

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Celeste

Platform: PC, PS4, Xbox One, Nintendo Switch

Genre: 2D Platformer

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Developer: Matt Makes Games

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Overview

Celeste is a sincere story about mental health and self acceptance. It is a narrative, single player platformer where Madeline and a small cast of characters make a highly reflective storytelling experience. The game is a fast-paced 2D platformer and the player can jump, air-dash and climb. The aim is to climb Mount Celeste and the game uses this simple objective to expose Madeline's worst fears. The climb is tough since the hike to the top makes Madeline vulnerable at every step and every level is only progressively tougher. This game's uniqueness lies in the subtlety through which it discusses important issues like depression. It teaches the player about dealing with their own demons but most importantly, it teaches the player to keep that feather afloat, and "Just Breathe."

Characters

Madeline:

One of the halves of her own duality, Madeline is the playable character of Celeste. She is a determined climber with red hair who seeks the mountain expedition as a break from her life. Her character arc is that of self discovery and the higher she goes, the more her anxiety takes over. The game develops her in bits and pieces because it wants the player to be in a state of curiosity to captures the player's mind. As the events

unfold, and the game gets tougher and Dark Madeline slowly takes over. Dark Madeline tries to pull her down and the mountain climb unravels to be a metaphor for Madeline's struggles with anxiety, self doubt and panic attacks. Her character weaknesses are the narrative strength of the game because Madeline's mountain climb represents her own self-healing journey to take control of her own life.

Dark Madeline:

Madeline's doppelganger and the antagonist of the game, Dark Madeline is a unique character in it's own way. She floats above Madeline's head and is the reason for Madeline's crippling anxiety and panic attacks during the climb. She is always questioning Madeline and trying to make her give up. Dark Madeline is portrayed as the main boss of the game and used by the game for some of the high paced gameplay sequences. Her arc takes a turn in the game when the story emerges to be about self-acceptance and Madeline makes amends with her inner-self because she realizes that Dark-Madeline cannot be escaped. She is the pragmatic part of Madeline. Dark Madeline explicates that resisting your thoughts isn't healthy. Her arc comes full circle when the game portrays the power of self-acceptance, when Dark Madeline becomes one with Madeline and gives the player the resultant second dash. The relationship between Madeline and Dark Madeline is what breathes life into the narrative- Madeline is the Yang to Dark Madeline's Yin. They both together are contradictory forces but they are relative to each other. Dark Madeline is a perfect example of the duality we all exist in.

Theo:

The symbol of friendship and a representation for social anxiety- Theo is a tall young American who is climbing the mountain to get a break from his hectic, monotonous life. He is almost always taking pictures to boost followers for his "InstaPix" account. Theo meets Madeline at various stages and they slowly get closer. Madeline is always surprised at Theo's "go with the flow" attitude because it contradicts her rather paranoid and anxious inner self. Even Theo has his own struggles and talks about how he feels that he is constantly judged and that he has a responsibility to keep up his reputation in his social following. Theo is also a great listener and helps Madeline learn a breathing trick to escape her panic attacks. Theo's significance in this game is heart-warming, and gives the game its own goofy moments.

Old Lady:

The Old Lady is a character in Celeste and one of the few known people who inhabit the mountain. She demonstrates great knowledge about the mountain, constantly warning Madeline about its powers. She is short, and has white hair with a green jacket and supports herself on a walking stick. The Old Lady's dialogue is key in some places because she is instrumental in revealing Madeline's inner struggles. She is one of the rather realistic characters in the game who gives cautionary advice to Madeline at every step of her journey. The Old Lady stands out from the rest of the supporting cast of characters because she does not have any distinct personality trait. More often than not, she wants Madeline to be careful and insists that the climb is not for the weak- implying that Madeline was meant to fail. These moments also show Madeline's strong determination and her unwillingness to give up. Her dialogue with Madeline midway through the Reflections chapter is what gives Madeline the motivation to continue the climb. It is this wisdom which helps Madeline because she decides to talk her inner self out of the fear of climbing, and accept her own self doubt.

Breakdown

The game starts with a very soothing tone, where it asks Madeline(the player) to breathe, and raises a simple question "Why are you so nervous?" This immediately invites the player into its premise and gives a small hint on Madeline's internal conflict. The game wants the player to channel their frustration towards the mountain climb. Celeste's narrative progresses with the simple idea of doing something, just because we want to. Madeline takes the mountain climb for the same exact reason, she is determined to climb it and wants to challenge herself. It is in the first chapter, the Old Site, after reluctantly traversing the first world- that Madeline comes across a mirror and sees her reflection break through it. Madeline's self doubt, and nervousness had all come to life in her dark form. Floating above her head, Dark Madeline was rude, unkind and constantly held Madeline back.

Madeline is constantly trying to run away from her doppelganger and this is her mistake. The game's central theme revolved around this idea of preventing evasiveness, and the development of a victim mentality. After the second world, Madeline reaches out to her ex-boyfriend and confides in him by telling her fears about a doppelganger chasing her. Her boyfriend is dismissive, not understanding of her troubles and labels Madeline's issues as a "dream." Her boyfriend's conversation is a lesson for everything one must not do when a loved one confides about their issues. Approaching a mentally fragile person with a dismissive attitude and not giving their personal issues credibility can

often cause imbalance in that individual's well being. This is one of the many examples of how Celeste uses its narrative to teach lessons about mental health to the player. At the Celestial Resort Madeline meets Mr. Oshiro and is very kind in offering help to clean up his untidy establishment. Mr. Oshiro is anxious because of his inability to clean up his own mess. His inner self is pulling him down with the burden of self doubt. In a brief interaction towards the end of the level, Madeline loses her patience and Dark Madeline lashes out at Mr. Oshiro. She yells at him by calling his resort a "dump" and Dark Madeline also brands him as a "loser." Madeline fails in helping Mr. Oshiro recover from his problems and he goes back to his hotel, anxious more than ever about the state of it. Mr. Oshiro is portrayed to be the character whose inner demons have trapped him and he is left helpless until Madeline meets him. Oshiro serves as a portrayal of everything self doubt can do to one. He is left with little self confidence after years of helplessness. The red goopy obstacles in the hotel are manifestations of his low self esteem and his hotel is progressively untidy the more one plays the game. Madeline doesn't yet understand that the dark part of her can't be escaped from- it is only when she embraces that part of her, will she fully understand herself and moreover, be in control of her own actions. Every time she runs away, her doppelganger grows stronger and the "boss fights" become progressively tougher at the end of each level. The hotel symbolizes everything that can go wrong if you're too afraid to commit to a task. It is commendable how the game used a minor character to imply negative themes related to Madeline's troubles and make the player more aware about their own mental well being.

Madeline is still determined and pushes through the climb where strong winds become her biggest obstacle until she reaches the gondola and meets Theo. The gondola malfunctions and Madeline's anxiety takes over her. Theo, tries to calm her down and teaches her a trick to overcome her panic attack by instructing her to shut her eyes, imagine a feather and keep it afloat by taking deep breaths. The game literally exhibits a breathing exercise by showing the feather on the screen and prompts the player to keep it floating in a box. The music and the tension creeps into the player and they give in to the breathing exercise to control the feather in the game. This exercise does the trick to calm Madeline down and the feather becomes an important tool for Madeline's climb in the excruciatingly difficult parts of the game.

The mirror temple was an exhaustingly difficult level. This was a level where themes of depression and anxiety played an important role. Theo takes off to embrace the "social-media potential" of the temple and Madeline is left alone to traverse the temple by herself. A few minutes into the level the player realizes that the temple has trapped Theo on the "other side" and Madeline has to rescue him. Madeline takes on a quest to

save him, and she is the only light in the rather dark rooms of the temple. The mirror temple's environment is what elevates its narrative feel. Everything is eerie about the temple and it possesses a ghost-like atmosphere. It all gets even more intense when Madeline comes across a large, cracked mirror which exposes the player to her nightmares. She is crouching in fear as a monster comes and kills her; literally living her worst nightmare. She later falls down, and meets Dark Madeline who lashes out at Madeline. Her inner self blames her for feeling like a victim, and makes her realize that she is the one doing all this to herself. She tells her that Madeline is the one in control. However, Madeline is left vulnerable at this point, she is defeated because her inner self gives up on Madeline and she blames her for everything going wrong. To make things worse, the temple brings a Monster from Madeline's nightmares to life and now the player not only has to get over the ever so challenging tight rooms but also has to make sure that the Monster does not eat Madeline. She meets Theo in the temple, and he is trapped in a cage, with a set of eyes looking at him and following him constantly. The temple not only manifests Madeline's worst fears but also brings to life Theo's worst feelings of being watched upon. Throughout the game, Theo is shown to take pictures for his "InstaPix" followers and the game tells a very real anecdote about today's generation which is obsessed with social media. The temple latches onto this idea of social appearance and the game's background has eyes which hauntingly stare at Theo in all rooms. The temple becomes spookier and the rooms only get tougher. Madeline has a moment of self reflection and an echoing voice of herself asks her to breath to hold her place to fight against the temple's mysterious forces. Madeline does save Theo heroically since she manages to carry him and at the same time, defeating her own monster to escape the temple.

The game is not only about the tight level design but it is also about the short breaks Madeline takes which serve as the game's exposition. When Madeline takes a break at the fireplace with Theo, they both open up about their issues. This dialogue is heartfelt and honest. Madeline speaks about how she feels like she is sinking down an endless void and there doesn't seem to be a way out of her depressed self. These dialogue pieces make the player introspect about themselves and almost go through a similar self realization. However what is more powerful is Theo's role- the game uses him to teach the player to be a better friend and how to be a listener for someone going through the same issues. Theo is sweet and caring, but unlike Madeline's ex-boyfriend, he never undermines or overlooks Madeline's issues. Celeste teaches the player that sometimes, just listening is all that your friend/colleague/relative needs. Theo never gives any professional help apart from teaching the feather trick.

Madeline wants to set her inner self “free” by driving her doppelganger away. However, this is a mistake and the game wants to teach that self acceptance is what heals oneself. We all live in our own duality and it is only futile to try and run away from yourself. Her inner self yet again overpowers her; making her fall down through the mountain and literally hit rock bottom. This time the game gives the power of the feather to improve the player’s maneuverability and even though the levels are tough, the feather serves as a constant reminder for the player to breathe. She meets the Old Lady who teaches her to reflect on her inner self, question her feelings and understand that part of her.

Madeline opens up to her doppelganger and tells her that they can be one. She wants to understand her own fears and Dark Madeline just needed to be understood. This is the climax, the moment of understanding where Madeline deduces everything. Quite symbolically, it was only after she hit rock bottom, crossing the “Reflections” chapter that she becomes fully self-aware. She embraces Dark Madeline and this changes the dynamic of the game because now the game harnesses the power of self acceptance and the player is rewarded with a double dash. This extra dash exemplifies the power of self acceptance, and shows the player how easy can it make the same challenge.

Madeline’s character arc is not just her, but could be very well be of someone who has similar struggles. The game’s narrative does not delve into her past- this is because like Madeline, the game does not want the player to question what happened in the past. The game is about Madeline leaving her past behind but at the same time accepting her inner self.

Celeste leverages the difficulty of a platforming game to convey its narrative themes. Mental health has spoken to every element in the game very strongly but the level design exemplifies how the game uses its mechanics to channel the themes to the player. Overcoming the mountain and finishing the climb was analogous to Madeline getting over her own internal conflict.

Further dissecting its level design philosophy, one of the parts which also spoke very closely to its overall narrative was the way Celeste designed its progression. Each “room” was very small and focused, the player knew that they had to reach the side opposite from where they started. This was very important to supplement Celeste’s message. Celeste mountain is a metaphor for any big challenge which comes across the player’s way, the challenge looks insurmountable but breaking a problem into smaller pieces and taking an iterative approach makes that challenge seem much more easy. This is what the level design stands for; every room is small, the player is never shown what lies ahead and “how much of the world is left to complete.” The player is never taxed with these rather intimidating details which incite self doubt about finishing

the climb. This, as a whole makes the game easy because the player enters a state of flow and the levels become more of the jumping, dashing and oscillatory obstacles. Dying is never met with a loading screen so the player doesn't have the time to think about the previous failure, and almost immediately moves onto the next attempt. All the elements of the game together explain to the player, that everytime you fail; you learn more and become successively better at the level. The death count is not a metric of failure- but it is a trophy that reminds the player of all the times they didn't give up. These are lessons which are self-reflective in nature. The idea of not giving up is the central theme of this game. This makes failing almost optimistic and moreover, the climb never seems as intimidating. Celeste wants to teach the player that failure is the first step to success, the idea to gamify these simple teachings brings life into a mountain climb, makes the experience personal at every passing moment in the game and touches the player beyond the game. The hero's journey is not just Madeline, but- it is everyone of us. As the player reaches the later stages of the climb, there are numbered flagpoles which countdown checkpoint-style to the summit and every time you cross a flagpole, the game uses positive reinforcement by use of little pixelated confetti to remind how close the player really is and that if they have made it so far, it is only futile to give up the climb.

The idea of tackling anxiety and nervousness is rooted so deep into every element of the game that their collective emergence touches the player, and gamifies the rather sensitive discussions around anxiety and depression.

Strongest Element

Celeste's strength lies in the cohesion of its game design principles and the message it wants to convey. Level design, environment and the music- are all elements which can be isolated from the narrative more often than not, but Celeste chooses to use their design philosophies cohesively to convey it's idea of mental health. Moreover, each of them progress in its own way to mirror Madeline's struggles and raise the overall aesthetic of the game. The environment is the best example in the way it conveys these ideas with subtlety. The eyes in the mirror temple create an eerie atmosphere, but also; the eyes hold metaphoric value in manifesting Theo's social anxiety. At the same time, Madeline is not only avoiding obstacles, but she also has to defeat her monster from her nightmares which the mirror temple brings to life. When the player first becomes the feather, the music turns uplifting, the levels break away from the traditional "room" design and the player just reaches for the sky. This seems like a breeze and a sense of

flow is achieved. The difficulty in the game never feels taxing to the player, and the player is never dissuaded from playing the game because Celeste is difficult but not punishing. It never pushes one back to the start of the world; it simply makes the player restart that room. It directs the player's frustration of failing into one single task and not scaling the entire mountain. The feather is a narrative piece to remind the player to breathe but also an in-game mechanic to help Madeline scale the mountain. Dark Madeline not only holds metaphoric value to represent Madeline's anxiety, but she is an important part of gameplay since she is the "boss" chasing Madeline through the fast paced rooms- which helps the game change its pacing and give the player a break from the monotony of pitfalls and spikes. Moreover, the merging of the two Madelines not only represents self acceptance but gives the second dash to the player. Every game mechanic is so intricately tied to the narrative that Celeste evolves into a symbol representing the fragilities related to mental health.

Weakest Element

Celeste's narrative underscores its core idea of a difficult game. The level design which is meant to be very difficult, can lead to parts in the game where the player is unable to cross the level, and is "stuck" in that room. The mirror temple, is a gruellingly difficult level with rooms where the player needs to have pinch perfect timing in their jumps through numerous amounts of narrow passages which may or may not be covered with spikes. While difficulty can be predicted while designing the game, the reliance on reflexes of Celeste makes the game's flow very unpredictable. This, by extension can create a disconnect between the narrative sequences of the game. Some players would be so invested to "beat" the game, that they would choose to rather skip the dialogue cues entirely. There is some structure in the way the game holds the narrative by having dialogue cues at the beginning, middle and the end of each level. These are short interactions with either the Old Lady, Theo or herself, but these moments can sometimes interrupt the flow of the game with childish dialogue. Moreover, after the player manages to beat a sequence of increasingly tough rooms- the intensity of the gameplay takes over the player and more often than not, they aren't seeking a break. When the player is unable to cross a level for an extended period of time, it is highly possible that the player loses the connection with Madeline due to the frustration of failure from dying multiple times over and over again. The "difficult" climb sometimes gets extremely frustrating, and the player could lose track of the story the game is trying

to tell the player. This unpredictable pacing of a very linear 2D platformer game is what I feel is its weakest element.

Highlight

Celeste's highlight is the bonfire conversation along with the sequence of becoming the feather after the fire temple. This section is extremely impactful to the narrative because Madeline is honest about her personal struggles to Theo and the game rewards the player for making it so far up the journey. It is special because Theo becomes a friend to Madeline and moreover, he listens to her. The player is given the option to control the dialogue and even though the player can choose to continue the game by ending the conversation early, there are some powerful lines that Madeline says which hit an important note in dealing with anxiety. To quote Madeline when Theo wants to learn more about her struggles "I'm just floating in this abyss, swimming in a random direction. Hoping that I find something." Lines like these during the conversation exemplify Madeline's problems and the game invites the player to understand Madeline. The player empathizes with Madeline and the events which follow later with Madeline and her doppelganger are so much emotionally effective. Theo also mentions how Madeline reminds him of his sister, Alex, who also deals with similar issues. The mention of Alex reassures Madeline that she is not the only one dealing with those struggles and Madeline becomes more comfortable in sharing her feelings with Theo. The sequence of gameplay immediately after the conversation is calming. Madeline manifests herself as a feather and she flies upwards. This is amazing because as the player flies upwards, they can see the Northern Lights in the background and the entire experience is almost meditative with uplifting music. This section of the game exemplifies the emotion and subtlety Celeste carries with itself. The narrative grounds the player into the world and moreover creates a positive vibe to counter the negative energy from the temple. This little break the players get in the game due to the narrative is remarkably powerful- the player is ever so connected to Madeline, and the game opens up to the player completely. This section is pivotal because it changes the narrative tone from darker themes about anxiety and depression to more positive ideas like self acceptance and learning to tackle your own demons.

Critical Reception

Overall, Celeste received great critical reception from all news outlets. IGN gave it a score of 10/10, Metacritic scores it at 91/100 and news outlets like Kotaku have given a lot of praise for its gameplay. To quote Tom Marks from IGN, “The strength of Celeste’s story and the honesty with which it tells it transforms this game from simply being one of the best platformers I’ve played this decade.” The common denominator in all the reviews is their mutual admiration for the tight dashing mechanics but also their surprise at how the game deals with themes of depression and anxiety. Critics have also appreciated synthesizer based music and how Celeste blends the soundscape and the narrative to its environment.

Lessons

- **Narratives should be about “story-sensing”, not just storytelling**

A video game is an immersive medium: it is a unique part of digital media where the player’s mind is actively involved by controlling what happens in the screen. This means that the game should not only engage the player but make them feel a part of it. While the narrative gives the player a premise, the environment has to speak to the game and its storytelling themes. Celeste’s environment reflects Madeline and by extension, the player’s mood. It uses tentacles to depict a panic attack creeping into you and the chaotic and the disorganized state of the hotel represent the mind of a person with suppressed emotions. Celeste beautifully weaves its themes into its environment, and moreover these things make a frustratingly difficult game also genuinely emotional. Every part of the game wants the player to empathize with the characters and the daunting mountain climb is almost forgotten because the player only cares about crossing the level they are in at that very moment.

- **Exploit one mechanic to the fullest**

Celeste’s jump and dash feels good because the controls are extremely simple. The jump is so well designed that the player enters a state of flow as they maneuver through those tight gaps and the spike traps; the game also challenges the player’s timing and forces them to think on their feet in sequences

where Madeline's doppelganger is chasing her. But this straightforwardness of its controls is what makes it extremely dependent on timing and reflexes. There are levels where missing a jump in a split second would see you face death. The game's central mechanic of jumping and dashing never changes- in fact it goes a step beyond to give a double dash to the player. There are rooms where the player can almost feel that moment of eureka when they realize the true path to get across. Sometimes it is the wind which could either help the player or push you back depending on its direction. The hotel had "evil" goo which would grow on the steps the player took, forcing them to think about the next step in the simplest of levels. There is so much variety in its core design of obstacles that the player never feels saturated of the jump.

- **A small cast of multi-dimensional characters trumps a big cast of one dimensional characters.**

Celeste's narrative design heavily relies on Dark Madeline and Theo. The Old Lady was also important because she reminded Madeline to be careful and motivated Madeline to continue the journey by constantly reminding her that she can't do the climb. Dark Madeline is one of the best examples of an antagonist in a video game. Her narrative significance is so intricately designed because she represented everything wrong with Madeline's psyche. The game uses her doppelganger to let the player understand and empathize Madeline. By bringing anxiety and Madeline's self doubt to life, the game tells a very touching story about self acceptance and how Madeline deals with her anxiety. Theo was used by the game to introduce the feather mechanic, and moreover teach the player about how to be a listener. Theo's friendship and her doppelganger's own character arc are extremely powerful elements in the game's narrative which exemplify that giving depth to the side characters in a game polishes the entire narrative feel of the experience.

- **Give meaning to death**

Celeste relies on the player's endless pursuit to reach the peak and not give up. This means the player dies often but the game does not give the player time to think. The next attempt is instantaneous and the player's frustration of dying is channelled towards the next attempt. This is extremely important in games like Celeste where the game is designed to be as difficult as it can get. Celeste goes a step further and adds little postcards in its loading screens where it tells the player to not be afraid of trying and failing. The game is very self aware of the fact that the player will die frequently and so, it constantly pushes the player. Dying in Celeste has a greater meaning and it wants to teach the player the idea

of persistence. It is a very simple idea but that is what makes this game special- it's almost childlike perception on simple game mechanics like death and pickups makes it unique and leads to a very compelling narrative.

Summary

As the game repeatedly says “The mountain brings out the worst in the ones making the climb” and it is true, the mountain did literally manifest Madeline’s worst fears, it did bring Theo’s social anxiety to life but- they both made it to the top and conquered their fears. This was the greater lesson, it was about facing your worst fears and getting over them. The game harnesses the power of its simplistic pixelated environment to go beyond the screen and teach the player about dealing with your own issues. The metaphoric significance of the Mountain and Dark Madeline are straightforward, and portray important themes. In addition, Celeste juxtaposes the calm and reflective moments from the intense, platforming moments which makes the game extremely powerful. Matt Makes Games uses the story with its level design to create an emotional, reflective narrative that keeps players engaged as Madeline’s climb to the top unravels to the end.

Citations

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