

Video Games as Participatory Playgrounds for Civic Imaginations on War: The Case of *Laika: Aged Through Blood*

Michel Maksimova

University of Illinois at Chicago
1007 W Harrison St. 1140 BSB (MC 132)
Chicago, IL 60607, USA
mmaks@uic.edu

Do Own (Donna) Kim

University of Illinois at Chicago
1007 W Harrison St. 1140 BSB (MC 132)
Chicago, IL 60607, USA
doownkim@uic.edu

This paper examines how video games can serve as participatory playgrounds for processing, rethinking, and representing war through a case study on *Laika: Aged Through Blood* (Laika; Brainwash Gang 2023). Gameplay is a complex process that encompasses both playing a game and playing with how its rules and fiction interact, including through meta-game engagement (Juul 2005; Lundgren et al. 2009; Mayra 2008). *Laika* players do not just “drive, jump, and fight [their] way” but also experience “the story about a tribe oppressed by occupant forces, and the personal story of a mother coyote warrior who descends on an endless path of vengeance to take back what her people lost” (official description, Thunderfulgames.com). *Laika*’s gameplay exemplifies how video games can textually and ludically represent and contest the horrors of war while remaining as a space of play and escapism. Drawing on close-readings of *Laika* and surrounding texts, we analyze *Laika*’s resistant deviance from the dominant representations of war in video game history (Godfrey 2022; Del-Moral & Rodriguez-Gonzalez 2020). Then, we contextualize *Laika* within world events and research on colonial violence and war effects on everyday life (Rodriguez 2011). We argue that *Laika*’s whimsical fictional and visual design enriches its nuanced gameplay by providing intertextual pliability for diverse critical imaginations on “real-life” wars while suppressing exploitative, abstracted spectacularizations. *Laika* demonstrates how video games, as playgrounds for both developers and players, can serve as playful spaces for civic imagination (Jenkins et al. 2020) on war through immersive engagement with “real” and fictitious lived experiences, supplying subversive potentials for human-focused political meaning-makings to international communities continually exposed to wars within and beyond their borders.

Laika introduces its players to a solemn and painful story of a small community encroached upon by imperial violence. Like war intrudes on our daily lives and becomes a part of them, it makes its way into the game’s narrative, shifting a playful experience into one of serious and traumatic tone. The game opens with a bloody

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scene: one of the children from a small settlement has been brutally tortured and killed. His father ran off for revenge, and the protagonist, Laika, sets out to find and save the father while avoiding heightening the conflict with the “birds”—the imperial force taking over the areas around the settlement. Laika soon finds out that the birds are building giant murderous war machines, and the elder of the settlement announces that the conflict has grown too large and they are officially at war. Despite the gruesome imagery at the start, the game also shows the generative agency and tenacity within the everyday: peaceful life at the settlement, genuine connections between characters, familial relationships, and rich culture of the settlement surviving despite the birds’ intrusion upon every corner of land.

Laika is not the only video game about war with a proactive anti-war message but it is one of the few that are positioned closer to the periphery of the gaming market. “Mainstream” video games about war have tended to focus on reimagining World War II or reproducing the clichéd narrative about a civilized (Western) world versus a barbaric (Middle Eastern) totalitarianism (Del-Moral and Rodriguez-Gonzalez 2020). While they may provide visually detailed representations of war, they are also objects of entertainment and militaristic commodities made for consumption (Godfrey 2022). *Laika* neither falls under explicitly referential and/or photorealistic depictions of existing or ongoing conflicts nor exists within the military-entertainment complex. Contrastingly, *Laika* draws on engaging yet diversely interpretable elements: a vaguely post-apocalyptic setting, a fictional settlement, and various anthropomorphized animals as its characters. *Laika* playfully distances itself from “real” history through its “non-real” elements; still, its core mechanics exist within the genre and medium that are deeply accustomed to war narratives. Positioned at this complex intersection, *Laika* presents a nuanced anti-war experience. Its rare focus on the effects of armed conflicts on small communities, as opposed to hyperrealistic top-down strategizations, additionally affords the players to ground the gameplay in ongoing wars and armed conflicts around the world at the time of release, late 2023, or whenever they happen to engage with the game.

The *Laika* experience around a small settlement facing a massive imperial power that threatens to demolish and oppress brings to mind how everyday life can mundanely and subversively exist alongside armed conflicts (Rodriguez 2011). In the context of late 2023 and early 2024, it is reminiscent of, but not limited to, how wars in Ukraine and Palestine have been invading the everyday spaces of local lives, as well as the digital feeds (and physical spaces) of remote yet connected global citizens, inevitably becoming a part of their lives and their trauma, too. At the same time, it inspires counter-imaginings (Ott and Aoki 2011) by spotlighting the subversive power in not only “drive, jump, and fight your way”-type bottom-up resistance but also in mundane everyday persistence that abstracted war depictions have hidden. Whether intended by the developers or not, we observe a striking timeliness in *Laika*’s release; in the context of ongoing war violence affecting everyone globally, *Laika* emerges as an emotional and political playground to meaningfully subvert everyday horrors, a place for processing and resisting war where peacemaking seems scarcely available (Das et al. 2001; Nordstrom 2004).

As an illustrative case of a playground for anti-war discourse, *Laika* extends the documented capability of video games to assist and encourage social activism through controversy and community-building (Amadori 2023), establishing shared language (Lin and Sun 2022), developing critical thinking against war (Esther Del-Moral and Rodriguez-Gonzalez 2020), and contextualizing video game experiences in

the actual world (Demirbag-Kaplan and Kaplan-Oz 2018). It opens up possibilities for “gamers” used to the first-person “shooter” perspective (Godfrey 2022) to critically interrogate their understanding of war and imperial violence by locally situating themselves (Mukherjee 2018). Playing *Laika* enables the players to play with it to process and reimagine their own experiences of war.

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