

Neo-rogue and the essence of roguelikeness

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Abstract

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Roguelike is a subgenre of computer role-playing games (cRPGs) characterized by randomly-generated content and permanent death that flourished in the 1980s but in the next decade became an entertainment niche. 'Neo-rogue' is a new term introduced to describe the recent wave of indie games which derive from the aesthetics of roguelike; these games have renewed popular interest in this subgenre. The purpose of the paper is to examine the history and nature of this phenomenon and to determine its place in the evolution of the medium.

KEYWORDS: *neo-rogue, roguelike, genre studies, history of computer games*

The term 'neo-rogue' has been introduced in this article to describe the wave of contemporary games strongly inspired by the roguelike subgenre of computer role-playing games (cRPG)¹. This trend has been recognized by game industry

¹ I would like to acknowledge Prof. Piotr Sitarski and Krzysztof Jajko for the passionate discussion that led to coining this term.

journalists (Edge, 2012b), game designers (Roguelike Radio, 2011a) and, last but not least, roguelike fandom (Maurog, 2011). Different authors have been calling it different names, including: ‘roguelike renaissance’, ‘roguelike-like’, ‘roguelike-inspired’, ‘Spelunky-like’ or ‘Sunday roguelike’. The reason for introducing the new ‘neo-rogue’ label is that it accurately renders the quintessence of the new roguelike phenomenon as well as emphasizes the importance of style and aesthetics in genre studies.

The neologism is created somewhat analogously to the ‘neo-noir’ genre in cinema; however, its emergence is not a crude transfer of film theory to game studies. In spite of the apparent similarities and a certain level of convergence regarding the evolution of media in general, one has to be very careful when comparing the historical and aesthetical development of games with that of cinema: they are not alike and should not be used as reflections of one another. From a strictly ludological perspective, Costikyan (2005) states, “genre is defined by a shared collection of core mechanics” and “has quite a different meaning for games than it does for fiction, or film; it is not based on theme [...]” (p. 4). However, recent approaches to game studies also tend to support the thematic notion of genre, defined by its “representational characteristics, [...] providing a meaningful framework for interaction” (Voorhees et al., 2012, p. 7–8). Therefore, the concept of genre in videogames is medium specific, but not limited to the game mechanics. It is bound by the merger of both thematic and ludic layers, the latter determined – in this perspective – by “the internal organization of game form” (Mäyrä, 2008, p. 47).

1. The origin of roguelike

Rogue (1980), created by Michael Toy, Glenn Wichman, and Ken Arnold, was an important step forward in game design and a milestone in cRPG evolution. Toy and Wichman were roommates at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and fans of the famous *Adventure*². Being immersed in fantasy worlds of tabletop gaming (i.e. *Dungeons and Dragons*) and interactive fiction (text games), the young programmers wanted to expand the ‘*Adventure* experience’ by adding the more advanced visuals (Whichman, 2011). The idea itself was not revolutionary, as graphical games had existed, at least, since 1962 (Burton, 2009, p. 25), but the problem was that the majority of computer terminals offered to students at American universities in the early 1980s were non-graphical. Thus,

² (*Colossal Cave*) *Adventure* – first written by Will Crowther in 1975 and expanded in 1976 by Don Woods, using fantasy elements. It is considered to be the first adventure game (Barton, 2008, p. 24–25).

the innovation of *Rogue* lay in Ken Arnold's contribution and his creation of the library of software routines called 'curses' (Whichman, 1997) that allowed for ASCII graphics³. Another important novelty was the incorporation of randomly created content, which, as Whichman (ibidem) remembers, was an essential game feature:

We decided that with *Rogue*, the program itself should "build the dungeon", giving you a new adventure every time you played, and making it possible for even the creators to be surprised by the game.

In 1983, *Rogue* became a great sensation as a part of the highly praised Unix system edition, created at the University of California (the so-called Berkeley Standard Distribution Version 4.2). Since then, the endless line of *Rogue* ports began to grow: from Macintosh (1984) to Amiga (1986) to every playable electronic platform (e.g. iOS, Android and even electronic watches), making *Rogue* a timeless classic of computer games.

Rogue's playability and code simplicity have led to the creation of many clones and permutations, which contributed to the establishment of a brand new computer game genre known as roguelike⁴, famous for its procedurally generated levels and ASCII graphics. The genre was at its peak of popularity in the 1980s, and in the beginning of the 1990s, reaching this peak with such acclaimed titles as *Nethack* (Stephenson, 1987), *Angband* (Cutler, Astrand, 1990) or *ADOM* (Biskup, 1994). However, with the revolution in 3D computer graphics that took place in the early-to-mid-1990s, roguelikes started to be regarded as an entertainment niche rather than as part of the video game mainstream.

2. The definition of roguelike

Roguelike is commonly categorized as a subgenre of cRPG, next to, for example, action-cRPG or tactical-cRPG. Sometimes, it is confused with dungeon crawler or 'hack'n'slash' games and classified as their subgenre, but these two

³ 'Curses' – a library of routines which allowed programs to do 'cursor addressing', which means the programs could put a character at a specific location on the computer screen. There were still no real 'graphics' but now one could use letters, numbers, and symbols to simulate pictures (Whichman, 1997).

⁴ Some authors recognize *Beneath Apple Manor* (Worth, 1978) as pre-Rogue roguelike and it does have enough elements of *Rogue* to be a part of the roguelike canon. Why then is the genre not called "BAM-like"? It seems that this name simply had no chance to become truly popular, as the game distribution was a failure. BAM was written exclusively for the Apple II microcomputer, a platform not as nearly accessible as Unix-operational computers at that time, as well as sold only in zip packages in a limited number of computer stores.

categories should not be used to define any type of genre at all since they tend to represent certain transmedia tropes or in-game scenarios. The most recent and viable interpretation of the roguelike definition (RogueBasin, 2008) emerged from the roguelike community at the International Roguelike Development Conference held in Berlin in 2008. The roguelike development scene suggested a very complementary characterization based on the genre canon represented by *ADOM*, *Angband*, *Nethack*, and *Rogue*. It is important to mention that the authors were not trying to be dogmatic and the notion of genre blurriness was included in their methodological approach. If a game does not have some elements from the list, it does not necessarily mean it is not roguelike. Similarly, possessing just a few of them does not define a given game as belonging to the roguelike genre. The characteristics are organized into two groups: according to high and low value factors. The actual defining qualities are shown in bold.

2.1. High value factors

As in the case of the original *Rogue*, the most important characteristic is the ‘**random environment generation**’, but it is strongly bonded with the second factor – ‘**permadeath**’ (permanent death). Those two elements are responsible for the unique experience of roguelikes and for the high level of replayability. Not only with every new game does the player enter a different location, but also s/he always does it as a new character with only one life. Although some famous roguelikes have the save game function, it is not acceptable as a rule according to the ‘Berlin definition’. The inability to save a game is a restriction that gives the gameplay the quality of interruptibility (Juul, 2010a, p. 36–37). It is what we know from casual games which allow gamers to play in short bursts of time. This component is best described by Matt Barton, who admits that he “usually does not bother saving a game, because when he is bored, he just quits it” (Barton, 2010, 4th minute). However, after mastering the game on a certain level, the obtained competence gives us a satisfying opportunity to endure more demanding gameplay over longer gameplay sessions.

The game map is **grid-based** and made of tiles, nowadays created with free-ware tile libraries that are specially prepared for roguelikes. These tiles serve the same purpose as the squares on a checkerboard. Roguelikes resemble the game of chess in that they are **turn-based**. Consequently, you can take as much time as you want to choose your next action, i.e. to decide which tile you would like to move to.

Every activity that takes place in the game should be available in one mode of game environment and at the same time, as it is **non-modal**; a violation to this

rule is, for example, the shop in *Angband*. To allow multiple solutions to the same goals, the game needs a minimum level of **complexity**.

An important element of roguelikes is the already mentioned **hack'n'slash** trope, as the exploration of the world develops in 'the player-vs-world scenario'. This element is bound to the aspect of **exploration and discovery**, a characteristic of almost every cRPG title, where immersion in the game-space is crucial to progression in the game. This experience is altered by the game's elaborated economy that demands sensible **resource-management** and interaction with the game world.

2.2. Low value factors

The aforementioned characteristics are mostly connected to the strictly ludological notion of computer game genres, while the factors below apply also to the thematic conventions such as the setting: fantastic⁵ **dungeons** crowded with supernatural **monsters**. Defeating them should always be a **tactical challenge**, involving the usage of different strategies against different opponents. All of the 'worthy foes' must be faced alone, because only a **single player character** is allowed in this player-centric game universe. Finally, the traditional display of roguelikes involves **ASCII graphics** and deliberately displayed **numbers** that describe the character's attributes and rolled hit points.

3. The influence of roguelike

It would not be an overstatement to say that *Rogue* was one of the most significant games of the cRPG genre. Its influence is visible in every decade: first in the 1980s with the constitution of the roguelike genre, then in the 1990s with the emergence of *Diablo* (Blizzard, 1996) and its clones ("first wave"), and finally in the last few years with the roguelike-inspired indie titles ("second wave").

3.1. The first wave of the roguelike influenced games

For the first time, roguelikes left their mark on game design with the birth of Blizzard's masterwork, *Diablo*, called – not by coincidence – "a roguelike

⁵ Roguelikes are in the vast majority fantasy based but there are some exceptions, especially of the science-fiction genre.

for the 1990s” (Barton, 2009, p. 319). At an early stage of development, *Diablo* was a turn-based game, planned as a rebirth of the dungeon crawlers (e.g. *Rogue*, *Moria*) that the senior designer – David Brevik⁶ – had become passionate about during college (Craddock, 2012). In the meantime, the original company that developed the game (Condor) was purchased by Blizzard Entertainment (as Blizzard North). This merger strongly altered the previous design roadmap. The new studio perceived the idea of a turn-based model as passé and encouraged the real-time model as a quality, which would make the gameplay more intense, as was the case of their own real-time strategy game *Warcraft: Orcs & Humans* (1994). As Brevik later described it, the simple thought behind Blizzard’s *Diablo* was to “take this standard RPG formula and insert action into it and make it this exhilarating experience” (Lee, 2005, p. 3).

The transition from the turn-based model to real-time gameplay was not the only change to the traditional roguelike formula. The developers also embraced the idea of a randomly generated dungeon, monsters, and loot but rejected the permadeath rule; thus the game could be saved and replayed using the same character. What is more, using the revolutionary Battle.net (internet gaming platform), players could enter the multiplayer mode online and as a result break the single-player factor. *Diablo* had tile graphics, strongly influenced by *X-COM: UFO Defense* (Mythos Games, 1994). The player’s avatar was seen from a third-person 3D isometric perspective, with transparent sidewalls which preserved the top-down view omnipresent functionality. The visual side of the game was not only a departure from the already archaic ASCII codes, but also one of the most sophisticated SVGA graphics of the year (i.e. the famous game intro).

It is said that *Diablo* gave birth to a new family of games called ‘point-and-click’ action cRPGs, including *Sacred* (Ascaron, 2004), *Dungeon Siege* (Gas Powered Games, 2002), or *Torchlight* (Runic Games, 2009). As a matter of fact, it influenced all cRPGs, introducing more dynamic gameplay to the entire genre, as it may be observed, for instance, in the most successful Polish cRPG series – *The Witcher* (CD Projekt RED, 2007-).

3.2. The second wave of roguelike influence

During the time in which the *Diablo* series enjoyed popularity, traditional roguelikes never ceased to be published, but remained a niche genre, supported by a faithful community. However, the last two years (2011–2012) have brought

⁶ David Brevik was Project Lead, Design Lead and Lead Programmer on *Diablo* and *Diablo II*, as well as co-founder of Condor Inc. (1993) and president of Blizzard North (1996–2003).

change, and the genre became recognizable and influential again. To be accurate, the turn began with the first public release of *Spelunky* (Yu, Hull, 2008). The game was released in 2008 but only premiered commercially on Xbox Live Arcade in 2012. The authors describe it as a ‘randomly generated action adventure’ but its core mechanics derive from roguelikes. The essence of ‘spelunky-ing’ lies in the generated content and the permanent death, as the *Edge* reviewer wrote (2012a): “[a] combination of randomized levels and the inability to save your progress through them serves to make dying seem fearful and significant once more”. As in the case of Yu’s game, the current wave of roguelike inspired games is a rediscovery of the essentials of the *Rogue* game design from the 1980s and, therefore, is referred to as ‘neo-rogue’ in this paper.

The decade of the 1980s keeps inspiring indie game developers as it has already done with platform games (*Braid*, *Limbo* or *Fez*). If the saying “the roguelike is the new platformer” is true then *Spelunky* is a great example of this transition. Other prominent desktop and console titles include: *The Binding of Isaac* (McMillen, Himsel, 2011), *Dungeons of Dredmor* (Gaslamp Games, 2011), and *FTL: Faster Than Light* (Subset Games, 2012). But neo-rogues are not only written for the ‘stationary’ platforms. Numerous titles are published for mobile devices, mostly for iOS and Android but also for Blackberry phones. Predictions for the mobile gaming market favor the roguelike trend. Suffice it to mention that Glenn Wichman, the father of *Rogue*, is currently working for Zynga on a roguelike social game project (more: Roguelike Radio, 2012).

4. The characteristics of neo-rogue

What is the difference between neo-rogue games and traditional roguelikes, as defined at the Berlin Conference? First of all, neo-rogue is consciously retro in both aesthetics and style, while the original *Rogue* was a modern game. The neo-rogue audiovisuals are created in a style that is reminiscent of games from the 1980s, with the ‘old-school’ top-down view or fixed camera, 2D-graphics, and 8-bit electronic stylized music. This game design choice may have two origins: one is related to the artistic preferences of the creators (see next section); and the other is connected to the purely economic circumstances – rendering 2D animations is less expensive than rendering 3D environments, therefore it is more feasible for a limited budget of an indie game developer.

Secondly, neo-rogues are generally perceived as casual games in comparison to the traditional roguelikes of the 1980s. However, this distinction has been introduced from the perspective of the present day. When *Rogue* came out, it was

considered a casual game, becoming more hardcore⁷ with new audiences who were used to less demanding games. According to Juul (2010a, p. 37), an important factor of casual games is the flexibility of time investment they require from players. Games of this kind usually have auto-save modes, which is not acceptable according to the standards of roguelike, nor does it appear in neo-rogues. However, the modern roguelikes give players a head-start by supplying them with extra lives or healing power-ups. These game design decisions may stem from the same motivations as in the case of *Rogue*: they are an attempt to make tabletop and text adventure games more attractive and accessible. One has to be careful in the pursuit of casual easiness, however, as the player may eventually miss the important factor of permadeath. The basis of this feature lies not in the simple lack of the save game function, but in the sense of failure when one loses the obtained level of advancement.

To better understand this problematic issue let's compare two roguelike-influenced games: *Dungeon Ascendance* and *The Binding of Isaac*. *Dungeon Ascendance* (Seramy Games, 2012) for Android is a good example of the casualization trend; very short levels (3–5 min) make dying no longer significant. In-game 'glorified death' seems more like an unsolvable Solitaire deal than being trampled on by Mum, the demanding boss in *The Binding of Isaac*. In *Dungeon Ascendance*, replayability is achieved through the process of unlocking character classes and dungeon types. Curiously enough, the same method is used in *The Binding of Isaac* (locked characters and achievements) but in this case the game is well-balanced with the arcade-style permadeath experience (the "easy to learn, hard to master" rule). *Dungeon Ascendance* is a perfect 'coffee-break' puzzle game with elements of roguelike aesthetics but it is not a true neo-rogue as *The Binding of Isaac* is.

Thirdly, *Rogue* is an almost ideal game regarding the purity of game design (Juul, 2010b) in the sense that an emergent complexity derives from simple rules and mechanics. This tendency is surpassed in neo-rogue by way of postmodern hybridization and remix culture. Neo-rogues are roguelikes which meet the standards of other genres in the shape of: shoot'em-up in *...Isaac*; adventure platformer in *Spelunky*; or spaceflight simulator in *FTL*. This is observed not only in the ludic gameplay, but also on a thematic level of digital game genre taxonomy. Neo-rogues are set not only in fantasy dungeons, but also in detestable horror undergrounds (*...Isaac*), adventure-like exotic caves (*Spelunky*), or in remote space nebulas (*FTL*). If it has to be a dungeon, it often incorporates a witty satire of the traditional roguelike conventions (*...Dredmor*).

⁷ A stereotypical hardcore player "has a preference for science-fiction, zombies, and fantasy fictions, has played a large number of video games, will invest large amounts of time and resources toward playing video games, and enjoys difficult games" (Juul, 2010a, p. 8).

Roguelike	Neo-rogue
Modern	Retro
ASCII	2D
Hardcore	Casual
Purity	Hybridization
Fantasy	Various

Figure 1. Comparison of roguelike and neo-rogue

Neo-rogue is different than traditional roguelikes (see Figure 1), but how does it diverge from the first wave of roguelike-inspired games? Why was *Diablo* not the first neo-rogue? The main dissimilarity between the first and the second wave lies in the institutional context. *Diablo* is an AAA game that was designed in a prominent studio as a hit, and won many ‘Game of the Year’ titles. Neo-rogues come from the same context as the original *Rogue*, and since they are created by independent game designers and aficionados, they do not immediately gain recognition (*Spelunky* was commercially published four years after its initial release). *Diablo* was to *Rogue* what Robert Rodriguez’s *Desperado* (1995) was to *El Mariachi* (1992) – a spectacular remake. What is more, one prominent title attracted a substantial number of followers. Neo-rogue is a more heterogeneous movement generating a lot of vibrant titles that are not simple clones of the first one – *Spelunky*. What we experience is rather a rebirth of the roguelike aesthetic paradigm that incorporates the general mechanics model, and certain visual (2D-graphics, top-down view, space creation) as well as thematic dominance (dungeon crawl or hack’n’slash). The correlation of all these elements defines the experience of roguelike gameplay, or, the essence of ‘roguelikeness’.

5. The classification of neo-rogue

After demonstrating the neo-rogue characteristics, it is time to identify its place in the games taxonomy. Since the neo-rogue category is created in parallel to the neo-noir phenomenon in cinema, it is useful to recapitulate the long-lasting dispute among film scholars on this subject. Even though film critics are far from reaching an agreement on the matter of neo-noir’s nature and its relation to film noir, three major theoretical stances may be distinguished (Pajor, 2010, p. 44–46). The first group of researchers (e.g. Foster Hirsh, Jerold Abrams and Leighton Grist) denies the existence of neo-noir as an autonomous class and claims that it is just another stage in the evolution of film noir. In this case, both *Maltese Falcon* (Huston, 1941) and *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982) are examples of the

same genre. In the second account (e.g. Alain Silver or James Ursini), neo-noir emerges as a separate genre in the 1980s, and is defined by the conscious use of the most significant aesthetic elements of film noir. From this perspective, *Blade Runner* represents a new generic aesthetic built on the legacy of *Maltese Falcon*. The last standpoint (e.g. Ronald Schwartz) describes neo-noir as a cinematic style not a genre – loosely inspired by the poetics of film noir; in this approach Ridley Scott intentionally imitates some of *Maltese Falcon*'s aesthetics in his science-fiction movie, *Blade Runner*.

On the same principle, it is possible to form three modes of neo-rogue classification:

1. a new phase in roguelike evolution;
2. emergence of a new genre: random'n'permadeath;
3. a style in contemporary game design.

Even though the suggestions (a) and (b) are mutually exclusive, they are still interconnected. According to the idea of a game genre lifecycle (Cook, 2007), every genre “evolves over time as players discover [it], fall in love, grow bored and then move on to other forms of entertainment” (p. 2). When presented in the form of a mathematical curve (see Figure 2), the stages of ‘introduction’ and ‘growth’ are symbolized by the rising to the top of the chart which indicates ‘maturity’. In the case of neo-rogue the phase of ‘introduction’ could be illustrated by *Spelunky*, ‘growth’ by ... *Isaac* or *FTL*, and ‘maturity’ is still impending.

The decline is a gradual process of falling out of the mainstream, both economically (niche markets) and artistically (the indie sector of game design). This model does not recognize any possibility of genre revival, neither as a product nor a cultural practice. It does not take into account a new phase of popularity that could be represented by another peak in the diagram, probably lower than the first one but still significant. In Cook's view, a new genre, which is referred to as ‘random'n'permadeath’ in this article in order to reflect its core mechanics and recognize the hack'n'slash heritage (listen: Roguelike Radio, 2011b), would form a totally new curve showing the rise and fall of a new phenomenon.

However, it is too early to establish whether or not neo-rogue is transforming into an entirely new quality and a new genre (random'n'permadeath), because of the lack of the benefit of hindsight. What is more, genre lifecycles are not linear in reality. On the contrary, they overlap with each other, dissolve in different subgenres, and merge in the constant processes of hybridization, making it almost impossible to define any clear boundaries. Therefore, it is hardly possible at the moment to determine whether random'n'permadeath will become a useful genre category or end up being just a post-roguelike subclass in the roguelike set.

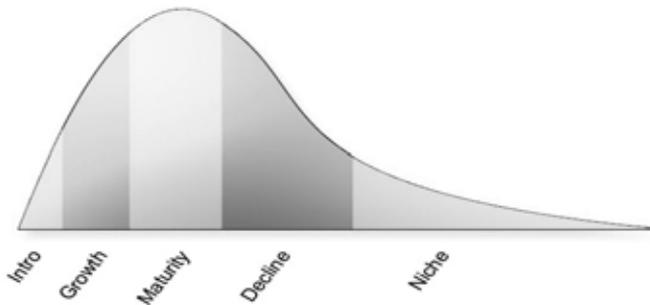


Figure 2: Stages of the game genre lifecycle (Cook, 2007, 2)

On the other hand, limiting neo-rogue to just another phase on a roguelike timeline is unconvincing in regard to the dissimilarities described in the previous section (Fig. 1). A different solution is to use Schwartz's guideline and define neo-rogue as a **style**, which is to say: as a noticeable manner in the contemporary indie game design that derives from the aesthetics of roguelike and consciously reinterprets its patterns in modern cultural and institutional contexts. The most distinctive attribute of this style is the way it alters the aesthetic experience of roguelike gameplay. It creates new qualities at the intersection of traditional genres and modern trends. The critics of this redefinition may argue that ASCII games like *Rogue* have never been surpassed, since "snazzy graphics and intricate storylines just distract from what they think makes CRPGs fun to play" (Barton, 2007, p. 1). In that case, we have to remember that the original *Rogue* was supposed to be 'adding snazzy graphics' to *Adventure*. Does this mean that every post-*Adventure* game is just a gradual downfall of the medium, and interactive fiction is in fact everything a computer game needs? The evolution of roguelikeness proves otherwise, showing that an artistically significant game genre can produce a long-lasting and creative influence on the entire medium. If only it has meaningful poetics, it can develop in time to form an independent style and have an impact on other genres.

Finally, the conscious choice of neo-rogue style often implies a very particular set of motivations. It depends, not only, as in the case of *Diablo*, on the designer's will to make his favorite game more spectacular, but also on a certain nostalgic gesture. The notion of nostalgia is important in the creation of neo-styles and stands behind every retro project (Garda, forthcoming). Neo-rogue is an example of a currently prominent tendency in the gaming industry to revive older epochs of the medium's past (i.e. the 8-bit era or 16-bit era). It encourages game designers to reflect the gleam of a particular era of videogames in their present work. As Juul (2010a, p. 78) points out, "neither game designers nor players start from the scratch, but carry the history of games with them". The pixelated Indi-

ana Jones fedora on *Spelunky's* character's head is as important as his fragile and chaotic in-game life. "Spelunky-ing" without the hat, and other retro-references, would be an entirely different experience.

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Neo-rogue i istota gatunku roguelike

Abstrakt

Roguelike, podgatunek gier cRPG, oparty na losowości generowanych treści i braku możliwości zapisu rozgrywki, święcił triumfy w latach 80., lecz w kolejnej dekadzie stracił na popularności i stał się rozrywką niszową. W ostatnich latach zainteresowanie roguelike ponownie wzrosło wraz z falą tytułów niezależnych nawiązujących do estetyki gatunku, które określam wspólnym mianem neo-rogue. Zadaniem artykułu jest zbadanie istoty tego zjawiska i wskazanie przynależnego mu miejsca w ramach ewolucji medium.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: neo-rogue, roguelike, gatunki gier, historia gier komputerowych