

Playing World War II: Designing a simulation game on the Resistance in Turin in collaboration with the historical archive.

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ABSTRACT

Historically games offer more and more opportunities to immerse oneself in specific contexts and re-enact specific historical events. As a theme for my doctoral project on cultural heritage, I decided to create a simulative board game about the Resistance in Turin between 1943 and 1945. This project serves to illustrate from a playful point of view the historical, political, social and military context of the city.

The game is made with materials from the city's main historical archives and structured following a specific historical bibliography and was officially presented in Turin on April 25th, 2025 during some events for the 80th anniversary of the liberation of the city of Turin.

Keywords

tabletop, games, historical, simulation, wargames, archives, ludic, history

INTRODUCTION

At a time when game studies is constantly dealing with the relationship between games and history, the University of Turin has created a doctoral program specifically to study in detail the relationship between game design and cultural heritage.

As part of my Ph.D. project, there was a desire on the part of myself, my mentors and the Piedmont Institute for the History of Resistance and Society to develop a project that would tell the story during the years 1943-45 in an unconventional way, answering the question: how can board game design be considered a tool for enhancing cultural heritage?

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THE REPRESENTATION OF ITALY IN BOARD GAMES AND VIDEO GAMES SET DURING WORLD WAR II

My research started with attending seminars with historical game designers and focusing on historical games studies (Uricchio, 2015; Chapman, 2016) and studying games that deal with the preservation of historical memory (Sisler, 2016). Then I analyzed a total of 69 video and board games set in Italy and showed that 90 percent of them reenact the Italian Campaign, which includes southern and central Italy. While in most board games Italian army is playable as part of the Axis faction, in video games Italy is an important part of the setting but presented generally as a *Non-Playing Character*. There are, however, some video games like *Venti Mesi* (We Are Muesli, 2015) or board games like *Repubblica Ribelle* (Aleph Game Studio, 2019) that manage to tell specifically what the situation was like during World War II, trying to moving away from classic war game canons, using storytelling and mechanics to focus on the civilian side of the population.

What about Piedmont and Turin? There are only one board game and one video game set in Piedmont, but none are set in Turin. The city historically played an important role for the Axis because of its industries and production of military resources, while in this region the Resistance is best known for the actions set on the mountains and the military operations in Langhe territory. Turin was not the scene of major battles, it suffered bombardment by the Allies during the course of the war and was an important hub for the management of national affairs. In addition to that it was also important for the growth of anti-fascist movements from 1943 to 1945, years when workers and citizens opposed the Germans with protests, strikes, and sabotages, which continued until the Allies arrived in the city in the spring of 1945. The purpose of my project is to use the historical archives, documents, events, and lives of the characters who contributed to the Turin resistance and bring them to life within a simulative game. The board game seen as a new medium (Booth, 2021) gives the possibility not only to actively act on the product, but also to reconfigure it by creating new scenarios (Caselli, 2022).

FROM STRIKES TO INSURRECTION: RESISTANCE IN TURIN 1943-1945

This game is made in collaboration with Istoreto (Piedmont institute for the history of Resistance and contemporary society) that counts in the archives several

thousands documents to the World War II period in the Piedmont area. Turin was a city in trouble, divided into a “bourgeois center and working-class suburbs” (Soldati, 1964). The key words on which the project was born are the terms that for Giovanni De Luna redefine this duplicity, due to survival from the War first and the Nazi occupation later: “the curfew, the bombs, the hunger, the cold, the terror” (1998), from these conditions begins the drafting of the narrative fabric. Much of the city lived in extreme poverty: the cold and hunger were the cause of many deaths in the city in those years, as well as one of the reasons that led to the organization of the strikes of March 1943. The workers' question was much discussed politically: in Turin itself parties with different ideals collaborated to defeat a common enemy (De Luna, 2021). In terms of game-design, my desire was to focus the game on the relationship between the anti-fascist parties and the city: the game in fact is a cooperative/competitive game.

During the first round players (playing four of the most important and declared illegal anti-fascist parties of that time: Communists, Socialists, Intellectual, Catholics and a left-wing non-Marxist organization called “Partito d’Azione”) must cooperate to build an anti-fascist network in the city through propaganda actions carried out with clandestine newspapers and leaflets. In the second round they also have to fight against the Nazis. Each neighborhood had a defense value, calculated according to the geographical location of the neighborhood (centrals or peripherals) and the historical presence of the Regime in that area.

The approach was to make a card-driven game with influence placement on the board, taking a cue from *Twilight Struggle* (GMT Games, 2005). Each player will hold cards related to events, locations, and characters specific to his or her party and some cards representing events or characters related to the regime and occupiers that harm the players. The key mechanic is the placement of influence in the city, neighborhoods or factories; having reached a certain number of cubes in each area, strikes or rebellions can be initiated. It is these actions that generate victory points: if the players win together there will be a moral winner above the others.

The game is constructed to be wearisome and exhausting. For example, Fascist cards are stronger than player cards and the odds on die rolls in succeeding in propaganda are often unbalanced. In addition, the mechanics of drawing player cards and historical events make the games always structured differently and always unpredictable. This is to simulate the difficulty of the imponderable and uncertainty

that was experienced in trying to counter the regime. The feeling of constantly living with the risk of being discovered, betrayed, arrested, killed. The game is meant to be a small tribute to all those people who fought and many times fell to the cry of “Long live free Italy!” (Pansa, 1995).

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