

A Connectionist Model of Spatial Knowledge Acquisition in a Virtual Environment

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Abstract. This paper proposes the use of neural networks as a tool for studying navigation within virtual worlds. Results indicate that network learned to predict the next step for a given trajectory, acquiring also basic spatial knowledge in terms of landmarks and configuration of spatial layout. In addition, the network built a spatial representation of the virtual world, e.g. cognitive-like map, which preserves the topology but lacks metric accuracy. The benefits of this approach and the possibility of extending the methodology to the study of navigation in Human Computer Interaction are discussed.

1 Introduction

This study is part of an ongoing research whose purpose is to identify the procedural and strategic rules governing user navigational behavior within virtual space. It aims to extract a spatial grammar underlying spatial knowledge acquisition.

The environmental psychology provides a basis enriched by an experimental support, for a better understanding of how humans perceive and understand the *space*. The work being carried out confirmed the idea that acquiring an internal representation of the environment is a very complex process involving primarily landmarks identification and understanding of spatial layout configuration. These two basic procedures are well known as *route-based knowledge* and *survey knowledge* [8]. Without underestimate the role of traditional methods, we propose the use of neural networks as an alternative tool for studying navigation within virtual worlds.

Neural networks have proven particularly suited to finding patterns in large amounts of complicated and imprecise data, and detecting trends that are too complex to be noticed by humans [2]. While neural networks have been fruitfully exploited by artificial intelligence researchers, their adoption within HCI is very limited. They were primarily applied to pattern recognition [16]. Finlay identified four areas of HCI, which involve pattern recognition problems, such as task analysis and task evaluation, natural interaction methods such as gesture, speech, handwriting, and adaptive interfaces [5].

Neural networks provide a very powerful toolbox for modeling complex non-linear processes in high dimensionalities [13]. ANNs have many advantages over the traditional representational models, in particularly distributed representations, parallel processing, robustness to noise or degradation and biological plausibility [10]. We consider that at least part of these strengths can be harnessed to model user's behavior in terms of spatial knowledge acquisition.

This research is part of an ongoing program applying neural networks in modeling user's spatial behavior within VEs. A simple recurrent network [4] has feedback which embodies short-term memory. This makes it suitable for application to symbolic tasks that have a sequential nature.

2 Navigation within Virtual Environments

Virtual environments (VE) have become a rich and fertile arena for investigating spatial knowledge. Within the VE, the user set of *actions* is restricted, consisting mainly of navigation and locomotion, objects selection, manipulation, modification and query [6]. As Sayers (2000) observed navigation has been found to be central to the usability of interfaces to VEs on desktop systems [21]. VEs offer the context for training and exploration, enabling the replacement of training and exploration within the physical world. This proves partially attractive when experiencing the real world is expensive, dangerous or hard to be achieved [3].

Evidence of significant similarities in the acquisition of spatial knowledge from real and VEs has been identified [11]. A further advantage consists of their powerful tractable characteristic [1], which enables accurate spatio-temporal recording of users' trajectory within the virtual space. Attempts to understand spatial behavior in both real and artificial worlds were primarily concerned in highlighting the symbolic representation of spatial knowledge.

2.1 Symbolic Cognitive Models of Navigation

The study of navigation in the area of HCI has developed mostly in the field of cognitive modeling, benefiting from inputs provided by both environmental psychology and geography [14]. Several models were described by Kuipers [12] and Darken [3]. Modeling of spatial knowledge has constituted a central research theme for the last four decades. Golledge elegantly presented different models of declarative knowledge acquisition, together with their relevant applications in the area of spatial cognition [7]. Kuipers developed several computational models for navigation, underlying the procedural knowledge embedded in the spatial representations [12]. The basic idea resides in the individuals' set of interactions with the environment, which facilitates a structured storage of perceptual experiences. These memorized experiences would enable users to build a more generalized structure for exhibiting an emergent spatial behavior unperformed before [7].

2.2 Connectionist Models of Navigation

Previous studies have shown that recurrent neural network can predict both circular and figure eight trajectories [4,9,17,19,22]. However, due to fact that the figure eight trajectory crosses itself, the training was more difficult for this type of trajectory. In our case, the trajectories covered by users are more complex than a circle or figure eight, even though some of them resemble a circular shape.

3 Methodology

Research in the area of navigation within VEs has been generally focused on large-scale virtual worlds [3]. In this study we utilized ECHOES¹ [16], as experimental test-bed. It is a virtual reality system, which offers a small-scale world, dense, static and with a consistent structure. Adopting a physical world metaphor, the ECHOES environment comprises a virtual multi-story building, each one of the levels containing several rooms: conference room (Fig.1), library (Fig.2), lobby etc.

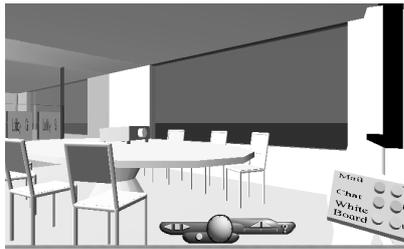


Fig. 1. Virtual Conference Room

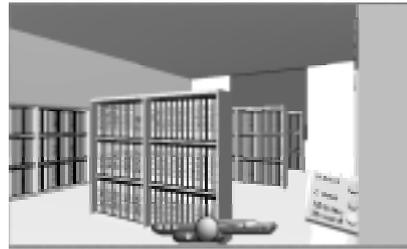


Fig. 2. Virtual Library

The present study captures the spatial behavior of users exploring an unfamiliar VE. Users can navigate from level to level using a virtual elevator. The rooms are furnished and associated with each room there is a cohesive set of functions provided for the user. These features enable ECHOES to offer an intuitive navigational model.

A sample of 30 postgraduates in the Computer Science Department was asked to perform two tasks within the virtual world, namely exploration and searching. In order to gain familiarity with the environment and learn movement control, the subjects were asked to look for a particular object within the virtual building for about 20 minutes. This exploratory task provided the primary data for the neural network approach. Furthermore, subjects were asked to find a particular room in the virtual building, namely the library. We considered the time and length of trajectory involved in this searching task as *performance indicators*. Based on these, we identified the quality of spatial knowledge acquisition and the efficiency of the exploratory strategy.

¹ ECHOES (European Project Number MM1006) is partially founded by the Information Technologies, Telematics Application and Leonardo da Vinci programmes in the framework of Educational Multimedia Task Force.

A comprehensive set of data consisting of users' positions was recorded throughout the experiment. Each movement greater than half a virtual meter, and each turn greater than 30° were recorded.

We present a connectionist simulation to test whether a network can build a *cognitive map* as an internal representation of environmental information [8] in terms of both landmarks and configuration of the spatial layout. The basic idea is that by mapping an input vector consisting of current Cartesian coordinates together with information about the nearest landmark is sufficient to induce the internal abstractions to predict the next position. To test our hypothesis, an Elman simple recurrent neural network was used to learn the trajectory and to predict the next step. The implementation was carried out by using Stuttgart Neural Network Simulator (SNNS). The network architecture [4] is presented in Figure 3 and consists of 6 input nodes, 12 hidden nodes, 12 context nodes and 6 output nodes.

The network input consists of a sequence of users' trajectories. At each time step t , an input vector is presented consisting of user's position, orientation angle, distance to the nearest landmark (the distance to the nearest point of the landmark) and its associated position (coordinates of the center of the landmark). For this simulation we considered only the trajectories performed on the ground floor of virtual building. Figure 4 presents an overhead image of this level. After each trajectory was entered, an input representing "reset" is presented, for which the network is supposed to zero out the outputs [15]. The output pattern represents the input vector of time $t+1$. All the input values were normalized.

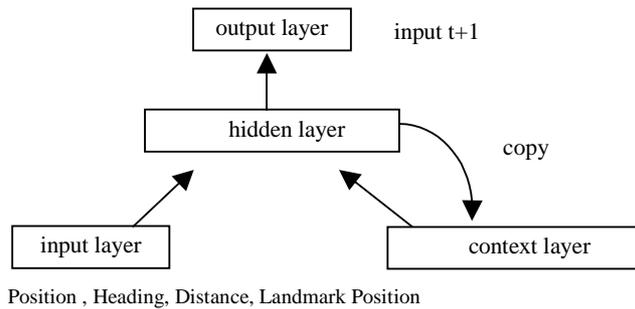


Fig. 3. Network Architecture

Fig. 4. Ground Floor

Using backpropagation learning procedure [4] the network was taught to predict for each current position the next position in time. Table 1 presents an example of input/output vectors.

input 1	-0.000	0.109	0.999	0.031	0.000	0.078
output 1	-0.000	0.109	0.999	0.031	0.000	0.078
input 2	-0.000	0.109	0.999	0.031	0.000	0.078
output 2	-0.000	0.156	0.999	0.078	0.000	0.078

Table 1. Input / Output Vectors Exemplification

At this stage of our work, we expanded the notion of landmark to any feature added to spatial layout. Therefore, apart from any piece of furniture, we considered also the choice points such as doors and lift entrance. Identifying which ones among these features prove to be salient and able to capture attention – being thus an authentic landmark – is a task to be solved by the network.

We divided randomly the entire set of data into five parts, using three of them for training, one for validation and one for testing. The network was trained for 1000 epochs, with 24 trajectories composed of 4668 input vectors. It was tested with 12 trajectories consisting of 1573 input vectors. The average trajectory length was 160 vectors. The learning rate was 0.001, the initial weights set within a range of 0.5 and the momentum was 0.

4 Results

In Table 2 we present the results of testing the network, obtained by computing the Euclidean distance between the output vector predicted by the network and the expected output vector.

Input description	Percent Correct
User's next position – X coordinate	97.13%
User's next position – Y coordinate	92.30%
User's next orientation (heading)	86.90%
Distance to next nearest landmark	99.87%
Next nearest landmark position – X coordinate	90.27%
Next nearest landmark position – Y coordinate	86.77%

Table 2. Prediction accuracy of each input element based on Euclidean distance

As it is shown, the network generalizes extremely well for all the input elements. However, for a prediction to be correct all the input elements should simultaneously be within specified limits (e.g. 1 virtual meter for Cartesian coordinates, 30 degree for rotation and 2.5 virtual meters for distance estimation). With respect to this composite criterion of accuracy, the network still performs very well, the success rate being 67.57%.

5 Discussions

The preliminary results obtained by training the recurrent neural network proved promising, indicating that the network not only learns to predict the next step for a given trajectory, but it also learns the spatial layout in terms of landmark configuration. In order to highlight the internal representation of the network, we

performed a series of analyses. Firstly, we were concerned whether the network could learn any boundaries. Since all the vectors predicted were within the limits delineating the ground floor layout, it seems that the network did indeed learn level boundaries. Another issue we were interested in was whether the network built any cognitive map of the virtual space. Figure 5a presents the actual map of the virtual space, together with routes linking landmarks, while Figure 5b presents the “cognitive map” derived from network representation of landmark positions.



Fig. 5a. Actual Map



Fig. 5b. “Cognitive” Map

As can be seen from these pictures, the “cognitive map” (the internal representation of space achieved by the network) conserves well the topology while its metric is less accurate. The same properties characterize the cognitive maps built by humans. In other words the network built a map of the space in a way similar to humans. For a better understanding of the network’s ability to discriminate between landmark features, we performed an analysis of network predictions regarding the attention it paid to each landmark. More precisely, we counted how many times a landmark was visited, or in other words how many times a given landmark was the nearest to the user. We took this measurement as an indicator of landmark saliency. The most important landmarks are the desk with a computer, the sofa in the center of the larger room, the door to the meeting room, the large elliptical table, the lift and the door between meeting room and library.

The saliency of a landmark is related to the landmark’s location in the room, e.g. centrality, its size, and unique features (e.g. shelves in the library are all alike thus undistinguishable). A particular attention was given to connectivity/decision points such as doors and the lift.

6 Conclusions

This simulation was carried out with the purpose of showing that some abstract aspects related to spatial cognition are learnable. The basic idea is that by mapping an input vector consisting of current Cartesian coordinates together with information about the nearest landmark such as distance to it and the coordinates of its center is sufficient to induce the internal abstractions to predict the next position. Moreover, the network is able to understand the spatial configuration of the virtual environment.

The network predicted correctly the next position together with its nearest landmark at a rate of 67.57%. It was also able to learn the boundaries of the spatial layout, and even to build a cognitive-like map. At the same time, it did not over-generalize. The spatial representation of the virtual world preserves the topology but the metric lacks accuracy. The network was also able to assign saliency to landmarks, related to their location e.g. centrality in the room frame, their size and distinctiveness.

A future direction will be to analyze the representations in the hidden layer in order to extract rules or procedural knowledge underlying the navigational behavior.

Using neural networks as a tool in studying navigation can be beneficial for user modeling in the area of spatial knowledge acquisition. Permitting a comparative analysis between efficient and inefficient navigational strategies, this methodology could suggest how VEs might be better designed. Based on these results further work will be focused on assisting new users, to improve their spatial abilities in exploring a new virtual environment. After a period of navigation, users could be classified in a cluster according with the navigational patterns [20]. By predicting the user's following trajectory, pertinent advice could be provided to reduce its offset from the desirable "good" trajectory. Thereafter this guidance will improve user exploration. Alternatively, a real-time dynamic reconstruction of the VE could assist the users in their tasks.

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