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The Procession to Calvary

In October 2021, I wended through the collaged, cacophonous landscapes carefully reconstructed from Early Modern European paintings in Joe Richardson's *The Procession to Calvary* (inspired by the Pieter Bruegel the Elder painting of the same name). As Bellona, the Roman goddess of war from Rembrandt van Rijn's 1633 eponymous painting, players have just returned from the "Holy Wars" the new self-appointed ruler forbids citizens from killing anyone else. Seriously, no more killing. Any needless violence against non-player characters (NPCs) in the game results in other NPCs withholding helpful information or refusing to interact with players at all. As the goddess of war this abstention is doubtlessly difficult, but for the sake of the game Bellona's sword is only used for cutting ropes and fish.

The Procession to Calvary immerses players in a visual and musical reinterpretation of the quest narrative reminiscent of *Monty Python* as they head south to seek revenge on the former ruler, "Heavenly Peter." Bellona is duped, drenched, dressed-up, and nearly decapitated on her adventure, but similarly asks players to engage in some morally dubious behaviors. For instance, Bellona helps "The Street Magician" turn water to wine, escape crucifixion, and rise from the dead, she conspires with creatures from Hieronymus Bosch's horrorscapes to summon the devil after their giant clam stops producing pearls, and she steals objects from anyone at any time. Nearly every game object and visual detail is taken from artwork belonging to the long Renaissance (1400-1800) and carefully manipulated to form creative and often hilarious scenes.

Richardson's game is self-conscious in its humor and purposefully plays with narrative to maximum comedic effect. *Procession's* soundtrack comprises an entirely pre-modern selection and each performance is visually represented on screen by painted musicians often playing together: a group of cats sing a Monteverdi motet; a Harlequin boy with pipes one of Beethoven's flute sonatas; Gabrieli, Bach, Piergelosi, and so on. The game invests so heavily in music that at one point, players must recollect and perform an aria at a talent show to progress through the game. Cross-media performances like this draw players farther into the game because its mechanics are straightforward and limited.

Procession's mode of engagement positions players as hybrid spectator-adventurers. As we follow Bellona on her quest, we realize that our choices are limited by game structure and its point-and-click mechanic. Every game object, including characters, has an extremely finite set of interactions available and world exploration is essentially nonexistent. Frequently, when the next step isn't entirely obviously, the game's strict adherence to a singular narrative (except for the ending) combined with the almost meditative click-click-click-click that moves players through the game world could easily be frustrating. But given the games relatively short length and

attention to visual detail, getting lost rarely occurs (and if it does, the game's happy to lend a hand) and all is forgiven when the path is regained.

The Early Modern world portrayed in *Procession* does not make any claim to realism whatsoever and much of the game's comedy lies in the way it plays with its visual source material. And just as the game's humor reads as *Monty Pythonesque*, its cut-and-paste artwork strongly evokes the aesthetic of Python animator Terry Gilliam. As a group of trained medievalists, or some of them at least, the Pythons were intimately familiar with the literary texts, visual artwork, and cultural motifs of Medieval and Early Modern Europe. And considering the noisy paintings of Pieter Bruegel (the Elder), Pieter Huys, and Hieronymus Bosch, just a few of those early modern talents whose dark *mises-en-scène* drag their viewers into oil-based entropy, it makes sense that the Pythons and *Procession* capitalize on this chaos for comedy's sake. The reformation (sorry, Martin Luther) we see in *The Procession to Calvary* allows players to explore the visual and sonic diversity of the Renaissance in Western Europe without placing pressure on the game's accuracy. The game's designed with humor and not realism in mind, but it nevertheless exhibits thoughtful research and an attempt to transmediate paint into pixels.

"Transmedia storytelling," a term coined by Henry Jenkins in 2003, occurs when a narrative is adapted, expanded, and reformulated across media to create a cohesive narrative network using paintings, novels, films, games, comic books, and manuscripts to just name a few. In his essay, "[Searching for the Origami Unicorn: The Matrix and Transmedia Storytelling](#)," Jenkins uses *The Matrix* as an example of transmedia storytelling and argues that audiences can only understand the film trilogy (soon to be expanded beyond that) if they also play the video game. This type of narrative network affords us the opportunity to engage with these "texts" in more meaningful, perhaps personal ways. Kishonna Gray uses transmedia as a critical term in her monograph, [Intersectional Tech: Black Users in Digital Gaming](#), and discusses the importance of transmedia storytelling to Black video gamers: "The transmediated nature of contemporary gaming communities affords the possibility of reframing traditional narratives, controlling and producing content, and sustaining Black cultural production" (2). Through Gray's words we can see the importance of taking traditional structures and using their building blocks to recreate new and meaningful ways engaging with games. There's a wonderful moment in the game where players explore a virtual museum of all the paintings used to create the game.

In an industry driven by presale profits and toxic masculinity, it's refreshing to see a Roman goddess in 17th-century Flemish style cast as the hero (generically speaking) of this game. This doesn't make it a feminist game, but this type of transmediation reframes on so many levels Renaissance portraiture and the impressive landscape paintings cut and pasted into *The Procession to Calvary*. Richardson and the design team used broad strokes in their constructed game world, but that quality makes the game more accessible (I have some constructive criticism

about a couple of the racier jokes, but I'll save them for if Richardson or the developers read this review...email me!). For the most part, the jokes are funny and wildly off-color, and I can't remember the last time I laughed this much playing a video game. I won't spoil any more of the game and I'll conclude here by saying that for what might seem at first glance like a niche game, I recommend this game to anyone (of age), from art amateurs and new gamers to Early Modern specialists and anyone interesting in learning their first fact about Renaissance art. Pack your bags, pop a squat, and join the *Procession to Calvary* for a unique gaming experience that's not afraid to break the fourth wall or the rules of perspective.