Opto-Phono-Kinesia (OPK): Designing Motion-Based Interaction for Expert Performers

Dr. Steve Gibson
Associate Professor
School of Design
Northumbria University
Newcastle upon Tyne,
NE1 8ST, UK
stephen.gibson@northumbria.ac.uk

Abstract
Opto-Phono-Kinesia (OPK) is an audio-visual performance piece in which all media elements are controlled by the body movements of a single performer. The title is a play on a possible synesthetic state involving connections between vision, sound and body motion. Theoretically, for a person who experiences this state, a specific colour could trigger both a sound and a body action. This synesthetic intersection is simulated in OPK by simultaneity of body movement, and audio-visual result.

Using the Gesture and Media System 3.0 motion-tracking system, the performer can dynamically manipulate an immersive environment using two small infrared trackers. The project employs a multipart interface design based on a formal model of increasing complexity in visual-sound-body mapping, and is therefore best performed by an expert performer with strong spatial memory and advanced musical ability. OPK utilizes the "body as experience, instrument and interface" [1] for control of a large-scale environment.

Author Keywords
Immersive environments; motion-tracking; live audio-visuals; synesthesia; ephemeral interfaces; multimodal experiences; interaction design; media art.
ACM Classification Keywords

Conference Themes
*OPK* responds to the following conference themes:
- Body as experience, instrument and interface
- Ephemeral interfaces
- Haptic and multi-modal experiences
- Aesthetic experience through tangible or full body interactions

Introduction
*OPK* is an audio-visual performance to be performed solo by an expert, trained performer. *OPK* consists of several shorter pieces that explore the relation of particular 3D planes to media control. Each piece takes a different approach to 3D motion and media control, thus relying on performer memory.

In contrast to most media art and interactive environments, *OPK* is not intended for interaction by the general public, but instead is a live performance that requires a trained body-based performer to execute it in real-time. *OPK* has embedded within it the possibility of musical timing errors, and contains complex spatial access points for media control, thus making it only suitable for an expert performer. *OPK* continues my 20-year project to design an interface strategy for body-based performance, in which all media aspects are controlled by a single user. *OPK* is body-based and immersive, but also employs a formal design strategy of multi-modal mapping via a simulation of the condition of synesthesia.

The Gesture and Media System 3.0 (GAMS)
*OPK* makes use of the Gesture and Media System 3.0 (GAMS) motion tracking system, and the FlashTrack 3D mapping software. With GAMS four infrared cameras are used to detect user position and velocity in 3D space. Up to four infrared trackers can be used simultaneously. Media can be mapped in different spatial zones using FlashTrack, and dynamic relationships can be established between user motion and common audio-visual parameters. Audio and video parameters are controlled by MIDI (for control of sound and video), and lights are controlled by DMX (the standard protocol for light control). Remote controls can be used to load new ‘Maps’ containing different media configurations. The software can also use other motion-based data – e.g. velocity of the trackers, proximity of the different trackers to each other - to change media parameters. Figure 1 shows the trackers and explains in detail about their functionality and use.

Synesthesia
Synesthesia is a condition in which a person experiences sensations from one sense in a second different sense. “How does it feel to hear music in color, or to see someone’s name in color? These are examples of synesthesia, a neurological phenomenon that occurs when a stimulus in one sense modality immediately evokes a sensation in another sense modality. Literally, ‘synesthesia’ means to perceive (esthesia) together (syn).” [2]
Various devices have been created over the past 150 years to simulate the effects of synesthesia for non-synesthetes. "The British inventor Alexander Wallace Rimington (1854-1918), a professor of arts in London was the first to use the phrase 'Colour Organ,' in his patent application of 1893." [3] The Colour Organ played lighted coloured lamps by means of an organ-type keyboard. In the succeeding years following the invention of Rimington’s Light Organ, other devices were created in order to play visuals simultaneously with music. The most well-known of these is Scriabin’s ‘chromola’ used in his Prometheus: Poem of Fire from 1912 (see Figure 2). What these and other similar devices share in common is the ability to mimic the
effect of audio-visual synesthesia through a single control technology. In OPK the audio-visual synesthetic simulation uses motion control instead of a keyboard or other musical device, extending the synesthetic experience into a third medium, that of the spatial - not precisely ‘dance’, but close (see Figure 3 for an example of a synesthesia map from OPK). Although the ephemeral nature of the interaction with the GAMS system does not produce any haptic feedback on the trackers themselves, in OPK the multi-modal connection between movement and the precise sound and visual response provides kinesthetic feedback through proprioception (joint/muscle senses, etc.).

**Designing Interaction for Expert Users**

My earlier work with GAMS, including Virtual DJ (2002-2005) and Virtual VJ (2011-13) [4], was primarily designed for general audience interaction. The user interface in these projects was deliberately simple, standardised and repeatable. For example, in Virtual DJ drums always faded in from zero volume in the back of the room to maximum volume towards the front. This was accompanied by a light dimmer that increased in intensity in a parallel manner. Similarly, all musical elements were ‘quantized’ to a very wide musical grid (usually to the bar), so that timing was always on the beat, even if the audience movements were slightly off rhythmically. The goal was to make the audience enjoy the experience without fear of making errors.

In contrast OPK is designed explicitly for a more rehearsed expert performer, in this case myself. I have over 20-years of experience in working with the GAMS system, and therefore almost certainly have a more developed spatial sense than the general population. In addition, I have a PhD in Music Composition and Theory and therefore my musical ability is likely higher than most of the general population.

My intention was to push myself as a performer so that an effort was needed to both keep the performance in sync, and to retain a level of musical coherence. This was partly achieved by setting the input quantization in the Ableton Live audio software to a much finer musical grid than I used in Virtual DJ (usually 1/8th notes for OPK), thus requiring me to pay very close attention to all of the rhythmic elements in order to keep them in relative time. This also enabled me to bring in musical elements in a syncopated fashion, thus getting away from an over-reliance on the 4/4 (time signature) grid. Another effect of using this finer grid was the possibility of errors, or at least the possibility of bringing in musical elements in an audibly ‘wrong’ manner - i.e. accidently starting a drum loop an 1/8th note early or late after a breakdown. The possibility of errors was key here: it increased the intensity of the performance and made it demonstrably more ‘live.’

In addition to the above, the structure of OPK is such that it starts very simply, with a bass note, a few drum hits, and a few controls applied to each of these objects and their accompanying lights/videos via changing coordinates or tracker velocity. As OPK progresses the 3D space is filled with more and more sound, light and visual layers until the penultimate section, in which every part of the 3D space has an audio-visual layer, often with multiple layers on different parts of the z plane (floor-to-ceiling) in the same bounding x/y coordinates. Simultaneously the degree of dynamic control is increased as the piece progresses. Table 1 shows all of the MIDI controls that are sent via the GAMS system to Ableton Live.
**OPK MIDI controls**

MIDI continuous controllers (CC) are used to send MIDI data dynamically so that musical parameters can be changed smoothly in real-time. This list shows some common continuous controls used in OPK.

- Filters – CCs 99 and 100
- Filter Resonance – CC 101
- Tremolo – CC 102
- Beat Repeat – CC 103
- Reverb Mix – CC 104
- Delay Mix 1 – CC 105
- Delay Mix 2 – CC 106
- Delay Feedback – CC 107
- Distortion – CC 108
- Pre-Distortion – CC 109
- Distortion Filter – CC 110
- Beat Repeat Grid – CC 113
- Auto Pan amount – CC 114
- Vocoder balance – CC 115
- Volcano Mix – CC 116
- Synth 1 volume – CC 117
- Synth 2 volume – CC 118
- Resonator Mix – CC 119
- Tempo – CC 120

Table 1: A list of MIDI continuous controls sent from GAMS to control audio parameters in Ableton Live. See Figure 5 for an example of how a MIDI control is mapped in FlashTrack.

As a performer, I have to be continuously aware of these controls. It takes a mental, musical and visual effort to recall the planes to which these controls are attached, and which controls may be active at any time. This includes many instances in which controls are being applied on multiple sound channels and different lights simultaneously.

The use of multi-modal mapping between the sound, light and video elements, using a synesthetic strategy, assists in bringing coherence to the performance, both for the performer and the audience. For example, at the start of OPK a very soft bass note is triggered in the back of the room. As I move forward (on the y plane) the bass filter is opened, and the dimmer on the light
becomes brighter. As I near a specific point at the front of the room the bass note is repeated and bent (Beat Repeat), which simultaneously causes the light prism to rotate. As I lift my hand up beyond 130 cm (on the z plane) reverb is applied increasingly to the bass, and the light becomes increasingly unfocused. Table 2 shows how the audio and light controls are mapped to specific 3D movements, as described in the example above.

These synchronized actions between the audio-visual domains are what provides the formal coherence in OPK, and they are also what gives the performer feedback on how his movements are affecting the audio-visual elements. Only through logical and careful mapping of motion to audio-visual parameters does this control become instinctive and intuitive for the performer.

Finally, much of OPK requires considerably physical exertion to achieve an effect. For example, some control changes are spread out of over longish distances (5-6m), therefore requiring me to make a physical effort to change the audio-visual parameters with a degree of coherence.

**Conclusion**

The different factors described above promote the 'liveness' of OPK, and are an effort to humanise both immersive interactive media and audio-visual performance. The technique of synesthetic mapping between audio, visual and movement domains allows for the intricate performance of an immersive environment by one individual performer. While we might instinctively presume that controlling two mediums with a third (movement) might be more difficult than controlling one, with thoughtful and careful mapping of movement to sound and visual result, the multi-modal performance is actually simpler for the performer and more rewarding for the audience. Similarly, the audience perception that the piece is open to performer variation, error and physical exhaustion re-humanizes digital audio-visual performance, creating a more genuinely live experience via the displacement of the body in 3D space.

**Acknowledgements**

Special thanks to: Liam Hardy for the camera on the OPK shoot; David Leonard for the loan of the Black Magic Camera for the OPK shoot; Moment Research and Limbic Media for GAMS 3.0; Northumbria University and Gilbert Cockton for GAMS 3.0 funding; Conroy Badger for FlashTrack fixes.

**Documentation**

Video documentation of OPK can be viewed at https://vimeo.com/228634638. A full performance of one piece from OPK can be viewed at https://vimeo.com/228541508

**References**