

TWO-TIERED RESOLUTION REAL-TIME PATH EVALUATION

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Abstract: Unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) are subject to unforeseen events in harsh environment. Embedded autonomous real-time path re-planning is a possible solution to this issue. Evolutionary algorithms have shown to be an excellent means to optimise the generation of UAV paths but their slow iterative process prevent them to be used for real-time computation. Part of that challenge resides in the computational demanding task of path feasibility evaluation, where each single segment of the generated path needs to be certified 'collision free'. State of the art algorithms require computationally demanding pre-processing of the world representation, which is too time-consuming for real-time computation. Taking advantage of advancements in the Field Programmable Gate Array (FPGA) technology, this work has evaluated a new feasibility evaluation technique that analyses the path directly from the raw data of the world representation, using two levels of resolution: a high resolution map used close to the UAV, and a low resolution map used far from the UAV. This technique has been implemented on an FPGA and tested in simulation. Timing results (more than 500 map cells evaluated within 5 μ s) demonstrate that the two-tiered resolution technique opens up avenues to real-time UAV path re-planning using evolutionary algorithms.

1 INTRODUCTION

Real-time path planning for unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) is a difficult problem. Previous work has shown that heuristic path planners can offer better path options than deterministic ones due to their capacity to better explore the solution space (Allaire, Tarbouchi, Labonté and Fusina, 2009). Heuristic algorithms, like the Genetic Algorithm (Bélanger, 2008), the Ant Colony (Bélanger, 2008) and the Particle Swarm (Eslam Pour, 2009), use a general structure that can be summarized by the following pseudo code:

1. Generate a random population of paths;
2. Evaluate the feasibility of these paths;
3. Modify these paths following a heuristic; and Loop through step 2-3 until a stop-criterion is met.

While evolutionary algorithms are well suited for optimizing that task, their slow iterative process prevents them from running in real-time.

One way of speeding up evolutionary algorithm computation time is to program a Field Programmable Gate Array (FPGA), which will be

solely dedicated to run the algorithm. It has been shown that with a dedicated FPGA, computation time for step 3 of a genetic algorithm (Allaire et al., 2009) can be increased as much as $10,000 \times$ faster than when it is running on a general purpose computer. However, this same study has demonstrated that the computational bottleneck of the evolutionary algorithm used in path planning remains on the evaluation of the path feasibility (step 2). This is why it essential to have a closer view over the path feasibility evaluation challenges.

Path evaluation consists firstly in verifying that the path is collision-free. The UAV aerodynamic constraints also need to be checked; however this paper concentrates on the collision-free aspect of path evaluation, which will be referred to as the feasibility check.

The feasibility check computational requirement is intimately related to the UAV's world representation. State of the art algorithms perform computationally demanding (Atay and Bayazit, 2006) pre-processing of the world representation to accommodate sequential processors. The Visibility Graph (Braaksma and Cook, 1980), the Voronoï Graph (Voronoi, 1907) and the Probabilistic

Roadmap (Kavraki, Svestka, Latombe and Overmars, 1996) are techniques used to pre-process raster map information and provide many feasible paths as options to the path planner.

Various authors have used the latest technologies to process these techniques in parallel achieving good results for indoor type environments that contain discrete obstacles (Atay and Bayazit, 2006) (Sridharan and Priya, 2005) (Priya and Sridharan, 1999) (Vachhani and Sridharan, 2008) (Sudha, 2007). However, these techniques aren't suitable for the continuous obstacles present in canyon-like environments (e.g. terrain shown in Fig. 1), to which a flying UAV may be exposed.

The octo-tree (Cocaud, 2006) (a 3D version of the quad-tree (Samet, 1980)) is a variable resolution graph that addresses the continuous obstacle issue, but it is still too computationally demanding for UAV real-time path re-planning in canyon-like environments.

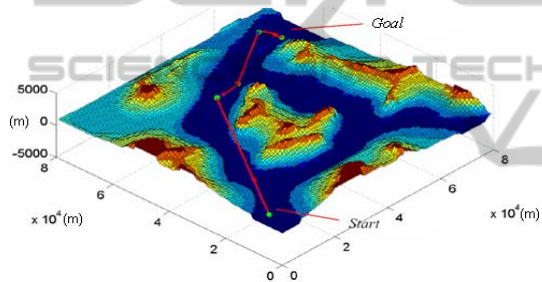


Figure 1: Canyon-like environment for UAV operation.

The problem is therefore to have a world representation, suitable to continuous obstacles environment, which allows the feasibility checks to achieve real-time path re-planning when unforeseen events require the UAV to change its path in flight. Judd (2001) and Chanthery (2002) pointed out that detailed path analysis is only needed close to the UAV and coarse analysis is sufficient farther away. Thus, this work develops a variable resolution technique which provides the possibility to do the feasibility check in parallel while requiring a minimum of pre-processing of the raster map information.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follow: *Section 2* describes the considerations and assumptions used to determine the timing requirements for a real-time path planner; *Section 3* presents the structural and functional design of the path feasibility check implementation on FPGA; *Section 4* details the testing environment used to evaluate the performance of the implementation; *Section 5* discusses the results; and *Section 6* concludes the paper.

2 DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS AND ASSUMPTIONS

In order to determine timing requirements, design specifications must first be set with respect to the UAV platform, the algorithm parameters and the safety zone concept. After covering the timing requirements, this section goes over the scenario considered by this work.

2.1 UAV Type

This project primarily considers Medium Altitude & Long Endurance (MALE) UAVs. Two well-known MALE UAVs are used to form a baseline of UAV characteristics: Heron and Predator. We add a tactical UAV, the Sperwer, for completeness (see table 1). We thus assume that a typical MALE UAV has a maximum speed of 70 m/s and that a sphere 17 m in diameter would encapsulate the whole UAV.

Table 1: MALE UAV Characteristics.

	Max Speed (m/s)	Max Size ^a (m)
Sperwer	70	4.2
Heron	62	16.2
Predator	62	14.8

^a Maximum value between wing span, length and height

2.2 Evolutionary Algorithm Parameters

Evolutionary algorithms have parameters (such as number of initial solutions) that require experimental analysis to adapt them to the problem being solved.

Based on previous works (Cocaud, 2006) (Allaire et al., 2009), we set our genetic algorithm characteristics as follows: a) 32 initial random paths for initial population; b) maximum of 16 waypoints per path; and c) use of 128 iterations.

2.3 Safety Zone

Within the pre-processing of the map information, obstacles are typically inflated by a distance equal to the size of the vehicle. This safety zone ensures that the UAV can always travel a distance equal to its size without collision.

2.4 Timing Requirement

Based on above assumption we can establish the timing requirements as follow.

2.4.1 Extreme Real-time Requirement

Based on the MALE UAV maximum speed and size, each 200 ms the UAV stays within its safety zone. Hence, if the computation of a new path is completed within 200 ms, then the path planner meets the extreme real-time requirement, which refers to the capability of knowing where to go before being at risk of collision.

2.4.2 Sufficient Real-time Requirement

The path planner must be able to provide a new path based on the current position and environmental conditions. It is assumed that the typical MALE UAV receives GPS position updates at a rate of 1 Hz. The path planner must calculate a new path before a GPS position update to meet the sufficient real-time requirement.

2.4.3 Feasibility Check Timing

Based on the sufficient real-time requirements and heuristic algorithm requirements, the path evaluation needs to be computed within $24.4 \mu\text{s}$ ($1 \text{ s} / 128 \text{ iterations} / 32 \text{ path evaluations}$).

Since the feasibility check is only one part of the evaluation phase, it is reasonable to aim for less than $5 \mu\text{s}$ for the computation time allocated to the feasibility check, leaving time for 4 additional path constraints to be evaluated within $5 \mu\text{s}$, e.g. climbing rate, minimum and maximum speed, turning rate, and range.

2.5 Scenario Selection

Many types of scenarios have been considered for this project. A canyon like environment (Fig. 1) was selected as the testing environment to allow performance comparisons with previous research (Cocaud, 2006) (Allaire et al., 2009) (Bélanger,

2008) (Eslam Pour, 2009). The terrain shown in Fig.1 is a $80 \text{ km} \times 80 \text{ km} \times 3.5 \text{ km}$ volume sampled with a resolution of 500×500 integer values of altitude (following the DEM standard). To increase the terrain resolution, the same data was scaled to a volume of $8 \text{ km} \times 8 \text{ km} \times 3.5 \text{ km}$. Hence, one cell of the terrain represents a square of $16 \text{ m} \times 16 \text{ m}$ (approximately the 2D projection of a “typical” MALE UAV), with a 12-bit altitude value.

3 IMPLEMENTATION DETAILS

In order to understand the new path feasibility evaluation approach proposed by this work, this section presents the structure of the custom processor implemented into the FPGA and its functionality.

3.1 Structure Overview

Fig. 2 shows the structure of this project.

3.1.1 Inputs

Since this project focuses only on the feasibility check, all inputs coming into the path planner (see dotted arrows in Fig. 2) are connected directly to the Path Feasibility Check module.

These inputs are:

- Enable signal ChekEN, to start the feasibility check;
- Position Data (Xuav, Yuav and Zuav), representing the current position of the UAV;
- Path Planner data, which are: the number of waypoints in the path, the path address, and the goal position (Xgoal, Ygoal and Zgoal);
- Xwpt, Ywpt and Zwpt are waypoint coordinates read from a Path Memory implemented in Block RAM, which stores all path waypoints, excluding

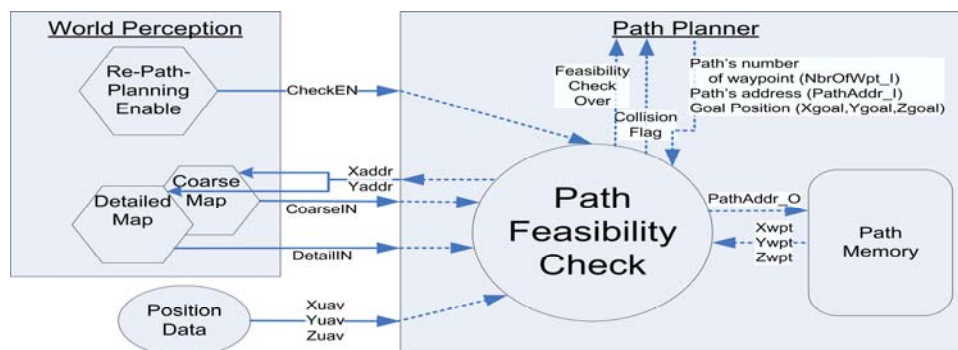


Figure 2: Structure of the hardware implementation.

the start (UAV position) and the end/goal waypoints;

- The variable resolution maps, which consist of two maps of the same area: a) the detailed map captures the full resolution of the initial map (512×512); and b) the coarse map (32×32) consists in the maximum altitude values of the 16×16 squares from the detailed map.

3.1.2 Outputs

A ‘collision flag’ is set as soon as a path altitude is less than or equal to its related terrain altitude. If no collision is found, a feasibility check runs to its completion and an ‘over flag’ is set.

3.2 Functionality Overview

The feasibility check is being done into three phases (see Fig. 3). A state machine with three states controls how the feasibility-check cycles through it. It will first wait for a path, and then it will evaluate the first two path segments against the detailed map and all other path segments against the coarse map. The following subsection details these three phases.

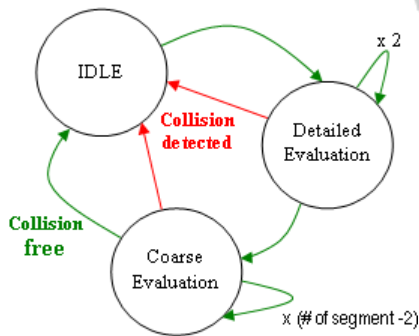


Figure 3: Path Feasibility Check State Diagram.

3.2.1 Idle Phase

This state helps with synchronisation. It waits for the enable signal to start the feasibility check process. Once the enable signal goes high, it captures and stores the input path waypoints and resets the collision flag.

3.2.2 Detailed Evaluation

In this state, the first two path segments are evaluated against the detailed map. As soon as one collision is detected, the collision flag is set and the system goes back to the IDLE state. If no collision was detected in the first two segments and the path has more than two segments, the process goes to the Coarse Evaluation state.

3.2.3 Coarse Evaluation

This state is similar to the detailed evaluation state except that the evaluation is done against the coarse map. Once all segments are evaluated, the system goes to IDLE.

The evaluation states are designed to cycle through the following two steps as long as there is a segment that has not been evaluated and as long there is no collision detected. The first step consists of the Bresenham line algorithm (Bresenham, 1965) (Chiang, 1994), which is used to identify which cells of the map need to be compared with the segment. The current Bresenham module implementation mimics the sequential Bresenham line algorithm. In the second step, all identified terrain cell altitudes are compared with their respective path segment altitudes.

4 TESTING ENVIRONMENT

The testing trajectory selected is pictured in 3D in Fig. 4 and in 2D in Fig. 5. A main characteristic of this trajectory is that it goes close to a mountain, forcing the feasibility checker to be precise. Another characteristic is that the two first segments cover about 2500 m from the UAV initial position which could be a reasonable radius of detailed path planning. Therefore, any additional segments are treated in a coarse manner, adding negligible computation time to the feasibility checker. Another interesting aspect of the trajectory is that it is considered as feasible overall from the perspective of the detailed map, but the last segment is considered as unfeasible from the perspective of the coarse map shown in Fig. 6, forcing the path planner to avoid risky trajectories.

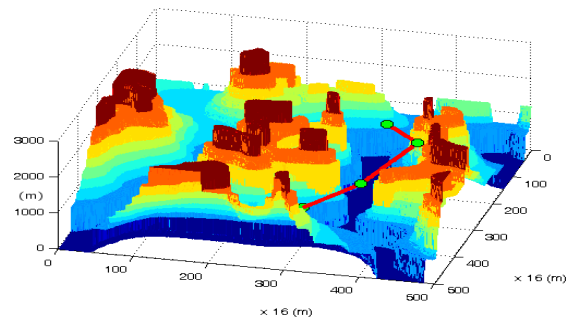


Figure 4: 3D view of testing trajectory.

The feasibility check design was implemented in VHDL, verified through simulation and synthesised for a Virtex5-xc5v1x330 FPGA.

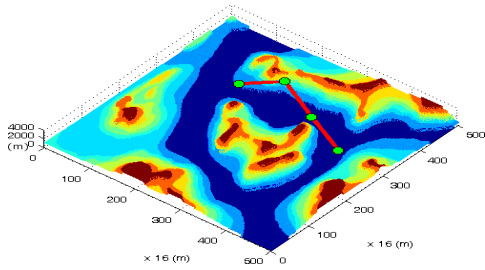


Figure 5: 2D view of testing trajectory.

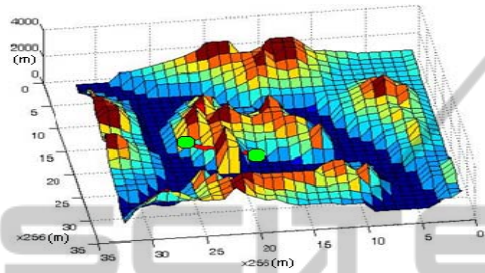


Figure 6: Unfeasible third path segment in coarse map.

5 RESULTS AND FUTURE WORK

Since the aim of this work is to compute in real-time the evaluation of the feasibility of path solutions for an evolutionary algorithm UAV path planner, this section presents the computation timing results and the resources used from the FPGA. Moreover, this section highlights related future works.

5.1 Timing Results

As mentioned in section 2.4.3, the feasibility check of a path should be done in less than $5 \mu\text{s}$ for our typical MALE UAV.

5.1.1 Feasibility Check Timing Breakdown

Table 2: Feasibility Check Timings.

Feasibility Check Step	Time (# of clock cycles ^a)
Capture of initial data	4
First Segment Evaluation (55 points in testing trajectory)	55
Switch of segment	3
Second Segment Evaluation (100 points in testing trajectory)	100
Switch of segment	3
Last Segment Evaluation (6 points in testing trajectory)	6
Return to Idle/Wait State	3
TOTAL	171

^a One clock cycle equals 8 ns

Table 2 shows how many clock cycles are required for each step of the feasibility check starting after receiving the enable signal.

5.1.2 Clock Period

Based on synthesis reports, the longest delay in the design (excluding the Bresenham algorithm module), is about 8 ns so the maximum data rate is 125 MHz.

5.1.3 Feasibility Check Timing Scalability

Based on the above results, it is understood that the specific Testing Trajectory is being feasibility checked within less than $1.5 \mu\text{s}$. This timing is well under the $5 \mu\text{s}$ aimed for.

Even if there were any additional segments to the path, the segments would be evaluated against the coarse map as explained in section 3.2. Moreover, the longest possible straight line on the map is the diagonal that goes from one corner to the opposite corner, and its length is 45 cells for the coarse map. Hence the worst case scenario could add 14×45 cells to the feasibility check of the testing trajectory, since a path cannot have more than 16 waypoints (see section 2.2). However, it would mean that the UAV is going back and forth from one corner to the opposite one 14 times, which is an unrealistic situation. Another reference is therefore required for the worst case.

Within $3.5 \mu\text{s}$ ($5 \mu\text{s} - 1.5 \mu\text{s}$), 392 cells can be evaluated; this distance represents more than 3 times the perimeter size of the map which is reasonably the longest path that could be expected to be generated by the path planner. Therefore, one can say that the two-tiered map resolution approach presented by this work meets the sufficient-real-time requirements, as set out in section 2 of this paper. Moreover, during the first $1.5 \mu\text{s}$ our design can evaluate 155 cells against the detailed map, hence more than 500 cells can be evaluated within $5 \mu\text{s}$ while covering a distance of more than 100 km. That gives a cell evaluation rate of about 100 cells/ μs .

5.2 Resources Used

Our design occupies only 0.1% of the FPGA logic resources in terms of programmable look up tables and 34% of the on-chip RAM. There is therefore ample room for the implementation of the rest of the path evaluation and the rest of the genetic algorithm on the FPGA.

5.3 Future Works

The two-tiered map resolution, as implemented in this work (using the equivalence of a sequential Bresenham line algorithm), meets the sufficient-real-time requirement for realistic path size, but doesn't meet the extreme-real-time requirement that requires up to 5 times more speed (hence a maximum of 1 μ s for the feasibility check). Further studies would be required to analyse what would be the best option between duplicating a sequential Bresenham or implementing a parallel Bresenham line algorithm (similar to the one proposed by Wright (1990)).

One could extrapolate the idea of a two-tiered search space for any other problem solved by an evolutionary algorithm and see if such an implementation could improve computation time for the evaluation of the solutions.

6 CONCLUSIONS

This paper described a hardware design for the implementation of the path feasibility check which is a critical step in the path evaluation performed in any path planning heuristic based algorithm. The novelty of this design is that it uses two maps with different levels of resolution to represent its world-perception. This design, with its cell evaluation rate of 100 cells/ μ s, proved to meet sufficient-real-time requirements for all possible realistic paths. These results validate the concept of using a two-tiered resolution map in support of the feasibility check phase required in any path evaluation.

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