

# COLLABORATING WITH BUSINESS

by academics in Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences

## The history lecturer on a crusade to educate through wargames

*Rolling the dice on new creative endeavours had surprising results for Dr Gianluca Raccagni's research and teaching.*

Analysts expect the global tabletop games market will be worth more than \$12 billion by 2023. Key to this boom, the growing popularity of tabletop strategy games has seen hundreds of new game clubs open across the UK during the past five years.

Many of the most popular games draw on history in their storytelling. However, Dr Gianluca Raccagni believes historians overlook their potential as a valuable tool. "Historians can be critical of historical inaccuracies in popular culture, but very few have engaged with the growing number of wargames companies in this thriving creative sector", he argues. "It is a missed opportunity to share historical knowledge with the scores of dedicated players and game designers who share a passion for the past."

Keen to find a way to connect his professional life with his lifelong interest in tabletop games, Gianluca began visiting local gaming clubs. "Playing games with other enthusiasts and game



designers allowed me to bounce ideas around", he recalls. "Speaking with Michael Scot from Supreme Littleness Designs, I realised there was a gap in the market for more historically accurate terrain and building models which form a large part of the gaming experience."

Gianluca worked with the Knowledge Exchange and Impact team to secure funding for a round table event for game designers to discuss history and game design. It was the start of new creative partnerships. "The designers and I meet regularly to brainstorm historically accurate scenarios and game pieces", he explains. "My reward comes from the opportunity to engage people in what I do for a living. I can reach a completely different audience to my academic publishing."

The work has contributed to Gianluca's research in surprising ways. "I helped Supreme Littleness Designs model a 12th-century crusader Genoese tower-palace for a game terrain kit, based on the Levant. The ancient region of the middle east which once encompassed the modern-day countries of Lebanon, Israel, Palestine, Jordan and Syria", he notes. "It



inspired a new chapter on Italian settlements in the Levant in my forthcoming academic book.”

“I’ve also started The History and Games Studies Network, to bring colleagues from the fields of history, archaeology and literature together to examine how games can be a valuable new interface between history and popular culture.”

Gianluca asked for a temporary reduction in teaching hours to find time for the projects. It was not an easy decision, but he believes that the effort paid dividends for students. “The success of the project demonstrated the value of the activity and gave me the legitimacy to ask for more time to pursue it”, he says. “Being away from the lecture theatre gave me space to pursue new creative opportunities, I’ve been able to harness in my teaching.”

Gianluca has introduced a game about the first crusade into his third-year Crusades and the Medieval World course. He created a new pathway for MSc in History students, exploring the emerging field of Historical Games Studies,

and plans to expand this into a full course on History and Gaming.

Popular medieval wargames rulebook Lion Rampant’s designers commissioned Gianluca and a team of his postgraduate and undergraduate students to develop the rules and gameplay scenarios for a new game expansion pack about the crusades. Gianluca is also working with Italian company Cobblepot Games to help it develop games based on the country’s medieval history.

In 2019 the Municipality of Gradara invited Gianluca to join the organising committee for Gradara Ludens, one of Italy’s largest festivals exploring the connections between games, education and the heritage sector. A critical tourist site the Italian region of Le Marche, Gradara welcomes more than 500,000 visitors per year.

His only regret is that he didn’t engage with industry early enough: “During my PhD and post-doc, no one talked about impact or engagement. I couldn’t have imagined finding the time to do anything other than write papers”, he recalls. “Thankfully, things have changed in the short time since, and

I’m pleased to see the support and opportunities for early-stage academics to work with industry have grown significantly. It’s a hugely rewarding experience which can give young scholars new outlets to be creative and grow professionally.”



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