Roguelike Universe: Drawing 36
Years of Roguelike Influence

Xavier Ho
Design Lab, University of Sydney
Digital Productivity Flagship, CSIRO, Australia
xavier.ho@sydney.edu.au

ABSTRACT
The roguelike subgenre has long been favourites of many gamers: procedural content generation and permanent deaths made every playthrough a deadly test of skills. This paper examines the diversity of roguelike subgenre through the lens of game industry journals. Roguelike Universe is developed as an open-source tool to draw from published interviews and postmortems. It creates an interactive visualisation of representative and influential games both in-genre and out-of-genre. The study does not directly focus on individual games, but instead investigates the online literature around them. With the aid of visualisation, the eras of roguelike can be visually discerned. With it, this paper proposes a visual measure of influence called genre-influential matrix using Roguelike Universe and apply it onto the roguelike subgenre as means of exploratory research. The tool is generalisable for studies in other genres and media in future works.

Keywords
roguelike, inspiration, influence map, game journals, visualisation

INTRODUCTION
Since the release of Rogue (1980), the roguelike subgenre has inspired decades of many game developers. Randomised levels created unique and refreshing experience for each playthrough; permanent deaths meant that failed players must start over, equipped with the knowledge of their previous playthroughs to delve deeper. This trial-by-error gameplay may seem harsh by design at first, but it influenced many games to-date, including NetHack (1987), Angband (1990) and Diablo (1996). Glenn Wichman and Michael Toy, creators of Rogue, wanted the game to “‘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” (Wichman 1997). This element of surprise encouraged players to revisit the game time after time.

The continued influence of Rogue—leading to a whole subgenre—invokes curiosity for cultural retrospection. Games journalists pack interviews with successful and promising developers. For Wichman and Toy, they wanted to make Rogue because they enjoyed playing Adventure, a text-based computer game (Wichman 1997). The developers of Diablo at Blizzard Entertainment revealed their inspiration for randomly generated dungeons were in fact from Rogue (Waters 1997). It is common to see mentions of influence in developer interviews. By connecting the names, I argue that the interlinked web of influence between video games are strikingly similar to that of the phenomenon made famous by Guare’s play, “Six Degrees of Separation” (1990). This paper aims to demonstrate that tight-knit connection by studying the surrounding journals in video game culture through a process of visual design exploration.
VISUALLY EXPLORING THE ROGUELIKE INFLUENCE

I developed a tool called *Roguelike Universe* (RU) to investigate the influential connections in roguelike games. RU does not individually examine the games themselves, but focuses on its designer and audience. The working hypothesis is simple: if a game is related to another, they will likely be mentioned together often. Therefore, RU crawls on the Internet (aided by the search engine *DuckDuckGo*) for developer interviews, postmortems and recollections to conduct a search on video game titles. It looks for keywords that identify titles and developers and applies lexical affinity (Cambria and White 2014) to discern their relations from a passion mention. My design exploration brought me to something akin to a Heinlein timeline, where future meets history in a recursive, horizontal flow.

In Figure 1, the top half is a timeline of roguelike games selected by the Wikipedia collective, whereas the bottom links video games in any genre that are connected to a roguelike, but are not categorised under the roguelike umbrella. This visualisation allows anyone to examine the connections interactively: as the mouse cursor moves from left to right, the focus is given to a particular roguelike game on the top, and the connections are expanded for the viewer. Colours are used to distinguish the connections, and the larger the arcs are, the more distant the connections.

---

Figure 1: *Roguelike Universe* with highlights on influences to *SLASH ‘EM* (1998).
WAVES OF INFLUENCE AND THE GENRE-INFLUENTIAL MATRIX

The points of influence is drawn in Figure 2. On the top left is *Angband* and its in-genre predecessors. In the early 1990’s, ChunSoft picked up the subgenre and released *Mystery Dungeon: Shiren the Wanderer* (1995), which was a highly acclaimed title at the time (Figure 2, top right). However, the western popularity for roguelikes was on the decline until the early 2000’s. It wasn’t until the release of *Strange Adventures In Infinite Space* (2002), hybrid roguelikes began to appear, (Figure 2, bottom left). Lastly, the bottom right of Figure 2 depicts the beginning of Garda’s (2013) “neo-roguelike” subgenre: indie games built on their own inspirations and novel, hybrid mechanics.

I formed the measure called the *genre-influential matrix* (Figure 3). At a glance of the visualisation, one can see if a game has mostly *in-genre* influences (arcs above the line) or *out-of-genre* influences (arcs below the line). A game is *representative* of its predecessors if most of the arcs are to its left. In contrast, it is most *influential* if most of the arcs are to its right. Of course, not many games fall to the absolutes, but most can be seen in one quadrant. For example, *Angband* (Figure 2, top left) is a good representative of its own genre, since all of its arcs are above the line and to its left. *Rogue Legacy* (Figure 2, bottom right) is representative for genre hybrids. This observation matches quite well with Garda’s (2013, pp. 63-65) history notes.
In closing, this paper demonstrates the tight-knit influence from within the roguelike subgenre and other genres by examining the natural frequency of game titles in online game journals. *Roguelike Universe* is available and open-source for anyone to use and improve. I propose the genre-influential matrix as a visual tool for influence, and it can be applied to other genres where data is available. Future work includes developing a graphical user interface for *Roguelike Universe* and conducting user research.

ENDNOTES
1. Source code for Roguelike Universe: https://github.com/Spaxe/roguelike-universe
2. Thanks to Andrew Rock who brought to my attention the works of Robert A. Heinlein.

BIBLIOGRAPHY
Atari (1979) *Adventure* [Atari 2600], Atari.
Blizzard North (1996) *Diablo* [PC, Mac OS, Playstation], Blizzard Entertainment.
Digital Eel (2002) *Strange Adventures In Infinite Space* [Windows, Mac], Cheapass Games.

