*How can different-sized people perform identical fine-motor tasks equally well, such as hitting a baseball or sending a text? In a study of the connection between brain, body and locomotor movement, researchers simulate "brain swaps" in fish to find out.*

# SIMULATED 'FRANKENFISH BRAIN-SWAPS' REVEAL SENSES CONTROL BODY MOVEMENT

Plenty of fictional works like Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* have explored the idea of swapping out a brain from one individual and transferring it into a completely different body. However, a team of biologists and engineers has now used a variation of the sci-fi concept, via computer simulation, to explore a core brain-body question.

How can two people with vastly different-sized limbs and muscles perform identical fine-motor tasks equally well, such as hitting a baseball or sending a text? Is it a unique tuning between our brain and nervous system with the rest of our body that controls these complex motions, or is feedback from our senses taking charge?

In a new study featured in the journal *eLife*, researchers have computationally modeled the various brains and bodies of a species of weakly electric fish, the glass knifefish *(Eigenmannia virescens)*, to successfully simulate "fish brain transplants" and investigate.

The team's simulations, which involved swapping models of the fishes' information processing and motor systems, revealed that after undergoing a sudden jump into the different body of their tank-mate, the "Frankenfish" quickly compensated for the brain-body mismatch by heavily relying on sensory feedback to resume control of fine-motor movements required for swimming performance.

Researchers say the findings provide new evidence that animals can lean on feedback from the senses to aid the interplay of the brain, body and stimulus from their external environment in guiding locomotor movement, rather than depending on precise tuning of brain circuits to the mechanics of the body's muscles and skeleton.

"What this study shows is the deep role of sensory feedback in everything we do," said Eric Fortune, professor at NJIT's Department of Biological Sciences and author of the study, funded by the National Science Foundation. "People have been trying to figure out how the animal movement works forever. It turns out that swapping brains of these fishes is a great way to address this fundamental question and gain a better understanding for how we might control our bodies."

Using experimental tanks outfitted with high-res cameras in the lab, the researchers tracked the subtle movements of three glass knifefish of different shapes and sizes as they shuttled back and forth within their tunnel-like refuges — a common behavior among electric fish that includes rapid and nuanced adjustments to produce sensory information that the fish need for keeping a fixed position within the safety of their hidden habitats, also known as station-keeping.

The team collected various sensory and kinematic measurements linked to the exercise — most notably, the micromovements of the fishes' ribbon-like fins that are critical to locomotor function during shuttling activity — and applied the data to create computer models of the brain and body of each fish.

"We showed that movements of the ribbon fin could be used as a proxy of the neural controller applied by the central nervous system," explained Ismail Uyanik, assistant professor of engineering at Hacettepe University, Turkey, and former postdoctoral researcher involved in the study at NJIT. "The data allowed us to estimate the locomotor dynamics and to calculate the controllers that the central nervous system applies during the control of this behavior."

"We logged nearly 40,000 ribbon-fin movements per fish during their shuttling to get the data we ended up using to help build models of each fish's locomotor plant and controller," added Fortune.

With their models, the team began computationally swapping controllers and plants between the fish, observing that the brain swaps had virtually no effect on the models' simulated swimming behaviors when they included sensory feedback data. However, without the sensory feedback data included in the models, the fishes' swimming performance dropped off completely. "Essentially, sensory feedback rescues them," said Fortune.

The team says the findings could also help inform engineers in the design of future robotics and sensor technology. "We want to be able to make robots that perform as well as humans [in controlling body movement], but we need better control algorithms, and that's what we are getting at in these studies," said Fortune. ■

*Author: Jesse Jenkins is an* NJIT Magazine *contributing writer.*