

Demonstrations of Expressive Software and Ambient Media

Topological Media Lab

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Abstract

We set the context for three demonstrations by describing the Topological Media Lab's research agenda. We next describe three concrete applications that bundle together some of our responsive ambient media and augmented clothing instruments in illustrative scenarios.

The first set of scenarios involves performers wearing expressive clothing instruments walking through a conference or exhibition hall. They act according to heuristics drawn from a phenomenological study of greeting dynamics, the social dynamics of engagement and disengagement in public spaces. We use our study of these dynamics to guide our design of expressive clothing using wireless sensors, conductive fabrics and on-the-body circuit logic.

By walking into different spaces prepared with ambient responsive media, we see how some gestures and instruments take on new expressive and social value. These scenarios are studies toward next generation TGarden responsive play spaces [Sponge] based on gesturally parameterized media and body-based or fabric-based expressive technologies.

Keywords: software, augmented clothing, media choreography, real-time media, responsive environments, TGarden, phenomenology of performance.

1. Context

The Topological Media Lab is established to study gesture, agency and materiality from both phenomenological and computational perspectives. This motivates an inves-

tigation of human embodied experience in solo and social situations, and technologies that can be developed for enlivening or playful applications.

The TML is the laboratory arm of a phenomenological research project concerning the substrate to heightened and everyday performative experience. The TML is also affiliated with a series of experimental performance installations including TGarden and txOom, which have been manifested in six generations of productions of responsive environments in 10 cities over the past four years [Sponge, FoAM].



Figure 0. Dancing in TG2001, a prototype TGarden, Rotterdam, The Netherlands.

Our approach is informed by the observation that continuous physicalistic systems allow improvisatory gesture and deliver robust response to user input. Rather than disallow or halt on unanticipated user input, our dynamical models always provide expressive control and leave the construction of meaning and aesthetics in the human's hands.

The focus on clothing is part of a general approach to wearable computing that pays attention to the naturalized affordances and the social conditioning that fabrics, furniture and physical architecture already provide to our everyday interaction. We exploit the fusion of physical material and computational media and rely on expert craft from music, fashion, and industrial design in order to

make a new class of personal and collective expressive media.

2. TML's Research Heuristics

Perhaps the most salient notion and leitmotiv for our research is continuity. Continuous physics in time and media space provides natural affordances which sustain intuitive learning and development of virtuosity in the form of tacit "muscle memory." Continuous models allow *nuance* which provides different expressive opportunities than those selected from a relatively small, discrete set of options. Continuous models also sustain *improvisation*. Rather than disallow or halt on unanticipated user input, our dynamical sound models will always work. However, we leave the *quality* and the *musical meaning* of the sound to the user. We use semantically shallow machine models.

We do "materials science" as opposed to object-centered industrial design. Our work is oriented to the design and prototyping not of new devices but of new species of augmented physical media and gestural topologies. We distribute computational processes into the environment as an augmented physics rather than information tasks located in files, applications and "personal devices."

One way to structure and design augmented physics is to adapt continuous mathematical models. The simplest in the set theoretic sense are topological structures. Topological media can richly sustain shared experience. Media designed using heuristics drawn from topological structures (continuous or dense structures rather than the special case of graph structures) and dynamical systems provide alternatives to the scaffolding of shared experience. Our hypothesis is that simulated physics and qualitative processes rigorously designed by topological dynamical notions offer a strong alternative to communication theories based on the conduit metaphor [Reddy].

3. Applications and Demonstrations

We are pursuing these ideas in several lines of work: (1) software: clothing augmented with conductive fabrics, wireless sensing and image-bearing materials or lights for expressive purposes; (2) gesture-tracking and mathematical mapping of gesture data to time-based media; (3) physics-based real-time synthesis of video; (4) analogous sound synthesis; (5) media choreography based on statistical physics.

We demonstrate new applications that showcase elements of recent work. Although we describe them as separate elements, the point is that by walking from an unprepared place to a space prepared with our responsive media sys-

tems, the same performers in the same instrumented clothing acquire new social valence. Their interactions with co-located less-instrumented or non-instrumented people also take on different effects as we vary the locus (the locus of...) of their interaction.

3.1. Software: Augmented Clothing

Most of the applications for embedding digital devices in clothing have utilitarian design goals such as managing information, or locating or orienting the wearer. Entertainment applications are often oriented around controlling media devices or PDAs, and high level semantics such as user identity [Aoki, Eaves] or gesture recognition [Starner].

We study the expressive uses of augmented clothing but at a more basic level of non-verbal body language, as indicated in the provisional diagram (Figure 1). The key point is that we are not encoding classes of gesture into our response logic but instead we are using such diagrams as *necessarily* incomplete heuristics to guide human performers.

Performers, i.e. experienced users of our "software" instrumented garments will walk through the floor of the public spaces performing in two modes: (1) as human social probes into the social dynamics of greetings, and (2) as performers generating sound textures based on gestural interactions with their environment. We follow the performance research approach of Grotowski and Sponge [Grotowski, sponge] that identifies the actor with the spectator. Therefore we evaluate our technology from the first person point of view. To emphasize this perspective, we call the users of our technologies 'players' or 'performers' (However, our players do not play games, nor do they act in a theatrical manner.) We exhibit fabric-based controllers for expressive gestural control of light and sound on the body. Our software instruments must first and foremost be comfortable and aesthetically plausible as clothing or jewelry. Instead of starting with devices, we start with social practices of body ornamentation and corporeal play: solo, parallel, or collective play.

Using switching logic from movements of the body itself and integrating circuits of conductive fiber with light emitting or image bearing material, we push toward the limit of minimal on-the-body processing logic but maximal expressivity and response. In our approach, every contact closure can be thought of and exploited as a sensor. (Fig. 1)

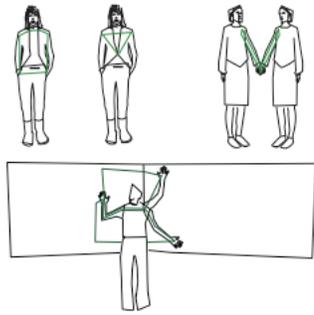


Figure 1. Solo, group and environmental contact circuits.

Demonstration A: Greeting Dynamics (Fantauzza, Berzowska, Dow, Iachello, Sha)

Performers wearing expressive clothing instruments walk through a conference or exhibition hall. They act according to heuristics drawn from a *provisional* phenomenological schema of greeting dynamics, the social dynamics of engagement and disengagement in public spaces built from a glance, nod, handshake, embrace, parting wave, backward glance. Our demonstration explores how people express themselves to one another as they approach friends, acquaintances and strangers via the medium of their modes of greeting. In particular, we are interested in how people might use their augmented clothing as expressive, gestural instruments in such social dynamics. (Fig. 2)



Figure 2. Instrumented, augmented greeting.

In addition to instrumented clothing, we are making gestural play objects as conversation totems that can be shared as people greet and interact. The shared object shown in the accompanying video is a small pillow fitted with a TinyOS mote transmitting a stream of accelerometer data. The small pillow is a placeholder for the real-time sound synthesis instruments that we have built in Max/MSP. It suggests how a physics-based synthesis model allows the performer to intuitively develop and nuance her personal continuous sound signature without any buttons, menus, commands or scripts. Our study of these embedded dynamical physics systems guides our design of expressive clothing using wireless sensors, conductive fabrics and on-the-body circuit logic.

Whereas this first demonstration studies the uses of software as intersubjective technology, of course we can also make software more explicitly designed for solo expressive performance.

Demonstration B: Expressive Software Instruments Using Gestural Sound: (Sha, Serita, Dow, Iachello, Fistre, Fantauzza)

Many of experimental gestural electronic instruments cited directly or indirectly in the Introduction have been built for the unique habits and expertises of individual professional performers. A more theatrical example is Die Audio Gruppe [Maubrey]. Our approach is to make gestural instruments whose response characteristics support the long-term evolution of everyday and accidental gestures into progressively more virtuosic or symbolically charged gesture.

In the engineering domain, many well-known examples are mimetic of conventional, classical music performance. [Machover]. Informed by work, for example, at IRCAM but especially associated with STEIM, we are designing sound instruments as idiomatically matched sets of fabric substrates, sensors, statistics and synthesis methods that lie in the intersection between everyday gestures in clothing and musical gesture.

We exhibit prototype instruments that mix composed and natural sound based on ambient movement or ordinary gesture. As one moves, one is surrounded by a corona of physical sounds “generated” immediately at the speed of matter. We fuse such physical sounds with synthetically generated sound parameterized by the swing and movement of the body so that ordinary movements are imbued with extraordinary effect. (Fig. 3)

The performative goal is to study how to bootstrap the performer’s consciousness of the sounds by such estranging techniques (estranging is a surprising and undefined word here) to scaffold the improvisation of intentional, symbolic, even theatrical gesture from unintentional gesture. This is a performance research question rather than an engineering question whose study yields insights for designing sound interaction.

Gesturally controlled electronic musical instruments date back to the beginning of the electronics era (see extensive histories such as [Kahn]).

Our preliminary steps are informed by extensive and expert experience with the community of electronic music performance [Sonami, Vasulka, Wanderley].



Figure 3. Gesture mapping to sound and video.

The motto for our approach is “gesture tracking, not gesture recognition.” In other words we do not attempt to build models based on a discrete, finite and parsimonious taxonomy of gesture. Instead of deep analysis our goal is to perform real-time reduction of sensor data and map it with lowest possible latency to media texture synthesis to provide rich, tangible, and causal feedback to the human.

Other gesture research is mainly predicated on linguistic categories, such as lexicon, syntax and grammar. [MacNeill] explicitly scopes gesture to those movements that are correlated with speech utterances.

Given the increasing power of portable processors, sophisticated sub-semantic, non-classifying analysis has begun to be exploited (e.g. [VanLaerhoven]). We take this approach systematically.

Interaction Scenario

In all cases, performers wearing software instruments will interact with other humans in a public common space. But when they pass through a space that has been sensitized with tracking cameras or receivers for the sensors tracking their gesture, then we see that their actions made in response to their social context take on other qualities due to the media that is generated in response to their movement. This prompts us to build responsive media spaces using our media choreography system.

3.2. Ambient Media

After Krueger’s pioneering work [Krueger] with video, classical VR systems glue inhabitants’ attention to a screen, or a display device and leave the body behind. Augmented reality games like Blast Theory’s *Can You See Me Now* put some players into the physical city environment, but still pin players’ attention to (mobile) screens. [Blast]

Re-projection onto the surrounding walls and bodies of the inhabitants themselves marks an important return to embodied social, play, but mediated by distributed and tangible computation.

The Influencing Machine [Hook] is a useful contrasting example of a responsive system. The Influencing Machine sketches doodles apparently in loose reaction to slips of colored paper that participants feed it. Like our work, their installation is also not based on explicit language. In fact it is designed ostensibly along “affective” lines. It is interesting to note how published interviews with the participants reveal that they objectify the Influencing Machine as an independent affective agency. They spend more effort puzzling out this machine’s behavior than in playing with one another.

In our design, we aim to sustain environments where the inhabitants attend to one another rather than a display. How can we build play environments that reward repeated visits and ad hoc social activity? How can we build environments whose appeal does not become exhausted as soon as the player figures out a set of tasks or facts? We are building responsive media spaces that are *not* predicated on rule-based game logic, puzzle-solving or exchange economies [Bjork], but rather on improvisatory yet disciplined behavior. We are interested in building play environments that offer the sort of embodied challenge and pleasure afforded by swimming or by working clay

This motivates a key technical goal: the construction of responsive systems based on gesture-*tracking* rather than gesture-recognition. This radically shortens the computational path between human gesture and media response. But if we allow a continuous open set of possible gestures as input, however reduced, the question remains how to provide aesthetically interesting, experientially rich, yet legible media responses.

The TGarden environment [Sponge] that inspired our work is designed with rich physicalistic response models that sustain embodied, non-verbal intuition and progressively more virtuosic performance. The field-based models sustain collective as well as solo input and response with equal ease.

By shifting the focus of our design from devices to processes, we demonstrate how ambient responsive media can enhance both decoupled and coordinated forms of playful social interaction in semi-public spaces.

Our design philosophy has two roots: experimental theater transplanted to everyday social space, and theories of public space ranging from urban planners [PPS, Whyte] to playground designers [Hendricks]. R. Oldenburg calls for a class of so-called “third spaces,” occupying a social region between the private, domestic spaces and the vanished informal public spaces of classical socio-political theory. These are spaces within which an easier version of friendship and congeniality results from casual and informal affiliation in “temporary worlds dedicated to the performance of an act apart.” [Oldenburg]

Demonstration C: Social Membrane (Serita, Fiano, Reitberger, Varma, Smoak)

How can we induce a bit more of a socially playful ambience in a dead space such as a conference hotel lobby? Although it is practically impossible in an exhibition setting to avoid spectacle with projected sound or light, we can insert our responsive video into non-standard geometry or materials.

We suspend (*pace* T. Erickson [Erickson]) a translucent ribbon onto which we project processed live video that transforms the fabric into a magic membrane. The membrane is suspended in the middle of public space where people will naturally walk on either side of it. People will see a smoothly varying in time and space transformations of people on the other side of the membrane. (Fig. 4) The effects will depend on movement, but will react additionally to passersby who happen to be wearing our software augmented clothing.

The challenge will be to tune the dynamic effects so that they remain legible and interesting over the characteristic time that a passerby is likely to be near the membrane, the affect induces play but not puzzle-solving. Sculpturally, the membrane should appear to have a continuous gradient across its width between zero effect (transparency) and full effect. Also it should take about 3-4 seconds for a person walking at normal speed in that public setting to clear the width of the inserted membrane.



Figure 4. Two players tracked in video, tugging at spring projected onto common fabric.

Above all the membrane should have a social Bernoulli effect that will tend to draw people on the opposite sides to one another. The same effects that transform the other person's image should also make people feel some of the safety of a playful mask. The goal is to allow people to gently and playfully transform their view of the other in a common space with partially re-synthesized graphics.

Artistic Interest and Craft

We do not try to project the spectator's attention into an avatar as in most virtual or some augmented reality systems. Instead, we focus performer-spectator's attention in the same space as all the co-located inhabitants. Moreover, rather than mesmerizing the user with media "objects" projected onto billboards, we try to sustain human-human play, using responsive media such as calligraphic, gesture/location-driven video as the medium of shared

expression. In this way, we keep the attention of the human inhabitants on one another rather than having them forget each other distracted by a "spectacular" object [Debord].

By calligraphic video we mean video synthesized by physicalistic models that can be continuously transformed by continuous gesture much as a calligrapher brushes ink onto silk. Calligraphic video as a particular species of time-based media is part of our research into the preconditions for sense-making in live performance. [Grotowski, Brooks].

4. Architecture

For high quality real-time media synthesis we need to track gesture with sufficiently high data resolution, high sample rate, low end-to-end latency between the gesture and the media effect. We summarize our architecture, which is partly based on TinyOS and Max / Macintosh OSX, and refer to [ISWC, TML] for details.

Our previous 6 generations of wireless sensor platforms have oscillated between small custom-programmed microprocessors with radio, and consumer commodity hardware with LINUX and 802.11b wireless Ethernet ([Sha Visell MacIntyre, Sponge]). Prior work focused on Analog devices ADXL202 accelerometers and video camera-based body location tracking. The best sample rates of 1000Hz / accelerometer channel were obtained using custom drivers with LINUX on an Intrinsic Cerf processor and wireless Ethernet. However, this solution required a video camera battery that was too heavy for casual movement.

Our current strategy is to do the minimum on-the-body processing needed to beam sensor data out to fixed computers on which aesthetically and socially plausible and rich effects can be synthesized. We have modified the TinyOS environment on CrossBow Technologies Mica and Rene boards to provide time series data of sufficient resolution and sample frequency to measure continuous gesture using a wide variety of sensory modalities. This platform allows us to piggy-back on the miniaturization curve of the Smart Dust initiative [Kahn], and preserves the possibility of relatively easily migrating some low level statistical filtering and processing to the body. Practically this frees us to design augmented clothing where the form factors compare favorably with jewelry and body ornaments, while at the same time retaining the power of the TGarden media choreography and synthesis apparatus. (Some details of our custom work are reported in [ISWC].)

Now we have built a wireless sensor platform based on Crossbow's TinyOS boards. This allows us to explore shifting the locus of computation in a graded and princi-

pled way between the body, multiple bodies, and the room.

Currently, our TinyOS platform is smaller but more general than our LINUX platform since it can read and transmit data from photocell, accelerometer, magnetometer and custom sensors such as, in our case, customized bend and pressure sensors. However, its sample frequency is limited to about 30 Hz / channel.

Our customized TinyOS platform gives us an interesting domain of intermediate data rate time series to analyze. We cannot directly apply many of the DSP techniques for speech and audio feature extraction because to accumulate enough sensor samples the time window becomes too long, yielding sluggish response. But we can rely on some basic principles to do interesting analysis. For example we can usefully track steps and beats for onsets and energy. (This contrasts with musical input analysis methods that require much more data at higher, audio rates. [Puckette])

The rest of the system is based on the Max real-time media control system with instruments written in MSP sound synthesis, and Jitter video graphics synthesis. (Fig. 5)

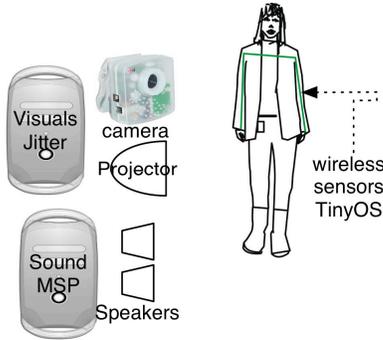


Figure 5. Architecture comprises clothing; sensing: TinyOS, IR camera; logic and physical synthesis: Max, MSP, Jitter; projectors; sound reinforcement.

Technical Comment on Lattice Computation

Our research aims to achieve a much greater degree of expressivity and tangibility in time-based visual, audio, and now fabric media. In the video domain, we use lattice methods as a powerful way to harness models that already simulate tangible natural phenomena. Such models possess the shallow semantics we desire based on our heuristics for technologies of performance. A significant technical consequence is that such methods allow us to scale efficiently (nearly constant time-space) to accommodate multiple players.

We briefly describe these lattice methods since they offer a fair amount of play in our current ambient media installations. Our lattice operators are modeled after the wave equation:

$$\frac{\partial^2 \Phi}{\partial t^2} = \Delta \Phi$$

and the heat equation:

$$\frac{\partial \Phi}{\partial t} = \Delta \Phi$$

where Φ is a potential function on $\mathbb{R}^2 \times \mathbb{R}$:

$$\Phi : \mathbb{R}^2 \times [0, \infty) \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$$

We modified the Laplacian operator Δ by coefficients on the second order and first order derivatives of Φ in order to provide degrees of anisotropy and viscosity. Properly tuned, these parameters enable an even more physicalistic response to the people's activity.

Another example is a class of operators that index time on streaming video at the pixel level. Our time-shifting operator can be parameterized by functions of a second stream of video, tracking data derived from live infra-red videocamera, offering a physicalistic but entirely non-realistic response to people's activity. People invariably play and move quite differently in concert with these modified dynamics when the media was projected back into their surround physical space.

Since the movements and body-projections of the human participants seed the dynamics of our media system, the people themselves are analog, distributed elements of the distributed computation. Thus the people themselves as a matter of course inject liveness and playfulness into their own space.

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