

FLEXIBLE CONTROL OF COMPOSITE PARAMETERS IN MAX/MSP

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ABSTRACT

Fundamental to the development of musical or artistic creative work is the ability to transform raw materials. This ability implies the facility to master many facets of the material, and to shape it with plasticity. Computer music environments typically provide points of control to manipulate material by providing parameters with controllable values. This capability to control the values of parameters is inadequate for many artistic endeavors, and does not reflect the analogous tools and methods of artists working with physical materials.

Rather than viewing parameters in computer-based systems as single points of control, the authors posit that parameters must become more multifaceted and dynamic in order to serve the needs of artists. The authors propose an expanded notion of how to work with parameters in computer-centric environments for time-based art. A proposed partial solution to this problem is to give parameters additional properties that define their behavior. An example implementation of these ideas is presented in Jamoma.

1. INTRODUCTION

Presets and *automation* in computer music systems can be considered possible archetypes of strategies for dynamic control of a system. Presets in their purest form are a vertical-only approach; all values are instantly set to a certain state. Automation on the other hand, in its purest form is a horizontal-only approach; a fixed stream of time-tagged values progressing over a limited amount of time to control the state of one parameter, often with interpolation from one value to the next. While presets are widely used in real-time signal processing environments, the use of automation is fundamental to linear time-based media software such as digital audio workstations and video editing software.

One obvious way of expanding the flexibility of presets is by implementing a cross-fade or gradual transition to the new preset by means of interpolation. Several works have expanded this further by presenting the set of presets as points in a dataspace and develop strategies of traversing that dataspace, creating dynamic interpolations between two or more presets [1, 3, 8]. This has also been extensively used by one of the authors for developing the Hipno audio plug-ins [11].

Jamoma¹ is a system for developing high-level *modules* in the Max/MSP/Jitter environment [9]. It implements a *Model-View-Controller* (MVC) strategy, where “objects of different classes take over the operations related to the application domain (the model), the display of the application’s state (the view), and the user interaction with the model and the view (the controller).” [6, p26]. All state management, parametric control, and automation for Jamoma is handled within the controller layer of the MVC paradigm. This forms the basis of all relationships both within a module and between different modules.

In Jamoma we are currently working towards more complex transitions of parameters in time that integrate both vertical and horizontal qualities. This is achieved through the integration of a *cuelist* system. This system permits instant updates to parameters, or scripting of complex transitional progressions, introducing horizontal aspects.

Previously Jamoma offered possibilities of *ramping* to a new value over a certain amount of time by means of linear interpolation only. Recently this has been expanded by re-implementing ramping as a combination of two new libraries.

2. THE COMPOSITE PARAMETER

The parameter is the primary interface for a user manipulating the state of a module. In most systems, the parameter has a single task: to set a variable or coefficient. While it is straightforward to understand such a simple one-dimensional control, it does not offer the degree of nuance that, say, a sculptor has when working with clay.

In Jamoma, the parameter is expanded by adding *properties* and *methods* to the parameter that further refine or change its behavior [10]. These behaviors themselves can be in constant fluid motion together with the value of the parameter. Some examples of parameter properties include setting a value range, filtering out repetitions, determining the type of units used to express values, and how automation is applied. The result is a composite parameter or *node*, made up of many constituent parts rather than representing only a single value. As such it is more like a multi-dimensional tool than a single point of control.

¹ <http://www.jamoma.org>

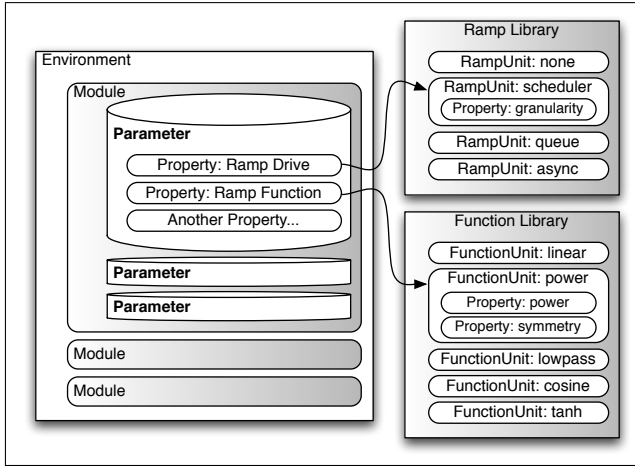


Figure 1. Parameter structure in context: Within an environment, there may be many modules. Each module may have many parameters. Each parameter may have many properties. The properties may point to a dynamic entity which itself has properties, and so on.

Property or Method	Description
:/value	Value of the parameter
:/value/stepsize	Size of step taken inc and dec
:/value/inc	Increase the value
:/value/dec	Decrease the value
:/value/default	Initial value
:/type	Type of data (int, float, etc.)
:/priority	Order for recalling values from a preset
:/ui/freeze	Stops GUI updates to save CPU
:/ui/refresh	Updates the GUI
:/ramp/drive	Timing mechanism for ramps
:/ramp/function	Interpolation shape for ramps
:/repetitions	Filter out repeated values
:/range/bounds	Set a low and high range
:/range/clip	What to do when the range is exceeded
:/description	Documentation

Table 1. Selected parameter properties and methods in Jamoma

2.1. Properties and Methods

We have stated that a parameter may be enhanced by the addition of *properties* and *methods*. A property is an aspect of the parameter which itself has a state. For example, filtering of repeating values can be turned on or off. A method is simply a mechanism for doing something, such as refreshing the user interface for the parameter, but the method itself does not have any value to maintain.

One interesting aspect of properties that does not apply to methods is that properties may themselves have properties, as illustrated in Figure 1.

2.2. Parameter Properties in Jamoma

Jamoma’s parameter object is an implementation of the idea that properties and methods can meaningfully extend parametric control. When communicating to and from modules using the Open Sound Control protocol [13] we

use the colon separator to access the properties of the parameter as proposed in [10]:

```
/path/to/parameter <value>
/path/to/parameter:/property <value>
```

Table 1 lists the currently implemented properties of the parameter object, with the path to the parameter omitted.

3. IMPLEMENTATION

In Jamoma, the parameter is implemented as a Max external called *jcom.parameter*. Within *jcom.parameter*, the ramping properties are implemented internally as a combination of two shared libraries called the *RampLib* and *FunctionLib*. The *RampLib* determines *when* a new value is required during a ramp, while the *FunctionLib* determines *what* the new value will be. Both of these are reconfigurable on-the-fly during performance.

3.1. The Ramp Library

Depending on the circumstance it might be desirable to generate new interpolated values in different ways during the ramp. Several real-time signal processing environments distinguish between audio rate and control rate signals [2, 7]. If the parameter is controlling a video processing algorithm it might be sufficient to update the value once per video frame processed [5].

The Jamoma *RampLib* provides a means by which to create and use *ramp units* in Jamoma. A ramp unit is a self-contained algorithm, implemented as a C++ API, that can slide from an existing value to a new value over a specified amount of time according to different timing mechanisms. Currently four such ramp units are implemented:

- *none* - jumps immediately to the new value. Typically used for values where ramping is not relevant or desirable.
- *scheduler* - use the Max internal clock to generate new values at fixed time intervals. The timing granularity can be controlled using a property.
- *queue* - ramping using the Max queue, updating values whenever the processor has free capacity to do so.
- *async* - only calculate new values when requested to do so. This is typically used in video processing modules to calculate fresh values immediately before processing the next video image or matrix.

The *RampLib* can easily be extended with more ramp units, and one planned extension is the implementation of audio rate ramping.

When a new ramp is started, the ramp unit internally use a normalized ramping value, increasing linearly from 0.0 to 1.0 over the duration of the ramp. Whenever the






		None	Scheduler	Queue	Async
Cosine					
Linear					
Lowpass					
Power					
Tanh					

Figure 2. The possible ramping configurations in Jamoma can be represented as the intersection of a choice on each of the x and the y axes.

ramp unit is to provide a new value, it updates the normalized ramping value, and pass it to a Function Unit as described in Section 3.2. The normalized value returned is then scaled to the range defined by the start and end values for the ramp, and passed on to the module.

3.2. The Function Library

The Jamoma FunctionLib API provides normalized mappings of values $x \in [0, 1]$ to $y \in [0, 1]$ according to functions $y = f(x)$. Currently five functions are implemented:

- Linear: $y = x$
- Cosine: $y = -\frac{1}{2} \cdot \cos(x \cdot \pi) + \frac{1}{2}$
- Lowpass series: $y[n] = y[n-1] \cdot k + x[n] \cdot (1-k)$
The feedback coefficient k can be set as a property.
- Power function: $y = x^k$.
The parameter k can be set as a property.
- Hyperbolic tangent: $y = c \cdot (\tanh(a \cdot (x-b)) - d)$
The width and offset of the curve can be set as properties, and control the values of the coefficients a , b , c and d .

The FunctionLib can easily be expanded by introducing new functions as C++ classes.

3.3. Combinations

One of the advantages of implementing ramping as a combination of two libraries, is that any RampUnit can be combined with any FunctionUnit. Current, with 4 RampUnits and 5 FunctionUnits implemented so far, this provides a total of 20 options for how to perform ramping, as illustrated in Figure 2.

4. DISCUSSION AND FURTHER WORK

The proposed system for ramping of parameter values can be understood as an extension of the well-established ADSR (attack - decay - sustain - release) envelope used in classic synthesizers in order to create more complex developments in time. Ramps are initiated and controlled

```
#####
CUE upAndDown
#####
/path/to/parameter 0.
/path/to/parameter:/ramp/function linear
/path/to/parameter 1. ramp 2000
WAIT 2000
/path/to/parameter:/ramp/function cosine
/path/to/parameter 0. ramp 4000
```

Figure 3. A simple cuescript. The parameter first traverse linearly from 0. to 1. in two seconds, and then returns to 0 in four seconds according to a cosine function

by simple OSC messages, thus combining simplicity of access with complexity and expressivity of the result.

One Jamoma module, *jmod.cuelist*, loads a text-based script of *event cues*, and is able to control all other modules [9]. A WAIT syntax can set the execution of a cue on hold for a specified amount of time. Thus more complex auditive events can be created by combining parallel ramps for several parameters. Simultaneously the transitional curve for each of the parameters can be made more complex by building compound curves splicing several ramp segments, where different functions can be used for each segment, as illustrated in Figure 3.

In the discussion so far ramps have been implicitly understood to be *goal-directed*, that is moving towards a final destination in a fixed and limited amount of time. If this assumption is relaxed, the RampLib and FunctionLib implementations can be expanded further to provide even more possibilities for continuous drift of parameter values. For instance low frequency oscillators can be implemented as a sequence of repeating and possibly reversed ramps. If the FunctionLib is expanded by introducing stochastic functions, and ramps are permitted to be of infinite duration, the RampLib can be used to trigger new random values when required, leading to different kinds of stochastic drifts and processes in time.

Presets and automation has been mentioned in Section 1 as archetypes of strategies for dynamic control of a system. A third possible archetype for controlling a system is the use of mappings. Mappings define relationships between various components in a system that interact with each other. This creates a complex and dynamic methodology for generating not only vertical transmutations but gestures which develop over time [4, 12].

The Function Lib can be used outside the context of *jcom.parameter*. The *jcom.map* Max external maps values in the input range $[a, b]$ to values in the output range $[c, d]$. The FunctionLib is used to determine what curve the mapping is performed according to, and the curve can be changed on-the-fly by switching between all available FunctionUnits.

In a similar way the RampLib can be used outside the context of *jcom.parameter* for other scheduled tasks.

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²<http://imal.org/>

³<http://www.gmea.net>