Astronomy is thought of as a visual science, but astronomers have long since exceeded the wavelength range of the human eye. We find many ways to represent otherwise invisible data to our senses. If astronomical data can be represented in diverse ways, the audience for which the data are useful becomes more diverse, and our opportunities for conceptualizing the data expand as well.

At Glasgow University we have developed a tool for rendering space physics data non-visualy, through sonification. Sonification can open up the space physics data collection to a new community of researchers now excluded from space physics research, including the visually impaired. In addition, the sound of many types of astronomical data allows for a richer intuitive understanding of it by everyone.

Sonification can benefit all students and researchers, allowing them to:
- analyze complex or rapidly/temporally changing data.
- explore large datasets (multi-dimensional datasets).
- intuitively explore datasets in the frequency domain.
- identify new phenomena that current display techniques miss.
- find hidden correlations and patterns masked in visual displays.
- monitor data while doing something else (background event-finding).

For instance, when searching solar data for bow shock and magnetopause crossings, we expect that distinctive signatures will be especially apparent above the background noise. These boundary signatures appear as characteristic changes in the whole spectrum. Other emissions appear as tones at distinctive frequencies or time-frequency spectra (such as electron plasma oscillations, magnetic noise bursts in the magnetosheath, and whistler mode emissions marking regions of currents).

The xSonify tool sonifies 1-dimensional data from text files and from CDAWeb heliophysics data holdings. xSonify is based on Java 1.5 with Java Sound, MIDI, JavaSpeech, WebStart and Web Services technology. xSonify features three different sonification modes (Pitch, Loudness, Rhythm) with various controls (Play, Stop, Loop, Speed, Time point). It includes capabilities for limited pre-processing of input data (Limits, Invert, Logarithm, Averaging). We will further enhance xSonify to handle all 1-dimensional (as well as multi-dimensional) data and add additional features. The source code is openly available at http://xsonify.sourceforge.net under the NASA Open Source Agreement (NOSA).

The non-visual representation of data (sonification), made possible through this tool began with NASA support, starting from the Space Physics Data Facility (SPDF) requirement to improve access to heliophysics data. This project will also meet the goals of contributing to the development of the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) workforce (especially in under-served and under-represented communities) [NASA Education Outcome ED-1] and attract students to STEM disciplines [NASA Education Outcome ED-2].

EX Hydrae is a southern variable star classified as an eclipsing intermediate polar-type cataclysmic variable (CV) of the DQ Her type. As a binary with an orbital period of 98 minutes, EX Hya belongs to a small group of intermediate polars with ultrashort periods. The observed
with visualization can enhance scientific data analysis. If new efficiencies or new capabilities are identified, our study seeks to understand how to build on these through training.

The perception experiments include empirical measurement of performance. Here, double-peaked radio-frequency spectra of water maser emission observed in the corners of active galactic nuclei were simulated by a pair of gaussians displayed on the screen, over which random noise was superimposed. Participants were presented simulated spectra and asked to identify the presence of a “signal” obscured by noise, at varying signal-to-noise ratios. Test volunteers experience astronomy data via audio cues, visual cues, both together, and also both cues with a sweep line. The volunteers responded to the cues using the keyboard, and their threshold for detection was estimated using an algorithm called QUEST (Quick Unbiased and Efficient Statistical Tree). We hope our results will bring a more diverse community into data analysis and will open up a multimodal approach to scientific data.

Perception Experiment

We recently completed perception experiments to investigate the effectiveness of sonification together with visual display for compare event detection in the data as compared to visual display only. A second aim of these experiments was to investigate whether sonification enhances data analysis. These rigorous laboratory experiments on attention control, and human-computer interaction (HCI), will help identify how combining sonification

Acknowledgments

This work has been supported by the Smithsonian Women's Committee, the George E. Burch Foundation Fellowship at the Smithsonian, and the Laboratory for Visual Learning at the Science Education Department at the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics.

67-minute oscillation is believed to be the spin period of the white dwarf component. A long (~500 ks) Chandra observation of EX Hya was obtained with HETG and ACIS-S. We sonified the EX Hydra X-ray light curve in pitch mode, normalized to a musical scale, to analyze its frequency content. Temporal fluctuation information is portrayed as simultaneously sounded clusters of pitches. Phase, frequency and time variations as a function of pitch can be grouped and then extracted from the data. Persistent or intermittent features in the data may map to interesting physical parameters of the EX Hya system. Given the human ability to transform the disturbance reaching our ears from the space domain to the frequency domain, this step may be compared to decomposing the data into different simple modes of oscillation.

We listened to the FFT data, binned into segments of 10 min each. The frequency information was represented as musical notes readily familiar to the ear, and the spin period is easily recovered. A period search performed by extracting the harmonics showed several statistically significant periods in the range between 250 and 800 sec.

Fig. 2 - First page of a 29 page musical score corresponding to the sonification of the FFT of the Chandra X-ray lightcurve of EX-Hya.

Fig. 3 - Our experiments simulated the double-peaked H$_2$O emission profiles from active galactic nuclei, here from (a) NGC 3393 and (b) NGC 591. A double gaussian was used to simulate the emission peaks, and random noise was added. The experiments measured the signal-to-noise threshold at which participants were able to reliably detect the “signal” in the presence of noise. The experiment compared response sensitivity in visual presentations, auditory presentations, and combined visual and auditory presentations to gauge the efficacy of sonification for promoting detection.