

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

2.1 1996-1997: The Early Days

January 1996, two young players that identified themselves online as "*Spleenripper*" and "*Dr. Rigormortis*" were already building new systems and preparing a full LAN setup to get ready for the release of Quake (Degroat n.d.). Said release was

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

still half a year hence.

Quake was already a phenomenon within its own niche before it was even a tangible game you could play. Although most of this knowledge comes from stories told by old players and currently inaccessible forums for the most part, there are still a few resources, mainly made by old Quake clans, that can give insight about how the situation was at the time (Degroat n.d.).

The first relevant version of Quake that hit the public was *QTest* (*Quake Wikia: QTest* n.d.) on February 24, 1996. It became extremely popular amongst players that already knew about *Doom* id Software (1993) and were eager to see the next big thing from *id Software*. This version only could be played in multiplayer, which shows the emphasis that the devs put on that aspect of the game.

Soon after that it came the shareware edition of Quake. By this time the formation of clans such as *The Amish*, *Red Dragon* or *Impulse 9* was already established in the community. The fact that these clans were astonishingly passionate about the game mixed with the gaming web boom at the time with some pages like *Blue's News* hitting consistently 40.000 views a day. This created the perfect hotbed for the growth of such a new and fervent community.

Soon came the real deal, the commercial release of *Quake* (id Software 1996) in May 1996 only heated the circumstances. Talks about creating tournaments were being held every day at the forums and some small ones started to happen, these were both small for current standards but big for the time. Also, the first QuakeCon (*QuakeCon* n.d.) event was held in a hotel close to id Software's offices. It had 30 attendees in the first day and 100 by the end of the weekend once the news spread out.

At this time nothing could compare to what happened in May of 1997 when businesses like Intergraph, Microsoft and the developers from id Software got together to organize the biggest tournament to date, they called it ***Red Annihilations***. Said event

was held during the now very famous **E3 expo E3** (n.d.) in the famous **World Congress Center**.

This **1v1** tournament had more than 2000 participants qualifying online and the top 16 were flown to the live setting in the event to compete for **John D. Carmack's** ² **Ferrari 328 GTS**. More and more breakthrough concepts kept being tied to this event. Not only the live audience was very significant but most of the spectators were able to watch the tournament via online in-game cameras professionally orchestrated. At the end of the tournament media like the NBC and The Wall Street Journal covered the event.

Right at that time the **CPL** (*Cyberathlete Professional League* n.d.), the pioneer in professional video-game tournament organizers, was created and a few months after, in October 1997 they organized their first event called **The FRAG** with a price pool consisting of \$4.000 in merchandise.

At the end of 1997, Quake was already becoming a big hit in the gaming community and it didn't show any signs of stopping.

2.2 1998-Early 2000: Exponential growth

Quake II (id Software 1997) was released at the very end of 1997 and quickly became the standard for tournament play. The short intervals and significant improvements between versions of Quake had the community permanently excited to learn and compete and this clearly showed during this era.

The **year 1998** fed on the previous success and saw a significant increase on both the size of big events and the amount of small ones. On July of this year the already mentioned CPL paired with some community members involved in previous tournaments organized the third QuakeCon event,

²John D. Carmack was the co-founder and lead developer in id Software during the era that concerns us.

which at the same time was the second FRAG event from CPL. At the time this presented a bad view to some members of the community which considered this as not the best event that could have been. Even in those circumstances it had an attendance of 800 people and 300 BYOC ³. The prices went from being merchandise to real money, giving \$1.000 for 5th place and scaling up to \$5.000 for first.

After contemplating the potential for big tournaments the **QuakeCon** organizers decided to dedicate more time to prepare the event without relying on the CPL. Going into the **year 1999** the event was much larger. The major involvement from id Software as a sponsor allowed to use a much bigger venue and have developers participate in the event. The attendance rose to 1100 people and 500 BYOC. Another important factor was the first ever tournament with *Quake III* (id Software 1999), which was still far from its release.

Later on in the year 2000, the event raised its numbers to 3000 attendees and 900 BYOC.

The **CPL** also kept blooming and establishing themselves as **the big fish in the growing pond** of eSports tournament organizers. They served as an example for many new game events and eSports leagues but none could compare to their success yet. After 1999 successful event they broke records when in the year 2000 they held a *Quake III* tournament with a **price pool of \$100.000**, 40.000 of which went to one of the rising stars of Quake, Johnathan 'Fatal1ty' Wendel. The existence of this character only helped eSports and Quake to be more recognized and reach new potential fans.

2.3 Late 2000-2001: Slayed by its own son

Minh "Gooseman" Le (*Counter-Strike Wiki: Mign "Gooseman" Le* n.d.) was a Vietnamese programmer deeply involved with the modding community of Quake. Him and another programmer

³**BYOC** stands for Bring Your Own Computer, the term is used for members of an event or a LAN party that carry and use their own machines.

in the same Quake modding team, **Jess Cliffe**, started to work on what would become the **heir of Quake** in the eSports scene, *Counter-Strike* (Valve L.L.C. 2000).

Counter-Strike came as a mod for *Half-Life*, the incredibly successful First-Person Shooter game based on the *Quake II* engine. Le was already used to work with said engine so modding *Half-Life* felt familiar. This created a very interesting situation after the first version of the mod came in June 1999.

CS ⁴ kept gaining fans and getting bigger by the weeks. The story of Quake was being repeated but in a much shorter time frame. Old fans from the franchise were switching to CS, tournaments quickly put it at the same position as Quake in the year 2000 and the snowball just kept fattening and rolling down an increasingly steep hill.

Such was its success that **2001** saw the decline of Quake by the hands of a game that was a direct successor. Quake not only gave a large part of its technology and design to CS, but also a big part of its fan-base, Quake-based tournament and league organizers and, in general, a perfect platform for the next big eSports to grow.

A good example was what the CPL calls the beginning of their **"Golden Years"** (*Cyberathlete Professional League* n.d.), which at the time could be considered also the golden years of eSports given the position the CPL had representing them. In 2001, the event's main title was no other than CS replacing the long standing Quake. This year saw a price-pool of \$150.000 and was regarded like the biggest event to date.

The leap was immense and so the reasons to consider Quake as the main game for a tournament or league were becoming insignificant compared to the potential wins of **having CS instead**. Other new competitive games, sometimes from other growing genres, were quickly developing and feeding

⁴CS is a common abbreviation for Counter-Strike.

from the fan-bases of older games. A good example would be *Starcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 1998) representing RTSs ⁵.

In general, given the deep relationship and obsession that the core of the Quake community had with the game, id Software's franchise fell to a stable and consistent position in the shadow of the biggest, more prominent games. Looking back during the beginning of the new millennium, it looked like the years of Quake ruling the early days of the eSports kingdom were long gone.

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 control 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 to 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.-

⁵RTS is short for the Real-Time Strategy genre or games.

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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