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Doing it for themselves: the practices of amateur musicians and DIY music networks in a digital age

Michaela Hoare, Steve Benford, Chris Greenhalgh, Alan Chamberlain
Mixed Reality Laboratory
Department of Computer Science
University of Nottingham
psxmh3@nottingham.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

A fast expanding network of DIY music communities in the UK see digital technologies transforming ways in which part-time amateur musicians are able to collaborate creatively and form alliances, producing unique performance techniques, experimenting with genre conventions and reaching out to an international audience. With a DIY approach, creative autonomy and control is retained and celebrated in shared non-commercial spaces run by the artists themselves. A rich ethnographic study seeks to explore these shared ideologies and practices.

LOCAL TO GLOBAL

With the aid of online music platforms and social media, amateur musicians are now able to quickly engage with a wider community of musicians beyond their local area. This has stimulated the growth of a network of amateur musicians seeking to establish local performance and recording spaces for amateur musicians with limited funds but the ambition to produce and distribute their music to a professional standard [5]. In addition, as venues for live performance, these spaces form a network of interconnected venues for like-minded part-time musicians to perform at and establish connections with others, allowing artists to assist each other in tapping into international audiences without the aid of or commitment to a formal record contract.

Where once the amateur musician might be limited to local collaborations with other musicians on a regular basis, digital technologies are enabling creative projects to be set-up and contributed to remotely. As the online and offline practices of maker and DIY communities continue to expand the possibilities for creative amateurs [7, 8, 9], our research uncovers the unique activities of amateur musicians exchanging skills and resources to maintain diversity in local music scenes as well as expand their own creative scope. These collaborations are then celebrated online, with the distributing of their music through music platforms and social media. For example, the setting up of DIY labels and split records showcasing two bands from different cities, released online with limited edition packages are some of the activities resulting from the networking between amateur musicians locally and then shared with a global audience.

GLOBAL TO LOCAL

Online connections forged between amateur musicians practicing in DIY recording studios and venues are also assisting a creative diversity in local music scenes. Online promotion and a digital presence not only widen the amateur musician's creative network and audience but also help to foster local face-to-face collaborations between bands and artists whilst promoting their local gigs and venues. In the case of the latter, the musicians attached to local DIY communities are keen to maintain direct contact with their audience, arranging tours across the world through their network of musicians and DIY venues.

Whilst the mainstream music industry considers new business models in a world of free music sharing [6], amateur musicians' adopting of free and accessible promotion and distribution channels online and democratised technologies can be seen to be assisting a decentralised model for music production and distribution. A promoting of music diversity and local identity is a shared pursuit amongst the amateur musicians within these DIY music networks, and now that local amateur music-making has a global audience, the autonomous DIY spaces run by amateur musicians aim to celebrate their distinct localities through the performance and recording techniques unique to their area.

ETHNOGRAPHY

Understanding these new and evolving technologies and the way that people *reason* about such technologies is key to both their design and use. The use of ethnographic methods and approaches have been shown to be a way to accomplish this; in respect to understanding the practices of people, in terms of informing the design [1, 2], during the design phase, and post-design as a way of evaluating the use of such emergent technologies. Having researchers based 'in the wild' [3] can also further inform the design and also engender innovation [4] which can lead to the adoption and sustained use of the technologies in question.

CONCLUSION

With the continued growth and accessibility of creative digital technologies, our study of a network of DIY communities reveals how amateur musicians are experimenting with the boundaries of micro-scale local music-making. Expanding their audiences whilst preserving a local identity in their live performance and recording techniques, these DIY networks exhibit a unique approach to music practices in a digital age.

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