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## **Where is Medieval Italy? A Notable Absence in Anglophone Videogames**

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The Middle Ages are a frequent setting and inspiration for videogames. The period is represented in almost every genre of game from the action-adventure of the original *Assassin's Creed*, through role-playing games like *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, to real-time strategy such as *Medieval: Total War* and the grand strategy of *Crusader Kings*. The period plays a prominent role within games and series spanning all of history such as *Civilization* and serves as a key inspiration for fantasy worlds in games. The period is popular among developers and audiences and these games have the potential to fundamentally influence their players' understanding of the Middle Ages.

However, medieval Italy is almost inevitably marginalised or omitted within these games. Anglophone games about the Middle Ages focus most frequently on the British Isles, the Crusades, and the Vikings. When medieval Italy appears in games, the region and the population are usually presented as fundamentally similar to that of the rest of Europe: they are a palette swap with little mechanical difference from any other faction. Occasionally, the region is used to signify the exotic, the religious, the mercantile, or the learned, but these examples are rare.

To understand this absence, we need to consider the unique place of Italy within the medieval world. Medieval Italy (especially the north) was a land of cities, merchants and artisans. The north was decentralised with a substantial degree of political power in the hands of the secular magnates, bishops, and the cities. It was the home of the Pope and a centre of ecclesiastical reform and conflict. The region (especially the south) was a meeting point of cultures and peoples from around the Mediterranean and further afield.

Medieval Italy does not fit with many of the medieval tropes common within modern media. In popular film, tv, books, and games, the Middle Ages are thoroughly rural and dominated by peasants and knights. Medieval polities are ruled by kings, who often possess near absolute authority. The Middle Ages are frequently presented as white – and northern European in particular.

Medieval Italy also does not fit well with many of the tendencies and restrictions of videogames. Games typically rely on simple and abstract systems of rule which do not cope well with politically complex and fragmented areas such as medieval Italy. Christianity is a difficult topic for many games and is often avoided or used for purely cosmetic purposes. Games in general tend to focus on white, anglophone character.

In this paper, I will identify the ways in which medieval Italy is marginalised across most genres of videogame. I will argue that this is caused by the incompatibility of the historical themes pertinent to medieval Italy with the tropes common to videogames and to popular perceptions of the Middle Ages. I will highlight the ways in which some games have represented medieval Italy in a more thoughtful manner and consider how these approaches may be adapted for commercial and educational benefit in the future.