

Clair Obscur: Expedition 33 is an audacious RPG with all the right moves

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by Khee Hoon Chan
Apr 25, 2025, 7:30 PM UTC

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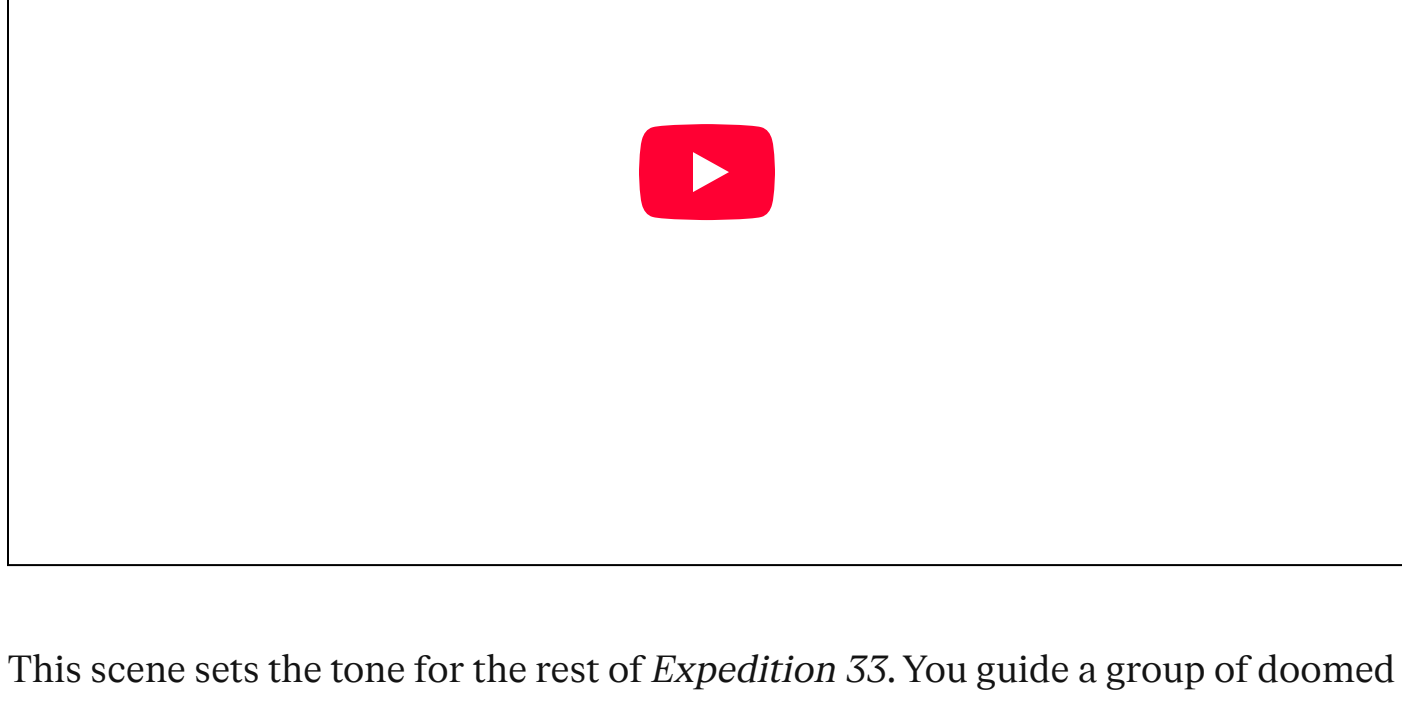
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On paper, *Clair Obscur: Expedition 33* doesn't seem to stand out amidst a recent wave of prestige RPGs, from the newly polished high fantasy of the *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* remake to the medieval warfare of 15th century Bohemia in *Kingdom Come: Deliverance II*. For one, its fantastical conquests are set in a world reminiscent of France's Belle Époque period, an era known for its economic prosperity and radical artistic movements, from Art Nouveau to Expressionism. Add a tinge of melodrama and an emotional backstory, and its setting resembles a medley of games that take place in vaguely European worlds like *Greedfall*, *Bloodborne*, and *Dishonored*. At the same time, *Expedition 33* boasts a turn-based combat system inspired by Japanese RPGs like *Final Fantasy* and *Dragon Quest*.

All this is to say that *Expedition 33* risks appearing banal and cliché. Fending off impossible odds in a world, where everyone wants to swing their very imposing weapons at your head amidst medieval ruins, isn't all that unique these days. But *Expedition 33* isn't covered by the lineage of RPGs that came before. Instead, it displays a sense of quiet confidence, understanding that the keys of the genre — narrative and combat — need to be distinct enough to weave a poignant tale.

This is embodied in the prologue, which takes its time to unfold the game's emotional stakes. At the start you're introduced to the scraggly-but-charismatic Gustav, who's nervous about his meeting with ex-partner Sophie. Apart from going through the basics of combat, Gustav spends the first half of the chapter on a leisurely stroll with her along the town's boulevard, as they make their way toward the harbor. It's then that the game's conceit is revealed: the Paintress, a malignant, immortal being of sorts, wakes up once a year to paint a number on a massive monolith, culling the town's dwindling population. When this happens, everyone of that particular age simply dissipates into petals. It's a moment that could easily tip into mawkishness, but a palpable feeling of melancholia sets in. A lump in your throat lingers.



This scene sets the tone for the rest of *Expedition 33*. You guide a group of doomed Expeditioners like Gustav, who are embarking on a last-ditch attempt to stop the Paintress. It would've been easy for *Expedition 33* to plunge into an never-ending cycle of abject hopelessness, but there's a genuine sense of wonder in traveling beyond the small town of Lumiere, and toward the vast expanse of its larger, phantasmagoric world.

One landscape has towering pink corals and shimmering sea flora, swaying like underwater tendrils, with bubbling streams rising from the ground. Another showcases the remnants of Art Nouveau architecture, with dilapidated buildings rife with elegant curves and floral patterns, as well as marble faces carved onto their surfaces. It's as if these lands, once rich with history and biodiversity, have long been wrecked by a cataclysmic war. Despite the looming threat of certain death, even the Expeditioners were awed by the painterly allure of their surroundings, almost thrilled to be on such a lustrous journey.

Equally — and unexpectedly — resplendent is the game's combat. Encounters typically begin with the crew striking some monstrous titans with an initial, vibrant blow (or, in unlucky instances, with enemies walking into them), and being transported to a grandiose arena. These scenes are beautiful tableaux, with every attack depicted with the finesse and flourish of stylish sword fights.

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Expedition 33's turn-based combat appears deceptively straightforward. You can issue commands to each Expeditioner every turn, who have their own impressive set of moves. The backbone of Gustav's attacks, for instance, is his prosthetic arm, which allows him to charge up his assaults and subsequently land a powerful finisher. Whereas another Expeditioner, Lune, embodies the mage archetype with several elemental spells at her disposal.

Adding a wrinkle to this turn-based formula is that enemy attacks can be dodged and parried. When timed right, this allows you to collect more action points for pulling off a string of attacks, or launching a countermove. Performing twitchy maneuvers like these are incredibly satisfying. A perfectly timed parry can easily turn the tide of combat, letting you deal a massive amount of damage. That's not to say that battles are easy; executing these moves, at the right time, is contingent on your understanding of enemy movements, some of whom are prone to feigning their attacks. Most enemies even present their own twists to combat, which makes every tussle substantial.

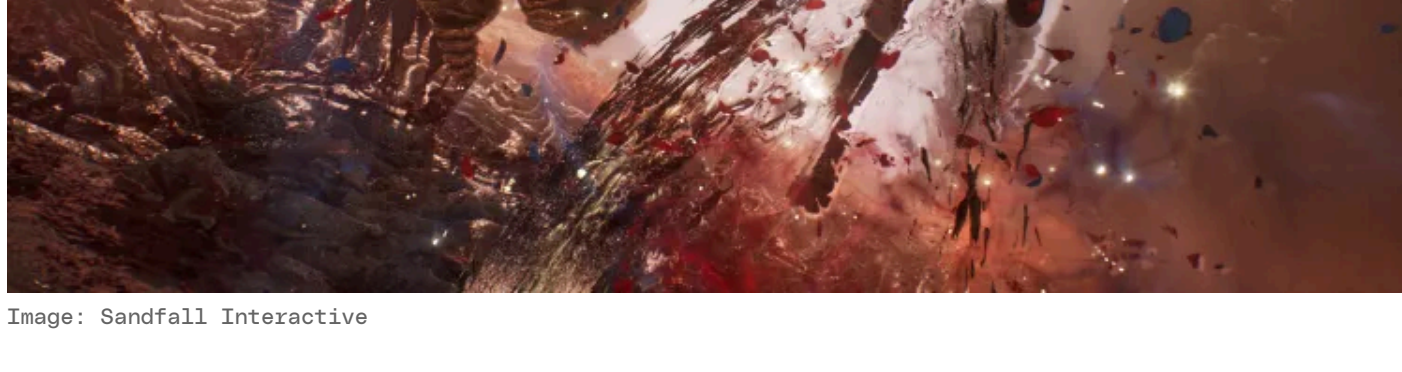


Image: Sandfall Interactive

Adding some tactical diversity to combat are Pictos, which are items the Expeditioners can equip to buff their attacks. This is, by far, one of the smartest tricks *Expedition 33* has up its sleeve. There are plenty of these to collect across the map, so you can further customize each Expeditioner to a specific, preferred build. Gustav's Overcharge, for instance, requires him to land a flurry of melee assaults to charge up the skill, so I prefer to equip him with Pictos that increase the potency of his attacks.

This is how *Expedition 33* lets you subtly refine the cadence of battles. And then there's the joy of the grind; if an enemy proves to be too overwhelming, you can always plow through ramshackle bands of mechanical titans for experience points. That's because the ritual of grinding in *Expedition 33* is deeply cerebral, rather than mindlessly tedious, with every encounter a sizable, yet surmountable challenge. Plus, swinging enormous swords and scythes at the heads of Expedition 33's monstrous giants — accompanied by a rousing, atmospheric soundtrack — lets your attacks land with a really meaty thump. Fighting is a grand, stupendous affair.

There's much more to say about the sheer extravagance of *Expedition 33*. Its characters carry shades of complexity and compassion that surface in their conversations. Its music swells and swirls with orchestral lavishment, punctuating every interaction with a note of majesty or calamity. Its tale is heart-wrenching, stirring, and humorous in equal measure. Some parts of *Expedition 33* can be a tad superfluous — like the need to put a numerical value in the Expeditioners' relationships, and certain dialog choices that make little sense — but these do little to mar its experience.

Expedition 33 is built upon the conventional anchors of its genre. But its grandiose tale, bolstered by a downright robust combat system, turns it into something much more than just a scrappy underdog. /

Clair Obscur: Expedition 33 is available now on Xbox, PS5, and PC.

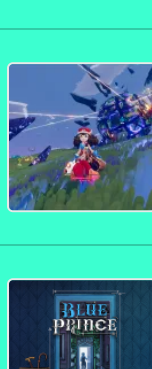
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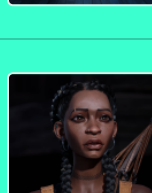
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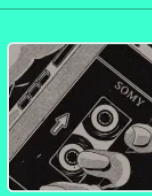
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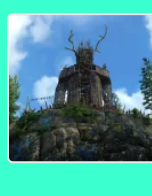
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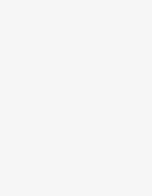
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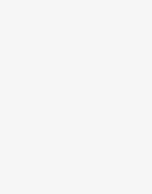
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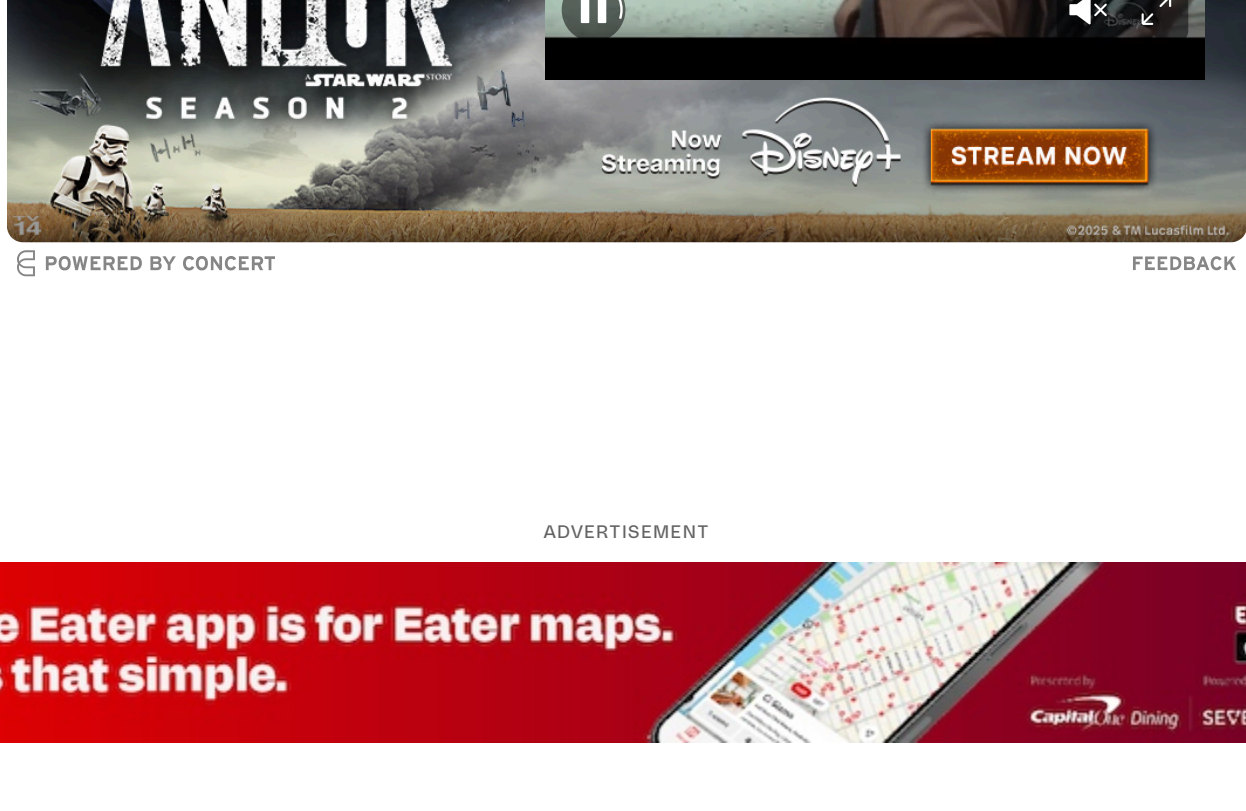
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