

Experimental Validation of Reference Spreading by Robotic Manipulation of Unmodeled Objects

Gijs van den Brandt

Abstract—Exploiting impacts can speed up robotic object manipulation. However, when using traditional control approaches, impacts are paired with peaks in joint torques and contact forces that may damage the robot or its environment. Reference spreading (RS) is an impact-aware control approach that addresses these peaks without significantly compromising on tracking performance. Numerical studies have validated the benefits of RS controllers for object manipulation tasks, but these controllers rely on knowledge regarding the robot's contact state and accurate object models – information that is not easily available in a real-life setup.

To facilitate experimental validation of RS for object manipulation, this work describes an impact detection algorithm and a model-free trajectory planner using teleoperation. Furthermore, a soft end effector is designed. These components are implemented on a dual-arm robotic setup to evaluate RS in a usecase that is relevant to industry, namely grabbing a box. Experiments show that RS reduces control effort – and therefore joint torques and contact forces – without inhibiting tracking performance. Consequently, impacts at higher velocities become feasible, meaning that RS can contribute to faster object manipulation.

I. INTRODUCTION

Automation has historically played a crucial role in the logistics industry. Our current way of living depends on autonomous systems for global transportation and warehousing. The growing labor shortage and increasing demand for online retail motivate further developments in the logistics sector [1].

A logistical aspect where machines struggle to fully compete with humans is object manipulation. A practical examples of this is depalletizing. While robots are strong and consistent when manipulating objects, humans are versatile and swift. Robots are held back from faster performance because they must often slow down prior to making contact; establishing contact at a high velocity – an event referred to as an impact – could cause damage to the robot or its environment. On the contrary, humans intrinsically exploit impacts in the form of grabbing, bouncing and hitting.

The field of impact-aware control aims to better equip robots for making contact at high velocities. These impacts are paired with large contact forces that could damage the system. Previous work describes control using the maximum allowable impact velocity that complies with safety constraints such as limits for the contact force [2, 3]. This was combined with a compliant cover for the robot that reduces contact forces at impact, facilitating higher feasible impact velocities. Rather than using a soft cover, low impact forces may also be achieved by designing a robot with low inertia and high backdrivability as was done in [4].

In addition to the large contact forces, a subject of interest is the velocity jump at the time of impact. Time misalignments between velocity jumps in the reference and in the actual system cause the velocity tracking error to peak[5]. This error peak results in undesired control effort and consequently increased joint torques and contact forces, which may damage the robot or its environment. Increased control effort due to error peaking should thus be avoided.

In [6], the robot's velocities are projected into an impact-invariant subspace based on the expected point of impact. As a result, impact-driven peaks in the velocity tracking error are reduced significantly. It is not always possible to describe a point of impact, however. Often times, impacts occur between surfaces rather than just points. Furthermore, corners of the surface may impact at diverging intervals in uncertain order during what is called near-simultaneous impacts.

The impact-aware control scheme called Reference Spreading [7] also addresses error peaking caused by misaligned impacts. It operates on the basis of a tracking error that switches from an ante- to a post impact reference once an impact is detected. Near-simultaneous impacts can be accounted for by an intermediate impact mode as was done in [8]. By addressing the peaking error, reference spreading facilitates faster object manipulation, making it interesting to industry if its effectivity can be proven in practice.

Experimental validations of reference spreading have been limited to interaction with a fixed environment [9, 10]. In numerical studies, it has already been shown that reference spreading can also benefit object manipulation [8, 11]. These works use models of the environment to formulate a trajectory with impact-driven velocity jumps that are coherent with the system's dynamics. A lack of sufficiently accurate object models in the real world means that a different approach to trajectory formulation is required. Furthermore, the controllers used in simulation rely on information, such as contact state or object location, that often is not available on an experimental setup.

The goal of this work is to **evaluate reference spreading for practical object manipulation tasks on an experimental setup**. To this end, a soft end effector is designed to increase friction during object manipulation. This end effector also reduces peaks in contact forces upon impact. Furthermore, since the lack of accurate environment models does not allow for model-based trajectory planning, a motion planner that utilizes teleoperation is formulated. To monitor the contact state using sensor data, a novel impact detector is described

and compared to impact detectors from literature that are prone to false-positives. Finally, these components are implemented with a reference spreading controller on a dual-arm setup. A box-grabbing experiment is then conducted to compare control approaches with and without reference spreading.

II. BACKGROUND

A. Robots suitable for impacts

goal: Explain why franka emika robot is suitable for impacts, explain torque control, show custom end effectors from literature, motivate design of a new end effector

Traditionally, robots employ low-level controllers which govern a motor torque based on a joint position or velocity reference, encoder measurements, and gain parameters.

B. Quadratic programming control

goal: motivate QP control, formulate cartesian impedance task, posture task, and list dynamics of motion and safety constraints

Controlling a robot for object manipulation involves, e.g., addressing redundancy and accounting for limits of the robot, while simultaneously applying a contact force and moving to a position. These objectives often clash with each other, meaning that they cannot always be perfectly satisfied. It is possible to distinguish between constraints – control objectives that must always be satisfied – and tasks – objectives that should be performed as good as possible but not necessarily perfectly.

Quadratic Programming (QP) relies on this philosophy. In a QP scheme, constraints and task errors are defined as a linear function of optimization parameters. Then it becomes possible to efficiently find the parameters that minimize the task errors while adhering to the constraints. Furthermore, priority between the tasks can be achieved by assigning weights. In the context of a robot where the optimization parameters are, for example, joint accelerations \ddot{q} , the optimization problem can be formulated as

$$\min_{\ddot{q} \in \chi} \sum_i w_i \|e_i(\ddot{q})\|^2 \quad (1)$$

where w_i and e_i are the respective weight and error of the task with index i , and χ is the feasible space where all constraints are met. The remainder of this section describes constraints and tasks that are relevant for object manipulation.

Torque constraint: To protect the robot, we can define a constraint that limits the control torque τ within a safe range, i.e.,

$$\tau_{min} \leq \tau \leq \tau_{max} \quad (2)$$

This constraint must be formulated as a function of optimization parameter \ddot{q} to be compatible with the QP scheme. The relation between \ddot{q} and τ is given by the equations of motion

$$M\ddot{q} + h = \tau \quad (3)$$

with inertia matrix M and vector of gravity, centrifugal, and Coriolis terms h . Subsequently, the torque constraint

formulated as linear function of the optimization parameter becomes

$$\tau_{min} \leq M\ddot{q} + h \leq \tau_{max}. \quad (4)$$

Impedance task: When manipulating objects, both the position and the contact force of the robot should be controlled. Impedance relates displacement to force, meaning that enforcing a desired impedance is a suitable control approach for object manipulation.

Rather than enforcing a virtual impedance at each joint, it is preferable to apply a virtual impedance in Cartesian space, which is more intuitive when tuning task weights or when performing teleoperation. The impedance should then act on the cartesian pose of a body, i.e., its translational coordinates p and rotation R . Velocity and accelerations are represented by ω and α for rotations, and by v and a for translations.

An impedance controller aims to achieve the closed loop behaviour

$$\Lambda \begin{bmatrix} \alpha \\ a \end{bmatrix} + D \begin{bmatrix} \omega - \omega_d \\ v - v_d \end{bmatrix} + K \begin{bmatrix} -e_{rot} \\ p - p_d \end{bmatrix} = f_d \quad (5)$$

with Cartesian-space inertia, damping and stiffness matrices Λ , D and K , and rotation tracking error e_{rot} as defined in Appendix xxx. Subscript d denotes the desired value, and f represents the external wrench.

Stiffness K is typically chosen as a diagonal matrix. The damping matrix is determined following $D = 2(\Lambda K)^{\frac{1}{2}}$ which guarantees stable behavior when K and Λ are symmetric [12]. Furthermore, for the inertia matrix, two options are considered. Choosing a diagonal matrix Λ decouples the accelerations w.r.t. to the position error, resulting in better position tracking in free motion. This approach was used in [13]. In this work, however, the task-space inertia is set to match the joint-space inertia following $\Lambda^{-1} = JM^{-1}J^T$, decoupling the contact force w.r.t. the position error for better performance during contact.

We can define the target task-space accelerations α_t and a_t based on (5):

$$\begin{bmatrix} \alpha_t \\ a_t \end{bmatrix} = \Lambda^{-1} \left(D \begin{bmatrix} \omega_d - \omega \\ v_d - v \end{bmatrix} + K \begin{bmatrix} e_{rot} \\ p_d - p \end{bmatrix} + f_d \right) \quad (6)$$

The desired behaviour of (5) is achieved as the robot's acceleration approaches the target acceleration, i.e., we want to minimize the impedance task error e_{imp} given by

$$e_{imp} = \begin{bmatrix} \alpha_t \\ a_t \end{bmatrix} - \begin{bmatrix} \alpha \\ a \end{bmatrix} \quad (7)$$

The QP scheme requires the task to be formulated as a linear function of the optimization parameter \ddot{q} . The relation between the task-space and joint-space acceleration can be found using the Jacobian J , which adheres to

$$\begin{bmatrix} \omega \\ v \end{bmatrix} = J\dot{q}. \quad (8)$$

Derivating with respect to time gives

$$\begin{bmatrix} \alpha \\ a \end{bmatrix} = J\ddot{q} + \dot{J}\dot{q}. \quad (9)$$

Finally, combining (7) and (9) results in the impedance task error as a function of the optimization variable:

$$e_{imp}(\ddot{q}) = \begin{bmatrix} \alpha_t \\ a_t \end{bmatrix} - J\ddot{q} - \dot{J}\dot{q}. \quad (10)$$

Posture task: In object manipulation, the 6-DoF end effector pose is of particular interest. Robot arms that mimic human anatomy often possess 7 DoF's, however. This results in a DoF redundancy, which should be addressed for a well-posed QP scheme. The additional DoF can be imposed by a so-called posture task, as was done in [13]. This task attaches a virtual, critically-damped spring and damper with stiffness k to the joint angles, i.e.,

$$\ddot{q}_t = k(q_d - q) - 2\sqrt{k}\dot{q}. \quad (11)$$

The posture task error is then given by

$$e_{pos}(\ddot{q}) = k(q_d - q) - 2\sqrt{k}\dot{q} - \ddot{q} \quad (12)$$

C. Reference spreading

goal: explain error peaking, explain reference spreading, formulize reference extending, explain intermediate mode

Error peaking: Many controllers, such as the impedance-based controller described in the previous section, rely on a velocity reference for tracking. When a trajectory contains impacts, both the measured and reference velocity signals contain jumps. Due to, e.g., imperfect tracking or uncertainty regarding the position of the contact surface, the measured and reference jumps can be misaligned in time. This causes the tracking error to peak – a phenomenon that will be referred to as error peaking. This is shown in Figure xxx. The peak is paired with high control efforts that could damage the robot and its environment, while not necessarily contributing to better tracking. To prevent large peaks in the tracking error, robots often avoid high-velocity impacts.

Switching reference: Reference spreading (RS) enables high-velocity impacts by addressing error peaking. RS distinguishes between a reference before and after the impact. While neither of references contains velocity jumps, switching from the ante- to the post-impact reference upon impact results in a velocity jump that is aligned with the the velocity jump of the actual system. Figure xxx shows that this reduces the peak in the tracking error, meaning that faster impact become feasible.

Near-simultaneous impacts: Sometimes, impacts are paired with multiple velocity jumps. Corners of a contact surface may impact at diverging intervals in uncertain order during what is called near-simultaneous impacts. This is visualised in Figure xxx. Between the moment of impact and contact completion – an interval referred to as the intermediate (impact) phase – both the ante- and post impact reference would result in error peaking. Literature describes intermediate phase controller to deal with this: during the intermediate phase, velocity feedback may be disabled [8], or the velocity reference may be set to zero [10].

Reference extending: RS relies on the formulation of ante- and post impact references. These can be generated by splitting a reference at the nominal impact time, and then

extending beyond the nominal impact time. One extending approach is maintaining constant

D. Impact detection

goal: explain error peaking (including near-simultaneous impacts), explain reference spreading, formulize reference extending, explain intermediate mode

E. Trajectory planning

III. METHODS

A. Soft end effector

Nulla malesuada porttitor diam. Donec felis erat, congue non, volutpat at, tincidunt tristique, libero. Vivamus viverra fermentum felis. Donec nonummy pellentesque ante. Phasellus adipiscing semper elit. Proin fermentum massa ac quam. Sed diam turpis, molestie vitae, placerat a, molestie nec, leo. Maecenas lacinia. Nam ipsum ligula, eleifend at, accumsan nec, suscipit a, ipsum. Morbi blandit ligula feugiat magna. Nunc eleifend consequat lorem. Sed lacinia nulla vitae enim. Pellentesque tincidunt purus vel magna. Integer non enim. Praesent euismod nunc eu purus. Donec bibendum quam in tellus. Nullam cursus pulvinar lectus. Donec et mi. Nam vulputate metus eu enim. Vestibulum pellentesque felis eu massa.

Quisque ullamcorper placerat ipsum. Cras nibh. Morbi vel justo vitae lacus tincidunt ultrices. Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. In hac habitasse platea dictumst. Integer tempus convallis augue. Etiam facilisis. Nunc elementum fermentum wisi. Aenean placerat. Ut imperdiet, enim sed gravida sollicitudin, felis odio placerat quam, ac pulvinar elit purus eget enim. Nunc vitae tortor. Proin tempus nibh sit amet nisl. Vivamus quis tortor vitae risus porta vehicula.

Fusce mauris. Vestibulum luctus nibh at lectus. Sed bibendum, nulla a faucibus semper, leo velit ultricies tellus, ac venenatis arcu wisi vel nisl. Vestibulum diam. Aliquam pellentesque, augue quis sagittis posuere, turpis lacus congue quam, in hendrerit risus eros eget felis. Maecenas eget erat in sapien mattis porttitor. Vestibulum porttitor. Nulla facilisi. Sed a turpis eu lacus commodo facilisis. Morbi fringilla, wisi in dignissim interdum, justo lectus sagittis dui, et vehicula libero dui cursus dui. Mauris tempor ligula sed lacus. Duis cursus enim ut augue. Cras ac magna. Cras nulla. Nulla egestas. Curabitur a leo. Quisque egestas wisi eget nunc. Nam feugiat lacus vel est. Curabitur consectetur.

Suspendisse vel felis. Ut lorem lorem, interdum eu, tincidunt sit amet, laoreet vitae, arcu. Aenean faucibus pede eu ante. Praesent enim elit, rutrum at, molestie non, nonummy vel, nisl. Ut lectus eros, malesuada sit amet, fermentum eu, sodales cursus, magna. Donec eu purus. Quisque vehicula, urna sed ultricies auctor, pede lorem egestas dui, et convallis elit erat sed nulla. Donec luctus. Curabitur et nunc. Aliquam dolor odio, commodo pretium, ultricies non, pharetra in, velit. Integer arcu est, nonummy in, fermentum faucibus, egestas vel, odio.

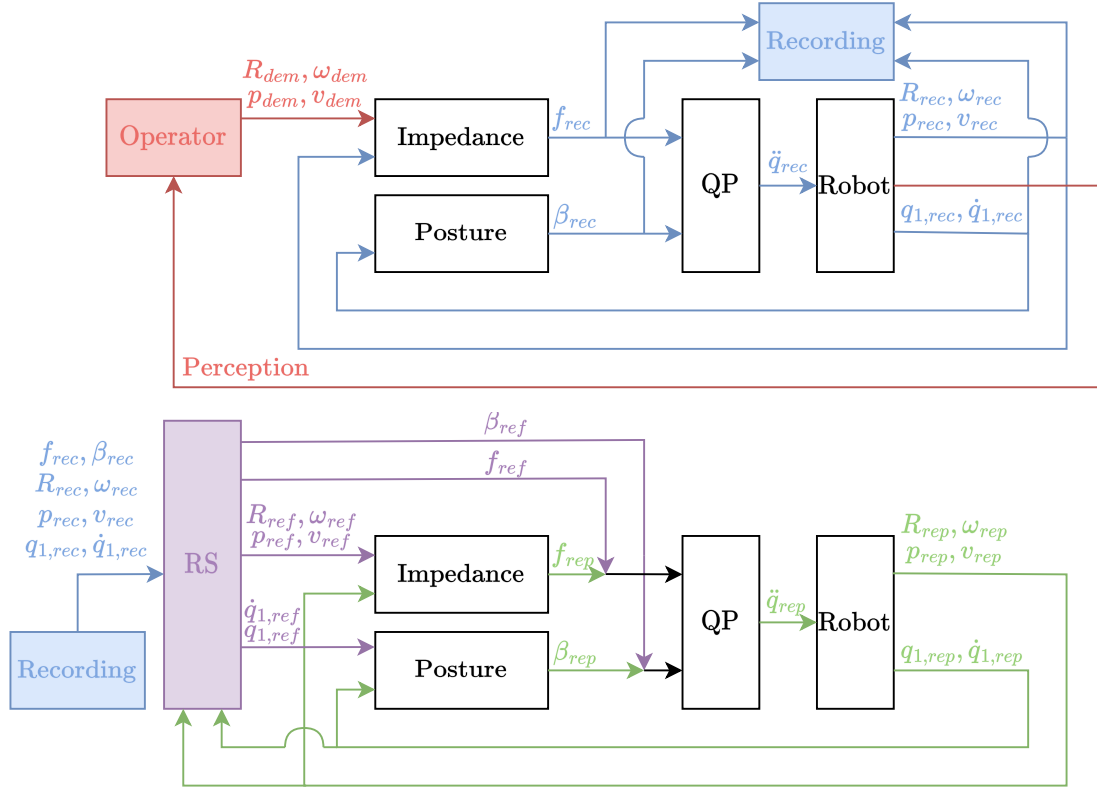


Fig. 1. Inductance of oscillation winding on amorphous magnetic core versus DC bias magnetic field

Sed commodo posuere pede. Mauris ut est. Ut quis purus. Sed ac odio. Sed vehicula hendrerit sem. Duis non odio. Morbi ut dui. Sed accumsan risus eget odio. In hac habitasse platea dictumst. Pellentesque non elit. Fusce sed justo eu urna porta tincidunt. Mauris felis odio, sollicitudin sed, volutpat a, ornare ac, erat. Morbi quis dolor. Donec pellentesque, erat ac sagittis semper, nunc dui lobortis purus, quis congue purus metus ultricies tellus. Proin et quam. Class aptent taciti sociosqu ad litora torquent per conubia nostra, per inceptos hymenaeos. Praesent sapien turpis, fermentum vel, eleifend faucibus, vehicula eu, lacus.

Pellentesque habitant morbi tristique senectus et netus et malesuada fames ac turpis egestas. Donec odio elit, dictum in, hendrerit sit amet, egestas sed, leo. Praesent feugiat sapien aliquet odio. Integer vitae justo. Aliquam vestibulum fringilla lorem. Sed neque lectus, consectetur at, consectetur sed, eleifend ac, lectus. Nulla facilisi. Pellentesque eget lectus. Proin eu metus. Sed porttitor. In hac habitasse platea dictumst. Suspendisse eu lectus. Ut mi mi, lacinia sit amet, placerat et, mollis vitae, dui. Sed ante tellus, tristique ut, iaculis eu, malesuada ac, dui. Mauris nibh leo, facilisis non, adipiscing quis, ultrices a, dui.

Morbi luctus, wisi viverra faucibus pretium, nibh est placerat odio, nec commodo wisi enim eget quam. Quisque libero justo, consectetur a, feugiat vitae, porttitor eu, libero. Suspendisse sed mauris vitae elit sollicitudin malesuada. Maecenas ultricies eros sit amet ante. Ut venenatis velit.

Maecenas sed mi eget dui varius euismod. Phasellus aliquet volutpat odio. Vestibulum ante ipsum primis in faucibus orci luctus et ultrices posuere cubilia Curae; Pellentesque sit amet pede ac sem eleifend consectetur. Nullam elementum, urna vel imperdiet sodales, elit ipsum pharetra ligula, ac pretium ante justo a nulla. Curabitur tristique arcu eu metus. Vestibulum lectus. Proin mauris. Proin eu nunc eu urna hendrerit faucibus. Aliquam auctor, pede consequat laoreet varius, eros tellus scelerisque quam, pellentesque hendrerit ipsum dolor sed augue. Nulla nec lacus.

Suspendisse vitae elit. Aliquam arcu neque, ornare in, ullamcorper quis, commodo eu, libero. Fusce sagittis erat at erat tristique mollis. Maecenas sapien libero, molestie et, lobortis in, sodales eget, dui. Morbi ultrices rutrum lorem. Nam elementum ullamcorper leo. Morbi dui. Aliquam sagittis. Nunc placerat. Pellentesque tristique sodales est. Maecenas imperdiet lacinia velit. Cras non urna. Morbi eros pede, suscipit ac, varius vel, egestas non, eros. Praesent malesuada, diam id pretium elementum, eros sem dictum tortor, vel consectetur odio sem sed wisi.

B. Trajectory planning via teleoperation

Due to the absence of an environment model, the velocity jump during an impact cannot be determined analytically, and hence it is not possible to replicate the trajectory planning methods used in simulation as described in Section xxx. Instead, we employ teleoperation so that a human operator may demonstrate a task. Low control gains are

used during teleoperation so that impacts do not cause an excessive control effort. The humans in the loop allows for the execution of complex manipulation tasks, despite the poor control gains. Furthermore, the resulting trajectory is guaranteed to be coherent with the dynamics of the robots, and can be used as a reference for an RS controller.

VR device: Teleoperation requires an interface between the operator and the robot. This work uses the HTC Vive VR handheld devices for the interface. With the openVR library, the following signals can be extracted from the VR devices during a demonstration: rotation R_{dem} , angular velocity ω_{dem} , position p_{dem} , and velocity v_{dem} .

Teleoperation controller: During teleoperation, the goal is to track the VR device and record the trajectory of the robot, i.e., save the recording. This is achieved using a QP controller as described in section II-B.

In this context, the impedance task (7) becomes

C. Reference spreading formulation

IV. EXPERIMENTAL VALIDATION

A. Implementation

B. End effector evaluation

C. Reference spreading

D. Intermediate modes

V. CONCLUSION

APPENDIX

- A. Rotation mathematics*
- B. End effector design*
- C. Supplementary experimental results*