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Workspace Awareness in Collaborative Audio-Only Interaction with Diagrams

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ABSTRACT
Using an audio-only diagraming tool, sixteen pairs of sighted individuals collaborated in a workspace where they used sound as the only means to communicate with each other and to access and edit shared entity-relationship diagrams. We examined the effects of the means for delivering audio to such a workspace – using headphones or speakers – on pairs’ workspace awareness. Results showed that patterns of workspace awareness information exchange changed when both the means for delivering audio and collaborators’ choice of working style changed. The results highlighted the need to accommodate different working styles when designing awareness support in collaborative diagramming tools, and identified the types of awareness information that should be communicated to collaborators to match the dynamics of their interactions with and through diagrams.

ACM Classification Keywords
H.5.2 Information Interfaces and Presentation: Users Interfaces–Auditory (non-speech) feedback; H.5.3 Information Interfaces and Presentation: Group and Organisation Interfaces–Collaborative computing, Computer-supported cooperative work, Synchronous interaction

Author Keywords
Audio-only Collaboration, Workspace Awareness, Diagrams

BACKGROUND
Audio in collaboration
Sound plays a primary role in communication, mediating not only verbal exchange, which is essential in collaboration, but also a variety of incidental events that contribute to enriching collaborators’ awareness of the context of their interactions. In remote collaboration, auditory display of information has been shown to provide a usable and sociable space for interaction even in the absence of other modalities [8]. Researchers have learnt from the way in which people use incidental sounds, and used this knowledge to design and integrate auditory cues back in shared spaces. Such engineered sounds were found to support awareness and enrich the collaborative experience [3, 1, 16]. In co-located collaboration, audio has been used to augment visually-dominant collaborative displays (such as interactive boards, wall displays and tabletops) with auditory feedback that communicate information about users’ actions and represent aspects of the shared workspace itself. The means for delivering audio in such multimodal contexts – through
headphones, individual or shared speakers – can impact levels of awareness as well as strategies for completing shared tasks [15, 11]. However, it remains unclear what this impact is on the exchange of workspace awareness information in audio-only collaboration.

**Audio and workspace awareness**

Gaining an awareness of something in a collaboration involves acts of monitoring both the shared space and co-present individuals, as well as displaying one’s own activities to others. Competent collaborators typically adjust the levels of obtrusiveness in their monitoring of co-workers and explicitness in displaying their own actions to match the demands of the current task or state of the collaboration [7]. *Workspace awareness* is one particular type of awareness that refers to the ability to keep track of collaborators’ interactions within a synchronously shared workspace. Gutwin and Greenberg [5] framework for workspace awareness describes what knowledge constitutes workspace awareness, which perceptual mechanisms are used to extract such knowledge from a shared workspace and how it benefits collaboration. One important characteristic of workspace awareness is its focus on collaborators’ interaction within a defined space, in realtime, and with shared resources [4]. However, the potential of audio as a sole means for delivering and maintaining workspace awareness remains largely unexplored.

**STUDY**

To contribute to addressing these gaps, we aimed to examine how the means for delivering audio to an audio-only workspace impacts the exchange of workspace awareness information during collaborative diagram editing. In this study, pairs of participants worked together in an audio-only workspace to construct entity-relationship (ER) diagrams ¹ from a textual description using a shared audio-only diagramming tool. The workspace was such that participants could not see one another but could hear each other, and could not see the diagrams they worked on but access them through an audio-only interface. The tool we used to achieve this was based on Metatla et al.’s approach to the sonification of diagrams [14, 12] allowing participants to both explore and edit diagrams’ content through sounds. We manipulated how the audio output resulting from participants’ interactions with this tool was delivered to the shared workspace in a within-subjects experimental design. In a *Shared* condition, the audio output of each participant’s interactions with the tool was delivered through speakers, rendering its auditory output present in the collaborative workspace, i.e. participants could hear both their interactions with the shared tool and their partners’. In a *Non-Shared* condition, the audio output of each participant’s interactions was delivered through their own headphones, rendering the audio absent from the collaborative workspace, i.e. participants could hear themselves but not their partners’ interactions with the shared tool.

1ER diagrams are used by system analysts and software engineers to model the conceptual structure of a system prior to its development and are particularly popular for modelling database systems.

**Setup**

We opted for a co-located collaborative setting in order to compare both shared and non-shared audio setups under the same conditions². Pairs sat facing each other and had each a keyboard to interact with the audio-only tool and a set of computer speakers or headphones to use in the Shared and Non-shared conditions respectively (see Figure 1). The keyboard, speakers and headphones were connected to two computers, one for each participant with one of those acting as a server and linking the pair to a shared diagram. An opaque board was placed between the two participants to eliminate any form of visual communication (body language, facial expressions, etc.). Participants could only hear each other’s audio output in the Shared condition, but they were able to converse comfortably with one another in both conditions.

![Figure 1. Experimental setup](image)

**Procedure**

Participants were introduced to the basics of ER modelling and to the audio-only collaborative tool. Features of the tool and its auditory display were thoroughly demonstrated until the participants felt comfortable using it. They were then presented with a sample ER diagram and a textual description – similar to those used in the testing part – and were given time to use the tool to construct various parts of the diagram while being closely assisted by the experimenter. The training part lasted for up to thirty minutes. Once familiar with the tool, they were asked to perform the experimental task.

**Collaborative task**

Participants were asked to construct two diagrams, one at a time, under each of the two experimental conditions; the order of the conditions was randomised across the sixteen pairs to cancel out learning effects. The testing part lasted for up to an hour. At the start of each test, an initial diagram was loaded onto the tool and participants were given a textual description containing information about how the diagram could be completed. The initial diagram consisted of a subset of the elements shown in Figure 2. Participants were instructed to consult the textual descriptions and to complete the diagram as they see fit. They were informed that they had complementary information on each description and therefore needed to

²A co-located setup also allows for a technically simple realtime provision of shared audio for the purposes of this study; i.e. using speakers rather networked transmission of shared audio, which can introduce latency issues that might interfere with the analysis of workspace awareness exchange, and hence deviating the focus of the present study.
consult with one another. They were given no time limit to complete the diagram, and were free to decide which information to include from the description and which to omit or delete from the provided initial diagram. Figure 2 shows an example of the typical complexity that the finished diagrams reached.

Participants
Thirty-two sighted individuals were recruited for this study. Twelve participants were undergraduates, twelve were studying for a Masters, seven at various PhD levels and one participant at a post-doctoral level. Twenty-four were male and eight were female. This made up a total of sixteen pairs who knew each other. All participants were from the computer science or electronic engineering disciplines and had varying knowledge of ER diagrams ranging from very low to very high. Each participant received a cash incentive for their participation.

Data Gathering, Transcription and Coding
We transcribed the conversations between participants in a pair and used Gutwin and Greenberg’s framework for workspace awareness (WA) [5] to develop a coding scheme identifying occurrences of WA elements in the transcripts. Table 1 shows the five elements of WA information that we focused on in this scheme given the nature of our experimental setup. These are: information about location within the shared workspace (in this case this refers to which diagram element a participant is working on); past and current editing and navigation actions; intention about future actions; and information about an action’s completion status. We further divided WA information exchange into Supplied and Requested types, where the supplied type refers to information provided by a participant to their partner without the latter having asked for it, and the requested type refers to instances where a participant explicitly asks their partner for information regarding their actions, intentions or location. Two independent coders used the developed coding scheme to code video transcripts from two pairs’ collaborations. We performed an interrater reliability analysis using the Kappa statistic to determine consistency among raters. This revealed high levels of reliability Kappa = 0.93 (p<0.01).

RESULTS
All pairs completed the construction of two ER diagrams under each experimental condition using the provided tool. Data from one pair was lost due to a system failure and was thus excluded from the analysis. We used Wilcoxon Sign Ranks tests with Bonferroni adjustments to determine significance within the captured data. The tests confirmed that overall participants exchanged significantly more WA information in the Non-Shared condition than they did in the Shared condition (W=25.5, p<0.005). Participants supplied significantly more WA information to each other than they requested from one another in both conditions (70% supplied versus 30% requested in the Shared conditions; W=79.5, p<0.01, and 75% supplied versus 25% requested in the Non-Shared condition; W=5, p<0.01). A separate comparison of the supplied and requested types of WA information across the two conditions revealed that the supplied type of exchanges were significantly higher in the Non-Shared condition (W=23, p<0.005), but differences between the requested type of exchanges across the two conditions were not statistically significant (W=106.5). Comparing the occurrences of each of the five elements of the supplied type across the two conditions revealed that exchanges of three out of the five elements were significantly higher in the Non-Shared condition; pairs supplied significantly more information type “What I Did” (W=15, p<0.01) and what we refer to as “Supplied Completion Status”\(^3\) (W=15, p<0.01) when audio was delivered through headphones.

Working Styles
An analysis of working styles based on Metatla et al.’s analysis of group interaction patterns [13] revealed that most pairs used a parallel working style as a dominant style in the Non-Shared condition, but worked sequentially and/or in parallel in the Shared condition. In particular, the proportion of overlapping interaction times were significantly higher in the Non-Shared condition (42.56% vs 26.22% in the Shared condition; t=2.841, p=0.013), but this result changed when pairs were grouped on the basis of their dominant working style in the Shared condition. For pairs classified as Sequential, the proportion of overlapping interaction times was not significantly different from one pair was lost due to a system failure and was thus excluded from the analysis. We used Wilcoxon Sign Ranks tests with Bonferroni adjustments to determine significance within the captured data. The tests confirmed that overall participants exchanged significantly more WA information in the Non-Shared condition than they did in the Shared condition (W=25.5, p<0.005). Participants supplied significantly more WA information to each other than they requested from one another in both conditions (70% supplied versus 30% requested in the Shared conditions; W=79.5, p<0.01, and 75% supplied versus 25% requested in the Non-Shared condition; W=5, p<0.01). A separate comparison of the supplied and requested types of WA information across the two conditions revealed that the supplied type of exchanges were significantly higher in the Non-Shared condition (W=23, p<0.005), but differences between the requested type of exchanges across the two conditions were not statistically significant (W=106.5). Comparing the occurrences of each of the five elements of the supplied type across the two conditions revealed that exchanges of three out of the five elements were significantly higher in the Non-Shared condition; pairs supplied significantly more information type “What I Did” (W=15, p<0.01), “What I Am Doing” (W=81, p<0.05) and what we refer to as “Supplied Completion Status”\(^3\) (W=15, p<0.01) when audio was delivered through headphones.

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Results for Parallel Pairs
A total of eight pairs were classified as Parallel based on their dominant collaborative working style in the Shared condition. Parallel pairs exchanged significantly more WA information in the Non-Shared condition than they did in the Shared condition

\(^3\)This refer to element number of 5 in Table1.
The study presented in this paper examined how WA information was exchanged between pairs of individuals while collaborating to design entity-relationship diagrams in an audio-only workspace. An audio-only collaborative workspace where sound is present through speakers made information about partners’ diagramming activity and progress readily available, but the use of this information varied depending on the working style. Particularly, the loose character of parallel pairs’ collaborations often meant that participants felt a greater need to find out about each other’s past actions and frequently supplied each other with information in the form of updates about what has happened. On the other hand, sequential pairs’ collaborations were focused, and information was often supplied in the form of descriptions about what was currently happening or what was about to happen in the immediate future. The coding scheme that we used captured instances in the collaborations where participants explicitly exchanged information pertaining to workspace awareness. This provided a means for establishing which elements of workspace awareness information were used during the collaborations and for quantifying such information. The results confirmed that delivering audio through headphones to an audio-only workspace increased participants exchange of workspace awareness information. Participants supplied significantly more information to each other than they requested from one another, but examining the details of such exchange revealed that this significance was in supplying WA information of types What I Did (past actions), What I am Doing (current actions) and Completion Status (activity level). However, when considering each working style group independently, our analysis revealed differences in the details of these exchanges:

- Parallel pairs supplied as much WA information to each other as they requested from one another when audio was delivered through speakers. On the other hand, sequential pairs supplied significantly more information to each other than they requested from one another in both conditions.

- When audio was delivered through headphones, parallel pairs supplied significantly more WA information of type What I Did (past actions), whereas sequential pairs supplied significantly more WA information of type What I am Doing (current actions) and requested significantly more WA information of type What Did You Do (partner’s past actions).

- When compared against each other, sequential pairs were found to supply significantly more WA information of type What I Will Do (intentions) than parallel pairs when audio was delivered through headphones.

**CONCLUSION**

Awareness of other people’s activity is an important part of shared-workspace collaboration. Gutwin and Greenberg [5] suggested that part of the solution to addressing the awareness problem in groupware design is to provide users with more information about their collaborators. But designers must carefully determine what information is most important at any given moment in a collaboration.
Awareness has typically been supported using visual displays. But there are many situations where attending to a visual display can be difficult, for example due to the type or context of activities users engage in or the type of devices they use in such activities, which may have limited screen space for displaying information. Using audio as a means for providing awareness information, for instance by providing audio representations of actions on these devices, can overcome these limitations.

The study presented in this paper provides new empirical evidence about the use of audio as a means for gaining awareness in a shared workspace. In particular, the study aimed to examine the impact of the means for delivering audio to an audio-only workspace on the exchange of workspace awareness information in the context of diagram editing collaborative activities. The results showed that varying the means for delivering audio to such a workspace had an impact on which workspace awareness information was exchanged between partners, and that this observed impact was also dependent on the working style they chose to employ.

REFERENCES