



MARIO + RABBIDS SPARKS OF HOPE

Refining the formula

In 2017, *Mario + Rabbids Kingdom Battle* proved naysayers wrong by offering a well-crafted tactics game that successfully blended two very disparate franchises. Its sequel, *Sparks of Hope*, now must live up to fan excitement rather than dispel their doubt. Ubisoft Milan accomplishes this feat by returning to the drawing board, reworking its template, and creating a more streamlined, dynamic experience that maintains strategic depth. The core combat remains strong, but Ubisoft fleshed out the rest of the offerings to create a more wholly engaging package.

Sparks of Hope plays identically to the last game; you engage in tactical turn-based battles as a squad of Mario icons and their Rabbid doppelgängers. However, the grid-based movement is gone. Instead, you freely move your three-member team as you would in a standard third-person game. The game still restricts you to a character's movement range, but positioning feels more natural and kinetic, expanding your offensive flexibility. I love how the looser framework allows me to squeeze more actions from a turn, and combat feels more exciting as a result.

The colorful stages sometimes incorporate real-time elements that put this freedom to good use. One winter stage features timed wind gusts that blow players off the course. I avoid this by simply running past at the right times rather than adhering to a rigid turn order. *Sparks of Hope* also mixes up its objectives often enough to keep the action from getting too stagnant. I enjoy battling a giant rampaging Wiggler aboard a moving train or shattering dams with bombs to restore a region's water flow.

Sparks of Hope offers enough challenge that poor planning can lead to a punishing team wipe. This time, however, you have the help of Sparks: hybrids of Rabbids and Super Mario Galaxy's Lumas. Equipping these critters to heroes bestows a wide range of powers and perks, such as adding elemental traits to their attacks (like fire and ice). Other Sparks disrupt enemy formations by repelling or attracting foes. One of my favorites temporarily renders a character invisible.

Since each hero can carry two Sparks, they feel more versatile as individuals resulting in more well-rounded teams. I appreciate how enemy vulnerabilities forced me to constantly switch Sparks and prevent me from sticking with the same loadout or team out of complacency. It's also great that party building allows for any combination of heroes, ditching *Kingdom Battle*'s restriction of only using Mario and at least one Rabbid. Since heroes have inherent specialties - Luigi is a long-ranged sniper, Rabbid Peach serves as a healer, and Rabbid Mario does up-close physical damage, for example -

assembling squads feels more interesting since I can mix things up better. The three newcomers, Bowser, Rabbid Rosalina, and Edge, a mysterious tough-as-nails Rabbid, are also good additions.

Expanded overworld exploration adds more engagement outside the battlefield. Multiple themed planets, such as a tropical beach or a mechanic's junkyard, are packed with sidequests, puzzles, and secrets. You're free to mainline the sizable critical path, and you'll largely remain appropriately leveled. But if you do, you miss out on earning planet coins (native currency unlocking special keys, weapon skins, and more), useful combat items like POW blocks, and more Sparks. Tasks include helping a DJ find his missing records or solving a series of entertaining riddles for an enthusiastic explorer. These missions aren't the deepest, and I wish some had more variety; expect to fulfill the same "kill X-amount of X-enemy type" task on each world. But they're enjoyable enough and can be welcome breaks from constant battling.

Upgrading Beep-0 with new abilities to unlock inaccessible areas give worlds a nice, light *Metroid* feel. I acquired a sonic pulse to shatter weak walls and move blocks and a special light that exposes invisible paths and treasures. Solving environmental puzzles is also fun, offering adequate challenges without feeling tedious.

A charming though uneventful narrative about stopping a cosmic darkness from consuming the galaxy rounds out this delightful package. Like the best sequels, *Mario + Rabbids Sparks of Hope* builds upon *Kingdom Battle*'s foundation with smart tweaks and fun additions to emerge as a better game in every way. BY MARCUS STEWART

9

PLATFORM Switch STYLE 1-Player Strategy
PUBLISHER Ubisoft DEVELOPER Ubisoft Milan,
Ubisoft Paris RELEASE October 20 RATING E10+

GAMEINFORMER



STREET FIGHTER 6