Wearable Robotic Third Arm 2021 Fall Semester Report

Designing an Online Controller for the Wearable Robotic Third Arm for Self-Handovers and Obstacle Avoidance

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The Wearable Robotic Third Arm previously used an offline controller to go to a predetermined location and deliver an object to the other hand of the human. This can be challenging for the human wearing the arm as it requires more user input and the user must remember where the arm will move to, especially while engaged in another task. This report details the development of an online controller to adapt the robot’s movement based on the target hand motion to deliver the grasped object. This includes avoiding collisions with the human body and other obstacles as well as controlling a underactuated 5-degree-of-freedom robotic arm.

**Additional Keywords and Phrases:** Handovers,Wearable Robotics, Motion Planning

1. Introduction

Wearable robotic arms are robots that are attached to a person that can add assistive benefits. For example, providing support when assembling cars from uncomfortable angles, holding a drink while the person is working on something, or opening a door when a person’s hands are full. This report outlines the development of an online controller for a wearable robotic arm, the Third Arm, for use in handing something to oneself, self-handovers. The controller consists of a servo controller to move the arm, sensor integration with ROS and the OptiTrack Motion Capture systems for object locations, a motion planning system to control the Third Arm, and an obstacle avoidance system.

With this system, tasks like cooking can be supported with the Third Arm as one hand can be stirring a pot while another is given an ingredient out of reach normally as in *Figure 1*.

Diagram

Description automatically generated

Figure 1: User wearing the Third Arm while cooking and using it to pass them eggs.

1. Literature Review

Yang et al. [1] and Tong et al. [5] discussed the different types of wearable robotic arms and controllers developed but missing from them were online controllers for obstacle avoidance and handovers. In another paper, Chen et al. [2] found that they were able to use a potential field controller with their robotic arm to avoid obstacles. Vatsal et al. [4] discussed the inverse kinematics solution for the Third Arm in their technical report and implemented it in MATLAB; however, it was not tested or validated on the Third Arm. Vatsal [3] also developed the Third Arm and conducted experiments with it using an offline controller.

1. Development

The Third Arm was originally developed using ROS Indigo on Ubuntu 14 using the Dynamixel Controllers ROS package. It had no online controller, integrated inverse kinematics controller, or sensor integration barring voice recognition for the experiments run by Vatsal [3].

Throughout the course of this project, the ROS and Ubuntu systems were upgraded, an updated control system was developed, OptiTrack sensing was added, an online controller was created, and began developing obstacle avoidance systems.

* 1. Upgrading

We began by updating Ubuntu 14 to Ubuntu 20, ROS Indigo to ROS Noetic, and Python 2.7 to Python 3.1 As the Dynamixel Controllers ROS package was not available for ROS Noetic, Dynamixel Workbench was tested for use but found to lack the velocity control and abstraction needed for the motion planner. PyPot, an open source Dynamixel motor controller, was used instead with great success and came with both register level and higher-level position and velocity control for the servos.

* 1. Control System Development

We began tests at the register level to control the Third Arm with PyPot. Once we found the arm could be controlled, we moved on to the higher-level positional and velocity control and validated the arm also worked with these commands through a series of demos and tests. We then created a servo control class for positional and velocity control and added methods to initialize each controller in the motion planner as well as integration for the PyPot robot configuration. This controller was then tested and validated by running the controller on the Third Arm’s servos.

* 1. Sensor Integration

OptiTrack integration was added to allow the Third Arm motion planner to know where the Third Arm base and gripper were, as well as the target position for the gripper to go to. We found that OptiTrack had compatibility problems with ROS Noetic, so we ported the Third Arm code over to ROS Melodic, where it returned the quaternion and position vector for each object.

**PICTURE**

* 1. Motion Planning Pipeline

The motion planner allows for the Third Arm to have a feedback loop for control and use its sensor integration code to determine where, and how, to move next. We first created a liaison file for all ROS communication that processed the quaternion and positional vectors into transformation matrices to be used by the inverse kinematics solver in the motion planner. This file would also control when the motion planner was called and feed it the required data to actuate the arm.

The motion planner was created next. It instantiated controllers for each Third Arm servo and the PyPot robot configuration. The inverse kinematics solver was ported over to Python and used in the motion planner with the transformation data sent from the ROS liaison file. Its outputs were processed by PIDs we created for each Third Arm servo. We were able to have the arm track the target along one degree of freedom but found there were errors in Vatsal’s technical report for the inverse kinematic solver and have been in the process of correcting them to have a full inverse kinematics solution.

Diagram

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Figure 2: Motion planning and movement cycle

* 1. Obstacle Avoidance Introduction

To avoid hitting obstacles on the way to the target, obstacle avoidance was added in the form of a potential field. The distance from each obstacle to the arm will be calculated using the forward kinematics from the gripper and arm base positions to create a reference of the arm. The shortest path is then found from the obstacle to the arm as a vector and compared with the joint actuation directions to apply the appropriate adjustments in the correct directions to avoid hitting the obstacle. These adjustments would then go through PIDs before being combined with commands and safety tolerances to move to the target.

Conclusions and future work

This semester, we updated the controller for the Third Arm, added a motion planner, worked on the beginnings of a obstacle avoidance algorithm, and were able to have the arm track a target.

This upcoming semester, we plan to conduct further tests to finish the obstacle avoidance system, use the servo LEDs to communicate when the arm is out of reach of the target hand, integrate voice control to tell the arm when to perform a handover, and run an experiment with the new developments of the Third Arm.

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