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A Medieval setting – or what has been rightly called “popular medievalism” (Houghton and Alvestad 2021, 1) – has become popular in not just video games but across a broad spectrum of entertainment media. Byzantium itself remains less popular, having no large-budget productions centered on its millennium-spanning

The influence that video games have had on defining modern cultural narratives is well understood, and it has been particularly well-illustrated for certain epochs, such as for World War II (Allison 2010, Ramsay 2015). This medium has recently begun receiving the attention it deserves from Medieval historians too – notable are the works of Juan Jiménez (2009, 2011), Robert Houghton (2022, 2025) and Vicente Valero (2024). Byzantium’s presentation in game media has also received some attention (Christesen and Machado 2010, Betancourt 2017, Fasolio 2021, Fasolio 2023). This has also included a growing number of fruitful panels and presentations.ⁱ But so far this has largely focused on the broad strokes of its presentation rather than delving into the specifics, which is where an important part of what must be untangled lies. Byzantium’s army, and in fact, a highly specific set of vectors from within this army, have come to highlight the civilization’s footprint in video games and thus in the minds of lay audiences. But as we shall see, both the reasons and

results of this go far beyond just a military angle, affecting and distorting Byzantium's popular perception in its entirety.

Byzantium remains relatively under-represented in game media in comparison to more popular historical epochs (e.g., Roman antiquity, World War II) as has been highlighted recently by Marco Fasolio (2021, 2023), and the reasons for this are multiform.ⁱⁱ The little exposure that Byzantium does get in game media therefore fulfills an oversized role in guiding its legacy. Some of the most popular titles featuring Byzantium are *Age of Empires II* (1999) and *Age of Empires IV* (2021), henceforth *AoE2* and *AoE4*; *Sid Meier's Civilization V* (2010) and *Sid Meier's Civilization VI* (2016), henceforth *Civ5* and *Civ6*, *Medieval II: Total War* (2006), henceforth *MTW2*, *Crusader Kings II* (2012) and *Crusader Kings III* (2020), henceforth *CK2* and *CK3*, and *Europa Universalis IV* (2013), henceforth *EU4*.ⁱⁱⁱ Games presenting Byzantium skew towards the strategy genre and its various subcategories, RTS (real-time strategy) and 4X (Explore, Expand, Exploit, Exterminate), unlike, for instance, the much higher percentage of FPS (first-person shooter) games for titles set during World War II (Allison 2010, 193). This is arguably due to the ease of implementing a first-person perspective (i.e., seen through a soldier's eyes) when gameplay consists of aiming and shooting, instead of swinging swords. Other genres do occasionally feature Byzantium, yet they are fewer and often include tangential, fictionalized references, such as in *Rise of the Tomb Raider* (2015), or are set beyond its timeline, as in *Assassin's Creed Revelations* (2011) depicting the 1510s.

Broadly speaking, Byzantium's presentation in video games mirrors many of the same tropes and distortions seen in other types of media. These include the stripping away of Byzantium's Roman continuity, the homogenization of society, an overemphasis on religion and piety, the downplaying of *realpolitik* and political thought, an

exaggeration of *hiding behind walls* as a means of survival, and the continuous decline narrative. While these common distortions are addressed below in more detail, what is more relevant for the scope of this paper are a series of representations and distortions unique to the video game medium. Since games tend to focus more on warfare than say, civil society or literary culture, these errors mostly concern the military sphere (with wide reaching consequences). These tenets have remained largely unaddressed in scholarship, except for Marco Fasolio (2023) who briefly touches upon them during his survey on the broad strokes of Byzantium's representation in *AoE2*, *MTW2*, and *EU4*, including an up-to-date and much needed historical introduction to the subject. But he does not address why a handful of highly specific military entities have represented Byzantium in almost all strategy games of the last thirty years (pretty much since the advent of computer gaming, despite these games being developed by different teams across different decades and places).^{iv} The three things that almost unanimously present Byzantium in video games are: Greek fire, Varangian guardsmen, and *kataphraktoi* (cataphracts). Explaining and unraveling the repercussions of this overwhelming focus is the aim of this paper.

Byzantium is notably never the only civilization in the video games that feature it, instead being one of many selectable and playable factions (a video game centered entirely on Byzantium is yet to be developed, which is striking considering its over-a-millennium lifespan). What all of these games have in common are a handful of unique features to distinguish different civilizations from one another, both aesthetically and functionally. These features are intended to be typical and representative of their respective civilizations and end up playing an oversized role in their popular perceptions. For Byzantium these designators in video games almost always include Greek fire, Varangian guardsmen, and *kataphraktoi*, and to a lesser extent *dromon* warships and strong fortifications. It is these particulars *unique* to

Byzantium that come to define it for the player, who may well be engaging with the civilization for the first time in context of said game. Why has this particular, military-inflected intersection – that is riddled with erroneous presentations – come to define Byzantium? What about all that has been omitted (even just in the military sphere)? And lastly and perhaps most importantly, what effect has this highly curated selection had on shaping Byzantium's popular legacy?

Greek Fire

In 1995, Alex Roland presented a report to the U.S. Army War College's annual strategy conference in which he underscored the importance of technological superiority in military strategy (Roland 1995). Seeking to highlight the most poignant examples from across history, he presented three case studies: chariot warfare in the second millennium BCE, Greek fire in the first millennium CE, and submarine warfare in the early-nineteenth century. Anyone wondering why Greek fire made it into this millennia spanning list may consider the following scene: the year is 678.

Constantinople has been besieged for four years by the powerful navy of the Umayyad Caliphate. The Byzantine Empire looks set to fall. But just as the noose is tightening, the Byzantines unleash a new, secret invention that would come to shape the future of naval warfare for centuries, turning the tides of history in the process. Small bronze tubes are directed at enemy ships out of which a liquified form of what appears to be fire is launched, engulfing all it hits in flames and even setting the surface of the sea aflame. Panic-stricken Arab sailors struggle to locate gaps in the water surface as they jump off their crumbling ships in terror; many, many vessels and men suffer a horrible, burning demise. Constantinople is rescued, and it would not fall to an external power for over five more centuries (until the Fourth Crusade captured

it in 1204). During this time, the Byzantines relied on liquid fire in many naval victories.

Unlike what those on the receiving end of it in 678 may have thought, this new weapon was in fact not supernatural. Greek fire or, as the Byzantines called it, liquid fire or sea fire, was an incendiary fluid analogous to modern napalm. It was created from what is referred to in sources as *naphtha*, which consisted of crude oil extracted from wells around the Sea of Azov that was mixed with Sulphur and resin, although its precise composition remains debated (Partington 1998, 1-42). Ships that deployed it were commonly fitted with a frontal implement that consisted of a bronze tube used to propel the mixture to enemy ships (it could be ignited during propulsion, or from afar after delivery). Somewhat similar to napalm, it was used to devastate naval engagements since it would set fire to the sea surface, along with the wooden ships of the enemy. The technology behind it, from its composition and assembly to its delivery mechanism, was a closely guarded state secret of utmost value. The only assembly plant was in Constantinople whence ships were fitted and the know-how was tightly compartmentalized so that no one person knew the entire process of its creation. The wells located around the northern Black Sea coast where crude oil was extractable with Medieval techniques represented important strategic targets as the *De Administrando Imperio* commissioned by emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos makes abundantly clear (*DAI*, chapters 52-53 in Moravcsik 1985, 256-286). Control of the northern shores of the Black Sea were a critical foreign policy objective to maintain this technological advantage.

Given all this, it comes as no surprise that Byzantine liquid fire commonly makes it into video games (Moravcsik 1985, 256-257, 285-286, Roland 1992, 658-675). It has been popularized in other types of media too, often without attribution (e.g., HBO's

Game of Thrones [2011-2019]).^v The presentation of liquid fire as a Byzantine feature in video games makes good sense from a design point of view, since it was indeed a highly valuable technological advantage that was put to great use through the centuries and came to adorn imperial policy documents and chronicles alike. But if we investigate how exactly it is presented to players, certain issues become apparent.

In *AoE2*, several civilizations have access to fire ships, with the Byzantines additionally having a slight bonus through a unique technology the game calls Greek fire. All this does is add a bit of extra range to the flame jet that Byzantine fire ships launch. While its depiction and how it works (e.g., being good against other ships) is relatively accurate within the game's constraints, the technological advantage that the Byzantines held is blurred. In reality, so important was the safeguarding of this technology that the Byzantines rarely used liquid fire outside of defending the capital (Roland 1995, xi-xiv). It was too risky to use it in far-flung or smaller naval battles since if the enemy ever got hold of it, Constantinople itself would be vulnerable. *AoE2*'s proliferation of this technology to many other polities would have indeed represented a Byzantine foreign policy nightmare – something that was historically avoided through great effort and diligence.

AoE4, in turn, moves away from a purely naval application of this technology and grants the Byzantines Greek Fire Projectiles, which increase the power of siege engines and adds a lingering burning effect to their impact area. It thus highlights Byzantium's liquid fire technology in its historically much rarer terrestrial application. This is likely a game design issue, since titles in the *AoE* series skew towards land warfare, as do all the games reviewed here. But adding a burning effect to munitions launched from an artillery piece (such as a trebuchet) did not necessarily require the usage of Byzantium's prized liquid fire technology; burning projectiles were used

since antiquity by simply using a flammable missile or ordinance. Historically, the terrestrial usage of liquid fire was often the opposite of this. It was more commonly used to counter artillery by burning the enemy's siege engines (which were made of wood), which is how the Byzantine general Manuel Erotikos defended Nicaea in the 970s (Thurn 1973, 323). Trebuchets had taken over from older stone projectors (catapults) from the sixth century onwards and could launch very heavy projectiles great distances (Chevedden 2000). Especially the powerful, gravity-assisted counter-weight trebuchet (eleventh century onwards) posed a grave threat. Dismantling the enemy's artillery was therefore a top priority in any defensive engagement, enough so to warrant the usage of Byzantium's prized napalm analogous substance.

The errors that games such as the *AoE* series make with Greek fire have a long history which has become fairly embedded in Western thought. After all, the term Greek fire is an exogenous construct; the Byzantines never referred to their own product with this name, as stated above. Why would they? They did not call themselves Greeks in the first place (for thousands of years they had referred to themselves as 'Ρωμαῖοι or Romans). The origin of the label Greek fire can be traced to the eleventh and twelfth centuries, when European Crusading armies popularized it after witnessing it firsthand. Moreover, the Crusaders were reportedly so impressed with what they called Greek fire that they began calling any sort of incendiary weapon they encountered Greek fire too. This dilution of the term's specific meaning now lives on in modern media. For instance, in another popular strategy game, namely *Stronghold: Crusader* (2002), there are infantry who throw fiery grenades consisting of Greek fire according to their in-game description. But neither are they Byzantines nor is their product the famed Byzantine state secret. While the Byzantines did on occasion use their viscous flammable substance in grenade format or to ignite combustible projectiles, this was far from its common usage.

The appropriation of this technology to a wider and broader geography has much to do with Byzantium not having a modern successor state to course-correct its modern representation; neither Greece nor Turkey nor any of the Balkan countries or Russia currently lay full claim to Byzantium's legacy.^{vi} Byzantine liquid fire is thus frequently presented in games as a broad set of flaming weaponry, commonly utilized by various so-called Eastern peoples – an ill-defined category. In *MTW2*, for instance, the Byzantines have access to *fire throwers* in addition to several other civilizations including the Egyptians, Mongols, and Turks, the latter of whom field infantry called Naffatun, stemming from the Byzantine word *naphtha*, the main ingredient of liquid fire. Several distant civilizations are thus grouped under the umbrella of a generalized incendiary weapon, even though the Byzantines never fielded fire throwers in any substantial way. This grouping serves the purpose of casting this vaguely fiery style of combat (and its practitioners) as exotic and *different* – different from the Western European default that is otherwise presented. This is the definition of *orientalism*, first identified in Western attitudes towards the East by Edward Said. Unfortunately, Byzantium has a long history of being appropriated like this, a phenomenon definitely not confined to just entertainment media (Cormack and Jeffreys 2000, Cameron 2003, 1990, Kaldellis 2019, 3-37, Clark 2021). As we will also observe below with Varangian mercenaries and *kataphraktoi*, it is not surprising to see products of this broader pattern seep into entertainment media (Marciniak 2018).

On a more positive note, *EU4* has arguably the most accurate description of this incendiary technology, granting Byzantines what it correctly calls "liquid fire," a unique feature that increases their ships' military effectiveness. In this way it strips away the erroneous naming conventions while also correctly highlighting the technology's primarily naval usage. The *Crusader Kings* series, in turn, mentions Greek fire, but it does not really affect anything since the game mostly avoids naval combat.

“It is reasonably certain that no other section of the public service of the Byzantine Empire was the cause of so much entertaining fiction as the Varangian guards – nor has any other retained such a consistently glamorous public image for so long,” B. S. Benedikz wrote back in 1962, identifying a trend that has only continued to grow. Tales of the Varangians and their heroic deeds circulate in Icelandic sagas, Danish

literature and Byzantine chronicles, beginning already in the Middle Ages during their time of operation. But had Benedikz surveyed the video game milieu in 2024, he would have found that this trajectory has accelerated even further. Varangian guardsmen continue to decorate the popular imagination from video games to films and books. They are presented as a unique Byzantine unit in games including *MTW2*, *CK2*, *CK3*, *EU4*, and *AoE4*.

Varangian guardsmen being one of the few entities that a lay person may know about Byzantium is ironic considering that they were specifically non-Byzantine, instead being a mercenary group composed of Norsemen, Rus', and Anglo-Saxons who served Byzantine emperors from the late-tenth to the fourteenth century. Their origins can be traced back to Basil II's formation of an elite unit of axe-bearers organized out of about 6.000 warriors gifted to him by Vladimir I of Kiev in the 980s – part of a broader agreement that included princess Anna marrying a Kievan prince. This brings us to the biggest misdirection associated with the widespread portrayal of Varangians guardsmen in video games: the idea that Byzantium was unable or unwilling to fend for itself. The popular image of a mercenary-dependent Byzantine military often materializes through an exaggeration of the role of the Varangian guard, particularly from a chronological perspective. Historically specific parts of the later Middle Ages are erroneously applied as a blanket statement across Byzantium's entire history and legacy.

From the eleventh century onwards, Byzantium's provincial military commands (known as *themata*) were dismantled and its army overhauled under the Komnenian emperors, being replaced by a smaller professional army alongside contracted mercenary companies (Rance 2018, 414-421, Haldon 1993, 60-62). This was accompanied by many territorial losses, for a centralized army can only be in one

place for so long, and once withdrawn the area becomes vulnerable again (unlike with the older provincial armies that were rooted in their respective provinces somewhat akin to a defensive militia). Moreover, mercenary companies were prone to rebel or transfer their loyalties elsewhere, as happened time and time again with powerful foreign leaders employed by Byzantium, such as Roussel de Bailleul or Robert Crispin (Beihammer 2017, 211-213, Reinsch and Kambylis 2001, 14-17). But the idea of a mercenary-dependent Byzantium with powerful foreigners defending its heartland – that is inadvertently conveyed through a heavy focus on the Varangians in video games – was not true for most of the civilization's history. From the inception of the Eastern Roman capital in Constantinople in the 330s all the way to the eleventh century, mercenaries were not substantial in the Byzantine army. So why is it that, as Benediktz noted back in 1962, Varangians have left such an outsized footprint in popular culture?

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Varangian guardsmen were loyal (as far as mercenaries go) and notoriously fearsome, functioning as an elite palatine guard in Constantinople, while on occasion also drafted into the field armies, as noted in both Byzantine and Rus' sources (Blöndal 1978, D'Amato 2010, Reinsch and Kambylis 2001, 78-79, Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor 2012, 93). Their tradition of loyalty was commented on by Anna Komnene in the twelfth century, when she wrote that "[they] regard loyalty to the emperors and the protection of their persons as a family tradition, a kind of sacred trust and inheritance handed down from generation to generation" (Reinsch and Kambylis 2001, 78-79). Images of what the Varangians looked like survive in a twelfth-century copy of Ioannes Skylitzes' *Synopsis Historion* (Thurn 1973). They were visually distinct, wearing their native clothing and wielding large battleaxes. They looked nothing like the typical Byzantine soldier. In fact, in the late-twelfth century Niketas Choniates referred to them exclusively through their weaponry, calling them "bearers of one-

edged axes” (ἑτερόστομος πελέκεις) or “those who bear axes” (τῶν πελεκυφόρων) throughout his lengthy narrative (Van Dieten 1975, 172, 248-249, 407, 525-527, 545).^{vii} Clearly then, Varangians were distinguishable at a glance.

This holds up with their depiction in *MTW2*, where they are a favorite among fan communities (due in no small part to their in-game prowess).^{viii} Meanwhile, in *AoE4*, Varangian guardsmen are shown wielding large, two-handed weapons and can invoke an ability called “berserking” to gain increased offensive capabilities for a short while. This vivacious and fearsome imagery indeed aligns with our sources, evoking the Varangians’ successful performances at, for instance, the rebellion of Nikephoros Bryennios in 1078, the Battle of Beroia in 1122, or the defense of Constantinople in 1203 (Meineke 1838, 8, Van Dieten 1975, 545, Kaldellis and Krallis 2012, 462-463). Direct chronological contradictions are also less widespread compared to the presentation of other Byzantine entities, such as the *kataphraktoi*, as we shall see below. The timelines of *MTW2* and *CK2*, for instance, begin in the eleventh century by which time the Varangian guard already existed. And if in *CK3* the option of starting earlier is selected by the player, Varangian guardsmen are indeed not available from the outset. Meanwhile, in *AoE4*, an obtuse timeline clouds chronological issues (but it does pose other problems).^{ix}

After a cursory glance, the Varangian guard thus seems to be represented in a generally acceptable way within these games. But there is a deeper problem churning beneath the surface. While not strictly speaking a problem of historicity, resting a big part of Byzantium’s military legacy on the Varangian guard leads to an issue of emphasis, or more specifically, of omission. The widespread inclusion in video games of the Varangian guard but not of the *exkoubitores* or *hikanatoi* or any other of Byzantium’s prized battalions, provides a highly selective picture to the player. The

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55). But this also made the wearer prone to overheating, and one common way of dealing with them on the battlefield was to avoid combat and tire them into exhaustion. Riders wielded a variety of weaponry depending on their position in the cavalry formation (McGeer 1995, 37, Dennis 2010, 82-104, Reinsch and Kambylis 2001, 134-135).^{xiii} *Kataphraktoi* were thus very costly to field, one of their biggest drawbacks. For instance, at least two squires were required to accompany each cavalryman on campaign for armor-bearing among other duties of upkeep and maintenance. And the full mail armor and high-quality warhorse that they required were far beyond the acquisition capabilities of ordinary people. A strong horse was needed to support all that weight, and the supply of such prized breeds was sharply contested in the Medieval world. All of this made *kataphraktoi* privileged units, correlated with wealth and social prestige.

As can be surmised, they were far too valuable and expensive to send into the thick of battle without meticulous planning and a precise course of action. It is for this reason that Byzantine military manuals feature extensive tactical insights on the positioning, maneuvering, and protection of *kataphraktoi*. The first thing to note is that *kataphraktoi* have a large footprint in strategic manuals dealing with offensive warfare, and their proper utilization needed a large open space. This type of traditional, pitched battle is emulated well in the *Total War* series (2000-2023), including *MTW2*. On the contrary, smaller engagements (such as mountain-pass ambushes) or any type of asymmetric warfare or resistance was not their forte, since a central problem in deploying *kataphraktoi* was that their usefulness was tied to the enemy's willingness to engage them in battle. Evading their charge was often a possibility and offered one of the easiest counters to them (Eadie 1967, 173, McGeer 1995, 39-51). As such, they were a liability in skirmishes or when facing a guerilla-style defense. In fact, manuals indicate that their primary duty was to act as a single,

decisive, battle-ending charging force (McGeer 1995, 45-49).^{xiv} They typically engaged the enemy's main army column, charging in a trapezoid shaped formation to break through it. They were not able to re-form at any feasible rate; it was all designed for the first devastating charge to be successful. Byzantine doctrine thus saw *kataphraktoi* as elite shock troops. Even in their heydays they numbered only a few hundred at most, a marginal number in comparison to the foot soldiers or lighter cavalry in an average Byzantine field army (McGeer 1995, 35, 113).^{xv}

Their historical role on the battlefield contrasts with their in-game depictions in several critical aspects, particularly in games of the RTS genre. In *AoE2*, for instance, *kataphraktoi* can freely disengage, re-engage, pivot and turn around, and they are quite fast at all this. This makes them adept at small, mobile engagements and skirmishes, and in chasing down fleeing enemy troops, which is an almost complete reversal of the historical reality. As the esteemed Byzantine general Nikephoros Ouranos stated in his *Taktika*, *kataphraktoi* were not meant to pursue fleeing units; that was a duty left to lighter cavalry. It was too dangerous for *kataphraktoi*; the risk of being lured into an ambush was too great for such expensive units, and not really feasible given their lack of agility (McGeer 1995, 105). While some of these in-game errors can be overlooked from the perspective of playability and the limits of the game engine, it is hard to understand why the developers allowed heavily armored and hard-hitting *kataphraktoi* to move at the same speed as lighter, completely unarmored cavalry. Thankfully, some later titles including *AoE4* and *Civ5* address this by making *kataphraktoi* move slower.

An even bigger problem connected to the cultural assimilation of Byzantium concern visual depictions. *Kataphraktoi* in *MTW2* wield lances, which was representative of Western European knights. As stated above, Byzantine *kataphraktoi* usually wielded

the apex of the *kataphraktos*. This burst of offensive warfare is inadvertently conveyed as a *longue durée* Byzantine reality to players.

Despite their powerful charge, there were counters to *kataphraktoi* on the Medieval battlefield other than avoidance. According to Byzantine wisdom, heavy infantry called *menavlatoi*, who wielded long spears up to ten feet in length, were the advised way to stop a charge of *kataphraktoi*. Nikephoros Ouranos describes how *menavlatoi* normally sheltering in the backlines were to rapidly assemble at the front when an incoming heavy cavalry charge was spotted (McGeer 1995, 94): "The *menavlatoi* must stand their ground and bravely meet the charge of the *kataphraktoi*."^{xvii} Particularly important were the spears of the *menavlatoi*, which had to be carefully made "as thick as the hand can hold" (ibid.) from a single piece of hardwood such as oak or cornel (i.e., not a composite), such was the ferocity of the charge they needed to halt. Weaker ordinary spears would be easily shattered by a charging column of armored horses, regardless of whether or not their rider even used a weapon.

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Another major divergence from reality thus begins in the arena of army composition. It is possible (and not at all uncommon) to create an army consisting almost wholly of *kataphraktoi* and decimate decisive engagements in titles including *AoE2*, *AoE4*, and *MTW2*, in addition to *CK2* and *CK3* to an extent, where *kataphraktoi* can be sent to single-handedly quell provincial revolts (something they were specifically bad at). This unanimous presentation of *kataphraktoi* as self-sufficient military machines is clearly misleading, since they were a tiny fraction of any field army and for good reason. Leaving aside the mountain of squires and other logistical aides that were required to deploy a unit of heavy cavalry, this presentation also ignores the myriad other troops that needed to act in harmony with *kataphraktoi* in order for them to achieve anything. As mentioned above, they were a costly liability if not properly strategized

around – something that Byzantine military manuals underlined time and again (e.g., *Praecepta Militaria* [McGeer 1995, sections II-IV]; Nikephoros Ouranos' *Taktika* [Dennis 2010, sections 57, 60-61]). Thus, running around the battlefield with a contingent consisting solely or heavily of *kataphraktoi* – as is often the case in games such as *AoE2* – is not a realistic presentation of history. Neither is the singular dispatchment of *kataphraktoi* to quell a provincial rebellion, which is an even more egregious misrepresentation. In reality, it was the opposite: *Kataphraktoi* would be the worst units to send into a locally embedded resistance. They were engineered around pitched battles and open engagements, making their depiction in the larger battlefields of *MTW2*, for instance, more accurate than the smaller skirmishes common in *AoE2*.

One reason for the popularity of Medieval heavy cavalry is that offensive warfare attracts more excitement than its defensive, localized counterpart. This phenomenon is particularly pronounced for FPS games, for which studies have shown that particularly the erosion of the rules of warfare offers a ripe platform for glorifying expansive and/or offensive campaigns (Renic and Kaempf 2022). Large urban zones are commonly devoid of civilian life (e.g., *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* 2019) and any remaining civilians are often presented as legitimate targets to players, removing one of the most unsavory aspects of real warfare; everyone caught in the fray is shown as a participant in the violence, in a stark contrast with reality. Additionally, the idea of a *virtuous war* is commonly used in the entertainment industry to infuse a do-good attitude into military invasions (Der Derian 2009). The allure of fighting in a space supposedly beyond one's own territory is compounded by the largest market for games (the Western world) having many more cases of extra-territorial warfare than the reverse in its modern history. Defensive resistance ends up taking the back seat in what is marketable. Thus, for instance, the elastic, guerilla defense that successfully

protected Anatolia against one of the most rapid conquest sprees in recorded history is entirely absent in media. Resisting the Caliphate was arguably one of Byzantium's greatest achievements, and the doctrine of this resistance is recorded in the *Peri Paradromis*, a fascinatingly detailed Byzantine manual on skirmishing and guerilla warfare (Dennis 1985, 144-239). A game or other piece of media focusing on this era of total war would be a welcome change. And a tooth-and-nail struggle for survival definitely fits the term *total war* more so than the pitched battles depicted in the game series that features this very term in its title (*Medieval Total War*).^{xviii}

Conclusions

The presentation of Medieval warfare in video games distorts and outright ignores much of what animated history with its myriad strategic, logistical, and economic challenges. This conveys to lay audiences a remarkably uniform and sterilized picture; there is little to separate Byzantium – with its supposed knights galloping around the battlefield – from Arthurian legends, for instance. Neither do we witness the tremendous amount of civilian effort and suffering that accompanied almost all forms of warfare. While the sterilization of history is common in all forms of media, as discussed above in relation to WWII games, the former issue is specific to the modern presentation of the Medieval setting. It is part of marketing the Middle Ages. Mystifying and purposefully obfuscating the untrendy complexities and darker corners of the Medieval era will inevitably lead to better game sales, which is the ultimate guiding principle for commercial products. This leads to a very important problem in the presentation in modern media of not just Byzantium but of the Middle Ages more broadly speaking. The onus is on historians and scholars of Byzantium and the Middle Ages to course-correct this misleading narrative, not only in the name of academic integrity but also to remove the rose-tinted glasses through

which Medieval warfare particularly, but also war more generally, continues to be viewed.

As we have seen, players of popular strategy video games know about cataphracts, Varangian mercenaries and liquid fire, and associate these with Byzantium, but receive little information on the most basic facts associated with this enduring polity, including its language, ethnicity or governance. Nor is the longevity of Byzantium ever explained, which on the contrary is often presented as a paradox; a supposedly stagnating civilization that somehow, miraculously, survived and prospered for over a millennium in a highly competitive geography. Players of video games may wonder how on earth Byzantium managed this after reading the in-game description of the Byzantines in *MTW2*:

"Byzantium is the shadow that remains of the old Roman Empire. It is a mere shadow because despite retaining the civilized ways of the Roman legacy, the Byzantines have done little to further it. In fact, it is their reverence of the old ways that has brought the empire to a point of stagnation, in a world that has gradually kept moving on."

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Byzantium's entire history is thus presented as one long episode of decline and stagnation. The Byzantines have reportedly done little to further Rome's legacy in any aspect whatsoever; a thousand years of history is thus brushed aside as inconsequential. The perplexing question of how such a decrepit entity weathered countless adversaries and challenges throughout so many centuries must indeed appear puzzling. The only possible explanation that game studios provide are to highlight Byzantium's walls and fortifications; the idea that it sheltered and hid its way through the centuries. Needless to say, this is extremely reductionist.^{xix} These sorts of highly outdated notions originate in Enlightenment though (e.g., Hieronymus Wolf,

to lay audiences. As long as this current pattern continues, the same static and misleading picture will get further entrenched in popular perceptions. Lacking self-identifying successors in today's world should not doom Byzantium's legacy to assimilation and subservience. There is an urgency, incumbent upon scholars of Byzantium, to help disseminate a better-rounded, more nuanced, and most importantly, independent presentation in the growing and highly diffuse medium of video games.

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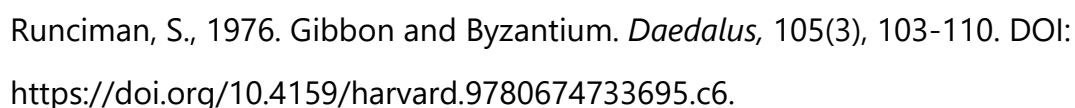
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Greece has been somewhat reconciling with its Byzantine past in recent years, and particularly Byzantium's religious legacy has remained attractive to Greece, Russia and other Orthodox Christian countries. But this has remained insufficient for the purposes of fully embracing and championing the Byzantine past as national heritage, which thus remains somewhat lost in the community of historical polities (Bastéa 2000, Hamilakis 2007, Durak 2014, Kaldellis 2021, 349-367).

ⁱⁱⁱ Other iterations of these game series may also be listed (e.g., *Age of Empires III* (2005), *Medieval: Total War* (2002), earlier *Civilization* titles). But since they have similar representations of Byzantium, I have decided to omit these entries, and instead focus on the most popular titles in their respective series. But in other cases (e.g., with *AoE2* and *AoE4*) the difference in Byzantium's representation is substantial enough to warrant separate analysis.

^{iv} Fasolio (2023) very shortly touches upon Varangians noting that they became a ceremonial unit from the thirteenth century onwards, he recognizes Greek fire as a unique Byzantine tenet in a sentence, and notes the chronological problem of *kataphraktoi*. But this remains a small part of his chapter, which provides a broad survey, and does not aim to deconstruct the reasoning behind (and repercussions that stem from) these highly specific choices.

^v It is called wildfire in the TV-show and also in the *A Song of Ice and Fire* book series by George R. R. Martin (1996-2011) upon which it is based. It is also featured in novels such as Sansom 2004, Crichton 1999.

^{vi} While Greece and also Russia have championed certain aspects of their Byzantine past and connections to it (for Greece this has revolved a lot around religion), they do not draw on its full historical legacy. For instance, in Greece there is a tendency to downplay or outright exclude Byzantine material in favor of the Classical heritage, perhaps best exemplified in the structuring of modern Athens (Bastéa 2000, Hamilakis 2007). Also, see endnote ii, above.

^{vii} Van Diemen 1975, 172 (οἱ τοὺς ἑτεροστόμους πελέκεις ἐπὶ των ὠμων ἀνέχουσι), 248-249 (οἱ κατωμαδόν τοὺς ἑτεροστόμους πελέκεις ἀνέχουσιν), 407, 525-527 (των πελεκυφόρων), 545 (των πελεκυφόρων βαρβάρων).

^{viii} Fan communities of *MTW2* are populated with so-called Byzantophiles or Byzantiboos who describe the Byzantines as their favorite (or as the most powerful) faction in the game. For instance, see Total War Center 2024.

^{ix} The ambiguous timeline presented in *AoE2* and *AoE4* brings together not just different troop types but whole civilizations that never chronologically overlapped in reality.

^x E.g., Durak 2022, 123-139. For a historical overview, see Ransohoff and Aschenbrenner 2021.

^{xi} Feudalism as a social system is generally accepted by scholars as not being applicable to Byzantium owing to the significance differences that it exhibited. While Late-Byzantium or the Palaiologan era most approached certain tendencies that are often grouped under the label feudalism, it was still vastly different in many key aspects, such as those concerning social relations or territorial administration (Whittow 1995, Laiou 2009, Bartusis 2012).

^{xii} Popularized in films such as *A Knight's Tale* (2001), *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005), *The Green Knight* (2021), or book series (and their associated TV-shows) set in fictionalized, pseudo-Medieval fantasy worlds that resemble the social organization of feudal Europe, such as *A Song of Ice and Fire* by George R. R. Martin, *The Wheel of Time* by Robert Jordan (1990-2013), or *The Witcher* by Andrzej Sapkowski (1986-2024).

^{xiii} The first four ranks wielded heavy iron maces, the flanks of the cavalry wedge wielded lances, while the center could have archers. All carried swords too. *Praecepta Militaria* 3.6-7 in: McGeer 1995, 37. Also see Leo VI's *Taktika* in: Dennis 2010, 82-104. For a description of the armor's robustness, see Anna Komnene's comments on her father's experiences in the *Alexiad* 4.6: Reinsch and Kambylis 2001, 134-135.

^{xiv} This is the *Praecepta Militaria* 4.11-15 (McGeer 1995, 45-49).

^{xv} Sources on this are the *Praecepta Militaria* 3.1 and Nikephoros Ouranos' *Taktika* 60.1-2 (McGeer 1995, 35, 113).

^{xvi} Similar problems of chronology also exist with the presentation of cataphracts in CK3.

^{xvii} "οἱ δὲ μεναυλάτοι ἵνα ἰστώνται καὶ ἀπαντῶσι γενναίως τὴν ὀρμὴν τῶν καταφράκτων καὶ τῶν λοιπῶν πολεμίων καὶ στρέφωσιν αὐτούς." Nikephoros Ouranos, *Taktika* 56.10.

^{xviii} The most recent title surveyed here, *AoE4* (2021), features Byzantine *limitanei* (as a form of spearmen) in a small step in the right direction. Historically, *limitanei* did not necessarily wield spears, but they were garrisoned along the empire's frontiers until the sixth-seventh centuries, by which time they disappear from records. While this inclusion somewhat nuances the Byzantine historical record presented in *AoE4*, it does little to address the much larger issues at play, as seen in the above mentioned in-game introductory sentence for the Byzantines.

^{xix} Highlighting Byzantium's defensive prowess factors into *AoE2* where all Byzantine structures are 40% more durable compared to all other civilizations. *EU4*, meanwhile, names and draws attention to its historical walls, such as Constantinople's Theodosian walls, or the Hexamilion that lined the entrance to the Peloponnese. Moreover, Constantinople is presented as a defensive bastion "*constantly under siege*" that grants the Byzantines a unique attribute called Defensive Mentality. In CK3, in turn, Constantinople is visually depicted as one large, oversized castle, conveying the same passive notion. While a glorification of Byzantium's static defenses is a welcome addition in video games, an overwhelming emphasis on 'sheltering behind walls' as a defensive doctrine serves to convey an ineptness in active defense and even in administration and foreign policy. As any reader of the tenth century handbook of Byzantine foreign policy (*De Administrando Imperio*), of the detailed defensive strategizing presented in the *Peri Paradromis*, or of the countless narrative sources showing the hair-splitting details of diplomacy and policy-making that was conducted to great success will realize, Byzantium's longevity rested on much more than just its robust walls (Thurn 1973, 200-276, Moravcsik 1985, Dennis 1985).