

Analysis of Celeste

By Jason Teo Jun Hao

Introduction

Identification

Here, I'll explain how the developers designed the game and wrote the story to help us connect with Madeline.

Changing Names

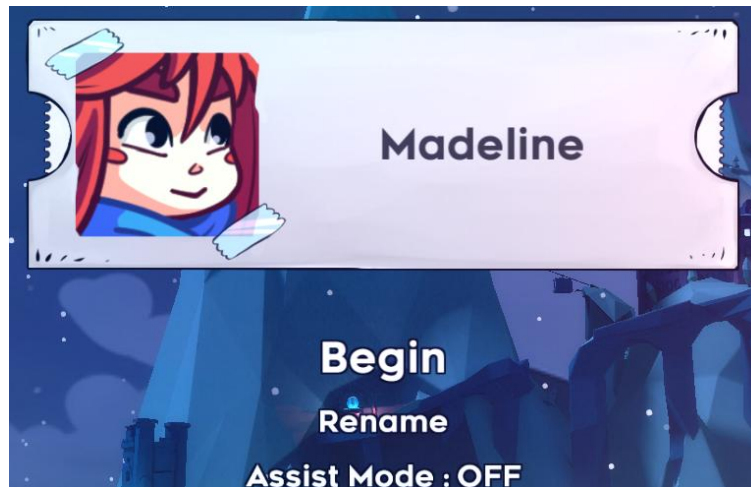


Fig 1.1 UI when starting a new game

At the start of the game, you can change Madeline's name (fig 1.1). Seeing your own name in the conversations makes it easier to relate to what the character is going through.

The Story

Overview

In Celeste, you play as Madeline, the main character. She decides to climb Mount Celeste to challenge herself, even though it's risky. When a local warns her about the tough journey and questions her determination, she feels the need to prove them wrong. Throughout her journey, she faces dangers like falling rocks, wide gaps, ghosts, and even her own inner struggles that become real.

The Opening

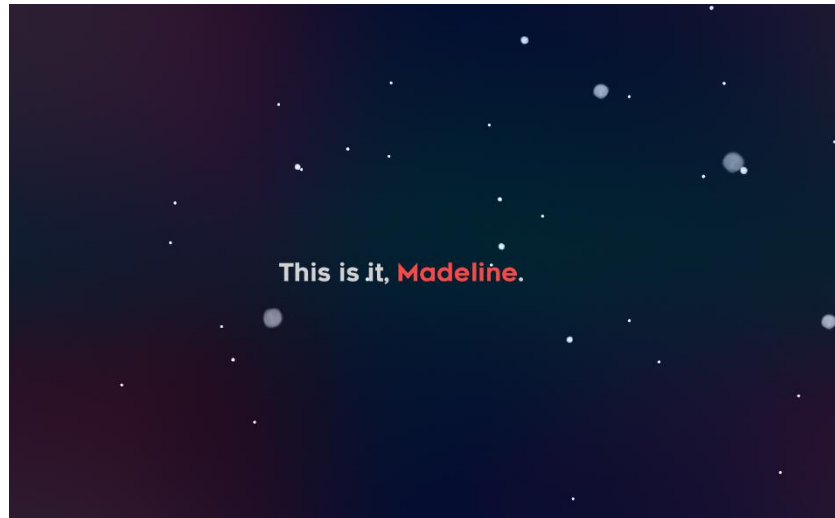


Fig 2.1 Screenshot of the first line of the game

"This is it, Madeline." "Just breathe." "Why are you so nervous?" These are the first lines of the game. They show Madeline's worry and fear about climbing Mount Celeste. The developer connects our own nerves about starting the game to Madeline's anxiety, which helps us relate to her. If you use your own name instead of Madeline's, this feeling is even stronger because the self-talk feels more personal.

Theming

Celeste's main theme is self-acceptance. The game introduces characters who each face this struggle differently, such as Theo, Mr. Oshiro, and a character fans call "Badeline."

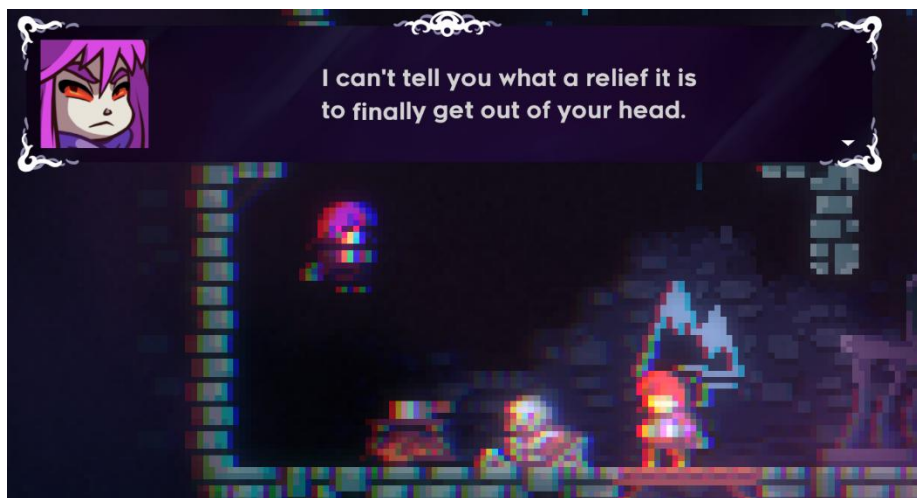


Fig 2.2. Screenshot of first conversation with Badeline

Badeline, created by the mountain's magic, is the physical form of Madeline's struggles with depression, self-doubt, and anxiety. She calls herself Madeline's "pragmatic side" and tries to sound realistic, but she actually represents Madeline's fears and worries. This is clear in their conversation in Chapter 2 (Old Site):

Badeline: But look, I'm worried about us. We need a hobby but this...

Madeline: I know it sounds crazy, but I need to climb this mountain

Badeline: You are many things, darling, but you are not a mountain climber (Maddy Makes Games, 2018, Chapter 2)

As you play, you'll see more conversations between Badeline and Madeline that highlight this idea. Many people can relate to this ongoing inner struggle.

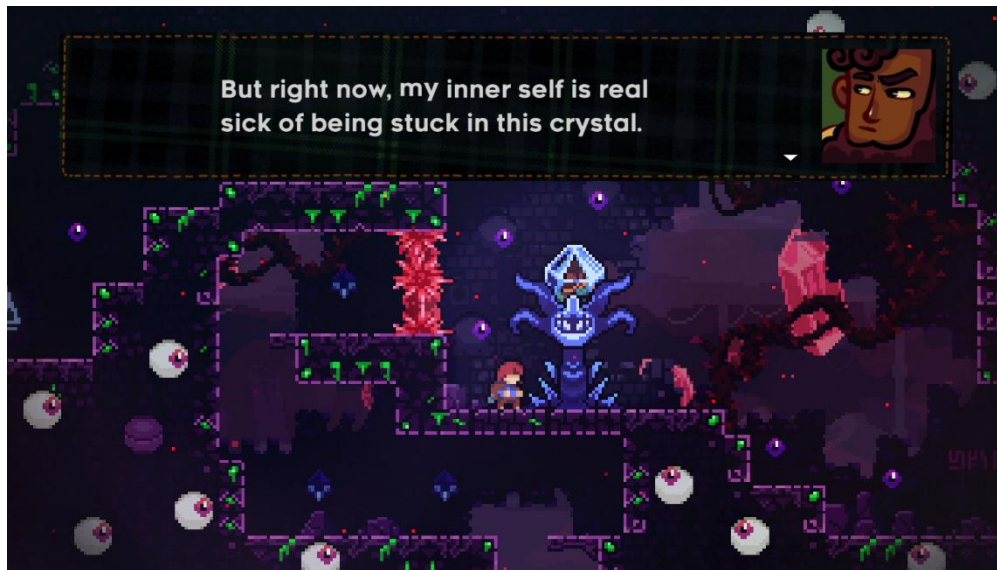


Fig 2.3. Screenshot of conversation with Theo in Chapter 4

Theo comes across as a relaxed, easygoing person who visits Mount Celeste to take photos and get attention on InstaPix, the game's version of Instagram. But in Chapter 4, Mirror Temple, we learn there's more to him. The Mirror Temple is a magical place where your inner troubles turn into monsters. By the end, it's clear that not all the monsters come from Madeline. Some, like the Eyes, come from Theo. This is shown in the following conversation:

Madeline: I shouldn't be mad, this isn't your fault. I'm glad you're safe, but you're trapped because of me. And now this temple is showing you what I'm really like. I'm horrible...

Theo: Hey, we're in this together. Don't act like this is all on you.

Madeline: What do you mean?

Theo: You didn't trap me in this crystal. Sure, those monsters are coming from you, but the temple is shaping itself around me too. I can feel it. These eyes are staring at me... And this crystal is coming from me, I know it. I hate to ask, but I really need your help right now.

(Maddy Makes Games, 2018, Chapter 4)

Theo's struggles come from his need to be noticed by others, which is something many people can relate to today, especially with how important social media has become.

Mr. Oshiro is the ghostly manager of the Celestial Resort. He's stuck running the hotel alone because he can't let go of his regrets about the resort closing. He lives in denial and avoids facing the truth, so we end up dealing with his problems. Madeline tries to help him, but her kindness is mixed with arrogance, and she ends up making things worse. This situation is familiar to anyone who has tried to help someone but ended up causing more trouble.

Even though these examples are specific, they make the characters easier to relate to. From what I've seen, people who skip the story don't enjoy the challenge as much. That's why I believe the story is a key part of what makes Celeste different from other platformers or rage games.

Motivation

Intrinsic

Theo and Madeline's Conversations



Fig 3.1 Screenshot of conversation with Theo in Chapter 2

Throughout the game, Theo's conversations with Madeline set the tone for their relationship. In Chapter 2, Old Site, he excitedly shows her his photos, even though she doesn't seem very interested. "Maybe I'll finally hit a thousand followers with these" when he posts new photos. "My grandpa was really into it. Apparently he was semi-famous in the photography world. I don't know if I'll ever be that good at it. But it's nice to feel close to him." when asked why he takes pictures (Maddy Makes Games, 2018, Chapter 2). This is a mix of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, but what's interesting is the effect of these conversations.

These conversations, while partly extrinsic, show that each character has their own reason for climbing Mount Celeste. Hearing their stories makes us think about why they're playing the game, too. This conversation comes right after a tough chase with Badeline, which makes it even more powerful and gives us a moment to reflect.

Strawberries (Collectables)

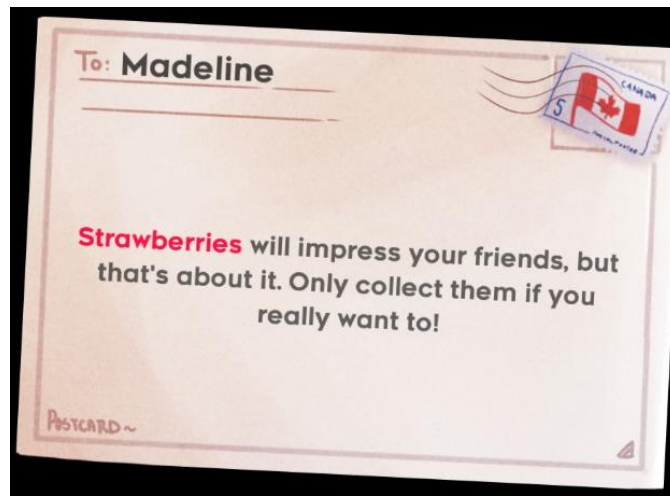


Fig 3.2 One of the postcard that appears between levels

Strawberries are collectables you can find in the open, hidden, or behind puzzles. They can also encourage you to finish a level in a certain way. Usually, collectables are an extrinsic motivator, so they don't have as much impact as the intrinsic motivation I mentioned earlier. But the developers use postcards (fig 3.2) to tell us that collecting strawberries only matters if you want to do it for yourself. This makes the motivation more personal.

These choices show that the developers wanted the game to focus mainly on intrinsic motivation. The main story highlights this, while extrinsic motivators like Heart Gates only show up after the Epilogue.

Extrinsic

Crystal Hearts and Heart Gates



Fig 3.3. Screenshot of Heart Gate in Chapter 8

Crystal Hearts are hidden in each level and can also be earned by finishing the harder B-side versions. After the Epilogue, you unlock Chapter 8, The Core, as an extra story part. To move forward in The Core, A-side, you need to collect four Crystal Hearts to open a gate. There's a similar gate in the downloadable Chapter 9, Farewell, but it needs fifteen Crystal Hearts. (Celeste Wiki, nd) These requirements make collecting Crystal Hearts an extrinsic motivator.

Flow

Level Design

The level designs, which I'll talk about more later. Complexity is layered such that we don't get overwhelmed or lose our sense of flow. The developers balance the levels carefully between being challenging and matching the player's skill with the mechanics. This keeps each level engaging and never too hard to play.

Learning

Mastery

Preemptive warning

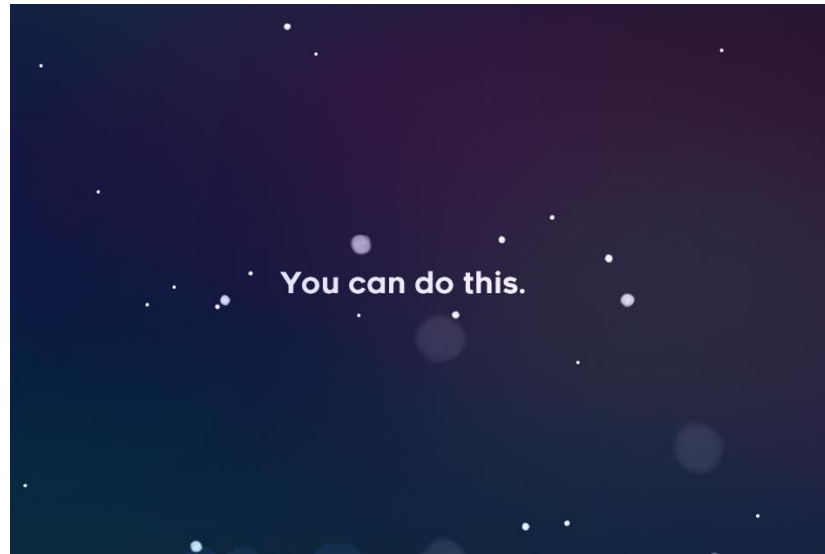


Fig 4.1 Screenshot after clearing Prologue

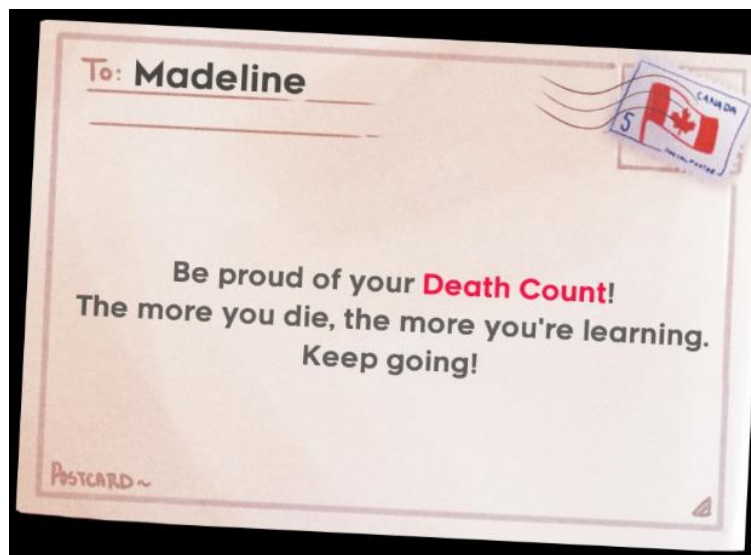


Fig 4.2 Postcard of Encouragement

“You can do this.”(Fig 4.1) The developers saw this line as very important, and for good reason. It shows that the game will be difficult, but not impossible. It helps us accept that it’s okay to fail because the challenge is real. The postcard (Fig 4.2) also supports this idea by saying that our death count is a sign of learning.

Hidden Rooms



Fig 4.3 Screenshot of a room 12 in Chapter 1

By the time we reach this room, we've noticed that strawberries and even rooms can be hidden. We also note that you can travel up through a platform even if there are spikes above. So if you're paying attention, you might spot a strange gap where there is a brown platform seemingly for no reason. If you explore it, you'll find that the boxed area in Fig 4.3 is a secret room!

Call-Back Level Design (Chapter 7 Summit)



Fig 4.3 Comparison of Chapter 1 remixed(left) and original(right)

In the final chapter of the story, after falling to the ground in chapter 6, she comes to terms with her anxiety. She works together with Badeline to reach the summit. That would normally mean going through everything again, but the developers cleverly treated the different chapters as remixes. This will give you not only a sense of nostalgia but also a feeling of having come very far. These remixes were not made to become a challenge; rather, a testament to your improvement, of course, with the double dash in mind.

Scaffolding

General Level Design



Fig 4.4 Screenshot of Room 4 of Chapter 1

In Chapter 1, the design of Room One is simple. We move from the starting area, use dashes and jumps to reach each platform, and avoid falling on the spikes. This

gives us a sense of relief after the earlier warning, and you might find yourself thinking, “That wasn’t so bad,” just like I did. The developers would introduce the mechanics first without extra complexity (Fig 4.4) and then slowly add more in the following rooms.

Gestalt

Figure-Ground

Foreground vs Background

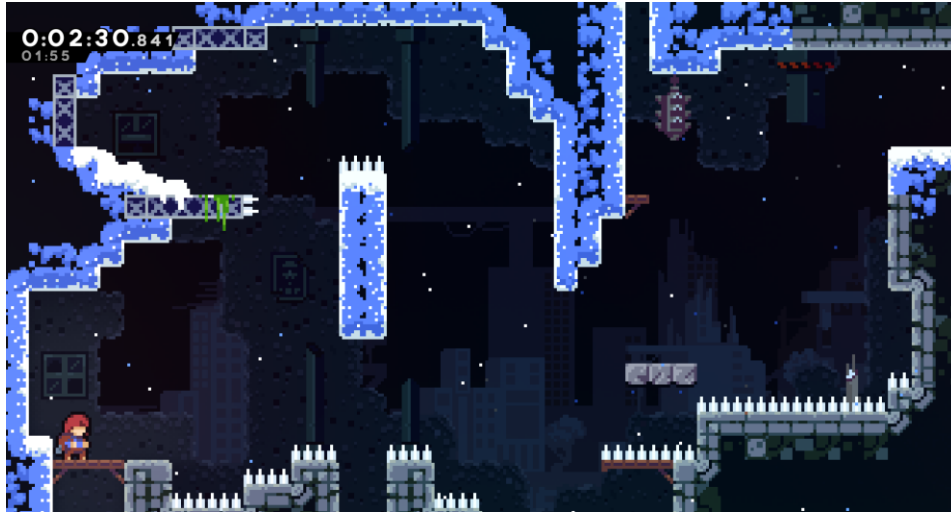


Fig 5.1 Screenshot of Room 12 of Chapter 1

From fig 5.1, we can see that the assets in the playable area are brightly lit compared to the background. This makes it easier to see what is part of the game and what isn't. This is essential since Celeste is a platformer which requires precision.

Similarity

Madeline's Hair Color (Dash State)



Fig 5.2 Screenshot of Madeline's Hair Colors

Madeline's hair color comes in three states: blue, red, and pink. Pink is only available after chapter 6, when Madeline decides to accept Badeline as part of her and embrace her anxiety. Throughout the game, these colors are a helpful way to remember and plan our route when clearing the rooms. Blue means Madeline has no more dashes. Red is her normal state, which after prologue would mean she has one dash, and pink means two dashes are available (Fig 5.2).

Proximity/Similarity



User Interface

Fig 5.3 Screenshot of Pause Menu UI

Fig 5.3 shows the bottom of the pause menu in-game, which you can open by pressing the escape key during a chapter. Not every room has a strawberry. This UI shows red for newly collected strawberry this save file, blue already collected strawberries this save file, and a grey dash for a uncollected strawberry. The order matches the order in which the strawberries come. Having it ordered makes it easy for us to see if we missed a strawberry somewhere.

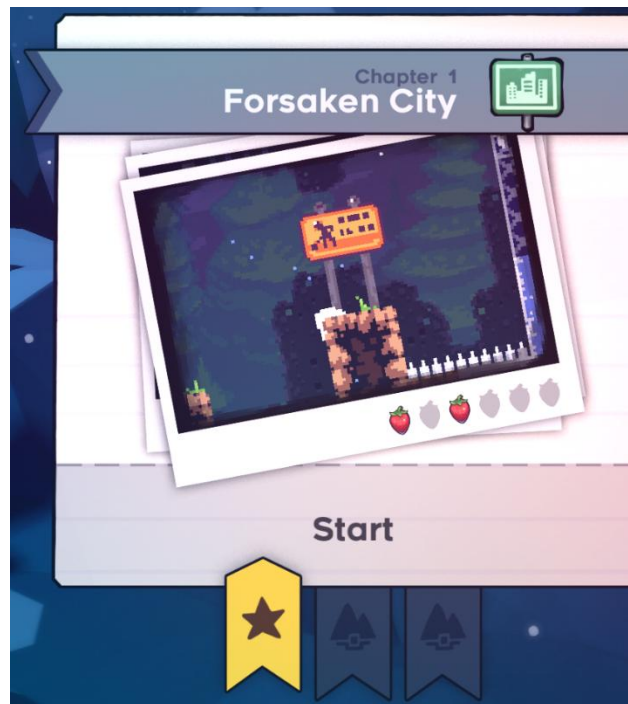


Fig 5.4 Screenshot of Chapter Selection UI

Fig 5.4 shows the map select UI. Here, it displays the groups of rooms and the number of missed strawberries in each group. A group can also be identified by the line separating the dashes in Fig 5.3.

Conclusion

Celeste's impact goes beyond its challenging platforming. Its narrative and mechanics are carefully crafted to encourage identification with Madeline, prompting us to reflect on their own struggles. Intrinsic and extrinsic motivators are interwoven to keep us engaged, while the gradual increase in difficulty creates a sense of flow and mastery that is both satisfying and meaningful. The application of Gestalt

psychology in level and UI design ensures the environment is intuitive and rewarding to explore, reducing frustration and supporting learning. Ultimately, Celeste demonstrates how the thoughtful use of psychological concepts can elevate a video game and make it stand out from others.

References

Celeste Wiki. (n.d.). *Heart door*. Retrieved June 24, 2026, from https://celeste.ink/wiki/Heart_Door

Maddy Makes Games. (2018). *Celeste* [Video game]. Maddy Makes Games.

In-Game Screenshots taken by Jason Teo Jun Hao