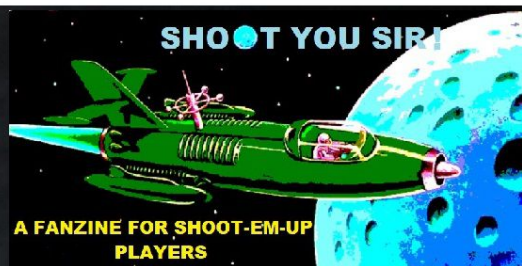




Merry Christmas from Graham and Sly



A FANZINE FOR SHOOT-EM-UP PLAYERS

Issue 37

December 2023

Hi there and welcome to the last issue of 2023. It's been a good year for shmup fans and 2024 looks to have just as much fun lined up. We look at the old and new in issue 37. The old being a very early 21st century arcade blaster, Progear. And the new is the much awaited, December release, Valfaris Mecha Therion. We hope you enjoy these and look forward to more shooter fun in the new year.

Happy gaming.

SHOOTER NEWS

The Legend of Steel Empire

I remember playing Steel Empire on Sega's Megadrive, way back in the early 1990s. I loved that futuristic-retro design then and now. Much used, in our love of all things Steam Punk, it is a style made for old school 2D shoot-em-ups.



Well, it is coming to the Nintendo Switch in January 2024 and a bit later on the PS4. This new version will be an HD remaster.



Based on the PC version, this will get additional features, that will include revamped controls, high-def visuals, plus a leveling system that boosts both your strength and the enemy's resilience, depending on how many and which items you gather up. There will be both physical and digital version available. Can't wait.





PROGEAR Game Review By Graham Pike

I remember seeing this shooter in the arcades, back at the beginning of the 2000s and wishing it would get a home console release. Well, it took about 20 years but it finally made it onto the Nintendo Switch, as part of Capcom's Arcade Stadium release. And in my view, this game alone made the whole compilation a bargain, let alone a host of other neat shooters within

the game's vast collection.

Originally hitting the arcades in 2001, this is a large sprite, 2D horizontal shooter, developed by Cave and published by Capcom. This game was a pre-cursor to the mighty Akai Katana. And even though it cannot compete with its successor, in any sense, it was still a very impressive game on its release and still is, in my opinion.

And you will find, when you start playing this game, that this is definitely a Cave game and although they are far better known for their vertical shooters, this bullet hell, with some very some very strategic missile patterns, may seem quite familiar. This is old school, arcade Cave, with plenty of style and rock hard gameplay.

The large sprites have that retro-futuristic look, so popular with the developers. With plenty of air, water, land and even railtrack based foes. And though it doesn't reach the dizzy heights of later Cave horizontal shooters, like Death Smiles and Akai Katana, it is still quite glamorous and characterful. You start with a choice of pilots and power-shots. And control wise, you can hold the fire button down, to get a more powerful, concentrated, straight-ahead shot. Or fast stab that fire-button, for all you are worth, to get a wide spread and homing firepower, which is most useful when you are dodging for your life. And believe me, you will be doing a lot of dodging. Your shooter movement skills will be pushed to the limit in this game. It may not be Cave's finest but it's still a lot better than many a more contemporary game.

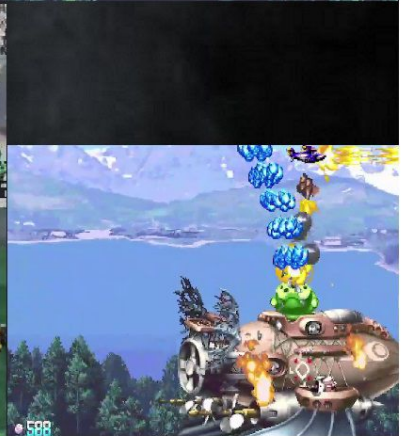
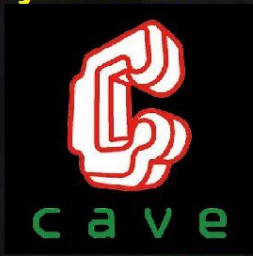


CAPCOM®



Sonically the game is bold and dramatic but there is little in the music to get your adrenalin going or create a special atmosphere. I suppose you could call it standard, arcade shmup music. Good but not great. As they used to say in school reports, "could do better".

Progear is a game for gamers with specific skills. Eye to hand speed and tactical awareness are needed in abundance, to get you through this game. And unfortunately you won't get a huge amount of time to appreciate the pretty backgrounds and sprites that Cave have supplied you with. Progear is old school, in a very nice way. Cave may have been finding their horizontal shooting way, with this game but they have supplied a fairly hardcore challenge that is some fun to play. beginners, you'll have to get good soon. Experienced players, be at your best.



SCORES

Graphics: 17 Sound: 15 Control: 18 Fun: 17 Last: 18

OVERALL: 85%

A BLAST FROM THE PAST

The strange thing about the vertically scrolling shooter 1942, is that it was designed in Japan, yet it's main goal is to destroy the Japanese air force. Released in November 1984 by Capcom this game was designed by Yoshiki Okamoto, with Ayako Mori composing the music. It ran on the Z80 arcade system. It actually began a rather good sequence of WW2 shooters, now referred to as the 194X series. It is loosely based on the Battle of Midway and it's, get the Japanese Air force theme, was because it was being aimed firmly at the western market. An aim that was very successful.

You, as the pilot "Super Ace", flew a Lockheed P-38, shooting and dodging, as in most games in this genre. You also collected power-ups, one of which gave you two, smaller, helper jets. As in many of the later incarnations, in 1942 you could roll your jet, in an upward loop, which got you out of the way of enemy firepower. For it's time, this shooter had colourful and quite detailed graphics, with the upward roll being handled particularly well.

The game was a commercial success and got ported to many home systems, including the Amstrad CPC, ZX Spectrum, Commodore 64, the Nintendo Entertainment System and Game Boy Colour. It is also

included in the excellent Capcom Arcade Stadium compilation.



1942



CAPCOM®

Game Review

On Steam

VALFARIS™

Mecha Therion

Grave Master K. Smith

By Slyelessar

So let's explore what this actually means. Firstly, let me take you back to the days of the Shoot You Sir podcasts on Sunaru gaming, when Graham brought up a new platform game he had been playing: Valfaris. This led me to pick up the game and become quite obsessed with it. The music was metal and brutal, the visuals were gnarly and beautiful, the level design found in the game was strong, the pixel art



the flavour and aesthetic of the first game, and adds this as a cherry on top of one very good shoot em up mechanics. A full screen horizontal type shoot em up, VMT's world painting and atmosphere, drips of merging green, purple, red, and black. That flow seamlessly with the wonderful soundtrack that truly is the 'gift of metal'. When the demo originally hit Steam, I really enjoyed playing it. It felt just right.



Here's the bottom line: Valfaris Mecha Therion is SHMUP of the year for me. Not only is this the first SHMUP from developers Steel mantis, who have nailed exactly what it is to make a quality shoot em up, but they've taken their Valfaris IP and managed to integrate it flawlessly into new mechanics. This feels like a Valfaris game. This also feels like a horizontal SHMUP should.



design of the environments was unique. The difficulty of the game was as brutal as the needles of a large prince Albert piercing, that I imagine the main character Therion, is sporting beneath his armour. Without getting too drawn into Therion's trouser accessories, the game also sported the odd puzzle and some of the most unique bosses we have seen in a long time. Valfaris Mecha Therion takes



However, demos usually being the vertical slice that they are, you will never truly know what the game is until the finished version is in your hand. There's so many shoot em ups recycling the old hat and not taking the visuals anywhere new. There's pixel art and then there's art. As a gamer, yes the mechanics of a game have to the focus,



that is 'pixel art', as the term allows them to use the restrictions to the peak of their ability, without the worry of heavy criticism on the graphics front. Valfaris takes this a step further, and you really see a specific art design within it. There's love, but there's blood and death also. This bleeds through the screen. It's a Steel Mantis game - you can see that just by looking at any of their titles in recent years.



carrying. You are given a main shooting weapon, that must charge by killing things and destroying specific parts of the environment, when they appear. You have your main melee weapon, which can be charged and launched like a boomerang or used to hammer, cut, slice, and rend your foes. You are given a 'bomb' type attack, which is more of a tertiary weapon, rather than the screen clearing type you tend to see in the



as this effects whether a game plays well or not. Are the controls and movement tight? Is there an upgrade system to allow this to get to the point where it feels like I am powering up to get the point where it feels slick and fun? But we gamers, and indeed we guitarists, are visual beasts. Like the wolf, we hunger for something more. Graphics are very important, and it's easy for a developer to drop a game



Pulling this review back to the point, VMT has a story, but like the original Valfaris, it keeps this concise and to the point. Never does it bleat on to the point where it interferes with gameplay. It has spice peppered appropriately, across the game. The controls are fairly simple, but depending on weapon choices through the game, you may have to adapt the way you are playing to suit the weapons you are



run of the mill shooters these days. Auxiliary weapons are picked up as you play through the different levels, which can help. Now I could write a whole section on the weaponry. Many of the fan favourites return from the original game, all feel quite different and some look more spectacular than others. But all are fun. You start off with Hellwraith,



You start off with Hellwraith, Bathoryn, and Blade Tempest. Hellwraith is a really cool looking gun that shoots in bursts. Bathoryn is Therion's main sword, and blade tempest are seeking swords (much like seeking missiles). Now, these can be upgraded and used to the end of the game. I tend to keep Bathoryn, and although I love Hellwraith, there's something about the lightening blasts from Bringer Of Mayhem that seems to feed into the way that I play Valfaris games. Whatever weapons you choose, I am sure you'll find the winning combination for you. Enemy sprites are unique in design, and although you see some returning characters and enemies, there's a lot more on show here than your average SHMUP. The effort that has gone into this game is clear, whether that's the characters or the dark and beautiful environments. Bosses are probably the most unique thing about the game. They are bastards. Once you've figured out how to beat the difficulty spikes, there's a wonderful feeling of victory you get, with these games, and VMT is no different. This is made by gamers for gamers.

I spoke about how grim and pretty the environments look, but I didn't take time to describe the weather effects in the game. Whether that's any form of rain, mist, or flame, it only adds to the atmospheric element within this game. I also want to take the time to address the metal within the game. For anyone not into metal music, this is NOT a non-stop, in your face blast beats and growl from the debts of your mothers womb. This is tasteful, atmospheric stuff, with some great riffs that are dropped in specific places, where it makes sense for the action. For those already open minded to metal music, the soundtrack is most enjoyable!





Review continued

In his mecha suit, Therion is able to move around in tight sweeping motions. Time was obviously spent to get this feeling just right, and it is much appreciated. This can be one of the most tricky things for a developer new to shmups, to balance correctly, so I take my flatcap off to you sir, and run my hand through my beard with a gentle nod. Different environments call for different planning of routes. For example, there are times the game filters you through a section where you can either go in or go through somewhere, or above or below part of the environment. If you do not choose wisely the first time around you might miss an item. Items come in the form of hearts for health and energy for weapons. These are minimal, and usually thrown into sections that are particularly challenging. When you reach checkpoints, you are able to upgrade or change any of the weapons that you have. Once again, this is very quick and easy to do and does not interfere with gameplay if you want to just push on through. However, after a particularly challenging section, you might want to take a breather and enjoy the feeling of getting past it.

So the bottom line at the top of this review stands. My question is what next for steel Mantis? What next for Therion? Is this something they decide to put down for now, to pursue something else. Personally, I'd love to see one more game in the Valfaris saga, that being, an into the screen, run and gun game. I use Shock Troopers on Neo Geo as an example of this done best. There are other games that have done this, but none as well as the original Shock Troopers - it looks beautiful, plays tight, and is a lot of fun. Imagine the beauty of the Valfaris and Therion making his way across this sort of game. You could throw in some mecha fast scrolling levels as well, and it would make such a great third game. One can only dream!

So who is Valfaris Mecha Therion for? I would recommend this specifically to those that like some of the more hardcore shoot em ups. I would encourage everyone to try it, as it is both unique and rewarding, but I think those that like character shooters and obviously, horizontal scrollers with big environments, will enjoy this the most. This certainly gets the Shoot You Sir! seal of approval! Keep your eye out next year for Graham's review of V.M.T., on consoles!



SCORES
Graphics: 20
Sound: 19
Control: 19
Fun: 20
Lastability: 18
OVERALL: 96%

