



THE PAST IS NOT DEAD: NO MORE HEROES III AND THE EVOLUTION OF GRASSHOPPER MANUFACTURE

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My introduction to Grasshopper Manufacture was a lot like meeting Travis Touchdown himself.

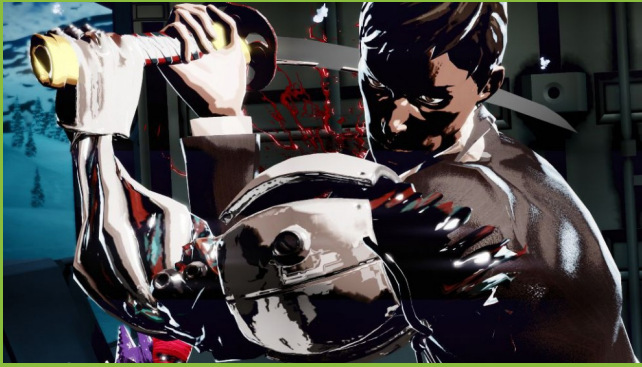
In those first few minutes of *No More Heroes*, I was plunged into a bloody crescendo of noise, colour, and action. I was hooked from the start. Here was a developer that really breathed the “punk” spirit they claimed: Grasshopper Manufacture wasn’t afraid to bend the rules or take risks, an attitude prevailing with every release.

Behind that reputation for the unconventional, however, lies a company in constant metamorphosis. Over the last decade, Grasshopper Manufacture has grown exponentially, then downsized all over again. Even CEO Goichi Suda’s role has changed over the years. Though he’s often viewed as Grasshopper Manufacture’s sole creative voice, his last solo directorial role before 2019’s *Travis Strikes Again* was the original *No More Heroes*. Even *No More Heroes*

2 only lists him as “Executive Director”. That’s a huge gap for someone many consider an auteur. If Suda’s not always in control, can we still call every Grasshopper Manufacture project a “Suda51 game”? And, with his involvement in the series inconsistent, what will *No More Heroes III* even be like?

I believe that Suda51 has something far richer in store than just another stylish hack n’ slash. All signs point to the next chapter of Travis’ story becoming the next chapter of Grasshopper Manufacture’s story, too. It’s through his most popular series that Suda51 reasserts his creative voice and the direction of his studio, following a rollercoaster ride of missteps and successes alike. *No More Heroes III* is more than a highly anticipated sequel - it’s Suda51’s way of solidifying the complete Grasshopper Manufacture vision, forging ahead into the future of games.

Suda51’s career began at Human Entertainment



with *Fire Pro Wrestling* and the *Syndrome* games. Although *Moonlight Syndrome*'s psychological horror drew attention, it was *Fire Pro Wrestling Special*'s shocking, bleak ending that made Suda infamous. The influence of these early works on Suda's writing resonates; in spite of *No More Heroes*' reputation, most of Suda51's writing is serious and story-driven with incisive social commentary lurking below the surface. Notably, *Moonlight Syndrome* gave rise to Grasshopper Manufacture's visual novel debut, *The Silver Case*, kicking off Suda's sprawling, mysterious Kill the Past chronology. Breadcrumbs of Kill the Past, nearer to *Killer7* in tone than *No More Heroes*, are spread throughout Suda's catalogue, and these dark stories earned Grasshopper their cult following. Even *No More Heroes* followed at these games' heels, courting themes of existential crisis and escapism behind the action.

Yet *No More Heroes*' success marked a paradigm shift. Grasshopper had found a new brand: off-beat games from the eccentric Suda51. However, now CEO to a rapidly expanding company, Suda could no longer give each game the same personal touch as before, and Grasshopper's reputation became a double-edged sword. "Suda51 games" had a name to live up to; Suda stepping back creatively was downplayed while collaborators like Masahiro Yuki (*Lollipop Chainsaw*), Hideyuki Shin (*Let it Die*), and Massimo Guarini (*Shadows of the Damned*) stepped up to showcase their own ideas. Today, Grasshopper Manufacture's best seller is still *Lollipop Chainsaw*, one in a series of stylish action games driven by such other creators. But this was still Suda's company, purportedly selling Suda51 games, and fans had mixed emotions. At best, things were fun, but off; at worst, Suda was a hack and a sellout. With his narrative style absent, it was as if Suda had killed his own past, too.

Travis Strikes Again, Suda's directorial return, marks a step forwards and inwards. Through its crossovers and Kill the Past teases, *Travis Strikes Again* becomes Suda's confessional and career retrospective. Travis, like Suda, self-isolates, lamenting a lost identity and purpose. But Dr. Juvenile, creator of the fictional games that frame *Travis Strikes Again*'s levels, channels one of Suda's

greatest disappointments: *Shadows of the Damned*. In the chapter based on Juvenile's ill-fated passion project, "Serious Moonlight", we learn that antagonist Damon Riccitiello, her former colleague, rallied their team to shoot down all her out-of-the-box ideas for the sake of a perfect game. With the original game cancelled, the level transforms instead into "Damned: Dark Knight", a fictional sequel to *Shadows of the Damned*. In reality, *Damned* was also marked by significant pressure by its publisher EA, to the point that Suda's "heart was broken" by the heavily altered final product. Damon even shares a surname with John Riccitiello, CEO of EA at the time of *Damned*'s release. Yet, in spite of it all, "Damned: Dark Knight" is still a joyful, heartfelt tribute, even reimagining Garcia Hotspur's partner Johnson as a showstopping final boss. In this way, Suda comes to terms with *Shadows of the Damned*, regrets and all. It, and every other Grasshopper Manufacture game, become vital pieces of the studio's story, no matter the extent of Suda's role.

No More Heroes III stands on the shoulders of all previous games, looking to the future without forgetting Grasshopper's past. More than callbacks, it's a full reinvention of the new and rediscovery of the old. Fittingly, Grasshopper is indie-size once more, mixing veterans and fresh faces. It's by remembering this collaborative environment that Suda51, paradoxically, reclaims his own creative voice. While still a leader, he no longer needs to be a creative figurehead. This frees others from Suda's shadow and grants the man himself the freedom to set his own work apart, without diminishing his peers. In this way, Suda reconciles his ownership of the studio with his ownership of his own ideas.

Today, I'm still intrigued by Grasshopper Manufacture, including but not limited to Suda51. From recent additions like composers Kazuhiro Abo and Nobuaki Kaneko to veterans like co-directors Ren Yamazaki and Nobutaka Ichiki, *No More Heroes III*'s team combines old and new, balancing Suda51's overall concept with the unique perspectives of his co-creators. It's a thrilling new era for the studio, brimming with possibility, a newfound clarity of direction, and, of course, the potential to break the rules and push the envelope. With any luck, punk might not be dead, after all.