

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Celeste

Platform: PC, Nintendo Switch, Playstation 4, Xbox One

Genre: Platformer

Release Date: January 25, 2018

Developer: Extremely Ok Games

Publisher: Extremely Ok Games

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Maddy Thorson

Overview

Celeste is a story about Madeline , a young woman who is trying to climb the eponymous Celeste Mountain. Its narrative deals with the personal nature of mental health, framed through an enacted narrative of Madeline's internal struggles with her own thoughts and identity, a theme which parallels the player's own gameplay journey through the progressively harder levels. Madeline arrives at the Mountain looking for an escape from her mental health, but soon encounters a doppelganger manifestation of her negative thoughts known as Part of Me (or, as the community calls her, Badeline). Madeline runs from Badeline, scrambling up the mountain through a series of linear areas sprinkled with cutscenes and characters. But, after Badeline throws her to the bottom of the Mountain at the cusp of victory, Madeline chooses to embrace this side of herself and, reunited, the two of them together are able to reach the summit. It is a narrative told as much through gameplay as through cutscenes, allowing players of all backgrounds and experiences to connect with and relate to Madeline's experiences.

Characters

Celeste features a limited cast of recurring characters, most of whom are encountered at distinct points along the trail to the summit. These people have various different reasons for being at the Mountain, and their encounters are carefully paced to stand out as interludes from the hundreds of tricky platforming screens standing between the player and the summit.

- **Madeline** – The game’s protagonist and player avatar, she is a young woman who wants to climb Celeste Mountain. Madeline arrives at the mountain alone, and while we never fully hear her backstory, it’s clear from the start that she is very unsure and uncomfortable with herself, suffering from anxiety attacks and mood swings. To her, climbing this mountain is a test of her own fortitude, and failing to reach the top would be unacceptable.
- **Badeline/Part of Me** – A shadowy twin of Madeline, mysteriously created by the Mountain early on along the climb. She is a physical representation of Madeline’s anxiety and feelings of self-doubt, acting as the game’s primary ‘antagonist’ as she attempts to stop the player’s progress and convince Madeline to give up. She is also quite snarky and, even as her relationship with Madeline begins to turn a corner, maintains the temperament of a sulking teenager.
- **Theo** – A friendly, laid back hiker encountered at various points along the climb. He is climbing the Mountain after burning out at an office job and frequently blogs his own journey on social media. His friendliness and unbounded supportiveness helps Madeline to stay calm and quell her anxiety attacks, and the two of them grow close as their journeys intertwine.
- **Mr. Oshiro** – The departed owner of a once grand hotel nestled halfway up the mountain. Though his hotel is in ruins, Mr. Oshiro sticks around as a ghost, fruitlessly trying to clean it for guests who he believes will come again. He convinces Madeline to help him clean and, after her anxiety worsens and Badeline emerges to berate him, he attacks them and drives them away.
- **Granny** – A wizened, laughing old woman who lives on the Mountain and cryptically guides Madeline at difficult points on her trek. Granny dies between the game’s eighth and ninth chapters, an event that deeply affects Madeline and compels her to return to the Mountain one last time.

Breakdown

Celeste begins very simply. Offscreen, a car pulls up, as text prints out on the screen “This is it, Madeline. Just breathe. Why are you so nervous?”. The screen zooms out and Madeline walks into frame. This is the player’s introduction to the game, and the next screen is a simple tutorial of moving, jumping, and climbing - standard pixel platformer affair. After likely dying several times, the player moves to the next screen and meets Granny, who laughs at Madeline’s plan to climb the Mountain: “If my ‘driveway’ almost did you in, the Mountain might be a bit much for

you.” Madeline ignores her and runs right, transitioning back to gameplay as the ground under her feet begins to break. As she falls towards the bottom screen edge of death, time stops. A bird flies down, pecks the ground, and helpfully points out the game’s signature gameplay mechanic: the dash, a one button move that shoots Madeline in a direction before hitting the ground. “You can do this.” Madeline says.

The structure of *Celeste*’s narrative is directly linked with its gameplay structure, a design strongly on display in this opening prologue. The game is divided into nine chapters, with each chapter taking place in a different location on the Mountain, identifiable by a unique visual palette and set of mechanics. Its main narrative, however, only spans the first seven chapters, with the remaining two serving as an epilogue and a bonus story, respectively.

Chapter 1, the Forsaken City, is, all things considered, a pretty standard opening platformer level. Madeline is climbing through an abandoned city, dashing across gaps and onto springs, all mechanics introduced with a well-honed precision. At one point, the player meets Theo for the first time, stopping to talk and take an unwilling selfie. Beyond that, though, there are no cutscenes or pauses for dialogue, a choice that makes sense given the importance of the core mechanics being taught and practiced. Eventually, Madeline makes it through the city and stops to rest by a memorial marker, falling asleep as the bird from the opening lands on her head.

Chapter 2, the Old Site, is anything but the conventional introduction of Chapter 1. Madeline wakes abruptly and finds herself in a dream-like contortion of the real world, a rain of stars in the background. Heading forward, the player explores a nonlinear maze of rooms before stumbling upon a mirror. Standing in the other plane of the mirror is Badeline, and when Madeline stops to stare, her purple double breaks through the glass and escapes into the real world. The Old Site lights up, its dull environment transforming into dash blocks, a gameplay element that allows the player to launch themselves at a great pace through the terrain. Using these blocks, the player catches up to Badeline at the top of a ruined tower. Madeline understands who Badeline is, even acknowledging the creeping anxiety that birthed her, but the two quickly devolve to arguing until Badeline has had enough and stops talking. A chase sequence begins, with urgent music and a chain of Badeline clones mimicking the player’s inputs as Madeline runs in search of an exit. Eventually, escaping the Old Site and leaving Badeline behind, Madeline finds a solitary phone booth. She tries to call her mother but instead reaches a faceless stranger, who taunts her for being negligent before the phone transforms into a monster and eats her, waking her from the nightmare that this apparent dream has turned into. The chapter ends with a quiet traversal through the real Old Site, desolate and empty, not a dream block to be found.

After this one-two punch of chapters, new players will have already died several hundred times. The difficulty is ramping up and players can feel what Madeline has been saying: this is going to be a hard, hard journey, one without shortcuts or cop-outs. In effect, the player experience has arrived at a kind of harmony with the narrative experience, a synergy that is key to making the story of *Celeste* work so well. Narratives aren’t a given in the 2D platformer genre, and some of *Celeste*’s most successful contemporaries - from *Super Mario Bros.* to *Super Meat Boy* – became household names with simple stories that served as simple backdrops to the all-important gameplay. But after the Old Site, it is clear that Madeline’s story is no backdrop - it

is a fundamental part of the gameplay experience, allowing players to empathize with her experiences and motivating them to keep playing.

Chapter 3, then, upends the World 1-2-3 platformer structure yet again. Madeline reaches the Celestial Resort, helmed by the ghostly Mr. Oshiro. The place is messy and cramped, full of Dust Bunnies that need to be cleaned up and stacks of laundry floating in space. Mr. Oshiro needs help, and Madeline, despite being in a poor mental state after the disturbing events of her dream at the Old Site, feels obliged to clean up. The player is then shunted through a nonlinear series of gauntlets in what is probably the largest difficulty spike of the whole game. While well crafted, this sequence will intentionally frustrate many players, serving to again make them empathize with Madeline's growing frustration. She just wants to leave, and, soon enough, her growing anxiety brings Badeline out, this time into the real world. When an argument between Badeline and Mr. Oshiro begins to escalate, the hotel manager loses control, transforming into a floating monster who chases Madeline across the rooftops. She narrowly escapes and, looking after her, Mr. Oshiro sees the damage that he has done and retreats inside in shame.

After the back-to-back intensity of the past two chapters, Chapter 4, Golden Ridge, is a respite. No explicit narrative beats occur in this meditative level, just screens of Madeline fighting against the growing force of wind - yet another mechanic that seems to almost want her and the player to fail and quit. Ironically, though, the narrative coupled with the game's fair mechanics - from fast respawning to a plentiful accessibility menu - do a lot to gently motivate the player to keep going. All these design decisions, mechanics, and options silently echo to the player what Madeline whispers to herself: "You can do this."

Between Chapters 4 and 5, however, Madeline crosses paths once again with Theo at the edge of a cliff. He has found a gondola and, despite Madeline's protests, finds a way to turn it on, pulling them up the side of the mountain. Then, a flash of light, and Badeline appears as the gondola grinds to a halt, ominously swinging above the drop. Madeline has a panic attack, the camera drawing in as the sky turns black and undulating tentacles reach in from every direction. Then, Theo suggests something: imagine a feather in your mind, let it float up and down, and now float the feather on your breathing. A minigame begins, and, as the player taps a button to help Madeline breathe, the game view fades out, replaced with a single feather, floating in the gentle currents of air. The gondola starts to move again and, as Madeline opens her eyes, the duo reach their stop and walk off to safety.

Chapter 5, the Mirror Temple, leaves Madeline little time to relax before Theo spots the entrance to a secret temple and charges in to take photos. The promise of more unknown dangers worries Madeline, but she nevertheless follows, fearing for Theo's safety. Her instincts turn out to be correct, as she soon finds him trapped inside a mirror, just as Badeline once was. As the player dives into this temple - a labyrinthine maze designed to turn the player around and loop back on itself - Madeline realizes that the temple mirrors the insecurities and inner thoughts of its inhabitants. She is sucked into the mirror world and, while rescuing Theo, encounters one-eyed monsters who bounce around, repelling all who come near. The player is tasked with carrying Theo - encased in a crystal but otherwise his usual chatty self - out of the temple, dodging the monsters and bouncing through puzzle-like rooms. This section is linear and

focused unlike the first half of the chapter, and as Madeline reaches the exit and defeats the monster blocking their path, her thinking also narrows in a potential solution to her problems. To free herself of Badeline and her own anxiety, Madeline believes that just has to leave that Part of Her behind at the Mountain. It is, after all, the bad side of her, right?

At the start of Chapter 6 - simply titled Reflection - Madeline and Theo, exhausted from their ordeals, set up camp atop an icy bridge. Here, the player is allowed to freely choose a number of conversations between the two. The topics start light, but Madeline's conversation options gradually narrow in on how she's feeling. Theo is surprised to hear about Badeline, not because he thinks Madeline is lying, but instead because he didn't realize that Madeline had so many bad thoughts walled up inside her mind. "You don't talk to anyone about it?" Theo asks? "No... not really." she replies.

Ok, we need to take a quick stop here. So far, this has been a very chronological summary of *Celeste*. Every Chapter in order, every sequence in place. However, there's one other thing that should be addressed at this point before continuing into Chapters 6 and 7. In a blog post on November 5th, 2022, Maddy Thorson - the game's director, writer, and lead designer - confirmed that Madeline is a transgender woman. This fact is only explicitly referenced in the game within the Chapter 9 DLC, where a photo of Madeline's desk reveals a tiny trans flag by her computer. No direct mention of her trans identity exists in the original game, and Thorson, who herself transitioned after the game's release, even confirms that she "didn't know that Madeline was trans during the development of *Celeste* [...] and had a hunch while we made [the DLC]." This is a unique situation from an academic point of view, as it raises many questions related to the death of the author and whether such a central piece of a character's identity can be considered to be 'canon' if it wasn't deliberately established by the author at any point during development. Thorson's post addresses this quite eloquently, making it clear that she "didn't want to pull a JK Rowling and start inserting details that might feel insincere or forced."

Frankly, though, such discussions aren't particularly relevant here, not just because this is supposed to be a straightforward narrative review, but because *Celeste* is so clearly written from a trans perspective. Madeline's struggle with a Part of Her, which she fights and curses and runs away from, personifies the indescribable weight that gender dysphoria inflicts on a person with an uncanny accuracy. The feeling of living a life you know so intrinsically to be a lie, and the internal backtalk saying no, maybe you're going through a phase or making a mistake or are just plain crazy. These are the feelings that come on the journey to accept your own gender identity, and they are the feelings that Madeline grapples with in every chapter of *Celeste*. To be afraid of a part of yourself is a wicked kind of terror, for until you can push past that fear and embrace the love hiding just beyond, every day seems dark and every summit seems unclimbable.

This all is not to say that *Celeste* is not about anxiety, depression, or any other artistic interpretations that a player may make of it. Indeed, its power as a story lies in its approachability and ability to connect with a wide range of experiences. As already established, the analogy of Badeline works for many different experiences, as the feeling of fighting with a Part of You that seems to just want to hold you back and make you feel bad is a universal

sentiment. This is not a trans-exclusive story, but rather an all-inclusive one, which, through its difficult yet conquerable gameplay, invites every player to connect with Madeline's journey.

So, Chapter 6. Reflection. As Theo and Madeline drift asleep, the world shifts and Madeline finds herself dreaming once again. The player is given one more mechanic: the feather from Theo's meditation advice. Jumping into it, the player enters a controlled flight upward, soaring between platforms with not a hazard in sight. Then, as the air thins and the Northern Lights glow below, Madeline finds Badeline. This time, she is happy to see her twin, as her revelation at the Mirror Temple has seemingly brought her resolution. "I don't need you anymore." Madeline states. "I'm setting you free." Badeline erupts. Tentacles consume the screen, and the sky turns red as synths blast around the suddenly terrified Madeline. The feather minigame from the gondola returns, but as the player attempts to hold it aloft and block out the panic, Badeline slashes the feather in half and flings Madeline downward into void. The dream ends, and the player catches a glimpse of Madeline clinging to the icy ground before falling down, down, down.

The bulk of Chapter 6 takes place in a green and pink grotto nestled beside the Mountain's base. Like Chapter 1, it is a mostly linear upward climb, incorporating more vertical elements and bringing back the feather as a regular gameplay mechanic. Despite it being the hardest chapter yet, the player experience is remarkably calm, especially considering the narrative situation that Madeline finds herself in. But after some time of pushing forward, she encounters an unexpected person: Granny, the old woman from the game's prologue. Between chuckles, she makes a comment: "I've never met someone so angry at themselves." She suggests to Madeline that, rather than pushing that Part of Her away, she should talk to her and "figure out why she's so scared." And so, one last chase sequence begins. This time, however, it is Madeline who chases after the frightened Badeline, a lightning quick reverse boss fight that pushes the player's skills to their limit. But as the player perseveres, Madeline inches nearer until Badeline comes to a halt, too tired to keep running. And this time, Madeline has something new to say, something that she has been unable to say for so long. "Please. Let's work together. It's okay to be scared."

This scene is the emotional and narrative climax of *Celeste*. The message is simple: embrace yourself, your whole self, and you can do anything. In the general analogy of anxiety, it's a reassuring message to love yourself and to have faith that, while things may seem scary, you have the strength to be strong and persevere. However, this is also the moment where viewing *Celeste* as a trans story is most important. The physical, very explicit metaphor for accepting a side of yourself that you have long forsaken is a fundamental struggle when coming to terms with one's trans identity. There's an external component, where the world around you tells you to be something that you know you aren't. But when that struggle for ownership of your own identity also occurs within your private thoughts, there is a temptation to wholly reject what you know in your heart to be an important part of who you are. By overcoming that temptation, by rejecting self-hatred and embracing self-love, Madeline has taken a monumental step on the road to being herself. Her journey is not over, but at this moment, Madeline and Badeline become one.

Chapter 7, The Summit, takes this powerful journey of unification and brings it to a satisfying conclusion. As the two embrace each other, Badeline is absorbed into Madeline, turning her hair purple. These two sides are finally working together, a change that is felt through a crucial addition to the Chapter's gameplay. The player's dash ability is upgraded, allowing for two consecutive dashes before touching the ground. This seemingly small mechanical change totally alters the feel of *Celeste*'s movement, achieving a new level of fluidity and expressiveness. Armed with this newfound power, Madeline charges back up the mountain, retracing her steps through a montage of the past 6 Chapters. As expected, this is the hardest Chapter yet, but it feels distinctly familiar. The player has experience with all the mechanics found here, and, when paired with the double dash, the resulting level design makes the player feel strong and free. This all takes place through a bright collage of level themes and imagery - with a final area whose color scheme, it should be noted, is the same pastel blue-pink-white of the trans pride flag.

Finally, the hazards disappear and the music fades out. The player climbs one last set of rocks, and Madeline has reached the summit. Badeline reappears, and the two look out over the landscape below. "We actually did it." Badeline says with a smile.

Strongest Element

The strongest element of *Celeste*'s narrative is its brilliant intermixing of narrative and gameplay. Great writing goes a long way towards immersing a player in the world and headspace of a character, but it is through gameplay that players can truly feel the weight of that writing. Examples of this can be plucked from every Chapter, but explicit examples include the chase sequences from and then towards Badeline in Chapter 2 and 6, the heavy wind blowing Madeline back in Chapter 4, and the 'boss fight' against the once friendly Mr. Oshiro in Chapter 3. This philosophy can also be applied to underlying level structures of the environment that a player traverses. For example, the unlit maze of Chapter 5 evokes a feeling of genuine isolation and helplessness, while the cheery simplicity of Chapter 1 grounds the player's initial impressions with optimism and hopefulness, just like Madeline. Really, the whole game's structure also serves both narrative and gameplay as one. By making the game so difficult yet approachable, the player arc of frustration and eventual success in each room organically syncs with Madeline's journey. Even a player with no personal experience with gender dysphoria or even having anxiety in general would still come to understand Madeline's struggles, an achievement by Maddy and the team that cannot be understated.

Unsuccessful Element

Despite describing it quite positively in the narrative breakdown, Chapter 3, Celestial Resort, is one section that I personally think is less successful than other parts of the game. While it tells a succinct, self contained story about Mr. Oshiro's own inability to move past his fears and the

burden placed on Madeline's own strained mental health by trying to help him, it's also somewhat of an outlier in Madeline's story. Every other section of the narrative is a very focused piece of Madeline's arc, and the other characters move in and out of that narrative. Theo's story is important, but it doesn't take center stage when Madeline runs into him on the trail. Chapter 3, in contrast to the other Chapters, focuses more so on Mr. Oshiro's experiences and his own anxiety, sidelining Madeline for much of its runtime. The consequence is that the impact of Chapter 2's monumental introduction to Badeline is forgotten until the Chapter's final chase, which interrupts the flow of Madeline's own story. Again, the theme of taking on others' burdens in place of your own do fit with *Celeste*'s narrative, but I believe there is a better way of integrating it with the game's narrative. A potential alternative would be to remove Chapter 3 and put Oshiro as a more passive recurring character within Chapter 4. Frankly, though, while that change might tighten the narrative arc, Chapter 3 is still fun, emotional, and one of the coolest themed Chapters in the game. As is, the game is still elevated by its existence, which is really just a testament to how well made the game as a whole is.

Highlight

In spite of the game's numerous narrative high points, there is one that outshines them all as my personal highlight. It occurs at the end Chapter 6, when Madeline tells Badeline that she accepts her and wants to continue the journey with her. The chaotic particles and swirling mist of the background fades away, the game goes quiet, and a small popup appears on screen. A handmade illustration of Madeline reaching out to Badeline. Then the drawing fades out and a new one takes its place. Badeline hugs her back.

Critical Reception

Celeste's was met with critical acclaim by all metrics, consistently scoring above a 90 on Metacritic on all consoles and garnering dozens of award nominations. Unsurprisingly, reviewers lauded the game's narrative as one of its strongest aspects. Russ Frushtick's review for Polygon notes how the game surprises players looking for a standard platformer with its deep narrative, but especially praises how it never "feels overbearing or tacked on." His review is actually one of the less favorable critic reviews, awarding the game an 8/10 - still a score that many developers would dream of. But though he cites isolated frustration with a few specific level segments and some inconsistencies in the side content, the narrative receives nothing but praise. In particular, his review directly highlights the direct parallels between the gameplay of the seven chapters and Madeline's ultimately positive arc with her own identity, noting that the narrative makes playing the game feel more uplifting and doable.

Tom Marks of IGN similarly calls out the effect of narrative on gameplay and vice versa asserting that "the way *Celeste* balances these two parts of itself by default is flawless." He elaborates on this point, noting how the experience of being powerless to help Madeline during

moments like her anxiety attacks inflicts a similar distress on the player. Many reviews also reacted with similar acclaim to the game's other characters and their impact on the story. Marks, for example, was surprised at how candidly the game talked about mental health, with particular praise directed towards the scene from the start of Chapter 6 where Madeline and Theo talk openly about depression. His review - which gave the game a 10/10 - ends with a tagline that just about sums up how much this game and its narrative resonated with players: "*Celeste's* incredible platforming, innumerable secrets, and emotionally genuine story make it a surprise triumph."

Lessons

- Lesson 1: Narrative can and should be considered to enhance gameplay, and vice-versa. This has been said many times before in this review, but it bears repeating here. Their integration doesn't necessarily need to follow this same parallel structure, but even just considering them as linked from the outset of development can, as we see here, elevate the game as a whole experience.
- Lesson 2: Side characters in games don't have to have complex backstories or be constantly showing up to have an impact. Granny is a character who appears only twice before the credits roll, yet she makes a lasting, memorable impression on both the player and Madeline, thanks in no small part to her hilarious yet oddly poignant dialogue. We know nothing about her - not even her real name, as Granny is just Madeline's nickname for her - but that doesn't stop us from loving her all the same.
- Lesson 3: narrative in media doesn't need to be concretely etched in an immutable stone before its release, and the non-diegetic perspective and input of its author can positively enhance the experience of hearing that story. This is a more contentious opinion, but it is undeniable that any narrative analysis of *Celeste* becomes even richer with the external confirmation that Madeline is a trans woman. By confirming Madeline's trans identity, Maddy didn't limit the broad appeal and relatability of the story. It is truly an inclusive addition, as the larger metaphor remains intact. *Celeste* can still be experienced by a player to be about anxiety, or depression, or just the feeling of being stuck on a really hard level in a game. But Maddy's blog post encourages a second look at that story - and also makes *Celeste* a beacon of inspiration for a community whose positive representation in media leaves a lot to be desired.

Summation

Not much more can be said about *Celeste's* narrative, save for a simple suggestion: please play it. The beautiful thing about game narratives is that, no matter how many articles you read or videos you watch, no second hand retelling can quite capture the experience of playing through that story for yourself. *Celeste* is a hand-crafted experience, created by developers who set out with one story to tell and ended up releasing something different and far more beautiful. It'll

make you laugh and maybe make you cry. You'll throw the controller down in frustration, then pick it right back up and make it through. And when you, Madeline, and Badeline all make it to the summit, you'll sit back and look down at the journey you've pushed through. You made it.