

Games, Media, and Politics. Does "Mafia II" Defame Italian Americans? Interview with Andre' DiMino

Ottorino Cappelli (August 28, 2010)



Several Italian-American organizations are staging an anti-defamation campaign against the videogame "Mafia II" on the ground that it offends and stereotypes Italian Americans as mafiosi. Here we present the argument against the game through the words of Andrè DiMino, Chief Media Executive and Immediate Past National President of UNICO National. In the next few days we shall investigate the opposing viewpoint.

Mafia II—a much-anticipated, high quality videogame that is just being released by [Take Two Interactive](#) [2], chronicles the rise of Vito Scaletta, the son of Sicilian immigrants. The official presentation describes the story as follows: “Born the son of a poor immigrant, Vito is a beaten down



Italian American who is trying to secure his piece of the American Dream. Looking to escape the life of poverty that consumed his childhood, Vito is soon swayed by the lure of power and wealth that a life of Organized Crime can bring. A petty criminal his whole life, Vito, along with his childhood friend, Joe, will descend into the world of organized crime. Together, they will work to prove themselves to the Mob as they try to make their names on the streets of a cold and unforgiving city."

In mid-August, several Italian-American organizations started an [anti-defamation campaign](#) [3] against the game, arguing that it offends and discriminates against Italian Americans by suggesting the equation Italian

Americans = Mafia. The campaign grew to involve everybody however "associated" with the game—from New York's Metropolitan Transport Authority, for allowing Mafia II advertising in subway stations, to [92nd Street Y](#) [4] cultural and community center for renting its facilities for a "Mafia II Launch Party" in Tribeca on August 28th. In the latter case, the protest risked evolving into an intra-ethnic controversy, given the fact that the 92nd Street Y is a Jewish association (its full name is the 92nd Street Young Men's and Young Women's Hebrew Association.)

Here we present the argument against the game through the words of Andrè DiMino, Chief Media Executive and Immediate Past National President of [UNICO National](#) [5], the largest Italian American service organization, established in 1922. Mr DiMino, who is CEO of Montvale Technologies in Northvale, NJ, is currently the President of [Italian American One Voice Coalition](#) [6]. In the next few days we shall investigate the opposing viewpoint.

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Mr. DiMino, you are among the Italian-American community leaders who are organizing a protest against Mafia II. Would you explain to our readers the main reasons for your protest and what objectives you are planning to achieve?

Early in August I learned about the upcoming release of the Mafia II video game. I then reviewed demos and previews on YouTube and other web sites and immediately sent a letter to Strauss Zelnick, Chairman of Take Two Interactive, the producers of the game. In the letter I advised Mr. Zelnick that "...the game is an inappropriate and insulting perpetuation of the pervasive and denigrating stereotype of organized crime being the exclusive domain of Italians and Italian Americans." I continued, "Why would you foist a game on a targeted audience of young people wherein you will indoctrinate a new generation into directly associating Italians and Italian Americans with violent, murderous organized crime, to the exclusion of all of the other 'mafias' run by other ethnic and racial groups. Take Two is directly, blatantly and unfairly discriminating and demeaning one group to the exclusion of all others. We are demanding you halt release of the game and cleanse it of all references to Italians and Italian Americans."

I asked for a meeting with Zelnick and his associates to discuss their insensitivity to Italian Americans and to hear what they would do about it. After not hearing from them for over 1 week, on August 18, we made the content of my letter public through a UNICO National press release, which was the start of the public opposition to this game.

Thereafter, I am very pleased that a number of other Italian American groups joined with us in opposing this disgraceful game. These include The Coalition of Italian American Associations (CIAA) of NY, led by Dr. Joseph Scelsa; The Italian American ONE VOICE Coalition, led by Dr. Manny Alfano; The Italian American Legal Defense and Higher Education Fund, led by Jack Como; The Italian American Political Action Committee, led by James L. Lisa; The NY Commission for Social Justice of OSIA, led by Stella Grillo; The National CSJ of OSIA, led by Santina Haemerle; and, other individuals and groups. Meetings were held and a course of action planned.

Mafia II perpetuates the negative stereotype directly and inexorably connecting violent, organized crime to being an Italian American. The promos and story lines go into great detail about the characters coming here from Sicily and joining with other Italians in bloody, murderous crimes and nefarious activities as their only pursuits. Although the negative stereotyping is being disclaimed by



Take Two, and its' misguided devotees, as a "period piece" or somehow, laughably, an "historical account" - that belies the fact that in that period, and with accurate historical reference, the infinitesimally small percentage of Italian Americans in organized crime were second to more powerful and murderous criminals from other ethnic groups. However, in all cases, it is the small percentage of Italians involved in crime during this period that are ubiquitous in the media and entertainment industry. This, as is evident, has welded that negative perception into the collective consciousness. If there is truly to be historical perspective, where are the stories about the extremely high relative percentage of Italian Americans who fought for this country in World War II and those that have contributed so much to this world and this country. You just don't see or hear about that at all.

Mafia II is the sequel of Mafia and there are dozens of Mafia- and mob-based games for PCs, game consoles, and even those for the Internet. Are you aware of this larger phenomenon, and what do you think could be done about it?

Of course I am aware of the ubiquity of these games - the proliferation and continuation of the denigration and negative stereotyping of Italian Americans is certainly easy fodder for profits. Enough is enough! We can not sit idly by and continue to ignore the continuous attack on our heritage and culture. Why is it OK for this to be so rampant about Italian Americans when you do not see it with other groups. And, specifically ignoring the fact that these games are targeted at young people, is not acknowledging that this is creating a whole new generation that directly and unequivocally connects Italian Americans with murderous, violent and sleazy organized crime.

Zelnick should have had the courtesy to respond to me. But, after seeing his publicly issued response, I can understand why he would not. What ludicrous, self-serving pablum. In his public statement specifically aimed at me he used words to describe his games like "Socially responsible" and "thoughtful" Is he kidding? He just can't be serious. He "fully and completely" stands behind his creative team and "socially responsible" products? Wait... is he referring to Grand Theft Auto, Bully, Manhunt and now Mafia 2? Some of his games have been alleged to have caused shootings and violence. Perhaps he is the one living in a videogame! Unfortunately, although Zelnick can hide behind the "M" rating on this disgraceful game, we all know that millions of teens and pre-teens will be engrossed with playing Mafia II. Consequently, we abhor the potential of a new generation being catalyzed into automatically associating Italian Americans with the disgusting thugs and violent bums who inhabit Mafia II. It is just not fair or acceptable!

For many, many years, UNICO has consistently and repeatedly fought negative stereotyping and defamation. This has included protests against The Sopranos, Shark Tales, stereotypical advertisements, TV series, and many other media items. Most recently, UNICO has been at the forefront in the very public campaign against MTV's Jersey Shore for which I made many, many media appearances. You should know that UNICO was actually founded 88 years ago BECAUSE of discrimination against Italian Americans. Here we are, 88 years later and we now have to fight a new high-definition version of very detailed and realistic video games that negatively stereotypes Italian Americans.

Besides the software company that produces Mafia II, your battle involves other targets. You criticized New York's Metropolitan Transport Authority for allowing Mafia II advertising in subway stations, as well as the 92nd Street Y cultural and community center for renting their facilities for a "Mafia II Launch Party." What are you planning to do and what have you achieved thus far?

It is important for those that help to promote these attacks on our heritage to understand that they are complicit in these acts. The advertisements for Mafia II throughout the NY Subway system are viewed by millions of people, multiple times per day - again implanting the association of Italian Americans and the Mafia deep within the subconscious of all these people.

The 92nd Street Y's hosting of the Launch Party for Mafia II is another matter altogether. It is just incredible to think that such a venerable and respected institution would be so insensitive to allow this disgraceful attack on Italian Americans to be launched at their facility. It is just unthinkable and completely unacceptable that this would occur. If the tables were turned, the outcry would be



immediate - and rightly so. Why should it be different for Italian Americans? The 92nd Street Y is making a huge mistake in being associated with this despicable situation.

I, along with the other Italian American leaders, as well as several prominent Jewish organizations and individuals, have made significant efforts to professionally and courteously contact the executives at the 92nd Street Y, specifically Executive Director Sol Adler, to seek out a meeting with them to find a solution to this divisive problem. Unfortunately, they have not acceded to our requests - although at first Adler did confirm by email to me that - "...we are in the process of working to resolve the situation so that the launch event for this video game does not take place at our institution." After sending congratulatory emails of thanks to him, he unfortunately, reversed his decision.

Is there a similarity between this protest and other anti-defamation initiatives staged by Italian-American organizations such as the recent mobilization against the MTV show "Jersey Shore" or the historical protests against films like "The Godfather" or TV shows like "The Sopranos"?

I firmly believe that there is a galvanization occurring in the Italian American community supporting our efforts at fighting stereotyping and denigration. This is based upon what we directly experienced with our campaign against MTV's disgraceful series "Jersey Shore." We received national and international exposure of our efforts and many, many Italian Americans, as well as many people from other ethnicities and groups, expressed their strong support for our fight against these attacks on our heritage and culture. Our campaign included a concentrated public attack against MTV and the Jersey Shore encompassing securing many national advertisers to confirm publicly and in writing that they would not advertise on the series. We maintained the pressure on MTV and its advertisers and I am so pleased that our efforts were so successful. The result was that ALL of the references to Italian Americans and Italian symbolism and pejorative terms, so prevalent in the first season, were completely eliminated from the second season of Jersey Shore. This confirms that our efforts can and do have an effect.

Although there were similar protests and opposition to the Sopranos and other shows, I do believe the nature of Jersey Shore, being promoted as a "reality" show is, what brought such unanimity to the fight against it by so many Italian Americans.

However, I do believe the Mafia II game is a very different situation. This is due to the fact that, as opposed to a transient TV show, Mafia II will be played for hours and hours, day after day, week after week, and so on, by millions of young people, here in America and throughout the world. This will be a thorough and effective brainwashing of a new generation into seeing Italian Americans as being directly and inexorably tied to the murderous, bloody, sleazy criminals that inhabit the Mafia II world.

What else in your opinion could the Italian-American community do to correct the way in which IAs are portrayed and perceived in this country--other than reacting to the events and try to censor offensive behavior when it takes place? In other words, where does "reaction" end and "pro-action" begin?

You would be disingenuous to foster the idea that all we have done is be reactionary to these situations! On the contrary, Italian American organizations have a stellar record of promoting the positive things about Italian American heritage and culture. There have been millions of dollars and millions of hours expended by individuals and organizations, like UNICO National, in stressing the positives about our culture and heritage. As a matter of historical fact, UNICO National was actually founded because of discrimination against Italian Americans. But, instead of protesting that negative treatment, the philosophy and mission of UNICO National is for its volunteer members, across the country, to dedicate themselves to community service and charitable works - a positive form of anti-bias. Likewise, other IA organizations certainly have an outstanding record of service to the community.

As we know, Italian Americans have an unparalleled record, throughout history, in contributing to the



world and this country. After all, we discovered it, we named it and we built it- and we continue to make major contributions through the arts, food, politics, sports, business, science, architecture, and on and on. However, this is not what gets the attention of the media or entertainment media! We can shout from the highest mountain top about the incredible contributions of Italians and Italian Americans but what we continuously see is the pervasive stereotype of mobsters, Mafiosi, bimbos and buffoons.

Enough is enough! We must diligently and relentlessly continue to campaign against the negative stereotyping and denigration of our heritage and culture. If not, we have to accept the fact that whenever anyone hears an Italian name or meets an Italian American, they will immediately perceive them to be equivalent to the stereotypical portrayals they see in all media.

Perception is reality

— and the perception being hammered in, each and every day, is the negative stereotype of Italians and Italian Americans. If you think this does not have an effect on Italian Americans, in such things as career advancement, community acceptance, social interactions and other venues, you are supremely naïve. Stereotyping is how you marginalize and demean a group of people thereby creating prejudice. We should not tolerate stereotyping of Italian Americans, or for that matter, any other group.

In addition, it must be said that no one is promoting censorship. Instead, what we are seeking is fairness and equal treatment as compared to other ethnicities and groups. Why is it “off limits” to stereotype and demean other groups but Italian Americans must experience it every day?

I am so proud to be an American! And, I am proud of my Italian heritage. I feel a duty and obligation to the memory of my parents, who came to this country for a better life, as well as to the coming generations of Italian American youth, to protect, defend, celebrate and respect Our Shared Heritage, Our Shared Pride. I am hopeful that all Italian Americans will share that sentiment and not allow Italian Americans to continue to be the last ethnicity that it is OK to stereotype and denigrate.

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- [1] <http://test.casaitaliananyu.org/files/mafia-2-e3-2010-made-man-trailer-hd>
- [2] <http://www.take2games.com/>
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