

An Integrated Object Detection and Tracking Framework for Mobile Robots

William Kristian Juel*^a, Frederik Haarslev*^b, Norbert Krüger^c and Leon Bodenhagen^d

SDU Robotics, University of Southern Denmark, Campusvej 55, Odense C, Denmark

Keywords: Detection, Visual Tracking, Mobile Robots, Perception System and Automation.

Abstract: In this paper, we propose an end-to-end-solution to the problem of multi-object tracking on a mobile robot. The tracking system consists of a process where we project 2D multi-object detections to the robots base frame, using RGB-D sensor data. These detections are then transformed to the map frame using a localization algorithm. This system predicts trajectories of humans and objects in the environment of the robot and can be adapted to work with any detector and track from multiple cameras. The system can then be used to build a temporally consistent costmap to improve navigation strategies.

1 INTRODUCTION

Mobile Robots are becoming an integrated part of our society and are already making their ways around factory floors, but they are also moving into unconstrained environments, filled with people and object, as hospitals. For a mobile robot to seamlessly navigate and manipulate within an unconstrained environment, reasoning about the environment is important. Mobile robots manipulate within an environment by finding the cheapest costs of a movement in a costmap. The costmap gets information about obstacles in the environment from the laser range sensors and/or 3D cameras on the robot. In the classical methods, every obstacle is treated the same way and there is no spatio-temporal nor semantic information about each of these obstacles in the costmap. In unconstrained environments, there can be a lot of humans and non-static objects, and because there is not enough knowledge about these and their trajectory, the robot fails to make an adequate decision when encountering them. We implement a system that predicts trajectories of humans and objects in the environment of the robot, which can then be used to build a temporally consistent costmap to improve navigation strategies. We refer to such a system as an object

tracking system. A tracking system for a mobile robot must be able to provide a target identity for the object being tracked at each time-step. It should also be able to perform well on a variety of sequences from different environments and with a variation in the level of crowdedness. Since the robots are moving, a tracking system should be able to handle camera motion and to some degree changes in illumination. Many, mobile robots also have several cameras mounted, and therefore a tracking system should be able to utilize views from multiple cameras. A tracker should be able to function using a fixed set of parameters for every sequence in any type of environment so that installation time is kept at a minimum (Leal-Taixé et al., 2017), it should also have a limited computational complexity such that it can be run on embedded devices.

Most state-of-art tracking methods follow the paradigm of *tracking-by-detection*. This is a two-step process where first a frame-by-frame object detection is required. Here learning-based detectors like (Redmon et al., 2015; Ren et al., 2015; He et al., 2017) can be used or (Cao et al., 2018; Zhou et al., 2019) if humans and their pose are of special interest. Secondly, the task is to determine inter-frame correspondence between detections in order to predict trajectories. This is referred to as performing data association where the quality of the matches between each detected object per camera sequence is measured (Kim et al., 2015; Rezatofighi et al., 2015; Wojke et al., 2017; Son et al., 2017; Schuster et al., 2017).

The state-of-the-art benchmark for tracking systems is the MOT challenge (Voigtlaender et al., 2019).

^a  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5046-8558>

^b  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2882-0142>

^c  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3931-116X>

^d  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8083-0770>

* Equal contribution between the authors.



Figure 1: Two problems arising when using 2D tracking on a mobile robot. Left column shows camera images before and after the robot has rotated, causing a shift in the center pixel of the person. Right column shows a person transitioning from one camera to another, which is undefined in image coordinates. Both are non-issues when tracking the 3D coordinates in the map frame. Here the before and after are shown as time step t_1 and t_2 .

This challenge focuses on tracking in the image plane, which might be a reason for most state-of-the-art tracking systems being designed respectively. However, our 3D detection and tracking system tracks in the map frame and not in the image plane. It estimates the tracked identities absolute position in the map frame, which is reliable even in cases where the robot is moving as opposed to tracking in the image plane. Mobile robots often have multiple cameras mounted, and transitions between pixel coordinates in different cameras are not well defined in 2D. This is not the case for 3D since point clouds can be transformed into other camera frames (given a calibration) making the transition well defined. Therefore, we change the state-space to the 3D position of the detected object in the map frame (see fig. 1). By using the map coordinates the robot can move while the state of the objects does not change. In that way, it will be able to use the tracked identities in robot navigation tasks and general reasoning about the environment the robot manipulates with and in. Likewise, many of these 2D trackers are not designed with computational complexity in mind, but instead with a focus on scoring as high as possible on a benchmark dataset. However, tracking systems deployed on mobile robots must be able to run on embedded devices

such as a Jetson AGX XAVIER¹. These two aspects are essential to our implementation of the 3D detection and tracking system and therefore our contribution can be summarized as the following:

- We present a framework within the *tracking-by-detection* paradigm by modifying a state-of-the-art tracking algorithm to operate in the map frame. This enables the framework to work with multiple detectors operating on any number of cameras, while only using a single global tracker.
- We show the framework working on a mobile robot deployed in an unconstrained environment.
- We show that both the detector and tracker can run online on the Jetson AGX XAVIER using multiple cameras as input.

2 RELATED WORK

The tracking-by-detection paradigm divides the problem of multi-object tracking into two steps: (1) An independent bounding-box detection of any object in the scene – animate and inanimate – usually done using a convolutional neural network (CNN) such as (He et al., 2017; Zhou et al., 2019; Cao et al., 2018). (2) Data association, where a frame by frame linking of all object instances detected in the scene is done and each is assigned a trajectory that describes the path of each of the object instances over time.

Traditionally, Multiple Hypothesis Tracking (MHT) (Blackman, 2004) and Joint Probabilistic Data Association (JPDA) (Rezatofighi et al., 2015) have been used to solve the data association problem in Multi-object tracking. However, the computation times of these methods make them unfeasible for online tracking - the complexity is exponential with the number of object instances. In the following section, we will focus on CNN detectors and tracking algorithms that can track online.

2.1 Detectors

Since the introduction of AlexNet (Krizhevsky et al., 2012), CNNs have been the state-of-art architecture for image classification. Likewise, CNNs have shown to work well for object detection and bounding box prediction tasks. Object detection networks are usually divided into two different categories, two-stage, and one-stage detectors. A widely used two-stage detector is Faster R-CNN (Ren et al., 2015), which de-

¹<https://www.nvidia.com/en-us/autonomous-machines/embedded-systems/jetson-agx-xavier/>

jects objects by first proposing possible object bounding boxes, then classifying the boxes as either containing objects or not, and finally which type of object it is. The Faster R-CNN architecture improves on the computational complexity problems from earlier versions (Girshick et al., 2013; Girshick, 2015) by computing proposals with a CNN. Mask-RCNN by (He et al., 2017) is an extension on Faster R-CNN, that predicts a segmentation mask within the region proposal. A segmentation mask like this could be useful in a tracking system to feed the tracker with more fine-grained information about the specific object and in that way be able to ignore the background pixels.

Instead of detecting objects by region proposal and classification, one-stage detectors like YOLO (Redmon et al., 2015) and SSD (Liu et al., 2015) estimate the bounding boxes in a single forward pass using anchors. One of the main problems with anchor-based one-stage detectors is spatial constraints on the bounding box predictions since each grid cell only predicts a limited amount of boxes and only can have one class. Another type of one-stage detector uses keypoint detection to detect more than just the bounding box of the objects. OpenPose (Cao et al., 2018) is used specifically for humans, in that it uses heat maps to detect joint locations, and part affinity fields to associate the key points to a single human. CenterNet (Zhou et al., 2019) is a keypoint based one-stage detector which expands on this idea. It uses keypoint estimation to find the center pixel of detected objects, and regression to estimate the width and height of the bounding boxes. The architecture can easily be expanded to regress to other object properties such as 3D pose, and can even be used for human pose estimation by adding a joint keypoint head. The key points are then associated with each center detection using the regressed width and height of the bounding box. All of these methods above facilitates a wide range of flexible architecture designs, where a compromise between runtime and mean Average Precision (mAP) has to be made.

2.2 Tracking Algorithms

Tracking on a mobile robot must be done online while the robot manipulates in its environment. Likewise, the runtime of the tracker must be low enough so that the robot has time to act and react to each tracked object instance. Therefore, trajectories must be calculated for each object instance on a frame-by-frame basis. Due to the advancement in real-time object detection, we theorize that using tracking algorithms that focus on feature extraction from the detected object instances is the best for deployment on a mobile

robot. Methods such as (Wojke et al., 2017; Son et al., 2017) both exploit deep learning techniques.

In (Wojke et al., 2017) the tracking algorithm DeepSORT uses a Kalman filter for state estimation and the Hungarian algorithm to solve associations between the predicted Kalman states and new object instances. They apply a siamese CNN with triplet loss, that has been trained to discriminate between humans. The triplet loss helps the network learn different feature vectors for different humans. This increases the tracker's robustness to misses and occlusion while running at 40 Hz. In (Son et al., 2017) a Quadruplet Convolutional Neural Networks (Quad-CNN) is used for multi-object tracking, this learns to associate the object instances across frames by using quadruplet loss. This type of network consider object appearances and temporal adjacencies for data association, Quad-CNN enforces temporally adjacent detections to be more similar then the ones with large temporal gaps.

3 3D DETECTION AND TRACKING

The tracking framework proposed in this paper consists of multiple components, communicating through ROS (Stanford Artificial Intelligence Laboratory et al., 2018). As per the *tracking-by-detection* paradigm, the two major components are object detection modules and the tracking module. These are supported by two utility modules: a camera gate that controls the flow of images from multiple cameras to the different detectors, and a map frame transformer which transforms the detections to the map frame. Figure 2 shows an overview of the framework. The code is available at https://gitlab.com/sdurobotics/semantic_map.

3.1 Capturing and Distributing Images

The developed framework is a visual tracking system, and as such needs image and depth data in order to detect and track objects in 3D. These images are provided by any number of RGB-D sensors. Any type of RGB-D sensor works with the framework, as long as it has ROS drivers that publish color images with intrinsic camera parameters and a depth map with a known transformation to the color image frame. The images are used as input to the various detectors implemented for the framework, but in many cases, it does not make sense to use images from all cameras as input for all detectors. Examples of this include only detecting obstacles in the camera pointing in the

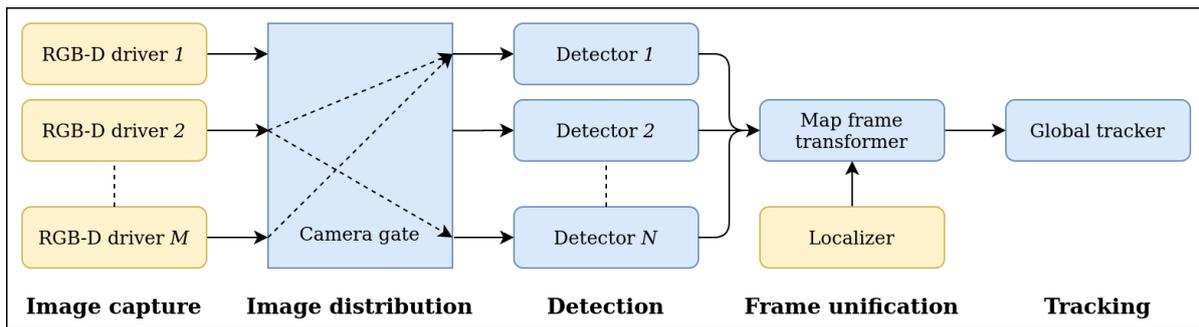


Figure 2: Flow of the tracking framework. Blue indicates modules implemented for the framework, where yellow is standard modules available in ROS. Images from M RGB-D cameras are passed to a logic gate which can turn on/off passthrough to each of the N detectors. The detectors process the received images as a batch and pass them to the map frame transformer which unifies the coordinate frames using global localization information. The detections are then in the map frame and can be tracked by the global tracker.

movement direction of the robot, or only detecting the pose of an object of interest once the robot is near it.

To control this a camera gate module is implemented, which can be used to open up an efficient publisher/subscriber connection between a camera and detector, using a simple ROS service call. The service sends the intrinsic parameters of the selected camera to the desired detector, adds the detector to a list of connections for that camera, and then creates a subscriber to the camera if it was not created previously by a service call for that camera and a different detector. Whenever a color and depth image pair is published to the camera gate, it is immediately republished to all detectors on the connection list of that camera. A corresponding service call for deleting connections is also implemented. It removes the detector from the list of connections of that camera, and if the list becomes empty the camera subscriber is removed entirely. The next step is then to detect objects in the color/depth image pair.

3.2 Detecting Object Properties

For the detection of objects, a versatile detector ROS package has been implemented which can be configured to detect a variety of object types. The task of the detector is to detect each object of specific classes in the color image, and then use the depth information to derive each object’s 3D position or full 6-DoF pose, along with optional keypoint information. Additionally, the detector must also output a cropped image of each object, as it is needed for the tracker as explained in section 3.4. This is accomplished using CenterNet (Zhou et al., 2019). CenterNet is a simple CNN which can be configured for various detection tasks. The authors of CenterNet have released models for a 2D bounding box, 3D bounding box, and human keypoint detection. In the simple case of 2D bounding

box detection, the pipeline is as follows: CenterNet is used to detect the bounding box of each object in the color image of the classes which it has been trained to detect (fig. 3). For each detection, the detector now uses the bounding box to crop the object image and then transforms the bounding box to the depth image. This enables the estimation of the objects 3D position by finding the median depth in a small square around the center of the bounding box and then projecting it to 3D. The detector then outputs a ROS message which for each object contains, their class, cropped image, and 3D position. In case that multiple sensors publish to the detector, then CenterNet processes all color images as a batch in order to conserve computing resources. Afterward, each detection is processed individually as previously stated, but using the depth map corresponding to the color image where the detection was made.

Besides the 2D bounding box network, the human keypoint configuration of CenterNet has also been integrated with the detector. It functions in the same way since it also provides a bounding box detection, but additional to the 3D position, it also estimates the torso direction of each detected human and the detected keypoints in 3D. This is done by transforming each keypoint to the depth image and projecting it to 3D. The torso direction is then found as the vector orthogonal to the vector between the two shoulder joints. The integration of the 3D bounding box detection configuration is also planned in the near future.

3.3 Unifying Detection Frames

Since the system supports multiple cameras, detections might have the same 3D position in their respective camera frames. E.g. an object 2 meter in front of a robot’s front camera, has the same coordinates in the front camera frame as an object 2 meter behind the

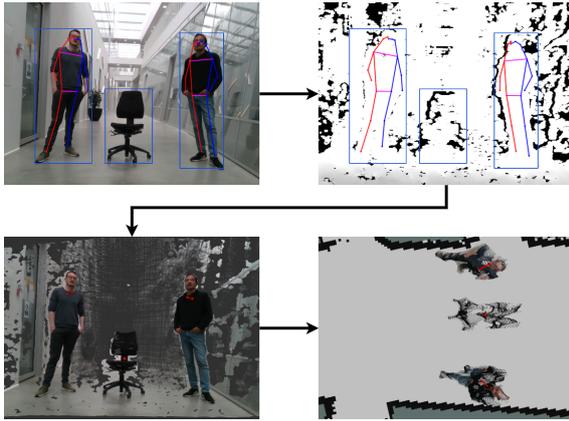


Figure 3: The flow of the two integrated detectors. The bounding boxes for each object in the image is found, and depending on the detector, keypoints as well. The detections are transformed to the depth map, and are then used to estimate the 3D position of each object. The positions are then transformed to the map frame. Along with the 3D position, the human keypoint detector also estimates the torso direction as the vector orthonormal to the vector between the projected shoulder joints.

robots back camera has in the back camera frame. In order to distinguish these objects, their position needs to be defined in a common frame. An idea could be to transform each detection to the base frame of the robot. This solves the ambiguity of the positions, however, in case that the robot moves stationary objects will appear to move relative to it. This makes the objects hard to track if the robot moves, as all objects will appear to move in that way. Instead, each object is transformed into the map frame using localization data from e.g. the ROS navigation stack. This way detections from different cameras have unique positions, which only changes based on the object’s own movement, given a good localization. In reality, localization is not perfect, which means that the positions of the detection might jump in the map from one time step to the next. It is then the job of the tracker to correlate detections over time and estimate the objects’ true positions.

3.4 Tracking Object Instances

Until now each step in the framework happens with no knowledge of the previous time step. This is not the case for the tracker, which is used to assign IDs to the detections while correcting the detected state of the object. The tracker is based on DeepSORT (Wojke et al., 2017), which uses a Kalman filter combined with a deep association metric in order to track detections. The state space of the Kalman filter has been changed to the 3D position of the object along with

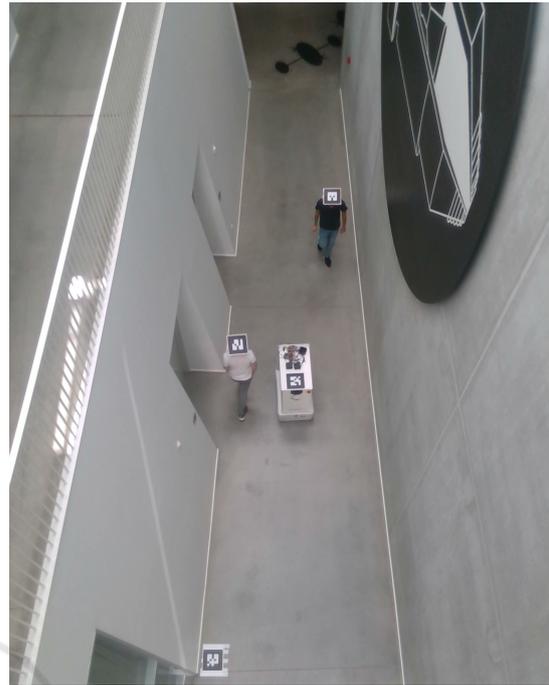


Figure 4: Experimental setup viewed from the top-down view camera: Reference marker on the ground-plan, Marker on the robot and a marker on each test subject.

pose information if available. This enables the tracker to smooth out detection noise and predict the movement of objects if e.g. they move out of the field of view of the camera. The deep feature used for association is found by inputting the object image cropped by the detector to a siamese CNN.

4 EXPERIMENTS

The robot used in the experiments has two Intel RealSense cameras mounted – one in the front and one in the back. Both are positioned 82 cm above the ground plane. To assess the performance of the framework we design an experimental setup where we mount a camera in a top-down view in a hallway where the robot is maneuvering. The test is limited to the field of view of the top-down view camera. Ground truth of trajectories are collected by mounting markers on the test subjects and the robot and a stationary marker is placed on the ground as a reference point for calibration of the marker detection camera placement in the map frame. The experimental setup is shown on fig. 4, from the point of view of the marker detection camera.

Different scenarios are tested where the robot is either stationary or moving, and one or two test subjects move around in either one of the cameras field

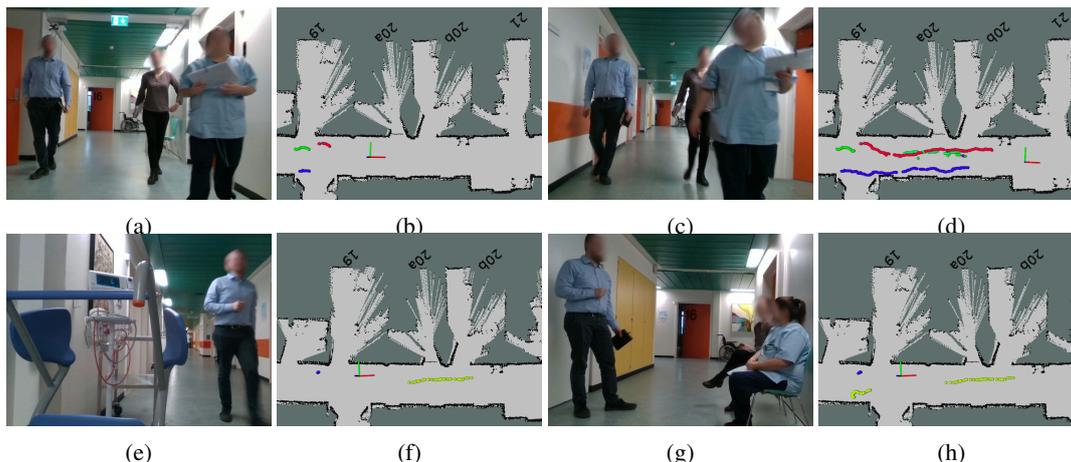


Figure 5: The image pairs on the left hand side (a)+(b) and (e)+(f) are initial trajectories where the image pairs on the right hand side (c)+(d) and (g)+(h) are the final tracked trajectories. The color represents the ID of the track.

Table 1: Tracking results using the bounding box detector with different backbones or the human keypoint estimator.

Detector	MOTA	ID Sw	Frag
BBox-ResNet-18	0.740	9	5
BBox-DLA-34	0.725	10	7
Pose-DLA-34	0.742	19	6

of view, or both. The test is done using three different detectors: two bounding box detectors with differing backbones (BBox-ResNet-18 and BBox-DLA-34) and a human pose estimator (Pose-DLA-34). We compute 40 individual trials consisting of a total of 6118 frames. Evaluation is carried out as suggested in (Bernardin and Stiefelhagen, 2008) with the following metrics:

- **MOTA.** Multiple Object Tracking Accuracy, measuring the combination of three error sources, false positives, missed targets and identity switches, as a value between 0-1.
- **ID Sw.** The number of identity switches.
- **Frag.** The number of times a trajectory is fragmented/interrupted during tracking.

The results from the evaluation can be seen on table 1.

Our results show that we have few identity switches, between 9 and 19 over 6118 frames. This shows that we maintain object identities through occlusions, e.g., when the test subjects are in the robot’s blind spots or when the test subjects occlude each other during movement. Because of the appearance information identities can be maintained through longer occlusions. Likewise, the number of trajectory fragmentations are below 8, which can be contributed to the Kalman filter predicting the subject positions

while they are transitioning between cameras or occlude each other. The MOTA is around 0.75 which indicates we have a relatively low amount of false positives combined with few missed targets and identity switches.

4.1 Real World Experiments

To assess the framework in an unconstrained environment we use data recorded on the same mobile robot but operating in a hospital ward. This data does not have ground truth associated with it and therefore we do a qualitative assessment of the performance. The test is visualized in a top-down view of the map at the hospital ward. In the map, the robot position is shown with a base link marker and the trajectory of each tracked identity in the scene is marked with a colored line (fig. 5b). Changes in the color of a continuous line thereby symbolizes an identity switch. In figure 5 we see two examples of encounters with the mobile robot.

In the first example, figs. 5a and 5b are the initial measurement and figs. 5c and 5d are the final. Here we see three people walking behind the robot while it is driving. Generally the colored trajectory lines on fig. 5d are stable. We observe zero identity switches, although we can see that the two people walking on the right-hand side of fig. 5c are walking in a line following a similar path (red and green), naturally the person furthest behind (the green) will occasionally be occluded by the person in front (the red). This occlusion appears as fragmentation in the colored line, which happens twice for the green line. After both occlusions, the person is picked up by the tracker again and given the same identity as before the occlusion. The blue and the red line are continuous, each of the

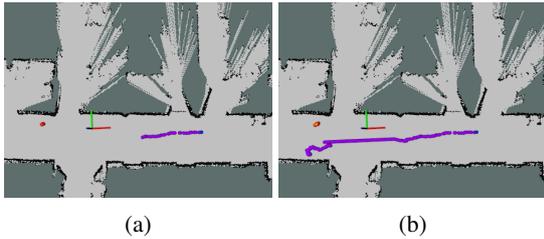


Figure 6: (a) shows the trajectory before the person leaves the field of view of the first camera and (b) shows the estimated trajectory of the person while not in the field of view of the robot and the measured trajectory when the person enters the field of view again.

trajectories is only fragmented once. To summarise, this first example shows that the tracker handles occlusions well and can keep the identity even after a short time of occlusion. This example also shows that the tracker handles long continuous walking down a hallway consistently.

In the second example, figs. 5e and 5f are the initial measurement and figs. 5g and 5h are the final. Here the robot is not moving but parked at the side of the hallway. Initially, we see one person walking towards the robot on fig. 5e. This person’s measured trajectory is the green line in figure fig. 5f. We also see a blue line, which is a measured trajectory of a stationary person sitting behind the robot. On fig. 5g the person has walked past the robot and enter into the camera frame of the second camera, where we also see the stationary people. On fig. 5h we can see that after the person leaves the frame of the first camera, passes the robot, and enters the field of view of the second camera, he is picked up by the tracker and given the same identity as before leaving the first camera frame. We see that there are two stationary people, and only one of them is detected and tracked, which is marked with a blue line. This blue line is stable and does not flicker which indicates that the tracker handles this situation satisfyingly. In this example, zero identity switches, and only one fragmented trajectory is observed when the person leaves the camera frame before entering into the view of the second camera. To summarise, this second example shows that the tracker handles the tracking of a person leaving the first camera frame and entering the second camera frame well and can keep the identity even after a short time of disappearance. This type of fragmented trajectory, due to the person leaving the field of view of one of the cameras, can be handled by using the estimated states or trajectories from the Kalman filter. In figure fig. 6 we see the exact same example where one person leaves the field of view of the robot and enters it again on the other side (the predicted trajectory is now purple instead of green). By including the estimated trajec-

Table 2: Run time evaluation of the framework using using the bounding box detector with differing backbones, or the human keypoint estimator. Each combination is tested using 1-4 cameras.

Detector	M cameras			
	1	2	3	4
BBox-ResNet-18	13.3Hz	11.5Hz	7.9Hz	5.9Hz
BBox-DLA-34	11.6Hz	9.2Hz	6.3Hz	4.8Hz
Pose-DLA-34	7.5Hz	5.1Hz	3.3Hz	2.6Hz

tories from the Kalman filter we see that the trajectory is not fragmented when the person leaves the field of view of the robot, because we continuously estimate a linear velocity.

4.2 Run Time

To ensure that the framework can track online on embedded robot hardware, we evaluate the run time of our system on a Jetson AGX XAVIER. The test is done using the three aforementioned detectors and a 1-4 camera configuration. The results of our run time evaluation can be seen in table 2. From the results we can see that the framework is computationally efficient and can operate in real-time on a mobile robot. The environments that people interacting robots often operate in are rather slow-paced with humans and many stationary objects. Here a run time of minimum 2.6Hz will be enough time to react to changes in the environment.

5 CONCLUSION

We have presented an end-to-end-solution to the problem of multi-object tracking on a mobile robot. We change the state-space of a tracking algorithm to 3D, and track 2D detections by transforming them to the map frame using available depth and localization data. Our experiments shows that we are able to track through periods of occlusion, when people are transitioning between different cameras and we predict reliable trajectories while the robot is moving. We analyze the run time of the system and show that it can be used directly on mobile robot hardware. Our system runs between 2.6-13.3Hz depending on detector and camera configuration, making our system computationally efficient and able to track online on a mobile robot.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This research was supported by the project Health-CAT, funded by the European Fund for regional development, and by the project SMOOTH (project number 6158-00009B) by Innovation Fund Denmark.

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