

Reconstructing Arctic as Gamescape: Historical Authenticity in Arctico and Never Alone

Video games, historical authenticity, arctic, gamescape, interactive media

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This article investigates two video games, Arctico (2022) and Never Alone (2014), to examine their roles in constructing a spatial-temporal landscape imbued with historical authenticity. This article uses non-representational theories to argue that video games immerse players in a historically rich experience, blending emotional and practical elements. This approach emphasizes the interplay between representational elements – such as mythology, history, culture, and rhetoric – and non-representational elements like memory, experience, and emotion. This study sees video games as a conduit for historical representation, offering a unique interpretation of the Arctic’s portrayal and seeking to understand how affective experiences within the gamescape contribute to a player’s sense of engagement. This comparative analysis reveals that video games, through their interactive medium, offer alternative narratives and understandings of historical authenticity.

Introduction

In the rapidly evolving field of digital humanities, video games have emerged as a powerful medium for storytelling and historical representation. The immersive and interactive nature of video games opens up new avenues for exploring and understanding history. This is also relevant in the context of the Arctic, a region that has been the subject of various narratives, often shaped by colonial and cultural discourses. For centuries, the Arctic has served as a source of inspiration for researchers, explorers, and travelers (Hylland Eriksen, Valkonen & Valkonen 2018), being imagined as a remote, exotic, or even hostile natural region. Unlike most regions in the south, the ice-covered waters, permafrost, and extreme cold temperatures make the Arctic difficult to access and navigate. The inaccessibility of the Arctic and its harsh conditions have historically contributed to its mystique and the perception of the region as the final frontier for human exploration and exploitation (Bravo & Sörlin 2002; Steinberg, Tasch & Gerhardt 2018). This Western-centric historical narrative is reflected to varying degrees in literature and different forms of art, including video games. Compared to other media, video games possess certain media-specific characteristics. While these games incorporate elements from actual historical events and contexts, they often adapt and interpret these elements creatively to enhance engagement and narrative depth. Due to the interactivity of video games, players are not just reading about history; they are experiencing history, which includes emotional and practical participation. However, it is important to note that these representations are shaped by the developers' choices and the interactive nature of the medium, which may influence how history is perceived and understood by players.

Within these games, what exactly constitutes the "history" experienced and accepted by players, and how is it shaped and conveyed within the game? As a form of entertainment media, balancing interactivity, narrative, and immersion often makes it challenging for games to achieve a high level of historical accuracy. Therefore, this article substitutes the broader concept of "history" with "historical authenticity", discussing how games generate a sense of authenticity as subjectively experienced by players. On this foundation, inspired by non-representational theories, I contend that the spatial-temporal landscape in games is not merely a conceptual space or visual object but also an emotional and practical space. It is through this immersive interaction that games transcend traditional storytelling, offering players a more dynamic and personal way to engage

with historical themes. This article discusses how these elements collaboratively work to construct historical authenticity.



Image 1. Official posters of *Arctico* (2022) and *Never Alone* (2014).

This article conducts a comparative study of two video games, both theme on the Arctic, *Arctico* (2022) and *Never Alone* (2014), which serve as case studies for analyzing how interactive digital media reconstruct and interpret the Arctic's spatial-temporal landscape. By focusing on these games, I seek to uncover how video games can offer alternative perspectives on historical authenticity through the reconstruction of gamescape, emphasizing the role of in-game practice and experience in shaping our understanding of the past. The exploration of both games is guided by two principal questions: How do *Never Alone* and *Arctico* utilize gameplay mechanics and narrative strategies to construct their unique interpretations of Arctic historical authenticity? Moreover, in what ways do the affective experiences generated by the gamescape contribute to the player's sense of historical immersion, especially when considering the interplay between representational and non-representational aspects? To address these questions, the analysis will draw upon non-representational theories, including the discussions related to affect, emotion, and digital spatial practices, to better understand how these elements influence player engagement and the construction of historical authenticity within the gamescape.

In this study, I employed a mixed-methods approach to fit the theoretical framework of non-representational theories. The analysis incorporated both representational and non-

representational methodologies to capture the multifaceted nature of video game landscapes. Representational analysis concentrated on the visual, narrative, and cultural symbols embedded within the games, while non-representational analysis focused on examining players' affective experiences and interactions within the gamescape. The detailed non-representational methodology will be elaborated in the subsequent sections.

Historical Authenticity in Video Games

The study of the interplay between video games and historical representation is often based on the recognition that video games, as cultural artifacts, are not insular but are instead a composite of multiple media forms. They engage players through their rules and mechanisms which preconfigure and simulate interactions within historical settings and characters (Champion 2020; Šisler et al. 2022). Such games embody a complex assembly of visual art, interactive narrative, and historical simulation that invites players to engage with and interpret the past in multifaceted ways. The games often borrow from existing historical and cultural narratives, weaving them into the gameplay and storylines. However, as digital games draw upon the techniques of various media forms, they inherit and potentially reshape the underlying assumptions about how history is constructed and understood.

When analyzing cultural and artistic works that represent history, “accuracy” and “authenticity” are often two important benchmarks (Mochocki 2021a; Saxton 2020; Šisler et al. 2022). Factors such as the lack of detailed historical records or imaginative interpretations to meet specific media or thematic needs affect the accuracy of historical portrayals. Since the past is inaccessible and can only be approached mainly through textual representations and material artifacts (Munslow 2006, 57), discussions on historical accuracy today often reflect a poststructuralist view that historical “facts” are constructed through language, discourse, and power relations (see Barthes 2010; Derrida 2016; Foucault 2009). Thus, historical research is to some extent subjective, composed of various “interpretative chains” (Munslow 2006, 62). From this perspective, Saxton (2020) defines authenticity as a subjective impression of accuracy, influenced by the context provided by the medium and its coherence with previous representations encountered by the reader. Kapell and Elliott argue that accuracy is about correctly reflecting historical facts, while authenticity is “about getting the experience and expectations of the past ‘right’” (Kapell & Elliott 2013, 361). Mochocki introduces the concepts of “accuracy-of-facts” and “authenticity-of-feelings” (2021b, 30), utilizing

cultural heritage theory to attempt a distinction between both concepts through the dichotomy of object and subject. All these ideas resonate with the poststructuralist way of thinking, suggesting that historical representation is not a precise reconstruction of history.

My research also agrees with these perspectives that historical authenticity is perceived subjectively. As for the study of video games, the immersive interactivity provided by gaming media not only intensifies this perception but also tends to compromise the accuracy of historical narratives. Building upon these discussions, I conceptualize historical authenticity within video games as a re-created narrative experience based on specific historical elements, aimed at fostering historical engagement among players and acknowledging the game's substantial reference to the players' understanding of the past, including thematic, emotional, and experiential alignment with the historical period being depicted, though it might not strictly adhere to factual accuracy. Herein, this study does not discuss "historical games" as defined by various genre classification criteria; instead, it focuses on the pervasive presence of historical elements in games, even those not explicitly involving concrete historical events, processes, or characters. The "historical elements" under discussion may include academically verified historical evidence, but also narratives or mythologies corresponding to popular imagination, artistic renditions of personal memory and experience, and so forth. I believe that the unverified historical elements, despite lacking the accuracy pursued in rigorous historical research, still serve as vital supplements to historical narratives as forms of marginal discourse. For instance, the depiction of tribal histories in games like *Never Alone*, where oral stories and folklore are integrated into the gameplay, provides a vital cultural narrative that enriches the player's engagement with Iñupiat culture.

Gamescape as Historical Context: Insights from Non-representational Theories

As previously mentioned, historical authenticity is often influenced by the context provided by the medium. Within the study of video games, the context primarily refers to the game's spatial-temporal landscape. In existing research related to this aspect, there is often mention of the game's visual effects technology, discussions on graphics resolution, and their restoration of historical scenes. For example, in the past decade, numerous studies on the *Assassin's Creed* series – a video game series with meticulously detailed historical features paired with fantasy elements –

have discussed how the game achieves a sense of immersion for the player through its use of images, animation, and sound along with other multimedia audio-visual effects (Gilbert 2017; Makai 2018; Mochocki 2021a; Spring 2015).

However, I believe that audiovisual production technology is not the decisive factor in creating game authenticity. As Gillian Rose (2019) emphasized, merely analyzing media as “representation” is insufficient to address the myriad changes brought about by digital technology. As for video games – a medium that combines traditional images and texts with bodily and material participation, diving into the technical details of representation does not fully explain the historical authenticity created from experiences and immersion. Therefore, my interest lies in exploring the interaction between narratives, spatial dynamics and the player’s agency within video games. As the essential foundation upon which historical authenticity is established, the spatial-temporal landscape in video games is often created through a combination of narrative, in-game environments, and the conceptual spaces constructing the virtual landscape. In both video games analyzed in this article, the passage of time is presented through changes in space. In other words, the transformation of space serves to propel the narrative. The space of history and the history of space are intertwined, collectively portrayed as a spatial-temporal landscape.

Shoshana Magnet (2006) refers to this changing landscape in video games as the “gamescape”, which underscores the influence of the gaming environment in molding a player’s comprehension of the game’s embedded spatial ideologies. This concept aims to illustrate that the virtual landscapes in games exist not merely for observation but are dynamic, requiring active player involvement in their construction. While introducing this concept, Magnet’s case analysis of the game *Tropico* (2001) adopts a traditional Marxist perspective, focusing solely on the dual discourses of capitalism and colonialism embedded within *Tropico*’s gamescape (Buhari 2024; Lammes 2010; Mukherjee 2018), without specifically addressing the player agency. Nevertheless, the notion of “gamescape” as a dynamic and practical space has inspired subsequent scholars to view the gamescape as a space layered with temporal and spatial practices (e.g., Martin 2013; Mukherjee 2022; Schubert 2018). In this study, I will also adopt this definition, which emphasizes both the representational and practical aspects in the spatial-temporal landscape of video games, instead of seeing gamescape as purely an ideological space. This definition resonates with non-representational theories in cultural geography and landscape studies, which view landscape representations as outcomes of subjective practices. Inspired by the recent advancements in non-

representational theories over the past decade, I conduct my case analysis using two approaches: representational analysis and analysis of player agency and affect.

Non-representational theories, also known as “more-than-representational theories”, is a style of thinking that emerged in the mid-1990s, focusing on understanding human life and social worlds beyond representations, emphasizing practices, experiences, emotions, and the mundane activities that constitute everyday life (Waterton 2018). These theories challenge traditional focuses on symbolic interpretation and instead highlight the dynamic, fluid, and embodied aspects of living in the world, and encourage scholars to consider how actions, sensations, and the material environment interact to produce meaning and knowledge. As the discipline evolves and the mediums of representation diversify, in the debates surrounding non-representational theories over the past decades, many scholars from cultural geography have engaged the importance of representational systems and their role in meaning production again, advocating for a broader understanding that landscapes require an “understanding of the co-constitution of visibility and materiality” (Rose & Tolia-Kelly 2016, 2). In other words, there is no irreducible difference or separation between representation and practices (Anderson 2019).

Emotions or affects are one of the main concerns of non-representational theories and are also increasingly considered one of the core elements of the gaming experience, often cited as a primary reason why people enjoy video games. (Lazzaro 2009; Madeira et al. 2013). Non-representational theories, with their emphasis on practices, experiences, and bodily engagement with space, offer valuable insights into how these emotional and affective dimensions contribute to the overall gaming experience. In non-representational theories, the definitions of “emotion” and “affect” are various and full of controversy (Anderson 2013; Dixon 2006; Thrift 2004). In general, emotion is tethered to psychological, cognitive, and representational frameworks, often associated with individual experiences and expressions, while affect, in contrast, transcends these boundaries, embodying a more elusive, transpersonal force that operates beyond conscious recognition and articulation, fundamentally shaping how life is lived and experienced across interconnected bodies. The discussions on emotion and affect have also been appropriated into game studies (e.g., Mukherjee 2022; Shaw & Warf 2009; Cremin 2016).

In this article, I do not strictly differentiate between emotions and affect, due to their intrinsic connection and mutual reinforcement within the context of video game studies. With the tremendous commercial value brought by video games, sensory and emotional experiences are

commodified, and the complexity of game spaces continues to evolve, offering a deeper sense of presence and immersion. Such environments not only cater to the generation of emotional responses but also to the nuanced experiences of affect that transcend the immediate, tangible aspects of gameplay to engage players on a pre-reflective and somatic level. Emotions and affects are two sides of the same coin (Low 2017; Ahmed 2014) – they are intertwined elements that, together, shape the player’s experience in a dynamic, interactive digital landscape. In the context of this analysis, distinguishing between emotion and affect stringently would overlook the complex interplay and mutual influence they exert within video games, where both elements are essential in creating a rich, immersive, and engaging player experience.

As Phillip Vannini (2015) emphasized, there is no unified or orthodox school of non-representational methodologies. Therefore, I needed to adapt my research methods to the specific subject of study. In this paper, I primarily employed participant observation, supplemented by close reading, to investigate the affective flows and interactive experiences between players and game mechanics. Participant observation here means that my data collection was largely based on my own experiences as a player. This approach allowed me to capture various emotional and mechanical design details that arise during interaction with the game environment. I immersed myself in each of the two games for over 20 hours, during which I used screenshots to document notable moments. This method was quicker than textual recording and did not disrupt my immersive experience. I then reflected on and reviewed these screenshots, recording my fragmented thoughts in a reflective journal. This means that my data collection mainly included gameplay sessions, where I documented my interactions, environmental changes, and emotional responses. Furthermore, to address the concern that my own subjective experience might not suffice as empirical data, the observations were supplemented by textual analysis of in-game narratives and player reviews. Through close reading, I analyzed a large number of player reviews for both games, combining them with my own experiences to present a comprehensive description of the gaming experience in this article. By integrating these methods, the study aims to provide a replicable framework for future researchers in game studies who wish to incorporate non-representational theories into their analyses.

***Arctico*: Spatial-temporal practices in an orientalist gamescape**

Arctico (2022) is an indie game developed by Claudio Norori and Antonio Vargas. It was initially conceived as a simple survival game called *Eternal Winter*, but it evolved into an exploration and base-building game with a focus on peaceful gameplay and discovery. Norori, originally from Nicaragua, began working on the game right after high school. Over the years, the project expanded significantly, with the developers dedicating extensive time to refining the game's mechanics and visual style. In the final version of *Arctico*, the stage is set on a remote, icy island named "Arctico". The game begins with a letter to the player, expressing condolences for the loss of Dr. García, the mentor of the player, and outlining a critical mission: Dr. García's work spanned various fields, notably clean energy production and agricultural research under extreme conditions. She made provisions for the player to inherit the mantle of her research, recover the documents and projects scattered across the island. The game does not have a conventional storyline. Instead, it focuses on the exploration of the Arctic and the history embedded in its icy expanses. Players learn about the pioneers who ventured into these territories long ago, unraveling the stories of their endeavors and the remnants that they left behind. In the gameplay, players navigate the terrain on foot, by dog sled, or canoe, discovering locations filled with the legacies of those who utilized the Arctic for research, resource extraction, or other purposes. The core of *Arctico* lies in expanding the base using resources gathered during expeditions.

At the beginning of gameplay, the player awakens in a research station equipped with advanced technology left by the mentor, which is her academic legacy. On Arctico island, the player can collect samples, analyze them using the station's equipment, and share results online for rewards and chips. These chips, combined with local resources, are utilized to construct solar panels, heating facilities, greenhouses, mining stations, and so forth. The building process is instantaneous, without depicting any visible labor involvement. All materials are meticulously tracked on a mobile device. The primary task is to expand the research base through strategic resource management, using mentor's blueprints.

I would like to suggest a reading of *Arctico*'s narrative from an orientalist perspective, which, as theorized by Edward Said (1980), depicts the context where a dominant culture projects its fantasies and simplifications onto a different region or people, thereby asserting a form of soft power and intellectual dominance. In the context of the Arctic, this could reflect in how Arctic

indigenous cultures are often overlooked or misrepresented in favor of more accessible narratives that serve non-indigenous interests. In contrast to *Never Alone* – a game discussed in the next subsection, which is rooted in an Iñupiaq perspective – *Arctico* employs distinctly different approaches to representing the Arctic landscape. In *Arctico*, while the island “Arctico” does not emphasize a direct real-world geographical correlation, elements such as the game’s title, local environment, and husky sleds suggest the appropriation of certain aspects of Arctic indigenous life. However, the game lacks any traces of indigenous inhabitants or other human presence, featuring only records left by outsiders – scientists, explorers, and so forth. This setup evokes the narrative of an idealized, untouched wilderness, implying that the Arctico island is an uninhabited or unused land awaiting to be discovered and utilized for scientific progress. The emphasis on exploration and resource management perpetuates a mindset that the Arctico island’s value is measured by its utility to the player. It mirrors the historical extraction and exploitation of the Arctic’s natural resources, disregarding the intrinsic value of the landscape and its indigenous cultures. The player’s engagement with the environment, primarily through the lens of utility and exploitation, enacts a digital form of orientalism, where the virtual Arctic becomes another territory to be dominated and utilized for personal or scientific gain.

The gamescape of *Arctico* creates a pristine, exotic space through selective historical representation and concealment. The gameplay is officially described as a “peaceful exploration” and Arctico island as a “silent paradise” with “beautiful horizons and serene moments at all times” (*Arctico*, 2022). However, the peaceful atmosphere is established on the masking of several aspects, for instance, has the Arctic ecosystem been effectively protected? Why can players, as conquerors of the land and wilderness explorers, infinitely expand a research station, which symbolizes a more developed civilization? Is the exploration based on economic control over indigenous peoples? The game failed to provide explanations for these questions but naturalizes some outcomes of related history – such as adopting indigenous transportation and lifestyles into the daily experiences of players as outsiders.

In *Arctico*’s gamescape, historical authenticity is articulated through various dimensions. Firstly, the game sets its background following the stereotype of the Arctic wilderness, an image not accurate but aligns with the public imagination, thus creating a subjective sense of authenticity (Image 1). Secondly, the game naturalizes the conquest of the Arctic and the exploitation of its resources through the benign and neutralized action of “scientific exploration”. Lastly, considering the in-

game narrative, *Arctico* unfolds towards both the past and the future – requiring players to actively search for texts to uncover the island’s “past”, while also allowing them to shape its history through spatial transformation. As Michel Foucault (1986, 22) noted, “space itself has a history in Western experience and it is not possible to disregard the fatal intersection of time with space.” This assertion is concretely manifested in *Arctico* – the practice within the gamescape is intrinsically a historical shaping activity that incorporates player agency.



Image 2. Gamescape in Arctico.

Numerous game studies scholars have acknowledged the intrinsic link between spatial representation and narrative progression to player agency (Chapman 2016; Mateas 2004). In expansive Role-Playing Games (RPGs), for instance, the autonomy afforded to players in choosing whether to engage with specific side quests directly influences the accessibility of certain game spaces and the potential for related narrative unfoldment. These decisions, encompassing both the selection and sequencing of game activities, invariably impact the narrative structure of the game. Consequently, the construction of the gamescape becomes a collaborative endeavor between game developers and players. Developers delineate the parameters and potentialities of the narrative space, whereas players, navigating within these predefined constraints, actively shape the narrative through their in-game decisions and actions.

In *Arctico*, the autonomy is provided to players in choosing how to engage with the environment, manage resources, and expand their base. After the tutorial session, the game immerses players in a world devoid of direct narrative guidance, allowing them the freedom to shape their own experiences. Players are left in the icy world, accompanied only by four huskies, with no narration, cutscenes, or any non-human character (NPC). This high degree of spatial freedom facilitates a diverse range of player-driven narratives, from exploration and resource expansion to simple leisure activities within the game's environment. Such "configurative-production", as termed by Chapman (2016) referring to the reformation of story and space within the game narrative, underscores the gamescape's evolution predominantly through player interaction, intricately linked to individual personalities, emotions, and preferences.

On Steam, the platform where *Arctico* was released, it is a controversial game according to the players' reviews. Comments such as "boring", "lacks gameplay" and "no goal and intrigue" represent the most common criticisms. However, this very absence of a strong purpose is precisely why another segment of players adores the game. Within its gameplay, the lack of directive information paradoxically creates a stronger sense of realism and enhances the articulation between the game and everyday life. Among the most favored positive reviews on Steam, it is noted:

If the idea of reading notes about the freedom of solitude and awareness of mortality doesn't sound like your thing, then do yourself a favor and skip this one. [...]
 What *Arctico* really is is an exploration of loneliness. [...] the notes are what I found the most appealing. They're short, many of them read more like poems rather than prose. They speak of broken dreams, of longing, of escape from society, of contentment, of change, of pride, of acceptance. (Vitlök 2023)

This comment elaborates on the affective experiences that *Arctico* offers. The absence of a primary objective in the game fosters a deeper sense of immersion, with the high degree of freedom in gameplay mechanics opening up numerous possibilities for engagement. Unlike many narrative-driven games with multiple endings, *Arctico*'s possibilities are not finite – it does not have a conventional "end" to the game, allowing endless exploration and building if desired. What truly attracts players to *Arctico* is not its storyline but the affective experiences within its specific virtual temporal-spatial context.

After the tutorial session in *Arctico*, players find themselves left alone in the expansive virtual landscape, a circumstance that notably sharpens their perception of temporal flow. The game's skyscape serves as a temporal marker, with its evolving luminosity from dawn to dusk and the subsequent appearance of the northern lights (Image 3). Initially, the sense of solitude may provoke the affectivity of apprehension or fear, which mirrors the Arctic's portrayal within global discourse as an untamed and pristine territory – an imagery that encapsulates the formidable challenges of the Arctic's dynamic seas, severe weather conditions, and hazardous environments that represent considerable survival threats to those unaccustomed to its extremes (Ahlness, 2019). As the game progresses, players will notice that the game's design does not include a death mechanism. Players are invariably able to effortlessly catch fish with a kayak, cultivate crops in a greenhouse, and recover their energy by resting in a temperature-controlled base. From this point, players enter a new emotional phase, where they may experience novelty in the environment, solitude, melancholy, and nostalgia while reading letters, and a sense of achievement as their base expands. The emotional experiences of players are significantly influenced by their autonomy or choice. The gamescape thus evolves into a realm brimming with affective possibilities, where the conventional binary of success and failure is replaced by a player-driven narrative that accentuates personal agency and the experiential journey.



Image 3. Northern light in Arctico.

Historical authenticity in *Arctico* is not about replicating exact historical events or conditions but rather about creating a sense of place and time that resonates with players' understanding of the Arctic fantasy. The players' emotional experiences are built upon an orientalist representation of the Arctic, rooted in the imagined solitude of the northern wilderness. In other words, it is precisely this orientalist fantasy that provides game designers with an experimental ground for offering players diverse gaming experiences. This scenario is constructed upon the suspension of the Arctic's real spatial context, where *Arctico* serves merely as a narrative backdrop representing wilderness, with the game lacking mechanical and interactive designs that engage with the material realities of the Arctic. In this sense, the historical authenticity of *Arctico* is predicated on catering to popular imagination and the alienation from historical accuracy.

***Never Alone*: The representation of memory and experience**

In 2014, *Never Alone* emerged as a pioneering video game that collaborated closely with the Iñupiaq community, spotlighting their stories and traditions. This collaboration marks a significant departure from typical portrayals of indigenous cultures in video games, offering a platform for the Iñupiaq people to share their heritage authentically. The game, developed by Upper One Games, which is the first indigenous-owned game company in the U.S., features narratives based on traditional Iñupiaq tales, integrating cultural insights and educational content. The game has attracted significant academic attention for its authentic representation of Indigenous stories, memories, mythologies, and histories (e.g., Champion 2020; Massanari 2015; Perreault, Perreault & Suarez 2022; Rodriguez Espinola 2021).

The narrative of *Never Alone* centers on Nuna, a young Iñupiaq girl, and her Arctic fox companion as they start a journey to find the source of an eternal blizzard threatening their village. Unlike the tranquil atmosphere of *Arctico*, characters in *Never Alone* constantly confront various threats from the harsh polar environment, such as polar bears, cliffs, and invading strangers that pose lethal risks to Nuna and the Arctic fox. The gamescape of *Never Alone* is divided into three primary segments: the first part encompasses the game's main storyline, which includes various chapters and scenes featuring a diverse array of Arctic landscapes, such as snowfields, ice rivers, villages, underwater environments, and caves. The second part consists of narrative cutscenes presented in scrimshaw^[1] style (Image 4), which is a traditional Iñupiaq art style using engraving and carving to tell stories. The third part bridges the game with reality – whenever the player encounters an owl

in the game, it unlocks an educational video. These videos, found under a menu called “cultural insights”, feature interviews with the game’s designers and Iñupiaq indigenous residents. They talk about the creative inspiration behind *Never Alone*, childhood memories of the local people, Iñupiaq customs, beliefs, and values, providing a rich context to the game’s cultural background. Players can pause the game at any time to access these interview videos from the main menu. These videos enhance the intertextuality between the game space and other media for storytelling, extend the narrative experience beyond the confines of gameplay, incorporating elements traditionally found in documentary films or oral storytelling into the digital medium.



Image 4. Scrimshaw storytelling in Never Alone.

The intertwining of these three spatial dimensions significantly enhances the player’s understanding of the overall story from different levels. Given the game’s adoption of an indigenous perspective and considering the player’s unfamiliarity with the Iñupiaq worldview, the game first unfolds through scrimshaw-styled cutscenes. This style evokes ancient engraving art or early comic books, using simple lines and concise language to sketch the story’s backdrop. Shortly after the game starts, the players encounter an owl, and the “cultural insight” piece collected informs us that scrimshaw is a beloved way of storytelling among the Iñupiaq elders and also a traditional method for Alaskan native people to record history. The story of *Never Alone* is also adapted from such indigenous history. These histories may carry a mythological reference and their accuracy may be unverifiable, but these stories reach the historical authenticity by embracing the subjective and experiential aspects of indigenous storytelling.

From a representational perspective, the gamescape of *Never Alone* is saturated with an array of cultural symbols. A wealth of folklore, legends, as well as individual experiences and memories, are encoded into the gameplay. For example, the northern light is presented as a mere visual object in the background sky of *Arctico*. On the contrary, in *Never Alone*, the game employs the Iñupiaq worldview – “everything is alive” (*Never Alone* 2014). In an interview collected in the “cultural insights”, an Iñupiaq man named Ishmael explained that his mother told him the northern lights are “children who’ve passed away when they’re children”. In the gameplay, the aurora is portrayed as mischievous spirits. Once Nuna comes into close contact with them, she is whisked away into the sky (Image 5). Similarly, to depict the harsh climatic conditions of the North Alaskan region, the game designed mechanics for interacting with blizzards. Initially, when a gust of wind arrives, players must control Nuna to crouch down to prevent being blown away (Image 6). As players become more accustomed to the environment, the wind becomes a tool that Nuna can use. Jumping right at the moment of a blizzard attack allows Nuna to leap further.



Image 5. Northern light in Never Alone.



Image 6. Interaction with blizzards in Never Alone.

Shaw and Warf (2009) argue that compared to first-person RPGs and other three-dimensional games, puzzle-platformer games are often considered to provide a lesser immersive experience for players, as the character is detached from the player in two-dimensional games, and the two-dimensional plane provides a more observable boundary between the game's narrative environment and the player's physical reality. Game immersion is one of the key factors that influence the subjective gaming experience and can also affect the conveyance of authenticity in video games (Mochocki 2021a; Wang et al. 2021). Shaw and Warf's viewpoint emphasizes an important aspect of gameplay experience relating to the dimensionality of video games, but the immersive experience is shaped by multiple factors such as narrative depth (Sousa et al. 2020), audiovisual design (Limperos et al. 2014; Fahlenbrach & Schröter 2016; Salselas, Penha & Bernardes 2021), player's personality (Haizel et al. 2021), cognitive level (Latham, Patston & Tippett 2013), cultural and ideological relevance (Toscano 2020) and so forth. In the story of *Never*

Alone, Nuna is given a strong narrative motive – to search for the source of the abnormal weather conditions threatening her homeland. As the game progresses, dramatic plots tug at the player’s emotions. The gameplay presents certain challenges. Whenever the player makes a mistake that leads to the Arctic fox’s death, Nuna cries out in sorrow, and similarly, when Nuna dies, the Arctic fox howls in grief. When the cruel strangers chase Nuna attempting to steal the Iñupiaq’s talisman “Bola”^[2], the atmosphere becomes tense, requiring the player to quickly move and dodge obstacles, while completing some puzzle tasks simultaneously. The immersive quality of *Never Alone* is not diminished by its two-dimensional gameplay; instead, it is enhanced through the game’s integration of a rich, narrative-driven experience.

In this sense, the narrative and spatial-temporal settings of the game become a representational intermediary, enabling players to access the collective memory of indigenous groups and to experience the Arctic from Iñupiaq’s perspectives and worldviews. This involves a process of encoding experiences and memories, yet what is decoded is not merely the “signified” or “meaning”, but also the player’s gaming experience – a digital simulation of Iñupiaq life. This re-presentation of memory and experience involves reconfiguring the possibilities between materiality and representation. For example, natural elements such as the aurora, snowscapes, and storms, which in the game can be considered either purely as background or as interactive elements, reflect the worldview the game designers wish to convey. As the game progresses, this interactivity evolves – like wind transitions from an initial obstacle to a tool that can be utilized. This evolving interactivity serves as a dynamic record of history, not through the static accumulation of facts, but through the lived experiences it simulates. It created a metaphor referring to the adaptive strategies of indigenous peoples to their environments. *Never Alone* offers a unique avenue for historical representation that traditional narratives – fixed in text or oral tradition – cannot fully encapsulate. This is history experienced through action and decision-making within the gamescape, where players engage in a simulated environment and learn, adapt, and survive following the indigenous ways.

Conclusion

John Wylie posits that the concept of landscape often exists in a tension between “seeing and dwelling” (Wylie 2007, 4), suggesting that landscape forms a representational relationship between the observer and the place on one hand, and is simultaneously produced through

practical activities on the other. Both aspects are profoundly manifested in video games, where players not only observe and navigate through virtual landscapes but also engage with them through gameplay, thus experiencing a blend of representational and affective spaces. From the analysis of *Arctico* and *Never Alone*, it is particularly evident that the interplay between representational elements such as mythology, visual design and narrative, and non-representational elements like memory, experience, and emotion, is not distinctly segregated. Instead, these facets are interrelated, collectively influencing the player's perception of the spatial-temporal landscape.

Despite both being set in the Arctic, *Arctico* and *Never Alone* employ divergent strategies in crafting historical authenticity. *Arctico* utilizes traditional Western narratives to shape its portrayal of the Arctic landscape and history, imagining the region as a distant and primordial wilderness waiting to be explored and conquered. The game's spatial practices, such as exploration, resource management, and base expansion, serve to reinforce this narrative, placing the player in the role of an explorer engaging with an untouched landscape. However, although this construction of the Arctic resonates with a predominantly Western narrative, the gameplay prioritizes spatial practice as its main mechanic, dissolving the dichotomy between the observing subject and the observed object – the landscape. By immersing the player in an experimental environment, the game compels the player to reflect within the monotony of repetitive labor, transforming the gamescape into an affective space. The repetitive tasks immerse players in the rhythm of daily work in the exotic environment, making the gamescape setting more tangible. The gameplay becomes a medium through which the emotional landscape is invoked, creating an affective space that engenders feelings of isolation, perseverance, and sometimes, futility.

Contrastingly, *Never Alone* offers a counter-narrative by grounding its game space in the collective memories of an indigenous group. The gamescape in *Never Alone* is created not as a desolate wilderness but as a space imbued with meaning, history, and myths. This alternative representation challenges the traditional Western portrayal of the Arctic, presenting it through the lens of those who have inhabited and coexisted with the land for centuries. The affective spaces in *Never Alone* are created through the integration of cultural narratives, emotional engagement, and gameplay mechanics that resonate with indigenous practices and worldviews. These elements foster a deeper connection between the player and the game world, enabling an immersive experience.

This analysis, through examining the Arctic gamescape constructed respectively by the two games, discusses the viability of non-representational theory as a method for studying historical authenticity in games. This perspective provides a valuable supplement to representational analysis, bridging the divide between representation and the material practices of digitalization (Rose 2019). The unique interactivity of video games not only strengthens the practical effect of space, making W.J.T. Mitchell's concept of landscaping as a dynamic process (Mitchell 1994) more intuitively reflected in a diachronic dimension; it also, unlike film and other audiovisual media, allows the immersion and emotional response brought about by game operation and interaction to create a space for the conveyance of collective memory, local legends, and other marginal historical discourses. Understanding historical authenticity through the dual pathways of representation and emotion, we can argue that games, as an interactive medium, are not only a cultural site filled with collective imagination but also participatory and experiential spaces, where emergent affects and psychological experiences exist beyond the dominance of representation.

Based on the output of this study, future research could explore other video games that tackle similar themes of historical authenticity, particularly those set in culturally or geographically specific contexts. Investigating how different representational methods, such as semiotic analysis or iconography, can be integrated with non-representational approaches will provide new insights into the multifaceted nature of historical representation in video games. Additionally, comparative studies involving a broader range of games could help elucidate the varying strategies developers use to evoke historical authenticity and how these strategies resonate with diverse player experiences.

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Notes

[1] Scrimshaw: a form of art that originated with the indigenous Inuit (including Iñupiaq) and other Native American peoples, which involves the carving or engraving of designs on the ivory or bones of marine mammals using a sharp tool. In Iñupiaq culture, scrimshaw is more than just a decorative art form; it is a means of storytelling and preserving history and culture. The intricate designs and scenes tell stories of the Iñupiaq people, their relationship with the environment, their myths, and their way of life.

[2] Bola: a throwing weapon made of weights on the ends of interconnected cords, designed to capture animals by entangling their legs. Variations of the bola have been used by many Indigenous peoples across the Americas. In Iñupiaq and other Indigenous Arctic cultures, it is used for hunting birds or small animals. The traditional bola would be swung and then thrown at the legs of the target, where the weights would cause the cords to wrap around and entangle the animal, restricting its movement and making it easier to approach and capture.