Force Feedback Stabilization for Remote Control of An Assistive Mobile Robot
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Abstract—In this paper, we consider a bilateral control of an assistive mobile robot over communication channels with constant/variable time delays. The mobile robot is used for exploring a domestic environment. The main purpose of the present work is to help the human in controlling better the slave robot. In addition, the proposed control scheme improves the operator perception of the remote environment. The human-operator can actively control the mobile robot, using its intrinsic sensors, and “feel” the robot’s environment. The haptic device is used like a joystick and controls the linear velocity and heading angle of the mobile robot. Many experiments have been performed to validate the proposed control scheme, and to show, in the same time, the importance of the force feedback in such applications and accessibility situations: doorways, obstacle exploration, wall tracking, etc.

I. INTRODUCTION

The increasing number of elderly people, especially with pathologies such as Alzheimer disease, is becoming an important issue in Europe. It is more and more difficult and expensive to assure long term hospitalization for these people, so they stay at home as long as possible. There are two aspects to make that possible: security of the person and cognitive stimulation. The aim of the European CompanionAble project is to assist the people with Mild Cognitive Impairment (MCI) and their families in those situations, in the context of ambient assisted living. Thus, a robot is used to give the possibility to caregivers and relatives to have distant interaction with the user. The purpose of the robot is not to remove the human presence around the person, but to ease his caring. Decreasing this presence is a clearly expressed wish, in a quite comprehensible will of intimacy for the person and in a will of assistance for the family.

Teleoperated mobile robots are an important tool in the exploration of unknown and risky environments. Bomb disposal robots [9] or robots used for exploration of underwater environments [12] are two common applications made through mobile robots. However, the motions of these mobile robots are usually controlled by human operators using passive sensors, such as the camera. Although vision systems provide much information on the environment, they require a fairly high bandwidth network and the continuous attention of the operator.

To overcome these problems, low-cost force feedback devices are incorporated in these applications because of their success and their simplicity of use. Many of these interfaces, like the haptic one, appear in many research areas of robotics and recently in the field of mobile robot teleoperation [4], [6]. These mobile robots operate in unknown and dangerous environments, physically distant performing particular tasks (e.g. space applications, nuclear exploration, surveillance and rescue, etc.) Haptic devices help to improve the operator’s perception of the environment and give users the illusion of “feeling” the robot workspace, improving, among others, his/her ability to avoid obstacles and reducing the number of collisions [7].

These applications find all their interest in slaves remote environments, namely the human intervention of a competent person on one or more “remote sites”. But this distance induces major problems of stability and transparency due to communication delay. To ensure the stability of haptic feedback of such interactions, some control schemes have been proposed. The first is a simple transposition of the control scheme used in classic bilateral teleoperation, [Sha09]. But the differences between the two applications (teleoperation and remote control of mobile robots) are many: 1) the workspace haptic devices is limited while the slave environment is infinite, 2) kinematics of the mobile robot is subjected to non-holonomic constraints, so we do not have the same freedom as the haptic arm. The second type of control schemes are generally passive and, unfortunately, degrade significantly the transparency of the haptic rendering, [6]. This last property is essential to feel details interactions between mobile robot-slave environment (corners, obstacles shape, etc.)

Compared to classic bilateral teleoperation, few schemes have been proposed for mobile robots [4], [6]. The time delays problem has been addressed in some of these works, unfortunately, the authors neglect the fidelity of haptic rendering (crucial aspect) to the benefit of stability due to passivity based control and the impact of variable time delay on these properties (stability and transparency). In contrast, based on predictive control [11], our proposed control scheme supports variable / constant time delays, and experimentation results. Discussions and the traditional conclusion wrap up this work.

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Force Feedback Stabilization for Remote Control of An Assistive Mobile Robot
II. RELATED WORKS

The most important problem in remote controlled tasks comes from sensorial impoverishment because of the separation between the entity which controls the action (the human) and the entity which executes it (the machine). Figure 1 illustrates a remote control situation in which the human operator is far from the area where the action takes place. The most common solution to solve the problem is to elaborate a human-machine co-operation. Both human and machine have the abilities of perception, decision and action. They can help each other to realize the mission desired by the operator by the mean of shared control modes of the robot [Yanco04], [Colle02]. In normal situation, humans exploit a great diversity of sensorial information (visual, aural, tactile, vestibular, etc.). In remote control situation, some of them are degraded or absent. Two of them are overexploited: vision and proprioception. In this paper we deal with proprioception, which deals with low cognitive level feedback to the user.

III. SYSTEM DESCRIPTION

An overview of the mobile robot haptic teleoperation system is illustrated in Figure 2. It consists of two sides: the master side, which contains the haptic device and the master station and the slave side, which contains the mobile robot and a slave robot server/environment.

Generally, haptic feedback is achieved by transmitting either real contact force (measured by force sensors) or artificial/virtual force computed according to the distance between the robot and obstacles (measured by sonar). However, in some applications, such extra sensors may be too costly or ineffective (e.g. contact outside sensing zone). Their failures may also result in erroneous force feedback or even unstable system behaviors [6]. For our application, the haptic feedback is achieved by using only the basic navigation sensors.

The mobile robot that was used is named Lina and it is a circular, two driving wheels, robot (see experiments subsection for more description).

IV. SYSTEM MODELING

A. Mobile Robot Modeling

Based on [3], the dynamics of a non-holonomic two wheeled mobile robot is given by:

\[
D(x) \left( \begin{array}{c} \dot{v} \\ \dot{\phi} \end{array} \right) + Q(x, \dot{x}) \left( \begin{array}{c} v \\ \phi \end{array} \right) = \left( \begin{array}{c} u_1 \\ u_2 \end{array} \right) + \left( \begin{array}{c} \delta_1 \\ \delta_2 \end{array} \right)
\]

(1)

Where \( v(t), \phi(t) \) are the linear velocity and the heading angle of the mobile robot, \( x = (x, y, \phi, \theta_1, \theta_1) \) is the 5-DOF configuration of the robot with \((x, y)\) and \((\theta_1, \theta_1)\) are the position of the robot gravity center and the rotation of the right/left wheels, \( (\delta_1, \delta_2) \) are the external forces/torques acting on the robot, and \( (u_1, u_2) = (\frac{\tau}{l_1}(u_r + u_l), \frac{\tau}{l_1}(u_r - u_l)) \) are the controls with \((u_r, u_l)\), \( h \), and \( c \) being the angular torques of the right and left wheels, the radius of the wheels, and the robot body radius, respectively (See Figure 3).

Then, the evolution of the 5-DOF mobile robot can be computed by solving the (reduced) 2-DOF dynamics, equation 1, and the following kinematic constraint:

\[
\begin{align*}
\frac{dx}{dt} &= v \cdot \cos \phi \\
\frac{dy}{dt} &= v \cdot \sin \phi \\
\frac{d\phi}{dt} &= \dot{\phi} \\
\frac{d\theta_1}{dt} &= \frac{v \cdot \cos \phi}{h} \\
\frac{d\theta_2}{dt} &= \frac{v \cdot \cos \phi}{h}
\end{align*}
\]

(2)

The mobile robot dynamic model can be used for several applications, such as a semi-experiment to test the control laws before tests with real robots (what we have achieved, but not discussed in this paper), reconstruction of the slave environment, the identification of dynamic parameters of robots with special structure, etc.

B. Haptic Device Modeling

The haptic devices are much less bulky than the master arms used in teleoperation. Thus, almost all of these devices are “human arm scale” and allow effortless handling (weight compensation and inertia), in an appropriate workspace. On the other hand, the motion transmission is done by systems...
with very low friction. In addition, a small workspace limits the accelerations and velocities that can be made by the operator, thus inertial effects are neglected.

Taking into account the previous assumptions, it becomes possible to model, in a linear way, a large class of haptic devices as an apparent mass and/or inertia that the operator manipulates inside the device’s workspace under a small apparent friction.

\[ m \ddot{x} + b \dot{x} = F_h + \tau \]

Where \( m \) is the apparent mass, \( b \) the apparent friction, \( \dot{x} \) the end-effector displacement, \( F_h \) the exerted human force and \( \tau \) the control input (torque), respectively. On Figure 4, \( \dot{v}_e \) (velocity) and \( F_e \) (force) represent the input/output of the interaction between human operator and the slave environment.

V. CONTROL DESIGN

This section addresses a general control design for a time-delayed haptic interaction with real/virtual environments. Here a stable predictive-like approach is adopted based on the Smith predictor technique, [2], [10]. The major difference with this technique lies in the fact that we do not need to estimate the time delay or know its fluctuations. Therefore, our controller applies to constant or time-varying delays cases without any adaptation.

\[ m \ddot{x} + \tau = F_h + \tau \]

Where \( m \), \( b \) are respectively the apparent mass and friction of the haptic device, \( x \) and \( y \) are end-effector displacements, \( F_h \), \( \tau \) being the exerted human force and control input (torque), respectively. On Figure 4, \( \dot{v}_e \) (velocity) and \( F_e \) (force) represent the input/output of the interaction between human operator and the slave environment.

We consider a 3-DOF haptic joystick as the master device. Only 2-DOF are used for the control of the mobile robot (planar motion with respect to \( x \) and \( y \) end-effector references). The device dynamic model is governed by following equation:

\[ m \ddot{x} + \tau = F_h + \tau \]

Where \( m \), \( b \) are respectively the apparent mass and friction of the haptic device, \( x \), \( y \) are end-effector displacements, \( F_h \), \( \tau \) being the exerted human force and control input (torque), respectively. On Figure 4, \( \dot{v}_e \) (velocity) and \( F_e \) (force) represent the input/output of the interaction between human operator and the slave environment.

VI. STABILITY ANALYSIS

The present controller constitutes a generic result and can be applied for virtual or real haptic environments.

Figure 6 represents two interconnected systems defined respectively by their transfer functions \( G_1 \) and \( G_2 \). The respective inputs are \( e_1 \) and \( e_2 \) and the outputs are \( y_1 \) and \( y_2 \). These parameters are governed by the following equations system:

\[ \begin{align*}
\dot{u}_1 &= e_1 - y_2 \\
\dot{u}_2 &= e_2 + y_1
\end{align*} \]

Where \( u_1 \) and \( u_2 \) are the control signals.

If \( \tau_i \) are zero, the passivity of the present interconnected system depends on the passivity of each system, see [5].

The entire interconnected system (Figure 6) can be stabilized, using a control based on the process model \( G_1 \) or \( G_2 \), as shown in Figure 7.
The proof is quite simple. The equations describing the system are given by:

\[
\begin{align*}
    u_1(t) &= e_1(t) - y_2(t) * h(t - \tau_2(t)) \\
    u_2(t) &= e_2(t) + y_1(t - \tau_1(t)) \\
    &+ y_1(t) * h(t - \tau_1(t)) - y_1(t)
\end{align*}
\]

(5)

where,

\[
\begin{align*}
    y_1(t) &= u_1(t) + y_1(t) \\
    y_2(t) &= u_2(t) * g_1(t)(t) \\
    y_1(t) &= y_2(t) + h(\tau_2(t)) * g_1(t) \\
    y_1(t) &= y_2(t) * g_1(t) \\
    s_1(t) &= y_1(t) + y_1(t) \\
    s_2(t) &= s_1(t) * h(\tau_1(t)) - y_1(t)
\end{align*}
\]

(6)

\(h(\tau_1, t)\) represents the impulse response of the transmission channel (\(\tau_1\) may be variable). If we assume that \(g_1(t)\) is known and linear, the output equation of \(s_1(t)\) becomes:

\[
\begin{align*}
    s_1(t) &= y_1(t) + y_1(t) \\
    &= u_1(t) + y_1(t) + (y_2(t) * h(\tau_2(t))) * g_1(t)
\end{align*}
\]

(7)

By substituting the value of \(u_1(t)\) into (5), we obtain:

\[
\begin{align*}
    s_1(t) &= (e_1(t) - y_2(t) * h(t - \tau_2(t))) * g_1(t) \\
    &+ (y_2(t) * h(\tau_2(t))) * g_1(t)
\end{align*}
\]

(8)

This can be simplified as:

\[
    s_1(t) = e_1(t) * h(\tau_1, t)
\]

(9)

By replacing this equation into \(s_2(t)\) formula, we have:

\[
    s_2(t) = (e_1(t) * g_1(t)) * h(\tau_1, t) - y_2(t) * g_1(t)
\]

(10)

This system can be represented by the new control scheme illustrated by Figure 8.

Now, we shall prove that if the transfers \(g_1\) and \(g_2\) are stable, then the entire system is also stable.

Let’s consider two separate cases: constant and variable delay.

In the first case, the impulse response of \(h(\tau_1, t)\) becomes a linear operator on which we can apply the following property:

\[
    (f \circ g) = f \circ g = f \circ g
\]

(11)

Hence, the expression of \(s_2(t)\) will be simplified to:

\[
    s_2(t) = (e_1(t) - y_2(t)) + g_1(t)
\]

As transfers \(g_1\) and \(g_2\) are assumed linear, then the closed loop system is passive (stable).

When the time delays are variable, the previous system cannot be simplified because of \(f(\tau(t)) \neq f \circ g(t)\), and we have:

\[
\begin{bmatrix}
    s_1 \\
    u
\end{bmatrix} = \begin{bmatrix} 1 & 1 & 1 & \end{bmatrix} \begin{bmatrix} G_1G_2 & 1 & 0 & \end{bmatrix} \begin{bmatrix} \tau_1 \end{bmatrix} \]

(13)

where \(s_1\) is the first delayed output and constitutes the input of the closed loop system \(G_1G_2\) and \(u = s_2 + e_2\). In this case, the system stability is guaranteed because \(1 + G_1G_2\) is supposed stable. We suppose that \(g_2(t)\) represents the mobile robot and its slave environment.

VII. FORCE FEEDBACK STRATEGY

As stated before, the force feedback is computed according to the distance, \(X_i\), between the robot and obstacles (measured by sonars). In order to compute the necessary force to alert the human operator on the presence of obstacles or an upcoming impact, we set two thresholds distances from which the operator feels two different forces (Figure 9). These thresholds are defined as follows:

\[
\begin{align*}
    &X_{wall} \leq X_i \leq X_{spring} \rightarrow F_i = k_1(X_i - X_{spring}) \\
    &0 \leq X_i \leq X_{wall} \rightarrow F_i = k_2(X_i - X_{wall}) + k_3(X_{spring} - X_{wall})
\end{align*}
\]

(14)

Where \(X_{spring}\) is the first threshold position limiting the “spring” zone, \(X_{wall}\) is the second threshold position limiting the “wall” zone, \(k_1\) and \(k_2\) are respectively stiffness coefficients calculated depending on the zone properties.
A. Joystick Effect

For security reasons and to preserve the mobile robot, we added a permanent force feedback \( F_0/(x,y) \) so that it repositions the haptic end-point on its neutral position or neutral zone. This property is important if the operator releases the haptic arm, the end-point quickly returns to the neutral position and the robot stops its progression.

\[
F_0/(x,y) = -k_0 X_m
\]

where \( k_0 \) is a small stiffness.

The neutral position may be extended to a neutral zone, in order to ignore minute hand movements (shaking), thus preserving the life of the engines.

VIII. SIMULATION AND EXPERIMENTAL RESULTS

A. Simulation Results

In this section we present simulation results of the used predictive control. The haptic display parameters are a felt-mass of \( m = 0.2 kg \) and a motion felt-friction of \( b = 3 Ns/m \). The simulated virtual contact is performed between a rigid virtual probe and virtual walls of stiffness \( K_e = 1000 N/m \). Time delays, \( \tau_1(t) \) and \( \tau_2(t) \), have the same shape.

Figure 10 shows the result of the haptic interaction under time-varying delay (\( \tau_1(t) \) variation is plotted on the same figure). In this case, the simulation shows a globally stable behavior of the system. Therefore, the dynamic of \( \tau_1(t) \) affects the response behavior of haptic feedback. Indeed, Figure 10 shows clearly that when a transition occurs between different \( \tau_1(t) \) behaviors, i.e. between varying and constant delays, the force feedback response switches respectively between two different system behaviors. The transitions seem to be abrupt but do not affect the overall stability of the system.

The control scheme robustness, against error estimation of model parameters, will not be studied in this paper.

B. Experimental Results

All the experiments have been performed on a real robot, Lina (Figure 2) is a circular two driving wheels robot (55 cm of diameter). Its maximum linear speed is \( 1.2 m/sec \) and \( 4rad/sec \). Motor’s optic coders are used to compute odometry. It is equipped with 12 ultrasonic sensors all around its body, one each 30°. For the present experimentations, only the seven frontal sensors are used. They are labeled \( x_0 \) to \( x_6 \), from the left to the right. A laser range finder is also present in the front (210° of aperture) of the robot. A pan-tilt camera is used for video feedback to the operator. The robot uses a Wifi connection for communication between control units. Speed orders are sent to the robot through this connection. Optional functions such as obstacle avoidance are available through a human-machine interface displayed on the touch screen of the robot.

On the operator side, we use a Phantom Omni to generate force feedback.

We have validated our model in three classical spatial situations encountered in indoor environments: movement towards a wall, following a corner wall and driving between two obstacles. Due to the reduced paper space, only a few results have been presented here.

For each of these spatial situations, four kinds of feedbacks to the human operator have been performed. In the first one, no force is sent to the user (not represented here). This situation is called “SE”. It is a reference experiment, in which forces are computed but not fed back to the operator. That will be a mean to compare this situation with the others. In the second situation, a force is fed back to the operator, without transmission delay (Figure 11). This situation is called “SR”. The third situation corresponds to a force sent with a delay and no stabilization control is applied (Figure 12). This situation is called “RNC”. The last situation corresponds to a force sent to the user under various size of time delays (Figure 13).

Four subjects, aged between twenty-five and thirty, have taken part to the experiment. They had about twenty minutes to get familiar with the application. This learning was conducted without transmission delays.

Figure 11 illustrates the behavior of the whole interaction under ideal conditions (i.e. time delays are zero). The mobile robot is controlled to move closer to a wall. In this figure, we note at the beginning of the experiment a non-negligible force feedback, which corresponds to the joystick effect, necessary to return the haptic device in its neutral position.
In Figure 12, we can notice the instable behavior of the force feedback during the same experiment as above. But, here time delays are about 100 msec. In this experiment, the human operator feels vibrations on the haptic arm, not helpful to give him an idea on the evolution of the mobile robot.

In this last Figure 13, the mobile robot navigates in a complex environment where it must pass between two obstacles. The experiment is performed under a variable time delays with mean at 200 msec. The curves show a stable force feedback. But, because a large time delay and a speed control technique of the mobile robot, human operators feel compelled to slow down to pass away the obstacles safely (a small linear velocity of the mobile robot).

IX. CONCLUSION

In this paper, an assistive robot teleoperation system with haptic interface has been presented. The goal considered is that of remotely driving a mobile robot to perform an exploration task for a domestic environment.

The proposed control scheme uses the X-Y displacements of the haptic device as a speed control for the mobile robot. This scheme offers a very intuitive manipulation. For security reasons we have implemented a standard joystick control to preserve the robot’s motors from damages.
The structure of the controller leads to interesting extensions that:

- avoid the estimation of time-delay (variable or constant);
- make a straightforward extension to time-varying delay (without any adaptation);
- the mobile robot behavior knowledge is not necessary.

The first experimental results presented above have also suggested that force feedback helps the user to pilot the robot amongst obstacles, in particular, in the case of low quality video feedback (due to overexposure for example). We plan to run an experiment to attest that with statistical results, to measure the influence of delays and to evaluate the efficiency of delay correction we will develop.

Future work will deal with the creation of the remote environment geometry in real-time and the contribution of force feedback in the rapid completion of tasks.

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