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Abstract

A review of James Cartlidge's edited volume, *The Rise of the Roguelite: Inside a Gaming Phenomenon*. Published by CRC Press, 2025. ISBN: 978-1-00341-547-3, 200 pages.

Keywords

Roguelites; game design; game analysis; book review

In April 2025, the book *The Rise of the Roguelite*: *Inside a Gaming Phenomenon* edited by James Cartlidge was published by CRC Press. After books that are mainly interested in the exploration and history of roguelike video games, CRC Press has published this edited collection, shifting the focus to roguelite video games. I received this book with excitement, as a game scholar interested in roguelite and roguelike games, and as a fan wanting to know more about them.

For those unfamiliar with roguelike and roguelite video games, the roguelike genre was developed after the success of the video game *Rogue* (Toy & Wichman, 1980). They have many possible features, but the most common ones are a cyclical permadeath system, procedurally generated scenarios or levels and a grid-based movement system. Roguelite video games stem from roguelike video games. Roguelites may include real-time action-based gameplay, permanent upgrades for the player character after their death, synergies between upgrades, or characteristics that are rooted in other video game genres. For more information about roguelikes, I recommend *Exploring Roguelike Games* (Harris, 2020), *Game Design Deep Dive: Roguelikes* (Bycer, 2021), and *Dungeon Hacks* (Craddock, 2022).

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The Rise of the Roguelite starts setting clearly its objectives and expectations: it wants to analyse the wave of roguelite video games that have enchanted players in the last decade, situating them in a sociocultural and historical context that makes them thrive. Similarly, James Cartlidge sets the profile of the book's expected readers: game studies researchers, game designers and students of any of those disciplines. To achieve these objectives, the book offers a wide range of perspectives that should satisfy different interested specialists, but it also provides easy and clear texts that are accessible for students. Cartlidge is supported by ten scholars that offer different perspectives on the success and potential of roguelite video games. Game design, politics, gender studies, queer studies or philosophy are some of the fields that try to explain the outstanding potential of this genre of video games in ten chapters and an introduction.

Since the chapters are not grouped in sections, for the sake of a more cohesive review, I will sort them depending on the main topics of their discussions in three groups: those that are focused on roguelites' design and mechanics (chapters 3, 4, 8); those that are interested in analysing them from a historicist perspective (chapters 2, 5, 6, 7), and a third group that analyses how genre and identity can be potentially depicted in roguelites (chapters 9, 10, 11). Despite their differences, all these chapters show an interest in roguelites' game design turning them into a coherent group of chapters that is in dialogue with each other.

The introduction presents an easy-to-understand and brief explanation on the rise of roguelites, their main design concerns, and the purpose of the book, opening the door to the different chapters with a short description of each one. James Cartlidge uses Steam data to explain the rising popularity of the genre and the number of players that enjoy them, showing their importance in the global video game industry. For example, Cartlidge points out that in January 2025, there were 9,998 games labelled as roguelites in Steam. Apart from this, Cartlidge shows that roguelites have established a strong presence in the indie scene, mentioning some recently published video games. Similarly, they introduce the reader to the 'Berlin Interpretation' of roguelikes to set some important characteristics of roguelike video games that are also part of roguelites. A good example of Cartlidge's use of the Berlin Interpretation is that it is not explained as a set of compulsory characteristics that make roguelikes as such, but as a dynamic set of characteristics for future developers to be used, giving flexibility to the interpretation. Cartlidge finishes the introduction showing the variety of disciplines that roguelites bring over the table (politics, philosophy, game design, etc.), while introducing the chapters featured in the book.

Shifting the focus towards the chapters focused on roguelites' game design and mechanics, chapter 3 "What Makes a Good Roguelite?" by Marc Dolgin offers an analysis of the main characteristics of this genre. Among the various aspects analysed in this chapter, the section dedicated to 'synergies' is especially well described. A synergy in roguelites is the result of the interaction between two upgrades obtained during

the gameplay that affects positively the player's character performance. Dolgin offers an interesting segmentation of synergies in three types: minor synergies, major synergies, and scripted synergies. Minor synergies are those that simply affect increase the stats of the player's character, major synergies significantly boost the performance of the player through emergent interactions between upgrades, and scripted synergies happen when two specific upgrades have been coded to shape a synergy. In my opinion, this division will prove useful in the future, since it allows a more comprehensive organized analysis of roguelites' mechanics by sorting synergies in coherent groups. Similarly, the author accurately describes meta-progression as one of the key traits of roguelites and a core difference with roguelikes. However, I observe a lack of engagement with previous literature about roguelikes and roguelites design, like *Game Design Deep Dive: Roguelikes* (Bycer, 2021) or "Genre, Prototype Theory and the Berlin Interpretation of Roguelikes" (Cartlidge, 2024). It is true that this chapter is one of the first texts explaining roguelites' main characteristics and how they are implemented, but their description could have been richer if a conversation with previous research would have been established. Nonetheless, I consider that the analysis is detailed, well thought out, easy to understand, and it opens the path to more comprehensive analyses of roguelites' design.

Chapter 4, "Roguelites and the Problem of Ludonarrative Dissonance" by Leonardo Codamo, brings over the table one of the main narrative problems of roguelite video games. As a scholar trained in narrativity and literature, I have struggled with the ludonarrative dissonance that roguelites' mechanics cause in stories that, otherwise, would have been much deeper and more believable. Since the eternal cycle of life and death is not represented diegetically, roguelites usually break players' immersion and throw them off the fictional world that is depicted. They usually feature stories that do not acknowledge what it is happening in the gameplay. Codamo tackles this problem and proposes ludonarrative harmony as a necessary step in roguelites' design to craft richer storyworlds that players could enjoy. To achieve this, the author introduces several examples of video games (for example, *Hades*, *The Binding of Isaac* or *Rogue Legacy*) that have tried to solve the issue and offers some design choices that could be implemented to alleviate this problem, like introducing machine learning that may support emergent storytelling linked to gameplay. In addition, the author effectively establishes a conversation with previous research about the topic, mentioning key authors like Clint Hocking (2009), or Miłosz Markocki (2021). I just miss a reference to the article on ludonarrative dissonance made by Paweł Grabarczyk and Bo Kampmann Walther (2022). I consider this chapter especially useful for those who want to delve into the topic in this specific genre.

The last chapter that is mainly focused on game design is Chapter 8, "Edit Wands Always: Experimentation, Modding, and Metagaming in *Noita*" by Andrew Bailey. This chapter analyses *Noita*'s (Nolla Games, 2019) modding community and how they interact with the original game design, as well as with the expectations of its developers. This chapter cleverly uses the analysis of social media to understand the

nature of *Noita*'s mods as an answer to the general design concerns of the fan community, like the necessity of checkpoints or easier wand customization mechanics. Bailey's approach to this topic is rooted in previous literature about the use of fandom or fan communities in the analysis of video games. These studies are combined with their knowledge about the game, data from *Noita*'s fan Reddit and Discord communities, and the conferences and other documenting material made by the developers. This way, Bailey intersects the views from the fans and the developers to explain the singularity which is *Noita* within roguelite video games. Additionally, this chapter's structure and clarity when providing key points make it an easy-to-read text that fulfils its objectives.

In the case of the group of chapters that approach roguelite video games from a historicist perspective (chapters 2, 5, 6, 7), chapter 2 "When Darwin Met Lovecraft: Generating Mystery and Discovery in *The Curious Expedition*" has been written by Mark Johnson. This chapter combines literary analysis from Lovecraft's work, sociocultural contextualization about the influence of European scientific explorations of the 19th century, and an analysis of game design choices that inspire a sense of discovery in the player. Due to my academic background, I appreciate the scrupulous effort made by Johnson to explain the influence of Lovecraft's take on mystery and horror literature in *The Curious Expedition*. From my point of view, the main attractive point in this chapter is that Johnson explains how to effectively express the literary influence of this writer in the form of mechanics and game systems that are focused on discovering the unknown, for example emergently finding isolated tribes. Despite using just one roguelite video game as an example, this text can be applied to other video games, especially roguelites, that are influenced by this type of literature. I also consider that this text can be used by game designers as a source of strategies that may make players feel curious and intrigued continuously in roguelite video games or games with replayable cycles. As a downside, this chapter does not engage with previous academic texts about the influence of Lovecraft in video games that could have been useful for their analysis like Kevin Corstorphine and Matthew Crofts' study of Lovecraftian gothic spaces in video games (2021) or André Cowen's paper (2023) on cultural otherness in Lovecraft-influenced video games. Occasionally, this leads to the self-citation of the chapter's author due to the lack of secondary bibliography.

In Chapter 5, "Players' Will and Characters' Deeds: Agency and Legacy", Robert Seddon is interested in the effects that roguelite video games may have in the feelings of the player. Seddon focuses their chapter on the player's moral choices implied in the continuous cycle of life and death of roguelite video games. Their objective is showing that meta-progressive roguelite games trivialize the death of the playable characters in pursuit of a higher objective. The topic of discussion and the objective of the chapter are from my point of view particularly important if we want to analyse roguelite video games from a psychological point of view. For example, the success of *Hades* (Supergiant Games, 2019) or *The Binding of Isaac* (Nicalis, 2014) have proved that players like video games that have moral implications after or during each cycle.

However, I consider that this chapter suffers from a structural problem in the way it manages its citations. There are too many long consecutive citations that dilute the author's main argument. Similarly, the description of previous moral discussions about certain video games are also lacking since the author uses articles in different media but does not engage with academic writings about dark play. Despite these two problems, Seddon cleverly brings over the table the role of death and player agency in roguelites' permadeath cycles.

Chapters 6 and 7 can be understood as a group since both share a similar strong historicist approach that converts them into complementary chapters. In fact, I think of them as the highlights of the book because they show the potential of interpreting roguelites and their mechanics as the result of a certain sociocultural context. The editor of this collection, James Cartlidge, is in charge of chapter 6, "The Chain of Power: Foucault's Philosophy and *Vampire Survivors*-like Roguelites", and Steven Harvie has written chapter 7, "Historicizing the Roguelite: The Legacy of Neoliberalism and the Dawn of Social Media". Cartlidge explains that roguelite games may work as a metaphor for power structures since, sometimes, their mechanics imply chaining different powerful upgrades or downgrades. They use and assimilate Foucault's works about power like *The History of Sexuality* (1978) and cleverly applies them to *Vampire Survivors* (poncle, 2022). Similarly, Harvie dissects how neoliberalism gave birth to self-help books and other cultural artifacts that place the individual as the cause behind current political, social, and economic problems. Harvie explains that, in roguelite video games, players are the main cause of failure. In other words, it is completely the player's fault that they fail, not the system's fault. This complements Cartlidge idea of roguelites as an example of the effects of structures of power. Both chapters show that video games are children of our age, and they reflect the problems we experience, something that the authors have understood perfectly. I hope that these authors keep researching these topics, since they resonate with current challenges in game studies and, in general, in historicist analysis.

Chapters 9, 10 and 11 are focused on the expression of identity and queerness in roguelites. As roguelites are political objects that are the result of certain sociocultural circumstances, they carry the capability to portray certain identities. In chapter 9, "Simulation Gaps, Failures, and the Potential for Queer Game Design", Xavier Ho talks about the potential of roguelite video games to introduce queer voices. For that, they show game design choices that may encourage this, like introducing silenced voices that experience frustration both in narrative and gameplay. I agree with Ho's idea that failure and resistance in roguelite video games allow the introduction of complex identities that have suffered mistreatment or have been relegated to ostracism. Introducing and assimilating fundamental authors like Adrienne Shaw or Bo Ruberg, Ho shows wide knowledge of the fields that are being used in the chapter while explaining the potentialities of roguelite video games.

This potential is shown in Chapter 10, "Roguelites, Romance, and the Power of Genre-Bending in *Boyfriend Dungeon*", by Christine Tomlinson. In this chapter, the

author explains the flexibility of roguelites video games as a genre, especially in its narrative aspects, since it allows the introduction of non-normative stories or stories related to identity. Using *Boyfriend Dungeon* (Kitfox Games, 2021) as the main case study, Tomlinson explains that through using roguelite mechanics and a story that acknowledges them diegetically it is possible to introduce elements of, for example, romance video games and dating sims. This author shows that the potential of queering the narrative of roguelite games also invites the introduction of aesthetics and genres that have not been usually applied to roguelike or roguelite video games before, except for *Hades*. In fact, in Chapter 11, "*Hades*, the Queerness of Roguelites, and the Recursivity of Trauma", Kit von Campe shares part of their argument with Tomlinson and Ho: they show that roguelite mechanics offer a clear potential for complex identities. In the case of von Campe's research, the complex identities refer to those based on trauma. This author accurately explains the implications of permadeath and meta-progressing roguelites and how *Hades* carry them in its narrative to tell a story of family trauma. In my opinion, chapters 9, 10 and 11 use their sources and assimilate them very well. As a remarkable note, these chapters are in an indirect discussion with each other, expanding the scope of the topics the three authors develop in their texts.

All these chapters show that *The Rise of the Roguelite* does an excellent job in providing a mixture of perspectives about the reasons why roguelites are nowadays so popular and which aspects of them should be studied deeply. Despite some downsides, all the chapters establish a connection with other disciplines and authors, while opening new paths of research. Cartlidge, as the editor, does not limit this constructive approach here, but also introduces an appendix with key books and papers that can be used to improve the reader's knowledge about roguelite and roguelike video games. This starts a general dialogue with previous literature about the topic and directly acknowledges the place of this edited book in the field of study. Due to all of this, I heartily recommend this book to anyone who is interested in the genre, especially if they have just started their research on it.

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