

Cruising in Apulia. *Mediterranea Inferno* at the Crossroads of Queer Desire and Political Crisis

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In 2023, Italian indie game studio Santa Ragione published *Mediterranea Inferno*, a visual novel created by Lorenzo Redaelli / Eyeguys, which catches its protagonists and their country (Italy) at a variety of crossroads.

Taking place after the end of the Covid lockdowns, the game stars Claudio, Andrea and Mida, three queer young men who used to be starlets of the Milan nightlife – known and feted as *I ragazzi del sole*, the “boys of the sun” – but who have not seen each other since the pandemic hit. Claudio invites his two friends to spend one summer at his granddad’s native home on the coast of Apulia, hoping to rekindle his friendship with them. What Claudio is maybe wilfully ignoring is the fact that none of the three boys has stayed the same since the last time they saw each other, and the game – with its branching narratives and multiple endings – allows the player to experiment with different scenarios of tragedy or reconciliation.

These crossroads presented in *Mediterranea Inferno* straddle a variety of allegiances, contexts, and (shifts in) identity. The ever-present background is the divide between Northern and Southern Italy, between big cities and provinces – but equally relevant is the crossroads between straight and queer, between family and personal freedom, between public and private, between older and newer generations and between classes. Claudio, for instance, is a passionate creative who can’t seem to reconcile his admiration for his granddad (an acclaimed stylist) with his need to find his own voice; he is torn between Milan’s North which saw him grow up and blossom, and Apulia’s South where he hopes to find his roots and a pathway to his future. Mida experienced a meteoric rise as an influencer during the pandemic, but he’s spiralling into a mental breakdown because he still does not feel accepted or loved by his fellow *ragazzi del sole*. Andrea is struggling as his promiscuous sex life – put on hold because of the Covid lockdowns – is now free to resume, but he is hampered by internalised feelings of homophobia and self-loathing. All three men, now in their mid-20s, are at a crossroads of their lives as Italy and the entire world finds itself at a crossroads dictated by the Covid crisis, and they will be forced to choose paths as a magical (and maybe demonic?) force compels them to face their inner turmoil.

In this paper, I will examine *Mediterranea Inferno* as an example of a queer game whose narrative spans from the personal to the political. As game creator and artist Robert Yang stated in an interview with Bonnie Ruberg, “In order to represent a gay

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world, you need a gay body” (Ruberg 2020) – a challenge that *Mediterranea Inferno* more than rises to by unabashedly portraying queer male physicality on full display and making it the site of desire, trauma, and consciousness. How do the intersectional underpinnings such as sexuality, class, and belonging find their place in the game – how do they become, in fact, visible and *playable*? What kind of meanings and chains of associations does the game’s hallucinated and queering use of Catholic iconography evoke? And how does the player get to impersonate and embody the game’s protagonists with all their imperfections and pain?

In my examination of *Mediterranea Inferno*, I will build on pre-existing scholarship on narrative queer games – for instance Christina Xan’s analysis of ludic queer temporality and spatiality and in *Gone Home* (Xan 2024) or Joshua V. Rivers’ reflections on “queer video games as critical method”, centred on how embodying queer avatars can allow players to understand non-heteronormative experiences and critique the political and societal conditions that endanger them (Rivers 2019). I will also analyse how *Mediterranea Inferno* makes peculiar use of the visual novel format with its “politics of failure” (Ruberg 2019) which are typical of the genre. This will be particularly relevant in terms of how the game uses “navigational feints” (Kretzschmar & Raffel 2023) to get the player through a variety of incomplete, bad endings before landing on a definitive one that is even more effective for the ordeal survived by the boys and the player. I will thus highlight how the game – while candidly presenting the lives and difficulties of queer protagonists – does not easily fall in the “empathy” trap described and criticised in the context of queer games by Teddy Pozo (Pozo 2018), allowing the player to impersonate characters that are nuanced and not clear-cut in their moral outlook. In doing so, considerations of genre dynamics will also be highly relevant, e.g. through the game’s use of the “first-person perspective” typical of VNs (Kretzschmar & Raffel 2023) to situate forms of homosexual male gaze (Rohrs 2019, Nevin 2023) in the narration, allowing the player to experience it in all its nuances, joyous or toxic as they may be.

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