JEN JENSON, NICK TAYLOR, SUZANNE DE CASTELL, MILENA DROUMEVA AND STEPHANIE FISHER

5. BAROQUE BAROQUE REVOLUTION

New Rules for an Old Game

INTRODUCTION

This paper offers a case study of the design, development, and play-testing of a Flash-based Baroque music game, “Tafelkids: The Quest for Arundo Donax”, focusing on the tension between constructing an online resource that an audience aged 8–14 would find engaging, and the directive to include historical information and facts, as well as convey some of the sounds, musical structures and conventions of Baroque music, history and culture through play. We begin by setting out some basic theoretical principles around game-based learning, in particular, introducing the concept of “ludic epistemology”, in order to situate our design efforts within an emerging pedagogical paradigm. After detailing the game’s design, we document 3 play-testing sessions in which we observed, in total, over 150 students aged 12–14 play the game. We conclude with a discussion of the particular challenges in designing a bridge from propositions to play, digitally re-mediating a traditional approach to Baroque music education to address the broader epistemological question of what and how we may best learn, and learn best, from play.

NEW MEDIA, NEW AUDIENCES

In today’s super-saturated, socially networked, ‘second-life,’ online, content-generating, 2.0, 3.0, ‘glocal’ culture, the world of Baroque music, to many people, not only feels like a relic from an inaccessible past, but it often looks that way as well. The project we describe here was commissioned by Tafelmusik Baroque Orchestra, a group based in Toronto, whose mandate is to create an audience of appreciative and informed younger listeners through engaging educational resources about baroque music (http://www.tafemusik.org). Tafelmusik already does an enormous amount of public outreach: Baroque education days for school children, the creation of a curriculum for teachers that matches specified ‘outcomes’ for provincial standards, the production of an award-winning CD for kids, and most recently their attempt to use the media that many youth (especially boys) are still so fascinated with – videogames. For us, as academic researchers and educators, this was a golden opportunity to design a learning-rich, engaging and challenging, game which takes advantage of mainstream media conventions, and reconfigures these for use in an informative context.
deep understanding, risk-taking and experimentation, or even simply having fun as potentially valid and valuable, alongside the traditional models of fact retention. The case that we present here of experiencing Baroque music through the medium of a Flash-based game constitutes a two-fold example of this new-old approach to education which aspires to a “ludic epistemology”. On one hand, it traces our work as designers attempting to merge both static and participatory models of learning and play while leveraging popular gaming conventions and resisting patronizing efforts by “educational media” to disguise itself (mostly unsuccessfully) as entertainment. On another hand, the experience from our play testing demonstrates not only the persistence of digital media conventions (disinterest in “enforced” learning and screen instructions – tendency to play by intuition and discovery, in a participatory, communal fashion) and highlights other potential indicators of learning, besides retention of facts about Baroque music and history – pleasurable engagement, communal learning, confronting game challenges, competition, changing and negotiating game rules, and, most importantly for all of our participants, an embodied, first opportunity to listen to and experience Baroque music. The competencies and dispositions that we saw beginning to emerge from these play-testing sessions do not, we argue, constitute a ‘new literacy’. Rather we see the game as a re-mediation, through digital play, of the kinds of embodied knowing involved in musical performance. In a time when there are few, if any, music programs remaining in public school and where students’ opportunities to engage in, listen to and experience other musical forms is almost non-existent, these kinds of resources can, at the very least, give a kind of fun, engaging educational experience to students who would otherwise never have it. To put it as one of our early user testers did: “I never heard this kind of music before: that means it’s educational for me, right?” Right indeed: if only more educational experiences were so transparent.

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NOTES

1 Baroque Adventure: The Quest for Arundo Donax includes a CD of Baroque music played by the Tafelmusik Orchestra, interspersed with a narrated story of Frances and Edward Purcell’s quest to retrieve Arundo Donax, the plant used to make reeds for oboes and bassons. The CD also includes an illustrated booklet depicting scenes from the adventure. More information about the production can be found at http://www.tafelmusik.org/media/presspdfs/Tafelmusik_ChildrensCD.pdf.

2 This tension around what constitutes ‘knowledge’ in game-based learning is played out on Tafelmusik’s education website, where the game is hosted (http://www.tafelmusik.org/education/webgame.htm). Tafelmusik lists the game’s “learning resources”, citing “composer bios”, “Baroque instrument descriptions”, “musical excerpts”, and “historical information on the Baroque era”. No mention is made here about what might be learned through the kinds of play the game offers.