

Game title: Mother 3  
Platform: Game Boy Advance  
Genre: adventure / role playing  
Release date: April 20th, 2006  
Developer: Brownie Brown / HAL Laboratory / Nintendo Software Planning and Development Group 3  
Publisher: Nintendo  
Writer / creative director: Shigesato Itoi  
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## Overview

Mother 3 tells the story of Lucas and Claus, twin brothers who live on the Nowhere Islands. These islands (and specifically their main settlement, Tazmily Village) are initially a vaguely socialist, rural utopia with no need for money, electronic devices, or even an operational jail. However, the islands and their inhabitants undergo an uncomfortable change when the Pigmask Army, led by the childish ruler Porky, arrive and begin introducing modern goods and conveniences. Under Porky's orders to make things “more interesting”, they also begin using the local wildlife in strange cybernetics experiments, causing them to become vicious “chimeras”. One of these chimeras kills the twins' mother, causing Claus to run away from the village and Lucas to eventually oppose the Pigmask Army with several companions he meets during the story. Later, it is revealed that the islands hide seven needles which seal away a being called the Dark Dragon, and that these needles are being pulled from the earth under Porky's orders by a “Masked Man” (who is actually the brainwashed Claus). Once freed, the dragon will recreate the world according to the values of its liberator. Lucas must race to pull at least four of the needles before his brother.

Mother 3 was given multiple taglines, one of which is “Strange, Funny, and Heartrending”. While the main plot of the game is often saddening, it also contains numerous puns, non sequiturs, and other lighthearted moments. The story's tone shifts often, sometimes very suddenly. Mother 3 is probably most remarkable for its harmonious integration of play elements with exceptional narrative content, encompassing strong characterization, coherent symbolic and thematic aspects, and pointed commentary on human nature and society.

## Characters

- Lucas—The main protagonist. Lucas is the twin of Claus and a son of Flint and Hinawa. He is more timid than his brother early on, though he gains confidence over the course of the story. Lucas is one of a few main characters in the game who can use psychokinetic “PSI” abilities in battle, and is the only person besides his brother who can pull the needles of the Nowhere Islands.
- Claus—The more assertive of the two brothers, Claus runs off after the death of Hinawa, saying that he needs to become stronger. He later appears as “the

MaskedMan” who fights Lucas and his companions several times on their journey. Exactly

what happened to him after leaving the village is uncertain, but little of his former self is intact once he reappears. When fighting Lucas for control of the final needle, Hinawa's voice somehow reaches him and he remembers his family. After Claus kills himself out of penance, Lucas is able to pull the final needle.

- Hinawa, Flint, and Boney—Hinawa is the eponymous mother of Mother 3. As mentioned in the overview, she is killed by a chimera in the first chapter, setting the events of the plot in progress. Flint is the twins' quiet but strong-willed father and is described as a “reckless nice guy”. Boney is the family's dog, and is the only member to accompany Lucas on his journey.
- Porky—The returning antagonist from Mother 2 (AKA Earthbound), Porky harbors extreme resentment toward the lives of others and has managed to become immortal, traveling through time and space while extending his life with advanced technology. Porky commands the brainwashed Claus to pull the needles since he himself can't, believing that this will result in a world of nothing with only himself and the dragon left.
- Kumatora and Duster—Kumatora is a somewhat masculine teenage girl raised as the princess of Osohe Castle, a haunted area in ruins near Tazmily Village. Duster is trained as a thief, though he doesn't actually steal from the villagers. He has a slight limp, bad breath, and average looks. According to Mother 3's creative director and writer Shigesato Itoi, characters with undesirable or unpopular qualities like Duster were included as “symbols of not rejecting such people”<sup>1</sup>. Notably, Kumatora and Duster also have no mothers, and in Duster's case a verbally abusive father (named Wess) who also claims to be the cause of Duster's bad leg.
- Salsa and Yokuba—Salsa is a performing monkey held captive by the selfish and manipulative Yokuba, who serves Porky. Yokuba frequently electrocutes Salsa when he is disobeyed, and is unable to understand the pain he inflicts on others. Salsa's goal is to free his girlfriend Samba, another monkey captured by the Pig masks for use in their chimera experiments, and escapes Yokuba with the help of Kumatora and Wess. Yokuba is also responsible for distributing money and modern technology to the villagers, including the popular “Happy Boxes” which resemble television sets or personal computers. While making their way to Porky near the end of the game, Lucas and his companions discover that Yokuba was actually Locria, the seventh of the Magypsies (who are discussed below). It is also indicated that although Yokuba was often wicked, there were occasional instances in which he was kind to others. Ultimately, the nature of his motivations and world view are left ambiguous.
- NPCs—A large cast of distinctive nonplayer characters populate the Mother 3 world. Of note are the seven Magypsies, who are said to be “neither male nor female” and guard the islands' needles. Leder the bell ringer is also a significant minor character. Although silent for most of the game, in the final chapter Leder tells the mysterious story of how the Nowhere Islands came to be settled.

<sup>1</sup> Itoi Interview, The Mother 3 Fan Translation. <http://mother3.fobby.net/interview/>.

## Breakdown

The plot of Mother 3 is effectively paced, and successfully builds the attentive player's

interest and emotional investment throughout the game. Much of this is done by giving the player room to infer and interpret events for himself or herself. For example, Hinawa's death is not explicitly shown, but remarks made by other characters and the placement of items (like a piece of cloth from her dress and a machine used to create chimeras) allow players to mentally reconstruct the related events for themselves. Because of this, engaging in investigative play often pays off significantly, and serves to develop and enliven Mother 3's characters and world.

Near the end of the game, several major plot twists are revealed. One of the most significant is Leder's story, which describes the current inhabitants of the Nowhere Islands as having escaped from the destruction of another world on the "White Ship".

Upon arriving at the islands, they decided to erase their memories of this journey and the old world in order to live their ideal lives. This is subtly foreshadowed beforehand, with characters like Wess making odd statements when trying to remember events from many years ago, and one largely incidental character even noticing that many people don't resemble the others in their families. Upon learning of this, many of the game's events can be seen in a very different light, particularly those touching on deception and social order. For these subjects, the message of Mother 3 suddenly becomes far more complex than it initially appears, going from something like "consumerism instills artificial values" to the disquieting "society in general relies upon artificial values".

The game's overall progression toward the facing of Lucas's quandary is of interest in its own right. The story is told in eight chapters of varying length. Each chapter provides an episodic subplot of its own, most of which follow a traditional three act structure. In this way, Mother 3's plot is organized somewhat like those of other serialized media such as television dramas or graphic novels. However, the game's main plot is not easily divided in this way, and falls most naturally into a four act structure. The first act contains Hinawa's death and begins the villager's gradual loss of their old way of life. After the plot skips ahead three years between chapters, the second act begins, in which Lucas overcomes his emotions and gathers his friends to stand up to the Pigmask. After disabling the lightning shooting "Tower of Peace and Love" and falling from a Pigmask airship, Lucas has a vision of Hinawa in a field of sunflowers (strongly echoing the Campbellian goddess archetype), beginning the third act. This act sees Lucas develop inwardly, and many of the game's strongest themes begin to take shape at this point. During the third act, Lucas learns of the seven needles and both he and Claus are able to pull three of them. Meanwhile, the inhabitants of Tazmily leave for Porky's newly built city. The final act consists of the last chapter, where Lucas and his companions travel to confront Porky and pull the final needle, which is located beneath his city. Although Porky is immortal, he foolishly enters a device known as the "Absolutely Safe Capsule", which, while absolutely safe, is impossible to ever leave. After this, Lucas faces off against Claus, who finally reveals his identity after struggling with his memories and the subsequent knowledge of his transgression.

## Buildup To Quandary

- Final battles
- Hinawa's death
- Leder's story
- Lucas's vision

## First Act Second Act Third Act Fourth Act Resolution

Upon pulling the final needle, a short cutscene shows the destruction of the Nowhere Islands in a series of natural disasters as the gigantic Dark Dragon rises from the earth.

A black screen displaying "The End?" appears, but the player remains in control of Lucas and can walk around in the dark to speak with characters from the game, whose aim is to believe that things will turn out okay. The credits roll and the true ending screen appears, showing the game's logo composed entirely of wood rather than the odd wood and metal combination it had previously used. As with most of the story, the ending is left open to interpretation.

Many thematic elements are used throughout the game, some blunt and others quite nuanced. Dragons appear as a particularly prominent symbol and seem to represent natural forces. The Dark Dragon is probably the most obvious example of this, and is

explicitly said by Leder to be a manifestation of "the power of the earth itself". Additionally, the chimera that kills Hinawa was originally a peaceful dragonlike creature but was corrupted by the Pig masks (much like the island as a whole). Even the name of Tazmily Village may be partly derived from the Japanese word "tatsu", meaning "dragon".<sup>2</sup> Other thematic concepts include the relationship between isolation and safety (shown in both the Absolutely Safe Capsule and the tale of the White Ship) and the contrast between childhood and maturity (presented mainly with Lucas's emotional growth and Porky's incessantly childish behavior). Such aspects provide additional food for thought while supporting the game's main premise. They also show that the Mother 3 world, like reality, contains complex problems that may not always have easy solutions.

<sup>2</sup> Translation Notes, The Mother 3 Fan Translation. <http://mother3.fobby.net/notes/>.

## Strongest Element

I think that the overall construction of Mother 3's themes of family bonds and personal growth form its strongest narrative element. Many aspects of the game work together to create a compelling story, but the heart of Mother 3 lies in how it presents the relationships between Lucas and those close to him.

From the beginning the personalities of Lucas's family are well established, and after Hinawa's death each member develops in his own way. The degree of humanity and believability these characters exhibit as they struggle with their loss is an unfortunate rarity in video games today. Lucas in particular is shown to grow tremendously, from

being consistently described as a crybaby to gaining the courage to confront his brother-turned-enemy at the climax of the game. Flint hopelessly searches for Claus in the mountains near Tazmily for years and later protects Lucas from his brother's attacks, while Boney steadfastly follows Lucas on his adventure. Claus's story is as tragic as

Hinawa's, and even the villain Porky is shown to act out of loneliness. These sympathetic aspects invite the player to bond with the game's characters over the course of the story.

### Unsuccessful Element

While most of the main characters are sufficiently developed throughout the game, Lucas's main party members (Kumatora, Duster, and Boney) do not receive much development toward the story's end. For Duster and Kumatora, the portion in which they play significant roles doesn't begin until Chapter 2 and is mostly over by Chapter 5. By the end of the game, I felt as though they had little reason to continue their involvement with Lucas's quest besides wanting to see him succeed. Boney, being a dog, understandably receives the least substantial characterization. While this does make Boney quite believable as a dog, I think it's reasonable to have hoped for a little more depth. Many of the game's characters are animals with human personalities, and Boney is notably a member of Lucas's family. Even Salsa the monkey, whose story is told in Chapter 3 and part of Chapter 7, receives more characterization than Boney and arguably more than even Duster and Kumatora. While both characters do have strong personalities, they lack clear motivations. Salsa manages to come across as a complete character with both of these qualities despite his limited face time and lack of dialog. I think it would have been better to see the other party members have something personal to fight for at the end of the game, especially considering how effective this was with Lucas.

### Highlight

Much has been made of the final battle between Lucas and Claus, which subverts the game's combat system by making it into a mechanism through which substantial narrative content is communicated. I agree with the majority opinion here—this part definitely stands out as the single strongest point of Mother 3's story to me. The player's experience of this sequence, arguably the most powerful in the game, would be impossible without the ludic elements it employs. The tension brought on by the player's

active struggle to survive the beginning of the fight is gradually lessened as Claus weakens, replaced with a distinct uncertainty of how to proceed. The clever use of practically every available play mechanic during the battle scene is remarkable, with even standard damage counters, message prompts, and the battle's typical psychedelic backgrounds revealing the wavering wills and mutual confusion of both combatants. In essence, the climactic point of Mother 3 is the player's total identification with Lucas and his sympathy for Claus. Very few games have achieved this near perfect union of play experience with complex emotional content, and Mother 3 shows that it doesn't take advanced graphical fidelity or huge budgets to produce gripping, intelligent, and even profound experiences with interactive media.

## Critical Reception

In Japan, Mother 3 was highly anticipated and generally received great praise upon its release. Weekly game magazine Famitsu's reviewers Hamamura, Suzuki, Watanabe, and Giorgio collectively gave the game 35 points out of 40, calling its story "marvelous" and noting the great attention to detail<sup>3</sup>, a sentiment shared by Simon Parkin of the Website Eurogamer. Parkin noted that the game's outwardly simple story "soon demonstrates a breadth and depth of quality that few titles many times its budget achieve." He added that the presentation of the game's characters conveys "comedy and tragedy with unexpected impact, the simple story drawing readers in with a nod and wink before turning on a sixpence to deliver affecting scenes." Parkin awarded the game 7 out of 10 points.<sup>4</sup>

## Lessons

- Allow some room for players to interpret the game's plot and themes for themselves. Doing so allows association of these elements with one's own experiences and gives depth to even simple concepts. The open nature of Mother 3's narrative is the source of its enduring mysteries and the broad applicability of its philosophical implications.
- Strong characterization of NPCs increases verisimilitude and allows the game's setting and events to feel much more relatable. Relationships between characters can go a long way toward making the story's resolution important to the player. Characters that change internally over the course of the story also make for very strong narrative architecture, something that many games curiously fail to take note of.
- Every aspect of the game should be included with consideration toward how it will affect the player's experience as a whole. Mother 3 exhibits an almost poetic construction where each successful piece of the plot is very deliberate and complete. As the author Antoine de Saint-Exupéry famously said, "Perfection isn't reached when there's nothing left to add, but when there's nothing left to take away."

<sup>3</sup> Famitsu Weekly Cross Review of Mother 3, Starmen.net.

<http://web.archive.org/web/20080616125710/>

<http://starmen.net/mother3/gameinfo/reviews.php/> (archived from the original Web page, which is no longer available).

<sup>4</sup> Mother 3 Game Boy Advance Review, Eurogamer.

<http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/mother-3-review/>.

## Summation

Mother 3 has a lot to tell its players about living in the world, and it also has a lot to teach designers and writers of video games about conveying a worthwhile story with their medium of choice. Alongside classics like Ico and The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask, Mother 3 avoids dissonance between play and story, building each upon the other and strengthening them both as a result. Mother 3 is a strong example of the value beyond simple entertainment video games can provide to people's lives as a communicative medium.