

Trabajo Fin de Máster
Máster en Ingeniería Electrónica, Robótica y
Automática

Aerial co-workers: a task planning approach
for multi-drone teams supporting inspection
operations

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Álvaro Calvo Matos

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Abstract

This Master's Thesis has addressed problems arising from the recent increase in the applications of cooperative Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) teams, which are the autonomy to operate over a long period of time with robustness to possible failures, and the difficulty of providing the team with cognitive capabilities to be able to operate in dynamic environments with humans.

Many of these applications are currently being executed by humans, making the activities much more expensive, time-consuming, and in some cases even dangerous. This is why there is currently a great deal of interest and effort being put into developing solutions to the problems posed.

The aim of the work was to develop cognitive planning techniques for coordinating fleets of quadrotors to assist human operators in inspection and maintenance tasks on high-voltage power lines. These techniques should also extend the autonomy of the system, ensure that safety requirements between drones and human workers are met, and ensure the success of the mission.

A software architecture has been proposed based on a central planner and a distributed behaviour manager. To carry out the planning, a cost has been defined, which is calculated for each task. Thus, each one is assigned to the UAV that consumes the least executing it. On the other hand, to control the behaviour of the drones and ensure the safety of the aerial equipment, a behaviour tree has been implemented.

As a result, it has been possible to develop a software architecture capable of dynamically planning missions while ensuring the safety of the equipment involved. This provides a good base that can be easily adapted and from which more complex planners can be developed in the future. Compared to the typical way of implementing behaviour managers, involving complex finite state machines that are difficult to read, reuse and extend, the use of behaviour trees is a great improvement and will allow the creation of increasingly complex behaviours.

Resumen

Este Trabajo de Fin de Máster ha afrontado problemas que surgen del reciente aumento de las aplicaciones de equipos cooperativos de UAV, los cuales son la autonomía para operar de forma prolongada en el tiempo con robustez ante posibles fallos, y la dificultad de aportar al equipo capacidades cognitivas para poder operar en entornos dinámicos con humanos.

Muchas de estas aplicaciones están siendo ejecutadas actualmente por humanos, haciendo las actividades mucho más costosas, lentas, e incluso en algunos casos, peligrosas. Es por eso que actualmente existe un gran interés y se están destinando muchos esfuerzos para desarrollar soluciones para los problemas planteados.

El objetivo del trabajo era desarrollar técnicas cognitivas de planificación para coordinar flotas de drones que asistan a operarios humanos en tareas de inspección y mantenimiento en líneas eléctricas de alta tensión. Estas técnicas debían además extender la autonomía del sistema, garantizar que se cumplen los requisitos de seguridad entre drones y trabajadores humanos, y asegurar el éxito de la misión.

Se ha propuesto una arquitectura de software basada en un planificador central y un gestor de comportamiento distribuido. Para llevar a cabo la planificación se ha definido un coste, que es calculado para cada tarea. De esta forma, cada una se asigna al UAV al que cueste menos. Por el otro lado, para controlar el comportamiento de los drones y asegurar la seguridad de los equipos aéreos, se ha implementado un árbol de comportamiento.

Como resultado, se ha conseguido desarrollar una arquitectura de software capaz realizar la planificación de las misiones de forma dinámica asegurando mientras tanto la seguridad de los equipos involucrados. Esto constituye una buena base que se puede adaptar fácilmente y a partir de la cual se pueden desarrollar futuros planificadores más complejos. Comparado con la forma típica de implementar gestores de comportamiento, involucrando complejas máquinas de estados finitas difíciles de leer, reutilizar y ampliar, el uso de árboles de comportamiento supone una gran mejora y permitirá la creación de comportamientos cada vez más complejos.

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1 Introduction

The use of UAVs has grown considerably in recent years for numerous applications including real-time monitoring, search and rescue, providing wireless coverage, security and surveillance, precision agriculture, package delivery and infrastructure inspection [1]. With the rapidly developing technology in this area, and demonstrations of what UAVs can do, there are increasing efforts to bring this technology to other applications. With the expected increase in applications for this technology, new problems and challenges arise, including autonomy, safety, obstacle avoidance and coordination of multi-UAV teams. Developing the technology to solve these problems will be a major effort, but as UAVs have proven to be critical in situations where humans are at high risk or highly inefficient and their capacity to evolve and develop even more potential in the short term, companies are investing in developing all sort of UAV-based solutions.

1.1 Motivation

With the increase in global electricity demand, a challenge has arisen for electricity supply companies to maintain and repair power grids in a way that minimizes the frequency of outages. According to [2], one of the main causes of power outages is damage to transmission lines due to bad weather or inefficient inspection campaigns.



Figure 1.1 Operators getting off the helicopter during a maintenance mission.

The strategy often used by electric companies to reduce power outages is to schedule periodic maintenance operations on active lines. This is the most suitable method if the correct functioning

of the system is to be ensured and when replacing a circuit is unacceptable [2]. These maintenance missions are carried out by experienced crews on board helicopters and equipped with safety suits and harnesses among other things that prevent the operators from receiving an electric shock (see figure 1.1). The problem with this solution is that these activities are dangerous for the operators, as they are working at high altitude and on electrified lines, are extremely time-consuming and expensive (\$1500 per hour) and are subject to human error [3].

These are the reasons why distribution companies have the need to develop more efficient and safer maintenance methods. Multiple solutions have been proposed to automate this task [4], but the best of them seems to be the use of UAVs because of their flexibility and ability to inspect at different levels [2]. To achieve this, there are still some important barriers to overcome, such as the limited autonomy of these devices, the strong electromagnetic interference to which they would be subjected due to being close to power lines and the ability to detect and avoid obstacles of different nature that can be found in this type of environment [3]. Providing UAVs with the cognitive capability to operate autonomously in such dynamic environments and with the presence of humans, and providing them with a rapid on-line planning method [5], is key to address these complexities and to safely and successfully accomplish the assigned mission with UAV fleets.

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