

Quake: The Rise and Decay of the Grandfather of eSports

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Abstract

We will take a look at why and how Quake laid the first stone in the creation of eSports as we know them today to then degrade in popularity to the point that it is currently. We will examine the different reasons that caused it to be the number one competitive eSport as well as analyse how those ceased to be an advantage over time. The analysis will relate to events that happened in the late 90s early 2000s (1997-2001), the period that encompasses the birth of Quake as an eSport, its rise to the top and the final decline at the hands of other competitive games like Counter-Strike.

1 Introduction

The deafening and thunderous sound of the current eSports scene is getting more and more common each year that goes by and so is its volume as the latest The International event for Dota shows in the tremendous prize pool of almost 25 million dollars (*E-Sports Earnings: Largest Overall Prize Pools in eSports* n.d.).

We got used to colossal games and titanic multimillion events happening every year involving eSports competitions. But every story has its beginning and this one is no different.

Back in the 90s when eSports as they are today could only be imagined or dreamed one game and its players started to lay the first few stones. **Quake** and its small but enthusiastic fan-base had a very significant impact in creating the foundation of the

competitive gaming scene and, as such, they gained the right to be considered amongst the *Grandfathers of eSports*.

1.1 Defining eSport

Before jumping into the core of the content regarding Quake it is necessary to have a common idea of what the term **eSports** means in our current context. Commonly defined as any form of competition facilitated by video-games, that definition would be slightly distant from the real meaning that it tends to have between players. When someone that knows about the eSports scene thinks about examples of what an eSport actually is games such as *League of Legends*, *Counter-Strike*, *Starcraft* or *Street Fighter* generally come to mind.

The common factor that these games have that the definition ignores is the fact that they all involve **direct competition** against other players. This distinction is important in the context of our topic since it leaves out of the eSports definition the competitive arcade game scene in the 80s.

Games such as *Pac-Man* (Namco 1980) or *Donkey Kong* (Nintendo 1981) had significant competition before the 90s as documented in The King of Kong (Gordon 2007). But this type of **indirect competition** in which players try to perform better than their opponent against the machine is not very correlated to the current common eSports definition. A good argument for this is the fact that the top 100 games by prize money (softly correlated to player counts and view numbers) does not list a

single game that involves **indirect competition**, all of them have a direct players versus player model.

Having this in mind, a good short and simple definition could be:

Direct video-game competitions often played for on-line or live audiences

1.2 Introducing Quake

Terms such as *Arcade Style Shooter*, *Arena-FPS* or *Ego-Shooter* are commonly used to describe what Quake is. Understanding what this means is important to then being able to fully grasp why the story started and ended the way it did.

This game was about highly enthusiastic communities, almost reaching a somewhat healthy version of fanaticism. It came to tap into the deeply rooted but unsatisfied desire for real competition that these players had. Previously there were things such as the already mentioned arcade game tournaments but those lacked the thrill of directly defeating you opponent with your superior skills. And games such as *Doom* (id Software 1993) that offered similar game-play were significantly worse regarding the technology, availability, level of competition and more factors expanded in the next sections.

Here it is where the very interesting definition of *Ego-Shooter* comes into play. Surprisingly enough, that is the translation of First-person shooter for the German language. The word *Ego* here started without the usual meaning related to valuing oneself too highly but slowly morphed towards there when English speaking European players found out how well this fitted the game and its players.

The design of this game made it so mastery was difficult but satisfactory. This high skill ceiling is one of *Quake*'s most notorious characteristics even today and it made competing against similarly passionate opponents especially attractive. Even more so than the few previous directly competitive

games that came before such as the first *Street Fighter* (Capcom 1991).

1.2.1 Why not others?

Given that our definition already excludes indirectly competitive arcade games the only true relevant contender for the title of *Grandfather of eSports* is the game that was just mentioned: *Street Fighter II* (Capcom 1991).

Two games from the *Street fighter* franchise were the ones involved in the first *Evolution Championship Series* in 1996. There are two main reasons why Quake's run in the late 90s makes it more relevant than *Street Fighter*.

The first one is the raw size, visibility and quality of the first real tournament, **B3**¹. There were roughly 40 players involved and the matches were not shown on-line or to a significant live audience besides the players themselves. The only way to see some of the matches was with VHS recordings.

The other significant reason is that there was not another significant competition for *Street fighter* until the year 2000 were another *Battle by the Bay* tournament, the **B4**, was organized. This shows the **lack of impact** that this game had when compared to the big events that Quake had starting in 1997 with thousands of people in a live audience, high production value on-line streaming and big prize money.

2 The History

Notes about future content.- This section will mainly contain the events that happened between the year 1997 and the beginning of the new millennium. How and why these events happened and started sets a good framework to then go into detail

¹**B3: Battle by the Bay**(*Evolution Championship Series* n.d.) was the first tournament organized by the now known as **Evolution Championship Series**

in section 3.

Besides commenting on the facts about the events themselves in chronological order some extra comments analysing interesting phenomena will be added. A good example would be how, especially in the first few years, Quake was not actually "picked" as the game to become the eSport but it was originated from Quake fans wanting to compete so they created the tournaments, selecting which game will be in the tournaments was not even considered, they were very passionate Quake fans (and usually only played that game), so the choice was obvious (there really was nothing to choose).

In that era there were not factors like what game is the most marketable, how big is the fan-base or the hype, is it relevant for sponsors, do crowds want to watch it, can it get good venues or is this good for the future of my event. Most of those would be against Quake being chosen as a big eSports game right now, but then they were not relevant.

When commenting on the final years of Quake as the big eSports game we will mention how the biggest percentage of the public left the game to focus on others like *Counter-Strike* (Valve L.L.C. 2000) much in the same what that tournament organizers did (remarkably the CPL switching to *Counter-Strike* (Valve L.L.C. 2000) as the main game in the year 2000).

A possible approach is divide it by games: *Quake*, *Quake II* and *Quake III*.

Some events that deserve mention are:

- Red Annihilation
- All the CPL events (1997-2000) (*Cyberathlete Professional League* n.d.)
- All QuakeCon events (merged once with CPL in 1998).

A good approach could be to note what came new with each game and relate how the games improved

in each iteration and how the community also grew too the size and recognition of all the events that deserve to and will be mentioned.

Complete the History section

3 The Reasoning

Notes about future content.- This section will be the bread and butter component of the paper. Once the right context has been set in sections 1 and 2 it is possible to dive deeper into the reasons that support the statement of "Quake being the Grandfather of eSports".

One of the subsections will focus on how the design of the game affected its situation, how those made the game very compelling at the beginning and also how those ceased to be relevant in the latter years of Quake's success. Some interesting things that will be mentioned are:

- How some of the most compelling mechanics were unintended.
- The very steep learning curve and high skill ceiling, considered elitist by many, and its implications (not fun for casual players, the charm of the game being inherently against casual, big eSports games and players).
- How the good quality multi-player broke through the market allowing people to play directly against other competitors.
- How community creativity was very encouraged and important (Custom servers and custom maps, a lot of modding freedom with the example of Goosman, that worked on Quake and the *Counter-Strike*). Now developers controll the game much more as far as eSports and who makes what content.
- idSoftware as a company does not keep working on the same project, they like the make, release and move on from the game model.

Another very interesting and important section will be focused on the technology of the game. So much of its success depended on how breakthrough some of the features of the games were. Some of the things worth mention would be:

- Real 3D engine: Moving and looking in all axis (adding up and down compared to Doom).
- Best Netcode to date (TCP/IP and servers).
- Realistic rendering techniques performing very well in real time for the era.
- Lack of other games with similar technology that would impress the potential public.

Some other situational advantages that it had at the beginning could also be mentioned. A good example would be that a huge amount of people claimed that they bought Quake only for the single-player since *Doom* was already a huge success years before. Then when they had already played Quake's single-player mode and discovered the multi-player it opened this door of opportunity to keep enjoying the game in a whole different way. This is important since they did not market the game for the multi-player, and people did not feel like they were gambling and buying this "new thing", they were investing in a single-player game in their eyes from a company they already trusted.

Complete the Reasoning section

4 Conclusion

Notes about future content.-

To wrap up I would mention why after everything that has been explained I consider that Quake (or a Quake style game) can't be at the top of eSports again.

Besides that, it will contain some personal notes about the importance of this old and almost forgotten games. In some cases even unknown to new young players coming into eSports. After commenting on

the monstrous growth that eSports had in the last 20 years going from nothing to the huge movement that it is, some credit should be given to games like Quake.

A curious like of thought could also be included about how when a medium gets big enough the things considered the best are not the most popular any more. There are a lot of interesting analogies, a good one would be with music. There was a time when bands could be at the same time considered the best and the most popular (Led Zeppelin?) but then Pop music was created. Pop (from popular) music is specifically designed to be, well, popular while not necessarily being the best. In the same way, there are games considered better than other games that are more popular in the eSports scene, and it is the case that the latter are better suited and designed to be popular, watchable, enjoyable for casual players, etc.

Complete the Conclusion section

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