is produced in the process of communication, rather than existing as an objective truth independent of cultural context (Hall, 1997).

In his work on cultural representation, Stuart Hall distinguishes between three key approaches that reflect different ways of constructing meaning. The first one is the traditional reflective approach, which assumes that language and images faithfully represent reality and that meaning is directly related to the objects they represent. In this view, as Hall states: *representation acts as a mirror that reflects the world as it is, without distortion or interpretation* (Hall, 1997). This approach is based on the assumption that there is an objective reality and that our sign systems merely reflect it.

The second approach is the intentional approach, which emphasizes the role of the sender of the message. In this view, it is the intention of the creator or sender that determines the meaning of the message. However, Hall points out that this approach has its limitations because it assumes that the receiver always interprets the message according to the sender's intentions, which is not always the case in practice: *Meaning is not only the result of the sender's intentions, but also of the context in which the message is received* (Hall, 1997).

The last one approach that Hall develops is the constructivist approach. According to this approach, meanings are not simply a reflection of reality, nor are they only the result of the sender's intentions. Instead, they are actively constructed through a process of interpretation (Hall, 1997). Hall emphasises that meanings are negotiated, changed and reinterpreted according to cultural, social and historical contexts (Hall, 1997). This approach is also followed in this work.

Hall's constructivist stance highlights the role of power and ideology in the process of representation. As Hall notes: *representations are never innocent - they are always embedded in specific power relations and serve specific purposes* (Hall, 1997). Therefore, an analysis of representation requires not only an understanding of how meanings are created, but also of what social and political interests lie behind their construction. In doing so, Hall opens a space for a reflection on how culture shapes our perceptions of the world and how one can challenge dominant narratives.

One of Hall's key points in theory regarding representation is the encoding and decoding model (Hall, 1980). He points out that media messages do not have an explicit meaning but are encoded by the sender according to dominant ideologies and then decoded by the audience according to their experiences and cultural context. In this process, audiences can read messages in three ways: in a hegemonic way, accepting the dominant interpretation, then in a negotiated way, partially accepting and modifying the meaning, or lastly in an oppositional way, completely rejecting the imposed meaning and creating an alternative interpretation (Hall, 1980).

Hall's theory also emphasizes that representation is strongly linked to ideology and power. With reference to Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony (in Hall, 1982), Hall argues that the way social groups are represented in media and public discourses reflects and perpetuates power relations. Representations not only shape perceptions of social groups but also influence their social standing and ability to influence reality (Hall, 1982). In this way, hegemonic representations can marginalize certain groups, normalizing looking at them as inferior and reinforcing existing social inequalities. This links to Edward Said's stance, as he points out in his theory of *Orientalism* that representation plays a key role in the construction and perpetuation of stereotypes, particularly in the context of colonial relations (Said, 1978). According to Said, the representations of the Eastern world created by the West are not neutral descriptions, but ideological constructs aimed at maintaining relations of domination (Said, 1978). Similarly, Homi Bhabha emphasises that representation is a dynamic process in which hybrid identities are created as a result of colonial and postcolonial interactions (Bhabha, 1994).

Hall also emphasizes the dynamic nature of representation – he claims that meanings are not fixed but rather they are a subject to constant negotiation and change depending on the historical and social context. This process leads to shifts in meanings, which can be the result of a struggle for control over cultural narratives. In this sense, representation is not only a reflection of the social world, but also an active place of conflict and struggle for power over meanings (Hall, 1997).

To sum up, according to Stuart Hall (1997), cultural representation is defined as a process of active construction of meaning, in which language, images and symbols shape the way in which individuals perceive the world and social relationships. It is not a neutral reflection of reality, but a mechanism that reproduces ideologies and power relations, which in turn influences social perceptions of groups and identities (Hall, 1982). This representation is subject to constant negotiation and can be a means of both hegemony and resistance to dominant narratives (Hall, 1980).

3.2 Cultural Translation

According to Homi Bhabha, cultural translation can be defined in two different ways. Firstly, it is defined as a process of interpenetration and negotiation of meanings between different cultures. Secondly, it is defined as a metaphor for the processes of transformation of meanings between those two cultures. Bhabha emphasizes that, in the postcolonial world, culture is not a static and

monolithic creation, but a dynamic field in which there is a constant transformation of identities and meanings (Bhabha, 1994).

One of the central elements of Bhabha's concept of cultural translation is the notion of the *third space*. This space is described as a place where different cultures meet and create new, hybrid meanings. The third space is not simply the sum of two different traditions or cultures, but a new quality in which original cultural forms are transformed. In this space, meanings are constantly negotiated and questioned, leading to the disruption of established hierarchies and the destabilization of binary divisions such as colonizer-colonized or East-West (Bhabha, 1994).

Bhabha also introduces the concept of *ambivalence* in relation to cultural translation (Bhabha, 1994). This ambivalence is that the colonisers, while trying to impose their culture on the colonised, at the same time adopt certain elements of their culture, unconsciously internalising it. This process leads to a situation in which the dominant culture begins to destabilise because it is no longer completely distinct from the subjugated culture. Thus, cultural translation becomes a process in which both poles - colonizer and colonized - are transformed, albeit often unequally (Bhabha, 1994).

3.3 Narrative Game Design

Narrative game design in video games is one of the aspects of shaping players' experience and their opinions and view of the game, by integrating narrative with gameplay mechanics to create a cohesive game world (Murray, 1997). Unlike traditional forms of narrative, such as literature or film, video games offer interactivity that redefines the ways in which stories are told and audiences are engaged. As Janet Murray (1997) notes, video games allow for an *improvised narrative* in which the player influences the unfolding of events, making the medium unique in the context of narrative theory.

Ernest Adams (2010), in his work *Fundamentals of Game Design*, defines the game narrative design as *the process of designing narrative experiences that engage the player through interactivity and gameplay mechanics*. It can be said then that his approach focuses on integrating the narrative with the game mechanics, so that the story is created from the player's actions rather than simply being an add-on to the mechanical layer. Adams also asserts that *narratives in games should not be treated as a separate element, but as an integral part of design that interacts with the design goals and user experience* (Adams, 2010). This approach underscores the significance of coherence between the story and the player's actions in order to engender a more immersive and engaging experience.

At the same time, in her research on interactive narrative, Emily Short (2016) draws attention to the adaptability aspect of narrative, defining narrative game design as *constructing stories that respond dynamically to player decisions* (Short, 20216). In her view, it is crucial to adapt the narrative structure to the non-linearity of the gaming medium, allowing for different story paths and endings. Short emphasizes that narrative in games should be flexible to allow players to explore different storylines and make decisions that have a real impact on the development of the story (Short, 2020). This approach requires designers to create narrative systems that are able to respond to different player choices, which increases the sense of agency and engagement.

Janet Murray (1997), in one of her most recognisable works – *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, introduces the concept of *cyberdrama*, which is defined as a form of storytelling that uses interactivity as a key element in the construction of a narrative experience (Murray, 1997). Murray argues that video games offer a unique opportunity to create narratives that are not only told but also experienced by players in an active way. She points out that *interactivity allows for the creation of narratives that are more immersive and personal, as players become active participants rather than passive recipients* (Murray, 1997).

Following this approach, Jesper Juul (2005) in his work *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* analyses the tension between narrative and mechanics in video games, arguing that video games represent a unique and hybridized medium, combining narrative elements with established game rules, thus giving rise to a variety of distinctive and new forms of storytelling (Juul, 2005). In his view, narrative design in games requires balancing these two aspects to create a coherent and engaging experience for players (Juul, 2005). Juul points out that *narrative in games often competes with mechanics, but at the same time can be enhanced by them if properly integrated* (Juul, 2005). This approach emphasises the importance of designing games in which narrative and mechanics interact rather than compete.

Henry Jenkins (2004), Henry Jenkins, whose approach will build one of the basis for methodological discussion later in this work, in his essay *Game Design as Narrative Architecture*, introduces the concept of narrative as spatial architecture, arguing that: *video games are spaces where narrative becomes action and players become co-creators of the story* (Jenkins, 2004). Jenkins emphasises that narratives in games need not be linear or based on traditional story structures but can be constructed through the design of spaces that encourage exploration and story discovery (Jenkins, 2004). He points out that videogames offer a valuable opportunity to create

narratives that are that are self-generating and based on players' personal experiences rather than predetermined scenarios (Jenkins, 2004). This approach emphasizes the importance of designing games that allow players to actively participate in shaping the story.

In conclusion, narrative game design is a multidisciplinary field that combines elements of literature, game design, psychology and technology to create interactive narrative experiences. As Jenkins states: *video games are spaces where narrative becomes action and players become co-creators of the story* (Jenkins, 2004). This approach underscores the significance of creating narratives that are not only immersive but also empower players to actively contribute to the shaping of the story. The integration of narrative with mechanics, the flexibility in story structure, and the harnessing of interactivity present a unique opportunity for narrative game design to create profound and immersive experiences for players.

4. Methodology

The next part of this project will explain the methodological approaches of the research starting with qualitative research, then moving on to ontological and epistemological approaches (constructivism and social constructivism), This section will begin with an examination of qualitative research, progressing to an analysis of ontological and epistemological approaches, namely constructivism and social constructivism. Next, I will point on what material I chose to analyze, and explain the reasons why I did so. Finally, I present my chosen method of analysis, which is narrative game design analysis. The latter part will be divided into three subsections corresponding to elements of the methodology that will allow a more precise analysis - these will be storytelling, procedural rhetoric and also semiotic analysis.

4.1 Qualitative Approach

Given the aim of my study, which is to analyse the narrative design of the game *Never Alone* in the context of Inuit representation, I chose a qualitative approach, as it allows for an in-depth interpretation of the cultural and narrative content contained in the game. Qualitative research, as Flick (2007) points out, is particularly useful in the analysis of visual media because it captures their multidimensional nature and complex meanings. This methodology also allows for the exploration of deeper layers of meaning, which is important in the context of studying representations of minority cultures in digital media (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005).

Silverman (2013) emphasises that qualitative research enables the analysis of socio-cultural context, which, in case of *Never Alone*, allows to understand how the game reflects Inuit traditions, beliefs and history through visual narrative and interactive experience. The narrative in games, as Jenkins (2004) points out, is not static, but dynamically shaped by the player's actions, making qualitative research a suitable approach for analysing such cultural texts.

In addition, Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) point out that qualitative research allows for a flexible research approach, allowing methods to be adapted to the data that is being analysed, which is crucial when studying complex cultural texts such as video games. The choice of qualitative research in the analysis of *Never Alone* also justifies the ability of this methodology to capture nuances of representation and hidden meanings, which is also highlighted by Creswell (2013), pointing out that a qualitative approach allows the researcher to delve deeper into the socio-cultural context and understand the perspectives and narratives present in the medium under study.

4.2 Ontological and Epistemological Stances

Given the aim of my study, I adopt a constructivist ontological stance, assuming that social reality is dynamically constructed by social actors rather than existing independently (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Constructivist ontology, as highlighted by Crotty (1998), suggests that reality is created through experiences, interactions and interpretations, which is relevant to the analysis of media such as video games, which are themselves interactive forms of narrative. In this context, the analysis of the game *Never Alone* assumes that representations of Inuit are the result not only of the creators' intentions, but also of the players' perceptions and wider socio-cultural discourses. Additionally, according to Bryman (2008), constructivism suggests that researchers co-construct versions of reality rather than discovering objective truths. This corresponds to the fact that the conducted analysis and the employed theory and methodology are just one of the possible interpretations of *Never Alone*, and do not claim to represent the objective truth about the game.

Epistemologically, the study is based on social constructivism, which, as Schwandt (1994) points out, views knowledge as constructed by people in the process of interaction with their environment. This approach is particularly relevant in media studies, where interpretations and meanings are multi-layered and context-dependent (Burr, 2003). The choice of a constructivist epistemology enables an analysis of how *Never Alone* creates and communicates knowledge of Inuit culture through different narratives. As reflected in Hall's (1997) theories of representation as an active process of meaning construction. This perspective allows us to explore how the narrative elements

of the game fit into a broader cultural and historical context, offering a nuanced analysis of Inuit representation.

4.3 Data Selection

The choice of data for this study was made to analyze the representation of Inuit in the game *Never Alone*. This game was chosen for its unique significance as the first commercial project created in collaboration with an indigenous Inuit community, making it an important case for the study of cultural representation in video games.

In this study, I will focus only on the basic version of the game, without the analysis of DLC *Foxtales*. This decision was made due to the fact that the DLC presents a completely separate story, that is not directly related to the storyline of the base game.

Focusing on the main version of the game allows for a detailed analysis of how the developers create a representation of the Inuit through narrative elements and gameplay mechanics. As previously mentioned, *Never Alone* is an example of media co-created with representatives of indigenous communities, allowing an examination of how their perspectives have been incorporated into the narrative structure of the game and whether this has influenced mainstream perceptions of Inuit peoples.

In this study, I will focus on the visual aspects of the game – both the design of the characters or spaces in the game, as well as the visible mechanics and the storyline itself as observed by the player. Due to the space limitations of this thesis, I will omit audio aspects such as the language and type of voice narration or music.

Due to the fact that the work will focus largely on visual elements, screenshots I took during the game and while learning about the construction of the game as a program will also be included in the content of the analysis. This allows me to explore elements outside of the gameplay itself (such as settings or mini-documents, which will also be mentioned in the analysis). These screenshots will allow for a more complete and in-depth analysis and help the reader to understand more detailed or nuanced content, as they will correspond to what the player sees on their screen during the game. The screenshots described will usually be at the beginning of the analysis of each element to which they relate.

4.4 Narrative Game Design Analysis

As mentioned earlier in the theory section, narrative game design is a rather broad concept.

Therefore, I have chosen to narrow the analysis down to a few selected categories that will help to establish how Inuit representation is constructed in the game and what techniques are used to do so. The elements that will be analysed will be analysis of the built world in the context of how space and the characters in the game look and relate to which will be followed by the analysis of game mechanics and storytelling.

It is important to note that the categories presented, despite each focusing on a slightly different aspect of the game, often overlap. On the one hand, this can somewhat disrupt the organization and orderliness of the analysis, but on the other hand it allows for a more complete, holistic view of the game and its elements as a highly interconnected system.

4.4.1 Semiotics

Firstly, most of the visual elements of the game will be analysed using Barthes' approach as a point of reference. Visual semantics in the context of Roland Barthes' theory of semiotics focuses on the analysis of signs and meanings that images generate. In the context of this study, images will be visual elements both relating to the design of the world in the game and the characters themselves.

Barthes, in his works *Mythologies* (1957) and *Image-Music-Text* (1977), presents the concept of denotation and connotation as two levels of visual meaning that allow for a deeper understanding of how images and symbols function in culture and communication. Denotation refers to the literal, first level of meaning of an image, being an objective, direct representation of reality that does not require cultural interpretation. For example, a photograph of a tree simply denotes the tree – this level focuses simply on its shape, form or colour (Barthes, 1977, p. 32).

This level of meaning, known as denotation, is characterized by its universality and independence from cultural context. It refers to an objective, literal representation of reality that is common to all audiences, regardless of their background or experience. However, as Barthes notes, images rarely function solely at the level of denotation, but rather generate additional, deeper layers of meaning that are linked to connotation (Barthes, 1997, p.32). Connotation refers to the second level of meaning, which is more complex, subjective and dependent on cultural, emotional and ideological contexts. This deeper level of meaning includes the associations, symbols and values that viewers attribute to an image based on their individual experiences, knowledge and social context (Barthes, 1977, p. 33).

Returning to the example of the tree, Barthes points out that connotations can range from those associated with nature, life, growth, rebirth, to more specific ideologies such as ecology or environmental protection as well as myths and belief systems (such as the Biblical tree in the Garden of Eden, or the tree where Odin was seen in Norse mythology) (Barthes, 1977, 33). For some, a tree may symbolise peace and harmony, while for others it may be a sign of resistance, as in the case of environmental movements that use trees as a symbol to fight the destruction of the planet (Barthes, 1977, p. 33; Hall, 1997, p. 45). Barthes emphasises that connotations are often shaped by cultural mythologies that give images additional layers of meaning. *Myth*, in Barthes' terms, is a system of signs that transforms cultural meanings into something that seems natural and self-evident, although in reality it is a social construct (Barthes, 1957, p. 112). For example, in Western culture a tree may be mythologized as a symbol of life and duration, whereas in other cultures it may have quite different connotations, related to spirituality or tradition (Barthes, 1957, p. 115; Eco, 1976, p. 78).

Barthes also points out that connotations are often used in media and advertising messages to influence audience perceptions and behavior. Advertisements often operate at the level of connotation, linking products to values such as luxury, youth, success or happiness in order to evoke desired associations (Barthes, 1977, p. 34; Williamson, 1978, p. 25). In this way, images become carriers of ideologies that shape the way viewers perceive the world and themselves. Connotations are therefore not only individual associations, but also tools of cultural persuasion that reflect the dominant values and beliefs in a given society (Barthes, 1977, p. 35; Hall, 1997, p. 50).

The methodology of visual analysis according to Barthes involves several key steps that allow an in-depth understanding of the meanings generated by images. Firstly, it is necessary to identify the denotative aspects of an image, for example the elements that are visible at first glance and which form the basis for further interpretation (Barthes, 1977, p. 32). This level of analysis is necessary to establish what exactly the image represents before moving on to more complex interpretations.

The second step is the identification of connotations. This step requires consideration of the cultural and contextual codes that influence the interpretation of the image. Connotations are dependent on the viewer's social experiences, knowledge and emotions, making this level of meaning more complex and subjective (Barthes, 1977, p. 45). As mentioned before, connotations are often shaped by cultural mythologies that give images additional layers of meaning, which leads analysis to the

last step – analyzing those elements. For the analysis in the following chapter, this analysis will include, for example, the Inuit myths on which the analyzed game is based.

4.4.2 Mechanics – Procedural Rhetoric

The second element analyzed in this work will be game mechanics. This part will follow Ian Bogost's approach. Bogost (2007) in his book *Persuasive Games: the Expressive Power of Videogames* introduced the concept of *procedural rhetoric*, which refers to the way games communicate ideas and arguments through their mechanics. Bogost defined procedural rhetoric as *the use of processes to convey persuasive messages* (Bogost, 2007, p. 29). In contradistinction to traditional rhetorical forms, which depend on the written or spoken word, procedural rhetoric employs interactive systems to engage the player in an experience that is both educational and persuasive. Procedural rhetoric is therefore the use of rules and algorithms to present specific messages, values and ideologies. Bogost points out that video games, due to their interactivity, have the unique and new in comparison to other medias, ability to communicate content through the actions of the player, rather than solely through visual content or dialogue (Bogost, 2007).

The author emphasizes that game mechanics are not neutral but carry specific meanings and values. Procedural rhetoric is based on the idea that the rules and processes that govern a game can carry persuasive content that influences the way the player perceives and interprets reality. As Bogost notes: *games are unique in their ability to model systems and processes, allowing them to convey complex ideas in ways that are both experiential and persuasive* (Bogost, 2007, p. 45). In this way, game mechanics have become a tool for exploring and critiquing social, political or ethical realities.

Procedural rhetoric is not limited to games with an explicit social or political message. Even mechanics that at first glance appear neutral or purely functional can contain deeper layers of meaning. Bogost emphasises that *even the simplest mechanics can be vehicles for complex ideas if they are properly designed* (Bogost, 2007, p. 67). In this way, procedural rhetoric makes it possible to explore how game mechanics influence the player's thinking and perception of the world, even if they are not directly linked to an explicit narrative message.

The methodology for analysing game mechanics in the context of procedural rhetoric, as outlined by Ian Bogost, involves several key steps.

Firstly, it is necessary to identify the main mechanics of the game and understand how they catch and manage the player's interactions. These mechanics include not only the basic rules governing

gameplay, but also scoring systems, resource management rules, decision-making mechanisms and reward and punishment systems. For example, in the game *The Sims*, the character's needs management mechanics demonstrate the complexity of everyday life and the importance of work and consumption (Bogost, 2007, p. 255).

Secondly, it is important to examine what behaviours and decisions these mechanics promote and which ones they marginalise. Game mechanics often favour certain strategies of action, which affect the way players perceive the reality depicted in the game. An example of this is *Papers, Please* (2013), where a mechanic involving document verification leads the player to reflect on the moral aspects of bureaucratic work (Pope, 2013 in relation to Bogost, 2007).

The third step is to analyse what values, ideas or arguments are conveyed through these mechanics. It is so, because these mechanics are not neutral – they are designed in a way that carries a particular message. In the *McDonald's Videogame*, mechanics portray the negative aspects of the food industry through procedural rhetoric showing the exploitation of workers and the environment (Bogost, 2007, p. 299).

Finally, it is important to assess how the mechanics affect the player's experience and what emotions or reflections they evoke. Procedural rhetoric operates on an emotional and intellectual level, prompting players to think about the issues presented. As Bogost notes, games not only entertain but also teach and provoke thought (Bogost, 2007, p. 3).

4.4.3 Storytelling

Lastly, the analysis will be concluded with the analysis of the storytelling. The analysis of narrative in video games, also known as storytelling analysis, focuses on the story of the game itself and through which techniques it is presented. One of the best-known researchers in this field is Henry Jenkins, whose work *Game Design as Narrative Architecture* (2004) is one among the most known studies on the specifics of narrative in video games. In his analysis, Jenkins emphasises that video games are not simply another medium for communicating stories but they offer entirely new possibilities for storytelling that comes from their interactive nature. Unlike traditional forms of narrative, such as literature or film, where the story is told in a linear and author-controlled manner, video games rely on distributed and uneven narrative structures that require the active involvement of the player (Jenkins, 2004, p. 118).

Jenkins introduces the concept of narrative spaces, which he defines as environments designed in such a way that the player can discover the story through exploration and interaction (Jenkins, 2004). In this view, the game world becomes a kind of *text* that the player interprets by navigating its physical and symbolic dimensions. Jenkins emphasizes that space in videogames is not just a backdrop to the action, but an active participant in the narrative process (Jenkins, 2004). Examples include games such as *BioShock* (2007) or *Dark Souls* (2011), where key elements of the story are conveyed through architecture, the placement of objects or atmosphere, what Jenkins refers to as environmental storytelling. This technique allows developers to convey the story in a subtle way, leaving space for players to interpret it themselves (Jenkins, 2004, p. 121).

Jenkins identifies four basic types of narrative construction in video games: embedded narrative, emergent narrative, environmental storytelling and procedural storytelling. Each of these types reflects different dynamics of interaction between the player and the narrative and allows for a better understanding of how narrative gets constructed in games (Jenkins, 2004, p. 122).

Embedded narrative is defined as story content that is planned by the developers and embedded within the game world. Jenkins (2004) explains that this is a traditional form of narrative, in which the story is presented through cinematic interludes, documents, dialogue, and environmental elements that players discover during gameplay. The author emphasises that, unlike more traditional forms of narrative, this one can resemble narratives familiar from literature and film, but in games, it additionally requires active exploration on the part of the player (Jenkins, 2004, s. 124).

Second type of narrative – emergent narrative is based on the actions of the players themselves, who create their own stories through their decisions and interactions with the game mechanics. Emergent narrative, by contrast, is predicated on the actions of the players themselves, who, through their decisions and interactions with the game mechanics, create their own stories. Jenkins (2004) points out that this narrative is not strictly controlled by the developers but rather emerges from unpredictable interactions within the game world. Sandbox games, including *Minecraft* (2011) and *The Sims* (2000), provide a platform for emergent narratives that, at times, are comparable in their engagement to those crafted by the designers. In these games, the narrative emerges organically from the player's choices, creating unique and personal experiences (Jenkins, 2004, s. 126).

Another method of constructing narratives in games is environmental storytelling. Jenkins (2004) has highlighted that the game environment can function as a *narrative stage*, where players, by

focusing on the intricacies of the environment, are able to re-enact segments of the narrative. The arrangement of e.g. objects, graffiti on walls, and the architecture of buildings can collectively suggest past events or relationships between characters, thereby creating an immersive experience independent of direct information (Jenkins, 2004, 128).

Procedural storytelling is defined as situations in which the game mechanics themselves communicate specific content. Jenkins (2004) emphasises that the rules governing gameplay can convey ideological, moral, or social messages, and that their analysis allows the discovery of a deeper meaning hidden in the interactive structure of the game. The procedural nature of narrative has been linked to the concept of *procedural rhetoric*, as described by Ian Bogost (2007), who asserts that game mechanics can convey ideas in ways that are not accessible through traditional media (Jenkins, 2004, p. 130; Bogost, 2007, p. 45). This concept will be further developed on, while providing a framework for the analysis of game mechanics.

By distinguishing between embedded, emergent, environmental, and procedural narratives, Jenkins (2004) provides a holistic framework for analysing how games construct storytelling and how they create meanings through it. It is important to note that some games do not just follow one in the narratives described above but combine elements of several of them. They are therefore not separate categories, but more complementary categories that build the storyline and convey the values in the game.

In conclusion, an analysis of game mechanics in the context of procedural rhetoric provides a more comprehensive understanding of video games' capacity to communicate ideas and influence players' worldviews. Through an examination of the rules that govern gameplay, scholars can unearth the implicit meanings and messages embedded within interactive systems.

5. Analysis and Discussion of Findings

This chapter will focus on analyzing and discussing selected elements of the game. Firstly, the settings in which the game takes place and the characters that appear in it will be analyzed. It will then serve as an introduction and starting point for analyzing the other elements - the game mechanics and the type of narration.

5.1 World of the Game

The first part of the analysis will focus on the game's setting and characters. The analysis will start by analyzing the settings in the game to then move on to character analysis. These will be divided into three groups – protagonists, antagonists and side characters.

5.1.1 Game Settings

The game's storyline takes place in several distinct settings. Each of these environments presents the characters – the girl Nuna and her fox companion – with different challenges. This part of the analysis will focus mainly on visual analysis, but other aspects such as the mechanics of movement in specific spaces will also be addressed.

5.1.1.1. Tundra

The first setting players see in *Never Alone* is an open tundra during the snow blizzard.



Illustration 1.

This scenery plays quite an important role in the game, as it is the first space that the players get to know, and therefore this setting is what they base their first impression of the game on.

On a denotational level, the tundra environment is vast, uniform and lacking in clear landmarks. This landscape is characterized by an almost monochromatic color palette, dominated by shades of white, light, shady blue and grey. The lack of clear elements in the background, such as rocks or more defined hills in the horizon, makes space appear uniform and difficult to navigate.

An additional factor shaping the scenery is the heavy snowfall and strong winds, which limit players' visibility and leave further parts of the landscape hazy or invisible. The figures of the protagonists seem small in comparison to the surrounding landscape. This emphasizes how big the

tundra is. Characters movements seem limited by the force of the wind and the harsh weather conditions, further marking the impact of the environment on humans.

However, at a connotational level, the tundra is not a hostile space, but an environment that requires understanding and the ability to adapt. The limited color palette does not really imply deadness but is more an element that reflects the dynamism of the Arctic landscape, where every change in wind direction or snow structure carries a specific meaning. This environment is not a wild, untamed space, but a place that, despite being demanding, is not unwelcoming. The relationship with nature is not one of antagonism but here nature becomes a guide that the protagonists do not fight against it but adapt to.

The setting also underlines the way in which Inuit culture is portrayed. In Western narratives, the Arctic has often been described as a place of extreme hardship, where indigenous people are condemned to a constant struggle for survival (Harper, 2010). In *Never Alone*, this point of view is reversed – the Inuit are not portrayed as victims of the harsh climate, but as a people who are able to function harmoniously in this environment. Snow and wind, which at the denotational level seem like obstacles, at the connotational level become part of a larger ecosystem, in which the Inuit are defined not by passive resilience, but by their ability to read the signs of nature and interact with it.

5.1.1.2 Ice Caves

The next space in the game are the ice caves inside of the glacier. The player runs into them while escaping from a polar bear.

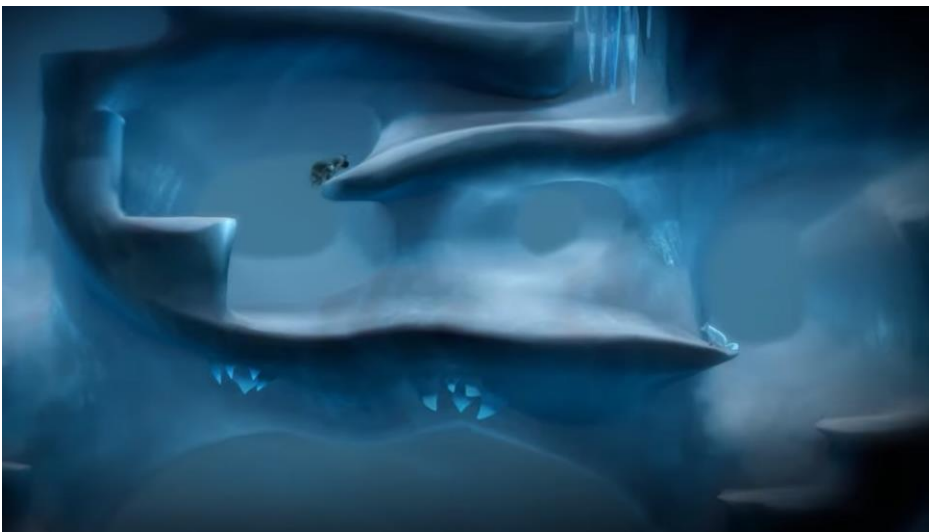


Illustration 2.

The ice caves are narrow spaces that are additionally enclosed by massive walls of ice. This environment is characterized by a cool, almost monochromatic color scheme, dominated by shades of black, blue and grey. The light also plays a rather important role in this setting - it is diffused by the ice walls, which adds depth to the space. Players can also see icicle-like formations. This detail further adds to the sharpness and character of the space.

This environment, similarly to tundra, is also dynamic. Here, however, instead of snow, the player encounters falling icicles and shards of ice. Movement in the caves is more controlled than on the open tundra –slippery surfaces like ice floors make it difficult for players to move, and narrow passages require the player to jump and climb the walls to be able to reach upper levels of the caves. They must do this carefully and precisely, as the corridors are small and slippery, and it is therefore easy to fall.

On a connotational level, the space shows Inuit peoples as a community with an in-depth knowledge of the environment. At first glance, this space and the puzzles within it appear almost impossible to overcome, but its visual structure suggests that it can be navigated if one has the right knowledge and experience. In this context, the caves are not just an obstacle, but an element of the world that can be understood and tamed. Like the tundra, this environment also emphasizes the portrayal of the Inuit as a people who do not struggle against the harsh conditions in which they live but adapt cleverly to them.

Ice caves can also be example of Bhabha's (1997) *third space*, as to a Western player they may seem like a labyrinth full of dangers, but to the Inuit they are part of a familiar landscape, a place where experience and knowledge of nature allow for survival. Once again, through this space the game depicts the Inuit as a people functioning in symbiosis with the environment, which contrasts with the colonial image of the Arctic as a wilderness in need of conquest.

5.1.1.3 Abandoned Inuit village

After traversing the ice caves, the player arrives at an abandoned village.



Illustration 3.

The main element of the village that is noticeable to the players are dilapidated huts and ruins. The surroundings are almost entirely covered in snow, with the remains of wooden structures that seem to be neglected and abandoned. The main colors of that setting are shades of grey, green, blue and brownish. The ruins of the buildings can be associated with neglect and abandonment, which is further emphasized by the colors and cold atmosphere. In certain areas of the village, players can still see evidence of former human activity such as remains of bonfires, which highlight the fact that in the past the village was a vibrant, lively place.

The space of the village is relatively enclosed, and even though it is not as vast as the tundra, it still seems to be full of nature. From time-to-time players can see traces of abandoned paths that lead to other ruins or parts of the village, as well as the winter landscapes that surround the site.

Contrasts are the one of the most important visual elements in this setting – on the one hand the player sees destroyed, abandoned ruins, and on the other, they encounter also spaces that are still part of nature as if the nature was slowly consuming the place.

On a connotational level, the village is a place that reflects the people's relationship with nature, but this time, in the context of loss and transformation. In contrast to the harsh, open spaces of tundra, the village seems to be calmer, already tamed by humans' place. The setting serves as a reminder of the past and history of the people who used to live there.

The village can be seen as a symbol of isolation and abandonment, as it is destroyed by the forces of nature and time, but on the other hand, it is also a space that tells a story of survival, as it also shows, that the Inuit peoples produced and settled in the harsh, hostile environment. The village can

therefore be a reminder that despite all the hardships and changes, the Inuit were able to harmonize their lives with the Arctic environment, leaving behind traces of their culture and daily practices.

This kind of setting breaks down colonial notions of the Inuit as a primitive people (Said, 1987), whose main focus is on surviving the climatic conditions (Harper, 2010). In *Never Alone*, the village becomes a place where life and culture are as present as the harshness of nature. It also shows a certain cyclicity that is present in Inuit culture – the destroyed and abandoned village does not signify the demise of culture but only highlight the Inuit life cycle in which the nature and the humans continually transform and change places. It also presents the Inuit as a community with its own culture and history, rejecting the mainstream view of them as a wild and primitive people (Said, 1987).

5.1.1.4 Forest

The next setting of the game is a forest. This setting appears just before the final battle in the game, being one of the last spaces that Nuna and the fox pass through.



Illustration 4.

On the denotation level, forest is a dense, dark area filled with tall, deformed trees with elongated, irregular trunks. The trees seem almost unnatural, resembling more something created by spiritual forces rather than a typical feature of the Arctic landscape. Unlike the tundra, which was characterized by open space, in the forest the players move in a low, cramped space, surrounded by massive trees.

The forest is a dark place, mostly overgrown by large, almost black trees. Its color scheme remains in shades of dark blue, grey and black quite an important role in this scenery is played by the light,

which breaks through the trees in places, adding a rather mysterious and mystical overtone to the whole scenery.

On the connotation level, the forest acts as a space between the material and supernatural worlds. Its closed structure contrasts with the open space of the tundra, creating at the same time a transitional moment in the game's narrative. If one assumes, that the tundra represented the Inuit world – harsh but simultaneously understandable and predictable – the forest is the place where this familiarity with the world almost disappears. The player enters an unfamiliar space with no reference points, suggesting that the forest is not a part of reality, but it serves more as a spiritual area that requires from players a new way of thinking and understanding this reality. This point of view can also be supported by the fact that the forest is the place of greatest activity of the ghosts, who help Nuna prepare for the final battle.

The forest therefore can be seen by players as a space where the boundaries between the known and the unknown are blurred. In this space, the Inuit peoples do not function as people of the tundra, but as beings who can move between different dimensions of reality – both in physical and spiritual way.

This setting decolonizes traditional representation of Inuit peoples, which often reduce their culture to survival in extreme conditions (Harper, 2010). Here Inuit are depicted not just as a tundra people, but as a community operating in a dynamic, multidimensional reality in which nature and spirituality are linked. The forest, as a site of transformation, shows that the Inuit are not just passive inhabitants of the Arctic, but active participants in a world that encompasses both the material and immaterial aspects of their existence.

From the Forest, Nuna and Fox walk back out into the Tundra, where Blizzard Man is waiting for them. The main battle is fought on the giant's back, creating another setting at the same time. Nevertheless, Blizzard Man visually and symbolically will be described as an antagonist in the next part of the analysis, while the mechanics of moving through this space will be addressed in the section on combat mechanics.

To sum up, the spaces in *Never Alone* create a representation of the Inuit that defies mainstream, colonial narratives that reduce their culture to exotic, primitive communities struggling to survive in a harsh climate. The tundra, though seemingly empty and hostile, portrays the Inuit as a strong people, adapting to the environment and working together with it rather than its victims. The ice

caves and abandoned village further highlight their ability to adapt and exist in a dynamic, multi-layered space – on both physical and spiritual level. The last setting – forest, due to being a liminal place between the physical and supernatural worlds, reinforces the image of the Inuit as a community living in harmony with, rather than separate from, mythology.

5.1.2 Characters

The next part of the analysis will focus on identifying which mythological elements of Inuit culture are referenced by the characters in *Never Alone*, and what image of Inuit representation is created as a result. In keeping with Barthes' methodology, I will first focus on the characters' literal expressions and then examine their non-literal symbolism connected to it as well as cultural references.

For the sake of clarity and order of analysis, this section will be divided into an analysis of the protagonists, antagonists and then lastly the side characters who appear in *Never Alone*.

5.1.2.1 Protagonists

Never Alone features two protagonists whose task is to unravel the mystery of the eternal storm and put an end to it.

The first protagonist is Nuna, a girl from the Inuit community who one day discovers that her village has been destroyed and she must go on a journey to defeat Blizzard Man and save her world from the destruction that would befall it as a result of the eternal snowstorm.

The second protagonist, on the other hand, is Fox. The player does not get to know his backstory - the Fox simply appears by Nuna's side at the beginning of the game defending her from a polar bear. His main task is to help Nuna and to contact the spirit world. A little after the middle of the story, the Fox is killed by Manslayer and transforms into a ghost with the appearance of an Inuit boy. Throughout the game, however, the player doesn't learn much about his past or the motives that made him decide to go on this journey with Nuna.

5.1.2.1.1 Nuna

The first to be analyzed is Nuna. She is the main protagonist of the game. Her mission is to stop the eternal snowstorm and save her home village from destruction.



Illustration 5.

On the denotational level, Nuna is an Inuit wearing Inuit parka – a is a long, hooded jacket made of leather and trimmed with fur. This is a reflection of Inuit clothing practices adapted to the harsh climatic conditions of the Arctic. Nuna's facial features are rather delicate and simplified, which keeps up with the visual characteristics of the new media such as games and animation. On this level then, Nuna is rather a culturally credible character whose appearance and dress reflect the realities of life in Inuit communities.

On a connotational level, parka that is worn by Nuna is not just a garment to provide warmth but also becomes a symbol of cultural belonging and self-awareness, a connection to the ancestors and their heritage. In the context of the game, this clothing can symbolize protection on both physical and spiritual level, as parka serves as a barrier against the harshness of nature but also can be read as a metaphor for the permanence of tradition and the strength of community.

It is also worth noticing that culturally, parkas can act as a link between the past and the present. This is because it is an attire that is handmade and often handed down from generation to generation. This emphasizes the importance of cultural memory and continuity of tradition. As Dorothy K. Burnham (1992) notes, Inuit clothing is not simply the result of the need to adapt to harsh climatic conditions, but also a manifestation of cultural creativity and identity. Similarly, Betty Kobayashi Issenman (1997) emphasizes that the way traditional parkas are made and decorated is a form of transmission of knowledge and aesthetics in which both the daily lives of the Inuit and their spiritual beliefs are reflected. Therefore, Nuna's outfit opposes the mainstream, colonial representation of Inuit and highlights the fact that Inuit are a people with traditions and culture that go back generations.

As mentioned in one of the earlier chapters of this work, the plot of *Never Alone* relates to the myth called *Kunuksaayuka* (presented in writing form in 1980). The character and the design of Nuna, on the one hand, can be analyzed as a modification of this myth, but it can also refer to other archetypes present in Inuit culture and mythology.

Regarding the modification to the *Kunuksaayuka* (1980), in the original myth, the protagonist is a boy. However, the game makes a significant modification, replacing him with a girl – Nuna. This modification is not only an aesthetic or narrative decision but plays an important role in the representation of Inuit, departing at the same time from colonial perceptions of their culture. Traditional Western narratives of indigenous peoples have often portrayed them as patriarchal societies, subject to harsh environmental conditions. The choice of a female protagonist, however, highlights the equivalent role of women in Inuit communities and their place in the transmission of knowledge and traditions.

Nuna's journey also reflects important elements of the Inuit value system, in particular the concept of *qaujimajatuqangit* - of traditional Inuit knowledge, which emphasizes the importance of learning through experience, observation and the transmission of wisdom from community elders (Tester & Irniq, 2008). In this context, her adventure is not just a literal journey across the Arctic landscape, but also a symbolic path of knowledge where she gains new skills and an understanding of the principles that govern the world. In Inuit culture, knowledge is not transmitted formally (e.g. in written form), but through practice and participation in daily life, and elders, as guardians of tradition, play a key role in this process (Tester & Irniq, 2008). Nuna, therefore, is a figure that shows the fullness and complexity of Inuit culture and their tradition of education, which again opposes the mainstream representation of Inuit people.

Nuna can be also an example of some universal archetypes, that are present both in Inuit and Western culture. One of them can be for example the archetype of the child-hero who embarks on a journey fraught with danger. Nuna is doing that in order to gain knowledge and contribute to the survival of her community. This is a figure deeply rooted in the narratives of the Inuit peoples, but at the same time can be found in mainstream, Western culture (e.g. in the popular book series *Harry Potter* (1997-2007) or classical literature like *Alice in Wonderland* (1865)). In this way, Nuna becomes a protagonist with whom the Western player can identify and who breaks with the colonial representation of Inuit as a primitive and savage people by showing similarities in Inuit culture to Western culture. In this context, it can also be read as a form of a *third space* – Nuna, as a

protagonist is inspired by indigenous myths but presented in a modern narrative form, exemplifies this hybridity – combining elements of myth, Inuit ecological consciousness and the universal, intercultural motif of the initiatory journey.

To sum up, both on the denotational and connotational level the character of Nuna creates a representation of Inuit that departs from mainstream, schematic colonial narratives. Instead of a static and primitive image of an indigenous culture, Nuna portrays the Inuit peoples as dynamic communities that have developed culture, values and is constantly evolving. Nuna combines elements that may be new to non-Inuit audiences (such as her clothing or the fact that her character relates to a myth that is not widely known by Western players) with those that are already universal and familiar to players (such as respect to nature, cooperation, the power of interpersonal bonds and friendship or loyalty). Together with the form of storytelling itself, which is the game, this creates a *third space* where, on the one hand, the viewer assimilates this new representation, which differs from the mainstream, by means of a familiar form and has points of reference with which to identify, but, on the other hand, encounters a new culture and new cultural systems.

Nuna's character also renegotiates Inuit identity in the context of the contemporary world, portraying Inuit as subjects of their own narrative rather than passive objects of external interpretation. She breaks with the colonial stereotype of domination over nature, portraying the Inuit world as a space of harmonious coexistence in which indigenous knowledge and experience are central to survival and development.

5.4.2.1.2 Fox

The second protagonist (and at the same time a character that the player can control) is Nuna's companion, the Fox. Initially, Fox is depicted as an animal – an Arctic fox – but towards the end of the game the Fox dies as a result of a confrontation with the Manslayer. After this he transforms into a ghost and in this form, he accompanies Nuna until the end of the game.



On a denotational level, the Fox is presented as a quite realistically rendered animal, with white fur and a slender body, characteristic of Arctic polar foxes. His design emphasises his adaptability to the environment. Functionally, he acts as a support for the main protagonist (Nuna), making it possible for her to reach places inaccessible to humans and interact with elements of the environment (such as Spirits).

When transformed into a ghost, characters' new form still has some of the visual characteristics of a fox but takes on a more anthropomorphic form. The ghost resembles a boy with delicate, Inuit facial features. The contours of his body are slightly blurred, and his body is glowing, emphasizing his otherworldly, mystical character. The color scheme remains coolly colored, with white, black and grey. On the one hand, these colors are typical of the Arctic and indicate Fox's connection to this world (which is further emphasized by the fact that his face still retained the beige color attributed in game to human faces), but on the other hand, by being very bright and the whole silhouette of the fox appearing to glow slightly, its appearance also highlights its belonging to the extraterrestrial, eternal world.

He is dressed in clothing that resembles a traditional Inuit parka. The only thing that separates it from the clothes of the other characters is the color - traditionally the parka is slightly brown, a result of the fact that it is made from the skins and furs of animals, while Fox's clothes are white, which on the one hand alludes to the fact that he was an Arctic fox in his previous form, but also indicates that he now no longer belongs to the material world, but to the spirit world.

On a connotational level, the Fox is not just a mechanical travelling companion, but a figure with a symbolic meaning that is rooted in Inuit culture and mythology. Mark Nuttall (1993), in his work *Arctic Homeland: Kinship, Community and Development in Northwest Greenland*, points out that in traditional Inuit beliefs animals play a key role as spirit guides and mediators between the physical and metaphysical worlds. Nuttall points out that the relationship between humans and animals in Inuit culture is based on mutual respect and exchange (Nuttall, 1993), which is reflected in the role of the Fox in the game. His character is not limited to his function as a helper in solving puzzles or overcoming obstacles but he becomes a carrier of cultural and spiritual values. A key moment in the game's narrative is the death of the Fox and his transformation into a ghost. This transformation not only highlights his symbolic role but also points out the Inuit perception of the world as a space in which the boundaries between life and death are fluid and blurred. Julie Cruikshank (1998), in her

work *The Social Life of Stories: Narrative and Knowledge in the Yukon Territory*, points out that in traditional Inuit narratives, death is just a transition to another state of existence, which is reflected in the game's plot. After his death, Fox does not stop to support Nuna. The only thing that changes is the way he does it – from a physical companion, he becomes a spiritual guide, which emphasizes his role as a mediator between worlds. In *Never Alone*, Foxes death is not the end but the beginning of a new form of collaboration, reflecting an Inuit understanding of the cyclical nature of life and death. This foregrounds the Inuit as a multidimensional people who have a developed belief system and who can simultaneously function in both the material and extraterrestrial worlds.

5.4.2.2 Opponents

During the course of the game, Nuna and Fox encounter the three main opponents - the polar bear, the Manslayer and the Blizzard Man. The first two make their way through the game from the very beginning and the protagonists engage in several fights with them, while Blizzard Man is the main antagonist whose actions affect Nuna and Fox from the beginning of the game, but the first time the player encounters him is only during the final fight at the end of the game.

5.4.2.2.1 Polar Bear

The first opponent the players encounter is a polar bear. This character appears several times in the game making Nuna and Fox having to constantly run away from him.



Illustration 8.

On a denotational level, the polar bear is a massive animal with white fur, dominating the game space. Its silhouette is much larger than Nuna's, which emphasizes bear's physical superiority. The bears moves are quite realistic – they are slow but forceful, and when the animal spots the main characters, he starts to aggressively pursue them. Players the animal in tundra, which is a harsh, icy

landscape. This additionally adds to the impression of danger. Mechanically, as already mentioned, the bear acts as an obstacle in the game – the player has to dodge its attacks and use the environment to escape, which reinforces the tension and highlights its role as a threat.

On connotation level, the polar bear is an animal with symbolism in Inuit culture. As Igor Krupnik points out, the polar bear has a central place in traditional Inuit stories. He is presented there both as an adversary and a teacher, because it is an animal that on the one hand demands cunning and survival skills from humans, but on the other teaches respect for nature (Krupnik, 2002). In *Never Alone*, the bear poses a challenge but at the same time is presented not only as an antagonist – it represents also the wild Arctic to which rules Inuit have to respect and obey, but with which they simultaneously coexist. In this case a polar bear becomes also a symbol of survival and resilience, as Nuna does not defeat the animal by force, but by adaptability and intelligence.

The polar bear and Nuna's confrontation with him contradict the colonial representation of Inuit as passive recipients of the world and victims of harsh conditions. Instead, he serves as yet another element in the game that portrays the relationship between Inuit peoples and nature as not only as challenging and dangerous but also possible to harmonize through knowledge, experience, and adaptability. Nuna does not fight the bear in a confrontational way, but uses her surroundings and intelligence, which emphasizes the Inuit way of dealing with nature –by understanding its rules rather than trying to dominate it.

The polar bear functions also in opposition to Western stereotypical perceptions of indigenous communities as disconnected from the reality of survival. Nuna is not a helpless victim of brutal nature, but a competent and valid participant in the ecosystem. She can coexist with the world around her, adapting to its rules.

Ultimately, the polar bear does not function in *Never Alone* as a purely antagonistic figure, but as part of a world that is not hostile but demanding. This is just the reality in which Nuna, like her community, lives and is not a passive observer but an active participant. In this, she also changes and creates the dynamic reality of the Arctic.

5.4.2.2 Manslayer

Another antagonist the player encounters is the Manslayer. In the game he is only described as *a terrible man*, the game does not give him any specific name. The player learns his name through one of the mini documentaries that come with the game but are not part of the gameplay. He is,

however, a hunter who is trying to take Nuna's bola (her weapon) and in his final attempt to do so, kills the Fox.



Illustration 9.

The Manslayer is a figure with massive, heavy physique. Like some other characters, he is also wearing parka. Manslayer physically dominates Nuna, which highlights his strength and superiority over the girl.

His face is sharp, with a large mouth twisted in a grimace of anger and almost threatening red eyes. This gives him an almost grotesque character. His nose is large and prominent, which, combined with his sharp facial features, emphasizes his aggressive nature. His eyes are deep-set and red, which sets him apart from the other characters and heightens the impression of danger. This is complemented by his furrowed eyebrows and clenched lips, which give him a stern and hostile expression.

Another important visual element of the character is the way he moves in the game. His movements are stiff, heavy and aggressive, which contrasts with the more harmonious animation of the main characters.

Connotatively, the Manslayer represents an internal threat – he is not a colonizer from the outside, but someone belonging to the same world and culture as Nuna and yet standing in opposition to her values. His face, although still contains some Inuit features, is exaggerated and deformed, which builds up his visual ‘alienness’ and ‘otherness’ in relation to the protagonist. For that reason, one can interpret his character as an attempt to construct an *Other* - someone who exists on the margins of the Inuit not as a colonial force, but as more of the inner enemy. Despite the fact that the

Manslayer also comes from Inuit culture, he rejects it's main values like co-operation, spirituality and harmony with nature in favor of force and domination.

This character also fits in a way with the concept of Bhabha - he is visually part of the Inuit world, but his behavior is a radical negation of its values. His exaggerated facial features and aggressive behavior make him appear as a character with an uncertain identity – he is someone who looks like a member of the community, but through his actions becomes its opposite. He is therefore a hybrid - an Inuit who rejects Inuit values but does not become part of any other group.

The visual presentation of this character not only emphasizes his antagonistic role but also reinforces the narrative of the Inuit as a strong, resilient people capable of survival through cooperation. Nuna and the Fox survive through balance and a relationship with nature, while the Manslayer, driven by power and greed, is ultimately defeated. His deformed face emphasizes this difference – he is someone who, although coming from the same world, has lost harmony and thus has himself become a symbol of chaos and destruction.

5.4.2.2.3 Blizzard Man

The last of the antagonists this work will focus on is Blizzard Man. He is the character that Nuna has to battle in order to protect her world from the snowstorm. Blizzard Man has already been partially introduced in the first part of the analysis, but now the analysis will focus on him not as a setting for the battle, but as a character.



Illustration 10.

Blizzard Man is a character with a monumental appearance. His entire body is so huge that during gameplay, players do not see him in his entirety – they can only see parts of his body, which highlights his scale. His surface is rough and irregular, resembling naturally shaped. The massive silhouette dominates the space and directly contrasts with Nuna's small figure, thus emphasizing the scale of the challenge it poses to the protagonist.

A particularly important visual element is his face, which – despite its icy structure – remains clear, with realistic features and a visibly Inuit character. He has broad cheekbones, a strongly defined jaw, which makes him look menacing on the one hand, but on the other resembles an experienced elder. His eyes are deeply set, giving him a stern and penetrating expression. His chin, although short, is clearly defined, and so is his hair, which also appears to be made of snow. His mouth is wide, and its shape and the way he clenches his jaw emphasize his dominant and implacable nature.

On the connotation level, Blizzard Man exemplifies the visual personification of the forces of nature, rooted in Inuit mythology, in which the natural elements often took anthropomorphic forms (Krupnik, 2002). Its size, and the fact that it appears to be made of ice, fits in with Inuit thinking of nature as a great, unpredictable force. However, an important element of this representation is also that Blizzard Man is not a completely alien for Nuna and her community - his face bears Inuit features, suggesting that he also belongs to the same culture.

It is important to note that Storm Man is not a character who knowingly acts to the detriment of Nuna and its village – the snowstorm was caused by Storm Man throwing snow towards the village and thereby unknowingly causing a blizzard. Rather than being a classic antagonist, he simply represents the forces of nature that the Inuit must face. In this way *Never Alone* also departs from the mainstream notion of an in-game opponent as an explicitly negative character whose defeat means his death - in this game, Nuna only takes his shovel and hides it to stop a snowstorm, rather than destroying Storm Man as an opponent.

In Western narratives, the forces of nature are often portrayed as hostile to humans and in need of subjugation. In *Never Alone*, however, Blizzard Man is not seen as an absolute threat, but as part of the natural order that the Inuit Nuna must confront, but not in a confrontational way in the Western understanding of fighting nature. The game in this way reflects the indigenous Inuit philosophy that man is not separate from nature but remains in a relationship of mutual adaptation and respect with it.

The figure of Blizzard Man also functions as Bhabhi's *third space*, as he is both an antagonist and a symbol of nature – both a force to be faced by the Nuna and a figure with indigenous qualities that fits into the Inuit belief system. In doing so, Blizzard Man avoids a simplistic, colonial narrative of a wild, untamed nature in need of conquest, and instead subscribes to an alternative point of view, in which man and nature are inextricably linked.

As mentioned previously, Blizzard Man serves not only as an antagonist, but also as a setting for players to move within.

Visually, this location contrasts with the earlier settings – although it still operates with a winter aesthetic, its structure is different. While being on the body of Blizzard Man, the player has to move differently – previous settings focused on horizontal movement, as although players had to e.g. climb various obstacles, they mainly moved forwards. In this case, however, the main direction of movement is upwards, as Nuna climbs to the top of the giant. Also, by making this setting the body of a living and moving organism, the player has to deal with a much more challenging environment. The surface on which player moves seems rough and irregular, as if it were part of a living organism, at the same time still reminding ice and snow formations.

The color scheme of this space remains in a cold palette, dominated by white, grey and light blue tones. In contrast to previous locations, where there were strong contrasts between light and shadow (e.g. in the Caves or the Forest), here everything seems more homogeneous and almost luminous. This gives space a somewhat abstract feel - it is no longer a realistic representation of nature, but a more spiritualistic, symbolic place.

On the connotation level, the body of the Blizzard Man as a space represents the moment of the narrative, in which Nuna not only faces the antagonist, but also undergoes a transformation as a character. Because of that, the dominant bright colors can be read as a metaphor for purification and the end of the journey. Unlike previous spaces that showed the Inuit as a people coexisting with nature, here the protagonist not only adapts to her surroundings, but actively acts within them, confronting a force that disrupts the balance of her world.

This space can be interpreted as *third space* - a place where Nuna not only negotiates her identity but also actively transforms it. She moves from passive adaptation to the world to a causal role, which again decolonizes the narrative of the Inuit as a community only adapting to external conditions. The space, while still rooted in an Arctic aesthetic, can also be seen as a symbolic

battlefield in which the Inuit protagonist takes control and not only adapt to the world, but actively changes it.

5.4.2.3 Side Characters

The final group that is being taken into consideration in this part of analysis are the side characters that Nuna and Fox meet during their journey.

5.4.2.3.1 Owl Man

The first character analysed in this section is the Owl Man – a mysterious character who helps Nuna and Fox to solve the puzzles and eventually gives bola (the traditional Inuit weapon) to Nona.



Illustration 11.

In appearance, Owl Man incorporates features both typical of a human (such as his figure and face) and those that make him resemble an owl (such as his eyes). The player can only see him in a seated position. On the one hand, in this Owl Man resembles a resting bird, but on the other he also brings to mind an experienced elder who shares his knowledge with the students.

Owl Man's face is not fully human - instead of typical facial features, players see a mask. The main element in his facial appearance that the player focuses on is his large red eyes, which resemble those of an owl. That element reinforces the impression of the character's inhumanity. The large eyes, characteristic of owls, can also symbolize wisdom or the ability to see what is hidden, a common motif in mythologies and folklore of various cultures.

The Owl Man's costume consists of a furry, traditional parka in neutral, earthy brown. This color scheme not only emphasizes his connection to nature and suggests that he is an integral part of the

environment in which he moves, but by the fact that Owl Man wears a parka, it also highlights his affiliation with Inuit culture.

In his hands, Owl Man holds an elongated pipe, probably made of animal bone. It shows drawings in traditional Inuit style. These are graphics that the player can see in the cut scenes (this topic will be developed in the next part of the analysis). The presence of this pipe indicates that Owl Man is a keeper of the stories, myths and traditions that he passes on to the main characters (which can be further confirmed by the fact that each encounter with Owl Man that is linked to progression in the game unlocks mini-document videos related to Inuit culture for the player to access in the main menu of the game). In this way, Owl Man becomes not only a physical character, but also a symbolic carrier of the cultural heritage that the game seeks to save and pass on to players, and highlights the richness and depth of culture, thus fighting against mainstream perceptions of Inuit peoples.

It is also worth noting that the animal alluded to by Owl Man - the owl - is an animal that is symbolic in Inuit culture. As Frédéric Laugrand and Jarich Oosten note, in Inuit mythology the owl symbolizes both wisdom and a connection to the hereafter, often appearing as a spiritual guide or guardian of knowledge (Laugrand & Oosten, 2010). In this context, the character of Owl Man in *Never Alone* serves a similar function –he tests the protagonist, Nuna, before handing her a weapon – bola. His enigmatic nature also emphasizes that the knowledge he offers is not easily accessible.

Owl Man is a liminal figure, combining both human and animal traits, which is in keeping with the way Inuit culture understands interspecies relationships - not as clearly separate, but as coexisting and interpenetrating. Bhabha points out that this kind of hybrid identity shatters the binary divisions imposed by dominant, often colonial narratives (Bhabha, 1994). In the context of Inuit representation in *Never Alone*, Owl Man becomes not only a guardian of knowledge, but also a symbol of an alternative way of thinking about the world in which the boundaries between human and animal, spiritual and profane, are not so clearly drawn.

Although resembling a traditional Inuit shaman, Owl Man also opposes the colonial representation of the Inuit. In contrast to stereotypical representations of indigenous peoples as primitive and locked in the past (Said, 1978), *Never Alone* through the character of Owl Man shows that Inuit mythology still continues to shape their perception of the world and highlights that their relation to nature and spirituality is based on co-existing rather than on opposition.

5.4.2.3.2 Spirits

The next characters are the spirits that the protagonists meet on their way during the gameplay. Their role is to help Nuna and Fox - they can carry the main characters to hard-to-reach places or create bridges for them from their bodies, allowing them to progress through the game.



Illustration 12.

On a denotational level, spirits are semi-transparent beings with soft, fluid shapes that float in the air. In shape, they often refer to animals such as fish or birds. Their visual representation is subtle and blends into the Arctic environment of the game. The spirits' color scheme oscillates around white, making them seem an integral part of their surroundings – especially in the ice caves, where their translucent forms blend into the ice, and on the windy tundra, where their shapes harmonize with the winter landscape.

The spirits remain motionless and almost invisible until they are activated by Fox, who, as the only one, can communicate with them. Once activated, they change their position and become better visible, allowing Nuna access to new areas or protecting her from threats.

When activated, the ghosts change both their behavior and appearance - they become better visible to the player, and can move, create bridges with their bodies, block the wind or open new paths, allowing the protagonists access to previously inaccessible areas or protecting them from different hazards. The presence of spirits in the game is not random- they appear at moments when Nuna and the Fox encounter obstacles that they cannot overcome on their own.

On a connotational level, spirits can be interpreted as representations of natural forces, helping spirits of Nuna's ancestors or caring beings that reflect Inuit beliefs in the existence of a spiritual

world that co-exists with material reality. Their translucency emphasize their non-human nature, while also suggesting that they are part of a larger, invisible order that influences people's lives. The fact that only the Fox, who is seen in Inuit culture as a mediator between worlds, can communicate with spirits emphasizes their otherworldly, spiritualist nature.

In the context of Inuit mythology, helper spirits can be also interpreted as a reference to Sila, an omnipresent force of nature that is not personified but manifests itself through various phenomena and spirit beings. Their role in the game aligns with the traditional Inuit belief that the spirit world is not separate from the human world but is an integral part of it (Laugrand & Oosten, 2010). These spirits do not intervene directly in events, but their presence indicates the need for humans to interact harmoniously with the forces of nature.

Spirits are another element that shows Inuit's strong connection to nature and their belief that there is a spiritual world that interpenetrates the material one, without placing a strict boundary between the two. This stands in opposition to the colonial representation of the Inuit as a people devoid of spirituality and culture (Musiał, Lubowicka 2018).

5.4.2.3.3 Small Folk

The players also encounter Small Folk on their way. They are quite ambiguous characters who, on the one hand, can hinder players from overcoming more puzzles, but on the other hand, if the player uses the right mechanics in relation to Small Folk, these characters can also be helpful.



Illustration 13.

Small Folk at a denotational level are depicted as humanoid beings with a quite schematic look. The most striking feature is their short height and the traditional Inuit masks on their faces. Their figures

are proportionally reduced, and their movements are agile and energetic, emphasizing their dynamic nature. They are not dressed in traditional-looking parkas like the previously described protagonists, but their clothing also evokes a slightly more relaxed, Inuit attire. Small Folk often appears in groups, which suggests their social nature and emphasizes their ability to work together, which also indicates to the player how important cooperation is in Inuit culture.

On connotation level, the Small Folk can be interpreted as a contemporary reference to the mythological *Tuurngait* - spirits present in Inuit beliefs. In traditional Inuit stories, *Tuurngait* were spirit beings who could take on different forms and manifest different intentions, ranging from protective to dangerous, depending on the context and their relationship with humans (Seidelman, H, 1993). This dualistic nature of the *Tuurngait* is reflected in Small Folk's portrayal in the game, where their role is not clearly defined, and their assistance is neither entirely selfless nor entirely predictable.

In the game, Small Folk are not presented as clear-cut antagonists, but their behavior and interactions with the main characters highlight their ambivalent nature. Although they help to overcome obstacles and solve puzzles, their assistance is not direct, like in case of Spirits. They often require the player to engage with them, understand the game mechanics and adapt to their specific behavior. This feature can be interpreted as a reflection of Inuit beliefs, in which the spirit world does not operate on a simple dichotomy of good and evil but is full of nuance and complexity. Spirits, such as the *Tuurngait*, could be both a source of support and a threat, depending on the circumstances and the way people related to them.

The nature of Small Folk emphasizes that the relationship between the human world and the spirit world requires respect, understanding and caution. The player has to take the initiative to be able to use Small Folk's help. This dynamic reflects the traditional Inuit approach to the spiritual world, in which relationships with spirits were based on deep understanding, rather than simple dependencies.

Furthermore, the ambivalent nature of Small Folk can also symbolize the unpredictability of nature and the need to adapt to changing conditions. In the harsh environment of the Arctic, where survival depends on the ability to cope with dangers and use available resources, characters like Small Folk remind player that the world is full of challenges that require flexibility and understanding.

Small Folk are an important part of Inuit representation because they move away from the stereotypical Western portrayal of indigenous communities as primitive or lacking a complex

cosmology (Musiał, Lubowicka 2018). Their presence in the game portrays Inuit mythology as a rich and dynamic system in which the human and spirit worlds intertwine. Small Folk are also another element that emphasizes the importance of cooperation and respect present in Inuit culture and action system.

5.4.2.3.4 Aurora People

Another ambiguous characters are the Aurora People. If the player is not careful, they can kidnap either Nuna or Fox into the sky, resulting in their deaths, but also, at certain points in the storyline, Fox and Nuna can travel on their bodies as a solution to a puzzle and further progression in the game.



Illustration 14.

The bodies of Aurora People seems to be made of pure light with shades of green and blue, which corresponds to the colors of the actual aurora visible in the Arctic sky. Their silhouettes are close to humanoid with clearly visible heads, faces and limbs, but at the same time their bodies still lack some of the anatomical details.

Their function in the game is not clear – on the one hand, they sometimes act as antagonists, as in certain areas any careless movement of the player may end up in being kidnapped by the Aurora People, but on the other hand, if the player can skillfully direct the characters, the Aurora People can help him or her get through certain puzzles.

The space in which Aurora People appear is very dark, almost monochromatic, which reinforces their visual impact on the player. The background is a dark night sky which is being lit up by Aurora

People. The ground is covered with snow, in which the light produced by the characters is reflected, further enhancing the impression. The bright lights of the Aurora People contrast with the darkness of the Arctic night, giving the impression that they are elusive and that they belong not to the realm of humans but to a more extraterrestrial spirit world.

On a connotational level, Aurora People represent a reinterpretation of Inuit beliefs about the aurora borealis. In traditional Inuit beliefs, auroras were often linked to the souls of the community members, who have already died (Laugrand & Oosten, 2010). In some myths, these lights are depicted as creatures that can snatch a person, especially if they do not show respect (Laugrand & Oosten, 2010). This aspect can be seen in the way Aurora People are presented in the game, as their movements are unpredictable but unavoidable, highlighting the sense of danger that the Inuit may have associated with the aurora borealis.

It is important to notice that Aurora People move away from Western perception of ghosts, as in Western culture, ghosts are often portrayed as beings looking similarly to humans. They still had some individual characteristics. Meanwhile, Aurora People function more as abstract figures that do not communicate directly with Nuna or the player. This emphasizes the Inuit view of the spiritual world – in Inuit traditions spirits are not strictly separate from the human world, but they are an integral part of the surrounding environment.

Aurora People are also another example of hybrid representation – their mythological roots are embedded in Inuit cosmology, but the way they are depicted in the game combines traditional beliefs with the modern medium of video games. On the one hand, their presence preserves key elements of Inuit myth, but on the other hand, their role in the gameplay mechanics makes them interactive characters, which changes the way the player interacts with them. They are not just a narrative backdrop, but an active part of the gameplay, which forces the player to reflect on their meaning.

In this way, *Never Alone* once again avoids a colonial narrative in which Inuit culture is treated as static and exotic (Said, 1978). Instead, the game portrays Inuit mythology as a living belief system that is dynamic and serves as a subject to reinterpretation in modern media. Aurora People, as a manifestation of the spiritual world of the Inuit peoples, emphasizes this perspective, showing the relationship between the material and immaterial worlds not as an opposition, but as intertwining realities.

5.3 Mechanics

The next part of the analysis will focus on a more global analysis of game mechanics. It will first focus on the main mechanics of the game, which is co-operation, to then move on to how the player progresses through the puzzles (considering both environmental mechanics, actions from side characters and combat mechanics), to then move on to elements that are not directly related to gameplay, such as cut scenes and mini documentaries.

5.3.1 Cooperation

One of the most important mechanics in *Never Alone* is the co-operative system between Nuna and the Fox. The player can switch between the two characters or, in co-operation mode, control them together with another person. Each character has unique abilities – Nuna can use objects and interact with her surroundings in a physical way, while the fox can move in hard-to-reach places and interact with ghosts.

It can therefore be seen that *Never Alone* uses procedural rhetoric in a way that forces the player to internalize the values reflected in Inuit culture – such as cooperation or value of friendship and community. Rather than communicating them more directly through text or dialogue, the game requires them to be put into practice, as without cooperation and an understanding of the differences between the characters and their skills, it is impossible to pass the game. In this way, the game not only tells the story of Inuit culture but also allows the player to experience its principles in action, which is a key aspect of procedural rhetoric.

Such mechanics perfectly capture a key element of Inuit culture, which are community and interdependence. It is important to note that traditional Arctic communities, survival was only possible through cooperation and mutual support. Those values are reflected in the game – Nuna and Fox cannot act alone – only by combining their abilities are they able to overcome difficulties and continue their journey. This is a procedural representation of Inuit values – the individual cannot survive in extreme conditions without the help of others, and harmony between man and nature is the foundation of everyday life.

5.3.2 Environment as learning mechanics

The game is set in the Arctic landscape, which is not only the backdrop for the story but also an active part of the gameplay mechanics. The player must contend with gusty winds, frozen rivers and the unpredictable behavior of wild animals.

This gameplay design is not just a challenge – it is a form of procedural learning about how the Inuit have adapted to life in the Arctic. Rather than giving players dry information about the harsh weather conditions, the game forces the player to feel them for themselves. The mechanics also reflect the Inuit philosophy that survival in Arctic depends on careful observation of the environment and adapting to the conditions, rather than on trying to overcome them by force.

It can therefore be seen that *Never Alone* uses procedural rhetoric in a way that not only conveys knowledge but also engages the player in the experience. In this game the gameplay mechanics not only reflect the harshness of the Arctic environment but also teach the player how the Inuit view the world – as a place where harmony with nature and attentiveness to its laws are crucial for survival.

In this way, the game becomes not only entertainment, but also an educational tool that explains and translates Inuit values and traditions in a more subtle way, while engaging the player in the process of understanding and assimilating them. *Never Alone* not only tells the story of Inuit culture but also allows the player to experience its principles in action.

5.3.3 Relationship with the spiritual world in game mechanics

In Inuit beliefs, the physical and spiritual worlds can merge together – the spirits of animals, ancestors and forces of nature play an important role in everyday life of Inuit (Seidelman, 1993). In *Never Alone*, this relationship is explained to players through a mechanic in which Fox can interact with the spirits and summon them to help Nuna on her journey. This is not just a narrative element of the story, but an integral part of the gameplay – the spirits reveal new paths, create bridges or reveal hidden objects.

Through these mechanics, the game captures the Inuit concept of man's relationship with nature and spirituality. The player not only learns about these beliefs in theory but is forced to understand and put them into practice. Instead of treating ghosts as a passive element of the narrative, *Never Alone* implements them as a mechanic that forces the player to accept the Inuit view of the world as a space in which the spiritual and physical realms coexist and influence each other.

This representation of Inuit spirituality is quite an important factor that allows the player to understand Inuit culture. In the game, spirits are not abstract beings, but active participants in the gameplay that have a real impact on the player's progress. For example, to cross a gap in the ice, the player has to rely on the spirits to create bridges out of their bodies. This is not only a logical

challenge for the player, but also a study of how the Inuit view the world, which for them is a place where spirituality and physicality are strongly linked.

In this aspect, *Never Alone* mechanics to make it easier for players to understand Inuit. Rather than telling the story of the spirits through text or dialogue, the game forces the player to interact with them, leading to the internalization of these values. The player not only learns that the Inuit believe in spirits, but experiences how these beliefs affect everyday life and decisions. Through gameplay mechanics, the game shows that for the Inuit, the spiritual world is an integral part of reality that must be reckoned with and cooperated with in order to survive.

5.3.4 Combat mechanics

Instead of focusing on fighting enemies like most action games, *Never Alone* centers around not engaging with threats while strategically manipulating the surroundings and tools. This game imitates the Inuit's way of surviving not through fighting, but through modification. This is another element in the game that shows how this philosophy is deeply rooted in the Inuit culture.

One of the primary threats in the game is the Manslayer who attempts to capture Nuna. In these sequences, the game does not allow for direct combat – the only option that is given to the player, is to run away and use the environment to confuse the enemy. This approach mirrors the way the Inuit traditionally dealt with threats – they preferred to avoid danger and use their knowledge of the terrain and the environment to their advantage instead of using violence or aggression. In the game, the player has to observe the environment, look for hiding places and use landscape elements such as ice walls and snow drifts to survive. This is not only a skill challenge, but also a study of how the Inuit viewed threats – not as something to be overcome by force, but as something to be thought through. These mechanics emphasize the Inuit philosophy that survival in a harsh environment requires, above all, cleverness, patience and an understanding of your surroundings.

The other key mechanic is the bola, a traditional Inuit weapon consisting of weights connected by rope that can be thrown to hunt animals or hit a target from a distance.



Illustration 15.



Illustration 16.

In the game, Nuna uses the bola to smash obstacles and ward off threats, which captures how the Inuit used their knowledge of tools and hunting to survive. The mechanics of the bola in *Never Alone* do not allow for aggressive combat, but rather for tactical and precise use. The player must target specific objects to create new paths or fend off threats, which requires planning. This is a reflection of the Inuit approach to tools – they are not used to dominate or destroy, but as a way to cooperate with nature and adapt to its conditions. In *Never Alone*, the player does not use the bola to kill (as even if other characters or animals are hit with bola, they do not suffer any damage), but to solve problems and overcome obstacles. This is another example of how the game translates Inuit values through mechanics that require the player to understand and apply these principles in practice.

Through the mechanics of combat, the game teaches players some of the most important Inuit values in practice – the player must manage the game not through aggression and physical elimination of opponents, but through cunning and the ability to adapt to the environment. In this way, the game moves away from portraying the Inuit as aggressive and primitive and instead again emphasises the importance of cleverness and understanding the environment.

5.3.5 Oral narrative and its interactive adaptation

Another aspect will be analyzed is the way *Never Alone* integrates Inuit oral narrative tradition. Instead of presenting and explaining the cultural elements the player encounters in the game through, for example, dialogues or other elements in the gameplay itself, the developers decided to create a series of mini documentaries that the player unlocks as they progress through the game when they encounter a new cultural element. The content of the videos consists of elders of the Iñupiaq community talking about Inuit culture and explaining their beliefs and values.

Documentaries do not appear directly in the game, and the player can access them from the pause game menu (see Illustration 19.). Each time a new video is available, the player notices a silhouette of an owl in the gameplay background (see Illustration 18.). In this way, the gameplay itself is not disrupted, and the player can watch the video at any time that suits them.



Illustration 17.

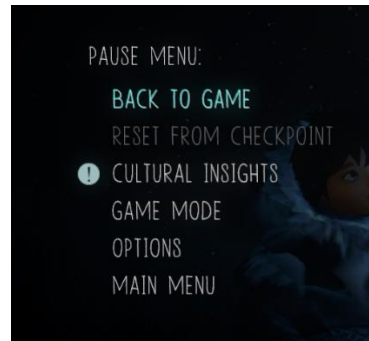


Illustration 18.



Illustration 19.

One can say, that this mechanics is used to reflect the spirit of Inuit culture. In the game, knowledge is not just simply given to the player but is discovered as the player explores the world. Each documentary can be treated as a reward for interacting with the environment, overcoming challenges and exploring mysteries (which are the aspects that allow the player to progress in game). This reflects an Inuit approach to learning, where knowledge is gained through experience, observation and listening to stories passed down from generation to generation.

The procedural rhetoric can be seen here through the mechanics of exploration – the more the player discovers of the world, the more documentaries they can access. This is a procedural

representation of the Inuit way of learning, in which knowledge is not transmitted in a linear or abstract way (e.g. through lessons focusing on the theory of given topic), but through interaction with the world and the community. Additionally, in traditional Inuit communities, elders act as teachers, and they share their stories and knowledge to teach younger generations the survival in the harsh conditions of Arctic. In *Never Alone*, the player takes on the role of a student who gradually discovers the wisdom of the Inuit by listening to their stories and observing how these stories relate to the challenges they face in the game.

It is also worth noting that this mechanic has a deeper, educational function. Instead of giving the facts in a dry way, e.g. by means of dialogue or additional texts, the game engages the player emotionally and intellectually. This forces them to reflect on how the Inuit view and understand the world. The stories told by the indigenous people of the Arctic are not just an add-on to the game – they are an integral part of the experience that shapes the player's understanding of Inuit culture. As a result, the player not only learns facts, but also how the Inuit interpret the world, how they perceive the relationship between humans and nature, and how they pass on knowledge to the next generation, which also changes the way Inuit people are perceived – their representation changes from the mainstream one to the one showing Inuit peoples as communities with their own culture and traditions.

5.3.6. Cutscenes

Cutscenes are a video element that appears quite often in games. They aim to highlight key moments in the game and explain information to players that they may not assimilate through gameplay. Most often, cutscenes are animated in a similar graphical style to the game. In *Never Alone*, however, these cutscenes differ graphically from the gameplay. Those videos in the game are based on traditional Inuit carvings and paintings, with a graphic style reminding of drawings carved into bone or painted on skin. The animation style appeals to symbolism and simplification - instead of realistic or graphically fitting gameplay characters, the player is presented with characters and graphics in a traditional Inuit style, which further reinforces the power of the oral traditions, that were mentioned in the previous part of the analysis. Such a choice not only emphasizes the visual richness of the culture but serves also as a *third space*, as traditional Inuit art become part of the video, which is a more contemporary, mainstream medium.

The cutscene below shows the story of Blizzard Man, which the player learns just before fighting the final battle with him. The scene tells the story of Blizzard Man creating a blizzard inadvertently by shoving snow out of his path.

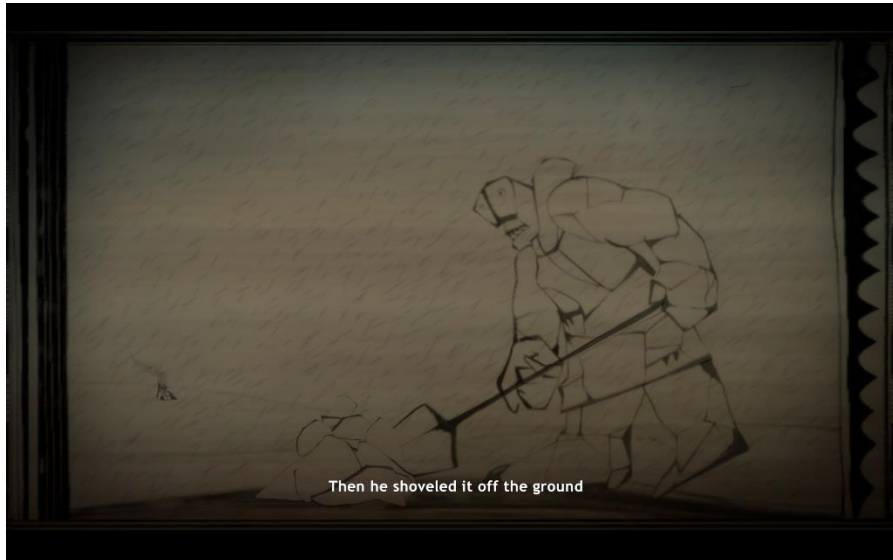


Illustration 20.

Keeping the cutscenes in a traditional aesthetic procedurally tells the player about the way Inuit culture stores and transmits knowledge – not through textual records, but through images and oral stories. Cutscenes are an extension of this tradition, but they are filtered through an interactive medium. Also, the symbolism of these cutscenes is important, as the player is not presented with simple, unambiguous scenes in the video, but is still left with room for interpretation and self-directed thinking and understanding.

Cutscenes introduce players to the visual culture of the Inuit, portraying them as a people with their own culture and sensitivity to art. They do this not only by showing the player Inuit drawings, but by actively introducing the player to the world of Inuit art and understanding. By making these drawings animated, they start functioning as the *third space*, in which the player can learn about something culturally new through a familiar and easily assimilated medium.

5.5 Storytelling

The final part of this analysis will cover the topic of storytelling and will focus on outlining the types of narrative in the game, building on the findings from the previous parts of the analysis.

One of the most visible types of in-game narrative in *Never Alone* is environmental storytelling. Jenkins points out that *environmental narrative is a technique in which what we see and interact*

with in the game world tells us about the world presented, its history and its values (Jenkins, 2004). In the case of *Never Alone*, different spaces in which players move are not just a setting for the story but actively participate in shaping the story. The game shows that the environment is something Inuit must co-exist with, rather than something that threatens them. As Jenkins notes: *the environment in video games can be seen as a narrative because the player is forced to interact with the space and its elements* (Jenkins, 2004). In each of the game's locations in *Never Alone*, the player solves more puzzles and goes through obstacles, actively creating progression through the game, as well as taking in more elements of Inuit culture and learning about them as a community with their own culture, beliefs and sensibilities to the world.

Another type of narrative that can be noticed in the game is emergent storytelling. In *Never Alone*, the player, by solving puzzles or interacting with elements of the environment, experiences the game world's rules, as well as the culture and symbolism. The main point of the game is not only to overcome the obstacles, but also to experience the world, learn about it and discover a story that player gradually discover according to their actions. Jenkins emphasizes that in emergent narrative, *the player becomes part of the story as his or her decisions and actions shape the course of events* (Jenkins, 2004). In *Never Alone*, the player is not just a passive audience but actively creates the story by experiencing Inuit culture and their relationship with nature. For this reason, the game can be interpreted as a kind of narrative of human coexistence with the world around them, where every decision and action of the player matters in the context of the larger goal of ending the eternal snowstorm.

In addition to these two types of narrative, *Never Alone* also uses elements of embedded storytelling by e.g. mini documentaries that explain the cultural and mythological background of the game. In these moments, the game shows to the player information about Inuit traditions, beliefs and myths that underpin the entire storyline. Using this form of narrative makes *Never Alone* not only a game, but also an educational experience that allows the player to immerse themselves in Inuit culture. As Jenkins notes, *embedded storytelling gives the player key information about the game world in a way that does not compromise the fluidity of the gameplay, but still advances the story* (Jenkins, 2004). This allows the player to understand what nature means to the Inuit, what role the spirits play in their daily lives, and what values guide their actions.

The use of these three narrative types in *Never Alone* – environmental storytelling, emergent storytelling and embedded storytelling – allows for the creation of a story that interactively

communicates to the player mythological and cultural content. The game presents the traditional Inuit myth at the same time allowing the player to actively participate in the story. Through that, *Never Alone* deconstructs stereotypical representations of Inuit culture, which have often portrayed its representatives as 'savage' or 'primitive'. The game presents the Inuit as a wise, strong people, able to survive in harsh conditions, while living in full symbiosis with nature. Their knowledge, skills and spiritual connection to the surrounding world are key elements of the storyline, and the environment in which the characters move is a testament to this deep relationship. In this sense, *Never Alone* is a game that not only educates about Inuit culture but also restores their subjectivity by offering an alternative narrative that goes beyond colonial and stereotypical representations.

6. Conclusions

To sum up and answer the problem formulation, *Never Alone* creates a new representation of the Inuit that stands in opposition to this colonial and mainstream representation. Steward Hall (1997) points out that the importance of cultural identity lies in its constant redefinition and reinterpretation, which is manifested in the game's adaptation of the *Kunuksaayuka*. By reinterpreting it and presenting it in the form of a computer game, the creators have presented a more multidimensional, full representation of Inuit peoples.

In the spirit of Hall's theory, the game reconstructs the colonial representation that portrayed the Inuit as humanly primitive, devoid of culture, belittled to the victims of the climatic conditions in which they live.

The game portrays them as not victims, but proactive people who use cunning and experience instead of aggression and violence, adapting to the environment and respecting nature rather than fighting it. At the same time, however, they are not portrayed as passive – they are active creators of their world and the reality in which they live.

This is shown through the example of the main character – Nuna is not a helpless figure at the mercy of nature, but a person consciously acting within her world. Her journey is not just about fighting for survival - it is a story about relationships, cooperation and respect for nature.

Throughout her journey, she does not fight nature but uses it to achieve her goal and survive. She does not see nature as an enemy, but as a tool that, skillfully used, will allow her to achieve her goal.

Another of the values on which the representation of the Inuit in *Never Alone* is based is cooperation – Nuna does not travel alone, but has Lisa with her, who is able to do things that Nuna would not be able to do (like climb high walls or communicate with Spirits). This shows the player the importance of friendship and how important community is to the Inuit, as they would not have survived in the Arctic alone. This is further emphasized by the fact that Manslayer – the only character in the game from Inuit culture who acts alone and is disconnected from the community ultimately fails.

The player would not have been able to complete the game if not for the help of the Spirits, who are beings from the spiritual world, but also function in and are able to influence the material world. On the one hand, this is another element showing the importance of cooperation, but on the other hand, it also highlights that, despite the colonial representation that portrayed the Inuit as a people devoid of a deeper spirituality, it presents a complex and multidimensional Inuit belief system in which there is no concrete boundary between the material and spiritual worlds, and the two intermingle, which is shown through characters such as the Spirits, Aurora People, Blizzard Man, Owl Man or Fox, who are not earthly characters but still function in the material world, as well as through the magical forest, which is where Nuna prepares to fight Blizzard Man, but which is also the place between the material world and the spiritual one.

Thus *Never Alone* creates a representation of the Inuit as a people deeply connected to nature, who know how to interact with it, but also how to actively change their environment and direct their destiny. They have a developed culture (both literary – as evidenced by the fact that the game is an interpretation of a myth – and visual – as evidenced, for example, by the masks on the faces of some characters, or by the cutscenes) and belief system. They believe in the existence of an extraterrestrial world, which nevertheless permeates the material world. Contradicting colonial narratives, the Inuit peoples, instead of being savages, are also guided in their lives by certain values such as friendship, loyalty or cooperation.

The game builds this representation in several ways. The most obvious is the theme of the game itself - basing the storyline on Inuit folklore already emphasises the fact that they have a culture and that it is important enough to become a topic in the international arena. The game has been translated into almost 20 languages, indicating that its developers wanted to focus its message not only on Inuit players, but also on those speaking other languages and from other cultural backgrounds.

Learning about a new culture involves education, which is another tool that was used to create a representation of the Inuit. Through the portrayal of different Arctic environments, as well as different characters relating to Inuit beliefs, the developers introduced players to both Inuit beliefs but also introduced them to Inuit values. It is important to note, however, that the acquisition of this knowledge did not, however, merely involve accepting the dry information that was given to the players by the game's creators, but the players had to assimilate this knowledge themselves through the experience they acquired by learning the game's mechanics. In this way, the developers also incorporated the Inuit way of learning, where knowledge is mainly acquired through experience and the stories of elders.

This latter element also takes place in the game through the form of mini documentaries featuring Iñupiaq elders, which the player unlocks as they play the game. In this way, the two primary forms for Inuit knowledge acquisition were combined, as the player first had to pass a certain puzzle or overcome a certain stage in the game in order to unlock a video. He therefore had to first gain experience in order to access the oral transmission.

Another tool that has been used to create a cultural representation is to add elements to the game that are familiar from its own Western culture – in the game this has been done either by modifying elements from Inuit culture (such as modifying the *Kunuksaayuka*), or by using universal elements present in both cultures (such as by referring to universal values such as friendship or cooperation, or designing the main character as an archetype that has counterparts in Western culture). In this way, players can, on the one hand, better identify with and understand the game, but also, by showing similarities between Inuit and Western culture, the game developers emphasize that, contrary to colonial representations, the Inuit are not this exotic, primitive and savage people, but in many aspects similar to those of Western culture.

In this context, one can also talk about *third space* and *hybridity* (Bhabha, 1994). The game does not simply transfer the myth to a modern medium, but combines elements of Inuit narrative, aesthetics and spirituality with the interactive form of video games. Because of that, the game is creating a new quality – a space where two cultures meet. This *hybridity* manifests itself both in the narrative structure and in the way the characters, the world and the player's interaction with the environment are depicted – to sum up, the *hybridity* can be seen in all the elements analyzed in this work. In addition, all these elements interpenetrate each other, which further reinforces the impressions that exemplify the creation of a cultural representation in the game, as the player

perceives the message that the game creators want to convey to them on an multiple levels – not only does the players see it in the way the storyline or in the character design, but he can also experience everything themselves through, for example, the game mechanics. This multidimensionality in the way cultural representation is created allows for a deeper rethinking and reinterpretation of the game, and thus the image of the Inuit it creates.

Never Alone is the first computer game to be developed in collaboration with the Inuit community. Thanks to this, Indigenous people have been given their voice, which had been taken away from them through centuries of colonization. They used it to represent themselves and their culture, but also to show their place in the modern world and outline contemporary issues. For on the one hand, they showed their attachment to tradition, but on the other hand, by presenting it through the modern medium of the video game, they showed their presence in the contemporary technological world. Also, the subject matter, although already touched upon in the myths, is still relevant - the game's storyline speaks of the need to respect nature and live in accordance with its principles, which becomes particularly important at the time of current climate change and global movements to reduce man's destructive impact on the environment. This is a particularly important topic for Inuit communities, as they are among those already most affected by climate change and who are trying to raise people's awareness of the issue.

Never Alone was developed by Inuit for players from both Inuit and non-Inuit communities. Through this game, Inuit peoples have gained a voice on the international stage to speak about themselves and create a new representation of themselves, but also to address themes that affect every culture and every person, such as friendship, loyalty or respect for nature and environmental awareness. Through this game, the players not only travel with Nuna and Fox to defend the village from the eternal snowstorm, but also learn about and experience a new culture, reminding themselves at the same time of the values that are important in human life, no matter what part of the world they come from.

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