

Motherhood in Motion: Play, Performativity, and Aesthetics in “Monument Valley 2”

Zsófia Orosz-Réti¹

¹ University of Debrecen
reti.zsofia@arts.unideb.hu

The realm of popular culture is by definition an orphaned land, where the prerequisite of the journey that the hero must undertake (see Campbell) is the (at least) symbolic death of the mother (Ventura); hence mainstream Western culture in all media by and large has been devoid of functional mother figures in the last few centuries (Åström; Francus, ‘The Lady Vanishes: The Rise of the Spectral Mother’). Those who do appear are typically depicted as monstrous (Francus, *Monstrous Motherhood: Eighteenth-Century Culture and the Ideology of Domesticity*) and abject (Kristeva), marking their difference from the domestic norm. Interestingly, the most functional mother figures are those who are not biological moms, and what is more, not even biological creatures: android mothers such as in *Raised by Wolves* (HBO, 2020) or in the game *Detroit: Become Human* (see Waszkiewicz) seem to fare much better than their human counterparts. However, despite the more and more prevalent “daddification” of games (Voorhees), more complex and dynamic representations of motherhood are scarce, especially when it comes to video games.

The present paper addresses this gap by the analysis of the mobile game *Monument Valley 2* (Ustwo Games, 2017) to argue that the game, through its mechanics, presents a dynamic, interrelational and performative experience of motherhood while exploring how intersections of playing and mothering allow for the emergence of an aesthetic practice.

My inquiries will be informed by Miguel Sicart’s suggestion that play functions as an aesthetic practice (70) on the one hand, and recent conceptualizations of motherhood on the other. In *Play Matters*, Sicart proposes to look at play as a practice that might be regarded artful in a procedural

sense - as opposed to ‘artsy’ visuals or in-game art inspirations - building upon contemporary aesthetic theories. One of the approaches he offers, *relational aesthetics* (Bourriaud), which is “largely concerned with producing and reflecting upon the interrelations between people and the extent to which such relations - or communicative acts - need to be considered as an aesthetic form” (Downey). Unsurprisingly, it is exactly along these lines that motherhood from the third wave of feminism on is understood as relational (Benjamin), performative (Chandler) and a series

of actions that “opens up the possibility of an ethical ... exchange with others” (Jeremiah 26). In this sense the process of mothering, the ever-shifting challenges of parenthood might potentially allow for similarly dynamic subject positions as in play as an aesthetic practice.

Monument Valley 2, emulating the parallel journeys of Ro, a mother and her unnamed daughter, uses both game mechanics and symbolism to demonstrate how their relationship changes over time. With a perhaps unprecedentedly positive note, the paper contends, they both grow as individuals but also manage to preserve, yet transform their love for each other, shifting from the complete dependency of the daughter to her growing up to become her own person, with Ro having to constantly redefine herself until ultimately rejoicing as equals. The close analysis of *Monument Valley 2*, therefore, exemplifies how motherhood and play are connected as forms of aesthetic practices that celebrate intersubjective, relational, performative and ever-changing subjectivities and how, as a result, could be both regarded as art.

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