

Promoting the Bingo Renaissance!

Ideas from the world of 90# Bingo...

The word ‘Renaissance’ comes from the combination of the French verb *renaitre*, meaning “to revive,” and the noun *naissance*, which means “birth,” and refers to that period of European history that extends from about the mid 14th century to the mid 17th century, when the medieval era in Europe began to give way to modern civilization. The Renaissance, called ‘Rinascimento’ in Italy, was characterized by ideals of a flowering human spirit and an unfettered freedom of thought and inquiry after a Europe dominated for centuries by superstition and serfdom.

Copernicus, Galileo, Medici, and names like Michelangelo, Rafael, and daVinci are a just a few of the patrons of Renaissance art and science. The world was forever changed during the Renaissance by inventions and innovations that included the printing press, the pencil and affordable paper, microscopes, telescopes, the magnetic compass, wallpaper, flush toilets, long-range cannon, mechanical clocks, and bingo.

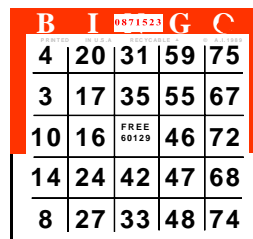
Bingo! Yes, a Renaissance product, though not originally in a form we would know today in North America. Bingo historians tell us that our game has its roots in Italy, a country at the very heart of the Renaissance. In the early 1500’s various forms of lotteries were springing up in Italy... in fact, the word ‘lottery’ is believed to come from the Italian word “lotto,” meaning destiny or fate. In one of the earliest recorded Italian lottos, players would write their names or mottos on slips that were dropped into an urn. Into another urn went a corresponding number of tickets: some were blank, some had prizes, and some had the word ‘paciaentia,’ meaning *patience*. All of the tickets were drawn and matched, which depending on the number of participants, could take days!

Paying money for the chance to win is generally attributed to a version of lotto played in Florence around 1530, but diverse forms of local lotteries were happening throughout Italy. In Genoa in 1576, a government reform provided for the annual selection of 5 local government officials from a pool of 120 candidates by randomly drawing numbered balls from an urn that corresponded to a numbered list of the candidates. This selection process worked well for choosing officials... but it also became popular amongst the people to place side-bets on which balls would be drawn. Later reductions in the number of candidates led to the 5 numbers being drawn from a pool of 90 numbered balls, and a 90# lotto was born... what eventually would become *Lo Giouco del Lotto d’Italia*, and the early forerunner of European bingo.

By the late 1700’s *Le Lotto* had migrated to France, and it was in this period that the ‘classic’ style of European bingo appeared. Bingo playing cards were divided into three horizontal rows and nine vertical rows. Each horizontal row had five numbers and four blank squares in a random arrangement. The vertical rows contained numbers from 1 to 10 in the first row, 11 to 20 in the second row, et cetera, up to 90. No two bingo-lotto cards were alike. The caller would reach into a cloth bag and pull one of 90 numbered wooden chips, and read the number aloud. The bingo players covered numbers as they appeared on their card, and the first bingo player to cover a horizontal row was the winner!



Today, 90-number bingo is still the dominant game-form in the bingo halls of Europe, and this includes Italy, Spain, and the U.K where millions of Euros are wagered on bingo annually. It is also the bingo game of choice in Latin America, where it spread largely through Spanish influence, and can be played in South and Central America and Mexico. Australia and New Zealand have a bingo culture similar to that of the U.K and also play 90-number bingo. Our 75-number bingo with its 24 number face-card is almost exclusively North American!



With both forms, Bingo is truly a world-wide phenomenon, with millions and millions of players and billions of dollars being wagered and paid out in prizes. With its roots in Renaissance Europe, the 'lotto' tree has grown out these two main branches of bingo... 75# and 90#... and given each some very distinct attributes. At the Global Gaming Expo (G2E) in Las Vegas this past October, I had the opportunity to talk about these evolutionary differences with manufacturers, suppliers, and hall operators from Europe and Latin America, and found a growing interest in what might be called 'bingo cross-pollination,' that is, the sharing of ideas about bingo between cultures representing the two different branches of 75# and 90# play.

The 90# bingo world is in a parallel phase of industry evolution to our own, although North America is generally ahead of their curve in the assimilation of electronic bingo technology. But the 90# markets are developing and embracing new technology rapidly, and iterations of electronic bingo and linked gaming with high-stakes jackpots are the leading waves of change. There's always been dialogue between our 75# market and 90# bingo providers, but over this last year a new intensity was palpable...

the dialogue has produced real interest in how the different styles of bingo play and presentation work, and how a sharing of ideas and products between worlds might create positive change and new business opportunity. What can we learn from each other's respective styles and nuances of bingo, and can cross-pollination of ideas contribute healthier future trends?

It's helpful to look first at the most obvious differences between 90# and 75# bingo. The most basic difference is this: 90# is not played for bingo 'patterns.' In 90#, the objective is to make a horizontal line bingo, which is generally progressed into a 'full-card' blackout. Sometimes it will be a three part game, with a single line played to a double line and then for a blackout.

By comparison, our 75# bingo can appear complicated, especially for new players. Trying to grasp the hundreds of bingo patterns we use, with names that change from location to location, can be baffling and even intimidating! We have patterns such as California's "4-Card Merry Mix-Up" or the infamous Mississippi Quad Bingo... bingo patterns with dozens and sometimes hundreds of potential winning combinations.

So, 90# is simpler... a single line, maybe two straight lines, and a blackout. North American players might even consider it a bit... boring. But here's the thing: it's easy, and it's fast. Very fast. And this leads to us another fundamental difference: 90# is played faster than North American bingo, sometimes two to four second ball calls, and you can play many more games per hour.

This last summer I had the opportunity to visit Italy, and play bingo in some of the bingo halls of Rome. I was amazed at how different the bingo experience in Italy is from North American play. It starts with the 90# bingo prizeboards, which were completely parimutuel. Bingo cards are sold on the floor game by game, and \$1.50 euros *per card* was not uncommon. As the floor-runners return to the point-of-sale, total sales for each game are quickly calculated, and the system allocates percentages of the gross revenue for that game to the prizeboards. There are prizes for the line bingo(s), a line bingo in the first 5 numbers out, a prize for the blackout, and a progressive prize won by achieving a full-card bingo in less than a certain number of balls called (32 to 49 numbers).

Adding these elements together, I found myself in an easy-to-figure-out but fast-paced bingo game with a player-funded prizeboard... which allowed me to play a few games, take a break, and play some more. Players, I was told, might drop in and play for a few minutes or stay for hours and hours and hours. The halls were open sometimes 18 hours per day. The drop-in nature of 90# bingo in general, and the fact that it's very easy to play, seems to encourage attendance... you can pop into a 90# bingo parlor on the way to dinner, after a movie, or pretty much anytime at all without being committed to playing-out a 3 hour session. In the hours we played, we observed a lot of player traffic coming and going, but the halls were invariably packed with people.

I had a slight problem... the play was SO fast, I couldn't keep up. I should have taken time to learn how to count in Italian, at least up to 90. That might have helped me keep pace with the ball call. As it was, I could barely manage one card, let alone a strip of cards. And it was then I noticed how young the crowd was! Here, in North America, we ask ourselves how to attract the 21 to 49 year old crowd into bingo to complement our 50+ player demographic. In Italy, based on my experience, it would be exactly the opposite. You needed the reflexes of a cougar to keep up with that ball call, and

there was a noticeable tilt toward younger players in the Italian bingo clubs we visited... was the game TOO fast for many older players to enjoy?

Maybe. But there is more to it than that. The bingo clubs we visited were like nightclubs... vibrant, upscale environments, and they were flowing with that younger club-going crowd. Cars could often be valet parked; hosts and hostesses greeted incoming patrons at the door. Interiors were often decorated with marble and interesting lighting and decor which matched with beautiful hand-free bingo blowers on the callers-stands and huge flashboard displays to give the halls an elegant feel. Each round table, a shape that really facilitates traffic inside the hall, had a built in video screen in the center which not only showed the ball call and winning cards, but also played music videos in-between games while the runners were selling cards and waiters and waitresses were taking drink orders! This was like bingo in an alternate universe, and it made me realize just how alien our 75# bingo operations might look to players from Europe and Latin America!





On the subject of cross-pollination of ideas, we can ask how some of these ‘Eurostyle’ bingo attributes might fit into the North American bingo marketplace. Interestingly enough, we’re already seeing a wave of change in North America that includes 75-number, electronic pari-mutuel speed bingo that can offer players that ‘drop-in’ opportunity. This is certainly a marketable match for players with a fast-paced lifestyle who would find a 3-hour bingo session just plain too long.

While ‘share the wealth’ games are not new to North America, they are definitely not the standard; most of our bingo sessions are built on fixed prize boards with buy-in packages and supplemental floor sales. In Italy, it was all floor sales, and the system of sales and accounting is refined for speed. In some of the idea-sharing that’s been going on, the concept of blending and alternating 75# and 90# bingo games is being studied, and we’ll see experiments in this area cropping up on both sides of the ocean. In North America, nearly all of our flashboards and blowers are built to handle 75 balls, but this can change, and there are immediate workarounds for Indian Country bingo using video flashboard presentations and 90# random number generation to call balls.

The energized 'club' environment so prevalent in the 90# world is a particular presentation of the bingo that should be of interest to North American bingo operators... its an idea that's been building here for some time in different areas, and one whose time is undoubtedly coming. There are ways to create to that type environment within existing tribal bingo facilities, even in cooperative presentation with the 'normal' session of bingo. It's about packaging the bingo experience differently. If bingo is a hot dog, can we sell more to a bigger variety of customers if we offer the hot dog wrapped in a croissant, a tortilla, fry bread, a baguette, or a tie-dyed bagel, in addition to our standard hot dog bun? Silly analogy, but you see the point... 75# or 90#, bingo is bingo, but the presentation that we wrap it in that offers the most invigorating way to change the nature of the bingo experience itself.

We can look at the respective bingo products from the 90# and 75# bingo worlds and devise ways to blend them... this would be a good thing to study under any circumstances because we can each, potentially, add depth and freshness to our bingo programs. And if examine our session bingo with pack sales and fixed prize-boards as compared to player-funded prizing, drop-in bingo opportunities, and generally faster play... these things can feasibly be co-mingled, and that too is worth a look. You can even start by talking to your bingo suppliers about the availability of 90# bingo products.

Most importantly, 90# bingo is ***packaged in a way that delivers a different energy and ambience*** from that of our 75# bingo world. That has to be the biggest single revelation in the comparison between these two branches of bingo. In this information age our two worlds are colliding, and each will add new dimensionality to the other's style of bingo. The coming months will see an increasing cross-pollination of 75# and 90# products, technique, and packaging, and this will offer a $1+1=3$ equation for a bingo industry in rebirth and reinvention.

-Eric

