No Good Endings: The Tragic Pleasure of Clair Obscur: Expedition 33

Benjamin Horn
University of Hong Kong
Pokfulam Rd, Hong Kong
bhorn@hku.hk

Keywords

Game Analysis, Close Reading, Game Philosophy, Tragedy, Clair Obscur

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This paper offers a close, Nietzschean reading of the two endings of *Clair Obscur: Expedition 33* (Sandfall Interactive 2025), arguing that part of the pleasure of the game comes from its choice of twin tragedies. *Clair Obscur: Expedition 33* (hereafter *E33*) tells the story of a group of expeditioners from the Parisian-esque city of Lumiere who venture out to find and destroy the Paintress, a mysterious giant woman seemingly responsible for the deaths of many of the citizens of Lumiere.

E33 has been both a critical and commercial success, widely lauded for its clever narrative, mix of real-time and turn-based combat, and unique "Belle Époque France" (Sandfall Interactive 2025b) inspired world. At the time of writing, the game has impressively swept the Golden Joystick awards (Khan 2025), winning the marquee Ultimate Game of the Year as well as six other category awards. This is to say that the game has certainly been influential in the gaming industry, and therefore it may be worth taking the time to unpack.

In ludo-narrative terms, the game is relatively straightforward: most of the player's choices are irrelevant to what happens in the story. The main questline only has one path along which players must inevitably proceed, with one notable exception: the player is offered a choice between two endings at the conclusion of the game. Even more interestingly, both endings are tragic in nature, in stark contrast to the typical trifecta of perfect/good/bad endings offered by many similar games. Why is there no good ending – or maybe the endings are "good" in some other sense? Perhaps the game's shower of accolades came *because* of the tragic endings?

Some context of the game's story is necessary to fully grasp the tragedy. Without going into too much detail, the death of a beloved brother sends the family of the protagonists - Verso and Maelle - spiraling into grief. At the end of the game, the player is asked to choose between siding with one of the two. If the player sides with Maelle, the world of the game survives and Maelle creates her own escapist paradise, but it is implied that she kills herself in the process. If the player sides with

Proceedings of DiGRA 2026

Verso, the world of the game vanishes into nothing, the player's companions all dying one-by-one, before a final scene shows the remaining members of the family, including Maelle, standing above the grave of the deceased brother.

This is a tragedy, or perhaps it would be better to say: these are tragedies. But what is tragedy? Steiner (1961) refuses to give an exact definition but lists qualities: "Tragedies end badly…Tragedy is irreparable…Tragic drama tells us that the spheres of reason, order, and justice are terribly limited and that no progress in our science or technical resources will enlarge their relevance" (8). Tragedy has been explored in digital games primarily through the lens of classical Greek tragedy, notably with reference to Aristotle's *Poetics* (Meakin et al 2021; Torabi 2024).

Of particular interest in the discussion of tragedy and digital games has been Juul's (2013) *The Art of Failure*. The book primarily focuses on the tragedy of player agency and action (see also Bushnell 2016; Brock 2017; Zhang 2025). Juul defines the tragedies of the player - such as if the player were to die in the game and lose hours of progress - as "real failure", while the tragedies of the characters in the game as "fictional failure", or more simply as "tragic game endings". *E33* would be, in Juul's language, an example of a fictional failure.

Juul argues that fictional failures "appear distressing due to the tension between the success of the player and the failure of a game protagonist, but this distress can give us a sense of responsibility and complicity, creating an entirely new type of tragedy" (29). Indeed, he even goes on to suggest that, because of these feelings of complicity that games push upon the player, that "games are the strongest art form yet for the exploration of tragedy and responsibility" (114).

Concurring with Juul's rationale, this paper seeks to further the understanding of tragedy in games with a close reading of *E33* informed by Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* (1872). There are several reasons for putting these two in conversation. First, in regards to the study of tragedy in games, the focus has mostly been on the classical texts, leaving Nietzsche's work relatively untouched. Juul briefly mentions him, but does not go into detail. Dixon (2009) uses *Birth of Tragedy* to investigate Caillois, but his project is not necessarily interested in tragic games.

Then, Nietzsche's understanding of tragedy appears uniquely suited for *E33*. One of the major themes of the game is in the title: "clair obscur", referring to the chiaroscuro painting style that emphasizes the contrast of light and dark. Nietzsche's model is itself a contrastive dialectic of the Apollonian and Dionysian artistic impulses through whose interplay the tragic finds its meaning.

Finally, the Apollonian and Dionysian as Nietzsche positions them may be useful concepts for unraveling the complex pleasures that tragic games evoke in players. Nietzsche specifically references the chorus of Greek tragic drama representing the Dionysian "blissful ecstasy" (26) while the dialogue is the Apollonian "world of pictures" (68). Perhaps, following Dixon, this concept may be productively employed to understand the back-and-forth complicity/responsibility of the player in the fulfillment of the tragic game ending.

Through this Nietzschean close reading of *E33*'s dueling endings, this paper will conclude that the game delivers an insightful thesis on tragic grief that itself acts as a

commentary on the use of virtual worlds for wrestling with the passing of a loved one. This paper represents the early stages of an ongoing research project, and the author would greatly appreciate receiving feedback on the paper for further development.

REFERENCES

Brock, T. 2017. "Videogame Consumption: the Apophatic Dimension." *Journal of Consumer Culture. 17* (2): 167–183.

Bushnell, R. 2016. *Tragic Time in Drama, Film, and Videogames: The Future in the Instant*. Palgrave MacMillan.

Dixon, D. 2009. "Nietzsche contra Caillois: Beyond Play and Games." In *Proceedings of Philosophy of Computer Games 2009*. Oslo.

Juul, J. 2013. *The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games.* Playful Thinking series. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Khan, S. 2025. "Clair Obscur: Expedition 33 wins big at Golden Joystick Awards." *BBC*. https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c9894l4jr0go

Meakin, E., Vaughan, B. and Cullen, C. 2021. "Understanding" Narrative; Applying Poetics to Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice. *Game Studies. 21* (2). https://gamestudies.org/2102/articles/meakin_vaughan_cullen

Nietzsche, F. 1872/1910. *The Birth of Tragedy*. Translated by WM. A. Haussman. London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd.

Sandfall Interactive. 2025. *Clair Obscur: Expedition 33*. Kepler Interactive.

Sandfall Interactive. 2025b. Overview. *Clair Obscur: Expedition 33 Official Website*. Kepler Interactive. https://www.expedition33.com/overview

Steiner, G. 1961. *The Death of Tragedy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Torabi, S. 2024. "A Tragedy at the Ends of Time: Applying Aristotle's Poetics to The Last of Us Part II." *Acta Ludologica. 7* (1): 5–17.

Zhang, X. 2025. "Oedipus at the Crossroads: Tragic Agency in Contemporary Videogames." In *Proceedings of DiGRA 2025*. Malta.