

Good King Wenceslas goes virtual

Good king Wenceslas looked out. The snow lay round about, deep and crisp and even. The branches of the trees in the palace grounds were etched in white, glistening in the light of the full moon. 'Amazing', said the king, 'wonderful! What's that? No, who's that?' A figure had come into sight, slowly trudging across the snowbound landscape, a large bundle strapped to his back.

'Hither page!' called the King. 'Sire', responded the page, joining his monarch, 'should I open the windows, it's getting very stuffy in here.' Indeed the page was right. A hot afternoon sun was beating through the windows and despite the size and height of the palace rooms, it was starting to feel oppressive. 'Mmn?' said the king. 'Yes. Do. Sorry I was in the deep mid-winter as it were,' he indicated a pair of oversize goggles he had just put down. 'Virtual reality glasses,' said the page, 'how did you come by these sire?' 'Chap from the tourist office,' said the king. 'Came talking about enhancing the visitor experience at the palace, you know the way they do. Most of our visitors come in summer of course and he thought they should see the place in winter too, and this was how to do it. Must say it's very good, but no, it wasn't for the windows that I summoned you, just take a look in these glasses will you and tell me what you think.'

Good king Wenceslas's page looked out too. The snow lay as before; the moon shone brightly. 'Good isn't it sire,' he commented, then, 'well, well, that looks just like old Thomaz the peasant.' 'D'you know him' asked the king. 'Yes, sire he lives oh a good league hence, underneath the mountain, right against the forest fence' – 'oh I know where you mean,' said the king – 'by St Agnes' fountain?' 'That's right,' said the page, 'looks as if he's been gathering wood for his stove. Oh, that's strange, he's fallen, must have tripped over something, except he hasn't got up. 'What!' cried the king, 'let me have a look, where's the replay, ah yes, yes, he goes down doesn't he and stays down, - we can't have that page, we've got to do something!'

'But sire,' said the page, 'it's not real, it's just a computer program.' 'I know that and you know that,' said the king, 'but will the punters who visit the palace know it too? All they will see is a dead peasant in the royal park and the

king seemingly totally indifferent to his fate. That's not the enhanced visitor experience we need, nor good PR, page, the press would have a field day.'

'Tell you what,' said the page, 'I know a firm that's quite close to here, they're into digital media stuff, Dancing Aardvark they're called, I'm sure they'll help.' 'Dancing Aardvark,' replied the king, 'not exactly local fauna is it! Why not Dancing Hedgehog or Dancing Badger?' perhaps it doesn't have the resonance they need,' suggested the page. 'Whatever, if they're good – get in contact,' said the king, 'and come up with something better than this.'

A few days later the page was reporting his progress back to the king. 'Have a look now, sire,' he said offering the glasses. 'Well, the beginning's the same,' said the king, 'snow and moonlight, very romantic if it wasn't so cold. Ah and here's the peasant – he looks no different either, and look he's still falling down and he's there a lump in the snow.' 'But what happens next,' asked the page. 'Oh, we're back in the palace, and someone's looking out of the window: is that me?' 'Crown on your head's the giveaway,' said the page, 'uh,' responded the king, 'and I suppose that's you next to me, and I'm pointing outside and am I ordering you to go out there? No, no, we're both going outside and there's subtitles appearing: 'Forth into the snow they went, forth they went together, through the rude wind's wild lament and the bitter weather.' Bit poetic isn't it – not sure about a rude wind – cold would be just as good.' 'I'll mention that to Dancing Aardvark,' said the page. 'Yes. Do,' said the king, 'so there we go and what's happening now. We've reached the peasant and we're helping him onto his feet, and starting to bring him back here. Fine, that's a charitable gesture to be sure. Oh, but what's happened now, he's fallen down again and so have you! Oh what's this, more subtitles: 'Sire the night is darker now, and the wind blows stronger: fails my heart, I know not how, I can go no longer.' That's you speaking I suppose. Not quite the sort of language I think you'd use myself, but heigh-ho. Oh what's happening now. The snow seems to be melting just where I am standing, and I'm making a path for you through the snow, oh and yet more words: 'Mark my footsteps good my page, tread thou in them boldly: thou shalt find the winter's rage freeze thy blood less coldly!' Are they on the same planet at Dancing Aardvark, it's just doggerel really!' 'But memorable surely,' replied the page, 'and I think you'll find that by now we're back in the palace, safe and

unharmd and having something to eat.' 'And there's a final caption,' said the king, "ye who now will bless the poor shall yourselves find blessing.' Well it's all a bit Victorian melodrama really but still better than leaving the poor sod to die, nevertheless...'

The king was interrupted by a knock on the door. 'Are we expecting anyone,' asked the king? 'O my goodness I completely forgot sire, the archbishop had asked to see you' – 'well show him in,' said the king, 'let's find out what his latest scheme is.'

'Welcome your grace, and what is on your mind this sunny day?' 'Thank you your majesty, yes it's still very hot outside isn't it, but oh, I see you have some virtual reality glasses there, well well. I thought I would really surprise you, but perhaps not, you see, I have brought a pair with me too.' 'Not from the tourist office I hope?' asked the king. 'No,' replied the archbishop, 'we have been working on a church program with a local digital media company.' 'Dancing Aardvark', asked the king? 'Your majesty must be psychic,' said the archbishop, 'yes indeed. I've been thinking we might enliven our church services by using virtual reality. You attend your local church but can choose to be in a different one using your glasses. You can be in St Peter's in Rome, St Basil's in Moscow, St Paul's in London, or in a clearing in the jungle or in the Australian outback – and that's just for starters.' 'So do you mean that some poor minister is going to be leading a service facing a congregation all immersed in over-size goggles. It would be like preaching to a group of fully kitted frogmen!' 'They'll get used to it,' replied the archbishop. 'Most people don't look at the priest during service in any case. And don't like the priest looking at them – makes them feel guilty.'

'No, no, this scheme is surely nonsense,' said the king. 'Sire!' interrupted the page, 'before you go any further may I be so bold as to enquire of the archbishop if in establishing what is effectively a virtual church there would also be a role for virtual saints?' 'Well, now you mention it,' said the archbishop, 'I suppose that's possible, but I'm not sure how....' 'Perhaps his majesty can assist you,' said the page. 'Sire?'

‘What?...Ah, I see, yes,’ the king beamed with pleasure – ‘my dear archbishop, perhaps I can help...Would your grace care to glance in here for virtual saintly action!’

Therefore Christians all be sure
A Virtual glass possessing
Will show you saints who evermore
Shall give a digital blessing

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