Department of Mechatronic Engineering

MXEN4000 - Mechatronic Engineering Research Project 1

Progress Report

Navigation Assistance for a Semi-Autonomous Smart Wheelchair

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Abstract

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1 Introduction

Many people with motor disabilities rely on wheelchairs for movement, and powered wheelchairs have enabled greater independance for people with disability. Despite the huge benefit powered wheelchairs have granted, the use of this technology can be inaccessible or unsafe for people with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) or vision impairment, who may be unable to use a joystick or see their environment clearly.

Smart wheelchairs are wheelchairs with additional sensors and computers, enabling greater usability and safety. This can come in the form of alternative input methods, such as eye-gaze tracking [1] or using a brain-computer interface [2] to control the wheelchair. For people with vision impairment, haptic feedback [3][4] has been used to improve awareness of the surrounding environment and make indoor navigation safer.

Another form of smart wheelchair is semi-autonomy, where sensors are used to avoid obstacles and hazards. This allows the user to retain control over their movements, while still improving safety and ease of navigation.

2 Aims

The aim of this research is to develop a semi-autonomous smart wheelchair system. This research is done in collaboration with Glide, a WA wheelchair manufacturer, who have provided an existing powered wheelchair (CentroGlide) to use as a base for this functionality. By developing assistive technology for the wheelchair, the user is granted greater mobility, confidence, and independence.

There are multiple engineering research project students who are part of this team, working on elements such as controller design, navigation assistance, and object detection. This work specifically focuses on pathway assistance, which identifies suitable paths for the wheelchair to drive on. If a user unintentionally drives off their desired path, this can lead to uneven terrain and possibly falling from the wheelchair. By guiding the user along a path, these safety issues can be mitigated.

Emphasis is placed on the ’semi-autonomous’ aspect of the wheelchair. An important requirement of this project is that the user still has control over their wheelchair, and can override any semi-autonomous functionality if required. When false positives occur within the smart wheelchair system, the users mobility should not be compromised.

Another requirement of the system is that any sensors mounted to the wheelchair should not impede the users comfort or the wheelchairs manouverability. Many wheelchair users have specific requirements for wheelchair seat adjustments, to avoid pressure sores and discomfort. Figure 1 shows the wheelchair configuration when fully reclined, demonstrating that some sensor mounting locations are infeasible.

The smart wheelchair system should also be commercially viable. This means that high-cost components such as 3D LIDAR are infeasible. Internet connectivity should not be a requirement for the system to operate either - the round trip time required to communicate with a server would compromise the safety of a user. Because of this, all processing is performed locally on the wheelchair.

Figure 1: CentroGlide in Reclined Configuration

3 Results and Discussion

The first stages of smart wheelchair development involved:

1. Identifying desired sensors and hardware for the wheelchair.

2. Choosing an appropriate mounting point for these sensors.

3. Researching the field of machine perception and computer vision (both applied to wheelchairs and more generally).

4. Collecting an initial video dataset, enabling work to begin on labelling and algorithm evaluation.

3.1 Hardware

The smart wheelchair should have the ability to sense, process, and manouver within the surrounding environment. To do this requires some necessary hardware, including a sensor

Sensor	Advantages	Disadvantages
Stereo Camera	High Resolution	
MMWave Radar		
3D Lidar		High Cost
2D Lidar		
Ultrasonic Radar		
Inertial Measurement Unit (IMU)		
Servo Motor Encoder		

Table 1: Sensor Comparisons

system, compute element, and motor controller. Due to the 2021-2022 chip shortage, hardware selection was identified as a process that should occur relatively quickly.

Table 1 shows some sensors that were considered for use in the smart wheelchair. Selecting a sensor to use is not necessarily an either-or decision. Sensor fusion algorithms such as the Extended Kalman Filter (EKF) or Unscented Kalman Filter (UKF) [5] allow outputs from multiple sensors to be used together to improve their accuracy. Additionally, some sensors may be used for different applications on the smart wheelchair.

After consideration of the available options, it was decided to use a stereo camera as the main forward facing sensor, with 2D LIDAR used for the side and rear of the wheelchair.

The front of the joystick control unit was selected as the best mounting point for the stereo camera, due to several reasons:

1. Clear view of the environment in front of the wheelchair.

2. Not obstructed by the user in any wheelchair configuration.

3. When needed, the user can move the joystick control unit out of the way, which also moves the camera out of the way.

However, there are some challenges faced when using this mounting point, which must be addressed.

1. Shaky video footage due to low rigidity in joystick mount.

2. Close to the front of the wheelchair, which reduces visibility of the sides of the wheelchair.

3. Maximum camera width of 150 mm before doorway manouverability is affected.

To evaluate the effectiveness of this mounting point, a GoPro (Hero 4) was attached using a temporary mount and a 34 minute driving dataset was collected around Curtin University. It was found that camera shakiness could be reduced by using a stiffer mounting solution, however some shakiness would always remain due to the unstable mounting surface. It was also found that alternative sensors, such as 2D LIDAR, would be required for features such as doorway navigation and docking, due to the low field of view (FOV).

4 Future Work

5 References

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