

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.¹ 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.²

As I remarked back in 2017, the term we adopted—ludomusicology—was playful and practical.³ 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.

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

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.” ■