PURSUITS FOR THE HEART

Monument Valley 2 and Intergenerational Play
LAUREN CRUIKSHANK

Sitting close together on our living room couch with a blanket covering both of our knees, my nine-year-old daughter Adria sits beside me and cradles my iPhone, excited for a chance to gain possession of my phone, to finally open the new game she's been looking forward to playing, and to spend some uninterrupted time with her mom while her younger siblings nap and hang out with her dad respectively. On my nod, she clicks on the app and the game begins with an opening screen that reveals a small figure seated alone on an angular geometric structure, playing a flute while snow gently falls. The vibrato tones of the flute's gentle song float out of the iPhone's speakers as the words "Tap the path to move Ro" appear in white on a background of muted greys. Adria says, "Oh she's good." "What is she doing?" I ask. "She's playing the flute…a little pink flute. And she has a little black bun and she's wearing like this flowery cape thing. I don't want to make her stop!", Adria responds, listening to the ethereal flute song. Listening too, I say, "Oh, I can hear some rain or snow or something." Adria says, "I think that's snow… Ready?". I respond with a "yep", and she uses her finger to touch the screen, carefully spinning a crank in the structure, rotating the geometry of the shapes to create a consistent path for Ro to travel. She has learned how to do this in the first game of this series, and successfully applies that experience here to turn

components of this first puzzle to connect up the gap in the path. Having solved this first architectural challenge, Adria taps the spot on the touchscreen where she desires Ro to go, causing the little caped figure to tuck away her flute, stand, and walk with echoing footsteps along the path now organized for her, up a set of stairs to a decorative platform at the top of the screen. Adria says, "This is just the introduction," to which I add, "It's so pretty though". "Mmhmm" Adria says absentmindedly as she watches the in-game animation that follows Ro's arrival on the platform. As Ro's featureless face tilts up, the camera pans upwards and the music swells and slides with dramatic glissandos, revealing a sun setting behind a mountain range tinged with greens. White lines begin to slowly trace a pattern in the sky at the top of our screen. Adria says excitedly, "Oh, look it's a 2! Never noticed that till now." "Oh! Me either!", I say. Adria continues, "An M and a 2". "And a V," I add, "*Monument Valley 2*". The music swells again as an eight-pointed star-shaped button appears over Ro's head, indicating the end of a chapter and the opportunity to start a new one. Adria turns to me and with a smile, says, "Let's do it!" "Let's do it." I respond, returning her smile.

MONUMENT VALLEY 2

Monument Valley 2 was released by British independent game studio Ustwo Games in 2017 and follows their immensely successful *Monument Valley* title, which debuted in 2014 to critical acclaim, millions of downloads and the title of Apple's iPad "game of the year" *(Webster, 2017; ustwo Games , 2017)*. Both *Monument Valley* and *Monument Valley 2* are mobile puzzle games that encourage players to traverse mazes by spinning and sliding architectural elements to manipulate the environment and find a path for the main character(s) to traverse through each level. Players must make use of perspectival tricks, clever mechanics, and optical illusions to negotiate the games' structures in ways that defy ordinary physics. Both games feature silent, featureless, female protagonists that navigate each level, and striking art

styles inspired by influences that range from the drawings of M. C. Escher, to Bauhaus posters, Brutalist architecture, Nicki Minaj music videos, and the colour palettes of licorice allsorts candies *(Campbell, 2019)*. Where *Monument Valley* focused on a white-capped princess as its single protagonist, *Monument Valley 2* takes its 2 to heart, and presents players with two protagonists in a mother figure, Ro, and her unnamed daughter. Although its mechanics situate this game undoubtedly as an isometric puzzle game, *Monument Valley 2,* like its precursor, is also explicitly a game with storytelling at its heart. Levels are presented to us as "Chapters" with titles and subtitles such as "The Viaduct, in which The Child Learns Her First Lesson", or "Menantol, in which Reflection Unfolds Old Memories". Interspersed between puzzles are animated scenes in which characters approach ghostly ancestral figures, who then speak words of explanation and wisdom to help reveal the game's story and acknowledge the emotions the characters are experiencing as they journey through the narrative arc of the story. At first Ro leads the way and her daughter skips along behind, trailing her mother's every move. As the game progresses, however, mother and daughter are separated and reunited several times in small and larger ways, and the daughter begins to not just trail behind her mother, but mirror her movements in helpful ways. Eventually the daughter is controlled on her own or even leads the way herself. In many ways, these shifting player controls exemplify the main story and emotional sweep of the game. The exact story is largely open to player interpretation, but richly draws from the bittersweet themes inherent in being a parent, and in being a child. It is about growing up, learning new skills, and striking out on one's own. It is simultaneously about the pain of letting go of someone you love, the challenge in navigating loss and finding oneself again, knowing that things will never be the same, but taking comfort in the cyclical nature of life and legacy.

PLAYING TOGETHER

Having long had a research interest in games, gender, avatars, and lately, representations of mothers (and the lack thereof) in digital games, I was intrigued by MV2 and the choice by Ustwo to follow the success of the first iteration with this mother and daughter story. The design team at Ustwo has articulated that the explicit goal for their second *Monument Valley* game was to be more story-driven and emotionally engaging, and that while brainstorming characters for the second game, they concluded that "of all the characters that we had, the mother and the child felt the most fresh and presented the best opportunities for storytelling" *(Huerta, 2018)*. Knowing also how much my two older children, aged six and nine respectively, had enjoyed playing through the first *Monument Valley* game, and how they had often called over their shoulder for a parent's consultation on a particularly challenging puzzle level, I made plans with my eldest daughter, Adria, to play through this sequel in its entirety and document our experience with an audio record of our play. This game was an ideal choice for an intergenerational play analysis thanks to its accessible puzzles, its relatively short duration, its relatable story of a mother and daughter, and its play-at-your-own-pace speed, which allowed for ample real-time discussion and collaborative play. I was intrigued to see how playing this game together might illuminate or inform aspects of the game experience, or in turn, our mother-daughter experience. In other words, how would our interactions and roles as parent and child both mediate and be mediated by the experience of playing this mother-daughter game together? And how might the themes of this game in particular have potential resonance or resistance for us as players that echo the mother-daughter dyad of protagonists in the game?

In order to explore these questions, Adria and I agreed to play through *Monument Valley 2* over the course of a weekend in mid-February, 2019. We downloaded the game on my iPhone X, and

played it sitting side-by-side on the couch or on a bed in the home we share with the rest of our family of five. Adria held the phone and controlled the touchscreen actions for most of the gameplay, although we did pass both control and device back and forth between us often, taking turns manipulating the environment and moving the two characters. We made suggestions, asked questions, and exclaimed at each other actions throughout the time we played together. At several points in our gameplay, on Adria's suggestion, we took responsibility for the actions of a character each, alternating who would touch the screen and initiate a game action.

Image 1: Intergenerational collaborative play on a smartphone

In total, it took us about three hours of contact time to finish this relatively short game, which we accomplished in three play sessions of about an hour each – two on the first day, and one on the second day. The unhurried pace of this particular game

allowed for plenty of time during play for pauses and reflection in order to discuss the story and what strategies might work best to address a given chapter's challenges. We took screenshots of moments of play we thought were particularly important or resonant through our play sessions, making use of the phone's capture function often for this purpose. Once we had completed the game, we spent a few additional minutes reflecting on the game as a whole and our experience playing it together. After the audio recordings were complete, I reviewed and transcribed our three gameplay sessions for further reflection. Adria also created some artwork in response to our gameplay collaboration, included later in this work.

INTERGENERATIONAL PLAY

A: On to the next. (reading) Chapter 3: The Oasis: In Which Young Eyes See New Wonders.

L: Mmhmm.

A: Oh my gosh, ok. Oh no, that's gonna fall. That's gonna fall. Oh, it didn't fall. Really?

L: Cool music.

A: Oh, this thing moves. I love those little floating bricks. (gasps) Her daughter just fell! Oh no! They're.. They're running down the hill. Oh my gosh. Ro! No! They can't lose each other! Oh no! I think…

L: They're separated for the first time.

A: Ok, you be the mom and I'll be the daughter, ok?

L: Ok.

Playing this game cooperatively with Adria was a rich experience in more ways than one. The transcripts of our time playing

Monument Valley 2 suggest several interesting phenomena that bear considering further in terms of intergenerational gaming, and specifically parent-child play.

Parent-child play of digital games is common, according to "Essential Facts" paper published by the Entertainment Software Association (ESA), a not-for-profit trade association for the digital game industry. For example, the 2018 Essential Facts report notes that 67% of parents play video games with their child at least once weekly, and report the top reasons they play with their children are: "1. It's fun for all of us. 2. My child asks me to. 3. It's a good opportunity to socialize with my child. 4. I enjoy playing video games as much as my child. 5. It helps me monitor what they are playing" *(Entertainment Software Association, 2018)*. The Canadian-specific ESA describes even higher intergenerational play prevalence in Canadian families, with 71% of parent respondents reporting playing video games with their children at least once a week *(Entertainment Software Association of Canada, 2018)*.

Despite the popularity of parent-child play, intergenerational play is not frequently taken up by digital game studies scholars. There are some important contributions by scholars such as Alison Harvey, whose work on familial play in domestic contexts explores the gendered and generational dynamics that colour gameplay access and practices for children and parents in their homes (*Harvey, 2015)*. Kelly Boudreau and Mia Consalvo consider adult family members playing social network games together across distance to describe how how familial bonds "shape the reasons for and means of gameplay" (*Boudreau & Consalvo, 2014, p. 1128)*, including how playing with family may keep players playing a particular game longer out of a sense of familial obligation and a desire to stay connected. Other work on intergenerational digital gameplay from diverse disciplines traces how playing games in combinations of children, parents, and grandparents can strengthen existing intergenerational

bonds, help to forge new ones, and challenge age-based stereotypes for players (*Chua, Jung, Lwin, & Theng, 2013*). Playing digital games together has also been found to enhance intergenerational interactions by encouraging prosocial behaviour, combatting senior loneliness, and facilitating the sharing of knowledge and skill (*Costa & Veloso, 2016; Deterding, 2018*). In one of the only studies to look specifically at parent/young child cooperative and co-situated digital play, Siyahhan et al. find support for parent and child play producing quality time together, but also providing a valuable opportunity for parents to engage and support their children's thinking, development and learning (*Siyahhan, Barab, & Downton, 2010*). In this way, play becomes not only leisure, but is productive for parents as a tool for parenting, in which "to play is to provide" (*Deterding, 2018, p. 265*).

This is one of the main distinctions of intergenerational family play, that, unlike potential peer play partnerships, the parent-child interaction is inherently unequally balanced, since parents are responsible for their dependent children as guardians and care-givers (*Dalsggaard, Skov, Stougaard, & Thomassen, 2006*). However, the mediation of play through digital technology serves in many cases to help level this playing field somewhat, with a perceived or actual generation gap in skill and experience with games and technology often giving children the opportunity to exchange or share roles with a parent in terms of who is the novice and who the expert (*Siyahhan, Barab, & Downton, 2010; Aarsand, 2007; Barendregt, 2012*). This potentially provides a situation where "children's competence is celebrated and where the child is cast at the centre of the attention" (*Aarsand, 2007, p. 252*), pushing back on parent-child norms of interaction and allowing for more balanced exchanges of expertise as parents and children play digital games together.

Certainly in our play experience, we experienced a variety of intergenerational play dynamics first-hand. Negotiating how to

play this normally single-player game together was not established by Adria and I in advance, but patterned in large part after our parent-child experience in working together on other kinds of tasks. She was the main apprentice of the game-world, and I was there to observe, discuss, advise, and take a turn when prompted or requested. We physically passed the device back and forth many times as we played, or held the phone for the other as our partner attempted a manoeuvre. Given the relatively small play surface of the smartphone we were using, playing collaboratively necessitated sitting very closely together and positioning the screen in such a way that we could both see, hear, and interact with it as we played. Our relationship as a parent and child made this tight physical closeness comfortable for both of us and our sharing of the game device worked relatively smoothly for most of our gameplay, although there are moments in the transcript when we have to remind each other to share the screen, positioning it in such a way that we can both participate. Fiona Maine, who has written about the first *Monument Valley* game and her observations as pairs of children worked together to play through that game, notes that collaborating on a mobile game such as this is a physical challenge. Tablets and smartphones are designed to respond to a single touch, and more than one finger on the screen means the interface is unresponsive or reacts unpredictably. This single-touch feature necessitates "negotiation for successful collaboration and enhanced dialogical interaction" (*Maine, 2017a, p. 221)*.

This constant ongoing negotiation between parent, child, and game as we played made especially transparent the process of meaning-making that occurs in more opaque ways when one plays a game solo or competitively. Maine, using the work of James Gee, reminds us that game texts are inherently conversational to begin with in their interactivity. She writes that "whilst it is useful to identify the parallels that games have

with other visual media that we might 'read', there is a difference in the transaction of meaning-making that occurs with a digital narrative game… games answer back through their response to a player's actions and this then creates a dialogue between text and reader as each responds to the actions of the other." *(Maine, 2017b, p. 139)*. In this case, as we engaged in three-way conversation with each other and the game itself, our negotiation and interpretation of the game text was not only visible on the screen, but also audible in our verbal reactions, strategies and observations to each other as well. In our play transcript, words and phrases such as "maybe," "I wonder," "let's try" "so now" and "what if?" appear frequently throughout the three sessions. We debated not only how to forge a path through each puzzle, but also the possible meaning of changes in the character's appearances, the connection of the story to the first *Monument Valley*'s characters and lore, the relationship of minor characters to our protagonists, and the significance of colours and lights in the architecture we were traversing. Ro and her child do not speak or have facial expressions to communicate their intentions or emotions to players, so we speculated as well based on their movements and each chapter's environmental cues how they might be feeling, why they were acting in the ways they were, and what their larger goals within the story might be.

There were many moments of success and surprise in the beauty of this game's design, and pride in solving its more challenging puzzles as we played through each chapter. However, it was the resonance of the simple, bittersweet story at the heart of *Monument Valley 2* that provided our gameplay sessions with their most evocative moments. Siyahhan et al. call attention in their own research to how "intergenerational play can also be a transformative experience when interactive narratives are designed around issues that are meaningful to the family". *(Siyahhan, Barab, & Downton, 2010, p. 430)*. While playing a game together, regardless of what title we had chosen, would have no

doubt yielded an interesting collaborative experience for Adria and I, working through this particular game became a meaningful experience for both of us in ways we hadn't necessarily predicted.

The bonds of parent and child and the poignant intertwined experiences of growing up and letting go are at the very core of the story of *Monument Valley 2*, a decision made explicitly by the designers of the game. As art director David Fernandez Huerta states in detailing the design team's philosophy for the game, "It has to be personal". Huerta himself reflects on how the birth of his son Atlas inspired many of the details for the game, and how his becoming a parent is "a big reason why the game is the way it is". He notes that of course, as a sequel, *Monument Valley 2* was already embedded in a generational relationship of its own, "and like every good sequel, it turned out to be about family. And guess what? It was more specifically about heritage and legacy. The people that come before and the people that come after" *(Huerta, 2018)*.

In an unusually intimate peek behind the curtain of a small studio, the developers of Ustwo games acknowledge and expand upon these familial themes in a short video published on their development blog, titled "The Parents of *Monument Valley 2*". Parents and other family members of the development team are shown being flown in and celebrated at a special launch and playtest of the *Monument Valley 2* game, and are then asked to reflect upon their experiences of the game's main themes in short informal interviews. The mother of an Ustwo programmer tells us that for her part "what I see in the game is to let them go, to let your child go. Every parent has that problem. But it is still quite scary. But that doesn't stop the world turning. And it doesn't stop people pursuing their dreams *(Gray, 2017)*.

PURSUITS FOR THE HEART

One of the most effective ways the game communicates its story of a child coming into her own is through clever shifts in the mechanical controls of this game that mirror the growing independence of a child. Players' ability to move one or both characters in tandem or independently via the touch interface changes at different points in the game to reflect the character development and evolving relationship of the protagonists. In terms of the narrative, Ro's daughter evolves from merely following her mother around a few paces behind, to mimicking her actions as an apprentice, to setting out on her own to learn independently, and finally returning fully realized, able to act skillfully in the world, to partner her mother as an equal, and even take a leadership role in picking up a legacy. It is a process well known to parents and one that is inherently bittersweet. As Ro and her daughter experience a number of separations throughout the game, some accidental and others seemingly agreed upon, the music, colours, architecture, and pace of the game impart emotional tones of trepidation, loss, acceptance, self-discovery, resilience, and reunion.

For Adria and I, these scenes were particularly meaningful and memorable. The transcript excerpt above reflects in particular Adria's alarm and concern at the first distressing separation of mother and child on-screen. She expressed concern multiple times throughout the rest of our gameplay that the characters might experience separation again. When they do, in a calm departure scene that surprised both of us, she characterized these events as "so sad" many times.

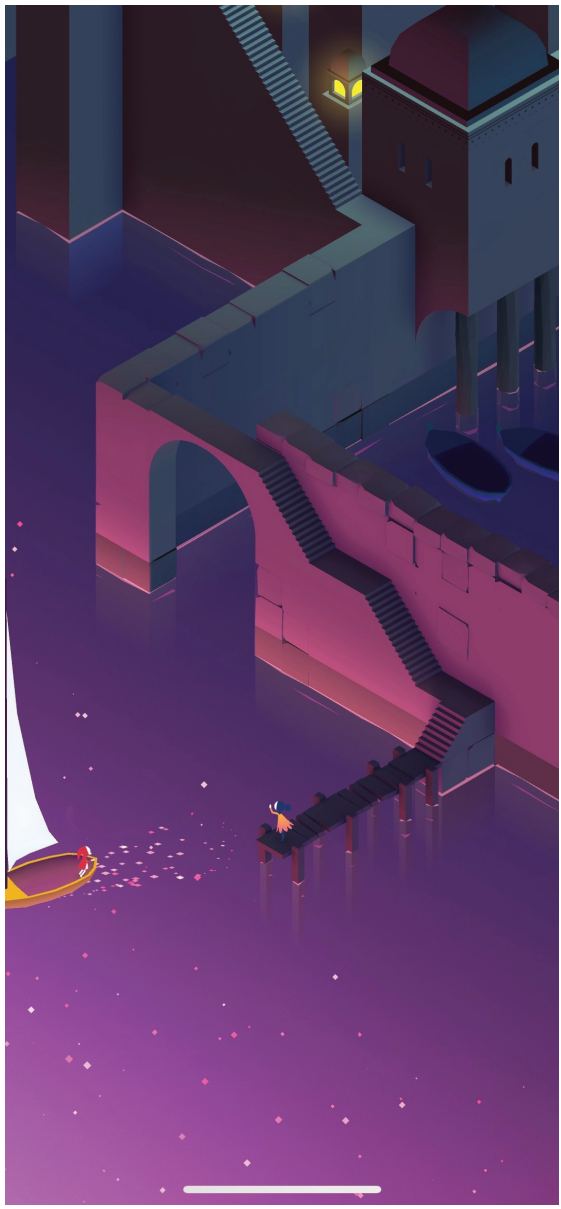

Image 2: Screenshot of a key moment in Monument Valley 2 from Chapter VI: The Docks

A: (reading) Chapter 7: The Towers,: In Which There Remain other Purse…

L: pursuits.

A: Pursuits for the Heart.

L: What do you think that means?

A: There are other occupants for her heart?

L: Hmm. It's black and white now.

A: Yeah, probably because she's sad. How do I do this? It's so hard to… Ah, poor her, it's so sad… You'd be sad too, right?

L: If what?

A: If we had to do this.

L: if my daughter jumped in a boat?

A: yeah, and sailed away?

L: Yes, I would be very sad.

A: And you didn't even know if you could see her again… That'd just be sad.

L: Do you think they'll see each other again?

A: I think they will, knowing this game. I don't think they can support sadness. Oh, so now I can go up.

L: So now there is some red in the picture.

A: Maybe this is like hope or something. And hope that she'll come back.

This moment in our gameplay is one of many in which Adria

connects the story of Ro and her daughter to our own mother-daughter relationship, and relates on an emotional level to how the characters must feel – more explicitly how she would feel and how I would feel, if we were in their situation. I didn't appreciate until I reviewed the transcript of our play sessions just how often Adria expressed concern or sadness about the separation of the two main characters. This preoccupation, I have no doubt, was stirred by the knowledge that a few days after our play sessions together were complete, I was scheduled to get on a flight to a different part of the country to spend a few weeks supporting my own parents as my mother recovered from major surgery. Ever since she was quite small, Adria has always expressed anxiety about saying goodbye to me for any length of time, or having distance between us when life necessities I travel without my kids. The themes of parent-child separation we were navigating in the game world were made all the more affecting by our real-life current circumstances and concerns.

However, this connection to personal meaningful markers in the game's text was not an outcome she alone experienced. Similarly, the points of the gameplay that stayed with me the longest after the game was finished touched on themes that are very real and resonant to me in my own daily experience as a parent of three growing kids. With apologies for revealing some of the key scenes in the game, these moments included the representation of melancholic grit required to get on with one's work after a tough but necessary separation, and the emotional punch of watching a child transition from a carefree and curious dependent to a tall and capable individual seemingly in the blink of an eye or, in this case, the brief passage through a leafy doorway.

Image 3: Screenshot of a child transitioning into an adult from Chapter XII: The Orchard, in Monument Valley 2.

With one daughter now initiated into her preteen years, and

my other two kids also growing impossibly quickly each day, these short, abstracted scenes embedded in *Monument Valley 2* intersected with my own experiences in ways that compounded the meaning of these in-game moments exponentially and gave them very personal poignancy.

While I transcribed our gameplay sessions and composed this article, Adria was interested in contributing something further of her own to the dissemination of our joint gameplay project. To this end, she presented me with two pieces of original artwork inspired by the game and our time playing it. The first is her rendition of Ro and her child, inspired from the icon that accompanies the game's app on my phone.

Image 4: Monument Valley 2 fan art by the author's daughter, Adria, 9.

The second is her interpretation of her and I in the style of *Monument Valley 2*, replacing Ro's black bun with my graying brunette ponytail, and the child's red hood with her own characteristic red curls. The image serves for me as a fitting

exemplar and reminder of how the meanings available to us in games are richly co-constructed and always already interpreted through personal experiences and relationships as we play.

Image 5: The author and her daughter, depicted in the style of Monument Valley 2. Artwork by Adria, 9.

L: Anything else you want to say about this one?

A: It was very challenging, but it was also very fun to play with you.

L: It was fun to play with you too. We had good teamwork, I thought!

A: Yeah! High five!

L: Haha! Does it make you feel sad, knowing that I'm going to be going away for a while?

A: Yeah.

L: But just like the game, we'll be back together soon.

A: Mm.

L: Don't grow that much when I'm gone though…

A: I'm not going to! I don't think I'll be a teenager by the time you come back! Unless I have a magical tree sprouting flower things, 'cause like the tree was in a petal and then she was in a petal at the top.

L: Don't walk through any tree doors while I'm gone.

A: I won't. At least I'll try not to.

L: I love you.

A: I love you too.

L: Thanks for playing with me.

A: You're welcome.

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