

Mega Man 3 by Salvatore Pane

written by Guest Contributor | October 13, 2016



Mega Man 3 by Salvatore Pane
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Salvatore Pane's *Mega Man 3* warps its reader into a shared past, where the flickering of 8-bit graphics on an Emerson CRTV warms a wood-paneled living room. There, a child blows into a Nintendo cartridge, slots the game into her NES, and pushes power. The screen flashes black, then a title appears: *MEGA MAN III*, in an angular silver font. The game offers two options: "Game Start" and "Pass Word." An electronic dirge issues from the television. The player grips her NES controller and trembles. For her—for us—the screen is a metaphor for what the future holds.

When players first encountered *Mega Man 3*, the stark title screen created the same foreboding as the desolate cover of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. The player senses immediately that she must blunder on, alone. The game's stage select screen magnifies the player's isolation. In the center square, the child-like Mega Man's face is contorted, mid-panic attack. Surrounding him are the squares of eight new Robot Masters, their antagonism unexplained. "In *Mega Man 3*," Pane observes, "there is very little narrative justification for why the player must hunt down and kill colorful robots."

What the game withholds, Pane's book provides us: narrative justification for *Mega Man 3*. Like the other titles published by Boss Fight Books, Pane's is a hybrid of memoir, cultural criticism, and video game study. Here, he achieves the concision and clarity of vision found in the novella—evidence that his skills as a novelist are also on full display. (Pane is the author of *Last Call in the City of Bridges*, published by Braddock Avenue Books in 2012). From the Nintendo generation's anxious coming-of-age and *Mega Man 3*'s paucity of narrative, Pane constructs a provocative account of how a video game corroborates the secret histories of its fans, critics, and developers.

To illuminate the lives in *Mega Man 3*'s orbit, Pane reads the game and its sparse narrative as one might a *roman à clef*—one for which the key is an existential sadness of Samuel Beckett proportions. Pane traces this

melancholy back to Mega Man's co-creator Akira Kitamura, who perceived in the character a "certain gravity and seriousness," like the loneliness of "a young child playing alone." In the book's memoir segments, Pane stands in for Kitamura's lonesome child, that reflection of Mega Man. Pane first empathizes with the Blue Bomber while reading the *Mega Man 3* strategy guide in *Nintendo Power* #20. Pane writes,

I found myself strangely moved by the image of Mega Man on page 8 [of *Nintendo Power* #20]. Half his body is the hero child we recognize. The other is an x-ray scan of his insides, a jigsaw of steel and fiber-optics. Even then, I felt different from other children, a sinking feeling that my insides weren't exactly the same, that I wasn't human enough and never really could be. [. . .] Although I couldn't articulate it at age six, I weirdly related to Mega Man and what I misinterpreted as his Pinocchio-esque quest to become real, to fully feel like everyone else.

This passage implies more than a "Pinocchio-esque quest." It communicates something else a six-year-old child couldn't explain, namely, a vague awareness that our parents, teachers, and role models are wiring and programming us. Nonetheless, Pane's strokes of memoir console the reader: if you have been alone in your fear, anxiety, or depression, then *Mega Man 3* is for you.

Pane's glosses of *Mega Man 3*'s gameplay prime readers for a theme undergirding his accounts of the franchise history and today's retro-hungry gaming culture. The game offers Mega Man as an infinitely adaptable figure—something Pane seizes on. Firstly, there is Mega Man's most famous power: when he defeats the Robot Masters, he acquires their weapons and collects new power-ups for his robotic dog, Rush. Secondly, *Mega Man 3*'s level design forces players to solve non-linear stages, which overthrow the just-run-right formula of *Super Mario Bros*. Pane describes one particularly vexing moment in Gemini Man's lair—an "ice moon," a "Cronenberg-esque biological prison":

Along the way are barely submerged platforms atop which sit an extra life and an all-important energy tank. Here, you're presented with a true existential dilemma. Do you: (a) leap into the otherwise deadly waters, nab the collectible, and use the Rush Coil to spring back to the path; or (b) continue on as before and acknowledge you don't have the ability or skill to track down every last collectible? I can't advise you, but I will say that here I died again and again and again, my controller slippery with sweat.

Mega Man is our avatar for navigating the dilemma on Gemini Man's ice moon. He's also a portent for real-life decisions. The character's endless customization and the game's non-linear levels anticipate the risks inherent in adapting to our breakneck modernity. In this environment, survival is a beautiful accident, something Pane suggests via *Mega Man 3*'s fraught development history. When *Mega Man 3*'s project leader, Masahiko Kurokawa, left midway through development, Mega Man co-creator Keiji Inafune returned and salvaged a half-finished project with looming deadlines. (Pane notes that

players can find evidence of the “rushed-to-shelves” quality that rankled Inafune: the source code betrays unused sprites, and plugging a second controller into the NES grants gamers access to the developer’s debug mode.)

If *Mega Man 3* is a half-formed thing that nonetheless *feels* complete, so are the players who seek out old games despite rising cartridge prices. Certainly, nostalgia plays a role here; of his conversations with NintendoAge forum members, Pane writes, “Nearly every user I talked to brought up nostalgia and that the rise in NES prices coincided with folks born in the late 70s and early 80s gaining disposable income.” Yet Pane also notes the influence of James Rolfe’s *Angry Video Game Nerd*, a self-explanatory persona that has made Pane—and many other gamers—aware of a broader gaming community. This gestures toward an impression that these games (like the innovations in the Mega Man franchise) make the daunting paths before us bearable.

When we embark on these unknown trails, we inevitably transform into people with arsenals of unexpected and uncanny talents. The dilemma in the depths of Gemini Man’s ice moon leads to enhancements for Mega Man; this proves to be a rehearsal for Pane’s story of how he “stumbled” from MFA candidate, to English professor, to digital humanist. Pane treats his reader to a retrospective of *Mega Man 3*’s transformative potential in the form of a course entitled “The Critical Discourse of Video Games”:

When I printed out the syllabus before the first day, it didn’t just feel like the culmination of everything I’ve been working on since reading Ian Bogost or Janet Murray. It felt like the natural result of my entire life [. . .] dating back to 1991, when I first paired my copy of *Nintendo Power* with a rented *Mega Man 3* cart. Viewed this way, the story behind *Mega Man 3* isn’t solely about the game or the dev team or retro game collecting. It’s my origin story too, of how I came to be.

This is the marvel of Pane’s slender book on the Blue Bomber. He derives origin stories from a game with a skeletal plot that would make creative writing undergrads balk. His glosses of *Mega Man 3*’s gameplay are honed metaphors for the woes of a Nintendo generation entering an adulthood marred by crippling school debt and bleak job prospects. Here, Pane has penned incisive criticism that enhances its 8-bit source material. Moreover, his book urges us to pick up the NES controller, press power, and discover our own route through an uncertain future—alongside Mega Man, of course.



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