

Corteo and political play in late 1970s Italy

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ABSTRACT

This abstract presents a historical analysis of *Corteo*, a tabletop wargame produced in Italy by a group of far-left militants as a political statement. The abstracts employs a twofold methodology – oral history and a design analysis based on Švelch’s notion of “speech act” as applied to game studies – in order to demonstrate the relevance of studying locally produced analog games as parts of a more comprehensive cultural and political heritage.

Keywords

Local history, oral history, wargames, political activism

In 1977, following the death of feminist activist Giorgiana Masi during a protest rally, the Italian Ministry of the Interior Francesco Cossiga declared a temporary ban on all political demonstrations and marches in Rome. The documented habit of the Roman far-left and anarchist groups of organizing the “manifestazioni del sabato” (“Saturday’ marches”) came to a sudden halt. In the year following the ban, a group of activists decided to design a boardgame that would allow them to re-enact those marches and come up with tactics to face police repression.

This collective of designers, named CUNSA (Collettivo un sacco alternativo – A very countercultural collective, a riff on an idiomatically Roman phrase), released the first edition of *Corteo* (“march” or “demonstration”) in late 1979. The game was later seized by the police – who considered a tool for political radicalization potentially leading to terrorism – and then re-published by Mondadori, Italy’s largest publisher at the time, owned by entrepreneur and, later, politician Silvio Berlusconi.

Based upon the blueprint of traditional hex-and-counters wargames, *Corteo* is a two-player games, with one player acting as the activists, and the other as the police. Both players must secure their position and gain ground through tactical combat in a fictional urban context.

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This paper offers a reconstruction of the history of *Corteo* and an analysis of its salient game design features, both in relation to other existing games, and with regards to the authors' stated intentions. The paper employs a twofold methodology which, in itself, acts as a proposed best-practice for analogue and digital game historiography. On the one hand, the research is backed by an extensive historical excavation, performed mainly by means of oral history. The paper is based on over 20 hours of oral accounts, and several unpublished or rarely-seen documents (see also Casa, 2009). On the other hand, the game design analysis moves from Švelch's (2018, via Austin 1962) proposal of reading local independent games a ludica speech acts, that is as identitary or political statements made through game design. *Corteo* is a relevant example of such game, since it was produced within a relatively closed community, and distributed alongside other materials (pamphlets, books, flyers, posters, political newspapers) which helped position it as part of the larger communicative project of the Roman far-left movements of the time.

The main research questions, that will be addressed during the presentation and the discussion, can be summarised as follows:

- 1) What is the role and positioning of *Corteo* within the far-left movements of late 1970s Italy? How was it perceived and how (if at all) did it contribute to the political project and agenda of its creators?
- 2) How (if at all) were communities of play and political groups connected at the time in Rome? How can this knowledge contribute to a cultural history of play in Italy?
- 3) How does *Corteo* relate to existing wargames simulating urban and tactical-level warfare and what kinds of adaptations were made by the authors of *Corteo* to the existing blueprint of American wargames?

Our paper aims at reading *Corteo* as a political speech act performed through game design, but also as a proof of the existing superimposition between niche gaming cultures (e.g. wargames, strategic games, historical simulations) and political activism in late 1970s Italy, thus contributing to the larger project of writing a political history of XX Century tabletop wargaming (Alonge, 2019).

The final section of the presentation will be devoted to the analysis of the influence of *Corteo* on later games and its cultural relevance in popular culture in the 1980s. We will argue that *Corteo* ignited a small but significant wave of politically-inflected board games (e.g. *Golpe*, "Coup") which confronted the players with ludic versions of some of the facts of the so-called "anni di piombo" ("years of lead"), a time of political violence and social unrest that started in the 1970s and extended into the early 1980s.

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