

MOTHER 3

MORE THAN A DECADE IN THE MAKING, SHIGESATO ITOI'S THIRD MOTHER RPG IS FINALLY HERE

DETAILS	
	Game Boy Advance
ORIGIN	Japan
PUBLISHER	Nintendo
DEVELOPER	In-House
PRICE	¥4,800
RELEASE	Japan: Out Now
PLAYERS	1

The role-playing game is part of a bizarre genre. It's like the huge curio that is politics – there are infinite slight variations between various extreme approaches, but it's often difficult to tell what the differences are without studying manifestos. Or in this case without playing RPGs for hundreds of hours on end. There are a few role-playing games, though, which have distinct appearances and stand out from the crowded backbenches where *Breath Of Fire* and *Legend Of Dragoon* snooze away their afternoons.

Mother is the Boris Johnson of RPGs. It has a sense of humour – although it may not be appreciated in Liverpool – and its presence has inflated over time. So, what would Boris have to say about *Mother 3*? Never mind, listen.

If you're not familiar with the lineage of this undervalued Nintendo series, its history scrolls like this: *Mother* was released on the 8-bit Famicom in Japan, it was never exported, but these days a translated ROM image is in circulation followed by *Mother 2* on the Super Famicom (which appeared on the US SNES as *Earthbound*) and *Mother 3* was due on Nintendo's 64DD circa 1997. It was delayed until eventually Nintendo cancelled the project. All talk of it lulled to a quiet echo until the recent

re-release of *Mother 1+2* on Game Boy Advance which is the format that *Mother 3* has ended up on ten years after it was originally shown at Nintendo's Spaceworld '96 trade show.

The difference between *Mother 3* and the first two games is – after ten years of deliberation – only minimal. Again, a quirky cast of characters (quirky in personality, that is; not quirky because they have huge spiked hair or guns attached to their limbs), connecting lost family members and a pet dog, journey through an alternate Earth/America to solve their individual problems and, ultimately, defeat the pig men who are snorting havoc in Nowhere Island. *Mother 3*'s format is such that it breaks down to eight separate adventures, each of which takes around five hours to complete. Although the game is episodic in this sense, there are links between adventures – story overlaps and consistent characters – which give at least the impression that *Mother 3* is a single, 40-hour-long epic. Viewed from that perspective, there is more to see and do in *Mother 3* than there was in either of the previous *Mother* titles.

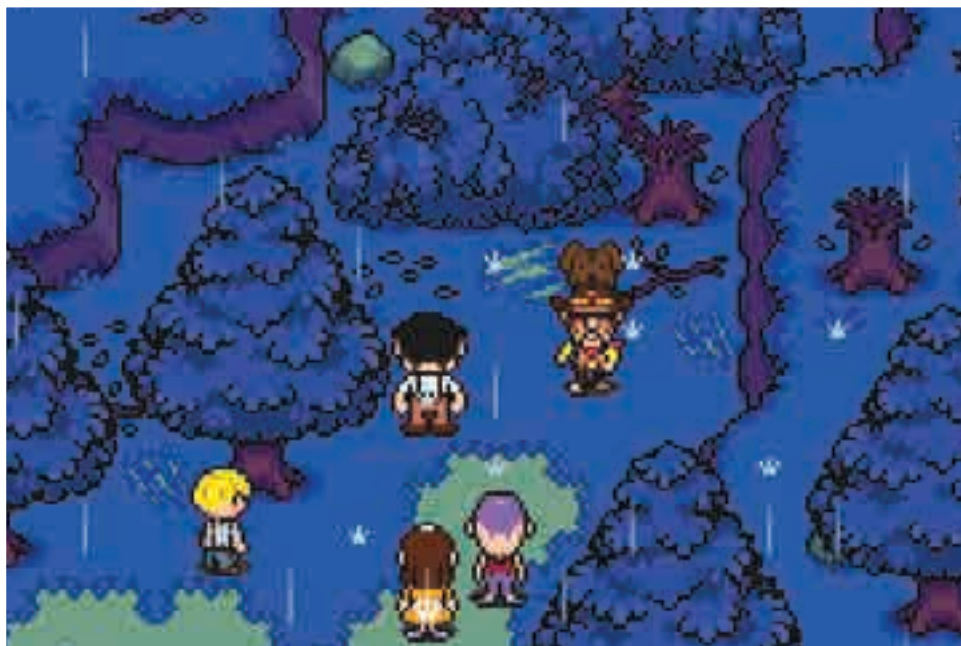
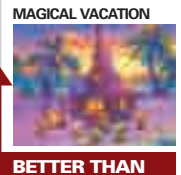
One obvious differentiating factor, however, is *Mother 3*'s rhythmic battle system. Music is the key. According to enemy type, the battle tunes change; but in any case, *Mother 3* rewards

FAQs

Q. WHO IS SHIGESATO ITOI?
He is the godfather of *Mother*, if that makes familial sense. You can find his blog (in Japanese) at 1101.com.

Q. WHAT HAPPENED TO THE OLD MOTHER 3?
Prototype 64DD disks undoubtedly exist. In fact, two such disks were sold on eBay recently, although the chances of them containing anything beyond ten per cent complete code are slim to none.

Q. WILL MOTHER 4 EVER HAPPEN?
Itai has gone all hush hush again, which leads us to expect a wait of, say, 12 years. See you in 2018.



■ Forests are blue at night – at least, they are in *Mother 3*. The expert use of palette to achieve atmosphere is typical of Brownie Brown's *Magical Vacation* games.



■ Lucas, the blonde kid, looks on bemused as the town centre overfills with odd creatures and ice cream.



■ Forest fires give *Mother 3*'s adventurers a problem in an alternate Wild West setting.



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 WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE
DANCE DANCE: *Mother 3's* battle system is fresh but not quite a revolution. The game's standard attacks and special moves are strengthened if you can keep in time with battle music. Alas there is no dance attack.

■ On GBA's small screen, or even on a DS display, the game looks reasonably detailed, but it's the character animation that will make your eyes smile.

you if you can keep in time – tapping A – with the countless numbers on this cart. Regardless of what assaults enemy characters are able to launch, simply tapping along can double the effectiveness of your own attacks. Somehow, this feature twists the typical sensation of being 'in battle' to the extent that fights become light-hearted, enjoyable occasions. In other words, the antithesis of big menu screens and turn-based lethargy.

There's another battle-related advantage which *Mother 3* lauds over its more serious-faced rivals: no randomness. You can see potential jousting on screen no matter where you are exploring, and you can avoid them if you so wish. The presence of this simple choice moves *Mother 3* away from so many other RPGs; arguably, it's a choice which the player always deserves to be given. Admittedly, there are instances here which equate level ups with progress or at least the ability to progress past high-level enemies and bosses, but the player can choose when and how to effect level ups by kicking off only worthy battles. No time is wasted in *Mother 3*, and that adds immeasurably to the sense of satisfaction you can gain from playing it.

As for *Mother/Earthbound's* famously droll brand of humour, that too is retained. Japanese developers do get irony, after all – and there's plenty of proof of that in the pudding that is *Mother 3*. To talk in specifics will ruin set-pieces for potential players, but the overall tone is what counts: characters make mockeries of each

other, nothing can be taken at face value, and there are more unexpected twists in *Mother 3's* story than there are in any David Mitchell novel. This is Shigesato Itoi's ace card. He has a game which could easily have been released on Super Famicom ten years ago, yet in many ways this was a story worth waiting a decade for. In the West, we have the legacy of *Monkey Island* and *Broken Sword*; in the East, they enjoy the impossibly well-written banter of *Mother*.

Visually, *Mother 3* has reverted to type. There are no signs of the 64DD build's polygonal world; it's sprites all the way. Fortunately, the animation and detail packed into character design is sufficient to distinguish the game as a kind of post-GBA GBA game: it wouldn't look out of place on Nintendo DS.

Mother 3 only falls short of what was expected of it because, a) it is not a huge departure from its 12-year-old predecessor, and b) the waiting period was unbearably long. Waiting for *Mother 3* was like waiting for the new Daft Punk LP. Both deliver, but not quite in the way we expected them to.



VERDICT 8/10
 TEN YEARS' SUPREME SCRIPTING – BUT NOTHING MORE

NITTY GRITTY

As with *Mother 2*, albeit in slightly different form, *Mother 3's* foundations are solid. There are plenty of save points in the form of frogs, the dialogue – even of inconsequential characters – is always entertaining, and the sheer variety of encounters you'll face is unrivalled within the RPG genre and includes pig men, zombie dogs and crickets. Ultimately, *Mother 3's* style is non-conforming, a mishmash of the rules that other RPGs stick to. There are long spells when you'll be adventuring alone, but then there are other adventures which introduce multiple characters, leaving you with a band of journeymen à la any game by Square-Enix.



■ Nowhere Island is full of loonies in parks, dressed like Village People and twice as entertaining.