Monocular Drone Detection and 3D Localization Using Unreal Engine Synthetic Data

A Complete Implementation Guide

Abstract

This paper presents a comprehensive methodology for developing a monocular drone detection and 3D localization system using synthetic data from Unreal Engine. The approach combines YOLO11s object detection with monocular depth estimation to achieve 3D position tracking from a single camera. By leveraging Unreal Engine's perfect ground truth coordinates, we eliminate the need for expensive multi-camera setups or real-world data collection while achieving 8-12% relative position error at operational distances of 20-150 meters.

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1. Introduction

1.1 The Challenge of 3D Localization from Single Camera

Traditional 3D localization requires either stereo vision (two cameras) or expensive depth sensors. Stereo systems calculate depth through triangulation - measuring the disparity between the same object in two images taken from different positions. While accurate, this approach requires precise camera synchronization, calibration, and doubles hardware costs.

Monocular (single camera) 3D localization presents a fundamentally different challenge: recovering three-dimensional information from a two-dimensional image without geometric triangulation. This requires the system to infer depth from visual cues like object size, perspective, occlusion patterns, and atmospheric effects - similar to how humans perceive depth with one eye closed.

1.2 Why Unreal Engine for Training Data

Unreal Engine provides three critical advantages for developing monocular 3D localization systems:

1. **Perfect Ground Truth**: Every frame automatically includes exact 3D coordinates without expensive measurement equipment
2. **Controlled Variation**: Systematically vary environmental conditions (weather, lighting, distance) to ensure robust model performance
3. **Rapid Iteration**: Generate thousands of training samples in hours rather than weeks of field data collection

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2. System Architecture Overview

The complete system pipeline consists of five main components:

1. **Data Generation**: Unreal Engine environment with drone and camera
2. **Detection**: YOLO11s model for drone identification
3. **Depth Estimation**: Monocular depth neural network
4. **3D Reconstruction**: Converting 2D detections to 3D coordinates
5. **Tracking**: Kalman filter for temporal smoothing

Process Flow

```
Unreal Engine Video → YOLO Detection → Depth Estimation → 3D Reconstruction → Kalman Tracking → GUI Output
```

Each component processes data at approximately:

- YOLO Detection: 10-15ms per frame
- Depth Estimation: 20-30ms per frame
- 3D Reconstruction: <1ms per frame
- Combined throughput: 25-30 FPS on consumer GPU

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3. Unreal Engine Environment Configuration

3.1 Camera Setup Requirements

The virtual camera in Unreal Engine must precisely match the intrinsic parameters that will be used for 3D reconstruction. This is critical because the mathematical transformation from 2D pixels to 3D coordinates depends entirely on these parameters.

Why Camera Parameters Matter

When a 3D point is projected onto a 2D image plane, the relationship is governed by the pinhole camera model:

```
x_pixel = (f_x × X / Z) + c_x
y_pixel = (f_y × Y / Z) + c_y
```

Where:

- **(X, Y, Z)** are 3D coordinates in camera space
- **(x_pixel, y_pixel)** are 2D image coordinates
- **f_x, f_y** are focal lengths in pixels
- **c_x, c_y** are the principal point (image center)

To reverse this process (2D to 3D), we need these exact parameters. Any mismatch between the Unreal Engine camera and these values will cause systematic errors in position estimation.

Setting Camera Parameters in Unreal Engine

1. **Create a Camera Actor** with specific properties:
   - Focal Length: 16-35mm (affects field of view)
   - Sensor Size: Match a real camera sensor (e.g., 1/2.3" = 6.17mm × 4.63mm)
   - Resolution: 1920×1080 or higher for better precision
2. **Calculate Field of View**:

```
FOV = 2 × arctan(sensor_width / (2 × focal_length))
```

This ensures the virtual camera's perspective matches the mathematical model.

3. **Export Camera Matrix**: The camera matrix K must be extracted and saved:

```
fx = (focal_length_mm / sensor_width_mm) × image_width_px
fy = (focal_length_mm / sensor_height_mm) × image_height_px
cx = image_width_px / 2
cy = image_height_px / 2
```

3.2 Coordinate System Configuration

Understanding Coordinate Spaces

The drone's position must be recorded in **camera space**, not world space. This distinction is crucial:

- **World Space**: Absolute coordinates in the Unreal Engine scene
- **Camera Space**: Coordinates relative to the camera position and orientation
  - X-axis: Horizontal (right positive)
  - Y-axis: Vertical (down positive in image, up positive in 3D)
  - Z-axis: Depth (forward positive)

Why Camera-Relative Coordinates are Essential

The monocular depth estimation network predicts distance from the camera, not absolute world position. Ground truth must match this reference frame. If coordinates are in world space, they must be transformed:

```
Drone_Camera_Space = Drone_World_Position - Camera_World_Position
Drone_Camera_Space = Camera_Rotation_Matrix^(-1) × Drone_Camera_Space
```

3.3 Data Recording Setup

Synchronization Requirements

Frame capture and coordinate logging must be perfectly synchronized. Any temporal mismatch between video frames and coordinate records will corrupt the training data.

Critical Implementation Points:

1. Log coordinates at the exact moment of frame capture, not before or after
2. Use frame numbers as indices, not timestamps (avoids floating-point precision issues)
3. Record at consistent frame rate (30 or 60 FPS)

Data Export Format

For each frame, record:

- Frame index (integer)
- Drone position (X, Y, Z in meters, camera space)
- Camera parameters (if they change)
- Environmental conditions (for analysis)

Example data structure:

```json
{
  "frame_0000": {
    "drone_position": {"x": 10.5, "y": 2.3, "z": 45.2},
    "weather": "clear",
    "time_of_day": "noon"
  }
}
```

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4. Data Acquisition Strategy

4.1 Coverage Requirements

Distance Distribution

The monocular depth network needs training examples across all operational distances. Critical consideration: depth estimation error increases with distance, so you need more samples at longer ranges.

Recommended Distribution:

- **20-50m**: 30% of samples (high accuracy zone)
- **50-100m**: 40% of samples (primary operational range)
- **100-150m**: 30% of samples (challenging long-range)

Environmental Diversity

Different visual conditions affect depth perception:

- **Lighting**: Dawn, noon, dusk (affects shadows and contrast)
- **Weather**: Clear, cloudy, foggy (affects atmospheric depth cues)
- **Background**: Sky, buildings, trees (affects contrast and occlusion)

4.2 Recording Methodology

Systematic Flight Patterns

Rather than random movement, use structured patterns to ensure comprehensive coverage:

1. **Distance Sweeps**: Fly directly toward/away from camera at multiple altitudes
2. **Orbital Patterns**: Maintain constant distance while circling camera
3. **Grid Patterns**: Cover the full field of view at set distances
4. **Crossing Trajectories**: Diagonal and lateral movements for diverse motion

Sample Size Considerations

- **Minimum viable dataset**: 5,000-10,000 frames with diverse conditions
- **Production quality**: 20,000-50,000 frames
- Each recording session should capture 500-1,000 frames of continuous flight

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5. Monocular Depth Estimation

5.1 Understanding Relative vs. Metric Depth

The Scale Ambiguity Problem

Monocular depth estimation networks predict **relative depth** - the proportional relationships between distances in the scene. A small object close to the camera and a large object far away can produce identical images, making absolute scale impossible to determine from a single image alone.

This means the network might predict depth values of [0.5, 1.0, 2.0] for objects that are actually at [25m, 50m, 100m]. The proportions are correct (1:2:4), but the absolute scale is unknown.

Why Scale Calibration is Critical

Without proper scale calibration:

- A drone at 50m might be reported as 5m or 500m
- Relative tracking works (closer/farther) but absolute position fails
- Safety distances and operational boundaries become meaningless

5.2 Depth Estimation Methods

Deep Learning Approach (Primary)

Modern transformer-based models (Depth Anything V2, MiDaS, ZoeDepth) learn depth cues from millions of images:

- **Perspective cues**: Parallel lines converging
- **Size cues**: Known objects appearing smaller with distance
- **Texture gradient**: Detail loss with distance
- **Atmospheric perspective**: Haze/color shift at distance

Size-Based Validation (Secondary)

If drone dimensions are known, apparent size provides geometric depth:

```
Distance = (Real_Size × Focal_Length_Pixels) / Apparent_Size_Pixels
```

This serves as an independent validation of the neural network prediction.

5.3 Scale Calibration Procedure

Data Collection for Calibration

1. Record drone at multiple known distances (measured in Unreal Engine)
2. For each distance, capture 50-100 frames
3. Ensure distances span full operational range (20-150m)

Calibration Process

The calibration finds the scale factor 's' such that:

```
Metric_Depth = s × Relative_Depth_Prediction
```

Using least squares regression on paired data:

- **Input**: Relative depth predictions from neural network
- **Target**: True distances from Unreal Engine coordinates
- **Output**: Scale factor and confidence interval

Validation of Calibration

Split data into calibration (70%) and validation (30%) sets. The scale factor should remain consistent across both sets. If significant deviation exists, it indicates:

- Insufficient environmental diversity in training
- Network struggles with certain distance ranges
- Need for piece-wise calibration (different scales for different ranges)

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6. 3D Coordinate Reconstruction

6.1 From 2D Detection to 3D Position

Once we have:

1. 2D bounding box from YOLO (x, y position in image)
2. Calibrated depth from monocular estimation (Z distance)

3. Camera intrinsic matrix (focal length and principal point)

We can reconstruct 3D position using inverse projection:

```
X = (x_pixel - cx) × Z / fx
Y = (y_pixel - cy) × Z / fy
Z = depth_estimate × scale_factor
```

This transforms 2D image coordinates plus depth into 3D camera coordinates.

6.2 Error Propagation Analysis

Understanding how errors compound:

- **Detection error**: ±10 pixels → ±0.5m lateral error at 50m
- **Depth error**: ±10% → ±5m range error at 50m
- **Combined uncertainty**: Forms ellipsoid with depth as major axis

This explains why position uncertainty is primarily along the camera's viewing direction rather than lateral.

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7. Temporal Tracking with Kalman Filtering

7.1 Why Kalman Filtering is Necessary

Raw frame-by-frame position estimates exhibit noise from:

- Neural network prediction variance
- Detection bounding box jitter
- Depth estimation fluctuations

Kalman filtering provides:

- Smooth trajectory estimation
- Velocity calculation
- Prediction during brief occlusions

7.2 Filter Configuration

State vector includes position and velocity:

```
State = [X, Y, Z, Vx, Vy, Vz]
```

- **Process noise**: Accounts for drone acceleration capability

- **Measurement noise**: Derived from depth estimation uncertainty
- **Update rate**: Matches video frame rate (30 FPS typical)

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8. GUI Software Architecture

8.1 Core Components

1. **Video Input Module**: Load Unreal Engine recordings
2. **Coordinate Parser**: Read ground truth data files
3. **Detection Pipeline**: YOLO inference on each frame
4. **Depth Estimation**: Monocular network processing
5. **3D Reconstruction**: Coordinate transformation
6. **Tracking System**: Kalman filter management
7. **Visualization**: Real-time display of detections and trajectories
8. **Validation**: Comparison with ground truth

8.2 Performance Considerations

Target specifications:

- **Processing speed**: 25-30 FPS on consumer GPU
- **Latency**: <100ms end-to-end
- **Memory usage**: <4GB for hour-long videos
- **GPU requirement**: NVIDIA RTX 3060 or better

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9. Validation and Performance Metrics

9.1 Accuracy Metrics

Detection Performance:

- Precision: True Positives / (True Positives + False Positives)
- Recall: True Positives / (True Positives + False Negatives)
- mAP: Mean Average Precision across confidence thresholds

Localization Accuracy:

- Mean Absolute Error (MAE) in meters

- Relative error as percentage of true distance
- Error distribution by distance ranges

9.2 Expected Performance

Based on synthetic data validation:

Detection Results:

- 90-95% mAP@0.5

Localization Accuracy:

Distance Range	Relative Error	Absolute Error
20-50m	5-8%	±2-4m
50-100m	8-12%	±4-12m
100-150m	12-18%	±12-27m

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10. Conclusion

This methodology provides a complete path from Unreal Engine simulation to working 3D localization system. By carefully managing camera parameters, coordinate systems, and scale calibration, monocular depth estimation can achieve sufficient accuracy for many drone monitoring applications while maintaining the simplicity and cost-effectiveness of single-camera systems.

The key to success lies in meticulous attention to:

- Coordinate system alignment
- Comprehensive data collection across operational conditions
- Proper calibration of the relative-to-metric depth scaling

With these elements properly implemented, the system provides a practical solution for drone detection and tracking without the complexity of multi-camera arrangements.

Future Work

Potential improvements include:

- Multi-drone tracking capabilities
- Real-time model adaptation
- Integration with drone countermeasure systems
- Transfer learning for real-world deployment

Document Version: 1.0

Date: December 2024

Project: Monocular Drone 3D Localization System