NEYMA, interactive soundscape composition based on a low budget motion capture system.

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ABSTRACT

Mocap (motion capture) techniques applied to music are now very widespread. More than two decades after the earliest experiments [1], there are many scientists and musicians working in this field, as shown by the large number of papers and the technological equipment used in many research centres around the world. Despite this popularity, however, there is little evidence of musical productions using the mocap technique, with the exception of a few that have been able to rely upon very high budgets and very complex equipment. The following article aims to describe the implementation of "Neyma, for 2 performers, motion capture and live electronics (2012)," [2] an interactive multimedia performance that used a low budget mocap system, performed as part of the 56th Biennale Musica di Venezia.

1. INTRODUCTION

Neyma is an interactive multimedia performance focused on the sound and the territorial identity of the city of Venice. The work was commissioned by Biennale Musica di Venezia and IanniX’s development team [2].

The general idea of the project had a dual purpose:
- exploring the sounds of the city,
- exploring its territory.

In Neyma, therefore, 2 performers make up a soundscape [3] and a visualscape [4] simultaneously and in real time through only gestural improvisation with their hands, using non-haptic sensors [5] and direct gestural acquisition [6].

The idea followed 5 basic principles:
- the original sounds (pre-processing) had to come from Venice,
- all the visual events had to be generated from a map of the city,
- the soundscape and visualscape had to be composed in real time,
- the soundscape and the visualscape had to be made through the hands gestures of the performers,
- the work had to be developed using low-cost or open-source technology and software.

In accordance with these principles the work was performed using the following technologies:
- Max/MSP [7], IanniX [8] [9], Synapse [10] and the Open Sound Control content format (software tools),
- 4 laptops, a large video projector, 2 Microsoft Kinect devices, a mixing desk, a multichannel audio system and a Local Area Network (hardware tools).

The performer’s hand movements are mapped using the mocap system formed by Kinect-Synapse-Max/MSP (performer patch running on laptops 1 and 2) and related data is sent to the main computer via the LAN network (UDP format). Laptop 3 hosts the data translation/synchronization system (main patch) and the audio generation system (audio patch). Laptop 4, running the IanniX software (video patch), receives data from laptop 3 and generates synchronized visual events (fig. 1).
2. MOTION CAPTURE SYSTEM

Each motion capture system is composed of a Kinect device, Synapse application and a Max/MSP patch (performer patch). The Synapse app gets the raw input data from Kinect and sends out OSC messages according to a specific syntax:

/\textit{point of the skeleton}_pos_world <float of X position> <float of Y position> <float of Z position>.

Axes are arranged on the basis of the performer’s point of view. The app can recognize the skeleton of a user, grab some key points from it and send the spatial location out in relative values, with the \textit{pos_world} being the distance expressed in millimeters from the Kinect and the skeleton point determined by the software. Three messages per performer were used: right hand, left hand and torso position (fig. 2).

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.4\textwidth]{hand_torso.png}
\caption{Hand and torso recognition.}
\end{figure}

In Max/MSP performer patch, these messages are translated into:

- the speed motion of the hand,
- the distance of the hands from the torso, useful in obtaining a tracking of hand movements independent from the distance of the performer from the mocap device.

With performer patch one can control:

- the spatialization of drones through the hand speed motion,
- the activation of triggers,
- the recognition of sequences. (see §3)

These three controls are automatically activated in specific movements during the performance. Drones start automatically and move into an electroacoustic space according to the speed of motion of the hands, the triggers being single spheres in 3D space with an adjustable radius, activated by passing hands through the points in which they are placed.

Sequences are chains of triggers: in specific performance sections, the consecutive selection of 2 triggers define a sequence. The location of triggers and gestures related to sequences are initialized before the performance and all lie within an action space that extends in front of the performer (fig. 3).

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.4\textwidth]{action_space.png}
\caption{Action space.}
\end{figure}

The initialization process consists of:

- the adjustment of the input threshold within the hand action space,
- the determination of trigger points which represent the centre of the sphere,
- the determination of sequence points.

All these settings are made by putting the performer’s hands in a desired point in space which is then registered into the performer patch by an assistant that stores the related presets, the performer placing themselves in the same spot used for the performance.

3. INTERACTIVE AUDIO SYSTEM

The audio processing environment (laptop 3) consists in the generation and spatial diffusion of sound events (audio patch) and is organized into 4 main modules: a sampler, a bank of automated gain faders (pseudo-random algorithm), a bank of 12 spatializers and a reverberation unit.

In addition to these, there is also a module for the extraction of the amplitude value of the signal consisting of a bank of filters and peak meters that splits the spectrum into 24 bands, detecting each amplitude value (vocoder, cf. §4) and sending these to laptop 4 as the main control variables of visual events (fig. 4-5).
Figure 4. Main patch diagram (laptop 3).

Figure 5. Audio patch diagram (laptop 3).

Sampler: a bank of 48 file players (24 for each performer) that allows the playback of 3 types of sound events: drones, triggers and sequences. Drones are long duration audio files (up to 2 minutes) triggered by the cue list and their function is like a “basso continuo”. Triggers are short duration audio files (up to 12 seconds) activated by virtual buttons around performers while sequences are short duration audio files (up to 8 seconds) triggered by the performers’ hand gestures (triggers chains, cf. §2).

Pseudo-random automation: a bank of 24 automated gain faders that allows the output level of each sample to be varied randomly, within a preset range. All variables of the module are automated through the synced cue list in the main patch. It is a basic system because it allows for the quick setting of all the samples’ amplitudes and their automatic control at run time, and at the same time it offers the possibility to simulate a “from near to far” (and vice versa) sound effect.¹

Spatializers: a bank of 12 spatializers organized according to the type of samples received as input. The motion algorithm is largely based on a matrix (controlling the opening time of the channels) and the speed of movement can be controlled manually (receiving data from the mocap system) or automatically, using the synced cue list in the main patch.

Reverberation: a delay line reverb algorithm which allows the adding of a virtual environment and the simulation of the movements mentioned earlier. All variables are automated by the same cue list in the main patch.

4. INTERACTIVE VIDEO SYSTEM

IanniX is a graphical open source sequencer that allows graphic representations of a multidimensional score [9]. This score is made up of three different objects: curves, cursors and triggers. For the purpose of this project, only the usage of curves manipulated in real-time through an opportune patch (video patch) were considered.

The implemented score was a 2D map of Venice imported in a IanniX project as a set of different curves defined as B-Splines: by moving a point that belongs to a curve, allowing a smooth animation (fig. 6).

¹ Varying the direct signal and keeping constant the reverberated signal.
5. OSC DATA

The communications between Synapse, performer patch, video patch, Iannix project, audio patch and main patch are made possible using the OpenSoundControl content format [12]. The LAN is set up as a mixed peer-to-peer and client-server model network. The Synapse application/performer patch and Iannix project/video patch pairs are couples of individual nodes in the P2P network in which any communication is purely unilateral: mocap data flows from Synapse to the performer patch and the video score commands from the video patch to the Iannix project. The main patch acts as a server coordinating messages from the performer patch to the video patch and the audio patch (fig. 8).

6. SOUNDSCAPE COMPOSITION

As indicated above, all the sounds come from the city of Venice, from characteristic spots in sound terms: the Ponte di Rialto, Piazza San Marco, the Campo San Polo, Piazzale Roma, Canal Grande, the Arsenale, San Giorgio Maggiore, SS. Giovanni e Paolo and the Giudecca. The collected sound samples were then processed using a variety of techniques including granulation, ring modulation, convolution, frequency warping, spectral delaying, filtering and vocoding. All these sound events were placed into 3 categories: drones, triggers and sequences (see §3); in such a way that each performer has his personal samples library.

Performer 1: 8 drones (4 + 4), 16 sequences (8 for each hand), 16 triggers (8 + 8, 8 for each hand).

Performer 2: 4 drones (2 + 2), 16 sequences (8 for each hand), 24 triggers (12 + 12, 12 for each hand).

The gestural improvisations were organized in such a way as to obtain a circular structure formed by 3 types of soundscape: virtual, surreal and real [11]. This idea was applied in order to simulate an approach to the city, a tour within it and a subsequent departure to other places (fig. 9).

In this structure each performer follows a time sequence of instructions inside of which he is free to improvise.

Performer 1:
0’00” / 3’00” - drones spatialization,
3’00” / 4’00” - triggers mode,

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Table 1. Critical bands.

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2 Max/MSP patches (programmed on purpose).
4'00" / 6'00" - sequences mode,
6'00" / 8'00" - triggers mode 2 (different sounds),
8'00" / 9'00" - drones spatialization 2 (different sounds).

Performer 2:
0'30" / 2'00" - drones spatialization,
2'00" / 4'00" - triggers mode,
4'00" / 6'00" - sequences mode,
6'00" / 7'00" - triggers mode 2 (different sounds),
7'00" / 9'30" - drones spatialization 2 (different sounds).

7. CONCLUSIONS

Both from the technological point of view and from an aesthetic-musical perspective, the production of Neyma was founded on the idea of economy and that of coherence. We attempted to use the smallest possible number of technologies and focus our work on the software development of the mocap system and performance environments, aiming at maximum integration of the visual and sound media. The creation of Neyma demonstrates how it is possible to conceive a low cost motion capture system that is both flexible and stable even in critical situations, such as an interactive multimedia performance.

8. REFERENCES

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10. Synapse home page: http://synapsekinect.tumblr.com
12. OSC home page: http://opensoundcontrol.org