



NEVER ALONE OFFERS AN AUTHENTIC NATIVE AMERICAN TALE

[NEWS / NEWS](#) Jun 24, 2014 by [Dubois-Salazar-Morris \(author/duibian-salazar-morris\)](#)

Nuna is a little Iñupiaq girl who lives in an Alaskan village with her family and a pet arctic fox. One winter, her village was battered by an unending blizzard. Her family was starving. They were unable to hunt, fish, or gather food for months. In an effort to save her village, Nuna and her fox set off on an adventure to find the source of the blizzard and end it once and for all. This is the premise of *Never Alone* (*Kisima Ingitchuq*), a game from the first indigenous-owned game company Upper One Games and developed by E-Line Media.

Inspired by the folklore and tradition of Alaskan Natives, specifically the Iñupiaq people of northern Alaska, *Never Alone* is an effort by the Cook Inlet Tribal Council, who launched Upper One Games, to share the stories of their people with the world as well as keep their youth connected to their history. "Kisima Ingitchuq" (pronounced Kees-ee-m-a Eeng-eeet-eh-na), means "I am not alone" in the Iñupiaq language. The Iñupiaq traditionally lived near or on the northern Alaskan coast or in the interior of northern Alaska. They were mostly known as hunter-gatherers that lived off of walrus, seal, whale, polar bears, caribou, and fish as well as ducks, geese, rabbits, berries, roots, and shoots.

"The Cook Inlet Tribal Council is a service organization that serves Alaska Natives and American Indian communities in the Anchorage area," said Andrew Stein, director of consumer marketing for E-Line Media. "They've been looking for ways to build self-sufficiency; they've been looking for ways to share Alaska Native culture with the rest of the world, and looking for ways to connect to today's Alaska Native youth to their culture and heritage. They've become very disconnected as western cultures have encroached and digital media penetrated. Kids rather be on Facebook instead of hearing their grandparents tell them stories that have been handed down for generations."

Nuna_fox_coastalvillage

A little girl and her fox.

Upper One Games partnered with E-Line Media because of their experience with games for education and social impact. E-Line Media in turn recruited Sean Vesce, a creative director who worked for Eidos, Activision, and specifically worked on the Tomb Raider reboot, and Dima Vervovka, an art director who worked on the SOCOM series, MAG, and Unit 13, to gather ideas on how to make these Native stories into a viable video game. The making of the game has been a collaborative effort since day one, where tribal elders, storytellers, and the Native community participated in making sure everything from the visuals to the message of the stories in the game stayed authentic.

The foundation of the game's story comes from the Iñupiaq tale "Kunuksaayuka" (Koo-nook-sah-yeeska). It's a story about a devastating endless blizzard originally told by Robert Nasruk Cleveland, an Iñupiaq storyteller who was born in 1888 and grew up around Alaska's Black River and later the village of Shungnak. He recorded a bunch of his stories in the 1960s before his passing.

Screen2_SpiritOwl

The wisdom of an owl.

"The Upper One folks actually found his daughter, Minnie Gray," Stein said. "She's 85 years old, and we wanted to make sure that she not only knew about and agreed that 'Kunuksaayuka' could be the narrative arc for *Never Alone* but that she would be involved and could make sure that as the story was adapted and evolved for game design, that the meanings, the value, the wisdom of that story was maintained and still transmitted."

Within *Never Alone's* tale of "Kunuksaayuka" is other folklore and tales from the Alaska Native culture. I had a chance to play the game at the PlayStation booth during E3. It's a side-scrolling platformer with puzzle elements. I not only played as Nuna in the demo, I played as her arctic fox too. Animals are a very important aspect of Alaskan Native stories and often appear as companions and shapeshifters in a story. Foxes, owls, wolves, and bears appear in the stories and some of them make appearances in *Never Alone* too.

In the early version I played, *Never Alone* looked gorgeous. The dark, windy, snowy environment engrosses you in Nuna's mission and seems to give you an idea of what a blizzard would be like in the Arctic. Some of the gameplay mechanics and controls are still being worked on, however. There were parts of the game where the timing between my button push and Nuna's movement were off a bit and caused me to fall to my death (which was really sad, since I was controlling a little girl!).

Screen2_Riverbank

A blizzard in the Arctic.

I enjoyed the puzzle-like situations where both Nuna and her fox have to work together to get past certain areas, but the fox was also vulnerable to some of the glitchy controls. When the fox dies, Nuna drops to her knees and cries. It's heartbreaking! You really don't want to die in this game.

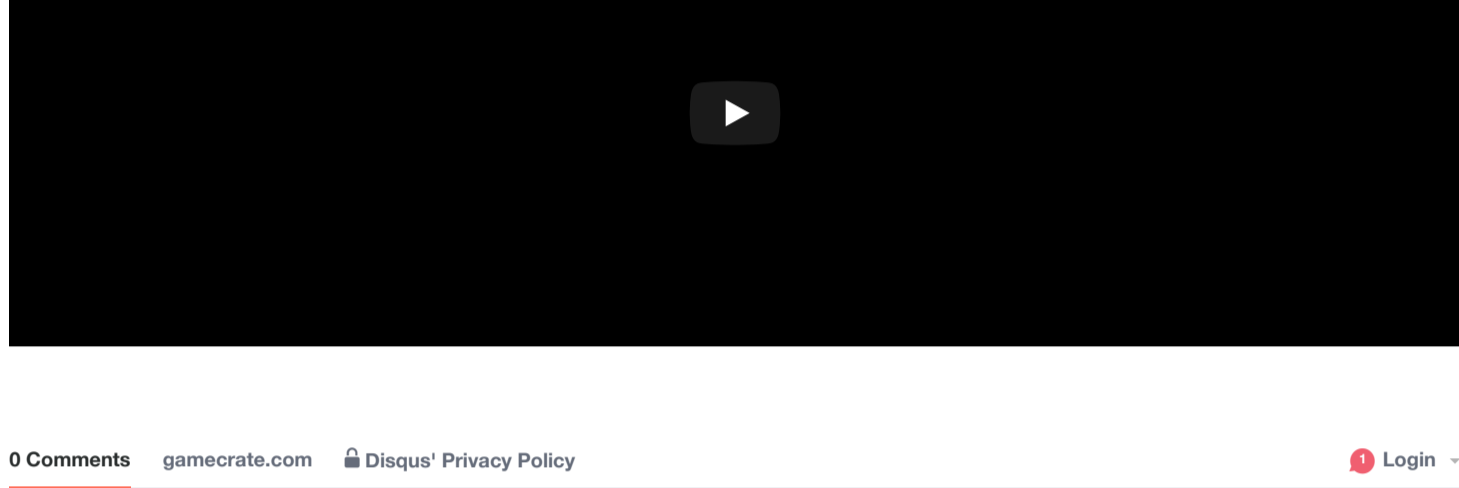
Another cultural aspect of the game is Nuna's run-in with the Sky People. In some Alaskan Native stories, the Sky People live in the Aurora Borealis. Parents told their children that if they didn't come in at night, there was a chance the Sky People would come down out of the Aurora Borealis and snatch them up. And when I wasn't quick enough to run past a "Sky Person" who was flying around a structure I needed to climb, that's what happened. Snatched up!

The Sky People will get you!

The Sky People will get you!

My favorite part of the game, however, was the story telling. Not only is the story and adventure intriguing, the game is narrated in the original Iñupiaq language (with English subtitles) giving the experience a wholly authentic feel. This is something not seen very often in games as a whole and one we're definitely looking forward to. The game will be available on the PlayStation Network, Xbox Live, and PC this fall.

Watch the trailer:



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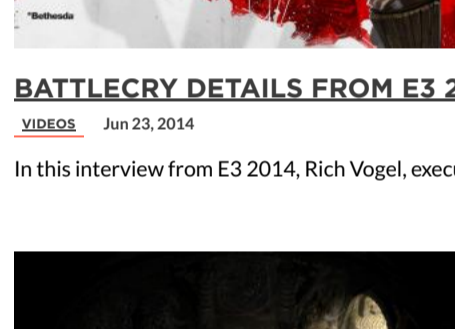
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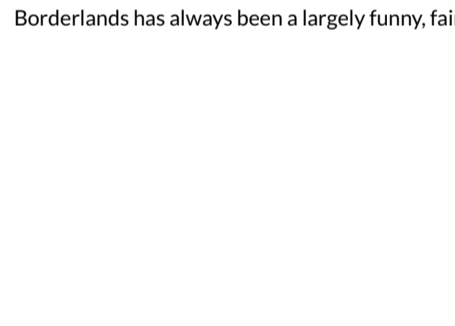
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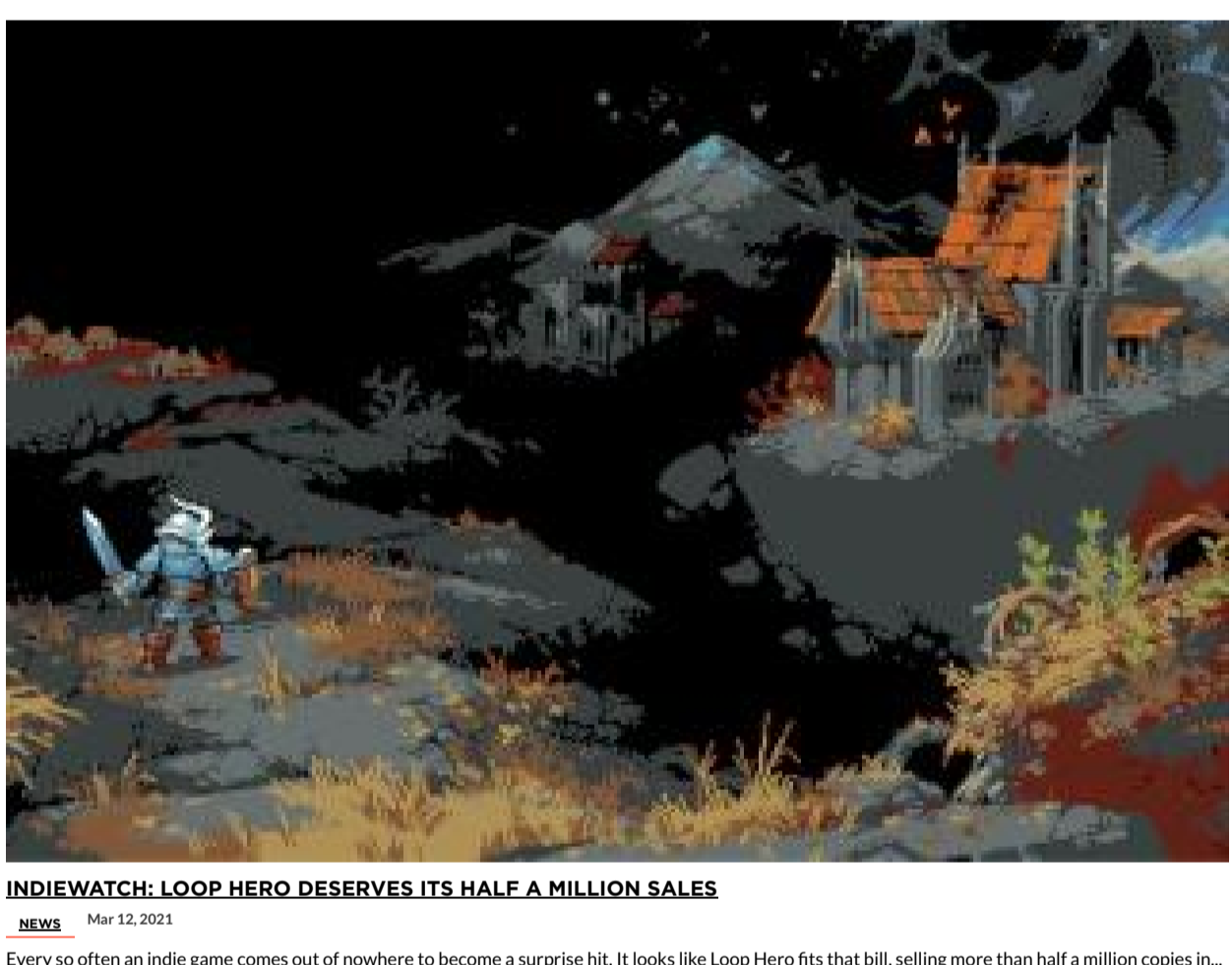
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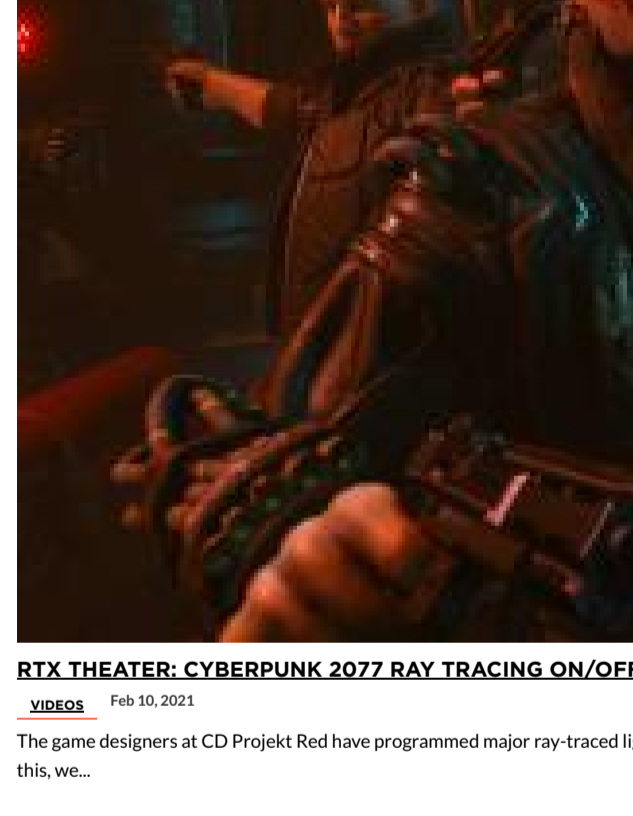
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