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## Pokemon Unbound: The Very Best ROM hack

by Shawn Wilkins | Aug 31, 2024 | Features | 0 comments



Pokémon Unbound is regarded as one of the best ROM hacks currently available for the entire Pokemon franchise. It has a new original story, new region, custom assets, redesigned UX, and a ton of other quality-of-life features that set it apart from all of its peers.

The game itself is still a Pokemon game at its heart, but what it does well, it does exceptionally well. The game feels like a love letter written by a fan who so desperately wanted the GBA generation games to evolve, as opposed to being sacrificed for the sake of 3D. And I'd argue that it may very well be the best Pokemon game I have ever played.



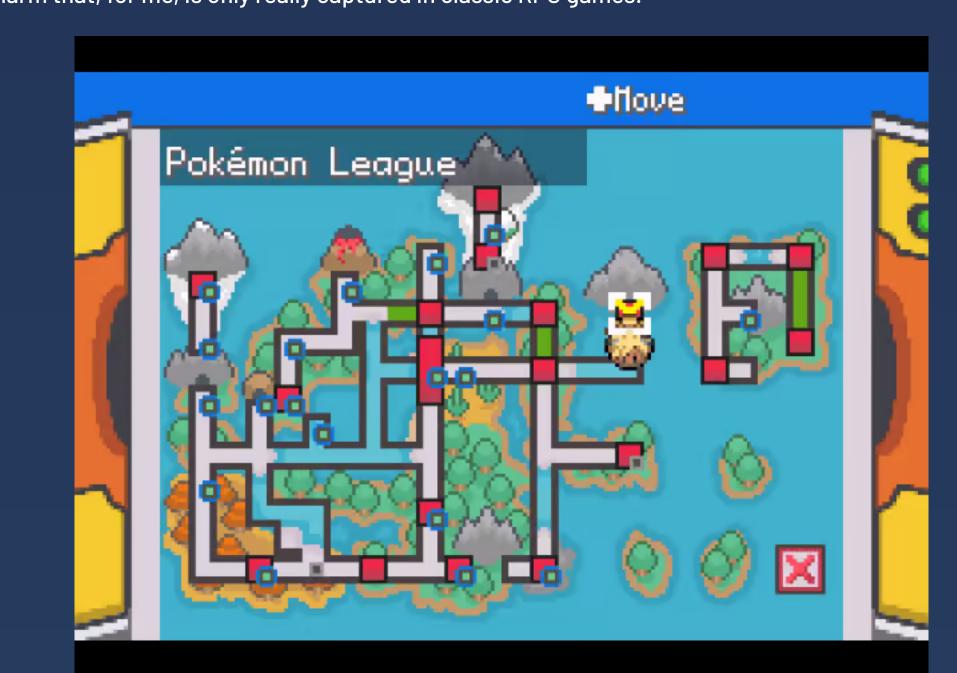
It's so ludicrously packed content that it separates itself entirely from other ROM hacks that come before it. It manages to capture the charm of Pokemon, while still adding a layer of maturity to the series as we know it. It's still Pokemon, so it still verges on that edge of corny and childish, but it puts it in a package that seems geared for older, more mature audiences that remember enjoying the games as children. It's not an adult-themed, highoctane version of Pokemon, it's a version of Pokemon that tugs at nostalgia's coattails with every passing moment.

Even when looking at its development when broken into separate bits, it goes above and beyond. Skeli, the developer, has set up custom special distribution Pokemon, which you can obtain by talking to an NPC and giving them a password. He's set up a website to help people manage their Pokemon boxes outside of their save files ingame. It's a next-level commitment to creating an all-inclusive package, but it doesn't falter on anything it intends to accomplish. It does it all exceptionally well.

### POKEMON UNBOUND

## The Story: Creative, Unique

Pokemon Unbound is centered around a wholly new region, Borrius, after a war with the region from Pokemon X & Y, Kalos. Events unfold and, as with all Pokemon games, you are thrust into the middle of world-saving responsibilities due to your desire to become a Pokemon champion. You'll find your character dealing with people who share their grief openly, others in anguish, and the ever-popular RPG plot of momentary betrayal. It's a standard fair of emotions running through the veins of this game's story, but those same standards are what bring me back to RPGs on the GBA. A game is "not too serious" and meeting the intersection "insanely corny" creates a mix of charm that, for me, is only really captured in classic RPG games.



Town Map

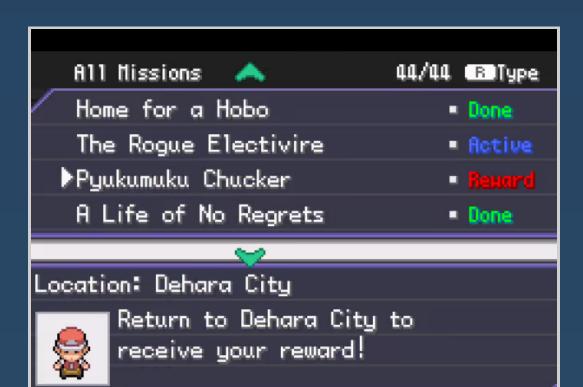
The story of the game increases in severity as you gain gym badges and progress — like every Pokemon game. The story starts off by introducing you to cartoonish characters with mildly humorous personalities, some a bit more childish than others. As you learn more about each character and the world they've devised for themselves, you get to understand the multifaceted nature of ambition and self-identified altruism. It sounds almost too robust for a fan-made romhack of a Pokemon game, but as more new additions and changes were exposed to me, the less surprised I was by the aspirations the game clearly set forth.

The creative spins within the story elevate Unbound into a realm of ROM hack that I haven't seen explored before. Years prior, Pokemon romhacks could be summed up as difficulty patches or games struggling to break the mold of the game their based on. Unbound adds innovative changes, quality of-life improvements, and additional features that augment the gameplay experience to being more than simply filled by nostalgia.

#### New Features: Teach An Old Poke New Tricks

One of my favorite features of the game is the Mission Log. Throughout the game, you meet various NPCs that sometimes have interesting requests they'd like you to help them complete. Sometimes it can be something as simple as jumping over a set number of rod ledges to figuring out the secret behind mysterious slabs appearing around the region. In battles, my most used new features are pressing L to use the last thrown ball, or pressing R to immediately run away. Small additions like this smooth out gameplay and take out the tediousness of traversing the UX in earlier titles.

The Mission Log is a single addition, but it does so much to improve how your average person would probably pay Pokemon were it released today. You can see each entry, if it's complete, where the quest is currently located, and if you've completed it but have yet to collect the reward. It makes it easy to keep up to date with the main quest line as well, always updating as you complete every small bit of it. It's as if the game has its own specific, noninvasive trophy or achievement system.





The Mission Log

Inside of all of this is time little minute features we've seen in previous entries — but nothing like this. The game features daily events, some even hourly or momentarily. There are certain quests that require you to visit areas either during the day or at night. There are raid dens you can find hidden throughout the game that give you an opportunity to catch a stronger version of a Pokemon found in the wild. And it's all mandated by the time set in-

game; it's impressive. Smaller features and quality-of-life improvements are the major standouts in Unbound. Getting new items shows you what the item does as you receive it, your character automatically runs, you automatically turn around when you finish healing in a PokeCenter, you can register multiple items, you can carry infinite items, and through the game's settings, you can adjust how EXP share works. Changes like this to the overall UX of what we know is a

Pokemon game to capitalize on the innovations made possible by the Complete FireRed Upgrade engine. More modern games feature New Game+, a way for players to relive the game wither sometimes stronger opponents, some gimmick attached, or simply to replay with the same characters. In Unbound, it's so much more. Your team carries over, certain key items, new NPCs to alter IVs and EVs (Pokemon nerd stats), and legendaries can be found before the post-game on your second playthrough. It's, again, above and far beyond any

## expectations I had for a rom hack. Design & Style: Almost Edible

The designs in this game are a cut above the rest, too. The characters can be customized by hair and skin color, even the color of the jacket and its trim. It uses 2D sprites for Pokemon up to Sun & Moon. The towns all carry direct themes that inspire their map and design. Crater City is filled with craters from meteor strikes. Redwood

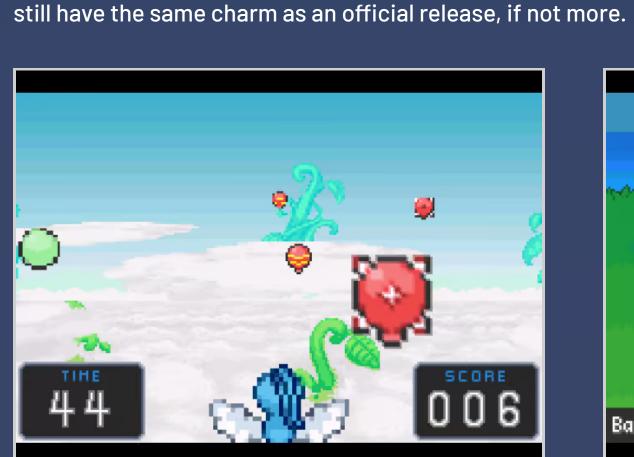






Frozen Heights Crater Town Redwood Village

In between the game's art style, there are some new mini-games tossed in that further illustrate the commitment Skeli put into the game's development. Cloud Burst is a game that sees you soaring around trying to avoid certain balloons while popping others. The Safari Zone as you know it is no more; replaced with a game that seems heavily inspired by Pokemon Pinball. It's astounding the amount of changes a game can have packed into it, yet



Cloud Burst



Exploring the Borrius region alone feels like a digital artscape crawling with personality at every corner. It feels as if you're traversing around the world, visiting places thriving during their best season. Little design quirks and the moments therein cement the devotion to the game's appearance alone but also showcase the amount of work

#### that went into making an extravagant game that flows from town to town while keeping you interested. In Closing

Pokémon Unbound is a game almost specifically crafted for fans who were once attached to Pokemon but fell off somewhere along the way. The group that clings to the old pixel designs of the GBA era, but may have bled into the DS games and wanted the franchise to mature along with it. Unbound delivers a game that is not only enjoyable to play but can have you yearning for more with every new story advancement. It's clear when playing the game that it doesn't aim to be a better version of a pre-existing game, it strives to be the best in class and remain that way. Having released in 2020, it's surprising that it still stands alone, in a class of its own.

This game has grown to become one of my favorite gaming experiences in a long time. There are games nestled within the folds of my brain solely because I can remember staring at the screen and losing track of time, hours passing by. There are some, like Pokemon Sapphire, that had me struggling to get every Pokemon in the Pokédex at the same time as my friends, knowing we would at one point trade each other to get whatever we thought was cool at the time. There's Mother 3, a game that grabbed my attention through its powerful story, heartwrenching moments, and how it tackles the concept of grief and abandonment all while having the most gorgeous pixel art.



Prof. Log congratulating me

Unbound feels like a blend of all of those specific feelings. A story-driven game that looks almost edible, paired with the collect-athon nature of catching Pokemon. It scratches the itch for a classic entry in the Pokemon series, while also introducing new features that make it feel modern and exciting. There's a reason Pokemon Unbound is almost unanimously agreed upon as the best ROM hack, but it should be known: it's not just a good ROM hack, it may be in the best gaming experiences you'll have.

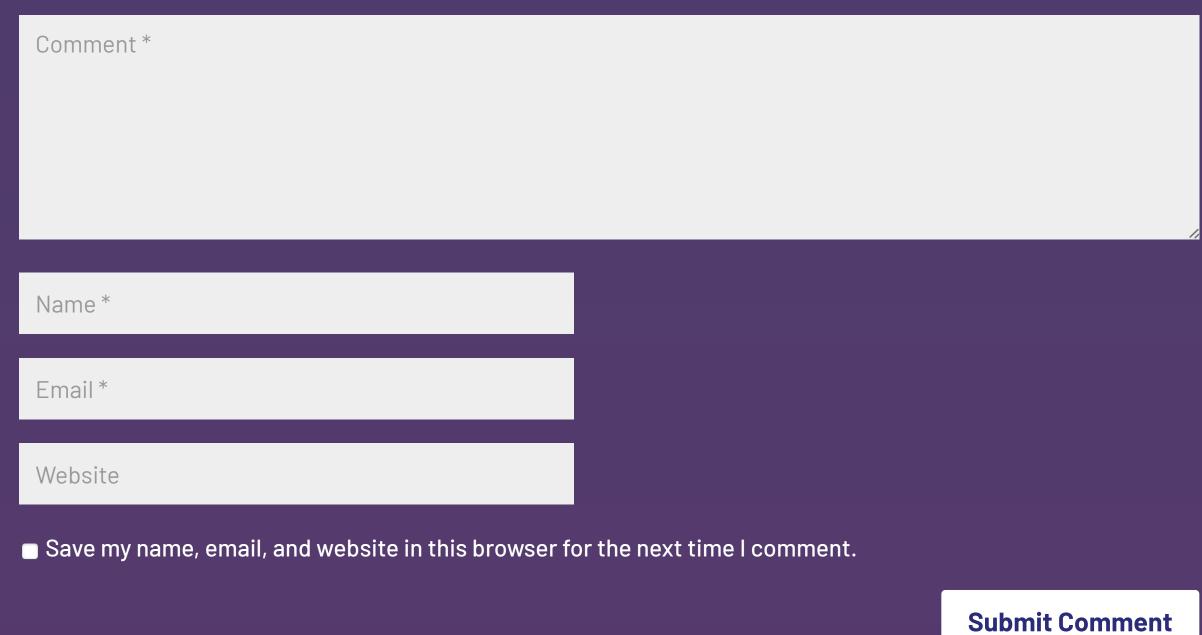
**POKEMON UNBOUND** 

Are you going to check out Pokemon Unbound? Are you interested in other hacks like it? Let us know in the comments below, and chat with us in our Discord!

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