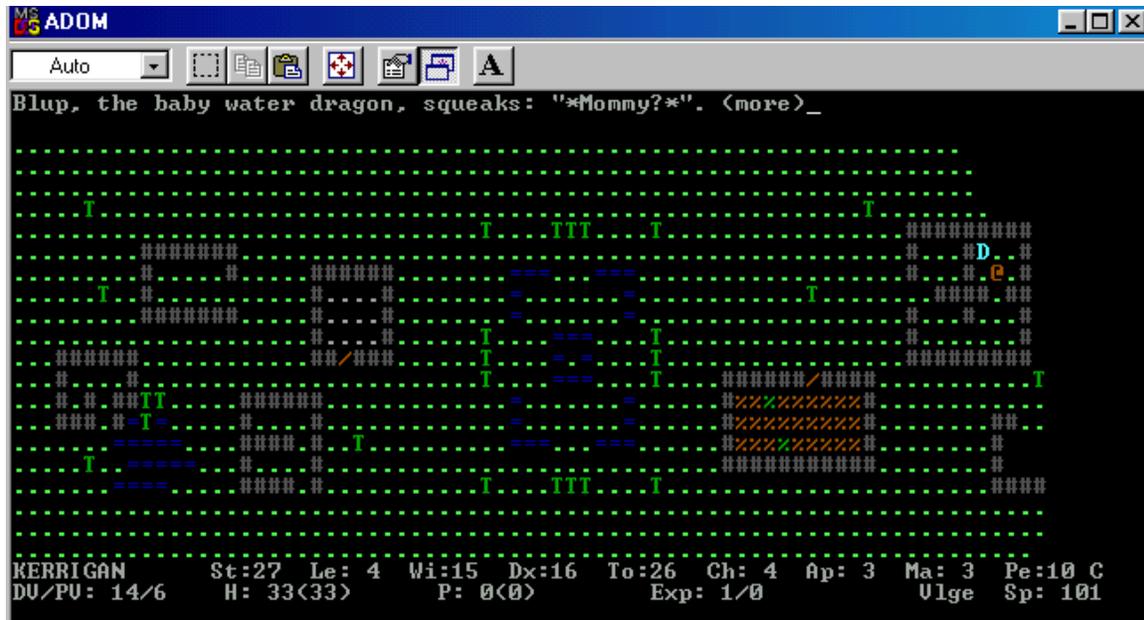


Ancient Domains of Mystery and Rougelike Games



The epic quest begins in the city of Terinyo.

A *Quake 3* deathmatch might begin with a player materializing in a complex, graphically intense 3D environment, grabbing a few powerups and weapons, and fragging another player with a shotgun. Instantly blown up by a rocket launcher, he quickly respawns. Elapsed time: 30 seconds.

By contrast, a player's first foray into the ASCII-illustrated world of *Ancient Domains of Mystery* (ADOM) would last a bit longer—but probably not by very much. After a complex process of character creation, the intrepid adventurer hesitantly ventures into a dark cave—only to walk into a fireball trap, killing her. But a perished ADOM character, represented by an "@" symbol, does not fare as well as one in *Quake*: Once killed, past saved games are erased. Instead, she joins what is no doubt a rapidly growing graveyard of failed characters.

In a day when most games feature high-quality 3D graphics, intricate storylines, or both, how do games like ADOM not only survive but thrive, supporting a large and active community of fans? How can a game design seemingly premised on frustrating players through continual failure prove so successful—and so addictive?

The Development of the Roguelike Sub-Genre

ADOM is a recent—and especially popular—example of a sub-genre of Role Playing Games (RPGs). Games of this sort are typically called “Roguelike,” after the founding game of the sub-genre, *Rogue*. Inspired by text adventure games like *Adventure*, two students at UC Santa Cruz, Michael Toy and Glenn Whichman, decided to create a graphical dungeon-delving adventure, using ASCII characters to illustrate the dungeon environments. This method of constructing a graphical adventure had just become possible through the work of Ken Arnold at UC Berkeley in developing the curses library, allowing display of ASCII characters at a given point of the monitor. Arnold later significantly contributed to the development of *Rogue* after Toy transferred to Berkeley. Along with *Wizardry*, *Rogue* was among the very first graphical adventure games. Bundled with the Berkeley Software Distribution version of Unix in 1980, *Rogue* became wildly popular at college campuses around the world and was later ported to the Macintosh and DOS.

But Toy and Whichman had a crucial insight that set *Rogue* apart from text adventures like *Adventure* or *Zork*, or even early RPGs like *Wizardry* or *Ultima*, games that Whichman terms “‘canned’ adventures—they were exactly the same every time you played.” Toy and Whichman wanted to create a game that would provide a different experience each time the player played it—a game that even the designers could have fun playing. Therefore, when an intrepid adventurer descended into *Rogue*’s Dungeons of Doom, she would encounter a series of randomized levels with a different distribution of items and layout of monsters. As Whichman puts it, “Every time you played, you got a new adventure. That’s really what made it so popular for all those years in the early eighties.”¹

Perhaps the most fundamental component of a Roguelike game is, then, the presence of a randomized adventuring world. Also common to most or all Roguelikes are ASCII graphics, a fantasy setting, turn-based movement and combat, an experience system whereby characters grow more powerful as they defeat enemies, and a very high level of difficulty. In contrast to text adventures like *Zork*, which are based on typing commands as phrases, character actions in Roguelikes are typically controlled with long lists of single-button commands (the list of key bindings for ADOM is several pages long, including frequently necessary actions like “clean ears”). A Roguelike game will have a real sense of risk: a dead character is an occasion for mourning, not reloading. Roguelikes are usually open-source and always free for download.²

Roguelikes seem to define a separate gaming sub-culture; they are seldom covered by the mainstream gaming press, and they even possess their own Usenet newsgroup hierarchy (rec.games.roguelike.*). Among the most enduringly popular Roguelike games are *Hack*, its successor *Nethack*, *Angband*, *Moria*, and ADOM.³ In addition to taking place in different worlds and telling different stories, these later efforts add a substantial layer of complexity to *Rogue*’s original concept without fundamentally changing its basic gameplay.

¹ Whichman, Glenn R. *A Brief History of "Rogue."* <http://www.wichman.org/roguehistory.html>

² Kuittinen, Petri. *Guide to Roguelike Games.* <http://www.hut.fi/~eye/roguelike/intro.html>

³ Bolsø, Erik Inge. *Genealogy & Chronology of Roguelike Games.* <http://www.mo.himolde.no/~knan/roguelike/#history>

For an example of the further development of Roguelike games, we turn to *Nethack*, produced by a team of programmers on the Internet and released by Mike Stephenson in 1987. (The “Net” of *Nethack* refers to the efforts of programmers around the internet to create the game, not anything to do with network play.) *Nethack* added more character classes, more items, more spells, and more Easter Eggs—not to mention the always-diverting challenge of keeping your character fed. None of these alterations fundamentally changed the gameplay of *Nethack* as opposed to *Rogue*, but what each seemingly trivial addition did was add to the depth of the game, making replaying *Nethack* an even more rewarding and distinctive experience than in *Rogue*.⁴

Some of the conventions of the Roguelike sub-genre reached the mainstream gaming world through Blizzard’s smash hits *Diablo* and *Diablo II*. Originally conceived as a fully graphical adaptation of Roguelikes, including turn-based movement and combat, the team designing *Diablo* initially had difficulty finding a publisher willing to support such a throwback in game design. Although *Diablo* switched to real-time combat during development, nevertheless *Diablo* preserved the randomized dungeon layout and item generation of a Roguelike—and by far the most addictive property of *Diablo* was its randomness. What items would you get? What challenges would the next random level bring? What monsters would you encounter? The result, as Designer Bill Roper noted and millions of players found out, was that “you can play the game over and over again.”⁵

With the exception of *Diablo* and other action games inspired by its extraordinary commercial success, the development of the Roguelike sub-genre proper has not been especially radical. Instead, each Roguelike game has, like *Nethack*, involved an array of complex gameplay additions to the basic elements of *Rogue*, attempting to create a game that is fun, intricate, addictive, and replayable.

History and Development of ADOM

The sole creator, designer, and programmer of ADOM is Thomas Biskup of Gelsenkirchen, Germany. Starting in 1988, Biskup began playing early computer RPGs, including the *Bard’s Tale* series and *Wasteland*. Biskup comments that *Wasteland* is “my most beloved game” and that “the depth of *Wasteland* still is what I aspire with ADOM.” Biskup was introduced to Roguelikes by *Hack* in 1991, and quickly moved on to the more complex *Nethack*. Although he, like the majority of players, was “never very successful” at *Nethack*, “Nonetheless I liked it and quickly felt the need to expand it according to my needs.” The need to constantly expand the options available to the player is the key to understanding the development of ADOM.

Two years later, Biskup got his hands on the *Nethack* source code and began to attempt to extend it. But this proved daunting: the sources “looked pretty complicated and already were huge at that time. Thus I decided to write my own game.” Development on ADOM commenced in earnest in 1994. Early in the design process, in July 1994, Biskup released the first, primitive development executable of ADOM, then available only for

⁴ Kuittinen. <http://www.hut.fi/~eye/roguelike/nethack.html>

⁵ Keighley, Geoffrey. *Eye of the Storm: Behind Closed Doors at Blizzard*. <http://gamespot.com/gamespot/features/pc/blizzard/>

Linux. Response from the Roguelike community was slow at first, but soon suggestions and requests from a growing community of fans started pouring in.⁶

The design of ADOM has been a one man show from the beginning. Although compiled versions of ADOM are free for download, unlike most Roguelikes ADOM is closed-source, preventing fans from making their own modifications and forcing players to discover secrets within the game rather than by scouring the source code. The speed of progress is very much dependent on the course of Biskup's own life; in August of 2001, Biskup commented:

...I'm now working in a real job (most of the ADOM development was done in my student days), so things have slowed down somewhat (ok, things have slowed down quite a bit). I'm CEO of an IT company I founded with some other valiant adventurers, I'm trying to get a Ph.D. in Computer Sciences and I still want to have a life.⁷

After this initial release, ADOM grew rapidly in popularity, as Biskup continued the process of adding feature after feature to the basic design of the game. Despite years of wide attention in the Roguelike community, the first "complete" version of ADOM, Version 1.0.0 was only released in August 2001. Originally developed under Linux, ADOM is now available as a binary file for DOS/Windows, Amiga, and BeOS.⁸

Plot, Gameplay, and Design of ADOM

The plot of ADOM is generic fantasy fare. As part of the epic conflict of Order and Chaos, the protagonist sets off to attempt to foil the onslaught of the vile forces of Chaos. This quest takes the player across the gameworld, and more specifically into many dank, dark dungeons. Although ADOM's dungeons are random, various quests available for the player to pursue remain the same from game to game. But, like all Roguelikes, the plot is not nearly as important to the game as combat and exploration through the random dungeons. A successful game is relatively short by the standards of an RPG. But odds of achieving a successful game are very low, even for experienced players. Only the most dedicated players can achieve the several winning results, which are of varying difficulty. These results include the salvation of the world by the protagonist, the player's ascent to a "ChAoS God" or the "Ultimate ChAoS God," or his transformation into an Avatar of Balance or Order.

The design philosophy behind ADOM is bottom-up rather than top-down. Biskup started with a small code base to which he has continually added features: "This always has been my strategy: start out small and plan from there. Just make sure that you keep enough room for improvements but don't try everything at once, because a typical roguelike game is so huge."⁹ Initially, for example, ADOM lacked color—one "frill" a player quickly realizes is absolutely necessary to distinguish among different monsters

⁶ Biskup, Thomas. *ADOM: The Official Website*. <http://www.adom.de/adom/past.php3>

⁷ Biskup. <http://www.adom.de/adom/present.php3>

⁸ Biskup. <http://www.adom.de/adom/history.php3>

⁹ Biskup. <http://www.adom.de/adom/past.php3>

and items. But, apart from bugfixes, the vast majority of alterations to ADOM have been the addition of monsters, weapons, options, and endings.¹⁰

Biskup is a hobbyist who does not rely on ADOM as a source of income. But despite his financial independence from his audience, the desires of the community of ADOM have been vital to the process of development since Biskup first released a build of his game on the internet. While Biskup works alone on the code, the community that has risen up around the game has been extremely important in the development of the game. Adding details, details: suggestions from users about tiny things to add. These are archived on the site as RFEs, or Requests for Enhancements. There are hundreds of such suggestions that Biskup has implemented, from small features (requests to include South Park jokes in in-game fortune cookies) to genuine bugfixes and suggestions for improvement of the balance of the game.¹¹

The community of ADOM has influenced the development of ADOM in other ways. The vast majority of Roguelikes are free, not even shareware, but Biskup has suggested that he will move to a shareware model in the future—not for features that he himself wants to implement, but rather features desired by users that he feels are detrimental to the game. Among these features are cheat codes and allowing the user to select of formerly random starting attributes for characters. In other words, he plans to maintain a “base” ADOM, while users desiring broader features can pay for the shareware version.

What does Biskup plan to add to the current free version of ADOM? He puts his main goal succinctly: “More quests, monsters, items, spells and secrets.”¹² He is not pursuing a revolution in the design or gameplay of ADOM, but rather he seeks to add more challenges and mysteries for players. The fact that the same game with minor alterations can continue to capture the attention of players attests to the replayability of ADOM. Imagine playing the same single-player First-Person Shooter for years!

Future of ADOM: JADE

ADOM had an extremely long development cycle to reach “completion,” and it still continues to develop. But Biskup has felt the need to move on and code a sequel to ADOM, set in the same world, code-named JADE (Java-based Ancient Domains Engine). JADE addresses what Biskup sees as the shortcomings of ADOM, primarily technical shortcomings that make the code base of ADOM difficult to modify and extend. The alterations of JADE exist in order to improve the array of options available to the player, to improve replayability, or to make the job easier for the programmer to accomplish the first two goals.

First, JADE is intended to allow the exploration of a much larger world. The overworld map of JADE will not only be much larger than that of ADOM, but will have weather patters and more random locations. No longer will players be restricted to specific classes, but instead a character will be able to master multiple professions within a complicated yet flexible system. Monsters and players in JADE use the same data models, and JADE’s code employs flexible event-driven programming, allowing the designer to add more features, faster. Finally, JADE will contain a random quest

¹⁰ Biskup. <http://www.adom.de/adom/history.php3>

¹¹ Biskup. <http://www.adom.de/adom/fixed-rfes.php3>

¹² Biskup. <http://www.adom.de/adom/future.php3>

generator, ensuring that no two games will unfold alike, and adding even greater replayability.

But by far the most interesting development of JADE is the attempt to move away from the goal-oriented gameplay of previous Roguelikes, and indeed RPGs in general: “[The player] will be able to venture through a vast world and it’s his choice whether he wants to engage in adventure or just lead a normal and sheltered life (for an adventurer, e.g. guarding caravans). Everything can happen and usually everything will happen - it’s your choice what you make of it...”¹³ Considering how few players ever make it to any of the successful endings of ADOM, this seems like a logical development to make the game more rewarding to more casual gamers.

Analysis of ADOM

In a sense, ADOM could be regarded as the *reductio ad absurdum* of Roguelikes, living on a different plane of complexity and challenge. For example, consider the ADOM character creation process, as of Version 1.0.0: After receiving entirely random and potentially important bonuses and penalties based on the time of your character’s birth, the player chooses among 10 races (including “Troll” and “Dark Elf”) and 20 professions (including “Mindcrafter” and “Assassin”). After this, a page describing the character’s biography from birth is presented, again including random factors which affect the character’s starting situation and skills. Finally, much as in the classic prolog to *Ultima IV*, the player answers a number of hypothetical questions (for example, asking how you would respond if “Your brother has come asking that you hide him from the law”) to determine the character’s personality and attributes. The limitless options do not end with character creation. At each level up, the character will have numerous skills, such as “Literacy” or “Athleticism,” to improve.

Even if the array of options and the gaming world weren’t so enormous, ADOM’s high level of difficulty, even for a Roguelike, frustrates many players. As one fan of the sub-genre laments concerning ADOM, “My characters tend to die suddenly, unexpectedly, through no apparent ‘fault’ of my own; even when playing ultra-conservatively, they die, die, die, die, die...It is demoralizing.”¹⁴ With the player assaulted with unpredictable and unpreventable disasters at every corner, ADOM seems the ideal game for a masochist.

And yet this near-impossible behemoth of a game has become very popular: the home website has recorded nearly a million hits and it supports an active community of thousands of fans who continue to find ADOM addictive. What makes it successful? And why do gamers play ADOM rather than commercial RPGs that have graphics beyond colored ASCII?

For some players, ADOM may be a nostalgic experience in terms of early-1980’s RPGs, like the early entries in the *Wizardry* and *Ultima* series. Few successful commercial RPGs have anything like the number of options of ADOM, or the focus on straightforward combat seen in early computer RPGs. Indeed, many Computer RPGs, such as *Septerra Core* and *Anachronox*, have been strongly influenced by console RPGs like the *Final Fantasy* series, titles which minimize the number of choices for the player in favor of offering an elaborate plot. Other recent RPGs, like *Planescape: Torment*,

¹³ Biskup. <http://www.adom.de/jade/background.php3>

¹⁴ *Roguelike Review*. <http://txe.swa.com/roguelike/review.htm#adom>

focus on complex dialog rather than exploration and combat. For fans who enjoyed the classic “dungeon crawl” RPGs, Roguelike games might be appealing in some respects— if not necessarily the first choice over recent, higher-budget entries from the *Wizardry* and *Might and Magic* franchises.

Furthermore, for those willing to scale the steep learning curve, the almost absurd complexity of ADOM offers extraordinary replayability. Few single-player games will provide as distinct an experience each time through as ADOM.

Another motivation for playing ADOM was suggested by Chris Crawford: the “Need for Acknowledgement.”¹⁵ A number of websites exist wherein players post their most successful characters, often with stories of the secret of their success or the tragedy of their demise.¹⁶ The extreme challenge of achieving a successful ending makes the prize all the more enticing. Winning an ordinary RPG is expected for any dedicated player; becoming a ChAoS God in ADOM is a quite extraordinary achievement.

But how can we reconcile the popularity of ADOM with the almost inevitable failure met by a new game? Since in ADOM a normal player can have little expectation of victory, maintaining what Crawford terms the “Illusion of winnability” is difficult: “If a game is to provide a continuing challenge to the player, it must also provide a continuing motivation to play. It must appear to be winnable to all players, the beginner and the expert. Yet, it must never be truly winnable or it will lose its appeal.”¹⁷

Appreciation for the Roguelike sub-genre demands that the player abandon any desire for the “illusion of winnability.” Argues one Roguelike fan:

But, to me, with Roguelikes, winning and finishing a game is not the point... You need to get used to the idea that the game is designed to be eternally replayable. If you can push past your first couple dozen character deaths, you'll soon find yourself enjoying all parts of the gaming process, including a character's birth, life, and death.¹⁸

The fact that ADOM, or any Roguelike, demands that the player embrace this almost inevitable failure results in a game design that will probably never achieve mass appeal. But the mind-boggling array of options, the high degree of replayability, and the sheer challenge of ADOM will continue to occupy aficionados of the sub-genre.

¹⁵ Crawford, Chris. *The Art of Computer Game Design*.

<http://www.vancouver.wsu.edu/fac/peabody/game-book/Chapter2.html#Need> for

¹⁶ *ADOM Hall of fame*. <http://adom.brinkster.net/hof/default.asp>

¹⁷ Crawford. <http://www.vancouver.wsu.edu/fac/peabody/game-book/Chapter6.html#THE> ILLUSION OF

¹⁸ *Roguelike Review*. <http://txe.swa.com/roguelike/intro.htm>