

## The Ludomusicology Research Group

### *Reflections on Our First Decade*

**ABSTRACT** Mark Sweeney, cofounder of the Ludomusicology Research Group, looks back at ten years of conferences and other research activities. He considers how the events and the field have developed during this time and points to directions for future development. **KEYWORDS** conferences, Europe, RMA, Royal Musical Association, Ludo, canons, SSSMG, interdisciplinarity

As I began drafting this reflective piece for *JSMG*, almost ten years after the establishment of the Ludomusicology Research Group (hereafter sometimes referred to simply as Ludo), I received an exciting and wholly unexpected email from the United States Library of Congress. We were informed that they consider the Ludomusicology website (<http://www.ludomusicology.org/>) an important part of the historical record of Professional Organizations for the Performing Arts, and that they will be including it in their collection of internet materials for the Performing Arts Web Archive (<http://www.loc.gov/collections/performing-arts-web-archive/>). I can safely say that I never predicted anything like this in August 2011, when, together with Michiel Kamp and Tim Summers, we cofounded the Ludomusicology Research Group.

An interview describing the background of the group—Michiel, Tim, Melanie Fritsch, and myself—and our first few years was published in *GAME* in 2017 and is freely available, so I won't repeat at length what I wrote there.<sup>1</sup> Instead, I want to take this opportunity to reflect a little on the purpose of the group and how we collectively interpret the evolution of the field over the last decade, at least as viewed primarily through the prism of our main activities—the annual conferences and our publication collaborations. I have attempted to strike a balance between academic and personal observations, because I believe both are fundamentally important to how I see our group and the broader academic community. The views expressed here are, of course, heavily informed by recent conversations with Michiel, Melanie, and Tim, so I'm attempting to represent the perspective of the whole Research Group, but ultimately what follows are my own personal reflections, and any misrepresentations or errors are my own (and nothing here necessarily constitutes a formal position of the Society for the Study of Sound and Music in Games, SSSMG).

1. "An Interview with Mark Sweeney: The Ludomusicology Research Group," *GAME* 6 (2017), accessed April 29, 2021, <https://www.gamejournal.it/an-interview-with-mark-sweeney-the-ludomusicology-research-group/>.

When I was in the early stages of developing my doctoral research on aesthetic theory and video game music at Oxford, my supervisor, Peter Franklin, introduced me to Tim, who was close to completing his thesis on video game genres and music at Bristol. We reached out to Michiel Kamp at Cambridge, who was at a similar stage to me, working on ways of hearing video game music. We also collaborated with composer Huw Catchpole-Davies, whose doctoral work was dedicated to procedural music. Michiel and Melanie Fritsch both attended a 2011 symposium in Utrecht on “Videogame Music: Play, Fans, Space” organized by Isabella van Elferen. Melanie quickly became a key influence on us all and joined the group in 2016 as she worked to complete her thesis at Bayreuth on music performances of video game culture.<sup>2</sup>

As I remarked back in 2017, the term we adopted—ludomusicology—was playful and practical.<sup>3</sup> While our website still states that our focus is on “the musicological approach to video game music,” and the term reflects our academic backgrounds, from the very start we had a broad outlook and aimed to develop and embrace a network representing diverse disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives. Nevertheless, our own doctoral work, like much of the research in this space around that time, aimed to establish high-level theoretical frameworks for thinking about game sound and music, and thus to provide a solid foundation for developing a broader and more material body of scholarship. Our work, perhaps unsurprisingly, was on some level also an attempt to justify a serious academic approach to video game music. It was therefore also all the more essential to all of us that we found ways to make connections with other scholars, in order to both deepen and, crucially, broaden our thinking.

## CONFERENCES AND GROWING WITH THE LUDO COMMUNITY

The 2012 RMA Study Day was envisaged as a one-off event to jump-start these lofty goals by providing an opportunity to share our ideas and make lasting connections with like-minded researchers. The day was well attended, and the high-quality contributions alongside keynote addresses from Isabella van Elferen and Anahid Kassabian inspired future events at Liverpool and then Chichester, and it quickly became evident that there was demand for an annual event. The duration of the conference increased to three days, and the number of attendees from all corners of the globe has grown significantly over the years, and especially as we were forced to move the conference to an online-only format for 2020 and 2021.

From the very start, at the 2012 event we were able to reach out to industry professionals like Jonathan Williams and Rich Aitken at Nimrod Productions. We have subsequently benefited from an amazing array of keynote speakers and dedicated practitioner sessions with a diverse range of composers and audio professionals. The invited keynote speakers are listed alphabetically here (Table 1), and while the magic and impact

2. Mark Sweeney, “Melanie Fritsch Joins Ludomusicology Research Group,” Ludomusicology Research Group, October 25, 2016, accessed April 29, 2021, <https://www.ludomusicology.org/2016/10/25/melanie-fritsch-joins-ludomusicology-research-group/>.

3. “An Interview with Mark Sweeney.”

TABLE 1. List of Ludomusicology conferences and keynote speakers.

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| <b>2012 RMA Study Day</b><br>April 16, 2012     | St Catherine's College,<br>University of Oxford   | Isabella van Elferen<br>Anahid Kassabian   |
| <b>Ludo2013</b><br>April 12-23, 2013            | University of Liverpool   | William Gibbons<br>Mark Grimshaw   |
| <b>Ludo2014</b><br>April 10-12, 2014            | University of Chichester  | Stephen Baysted<br>William Cheng<br>Kevin Donnelly<br>James Hannigan<br>Richard Jacques<br>Winifred Phillips |
| <b>Ludo2015</b><br>April 9-10, 2015             | University of Utrecht   | Karen Collins<br>David Roesner<br>Richard Stevens  |
| <b>Ludo2016</b><br>April 8-10, 2016             | University of Southampton   | Andrew Barnabas<br>Neil Lerner   |
| <b>Ludo2017</b><br>April 20-22, 2017            | Bath Spa University   | Rob Hubbard<br>Kenneth McAlpine<br>Roger Moseley   |
| <b>Ludo2018</b><br>April 13-15, 2018            | Hochschule für Musik und<br>Theater "Felix Mendelssohn<br>Bartholdy" and the<br>University of Leipzig | Michael Austin<br>Adele Cutting<br>Kristine Jørgensen  |
| <b>Ludo2019</b><br>April 26-28, 2019            | University of Leeds   | Lydia Andrew<br>Joe Henson and Alexis Smith (The Flight)<br>James Newman<br>Paul Weir                        |
| <b>Ludo2020</b><br>April 25, May 2, May 9, 2020 | Virtual Conference Series   |  |
| <b>Ludo2021</b><br>April 23-25, 2021            | Virtual Conference  | Hillegonda Rietveld<br>Poornima Seetharaman<br>Markus Zierhofer  |

of these sessions is somewhat lost in the translation to this format, the names trigger many standout memories and formative experiences for me. Indeed, all four of us in the Ludo group have felt so deeply honored and privileged to have benefitted from exposure

to the work and guidance of all these people, not to mention the many other significant contributions to the field that have been shared at a Ludo conference.

These memories, alongside numerous other speakers, sessions, and especially social events—like a *Guitar Hero* competition at Ludo2013, the evening concert at the Michael Tippett Centre during Ludo2017, Ludo2018’s Pac-Man and pizza evening, or our now-infamous homemade pub quizzes—have coalesced into the broader fabric of this vibrant academic community. Diversity and inclusion are easy buzzwords to reference, and I’m acutely aware of both my own privileges and the responsibilities that come with my current roles. I also maintain that my own successes have come in no small part from being surrounded by great people—Melanie, Michiel, and Tim foremost among them—but more than this: it has been a fundamental part of my own personal development to listen and learn from the diverse voices at the Ludo conferences. On a personal note, I really want to take this opportunity to thank everybody who has submitted an abstract, delivered a paper, asked a question, called out false or problematic assumptions, or simply conversed with me in the coffee break: you really have challenged me as an individual to listen more, to think more, and, in short, to be both a better academic and person.

I can report that over the years the Ludo group has witnessed an increasing diversity of materials and speakers. Increasingly, valuable contributions are made from people who do not necessarily identify academia as their day job. There is always more still to do. We believe that as issues of identity, race, gender, disability, and sexuality are more regularly the topic of conversation in the papers themselves, there is a powerful amplification of consciousness and understanding across the community. We are proud to receive consistent feedback that we’re a supportive, welcoming community, and as we continue to ask more of each other academically and hold each other to higher expectations, our goal at Ludo is to ensure this is achieved in a supportive way. That’s why both words of the phrase *academic community* are important.

#### LUDOMUSICOLOGY RESEARCH GROUP PUBLICATIONS

By building the website and social media channels to promote the conference, over the years we have developed the apparatus to help connect people and to share ideas. We have published over twenty guest contributions on the Ludo blog—which has predominantly showcased guest speakers rather than our own research—including conference reviews, analytical pieces on games, interviews, and most recently a series of articles on the state of research in various countries and regions around the world. Michiel has for many years taken the lead in managing an ever-growing bibliography, which is now housed on the SSSMG website (<https://www.sssmg.org/wp/bibliography/>) and has grown to almost 600 entries.

Our edited volume, *Ludomusicology: Approaches to Video Game Music* (2016, Equinox),<sup>4</sup> originated primarily from papers given at our inaugural conference and reflects the variety of approaches to the study of game music. Through the various ways

4. Michiel Kamp, Tim Summers, and Mark Sweeney, eds., *Ludomusicology: Approaches to Video Game Music* (Sheffield, UK: Equinox, 2016).

our contributors pioneered conceptualizing and analyzing game music, we attempted to draw out critical issues including the distinction between gameplay and music play, how notions of diegesis are complicated by video game interactivity, the importance of cinema aesthetics in game music, the technicalities of game music production, and the relationships between game music and art music traditions. Again, the aim was always to strive for accessibility while remaining theoretically substantial.

More recently, we launched a book series with Intellect Academic Publishing: *Studies in Game Sound and Music*.<sup>5</sup> The first entry in the series is penned by our very own Tim Summers and offers a comprehensive and in-depth companion to the music and sound of a single video game, *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*.<sup>6</sup> We have an exciting pipeline of more academic peer-reviewed monographs and edited collections for the series. As always, we're striving to engage game audio practitioners and researchers from a range of disciplines, including anthropology, computer science, media studies, psychology, sociology, and sound studies, as well as musicology.

The conferences also provided the source for the double special issue on video game music and sound that we guest edited for *The Soundtrack* (vol. 8, no. 1–2) in 2015. This editing experience was invaluable. As early as Ludo2014, we convened a special session to gain input from a wide range of scholars on the question “What Would a Game Music/Sound Journal Look Like?” That discussion with colleagues from the North American Conference on Video Game Music (NACVGM, <https://vgmconference.weebly.com/>), and many others, led to the establishment of the Society for the Study of Sound and Music in Games (SSSMG, <http://www.sssmg.org/>). The Society was in no small part formed with the objective of launching this journal, the *Journal of Sound and Music in Games (JSMG)*, which published its first volume in 2020 with the University of California Press.

## THE FUTURE

Across all these areas of activity, it has been really pleasing to see a coherent corpus of knowledge developing, but we're also very aware of issues around canonicity of authors, subjects, and games. While to some extent these seem like common growing pains of any field of research, it's been critical to the Ludo group that we don't establish exclusionary systems of study and academic culture. Of course, SSSMG too has an increasingly important role to play to ensure accessibility, diversity, and inclusion, and we are working hard—and listening carefully to the community—on what a sustainable, accessible, and inclusive future might look like. In particular, we aspire to better support students, early-career researchers, and independent scholars.

From the perspective of the Ludomusicology Research Group, it's been very exciting to be part of the rapid growth and interest in game music. Through the conferences and

5. “Intellect Books | *Studies in Game Sound and Music*,” Intellect Books, n.d., accessed May 3, 2021, <https://www.intellectbooks.com/studies-in-game-sound-and-music>.

6. Tim Summers, *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time, A Game Music Companion* (Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2021).

our publishing activities, we have seen a gradual shift from more general topics on video game music writ large—akin to the scope of our own doctoral work—to more specific topics like chiptune, medievalism, and specific sociocultural issues. As we provide themes in our calls for papers each year (which are intended as prompts and jumping-off points to attract diverse and interesting submissions) and as we subsequently attempt to collate the conference programs into coherent sessions, perhaps we can even start talking about the emergence of subfields within the broader discipline. This may be an interesting marker for the maturity of video game music studies.

We are on a continuing mission for further interdisciplinarity and are making inroads to allied subjects and methods. In recent years we have enjoyed increasing engagement with scholars in other parts of the world, especially with creators and game traditions beyond Europe, Japan, and the US. We try to remain vigilant against unhelpful wall-building and gatekeeping, which also means maintaining awareness of our own responsibilities as curators of research. And we continue to welcome feedback (positive and recommendations for improvements) from across this remarkable academic community. As Tim so eloquently concluded in a recent Ludo team meeting, we will, “as with the games we study, keep thinking, listening, and playing.” ■