



Professional Bachelor Applied Information
Science



A flexible multi-agent system (MAS)
architecture for robots.

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Promoters:

Tim Dupont
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Abstract

A single drone is not able to accomplish much on a large scale. Compare this to a bee trying to harvest a field of flowers, an impossible task for just a single bee. Nature solves this problem using swarm intelligence, using a colony of bees working together to solve a bigger problem. This phenomenon is not only perceived in bees. Birds flocking, hawks hunting, animal herding, bacterial growth, fish schooling and microbial intelligence are all examples of swarm intelligence in nature. Multi-agent UAV systems are based on swarm intelligence, using multiple UAVs (aka drones) to solve more complex and bigger problems that are impossible for just a single drone to solve.

This research is conducted by PXL Smart ICT, the IT & Electronics center of expertise and part of the research department at PXL University of Applied Sciences and Arts. The goal of the project is to enable IT companies to implement UAV projects via rapid robot prototyping.

The internship provides a multi-agent system (MAS) architecture that supports homogeneous as well as heterogeneous structures. Each drone is an agent that processes data on its own and shares its knowledge with the other agents. The agent organization can handle hierarchical, hologenic and coalition teams. Different types of organizations will be compared regarding task completion time, computational time and accuracy of the completed task. A blackboard system takes care of knowledge sharing between agents, with the option of working over multiple computers.

ROS (Robotic Operating System) is used to control the drones, each equipped with a PX4 autopilot. ROS is a set of software libraries and tools that help to build smart robot applications. The PX4 autopilot uses MAVLink, a very lightweight messaging protocol for communicating with drones. MAVROS, an implementation of MAVLink in ROS, is a component that can convert between ROS messages and MAVLink messages. This provides easy control of the UAVs. By gathering information from the UAV components the agents can analyze data. For example, the agent receives images from the camera and can detect if an object is a car using OpenCV, a person, or something else.

The goal of this internship is to create a flexible multi-agent system (MAS) architecture including a few exemplary demonstrators. In these examples, it is made clear how each UAV makes decisions and how data is shared.

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Introduction

A new technical era has arrived with drones becoming more and more advanced and becoming available to the public. The drones of today are capable of accomplishing tremendous complex tasks on their own. But what if we combined multiple drones in a multi-agent system? How will these drones cooperate and how can this be implemented? To define the capabilities of a multi agent-system multiple scenarios are tested with multiple drones.

In this short note an example of a multi-agent system will be explored to familiarize the reader with the concepts of agents, multi-agent systems, and the cooperation of agents in these systems. First the technologies will be explained to help the reader comprehend the concepts. In the example a multi-agent system is set up where 5-10 drones can cooperate as intelligent agents, communicating through a blackboard communication system. Each agent is able to decide its own actions autonomously. The entire system is run inside docker containers with the ability to visualize the environment in Gazebo, a 3D dynamic simulator with the ability to accurately and efficiently simulate populations of robots in complex indoor and outdoor environments.

1 Traineeship report

1.1 about the company

1.2 technologies

1.2.1 ROS



Figure 1: ROS logo¹.

The Robot Operating System (ROS) is a set of software libraries and tools that help you build robot applications. ROS enables the user to simplify the creation of robust robot applications. Using nodes, ROS provides an easy method of communication between a robot and the user or, in case of multiple robots, between robots themselves. All the nodes are connected to ROScore differentiated by name. Each node can contain multiple topics, with each topic assigned a topic name. Using this topic name a user can create subscribers (to access information from this topic) and publishers (to add new data to the topic). Information can be shared between nodes using these subscribers and publishers from different nodes [4].

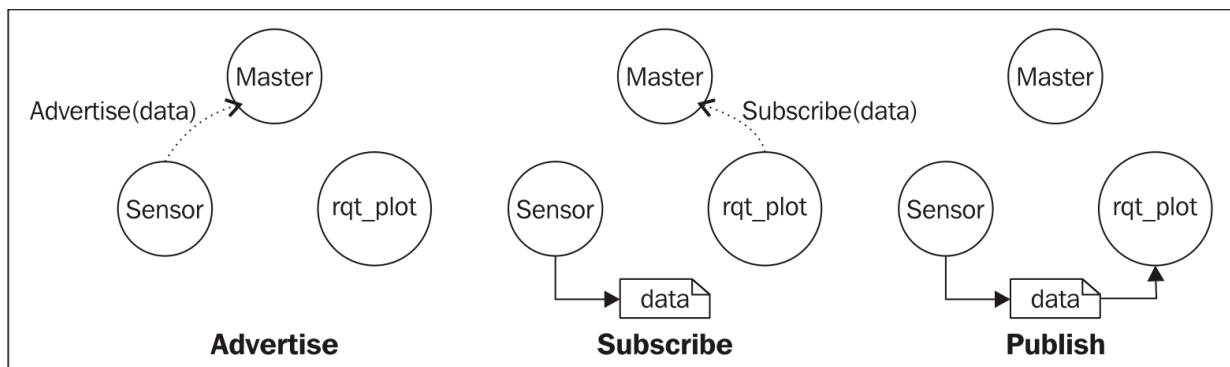


Figure 2: ROS core².

1.2.2 MAVLink



Figure 3: MAVLINK logo³.

MAVLink is a very lightweight messaging protocol for communicating with drones. Data streams are sent/published as topics. The messages are defined within XML files. MAVLink is very efficient, it does not require additional framing and is very well suited for projects with limited bandwidth. Next to being very efficient, MAVLink is also very reliable. It provides methods for detecting corrupt packages, if any packets have been dropped, and for authenticating packets. A developer is able to control 255 concurrent systems on the network when using MAVLink, with each system having the ability for onboard and offboard communication [5].

Many languages support MAVLink v1, MAVLink 2 and Message Signing. There are also prebuilt MAVLink C libraries available on the MAVLink website.

1.2.3 MAVROS

Mavros is a MAVLink extendable communication node for ROS with a proxy for Ground Control Station. This is the crucial link between MAVLink and ROS. It is a ROS “node” that can convert between ROS topics and MAVLink messages allowing ArduPilot vehicles to communicate with ROS [6]. Next to providing communication between ROS and the ArduPilot vehicles MAVROS also contains a multitude of builtin methods to simplify coding when handling basic actions of a vehicle.

1.2.4 PX4



Figure 4: PX4 logo⁴.

PX4 is an open-source autopilot system oriented toward inexpensive autonomous aircraft. It is supported by an active worldwide community, it powers all kinds of vehicles from racing and cargo drones through to ground vehicles and submersibles [7].

1.2.5 Docker

Docker is a set of platforms as a service product that uses OS-level virtualization to deliver software in packages called containers. Containers are isolated from one another and bundle their own software, libraries, and configuration files.



Figure 5: Docker logo⁵.

Containers use shared operating systems. This means that they are much more efficient than virtual machines. Instead of virtualizing hardware, containers rest on top of a single Linux instance so they leave most of the virtual machine behind. Another great feature of docker is that it is great for Continuous Integration/Continuous Deployment (CI/CD). This methodology comes from DevOps. Developers can share and integrate code into a shared repository early and often. Offering quick and efficient deployment [16].

1.2.6 Gazebo

Gazebo, an open-source 3D robotics simulator, makes it possible for developers to rapidly test algorithms, design robots, perform regression testing, and train AI systems using realistic scenarios. In gazebo the developer can create custom environments. These environments have realistic rendering including high-quality lighting, shadows, and textures. Sensors that can see the simulated environment on robots can be modeled [8].



Figure 6: Gazebo logo⁶.

1.2.7 Python

Python is an indentation language emphasizing code readability with notable use of whitespaces. The standard library is very comprehensive. Object-oriented and structured programming are both fully supported. Python has not all functionality in its core, it is rather built to be highly extensible [9].



Figure 7: Python logo⁷.

As a dynamically typed language, Python is very flexible. There are no hard limitations or rules on how to build an application or solution to a problem. Encountering errors python still compiles and runs your program until it hits the problematic part.

1.3 Implementation

1.3.1 Iris drone

PX4 provides a default drone, the iris. The iris is a quadcopter that has multiple control options, providing redundancy and flexibility. It has a built-in radio for real-time mission monitoring, data logging and control. For controlling the drone it has powerful cross-platform ground station/mission planning and analysis software that runs on Windows, OS X and Linux, providing simple point-and-click programming and configuration. And finally Maybe the most important feature for a developer: failsafe programming options in the event of lost control signal, GPS, or low battery conditions [10].



Figure 8: Iris drone⁸.

Using xarco files a developer is able to add components to this drone. In this project it is able to spawn up to 10 drones. As a generic solution the project contains a `generate.launch` script that can accept a parameter for `n` amount of drones. This script is written in bash so the argument can be passed in the command line. It generates a launch file as a string, and then writes this launch string to a file named “`smartuavs.launch`” inside the launch folder. This will later be further detailed in the simulation container.

In the project a 3D-camera is added using a components snippet from the PX4 GitHub repository. The 3D camera has multiple topics where it publishes to where it publishes data.

1.3.2 What is an agent?

There has yet to be a true definition of what an agent is. A lot of different pieces of literature define an agent in their own way. All these definitions are strongly based on the background of the research they are conducting. In [3], an agent is defined as :

An agent is anything that can be viewed as perceiving its environment through sensors and acting upon that environment through effectors.

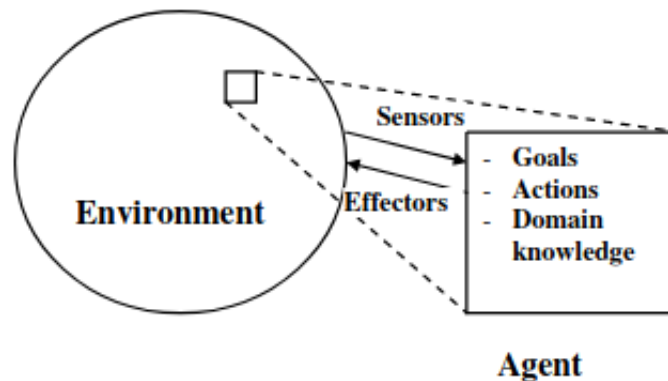


Figure 9: agent⁹.

This means that an agent is an entity that can perceive its environment through sensors and perform tasks using data received from these sensors.

An agent has two basic properties, being autonomous and being situated in an environment [1]. To achieve autonomy the entity must have a goal. An autonomous agent will try and achieve this goal using a set of actions. The agent will decide independently what the best set of actions is. During this process there will be no direct intervention from other entities.

To enable an agent to be situated it must have the ability to adapt to dynamic (changing rapidly, unpredictable (not static) and unreliable environments (it is not able to predict future states of the environment)).

An intelligent agent has additional properties :

- Reactive
- Proactive
- Flexible
- Robust
- Social

Agents are often situated in dynamic environments. Because of this they will need to adapt to each change to keep pursuing the goal, the agent is reactive. The second additional property, proactive, is that the agent will keep pursuing the goal over time. If an attempt fails the agent will need to recover and be robust. To achieve robustness the agent will need a range of actions to achieve the goal so it can be flexible in case some actions are not available, have failed before. Lastly an intelligent agent is able to interact with other agents and share its knowledge, the agent is social.

Implementing this concept, each drone is an agent. To create an agent in ROS, firstly a node is created. A node is an executable that uses ROS to communicate with other nodes [11]. For this small example the name UAV_0 is given to the node.

```
rospy.init_node('UAV_0', anonymous=True)
```

The drone is able to situate itself using an internal GPS. Using MAVROS the developer is able to control the drone. MAVROS will translate the messages sent from ROS to MAVLink so the drone can “understand” these messages. To send a message the developer must first create a publisher to a specific topic, in this example the drone is sent to a specific location.

```
point_push = rospy.Publisher('/iris_0/mavros/setpoint_raw/local',  
                             PositionTarget, queue_size=1)
```

A publisher is made for the topic ‘/iris_0/mavros/setpoint_raw/local’. When publishing to this point the data must be a PositionTarget. Each topic has a defined type of message so that MAVROS can translate this message to MAVLink. Following the same reasoning multiple publishers can be made for more complex movements or actions. Next to creating more publishers a developer also has the ability to create custom topics with custom messages.

A drone can also receive information with a subscriber. Like in a publisher the type of message has to be defined. Finally a callback has to be given as an argument where the data is processed. These callbacks are default run single-threaded. This can cause some performance issues in bigger problems. To solve this problem ROS provides Multi-threaded spinning and AsyncSpinner [12]. For this short example, processing a local GPS message, a subscriber is needed with the callback.

```
gps_local_sub = rospy.Subscriber('iris_0/mavros/global_position/local',  
                                 Odometry, self.gps_local_callback)
```

The subscriber receives messages from the topic ‘iris_0/mavros/global_position/local’ where the message type is Odometry. The callback, `self.gps_local_callback` , will process the data each time it is updated.

```
def gps_local_callback(self, info):  
    pose = info.pose  
    self.x = pose.pose.position.x  
    self.y = pose.pose.position.y  
    self.z = pose.pose.position.z
```

In this case the local position of the drone is updated each time the callback is called. Multiple callbacks can be made in a single node to further improve the complexity and possibilities of the agent.

1.3.3 Simulation

The project contains multiple containers, each built from scratch. Each container has its purpose. To create all the images for the containers there is a script, `0_build.images.sh`, that will build all the images for the containers. The `start_terminals.sh` script will take the argument to spawn `n` drones. This will start multiple containers and it gives the user a terminal tab for each container. The code in each container is in a catkin package. Catkin is the official build system of ROS.

The first container is responsible for running Gazebo, the simulation. The container is built with the image `smart_uav_px4` from another project built by fellow colleagues Vic Segers and Borcherd Van Brakel. ROS, MAVLink, MAVROS, PX4 firmware are all installed on this image. The simulation container is responsible for spawning all the drones in a world. As previously, the script `generate_launch.sh` creates a launch file by generating a string and then writing this string to the `smartuavs.launch` file.

Inside this launch file a `xacro` file is passed as an argument for each drone. The `xacro` file, `iris_base.xacro`, that is passed is in the folder `rotors_description/urdf`. The file takes two arguments, a TCP and a UDP port. Giving each drone different UDP and TCP ports gives the ability to control each drone separately.

Inside the `iris_base.xacro` file all the components for the iris drone are added. Before adding a component the file where it is originated must be included first.

```
<xacro:include filename="$(arg rotors_description_dir)
                        /urdf/component_snippets.xacro" />
```

After including the `xacro` file, a component can be added to the drone. Some components can take arguments like the 3D camera, the `vi_sensor_depth_macro`, can take some arguments on where to place the camera, how to orient the camera, a namespace, a parent link, a camera suffix (for the topic where it publishes its data to) and a framerate.

```
<xacro:vi_sensor_depth_macro
  namespace="{namespace}"
  parent_link="base_link"
  camera_suffix="iris_depth"
  frame_rate="30.0">
<origin xyz="0 0 0.01" rpy="0 1.57079632679 0"/>
</xacro:vi_sensor_depth_macro>
```

If there is only one drone, SDF files can be used to simplify the process. The reason `xacro` files are used is that they can take arguments whereas SDF files can not. This means the UDP and TCP ports can not be adjusted so only one drone can be controlled [13].

The simulation container also contains Rviz, a 3D simulation tool for ROS. A developer

can add topics, for example a point cloud from the camera, and Rviz will visualize this data. Finally to run the simulation and Rviz there is a script called `1_run_launch.sh` inside the container. As a first argument (-a) it takes n amount of drones. The default value is the n amount of drones previously given by starting the containers. The second argument (-w) is a path to a world file. The third argument (-g) is a boolean if Gazebo needs to have a visualization window. Without a window for gazebo the performance is a lot higher because of the limitation in gazebo rendering all the data thus giving a better real-time factor.

Rviz, abbreviation for ROS visualization, is a visualization software that allows a developer to view data from Gazebo (or real-world). It can capture data, capture sensor information, replay captured data and provide a viewpoint of a robot. All this information comes in the form of topics. A developer can choose multiple topics in Rviz to visualize. Rviz has the ability to visualize multiple topics at the same time while maintaining high performance. By viewing the standpoint from a robot debugging is made substantially easier for a developer [14].

Logging information is a crucial part of developing with ROS. Rosbags provide an easy way of logging information. These files can be quite large so ROS provided a way of capturing only crucial data. One or more topics can be listed after the command “`roscat record`”, capturing only data given by the user. When playing back this rosbag will loop over the data, while Rviz visualizes it. A developer can use this for tracking down bugs, optimizing code, implementing features, etc.

1.3.4 Blackboard communication system

To enable the agents to communicate with each other in a multi-agent system a blackboard communication system is introduced. The blackboard system is essentially a node containing all the information for agents to share with each other. The information can be separated using different topics depending on the internal hierarchy of the multi-agent system. As doing so the agents can be split into groups and only specific information will be shared while still maintaining information sharing inside the groups.

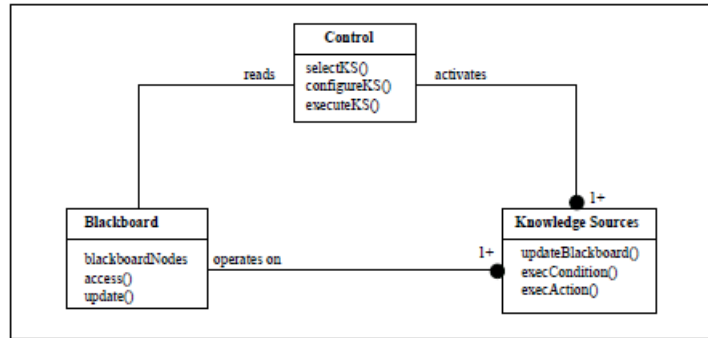


Figure 10: Blackboard communication¹⁰.

The second container is responsible for the blackboard communication system. The container uses the image `smartuav_ros_mavros`. MAVLink, MAVROS and pymavlink are installed in this image. Using these libraries a developer can construct custom messages that can be updated in the blackboard system. The blackboard can then publish these custom messages as a bundled package to a custom topic. A problem can be placed inside this package with flags and actions for the agents.

When handling a problem, each agent will take a portion of the problem and iteratively update the blackboard node. For example searching for an object in a large field. Each agent will take a portion of that field and search for the object. When an agent finds the object it updates the blackboard, therefore notifying the other agents that the object is found [15].

When implementing the blackboard system in the project it unlocks a whole new set of possibilities. The agents now have information on the whereabouts of the other drones. With this information the agents can implement collision prevention between each other. Next to just GPS information agents are now able to distribute a problem over multiple agents. Communication between agents introduces a multi-agent system.

1.3.5 What is a Multi-Agent System (MAS)

Like the definition of an agent, there has yet to be a true definition for a multi-agent system. Yet again there are a lot of definitions, each depending on the background of the research they are conducting. For this research the definition is chosen from P. Stone. In [2], a multi-agent is defined as:

A multi-agent system is a loosely coupled network of problem-solving entities (agents) that work together to find answers to problems that are beyond the individual capabilities or knowledge of each entity (agent).

So a multi-agent system is a group of agents organized to solve a problem a single agent would not be able to solve on its own. The agents are organized, they have a structure and are able to communicate with each other to share knowledge.

An agent in a multi-agent system has some important characteristics. As mentioned before, the agent must be autonomous in some form. It can make decisions on its own without any intervention. Secondly, no agent has a full view of the world. And thirdly the system must be decentralized. There is no controller controlling each agent independently.

There can be different types of internal hierarchies in a multi-agent system, depending on how the developer wants the agents to work together.

When agents work in teams, each team has its function. When a team reaches a goal it will share this information with the other teams.

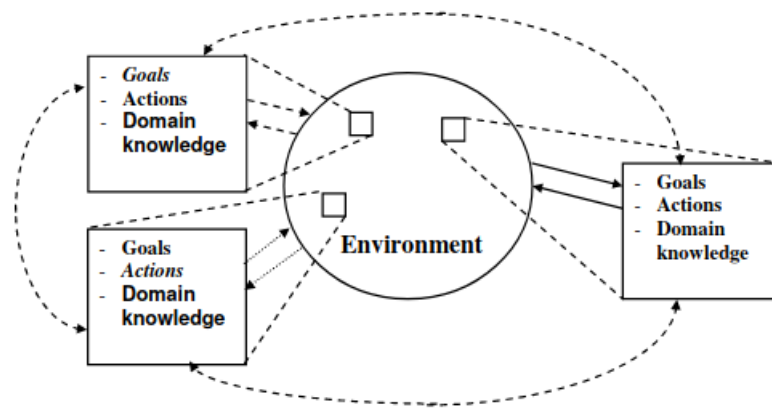


Figure 11: Communication as teams¹¹.

For example a patrol, search, and track problem. Where each team has its own goal. Team A will patrol an area and report if it finds some abnormalities. Team B will search for these abnormalities in the area and report any findings to team C. Team C will then on its turn start and track these objects.

Coalitions, like teams, consist of multiple drones working together. In coalitions not each drone has the same goal. The agents will adapt to the information and the environment to change its goal.

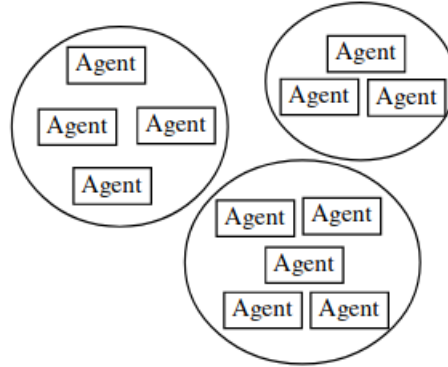


Figure 12: Communication as coalitions¹².

Let's take the same example from teams. Each coalition will take on a subarea of the original area. Within the coalition, each agent will take action depending on the current state of the area (if an object is found or not). Depending on the information an agent can decide to switch actions, for example from searching to tracking.

In a hologenic hierarchy all the agents will communicate with each other. Prioritizing the one closest to them. Each drone will share its current state other agents will adapt to this information. When receiving new information from the blackboard system agent states can change, updating the entire hierarchy.

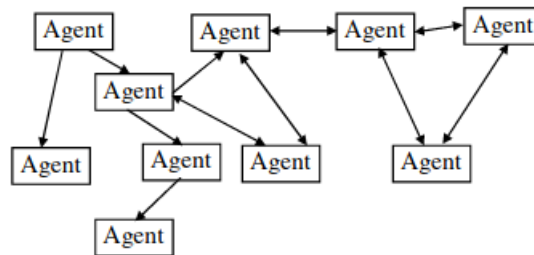


Figure 13: Communication as hologenic hierarchy¹³.

1.3.6 Advantages of MAS

When handling a large problem multi-agent systems provide a robust and scalable solution. By spreading the computational workload the system is not only fast but also very reliable.

When an agent fails in a multi-agent system the system will have the availability to recover fairly easily from this due to the robustness. Control and responsibilities are shared over all the agents. The system can tolerate failures of one or more agents by adding the failed actions that were being performed by these agents back into the blackboard system. Other agents can then try and complete these actions again.

Another advantage of a multi-agent system is scalability. Adding another agent to a multi-agent system is easier than expanding an already existing application. In a multi-agent system, all the agents are identical therefore introducing a new agent will only update the internal hierarchy.

1.3.7 Controlling the agents

The last container, the controller, is responsible for starting the multi-agent system. Each drone will run as a parallel process in the simulation. To start a drone a specific pattern of commands has to be followed. Before starting a connection, a heartbeat, must be made with each drone that must be maintained throughout its flight. When a connection is lost that specific drone will stop its current action and land on its home point.

When a connection is established, a developer is able to arm the drone. It is possible to visually confirm that a drone is armed when its rotors are spinning. After arming a home point has to be set, this is a safe place where the drone can land in case of connection loss. When a drone is armed and has a home point it is ready for further instructions. These agents fly autonomous. For a drone to fly without user input it has to be put into the “OFFBOARD” mode. Finally, when a drone is in this mode it can be added to a team, coalition, or hologenic hierarchy. Depending on the hierarchy a drone will take on an action and help to try and solve the given problem.

2 Research topic

2.1 Research and hypothesis

2.1.1 Problem

Currently there is no framework available to easily prototype multi-agent UAV systems in a simple environment. In case a company/person would like to develop such technologies they would need to start off from scratch which would mean they would first need to invest time/money into developing such environments.

The current state of the project is a proof of concept with a single UAV. Developed for firefighters to give live feedback from the air, scanning the area for possible dangerous chemicals.

2.1.2 Question

2.1.3 Suggested solution

2.1.4 Sub-question

2.1.5 Hypotheses

2.2 Research method

3 Conclusion

type conclusion here

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Appendices

Description Appendix A

Description Appendix B

Description Appendix C