

It is time to stop painting – *Clair Obscur: Expedition 33* as a dilemma of pleasant fictionality

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ABSTRACT

The discussion around the value of authenticity is a fundamental element of the Western history of thought. Since its formalisation in *The Republic* (Plato, Book VII, 2000), Western reflection has been greatly concerned by the truth-falsehood dichotomy. This notion can be seen throughout the history of philosophy after Plato, with most philosophers thereafter positioning the truth as their teleological imperative, such as Descartes (1996), serving as a prime example. In the XX century, due to the prominence of existentialist writers such as Martin Heidegger or Jean-Paul Sartre, authenticity reemerged as a fundamental aspect of philosophy. Nowadays, the notion of authentic experience remains in the context of cultural studies (Zimmerman, 2021). The problem of authenticity is evident in *Clair Obscur: Expedition 33* (Sandfall Interactive, 2025), where it is the fundamental aspect of the plot.

In my presentation, employing a close reading method, further enhanced by Kłosiński's hermeneutical approach (2022), I aim to illustrate how *Clair Obscur: Expedition 33* can be read as an explication of the experience of the fictional world and the issues related to it. *Clair Obscur* utilises its narrative to discuss the value of authenticity of the individual experience, understood from the existential perspective (Heidegger, 2008).

Clair Obscur's storyline revolves around the denizens of the city of Lumière, led by Maelle and her brother Gustave, who try to stop the cataclysm controlled by the entity called the paintress. However, throughout its runtime, the storyline is subverted, as the player and the characters realise that the

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world, in which the story takes place, is a piece of art created by the members of the Dessandre family, of which Maelle is a part. This reveals a change in the narrative's goal. Maelle and Verso – her brother from the “real” world – attempt to free the painting from the reign of the members of Dessandre family. Ultimately, the game culminates in a confrontation between Maelle and Verso. Maelle wishes to preserve the painting, while Verso aims to destroy it.

Both characters present conflicting philosophical perspectives:

1. Existential reading (Verso): authenticity is the experience of one's being-in-the-world (Heidegger, 2008). The world of *Clair Obscur* is not real, as its elements exist only in the ontological sense, and not the existential one (Sartre, 2018). Authenticity is objective, as it emerges from the experience of one's existence. Verso is aware that his existence is not authentic, because he exists in a fictional world
2. Absurdist reading (Maelle): The concept of authenticity is meaningless, as it is as fake as the painting itself. The subject has the power to make anything authentic. The meaning of an experience cannot be found; it must be created (Camus, 2018). Maelle knows that the painting is not real, but she chooses to believe that it is.

The confrontation happens as the focal point of the narrative. The characters of *Clair Obscur* believe that their world is real. However, in a moment of metalepsis (Waszkiewicz, 2024), they become immersed¹ (Kubiński, 2015), as they realise that every part of their world, aside from Maelle, is inauthentic. The confrontation between Maelle and Verso answers whether the world they inhabit is authentic. If Maelle wins, the world is deemed authentic. If Verso wins, the world is considered fake.

However, the confrontation also happens from the player's perspective, which mirrors that of the characters. At first, the player is led to believe that the characters inhabit the “real” world, which is then subverted in the moment of metalepsis and their immersion from the fiction. The final confrontation puts the decision of authenticity in the player's hands. If the player chooses Maelle, the world of *Clair Obscur* is real. If the player chooses Verso, it is fake. The player experiences their own immersive metalepsis. The player knows from the start that the world of *Clair Obscur* is not real, as it is a part of the video game. The subversion of the game's narrative reflects the game's main conflict onto the player. The player must decide whether their experience of the fictional world was authentic, thus worth preserving, or fake, hence not worthy of their time.

I propose that *Clair Obscur* explicates the fundamental issue behind one's every experience of art objects, which I conceptualise as the *pleasant*

¹Immersion is the moment of disillusionment of the player. The player's engagement with the fictional world breaks, which leads to their realisation that they are partaking in an artificial experience.

fictionality dilemma. While the dilemma is evoked by the game itself, it occurs on a meta level, when the player evaluates their experience. Video games, like every other piece of culture, are created, which evokes the question of the authenticity of one's experience. If the experience of the game is real, thus authentic, it puts a real emphasis on the player to care (Sorge) (Heidegger, 2008) for the elements of the game-world. If the player deems their pleasure as real, then they have to also consider the object of their pleasure as real, which puts actual moral and ontological obligations upon them. For example, the realness of a video game entails the realness of the characters within it, thus obligating the player to treat them in the same way as they would their common man. If they consider their pleasure as fake, then this also makes the object of their desire not real. This absolves the player of their obligations, but questions the reality of their experience.

In summary, *Clair Obscur: Expedition 33* is a game centred on the concept of authenticity. The main story concludes with a choice whether the fictional world is an authentic place, thus making the experience of it real. This conflict happens on two levels. Firstly, it is decided within the game's story. Secondly, lies within the player, who decides whether their experience of the game was authentic. The *pleasant fictionality dilemma*, which occurs on a meta level, requires the player to either treat their experience of a video game as real, thus obligating them to treat the beings within the game as real, entailing ethical obligations, or to affirm the artificiality of their experience, hence making it false. Authenticity is a crucial aspect concerning studies of works of art, as it carries a set of ontological, moral, and aesthetic obligations with it.

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