

Militarizing Monopoly: Game Design for Wartime

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Monopoly was born an American game and became an international phenomenon. Since its creation at the turn of the twentieth century, it has been licensed in 103 countries and printed in 37 languages. These transformations make Monopoly a paradox. It is at once a global artifact and a local one. Historically, the design of the board changed with each new national context, while the capitalist spirit of the game remained the same. Gaining ownership of a city, block by block, establishes the Monopolist, the winner. Put another way, the rules encourage players to dominate the game's economy as a means to take ownership of its geography. Monopoly was thus well-positioned to channel the combative mindset of the late 1930s, when it first began its journey to near-universal familiarity. In this article, I tell the story of how Monopoly, a familiar object, was militarized and commercialized on the eve of World War II. I trace how game makers working for both Allied and Axis nations redesigned Monopoly to address their own political contexts, ranging from the Great Depression to Italian Fascism to Nazi Germany POW camps.

To understand how different nations mobilized Monopoly for wartime, we first turn to the historical origins of its design. Monopoly was invented by Lizzie Magie, the talented writer and inventor, in Maryland in 1903. Originally titled "The Landlord's Game," Magie intended the game as a pedagogical tool. The game circulated through the East Coast and Midwestern states, becoming popular in Quaker circles. In 1928 one young teacher, Ruth Hoskins, brought it from her home in Indiana to New Jersey. To connect her Quaker colleagues with the game, she worked with Dorothy and Cyril Harvey to design a new grid based on Atlantic City, the site of the Friends School where Hoskins worked. It soon became popular throughout the city. Playing promised to demonstrate the negative aspects of concentrating land in private hands. Ironically, the lesson is the opposite of the goal of modern Monopoly. Today, the goal of the game has evolved into one of real estate accumulation and property ownership. Originally, two sets of

learn that building as much as possible is the quickest path to victory. Liquid funds encourage construction, so mortgages can offer players another means toward this desired end. Other factors affect the players' funds as well. Community Chest and Chance cards, as well as tax squares, stall or stimulate financial progress. The aim of the game is to drive opponents into bankruptcy. Calous though this goal may seem, it aimed to teach an economic lesson: the evils of monopolies. Magie aimed to spread the financial gospel of political economist Henry George. An anti-monopolist, George argued that the most ethical economies were those that rewarded wealth creation. They were, he contended, far preferable to unrestrained commercial enterprise that monopolies trigger and to the extreme social inequality that they ultimately cause.³

In 1936 Parker Brothers authorized Monopoly for sale abroad. The company began with expansion in Great Britain, by licensing to the John Waddingtons Limited game company for the game's production and sale. Originally, Waddingtons had been a printing company. It created designs for paper, cardboard, and silk. Waddingtons later expanded into games and developed Parker Brothers distribution channels in Anglophone nations (e.g., Australia and New Zealand). Soon, the company expanded to the European market as well, registering Monopoly with the British Patent Office. Having secured the Monopoly trademark, Waddingtons then licensed the reproduction rights to Arnaldo Mondadori, the Milanese publishing magnate, for Italian distribution.⁴ Mondadori's in-house translators, including Emilio Ceretti, eagerly gathered to see the game.⁵

Emilio Ceretti, known as Mimi, was not yet thirty and had joined Mondadori Publishing just one year earlier. But he had already established himself as a journalist and film critic for *L'Ambrosiano* and *Il Tempo*. In addition, Ceretti was fast becoming Mondadori's top translator for the Medusa series, which focused on American and British short stories, including Aldous Huxley's *The Gioconda Smile* (1933) and Katherine Mansfield's *The Singing Lesson and other Stories* (1935).⁶ A fan of American popular culture, Ceretti undertook the Monopoly translation project on behalf of the Mondadori publishing house. Together with two colleagues, Paolo Palestrino and Walter Toscanini, Ceretti founded the board game company Editrice Giochi S.A. Authenticated under Ceretti's ownership by patent #225-13, Monópoli was to be Editrice Giochi's first board game.⁷ But changing American Monopoly to Italian Monópoli involved much more than language translation. Rather, it was a political translation—one that reconfigured Atlantic City's free-wheeling capitalism to align with the Fascist economics of industrial Milan (see Figures 2 and 3).

- 3 Advertisement for The Landlords Game, *The Christian Science Monitor*, Philadelphia 1932.
- 4 Philip Orbanes, *Monopoly: The World's Most Famous Game and How It Got That Way* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2006), 85–86.
- 5 "Monópoli, il gioco che nessuno voleva" [Monopoly, the Game Nobody Wanted] *La Corriere della Sera*, March 17, 2011, and Albert Neil, "The World of Monopoly," www.worldofmonopoly.com (accessed September 23, 2019).
- 6 These works were published in Italian, respectively, as Aldous Huxley, *Il sorriso della Gioconda e altri racconti*, trans. Luigi Barzini Jr. and Emilio Ceretti (Milano: Mondadori, 1933); Aldous Huxley, *Dopo i fuochi d'artificio e altri racconti* [After the Fireworks and other Stories], trans. Emilio Ceretti and Piero Gadda (Milano: Mondadori, 1936); and Katherine Mansfield, *La lezione di canto e altri racconti* [The Singing Lesson], trans. Emilio Ceretti (Milano: Mondadori, 1935). Ceretti also would later translate Sinclair Lewis's *Speed as Velocità e altri racconti*, trans. Emilio Ceretti (Verona: Mondadori, 1940).
- 7 The Monopoly played in Italy today originated with this version, first produced in the Fascist period. It is not the only contemporary European Monopoly whose origins lie in dictatorship. In the Nazi-occupied Netherlands, Dutch use of Monopoly games, with their American and British locations, infuriated the Nazi German government. Local collaborators developed a Dutch version to promote nationalist sentiment. Unlike the Italian board, the Dutch board contained no specific references to Nazism or to Fascism. The board continued to be used during the war and after, and it forms the base for Monopoly games played in the Netherlands today.



Figure 2
 Monòpoli Board. Printed in Milan, 1937.
 Courtesy of the Strong National Museum
 of Play, Rochester, NY.

Go to Prigione: Linguistic Changes in Monòpoli

The last word that comes to mind when thinking of the tone of Benito Mussolini’s Italian dictatorship is “playful.” But toys and games played a central role in the regime’s formation of future Fascists.⁸ These games taught children to battle, to conquer, and to win at all costs. By design, these rules reigned in the Fascist version of American Monopoly.

In the cultural context of Fascist Italy, translation also meant Italianization. Foreign imports were strongly discouraged under Fascist law, which sought to promote autarky. Economic self-sufficiency promised to increase Italian independence by decreasing the consequences of financial reprisals for military aggression abroad. Fascist calls for autarky reached a fever pitch during Monòpoli’s final development. In fact, the game’s first-run distribution coincided with the invasion of Ethiopia in October 1935. The League of Nations introduced economic sanctions against Italy following the invasion, and in response, the Fascist state used the Ministry of Popular Culture to promote linguistic autarky. Speaking only standard Italian was one part of a larger push. Magazines like *Bellezza* promoted autarkic fashion made from textiles like rayon and lanital, both synthesized in Milanese laboratories. Publications in favor of autarkic cooking, like *La cucina italiana*,

8 See Dennis P. Doordan, “In the Shadow of the Fasces: Political Design in Fascist Italy,” *Design Issues* 13, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 39–52.

Figure 3

Monópoli board with box, instructions, and money. Printed in Milan, 1937. Courtesy of the Strong National Museum of Play, Rochester, NY.



endorsed Lombard rice as a substitute carbohydrate to take the place of imported Turkish grain for making pasta. Karkade tea took the place of coffee. Imported American and British products drew Mussolini's ire in particular because of the central role these nations played in squeezing Italian access to trans-Atlantic trade. These broader political events dramatically raised the stakes of Ceretti's successful translation and insertion of American Monopoly into the culture of toys and games in Fascist Italy.

Direct translation of Monopoly into Italian would place the accent on the third syllable, making it Monopóli. Instead, the accent appears on the second syllable, as Monópoli.⁹ This tiny detail is the key to unlocking the meaning of Monópoli. Nationalist sentiment changed Monopóli to Monópoli. When contemporary

9 Monópoli finally reverted to the original American spelling of Monopoly in 2009. See Stewart Woods, *Eurogames: The Design, Culture and Play of Modern European Board Games* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012), 302.

Italians hear the word Monópoli, the first association is likely to be the seaside town called Monopoli near Bari, Puglia. During the Fascist period, the idea was to avoid associations, specifically with the board game's foreign birthplace.

Rechristened as Monópoli, the game could pass the censors at the Ministry of Popular Culture. But what if they opened the bright red box?¹⁰ Inside, Ceretti changed the place names to make them more palatable to the regime. Again, these changes were not direct translations, but rather Italianizations. For example, the board game's illustrations at first glance would appear to be legible to players on either side of the Atlantic. But they, too, had to be changed to make sense to foreign markets. Put another way, the American board had to be translated into the Fascist cultural context, as well as the Italian language. A whistle-blowing policeman decked out in blue can tell American players to "Go to Jail." Once there, an angry man peers out from behind the bars for a predetermined sentence. In Fascist period Monòpoli, an Italian *carabinieri* is armed with ammunition strung across his chest and ready with a rifle behind his back. If he sends an Italian player to "Prigione," they appear to waste away. Although the Italian prisoner is similarly described as being "in transito," he looks like he has been there for a while. The Italian prisoner is emaciated and uniformed in a baggy, striped suit bearing the unlucky number thirteen. The sunken cheeks of the Italian prisoner visually stamp the idea into players' minds.

From Pacific Avenue to Via del Fascio: Geographic Changes to Monópoli

Rome, or perhaps Predappio, might be expected to take the place of Atlantic city under Benito Mussolini's rule. Instead, Ceretti largely situated Monópoli in Milan. He toyed with invention too: Starting from "Via," he invented the first two purple properties, substituting Vicolo Corto for Mediterranean Avenue and Vicolo Stretto for Baltic Avenue. Both were only 6.000 *lire*, the cheapest spots on the board. Ceretti edited Milanese geography by organization as well as by addition. He grouped streets together because their names collectively evoked an idea, creating thematic neighborhoods marked by color. As in the American original, the electric company and the waterworks appear as public utilities: the Società elettrica and Acqua potabile.

After the imaginary Vicolo Corto and Stretto come the blue properties, all mountains: Bastioni Gran Sasso (10.000 *lire*, Oriental Avenue), Viale Monterosa (10.000 *lire*, corresponding to Vermont Avenue), and Viale Vesuvio (12.000 *lire*, Connecticut Avenue). Next comes higher education in the orange zone, with Via Accademia

10 The Italian Monópoli set studied here dates from 1937 and is now housed in the Rochester Museum of Play.

(14,000 lire, Virginia Avenue), Corso Ateneo (14,000 lire, States Avenue), and Piazza Università (16,000 lire, St. Charles Place). Artists and authors follow in brown, with Via Verdi (18,000 lire, St. James Place), Corso Raffaello (18,000 lire, Tennessee Avenue), and Piazza Dante (20,000 lire, New York Avenue). Royalty, in red, come next, led by Via Vittorio Emanuele (22,000 lire, Kentucky Avenue), Corso Umberto (22,000 lire, Indiana Avenue), and Largo Savoia (24,000 lire, Illinois Avenue). Thus far, the game illustrates Ceretti's vision and secondarily evokes the regime's approaches to economics.

With the streets in yellow named for Roman emperors, more explicit Fascist tropes emerge: Viale Augusto (26,000 lire, Atlantic Avenue), Viale Traiano (26,000 lire, Ventnor Avenue), and Piazza Giulio Cesare (28,000 lire, Marvin Gardens) march past in quick succession. Romanità ruled this neighborhood of the Monópoli board: under Fascism, Romanità heralded the virtues of Ancient Rome—its civil society, its athleticism, and its imperial success. Here, honoring the emperors through street names provided a historical reference point to Fascist society. By design, connections between the Ancient Roman past and the Fascist present implied that the regime's paramilitary goals developed naturally out of the Italian people's common Ancient Roman origins. More emphatically still, capital city streets, in green, saluted the dictatorial regime with names like Via del Fascio (30,000 lire, Pacific Avenue), Corso Impero (30,000 lire, North Carolina Avenue), and Largo Littorio (32,000 lire, Pennsylvania Avenue).¹¹ Locating the Fascist place names toward the expensive end of the board game implied that places associated with the dictatorship held high value. Both financially and symbolically, they were worth more than other neighborhoods. Yet because of how the game is played, dictatorial squares also extracted the largest penalty from players who were unlucky enough to land on those spots and had to pay those rents.

Concessions to Fascist naming begin with the Via del Fascio and the Largo Littorio. The *fascio littorio*—a bundle of rods gathered and bound around an axe—were carried by the lictors (*littori*, or attending magistrates) of ancient Rome. Symbolizing the power and authority of the central magistrate, the fasces imbued its namesake, Fascism, with the power of Romanità—that is, the reflected glory of the former Roman empire. Finally, the Corso Impero celebrates the invasion of East Africa, concurrent with the 1935–1936 distribution of the game up and down the Italian peninsula. Indeed, the board even takes the Fascist enthusiasm for transportation into account, with stations for buses, trains, steamships, and airplanes in place of the American Monopoly's train station-centric board. Italian transportation networks were rapidly built

11 Concerns for Italy's East African empire emerge in the Milan 1940 copyright for the game, as well as on the board itself. The Sagdos Graphic Office copyright, printed at the end of the game rules, reads, "Reservati per l'Italia, impero Etiopico, Possedimenti e Colonie" [Reserved within Italy, the empire of Ethiopia, its territories and Colonies].

and expanded during the Fascist period, a point of pride for the regime. Networks aimed not only to bridge regional factions and unify Italians as a nation but also to consolidate technological power in the event of war.

Finally, the priciest properties, in mauve, complete the board with one more creative moment for Ceretti, and a salute to the regime. Ceretti lived by the Giardini Margherita, and in the postwar period he would rename this board game square for Viale de Giardini (35.000 *lire*, corresponding to Park Place). This street, upon which Ceretti paid his expensive rental in real life, still exists today—at the Montenapoleone metro stop and parallel with via Manzoni. The last square on the board is Parco della Vittoria (40.000 *lire*, Boardwalk).

Translation of Monopoly, according to Emilio Ceretti's design, meant militarization. He balanced the capitalist bent of the American game with geographic flourishes to placate the Italian Fascist regime. His approach was a triumph. The Fascist state permitted Edizioni Giochi S.A. to produce Monópoli in ever greater numbers, with new editions appearing even as partisan-led clashes surged up the Italian peninsula in the 1940s. But Ceretti was not the only game maker who faced the high stakes of political and military translation. In Allied Britain, game makers aimed to assist soldiers directly, by designing a board for players in captivity.

Get out of Jail Free: The 1941 British Special Edition

In 1941 the British Secret Intelligence Service had a map problem.¹² More specifically, the service had difficulty smuggling paper maps into Nazi Germany prisoner of war (POW) camps. They were impossible to use behind enemy lines, where captured British and American POWs would need them most. Unfolding them was noisy. Rain rendered them illegible. The Intelligence Service needed an alternate distribution system and a different kind of material. They needed Monopoly.

The MI9 turned to John Waddingtons Limited. The company had already produced silk maps for use by British airmen on behalf of the Secret Service. Now, MI9 called on Monopoly's original foreign distributor to produce a special edition of the game. Fake charity organizations involved in the effort included the "Prisoners' Leisure Hours Fund" and the "Licensed Victualers' Prisoners Relief Fund," Hermann Wilhelm Göring's food policies were beginning to fail. With depressed conditions limiting the provisions even for top-priority Nazi troops, obtaining supplies for captured Allied soldiers became a far-distant priority. German camps accepted the aid packages to keep financial shortfalls quiet. Nevertheless, the Nazi Party sought to maintain the

12 Philip Orbanes published the first definitive account of Waddington's involvement with the MI9. See Philip Orbanes, *Monopoly: The World's Most Famous Game and How It Got That Way* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2006). See also Megan Garber, "How Monopoly Games Helped Allied POWs Escape During World War II," *The Atlantic* (January 9, 2013): www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2013/01/how-monopoly-games-helped-allied-pows-escape-during-world-war-ii/266996/; and Erin McCarthy, "How an Intelligence Officer Used Monopoly to Free POWs," *Mental Floss* (March 19, 2015), www.mentalfloss.com/article/62285/how-brilliant-intelligence-officer-used-monopoly-free-wwii-pows.

appearance of economic solvency on the world's stage, and this goal entailed ensuring that the POW camps met the Geneva Convention codes. To bridge the gap, German leaders accepted British foreign aid. After all, the gift of games seemed as though it might keep restive prisoners harmlessly occupied while in confinement.

Marked by a fake printing error, a small red dot at the corner of "Free Parking," the modified boards hid toolkits for prisoners of war to literally get out of jail. On the Monopoly box, a false cardboard cover opened to a secret folder containing a silk map—waterproof and whisper quiet—marked with safe houses in the region of each POW camp. Inside, playing pieces included a nail file and a compass in addition to the traditional Scotty dog, thimble, and roadster. Underneath Rich Old Uncle Pennybag's play bills lay German *deutschmarks*, Italian *lire*, and French *francs* for bribes. The Monopoly game money was real.

Legacies of Militarized Monopoly

The war ended, but the game continued. During the postwar years, currency denominations for locally licensed Monopoly boards reflected the financial status of their country of production. For Great Britain and the United States, the Allied victory in World War II brought economic expansion and rapid industrial development. British and American game makers rushed to update the Monopoly money and real estate prices to keep pace with the economic surge. In postwar Italy, however, the value of the *lira* cratered. Yet Ceretti, who continued to develop Monopoli after the fall of Fascism, kept the costs of the game's streets the same.¹³ It was, he wrote some years later, an act of hope in anticipation of Italy's own economic boom.¹⁴ For this reason, the Parco della Vittoria continued to cost 40,000 *lire*, which would have been a substantial sum in the late 1940s. Today, the neighborhood is advertised as a "Smart City," a booming urban oasis of green bikeways and pocket parks.¹⁵ The rent is astronomical.¹⁶

Because the winners wrote the maps, as well as the history books, postwar American and British editions of the game retained Atlantic City and London's urban nomenclature, with the stations and street names celebrating prime ministers and presidents. In London, paper board game squares evoked greater permanence than the actual shattered city blocks. Most of the British Monopoly sites, like Leicester Square and Coventry Street, lay in wreckage from the German Luftwaffe's bombs (1939–1945). But Great Britain emerged victorious, and so the city would rise from the rubble. Urban planners, not Monopoly designers, would reconstruct the city. By contrast, Italian game makers faced a very different dilemma in the postwar years.

13 After the war, Ceretti's enthusiasm for Anglophone popular culture developed into partisan activism. He founded the Edizioni Riuniti, an anonymous publishing group that continued to print British and American books and articles during World War II. Paradoxically, he also served as a war correspondent for *Il Popolo d'Italia*, a Fascist party mouthpiece founded in 1914 by Mussolini. After the war, Ceretti would continue to import American toys and games to Italy. His greatest postwar success included bringing Barbie dolls into Italy in 1959. In the 1960s, he acquired Milton Bradley games, including "Operation," translated as "L'Allegro Chirurgo" [The Happy Surgeon]. In the 1970s, he added "Risiko" [Risk] to his game list.

14 Gian Paolo Serino, "Emilio Ceretti: Chi era costui?" [Emilio Ceretti: Who was he?], *The Paper Blog* (January 9, 2012): www.it.paperblog.com/emilio-ceretti-chi-era-costui-903462.

15 "Parco Vittoria: Centro Residenziale [Vittoria Park: Residential Center]. Projects for Living," (Milan: Acacia, 2000).

16 In 2020, the monthly rent for a 110 square meter apartment cost €975,000.

Among the three militarizations of Monopoly discussed here, the Italian Fascist case stands out for its position among the vanquished countries of World War II. Monópoli street names reflected the real names of locations in Milan. After the fall of Fascism, those street names changed in both the city and the game. Postwar Monópoli designers had to translate Milan's urban landscape a second time—this time to dissolve its Fascist associations. In the 1947 edition of Monópoli, the first to be produced after World War II, Largo Littorio became Largo Augusto both in Milan and on the board. Via del Fascio became Via Nirone in Milan and Via Roma on the board. In other words, although the obvious reference to Fascism was swept away, it was replaced by an amphiboly—that is, a combination of words evoking radically different meanings for different audiences. The new name divided the audience between those who took the name at face value and those who could hear the resonance of Fascist urbanism it contained. Romanità echoes through the renaming of Via Roma. Meanwhile, the third green property, Corso Impero, stayed the same both in the game and in life. All that changed was the imagined geography, the given empire that this street evoked.

If we trace the evolution of the board game's urban features over time, we see that both cardboard and concrete streets were shaped by the same postwar amnesia. Both were created through memory suppression—particularly in relation to those street names that evoke the Fascist regime's colonial ambitions.¹⁷ Describing Rome today, Igiaba Scego notes that erasure of Italian imperial history most often occurs in urban spaces that recall East African nations and imperial battles (e.g., Viale Somalia, Piazza Cinquecento) or that feature monuments taken as war booty (e.g., the Ethiopian Stelle of Axum, located for many years in front of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations).¹⁸ Here, Monópoli presents a miniaturized, Milanese equivalent. In Monópoli, as in Milan, designers renamed but did not restructure the Fascist features of an Italian city.¹⁹

By design, Monopoly rewards adversarial approaches to one's fellow game players. Taking and keeping always beat sharing and giving. This zero-sum mentality is inherent to the commercialized game's construction and, arguably, to its allure. Applauding avarice influenced the interwar Monopoly editions in three key ways. First, it sparked dark glee among the players, making the game fun to play. Inventor Lizzie Magie originally designed Monopoly as an educational tool to warn against the dangers of wealth concentration. But the game did not become popular until

17 This tendency exemplifies what Gaia Giuliani and Cristina Lombardi-Diop have referred to as the whitewashing of colonial memory in Italy. See Gaia Giuliani and Cristina Lombardi-Diop, *Bianco e nero: Storia dell'identità razziale degli italiani* (Black and White: History of Racial Identity in Italy) (Florence: Le Monnier, 2013).

18 Igiaba Scego and Rino Bianchi, *Roma Negata: Percorsi Postcoloniali nella Città* [Rome Denied: Postcolonial Paths in the City] (Rome: Ediesse, 2014).

19 Monópoli continues to be popular in Italy today. While Americans may play a version called Italo-poly, Italians play Monópoli Città d'Italia (introduced in 2002). In 2017, Naples was the first Italian city (after Ceretti's Milanese original) to have a dedicated Monópoli board. Appropriately, for a game focused on capitalism and currency, there is even a Monópoli Euro, made in 2003 to celebrate the common currency of the European Union, which was introduced in Italy in 1999.

Charles Darrow recast property seizure as aspirational, flipping Magie's earnest economic philosophy upside down. When Darrow stole the game and falsely claimed it as his own invention, he arguably acted in the same selfish spirit that turned Monopoly from a dreary sermon into an entertaining game.

Although high amusement value set Monopoly on the path toward international distribution, the glorification of avarice also changed the game in a second way: It contributed to the game's successful circulation in authoritarian nations during the mid-1930s. Because Monopoly hailed the appropriation of money and of city blocks, it could be redesigned to conform to the aggressive zeitgeist of Fascist Italy. Translators like Emilio Ceretti successfully leveraged similarities between the game's capitalist structure and Benito Mussolini's autarchic projects. Thus, Mondadori was able to license and sell *Monòpoli*, an ideologically dangerous American import, during the darkest years of Italian Fascism.

The ascendant popularity of Monopoly's greed-centric design allowed game makers in Great Britain to deploy it in a third way. By World War II, Monopoly's ascendant popularity made the game recognizable across Europe. As a result, Monopoly's now commonplace box and board did not provoke suspicion. The M19 made use of Monopoly's familiarity to slip the 1941 British Special Edition past Nazi German guards, providing Allied prisoners of war with the maps, tools, and local currency necessary to escape from camps behind the Axis lines.

In this article, I have investigated how three different nations, as both allies and enemies, deployed the same American board game toward their own political and militarizing ends on the eve of and through World War II. As the success of these war-time Monopoly designs has shown, U.S. consumerism, and the global capitalist marketplace, won in the end.