machine

The project guide

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this document is to outline the process behind the Elektron Users album Machine, in the hope that it will serve as a guide to creating an online community based music release. Before going into the finer details of the project here is an explanation of the project and community it was created by:

Machine is a unique compilation album and collaborative effort, produced in its entirety by the elektron-users.com community, made primarily with instruments created by the Swedish boutique synthesiser company Elektron. The elektron-users.com forum is a playground for experienced and inexperienced electronic musicians activated by a base of friendly, helpful and creative people from all over the world.

The initial idea

Over seven months ago (November 2009) an idea developed on the forum around the concept of creating an album. It was suggested we should pool our resources to create something unique to our community and the unusual instruments that it is formed around.

As the idea gathered pace it was clear that this would be a fairly large task, and that if it was to be undertaken it would require co-ordination. Since at that point I had a fair bit of spare time outside (and inside) of work I volunteered my time to the organisation of this project, on the proviso that someone else would join me as partner for any administrative tasks: while I had time I didn't have any experience in putting any kind release together and would need plenty of support. Fortunately Kirlian stepped forward and we started to bounce ideas on how to develop the initial idea further both in private and on the forum.

2. Committees

In order to fully explore all areas of such a large project Kirlian and I decided it would be best to enlist users that had volunteered their services (in the original thread) to the project in small committees. We felt these groupings of 3-4 people would enable the key areas of the project to be developed in more detail, and settled on the areas of graphic design, concept/creative direction and voting.

In addition to these committees other forum regulars volunteered mastering skills and the offer of help whereneeded from somebody with experience in organising another large elektron-users project (a community tribute album), as well as a background in web design.

The main task and involvement of each committee will be outlined throughout this overview, however it is worth adding at this point that the committees were absolutely central to this project and without them it simply wouldn't have been finalised.

The concept/creative direction committee

The concept that a group of musicians should release an album isn't a particularly groundbreaking or inspiring one; we felt in order to create something worthwhile we should investigate the motivation and/or concepts that link us as a community and the unusual instruments it is formed around.

At this point the concept team took charge, they exchanged and explored various ideas and presented them to the forum.[1] The initial suggestions were then refined into two fleshed out ideas for the community to chose between.[2]

1. Initial thred: http://elektron-users.com/index.php?option=com_fireboard&Itemid=28&func=view&catid=13&id=73581
2. First ideas presented: http://elektron-users.com/index.php?option=com_fireboard&Itemid=28&func=view&catid=13&id=74826

Eventually it became clear that neither concept particularly fitted the bill for our community, and the concept team decided to go back to the drawing board. This was the first success story behind the machine project: In my opinion the concept committee nailed a perfect concept for our particular community. Upon presentation of this concept to the community, via a downloadable .pdf file[3], it was clear that the rest of the forum agreed. After over a month of fleshing out ideas and concepts the machine project was underway. I cannot overstate the importance of this time on the project; once the project had an engaging concept to our community it really came to life; the time the team spent developing and fermenting this idea was absolutely crucial.

Presentation and guidelines

While the creative team had been working their magic Kirlian and I as the admin team had been discussing various formats in terms of basic logistics. We decided on a timescale for the project (just over 6 months) and created a timeline of what we felt were the key areas we needed to be working on at particular times, the first of which was the presentation of the project to the community and the establishment of any rules. Kirlian and I agreed that submitting an entry for this project should be as simple as possible, whilst at the same time encouraging certain creative aspects. In the end we settled on 3 criteria which encompassed the areas we felt were important:

• Since we are an Elektron forum, these instruments should feature prominently in the track. Let's celebrate these machines that have brought us together as a community. The use of other manufactures instruments is allowed, though the track selection committee will be looking for tracks that are 'Elektron loud and proud'.

• Collaboration is encouraged, since we are an online community of many artists we would like to encourage people to make links with other artists on the forum in the creation of any work submitted. While collaboration is not compulsory, again the track selection committee will be looking for work that has been born out of this approach.

3. Final presentation of concept: http://elektron-users.com/index.php?option=com_docman&task=cat_view&Itemid=30&gid=19&orderby=dmdate_p

These criteria were put forward to the rest of the forum along with concept and all other important information in a thread at the forum[4]. In hindsight our criteria were probably over-simplified, there will be more on that later. However, importantly all of the established dates have been followed as planned and the community was now activated to begin producing contributions for the album.

The graphic design committee

Whilst I had botched the original concept downloadable to encompass some aspects of Elektron's design it was clear that this project needed to move beyond this and create an identity of its own; once the creative team had finished their concept overview the graphic design committee began their work.

Having a definitive name and a concept for the project, the graphic design team then started to brainstorm on a logo. After some tests, they came with the actual logo which was later introduced to the community to remind them that the project was still going on, and to get a little hype for it. The concept of the Machine logo was to display a balance between mechanical type and handwriting, to represent the human/machine interaction. The graphic design team then worked with distorted pictures to create an dark ambiance where the logo would sit well.

It was then a matter of creating all the needed graphic design for the project, from the website to the ad banners, always using the logo and the distorted pictures as the primary points of the Machine brand.Ultimately the design team succeeded in creating a strong, unique and independent brand, which allowed the project to distance itself from Elektron as a company: This was after all an elektron-users project as opposed to an official compilation.

Results of the design teams work were used to advertise for participation at both the elektron users website and at the official elektron site, who kindly gave us a feature spread in the run up to the track submission date.
Collection of material

4. machine main thread: http://elektron-users.com/index.php?option=com_fireboard&Itemid=28&func=view&id=81044&catid=13&limit=10&limitstart=0

Until April the first all material was collected in MP3 format, with the addition of track information through meta tags. In reality this didn't go too well: While deadlines were met without any major dramas it was clear in hindsight that an upload form was needed in order for us to get all of the relevant information we required from each of the submitting artists. There will be more on this later in the issues section…

The voting committee

Since this was a community based album we wanted to make sure the material which made it onto the finished article was chosen by the community, hence we created a voting committee made up of around 30 forum members all of whom had been active on the forum for the duration of the machine project and connected them requesting participation in this process along with some guidelines.

The voting process was set up with the concept and criteria in mind, as well as with the intention of keeping things as simple as we possibly can for a project of this scale: at this moment in time Kirlian and I were both extremely busy with real life issues so simplicity became key. The key points in casting votes were that each voter had 5 selections, was able to vote on their own tracks and considered concept and collaborations whilst casting their votes. The link to the full voting mailout can be found at the bottom of the page.[5]

At this point it was clear that this system had its imperfections and was incredibly subjective, especially as there were difficulties with submission information (again, more later). However after a tie break and second round of voting we had our 15 track selection.

Results of the design teams work were used to advertise for participation at both the elektron

5. The voting mailout: http://elektron-users.com/index.php?option=com_docman&task=doc_download&gid=551&Itemid=30

Mastering

Once high quality files were collected by way of a dropbox free account, mastering work began. Having a mastering engineer dedicated to this project was hugely important; with submissions coming from all manner of different quality recording setups and approaches it was important for the final product to have cohesion in terms of overall sound: Having one individual provide this final master allowed this. In addition after spending time working with these tracks the mastering engineer was also able to come up with the final track list for the 15 submissions.

Website and Promotion

The final stages of this project, and the ones which are underway as I write this, is the final coding for the website and promotion push for the release. Again, since I am not skilled in the art of web design I cannot go into too much depth, however I believe the drupal framework was used to allow for carting from the machine-project website, allowing a charity donation to be made with any download of the album. In addition it is planned the full release will be available for download through bandcamp and itunes.

The promotion push for this project is ongoing and writing this guide is one part of that process: with the sharing of the project outline not only is it a resource for other forums but also hopefully a stimulus to download and listen to our project. Along with the sharing of this on other forums we have approached Elektron for potential advertising space at their website, distributed banners and flyers for people to share at social networking sites and created a video to generate interest. At this point in time the biggest push in terms of promotion is yet to come, but the general idea is to generate as much exposure as possible through a variety of media formats.We hope to have created enough of a buzz by release on July the 1st.

Rather than setting up another committee for this part of the project, we simply asked for anyone who had worked on the project so far for their time and ideas with this.

3. In Hindsight… A few difficulties

With any project of this size there will always be difficulties, here are the key issues we faced. Learn from our mistakes… should you decide to coordinate a similar project this section should prove helpful.

Organisation

Clearer rules were needed from the outset; although we stated a couple of times tracks should be of reasonable length (I think I remember the statement below 7 minutes if its really good being used!) this was not always the case with the entries. That was not the fault of people submitting, it was our lack of clearly stating those guidelines somewhere people could find them easily. We should also have stated that only previously unreleased tracks that were created specifically for the album should have been submitted, as it became clear we had a few pieces that were either released somewhere else or were old label demo's which caused us problems. While that can't really be policed in any way, at least we'd have been clear from the start about what we wanted.

As mentioned earlier the management of the submissions was not without problems. Although we asked for certain information from the artist to accompany the release, to assist the voting committee's choices, this wasn't always submitted and where it was it was problematic: metatags which where edited in one computer didn't always appear on another, as I discovered when editing in the information for my own tracks. In order for us to have gained all of this information it would have taken a huge amount of contacting, data entry and chasing up, in the end we decided to mail out the music to the voting committee without any information unless it was already listed in the metatags (ie we didn't add or delete anything from the files we were sent). An upload form accompanying each submission would have solved this problem, whether this would have effected peoples choices when selecting tracks I cannot say.
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Other areas in which Kirlian and I didn't make things easy for others were in respect to time-scales and a lack of clearly stated tasks and goals. While we were able to run this project on the back of a vague timeline put together in the first month (and stick to it pretty well in our own way!) this was probably not the easiest method for others to follow.

In a project like this detail is key, while two people might have this (or at least muddle through it as best they can), presenting this to those working closely around you in a clear manner would ease a lot of nerves and put a lot of minds at rest. These difficulties were probably amplified during times when we were unable to give the project as much time as we'd have liked, which leads me on…

The machine project was entirely voluntary, all participators has real life things to tend to in addition to this: Losing jobs and finding news ones, moving house, emigration, holidays, illness… they all played a part. Real life is not to be underestimated and the success of the project is dependent on each participant's motivation, available spare time and ability to prioritise the project. In terms of pure hours a project of this size can easily run into those of a part time job. Make no mistake this is a labour of love… and be warned that not everyone will feel the same way about it as you do.

Democracy

The Machine compilation was a collaborative project, so it would seem natural to do it by democratic process: Everyone could share their opinions and views while others are listened to,due tothis process the outcome would be far greater than anyone could create on their own. In hindsight it's fair to say this concept is idealistic and unrealistic in certain situations.

During the project the concept team found out pretty fast that public discussion concerning the concept didn't really lead to progress. While a lot of enthusiasm was generated at the forum, most of the ideas where mixed up in a very sketchy manner.

In a democratic process or discussion nobody has to take responsibility of the end product and because of that almost every idea is welcomed with joy. In our case this resulted in a very incoherent concept and a blurring of the core-idea. We eventually discovered that one or two people had to engage with the concept more deeply in order for it to be successful, and that ultimately the concept itself was far more refined and coherent when it was constructed for the group. While this was not democratic it became clear that an effective agreement was never going to be settled upon and refined in a larger public group.

This particular failure of the democratic process doesn't mean that it wasn't suitable for anything: With the Machine-project we found out that voting on ready-made ideas, tracks and finer details to be a working solution. Voting and discussion moved the project forward in many different ways: It legitimised the ideas, concepts and work people were involved in, helped forum members to focus on them, kept people involved when things went quiet and, perhaps most importantly, helped us form good working relationships and friendships along the way.

Teamwork

The main issuewith team work of this nature was communication. Because we could not meet face to face, we had to use different technologies to fix this. There are two types of communication: personal and public. Within any project these two types overlap. E-mail is good for personal communication between certain team members: Ideas can be discussed in detailed manner and files can be exchanged. There are other things that need to be discussed in public, either between all team members or with the community as a whole. To enable us to share ideas as a team away from the community a private subforum was created. Prior to this we had tried other communication media such as google buzz, though that never really took off with the group (or indeed the rest of the world).

Often the communication went something like this:

1. People discuss on what should be done
2. Individuals go away to do the things discussed
3. They come back and present what they have done (which is typically somewhat different what had been discussed)
4. People discuss about it and continue to do another cycle

One problem with communication is that people are afraid to shoot ideas down. Nobody wants to be a 'bad guy' and therefore everything might be accepted in a very conformist manner. This does not result best possible outcome, instead people need to break the ice and raise confidence on each others. Only with the egalitarian confidence that everybody belongs to group and that each individuals opinions matter can people start shoot bad ideas down.

With true communication the objectives will become more defined and everybody will push towards the target, correcting, challenging and feeding back to one another as this is achieved. It must also be noted that 'best possible outcome' cannot be the ultimate goal, because in reality nobody knows what that is. Even if somebody thinks they know, its probable others won't agree or their goal does not fit the project as a whole. Therefore there needs to be flexibility and an openness to ideas throughout the concept; every team member must be given the opportunity to create things of their own and have their own input. The final outcome is of course some sort of compromise, but when communication works it is usually a good compromise that satisfies everyone in a team. With our own project we have been extremely lucky in that each member of our team was open to change, flexible, adaptable and communicative... possibly a musician trait, though probably not.

We found the key to relaxed communication through the obvious methods; small talk, GAS talk etc. People will have to get to know each other, in best possible scenario they would already have done that in the forum…A heathly dose of sociability is key to success in terms of teamwork.

4. Conclusion

The machine project has been a huge part of my life for the last 7 months; as mentioned the workload at times has been huge and the project has added more than its fair share of stresses. That said it has been a privilege to be a part of its creation, and I hope that when I finally listen to the album on July the 1st it is something I can look back upon with a huge amount of pride.

I would highly recommend anybody having a crack at putting something like this together; even with limited knowledge and skills in creating something of this nature my administrative donkey work has allowed others involved to work their creative magic, and for myself to be continually amazed and inspired by the way we have all made this idea a reality. Throughout the project I have I have learned an awful lot about each aspect of putting together a release from my collaborators, the reality is I can barely scratch the surface of all the experiences I've gained through this project; and for that I will always be grateful.