

Italy

Video games entered Italian society in the late 1970s, mostly notably *Space Invaders* (1978), with a few other exceptions. Investing more in hardware development than software and play, Italian information technology (IT) developer Olivetti produced globally competitive computing machines without thinking of any dedicated games. On the other hand, arcade manufacturer Zaccaria developed the first Italian coin-op, *Quasar* (a *Space Invaders* clone), in 1980 (also worthy of mention is Zanussi's Creativision platform). Such attempts, however, had a marginal impact compared to the global success of American and Japanese machines. The early cultural imaginaries

of games produced in Italy were initially and largely characterized by themes imported from transnational media, such as high fantasy, space, and the Cold War. Games also sparked a nascent hacker subculture, beginning with early adopters and experimentations. As a consequence, creative elements of national or regional character, which were largely absent at the beginning, began to emerge through local designers and companies by the late 1980s.

Between 1985 and 1995, the Italian video game development scene started to take shape with Idea, Simulmondo, Genias, and other small-to-medium work design, production, and distribution teams. In a market where consumption and the development of a critical scene and fandom were largely spun by the localization of foreign products, Simulmondo experimented with peculiar distribution models (e.g., games sold as episodes at newsstands and presented in glossy comic-like cases) and successfully built brand and license relationships with themes and brands from national creative industries, teenage audiences, and popular culture, especially via comics (such as *Dylan Dog* [1986–present] and *Lupo Alberto* [1974–present]), pioneering a serial and cross-media mode of production and attempting to reach European and international audiences. Sports were a significant theme as well, as in the case of *Mille Miglia* (1991) and *I Play 3DSoccer* (1991).

The early 2000s were characterized by an increasing need for large budgets. Italian software houses had to gather sufficient financial resources to claim a position in a market dominated by harsh international competition. Two companies emerged as leading examples: Milestone

and Artematica. Both initially focused on the PC market and were eventually able to license original products for the international console manufacturing giants. On the one hand, Artematica can be taken as an example of how Italian productions functioned through a combination of adaptations and the licensing of local brands deemed as having enough potential to attract a national and transnational audience (such as *Druuna: Morbus Gravis* [2001], *Totò Taste* [2004], and *Diabolik: The Original Sin* [2007]). On the other hand, Milestone was the only Italian company that was able to develop the resources to produce demanding triple-A game franchises such as *MotoGP*, *Ride*, and *WRC*, usually themed after attractive sports and racing brands. The increasing need for significant production capital also widened the geographical gaps between more and less affluent regions in the Italian scene.

During the 2010s, the increasing global expansion of video game audiences as well as the potential for easier access to development and distribution tools allowed for a flourishing of small companies and independent teams alongside an expanding triple-A industry, coinciding with a diversification of audiences. Success stories include Italian game company and publisher Mangatar and games such as *Bang!: The Official Video Game* (2010) and *Candy Crush Saga* (2012), which hailed from companies either based in Italy or that involved Italian designers and lead practitioners. However, Italy largely remained a consumer base for foreign productions while also providing a localization workforce for external producers and distributors. While multinationals such as Ubisoft consolidated their presence in Italy by

opening local headquarters, smaller Italian software houses (e.g., RayLight and SpinVector) struggled to keep pace with personnel and resources. In parallel, distributors such as 505 Games and Leader became publishers with a global scope (e.g., *PayDay 2* [2013] and *Rocket League* [2015]).

In principle, the rise of crowdsourcing platforms, free game engines, and accessible delivery channels and the potential for mobile/social market penetration during the 2010s also helped the national production scene to establish itself on the global stage. However, no nationally distinctive Italian wave of mobile/social video game companies and games emerged. Still, elements of innovation developed from within the indie scene. Molleindustria, a collective of game designers, created highly groundbreaking serious games (e.g., *Operation: Pedopriest* [2007] and *Faith Fighter* [2009]).

Mobile devices also increased the audience of the medium, pushing local developers to find novel solutions to attract players. Some elements of “Italianness,” such as references to pop culture, emerged in games such as *Doom and Destiny* (2011) and *Joe Dever’s Lone Wolf* (2013), even though mostly within transnationally recognizable styles (such as pan-Asian role-playing game [RPG] aesthetics and Western graphic novels). Casually oriented projects embedded themes from Italian national and popular cultures and histories while trying to attract both a domestic and international audience. The industry’s overall production presents an ambivalent character, oscillating between global themes, such as 1980s nostalgia and chapters of Italian history. Some games sought to employ the medium to convey themes of national

culture (as in the case of Italian National Resistance during World War II, which is represented in the video game *Venti Mesi* [2016]).

Over the past decade, scholars and small companies have developed small-to-medium production scale games with national and regional themes (e.g., *Wheels of Aurelia* [2016], *Slaps and Beans* [2017], and *Milanoir* [2018]). These games drew on themes from Italian society and popular actors and film genres, making use of regionalisms and providing discourses on nationhood and its narratives as their main features or selling points. Such productions coexist at the national level of production in a separate niche from the local subsidiaries of multinationals such as Ubisoft. While triple-A products such as the *Assassin's Creed* series may resort to globally recognizable, grand historical themes and commonplaces, such as Italian Renaissance, the increasing mainstreaming of games in Italian society has inspired institutional and entrepreneurial projects aimed

at supporting the local industry and cultural heritage through digital games. Thus, various initiatives have begun to praise games as a medium through which to promote national and regional heritage at an international level, making the Italian market a promising terrain of investigation for the institutionalization of digital games. The establishment of AESVI, Italy's association of game producers and distributors, has been hailed as a major turning point for the promotion of the national games market, which still struggles with poor public support, lack of private investments, and insufficiently coordinated education efforts.

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See also: France; Germany; Spain

Further Reading

Gandolfi, Enrico. "Italy." In *Video Games around the World*, edited by Mark J. P. Wolf, 305–318. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015.