

PANDORA Monstertruck: A 4WS4WD Car-Like Robot for Autonomous Exploration in Unknown Environments

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Abstract—This paper presents a Four-Wheel-Steering Four-Wheel-Drive (4WS4WD) car-like robot, able to autonomously explore unknown environments with flat or uneven terrain. The robot contains a set of sensors and actuators and utilizes a number of algorithms to effectively map the environment, localize in it, plan and execute motions, while utilizing the maneuverability of the four-wheel-steering kinematic model. For the task of autonomous navigation, a ROS-based 4-Tier architecture is proposed consisting of global path planning, dynamic local path deformation for collision avoidance, kinematically feasible local path synthesis and finally local path tracking using a fuzzy logic controller for 4WS car-like robots.

I. INTRODUCTION

Autonomous Mobile Robots (AMR) are robots able to perform tasks without any human intervention or control. AMRs are increasingly used in commercial, industrial, military and lately even domestic settings and are extensively researched worldwide. The AMR presented in this paper, was specifically developed for research purposes in the field of Unmanned Search and Rescue (USAR).

An AMR must be able to perceive its environment, move safely and efficiently inside it and make decisions based on sensory inputs and artificial intelligence algorithms about how to proceed, in order to complete a given task. Therefore, it utilizes a set of algorithms that can be separated in three basic categories: perception, decision making and motion planning & execution, which in this case, translates to simultaneous localization and mapping (SLAM), exploration - target selection and autonomous navigation respectively.

This paper presents the architecture of an AMR and the algorithms required for its autonomous operation, focusing on motion planning and execution, while the problems of simultaneous localization and mapping (SLAM) and exploration are tackled, by utilizing a number of open source algorithm implementations. In particular, the CRSM-SLAM [1] algorithm is used, which performs scan matching to determine the pose of the robot and construct the map of the environment. In addition, exploration is performed using a frontier exploration

algorithm implementation for ROS, which considers frontiers as borders between explored free space and unknown space.

The developed robotic platform adheres to a four-wheel-steering kinematic model, which presents a set of nonholonomic constraints that restrict the feasible velocities of the robot in the plane and as a result render the problem of motion planning especially difficult in comparison with the more popular Differential, Skid-Steer and Omnidirectional kinematic models. As a result, the open source implementations of navigation algorithms, such as Dijkstra and A* for path planning and the Dynamic Window Approach [2] or Elastic Band [3] for collision avoidance and path tracking, should be modified. Thus, the navigation system architecture employed, is the same as for the above models, but the collision avoidance and path tracking component are replaced with appropriate ones that consider the kinematic constraints of the 4WS robot.

The proposed Reeds-Shepp Band method was based on the Nonholonomic Bubble Band by Khatib et al. [4], which dynamically deforms a global path, while satisfying the non-holonomic constraints of car-like robots. The proposed method uses a two-step approach to dynamically deform the global path for collision avoidance using the Elastic Band algorithm and then perform interpolation on the deformed path waypoints using collision-free Reeds-Shepp paths [5], in order to achieve the kinematic feasibility of the path. The navigation system is complemented with a fuzzy logic path tracking controller, based on the methods presented in [6] for car-like robots and [7] for 4WS robots and aims to take advantage of both the counter steering and crab steering capabilities of the robot.

In Section II, the developed PANDORA Monstertruck robotic platform is presented. Section III focuses on the software architecture of the robot and the proposed autonomous navigation system. Section IV demonstrates the experimental results from simulation and physical robot operation, followed by the conclusions and future work in Section V.

II. THE PANDORA MONSTERTRUCK ROBOT

The PANDORA Monstertruck robotic platform that is depicted in Fig. 1 was built using a Redcat Racing Ground-pounder 1:10 RC monstertruck, that features simultaneous and independent front and rear wheel steering (4WS), as well as drive transfer to all four wheels (4WD).

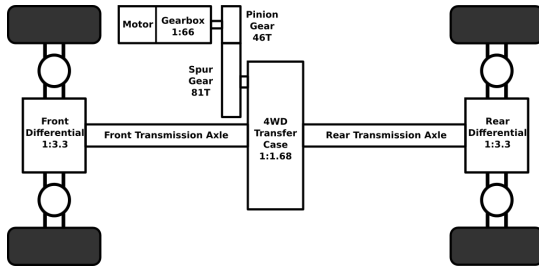


Fig. 1. PANDORA Monstertruck.

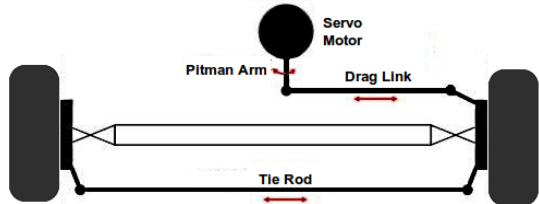
A. Actuators and Motion Transfer

1) *Drive System:* The driving motion of the wheels is generated by a single brushless 18000 *rpm* maxon EC-max 283858 motor, controlled by a maxon EPOS 24/1 positioning controller. The turning motion of the motor is transferred to the wheels via a drivetrain mechanism, as shown in Fig. 2a, which consists of four basic transfer stages: the motor gearbox (1:66), the spur & pinion gears (1:1.76), the 4WD transfer case (1:1.68) and the front and rear differentials (1:3.3), resulting in a 1:644 transfer ratio and a maximum speed of 0.2m/s.

2) *Steering System:* The steering motion of the wheels is generated by two Hitek HS-7954TH servo motors, controlled by a Pololu Micro Maestro 6-Channel USB servo controller. The servos steer the front and rear wheels via two drag link steering mechanisms, as depicted in Fig. 2b.



(a) The 4WD drivetrain that transfers the motion from the motor to the four wheels.



(b) The drag-link-steering mechanism used for the 4WS system.

Fig. 2. The motion transfer systems of PANDORA Monstertruck.

B. Hardware Components

The main goal of the developed robotic platform is to autonomously explore unknown environments with flat or uneven terrain. In particular, the robot must be able to map its environment and detect obstacles. These tasks are accomplished using a Hokuyo URG-04LX Laser Scanner (Fig. 3a) that offers laser scans, with a 10Hz frequency, 60 – 4095mm range and 240° measurement area.

Reliable localization, mapping and obstacle detection demands the laser scanner to always be stabilized on the horizontal level. This is accomplished by employing a roll-pitch stabilization mechanism consisting of two Dynamixel AX-12A smart servos in a roll-pitch topology (Fig. 3b) that continuously correct the roll and pitch deviations of the sensor.

For the laser scanner stabilization task, the roll and pitch deviations are required, in order to adjust the mechanism rotations using the inverse angles. The roll and pitch angles are measured using a compass and specifically an Ocean Server Compass OS4000 (Fig. 3c), which contains a 3-axis magnetometer and a 3-axis accelerometer and offers measurements of the *roll*, *pitch* and *yaw* angles, as well as the linear accelerations $\alpha_x, \alpha_y, \alpha_z$.

In addition, the sensor equipment of the robot is complemented with a Logitech Portable Webcam C905 (Fig. 3d), used at the time, only for monitoring purposes during the teleoperated and autonomous operation of the robot.

Finally, the central node that acts as the brain of the robot and communicates with the sensors and actuators, consists of an ODROID-XU4 single board computer (Fig. 3e) that was chosen due to its small size, low power consumption and high enough processing power.

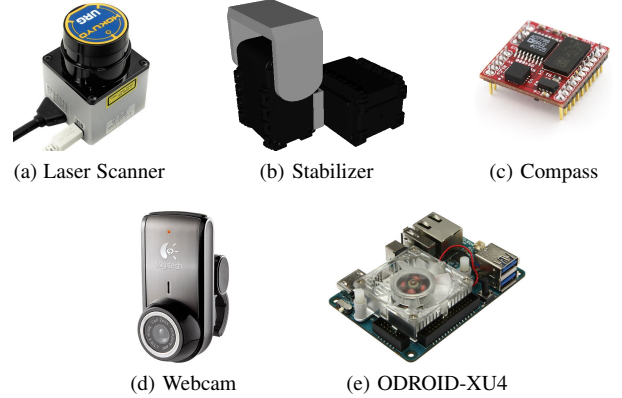


Fig. 3. The sensors, laser scanner stabilizer and computer board of PANDORA Monstertruck.

C. Kinematics

In [8] the 4WS kinematic model is presented with the requirement that in order for a 4WS vehicle to perform slip-free motion in low speeds, it must comply with the 4WS Kinematic Condition. This condition states that the perpendicular lines to each wheel must intersect at the same point *O*, called the Instantaneous Center of Rotation (ICR) and is expressed as

$$\frac{1}{\cot \delta_{of} - \cot \delta_{if}} + \frac{1}{\cot \delta_{or} - \cot \delta_{ir}} = \frac{l}{w} \quad (1)$$

where δ : steering angle, i : inner, o : outer, f : front and r : rear, l : wheelbase and w : track.

However, the developed robotic platform uses steering mechanisms that do not comply with the above kinematic condition and define a steering relation between the left and right wheels that is approximated as equal ($\delta_{if} = \delta_{of} = \delta_f$, $\delta_{ir} = \delta_{or} = \delta_r$). As a result, the wheels are subjected to slipping by a side-slip angle α even in low speeds. The slipping of the wheels is demonstrated in Fig. 4 and is expressed as

$$\frac{1}{\cot(\delta_{of} - \alpha_{of}) - \cot(\delta_{if} + \alpha_{if})} - \frac{1}{\cot(\delta_{or} - \alpha_{or}) - \cot(\delta_{ir} + \alpha_{ir})} = \frac{l}{w} \quad (2)$$

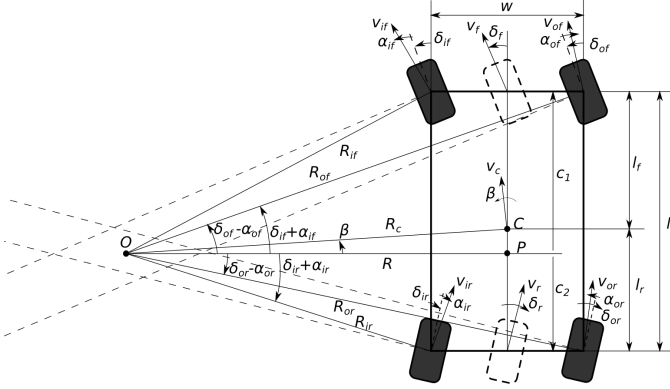


Fig. 4. The 4WS Kinematic Model with Slipping.

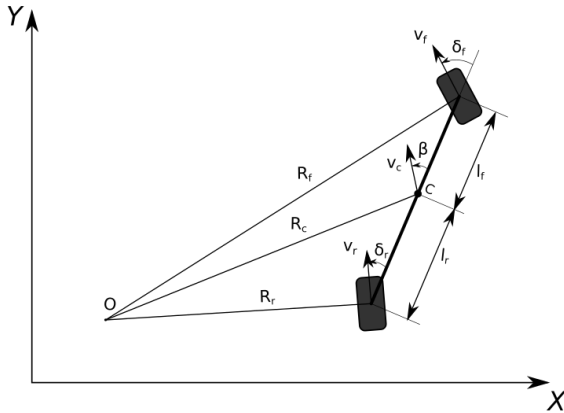


Fig. 5. Equivalent bicycle model of the 4WS model on the plane.

The motion of the robot in the plane, as shown in Fig. 5, using the equivalent bicycle model, can be expressed using the velocity equations from [9]:

$$\dot{X} = v_c \cdot \cos(\theta + \beta) \quad (3)$$

$$\dot{Y} = v_c \cdot \sin(\theta + \beta) \quad (4)$$

$$\dot{\theta} = \omega_c = \frac{v_c \cdot \cos \beta \cdot (\tan \delta_f - \tan \delta_r)}{l} \quad (5)$$

where

$$v_c = \frac{v_f \cdot \cos \delta_f + v_r \cos \delta_r}{2 \cdot \cos \beta} \quad (6)$$

$$\beta = \arctan \frac{l_r \cdot \tan \delta_f + l_f \cdot \tan \delta_r}{l} \quad (7)$$

III. AUTONOMOUS NAVIGATION IN UNKNOWN ENVIRONMENTS

A. Software Architecture

The software of PANDORA Monstertruck was based on the Robot Operating System (ROS) and as shown in Fig. 6 consists of six basic components, as described below.

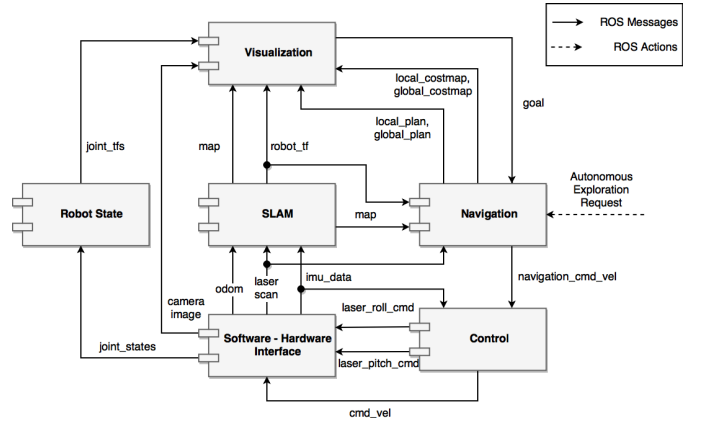


Fig. 6. A simplified component diagram of the software architecture of PANDORA Monstertruck.

- 1) *Hardware-Software Interface*: Component that contains drivers and ROS interfaces for sensors and actuator controllers.
- 2) *Control*: Component responsible for teleoperation, the laser scanner stabilization and velocity command priority multiplexing, between navigation and teleoperation commands.
- 3) *SLAM*: Component responsible for environment mapping using the CRSM-SLAM algorithm and state estimation.
- 4) *Robot State*: Component responsible for publishing the transformations between the reference frames of the joints of the robot.
- 5) *Visualization*: Component responsible for the visualization of the information provided by the sensors and algorithms of the robot (runs on the remote monitoring station).

6) *Navigation*: Component responsible for the exploration and autonomous navigation of the robot. It consists of two nodes, a frontier exploration node for autonomous target selection and the ROS node `move_base`, which, given a goal in the world, will try to reach it. The node `move_base`, as shown in Fig. 7, is used in combination with the `global_planner` plugin and the `rsband_local_planner` plugin, which implement the algorithms Dijkstra/A* for global path planning and the Reeds-Shepp Band algorithm for dynamic local path planning, respectively. The `rsband_local_planner` plugin, also, implements a fuzzy path tracking controller for 4WS car like robots that along with the Reeds-Shepp Band algorithm are presented in the following subsections.

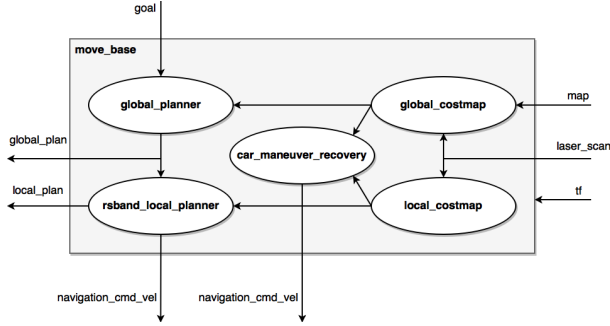


Fig. 7. The ROS `move_base` node with the `global_planner` and `rsband_local_planner` plugins.

B. Reeds-Shepp Band

The Reeds-Shepp Band algorithm is an approximation of the Nonholonomic Bubble Band algorithm by Khatib et al. [4], which is used for dynamic modification of a global path, in order to achieve dynamic collision avoidance, while at the same time transforming the path to a kinematically feasible one for car-like robots.

The Bubble Band algorithm uses bubbles, which represent the locally reachable space around a given configuration, while considering the obstacles around it via an appropriate distance metric. A nonholonomic bubble is a bubble produced using the shortest nonholonomic distance [10] or the shortest collision causing Reeds-Shepp Path around a configuration, where Reeds-Shepp paths are defined in [5] as the optimal paths for a car that goes both forwards and backwards. The Bubble Band is produced by generating nonholonomic bubbles across the given global path and dynamically applying to them artificial internal forces that tend to straighten the path and external forces that tend to move the path away from obstacles.

The Reeds-Shepp Band algorithm approximates the Nonholonomic Bubble Band algorithm, by using the computationally more efficient euclidean distance metric, resulting in a holonomic elastic band. The elastic band [3] algorithm dynamically deforms the global path (Fig. 8a) in a collision free path, which, however, is not kinematically feasible. Therefore, in the next stage, the elastic band path (Fig. 8b) is interpolated using collision-free Reeds-Shepp paths, resulting in a both collision-free and kinematically feasible local path (Fig. 8c) that the

robot can follow, using the fuzzy path tracking controller presented in the following subsection.

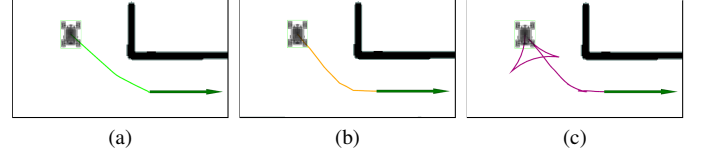


Fig. 8. (a) A Global Path (A*) and the resulting (b) Elastic Band and (c) Reeds-Shepp Band.

C. Fuzzy Path Tracking Controller

In order to track/follow the Reeds-Shepp Band path, the information about the path and the robot pose must be fed to a controller in order to produce suitable velocity commands. This role is fulfilled by a path tracking controller (PTC), shown in Fig. 9, which is based on fuzzy logic and was developed with the goal to utilize both the counter steering and the crab steering capabilities of the robot.

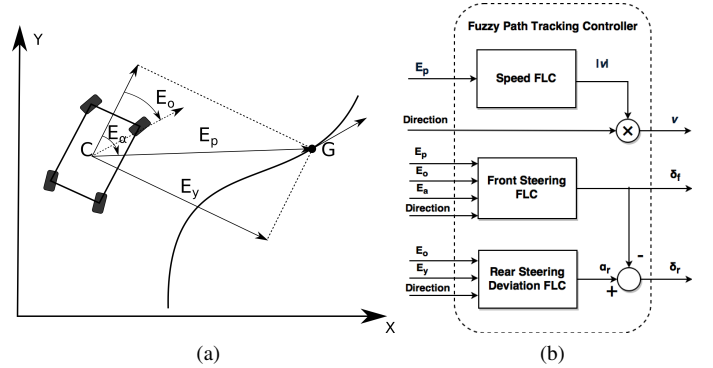


Fig. 9. (a) The deviation errors between robot pose and goal pose and (b) the fuzzy path tracking controller.

As shown in Fig. 9, the PTC considers four error variables and in particular the orientation error E_o , the angular deviation error E_α , the position error E_p and the lateral deviation error E_y , as well as the direction of motion defined as forwards for $|E_\alpha| \leq 120^\circ$ and backwards for $|E_\alpha| > 120^\circ$, whose membership functions are presented in Fig. 10. The path tracking controller, similarly to the controller presented in [7], consists of three individual fuzzy logic controllers (FLCs), responsible for the control of the speed v , the front steering angle δ_f and the rear steering deviation angle α_r , the membership functions of which are shown in Fig. 11.

The rule set of the FLCs (Fig. 12) was designed, such that the robot performs position correction when it is far from the goal and orientation correction when it is close to the goal so that it reaches the final goal pose, similarly to the approach in [6]. In addition, using the rear steering deviation controller, the robot uses counter steering when the position and angular deviation errors are big and crab steering in order to correct slight lateral deviations without any significant increase in the orientation error.

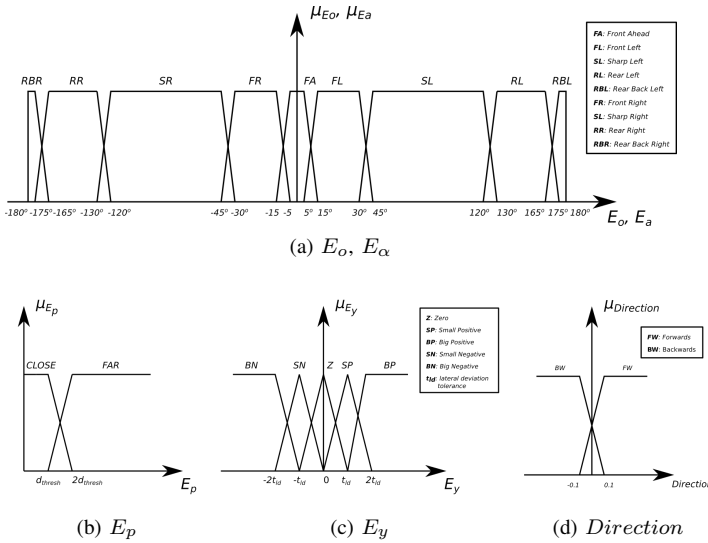


Fig. 10. The membership functions of the input variables of the controller.

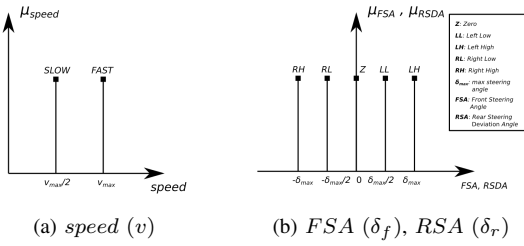


Fig. 11. The membership functions of the output variables of the controller.

IV. EXPERIMENTAL RESULTS

This section presents a series of experiments conducted in order to demonstrate the behavior of the autonomous navigation and exploration of the developed robotic platform.

The path tracking experiments presented in Fig. 13-14 were conducted in the Gazebo 3D simulator, with a view to demonstrate the operation of the fuzzy path tracking controller. For this experiment, a feasible static global path was constructed, which the robot managed to track successfully in both cases by using both counter and crab steering in order to offset angular and distance errors so as to follow the path as close as possible.

The experiments presented in Fig. 15 demonstrate the trajectories followed by the robot, using the A* global path planner, the Reeds-Shepp Band local path planner and the fuzzy path tracking controller, in order to reach three arbitrarily selected goal poses. These experiments were run on the 2D simulator STDR with a known map and perfect localization.

Finally, an autonomous exploration experiment with the actual PANDORA Monstertruck robot was conducted in the Computer Systems and Architecture Lab (CSAL) of the School of Electrical and Computer Engineering, AUTH, as presented in Fig. 16.

V. CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, the software and hardware architecture for a 4WS4WD mobile robot was presented capable of successfully

Speed Fuzzy Rules	if E_p is CLOSE then Speed is SLOW if E_p is FAR then Speed is FAST
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FSA Fuzzy Rules	if E_p is FAR and E_a is RBL then FSA is Z if E_p is FAR and E_a is RL then FSA is LH if E_p is FAR and E_a is SL then FSA is LH if E_p is FAR and E_a is FL then FSA is LL if E_p is FAR and E_a is FA then FSA is Z if E_p is FAR and E_a is FR then FSA is RL if E_p is FAR and E_a is SR then FSA is RH if E_p is FAR and E_a is RR then FSA is RH if E_p is FAR and E_a is RBR then FSA is Z if E_p is CLOSE and Direction is FW and E_o is SL then FSA is LH if E_p is CLOSE and Direction is FW and E_o is FL then FSA is LL if E_p is CLOSE and Direction is FW and E_o is FA then FSA is Z if E_p is CLOSE and Direction is FW and E_o is FR then FSA is RL if E_p is CLOSE and Direction is FW and E_o is SR then FSA is RH if E_p is CLOSE and Direction is BW and E_o is SL then FSA is RH if E_p is CLOSE and Direction is BW and E_o is FL then FSA is RL if E_p is CLOSE and Direction is BW and E_o is FR then FSA is LH if E_p is CLOSE and Direction is BW and E_o is SR then FSA is LH
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RSDA Fuzzy Rules	if E_o is not FA and E_o is not FR and E_o is not FL then RSDA is Z if Direction is FW and E_o is FA and E_y is BP then RSDA is Z if Direction is FW and E_o is FL and E_y is BP then RSDA is Z if Direction is FW and E_o is FR and E_y is BP then RSDA is Z if Direction is FW and E_o is FA and E_y is SP then RSDA is LH if Direction is FW and E_o is FL and E_y is SP then RSDA is LH if Direction is FW and E_o is FR and E_y is SP then RSDA is LH if Direction is FW and E_o is FA and E_y is Z then RSDA is Z if Direction is FW and E_o is FL and E_y is Z then RSDA is Z if Direction is FW and E_o is FR and E_y is Z then RSDA is Z if Direction is FW and E_o is FA and E_y is SN then RSDA is RH if Direction is FW and E_o is FL and E_y is SN then RSDA is RH if Direction is FW and E_o is FR and E_y is SN then RSDA is RH if Direction is FW and E_o is FA and E_y is BN then RSDA is Z if Direction is FW and E_o is FL and E_y is BN then RSDA is Z if Direction is FW and E_o is FR and E_y is BN then RSDA is Z if Direction is BW and E_o is FA and E_y is BP then RSDA is Z if Direction is BW and E_o is FL and E_y is BP then RSDA is Z if Direction is BW and E_o is FR and E_y is BP then RSDA is Z if Direction is BW and E_o is FA and E_y is SP then RSDA is LH if Direction is BW and E_o is FL and E_y is SP then RSDA is LH if Direction is BW and E_o is FR and E_y is SP then RSDA is LH if Direction is BW and E_o is FA and E_y is Z then RSDA is Z if Direction is BW and E_o is FL and E_y is Z then RSDA is Z if Direction is BW and E_o is FR and E_y is Z then RSDA is Z if Direction is BW and E_o is FA and E_y is SN then RSDA is RH if Direction is BW and E_o is FL and E_y is SN then RSDA is RH if Direction is BW and E_o is FR and E_y is SN then RSDA is RH if Direction is BW and E_o is FA and E_y is BN then RSDA is Z if Direction is BW and E_o is FL and E_y is BN then RSDA is Z if Direction is BW and E_o is FR and E_y is BN then RSDA is Z
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Fig. 12. The rule set of the fuzzy path tracking controller.

exploring unknown environments by utilizing the CRSM-SLAM algorithm for mapping and localization and a 4-Tier Navigation System containing a Dijkstra/A* global path planner, Elastic Band dynamic path modification, with Reeds-Shepp interpolation (Reeds-Shepp Band) and complemented with a fuzzy path tracking controller.

Further work could be done to improve the robustness, stability and safety of the navigation system by using a more deterministic Reeds-Shepp planner and by adding collision detection capabilities in the path tracking controller. In addition, through the employment of additional sensors and perception algorithms, the capabilities of the robot could be significantly increased regarding localization, mapping, rough terrain traversal and point of interest search.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors would like to thank P.A.N.D.O.R.A. Robotics Team for the equipment, source code and know-how provided

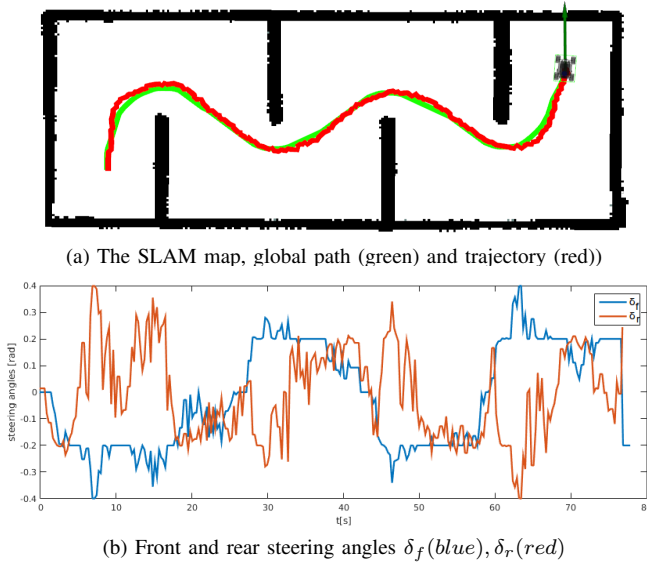


Fig. 13. Path tracking experiment in an environment in Gazebo.

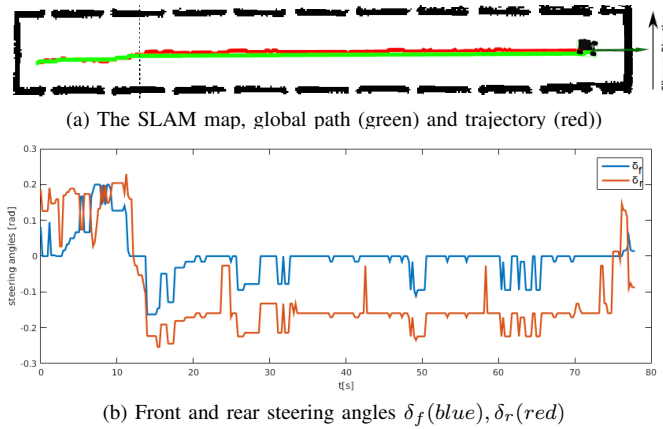


Fig. 14. Path tracking experiment under high slippage in a perpendicularly inclined corridor.

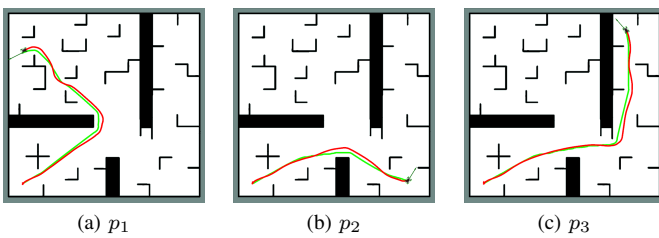


Fig. 15. Autonomous navigation experiments using the Reeds-Shepp Band algorithm with the fuzzy path tracking controller for three random goal poses in the map sparse_obstacles of the STDR simulator.

for the development of the PANDORA Monstertruck robotic platform.

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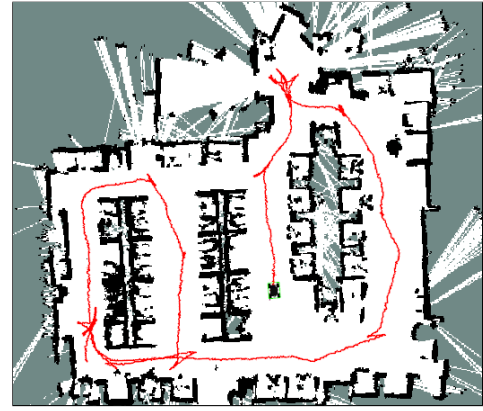


Fig. 16. Autonomous exploration experiment of PANDORA Monstertruck in CSAL. The map was constructed using the CRSM SLAM algorithm and the executed trajectory is denoted by the red continuous line.

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