# Digital Synesthesia: Using Mobile Technology to Interact with Our World

#### By

#### Santiago Eloy Alfaro Bernate

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Author:

Santiago Alfaro

Program in Media Arts and Sciences

­­

Thesis Supervisor:

V. Michael Bove Jr.

Principal Research Scientist

MIT Media Lab

Thesis Reader:

Joseph Paradiso

Professor of Media Arts and Science

MIT Media Lab

Thesis Reader:

Kevin Slavin

Assistant Professor of Media Arts and Sciences

MIT Media Lab

# Acknowledgements

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# Executive Summary

Humans have dreamt for many years of going beyond our physical capabilities. We have dreamt of flying, breathing underwater, exploring space or simply moving as fast as possible. All of these dreams have been made possible through the use of technology and our understanding of the physical world around us. We have also dreamt of augmenting our senses. In popular culture, we create characters that are able to see through walls, feel the presence of danger, use echolocation or sense the emotional state of others. Technology has already given us the tools to make most of these dreams a reality. Furthermore, mobile technology has made it possible for humans to use sensors as a ubiquitous just-in-time source of information. This ability to access digital information from anywhere at any time is the main value of mobile devices. But interaction with mobile devices relies heavily on transmitting information visually, which demands a high level of attention from the user.

This thesis explores a way of using sensor and mobile technology to create a superhuman sensory experience that feels as natural as possible to the user. I aim to develop a new paradigm of interaction between users and their mobile devices: one in which the device acts mainly as the “translator” of information while the users interact directly with the world they are trying to explore. This “Digital Synesthesia” can be achieved by using a sensory channel other than vision to relay the information detected by external sensors.

Digital Synesthesia refers to the ability to use mobile technology as the conduit between the body and aspects of the world that the human body is not able to sense. It will connect modern sensing technology with the brain’s interpretation of external data. I will show that by using natural sensory channels to represent information beyond human perception, the brain will be able to interpret and assimilate the new stimulation as a new sense. Instead of giving the users an absolute value of the information being detected, the users will feel this translation on their bodies. This will allow each user to find a personal meaning for the information that they are experiencing and interpret it in a unique way. By spreading out the interaction across more senses, the experience will feel more natural and thus allow the users to more easily divide their attention between concurrent tasks. Thus, Digital Synesthesia creates a richer, more immersive experience.

The related work falls mostly into two categories, those that replace a non-working sense with another, and those that give the user a completely new sense. The results of these projects have proved that there is a great opportunity in using senses other than vision or hearing. They have also demonstrated the plasticity of the brain in interpreting information when received through different senses. This thesis will go further by building on top of these findings and asking how we can use Digital Synesthesia to create a new interface paradigm, one that will allow the users to interact directly with the world and not with the mobile device. Since we understand our environment through our senses, having new sensory experiences will grant users a richer understanding of the world as they explore their new sensory capabilities.

The evaluation of this work will be done by conducting a series of studies in which users will wear devices that generate new sensory feedback loops. In these studies, the subjects will be asked to complete a task with the aid of one or more new digital senses. The studies will range from scenarios in which the subject simply compares the digital sense with a natural sense, to a situation where the subject can feel new information and has to discover what it means. Data will be collected on the time and accuracy of the completed task and a qualitative result will be obtained from discussion with the subjects about the wearable technology and the experience in general.

### Future Projection

Many animals use natural phenomena to their advantage every day, such as sensing ultra-violet light to choose the best flowers or sensing magnetic fields to find direction. When humans are able to interpret these physical phenomena in a way that is more in tune with their bodies and less of a cognitive interpretation of quantity, then our interaction and general experience in and with the world will change dramatically. By understanding and interpreting these natural phenomena, designers of digital synesthetic interfaces will be able to create new sensory loops that offer new experiences to the users. Digital Synesthesia will give everyday users the ability to turn senses on and off depending on the experience they seek.

# Abstract

Digital Synesthesia is the concept of using sensors and mobile technology to create a user experience that mimics the way people use their senses and enables the perception of information that is outside of our sensory spectrum. Modern technology already offers the ability to detect this information, but what has not been achieved is the way for our brains and body to incorporate this new information as a part of our sensory tool-belt. Then we can truly begin to understand our surrounding world in a new and undiscovered way.

The vision of Digital Synesthesia is to make the current idea of Human-Computer Interfacing evolve so that it gives way for a new Human-Environment Interfacing. Digital Synesthesia aims keep our mobile devices in our pockets while allowing us to experience the world by sensing information outside of our sensory capabilities.

The system will not only collect data through sensors, but also find the best way to pass the information to the body while bypassing visual and auditory channels. This way, the brain will be able to interpret the new information without shifting or dividing attention from the current task.

# Introduction

In his theory of the Umwelt[23], author Jakob von Uexküll proposes that every creature has an individual and unique understanding of their environment, given the individual affordances offered by their senses. This leads to the belief that the access to new senses should expand the way in which humans experience their world and therefore is at the center of the Digital Synesthesia project. Modern technology already offers the ability to detect information from the world that is beyond our natural sensory spectrum, but what has not been achieved is the way for our brains and body to incorporate this new information as an addition to our sensory capabilities. Digital Synesthesia offers a way of taking new sensory experiences and transmitting them to the body in a way that mimics our other senses, without relying on a mostly visual and highly cognitive experience which demands a big part of the user’s attention. With Digital Synesthesia, we will be able to understand our surrounding world in a new and undiscovered way.

This project will look at the ability of a user to quickly assimilate an external stimulation and understand the significance of the signal. In order to do this, the user must be able to combine the information from the stimuli, their understanding of their context and surroundings and cues from proprioception that relate to the new sensory experience.

# Background and Related Work

Many projects and research have sought to understand the feasibility of using touch, thermal, vibration and haptics to communicate information to the brain. I’ll present here the research and projects that best support the basis of Digital Synesthesia.

## Thermal Interfacing

Studies on a person’s ability to discern between two materials using only thermal cues have been conducted. They show how such perception is possible when there is a large difference between the thermal capacity and conductivity of the materials[1]. Similar results have been used to present thermal cues to the users in virtual environments and teleoperated systems [2][3]. Digital Synesthesia will further this research by finding more effective ways of coding information through the sense of temperature.

## Vibrotactile Interfacing

LA Jones et al have tested a tactile display mounted on the user’s arm and back[4]. Simple commands and instructions were communicated through a vibration pattern and tested for accuracy and efficiency. SenseableRays[5] from Rekimoto Labs uses a small finger-mounted module that detects a structured light signal and emits a vibratory pulse giving the sense of feeling the projected light. LA Jones has shown that vibrotactile interfacing is a very effective way of transmitting information while Rekimoto shows the added value that the tactile sense brings to an experience. Digital Synesthesia will try to join these two efforts to create a more immersive and efficient experience.

## Mobile Communication

Rekimoto lab has presented AffectPhone[6], a system that gives a handset the ability to detect a user’s arousal level through Galvanic Skin Response sensors and transmit it to another user as hot or cold sensations in the hand. Similarly, Pressages[7] is a system that translates the pressure with which one user squeezes the sides of the mobile phone into a vibration on the receiving phone. Both these projects are looking to create a better communication by using sensory feedback of the users’ state. Connexus[8] was an ambitious project that attempted to detect several signals of the users in order to recreate an image of the non-verbal cues that were being lost in non-co-located communication. Even though these projects hit close to what Digital Synesthesia looks for, they are from the start limited in certain ways. Since Digital Synesthesia is based more on detecting occurring phenomena than on detecting the other users’ willingness communicate in a new way, the experience is more reliable. Perhaps with the findings from this thesis, other projects like the ones discussed can be revised with a better understanding of digital sensory loops.

## Sensory Substitution

Either because a person may be lacking one of the five senses or because a different sensory input may offer other benefits like greater detail, sensory substitution has been seen in several fields. Most sensors translate information, such as temperature, wind speed, distance or the passing of time. All are things our bodies can perceive but by using a sensor and translating the information to a coded visual form we add the ability of greater accuracy and universal understanding. Brainport[9] is a system that captures images through a camera and translates it into electrical signals that are felt on the tongue. The artist Neil Harbisson and his team have developed Eyeborg[10] so that Neil, who is completely color-blind, can use this device to capture color information through a camera on his forehead and translate it to sound he hears through bone conduction. These hit at the core of Digital Synesthesia. But what this project proposes is that these kinds of interfaces will be useful in the everyday experiences of the average user. In order for this to happen, the interface has to find a way to be less obtrusive and more user friendly.

## New Senses

Another big area in this field is creating completely new senses. Adding a new sense to our repertoire changes the way we understand and interact with the world. The FeelSpace[11] belt was a device with vibrators that could be worn around the waist. The vibrator closest to geographical north would constantly vibrate, giving the user a sense of direction. Another take on navigation is Momo[12], a handheld egg-like device that leans towards the direction in which the traveler needs to go. The change in the center of gravity of the device is perceptible in the hands of the user. Dan Berg, a writer and technology advisor, implanted a small magnet into the little finger of his right hand[13]. One of the reported effects was the ability to sense electrical flow by the disruptions on the magnetic field. Disney research has developed Aireal[14], which uses air vortices to create a tactile sensation of virtual images or images projected on the body. These projects hint at the ability of the brain to interpret new experiences. Digital Synesthesia will make use of this ability to understand how the brain can learn to adapt to new sensory inputs.

## Situational Awareness

Situational Awareness is the ability to extract information from our environment and integrate it with previous knowledge in order to form a coherent mental picture[15]. The US military has done extensive research on Situational Awareness. They have explored the limits of the brain when forced to work in an environment with many attention cues, as well as different strategies for reducing the cognitive load while conveying information to the brain through channels other than sight or sound. In addition to many studies in how to measure Situational Awareness in various users and situations, there are some papers on actual devices being tested that use Vibrotactile Displays[16] and Tactile Navigation Cueing[17]. The findings in these studies will inform Digital Synesthesia on the cognitive limits of the brain when presented with multiple sensory inputs at once.

## Neuroplasticity

The field of Neuroplasticity has explored the way in which the human brain is able to evolve and change given different sensory inputs. Studies have shown that a child’s brain exhibits a greater range of neuroplasticity than the adult brain but that the adult brain is still capable of change and adaptation[18][19]. This research brings a very interesting question to this project. There might be an interesting parallel process in the way the brain adapts to natural sensory inputs and how the brain will map to the new digital sensory inputs. Even though most studies show that the time scale for these changes in the brain to take effect is longer than what this thesis will allow, some new studies are looking into more immediate effects of learning new skills.[20][21][22]

# Digital Synesthesia

## Why?

The evolution of our mobile technologies has come hand in hand with the feeling that we are slowly isolating ourselves in a virtual social bubble where we can only acknowledge what the screen is showing us and only relate to our social networks. Many thinkers have looked at this issue from both positive and negative points of view (Alone Together, Smarter than you think) and most arriving to the conclusion that we are surrendering some of our social costumes in favor of newer virtual ways of relating to one another and to the world.

It is my view that our technology should be better at looking for a way to help us be closer to our physical surroundings and smarter at finding a way of giving us all of the benefits it offers without compromising our interactions with our world and peers. Digital Synesthesia is a way of attempting to do just that. I understand that what we have done with mobile devices is offer just-in-time information streams that enhance our understanding of every moment, place and time. But all this information is being bottlenecked through one sensory channel and in doing so our brain is overwhelmed needing to place most of its attention to this one output and ignoring many others.

## Design Approach

Digital Synesthesia is divided in three major parts. Sensing, translation and feedback, the understanding and implementation of these three areas is the key to create a stable base for future designers to be able to build upon this project.

Sensing is the technology that will capture information from the world. This area brings interesting cross sections between fields. Knowledge of what sensors may be available to capture raw environmental data is needed. Also knowledge of how other organisms may use information that is outside of our human sensory capabilities. Most importantly there is the need to understand that if one sensor may be detecting very specific phenomena, the interpretations and usefulness of that information to us humans might be completely unrelated to how other organisms might use it.

Translation is a more narrow area where the designer can implement knowledge in coding and electronics to interface the sensor to a mobile device in order to capture the data. The mobile device will then translate this information to the appropriate feedback.

Feedback is the final step. At this stage, the designer will draw upon their knowledge of user interfaces and ergonomics to create a comfortable sensory experience that will make sense with the user’s need and surrounding context.

## Implementations

Three implementations have been developed in order to test the user’s ability to relate to artificial sensory systems. Each of the implementations was designed to test the user’s ability to relate to an artificial sense while reducing the familiarity with the experience. The first user study was designed so that the users would be able to try a new artificial sense that would provide a redundancy with an existing natural sense. This way, the users were able to quickly learn to understand the patterns of their new sense. The second user study was designed to take away the redundancy but still give the user some contextual information on the experience. The third user study would remove all redundancies and contextual information and simply ask the users to explore their world and try to understand what the artificial sense was responding to.

## First Study: Proximity Sensing

For this study, I gave the user a proximity sensor to wear on the palm of their hand and a vibration on the thumb of the same hand. The study was comprised of three stages. First, with a blindfold on, the user was asked to wave their open palm over a table where I had placed a certain amount of objects and try to sense how many objects there were. After every guess, the user was allowed to take the blind fold off and see the real answer. This was important because the users would then try to remember the feeling of the new experience and in essence calibrate themselves to be able to identify and ignore the noise in the signal.

The second stage used the same methodology but the user was asked to identify the shape of a single figure that was place on the table. The figure would be a square, circle or triangle. This time, the users had to rely on a 2D movement of their hand and also they would have to compare their expectation of how a shape would feel to what they were feeling.

## Second Stage

At this stage, the project will look into the creation of new sensory experiences. Using some of the prototypes that I have already developed and some prototypes that are in the works, this project will study the users’ acceptance of new information that will be consciously mapped to a particular sensory experience. This means that the users will have full understanding of the task to be accomplished, the new sense to be detected, and how the information will be translated into a sense they can actually feel. This will allow me to understand how quickly users can get used to their new sensory experiences and record their impressions on the experience.

Another aspect in the second stage will deal with the users’ prior experience with a given task. I want to see if there is a difference in how valuable a user finds the new sensory experience when it is part of a learning process and when the user knows the task and the new sensory experience might be redundant.

## Third Stage

Here the project will set up a new sensory experience in which the users have no prior understanding of the translation taking place. This situation mimics the pattern in which a newborn might search for patterns in order to understand its new senses[24]. This will be a useful experiment to see how quickly the users can find a correlation between something that could not previously be felt and the sensory feedback. This stage also seeks to investigate the impact that a subjects’ age has in the way the brain will interpret new digital senses. The project will shed light on how a digital sense is learned and interpreted at different stages of human development.

## Fourth Stage

This stage will look at the future of Digital Synesthesia. To understand this project as a whole, it will be important to take what has been learned in the previous stages and interpret those findings towards a Digital Synesthetic theory of user interface.

# Sensory Translation and Habituation

# Research Questions

In each stage I will be looking to answer specific questions that will inform the next stage or the overall project. In order to answer the questions, specific test scenarios will be designed. The questions will look at, amongst other things, A) the relation between the type of data and the mode of transmitting this data to the body; B) how the user will understand an analogous sense, a new sense or the substitution of a sense; and C) how quickly the user will understand the sensory feedback loop.

## Discreet and Continuous Data

1. Will a discreet signal that just turns on and off to get the user’s attention be more effective than a continuous signal that requires the user’s interpretation of changing data?

2. Is there an optimal pairing between the input channel and the type of data to be analyzed (i.e. will temperature be better at data that relate to other’s emotional states and vibration at data from the surrounding environment)?

## Sensory Substitution

3. In a situation where vision is used to make a quick decision, will Digital Synesthesia prove to be a valid alternative to accomplishing the same task or part of that task?

## Sensory Augmentation

4. In a situation where the user already bases a decision on information from a sense other than vision or audio, is there an advantage to being able to interpret that same data through a different sense and in greater detail?

## New Senses

5. How does a user perform in a specific task when using new information that could not previously be sensed, compared to completing the same task without sensory enhancement?

## The User and the New Stimuli

6. How accurate is the interpretation of data when experienced through new digital senses?

7. Will there be feelings of “phantom sense” where the user will feel the effects of a stimulation that is not present anymore?

8. How valuable is Digital Synesthesia when used to complete an unfamiliar task? When used by someone who is experienced in the given task?

## Escaping the visual user interface

Because visual interfaces are the most common, we tend to think of the interfacing with new senses in purely visual terms, where input signal is translated to numeric data and transmitted to the eyes.

9. Can this research start to uncover the particular ways in which information should be understood and interpreted when transmitted to the skin (or other senses)? Perhaps the idea of “value” is mostly a visual construct.

## Design Thinking

10. Can a pattern be observed such that we can use the findings of this thesis to create a guideline for future Digital Synesthesia interface designers? Could this research pave the way for a new “Mixed-Sensory Interface” field in the user interface world?

## Human Development

11. All babies learn to understand their sensory experiences as they explore the world. Can a similar process be identified when learning new digital sensory experiences?

12. Are children able to assimilate a new sensory experience faster than adults?

# System Description

# Evaluation Research Plan

Proximity to Vibration

Evaluation

Temperature to Vibration

Evaluation

“Glass” to temperature

Evaluation

Contributions

Conclusions

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# Bio

## Santiago Eloy Alfaro

Santiago has received a B. in Industrial Design from the “Universidad Jorge Tadeo Lozano” in Bogotá, Colombia in 2003, a Master in Industrial Design from the “Rhode Island School of Design” in 2007 and a S.M. in Media Technology from MIT in 2010. During his time before MIT Santiago worked in areas as varied as Media Broadcasting, Architecture and Education. During his master at the Media Lab, he started to look into the interfaces between users and mobile devices with an emphasis on video storytelling. He has also taught courses on fabrication and design.