A person wearing a heavy, fur-lined hooded jacket is seen from behind, sitting in a small, light-colored boat on a misty lake. The water is dark and reflects the light from the sky. Several birds are flying in the sky above the boat. The overall atmosphere is quiet and atmospheric.

NEVER ALONE  
< K I S I M A I N N I T C H U N A >

GAME REVIEW

*By: Hannah Jennings, Nick James, and Jessika Schiffer*

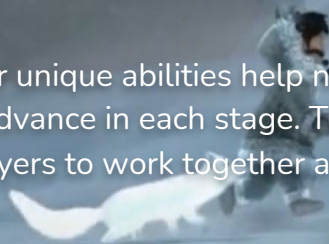
# OVERVIEW

*Never Alone* is an independently developed game project. It was produced in joint by indigenous peoples of Alaska and an indie game company.

This side-scrolling platformer is lead by two main characters, Nuna an Iñupiaq girl and Fox the arctic fox. Together they embark on a journey to solve the mystery of the blizzards that are destroying *their* homes.

As players switch between characters their unique abilities help navigate each setting and reach checkpoints. Both characters require help from the other to advance in each stage. This game can be completed alone or played co-op with a friend. A co-op experience allows both players to work together as Nuna and Fox

The goal of the game is for viewers to experience the rich culture of the Iñupiaq people and the stories that shaped them. The game also represents the importance interspecies kinship. Throughout the journey, Nuna and Fox's relationship is integral, sometimes even saving each others lives. This theme of interconnectedness resonates within the art style and emotional animations shared between the two.



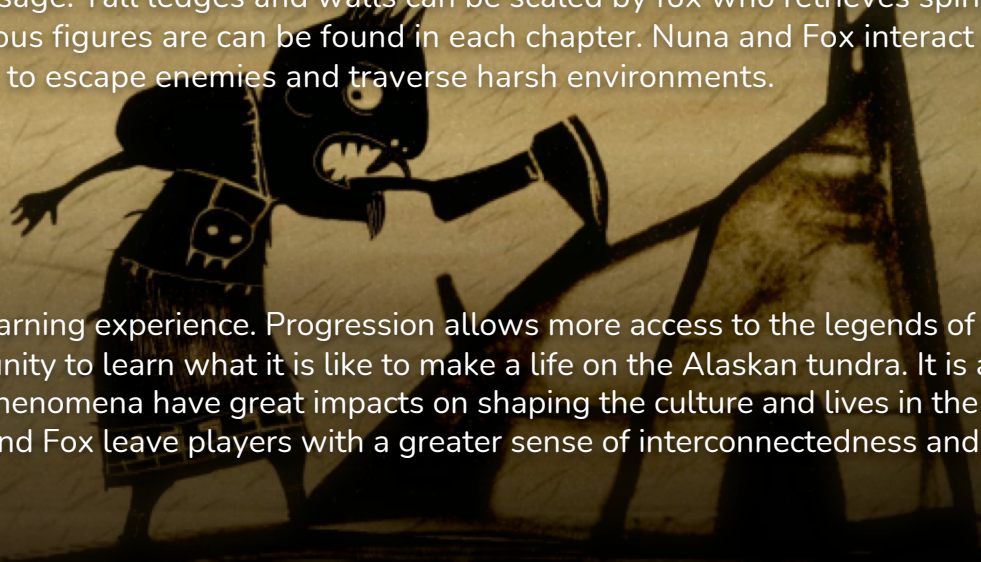
# THE GAMING EXPERIENCE

## GAME MECHANICS

As a side-scrolling platformer, players guide Nuna and Fox through a cinematic experience. Nuna and Fox both need each other to get through the levels, this can be done through co-op or solo play. Obstacles like ice, can be broken by Nuna's bolo to reveal a hidden passage. Tall ledges and walls can be scaled by fox who retrieves spirits to lift Nuna. Enemies, spirits, and other mysterious figures are can be found in each chapter. Nuna and Fox interact with the world in different ways, they use their skills to escape enemies and traverse harsh environments.

## GAMING EXPERIENCE

The entire game is designed as a learning experience. Progression allows more access to the legends of the Cook Inlet community. Players get the opportunity to learn what it is like to make a life on the Alaskan tundra. It is also taught that natural and sometimes unnatural phenomena have great impacts on shaping the culture and lives in the region. Overall, the daunting tasks faced by Nuna and Fox leave players with a greater sense of interconnectedness and community.



# VISUAL STYLE

Overall, *Never Alone* is full of high resolution visuals that are above all else beautiful. However, these visuals played into how captivating the game and its message were.

Some amazing visuals included:

- The characters and their clothing. The characters appeared to be wearing traditional clothing of the indigenous people, which helped to push the part of the game's goal to share the culture of the Iñupiaq people.
- The Alaskan arctic setting which although beautiful was very difficult for Fox and Nuna to navigate. There was ice, snow, freezing cold water, and intense winds that had the power to blow the characters back. The elements were the main challenge in the game, but when the wind wasn't blowing it seemed serene. I think these visuals helped to set the mood and allow the player to feel as if they were Nuna.
- The animation of the spirits and northern lights is perhaps my favorite visual choice. The helping spirits are shown as white wispy beings that depict different types of animals, and in my opinion, gives off the spirit effect very well. The northern lights or Aurora Borealis are depicted as neon green ghosts that can kill Nuna and Fox, which is a very interesting choice and an engaging visual. The role both of these play in the game and delivering its message will be discussed later.

# THE AUDIO

- One of the sounds is the native language of the Iñupiat (Alaska native people). It is spoken throughout the game, and it fits perfectly in the design of the game and gives insights on the real life and culture of the Iñupiat.
- There are many atmospheric melodies, different background noises that change based on the scene, but overall is mostly serene. These overarching melodies add emotion to the game play.
- In different parts of game play, you can hear sounds of nature and animals, such as the heavily blowing wind or growling bears, which creates feeling of real life perceptions, tension, moods and feelings.

Overall, the sounds that are chosen to be played throughout the game make the game very interactive by helping us to better connect to the characters and the scenes as they invoke emotion. Additionally, they provide insight into the Iñupiat culture and the arctic world.

# THE ROLE OF THE CHARACTERS: NUNA AND FOX

The two main characters in *Never Alone* are Nuna and Fox. However, throughout their journey there are different characters that show up and interact with them, but the story and meaning of the game ultimately relies on the interaction between Nuna and Fox.

Nuna is a determined young girl who does not stop at anything to keep going to find the source of the blizzard destroying her village. *Never Alone* very clearly sends the message of symbiosis and making kin, and Nuna plays the role of humankind in terms of the relationship between humans and the natural world.

Fox is an arctic fox that shows up out of nowhere to save Nuna from a polar bear. Fox plays the role of the natural world. He is able to unlock helpful routes by connecting the spirits and Nuna, which again perpetuates the message of interconnectedness between humans and nature. Later in the game, Fox is killed by the Manslayer, the man who burnt down Nuna's village, but he returns as the spirit of a young boy, which can further cement how closely related humans and the animal world are.

Throughout the game the two work together and they both are equally as important for their mutual survival. This is because they both possess different, but equally as helpful skill sets. Nuna has the ability to throw a bola that she received from the owl man. Fox has the ability to connect to the spirits, and he can climb up walls unlike Nuna. They must be played equally and work together to make up for their individual weakness, which matches with the message of symbiosis.

# THE ROLE OF THE CHARACTERS: SPIRITS AND INTERACTING CHARACTERS

As previously mentioned, Nuna and Fox meet different characters throughout their journey.

A recurring type of character that they encounter is the spirits. The spirits are helpful as they allow Fox and Nuna to get further in their journey, and they are introduced through Fox. The spirits typically are depicted by white ghostly drawings of animals. The spirits help to perpetuate the message of oddkin and interconnectedness between humans and the natural world as they often allow Nuna to escape danger when she wouldn't normally.

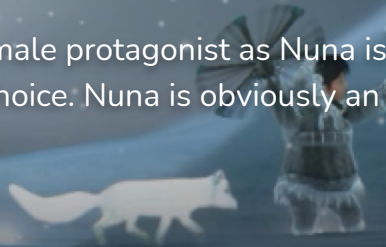
The Northern Lights or Aurora Borealis are depicted as neon green ghosts that can kill Nuna and Fox if they walk in the path of the ghosts. The ghostly northern lights almost acts as a visual metaphor of the Grim Reaper or even just the harsh weather of the Arctic, where if you aren't careful and aware of everything around you, you will die.

A character that ends up returning is the Manslayer, who destroyed Nuna's village and killed Fox. He is only associated with destruction. In my opinion, he plays the role of showing the destructive side of humans. Humanity can be destructive and cruel intentioned, and the Manslayer is able to showcase that.

The Iceman is the man causing the unrelenting blizzard. The fact that the game developers chose to depict him as a man is an interesting choice, and I think it was intentional for more than just having a tangible enemy for Nuna to defeat to win the game. Similar to the Manslayer, I think the reason that blizzard was caused by this Iceman was to show the harsh nature of humans and how it can influence the environment, such as causing climate change like a never ending blizzard.

# EXTRA INFORMATION WITHIN THE GAME

- Informational short videos that serve as an educational component which are unlocked with progressing in the game. The short documentaries are told by indigenous community members and are about their culture. The videos are extra information but are not necessary to watch in order to progress in the game.
- The interconnection of all living beings, especially humans and the natural world, is portrayed by “helpers” or spirits that appear in the game that are there to help solve problems that would otherwise not be able to be solved.
- *Never Alone* breaks the mold of a white male protagonist as Nuna is a very young female person of color, an Ingenious person. This was a conscious choice: Nuna is obviously an Iñupiaq person due to the fact that the game is meant to share their culture.





# CONCLUSION

Never Alone is a masterful short story that is endlessly replayable. Beautiful cutscenes, unforgettable art style, and encapsulating gameplay make this game perfect for getting across important messages. It shares the spirit of people passed down by the Iñupiaq, and the need to make oddkin with other creatures in order for our mutual survival.

