

DISSERTATION

REPRESENTATION CONVERSATIONS: HOW INDIGENOUS
VIDEO GAME PLAYERS AND OTHERS EXPERIENCE “NEVER ALONE”

Submitted by

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ABSTRACT

REPRESENTATION CONVERSATIONS: HOW INDIGENOUS VIDEO GAME PLAYERS AND OTHERS EXPERIENCE “NEVER ALONE”

“Never Alone” is a video game co-created by an Alaska Native tribal council and an educational video game company. This dissertation asks the question: How do Indigenous players who are not Alaska Natives experience and discuss the game? Existing video game research into whether, and how, under-represented audiences value representation in video games, and research specifically on Indigenous video game players is rare. In addition, “Never Alone” has many unusual aspects, including commercial success, critical acclaim and its production process. There is also some published anecdotal evidence that Indigenous players experienced a boost in well-being from playing the game. I conducted in-depth interviews with Indigenous players of “Never Alone” who discussed playing this particular game as well as Indigenous representation in other games, movies, television, and other pop-culture genres. I combined this interview data with transcripts of three publicly available panel discussions of Indigenous representation in stand-up comedy, comic books, and the Star Wars science fiction universe. I also analyzed comments about the game on Reddit and interviewed three members of the game’s production team. Using a theoretical perspective that included self-determination theory (SDT), visual sovereignty scholarship, communitarian media ethics, and an Indigenous self-determination perspective, I identified themes that build a picture of what these Indigenous media consumers and creators believe are important elements of their identities as well as how they classify examples including “Never Alone” into negative, positive, and best representation. I

also identified two processes – Representation via Adoption and Representation via Adaptation -- by which Indigenous media consumers imaginatively “fix” representation when it is absent or poorly done. In addition, I found that while media consumers were not necessarily aware of the detailed, collaborative, intercultural production process that the creators of “Never Alone” developed, they were aware that many elders and artists from Alaska’s Inupiaq community were involved in key decisions. This study contributes to the literature on representation in video games, and that on “Never Alone” specifically, by showing how players discuss a representative game in the context of their overall consumption of entertainment media. It also offers a window on how Indigenous consumers of entertainment media value, assess, and imaginatively create representation. It also shows that some Indigenous players value cultural production and want Indigenous people involved in key media-making decisions. For media producers and researchers, this study gives detailed insight into the goals of the video game company, tribal council leaders, and the decision-making process that helped ensure the game would be seen as “good representation.”

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PREFACE: HOW I GOT HERE

I was lost when the video game “Never Alone” found me.

I had left my profession and my newspaper, and the future of both were in doubt in a whirlwind of technological change. My father was nearing the end of his lung cancer journey. My favorite uncle, the anchor of my late mother’s family, had just died. Even my much-loved 14-year-old dog was dying. All of the anchors that centered me were dissolving.

I felt at sea in the world of graduate school. But in a course on disaster and resilience, I was reading a book about the people who inhabit the island village of Shishmaref, Alaska. In *Fierce Climate Sacred Ground* (2015), Elizabeth Marino describes the community that perches precariously on a barrier island in the Chukchi Sea, off the coast of far northwest Alaska. Shishmaref is just one of many Alaska Native communities threatened by climate change. My classmate, Julia Reedy, and I were preparing to facilitate a discussion of the book and the quest of the *Kigiqtaamiut* people to preserve their culture in the face of global warming. And I needed to know how to pronounce *Kigiqtaamiut* correctly.

My search for pronunciation advice found no answers. But the search did lead me to an animated video on YouTube. That bit of footage, still available today, shows a little girl in a fur parka glaring into a swirl of windblown snow as it hits her right in the face. Then, from out of the storm pounces an Arctic fox, and into the drifts the girl and the fox tumble, laughing together.

That moment was like looking in a mirror at my happiest memories. The video recalled a dog from my past, an Alaskan husky with wild mischief in his eyes and a love of rolling in the snow. When I found the video I was beginning to enjoy graduate school, but I craved more time enjoying the simple, concrete pleasures of playing outside. Just like the little girl in that trailer, I

had laughed and wrestled in snow with a parade of canine friends through the decades. I had known those moments of unfettered joy and laughter. The promotional video for a child's game had spoken to the lost child within me.

Finding out more about "Never Alone" became my new journey. I read everything I could get my hands on about it. I found out about how it had been made. I discovered that a tribal council in Alaska had wanted to reach not just Alaska Natives, but create a way for anyone, from any culture, to embrace Alaska Native stories and culture. The tribal council knew nothing about making a video game. They knew that investing in something they had never done before would be risky and difficult. But one elder told them, "I don't care if it's hard. Go do it." So they did.

The game's critical and commercial success was an example of the rewards of innovating and persevering. Although I had never been much of a video game player, I found CITC's dedication inspiring. The more I read, the more I suspected that "Never Alone" might be doing unusual work for the people who played it, especially its primary audience of Alaska Natives and Native Americans. I had a journalist's instinct that a story lurked there.

Like CITC, I had a long learning curve – much longer than I thought. I had to learn about a place, a history, and a people, as well as the blindness of media creators to the cultures they stereotyped or failed to include. The Indigenous scholars I read or spoke with pointed me toward new, inclusive media stories and new scholarship. They told me that I was pursuing a story of resilience, not invisibility. Their optimism kept me on this journey.

Because the video game reached out and included me when I was feeling lost, I wanted to explore what it might have done for its most important audience -- Indigenous players. Just as when I got ready for a hike with my wild-eyed, Alaskan husky, I was unsure where that journey might lead or how long it would take. But my boots were right by the door.

DEDICATION

To the memory of Amy Nicole Fredeen
and the memory of Patricia Ann Shepherd

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INTRODUCTION

Leaning into a blizzard, an Iñupiaq girl and an Arctic fox scale obstacles in a wind-scoured Alaskan landscape. They leap ruins, swim frozen seas, and consult spirit beings to discover the source of the storm that is devastating her village.

This is the story conjured in “Never Alone,” a video game created to embody the Iñupiat values of interdependence, cooperation, and respect and the focus of this dissertation. It came into my life by accident. I was reading Marino’s (2015) study of Shishmaref, a tiny Alaskan community poised on a barrier island that sits on the leading edge of climate change. Marino chronicled the residents’ struggles to relocate their village while preserving their culture, which has adapted to Alaska’s northwest coast over millennia.

The name of the Iñupiat people who live on Shishmaref is *Kigiqtaamiut* (Marino, 2015, p. 12). As a journalist, I wanted to pronounce *Kigiqtaamiut* correctly. I thought Google would know. But my search yielded no explanation of how to wrap my Midwestern tongue around *Kigiqtaamiut*. I did, however, learn that the people of Shishmaref belong to the Iñupiat, or “real people,” a language group of Alaska Natives. And the Iñupiat had made a video game about themselves, “Never Alone.” The preface described how a 3-minute trailer for the game enthralled this non-gamer, non-Native, 50-something graduate student. Figure 1 below shows a frame from that video, and this introduction details how I decided that researching “Never Alone” might lead to important insights for media makers and media scholars.

Figure 1.

Nuna and Fox Travel Arctic Waters in “Never Alone.”



Note: Courtesy of E-Line Media and Cook Inlet Tribal Council. Source: “Never Alone Announcement Trailer, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G2C3aIVeL->

1. Why Research Never Alone?

In the process of reading everything I could get my hands on about “Never Alone,” I found several things that made the game stand out. First, a compelling essay with the voices of three Indigenous players argued that society and players, especially Indigenous players, needed the industry to produce more Indigenous video games, giving at least anecdotal evidence of positive effects. Second, the game achieved unusual commercial success for an independent video game. Third, it achieved unusual critical notice, and continued to do so eight years after its debut. Fourth, it was created by a carefully built partnership that involved continual consultation with the tribal council, as well as Indigenous elders and artists, at every step. And fifth, the partnership used a byproduct of this production process to create a unique element for the game.

1.1. Three Players, Profound Emotional Effects

Soon after the release of “Never Alone” in 2014, Indigenous technology writer and game reviewer Daniel Starkey reviewed the game for Eurogamer.com, a video game news website (2015a). He gave the game a 10/10 rating, which drew a bit of backlash in online comments. These responders to the review suggested that Starkey was giving the game an excellent rating just because of its Indigenous subject matter. Starkey responded several months later on Polygon.com with a personal essay about his ties to his culture and making the case for more Indigenous video games (2015b). Starkey wrote about his deep grief at the recent death of his grandmother:

Knowing that she was a spirit that walked with me wasn't enough. I needed her to hold my hand. I needed to see smoke billowing from her lungs. I needed to feel her voice tell me that everything was going to be okay.

For Starkey, playing “Never Alone” was the way forward out of grief for the elder who was his connection to culture. Starkey also interviewed Renee Nejo, a video game developer herself, who told him that “Never Alone” brought her back to a space of unashamed joy, “celebrating the parts of me I thought made me special ... The love and care that went into the characters and narrative paid off.” Manuel Marcano, another Indigenous game developer, told Starkey about hiding his identity as Taíno while living in South American and in the U.S. Marcano said he hated doing that, but “it was much happier than getting beaten up, or killed.” But playing “Never Alone,” and knowing that it would be marketed widely, “almost legitimized me as a person. ... I wasn’t out of the closet as a Taíno, I was just a Taíno,” he told Starkey. A fellow graduate student connected me with Nejo, and I spoke with her in the spring of 2017,

confirming what she had told Starkey. I thought it was possible that other Native Americans were having a similar experience.

1.2. Unusual Commercial Success

For a video game often referred to as an “indie” game, “Never Alone” has been commercially successful. For example, within two years of its launch in 2014, “Never Alone” had been downloaded 2.2 million times (Henseler, 2020) To put those downloads in perspective, Nintendo’s “Mario Kart 8” sold 1.7 million digital and physical units the year after its launch (Graser, (2015). Both games occupy the same genre, but Nintendo is a major game studio and “Mario” an established gaming franchise.

1.3. Unusual Critical Success

Table 1 lists the awards and honors that independent media and Indigenous media organizations have given the game. The list includes a British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) award for best debut game and a Peabody Award for Interactive and Digital Media.

Table 1*Selected Awards “Never Alone” Received or Was Nominated For 2014-2022*

Award or Honor	Organization	Year
Best Debut Game^a	British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA)	2015
Most Significant Impact^b	Games for Change	2015
Game of the Year^c	Games for Change	2015
Outstanding Achievement in Game Direction (nominee)^d	Academy of Interactive Arts and Sciences (DICE Awards)	2015
Matthew Crump Cultural Innovation Award (nominee)^e	South by Southwest (SXSW)	2015
Interactive and Digital Media Award^f	Peabody	2022

Note: ^aBritish Academy of Film and Television Arts; ^{b,c}Daavpuke; ^dAcademy of Interactive Arts & Sciences; ^eSXSW; ^fLakota Times.

A second indicator of the game’s critical success is that it has been featured in its own right or displayed as part of other exhibitions at arts and cultural museums. These include the Museum of Modern Art (Aguasviva, 2022; Watercutter, 2022) Smithsonian Institution (Schilling, 2021), Denver Art Museum (Lambson, n.d.), and the Heard Museum in Phoenix (Encelewski, 2019).

1.4. An Unusual Production Process

The Cook Inlet Tribal Council (CITC) and E-Line Games (now E-Line Media) collaborated to create “Never Alone.” The tribal council is the social services agency of Cook Inlet Regional Incorporated (CIRI) one of more than a dozen Alaska Native tribal corporations.

E-Line is an educational video game producer. Both E-Line and CIRI are for-profit corporations, though CITC is a nonprofit.

In 2012 CITC was seeking an investment opportunity that would connect Alaska Native youth to their cultures, according to Amy Fredeen, a member of the CITC (A. Fredeen, personal communication, July 20, 2017). “Cultures” here is plural, because CITC serves Alaska Natives and Indigenous people in the greater Anchorage area irrespective of tribe. CITC thought creating a video game might fulfill the dual goals of investment and cultural connection, but the council needed a video game company to partner with. E-Line was the top candidate, and the two organizations agreed to research the market and the possibilities. That step of the process took several months to complete.

After that, the organizations agreed to collaborate on producing the video game. CITC provided the financial capital; E-Line assembled a skilled creative team, according to Alan Gershenfeld, co-founder and president of E-Line (A. Gershenfeld, personal communication, July 7, 2022). Both organizations agreed that CITC would be involved in every step of the game’s production. Part of that process was choosing Native Alaskan artists and elders to participate in producing the game. . One artist, Ishmael Angaluuk Hope, was part Iñupiaq , as was Fredeen. Another participant was Robert Nasruk Cleveland, a famed Iñupiaq storyteller. Fredeen then assembled a group of Iñupiat elders and artists, who were mainly from Utqiagvik (formerly Barrow), Alaska. These “cultural ambassadors,” as the two organizations decided to call them, consulted with E-Line on key visual, cultural, historical, environmental, and narrative aspects of the game (A. Fredeen, personal communication, April 14, 2022). Panels with members from CITC, the ambassadors, and E-Line reviewed the game at every stage of its creation, sometimes requiring changes or producing entirely new ideas.

1.5. An Unusual Game Element

In 2012, when work began on “Never Alone,” Zoom did not exist. The game-builders were in Seattle. CITC had its headquarters in Anchorage, and most of the cultural ambassadors, as well as the environment the game was to be set in, were on Alaska’s far northwest coast, hundreds of miles above the Arctic Circle. To bring the Iñupiaq world to life for the game builders, the team chose to videotape interviews with the cultural ambassadors. This strategy produced more than 30 hours of video interview footage (A. Gershenfeld, personal communication, July 7, 2022). In the final, frantic weeks of the game’s production, the team decided to use that footage to create 24 short video segments that could be viewed at particular points during the game. Called “Cultural Insights,” these videos featured Alaska Native people talking about elements of their culture. For example, one showed artists discussing how scrimshaw art told stories in pictures. Another featured a young man talking about almost floating away with his father on an ice floe due to warming seas. Still another had an elder explain the Iñupiat concept of *Sīla*, the soul of the Arctic environment.

2. Launching the Research Project

The above evidence that “Never Alone” might be having unusual effects intensified my curiosity. I wanted to know whether the game was having a similar impact on other Indigenous players, and whether its makers would be open to a non-Indigenous person studying such effects. I spoke with CITC chief financial officer Amy Fredeen by phone, and she suggested that I visit during a Native youth conference. At the end of October 2017, I flew to Anchorage to meet three members of the CITC. I knew that they didn’t need a graduate student from Colorado to tell them the game was unusual; they had seen such effects firsthand as they tested and demonstrated various versions of the game in Native communities. But they said they wanted to know how

non-Alaskan Native American players in the Lower 48 states were experiencing the game (A. Fredeen, personal communication, Oct. 29, 2017). Thus encouraged, I continued to pursue the project, shaping it around the overlap between questions I had and those that interested CITC

2.1. Recruiting Challenges and Additional Data Groups

I defended my research proposal in the summer of 2019, and received project approval from both the Colorado State University and the Alaska Area institutional review boards in January 2020. However, the global pandemic began shutting down research that involved face-to-face contact in March 2020. The pandemic affected both the recruiting process because all video game players, not just Indigenous players, were less able to gather socially. In addition, college campuses, where I hoped to find Indigenous players, were often closed down or minimizing face-to-face contact and public events.

Fortunately, I was able to do my first interviews with “Never Alone” players by phone. Unfortunately, because “Never Alone” requires the physical presence of players, I was unable to play the game with participants. However, several published conversations with Indigenous creators and fans of other pop-culture genres became available during 2020 and 2021. These conversations seemed to echo the themes emerging in the player interviews, especially the identity and representation themes. The three panel conversations are: 1) stand-up comedy; 2) comic books; and 3) movies and television shows based on the “Star Wars” science-fiction universe.

I made a second adjustment to my data field to cast a wider net for disconfirming data, which were not appearing in my interviews or panel conversations. I turned to Reddit and began searching for threads and comments that mentioned “Never Alone.” I found several threads dedicated to “Never Alone” by itself and some focused on Indigenous representation in video

games, and the game turned up as well as in threads discussing other topics. This data included several comments that indicated not caring about representation, actual dislike of representation attempts, and criticisms of the game.

3. Potential Impact on Media Creators and Research

Work began on “Never Alone” in 2012; I completed my data analysis in 2023. In the years between, more media creations that portray Indigenous characters, employ Indigenous actors, or create collaboration between Indigenous creators, producers, artists, and distributors, have been launched every season and every year. The Hulu streaming service produced “Reservation Dogs,” (2021-2023), a dramedy series featuring four Indigenous high schoolers in rural Oklahoma. Alaska PBS launched “Molly of Denali,” (2019-2025), a children’s animated series about an Alaska Native girl. And the “Civilizations 7” video game included the Shawnee leader Tecumseh as a playable character – speaking Shawnee and voiced by Shawnee actor Dean Dillon (Brewer & O’Brien, 2024; Chalk, 2024).

It became clear as I gathered my data that the industry knew audiences – and not just Indigenous audiences -- wanted more, and better, Indigenous content. My overarching research question became, *how might a video game featuring a single tribe be creating positive effects specifically for Indigenous players of any, or many, tribes?* If inclusive media stories had positive effects, then it could be argued that inclusive stories presented models for media creators to follow.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section I first describe self-determination theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and explain why the theory fits this study. I summarize what the authors describe as universal psychological needs and what motivates people to engage in activities that satisfy these needs. I then examine selected video game studies that use SDT as a framework for studying videogame effects and describe several similar concepts used in research with Indigenous people. Second, I discuss theory and research that focuses on identification with media characters. Third, I explore the role of media in the process of identity formation, especially for Indigenous and other under-represented people. As part of that exploration, I discuss studies of Indigenous representation in video games specifically. In closing, I will present the research questions that emerged from these three categories of theory and research.

1. Self-Determination Theory

Self-determination theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 2000) was attractive as a framework for this project for several reasons. First, it assumes that people naturally direct their activities toward growth, integration, and well-being. SDT defines “well-being” mainly as a state of positive mental health. Ryan and Deci (2017) define well-being as more than subjective happiness. Well-being, they say, is the state that results from doing the things *well* that an individual determines are *worth* doing. It is more than happiness or pleasure; they describe it in terms of “thriving or being fully functioning” and “vitality, awareness, access to, and exercise of one’s human capacities and true self-regulation” (p. 241). Ryan and Deci trace their definition of the concept all the way back to Aristotle and the idea of a life in which a person pursues goals that result in happiness and are believed to be “expressive of what is truly worthy” (p. 240).

Deci and Ryan (2000) argue that the activities that produce well-being don't have to be motivated by a conscious quest to improve that well-being. They use the example of a child at play: Children naturally engage in play; they do not have to be motivated by an outside force to do so. However, that play might still be satisfying one of three basic and universal psychological needs and contributing to the child's growth and mental health. The same is true for adult activities. An adult might become active in their church's administration because they feel a specific task needs to be done better, but discover other satisfactions along the way, such as close friendships. The psychological needs that Deci and Ryan (2000) argue must be satisfied for mental well-being are autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Fulfilling these needs is essential and exists in all cultures and at all stages of development, they theorized. Finally, the degree to which all are fulfilled or frustrated either builds, or reduces, a person's well-being.

Second, SDT acknowledges that although people can voluntarily direct themselves toward need-fulfilling activities, outside forces and systems can increase or reduce people's opportunities to access such activities. It is thus a realistic theory that takes into account interpersonal, educational, cultural, environmental, and economic inequalities. To the category of outside forces and systems, some researchers add the media and its vast repository of images, characters, and stories (e.g., Rigby & Ryan, 2017; Adachi et al., 2018; Sherrick et al., 2022; Yee & Sng, 2022).

In addition, SDT predicts that the degree to which an activity fulfills one or more of the three psychological needs depends on the nature of the person's motivation to pursue it. If the person's motivation is intrinsic, meaning self-chosen and self-directed, the activity will lead to need fulfillment and an increase in well-being. In contrast, when motivation is extrinsic – required and / or directed by another person or an organization's rules or laws – need fulfillment

will be lower, and the result might be that well-being remains static or is decreased. Finally, people can integrate extrinsic motivations to varying degrees if certain circumstances and supports are present. The three needs and the different types of motivations are discussed further below.

1.1. SDT's Three Needs: Competence, Autonomy, and Relatedness

The basic need for competence is fulfilled when a person completes the first part of Deci and Ryan's (2000) definition of well-being described above: the successful doing of things. They defined the basic need of competence as feelings of "mastery or effectance" (p. 252). In other words, humans need to feel that they are successful at a goal-based behavior. Otherwise, they tend to lose any intrinsic motivation to pursue those behaviors, and they will usually become less engaged (typically leading to less success) or discontinue the behavior entirely. Ryan and Deci (2017a) reviews empirical studies showing how negative feedback – which tells a person that they are *not* competent -- reduces intrinsic motivation to engage in activities. The opposite effect has been observed for positive feedback, but only if people believe that positive feedback is *earned* by their performance – in other words, they have to believe that the feedback is correct and that their performance directly resulted in the positive feedback. If these conditions are met, people experience fulfillment of competence needs, which then increases intrinsic motivation. If the basic need to experience competence is regularly or significantly thwarted, the result can be a state of *amotivation*, where people struggle to engage in goal-related behavior at all, can result (Ryan & Deci, 2014, p. 229). Even worse, amotivation can become self-perpetuating.

To use a video game example, if a player selects a game that has the right level of challenge for them and then succeeds at the game, they're likely to experience feelings of competence. The game may give the player feedback in various ways: allowing them to advance

to a more challenging level, or showing they have a high score compared to others or improvement in their own score. SDT predicts the player would experience higher fulfillment of competence needs if *they* made the decision to play, directed that play, *and* if they believe the game's positive feedback is accurate. Thus, fulfillment of competence needs and intrinsic motivation are entwined and can build on each other, with feeling successful at the game building on intrinsic motivation to play and leading to increased well-being. In this way, if intrinsic motivation leads to satisfaction of competence needs, a goal-oriented behavior can become self-sustaining.

Autonomy, on the other hand, refers to the need to feel “volitional, acting from one’s integrated sense of self, and endorsing one’s actions” (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 242). This need returns to the description of well-being above, but focuses on the second part: the worthiness of the thing that’s being done, and *who* selects and directs the activity. Here, it’s the choices that matter most. Ryan and Deci (2017) survey studies where persons encounter environments that support, or do not support, their needs for autonomy – circumstances where others such as parents, supervisors, or institutions exert a high degree of control over the macro- and micro-choices that make up a pursuit. As SDT would predict, the high-control environments result in lowered well-being, regardless of success at the activity. In contrast, conditions that give people more leeway to choose activities and shape their own progress tend to increase well-being. When a video game player selects which game to play, that self-directed choice itself is an autonomous act. In addition, game features such as avatar customization, choosing from a menu of different skills or tools, or selecting from a range of difficulty levels can also satisfy autonomy needs. In games and real-life circumstances, Ryan and Deci argue suggest that autonomy satisfactions can encourage individuals to use that autonomy to seek fulfillment of competence and relatedness

needs. In other words, autonomy can sometimes act as a gateway or condition for satisfaction of all three needs to produce increases in mental well-being.

Deci and Ryan (2000) define relatedness as the need “to seek attachments and experience feelings of security, belonging, and intimacy” (252). Relatedness needs are satisfied when a person feels recognized, supported, and valued by others, and is able to connect with and be helpful to others. When activities do not fulfill this need, a person may experience reduced motivation even when their competence and autonomy needs are satisfied. Ryan and Deci (2014) reviews research that examines circumstances in which affection and regard are conditional versus unconditional in parent-child and teacher- or coach-child relationships. Where relatedness is conditioned on success at *extrinsically* motivated or directed activities – in other words, where other people do not provide appropriate autonomy supports -- relatedness suffers as well as autonomy. Satisfaction of relatedness needs in an unconditioned way, however, supports *intrinsic* motivation. In other words, where relatedness is satisfied, a person is more likely to *use* their autonomy to make intrinsically motivated choices. Thus, relatedness – in addition to being a basic need in itself – acts as a support that encourages the exploration and creativity needed for the success that satisfies competence needs. Relatedness is marked by its impact on intrinsic motivation as well as the two other basic needs.

Relatedness might not seem like a need that playing video games would fulfill, but Ryan and Deci (2017b) suggested a range of opportunities for connection with others that games and other virtual environments offer joining other players in guilds, teams, or chat rooms; or for online, cooperative “missions.” Players often become attached to compelling non-player characters (NPCs) who can be instrumental to the player’s success, they argue. For video games that are played solo, attachments to NPCs and outside-of-game conversations with other players

may fulfill these needs. So might a simple, non-online puzzle game, if played with important others. For example, when Pusey et al. (2022) used SDT to study players' ($n=27$) engagement with two simple puzzle games, their case example was a woman who played one of the puzzle games with her younger sister. Relatedness was her most important motivation for gaming. She said that outside of the study, she joined multiplayer games mostly to share time with friends. Thus, in video games, satisfaction of relatedness needs could increase intention to continue or repeat play. A video game such as "Never Alone," which, even played solo rather than co-op, offers connections to a culture, characters, and real-life people, might satisfy relatedness needs despite its lack of online or multi-player aspects.

1.2. Intrinsic, Extrinsic, and Integrated Motivations in SDT

In defining autonomy needs, Ryan & Deci (2017) explain how important satisfaction of this particular need is to maintain intrinsic motivation. Deci and Ryan (2000) define this type of motivation as the engine that fuels goal pursuit. When people are in charge of selecting their goals and how to achieve them, versus having their goals chosen and controlled by others, the well-being benefits harvested from goal achievement are greater. The classic workplace complaint about micromanagement is a common example. Workers accept that they are paid to work toward goals chosen by the company and their managers, but show greater well-being in circumstances where the means of goal achievement are self-selected. Workers dislike intrusive control of every step taken toward a goal. SDT predicts that if a goal-directed activity is undertaken because of intrinsic motivation, then goal achievement resulting in satisfaction of basic needs will produce a more profound well-being effect. In the opposite condition, extrinsic motivation – where goals are chosen and the means to achieve them are decreed by others, SDT predicts that the result will be lower engagement in the behavior as well as lower or no

improvement in well-being when the goal is achieved. Deci and Ryan (2000) argue that this principle applies to all three of the basic needs. To apply it to a video game context, playing is almost always a self-directed choice. But where it is not – where, say, playing a “gamified” version of required educational content is assigned by others – SDT predicts that need-satisfaction benefits would be diminished or absent.

Ryan and Deci (2014) describe a process by which extrinsic motivation can move closer to an intrinsic motivation to a greater or lesser degree, via a person’s *regulation* of their motivation. They distinguish four different degrees on a continuum of goal internalization: externalized, introjected, identified, and integrated regulation. If an extrinsic goal is merely externalized, a person pursues it only to attain rewards or avoid negative consequences. At the other extreme, integrated regulation describes what occurs when a person fully endorses a goal chosen by others. They believe the goal is coherent with their values and self-concept. Achievement of an integrated goal affords the highest need satisfaction of a goal that is extrinsically imposed. For video gamers, a student assigned to play “Never Alone” might already have heard of the game and been intrigued by it and find that they in fact enjoy playing it. Thus, they might be likely to integrate extrinsic assignment goals. Hypothetically, in an environment with autonomy and relatedness support, they might discover additional intrinsic goals along the way. And they might reap well-being effects comparable to those of an intrinsically motivated player.

1.3. SDT in Video Game Research

Researchers often use SDT to assess the potential need satisfactions and other impacts of playing video games. Xing et al. (2024) used SDT as a framework to compare the need satisfactions of the creature-capturing games Palworld and Pokémon. They surveyed players of both games ($n = 252$) to measure the extent to which the players said that they could make meaningful choices (autonomy), build skills to gain mastery and effectiveness (competence) and experience cooperation and connectedness (relatedness). Unlike Pokémon, Palworld offered online social play, with teams of up to 31 players. As expected, players reported having higher experiences of relatedness while playing Palworld, and the range of choices it offered players in choosing and “armoring” their teams of “Pals” led to higher experiences of autonomy than those offered by the other game. However, levels of experienced competence were similar between the two games. Achterbosch et al. (2024) used SDT to investigate the need-satisfaction impacts of “griefing” in massively multi-player online role-playing games (MMORPGs). Griefing is defined as behaviors that disrupt other players’ enjoyment and sense of accomplishment. The researchers surveyed 656 players. Among those who said they regularly encountered griefing ($n = 100$, or 15% of the overall sample), more than half (54%) said the experiences had lowered their feelings of autonomy and nearly half (48%) reported decreases in feelings of relatedness. The study defined “regularly” as players being grieved for half or more of the time they spent playing MMORPGs.

In a study inspired by gamification (using game-design elements to foster motivation for real-world tasks), Sailer et al. (2017) used SDT to create an experiment in which game-design elements were manipulated to assess their impacts on need satisfaction. Performance feedback (badges, leaderboards, etc.) was used to assess satisfaction of competence needs; avatar choices

and “meaningful stories” (defined as narrative elements in which characters and actions were embedded) were used to assess satisfaction of autonomy needs; and teammates’ shared goals were used to assess satisfaction of relatedness needs. For the 419 participants who completed the study, the badges and leaderboards helped satisfy their competence needs, and avatars and meaningful stories helped to satisfy their relatedness needs. However, players didn’t perceive avatars and meaningful stories as boosting autonomy. The researchers suggested that the lack of autonomy effects might be due to a relatively “weak dose” of the freedom to create an avatar and a “thin” narrative framework. In other words, these elements of the games weren’t strong enough. The avatar customization choices were too few or not interesting and the story wasn’t sufficient to give the characters’ actions enough context or meaning.

Peng et al. (2012) studied whether autonomy- and competence-supporting game features affected satisfaction of the relevant need in a 2 (autonomy features on or off) x 2 (competence supporting features on or off) experiment. Participants were Midwestern college students ($n=893$). The researchers created an in-house designed exergame, *Olympus*, which contained the need-satisfying features. To support autonomy-needs, the game facilitated three types of player choices: avatar customizations, which gods to donate earned treasure to in return for skill improvements, and the answers players made in conversations with non-playing game characters. The competence-supporting features were achievement badges, an on-screen “heroism meter,” and adjustments to the difficulty of future challenges (success was followed by tougher challenges and difficulty by easier challenges). In the comparison groups, these need-support features didn’t exist. The researchers found that the game’s autonomy features led to this need’s satisfaction and fully mediated four outcomes: players levels of enjoyment, motivation for future play, game recommendation to others, and game rating. Meanwhile, the competence-

supporting features fully mediated two outcomes – motivation for future play and game recommendation -- and partially mediated enjoyment and game rating. The study was thus able to directly tie specific game features to two SDT need satisfactions and, importantly, to motivation for future play – a key outcome in a game designed to benefit physical health by increasing exercise.

Tamborini et al. (2010) also used an experiment to develop a model of enjoyment rooted in SDT needs. Players ($n = 129$) in the 2 (play alone or play with partner) x 2 (enhanced game controls on or off) experiment were answered screening questionnaires and then were assigned to one of the four experimental groups. After play, Tamborini et al. measured fulfillment of competence, autonomy and relatedness needs as well as game enjoyment. Their revised model was found to be responsible for 51% of the variation in game enjoyment. In addition, the path analysis showed that the social play context was related to fulfillment of relatedness and that the enhanced game controls were related to fulfillment of competence and autonomy – and that the three satisfactions each led separately to game enjoyment. Tamborini et al. then added a dimension from their screening questionnaire: perceived video game skill, which turned out to facilitate satisfaction of autonomy needs. In other words, a player's perception that they are *already* competent raised the likelihood that they would reap autonomy satisfactions from playing – a demonstration of how interrelated need satisfactions can be.

Yee and Sng (2022) took advantage of the opportunity the global pandemic offered to use quasi-experimental methods to investigate a video game's need satisfaction. They sensed that the social isolation of 2020 would increasingly drive people to use video games to seek connection with other players or parasocial connection with video game characters. The pair conducted semi-structured online interviews with 17 people who played "Animal Crossing: New Horizon"

during the pandemic. They found that the game satisfied some players' needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy, and when players felt the game thwarted these needs, they stopped playing and found alternative ways to satisfy these needs.

Two recent studies combine SDT with the dualistic model of passion (DMP). This model theorizes motivation differently from SDT; it argues that people engage in behaviors because the behaviors resonate with their personal identity and lead to personal growth. Over time, the activities become passionate ones that become meaningful. DMP distinguishes between harmonious passion, which remains in balance with other life activities, and obsession passion, which presents an overwhelming urge to engage in the target behavior. Türkay et al. (2023) conducted semi-structured interviews with 11 adult Australian gamers in the pandemic summer of 2020, using SDT as a framework for some questions and DMP for others. Their thematic analysis found that playing video games satisfied all three SDT basic needs, with players mentioning how the pandemic had diminished their ability to satisfy needs for autonomy by reducing the possible choices for leisure pastimes. Tóth-Kiraly et al. (2019) also combined SDT and DMP to focus on possible connection between need satisfaction and harmonious passion as well as need frustration obsessive passion (maladaptive engagement). Tóth-Kiraly et al. defined need frustration as players' sense that their drive to satisfy an SDT need was being thwarted. Their large sample ($n = 1,065$) included online video game players, smartphone game players, watchers of TV series, and Facebook users. The researchers surveyed participants using several validated need-satisfaction and other scales. In all four groups of media users, need satisfaction negatively predicted obsessive passion, supporting the hypothesis that media activities that satisfy SDT needs would be less likely to lead to obsessive overuse.

Oliver et al. (2016) extended SDT by theorizing an additional need, the need for insight, defined as “feelings associated with contemplating, introspecting, and experiencing greater understanding of essential values, fundamental beliefs, and important life lessons” (p. 393). The study used this four-need framework to compare what led to enjoyment of “fun” video games versus appreciation in “meaningful” video games. Participants ($n = 512$) were randomly assigned the “fun” or “meaningful” group. They were then asked to choose a game they had played that fit their assigned group’s description and answer questions about their enjoyment of the game and its satisfaction of the three SDT needs plus need for insight. Appreciation of the game was higher in the “meaningful” game group, and it was related in both groups to satisfaction of relatedness and insight needs. Meanwhile, enjoyment was higher in the “fun” group and related to satisfaction of competence and autonomy needs.

Like Oliver et al., Wu et al. (2013) theorized an additional need: purpose in life. They conducted a study of problematic video game playing among Chinese adults ages 18-30. Wu et al. found that among respondents to their questionnaire ($n = 172$), high satisfaction of all four needs (competence, relatedness, autonomy, and purpose in life) were directly or indirectly related to avoiding problematic game playing. More specifically, purpose in life acted as a mediator of SDT need satisfaction’s negative relationship to problem gaming. In other words, purpose in life helped the satisfaction of SDT needs protect players against falling into game addiction. Finally, Rieger et al. (2014) examined how people manage their moods while fulfilling SDT needs via successfully playing video games. In a laboratory setting, participants ($n=46$) performed a stressful math task, then played the video game Mario Kart. Rieger et al. found that succeeding at the video game made participants feel competent and autonomous, which led to improved mood.

These studies demonstrate that SDT has been and continues to be used as a framework to study video games' effects on well-being. The experimental and quasi-experimental studies (Yee et al., 2022, Sailer et al., 2017, Peng et al., 2012, and Tamborini et al., 2010) show that manipulating game features to support autonomy, competence, or relatedness led to higher satisfaction of these three needs, higher enjoyment, and intention to repeat play. Studies analyzing large samples of video game players' reactions (Tóth-Kiraly et al., 2019, Achterbosch et al., 2024) showed the impacts of negative game experiences and frustration of SDT needs. Wu et al. (2013) and Oliver et al. (2016) theorized additional needs for insight and purpose in life for their populations of gaming social-site readers and Chinese adults, respectively, and Rieger et al. demonstrated how fulfilling SDT needs through a short videogame could improve mood after a stressful task. These studies and others demonstrate that satisfaction of the three universal, basic needs theorized by Deci and Ryan (2000) – autonomy, competence, and relatedness – provide a robust and flexible way to examine potential positive effects of a video game such as “Never Alone” on well-being. The history of colonization is one of continual and effective efforts to thwart Indigenous peoples' satisfaction of these three psychological needs, let alone their physical and political needs and rights. My key contacts and Indigenous scholars reminded me that this need frustration had significant influence on the lives of relatives and friends (Wilson, 2008; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012; A. Fredeen, personal communication, October 28, 2017).

1.4. Indigenous Self-Determination and SDT: Two Approaches to Well-Being

As I reviewed research using SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2000) in order to conduct studies with Indigenous people, I ran into some confusing overlaps in terminology. These overlaps make it necessary to draw some distinctions.

Although some Indigenous scholars and research with Indigenous people use self-determination *theory* as a theoretical framework or a lens through which to view individual well-being, use of the term “Indigenous self-determination” is not always related to SDT. The metaphorical expression “theoretical lens” is apt here because lenses not only help a person see some things more clearly, lenses also inherently limit a person’s vision. Some things are obscured to set others in sharper relief, and there are always the phenomena that are left out of the frame.

Scholarship and research that references Indigenous self-determination often refers mainly to activities of communities to achieve or protect control of their own fates. These activities take place in legal and political battles but also in other arena, such as education and health. Some Indigenous scholars take a deeply integrated approach where avenues for improving well-being are explored with a variety of theories. Murphy (2008, 2014) explores Indigenous self-determination with a definition rooted in Nussbaum (2008) and Sen (1999) as well as SDT. Murphy defines self-determination as the capacity to exert control over one’s life opportunities, ultimately leading to increased chances for well-being. Thus, it is similar to SDT’s need for individual autonomy. However, it also includes Indigenous communities’ ability to control and administer their own systems; Murphy argues this collective form of self-determination applies especially to Indigenous health systems.

For Deci and Ryan, autonomy is the most important SDT need. To Murphy, the Indigenous experience is one where collective as well as individual autonomy is often lacking. Murphy argues that a primary reason some Indigenous communities experience poor health and well-being is that Indigenous people don’t control their own tribal health systems. Murphy

highlights how collective autonomy is linked to physical and psychological well-being and how the absence of collective autonomy can thwart improvement in either.

Gordon (2019) and Gordon and Ratta (2022) provided an example of how Indigenous self-determination can work when they examined Indigenous self-determination through ethnographic futures interviews and focus groups in Ninilchik, Alaska as well as participatory action research with an Indigenous cultural group in Bangladesh. The authors addressed a critical gap in research with Indigenous people by examining both individual and collective self-determination. The authors approached self-determination from the capabilities approach of Amartya Sen (1999). Like SDT, a capabilities approach specifies that the negative conditions which remain beyond individual or collective control can be limiting factors on well-being. Gordon and Ratta demonstrate how colonization inflicted just such systemic negative conditions on personal, relational, political, and place-based paths for exercising self-determination. Using an Indigenous relational lens, Gordon and Ratta emphasize the inseparability of three forms of well-being: individual, community, and environmental. “When people are individually engaged they set an example for other members in the community and that engagement can spread to others, inspiring them to become involved as well,” they wrote about the Alaska participants’ responses. But “the optimistic future needs the involvement of everyone.” The Ninilchik participants show how activities that SDT might define as driven by autonomy and relatedness needs can require a deep understanding of community circumstances – Gordon herself is an Alaska Native, so she was well-connected to pursue this understanding. Gordon and Ratta suggest that individual and collective self-determination, exercised together, can lead to a trajectory of improved individual and collective well-being.

Cheng et al. (2021) wanted to adapt and improve an existing health information technology for use by young, non-urban Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as well as those who were non-cisgender or linguistically non-mainstream. These Australians experienced mental health problems at a higher rate than other Australians. The researchers conducted co-design workshops with 105 people from remote and island areas and used SDT, among other frameworks, to guide their data analysis. The user priorities for a health information technology that emerged in the workshops – control, useability, and affirmation – were similar to two of SDT’s basic needs, mainly, autonomy and competence. The theme of “affirmation” was particularly interesting because what indicated affirmation to users was a wider range of choices for identity markers when they created their health profiles. They asked to be able to specify such things as family history, ethnicity, gender identity and housed or unhoused status, and they wanted the technological interface to make them feel as if they – in all aspects of their identity – were represented and valued. They wanted any health providers who might interact with them to be able to see them through a strengths perspective, not merely as a diagnosis, as a prerequisite to interacting with that provider. In other words, the participants wanted an environment with autonomy and competence supports *before* engaging in a new kind of digital relatedness.

Murphy, Gordon and Ratta, and Cheng et al. illustrate that increasing capabilities for Indigenous individuals and groups to improve their own well-being is a goal best served by a flexible approach to applying SDT. Such an approach must incorporate awareness of the varied ways colonization has historically destroyed opportunities for basic need satisfaction *and* self-determination for Indigenous people on individual and collective levels. These realities may influence Indigenous video game players’ approaches to need satisfaction. For example, colonization acted to eradicate many Indigenous communities and disconnect people from the

possibility of collective action, which would impact the way individual autonomy and collective autonomy are interrelated. Thus, Indigenous self-determination scholarship adds three implications to SDT. First, Indigenous self-determination scholarship links individual and collective autonomy. Second, this area of scholarship sheds light on the *degree* to which satisfactions of autonomy needs and relatedness needs may be intertwined for some Indigenous media audiences, including players of “Never Alone.” Finally, it highlights how the fulfillment of both types of autonomy supports social change.

1.5. Communitarianism and SDT in an Indigenous Context

Communitarianism, helps explain how SDT’s autonomy and relatedness might be intertwined for under-represented media audiences. Taylor (1985, 1989) proposed this socio-political ethical framework from the 1840s as a reaction to the liberal individualism framework that posited that the pursuit of individual goals leads to the communal good. Taylor (1985) argued that liberal individualism was not up to the challenge of confronting difference in a democratic society because it bypassed the principle that human beings of necessity knew themselves through language, which is socially developed in dialogue with groups of others. Thus, a person can only define what their “self” actually is in relation to the social groups that surround them, some of which they belong to and some of which they might not. Identity development through language and social groups is a constant process of self-interpretation. Taylor argues that social groups also are engaged in a continual process of interpretation, just on a more complex level. He sees individuals and groups as self-interpreting organisms linked in a dialogic process with individuals as well as other groups. When the partners in that process have goals or values that are in irreconcilable conflict, social or individual pathologies can be the

result: for example, the social pathology of land rights conflicts or the individual distress of a person whose children are forcibly removed to a boarding school.

This dialogic process that Taylor describes produces “social imaginaries,” a concept comprising “the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations” (Taylor, 2004, p. 23). A social imaginary is held by most members of a group, and is expressed in “images, stories, and legends,” Taylor argues. A social imaginary fuels, inspires, and justifies social practices as well as individuals’ sense of legitimacy. It contains a moral framework – those “deeper normative notions” Taylor mentions -- but it also contains the characters, narratives, and art that expresses or explains that moral framework.

The communitarian perspective views identity as only definable against the context of the social group, rather than within the self, a view of the self Taylor calls atomistic individualism. This view of identity pushes the SDT vision of goal-oriented behavior and basic psychological need fulfillment in a more complex but richer direction. Where an Indigenous self-determination framework views individual and collective autonomy as intertwined, and thus both essential to well-being, a communitarianism perspective would theorize competence and relatedness at the social-group level as well. Taylor argues that social groups have dialogic relationships with other social groups as well as subgroups within them. These relationships also involve dialogues in which self and group are interpreted.

To return to SDT, social group activities can fulfill not just individual and group relatedness needs, but individual and group competence needs. And even if a group undertakes a decision that is not agreed on by all of its members, the dialog producing that decision might still

fulfill autonomy needs for an individual *if* they see that the decision was arrived at in a process that allowed them to express individual autonomy on the points with which they disagreed. If they feel that they disagreed effectively, that might fulfill individual competence needs. If the individual believes the group attained its goals, its activities might fulfill *both* individual and group competence needs. Communitarianism expands relatedness in a similar way. For example, when formally introducing themselves, Diné people often place themselves in a clan and cite their “born to” and “born for” lineages. They are Dine, then a clan, but also connected to both parents’ families. In a non-Indigenous example, most religious faiths have subgroups that have varied qualities of relationships with one another, from co-existence to armed conflict. Kenney and Akita (2018) highlight the concepts of person-in-community and group-in-community as conceptualized by Christians et al. (1993).

When applied to news media, a communitarian ethic argues that an individual journalist and the news media organization should consider themselves as person- and group-in-community with the other persons and social institutions in their audiences. (Kenney & Akita, 2018). Ideally, the role of news media organizations becomes nothing less than making sure “the multitudes are empowered; the disenfranchised are given voice; the elements of their lives are ‘named’ ” (Kenney & Akita, p. 175). In contrast to a “give the people what they want” ethic, communitarianism drives toward greater responsibility *and* responsiveness. It argues that media should drive toward the public good and facilitate the dialogues that can lead to improvements in social well-being.

The application of a communitarian ethic to media outside of news – specifically, fictional TV series might seem a stretch, but has been used by researchers studying the relationships of minoritized audiences to media that try to include them. Waggoner (2018) used

communitarian ethics to explore how LGBTQ+ communities on Twitter and Tumblr reacted to the violent death of a lesbian character in the CW streaming TV series “The 100.” Waggoner examined the online fans’ reactions through the communitarian lenses of duty and mutuality. First, online fans were angry that creators and writers of “The 100” had adopted the “Bury Your Gays” trope common in entertainment media’s portrayal of female characters in same-sex romantic relationships. Roughly one-third of such characters on TV are killed off, Waggoner said. Fans of “The 100” felt that if the show included gay female couples, and even marketed such inclusion in advertising, the media makers had a duty to represent the actual reality of women in same-sex couples – surviving, thriving, breaking up, staying together – rather than going for the cheap shock. And second, the production team had a *responsibility* to address fan concerns, apologize for mistakes, and do better. Producers should engage in mutual dialogue with fans or else; the “else” in the case of “The 100” was a boycott of the next episode.

A case comparison by Cover and Milne (2023) argued that in two decades, a fundamental shift has occurred in how TV production teams viewed their relationship with, and duty to, fans. Cover and Milne examined a 2002 case where the gay female character of Tara was killed off in the popular supernatural soap opera, “Buffy the Vampire Slayer.” The authors compared the online fan reactions and producer response in the “Buffy” case with the case of “The 100.” In the “Buffy” case, show creator Joss Whedon addressed the issue only in terms of character and story arcs, Cover and Milne wrote. But with the death in “The 100,” online LGBTQ+ fan communities, facilitated by newly omnipresent social media, had begun *conceiving of themselves as a group* that could organize, protest, and convey their dissatisfaction to *producers as a group*, and to actually have producers acknowledge their complaints. The “normative practice of Twitter and other Internet ‘pile-ons’ that are marked by adversity and hostility” was nothing less than an

attempt to alter the normative practices of the creators, the authors argued (p. 817). And they were successful: The show's producer apologized to fans and vowed to improve the show's representation of non-cisgendered identities. Together, Waggoner (2018) and Cover and Milne (2023) showed how consumers rejected the limited social imaginaries of producers and took collective action to reconcile those limited imaginaries with their own individual and community senses of self-hood and group-hood.

When a media producer practices communitarian ethics, they admit the impact of fictional media on people's lives and the role they, as a producer, play in creating a shared social imaginary. In the case of the "Bury Your Gays" trope, communitarianism would argue that producers should not just replicate existing tropes, or make their media according to audience dictates, but to drive toward a more comprehensive understanding of the audience for a specific creation. Media producers, for good or ill, are updating and adding to the social imaginary through the fictions they create. Communitarianism argues that they should do so in dialogue with audiences and remain responsive to them. A third study of a television show with a female same-sex relationship, Cook (2020) explores how online fans connected with a writer who avoiding replicating the "Bury Your Gays" trope. Devotees of the supernatural Western "Wynonna Earp" – calling themselves "Earpers" – used social media as well as real-life events to successfully campaign to keep the show alive for a fourth season. The fans then retained those social ties to take collective, face-to-face action on local social and environmental issues.

1.6. Visual Sovereignty: The Importance of Autonomy

Scholars of Indigenous art, photography, and film have often focused on the impact such creations have on audiences as well as the artists themselves. These scholars originated the

concept of visual sovereignty as a lens or framework to view such creations, and this lens is similar, but not the same, as SDT's conception of autonomy.

Visual sovereignty prioritizes Indigenous creators' control over how an artistic medium will represent them, but it embraces more than just the authorship aspect of a created work. It asks broad questions about process and whether that process supported individual and group autonomy. Given that creating art is usually an intrinsically motivated activity, visually sovereign creation processes are likely, but not guaranteed, to fulfill autonomy needs on both individual (say, photography) and collective (say, filmmaking) levels. Visual sovereignty also asks about the impact of process and product on relationships first between Indigenous individuals and groups, and then on relationships with non-Indigenous individuals and groups. Thus, it incorporates SDT's concept of relatedness and the need for it. Finally, visual sovereignty asks what capabilities are being built and for whom. If, for example, a partnership to create a video game ultimately results in greater digital literacy for an Indigenous population, the game then provides an experience of competence or at least a greater capability to achieve it.

Visual sovereignty provides goals for creators to strive for and for audiences to demand. Because media affect well-being, visual sovereignty asks that media portraying Indigenous places, people, or cultures are created in particular ways and are evaluated against particular standards. In addition, through evaluating a work's adherence to the principles of visual sovereignty, critics can add their voices to a conversation that leads to more media that foster well-being. To trace this concept's importance for the video game "Never Alone" requires distinguishing it from the term "sovereignty" by itself as well as more recent uses of the term that have dropped the "visual" part to broaden what it defines.

Rickard et al. (1995) first discussed visual sovereignty by distinguishing it from the purely legal definitions denoting the independent status of a government, community, or tribe. Later, in the context of Indigenous creative works, Rickard declared that sovereignty includes “intellectual, cultural, artistic, and visual expansions” of the term (Rickard, 2017, p. 82). Under this broader definition, individual or collective works of art as well as events join political activism and legislation as expressions of sovereignty. When these actions or creations are experienced in a visual way, Rickard describes them as expressing visual sovereignty. For example, among all of the many exhibitions and events at the opening of the Smithsonian Museum of Native American Art in 2004, Rickard described the procession of more than 200 Native nations as the most powerful part of the opening because the procession refuted the idea of “vanished” Native people (2007, p. 87-88). The parade visually demonstrated, via a real-time event, the diversity and contemporary vibrancy of the many cultures that participated.

Indigenous scholar Raheja (2007, 2010) extended the concept of visual sovereignty to analyze films created by Indigenous creators. For example, the Inuit-produced, directed, and acted “Atanarjuat (The Fastrunner)” retells a traditional legend about a spirit of discord that comes to inhabit a community. The movie, produced in 2000, is set in a distant Arctic past, recreated not just in historically correct visual detail, but in the slow pacing, Raheja writes. Then, in the film’s credits, the producers show us video sequences of the film’s camera workers and other creators in modern dress as they film the most dramatic sequence, in which the naked title character runs across the edge of freezing seas to escape attackers. Raheja argues that this juxtaposition makes sure the viewer sees the “vibrant contemporary Inuit community” that made the film as well as the traditional story (p. 1179). This blending of history and modernity, wielded with sly humor, asserts the Inuit film makers’ sovereignty over representation of Inuit

people, Raheja says. The inclusion of the “making of” footage reminds viewers who holds the camera, and that this *who* matters. Being the makers of a film depicting their cultural heritage puts the power in Indigenous hands.

Raheja (2010) describes other Indigenous films as examples of visual sovereignty. In “Reel Injun: On the Trail of the Hollywood Indian,” filmmakers Bainbridge and Diamond (2009) trace a history of Native Americans in film and television. Structured as a road movie, the film travels in time from the first moving images of Native Americans to the 1998 coming-of-age comedy “Smoke Signals” and other Indigenous feature films. “Reel Injun” combines movie clips with commentary on the films from Indigenous creators and cultural experts, thus giving Indigenous people representation as authorities *on* their representations.

Three additional film scholars use the concept of visual sovereignty as a way to evaluate the ethics and impacts of artistic works and audiences’ involvement with them. Teves (2014) analyzed the film *Ke Kulana He Māhū* (2001), which explored the role of māhū, the Native Hawaiian word for LGBTQ+ identities. The film recounted the stigmatization of these identities during colonization as a way to set the context of the struggle to win same-sex marriage rights under Hawaii’s state government. The film broke new ground by including the voices and images of prominent māhū engaged in cultural, teaching, and familial roles, which were historically valued by Native Hawaiians. Teves argues that although the film makers invite viewers to infer that the māhū support the marriage-law campaign by juxtaposing the māhū’s speech with the voices of scholars and specialists, a close viewing of the film reveals that “at no time do any māhū in the film express any interest in being accepted in dominant society. Nor do they express a desire for same-sex (or any kind of) marriage. ...” (p. 11). Despite this omission, Teves writes, “*Ke Kulana He Māhū*” is a visually sovereign work because it counteracts the imposition of

colonizers' religious framework that devalued the *māhū*. The visuals that dwell on scenes of belonging and mutually nourishing relationships to the land have more importance than its political agenda, Teves is saying.

Peterson (2013) discussed the remastering and redistributing of a participatory film project from 1966 that resulted in the documentary, "Through Navajo Eyes." In 2011, the film returned to the Navajo Nation for new public showings along with the seven short films that resulted when project leaders gave Diné people cameras and editing equipment to create their own movies. The original film evoked all of the usual questions about non-Indigenous film makers recording Indigenous speakers, but the short films privileged the agency of the Diné people. Media coverage of the films after it debuted ignored decades in which Indigenous and specifically Diné people had been involved in film and radio production, Peterson recounted. However, the author argued the 1966 shorts still showcase Indigenous people "on their own terms" engaged in self-representation and confronting contemporary realities. In addition, the events that brought the films back for showings on Navajo land provided an opportunity for conversations and connections between members of the community, including descendants of the Dine filmmakers from the 1960s, showing how even a partly visually sovereign production can have positive impact long after its completion.

Varga (2020) analyzed how Mi'qmaq filmmaker Jeff Barnaby played with the history of two Indigenous disasters – residential schools and the transmission of deadly diseases -- in the comedy "Rhymes for Young Ghouls" (2013) and the zombie movie "Blood Quantum" (2019). Varga argues that the seminal Inuit film "Atanarjuat" was an example of the activist and change-making role that visually sovereign productions should, have. After the film won its battle for a larger share of government distribution funding, the Canadian Film board changed how that

funding was allocated, smoothing the way for similar projects to find audiences. Barnaby's two films, Varga writes, wield comedy and horror to perform this activist function, and more films ought to do that. "It is not enough for cinema to show us past crimes against humanity," he writes; film must also "agitate us in a way that compels us to want to transform the existing order" (p. 25). The discussion of what is good in film, video, and art depicting Indigenous people reached enough of a critical mass that in 2019, the Canadian nonprofit *imagineNATIVE* produced an 80-page guide to ethical practices for media makers, titled "On-Screen Protocols and Practices" (Nickerson, 2019). The guide outlines principles that non-Indigenous or collaborating media creators should understand and follow when working with Indigenous content, characters, individuals, and communities.

Researchers also have debated whether and how much video games express visual sovereignty. Carpenter (2021) dissected the long-term strategy games "Civilization" and "Europa Universalis" using a visual sovereignty lens. Both games are "grand strategy" games, where the persona a player adopts is that of a nation-state or land-based political entity. While the author applauded both games for including Indigenous nations as equal among the choices of which nation-state to adopt and play as, they also criticized both games for envisioning the goal and means of play as that of competition rather than collaboration; success is thus still framed in a colonizing context. For example, the subgenre of strategy games that comprises these examples is sometimes described as "4X" games because the goals of player-nations are "explore, expand, exploit, exterminate." Thus, even if a player chooses to play as Shoshone in "Civilizations 5" or as the Cherokee nation in "Europa Universalis," play entails venturing into an "empty" land, claiming its resources and then competing for supremacy. In addition, the "Civilization" iterations could not help but simplify complex cultures, histories, and diversities in order to

represent them, according to Carpenter. “Finding a successful path between essentialization and erasure” required consultation and inclusion of Indigenous stakeholders, but such inclusion did not guarantee success, Carpenter argued (p. 40).

The search for a game that avoided the traps described above led another researcher to create his own games. Carriere McKenna (2024) describes the impact that building two games based on Métis culture had on his connections to land and ancestors. The games, “Sage Plains” and “Infinite River,” tackle the issue of displacement. How, Carriere McKenna asks, can virtual representations of ancestral lands provide reconnection without appearing to abandon the struggle for in-real-life land restoration or ignore histories of land theft? “Sage Plains” and “Infinite River” were made to acknowledge that tension, the author writes. The act of “claiming and creating our own future imaginaries must extend into virtual spaces” as a matter of survival (p. 101).

These scholars and others demonstrate that visual sovereignty is not a binary phenomenon that either does, or does not, exist in an artistic work. Instead, it is multi-dimensional and those dimensions exist along continuums. As a result, evaluating a media creation through the visual sovereignty lens involves examining any of the following: creator goals, production processes, the product itself, the product’s impact on audiences, and the effects of the production process on industry relationships. For Teves (2014), *Ke Kulana He Māhū* is a visually sovereign work because it corrects colonial narratives by making space for māhū voices to be heard, despite the film’s use of those voices for a political goal of legalizing same-sex marriage. The film makers’ goal could not drown the message of visuals that showed māhū contributing to and being appreciated by Native Hawaiians, Teves argues. For Peterson (2013), visual sovereignty is reclaimed in showing the remastered Diné short films on the Navajo

Nation, 50 years after their creation. Sovereignty is also enacted because the showings enabled conversations, sometimes with direct descendants of the film makers. Seeing Indigenous people claim agency over the stories told about them demonstrates the possibility of making and consuming visually sovereign creations to a wider audience. In Teves's description of her first encounter with *Ke Kulana He Māhū* as a Native Hawaiian teenager, there are similarities to Starkey's (2015b) profound experience of self-recognition while playing "Never Alone." Teves demonstrates that media works can express visual sovereignty in ways that go beyond creators' intentions.

To return to visual sovereignty's connection to SDT, creation of a work in a visually sovereign way would create an atmosphere that satisfies individual and collective autonomy needs. So might experiencing visually sovereign works. Viewing films such as those Raheja (2007, 2010) describes might satisfy autonomy needs in Indigenous audiences because they feature Indigenous creators and critics describing an Indigenous subject. Visual sovereignty and autonomy have a relationship in the sense of speaking to one another, rather than an equivalency such that one term can substitute for the other. Visual sovereignty applies to the works themselves; autonomy needs satisfaction applies to the viewers/consumers/players

Such films might also satisfy competence needs in a self-perpetuating, virtuous-cycle way: The films' creation builds opportunities for Indigenous creators to enhance their skills and reputations, and offers Indigenous audiences an example of successful Indigenous films. Impacts on the media industry could go in many directions. Inspired Indigenous creators make more media stories, which builds yet more opportunities for success and networking, and provides audiences with more examples of Indigenous successes. In this way, a visually sovereign creation might be fulfilling more than one type of autonomy and more than one basic need of

SDT – and it also could be building capabilities for individuals and communities, thus contributing to Indigenous self-determination.

The ways these authors conceptualize visual sovereignty, evaluate media creations, and recommend practices for working with Indigenous communities suggest using the following questions to explore to extent to which a creative work is visually sovereign:

1. Does it put Indigenous creators at the center, not the periphery, of the work so that they are in charge of how they are represented?
2. Does it use a place-based, specific framework that acknowledges other decolonizing discourses as well as differences among Indigenous communities' philosophies?
3. Does it use accurate portrayals of Indigenous traditions strategically to correct or rework colonial narratives?
4. Does it do decolonizing work? That is, does it deconstruct, rework, or reclaim colonial narratives? Does it engage in current dialogues in its discipline in a critical or reflexive way? Does it act as a “distancing strategy from the West” (Rickard, 2017, p.83)?
5. Does it reinvest in a “shared imaginary” by reviving and/or re-interpreting traditional practices, stories, and characters? (Rickard, 2017, p. 83)
6. Does it position audiences to think about the work in a way that “notices the space between resistance and compliance?”(Raheja, 2007, p. 1160). In other words, does it encourage critical thought about issues of justice? Or does it at least lead non-Native audiences to think differently about Indigenous content, representation, and aesthetics?

1.7. Applying Four Frameworks to an Indigenous Video Game

The four theoretical lenses – SDT, Indigenous self-determination, communitarianism, and visual sovereignty – described above suggest multiple ways to view a specific media creation and ask what effect it has on a particular audience and why. SDT is useful because it creates a basis for examining the *how* and *why* of a specific media effect, be that effect positive or negative. SDT offers the answer that media creations can be positive – that is, they can increase human well-being -- when they satisfy universal basic needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. SDT has been used to study effects of video games across cultures (Xing et al., 2024, Wu et al., 2013;) and shown that video games can help players meet these needs. In studies where researchers manipulated video game features based on SDT theory, satisfaction of needs reliably predicted enjoyment of the game and short-term positive effects on well-being. When I look at “Never Alone” through the lens of SDT, I see that basic need fulfillment might be the source of possible positive effects on well-being. The game’s authentic portrayal of culture and inclusive development process might satisfy autonomy needs. The puzzles Nuna and Fox solve might serve as an experience satisfying competence needs. And, because of its Insight videos featuring present-day Alaska Natives, the game might prompt players to seek out their own social and family connections, satisfying relatedness needs. In addition, SDT suggests that the nature of players’ motivations for playing are likely to affect any need satisfactions they experience.

If SDT is a theoretical lens, adding an Indigenous self-determination perspective – think of it as one more lens in a camera bag – encourages making sure that media effects questions are adapted to the Indigenous context where they will be asked. It acknowledges the history of colonizers’ denial of the autonomy of Indigenous individuals and communities, and that this

denial still exerts negative influence. Indigenous self-determination reminds researchers that the lived experience of Indigenous audiences might, or might not, mean that Indigenous audiences specifically seek media that satisfy the same basic needs that are frustrated by under-representation and stereotyping. It asks, *in what context is this occurring?* This perspective's capabilities approach alerts researchers to possible variations of SDT needs or additional needs unique to Indigenous media consumers. For example, Indigenous community members told Gordon (2019) that individual and collective autonomy are intertwined and that both must be wielded to create the possible best future. "Never Alone," designed with elements that represent interdependence on the small (Nuna and Fox) and large-scale (real-life Iñupiat people generally) levels, might be providing experiences that fulfill both kinds of autonomy.

[BETTER TRANSITION THAN FINALLY.] Finally, the concept of visual sovereignty helps researchers ask the questions *who* made this, *how*, and *what was the impact?* Visual sovereignty reminds the researcher that media questions embrace specific complexities in an Indigenous media context. The concept suggests that a specific media creation can increase Indigenous well-being more effectively if it accomplishes important decolonizing tasks. It should center Indigenous creators, accurately represent Indigenous peoples and cultures, and correct the false narratives and stereotypes that abound in media portrayals, among other goals. Visual sovereignty provides a way to examine the visual aspects of "Never Alone," obviously, but also guides me to question the impact of the game's narrative and functional aspects. Visual sovereignty's definition as any "place-based action" (Rickard, 2017, p. 82) encompasses art, events, film, media, and the processes of creating them. In practice, this means that a visually sovereign media creation should satisfy autonomy needs for creators and audiences. Visual sovereignty demands that where Indigenous people are subjects, they must also have agency over

what is being created. This demand states that both product and process are important for a study of “Never Alone,” conceived of by a tribal council and executed the council in partnership with a video game company. It brings the nature of that partnership and its impact on the game and its players into my study’s field of view. The Indigenous self-determination perspective and the concept of visual sovereignty shape the ways that I might apply SDT theory to a study of the video game “Never Alone.”

2. Identification with Video Game Characters: Varied Conceptualizations

The next section of this literature review will look at a theoretical construct that offers another explanation of how video games encourage people to spend time with them: Identification with the game characters players encounter. Cohen (2001) traced identification from its roots in child psychology and provided the following definition of identification: “an imaginative experience in which a person surrenders consciousness of his or her own identity and experiences the world through someone else’s point of view” (p. 246). Cohen saw identification as a process that required some loss of self-awareness, adoption of the character’s perspectives and goals, and experiencing the character’s emotional responses. Cohen distinguished identification from other similar reactions to characters – liking, affinity, similarity, and imitation -- and argued that features likely to increase identification included characters’ attitude and appearance similarity to the user, the depth and intricacy of the product’s storyline, whether the storyline or virtual world was realistic, and the length of time the user spent with the product. Klimmt et al. (2009) argued that video games’ interactive nature meant that Cohen’s definition of identification needed distinct features when applied to this specific medium. Although identification with a video game character might at first be intuitive and immediate, because play is user directed, identification is as well. Players decide whether and how much

they identify, and can intensify or end the process at will during a game. For example, some games place characters in morally fraught situations where immoral actions are more effective in leading to success. Klimmt et al. disagreed with Cohen that player identification was less likely with fantasy-based or other-than-human characters. Most importantly, Klimmt et al. theorize that the ability to customize some aspects of the video game increases the likelihood of identification because customizing means a player can assign elements of their ideal self to the character. This may act to reduce the distance between a player's actual self-concept and their ideal self, as they will be acting in the game as this customized ideal character. This process of choosing ideal self-elements and playing as a character who possesses them might act to address two SDT needs: autonomy, but also competence, especially if the hypothetical player's chosen abilities lead to in-game success.

Cohen (2001) and Klimmt et al. (2009) were discussing characters in fictional media. When Brown (2015) conceptualizes identification, he brings non-fictional characters such as celebrities and public figures into the set of characters that might affect audiences. He calls this combined group of people – fictional and real – media personae. Brown theorized that two processes had to precede identification: transportation and parasocial interaction. Transportation brought an audience member into the narrative, meaning the sensory experiences and emotions of the story eclipsed those happening in real life; the person was “transported” into the story. Then the audience member developed a parasocial relationship with the media character as they responded to the character. Identification only then developed as the result of this strong parasocial relationship. Worship – defined as real-life concentration on a media persona or character as the primary object of attention and approval – sometimes developed out of

identification. Brown saw transportation, parasocial interaction, identification, and worship as somewhat similar processes along a scale of increasingly intense involvement.

In a response to Brown, Moyer-Guse (2015) argued that identification during media consumption should be distinguished from any post-consumption effects of identification. While the *effects* of identification might occur outside of a video game, when the game was over, so was identification. She also disagreed that transportation and parasocial interaction were steps in the process to identification; instead, they are each involvement processes in their own right. The reason is the differing nature of the relationship between person and character. Transportation and identification require a degree of permeability between the boundaries of the person and the character, so that the player can experience the reactions and goals of the character and live vicariously in the fictional world, relinquishing some self-awareness. Parasocial interaction and worship, on the other hand, keep the person's identity boundary mostly intact, because self-awareness is necessary; there must be a separate self to form a relationship with the character or the object of worship. Finally, Moyer-Guse argues, identification should be looked at as a dynamic process; researchers might consider audience members as "oscillating between identification, transportation, PSI, and worship throughout a particular narrative" (p. 287).

2.1 Studies of Identification in Video Games

Despite these different conceptualizations of identification, its impact, and ways to encourage it have been studied using various video games. In a project focusing on LGBTQIA+ video gamers and social anxiety, Yokotani et al. (2025) measured social anxiety and digital communication among participants ($n=965$) who did or did not claim this identity. Answers to initial questionnaires suggested that LGBTQIA+ participants had social anxiety in real, but not in virtual, social environments. The researchers then had participants play Pigg Party, a massively

multiplayer online game with high levels of player anonymity and customization of avatars. They found that LGBTQIA+ players had higher levels of avatar customization and identification with their avatars, and that these two features increased the players' number of avatar-based communications within the game. And increased avatar communication predicted decreased social anxiety in real-life environments, an example of an identification process leading to a positive, after-game effect. Viewed through SDT, this could be an example of playing video game leading to increased ability to meet relatedness and / or competence needs.

In another study, Li et al (2022) used a 2 (avatar present versus avatar absent) x 2 (virtual coach present versus virtual coach absent) experiment to examine the influence of avatars and virtual coaches on participants' motivation to use an exergame. Players ($n=139$) with the avatar present identified with the avatar and the game environment to a greater degree, and players with the virtual coach present felt socially present with coach character. Both experimental conditions were related to higher feelings of competence within the game and higher intention to exercise.

Song and Fox (2016) looked at female players of romantic games in Japan. Given that these video games featured the same kinds of idealized, unrealistic characters and narratives as Japanese romantic TV and movies, Song and Fox wanted to know whether players' identification with avatars in these games would give players more idealized romantic beliefs. They hypothesized that higher identification with avatars would lead to increased levels of parasocial relationships with in-game romantic targets, then to more idealized romantic beliefs. They found that higher amounts of *time* spent playing the romantic games led to higher levels of two phenomena: identification with their avatars and parasocial relationships. Higher identification and parasocial relationship then led to idealized romantic beliefs.

Green et al. (2021) conducted an online survey of 993 gamers, asking them to answer four open-ended questions that measured their identification with and attachment to their avatars. While about 9% of participants used terms of endearment to describe their avatars' importance, a larger proportion (18.9%) had a much more mechanistic view of their avatars as mere tools used to play games, with one describing them as "a bunch of pixels that have nothing to do with my real life" or "It could just be a brick and that would be fine." These results indicate that players attach a variety of importances to avatars, even when they are customizable. For some of the less attached players, other game elements such as the virtual world or how the game worked played a more valuable role in their enjoyment than identification with their avatars did.

Finally, Shaw (2011) questioned several key assumptions of studies of identification. She conducted multiple interviews with 27 video game players who identified as non-heterosexual, non-male, and/or non- or not solely white to find that not all players wanted characters that they recognized as "like" themselves, a condition that is theorized to facilitate identification. Nor did they always want to customize an avatar to be like themselves. In addition, identification was difficult to discern from how the players talked about playing. Shaw argued that video game research needs to distinguish between identifying *with* – which her players described as a sympathetic or empathetic connection with the character – and identifying *as*, meaning feeling as if they were the one acting in the game through their avatar.

Shaw (2013) recounts two in-depth interviews of two female gamers who play alone. Shaw concluded that researchers in game studies needed to acknowledge the many dimensions of the video game experience as well as the wide variety of people who play them. Players use a variety of platforms, from cellphones to desktops and laptops to gaming consoles. They come

from different cultures, countries, genders, races, classes, and ages. They don't always identify as "gamers" and their play doesn't always involve a social aspect.

These studies show how wide the range of approaches to identification with characters is currently. Identification with characters can lead to some positive or negative outcomes of interest, as it did for Yokotani et al. (2025),) Li et al. (2022) and Song and Fox (2016). But identification with characters cannot be assumed to be an important explanation for a video game's effects on players; the results of Green et al. (2021) do not support this assumption, nor do those in Shaw's 2011 set of interviews. It seems clear that identification with characters in video games is a multidimensional and complex phenomenon and that individual players vary widely in how important they say it is to their enjoyment. On the other hand, even in a game such as "Never Alone" that doesn't have customizable characters, identification might be the source of its positive effects. However, Shaw (2011) and Green et al. (2021) argue that player desire for identification with characters cannot be taken as a given.

3. Identity and Representation in Video Games

Identity, representation of that identity in media, and the question of whether such representation results in positive effects on media consumers, forms the third vein of research that I examine in relation to video game playing. To lay the foundation to examine representation, a brief definition of identity is necessary, as well as a look at how media exposure affects identity-building and changes in identity over time. I will also describe studies of identity-building in Indigenous groups. With that foundation established, this section will survey studies of representation in video games and then Indigenous representation in video games.

First, a brief definition of identity that video game researchers have used bears mentioning. Toth (2014) calls identity a "practiced, situated accomplishment" (p. 153) – a thing

that an individual creates each time they need to tell someone else who they are. In other words, while the outlines of an identity is not static, the specificity of an identity, is “contextually dependent and constantly changing” (p. 160). Toth’s view of identity matches what a key contact told me about Indigenous college students’ identities – that these emerging adults were actively engaged in crafting their identities and figuring out where Indigeneity fit and what it meant to them (T. Kelly, personal communication, December 11, 2018).

3.1. Identity Building Through Media Exposure

Research on how media exposure, consumption and creation affects specific populations' identity-building is widespread and includes studies on groups as diverse as young witches building religious identities in Australia (Berger & Ezzy, 2014); refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo building new positive identities in a new country; (Harding et al., 2025); Muslim-American high schoolers growing up in the American Midwest (Saleem & Ismail, 2025); teen girls and their budding STEM identities and aspirations (Steinke, 2017); men and dissatisfaction with their body images compared to the ideals presented in magazines (Ku et al., 2022); and Filipino LGBTQ college students who engage with queer media representations (Espina et al., 2025).

While empirical research on media's role in identity-building processes in Indigenous people specifically is less abundant, the fields of Indigenous education and empirical studies on effects of Indian mascots show that representations matter. Leavitt et al. (2015) argued that the negative impact of under-representation applies equally to adults' construction of their identities, as well as non-Indigenous people's awareness of the diversity and contributions of Indigenous peoples. In other words, these identity struggles have a negative impact on society at large in addition to thwarting Indigenous well-being, and these two negative impacts are self-perpetuating:

“In the absence of direct in-person contact or other pertinent sources of information, media representations [of Native Americans] emerge as prototypes ... that establish the quality and quantity of characteristics people associate with different groups and, thus, influence the psychological resources afforded to individual group members” (Leavitt et al., 2015, p. 45)

Eason et al. (2018) argued that biased and inaccurate representations perpetuate cycles of bias in legal, media, and educational institutions, and that representation can be most effectively addressed when ideas, institutions, interactions, and individuals work together. Elliot-Groves and Fryberg's commentary (2019) on Indigenous education argued that "representational erasure" – the still-too-small number of positive media portrayals of Native Americans – was compromising young people's ability to envision positive future selves, a necessary basis for constructing healthy identities, and Fryberg and Eason (2024) called growing up Native American a "representational landscape minefield" for both youth and adults, while noting that efforts by Indigenous creators and communities were working to change this circumstance. "The media, for example, can help to intentionally foster new representations and narratives made by Native Peoples that reflect and amplify Native Peoples's voices, experiences, perspectives and values," the authors said (p. 1912).

3.2. Representation in Video Games

Research on representation of minorities in media has a decades-long history in American media. Clark (1969) conceptualized four stages of representation: (1) Non-recognition, when minoritized identities are simply absent from media; (2) ridicule, when those identities appear, but only in negative, subjugated roles that reinforce negative stereotypes; (3) regulation, which limits appearances of minoritized identities to specific roles that support current power structures, such as law enforcement; and (4) respect, in which those identities appear accurately, with full humanity, and with sufficient quantity of representation that the media personae, taken as a whole, can exhibit the full range of human flaws, strengths, and life trajectories. Clark's commentary focused mainly on portrayals of Black people on U.S. television, it but provided one useful way to examine media representation. Fitzgerald (2010) tested Clark's model with

portrayals of Native Americans on U.S. television, evaluating key roles (star or co-star) in series and mini-series from 1949 to 2009. Fitzgerald found that most Native American characters in that time period fell into the regulation stage or regulator-type roles, and added in his notes that few of these characters had been played by actual Native Americans. He also emphasized that the conceptualization of these stages were not intended as an exclusive list or a linear progression; in fact, Fitzgerald described regressions between the third and fourth stages. Raley & Lucas (2008) analyzed how lesbian, gay and bisexual characters were represented on nine prime-time U.S. series. The authors found that most of the characters they evaluated were still being ridiculed, although a few characters fell within the regulation or respect stages.

In addition to studying *how* minoritized identities are portrayed, researchers have examined the sheer quantity of those portrayals. In 2009, Williams et al. compiled a census of the genders, races, and ages of characters represented in the 133 best-selling boxed video games of 2005 and compared it to U.S. census data. The sample included 95% of all video games sold and coded the races of primary and secondary characters. Native American characters were 0.09% of game characters, but made up 0.9% of the U.S. population in 2000 U.S. census and special report data. In 2025, Jones et al. replicated Williams et al.'s video game character census, comparing game characters of top-selling games in 2017 to U.S. population data from the same year. They then compared their 2017 data to the data from Williams et al. (2009). The representation of Native American characters in games had actually dropped from 0.09% in 2005 to 0.04% in 2017, while the percentage of Native Americans in the U.S. population in 2017 was 0.74%. Jones et al. (2025) laid the retreat in the representation of most minorities at the feet of the video game industry's risk-averse posture, similar to that of most entertainment industries. Native American

video game players have a vanishingly small chance of finding a Native American character in a best-selling game unless they specifically look for the few games that feature them.

Under-representation in media is not unique to Indigenous identities. Stasienko et al. (2021) performed quantitative content analyses of the disabled characters in a purposive sample of 79 games in which disabled characters appeared. The authors then conducted a focus group with disabled players. Of the analyzed video games, the researchers selected six – three commercial games and three indie games – for the focus group to play and then discuss. Stasienko et al. concluded that developers often relied on “transhumanist camouflage” – showing characters whose disabilities were compensated for via “futuristic implants, prostheses, and exoskeletons;” that disability often served as a way of punishing characters; and that disability portrayals were dominated by physical as opposed to sensory or cognitive disabilities (p. 164). Despite these criticisms by researchers, the four players interviewed in the focus groups as being overall “content” (p. 159) that they were being represented; some games that the researchers categorized as problematic were not seen that way by disabled gamers. Stasienko et al. called for game makers to portray disabled people with characters who are “simply attractive heroes treated equally at all levels of the elaborate construction of this complex medium that is video games” (p. 165).

A robust body of research has examined non-cisgendered video game characters and players to the extent that Bonnie “Bo” Ruberg’s 2019 book is titled *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*. The representation of non-binary gender identities has been viewed through a variety of theoretical lenses and critical lenses as well as empirically studied for their impact on queer gamers. Látal (2021) conducted a critical discourse analysis of posts and comments on two Reddit threads focused on queer gamers. Látal’s conversants expressed appreciation that queer

representation existed in games at all, and they noted that some games offered more intimate versions of representation. These Redditors expressed the most appreciation for the representations in niche and indie games. Látal's explanation is that many of the games these players mentioned were created by queer people themselves; some were both created by and marketed to queer people. Thus, it's not surprising that queer gamers would find that such games would contain believable characters. On the negative side, Látal's commenters lamented that there were many more female gay characters than male gay characters, potentially fetishizing lesbian identities. Commenters also noted that there were few bisexual, asexual, trans, genderfluid, and other non-conforming sexual identities. Also, "playersexual" characters – those whose attractions and sexual identity could be chosen or inferred by the player – came in for some criticism for what one commenter termed "inclusion but not representation" (p. 155); in other words, a gamer could choose to remove queerness from a character's attributes. Having the only representation of queerness be optional in a video game is problematic even when the menu of customizations is more inclusive. The solution would be a game that featured multiple queer identities, some of them non-optional. This study demonstrates that even avatar attribute choices are often viewed differently by different players within a minoritized identity.

Adrienne Shaw has extensively studied minoritized and non-Western video gamers. Her 2011 analysis of interviews with 27 game players who were non-male, non-cisgendered and/or non-White – in other words, outside the male, white, gamer stereotype – found that questions about representation drew a wide variety of answers. Most did not say they identified with game characters or avatars. "He could be a bunny rabbit for all I care," one of her interviewees said of a game character (p.97). Some participants said that they found their identities represented sometimes, but it wasn't the reason they bought or played a particular game; competitiveness

was a more frequent motivation. In a 2014 study, Shaw reported that some participants were apathetic about representation, calling it “nice when it happened” (p. 192) but not something they required or even sought. She suggested that these participants had simply given up, having encountered only absence, tokenism, stereotyping, or homogeneity in video game characters. This aligned with evidence from a previous study (Shaw, 2012) in which gay players said they did not want to be targeted as a demographic on which to base characters.

3.2.1. Difficulties in Creating and Researching Representation. The above research shows that some gamers don’t care about representation. A further complication is that among game players who *do* care, what they see as representation may well be different than what game developers expect and what researchers have previously found. Šisler (2008), Cheong and Gray (2011), and Shaw (2011, 2014) argue that game developers who attempt to create representative characters often fail. The reason, these scholars believe, is that developers often rely on a limited or stereotypical repertoire of characteristics when they build a character. For example, in Shaw 2014, players discussed games that had Black characters, but the signifiers of Blackness in those games were not what signified Blackness to players. Thus, it’s important to know what signifies a character’s queer, or Black, or disabled, or Indigenous identity to an individual player before we can ask that player what representation looks like to them, and before we can create representative games. The common practice in the video game industry has been to assume or use the perspective of the (usually) lone developer who is a member of a group. Actual outreach costs time and money. Shaw’s study with Finnish gamers (2009b) asked the question, “What does Finnishness mean in a video game?” The answer was use of Finnish language. In India, where diversity of ethnicity, religion, race, and class is high, players didn’t even expect representation of these dimensions (Shaw, 2013a). Instead, one of her contacts said that character

personality dimensions were a better way to think about representation than attempting to create game characters with specific demographics. These two studies (2009b and 2013a) show that for any given identity, what they recognize as representing their identity can be radically different.

So, to reiterate: Representation is, in fact, complicated. But video game scholars also make an ethical argument for representation. They saying that industry and researchers have a responsibility to create more inclusive stories to move the overall media ecology forward, for industry; and of critically evaluating its progress, for researchers. Shaw (2018) and Gray (2018) argue in two critical essays on the future of video gaming that society needs to see the full, possible range of human identities in video games (as well as other media products). Shaw (2018) pushes for a view of identity that goes beyond checkboxes in categories, calling for a view of identity that acknowledges its different sides and how they interlock to limit or permit how individuals are permitted to act in the real world. Gray (2018) writes that even Black video game heroes viewed by audiences as a leap forward and spark positive online conversations too often remain locked into colonial narratives of devious criminals, “dangerous black bodies,” (p. 62), and other white ideas of how Blackness should be portrayed. Such narratives have power, Gray argues, because “they make sense of the world and become more powerful as they are constantly deployed and repeated.” In *Cybertypes*, Lisa Nakamura (2002) argues that in digital worlds, race is too often used to stabilize identities for those who are *not* Other. Characters who *are* Other, meanwhile, often serve only to highlight what the games’ mainstream, often white, identities are opposite to.

Video games’ progress in representation seems to be a matter of small, incremental steps forward and steps back. In 2009, Shaw interviewed a dozen professionals in the video game industry – eight heterosexual and four who identified as gay, bisexual, or queer. Shaw asked

about what the production of games with explicitly or implicitly non-heterosexual characters meant to these professionals. Some of the interviewees were concerned that representing gay identities for the sake of inclusion alone would inevitably lead to tokenism and stereotyped characters. Others worried that inclusion would lead to making a game “about being gay” or shallow characters who seemed forced into a storyline. In contrast, just seven years later, Nakamura (2016) profiled two independent games that tackled representation in emotionally moving ways: “Journey,” by Jenova Chen, and “Dys4ia,” by Anna Anthropy. The avatars in Chen’s “Journey” deliberately lack arms and mouths, so there’s no combat and no grieving; instead, friendly behavior and collaboration are rewarded. In “Dys4ia,” gamers take on the identity of a character undergoing a gender transition.

3.3 Indigenous Representation in Video Games

“Never Alone” was not the first video game to represent Indigenous people nor the first created by Indigenous people. Indigenous scholars laud the work of games scholar and game creator Elizabeth LaPensée, both on her own and with other Indigenous creators. Those games include “Survivance” (2011) “Invaders” (2015), “Honour Water,” (2016), “Thunderbird Strike,” (2017), and “When Rivers Were Trails” (2019). “Survivance” offered players a chance to reflect on their own identities as they complete various quests, then post a creative work of their own for other players to review. “Invaders,” inspired by the early video game “Space Invaders,” puts players in the position of the invaded, where they must fight wave after wave of arriving aliens; victory is impossible. “Honour Water” is a tablet-based singing game that teaches songs in Anishinaabegowin, featuring a group of Anishinaabe female singers. “Thunderbird Strike” is a mobile game in which players use a flying Thunderbird to protect land and water from extractive

industries. “When Rivers Were Trails” is a free, educational game in which players travel as an Anishinnaabeg person moving from traditional land in Minnesota to California. The player meets and interacts with people from other Native communities, hunting, fishing, and canoeing along the way. More than 30 Indigenous creators collaborated on the project. In the essay “Toward Sovereign Games” (2017), LaPensée et al. explore the possibilities exemplified when sovereignty is enacted in game development, entailing “consideration for who is involved and in what roles, how funding is gained and distributed, how intellectual property rights regarding Indigenous knowledge are managed, and how decisions are made regarding who can access a game and in what ways” (p. 329).

3.3.1. Research Involving “Never Alone.” “Never Alone” itself has already inspired scholarship. Tanaka (2022) called for libraries to include Indigenous games such as “Never Alone” and LaPensée’s work in their collections to make such games easier for the populations represented to access. Bogac Evren (2025) explored “Never Alone” using descriptive analysis to test a hypothesis that the game serves as a way to preserve Iñupiaq culture and communicate Iñupiaq values globally. Madsen (2017) performed a comparative descriptive analysis of “Never Alone” and LaPensée’s “Invaders,” finding that the two very different games went about their tasks of educating players about Indigenous experience in fundamentally different ways. In “Never Alone,” players progressed through puzzles to save a village. “Invaders” is a game that requires players to sacrifice non-player characters to temporarily stave off inevitable defeat. Though both were successful, different game mechanics and different production processes highlighted different approaches to cultural lessons about what it means to be Indigenous.

Studies where Indigenous players or those involved in making “Never Alone” were actually interviewed are more rare. Bodenhorn and Ulturgasheva (2018) explored the portrayal of

Alaska Native hunting skills in “Never Alone,” engaging in conversations with young reindeer herders in Eveny, Siberia. The herders reacted to the game with appreciation and enthusiasm, recognizing in it many elements of their own hunting traditions, including animal guides. They recounted tales of local hunters with helpers that included a fox, an ermine, a sable, and a snow ram. But these players also criticized the game’s rules-based mechanics, saying that it made some of the challenges, such as the polar bear attack, seem too simplistic. In Siberia, the herders said, whether they survived a bear attack depended on many factors and a large proportion of sheer luck. The study’s authors noted that at a conference in London, Eveny herders had recounted increasingly erratic Siberian brown bear behavior due to habitat destruction from wildfires. Bodenhorn and Ulturgasheva advocated for using “Never Alone” as a starting point for discussions about culture, but not a replacement for them. “For us, [the game’s] greatest potential is its capacity to energize reflection and thought,” they wrote (p. 108). Rodriguez Espínola (2021) interviewed both E-Line and CITC staff as well as some of the Alaska Natives who appear in the game’s Cultural Insight videos. Her study explored “Never Alone” as decolonization and as a potential form of cultural diplomacy between non-state actors, suggesting that its development process bore lessons for diplomatic and cultural development.

These three veins of research – the need satisfactions of SDT, the process of identification with characters, and the effects of representation of seldom-seen-in-media identities – offered ways for me to think about Indigenous players of “Never Alone” and generate research questions. First, if the video game were having positive effects on Indigenous players, as they did on Starkey and his interviewees (Starkey, 2015b), they might be doing so because they satisfied one or more of the three basic needs of self-determination theory: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). They might be satisfying some other need specific to an

individual player or a type of player, but this need could be related to SDT, akin to what some researchers found when they extended or modified SDT or combined it with other theories. Second, “Never Alone” might be offering Indigenous players a rare chance to identify with a character in a videogame through the portrayal of an Iñupiaq girl and the “Cultural Insight” videos featuring real-life, modern Alaska Natives. Finally, the representation of elements of Indigenous identity and culture in the game might be helping to repair the “representational erasure” Elliott-Groves and Fryberg (2019) described as affecting Indigenous media consumers.

4. Research Questions

The three veins of literature described in previous sections – SDT theory, identification processes, and representations of identity in video games and other media products– provide rationales for how a video game could impact a player’s well-being. However, to use these three bodies of research to formulate questions about an Indigenous video game might affect Indigenous players requires me to incorporate awareness of the historic and current impacts of colonization (Murphy, 2008; Gordon & Ratta, 2022; Cheng et al., 2021).

Identification with the Indigenous media personae in “Never Alone” might help players evaluate similar aspects of their own self-concepts more positively or construct more positive possible futures, as identification did for video game players in Yokotani et al. (2025), Li et al., (2022), and Song and Fox (2016). Seeing representation of people like themselves is an option that has been rarely on the menu of available entertainments for Indigenous consumers, so when it does appear, it might exert a greater impact than it would for populations that are not underrepresented. However, when Green et al., (2021) surveyed 993 video game players, few professed any particular attachment to their avatars. Shaw (2011) found similar results. Thus, it cannot be assumed that if a game is satisfying SDT needs, identification must be occurring. This

same lack of a definitive trend exists to connect identification with representation. If players believe that characters represent them, they might be more likely to identify with those characters, but evidence on this question is also mixed. Some of Shaw's (2011) player interviewees professed not to care about representation of their identities, but others called it "nice when it happens." There *is* evidence that media with stereotypical representation and absence have negative effects in Indigenous groups (Fryberg et al., 2016) and in other minoritized groups (Látal 2021; Stasienko et al., 2021).

To the three veins of research that suggest ways "Never Alone" might be having positive effects, the concept of visual sovereignty and cultural criticism by Indigenous scholars add a normative push. If video games can affect well-being for good or ill, then game makers should create products that maximize positive and minimize negative effects. If a game is based on Indigenous culture, then some scholars say that the game should express not just visual sovereignty but sovereignty in all aspects of the game, from inception to product ownership (LaPensée et al., 2022).

4.1. Elements of Indigenous Identity and Their Importance

Self-determination theory led me to conclude that understanding the nature of any positive or negative effects of the game required a deeper understanding of Indigenous identity itself. I could not assume that the elements of Iñupiaq and Alaska Native culture built into the game would be seen as representative by players who were Indigenous but non-Alaskan. Thus, it was reasonable to ask about the important elements of identity.

RQ1: *How do players of "Never Alone," pop-culture panelists, and Reddit commenters discuss important elements of Indigenous identities?*

4.2. Effects of Indigenous Representation in “Never Alone”

Research Question 2 aims to discover how Indigenous players, panelists and commenters react to the representations of Indigenous people in “Never Alone.” As with RQ1, a player’s experiences with media in general – good, bad, indifferent, representative, or stereotypical – are likely to be important in understanding how they experience “Never Alone.” Thus, this question is deliberately construed to include other media creations that consumers might mention.

RQ2: How do Indigenous players of “Never Alone,” pop-culture panelists, and commenters on Reddit discuss representations of Indigenous identities in the game and other media?

4.3. Reactions to Playing the Game

While RQ1 and RQ2 discuss identity and representation this question asks more directly about the experience of playing “Never Alone.” If playing the game satisfies players’ and commenters needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, players might allude to these experiences when they talk about playing. For example, succeeding at the game – completing its challenges and getting to the end of its story – might satisfy competence needs. “Never Alone” portrays Iñupiaq culture, stories, land, and people in its images and Cultural Insight videos; this web of connections might be satisfying relatedness needs. Thirdly, Indigenous self-determination ideas and visual sovereignty scholarship suggest that players might perceive the Iñupiaq values discussed and the visual environment depicted in “Never Alone” as expressions of autonomy. (This question is focused on the Indigenous players and online commenters, as the pop-culture panelists did not discuss the game.)

RQ3: How do Indigenous players and Reddit commenters describe the experience of playing “Never Alone”?

4.4. Cultural Production of “Never Alone”

LaPensée et al. (2022) unite the process of video game creation under a lens of visual sovereignty and political sovereignty. The authors argue that everything is part of the game, from its inspiration and goals to how it is produced, how acts in the world, how it is distributed, and who profits from it. “Never Alone” was instigated by a tribal council, which entered into a partnership with a video game company. The tribal council was still involved or in charge of most aspects of the game as it was created, and it wanted the game to be profitable as well as culturally accurate. Profitability mandated serving dual audiences. The game thus belongs on a continuum between media products that Indigenous people fully control (i.e., conceive, create, produce, distribute, and own), and media products that merely feature Indigenous stories made with some Indigenous involvement.

RQ4a focuses on the cultural production process that CITC and E-Line created to ensure that they met their goals for “Never Alone. Then RQ4b examines player reactions to how this production process shaped the game. These two research questions examine the insights of game makers and Indigenous players about how media that belong in this “between space” might provide experiences of self-determination or autonomy.

RQ4a: How do the game’s makers describe their goals in creating and implementing a cultural production process for “Never Alone” and its Cultural Insights?

RQ4b: How do Indigenous players and online commenters discuss the cultural production process of “Never Alone” or other entertainment media?

METHODS

My aim was to explore the meanings of playing “Never Alone” for Indigenous players – those who seldom see their identities portrayed positively or with full complexity (Bainbridge & Diamond, 2009). I am not Indigenous, as I will describe in more detail below. Because of the open-ended nature of my research questions, I knew that an interpretive paradigm would fit my questions. In addition, the literature described in the previous section, along with conversations with Indigenous colleagues and key contacts, told me that in order to ethically conduct this research, I would need to adopt an Indigenous paradigm as much as possible.

I will first describe these two paradigms briefly and describe what each one adds to my approach. Second, I will describe my choice of methods and how these paradigms and methodology shaped them. Third, I will account for the first steps in approaching my study population. As part of that subsection, I will explain how I adapted a life-story interview protocol to my study. Fourth, I will detail how I adapted to the global pandemic and describe the two data groups that I added to my project. Fifth, I detail how I analyzed the data and ensured quality in the analysis.

1. Interpretive Paradigms

While many paradigms and methodologies have been used to research Indigenous questions, an interpretive paradigm seemed most applicable to a question of the effects of “Never Alone.” According to Lindlof and Taylor (2011), the goal of interpretive research is “deep understanding of human actions, motives, and feelings” (p.11) as well as human symbol systems such as media stories. “Unique, plural, simultaneous, and local phenomena” make up the realities of human experience. (p. 8). I wanted to know what Indigenous audiences felt and understood

after experiencing the game, and those experiences would surely be unique to each individual, but those individual experiences might at least somewhat converge. Because of the open-ended nature of my research questions, an interpretive paradigm was a good fit.

The nature of the knowledge interpretive research produces is assumed to be “positioned,” meaning that different researchers, given the same opportunity to look at a situation, will likely come to different interpretations depending on their diverse backgrounds, purposes, and understandings. Knowledge is also assumed to be partial, rather than complete, because a researcher’s background, purposes and understandings are likely to limit their ability to see the whole of a particular situation. Because I am not Indigenous, these assumptions fit my situation of asking questions of people whose social experiences would be, at least on the surface, quite different from my own. Acknowledging these limitations from the beginning seemed a foundational act in many of the cross-cultural projects I examined (Sakakibara, 2008; Marino, 2015; Bodenhorn & Ulturgasheva, 2018). To counter the challenges of doing research that results in meaningful knowledge despite its positionality and partiality, interpretive researchers employ field and qualitative methods, immerse themselves in their data, and pay scrupulous attention to issues that arise during data collection, analysis, verification, and presentation (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). These strategies allow the researcher to examine a given phenomenon from multiple points of view and be alert for complications. In this way, even partial, positioned meanings can be evaluated for consistency and coherence and their connections and contradictions described.

2. Indigenous Paradigms

According to Shawn Wilson (2008), a long history of outsiders conducting exploitive or extractive research about Indigenous individuals or communities has made them justifiably wary. “Because community members are for the most part excluded from the research process, they have become resentful of research in general,” he wrote. Gaining a basic understanding of the history of research *on*, rather than *with*, Indigenous people prepared me for some of the difficulties my project would encounter. More importantly, Wilson argues that Indigenous research takes interpretivism’s idea of fluid, plural realities further still by tying these realities to specific individuals and locations. He argues that interaction between researcher and participants is not mere method, but the key to knowledge: reality is not discovered, but co-created in the “socially constructed concepts that are shared” in the interaction (p. 37). The goal of research is creating “a mutual reality ... a construction that is better informed than it was before” (p. 37). This seemed highly relevant to a project that would involve a non-Indigenous researcher whose project focused on Indigenous video game players’ experiences.

Wilson (2008) and Tuhiwai Smith (2012) argue that a necessary part of any research project involving Indigenous people was making sure that they were involved in the framing of the research. Thus, in 2017, I traveled to Anchorage to meet with three members of CITC to ask what they wanted to know about the impact of the project, and the project plan I submitted for review includes plans to return to discuss my findings with them.

Both paradigms approach interpretation in the same way, but an Indigenous paradigm warns of the potential harms or lack of benefit that often results from research *on* Indigenous people. In the past, such research often “told us things already known, suggested things that would not work, and made careers for people who already had jobs,” writes Tuhiwai Smith (p. 3) Wilson

recounts an interpretive project done with an elder of his acquaintance that resulted in multiple errors of interpretation. Both scholars explain that even positivist research can be done in a way that benefits Indigenous people and that ethnographic and critical cultural studies can be conducted in ways that are arrogant and harmful. My project requires both paradigms because interpretivism most closely describes the nature of the knowledge I want to discover, while an Indigenous paradigm describes ethical ways to co-create and share that knowledge. The Indigenous paradigm directs my actions in the first phases of the study: seeking permission, listening to Indigenous priorities, gaining context, and recruiting participants in a way that embodies respect, relationality, and reciprocity (Wilson, 2008). Interpretivism guides the lens through which I will analyze my data once it is obtained, looking for deep understanding of individual Indigenous game players' experiences. At the end of this project, an Indigenous paradigm once again directs my path, to share what I have gathered and interpreted with participants and the key contacts who permitted the work.

2.1. My own positionality

I am a cisgendered white woman of mixed settler heritage (mostly English, Scot, and German.) I am also over 60, although I was in my 50s when I began this research. I am also a former newspaper journalist, having spent over 30 years in the business, with 22 of those at major metro and national newspapers. My interest in inclusive media is anchored in the social justice mission of journalism. It also stems from the well-intentioned but sometimes misguided and poorly executed efforts of the journalism profession to include the voices of the unheard and under-represented. I am interested in the historic, cultural, and political resilience of the Indigenous people who were the first inhabitants of the North American continent. I am also, as a descendant of colonizers, aware that my own privilege and advancement came at great cost.

I work within interpretive and Indigenous paradigms for several reasons. My background as a journalist trains me in listening and gathering descriptions of personal

experiences, but also in the ethic of minimizing harm to the people who tell me their stories. Research under all paradigms as well as institutional review boards espouse the principle of beneficence, but the Indigenous paradigm instructs research collaborators to achieve a higher bar: that of working within relationality and reciprocity. The difference of degree between these two ethics is subtle, but important: the first instructs the researcher to ensure that participants will at least potentially access some form of benefit from the study. The second, relationality and reciprocity, asks researchers to do *commensurate* good and remain accessible to the community. In other words, the study should benefit the researched as well as the researcher. As someone who traces her roots and well-being back to Midwestern farmers who survived the Great Depression because of land ownership, I attempt to work from a position of respect and reciprocity when approaching Indigenous communities, individuals, and histories. Under an Indigenous paradigm, knowledge is co-created and communally held. My position as a researcher gives me a unique window into the similarities and differences between individual and collective stories, but the interpretive paradigm instructs me to keep in mind that my interpretation is not the only one possible.

3. Approaching the Study Population

Based on my research questions, I needed to recruit a purposive sample of Indigenous players of “Never Alone.” I chose adults who self-identified as Indigenous, Native American, or American Indian, in part or whole, regardless of tribal identity or official registration. I chose adults because I believed they would be more likely to be able to describe a past media experience more insight and depth, but I did not specify an age group other than 18 or older. College settings where many emerging adults were gathered in one place seemed a logical place to recruit. A key contact as well as previous studies told me that Indigenous college students

were often engaged in consciously choosing how to construct a Native American identity (Markstrom, 2001; T. Kelly, personal communication, April 24, 2018; York-Crockett, 2018). Parents, meanwhile, of all ages might have played the game with their children or other young relatives, which would bring another perspective to my study. In addition, for many Indigenous people, grandparents played an important role (A. Fredeen, personal communication, October 29, 2017).

I did not specify in my recruiting materials whether participants needed to have had profoundly meaningful or positive experiences with the game. Many qualitative research scholars emphasize the importance of seeking disconfirming cases (Lindloff & Taylor, 2011; Tracy, 2020; Brennen, 2025). For my project, a disconfirming case would consist of a participant for whom the game did not have any special meaning or who simply didn't enjoy the game. I did specify that I would not require membership in any recognized tribal group or nation. Such a membership requirement, my literature told me, was not just a tool of colonialism; it belied the fluidity, complexity, and modernity of Indigenous identity and evoked other artificial tests of "Indianness." In addition, I felt my interview questions would be probing enough to detect and winnow out anyone falsifying an Indigenous background. I set the minimum amount of time spent with the game at about six hours – not always enough time to finish the game, but long enough to have developed familiarity with its levels, characters, and tools, as well as some of the "Cultural Insight" videos. Participants could have played alone or with a partner.

3.1. Gaining Context

Participant observation is considered a primary starting place for many qualitative project. There is no substitute for spending time among the people whose lives you hope to understand (Luker, 2010; Creswell et al., 2024). A fellow graduate student who is Choctaw

suggested that I attend Indigenous Pop Expo in Denver in 2019; the makers of “Never Alone” had brought the game and some of its creators to a previous version of the event in Albuquerque, N.M. Volunteering there seemed an effective way to demonstrate reciprocity (Wilson, 2008). As part of the proposal process, letters of cooperation were obtained from the Cook Inlet Tribal Council; E-Line Media, and the director of Indigenous Pop Expo Denver.

With the permission of event founder Dr. Lee Francis and the Denver event’s director, Kristina Maldonado Bad Hand, I joined the ranks of the public event’s volunteers for four days in August 2019. Because my proposal was still being reviewed at that time, I did not formally gather data. I helped set up chairs and tables, ran the freight elevator, directed performers to changing rooms, helped vendors find their spaces, and answered attendees’ questions. I also had conversations with culture brokers and discussed the project. Key informants said that a study of “Never Alone” could be interesting and useful to Indigenous communities. I made plans to attend the upcoming “Indigipop Expo Prime” scheduled for March 2020 in Albuquerque, New Mexico., where I could continue recruiting and conduct interviews.

3.2 Institutional Review Board Approval

I first sought approval for the project in the spring of 2019; then resubmitted it due to adding life story questions to the interview protocol for the game’s players. That approval was granted and Colorado State University suggested also seeking approval from the Alaska Area Institutional Review Board (AAIRB). The Alaska board suggested that I implement a trauma-centered care plan for the interview protocol and treatment of interviewees. To complete these tasks, I first revised the interview protocol to begin with the topic of “Never Alone” and then more gradually approach the topic of interviewees’ experiences with media stories that made them feel included or excluded. I also agreed to find contact information for local mental health

and crisis intervention resources for each interviewee before the first interview was conducted. Thirdly, I explained to the AAIRB reviewers that I often proactively connected my students to mental health resources at Colorado State, and that I had also taken 8 hours of training in mental health first aid to better serve those students. The new interview protocol is described in more detail below in the data collection subsection. The Alaska and CSU boards approved the project in January of 2020.

3.3. Recruitment

My recruitment materials, consisting of a project website and 8-by-11-inch fliers, were approved by the CSU and Alaska Area institutional review boards. The fliers are shown in Appendix C. In addition, I recruited potential interviewees in several ways. I asked key contacts from my department, Indigenous Pop Expo, and my personal circle of friends to distribute and post the fliers. The director of the Native American Cultural Center at CSU also agreed to post them at the center's offices in the student center. Unfortunately, the global pandemic that restricted social contact, shut down campuses, and greatly reduced event scheduling made recruiting extremely difficult even when it was possible to travel. However, through Kristina Maldonado Bad Hand, who posted links to my recruitment materials on her Facebook page, I was able to recruit and interview six Indigenous players of "Never Alone" and interview them multiple times in 2020 and 2021. I interviewed the makers of the game in the summer of 2022.

3.4. Consent

The interviewees were emailed the consent form before the interview and their consent was obtained either orally and recorded or given via email. The consent script worked out with the AAIRB was designed to be read to a participant if they wished, but this was not necessary for my interviewees. One study performed in Yupik communities in Alaska used a hybrid approach

to identifying participants and communities because what participants and participating communities varied in what they wished. Leaders in one village strongly felt that they wanted their community named and represented in the study. Leaders and participants in the second village strongly wished to remain anonymous (Ayunerak et al., 2014). I asked my participants to choose a pseudonym, but some said that I could use their real names. In consultation with an Indigenous scholar, however, I decided to keep these names confidential and refer to the players that I interviewed as Players A-F.

3.5 Interviewees and Sample Size

My total number of interviewees is small: six players and three people from CITC and E-Line. I conducted a total of 17 interviews with these nine people. This is similar to some qualitative studies of both Indigenous people and video game players. Topash-Caldwell (2020), for example, was able to interview 18 participants who consume Indigenous-created science fictions before the pandemic. The author is a member of the Pokegon Band of Potawatomi and lived on the band's reservation for two years. Rodríguez-Espínola (2021) conducted eight interviews with "Never Alone" game makers, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, to inform an analysis of the game as a form of cultural diplomacy. LaPensée and Emmons (2019) interviewed eight players of "When Rivers Were Trails," a game that LaPensée collaborated on. Guzetti (2021) narrowed her focus to the media creations of a single female Navajo artist, conducting multiple interviews and e-mail conversations over two and a half years. Medina (2021) interviewed nine queer Black or Latinx men about their experiences in online gaming and online gaming groups. And Snodgrass et al. (2020) used a thematic analysis of nine gamer interviews in a study of gaming and resilience.

Despite the small size of my sample, it was highly diverse. It included connections to more than six tribes; included hybrid (combining Indigenous and non-Indigenous) identities; and included males and females (though no interviewees self-identified as LGBTQ+.) More detail about other aspects of player identities is included below in Table 2. Also below, Table 3 lists the names of the games' makers that I interviewed for ease of reference in the findings sections to come. I will refer to these interviewees as either players or makers. The makers all agreed to be identified in this dissertation by name, so that is how I will refer to them. Meanwhile, I will refer to the Indigenous game players I interviewed as Players A, B, C, E, D, and F to maintain the confidentiality of their identities and data.

Table 2.*Identities Represented in Indigenous Players of “Never Alone” Interviewees*

Tribal affiliations	Gender	Professions	Parent or non-Parent
Iñupiaq	Females: 4	Hotel manager; stand-up	Non-parents: 4
Cherokee	Males: 2	comic; screenwriter,	Parents: 2
Nakoda		academics (graduate student	
Cree		or professor); illustrator;	
Navajo / Diné		publisher; store owner; poet;	
Laguna Pueblo		teacher	
Anishinaabe			

Note: Many participants had more than one profession, or held a position in one profession while studying to enter a different one.

Table 3.*Names and Roles of Game Maker Interviewees*

Name	Role
Amy Fredeen	Vice president and chief financial officer of Cook Inlet Tribal Council
Alan Gershenfeld	President of E-Line Media (formerly E-Line Games)
Casey McDonnell	Artist at E-Line Media who worked on “Never Alone”

3.6. Adding Public Panel Discussions

By the second year of the pandemic, recruiting attempts were yielding no new Indigenous players who were willing to be interviewed. Face-to-face events were only beginning to return to normal schedules. I had hoped to recruit interviewees at Indigenous Pop Expo Prime, scheduled for March 2020, but that gathering became an online-only event. In spring of 2021, I sent emails with fliers to the directors of Native American centers at six colleges or universities within driving distance of Colorado State University. In summer 2021, I also sent recruiting fliers with a

Cherokee contact who was making a road trip by car to Texas for a wedding and would be stopping to stay with multiple Indigenous friends and contacts in different towns. None of these recruiting efforts produced additional interviewees.

Consequently, I began considering two additional ways to enrich my data field. The first way of enriching the data field was a set of publicly available media conversations about Indigenous representation, all recorded or published in 2020 and 2021. The first two of the three conversations were videotaped or Zoom-recorded panels made available by the digital Indigenous Pop Expo Prime in March 2020. I streamed and audio-recorded the panel discussions while digitally attending the expo. The first panel was on Indigenous representation in comic books and featured historian Michael Wilson and poet R. Vincent Moniz, Jr., who are both fans of and experts on Indigenous characters in comic books. The video recording of this panel was also posted on YouTube later. The second streamed panel was a previously recorded version of a Zoom session featuring four Indigenous women – Johnnie Jae, Rowi Shebala, Sonya Ballantyne and Tony Sanchez. Titled “The Good, the Bad, and Baby Yoda,” it featured the panelists discussing Indigenous representation in the “Star Wars” movie and television franchise. These two video-recorded conversations added six Indigenous voices discussing Indigenous identity and representation in two different pop-culture genres.

The third “panel” consisted of two journalism stories on Indigenous representation in stand-up comedy. Both online articles were likely occasioned by the publication of the book, *We had a little real estate problem: The unheralded story of Native Americans in comedy*, Kliph Nesteroff’s 2021 history of Indigenous comedians. The first article appeared on Vulture.com, a culture and media news and commentary website. The Vulture piece featured four Indigenous stand-up comedians: Adrienne Chalepah, Brian Bahe, Joey Clift, and Jackie Keliiaa, as well as

Nesteroff. The interview was conducted by Megh Wright and was transcribed, condensed and edited from a Zoom recording. The second story aired on the National Public Radio program *1A* and appeared on the program website as an interview transcript. Conducted by Jenn White, the interview featured Chalepah and Bahe, as well as Nesteroff. These two published group interviews, taken together, added the voices of four Indigenous stand-up comedians talking about their experiences in this branch of the entertainment industry. I grouped the two published stand-up comedy stories together because two of the performers were interviewed in both stories and both of the articles talked about representation of Indigenous people in comedy.

I collected the transcripts of these three conversations before I decided to add them to my data field; I was initially unsure whether they would be useful. But as I continued to try to recruit more players and code the player interviews that I had obtained, it struck me that these conversations might help answer my research questions, especially RQ1, about identity and RQ2, about representation. Once I began to code these transcripts, their contributions to emerging themes became clear.

Taken together, these three public conversations added 10 Indigenous speakers and 15 different tribal backgrounds to my data. For clarity and simplicity, I decided to call all three conversations panel discussions or panels and those who took part in them, panelists. Table 4 below lists the three conversations, the people who spoke in each one, and the Indigenous community or tribe(s) they identified as part of.

Table 4.*Panelists Who Speak in Published Indigenous Pop-Culture Conversations*

Conversation	Panelist	Tribal Affiliations
Indigenous Comic-book Characters		
	R. Vincent Moniz, Jr.	NuuÉtaare, enrolled citizen of the Three Affiliated Tribes on the Fort Berthold Indian Reservation
	Michael Wilson	Ojibwe
Star Wars and Baby Yoda		
	Sonya Ballantyne	Cree
	Johnnie Jae	Otoe-Missouria and Choctaw
	Rowie Shebala	Diné and Shiwi (Zuni)
	Toni Sanchez	Seminole
Indigenous Stand-up Comedy		
	Brian Bahe	Tohono O’odham, Hopi, Navajo
	Adrianne Chalupah	Kiowa
	Joey Clift	Enrolled Cowlitz member
	Jackie Keliiiaa	Washoe, Paiute, Native Hawaiian, Portuguese and Italian

3.7. Adding Reddit Commenters

Both of the Starkey articles (2015a and 2015b) had elicited a range of online responses, both positive and negative. This told me that video game players in general were readers of online media and that examining online conversations might provide interesting additional reactions to the video game. I chose Reddit for multiple reasons. First, E-Line Media felt that Reddit was an important platform where gamers gathered digitally to discuss video games. To coincide with the game’s release, E-Line sponsored an “AMA” – “Ask Me Anything” forum with the game’s design team. Second, some Reddit threads mentioned Starkey’s review of

“Never Alone” (2015a) and the later essay on why more Indigenous video games were needed (2015b). This indicated to me that some Reddit commenters were likely to be well-informed gamers who had played the game. The third reason for choosing Reddit over other digital discourse platforms was that comments were not limited to any specific length. This meant that posts and responses could discuss the game and Indigenous representation in a level of depth and detail that might address my research questions.

In early 2022, I conducted a search for mentions of “Never Alone” or Indigenous video games on Reddit and found enough threads and comments to conclude that it would be worthwhile to include them in my study. The disadvantage of using comments on Reddit as data was the relative anonymity of commenter demographics. I would not be able to check whether a Redditor claiming to be Indigenous was telling the truth. However, if a Redditor claimed Indigenous identity, but said that the Indigenous identities of characters or game makers was not important to them, that statement would concur with some of what Shaw’s (2011) participants told her. It would also serve as a signal that disconfirming data might exist, even if it was a faint signal. I knew that most of my player interviewees had enjoyed playing “Never Alone,” and that I had not yet been able to recruit any Indigenous players who did not like or enjoy it. I hoped that passive collection of Reddit data (Rocha-Silva, 2024) might turn up at least some players who had criticisms of the game.

I searched for threads as well as comments that mentioned the phrases “Never Alone,” “Indigenous video game,” “Native American video game,” “Native American representation,” “Indigenous representation” and “cultural games”. I found 12 threads that mentioned “Never Alone” or Indigenous video games in the question or statement that the thread’s creator posted to begin the discussion. I also found 36 more threads where “Never Alone” or Indigenous video

games were not part of a thread's originating content, but commenters brought up those topics once to five times.

I will use the word “commenters” to refer to all of the Reddit members who posted to the combined 48 threads. I anonymized these commenters with numbers as recommended in Rocha-Silva (2024) and Norman Adams (2024). However, I did not alter the text of their comments for two reasons. First, the risks of harm if a specific comment about “Never Alone” or Indigenous games in general were extremely low. Second, preserving the original content of the comments allows other researchers to arrive at their own interpretation of the comments' importance and relevance to the research questions.

4. Data Collection: From Life Story Questions to “Media Stories” Questions

To ask better questions about how and why “Never Alone” has or fails to have effects, I needed a grounding in participants' past media consumption. The stories that players had already experienced in media and in real life might have helped to shape who they felt they could become and who they believe they are now (Mora & Kang, 2016; Nakamura, 2016, Breen et al. 2017), which could also influence how they experienced “Never Alone.” At first I thought that life story interviews (Atkinson, 1998, and McAdams, 1993) would be an effective way to collect this data. Life-story questions ask participants to talk about the shape of their life as a story, detailing low points, high points and turning points. But in extensive consultations with the Alaska Area Institutional Review Board (AAIRB) in 2019, we determined that this approach ran the risk of re-traumatizing participants who were likely to have experienced generational and possibly personal trauma. I re-centered the protocol for the first interview on the role of “Never Alone” and other media stories in participants' lives. Interviewees might still describe negative events and the negative feelings those events provoked, but talking about Indigenous identity

through the lens of representative or non-representative stories would bring the conversation into a safer space that avoided re-traumatization. The new set of questions also gave interviewees more control over whether or not they told a story of a negative reaction or event. Situating interviewees as having critical power over their own storytelling better embodied the Indigenous paradigm's value of respect.

Some of the new questions invited interviewees to talk about media stories that made them feel excluded, but focused the inquiry on the features of the media story rather than personal pain. The complete revised interview protocol is included in Appendix A on page 250. Below are some examples of the "Story of My Media Stories" questions:

- As you made the transition into adulthood, what story or media creation meant the most to you, and why?
- As you began to make your own choices about what stories or media to consume, what became important to you about the characters or events of those stories?
- Were there characters, authors, actors, or shows you chose to follow or became a fan of?
- What about them inspired you to do that?
- Looking back over stories from this stage of your life -- from stories you may have been told by someone you know, to games, movies, TV, or books that you chose, which were the ones that made you feel the greatest sense of belonging?

In addition to using this revised protocol, I turned the recorder off at the end of each interview to read the following text: touched base by phone or email with my Indigenous participants shortly after the first interview to make sure that in the event that speaking with me had brought up any negative feelings, they knew they could talk with a professional in their

community about such feelings. Below is the language I read to each interviewee after letting them know that I had stopped recording:

As part of this project, I had to think back over my own life and write about stories and events that left me feeling included, or excluded. Experts estimate that up to half of adults have experience trauma, and some have experienced multiple traumas. I have had some of these in my own life, many years ago, and it was hard to write about them and talk about them, even though they are long in the past. If you experience any negative feelings from our conversations, I want to be sure that you aren't going through them alone. Is there someone that you know well, who you usually might talk to if uncomfortable feelings or everyday disappointments come up?

I was prepared to connect each participant with nearby mental health resources if interviewees gave a negative answer to this last question, but this did not happen with any of the six players I interviewed.

4.1. "Play" Interviews Become Follow-Up Interviews

Shaw's participants were active players of a wide variety of games (2010a). She conducted a "play interview" involving a game chosen by her participants. The play interview is a method devised by Schott and Horrell (2000) that involves having the player explain the game as she or he plays, while the interviewer asks questions or even joins the game. Unfortunately, because of the pandemic, I was unable to meet with interviewees in person to play the game with them. The format of "Never Alone" requires that both players be physically present in the same space. Instead, I substituted a second interview with questions based on the first interview.

4.2. Interview Procedures

The plan was to conduct the first interview by phone, video conference, or face to face according to interviewee preference. Given pandemic travel restrictions, all of my interviews were conducted via phone or on Zoom. This had some advantages. As a journalist I have found that some interviewees are actually more open and reflective if a first interview does not involve face to face physical presence, and that as an interviewer, I am better able to build rapport and listen intently without having to attend to visual information at the same time. In addition, I was no longer restricted by geography or travel funding. As it turned out, my players were located in Canada; Arizona; New Mexico; Michigan; and California.

I interviewed one of the players once and another player three times; the remaining four were each interviewed twice; I determined this frequency based on my review of the first interview and whether I felt it had provided answers to the interview protocol questions. I interviewed game makers Amy Fredeen and Alan Gershenfeld once and E-Line artist Casey McDonnell twice. During my first conversation with McDonnell, he told me that that Fredeen had died in a car accident the previous week. We completed our interview, but I knew it had been emotional at least on my end, so I requested a second interview with him and he agreed. The interview protocol for the game's makers is included in Appendix B.

All interviews were audio recorded with interviewee permission. We sometimes met via Zoom, but I recorded the audio only. Visual recordings entail a more complex IRB approval process and subject interviewee confidentiality to additional risk. Video recordings also use additional wireless bandwidth, which I could not assume interviewees would have. In addition, video recordings do not allow interviewees to move about as they speak with an interviewer. Audio recordings were automatically transcribed using the Otter app. I then listened to the audio

file multiple times to ensure accuracy of the transcripts. Once a transcript of the interview was completed and checked by me, it was sent to interviewees for any corrections or deletions.

4.5. Indigenous Player Confidentiality

Originally I had planned to ask each participant whether they would prefer to be named or to choose a pseudonym. One study performed in Yup'ik communities in Alaska used a hybrid approach to confidentiality because what communities' wishes were different; one village strongly felt that they wanted their community named and represented, but the second village strongly wished to remain anonymous (Ayunerak et al., 2014). The wishes of my interviewees were similarly varied, although one of my player-interviewees strongly wanted their registered tribal membership mentioned. Finally, an Indigenous author and sociologist strongly recommended that I keep all of my Indigenous players' identities confidential rather than name some and not others. I thus identify them with capital letters while disclosing some of the features of identity, such as tribal connections, that they discussed with me. Because my player interviewee pool is so small, I use the pronouns "they" and "them" for players because gender identity would make it easier for readers of this study to find their identity. The game's makers each agreed to be identified by name, and because their dissimilar roles in making the game would be important to understanding their data, I concurred. They are thus identified by name.

Interviewees were offered an incentive of \$50 after two interviews were completed, which was sent to them in a form they chose (Amazon.com gift card, Venmo, etc.) They could choose to have me donate this incentive to a charity of their choice. All three of the maker interviewees chose this option.

5. Data Analysis

For data that consisted in how people discussed playing or creating a video game, an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA; Eatough & Smith, 2012) seemed best suited for several reasons. First, my research questions were focused on particular, individual experiences – the playing of and making of “Never Alone” and other experiences of Indigenous (mis- or non-) representation in media. The IPA approach assumes that people are driven to make meaning from their experiences; once they are recorded and analyzed, these meanings can then be compared with theoretical perspectives. IPA is used frequently with qualitative data in health studies (Uche & Uche, 2023; Zhou et al, 2024) but has also been used recently to examine media effects on well- or ill-being (Firdaus et al., 2025; Heydari et al, 2014). It also has been used in studies of Indigenous well-being (Adcock et al., 2023) and of video games (Peat et al., 2023). IPA is fundamentally concerned with how individuals impose meaning on their lives in regard to identity and their sense of self, which are “existential matters of considerable importance for the participant” (Eatough & Smith, 2012, p. 13).

Second, IPA’s approach focuses on the individual experience while still looking for patterns as well as the context that surrounds those patterns, is well adapted to smaller samples that are somewhat homogenous in that each individual has experienced a similar thing. For example, I was looking for patterns and commonalities in important Indigenous identity elements (RQ1) among Indigenous players of “Never Alone.” Semi-structured interviews are the dominant data collection method, but not the only one, for IPA; and data collection is seen as a dialogue with interviewees given power over the shape of the conversation.

As described in Eatough and Smith (2012), I first read each transcript multiple times while listening to the audio to manually correct it. I then sent each interviewee their transcript to review, correct, and if needed, remove parts of the conversation (only one player interviewee did

this). I took minimal notes during these readings, saving most analysis until the transcripts were corrected by interviewees and imported into NVivo. Transcripts of the panel discussions and the text of the Reddit threads were also imported.

I began analysis, as IPA instructs, with several close detailed readings, breaking transcripts into paragraphs and coding them at the paragraph level into subthemes that did not necessarily answer my research questions. At first, looking at panelist, players, and commenters, I did not distinguish subthemes based on which data group was speaking. Once I had made this first coding pass, I noticed that my player interviewees were telling me many short stories that were key to their Indigenous identities, with only some of focused on media and representation. I made a second coding pass to give these stories titles. Breaking each of the player interviews and panel discussions into these short stories helped me bracket my research questions and look more broadly at what Indigenous participants were telling me, without being influenced by my research questions. I then returned to the subthemes and reorganized them thematically, attaching each subtheme to one of the research questions. Some subthemes applied to multiple research questions, and I allowed this duplication to remain as I began to write my findings sections.

The danger in such an approach was that the data would be condensed through a white, Settler-culture lens. I aimed to avoid that pitfall via a data verification process. In addition to allowing interviewees to read transcripts, I sent each interviewee a copy of any sections in which they were quoted or referred to in order to make sure that I had interpreted their interviews correctly. I also consulted an Indigenous researcher with a Ph.D. in sociology at a neighboring university to read the entire text and offer feedback.

5.1. The Roles of Triangulation and Crystallization

Triangulation in mixed-method, positivist and post-positivist research usually means the use of multiple types of research tools in gathering data, such as surveys as well as interviews, experimental methods, focus groups and critical textual analysis. Triangulation in a successful study means that results from each research method will show some concordance with results from the others (Tracy, 2020). In other words, the data can then be synthesized to produce meaning, and where concordance does not appear, the limits of the research can be identified.

However, according to Glesne (2016, p. 45), triangulation can also mean gathering data from multiple kinds of data sources. Thus, the ways that I expanded my group of data providers to include panelists and commenters increased my chances of locating important themes and subthemes that answered my research questions. Luker (2008) describes it as similar to triangulation in a mixed-method project, meaning that data gathered with different methods begin to produce similar themes and subthemes or at least echoes of them. Recently, crystallization's definition has been broadened to mean taking multiple paradigmatic approaches as well as conveying results in more than one way, for example, not just a research report, but also a creative work – i.e. a work of poetry, art, or a dramatization (Ellingson, 2009).

I did not intend this project to embody crystallization in the way Ellingson defines it, but believed that my theoretical, purposive sample is likely to provide some evidence of crystallization as Luker and Glesne described it. If, for example, panelists recounted similar types of stories or reflected on representation in a way similar to the player interviewees, that would be an example of crystallization. For another example, if the comment threads on Reddit and the players discussed the Cultural Insight videos similarly, and in a way that echoed game-

maker intentions, that would also be an example of crystallization. Views of the topic from the four distinct types of data contributors held the potential to deepen, amplify, or extend themes.

5.2. Ensuring Analysis Quality

Tracy (2010) lists eight measures of quality in qualitative research. Of her octet, “rich rigor,” “resonance,” and “meaningful coherence” are the three that can be fulfilled by the data the researcher gathers; the other five address topic choice, research questions, and project ethics. Saturation is not one of the eight. However, given that the data I would gather would include two types of interviewees, three panel discussions about Indigenous representation in other pop-culture genres, and two types of online comments, I felt reasonably confident that “rich rigor,” “resonance,” and “meaningful coherence” would result from the analysis.

Other communication scholars suggest several ways to maximize the chances that saturation will emerge. I will describe how I employed several of them below.

5.2.1. Constantly compare themes to one another as themes emerge. (Lindloff & Taylor, 2011; Constantinou, 2017). As I coded interview and panelist transcripts, the repetition and variation took on more depth and complexity. I noted methodological and interpretation questions as I coded, and followed them up with conversations with committee members.

5.2.2. Rigorously seek negative case instances (Morse, 1995). This was difficult given recruiting challenges. Indigenous players of an Indigenous video game who simply did not like the product may have been unwilling to share that negative impression with a non-Indigenous interviewer. However, negative case instances did make themselves known in the Reddit data.

5.2.3. Track theme emergence across interviews (Lindloff & Taylor, 2011; Constantinou et al., 2017). This technique became crucial as I coded the panel conversations. Because each of these conversations was explicitly about representation (though not about video

games), the sub-themes about representation became especially rich. I also noticed that some interviewees were telling entire anthologies of mini stories about themselves and their identity experiences. I thus began to separately title and code these stories, returning to player and panelist transcripts to extract possible stories.

5.2.4. Be specific when describing saturation. Morse (1995) recommends that researchers avoid conflating themes that have and have not achieved saturation. However, he also urges remembering that unexpected themes may partially or fully emerge and must not be ignored (Morse, 2015). Both of these phenomena – themes that were not fully saturated and unexpected themes -- occurred with my data. The Findings sections will describe unsaturated themes more fully, and the Future Research section will describe the unexpected theme of small stories.

5.3. The Role of Saturation

Saturation was a potential problem in my study, given the small number of interviewees.. Currently, however, theorists often disagree about what saturation consists of; what it requires; how one achieves it and how one knows when it has been achieved (Barbour, 2001; Francis et al., 2010; O'Reilly & Parker, 2013). Qualitative researchers use phrases such as “until saturation was achieved” and “until data were saturated” (O'Reilly & Parker, 2013). Calls for more detailed and instructive descriptions of saturation abound, especially Francis et al. (2010). The authors of that study reviewed 18 articles published over 16 months, finding that none of the articles were transparent about how saturation was achieved. There seemed to be little agreement about what kind of phenomenon saturation is.

5.4. Signals That Saturation Has Been Achieved

According to Lindloff & Taylor (2011) and Morse (1995, 2015), when a set of themes are saturated, the data from which that set is drawn will be both broad and deep.. One researcher interviewed by Glesne (2011) described achieving saturation as being no longer able to be surprised by the content of an interview – in fact, when a certain amount of boredom had set in. For me, however, boredom never occurred with the people I interviewed nor during data analysis.

FINDINGS 1: IDENTITY

This section addresses RQ1: *How do players of “Never Alone,” pop-culture panelists, and Reddit commenters discuss important elements of Indigenous identities?*

To understand the Indigenous players’ experience of “Never Alone,” my interview protocol was designed to gain a picture of each player’s consumption of media stories, especially those they enjoyed or rejected and the reasons for their reactions. I felt these reasons might hold the key to important elements of their own identities and whether they wanted to see those elements reflected in media. The complete interview protocol is included in Appendix A. Among the questions about media stories outside of “Never Alone,” for example, are:

- Tell me about the most important story you experienced during [childhood, adolescence, etc.], and why it was important.
- How did it come to you – through a book, someone in your life, through a movie, a game, etc.?
- Did you experience it by yourself or with others?
- Looking back over these stages and stories of your life, from stories you may have been told by someone you know, to games, movies, TV, or books that you chose, which were the ones that made you feel the greatest sense of belonging?

As part of conversing about “Never Alone,” players discussed features of their identities and the identities of characters important to them. In the panel conversations, the panelists did the same for the three media genres their conversations focused on: stand-up comedy, comic books, and the science fiction “Star Wars” universe. Meanwhile, as part of the Reddit threads

where they commented, Redditors sometimes discussed elements of Indigenous identity, but this data was by nature less rich and Indigeneity was not verifiable.

Across the players, panelists, and commenters, four identity-related themes emerged:

1. Identity is specific and lives in details;
2. Identity includes connection;
3. Indigenous identities are carefully curated through tensions and struggle.

Below, descriptions of each theme will show the depth of what players and panelists said, as well as what the Reddit commenters added to these themes.

Theme 1: Identity Lives in the Details

When “Never Alone” or another media creation portrayed a specific detail of a cultural practice, players and panelists responded with delight, humor, and/or recognition. The granularity of these details was the important thing. Details, whether visual, cultural, or narrative, impressed these Indigenous people because only a depth of knowledge drawn from personal experience or meticulous study could lead to the creator of a media product reproducing such details correctly. Players and panelists noticed when media creators had done this work. When the creators failed to get the details correct, that failure was also noticed, and it was sometimes taken as a sign of not just ignorance, but an absence of caring.

For example, Player D described appreciating the realism of how the bolo is used in “Never Alone,” as a tool that it takes a player some time to learn to use. In the game, Nuna doesn’t have the bolo from the beginning of her quest. She must complete a task to earn it. She helps the Owl Man recover his drum from the Little People, and when she does this, he gives her the bolo to thank her. Then, she must learn to wield it. “You’re not just like madly shooting, like you would in a lot of games. You have to actually learn this skill, to move your joystick around

in a circle and release it at a certain time,” said Player D. In real life, as in the game, Player D said, tribal identity and cultural practices are both learned and earned. Player C described their daughter appreciating the fact that Nuna, the Iñupiaq girl, looked like her. Player C also said that the game narrator, who speaks in Iñupiaq, sounded like their Iñupiaq grandfather. And Player A appreciated the fact that the story in “Never Alone” came from an actual Iñupiaq story and storyteller, because their own Indigenous group also had its stories that were passed down and told to children to teach them values and keep them safe.

Indigenous players and panelists also noticed when creators failed to accurately portray Indigenous identity. The two comic-book panelists (Wilson and Moniz Jr.) noted how ironic it was to expect elements of real Indigenous identities in a media genre that features people who transform into animals and possess superpowers. But that didn’t preclude the panelists from mocking the lack of realism in the way comic-book artists drew Indigenous peoples’ physical features. Wilson joked about how artists drew the bodies of female Indigenous superheroes, calling them “thin girls that can show their breasts and hind ends simultaneously.” Of the men, he said, “Not a frybread bod among them. Nobody’s eatin’ well.” Even though the bodies of nearly all identities were exaggerated to fit into the medium of comics, Moniz noticed and pointed out when an Indigenous character was drawn with a shorter, rounder physique.

When it came to clothing, however, Wilson cut Chris Claremont, creator of “New Mutants” character Danielle “Dani” Moonstar, a little bit of slack for drawing Dani wearing lots of stereotypical fringe and feathers. Wilson told panel attendees that Moonstar’s creator was born in the 1960s and likely would have been drawing Dani in the 1980s:

He would have seen all those AIM [American Indian Movement] guys on TV during the standoff at Wounded Knee. And that would have been part of his pop-culture

consciousness. That was his conscious way of identifying Native people. That's why, like, a ton of his Native people have headbands and like, fringed boots at one point.

(Michael Wilson)

Here, Wilson speculated that Claremont's depictions might have been an attempt at accuracy that the artist based on contemporary photographic or televised images of actual Indigenous people. Moniz, his fellow panelist, disagreed. He said of Moonstar: "She does randomly have a feather on, and I don't know about you guys, but I don't randomly go around with feathers or leather wraps or super tight leather vests."

The "Star Wars: The Good, The Bad, and Baby Yoda" panelists gave testimony that tribal details and the meanings that live in those details matter a great deal. Panelist Rowie Shebala pointed out Princess Leia's hairstyle and its similarity to traditional Hopi hairstyles.¹ But *not just any Hopi hair*. Fellow panelist Johnnie Jae added that in Hopi culture, this specific hairstyle was exclusively worn by young, unmarried women who were in leadership positions. Because Leia is a leader of her people and a lead character, the hairstyle is appropriate to her status. That led Jae to interpret the visual reference as inspiration, rather than appropriation:

"So to see that hairstyle and to kind of learn about the symbolic meaning of that to the Hopi people, like I thought that was really cool in the way they incorporated that because it's not the exact hairstyle, either. It's just something that is based on that style." (Johnnie Jae)

¹"Star Wars" creator George Lucas has been quoted as saying that he based Princess Leia's hairstyle on those of female Mexican revolutionaries in Pancho Villa's time. Some online authors, however, argue that those revolutionaries were likely inspired by the hair of young Hopi women of marriageable age.

1.1. Getting the Details Correct

What I eventually noticed about the players interviewees is that each was a knowledge creator – an illustrator, academic, poet, publisher, comic – in their own right. And in their roles as media or knowledge creators, players described how hard *they* worked to ensure that the details of their work were correct when they were portraying an Indigenous topic or person. Player D talked about their job working at a living-history museum and knowing how to set up the two different kinds of tipis used by various nomadic Plains tribes: tipis made of elk hide as well as those made of the much heavier buffalo hide. Player A was commissioned to illustrate a book by authors from a tribe that shared some cultural similarities with their own tribe, but there were also crucial differences:

“So there’s just some things that I would have to ask questions about, like say, the baby swing. There’s, there’s pieces of wood that go there and then some, a little rope that goes around the middle part. And I didn’t know because our culture, well, our tribe does it a little differently.” (Player A)

In addition to players wanting things to be made correctly, panelists wanted things to be *said* correctly. Stand-up comedy panelist Jackie Keliiaa – pronounced Kee LEE-ee-AH-ah, according to the comic’s YouTube channel – talked about her efforts to get others to pronounce her last name correctly. She is “Native Hawaiian and Native American on my father’s side, Portuguese and Italian on my mother’s side ... which somehow, makes me Mexican,” she says on her YouTube channel. Keliiaa’s home is in California’s San Francisco Bay Area, and a sufficient number of Native Hawaiians live there that most people pronounce her last name correctly. But one person – a booker for a comedy showcase, an important gatekeeper role in

Keliiaa's career, refused: "[She] was like, 'I'll just say 'Kelia.' And I was like, 'Bitch, I'm never working with you again,'" Keliiaa said.

Reddit commenters voiced concerns about being accurate in multiple threads about "Never Alone." They discussed how to correctly describe the tribe portrayed in "Never Alone," including the correct usage and meanings of "Iñupiaq" and Iñupiat" as well as when to describe people as "Inuit," "American Indian," "Native American," "First Nations," and Indigenous. One commenter whose words implied an Indigenous identity tried to untangle these distinctions"

It's complicated. ... Some groups agree that American Indian is cool, some groups say that Native American is better. Some folks still think First Nations is the best option, and then there are those who don't give a shit or who want you to identify them by their tribe.

(Commenter 1)

Players and panelists agreed with Commenter 1: The work of staying up to date on terminology should fall to non-Indigenous people wanting to interact with Indigenous people. Explanations take effort and time on the part of Indigenous folks, they said, and sometimes that effort is wearisome. As Player F said, "There's a thing called Google ... We're not going to spend our time explaining it to you. We're going to spend our time talking about the fun things that we want to talk about."

1.2. Correctness Includes Real-Life Tribal Affiliations

In addition to getting the details correct, creators need to portray the rich variety and breadth of Indigenous cultures, players, and panelists. Or, as writer Daniel Starkey put it in his essay for Polygon.com (2015, paragraph 5). "What makes Natives different is that there's so many tribes, nations, and peoples and each of those have microcosms of their own." They wanted creators to choose a *real* tribe and portray it faithfully. For example, Player D wanted it

known that the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma is different from the United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians or the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians. To Player D, “enrolled citizen” is an important distinction.

I really take care to say that we’re enrolled citizens, because I think by saying you’re an enrolled citizen, it emphasizes that we are a nation, that we do have sovereignty, that I am a dual citizen of the United States and of the Cherokee Nation. And so I’m very specific when I choose how I’m going to identify myself. (Player D).

Likewise, Player A said that playing the 2019 video game “This Land is My Land” was disappointing because players had to assume a generic Native American identity:

There’s no specific tribe that they use, they make up all the different names that kind of sound Native, but they’re not. They don’t really mean anything ... They just kept it general to like, not get in trouble for doing something wrong, but also generalizing tribes like that is kind of just as bad. (Player A)

When writers or producers failed to connect a character or environment to a specific, actual tribe or Indigenous group, players and panelists mocked the creators without mercy. Comic-book panelist Wilson pulled no punches in describing a generic Indigenous comic book character:

Miriam Delgado, from some random South American tribe, nobody knows. Because hey, looking in an encyclopedia and just picking a tribe is a lot of fucking work, and then you got to stick with it, right? And then you got to pay attention, and [sarcastically] continuity is not a hallmark of good comics! (Michael Wilson)

1.3. Implications of the Desire for Correctness

When identity details are faithfully rendered, audience members may feel a need fulfillment that partakes of a mix of SDT’s theorized needs for autonomy and competence. When

media consumers feel that important identity elements are recognized, this may allow them to feel a greater degree of autonomy fulfillment when a character exercises their autonomy. My Indigenous speakers compare this experience of being known to consuming media that didn't include their important identity elements. When speakers expressed an opinion that a media representation fell short, I interpreted these critiques as assertions of autonomy and competence, as Indigenous media users putting their knowledge to work, as saying, "This is *not* how I / my group should be portrayed." They chose to express an opinion, and believed they were competent to develop and express it. Commenter 1 could explain the complexities of the various general terms for Indigenous people, as well as the terms they preferred and that others preferred. Panelist Moniz said that they did not randomly go around wearing fringed leather or feathers, but Wilson responded that American Indian Movement protesters might have done so during the time when an artist was drawing a particular comic book. They were making fine distinctions about how the groups that they belong to should be described or drawn. By making such statements, speakers symbolically placed themselves among their tribe's culture bearers, as messengers of the proper way to represent a collective. This is a highly competent and autonomous role.

Details portrayed in a way that Indigenous audiences recognize as authentic convey respect – Clark's last stage in a minoritized group's trajectory to full portrayal in media products (Clark, 1969). But when the speakers in this study saw portrayals that fell short, they want media makers to listen to their criticisms and resolve to do better. They wanted a communitarian dialogue (Christians et al, 1993). The speakers' critiques show Indigenous people in the act of creating communities that can wield collective autonomy to nag, push, and cajole media creators to learn the subtleties of their cultures. These critiques are akin to those that online audiences

made of TV producers using “Bury Your Gays” tropes (Waggoner, 2018), and they make a similar demand: that media creators behave as a group-in-community with their audiences. Indigenous speakers in this study wanted to create the kind of communitarian, dialogic relationship between media and audience that Christians et al. (1993) describe. In this relationship, the best way to portray Indigenous identity gets hashed out in a conversation. When media creators are in such a relationship with Indigenous people, they can fulfill some of the requirements for visual sovereignty, namely centering Indigenous people and accurately depicting traditions (Rickard, 2007, 2017).

Theme 2: Identity Includes Connection

With tribal identity comes connection to specific histories, traditions, practices, and languages, as well as relationships with communities, human and non-human others, and the environment. The players and panelists, and to a lesser degree, Reddit commenters, unpacked these connections in their interviews and comments about how “Never Alone” and other media made them feel included or excluded as well as connected or disconnected to important others and groups.

2.1. Connection to Language

For the players and panelists, languages occupied an important place in the cultural and historical connections that support Indigenous identity. Players appreciated the use of Iñupiaq language in “Never Alone.” Player C explained that their grandparents were sent to boarding school, so they didn’t speak much Iñupiaq, and he never learned the language. But when the narrator in “Never Alone” speaks, he speaks in Iñupiaq; players can choose a language for the subtitles. The use of the Indigenous language hooked Player C’s daughter immediately:

She loved it. She tried to say the words. Within several months in, she, she understood; she was through with the subtitles. ... For her, it was like, she was a real Eskimo. ... part of the appeal of the game is sort of connecting with your culture, because through boarding school and relocation, foster care, you know, me and my daughter don't have that connection to our culture. (Player C)

Player F said the video game being in the Iñupiaq language struck an emotional nerve: "This is so – it's all in their language, it's so beautiful." Player D mentioned the prominent role the United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians has played in preserving Cherokee language. And Star Wars panelist Johnnie Jae described the subtle homage to Indigenous languages she perceives when Princess Leia speaks Diné.

2.2. Connections to Cultural Practices

Players, panelists, and commenters alike described cultural practices important to their tribe or tribes, such as storytelling, dance, and the making of clothing. All of the players talked about how "Never Alone" and its "Cultural Insight" videos connected them to Iñupiaq culture through the role of storytelling. Player B and Player F, as well as one of the comic book panelists, talked about how in their specific tribal cultures, there was a particular time of the year for storytelling – usually winter. For Player B, there had to be snow on the ground in order for certain stories to be told. It was the same for comic-book panelist Moniz; his family only told fantastical stories from his tribal group in winter. When he found comic books as a child, it was a revelation, because he could now enjoy fantastical stories during other times of the year. Commenters also discussed the use of storytelling, with two commenters agreeing on the nature of Indigenous stories from the far northern tribes. Such stories were often "creepy as hell" (Commenter 25).

Players E and F mentioned being protective of stories that were not meant to be shared outside the tribe. And Player F inferred from reading about “Never Alone” that the game’s makers must have had similar protective impulses about which stories could be shared and how they could be shared:

I would imagine discussions were not only around economic development ... but also, what story are we comfortable telling? And what story are we comfortable putting out there? And I think the magnificent part about [“Never Alone”] is, it’s a very simple story, right? And, and Indigenous people share those kinds of stories all over. (Player F)

Comic book panelists Wilson and Moniz bantered about the backstory that Wilson invented for comic-book character Pow-wow Smith: that the character had been named after a real person who was culturally important on the pow-wow circuit in northern Minnesota. Creating, and arguing about, this backstory for a fictional character allowed both panelists to appreciate the humor in the name and the way that they had connected it to traditional Indigenous social events.

Moniz: The greatest name ever! I’m gonna name my daughter Pow-wow Moniz.

Wilson: That would be dope! Comin’ to the christening ... I always thought they named him after Johnny Smith. I always assumed ...

Moniz: That’s way too inside.

Wilson: Johnny Smith is from Red Lake; he taught like half of Minnesota how to sing and grass dance. No exaggeration, half of Minnesota. (R. Vincent Moniz, Jr., and Michael Wilson)

For Player D, the Cultural Insight video about caribou skin clothing called to mind a story from their professional life working in museums. A 100-year-old Siberian Yup’ik parka made from seal gut had been “collected” in 1892, Player D said. The parka had been stored “crumpled

up into a ball,” and the museum wanted to display it as part of an exhibition they were developing in consultation with a Yup’ik community. Museum workers were afraid that opening up the parka would severely damage it:

So they’re asking the Yup’ik elders and community members how to do it safely and they’re like, “Just put it in water. It’ll perk right back up.” And of course, like anyone in a museum or whatever, they’re like, “Oh no, we can’t just stick anything in water!” So they have this little squirt bottle and they’re like slowly squirting it and opening it a little, and yeah... [the elders] were right! It was fine. (Player D)

2.3. Connection to Values Through Storytelling and Humor

Players and panelists discussed the important role of values in an Indigenous identity and praised “Never Alone” for its highlighting of Iñupiaq values such as interdependence, valuing the land, and respecting other forms of life. They discussed the unique way Indigenous stories tend to do this – through humor or parable. Player C praised the subtle way that Indigenous stories often impart lessons, comparing “Never Alone” to the acclaimed movie “Smoke Signals”: “Just sort of tell a story without telling you flat out, you know, leaving the audience smart enough to connect the dots. That’s basically what the game is.” Star Wars panelist Rowie Shebala compared Yoda’s way of talking in riddles to the way her elders conveyed lessons on how to act: “It’s never been ‘oh, no, don’t do this,” she said. For Player F, the stories in “Never Alone” – the ones told to help Nuna understand the importance of her journey – evoke similar stories from Player F’s culture that worked to transmit values:

“So you see in Pueblo style, you can see traditional trickster stories, especially coyote stories ... Coyote has been very helpful. ... Coyote is the one that tells you, like, “Yeah,

don't do that. Don't be like this dumbass. Don't be greedy. Don't be stupid." Right?

(Player F)

I expected that Indigenous stand-up comics would discuss the role of humor in Indigenous identity, but other panelists and the players mentioned it as well. Mainly, however, they mentioned it in the context of connection to community. For example, Player B shared how her family used humor as a way of coping with collective grief:

It just kind of reminded me of my own family, of how we told stories that was, like, humorous, especially in the time of like, grief. ... When you go to like a Native funeral, I always hear, like laughter, and I always thought that was so strange, but like, you get kind of used to it. (Player B)

But soon after the above description of Native humor, Player B recounts the limits of using humor as a coping strategy.

I noticed that me and my friend, we can't do it. We can't do it with each other, but it makes sense. I think it makes it less painful. No, I don't think it makes it less painful. I think it makes it more tolerable. (Player B)

For Star Wars panelist Rowie Shebala, humor and teasing are the way her culture is transmitted:

It's so funny because you see how Yoda was treating Luke when he went to Dagoba to be trained? And [Yoda] was just giving [Luke] a hard time, harassing him, you know, and just being obnoxious to him. And I was like, "that is our family when they're trying to teach us something." Like, we never really take it seriously. (Rowie Shebala)

2.4. Connection to Community

Players and panelists understood that supporting their communities was an important part of Indigenous identity. Player F characterized Nuna's journey in "Never Alone" as a quest to

save her village, and they said that monsters like the Blizzard Man are common in many Indigenous groups' stories because they stem from a common archetype, one that would destroy the community and as a result, the individuals within it.

I really like where this comes from, 'cause it's a young woman trying to save her community from a monster. And we all have monster stories, right?... We had a concept of monsters, and monsters were those who would destroy the community. They were against the community; they were against the people. (Player F)

Player E discussed feeling protective of stories from their tribal community and wanting to respect the relationships that gave them access to those stories, rather than just using the stories in their work or sharing them without express permission. "I don't want the relationships that I have with people [in their community] to be just extractive in those inherent ways," Player E said. Stand-up comedy panelists Joey Clift and Adrienne Chalepah discussed responsibilities to their community of fellow Native comedians, the need to pay forward the support that they had received from groundbreaking Indigenous comedians.

2.5. Connection to Important Others

For players A, B, C, and D, talking about "Never Alone" included discussions of connections with relatives or close friends – sometimes, the same people they played the game with. They also mentioned valued non-human others or important people who were no longer alive. These relationships to *specific* others, rather than to an Indigenous community involved in group practices, underpinned their connection to culture. For players C and B, it was the daughter and niece, respectively, with whom they played "Never Alone" and to whom they themselves acted as a guide to culture. Player C's grandmother told the story of why Little Diomedes Island in Alaska has no alcohol to this day, because a man got drunk, started a fight and

“got his nose bit off and became a Catholic.” At the end of her life, Player C’s grandmother had a stroke and began speaking Iñupiaq again, though her sisters were the only ones in the family who could translate. Player D talked about her Cherokee mother whom she accompanied to pow-wows as a teenager.

Some panelists also brought these family or close relationships into the panel conversations. For comedy panelist Brian Bahe, it was his grandmother who connected him to his culture. Panelists told of family or chosen family who were honored by the selection of a descendant’s name. The women on the Star Wars panel discussed the moment in the most recent movie trilogy when Han Solo, played by Harrison Ford, calls his son “Ben” – and the panelists realized that Solo has named his son after the Jedi character Obi-Wan Kenobi: “I really liked that little Native touch of that. Because like so many people will name their kids after friends. Like Raven family generally,” Sonya Ballantine said.

Relationships with non-humans and culture-related spirit beings were also important connections to Indigenous identity. Player B described the little people in “Never Alone,” a group of beings that Nuna and Fox must outsmart to capture the Owl Man’s drum and return it to him: “I was impressed with how [the game makers] did it, because that’s how stories I’ve heard about them show them, that they’re mysterious people” (Player B). Player E talked about the way Indigenous people’s relationship with the supernatural is portrayed – as simply a part of life. They used a character in the TV series “Reservation Dogs” as an example:

Deer Woman is a character in the series. And yeah, that’s also one of like, the cool aspects of this particular type of Indigenous storytelling is that it is it does involve elements of the supernatural, supernatural beings and so on, but the character in the show doesn’t treat it as such. That’s just how the world is. (Player E)

Players A, B, C and D commented on the relationship between Nuna and Fox as well as their own relationships with animals. Player A described their white Chihuahua-Pomeranian mix as looking a bit like Fox: “So like, when Fox dies -- in ‘Never Alone,’ not in ‘Fox Tales’ – it’s so sad to me, like the saddest thing ever. I definitely did cry a little bit at that part,” Player A said. Player B, who played “Never Alone” with a niece, said the niece was fascinated by foxes and had written a story for school about a family of foxes that raised a little boy.

2.6. Connection to Land and Environment

Players and panelists felt that connection to land and landscape was important to Indigenous identity because in many Indigenous cosmologies, respect for the land that provides food and shelter is an important value. Whether that connection was felt while playing “Never Alone” or while experiencing other media stories, land and environment were noticed when they were portrayed with accuracy and specificity. Player D remarked on the visual landscape of the TV series “Reservation Dogs” and Sterlin Harjo’s other work:

Oklahoma, for so long, that’s been no man’s land, you know, that’s Indian Country. ...

There’s never really considered to be a lot there, at really any point in U.S. history. So for [director Sterlin Harjo] to say, “Hey, Oklahoma is beautiful, and there’s amazing stories here, and everyone is missing it, and I am going to share those stories.” ... I remember there’s this film he did called “Barking Water,” and there’s just these long shots of the road. And there was something about those long shots of the road that helped me not feel homesick. (Player D).

Film critics sometimes characterize the landscape in a movie as having the same importance as a character. But Player B said they believed that this conception of land was too limited:

There's not a category of character that exists to kind of contain the way the land is in "Never Alone." ... I think about it in like elemental terms. Like the wind is even a kind of ... there's moments in the game where you're standing on one side of the cliff and you have to reach the other side, and ... like, falling and understanding that the wind can carry you. (Player B).

BELOW IS ML's FEEDBACK on THEME 2

2.7. Implications of the Desire for Connectedness

Ryan and Deci (2017a) emphasize that relatedness is an important need whether a culture is considered to prioritize individualism or collectivism. For the speakers in my study, connections to language, cultural practices, values, community, important others, and land were important aspects of their own identity. If consuming media is an activity that can fulfill relatedness needs, it seems logical that portrayals of Indigenous people who also prize the same connections listed above might do so. Speakers described an abundance of types of connections and an abundance of examples of each kind. . Multiple players discussed how meaningful the use of the Inupiaq language in "Never Alone" was to them. Player C's daughter enjoyed learning to speak Inupiaq from the subtitles on the narration in "Never Alone"; that activity made her feel like "a real Eskimo," connected to her heritage through language. Player B spoke of "Never Alone" dramatizing how the wind of the Arctic coast could help Nuna and Fox progress through the game's puzzles, illustrating the nature of connection to land and environment

Relatedness to land and environment was not discussed in the sources I consulted on SDT or communitarianism ethics, but Indigenous self-determination and visual sovereignty scholars place it among the most important of relationships (Teves, 2014; Peterson, 2013). An Indigenous self-determination framework asks whether Indigenous communities are allowed to control their

own systems, including the ancestral and traditional lands that are an important source of well-being. The health of the land, its plants and animals, and its people are inseparable in an Indigenous self-determination perspective (Marino, 2015, Sakakibara, 2017). This type of relatedness is especially pertinent for Alaska communities where Indigenous control of hunting, fishing, mineral, and energy rights are often contested, and tribes have lived on their lands for millenia (Ayunerak et al., 2014). Meanwhile, a visual sovereignty framework requires that portrayals of Indigenous people consider culture as place-based. Creators should be aware of the people who have held, used, or journeyed through the places they portray, whether they are sparsely populated or urban. Varga (2022), a game maker himself, questions whether *any* representation of ancestral lands can be created without media consumers assuming that any relevant land struggles are over and done with.

Theme 3: Carefully Curating Identity Through Struggle

At many points, players, panelists and commenters recounted delicate balancing acts that they as Indigenous people must perform. Such acts could be social or solitary, and involved ways they had fought stereotypes, disconnection, or erasure in their own lives. Panelists had exchanges about how media characters evoked, or fail to evoke, features of Indigenous identities, and how media creators might shape characters in better, more accurate and more connected ways. These speakers had collected examples where media portraying such struggles were able to inform and educate, rather than entrap Indigenous characters. They also applauded places and media creations that managed to avoid making Indigenous identities exclusively about struggle. According to players and panelists, and to a lesser extent commenters, these careful balancing acts occur during media consumption, creation, and when Indigenous people are just living their lives.

Player D told the story of being bullied at a Native college-preparatory high school in New Mexico. The reason: being only half Native. Player D responded by writing an essay about the Irish half of their identity. Player D read the essay before the entire school, and the local newspaper published it. “It was basically like, ‘Well, let me tell you about my Irish side. And let me tell you that we’ve been living with colonization a lot longer than you. So you are barking up the wrong tree,’ ” Player D said. After the reading and publication of the essay, the bullying stopped.

When told about the video game “Blood Quantum,” created by Renee Nejo (the same player of “Never Alone” that Starkey (2015b) had interviewed), Player D became intrigued, because assessing a person’s degree of Native heritage provokes controversy within Native communities:

[Blood quantum] is such a big issue in Indian Country and, you know, we hold onto it now as this identifier. But it was never our way to identify our own. It’s the way that the government wanted to identify us so they knew when we all disappeared and then they could void the treaties. ... What I don’t agree with, is this idea that somehow you are less than, if you’re something else. And there’s always something else, right? Like you grew up in the city, you didn’t grow up on the reservation. On the reservation, you don’t speak your language – like it’s this, to be a real Indian, the list of stuff that we would have to check off is incredibly immense and complicated. And that’s just ridiculous. We decide for ourselves who we are. (Player D)

Player D thus had experiences defending the non-Indigenous side of her family history, and those experiences informed her reaction to Indigenous people trying to structure a hierarchy of how “to be a real Indian.” Player F recounted being tempted to write an opinion article about Covid-19

and Indigenous communities. In the end, they refrained, because they anticipated a stereotypical reaction from non-Indigenous media and commenters, even if the reactions were well-meaning. “It was like, man, Western society loves dead and dying Indians. Dude, that’s their thing, right? And journalists ... won’t show how Native communities are actually being resilient and focusing through on this,” Player F said. Comedians Adrienne Chalepah and Joey Clift said they wrestled with how to identify themselves in their comedy. Chalepah said some comedians told her to conceal her Indigenous roots if she wanted to achieve crossover appeal. Clift said he came gradually to the conclusion that he needed to include his tribal affiliation so that aspiring Native comedians would know that there was a place for them in comedy: “Hopefully somebody going through the UCB performer page sees ‘enrolled Cowlitz Indian tribal member, Native American,’ et cetera,” Clift said.

3.1. Native and Female: Intersectional Tensions

Another group of tensions for players and panelists emerged when gender and Native identities combined. Player E described a conversation on the TV show “Reservation Dogs.” Elora, one of the teenagers, wants her group of friends, including her male friend Bear, to raise enough money to leave Oklahoma for California. But the others keep finding other ways to spend that nest egg, which Elora finds immensely frustrating. When Elora and Bear’s mother talk, “it just taps this interesting, like almost paralleling thing ... about these particular burdens of what it is to be a Native woman, trying to stay strong, alongside these, like, kind of broken men or boys,” Player E said. Perhaps the most articulate expression of the balancing act Native women are required to do comes from comedy panelist Adrienne Chalepah:

Being a woman and being a Native woman, and I just get sick of the narrative that we’re just these helpless victims, and so I constantly – especially since that’s not the case in my

own experience, I come from a family that is full of really strong matriarchs and to the point where it can feel like the men are the victims ... So I try to just balance out the narrative a little bit, and especially playing with femininity and masculinity, because that's another thing I'm passionate about. (Adrianne Chalepah)

3.2. Resistance as Part of Indigenous Identity

Identity, expressed through art, history, or story, has power, and the material items that express it have power, players and panelists told me. Sometimes that power is protective in the face of colonization and the indignities and ill-being it inflicts.

Player F spoke of media accounts of COVID-19 in Navajo communities, and the rush of non-Native media to tell yet another story of “dead and dying Indians” rather than the actual things Native communities were doing to protect their people from the pandemic. When Player D described divisions and hierarchies that still exist within Native communities around the issue of full blood versus mixed blood, they called it a “difficult” conversation, a “family conversation,” and one that they believed was an aftereffect of colonization. Star Wars panelists Johnnie Jae and Rowie Shebala compared the armor that the Mandalorian wears to the symbolic and protective effects of cultural identity:

You know, our culture is kind of like that armor that we wear too. It's something that we use to protect [ourselves] as well. We're out here trying to, you know, survive in this colonial state. And at the same time, it's also there to kind of keep us grounded, and to remind us of who we are, our resiliency, our strength and even our brilliance. (Johnnie Jae).

One panelist told a particularly striking story of learning about an Indigenous land protest, weaving together many of the themes of Indigenous identity listed in this section:

accuracy, community, struggle, connections to land, and the need to remember history and culture. Star Wars panelist Rowie Shebala spoke about the T-shirt she is wearing during the video panel “Star Wars: The Good, The Bad, and Baby Yoda.” The shirt depicts an Empire Stormtrooper and a person in Native dress standing face to face, practically helmet-to-eyebrows (Fig. 2). The image is an homage to an historic photograph taken during the 78-day Oka standoff in Toronto, Canada, in 1990 (Fig. 3). The protest erupted when the Quebec government attempted to take land, including a burial ground, from the Kanesatake Mohawk for a golf course and townhouse development. Ultimately, the standoff failed to halt the development or preserve the Kanesatake Mohawk’s burial ground. The months of media coverage, however, were viewed as a mixed win for First Nations people in Canada (CBC/Radio Canada, n.d.). Newspaper accounts highlighted the Mohawk people’s connections to land, culture, and history. It reminded Canadians and North Americans that Indigenous people still existed and would defend their rights.

Figure 2.

Enoch and Manasseh Endwarrior Explain Their Art at Albuquerque Comic Con



Note: The Endwarrior brothers, Enoch, left, and Manassah, explain the inspiration for their graphic art that blends Star Wars images with themes of Indigenous pride and resistance, shown on Manassah's hoodie. The photo, taken by Ravonelle Yazzie, appeared in the Navajo Times. (Yazzie, 2020, Jan. 23, Design company celebrates links between 'Star Wars,' indigenous culture." <https://navajotimes.com>)

Figure 3.

“Face to Face,” Newspaper Photograph Taken During the Oka Crisis



Note: The photograph, taken by freelancer Shaney Komulainen on Sept. 1, 1990 for The Canadian Press, shows soldier Patrick Cloutier and Ojibway economics student Brad LaRoque. (Lazowsky, A., 2015, Sept. 20, “One photograph shaped how everyone saw the Oka crisis,” CBC.com).

In the real world, where Indigenous people try to remember their resiliency, strength, and brilliance, modern dress such as the T-shirt referencing the Oka standoff can be seen as armor, as a garment that announces identity to those in the know, but allows the wearer to choose whether and how to tell the story. Shebala bought the T-shirt at an Indigenous Comic Con, where Navajo brothers Enoch and Manasseh Endwarrior told her the story of the standoff. The original image is

part of history. Shebala wears the reimagined image in the present. But the image itself conceptually carries Indigenous resistance into the future, as if to say, “we will always defend our land.” Shebala said that wearing the T-shirt and answering questions about it gave her the opportunity to keep the story of the Oka protests alive for a new generation:

“A lot of people would be able to ask me questions about this shirt, and then, [I could say] “Okay, there’s this,” and then at the same time I’m educating them about something our history, within our, within this world, that they didn’t know about.” (Rowie Shebala)

Another T-shirt story, recounted by Player D, tells of the creation of a second real-life, tangible identity garment, again demonstrating their protective power. During the Dakota Access Pipeline protests on the Standing Rock Reservation in 2016 and 2017, a school-age girl was assigned to “dress up like an Indian” for a class.

And so she just drew on a shirt, it said “NO DAPL,” and she went to school. I just thought, “that’s amazing. That was amazing.” Because that is – that’s what it should be. And it shouldn’t be people trying to make a vest out of a paper grocery bag, or a headdress or something ridiculous, you know. (Player D)

As fellow Star Wars panelist Toni Sanchez explained, acts of resistance are woven into Indigenous culture and history. So it’s easy for the cyclical nature of themes woven into “Star Wars” media to evoke stories of Indigenous political resistance.

Overall Star Wars touches on, just on this idea of always running and hiding in order to survive, you know. ... It’s like, you know, ‘yes, we won at a certain point, we may have won this particular battle, this particular war, but don’t you know, those imperialists are at it again,’ and it’s like, we have to start all over. ... A lot of Star Wars, but especially “Last Jedi,” is about reconnection, which I think a lot of Natives especially these days are

trying to figure out. Where is the line of how do we reconnect? And what is the best way in which to reconnect? (Toni Sanchez)

3.3. Implications for Identity Building

Players, panelists, and commenters discussed how an Indigenous identity often required resisting discriminatory and colonizing influences. Often, the ability to resist was found in connection and relatedness – and in turn, those connections enabled a stronger sense of identity in turn. Connection to community, for Players E and F and the comedy panelists, required a certain amount of giving back to community. Players E and F felt protective of some of their cultures' stories, and the comedy panelists felt a duty to mentor other Indigenous comics because they had been mentored. For this study's speakers, relatedness required action. Providing opportunities to others was an activity that *shared* opportunities to fulfill relatedness needs. Protecting community stories protected opportunities to experience relatedness.

The resistance stories that players and panelists told and the items they described fulfilled many of the requirements of visual sovereignty. When the Star Wars panelists compare the Mandalorian's armor to the protective web of connections their cultures provide, or describe the visual origins of Princess Leia's cinnamon-roll hairstyle, they stock a new cultural imaginary with heroes and she-ros who resist oppressors. When Player F and a comic-book panelist refuse to have their culture or their gender stereotyped as victims, they are claiming sovereignty over how they are represented.

FINDINGS 2: REPRESENTATION

Findings 1 detailed themes related to important elements of Indigenous identity in three speaker groups: players, panelists, and, for some themes, the online commenters. This section presents themes found in the data related to Indigenous representation in “Never Alone” and other media, focusing on the same three data groups. Specifically:

RQ2: How do Indigenous players of “Never Alone,” pop-culture panelists, and commenters on Reddit discuss representations of Indigenous identities in “Never Alone” and other media?

The themes that emerged to answer this question were particularly voluminous because players discussed examples of representation both specifically in “Never Alone” and in other media that they enjoyed or avoided, while panelists discussed a range of examples in the genre that their discussion focused on. I grouped these examples into absence, negative, positive, and best representation to sketch a continuum but also to shed light on the characteristics audience members evaluated where a creative work should fall on this continuum.

In addition to the ways that they evaluated representation, the player interviews and panel discussions showed Indigenous audience members wielding their own creativity and interpretive autonomy to do two things: First, to create representation where it did not explicitly exist, usually in genres that they were fans of; and, second, adding or changing elements of a character or media creation that they felt were poorly executed or stereotypical. I called this first activity representation via adoption. A comic-book panelist called the second process “making up backstories.” I named it representation via adaptation, because audience members were adding or subtracting features of an already-existing character. These two activities showed that

unlike the video game players Shaw (2017) studied, many of the Indigenous media consumers I studied valued representation so much, and wanted it so badly, that they created it where it didn't exist and improved it where it existed, but was poorly executed.

Theme 1: Absence of Representation and its Costs

Of the three speaker groups, the panelists produced the richest remarks about absence of Indigenous representation in popular media. The panel conversations themselves were focused on representation in a specific genre from the beginning, so this wasn't a surprising result.. Meanwhile, several players talked about the relative absence of representation in their pasts, and how they felt when they finally encountered representation (good or bad). In contrast, some commenters rejected the idea that Indigenous characters were absent from video games before "Never Alone," and one commenter who claimed an Indigenous identity argued that they neither needed nor wanted representation of their Indigenous identity.

For players, absence of representation was a given in the past. Player A lamented the lack of Native American versions of popular toys such as action figures and dolls. Player C noticed the specific absence of Alaska Natives. For Player D, the absence forced them to build a sense of Indigenous belonging out of their experiences and personal relationships. But when Player D finally saw a Native character included in a wide-release feature film, the quality of that portrayal angered them:

I remember when "Pocahontas" came out in the theater. I was a *livid* 12-year-old. I remember standing outside the theater and telling these 5- and 6-year-olds what was all wrong with the movie, and their mom was so offended. She's like, "It's just a movie!" I'm like, "They need to know!" (Player D)

Panelists saw the absence of Indigenous characters or people in their media genres (comedy, comic books, or “Star Wars” movies and spin-offs) as a problem to be angry or frustrated about, and one that had an impact on what they felt was possible in their own careers. For example, comedy panelist Joey Clift said he grew up a fan of comedy. But because he never saw Native people performing it, he internalized the message that this path wasn’t open to him. As an adult, he moved to Hollywood and began work as a comedy writer, pursuing at least part of his dream. Eventually, he made his way to performing his own jokes and now has a chapter devoted to him in a book on Indigenous comedy (Nesteroff, 2021). Reflecting on that journey, Clift said:

For me, it’s just extremely surreal to go from wanting to do comedy but not thinking that I was allowed to — because there were no Natives doing comedy on a national stage — to having a chapter about me in a book about Native comedy. That’s personally nuts.

(Joey Clift)

Despite that breakthrough, Clift pointed out that there hadn’t been an Indigenous stand-up comic on a late-night show “since Charlie Hill did ‘Letterman’ back in the mid-2000s, which was nearly 20 years ago.” Comedy panelist Adrienne Chalepah described a similar career path — starting out as a writer because she didn’t see opportunities to perform her own comedy. In other words, absence persisted.

Absence exacts a price, comedy panelists said. Just as Player D felt anger when the first Indigenous character in a major film release was stereotyped, the Indigenous comedy panelists felt anger about having to continually remind the entertainment world that Native comedy existed at all, let alone that it was, in fact, funny. They were tired of having to constantly yell, “Hey, we’re here! We’re here!” as Keliiaa put it. But if they ceased the collective fight for comedy producers, agents, and other entertainment industry gatekeepers to notice the quality and

quantity of Native comics, the gatekeepers defaulted to the habit of forgetting their existence. Absence wasn't coincidental; it was a *habit* that gatekeepers failed to break because as all habits, it was work to break. But that habit of failing to book Indigenous comics led audiences to also assume Indigenous people had disappeared. "It just gets very exhausting trying to convince America that we did not go extinct," said Chalepah. Brian Bahe didn't characterize the work as exhausting, but he did describe it as never-ending. "You kind of get used to, just like having to deal with people being like, 'oh you're Native American' and it's almost as if they have never met a Native American before." As a reminder, the commenters whose remarks I analyzed could not be assumed to be Indigenous; some included their identity in a comment to add context to their words, but most did not. My analysis of what commenters said about absence of representation also requires a bit of historical background. "Never Alone" was released in November 2014, a contentious time for inclusivity in video games. The "Gamergate" controversy had erupted a few months before the game's release, in August of 2014. Gamergate was a backlash against non-white, non-male, and non-cisgendered identities being represented in game characters, the video game industry, or even those with such identities joining online discussions about video games. Starkey's review of "Never Alone" (2015a) and his essay (2015b) about what "Never Alone" meant to him as an Indigenous person and player also became somewhat contentious amid the backlash against inclusion. Some of the debate about Indigenous representation in games found its way onto Reddit, but I did not include the comments on the Starkey articles in my data unless they also were posted on Reddit.

Two veins of Reddit comment seemed to be part of the GamerGate backlash. The first was whether video games even lacked Indigenous characters in the first place. The second was whether popular culture "needed" more Indigenous games. One thread contained 11 comments

that listed specific Indigenous characters in specific video games (without commenting on the quality of the characters, only their existence). A commenter criticized the word “need” in the headline of Starkey’s essay in Polygon (2015b), which had been headlined, “Never Alone and the need for American Indian narratives in games.” “That word again,” said Commenter 2. “There is no ‘need’ for Native Americans in games. If people want to make and play games with Native Americans, they are free to. But there is no ‘need’ for it.” Commenter 3 opined that not only was Indigenous representation not necessary, but it was “dumb.” This commenter identified themselves as Native American and said they had never cared about representation:

Actually if a game came out that forced me to play as a Native American, I wouldn’t even want to play it if it made the game like the stereotype for us. “Prey” got a pass, because it wasn’t bad at it. I still only played about 30 minutes of it and never again. That other new game that had an “Eskimo” was not interesting to me at all. Never Alone. I didn’t even care. I love my culture, but I don’t care to have games focused on it. It’s just a dumb idea for a game, and quite lazy. (Commenter 3).

Implications of Absence: Injustice or Coincidence?

The stark contrast between how players and panelists discussed the absence of representation and how commenters did so adds to Shaw’s findings (2010a) that representation was *relatively* important for players with identities different from the stereotyped video gamer. To players and panelists, representation was highly important, period. Among commenters, most, but not all, thought that representation was important. In contrast, some commenters argued that the absence of Indigenous characters in the video game genre either didn’t exist or didn’t matter. Commenter 3 seemed to expect that if a game were made that included Indigenous characters, the portrayals were likely to be stereotypes, which aligns with Shaw’s ([NEED YEAR HERE!])

data showing some media consumers became cynical about representation, neither wanting it nor expecting it to be any good at all if it happened.

The ways that players, panelists, and commenters disagreed about absence of representation partly supports Clark's (1969) conceptualization of four stages of media representation of minoritized groups: absence, ridicule, regulation, and respect, but it contests that these are continuous and mutually exclusive stages. When Player D reacts with anger to their first encounter with an Indigenous movie character, their anger suggests that the move from absence to presence can be highly anticipated and thus highly fraught. Even if the character of Pocahontas in the eponymous Disney film signifies a leap from absence to what Clark called "regulation" – a character who supports a colonized power structure or framework – a less-than-optimal first encounter is likely to evoke criticism. Meanwhile, comedy panelists describing how an absence of Indigenous comedy performers shaped their career paths shows the negative power of absence in identity formation. Comedy panelists mentioned the Indigenous role models who mentored them and that they were giving back by taking on mentoring roles themselves. Continued effort was necessary, because otherwise, comedy gatekeepers would return to the habit of ignoring the existence of Native comics. Thus, Indigenous comics and their "group-in-community" (Taylor, 2004) might be seen as fighting to establish a communitarian dialogue between themselves and comedy gatekeepers. The panelists are making these efforts; they know that the efforts are necessary, but they also wish that Indigenous comedians could move on from fighting to be heard, seen, and booked. However, in their connection with their fellow comics, mentors and mentees, the comedy panelists can be seen as connecting their individual actions to groups of Indigenous comics and thriving *through* satisfying their SDT relatedness needs in this way.

Theme 2: Negative Representation: Generalized and Stereotypical

Players, panelists, and, to some degree, commenters talked at length about representations outside of “Never Alone” that were stereotypical, generic, hypersexualized, or simply inaccurate. Negative representations resulted in anger, frustration, disappointment, indignation, and weariness. Speakers criticized creators for being too lazy to choose a specific tribe, gain knowledge about it, and create a character with any accurate elements. All six players had encountered negative representations, and some singled out the same media creation as problematic. Both Players A and D took issue with the video game “This Land is My Land,” a video game in which players assume the identity of a Native American chief who must defend the West from colonizers. Player D was emphatic about disliking the game’s main character and purpose, and the overused stereotype of the male “Indian” warrior:

And then there’s another game that looks terrible, called “This Land is My Land.” It’s generic, and they [game makers] said they did that on purpose. It’s like a Polish or Swiss company² that created it, and so they just ... they just wanted to play Indians over there, is really all it is. And so they created this game where [players] could be a male warrior and like, go around and kill things. (Player D)

In contrast, Player D complimented the way that makers of “Never Alone” deliberately reached outside the “male warrior killing things” stereotype: “When people think about Indigenous people, they don’t often think about women, and they probably even less think about children, and probably even less think about female children.” Player D grouped “This Land is My Land” with an older game, “Oregon Trail,” and “Skyrim,” a game that doesn’t have overtly Indigenous characters. In these games, Player D said, Indigenous identity is used as a veneer, foil, or plot device. In “Skyrim,” Player D said that a population that could be interpreted as Indigenous is

portrayed as backward and ineffective. Player D also questioned Skyrim's use of a real-life Creek leader's name for a character in the game. They said:

One of their leaders that they mythologize about in this group is called Red Eagle. And Red Eagle – not sure how much you know about your Creek history – he was a leader during the Red Stick Rebellion.³ ... So they're even taking the name of an Indigenous warrior, and they're using this concept to call up this sort of, mysterious, exotic idea, of what this group is. (Player D)

FOOTNOTE 2: "This Land is My Land" was made by Game-Labs, a Ukrainian company. It was released in an early version to Windows in 2019 and released on gaming platforms in 2021.

FOOTNOTE 3: The Red Stick Rebellion refers to battles caused by a split in the Indigenous Creek population in the 1810s. "Red Stick" Creeks in the Northern part of the group's traditional lands (in what is now Alabama) wanted to resist colonial expansion; Creeks in the southern part wanted to maintain peaceful relationships with white Americans and the neighboring Cherokee (Moore, n.d.)

In other words, the makers of Skyrim weren't just appropriating a name, they were erasing an actual, important person in a tribe's history – a person who resisted colonization, no less – to substitute a stereotyped, generic character. Players E and F also talked about examples in which colonial myths of the American West still permeated pop-culture creations.

For the comic-book panelists, negative representation was an occasion for mocking characters and creators, but also acknowledging that some efforts were breakthroughs for their time despite their stereotyped nature. A female character who wore a leather bikini but was from a Canadian tribe led Moniz to crack wise: “Like, really? That's your superpower, like you can't feel the cold?” And a superhero named Barbaric, shown in Figure 3 below, elicited the following dialogue:

Moniz: [pounding table] He's literally RED!

Wilson: [jerking thumb at an image of Barbaric] With blond hair.

Moniz: He's inappropriate!

Wilson: Red with blond hair. You know what he is? He's “College Indian.”

Moniz: Of course!

Wilson: He's huge, punches things, regenerates. He's actually indestructible, most likely because he's American Indian Studies angry ...

Moniz: Yes!

Wilson: And that rage powers him through anything.

Moniz: And it turns his hair blond.

Figure 3.

Comic-book Character Barbaric



Note: Barbaric was seen in Image Comics’ “Freak Force” books, which were published from 1993 to 1995.

The most irksome example for Moniz, however, occurred when Marvel Comics created a team of teenage superheroes who were more inclusive and less stereotypical, except for the single Indigenous character. Moniz described Marvel’s 2015 “All New, All Different” marketing campaign touting characters such as Amadeus Cho, a Korean-American version of the Hulk; Kamala Khan, a female Pakistani-American fan of Captain Marvel who eventually becomes Ms. Marvel; and Miles Morales, a biracial teen with Spider-Man-like powers. But when it came to an Indigenous superhero, Marvel resurrected an earlier character, shown below in Figure 4.

Figure 4.

Red Wolf, a Marvel Comic-Book Character Rebranded as “All-New” in 2015



Note: Different versions of Marvel’s character Red Wolf were seen in comic series from 1967 through 2015. (Matter, 2020, Nov. 30).

The character seemed to hit Moniz as a gut punch, something too extreme to joke about:

And then, they pulled Red Wolf out. Red Wolf is from ... I don't know. Awful times? He's that old character that is just the – he basically looks like the Redskins logo. That's it. ...

And I went, “No! I want all new, all different as well! I want something, anything, like Kamala Khan! Amadeus Cho!” I want that so much. I still wait. (R. Vincent Moniz, Jr.)

Some commenters actually reached out on Reddit to find out where “Never Alone” fit on the scale of awful to good representation. Commenter 5 posted the question “Does Anyone Know if ‘Never Alone’ is Problematic?” Participants in this dialogue wanted to make sure that the representation in “Never Alone” couldn't be put in the same category as Marvel's stereotypical Red Wolf or other generic “Indians.” They didn't want to buy “Never Alone” only to discover it to “reek of cultural appropriation” (Commenter 5). When Commenter 4 responded that they had spoken with one of the game's makers at an Australian developers' conference, and it seemed that the Iñupiaq were proud of the game, Commenter 5 was reassured: if they're happy with it, then I'm excited again to play :)” Commenter 6 added, “I'm half Inuit, and I'm pretty psyched to play the game. I've only had time to play maybe the first half hour, but that was pretty neat.”

2.1. Implications of Negative Representation

The players, panelists, and commenters felt disappointment, frustration, and anger when a media creation presented stereotyped Indigenous characters such as Red Wolf or Red Eagle. They wanted me to know exactly how media makers had let them down as an audience, why a character or product was insufficient. Like Player D in their childhood, they felt someone needed to know about why a character should be dropped. And Player C craved a specific breakthrough for Indigenous characters: a realism where their Indigenous identity wasn't necessarily central to the story. “If you're telling a story about some guy in 2021 falling in love, you know, he doesn't

have to go to a sweat lodge. You don't need to talk about his alcoholic brother," Player C said. The example Player C gave was the 2020 movie "Minari," a tale about a Korean-American family struggling to start a farm in Arkansas. The plot has universal appeal beyond representation, Player C said: "It's an immigrant story, sure, but it's an American story." When speakers discussed flawed representation, they included good representations, real or imagined, for contrast. When I talked with Player D about Indigenous representation in video games, they remembered a conversation about how Grace O'Malley, a real-life, female, Irish pirate captain from the 1600s, would make a great Indigenous video game because the pirate lived long, led rebellions against the English and died in her own bed. Player B remembered writing children's books with Indigenous characters for their nieces and nephews.

Most of the examples of negative representation speakers mentioned fit into the ridicule or regulation categories of Clark's (1969) four stages of minority representation in television. They wanted accuracy: skin that wasn't red, characters who weren't "Indian Studies Angry." Player C wanted characters whose Indigeneity was only one of many interesting backstories, and Player A wanted characters whose Indigeneity was specific, not generic. Panelists saw characters such as Red Wolf or Barbaric as the polar opposite of visual sovereignty. These characters ressurected, rather than resisted, old hierarchies and imaginaries imposed by colonization.

Contrasting these negative examples or dissecting their offensive aspects seemed an activity that defused the power of these characters to limit speakers' imaginations. Because the activity of discussing negative characters placed speakers in a power position, it might satisfy autonomy needs; because it involved a high degree of learning and experience, it likely expressed competence; and when character critiques found social expression, such as in the

Indigenous Pop Expo panels, the activity likely satisfied relatedness needs (Ryan & Deci, 2017b).

When panelist Moniz reacts with anger to Indigenous identities being once again stereotyped by Marvel Comics' much-marketed inclusion effort, part of what I see is a media consumer railing against a violation of a communitarian duty ethic (Plaisance, 2018). Indigenous identities *should* be included in a multicultural superhero universe, but that inclusion should be current, realistic, and maybe even, perhaps, viewed by an actual Indigenous person (or several) for their feedback. In speakers' hopes and imaginings, I also see the linkage between individual autonomy and collective autonomy that Indigenous self-determination scholars (e.g. Murphy, 2008 and 2014) describe as the key to improved well-being. When such conversations about negative representation turn to what would have been better, and those conversations become social ones and multiply, the seeds for media that represent Indigenous individuality and resilience can also multiply.

Theme 3: Positive Representation

Panelists and players spoke at length about media characters and products they believed were examples of good representation; commenters discussed "Never Alone" as an example of good representation, but did so less frequently and with less depth. Four subthemes emerged from discussions of what constituted good representation: Getting the Indigenous details meticulously correct; portraying a character's many connections, including culture, community, and environment; making the character not just Indigenous, but fully human, meaning complex and flawed, and as someone whose identity was not the only feature of their existence; and combining contradictory elements. Getting tribal details correct and connecting characters to

land, language, and community have been discussed in detail in Findings 1: Identity, so discussion of these subthemes will focus on examples not previously mentioned.

3.1. Get the Tribal Details Correct, Visually and Otherwise

Players, panelists, and commenters concurred that good media characters and stories had accurate, specific tribal details. They appreciated the many ways that attention to such details showed up in “Never Alone.” Player C, Iñupiaq herself, appreciated the care that went into making Nuna look like a real Iñupiaq child. “I can see every little cousin or niece in that little girl. Those are their features, like the cheeks, the eyes, the facial expressions,” Player C said. Player F was impressed by how the narrator in “Never Alone” spoke Iñupiaq language, thus requiring players to read subtitles. Player D recalled the way that real Iñupiaq mythical characters and cultural tools were used to advance the story in “Never Alone.” For example, when Nuna rescues the Owl Man’s drum from the Little People, the Owl Man gives her a bolo to thank her. Players then must use the bolo to unlock a Cultural Insight video that explains how Iñupiaq people used the bolo, rather than a firearm, to silently hunt birds. Player D felt that this attention to a game mechanic made the point that cultural practices required learning and skill; it was a way that the narrative showed fidelity to the tribe’s details.

Panelists, like the players, noticed when specific tribes and languages were featured as part of media. Star Wars panelist Johnnie Jae said she enjoyed the fact that the Ewoks were not just based on the Miwok people, but that the movie’s makers placed the Ewoks in the redwood forests of the Pacific Northwest, the traditional lands of the Miwok. Rowie Shebala, Diné herself, remembered when she saw “The Empire Strikes Back” as a child and heard Diné spoken in the movie. Both comic book panelists applauded the characters Dani Moonstar and Forge, because they have consistently been identified as Cheyenne. Likewise, panelist Wilson appreciated

Johnny Cloud, a Navajo comic-book character from the World War II era whose tribal identity was specific and consistent. Wilson said this accurate representation had such an impact that Indigenous veterans of the Vietnam War told him about their families sending them Johnny Cloud comic books.

3.2. Portray Connection to Culture, Community, and Environment

Players and panelists argued that good representation portrayed Indigenous people not as mystic loners, but people with ties to family, community, culture, and places. For example, although Nuna had only Fox to accompany her on her quest, Player F pointed out that her quest was launched to solve the problem of the storm and save her village. Players A, D, E, and F spoke of seeking and enjoying stories like those in “Never Alone” that reinforced characters’ connection to specific Indigenous cultures. They put the stories embodied in “Never Alone” in the same category as their own tribal or family stories. Player D recalled a story told to keep young female teenagers safe. Player A said that they specifically sought out stories specific to other Indigenous groups; this was part of the reason they had bought “Never Alone”:

I just want to learn about all the tribes. But also the different types of legends, you know, and the different stories made to make kids scared so that they don’t do certain things.

Like in my tribe, we have Iktomi, and he’s like the trickster. (Player A).

Outside of “Never Alone,” players D and E mentioned two new TV series, “Reservation Dogs” and “Rutherford Falls” as representations that faithfully portrayed connections to culture. In “Rutherford Falls,” Player E explained, one of the main characters, an Indigenous historian, has to rethink how she defines history in order to best serve her community. In other words, Player E appreciated how the character redefined her job, prioritizing her community’s needs to feel a part of history over academic definitions of which objects are considered historic.

I'm going to buy this really great episode where she ends up doing the community curation thing... She ends up getting like a bunch of what she thinks is just junk from some of her community members. But by the end of the episode, she comes around on the idea that this isn't just junk – that there are stories there. (Player E).

The four Star Wars panelists brought up the way that the new Star Wars films featured a younger generation fighting for independence and recognition, but involved characters from the previous trilogy. The panelists' compared own positions in Native communities, media, and advocacy, and the need to link their work to the future by guiding younger people to define Indigeneity for themselves. The idea of collective well-being surfaced when panelist Rowie Shebala described the importance of the Mandalorian's armor as going beyond physical protection, but also beyond a metaphor for the protection of Indigenous culture. The armor was important because it signified his culture to *other* characters and cultures:

The fact that whole universe was able to understand where he came from, who he is, what he represents, and to have that, it was ... it made me (think) like, if a whole universe can understand his culture, then it's very possible that a whole world could understand our culture. (Rowie Shebala)

Comic book panelists Wilson and Moniz applauded when comic book characters or stories involved Native land or tribal communities. For example, Wyatt Wingfoot, the boyfriend of She-Hulk, contradicts the stereotype of Indigenous people as isolated or extinct when the two characters visit Wingfoot's village, Wilson said. The panelists noted, however, that this connection is not quite perfectly executed:

Moniz: But not that last name, though. There are no Wingfoots.

Wilson: Probably not. ... There's some Whitefoots.

Moniz: There's definitely Whitefoots, but no Wingfoots.

3.3. Make the Character Fully Human

While specificity was necessary for good representation, players and panelists said that a character who had specific tribal details *and* displayed universal aspects of humanity, or was dealing with common human issues, was even better. In other words, the character wasn't *just* Navajo and from a certain clan, the character was also on a journey common to most humans. Player E applauded the characters in "Reservation Dogs" because they were experiencing all the problems that teenagers – and the adults responsible for those teenagers – usually have. Player E perceived Indigeneity as one of those issues, but not the only one. Player C desired characters who were from a specific certain tribe, clan, or location, but also had other dimensions to their lives. Because such characters weren't common, Player C was creating one as part of a screenplay they were writing: "So like, with portrayals of Native media, like, I would rather just have good stories, where the characters *happen* to be Native Americans."

The comic-book panelists discussed John Proudstar / Thunderbird, an Indigenous character played by actor Blair Redford on the Fox series, "The Gifted," set in the X-Men universe. The character, Wilson and Moniz said, defies stereotypes of the "mystic Indian," they agreed – though they both note that they don't know whether the actor is Indigenous.

Moniz: He plays one of the most iconic, yet indie characters in the X-Men. His brother and him are kind of like brown Supermen. They're super fast; they're invulnerable. And he doesn't have to wear, like, feathers, and he talks a whole bunch. He solves problems and ...

Wilson: He's an Army vet

Moniz: He's an Army vet

Wilson: Er, Marine veteran, sorry.

Moniz: Yeah. Military. We'll go with that. And that's what I like ... that he's fully realized, that he has character beyond just being an Indian guy.

3.4. Combine Past and Present, Real and Supernatural

Players D, E, and F, as well as some panelists spoke about how good representations often combined traditional and modern culture, or “real” and supernatural characters. Player D said that “Never Alone” could not have been an example of good representation without the “Cultural Insight” videos’ portrayal of real, thriving Iñupiaq people.

What's great about that is, it's both historical and contemporary. ... I love that it's *both* of those. ... I think that a lot of times, media creators have to choose if they want it to be historical or if they want it to be contemporary. And I really think that the answer is for it to be both, because ... I think to really represent Native people, you have to see Native people today. And that sounds so silly, but I really just think that seeing a Native person alive sitting in front of you, talking to you, does a lot. (Player D)

Outside of “Never Alone,” players D and E mentioned two new TV series, “Reservation Dogs” and “Rutherford Falls” as representations that faithfully portrayed connections to culture.

“Reservation Dogs” often blurs the line between spirit characters and the “real” humans. Player E discussed how in an episode of “Reservation Dogs,” the mythic character of Deer Woman – a spirit who avenges wronged women in several Indigenous cultures – appears to one of the Oklahoma teenagers as a normal woman shopping at a convenience store. Then she hitches a ride with a white man, correcting his presumptuous and incorrect guess at what her tribe might be. As she steps into his vehicle, viewers see that her feet are actually the hooves of a doe, indicating that she is Deer Woman, and the driver is likely due for some retribution. “She just is a

character,” Player E said. “It’s [the story] not presented as ‘Oh, that’s just some story we’ve heard.’ Right? It’s part of reality,” Player E said. Ghosts and spiritual characters, such as William Knifeman, played by Dallas Goldtooth, appear frequently in the series to advise, or just mess with, characters, or, as Player E put it, “mirroring and paralleling and playing with aspects of reality,” Player E said. “Star Wars” panelist Johnnie Jae linked the franchise’s impact on Native audiences to its ability to bridge generations and eras:

Our cultures, we were never stagnant people. Like we were always evolving, our knowledge was always evolving. Our cultures, our traditions, everything was always evolving and changing. And, you know, we need to let that happen and not be so caught up in thinking, “Oh, change is bad, or change is for forgetting.” (Johnnie Jae)

3.5. Implications of Positive Representation

To these players and panelists, these positive representations conveyed that the media creators who made them took care with details, connections, character multidimensionality, and the contradictions and complications of an Indigenous identity, with its needs to sustain cultural and spiritual practice. And, ideally, such creations were funny, memorable, surprising, even eerie in the way that the Deer Lady’s appearances serve as warnings to the characters in “Reservation Dogs,” or the way that the Little People in “Never Alone” giggle as they scurry about to thwart Nuna and Fox’s quest. When Moniz and Wilson criticize Wyatt Wingfoot’s last name as not authentic, they are doing so tongue-in-cheek.

Adding full humanity to characters and imbuing the worlds in which they live with multidimensionality are measures of quality in any fictional medium, not just Indigenous representation. What these higher levels of positive representation show is this: When a media creation and its characters is rich enough, the activities of experiencing it and then discussing it

can fulfill more than need satisfactions. Instead, these individual and collective acts of media consumption and criticism can create conversations that push producers in positive directions. The discussions are at least one side of a communitarian dialogue, and they can lay the foundation for producers to consider a communitarianism's ethic of identity. (Plaisance, 2018). In addition, such media creations fulfill many of the goals of visual sovereignty. They are usually place-based (in the case of "Never Alone," the Arctic coast; in "Reservation Dogs," the plains of Oklahoma); they position audiences to notice resistance and in many ways, they are change-making, employing Indigenous actors, artists, writers and producers, as well as building capacities and career opportunities.

Theme 4: Best Representation Requires Indigenous Creators

Some players and panelists pointed out how the best representation could only occur if Indigenous people were included on the creative team that made the product. Without Indigenous creators, "you get a very one-sided character or story," Player C said. Indigenous people on the creative team for movies was something Player C watched for: "I just read an article that the next Predator movie is going to be about a Cheyenne warrior. But it's written, written and directed, by possibly two of the whitest people I've ever seen." Player C was deeply skeptical that the film would have any kind of authentic portrayal or be enjoyable without Indigenous people on the team – preferably Cheyenne people.

Players in general applauded when Indigenous actors, writers, and camera people were on a production team, but Players E and F pointed out examples that fell short of ideal representation even with an inclusive production team. Player F believed that improvements in representation would not go far enough until Indigenous people were *fully* in charge.

Listen, we're not seeing any changes until Natives take over the means of production and the means of distribution. A lot of the times it's just Native folks just, you know, being used for their cultural elements in these particular spaces. You know, whether it be gaming, whether it be publication, whether it be whatever. I'm like, 'You don't have a native game studio yet. (Player F)

Comic-book panelist Moniz said he first saw an Indigenous-created comic book in 2012, when author Arigon Starr handed him a copy of her book, *Super Indian*. "It was eye-opening to me -- these were real people. Super Indian's sidekick is shaped exactly like me [short and round]. And that wasn't a thing that I ever saw." For the Indigenous comedy panelists, the focus was on taking control of the future of Native comedy by making more space for Indigenous comics to perform. They knew that making that space was up to them. Finally, the commenters' threads and responses often focused on the involvement of the Inupiaq elders and artists who steered "Never Alone" in its development phases. Knowing that this community was consulted and involved allowed commenters to set aside worries that the game would "reek of appropriation."

4.1 Implications of Wanting Indigenous Creators

When Indigenous creators are in charge of how Indigenous people and cultures are represented in visuals, in narratives, and in game mechanics, the result for the speakers in this study was that of suddenly being seen. Player C's daughter and comic-book panelist Moniz had similar reactions to "Never Alone" and "Super Indian": That person is like me. Player D, seeing long roads and straight horizons in a Sterlin Harjo film, recognized their Oklahoma: That land is the one that I have a connection with. with. Player A's meticulous attention to the traditional construction of a baby carrier that they were capturing in an illustration shows that particular player as creating visual sovereignty.

At the same time, Player A's negative reaction to a generic "Indian" in a video game shows Player A as an audience member who desires games that use a visual sovereignty framework to build stories. All six players were wary of representation that was not created by Indigenous people, and some wanted members of the specific culture represented on the production team and given decision-making power, as they were in "Never Alone." Without satisfying this condition of visual sovereignty – making sure that Indigenous characters and people were centered, not peripheral, in both process and product – a media creation could not hope to satisfy the others. Re-interpreting the legends and stories – the social imaginary that communitarianism thinks of as expressing a storehouse of values and ethics – can and should only be done by, or at least with, members of the culture that birthed those legends and stories, the players and panelists were saying.

When a representation fulfills these conditions of sovereignty, giving an audience member that feeling of recognition, I believe it can be the key to any potential benefits of identification with characters (Brown, 2015). The potential for identification with characters, the environment, or a story begins with enough similarity between X and Y to engage a person's interest in a positive way. Whether identification is what's occurring or not, or which conceptualization of identification best fits any particular media product, the time spent with a visually sovereign creation is more likely to fulfill the basic autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs of SDT.

Theme 5: Fixing Stories with Bad or Missing Representation

My interview questions were designed to encourage players to discuss a continuum of absent to bad to good to best representation, and the panelists engaged this issue by virtue of the topics of their discussions. From this data, two processes emerged by which players and panelists

used their creativity to improve bad or absent representation. I called these two processes *representation via adaptation* and *representation via adoption*. In adaptation, these Indigenous speakers “created backstories” for characters that were already Indigenous, but were stereotypical or otherwise flawed. In adoption, players and panelists gave non-Indigenous characters an Indigenous backstory or specific roots, inferring Indigeneity from location, personality, a visual characteristic or some other feature. Through these processes, audience members improved bad representation and created representation where it was absent. To me, this was a unique claiming of autonomy over their individual or shared experience of a media product.

5.1. Representation via Adaptation

Some players and panelists created backstories for problematic Indigenous characters or a reason for a creator’s portrayal that might be good representation for its time. Comic-book panelist Wilson was the most frequent user of this practice, and he discussed his motives for doing it: If there were going to be so few Indigenous characters, they ought to be good ones:

Does it turn me away when, like, the dude is super buff and he never says anything, he just grunts and stuff, and it’s just you know, the stoic warrior? Yeah. But ... But ... “Man, there’s an Indian guy in there!” ... So I make up my own backstories for these characters when they’re basically like, super thin, one-dimensional. And that’s really what I love about comics and stories. (Michael Wilson)

Wilson enjoyed “making up backstories” for characters that were problematic because it meant that he could still enjoy the character. Usually, Wilson said, his fellow panelist Moniz would disagree with whatever apologies or backstories for characters the pair had just classified as bad representation. Wilson said he would respond by pleading: “Just let me pretend. Let me have this

one thing, please!” Wilson’s craving for representation is that intense; it leads him to invent a connection between the comic-book character Pow-Wow Smith and a real-life teacher of a traditional dance from his tribe, Johnny Smith; it leads him to believe that comics artist Chris Claremont was replicating the clothing of actual members of the American Indian Movement, from their news appearances in the 1960s and 70s. With the Fox superhero series “The Gift,” however, both Moniz and Wilson rejoiced that they didn’t have to rationalize or invent: The character of John Proudstar, who already had a specific, believable backstory and broke stereotypes by talking a lot and solving problems. The character was not “super-thin.”

5.2. Representation via Adoption

In representation via adoption, players and panelists declared an Indigenous identity for a character or real-life person who wasn’t explicitly Indigenous. They discussed the evidence for claiming a media persona was Indigenous; they brought up particular elements of a character’s behavior or history or parallels within storylines. Player C, for example, declared that the actor “Iron Eyes” Cody was Indigenous. Cody played countless Indigenous characters in commercials and movies, married a Navajo woman, and with her adopted several Native children (Yamada, 2014). Because of this, and the discrimination Cody had faced because of his Italian immigrant parents, Player C declared that Cody “was born Italian, but he died an Indian.”

Player B said that years before they found “Never Alone,” they interpreted Indigeneity in some of the video game characters that they enjoyed. Player A found it in J.R.R. Tolkien’s fantasy series. Moniz saw the agrarian, Great Plains Mandan culture in Marvel’s character Wolverine: “I just pretend Logan is Mandan,” he said. And Player F and the Star Wars panelists found it in Baby Yoda and other characters and story elements in the Star Wars universe, a case of representation via adoption that merits a bit further detail.

The character of Baby Yoda in the Disney+ Star Wars spinoff “The Mandalorian” evoked so many things to the four women on the Star Wars Panel. In fact, the title of their discussion mentioned the character by name. To them, Baby Yoda recalled their own Indigenous childhoods, colonization’s fraught history of abusing of Indigenous children, and the vulnerability and importance of children for all cultures. Why are Native folks obsessed with Baby Yoda, panelist Johnnie Jae asked, and then answered, “Because he’s so frickin’ cute!” But that wasn’t the only reason.

Baby Yoda eats weird food:

You know, that little part where he’s got the frog, and he’s so happy eating it, and the kids start laughing and he just like spits it out and he looks so sad? That is totally how I felt growing up. You know, when I was all happy eating kidneys or I’d have friends over and we’d be having kidneys or something, and they’re looking at us like, “eee-yew...” And it’s like “Oh. This isn’t normal?” (Johnnie Jae)

He wears clothes that are too big for him:

Like how he’s [got] folded little sleeves and stuff. It reminded me of my own little sister who had to wear hand-me-downs that I had given her. ... It just reminded me that Baby Yoda is poor. Like he is like relying on the kindness of people to help him out. (Sonya Ballantyne)

And when Yoda does grow up, his home evokes a southwestern U. S. tribe:

I remember a lot of people were saying, “Baby Yoda is Indigenous, because look at Yoda’s home, because he lives in the earth. He is baking over an open fire. ... I remember someone saying “Baby Yoda is Pueblo, because look at their homes.” (Rowie Shebala)

Just as important to the panelists was Baby Yoda's vulnerability. The character brought up memories of growing up as a different, lonely child whose mere existence often provoked a negative reaction. Panelist Toni Sanchez said Native people feel Baby Yoda's "humanity, his adorableness, his cuteness, and [we] feel the need to protect him, versus all these other people. Player F also weighed in on Indigenous audiences adopting Baby Yoda. He seemed to perceive this adoption of Baby Yoda as Native as a bit of enjoyable scale-balancing after decades of seeing only stereotyped portrayals:

Native folks ... have only existed in popular culture, right? We have our own identities, we have our own communities and societies, but within pop culture, we have always existed within a mythological state, you know – and at the extremes of the mythological state, either the historicized version or the tragic version. ... So when we can kind of, can break out of that and have these conversations, it's just like, "No. We claim Baby Yoda. He's ours now. Sit down!" (Player F)

Player F also claimed an ethnic / species group that appears in some episodes of the *Mandalorian*, saying that the Tusken raiders were like the Comanche, whose approach to white settlers was flexible; they would engage in trade rather than combat if it served their interests. But the Star Wars panelists also the limits of representation via adoption: Sure, it was fun and all, but *actual* representation would have been better. A fictional future that included actual Indigenous people would, in fact, have been great, said panelist Sonya Ballantyne:

All of sci fi takes their stories from us, basically. All first contact stories are about us. And it just seems so unfair to not be included in that. It's why we're -- not to get too "Star Trek" – but I like that Star Trek has a Maori actor [Evan Evagoria in "Star Trek: Picard"] as a heroic character, but the problem with it is he's not Maori, he's Romulan. And I'm

like, ‘why can’t he be Maori, darn it!’ ... So it just seems like we get to be aliens, but we never get to be who we are, as you were saying. ... So it’s like we get a little bit of a shadow of ourselves, but not enough. (Sonya Ballantyne)

5.3. Implications of Adoption and Adaptation

Players and panelists all said good representation will continue to be hotly debated., The relative abundance of new Indigenous content being released has led to rising standards for what qualifies as good representation, some players and panelists said. And while that’s definitely good for Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences, more media creations can lead to audiences being overly critical of important steps that have been made, or are being made, toward better representations.

We’ve got the numbers [of Native media creations] to be like, “This is all the problems.” And they [fans of the WWII-era character Johnny Cloud] are like, “Shit, we’ll take it. We got the one guy, and we’re gonna take it.” ... Like, my friends who are Dakota, and Lakota, bitch all the time about “Dances with Wolves,” and how the language is wrong. I’m like, “You know what? My people don’t even have *that* movie. We got to watch *your* movie and get excited about it.” (Michael Wilson).

Criticizing bad representation is not enough, Wilson concluded. He suggested a carefully constructed middle path for Indigenous audiences: they should “maybe ... back off a little bit” from criticizing every aspect of a media creation that tries to be representative – “and then make the next best, the next good thing, and make it ourselves.”

The debates about “getting it right” – “it” being representations that include or foreground Indigenous characters and thus qualify as good representation – are likely to continue. Such debates evolve with each new Indigenous series, movie, or video game made.

What matters, speakers told me, is that stories of Indigenous people will continue to be told in media, and that the conversations about what's good and bad in those stories *must* continue. Those conversations, players and panelists said, push media makers, Indigenous creators and others, to make “the next good thing.”

FINDINGS 3: PLAYING THE GAME

This section addresses Research Question 3: *How do Indigenous players and Reddit commenters describe the experience of playing “Never Alone”?*

This question focuses on players’ reactions during or soon after playing “Never Alone.” Gee and Hayes (2011) divide video game experiences into two categories – “the game” to describe actual play and what happens while playing, and “The Game,” capitalized, to describe discussions of meaning. Unlike the first two research questions, RQ3 is about reactions during actual play rather than metacognition. A second distinction is that RQ3 asks only about “Never Alone” and not other media creations. Consequently, I analyzed data from two of the four groups of speakers: players and Reddit commenters, because the panelists did not discuss “Never Alone.” However, because the discussions analyzed in this section were only about “Never Alone,” rather than the broader context of other video games or fictional media, this section zooms in on the satisfactions that different elements of the game provide.

While the Reddit commenters were not necessarily Indigenous and there was no way to be certain they had played “Never Alone,” I found their comments by searching for threads that specifically mentioned “Never Alone” or Indigenous identities in video games. The Reddit commenters’ utterances cannot stand alone, but they provide insight and context for what players experienced. Commenters also discussed the game in enough detail to find it plausible that they had played it. As with other sections, some Reddit commenters quoted here claimed an Indigenous identity and others implied it or led me to infer it, but certainty cannot be had.

A second problem in addition to the uncertainty of commenter’s identities came up because of the inability to conduct play interviews because of the global pandemic. When I

analyzed transcripts, deciding whether a reaction that a player or commenter described was one that they experienced during or soon after playing, as opposed to a reflective reaction, was often a matter of interpretation. Some of the reactions from players and commenters included temporal indicators such as the use of present tense – for example, player F saying, “I’m crying, it’s so beautiful.” In another example of distinguishing between immediate reaction and later reflection, In an example of using temporal words to distinguish between in-game enjoyments and after-game reactions, Player C described the moment of being captivated by the game narrative and a later appreciation of the game makers’ process.

Looking at [the game], I can see the importance of the design, and then the creators of the game – like an objective point of view – everything the [creators] did was intentional. ...

When we played, though, it was the story that sort of “got” us. But you know, when you look at it as a storyteller, the way they portrayed [the characters] sort of added to the story, helped complete the story. (Player C)

1. Reactions to the Game as Storytelling

Players and some of the commenters were unanimously positive, sometimes emotional, about their initial reactions to the layers of narrative in “Never Alone.” Player A said they “loved all of it instantly ... It’s really easy to make me cry, for like anything that’s cultural. And I love that kind of thing. So I was instantly hooked to that.” The game’s storytelling also quickly connected with Player F; they called it “magnificent.” As an example, Player F described a moment early in the game in which Nuna and Fox return home after playing in the snow among the knolls of the tundra. The pair crest a hill and see their village burning and deserted: “I was like, ‘Oh!’ It’s the fact that it’s the little girl, that comes back and she was like, ‘Where’d everybody go? Oh, noooo ...’” Player F said. Players A and F connected the story of Nuna and

Fox's quest to trickster stories from their own cultures, and Players E and F talked about stories from their cultures that were meant to be shared only within the tribe.

2. Reactions to Game Mechanics: Better Played Together

For some players and commenters, the quality of the "Never Alone" experience depended on whether they played solo or with another person as well the device or platform on which they played. A solo player would be able to manipulate either Nuna or Fox, and switch between characters via a toggle. The two characters had different abilities; Fox could jump and scramble better; Nuna could manipulate objects. So, for example, if Fox jumped up on a cliff, he could nose one end of a rope over the cliff, allowing Nuna to climb up via the rope. As a solo player moved Fox or Nuna through terrain, the other character would follow automatically at various distances. In contrast, playing with a partner allowed players to move the two characters simultaneously and manipulate them to solve puzzles together. Some levels required Nuna and Fox to execute actions almost simultaneously, making success more difficult for solo players. Different dedicated gaming platforms and controllers – Sony's PlayStation, for example – allowed players to move characters faster and more easily than on a desktop or laptop. As player and commenter excerpts will demonstrate, the game mechanics were intertwined with the story or plot points. The game mechanics had a impact on the relationship *between* the characters, which some speakers saw as the moral of the story.

Players B and D remarked on how the difference between playing solo and in "co-op" mode helped make the game's point. Player D tried playing "Never Alone" solo, but got stuck about halfway through the game. They decided to finish the game later with the friend who had recommended "Never Alone." Player D said the difficulty of solo play impressed on them the

need to play in a way that gave the other player-character agency – and that this made the game designers’ point:

In sort of a typical video game fashion, I tried to use the second player as a foil so that I could get past something. I tried to like, jump off of the fox or something to get to the other side. ... Like, [the co-op mechanic] automatically makes you feel differently about that other character. [The other character] is not something that’s disposable. (Player B)

Unlike players, some online commenters judged the game’s mechanics to be problematic or unsatisfactory. Negative assessments of the game mechanics ran the gamut from dull (“boring” “pretty ho-hum,” “nothing special”) to frustrating (“unresponsive,” “floaty,”) to awful (“very clunky.”) For two commenters, the mechanical and gameplay issues sank their impression of the game. To the question of whether a commenter would buy a hypothetical “Never Alone 2,” Commenter 7 said, “I’ve played the game through to 100% and can say no. The controls would need to be way tighter.” The most critical of all the reactions came from Commenter 8, who called the controls clunky and said the “awful AI ruins the singleplayer experience ... As your partner [Fox] has a suicidal tendency and throws himself off cliffs left and right.” In co-op play, this commenter said, the game merely “evolves from a bad platformer into a mediocre one.”

Some commenters applaud some game aspects in the same comment in which they mentioned the frustrating mechanics. Commenter 9 said they had been “enjoying it so far,” even if the “dumb buddy AI” had made them die unfairly several times. Commenter 10 said:

Never Alone is presented beautifully. The characters are full of life, and quite endearing. However, the constant bugs, the fox committing suicide every two platforms, etc. have rendered it very frustrating. I have had to restart it twice and eventually gave up. It’s an awful pity to see such potential held back by bad code. (Commenter 10).

In stark contrast were two positive comments on the game's mechanics in addition to its other aspects. One commenter described the mechanically challenging parts as positive features, not flaws:

... It's not overly challenging but it's eye-candy, a compelling story and just a beautiful environment. Some of the puzzles are really – well – puzzling. Two of the polar bear scenes confounded me for a long time. Once I figured out how to get by the first polar bear chase, I got stuck in his cave and I have yet to figure out how to get out ...

(Commenter 12)

The second commenter in this category also recounted an overall positive experience, calling the mechanics “clever”:

Already had “Never Alone” from the Christmas sale. It's really quite a fun little game with some sweet visuals and clever mechanics. It's good for coop play too – my wife did a lot of running around as the fox, and we really enjoyed it. (Commenter 13)

One last category of critical online comments focused on the game's replay potential. That is, was the game worth playing a second time once you had played it through to the end? Some commenters didn't believe that it was. As Commenter 14 put it, “when you're done, you're done.”

3. Reactions to Game Characters: The Specific Case of Fox

For the most part, players and commenters described enjoying Fox, Nuna's companion for most of her journey in “Never Alone.” But – spoiler alert! – Fox dies in the game. The character actually dies in two different ways. As with Nuna, if Fox doesn't jump far enough across a frozen crevasse or between ice floes, he falls to his “death,” eliciting cries of anguish

from Nuna. As with most games, players can start the level over, and Fox or Nuna “resurrect” so the player(s) can try again.

At the end of the game, however, Fox dies for real – permanently. Fox then transforms into the spirit of a little boy and tells Nuna that he will always be with her. Players and commenters described emotional reactions to both Fox’s temporary and permanent deaths, but they didn’t discuss Nuna’s temporary deaths with the same frequency, depth, or intensity. Players A, B, and C said they or their gaming partners connected emotionally with Fox. Player B, who played with their niece, said the niece always wanted to play *as* Fox. “She loves foxes. She’s fascinated with them. She told me about a story she’s written for school about a fox family that was raising a human child. How cool is that?” When Fox died for the final time, Player B’s niece was “very disappointed.” Fox’s fate also deeply engaged some commenters, leading to one of the commenter data group’s most engaging dialogues. They loved how the character was drawn and animated. They lamented both his temporary deaths and his final one. They also empathized with Fox’s distress when Nuna dies temporarily. It was clear that they were as emotionally attached as the two players described above. Commenter 15 raved about the character: “... this is so adorable! I just love watching his tail flick and wag about.”

Commenters debated whether Fox’s temporary deaths would be too emotionally intense for a child:

Commenter 15: Tried it with my five-year-old. She didn’t like all the dying. Make a mistake – die. Make another mistake – die. She doesn’t mind it in Max or Mickey Mouse, but somehow the dying in “Never Alone” was too much.

Commenter 16: It’s pretty brutal how sad the characters get when the other dies.

Watching the fox just curl up and whimper or the girl scream is heart-wrenching.

In a second thread, a similar, extended dialog discussed Fox's final death. The dialog kicked off with a potential player attempting to predict the emotional impact of the game.

Commenter 17: This looks really good, but I am way too [sic] nervous that the wolf will die at the end and I don't think my heart can take that.

Commenter 18: Where's the fox? WHAT THE HELL HAPPENS TO THE FOX?

Commenter 19: You know what happens to the fox ...

By the end of this dialogue, the commenters have begun joking about their future reactions to the game's emotional content. They want information about any heart-wrenching impact *before* they decide to play:

Commenter 20: So is the big emotional moment when the kid dies or the fox? Edit: I'll clarify that I've not played the game so I can't call this a spoiler, I am merely highlighting that all these original indie games are pretty predictable.

Commenter 21: "Have you heard of that story where the one character dies?" This isn't exclusive to indie games.

Commenter 22: If the fox dies we burn everything down!

4. Reactions to the Game's Environment

Both players and commenters described the environments depicted in "Never Alone" and the visuals used to do it. They used words like "dreary" and "neutrally toned" to talk about the game's color palette. But because of the game's Arctic setting, commenters also interpreted the subdued palette as an accurate effort to bring Alaska's far north coast to life, using words such as "beautiful," "gorgeous," "stunning," and "really cute." Player B called the colors "emotional paints ... When you're walking, when you're kind of sifting through these different moods. ... I really, really enjoyed that." Player B also enjoyed how the environment played an important role,

especially the wind, which Fox and Nuna must fight. In one level, the characters continually have to duck behind landscape features when Arctic gales threaten to blow them off their path, Player B said:

“I think about it in, like, elemental terms. Like the wind is even a kind of ... like, the girl falling and understanding that the wind can carry you and once they figured that out, I was like, “oh, it’s pushing us to this side, and we can climb down okay.” (Player B)

During our interview, I sensed that there was more to Player B’s appreciation of the game’s visual landscape. I asked player B whether they saw the environment as if it were a non-playable character within the game. But Player B resisted the idea of the land as game character; land played a much bigger role, they said. Player B described the Arctic environment as sentient entity, with whom an Indigenous player is already in relationship. The land and the player recognize each other:

You’re not stepping into an unknown place. Like, you’re known to the unknown. ...
There’s always ... an awareness that Indigenous people have for the land and for spirits that live within the land ... There’s always an Indigenous hero’s journey with spatial awareness, already knowing what’s waiting for you, because it is kind of ingrained, and I want to say it’s like ancestral knowledge – no, not ancestral knowledge. It’s already there.
(Player B)

Some commenters seemed familiar with Arctic weather and terrain features. Others appreciated that the atmosphere was foreboding and “creepy” (Commenter 25). Some commenters wanted more games in the same style, suggesting other animals for Nuna to partner with or other traditional Indigenous lands whose environments cried out to be portrayed in media, such as Maori ecosystems with giant birds. Commenter 23 called the game’s setting “far and away the

best thing about the game,” specifically discussing the way “the aurora borealis, ice floes, glaciers, and blizzard winds are incorporated into the challenges of each level, and interwoven into the Iñupiat mythology that carries the plot of the entire game.” Commenter 25 applauded the way the game’s art style blended with a story type that combined suspense and humor: “Yeah the art style fits the narrative style pretty well. The folk tales up here have always been creepy as hell, but filled with silly jokes at the same time.”

For Commenter 26, the nature depictions spurred an imaginative journey, conjuring future possible companions for Nuna: “an owl or a wolf or a hare or a polar bear cub or _____ (insert cool northern animal here)!” Some commenters had only seen the game’s depictions of the environment in trailers or media accounts, but said they were eagerly anticipating buying and playing because of those visual excerpts.

5 Reactions to Cultural Elements

Players and commenters discussed not just the quality of the game’s cultural elements, but the quantity and variety of them: language, storytelling, mythical characters, drumming, art, spirituality, child-rearing, and finding food. Seeing these elements invited players to describe parts of their tribal traditions or others they had heard about. These elements encouraged players to step into Nuna’s world, *her* culture. The players interpreted playing “Never Alone” not as a form of “identity tourism” (Nakamura, 2016), but as the game inviting them to step into an actual Iñupiaq story and play a character whose identity elements were accurate.

Players B and C especially connected with the style of the artistic depictions of Iñupiaq culture. Player B mentioned the scrimshaw-style, two-dimensional cutscenes that were interspersed throughout the game. They enjoyed the juxtapositions of the scrimshaw with the detailed animation, “the going back and forth between the, you know, the full-color, fleshed-out

people and the sort of scrimshaw type of drawings.” Player C was struck by the Blizzard Man’s “terrifying Eskimo mask.” Both B and C mentioned the depictions of the “little people” who play a critical role in one of the game’s puzzles. These mischievous characters steal the Owl Man’s drum, and he asks Nuna to get it back for him. In that level of the game, the animators found a way to show the little people running around, hidden from Fox and Nuna by the tall grasses, but just visible to game players. The animation amused Player B:

We would see like little dots running, like the top of their heads. ... Yeah, it’s really cool to take the drum back, because they [the little people] are being naughty ... and [the makers] did it in a way where it was very innovative. (Player B)

Preserving culture through storytelling was important to Player E. When the Northern Lights appear in the game, a Cultural Insight video explains how Iñupiaq people told children that they had to keep their parka hoods up when the Northern Lights appeared. Parents would tell their children that the lights were spirits who would steal their heads and bowl with them. Parents would do this because the lights usually appeared on the coldest of nights, and keeping their hoods up kept the children warm. Player E appreciated “the pretty cool incorporation with what was going on ... that sort of level of stories within stories.” Player F enjoyed how the game positions the player to *become* Iñupiaq, to play as one of the characters within the story:

“You’re not redfacing, right? You’re not trying to be Native; you’re not dressing up as somebody Native. You’re being it, because you’re ... the avatar view is this little girl, is this young woman that is off on an adventure to save her community.”

In other words, players had to *embody* Indigeneity; they were not allowed to choose items from a menu to include only the characteristics they enjoyed. They had to go on Nuna and Fox’s quest, not create one of their own. For commenters who were new to Inupiaq culture, playing Nuna and

Fox and watching the Cultural Insight videos “provided wonderful insight” (Commenter 29) or did “a great job of introducing people to the Cook Inlet community and some of Iñupiat culture” (Commenter 30), and other commenters concurred. These players who enjoyed the educational aspects of the game sometimes defended the game from critical commenters. In a dialogue where one commenter criticized a description of the game as “amazing,” Commenter 31 responded:

I didn’t use the word amazing to be extreme or get upvotes. I used the word amazing because that’s how I personally feel about the game. When has another beautiful game been made that brought to the wider public eye a tale from indigenous people that was so intentionally created to honor those people’s traditions? (Commenter 31)

Finally, commenter 5 defended their positive opinions of “Never Alone” with a speculation about the mindset of those who viewed it negatively:

I saw some of those same criticisms, people saying the puzzles were too easy, or it was just boring where all you do pretty much is run and jump. But really, I think that the people who left those comments just completely missed the whole point of the game. ... The people who complained about the game being too easy really just sound to me like they would sit there while an elder tells the story, then respond afterwards, “It was so boring, all we did there was just sit!” Completely ignoring that the purpose was not to sit, but to listen. (Commenter 5).

6. Implications of Playing for Relatedness

If SDT's theory that satisfaction of relatedness needs is required for human well-being, then arguably, connection to well-known and well-loved others and connection to a larger, more broadly defined community are also important for all humans. The communitarian view of self-in-community as a dialog, and group-in-community as a second type of dialog, aligns with this view of two levels of relatedness. An Indigenous self-determination perspective unites the level of individual and community well-being through individual and collective autonomy. What the players and commenters' discussions seem to indicate is that satisfaction of the two levels of relatedness may convey a similar tie to well-being.

Both micro- and macro-relatedness elements of "Never Alone" seemed to fuel player and commenter enjoyment, understanding, and attachment to elements of the game. Because playing "Never Alone" was something players and commenters chose to do, for their own varieties of reasons, it likely satisfied individual autonomy needs. But via making the Cultural Insight videos part of the game, and giving the game itself a goal of saving a community, the game's connection to collective autonomy became plain: Iñupiaq people defined themselves in the videos and an Iñupiaq girl undertook the village-saving quest in the game. The cultural practices and the ways the Iñupiat expressed belonging (drumming, hunting, and sharing stories, for example) made possible players' identification with a particular kind of relationship to Indigenous collectives. Via the striking visual depictions of an Arctic environment, and the helpful or challenging roles that environment assumes, the game facilitates player identification with a particular kind of relationship to environment – that of environment-*as*-community. Player B struggled to put this relationship into words. This player seemed to conceive of the environment as a collective that was sentient. The environment *knew* the Indigenous traveler's journey in detail, just as the

Indigenous traveler through an environment knew about the environment and knew it as a network of individuals-in-community, a *system* which held knowledge collectively. Moreover, this second type of collective relatedness – environmental relatedness – is already part of an Indigenous self-determination framework, because that framework emphasizes how much sovereignty over traditional land and its resources is essential to Indigenous well-being. When the game makes relationships to environment more salient, it is engaging in visual sovereignty practices: accuracy as evaluated by Indigenous people, and instigation of specific, place-based action. It is correcting a colonized perspective on relationship to environment and stocking a shared, social imaginary with different, dialogic relationship.

FINDINGS 4: CULTURAL PRODUCTION

Research Questions 4a and 4b asks about the goals of “Never Alone” ’s cultural production process and the impact of it on players’ experiences:

RQ4a: *How do the game’s makers describe their goals in creating and implementing a cultural production process for “Never Alone” and its Cultural Insights?*

RQ4b: *How do Indigenous players and online commenters discuss the cultural production process of “Never Alone” or other entertainment media?*

One of the reasons to study “Never Alone” was that the game was made in an unusual way: CITC, the tribal council, had the original idea to invest income from the tribal corporation’s for-profit businesses in a video game. CITC selected E-Line Media and the two organizations formed a partnership to produce the game. But along the way, CITC recruited Iñupiaq elders and artists to work with the game developers at every subsequent step of the process. The partnership called this process “inclusive production,” but I have used a term more commonly used in video game research, “cultural production.”

To answer RQ4a, I conducted interviews with the game’s makers to my data. I then used data from players and commenters to answer RQ4b. (The panelists did not discuss “Never Alone.”)

1. Maker Interviewees

I interviewed three of the game’s makers: Amy Fredeen, chief operating officer of CITC Enterprises; Alan Gershenfeld, president of E-Line Games; and Casey McDonnell, lead artist on “Never Alone.” They also agreed to be identified by name in this dissertation. McDonnell was interviewed twice; the others were interviewed once. While I had spoken to Fredeen by phone,

met with her in Anchorage, and corresponded with her over email, this was our only formal research interview. Gershenfeld and I had also corresponded over email before our research interview. I had not previously spoken with McDonnell.

2. Makers' Goals for the Game

From the outset, CITC had two goals in creating a video game. The first was to make money, and the council was willing to spend money to make money. Many Alaska Native corporations own and / or operate multiple businesses in different sectors. Cook Inlet Region Incorporated (CIRI), of which CITC is a nonprofit, social services subsidiary, is no different. CIRI had profit from other business sectors that it wanted to invest and grow. The second goal was to connect Alaska Native youth to their cultures. Research shows that cultural connection is an important factor in Indigenous well-being for both youth and adults (Wexler et al., 2014; Cross et al., 2020; Hunter et al. 2025). CITC's board held extensive discussions about making a video game before taking the possibility outside the council. Fredeen, then chief financial officer of CITC, was leery of the project because of the risks: a game might fail to make a profit, but could actually lose the corporation's investment capital.

CITC serves people from multiple tribal cultures in the Anchorage area – Yupi'k, Athabascan, Haida, Iñupiaq, Tlingit, just to name a few. In the early stages of deciding to make a game, CITC had not yet chosen to focus on Iñupiaq culture or an Iñupiaq story.

Step 1: Articulating Dual Goals

Because of the dual goals of profit and impact, Fredeen understood that any video game the council made would have to attract non-Indigenous players as well as Alaska Natives. “We knew, if this game was just focused on being sold to our youth, it wouldn't, No. 1, make a financial return, and (it) wouldn't actually make the impact we wanted for our kids,” Fredeen

said. By “our kids,” she meant a geographic group rather than a tribal one: Alaska Native youth of all tribes in the Anchorage area. And by “the impact we wanted,” she was referring to a felt connection to Alaska Native cultural practices and the people engaged in those practices. One of the services CITC provides is working with grandparents, who are a vital cultural resource for Alaska Native families and sometimes serve as primary guardians.

Meanwhile, E-Line, the game company with the name drawn from educational games, had dual goals that were similar to CITC’s, according to company president Alan Gershenfeld. The company had mainly built educational games, but E-Line wanted to make games that were impact-focused but marketed beyond educational channels, he recalled. Another goal for E-Line was “to bring diverse voices and perspectives” to games, he said. Later in the game’s development, when the art was being produced, E-Line artist Casey McDonnell said he knew “Never Alone” was being built to connect Native youth to their heritage. But he also knew that such a niche audience wouldn’t sustain a game that cost millions to make. To meet the goal of making money, the game had to appeal to non-Indigenous gamers. That audience would prioritize fun; and “[if] they want it to be meaningful, that’s great. But it couldn’t kind of speak over their heads either,” McDonnell said.

Step 2: Mitigating the Risks of Making the Game

In each phase of the game’s development, both organizations had to consider financial and ethical risks if they made the wrong decision. The financial risks were to CITC’s capital and to both companies’ reputations if the venture didn’t make money. The ethical risks included making a game that Alaska Natives saw as appropriation or stereotyping. Aside from the reputational harms of making a game that failed in these two ways, such an outcome would have violated both companies’ values and missions. To avoid these risks, the game makers to revisit

not just their goals, but their values, while creating the game. The consequences of how multiple audiences would see the game often dominated Fredeen's and Gershenfeld's minds. Fredeen said that Gershenfeld and E-Line CEO Michael Ang actually tried to talk CITC out of making a game, and that this risk-aware approach helped build trust between the two groups.

2.1. Conducting the Landscape Analysis. CITC agreed to give E-Line a short-term consulting contract to perform a landscape assessment, which corresponds roughly to a market analysis in book publishing. Both organizations agreed to spend six months on this analysis, scoping out the potential for an Indigenous video game to succeed critically and commercially. The results of the analysis brought into sharper focus how many other similar games had been created, as well as how and why they might have failed or succeeded. Gershenfeld said:

We studied movies like *Whale Rider* that were very successful commercially. We studied world music. We looked at graphic novels, like *Persepolis*, and ... and we talked to distributors or you know, the folks that distribute games, like Steam, and other folks.

(Alan Gershenfeld)

Based on information from the analysis, E-line concluded that an Indigenous video game *could* succeed commercially, but only *if* it also succeeded critically. Gershenfeld told CITC the game had to be made at a “high level of craft.” Good intentions would not be enough to help it “rise above the noise” of the entertainment industry. The game also had to succeed apart from any Indigenous subject matter; it had to be fun to play. *If* the game cleared those hurdles, it might stand out among the thousands being released each year. The dual goals meant that E-Line would have to assemble a team of top game makers and CITC would need to bring Alaska Native writers and storytellers on board. This combined effort would create a “shot” at success..

For CITC's Fredeen, whose job it was to steward the money, that was a lot of "ifs." She credited CITC's then-board chair, Clare Swan, for being willing to take the risks. According to Fredeen, Swan told the group, "Well, go get it done. I don't care if it's hard."

2.2. Building the Partnership. CITC members had seen the outcomes of other collaborations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups, projects in which Fredeen said "experts come in, they do a project for you, and then they leave with all the knowledge." For this venture to realize both organization's goals, the entities had to be true partners, she said. CITC wanted a process "where we were doing the work together, side by side and every step of the way," according to Fredeen. As a result, CITC and E-Line signed an agreement to co-develop and co-publish the game. As part of the agreement, CITC received part ownership in E-Line and made a direct cash investment in the game company, as well. "That way," Fredeen said, "we knew for sure they weren't going to [want to] leave us behind" when the project was completed. For E-Line, the structure of the agreement meant that the project was going to be much more than work-for-hire. The game would be E-Line's core focus for multiple years, and CITC would be involved in approving nearly every step of production. E-Line had never produced a game this way before.

2.3. Building the Cultural Production Process. For both Fredeen and Gershenfeld, setting up a process that required buy-in from both parties at nearly every step felt like carving new ground. They weren't just creating a game; they were creating a way to make a game. The core team, which included members of both organizations, decided that a "greenlight committee" would approve each stage of development. This committee had to include members from not just the two organizations, but also members of the community being represented. Fredeen took on the role of recruiting Alaska Natives to serve on the greenlight committee; they would be called

“Cultural Ambassadors,” bridges between the values, heritage, and perspectives of Indigenous groups and the go-fast, tech-oriented culture of a game studio. Meanwhile, Gershenfeld began recruiting a team of game artists, including Sean Vesce of the “Tomb Raider” game series, who would become creative director. Gershenfeld and Fredeen both knew that because this group from different professions and cultures was so diverse, difficult conversations were going to happen.

To talk to anybody that works in game development, especially commercial game development, it’s hard. It’s technology. It’s an art form. It’s a fast-moving sector. It’s technology mediated. But it’s a craft – it’s not a commodity. And it involves, you know, creative people, which are challenging to manage. And so all of that ... on top of the fact that we were doing it inclusively with the community (Alan Gershenfeld).

Step 3: Creating the Cultural Insight Videos

My interviews with the three game makers uncovered a fact that surprised me: The Cultural Insight videos – one of the features of the game that received the most positive critical response – were an afterthought.

“Never Alone” was produced in 2013 and 2014, long before the pandemic made video-conferencing apps indispensable. To bridge the distance from Seattle to Anchorage and Utqiagvik, E-line hired a videographer to tape interviews with the Cultural Ambassadors. This way, the footage could be shared with E-Line’s artists and game developers without them having to travel in Alaska’s unpredictable weather, and they could revisit the video footage at will. The videos were a more immersive way for E-Line staff to see and hear the voices of the Cultural Ambassadors, study the way ice floes move, and view tribal art and artifacts.

“It was so bizarrely different than how we’re working today,” McDonnell recalled.

“We’re literally on the video call every single day and sharing our screens, and I don’t think any of that was going on back then.” The interviews resulted in about 40 hours of film footage, Fredeen said. But the idea of using that footage to build 23 short videos only occurred to the makers a few months before the scheduled launch date, and it came from creative director Sean Vesce and artistic director Dima Veryovka. Fredeen said that Vesce and Veryovka’s goal was to ensure the project honored the time and insight the Cultural Ambassadors gave. “You know, just credit,” Fredeen said. A second reason was the “magnetic” quality of the footage, Gershenfeld said. Gershenfeld wanted the videos to be excellent, short, relevant, and perhaps most important, optional. “Video games have a terrible history with videos,” Gershenfeld said. “They’re not interactive. ... It pulls you out of the game.” The greenlight committee considered a companion website, he recalled, “but nobody visits companion websites.” Eventually he agreed to the creation of the videos and their use within the game, but only if the knowledge gained from them were supplemental, not required. Players who skipped them couldn’t be penalized, and they had to be able to watch the videos outside of the game. Fredeen expressed a negative intention – a reaction on the part of players that she wanted to avoid. I include this intention last because I believe it to be such an important part of Amy’s collaborative personality that this intention may have come to her in hindsight, or at least as she viewed the videos in production. She did not want the videos to come off as “preachy” or educational. “We didn’t want it to feel like you know, high and mighty, you know, ‘Indigenous group that’s blessing you with their presence,’” she said. “It was more about just being welcoming and being open.” She felt that the interview format of the videos helped avoid that “preachy” effect. The resulting 24 short videos zoomed in on a small slice of Iñupiat life: culture, environment, or a specific current issue. Each video was

paired with a relevant section of the game so that the video could offer modern or historical context on an aspect of a puzzle or a piece of the narrative. For example, the first video, “A Living People,” accessible early in the game, discusses how the Iñupiat are living in modern times. “We’re not a museum piece,” Fredeen says in the video. “The Iñupiaq people are a living people and a living culture.” In another video, Cultural Ambassadors recount the history and use of the bolo, a tool for silently hunting game birds to avoid revealing the hunter’s presence to any nearby whales. Other videos discuss Iñupiaq conceptions of their relationship to the environment (“Northern Lights,” “Sila”) and to animals (“Arctic Fox”). Still others emphasize the importance of cultural practices (“The Trapping Trail,” “The Heartbeat of The Community” {a video about drumming}) Table 5 below lists the 24 videos by content category, along with a capsule description, to show the wide variety of topics covered. All of the videos are available to watch on YouTube at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_gWjothx6V4

Table 5*“Never Alone” Cultural Insight Videos by Category*

Title	Description or Key Quote
Category: Culture	
A Living People, A Living Culture	“We’re not a museum piece.”
It Would Be Really Nice to Hear a Story	“Stories ... need to be told. They need to be heard.”
Scrimshaw	“Each etching is telling a story of some event.”
Caribou Skin Clothing Was the Best	“With that stuff on, you could sleep outside in 50 below...”
Little People	Legends of little people from cultures across Alaska
Bolo	A silent weapon for bringing down game birds without alerting whales
Rebirth and Naming	How children are named or nicknamed for elders
Kunuksaayuka	The Blizzard Man story on which the game is based
Category: The Environment	
Arctic Fox	“Foxes are like little spoiled kids in a way.”
Sila Has A Soul	“From the land, into the moon, the sun, the stars. That’s sīla.”
The Trapping Trail	“We were on ecological time.”
Stranded	A young man’s tale of drifting on an ice floe
No More Thick Ice	Iñupiaq people talked about climate change before scientists did.
King Island	A historical Iñupiaq-inhabited island with stilt houses
Northern Lights	“Don’t play [outside] without your hood on”
The Month of Night	A tale of hunting caribou under the moonlight
Reading the Weather	Traditional knowledge about impending storms
Category: Connection and Cooperation	
The Heartbeat of the Community	The role of drumming as a cultural practice
A Girl and Her Nanuq	A hunter kills a mother polar bear and becomes responsible for the polar bear’s cub
Subsistence Lifestyle	“It’s about feeding the whole community.”
Everything is Alive	“If everything is alive, we want to respect it.”
Sharing for Survival	The importance of cooperation and community
Animal Spirits	“...all the animals have a human form ... so they have just as much, or more, intelligence.”
The Manslayer	A villain whose lesson is “don’t act only for yourself.”

3. Aligning Process With Goals and Values

Once the game was in development, McDonnell, as E-Line's lead artist on "Never Alone," felt the importance of the relationship between E-Line and CITC, and the risk that should the game fail, it would also affect the partnership and perhaps even the future of similar collaborations. "It's not just a helping role," he said of E-Line's involvement. "It's a deep partnership, and it's sort of in service of something that's much bigger than even the individual partnership or the individual game."

McDonnell explained how fraught the process of creating *any* video game can be. "There's like literally a million ways that it can fall apart and more often than not, they do fall apart. Everything about them is really fragile," he said. According to Gershenfeld, E-Line's creative team often had to make multiple presentations to the greenlight committee before the committee approved a key decision for the game. Six examples of decisions that the greenlight committee debated demonstrate how carefully the committee and the creative team worked together to come to alignment on the narrative, characters, look, and feel of the game.

Alignment 3.1. Choosing the Story

Fredeen recruited Ishmael Angaluuk Hope, a writer and poet who is Iñupiaq and Tlingit, to be the game's lead writer. This was a key choice; stories are one of the Iñupiaq culture's most important art forms. The tribe celebrates a renowned writer, Robert Nasruk Cleveland, whose tales were collected and published in *Stories of the Black River People* (Cleveland et al., 1980). The creative team, with Hope on board, chose the story, "Kunuksaayuka," or "The Blizzard Man," an Iñupiaq tale of a boy who goes on a journey to discover the source of a blizzard destroying his village. But appropriation of Indigenous creations was one of the pitfalls CITC and E-Line wanted to avoid. Cleveland died in 1971, and daughter Minnie Aliitchak Gray was

his eldest living child. The team contacted her and received permission to base the game on the story.

Fredeen talked about how this particular choice – choosing to portray the Iñupiat culture, *her* culture – made the risk of the game failing at its goals personal for her: “These are *my* people’s stories. ... Are these people [E-Line] going to do the right thing by us? ... It’s like, ‘holy crap, are we going to be appropriating *our* culture?’” she said. In other words, just because an Iñupiaq person was involved at a high level didn’t guarantee mean every decision would be the right one. But by involving Hope as lead writer as well as the other Cultural Ambassadors, Fredeen and the partnership increased the number of collaborators and viewpoints that went into all of the decisions. Giving decision-making power to a collective maximized the chances that if at any point, the game makers were about to veer off course, someone would correct them. Because the way that Inupiat were portrayed would be the product of many shared decisions, the community was more likely to see the game as a product of Alaska Natives deciding how Alaska Natives should be depicted – in other words, an expression of visual sovereignty. Fredeen’s concerns showed that CITC’s approach to risk was to summon a *collective autonomy* in which decisions were made via a dialogic, communitarian process between media makers and the people being portrayed.

Alignment 3.2. Choosing the Main Character

Then the question arose about the gender of the main character. Gershenfeld said it was one of the back-and-forth debates the greenlight committee had. There were risks in making the character a girl because boys made up a majority of young video game players, though scholars argue that gamer demographics are more diverse than assumed and some even question the relevance of the term “gamer” (Shaw, 2009; Massanari, 2014). But creative director Sean Vesce

had helmed a successful, female-protagonist game in “Tomb Raider,” the game that spawned multiple sequels and became a feature film franchise. In addition, though the idea phase of “Never Alone” predated the “GamerGate” controversy, game scholars had long been aware of the gaming industry’s tendencies to exclude, or even be hostile to, female players (Massanari, 2014). Finally, lead artist McDonnell pointed out that many members of the E-line team had young daughters. Working on a game their daughter might eventually play provided extra motivation and interest, he said. This alignment shows that game makers weighed the potential impact on audiences and responded to current controversies within the video game genre. The “Never Alone” partnership. They were considering a relationality beyond the Inupiat and beyond Alaska Natives, one with the wider video game audience in which few hero quests featured girls.

Alignment 3.3. Choosing Nuna’s Companion

Who would accompany Nuna on her quest? Domesticated canines have a storied history with Alaska Natives (Hensley, 2009b; C. Griffitt, personal communication, February 8, 2021). But one of the game’s purposes, and an Iñupiat value, was to show kinship with not just domestic animals and those who could be hunted for food, but all living creatures. One of the Cultural Ambassador’s families once had an Arctic fox as a pet. But many Alaskans didn’t want their children to become enamored with foxes because the animal can carry rabies, Gershenfeld said. So the second character on the quest was initially a wolf. The game makers debated the companion’s species just as they had debated the gender of the main character. The deciding factor, artist McDonnell said, was the size of the animal. The fox could realistically be shown in a size that would not dwarf a 10-year-old Iñupiaq child. The character could more likely be experienced as a helpful, beloved, though still wild, partner on Nuna’s quest and thus an example of a relationship with a non-human, “person” within the surrounding environment. Fox being

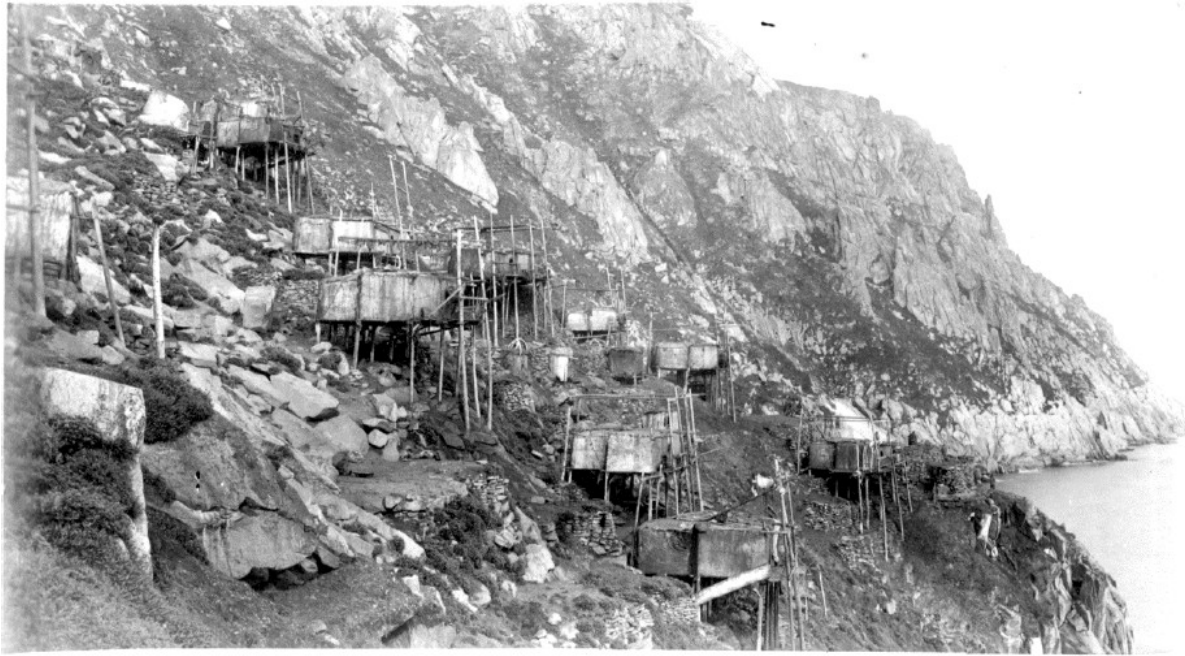
Nuna's size put the quest partners on more of an equal footing, possibly increasing the chances that players might identify with Fox if they didn't identify with Nuna. Having two characters of equal size and equally valued abilities could also be more likely to imbue game-play with relatedness satisfactions, even if someone was playing solo. Thus, SDT's relatedness need showed up in both process and product; the community's objection to having the animal be a fox was heard and weighed against the other possibilities.

Alignment 3.4. Getting Visual Details Right.

The attention paid to getting the visuals of "Never Alone" correct – so that, as Gershenfeld put it, the Alaska Native communities could "see themselves" as portrayed accurately in the game – was as painstaking a process as creating the game mechanics. Every visual element of the game was based on research, whether that was research on historical artifacts, how ice floes move on Arctic water, or the diverse terrain of Alaska. "At first, you know, when you look up 'the Arctic' [on Google or in a reference book] you might at first think, 'well it's just like flat areas and snow,' " McDonnell said. But in a video game, players expect to be challenged by different types of terrain. "So we have to like figure out, where are the places that you can go to?" The team found that there were plenty of authentic landscapes in Iñupiat traditional land to choose from: ice floes, large forested areas, coastal grassland habitats, riverbanks, islands. "There's an island that shaped our [vision] ... it's an abandoned village that used to be popular, and it's on stilts. So King Island became the shape of another level," McDonnell recounted. "Literally everything [in the game] was researched, and nothing was just like made up out of nowhere." See Figures 5 and 6 below for a comparison of a photo of King Island and an image from the game.

Figure 5.

King Island Houses Used as a Source for a “Never Alone” Level.



King Island - cliff dwellers

Note: King Island in 1888. Courtesy of Alaska State Library, Mrs. Allen (Agnes Swineford)

Shattuck Photograph Collection, P27-110

Figure 6

King Island Level in the Video Game “Never Alone”



Note: In the background of a “Never Alone” screenshot, the wreckage of a King Island-type stilt structure can be seen. Image courtesy of E-Line Games.

Two additional examples of the artists’ attention to authenticity were the scrimshaw-based cut-scenes and the designs on Nuna’s parka. McDonnell said that the beauty of historic examples of scrimshaw art and scrimshaw’s importance as an aid in recording stories entranced the game artists. They wanted to find a way to bring that dramatic style into the game. Artistic director Dima Veryovka drew specific scenes from the Blizzard Man story in a scrimshaw-based style. Then the other artists digitally cut out the characters, as if they were to become two-dimensional stick puppets, and animated the characters and scenes. These short graphic videos were then set

to audio narration in Iñupiat. Figure 7, below, shows a frame from of one of the scrimshaw cutscenes.

Figure 7

A Frame From the “Never Alone” Cutscenes Based on Scrimshaw Carvings



Note: The English writing at the bottom of the image is an English subtitle to translate the audio narration in Iñupiaq. Players could choose the language of the subtitles.

Both the scrimshaw-based cutscenes and the King Island levels were important to the narrative structure of the game. The connection of these two features to actual Inupiaq art and places fulfills the visual sovereignty directive to put Indigenous people at the center, not the periphery, of a creative work. With these two game elements, “Never Alone” integrated that directive into the look, the sound, and the story of the game. Player C told me that their Iñupiaq family came

from an Alaska island similar to King Island, and that their daughter was learning the language from playing the game.

Alignment 3.5. Correcting a Game Mechanic

A fifth example demonstrates how the greenlight panel emphatically rejected an element an E-line developer had created. At various stages in the game, “spirit helpers” come along to assist Nuna and Fox. These creatures, drawn in ghostly green outline, help Nuna and Fox by carrying the two adventurers over roiling waters or giving them a boost up cliff faces. A game developer at E-line had made these helpers available to Nuna and Fox on demand – in other words, they could be summoned by game players whenever desired, with a single keystroke. CITC greenlight members vehemently objected. As Fredeen tells it, the developer refused to alter this basic, but important mechanic that appeared throughout the game.

CITC members agonized about what to do, Fredeen said. “We don’t leave people behind in Alaska!” she exclaimed. “Number one, we didn’t want to waste money, and we didn’t want to lose talent.” But the panel approving each step in the production process strongly objected to this utilitarian view of the helping spirits:

“That’s not appropriate for how we see our interaction with the natural world and spirit world. And ... that guy ended up having to go. He didn’t understand how detrimental [the mechanic] was, in our view, for the game. ... At the end of it, um, E-Line listened to us, and we made the right decision.” (Amy Fredeen.)

Fredeen’s description of this moment in the game’s development highlights how the value of relationality – being in community and being accountable to that community – made this course correction necessary. “Particularly on projects like this, if someone isn’t going to listen to the community, as [to] what the Indigenous community outlines is appropriate ... you can’t let them

stay on the project,” Fredeen said. Communitarianism’s descriptions of dialogs about ethics between audiences and producers usually take place after the media work is released (Waggoner, 2018), but this example shows a dialogue about how to represent a relationship *during* a production process.

Alignment 3.6. Removing Portrayals of Whaling

The Iñupiat have long hunted and coexisted with many coastal species. Whale meat continues to be an integral part of Alaska Natives’ diets, supplying protein, vitamins, and essential fatty acids (Marino, 2015). The species is embedded in Iñupiat culture to the extent that whale jawbones sometimes mark Iñupiat villages, and the distribution of whale meat to elders and other people who are unable or unskilled at hunting is an important ritual to ensure the upcoming year’s food supply for tribal members (Sakakibara, 2017). The spirit helpers that show up in “Never Alone” have been described by some players as whale shaped.

At one point in the game’s production, a whaling captain gave a video interview to help game developers understand the Iñupiat. Later, the videographers and editors creating the Cultural Insight videos used the interview footage in one of the videos, Fredeen said. But when the greenlight panel showed the videos to Iñupiaq leaders from outside the game team, the whaling video drew objections.

[Whaling] *is* important to us, but it’s so important that the whaling captain didn’t want to give permission to use [footage of his interview]. Because ... if they lose the ability to whale, it’s their food source for the entire community. And actually, when there’s a low whale season, they see a lot of community strife, whether it’s crime or depression and suicide ... It’s such an integral part of our community even today that it’s hard for us to *not* show it, but at the same time ... we have to put the practice first. (Amy Fredeen)

This alignment highlights two important actions: playing the CI videos for community leaders *outside* the game team, and deciding to remove the whaling video. The threat to this millenia-old practice is real; despite the long history, importance, and legality of whaling, depictions or even descriptions of it have brought Alaska Native whalers condemnation, even death threats against teenagers, from outsiders (O'Malley, 2017). Climate change, by inflicting less-predictable weather and ocean conditions, also threatens Alaska Natives' ability to hunt whales. This alignment shows the cultural production process preserving two relationships: one between CITC and Inupiaq communities, and a second between CITC and all the Alaska Native communities that exercise hunting and fishing rights.

3.7. Implications of Goals and Process Alignments

The above alignments connect to most of theories described in this study's literature review. First, each of the above alignments shows Line and CITC fulfilling multiple visual sovereignty directives as the partnership made important decisions. In asking permission to use the "Blizzard Man" story and basing the game's look, sound, and story on real-life Inupiaq art, language, and values, the partnership put Inupiaq people at the center of product and process. Second, game makers prioritized preserving relationships by vetoing a game mechanic and removing a Cultural Insight video. In these two corrective steps, the partnership demonstrated its collective autonomy but also embraced the collective autonomy of other groups. As communitarians would see it, the partnership acted as a group-in-community (Christians et al., 2007). Third, from an Indigenous self-determination framework, the partnership harnessed its collective autonomy to maximize any well-being benefits and minimize harms to Alaska Native people. And finally, the decisions it made about the game's two main characters may have made

it more likely for more players to identify with the Nuna and Fox or the relationship the two shared.

4. Players and Commenters Discuss Cultural Production

Players were aware that “Never Alone” had to appeal to Native and non-Native players while making a game that Alaska Natives saw as accurately portraying one of their cultures. Player F, for example, had no direct knowledge of the game’s development process, but said they imagined the tribe’s leadership discussing which stories its members felt comfortable sharing with the world. The care that CITC took with interpreting the “Blizzard Man” story intrigued Player F. In many Indigenous communities, they said, ownership of a traditional stories is held communally:

“... and it’s not an ownership per se, it’s an ownership that protects it from outside interests. ... But it’s something that always goes deeper than that, right? It’s ... creation owns it. You know, the stories came from creation. It didn’t come from us.” (Player F)

Commenter 36 took the time to correct the misconception that a game company had merely “consulted” with Alaska Natives and shared a link to an online article that described CITC’s role as originators more accurately. And in one thread, a Redditor directly asked the question, “Is “Never Alone Problematic?” However, few responses to that particular thread were about Native involvement in production; many more were concerned about appropriation or potential issues the content of the game rather than its production. Generally, commenters seemed opposed to non-Natives profiting from Native art or stories without sharing any of the benefits obtained.

4.1. Players and Commenters Valued Cultural Production

As with representation, the six players in this study craved media from Native creators at every level. They knew when a media creation, or even just parts of it, was problematic or had

sparked discussions. For example, Player C knew the specifics of the Indigenous identities of the “Reservation Dogs” production crew. Director and producer Taiko Waititi is part Māori, and Player C questioned his ability to truly understand Native circumstances in the series’ Oklahoma setting” Players celebrated media creations that made incremental improvements to including Indigenous people in production staff, but said they still yearned for mainstream media producers and creators to seek out Indigenous actors, artists, experts, directors, and publishers. Player C said:

I don’t think you can tell a Native American story, without it coming from Native creators. ... You see that with other media that tries to sell Native stories. I just read an article that the next “Predator” movie is going to be about a Cheyenne warrior. But it’s written, written and directed, by possibly two of the whitest people I’ve ever seen. I don’t think they’re gonna be able to tell a good story. (Player C)

Player C made an exception, however, for Kliph Nesteroff, another “whitest guy” and the author of “We Had a Little Real Estate Problem: The Unheralded Story of Native Americans & Comedy” (2021). “It hurts my heart that we didn’t write it,” Player C said. “I mean, I’m glad he did, but it’s like, man, ‘we could have done that.’ ” In other words, *if* a media creation needed to be made, and Indigenous people weren’t doing it, *someone* should – but they ought to be sure to do it in a good way.

Players and commenters made distinctions between different levels of cultural production as well as different degrees and ways Native people might be included in production. Commenter 37 asked E-Line staff about whether a formal copyright process had been involved in using the Kunuuksaayuka story. E-Line’s lead game designer, Grant Roberts, responded to tell this commenter about consulting with the late Robert Nasruk Cleveland’s daughter, Minnie Gray, to

obtain permission. “Lovely to hear you did it right,” Commenter 37 responded. Meanwhile, Player E and I had a long discussion about several television series that involved Native characters, settings, and creators, as well as series that could have, and should have, but didn’t (“Wynonna Earp,” set in the Dakotas, was one example of this failing). The most important example was “Reservation Dogs,” the Hulu teen dramedy, which won Player E’s admiration for its fully complex teenage characters and the fact that “finally, almost everyone involved is Indigenous.” But even with a nearly-all-Indigenous cast and crew, pitfalls remained.

So there’s on the one hand, you know, just getting Indigenous peoples involved. On the other hand, you know, those people may not necessarily be the voices of the communities that they’re presenting. And I think that still is a little bit of something that I’m sure we’ll be working on in the years to come. (Player E)

When I interviewed Player E, “Killers of the Flower Moon,” the 2023 movie based on the 1920s Osage murders in Oklahoma, was in production. Martin Scorsese had earlier bought the movie rights to David Grann’s 2017 non-fiction book about the murders that happened in the early days of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Leonardo DiCaprio had agreed to play a lead role. Player E was following news of the production and had heard that “some good cooperations” were occurring with the Osage tribe and that filming was taking place on location in Oklahoma. But Player E qualified, “the whole centering still is non-Indigenous.” In these examples, Player E and Commenter 37 both show an awareness of different layers of cultural production: Not simply avoiding appropriation or outright theft of content (Commenter 37), but making sure that more than just a single Indigenous person is consulted (Player E).

4.2. Players and Commenters Discuss the Cultural Insight Videos

The reactions of players and commenters diverged on some aspects of the Cultural Insight videos, showing that not all players of the game found them relevant or effective. The six players of “Never Alone” that I interviewed welcomed and made use of the freedom to launch or ignore the Cultural Insight videos, showing that making the videos optional was a wise choice. Two players, F and E, felt the tension between watching the videos and skipping them to concentrate on getting Nuna and Fox to their goal. But both players still watched each video during play, at least on their first time through the game. Players A and D, however, didn’t mention this tension; instead, they liked the way the videos were woven into the game. For Player A, the videos gave a welcome break from harder parts of the game, where “I died a lot.” Player D saw the two types of content as complementary; they skipped a few during their first time playing, but made sure to watch the missed videos on a second or third playthrough. Discovering these missed video brought value to repeat play, Player D said.

In contrast, Commenter 40 disliked the fact that the videos seemed to be offered, rather than won via some achievement in the game. They said that this made the videos less relevant. There were “only a few that you actually have to try and find, and even then they are beyond easy,” Commenter 40 said. The most vehement negative reaction came from Commenter 8:

Without pausing the game, going into the menu and watching those videos, you will learn absolutely nothing about the culture just from playing the game. They are two different experiences and not connected in any way. ... The team should have just created one strong documentary and put it on Netflix.

Players and commenters also had differing opinions about whether the videos had met the makers’ other goals of brevity, quality, relevance, and avoiding being “preachy.” Players thought

these goals had been met, but not all of the commenters did. Players thought the videos were high-quality and relevant; Player D even called them “little treasures.” Commenter 39 said the videos portrayed “a unique and fascinating history without making the player feel as if they were being sold something exotic or bizarre.” They added that “each one of the interviewees has amazing talent to rival the best speakers, poets, historians, and philosophers alike.” For Commenter 8, game makers failed at relevance by making the videos optional. But for Commenter 23, the makers fulfilled the relevance goal: “You just spent a level dodging evil aurora borealis spirits? Well here’s a small documentary piece on how the Iñupiat people thought the northern lights could come down and kidnap people.” **4.3. *Implications of Cultural***

Production

In their reactions to the involvement of Inupiaq people in the project of making “Never Alone,” players and commenters emphasized on media makers engaging in dialogue with not just individuals, but collectives, to ensure a good process, evoking a communitarian ethic. They seemed to want the production team to see itself as a group-in-community (Christians, 2007). And they wanted the production team to recognize a principle from the Indigenous self-determination framework: The exercise of collective autonomy to collaborate on (or reject) media projects or elements within them is essential to the well-being of Indigenous communities. This is what Player E was pointing toward in warning media producers against using a sole Indigenous contact to represent the consensus of the community being portrayed. Discussions around relevance were similar to several visual sovereignty principles: The visual story elements were not just accurate for the Indigenous place, but accurately described the *meaning* of these elements for the tribe being portrayed. Thus, the aurora borealis depiction is both narratively and visually accurate, and Iñupiaq people are central in explaining the aurora stories. When the

commenter notices that the video is relevant to the game's level in which it appears, they're noticing that the game connects to a specific, place-based phenomenon in multiple ways, and that it does so in an authentically Inupiaq way.

DISCUSSION

By focusing on “Never Alone,” I examined an unusual video game whose makers also created an unusual production process involving frequent checks and collective decision-making. By encouraging Indigenous interviewees to discuss their media experiences broadly using a “Story of My Media Stories” interview protocol, this study creates a more complete picture of how one minoritized audience discusses how their identities are represented in “Never Alone” and other fictional media. Combining player and panelist data created a rich field of data that puts representation failures and successes in context to help answer my four research questions. In addition, putting this study’s findings in a framework that combines media effects theories and concepts with Indigenous frameworks and communitarian ethics allowed me to build a continuum of representation quality, which will be described in the conclusions section.

This discussion will first describe a few methodological strengths of the study, then review how the findings answered each of my research questions and contribute to similar bodies of research. Finally, it will list the theoretical implications for two of SDT’s needs – autonomy and relatedness -- and for the visual sovereignty framework.

1. Methodological Strengths

One of the strengths of this project was the addition of the panel discussions and Reddit comments to my data field. The panelists, all Indigenous people themselves, echoed some themes that emerged from the player interviews and enriched others. Because these were group interviews or multi-speaker, video-recorded panels, they acted almost as focus groups on representation in other specific pop-culture genres. The online commenters provided additional voices that, while not necessarily Indigenous, confirmed some themes as well as offering

glimpses of disconfirming data. For example, a few commenters didn't want representation of their tribes to become fodder for video games and were skeptical that games with this motive would provide any entertainment or enjoyment. Several other voices argued that if "the market" desired Indigenous video games, such games would be made and that no specific effort at representation was needed.

A second strength of the project was that although its main focus was on players' experiences, it also looked at the game's creators goals and the cultural production process they used to achieve those goals. Adding the interviews with three game makers allowed me to get a more complete picture of how the tribal council maximized the chance Indigenous audiences would feel represented by the game. The game's makers built their set of goals against, against what they did *not* want the game to be: an example of stereotypes, generic "Indians," or appropriation of Native cultural creations. This view into the priorities and process of game makers included two non-Indigenous people who discussed the challenges and joys of making the game. Thus, all four groups of data providers – players, panelists, commenters, and makers – were discussing the game or Indigenous representation from different points of view and different degrees of depth allowing me to create a more complete picture from the game's inception to its reception.

Finally, the need to take a trauma-centered care approach forced me to adapt a life-story interview protocol to one that I called a "Story of My Media Stories" approach. Because I was a white person of settler heritage interviewing Indigenous people, this protocol was less intrusive and more appropriate for speaking with people from a minoritized group that I could not meet with in person. Talking about the fictional media they valued and critiquing the stories they classified as bad representation presented much less risk and awkwardness on the first interview,

and players revealed more of themselves and their life stories on the second interview. Talking about the reasons they liked or disliked representation gave them control of the story and how much they would reveal.

Despite the disruptions of the pandemic and recruiting challenges, the methodological strengths described above combined to serve my research questions well. Below, I discuss how my findings addressed each research question and how the results add to existing studies and relevant bodies of theory.

2. Identity: Ingredients for Supporting Well-Being

The answer to RQ1, *How do players of “Never Alone,” pop-culture panelists, and Reddit commenters discuss important elements of Indigenous identities?* was three ways: in accurate cultural details, in webs of connections, and in expressions of resistance. The Indigenous players and panelists in my study said identity lives in specific, even granular, details that are different for each tribe and sometimes different for subgroups within a tribe. These might include the way a particular culture recycles names, or the way a particular elder used a humorous story to teach a lesson. The *specifics* were what mattered. Player F, from the U.S. Southwest, appreciated seeing the similarity between how their tribe and the Iñupiaq used monsters in stories to emphasize the need to protect the community. Player A enjoyed making an illustration of a baby carrier from another culture because she enjoyed researching the granular details of how it was done in that tribe, rather than her own.

2.1 Identity, SDT, and Identification

The theme of identity living in the correct details concurs with research on well-being. For Indigenous people, minoritized and all but invisible in media, connections to their own cultures are fundamental to well-being. (Wexler, 2011; Wexler et al., 2014; and Leavitt et al.,

2015.) When these cultural details are ignored or overlooked by outsiders, the chances of inaccurate or “generic Indian” representations grow because -- as comic-book panelist Wilson complained -- looking up an *actual* tribe and keeping track of cultural details is work. But there is a cost for avoiding that work: When media producers fail to see the granular details and they are never documented in media, Indigenous people worry that the resulting loss of their culture can become a constant, inexorable process. (Ayunerak et al., 2014). This finding also suggests that accurate details may increase the chances that players experience are experiencing some form of attachment to, or identification with, characters or other elements in the game (Brown, 2015; Moyer-Gusé, 2015).

Within the theme of identity connections, two subthemes arose as especially important: language and environment. The players in my study valued the way the game included Iñupiaq language in “Never Alone,” even if it wasn’t their own tribal language. Player C’s daughter, who was Iñupiaq and Navajo, was learning Iñupiaq from “Never Alone.” The daughter would say the words in Iñupiaq along with the narrator’s voice-over. One of Player F’s exclamations about the game was “it’s all in language, it’s so beautiful,” and Player B was teaching a toddler nephew Ojibwe words during our interviews. This emphasis on Native language is consistent with scholars who point out that many such languages have few living Native speakers remaining (Breinig, 2006; Pietikäinen, 2008; Wyman, 2009). Although suppression of Native languages occurred globally, players felt it personally and felt this feature of the game supported Native language preservation. Connections to land and environment were also essential, consistent with Kulis et al. (2016) who found that many Native American middle-schoolers who returned to reservation or other tribal lands regularly had strong connections to their culture and high well-

being. Maintaining connections to homelands and the people who live on them is a practice that helps to keep cultural practices alive and self-concepts positive (Hensley, 2009a, 2009b).

A third identity subtheme – stories of resistance – also adds to current literature on Indigenous resilience and well-being. The struggle to shape a positive identity has been documented in negative effects of Native American mascots (Fryberg et al., 2008) and stereotypes (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2009; Fryberg & Townsend, 2008). The players and panelists in my study discussed the risks they confronted when asserting their Indigenous identity. Player D was bullied at school for being only half Indigenous; and Player C recalled his Navajo future spouse's family disliking him because they identified him as Mexican. Player F yearned for more public events like Indigenous Pop Expo, where events like the tragic history of Indian boarding schools and other disasters didn't have to be explained to non-Natives.

The identity stories that players and panelists told revealed an aspect of identity that I had not seen yet in the literature: that adults consciously curate their identities throughout the stages of adulthood. Studies with Indigenous youth (Lee, 2015; Bals et al., 2011; Mayhew & Weigle, 2018;) suggest ways to influence identity building, but it appears to be relatively understudied in Indigenous adults. However, data from this dissertation aligns with studies of other groups of minoritized adults using media to negotiate identity transitions (Ku et al., 2022; Espina et al., 2025) or disruptions (Harding et al., 2025). Much of the research conducted on media effects in minoritized groups focuses on children or adolescents for understandable reasons; they are in critical stages of forming their identity when negative or positive representations can have long and profound impacts (for example, Saleem & Ismael, 2025). The players and panelists in my study, all adults, seemed adept at adopting, rejecting, or modifying identity elements to fit

evolving identities. How they do this in times of identity transition – changing professions, coping with grief and loss – is an understudied area.

2.2 Identity and Visual Sovereignty

Indigenous art scholarship discusses visually sovereign creations (Rickard et al., 1995; Rickard, 2007, 2017) as fulfilling three goals relevant to identity. Such creations should showcase Indigenous creators, challenge colonizer conceptions of “the Indian,” and correct colonized narratives. The concept has often been used to evaluate film projects (Raheja, 2007 and 2010; Teves, 2014; Peterson, 2013; Sonza, 2018). These definitions of visual and other kinds of sovereignty are close kin to the SDT basic need of autonomy, but with an extra quality that might be called fierceness. My players and panelists talked about multiple occasions when they confronted the risks of claiming an Indigenous identity. What most frustrated them was when an opportunity to portray accurate identity elements was poorly executed. For example, when Player D first saw the Disney movie “Pocahontas” as a child, they were filled with anger and lectured a mother and her kids attending the movie. Comic-book panelist Moniz was still waiting for an “all-new” Indigenous Marvel comics character rather than the one “from dark times” the company had rolled out. The way the characters had been marketed as “all new” had led him to expect good representation; after all, other minoritized identities were getting good representation.

These reactions to visual sovereignty or its lack, suggest media which fail to employ at least some elements of visual sovereignty will disappoint and frustrate consumers (Toth-Kiraly et al., 2019). In the opposite condition, visually sovereign media creations may provide opportunities to experience autonomy, which Deci & Ryan (2000) called the most important need. The players and panelists in my study collected their experiences with visually sovereign

media, even when those experiences were brief. They valued “little treasures,” as Player D called the Cultural Insight videos. When media accurately portrayed the important elements of Indigenous identity -- correct details, connections to culture, and confronting risk and struggle, players, panelists and commenters *noticed*. They seemed to feel an affirmation of their similar identity elements and a desire to tell me about that part of their identities. Perhaps the inclusion of the last theme of this section, the role of struggle and resistance in Indigenous identity, was the most likely to fulfill needs to experience autonomy when audiences saw it represented. Players and panelists told small stories of resistance in which they, or others, wielded their autonomy to correct representation or refuse to be defined by others, and they celebrated such stories when they occurred in media or real life. “That’s what it should be,” Player D said about the middle-schooler who wore a “No DAPL” (Dakota Access Pipeline) T-shirt to her school’s “dress like an Indian” day.

3. Representation and Media Effects Theories

RQ2 asked, *How do Indigenous players of “Never Alone,” pop-culture panelists, and commenters on Reddit discuss representations of Indigenous identities in “Never Alone” and other media?* The themes that emerged from all data groups give a detailed and sometimes surprising answer: The speakers know what they want to see and what they are tired of seeing. All speakers had view of which media creations were examples of bad, good, and best representation and why. Four main themes detailed what Indigenous players, panelists, and commenters wanted: Correct Indigenous and tribal details; characters whose lives involve a web of connections; characters with full human complexity; and finally, a skilled blending of seemingly contradictory elements such as history and modernity, or reality and spirituality.

The findings specific to RQ2 bring another population into the body of studies on representation in video games such as Shaw (2009a, 2010a, and 2013a) and Stasienko et al. (2021). Unlike Shaw's study subjects, some of whom didn't care about or expect representation, the disabled gamers who participated in Stasienko et al.'s focus group were more like my study population. They had specific desires about how they should and should not be represented in video games, such as not wanting characters who become disabled as a punishment. While my findings did not achieve saturation on themes of how Indigenous players want to be represented, many of the same subthemes were present in player, panelist and commenter discussions.

Like Stasienko et al.'s players, the speakers in this study wanted to see themselves reflected in media in specific ways. When fictional media gave them this experience, it made them feel seen accurately by the outside world. The consistency of this data from players and panelists, despite the presence of disconfirming data from some commenters, adds to the body of research on non-mainstream consumers of video games by providing the perspectives of Indigenous players.

3.1. Representation's Ties to Visual Sovereignty and Identification

Four main themes emerged from conversations discussing representation. Characters needed correct and specific, rather than generic, tribal details; a web of connections that they were part of; and full human complexity with common human challenges. In addition, some speakers wanted a skilled blending of contradictory elements such as history and modernity, realism and spirituality, or tragedy and humor. These themes add to the studies and bodies of theory from the literature in various ways. The themes connect positive effects of playing "Never Alone" or consuming other media genres to experiences of autonomy, competence, and

relatedness. The themes also suggest that the degrees to which players identify with characters might be part of how the fictional media satisfy these needs.

3.2. Correct Details and Identification with Characters

When characters in “Never Alone” or other media speakers discussed were complete and correct in their identity details, players, panelists, and commenters applauded them and enjoyed spending time with them. When fidelity to the details was executed poorly, the speakers in this study mocked characters and creators and sometimes even the streaming service or producers. This suggests that attention to detail is not only noticed, but is doing something important. I believe this “something important” is maximizing the chances of identification with characters and through it, providing experiences of autonomy, visual sovereignty, and competence. Despite the disagreements that exist in media scholarship about how to theorize and measure identification with characters (Cohen, 2001; Brown, 2015; and Moyer-Gusé, 2015,) the wholehearted approval with which players, panelists, and commenters greeted correctly detailed characters suggest that meticulous inclusion of detail facilitates attachment to, involvement with, and approval of these characters. When my data providers talked about these details, they seemed to be saying to writers and producers, “I know *my* culture’s details, and this character can come alive for me because you took put in the effort to know *this character’s* culture’s details and represent them faithfully.” Or, in the opposite case, “the character you wrote is always shown in fringed leather and a headband with a feather, and I *don’t* do that.” It wasn’t necessary for the correct character to be from the media consumer’s tribe.

3.3. Correct Details, Needs Fulfillment, and Sovereignty

The phenomenon that I saw happening when consumers of “Never Alone” and other Indigenous media experience correct details also connects to SDT needs of competence and

autonomy, and through autonomy to sovereignty. The ways that speakers in my study judge characters who do, or do not, embody correct details conveys that they are authorities on this issue, having done the work or absorbed the knowledge on their own cultures. In characters or stories where they saw attention to details that have analogs to their own cultures, they reacted with approval. For example, they recognized and appreciated that the way “Never Alone” defines a monster is similar to their own culture (Player F). Monsters are those who would destroy the community. Autonomy is one of the basic needs of SDT that colonization made difficult to fulfill. It relates to visual and other sovereignties because the work of disseminating correct cultural details can involve defending community rights or acting collectively or individually to assert those rights. This collective version of sovereignty aligns with what Raheja discusses in her analysis of the film *Atanarjuat* (2007). She argues the film seems to say “*We made this and we made sure it was visually correct. We used our sovereignty to make sure we were represented correctly. You can use your sovereignty in your media choices.*”

In the opposite circumstance, when speakers encountered representation that ignored cultural details or presented negative stereotypes, they felt strong disappointment. This seemed to be somewhat common. When speakers were sometimes led by marketing campaigns to expect detailed representation, but then encountered bad representation, they experienced frustration. The literature on media effects on Indigenous youth and young adults show absence and misrepresentation thwart development of positive future selves (Elliot-Groves & Fryberg, 2019; Fryberg & Eason, 2024), but again, this experience of representation disappointment is understudied in adult media consumers.

3.4. Connections, Contradictions, and SDT’s Relatedness Needs

The subthemes of portraying connections and including contradictions were often intertwined in players and panelists' discussions. Player D argued that good representation *required* that the media story connected accurate history, myth, or spiritual practices with realistic, modern characters. We can thus consider portrayal of contradictions as specific way of portraying connection and consider their need satisfactions together.

Players, panelists, and commenters all spoke positively about media that included the connections that were important identity elements: history, culture, community, land, and environment. These data were consistent with studies of Indigenous well-being (Leavitt et al., 2015; Fryberg & Eason, 2024). In addition, the combinations of past and present, reality and the spiritual, that Players D and enjoyed were also reflected in the visually sovereign films that Michelle Raheja applauds in her book, *Reservation Reelism* (2010). While this "connection via contradiction" phenomenon fell short of saturation, the similarities to the films that Raheja applauds are fuel for thought. Perhaps the incorporation of supernatural or fantastical elements into realistic media, and vice versa allow for a form of identification with characters or story that acts to ease the burden of paradoxes and contradictions that are part of many Indigenous lives. When media creators infuse media stories with contradictions that invite humor, perhaps the stories invite the kinds of conversation, commentary, or internal dialogues that ease the impact of negative representation experiences.

3.5. Best Representation, Ownership, and Sovereignty

The key insight from the way that players and panelists discussed "best" representation was that they knew where they would place different media creations on a continuum of representation and that they judged both product *and* process. Had these insights occurred only in the player data, it would be tempting to say they emerged because of my interview questions,

but panelists also discussed representation in the production process. For two players and two panelists, best representation meant having Indigenous people be the media makers, and one player went even farther: Player F said that best representation meant, Indigenous people were just be in the cast or the writer's room, but in control of decisions and the means of production and distribution. Indigenous people needed ownership in the literal sense to experience autonomy writ large, Player F said. Partnership projects like "Never Alone" were the next best thing, but such partnerships should ideally build capacity for best representation, or "the next best thing," as panelist Wilson put it.

These discussions of ownership show that players and panelists were aware of many subtle gradations in how much of a role in media creation Indigenous people played. Whether these gradations are related to how much a media story satisfies autonomy needs is a question for a different study, but player and panelists' careful assessment of representation in process as well as product aligns with the critical perspectives on visual and other kinds of sovereignty. In "Toward Sovereign Games," LaPensée et al. make the point that when Indigenous collectives fund the making of video games without a profit-making objective, those games can focus on Indigenous players as the most important audience. Such games do not have to be shaped to appeal to two audiences as "Never Alone" was. Indigenous organizations can also offer the game free to the communities that might benefit or helped to produce it, removing any barriers to access. If a game's experiences of autonomy, competence, and relatedness enhance well-being, LaPensée et al. argue, that benefit should go first to the people from whom colonization extracted a price. In other words, games that embody sovereignty, as opposed to visual sovereignty, puts the audience in a more powerful position than games that are merely representative or include Indigenous people among their creators. Madsen (2017) compared the game mechanics in

“Never Alone” and “Invaders,” one of LaPensée’s games. Both games base player actions on Indigenous epistemology, but Madsen notes that “Never Alone” elides the history of King Island, whose inhabitants were involuntarily relocated by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The “Cultural Insight” video about the island never mentions this connection, Madsen points out, implying that the omission might be one of the sacrifices made to create a commercially viable game.

3.6. Audiences Act to Improve Representation via Adaptation or Adoption

Two subthemes that emerged from player and panelist discussions are unique to this study: representation via adaptation and representation via adoption. In these subthemes, players and panelists wielded their own creativity to provide representative characters or to fix problematic ones. And they carried out these imaginative efforts with humor and gusto.

While these subthemes did not achieve saturation, the nature of the examples within it suggests that SDT needs might involved in these creative efforts. To explain via example, when a comic-book reader encounters the character Pow-Wow Smith, if they counter his stereotyped appearance by inventing a connection to a real-life Indigenous cultural leader -- grass dance instructor Johnny Smith -- they are more able to enjoy the character and let go of the artists’ errors of representation. Via this kind of reclaiming, which I called representation via adaptation, the reader can permit themselves to identify with the character and perhaps experience satisfaction of autonomy, competence, or relatedness needs via the character’s story arc. In addition, the reclaiming is an act of autonomy in itself, saying in effect, “This character expresses Indigeneity in the way that *I* say he does, because *I* control how I interpret and enjoy this story.” For my players and panelists, less-than-well-realized Indigenous characters were an invitation to imaginatively alter them. In experimental studies of video games, the ability to customize characters has been shown to increase enjoyment, intentions to play again, and

satisfaction of autonomy needs (Peng et al., 2012; Yokotani et al., 2025). So it is possible that the imaginative reclaiming of a character to make them more representative might serve to increase SDT need satisfaction. Or, as panelist Michael Wilson put it, “It’s OK to like problematic characters as long as you know they’re problematic.”

In representation via adoption, players and panelists “claimed,” rather than reclaimed, a character with no overt Indigenous characteristics, creating representation where it was absent, rather than present but not well executed. For example, Player C engaged in representation via adoption when he said that actor “Iron Eyes” Cody, who was born Italian but played Native Americans in a host of films and commercials (Yamada, 2014), was “Indian” because Cody married a Navajo woman and had experienced discrimination because of his Italian ethnicity. Players B and D inferred Indigeneity in video games other than “Never Alone” characters because of how the characters were positioned within the games. The Star Wars panelists “adopted” many characters in that science fiction universe, particularly Baby Yoda. This process of adoption seems more centered in the individual audience member’s conceptions of what constitutes Indigeneity than the media character itself. In other words, it is audience-centered rather than character-centered. How this might influence satisfaction of SDT needs remains unclear. However, it is possible that bringing Baby Yoda into circles of conversation such as the Star Wars panel satisfies the relatedness needs of SDT through a parasocial relationship with the character (Brown, 2015; Moyer-Gusé, 2015) as well as the discussions about the character within the circle of real-life relationships. Unlike representation via adaptation, representation via adoption conceives of the character as a *person*. Adaptation, in contrast, treats the character as a creation to be improved. Representation via adoption might also satisfy autonomy needs because the power to award Indigeneity to a character is completely within the player’s (or viewer’s)

control. Neither of these two subthemes is saturated by the data I was able to obtain for this study. However, the representation via adaptation theme was particularly richly described. In addition, neither of these themes were identified in representation studies that I reviewed, pointing to a gap future research might explore to support a grounded theory.

Another intriguing question for media theory arises from these two themes. Players engaged in these processes when representation was either absent or badly executed. My players did *not* use these processes with media characters who they thought were *good* representation. Perhaps the need to adapt or adopt characters disappears if examples of good representation dominate the fictional media ecosystem. Perhaps adoption and adaptation are indications that characters are *somewhat* representative, like Pow-Wow Smith. The effort to improve characters and convert absence to representation might be indicators of where, on Clark's 1969 sequence of four stages of representation, a specific media character belongs. Given these four stages of absence, ridicule, regulation, and respect, adaptation can be seen as an effort to move a character from regulation to respect. Giving Pow-Wow Smith a connection to a real, valued elder does this. Adoption of characters from "The Mandalorian" as Indigenous would teleport the series from absence to respect. And Marvel's "all-new," stereotypical character "Red Wolf" would belong in the ridicule stage; comic-book panelist Moniz certainly saw him as irredeemable.

4. Playing the Game: Representation and Need Satisfaction

RQ3 asked, *How do Indigenous players and Reddit commenters describe the experience of playing "Never Alone"?* Without being able to conduct play interviews, I had to interpret when players were discussing immediate reactions versus later, more reflective thoughts. Nonetheless, four themes emerged from the data that addressed this research question: reactions to game mechanics; attachment to Fox; appreciation of the game's visual environment; and

connections to culture. Of these, the data for the last three themes were the most rich and interesting.

4.1. Attachment to Fox: A Variety of Possible Causes

Multiple players and commenters talked about their attachment to Fox. But none of the players or commenters talked about Nuna in this way. Could this mean that – despite the problems in using interviews to assess identification with characters (Shaw, 2010a, 2013b) – players were identifying with Nuna because of the character’s bond with Fox? This subtheme evoked a myriad of potential questions about identification with character dyads, and more specifically, human and other-than-human dyads. This is consistent with the literature to the point that other studies and theories look at relationships with characters. Song & Fox (2016) examined how a romantic video game attracted players through allowing them to act out fantasy-type partnerships. Brown (2015) distinguished identification with media personae from parasocial relationships, but analyzing attachment to Fox through this perspective is difficult. Is Fox a media personae players are identifying with, or part of a parasocial relationship? “Never Alone” emphasizes collaboration between its two playable characters. This may mean that it’s the relationship between the two characters, rather than identification with either Fox or with Nuna, that leads to players’ attachment to the character; they see similarity and identify with the human-animal bond. Meyer-Guse (2015) argues that parasocial relationships can exist outside of identification with characters and that these two processes can happen independently. So this phenomenon’s relationship to the character identification literature is ... well, like Fox, it’s fuzzy.

4.2. Can Dyadic Bonds Fulfill Relatedness Needs?

A second way to look at players’ attachment to Fox is through self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000). Fulfillment of relatedness needs via video games has typically been

studied through players' connection to other gamers via multi-player online games (Neys et al., 2014; Rigby & Ryan, 2017) or social game features (Li et al., 2022). Studies of Indigenous people's well-being have found that strong ties to Native communities and elders boost well-being (Wexler, 2011; Allen et al., 2014). But there is little existing research on the potential of dyadic relationships between characters in video games to satisfy relatedness needs, or to boost well-being. The data in my study suggest this is possible.

4.3. Environment, Culture, and Their Role in Relatedness

SDT's theorized need of relatedness SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2000) fit these two subthemes well. Relatedness usually is conceptualized as connections to communities or groups (Ryan & Deci, 2014) and measured in video game players via social interactions with other players or non-player characters (Tamborini et al., 2010; Yee & Sng, 2024). But for Indigenous people, connection to land and environment means much more than access to resources. In the Cultural Insight video "S̥ila Has A Soul," Iñupiaq elders instruct players on their culture's view of the environment as both a sentient consciousness and a philosophy. S̥ila is "one way of knowing you're connected to everything," Amy Fredeen says in the video. Data from players were consistent with research on the importance of connections to traditional homelands as a factor Indigenous well-being, including Kulis et al. (2016). Sakakibara (2017) explored how the inseparability of land and culture magnified the impacts of climate change on cultural practices and well-being for Iñupiaq people. Thus, game content portrayed a relationship to the land and environment that was reciprocal, rather than extractive. This is a view of the relatedness needs of SDT that is both consistent with existing literature and a unique case.

4.4. Relatedness, Culture, and Cultural Competence

Culture comprises many activities; players and commenters mentioned language, art, and storytelling specifically, but culture also embodies cosmology, spirituality, and specific histories. Players discussed the storytelling aspect of the game as making them think of their own culture's traditional stories. These reactions are consistent with studies on Indigenous well-being as well as video game research. In Indigenous people, whose cultural connections commonly were severed by forced relocation or disruption, absence of representation or stereotypical representations negatively impact well-being (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2014; Rains, 2023). However, Hunter et al. (2025) found that reinforcing cultural connections could help to protect Indigenous peoples' well-being even during the global pandemic.

The specific issue of language preservation affects many Indigenous people, including in the U.S. (McCarty et al., 2009; Brewer & O'Brien, 2024); in Canada (Renwick, 2021); and Arctic Norway, the traditional home of the Sami (Bals et al., 2011; Pienimäki, 2019). Bals et al. suggested that competence in speaking Sami was protective of well-being for Sami youth at two levels: family / peers and school / community. These studies suggest that connection to culture can help an Indigenous video game provide experiences of competence within that culture's activities. Players' interview data was consistent with this literature. For example, Player F described the Iñupiat-language narration as one of the features of "Never Alone" that evoked an emotional effect. For Player B, the game evoked their own tribes' use of canines as pack animals.

This study, along with Bals et al. (2011) and Hunter et al. (2025), suggest that the needs for relatedness and competence support each other and that some activities may satisfy them simultaneously. It is possible that a particular version of SDT's competence, *cultural* competence, requires a fulfillment of relatedness, or that fulfilling relatedness via contact with elders, revisiting traditional land, and engaging in cultural practices also provides an experience

of cultural competence. While I am not arguing for cultural competence as an addition to SDT's universal basic needs, I do think that the cultural version satisfies the drive for competence *if* the individual places a high value on that competence and that relatedness support makes experiencing cultural competence more likely. As Indigenous methodology scholar Shawn Wilson puts it in *Research is Ceremony* (2008), "We could not *be* without *being in relationship* with everything that surrounds us and is within us" (76). Wilson seems to argue that fulfilling relatedness needs may be a prerequisite for satisfying other needs – or at least, that it should be a prerequisite, and researchers should be aware of the connection between needs. This is another indication studying Indigenous representation in media requires multiple theoretical lenses and perhaps a theory of need fulfillment that is aligned with Indigenous ontology, wherein reality and relationships are intertwined.

4.5. The Gap in Representation Studies

The impact of an Indigenous ontology helps explain why video-game studies focused on connection to avatars or the social aspects of massively multi-player online games can't sufficiently explain the effects of "Never Alone." Indigenous peoples' connections to culture can be valued indicators of well-being, but they can also be highly contested ground, where representations are evaluated, debated, and rejected or adopted in part or in whole. All of the players I interviewed, and many of the study's panelists, told stories about the complications of their identities and their connections to culture. This study's findings differ from the results of some research with non-Indigenous video players grounded in SDT, specifically Xing et al. (2024), Sailer et al. (2017), and Tamborini et al., (2010). In these studies, features of games were manipulated and produced predicted effects on feelings of relatedness. But my findings suggest

that entertainment media attempting to fulfill relatedness needs for Indigenous consumers may face a higher bar, given the complexity and richness of Indigenous cultural connections.

Here, I don't mean to describe theorized differences between collective-prioritizing cultures versus individualistic cultures. I am arguing that for Indigenous people, the need for "being in relationship" can be a more profound and important version of SDT's relatedness need. Indigenous cultures faced centuries of efforts to erase them and isolate community members (Hensley, 2009a). Cultural reconnection in *all* its forms – to language, land, traditional food, etc. – has been hard-won for some modern Indigenous people; this is why providing connections and sparking conversations between Alaska Native youth and elders was one of the goals behind the creation of "Never Alone." If we view Indigenous media consumers' need for relatedness within an SDT framework, then we need to acknowledge that this need might become more foundational and more multi-dimensional than research on non-Indigenous audiences has previously captured. In other words, restoring connections to culture may have a greater impact on well-being when colonization or other forces have severed cultural connections or denied their importance. Media that attempt to restore such connections thus take on greater importance. But an optimistic view might be that what my findings show about representation is, there are *many* ways to include cultural connection when representing Indigenous people in media.

5. Cultural Production: Important to Indigenous Media Audiences

Because “Never Alone” was created by an unusual partnership, half of which was a non-indigenous company, I wanted to know how the makers of “Never Alone” described their process in making the game. I would then want to know how players reacted to that process. This desire fueled RQ4a and RQ4b: *How do the game’s makers describe their goals in creating and implementing a cultural production process for “Never Alone” and its Cultural Insights? And How do Indigenous players and online commenters discuss the cultural production process of “Never Alone” or other entertainment media?* My findings show that the game’s makers were meticulously careful to create a truly collaborative, relational partnership to achieve their goals of profit and impact. They also show that players and online commenters were aware of the cultural production process and valued it highly; in fact, they called it essential to creating media that qualified as good representation.

Here again, my data diverged from Shaw’s cultural production findings (2009a) in some ways, although that was to be expected because of the differences between the two studies. This Shaw’s 2009 project involved interviews with game company executives and staff about the ways sexual and gender minorities are portrayed (or absent) in video games and the rationales behind those portrayals or lack of them. Findings included that, like the “Never Alone” partners, game developers were concerned about risk and profitability. Game makers asked whether a game with gay characters could appeal to cisgendered players, and whether gay inclusion might spark a backlash. If “gaymes” actually made it to market, it was usually because LGBT people were on the development team or developers felt that inclusiveness in media should be a goal. My interviews with the three game makers showed that they wanted the game to be profitable, but the goal of making impact – of producing a game that would be culturally specific and

represent Iñupiaq people to the world and to themselves, was just as important. Like Shaw's maker interviewees, mine were aware of the risk of trying to appeal to two distinct audiences. Unlike Shaw's game makers, however, mine did not discuss any concern that game consumers would be offended by Indigenous representation. My commenter data suggest that media which give visibility to the existence of Indigenous people can encounter indifference rather than religious outrage, and while this data shows some evidence of backlash against inclusion, the makers of "Never Alone" were much more concerned that the game would be negatively received by Iñupiaq people, Alaska Natives or other Indigenous players.

Although the players I interviewed didn't know about the many efforts the game's makers made to ensure that Alaska Natives recognized themselves in the elements of "Never Alone," they were aware Alaska Natives were deeply involved in the process. They clearly felt cultural production was important and necessary. Non-Natives would never get Native stories completely right, even with the best intentions and information, Player C and two of the three groups of panelists said. Players also noticed different degrees and subtleties of cultural production. Player E remarked that even in "Reservation Dogs," the involvement of Taiko Waititi as co-writer and executive producer brought an Indigenous Oscar-winning artist to the series, but one who wasn't Native American (Waititi is part Maori). Meanwhile, online commenters, when they remarked on cultural production, described it as proof that "Never Alone" wasn't "problematic."

5.1. The Cultural Insight Videos

The revelation that these short videos were made as a way to give credit to the elders and artists who helped guide the project made me ask whether the game would have been as powerful, innovative, or need-satisfying without this element. I argue that it would not have done so.

First, the videos introduced players to a much larger cast of media personae than the game itself. In addition to the fictional characters like Nuna, Fox, and the Owl Man, the Cultural Insight videos feature real people of all ages who describe cultural practices and knowledge. If the game's effects are due to identification or parasocial relationships, the videos more than double the number of what Cohen (2001) calls media personae with whom players could identify. Whether this actually increases chances for identification with characters is beyond the scope of my study, but players in my study recalled specific Insight videos from memory, indicating that these short pieces of content at the very least had an impact on players.

My data are not clear about the reason for that impact. Players and commenters alike found the videos engaging, and discussed being torn between continuing to play and stopping each time a video became available within the game. What the context of Indigenous underrepresentation in media in general (Fryberg & Townsend, 2008) and in video games specifically (Jones et al., 2025) suggest is that images of real, culturally connected, thriving Indigenous people are vanishingly rare. Given this rarity, decision of the "Never Alone" team was a wise one; it provided an abundance of media personae and thus opened access for identification with characters. The videos could also provide players with vicarious (at least) experiences of autonomy, competence, and relatedness or bring up memories and associations of such experiences. The voices and images of real Iñupiaq people talking about their community,

environment, and art , I argue, also provide an experience of visual sovereignty akin to what Teves (2014) found in examining a documentary featuring Native Hawaiian Māhū. The Iñupiat and Māhū act as the authority on themselves. No one but them should describe who they are.

I argue that if the Cultural Insight videos are subtracted from “Never Alone,” the game becomes a substantially different, and lesser, product, with lesser chances to affect well-being through need satisfaction, identification, or examples of sovereignty. Below is a list of the goals I believe the Insight videos achieved, but that makers did not bring up in their interviews:

1. Augmenting the game, which was set in the mythic past, with the voices and images of real people in the present day, which players had identified as an element of good representation;
2. Adding a range of ages, occupations, and backgrounds to the game’s media personae, potentially adding to players’ conceptions of possible future selves and maximizing opportunities for identification;
3. Showing that the natural environment, animals, and artifacts of the game were realistically portrayed, meeting the requirement of accurate details;
4. Discussing, rather than just evoking, Alaska native spirituality and culture, meeting player’s requirement of portraying connections;
5. Discussing how a warming climate is affecting people in northwest Alaska; meeting the visual sovereignty framework’s request for portrayals of “place-based action.”

Even though makers didn’t discuss the goals of the Insight videos in this kind of detail, this doesn’t diminish their impact. Players and most commenters agreed that the videos enhanced the experience of playing the game.

6. Implications: Autonomy and Collective Autonomy

SDT posits three psychological needs that must be met for human well-being: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2001). The lens of Indigenous self-determination, however, illuminates how colonization altered, and in some cases destroyed, the resources that allowed Indigenous people to meet these basic needs (Murphy, 2008; 2014). By severing connections to land, family, tribe, culture, language, and political authority over their own fates, colonization inflicted losses that continue to have an impact today (Fryberg & Eason, 2024). Indigenous self-determination argues that improving Indigenous well-being can only happen through exercising collective power over the necessary resources and systems. Viewing SDT through this framework does two things: It highlights the view that local conditions and histories have an impact on access to need fulfillment; and it suggests that activities which exercise collective autonomy can also be need-fulfilling. In fact, wielding collective autonomy to achieve community goals can fulfill all three SDT needs, depending on the circumstances. Gordon (2019) provides an example in her interview study with villagers in Ninilchik, Alaska. All of her interviewees' ideas for creating a positive future for the village depended on taking collective action. Should any of the project brainstorm come to fruition – they ranged from library expansion to better communication of the availability of road-killed moose meat – those responsible would be likely to feel competent in their tasks, related to their project collaborators, but also both individually and collectively autonomous.

I see Indigenous individuals wielding their own autonomy and collective autonomy in multiple ways in this study. The most basic was the choice of the Indigenous people whom I interviewed – six players and one game maker – chose to speak with me. In addition, my interview method was deliberately chosen to maximize their control over which stories they

would tell me about the media stories they consume and their reactions to those stories. But most importantly, many of the stories they told me were about satisfaction of individual and collective autonomy needs.

All of the players I interviewed exercised individual autonomy in choosing media stories that were at least somewhat representative and avoiding those that contained bad representation. Player A said they were always on the lookout for stories that facilitated learning about other tribal cultures. Player C anticipated exercising their autonomy in a decision to *not* see an upcoming movie in the “Predator” franchise because there was supposed to be a Cherokee character, but the movie was being written by “the two whitest guys ever.” Players seemed to enjoy discussing opinions or interpretations that were uniquely theirs or were likely to differ from those of non-Indigenous audiences, suggesting that such discussions might fulfill autonomy needs. The two comic-book panelists, longtime friends, absolutely enjoyed sharing their opinions on good or terrible Indigenous representation in comic books, especially when they disagreed.

The nature of my discussions with players and panelists’ discussions with one another argues that critiquing is autonomy-need-fulfilling, especially when shared with a receptive audience. Sharing their opinions of good or bad representation would likely fulfill autonomy needs because the media experience is self-chosen and the opinion self-created. In addition, opinion-sharers symbolically placed themselves within the group of their tribe’s culture bearers. The act of discussing identity elements and weighing in on representation can thus fulfill a person’s autonomy and competence needs.

Players also made references to collective autonomy when they described the nature of the communities to which they belonged and examples of those communities exercising autonomy. Players E and F knew which stories their culture wanted kept only to their tribes and

not shared with the public or a white researcher. Player D applauded the decision of Native Hawaiians to wield collective autonomy and *not* seek federal recognition, because this Native group wanted to emphasize that they had *always* been sovereign. my data. The comedy panelists paid homage to Indigenous comedy collectives and troupes that set up Indigenous comedy showcases and mentored up-and-coming Indigenous comics. In the theme of Resistance as Part of Indigenous Identity, Rowie Shebala describes wearing an evocative T-shirt to spark conversations about a Canadian tribe's land rights struggle. The tribe lost the land – but its collective action made it the tribe more widely known. Shebala's action is one of individual autonomy; in wearing the T-shirt, she takes on the role of story carrier. But that action also connects to two additional expressions of collective autonomy. The first is set in the past: the actual land rights protests in. The second is the collective autonomy wielded by Endwarrior brothers, the designers of the T-shirt. They made it possible for *many* people to share the story.

Another principle that Indigenous self-determination brings to SDT is that, as with the Oka crisis T-shirt, autonomy expressions can facilitate future autonomy-fulfilling actions. What the process alignments described in the Cultural Production section show are decisions that used the collective autonomy of the game partnership and facilitated future autonomous decisions. Neither the Indigenous board members of CITC nor the game-savvy E-Line team held sole power; decisions were made in a collaborative process that likely became easier as the partnership solidified and built trust. The interviews with game makers revealed the partners collaborating to build good representation, but also to eliminate proposed elements that were seen as misrepresentation or as posing a risk to whaling, an important community resource. The first collaborative decisions likely set the tone for the more difficult, later decisions, like the one

to fire a game developer. Taking these steps showed not just collective autonomy, but how ideally, such autonomy includes responding to other collectives and creating solutions together.

7. Implications: Communitarianism and Different Types of Relatedness

Abundant *types* of relatedness that show up in this study's data. Close relationships with partners or well-known others are one version of relatedness. Examples include the interdependence of Nuna and Fox, or of the two people playing the game in co-op mode. Playing "Never Alone" activated thoughts of other close relationships: between players and their pets, players and their friends, players and their children, players and their spouses. When the game ends, speakers mourned the severing of the tie between Nuna and Fox. The game mechanic emphasizes interdependence; Fox and Nuna have to collaborate to succeed at their quest, and the whole point of their quest is saving their village. But In the game's narrative the close relatedness between Nuna and Fox risks itself to serve community relatedness. If media consumers identify with relationships and with different types of them, then this version of identification might be an activity that satisfies SDT's theorized basic need of relatedness. It would also multiply the possible ways a consumer might experience identification or enjoyment.

But "Never Alone" and data from this study's speakers also discussed relationships to middle-sized and larger communities, and relationships among those communities. And from the Cultural Insight video "Sjila has a Soul," it was clear that game makers wanted to convey the idea of environment itself as a community, one full of supportive beings and specific challenges and resources. Communitarianism, as both an ethic and a philosophy of identity, fits well with this conception of individual human identities as constructed within a web of relatedness (Taylor, 1989, 2004). Communitarianism argues that the self *and* the collective are able interpret themselves only in relation to relevant communities. A communitarian ethic confronts the

challenge of under-representation and diversity of identities by arguing for dialog between media creators and consumers as individuals and collectives. The cultural production process of “Never Alone” embodied this ethic by continually consulting Inupiaq community members on elements of the game before its launch.

Player and commenter reactions to the Arctic environment and cultural practices portrayed in “Never Alone” reveal a second level of relatedness that the game portrays. The game’s depiction of rustling grasses, sweeping green auroras, and other ecosystem features evoke a specific place and mood. And as the relationship between Nuna and Fox provides a potential point of identification with the game, so does the relationship with the environment, including climate, terrain, plants, seas, animals and spirits. The Cultural Insight videos make the many dimensions of this relationship more explicit by describing *S̥ila*, the Iñupiaq concept of a sentient environment, and other ecosystem features in detail. Players and commenters knew that the game was making a point about relationships with the environment because they either described environmental features explicitly or discussed their own Indigenous communities’ connections to specific places. Player B talked about their tribe’s use of dogs for travel; Player C talked about fishing, and Player D mentioned the long roads and far horizons of Oklahoma. The speakers were connecting to an inhabited and multi-dimensional landscape – in other words, a collective or community. When Player B resisted the idea of considering environment as a character, it was because that conception was too small; a character is *one* being. Player D wanted a conception that included both land and “spirits that live within the land.” I believe that what players and commenters are pointing to is a version of communitarianism in which environment is a dialogic partner in the self-interpretation process. The Iñupiat concept of *S̥ila* described in one of the

Cultural Insight videos describes Sîla as encompassing everything except the person and the earth itself – a large and multi-dimensional community indeed.

8. Implications: A Visual Sovereignty Continuum

The speakers in this study largely concurred that the *best* representations of Indigeneity in media contained representation in process and product, and this data aligned with scholarship on visual sovereignty (Rickard et al., 1995; Rickard, 2017) and scholars' discussions of best practices in media creation and video game creation (Raheja, 2007, 2010) while diverging somewhat from empirical studies of cultural production, as discussed above.

Adding the panel discussions to the player interviews had another important result: the picture I gained of how Indigenous people evaluate representation drew from an abundance of examples. Combining this study's findings on examples of absent, bad, good, and best representation aligned with Rickard's (2007) and Raheja's (2007, 2010) visual sovereignty framework and added to Clark's (1969) four stages of representation in media. Below, I synthesize what these scholars and others have said about levels of representation into a continuum, one that is more detailed than Clark's.

8.1. Absence of Representation

Clark (1969), in his commentary on Black representation in television, writes about this stage as including zero representation of the minoritized group, and characterizes it as a stage that television had already moved beyond. But the speakers in my study gave evidence that in their experience, some television as well as other fictional media had not progressed beyond absence. Player E wondered why "Wynonna Earp," set in the Dakotas, had zero Indigenous representation in early seasons. The Star Wars panelists wondered why a Maori actor in Star Trek had to be Romulan, rather than representing his own culture and making a statement that

Indigenous cultures would still be around in future millenia, just as they have been in past millenia. These panelists wanted representation in the social imaginary of the future, so they created it for themselves. Comic-book panelist Moniz did the same, claiming the character of Wolverine as Mandan. Absence from production processes also shows up in my speakers' data. Players, panelists, and commenters felt that without Indigenous people involved, not merely consulted, in media creation, representation would always fall short. Absence of representation violates a communitarian ethic that urges media to remain in relationship with its audiences and collaborate to produce representation (Fitzgerald, 2010). Unfortunately, absence of Indigenous characters is more prevalent in video games today than it was decades ago (Jones et al., 2025). From a visual sovereignty perspective, creations without Indigenous people on staff or in characters cannot be sovereign *or* representative.

However, this level of representation is the one that tends to fuel acts of Representation Via Adoption. absence is filled, would under-represented audiences

8.2. Problematic Representation: Presence in Product Only

As the speakers in my study said, without representation on the production team, representations can't achieve best representation. But they didn't always have to be problematic, either. This level is one that Clark (1969) did not exactly describe because he did not weigh whether Black people were represented in the production process. However, while I mean for this level to encompass a wide range of quality of representations, it mainly corresponds to Clark's levels of ridicule or regulation.

Players, panelists and commenters placed products with generic or stereotypical "Indians" at the very bottom of this level. The video game "This Land is My Land," with its generic tribal chief character, belonged here. Only slightly above them were media works where

creators paid, or might have paid, attention to tribal details, at the very least doing some research and at the very best, consulting with Indigenous individuals to save themselves from their worst ideas. Panelists Moniz and Wilson described many comic-book art and stories as belonging somewhere in this level, and they responded to ridiculous “Indian” characters with ridicule of their own. Player D did the same with Indigenous video game characters.

8.3. Decent Representation: Presence in Product and Process

At this level, Indigenous people are represented in some important way in the creation process as well as in the product’s characters. Representation at this middling level might still result in a sovereign work, but there would be some qualifications. Here, where to locate a creative work becomes a matter of critical analysis. For example, the video games “Civilizations 5” and “Europa Universalis” are world-building strategy games that Carpenter (2021) analyzed for the quality of their Indigenous representation. While the game teams *might* have done some research or consulted Indigenous people, the game’s representations were fairly basic and the game reinforced colonization’s priorities.

8.4. Better Representation: Higher Levels of Accuracy and Indigenous Involvement

The “Civilizations” franchise, mentioned above, is an interesting case that is useful to exemplify this level as well. For “Civilizations 6,” game makers consulted with the Cree before including Cree identities as characters, but the outcome for the relationship between game makers and the Indigenous community wasn’t a happy one (Chalk, 2024). Player E mentioned the film “Killers of the Flower Moon” as a white-produced movie about the Osage murders in 1920s Oklahoma as a work that might reach this level because the film’s producers were in regular consultation with the Osage. Some media creations that scholars mentioned might have achieved this level. Teves’ 2014 analysis of the Hawaiian documentary “Ke Kulana He Mahu”

concluded that it was a visually sovereign creation even if the voices of the Mahu were included in service to the goals of others, so Teves might conceivably place it at the top of this level.

8.5. Still Better: Accuracy, Involvement, and Impact

Here, one of the best examples also comes from the Civilizations franchise. For “Civilizations 7,” the game makers consulted for months with the Shawnee nation in order to make the Shawnee leader Tecumseh a playable character (Brewer & O’Brien, 2024). When they discovered that language preservation was an important issue for the Shawnee, they incorporated the language into the game and hired a Shawnee actor to be Tecumseh’s voice. They also donated “hundreds of thousands” (Brewer & O’Brien, 2024, n.p.) to language and culture preservation projects. In this way, Firaxis Games was able to implement at least some elements of a visual sovereignty framework, and this example would fit in Clark’s stage of respect.

8.6. Best Representation 1: Cross-Cultural Production

I would argue that media creations such as “Never Alone” which follow the visual sovereignty directives of positioning Indigenous people at the center of both the creation and the process as belonging at this level of the continuum. “Never Alone” fulfilled representation expectations for players and most commenters. The game’s characters, story, use of the Iñupiaq language, and inclusion of multiple levels of relationships helped to stock the social imaginary of Indigenous legends and stories so that people inside as well as outside the Iñupiaq community could draw from it. In addition, the game’s cultural production process made sure that accurate, though still creative, visual elements hearkened back to actual Iñupiaq artifacts as well as a specific environment, the northern Alaskan coast. Finally, the game did decolonizing work by building capacity for the Cook Inlet Region Incorporated in the form of further collaboration and economic partnership. This level also embodies the principles of the level above it, but in a

deeper way that envisions future representative and visually sovereign creations, such as “Never Alone 2.”

8.7. Best Representation 2: Sovereign Production and Impact

I conceptualize the level of “Best Representation” as having not two sub-levels, but two types, because I believe both types of best representation are necessary, and their difference is one of kind rather normative goodness. To exemplify this level, I chose two very different examples: Sovereign video games as defined by LaPensée et al. (2022), and a T-shirt story told by one of the Star Wars panelists.

As a scholar, critic, and video game maker, LaPensée is a seminal thinker on this issue. She and co-authors in the 2022 article conceptualize sovereign games as being Indigenous from conception to retirement. Unlike “Never Alone,” which had to appeal to non-Indigenous gamers in order to recoup CITC’s investment, LaPensee advocates for Indigenous games to be created, financed, and distributed by collaborations between Indigenous communities and Indigenous arts organizations. In this way, Indigenous creators and audiences are not just included, but primary; appeal to non-Indigenous audiences might happen, but is not a goal. In addition, the game should be available at no cost to Indigenous community members, and ownership should stay within Indigenous tribal or collective hands. While games made in this way don’t necessarily position the audience to notice the difference between “resistance and compliance,” as Raheja puts it (2007, p. 1160),

The second example can be seen as a simple T-shirt, but the actions around creating it, wearing it, and sharing the story of the reinterpreted image that adorns it all qualify as acts of visual sovereignty. In Rickard’s conceptualization (2007, 2017), visual sovereignty extends to action inspired by the creative work. An act of visual sovereignty can involve a creative work,

but can also extend beyond its boundaries. When Player D and Rowie Shebala tell stories of T-shirts created and worn to position Indigenous people as facing down exploitation of traditional lands, the creation, the wearing, and the storytelling all qualify as acts of resistance based in visual sovereignty. Both the re-imagining of the Oka crisis as taking place in the Star Wars universe and the T-shirt emblazoned with “No DAPL” are place-based activism, rooted in a visually sovereign creation.

LIMITATIONS

This study had several limitations, including a small purposive sample; the inability to do play interviews, the low number of disconfirming cases and issues with saturation of themes.

1. A Small, Somewhat Homogenous Sample

The global pandemic and the restrictions on social gatherings that it imposed created extreme challenges in recruiting a sample of adequate size. I obtained final IRB approval in January of 2020; by February doctors had identified a positive Covid-19 case in the county where CSU is located and by early March, our campus and many others were closed and classes were moved online. All events were either canceled or held in an online version. These restrictions made recruiting even more difficult than I had foreseen because I could not attend events to recruit in person or widen my network of key Indigenous contacts. Even in 2021, when vaccines began to become available, one contact told me that Indigenous college students had almost no mental bandwidth for any extra activity. Every player interviewee who participated came from my key contact at Indigenous Pop Expo in the summer of 2019.

Due to these recruiting challenges, my purposive sample of player interviewees is small in size, but it is also homogenous on a key dimension. All six players, recruited from the Indigenous comic-book Facebook group moderated by Kristina Bad Hand Maldonado, were what Lee Francis, founder of Indigenous Pop Expo, would call “Indiginerds.” They were interested in representative media creations and pop-culture media already. While there was certainly variation in the intensity of each player’s interest in issues of representation, all but one player had sought out “Never Alone” because its characters and subject were Indigenous. While players came from four different U.S. states and Canada, those U.S. states were mostly in the

West. They had all attended college and some had or were pursuing graduate degrees. A larger sample with wider variation in media consumption, locations, and education levels likely would have resulted in a wider variety of insights into identity elements, views on representation, reactions to playing the game and thoughts about cultural production.

Because of the low number of players and the difficulties in recruiting, I received approval from my committee members to add published panel discussions on Indigenous representation in three pop-culture media genres: stand-up comedy; comic books; and the Star Wars sci-fi franchise, specifically the movies and related television spin-offs. The publication of a history of Native American comedy (Nesteroff, 2021) provided the impetus for the two journalistic group interviews that were published; the digital-only Indigenous Pop Expo 2020 event aired the other two panels online. However, I did not conduct a systematic search for all possible such panel conversations or journalistic coverage of such conversations. The 10 people added to the study through including the panels were also likely “Indiginerds,” i.e., avid consumers and discussers of Indigenous representation, because they were engaged in creating contemporary Indigenous content, including comedy, poetry, and art, in addition to their panels. What they said added richness and depth to the data on identity and representation, but not a great deal of variety of locations, education levels, or levels of knowledge of Indigenous media to my study. Because I wasn’t able to interview any non-Indigenerds, or find any publicly available conversations that argued against representation, my study lacks the perspectives of people whose Indigeneity is less central to their identities or who don’t particularly seek out media that represents them.

2. Changes To Interview Methods

In addition to causing difficulties with recruiting, the global pandemic made it impossible to do “play interviews” (Schott & Horrell, 2000; Shaw 2011). “Never Alone” belongs to a genre called “couch co-op” in which the solo player or two-person team of players must be physically present. I tried one digital version of this type of interview by having Player A share their screen while playing the “Never Alone” spin-off game, “Fox Tales,” but felt the data I gathered from cheering on Player A as they played was unlikely to be useful to answer my research questions. Thus, I dropped this suboptimal version of play interview in favor of a second in-depth interview. I generated follow-up questions from the transcript of the first interview. In the second interviews, players were more reflective about their media use and more willing to discuss media stories other than “Never Alone.” Players also shared deeper, more thoughtful perspectives on the issue of representation and seemed more willing to share stories from their own lives. Had I been able to conduct the play interviews, my data and findings would have been very different and possibly more difficult for me to interpret as a person who seldom plays video games. I do, however, watch movies, television, and consume stories, so the second interview deepening our discussion of Indigenous representation in these media helped me to interpret data and discern themes.

3. The Lack of Robust Disconfirming Data

In a qualitative study, finding disconfirming cases is a marker of trustworthiness because it signals that the researcher has cast a wide enough “net” in gathering data. Obtaining such disconfirming cases, which I defined as Indigenous players of “Never Alone” who did not like the game or did not enjoy playing it, was difficult. This may have been due to the fact of widespread positive media coverage of “Never Alone” and its production processes. Indigenous

people who didn't like the game might have been unwilling to criticize it to a white researcher. My searches of Reddit did turn up a few disconfirming cases – commenters who didn't like the game, didn't enjoy playing it, or who didn't feel that representation in games was important or desirable – but these commenters' Indigeneity could not be confirmed due to Reddit's use of profile names, and their data was not particularly rich or insightful. The presence of negative opinions of the game and negative reactions to the push for representation was consistent with data from participants in some of Shaw's studies (2011, 2013b) who actively didn't want their identity represented. However, the disconfirming data my study found lacked sufficient quantity or richness to suggest reasons for such opinions, such as stereotype fatigue or simply playing video games for other reasons rather than representation.

4. Issues with Saturation

I knew early that saturation would be a sticky issue because my sample was small. and while player interviewees were similar on some dimensions, such as profession and education levels, in other ways they were likely to be extremely heterogenous. Indigenous people's lived experiences and opinions resist easy categorization. However, the similarities between the discussions I had with Indigenous game players of "Never Alone" and the discussions that panelists had with one another helped distinct themes emerge on the topics of identity elements, quality of representations, reactions while playing the game and cultural production. While I would not call these themes saturated given the size of this sample, the beginnings of crystallization (Luker, 2010) can be clearly seen in the identity and representation themes and subthemes. Data from the panelists was essential in to discerning the Representation via Adoption and Representation via Adaptation themes. How individuals from minoritized

populations wield imaginative power to create representation where it is lacking or low-quality has not been reported before to the best of my knowledge.

5. The Death of a Key Contact

The death of CITC executive vice president Amy Fredeen in a car accident in 2022 at the age of 48 (Kincanon, 2022) was a limitation in the most profound sense that her continued reflection on the process became unavailable. At the time of her death, Fredeen was also CFO of E-Line and CITC, although she was looking forward to stepping down from that role at E-line to helm other media projects at CITC, such as a possible feature film and guiding a new team to create full-length video game sequel to “Never Alone.” Fredeen’s role in steering the game, enlisting the help of Iñupiaq elders and artists to ensure the game’s quality, and explaining its continued effects eight years after its launch, were indispensable. While I can’t speculate on the insights she might have shared, what I can know is that if I asked, she would have generously shared them whenever possible.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Research and scholarly commentary about Indigenous representation in video games is ongoing; “Never Alone” has spurred many of these projects (Massanari, 2015; Madsen 2017; Williams, 2018; Rodriguez Espínola, 2021). In addition, game makers and Indigenous scholars are going beyond “Never Alone” to chart a path for “sovereign games” that are created by connected, Indigenous collectives and eschew the need to make a profit, allowing game makers to focus on Indigenous audiences (LaPensée et al., 2022). These projects join a flourishing body of video-game studies looking at satisfaction of SDT needs or using other frameworks to discern effects on underrepresented audiences such as disabled or queer people (Ruberg, 2019; Shell et al., 2021; Yokotani et al., 2025; Lee et al 2026). Beyond video games, scholars are evaluating representation and its effects in other media genres, including television shows featuring European neurodivergent detectives (Dall’Asta, 2021) and Indigenous womxn creators on Instagram (Folsom, 2022).

1. Further Research Based on This Study’s Data

The data gathered for this study of “Never Alone” support other types of analysis, especially narrative analysis. In coding the transcripts of Indigenous player interviews and Indigenous panel discussions, I identified as many as 170 potential small stories. Players revealed stories of family members’ passing, being bullied in high school, getting their first period and being paraded around a pow-wow vendor area by their mother, crowing about this feminine milestone at the top of her voice. They told of being Indigenous, but also Mexican and Puerto Rican by virtue of their foster parents; of growing up in California’s Bay area after the relocation programs of the 1960s moved their grandparents and parents away from Alaska.

Panelists told of growing up and white friends not understanding their food or familial relationships. Analysis of these stories and the way speakers used them to talk about their own identity journeys could generate knowledge about Indigenous storytelling and the role that media now play, or could play, within it. Such an analysis could even explore the potential impacts on collective well-being that storytelling and storylistening (Dillon & Craig, 2022) can have, especially in public debates about representation and the challenges of human relatedness to ever-more-scarce natural resources and ecosystems.

2. Future Research on “Never Alone 2”

Yes, CITC and E-Line are collaborating on a full-fledged videogame sequel to “Never Alone.” My interviews with Fredeen, Gershenfeld and McDonnell, the lead artist for “Never Alone 2,” told me that the game would include many of the unusual elements of the first “Never Alone.” The game would still include Cultural Insight videos and be produced by the same partnership and use a similar cultural development process, Gershenfeld said. Nuna and Fox will still be in the game, but Nuna is a little bit older than in the original. One significant change is that the game’s co-op mode will be playable by two distant partners, rather than limited to a single location.

The goals of the sequel remain the same, Fredeen said – to make money and make impact by connecting Alaska Native youth to their culture and elders. The need to achieve the second goal has, if anything, become more necessary, Fredeen told me. At preliminary meetings about new “Never Alone” projects, Fredeen realized that in addition to Native youth, there were many adults, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, trying to navigate issues of identity. “I do think there's a common thread, you know, in a lot of communities about rediscovering who you are, whether you as an indigenous person or just you as an individual finding your own way in the world,” she

told me. So the partnership saw a need and an audience for a second game. A trailer has been posted on YouTube (https://store.steampowered.com/app/2154420/Never_Alone_2/) but does not include a release date.

There are many research possibilities that involve “Never Alone 2,” and the following are just a sample of possible fields of data:

- Conducting online play interviews with the Indigenous players from this study;
- Conducting follow-up interviews with these six players to discuss new media products that represent Indigenous identities;
- Interviewing additional Indigenous adults who played the first version of the game a decade ago;
- Comparing cultural production goals, processes, and decision-making on the second game to those on the first game;
- Interviewing makers of other Indigenous-created video games to discuss both “Never Alone” games
- Watching co-op play involving a team with Indigenous and non-Indigenous identities

3. New Cross-Cultural Media Productions

In addition, the context of Indigenous media stories that this study explored continues to become richer. Dialogues and debate about bad, good, better, and best representation continue in online fora and legacy media channels. Cross-cultural media projects that involve Indigenous communities, history, people, and cultures are likely to expand in the next decade. One of my players discussed the movie “Killers of the Flower Moon” and whether the non-Indigenous directors and producers were consulting effectively with the Osage community in Oklahoma.

The Peacock series “Rutherford Falls” and Hulu’s “Reservation Dogs” have been the basis of semiotic analysis (Bednarek & Meek, 2025) and community narrative analysis (LaPoe et al., 2023). Each of these studies looked at the media products rather than audiences’ reactions to them. Although the AMC series “Dark Winds,” based on the mysteries by Tony and Anne Hillerman, recently released its fourth season, I was not able to find any scholarly analysis of audience reactions to it. However, online commenters, industry publications and Indigenous news publications (specifically Krisst, 2022) have written extensively on the series, and its Diné cultural advisor published an essay about his work (Joe, 2023).

These gaps in research on Indigenous stories and characters in media suggest a place for case studies of production teams’ processes and engagements with tribal communities, and how the goals of profit, impact, and representation interact and conflict. New research projects would, in a best-case scenario, center the voices of Indigenous scholars and / or Native journalists such as Krisst, whose *Navajo Times* article quoting a number of Navajo critics of “Dark Winds” was the first of a series that included including interviews with director Chris Eyre and other show staff. One of the online criticisms of the show was its treatment of the language; and the process of improving the authenticity of spoken Diné continued through several seasons. The attention to the correct details of, and appreciation of, the language transferred over to the book series. One of Anne Hillerman’s recent books features a segment with a Native Diné speaker, pronouncing key words from the story. These and other recent cross-cultural productions such as the movie “Killers of the Flower Moon” and “True Detective: Dark Night” require Indigenous and settler creators to find their way through the complex ethical minefield of cultural production processes. A study that focused on such cross-cultural productions might come from the fields of business

ethics or organizational communication, but also from Indigenous-rooted realms of theory and paradigms.

4. Other Identities And Their Quests For Representation

Research with other under- and misrepresented identities also provides ample inspiration for examining the effects of characters and narratives and reexamining foundational theories such as cultivation (Lindell, 2022). Scholars whose work combines analyzing inclusive media and its impact on audiences have begun to follow this path, starting with Shaw's work with LGBTQIA+ video gamers (2009-2018) and continuing through Lee et al.'s (2026) study of disabled gamers. Consumption of media stories is voluntary, but when available representations are limited to stories of stereotypes and limited possible futures, cultivation theory would argue that this limited imaginary has real effects on real people. Thus, this limited imaginary becomes an ethical issue and an equity challenge for creators and the entertainment industry.

Dall'Asta's 2021 study exploring online, autistic peoples' posts about European neurodivergent detective characters (2021) shows all of the complexity of audience reactions to representations that are overt ("Astrid et Raphaëlle") or interpreted (the BBC "Sherlock"). Dall'Asta's study of autistic forum participants echoes some of the complexities in my data of Indigenous peoples' reactions to being represented. In addition, some of her participants seemed to engaged in the processes I called Representation via Adoption and Representation Via Adaptation. Some members of autistic online forums had "adopted" the character of Sherlock as on the autism spectrum, even though he calls himself a "high functioning sociopath" and never mentions being autistic. In contrast, the makers of "Astrid et Raphaëlle," a French detective series, engaged with real-life autistic people and support groups to make the character of Astrid representative. However, the producers still took some online heat for making Astrid's gestures

and mannerisms too extreme. Other under-represented, stigmatized, or minoritized audience groups might also engage in adaptation and adoption to improve or create representation that aligns with their own individual and collective self-concepts.

5. Representation of Intersectional Identities

What will be challenging in years to come is incorporating intersectionality in media stories, conversations, and scholarship, partly because portrayal of such identities is rare – but it does exist. Indigenous stand-up comedy panelist Brian Bahe is gay and identifies himself as “vers bottom” on his website. Star Wars panelist Johnnie Jae identifies themselves on one of the websites they co-create as asexual. Intersectionality of Indigenous characters already shows up, albeit rarely, in media stories. In the abovementioned “Astrid et Raphaëlle,” an occasional character is both autistic and Indigenous. His intersectionality played a key role in an episode of the show’s third season. These declarations of intersectional identities hold promise as fuel for intercultural conversation as well as continued critical analysis and scholarly work; Teves’ 2014 examination of Native Hawaiian Māhū identities is one example. In addition to the intersection of Indigeneity and gender identities, some, but definitely *not* all, Indigenous people in the United States face class struggles or disabilities worsened by having to battle for equitable and accessible health care. Some are either survivors of sexual violence or generational trauma, which complicates the web of relationships that are a source of need fulfillment and well-being. Thus, intersectionality can complicate Indigenous peoples’ fight for the autonomy and sovereignty to tell these identity stories in the ways that they choose.

6. Indigenous Representation and Sovereignty on Instagram and TikTok

One of the media spaces where storytelling as a route to well-being is currently being practiced is Native channels on Instagram and TikTok. This storytelling is not aimed exclusively

at Indigenous audiences. Folsom (2022) analyzed womxn artists on TikTok using their work to raise awareness of violence against Indigenous women in her Ph.D. dissertation. Ojibwe author James Vukelich Kaagegaabaw posts regularly to Instagram and has a podcast with explanations of Ojibwe words keyed to topics of the day. Youth advocate and storyteller Eagle Blackbird, with over a million followers on TikTok, ran a series of humorous videos called “Teaching My White Friend to Be Native.” The content includes reels such as “When Your White Friend Asks For A Spirit Name” and “When You Teach That White Friend How to Act on the Rez,” and these are just a few examples of many content creators making similar reels. These examples bring Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences together to learn, inspired, and laugh. Studying whether these social media channels raise awareness and result in action among white audiences, and constitute mediated experiences of sovereignty or need satisfaction for Indigenous audiences, would be a fruitful avenue of study.

In another of Blackbird’s reels, titled, “I Never Had This Growing Up, But He Will,” Blackbird holds a child dressed for pow-wow in bright orange-red appliquéd shirt and white-fringed pants. Blackbird doesn’t speak, but the song “Logic” by Juanes plays, and the lyrics sung by Alessia Cara float over the video as the boy runs: “*And when you stare at your reflection / Finally knowing who it is / I know that you’ll thank God you did.*” Digital spaces are full of creators sharing micro-stories of Indigenous identity, representation, and cultural production, as well as humor, family, and connection to lands and culture. These media spaces are continually reclaiming Indigenous sovereignty and positive futures. Media researchers should be, as the ‘Gram creators say, “totally here for it.”

In our research interview in early summer 2022, the late CITC vice president Amy Fredeen said she believed that the most important lesson of “Never Alone” wasn’t how to create

a profitable media product that represented Indigenous identities. Nor was it how to invent an inclusive process. The most important lesson was how to facilitate conversations about imperfections and successes in *both* product and process. It seems appropriate to end this dissertation with Fredeen's words as she contemplated CITC's potential to spin Nuna and Fox's adventures into a full-fledged "Never Alone 2" game as well as an animated movie:

"Knowing that that 'Never Alone' spurred conversation in that space, whether or not it would be the best [video game], or be the best example [of Indigenous representation] or not, I think, to me, is not really the point. ... The more these conversations happen in multiple areas of the media, I think, the better it will be, long term, for both the industry and the underrepresented communities." (Amy Fredeen)

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Letter to AAIRB Summarizing Revisions to Research Protocol

Colorado State University
Journalism and Media Communication
C244 Clark Hall
Fort Collins, Colorado
80502

January 14, 2020

Dear Alaska Area IRB Reviewers,

Thank you so much for your thoughtful response to my proposed study amendments. I agree that the Life Story approach taken in the Interview Questions in that proposal is intrusive, especially as the first questions to ask in a first conversation with a participant. They have been deleted; on reflection, I believe that the relevant events will come up as I ask participants about the stories that have affected their lives and identities.

My revisions to the documents included are as follows:

1. A revised Interview Protocol Document, clean and track-changes versions

This document deletes the broader, classic “life story” questions, but retains the questions that ask about stories in a different sense of the word – that of the stories experienced in various stages of life, their effects on the participant, and the stories’ roles in shaping identity or learning lessons and values. These are the questions that are the heart of the study: How do Native Americans in the Lower 48 experience this very narrative-based game? What are the qualities, in their view, that characterize a story that excludes vs. a story that includes and reconnects? Thus, the Interview Protocol Document now includes a “Stories in Your Life” series of questions.

These questions were included in the previous version and have undergone only minor edits (pages 1-4 on the clean version).

This document also incorporates some elements of trauma-informed care principles. The section that instructs participants that they have autonomy in the shaping of the interview has been strengthened; these sections are at the beginning and end of the “Stories in My Life” interview. The section at the end of the “Stories in My Life” interview also asks participants whether they have a person close to them with whom they discuss negative feelings. I altered this section because, although the questions probing for traumatic experiences have been removed, participants may still volunteer to tell me these experiences, and/or they may remember them after our interview. I plan to volunteer, if appropriate, at the end of the interview that I recently wrote about some of my own childhood traumas in a journal entry, and even though they happened decades ago, it was still difficult to write and talk about them. I will use this disclosure as a way to lead into making sure that participants are connected to Native-focused mental health resources or close friends should similar feelings come up for them. To me, this expresses respect for their effort in sharing their experience, as well as supporting their emotional and psychological safety and comfort, as well as reciprocity. This new question will be asked with the recorder paused (Question page 4 on the clean version). I also ask if I may give them a handout with mental-health and crisis intervention resources in their area, preferably Native-focused.

I will also contact each participant two days after the Stories in Your Life interview. There are many logistical purposes for this phone call – to set a time for the game interview is just one – but it also serves as an excuse to check in and see how they sound, ask how they are doing after the first interview (page 4, Question 4, on the clean version).

2. A revised Study Protocol, clean and track changes version.

This document gives a more detailed rationale for the “Stories in Your Life” interview approach and incorporates trauma-informed care approach changes. These changes are located in the “clean” version on pages 2-4 (justification for “Stories in Your Life” interview); pages 5 and 6 (new date of Indigenous Pop Expo in New Mexico; additions to interview procedure); p. 9 (expanded benefits section); and page 11 (complete citations for trauma-informed care sources.)

3. A Certification Document (new document).

This document certifies that I have passed an 8-hour, in-person training course in Mental Health First Aid. Originally I did not sign up for this training because of my research project but to be better prepared to help my students. I should also explain that my experience in responding to difficult stories is much broader and deeper than this brief training and certificate captures.

The students I teach at Colorado State are no different from the roughly 50 percent of adults who have experienced trauma. In the summer and fall of 2019, however, it seemed that the number of my students experiencing PTSD or other mental health or personal crises skyrocketed. In my small News Writing class, 10 of 16 students experienced a significant life event, from troubles with adjusting their mental health medications to coming out as gay to parents and grandparents to a student whose mother almost died of smoke inhalation in a house fire. I have had students who were taking a parent through chemotherapy; students whose parents failed them financially; and a student who disclosed that an abusive ex-boyfriend threatened to burn her family alive. I had to build a “Self-Care for Journalists” learning module during the confirmation hearings for Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh. I have had a student who acted out in such a way that he had to be removed from my class for his fellow students’ safety.

I want the review board to be aware that I have had continual experience in referring emerging adults to crisis resources in the last four years. I am willing to provide specific, Native-focused and Native-staffed resources in participants' communities. I cannot make my participants use such resources, but I can make it easy for them to use them. As with many people of any identity, they may choose to rely on friends, family, and community rather than mental health professionals who are unknown to them or who are non-Native.

4. An Example Resources Handout (New Document).

This document is an example of the abovementioned resource handout that I would use with a participant in the Fort Collins or Northern Colorado area. It may be updated after consultation with Native organizations or individuals, and will be adapted to the participant's specific location.

5. A final note (This note does not refer to a document).

I write this final note because I sense that part of what the review board members need to know about the project will not fit in a document template. Basically, I am asking board members to trust me with my participants' emotional and cultural safety. And a perfectly appropriate response from you is, "Who are you that we should trust you?"

In the interests of respecting your time, I will be brief. I was a horribly bullied child. In the 1960s and early 1970s, we did not use the word "bully" as a verb – my tormentors were just being boys (or girls). The stories of my experiences during that time are difficult to relate. In addition, a thread of mental illness runs through my mother's family. She grew up amid the Great Depression, with a mother of her own whose schizophrenia was not diagnosed until in her last years in a nursing home. If I ask participants to trust me with their reactions to stories of inclusion and exclusion, I must be willing to re-experience my own. I did so last week in a

journal entry that kept me up late into the morning. This reflection reinforced the truth of board members' qualms about the Life Story approach.

As an instructor, I have been able to navigate difficult conversations with students partly because of some solid initial training, but also because my nearly six decades of living have made me more compassionate. My own struggles gave me a taste of what it feels like to negotiate a difficult road to adulthood, to have to repeatedly carve out a space of safety, belonging, and potential in the world and then to fiercely defend it.

I am absolutely not equating any of my experiences with what my participants may have experienced. My parents were not taken from their parents, told their entire culture was invalid, forbidden to speak their language, forced to cut their hair. My mothers' family members were not kicked off their land. No one flung racial epithets at me. The names I was called were personal and specific; and they occupied only a small part of my life.

However, it is also important for the board to note that I must not underestimate my participants' capacity to creatively re-story their own experiences into stories of growth and success. For me, one of the most striking examples of this is Irene Bedard, the part-Inupiaq actress who was the voice of Disney's "Pocahontas." She told her audience at Indigenous Pop Expo Denver that one of her sisters had been sexually trafficked. She told us that her interest in theater was sparked when she began making up plays as a way to keep track of her younger siblings and track where they were. In her present life, she said, her personal vision and mission statement is, "Healing through the art and power of story." Native tech writer and video game writer Daniel Starkey does the same thing in his essay for Polygon.com on "Never Alone," writing how playing the video game became part of his story of grieving for a female elder. In

order to tell these stories of resilience, participants may, or may not, tell or allude to stories that bring up negative feelings. But it must be their choice to open, or not open, that door.

None of this necessarily means you should trust me to ask Native American people to tell me about the role of stories in their lives. I can only assure you that will do everything I can with the lessons life has given me to make sure my participants are emotionally cared for in the telling of their stories. I do this just as I would do with and for my students, because as my students often are, in this case my participants will be my teachers.

I hope that these paragraphs answer the questions you would ask if we were to meet in person.

With great respect,

Susan Clotfelter

Appendix B: “Story of My Media Stories Interview” Questions

INTERVIEW 1: THE STORY OF “YOUR” STORIES

INTRO

Thank you so very much for speaking with me to talk with you about the stories and media products that you have experienced, and for telling me about your experience with the video game “Never Alone.” These questions will help me to understand the stories and/or story tellers that you’ve found valuable to your journey as an adult, specifically an [Indigenous or more specific tribal identity] adult. Some of these questions may seem not to be related to the video game, but I include them so that you can me the full story of what the game means, or doesn’t mean, to you.

You can also skip, or come back to, any question that you want. You do not have to shape what you tell me in any other way than how you wish to. I will listen to the transcript and correct it to the best of my ability, and then send it to you in whatever format you wish (hard copy, email, etc.) so that you can add to, delete, correct, or clarify anything that you wish. The transcript file itself also will be yours to do with as you wish. Also, when I write about what you’ve told me, I will send you the text of anything that refers to you to make sure that what I write is as accurate as possible. You may ask me any question you wish, about any part of the project, at any time; and you may also tell me anything about your experience that is important for me to know, but that I have failed to ask. You can diverge from the sequence of questions I ask at any point to add anything. What is important is that you feel in charge of our conversation.

Are there any questions you have that I can answer?

Is there anything you would like me to know before we start?

Are you still willing to be mechanically recorded?

I am honored that you are willing to share your time with me and tell me about the role of stories in your life.

Characters, stories, and media

Because this project is about a particular video game in which story is important, I would like to ask you about the stories that were important in your life, whether they were told or read to you, were part of an activity or a class at school, or came to you in a book, TV show, movie or video game.

1. From your childhood.

Tell me about a favorite story from that time. How did it enter your life? Was it told or read to you by someone important? Did you encounter it on television, or a movie? Was there something you learned from it? Who were the important characters in it? What does your love of that story tell you now, about your younger self then?

2. From adolescence and teen-age years.

Tell me about the most important story you experienced during this phase of your life, and why it was important. How did it come to you – through a book, someone in your life, through a movie, a game, etc.? Did you experience it by yourself or with others?

3. Into adulthood.

As you made the transition into adulthood, what story or media creation has meant the most to you, and why? As you began to make your own choices about what stories or media to consume, what became important to you about the characters or events of those stories? Were there

characters, authors, actors, or shows you chose to follow or became a fan of? What about them inspired you to do that?

4. From today.

How did you come to know about “Never Alone”? As much as you can remember, tell me about your decision to play it. Where, when, and with whom do you / did you play it? Tell me about how it was similar, or different – or both – to other stories you consume.

5. Connections.

Now I’d like to ask you to consider the stories you’ve told me about yourself alongside of the characters and stories that you enjoy being told or experiencing through media – books, games, movies, TV shows, or just stories people you know tell.

5a. Did you see yourself, or people like you, in whatever way comes to mind, in these media characters? If so, tell me where and when that happened, who was involved, who you talked about this experience with, and what your thoughts and feelings about it were. And if it did *not* happen, what did that mean to you?

5b. Did you ever wish, or imagine, that someone would offer a media character who was like you – or wish that you were like a media or story character? Did you ever see a character who was like someone you knew well?

6. Looking back over these stages and stories of your life, from stories you may have been told by someone you know, to game, movie, TV or book stories that you chose, which were the ones that made you feel the greatest sense of belonging?

6a. Was there a story that you *wish* had included characters like you, or that you felt should have included you? Tell me about that story or stories.

6b. Was there a story that you felt *failed* to include you or anyone like you, or included you, but in a negative way? Tell me about that story or stories.

Culture, traditions, and community / family

Next, I'd like to know more about culture, traditions, community and family in the stories you enjoy. Everyone has a culture, but for many Native or Indigenous people, culture and traditions become even more important because Western culture deliberately made these things so difficult to preserve culture and pass on. Culture, traditions and community are also important in "Never Alone."

I understand that there may be limits to what you may share or wish to share with me on this topic. I accept those limits, whatever they may be. I am grateful for what you choose to share.

1. When did you first get a sense of your own Native identity – as a child of your parents, your gender, your tribe or community? How did that happen? Where do you feel you are in that process?

2. Tell me about the story tellers or story carriers in your childhood. What was their background and relationship to you? When and where – and why – did they tell you stories? What did they tell you *about* the telling of stories? Are there traditions your family observes about the telling of stories?

3. What is your favorite memory of a specific cultural activity or tradition, other than storytelling, that you are permitted and feel comfortable sharing with me? Once again, tell me where and when it happened, and who was involved? Why is it an important memory for you?

4. What values were passed on to you as a child, teenager, or adult? Who did the passing?

What do those values mean to you today?

5. What role in your life does your culture play today? Has that changed over the stages of your life so far?

Reflections

1. What you love and value in stories. Thinking back over the stories you've told me about your own life, your culture, and the stories you have heard, read, watched, or played, do these stories have anything in common? Are there types of plots, characters, or settings that you look for – or do you like several types, or a wide variety?

2. Are there any other important thoughts about your own story, or the stories and characters that you have enjoyed, or that you wish had been better or different, that you'd like to share with me?

3. The story you've told in this interview. Thank you very much for what you've shared with me in this interview. I'm wondering if you might tell me what this interview, here today, has been like for you.

PAUSE recorder

4. Thinking about what you've told me in the next days. As part of this project, I had to think back over my own life and write about stories and events that left me feeling included, or excluded. Experts estimate that up to half of adults have experience trauma, and some have experienced multiple traumas. I have had some of these in my own life, many years ago, and it

was hard to write about them and talk about them, even though they are long in the past. If you experience any negative feelings from our conversations, I want to be sure that you aren't going through them alone. Is there someone that you know well, who you usually might talk to if uncomfortable feelings or everyday disappointments come up?

Record answer to above question: _____

Would it be OK with you if I give you a handout with some additional people to contact if that happens?

RESTART RECORDER

I will be in touch in a couple of days to set up a time and place for the interview where you'll show me the game and how you play it, and to listen to anything you would like to add or any questions you may have. And you can also contact me at any time, via phone or email or text.

Do you have any other comments or questions for me now?

Once again, thank you very much for your help with this project. I will give you a call soon to set up the next interview.

Adapted from McAdams (2008,
<https://www.sesp.northwestern.edu/foley/instruments/interview/>, paragraphs 1-14 and 31; and
Atkinson, 1998, pp 40-53; Jones, Berg, and Osher, 2018; and Wartenweiler, 2017 (full citations in Study Protocol).

Revised Play / Second Interview Questions

INTRO

Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with me again to share your experience of this video game. We'll talk a little bit about it, then I'll have you, or the two of us, play it, and we might stop it at points to talk about its features. Then I'll have more questions after we've played it for a bit.

Once again, you can stop the interview at any time, skip any questions, or postpone any questions to think about and respond later. Your participation is voluntary, and anything you tell me will be confidential. As with the first interview, I will email you a transcript of our conversation and you can add to, delete, clarify or change what you've told me. If there are points in the gameplay that are important to you, I may snap screenshots of those moments with my phone to aid in my memory of them and explanation of them, but you will not be photographed. If there is anything in a photo that might identify you, I will crop that feature out or substitute the photo with a similar still photo supplied by the game's maker.

END INTRO.

0a. Was there anything you wanted to talk about from our earlier interview?

0b. Did you have any questions?

1. What brought you to Indigipop Expo (OR: What brought you to CSU {CU, UNM, or other locations or community groups})?

2. How would you describe yourself and your own identity, using any characteristics or terms you want?

3a. Tell me about yourself as a video game player. How long have you played, what games or kind of games you like, what platform(s) you play on, alone / with others?

- b. What do you look for in games? What are your criteria for a good game?
- c. How you describe yourself as a gamer?
- 4. What other types of media do you generally like – TV, books, movies, music?
- 5. What kinds of games do you usually enjoy playing?

[BREAK FOR SETUP OF GAME]

- 6a. How did you find out about “Never Alone”?
- b. Before you bought it or played it, did you know anything about how it was made?
- c. What made you buy it, if you bought it, or decide to play it?
 - d. When you first heard about it, what did you think?

- 7a. Tell me about how you play(ed) the game.
- b. Are you still playing, or have you stopped?
- c. Did you “play it through”?
- d. Do you binge play, or just pick it up from time to time?
- e. Where do you usually play, and on which device and platform?
- f. Do you usually play it alone, or with someone?

7. The first time you sat down to play “Never Alone,” what specifically brought you to the game? What were you wanting from the experience?

- 8. When you began playing it, what was that like?
 - a. Was it like your experience with other games, or different? Why or why not?

b. Did the way you thought about it, or the reasons you played it, change over time?

9. Did you tell other people, friends or family or gaming friends, about the game? What did you tell them?

[WHEN CI VIDEOS COME UP IN PLAY OR CONVERSATION]

11. How did the Cultural Insight videos affect your experience of the game? What do you think of them?

[DURING PLAY, OR AS THESE TOPICS COME UP]

12. What seems to be the goal of the game itself?

13. What do you see as Nuna and Fox's goal?

14. What do you see as "the story" or "stories" in the game? Do you think about the(se) stories as you are playing?

15. Tell me about the environment around Nuna and Fox in the game.

16. Tell me what you think about the relationships between the game's characters.

17. What do you think about the role of story in the game?

18. What do you think about the role of art in the game?

19. When you play, where do you feel as if you are? Are you inside Nuna's world, outside of it? Do you feel as if you "become" her, or or can feel what she feels? Is this the same, or different, from how you feel with other games? With other characters from games or other media?

20. [If not previously answered]. When the CI videos come up, what is your reaction? Do you watch them not at all, only once, or more? How do you see them fitting (or not fitting) into the game, and in how you play? Do you like some, all, none of them? Why? Who do you think they were created for?

21. When you were playing the game (when you play it now), do you talk about it with family, friends or groups of friends? With Indigenous friends or groups? Tell me about that – or any experience with the game and other players that were particularly enjoyable or important.

22. Are there stories, or real people, or other characters from media, that the game recalled for you?

23. Are there thoughts or feelings about your own life that it brought up for you?

24a. Do you ever identify with characters in books, TV, movies or games? Why, or why not? What does it mean to you to identify with characters?

b. Is it important for you to be able to identify with characters? Has this changed over time?

c. Did it matter to you to see an Indigenous or Native American character in the game? What about in other games or other media?

d. Do you think that the characters' Native American identity is important to other Indigenous players? To Indigenous kids?

e. Do you think that seeing Native American people in media like "Never Alone" is important for people – of any age – who are *not* Native American?

[TO WRAP UP]

25. Is there anything else about your experience of this game, or others like it, that you want people to know? Think perhaps of other game consumers and game creators, Indigenous or non-Indigenous, or of the people you know who play video games.

Again, thank you so very much for helping with this project. As with the earlier interview, you can contact me at any time with questions or additional thoughts you've had about what we've talked about. When I begin writing up what people have told me, any chapters where you are quoted, or where what you've told me, is included, those chapters will be sent to you to review. So will a copy of the entire dissertation, or any executive summaries or shorter versions that I create, if you prefer.

(Adapted from Shaw, 2010a, p. 291).

Appendix C: Game Maker Interview Questions

0. If you could structure the period of the game's development, from idea to launch, into chapters, or episodes, or game levels, what would those be?

1. Take me back to the time when the idea of the game first came up. As the idea began to crystallize and take form, what were the intentions for the game itself?
 - a). Who were the players or types of players who it was intended for?

 - b). What kind of discussions happened around the age level of the game?

2. As you and E-line and the board worked on the concept, how did it shift or change? Did some things remain constant?

3. How did you come to the decision to consult the elders in Barrow and elsewhere about the game?

4. Tell me about the decision to include, and then create, the Cultural Insight videos.

5. Tell me more about the intentions for those videos – different, or similar to intentions for the game?
6. Tell me how you worked through the development process of the game. Were there times when you went back to the original intentions, modified the game in progress, or modified the intentions? How did you arrive at decisions?
7. This may seem a little meta, but tell me the story of how the game’s story emerged.

ABOUT FINANCIALS

1. Tell me about the first structure for the partnership between E-line and Cook Inlet Tribal Council and how that came about.
2. How and why did that begin to change?
3. What were the financial goals for the game, for (both / either) company?
4. When did (both, either) organization realize that “Never Alone” was a “hit”?

5. Talk to me about Upper One Games – how did that subsidiary come about?
6. Take me up to the present-day organization, where CITC owns just over a third of E-Line Media.
7. From a financial perspective, what are the risks and rewards of a development process like that of “Never Alone”?
8. So the difficult part is always ending a story. Does the financial story of “Never Alone” have an end? Or does its creative genealogy continue?

About game visuals (for Veryovka or other artists)

1. Tell me about how you came on board to work with the game’s visuals.
2. Tell me the story of how you arrived at the eventual look and style of the game’s world and its characters – I understand that it went through several stages.
3. What was the most important or key experience in creating that style?

4. Was there a time when you were worried it could not be done, or could not be done *well*?
5. When did you know you were starting to get it right?
6. What was your most important goal in the visual style of “Never Alone?”
7. Is there a part of the game that you feel best fulfills that vision? A part that was most frustrating?
8. When it came to launching the game, it was delayed for two weeks. Tell me about that.
9. You went on to be art director for another cultural game about the Ukraine. Was there, so to speak, unfinished business from “Never Alone” that helped motivate that effort for you? Or goals for “Forest Song” that “Never Alone” inspired? Or any other connection between those efforts that you think is important?

Appendix D: Recruiting Materials

(See next page)

Have you played “Never Alone”? I’d like to speak with you!

Who is conducting this study, and what is it about?

My name is Susan Clotfelter and I am a graduate student from Journalism and Media Communication at Colorado State University. I am recruiting participants for a study of meaning-making in the video game “Never Alone.”

Who can join this study?

Anyone who identifies as part or whole Native American or Indigenous of any or multiple tribes and who has played “Never Alone.” You can participate if you are an adult (age 18 and up) and have played for at least six hours.

What will I be asked to do?

Talk with me in an interview about the role of stories in your life and your own life story. Then we’ll talk in a second interview about how you play the game, as you play or as we play together.

Why should I join this study?

The Cook Inlet Tribal Council, based in Anchorage, Alaska, created the game. Its members tell me they would like to know what Indigenous players in the Lower 48 states think and feel about playing it. They might find the results useful as they and their partners create more games like “Never Alone.” In addition, media researchers currently don’t know very much about what it means to game players to have characters that are like them. Interviewees will receive a \$25 gift card for each interview.



Nuna and Fox in “Never Alone,” Cook Inlet Tribal Council and E-Line Games. Used with permission.

How do I join this study?

Go to this link to find out more: www.NAproject.info, or email me at susan.clotfelter@colostate.edu; or Contact either of the people below with any questions you might have.

Susan Clotfelter, Study Coordinator and CO-PI, 970-214-4437
Susan.Clotfelter@colostate.edu – texts accepted!

Marilee Long, Principal Investigator
Marilee.Long@colostate.edu

If you have questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the CSU IRB at: RICRO_IRB@mail.colostate.edu; 970-491-1553.

