



Ludic Music: Defining a Genre within Immersive Practice.

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Abstract

The term “immersive” has become a dominant descriptor for a wide range of contemporary arts and media practices. While useful as a broad entry point, it often collapses meaningful distinctions between fundamentally different forms of work within this umbrella. In particular, interactive experiences where music is the primary medium lack clear definition within this landscape.

This paper introduces **Ludic Music** as a term to describe a specific category of music-first interactive work, formalising a distinct genre grounded in existing practice. Drawing on principles of play, rule-based systems, and spatial engagement, Ludic Music positions music not as a supporting element, but as the defining force within this specific genre of immersive experience.

By defining this term, the paper aims to provide a clearer framework for understanding, developing, and presenting such works - supporting their recognition as a distinct and clearly articulated cultural form.

1. The Problem: “Immersive” as a Catch-All

“Immersive” has become an increasingly common label across the arts, media, and entertainment industries. It is applied to installations, performances, exhibitions, games, and hybrid experiences that share a broad aim: to engage audiences in more spatial, embodied, or participatory ways.

However, as a descriptor, “immersive” functions primarily as a catch-all. It describes a mode of engagement rather than a specific discipline or experiential structure. As a result, it introduces two key problems.

First, it flattens distinctions between fundamentally different forms of work in which it is collectively referring to. A music-led interactive system, a narrative-driven installation, and a visually spectacular environment may all be described as “immersive,” despite being created for different purposes and operating through entirely different experiential logics.

Second, it often promotes the framing of work in terms of its medium or technology, rather than its underlying experiential structure. Projects are frequently understood through the tools they employ - projection, motion tracking, haptic sensing, virtual reality, spatial audio - rather than the systems, rules, or compositional approaches that define how they function and the intentions that shape why they exist.

This emphasis on visible technologies can initiate a feedback loop in how such works are understood and developed. When projects are framed primarily through their technical components, these elements begin to define expectations - shaping how future work is commissioned, designed, and presented. Over time, this reinforces a pattern in which these outward, superficial characteristics are replicated, while the underlying systems that give a work its meaning receive less attention. As this cycle repeats, the defining qualities of more specific practices risk becoming diluted or obscured, making it increasingly difficult to distinguish one form from another.

In this way, the framing of the work does not simply describe the field - it actively participates in shaping it.

Together, these tendencies can obscure what is actually taking place within a work. Complex, rule-based systems may be reduced to their surface characteristics, while deeper intentions and experiential frameworks remain under-articulated.

This flattening effect is comparable to grouping video games and film together simply because both utilise audiovisual media in the delivery of a story. While they may share certain surface characteristics, their underlying purpose, structures, and modes of engagement are distinct.

Without more precise language, these differences risk being overlooked, limiting both critical understanding and creative development.

2. Context Shapes Meaning

The context in which a work is framed is not neutral. It actively shapes how the work is understood, engaged with, and ultimately realised.

Music-led interactive systems are frequently positioned within broad categories such as “immersive,” where they are subject to cultural expectations that prioritise visual spectacle, spatial design, and narrative. Within these frameworks, the musical system - often the core of the work - can become secondary or obscured.

This creates a form of cultural selection pressure: subtle but persistent forces that influence how work is commissioned, presented, and interpreted. Funders, curators, and audiences bring expectations associated with existing categories, which in turn shape how works are developed, deployed, and received.

Over time, these pressures can flatten the perceived identity of such works, reducing complex, rule-based musical systems into generalised “interactive experiences.”

This effect is comparable to viewing the shadow of a transparent perspex cube: a multi-dimensional object reduced to a simplified projection of its true form. Something essential is lost in translation.

What is missing is a clear way to define and understand music-led interactive systems on their own terms.

3. Defining Ludic Music

Ludic Music is defined here as:

‘a form of immersive work in which music is the primary medium, structured as a system to be engaged with, and shaped in real time through interaction with people, objects, systems, and environment.’

The term draws on the concept of the ‘ludic’ - relating to play - emphasising systems governed by rules, interaction, and exploration, and on the concept of ‘music’ - not simply sound or audio, but the structured systems and qualities of sound shaped expressively through composition.

Ludic Music is characterised by the following principles:

Music-First

Music is the primary medium. All other elements - visuals, physical structures, interfaces, and technologies - exist to support and deliver the novel musical experience, rather than the reverse.

Rule-Based Interaction

Engagement is structured through systems of rules or 'potentials'. These systems govern how musical material is generated, behaves, and evolves in response to interaction, which may be direct, indirect, environmental, or emergent. Participants do not simply trigger pre-defined outcomes; they exist within and influence systems that shape the musical result over time.

Dynamic and Non-Linear Composition

The musical output is not fixed. It unfolds in real time, shaped by interaction, allowing for variation, emergence, and replayability.

Spatial and Embodied Engagement

Interaction often occurs through physical space, objects, or real-world environments, inviting participants to engage with music through movement, proximity, and physical interaction.

Technology as Enabler

Technology - whether high-tech or low-tech - serves as a means of facilitating interaction and musical expression. It is not the defining feature of the work.

4. What Ludic Music Is Not

Defining Ludic Music also requires distinguishing it from adjacent forms and practices across the wider arts, media, and immersive sectors.

Ludic Music is not:

Interactive work where music is secondary

Installations or experiences where music and sound support a visual or conceptual focus, rather than acting as the primary medium.

Video games with adaptive soundtracks

While video games may feature dynamic music, the musical system typically responds to gameplay rather than constituting the primary experience itself.

Sound art without rule-based interaction

Works that present sound spatially or conceptually, but do not centre interaction within a defined system of play.

These distinctions are not hierarchical. They reflect differences in structure, mechanisms, and intent - not value.

5. Lineage and Context

Ludic Music does not exist in isolation. It intersects with and draws from multiple existing fields, including:

- Interactive installation
- Sound Art
- Game Design
- Sandbox environments
- Performance
- Experience Design
- Electronic and experimental music practices

However, within these fields, music is often positioned as one component among many. Ludic Music reorients this relationship, placing music at the centre of the experience.

It is not a rejection of these practices, but a reframing that clarifies a specific approach within them, helping such work to be understood and presented on its own terms.

6. Why This Matters

Establishing Ludic Music as a defined category provides several key benefits, both in how this work is understood and how it is developed:

Clarity of Practice

It gives creators a clear language to describe, position, and advocate for their music-led interactive work.

Improved Understanding

It enables curators, funders, and audiences to better recognise the structure, intent, underlying systems, and value of these works - supporting more informed programming, commissioning, positioning, and presentation.

Protection of Core Identity

It helps prevent the flattening and misrepresentation of music-first systems within broader categories that prioritise non-musical elements.

Foundation for Growth

It supports the development of a shared framework that can evolve into a wider cultural movement, enabling new work to be developed, recognised, and built upon. By providing a clear lens through which these works can be understood, it creates the conditions for more considered development, allowing the full depth and potential of these systems to be more fully realised.

Without this clarity, works that prioritise music as a dynamic, interactive system risk being consistently misread, misrepresented, or absorbed into broader categories that obscure their defining qualities.

7. Case Studies

Each of the following works demonstrates Ludic Music principles in practice:

The Playce

A large-scale, walk-through cardboard world in which visitors explore and shape a living musical soundtrack. As participants open doors to bring buildings to life and power up or down different parts of the town, new musical voices are introduced, transformed, or removed - allowing the composition to unfold, build, and shift over time. Through this process of discovery and activation, the space reveals itself as a playable environment in which interaction directly influences the structure and energy of the unfolding music, encouraging long-form exploration and deep listening.

The Expression Orchestra

A participatory musical system in which the audience become the performers, engaging with an ensemble of multi-sensory instruments designed to expand access to rich musical expression. Each instrument supports a distinct mode of interaction, while a central system - The Conductor - interprets and responds to participants' actions in real time, shaping the resulting musical output. Rather than fixed compositions, the system operates through open-ended 'Scores' that allow participants to explore and contribute within a shared compositional space, resulting in a collaborative, emergent musical experience.

The Compendium of Somethings

A growing collection of experimental musical artefacts that explore how everyday objects, materials, and forms can become playful systems for musical interaction and discovery. Drawing on ideas of object affordance, each piece aligns the physical qualities and behaviours of an object with compatible musical phenomena - transforming gimmickcraft into a legitimate site of compositional and experiential design. Rather than existing primarily as fixed installations or singular immersive spaces, these artefacts present Ludic Music through discrete, object-centred encounters that invite curiosity, participation, and exploratory engagement with music beyond the screen.

The Sky Vane

An outdoor, environmentally-driven musical system centred around a landmark sculptural form fitted with meteorological sensors. Atmospheric conditions - such as temperature, wind, rainfall, and air pressure - directly control a continuously evolving, dynamic music soundtrack, which is emitted into the surrounding environment. Rather than relying on direct audience input, the work produces a responsive sonic field to which participants occupy and respond to, generating patterns of social activity and behaviour. Through this intra-action between system, environment, and audience, the soundtrack acts as the primary force, shaping how the space is inhabited and experienced over time - establishing The Sky Vane as a music-led placemaking landmark.

8. Conclusion

Ludic Music defines a specific approach to interactive work in which music operates as the primary medium - not as accompaniment, but as the system through which the experience is constructed and unfolds.

Within a landscape where “immersive” has become a broad and often imprecise descriptor, this paper has argued for the need to articulate more precise categories that reflect the structural and experiential differences between forms. Without this distinction, music-first interactive systems risk being consistently flattened, misread, or absorbed into frameworks and environments that do not adequately account for their defining qualities.

By naming and defining Ludic Music, this paper establishes a foundation for recognising, developing, and situating a distinct genre within the wider field of immersive work - one that places music at the centre of interaction, rather than in support of other mediums. In doing so, it offers a lens through which existing works can be more clearly understood, and through which new works can be more intentionally developed. This act of definition also points toward a wider opportunity: that other distinct forms, similarly flattened under the broad framing of “immersive,” may be more clearly articulated through the same process of careful classification.

This is not a rejection of the broader immersive landscape, but a refinement within it - an attempt to bring clarity to a form that has, until now, lacked the language required to fully articulate itself.

Ludic Music is not a niche or peripheral practice. It represents a distinct mode of musical experience - one in which music is no longer an afterthought, but the defining system through which the experience unfolds.