

IMPERIAL COLLEGE OF LONDON

RESEARCH PROJECT REPORT

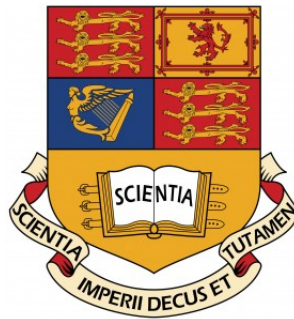
Learning walking skills and Laws of Commands for modular Robots

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Abstract

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Learning Walking Skills and Laws of Command for Modular Robots

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Though classical automation has proven to be really efficient for many problems in the last years so that we see consequence of its use everyday in our life, non-linear problems and problems with many degrees of freedom seem to be resistant to the classical approach. The goal of this project is to generate automatically laws of command for complex modular structures composed of simple blocks and joints. By learning from a 3D world under simulated physics laws the robot will learn to move on the ground by itself. It will then be possible for someone to control it via a simple interface like a joystick. Another goal/demo is to start in a situation with blocks and joint scattered in the 3D world and find the best way to regroup all of them in one structure using the pre-generated command laws/results for all intermediary structures.

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Chapter 1

State of the Art

The first remarkable examples of modular robotics learning to evolve in a 3D simulated world is due to Karl's Creature in 1994 [?]. Since then Genetic Algorithms have proven to be very efficient to solve motions problem especially in trying to maximize on parameter (speed for instance) [?] [?] [?]. Some of those learning algorithm are also tested on physical implementation of complex structures [?] [?]. More recently new techniques using reinforcement learning [?] showed interesting results. The M-blocks initiative at MIT [?] tackles the mechanical engineering challenges behind modular robotics, but a lot of challenges remain from a software perspective in order to use modular robotics in the future fields we expect it to have an impact one, such as space (or non-friendly human environments) exploration and construction, medicine, ...

Chapter 2

Simulation Environment

The first task of my project was to build a simulator to be able to get feedback from a simulated world. The goal of the simulator is to provide an environment which is governed by physics laws. In this project such physics laws are gravity, friction and collisions. Combining these two phenomena on complex structure can lead to situations difficult to predict, especially since it has a chaotic behavior. Two movements of a structure in such a physical world, though they differ just a little, can lead to very different outcomes.

2.1 Physics Engine

In order to simulate the behavior of complex shapes and bodies in a simulated world, a physical engine is required. This kind of physical engine is used in a lot of different areas, for instance the film and video games industry, to simulate destructions or complex situations where placing all bodies by hand would be too difficult. I tested two different libraries that provide tools to simulate these complex situations : `bullet ODE` (`Open Dynamics Engine`). The first part was to simulate the static part of the world, which is the ground. For now, I used a plane, with a friction coefficient, but we can imagine testing all the structure on different surfaces, (not necessarily plans). Also in order to simplify the structure, so that the modules are simple shapes, all the robots are only composed of cubes, linked by different type of joints. ODE and bullet also provide tools to simulate joints (adding constraint on the relative movements of different bodies)

and also to animate them simulating motors. I choose ODE for its simplicity to control different joints using this motors. In order to simulate a servomotor properly, it is for instance possible to set a maximum torque value and a command to the motor.

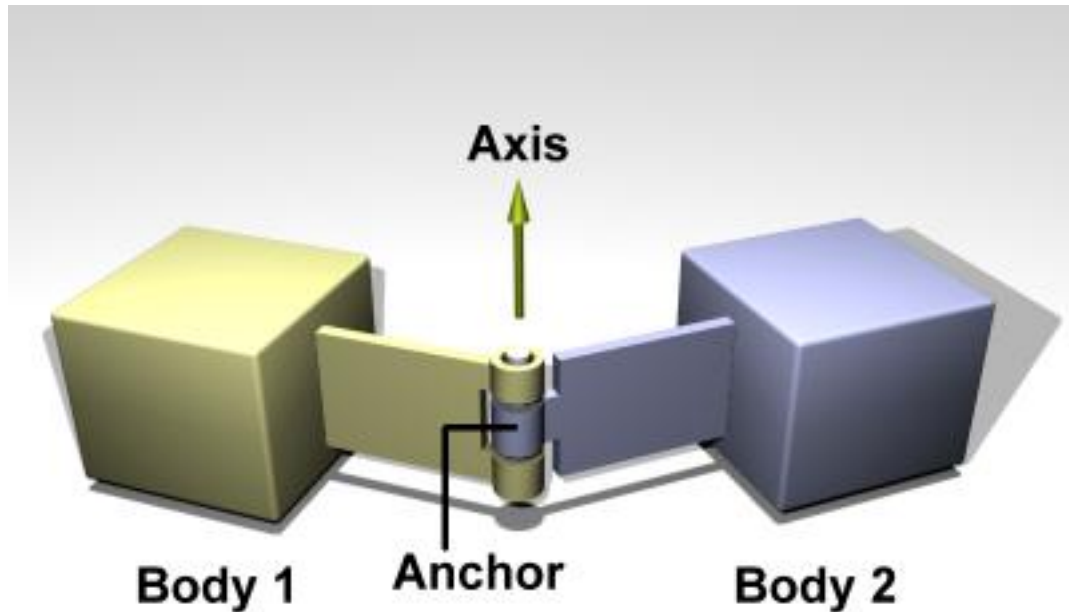


FIGURE 2.1: A 3D representation of a Hinge Constraint

2.2 Visual rendering

A good thing about the physical engine is that it is completely separated from the rendering part. That way, it is possible to run much faster for the learning process. But it is also necessary to see the result, especially for the purpose of debugging the simulator. Carnegie Mellon University developps a framework called panda3d, that integrate both a rendering librairy using OpenGL and different physics engines (ODE and bullet). All this tools are developped in C/C++ with binding for python, which makes it an easy tool to create animation movie, games or simulations.

2.2.1 The coordinate system

In order to represent all the objects that we manipulate in the simulation (physics and rendering), panda3d uses a system of global/local coordinate and a tree architecture. Each element of the tree is represented in the coordinates of the father. In order to keep a coherence with this architecture, it is natural to use a graph to represent the modular structure of the robots. Panda3d also uses 4-by-4 matrices to represent the transformation of a node to its one of its children. These transformation are classical in 3d representation. They combine the benefits of 3 by 3 matrices that represent functions ($\mathbb{R}^3 \rightarrow \mathbb{R}^3$) that can be interpreted as the set of combined rotations and homotetia, where the matrix multiplication is the composition of such transformations, and a translation. Manipulating translations requires to use 4 by 4 matrices instead of 3 by 3 but the properties of the product are kept, which makes it a very useful tool to manipulate 3d objects. For instance, if the children of the node is translated of a vector $(1, 0, 0)$, then we can use a function on the object representing the Matrice (TransformState in panda3d) to change the matrice and add the translation. The same goes for giving a certain orientation to the object using quaternions to represent the 3D orientation and add this to the 4 by 4 matrix.

Picture of the 4*4 Matrix

2.3 Structures of the Robots as a Graph

We can represent a Robot as a graph, where each node is a component of the robot. In this project there is four types of components :

- the head: which has a cube shapes and 6 sons (one for each faces), There is only one head per structure.
- a structural block: This is also a cube, also with 6 sons (or edges in the graph) for all faces.
- a hinge joint: The hinge is composed of two small cubes, separated by the joint whith one degree of freedom.

- a vertebra : a vertebra is very much like a hinge but has two degrees of freedom (two angle directions) with smaller range, but bigger maximal torque.

Picture of Hinge and vertebra ?

This Structure is represented in python with an object called `MetaStructure`, with very simple function to move within the graph and add components and follow edges that make it easy to design a structure that we have in mind, (or for possible later use to generate them automaticly...). This object is the key to describe a structure.

Chapter 3

Control

Once the simulation is fully implemented, the goal is to use it as a testbench for different ways of controlling the structure. The second part of the project will be fully consecrated on this part. A few tools have been implemented to test some of the algorithms that are used in such problems.

3.1 PID Control of the joints

One of the problem to control accurately a joint is to adapt the command so that it can adapt to difficult situation. For instance, it is easier to walk in a swimmingpool than on the ground and this is why people recovering after an injury do aquatic training. For a joint, it can be easy to do a movement in the air, but the same movement is more difficult when touching the ground. One way to avoid this problem is to implement PID (Proportional Integral Derivative) controller. This kind of controller is used in a lot of different situation in the world of automation to control degrees of freedom. In or case, servomotors often integrate such loops to account for these changes of use. In the simulation, at each step, the command of each degree of freedom of the structure is calculated using such a PID controller.

Picture of the PID sinusoid answer

A few issues come from introducing PID in this problem. The stability is one of them. The PID loops need to be fast enough to be stable, which means that reducing the time

between two steps of calculation on the physical world. The other problem is more a biological concern. The main goal of this project is to find solutions that are biologically inspired instead of using a classical automation approach. Therefore though the use of PID is necessary in many robotics applications, we will try to avoid using them in generating oscillations.

3.2 Central Pattern Generator

Central Pattern Generators (CPGs) are neural networks, that can generate oscillation for the control of the muscles of our body. They are the consequence and the cause of the paradigm of periodic movement in the locomotion of animals. Different models have been implemented to represent CPGs. We can represent them as a graph of coupled oscillator, where each node influence the behavior of its neighbours.

Equation of the chosen model

A modification of this model is possible to plug the measured value of the degrees of freedom. Thatway a direct control is possible without using the PID controllers.

3.3 Learning

It is then possible to learn the parameters of the CPG to optimize the movement of the structure. Instead of having to find the value of the angles, the CPGs act as basis function for the angles, and thatway we reduce the space of research to a space with finite dimensions.