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# Characters in Fire Emblem Three Houses

A Ludo Mix Perspective

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## ABSTRACT

The article focuses on how dynamic game characters create friction in a ludo mix strategy consisting of primarily ludic media, disturbing the narrative coherency that trans- or cross-media strategies strive for. In particular, dynamic game characters, with a development structure that the player influences, cause narrative inconsistencies with the character's transmedia appearances. Yet, in Japanese media and ludo mixes, character proliferation is the norm so that different versions of the same character can exist without any issues of narrative coherency. Through a case study of the *Fire Emblem: Three Houses* ludo mix, this article argues that the Japanese concept of the *kyara*, a proto-character, demonstrates to be an excellent means to avoid a clash between

the dynamic game character in one work and its appearance in another work. It concludes that through the use of the *kyara*, the IP owner avoids any clash between the dynamic game character's appearance in its source work and its appearance in other ludic works, thereby giving the impression that the player's agency over the dynamic game character stays intact.

#### Keywords

Ludo mix, dynamic game character, Fire Emblem Three Houses, *kyara*, *kyarakutā*

## INTRODUCTION

Game characters do not just appear in games. They travel from game to game, from medium to medium and from story to story. Although game characters require their own medium-specific analytical framework, they need one that is situated in a larger media ecology that takes their different counterparts into consideration, because games create tension in cross-media transfers, as the underlying ludic structure of the game cannot be adapted to non-ludic media such as most novels, comics, or films. Game characters add to this cross-media tension, so that when they are dynamic – that is, when the player has creative agency over their development—they obtain multiply identities within a single work. These identities are difficult to sustain in trans- and cross-media strategies such as media and ludo mixes. Since a media mix is a commercial strategy to spread content across a variety of media platforms and objects (Steinberg 2012), a ludo mix can then be considered a variant of a media mix in which games are the focal point of the strategy. As a result of having multiple identities, dynamic game characters tend to be pushed to a peripheral position in the transmedia network in which they appear, giving the player only the illusion of creative agency (Blom 2020a).

This article is a continuation of my article “The Manifestations of Game Characters in a Media Mix Strategy” (Blom 2020b) on the influence of dynamic game characters in the *Persona 5* (P-Studio 2016) ludo mix. Here I argue that, although characters do not have to have a fixed coherent identity in the *Persona 5* ludo mix, the ludo mix’s intellectual property (IP) owner, Atlus, maintains a position of authority to determine which identity of the dynamic game characters should be counted as normative, and which as heresy. *Persona 5* manifests as a ludo mix in which official adaptations by Atlus focuses only on the game’s overarching narrative, ignoring the *system of affection* segments in which the player facilitates relationships between the game’s protagonist, Joker, and other characters (mostly of a romantic nature). On the other hand, peripheral comic magazines – such as the *Persona 5 Comic Anthology* (DNA Media Comics 2017a; 2017b) — that obtained the copyright to use the character images, do acknowledge the relationships between characters in their short ‘what-if’ stories exploring the different relationships between Joker and the other characters. However, this acknowledgment only occurs on the condition that the depiction of every relationship neatly corresponds to the relationships presented by the game. No story opposes the source work’s original relationships. If anyone wants to see alternative queer readings of these relationships, they will have to go to fan works that have not obtained any copyright permission. This strategy of which relationships are normative and which are heresy implies that the creative agency that the player has in *Persona 5* is ultimately of secondary value to the game’s overarching narrative structure.

Nevertheless, this was but a single case study of a ludo mix strategy with dynamic game characters, mostly comprised of non-ludic media, such as *manga* or *anime*. Therefore, I find it imperative to explore other ludo mix strategies to understand how dynamic game characters cause friction with their counterparts in other media. *Fire Emblem: Three Houses* (*Three Houses*) makes for a good additional case study, because the *Three Houses* ludo mix has a different structural organization; it consists mostly of

games. With the exception of the peripheral online comic, “Fire Emblem Heroes – a Day in the Life” (Intelligent Systems 2017), the *Three Houses* ludo mix has its characters also appear in the games: *Fire Emblem: Heroes* (Intelligent Systems 2017) and *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* (Bandai Namco Studios 2018). The connection between these three games make up this article’s case study. Doing so, this article examines the tension created by dynamic game characters in media and ludo mixes as a result of games conveying an illusion of creative agency over the identity of the character to the player, while the dominant identity of the characters is (for commercial reasons) presented in the media mix’s other media platforms. It therefore engages with the question: how do dynamic game characters create tension in media and ludo mixes?

This article uses the theoretical distinction between the *kyara*, a visual icon without a story, and the *kyarakutā*, a *dramatis persona* that develops as a person in a story, from Japanese media studies, to explain what strategy the *Three Houses* ludo mix’s IP owner, Nintendo, adopts to avoid a clash between the multiple identities of its dynamic game characters. Japanese scholarly work often uses the *kyara* to explain the overabundance of incoherent information about a character in a media mix (Wilde 2019), or considers it a touchpoint for new consumers to a ground of products in a media mix (Nakamura and Tosca 2019, 3 – 4). This article however, adds to those functions that Nintendo’s use of the *kyara* actively serves to avoid clashes in the coherence of dynamic game characters’ identity when the figures spread over multiple works. It argues that, even when a ludo mix contains multiple ludic works, the IP owner seems reluctant to add a story to the characters outside of *Three Houses*, in order to potentially avoid any clashes with character coherence in their source work and their appearances in other ludic works.

## THE MEDIA MIX: KYARA AND THE KYARAKUTĀ

The phenomenon of media convergence is known in Japan as the media mix, which, as stated before, refers to a commercial strategy to spread content across a variety of media platforms and objects. Steinberg (2012) describes the media mix as the “cross-media serialization and circulation of entertainment franchises” (vii). It has its own history and development alongside of what we know as media convergence in Europe and North-America (also called the “West”) (vii). In the “West”, common labels used for the phenomenon of media convergence are “transmedia storytelling” (Jenkins 2006; 2007), “transmedial worlds” (Klastrup and Tosca 2004), or “transmedia practice” (Dena 2009), among others.

Unlike transmedia storytelling, in which the coherence of stories is of primary interest (Jenkins 2007), in a media mix, characters are the focus point that connect different media, stories and objects with each other (Steinberg 2012, 83). Character proliferation is the means for all these media platforms to connect, as characters appear in different stories and settings that do not necessarily have to make any coherent or continuous sense. As a result, multiple versions of the same character exist and continue to proliferate as they hop from one medium to another.

Works on transmedia storytelling took off in the early 2000s, but Japanese works on the media mix have been around since the late 1980s. In 1989, Ōtsuka defined the concept ‘narrative consumption’ (Ōtsuka 1989; [1989] 2010) to describe how individual narratives of characters enables consumers to gradually learn about the world in which they live. Through the accumulations of multiple small narratives of the characters, the consumer comes to see a grand narrative, the world behind the characters so that the consumer comes to understand what is happening in that world (Ōtsuka 1989; [1989] 2010).

Ōtsuka's work remains largely untranslated, but one of the few translated works on the topic of the Japanese media mix is Azuma's *Database Consumption* ([2001] 2009). Within this work, Azuma responds to Ōtsuka's concept of 'narrative consumption', claiming that the 'narrative consumption' Ōtsuka speaks about collapsed with the entrance of postmodernity. According to him, the collapse resulted in the phenomenon in which, for the *otaku*<sup>1</sup>, *the character becomes the most important object of a work* (31). *Contrasting narrative consumption, Azuma names the consuming behaviour of the otaku "database consumption", which refers to otaku consuming the aggregated elements of characters and settings, but not the grand narrative* (54). *The database he speaks of consists of these aggregated elements based on the moe, feelings of desire towards a fictional character that they might invoke, which could be cute cat ears, sailor uniforms, or specific types of hair, and more. From this database, different elements can be put together to form a new figure, towards which one has feelings of desire, and placed in a new context.*

To account for all the different versions of a character, Japanese theorists and scholars of Japanese media studies distinguish between the *kyarakutā* and the *kyara* (Wilde 2019, 5), first coined by Itō Gō (2005). In his – still largely untranslated — book, *Tetsuka izu Deddo*, Itō describes the former as a *dramatis persona*, a person who gives the impression of being born into a life and also having the possibility to die in that life (120). The *kyara*, on the other hand, is just a 'proto-character', a visual icon that only looks like a character; it precedes the *kyarakutā* before it actually becomes a character (116). The main aspect of the *kyara* is its versatility to be repurposed for many different contexts. Wilde explains that *kyara* function essentially as hubs or interfaces that can be placed and used in many different contexts (7). For example, in *manga*, or *dōjinshi*<sup>2</sup>, *kyara* function more

1. Otaku are men, usually between 18 and 40 years old, who obsessively consume popular cultural products, such as anime, manga, or games.
2. *Dōjinshi* are self-published fan magazines by amateurs depicting alternative stories involving the characters of a particular media or ludo mix.

akin fictional persons, whereas as figurines they are merely a visual representation. This means that, unlike the *kyarakutā*, the *kyara* is a character without story, which, according to Wilde, is not because the image is not grounded in a lack of narrative information, but rather, it is “based on the (over)abundance of competing and utterly incoherent information” (2019, 6). Although Wilde considers them hubs or interfaces, Azuma, in the untranslated book *Gēmuteki riarizumu no tanjō* (2007, 125), explains the *kyara* to be *meta-monogatari-teki na setsuten*, meta-narrative nodes that can be placed in different narrative contexts. As nodes, they enable the possibility of a *meta-monogatari-teki na sōzōryoku no kakusan*, proliferation of the power of meta-narrative imagination, that lets consumers imagine the character in separate stories, which includes not only the original works from the same author, but also derivative works from other authors. In short, what can be gathered from these explanations is that, while the *kyara* can be considered a visual cliché useful to be placed into different settings, the theoretical distinction between the *kyara* and the *kyarakutā* operates as a theoretical spectrum to make sense of the different narrative settings in which the character appears due to the media mix’s focus on character proliferation.

Most discussions on the distinction between the *kyara* and the *kyarakutā* remain untranslated to the English language, but gradually, more articles in English on the topic are starting to appear, which can be particularly useful to understand the more pragmatic use of the *kyara* in a media mix. Such an article comes, for example, from Nakamura and Tosca (2019), who describe the *kyara* functioning as a “recognizable archetype” (12) in different series and media entertainment that do not have to make any continuous linear sense. They explain that, as the IP holder surrounds consumers of a particular media mix with IP-related products in the form of the *kyara*, fans can choose whatever product they want to consume. Simultaneously, this allows the IP holder to create “more touchpoints to newcomers to a ground of products” (4). In other words, besides a visual image without

story, the *kyara* is part of the consumer strategy of the IP holders to attach as many possible consumers to their media mix as possible.

## DYNAMIC GAME CHARACTERS IN A LUDO MIX

The Japanese video game industry is characterised by the media mix (Picard and Pelletier-Gagnon 2015, 3). This industry is shaped on a local scale by marketing strategies, on a national scale by industrial transformations, and on a global scale by creative and technological developments (3). Picard calls the particular media ecology of Japanese games “*geemu*” (2013), as the Japanese video game industry operates “at the crossing of electronics, computer, amusement and content industries in Japan –and technological and artistic developments – from the hardware to the software” (2013). *Manga* or *anime* are usually the main media platforms for a media mix (Itō 2005; Lamarre 2009; 2018; Napier 2001; Steinberg 2012), but games increasingly occupy the focal point in the consumption of a media mix strategy as well. Although one of the best internationally known media mix examples would be the *Pokémon* franchise (Allison 2004; 2006), more recent examples include *Nier: Automata* (PlatinumGames 2017), *Persona 5* (P-Studio 2016), *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo 2020), *Final Fantasy VII Remake* (Square Enix 2020), and this article’s case study: *Fire Emblem: Three Houses*, to name just a few.

A ludo mix presents its own challenges in consumer strategies: games tend to cause friction in trans- or cross-media strategies, disturbing the narrative coherency that transmedia storytelling strives for, as they structurally differ from non-ludic media (Aarseth 2006). This friction is usually dismissed by relegating games to peripheral, ancillary elements of, and gateways to, a transmedia storyworld (Aarseth 2006; Bateman 2014; Evans 2008; Harvey 2015; Wolf 2012). Yet, in a ludo mix, as games become the anchor on which the strategy operates, the



incoherency that games create, cannot be concealed. According to Aldred (2012), game characters especially tend to cause issues in movie-to-game cross-media transfers, because they have to act as the embodiment of players in the game world, while simultaneously they have to function as film characters transported to the game (91). She explains that the friction lies in the duality in which film characters are tied to the seemingly realistic representations of the actors playing them, whereas game characters primarily operate on their functionality in the game space (100). Although other scholars such as Thon and Schröter (Schröter and Thon 2014; Schröter 2016) describe game characters as more than just functions in game spaces, explaining the entities as intersubjective communication constructs to be experienced by players as fictional beings, game pieces, and representations of others respectively, Aldred (2012) points to the expectations and constraints movie-to-game characters are bound to as the representative of their filmic manifestations. The structural differences between games and non-ludic media force the movie-to-game character to be coherent with its filmic counterpart, rather than being a locus of agency and subjectivity for the player to experience the game world with (102).

It is within this friction between games and other, often non-ludic, media that the dynamic game character becomes relevant. In an earlier study, I explain (Blom 2020a) that dynamic game characters are a type of video game character with a development structure that branches into different outcomes. These outcomes are undetermined until the player actualises one or more possibilities that influence the direction of the development onto distinct branches with a specific outcome. The actualisation of these possibilities has structural consequences for how the player continues to traverse the game as they open up a certain path and thereby close off another path of that character's development (Blom 2020, 146). For example, choosing to destroy Maelon's data in *Mass Effect 2* (Bioware 2010) has major consequences for Eve in *Mass Effect 3* (Bioware 2012), who dies because there is not enough knowledge of her condition to save her. Had the

player chosen to keep Maelon's data, Eve would have survived. This means that the player has creative agency over the identity of that character, so that, as a result, different players can end up with vastly different versions of the same figure.

Given that characters are the devices through which media platforms and objects connect in media, it becomes relevant to perceive how the dynamic game character creates additional tension to the already existing friction between games and non-ludic media in trans- and cross-media strategies — such as the ludo mix.

## SHAPING DESTINIES IN THREE HOUSES

*Three Houses* is the newest instalment of a long line of games within the *Fire Emblem* (FE) series. The player takes on the role of Byleth, a mercenary-turned-professor at Garreg Mach Monastery, the headquarters for the Church of Seiros and the Officer Academy. Although Byleth is the figure that the player directly controls, the player has, in fact, agency to influence a whole cast of different dynamic game characters. Each character has their own specific statistics, conditions, possibilities and limitations that the player influences throughout different segments of the game. This influence spans across the game's macrostructure (Backe 2012), the overarching narrative structure, and the game's microstructure containing different segments and events, including battle, cooking, dinner, support, or tea party segments contributing to the characters' development.

### Agency in the overarching narrative

The game's macrostructure can be pictured as a four-branch narrative tree with four different main outcomes, depending on which house the player opts to be the leading professor. At the start of the game, the player chooses between three houses: the Blue Lions, Golden Deer or the Black Eagles, each represented by

its respective house leader, Dimitri, Claude, or Edelgard. This choice bears heavy structural consequences for how the player will traverse the game: each house will present the player with a different story route, and a different ending. As the leading professor of the Golden Deer house, the player will enter the upcoming war with Claude to open Fódlan to the outside world. Choosing Dimitri's house, the Blue Lions, leads the player on a route towards revenge, as Dimitri has sworn to kill Edelgard, the leader of the third house, the Black Eagles. Choosing the Black Eagles gives the player two possible routes: as this narrative branch unravels, the player can either choose to side with either Edelgard to create a unified Fódlan under the Empire's power, or they side with the Church of Seiros against the Empire. In short, because of this choice at the start of the game, the player can effectively experience the game's story from four different perspectives, all with different story outcomes, to experience the maximum of the game's content.

The choice for different narrative branches also bears structural consequences for the development of the characters. Each house has a group of students over which the player has a certain amount of influence, but that agency is limited to the house that is led by Byleth. For example, if Byleth leads Dimitri's house, the Blue Lions, the player is able to influence the Blue Lions students' development, which the player cannot do for students in the Golden Deer or Black Eagles house, unless they specifically recruit these other students. Recruiting characters from the other two houses can be quite important to the player, because being in the player's house ensures the students' survival in the upcoming war, a major plot point in the game's macrostructure. However, this recruitment depends on the combination of the (skill) statistics that the different students prefer, and Byleth's acquisition of those specific statistics. During my play of the Golden Deer route, I managed to recruit Felix, Sylvain and Dorothea, because my Byleth's statistics for her sword and magic skills were high enough, and the character was female (the condition to recruit Sylvain). However, especially in the first

playthrough, it is incredibly difficult to raise all Byleth's statistics, as the resources are scarce and increase only slowly throughout the overarching narrative story when Byleth's level also increases. As such, the player will be unable to recruit all available students in a single playthrough – with deadly consequences. For example, I tried to recruit Ferdinand from the Black Eagles house into the Golden Deer house, but due to my low dexterity and heavy armour skills I could not persuade him. Only death awaited him.

As such, the choice of house determines which narrative branch the player will unravel in the overarching narrative, and simultaneously affects the destinies of the dynamic game characters within each branch. This choice bears particularly heavy consequences for the house leaders, Dimitri, Claude and Edelgard, as – although Claude can survive the war in most narrative branches – Edelgard and Dimitri will always die outside of their own narrative branch. That said, the player does have the agency to influence these characters by recruiting them into their house so that their destiny in the overarching narrative would be different than if they had stayed in one of the other houses. However, the player's agency does not simply stop there, since, as I will explain in the next section, the player will be able to influence the students with greater granularity in the game's microstructure than the game's macrostructure can provide. In the microstructure the player obtains the creative agency to create and shape the relationships between the individual students and teachers to develop them as narrative entities and game pieces alike.

#### Dynamicity in the microstructure: romance and friendship

The dynamicity of the characters in this game's microstructure is mostly derived from the game's *system of affection*, a ludic process that lets the player facilitate relationships between game characters (Blom 2020, 197). Several games from the *FE* series make use of the system of affection, also known as a support system in these series. Games that use the system of affection

include *FE: Genealogy of the Holy War* (Intelligent Systems 1996), *FE Awakening* (Intelligent Systems 2012), and *FE Fates* (Intelligent Systems 2015). The latter two games, and *Three Houses*, have been using a so-called marriage system, brought over originally from *FE: Genealogy of the Holy War*.

As the player recruits different students in their house, the player obtains the possibility to create different connections between different students, and between Byleth and the students throughout multiple segments of the game. For example, during the exploration mode, the player has the possibility to dine with two different students that strengthen the connection between each student, and each student with Byleth. The students can also sing, cook, or have a tea party with Byleth. In the battle mode, the player has the possibility to position students who fight next to each other to strengthen their relationships. And, in the overarching narrative segments, the player will sometimes choose between two to three answers that can strengthen – and also weaken – the connection between Byleth and the other student or teacher. Although the player has many opportunities to facilitate these relationships, they can only facilitate these connections between a fixed set of characters: for some students the player is unable to create any kind of relationship at all, whereas for others, the player can only facilitate a certain kind of connection<sup>3</sup>. No matter how much I might wish it, the student Marianne will never have any kind of relationship with student Felix beyond what the

3. These limitations are specifically determined by the characters' gender. Byleth can obtain an 'S' rank with one individual out of all characters from the opposite gender, but only a limited amount out of the characters from the same gender. It is especially striking that a female Byleth can have a rank of 'S' with five female characters: Edelgard, Dorothea, Mercedes, Rhea, and Sothis, whereas a male Byleth can have an 'S' rank with Lindhardt, Jeritza, Gilbert, and Alois, of which the latter two are platonic relationships (Fandom n.d.; n.d.). This means that, despite the characters' dynamicity, this dynamicity is limited by the heteronormative standards the game maintains, and when it does allow queer relationships, it favours female-to-female relationships. This could suggest one of two things: either the game is more comfortable with the depiction of queerness between women, or the game caters to the male gaze that objectifies women's sexuality aimed towards heterosexual men.

overarching narrative dictates. Additionally, even if I were to try to facilitate a connection between her and the student Sylvain, this connection will not surpass rank ‘B’.

The facilitation of relationships between characters rewards the player in two ways: first, the player obtains stronger game units in battle. When two or more characters with a relationship rank of ‘C’ or above are within three squares of each other, they receive bonuses in their statistics, making it easier to win from difficult enemies. Second, the player receives additional narrative content. This reward is particularly important, because the system of affection in *Three Houses* is ultimately a meaningful experience on the narrative side of the character. When the player puts in time and non-trivial effort to facilitate relationships between characters, they are rewarded with special conversations between the characters whose connection they strengthened, which can reveal additional information about these figures’ backgrounds. For instance, the relationships between Byleth and Dimitri, Claude and Edelgard can only be strengthened if the player has chosen their respective house. When the player reaches rank C between Dimitri and Byleth, for example, they discover early in the game that Dimitri lost his parents at a young age – his mother due to illness, and his father and stepmother four years prior. They also learn that Dimitri was close to lord Rodrigue, the father of the student, Felix. If the player then also reaches rank ‘C’ between Dimitri and Felix, they learn that Felix hates Dimitri, considering him more a beast than a human, due to the Dimitri’s ruthless slaughter of a rebellion two years prior.

The information that the player receives through these meaningful events in the game’s microstructure provides them with *additive comprehension*. Additive comprehension is a term borrowed by Henry Jenkins from game designer, Neil Young (Jenkins 2006, 123). It can be described as a term that refers to the additional knowledge someone attains when they gain a piece of information that turns their perception of the situation around. Dimitri looks and acts like the prime example of a noble young heir to the

throne, but even before the player discovers the full extent of Dimitri's dark past through the game's overarching narrative structure, the system of affection's support scenes demonstrate Dimitri's bloodlust tendencies, showing that he is not who he initially appears to be. Later, when confronted with rampaging inhabitants of the village of Remire, the player can interpret Dimitri's painful reaction to the scene as bloodlust, rather than suddenly being ill or afraid of the sight – which is what the scene initially suggests. This interpretation was later confirmed by Dimitri himself when he apologized for his behaviour at that time. In other words, it is in the microstructure in which the system of affection is most prominently present that the player is able to delve deeper into the character's background stories and the (initial) nature of their connections to the other students. As the player facilitates and strengthens these relationships between the characters, the information that the player obtains gives them the possibility to interpret narrative segments from the game's macrostructure in a different light.

That said, it is not only additive comprehension that the player attains through facilitating these relationships. Additionally, the player can influence the individual endings that all (surviving) students will receive through the system of affection. The possible endings differ slightly, depending on which story route the player takes, but the biggest differences between the students depend on which partner the characters end up with. When the player manages to bring Dimitri and Byleth together – have them married, that is— Dimitri's individual ending will look as follows:

Paired with the end of war, the joyous marriage of Byleth, the newly-appointed archbishop, and Dimitri, the newly-crowned king of Fargus, gave the people of Fódlan much to celebrate. The two were devoted to improving life for the people and to seeking greater wisdom in order to reform the government and the church from the inside out. As leaders of church and state respectively, at times they engaged in heated debate. Even still, when enjoying a long horse ride or a quiet evening, they were not as the world saw them, but

rather two adoring spouses, desperately in love. They remained as such for the rest of their days. (Intelligent Systems 2019)

Most dynamic game characters in this game will have a similar ending, provided they have a partner. If Dimitri ends up without any partner, his ending describes his focus for making his government more participative in his reign, listening to all kinds of voices, which grants him the title of Savior King.

All in all, it can be said that the granularity to which *Three Houses* lets the player influence these dynamic game characters primarily operates on the system of affection. This system makes the game characters become dynamic, and as such, enables the player to create meaningful experiences that they can enjoy as they influence relationships between characters, based on their own personal preferences and limitations of the game.

## CHARACTERS IN THREE HOUSES' LUDO MIX

At the time of writing, Nintendo, the IP owner, does not seem to have granted a copyright license to have *Three Houses* adapted into a *manga* or an *anime*. This does not mean that the characters do not make any appearance outside of the main game at all. As character proliferation is the main aspect for media and ludo mix strategies, the *Three Houses*' ludo mix has its characters appear in the mobile phone game *Fire Emblem: Heroes* (*Heroes*) and in *Super Smash Bros Ultimate* (*SSBU*), both on the Nintendo Switch and intellectual property of the Nintendo company. Since both of these platforms are ludic media, which means they have the structure to uphold dynamic game characters, it is relevant to see how a ludo mix strategy consisting of primarily games engages with the tension that dynamic game characters bring to the different ludic works.



## Fire Emblem: Heroes

*Heroes* is a free-to-play game, available to any player as long as they have access to the internet on their smartphone. The game consists of six different battle modes, of which I will focus on the so-called ‘Story Maps’ that contain the narrative structure. This story mode includes a ‘main story’, ‘paralogues’ and three other ‘maps’ in which the player can refresh the rules of the battles, or obtain additional skills for the fighters. The main story is currently divided into four different books consisting of different chapters. In each chapter, the player is presented with a map, the game’s battle segments, in which they must defeat the opponents to progress to another chapter. The game’s story is told through cut-scenes appearing before and after the map. It follows the adventures of Alfonse and his sister Elena, the prince and princess of Askr Kingdom, and the player who dons the role of the summoner able to transport *FE* heroes from other worlds into Askr Kingdom. Technically, the player can completely ignore the story mode and its paralogues, and still play the other battle modes just fine, but it is beneficial to go through the different chapters, as it will reward the player with new heroes that the player can use for the battle segments.

The summoning of different heroes is one of the main features of the game. These characters can be obtained with the in-game currency of orbs that the player obtains by logging in, participating in special events, or clearing battle maps, among others. The player spends these orbs through a mechanic adapted from *gachapon*<sup>4</sup> machines, vending machines with capsule toys found in Japan, that the player of *Heroes* uses to exchange four to five orbs per round to receive a single random hero. The chances of summoning a five-star hero, the highest rated heroes with the best abilities and statistics, are very low; so low that Nintendo often creates special events to allow players to obtain these kinds

4. *Gachapon* are vending machines in Japan, dispensing capsule toys. By throwing in a certain amount of money (usually between 100 – 500 yen), consumers can obtain a random mini-figurine from a determined set of figurines.

of heroes through different means other than pure luck. One of the opportunities to receive a *Three Houses*' character was that players who used the same Nintendo account for their copy of *Three Heroes* on the Switch, and for their copy of *FE: Heroes*, could receive the male version of Byleth. The female Byleth on the other hand, can still only be received through the *gachapon* mechanic, and has therefore been much harder to obtain. What the statistics of the characters suggests is that these characters are game pieces to be possessed and used, rather than characters with their own story development.

The treatment continues throughout the entire game. The heroes lack the distinctive impression of being a character, functioning instead as *kyara* more than as *dramatis personae*. The characterization of the heroes happens through beautiful visual images and voice lines. The characters are drawn by different artists, with each character unit containing four different images: a 'normal' image, an 'attack' image, a 'special' image, and a 'damage' image. Each character also has several voice lines they utter when the player taps on them in the character screen, during battle, or when the character is summoned. For example, one of Byleth's voice lines is: "My heartbeat is...not what you expected it to be", which does not exactly give away what is so unexpected about their heart beat, but a player familiar with the source work, *Three Houses*, will know it refers to Byleth's lack of heartbeat. Yet, their 'character-ness' does not extend beyond the visual and audible representation, that is, beyond the *kyara*. They might look and sound like characters, but unlike the story-driven *dramatis personae* from *Three Houses*, these heroes lack the story to turn them into *dramatis personae*. In this game, the heroes function only as game pieces, and are just as replaceable as the player's pieces in a game of chess. All their visual images and voice lines do is refer to the characters' source works, from which they borrow their sense of 'character-ness', and even then, only on the condition that the player is familiar with that source work. In short, these heroes function as *kyara* because they completely depend on the intertextual support from their source works to give

some impression that they are a character, but aside from that, they lack any story in *Heroes* itself to give that impression.

On top of that, despite the game having a story mode, the narrative structure can be entirely ignored as the game focuses on the heroes primarily as game pieces whose abilities and statistics are of importance to the battle segments. The number of stars they have and their statistics and abilities are aspects of the character that the game constantly asks the player to strengthen and level up by giving them not only orbs, but also feathers, and the skill points they obtain by completing battle segments. These statistics only matter for the battle modes, and add almost nothing to the game's story mode. Even so, in the battle mode of the story, the battle's mechanics is extremely minimized in comparison to the battle mode in *Three Houses*. In *Three Houses* the battle mode matters for the improvement of the characters' relationships, as the characters' positions next to each other raises their affection. In *Heroes* the battle mode matters not because there is no system of affection; all the heroes' position on the battlefield determines is how high their statistics are, to increase the chances of defeating the opponent. The only aspects that the player hears or sees to give the heroes an impression of 'character-ness' is the hero's visual representation and voice lines when they use the unit. Yet, the same line is repeated so often that it can become annoying to the player. I took the hero, Shigure, out of my team, simply because I could not stand to hear the line: "I am Shigure!", one more time.

The emphasis on the hero as a game piece is also clear in the main story mode. In this mode, regardless of the heroes the player chooses for their battalion, the characters in the story mode ignore the heroes' appearances, and only acknowledge the characters that have been scripted to be in a particular battle segment, that are usually, if not most of the time, the opponents. Additionally, if the player places the character on their team that is also on the opposite team, the game ignores it. Two or even three characters can exist in the same battle at the same time, and it will not make

a difference to the story. The player can even have the same character twice or more in their database of heroes, with the only difference being the star rate and therefore different skills and statistics. In other words, as far as their ‘character-ness’ goes, it does not go beyond the heroes’ visual images and their voice lines, which refer to the source work they appear in. This is quite convenient since it means that Byleth’s dynamicity from *Three Houses* does not clash with any story that *Heroes* might depict. Rather, as Byleth is without story in *Heroes*, only existing as a character on the level of intertextual references to its source work, the game avoids any friction in Byleth’s character coherence. Byleth’s function as a *kyara* in *Heroes* makes it so that there is no tension in character coherence between *Heroes* and *Three Houses*, because *Heroes* does not present a story to clash with.

#### Super Smash Bros. Ultimate

Besides his/her appearance in *Heroes*, Byleth is also available as downloadable content (DLC) in *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* (SSBU), a crossover fighting game for the Nintendo Switch. When the player buys this DLC, Byleth joins the 63 other characters as a playable fighter whom the player(s) can choose to use to fight battles in the multi-player and single-player modes of the game. Other characters, such as Claude, Edelgard, or Dimitri only appear in the background environment that comes with the DLC, but cannot be engaged with otherwise.

Characters play a large role in the fighting game genre. According to Hutchinson (2019), unlike role-playing games or action-adventure games, characterization of the figures occurs primarily in the game’s peripherals, since the fighting game genre does not contain hours upon hours of linear gameplay to flesh the characters’ backgrounds (Hutchinson, 2019, 71). Instead, the characters’ backgrounds and relationships are told through peripheral segments such as the game environment associated with the figure, the opening cinematics, cut-scenes between fights, and the voice lines they utter before or after the fighting

segments (Hutchinson, 2019, 73). “All these pieces of story and characterization act like a puzzle, which players must piece together in their minds as they play through the game” (Hutchinson, 2019, 73).

One of the most important aspects to the fighters in the fighting game genre are the moves of the character. Hutchinson (2019, 73) points out that characterization partially happens through players becoming familiar with the fighters’ move-sets. In *Three Houses*, the player controls Byleth’s fighting moves only through indirect control due to the game’s turn-based battle system; on the battlefield it is just a matter of giving the character the order to fight, and Byleth will act on that order. In contrast, in *SSBU* the players’ direct control over Byleth lets them experience the character in a more physical way. The character’s fighting moves from *Three Houses* are translated into moves that the player directly controls in *SSBU*. As a result, the character can be characterized differently in one game than another. For example, to my surprise, Byleth moved slower in *SSBU* than in *Three Houses*, because I had always thought of the figure as a rather fast and light fighter. Instead, Byleth’s heavy movements changed my impression of him/her, piecing together a different part of the puzzle that makes up Byleth in *SSBU*.

That said, although the game attempts to characterize Byleth through the aforementioned peripheral segments commonly used in fighting games, as a *cross-over* fighting game, it ultimately emphasizes the character’s intertextual appearances, recontextualizing the figure as a *kyara* in a fighting game. Just like *Heroes*, the game rewards the player by recognizing the intertextual references, which players unfamiliar with *Three Houses* might not understand. The example I use here is Byleth’s ‘Final Smash’ move. Each *SSBU* fighter has a ‘Final Smash’, an all-out attack so powerful that it usually knocks an opponent out of the fighting stage. They can only use it occasionally. During the release of Byleth’s Final Smash, the goddess, Sothis, appears, while at the same time, Byleth’s visual appearance briefly

changes to his/her god-form. The story behind this reference is utterly lacking, as nothing in *SSBU* even attempts to explain why Byleth has this move, why there is suddenly another character present, or why Byleth's appearance changes. In *Three Houses*, however, all these aspects are explained, as *Three Houses* reveals in any story route that Byleth is the reincarnation of the goddess Sothis, and eventually merges with the goddess to gain their ultimate power. A player unfamiliar with *Three Houses* will not understand the intertextual reference, which is a significant factor of Byleth being a *dramatis persona*, whereas, a player familiar with that game can interpret Byleth's 'Final Smash' as the figure tapping into his/her true potential, knowing the story behind the transformation. In short, just as in *Heroes*, the story of Byleth remains in the character's source work, with *SSBU* just relying on that story while offering no story in the game itself.

As such, even in this game, Byleth does not escape its fate as a *kyara*, and operates primarily as a game piece without a story. The game relies on Byleth's manifestation as a *dramatis persona* in *Three Houses* to give a sense of 'character-ness', but does not give Byleth a story that could potentially clash with the character's source work. Instead, by characterizing Byleth only through its visual depiction and moveset, which intertextually depends on Byleth's source work, *SSBU* stays neatly within the lines of *Three Houses*' characterization of the figure. As a result, Nintendo avoids any conflict between Byleth's different manifestations within *Three Houses*' four story branches, and Byleth's manifestation in *SSBU*.

## TENSION IN THREE HOUSES' LUDO MIX?

Out of the three games discussed, only *Three Houses* presents its characters as dynamic, enabling the player to influence the outcomes, fates and different nuances. Both *Heroes* and *SSBU* portray Byleth primarily on the level of the *kyara* in which his/her visual image from the source work is used to recontextualize the

character in a different setting, whose role is then adjusted accordingly to fit the mechanics of the game. On top of that, the system of affection is nowhere to be found in both *Heroes* and *SSBU*. Rather, both games present the character more akin game pieces than a *dramatis persona* with a story.

To come to my conclusion on how dynamic game characters cause friction in a ludo mix, I would like to return to Wilde's (2019) and Nakamura and Tosca's explanation (2019) on the *kyara*. As stated before, Wilde describes the *kyara*'s existence as a theoretical concept grounded in the overabundance of incoherent information to explain the entity as coherent (6) – as is often the case for the Western understanding of characters (Blom 2020). Nakamura and Tosca explain the *kyara* as touchpoints for newcomers to the IP's products. What I demonstrated through my analysis of Byleth's appearance in *Three Houses*, *Heroes*, and *SSBU*, is, however, that the *kyara* is not only an explanation for the overabundance of incoherent information, nor simply a touchpoint, but it is also used by IP owners to strategically avoid clashes in character coherence – in particular, that of the dynamic game character. The four different story routes of *Three Heroes'* overarching narrative, and the system of affection on the microstructure of the game gives the player agency to such granular detail over the dynamic game characters, that any transfer to another medium not only clashes with the player's own agency, but also with the macrostructure of the game's narrative. The *Persona 5* ludo mix strategy showed that the IP owner, Atlus, has no issues ignoring the player's agency in their official *manga* and *anime* adaptations, but in the case of *Three Houses*, the four different story routes pose another problem: which story route should the IP owner adapt? Adapting any story route to a *manga* or *anime* would mean that Nintendo risks rejecting the narrative structure they created, casting off three narrative branches while giving significant weight to the other branch. This would also mean that one of the three house leaders, Claude, Edelgard or Dimitri would be presented as bearing more significance than the others. This is a risk that Nintendo might not want to take and

could be a reason why *Three Houses*' story may never be adapted into an official *manga* or *anime*.

It should be noted, however, that *Three Houses* is not a ludo mix completely separate from the previous *FE* ludo mixes, especially the ludo mix of *Heroes*. *Heroes* has an official – but peripheral — *manga* series called “Fire Emblem Heroes – a Day in the Life” (Intelligent Systems 2017) available online in a selection of languages such as English and Japanese, and updated with a new page every fortnight. The format of this *manga* is the *yonkoma*, four-panel comics meant to provoke laughter. Each page contains a what-if story written by different artists about the characters that appear in *Heroes*. Since *Heroes* operates on summoning characters from previous games, this means that the *yonkoma* has a rich cast of *kyara* that they could recontextualize in this short-story format. It provides the opportunity to show how characters, which usually do not appear in the same game, meet and interact with each other through comical what-if situations, or they are used to make fun of *Heroes*' mechanics. For instance, Byleth appears as two separate characters, just as in the game, *Heroes*. For example, the *yonkoma* ‘Eat Up!’ shows both male and female Byleth in one panel, showing no problem at all that this is technically not possible in *Three Houses*. Yet, this is entirely appropriate, due to the *yonkoma* format of this *manga*, which is not meant to be taken as the actual story of *Three Houses*, but rather as *omake*<sup>5</sup>, little extra stories that stand apart from the main narrative of any storytelling medium. These comics stand completely separate from *Heroes*, and are not meant to be interpreted as a continuation of any story.

A similar strategy occurs with *Three Houses*, *Heroes*, and *SSBU*. As demonstrated, neither *SSBU* nor *Heroes* clash with the dynamicity of the *Three Houses* characters. Both games

5. *Omake* are quite common in Japanese popular culture. In anime or *manga* series *omake* often manifest as short comedy sketches at the end of an episode or volume that depicts characters breaking the fourth wall by talking to the audience, or otherwise being in comical situations, in general.



completely ignore the dynamicity of *Three Houses* by not adding any story to the characters. The appearances of the characters in *SSBU* and *Heroes* remain on the level of the visual surface; they function as *kyara*, recontextualized in the context of those two games, whose characterization depends on the player's recognition of the intertextual references to the source work, *Three Houses*. Therefore, the *kyara* shows to be an excellent means to avoid a clash between the dynamic game character in one work and its appearance in another work. It gives the impression that the player's agency is still intact within the source work, and lets Nintendo off the hook of the problem of how to transfer the four-forked narrative to adapt to a non-ludic medium that is not meant to make light of or ridicule the intense and serious story that *Three Houses* presents. Of course, only time will tell if Nintendo will actually adapt *Three Houses'* story into a *manga* or *anime*, but if I were to bet money on it, I'd bet against it.

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