

APRIL 24, 2022

ASSESSMENT 2 –
GAMEPLAY ANALYSIS ESSAY
FM 2608 – GAME STUDIES 2

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Introduction/Thesis

Celeste opens to a black screen and the sound of a car pulling up and text being presented on screen. This text introduces us to the game's protagonist Madeline, and displays affirmations directed towards herself and the player as she states, "This is it, Madeline", "Just Breathe", and "Why are you so nervous?". The player is then thrust into the world as they are given control over Madeline's avatar and presented with their first platforming challenge with no information regarding the controls of the game. The game continues similarly throughout, with only brief moments of aid given to the player via a bird or other NPCs who direct the player with regard to traversing the environment. Madeline's journey to the top of mount Celeste is perilous and the potential for failure is always present. Both the player and Madeline must overcome a number of challenges in the form of the mountain and its terrain and Madeline's internal struggle as she battles with her mental health. This struggle is reflected not only in the narrative of the game, but also in the gameplay, which attempts to invoke feelings of struggle, failure, and anxiety within the player through its mechanics.

In order to better understand how this is presented to the player, this essay forms a textual analysis of *Celeste* with regards to its use of procedural rhetoric and affect within its design. First identifying how meaning is created through the rules of the game using procedural rhetoric as a design principle. Based on the work of Ian Bogost, as well as Miguel Sicart's critique of proceduralism in games. In addition to this, the essay will demonstrate how notions of affect may be incorporated into the design of the game in order to position the player within the ideological framework of the game. Based on the works of Tomkins, Shinkle, and Anable. By doing so, I argue that in refocusing the player the player's position, through affect, the player is no longer viewed as an observer of the game's pre-defined meaning but as an active configurator of it. However, by attending my embodied and subjective experience of the game, I also contest that the incorporation of affect within *Celeste* also has the potential to form a ludonarrative dissonance where the affect created may position the player against the procedural rhetoric of the game.

Meaning Through Processes

In order to identify the procedural rhetoric created within *Celeste*, it is important to first highlight exactly what this term means in the context of video games. Procedural rhetoric, a sub-domain of procedural authorship, as formulated by Bogost, "is the effective persuasion and expression using processes." (Bogost. I, 2008, p.125). From this, we may understand games as having the ability to create subjective meaning and formulate claims about the world through rules as processes for creating compelling arguments. This practice of using 'processes persuasively' is based on the proceduralism inherent to how rules are presented within computer systems. Additionally, Bogost identifies these rules as essential in 'creating a possibility space that can be explored through play', based on the works of Zelen and Zimmerman (Bogost. I, 2008, p.122). Within this understanding of procedural rhetoric and proceduralism more generally, Bogost places the focus of a game's meaning on the rules that comprise its system. This approach to design allows for a specific idea to be conveyed through the rules and the experiences that they create through the game's rules and mechanics. Bogost highlights the practical application of this design principle within the game *Animal Crossing*, where the rules of the game attempt to simulate a materialistic/ capitalistic ideology.



This same emphasis on rules as essential for creating meaning in games is highlighted within the works of Juul as he attempts to create a classic game model. Juul defines games as “a rule-based-system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels emotionally attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are negotiable.” (2005, p.52). This understanding of games identifies them as first and foremost systems comprised of rules with pre-defined outcomes, which allow for a space to be created in which player effort may be applied in order to reach said outcome.

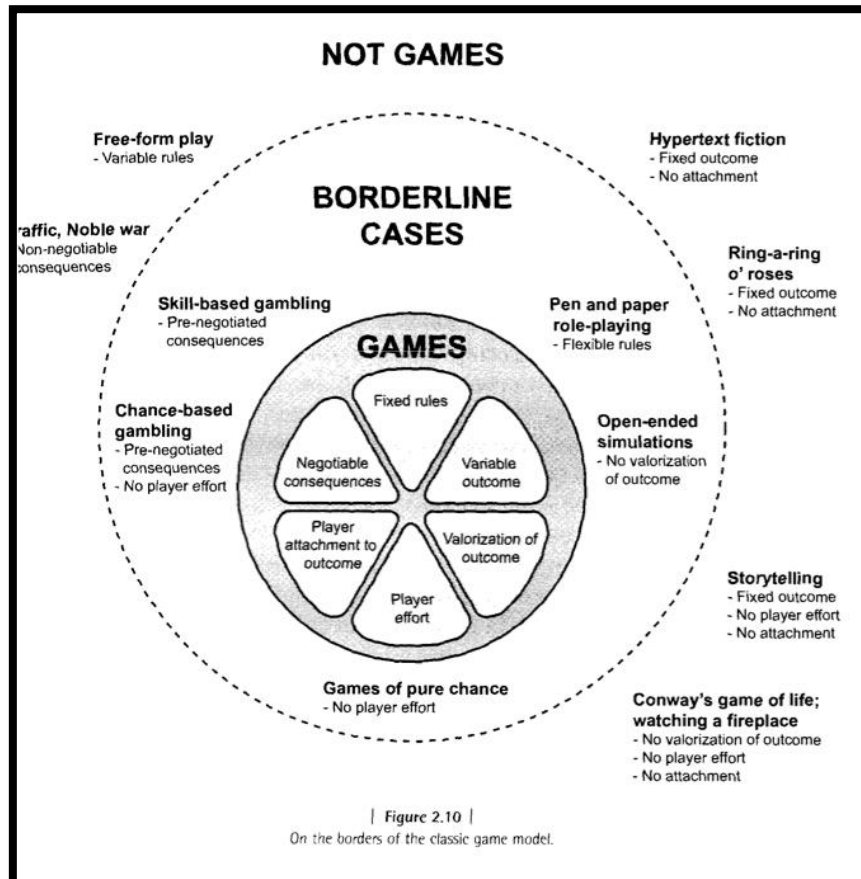


Figure 1: A visual representation of the classical game model from Juul, J (2005)

From this understanding of procedural rhetoric, we may identify several persuasive processes in *Celeste*. An overarching meaning for the game is outlined by Noel Berry in the quote below.

We always knew the game was about overcoming something you personally set out to do, and that we wanted the gameplay (climbing a mountain) to mimic that of the player (beating a hard game).” (Berry. N “/u/noelfb”, 2018)

This quote was submitted in an online subreddit, the development team Matt Makes Games answered a series of questions regarding *Celeste*.



The overarching meaning can be seen in the following examples from *Celeste*. The act of 'climbing a mountain' includes navigating relatively small, self-contained two-dimensional levels using various routes, avoiding/overcoming obstacles without falling out of frame (off the mountain, and using various 'moves' which allow for space to be traversed. The momentum created through this mimetic climb aims to keep the player moving forward constantly and progress is saved after each level is completed. These processes viewed within the context of the game's narrative – regarding mental health and overcoming anxiety and depression – allow us to identify the claims the game may be making. I believe that the climbing of the mountain is an analogy for one's 'uphill' struggle when trying to overcome disorders such as anxiety and depression. While the various move sets, continuous progression forward, and small levels (small battles), may be reflective of the struggles one might face when trying to overcome these disorders.

Concerns of Proceduralist Design

From this example, we can certainly see how both rules and their intended meaning may be reflected through gameplay. However, I do not believe that this meaning exists in isolation, but rather meaning is created through the player's subjective understanding of the system as well as the rules of said system. This same sentiment is conveyed by Bogost when discussing 'simulation fever' (Bogost, 2006, p. 108-109). In both his description of procedural rhetoric and simulation fever, Bogost does not exclude the player altogether from the meaning created, but rather the player's involvement of said meaning is placed second to the pre-defined meaning created through the system's rules.

While the effective use of procedural rhetoric and proceduralist understanding of meaning within games has already been highlighted, that is not to say either is without its faults. By placing the game's pre-defined meaning above the player's subjectivity, a one-dimensional view of the player may be created. This concern is echoed in Sicart's critical review of procedural rhetoric and proceduralism within games, as he states the following: "proceduralism enforces a type of instrumental play that eliminates the need for a player as an active configurator of the meaning of the game." (Sicart, M, p.10). Here, we can see the concern that the act of playing is no longer central within the proceduralist approach to design as the meaning already exists within the confines of the rules. Sicart continues to say that "The risk of proceduralist rhetoric is to identify play with reason, to control play and guide it to a predetermined purpose." (2011, p.14). Within this understanding of procedural rhetoric, all elements of free play (*paidia*) are removed and replaced solely with rules (*ludus*), subtracting from the player's configurative performance. The importance of which cannot be overlooked. Even when returning to Juul's definition of games (p.1), we can see that Juul also identifies the player's inclusion as key elements when defining what a game is. Specifically, Juul highlights the importance of the player's emotional attachment to an outcome in which they may influence the outcome. Here, this definition of a game departs from games simply as rule-based systems and identifies games as aesthetic devices.

This same notion is reflected in one of the key processes within *Celeste* known as 'Badeline'. This character (Badeline) is a mirror image of Madeline that embodies her negative thoughts and occurs throughout the game. Badeline's appearance is heralded by a shift in both audio and visual tonality. The once serene music is replaced with harsh synthetic sounds and the visual aesthetics of the levels shift to create a more ethereal appearance. Following this brief introduction, Badeline begins to chase the player in the hopes that she may capture them and stop them from progressing any further. If Badeline is successful, the player will be forced to restart from their nearest checkpoint reached.



I believe the procedural rhetoric conveyed here is one regarding the negative thoughts that may surround oneself, and how these negative thoughts may present an obstacle to progression and literally hold one back. This example highlights not only the aesthetic nature of *Celeste* but also the subjectivity of the game's meaning (conveyed through processes), as my personal experience with this sequence was one of struggle and failure, whereas the same may not be true for someone who has mastery of the game and may not struggle with this, potentially changing the context and therefore meaning.

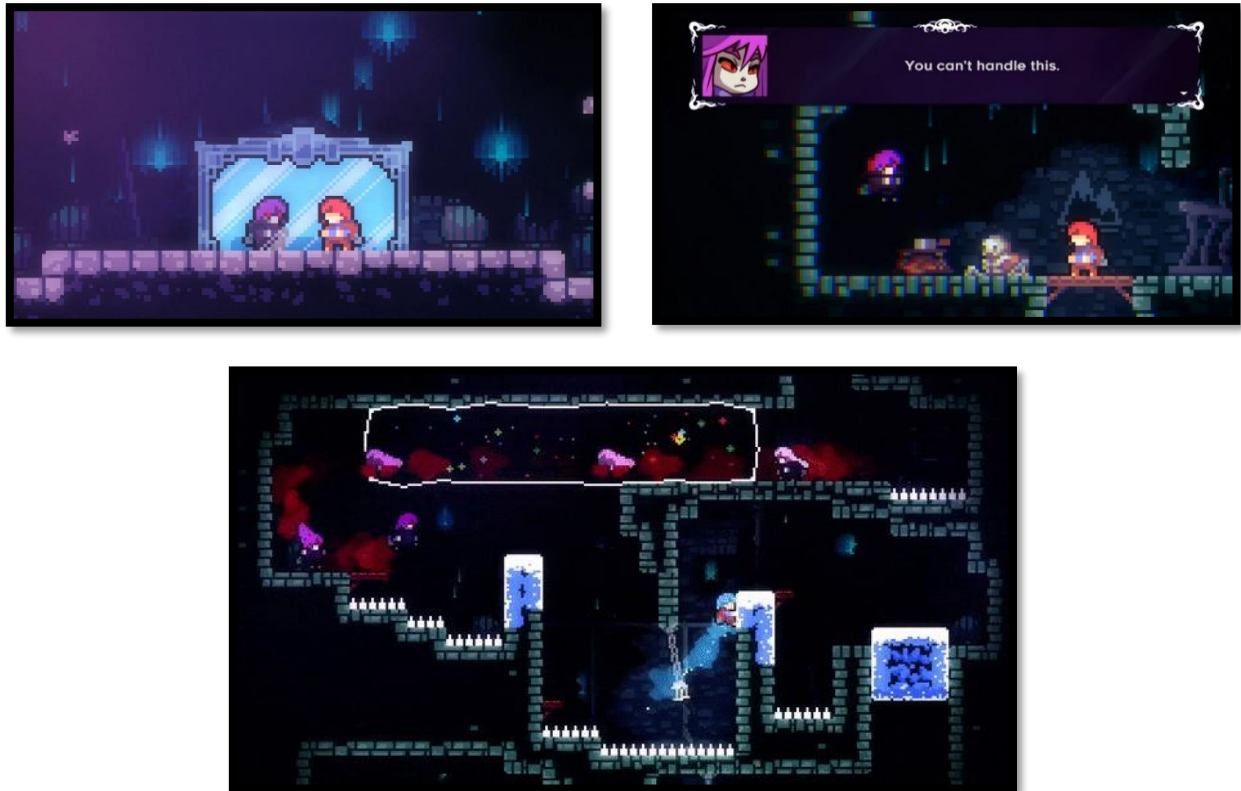


Figure 2-4: A sequence where Badeline is introduced and subsequently begins chasing Madeline, echoing her movements.

Positioning Meaning

From this example, we can see how *Celeste* emphasizes both the inclusion of games as rule-based systems as well as aesthetic devices. Where meaning is not created through the process described alone, but also includes the player as a configurator of this meaning through their affected subjectivity. Highlighted by the inclusion of my own embodied experience in the understanding of meaning as compared to someone else's. I believe the personal experience created may be attributed to both the process described as well as the design of the level and the emotions it aims to invoke within the player. The maze-like structure seen in these levels is typical of the adventure genre and critical to the game's procedural rhetoric. As outlined by Murray in her discussion on the game *Adventure* (Crowther. W, 1976) and the adventure genre more broadly, "The key to creating an expressive fictional labyrinth is arousing and regulating the anxiety intrinsic to the form by harnessing it to the act of navigation.". Murray continues to say that this allows for the structure and the navigation of said structure to invoke emotions of suspense, fear of loss of self, and abandonment, as well as courage and perseverance. (Murray. J, 1997, p.129). While this presents a fairly narrow understanding of the phenomenological aspects designed within the interactivity of the game by identifying only a few of the numerous emotions that may be invoked, it does help understand *Celeste's* use of affect.



While the term affect used here has been historically debated, largely due to the divide between affect as an ontological or phenomenological principle (similar to ideo-affective posture), it is used here in line with Anable's understanding of it. Anable describes affect, as existing both within the subjective player and the rules of the system, where affect has 'the capacity to touch and be touched' (Anable, A, 2018, p.39). Through the inclusions of affect and proceduralism within the design of the level, I believe the concerns raised by Sicart in his critical review are partially addressed. By viewing the rules through the lens of affect, the proceduralist approach to design no longer treats the player as one-dimensional but instead attempts to bring the player within a particular posture to better understand the procedural rhetoric. Creating the potential for a more persuasive game, where a particular meaning is not prescribed but promoted.

The use of affect and ideological positioning is highlighted in the works of Tomkins & McCarter (2008, p.764)- albeit inverted- whereby, the ideological orientation of a subject may be determined using Tomkins 'polarity scale'. Through his research on affect, Tomkins is able to reasonably predict the affect of images on an observer based on their ideo-affective posture. In the figures below (Fig 5-9) I have included several perspectives from an art piece by Troika as an analogy for this same observation. The art piece, known as "*Squaring the Circle*" (2013) makes use of a single, abstract sculpture which changes shape based on the positioning of the observer. I believe this illustrates the same relationship which would be employed through the use of procedural rhetoric and affect in design. Here, the base structure (procedural rhetoric) does not change, but instead it is the perception of the structure that changes by adjusting the player's position (through affect).

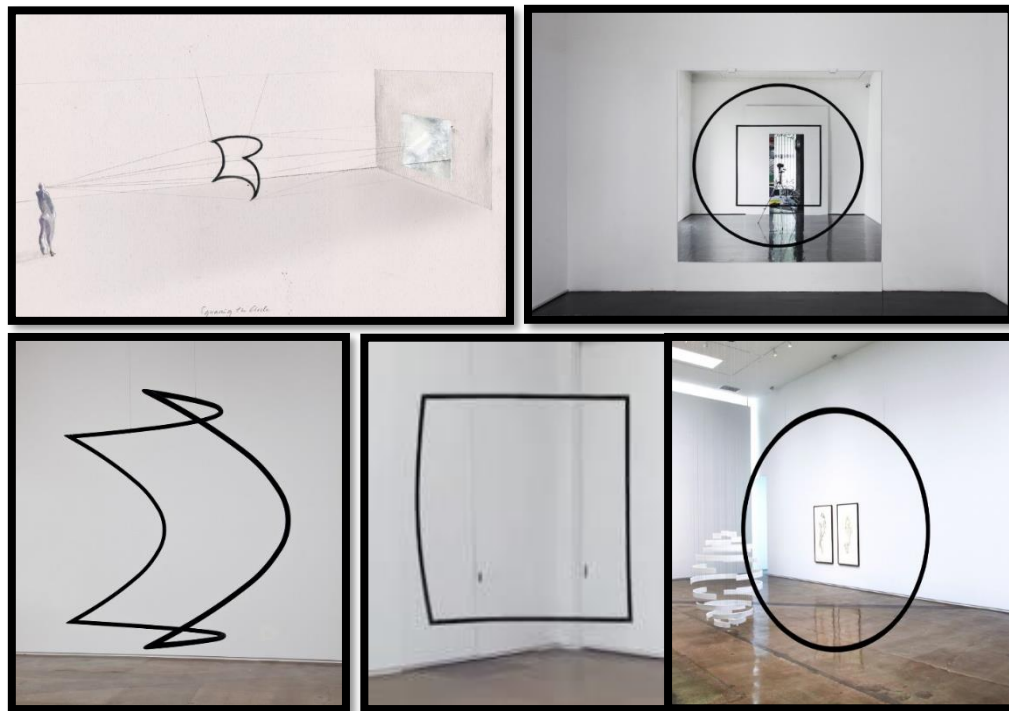


Figure 5-9: Troika, (2013), "*Squaring the Circle*" [Metal, Wire]



An example of this may be seen during an especially stressful sequence for Madeline, where she finds herself having a panic attack while on a gondola that begins to shake due to Badeline interfering with it. At this point, Theo attempts to help Madeline by teaching her a breathing technique. This initiates a sequence for the player where they must attempt to maintain a feather's position within a square as it moves up and down via the game's movement control. As the player begins to maintain the feather's position within the square, the harsh, synthesized music used to signify Badeline's presence begins to fade as it is replaced by more serene music again.

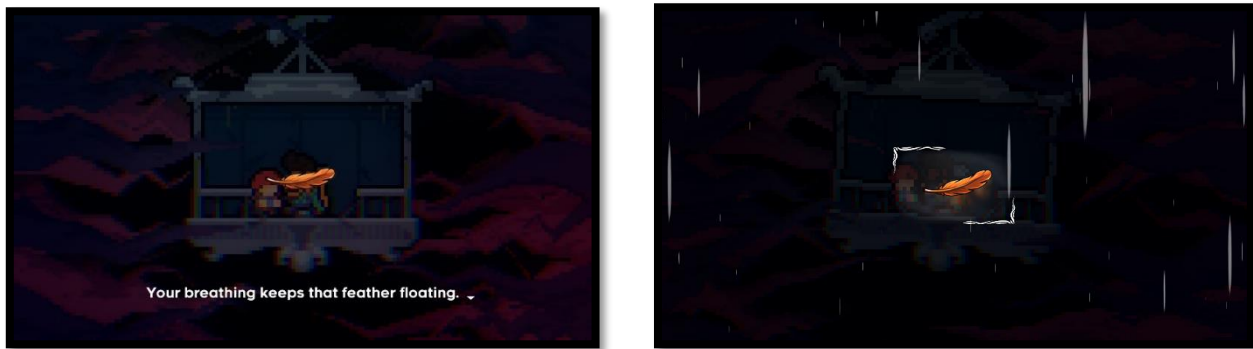


Figure 10-11: The feather 'mini game' sequence from Celeste

I found this particular sequence extremely powerful as through the combination of the visuals of the feather and the surrounding particles that move in tandem with the physical controls, as well as the change in audio, an experience of synaesthesia was created within me. I became so fixated on trying to control the feather's position, that unconsciously, the lines between Madeline's in-game breathing and my breathing began to delineate as they each followed the on-screen position of the feather.

Lost in Interpretation

From this example, we may see from my own embodied experience that *Celeste* has the capacity to create meaning beyond the confines of the rule-based system. However, the embodied experience described is still subjective and cannot be applied uniformly to all player experiences. As argued, by positioning the player through the use of affect, the meaning created through procedural rhetoric may be better understood by the player. However, in the same capacity, this approach to design may have the inverse effect. A similar concern is raised by Shinkle when discussing Poole's work on 'cybernetic dissonance' (Shinkle. E, 2005, p.5). "Reducing this cybernetic dissonance claims Poole, 'will always increase the possibilities of a closer and more pleasurable interaction with a videogame'". Whereby a less phenomenologically engaging interface may isolate the player from the meaning created through its processes. While the works of Poole and Shinkle's commentary of it were primarily concerned with physical feedback based on the hardware used to interact with a video game, I believe this same theory may apply to games on a software level where the feedback is based on the player interacting directly with the ludo-affective system.



During my experience of playing *Celeste*, I understood that I was undergoing changes within my emotional state just as Madeline was. I knew that I was helping her through her battle with anxiety just as I was overcoming it by completing each level that I struggled with. However, due to the state created within me during the final sequences of the game (particularly the final encounter with Badeline), I became overly frustrated and didn't believe I could overcome this obstacle. Even after having done so, instead of feeling rewarded, the game presents my statistical performance to me, by quantifying my numerous deaths (1673), playtime (9 hours and 47 minutes), and the number of 'strawberries' collected (14/175). On a subjective level, this feature loses any meaning of overcoming difficulties and is instead replaced with feelings of underperforming. This is further reinforced when a seemingly pleasant scene where Madeline bakes a strawberry pie using the strawberries collected, which is marred the game's critique of my performance as I did not collect enough strawberries.



Figure 12: My performance captured in the expression of the game's characters

Conclusion

The use of procedural rhetoric as an approach to game design is well-founded and the effective application of which can be seen throughout the industry. However, I believe that by isolating the player from a game's meaning, the designer runs the risk of disregarding the player as an active configurator within the meaning of the game. By introducing notions of affect, a designer may make effective use of a player's position in relation to the game's meaning, allowing for a more nuanced and persuasive argument to be made. The understanding of rule-based meaning and affect outlined within this essay illustrate this point. However, through the inclusion of my own experience, we may identify both these principles as still being subjective and run the risk of detracting the player from the intended meaning designed within the game.



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