

# DIGITAL GAME NARRATIVES AS LIVING CULTURE: NEVER ALONE\*

## Yaşayan Kültür Olarak Dijital Oyun Anlatıları: Never Alone

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### ABSTRACT

This study explores the representation of Iñupiat culture in the digital game *Never Alone*, released in 2014, by considering the culture of the Iñupiat people living in Alaska. It also aims to examine the effects of *Never Alone* on the preservation and transmission of Iñupiat culture. It can be argued that technology can play an important role in the reinvention of culture and traditions. In this respect, the study analyzes the game *Never Alone* in a descriptive way to reveal how Iñupiat culture is processed in the digital environment and how its cultural elements come together with the digital game experience. In particular, it examines how Iñupiat culture is integrated into the game's narrative and interface design. In this context, the study aims to contribute not only to folklore and digital game research but also to the academic debate on the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage. The hypothesis of the study is that *Never Alone* is a successful example of exploring traditional narratives in interactive digital environments. Based on this hypothesis, the role of the game in the rediscovery and transmission of endangered cultures is discussed. It also considers the applicability of similar methods in the transmission of other endangered cultures, such as the Iñupiat community, into the future. The main argument of the study is the necessity of using technology as an effective tool in the reproduction and transmission of cultural heritage. At a time when traditional practices are being eroded in the age of high technology, innovative methods are needed to safeguard intangible cultural heritage. Digital games, especially with their immersive storytelling and interactive nature, can offer a new perspective for these efforts. *Never Alone* is a prominent example in this context, successfully reflecting the fusion of technology and culture as a game in which indigenous people played an active role in the development process. This collaboration with the Iñupiat community during the development process enhanced the game's authenticity and cultural richness. The findings of the analysis reveal that *Never Alone* goes beyond being an entertainment tool and plays an active role in preserving cultural heritage. The results also show that the game, rooted in Iñupiat culture, has become a dynamic repository of traditional knowledge. The game's potential to preserve cultural heritage is supported by the fact that it reaches millions of players. This success supports the argument that digital games are powerful tools for the preservation and transmission of cultural heritage. This global success of *Never Alone* positions digital games as global cultural ambassadors. This reinforces the idea that digital games are an effective channel for cross-cultural interaction. Furthermore, the fact that the game offers the opportunity to correct misrepresentations and accurately portray Iñupiat culture emphasizes the importance of digital games in cultural representation. The game's effects not only impacted the Iñupiat community, but also opened up a global discussion on the potential of digital games to contribute to cultural heritage preservation. The findings highlight the need for further studies to investigate the effects of similar game experiences that support different local cultures. Furthermore, investigating the effects of collaborative game development processes that strengthen cultural communities and examining the educational effectiveness of digital games could be potential topics for future research.

### Keywords

Iñupiat culture, *Never Alone*, digital game, digital folklore, living culture.

### ÖZ

Bu çalışma, Alaska'da yaşayan İnyupik halkının kültürünü ele alarak 2014'te piyasaya sürülen *Never Alone* adlı dijital oyundaki İnyupik kültürünün temsiliyi araştırmaktadır. Bununla birlikte *Never Alone*'nin İnyupik kültürünün korunması ve aktarımı üzerindeki etkilerini incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Teknolojinin kültürün ve geleneklerin yeniden icadında önemli bir rol oynayabileceği ileri sürülebilir. Bu doğrultuda çalışma, *Never Alone* oyununu ele alarak İnyupik kültürünün dijital ortamda nasıl işlendiğini ve kültürel unsurlarının dijital oyun deneyimiyle nasıl bir araya geldiğini betimsel bir analizle ortaya koymaktadır. Özellikle İnyupik kültürünün oyunun anlatısına ve arayüz tasarımına nasıl entegre edildiği incelenmiştir. Bu bağlamda, çalışma yalnızca folklor ve dijital oyun araştırmalarına yönelik değil aynı zamanda somut olmayan kültürel mirasın korunması konusundaki akademik tartışmaya da katkıda bulunmayı amaçlamaktadır. Çalışmanın hipotezi,

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etkileşimli dijital ortamlarda geleneksel anlatıların keşfedilmesinde Never Alone'un başarılı bir örnek teşkil etmesidir. Bu hipotez üzerinden oyunun, yok olma tehlikesiyle karşı karşıya olan kültürlerin yeniden keşfinde ve aktarımında oynadığı rol tartışılmaktadır. Ayrıca İnyupik topluluğu gibi yok olma tehlikesi altındaki diğer kültürlerin geleceğe aktarılmasında benzer yöntemlerin uygulanabilirliği de ele alınmaktadır. Çalışmanın temel argümanı, teknolojinin kültürel mirasın yeniden üretiminde ve geleceğe aktarımında etkili bir araç olarak kullanılmasının gerekliliğidir. Yüksek teknoloji çağında geleneksel uygulamaların erozyona uğradığı bir dönemde somut olmayan kültürel mirasın korunması için yenilikçi yöntemlere ihtiyaç duyulmaktadır. Dijital oyunlar, özellikle sürükleyici hikâye anlatımı ve etkileşimli yapısıyla bu çabalar için yeni bir perspektif sunabilir. Never Alone ise bu bağlamda öne çıkan bir örnek olup, yerlilerin geliştirme sürecinde aktif biçimde rol oynadığı bir oyun olarak teknoloji ve kültürün birleşimini başarılı bir şekilde yansıtmıştır. Oyunun geliştirme sürecinde İnyupik topluluğuyla yapılan söz konusu iş birliği oyunun özgünlüğünü ve kültürel zenginliğini artırmıştır. Yapılan incelemenin sonucunda elde edilen bulgular, Never Alone'nun bir eğlence aracı olmanın ötesine geçerek kültürel mirasın korunmasında etkin bir rol üstlendiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Sonuçlar ayrıca İnyupik kültürüne dayanan oyunun, geleneksel bilginin dinamik bir deposu haline geldiğini göstermektedir. Oyunun kültürel mirası koruma potansiyeli milyonlarca oyuncuya ulaşmasıyla desteklenmektedir. Bu başarı, dijital oyunların kültürel mirasın korunmasında ve geleceğe aktarımında güçlü araçlar olduğu argümanını desteklemektedir. Never Alone'un küresel ölçekteki bu başarısı dijital oyunları küresel kültür elçileri olarak konumlandırmaktadır. Bu durum, dijital oyunların kültürler arası etkileşim için etkili bir kanal olduğu düşüncesini güçlendirmektedir. Ayrıca oyunun yanlış temsilleri düzeltme ve İnyupik kültürünü doğru bir şekilde anlatma imkânı sunması, dijital oyunların kültürel temsil konusundaki önemini vurgulamaktadır. Oyunun etkileri yalnızca İnyupik topluluğunu değil aynı zamanda dijital oyunların kültürel mirasın korunmasına katkı sağlama potansiyelini küresel bir düzeyde tartışmaya açmıştır. Bulgular farklı yerel kültürleri destekleyen benzer oyun deneyimlerinin etkilerini araştırmak üzere daha fazla çalışmanın yapılmasına olan ihtiyacı vurgulamaktadır. Ayrıca kültürel toplulukları güçlendiren iş birliğine dayalı oyun geliştirme süreçlerinin etkilerinin araştırılması ve dijital oyunların eğitici etkinliğinin incelenmesi, gelecekteki araştırmaların potansiyel konu başlıkları olabilir.

#### **Anahtar Kelimeler**

İnyupik kültürü, Never Alone, dijital oyun, dijital folklor, yaşayan kültür.

#### **Introduction**

The fact that technology constitutes the infrastructure of all means of production and consumption covering daily life practices has also triggered the discussion of the possibilities it can provide in the reinvention of culture or tradition. Blank (2009) argues that folklorists should turn to the internet for their research, while Dundes (2006: 24) claims that technology is an important tool in the dissemination and transmission of culture to the future and that the netnography method is particularly applicable in folklore research. Netnography is a qualitative method for investigating the consumer behavior of cultures and communities on the Internet (Kozinets 1998: 366). The method recognizes that folkloric items produced and consumed online are ideal subjects of observation for folklore research (Kõiva and Vesik 2014: 184). Despite the idealization of the method, Evren and Kanli (2022), on the other hand, are skeptical about the idealization of the method, claiming that the inequality of visibility spread across the internet negatively affects the visibility of folkloric content in these environments.

Discussing the main problems and limitations related to the digitalization of folklore, Evren and Kanli (2022) revealed that it is extremely difficult to create a participatory culture environment on the internet. Accordingly, the political economy infrastructure of social networks, which prevents participatory culture, directly affects the visibility and access of folkloric content. This puts folkloric content in unequal competition with content representing the dominant culture. For this reason, researchers have emphasized that netnographic research in the field of folklore should also focus on the elements that threaten participatory culture in the digital environment (Evren and Kanli 2022: 135). According to Blank (2018), folkloric content on the internet demonstrates how technologically mediated communication complicates, unifies and influences everyday practices

in virtual and physical spaces. Blank's conclusion (2018) is that cultural elements can be taken into account in studying complex human interactions online, but that this needs to be done very carefully. Recognizing that the Internet is an important tool for the preservation, archiving and dissemination of folkloric elements, Vajda (2015) also argues that digital media play an important role in transferring and keeping traditional culture alive for future generations. Considering the fragility and dynamic nature of traditional knowledge on the Internet, Vajda (2015: 39) revealed in his research that necessary measures should be taken to protect traditional knowledge in the long term and that digital media play a major role in the transmission and renewal of traditional culture. Sarpkaya (2021: 168), on the other hand, argues that the inclusion of epics, fairy tales and mythical narratives in digital games should be examined, as well as the attitudes of game producers and players towards cultural elements in games. The reproduction and transmission of cultural elements in digital games is an area open to research (Sarpkaya 2021: 168).

This study aims to examine the preservation and transmission of intangible cultural heritage through digital games, focusing on the game *Never Alone*, released in 2014, which introduces the culture of the Iñupiat people, an Eskimo people living in the north and northwest of Alaska, USA. The aim of the study does not allow the application of netnography as a method. Because the focus of netnographic research is on communities; it examines groupings, gatherings or communities of people on the internet (Kozinets 2010: 8). The focus of this study is solely on the content of *Never Alone*, and the research has the motive of revealing elements of Iñupiat culture in the game through descriptive analysis. The article questions how Iñupiat culture is embedded in *Never Alone*'s narrative structure, interface design and gameplay, and how cultural elements come together in the digital game experience. It aims to contribute not only to the academic discourse surrounding folklore research and digital games, but also to the ongoing academic debate on the preservation of intangible cultural heritage around the world.

The hypothesis of the study is that *Never Alone*, which enables the rediscovery of traditional narratives in an interactive digital environment, will make significant positive contributions to the field of digital folklore studies. Based on this hypothesis, it is aimed to discuss the role of *Never Alone* in the rediscovery of other cultures that are on the verge of extinction and whose members are diminishing in number. In addition to this purpose, the preference and applicability of a similar method in the transmission of other cultures that are in danger of extinction, such as the Iñupiat community, to the future is also discussed.

Based on Dundes' view (2006) that technology can be effective in the reproduction of culture and its transfer to the future, it can be said that the driving force of the study lies in the potential of digital games in terms of the protection and transfer of intangible cultural heritage to the future. In the age of high technology, where traditional practices are being eroded as a result of the adoption and spread of technology-based production and consumption, there is a need to research innovative methods for the protection of intangible cultural heritage. It can be argued that digital games, especially with their immersive storytelling techniques and interactive structure, offer a new way for this endeavor. *Never Alone* is an important example in this regard, not only exemplifying the convergence of technology and culture, but also doing so in collaboration with the Iñupiat community. The game's narrative is based on the traditional Iñupiat tale of *Kunuksaayuka*, and during the development phase, the game developers met with the locals and involved them in the development process (Longboat 2017; Williams 2018: 24-25; Parkin 2014). The collaboration between the game developers and the Iñupiat

community adds layers of authenticity and cultural richness to the game, while at the same time demonstrating a successful blend of modern technology and traditional storytelling.

### **Digital Gaming as a Cultural Product**

Digital games go beyond entertainment and leisure to become complex expressions of culture, embodying the creative endeavors, values and narratives of the audiences that produce and interact with them. Indeed, early game theorists were interested in what games tell players about societies and cultures (Barwick et al. 2011: 373-374). Huizinga (1970) and Caillois (1961) defined play as a cultural phenomenon. Similarly, recent game theorists read digital games as a cultural product and reflection, claiming that games draw on different cultural forms (Aarseth 2001; Linderöth 2015; Ryan 2009). For this reason, it is thought that by considering digital games as a cultural product, their role in shaping and reflecting cultural identity in the contemporary world is emphasized.

Cultural heritage can be subject to destruction and extinction due to natural and human causes (Garcia-Fernandez and Medeiros 2019). For this reason, cultural heritage conservation is especially important for the survival and transmission of cultures belonging to communities that are in danger of extinction, both to present and future generations (DaCosta and Kinsell 2023: 3). Globalization and the culture it dominates make it especially difficult to sustain and transmit the cultures of local communities to the future (Wang 2021). Despite this challenge, at the same time, these factors draw attention to the growing importance of cultural heritage conservation.

While the term computer game is mostly used in Turkey, the conceptualization of digital game has been used more frequently since the 2000s to cover games that can be played on both consoles, computers and mobile devices (Binark and Bayraktutan-Sütçü 2008: 42-43). However, while the concept of digital game is widely used in Turkey, the concept of video game is preferred in the international literature (Halaçoğlu 2020: 2). The main difference of digital games from traditional games is that they present meaning frames to the player in a ready-made form (Bizzocchi 2007; Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum 2012; Ralph and Monu 2015). Cultural elements also play an important role in meaning frames, and game developers are inspired by cultural heritage and historical events and reflect these elements in the interface, characters and narrative of digital games (Mortara et al. 2014: 318-319). The interactive nature of games creates a unique space for cultural representation and expression, allowing players to explore, interact with and be influenced by different cultures and unfamiliar historical events. Games thus become a space where underrepresented cultures can gain visibility, stereotypes can be challenged and the scope of cultural representation in media can be expanded (Champion 2011; Champion 2015; Foni et al 2010; Majewski 2017). Game developers often draw on their own cultural backgrounds, embedding elements of their own cultural heritage into the narrative, interface and mechanics of the game. This intentional representation affects players' perception and interaction in the game world. Games in particular serve as platforms for the creation and dissemination of cultural narratives (Cerezo-Pizarro 2023).

With the transfer of intangible cultural heritage to the digital domain, it takes on a different form and meaning from its existing form and emerges as a new genre. Digital spaces can be an opportunity to increase the awareness and recognition of intangible cultural heritage. Although the political economy-based inequality in the infrastructure of social media and the internet creates obstacles to the formation of participatory culture in these channels and the equal visibility of content (Evren and Kanli 2022), digital games can be evaluated at a different point. Sarpkaya (2021: 169) emphasizes that digital games

have an important impact and archive quality in terms of the folkloric elements they contain and argues that especially Turkish folklorists should include digital games in their research. Researchers should consider digital games as a folkloric event or product (Sarpkaya 2021: 169). Although a different medium from digital games, Kim et al. (2019) argue that digital exhibitions also play an important role in preserving and transmitting intangible cultural heritage. Kim et al.'s research (2019) concluded that through virtual reality technologies, people can learn new things about cultural heritage in an enjoyable way without being educative in the traditional sense. In this sense, digital games can be seen both as a leisure activity that the player can enjoy and as a medium through which they can learn new things about cultural heritage without realizing it.

Inspired by mythology, history or sensational events, digital games are becoming storytelling tools that resonate with players on a cultural level (Cover 2016). The interface design of games contributes to the authentic representation of different cultures by incorporating cultural elements, from architectural styles to traditional dress. In this sense, visual aesthetics play a crucial role in immersing players in culturally rich environments. Some games feature authentic language use and linguistic representation. This inclusion facilitates a more immersive experience and emphasizes the importance of linguistic diversity in cultural representation (Czech 2013; Pyae 2018). However, game language should not be seen as a mere tool of localization.

Although digital games have the potential for cultural representation, there are also challenges. These challenges include the authenticity and inclusivity of how cultures are portrayed in games. Digital games can intentionally or unintentionally appropriated elements of a culture without proper understanding or context. This can lead to misrepresentation and commodification of meaningful cultural practices. Stereotypes and misrepresentations can reinforce prejudices and perpetuate cultural stereotypes. This challenge highlights the need for accurate and successful representations that prevent the reinforcement of pre-existing cultural misunderstandings. Some games may lack cultural background or diversity representing the perspective of underrepresented communities. This lack of diversity can limit players' exposure to a wide range of cultural narratives and experiences. Developers may intentionally or unintentionally incorporate their own cultural biases into game narratives. This can lead to the unwitting reinforcement of some cultural perspectives and the marginalization of others.

Overcoming these challenges requires practicing ethical considerations that prioritize authenticity, respect and inclusivity in cultural representation. This requires extensive research and collaboration with cultural experts or community members to ensure accurate and inclusive representation. Including diverse perspectives in development teams can increase cultural sensitivity in this process. Team members from different cultural backgrounds can contribute to the creation of more authentic narratives and eliminate potential biases. Collaborating with the communities represented can lead to a more accurate and consistent portrayal, as well as preventing abuse and malicious intent. Games can include educational components that provide context and additional information about the represented culture. This can support players to understand the richness and complexity of the cultural narratives being explored.

### **Iñupiat Culture and Never Alone**

The common thread of Iñupiat culture focuses on helping each other survive through both learning and cooperation among the natives living in the Arctic. It is known that the Iñupiat people have been living in these lands for thousands of years, with hunting, gathering and fishing as their main sources of livelihood (Jolles 2006: 239). For the Iñupiat

community, storytelling goes beyond entertainment and is of great importance as it contains information for survival (Williams 2018: 7).

The difficult living conditions brought about by the climate have made the sharing of resources an indispensable element of Iñupiat culture. Especially food should be shared on the basis of need rather than individual consumption (Williams 2018: 7-8). In addition to cultural extinction and oblivion, another current problem of the Iñupiat community is that their lands are under threat due to climate change (Sakakibara 2008). While this climate-related problem causes negative changes in the geography of Alaska, it also threatens the culture of indigenous peoples.

The Cook Inlet Tribal Council (CITC), which serves Alaska Natives, addresses a wide range of social issues in the region, including youth participation in social life, unemployment, drug and alcohol addiction (Parkinson 2014). In 2010, the organization, which is funded by the US government, began to look for other means of income to sustain its work (Encelewski 2019). The most important challenge for CITC was to find a way to preserve the community's culture without harming it with modern methods (Parkin 2014). After much research and discussion, the CITC leadership decided to pursue the idea of creating a digital game focused on Alaska Natives and their culture (Encelewski 2019; Williams 2018: 24).

Since CITC had no experience in digital game development, in 2012 it co-founded Upper One Games, Alaska's first indigenous game company, in a joint investment with game development studio E-Line Media (Encelewski 2019; Parkin 2014). As a result of this investment, *Never Alone* was released by Upper One Games on November 18, 2014. During the development of the game, when game developer Sean Vesce traveled to Alaska with his team to collect stories and footage, Amy Fredeen, an Iñupiat, helped connect the developers with the community. Fredeen explained that they did not want the Iñupiat culture to be told by outsiders in the game, and that they decided to have the game's narrative created by indigenous people themselves (Bryant 2014). In addition, CITC officials were worried that since their culture and stories had previously been used without the knowledge and permission of the Iñupiat people, the game to be developed would carry financial concerns and go beyond its purpose (Parkin 2014). To avoid this, nearly forty Iñupiat elders, storytellers and community members were involved in the development of the game, ensuring that Iñupiat culture was accurately portrayed in the game (Longboat 2017; Williams 2018: 24-25; Parkin 2014).

Everyone involved saw the play as an opportunity to correct the misrepresentation of Alaska Natives in the media. During this time, more than forty hours of documentary footage was shot with indigenous people to reflect Iñupiat culture. The entire game was dubbed in Iñupiat and the documentary footage was embedded in the game under the title *Cultural Insight* and divided into twenty-six documentary interviews that were unlocked during the game (Encelewski 2019). The E-Line team, CITC, and indigenous people analyzed many stories from Iñupiat culture to determine the narrative of *Never Alone*. In adapting the oral story passed down through generations into a digital game, it was decided to create the character of Nuna, a young girl, instead of the main protagonist, a man. Ishmael Hope, the lead author of the game, stated that in Iñupiat culture, women also went hunting and participated in every activity in social life. However, in order to empower young women and tell a strong young women's story, they only stayed true to the story with a different protagonist (Wordsworth 2016). In conclusion, the traditional story of Kunuuksaayuka is about Nuna's dangerous and difficult journey to find the source of the wild snowstorm (Parkin 2014).

Never Alone, which has sold more than 3.5 million copies in total, has been recognized as one of the best games of 2014 by many different lists and has received many awards (Encelewski 2019). The most important thing to note about Never Alone is that rather than being a game about the Iñupiat community, it was made in collaboration with the Iñupiat people themselves. Thus, millions of people have played Never Alone and watched the documentaries embedded in the game, bringing the culture, stories and language of the Iñupiat people to a global audience. With Never Alone, the culture of an indigenous people in a remote corner of the world, which is in danger of extinction, has been transferred to the digital space and reached millions of people on a global scale. In doing so, it is thought that the game successfully reflects the Iñupiat culture by including the views, ideas and native language of the locals. In addition to its commercial success, Never Alone has been added to educational curricula at different levels in Alaska, from primary school to graduate school (Encelewski 2019). The play has also been exhibited in many museums, including the Denver Art Museum, the Heard Museum in Phoenix, the Chinese Academy of Fine Arts and the Smithsonian (Encelewski 2019).

### **Methodology**

In the study, non-probability based purposive sampling method was preferred. Purposive sampling is one of the basic sampling methods of qualitative research. In this method, situations that are suitable for the purpose of the researcher and are thought to provide rich information are included in the sampling (Suri 2011). It allows the researcher to examine the research topic in depth. In this direction, the 2014 game Never Alone was played and subjected to descriptive analysis. In analyzing digital games, descriptive analysis can be used to explain the game's features, content, playability and other important elements. Thus, it can address various aspects such as game design, story, graphics, sounds and user experience. Within the scope of the study, how Iñupiat culture is represented and reflected in Never Alone, which is considered as an interactive visual narrative, narrative structure and cultural elements in this structure are analyzed and interpreted.

### **Findings**

Developed in collaboration with the Iñupiat community, Never Alone represents a collaborative effort to weave Iñupiat culture, mythology and storytelling into the fabric of the digital gaming experience. The narrative of Never Alone is based on a story from the Iñupiat culture. Similar to the story, the game's narrative revolves around a young Iñupiat girl, Nuna, and her Arctic fox companion on a journey to find the source of an endless snowstorm that threatens the survival of everything.

#### *The storytelling tradition:*

The tradition of storytelling is a fundamental act of Iñupiat culture and plays a central role in the narrative structure of Never Alone. In Iñupiat culture, storytelling serves as a means of transmitting knowledge, cultural values and traditions to future generations. This oral tradition is a vital part of community life and contributes to the preservation of Iñupiat identity.

The player experiences the story from the point of view of Nuna, a young member of the ensemble, and an older voice-over narrator. It is thought that this narrative device not only serves as a framing mechanism for the play but also emphasizes the importance of intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge. In the play, the old storyteller is a symbolic figure representing the wisdom and knowledge he has acquired throughout

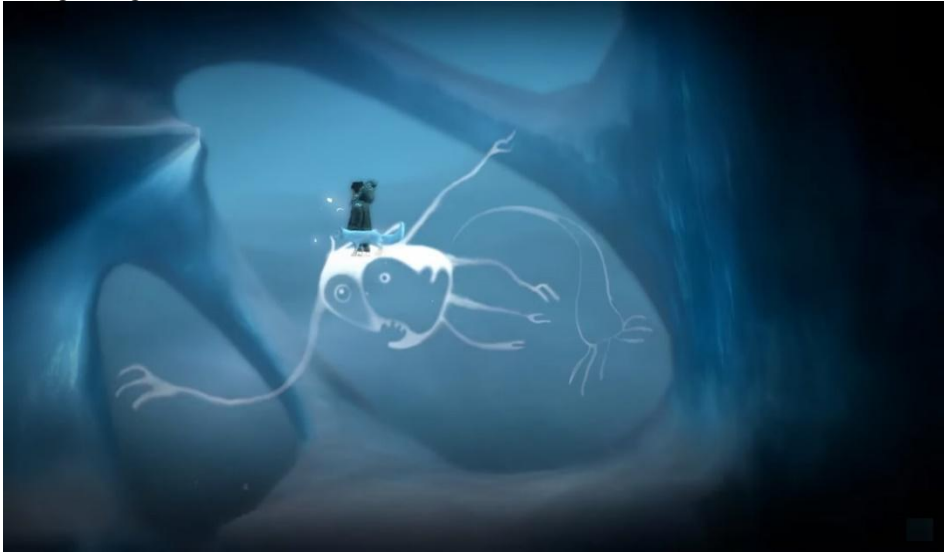
his life. The old Iñupiat passes on the cultural heritage of his people to the younger generation and people of different cultures, represented by the actor who controls the characters of Nuna and the arctic fox.

The story shared in the game is inspired by Iñupiat folklore and mythology. The game's narrative is based on the story of a boy named Kunuuksaayuka and his dangerous and challenging journey to find the source of a wild snowstorm. The narrative emphasizes encounters with mythological characters, the natural challenges of the Arctic and the need for cooperation to survive. Despite the hardships of their living conditions, the Iñupiat people maintain the tradition of storytelling as a powerful way of preserving cultural identity. This theme of resilience is reflected in Nuna's challenging journey.

The player can control both Nuna and the arctic fox in case of difficulties encountered during the journey. The fact that both characters are controllable necessitates cooperation between Nuna and the fox. In this way, the mechanics of the game and the exploration of the puzzles in the game are intricately woven with the cultural context, while at the same time reflecting the collaborative values emphasized in Iñupiat culture.

*Symbolic elements:*

The relationship between Nuna and her companion, the arctic fox, represents the strong cooperation and symbolic bond between humans and nature. Nuna is thought to represent the human perspective, while the Arctic fox is thought to represent the spirit of the Arctic. The throwing of the Nalukataq blanket depicted in the play serves as a powerful symbol. The action represents social celebration and unity. Blanket throwing is a cultural celebration in which community members come together to hold the edges of a large, stretched blanket or animal hide. Although this representation is not presented as a game mechanic in *Never Alone*, the throwing of the Nalukataq blanket is mentioned and explained in one of the Cultural Insights videos that the player can unlock as they progress through the game.



**Figure 1.** An example of auroras appearing in the sky.

The auroras (spiritual characters) that appear in the sky in certain parts of the game are both guiding lights and a physical platform to overcome obstacles (Figure 1). In *Never Alone*, the player's encounters with spirits and creatures from Iñupiat mythology not only



help to overcome challenges in the game but also give the player the opportunity to connect with the spiritual aspects of Iñupiat culture. Beyond their gameplay utility, auroras have symbolic significance, representing the presence of ancestors and the interconnection between the physical and spiritual worlds in Iñupiat belief systems. In addition, auroras introduce spiritual beings deeply rooted in Iñupiat mythology. The inclusion of these characters in the play serves as a visual representation of the supernatural dimensions within the cultural narrative. The narrative of the game includes a strong animistic belief system in Iñupiat culture that recognizes that animals and nature have spirits. By personifying animals and spiritual characters, *Never Alone* allows the player to interact with a worldview in which the boundaries between human and nature are blurred.

*Environmental representation:*

*Never Alone* presents the player with an Arctic landscape design with vast icy landscapes, snow-covered terrain and cold weather conditions. The game's interface design reflects the beauty and challenges of the Arctic, giving the player a sense of the Iñupiat people's relationship with nature. The inclusion of realistic environmental elements such as ice floes, frozen bodies of water and snowdrifts in the game interface contributes to the immersive gameplay experience and emphasizes the importance of resilience in the lives of the Iñupiat.



**Figure 2.** The polar bear threatening Nuna and the polar fox coming to her rescue.

The player witnesses Arctic wildlife such as polar bears, arctic foxes and owls, each playing a role in the story and reflecting the rich biodiversity of the region (Figure 2). The challenging weather conditions of the Arctic are dynamically represented in the game, including blizzards, high winds and freezing temperatures. At the same time, the transition between seasons influences gameplay and reflects how the Iñupiat community adapts their activities and lifestyles to changing climatic conditions.

*Representation of tradition:*

*Never Alone* goes beyond satisfying players' need for entertainment, offering insights into Iñupiat culture through Cultural Insights videos embedded in the game. The videos include interviews with indigenous people, documentaries and information about the development of the game. These videos offer the player the opportunity to learn more about specific elements of Iñupiat culture and traditions.



**Figure 3.** The moment when Nuna uses the bola to repel the polar bear.

The game also includes elements that showcase the practical skills and tools that the Iñupiat people use to survive in the Arctic environment. Most notable is the bola, a traditional hunting tool. Players can use the bola, a throwing weapon made of weights tied together with ropes, to overcome obstacles, forage for food and interact with the environment (Figure 3). The inclusion of traditional tools in the game also contributes to the preservation of Iñupiat cultural tools and practices.

As a result, the interactive narrative of *Never Alone* goes beyond cultural representation and allows players from different cultures to experience the Iñupiat culture. In this way, the barriers between different cultures are broken down and *Never Alone* functions as a bridge connecting different cultures.

### Conclusion

The findings of the analysis revealed that *Never Alone* goes beyond being a means of entertainment and assumes a protective role in the preservation of cultural heritage. Rooted in Iñupiat culture, the game has become a dynamic repository of traditional knowledge. With *Never Alone* selling more than 3.5 million copies (Encelewski 2019), it can be argued that in the face of cultural changes and globalized influences, digital games are powerful tools for the preservation and transmission of cultural heritage. *Never Alone*'s success on a global scale, reaching millions of players around the world, positions digital games as global cultural ambassadors. The reach of the game has extended far beyond the borders of the Iñupiat community, introducing millions of players around the world to the rich cultural heritage of the Arctic. In this sense, digital games have become a viable channel for cross-cultural interaction. The game has not only allowed the Iñupiat people to explain their culture to outsiders, but also to correct media misrepresentations of their culture.

The game's collaborative development process with indigenous people allowed them to actively shape how their culture is presented. This model of participatory collaboration serves as a model for other digital projects that aim to represent diverse cultural heritages and encourages a shift towards more ethical and participatory approaches to cultural representation in the digital space. In addition, *Never Alone* has proven to be more than just a leisure and entertainment tool, but also an educational tool for the preser-

vation and transmission of Iñupiat culture into the future. In particular, the Cultural Insights videos embedded in the game are considered to be a valuable resource for educators, students and cultural institutions. This educational component can contribute to a broader understanding of the complexities of preserving intangible cultural heritage through digital media.

In conclusion, *Never Alone* emerges as a pioneering case study in the preservation of cultural heritage through digital games. *Never Alone* shapes the global debate on how digital games can contribute to the preservation of diverse cultural heritage in an ethical and inclusive way. The game's successful representation of the Iñupiat culture and its global branding proves that the model adopted in its development is applicable to other cultures facing the threat of extinction.

Considering the findings and conclusions of this study, the effects of game experiences that support and host local cultures like *Never Alone* on players can be investigated. Indeed, 2018's *Mulaka*, inspired by Mexico's indigenous Tarahumara people, and 2020's *Ikenfell*, which features Filipino culture, are platforms for lesser-known cultures like *Never Alone*. However, it is also important to investigate the effects of the collaborative game development model on the empowerment of cultural communities. Future research could also investigate the educational effectiveness of digital games as cultural learning tools and contribute to the creation of guidelines and frameworks that prioritize inclusive and ethical practices in the representation of intangible cultural heritage.

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