



FORMAT: GBA
 PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
 DEVELOPER: BROWNIE BROWN
 ORIGIN: JAPAN
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The challenge in localising the series is in capturing its creator's penchant for pun and poetry. The names of nearly all enemies are heavily local plays on words. Those pictured here translate more simply to 'monkeywalrus'



What's initially striking about *Mother 3* is how easily it can muster complex emotions like longing, loneliness, deep shame and regret even with such an elementary flat-shaded palette and restrained pixel pantomime



Fight the rhythm

While still holding true to *Earthbound's* slowly-rolling hit point counter that allows enough reaction time to cast a quick heal and save a player from sudden death, *Mother 3's* combat has been upgraded with a new combo system linked to its variety of battle music. By pressing the attack button to the beat of the occasionally oddly-signatured themes, each character can do extra damage with a musical accompaniment. It's a simple addition but does wonders for turning otherwise mundane turn-based battles into a unique challenge for every fight.



One of the primary joys that has gained *Mother* such a rabid fanbase is the rich personality it invests in even the most minor of its cast, making an unforgettable experience out of what is mechanically otherwise a strictly traditional RPG

Mother 3

A decade later, Nintendo's dark horse RPG rides again. But will it be another Mother only Japan can love?



In a curious way, it could be said that the fervour behind the western *Earthbound* cult community has as much to do with the games it hasn't seen as with the one it has. Three years after the release of the SNES *Earthbound*, released in Japan as *Mother 2*, the discovery of a fully-translated internal-use cart of the NES original, known now as *Earthbound Zero*, fuelled in series fans the perception of a near vendetta by Nintendo to shield them from creator Shigesato Itoi's work. After a 700-page fan-prepared petition proved powerless to prevent the N64 sequel's eventual cancellation, their feeling was again underscored by the company's more recent decision to withhold the GBA's *Mother 1+2* collection from western release, despite having completed English scripts for both titles, and its reuse of the upgraded *Earthbound Zero* code it had prepared for America but never let loose.

That's not to say, though, that what the west has seen wasn't worth the dedication. Effortlessly unique, the SNES's *Earthbound* was noteworthy not just for its peculiar



Each chapter promises to highlight the experiences of a unique character, with others joining up as members of a following party. While the split might lead to a less epic tale than the journey undertaken by Ness, its new pacing should nonetheless be more satisfying in shorter bursts, which is in turn perfect for its new portable GBA form

position as a firstparty RPG from a company classically shy of the genre. Its pedestrian setting, a modern day urban tale skewed with '50s sci-fi B-movie Americana, its supporting cast, with adolescent hero Ness making frequent phone calls to both his mother and his estranged, never-present father (an intimate detail Itoi admits was taken from his own childhood), and its disconnected non-sequitur humour and dialogue all presented a startling and memorable eccentric vision of RPGs – something typical of a creator with no formal background in games.

And now its sequel, some 12 years later, looks ready to carry on every bit of that tradition. Rendered in pixel-crisp clarity and with far more detailed animations that don't reinvent so much as pay tribute to its design lineage, the game's initial chapters also show those previous themes of estrangement now much more engrained. The first chapter alone pulls the game into blacker territory with deadbeat father Flint reluctantly rejoining and violently lashing out at his family, and dealing with a sudden death close to home. Though there are still flashes of oddball levity and overarching themes of an alien invasion, the game is clearly working at greater depths than before. As with *Mother 2*, its battles are instigated by making contact with free-roaming overworld enemies, which leads to familiar, psychedelically-tinged turn-based battles, that now, unexpectedly, contain a rhythmic twist (see 'Fight the rhythm').

As always, though, the million-dollar question remains whether, given the commercial challenge inherent in the disparity of its kid-friendly pastel hues and murkier themes, this will be Nintendo's time to finally reunite the series with its western fanbase.

