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Gamevironments from the perspective of an actant. ChatGPT (prompt: "gameenvironments").

10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Issue

# Gamevironments Revisited

## Issue 21 (2024)

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# Video Games Beyond Play. Decolonizing Gamevironments

Christopher Helland

### Abstract

The true impact of videogaming is far from being fully comprehended and properly evaluated in our hypermediated world. Through theory and exploration, our scholarship examining videogames have shown us the proverbial tip of the iceberg when it comes to unpacking the cultural and social impacts linked with this significant form of media. Videogame research demonstrates that the games we play often reflect our cultural value systems and reinforce narratives and themes linked with the dominant values and ideologies of society. However, research has also illustrated that video games provide opportunities for counter narratives that challenge the dominant ideology, including colonization, and present alternative ways of being. In this way, videogames have become a site of resistance against colonial structures and a source of hope for decolonizing societies. By expanding the focus of videogame studies beyond research that focuses upon the game, the game producers, and the game players and instead considering the gaming context within our current society, the gaming-related actants (including the non-human) and gaming-related media practices, the larger cultural impact of video games can be better evaluated beyond just play. Through this new gameenvironments lens, it can be argued that videogames may be one of the most significant forms of new media for supporting decolonization and changing cultural perceptions about Indigenous identities and ways of being.

**Keywords:** Decolonization, Postcolonialism, Colonialism, Videogaming, Value Systems, Religion and Video Games, Indigenous Knowledge, Indigenous Agency, Indigenous Video Games, gameenvironments

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### Overview

“Indigenous people and cultures are rarely included in digital games, and if they are it is often in a rather thoughtless manner. The Indigenous peoples and

cultures of many parts of the world have been portrayed in digital games in several ways that show little respect or understanding of the important issues these populations face." (Loban and Apperley 2019)

"The misrepresentation of Indigenous culture in Western literature and film is as old as the history of colonization. Sadly, it seems video games have inherited many of the cultural biases of legacy media. Video games have had a checkered past when it comes to representing Indigenous nations, communities, and cultures. While purposefully designed Indigenous characters can reflect the knowledge and culture of the people they represent; mainstream developers often rely on harmful tropes that reduce Indigenous people to primitive and romanticized stereotypes." (Webb 2020)

Video games and video game development have a colonial past when it comes to issues related to cultural appropriation and the representation of others (Mukherjee 2017). Game developers take cultural elements (both material and non-material) from minority cultures without permission, proper context or understanding, and incorporate them within a game for their own purposes." This cultural appropriation leads to stereotypes and false information about minority cultures, which can lead to audiences being unable to distinguish these from true information in real life" (Svensson 2017, 30). This false representation supports dominant societal ideologies structured upon colonial values and imperial power structures (Consalvo et al. 2023). This arrangement within video games provides spaces where players in post-colonial countries can continue to support and engage with, for fun and pleasure, colonial values based upon conquering and exploitation (Skotnes-Brown 2019). In fact, many games are designed where "imperialism and colonialism is used as a tool for the player to wield and channel their power fantasies ... Theft and murder is presented as something sensible and acceptable, given that games often give players no choice in the matter" (Larson 2020).

To dismiss this activity as merely play or insignificant because it is a video game is a missed opportunity for properly exploring the complex cultural matrix in which games exist, the influence they may have, and the way we study them (Silva, Reyes and Koenitz 2022). Early gameenvironments studies did begin to unpack this issue by exploring the technical environment of digital games and gamers and the cultural environments of video games and gaming; however, this approach was limited in its scope in that it focused upon only some aspects of the relationship between video games and society, primarily the game designers and the game players (Radde-Antweiler 2024, 4). The more developed gameenvironments theory presents a new model for exploring the complex relationship between games and culture and through it a much better understanding of the decolonizing can be explored and examined for the larger impact it is having within our society (e.g., Jiwandono 2023).

The expanded gameenvironments framework focuses upon a developed and nuanced exploration of the range of relationships that exist between the games we play and the societies in which we live. This new framework moves away from an actor centered approach to an actant centered one that explores digital games as a communicative practice between technology, culture, media and the humans and non-human actors that engage with it (Radde-Antweiler 2024). As most scholars recognize, "video games are deeply embedded in people's cultures. They create and shape narratives, discourses, and representations that reverberate in other domains of the society" (Zambrano 2023). With this new analytical focus in mind, a greater understanding of the relationship between post-colonial video games that contest colonial domination and the legacies of colonialism and the shifts that are occurring within our society can be better evaluated (e.g., Nacher and Jankowski 2021). The use of video games as a tool for decolonization continues to gain momentum as more members of the Indigenous community become involved in the gaming industry,

more companies within the gaming industry acknowledge the colonial aspects of their games, and more scholars decolonialize their research (Silva, Reyes and Koenitz 2022).

## **The Colonial Context**

The struggle against colonialism and its control and impact over the territories and people that were/are colonized is an ongoing global process. Colonialism, at its most basic level, is the conquest and control of a territory and people by an outside government or power. It involves various forms of subjugation and exploitation, often forcing its own cultural values and ideological systems upon those within the dependent area. Despite political shifts and colonized nations gaining independence, internal colonialism continues to exist as a condition of oppression or subordination in various forms through segregation, institutionalized discrimination, racism, xenophobia and intolerance. Postcolonialism is a field of study examining the effects of colonization on these cultures and societies and how those that are subjugated respond to and resist colonialism and its discourses. Decolonization is the process of removing or undoing the modern/colonial order that has structured societies from the sixteenth century onwards (Mignolo and Walsh 2018).

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For the focus of this paper, I am exploring video game production in North America and decolonization within that context. Within Canada, where I am located, there is an acknowledged history of centuries of colonial rule. By the 1700s this included structured displacement and assimilation initiatives to disempower Indigenous groups and appropriate their territories and resources. Through the enactment of the Indian Act in 1876, a set of laws and restrictions were put in place to systematically



disadvantage and destroy the Indigenous communities that were under British rule. Despite being enacted almost 150 years ago, the Indian Act is still in place today (Joseph 2018). Along with these laws, rules and restrictions, there was also a systematic misrepresentation of the Indigenous peoples' cultural identities and ways of being within the Canadian education system (Dei, Karanja and Erger 2022). In the creation of a unified Canada with cultural homogeneity and solidarity around colonized principles, in the late 1800s a master narrative was presented by the state within the school curriculum that represented the Indigenous within the country from a European colonial perspective that represented them as cruel savages that were ferocious villains who plotted against the Europeans with fiendish ingenuity (LeMarquand 2021). Along with teaching the Canadian population how to see the *other* within the new nation, a residential schooling system was created by the government and the dominant religious traditions of the country to teach them how to see themselves. For over 150 years (with the last residential school closing in Canada in 1996) over 150,000 children from First Nations, Inuit and Métis Nation were removed from their communities and given a substandard European education where many were subject to physical, psychological, and sexual abuse and forcefully disallowed to learn or speak their own languages, practice their cultural traditions, or have their unique identities (see Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2015). Thousands of these children were killed through abuse and neglect and through this process, the Indigenous people under colonial rule suffered significant intergenerational trauma (Burrage, Momper and Gone 2022).

Despite this structured and systematic attempt to destroy the cultural identity of the Indigenous peoples of Canada, there was constant resistance and community resilience (e.g., McGuire 2010). By the late 1960s, a complex process of legal battles began between the Canadian government and Indigenous communities over their

rights to their land, their cultural identities and their ways of being. This decolonizing process represented a political and social shift that included a retelling of the cultural narratives surrounding the colonizer and the colonized. This was an engagement with and against the colonizing powers' discourses and the social hierarchies that controlled the dominant ideologies of the society (Gilbert and Tompkins 1996). Through a number of mechanisms and various forms of media, the Indigenous communities used their own voices to produce a cultural discourse that represents how they wish to be seen and understood, opposing the binary power relations and representations they were being subjugated under within the historical colonist and the colonized framework (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 2000).

I acknowledge my position within the Canadian society as a person of white privilege. Spending my early childhood in Southern Alberta, I witnessed the significant damage caused by colonialism to the Indigenous communities in the area. I saw the racism and discrimination firsthand, and it was reinforced within the school system. On field trips to places like Fort McCleod, we were taught the colonial narrative that the Indigenous community was savage and uncivilized, and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police brought order to the prairies. Growing up at that time and in that place, I did not see or experience any counter narrative. Moving to Vancouver Island as a teenager, I received a different exposure to Indigenous culture. This shift was first mediated through an encounter with the Indigenous art and crafts of the Haida community that traditionally occupied that area. Then through the school system and fieldtrips, which included guest teaching from Indigenous artists and elders, I was exposed to the decolonizing process. I heard their stories and saw their culture the way they chose to represent it. Although I was not part of their community, they shared with me their histories and I had a greater understanding of the oppression

and struggle they faced. This process was a mediated experience and the shift represented a change in authorship.

In our digital society, new forms of media are providing unique opportunities for this decolonial process to occur (Bedeley et. al. 2019). For example, social media platforms are used to advance counter narratives, alternative politics, and diverse networks of dissenting voices (Jackson et al. 2020). As videogames developed and became popular, they too became a platform for communicating counter narratives and a space where people could experience the decolonizing process (e.g., Poirier-Poulin 2020).

**Gamevironments as Decolonizing Space**

Within the expanded scope of the gameenvironments lens, this decolonizing process becomes significant when video games are seen as more than just the games people play, but rather as an essential part of social life and social shaping in a deeply gametized society (Radde-Antweiler 2024). As outlined earlier, the gaming industry has a checkered history by presenting traditional colonial narratives and misrepresentations of the Indigenous people and cultures within the games they make. This misrepresentation supports the master narrative that colonizing powers have presented for centuries. As Santo Aveiro-Ojeda (cited in Larson 2020) argues in Zeb Larson’s “Chasing the Anti-colonial Video Game”:

“Indigenous representation is severely lacking, and if there is Indigenous representation in a game, it often falls back to what settlers think an Indigenous person is (magical, antiquated, etc). This again goes in hand with how settlers think of Indigenous peoples outside games—often forgotten or thought about in the past tense.” (Aveiro-Ojeda cited in Larson 2020)

One of the key aspects of decolonization is the role of media to counter the negative stereotypes and prejudices presented within society; in effect, utilizing the same tools for a different outcome (e.g., Knopf 2008). "Video games, as a medium of expression and interaction, have the potential to act as tools for decolonization through their design and development, providing a platform for the deployment of decolonial ideas and concepts" (Zambrano 2023).

Although Indigenous voices are significantly underrepresented in the gaming industry, there are changes occurring that are altering this representation and utilizing the gameenvironment as a transformative form of media that may have a positive impact on the Indigenous communities and how others in the society see and interact with them. As Nacher and Jankowski(2021, 124) have argued, and others have recognized, "American First Nations have also recently been more vocal in the gaming industry and digital culture at large, which can be seen as inscribed within the larger processes of decolonization, based on 'reclaiming the territory,' on par with other decolonizing strategies and gestures." Within the gaming environment, this decolonization process requires a significant shift that includes Indigenous communities engaging with the gaming industry and having control over the narratives that are being used to represent them. This is a complex and ongoing process that is developing as society changes based upon other decolonizing transformations. In this way, "decolonization should be envisioned within the larger collaborative process of game development and the studio system with the aim of including Indigenous narratives and game mechanics that can reach larger audiences" (Webb 2020).

This process of transforming the gameenvironment from one that supports the colonizer's story and legacy to one that challenges it and presents an alternative

narrative is a complex undertaking that demonstrates the interconnectedness between videogaming and society. Those wishing to change this narrative face a struggle against an entire cultural system that has marginalized, silenced, and exploited them for centuries. Despite the incredible challenge, as society has shifted, so has the gaming industry and there are transformations underway. These changes are occurring by having more Indigenous working within the gaming industry, although they are still significantly underrepresented in the field (IGDA 2021); by changing game mechanics and the semantic values within games (Murthy 2019); through consultation with game designers concerning Indigenous representation (e.g., *Assassin's Creed III* (2012)); and, by developing games, either in partnership with gaming companies or independently (e.g., Indigenous Game Devs n.d.).

Each of these developments represents transformations within the culture and the gaming industry, and the two cannot be separated. These changes impact more than 152 just the technical aspect of the game and those that play the games but are intertwined with a much larger group of actants (Bettocchi, Klimick and Perani 2020). As Radde-Antweiler (2024, 21-22) notes in the developed gameenvironment framework, "the technical environment is part of the cultural environments of video games and gaming, or to be more precise, of gaming related media, gaming related communicative practices and gaming related actors. Media and actors form together the actants and are carriers and triggers of communicative practices." This actant approach is essential in evaluating and assessing the larger connection between games and society to determine the significant impact they may actually be having upon not just the players of the game, but also the society itself.

# Gamevironments Case Study: *Never Alone (Kisima Innitchuna)* as a Watershed Moment

To demonstrate this interconnectedness and the actant approach, I will briefly focus on the case study of the multiple award-winning, commercially and culturally successful video game *Never Alone (Kisima Innitchuna)* (2014) developed in partnership between the Iñupiat community and Upper One Games and published by E-Line Media. Released in 2014, the intent of developing the game was based upon the complex colonial challenges the Iñupiat people of Northern Alaska are facing that include social, economic, and environmental issues.

As a decolonizing opportunity, developing a video game was seen as a possible revenue stream and an opportunity for community members to become involved in the gaming industry (Martens 2014). The gaming industry is a billion-dollar business and as noted earlier in this article, Indigenous game designers are underrepresented in this industry. By developing a game, there was the potential for training youth for a new field of work and also for generating revenue for the Iñupiat community. Developing a video game was also seen as a way to revive and preserve the Iñupiat cultural traditions and stories and present them to the youth of the community (Bordenhorn and Ulturgasheva 2018). Amy Fredeen, the Lead Cultural Ambassador for the project shares, “Our people have passed down knowledge and wisdom through stories for thousands of years—almost all of this orally—and storytellers are incredibly respected members of society. But as our society modernizes it’s become harder to keep these traditions alive” (Fredeen cited in Parkin 2014). Through digital media, a video game platform was envisioned as a tool to become the contemporary equivalent of ancient storyteller and ritual expert (Lyons 2014). The creative director of *Never Alone* recognized that through this project they found a “depth of purpose

of game development that none of us thought was possible” (Veryovka and Vesce 2015).

Robert Cleveland’s (1980) work *Unipchaanich imagluktugmiut = Stories of the Black River People* was used as the framework for developing the game. In interviews between the author and Ishmael Angaluuk Hope, one of the key story tellers and game developers working on *Never Alone*, he explained to me the value of storytelling within the Iñupiat tradition and why he felt this particular work would transfer well into a video game. Ishmael has a deep understanding of the stories of the community and their value, he also has a deep appreciation of other forms of media used to tell counter narratives and the Indigenous experience, particularly graphic novels. However, the process of turning a respected story (originally from an oral tradition) into a video game was a new undertaking for the community and a significant challenge for everyone engaged in the process.

From a developmental perspective, the video game was created with a crafted in partnership process that allowed the Iñupiat community control over what was being represented within the game and how it would be shown. Through this partnership with Upper One Games and E-Line Media, boundaries concerning the beliefs, values, art, and mythology of the Iñupiat were strongly protected while at the same time there was a process of negotiation that allowed for representing the spirit of a people through a visual style that supported gameplay (Fredeen and Veryovka 2018). Ishmael Hope (Personal Interview, 17 September 2024) saw this experience as a form of “survivance” in that the process was a way for the Indigenous community to resist the ongoing pressures of settler-colonialism. To do this, the community and a group of almost 40 elders worked in partnership with the gaming company, allowing them significant control over the game’s visuals, the way the story was told, and even the

language that was used. Through this relationship, the game presents a well-executed ethnographic work representing the Iñupiat culture (Bledstein 2017). This process of game development was fundamentally about creating an engaging, dynamic environment where players were immersed within the Iñupiat worldview and cosmos, where the player could see what they see and be in the world the Iñupiat were in (Veryovka and Vesce 2015). This allowed players the opportunity to experience a decolonizing process where they could experience a perspective and way of being that would not have been part of their immediate reality (Mukherjee 2017).

Within the gaming experience, the player is challenged with an endless blizzard that requires a prolonged quest by the protagonist to restore balance to nature. As you progress within the game, you encounter several challenges that are both physical and spiritual. Through the game, it is made clear that within the Iñupiat worldview the real world and spirit world coexist in one place; there is no dichotomy or separation between the two. We are shown that spirit helpers are there for you, that you can earn a relationship with the spirit world, that you are never alone. The game includes issues that many people might perceive as religious, such as beliefs about the soul and afterlife, spirit guides and guardians, supernatural beasts and creatures, and the relationship between the real world and the spirit world. It also included fundamental issues for preserving their way of being in the face of colonialism, namely resilience, intergenerational exchange, and the acknowledgment of interdependence. However, within their representation, these elements are presented and engaged outside of our Western view of structured religious beliefs and practices. This view is a decolonized approach to the religion and spirituality of the Iñupiat people and a perspective that most non-Indigenous players would never have experienced before. It is also a decolonized approach to understanding the role of games within the culture as



important tools for teaching important things. And for the Iñupiat people, there is no dichotomy between what may be considered sacred or religious and playing a game and having fun while you learn them (Bledstein 2017).

Through this process, *Never Alone* shows players what the Iñupiat regard as ultimate and even sacred to the community without orienting them toward boundaries of insider/outsider, a religious tradition, or an us-versus-them mentality. As you move through the game you unlock cultural insights that further develop your immersion within the Iñupiat worldview (Bodenhorn and Ulturgasheva 2018). For example, you learn about Siġa, the weather. Yet, it is more than what the Western worldview would understand as the weather, as Siġa is the land, moon, sun, stars, the land, and the atmosphere. You are taught that Siġa “is very spiritual and we have a relationship with Siġa. Siġa has a soul in the same way we do as people, in the same way animals do” (E-Line Media 2016). However, in interviews with Ishmael Hope (2024), he made it clear that it was not enough to just tell people about Sila, they had to experience it in the game play itself. This was a complicated development process, but essential to the effectiveness of the game to be able to properly share the Iñupiat way experiencing and understanding Sila.

Throughout the game, *Never Alone* critiques colonial environmental politics and presents Indigenous cultural protocols that have been embedded in the games’ narrative, and through this we are given alternative, non-colonial ways of seeing our relationship between the non-human and the human (Miner 2022).

“It’s one way of knowing that you’re connected to everything. We’ve always had this spirituality of everything around us. It’s the interaction you have with the air you breathe, the ocean that you gather your resources from, the rivers from

which you gather fish, the tundra from which you pick berries, the animals that give themselves. It's all of that." (E-Line Media 2016)

Through the creation of this video game, we are being brought into a significant but limited encounter with the Iñupiat tradition that allows for sharing in an engaging and interactive digital space with what they feel is most important to communicate and present about their tradition. It is a significant decolonizing event.

## Gamevironments Beyond Play

Examining the media forms and actants beyond the game itself shows the wider impact *Never Alone* has on the culture of society. There are social media posts, fan-based reviews, YouTube videos, walkthroughs, and live streams of gameplay that engage with game players and designers. Alongside this material are literally hundreds of news articles and professional game reviews that have exposed non-players to the concepts within the game and the game development process. This game has also engaged Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars and is representative of a shift towards developing decolonized methodologies within academia (Smith 2021). The game has also been used in museums, high schools, and universities to provide a diverse experience of the Iñupiat culture and heritage and act as tools for knowledge dissemination and communication (Mol et. al. 2017). Game studios also saw the success of this particular game with over three million downloads and numerous gaming awards and accolades, opening up other opportunities for Indigenous game development.

People that encounter this video game either through playing it or other forms of media associated with it are shown how the Iñupiat want to be seen. Their worldview

and their story are presented in such a way as to engage people’s understanding of their community and way of life. Through this experience, people are afforded a sense of connection beyond the colonial boundaries that exist with the society to keep the Iñupiat beliefs and identity distant and unknown, silenced and marginalized or misrepresented. Through this process, we have an opportunity for cultural contact that is not based upon traditional colonial power structures and perspectives. Ishmael Hope stated, “I am hoping that this game will do its humble part to unlock centuries of oppression and colonization of Indigenous people. We need more positive images of ourselves, and we need more equal collaborations and opportunities such as the one this game provides” (Hope cited in Nielson 2015). He also noted:

“Though it would require more deep investigation than one video game to fully understand, it is personally satisfying to me that we were able to elevate and celebrate one of the world’s greatest storytellers ever. Pieces of the old-time nourishment of the qargi, the community house, remain. The joy of the feast of wisdom lingers, and this video game offers a tasty morsel, enough to know and to remember what we’ve been hungering for this whole time.” (E-Line Media 2016)

**Conclusion**

Video games and videogaming matter. In our deeply gametized society, the games we play embody cultural values, supporting ideological positions, worldviews, and ways of being. As decolonization has emerged as a significant force within North America, gameenvironments have become a cultural space where colonialism can be contested and contradicted, where people can be socialized and shown how to see things another way. Through a holistic approach to researching the full gaming environment, one that includes the cultural context, the game developers, the game players, the various media formats used, and the human and non-human actants

associated with the game, the full cultural significance of this decolonial shift can begin to be evaluated beyond just the game itself.

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