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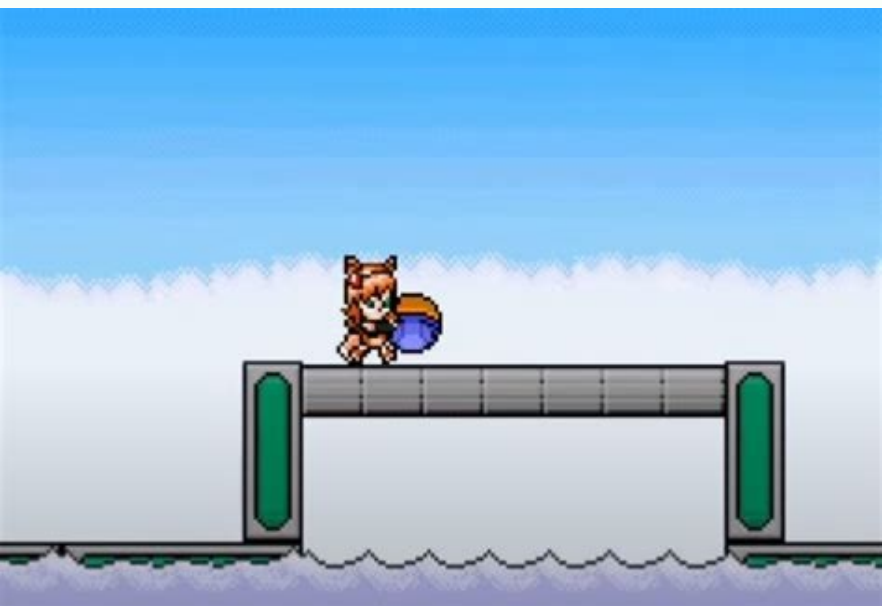


Image: Nintendo Trolls are the most recognizable element of ultra-hard Mario hacks and levels, known as kaizo. A simple, unexpected obstacle is not only funny but also creates that special sauce that makes kaizo so fun to watch. But not all trolls are created equally, and many creators use different interpretations of the concept to subvert players' expectations. A subgenre under the broader umbrella of ROM hacking, kaizo hacks emphasize precision and mastery in a way that's much more difficult than normal Mario platformers. These user-created games are also known for containing an abundance of trolls. Some particularly devilish or clever levels are even designed to exploit the player's knowledge of the genre and its conventions. Here are six hacks from the past couple of years that show how far creators have taken the concept of the "kaizo troll." Super Hark Bros. 2: The kaizo non-block Super Hark Bros. 2 continues in the classic tradition of the first installment, which was a creative display that never got too difficult for the player. More importantly, it includes some wonderfully playful trolls. Take the game's interpretation of kaizo blocks as an example. The most classic example of a kaizo troll is set up like this: You're jumping over a pit, but midway through the jump you bonk your head on a block that wasn't there before, sending you to your death. Not all invisible blocks in kaizo hacks are truly invisible, though. When creators want you to know where an invisible block is, they'll put an outline around it. That way, you can have enough information to complete the obstacle. Super Hark Bros. 2 by ChrisG__ subverts these two design flourishes by introducing a fake outline in a level late in the game. That way, when the player jumps to hit the supposed block, they'll go right through, launching them into the lava below. This is actually a reference to a troll in the first Super Hark Bros. "My philosophy is to have a laugh, but I also want the player to have a laugh," Chris says. "I try to make my trolls avoidable, so the player ends up trolling themselves most of the time. Obviously, if you look back at my older level design that wasn't always the case, but I think it's much funnier if you make the player do something to themselves that could have been avoided." Riff World 2: The exit that isn't Riff World 2 is the hyped sequel to Riff World, a hack with complex level design and emphasis on speed. In it, players encounter smaller optional levels that can unlock more of the game once they're all completed. These types of levels are called "switch palaces" in Super Mario World, but there's a great deal more going on in hacked versions of the concept. Typically, level designers give players a silly nod at the end of these short but challenging levels. But since the player expects something near the end of the level — and they're probably blazing through the course — that gives the hack creator ammo to mess with their victims. Near the end of a course in Riff World 2 that requires you to escort a key, you'll find the big switch with three keyholes on top of it. Most players will try jumping on the switch, probably without thinking — it's the only thing at the end of this tunnel. But when Mario's jump hits those floating keyholes, the plumber will suddenly open an attached door. The level designer hid an invisible key that Mario only carries for a split second. Before the player knows it, they're tossed out of the level without hitting the switch. "When they see the pit at the end and the switch with the keyholes above it they feel safe cause they've already bypassed what they think is the troll, and the best way to subvert that is to suddenly put a key they didn't want into their hands with barely enough time to react," says Freakin HA, creator of the Riff World games. For the creator of the hack, the comedy relies on the player's folly. "You want the player to feel like it was on them to some degree." That's why telegraphing the upcoming fake-out is key. "Something I feel like a lot of people don't get when they make a troll is you WANT it to look fishy, or maybe you WANT them to think something is up, and then you throw the twist at them. It's about subverting expectations in a way that they feel sort of included in, they could have considered X but didn't, so it's funny." The blast from the past, Grand Poo World 2 One of the hardest kaizo hacks out there, Grand Poo World 2 is often considered the Mount Everest of Super Mario games. Despite the challenge, Grand Poo World 2 is a tight collection of levels that kick your butt, sometimes via trolls. One of the most infamous trolls in Barbarous King's Grand Poo World 2 preys on players who hunt for secrets. While pipes are expected to contain secrets by nearly everyone, there's usually an assumption that exiting a pipe will lead you back to where you began, if they allow you to go anywhere at all. But what if the exit pipe also acted as a separate entrance for yet another Easter egg? Barb took this concept and hid the entirety of a level in the original Grand Poo World, Widow's Peak, inside the sequel. Dying in this level kicks you back to the midpoint, but more hilarious is the fact that beating this level unceremoniously dumps you back to the title screen. Encouraging you to go back through the pipe is the fake switch in this room, which is actually a disguised pipe you're supposed to go down. "The hidden Widow's Peak in Poo's Laughter House is a more elaborate in-joke for people who played Grand Poo World 1," says Barbarous King, creator of the hack. "When adding that in, I expected maybe one or two players to try to overcome Widow's Peak. Most players should know there that I would never make them complete the entirety of Widow's Peak to advance, so going down that path is knowingly diving into a dead-end of madness just to see what lay at the end. "Those poor souls deserved their reward of being returned to the title screen by a fake switch. Believe it or not, there were players who figured out exactly what to do at the end of Poo's Laughter House without ever having to die to one of the many sneaky pitfalls at the end." Hyperion: The tribute Hyperion is a visual stunner Mario hack with a world map that's structurally more open-ended than anything you'll find in Super Mario World. It's also kinder than most kaizo hacks. Actually, the more familiar you are with kaizo hacks, the more that knowledge can work against you in Hyperion. Known as anti-trolls, these are funny fake-outs that don't actually cost progress for the player but mess with seasoned pros in hilarious ways. Hyperion harbors an anti-troll just past the clear orb of one of the ice levels. Going into a pipe there will bring you to a screen that is identical to one from My Little Puzzles, a series of hacks that are infamous in the kaizo community for being extremely difficult. At first, this seems like a troll on the scale of Barb's Widow's Peak Easter egg in Grand Poo World 2, but progressing a bit more into the room shows that this isn't the case. As you progress, the level becomes a touching tribute to shoda, a beloved kaizo streamer and hack creator. "I do think trolls can be done in a funny way that isn't completely mean and degrading and there is still a place for them in the genre, but rarely are they designed in such a way that you can avoid or predict them without knowledge or experience of the 'troll lexicon'," explains hack creator Amper. Still, specific callbacks to moments that resonate with the community are fair game. Amper wanted to "take advantage of the memory of a bad time in My Little Puzzles to make folks think they made a mistake walking in the wrong door." It's completely harmless if you aren't familiar with the individual parts and conventions, but hilarious and even touching if you are. Sayonara Mario World: The bottomless pit trick A tribute to the rhythm-action game Sayonara Wild Hearts, SuperMargot's Sayonara Mario World broadens the notion of what a Mario game can be. This lofty goal is achieved by employing a handful of custom mechanics, along with a handful of kind trolls. But to explain the trick, we first have to understand a mechanic in the original game. Super Mario World has an odd quirk where if Mario has already grabbed a goal tape or orb and then falls into a pit while the end-of-level fanfare plays, the game doesn't count it as a clear. If the game counts up your bonus score while Mario is doing his walking animation, Mario dies and the player is thrown to the last available checkpoint. Creators often use this quirk to troll players who are overeager to end the level and grab the end goal without careful consideration. What Margot does is flip this trope, setting the trap for those who do know to be careful for end trolls, faking them out in the process. At the end of the Circular Logic, another screen-wrap level, there's an end orb that is perched above a pit. Except, when the player touches the orb, the player is then dumped into a pit. The screen wrapping in this level causes the bottom border of the screen and the top border to loop, so when you fall into a pit, you start falling from the sky. So while you don't die, Mario will then keep vaulting up and down, over and over again, until the end-of-level fanfare stops and you unlock the next stage. "You have to screen wrap to hit it, but you literally cannot die in the room," explains Margot. "To me, the best trolls are ones that challenge the player's assumptions or give them a quick scare that they can still react to if they're on their game," says Margot. She designs her trolls to all "have the same premise of defying the player's expectations and putting the onus of success on the player, but they all also are very readable/doable and they don't jump out as immediate fuckyous, which I think is really the crucial thing that makes a good troll good versus a bad troll." Invictus: The fake pipe Invictus by Juzook is one of the most popular kaizo hacks out now. With its emphasis on tough but reasonable levels and novel concepts, Invictus is often hailed as a good intermediate hack that you play if you have enough foundational experience. The hack has a lot of mean trolls, but its best one puts a purely psychological barrier between you and the end of a grueling level. Cemetery Bloom is the requisite ghost-themed level, complete with a ton of boo rings and fake-outs. The best happens right before the end of the level, though. When you go through the door that leads to the exit, you see the goal tape right in front of you. But there's also a pipe right before it. Now, it's customary to tempt the player with a secret or a clever curveball that might make the setup more than meets the eye. What ends up happening here is that the player will wonder if you're supposed to go down the pipe to get to the real end of the level or if it's a trap that will lose your progress. It might even be a secret screen designed to shout out a specific creator. It turns out that none of those are correct, and the pipe is entirely illusory. When you try to jump on it, you go right through it. The troll here is entirely psychological as the player is invited to overanalyze the situation and agonize over what the right choice is when there's no choice at all.

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