

Fire Emblem: Three Houses, Lacking in Representation

Stephanie Pao, Simon Fraser University

Content Warning: This paper will have a section discussing the narrative of my primary source, which contains descriptions of child abuse, assault, and PTSD.

Introduction

The year is 2021 and Christmas is around the corner. My brother and I load up *Fire Emblem: Three Houses* (*FE3H*) as his early present, and, once we are into the gameplay tutorial and meet our first few characters, we are immediately enthralled. This is our first tactical strategy Japanese roleplaying video game (JRPG) and the combat is an experience well worth its time. But what of the characters? We are required to pick between the houses of the Black Eagles, Blue Lions, and Yellow Deer because the main character is a professor assigned to teach the students within one of them. We both know that this choice would likely set us on a certain path within the game. We agree on Blue Lions for our first playthrough. Knowing that the story is amazing and that a different path would be interesting to play, I ask my brother if he is willing to make another save file when we are done, but he is not. So instead, I put away the idea of a replay and explore more about *FE3H* through a fan-based wiki. What I am most fascinated by is the same-sex options for romance.

At the end of the game, the main character, Byleth, has a choice between all the people they have achieved maximum likeability with. When my brother and I are prompted to make a choice, we are surprised to see not only male characters but female characters in our list of choices. Looking up the choices later, however, I am disappointed to discover that these choices are gender locked: if a player wants to have a same-sex romance option, there are only so many options to choose from after deciding to play as the female or male Byleth. Choosing either option opens to some relationships but closes off others. In other words, if a player desires to marry a female character playing as a female Byleth, they will find that there is only a limited selection. Even more depressing is the fact that same-sex romance representation between characters with no involvement from Byleth is also rare, let alone any unusual gender representation. I aim to argue that the

current *FE3H* Queer representation leaves a lot to be desired, and with that as a prime example, the video game industry still has room to improve the quality of Queer representation for future games. To do this, I will examine the romance mechanic, dialogue, characters, visuals, and narrative within *FE3H*. In terms of the second and third components I have listed, my playthrough will be used to explore them. In addition to that, I will be using sources that highlight these main components and how there are both significant signs of positive to neutral Queer representation, the latter being more prominent and frustrating.

An Explanation of JRPGs and the Relationship Mechanic

To understand the romance for *FE3H*, I will explain what the genre of JRPGs are briefly before delving into the relationship mechanic, what it does, and a comparison of this feature to a couple of other prominent JRPGs. The most common difference found between JRPGs and non-Japanese RPGs is that while many RPGs are usually more focused on gameplay, JRPGs focus more-so on the plot, as well as long hours of gameplay due to the level-up training that the player must put time and effort into for the characters they play.

FE3H holds a relationship system called support conversations and this advances the player's bond with and understanding of the characters they interact with, possibly leading to romance should they choose them at the end for marriage. These conversations lead into short dialogue events where the player encounters the character and discusses a particular topic with them: from arranged marriages, their past full of strife, to a favourite pastime. These dialogue options are not exclusive to the interaction between only the main character and other characters. Students and faculty characters within the world of *FE3H* may have support conversations as well, but, unlike Byleth, only a select few have options to view and listen to. The support conversations hold no impact on the narrative, but, depending on the character, references can be made regarding the plot. The support conversations that the player has with the characters are listed from C to S, depending on the gender the player chooses for Byleth, and those without them range from C-to A+ or even C to B only. If the player achieves the highest-level support conversation, they can have the character's name on the list of choices for romance options at the end of the game. As I have said, however, these are gender locked. Not all characters both the male and female Byleth befriend can become romantic interests to each other and some are even completely locked from being a romance option in the first place.

Unwriting & Queering

I will be delving into the intricacies of gender-locked relationships later in this essay. In this specific section, I want to compare the relationship mechanics between *FE3H* and two other JRPGs I have had prior experience with. In *Octopath II*, another medieval fantasy JRPG, there is no one character that the player must play, but rather there are eight different storylines that culminate together, every one being connected in some way. The relationship mechanic known as travel banter can allow the player to trigger bonus dialogue between characters that do not have any bearing on the game's narrative but will reference it depending on scripted timing to see it. There is, honestly, no romance within travel banter, with the dialogue all focusing on camaraderie between the characters. There is also no ranking of conversations like *FE3H*. So in terms of a romance for both Queer and straight audiences, it has none. As for *Persona 5*, a prominent supernatural JRPG set in modern-day Tokyo, the main character is a high school student referred to as Joker by his teammates during combat. This game holds a relationship mechanic known as "confidants" through which he can learn more about his friends and the people around him in his life, such as strangers becoming friends around the city or a peer from a different high school. This system has levelling for the relationship progress, from one to ten stars. Although there is a romantic relationship that can form between Joker and his confidants, it is strictly only the female confidants he can date. Overall, both systems are much more limited in terms of LGBTQ+ representation, but I find *Octopath Traveler II* more forgiving since there are not any canonical instances of explicit romantic relationships between the characters.

Research Playthrough

During my playthrough of *FE3H*, I choose the female version of Byleth. My intent within this playthrough is to progress the relationships of the female characters within the Black Eagles house, particularly aiming to marry Edelgard, the house representative and the future emperor of an entire country. Although she is a student and Byleth is a professor, to contextualize, the main character is canonically the age of a young adult at the beginning and the rest of the students are around the same age. After a time skip within the narrative, the students find them to have seemingly not aged while they, in contrast, visibly have over the past few years, all young adults like Byleth. I have found that while the story's justification is not realistically viable, it makes sense from a fantasy-based perspective considering that non-aging beings exist and the protagonist partially possesses that bloodline, hence a possible reason that they do not at least appear

Unwriting & Queering

to age. Trying to brush past the logic of the game, I play as I usually would, aside from the fact I am writing down many observations in terms of the interactions with Byleth, the bisexual characters, as well as the heteronormative ones. I can confirm that none of the Queer characters whom the main character teaches in their respective chosen house are treated differently because of their sexuality. In fact, their sexuality is never brought up as a topic between any of the characters during any support conversations. What I am left with is simply raw interaction without any preconceived anti-LGBTQ+ judgements. I think that in and of itself is a positive representation because it shows the characters are not treated any differently compared to any heteronormative interactions on the surface level, so I appreciated that. The progression of understanding the characters more throughout their support conversations gives me a sense of a closer bond developing between Byleth and them. Reaching the end of the story, where I choose to propose to Edelgard, she visibly blushes and clearly states that “she looks forward to starting their [her and Byleth’s] life together” and that “she may truly call her [Byleth] her partner and equal now” (Proposal scene) Though I am already aware that the dialogue is the same for both the male and female Byleth, it nevertheless feels special and sweet in the moment. Perhaps it is because I have worked countless hours toward this point that the satisfaction of having the two paired together puts a smile on my face.

Of course, I cannot ignore flaws within the dialogue, specifically that of the interactions between characters. A perfect example is one that Aimee Hart of *Gayming Magazine* writes on, one to do specifically with a pairing of Dorothea (one of the canonically bisexual female characters) and Petra, two characters from the Black Eagles house, where they look past each other’s differences and respect one another, forming a close bond. To them, “in a game which could do a lot better...Dorothea and Petra feel much like a mug of hot chocolate – warm and cozy” (“That’s Underrated”), and I do agree to a certain extent. Some lines during their support conversations do have romantic or at the very least, affectionate undertones such as Petra saying that “Dorothea is filling her heart full” or that “it is impossible to be imagining life without her” (Support Conversation C). As much as this example is quite sweet, it does not change the fact that their concluded written epilogue leaves much to be desired when the only remotely romantic implication the players can take from it is that “...she [Dorothea] becomes the person who Petra loves the most” (Epilogue) and that can easily be read as them being friends. To me, it feels quite disappointing that, while Byleth is written to have an explicit same-sex relationship with any of the bisexual characters, the other characters on their own are not given similar treatment.

Unwriting & Queering

Another example of this writing is through the male characters Hubert and Ferdinand. Both are at odds with each other at first, competing to be the most dedicated to Edelgard. Arriving at their final support conversation, the two hold more respect for one another, even awkwardly exchanging gifts with flustered expressions (Support Conversation A+). Their ending describes that they “are opposites...melancholy and merciless...bright and compassionate” and that “the two become known as the nation’s ‘Two Jewels’...some say their fame makes even Emperor Edelgard jealous” (Epilogue). Aside from the easily read opposites-attract trope, the player could also feasibly find that jealousy is a testament to how the romantic chemistry of Ferdinand and Hubert works so succinctly by the end. At the same time, considering the dominant heteronormativity within same-sex interactions, it is very easy to deny or deflect even the idea that these two characters could be romantically involved since that explicit wording for them is never provided. Overall, I find that, though I can appreciate the bonds that characters on their own have, it does not change the fact that it is easy for a heterosexual fan to see the canonical context and simply write them off as only friends and nothing more.

Explored Progressive Narrative

On the one hand, I am surprised in the first place that a JRPG has positive depictions of same-sex romances in a medieval setting, considering that Japan is a relatively conservative country and, though depictions of romantic and sexual relationships are traditionally heteronormative, *FE3H*'s storytelling has clear progressive themes. In *FE3H*, a large topic of contention, especially for the Black Eagles route, are Crests, which are essentially birthmarks passed down by the nobility that provide an abnormal amount of power to the holder, such as strength or magic. Heirs to these families must have a Crest, as it is a symbol of pride and authority in the public domain. The central church within *FE3H*, the Church of Seiros, upholds the power of Crests within the narrative but is considered to be a neutral party between nobles and commoners alike unless otherwise attacked because their religion and faith are questioned or rebelled against. Edelgard explicitly states how much she is against the Crest system that the nobles have rigidly built and what the church technically contributes to maintaining. What she fundamentally works to create is a new system where nobles must accept that anyone with merit and effort alone should hold recognition and power rather than that role being determined by the children they bear. The narrative for Edelgard, at its core, depicts a young, strong, and capable

woman who has a goal that essentially dismantles a system set so rigidly into society that breaking it will have a major impact on everyone.

Another aspect to note is that Edelgard is the only bisexual house representative. This is important since she is also the only house representative who rebels against the church in the narrative. Her disdain for the nobility and the church is what fuels her resolve, and her sexuality is never brought into question or even used as a source of conflict. She suffers from a traumatic past of childhood abuse. Her grudge with the church comes from what she is forced to undergo when an essentially antagonistic cult experiments on her to place a second Crest in her, while her father is stripped of imperial authority. The church upholds the Crests and so, by association, Edelgard is understandably antagonistic with the cult and the church. I would that say that the motivation to dismantle the church and the Crest system overall still has many intricate complications due to the narrative, especially since she forces herself to collude with the cult in order to ultimately do away with the church. Nevertheless, we can easily read the fundamental points of her vendetta as befitting the one Queer house representative who is against those who desire to suppress and erase her because she does not agree with what deep-seated totalitarian authority dictates. Loïc Mineau-Murray writes on a different JRPG, one belonging to the *Tales of* series, where they observe one of the characters “rebell[ing] against a society governed by the Abbey” and that her “resistance against a religious entity trying to erase her existence by pretexting the common good is reminiscent of battles LGBTQ+ individuals have and still have to lead against some conservative religious communities” (145). This situation in *Tales of* mirrors what is happening between Edelgard and the church. Whether or not the writing is intentional here, it is clear at the very least that *FE3H*'s writers are not afraid of exploring progressive themes within the narrative.

Visual Quality for Same-Sex Relationships

While the female Byleth has a few choices for same-sex romance, the male Byleth is provided fewer, and it does feel like an unintentional mistake, if not a deliberate choice to queerbait. In another article, Hart states that “when the game first came out, there was only one male same-sex romance...the player could also get an S support with elder male characters...but these endings turned out to be platonic” and that “throughout 2019, additional love interests were added...two for a gay male Byleth” (“Can You”). The choices for the male Byleth feel understandably shoved aside. It is also painful for the players when one of those same-sex

romance options is locked behind paid DLC (downloadable content), additional content added in the game if purchased. Whoever decided on the same-sex relationship options clearly favoured the female side much more. I consider it to be a somewhat fetishistic choice, since *FE3H* caters to a masculine heteronormative audience. Lesbian and bisexual women have historically been fetishized in Japan, and it is no surprise that this is still the case in recent games. Amina Hassan, a student at the University of Guelph, wrote a research paper documenting the history of this. She states, “records of same-sex relationships between women throughout Japanese history [...] are often heavily fetishized or have been created for the male gaze” (par. 1) and that “even among activists [in the women’s rights movement] women who experienced same-sex attraction were often not met with acceptance” (par. 17). It is no wonder then, that the ending illustrations for all the bisexual female characters to be subtly targeting the heterosexual male demographic.

Unlike the depiction of both Byleths visibly affectionate with their heterosexual fiancé(e) illustrations, the female bisexual characters are seen alone from the first-person perspective, only gazing affectionately at them, and in turn, the player. Even less subtle is Dorothea, who not only gazes towards Byleth and the player, but is also intentionally seen with her cleavage visible as she bends forward in her ending illustration. This cannot simply be read as a genuinely heartfelt moment between each Byleth and the player. As for the same-sex male romances, there is also barely any affection except within dialogue. Given the conservatism in Japan, there is also the possibility the team at Intelligent Systems may have been limited in what they could do to even write same-sex romance options. Unfortunately, I have no information as to whether or not that is true (please see the Acknowledgements section below). I will, however, criticize the choices for the options, as I find, with personal morals and ethics in place, two of the options for both Byleths feel quite perplexing as they are technically related to the main character by blood.²⁰ As a contextual note, the non-aging beings I mention previously in during my research playthrough are these exact two bisexual marriage options and they are a part of the Church of Seiros.

²⁰As a contextual note, the non-aging beings I mention previously in my research playthrough are these exact two bisexual marriage options, and they are a part of the Church of Seiros.

Fan and Critics: Desiring More

The fundamental problem with the romance of *FE3H* is that there is just not enough Queer representation overall for me to say the game is fully positive. It feels more like they blur the lines between positive and neutral since there is a lack of choice on the player's same-sex romance options and a lack of explicit canonical LGBTQ+ pairings for other characters' support conversations. In terms of the first point, I find that I don't agree with the idea that all characters should be made bisexual for Byleth to have plenty of choices for the romance in *FE3H*. As RnbwSheep, a user on *Reddit*, succinctly put it, their "problem with the 'make everyone bi' route is when the player is the only time the NPC expresses same-sex attraction," with ShamelesslyLenette, another user, adding that "it makes the cast feel diverse and real" (RnbwSheep). Overall, both users wish for more LGBTQ+ representation within the characters themselves and wish they did not have to or need to be attracted only to the main character. I agree with this sentiment, as it would help the characters feel more fleshed out as real people and not simply choices for the player to make and forget later. The writers already do an excellent job of giving more humanization to the characters, as Brendan Graeber at IGN states, since there are characters who don't necessarily get along outside of combat and evidently show that through support conversation (*FE3H* review). Supplementing this with realistic LGBTQ+ representation would only elevate the characters further. And I am left disappointed knowing that the writers did not, or perhaps could not, do that for *FE3H*'s characters.

When it comes down to Queer representation, the fans are the ones most affected by the overall game. While I have highlighted Hart as well as a couple of users on *Reddit* who are mainly dissatisfied by the way the game handles the LGBTQ+ representation, that does not stop anyone from creating their own fan art or fanfiction of the characters. Far from it, to be honest. PS Berge and Rebecca K. Britt write in the *Game Studies* journal that "immediately following the release of *FE3H*, fans online begin creating Queer content as a way of establishing legitimacy for the gay ships they supported – especially those denied paired endings in the original game" (par. 14). Their observation not only indicates to me that many fans could see the interpreted pairs as completely non-canon, but also that dissatisfaction fuels the fans' creative outlets for more Queer representation in the characters, so they decide to write or draw for themselves and others. I think that this motivation from the fans not to accept the endings of the official game is both admirable and saddening to me. It is admirable since they

Unwriting & Queering

firmly believe it is disheartening to see LGBTQ+ representation missed and make creations of their own to share with others, and saddening that they are the ones who take up that work, when it should have been on the game developer's part to try to be bolder in that representation.

It is already a challenge in the West for Queer representation to thrive in the lives of the LGBTQ+ community, let alone in video games for them. I recognize that for video games to have representation for Queer fans, the environment for the Queer community needs to change first. And by that, I specifically mean the very dominant heterosexual society surrounding them. Bonnie Ruberg and Amanda Phillips make very valid points when bringing up forms of resistance both against and for the LGBTQ+ community within politics. They bring up the prominent Gamergate controversy, a movement that maliciously harmed and harassed plenty of the Queer community and individuals just because they either created a piece of work that was explicitly tying video games to the Queer community or because they identified as LGBTQ+. At the same time, this brought about resistance from the LGBTQ+ community to rise against the Gamergate movement and create more work representing them involving video games (par. 15). It is this resistance that makes me consider how the parallels between Gamergate and the official *FE3H*, though not the same, do feel similar in restricting the more open-minded ideas of having more Queer representation in any facet of ways. Once again, it is disappointing to see that in both situations, LGBTQ+ fans and scholars alike are left to do the work to represent themselves because others either do not care to or rather hold hostile intent towards them. Comparing *FE3H* and the two JRPGs I have mentioned previously regarding their relationship mechanics, while my primary source is objectively more flexible in terms of portraying Queer relationships, it is evident that the developers of these games deliberately hesitate to add them in or completely leave all explicit romantic relationships out. For Queer players, I find that between *FE3H* and *Persona 5*, there is more that they can feel rewarded for in the relationship mechanic here, despite the latter being very heteronormative. In both, the relationships between the main characters and others feel more like a progression, unlike *Octopath II*, which at least can provide a better-simulated sense of feeling closer to the characters.

Conclusion

In reflecting on this research paper, I find myself a bit dissatisfied. There is certainly a lot more work to be done for the LGBTQ+ community to have a

Unwriting & Queering

diverse amount of representation within video games. The emphasis should be placed especially on the quality of this representation if developers both locally and internationally plan to include Queer plot, characters, visuals, etc. *FE3H* proves it has many flaws in that regard. I think that with more education provided to the youth of today, Queer representation can improve so much more in daily life, and, by having that become integrated into society, the video games industry can evolve and improve in the quality of it in this slowly progressive society.

Works Cited

- Berge, PS. and Rebecca K. Britt. "Dance With Me, Claude: Creators, Catalyzers and Canonizers in the *Fire Emblem: Three Houses* Slash-Ship Fandom" *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research*, Vol. 21, Issue 4, December 2021, https://gamestudies.org/2104/articles/berge_britt.
- Fire Emblem: Three Houses*. Directed by Toshiyuki Kusakihara, Intelligent Systems and Kou Shibusawa/Nintendo, 26 July 2019. Nintendo Switch game.
- Graeber, Brendan. "*Fire Emblem: Three Houses* Review – An Incredible Amount of Choice Both On and Off the Battlefield." *IGN*, <https://www.ign.com/articles/2019/07/25/fire-emblem-three-houses-review>.
- Hart, Aimee. "Can You Be Gay in *Fire Emblem: Three Houses*?" *Gayming Magazine*, 3 November 2020, <https://gaymingmag.com/2020/11/can-you-be-gay-in-fire-emblem-three-houses/#:~:text=Regardless%20of%20who%20Byleth%20can,Felix%2C%20and%20Hubert%20and%20Ferdinand>.
- Hart, Aimee. "That's Underrated: Petra and Dorothea from *Fire Emblem: Three Houses*." *Gayming Magazine*, 24 January 2020, <https://gaymingmag.com/2020/01/thats-underrated-petra-and-dorothea-from-fire-emblem-three-houses/>.
- Hassan, Amina. "Women's Same-Sex Relationships in Japanese History." *Footnotes*, Vol. 15, University of Guelph, 2022, <https://journals.scholarsportal.info/browse/28163745/v15inone>.
- Mineau-Murray, Loïc. "From Cleric to Daemon: Narrative and Ludic Agencies of Female Characters in the *Tales of Series*" *Japanese Role-Playing Games: Genre, Representation, and Liminality in the JRPG*, edited by Rachel Hutchinson and Jérémie Pelletier-Gagnon, Lexington, 2022, pp. 139–156.
- Octopath Traveler II*. Directed by Keisuke Miyauchi, Square Enix and Acquire/Nintendo, 24 February 2023. Nintendo Switch game.
- Persona 5 Royal*. Directed by Daiki Ito, Atlus and Sega/Nintendo, 21 October 2022. Nintendo Switch game.

RnbwSheep and ShamelesslyLenette. “Re: My Thoughts on The Same Sex Romance Options Fire Emblem Tends to Offer” *Reddit*, 2023.
https://www.reddit.com/r/fireemblem/comments/109k83e/my_thoughts_on_the_same_sex_male_romance_options/, accessed 22 July 2024.

Ruberg, Bonnie and Amanda Phillips. “Not Gay as in Happy: Queer Resistance and Video Games (Introduction)” *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research*, Special Issue, December 2018,
https://gamestudies.org/1803/articles/phillips_ruberg.

Acknowledgements

I want to first and foremost thank Professor Nicky Didicher for all the hard work she does to read over and evaluate my paper for this anthology.

I would also like to thank my fellow peers who have looked over my paper and provided me feedback during class. The reader may recognize some of them by name since their papers may also be published in this anthology. Thank you to Amelia Osborne, Delaney Kamstra, Josiah Loewen and Mika Goli for the feedback in grammar and context issues, as well as Bradley Foley for his feedback on how to cite a Reddit thread.

I would like to acknowledge that I did use Grammarly within Google Docs as an extension to further help me fix my grammar.

I would also like to acknowledge I attempted to contact Nintendo for an interview with the writers and/or English localizing team for *Fire Emblem: Three Houses*. Unfortunately, no reply was ever provided except when I had to reach the US-based contact since the Canadian based contact was outdated and was not being used for contact anymore.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

© Stephanie Pao, 2025