

Theme 3: Design a Tutorial Level for Celeste

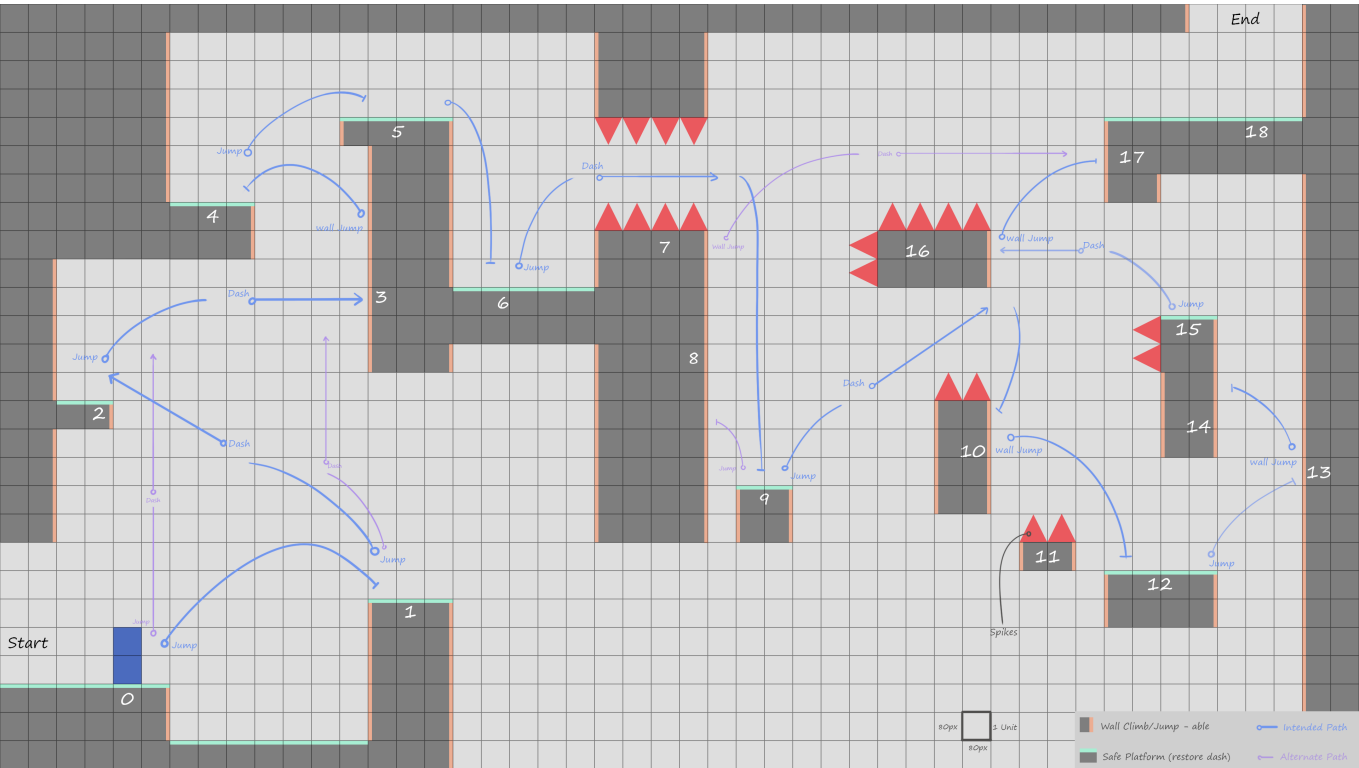
Roshan Premnath | Lab 3 GAD | Ecole Intuit Lab Mumbai

Level Overview

This is a tutorial level that teaches jump, Dash and Wall Jump. It is separated into two deliberately designed sections. First, a consequence-free playground that teaches the aforementioned mechanics through discovery and experimentation alone. Second, a stress-test to confirm minimum viable play using all three mechanics. At no point is the player instructed. Every mechanic is discovered through interaction with the geometry alone.

Learning Progression

The Playground (platform 0 to 6)



layout with numbered platforms to reference with ease

Jump

At the start of the level (platform 0) the player can see a gap and a platform 1 ahead of them. The player can reach 1 by jumping on it. The gap has no spikes, falling down is not a fail state, this encourages the player to retry immediately. Platform 1 is taller than 0. This serves as a visual goal to reach in order to get to platform 2. The distance between platform 0 and 1 is considerable but enough to cover with one jump. Reaching 1 familiarises the player with the distance and height they can reach by a single jump.

Dash

Once the player learns jump, they have reached platform 1. The next goal is to reach the platform 2. Due to its height and distance from 1, the player cannot reach it with one jump. The player must jump and dash diagonally left to reach it. Again, if they fail to reach it, they are likely going to fall in the gap between 0 and 1. They can immediately jump or climb back on 1 to retry immediately.

Wall Jump

When the player reaches 2, they have learnt dash. The next goal for the player, to complete the playground, is to reach platform 5. From 2, the player cannot jump and dash vertically to skip 3 and reach 4. This is because there isn't enough vertical distance between 4 and 2—

the underside of 4 will prevent the attempt. The player must jump and dash horizontally and hang onto 3. The player can climb up 3 but the overhang of platform 5 prevents them from directly climbing to it. The player must wall jump from 3 to reach 4.

Completing the Playground

Having reached platform 4, the player has learnt jump, dash and wall jump through interaction with the geometry alone. If the player had failed and fallen down to 0 at any point, they are likely to discover "skips" (refer to alternate path "purple") through experimentation with the three mechanics. Executing skips teaches the player a philosophy of Celeste's level design: there are multiple ways to take on a level.

The playground ends when the player reaches platform 6. The player must jump up and dash through the spikes above 7 to move past the threshold and reach the stress test section of the level.

The Stress Test (7 to 18)

 **Stress test's Goal**

The goal of the stress test is to confirm minimum viable play. The player must perform all three mechanics taught in the playground to reach platform 18 to complete the level.

Platform 7 is the threshold that separates the playground and the stress test. Dashing through it indicates to the player that danger is now imminent. 7 also serves as a mechanical indicator of the stress test. The fail state is death.

After dashing above 7 the player must immediately change their momentum and move downward to land on platform 9 otherwise they will die when they touch the spikes on left of platform 16.

When the player lands on platform 9, the most obvious path to platform 18 is by reaching 13 because there are no spikes between 14 and 13. They can be climbed safely.

From 9 the player must jump towards 10 and dash diagonally right to manoeuvre over 10's spikes. Dashing horizontally over 10 will kill the player as they will touch the spikes on 15. After dashing diagonally over 10's spikes the player must change their momentum and hang on to the right side of platform 10 to prevent falling on 11's spikes. From 10, the player can wall jump to land safely on 12.

The player can jump and climb between 13 and 14 to reach the top of 15. With their dash restored, the player can either simply jump and hang on platform 16 and wall jump to climb 17 or jump from 15 and dash vertically mid-jump to skip 16 and reach 17. After climbing 17, the player can move to 18 to complete the level and prove minimum viable play for future levels.

The player may also skip the path above by perform all three mechanics in one combo. They can jump from platform 9 to hang on 8 and climb to the top of it, the perform a wall jump to gain height over the spikes of 16. Mid-wall jump, the player can dash horizontally to directly reach 17.

My Process in designing the level

This section covers all the work I have done and my process towards designing the final pass of the tutorial level.

Studying Celeste

I first began by playing Celeste. I had to get a feel for the gameplay and derive any design philosophies the level designers had. I employed a simple framework for this; While I played the game, I wrote down (in a table) "what happened and how I felt", and "why it was designed that way"

Celeste Design Journal	
What happened How I felt?	Why it was designed that way?
The game just places you in the world, it assumes you to try out moves to eventually jump. Jump, jump was my first instinct.	Teaches the player the core actions. (Jump) The level needs jumping to clear, even when the iceberg collapsed. The player either dies or learns to jump on instinct. → Important lesson because I own ascending jump is the gateway for all other mechanics such as wall cling.
So, in the prologue, I felt threatened in two instances, the ice block falling and the Bellwing platform scene. After I spoke to the old lady. In the later case I jumped and the game taught me how to dash to save myself.	The game must teach the player and condition them at the use cases of actions. Jump is an action that allows progression and is an (analog). The player must jump to enable other actions such as wall climb and dash. Jump is supposed to be a safe place for wall climbing. That's a broken breaker. The player can take a breathers. Dash is another core move it is key in closing distances that also a stronger guard.
But I was relaxed and calm when the game taught me wall climb	
The levels Bellwing made me feel very thrilled, to execute the combos of the moves.	Levels are designed to take the players through various stages of learning. Introduce → Familiarise → Stress test

As I progressed the game, I reached chapter 2 and 3 and realised that the game never made it clear when the tutorial ended. I went back to the prologue and played until chapter 2 to confirm it.

Unlike other games, Celeste's tutorial section's end is blurred. The game does not tell when it stops holding hands. Finding the tutorial's end was quite difficult because all prompting ends with the prologue. And the tutorial surely continued after that because it was yet introducing more fundamental mechanics and stress testing the player's skill after the prologue.

Before playing the game again, I contemplated and tried to define what a tutorial even is to make my third play-through efficient.

A Proper Breakdown of Celeste's Tutorial

First, when does the tutorial end?

Obviously, it begins with the prologue.

↳ This is where the player is introduced to all the foundational mechanics.

So what is a tutorial?

It's the portion of a game where the fundamental mechanics are taught.

These systems are dominant throughout the game.

Therefore sections such as the hotel which have the red blob part, the town's ghost chase section are closer to gimmicks.

What are Celeste's Foundational Systems?

1. Jump
2. Dash
3. Wall climb

But wait, in a later chapter, Dash is taken away from the player. This deepens the understanding of the wall climb and jump.

↳ Even in this section, it can be argued that the game is teaching the player about the fundamental systems.

Through this exploration I realised that game tutorials have three phases: reveal, familiarise and stress test. After reflecting on other games' tutorials a bit longer I realised that the function and purpose of a tutorial is not to only reveal what the controls are, its to ensure the player can perform minimum viable play— this is why game tutorial always end with a "test".

Finally, I came to this definition of a tutorial:

What is a tutorial?

It is a portion of the game that teaches the player fundamental systems that are dominant throughout the game until minimum viable play is achieved.

Satisfied with my definition, the next step was to discern when celeste's tutorial actually ended. I played through the game again from the start while employing a new tabular analysis framework.

UbiLvl_2026_Finding Tutorial's end

The goal is to discern when Celeste's tutorial actually ends while breaking down how levels on the road to the last one (in the tutorial) are designed.

Level Breakdowns

Level No.	Mechanics Required	Design	Player State Produced
001	Movement and Jump	The level is straightforward. The player starts from a long patch of ground must jump across chasms, onto a moderate patch of ground under a big block of ice. When the player lands on said patch, the ice block shakes for a few moments and falls down. This would kill the player unless they swiftly jump across the next chasm towards the end of the screen.	The level is peaceful at first. There is some uncertainty because the player is unprompted and pushing button to figure what they can do/ gather their input bearings. The player can jump and at first a seemingly

Level No.	Mechanics Required	Design	Player State Produced
		The is no button prompt to tell the player how to jump. Jumping is intrinsic. To jump— is learning how to walk for the first time. The level is designed to teach the player that jump is the first instinct, to move forward and to evade danger. Level important thing to note is that the ice block shakes before it lands. To inform the player of imminent danger. This feedback is key in teaching the player of the utility of jumping in the face of danger.	calm experience with low risk turns into a brief, frantic moment of life-threatening danger.
002	Movement, jump and climb	This level is also straightforward but unlike the last level's flat patches of ground, this level consists of many broken vertically tall platforms. The intent of this level is to teach the climb mechanic. Tall platforms are required to prevent the player from clearing them by simply jumping. Wall jumping won't work either. The player must climb to scale these platforms. In terms of danger there is no spontaneous moment of danger unlike the last one. This level is also designed to teach one more lesson— to climb or cling to a wall after jump. The later part of the level has chasms and floating platforms that require the player to jump and then climb a wall. The purpose of this design is to familiarise the player with combo-ing actions (jump and climb)	This level is peaceful compared to the last one. There are no sudden moments of danger. Wall climb is generous, the player has time to think and control pacing. This mechanic is a momentary breather the player can take. The player also feels more like a mountain climber, this level make the player jump and wall climb as combos brings the player closer to the immersion of a rock climber.
003/4	movement, jump and dash	In this level Madeline meets old woman living at the foot of the mountain. The purpose of this level is to set the narrative context behind madeline's climb and to teach the player how to dash. The level is linear in terms of its verticality and ends with a falling platform section that is scripted to put the player in a near-fail-state to teach them how to dash.	The interaction with the old woman frustrates the player. She is condescending and the player is immediately encouraged to prove her wrong. At the end of the level is player is induced into panic as they have to outrun falling platforms and doom is imminent. Learning dash to save them from the predicament creates relief and is a power trip. Dashing is powerful, the player can evade death.
005	movement, jump, climb and dash	The prologue/ reveal part of the tutorial has ended This is the first level of the forsaken city. This tutorial yet continues because this is the first time the player is introduced to perilous terrain (spikes in the forsaken city). Further in the whole introduce → familiarise → stress test loop celeste's level design, this level falls in the familiarise part. The level starts off with a gap riddled with spikes at the bottom followed by another gap but a tall platform for the player to climb on, then another longer gap that can only be crossed by a dash— to be more specific, a diagonal upward dash. This level is designed to condense the same lessons and actions taught in prologue and it does so in the same order. This level serves as a rite of passage to familiarise the player with the basic actions they are expected to take in future levels.	To the player this is the first actual level in the mountain. They have begun their journey. The level isn't difficult but the player feels a sense of comfort with the movement of the game as its a repetition of the actions they learnt previously. The player feels prepared for whats to come.
006	movement, jump, dash and climb.	The level reveals the celeste's strawberry collectible. The tutorial presses one. This level also introduces spring board the first gimmick of the forsaken city and its function is immediately apparent. The start of this level shows a strawberry at the very top with no platforms available to reach there, instead the player can move onto the springboard and launch themselves towards the strawberry. Post strawberry, the player must dash through a gap with a ceiling and spiked ground to make it to the other side. The purpose of this level however is to teach the player that collecting strawberries is not mandatory in completing the level. Its purely optional.	The strawberry is immediately visible and its warm colour makes it stand out from the environment. The player feels that the strawberry is relevant. Although it is apparent that the strawberry is not mandatory, this level creates a sense of pride towards collecting strawberries and raising the difficulty optionally.

Level No.	Mechanics Required	Design	Player State Produced
		It creates an expectation of the difference between minimum viable play and the skill ceiling.	
007	movement, climb, dash and wall jump	This is an evolution of the previous level. It is more difficult and again makes the strawberry noticeable. It doubles down on teaching the player that the strawberry is purely optional as it is placed directly opposite the end of the level. This level also makes the difference between minimum viable play and the skill ceiling more apparent than the previous one. For minimum viable play, The player must simple perform climbs and dashes in succession. But to collect the strawberry, the player deliberately climb downward, wall jump towards the strawberry and continue wall jumping upward towards a stable platform. Further, this level also teaches the player that a strawberry can only be collected when the player touches it (strawberry follows the player) and land on a stable platform.	This level is more difficult and although its not mandatory to collect the strawberry, this level creates a sense of competition. it teases the player to collect the strawberry and finish the level since the player is already at the end when they can optionally choose to collect the strawberry.
008	movement, jump and climb.	This is a simple one. This level does not seem like a tutorial since it does not introduce any new mechanic thats dominant beyond the forsaken city. however, its purpose is to introduce another chapter exclusive gimmick — conveyor platforms. This level teaches that the conveyor can actually lauch the player with added force. if the player immediately jumps off it, they launch themselves towards spikes.	The player is yet unfamiliar and does not know what to expect from the game in terms of challenge. This level makes the player wary of new gimmicks and types of challenges to come.
009	movement, jump and climb	Now this level is yet another tutorial that reveals another type of strawberry challenge. Again, collecting them is optional. But, this strawberry has wings. It places a restriction on the player if they want to collect it. The player cannot dash, if they do, the strawberry flies away. This is another revelation of the difference between minimum viable play and a tall skill ceiling. It is clear however, that this added difficulty is optional, the game does not intend to have collectibles and trophies get in the way of progression.	The player encounters a new type of strawberry. Initially, they might simply go about it normally, performing they common actions such as dashing to reach it, but the strawberry flies away! The player then notices the signage and can discern than they cannot dash if they want to collect the strawberry. Another tease to overcome optional challenges and surprise and thrill to anticipate whats to come.
010/011	movement, jump, climb, dash and wall jump.	These levels are the standard. They themselves don't introduced new mechanics. However, they still come under a tutorial because the game introduced optional alternate paths. Right off the bat, in this level, the player sees light coming off their left. Going towards this takes the player to a new optional level in which they can attempt to collect a strawberry. This tutorial serves as an introduction to exploration and hidden/alternate/optional levels.	The levels are now incorporating more gimmicks but also introduce optional levels. The player's sense of exploration and discovery and enticed. And the completionist characteristic in the player is enticed.
COMMENT		It seems as though the tutorial ends with level 010/011. Because the next level introduces new gimmicks and the game's difficulty increases. The game also introduces a much larger set of optional paths to progress the chapter. The game now only introduces new gimmicks and more emergent interactions with the core mechanics.	

Celeste's design philosophies (derived)

After my journalling, multiple play-throughs and level breakdowns of Celeste I derived three design philosophies.

1. **Uncertainty comes from information asymmetry** not difficulty. The player doesn't need to be punished to feel uncertain. They need to not know the rules yet.
2. **Feedback precedes demand.** The geometry communicates what's required before it demands it. The ice block shakes before it falls (level 001 prologue)
3. **Stress tests confirm minimum viable play** in tutorials.

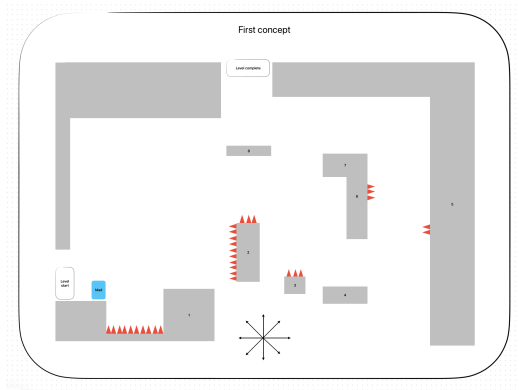
It was these three philosophies that significantly influenced my approach to the level design.

A quick side note, I watched the GDC talk on Celeste's level design and also learnt that incorporating multiples ways to clear levels is an important characteristic to its design.

On to the Passes

Pass 01

To begin with I was unsure of what my level needed, I thought my level being an entire stress test was enough. I wanted to quickly get a first pass through since its more effective to iterate rapidly than spend a long time perfecting one pass. I did this pass on freeform.



Issue 01: **Wall jump is introduced inside the hardest moment in the level.**

Resolution: A dedicated wall jump introduction moment earlier in the level. The player should hit a wall naturally and find that pushing off it is the obvious and safe path upward. No spikes nearby. No punishment for failing the first attempt.

Issue 02: **Dash has no isolated introduction before the combo sequence.**

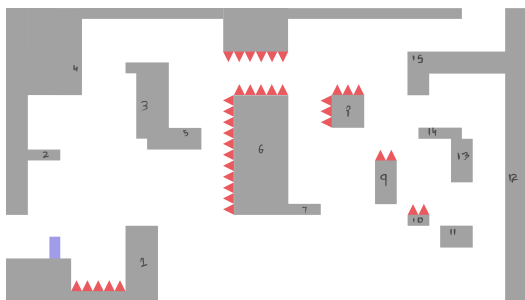
Resolution: A dedicated dash introduction in the left side space of the layout, between the opening jump and the combo section.

Issue 03: **Spike placement on platform 5 punishes discovery.**

Resolution: Remove or relocate the spike on platform 5's wall. The right wall at that point should be an invitation to experiment, not a hazard.

Pass 02

I realised, from pass 01, that the level needs to teach all three mechanics to the player in a safe section with little to no penalty before I could incorporate the stress test. I decided to split the level into two sections: a playground (no penalty) and a stress test (to confirm minimum viable play). I shifted softwares to photoshops to make my levels in 4k and make platforms in a grid for consistency.



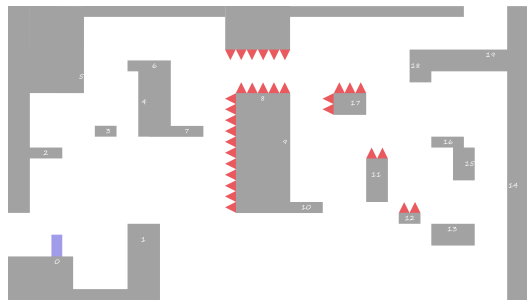
Issue 01: **Jump and Dash introduction still has no discovery moment**

Resolution: Remove spikes below the gap between platforms 0 and 1. The fall becomes a safe consequence-free fail state. The player experiments, discovers dash, clears the gap. The geometry teaches.

Issue 02: **Player can skip wall jump through jump + dash combo**

Resolution: A new platform added between platforms 2 and 3 provides a safe recovery surface if the player falls mid-attempt. Further, calculate units Madeline can travel through jump and dash mechanics.

Pass 03

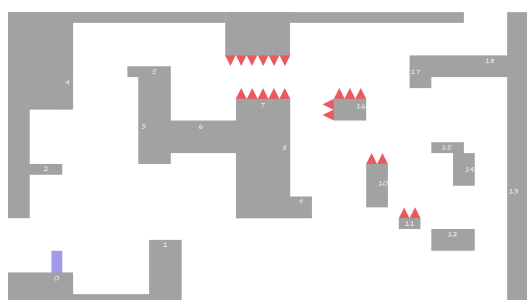


Issue 01: **Wall jump skip still exists in the playground section.**

The player can dash directly to platform 6 from the playground without ever wall jumping. Unlike the platform 3 overhang in pass 02 which geometrically forced wall jump regardless of approach, platform 6 has no equivalent inevitability. A player who skips wall jump in the playground arrives at the stress test without having discovered the mechanic.

Resolution: Either raise platform 6 beyond dash range from the playground to close the skip, or add a separate consequence-free wall jump moment in the playground that is geometrically unavoidable regardless of path taken.

Pass 04

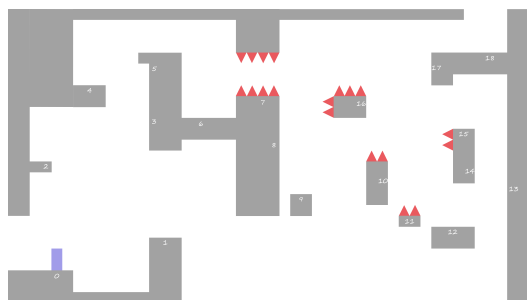


Issue 01: **Wall jump skip still unresolved — platform 5 is reachable without wall jump and exits without wall jump.**

The player can jump from platform 2 and dash diagonally upward to reach platform 5 directly, bypassing platforms 3 and 4. Platform 5 is a stable standing surface with no geometric exit that forces wall jump — the player simply drops down to platform 6 and enters the stress test having never wall jumped.

Resolution: Platform 4 must be redesigned so that wall jump is the only viable exit regardless of how the player arrived. A platform that receives the player safely but makes wall jump the only forward path would close the skip permanently.

Pass 05



Platform 4 was extended horizontally to block the player's jump. The player is now forced to dash horizontally to reach 3 making wall jump from 3 to 4 un-skippable.

Tweaking for jump/dash distance.

The next two passes must tweak the dimensions of platforms with respect to how much ground Madeline can cover by dashing, jumping and wall jumping. To find the distance covered, I captured a gameplay video in which I performed all actions, then extracted the before and after frames and applied to my grid (80x80) in the 4k layout. I then cropped out only the area of the before and after and applied to it my level to check whether any geometry needed to be tweaked. The following image is an example of the check being applied to the final layout. The geometry has already been tweaked in it.

