Art Imitates Life

When I started looking for topics for this paper, I knew I wanted to cover Celeste somehow, as it is one of my favorite games and soundtracks of all time. All of the music for this game was made by Lena Raine, and the remixes of her tracks were from various different artists. I know all three soundtracks that this game has spawned front to back, so when I was listening to it to prepare for this paper I was shocked to make a new discovery after so many listens. What I discovered was that this game gives a theme song to the concept of Anxiety, rather than to the main protagonist, Madeline or the”Part of Her”(commonly referred to as Badeline) that tries to hinder her progress up the mountain. I will be exploring how this theme is always present in the soundtrack, just as anxiety is always present in those affected by it, how this theme shifts and changes to match the event or mood of the situation at hand, and how this soundtrack mirrors the narrative of mental illness perfectly..

Before getting into celeste, I think it is important to cover the concept of themes and motifs in other games as well. Undertale is a perfect example of this concept, as there are a few themes that recur throughout the entire game. The theme of Asriel Dreemur is one very notable one, echoing its presence in the very first song heard upon starting the game. Character themes also show up in other character’s themes as well, such as “Heartache” (Toriel’s fight music) reappearing in “Asgore”, her ex husband’s battle music. These little musical hints as to deeper connections between characters and events is nothing new in video games, but the way Celeste pulls it off is different. Anxiety isn’t a character, but a disorder that a lot of people, including Madeline and even me, suffer from. It is present in the song of every level and interaction
Madeline has, regardless of if she is feeling good or bad, just as anxiety is always going to linger in the back of someone’s mind regardless of how they are feeling as well.

The first time that this theme is heard, is upon starting up the game in the track titles “Postcard From Celeste Mountain”. This song plays in between every level, including before the prologue, and takes on a peaceful and quiet tone as it is played by a single piano. Those first five notes especially, will become very important throughout the game. The first level begins, with Madeline determined and confident that she is going to be able to climb the mountain, and that is reflected in the music of this level titled, “First Steps”. The music starts off with upbeat piano, synths, and percussion and lots of ascending shapes, and before you know it, that same theme from earlier kicks in; only this time it is a lot different. It still represents anxiety, but it sounds a lot more happy and lighthearted, as Madeline isn’t fearing her anxiety as much as she is enjoying her confidence and her climb.

This theme evolves a significant amount over the course of the game, as just in the second level we are introduced to Part of You (“You” being Madeline), often referred to as Badeline. The music upon first meeting her is the same theme as before, but now with a distorted synth sound carrying the melody, and the ends of phrases have turned into more of an unsettling minor sound. This is very fitting, as Badeline is the physical representation and manifestation of Madeline's anxiety, so naturally it would not be as lighthearted as before. The theme then changes to a fast paced panicky version with lots of descending shapes as Badeline chases Madeline in an attempt to stop her.

Jumping ahead a few levels, Madeline finds herself in a gondola with her friend and fellow climber Theo, who she met on the mountain. The gondola breaks, and Madeline starts to suffer from a Panic attack, and as she spirals further and further, so does the music. The music
starts off sounding similar to the solo piano version, but with the minor twist on the ends of the phrases, and starts descending to heavy synth strings that suffocate the original track, just as Madeline is unable to breath and feels like she is suffocating. This is one of the most important and intense scenes in the game, and Lena Raine has even spoken on this track in an interview with Sam Goldner. Sam introduces this scene by saying, “Halfway through the 2018 indie platforming game _Celeste_, the main character, Madeline, suddenly stops all of her wall-jumping and air-dashing to say something to her friend: “I can’t breathe.” She’s beginning to suffer from a crippling panic attack while trapped aboard a gondola hundreds of feet in the air; as gnarled, pixelated tentacles encroach on her from both sides, the music swells into a spiraling web of paranoid synth stabs. It’s one of the most intense scenes in a game that is full of them, and if it weren’t for Lena Raine, it wouldn’t even exist”. Lena then tells him “When I got the music in for the ‘Anxiety’ scene, I remember Matt Thorson was like, ‘I just realized I need to completely change this, because it doesn’t live up to the experience you’ve created with the music’”. This moment of the game shapes the story and level design of the rest of the game, and manages to use music to instill a real feeling of dread and anxiety in the player throughout the whole scene.

Directly after this anxiety attack is the Mirror Temple, the darkest and most upsetting chapter in the game. About halfway through, Madeline goes through a large mirror, and into a world created by her dark inner thoughts. The music for this level, aptly titled “In The Mirror”, reverses and is mirrored as Madeline passes through the mirror, but there is another twist in this music as well. In the background of this song there is what sounds like a girl sobbing, and speaking backwards in a soft whisper. In that same interview from earlier Lena says “I wanted there to be something almost unintelligible, but something spoken in the background. So I took
my handheld recorder, shut myself in the dark in the closet, and just kind of talked to myself,” she says. “I improvised a little internal monologue, putting myself in the character Madeline’s perspective, and tried to vocalize what I related to in the struggles she was having”. When this message is reversed it says the following “Sometimes I… I don’t really know… what’s going on anymore… I… I don’t… know who I am… I just… look in the mirror and… don’t know who I’m looking at… or…. Who’s looking at me.. I think… a lot about...where my train of thought is going… and it’s not always a good place… and that scares be… I don’t like scaring myself… I don’t…” This is an extremely deep and upsetting bit of monologue that is in this track, and the fact that is comes right after the anxiety attack scene is no coincidence. Madeline is at an all time low with her anxiety, and just wants it gone.

Which is exactly what Madeline tells Badeline is the beginning of the next chapter. Madeline decides that she doesn’t need her anxiety anymore, and would be better off just missing that piece of herself. This does not work either, and she is throwing down a large part of the mountain as her anxiety bests her again. The end of this chapter is where things really start to get interesting in how the soundtrack evolves as Madeline does. The final section of this chapter is the only “boss fight” that this game has, and it is Madeline against Badeline. The track that plays here is called “Confronting Myself”, and features a lot of chanting vocals, percussion, ascending synth shapes, and of course the recurring theme of anxiety played by a distorted synth again. This song is pretty fast paced and intense with its active percussion and chanting. Madeline weakens Badeline enough to the point that Badeline accepts being left behind and Madeline moving forward with her climb and the rest of her life. The piece that plays during this whole scene is titled “Little Goth”, and features just two pianos playing that same theme, but in a more melancholy and peaceful tone. But for Madeline to just be magically rid of her anxiety is
not even close to an accurate depiction of how mental illness acts in the real world. Instead Madeline accepts that Part of Her, and the music changes, she “levels up”, and Bodeline and Madeline become one. The music shifts to a lot of ascending shapes, and a major version of the original anxiety theme played by pianos, before settling on a happy melody played by the upper octaves, and a more somber melody on the lower end working perfectly together. This theme mirrors the gameplay perfectly, as Madeline accepts all of herself and Bodeline starts to help Madeline rather than try to stop her. Two very different people, working together to achieve something incredible. Madeline goes on to reach the peak of Celeste Mountain, with the music playing the most driven, determined, and confident version of the theme present in the game.

Mental illness is not something to try to run from, or be ashamed of, or just straight up abandon; it is a part of every person affected by it. Only when that person accepts that it is a part of themselves, can they begin to cope with it and start funding ways to manage it. Only when Madeline accepted Bodeline as part of herself and they began to work together was she capable of reaching the peak of the mountain and embrace who she is. The theme of anxiety present throughout the soundtrack evolves and changes shape just as Madeline does and just as people learning to live with themselves do, and mirrors not only the narrative of accepting oneself but also mirrors the real life struggles and triumphs of living with any mental illness.
Works Cited