

Development of a Marker Tracking System for use in the Mariokart System

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Abstract—An autonomous go-kart system, nicknamed Mariokart was being developed. It required a simple algorithm to demonstrate its abilities and test its systems. To meet this need an algorithm was developed to follow the path of a marker. Three computer vision techniques color tracking, SURF and chessboard recognition were examined for the identification of the marker. Chessboard detection was chosen mainly due to its robustness to changes in lighting. The system was tested but never mounted to the Mariokart due to delays in the development of systems it required to interface with the kart.

I. INTRODUCTION

An electric go-kart was to be converted to allow it to move autonomously. The system required a basic program to control its movement. The program was to function as a proof of concept of the karts abilities as well as a method to test the systems that had been added to the kart. It had been decided that this program should allow the kart to follow a marker. The system that was being designed allowed the systems on the kart to interface through a laptop to 5 boards located on different areas of the kart. These boards handled all the low level control of the kart providing the laptop for functions to set the steering, brake and accelerator position. The only sensor present on the kart at the start of the development was a speed sensor however a large number of I/O ports of different types allowed for the addition of extra sensors.

The developed program was to run on the on-board laptop. It had to operate in real time recognizing the marker, finding its location and outputting the path to travel on with minimal lag. The kart was expected to be able to operate in both indoor and outdoor environments in a large variety of conditions without losing the marker. The system and any additional equipment and sensors required had to be low budget as the total budget for the entire conversion was less then \$1500.

II. MARKER LOCATION METHODS

A large variety of location methods were looked at when determining what type of sensors should be purchased for the kart system. Most modern autonomous vehicles rely heavily

on scanning laser sensors as their main method of viewing the surroundings. Scanning lasers rapidly move a measuring laser over the environment forming a matrix of distances to provide a 3d view of the world [1]. While extremely useful these sensors were discounted early due to their high price tag with even the most basic models starting at \$2000. The Microsoft Kinect camera was briefly looked at as an alternative solution that would provide 3d information about the world [2]. This camera used structured light combined with an ir camera to detect the locaion of objects in its field of view. This was also quickly discounted however as it had a maximum range of only 3.5m which was too limiting for the application. A second aspect that counted against it was that the ir pattern used by the Kinect was washed out by direct sunlight making outdoor use impractical.

GPS systems were discounted due to their inability to work reliably in an indoor environment. One solution that was given serious consideration was using a marker that output a RF signal and having three receivers on the kart use its signal strength to triangulate the position of the object. After further research it was found however that distance estimation using the level of RF detectors that were within our budget were only accurate to around 1m under ideal conditions [3]. This limitation means that the receivers must be placed far apart to minimize the effect the error would have on the direction the triangulation would calculate the signal to have come from. On a mobile kart system where the close proximity of the sensors was unavoidable this limitation made the method infeasible.

The sensor system that was decided upon to develop was a computer vision system. This system would utilize a web-cam mounted to the front of the kart. A unique marker was to be used that could be located in the image. This method had several advantages over the other methods considered. It was a cheap and easy to mount solution with only a web-cam required that would attach straight to the laptop with a USB cable leading to no foreseeable hardware problems. It also provided a large degree of flexibility with a large suite

of different algorithms and methods able to be implemented and tested for no modifications to the system. It was the only system that showed promise in being able to locate a marker accurately at distance within the budget so it was the only system pursued for development.

III. COMPUTER VISION THEORY AND BACKGROUND

A large number of algorithms exist for tracking an object in a video feed. Some of the more common were examined to determine how appropriate they would be for performing the task of tracking an object which the go-kart could follow. To perform this task the algorithm had to be able to reliably give the position of the object relative to the kart including an accurate estimate as to the distance from the kart. It also had to work even when the object was moving quickly across the camera and at a large distance from the camera. It had to be robust to the large variations in lighting conditions and backgrounds that it would experience when mounted to the kart. It had to be able to be performed in real time giving out information on the position of the objects location with little lag and at a high refresh rate

Color detection was the first process looked at. This approach took the cameras image and converted it to HSV (hue, saturation and value) space [4]. In this space each pixel was classified by its hue or color, its saturation which is the intensity of the color and its value which represents how light or dark the color is. This hue was then taken to vary by very small amounts for the object during the tracking. For the most simple form of color tracking the image was then thresholded by a color in the range of the object being tracked. This would leave only the desired color present on the screen. A more robust form of color detection is the camshaft algorithm. This algorithm takes in a region around the object to track and creates a histogram of the hues present. It then scans successive frames for regions whose color distributions closely match the histogram.

Chessboard detection is often used in augmented reality applications to get the position of a marker relative to a camera so that a 3d model can be displayed with the correct size and orientation [5]. This algorithm uses a chessboard of known size as its marker. It thresholds the image, applies a Harris corner detection to find the corners in the image this is combined with a Hough transform to find the lines on the chessboard. Once all the corners and lines have been found the image is searched for a pattern of them that would give the chessboard [6]. This method considers all of the intrinsic parameters of the camera as well as the extrinsic transformation for the chessboards location in the scene. This means that the position of the chessboard marker can be accurately computed even taking into account the curving effect of the cameras lens at the corners.

A second method for detecting a marker in a scene is the SURF (speeded up robust features) algorithm. This algorithm operates along very similar lines to the SIFT (scale invariant features transformation) algorithm except operating at a greater rate, hence the reason for the "speeded up" in its name. The

surf algorithm matches points that are common to two separate images. In this case the images are a unique marker and an image of a scene in which the marker is located. The algorithm operates by selecting a large number of unique points. Finding these points involves finding areas of an image that are unique in there surroundings and that can be easily identified regardless of changes to the viewpoint [7]. By themselves these points could not be located in a new image so instead a small window surrounding each point is also saved. Each new frame of the scene is then scanned for areas that match these points. SURF uses Harr like features to make this match.

Once the points are matched a second algorithm RANSAC (RANdom SAMple Consensus) can be used to extract the size and orientation of the object from the scene. RANSAC itself is not a computer vision algorithm but an iterative method to find parameters of a mathematical model within noisy data where redundancy in the number of points exists [8]. RANSAC works by randomly selecting four points in the image and from this working out the transformations the picture has undergone to fit these four points in the scene. Using this transformation a calculated location is found for all the other points. The distance between where a point is calculated to have been and where it actually lies in the image is found. This gives an estimation of the error in the transformations that the picture has undergone. If this error is small the transformation is kept and taken as correct, if it is large the process is repeated with four new points.

IV. IMPLEMENTATION OF SOLUTIONS

Colour detection, SURF and Chessboard detection were all then implemented to examine their performance for tracking an object in the required environment. To aid in this implementation extensive use was made of the opencv computer vision libraries. These libraries were used as they contained implementations of a large number of computer vision algorithms that had been thoroughly tested by a large community and optimized to run as effectively and efficiently as possible.

The first algorithm implemented was the simple color based approach. In this approach a bright blue ball was used as the marker to track. For this approach the scene was thresholded for a value that was approximately a bright blue and opening (that is erosion followed by dilation) was used to fill any holes in the image of the ball and remove background noise. The output of this process can be seen in Figure 1. A rough estimation of the balls location was then made using its x and y position in pixels from the center of the camera. The z location of the ball was taken to be proportional to the inverse of the size of the ball in pixels. These measures of x, y and z were extremely crude however they provided adequate for the testing that was performed on the color method.

For both the SURF and chessboard algorithms the intrinsic parameters of the camera had to be found so that the size of an object on the screen could be translated from the arbitrary pixel co-ordinate system used by the images to real world distances. These parameters were found by using the camera to take a series of photos of the chessboard from different

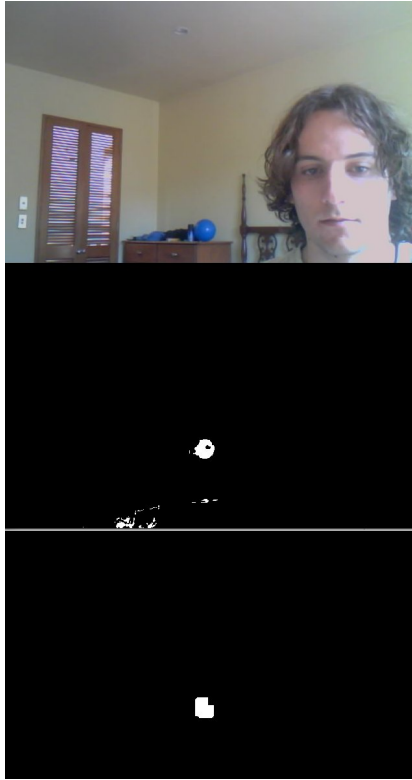


Fig. 1. Detection of marker ball using colour

angles and distances and using the geometry of the chessboard to extrapolate the cameras parameters [9]. Once this had been performed the parameters were saved to a file that was used by both algorithms. This calibration was a small disadvantage of these algorithms however as it only had to be performed once for a web-cam it did not diminish the practicality of their use by much.

The SURF algorithms marker was a printout of a cut away of an aeroplane. This image was used as it contained a large amount of strong lines and detail that meant that a large number of unique and easily identifiable points could be located on the image. An example of the SURF algorithm working can be seen in Figure 2. Two chessboards were constructed and tested with the chessboard registration algorithm. A large 6 by 5 chessboard with 100 mm squares and a smaller 7 by 8 chessboard. The larger chessboard was used for testing the distance at which the algorithm could pick up the board. The smaller one was used for calibrating the camera and some initial testing of the path finding algorithm discussed in this report.

V. PERFORMANCE OF SOLUTIONS

The algorithms were put through a series of tests to gauge how well they would perform in the system. A summary of the result of these tests is shown in Table II. All the tests were performed on a test was performed on a 2.1 GHz notebook with an Intel Centrino Duo processor. The webcam was a

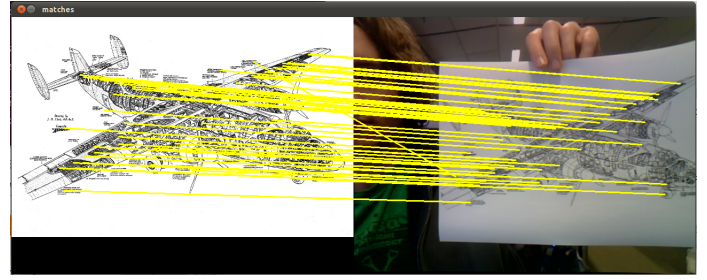


Fig. 2. The SURF algorithm matching points in the image to the scene

Creative Labs Laptop Integrated Webcam. This webcam had a resolution of 320 by 240 pixels and operated at 20 fps.

The robustness to light was tested by setting up an algorithm to recognise its marker in a room with a large amount of natural light. The lighting was then changed by closing the curtains and seeing if the object was still detected, once this was done the rooms lights were turned on. The maximum distance an object could be detected at was. Colour detection performed the worst in this test requiring recalibration before it could detect the target after every change in lighting. This problem stemmed from the fact that while the hue of the object being tracked remained constant changing the lighting levels altered the hue the camera perceived the object to be by a small amount. This problem stemmed right from the fundamental method by which the camera detects light and so very little could be done without recalibrating to attempt to account for this change [10]. The SURF algorithm handled almost all lighting changes without issue. The one situation in which it failed was if enough glare was coming off the object it was tracking to completely obscure most of the features it was tracking. The chessboard algorithm worked under every tested lighting condition. Large amounts of glare reduced the distance it could be detected from but even in this situation the small chessboard could be detected at up to 4m. An example of this systems robustness is shown in Figure.

The FPS (frames per second) for each system was recorded under normal operation. The color detection algorithm required easily the least processing power of all the computer vision methods looked at running at a solid 20 fps only limited by the speed of the camera it was receiving the images from. The SURF algorithm operated very slowly original operating at 0.8 FPS on locating a 640 by 480 pixel reference image in the scene. This speed was increase to 2 FPS by decreasing the reference image to 320 by 240. This was the lowest quality reference image which could be accurately placed in the scene. Chessboard detection operated slowly if the chessboard had not been located in the previous frame only operating at a rate as low as 2 fps. Once the chessboard was found however the algorithm used the previous location to find it more quickly raising the frame rate to around 15 fps.

Robustness to motion was tested in a fairly subjective manner. The marker was held 1 m from the camera and shaken until detection was lost. With colour detection regardless of

Algorithm	Run 1	Run 2	Run 3	Average
Colour	10	11.5	9	10.2
SURF	1.0	0.7	1.1	0.9
Chessboard	3.5	3.0	3.2	3.2

TABLE I
MAXIMUM DISTANCE BEFORE DETECTION OF MARKER IS LOST (ALL
VALUES IN METERS).

how fast the marker was moved detection was never lost, though the detected size decreased by up to around 50% as the image of the marker became a blur. With SURF detection only slow and careful movements would prevent the camera losing the target. Chessboard detection would lose the board if any quick or jerky movements were made. While this test was quite crud it clearly showed that SURF would be too susceptible to motion blur to be appropriate. It also showed that chessboard detection was also weak to this and a higher quality camera or some pre processing might be needed to help reduce the effect of motion blur when the system is attached to the kart.

Maximum distance the algorithm could detect a marker from was tested next. To make this a fair test for all systems the marker size for each system was set to an A4 page with the colour detections blue ball replaced by a sheet of blue card. The test was performed by walking away from the camera holding the marker and recording the distance at which the target was lost for the first time. The process was repeated three times and the results shown in Table I. SURF performed easily the poorest of the solutions with the marker needing to take up a large portion of the field of view before recognition occurred. The chessboard algorithm lost the board at around 3 m. At this point the 2.5 cm squares on the board were only around 3 pixels in height and so it would be hard to expect much more from this algorithm without a larger board or better camera. Similarly the colour detection operated up to 10 m at which point the marker was so small on the camera that it was removed as noise during opening. All three algorithms only operated over a relatively short distance in comparison to how far the kart might be from the marker. This would mean that the actual marker to be tracked would need to be significantly larger than those used in testing or/and a higher resolution camera would have to be used.

The ability of the algorithm to operate on a variety of backgrounds was tested. How effected the colour detection was was closely coupled to how well it performed in varying light. If the range of hues and saturations was set to be very close to the marker then almost no issues with background objects occurred. An example of this can be seen in Figure 1 where the blue ball is detected while sitting next to a blue can and a blue towel with neither of these being detected. These close tolerances meant that lighting had to be kept almost constant for the marker to be detected. If these ranges were relaxed to work in more varying light then any similiary colored part of the background would also be detected.

Algorithm	Colour	SURF	Chessboard
FPS	25+	3	15
Robust to light	No	Yes	Yes
Max distance	20 m	2 m	10 m
Needs calibration	Yes	No	No
Robust to motion	Yes	No	handles small move- ments

TABLE II
RESULTS FROM TESTING

VI. PATH FOLLOWING

Once the kart had located a marker a method for following the marker had to be implemented. The simplest solution of simply driving towards the marker had many drawbacks. An example would be that if the kart was following the marker and the marker moved forwards and then after a few meters turned to the right. The following kart would cut the corner and potentially smash straight into an obstacle. A second problem would be that if the marker left the karts field of vision the kart would be forced to immediately come to a stop as it no longer had a locaion to drive towards.

To solve this problem an algorithm was developed that would attempt to follow the path the kart had taken. This algorithm utilized the marker position given by the computer vision and combined it with information from the karts speed sensor and the position of the steering wheel. The program used the karts sensors and the time at which each reading was taken to calculate an estimate for its absolute position and orientation. Once the location of the kart had been found the relative position and orientation of the chessboard marker if present was also recorded. After this had been done the absolute position of the marker was calculated. The current and all previous positions were stored in an array.

Armed with these absolute position estimates the core of the path following algorithm was very simple and executed as follows. 1) The kart would select the first point on the path 2) The kart would set the steering to point at the point and drive towards it 3) When the kart came within a minimum distance of the line (set to the turning radius of the kart) or the point became too old the kart would deem itself to have reached the point 4) The kart would then repeat the process for the next point

By setting the criteria for meeting the point to twice the turning radius of the kart this meant that the kart would always be able to turn to be within this distance of the next point regardless of where it lay. The kart skipping a point if it became older than a set value (in testing set to 10 seconds) meant that if the kart began to lag behind the object it was tracking it would start cutting corners in order to catch up to the target. This meant that if the target was slowly moving through tight turns the system would work on matching its path and when the target was moving quickly the system would priorities keeping up with the target. It also helped to remove oscillations that could be set up when the kart was following a line.

The method used to estimate the absolute position was prone to compounding errors. This problem was slightly mitigated in that error could be present in the position of the kart as long as the same error was present in the recorded positions of the marker. This meant that the only error that would matter would be that introduced in the time between the marker being recorded at a point and the kart reaching that point. This meant when the kart was closely following a marker the time over which error could compound would be limited to a few seconds. In most environments the kart might navigate an error of the order of a meter could be acceptable. This meant that the position estimation could be very crude and still produce reasonable tracking.

VII. PERFORMANCE OF PATH FOLLOWING

Due to delays in the project converting the go-kart to a point where it could be interfaced with the laptop the algorithm was never tested on the kart. To allow for some basic testing a simple GUI output was instead added to the program. This mapped the absolute location of the kart and the chessboard as well as the path they had taken. It also highlighted the point which the kart was currently driving towards. Fake input from the steering and speed sensors were created giving the kart a constant speed and a maximum turn rate of 30 degrees per second. This system is shown in Figure 3. This interface allowed the system to be debugged and tested though was fairly limited in comparison to the actual go-kart. Its largest problem was that as the system believed that it was moving forward and turning it saw the marker it was tracking in front of it as moving to maintain the same relative position. This meant that testing the systems ability to follow patterns laid out by the marker was hindered.

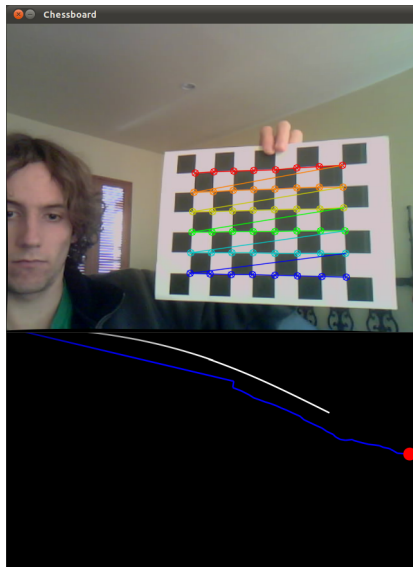


Fig. 3. Path finding GUI using chessboard detection. The path of the kart is shown in white, blue for the chessboard and the red dot is the current point the kart is driving towards

VIII. FUTURE WORK

Time constraints on this project meant that not all of the desired functionality was explored and implemented. One area that needed further work was what the path following algorithm did if it had lost sight of the marker and had not relocated it by the time it came to the end of its line of remembered points. This situation could occur if the vehicle it was following was performing a close turn around an obstacle or if it went down into a depression and out again. A possible solution to this would have been to fit a spline to the points the system had been following and extrapolate out from this the most likely course the leader with the marker had taken. Such splines could have also been used in the path planning finding the route that most closely followed the set path while taking into account the turning circle of the kart. This would have led to a more accurate and robust method of following the marker [11].

A second possibility that was not followed was the idea of using multiple methods of detection to find the marker. Chessboard detection worked well on its own but its performance suffered during motion blur, had some issues at large distances and had a slow output rate when it lost the target object. Colour detection had none of these same problems but suffered from far more crude distance measurements and the need to be recalibrated for different light conditions. The strengths of the two systems could have been combined by using the chessboard system to constantly recalibrate the color detection system using a brightly coloured chessboard instead of a black and white one to act as the marker for both systems. This would mean that the colour detection would have no longer had the issues with lighting and distance location as every time the chessboard was detected it would be used to reset the colour being tracked and to adjust the distance readings so the two systems matched.

IX. CONCLUSION

Three computer vision solutions were looked at for tracking a marker for use in allowing a kart to follow a lead vehicle. Colour detection was found to be too sensitive to changes in lighting conditions for it to be used in a robust tracking system. The SURF algorithm ran slowly and its inability to handle even small amounts of motion blur made it inappropriate for the application of being mounted to a moving vehicle. Chessboard detection was the only system that was robust enough to detect a marker and give its position reliably and it was slightly hindered by its own inability to deal with large amounts of motion blur. The output of these systems were combined with sensors measuring the speed and wheel angle of the kart to produce a system that followed the path the marker had taken rather than the marker giving more accurate following.

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