

How Advances in Wireless DMX Will Change the Way We Do Lighting

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Introduction

City Theatrical envisions a future of wireless lighting control in which every DMX controlled lighting fixture contains a tiny, inexpensive, Multiverse® Module, leading to wireless control of systems containing hundreds of fixtures and dozens of universes, and making lighting control easier for everyone.

Multiverse wireless DMX/RDM is the culmination of three years of research, engineering, and development and utilizes innovative technology that for the first time allows large scale multi-universe wireless lighting systems to be used effectively and reliably.

This white paper will take a look at the underlying technology which enables this breakthrough performance along with the many features built into Multiverse that can make lighting control easier for everyone.

A Brief History of DMX

To more fully understand how Multiverse works, let's briefly review the history of DMX and the evolution of its wireless counterpart.

DMX 512 (ANSI E1.11 - 2008 (R2018)) is the protocol used in entertainment lighting which standardized the communication between a lighting controller and a lighting device regardless of product manufacturer or brand. Prior to the use of DMX, manufacturers created proprietary communication protocols and systems were incompatible between manufacturers. This prevented lighting users from creating systems with products from various manufacturers of their choice, such as a console from one company, and dimmers from a second company. Market demand drove the development of a communication protocol that would allow products from all manufacturers to interoperate. It was developed in 1986 and became an ANSI standard in 2004.

A Brief History of Wireless DMX

In the early 2000s, wireless DMX systems were developed with the aim of eliminating the cables needed for lighting control, which were expensive to purchase and install. In addition, wireless control allowed designers the freedom to accomplish lighting effects that would have been impossible otherwise such as in moving scenery or in places that cables can't reach, such as across a river or highway or to the top of the exterior of a tall building.

Restraints to the Growth of Wireless DMX

While wireless DMX use has increased over time in all areas, and has become common in the film and video world, widespread acceptance has been limited. There are several interrelated reasons for this including:

- Inefficient wireless DMX systems with high radio energy to data ratios
- Crowded radio spectrum
- Limitations of the DMX512 standard
- Cost

Cost

Each professional quality wireless DMX transceiver (a device that can be made to either be a transmitter or a receiver) costs between approximately \$350 and \$2,000 and many productions require multiple transceivers. Later dongle style systems and “wireless module on a circuit board” systems reduced this cost but remain expensive. Even if scaling up a large show was technically feasible, it remains prohibitively expensive in most markets.

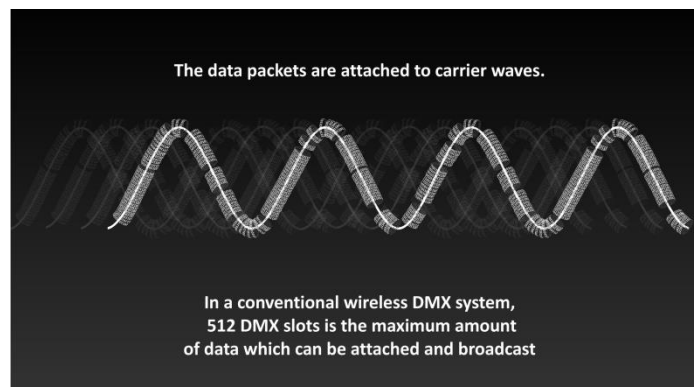
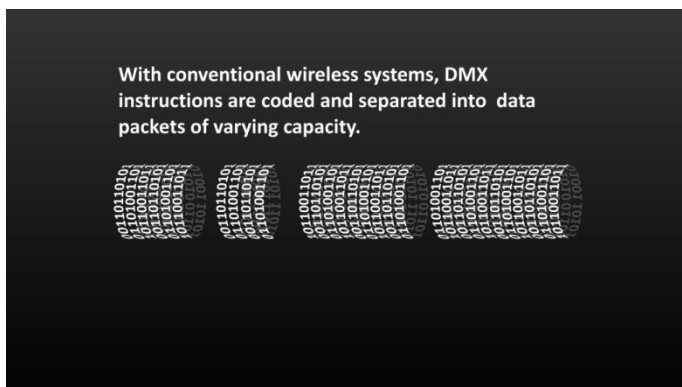
The Development of Multiverse

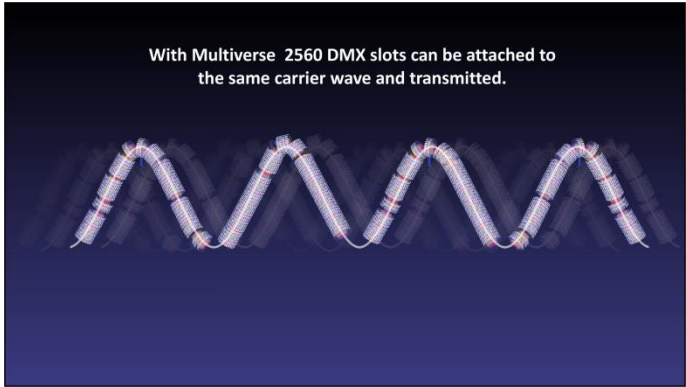
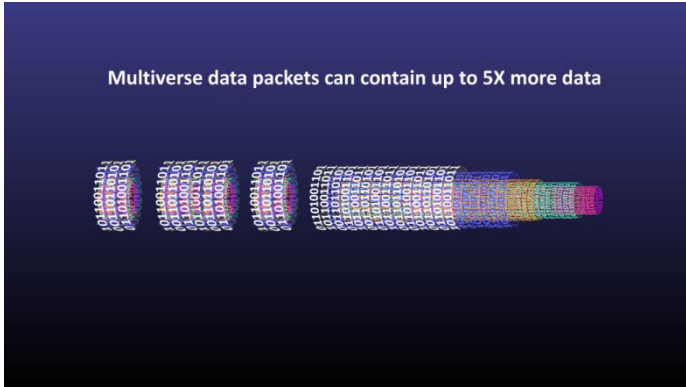
Faced with the great potential of wireless DMX contrasted with the inability of any available system to meet the growing demands of wireless users, City Theatrical began to design what we envisioned as a system that could be scaled up to meet the needs of future lighting users. Many new breakthrough technologies needed to be invented to overcome the drawbacks that had impeded all wireless DMX systems, including:

1. New radios that can transmit five times more data than ever before, while producing 80% less radio energy per universe than a typical single universe transmitter
2. Ability to transmit in either the 2.4GHz or 900MHz bands, or in both simultaneously
3. mDMX (Multiverse DMX) An encapsulation of the DMX512 standard for wireless transmission that produces an additional dramatic reduction in radio energy used
4. mRDM (Multiverse RDM) An encapsulation of the RDM (ANSI E1.20-2010) standard for wireless transmission that improves wireless RDM performance
5. Forward Error Correction to detect and repair missing data
6. SHoW Key Security to prevent interference from other Multiverse systems in the area
7. Smartphone and tablet lighting control built into Multiverse Transmitters
8. Lock PIN: Locks unauthorized users out of the system
9. Backwards compatibility with SHoW DMX Neo wireless DMX products (operates Multiverse in Neo Mode)
10. RDM integration of entities: Radio and fixture appear as one device when Multiverse Module is installed in lighting fixtures
11. Low cost technology

Let’s look deeper into each of these breakthrough technologies.

1. New radios that can transmit five times more data than ever before, while producing 80% less radio energy per universe than a typical single universe transmitter





The Multiverse radio’s ability to broadcast much more data while using much less radio energy is only the first step in building larger, more reliable DMX/RDM systems.

2. Ability to transmit in either the 2.4GHz or 900MHz band, or in both simultaneously

While most wireless DMX systems operate in the 2.4GHz radio spectrum, Multiverse systems are capable of also operating in the 900MHz ISM band, which is licensed for use in North America. Users can broadcast on both frequencies separately or simultaneously (depending on the Multiverse product) and configure their systems for optimal performance.

The 2.4GHz band has always been the area of choice for wireless DMX due to its ability to carry relatively larger amounts of data, but 900MHz has become a good choice also. Here is a comparison of the two bands:

2.4GHZ

Strengths	Weaknesses
Available nearly everywhere around the world	Crowded band
Passes through objects well	
Good broadcast distance	
Multiverse can carry five universes of data	

900MHz

Strengths	Weaknesses
Less crowded band	Available only in North America
Passes through objects better than 2.4GHz	
Broadcasts farther than 2.4GHz	
Multiverse can carry four universes of data	

Some U.S. theme parks do not allow wireless DMX broadcast in the 2.4GHz band to ensure that there is no possible conflict with cash transaction devices operating on 2.4GHz. 900MHz is a good option to overcome that restriction. Other users choose to split their broadcast over both bands to spread their radio energy over a wider area. Outside of North America, users must broadcast only in the 2.4GHz band.

3. mDMX (Multiverse DMX) An encapsulation of the DMX512 standard for wireless transmission that produces an additional dramatic reduction in radio energy used

mDMX is the heart of Multiverse's ability to reduce radio energy used far beyond the 80% baseline reduction achieved with Multiverse radios. The DMX-512 ANSI standard specifies data redundancy, requiring data to be sent as many as 44 times per second whether a DMX slot is moving or not. Picture an extreme example of someone giving a one hour speech at a podium with some lighting directed toward him or her. The lights are brought up to full in five seconds, stay there for an hour, and are brought back down to zero in five seconds.

Let's do the math:

60 seconds x 60 minutes = 3,600 seconds x 44 DMX packets per second
= 158,400 DMX packets in an hour

During that hour, the lights actually changed for a total of 10 seconds (five seconds up, and five seconds down) and were static for the remainder of the time. 10 seconds out of 3,600 seconds is .28% and therefore the lights were static for 99.72% of the time but receiving commands constantly.

In a wired system where bandwidth is not a concern, this is not a problem and we think nothing of it. But in a wireless system, the penalty is severe since we are sending radio energy into the spectrum that serves no purpose, and in fact causes interference with all other systems in our area of the spectrum.

City Theatrical's research into cue movements on large musical productions showed that even on the largest and busiest shows, the majority of DMX slots are static in any cue, and many DMX slots such as unused parameters on moving lights, never move the entire show.

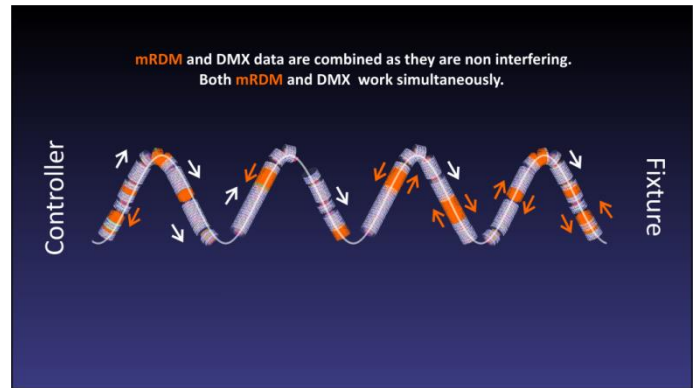
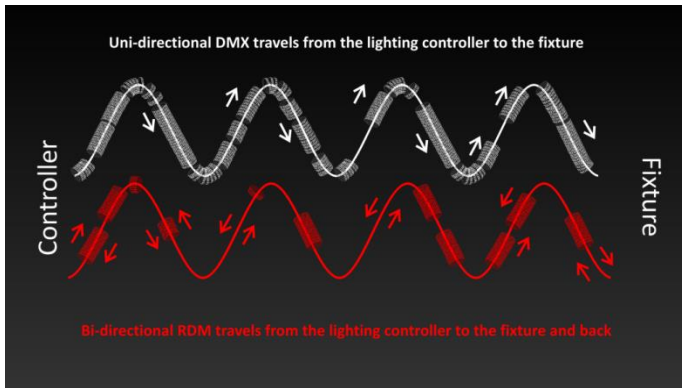
Since the link from Transmitter to Receiver is proprietary in a Multiverse system (no other lighting fixture or device is affected by it), we realized that it was not mandatory to follow the DMX512 ANSI standard and we created an encapsulation of the standard optimized for wireless use, and called it mDMX. This is a true technology breakthrough that changes everything in wireless DMX.

mDMX uses its radio energy extremely wisely, conservatively sending all of the data needed, refreshing it regularly and always retaining the ability to transmit entire universes with every slot moving. This allows larger and larger systems to be scaled up with careful stewardship of radio energy created, and with no reduction in performance of the lighting system.

4. mRDM (Multiverse RDM) An encapsulation of the RDM (ANSI E1.20-2010) standard for wireless transmission that improves wireless RDM performance

DMX is a uni-directional protocol with data flowing only from the lighting controller to the end device. RDM (Remote Device Management) is an enhancement to DMX which allows users to communicate bi-directionally with their lighting gear. That means lighting users can utilize RDM to change a DMX addresses or the personality of a lighting fixture without climbing a ladder, and can get status data such as fixture hours or circuit board temperatures remotely. The RDM ANSI standard requires DMX to briefly stop broadcasting when RDM is being used since in a wired system DMX and RDM share the same pair of wires. This degrades DMX performance and for that reason, many lighting users have avoided using RDM, and RDM has never achieved its full potential as a technology.

Multiverse's mRDM radio technology allows RDM to report back without disrupting DMX or interfering with DMX at all, and this feature is unique to wireless mRDM. Better RDM performance opens new worlds of easier setup and troubleshooting for wireless lighting users. City Theatrical was the innovator of wireless RDM technology and holds the U.S. patent for the technology.



5. Forward error correction to detect and repair missing data

Data can be corrupted during transmission, especially in an overcrowded radio environment. Forward error correction detects and corrects errors in transmitted data. This helps to maintain data fidelity when mission critical data is imperative.

6. SHoW Key Security to prevent interference from other Multiverse systems in the area

Multiverse wireless DMX systems employ SHoW IDs (unique combinations of broadcast parameters such as radio frequency, data rate, band location, and hopping pattern) to ensure optimal performance and fidelity within the environment in which they are operating. When setting up a Multiverse system, all components (transmitter and receivers) are set to the same SHoW ID. If two separate Multiverse systems with identical SHoW IDs are in use in close proximity (such as adjacent theatres or studios) there is the chance that one system could inadvertently control the other. To eliminate this possibility, a three digit SHoW Key may be added to lock down the system from any outside control.

7. Smartphone and tablet lighting control

Smartphone control of lighting for setup and troubleshooting removes the need to have a skilled lighting programmer on hand at all times. All models of Multiverse Transmitter include both Bluetooth and Wi-Fi radio receivers for input control. Through the use of City Theatrical's free DMXcat® smartphone app, users can set up and configure the wireless system as well as control any lighting fixture that is part of the Multiverse setup, whether it is a fixture with a built in Multiverse module, a fixture receiving its data from a Multiverse Node, or any connected (wired) fixture downstream of those devices. For tablet users, Wi-Fi lighting controllers like Luminair are supported as well.

8. Lock PIN: Locks unauthorized users out of the system

Since Multiverse systems can be modified and or controlled using RDM controllers such as DMXcat, for added security Lock PINs (four digit codes) can be assigned to each transmitter to prevent unauthorized or malicious use. When using Wi-Fi controllers to control Multiverse Transmitters, a Wi-Fi password can be utilized for the same purpose.

9. Backwards compatibility with SHoW DMX Neo wireless DMX products

Multiverse SHoW Babys, Multiverse Nodes, and Multiverse 2.4GHz radio modules are fully compatible with City Theatrical's Legacy SHoW DMX products and may be used to expand these existing systems' capabilities.

10. RDM integration of entities: Radio and fixture appear as one device when Multiverse Module is installed in lighting fixtures

When Multiverse Modules are implemented into a lighting fixture, they become an integrated part of the device. Lighting users simply look for the fixture they want to communicate with, not the radio module in addition to the fixture. This simplifies the setup process, particularly on large shows.

11. Low Cost Technology

The Multiverse Modules used in every Multiverse product are the lowest cost full featured DMX/RDM devices ever introduced. They are perfect for direct integration into all types of lighting fixtures.

How Multiverse Will Affect the Future of Lighting

Multiverse, for the first time, allows lighting users to scale up larger systems of hundreds of fixtures and dozens of universes, leading to a future of wireless lighting control. As more and more manufacturers implement the Multiverse Module into their fixtures, lighting systems will include Multiverse compatible consoles, lighting fixtures, gateways, fog machines, dimmers, and any other imaginable DMX device.

We live in a wireless world. Sometimes we plug in our laptops and sometimes we run them wirelessly, and the future of lighting control will be similar. Our lighting fixtures will have the capability to be run wired or wirelessly, and lighting users will make that choice depending on their needs, lowering costs, saving time, and adding flexibility to lighting setups.

Multiverse products are covered by U.S. Patents #7,432,803 B2, #10,129,964 B1, and other patents pending. Designed and manufactured in USA