Supporting Expressive Procedural Art Creation through Direct Manipulation

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ABSTRACT
Computation is a powerful artistic medium. Programmer-artists have demonstrated the unique creative opportunities of using code to make art. Yet manual artists interested in using procedural techniques must undergo the difficult process of learning to program, and must adopt tools and practices far removed from those to which they are accustomed. We hypothesize that, through the right direct manipulation interface, we can enable accessible and expressive procedural art creation. To explore this, we developed Para, a digital illustration tool that supports the creation of declarative constraints in vector artwork. Para’s constraints enable procedural relationships while facilitating live manual control and non-linear editing. Constraints can be combined with duplication behaviors and ordered collections of artwork to produce complex, dynamic compositions. We use the results of two open-ended studies with professional artists and designers to provide guidelines for accessible tools that integrate manual and procedural expression.

INTRODUCTION
New tools and technologies have emerged that support the production of procedural, parametric, and generative forms of art. While differing in their applications, these art forms share the common property of being defined by a representational system of rules, relationships, and behaviors, which makes them flexible, adaptable, and capable of systematic revision. Currently, most professional procedural art is produced through computer programming. Describing art with code allows artists to manage complex structures, automate processes, and generalize and reuse operations [36, 26]. More broadly, procedural tools support exploration, experimentation, and play because their processes can be revised and iterated upon without loss of quality or affordance [25].

There is increasing interest in the artistic applications of programming, as indicated by the growth of coding platforms for art [34, 21, 24]. Yet programming still presents many challenges for artists. In general, programming is challenging to learn. Programming languages present barriers to incremental learning by requiring people to learn many concepts before accomplishing even simple tasks [18]. Furthermore, while manual artists and craftspeople learn mainly through observation and action of tacit manual skills [25], programming education often emphasizes a structured top-down approach of learning formal principles for application to concrete, pre-defined tasks [9]. Victor states that learning programming may always be challenging because learning abstraction is hard [51], but he argues that tools can be designed to make that challenge more tractable [49].

In addition to the challenges of learning to program, there are significant interaction differences between programming tools and software for manual art. Graphic illustration software is concrete: it approximates physical art media through
direct manipulation interactions. Concrete tools often have a gradual learning curve [44], and can play an important role in engendering creative diversity [39] and conceiving new ideas [43]. Programming tools, by comparison, are typically representational [48], where one edits a description of the work rather than the work itself¹. Representational tools can present an additional challenge for artists accustomed to working with and thinking in terms of concrete mediums.

Contrasting the creative opportunities of procedural art with the challenges of programming raises our research question: Can we support accessible and expressive procedural art by enabling people to describe procedural relationships through direct manipulation? Prior work in developing accessible procedural tools for art has focused on creating simplified textual programming languages and environments [33, 34, 12], augmenting graphical user interface (GUI)-based tools with visual programming languages [6], or linked editing between textual programming and direct manipulation [13, 2, 5]. Conversely, our approach is to augment the conventions of graphic art software to support the creation and modification of procedural relationships exclusively through manipulation of concrete artwork. In doing so, we build on prior work using direct manipulation to create dynamic relationships in data visualization [51], interactivity [15], and architecture [22], but with the new objective of supporting and extending the practices of manual fine artists. This goal is challenging because it requires developing a procedural representation that supports expressive creation, yet is compatible with direct-manipulation conventions.

This paper makes the following contributions: First, we introduce Para, a new direct-manipulation tool that supports procedural art through live, non-linear, and continuous manipulation. Second, we demonstrate core declarative procedural operations that can be expressed through direct manipulation, are easy to use, and enable diverse creative outcomes. These operations include declarative geometric and stylistic constraints, visually represented ordered lists that can be used to specify how constraints map to collections of objects, and declarative duplication to enable dynamic copying. Constraints, lists, and duplication can be combined in different ways to produce different outcomes. Third, we provide evidence for how the direct manipulation of procedural relationships can offer accessible entry points and extend manual practice through two open-ended studies. These studies evaluate the accessibility of our system among professional artists and the expressiveness of artwork they produce with it. To our knowledge, these are the first open-ended studies in the domain of direct manipulation procedural art. Fourth, we provide recommendations for building expressive direct manipulation procedural tools, as gleaned from evaluation.

BACKGROUND AND RELATED WORK
To inform the development of Para, we reviewed literature that discussed support for learning and expressiveness through programming. We also examined research about the practices of fine and commercial artists and visual designers. While artists and designers differ in their goals, they frequently rely on the same tools; for example, Photoshop and Processing are both used for art and design. Questions about how tools support different creative motivations are outside the scope of this paper. Rather, our research focused on how different tools support or hinder creative practice. Therefore, we examine creative tool use in commercial and fine-art. In the comparison of procedural and manual tools for art and design, we focused on two primary tensions: ease of use versus expressiveness, and concrete versus representational tools.

Ease of use versus expressiveness
Programming languages are challenging for end users because they must learn a great deal in order to produce simple results [27]. This tension is reflected in procedural tools for art and design. Creative coding applications like Open-Frameworks [21] and Processing [34] are extremely expressive; however, these tools require people to learn numerous textual programming conventions and lengthy APIs before producing basic artwork. These severe learning thresholds are common in end-user programming and can present insurmountable barriers to novices [18]. Visual programming languages [6, 1, 37, 7] can provide a more accessible entry point by providing an impression of directly constructing a program, rather than abstractly designing it [28], and represent an important initiative to support artists, designers, and other end-users in programming. We describe interaction differences between visual languages and our system in the following subsection.

A similar conflict between ease of use and expressiveness also exists in computer-aided design (CAD). Entry-level parametric tools often enable customization of existing designs, however the ability to compose new designs requires learning significantly more advanced tools and workflows. Many GUI-based CAD tools, including Rhino and Inventor, support procedural and parametric functionality by enabling designers to author scripts and programs that act on objects created in the GUI. These features offer new opportunities but are difficult to use and learn in comparison with the GUI [22]. When adapted for people without formal knowledge in math, geometry, and logic, CAD tools often take the form of customizable parametric models [11, 40]. Although these tools can increase participation, studies indicate that they do not produce a diversity of creative outcomes, nor scaffold novice use of advanced, open-ended CAD tools [29].

We seek to create accessible procedural tools that retain forms of expressiveness relevant to a specific domain. Research that demonstrates this approach in other domains includes interaction design via parallel source editing and tunable control interfaces [8], UI behavior programming through combination of declarative constraints, state machines and a live, visual notation [31], and the specification of UI behaviors through direct manipulation of their ordering [23].

In developing procedural tools for artists, much can be borrowed from research in supporting novice programmers in other domains. In supporting young people and novice CAD users, it is important to balance accessibility with expressive-

¹Our definition of representational is drawn from computer science, and is distinct from its meaning in art to describe realistic imagery.
ness. Often this can be achieved by presenting a small number of programming concepts in a relevant, creative context. Resnick and Silverman asserted that for young people, a little bit of programming goes a long way, and focused on developing tools with a minimal number of carefully selected programming concepts. This enables children to explore a variety of creative outcomes, while minimizing learning thresholds [38]. The Logo [33] and Scratch [37] programming languages are two examples of this approach, and apply carefully designed simple languages with computational drawing and interactive storytelling respectively. Similarly, in the CAD domain, MetaMorphe presents a digital fabrication design framework in a format similar to web scripting, making parametric design accessible and expressive for people with familiarity in web programming [46] and Jacobs and Buechley assisted novices in expressive forms of computational design by linking a constrained programming environment with physical crafting [12]. We designed Para around a minimal set of programming concepts in order to make it accessible to novice coders. We structured these concepts within the software so that they could be used to produce diverse outcomes.

Concrete interaction versus symbolic representation

In fine art, concrete tools and mediums are common. These range from the physical (brushes, carving tools, hands), to digital (using direct manipulation software to manually adjust bitmaps or vectors). There is evidence that concrete engagement aids creative decision making; designers often conceive ideas through reflection-in-action and through direct engagement with physical media [43]. Many digital interaction designers find it difficult to conceive of novel concepts while working in the immaterial domain of software [32]. Concrete engagement can also play a role in learning. Klemmer describes how concrete interactions can support learning of new concepts in ways that reading and listening do not [17]. In contrast to concrete mediums, programming is abstract and often requires working through a textual representation. Visual programming languages can reduce some of the challenges of textual languages, however they still require the artist to work through an abstract representation of the artwork rather than on an artifact itself [48]. Our approach is different from both textual and visual programming languages because it uses direct manipulation of the artwork to define and manipulate procedural relationships.

While it is difficult to describe certain computational concepts in concrete form, direct manipulation can be used to describe dynamic relationships in ways that are comparable to programming languages. The earliest example is SketchPad, which demonstrated that parametric relationships could be described by selecting and manipulating geometric shapes [45]. More recently, Kitty and Skuid aimed to reduce difficulty in animations and interactive infographics by creating dynamic behaviors through direct manipulation of a relational graph [15, 16] and Recursive Drawing enabled non-linear editing of self-similar designs through the nesting of drawing canvases [41]. Hoarau and Conversy demonstrated graphic design tools that enable users to indicate dependencies between the properties of objects [10], Xia et. al. applied object-oriented principles to reduce reliance on WIMP UIs for touch and tablet interfaces [52], and Blackwell demonstrated a direct manipulation system for procedural editing of bitmaps [4]. In data visualization, Drawing Dynamic Data Visualizations [51] and Apparatus [42] support the creation of interactive visualizations through direct manipulation.

Our work is differentiated from prior work in two ways: the domain in which we work, and our approach to evaluation. Whereas prior tools support data visualization, interactivity, and animation, or emphasize new interaction modalities, our objective is to develop accessible procedural tools that extend the practices of fine artists. This distinction is emphasized by Para’s support of iterative variation and dynamic duplication, which is absent from prior tools [10, 52, 15, 16]. We are inspired by prior work that suggests the creative potential of dynamic direct manipulation, but recognize the need to evaluate this approach in actual art practice. Much of the prior research lacks evaluation; Hoarau and Conversy are unsure if their interface is understandable due to lack of user evaluation, and Victor recognizes his tools are untested stating that they are “not necessarily the correct way of doing things”, but rather a starting point for exploring new interfaces [51]. Other tools are evaluated, but focus on tool accessibility and efficiency through predefined tasks [52, 15, 16]. Conversely, we seek to understand the expressive potential of our system in professional art practice, therefore we evaluate it through extended open-ended studies and present polished original participant artwork in our results.

### PARA SOFTWARE DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

Para is a software tool aimed at accessible yet expressive integration of procedural techniques in visual art through a direct manipulation interface. Before building Para, we developed design guidelines by compiling procedural artworks by professional artists including Joshua Davis, Casey Reas, Marius Watz, Emily Gobielle, Theo Watson, Christopher Coleman, and Erik Natzke. Analysis of this artwork revealed procedural aesthetics and methods consistent across the artworks (table 1, common). We also highlighted qualities found in only a few artworks that blended manual and procedural creation (table 1, rare). Following this initial analysis, we prototyped interactions that supported similar approaches and aesthetics but were compatible with direct manipulation. The primary conventions we sought to preserve were image-based communication of structural and organizational relationships, support for live and non-linear edits, removal of textual commands and expressions, and integration of interface components from direct manipulation art tools. We iteratively revised the prototype interactions into a unified system that

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common</th>
<th>Rare</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Complex forms and patterns through procedural duplication and object-oriented programming.</td>
<td>Close integration of procedural and manual illustration.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iterative variation across scale, form and color.</td>
<td>Procedural transformation of hand-drawn artwork.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regular geometric/ symmetrical distribution of form.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generative compositions through random distributions (normal, uniform, etc.).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Techniques identified in professional procedural artwork.

A series which cycles through the values of the objects in the Polar values based on a diameter determined by the min and max values of the reference. Random seed is re-calculated when min or max is manually changed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Iterative Behavior</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interpolation</td>
<td>Evenly distributed values sampled from a Lagrange polynomial derived from the reference.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Random</td>
<td>A uniform distribution of random values between the min and max values of the reference. Random seed is re-calculated when min or max is manually changed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaussian</td>
<td>A normal distribution of values with the mean derived from the first reference object and a standard deviation derived from the distance between the first and last object.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radial</td>
<td>Polar values based on a diameter determined by the min and max values of the reference.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternate</td>
<td>A series which cycles through the values of the objects in the reference (e.g., for reference values 360, 45, 250, the result will be 360, 45, 250, 360, 45, ...)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Iterative constraint behavior options.

could produce sample artwork. We informed this revision through regular meetings with one artist (Natzke), and interviews with two others (Gobielle and Coleman). In the remainder of this section we detail the interface and feature set of Para in relation to these guidelines, and illustrate how these features enable different forms of expression.

Interface

We developed Para as vector drawing software because it enabled us to structure the interface and interactions around software used by artists. The interface features analogs of elements in digital illustration software including tools for manual shape creation, selection, and transformation (fig 1 a); a panel adjusting stylistic and geometric properties of vector artwork (fig 1 g); and a document structure panel which displays the current components in the drawing (fig 1 e). Para is implemented in javascript using Backbone.js [3], and the Paper.js vector graphics scripting framework [19]. Although Paper.js contains methods for managing hierarchies of vector graphics, we did not use this functionality; the procedural nature of Para required us to develop our own representation for document structure which we detail below.

Constraints

In textual procedural tools, complex relationships often are comprised of simpler, low-level operations and relationships. Para builds on this approach through object-to-object constraints which serve as the fundamental building block for advanced procedural functionality. Constraints allow artists to create relationships between geometric or stylistic properties of a minimum of two vector objects: a reference (the object whose properties are referenced in the constraint) and a relative (the object being constrained). Constraints satisfy three important conventions of direct manipulation. First, they support non-linear edits without creating errors or inconsistencies. Second continuous direct manipulation edits to a constraint reference results in live updates to corresponding relatives. Third, constraints provide a visual means of describing mathematical relationships between graphical forms. When created, constraints preserve the current state of the drawing. In their simplest form, one-to-one constraints are represented as expressions of the form $f(x) = x + o$ with $x$ the value of the reference property and $o$ the existing offset between the reference property and relative property prior to constraint. This format preserves any difference in values between the reference and relative properties when the constraint is created, enabling artists to describe constraint relationships by drawing them rather than by writing them as a mathematical expression. The constraint tool (%) enables the creation of one-to-one constraints by selecting the relative object and reference in succession. When the reference is selected, a set of icons appears over the reference object (fig 1 d) which enables the artist to specify the property to constrain: position, scale, rotation, fill and stroke color, stroke weight, or a sub-property of these. We extended the functionality of Constraint.js [30] to handle constraint propagation and added functionality to detect and prevent constraint cycles.

Figure 1 demonstrates one application of constraints to produce variations in the colors of a flower illustration. Here, the fill color of the inner red portion of the flower is constrained to the fill color of the yellow center and the outer orange portion is constrained to the red portion. As the hue, lightness, or saturation of the center is changed, the colors of the outer petals shift while maintaining their original offset. This enables global relative color changes across a drawing from a single edit (fig 1 h). This also demonstrates how edits propagate across chained constraints to secondary relatives. By varying which sub-properties are constrained, artists can fine-tune how different parts of the drawing respond to an edit.

Lists

Our discussions with procedural artists highlighted the importance of supporting efficient manipulation of large numbers of visual elements. Textual tools enable management of multiple objects through abstract datatypes to store collections of data and control structures like loops to efficiently generate iterative variations across collections. In Para, multiple objects are managed through lists: visually represented, ordered collections of artwork that can be procedurally manipulated. Lists are higher-level structures and can be used to map transformations to multiple objects. Lists are created from selected objects using the list button and appear in the list section of the document structure panel (fig 2 a). Manual
Table 2 lists the current options and their calculation constraints from a drop-down menu in the constraint inspector allows artists to select different mapping behaviors for cause interpolation does not support all distributions, Para and ellipses, by adding more shapes to the reference list. Because interpolating across the values of the objects in the reference list containing two green rectangles (fig 2 a). The artist can constrain the 14 small orange outer portions of each petal (fig 1) using a list and a single constraint.

Para’s lists also facilitate iterative variation similar to that found in textually-generated procedural art. This is achieved through many-to-many constraints: constraints in which both the reference and relative are lists. Many-to-many constraints create iterative mappings where each object in the relative list is constrained differently based on its index. This behavior is possible because unlike other tools [10, 15], Para’s lists are ordered. The values to constrain the relative are calculated by interpolating across the values of the objects in the reference list. Figure 2 demonstrates how a many-to-many constraint can be used to dynamically modify the distribution of a pattern. In this example, the shapes of a repeating ellipse and diamond pattern are constrained on the x and y axes by a reference list containing two green rectangles (fig 2 a). The artist can update the distribution of the diamond ellipse pattern by modifying the position of the rectangles. In the process, the geometric offsets are maintained between each member of the reference and relative.

Different types of distributions can be created by altering the content of the reference list. If the reference list contains more than two members, a non-linear reference value set is produced (fig 2 c). These values are sampled from a Lagrange polynomial that is produced from the values of the objects of the reference list. Moving the second rectangle in the reference list up or down changes the polynomial and results in the reference and relative are lists. Many-to-many constraints create iterative mappings where each object in the relative list is constrained differently based on its index. This behavior is possible because unlike other tools [10, 15], Para’s lists are ordered. The values to constrain the relative are calculated by interpolating across the values of the objects in the reference list. Figure 2 demonstrates how a many-to-many constraint can be used to dynamically modify the distribution of a pattern. In this example, the shapes of a repeating ellipse and diamond pattern are constrained on the x and y axes by a reference list containing two green rectangles (fig 2 a). The artist can update the distribution of the diamond ellipse pattern by modifying the position of the rectangles. In the process, the geometric offsets are maintained between each member of the reference and relative.

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Duplicators Our analysis of procedural art demonstrated the importance of automatically creating new forms for generative compositions. Constraints and lists facilitate procedural relationships, but cannot generate new objects by themselves. To address this, we added duplicators to Para. Duplicators are specialized lists with the ability to declaratively control the number of objects they contain. Duplicators are initialized on a single object. Doing so generates or deletes new shapes when the count is increased or decreased. When first created, duplicators contain self-referencing constraints on all geometric and stylistic properties. Practically, this results in iterative variations across all members of a duplicator on any property by directly manipulating either the first or last objects. Updates to the number of copies of a duplicator will preserve these variations. Like other constraints, duplicator constraints can be modified using the constraint interface to change offsets, specify exceptions, and change constraint behavior for different properties and sub-properties. Duplicators also can act as references or relatives in manually created constraints. To preserve correspondence across the geometry of their members, duplicators enact a constraint-like behavior on the paths of all of the duplicates wherein changes to the points of any individual shape is propagated across the other copies. Duplicators build on the low-level functionality of lists and constraints to enable creation and management of distributions with many shapes, for example, the creation of a random star field in Figure 3. A single five-point star is drawn and duplicated (fig 3 a). The start and end copies are manually altered by position, scale, and fill color to produce a diagonal line of stars growing in size and brightness (fig 3 b). The x-position constraint mapping is changed to random, producing a vertical gradient from light to dark (fig 3 c). Changing the mapping of the y-position constraint to random results in a field of stars with a random distribution of brightness and
Does the tool encourage thinking about procedural art tools? Can artists integrate their prior expertise?

**Reflection:**

Is it easy for novice programmers to use the tool? Can people understand the tool’s artistic applications?

**Creative outcomes:**

Does the tool support the creation of different procedural aesthetics? Does the tool enable creating variations of a piece?

**Process:**

How does working with the tool compare to traditional art tools? Can artists integrate their prior expertise? Can people move between manual and procedural creation?

**Limitations**

Our study required professionals to rely on prototype software with less sophisticated drawing tools than commercial software, which people found limiting. This is common in systems-building research. Although Processing was the most relevant textual procedural art tool to compare with Para, it also includes features for animation and interactivity. These features do not exist in Para and are therefore not

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Id</th>
<th>Background</th>
<th>Manual Art</th>
<th>Digital Art</th>
<th>Coding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>p1</td>
<td>graphic design</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p2</td>
<td>graphic design</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p3</td>
<td>design</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p4</td>
<td>printmaking</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p5</td>
<td>art and CS</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p6</td>
<td>illustration</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p7</td>
<td>installation design</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p8</td>
<td>architecture</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>p9</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p11</td>
<td>Product Design</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smith</td>
<td>painting graphic design</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 5. Artwork from workshop. Left: conditional-design from Processing. Right: Designs generated from multiple hexagonal duplicators from Para combined with a center motif from Processing.

directly comparable. We compensated in our study by focusing on Processing’s capabilities for static procedural art. Para’s cycle prevention feature was not implemented prior to our workshops, however we notified participants of the issue and with few exceptions, people did not create cycles. Our in-depth study surveys the experiences of of one person; however, evaluations with additional artists from different backgrounds would likely reveal additional insights. We believe the variety of aesthetics and styles produced by one person suggests the potential of our approach to support a variety of artists. Finally, it is challenging to measure expressiveness because different artists are expressive in different ways. We therefore present the artwork created with our system, in order to provide concrete examples of its expressiveness.

Workshop results
Overall results indicate that participants found the direct manipulation interface of Para more intuitive to use than textual programming in Processing. People who specialized in graphic design and illustration prior to the workshop felt that Para fit well with their current practices and they were interested in using it in the future. People with backgrounds outside of graphic art and illustration were less interested. Participants felt that textual code could provide greater control for experienced programmers. In the following section, we detail these results in the context of our evaluation criteria.

Ease of use: All participants were able to follow our instructions for using Para but struggled to understand our instructions for Processing. These observations were substantiated by survey responses: 7 participants stated that they felt Para was easy to learn, and 3 felt Processing was easy to learn. Many participants said the difficulty of Processing increased their desire to practice it when they had the benefit of instructor support. Conversely, participants said Para was familiar and felt confident they could learn it independently.

Process: All participants experimented with both Processing and Para throughout the workshop. Participants exhibited a mix of responses with regard to how Processing fit with their prior art practice (mean:3.6, std:0.92); however, nearly all participants expressed interest in using the tool in the future (mean: 4.3, std:0.47). In survey and verbal responses, participants indicated they struggled with understanding the logic of Processing programs. Several people described their process as one of trial and error. In addition, people were frustrated by not being able to adjust artwork manually. Despite the challenges in learning Processing, several people talked about how they could exercise greater control and perform tasks not possible in Para. Four participants stated that Para fit well with their existing practice, and six (including the first 4) stated that they could see themselves using Para in future work. People who had expertise in manual art and minimal programming experience were the most interested in using Para in the future. For people with interest in using procedural tools for 3D design and interactivity, Para was less relevant by design. Primary frustrations with Para centered on reduced sophistication of the direct manipulation tools in comparison with commercial equivalents.

Creative outcomes: Because of the short time frame, participants were not able to create polished artwork with either Para or Processing, although participants made a series of sketches that suggested different directions for more sophisticated work (fig 5). Participants who relied exclusively on Processing primarily created variations of a radial distribution example we presented in the instruction, incorporating randomness on opacity, scale, or rotation of shapes (fig 5 a,b). Participants who used Para exhibited a range of approaches: one person used portions of an illustration created prior to the workshop in a duplicated pattern (fig 5 c), while another experimented with the duplication functionality to simulate 3D rotated columns. Another participant generated a series of incrementally rotated geometric shapes. Using Illustrator, he combined these forms with a radial pattern from Processing (fig 5 d). Eight people stated that Processing enabled them to create things they would have difficulty creating otherwise (mean:4, std:1). 10 people stated that Para enabled them to create things they would have difficulty making otherwise (mean:4.1, std:0.83).

Reflection: In discussions and surveys, most participants felt that textual programming could be a powerful tool for art; however, they had a mix of reactions to using Processing. For several participants, it underscored their prior associations of textual programming as inaccessible. The majority of participants felt that they would have to practice extensively with Processing to create sophisticated projects. In the discussion and open-ended responses, participants expressed greater levels of confidence using Para because it had features similar to digital illustration programs. Others described Para’s interface as more intuitive than Processing. Several people wrote that they found the live feedback in Para helpful; however, these responses were solely from people with prior experience with textual programming tools. None of the people new to programming commented on the live aspects, suggesting that people who only use direct manipulation may take liveness as a given in digital tools. Several participants talked about how using Para and Processing for different purposes. One participant said Para was ideal for creating complex static illustrations, but Processing offered the opportunity for interactive pieces. Another participant said that Para and Processing were appropriate for different points in her artistic process, and said she would use Processing if she had a clear goal in mind.

In-depth study methodology
The workshop underscored the learnability of our system but did not demonstrate how Para performs in real art practice. We performed a second study to understand what kinds of artwork a person could create with Para through extended use. We commissioned the professional artist Kim Smith to use
Para for two weeks to create several pieces of art. Smith has extensive experience in abstract painting (fig 7 a), realistic illustration (fig 6 k,l), and graphic design. She is an expert with both manual and digital tools (table 3). She had an interest in applying procedural techniques in her work but was reluctant to invest the time needed to learn programming.

We met with Kim in person 6 times over the course of the study, every 2-3 days, for 1-2 hours apiece. First, we introduced her to Para in a 1 hour training session. In later meetings we reviewed the artwork she produced and discussed her experience. We gave her the choice of what to create during the study, but suggested experimenting with abstract and illustrated styles. Similar to the workshop, we allowed her to incorporate other digital tools into her work with Para. In the results, we distinguish between portions of artwork produced with Para and those produced by other means. In addition to written surveys and interviews, Kim wrote short reflections after every working session. We used automated surveys within Para to assess her experience while using the system [40]. Automated dialogs appeared every 20 minutes asking questions about her current task, goals and difficulties, and a snapshot of her work was saved. Throughout the study, we used Smith’s feedback to iterate on Para’s functionality.

In-depth study results
Smith found Para to be intuitive, and felt she could use it more effectively and with greater confidence than textual programming and parametric CAD tools. She produced seven finished pieces and applied Para to abstract and illustrative styles. In her artwork, she used duplicators and iteratively constrained lists, but did not find 1-1 constraints as useful. Smith felt Para was compatible with her painting practice and also offered new opportunities for creative exploration. Using Para altered the way she thought about her artistic process, and she requested to continue using the software afterwards.

Ease of use: Smith’s feedback from the experience sampling indicated that she struggled initially with Para’s vector selection and editing tools which were less refined than those in commercial software. Otherwise, she described the Para interface as accessible and enjoyable. Specifically, she said the emphasis on visual manipulation was “welcoming and friendly”, and contrasted this with using complex CAD software and textual programming tools. She also stated that Para made her “comfortable starting with a blank canvas” because the visual interface gave her confidence that she could produce something, and develop a process. When asked about the minimal procedural feature set, she said: “I think there’s a lot of options in a very small parameter set.”

Smith contrasted her use of Para with her use of textual programming tools: “It’s like this big wall that is slowing me down. I would imagine if I was good with Processing there would be a lot more I could do with it... But the entry point for me is high. For a long time it’s going to be in my way.

Smith found some procedural aspects of Para to be difficult. Initially she struggled with understanding the order in which shapes should be selected for 1-1 constraints. We modified the constraint tool to automatically pull up the property selection interface for selected objects when the tool was enabled. Smith said these revisions made the tool more intuitive. Although she experimented with 1-1 constraints and felt they might be useful for other artists, Smith never found a way to use them in her work. Smith also encountered organizational challenges when creating extremely complex work. At times it was difficult for her to identify and select specific procedural relationships. We partially addressed this by adding the ability to label constraints, lists, and geometry; however, organization remained an issue. In discussion, Smith pointed out how organization was also a challenge in non-procedural digital art tools, but felt that organizational mechanisms were particularly important for tools like Para because they made it easier to quickly build complexity.

Creative Outcomes: In week 1, Smith created four abstract pieces using Para (see examples in (fig 7 b,d). She produced them by drawing vector shapes in Para, and used duplicators to create multiple copies of with iterative changes in color, scale, and position. In week 2, Smith made two more abstract pieces. These incorporated procedural variation of opacity and blend modes, and constrained lists (fig 7 c). She also made an illustration (fig 6 j), that applied duplicators, lists, and iterative constraints to the creation of flowers (fig 6 a-d) and a snake (fig 6 e-i). In abstract and illustrative pieces, Smith used Photoshop to add additional color and texture by using painted imagery as a transparent overlay and background.
extend existing digital art tools.

cedural structure of Para demonstrated how our system could effectively incorporate features from Photoshop into the procedural art media, stating: "In a lot of ways [Para] feels similar to traditional tools. The freedom to implement quickly, understanding what’s happening, but not needing to have the foresight ahead of time [allows for] a more sculptural way of creating."

Smith associated the exploration possible with Para with traditional art media, stating: "In a lot of ways [Para] feels similar to traditional tools. The freedom to implement quickly, understanding what’s happening, but not needing to have the foresight ahead of time [allows for] a more sculptural way of creating."

Because she was interested in variations in color and layering, Smith requested support for opacity and blend modes\(^3\), which were features she relied on in Photoshop. We added UI components for opacity and blend mode that matched those in Photoshop and made it possible to iteratively constrain these properties. Smith incorporated these features into her abstract work (fig 7 c,e) and described how procedural control of opacity and blend enabled her to use subtractive masks and filters in a dynamic fashion. The ability to quickly and effectively incorporate features from Photoshop into the procedural structure of Para demonstrated how our system could extend existing digital art tools.

Smith initially focused on producing abstract work because this was representative of her fine-art practice. She felt Para was useful for illustrative work, but felt the goal-oriented nature of illustration required using the system with greater control. The lack of refined drawing tools made the illustrative work laborious at points. While Smith found constraints and duplicators useful in both abstract and illustrative work, she used other procedural aspects less. Lists were confusing at first, and it was labor-intensive to manually constrain them. We simplified lists to function in similar way as duplicators with automatically created self-referencing constraints. Smith said this modification corresponded with her objectives, and applied the new lists in her illustrations (fig 6 j) and abstract work (fig 7 d,f). Producing numerous variations of pieces with Para led Smith to identify the need for versioning functionality.

Reflection: Smith reflected on how Para was uniquely suited for combining abstract and illustrative forms: "I think there’s a space between abstraction and representation\(^4\) . . . this ambiguous in-between space where Para could be very useful.

She also described how the process behind a work of art was as important as the work itself: "I want to create things that surpass the tool and it’s not so obvious that some other process did all the interesting work."

As a result, she felt more successful when using Para in a way that obscured the use of obvious procedural aesthetics. In the closing interview, Smith described how working with Para had changed the way she thought about her own art process: The inclusion of Para changes not just the visual output. It changes the process, and that’s a lot of what I think about — how the tool changes the way you make things.

DISCUSSION

The components of Para provide one entry point into procedural art. Here we discuss the creative opportunities that resulted from the design of those components through three principle questions. Was Para compatible with the skills of manual artists? Did Para offer meaningful creative opportunities? What are the limitations of direct manipulation?

In addressing these questions, we provide the following recommendations for building expressive direct manipulation procedural tools: 1) Extending manual drawing tools with declarative relationships allows experienced artists to leverage existing skills. 2) It is possible to preserve expressiveness in direct-manipulation procedural tools by designing the tool around a small number of procedural concepts that can be combined in different ways to produce different outcomes. 3) Procedural tools with concretely represented relationships can enable productive exploration of form, color, and composition for professional artists.

Was Para compatible with the skills of manual artists?

The design of Para was partially based on the theory that a direct manipulation procedural tool would be more compatible with manual practice and enable manual artists to leverage existing skills. Two points of evidence support this theory. First, there are clear stylistic similarities between Smith’s...
prior work and the pieces she created with Para, despite being produced with different tools. The forms and compositions in her abstract paintings mirror her abstract work in Para, and her use of color and blending in her watercolor illustrations corresponds with her Para illustrations. These commonalities suggest that in addition to making use of its procedural affordances, Smith was able to transfer her prior skills and practices to Para. Second, both Smith and participants in the workshop described Para as “intuitive”, “enjoyable” and “familiar” in contrast to their experience with textual tools.

The intuitive qualities of Para are important because aside from supporting accessibility, intuitive tools support specific creative practices. People who think through movement, intuition, and visual impression require computational tools that validate intuitive and relational mindsets in order to be personally expressive [47]. In line with this, Smith and many of our workshop participants stated that intuition played an important role in their art. This suggests that direct manipulation procedural tools offer two ways to extend manual practices: by enabling intuitive manipulation of procedural relationships and by providing procedural techniques that are aligned with both the affordances and interaction paradigms of conventional graphic art tools.

Did Para offer meaningful creative opportunities?
A common trade-off in tool design is that the more accessible tools are, the less expressive they become. However, the results of our studies demonstrate that Para’s accessibility did not prohibit expressive creation by professionals. Although our system contained a minimal number of procedural concepts, the artwork people created contained procedural forms and patterns comparable to those created with textual tools. The sketches produced in the workshop (fig 5 d) demonstrated radial distributions comparable in complexity and appearance to those created in Processing (fig 5 a-b). Smith’s illustration demonstrates parametric modulation in color, scale, and rotation across repeated forms, and her illustrative and abstract work contains generative forms and patterns. Parametric variation, generative form, and complexity via repetition are considered to be primary affordances of applying programming to art and design [36].

Para also offered new creative opportunities by facilitating new processes for making art. Smith described how the ability to rapidly produce and manipulate complex compositions facilitated exploration and iteration. She also felt that the generativity in Para led to new ways of thinking about the creative process, describing it as “a way of expanding one’s creative mind”. Finally, Smith identified unique creative opportunities in combining procedural exploration with manual control, which she noted were unique to Para. Overall study results and participant artwork demonstrate how a small number of reconfigurable procedural concepts can support new processes and aesthetics through procedural exploration of form, color, and composition, as well as new ways of thinking about the creative process itself.

What are the limitations of direct manipulation?
Despite the intuitive qualities of direct manipulation tools, they are limited in some ways compared to textual tools. In Para, people sometimes struggled with interpreting and controlling complex relationships. Symbolic textual expressions can concisely and unambiguously represent complex relationships in ways that images cannot [25]. People also became frustrated attempting to make precise patterns through direct selection, or manage the organization of particularly complex compositions. In comparison to Para, and direct-manipulation software in general, textual programming tools can better support numerical evaluation and accuracy. Furthermore, computational abstraction as expressed through textual tools can greatly aid in complex organizational tasks.

While the representational nature of programming can create a barrier for manual creation, it also offers opportunities for reflection. Code can simultaneously serve as a functional object and as a record of ideas and process [20], thus, writing code can enable active reflection on the relationships that define one’s work. Understanding abstraction is difficult [50], and our studies demonstrate that on its own, direct manipulation does not lead to the understanding of representational concepts. However, given the confidence people expressed when using Para, direct manipulation of procedural relationships may provide a way to make the challenge of learning abstract representational tools more approachable. Alan Kay theorized that direct manipulation might aid in the learning process of representational systems by helping people to develop mental maps of abstract concepts [14]. Therefore, with further development, tools like Para could assist manual artists in the process of understanding computational abstraction and benefiting from its application to their art. Overall we believe there is potential expand the expressiveness of systems like Para through close integration of direct manipulation and textual programming paradigms. Systems that enable artists to express relationships textually and then manipulate them through direct manipulation may scaffold learning and support new forms of creative expression.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK
Through development and evaluation of a direct manipulation procedural art tool, we demonstrate that it is possible to support concrete and manual creation while simultaneously enabling expressive forms of procedural design. Going forward, we see additional opportunities in evaluating procedural direct manipulation within the context of self efficacy and its correspondence with the mental models of visual artists. We are also excited about the creative opportunities of procedural direct manipulation, and the potential for future systems which integrate this approach with other forms of programming. Overall, we see Para as a platform for developing new technologies that further support the combination of manual and procedural creation.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
We thank all the artists that participated in our workshop. Special thanks to Kim Smith, and also to Michael Craig for contributing to development. We would also like to thank N. Gillian, R. Jacobs, D. Mellis, A. Zoran, E. Natzke, the Dynamic Medium Group, and M. Resnick and the Lifelong Kindergarten Group.
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