UNDERSTANDING THE DELUGE (v3 - 170910)

by Andreas Roman

This is a collection of my first experiences with the Deluge, which I'm passing on to the next line of users. The Deluge is not difficult, but it might be tricky to know what to do with all its options at your disposal. It's deceptively open-ended. To save you some time, I'm sharing what I learned, so that you might get quicker to the good stuff than I did.

These ideas assume you're familiar with the basics. If you're not, spend an hour or so with the Deluge and learn the ropes on tracks, sections, kits and stuff. And then, come back here.

DON'T GO ENDLESS WITH THE SEQUENCER

WHILE THE SEQUENCER IS ENDLESS (no, it really is!), it's currently not well-suited for sections that go beyond 12-16 bars. The available edit features are still a bit thin, and when you want to start copying, moving and pasting, you'll hit a wall. Rather than building a track like you would in a more traditional piano roll sequencer, look at the Deluge sequencer as a super looper. You can decide for yourself if you wanna work with 2 bars, 4, 7 or 11, and consider that a strength. But as you go further, you'll approach dragons. Until the Deluge has proper edit features to move around pages and parts within pages, better to treat a track as a loop with awesome flexible options.

CONSIDER TRACKS AND SECTIONS AS PIECES OF A PUZZLE

IT'S BEST TO LOOK AT A TRACK AS PART OF A LOOP, not a complete piece in itself, but part of something larger. Treat a track with few drums samples, or maybe a bass line, or a lead or a chord. Don't cram it. Let every track be defined in what it brings to the song.

If each track is part of the loop puzzle, then a section is part of a song. Look at a section as a collection of tracks that all make up for an intro, or a transition, or the chorus, or a looping something that goes on and on until the sun goes up. But don't consider a section an entire work on its own, but rather like a defined part of your song, where each track brings something to the section's whole.

LEARN THE ZOOM FEATURE

THE DELUGE CAN ZOOM OUT TO LEVELS OF ALMOST INSANE SCALE, and zoom in to a fairly detailed level of granularity. Apart from the convenience of just being able to view what's going on, on a larger scale, this is also powerful when composing.

For glitch-like stuff, retriggers and stutters, just go deep with the zoom to the 64th level, and edit your micro steps like there was no tomorrow. And if you wanna be efficient with your first bars of drum tracks, zoom out to 4ths and just apply a kick over the grid, and you'll got an eight bar thing going in no time. The zoom's great for overview, but it's a killer tool for actual creative as well as efficient editing within the track itself. Learn it early, to speed up your workflow considerably.

STICK TO 1/16 RESOLUTION IN SONG MODE

IT'S COOL THAT YOU CAN ZOOM LIKE A MAD MAN ON THE DELUGE, but when you're in Song mode and just want to find your way around the tracks, I've learned that the 16th resolution works best. How so? you might wonder, and right you are in doing so. Well, because at this level, each track usually has such a unique set of stuff going on, visible in the lights, that it gets its own visual identity. Ah, there's the one with all the greens, and that's the one with purples and blues, and there goes the oranges. And so on. Zoom out, and you quickly lose a lot of this glorious visual identity detail. But stick to 1/16th resolution, and you'll soon connect the colours to music and easier find your way to the track you want to edit. When you've got two or three tracks going, this won't matter so much. When you've got more than twenty of them and counting, this matters. A lot.

PROTECT THE SOURCE

KEEP ONE SECTION INTACT AND UNTOUCHED, when you start elaborating on your work. This section would contain your original ideas or parts of ideas that you might or might not wanna use in parts of your song. The reason you want to keep this source material intact, is that the Deluge's limited editing options might put you in a place where you're stuck with parts of a section or track that you like, and parts that you don't - but due to almost no copy, paste or cut options, you could end up with the dreary task of filling up blanks in between the parts you like, just because you want to get some coherence into a track or session that grew out of proportion. In such a case, just having the source material where you can go back to the drawing board and start from scratch, is a nice option.

USE SONGS TO BUILD LARGER SETS

THE DELUGE CAN LOAD A SONG WITHOUT STOPPING PLAYBACK. Pretty damn awesome. So look at each song you've saved on your SD card, as something that can seamlessly follow after whatever you currently got going in the Deluge. You can build entire sets with no pause like this, stringing along one song after the other. Loading waits for the current playback to end before it launches the next song, so you'll get perfectly timed transitions as well.

Watch those envelopes or fx tails, though. They'll get cut from one song to another, so make sure your transitions between songs make sense without the requirement for these effects to tail between songs.

DON'T FILL UP YOUR KITS

USE THE SAMPLES INCLUDED TO LEARN HOW THE DELUGE WORKS WITH KITS, before you load your own stuff onto the instrument. The Deluge has a very

traditional tree-based file system for browsing and loading samples, but before you've learned to love the four-letter screen, you'll wanna focus on just building a kit, before you start using your own content. Besides, the on-board stuff is great. So it's not like you'll be lacking at first, anyway.

A kit can contain lots of samples. Lots and lots and lots. But you don't wanna go down that route. As you launch samples from the Deluge grid, you'll quickly find that kits with lots of samples in it, becomes tedious to navigate. You'll move up and down to find the sample you wanna tweak, and it'll bug you.

Instead, focus on the purpose of each kit. Is this kit the one with basic drum samples - your kicks, snares and hi-hats - or perhaps the one with a bunch of loops for flavour? Or is this kit the one with the atmospheric effects, such as rain, wind or fire, or is this kit the one with percussion that you'll use together with your basic drum kit? Don't be afraid to use multiple tracks for multiple kits, to gain control and focus on what you're doing within each kit.

MIND THE POLYPHONY

THE DELUGE HAS AN IMPRESSIVE VOICE COUNT. However, like the Electribe (at least the current gen one), you'll hit the CPU wall long before you actually reach the theoretical voice count limit. Like any computer, the Deluge can only handle so many things at once, and as soon as you apply flavour to your tracks (fx, automation, voice stacks and so on), the Deluge must work harder. When the sequencer starts to lag and notes fall off, you know you're there.

Depending on what you're up to, this wall will come early or late for you. But in general, it seems that people seem to reach it when they've got one or two sampled loops going on, a bunch of one shots (typically drums) and four or five synth tracks with a balanced amount of fx and automation. I usually reach this limit before that, cause I tend to use a lot of modulation, delay, p-locks and automation on

everything I do. But if you don't, it'll take longer for you. The manual has a few nice ideas on how to conserve CPU power, so I advise you to check those out, to learn what's taxing for the Deluge and not. One thing that's not in the manual, but worth mentioning, is that the resample feature is a voice saver. A track with a kit that applies eight one shots becomes just one shot, if you resample the entire track. Whoa! Octatrack style! Not bad, New Zealand. Not bad at all.

FIND THE SYNTH'S CHARACTER

LIKE ANY QUALITY INSTRUMENT, THE DELUGE HAS CHARACTER. But you won't find it in the default patches. It tries too hard to sound like the patches you're already familiar with, and as a consequence, sells itself short. A good place to start is to reach for the HPF filter, crank up the cutoff and then work the resonance. Or apply saturation and distortion together. Or modulate a lot of things in just one patch (the Deluge has crazy modulation options). And work several tracks at once by going into Song mode, select Affect All and use the Cutoff, the Stutter and the Custom knobs to find out what you can do when you're just using master fx all over the place.

I'd best describe the Deluge as an old Yamaha synth, and compared to a modern day instrument, it's closer to the Reface CS and the OP-1 than anything else. But you gotta do some digging, to find it. Like all great personalities, once you've found the depths, you'll just love them more.

SYNCING THE DELAY

YOU MIGHT STRUGGLE WITH GETTING THE DELAY TO SYNC WITH TEMPO, and you might scratch your head and wonder why there's no option to just get the de-

lay to snap to tempo. Well, it does. You gotta calm down, son, and not reach for all the knobs at once.

When going for a patch where you want to use synced delay, make sure that the Delay Time value is set to its default. This is already the case when you fire up an initial patch, and almost always the case when you go for one of the pre-designed ones. Even so, to make it snap to its default, touch the upper golden knob until the four parameter lights snaps to the middle ground - bottom two lit up, top two turned off - and blinks quickly. This means the Delay Time has snapped to the default, and is now in sync.

Then, for further depth, go for the Division value. Usually, the division is set to 16th, which is a pretty nervous delay. But scale it down to 8th, 4th or even across bars, and you get something that's closer to the delay most of us think of, when we think electronic music. And it's all in sync.

If you wanna go out of sync, just twist the Delay Time value to your heart's content. But don't say I didn't warn you, and don't say you can't get it back in sync, cause you can.

SAMPLE LIKE J DILLA

THE DELUGE STREAMS SAMPLES FROM THE SD CARD, so you can actually use its sampler as a recorder of entire tracks, as long as you're aware of the memory limit. 64Mb gets you pretty far, though, and the recorded samples are stored as wav-files on the memory card, which means you can use them in whatever context outside the Deluge, where such a file is applicable. I don't believe there's a context where it's not.

Now, consider this. You've got a sampler. That samples (not all of them does, these days). And streams from the card. And also resamples whatever's going on in

the Deluge. And plays that back, too, of course. You're approaching Roland SP-territory now.

Once you start to think outside the most obvious uses of the sampler, you realise that recording entire tracks, resampling them, triggering them for playback and apply master fx or layering them with new tracks, or I don't know, just fires up possibilities that can take you in so many different directions. You're in J Dilla land now, where the Deluge can be your deck of vinyls, your recorder, your trimmer and your sequencer for putting it all together.

MY THOUGHTS ON WORKFLOW

This is a far more subjective topic, and one that I'm putting separate because it might be completely useless to you, or absolutely brilliant. It's my own workflow with the Deluge, which can give you an idea of context to what we've just talked about, and perhaps open up an idea or two - or not at all.

Anyway.

I approach the Deluge like I approach any groove box. I work with it until I get to a loop that I like, one that almost always sounds like it could be in the middle of a song that's found its groove. How I get there, always varies. By playing, programming, taking notes, jamming, building a sound. I've got no routine there. But the first threshold is to reach a point where I've got something that's between 1-8 bars long, that sounds like it could be part of a song that's shifted into gear. I can reach this point within an hour, or it could take me weeks.

Now, in Deluge context, this 1-8 bar thing breaks down into:

- One or two tracks with drum kits,
- One track with sampled loops (usually atmospheric stuff - wind, water, vinyl scratches, city sounds)
- Four or five synth tracks - bass, lead, arps and comps and perhaps a chord or two.

All these tracks belong to one section. Also, by now, I've run into CPU issues and have already made a few easy or tough choices - I've done some voice priorities, I might've scaled back on a voice stack for a unison patch, possibly cut out a loop or a few one shots, and maybe sacrificed a synth track and decided the song might've been better off being more simple anyway.

From here, I branch out. I might have a idea for an intro now. Or a section that follows the one I already have. Or an ending. Or just another part, of which I don't know where it'll fit yet, but I know it'll fit somewhere, eventually.

I now copy all my tracks into a new section. I don't touch what I already have. In fact, this original section will remain untouched throughout the rest of the process. And on these new copied tracks, I now work out whatever idea I had, that might fit into my concept of the entire song. I take no prisoners here. I rip stuff up, tear it apart, throw things around, and generally just show no mercy to what's there. I don't have to. If I screw up, I still got my original work left in the first section I made. And if I don't, I now have another section, another piece of the song puzzle finished.

Once this new section is more or less done, I think about where it fits in the song. If it comes before or after the section I already got, I move it accordingly. Early stuff goes to the top of the song. Later stuff goes to the bottom. So if I just made what I think is the intro, I move all these tracks to the top. The end result would eventually be that the entire song is laid out from top to bottom and split up into as many sections as required to get to the end. Usually, I come close to the twelve available. But not always.

And then I repeat this. I copy a bunch of already existing tracks into a new section, build on those and place them where appropriate in the song grid.

The end result is usually between 8-12 sections, each of them containing about 4-8 tracks of various lengths, all sections grouped into falling order where introduction comes at the top and the ending at the bottom.

Despite the close to mind-boggling amount of lights and colours going on, and the huge size of the grid when moving up and down, I've found it easy to follow what's going on and find my way around the song, when using this method.