LISTENING OUTSIDE OURSELVES: HOW THE MUSIC IN CELESTE FACILITATES EMPATHY WITH QUEER IDENTITIES

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I declare that the research presented here is my own original work and has not been submitted to any other institution for the award of a degree.

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Abstract

In video games, players experience a blending of identities as their actions are entwined with the avatars they control. Bob Rehak has described avatars as doing "double duty as self and other". He explains that avatars function as an extension of self, as the physical movement of the player in operating their controller determines their movement. When players interact with video games, they dwell in an inter-subjective middle space of identity that highlights shared experience, encouraging empathy.

Through a critical reading of Lena Raine's soundtrack for *Celeste*—a game following Madeline, a transgender woman on a journey of self-discovery—this thesis examines how music enhances blended identity between players and queer avatars. Critics like Lisa Nakamura and Bonnie Ruberg argue that video games' attempts to foster empathy can result in "identity tourism"—an appropriation that oversimplifies and de-radicalises queer experiences. Drawing on Istvan Molnar-Szakac's idea of music as the "Language of Empathy," I posit that *Celeste*'s soundtrack goes beyond identity tourism, allowing for genuine empathetic engagement.

Using Timothy Summers' methodology of "analytical play," I explore the function of music within *Celeste*'s gameplay. I argue that Raine's use of "failed" timbres constructs a queer headspace parallel to Madeline's, allowing players to personally engage with queerness through subversive musical experiences. Additionally, through conveying emotion during pivotal moments, the music deepens the player's connection to Madeline, enhancing emotional alignment and facilitating a shared experience. The findings suggest that video game music constructs emotionally connected blended identity, allowing players to resonate with avatars outside of their own subjectivities.

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Introduction

In video games, players experience a blending of identities with their avatars. Although avatars inhabit a virtual world, they remain bound to the real-world decisions of the player. Bob Rehak has described avatars as performing "double duty as self and other".[1] He explains that avatars function as an extension of self, as the physical movement of the player in operating the controller determines their in-game movement. Jessica Alred has argued that this interaction creates a "blend of identities."[2] This is demonstrated in players using first person language to describe their avatar's actions. Through the interactivity of the game, a shared identity is constructed between avatar and player.

Celeste is a platform game, created by independent studio Maddy Makes Games, released on both console and PC.[3] In the game, players guide an avatar called Madeline as she climbs a fictionalised version of the mountain Celeste. The base game consists of eight chapters, split up into various "rooms", which are single-screen sections of level with checkpoints in between. Unusually for the platform genre, *Celeste* places a large focus on narrative, exploring themes of mental health, depression and anxiety. Madeline is a transgender woman, based off lead developer Maddy Thorson's experiences as a transgender woman herself. Her climb functions as a metaphor for her internal quest toward self-acceptance.[4]

Madeline's transgender identity was not confirmed until the year following *Celeste's* release, in a ninth chapter called "Farewell". In the base game, Madeline's identity is never

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1. Bob Rehak, "Playing at Being: Psychoanalysis and the Avatar," in *The Video Game Theory Reader*, eds. Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (London: Taylor & Francis, 2003), 106.

2. Jessica Alred, "Characters," in *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies*, eds. Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (London: Taylor & Francis, 2013), 359.

3. Maddy Thorson, developer, *Celeste,* music by Lena Raine (Vancouver: Maddy Makes Games, 2018), video game.

4. Maddy Thorson, "Is Madeline Canonically Trans?," Maddy Makes Games Blog, 2020, https://www.maddymakesgames.com/articles/is_maddy_trans/index.html.

explicitly discussed. In 2020, when Thorson came out publicly as transgender, she explained that extrapolating her feelings into the game was how she figured out her identity.[5] Despite this, even prior to the release of "Farewell", *Celeste* resonated with queer fans. As reflected by a player: "*Celeste* is a game about the process of understanding who you are, and in turn the process of learning to be empathetic to yourself. That process can, in a lot of cases, be extraordinarily difficult, painful work for queer people. I know it was for me."[6] There is something inherently queer to Madeline's character, perceptible to queer players even when not explicitly stated. This raises the question: how might blended identity function when non-queer players interact with Madeline*?*

Blended identity is not limited to players and avatars that share similar characteristics. Adrianne Shaw's research into identity and video games found that players are likely to identify with avatars they share experiences with, even if they do not share specific identity traits. [7] In *Celeste,* challenging gameplay has players succeeding and failing alongside Madeline repeatedly, as they battle to overcome each room. This shared experience can construct blended identity with any player, not just those who share Madeline's characteristics. Chris Tonelli argues that players spend extended periods in an "intersubjective middle space" between their own identities and those of the avatars they control.[8] He posits that spending time in this space challenges the human tendency to "Other" identities distinct from our own.[9] Thus, games like *Celeste* have the potential to build understanding for queer identities in non-queer audiences.

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5. Thorson, "Is Madeline Canonically Trans?."

6. marshall_h, "How the Celeste Speedrunning Community Became Queer as Hell," interview by Jeremy Signor, *Kotaku*, Jun 27, 2023, https://kotaku.com/how-the-celeste-speedrunning-community-became-queer-as-1848120383.

7. Adrienne Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 94.

8. Chris Tonelli, "Game Music and Identity," in The Cambridge Companion to Video Game Music, eds. Tim Summers and Melanie Fritsch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 332.

9. *Capitalisation intentional.* See Tonelli, "Game Music and Identity," 328.

For this understanding to amount to empathy, there must be a sharing of emotions—not just gameplay challenges. *Celeste*'s soundtrack, composed by Lena Raine, has been the subject of much critical acclaim.[10] Raine's music incorporates electronic sounds and realistic instrumentals to construct an evocative emotional landscape. Like Thorson, Raine is a transgender woman. She describes embedding a lot of personal experience into *Celeste*'s soundtrack, explaining, "The closest I've come to actually presenting myself through a soundtrack was *Celeste*."[11] As a result, throughout *Celeste*, Madeline's identity and queer journey is brought to life not only through gameplay, but also through music.

Istvan Molnar-Szakacs describes music as "the Language of Empathy". He posits that music communicates shared emotions, which in turn create empathetic and intersubjective connections between individuals.[12] When Raine's music sounds in *Celeste,* it communicates emotional experiences that all players can engage with, regardless of their existing identity. Timothy Summers explains that video game music has a unique function due to "the complex character/avatar relationship". The music in Celeste engages the "player's 'real' identity", intertwining it with Madeline's in-game emotions.[13] It strengthens blended identity through constructing a shared emotional journey that supports the gameplay. This highlights the similarities between the player's identity and Madeline's, allowing them to resonate with the struggles and joys of a transgender identity from a deeply personal perspective.

This paper takes *Celeste* as a case study, arguing that video game music can construct empathy for marginalised identities. To demonstrate, I make two key arguments.

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10. Ari Notis, "Celeste's Chill Soundtrack Is Perfect For A Snow Day," *Kotaku*, Feb 3, 2021, https://kotaku.com/celeste-s-chill-soundtrack-is-perfect-for-a-snow-day-1846185459.

11. Lena Raine, "Lena Raine," interview by Lijah Fosl, *Tiny Mix Tapes*, May 23, 2019, https://www.tinymixtapes.com/features/lena-raine-celeste-oneknowing.

12. Istvan Molnar-Szakacs, "The Language of Empathy," in *Music and Empathy*, eds. Elaine King and Caroline Waddington (Oxford: Taylor & Francis, 2017).

13. Timothy Summers, *The Queerness of Video Game Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 52.

Firstly, that Raine's use of "failed" timbres constructs an inherently queer headspace, parallel to Madeline's. Through engaging with the music, players have an experience of queer joy, finding delight in the subversive and unconventional. Secondly, that in communicating Madeline's emotions at moments of key narrative importance, the music in *Celeste* facilitates deep connection. Through feeling alongside Madeline, players are able to connect with her journey. I utilise Summers' methodology of "analytical play," which involves closely examining the interaction between gameplay and music. This is supported by an analysis of the FMOD studio project for *Celeste's* music, which has been made publicly accessible.[14] Through interrogating specific sections of *Celeste*, and how the music dynamically responds to player actions, I explore how video games can offer unique cross-identity understanding. I argue that, through constructing shared emotional experiences, the music in *Celeste* builds blended identity, allowing non-queer players to recognise themselves in a queer character. This recognition fosters deeper empathy with queer identities, moving beyond superficial identification.

Constructing empathy without co-opting experience

Firstly, it is necessary to address valid criticism on the application of an empathy framework to video game analysis. The power of video games to develop empathy for marginalised identities has been rightfully critiqued as "identity tourism". Coined by Lisa Nakamura, "identity tourism" describes an appropriation of affect—where non-marginalised people engage with existing in a marginalised identity for entertainment.[15] Bonnie Ruberg explains

14. FMOD is an audio middleware tool, used by composers to implement dynamic audio into video games. See Maddy Makes Games, *Celeste FMOD Studio Project*, FMOD, https://www.fmod.com/download#learningresources.

15. Lisa Nakamura, *Cybertypes Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet* (United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis, 2002).

that approaching queer games through an empathy framework oversimplifies diverse identities into palatable experiences for mainstream audiences. She argues that empathy as a construct "instrumentalises and de-radicalises [queer] experience and feeling".[16] In her view, presenting video games as a tool for empathy risks non-queer players feeling as though they understand queer identities without actually experiencing queerness.

In her critique, Ruberg discusses Anna Anthropy's *Dys4ia*, a game centred directly on Anthropy's gender dysphoria and her experience of starting hormone replacement therapy.[17] She cites a cisgender blogger who claims, "By the time the 15-minute experience was over, I was closer to understanding the 'T' in LGBT than ever before. And not just from a factual standpoint. I understood the feeling".[18] Anthropy has been critical of this reception, saying, "If you've played a 10-minute game about being a transwoman don't pat yourself on the back for feeling like you understand a marginalised experience".[19] For Anthropy, viewing *Dys4ia* through the lens of empathy is reductive, and does not acknowledge the depth and complexity of her lived experience.

Dys4ia focuses on the unique, often painful, elements of being transgender, in order to provide catharsis for transgender audiences. Gameplay experiences include, correcting people who call the player "Sir", attending a gender diversity clinic, and taking hormone replacement medication. Each element is a quick level with two or three tone pixel art. The gameplay is simple, usually involving pressing one or two buttons to perform an action. On *Dys4ia*'s download page, Anthropy is explicit in explaining the game was "created for other trans

16. Bonnie Ruberg, "Empathy and Its Alternatives: Deconstructing the Rhetoric of "Empathy" in Video Games," *Communication, culture & critique* 13, no. 1 (2020): 61.

17. Anna Anthropy, *Dys4ia*, (Toronto: Auntie Pixelante, 2012), video game, https://w.itch.io/dys4ia.

18. Ruberg, "Empathy and Its Alternatives: Deconstructing the Rhetoric of "Empathy" in Video Games," 59.

19. Anna Anthropy, "Why Video Games Can't Teach You Empathy," interview by Cecilia D'Anastasio, *Vice*, May 15, 2015, https://motherboard.vice.com/en_us/article/mgbwpv/empathy-games-dont-exist.

people who might have related" to her experience.[20] Thus, the game operates under the assumption that the player already knows what it feels like to be transgender. It does not attempt to access or create communal emotions that will be relatable to cisgender audiences. Instead, it presents snippets of transgender experiences, assuming players will bridge the emotional gaps from their own lives.

Figure One: This screenshot depicts a typical level in *Dys4ia*. The player has to correct people calling them "sir" whilst travelling home (Anthropy, *Dys4ia*).

When accessed by cisgender players, games like *Dys4ia* highlight the differences between transgender and cisgender experiences, encouraging identity tourism. In centring on the unique elements of being transgender, *Dys4ia* does not create blended identity for cisgender players, as it does not make obvious any shared experience. This is reflected in the blogger quoted above, who characterises the transgender experience as something foreign to him. He sees the merit of *Dys4ia* as allowing him to occupy another identity, and gain new

20. Anthropy, *Dys4ia*.

emotional experiences beyond his own. However, as noted by Wendy Chun, “when you walk in someone else’s shoes, then you have taken their shoes”.[21] The blogger de-radicalises the expanses of queerness—reducing it to an experience he can “walk” in 10-minutes. Through focusing instead on communal emotion, *Celeste* creates a blended identity that allows non-queer players to develop empathy for queerness, without stealing anyone’s shoes.

Narratively, *Celeste* does not focus on representing the actions and processes of being transgender—it is not a story that explicitly centres on coming out or transitioning. Instead, *Celeste* teases out communal aspects of how it feels to be transgender—the anxieties, self-doubts and joys. In one *Dys4ia* level, players navigate a maze filled with mirrors, dodging inaccurate depictions of their reflection to find themselves presented femininely. This experience is directly framed through the lens of gender dysphoria, preceded by a level where players have to battle mouths that insist on misgendering them. Mirrors and reflections are similarly utilised in *Celeste*; however they are pulled one step away from a directly transgender context. In Chapter Five, Madeline is pulled inside a mirror, needing to outrun a manifestation of her own reflection to escape unscathed. Her reflection insults her ability to climb Celeste, but not directly her gender. The mountain *can* act as a metaphor for Madeline’s struggles with gender identity—but also as anything else the player sees fit to project. Furthermore, once inside the mirror dimension, her friend Theo, a cisgender character, is also struggling with his own insecurities—being watched by numerous eyes that indicate his obsession with how he is perceived on social media. Despite being cisgender, Theo is also grappling with his self-image. Unlike *Dys4ia*’s more direct approach, *Celeste* demonstrates

21. Wendy Chun, “Presentation at Weird Reality Conference” (presentation, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 2016), quoted in Ruberg, "Empathy and Its Alternatives: Deconstructing the Rhetoric of "Empathy" in Video Games."

that feeling afraid of one's reflected self is a common experience for transgender people, but not an exclusive one.

Figure Two: Madeline's altercation with her reflected self remains open to player projection (Thorson, *Celeste*).

Highlighting shared experience is key to constructing blended identity between Madeline and the player. In her book *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture,* Shaw interviews and plays games with different people, asking them questions about what kinds of avatars they resonate with. She found players were more likely to resonate with avatars that they had similar experiences to, even if they had a completely different identity.[22] *Celeste*'s gameplay encourages this through creating shared experiences. *Celeste* is known for its highly challenging platforming. It is not a narrative-only game that unfolds like a storybook. Instead, the player will likely play each level over and over, practicing tight maneuverers of jumping and dashing to eventually succeed. This can be a frustrating experience, as it involves repeatedly dying and restarting. In having such difficult gameplay, *Celeste* creates an experience of struggle for the player that mimics Madeline's journey up the mountain. She is not an experienced climber, and is going to great effort to

22. Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture.*

make this climb. Both her and the player must be resilient, pushing past frustration to achieve success.

Blended identity, formed through gameplay, allows players to feel intrinsically connected to Madeline's character, without feeling as if they have experienced transness firsthand. As explained by Tonelli, blended identity constructs an "intersubjective middle space" between two identities—in which a player can dwell.[23] Thus, the identity that forms between a cisgender player and a transgender avatar is both transgender and cisgender. It is not an occupation of a transgender identity by a cisgender person, but instead a bridge between the two. In relation to *Celeste,* Thorson explains "Modern trans struggle might be unique in its details, but it is definitely not alien to the human condition… you could take [Celeste] as evidence that trans and cis feelings aren't so different, that the chasm between transness and cisness isn't such a wide gulf and that most of the ways that trans existence is alien to you are the result of unjust social othering and oppression."[24] She indicates towards the power of *Celeste* to construct empathy, through the way it highlights shared experience.

The construction of empathy relies on shared emotions. Gameplay can invoke shared feeling in players, such as the frustration discussed in the last example. However, music is a uniquely powerful tool for constructing complex, ongoing, emotional reactions. As the player engages with the game, repeating short sections of gameplay, dialogue and other reminders of the narrative and subtext can be infrequent. The player may witness a scene exploring Madeline's emotional state, but then spend the next hour just attempting to complete a complex series of jumps. Raine's soundtrack forms an ever-present engagement for the player with Madeline's queerness and feelings, embedding every experience with complex emotion. Music supports blended identity on an emotional level, bridging the player and avatar's

23. Tonelli, "Game Music and Identity," 332.
24. Thorson, "Is Madeline Canonically Trans?."

subjectivities. Empathy, then, is not constructed through identity tourism. Cisgender players do not feel they have experienced being transgender. Instead, they recognise the fundamental emotional experiences that underpin both identities.

Analysis

Part 1: Queer Failure

At its core, queerness rejects the normative and embraces the unconventional. Queer theory fundamentally resists rigid categorisations and binaries, instead emphasising the fluidity and constructed nature of identity. Value systems upheld elsewhere are twisted and reimagined through queer art. In his seminal text, *The Queer Art of Failure,* Jack Halberstam argues that in rejecting societal norms and binary expectations, queerness redefines failure as a desirable trait. In a society that naturalises heterosexuality, queerness will always be a "failure".[25] Halberstam argues that instead of resisting this label, queer people should embrace it. The queer art of failure, to Halberstam, is an "acceptance of the finite, an embrace of the silly, and the hopelessly goofy".[26] Embracing failure pushes people to think beyond rigid boxes, and accept themselves for all of who they are. Ace Lehner builds upon Halberstam's work, proposing their concept of "trans failure". They argue that transgender people reject normative constructs, to playfully "self-articulate outside bounds of current existence". Lehner proposes that the primary driving factor in this action is a commitment to finding joy. When able to live authentically, transgender people create joy for themselves in living freely, but also for those who observe them and are able to recognise the "liberatory potential" in not

25. Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).
26. Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 187.

being confined by unhelpful societal constructs.[27] Halberstam and Lehner illustrate that queer joy is often articulated through redefining failure to move outside of normative ideals.

Through this lens, *Celeste's* narrative can be viewed as an exploration of the queer joy found in embracing failure. *Celeste* redefines parameters of success, constructing a subversive and inherently queer experience. As Madeline climbs Celeste, she battles "Part of Me"—a character that is a physical manifestation of her anxieties, angers, and fears. She believes that to be happy, she must shed the failed parts of her identity. However, when she does so, she is thrown to the bottom of the mountain, upset and unable to reach her goal. Only once Madeline decides to accept all parts of herself and work alongside her "failures" is she able to find joy and reach the summit. This narrative mirrors that of Thorson's real life journey in accepting herself as transgender. She explains, "When Madeline looks in the mirror and sees her other self; when she attempts to abandon her reflection, who then drags her down the mountain; when the two reconcile and merge to become stronger and more complete… that was all unknowingly written from a trans perspective."[28] Thorson, like many queer people, had to unpack her value systems—learning to embrace subversive parts of her identity that were considered "failures" by wider society. Through playing as Madeline, players participate in a similar intentional failure.

Raine's soundtrack also embraces failure through intentional glitching and flaws. When Madeline begins to pursue "Part of Me", finally deciding to not to fight but instead accept her, the track "Confronting Myself" is triggered. In some ways, this track leans into genre conventions. A choir plays, drawing connotations to grandiose classical soundtracks. For instance, John Williams' famous "Duel of the Fates" utilises large choirs to provide

27. Ace Lehner, "Trans Failure: Transformative Joy in Consumer Culture," *Cultural politics* 18, no. 1 (2022): 110.

28. Thorson, "Is Madeline Canonically Trans?."

dramatics to a key battle scene in *Star Wars*.[29] However, as Madeline gets closer to "Part of Me", Raine embeds glitching into the recording. The choir cuts in and out, stopping and restarting, like a scratched CD.[30] These flaws are intentional, mirroring the unconventional moment in the narrative. Madeline is no longer trying to defeat "Part of Me", but rather to work with her. "Confronting Myself" does not position its failures as a negative. Instead, Raine synchronises these glitches with the beat of the music, blending them into the texture of the piece, transforming the flaws into an aesthetic choice rather than a technical issue. Through harnessing glitched sounds in this way, Raine challenges ideas of musical imperfection. As players find enjoyment in the sound of "Confronting Myself*",* they are forced to reassess their relationship to failure. This mirrors Madeline's own acceptance of her imperfect self, providing a shared experience of queer joy for the player and Madeline.

This argument can be extended through an analysis of timbre. Summers, in his monograph, *The Queerness of Video Game Music*, applies Halberstam's framework to the use of chiptune music in video games. Chiptune originated in early gaming consoles, which had limited processing capabilities and soundcards. They adopted a low fidelity sound due to necessity.[31] Over time, as gaming consoles developed, this was no longer the case. Now, most mainstream "Triple A" games have cinematic soundtracks, that utilise either a full orchestra or far more advanced synthesis. Timothy Summers posits that the continued use of chiptune in independent video game soundtracks is a musical form of queer failure.[32] These soundtracks often have large cult followings, adamant fanbases who find joy in their tonalities. For

29. "Qui-Gon Jinn & Obi-Wan Kenobi vs Darth Maul [4K HDR] - Star Wars: The Phantom Menace," filmed 1999, YouTube Video, 3:51, posted by "mechasalesman," August 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qo__6MZIg6U.

30. Due to the adaptability of the music, to demonstrate examples I will provide timestamps in a playthrough of the game*:* "Celeste - Full Game (No Commentary)," YouTube video, 5:32:28, uploaded by "Encrypted Duck," June 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cX9NJPwseIQ&t=6853s, 3:51:53.

31. Summers, *The Queerness of Video Game Music*, 43.

32. Summers, *The Queerness of Video Game Music*, 45.

instance, on the social networking site Reddit, one chiptune community, r/chiptune, has 43,000 members, putting it in the top 3% of communities on the site.[33] Another site, Chipmusic, hosts thousands of forums all dedicated to celebrating chiptune. These communities engage in the queer art of failure, embracing, in the words of Chipmusic, the "nonsensical".[34] They disregard conventional notions of progress and development, to instead find value in timbral qualities that have since been superseded.

Raine weaves chiptune into her compositions at pivotal narrative moments that support a queer failure reading. In the moments before Madeline is thrown to the base of Celeste, she has a revelation, and confronts "Part of Me" to explain she no longer needs her. As this plays out, Raine's track "Starjump" becomes increasingly lower fidelity.[35] The modern synthesisers that it began with are layered with a much louder chiptune melody. The anxious repeating motif in the chiptune track rises with "Part of Me"'s anger. The music reaches its peak moments before Madeline's fall, with several layers of chiptune instrumentation all playing simultaneously. As Madeline falls, the instrumentation cuts out, leaving the player in eerie silence. When the music returns, it is in a modern fidelity.[36] The chiptune fades back in as the realisation dawns on Madeline—she must accept "Part of Me", rather than fighting against her.[37] By interweaving these "failed" timbres with key moments in Madeline's journey, Raine invites listeners to engage with queer subversion, appreciating low-fidelity sounds not as inferior, but as integral to the emotional narrative.

Other modern independent games have utilised chiptune, but *Celeste* is unique in its blending of old and new timbres. Titles such as Toby Fox's *Undertale* constrain themselves

33. "r/chiptune," Reddit, accessed October 10, 2024, https://www.reddit.com/r/chiptune.
34. "Forums," Chipmusic, accessed October 10, 2024, https://chipmusic.org/forums/.
35. "Celeste - Full Game (No Commentary)," 3:06:40.
36. "Celeste - Full Game (No Commentary)," 3:10:15.
37. "Celeste - Full Game (No Commentary)," 3:31:37.

almost entirely to chiptune parameters.[38] Summers uses *Undertale* as his foremost example for the queerness inherent in chiptune. However, he acknowledges that part of chiptune's appeal is nostalgia, not a subversion of norms.[39] In consistently incorporating both kinds of timbre, Raine raises chiptune onto the level of modern synthesis. In "Scattered and Lost", a track that plays during Chapter Five of *Celeste*, the main melody alternates between a realistic synthesised piano and a lower fidelity chiptune instrument.[40] Raine challenges notions of progress, embodying a queer aesthetic that refuses to disregard outdated, "failed", instruments. She positions both modern and retro sounds as being capable of holding the centre of attention, directly challenging listeners to enjoy both as equally valuable.

Through embracing failure in her composition, Raine encourages listeners to empathise with queerness. The use of chiptune and intentional glitching in *Celeste,* not only reflects queerness in its aesthetic, but also invites players to enter a queer headspace. To engage fully with the audio, players must practice Halberstam's queer art of failure—embracing subversion and challenging binary notions of progress and success. They are positioned to find joy in the unconventional, listening beyond what Lehner describes as the "bounds of current experience".[41] This creates a listening experience that, even for non-queer players, is fundamentally queer.

As Madeline nears the summit of her journey, having accepted "Part of Me" and embraced herself as a fluid, complex person outside of normative classification, we hear Raine's track "Reach for the Summit".[42] As the player progresses, the music moves through the key motifs of other songs on the soundtrack. The player hears over and over again,

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38. Toby Fox, *Undertale Soundtrack*, (Bandcamp, 2015), Digital Album, https://tobyfox.bandcamp.com/album/undertale-soundtrack.
39. Summers, *The Queerness of Video Game Music*, 46.
40. "Celeste - Full Game (No Commentary)," 1:18:01.
41. Lehner, "Trans Failure: Transformative Joy in Consumer Culture," 110.
42. "Celeste - Full Game (No Commentary)," 4:04:24.

different harmonisations and utilisations of "failed" timbres—all sounding joyously together. In "Reach for the Summit", Raine reinforces the healing and transcendent power found in embracing complexity, providing the player with an aural experience that strengthens their connection to Madeline's journey. Through consistently exposing the player to queer timbral choices, Raine encourages blended identity with Madeline, helping players share in the joy of embracing failure. Through engaging with queer joy, players are able to connect their experiences to Madeline's—encouraging an empathetic perception that transgender people share the same underlying humanity.

Part 2: Emotional Alignment through Music

Music constructs blended identity through aligning the emotions of the player with Madeline. Molnar-Szakacs describes music as "the Language of Empathy". He posits that music is able to communicate shared emotions, that create an empathetic connection between individuals.[43] As highlighted by Shaw, shared experiences are key to constructing blended identity.[44] Blended identity bridges transgender and cisgender experiences, allowing players to uncover a shared emotional landscape between their own lives and Madeline's queer journey.

Through interactivity, the music in *Celeste* is able to bind the fictional and real worlds together. Kinesonic synchresis, as explored by Summers, refers to the phenomenon where player actions in the game prompt an auditory response—intertwining real life decisions with a video game's fictional reaction. [45] This connects players to their avatar and mediates "between the 'you' of the player and the 'other' of the fictional world and characters."[46] As

43. Molnar-Szakacs, "The Language of Empathy."
44. Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture*.
45. Summers, *The Queerness of Video Game Music*, 50.
46. Summers, *The Queerness of Video Game Music*, 50.

the player controls their avatar in the digital space, hearing the corresponding sounds in reality binds these worlds together. This fusion encourages blended identity.

The score of *Celeste* utilises kinesonic synchresis to intertwine Madeline's virtual emotions with the player. In his book, *Four Ways of Listening to Video Game Music,* Michiel Kamp explains players can listen to video game music as "background music". He outlines that this is the most common mode of listening, where players are not consciously engaged but are still "in music". The audio subconsciously sets the player's mood, embedding them in the experience.[47] As a player navigates *Celeste*, the music adapts depending on their movements. Each chapter has various tracks, comprised of different loops that enter in and out of the texture. The music operates as Kamp's "background", encouraging emotional responses in the player that mirror Madeline's in-game reactions. When the player makes a decision, they move Madeline in the virtual space. Through music, they then experience Madeline's emotional reaction to their decision. This interaction blends identity, constructing an emotional connection between Madeline and the player.

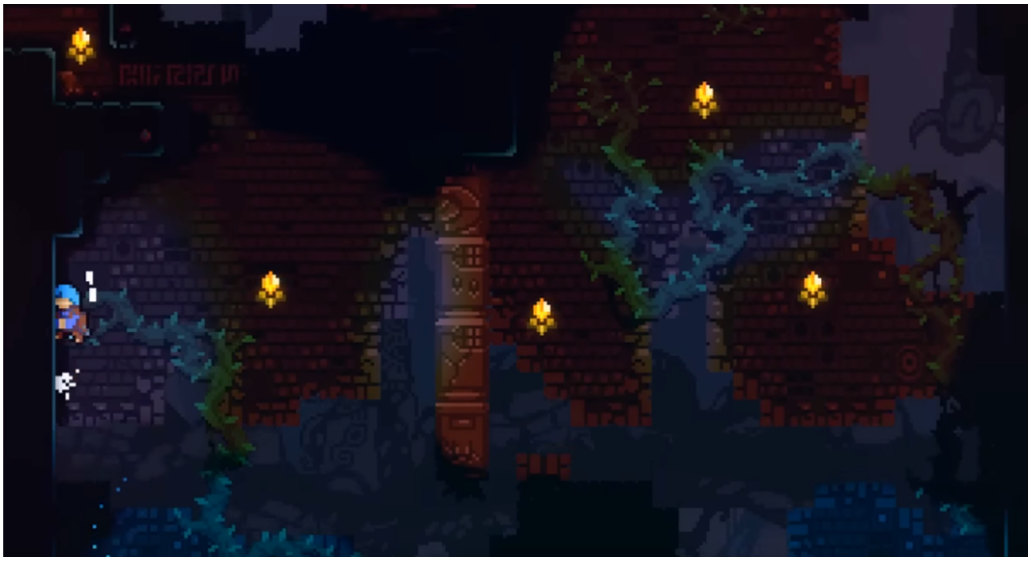

Figure Three: *Celeste's* Mirror Temple, dimly lit with torches in hard to reach places (Thorson, *Celeste*).

47. Michiel Kamp, *Four Ways of Hearing Video Game Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), 42 and 46.

In Chapter Five, Madeline journeys into the Mirror Temple, a darkly lit maze of dangerous rooms and corridors, to rescue Theo. As the level begins, the music plays Raine's track "Quiet and Falling". The orchestration centres on a soft, wandering piano. Raine utilises significant rubato—the melody feels lost, mirroring Madeline's emotional state. A heavy reverb effect lets the piano echo out—to meet synthesised chords in the background.[48] These large, yet sparse, sounds create a soundscape that feels vast and empty, much like the temple Madeline is navigating. The music adapts depending on the lighting in the rooms the player enters. Unlike previous levels, where players could see an entire room upon entry, the Mirror Temple is dimly lit. There are torches attached to the walls that the player can light, to ascertain a path forward. Upon lighting one of these torches, a bright arpeggiated synthesiser fades in—layering light plucked sounds on top of the otherwise dark and sombre track.[49] The player gets a brief feeling of hope, but it leaves almost as quickly as it arrives. Sometimes these torches are placed in easy to reach locations. Generally, however, reaching these torches involves leaps of faith, jumping into shrouded areas that may not have a safe space to land. Thus, the player spends a lot of time navigating darkened rooms, with no end in sight. Inside these dark rooms, the piano melody fades away. In its place, an intermittent synthesiser continues the main chord progression, and a bubbling noise takes centre place in the musical texture.[50] The music feels hopeless, like slowly sinking into dark water. At the end of each musical loop, the synthesiser plays its final chord. It does not resolve the progression, but instead leaves it lingering on a major fifth—not quite allowing the listener satisfaction.[51] The overall experience of this level section mimics the depression Madeline battles. She is

48. "Celeste - Full Game (No Commentary)," 1:54:14.
49. "Celeste - Full Game (No Commentary)," 2:00:46.
50. "Celeste - Full Game (No Commentary)," 2:00:46.
51. "Celeste - Full Game (No Commentary)," 2:01:14.

wandering through life, unable to ever quite achieve happiness. As players navigate through this level, they share in her experience, building a blended identity.

Halfway through Chapter Five, Madeline is pulled inside a mirror, entering a reflected dimension that showcases her worst fears and insecurities. It is inside this dimension that Theo is trapped. The music shifts in tandem to a track entitled “In the Mirror”. This piece still shifts between dark and light modes, but now both the piano and bubbles from “Quiet and Falling” are sounding in reverse.[52] The sonic world feels uneasy—familiar, yet also foreign. The player knows they cannot let their guard down here. This side of the mirror has enemies, called seekers, that are actively trying to attack Madeline. When the player moves into a room with a seeker, a bass drum joins the instrumentation—adding rhythmic intensity.[53] This urges the player forward with haste—a glimpse into the anxiety Madeline is grappling with.

As the player nears Theo, a whispered track fades in.[54] Madeline is deeply ashamed that Theo can see how her inner psyche manifests. The whispers that play are Raine’s own reversed vocals, discussing her insecurities. They add a tense, creepy ambience, that makes the main gameplay objective, locating Theo, feel tinged with pain. After she rescues him, and the two progress in their escape, a buzzing saw wave fades in.[55] This synthesiser is reminiscent of one heard in the preceding chapter that accompanied one of Madeline’s panic attacks.[56] It also appears at the start of the mirror dimension sequence, when Madeline encounters “Part of Me”.[57] Hearing it again now corrupts the experience of success, allowing the player to feel Madeline’s anxiety at Theo witnessing her inner self.

52. “Celeste - Full Game (No Commentary)," 2:27:48.
53. “Celeste - Full Game (No Commentary)," 2:24:15.
54. “Celeste - Full Game (No Commentary)," 2:26:27.
55. “Celeste - Full Game (No Commentary)," 2:44:42.
56. “Celeste - Full Game (No Commentary)," 1:51:04.
57. “Celeste - Full Game (No Commentary)," 2:17:55.

In the final room of the temple, awaits one final enemy to defeat. As the player brings Madeline nearer to this enemy, and the exit, effects are gradually applied to all of the musical elements—twisting the sound into something corrupted and hard to listen to.[58] This unpleasant noise makes the player feel tense and overwhelmed, rather than excited about the impending escape. Similarly, Madeline is struggling emotionally to stay calm. She is anxious about Theo's presence and the volatility of her own mind. To convey this, Raine avoids the cliché of having triumphant music fade in as the player progresses. Instead, she creates an emotional experience that mimics that Madeline's anxiety and self-doubt.

When Madeline and Theo finally break free of the temple, Chapter Six begins. The music shifts from the dark undertones of the last two tracks to play "Madeline and Theo".[59] The gameplay is a conversation between Madeline and Theo—the player controlling what dialogue options get selected. The music is similarly conversational. Throughout the game, piano is associated with Madeline, and guitar with Theo. "Madeline and Theo" is a duet between the two instruments, starting as largely separate parts taking turns to "speak". Madeline expresses her regret at what Theo has witnessed, the dark parts of herself that she shies away from. Instead of being disgusted with her, Theo is supportive and non-judgemental. As Madeline begins to open herself up, the melody incorporates both instruments playing at once.[60] This calm track is a sharp break from the music that came before it. Players feel Madeline's relief at being freed from the Temple—but also her newfound hope in being accepted by someone, even after they have seen the darker parts of herself.

58. "Celeste - Full Game (No Commentary)," 2:47:11.
59. "Celeste - Full Game (No Commentary)," 2:48:18.
60. "Celeste - Full Game (No Commentary)," 2:57:20.

Throughout the Mirror Temple sequence, music aligns the emotional experience of the player and Madeline. The emotions elicited in the player are not uncommon. They experience hopelessness navigating the temple alone, anxiety as they battle out of the mirror dimension, and hope as they find acceptance with Theo. Molnar-Szakacs argues music is a communicator of empathy because it can "convey, elicit and recall emotion". Through this recall, music is able to bring "emotional memories back into awareness".[61] When players engage with *Celeste*, the music recalls their own emotional experiences. As they control Madeline, kinesonic synchresis entwines these emotions with Madeline's journey. The blended identity that results intrinsically links these familiar emotions to Madeline's experiences—highlighting for the player the similarities between their identities and lives.

Conclusion

Through constructing shared experiences, Raine's soundtrack for *Celeste* blends Madeline's transgender identity with the player. Firstly, through utilising chiptune timbre and glitching, Raine develops an inherently queer aural experience. To engage with the music, players must disregard normative constructs that position failure as a negative—and instead embrace the queer joy found outside rigid binaries. This mirrors Madeline's in-game narrative, creating a shared experience between her and the player. Secondly, the music provides a constant engagement for the player with Madeline's emotions. As the player moves Madeline into new situations, the soundtrack adapts, providing the player with the same emotional experience they have created for her. By interlacing the players real-life actions with Madeline's fictional emotions, music blends their identities on a deeply significant level.

61. Molnar-Szakacs, "The Language of Empathy," 98.

Music speaks a uniquely emotional language. When embedded in a video game, music is able to communicate and connect players with avatars they may have little in common with in real life. Through emphasising shared experience, the music in *Celeste* is able to foster empathy that runs deeper than identity tourism. *Celeste* does not create a false impression for players that they have experienced being transgender. Instead, the music brings forth communal emotions, making obvious the underlying similarities between non-queer and queer identities. Thus, *Celeste* constructs empathy for queerness that is rooted in genuine understanding. This research indicates an exciting potential for video game music in creating a kinder, more empathetic world.

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