Understanding through Code Visualisation

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Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own original work.

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Acknowledgements

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...

Abstract

This thesis describes an empirical study of source code visualisation as a means to communicate the programming process in "live coding" computer music performances. Following an exploratory field study conducted during a live coding performance at an arts festival, two different interaction-driven visualisation techniques were incorporated into a live coding system. We then performed a more controlled lab study to evaluate the visualisations' contributions to the audience experience, with emphasis on the (self-reported) experiential dimensions of *understanding* and *enjoyment*. Both software visualisation techniques enhanced audience enjoyment, while the effect on audience understanding was more complex. We conclude by suggesting how these visualisation techniques may be used to enhance the audience experience of live coding.

Contents

Introduction

-introduce the topic...
-discuss visualisations
-discuss live coding

This thesis proposes that "code visualisation improves observer understanding and enjoyment". More specifically, this thesis investigates the question "can the application of visualisation techniques to live coding enhance audience experience by increasing understanding and enjoyment?".

Definitions...
-define live coding, understanding and enjoyment
-define visualisation techniques
-define the programmer and observer relationship
-define audience experience

1.1 History

For most of its history source code has been displayed as simple text due to the expressiveness of this format and despite its inefficiencies. It is only recently, due to ever increasing programming language complexity and increasing computational power, that code annotations and syntax highlighting have become more commonplace. Nevertheless, these visual enhancements rarely provide information beyond the basic grammar of the language they are intended to augment. The limitations of this approach are becoming ever more apparent as programming languages and interactive programming environments move towards the need for real-time comprehension and a need to understand the source code within the context of a running program.

The problem of understanding code within a running environment is complex. The fact that programming concepts are fundamentally different to human understandable concepts [Biggerstaff 1994] presents challenges in communicating the complex nature and intention of the program. The fundamental complexity lies within the translation from code to the brain; the programming concepts to the human understandable concepts.

The human brain is highly proficient in pattern recognition and there is evidence to suggest that visualisations can take advantage of this proficiency to enhance understanding. It would be in-

formative to investigate this translation using visual representations to translate and assist in the understanding of program concepts.

1.2 Structure

The structure of this thesis is as follows:
-initial field study
-design and visualisation approach
-first user study
-refinements
-second user study
-conclusion

Literature Review

Software visualisation is building momentum within the space of live coding. This section seeks to identify the reason for this momentum and identify the potential for visualisations.

2.1 Source Code

One of the most important questions within the space of computer science and effective software engineering practice is the need to understand source code.
-why is this an important question? evidence.
-what other questions are there? evidence.

Computer science benefits from source code visualsations through...
-why do they need source code visualisations? evidence.

Software engineering practice benefits from source code visualisation through...
-why do they need source code visualisations? evidence.
-why will source code visualisations make software engineering practice more effective? evidence.

2.2 Visualisation

The reason for visualising code must first be identified in order to successfully evaluate visualisation techniques.
-why must we identify the reason?
-how does the reason for visualising code help to evaluate visualisation techniques?
-why do we need to evaluate visualisation techniques?

Traditional software visualisation falls into a variety of categories. Each visualisation category corresponds to a reason for visualising the code.
-what are the categories?
-what reason for visualising the code do the categories correspond to?

The (abstract/graphical/animated) approach provides the basis for effective visualisations. Effective visulisations...
-what do effective visualisations do?

-what do effective visualisations achieve?

Existing code visualisations...
-gource [Caudwell 2010] -code flower -other existing visualisation examples.

2.3 Live Coding

Live coding can be broadly defined as writing a program while it runs [Ward et al. 2004]. Specifically, live coding is more often identified as the artistic process of musical and visual expression through programming [Collins and McLean 2003].

Live coding is in a unique position to combine both source code and traditional visualisation techniques [McLean et al. 2010]. This is due to the approach of live coding to the process of developing software involving effective sensory communication, a history of exposing audiences to the coding process, fast software iteration and refinement, and an ability to retain an audience's attention. These approaches involved are outlined below.
-how can it combine source code and traditional visualisation techniques?

Live coding is built around communicating visually and audibly the software process. It provides a space in which effective means of developing visualisations is provided.
-what kind of space is live coding?
-what are the effective means of developing visualisations?

Live coding has a history exposing audiences to code.
-what is the history of live coding?
-how does live coding expose the audience to code?

Visualisations can be quickly refined within live coding.
-how can visualisations be quickly refined?

Live coding can retain audience attention.
-how does live coding maintain attention?
-can retain attention through the output (music), the process (programming) or the field (technology).

Live coding is a good application space for visualisations.
-why is it a good application space?

Live coding is a good case study for visualisations.
-why is it a good case study?
-why is it good for visualisations?

Why live code?
-what does liveness mean? [Auslander 2008]
-what does it contribute?

-relation to improvisation?
-computational creativity. [Mclean and Wiggins]

2.4 Understanding and Enjoyment

There is currently a search for visualisations that increase understanding and enjoyment [McLean et al. 2010]. Here understanding refers to the ability of an observer or audience to
-why does he identify understanding?
-what is understanding?
-why does he identify enjoyment?
-what is enjoyment?
-how can these two factors contribute to effective visualisations?
-the concept assignment problem. [Biggerstaff 1994] (this paper may also be useful for explaining what understanding is in the context of software)

Understanding involves a number of factors.
-what factors?
-how do these factors relate to visualisations?

Similarly, enjoyment involves a number of factors.
-what factors?
-how do these factors relate to understanding?
-how do these factors relate to visualistions?

Duality of understanding and enjoyment...
-enjoyment is not completely separable from understanding. (not dual?)
-why can we not separate the two?
-what is the duality?
-how does this relate to visualisations?

2.5 Didacticism and Aestheticism

The duality of the concepts of understanding versus enjoyment are commonly associated with the duality of the concepts of didacticism vs aestheticism.
-what is the duality of didacticism vs aestheticism?

Didacticism...
-what is didacticism?
-how does it relate to visualisations?
-how does it relate to education?

Aestheticism...
-what is aestheticism?

-how does it relate to visualisations?
-how does it relate to art?
-how does it relate to music?
-how does it relate to live performance?
-how does it relate to live coding? [Bell]
Live coding has much potential to improve the aesthetics of
Didacticism vs aestheticism...
-can we combine the two?
-can we completely separate the two?

Exploratory Field Study

After a live coding performance at the "You Are Here" arts festival in Canberra, audience members were asked to fill out a survey regarding their perception of and response to the projection of the computer code during the performance. Each audience member was asked to indicate which of a number of curves/trajectories best represented their *enjoyment* and *understanding* of the performer's actions in typing the code through the performance. These trajectories allowed for "high", "medium", and "low" levels of enjoyment/understanding for the (self-determined) "beginning", "middle" and "end" of the performance. Other survey questions addressed their sense of "liveness" of the performance (c.f. [Auslander 2008]) and whether the projected code was confusing.

3.1 Rationale

The purpose of this interview was to gain insight into the audiences current understanding and enjoyment of the live coding process. Additionally, the relationship between enjoyment and understanding was to be examined. It was hoped that the examination of these factors would further inform the development of visualisations within live coding.

3.2 Method

Survey questions were distributed following a live coding performance. Both an online and paper copy were distributed.
Write a step by step description of what you actually did, identifying the different variables and how you controlled them. Describe what things you changed (variables you manipulated).

3.3 Participants

3.4 Results

Of the thirteen survey responses received, six audience members showed a high level of enjoyment throughout the whole performance, while the remaining seven responses showed alternating levels of enjoyment. No audience members indicated a low level of enjoyment throughout the performance.

Only two of the thirteen respondents indicated that they understood the relationship between the code projections and the music throughout the performance. Three of the six respondents who reported a high level of enjoyment throughout the performance also indicated an increase in understanding (from low to high) as the performance progressed, although a Chi-square analysis revealed no significant relationship between enjoyment and understanding due to the small sample size. Nine of the thirteen respondents stated that the code projection provided a sense of liveness to the performance and the remainder stated that viewing the code had no effect on their sense of liveness. Four respondents felt that the code projections were confusing, five felt that they were not confusing, and four did not answer the question.

Taken as a whole, the results of this small field study were salutatory towards the benefit of "seeing as well as hearing" code during a live coding performance, especially as far as the general public is concerned. The majority of the audience felt that they made the performance seem more "live". However, a minority stated that they found the projections confusing and only a very small number of respondents claimed to have actually understood what the programmer was doing. We were quite intrigued by the small cohort of respondents whose understanding increased through the performance and whose enjoyment remained high, and we wished to test whether augmenting code projections with additional visualisations might increase the understanding and enjoyment of the audience in live coding.

A total of thirteen survey responses were received. Of these, 77% regularly listen to music and 54% perform regularly. 38% of the respondents have high exposure to programming through work, study or their hobbies, as opposed to 31% who have no experience with it. Of the respondents, 69% had never been to a live coding performance before.

Enjoyment was measured according to the relative change in enjoyment through the performance from the beginning to the end. 46% of survey respondents had high enjoyment throughout the performance. The results for enjoyment are summarised in Table 1. The results suggest an overall high level of enjoyment of the performance. No respondents chose low enjoyment throughout the performance.

Dimension	Flat	High	Low	High to Low	Low to High	Unsure
Count	2	6	0	2	1	2

Table 1 : Enjoyment through the performance

Similarly, understanding was measured according to the relative change in understanding through the performance from the beginning to the end. 31% of survey respondents had no change to understanding through the performance The results for understanding are summarised in Table 2. Overall, understanding is spread out more than enjoyment with only 15% suggesting that they could understand the relationship between the visuals and the music throughout the performance. There is no statistically significant relationship ($p > .05$) between music listening habits and understanding nor is there a statistically significant relationship ($p > .05$) between coding experience and understanding.

Dimension	Flat	High	Low	High to Low	Low to High	Unsure
Count	4	2	0	2	3	2

Table 2 : Understanding through the performance

The relationship between enjoyment and understanding can be seen in Figure 1. Notably, three respondents who had high enjoyment throughout the performance were the only respondents who had a pattern of low to high understanding. However, the relationship between enjoyment and understanding is not statistically significant ($p > .05$).
69% of respondents stated that the visuals provided a sense of liveness to the performance. The remained 31% stated that they had no effect on their sense of liveness. There were no responses stating that the visuals negatively impacted the sense of liveness.
In terms of confusion, 38% suggested that no aspects of the visuals were confusing, though 31% did not respond to the question.
Supplementary observations of the performance are available in Appendix B.
1.Using all your senses, collect measurable, quantitative raw data and describe what you observed in written form. 2. Reorganise raw data into tables and graphs if you can. 3. Don't forget to describe what these charts or graphs tell us! 4. Pictures, drawings, or even movies of what you observed would help people understand what you observed.

3.5 Discussion

1.Based on your observations, what do you think you have learned? In other words, make inferences based on your observations. 2.Compare actual results to your hypothesis and describe why there may have been differences. 3.Identify possible sources of errors or problems in the design of the experiment and try to suggest changes that might be made next time this experiment is done. 4.What have experts learned about this topic? (Refer to books or magazines.)

Visualisation Design

4.1 Rationale

4.2 Design

4.3 Analysis

Both dynamic program analysis and static source code analysis have been used to implement the visualisations. (see combined static and dynamic approach taken in [Eisenbarth et al. 2003])

4.4 Mappings

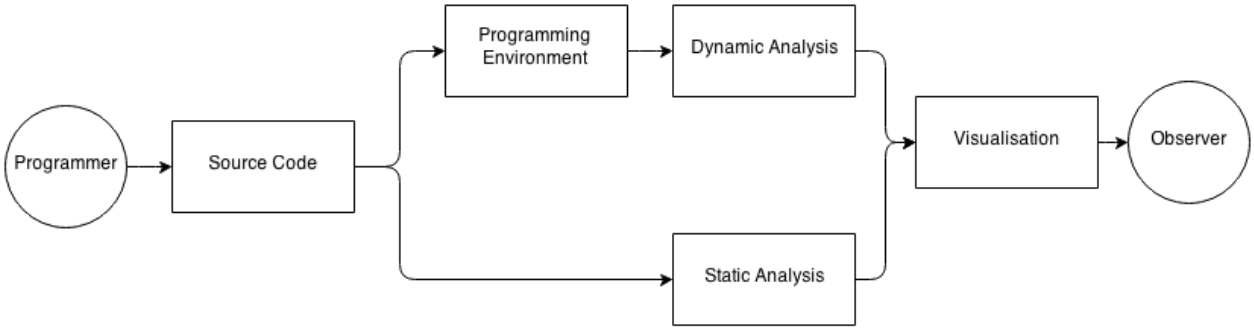


Figure 4.1: Knowledge flow from programmer to observer as directed by the visualisation technique employed.

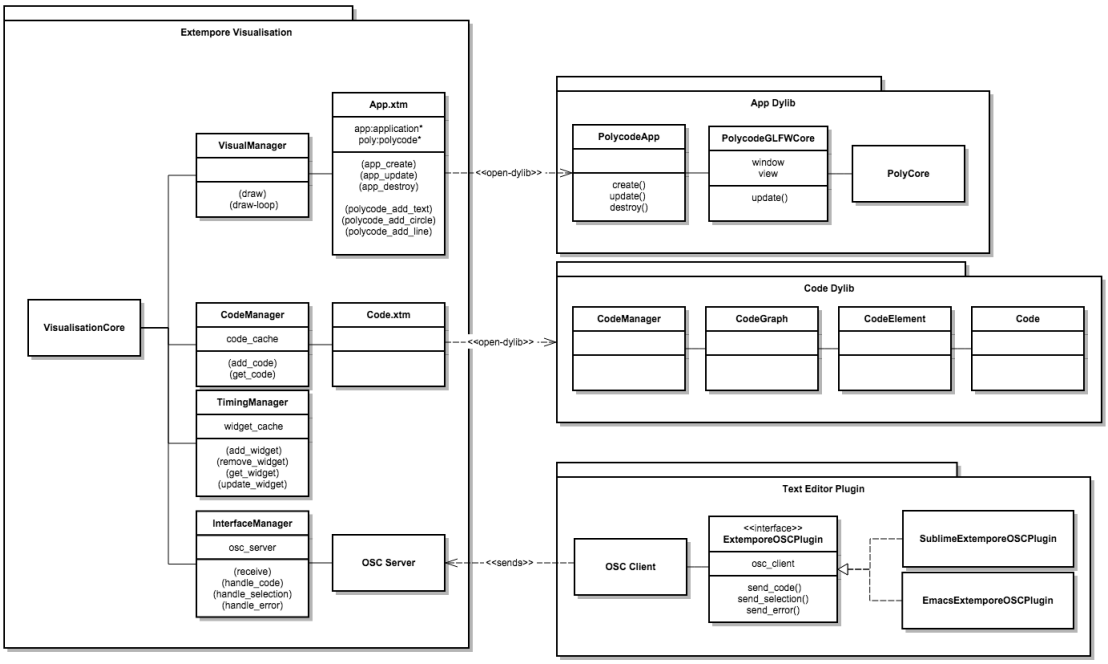


Figure 4.2: Class diagram of the visualisation technique employed.

Chapter 5

User Study

A second lab study was conducted to test the impact of additional visual feedback (beyond the raw source code) on audience understanding and enjoyment in live coding. Music visualisation is an extremely rich and open-ended task, so to guide the development of the visualisations for our lab study, we used the concepts of understanding and enjoyment from the initial survey to develop two new code visualisations: a *didactic* one and an *aesthetic* one.

The didactic visualisation (shown in Figure 5.1) attempted to communicate *information* about the actions of the programmer, prominently displaying the *names* of the active (source code) functions and the "time until next execution" for each function (which is particularly relevant in a time-sensitive programming context such as music making). Bright colours and solid shapes were used to ensure constant visibility and to communicate the intention of the underlying code. The didactic visualisations proceeded through four stages, with phase changes made depending on the number of active functions (instruments).

The aesthetic visualisation technique, on the other hand, was designed to react to the programmer's activity in a more abstract way, to maximise aesthetic appeal [Cawthon and Moere 2007] and to engage the audience's interest. Although still based on the source code and the livecoder's edits, the generation of shapes was driven by instrument volume and synchronised with the musical beat. The emphasis for the aesthetic visualisation was on the artistic appeal of the visuals (see Figure 5.2), including more variety in visual structure and colour. As in the didactic condition, the aesthetic visualisations proceeded through four stages, based on the number of active functions (instruments), but these visuals had no textual labels and they moved and interacted with each other over the entire projected scene.

Our hypothesis was the didactic visualisation approach would result in enhanced audience understanding, and a reduction in audience confusion through the performance. In contrast, we predicted that the aesthetic visualisations would positively influence audience enjoyment, both overall and over the course of the performance.

5.1 Rationale

5.2 Method

To assess the impact of these two visualisation techniques on audience understanding and enjoyment, we conducted a lab study. Two independent audiences ($N = 19 + 22 = 41$) recruited through an on-campus advertisement each watched a live coder perform two ten-minute "sets":

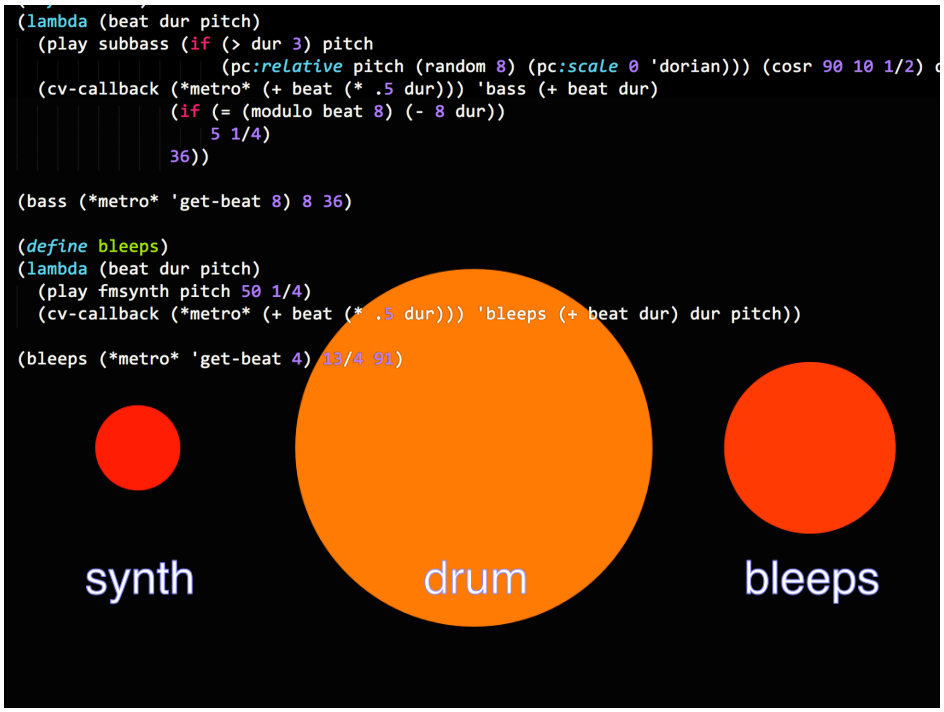


Figure 5.1: An example didactic visualisation.

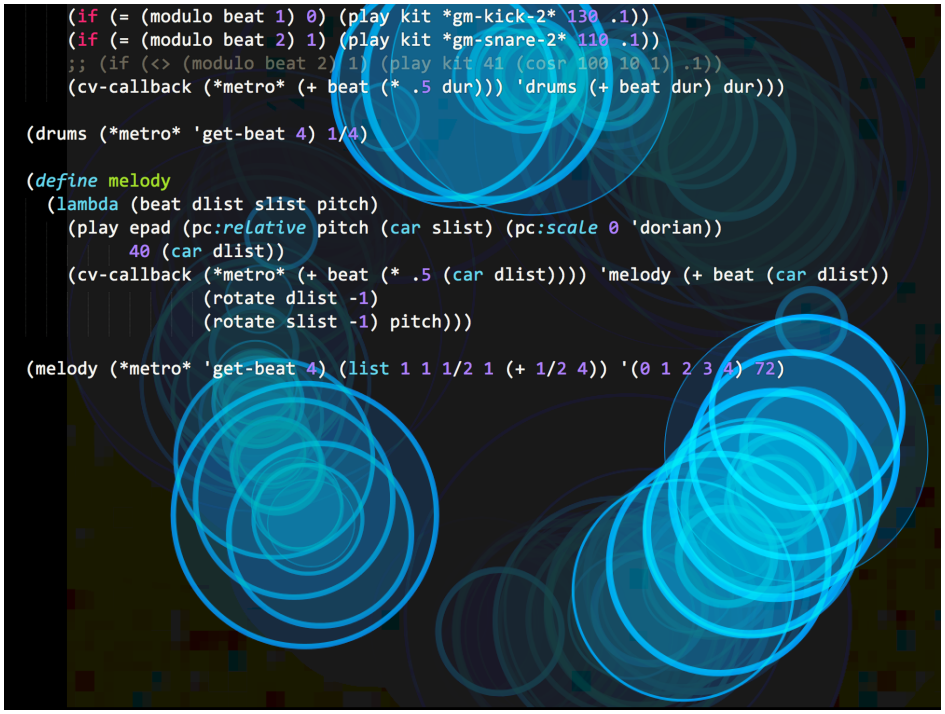


Figure 5.2: An example aesthetic visualisation.

one accompanied by the didactic visuals, and one with the aesthetic. The order of presentation of the two visual conditions was swapped between the groups. The improvisational nature of a live coding performance makes "controlled" experiments difficult, but the live coding artist attempted (as much as possible) to do the same two performances for each group.
Over the course of these performances, each audience member completed a survey consisting of four sections: demographic information, their opinion of the first piece, their opinion of the second piece and questions about the performance overall. Similar to the first field trial, the questionnaire primarily focussed on self-reported levels of "enjoyment" and "understanding" related to the visualisations specifically and also to the performance more generally. There was also a free-form question for suggested improvements to the visualisations.
After the lab study performance, a video-cued-recall [Suchman and Trigg 1992] interview was conducted with the live coder using a video of the performance.

5.3 Participants

A total of 41 participants took part in the study. Over the two performances, 19 participants observed the first performance and 22 participants observed the second performance. The demographic makeup of the audiences was similar.

66% of the participants stated that they were male (see Figure E.1b) and most participants were aged between 18 and 32 (76%, see Figure E.1a). As the study was conducted within the Computer Science Department, a large proportion of the participants were experienced with programming with 90% having current or previous experience with it (see Figure E.2a). Nevertheless, only 15% of participants had previous experience with any of the Lisp style of languages (see Figure E.2b), the style used within the performance.

Of the participants, 68% stated that they listened to a large amount of music (see Figure E.3a) though only about 15% of participants stated that they played an instrument or sung regularly (see Figure E.3b). Only 22% of participants had seen a live coding performance before.

5.4 Results

Of the 41 audience participants 66% were male, 76% were aged between 18 and 32 and 78% of the participants had never seen a live coding performance before.
The audience-reported enjoyment and understanding responses from the questionnaire were evaluated for the two visualisation conditions as described below. A significance level of 0.05 was used for the Chi-squared analysis.

5.4.1 Enjoyment

Overall, the majority of the participants reported that both visualisation conditions had a positive effect on their **enjoyment** of the performance: 76% stated that the aesthetic visualisations improved their enjoyment and 56% stated that the didactic visualisations improved their enjoyment. No significant difference between the visualisation types regarding enjoyment was found ($\chi^2 = 3.7733, df = 2, p = 0.1516$).

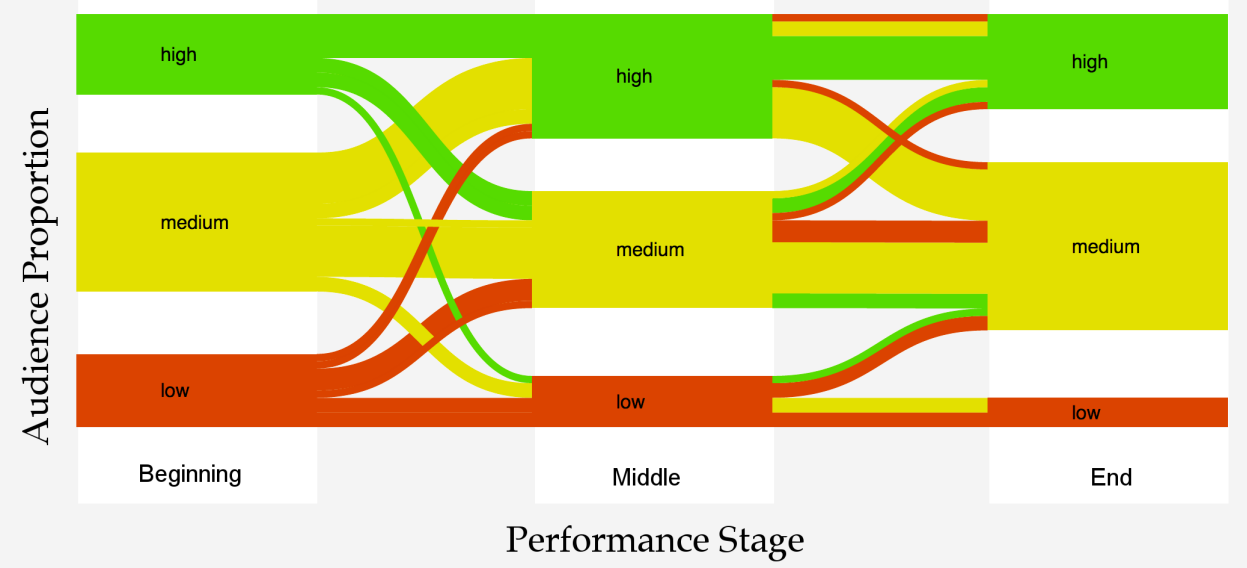


Figure 5.3: Audience reported enjoyment during the beginning, middle and end of the performance for the **didactic** condition.

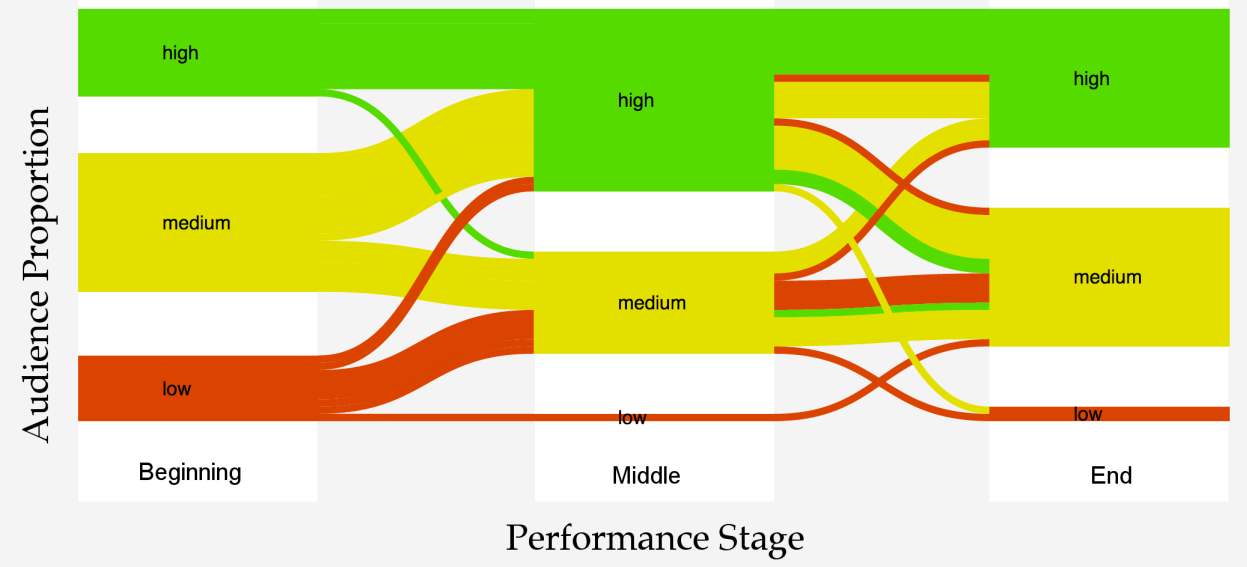


Figure 5.4: Audience-reported enjoyment level during the beginning, middle and end of the performance for the **aesthetic** condition. Line width at each stage indicates proportion of the audience reporting high, medium or low enjoyment, and line colour is determined by the enjoyment level at the *beginning* of the performance.

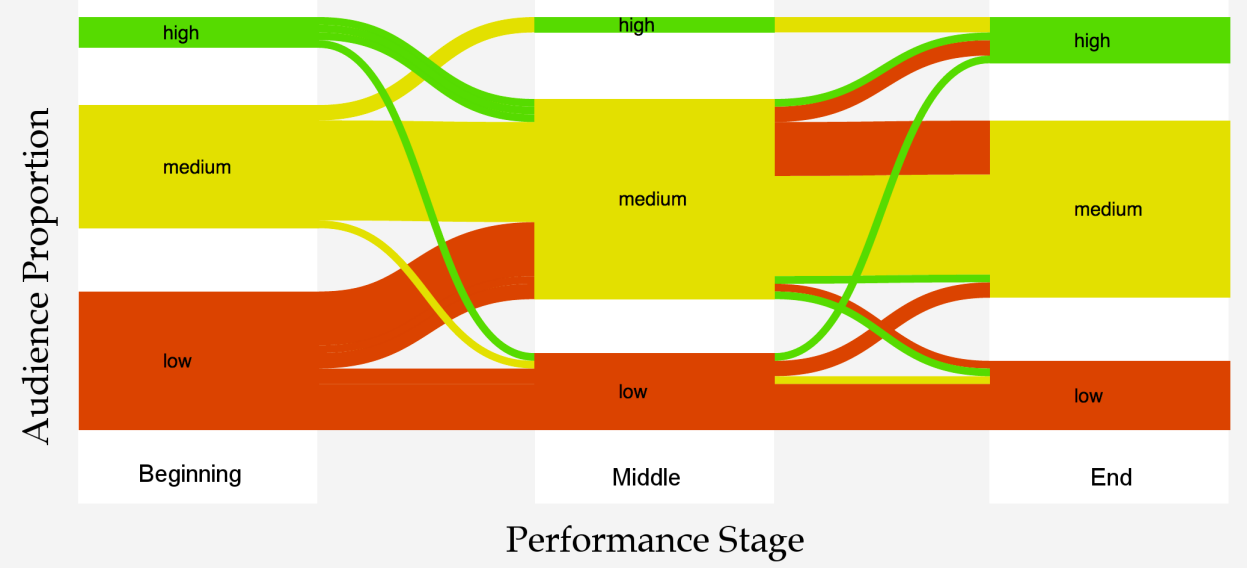


Figure 5.5: Audience reported understanding during the beginning, middle and end of the performance for the **didactic** condition.

Participants were asked to rate their enjoyment during the (self-determined) "beginning", "middle" and "end" of the performances (see Figure 5.4 and Figure 5.3). During the didactic performance, 15% of the audience stated that their enjoyment *increased* from the beginning of the performance and was steady thereafter. By contrast, 24% of the audience reported this pattern of enjoyment during the aesthetic performance. Approximately 30% of the audience of all (aesthetic and didactic) performances stated that their enjoyment remained steady throughout.

5.4.2 Understanding

In response to a specific survey question, 37% of participants stated that overall, the didactic visualisations "helped them to **understand** the code", compared to 12% of participants for the aesthetic visualisations. This was a significant difference between the visualisation conditions ($\chi^2 = 7.1986, df = 2, p = 0.02734$).

Again, participants were asked to rate their understanding during the (self-reported) "beginning", "middle" and "end" of the performance (see Figure 5.6 and Figure 5.5). During the didactic and aesthetic performances, 49% and 44% respectively of the participants stated that their understanding *remained the same* throughout the performances. During the didactic performance, 10% of the audience reported a level of understanding that *trended downwards* (eg. high to low) compared to 20% of the audience during the aesthetic performance. However, this reported advantage of the didactic visualisations was offset by the reported audience understanding at the beginning of the performance where 44% indicated a low understanding with the didactic visualisations compared to only 30% with the aesthetic visualisations.

Overall, the questionnaire results for audience understanding are complex, and reported levels of understanding fluctuated during the performances. Dramatically, Figure 5.5 shows that a very small proportion of the audience reported high understanding during the middle of the performances. One interpretation of this result might be that it took audience members some time to work out what the didactic visualisations were actually showing, and that this conflicted with the

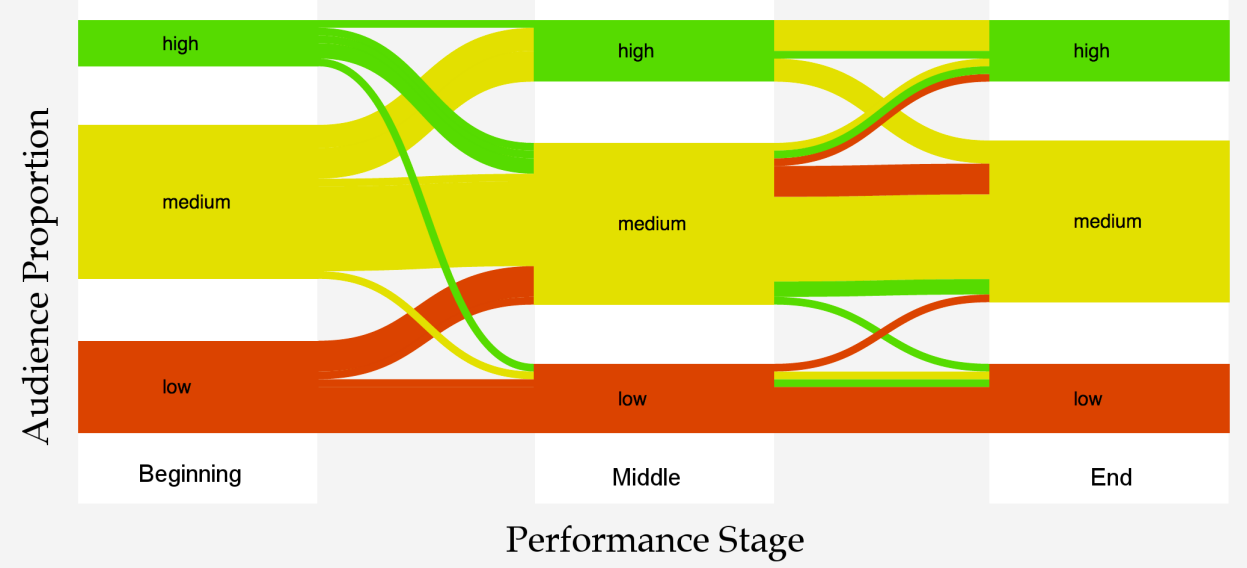


Figure 5.6: Audience reported understanding during the beginning, middle and end of the performance for the **aesthetic** condition.

first impressions of what some audience members (hence the decrease in levels of understanding from beginning to middle). However, once they finally understood the graphics some audience members were then able to better understand the live-coding performance.

5.5 Discussion

The overall enjoyment of the visualisations was high, for both the aesthetic and didactic visualisations. Reported enjoyment of the aesthetic visualisations was higher than for the didactic visualisations but the trends across Figures 5.4 and 5.3 are complex.

As discussed above, the small number of high responses for understanding during the middle of the didactic performances, and the decreasing trend from high to middle level understanding from beginning to middle of the performances perhaps indicates a higher cognitive load for understanding the didactic visualisations themselves. In fact, features of the didactic visualisation were reported to confuse some members of the audience, despite their stated aim of *assisting* audience understanding. One audience member even stated that they "found them distracting" and that they "preferred just to read the code".

The video-cued-recall interview indicated that the experience of the visualisations of the live coder and the audience was fundamentally different. While many members of the audience reported that they drifted between focussing on the music, focussing on the visualisations and focussing on the code, the live coder reported that their focus was purely on the code and the music, rarely drifting. In one particular section of the interview, the live coder stated: "I definitely wasn't paying attention to them [the visualisations] on the day. In fact I tune them out as best I can because I am just trying to focus on the code". By contrast, one audience member stated that "you could see the code being written and the visualisations helped to show when a piece of code started working". Another audience member stated that "the visualisations were interesting but distracting". When asked if the visualisations were distracting the live coder stated: "Ah, no. In general I'm just so

focussed on the code".

Chapter 6

Visualisation Refinement

6.1 Rationale

6.2 Design

6.3 Analysis

6.4 Mappings

Chapter 7

Follow-Up User Study

7.1 Rationale

7.2 Method

7.3 Participants

7.4 Results

7.5 Discussion

Chapter 8

Conclusion

Future work: type of language may affect understanding. Imperitive vs functional etc.

Appendix A

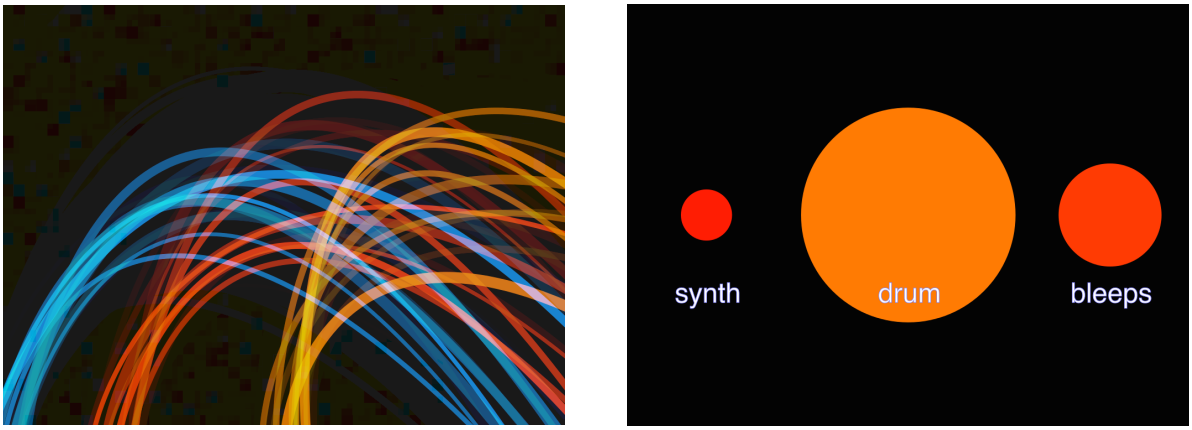
Field Study Survey Results

Field Study Follow-Up Interviews

1) What did you "understand" about what was going on with the code being projected? In particular, what did you understand about the relationship between the code and the music?
The code sets up a set of nested loops which are then modified by the composer in real time. This immediately leads to the danger of repetitive loops. It may be useful to have rhythms of 4 or 8 bar repetition as in Africa. Actually, this musical form lends itself to that type of rhythm and music. As soon as an organ comes in I am reminded of Mike Oldfield and am anxious that someone will say slightly distorted guitar. IN jazz one improvises on standards so there is a very strong form (AABA etc) which, in general, is respected allowing the audience to deduce where they are in the piece. I had the feeling that the present way the code is used limited the music
2) Would would you like to understand more about the code in order to enjoy the performance more?
Yes, I think that if the audience were told what was happening or the ideas behind the constructs then I would be happier. Compared to jazz it is not note by note improvisation so an explanation of the limits and advantages would be useful. Respondent 2
1) What did you "understand" about what was going on with the code being projected? In particular, what did you understand about the relationship between the code and the music?
In the beginning, I could tell from the silence and the live coding that it was being build, and sound by sound line by line was being added to as the piece grew. When Ben went back in the code to change beats or melodies, I could tell something was being changed but wasn't tracking what or how.
2) Would would you like to understand more about the code in order to enjoy the performance more?
I feel like I already understood a rudimentary amount [...] which was enough to enjoy it. I feel like if I had more knowledge about code I would focus on that to the detriment of the music; and if I knew more about music then I may have focused on that to the detriment of my attention on the code. Considering my education, if I had not had the exposure to code and music through [...], then some basic rudimentary knowledge of code would have been good. Respondent 3
1) What did you "understand" about what was going on with the code being projected? In particular, what did you understand about the relationship between the code and the music?
I understood that the music was being made from scratch and this was evident in the long silence before any sound is heard. I understand what sounds are being made based on the code names and that some of the numbers represent timing, volume and pitch. I still don't quite understand when the code is "ready" and starts working to make music. It has something to do with the highlighting the text, but that also confuses me. (I understand that most of the music is stored in

the program as "sound bites" of real instruments, but sounds can also be made from scratch as mathematical wave functions - but I don't think I would know this if Ben hadn't have told me). Sometimes the coder scrolls up and down the screen to much and I get lost, I don't have a big picture of what all the code looks like.
2) Would you like to understand more about the code in order to enjoy the performance more?
In some ways I would like to understand a little more about the code. It would be nice to have a director's commentary of what's going on behind the scenes, just so I can follow along with the changes that I can hear in the music as they are occurring. But I think I more enjoy just listening to the music, knowing broadly that a livecoder is manipulating code to make the sounds that I hear. I don't often like reading the code for the whole performance, maybe for a few minutes at a time, but then I like to switch off and just focus on what the musician is playing. I more often like to listen to the music and guess what the livecoder has done to make that changes (which is kind of backwards). I wouldn't mind having more understanding of the code on hand, but I probably wouldn't use the details of it during the whole performance every time.

User Study Visualisations



(a) Aesthetic Visualisation

(b) Didactic Visualisation

Figure C.1: Visualisation Examples

User Study Survey

Part A

Age?
18-22
23-27
28-32
33-37
38-42
43-52
53-62
63+

Gender? _____

How many live coding performances have you been to?
This is my first one
I have been to one or two
More than two. Please indicate the approximate number: _____

How much music do you regularly listen to?
Hardly any
A little
A large amount

Do you play an instrument or sing?
No - I would not consider myself a musician or singer
Occasionally
Yes - I play or sing regularly

How much experience do you have with programming?
No experience
Some experience
I currently program for my study/hobby/work

Do you have much experience with the Lisp family of programming languages? (e.g. Scheme, Lisp, Clojure, Racket)
Yes
No
I dont know what youre talking about

Part B and C (repeated for the two performances)

How would you rate your levels of enjoyment during the beginning, middle and end phases of this performance?
Circle one alternative for each phase - interpret beginning, middle and end as you wish:

Beginning: Low Medium High

Middle: Low Medium High

End: Low Medium High

Did the projected visualisations help with your enjoyment of the code?
Yes
No
No opinion

How would you rate your understanding of what the code was doing during each phase? Circle one alternative for each phase - interpret beginning, middle and end as you wish:

Beginning: Low Medium High

Middle: Low Medium High

End: Low Medium High

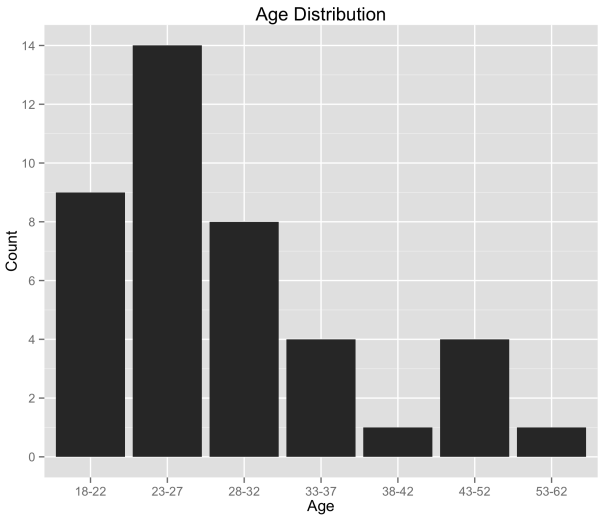
Did the projected visualisations help with your understanding of the code?
Yes
No
No opinion

This was a live performance! Did the projected code and visualisations help communicate the feeling that the performance was live? If so, how?

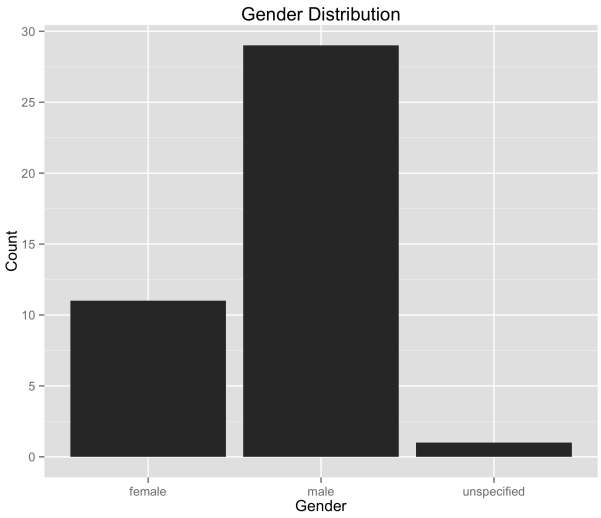
Part D

Do you have any suggestions for how the visualisations for either performance might be improved? (Continue answer on the back of this sheet if you wish)

User Study Survey Results

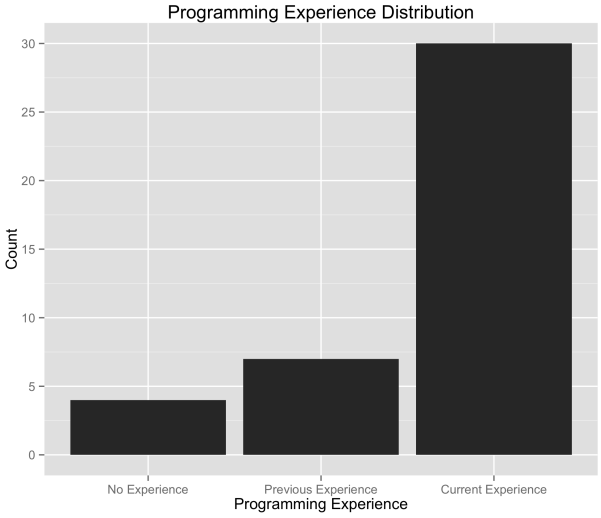


(a) Age Distribution

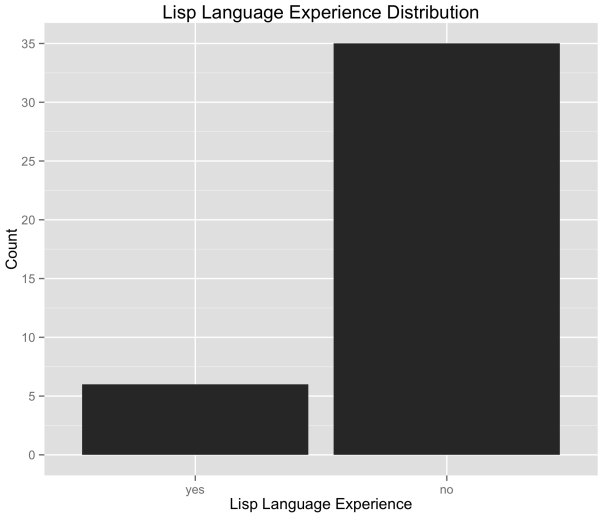


(b) Gender Distribution

Figure E.1: Basic Demographics

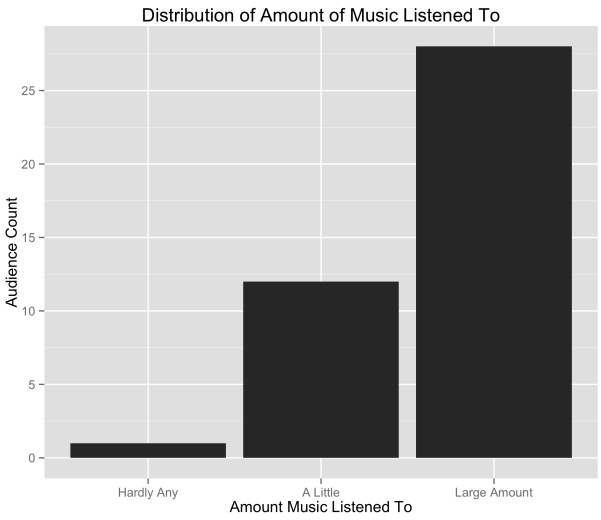


(a) Programming Experience Distribution

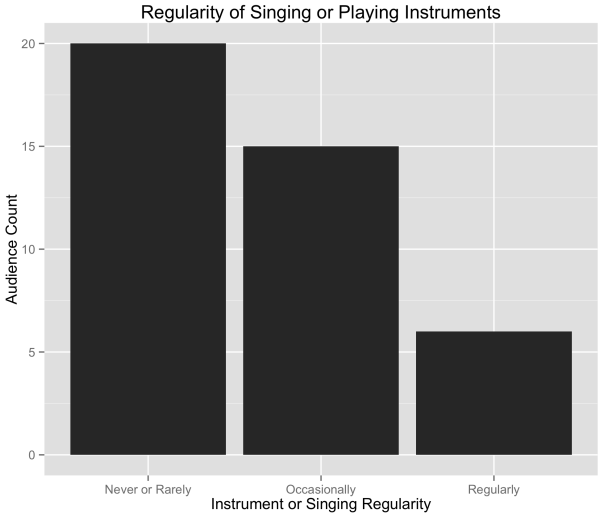


(b) Lisp Experience Distribution

Figure E.2: Programming Demographics



(a) Listen to Music Regularity Distribution



(b) Playing Instrument or Singing Regularity Distribution

Figure E.3: Musical Demographics

User Study Live Coder Interview Transcript

This appendix is a transciption of the interview conducted with the live coder (Ben) following the first user study. The first two performances were discussed.

Aesthetic Visualisation

Ben: So the first little synth thing in this I knew pretty much exactly what I wanted to do. I was going to do random pitches at 16th notes. I think I probably did this synth thing exactly the same in other performances.

Arrian: Is this a common technique you use?

B: Yeah, well. This was not even prepared specifically for this performance but I've done stuff like this in the past. This is a pretty common trick I use for getting up and running early.

I think the bass is playing at this point but I can't hear on these speakers.

A: How much planning went into this performance?

B: This performance was pretty safe. It was pretty simple and pretty preplanned. What I would say is that the form of all of the instruments are pretty standard for my live coding.

So for the bass to go through a list of pitches like that... I do that alot.

For the drums I play with some sort of modulation of the sample slot, of the kit... I do that alot.

I probably choose slightly different parameters each time through but, yeah, none of these things are really adventurous by the standards of my live coding.

A: Why is that?

B: Honestly, the main reason is that these things work well and I've tried other algorithms and they don't sound as good as these simpler algorithmic structures with judicious choice of param-

eters.

Though I feel that as an artist sure, as a programmer this is not so interesting because the algorithms are pretty safe.

There are a lot of people in computer music today that use fancy algorithms, they use cellular automata, they use generative algorithms but I think it works better if you use... I've had more artistic success using these simple algorithms and then just using my musical experience and intelligence to select good parameters...

A: Did you plan the performance around the visuals?

B: To be honest, I think in the second piece I tried to limit the callback rate because I knew that some of the visuals in the didactic setup worked better with a longer callback rate.

A: Do you think the visualisations held you back?

B: No, it certainly didn't hold me back. In some ways it is nice to have constraints.

I'm now going up an octave. It gives it a harder edge...

It is interesting that I'm very conscious of the hypermeter. I'm just grooving along and it just makes sense to evaluate in time.

A: Did you find this visualisation distracting?

B: Ah, no. In general I'm just so focussed on the code.

This little bit is adventurous. This drum bit I didn't know exactly what samples were in those slots. Before I was just guessing some numbers and picking numbers I thought might be good.

This bit is certainly more intense. This is more european house. I don't actually know if it is european house but I'm sure there is some name for this genre.

This end bit is a bit new. I hadn't planned to end it like that.

A: Did it occur by chance?

B: Not so much by chance. I got to the end and wasn't really sure how I would finish this. This is true making it up.

A: Were you happy with the performance?

B: Yeah.

I'm actually going diatonically out of the scale I was using for the whole piece.

Yeah, I hadn't planned to finish like that but... yeah, yeah, I'm reasonably happy with that.

B: I think in terms of the surprising stuff. There were no surprises when I started or added each new instrument. I knew pretty much exactly what I was going to do. I might not have had the exact parameters in mind. I would have put maybe a 60 instead of a 70. Even when I didn't have an exact number in mind I would have had an approximate number in mind... loud vs soft.

Once stuff is going then I think all bets are off and I at least don't really think through what I'm going to do after that. Generally I'll go back and start messing with stuff. In that case I went back and messed with the synth.

I did a bit of interesting stuff with the drums. I went from a more groovy and pretty standard drum beat to a heightened beat which definitely changed the mood of the piece.

I'm not unhappy with that. I'd probably do something different next time just because you do something different every time but that was one of the things that surprised me.

In general I was pretty happy with it. I think it is a good sound palette. The drums grooved pretty well which is an important thing. The bass line was pretty cool, though I couldn't hear it in that recording.

A: In terms of the visualisations, do you think they added anything to the piece?

B: I think they added something. I think they are just ambience. It is definitely cool to have that stuff going on that is a little visually interesting but I wasn't paying attention to them even then. I definitely wasn't paying attention to them on the day. In fact I tuned them out as best I can because I am just trying to focus on the code.

Like I was saying before there were times where it was hard to see the code underneath the visualisations.

A: Was this during the aesthetic or didactic performance?

B: I think it was more the didactic and I think it was the text in the didactic ones and not in the aesthetic.

I definitely like the visuals. They definitely add something and they don't take anything away even though I wasn't paying attention to them. I still see the text as the main thing but the visuals are gravy and that was nice gravy.

A: The audience was reasonably computer literature. Do you think they would have preferred to focus on the code, the music or the visuals?

B: That's a good question. I don't know. I'm really curious.

Focus is a funny thing. You rarely explicitly go "alright, I'm going to focus on blah and focus on blah". I think you drift. Probably at different points they were paying attention to each.

I think I'm a bad judge of what people pay attention to because I pay attention to completely different stuff when I watch it. What I pay attention is probably completely unhelpful in terms of an indicator for what even a computer literate audience member would be paying attention to.

Didactic Visualisation

Ben: Now this one starts at a slower tempo. Half the speed... 60bpm vs 120bpm.

Arrian: Was this due to the nature of the visualisation?

B: No, that was just to be different. They both work fine with the visualisations. In fact the visualisation pretty much work with whatever tempo.

So this one is a slower starting one. I still get it going fairly quickly.

A: Did the visualisations get in the way here?

B: It wasn't too bad because it's not over the top of where I was trying to work.

This is one of the things that I did have the visuals in mind when I put together this thing. Initially you have the fast spinning visuals. I knew that I was going to slow this one down and go for two bars of eight beat long sustained chords. I knew that that would look cool as a slowly rotating thing.

In fact I stuffed it up there. It wasn't so much a typo as I did a tricky thing where I tried to have a couple of overlapping temporal recursions and filter out only the fast one keeping the slow one going. But that relies on changing the code once you've got it to the state you want.

I think in general with these parameters I was just messing around. I knew the general form.

I've got a couple of polyrhythms. I really like this bit. I think it works well.

A: Despite the timing issue with the visualisations?

B: Timing is off by half. We knew that was a problem. I still think it works pretty well. I think this one has real potential but it is disappointing that they didn't sync up.

This one is just grooving. I quite like the beat in this one.

A: Did the visuals affect your ability to see here?

B: I can't remember to be honest. It wasn't a big problem to be honest. It probably only happened once through all four pieces.

A: Were you tuning out these visuals during the performance?

B: Even when I'm watching it I'm tuning out the visuals but definitely during the performance.

I don't think this was planned. It is a fairly standard part of my live coding toolbox. I'm just changing the pitch. So it's to do with the bass. Quick ones and then long ones.

Then I changed the offset of the chords and the chords would come in staggered. I don't know how well this one worked in the end. I like bits of it but...

This one I think the stuff that is kind of up beat and is really groovy is easier to do than this.

This bit was disappointing. I had a cool ending in mind and the I stuffed it up here. I forgot to put the tick symbol.

A: Did you manage to pull off the cool ending in the second performance?

B: No, I tried to do the same thing and stuffed it up in the exact same way. That was interesting and frustrating. I had a cool ending that I just thought of that day where I was going to do some harmonic organ-y stuff, take it through the circle of fifths and do an interesting chord progression but really kind of draw one out for a slow finish. I just forgot to quote that symbol when I went from the minor to the major.

If I had other instruments covering me I could of started it again but since everything had died if I started it again it would have been really obvious so I decided in the moment that that is where I would finish it whereas I had one more minute planned. I started to go down a path where I had a minute more of material to finish it off but then just dogged it. Frustratingly I did not quite the same mistake but a similar sort of mistake in the second one. It's kind of really rare... obviously I make typos but I don't tend to make them in that way.

A: Was there some reason for the mistakes?

B: Not really.

A: Chance?

B: Yeah, just chance. Just life.

A: Was the main goal of this performance to entertain the audience... beyond the research?

B: Yeah, I think so. I always want the people to enjoy themselves. I tried to keep them pretty short. I think every little set was under ten minutes. If you're going to do a live coding set longer than ten minutes it needs to be bloody good. So in general I try to stay under ten minutes.

It's interesting, some of my earlier videos are longer than ten minutes and I watch them now and I think 'this drags on'. I'm much better at it now and I'm much better at making things happen quickly. I'm especially better at getting stuff up and running, partially because I'm an emacs guru and have all the snippet magic to make that happen but also you just learn the little extempore tricks and the general tricks for getting things up and running.

For example in the aesthetic set, there was probably stuff going after only 10 seconds. For this one there was probably stuff up before 30 seconds. I reckon you've got to get something up before 30 seconds.

A: Was boredom getting to you?

B: Not really. Certainly not in a big way. By the fourth I was like "I'm done, this has been a lot of live coding, I'm sort of out of ideas".

It's not even fair to say 'out of ideas'. I had that cool idea about how I was going to finish it that I dogged both times. It's just exhausting. It really does take a lot of concentration.

I was done at the end and I was pretty happy it was done. I enjoyed it, I had a good time but I was glad it was done.

Appendix G

Follow-Up User Study Visualisations

Appendix H

Follow-Up User Study Survey

Appendix I

Follow-Up User Study Survey Results

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