Hey! So this video's about a very underexposed piece of fandom-grown art, so I'm going to say this right out of the gate for anyone who's watching who had a paw in this creation. This isn't a review, it's not a piece of constructive feedback. If I say something mean, it's not because I think you'll go and make better celeste maps after you're done with the video. I'm an artist and I build aesthetic intuition by articulating the feelings I have about art. You made a thing, it's a miracle that it exists in the first place, and I have lots of thoughts about it. Alright, on with the show.

I have over 400 hours logged into Celeste, and just so we're clear, there's not 400 hours of stuff in there. There's a lot, for sure, it goes an unprecedented length after the credits, but not that much. Quite a few of those hours are just down to my habit of sitting down to replay all nine chapters every half a year or so, but quite a lot more are down to my fascination with this game's modding scene, and more accurately my fascination with one very large mod. Now I understand that some people might be upset that I'm making a video about this game's modding scene while only talking about the single most popular mod on the gamebanana page, but like, the Spring 2020 collab is fucking huge and I've only just finished it. A lot of the footage in this video is gonna be stolen but this clip of me collecting the final heart is definitely 100% original.

Over the course of this video I'm going to try and argue for why this mod is interesting and worthy of study. So first off, what is this and why would you want to play it?

The Celeste Spring 2020 Collab is a bountiful cornucopia of short gameplay experiences built for the Celeste platforming engine. It is at times excellent and at times completely unpalatable, it is at several points visually and auditorily beautiful as often as it is impressively ugly, but it's always interesting and no singular map overstays its welcome.

The maps are all divvied up into lobbies, sweet little explorable areas that serve as hub worlds. Each lobby represents a different difficulty level. To put it in Celeste terms, the beginner lobby will be mostly comfortable for anyone who's beaten the original game's summit, the intermediate lobby is around B or C-side difficulty, the advanced lobby goes up to farewell territory and a little beyond, and then there's two more lobbies after that! Yeah, the modding scene for a precision platformer is necessarily going to have a bit of a heightened tolerance for frustration.

If that turns you off the idea of giving it a shot, uh, I'll be the first one to tell you that a lot of this mod's best stuff is in the beginner lobby. Maybe the easier difficulty attracted designers who were more curious about conventional game design, or perhaps it was a little harder to pass off bad design and under-testing under the guise of extreme difficulty. Who knows.

I most assuredly can't recommend that you plow through everything in this collab, unless you have infinite time on your paws. There's so much of it, and a lot of it is kinda bad. This isn't much of an issue for the beginner lobby, where a mediocre map is only an annoying ten to fifteen minutes of your time, but a mediocre advanced map is aggravating and a mediocre grandmaster map is soul crushing. Here's my recommendations for the un-missable Spring 2020 Collab maps if you just want to peruse the best and/or most "interesting" stuff this mod has to offer.

Beginner: Azurite Ascent, Blast Processing, Desolate Spire

Intermediate: Claustrophobia, Circular Platform Clutter, Flooded Waterways

Advanced: Satellite, The Climb, Mural Skies

Expert: Starlit Grotto, Electric Exuberance, Ligament

Grandmaster: Error 418, Temporal Tower, Heart of the Storm

If you want to know how to install it, uh, I'm gonna be real with you, this is the only Celeste mod I've ever installed and I did it like two years ago. I don't know how you do it now, but I've heard it's pretty simple these days.

Part 1: Fanfiction

So... have you ever thought about how mods are kinda like fanfiction for video games?

I mean, some of these maps are literally fanfiction, "Crimson Night" from the advanced lobby imagines a prospective grim epilogue to the story from the main game, where the mountain's magic is somehow corrupted into a dark force, and if you manage to find all the secret keys, Madeline fucking crushes the mountain's heart at the end. It's pretty ambitious, but also far outside the norm for this mod. Many of the maps are given only the lightest of narrative justification, and even more often there is no context at all.

A majority of the maps in the Celeste Spring 2020 Collab consist of you being dropped into a pretty environment, or sometimes just something that looks exactly like a chapter from the main game, where you then traverse a brief series of platforming challenges with no questions asked.

It's not fanfiction in the narrative sense, it's gameplay fanfiction. Playing all these maps by such a variety of authors lets us see many different interpretations of "Characters" like the dream blocks, green bubbles and crumbling platforms. "Rhythm Realm" by Ezel feels like a faithful emulation of the rhythm block section of Farewell, but playfully explores more sides of the character than we see in the base game. Traits such as the fact that being in front of a block as it spawns causes its appearance to be delayed indefinitely until you're out of the way are brought into focus with specialized challenges, in the same way a fanfic writer might be charmed by what they interpret as the secret vulnerable side of a cartoon villain.

Meanwhile, in the expert lobby, CANADIAN interprets the rhythm blocks in a way that's completely foreign to someone who's only familiar with the canon. In "Electric Exuberance", the rhythm blocks are utilized as timed sections of the map. The periodicity of the switches is very slow and changes arbitrarily to suit the design, there is no emphasis on internalizing a regular

pulse, only the constant sense that the ground underneath you could suddenly disappear. This is more like a fanfic where the goofy sidekick is rewritten as a gritty antihero.

You'd be surprised at what characters some authors will latch onto, do you remember that part right at the end of The Core where gravity is lower and Madeline wraps around the screen when you fall? Well, Skeleton's "Mobius Temple" is an entire chapter taking place in that environment, low gravity and all. Is that a good idea? I'm not sure, but someone had to do it.

Even something as mundane as blocks that fall when you grab onto them can inspire great things. Spoopy's "Cave-in Cavern" loves those, it makes a shifting spectacle out of them, the level dynamically shuffling its parts as you traverse through it. And then before the end it *also* does the core wrap around thing, just because. I actually like it a little more here.

Strange edge cases are explored and exploited, like in "Thunder Temple" where pinball bumpers sat in the middle of dream blocks allow you to pause and divert your path. In "Fire and Ice," unnaturally floating blobs of water interact with your dash in strange unexpected ways, acting as soft platforms and bunnyhopping practice when spikes are placed just beneath the surface. Also, hyperdashing into these arrays of fine vertical stripes of water causes you to gain immense speed, the fanfiction analogy is wearing a little thin at this point, I just wanna know how you even figure this kinda thing out.

Unlikely pairs are made, like in "Toxic Sewers" where jellyfish and dream blocks share the stage in totality for what is probably the first time, or spring pads and moving platforms on "Cirque Maderano", or including both types of bubble in "Lucid Caverns," you could name any two characters in a work of fiction and someone will passionately explain why they'd make a great couple.

There's original characters too, new mechanics that come into play with the rest of the world in fun and exciting ways. Some of them, like the circular moving platforms in "Circular Platform Clutter" are so well integrated into the canon that I momentarily forget they're a fan creation, like how you sometimes forget that Sans is never actually depicted with a blue flaming eye in Undertale. Some OCs are a little more disruptive and challenging to the status quo. "Desolate Spire" was a big roadblock when I first played this mod even though it's in the beginner lobby, just because the extra jump crystals constituted a whole extra kind of thing to do in midair. Other additions would be better conceptualized as alternate universes, like the systems of light and mirrors in "Blast Processing", transforming Celeste into something of a light puzzle platformer.

Madeline herself is thoroughly explored as a character by this mod. Not Madeline the plucky trans mountain climber, I'm talking about Madeline the little bunch of pixels that jumps and dashes in eight directions & is also trans. The character of her moveset, her hitbox, the way she interfaces with the environment, it is dissected further than would be practical or even advisable for a singularly authored work. We see several sides of her that aren't present in the base game.

Sometimes her moveset is reimagined entirely, be it in small ways like disabling neutral jumps, (the climb) or even disabling your grab (mural skies) or your dash (crumbling castle.) On “Serene Skydive” you have infinite dashes, but they’re really short so it works moreso as a small course correction that costs a little time. On “Northern Lights” you have massive sweeping dashes that you can bend in the middle, that’s weird! “Error 418” from the grandmaster lobby is my favorite for this, you’re given two stumpy dashes and a strangely shallow double jump that can be used for all sorts of wild midair speed tech. It’s nuts, it looks like Celeste but it feels like I’m playing a completely different game.

That’s one of the most interesting things about this mod, the degree to which these designers are beholden to the canon is very flexible and granular. Some mappers are steadfastly faithful, “Azurite Ascent” feels like it could be inserted directly between chapters four and five in the base game for how authentic its design is. “Satellite” embodies the supernatural intuition and direction combined with a paradoxical sense of looseness and freedom that I remember so fondly from Celeste’s most difficult chapters.

More often however, the author’s own quirks will be readily apparent. The platforming might be tighter, stricter than anything in the base game (ferocious sanctuary) and it might be broader, overwhelmingly without direction (above celeste’s peak). Sometimes the movement is fast, twitchy, inhumanly so (temporal tower) while at other times it is methodical and fiddly (trenches of jellies). Most interesting are the maps that introduce entirely new rhythms and colors to the Celeste experience.

Sometimes it’s a flying success, “Claustrophobia” incorporates puzzle elements in varying amounts across twenty static screens cut from the same cloth, each one feeling like a concise little treat that engages the twitchy fingers and the analytical brain at once. Sometimes the experiment doesn’t pan out, “Ancient Engine” attempts to bring metroidvania elements into the fold, which in practice means you end up playing the same three or so screens in perpetuity looking for whichever nugget of progression you need to find next. And sometimes it’s Chillout Mountain. What is this, why is it like this, why would you do this to me-

And even beyond that, some maps attempt to entirely warp the gameplay beyond recognition. These are my favorite ones to analyze. “Mural Skies” poses challenges that take place as prolonged chaotic airborne scrambles, your dashes and extra jumps serving as a hand of cards you carefully manage, the dream blocks representing the constantly changing shape of the stage such that nothing more than the first few jumps can be planned ahead. “Mossy Caverns” is this... weird underwater puzzle map where the only real threat is an added oxygen mechanic, and it’s just a chill time diverting currents. Some of these maps legitimately just attempt to become straight puzzle games, “Crystal Enigma” and “KoKoDoKo?”, I’m not sure if this is the right medium but I commend your fervor. KoKoDoKo is actually in the grandmaster lobby, so the solutions to the puzzles are *also* fairly tough platforming challenges, a combination never seen before and hopefully never again.

And then there's Crumbling Castle. My beloved Crumbling Castle, I legitimately don't know where to start. It's almost unplayably bad, I love it dearly. It's like... an adventure game? kinda? You don't have a dash anymore, although the author was clearly uncomfortable with this, as evidenced by the overabundance of bubbles. The platforming is strange and cluttered, filled with odd contingencies and little troll moments like it's a nintendo game. There's... puzzle solving? I think? Does being told what order you need to grab the crumbling platforms count as a puzzle? The music is... vibrating too high up for me to understand it. The final "boss fight" makes me want to die, one of those monsters from the mirror dimension slapped in a room filled with crumbling platforms that dissappear whenever the hell they feel like it.

That's what I mean though, it's fanfiction. The contract you sign when you boot up a fic on Ao3 is pretty fundamentally different from the one you sign when you pick up a published novel. This is expected, and the full force experimentation on display here is beautiful in its own way.

Ok, so this is all very cute and intellectual, broadly collaborative tinkering with a core ruleset leading to strange emergent moments of beauty, but I wouldn't be talking about this mod if that's all there was to it. At the end of the day, I'm an artist, and I'm intimately interested in aesthetic transcendence. I always thought Celeste's main story relied on textual narrative a little too much, but with the broad experimentation of this mod there is also ambition, a desire to communicate something emotionally that wasn't present in the original text. Design without narrative, presented nakedly as itself, simply and transparently exploring its own aesthetic potential. This is how we get "The Climb" by Holly.

"The Climb" has a very particular design ethos. The gameplay could be described as... speed tech puzzling, progression seeming to be impossible without special knowledge of reverse hypers and midair supers, in this way every push you make forwards feels like you're breaking out of bounds. There's no spikes, no damage zones outside of falling off the screen, which surprisingly does quite a lot to subdue the inherent "gameyness" of a 2d platformer. The music is gorgeous and somber, the visuals are subdued but dramatic at the same time, there is a grave scale to this map that I didn't think could ever be expressed in a game with just two dimensions. It feels as if Madeline has returned to the mountain after many years and found the magic to have disappeared, it's tragic, desperate. Nothing *happens* in it, there's no text except for this cute little moment where you walk out onto a ledge and Madeline gives you some ellipses, and yet the design of it makes my heart cry out in anguish.

That's the shit I love about fanfiction, the cool weird impactful stuff that you can get from simply throwing a new authorial voice at an established universe. It's neat! Maybe it doesn't have the same curated professional design as a commercial title, but the Celeste 2020 Spring Collab will certainly give you many very unfamiliar emotions as you play, which is worth something on its own.

Part 2: Difficulty

So if I'm gonna talk about Difficulty in an essay about video games, I should just get it out of the way & let you know that I don't think I'm better than you because I'm good at Celeste, no more than I'd think I was better than you for enjoying spicy foods. Difficulty is a flavor like any other, and I think it deserves to be treated as such. So going forward, I will be treating Difficulty as a neutral descriptor of an experience, an aesthetic of play, because I think that the Spring 2020 Collab has a few interesting things to teach us about it.

Now, a really interesting thing about this mod is that it covers an incredibly broad difficulty spectrum. Broader than any game that exists, two fifths of it are made up of stuff you won't find outside of very niche indie titles and rom hacks. This is useful to examine in and of itself, because it serves to magnify the general design challenges that come from high levels of difficulty.

Celeste, the base game from which this all sprung forth, is a broadly permissive experience. There's never an obvious "correct" way through any screen, which allows for spontaneous play that melds seamlessly with the greater focus on exploration that defines Celeste's main story. However, we run into a bit of tension as the difficulty level is raised. Like, a large degree of player freedom necessarily results in lower difficulty, so that part of the game's identity ends up being cast aside as the game gets harder. And... it kinda gets easier? I mean, the summit C-side is fucking hard, but most of it is down to memorizing the correct series of inputs. I never really felt like I had something insurmountable in front of me, because it was only a matter of time before I ground up the entire level into inputs. Mechanical difficulty goes up, conceptual difficulty goes down.

The Spring 2020 Collab, with its absurd difficulty range, has to confront this dichotomy head on. We get a lot of different answers as to what it *means* to raise the difficulty in a game like Celeste, and many attempts to maintain conceptual difficulty on the same turn. Although some mappers just go all out and fully embrace the pure execution angle, like iamdadbod, whose maps are so strict that playing them feels a bit like pressing the correct buttons to watch a movie. "Olden Tower Ruins" was certainly challenging, but by the end I felt like I'd binged an entire twitter thread of curated Tik Tok clips. Like the gameplay was simultaneously extremely intense but also braindead, it's so weird. It's a combination of sensations you won't get from a commercial title, that's for sure.

His maps also have this running bit, a dad joke if you will, where he'll just throw absurd amounts of neutral jumps at you. One of the screens in Olden Tower Ruins terminates with a sudden ice wall and you bet your ass I died there the first time.

He also made a dad-themed lo-fi punk album, like I just thought that was important to mention.

> *I don't need a map*
> *I don't need no GPS*
> *we're still good on gas*
> *I'm not asking for directions*

Cause I'm not lost

It's cute.

But I'd like to move on to another map from the expert lobby, one that might seem superficially similar, but approaches difficulty in a completely different way. Bissy's "Starlit Grotto" is also a series of tight maneuvers with liberal amounts of speed tech, only sparing us of Olden Tower Ruins' near constant dream hypers. It's the *tone* of it that's completely different, a different authorial voice. Bissy is more interested in testing muscles you've never had tested in this game before, the aforementioned "Desolate Spire" adding a second resource pool of midair actions for the player to juggle, "Flooded Waterways" in the intermediate lobby toggling switches that instantly submerge the level in water, periodically switching between Celeste and "The World's Hardest Game" (the flash game from back in the day) for allotted segments of play, "Crypt of the Kevins" in the grandmaster lobby putting under-utilized movement tech into a delightfully uncomfortable spotlight. If I sat down and explained what I was doing in this clip (kevin bunnyhops) I'd start to sound like a SummoningSalt video.

Starlit Grotto is probably my favorite Bissy joint in this pack, though. It doesn't have any flashy gimmicks, and it isn't as bonebreakingly hard as their grandmaster offering, but the tone of its difficulty is incredibly distinct. The motif here is arcane pufferfish escort missions, those little guys from Farewell that get bonked around when you hit them from the top and explode when you hit them from the bottom, the best mechanic in the game. They're arranged into complex configurations with springs on zip movers to form multi-step programs of bonking. A lot of the clockwork heart of this map happens offscreen, like in this part where you bonk a fish near the start and just watch it go on a little adventure off to the right. You don't even know why you have to do it, but it seems important. (It's this guy! It was important!)

The visuals are an overwhelming soup of dark blue, including both cliffside and city spikes along with large fields of electricity that turn the map into a sea of chaotic noise. You take so much of this map on faith, that there's a way through this mess, that whatever's happening offscreen will work in your favor, but there's a surprising amount of grease and uncertainty to the proceedings. There are springs present that may initially look like they're for you, but they're actually for the fish. You'll have to put just a little more cojones into your wavedashes and wallbounces than you're probably used to. It wears on you a little, and when it's over it feels like a more substantial accomplishment, even though Olden Tower Ruins was *handily* the tougher of the two if you take it on a raw input level.

The expert lobby is a fun specimen in general, because it's in a sort of middle ground. It's all... fucking hard, by the time you get to this point you're officially "cracked" as the kids say, or on the first stage of it at least. I booted up Watertown because the little icon said it was on the easier side of what this lobby had to offer, and was immediately greeted with *this* bullshit. But at the same time, it doesn't have access to the layered tiers of bullshit that the designers get to play with in the grandmaster lobby. It still has to halfway resemble a game, of sorts.

Sometimes conceptual difficulty is maintained with a little gesture towards the awkward, the unintuitive. High Voltage having you interact with zip movers mid-transition, sneaking in a use of that spring, leaping off before you're shoved into a wall of electric charge. Sometimes a demand for precision is sprinkled onto actions that were surefire safe moves in the original game, every dream block in "Blank Dreams" having a specific optimal point for you to enter from. Sometimes the intended route is so convoluted that figuring out how you're supposed to navigate the level is its own challenge, like in "Trenches of Jellies" or "Switchback Station."

Sometimes it's *Ligament.*

[ligament lake intro.]

There's something evil in the design of this map, I'm telling you. The most colorful area of the original game has had the color sapped out of it, the music is a single unending dark ambient drone. The gameplay is... I don't even know how to describe it, it's just wrong. Awkward, fiddly, precise in ways that aren't apparent from just looking at it. When the lights fell and I found myself desperately dashing away from a pile of spikes that were placed so incidentally that it felt unintentional, feeling like every gap was crossed only by the skin of my teeth, I knew I was experiencing something with a very precise vision.

The gimmick here is jellyfish interacting with mechanics they should never interact with, bubbles and floating blocks of water. It's hard to understand how you're "supposed" to do any screen, even after you've completed it. Because again, this is a fanmod, it doesn't come with the same assurance of frictionlessness that a commercial title would. It doesn't have the same clarity of intent, because it's so eminently possible that the map is just bad, yknow? Ligament plays with that tension very directly, shooting precisely at the sensation that none of this is the way that it should be, that none of it was actually designed.

You know, it's hard for art to disguise the nature of its own medium. "Funny Games" has this one eleven minute shot where you just watch things slowly play out from a camera angle that looks like it isn't taking the actors into consideration. It's terrifyingly immersive as a result, like the fourth wall doesn't even exist. I want you to understand that this map, Ligament, managed to achieve this sensation in a *2d platformer.*

And just in case you aren't familiar with Celeste's movement, jellies don't just drop from your grip by default when you let go of grab. That's a neutral drop, you have to be holding down at the moment you let go or Madeline will fling the jelly forward with all her might. Sounds simple enough, but when you're asked to do it like ten times on the final screen after you've already been through this terrifying maze of spikes with no setups anywhere, it's searingly painful. Like it's the kind of trick that can be spoiled entirely by nerves.

This final screen is several orders of magnitude more difficult than the rest, I swear. It's so *long* and the spikes are placed so weirdly, it hurts. The visuals get a little brighter here, like day has

broken outside of the dense dark fog that surrounds us. Something is happening here, but I don't know what. It's a completely unknowable sensation, if "The Climb" is a somber epilogue then Ligament takes place after Madeline has been in a coma for a thousand years and the mountain is completely unrecognizable. This map is very old and very slow.

But again, the real galaxy brain stuff sits in the grandmaster lobby. By that point we've escaped the bounds of this linear dichotomy I've illustrated, the mechanical difficulty becoming so intense that it becomes its own kind of conceptual difficulty. This screen on Tripeak Trail just about did my head in, this mash of flamboyantly kaizo realness. It's a granular and exhaustive exploration of the dream blocks from chapter 2, pulling apart the generous timing windows you're afforded for the jumpy dream exit move and contorting it into something unrecognizable.

Conventional design needn't apply in the grandmaster lobby, because what would that even mean? What even is "good" in an environment like that, where whatever assfuck levels you make will still eventually be beaten deathless by Parrot Dash?

Well, there's still a few principles that these mappers seem to be holding to. For example, a by-product of Celeste's heavy leniency with its hitboxes is that truly pixel perfect obstacles look impossible. (show that one nightmarish underwater screen from resort L-side.) I mean, you can make them, but it isn't readable without insider knowledge on exactly where Madeline's vulnerable heart lies.

The grandmaster mappers - for the most part - aim to maintain that sense of readability, and there are many creative examples of devilishly precise maneuvers that still give meaningful feedback with failure. One of my favorites of these moments is in TheHeck90, a map that was made from the word go to be the most fucked up map possible. On this screen, you have to wavedash over to this key token and then wavedash back. However! You're also being chased by Badeline, and through a lot of trial and error I discovered that you can avoid her on the trip back by immediately pumping the brakes on that returning wavedash, holding the opposite direction after you begin your flight.

But... you know what Madeline does if you jump from a rightwards wavedash while holding left?

[REVERSE WAVEDASH YEET]

So you have to jump first, and pump the brakes as soon as possible afterwards. It's very silly.

The grandmaster lobby is also, naturally, prone to a few ungraceful attempts to reach that level of difficulty as well. Some of these maps seem like they're looking for reasons to justify being this far up. "Aquatic Underground" feels like it's exactly one testing pass away from being demoted to the expert lobby, the movement looks unimpressive but upon playing the map you'll discover several invisible precision choke points that *definitely* would have been sanded off if it wasn't made to actively court grandmaster players. "Forest of the Ancients" is present in the

grandmaster lobby solely because every screen lasts a goddamn year and there's like ten of them. I'm sorry Dad, I didn't like this one.

"Gem Garden," uh, well I'm not sure why this is here. Should have swapped places with Cycle Madness.

But there are a few divinely inspired visions for what ultra high level difficulty can look like in this engine, like in what is among my favorite maps in this pack, "Temporal Tower." The main gimmick with Temporal Tower is that you exclusively get around via springs that kill you if you don't dash out of their arc. "Spring Cancels" they're called. I feel like I can't even properly comprehend what a genius level design move this is, but I'll try.

Okay, so the problem I have with techspam style maps like Olden Tower Ruins is that the spikes are just for show. Like, you can die on them, lord knows you can die on them, but it won't be because you didn't maneuver through them carefully enough. The spikes are there to enforce the sequence of speed tricks you have to perform. Performing these correctly sends you sailing through the tight spaces as if the spikes lining the walls aren't even there. The hardest part of this room is remembering to extend this particular midair superdash a little further than you think you should.

By contrast, every stray death zone in Temporal Tower is *real*. You have to actively interrupt every one of those automatic arcs you're sent on by the springs at a specific point, at every point in this interaction you are distinctly aware of the hot space surrounding Madeline. It's so good, it's also really fucking hard, but it's a good hard. It's a difficulty that's resistant to the kind of compartmentalizing that can happen with this sort of overly strict gameplay, christ, for the first time ever I'm halfway through a minute long screen I've attempted a thousand times and I'm not dozing off.

"Fish Hell" does something pretty similar, but instead of springs it's the upward boost you get when you bonk the fish. The first room has you hitting one and then dashing down to intercept its path almost immediately afterwards, and then doing this devilish maneuver where you have to dash sideways basically instantly after each consecutive fish bonk in order to avoid the shallow ceiling of spikes. And then they throw in a Theo crystal screen for the hell of it, but you don't have to do any neutral drops so it's actually pretty easy.

But I'd be an absolute fool if I forgot to mention the other main way that modding communities primarily step up the difficulty of their favorite games. That's right, it's time for-

> **Mini Essay: Discerning the Value of "Canonizing" Speedrun Tech (part 2 because none of you can behave)**

Some of you might remember the segment in my Marble Blast video where I laid out the framework for analyzing speedrun tech from a design standpoint. Essentially, when speedrun tech is "Canonized," used as intentional game mechanics, they ascend from the theoretical

uncurated space of speedrunning into a formally designed space of authorial intent. In the context of speedrunning, all mechanical interaction that lets you go fast is created equal. It's all an emergent space beyond the game, where any notion of authorial curation is meaningless. I argue that in the context of custom levels, works of art created by people who are actually expecting you to interact with it in a particular way, speedrun tech can be well designed or poorly designed.

This is why Farewell teaches you how to wavedash instead of how to extended hyper, it was a deliberate choice by maddy, it's the better designed mechanic. Extended hypers might be more consistent in the long run, but there's no way to adequately teach it besides insisting to the player that they'll get the timing eventually. Watch the Marble Blast video, it's good.

The Celeste Spring 2020 Collab is an aggregate creation made of dozens of small experiences helmed by dozens of authors with their own preferences and personal stomach for Jank, so there's no way that this *wasn't* going to exhaustively plunder the game's engine for whatever emergent behavior could be exploited. Well, not exhaustive, Celeste has a bottomless skill ceiling, but this mod went far enough to get me cracked on Celeste's very DNA. Let's take a look and see what we can learn from this experiment.

The advanced lobby is the first point that you're really asked to exceed the skills necessary to fully complete the base game, the beginning of the end, really. It's also the first time you're expected to learn movement tech that is never required of you throughout the entirety of Celeste, but it starts out pretty simple. Take neutral jumps for example. Neutral jumps fucking suck and I wish they weren't in the game-

Neutral jumps are how you scale walls without grabbing them and spending stamina. If you jump off a wall without holding any directional buttons you'll do a light tap off the wall instead of kicking away from it, combining this with a quick course correction back means you can just climb walls indefinitely, no grabbing required. This effectively replaces stamina management and jumping ingenuity with two buttons that you press in a rhythm you just learn over time. This room in Ferocious Sanctuary is either piss easy or the most annoying thing you'll ever play in a game, depending on whether the arbitrary timing of this one repetitive action is suitably baked into your paws. There's no in-between, no onboarding.

Another occasional feature of this map is reverse hypers, and this feels weird to say because I've done so many of these that it's second nature now, but they're unintuitive as hell. Like, dashing and then shifting gears mid-dash before you jump so you can preserve your momentum in the opposite direction, it feels like cracking a combination on a lock moreso than a process of gaining speed. Ferocious Sanctuary is easily the most tragic casualty of the "speed tech as design" modding pitfall, like I heard a lot of people say this was one of the most difficult maps in the advanced lobby but if you know the three or so tricks up its sleeve then it'll just play itself. I'm sorry that I'm singling out this one map so hard, Dad made me do it-

The expert lobby is when things properly start going off the rails, like we've properly dunked ourselves into the harsh mod soup at this point. You probably remember when the Old Site B-Side revealed that you can jump while exiting the dream blocks, but did you know that you can hyper out of them too? You gotta do it a little later than you think, it's incredibly awkward. And then Blank Dreams asks you to do it ten fucking times in a row-

The Celeste Community tends to associate certain tech with certain difficulty levels, and as such, SC2020 introduces a new palette of obscure movement tech with each new lobby in the form of a Gym. Because of this, these gyms begin to feel less like training areas and more like you're being introduced to the new list of things that mappers are going to be shoehorning into their maps in order to justify their position in this difficulty. Like when I learned that you can get more distance from bumpers and fish explosions by holding the direction away from them upon contact, my first thought was just "Oh, I guess that's what they're expecting me to do for every bumper and fish in the game now." And I was right. Well, not always right, there's exactly one cornerboost spot in the whole expert lobby and it's in an optional room that I missed the first time around. Hyper Bunnyhops appear, uh, I think they just don't show up here. Was I supposed to do one at this part of Electric Exuberance?

Actually, while we're talking about hyper bunnyhops, I was really expecting there to be more of them. It's fiddly and difficult, but like, it makes sense. The thread of logic is maintained, following a little hyperdash with a big jump feels like it should give the speed of the first and the height of the second. There's one map that really extensively uses them, Crypt of the Kevins, and it's one of my favorites.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. The expert lobby also introduces us to... ultras.

I have thought a lot about ultras while playing this collab, it's like the lingua franca of this game's super high difficulty levels. Any map touting an excessively high skill floor will use them almost as often as wavedashes are used in advanced level maps.

God, where do I start? Well I guess I can try starting where the mod does, with their little tutorial.

> *To understand how ultras work, we need to outline a few things first.*
>
> *Everytime Madeline down-diagonal dashes, she gains a 1.2x speed boost upon landing on the ground. Everytime Madeline dashes, it lasts 0.25s before ending.*
>
> *Top: If you land on the ground and jump before your dash ends, Madeline will do a wavedash. (resetting all built up speed)*
>
> *Middle: If you land on the ground and jump after your dash ends, Madeline will grind to a halt.*

Bottom: If you land on the ground after your dash ends, Madeline will gain the 1.2x speed boost and have a normal height jump.

Okay, so this didn't explain anything.

I mean, now that I'm getting kinda good at ultras I can recognize that they technically recounted most of how the trick functions, but the first time I got to this point it was just complete gibberish. It's got all the components, but it doesn't communicate what any of it actually means from a practical standpoint. Terminal speedrunner brain.

So, there's two components to an ultra. The first and most immediately obvious one for the player is the oblique angle that you travel on when you dash diagonally downwards at speed. The second half is jumping off of something without the game thinking you're trying to do a wavedash and getting confused. The sooner you dash down, the more speed you preserve. And to make use of the speed and get the magical 1.2x boost they mentioned, you must hit the ground at some point after the dash is over but preferably right after, and *refrain from buffering your jump*.

Yeah, that's the first thing the tutorial doesn't really get across. Celeste has a lot of artificial timing window affordances hardcoded into its movement, including a system where pressing the button a little before Madeline actually hits the ground will still result in a jump. Ultras are a fucking mad science accident though, so they don't afford you the same courtesy. It's like... the most common way that you'll mess these things up, speaking from experience, and if you don't know that's why it's happening then it'll just read as your inputs getting ate half the time.

Parrot dash has told me it's actually just 2/3rds chance of not working. Parrot Dash has also cleared D1D7 and probably just comes to expect random chance to dictate success in this game-

The result of ultras having different timing rules to every other interaction in this game, is that ultras will almost invariably stick out like a sore thumb in any maps they're used in, because they represent a brief visit to a version of Celeste that isn't as well programmed. The Celeste movement engine is slavishly tuned to reflect the player's intention instead of just their inputs... except here.

"Ultra Sandwich" is the worst case scenario here, assuredly. Like it's average, actually kinda easy for an expert lobby map, but exactly once per screen you get to do an ultra, this weird thing that looks kind of like a wavedash but the timing windows are completely alien. All of them are out of place, it's so weird. Ultra Sandwich was also made to be beatable by a robot at light speed, so that has to count for something.

There's another very important thing about ultras that this tutorial leaves out, which will become clearer as I shift gears and talk about some more maps. Firstly, Ultra Difficult, by Bob Dole. (oh, huh, bob dole.) You didn't think I was going to talk about Ultra Difficult? Well, neither did I, but at

some point during the production of this video I got cracked and cleared every grandmaster map, and I have *takes.*

So, if you haven't noticed, this mod has a pattern of associating speed tech directly with difficulty. The difficulty meter, especially on launch day, was essentially a meter for how much of that difficulty's speed tech was present. Ultra Difficult's difficulty meter is pushed so far that it's cracked, so naturally, it's an exuberant candybox of esoteric speedrunner bullshit.

You could make a whole essay about all the strange things this map asks you to do, so I'll just focus on the very first screen for now. I'm not lying when I say this screen took me like two hours to get right, it opens with an ultra that's performed on the ground, which normally doesn't do anything except for when you grab something before the second dash can finish and cancel your momentum. And *then*, after you've gotten the maximum speed with the jellyfish, you're asked to throw it backwards and use the miniscule speed boost you receive from that action to dash diagonally down and ultra with that speed.

So for those at home, you dash down at the ground, jump, dash again as soon as possible after, grab the jellyfish, jump, let go of down and press left so you don't neutral drop the jelly, release jelly, immediately dash down again, and *don't buffer your fucking jump*-

The next trick is so bad that it wraps around to being funny again. Those blocks from chapter eight that go buuwomph and launch you away from their center apparently have four frames as they break where the game considers you to be standing on solid ground, and you can hyper off of it. There's no feedback, no way to learn it without simply drilling the timing into your skull. The only tip I can give is that it's a little later than you think it should be.

Is this fun? I don't know, I think that's the wrong question to ask here. Like, I wouldn't say I'm having "fun" when I fail this impossibly tight reverse hyper into an ultra, and just to *get* here I had to hit a four frame window core super, a four frame window core hyper, ultra, ultra again into the ground, grab the jelly, jump, jellyfish backboost, ultra, *fuck this cornerboost*, another grounded ultra, grab the jelly and don't forget to jump at the end, but I still think there's an interesting aesthetic idea being exercised here.

Just take a survey of the way the map looks, a completely abstract formless color void. Even Madeline herself is abstracted, a blank set of pixels that bluntly indicate the game state rather than representing a character. This is a good idea. I mean, it was a good idea when Dustforce did it, which is what this map is referencing.

Dustforce's endgame challenges also opted for an abstract look, "Giga Difficult" using the same purple and orange color scheme that Ultra Difficult did. I like this choice, it feels like a more honest representation of the relationship you've built with the designers at this point. Like, I imagine that by the time you reach this level of competence and familiarity with the game, it's not really a game about a wiley band of janitors cleaning up leaves anymore. You're an object, maneuvering around a space, interacting with "stuff" to increase your score.

On the same token, playing Ultra Difficult made me struggle to remember a time that I ever authentically felt as if I was playing as a plucky trans mountain climber with anxiety. By purposefully extricating aesthetic interpretation, making the map entirely abstract in a way that is itself just a reference to Dustforce, the map becomes more of a direct dialogue between player and designer. Especially since, like, there's some parts that you straight up won't be able to complete if you don't have an answer to the question being posed. I had to look at someone's stream and study their twitch overlay input display frame by frame to figure out how to do this part, where you hyper and then dash diagonally into the ground so you can tokyo drift into this crevice. But that's the entire point, it's a dialogue. It's a fourth wall break.

Anyways, after that I played "Heart of the Storm" by CANADIAN, the other cracked red difficulty map. Heart of the Storm is, by contrast, not an abstract grab bag of speed tech. It's actually very focused and disciplined, it's the chained ultra map. The high speed extreme input density map. It has a distinct and direct aesthetic vision, it's a storm. Chaotic, imposing yet impartial. This really is exactly what a map based around chained ultras should look and sound like.

The first screen after the tutorial is the hardest, (or so I'm told, I fluked it in under an hour) but it's also the shortest. A mash of inputs that reportedly takes some people hours upon hours to adequately perform, stinging your face like sheets of rain. The screens afterwards get longer and progressively grow more relaxed, (or so I'm told, this stupid cloud-tech screen had me stuck for two consecutive afternoons) climaxing with this... nightmarish jellyfish screen, operating in that same arcane mostly offscreen fashion as the fish mechanisms in Starlit Grotto, but far bigger and slower. The storm is dissipating, yet the magnitude of it only grows more apparent with distance. This is so *fucking* cool. It's so cool, I love that even in this no-man's-land of extreme difficulty there can still be dramatically incisive aesthetic statements like this, I'm so delighted that my experience of beating every grandmaster map in ascending difficulty was allowed to culminate with two maps that are this different, that are this interesting.

But you know the other thing you should know about Ultras? The timing is dependent on how the mapper was feeling that evening. Remember, it's easy to confuse the game into thinking you're trying to do a wavedash, if your downdash is intercepted before it ends then you'll lose the momentum. This means that whether each platform is four, three, or two tiles down has severe ramifications for how long you need to wait after the jump before you dash. The ultras in Ultra Difficult are, ironically, kind of lax. You'll actually undershoot most of them if you try to dash down as soon as possible. The ultras in Heart of the Storm, however, gotta be fucking on the dot. Usually anyways, they actually change it on the fly a couple times. These first ultras on screen 2 are inhumanly tight four tile ones while just a little later you're given some looser two tile ones just to keep you on your toes. This optional screen off to the side of screen three changes it up on an ultra-by-ultra basis, speedrunners must be stopped-

But like, I dunno. If it didn't have that variety, Ultras could end up being just... fast neutral jumps. I was ready to call them fast neutral jumps until I played Heart of the Storm and it was the most fun I'd ever had playing this game since Farewell dropped. It's prickly, engaging, multifaceted,

with a greater sense of onboarding and feedback for failure than I could have imagined for something like this. God... how does this still resemble a game? How am I still going at this with a classical design sensibility while still being rewarded for it? I don't know, but maybe this'll inspire you to aim a little higher on the difficulty meter with your own projects, cus there's a surprising breadth of artistic problems and solutions to discover. At least try aiming higher than Celeste did-

Part 3: Beauty

I wanted to end this video with a big conclusive statement, but my mind kept on returning to the little things. I love this moment right at the start of "Abandoned and Ruined" where you're just... gently reminded that extended supers are a thing you can do, and then the map quietly ends with you doing a second one. I love this moment in Fish Hell where I was expected to hold both jump and grab simultaneously for the first time in my life. I love how Temporal Tower's rooms have cheesability progression, with the first room having a huge skip and the last one being virtually un-cheesable. I love how Ultra Difficult managed to have some rooms completely shift in layout depending on whether you went for the strawberry paths or not. I am just... immensely delighted that I went on this whole irresponsibly long journey and I never stopped discovering moments of pure curious ingenuity.

I love that the hardest room in the entire mod is just sitting off in some corner of Heart of the Storm, and it's more optional than optional. You don't even get a strawberry, it's just a nice view. I didn't come close to beating it, it's just a bunch of incredibly tight ultras and cornerboosts in rapid succession, which you might know as "never buffer" and "*must* buffer." I'm pretty sure this upwards cornerboost is frame perfect, I don't know. Maybe I'll grind this guy out someday, but for now I am oddly comforted by the knowledge that it's just out there. The nice view.

I loved coming to recognize certain names as they appeared in the credits before levels, seeing that Mun was credited with decorating the map and knowing that it was probably going to burn my eyes out. I loved the growing familiarity I began to feel with these authors and their design style, iamdadbod with his strict speedtech spam and the occasional strawberry that's essentially free but burdens you with the stress of carrying a strawberry for two thirds of the screen, Bissy's exploration into unfamiliar mechanics and rhythms that still manage to feel distinctly gamey, Thegur90's wild experimentation that results in three of the worst maps in the collab and two of the best.

I loved the music, both original and borrowed, you've been hearing it playing in the background for this entire video. I loved Marshall's 90s IDM chic beats with piano melodies that stand up to most of the stuff from the original game's OST. I loved how Thegur90s tracks barely ever fit the levels they were made for, even though they're pound for pound probably the best songwriter here. I love how Ceph was typecast as the composer for water levels three times out of three. I love Tortoise's cursed D&D music that goes on wild goofy excursions and tempo changes. I love Zachary Talis's harrowing dark ambient, which shouldn't work for a precision platformer but still somehow does with how it's used.

I loved exploring the lobbies before I even played any of the maps, each one with its own distinct little vibe and personality. I love how the higher difficulties start to include modestly difficult platforming while you're navigating between maps, the level select screen is bullying me, it's so cute. I loved systematically clearing every map in each lobby, collecting every mini heart, unlocking the final challenge. A "Heart Side," a communally built test of endurance, where I got to revisit each of these little experiences one last time before moving onto the next difficulty. I loved the ways in which they managed to condense the essence of these maps into such short little reminders.

I eventually started trying to picture how these maps would be translated into the heartside while I was playing them. Like, what do you do with Crumbling Castle? This strange, cluttered, humorous little adventure. Well, Tortoise managed to insert a brief little joke in there, seeing a bunch of seekers and then immediately crushing all of them with a rock. Tripeak Trail is a map that splits itself into three segments with zero cohesion, the aforementioned kaizo ass dream blocks, an incredibly jank high speed kevin room, and an incomprehensible jellyfish escort mission. Imagine my delighted dismay when I reached its portion of the Grandmaster Heartside and discovered that I would be doing all three, at once! Jank high speed kevin tech leading into kaizo ass dream blocks with at least two active jellyfish flying around at any given time. I love it so much, it's terrible.

These heartsides turn this collab into something almost impossibly cohesive, each one placed as a gentle step up in difficulty from the rest of the lobby you just completed, a substantial challenge for each stage of skill development I experienced while playing. They're tonally engaged with the text they reside in, the Beginner heartside is optimistic, beautiful, the first step into this communal art project and a hint of what's to come. The Intermediate Heartside is a dark turn, the yawning trailhead of a much longer journey that you're now committed to. The Advanced Heartside is an exalted leap into the unknown, the first monumental challenge that the original game couldn't have prepared you for, epic and swirling with excitement. The Expert Heartside is growing tension, the beginning of the end, glimpses of light closing behind you. A somber farewell to the version of you that didn't spend entire afternoons playing fucking celeste mods-

There's no STORY, there could never *be* a story with this many voices contributing to the final product, if it had a story it'd probably be much worse. And yet, the Celeste Spring 2020 Collab feels like a singular work of art. I don't know how, but it does. The Grandmaster Heartside is so distinctly a *destination* for this story, it's so vast, so final. They call back to the little intro sequence at the end, it's so sweet, so nice, it feels so right, and in a way that you can only get with a work of art helmed by a commune's worth of designers, programmers, artists and musicians. It might not be better than Celeste, or even really as good, but the sheer diversity of opinion here is something unique, beautiful.

------(if strawberry jam comes out before i'm done with this video, continue voiceover below)

I am, frankly, astounded by the sheer dedication and communal spirit present in this-

God *fucking* damnit they made another one.

(the end)