

The bite of steel. A flash of “magic.” The unmistakable aroma of baguettes. All that and more await players jumping into 2025’s sleeper-hit *Clair Obscur: Expedition 33*. Developed by the passionate developers from the Montpellier, France studio Sandfall Interactive, *Clair Obscur* enters the world as the studio’s first game. And man is it a marvel.

Set in a distorted fantasy version of late 19th-century Belle Époque France, but don’t let the starting city of Lumière fool you, this game is a wild ride in the best kind of way. Buckle up and prepare for a journey rife with danger, adventure, comedy, excitement, and enough emotional damage to level a continent! Oh boy!

Right out of the gate, *Clair Obscur* shows you what’s at stake. The world is fractured, gloom is over the city, and you prepare to see the reality of this new world you’ve found yourself in. Players enter the shoes of Gustave, a 32-year-old engineer in the city of Lumière with a cool-looking mechanical arm and a face that is eerily similar to real-life actor Robert Pattinson. After a few words with your adoptive younger sister Maelle and a brief – but in-depth combat tutorial – you are introduced to Gustave’s estranged former lover, Sophie.

Queue the waterworks.

This is when you, the player, learn about the Gommage, which I’ll explain in detail a few sentences from now, what you need to know RIGHT NOW is that Sophie’s death is imminent and everybody knows it. So, in true romantic fashion, Gustave and Sophie choose to spend their last moments together. You walk through the lovely Parisian-styled streets, interacting with your fellow citizens as they and theirs prepare for the coming Gommage. Each interaction is a heart-wrenching and emotional event filled with goodbyes and futile wishes that the event to come simply won’t.

But alas, your trip through the city and subsequent stops along the way (including a potential fight with a—possibly—secret mime) ends at the city’s pier. As Gustave and Sophie hold each other close, a massive monolith stands far in the distance on a landmass known as the main continent. Written on its face is the number 34, but as players and characters alike stare off into the distance, a giant being, the Paintress, stands up and paints a new number onto the face of the monolith: 33.

Thus, the Gommage begins. The number changes, tears begin to flow, and heartstrings are pulled taught. Everyone aged 33 slowly begins to die. Their skin and bones break away as the people that once stood amongst friends and loved ones turn into red and white flower petals and disappear into nothing.

I can’t stress how much water left my eyes in the first 30 minutes of this game. I was practically a prune.

But alas, the painful day ends in a somber party featuring the members of the eponymous Expedition 33 as they prepare to set off the 67th expedition to journey to the continent and kill

the Paintress, preventing another Gommage from ever taking away anyone else. Though as you can probably tell, after 67 failed attempts, most people are devoid of hope.

That doesn't stop our eclectic group of heroes. Not when the mayor of Lumière has such a moving speech, and we're treated to a dramatic voyage across the sea to reach the continent and put an end to the Paintress and her... painting. Once our main man Gustave sets boots onto the overcast beach, our journey truly begins, and Expedition 33 begins the battle to save all life in Lumière as Act 1 is underway.

Story hooks and establishing moments of the prologue aside, *Clair Obscur: Expedition 33* is a game worthy of being called one of the greatest RPGs of all time. It features a narrative that is rife with all the depths of human emotion, stacked and presented in ways that hit every heartstring with a perfect critical. From joyous moments of reunion to moments so deeply saddening, you'll feel the very same pain our characters do, even though we are just passing visitors to the moments of their lives. To say a game has never made me feel this level of emotion towards its character's hardships would not be a moment of hyperbole.

But it's not all doom and gloom. The game is rife with moments of comedy that serve as the glistening cherry on top of a gorgeously frosted slice of red velvet cake. Every character has a sense of humor. Some more than others. But the developers at Sandfall Interactive are masters at seasoning their dish with the perfect amount of levity to lighten the mood when things get heavy. A particular favorite of mine is the character Monoco, a being called a gestral whose introduction may, or may not, feature this masked hero bonking himself in the head with his own staff whilst trying to woo the ladies.

Alongside its glorious jests that **will** leave you laughing out loud, *Clair Obscur* features a breathtaking art style that brings the world to life in magical ways and truly gives the continent a feeling of otherworldliness. Have you ever wanted to see an environment in which everything you're standing in is a massive dress? What about a forest with crimson leaves and bone-white dirt that changes color schemes as the drawing of a sword? As the game's art director Nicholas Maxon-Francombe put it, "Every level has its own texture and color identity." It's truly self-evident that the game's art was shaped with a tremendous amount of care and a goal to create something both daring and unique in the vast world of video games.

But the visual art is just the start. Every level, every character, every enemy, every boss battle has its own sound. *Clair Obscur* comes loaded with a bombastic soundtrack over 8 hours long and features 154 unique songs with both orchestral and vocalized tracks. Composed by Lorien Testard, this soundtrack was the composer's very first video game work, but you would never be able to guess. Each song is a masterwork that springs emotions to the surface and dazzles the mind with pleasant notes and stirring chords. Paired with vocals from the impossibly skilled Alice Duport-Percier, this soundtrack is transcendental. Her vocals are beautiful, haunting, majestic, alluring, uplifting, and deeply pained all at once and only serve to elevate an already impressive sound to a height so far above the clouds even stars look up in awe.

The game's combat system is unique and, quite frankly, genre-redefining. Featuring robust turn-based gameplay, in which you and the enemy team take turns making attacks based on your agility start, the game takes a hammer to the wheel and introduces real-time defensive elements to counter your opponent's attacks. While your opponents work to end your expedition, you are presented with several defensive options.

The first, and easiest to master is the dodge mechanic. Press the button and your character will dodge out of the way of your enemies' attack. Dodging is a low-risk, low-reward defensive action. Its immunity window is relatively large and allows you to avoid damage, but without specific character builds, you don't get a benefit aside from not getting hurt.

Next up is the parry mechanic. This defensive feature is extremely high risk and extremely high reward. If you press the button perfectly, as your character is about to receive an attack, you can parry it. This completely negates the damage and gains 1AP (the game's energy points to use skills.) If you succeed in parrying all of an enemy's attacks in a single turn your character will unleash a powerful counterattack with the potential to one-shot. As the game progresses, you'll even encounter fights that require you to jump over attacks, which have their own special counterattack.

These unique mechanics enable you, as the player, to stay in the action even when it isn't your turn and create situations where you can complete difficult battles without even taking a single point of damage. Pair that with a unique system of passive buffs called Picto, and you're cooking with fire, baby.

As you continue your adventure you will discover Picto. Picto can be acquired from fighting and defeating enemies, collected from the environment, or purchased from vendors. Each character on the roster comes equipped with 3 open slots for these passive abilities. While playing with them equipped, after 4 victorious battles, they become a passive ability equipable by every character in a separate passive Picto management menu. However, this menu has a capacity limit denoted by the cost of each Picto within the menu. But fear not, throughout your journey you will find Lumina, which can be used to increase a character's Picto capacity to the point where you can stack massive amounts of passives and create an incredibly powerful build for your characters.

Layer this passive system with the weapons system and you can build something that would make a *Diablo 4* speed-runner green with envy. Each character has a unique playstyle and with it, unique weapons. Weapons come in an assortment of colorful damage types: Fire, Ice, Lightning, Earth, Dark, Light, Physical, and Void. As any long-time RPG fan can probably guess, each element comes with its own weaknesses and resistances. Enemies that are resistant to an element take reduced damage, while the opposite is true when they are confronted by their weaknesses. In some cases, however, you will encounter enemies that are so resistant to an element that they heal the damage they were dealt instead. A true and terrifying occurrence.

All this is to say that *Clair Obscur: Expedition 33* is a labor of love so incredible that it feels like a true masterpiece in its field.

*Clair Obscur* is to video games, what a Rembrandt is to art.

It's Homer's *The Odyssey*.

It's Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*.

It is, without question, a work of fiction so masterful that calling it genre-defining or can't-miss would not be far off the mark.

If you're a gamer whether just in passing or as a full-time hobby, *Clair Obscure: Expedition 33* is an experience depriving yourself of would be a disservice. Add it to your list of games to play, because adventures like this are impossibly rare.

To the team at Sandfall Interactive, I give the most raucous applause. This game is a marvel. Its characters breathe in ways both profound and relatable. It is equal parts grief and joy and for that, you have my deepest thanks. In the largest entertainment field in the world, this game manages to capture a spark of something completely unique and turns it into a flame as bright as the sun. Well done and good luck, I can't wait to see what's next.