

SUPER MARIO KART

GENRE(S): Racing

AVAILABLE ON: SNES

DEVELOPED BY: Nintendo

PUBLISHED BY: Nintendo

RELEASED: August 27, 1992

Super Mario Kart is credited as the one game which truly allowed the Mario universe to expand beyond its beginnings. The idea of such a strange excursion into the racing genre is credited to the release of the SNES itself; *Super Mario World* and *F-Zero* were released on the same day as the two launch titles for the Super Nintendo. What they were going for with *Super Mario Kart*, was a combination of the two; to improve on *F-Zero*'s impressive Mode 7-fueled visual template and offer a more rewarding and competitive gameplay experience, with familiar characters to appeal to all ages. Over ten *Mario Kart* titles later – one for almost every subsequent Nintendo system – I think it's needless to say how well they succeeded. Many fans and critics still consider the very original game the best in the series, but since we're doing a long stretch of the same core game through different eras, let's be a bit more honest and focus more on what was great about it, what's still great about it, and strong details that could not be replicated in the future. Don't get me wrong, it's still a decent game, and you can easily tell your kids they know nothing about *Mario Kart* until they've tried the hard one.

Although *F-Zero* was received as a technological wonder when it came out under two years before *Super Mario Kart*, the wasted potential of Mode 7 presents itself right away. *Super Mario Kart* looks as good as a game of its type could in the early 90's. It's rough, but it's colourful and comfortable, and through that, still relatively easy on the eyes. Apart from the new *Mario Kart* theme song, and a couple of oddities, the soundtrack comprises of classic Mario tunes tweaked with a different feel more in touch with the road. It's good.

Now that we have reached the consensus that there's nothing wrong with how the game looks and sounds, let's go to the game, which has seen better days if I'm being honest. To be completely honest, I've never been into racing games. They're something that have been a part of my whole life, through my brother mostly, but I've never been a fan. *Mario Kart* is an exception, but it's actually the next game in the series that I have spent the most time with.

How could I not like it? It's a Mario game. We have an all-star cavalcade of eight drivers familiar from the Mario universe to choose from: Mario, Luigi, Toad, Princess Toadstool, Koopa Troopa, Donkey Kong Jr. (the original, of course), Yoshi, and last, *definitely* not least, Bowser. I always use Bowser, no exceptions. This was the very first time Bowser appeared as a playable character in any game, and what the hell can I say? It's awesome. Bowser rules. All of the drivers have their own weight class, which has some effect on their performance regarding mobility. The two heavyweights, my man Bowser and Junior, are the toughest drivers to handle, but they're also moderately tough to beat once they take the lead and gather enough momentum. Don't despair, though: one of the core draws of *Mario Kart* since these times is that you don't have to win every single race to win the game. All you need is to make it to the Top 4, and at the end of each tournament, all your points are tallied up and that's how the winner is determined. This sure as hell isn't *CTR*. And *CTR* sure as hell isn't *Super Mario Kart*.

There are two single-player modes: the Grand Prix and the Time Trial. Although the craziest fans have dedicated whole websites to the original game's Time Trial all the way up to date, Mario Kart GP is the main dish as far as I'm concerned; you choose between 50 and 100 cc (difficulty levels), and race against all the other drivers in three different cups, plus one special cup, which of course unlocks after you have won the first three. After you've beaten the special cup at 100 cc, a new difficulty level is unlocked: 150 cc. The courses become trickier as you progress, with elements from the main series slowly seeping into the fray, such as an early lava level with a happy family of Thwomps ready to mangle you at every badly timed pass.

Two players also get Match Race and Battle Mode. The first is just you and your friend battling it out in a head-to-head race, and Battle Mode, which as a concept is arguably the greatest fun in the history of *Mario Kart* – to someone who isn't a fan of racing games – an all-out "deathmatch" in one of four different mazes designed exclusively for this game mode. I'll be sure to return to this later in another review.

What makes the race interesting, and such a Battle Mode possible, and finally, *Mario Kart* so famous, is that you have a variety of power-ups and outright weapons at your disposal to benefit yourself and sabotage the other drivers. All of these are just as well connected to the Mario franchise and have their own unique effects which more or less mirror those they're associated with. For example, Starman makes you invincible and enables you to just plow through the other drivers unharmed, while they become dazed for a while. Different types of Koopa shells can be used as projectiles, and a Mushroom gives you a speed boost. Coins are collected to slightly raise your top speed and your kart's durability.

The first game was the unlucky one, since apart from its first handheld iterations, it's the only one with purely digital control. As we've had analog control in all racing games since 1997, including the very next *Mario Kart* title which came out even earlier, digital control just feels coarse, crude and utterly impractical. The Nintendo Switch has a workaround in its analog control, but there we have the problem of oversensitivity. The game wasn't made to receive analog input, and it shows.

...And now for the final break. The single-player game really isn't as difficult as its special stipulations would have us believe, and the A.I. is way too average to provide any lasting fun after all these years and iterations. This game is at its best, and sadly, its only truly playable form, in multiplayer – assuming you're not a Time Trial enthusiast, which changes everything for you. It's a good game, a fun way to pass varying amounts of time, I'll give it all that, but it's clumsy and lacks substance. It has practically been remade ten times, and each time, it may not have become better, but more fun to play. That's just the way it is.

7.8