Co-Multi-Robotic Exploration of the Benthic Seafloor

New Methods for Distributed Scene Understanding and Exploration in the Presence of Communication Constraints

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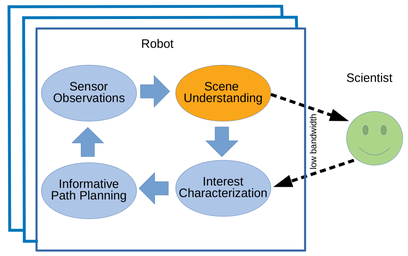
Overview

This project is focused on developing new techniques to enable interactive exploration in unknown, low bandwidth environments, with a multi-robot team. The proposed approach enables new types of data collection missions that can target spatiotemporally sparse, and previously unknown phenomena, in extreme environments like the deep sea.



Challenges

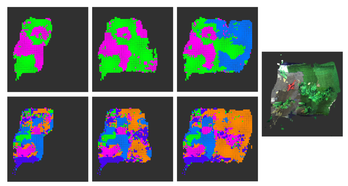
- The primary hurdle in deep sea exploration is the extremely **low bandwidth communication**.
- A vast majority of the oceans and the seafloor is **unexplored and unknown**, and hence there is very limited amount of data available for targeted autonomous missions.
- The **scale** of the oceans necessitate exploration using multi-robot teams. However hard to coordinate with them given the low bandwidth constraint.
- **Informative path planning for robots when observations are categorical**, such as observations of species or tax types, is hard when number of species is large.

Scientific Impact

- The proposed exploration approach generalized to many other types of environments beyond the deep sea such as: aftermath of a natural disaster, caves and mines, and other planets, where there exist communication bottlenecks.
- The work on distributed unsupervised scene understanding and active reward learning is the first (to our knowledge) to focus on communication constrained environments.
- The proposed generative model for spatially distributed categorical observations is ideally suited for modeling complex ecosystem, habitats, and community structures, enabling new applications in ecology.

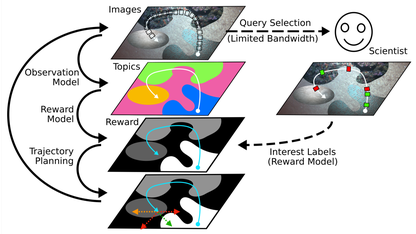
Key Innovations

Unsupervised semantic maps from streaming image data



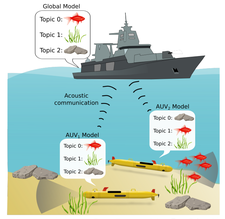
Girdhar, Y. et al. Streaming Scene Maps for Co-Robotic Exploration in Bandwidth Limited Environments. in 2019 International Conference on Robotics and Automation (ICRA) 7940–7946 (IEEE, 2019). doi:10.1109/ICRA.2019.8794132.

Active reward learning for co-robotic exploration



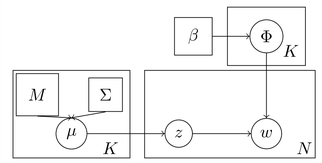
Jamieson, S., How, Jonathan P. & Girdhar, Y. Active Reward Learning for Co-Robotic Vision Based Exploration in Bandwidth Limited Environments. in *IEEE International Conference on Robotics and Automation* (2020).

Distributed unsupervised scene understanding in low-bandwidth environments



Doherty, K., Flaspohler, G., Roy, N. & Girdhar, Y. Approximate Distributed Spatiotemporal Topic Models for Multi-Robot Terrain Characterization. in 2018 IEEE/RSJ International Conference on Intelligent Robots and Systems (IROS) 3730–3737 (IEEE, 2018). doi:10.1109/IROS.2018.8594442.

Enabling informative path planning with high dimensional categorial observations



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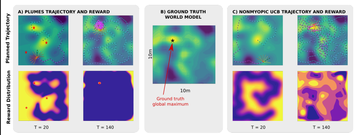
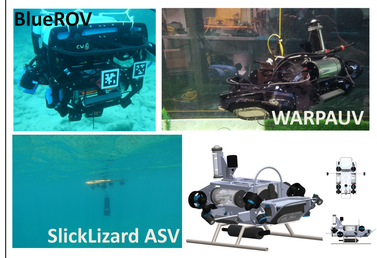
Informative path planning for maximum seek-and-sample missions



Flaspohler, G., Preston, V., Michel, A. P. M., Girdhar, Y. & Roy, N. Information-Guided Robotic Maximum Seek-and-Sample in Partially Observable Continuous Environments. IEEE Robot. Autom. Lett. 4, 3782–3789 (2019).

Robot systems for distributed underwater exploration



McGuire, N., Cai, L., Belani, M., Claus, B. & Girdhar, Y. [poster] WARPAUV: A low-cost, vision-guided AUV for robotics research. in Northeast Robotics Colloquium (2019).

Broader Impacts

Impact on Society

- Potential applications to coral reef health monitoring in the face of climate change. The 2020 field trials will collaborate with coral reef scientists to study endangered stag horn corals.
- Cross disciplinary work with phytoplankton ecologists.
- Use of methods by third party researchers/robots (NDSF AUV Sentry)
- Lowering barriers to using co-robotics to explore the ocean.

Education and Outreach

- Motivating STEM education in high school students through a summer volunteering in the lab.
- Training graduate students
- Robotics field trials with students
- Collaboration with minority serving institution – University of Puerto Rico Mayaguez
- Development of WARPAUV as an open research platform for vision guided AUVs

Impact

- 5 refereed conference papers
- 1 journal paper
- 1 finalist for best paper award at IROS.
- Open Source – Hardware, Software, Datasets, Methods (https://gitlab.com/warplab)
- Use of methods by third party researchers/robots (NDSF AUV Sentry).

2020 National Robotics Initiative (NRI) Principal Investigators' Meeting
FEBRUARY 27 - 28, 2020 | ARLINGTON, VIRGINIA

Award ID#: 1734400