

Action Movies...The Video Game?

Today's gamers are quite familiar with the most popular online first person shooter, Counter-Strike. This game is actually a modification of Half-Life (or "HL"), a game released by Valve Software in November of 1998¹. In Counter-Strike (or "CS") players are split into two teams: the terrorists and the counter-terrorists. It is the terrorists' objective to plant a bomb in one of two specific bomb sites, or, in some missions, to prevent the counter-terrorists from rescuing hostages. The counter-terrorists must rescue said hostages, or defuse the bomb when it is planted. And of course, in keeping with the theme prevalent in all first person shooters today, either team can win by killing every member of the opposite team. When a round is won, the game resets, and players have at it all over again.

To describe why CS is so popular today is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is clear to anyone that plays the game that the blend of the realistic and the unrealistic make the game highly addictive. In our class we read about and studied the concept of partial reinforcement, where in order to make a particular action addictive, the lab-rat (or human) is rewarded infrequently. The reward is frequent enough, however, to motivate another attempt at the action. Just as the user becomes frustrated to the point of quitting altogether, he/she is rewarded, to continue the cycle. This manifests itself in CS in a number of ways. Players fight in realistic looking arenas, modeled after real human structures that are believable. Players wield realistic weapons, sculpted to represent actual human weaponry. Every gun in CS, from the counter-terrorist's lowly USP to the powerful AWP can be found in today's military, lending to the agency and role playing of the game; the players feel as if they are truly terrorists or counter-terrorists. At the same time, the realism is offset by a number of unrealistic properties: players can sustain falling damage without breaking legs, players can receive multiple gunshot wounds and still survive, and players can even switch between their armaments almost instantaneously, giving them more tactical advantages, depending upon the situation. This blend of realism and unrealism serves as partial reinforcement in CS, with the realism creating the atmosphere of the game, and the unrealism providing the "rewards" necessary for players to avoid the frustration and monotony of a *fully* realistic world, such as the one found in a game like Rainbow Six.

However, few gamers know that CS did not pioneer this blending effect. It was, in fact, inherited from an older game. This game was Action Quake 2, a modification of id Software's popular game, Quake 2, released in 1997². Action Quake 2 (or "AQ2") attempted to provide gamers with "All the speed of your favorite action film, without the cost of a ticket!"³ In this case history I would like to introduce the reader to AQ2, and explain what made it popular. I will describe the A-team (the developers of AQ2) and

¹ <http://www.valvesoftware.com/projects.htm>

² <http://www.idsoftware.com/business/history/>

³ <http://action.telefragged.com/oldnews.htm>

provide a detailed account of one of their projects post-AQ2, and why it was that their actions in AQ2 ultimately proved to be disastrous for this project. Finally, I will attempt to draw some conclusions from the development of the Action series, and understand what it is that we can learn from it and its community.

As stated before, Action Quake 2 was a modification of the already popular first person shooter, Quake 2. By the time id Software released Quake 2, their original Quake game and Quakeworld multiplayer variety were becoming increasingly popular. Quakeworld introduced stable networking code into an already robust game engine, which allowed even players with 14.4 Kbps modems to play competitively on the Internet. As Quake modifications (or “mods”) such as Team Fortress and Jailbreak gained popularity, more and more gamers made the transition to online play. The release of Quake 2 only brought more players online. Development teams everywhere were beginning to create mods for Quake 2, notably among them were Weapons Factory 2, Loki’s Minions CTF, and Jailbreak 2. Nowhere, though, could one find a mod that would successfully saddle “realism” onto any of these games. It was on this stage that Action was thrust forward.

The original Action development team, or, A-team, was created sometime around March of 1998, and consisted of four members. Cail and Pietro were the programmers (although Cail also contributed weapon models, maps, and sounds), Vain designed Action-themed skins for the existing Quake 2 models, and Bartender managed the project and worked on sound. Their goal was to let gamers play as their favorite action movie stars, online. To this end they began to work. They removed all of the existing weapons from Quake 2 and added their own. For long range warfare, the SSG3000 Sniper Rifle was introduced. Close quarters combat enthusiasts received the MP5/10 Submachine Gun. The Handcannon, a fearsome 12-gauge shotgun, was also added, as well as a weaker but more versatile M590 Combat Shotgun. The starting gun was the MK23 Pistol. For the ninjas, hand held knives were added. In addition, to complement the weapons, unique items were introduced. A Kevlar Vest could now deflect a portion of the damage dealt to a player’s chest region. A Silencer could muffle the sound of a Pistol, MP5, or Sniper Rifle. A Laser Sight could decrease the spread produced by the user’s gun. With these features, the A-team began a tradition that CS continued: allowing players to use only such weapons and items that are found in real life.

With these in place, the A-team moved on to other aspects of the game. Locational damage was established, so that players could track and hit different parts of the opponent’s body, namely, the head, chest, stomach, and legs. Bleeding was introduced, where wounds needed to be “bandaged” or they would constantly reduce health. This was compounded as a leg shot would cause the player to limp, reducing his/her mobility, until it was bandaged. Realistic damage was added, where a single headshot with any weapon would kill a player. Falling damage was increased substantially, so that falls could (and often would) kill players. Breakable glass was added to the unique levels that A-team members created, each of them modeled after a unique action movie, such as Die Hard, Hardboiled, or Reservoir Dogs. Players could now jump and kick other players, dealing some damage, but more importantly, propelling the kicked player backwards substantially.

The actual gameplay was finalized. Players would fight in a standard deathmatch arena, each one spawning with a Pistol and a knife. Each map would contain several unique weapons that could only be used by one player at a time. That is, there was only one MP5 on the map, and when one player took it, nobody else could get it until the owner died. The number of kills players make in each life is tracked. For each subsequent kill, they receive more and more points, as a reward not only for killing but for surviving. Thus, the crafty player would not necessarily rush head first into battle, but instead, he/she could sneak around the map, killing players when possible but above all, remaining unseen. Armed with these features, the first public release of AQ2 occurred on April 3rd, 1998, and AQ2's growing community was first established.

As time passed, more features were added. Throwing knives, grenades, and the Akimbo Pistols were thrown into the mix, along with the fearsome M4 Carbine assault rifle. New items were introduced, such as Silent Slippers which let players run without making footstep noises, and the Bandolier, which allowed players to carry more ammunition and granted them infra-red vision. New members joined the A-team as well. First came Ace12GA in May of 1998, sporting a new Handcannon model and several maps. Next came Gooseman in June of that year with some very professional looking weapon models and code to animate them. Suislide joined in August, bringing additional weapon models, skins, and web talent.

By all counts, AQ2 was on the path to success. With the release of version 0.98 in early September of 1998, teamplay supplemented the standard deathmatch gameplay, allowing clans to compete against one another. This sparked an intense growth in the mod's community. One of the first gaming ladders, The Online Gaming League⁴, added a ladder for competitive 4v4 Action teamplay. As can be seen on their old webpage⁵, the A-team liked to keep their development process open to the community. They often put forth polls to ascertain just how important that second starting pistol clip was to the player, or whether falling damage ought to be made more powerful. The official AQ2 forums were jam-packed with weapon-balance posts, where gamers argued furiously about the "over-powered M4" or whether or not the "MP5 needs a range-based damage modifier". These long and drawn-out conversations, despite being angry in tone, were constructive enough to illustrate that the mod was alive and healthy.

Why then, did this essay begin with the mention of a disastrous set of moves on the part of the A-team? What went wrong? We could say that things took a turn for the worse when, on the 30th of July in 1998, Cail and Vain's computers were destroyed by the Windows CIH virus, taking with them a large chunk of the AQ2 work. A few days later, Pietro quit the A-team and left for Germany. Not only did this halt AQ2 development for a month, but it made Cail the sole programmer on the team. The irreparable damage, however, was a much deeper and much more fundamental issue. To understand it, we need to understand the physics model present in Quake 2. Beyond the basis axes of direction, including "jump" and "crouch", Quake 2 allowed players to engage in "strafe jumping". While running, a player would periodically tap the jump key while holding either "strafe left" or "strafe right". With proper mouse coordination, this resulted in a huge increase in the player's speed, up to 4-5 times as fast as normal

⁴ <http://www.worldogl.com>

⁵ <http://action.telefragged.com/oldnews.htm>

running. A post made by a well known Quake 3 mod developer⁶ shows that John Carmack, the id Software programmer behind the engines found in the Quake series, saw strafe jumping as a bug. As the post shows, Carmack tried to eliminate strafe jumping in Quake 3, but was met with a harsh response from the gaming community who had by now harnessed strafe jumping and used it to “spice up” the game by allowing battles to be fought with more speed and agility than before. This end result had repercussions across all games, especially AQ2.

For many players, however, strafe jumping is what made AQ2 enjoyable. In their opinions, the game served up just the right blend of realism found in the locational and realistic damage and guns, and unrealism, as players could whip around the map at light speed. When strafe jumping was applied rigorously, a practice known as trick jumping emerged, where players could exploit their fast speed to get to never before seen areas of the maps, or to create faster or more stylish methods of traversing certain areas of maps.

Did action movie stars run while angled slightly to one direction, jumping like bunnies, asked the A-team? No, they dodged by rolling, sliding, or diving, was the rhetorical answer. But other players argued that strafe jumping was an effective way of representing those dodges in a game engine with a physics model that was otherwise limited. This argument became a rift that grew wider and wider between both players and developers. Those who preferred the sneaky approach to AQ2 were now shot to pieces by other players who zipped around the map at velocities approaching the speed of light. These players sided with the developers, who felt that their grand vision of “Action” was being misrepresented in the state of affairs in Action Quake 2. It soon became clear, however, that the majority of players preferred the status quo, and wanted to jump around the map at high speed. The A-team was at a loss. The game they had created, Action Quake 2, was no longer what they envisioned. The players that in the past had supported them now rejected their vision, desiring to play this unique blend of action and arcade, this amalgam of realistic weaponry and fighting with completely unrealistic high-speed movement and jumping.

For a while, nothing much happened. After the release of 1.0, Siris took over the code base, and he began fixing the bugs in version 1.0c. And there were *many* bugs. On the beginning of a round, players could move freely through obstacles until the round began, a few seconds later. If the player happened to be inside an obstacle at this time, he/she would remain stuck in said obstacle. Siris hacked around this by allowing players to use the “unstick” command, which would propel them forward slightly, allowing them to become unstuck from other players or objects. This was woefully abused, however, to allow players to cross fantastic distances at the beginning of a round. Furthermore, the entire accuracy model for AQ2 was unbalanced. The M4, when coupled with a Laser Sight, had perfect accuracy and only a slight kick up which was easy to overcome by moving the mouse down. This made it terribly overpowered. Other weapons such as the MP5 and Shotgun/Handcannon were useless in comparison. This aggravated many, as extensive arguments began to play out on the official AQ2 forums, positing that weapon balance is important to the success of the mod. Allowing the player to succeed with any weapon increases the variety of entertainment in the game, and ultimately helps to alleviate boredom, lending to the game's longevity. But perhaps the most serious bugs

⁶ <http://www.iwnation.com/Forums/index.php?showtopic=4222>

involved multiplayer servers randomly crashing for completely unknown reasons, which made server operators reluctant to even host the game.

The lackluster attitude of the A-team coupled with the sheer number of bugs in the game made this period extremely stagnant both for the mod and for the players. Poor Siris who slaved on the messy code received nearly no recognition for his efforts. His ministrations reduced the mod's CPU usage by 20%, as well as dropping memory usage and file size. At the same time, he was harassed daily by players who complained about the overpowered M4. Eventually he quit out of frustration, and the A-team asked Gudlyf from the [BH] clan to take over. Like Siris, he grew frustrated and left quickly. Shortly afterwards, Fireblade and Zucchini, two generous players from the [GENO] clan, offered to pitch in with the programming. They didn't care one way or another for the A-team's vision, but they wanted to fix the sorry state that AQ2 had ended up in. At first the A-team was dubious over allowing Fireblade and Zucchini access to the code, so they began to rewrite AQ2 without *any* of the original source code, entirely from scratch. Once their variant, dubbed "Axshun" (to avoid trademark infringement), was beginning to bear fruit, they were able to convince the A-team to release the source for version 1.0c, allowing them to perfect their work. In exchange, the A-team would retain creative control over the game. It is argued by many that had the two kept the license, Axshun could have evolved into a much richer game. However, this was not the case. The A-team continued to treat both the gamers and the [GENO] programmers with disdain, as part of the general disappointment they had for their self-termed abomination and for the community that had accepted it.

In the end, the A-team made two fateful decisions that would affect them permanently. With so few of the team actually putting in work on the mod, they decided to stop working on it, and instead, they began to focus their energies on a new mod, Action for Half-Life (henceforth known as AHL), which they hoped would realize their vision of a true Action mod. In this way, they cut themselves loose from AQ2 entirely. They also burnt their last remaining bridges to the community by not recognizing Fireblade and Zucchini's work as "official" Action material⁷. They hosted it on the Action website and made it available for players, and although they thanked both of the programmers, they did not group them with the programmers who had made AQ2 or consider them A-team material. This was highly disrespectful towards Fireblade and Zucchini, as well as towards the rest of the gaming community that supported them.

Ironically, the community progressed quite naturally and happily without the A-team. Fireblade and Zucchini completed Axshun, and released it as version 1.5. They subsequently released versions 1.51 and 1.52 with the source code included, each to fix a series of bugs that cropped up during testing, including an overpowered M3 Shotgun. Around the world, the various AQ2 communities picked up the source code and created their own projects. In North America, the Action Quake Development Team (AQDT) released AQ:Espionage/Tournament Edition, which included additional gameplay modes such as the CTF-like Capture the Briefcase as well as other features that made competitive matchplay of AQ2 easier and smoother. In the UK, AQ:Millenium was created, serving much the same purpose as the tournament features released by the

⁷ <http://aq2.action-web.net/>

AQDT. A Finnish programmer wrote an Anti-Cheat proxy program for AQ2, which established an “honor system” among willing players to assist them in finding cheaters.

The AQ2 community prospered for a while, but with the coming of other popular games like Counter-Strike and Quake III, players slowly gravitated towards newer and flashier games. Today, only several dozen North American players continue to play AQ2 daily, while the slightly larger European and Australian communities are also quite diminished. Our description of AQ2, the A-team’s first foray into Action, ends here. Let us go back and continue to examine their second attempt with AHL.

The development of AHL began while Fireblade and Zucchini were working on AQ2 version 1.5. It is unclear from the documents that remain online exactly when this happened, but the beginning of 1999, shortly after HL had been released, is a good estimate. Their first public beta release was slated for July 29th, 1999⁸, which was 9 days after AQ2 version 1.52 (the last official version) was released. In writing Action for the Half-Life engine, the A-team was able to realize a few new features. Due to the increased complexity of the HL models, they were able to implement true rolling and diving “stunts”, which they had desired for AQ2 but could never accomplish. The model and weapon animations were much smoother and crisper, thanks to HL’s skeletal animation technology and the high model polygon count. They also re-balanced much of the weapons, placing a stronger emphasis on pistol weapons and a decreased emphasis on rifles. This echoed their vision quite well, as in most action movies we see the heroes using pistols rather than assault rifles. Beyond these feature additions, a few more important changes set AHL apart from AQ2. Firstly, there was no strafe jumping. Players could no longer rebound across the map at high velocities. Secondly, the actual player speed in the HL engine was, by default, much slower. Many Quake players, after playing a single game of HL, described the engine as “thick as molasses” or “like jello”. Many of them skipped over the multiplayer gaming offered by HL, opting for the faster Quake III Arena.

The existing A-team began to work earnestly on AHL. From the onset, Gooseman, Cail, and Vain were already gone, so the A-team recruited some more members, such as the programmer Mr. Grim, the modeler Oddjob, and many, many others. The exact dates aren’t well documented, but this is no surprise given the somewhat high turnover of A-team members during this time. Eventually, as stated before, they ceased all work on AQ2 and focused solely on AHL. At the same time, they advertised AHL as the logical continuation of AQ2. They took care to explain that AHL won’t be as fast as AQ2 in terms of raw speed, but maintained that the new stunts would compensate and continue the tradition of fast-paced gameplay. When the first beta was released, everyone had high hopes for the success of the mod. Many played it expecting to find a souped-up and repaired version of AQ2. And subsequently, many were disappointed.

Why, despite the A-team's warnings, was there a huge outcry on the official AHL forums? Why were many saying that “this isn’t AQ2” and “this is the slowest game I’ve played” or “you can’t call this Action”? It is, sadly, because of misunderstood hype on the part of the A-team and the AQ2 players. In their vision of Action and the HL

⁸ <http://ahl.action-web.net>

platform, they made the assumption that many former AQ2 players would be drawn to AHL because of the similar gameplay. To promote AHL, the A-team advertised to many AQ2 players, who were drawn in by the concept of another Action game, but with better graphics, better sound, stunts, and, most importantly, official A-team support. They neglected to think about the inherently slower movement or the lack of strafe jumping. When the beta debuted, there was a strong public backlash amongst the AQ2 players, who came in expecting a pretty version of AQ2, and instead received what they thought was a very slow first person shooter.

This misunderstanding, combined with the original rift of distrust and betrayal between them, split the gap between the AQ2 community and the A-team even further. No longer would many AQ2 players support the A-team, in anything. They returned to AQ2 and ignored AHL for the rest of its existence. Without their support, AHL did not have the critical mass it needed to gain mass acceptance. It didn't have a community with the zeal that the AQ2 community had. Other complications arose when several patches to HL itself, such as the notorious version 1.1.0.4, broke compatibility with all mods except Counter-Strike. These only added to the delays experienced by the AHL development team. And of course, AHL had to compete with Counter-Strike, Firearms, and Front-Line Force, for a share of the "arcade-realism" HL mod market.

It is now 2004, and AHL has been in development for 5 years. In late 2003, the A-team finally released version 1.0 of AHL, after five long beta phases. Compared to AQ2, where the A-team developed for only half a year, followed by community development for another half a year, it is easy to see just how much more successful AQ2 was, despite the fulfillment of the A-team's vision in AHL. In its one year of development followed by a one-year peak, AQ2 had many more players than AHL has had in its entire life.

It is unfortunate that the A-team chose to follow their vision and abandon AQ2. This happened at AQ2's critical growth period, and with more support, AQ2 could have shone even stronger. Perhaps all of the bugs could have been fixed, perhaps new weapons and features could have been added, perhaps the stunts could have been properly implemented. All of these would have made AQ2 even more successful. As is AQ2 enjoyed a brief but powerful moment, whereas AHL has lasted for years with a much smaller community. In the end, I believe the fundamental problem with the A-team and AQ2 was one that plagues many mods, that is, the problem of direction. It is clear what the A-team's vision was. However, from the beginning, their desired features were added to AQ2 haphazardly, without much regard for what the finished product would be. Despite the fact that strafe jumping was well known in Quake 2, the A-team only noticed it as a *fundamental* problem towards the end of AQ2 development. There are mentions of "overly fast strafing" on their old website, but they couldn't foresee just how popular this practice would be, and how important it would be to change it early, instead of late. The A-team then abandoned AQ2 to try again with AHL, but by then, the "Action" momentum was gone. Other realism mods had surfaced, and this and other factors stagnated AHL to the point where its community was almost non-existent.

Examining AQ2 and AHL reveals just how fickle and difficult it can be to deal with a player community. Gamers who like a certain game grow very attached to each and every mechanical aspect of the game. In this sense, they are highly conservative, and

it is an extraordinary task to get them to accept change. The AQ2 players could not enjoy AHL because it did not have the strafe jumping speed they were used to. To some people this may be viewed as a very small factor, especially when one considers that AHL brought with it features that severely impacted gameplay such as the stunts. Mod teams and professional development teams alike need to realize that if they go the route of appeasing the community, they need to be prepared for times when their changes, no matter how reasonable, will not be favorably accepted. This is something that Infinity Ward, the developers of Call of Duty, are now discovering. As an example, a recent patch to Call of Duty prevented players from executing two consecutive jumps without a “rest period” in between. Despite this being such a small portion of the game, the competitive community at large literally rebelled against Infinity Ward, and it is still uncertain whether they will attempt to compromise on the issue, or whether hundreds of highly conservative players will stop playing the game.

It is clear that today's CS could not have been possible without yesterday's AQ2. We now know that the “realism-arcade” genre was pioneered by the A-team, but we must also remember the lessons of AQ2 and AHL. Just as direction and vision are necessary, community support is necessary, so a balance between the two must be reached. Furthermore, as shown by AHL, there are many factors that go into a game's success that make excelling in the game industry quite difficult, and that projects undertaken by hobbyists without financial support need to be as prepared as they are dedicated. It is my hope, as a gamer, that the industry will learn from its mistakes and that we can look forward to a future filled with novel games, a future in part pioneered by AQ2.

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