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A Low-Cost Markerless motion capture system to automate Functional Gait Assessment: Feasibility Study

Osman Darici[1], Chanel Cabak[1], Jeremy D Wong[1,2]

Faculty of Kinesiology

Department of Biomedical Engineering

Abstract

Functional gait assessments in older adults have traditionally required manual in-person quantification of clinically-relevant metrics such as walking speed and step placement. This reliance on skilled labour hinders the frequency with which they are performed, and reduces their generalizability and replicability. To standardize and simplify gait assessments, we here leverage recently-developed open-source tools to produce a low-cost, AI driven markerless motion capture system. Validation of data collected with a traditional marker-based system on subjects (N=3) showed strong correlation to laboratory-standard measures of step length (R^2=0.989), step width (R^2=0.986), and body speed (R^2=0.964), suggesting that open-source markerless systems are currently sufficient to be used in gait assessments. Older adult subjects (N=5) performed the complete functional gaita assessment (FGA), and the system demonstrated data consistent with previous findings. Additional standard measurements were proposed to supplement and systematize existing FGA workflows. This markerless motion capture system demonstrates a proof-of-principle system for performing analyses of functional gait.

Introduction

Biomechanical analysis has largely been confined to laboratory settings, with limited application in practical environments such as clinics or rehabilitation. This is primarily due to the high cost of motion capture, and the complexity of data processing. Functional gait is an important indicator of overall health, and may provide critical information about fall risk. Falls in older adults are both prevalent and can dramatically reduce quality of life [1–3], and incur an estimated ~$10.3 billion per year in Canada[2] and $50 billion in the USA[3]. To address the current lack of standardization and ease-of use, we leverage recently-developed open-source tools to demonstrate the feasibility of a low-cost, AI driven markerless motion capture system to assess functional gait.

Three dimensional (3D) motion-capture is often of limited use in a clinical setting because it consumes money for equipment and ongoing software licensing, requires substantial time and expertise to analyse, and yet yields a large dataset that is difficult to convert into useful metrics that can predict health. Traditionally, high-frequency motion capture cameras are placed in a dedicated lab space to encircle the subject and record the position of limbs. Most commonly, limb position has been inferred from markers placed on the skin to track limb segments, a process which requires substantial skill, and consumes on the order of 30-60 min per subject. Following calibration of cameras to optimally estimate their positions, the set of 2D images recorded from cameras around the room are combined (often via proprietary software) to render a 3D motion capture. The recorded marker positions are not necessarily consistent through time, and must be "cleaned" to interpolate through dropped frames, or corrected for erroneous marker swaps. Recently, Markerless laboratory systems have begun to be used and have comparable accuracy, but at no major reduction in cost[4,5] due to software licensing. Present 3D motion capture systems thus have yet to achieve a widespread adoption because of prohibitive cost and analytical time.

A cost-effective motion capture system could make older adult functional gait assessments routine, quantifiable, and comparable, by standardizing existing clinical assessments. Here we highlight three established testing methods to show the difficulties in making assessments routine. Current

approaches assess the functional level of gait and balance by collecting simple movement lateral
step placements, walking duration, and walking speed. Timed Up and Go (TUG)[6], Functional Gait
Assessment (FGA)[7], The Edinburgh Visual Gait Score (EVGS)[8], have been developed to monitor gait
for clinical decision making and fall risk prediction. TUG and FGA do not require any sophisticated
equipment, but the resulting quantification is then more subjective: task time for each is measured
frequently via stop-watch, requiring trained personnel and limiting comparability. Moreover, FGA
identifies reduction in functional gait In FGA, lateral step placements constitute the remaining
assessment data, and are assessed by visual identification, again requiring training and limiting
across-subject and across-appointment comparability. EVGS outputs more sophisticated gait
metrics such as joint angles, but requires time to process[8] still depends on the observer's decision,
may lack of inter-rater reliability[9,10], and may not be predictive. These methods reflect the constraints
of performing quantitative assessments within a clinical setting. An affordable and simple end-to-
end motion capture system that quantifies gait metrics across these tests would reduce clinician
bias, save assessment time, simplify clinician workflow, and provide comparable data. In this paper
we focus on the Functional gait assessment, although we believe our approach is generalizable.

Advances in artificial intelligence and computer vision led to accurate pose estimation and
markerless motion capture techniques [11-14] that are opensource and present the possibility of motion
capture for a few hundred dollars. In this study, we tested the feasibility of one of these systems to
assess young and old adults performing tasks of FGA[15]. Utilizing only 3 low-cost webcams, we
measured motion data and found comparable accuracy to a marker-based motion capture system.
This set-up is capable of measuring step length and width, and step speed, and thereby obviate the
need for these measures to be performed by a clinician. We believe that this set-up can easily be
adapted for clinics in performing assessments, and reduce the subjective bias of the user to provide
sufficiently accurate gait parameters.

Figure 1: Experimental setup and validation experiment. A: Camera placement, with approximate distances relative to the
left edge of the walkway. B: Experimental validation of step placements, using markers placed on the feet, sacrum and
head. C: Validation of markerless data: step length, width and walking speed.

Methods

Ethics

Older adult subjects (N=5) provided their written informed consent according to institutional review board procedures.

Design

We first established the validity of using an opensource markerless motion capture system (Freemocap)[15] to record clinically-relevant metrics from walking—namely those used in FGA, 1) movement time; and 2) step width and step length—by comparing markerless foot placement position and the resulting step times and durations, to those from an active optical motion capture system commonly used in biomechanical studies (Phasespace Inc.). Next, we performed Functional Gait Assessment on young adult controls and Older adults[16]. We placed the analysis code in a repository for use by practitioners interested in performing their own analysis.

Setup

The markerless motion capture system used 3 (Jetaku Inc; Amazon) web cameras placed laterally to the main 6m walking axis (Figure 1A). As a demonstration of feasibility, a medium performance desktop PC (2018; 3.4 GHz; 4 Cores; 16 GB Ram) was used to record and process data. Total added cost of the cameras and usb extension cables was less than $200 (CAD).

The beginning of experiment session before recording data required approximately 20 minutes of time to setup cameras and perform 1) calibration and 2) capture volume orientation. To calibrate the system, the markerless motion capture system optimally estimates the 3D position of web cameras, and accounts for visual distortion of the camera optics. This is done by simultaneously recording video data from a Charuco board—a single black-and-white calibration image with known checkerboard pattern and dimension. To accommodate a 6m walking area, a large poster of dimensions (square size: 15.7 cm) was used. Custom software optimizes the 3D position of the cameras to minimize the 3D-positional error of the detected checkerboard patterns (or "bundle adjustment[17]"). The software[15] reports the number of full boards detected from each camera, and provides some information about calibration accuracy; practically, we ensured that at least 400 boards were recorded for from each of the web cameras for each of our recording sessions. This calibration process took 2 minutes of Charuco positioning, and about 10 minutes of computer processing time. Note that this calibration process needs to be done only once per camera configuration; stationary camera positions, such as those securely anchored without potential for repositioning, might only require one calibration.

To perform capture volume orientation, subjects stood at the beginning of the walkway and then at 5m, and 1 m right of the walkway. This procedure performed two functions. It defined the plane of the walking area, allowing rotation of the recorded data to interpretable dimensions. Additionally, the known magnitude of these 5m and 1m distances, while typically within about 5% of the true distances, were used to linearly rescale movements uniformly from the origin.

121   During data processing, keypoint software estimates the position of joints and other points of
122   interest on the body (Google Mediapipe). The software performs a lowpass filter (25 Hz) to reduce
123   the effect of joint misestimation, motion blur, and other artefacts.

Experiment 1

We performed our first experiment to determine the validity of the markerless motion capture
system to compute three measures that are necessary and sufficient to automate FGA: step length,
step width, and walking speed. To determine the accuracy of computer vision methods, we used
marker-based motion capture and collected 6 markers per person to capture feet, torso, and head
position. We simultaneously recorded walking trials of a 4 m distance with both systems, under two
conditions: normal step width, and step width where subjects were asked to step on the edge of the
30 cm marked path.

We compared the estimated positions of the two systems by using the heel marker position from
the markered system to the foot position from markerless motion capture. We time-aligned the two
systems by determining the maximum cross-correlation between the two extracted walking bouts
after upsampling the markerless system (30Hz) to the markered system's framerate (240 Hz). We
subtracted the initial (T=0) position of each left foot to register the two systems at the beginning of
the walking bout.

We computed step length and width as the distance between two consecutive foot placements. We
defined body speed as the distance between consecutive midstance events divided by the change
in time.

Experiment 2

142   Older adult subjects (N=5; mean age: 83 years) were asked to perform a complete functional gait
143   assessment, and timed up and go. We performed three repetitions of each task.

Markerless Setup

Accurate detection of body segments is sensitive to visual elements that make it difficult for the
Mediapipe algorithm to clearly separate body keypoints from the background. Moreover,
illumination—which affects shutter speed and thus motion blur—can affect localization. Optimal
algorithm performance was achieved by using contrasting shoes with the ground colour—either
white or dark shoes against the grey floor—and similarly contrasting colours for clothing, that fit
relatively tight to the body. These adjustments can substantially affect the algorithm's tracking
accuracy substantially, and occasionally performed poorly despite reasonable contrast, which we
speculate may be related to particular aspects of the motion being absent from the training set.
Therefore, we found it important that body keypoints be checked once after normal walking to
determine that tracking of the feet and head were accurate.

Data analysis

We developed custom Matlab code to analyze walking bouts, focusing on the metrics used in
Functional Gait Assessment: namely step length, step width, foot placement, and walking speed.
Briefly, the software extracts a bout of walking gait from kinematic data by detecting initiation and
termination events using cross-correlation of a template of foot speed during initiation and

termination of gait. To identify step placements during the bout, foot speed was low-pass filtered at
3 Hz, and regions where footspeed was below the speed threshold of 0.15 m/s were identified as
stance regions. We compute

To analyze gait bouts, we first identified the initiation of each walking sequence by cross-correlating
the start of each bout with a predefined gait initiation template created from the sum of left and
right foot speed. This approach allowed us to accurately segment individual walking sequences
across trials.

Foot placement data were processed by applying a low-pass filter at 3 Hz to the speed of each foot.
Using this filtered signal, we identified midstance as the midpoint of a region where foot speed
remained below 0.15 m/s, indicating the foot was securely on the ground. Step timing was
subsequently calculated based on the interval between consecutive midstance points, allowing for
accurate determination of step durations across each trial.

Head speed was used to estimate walking speed. Tracked head position was lowpass filtered (4th
order, 5Hz cutoff).

A specific area of difficulty with
Mediapipe is its identification of
foot location, which can
occasionally give erroneous foot
velocities that show
simultaneous acceleration of the
left and right feet during
midstance. This problem may be
exacerbated by poor lighting
conditions which increase
motion blur. While foot position
during static positions, such as
stance, is typically well-localized,
foot motion can be
misestimated. Because our trials
exclusively involved walking and
not running, we determined
simultaneous acceleration was
an artifact rather than a genuine
movement, and performed an
interpolation correction on the
foot trajectories whenever
sections of data displayed
simultaneous foot accelerations
exceeding 7.5 m/s^2.

We fit walking speed data to
power-law predictions of human

Figure 2: Comparison of markerless system foot placement estimates with traditional marker-based motion capture. A: individual steps identified via marker (O's) and markerless motion capture (X's). B: Step length measures for individual steps. C: Step width.

201 walking, under the assumption that older adults minimize the energetic cost to a combination of
202 energetic cost and linear time[18].

Results

Experiment 1

The markerless motion capture system was accurate in its detection of foot placement events (Figure
2A). The Markerless foot positions showed good agreement with the marker-based motion capture,
demonstrating high correlation in step length (R^2=0.989; Figure 2B) and step width (R^2=0.986; Figure
2C).

Body speed measures with the markerless
system were also similar to marker-based
motion capture. Figure 3 depicts step speed
across trials (Figure 3; R^2 = 0.964).

Experiment 2

In Experiment 2, we employed the Functional
Gait Assessment (FGA) for our older adult
subjects, which resulted in quantification of
individual footsteps (Figure 4A). Head speed
(Figure 4A, bottom) was sufficient to show
deviations in walking speed (speed projected
along the walking axis) for the FGA trials, relative
to nominal preferred walking (Trial 1).

Across subjects and repetitions, performance
variability was evident, with significant
fluctuations in maximum lateral step placement

Figure 3: Body speed comparison of marker-based (blue) and marker-less (red) foot steps.

225 (Figure 4B, top). While rarely did subjects exhibit different FGA classifications on successful
226 repetitions (denoted by horizontal black dotted lines), substantial variability is apparent.

227 Measures in addition to FGA that could be additionally used—step width, walking duration—were
228 qualitatively similar to FGA measures.

A FGA: Subject data

B FGA: Scoring

C Proposed supplementary measures

Figure 4: Functional Gait Assessment. A: Individual subject data. B: Functional Gait assessment scoring. Maximum lateral step placement for all FGA trials, across subjects (except for Steps trial). Data for mean aged subject groups adapted Walker 2007. C: Proposed additional measures of step width and movement duration.

Discussion

This study demonstrated the feasibility of a low-cost, AI-driven motion capture system utilizing three
standard web-cameras. The total cost of the added cameras and usb-extension cables is less than
$200 CAD. The computer was inexpensive and performance issues may especially be avoided in the
case where data are collected with a lightweight client program, and returned to a server for
processing. Through experiments on young and older adults, we showed that this system could
accurately capture foot trajectories in an absolute reference frame, achieving a comparable level of
accuracy for step width and step length to a gold-standard 10-camera motion capture system.
Furthermore, the system's utility was tested through Functional Gait Assessment (FGA) and provided
suitable data comparable to previous data[19].

The low-cost system exhibited strong agreement with laboratory standard, marker-based in
measuring step length and step width, and walking speed, which are useful predictors for functional
gait (Figures 4, 5, 6). These data currently form the foundation of clinical assessments, and here we
review the rationale behind recording these measures. Step width is particularly significant for
maintaining lateral stability[20–24], especially given the instability of human gait in the frontal plane[25].
Step length varies with walking speed[26,27] and the speed deteriorates with age[28]. Therefore, it may be
essential to track step length for assessing gait, particularly during unsteady walking conditions like
accelerating, decelerating, or changing directions where step length and stride length do not show
the same trends. Traditional systems for measuring step length and width, such as motion capture
systems or floor mats, are often costly and require technical expertise for data analysis. Our low-cost
system offers a viable, efficient alternative, delivering accurate measurements that can directly
benefit clinicians. We also propose the use of step width, in addition to or in place of lateral
excursion, which is not sensitive to details of the walkway and provides information about lateral
stability comparable to a substantial existing scientific literature.

A major contribution of this system is to reduce the subjective nature and burden of manual
determination of lateral step placement. We believe an automated markerless approach is
surprisingly robust and obviates the need for a clinician to carefully attend each step. Our system
successfully captured foot step placements during FGA. We measured step widths with very high R^2,
and RMSE of approximately 2cm. Lateral foot placement is an important metric in FGA, such that the
clinician should visually detect how far a foot moved away out of given limits (12 feet wide walkway).
The capability of measuring foot trajectories enabled quantifying lateral foot placement and as well
as the condition time (the duration that it takes to finish a condition i.e. walking straight) and therefore
automated scoring of FGA (FGA is based on scores of how fast a subject finishes a condition and how
far they get out of a 12 foot wide walk way within the condition), reducing the reliance on subjective
visual assessments by clinicians. This functionality reduces clinician workload as well and increases
the precision of gait assessments.

Our system also yields simple automated assessments of gait speed and walking duration. Gait
speed is a crucial metric in fall risk assessment and traditional approaches often involve single speed
measurements over set distances, relying on manual timing by clinician. This process is repeated
multiple times to see the deviations or deterioration (if any) in gait speed. Furthermore, gait speed is
combined with other measures such as trunk or head acceleration variability or stride length
variability and used to predict fall risk. Our system allows for a more detailed analysis by capturing

speed trajectories over varying distances and conditions, such as those in FGA tests (particularly
change in gait speed condition, Figure 6) as opposed to single speed measurement. Metrics like peak
speed, mean speed, acceleration, and deceleration durations can be quantified from the
trajectories. Therefore, our system can offer new metrics of speed for assessing gait speed changes
and fall risk. Furthermore, these metrics can be compared with optimal control models that predict
speed and provide foundations about the difference between older and young adults.

One limitation of the existing markerless system is the potential for motion of each foot to influence
the keypoint detection location of the other. Occasionally this results in positional artifacts such that
the stationary foot is briefly detected to move towards the swing foot as it crosses the stance leg. We
suspect that these errors likely stem from the underlying Mediapipe detection, since several different
open-source software packages, despite substantial differences in preprocessing and computer-
vision approaches, when utilizing the same backend keypoint detection of Mediapipe, display the
same artefacts[15,29]. Efforts to address these issues, such as using distinct footwear or shorts, yielded
limited improvement. Despite this, the system demonstrated high accuracy during foot-flat (stance)
phases, and filtering can substantially address the mistaken estimate of stance-leg motion, making
it reliable for FGA.

Future work will focus on enhancing the system's capabilities and usability. This includes increasing
the number or quality of webcams to extend coverage and reduce foot-tracking artifacts. We plan to
develop a user-friendly application interface that a healthcare professional can easily use to perform
gait assessments, such as FGA and TUG, and generate scores and illustrative graphs with just a few
button clicks. We also intend to keep patient records to support longitudinal tracking of gait metrics,
facilitating progress monitoring.

We also plan to explore integrating inertial measurement units (IMU's) with the motion capture
system. Combining data from IMU's mounted on the feet (measuring linear acceleration and
rotational velocity of the feet) can enhance the motion capture accuracy by correcting foot crossing
artifacts and extending the effective capture range. Another future objective is to position motion
capture cameras to cover extended distances and use them for position correction of IMU
measurements. When a subject walks their feet, movement can be measured with IMU's[30,31], but
absolute orientation and location errors from accelerometer drift may enlarge quickly in time. These
errors can be mitigated with our motion capture system. These open-source approaches
demonstrate the feasibility of much larger capture volumes and perhaps multiple simultaneous
subject recordings. For instance, assuming two cameras are sufficient to record an area of 2 meters
by 2 meters, then 10 cameras might be integrated to cover a large real-world coordinate system, and
provide body position data across a large functional region. Whenever the feet are in camera visibility,
the system can output real world feet position from the cameras, and these data could be integrated
into IMU position estimates (wider than what the motion capture system covers), and may include
realistic, poorly understood movements including turning and obstacle avoidance. This setup may
significantly improve the usage of IMU's and can facilitate various experiments to investigate how
individuals navigate and control their step length, width, and speed in larger environments.

In conclusion, this study validated the feasibility of a low-cost motion capture system powered by AI
and webcams. With continued development, this system has the potential to transform clinical gait
assessments by providing precise, automated measurements of key metrics such as step width and

speed. It offers a cost-effective solution to reduce clinician workload, minimize bias, and enhance
the accuracy of gait examinations, making advanced gait analysis accessible to a broader range of
healthcare settings.

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A Camera Placement

Camera 1

~0.5 m

~ 1m

6 m walking axis

0.3 m marked walkway

~ 3 m

Camera 2

~ 1m

~ 0.5 m

Camera 3

B Experiment 1 validation

head

sacral

toe

heel

C Experiment 1 predictions

marker-less

unity

individual steps

marker

marker-less

individual steps

marker

A: Individual walking bouts

marker ⊙⊙
markerless ✕✕

Wide

Subject 1
Right
Left
Start

Subject 2

Subject 3

Forward foot position (m)

Lateral foot position (m)

B: Step length

Step Length, markerless (m)

RMSE = 2.2 cm
$R^2 = 0.989$

Step Length, marker (m)

C: Step width

Step Width, markerless (m)

RMSE = 2.5 cm
$R^2 = 0.986$

Step Width, marker (m)

A FGA: Subject data

Step placements

Normal Speed Change Head-LR Head-UD Pivot Step-over Narrow Eyes closed Backwards Steps

Right
Left

1 m
0.5 m

Projected Head Speed

1 m/s

Speed up
Normal
Slow down

Step

5 s
Time

B FGA: Scoring

Max Lateral Step (m)

0.5

Normal Speed Change Head-LR Head-UD Pivot Step-over Narrow Eyes closed Backwards

FGA Score

70-79 ya,
80-89 ya,
Walker 2007

Normal Speed Change Head-LR Head-UD Pivot Step-over Narrow Eyes closed Backwards Steps

C Proposed supplementary measures

Max Step Width (m)

0.5

Normal Speed Change Head-LR Head-UD Pivot Step-over Narrow Eyes closed Backwards Steps

Duration (s)

Normal Speed Change Head-LR Head-UD Pivot Step-over Narrow Eyes closed Backwards Steps