Crimzon Clover/Crimzon Clover WORLD IGNITION – PC (2011), Arcade (2013), Steam, GOG (2014)

Indie/doujin bullet hell shoot-em-ups are dime a dozen nowadays, but few are as good or as fun to the average shmup fan as CAVE, Raizing and Psikyio’s best works [LINKS TO ARTICLES]. There’s something about these games that make even the thickest of bullet patterns or the hardest of True Last Boss fights fun to blaze through even for an unskilled player, and which many of their imitators lack. Many hardcore fans of the genre once considered the arcade to be the only acceptable home for games of this kind, but around 2011 came a game which changed the minds of many of these people. That game was Crimzon Clover. Crimzon Clover [i]rocks[/i].

Crimzon Clover looks, sounds and plays like a hidden gem from CAVE’s early years (before they began putting moe characters and overly complex scoring mechanics in their games), with a few of the Ray series’ [LINK TO ARTICLE] mechanics peppered in for good measure. The player begins each playthrough by choosing a difficulty setting, a mode (more on those later) and one of the three ships types, with the only difference between them being their shot width and speed - Type I has average shot width and low speed, Type II has variable shot width due to the inclusion of Gradius-esque Options [LINK TO ARTICLE] and average speed, Type III has minimum shot width and high speed and the unlockable Type Z strikes an ideal balance between the two stats, thus making it the ship of choice for those who dare tackle the game’s highest difficulty levels. Crimzon Clover’s gameplay is based around a lock-on shot which works similarly to the one featured in RayStorm and RayCrisis (bonus multipliers and all) and the BREAK system, the latter of which acts both as the game’s main scoring mechanic and as a bomb stock. By damaging and destroying enemies, cancelling their on-screen bullets and collecting the star items they drop, you fill up your BREAK gauge, which can be used to either trigger the BREAK and DOUBLE BREAK modes – which double and quadruple both your firepower and your scoring potential, respectively – or to set off a screen-clearing bomb, which unlike the ones in most danmaku shoot-em-ups, can also convert on-screen shots into star items.

The way this system works, plus the lack of a Rank counter in the most game modes, may lead first-time players to believe that reckless bombing is allowed – maybe even [i]encouraged[/i] - in Crimzon Clover, but there’s a big catch to it: the gauge requirement for setting off a bomb grows each time one is used, being very low at the beginning of a playthrough and rapidly growing to a full [b]two thirds[/b] of meter if the player doesn’t pay attention. This makes bombing essential to survival only in Boost Mode, an upgraded version of the original release’s Simple Mode included in all of WORLD IGNITION’s releases. While Simple Mode replaced the BREAK system from Original, Unlimited (hard) and Time Attack modes with a Rank counter that rewards players for putting their skills to the test, Boost Mode reworks it by making BREAK duration the Rank counter, which means that the longer you survive in BREAK Mode (which is now triggered automatically by reaching max gauge), the harder the game will get, with the only ways to lower your rank being bombing or losing a life; doing either will kick you out of BREAK mode, thus lowering the difficulty level but also taking away the boosts in score and firepower it gives you. Despite all of these little intricacies, Crimzon Clover is, as a whole, surprisingly beginner-friendly, especially due to the inclusion of a Novice difficulty setting, which limits your choice of game modes but offers a level of challenge ideal for newbies in the genre and/or for those more used to older, slower-paced shooters.

Crimzon Clover’s presentation, much like its gameplay, feels like it was ripped directly from the early days of bullet hell shooters, with the graphics’ pixellated, pre-rendered look and the large, colorful bullets going along surprisingly well with the rich synth score composed by doujin composer potechi. It’s only on later stages, however, that the game’s graphical style truly shines, with all sorts of transparency and parallax scrolling effects being cleverly used to pull off some incredible visuals – Stage 3, a massive underground cave/forest filled to the brim with hordes of spiderlike robots and huge flowers that bloom as you fly over them truly feels like a living, breathing world filled with mysteries to uncover, while Stage 4’s high-flying raid over a faraway metropolis is clearly inspired by Compile’s Genesis classic M.U.S.H.A. and its fast and furious setpiece-based action, with a dash of RayForce’s incredible graphics and visual storytelling thrown in into the mix. It’s clear that the game has pretty high production values for a doujin title, and its soundtrack is no exception, being a large collection of high-quality synth-rock and electronica pieces which fits the game perfectly (the boss themes in particular are fantastic, and only get more rocking as you advance in the game). And if the standard soundtracks for Original and Unlimited modes weren’t enough, the Steam and GOG releases also offer a brand-new alternative soundtrack as DLC, which despite sounding like something mid-90s ZUNTATA would compose, isn’t anywhere as good (or as fitting) as the original.

Crimzon Clover is probably one of the best doujin/indie shoot-em-ups out there, its gameplay, aesthetics and general feel being on par with genre classics that even modern masterpieces such as Ether Vapor and the ALLTYNEX Trilogy [LINKS TO ARTICLES] fail to imitate. The original release’s excellent sales at Comiket 79 and later arcade port - released through Taito’s NESiCAxLive digital distribution service, which allows arcade operators who own cabinets powered by the company’s TYPE-X family of boards to download games for their customers’ enjoyment, instead of having to switch ROMs/discs every time he or she wishes to change or update the games being displayed at the establishment, and which has allowed many smaller developers to break into the modern arcade scene due to its low cost of admission – serve as proof of its success, but it was only after the upgraded version (subtitled WORLD IGNITION) was released in 2014 that the game reached Western shores through Steam and GOG. WORLD IGNITION was originally released as an update to the arcade original, and changes several of the game’s aspects to make it more suited for this new environment: Continues are unlimited (as long as the player has credits to spare, of course), scoring potential is now cranked up to eleven, Boost Mode is included instead of Simple Mode, the Type III ship is introduced and all of the PC original’s extras unlockable through in-game currency – such as more credits and the Type Z ship – are now either built into the game by default or unlockable through playtime. The TYPE-X family’s hardware is (mostly) based off low-to-mid-range gaming PCs, and so the Steam and GOG releases are direct ports of that version that run smoothly on any modern computer. The only additions to it are the alternate soundtrack and Superplay DLCs, which are both cheap and completely optional.