Neural Network Homography Estimation in Snapshot-based Visual Homing for UAVs

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Abstract

As the use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) become more widespread, visual homing will become an increasingly important area of research. Several publications explore visual navigation or visual target finding on UAVs or ground robots. There are several papers which present promising visual homing simulations and implementations for UAVs. To explore new approaches for UAVs visual homing, techniques for image processing and machine learning must be carefully considered, selected, and implemented. The goal was to develop a system that is practical for use in real time. The research presented in this paper takes a unique approach to the problem of visual homing for UAVs. A convolutional neural network was trained to: extract features from reference snapshots taken on an exploratory journey, as well as from images from the camera on the return journey; then the neural network estimated the homography that relates these two images. The homography can then be used to navigate the UAV home. This approach was tested in simulation showed promising results for accurate visual navigation to home, and could be a practical solution to achieve visual homing in real-time on-board UAVs.

1 Introduction

Unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) have become an important area of research. UAVs are used in military as well as civilian applications, such as search and rescue, structure inspection, and environmental surveying [8]. However, the operational safety of UAVs continues to be a concern. Visual homing—the ability of the UAV to return to its starting position after having explored an area—could continue improving safety, and practicality, by preventing crashes and aircraft loss.

Much of the research on visual homing has been implemented on ground robots. Although research on visual navigation, target finding, and homing has been done on UAVs, these methods could be improved by combining techniques used by different research teams. Visual homing in the absence of GPS coordinates is an important problem to solve as it would make UAV operation easier and safer.

1.1 Related Work

Visual homing for unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) has become an important topic of research due to the flaws of GPS based navigation. A third party can use a jammer to intercept satellite communications to the UAV and send incorrect coordinates to the aircraft. By sending false coordinates from the jammer to the UAV, a third party would be able to hijack the the flight path of the aircraft [15]. Visual homing can add a layer of security to UAV navigation by providing an alternative to easily compromised GPS signals.

Visual homing also offers advantages over other navigation techniques. Cameras are less expensive and can replace bulkier sensors, which is important because of the small payload of UAVs. In addition, camera equipment consumes less power than laser or lidar, therefore the UAV can stay in the air longer. Computer vision can also be used for multiple tasks, with the camera serving as the primary sensor for navigation as well as other tasks [8]. Visual homing offers a sparse representation of the environment, often through a number of snapshots taken by the UAV during its flight. These images can be used for navigation and are independent of maps, which may be imprecise. Path planning and navigation based on snapshots can be done with relatively low computation [16]. Furthermore, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) regulations assume that pilots rely on vision, specifically that pilots must see and avoid other aircraft [18]. Visual navigation of UAVs can offer a distinct advantage over other navigation techniques.

Problems similar to visual homing include visual navigation or visual target finding. In the event of GPS jamming or GPS failure, computer vision can be used to approximate the position of the ground robot or UAV, making navigation possible [4] [19]. In research conducted by ChengHao, et al., ground images, or snapshots, were stitched together to create a map of the environment. By combining onboard cameras and an inertial navigation system (INS), the position of the UAV could be approximated [5]. Similarly, in UAV swarms, communication between drones can allow for accurate position estimation and navigation when some of the drones do not have a working GPS [20]. These and similar experiments rely on previous GPS information for navigation [17]. Though the techniques used to address the problem of visual navigation can be applied to visual homing, our project differs in that we will research visual homing in the complete absence of GPS information.

Visual target finding is another problem related to visual homing. In research done by Cumbo, et al., the homing strategies of bees inspired the techniques through which a ground robot was able to learn to use landmarks in the environment to approach a particular target. Even when the target was not present, the robot could navigate to the area the target had been based on the landmarks. In some cases, when the target was moved, the robot used landmarks to approach the area and found the target from there. However, when the landmarks were removed, the ground robot could not find the target unless its starting position was relatively close to the target [7]. In this case, the learned target finding was specific to the environment. Once the environment changed by removing the landmarks, the ground robot often could not find its target. While visual homing can be thought of as visual target finding—with the home position being the target—this paper's approach to visual homing will be more robust since it will not be environment specific.

There are a variety of approaches to visual homing. Many of these approaches are based on the behaviors of biological creatures such as bees or other insects, who are able to navigate home with poor resolution vision and limited computational brain power [8]. Visual homing includes long-range homing—where the target is not in view—and local homing—where the target is in view [9]. The task of image processing can be achieved through image-based or feature-based approaches. Using the whole image has the advantage of eliminating the need for expensive feature extraction and guarantees a solution that is not dependent on landmarks specific to a particular environment [1]. Feature-based visual homing involves the tasks of feature extraction and feature or image matching [19]. The visual homing approach used in this paper will address long-range homing using feature-based image processing.

Feature extraction, the first task of feature-based visual homing, can be approached with feature preselection—in which the UAV navigates by matching images from the camera to snapshots—or without feature preselection—in which flow-based matching methods, such as optic flow, are used to estimate how much features move [2].

The second task of feature-based visual homing is image matching. Because extracting features from an image can be time consuming and computationally expensive, researchers take unique approaches to minimize the time and computation costs. By reducing an image down to a number of critical points—the criteria for critical will depend on the application—the cost function for image matching techniques can be computed only on the select points, rather than every pixel in the image, without losing information [22]. Similarly, by knowing only the observed scale and the bearing of select key points which are visible from both the current position of the UAV and the home position, visual homing can be achieved by matching the key points [16].

Image matching depends on being able to match the images taken on the exploratory journey away from the home position with the images the UAV sees on its return journey. In order to compare these images taken from different angles, a homography can be used. The relationship between different images—the homography—can be evaluated by comparing the angles between four or more reference points in the images. The homography can then be used to compute the control vector, which tells the UAV in which direction to continue home. Research done by Lewis and Beard shows that a homography can be used to achieve effective visual homing in GPS denied environments [14]. Other research by DeTone, et al., shows that given two images, deep convolutional neural networks can learn to compute the homography relating the two images. This method has the advantage of avoiding feature extraction, as the neural network is able to directly estimate the homography from the two images [10]. This paper's approach will use a convolutional neural network to extract features from the reference snapshots and the camera images and compute the homography relating the two images, achieving the image matching task.

Using a series of snapshots taken during the exploratory journey away from the home position, UAVs can match current camera images to the snapshots to navigate home. As explained in research by Denuelle and Srinivasan, using snapshots for visual homing turns the problem of long-range visual homing into a series of target finding problems or visiting local waypoints. By visiting each of the way-points represented by the snapshots, the UAV will reach its home position [9]. The project presented here uses a similar approach by deconstructing the task of visual homing to the task of visiting a series of waypoints represented by snapshots of the environment.

1.2 Contributions

Based on previous research that addresses visual navigation or visual homing for ground robots, our aim is to bring the navigation strategies developed on land into the air. With respect to the research that addresses visual homing in UAVs, we aim to combine techniques to find a novel solution to visual homing.

This paper addresses long-range visual homing with no previous GPS information. A convolutional neural network will extract features from snapshots of the environment taken on the exporatory journey and images from the onboard camera and compute the homography. The homography will match the images by representing the relationship between them. This machine learning approach will achieve visual homing that is not environment specific. Previous research has used neural networks for various tasks involved in visual navigation [1] [2] [4] [7] [19] and specifically for homography estimation [10].

The methods presented will be tested in a simulated environment based on the work of Lewis and Beard [14], which was generated in MATLAB and Simulink. The simulated UAV will then use the open source image processing library *OpenCV* to see the simulated environment. Past See And Avoid research by Morgan and Jones has demonstrated the effective coupling of similar technologies [18]. By combining the techniques used for visual homing in ground vehicles and in UAVs, we will explore a novel approach to the problem of visual homing for UAVs.

1.3 Organization of the Paper

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows: Section 2 details the theory that motivates our approach. The methods we use to achieve our visual homing approach are explained in Section 3. Section **??** will explain the framework used for simulations. The results of the simulations will be discussed in Section 4. Finally, the conclusions of our research and future work will be explored in Section 5.

2 Theoretical Background

The theory and computation behind homographies and homography control law are central to our machine learning approach to visual homing. This section of the paper draws from the book *Multiple View Geometry in Computer Vision* by Hartley and Zisserman about projective transformations [12]; work done by Lewis and Beard about homography control theory [14]; and research from DeTone, Malisiewicz, and Rabinovich about convolutional neural networks and homography estimation [10]. The convolutional neural network will be trained to carry out the necessary feature extraction and compute the homography between camera images and reference snapshots. This homography estimation will be used to navigate the UAV home.

2.1 Projective Transformations

Computer vision forces certain assumptions to be made in order to model the three-dimensional world. Images project a 3D scene into two dimensions. This projective transformation does not preserve shapes, lengths, angles, distances, or ratios of distances, as these geometric features can be distored based on how an image is taken. However, straightness is preserved by such projections. To work with this geometric property, these models, called projective spaces, assume that two lines always meet. To create a projective space $\mathbb{P}^n$, extend the Euclidean space $\mathbb{R}^n$ to include points at infinity. This ensures that parallel lines in the projection will meet at points in the projective space, namely a point at infinity.

To model the world and work with the 2D representations of the world—images—computer vision assumes that the world is a 3D projective space and the image corresponds to a 2D projective space. A pixel $(x, y)^T$ in an image corresponds to the homogenous coordinates $(x, y, 1)^T$ in the projective space $\mathbb{P}^2$. The coordinates of the points in $\mathbb{P}^n$ are vectors with $n + 1$ elements, where the $n + 1$ element is a constant, k. In fact, the point $(x, y, 1)^T$ in $\mathbb{P}^2$ defines an equivalence class:

$$\begin{bmatrix} x \\ y \\ 1 \end{bmatrix} \sim \begin{bmatrix} kx \\ ky \\ k \end{bmatrix} \tag{1}$$

Any point that can be related to $(x, y, 1)^T$ through some constant k is considered equivalent to $(x, y, 1)^T$.

It is useful to relate points in the world—represented by projective space $\mathbb{P}^3$—to points in the image of the world—projective space $\mathbb{P}^2$. For example, consider a point in the three-dimensonal world with homogenous coordinates $(X, Y, Z, T)^T$ in $\mathbb{P}^3$. Suppose this point corresponds to a point in the two-dimensional image with homogenous coordinates $(x, y, w)^T$ in $\mathbb{P}^2$. In fact, the image point $(x, y, w)^T$ represents the homogenous coordinates to the point $(X, Y, Z, T)^T$. These homogenous points can be related by a linear transformation:

$$\begin{bmatrix} x \\ y \\ w \end{bmatrix} = \mathbf{P}_{3\times4} \begin{bmatrix} X \\ Y \\ Z \\ T \end{bmatrix} \tag{2}$$

where

$$\mathbf{P}_{3\times4} = \begin{bmatrix} 1 & 0 & 0 & 0 \\ 0 & 1 & 0 & 0 \\ 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 \end{bmatrix} \tag{3}$$

The linear transformation in Equation 2 simply eliminates the final element of the point in projective space $\mathbb{P}^3$ to find the homogenous coordinates in projective space $\mathbb{P}^2$.

A projective transformation represents the relationship between points that lie in the same plane. For example, a projective transformation could relate corresponding points between two images. Consider again the points $(X, Y, Z, T)^T$ in $\mathbb{P}^3$ and $(x, y, w)^T$ in $\mathbb{P}^2$—equivalent, homogenous points—and suppose that each point is captured in one of two images. Because these corresponding points in the two images lie in the same plane, we could let $Z = 0$. The projective transformation between these two points can be expressed as:

$$\begin{bmatrix} x \\ y \\ w \end{bmatrix} = \mathbf{P}_{3\times3} \begin{bmatrix} X \\ Y \\ T \end{bmatrix} \tag{4}$$

The matrix $\mathbf{P}$ in Equation 4 represents the projective transformation relating the two points.

The next sections will describe the applications of the theory of projective transformations more specifically to the task of visual homing using two images. More information on multiple view geometries and projective transformations can be found in *Multiple View Geometry in Computer Vision* by Hartley and Zisserman [12].

2.2 Homography

When a landscape is viewed by the same camera from two different angles, the resulting images can be related using a homography [14]. The homography $\mathbf{H}$ is a 3×3 matrix that can be found by relating at least four points—three of which must be noncollinear—from the current image p_c to the matching points in the reference image p_r. Once the homography is found, the two images can be related to one another with the equation

$$p_r = \mathbf{H} p_c \tag{5}$$

where

$$\mathbf{H} = \begin{bmatrix} h_{11} & h_{12} & h_{13} \\ h_{21} & h_{22} & h_{23} \\ h_{31} & h_{32} & h_{33} \end{bmatrix} \tag{6}$$

Equation 5 projects the points of image p_c onto image p_r.

Rather than relating the two whole images, we can also think of the homography as relating two particular points in the images. Let x and y be pixel coordinates of point p_1 in image p_c and x' and y' be the corresponding pixel coordinates of point p'_1 in image p_r. The homography relates these two particular points:

$$\begin{bmatrix} x' \\ y' \\ 1 \end{bmatrix} \sim \begin{bmatrix} h_{11} & h_{12} & h_{13} \\ h_{21} & h_{22} & h_{23} \\ h_{31} & h_{32} & h_{33} \end{bmatrix} \begin{bmatrix} x \\ y \\ 1 \end{bmatrix} \tag{7}$$

Note that Equation 7 shows similarity rather than equality. As explained in Section 2.1, all scalar multiples of the point $(x, y, 1)$ define an equivalence class. The relationship in Equation 7 holds for points in p_r of the form (kx', ky', k) for any k. The similarity represents that the vectors p'_1 and $\mathbf{H}p_1$ will have the same direction, but may differ in magnitude. Based on the discussion in the previous section, the homography $\mathbf{H}$ defines a projective transformation [12].

The homography can be computed using at least four points in the current image p_c and their matching points in reference image p_r. In order to compute the homography accurately, the selected feature points must be matched between the two images carefully. Given the four matched feature points, we can solve the matrix equation for the vector $\vec{h}$:

$$\begin{bmatrix} x_1 & y_1 & 1 & 0 & 0 & 0 & -x_1x'_1 & -y_1x'_1 & -x'_1 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & x_1 & y_1 & 1 & -x_1y'_1 & -y_1y'_1 & -y'_1 \\ x_2 & y_2 & 1 & 0 & 0 & 0 & -x_2x'_2 & -y_2x'_2 & -x'_2 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & x_2 & y_2 & 1 & -x_2y'_2 & -y_2y'_2 & -y'_2 \\ x_3 & y_3 & 1 & 0 & 0 & 0 & -x_3x'_3 & -y_3x'_3 & -x'_3 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & x_3 & y_3 & 1 & -x_3y'_3 & -y_3y'_3 & -y'_3 \\ x_4 & y_4 & 1 & 0 & 0 & 0 & -x_4x'_4 & -y_4x'_4 & -x'_4 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & x_4 & y_4 & 1 & -x_4y'_4 & -y_4y'_4 & -y'_4 \end{bmatrix} \begin{bmatrix} h_{11} \\ h_{12} \\ h_{13} \\ h_{21} \\ h_{22} \\ h_{23} \\ h_{31} \\ h_{32} \\ h_{33} \end{bmatrix} = \vec{0} \tag{8}$$

and rearrange the elements of $\vec{h}$ to obtain matrix $\mathbf{H}$, as in Equation 6. The homography $\mathbf{H}$ is also referred to as the Direct Linear Transformation (DLT) that relates corresponding points in two images [12].

2.3 Reprojection Error

Once the homography, $\mathbf{H}$, has been found, it can be checked to see how accurately it projects the current image p_c onto the reference image p_r. Then it is possible to compare measured feature points in reference image p_r to the projected points in image $\hat{p}_r$, where $\hat{p}_r$ is the result of the matrix multiplication in Equation 5. An individual pixel in $\hat{p}_r$ of the form $(\hat{p}_{r_x}, \hat{p}_{r_y})$ is obtained as in Equation 7. The error between points in reference image p_r and projected image $\hat{p}_r$ is known as the reprojection error e_r, and can be computed as follows:

$$e_r = \sqrt{(p_{r_x} - \hat{p}_{r_x})^2 + (p_{r_y} - \hat{p}_{r_y})^2} \tag{9}$$

Minimizing the reprojection error indicates that the computed homography accurately projects the current image onto the reference image, and therefore properly represents the relationship between the two images. The success of our visual homing scheme relies on correct homography estimation, as the homography will be used to direct the UAV to its next waypoint, represented by a reference snapshot.

2.4 Homography Four-Point Parameterization

Equivalent parameterizations of the homography can relate images in the same way. In fact, the research team of DeTone, Malisiewicz, and Rabinovich found that their deep convolutional network had more success estimating one such parameterization—the four-point homography parameterization, $\mathbf{H}_{4point}$—than the matrix homography in Equation 6, $\mathbf{H}_{matrix}$ [10]. Similar to the matrix homography, the four-point homography parameterization requires four carefully matched points in the current image p_c and the reference image p_r. Considering points (x_i, y_i) from image p_c and points (x'_i, y'_i) from image p_r, it is possible to compute the directional offsets for each point:

$$\Delta x_i = x'_i - x_i \tag{10}$$

Once the offsets Δx_i and Δy_i have been calculated for each point, the four-point homography parameterization can be found:

$$\mathbf{H}_{4point} = \begin{bmatrix} \Delta x_1 & \Delta y_1 \\ \Delta x_2 & \Delta y_2 \\ \Delta x_3 & \Delta y_3 \\ \Delta x_4 & \Delta y_4 \end{bmatrix} \tag{11}$$

There exists a one-to-one correspondence between $\mathbf{H}_{4point}$ and $\mathbf{H}_{matrix}$ that can be found using the Direct Linear Transform (DLT) [12] or the `getPerspectiveTransform()` function in *OpenCV* [10].

The convolutional neural network will estimate the four-point homography. Then the $\mathbf{H}_{4point}$ will be converted to the equivalent reparameterization, $\mathbf{H}_{matrix}$, which will be used to navigate the UAV towards home.

2.5 Navigation using Homography

Once the four-point homography $\mathbf{H}_{4point}$ has been estimated and converted to the matrix homography $\mathbf{H}_{matrix}$, the UAV will navigate towards the next waypoint using the relationship between the reference snapshot and the current camera view. By visiting each snapshot waypoint, the UAV will eventually navigate home.

Homography control law allows users to compute the vector in the direction that the UAV should travel [14]. The control law is based on the computed homography and the center of gravity of the selected feature points. The center of gravity of the feature points of current camera view is projectected onto the reference image using the computed homography. The control vector we seek will point from the reprojected center of gravity to the center of gravity of the feature points in the reference image. The control vector is a 3×1 vector computed by:

$$\vec{v} = \frac{\bar{p}_r^T \mathbf{H} \bar{p}_c}{\bar{p}_r^T \bar{p}_r} \bar{p}_r - \bar{p}_c \tag{12}$$

where

$$\bar{p}_r = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^{n} p_{r_i} \tag{13}$$

$$\bar{p}_c = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^{n} p_{c_i} \tag{14}$$

Equation 13 represents the center of gravity of the reference feature points and Equation 14 is the center of gravity of the feature points in the current camera view.

The control vector $\vec{v}$ in Equation 12 will direct the UAV to align itself with the reference image. As it reaches the reference image, it will visit the waypoint represented by that particular snapshot, and switch to homing in on the next snapshot waypoint. This series of local homing tasks will allow the UAV to navigate home, even in long-range homing.

3 Methods

In this section, the methods used to obtain training and testing data and the methods through which the convolutional neural network learned to estimate the homography between two images will be described.

3.1 Simulation Framework

3.2 Data Acquisition for Learning

3.3 Convolutional Neural Network

3.4 Navigation

3.5 Experiments

4 Results

5 Conclusion

[conclusion goes here]

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