Remade in Italy:
Italian Tabletop Gaming for the International Market

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It can happen that after a country acquires predominance in the production of certain artifacts, a group of authors from a different culture brings a fresh and innovative approach in that field, changing the standards of the very arena they entered. In the world of comics, this process occurred when several writers from the UK (like Alan Moore, Grant Morrison, or Neil Gaiman) started writing for American publishers in the 1980s and 1990s. While the resulting comics were American properties, the iconoclastic approach of these authors gave the stories a distinctive identity, which made American writing look bland in comparison, and forced it to evolve. In the tabletop games industry, something similar occurred when gifted German designers started developing a new philosophy of gaming in the 1908s and 1990s, challenging what up to then was an American dominance of the Western market. These designers created a style of games characterized by limited randomness, intense player engagement, short rulesets, high production values, lack of direct conflict, and predictable play times. This type of design became known as "German-style game", and after being further refined by other European authors came to also be called "Eurogame". In turn, the American market scrambled to adapt to the immense popularity that these games quickly acquired, to the point that today a German-style game / Eurogame can be designed and produced equally well in Essen, Paris, or Rio Rancho (NM).

In the Renaissance of tabletop gaming we are currently experiencing, which was kickstarted by the diffusion of Eurogaming but also went on to include role-playing gaming and thematic gaming, Italian designers and publishers certainly play a role. In the present essay I will map out some of the most significant contributions by Italian designers and publishers to the current hobby gaming market and culture, and will examine if, like it happened for English comics writers and German designers, the Italian perspective also brought a new, and specifically Italian, wave of change. For this reason, I will only discuss hobby games designed and published by Italians which had an impact on the international market.

The most popular Italian company making hobby games today is certainly Ares Games, founded in 2011. The company is usually identified with the person of Roberto Di Meglio, a game designer and Ares' production manager and main spokesperson. Soon after its incorporation, Ares made its mark in 2012 by publishing updated and enhanced versions of modern classics originally published by the Italian Nexus: *War of the Ring* (2004), by Di Meglio - Nepitello - Maggi, and *Wings of War* (2004) by Andrea Angiolino, rebranded by Ares as *Wings of Glory*. Designed by Italians and produced by Italian companies both in the Nexus and Ares editions, these games are characterized by highly international themes, the former being a rendition in playable format of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy by Tolkien, and the latter being an expandable wargame of air combat which includes models of English, French, German, American, Russian, Japanese, and also (but not prominently) Italian aircraft. Both games have been massively influential both in Europe and in North America.

Wings of Glory, for example, has been constantly expanded by Ares since its original release, and continues to be incremented by new models every year. Such a nearly 10-year run is the sign of a massively successful operation supported by a healthy community of fans. At the same time, several American companies have profited freely from some of the innovations introduced by *Wings of Glory* – and this fact, while certainly unpleasant for Ares, is still a sign of the game's success (no one tries to appropriate a stinker). Given that game mechanics cannot be legally patented, a more vivacious circulation of ideas is to be expected in the world of game design than in many other sectors. It is still considered good etiquette to give credit to designers one is borrowing from, and whenever possible to develop a new version of a game together with the author of the original idea. Still, the American company Fantasy Flight Games released in 2012 an expandable game of space combat called *Star Wars: X-Wing Miniatures Game* (usually known as *X-Wing*), which ported the main ideas of the *Wings of War / Wings of Glory* system to the *Star Wars* universe. *X-Wing* was to be originally developed in partnership with Nexus, but as Nexus folded, Fantasy Flight simply proceeded to make their own version. While there are differences between the two games, no one who has played both *Wings of Glory* and *X-Wing* would fail to see the strong resemblances between the two, which are made even more obvious by the similarities in the names (both containing the word "wing"). *X-Wing* has since become one of the most popular games of the last decade, vaunting a second edition in 2018 and over 100 expansions to date.

Soon after the original release of *X-Wing*, the American WizKids developed its own modified and rethemed versions of *X-Wing* (and therefore *Wings of Glory*) in their moderately successful *Star Trek: Attack Wing* (2013) and *Dungeons & Dragons: Attack Wing* (2014), which revolve around starships and fantasy creatures, respectively, and again include the word "wing" in the title. In the process, as *Wings of Glory* became the source for many American equivalents, the core system abandoned historicity to embrace fictional themes and well-established franchises in the hobby world. Things came to full circle when Ares released its own modified sci-fi version of the original game, developing *Battlestar Galactica: Starship Battles* (2018) around the game engine of *Wings of Glory*.

As for *War of the Ring*, both the 2004 and the 2012 versions can be seen as having a significant impact on modern gaming, especially when it comes to thematic games. Ancient games tended to be abstract, while early modern games often included a subject that was still very loosely represented (one does not learn much about geese by playing *Goose*). Starting from the 19th century, game companies have often relied on famous intellectual properties to boost their sales, with games incorporating content from popular books first, and film and TV later. Still, like with *Goose*, the connection with the subject remained superficial and cosmetic, to the point that most games based on famous franchises throughout the 20th century did tend to be thinly disguised versions of *Goose* (or *Monopoly*, *Trouble*, or *Clue*). Gaming for hobbyists in the late 20th century and early 21st started taking theme seriously, and at the cost of increased complexity and longer rulesets, it started capturing the feel and essence of its topics. *Monopoly: The Lord of Rings* (2003) has nothing of the majesty and epic sweep of Tolkien's saga: it is simply *Monopoly* with renamed pieces. *War of the Ring*, however, is a complex and innovative game built around the key elements of the original story, starting with the heavy asymmetry of the parties involved. One player controls the forces of darkness, and marches large armies across the land in an attempt to crush enemy resistance and capture the Fellowship of the Ring. The other player, controlling the Free People, attempts to keep the armies of darkness at bay, and most importantly stealthily maneuvers the Fellowship ever closer to Mount Doom. Commitment to theme leads the game to have overlapping but separate sets of rules for the two players, for example regarding the fact that to portray the

secretive movements of the Fellowship the game piece representing it is placed on the board only when the agents of Mordor locate it. Add to these mechanics a map the successfully reproduces the setting of the novel, evocative plastic miniatures, and cards, tokens, and game effects all actively synergized to convey the main elements of the story, and it is no surprise if the game was received as a remarkable achievement in thematic gaming. Rarely, before 2004, had tabletop board games managed to capture the essence of their fictional sources so effectively and compellingly. The game has been a milestone in paratextual thematic gaming (based on preexisting fictional sources) but it also showed game designers how to establish a feeling of immersion in any kind of storyworld, including those created specifically for a game, and not coming from preexisting fiction.

The status of modern classic that *War of the Ring* reached almost overnight was probably a strong factor in the successful diffusion of thematic games in the 21st century. Around the same time, the American Fantasy Flight acquired important licenses like *Star Wars* and *Game of Thrones*, and came to be identified as a leader in fiction-based games that could transmit the experience of the original stories. As this was happening, Nexus did not remain idle, and released important thematic games like *Marvel Heroes* (2006), about superheroes, and *Age of Conan* (2009), based on the famous fantasy barbarian. Ares picked up where Nexus had stopped, and after *War of the Ring* and *Wings of Glory* released the highly thematic *Galaxy Defenders* (2014), based on an original sci-fi universe; *The Battle of Five Armies* (2014), from Tolkien's *The Hobbit*; *Last Friday* (2016), inspired by American slasher movies; *Sword & Sorcery* (2017), inspired by the archetypes of Anglo-American fantasy; *Hunt for the Ring* (2017) again on *The Lord of the Rings*; the abovementioned *Battlestar Galactica: Starship Battles* (2018), based on the TV show of the same name. What all of these games have in common is their commitment to creating thematic immersion through rules and components tailored to their sources. However, they all rely on patently non-Italian sources, but rather on genres and franchises originating in the US and the UK. And while all of these genres are also popular among Italian hobbyists, it is hard to imagine that it was to please Italians specifically that such topics were adopted. Rather, these topics opened the way for Nexus and especially Ares to gain the massive international popularity they enjoy now, to the point that Ares' stand at Gen Con (the largest game convention in the US, and second in the world) is one of the largest and most popular of the event.

In this sense, we can say that Ares games are not just made in Italy, but remade in Italy. Topics and sources originated in the Anglo-American world, and transported to Italy, are turned by Italian designers and publishers into playable transpositions of those sources aimed primarily at the American market (given its size) and secondarily to other markets, including the Italian one. Couldn't Ares apply its philosophy of intense thematic immersion to *The Frenzy of Orlando*, *Jerusalem Delivered*, or *The Betrothed* (with the stealth mechanics of *War of the Ring* to represent Renzo's run from the law)? Generally speaking nothing would prevent them from doing so, but clearly the idea is not palatable enough to be pursued. Once a strong bridgehead in the American and international market has been achieved, it would be strange for them to turn back and devote their efforts mainly to the much smaller home market.

The potential "Italianness" of Nexus and Ares games is lost not only as the level of the subject, but also at that of the game mechanics. The German-style games we discussed at the beginning have a strong family likeness regardless of topic, while gameplay in highly thematic board games, even though the Italian *War of the Ring* was a pioneer, does not exude a particularly or specific Italian fragrance. For one thing, in the early 21st century designers outside of Italy were

also toying with the idea, simultaneously and independently from the people at Nexus. For example, the board game *A Game of Thrones* (2003) was designed, developed and published by Americans, with no contact with the *War of the Ring* project, and also succeeded at establishing a convincing rendition of its source (*A Song of Ice and Fire*). The parallel drive toward thematic gaming in the US, and the very success of *War of the Ring* internationally (especially in the US), kickstarted a simultaneous development of thematic gaming in Italy and in the US. German-style gaming grew slowly within Germany for over a decade (early 1980s to mid 1990s) before exploding as an international phenomenon and starting to influence non-German designers. By then, the main traits of a national school of game design were clear. Non-German authors could add to German-style gaming, but not contribute to shape it substantially, because that part had already been done. But in the same years as Italian game designers were applying the philosophy of *War of the Ring* (2004) to *Marvel Heroes* (2006) and *Age of Conan* (2009), designers and publishers in the US and elsewhere were doing precisely the same, resulting in well-received fiction-based games by international authors, including *Arkham Horror* (2nd ed., 2005), *Fury of Dracula* (2nd ed., 2006), *Beowulf: The Movie* (2007), *The Call of Cthulhu: The Card Game* (2008), *Battlestar Galactica: The Board Game* (2008), *Middle-earth Quest* (2009), or *Battles of Westeros* (2010). A school of Italian game design with a unique personality and a national flavor simply did not emerge because many others outside of Italy were pursuing the same objectives at the same time, exerting their own influence on each other and on Italians, and also because the American and international market remained the main target of Italian thematic designers and publishers all along. We have therefore this strange paradox, that while the Italian *War of the Ring* may have been one of the pivotal inspirations of thematic gaming in the 21st century, Italian publishers and designers cannot claim a particular influence on today's popularity of thematic gaming. Their effort was part of an intrinsically international trend, and one in which Italians had to adapt and follow at least as much as they led.

Another example of a similar process was started by *Four against Darkness* (2016) by the Italian Andrea Sfiligoi, published by Sfiligoi's own Ganesha Games. The game is a pen-and-paper game-master-less role-playing game that can be played in solitaire or cooperatively. It is inspired by classic role-playing games, and in particular it appears to harken back nostalgically to the 1983 edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* – the so-called "red box", which is universally acclaimed as one of the most iconic iterations of the game. In *Four against Darkness* the players control a party of heroes inspired by the archetypes of fantasy (warrior, wizard, elf...), and lead them into a dungeon full of monsters, traps, and treasures. As in most classic role-playing games, the goal is mainly self-aggrandizement, which is pursued by defeating enemies, acquiring experience points, leveling up, and slaying boss monsters. Physically speaking, *Four against Darkness* is a book, which is again typical of role-playing. It was originally conceived in English and for digital distribution, which allowed Ganesha (Sfiligoi's one-man operation) to gain immediate and unfiltered access to the world market. Anyone with an internet connection could (and can) order a copy from any print-on-demand service, and have it delivered in a matter of days. One can even just purchase the file at a reduced price, and print their own copy at home.

Four against Darkness contains information on how to create one's characters and how to procedurally generate the dungeon and the encounters by rolling dice on specific tables. Typically, the player would roll dice to determine which kind of room or hallway the heroes enter next, and which monsters, treasures, or traps (if any) are in there. Once the encounter is thus set up, the players make decisions that affect the outcomes of the event and will result in many different effects.

Content-generating tables of this kind have a tradition in role-playing which is as old as the genre itself. The first edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974) already contained tables to procedurally generate outdoor encounters, and a supplement by Gary Gygax released the following year (*Solo Dungeon Adventures*) added mechanisms to create indoor environment, basically providing an almost complete precedent for *Four against Darkness*. Ever since, similar random generators have appeared in role-playing hundreds if not thousands of times, most often as specific sections in larger manuals, and at times as the heart of an entire game or supplement (as famously in the 1979 *Tunnels & Trolls: Arena of Khazan*, a procedurally generated game of gladiatorial combat). In creating *Four against Darkness*, Sfiligoi could therefore rely on well-tested techniques from American role-playing. This could have been both good and bad. On one hand, the game had the advantage of looking familiar, and therefore easy to learn and play, to many role-players. On the other hand, that very familiarity could have caused *Four against Darkness* to sink into oblivion among hundreds of similar products. And yet, Sfiligoi's design somehow succeeded at taking the good without getting saddled with the bad. The game offered an approachable, well-paced, self-contained adventure system that, while adding some truly innovative touches, shines principally through its masterful execution of well-known concepts. We could say: *Four against Darkness* did not reinvent the wheel, but made it spin better than most.

The unexpected success of *Four against Darkness* led Sfiligoi to soon expand the game system with many supplements and standalone expansions, some written entirely by himself, and some in partnership with or outsourced to other designers, like the Australian Victor Jarmusz, the American Jeffery Baker, or the Canadian Erick Bouchard. Each supplement or standalone expansion relies heavily on the core concepts of *Four against Darkness*, so that the fans can find what attracted them toward the game in the first place, but also includes enough innovations to avoid unpleasant redundancy. As of now, more than 25 expansions and supplements for *Four against Darkness* have been released, showing the impressive success of the operation. While sometimes the system branches out into unusual declinations of the fantastic (like *Four against the Titans*, set in ancient Greece, or *Four against Ragnarök*, based on Norse myth), by and large most of these ancillary sets for *Four against Darkness* are classic, archetypal, Anglo-American fantasy, of the kind made popular by Tolkien originally, and turned into a topic for gaming by *Dungeons & Dragons*. «People only want elves!» joked Sfiligoi when asked about this trend by the author of this piece. Maybe unsurprisingly, classic fantasy developed in the UK and the US remains the most appealing source for role-playing in a market driven by American gamers. Like for Nexus and Ares thematic games, we can verify that Italian designers and publishers have had most success when they entered the American-led international market almost stealthily, without rocking the boat. German designers in the 1990s changed the rules of the game for everyone (pun intended); Italians learned to play thematic gaming and role-playing well, and became famous for their skillful use of Anglo-American game conventions and topics.

A partial step in a different direction, with an American-born game engine and an exquisitely Italian topic, is in the role-playing manual *Brancalonia*, by Mauro Longo et al. The game has been originally written in Italian, and it is presently being translated and developed to be released in early 2021 in both Italian and English. *Brancalonia* is not a standalone game, but an expansion of *Dungeons & Dragons* falling under *D&D*'s Open Gaming License, which allows third parties to freely develop ancillary materials for *D&D*. In this sense, *Brancalonia* is legally and mechanically an "American" product made by Italians, as it simply cannot be played without using the 5th edition of *Dungeons & Dragons*. Differently from Ares games and *Four against Darkness*, however, the topic of the game comes from the Italian adventurous tradition, with a

strong propensity for the comic, the ironic, and the picaresque. Boccaccio, Ariosto, Tassoni, and movies like *L'armata Brancaleone* or *Il soldato di ventura* (rather than the lofty Tolkienesque tradition) act as the sources for an original experiment of "spaghetti fantasy", whose goal is to combine Anglo-American gameplay and Italian culture, humor, and mindset. The image on the cover of *Brancalonia*, featuring a warrior who rests on the hilt of his swords while drinking from a flask of wine, encapsulates the spirit of the operation.

Thanks to an effective media campaign (conducted almost entirely in Italian), the game has attracted considerable attention, and has run a very effective Kickstarter campaign, collecting almost 200,000 euros. Now, if the trends we delineated above hold true, the penetration of *Brancalonia* in the international market should be more limited than that of products exhibiting both mechanics and contents resonating with American culture. We can imagine that while Italian players would appreciate familiar mechanics and contents, international players would mainly be attracted by the popularity of *D&D* and by the novelty of the setting, without the same degree of emotional investment in a tradition they know little or nothing about.

The hypothesis is confirmed by data shared by Mauro Longo with the author of this piece, showing that of the Kickstarter 3,297 supporters of *Brancalonia*, 1,617 are from Italy, followed by 730 from the US. Other countries follow after a considerable drop, with 180 backers from the UK, 104 from Canada, and an average of 50 backers each from the following 6 countries. The Italian team and the Italian topic, running on an American game engine, do not appear to have the same appeal on American and international audiences as games with Anglo-American mechanics and topics. This is made even clearer when considering that 730 American backers are a much smaller percentage of the US gaming community than 1,617 are of the Italian scene. If the game had raised the same level of interest and captured the same share in the two countries, the American total would be much higher than the Italian.

But isn't this obvious and banal? Shouldn't we expect that a national topic would necessarily thwart international success? The answer is no, because that's not how things always work in gaming. For example, a German-style game designed and produced by Germans, even without an Anglo-American theme, will tend to sell a larger number of units in the US than in Germany, as one can expect from a comparable degree of success within a much larger market. In the case of *Brancalonia*, the impression is that the *D&D* element plays in favor of a penetration in the US; the unfamiliarity of the theme against it; the Italianness of the authors neither in favor nor against it – a neutral factor, like it is in games by Ares or in *Four against Darkness*, which people buy because they love Tolkien and *D&D*, not because they see an Italian name on the cover.

In conclusion we can say that Di Maggio, Sfiligoi, the team behind *Brancalonia*, and many others, are internationally respected Italian designers and publishers, and while they are known to be Italian, they are not known *as* or *because* Italian. There is no "Italian touch" or "Italian philosophy" that fans of Ares games or *Four against Darkness* have learned to appreciate and have come to expect. There is such a touch in *Brancalonia*, and its effect appears to have been limiting, rather than propulsive. International and especially American gamers expect high quality, smooth execution, solid mechanics, fun Anglo-American-based topics from Italian designers and makers, but they don't do so *specifically*, as they expect the same things from American publishers too. In this sense, we can say that there is nowadays a strong trend of tabletop games "remade in Italy" which have had considerable success in the international market. These games have been designed by acclaimed Italian professionals, and yet they are not exactly Italian games, and therefore, unsurprisingly, do not add up to any recognizable kind of school or tradition. With little paradox

we could say that the most famous Italian operators in tabletop gaming are designers and publishers who happen to be from Italy, speak Italian, feel culturally Italian, (usually) live in Italy, but whose most appreciated work is not, in any meaningful sense of the word, Italian.