

Virtour: Telepresence system for remotely-operated building tours

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July 25, 2016

1 Introduction

The University of Texas at Austin has a constant stream of visitors and tours of the beautiful campus. Of special interest to us, are the large number of tours given at our computer science building: the Gates Dell Complex (GDC). The tour guests range in ages and backgrounds, and tend to be prospective students to both undergraduate and graduate programs, or visiting faculty. Unfortunately, there is a large population of prospective students that are unable to physically come to our campus and are thus unable to partake in the conventional tours.

Our lab has a group of autonomous wheeled robots which can localize, navigate, and perform tasks without human intervention for long periods of time. Furthermore, our lab is placed in a central part of our building and is thus a common place for tours. As such it only made sense that we utilize the platform we have built to try to solve the aforementioned problem.

This is why we designed Virtour. Virtour is a public facing system for teleoperated building tours. Virtour builds on the existing Building-Wide Intelligence autonomous robot platform and is designed to keep the robots and any humans involved safe. Through the use of modern web and robot technologies it allows untrained public users to remotely control our robots in what we call a virtual tour. Our system is created to balance external control abilities while maintaining our rigorous standard of safety and security for the robots and people involved. As such it gives the user control of what the robot is doing, while at the same time using existing the autonomous navigation capabilities and obstacle avoidance to provide the user with shared autonomy.

2 Related Work

The idea of using advanced robot platform to service web-based tours is not entirely new and has been explored in the past. The earliest virtual tour

system was built to serve as a museum tour guide in 1998 by (Burgard et al., 1998). Their robot, Rhino, mainly operated as a physically interactive tour guide that museum visitors could approach and request tours from, but also supported occasionally web-based tours where online visitors could vote on certain tours to use. Their web-based interface provided images from the on-board camera as well as static cameras, and allowed the user to download a Java applet to see real-time information. Web control was limited to voting on a desired tour (from a pre-programmed list) and viewing the robot's image stream.

Thrun, et al developed a second-generation museum tour-guide robot (Thrun et al., 1999) Minerva, which improved on the work done by Burgard. Most of their improvements were around localization, mapping, SLAM, and HRI. They improved the virtual tour interface by allowing arbitrary selection of navigation goals, rather than a pre-selected list. However, their real-time information required the download of a Java web-applet to simulate the robot.

Kim, et al developed Jinny in 2004, which was yet another autonomous tour-guide robot (Kim et al., 2004). Of special interest to us, was their upgraded web-based interface which allowed the user to interact with the natural language parsing system and ask questions, as well as request actions. Their system was built using Java, ActiveX, and Javascript, all of which require special installation on part of the end user to use.

More recent work virtual tour and telepresence systems were built in 2007 (Michaud et al., 2007) and in 2013 (Kusu et al., 2013). Kusu, et al's system is of special interest because it was built to provide campus tours.

Virtour differs from these related works in various ways. The first is that virtour's main purpose is to be a telepresence tour system, and thus gives web visitors priority in controlling the robot (unlike Rhino or Minerva which only occasionally allow web control). Furthermore, virtour is unique in that it uses only modern web standards and does not require the end-user to download any extra software (eg: Java, ActiveX). Thus virtour can be truly portable and accessed from any computer, tablet, or mobile device. Finally, virtour is also unique in that it provides the end-user with real-time video feedback and information about the robot. For example, the robot's position will be updated on the website in real-time without requiring any additional simulation software. Furthermore, the user's actions are performed in real-time and the results are shown almost immediately. So if a user requests the robot to rotate, he or she will be able to see the robot's camera feed update instantly. As part of virtour's goal of ease of use, it uses bandwidth scaling of video streaming to reduce the quality of the video according to the end-user's internet connection. Finally, virtour is novel because it provides the end-user with a wide variety of ways of interacting with the robot. Rather than just providing navigation and video streaming, it allows the user to deliver spoken messages and perform tasks.



Figure 1: Two of our second generation BWI robots

3 Building Wide Intelligence

Virtour is a part of the Building Wide Intelligence (BWI) project, which aims to develop fully autonomous mobile robots. The goal is to have these robots be permanent inhabitants of UT’s Computer Science departmental building. BWI focuses on the intersection of Artificial Intelligence and Robotics, and aims to create robots that are useful as research platforms, as well service robots to help the humans in the building.

Virtour runs on the BWI segbot robot platform. The segbot robot platform has three currently operating versions. Our last generation version 2 robots, a version 2 with an additional Kinova arm, and our latest generation version 3 robots. Although virtour supports all three versions, it is mostly run on the latest generation so that is what is described.

3.1 Hardware Platform

The robot’s base is a Segway Robotics Mobility Platform (RMP), which is powered by a built-in lithium-ion battery pack. The frame was designed in-house and supports a wide array of sensors. For navigation, localization, and obstacle avoidance, we use a Velodyne Puck lidar. Point clouds and RGB data are provided by a Microsoft Kinect. Our latest generation robots also have an additional laser range finder to compensate for the lidar’s blind spots. The robot is equipped with a custom-built computer which runs Ubuntu 14.04. The computer is powered by the RMPs battery, thus removing the need for an external car battery (which was present in our version 2 robots). The battery life on a running robot is approximately 6 hours when actively using the base, and 10 when stationary.

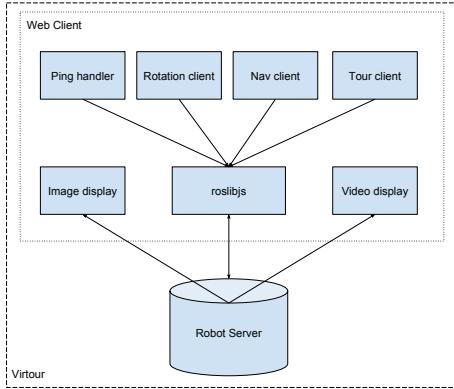


Figure 2: Overview of the virtour client structure and hierarchy

3.2 Software Stack

Our robots are powered by the Robot Operating System (ROS), which provides us with the infrastructure to run as a distributed node system. It provides the messaging framework to connect all the different components. ROS also provides us with access to many community packages such as device drivers, navigation implementations, and planning systems.

Our navigation stack starts out with the logical planner, which uses ASP to plan and describe the environment (eg: which corridors connect with which hallways, and which doors are open). It then moves to the logical navigator which uses the global costmap (generated from previous laser readings, and is an adjacency grid of obstacles) to create the navigation plan. Finally, the local planner uses the immediate sensor readings to send commands to the segway base and avoid any obstacles.

All of our software is open source and freely available online¹.

4 The Web Client

Virtour consists of two platforms, the user facing client, and the server and associated software that runs on the robots. The user client is accessible from a web browser and is built using web 2.0 technologies to adhere to modern web development trends and simultaneously support as many platforms as possible. We decided to use a web-based client because of the increasing prominence of web browsers in people's lives. Furthermore, a web based approach means that our end-users do not have to install any additional software to connect with or use the robots, thus reducing the friction for trying our service.

¹<http://github.com/utexas-bwi>



Figure 3: Landing page whenever someone visits the home page

4.1 Modern Approach

The web client is designed to be simple and functional while still being aesthetically pleasing to end users. It uses a grid system, powered by Bootstrap 2.0, to create a fully responsive web layout. This allows us to support any web-powered platform (eg: mobile devices, tablets, and computers) by making the website scale and re-organize based on the specifications of the device.

When a user first visits our website, he or she is greeted by a list of our currently active and available robots (more on server implementation later). Each robot is represented by a name and associated picture ². From here our user can select a robot to connect to (by clicking on the robot's name or image) to initiate a virtual tour session. When the user clicks on the robot, the web client will initiate a request to the specified robot requesting a tour session. Tour sessions can be either led or spectated. The difference is that when spectating the user has no control over the robot but can see the video stream, robot status, and track the location of the robot along the map. A led tour is one in which the user can actively instruct the robot to perform operations. Each tour can have at most one leader, but no limit on the number of spectators. We built virtour this way to ensure there is a consistent leader experience (so no two people fight for control of the robot), and for security reasons, since we can control whether a leader is allowed or not. If the tour has no existing leader and tours are allowed then a visiting user can elect to become tour leader by pressing the “Become Leader” button. Upon success, it will present the user with the leader UI.

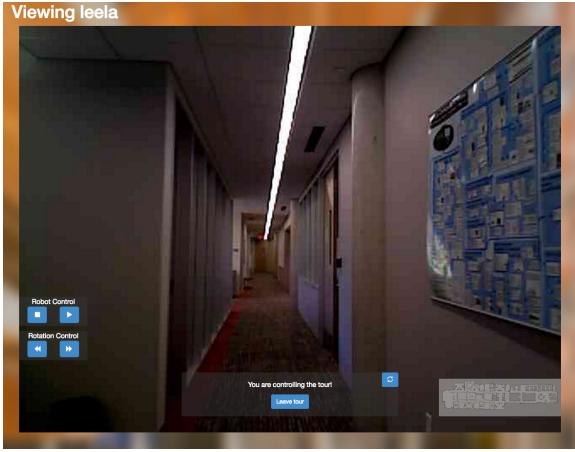


Figure 4: The controls available to the leader

4.2 Leader UI

The leader UI adds a number of components to that allow the user to control the operations of the robot. The current list of available capabilities is as follows

- Rotate the robot's base
- Navigate to a room on the same floor
- Navigate to a door on the same floor
- Speak a message (using text-to-speech)
- Deliver a spoken message (using text-to-speech) to a location
- Pause and resume a robot task
- Move the robot's camera (on supported robots)

The user can interact with the interface to request any of the previously mentioned tasks. For example, whenever the user is the leader a pair of directional arrow buttons is shown which will immediately rotate the robot when pressed. Navigation commands are access within the navigation pane

Whenever a user first connects to a robot, the web client will query the robot for the capabilities that it has (eg: which generation robot, which cameras it has access to, if the camera has servos, etc...) and then adapt the user interface accordingly to support whichever robot the user is connected to.

²All of our robots are named after Futurama characters

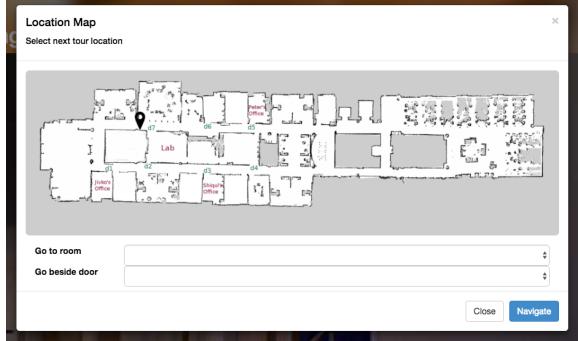


Figure 5: Navigation interface for leaders

The leader UI was developed using javascript and uses sockets to communicate with the robot. The javascript client can interact with ROS via the socket to make service calls, subscribe and publish to topics, as well as make actionlib requests. Regardless of the type of the request, it is serialized and transferred over the socket to be interpreted by the server (described in a later section).

In order to maintain leader consistency, the leader UI will ping the server at a known interval to ensure the leader is still connected. If the user closes the window or the ping fails, the leader will relinquish the leader status so other users can control robot.

For security reasons, we only allow outside parties to become leaders (and thus have control of the robot’s operations) if we explicitly enable virtual tours on the robot. Furthermore, all leader operations that affect the robot (eg: rotating, or navigating) require user authentication, to prevent unauthorized sources to take control of our robots. On the client side, this means that each user is assigned a unique identifier (valid only for the current session). Whenever a user requests leadership, they request it for their unique identifier. All subsequent requests are made using this identifier to ensure that only an authorized user can control the robot.

4.3 Guest UI

The guest UI is the default interface presented to the user whenever he or she connects to a robot. It dominated by the live stream from the robot’s camera which is shown prominently in the center. The robot’s camera is placed in a position on the robot that makes the user experience feel like a point of view camera. This makes the experience more immersive and the tour more engaging.

Furthermore, the interface also displays a mini map of which ever floor the robot is on, with a position marker to indicate the robot’s current position. This map is updated whenever the robot switches floors (via the

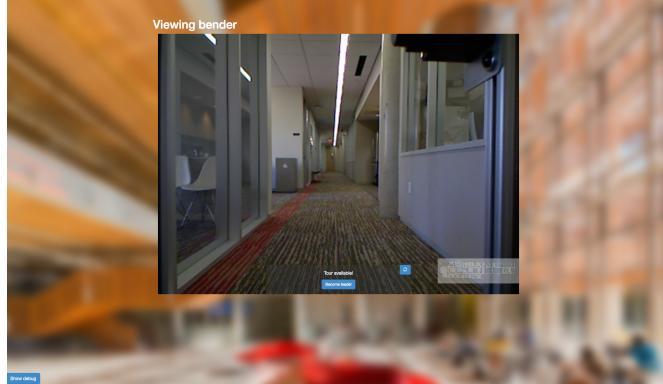


Figure 6: What the client sees whenever they are in guest mode

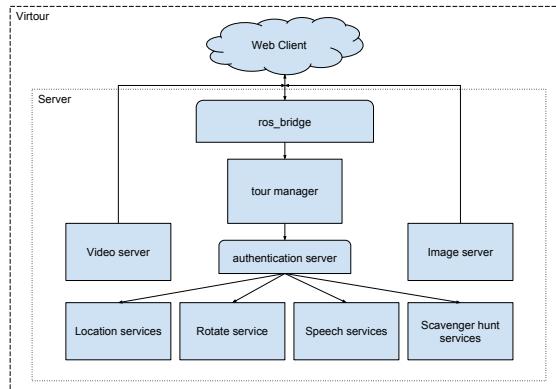


Figure 7: Overview of the virtour server structure and hierarchy

elevator) to show the most up to date map of the current floor.

Finally, the guest UI has a status box which displays whether or not a tour is on-going, allowed, or disabled. From here the user can request to become tour leader (if available), or wait for a tour to be available.

All our robots support the guest UI during all times we are running them, so that users can remotely connect to the robots and experience what they are doing.

5 The Server

The server consists of a number of components which run on the physical robot to enable the web client to perform the required operations. All communications from the web client hit the `ros_bridge` node, which then translates the commands to ROS commands. From there, all requests are sent to the tour manager, which will authenticate the requests (to ensure

they are validly formed and come from an accepted source) and then triage them to their respective service providers.

5.1 Tour Manager

The tour manager serves the role of maintaining tour integrity and managing active connections with all the clients that are connected to the robot. It keeps track of an internal state machine which controls whether tours are enabled and if so whether they are active. It will also maintain connection with the tour leader through pings to ensure the leader remains alive. If the leader disconnects (by closing the page) or is disconnected (missing a ping), the tour manager will demote them and open up the tour again. The tour manager will also grant tour leader status to clients that properly request it whenever tours are enabled.

5.1.1 Authentication

Due to the open nature of virtour (anyone can access/control our robots), security became an important factor. User authentication is done by generating a unique identifier to each client connected (generation is done client-side). This identifier is used to keep track of all the clients and the leader. All requests which control robot (ie: navigating, rotating, delivering messages) go through the authentication server. This verifies that the request is properly created, is coming from a valid leader, and is being executed at a time when tours are enabled. There is a 15 minute limit per leader, to avoid a single leader taking control of the system. Finally, we always have the option to disable tours (via the tour manager) which will immediately evict any active leaders and restore control of the robot.

5.1.2 Robot Control

The server-side code powering the remote robot control consist of various service providers which use the tour manager to authenticate requests, and then triage them to the appropriate robot commands. For example, the rotate control will take the rotate command (if properly authenticated) and then translate it to raw segway base navigation commands, which is considered safe because rotation stays within the robot's footprint so we do not need to consider obstacle avoidance. However, obstacle avoidance is very important whenever we are navigating to rooms or doors. For this reason, all navigation commands will go to the logical planner in the form of ASP goals. For example a request to navigate to a specific office will be turned into an ASP goal such that it is impossible for the robot to not be in that location. The navigation and planning stack then take over and will perform the planning and navigation required to accomplish the goal.

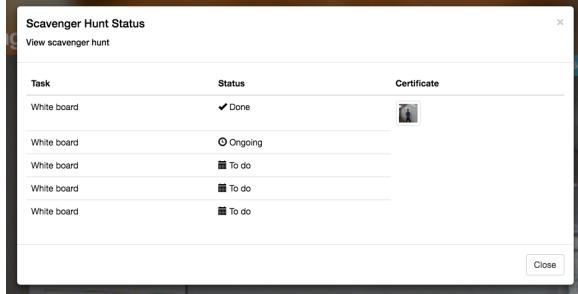


Figure 8: Screenshot of scavenger hunt task status and certificate display

5.2 IP management

In order to manage the IP addresses of all the robots, we created smallDNS³ (small multi-agent locally listable DNS). SmallDNS keeps track of the IP addresses of each of the robots (which are assigned via DHCP and are thus variable). Furthermore, it also keeps track of which robots are available and running via series of pings. This means that the end user does not need to worry about the IPs of the robots or which ones are alive. So when the user visits the home page (figure 3), they will see the list of currently active robots and will be able to connect to each without having to know the IP address.

SmallDNS consists of a simple DNS server running on our master server in the lab, and a cronjob that runs on each of the robots. That way if the robot detects that it has changed IP address, it will inform the server. As time passes, the server will try to ping all the active robots to ensure that they are still alive. SmallDNS serves the state of its IP database in json format, which is what virtour ultimately uses.

6 Scavenger Hunt Integration

Intro about scavenger hunt.

Whenever a user connects to a robot running the scavenger hunt, virtour will additionally allow the users to interact with the scavenger hunt. For example, the user can see the list of the currently running tasks by clicking on the scavenger hunt button. Furthermore, if a task is completed virtour will use its image web server to display the certificate on the website (appears as a thumbnail but is expanded whenever clicked on). Finally, if the user is the leader, they can also control the operation of scavenger hunt by stopping and resuming the current task. That way a user can stop the current scavenger hunt task, then navigate the robot elsewhere or perform any other operation, then resume the scavenger hunt later.

³Source code is available at <https://github.com/pato/smallDNS>

7 Conclusions and Future Work

Conclusions and future work.

8 Acknowledgments

Virtour couldn't have been completed with the help and support of my original research educator Matteo Leonetti, my current research educator Jivko Sinapov. Thank you to Peter Stone for providing direction and for all his support. Thanks to Shiqi Zang for helping and me with the scavenger hunt integration. Finally, thank you to Walter Sagehorn for helping develop smallDNS and to Benjamin Singer for developing the message delivery tasks.

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