Multitouching the Fourth Dimension

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The increased degrees of freedom in a multitouch interface help users control 4D worlds with intuitive gestures. Relative to a specialized mouse-based interface, a multitouch interface is easier to learn, and 4D object manipulation is up to 1.5 times faster.

nteractive computer graphics methods can effectively meet the challenge of exploring 4D worlds. Even though the physical world is only 3D, the virtual world of computer modeling can in principle represent any imaginable higher-dimensional geometry. The problem is how to present these models in a way that enhances users' intuitive experiences of the abstract geometric world they are trying to understand.

Multitouch interfaces can provide an excellent environment for exploring and building intuition about the geometric concepts of 4D worlds, offering a natural way to interact with the extra degrees of freedom that characterize 4D geometry. The common availability of these interfaces in handheld devices strongly motivates exploring how they might enhance a user's 4D manipulation experience.

To test the idea that multitouch interfaces might be a more efficient way to interact with and learn about 4D objects, we designed an intuitive interactive 4D exploration interface and implemented an application based on this design for the iPad and iPhone. Our 4Dice application enables the user to interact with the structure of a hypercube or tesseract viewed as an eight-sided, back-face culled 4D die (http://itunes.apple.com/us/app/4dice/id453083422).

Our interface is the first to exploit multitouch gestures to seamlessly explore all six 4D rotational degrees of freedom. In a user study comparing an equivalent mouse-based 4D-control interface with our multitouch-based system, we found that the multitouch interface exhibited about 1.5 times faster performance for 4D navigation tasks.

ADVANTAGES OF MULTITOUCH

Researchers have investigated how multitouch methods can provide innovative user interaction in a variety of environments.¹⁻³ With multitouch, researchers can expand significantly beyond the mouse's two degrees of freedom and still avoid the complexity of special-purpose devices embedded in 3D space. The simultaneous use of multiple fingers for input can provide extra one-handed degrees of freedom, allowing users to circumvent two-handed methods, such as the use of modifier keys to switch control contexts.

These extra degrees of freedom can be effective for applications in which the user must control data having unconventional geometry, such as 4D objects. For example, intuitively manipulating objects that are projected from a 4D model to a standard display screen requires six degrees of orientation control plus controls such as scaling, focallength adjustment, and translation.

Because multitouch technology is highly intuitive and physically natural, it has a high adoption rate. Unlike specialized interaction devices such as the space mouse and 3D wands, multitouch interface controls are ubiquitous





and easy to master, making them a good fit for educational applications.

VISUALIZING 4D OBJECTS

From the rich history of work on visualizing higherdimensional geometric models using computer graphics displays, A. Michael Noll's examination of how to project *N*-dimensional objects to a graphics screen for exploration⁴ and Thomas F. Banchoff's use of continuously rotating 4D mathematical objects^{5,6} are particularly relevant to our work. In designing our exploratory interface, we followed the core methods of these approaches, using perspective projections of 4D points, edges, and surface patches to 3D, then employing standard 3D graphics and lighting to render the result on the display screen.

Figure 1 shows our 4D imaging pipeline, which parallels the familiar process of 3D imaging with the addition of one final projection to the screen space. The image of a 4D object is a voxel image in a 3D volume screen instead of a 2D pixel image as in 3D imaging. After the user rotates the 4D object as desired, our interface projects it to a 3D image that is further rotatable in 3D, so that the user can see all its aspects in the final projection from the intermediate 3D voxel image to the 2D display.

In 4D imaging, a 4 \times 3 matrix implements orthogonal projection to eliminate a 4D directional line of sight, instead of the 3 \times 2 projection matrix typical of 3D imaging. To produce perspective projection, we divide by the 4D distance between a rendered element and the 4D viewpoint instead of by the 3D distance to the 3D viewpoint.

In 3D, if two curves have points that lie on coincident lines of sight, the nearer curve technically shadows the more distant one. Such curves can share a point in the 2D projected image even though they are far apart in 3D. Similarly, a pair of noncolliding 4D surface patches can share a curve embedded in the 3D projection where the two surfaces appear to intersect, with the nearer patch shadowing the other.

Geometry of 4D worlds

Those who dabble in the fourth dimension often hear questions such as, "Is the fourth dimension real?" or "4D can't be like the ordinary world, so it has to be time, right?"

The assumption is that 4D cannot be "real" because people are not familiar with visualization beyond 3D. However, once a piece of mathematics is inside the computer, it is as real as any other piece of mathematics inside that computer. Thus, one geometric data representation might consist of vertex points as 3D vectors; another might have vertex points as 10D vectors, as in string theory. All dimensions are real as far as the computing framework is concerned.

The interface between the mathematics inside the computer and the outside world that an observer can sense defines the connection with reality—the transformation from mathematical 4D models to the 2D computer screen. 3D stereoscopic displays are also possible, but here we assume a 2D screen on a handheld device.

Six 4D rotation parameters

Because we can express an arbitrary rotation in any dimension as a composition of rotations in planes defined by pairs of orthogonal Euclidean coordinate axes, we can specify all the 4D rotational degrees of freedom by six independent parameters, corresponding to the rotations in the planes labeled *wx*, *wy*, *wz*, *yz*, *zx*, and *xy*. In addition to the 3D subspace rotations, *yz*, *zx*, and *xy*, three new matrices effectively tilt the *w*-axis into the direction of the *x*-, *y*-, and *z*-axes.

The wx 4D rotation matrix is

 $R(\theta, wx) = \begin{vmatrix} \cos \theta & 0 & 0 & \sin \theta \\ 0 & 1 & 0 & 0 \\ 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 \\ -\sin \theta & 0 & 0 & \cos \theta \end{vmatrix},$

and the *wy* and *wz* rotations are permutations of this. Multiplying $R(\theta, wx)$ into a pure *w* column-vector $(0,0,0,w)^t$ produces a small positive *x* component (*w* sin θ) for small θ , and similarly multiplying a pure *x* column-vector (*x*,0,0,0)^t gives a small negative *w* component (–*x* sin θ).

4D back-face culling

A comprehensive simulation of 4D lighting and shading automatically removes the 3D parts of the scene that cannot reflect light to the 4D viewer.⁷ In 3D graphics systems such as OpenGL, enabling back-face culling removes the invisible polygons, which have normal vectors pointing



Figure 2. Rolling ball controller geometry. (a) 3D rolling ball controller geometry on a 2D screen and (b) 4D rolling ball controller geometry on a 3D screen.

away from the viewer. In four dimensions, it is similarly important to implement the 4D equivalent of back-face culling when constructing the projection of an object to the 3D image; our approach implements 4D back-face culling to produce a more accurate visual impression.

Back-face culling by itself can ensure correct visibility if the object being rendered is a solid convex polyhedron in 3D or a corresponding solid convex polytope in 4D. More complicated scenes require depth buffering in addition to back-face culling.

For a typical convex 4D polytope such as the hypercube, many of the polyhedra that would appear in a wireframe rendering disappear in any given back-face culled rendering. Applying 4D rotations to the hypercube causes the culled parts to reappear in the appropriate sequence. No more than four of the eight cubes that make up the hypercube's *visible* parts can appear at any one time.

The 4D rolling ball

Figure 2a shows the 3D rolling ball method,⁸ which suggests a particularly interesting control mode for 4D rotations. In 3D, the rolling ball implements the physical process

of putting a ball on a table, placing a flattened horizontal palm on top of the ball, and rotating the ball incrementally by moving the hand to the right for a positive *y*-axis (*zx*-plane) rotation, and toward the user for a positive *x*-axis (*yz*-plane) rotation. Moving the hand in clockwise horizontal circles produces counterclockwise rotations in the *xy*-plane (about the *z*-axis). Clearly, a mouse-based implementation of this algorithm permits rotations in all three planes, thus achieving any 3D orientation with a finite sequence of 2D motions.

In 4D, the precise analog of the 2D vector that controls the 3D rolling ball orientation is a 3D vector that controls the 4D rolling ball.⁹ Imagine a 4D object projected to 3D space along the *w*-axis, which is "pointing out at you" and therefore invisible, just as the 3D *z*-axis is for the 3D case. Then, as Figure 2b shows, to explore 4D orientations, we specify a 3D drag vector

$$\vec{dx} = (dx, dy, dz),$$

which tilts the *w*-axis slightly in the plane defined by the direction $d\vec{x}$ and the *w*-axis itself. This action hides an old piece of geometry on the side toward which this vector is moving, and makes a new piece of geometry appear on the 3D image's opposite side. This is exactly analogous to the 3D rolling ball, except that the 3D projection screen, not the 2D screen, is the canvas.

Finding all the 4D degrees of freedom

4D orientations have six degrees of freedom, so how can the 4D rolling ball, which apparently rotates only in three planes (wx, wy, and wz), generate the other three degrees of freedom? In fact, moving the controller in circles in the plane of any pair of control directions such as (dx, dy) will produce a rotation in that plane. Thus, because the three degrees of freedom (dx, dy, dz) correspond in pairs to the three missing planes (yz, zx, and xy), it is possible to incrementally produce rotations in all six planes (wx, wy, wz, yz, zx, and xy), and therefore to reach any possible 4D orientation.

4D INTERFACE DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

To achieve our goal of designing a fluid multitouch interface for interacting with 4D geometry, the first step was to



decide which functions we absolutely had to support at the top level of multiple-finger touching and dragging. We then chose those actions that had to be available without switching modes and set aside those that we could relegate to alternative modes, menus, and sliders. Figure 3 shows our basic vocabulary of multitouch gestures. The "Exploring the 4D World" sidebar lists some resources that can aid in understanding the research methods we used.

3D screen control

A primary design requirement was to have 3D control of the projected image, in which a default parallel projection simply chops off the fourth coordinate and displays the object geometry in terms of the first three coordinates. Thus, rotating in this 3D subspace of 4D is the same as rotating the 3D projected image. It is therefore natural to allow users to rotate the object geometry in 3D with a one-finger drag, in the same general fashion as dozens of existing touch-based (and mouse-based) 3D geometry systems. Although other 3D image control options are available, we chose to use the context-free 3D rolling ball.

4D control design

We characterized the remaining three 4D rotational degrees of freedom as rotations in the *wx*-, *wy*-, and *wz*-planes. Because any *wx* rotation mixes the *x*-component in the projected image and the hidden *w*-component, *x* and *w* continually change places with one another as θ increases monotonically. The same is true for *wy* rotations, enabling the clean control of any combination of *wx* and *wy* rotations with a two-finger drag on the screen's natural *xy* coordinate system.

Finally, the *wz* coordinate rotations fill out the sixparameter rotation space. There is a natural correspondence between "spinning" the screen around its center and familiar actions such as turning a drill brace-and-bit or a screwdriver. Such motions have one fixed center and a moving curved path around that center. Thus, we chose a two-finger action with one finger fixed as a perfect intuitive realization of this type of *z*-direction screw motion. It is a two-finger action, just like the *wx* and *wy* motions, but in gesture analysis, multitouch software can easily separate it from an action in which both fingers are moving.

4D perspective, screen space adjustment, and reset

To make exploration easier, we added several more multitouch controls, exhausting our chosen vocabulary. The most important was 4D perspective adjustment, associated with three-finger up-down dragging, which changes the 4D perspective transformation from orthogonal (pushing away, to the top of the screen) to high-perspective distortion (pulling toward the bottom). Two fingers moving

EXPLORING THE 4D WORLD

E fforts to understand the fourth dimension have stimulated a rich variety of thoughts and insights—from artistic treatments of the hypercube to a spectrum of novel implementation methods exploited in or suggested by our work.

Figure A shows an iPhone running the 4Dice application. For those who desire an introduction to manipulating 4D geometry, our eponymous YouTube video offers a one-minute conceptual overview of the back-face culled hypercube as a 4D die (www. youtube.com/watch?v=fx7ehl7YvMY).

Additional background and mathematical details for selected topics covered in this article are available at homes.soic. indiana.edu/hansona/ 4DTouchSidebars, including further discussion of the hypercube (hypercube.pdf), 2D and 3D rotations (2d3drot.pdf), 4D culling mechanisms (cullface.pdf), and the 4D rolling ball (4droll. pdf), along with an illustration of how to apply a multitouch interface on a handheld device to remotely manipulate 4D objects shown on a desktop or lecture display (remote.pdf).



Figure A. The 4Dice application, which runs on the iPod Touch, iPhone, and iPad.

apart or together scales the screen space, so the user can more easily examine details. A four-finger drag enables the translation of 2D screen space, a double-tap resets the 3D orientation, and a triple-tap resets the 4D orientation (see Figure 1).

MASTERING THE HYPERCUBE WITH MULTITOUCH

The hypercube, or tesseract, is a familiar 4D object that generalizes the 3D cube. As an application of our 4D multitouch interface, we chose to create an educational scenario in which every aspect of a 3D die, represented as a numerically labeled 3D cube and manipulated using the 3D rolling ball, has a parallel realization in a 4D hypercube manipulated with our interface.

Just as it is possible to view a 3D cubic die as three axes, (x,y,z) ranging from +1 to -1, with square surfaces pasted on the two ends of each axis, for a total of six square faces, so it is possible to view a 4D hypercubic die as four axes, (x,y,z,w), with solid cubic "faces" pasted on the two ends of each axis, for a total of eight cubic faces.

Our approach to making the 4D hypercube more familiar is based on first providing an interactive approach to understanding the geometric features of a 3D die. We can then use these 3D intuitions to provide a basis for interactive exploration and understanding of the hypercube by treating it simply as a 4D die.



Figure 4. (a) The basic geometry, visual presentation, and face-numbering rules of a 3D right-handed die. Opposite ends of the *x*-axis are labeled 1 and 6, the *y*-axis ends are 2 and 5, and the *z*-axis ends are 3 and 4. The darkened faces (4, 5, 6) are those that 3D back-face culling has removed. (b) The basic geometry, visual presentation, and face-numbering of a 4D right-handed die. Opposite ends of the *x*-axis are labeled 1 and 8, the *y*-axis ends are 2 and 7, the *z*-axis ends are 3 and 6, and the *w*-axis ends are 4 and 5. The solid cubes represented as green-colored wire frames (5, 6, 7, 8) are those that 4D back-face culling removes.

Understanding the ordinary cube as a 3D die

Figure 4a shows a single 3D die, which contains six square faces numbered so that opposite pairs sum to seven. One, two, or at most three of these are visible at any one time if back-face culling is enforced. Spinning about the x (or 1:6) axis reveals the numbered faces in the cyclic repeating order 3:2:4:5. Spinning about the y (or 2:5) axis reveals the faces in the cyclic order 3:6:4:1. Performing a counterclockwise circular xy-plane rolling ball action reveals the 1:2:6:5 faces "peeking" around the edges of face 3 as the die spins slowly clockwise about the z-axis.

Understanding the hypercube as a 4D die

To understand the hypercube as a 4D die, we can repeat the 3D process by exact analogy, attempting to make the strangeness of 4D geometry as familiar as 3D geometry. Figure 4b shows how to envision a 4D die as having four axes—x, y, z, and w—instead of three. Consequently, there are four pairs of labels, one pair for the two ends of each axis.

Opposite labels sum to nine. The opposite labels sum to nine instead of seven. A 4D gambler would be very familiar with the rule that opposite ends of the *x*-axis are labeled by 1 and 8, the *y*-axis by 2 and 7, the *z*-axis by 3 and 6, and the *w*-axis by 4 and 5.

Faces are cubes, not squares. The geometric objects at the ends of the axes are cubes instead of squares. At the ends of the 3D cube's three axes are square 2D faces. In

4D, the dimensions increase by one for everything, so the face objects at the ends of the hypercube's four axes are 3D cubes. Thus, hypercube faces are cubic volumes instead of square surfaces.

Solid cubic faces are drawn as transparent. The hypercube faces technically are solid cubic volumes, so we need to "look inside them" to see the numbering because the numbers label the cube's body rather than the surface. For that reason, we drew these solid objects as transparent wireframe cubes and represented the numeric labels as small solid spheres floating inside.

The rolling die

Figure 5a shows the simplest possible set of views for a 3D and a 4D die and the small rotations connecting them. A 3D die can show one face, rotate slightly to show a second face, and rotate slightly in another direction to show a third face; only three faces can appear at any one time. The 4D die possesses one more rotation direction, so up to four cubic face volumes can appear simultaneously, but no more.

Figure 5b shows the sequence of cubic faces and numeric labels that appear for each basic motion, *wx*-plane rotation, *wy*-plane rotation, and *wz*-plane rotation. In each case, in the left-to-right sequence, the number 4 labeling the positive *w*-axis becomes invisible as the rotation progresses, and then reappears in the fifth frame as the die approaches a full 360-degree rotation.





Rolling in the wx- and wy-planes. Dragging the 4D die with two fingers moving to the left on the screen spins the die in the *wx*-plane, passing from the 4 to the 1 label. Continued rotation by a leftward pull goes further to the 5 (negative *w*-axis) label. Continued pull to the left goes to 8, and then returns to 4, giving the 4:1:5:8 sequence. Pulling downward to produce *wy* rotations gives the analogous 4:2:5:7 sequence.

Drilling through the wz-plane. The last row in Figure 5b shows a rotation in the *wz*-plane as a full circle through the labels 4:3:5:6 of the cubic 4D die faces. With a two-finger-one-fixed clockwise "into-the-screen" spin in *wz*,

the number 3 labeling the positive *z*-axis appears in front atop the 4 label. Continuing the *wz* rotation, the 4 label shrinks and is replaced by the 3 label. As the 3 label shrinks away, the 5 label of the negative *w*-axis again becomes apparent, then the 6 of the negative *z*-axis, and finally the 4 label on the positive *w*-axis reappears.

x:y circles spin in *z*. The *z*-axis rotation induced by moving two fingers in a small clockwise circle parallels the *z*-axis rotation from a 3D one-finger-rotating drag. We can thus make the 4D die spin counterclockwise in its 3D image about the *z*-axis (the direction perpendicular to the screen from the user's view); counterclockwise circles



Figure 6. Using two-finger multitouch controls to produce 4D rotations in the *wx-*, *wy-*, and *wz*-planes. Two-finger dragging in the *x* or *y* directions in the screen plane changes 4 to 1 or 8, or to 2 or 7, respectively, and one-finger-fixed spinning produces an effective *z* direction drag that changes 4 to 3 or 6. Continuing further in any direction will expose the 5 on the opposite end of the *w*-axis from 4.

produce a clockwise z rotation. If the 4 label is showing, the 1, 2, 8, and 7 labels are visible peeking around the edges of 4 in sequence with the counterclockwise circle. The 5 label remains hidden on the far side of w, opposite the 4 label in 4D space. Starting with any other cubic face produces the appropriate sequence of four neighboring labels peeking around the edges.

Accelerometer control option. When only 4D orientation control is needed, the accelerometer available in many handheld devices enables controlling the entire set of three 4D rotation actions at once, producing a *w*-axis tilt in any direction. The 3D directional information from an incremental accelerometer motion provides an arbitrary value of $d\vec{x}$, no longer restricted to any Cartesian subspace, as input to the 4D rolling ball algorithm. An internal gyroscope can correct for device orientation changes, which the accelerometer might confuse with acceleration.

Figure 6 shows the correspondences between each multitouch 4D action and our chosen screen-centered Cartesian coordinates.

USER STUDY

To test the efficiency of our multitouch interface design, we recruited 20 participants and randomly divided them equally into two groups. Group G1, consisting of seven males and three females with a mean age of 26.7 years, used multitouching. Group G2, consisting of five males and five females with a mean age of 26.2 years, used a mouse and keyboard combination.¹⁰

All participants were at least somewhat familiar with both interaction methods, and none had used our multitouch interface before the study. Two participants had some basic knowledge of 4D (which we determined by asking them to draw a hypercube), so we split them between G1 and G2.

Each participant went through learning, practice, and task phases.

Learning phase

In this phase, which took approximately 20 minutes, we first presented the geometry of a hypercube as a 3D cube generalization and discussed the characteristics of a 3D die and a 4D die. We then interactively demonstrated the assigned interaction control (multitouch, or mouse and keyboard) and how participants could use them to manipulate a cube represented as a 3D die and a hypercube represented as a 4D die.

Practice phase

We then gave the participants five minutes to practice rotating the 4D die using the group's assigned interaction method. The initial view presented the front face of the 4D die labeled 5.

Task phase

In this phase, which took approximately 60 minutes, we gave the participants a task sheet with these instructions:

This is a test of your ability to rotate a 4D die to find a particular view with the interface control. It has 140 trials altogether, and in each trial, you will see a 4D die with a random number facing you and a goal number displayed at the top of the screen. Your task is to apply the interaction controls you just learned to quickly rotate the 4D die so that you can clearly see the dots in the face with the goal number. When you find the goal number, immediately press the done button and then press the start button when you are ready to go on to the next trial. If the number you found is incorrect, an error message will be displayed and you have to continue the rotation to look for the goal number. When you are ready to start these trials, press the start button displayed below.

To make up the 140 trials, we first created 28 trials with initial state face numbers from 1 to 4 and target goal numbers assigned to the seven remaining numbers. We repeated this process five times and presented the resulting 140 cases to the participants in a random order. The participants had to press a start button to begin, but they could press the done button at will. The testing environment detects if the participant has reached the goal number by checking the angular difference (in degrees) between the goal hyperface's normal direction and the view direction of the 4D projection, accepting matches below a threshold angle, typically 45 degrees.

Results and analysis

Our testing interfaces recorded each trial's start and end times, the accuracy (the angular difference between the final view and the goal description), the initial and goal numbers, and the number of times that the error message displayed.

To compare the data from the two interfaces, we first applied a moving window average of size 15 to the raw data to compensate for the noise in the time data. We then computed the average time taken and the standard errors in the times for the 10 participants in each group. This yielded the smoothed sampled values $T_1(k)$ and $T_2(k)$ for G1 and G2, respectively, for $k \in [1, 140]$. To further analyze the asymptotic perfor-

mance and the learning rate, we performed least-squares fits on the mean curves ($T_1(k)$ and $T_2(k)$) using the exponential model

$$T(k) = a e^{-bk} + c.$$

Figure 7 shows the results with standard errors displayed as error bars. We plotted only the first 100 of the 140 trials, since the curves beyond that are almost flat, with negligible changes in asymptotic performance.

An examination of the two curves' asymptotic trends reveals that the multitouch interface is roughly 1.5 times faster than the mouse and keyboard interface. To investigate further, we conducted a paired *t*-test on the data from trial 101 to trial 140 compared with the null hypothesis—the proposition that the mean values of the trial times for the two distinct interfaces are the same. The *p*-value was 0.0001 (39 degrees of freedom), and the difference between the mean trial times was statistically highly significant. Hence, we rejected the null hypothesis and concluded that the mean trial times for the two interfaces are significantly different, thus providing evidence that the multitouch interface enables better performance.

We also compared the average accuracy (quantified by the angular differences between the ideal goal and



Figure 7. Time to reach a goal number for participants using mouse and keyboard versus multitouching. For the mouse and keyboard, trial time averaged 5.96 ± 0.11 seconds and the exponential fit coefficient was 0.0696 ± 0.004 per trial. For multitouching, trial time averaged 3.82 ± 0.09 seconds and the exponential fit coefficient was show asymptotic performance.

the user-declared final view) for the two interfaces, with the result that the multitouch interface offers accuracy comparable to that of the mouse and keyboard interface.

We averaged the accuracy values over the 140 trials for each participant, and then performed a matched-paired *t*-test on the two sets of 10 averaged accuracy values (per participant) from G1 and G2. The mean values (and standard deviations) for the accuracy of the multitouch versus mouse and keyboard interfaces were 14.58 (12.14) and 13.76 (11.13) degrees, respectively. The *t*-value was 0.2861 with nine degrees of freedom, indicating no significant difference between the two sets of accuracy values.

ultitouch interfaces provide the opportunity to perform complex manipulations of virtual environments, such as those representing mathematical models of 4D objects. We have proposed an effective interface design supporting interactive exploration of 4D objects and their properties, and developed an application to facilitate the understanding of a hypercube as a 4D analog of a 3D rolling die. A unique feature of our hypercube interface is the inclusion of 4D back-face culling, which both simplifies the representation that the user sees and more accurately represents the 4D analog of what is apparent in the 3D world.

In future work, we hope to explore incorporating other polychora (4D regular polytopes) besides the hypercube, interacting effectively with more complicated objects such as the other polychora, and simulating 4D physical dynamics.

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