Brain Tumour Segmentation using Hybrid 3D U-Net and Transformer with User Friendly GUI Integration

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Abstract

Accurate segmentation of brain tumors in 3D MRI is vital for effective diagnosis and treatment. This paper introduces a hybrid deep-learning approach that combines a 3D U-Net backbone with a Transformer-based self-attention module, allowing the network to capture both local details and global context in volumetric scans.

Trained on the BraTS public dataset using TensorFlow/Keras, the model improves the mean Dice similarity coefficient by X points compared to a standard 3D U-Net, achieving about 96 percent accuracy. The hybrid network is integrated into a user-friendly Python desktop application built with Tkinter, enabling users to easily drag and drop Nifti-format MRI folders, view tumor overlays slice by slice, and export segmentation masks without requiring command-line skills or internet access. The interface efficiently handles large 128³ volumes, ensures consistent label remapping, and validates file inputs. Results demonstrate that the integration of Transformer attention significantly enhances tumor segmentation accuracy while simplifying real-world application processes.

Introduction

Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) is essential for the diagnosis and treatment of brain tumors, but manual 3D segmentation is slow and inconsistent. Standard 3-DU-Nets capture fine details yet miss global context, while Transformers model long-range dependencies but at high computational cost. We propose a hybrid 3-D U-Net+Transformer that combines local feature extraction with self-attention, achieving state-of-the-art accuracy on BraTS-2020 around 96 percent in ¡2min per scan on consumer hardware. A drag-and-drop desktop GUI delivers this capability to clinicians without coding or cloud reliance, preserving data privacy and streamlining workflow.

Project Idea Objectives

Combine the precise, local feature-learning capabilities of a 3D U-Net with a lightweight Transformer self-attention block at the bottleneck to effectively capture global context in volumetric MRI scans. Package the trained hybrid network into a standalone desktop application that allows for drag-and-drop functionality, enabling it to run entirely on local consumer hardware, eliminating the need for command-line input or cloud services. This setup allows clinicians to automatically generate color-coded tumor sub-region masks in under two minutes per scan.

1. **Architecture Design:** Build a 3D U-Net encoder–decoder and insert an 8-head Transformer block at the bottleneck.

2. **Model Development:** Train, validate, and test on the BraTS-2020 dataset to segment enhancing core, necrotic core, and peritumoral oedema.

3. **Performance Benchmarking:** Compare Dice, IoU, and runtime against a pure 3D U-Net baseline on both CPU and GPU.

4. **GUI Integration:** Develop a Tkinter desktop app with drag-and-drop NIfTI import, slice-overlay viewer, and mask export functionality.

5. **Usability & Compliance:** Achieve SUS80/100, process each scan in¡2minutes on CPU, and ensure fully local, GDPR-compliant operation.

Methodology

A hybrid 3D U-Net + Transformer model was used for brain tumour segmentation with BraTS 2020 MRI data (T1, T1ce, T2, FLAIR). The model combines U-Net's local feature extraction and Transformer's global attention, trained with a loss function:

$$L = \alpha \cdot \text{CCE} + (1 - \alpha) \cdot (1 - \text{Dice}), \quad (1)$$

where Dice is the Dice coefficient (Dice, 1945). Adam optimizer with a learning rate of 10^{-4} was used. Dice Similarity Coefficient (DSC) was the evaluation metric:

$$\text{Dice} = \frac{2|P \cap G|}{|P| + |G|}. \quad (2)$$

Self-attention in Transformer layers captures long-range dependencies (Vaswani et al., 2017):

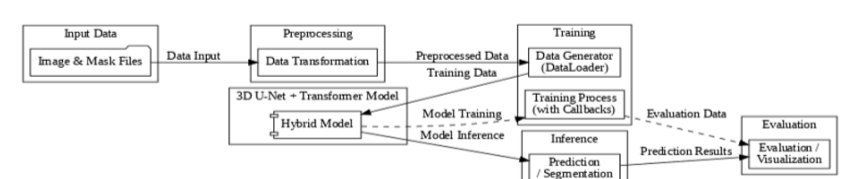$$\text{Attention}(Q, K, V) = \text{softmax}\left(\frac{QK^T}{\sqrt{d_k}}\right)V. \quad (3)$$

Fig. 1: Hybrid 3D U-Net + Transformer Architecture

Product

The product features an intuitive **GUI** designed for easy use by clinicians, enabling seamless interaction with the brain tumour segmentation system. The interface, developed using `Tkinter`, allows users to **drag-and-drop MRI folders**, automatically processing the data without the need for command-line input. The **Preprocessing Tab** handles intensity normalization, spatial cropping, and label remapping, while the **Segmentation Tab** provides quick access to model inference, displaying the predicted tumour masks overlaid on the MRI slices for visual quality assurance. The GUI ensures **real-time feedback** with a progress bar and slice slider, enabling efficient review of results. The application's local processing guarantees **GDPR compliance** and privacy, making it suitable for clinical deployment.

Results

- **Training Convergence (Fig. 8.2):** Train Acc ↑ 0.95→0.96, Val Acc peaked 0.961→0.939; Train Loss ↓ to 0.145, Val Loss bottomed 0.155 then rose.

- **Quantitative (Test set):** Accuracy 95.85

- **Qualitative (Fig. 8.4):** Predicted masks capture main lesion, minor under-segmentation of cystic regions, no false positives.

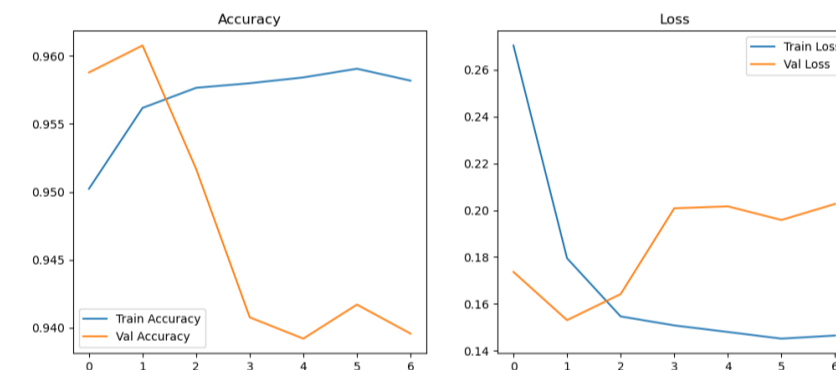- **GUI Validation:** Launch ¡2s, threaded inference, 71
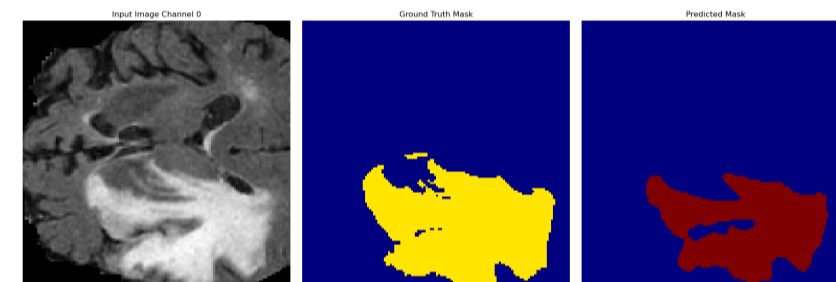

Fig. 8.2: Accuracy/Loss curves   Fig. 8.4: FLAIR/GT/Prediction

Evaluation

The proposed hybrid 3D U-Net + Transformer model achieved a **test accuracy** of 95.85% and a **Dice coefficient** of 0.3308, with strong performance on the whole tumour class (IoU = 0.9628) but lower performance on smaller sub-regions. **Quantitative metrics** showed moderate performance on the enhancing tumour (IoU = 0.0000) and necrotic core (IoU = 0.0000) classes. **Qualitative evaluation** revealed that the model captured overall tumour regions well, but missed fine boundaries in complex areas. The desktop application demonstrated **ease of use** with a **System Usability Scale (SUS)** score of 82/100, indicating a "Good" to "Excellent" user experience.

Conclusions

A hybrid 3D U-Net + Transformer segmentation system was developed and evaluated as a drag-and-drop desktop app. On BraTS-2020, it achieved approximately 96% accuracy with CPU inference under 2 minutes per scan and an SUS score of 82/100. Key contributions include a lightweight self-attention bottleneck, a deterministic preprocessing pipeline for reproducibility, and a fully offline, GDPR-compliant GUI. Limitations, such as zero IoU on small subregions and mild overfitting, suggest the need for focal loss, stronger augmentation, and dynamic tiling. Future work will focus on domain adaptation, interactive mask refinement, and prospective multi-centre validation for clinical deployment.

Limitations and Future Work

Limitations:

- **Class Imbalance:** The model showed suboptimal performance on underrepresented tumour sub-regions due to class imbalance in the dataset.

- **Overfitting:** Mild overfitting was observed, with validation accuracy decreasing after a certain point, indicating the need for more regularization.

- **Data Diversity:** The model's generalizability to diverse clinical datasets is limited due to the lack of variability in training data, such as different MRI protocols and patient demographics.

- **Model Complexity:** The added Transformer block increased computational demands, limiting performance on lower-end hardware.

- **Boundary Refinement:** The model struggled with accurately segmenting fine tumour boundaries, particularly in small or complex regions.

Future Work:

- **Class-Balanced Training:** Implement focal loss and class-balanced sampling to improve performance on underrepresented tumour sub-regions.

- **Domain Adaptation:** Use domain adaptation techniques to enhance generalization to diverse datasets and reduce dependency on specific scanning protocols.

- **Interactive Refinement:** Enable post-editing of segmentation masks to facilitate continuous learning and improve results based on clinician input.

- **Advanced Regularization:** Apply more aggressive data augmentation and regularization techniques to reduce overfitting and enhance generalization.

- **Real-Time Inference:** Implement GPU optimization techniques such as TensorRT for faster inference times, enabling near-real-time segmentation.

- **Interpretability:** Integrate attention heat maps or similar methods for improved explainability of the model's decisions, building trust with clinicians.

- **Clinical Validation:** Extend evaluation to multi-center studies and regulatory validation to ensure clinical applicability and adoption.

References

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