What Went Right

gamasutra.com/view/news/236049/Postmortem_ELine_Media_and_Upper_One_Games_Never_Alone.php

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When you think about how a game first gets started — that moment where someone says "we should do THIS" — you probably don't think of a nonprofit organization helping the indigenous people of southcentral Alaska. In fact, you probably don't think "Alaska" at all. But that's where our story begins.

For the past 30 years, the Cook Inlet Tribal Council (CITC) has been a leading provider of social, educational, and employment services to Alaska Native people of the region. But in 2012, they resolved to do even more. CITC wanted to share Alaska Native culture with new audiences globally, and use the power of games to celebrate and extend cultures throughout the world. That led to Gloria O'Neill, the CEO of CITC, conducting an extensive search of possible development partners. During that process, she met Alan Gershenfeld, the co-founder and president of E-Line Media.

E-Line already had a long history of using games to educate, engage, and empower players — but they were also interested in creating more traditional consumer-focused products. To do this, they brought aboard industry stalwart Sean Vesce, whose long list of credits includes *MechWarrior II*, *Interstate '76*, and many of the *Tomb Raider* games. Sean assembled a leadership group of other AAA veterans who were also eager for a transition from the world of hardcore action games into uncharted territory — then filled out the studio with a mix of seasoned developers and eager young faces.

The development team in August 2014 — Not pictured: animator Adrian Sairin, engineer Chris Eng, artist Kayl Myers, QA tester Nick Huntington

Not everyone on the core development team was familiar with Unity. Few of us had any experience making a platformer, puzzle or otherwise. And there was no precedent for the kind of relationship we developed and cultivated with members of the Alaska Native community over the course of the two and a half years between that first Gloria-Alan meeting and the game's launch in November of 2014.

It wasn't easy — Alan actually tried to talk Gloria out of the idea at that meeting, due to the risky nature of the games industry — but somehow, E-Line and CITC pulled it off. With a very small team, we shipped *Never Alone* on three very different platforms simultaneously on launch day, fully localized into ten languages. We've been nominated in nearly every major video game award program. We're on over fifty "best of 2014" lists. And most importantly, we made something that the Alaska Native community is proud of — which is a success on a completely different axis than what you usually find in this business.

1. Inclusive Development

One of the key things we discovered early on is that we neither wanted nor would have been able to make *Never Alone* without intensive collaboration with the Alaska Native community. The responsibility to the community was more rewarding (and demanding) than any relationship with a publisher that any of us had experienced.

The collaboration started in July of 2012 with a spirited, multi-day roundtable discussion in Alaska. There were elders, youth, artists, storytellers, and historical advisors from the Iñupiaq, Tlingit, Yup'ik, Tagish communities present, along with representatives from CITC and E-Line Media. There were many goals on both sides, but the most important objective of what would become the *Never Alone* development team was to earn and sustain the trust of the Alaska Native community by articulating our role as students, not borrowers.

From there, the team spent weeks meeting with Ishmael Hope, an Alaska Native storyteller. His involvement would continue throughout the project, and he was invaluable as its writer and most frequent creative collaborator. Ishmael shared hundreds of Alaska Native stories passed down through generations — many of which would make fantastic games! We eventually narrowed down the candidates for adaptation to a handful, and then chose Kunuuksaayuka as the framework for the game.

We could have stopped there. And indeed, one of the reasons we wanted to work so hard to establish trust and be careful stewards of Alaska Native culture is the several groups in the past who didn't even get that far. But choosing the story wasn't enough. As we learned through Ishmael, Robert Nasruk Cleveland was one of the greatest indigenous storytellers ever, and was acknowledged by the elders of his time for his immense knowledge. So once we picked Kunuuksaayuka as told by Nasruk, we met with Minnie Grey, his daughter and oldest living descendant — and received permission to adapt that version for *Never Alone*.

Minnie Aliitchak Gray (daughter of Robert Nasruk Cleveland) and Creative Director Sean Vesce

The process wasn't easy. The team relished the challenge of making a game based on a culture different from our own — and we all grew over the course of its development. We learned to rethink how we thought of stories. We learned how to let go of internalized stereotypes, both seemingly innocuous and otherwise.

It was also important for everyone to see the world through each other's eyes. Members of the core development team made frequent visits to northern Alaska to meet with people from all over the Iñupiaq community, from elders to preschoolers. And we were lucky enough to be visited in Seattle by Alaska Native elders and storytellers, some of whom appear in the Cultural Insights we feature in the game. I can personally vouch for James Nageak and his wife Anna — in addition to providing wisdom from multiple generations and James starring as *Never Alone*'s Iñupiaq narrator, the two of them are amazing dinner companions.

2. Atmosphere

We were continually surprised over the course of *Never Alone*'s development by how...extreme the stories could be. These aren't G-rated tales with a plucky hero and a jaunty musical number at the end. A lot of them are short, some of them are brutal, and a few are downright shocking — like the story of the razor-toothed big-mouthed baby that chews through its entire family and then terrorizes the surrounding village.

The art of Alaska Native people is similarly striking, whether it's sculpture, paintings, or scrimshaw carvings on baleen. When it was time to create the visual style of *Never Alone*, we knew it would be a challenge to faithfully represent the unique nature of its source material. To solve that challenge, I enthusiastically recommend employing an Art Director who studied the culture of the indigenous people of the Arctic Circle in his youth.

Dima studied indigenous art and culture at the St. Petersburg Academy of Arts

Much of Dima Veryovka's early artwork was influenced by Inuit art and mythology, so it was a natural fit for him to create the look of *Never Alone* as a mix of the world of Alaska Native stories and the real world that the Iñupiat live in today. The wall next to his desk is a collage of the familiar, the exotic, and the indescribable.

Dima created the first *Never Alone* concepts using a lot of pastels and desaturated colors, which helped to create the ethereal, dreamlike visuals that appear in the final game. At the same time, the ghostly green Aurora lights, the crystal blue glow of the ice, and orange Arctic sunsets added some much-needed saturation to the visual style — and helped to create contrast and punctuation throughout the experience. The look of the game evolved a lot over time as Dima was able to make more frequent trips to different parts of Alaska to experience the art of the Iñupiaq firsthand.

Subtle vignetting and heavy use of depth-of-field help to draw you into the Arctic winter, and the ever-present snow and howling winds keep you there. The blizzard was nearly as much of a character in *Never Alone* as Nuna and Fox — the story of Kunuuksaayuka is all about the endless blizzard that threatens the survival of Nuna's world.

Dima's visits to Alaska helped refine the game's award-nominated art style

Of course, the audio was just as important to get right. After all, it's hard to believe that the Arctic winds are howling without it. Our partners at Impossible Acoustic were up to the challenge, though — they hiked up icy mountains, raided snowy parking lots, and even visited the mystical land of Home Depot to buy a bunch of wood that they gleefully destroyed to provide the sounds behind the collapsing structures in *Never Alone*'s coastal village chapter. Next time, we'll bring Jamie and Brendan into the process even earlier to make the audio an even bigger part of the experience.

3. Local Co-Op and Iñupiaq Values

There are many values that members of the Iñupiaq community related to us as being core to who they are as a people. Values like subsistence, practicality, and a surprising amount of humor. But the three that we chose to focus on for *Never Alone* were resilience, intergenerational exchange, and interdependence.

It's easy to see how resilience features in our design of the game. Life in the Arctic is harsh even without an endless, debilitating, supernatural blizzard to deal with, so Nuna and Fox have to be resilient to survive. It's not just physical resilience, either — *Never Alone* starts out simple and quiet, but by the time Nuna reaches the end of her journey, players have to show the same resilience as their avatar.

One other thing that went right: we made an underwater level that no one hated

We tried to make the other two values reveal themselves in the game, too. Nuna must perform an act of kindness and respect for an elder in order to receive two keys to her quest: the bola she must keep safe from the man who destroyed her village, and the wisdom of the elder who rewards her. And interdependence plays a huge part in the narrative, as well: Nuna and Fox need to depend on each other to find the source of the blizzard, but they also need to live in harmony with the land around them.

Interdependence and intergenerational exchange also found their way to the experience of playing the game. We knew early in development that online co-op was something that other games had featured, but it never felt like the right fit for us. We worked hard to create a real sense of immersion in the world while you're playing the game, and knew it would be tough to maintain that if you had to talk through solving puzzles over a headset. Plus, making online co-op work in a game that requires such specific timing would have significantly affected our schedule.

So we focused on local co-op instead. That enabled us to reinforce the theme of interdependence through playing side-by-side with another person, something we saw firsthand a lot at trade shows and other public events. We also frequently got to see intergenerational exchange in person when parents would play with their kids. Nuna and Fox play very differently, so it was great to see people with different skill levels working together.

There aren't many puzzle platformers that feature local co-op, and it's understandable why: it was a big challenge to make the experience fun for both single-player and multiplayer playthroughs. But local co-op was a big success for us — especially compared to one of the things that Went Wrong.

What Went Wrong?

4. Cultural Insights

It would have been easier for us to just make a game and be done with it — but we have bigger ambitions than making a good puzzle platformer set in the Arctic. We're hoping that *Never Alone* will help to kickstart a whole new genre of World Games. That's not an easy thing to do, or a quick one; it's going to take place over multiple projects over multiple years.

Never Alone is version 1.0 of that idea. If we'd had more time on the project and gone about its development a different way, we would have more tightly integrated the previously mentioned themes of resilience, intergenerational exchange, and interdependence into the play experience. But we knew that we had a lot of themes, values and history that we wanted to showcase in the game — and the best way to do that given our development constraints was to do it in video form.

With apologies to Twisted Pixel, real-world video doesn't have the strongest track record in games over the last few decades. So when we decided to include video interviews with members of the Iñupiaq community as collectibles in *Never Alone*, there were quite a few skeptics on the team. But as is often the case, working within constraints led to a stronger experience. Once we embraced the idea of presenting the faces and voices of the real people who are a part of the Iñupiaq community, our Cultural Insights became something that received more critical praise than anything else in the game.

Chris, Zeek, Alex, Adam, and Daniel from Shep Films made the Cultural Insights into something magical

We worked with such a great partner in Shep Films who, incidentally, were also initially skeptical of the concept until their trips to Alaska. They captured over 40 hours of interview footage, cut it together with striking environmental shots, and weaved in plenty of other candid moments of the Iñupiaq people in their homes and workplaces. On paper, that might sound pretty dry. But it was really important to us to hear the real voices of the Inupiaq — as Amy Fredeen says in one of the Cultural Insights, they're "a living people, a living culture".

5. Awareness

As indie developers on PC and especially mobile can attest, it can be difficult for a first-time developer (or even a developer who's been around for a while) to get noticed. For every *Gone Home* and *Antichamber* that breaks through into widespread awareness, there are literally thousands of other games that are only known about by the developer's friends and family. So we knew we had an uphill climb when it came to getting attention.

The unique story of *Never Alone*'s genesis and early development was enough for Polygon to take notice of us. Colin Campbell become one of our earliest advocates, writing a huge (both in size and importance) article in August of 2013 about "The First Native American Games Company". Joystiq followed in March with more details. But our first trailer is what really burst the dam. It featured a lot of gameplay footage (a lot of which was either different or gone by the time we shipped), but just as important was the narration from Iñupiaq elder Ron Brower. That was our key differentiator. After that, we attended pretty much every trade show in the world from then until launch, across five continents.

We were busy

pretty much nonstop at PAX 2014; next time we'll make sure the banner stays straight

I'm not sure whether it was our constant trade show presence or our tireless PR outreach, but at some point our broad awareness in the big enthusiast sites become massive awareness in the mainstream, too. Suddenly, I was no longer sharing Kotaku articles on my Facebook page, but features from The New Yorker and NPR. As of February 2015, *Never Alone* has been reviewed, debated, and discussed in over 700 magazines, blogs, and other sites. We've been featured by a lot of big-name YouTubers and Twitch streamers. We just discovered a flat-out gorgeous 120-page German scholarly analysis of the characters in *Never Alone* as personality archetypes. And we were featured on Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?
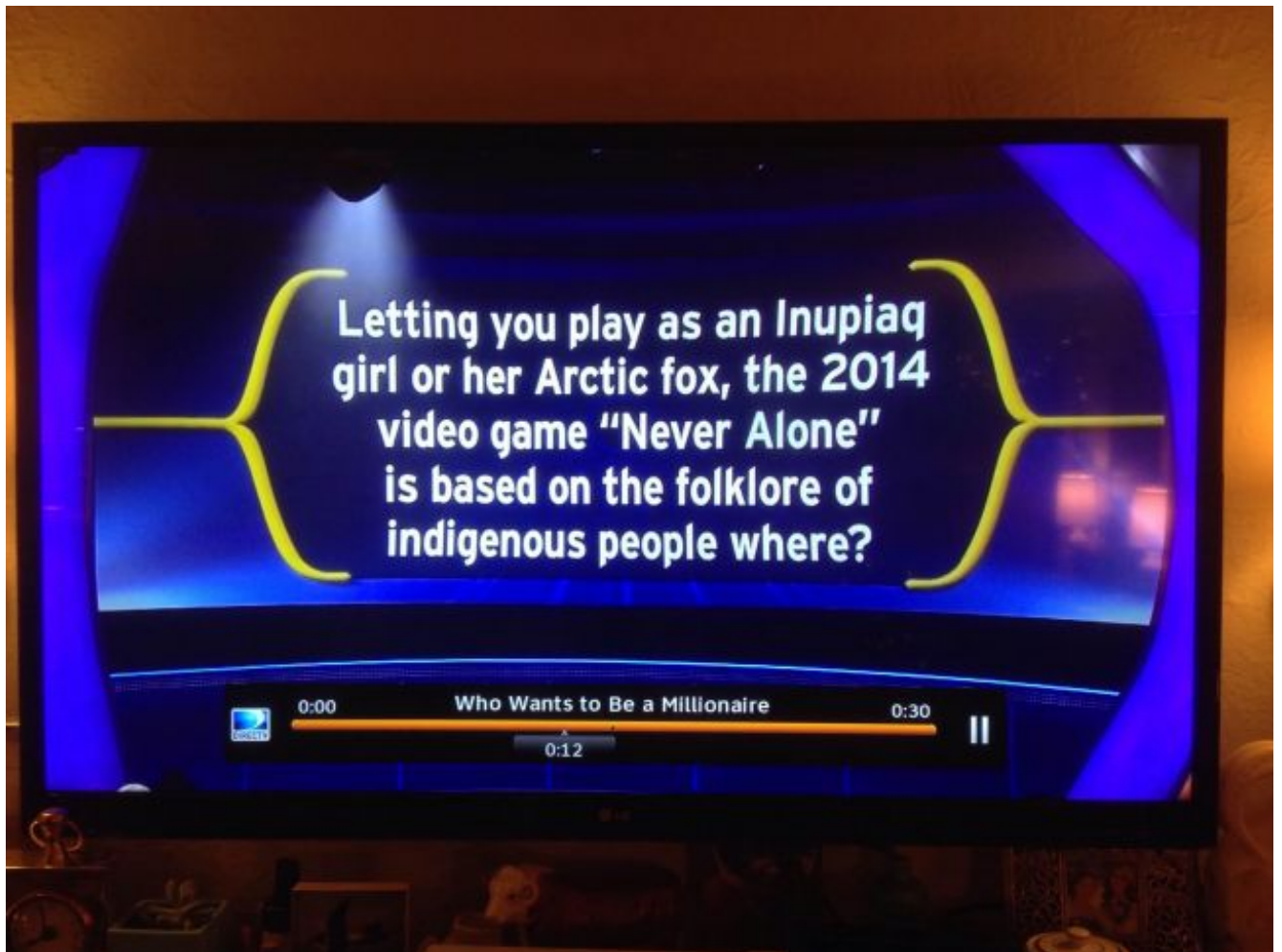
Hearing Terry Crews say "Iñupiaq" was one of many unique things about this project

It's been quite a ride.

1. We Should Have Done a Closed Beta

We still think of ourselves as "indie" here at E-Line, but we cheat in a few ways. At our peak, we had four QA guys, a full-time social media guy, and other things you wouldn't expect to see at an indie studio. We got a lot of feedback by bringing in friends, family, and other playtesters to play the game along the way. With all those people playing *Never Alone* all the time, we thought we had a pretty good handle on the game's issues.

So on launch day, we were completely blindsided by some of the things we read in reviews and saw on Twitch streams.

By default, the companion AI always tries to get to the player-controlled character. The designers then set up triggers to help them reach each other if there are obstacles in the way. Jump triggers to get across gaps, ledge triggers to reach new heights, and so on. Midway through the project, we added what we called "beacon triggers" so that when companion AI reached a position, it would wait there until conditions were met. My goal was to make it so you never noticed the AI, which meant that it was doing its job.

We knew handling it this way would require a lot of playtesting to make sure it was rock solid, so we did multiple playthroughs of the game from multiple people in the studio to make sure that they were behaving as expected. We found issues with the system and fixed them. We found triggers that weren't set up properly and updated them. And then we did a complete playthrough again and fixed even more issues. By the time we launched, we were confident that we'd nailed it. So it was devastating to see how wrong we were. Nearly every review mentioned "the AI" as a negative — in some cases, it was the ONLY negative thing mentioned.

Another problem came when it was time to distribute review copies of the game to the European press. At the

time, we were still working on the 1.01 patch that fixed some of the big issues we discovered after submission but before release. We had to choose between waiting to distribute the keys until the patch was live, or getting them out early to ensure more reviews on launch day and hope that the patch was live in time. The decision was made to go with the second option, but the patch took longer than expected to propagate — which meant most press outlets who reviewed the game early on PS4 did not have a great experience.

There were other nasty things that plagued us after launch, like a common PC-only crash on specific integrated graphics chipsets that slipped through compatibility testing. The difficulty level in the game spikes more significantly than we intended towards the end. But nothing was as big or as preventable (in retrospect) as the "AI" issue. We decided early on that we weren't going to do an Early Access phase of the game, as it doesn't seem like a good fit for a puzzle platformer — but performing some kind of closed beta for as many people as possible will identify issues like this in the future.

We also want to just get the community involved earlier in general — and now that we've shipped our first title, that will be easier for our next project. But it's absolutely critical to get fresh eyes on the game and fresh hands on the controller. Or on the keyboard and mouse if you must.

2. Making A Game Worthy Of Its Influences Took Longer Than Expected

If you read the original pitch for *Never Alone*, it might look familiar: a game focused on sharing Alaska Native culture and values, starring a girl and her animal companion, experienced as a relatively simple puzzle platformer. Unfortunately, the two years between that pitch and our launch saw us do a lot of... exploration in the woods before we returned to the main path.

We were charting new territory with making World Games, and that meant taking a long time to explore the kind of game we wanted to make. The goal was always to create a hand-crafted experience that evoked the world of the Arctic, and feature a strong narrative along the way that was worthy of the stories that influenced us. This took the form of a straightforward platformer with Iñupiaq narration that was light on puzzles, even in early prototypes. Which was great!

Except then we started to worry about the limited replay value of such a game, and how expensive it is to make a game where you move from left to right without stopping much. Plus, while the game was taking shape as a beautiful adventure that was evocative of northern Alaska's harsh climate, it didn't feel like Nuna was a part of a community.

So we shifted focus and started to explore some more systemic gameplay ideas — REALLY explore them. For an upcoming milestone, we spent many weeks building a big, nonlinear village environment that featured multiple questgivers. We added the ability to lift small objects and move them around. And most notoriously, we added a "catch fish as they jump out of the water to get enough food for the village for dinner" minigame. Even though it was in service of being stewards of an important culture, that milestone was what we now refer to as "The Dark Ages".

Concept art like this was inspired by traditional Alaska Native sculpture, carvings, and paintings

Collectively, everyone involved with the project realized that we were in the weeds. And while ordinary publishers would have likely pulled the plug on the project, CITC (and particularly Gloria O'Neill) believed in us — and said so to the team. We went back to basics and returned to the roots of the project, until it started to look remarkably like what was in those original documents. Before we got there, though, a lot of people spent a lot of time on a lot of concepts that were either barely used or cut entirely.

A proper pre-production and concepting phase (or, ideally, one of each) may not seem sexy, but without it you're setting yourself up for failure. Just as important is staying focused on what you wanted to build in the first place. For our next project, we're figuring out the core gameplay early on via an extensive greybox / prototype phase and iterating on that, instead of diving deep into untested concepts and not coming up for air.

Postmortem: E-Line Media and Upper One Games' Never Alone

3. We Bit Off More Than We Could Chew

Like I mentioned earlier, we were a bit bigger than a traditional indie studio. At our largest, we had 26 people in our office. We knew that it was going to be tough to launch on three platforms in ten languages, but we figured being digital-only and having institutional experience with the console certification process would help make things a little easier.

For the most part, we were right. It was definitely challenging to get *Never Alone* running on Xbox One, PlayStation 4, and Steam — but our engineering team, QA team, and producers did a great job keeping all the plates spinning. The problem came when we tried to do even more.

Once the game was ready to put in the hands of the public, we did so at every opportunity. We went to big shows like E3, GDC, EGX, Gamescom, PAX Prime, Tokyo Game Show, and PAX Australia. We went to small shows like the Youth & Elders Conference. We submitted builds for every festival we could find.

The interest all over the world was great for exposure, but every trade show meant someone from the team was out of the office. Every build meant time that we had to borrow from elsewhere in the schedule.

As we

learned from Fannie Kuutuuq Akpik, killing a mother polar bear is seriously frowned upon

We did adjust the schedule to compensate, but we didn't pay back all of the time we borrowed — and adjusting our timeline meant that we moved the release date right into the eye of the hurricane. Next time, we'll pick the highest value trade shows to attend and focus on those. And if we do end up attending as many as we did to promote *Never Alone*, we'll definitely keep the number of new builds to a minimum.

We're glad that we released the game on all three platforms. But if we had to do it over again, we would have picked a single platform for launch and then released versions on other platforms later. Instead, we did both — the Mac version of *Never Alone* is coming in the next few weeks, and it will appear on other platforms in 2015.

4. We Acquired Console Development Kits Very, Very Late

At the start of the project, our goal was to release *Never Alone* on Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, and Steam. The team had significant experience developing for those platforms, and the eighth generation of consoles was still almost two years away. Also, for a puzzle platformer like us, our market was likely to be found not in the early adopters of the new consoles, but in the tens of millions of Xboxes 360 and PlayStations 3 already in the world.

But over the course of development, we realized that to make the game we wanted to make — and to make the game that was faithful to the culture we were representing — we needed to switch to targeting the Xbox One and PlayStation 4. That, and the target audience for the game subtly shifted over time from "fans of atmospheric puzzle platformers" to "people who enjoy video games, or maybe would like to try one if the right candidate presented itself". So we made the call to switch with less than a year before launch, but there was still enough time (barely) to make the transition.

This

image was created a few days before launch and is one of our Steam Trading Cards.

Unfortunately, we didn't get the dev kits for another three months — a few weeks before it was scheduled to be playable by the public in Microsoft's booth at E3. We were able to make it work, but that trend continued until launch in November. We never stopped having to scramble to get the console versions caught up to the current state of the PC build.

On future projects, we need to make a decision on our launch platform(s) as early as possible, and then start acquiring dev kits before everyone has even hung up the phone. We also need to build content with an eye towards performance from the beginning, instead of leaving it until the last thing before going gold — which is only possible for the development team if you lock down the design and target platform as early as possible, and stick to it.

5. We Released on the Most Crowded Day of the Year

The executive team at E-Line headquarters and the leadership team at E-Line Seattle have over a hundred

years of collective experience with developing big-budget games and releasing them onto physical store shelves. That knowledge proved invaluable over the course of *Never Alone*'s development, from trade show negotiations to marketing to rapid schedule adjustment. But very few of us had significant experience with releasing digital-only games.

After a few of those schedule adjustments, we locked down the release date...on November 4. No problem, we thought — yes, we're coming out on the same day as *Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare*, but we'll be the plucky yet beloved indie film that releases on the same day as the summer blockbuster. Then we decided to push the date by two weeks to get some much-needed extra polish time. That moved us to November 18.

Here's a partial list of the titles that were released that day:

- *Dragon Age: Inquisition*

- *WWE 2K15*

- *Far Cry 4*

- *Grand Theft Auto V (PC)*

- *LittleBigPlanet 3*

- *Escape Dead Island*

Oh, and less than a week later, Nintendo released new games in the obscure *Super Smash Bros*. and *Pokémon* series.

So yes, releasing on the same day as a summer blockbuster is a viable strategy...unless there are a dozen of them coming out, too. We still sold well on our first day, but there just wasn't enough oxygen for us alongside all the heavyweights. Our biggest days came later during the Steam Holiday Sale and promotions on the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One.

There is plenty of precedent for a release date in a different time of year. In fact, most of our peers in the indie space have already figured that out: *Shovel Knight* and *Rogue Legacy* released in June, *Limbo* and *Bastion* in July, *Brothers* and *Papers, Please* in August, *Journey* in March, *Fez* in April, *Transistor* in May, and so on. We'll likely follow their lead with whatever comes next.

Conclusion

Never Alone started simply as a new way to share a culture with modern audiences, and grew into a phenomenon that took everyone by surprise — including everyone involved with its development. In some ways, we got the hard stuff right: we ensured that the game was truly inclusively developed with the Alaska Native community. We showed that the values of resilience, interdependence, and intergenerational exchange could be fun. And we used the power of games to share, celebrate, and extend Iñupiaq culture.

Iñupiat elder Ron Brower, Art Director Dima Veryovka & Lead Game Designer Grant Roberts during a play session

The game is certainly not perfect, and no one feels that more keenly than the team that put years of their lives into its development. But we're still proud of what we made — and we'll point to it for the rest of our lives as one of the best experiences in our careers. Now that we've established the studio and the inclusive development process, we're looking forward to doing it even better next time. There's a huge hunger for games like *Never Alone* in the world, and we can't wait to make what's next. Together.

Data Box

- **Developer:** E-Line Media / Upper One Games
- **Publisher:** E-Line Media / Upper One Games
- **Release Date:** November 18, 2014
- **Platforms:** PC (Steam), Xbox One, PlayStation 4
- **Number of Developers:** At our peak, we had 19 full-time and 5 contract developers
- **Length of Development:** 31 months between the first meeting in February 2012 and the November 2014 launch (first prototype achieved in September 2012)
- **Lines of Code:** 306,514 across 1,509 source files
- **Development Tools:** Unity (3.5, 4.x, 4.3.x), Microsoft Visual Studio (2010, 2012), Maya (2013, 2015), Photoshop, ZBrush, 3DCoat, NGUI, Cause & Effect (internal scripting tool), SceneDB (internal collaboration tool), lots and lots of Google Docs
- **Team-high Break Shot score:** 198,000,000 (Tim Tournay)