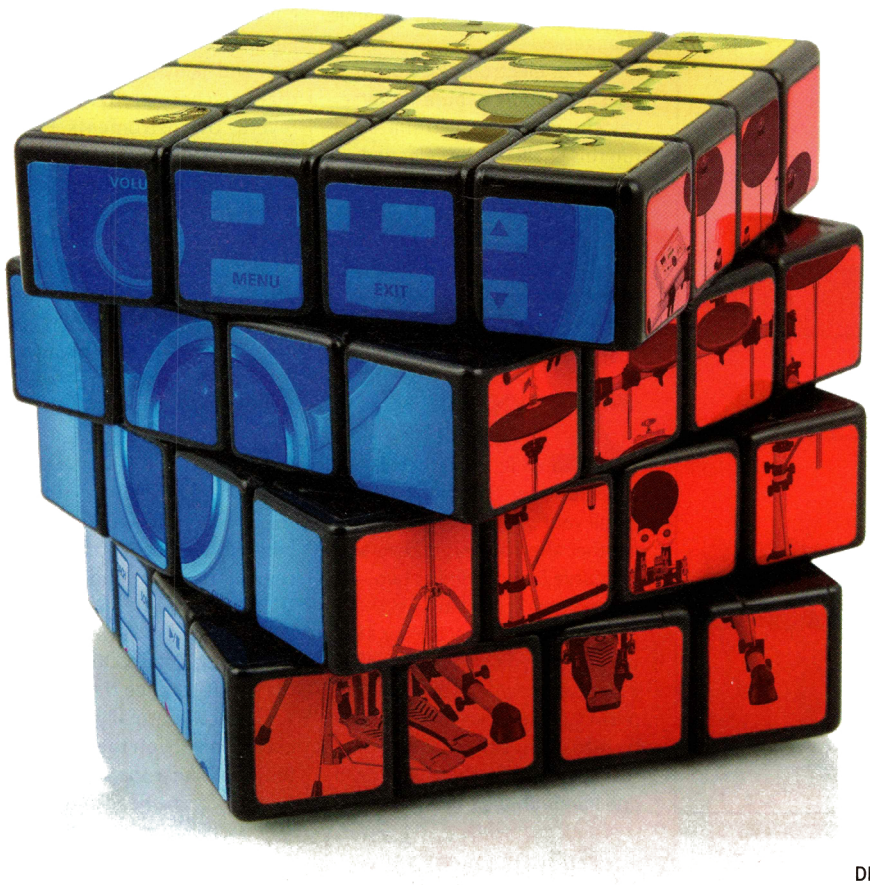
PLUGGED IN

8 CREATIVE E-KIT CHALLENGES

MESS WITH YOUR MIND & YOUR BODY WILL FOLLOW



By Norman Weinberg

Do your beats suffer from stagnation? Are your chops chipped? Is your independence inadequate? Well, have we got the solution for you! You may already have the essential remedy in your home using nothing more than a few common household objects. All this can be yours for the new low price of only your practice time and some creative thinking.

What's the difference between practicing and playing? Well, for some, practicing is working on something you currently can't play as well as you would like. Playing is, well, playing — having fun doing what you already know. To make a sports analogy, practicing is running lay-ups by yourself for three hours a day — trying new things, left handed, right handed, underhanded, with a spin, and so on. Practice and experimentation — these are the ways you get better and learn new skills. This means playing is much more fun when you can make that incredible shot during the big

game. You know, the one that makes the "Play Of The Week" on *SportsCenter*.

Most people buy electronic drum sets for their most basic purpose: practicing in a dorm, apartment, or home, quietly so you don't disturb your neighbors. While there's no doubt this is an important way to get those extra hours of drill without your roommates breaking your arms, it's only the tip of the musical iceberg. Something I like to do in my practice is set up a series of musical challenges and see: A) how long it takes me to accomplish my task, and B) how I might benefit by incorporating these new skills into my regular playing.

For example, one thing I do when practicing marimba is to use the same set of sticks for both connected playing with a warm tone and separated playing with a bright color. The challenge: Can I get that change of musical color without changing sticks? What do I have to do with my hands, my grip, my stroke, my beating spot, and my phrasing to get these colors and the musical effect to change? Then, once I've gotten to the point where I feel I can make these adjustments, when I actually *do* change sticks, it's so much easier and more effective, and my ability to control my touch has gotten much stronger.

The following is a series of musical challenges for you to try on your electronic kit that could prove to be more difficult that you first might imagine. Once you've spent some time working out the solutions, your touch and technique will have improved, along with the added benefit of jump-starting your creative juices. You'll find yourself coming up with new beats and patterns, and maybe even some compositional ideas. Ready? Here we go.

1. REVERSE & ALTERED DYNAMICS

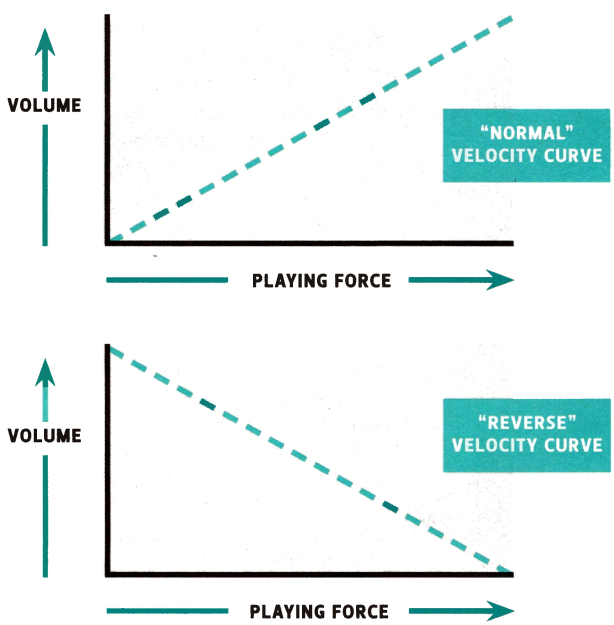
Most electronic kits let you adjust the velocity curve to best suit your playing style. And those same kits have a velocity curve that actually reverses the relationship between volume and playing strength. Normally, when you play with less velocity to your strokes, the resulting sound is soft. When you play with a great deal of force, your volume is loud. In this particular challenge, the idea is to totally reverse the curve so that your softest playing produces the loudest sounds (Fig. 1).

After making these changes, play as you normally would and you'll notice that your regular beat patterns are totally different. Your accented notes will now be very soft, while ghost strokes will be huge. Play around with this for a while — you just might come up with some new patterns that you might never have thought of otherwise. Some of your new ideas might be pretty crappy, some might be pretty good. You never know.

We all know that control of dynamic coloration is a big part of playing a convincing groove. Are the eighth-notes on your hi-hat automatically accented on *2* and *4* just because you play your snare on the same beats? Now, while keeping the curve reversed, try playing your normal beats and fills. By spending some time with this little challenge, you'll discover that your body has to adjust your touch to play anything that closely resembles a normal sounding groove. You'll soon feel that you have a better control of your touch and of subtle dynamic changes.

If your electronic kit's brain doesn't support a "pure" reverse velocity curve, you can still run this challenge by selecting a velocity curve you normally wouldn't use in regular playing. No matter which curve you select, you'll be able to come up with interesting new beats and feels, and be able to fine-tune your touch.

Fig. 1 Flip the velocity curve so your softest playing produces the loudest sounds.



2. DYNAMIC MIX & MATCH

While the last challenge reversed the velocity curve for all your pads in the same way, another alternative is to reverse the curve for only one or two instruments in the kit.

How would it feel to play a kit where the cymbals had a reversed curve but the drums used a normal curve? Your touch would have to change from instrument to instrument, keeping your head and hands on their toes.

To take this challenge to its ultimate conclusion, change the curves for all your pads and make each one different — some reversed, some normal, some using logarithmic curves, and some using stepped curves. Look at your user's manual and you'll find a variety of different curves that can be applied to each pad.

3. REVERSE KICK & SNARE

Everyone knows that one of biggest advantages of an electronic kit is the number of available sounds under your fingertips. With just a few alterations, you can turn a nice tight jazz kit into a stadium-ready force of nature. But tell me honestly, how many of you choose to keep your snare sounds under your snare pad and your kick sounds under your kick drum pad? That's what I thought — most of you!

This next challenge involves messing up the normal relationship of sounds to pads. At the most basic level, you can simply swap the snare and bass drum sounds. Now when you strike the snare pad, you'll hear a bass drum and vice versa. Playing normally will create some new and likely useful patterns that keep normal rhythm, but reverse the instruments. But if you really want to screw with your kinesthetic muscle memory, try playing your normal beats. You'll find that it will take a bit of getting used to and, even when you do, the phrasing will often be a little bit oddball. This could be very interesting, depending on your application.

4. REPLACE ALL YOUR SOUNDS

When you're ready to take this challenge to the limit, change up every sound in your kit. If you have stereo pads that are capable of playing different sounds assigned to the rims and the heads, change those as well. Yes, I know, normally when you play a rimshot on the mounted toms, you hear the sound of both the membrane head and the

metal rim. But what if playing on the head of your highest tom fired the sound of a foot-closed hi-hat, and playing on the rim resulted in a secondary higher-pitched snare?

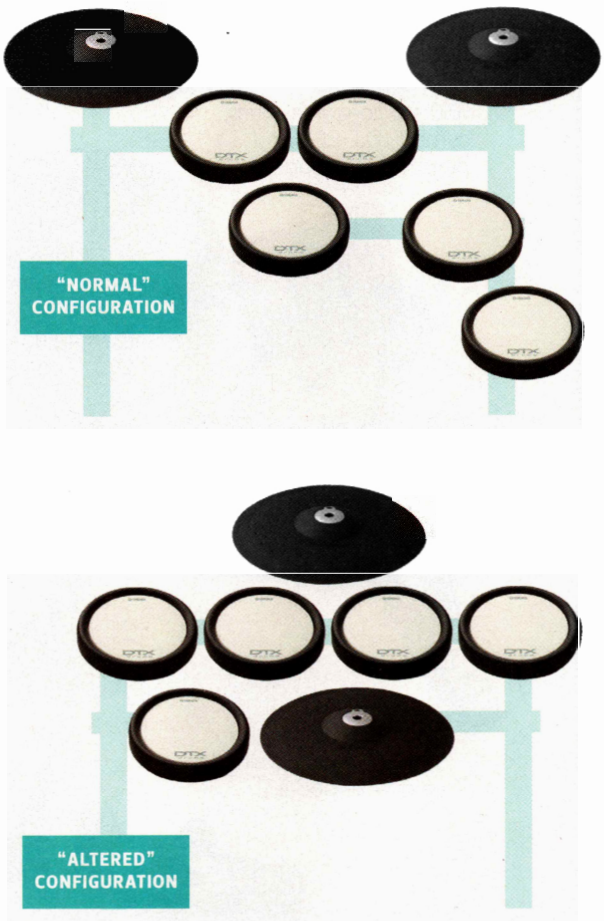
Again, there are two ways to approach this sort of a challenge. A) See what you have to do physically and mentally to imitate your normal playing. B) Improvise for a while and discover a new and exciting world of instrument relationships. One really fun way to play with this type of kit is to improvise over percussion or bass loops. When playing with loops, you'll feel less tied to keeping a beat and have a little more freedom.

5. DUB SOUNDS

Here's a challenge of a different nature. I don't know about you, but I really enjoy dubstep music. Here's why: It's highly repetitive in two-, four-, or eight-bar units (not unlike drum set grooves); it's highly rhythmic and syncopated (not unlike drum set grooves); and the "voices" seldom play real melodies (not unlike drum set grooves). To my ears, a lot of dubstep seems like playing a drum set with "bleeps, bloops, wahs, and wobbles." By creating your own dub-kits, you can stretch your creative chops and perhaps even compose the next killer EDM mega hit!

Instead of a kick drum, assign a low-pitched wobble or a short synthy, electronic phrase (I find that anything longer than one measure is sort of hard to deal with). Instead of a snare drum, have a heavily distorted guitar sliding down a half-step. Put a metallic click under your hi-hat pedal with a scratchy sound on the hi-hat pad, and assign a few stuttering vocals to your toms. Get the idea? If you've got stereo pads, you should be able to create a kit with at least a dozen different sonic events. You can either layer "normal" drum sounds with these dub sounds, or improvise on top of drum loops. Because dubstep sounds are generally longer than typical drum sounds, you'll often find yourself playing patterns that are less busy, but still allow for the overlapping of musical material. You'll quickly see how something like this will drastically change your approach to drumming.

Fig. 2 Just because you own electronic drums, you don't have to set them up like an acoustic kit.



6. ROLL YOUR OWN SOUNDS

If your electronic kit doesn't let you blow in your own samples, run a MIDI or USB cable from your kit to your laptop or tablet. There are several free or very inexpensive apps that will let you load and play your own samples and fire them via MIDI. If you own drum software programs such as Kontakt, BPM, Punch, Tremor, or Battery, you can create a kit with several layers, alternate sounds, velocity splits, and more. Spend a few minutes searching the web for free dub, trap, breakbeat, or downtempo sounds (or any number of other styles), and your drives will be overflowing with hip new colors to play from your kit. Now create a kit and improvise for a while. I'm sure you'll come up with something that is fun to play and will challenge your independence and technique.

7. GOING LEFTY (OR RIGHTY)

We've already seen the challenge where we place sounds under seven different pads of our electronic kit. How about moving the pads themselves? One of the nice things about electronics is that they are relatively small and can be placed in small areas. We tend to see electronic kits set up to imitate their conventional acoustic cousins, but is that really necessary? What would happen if you put the pads in a totally new configuration?

As before, this challenge can be tackled by trying to play more traditional drum grooves while the sounds and the pads have been sonically and physically changed. Or you can improvise and come up with new and creative ways to play and combine the sounds into new beats.

The easiest shift to make (not necessarily the easiest to play) is to reverse your pads as if you were a lefty (or a righty if you are a lefty). Instead of playing with an "open hand" style, you'll really be playing a reversed kit. Talk about giving your independence skills a shot in the arm! Something as simple as this will likely turn your head around. But after a few weeks, you might be surprised how quickly your body and your mind have adapted to this change.

8. CREATING A DRUM SCULPTURE

The next step would be to change the physical position of all the pads in your kit (Fig. 2). You can choose to include the bass drum and hi-hat, or just ignore them and use your drum and cymbal pads in a sort of "stand-up" arrangement. As before, the challenge is two-fold: Figure out how to play what you consider "normal" patterns and beats, and improvise on your new drum sculpture to discover entirely new ideas. Be sure to have a kick and a hi-hat assigned somewhere in your rig if you're planning to play conventional patterns. It's always a challenge to play regular beats in their entirely without using your feet. This is another good workout for both your control of touch and independence and technique.

Believe me. If you try some of these little challenges, your playing will grow and your technique and touch will improve. If you want to take these ideas to their ultimate conclusion, try experimenting with the combination of several of these challenges at the same time.