

Expedition 33: Evolving a Genre

Disclaimer: this essay contains complete game spoilers for Clair Obscur Expedition 33 and Xenoblade Chronicles I.

Clair Obscur: Expedition 33 provides a modern example on how a videogame can advance its genre (JRPG) forwards by masterfully subverting genre norms and player expectations. In turn, creating a deeper and more thoughtful experience that the game could've ever achieved if it had stayed within genre norms. In earnest, this level of evolution can be so powerful to not only advance a genre, but games as a medium. Therefore, to showcase the growth Expedition 33 has had upon the JRPG genre, a comparative analysis will be done with a more modern JRPG: Xenoblade Chronicles 1. This will be done on three fronts: plot armour, morality, and game length.

Killing plot armour

In the introduction of Xenoblade 1 there is the introduction of Shulk's romantic interest: Fiora. Fiora is a playable character in beginning of the game where she has her own set of abilities, skill tree, character specific gear, etc. Later on, to conclude the game's introduction, the character is killed, and thusly removed from the party. However, given the cost of developing a unique character in such a long and systems heavy game like an JRPG there is little believing that the character is actually dead. Doing so would be wasting hundreds of development hours creating a full-fledged character that isn't actually playable. Given this realization the player gets a strong sense of security, knowing that the character will come back. Which eventually does happen in the games final Act.



Fiora, Xenoblade Chronicles - [reddit](#)

In contrast to Xenoblade's Fiora, Expedition 33 has the main character of Gustave. Gustave, not only is the leader of the expeditioners, but he's one of four party members that the player can control in the game's first Act. Similar to Fiora Gustave has his own skill tree, unique weapons, cosmetics, etc. Given the precedent set by games like Xenoblade the player is lulled

into the same sense of security knowing that no matter what the game throws at Gustave, alongside all other party members, they will all survive no matter what. Because there is the knowledge that no developer would create an entire character for only one third of the game's runtime. However, that assumption is what the game throws out the window and marks a gut-wrenching punch to conclude Act I.



Gustaves death, Expedition 33 - [youtube](#)

By killing Gustave in the ending of Act I the game violates an invisible contract it had with the player. However, voiding it allows the game to fully commit to its themes. In the game, there is a central theme that expeditioners are expendable. A single expedition by itself is not there to bring an end to the Paintress, the game's central antagonist. Rather it is the compounding efforts of each additional expedition that allows the next to get ever closer to felling the Paintress. As such the phrases “for those who come after” and “we continue” are central to the game. As they show how each expedition and the expeditioners within it must continue despite the death of previous expeditions and their current fellow expeditioners. As such, if the game did not kill one of these characters, the theme of generational sacrifice would ring more hollow. Furthermore, given the player feels secure that all characters are safe from death, given previous media like Xenoblade, once Gustave actually dies it creates a far more potent and visceral emotional response. As the shocking death of a character is compounded by the shattering of this invisible rule, making the death of Gustave even more gutwrenching. In short, by violating this invisible contract, not only does it properly commit to the games themes but is able to create a far more potent emotional response in the player.

Morality: no moral righteousness

In modern internet culture it is often joked upon how JRPG's always end with the killing of a god. While cliché this plot device brings to a crescendo the main moral conflict between the main party and the god. Where after the main party wins they create a new world order upon

their own ideals, and casting away the world order created by the god. In short, they claim moral superiority and righteousness. This can be clearly seen in Xenoblade Chronicles where Shulk's party rejects the ideals of authoritarian rule and Natural Law from the god Zanza. Squashing them to create a new world order upon the ideals of self-determination and democratic ideals. Showcasing the moral righteousness that the main party of a JRPG has.



Choosing a better world, Xenoblade Chronicles - [reddit](#)


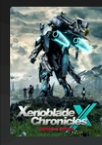


In contrast Clair Obscure abandons this idea of the party being morally superior, as both endings are equally morally corrupt: in Maelle's the world is allowed to live on at the grief of the Dessandre family, while in Versos the whole world is allowed to die for the happiness of the Dessandres. While this abandonment of superior morality might be a violation of the genre to some, this brings a higher level of depth into the story. Because in the example of Xenoblade is not that the moral dilemma was non-existent, but rather it claims the idea of a superior morality. However, in the field of ethics there never is a superior morality, but rather they are different points of view, which can be refuted and argued using different lines of thinking. As such Clair Obscure is able to bring a higher level of nuance and humanity to its central moral dilemma. Because no human is perfect, just as morality is not, and as such the real humans who make these choices at the end of the game have equal pros and cons. And this is exactly another of the game's main themes: the idea that morality is ambiguous. Therefore by abandoning the moral righteousness that the party always has in a JRPG, Clair Obscure can develop its themes and create a more complex and human view of morality.



Maelle vs Verso's ending, Clair Obscur - [IGN](#)

Replayable (short yet dense)

Another element that JRPG's are known for in the modern era is their game length. Because as a genre these are sprawling epics centered heavily in deep narratives and characters, as such these games traditionally have long runtimes. For example when looking at the gamelength of the Xenoblade series, each game is on average 61.25 hours long ([howlongtobeat](#)). Alternatively, when looking at Clair Obscur: Expedition 33 the game has a length of 28 and a half hours ([howlongtobeat](#)). Thusly, someone could assume that Clair Obscur fails in the story department, unable to have the gamelength to tell the complex narratives that the genre are known for. However, Clair Obscur avoids this by creating a game that has same level of story complexity but in a shorter runtime. In many ways it removes a lot of the innecessary filler that these longer JRPG's have. Conversely making this "filler" optional content in the form of logs of prior expeditions. All in all, the game is able to have an incredible story in a shorter runtime.

 Xenoblade Chronicles <table> <tr> <td>Main Story</td> <td>57 Hours</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Main + Extra</td> <td>83½ Hours</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Completionist</td> <td>142 Hours</td> </tr> </table> <p>Add to Profile</p>	Main Story	57 Hours	Main + Extra	83½ Hours	Completionist	142 Hours	 Xenoblade Chronicles X: Definitive Edition <table> <tr> <td>Main Story</td> <td>63½ Hours</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Main + Extra</td> <td>99½ Hours</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Completionist</td> <td>150 Hours</td> </tr> </table> <p>Add to Profile</p>	Main Story	63½ Hours	Main + Extra	99½ Hours	Completionist	150 Hours
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Xenoblade series runtime - [howlongtobeat](#)

By having this shorter runtime, not only does the game become more accessible to those with less time, but more importantly it makes the game far more replayable. What is imperative here is because these games have these complex stories with several twists that completely recontextualize the storyline; the ability to replay them allows the player to better understand the complexity and nuance of the story. However, as seen before most JRPG's have such long runlengths that replaying them is a tall order. Consequently, Clair Obscur evolves the genre. Because by making the runtime shorter, it makes the replaying of the game far more accessible than its contemporaries, allowing those players to better enjoy the elaborate and intricate story on a second go around.

In the end, all of these alterations to the JRPG genre create an experience that is not only fresh but revolutionary. Firstly, by killing plot armour death in-game is far more impactful. Secondly, by removing moral righteousness a more nuanced and human story can be told. Thirdly, It makes the genre far more replayable and accessible with a shorter runtime while keeping story depth. All in all, Clair Obscur: Expedition 33 shows how genres can progress overtime by thoughtfully breaking their pre-existing norms, keeping the play experience fresh and entertainment. Moreover, many of these learnings could be applied to other story-rich games, breaking norms, to create stories that are more meaningful and profound.

- Vittorio Corbo