How “randomizers” are breathing new life into old games



reader comments

11 with 11 posters participating

Share this story

- The *Link to the Past* randomizer can change not only the contents of the chests and rewards in the game but also your character sprite, the enemies that spawn, and the color palette of the world!
- Some say that you can’t improve on perfection. The *Final Fantasy VI* mod, Beyond Chaos, proves you can. Here, Yoshi is the new King of Figaro, and Master Chief is his twin brother.
- Using the popular “Universal Pokemon Randomizer,” you too can have Beedrill as a starter Pokemon who knows the Ghost-type move Steel Wing.

- With the power of the randomizer, Kent can now live out his secret life wish of being a Bard instead of a Knight in *Fire Emblem* on GBA!

Like a long-time partner or a favorite pair of socks, there's comfort to be found in revisiting a familiar game from your youth. There's a sense of ease knowing what lies inside each treasure chest, which bush an enemy will spring from, or the secret tactic that vanquishes a foe with ease. That calming intimacy makes games like these an easy nostalgic choice when you just want to take a load off.

But what if you want to add some spice back to that familiar experience? After playing a classic game to the point of memorization, how do you recapture the sense of adventure and discovery you experienced the first time you played it? A small but growing community in the retro emulation scene is aiming to answer those questions with a class of mods and hacks called "randomizers."

Shuffle up and deal

At their most basic level, randomizer mods shuffle the data in a game's ROM so that each run becomes a new and unpredictable experience. So *The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past* Randomizer could change which items you find in which chests, alter the rewards from dungeon quests, and even replace Link's sprite for one of the numerous fan-created options (the *Mega Man X* sprite is a personal favorite). And you can go even further than that, changing the exit locations for various in-game doors or even scattering the boss keys for specific dungeons throughout the world (rather than in the dungeons themselves)!

What started as a small niche has now evolved into its own retrogaming genre. The "BIG List of Video Game Randomizers" website, started back in 2016, now lists hundreds of randomization mods for games from *Metroid Prime, Golden Sun,*

and *Earthbound* to *Faxanadu, Adventure Island,* and *Doom*. The list is still updated weekly with new titles, so if your favorite isn't listed yet, it may be soon.

Different randomizer mods allow for different levels of randomization, but the idea of mixing up locations of items or discovered skills and abilities is rather standard. Some retain the title's intended structure but change the rewards and items you find on your journey. Others completely alter the way the game is played.

Two games at once

One of the more extreme randomizers out there actually combines two games in a way that makes you have to beat both over the course of a single playthrough. In the *Super Metroid x Link to the Past Randomizer* mod, you use special randomized doorways to navigate between the worlds of Hyrule and Zebes, collecting items in one to help you progress further in the other. There is a very real chance that Link's uncle could give you the high-jump boots that allow Samus to then go claim the Master Sword somewhere deep in Norfair.

Randomizers add near-infinite replayability to tired-old games, with fresh challenges for players to overcome with each playthrough. They test the player's skill and knowledge of the game instead of simply the muscle memory gained from years of experience. By limiting the player's ability to rely on their autopilot memory, the focus turns instead to quick adaptation and problem solving.

Deep knowledge of the base game is still useful in a randomizer, though, even if it's just to help you figure out what new avenues may be open with each new item you find. Perhaps you'll be forced to fight a difficult foe with more meager resources than you normally would have. Or maybe you'll be asked to consider keeping a party member with a special skill even though they can barely survive a single hit.

Even if you only have a passing memory of a classic game, there are plenty of resources and guides available to you that can help. These range from beginner's guides with basic strategies for approaching a randomizer run to full-on trackers that can show you what areas become accessible as you get new items.

I like to watch

I first stumbled on the retro-game-randomizer subculture a couple of years ago, when I popped into a Twitch stream of *The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past* (*LttP* going forward) that I initially struggled to comprehend. There, I observed a character who was most definitely not Link finding items in chests where they definitely did not belong. A quick trip down the Google-search rabbit hole explained what was going on and cemented my interest in this strange new world of fresh retro gameplay. Since then, I have dabbled in a randomizer for numerous *Castlevania* titles, *Super Metroid, Fire Emblem, Ocarina of Time*, and *Final Fantasy* (4, 5, 6). Each new mod only dug me deeper into the randomizer hole.

When I talk to other people immersed in the randomizer scene, my introduction via Twitch seems far from rare. While a few stumbled on the concept via random Internet searches, most seem to have come across the community in the past year or two by watching livestreams. Those range from smaller streamers and large-scale charity streaming events such as Awesome Games Done Quick, RPG Limit Break, and the recently held Questing For Glory 3 speedrun event just a few weeks back. And with the upcoming Awesome Games Done Quick 2020 scheduled to feature both the *LttP* and *Mario 64* randomizers, a whole new group of watchers will be introduced to these mods.

- One of the most popular randomizers streamed today is the fantastic "Free Enterprise" for *Final Fantasy IV*. Starting off with two random characters, an item, and

the airship, you set off on an open-world scavenger hunt to track down the items you need to venture to the moon and defeat Zeromus!
- October's SpeedGaming Live event proved that there could be a potential future in racing randomizers as an esport.
- Daily "*Link to the Past* Rando" races are a familiar site on the various SpeedGaming Twitch channels, with hundreds of viewers watching at a time.

Some of the most popular randomizers—including *Super Metroid, Zelda*, and the open-world *Final Fantasy IV* randomizer—have achieved their popularity in large part thanks to the embrace of the speedrunning community. *Final Fantasy IV: Free Enterprise* is one such randomizer. First released back in 2018, *Free Enterprise* allows players to break from the strict narrative structure of the original title to take part in an open-world scavenger hunt, searching for the items that will eventually send you to take on the game's final boss. A month after the mod's release, *Free Enterprise*'s Discord server had more users than the one devoted to speedrunning the original *Final Fantasy IV*. One year after its release, the game was featured in Awesome Games Done Quick 2019, the largest video game charity event on the planet.

Tournaments and races have become a staple of the randomizer community, with larger events being hosted by a number of organizers, including Challonge, SpeedRunsLive, and SpeedGaming. Back in fall 2017, the organizers of the *LttP Rando* tournament found demand for their event to be far higher than they anticipated. After their initial 100-competitor cap was filled, they had to set up a 150-person overflow tournament just to satisfy demand. By spring 2018, the same tournament had 512 registered players and likely would have accepted more if the seeding software could support it.

Today, if you stop by SpeedRunsLive, you can expect to see multiple randomizer races going on at any given time, with

their largest organized *LttP Randomizer* tournaments bringing in over 100 players. Daily *LttP* races on SpeedGaming attract hundreds of viewers regularly, and the annual SpeedGaming Live event featured randomizer tournaments for the first time in October with a prize pool of $3,000.

These numbers aren't going to give esports behemoths like *Fortnite* or *League of Legends* reason to fear, but they at least show the potential for the concept to grow one day from a niche to a potentially lucrative spectator sport.

Audience numbers aside, players, developers, event organizers, and viewers I talked to all agree that this growing class of mods has breathed new life into familiar older titles. The newfound ability to replay an old game and get a new adventure each time recreates that sense of wonder and discovery that we got the first time we popped in the original cartridge or disc.

Nostalgia is a powerful thing, and while randomizers will never fully replace the core experiences with these games we love, they can make them feel fresh and new time and time again.

A special thanks to everyone in the SpeedGaming, RPG Limit Break, Free Enterprise, and LttP Rando communities who were kind enough to answer my questions and share with me their experiences and expertise.

Listing image by Nintendo

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1627227