

# Closed loop motion planning of cooperating mobile robots using graph connectivity

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## Abstract

In this paper we address the problem of planning the motion of a team of cooperating mobile robots subject to constraints on relative configuration imposed by the nature of the task they are executing. We model constraints between robots using a graph where each edge is associated with the interaction between two robots and describes a constraint on relative configurations. We develop a decentralized motion control system that leads each robot to their individual goals while maintaining the constraints specified on the graph. We present experimental results with groups of holonomic and non-holonomic mobile robots.

*Key words:* Cooperative robots, Decentralized control, Mobile robot motion planning, Hamiltonian Graph.

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Cooperating mobile robots must be able to interact with each other using either explicit or implicit communication and frequently both. Explicit communication corresponds to a deliberate exchange of messages that is in general made through a wireless network. On the other hand implicit communication

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is derived through sensor observations that enable each robot to estimate the state and trajectories of its teammates. For example, each robot can observe relative state (position and orientation) of its neighbors (implicit communication), and through explicit communication exchange this information with the whole team in order to construct a complete configuration of the team.

A fundamental limitation related to these forms of interaction among the robots is the limited field of view of the physical sensors and the limited range of transmitters and receivers. When communication is essential to the completion of the specified task, the robots must move in order to maintain such constraints. In this paper, we address the problem of controlling the motion of a team of mobile robots subject to such constraints that we will call *formation constraints*. Formation constraints also arise in other situations. For example, in a object manipulation task, the robots must cooperate in order to keep the object contained in a subset of the configuration space. This requirement on cooperation can be translated into formation constraints that are functions of the object's position and orientation [1]. Additionally, robots must always avoid collisions with each other, which is also a motion constraint. Finally, mapping and tracking tasks may require constraints on relative positions and orientations to guarantee observability [2].

In this paper we are interested in the problem of controlling a team of robots performing a task that requires cooperation. More specifically, we are interested in tasks in which cooperation can be specified by constraints on relative configurations between pairs of robots in the team. We will model the team of robots as a set of independent agents that are decoupled except for these formation constraints. Each robot may be assigned its own motion plan toward its goal position, but it must conform to these constraints. The main goal in this paper is to develop a simple strategy for modifying the individual robot motion plans in runtime to maintain the formation constraints. Thus, we require each robot to be able to reach its destination while satisfying the formation constraints. While our main focus in this paper is on sensing and communication constraints, the basic approach is applicable to other kinds of formation constraints, including those that arise in cooperative manipulation and mapping tasks. We will show results with two different teams of robots that show the robots moving towards a goal under such constraints.

## 1 Previous Work

The multi-robot motion planning problem has been addressed with centralized motion planners by a number of groups. The paths are constructed in the composite free configuration space  $\mathcal{C}_{free} = \mathcal{C}_{free}^1 \times \mathcal{C}_{free}^2 \times \cdots \times \mathcal{C}_{free}^n$  [3]. This approach in general guarantees completeness but its complexity is exponential

in the dimension of the composite configuration space [4]. Other groups have pursued decentralized approaches to motion planning. This generally involves two steps: (i) individual paths are planned independently for each robot; and (ii) the paths are merged or combined in a way collisions are avoided. Some authors call these approaches *coordinated path planning* [5–7].

Completely decentralized, behavior-based control algorithms have been analyzed by Arkin, Balch and their co-workers [8,9]. In this approach, several desired behaviors are prescribed for each agent and the final control is derived by composing these behaviors. For example, the behaviors can be summed using weights to emphasize the relative importance of each behavior. Typically, each agent has a main behavior that guides it to the goal and secondary behaviors that are used in order to avoid obstacles and other robots in the team. These behaviors are generally based on artificial potential fields [10].

Our approach uses potential field controllers based on navigation functions [11]. In a single robot navigating an obstacle field, the navigation function provides a Lyapunov function that guarantees the robot's convergence to the goal. The navigation function can be modified to accommodate unmodeled obstacles or dynamic constraints [12]. We will use a similar approach, but in a multi-robot setting, to solve the motion planning problem with formation constraints.

For multi-robot systems, potential fields were used to deploy robots in known environments [13]. The idea of having artificial potential fields in order to have each robot repelling the others was also used in [14]. These approaches are not directly applicable to our problem because they cannot be easily applied to maintain formation constraints. Further, they do not use the Lyapunov function properties of the potential functions in any meaningful way. In this paper, we present proofs for our methodology which show that besides going to their independent goals the robots also satisfy the formation constraints in the problem.

There has been a great deal of recent interest in the problem of formation control [15,16]. In problems where a rigid geometric arrangement of robots is desirable, it is appropriate to model the set of robots in formation as a rigid structure, sometimes called a *virtual structure* [17,18]. A desired motion is then assigned to the virtual structure, which is decomposed into trajectories that each member of the formation will follow. Virtual structures are, in general, centralized and deliberative methods but some approaches use reactive *leader-following* in order to maintain formation. In such a framework, each robot has a designated leader, which may be other robots in the group or a virtual robot that represents a pre-computed trajectory supplied by a high level planner. Thus, each robot is a follower that tries to maintain a specified relative configuration (a fixed separation and bearing for example) with re-

spect to its leader(s) [15,19,20]. In contrast, in this paper we are interested in formation constraints. Instead of controlling the formation to maintain a rigid shape, we will want the shape to stay within specified bounds specified by a constraint graph that describes the cooperative task. But, it is worth pointing out that the approach proposed here can be used to drive a set of robots to a desired shape while maintaining formation constraints [21].

## 2 Problem Definition

The basic multi-robot motion problem is to find a motion plan for all the robots in a group such that each robot reaches its goal while avoiding collisions with other robots and with the obstacles in the environment. We will extend this problem by defining the *coordinated motion planning problem*, where besides avoiding collisions the robots need to cooperate and maintain formation constraints in order to reach their goals.

**Definition 1 (Coordinated motion planning problem)** *Consider a world,  $\mathcal{W}$ , occupied by a set,  $\mathcal{R}$ , of  $n$  robots. The  $i^{\text{th}}$  robot  $R_i$  can be represented by a configuration  $q_i$  in the configuration space  $\mathcal{C}$ . Let  $\mathcal{F}_i \subseteq \mathcal{C}$  denote the free configuration space for  $R_i$ . Additionally, let  $\mathcal{C}_{R_i}(\mathcal{R} \setminus R_i, t) \subseteq \mathcal{F}_i$  denote  $R_i$ 's valid configuration space imposed by its formation constraints. The coordinated motion planning problem is to steer each robot,  $R_i$ ,  $1 \leq i \leq n$ , from an initial configuration  $q_i^{\text{init}}$  at time  $t = t_0$  to the goal configuration  $q_i^{\text{goal}} \in \mathcal{F}_i$  at some time  $t = t_f > t_0$  such that  $q_i \in \mathcal{C}_{R_i}(\mathcal{R} \setminus R_i, t) \forall t \in (t_0, t_f]$ .*

*Formation constraints* are constraints on individual robots induced by the other robots in the team. Thus,  $\mathcal{C}_{R_i}(\mathcal{R} \setminus R_i, t)$  depends on the robots' characteristics, their configurations, and also on the nature of the task. Notice that our problem statement differs from the previous definition of multi-robot motion planning problem in the sense that, besides inter-robot collisions, we are adding other kinds of constraints that include, for example, sensor field-of-view constraints and communication range constraints. On the other hand, our definition of multi-robot motion planning is not too different from the definition of robot motion planning for single robots [22]. While the traditional definition considers the problem of moving the robot in a limited free space, where the constraints are induced by the (non-controlled) obstacles in the environment, here part of the valid (free) configuration space for the robots is controlled by the position of the other robots. However, instead of developing a single algorithm for coordinating the motion of all the robots, we develop a decentralized algorithm which allows each robot to choose its motion based on the available free space and the formation constraints.

### 3 Approach

In this paper we will solve the cooperative motion planning problem defined in Section 2 for a planar world  $\mathcal{W} = \mathbb{R}^2$  and will focus our examples and experiments on sensing and/or communication constraints. However, it can be shown that the solution can be extended for other constraints induced by cooperation.

We consider a two-level motion planner where the superior level is able to specify a deliberative plan [8] in terms of previously computed navigation functions for each robot and desired *neighborhood relationships*. The navigation functions are discussed in Section 3.3. The neighborhood relationships are pairwise formation constraints that are formalized in Section 3.2. The second level of the planner is the level we are concerned with. We address the real time modification of the pre-planned functions to accommodate the formation constraints. Before we proceed further, we will make some assumptions.

*Assumption 1:* All robots are identical in terms of geometry, and in terms of capabilities and constraints related to sensing, communication, control, and mobility, and all constraints are symmetric.

*Assumption 2:* The robots are point robots:  $q_i = (x_i, y_i)$ .

*Assumption 3:* The robots are holonomic. For the  $i^{th}$  robot, the dynamical model is then given by:  $\dot{q}_i = u_i$ .

We will need these three assumptions to derive the basic results. But as discussed in Section 3.6, we relax all three assumptions in our experiments (Section 4). A fourth assumption that we will need for an important proof is an assumption on the individual robot plans. This is introduced in Section 3.3.

#### 3.1 Networks of robots

The physical locations of the robots coupled with the characteristics of the hardware and the requirements of the task dictate the *physical network* for the group of robots. This network determines neighborhood relationships among the robots and can be represented by a *cooperation graph*,  $G$ , where the robots themselves are the vertices and the relationship itself is represented by the edges. The cooperation graph is represented by a tuple  $(\mathcal{R}, \mathcal{E}, \mathcal{G})$ , where  $\mathcal{R}$  is the set of robots,  $\mathcal{E} \subseteq \mathcal{R} \times \mathcal{R}$  is the edge set representing the relationship among the robots, and  $\mathcal{G}$  is the set of constraint functions that describe the conditions

under which each edge is maintained. For each element of  $\mathcal{E}$  there is at least one corresponding element in  $\mathcal{G}$ . When, for example, the task requires cooperation between robots  $R_i$  and  $R_j$ , the interaction between the robots is represented by the edge  $e_{ij} = (R_i, R_j) \in \mathcal{E}$  and a set of  $m$  functions  $\mathcal{G}_{ij} \subseteq \mathcal{G}$ , where  $\mathcal{G}_{ij} = \{g_1(q_i, q_j) \dots g_m(q_i, q_j)\}$ . In this case we also say that  $R_j$  is a *neighbor* of  $R_i$ . Under the assumption that robots are identical and the constraints are symmetric, the graphs can be modeled as undirected graphs. In this case,  $(R_i, R_j) \in \mathcal{E}$  is equivalent to  $(R_j, R_i) \in \mathcal{E}$  and  $\mathcal{G}_{ij} = \{g_1(q_i, q_j) \dots g_m(q_i, q_j)\}$  is identical to  $\mathcal{G}_{ji} = \{g_1(q_j, q_i) \dots g_m(q_j, q_i)\}$ . Also, the graph is simple — at most one edge connects any two nodes and there are no loops (edges of the form  $(R_i, R_i)$ ).

For a given graph  $G$  we define the *valency* of a vertex as the number of neighbors of this vertex and *cycle* as a graph where every vertex has exactly valency two. Also, a *path* from  $R_i$  to  $R_j$  is a sequence of consecutive vertices starting with  $R_i$  and ending in  $R_j$  such that consecutive vertices are neighbors. We also say that a graph,  $G$ , is *connected* if there is a path between any two vertices of the graph. We define now a *Hamiltonian Path (HP)* as a path through a graph that includes the whole set of vertices of the graph. One can observe that this graph can have one or none cycles. When all vertices have valency two it has a cycle and it is called *Hamiltonian Cycle (HC)*. It also can be noticed that for the same set of vertices,  $\mathcal{R}$ , several *HPs* and *HCs* are possible. In this paper we will call both graphs *Hamiltonian Graphs (HG)*. Routing algorithms, for example, can take advantage of the existence of *HGs* in order to create a channel of communication between any two vertices of the graph, since the existence of a path is guaranteed. Let the *spanning subgraph* of a generic graph,  $X$  be the graph that has the same set of vertices of  $X$ . Then, by definition, each *HG* is a common spanning subgraph of a set of generic graphs with  $\mathcal{R}$  as vertices. Figure 1 shows a particular *HC* for a set of nine robots as a spanning subgraph of two different graphs.

We are interested in moving the robots in a way they can reach their goals and also maintain connectivity in the cooperation network. Thus, based on the previous definition of *HG* it is easy to verify that we can guarantee connectivity in a group of  $n$  robots if we constraint the robots movements in such way there is always at least one *HG* of  $n$  vertex.

In addition to maintaining connectivity, it may also be desirable to maintain additional edges in order to increase the system robustness to robot failures and to improve task performance. In sensing algorithms, for example, edges in the graph provide additional information for estimators and the additional edges can improve the quality of the estimates. Thus, we may think of formation constraints including hard constraints,  $g$ , and secondary constraints,  $h$ . The edges corresponding to  $g$  are shown solid in Fig. 1, while those corresponding to  $h$  are shown dashed. Secondary constraints can be used to model

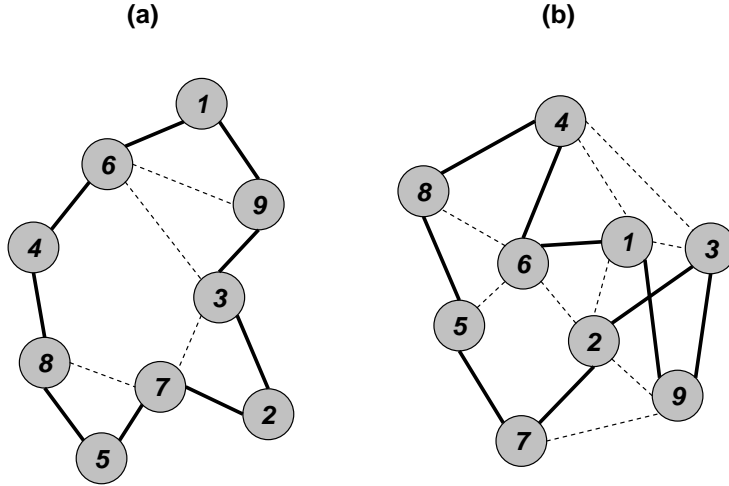


Fig. 1. *Hamiltonian Graph* as a common spanning subgraph of two different graphs. The continuous edges represent the *essential edges* that form the *HG* and dashed edges are *desirable edges*.

constraints on the desired shape. In this way we can redefine  $\mathcal{E}$  in  $G$  such as the graph has two types of edges: (i) *essential edges*, those which belongs to the *HG* and (ii) *desirable edges*, those which do not belong to the *HG*. Accordingly, we redefine  $\mathcal{G}$  as the set that includes, besides  $\mathcal{G}_{ij}$ , which correspond to essential edges, elements of the type  $\mathcal{H}_{ij} = \{h_1(q_i, q_j) \dots h_m(q_i, q_j)\}$ , corresponding to the desirable edges.

Based on these previous ideas we will develop decentralized controllers that (i) guarantee the existence of the essential edges for a given *HG*; (ii) tries to create or maintain desirable edges; and (iii) lead the robots to their goals. We will establish guarantees on (i) and (iii), but (ii) is treated as a secondary objective. The determination of the desirable edges can be done in a centralized or decentralized fashion. We will address these problem in subsequent sections.

### 3.2 Formation Constraints

As mentioned before, with each edge  $(R_i, R_j) \in \mathcal{E}$ , we associate at least one configuration constraint for  $R_j$  induced by  $R_i$  as an inequality of the form  $g_k(q_i, q_j) \leq 0$ , which represents a formation constraint. The set  $\mathcal{G}_{ij}$  of the  $m$  constraint functions due to edge  $e_{ij}$  is a representation of a region in the configuration space  $\gamma_{ij}$ , defined as:

$$\gamma_{ij} = \bigcap_{k=1}^m A_k, \quad (1)$$

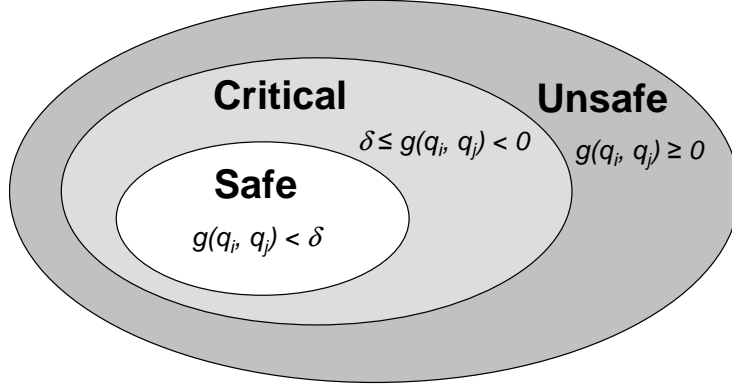


Fig. 2. The activation of the constraints define three regions in the robots' configuration space.

where,

$$A_k = \{(q_i, q_j) \in \mathbb{R}^2 \times \mathbb{R}^2 \mid g_k(q_i, q_j) \leq 0\}, \quad 1 \leq k \leq m.$$

This formulation defines a configuration space for a robot  $R_i$  in function of one of its neighbors,  $R_j$ , where formation constraints are satisfied. The intersection of the configuration spaces induced by all neighbors of  $R_i$  defines the region for  $q_i$  where all neighborhood relationships are maintained. It is represented as:

$$\Gamma_i = \bigcap_k \gamma_{ik}, \quad \forall (R_i, R_k) \in \mathcal{E}. \quad (2)$$

Analogously to the problem defined in Section 2, one can see that the region in the configuration space represented by  $\Gamma_i$  and defined by the constraints in  $\mathcal{G}$ , directly determines the valid configuration space for  $R_i$  as:

$$\mathcal{C}_{R_i}(\mathcal{R} \setminus R_i, t) = \mathcal{F}_i \cap \Gamma_i. \quad (3)$$

In this paper the formation constraints define three regions in the robot's configuration space (see Fig. 2). In the *safe region*, each constraint  $g(q_i, q_k) < \delta$ , where the small negative number  $\delta$  can be thought of as a threshold. The region defined by  $\delta \leq g(q_i, q_k) < 0$  is the *critical region* for the robot. The constant  $\delta$  is designed in order to guarantee that the constraint is still satisfied in the critical region and also to ensure the robot does not leave this region. We say that a constraint is active when  $g(q_i, q_k) \geq \delta$ . If  $g(q_i, q_k) \geq 0$  the robot is outside the valid configuration space that we call *unsafe region*. Depending on the nature of the constraints, the robots may not be able to return to the safe region of the configuration space. Our decentralized controllers are designed with the objective of keeping the robots in the safe configuration space.

### 3.3 Navigation Functions

As discussed in the beginning of this section, a navigation function for solving the non-cooperative problem of steering each individual robot towards the goal while avoiding the static obstacles in the environment is assumed to be available from a higher level planner. Navigation functions are artificial potential fields without local minima [11]. Thus, for a navigation function,  $V_i$ , robot  $R_i$  input is given by  $u_i = -k\nabla V_i$  where  $\nabla V_i$  is the gradient of  $V_i$ . As pointed out in [12], this kind of navigation function can be thought of as a Lyapunov function for the system  $\dot{q} = u(q)$ ,  $u(q) = -\nabla V(q)$ , because  $V(q)$  is positive definite and the value of  $V$  is, by definition, always decreasing along system trajectories. Also, the navigation function can be modified in real time if to its gradient is added a generic vector, given that the magnitude of this vector is smaller than  $\|\nabla V(q)\|$ , where  $\|\cdot\|$  is the norm operator.

**Proposition 1** *A navigation function  $V(q)$  with goal in  $q^{goal}$  is a Lyapunov function for the holonomic robot  $R$  with dynamics  $\dot{q} = u$  controlled by  $u = -\nabla V(q) + U(q)$  if  $\|U(q)\| < \|V(q)\|$ .*

*Proof:*  $V(q)$  is positive definite by the definition of navigation function. We need to show that  $\dot{V}(q) \leq 0$ .

$$\begin{aligned}\dot{V}(q) &= \nabla V(q) \cdot \dot{q} = \nabla V(q) \cdot u = \nabla V(q) \cdot [-\nabla V(q) + U(q)] \\ &= -\|\nabla V(q)\|^2 + \nabla V(q) \cdot U(q) \leq 0,\end{aligned}$$

since  $\|\nabla V(q)\|^2 \geq \nabla V(q) \cdot U(q)$ . Hence,  $\dot{V}(q)$  always decreases along the robot's trajectory and vanishes at the goal position where  $\|\nabla V(q)\| = 0$ . Therefore  $V(q)$  is a Lyapunov function for  $R$ . ■

The construction of navigation functions is beyond the scope of this paper. A methodology for constructing analytical functions was proposed in [11]. A numerical method that allows for complex environments is presented in [23].

When robots are cooperating, there are formation constraints that force them to navigate near each other and their final goals are also reasonably close to each other. In this situation, the gradients of navigation functions for neighboring robots are similar. Based on this observation, our fourth assumption is:

*Assumption 4:* For any pair of cooperating robots,  $R_i$  and  $R_j$ ,  $\nabla\Phi_i(q_i) \cong \nabla\Phi_j(q_j)$ , where  $\Phi_x$  is the navigation function for  $R_x$ .

Obviously if the robots have goals that are not close to one another and the robots are close to their destinations, this assumption is not valid because

their navigation functions will be very different. This fourth assumption is required for the proof of Proposition 3 in Section 3.4 and will be experimentally evaluated in Section 4.1.

### 3.4 Decentralized Controllers

Our control system is decentralized and implemented using a set of three reactive controllers, one for each region of the configuration space shown in Fig. 2. The switching between these controllers is governed by activation of constraints that depend on the relative positioning of a robot with respect to its neighbors. Our control system allows each robot to have up to two assigned essential neighbors and several desirable ones. In other words it guarantees connection with up to two robots by maintaining at least one Hamiltonian Cycle and tries to maintain several other edges. We will assume for each robot the availability of a navigation function  $V_i(q_i)$  with a unique minimum at  $q_i^{goal}$  which is presumably derived from a knowledge of the obstacles and the goal destination.

In this section we will call the two essential neighbors of  $R_i$  (those which belong to the  $HC$ ) by  $R_a$  and  $R_b$ . We denote the constraints due to  $R_a$ , which have the form  $g(q_a, q_i) \leq 0$ , by  $g^a$  and those due to  $R_b$ , which have the form  $g(q_i, q_b) \leq 0$  by  $g^b$ . In general constraints induced by  $R_x$  will be denoted by  $g^x$ .

When a robot is in the *unsafe* configuration space it tries to move in order to satisfy the constraints induced by its essential neighbors without using the navigation function. In other words, the constraints themselves act as potential fields attracting the robots to each other and forcing them into a feasible configuration that satisfies all the constraints. The control input in this mode is:

$$u_i = -k_1 (\alpha \nabla g^a + \beta \nabla g^b) , \quad (4)$$

where  $\nabla g^x$  is a unit vector along the gradient of the constraint defined by:

$$\nabla g^x = \frac{\partial g^x / \partial q_i}{\|\partial g^x / \partial q_i\|} .$$

$\nabla g^a$  is due to  $R_a$  and  $\nabla g^b$  is due to robot  $R_b$ . The variables  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  assume value 1 or 0 depending whether the constraints are active or not, respectively and  $k_1$  is a positive constant.

In the *safe* configuration space the robot has the following input:

$$u_i = -k_2 v_i , \quad (5)$$

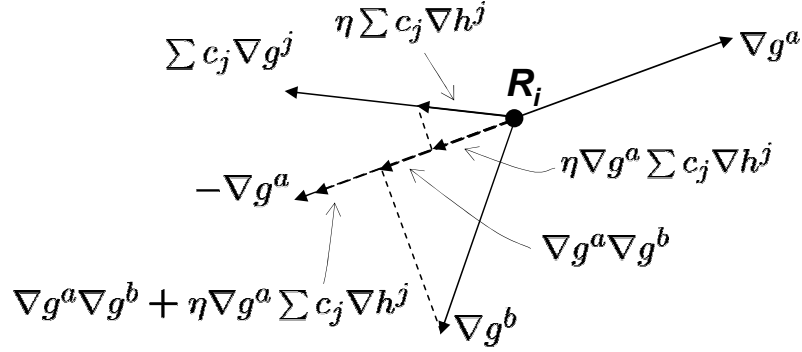


Fig. 3.  $\eta$  is chosen in order to avoid  $R_i$  move in a direction contrary to  $\nabla g^a$  and  $\nabla g^b$ . Only the constraint relative to  $\nabla g^a$  is illustrated by simplicity. Observe that a small  $\eta$  was chosen in such way  $\nabla g^a \nabla g^b + \eta \nabla g^a \sum c_j \nabla h^j < -\nabla g^a$

where

$$v_i = \frac{\nabla V_i(q_i)}{\|\nabla V_i(q_i)\|},$$

is the normalized gradient vector of the navigation function  $V_i(q_i)$ .

In the *critical* configuration space a robot tries to navigate toward the goal while maintaining the formation constraints. The control input for this state is:

$$u_i = -k_1 \left( \alpha \nabla g^a + \beta \nabla g^b + \eta \sum_j c_j \nabla h^j \right) - k_2 v_i, \quad (6)$$

where  $k_2 > 3k_1$  in order to guarantee convergence to the goal, as will be shown in the proof of Proposition 3. In this equation  $\alpha$ ,  $\beta$ , and  $c_j$  can each be 0, or 1. When  $g < \delta$ , the value 0 is assigned. When  $g \geq \delta$ , the value 1 is assigned. The summation  $\sum c_j \nabla h^j$  is the part of the control action due to the desirable connections in the graph and corresponds to the summation of the active constraints induced by the desirable neighbors (those which do not belong to the *HC*). The non-negative gain  $\eta$  must be properly chosen in order to satisfy the following constraints:

$$\begin{aligned} -1 &< \alpha \beta \nabla g^a \cdot \nabla g^b + \eta \beta \nabla g^b \cdot \sum c_j \nabla h^j \leq 2 \\ -1 &< \alpha \beta \nabla g^a \cdot \nabla g^b + \eta \alpha \nabla g^a \cdot \sum c_j \nabla h^j \leq 2. \end{aligned} \quad (7)$$

As shown in Fig. 3, these two constraints for  $\eta$  are used in order to guarantee, by controlling the size of  $\eta \sum c_j \nabla h^j$ , that (i) the robots will never go in directions contrary to  $\nabla g^a$  and  $\nabla g^b$ , and (ii) the robots will never go in directions contrary to  $v_i$ . The value of  $\eta$  can then be chosen as the maximum non-negative value that satisfy the constraints. Observe that  $\eta$  is zero when  $\nabla g^a$  and  $\nabla g^b$  are anti-parallel vectors. In this case the robots give up of keeping the desirable edges and worry only about the necessary ones.

The three control laws (4), (5) and (6) guarantee the formation constraints

are satisfied and, given Assumption 4, solve the  $n$  problems of individually leading the robots to their goals.

**Proposition 2** *If the robots start in a feasible configuration, i.e. a configuration which satisfies all formation constraints, the switched control law represented by (4), (5) and (6) guarantees that those constraints are satisfied during the robots motion.*

*Proof:* We consider a generic constraint involving a generic pair of robots  $R_i$  and  $R_j$ ,  $g(q_i, q_j) \leq \delta$ , and show when the constraint is active, the control input makes  $\dot{g}(q_i, q_j) \leq 0$ . The time derivative of  $g(q_i, q_j)$  is given by:

$$\dot{g}(q_i, q_j) = \frac{\partial g}{\partial q_i} \dot{q}_i + \frac{\partial g}{\partial q_j} \dot{q}_j . \quad (8)$$

For the  $i^{th}$  robot, if  $g(q_i, q_j)$  is active, then for the  $j^{th}$  robot,  $g(q_j, q_i)$  is also active (since we assume symmetry in Assumption 1). In the control law (6),  $\nabla g^a = \nabla g^j$  for  $R_i$  and  $\nabla g^b = \nabla g^i = -\nabla g^j$  for  $R_j$ . Let  $\nabla g^\alpha$  be the term associated with the constraint induced by the other necessary neighbor of  $R_i$  and  $\nabla g^\beta$  be the term associated with the constraint induced by the other necessary neighbor of  $R_j$ . Substituting for  $\dot{q}_i$  and  $\dot{q}_j$  in (8) from (6), the time derivative of  $g(q_i, q_j)$  is given by:

$$\begin{aligned} \dot{g}_j &= \frac{\partial g}{\partial q_i} \cdot \left[ -k_1 \left( \alpha \nabla g^\alpha + \nabla g^j + \eta_i \sum c_k \nabla h^k \right) - k_2 v_i \right] \\ &\quad + \frac{\partial g}{\partial q_j} \cdot \left[ -k_1 \left( -\nabla g^j + \beta \nabla g^\beta + \eta_j \sum c_l \nabla h^l \right) - k_2 v_j \right] \\ &= \left\| \frac{\partial g}{\partial q_i} \right\| \nabla g_j^k \cdot \left[ -k_1 \left( \alpha \nabla g^\alpha + \nabla g^j + \eta_i \sum c_k \nabla h^k \right) - k_2 v_i \right] \\ &\quad - \left\| \frac{\partial g}{\partial q_i} \right\| \nabla g_j^k \cdot \left[ -k_1 \left( -\nabla g^j + \beta \nabla g^\beta + \eta_j \sum c_l \nabla h^l \right) - k_2 v_j \right] \\ &= \left\| \frac{\partial g}{\partial q_i} \right\| \left[ -k_1 \left( \nabla g^j \cdot \nabla g^j + \alpha \nabla g^j \cdot \nabla g^\alpha + \eta_i g^j \cdot \sum c_k \nabla h^k \right) \right. \\ &\quad \left. - k_2 \nabla g^j \cdot v_i \right. \\ &\quad \left. - k_1 \left( (-\nabla g^j) \cdot (-\nabla g^j) + \beta (-\nabla g^j) \cdot \nabla g^\beta + \eta_j (-\nabla g^j) \cdot \sum c_l \nabla h^l \right) \right. \\ &\quad \left. - k_2 (-\nabla g^j) \cdot v_j \right] . \end{aligned}$$

Under the assumption that  $v_i = v_j$  we have:

$$\dot{g} = - \left\| \frac{\partial g}{\partial q_i} \right\| \left[ k_1 \left( 1 + \alpha \nabla g^j \cdot \nabla g^\alpha + \eta_i \nabla g^j \cdot \sum c_k \nabla h^k \right) + k_1 \left( 1 + \beta (-\nabla g^j) \cdot \nabla g^\beta + \eta_k (-\nabla g^j) \cdot \sum c_l \nabla h^l \right) \right] \leq 0 ,$$

since  $\eta_i$  and  $\eta_k$  were chosen in order to satisfy constraints (7).

If  $v_i \neq v_j$  eventually,  $\dot{g}(q_i, q_k) > 0$ . In these cases at certain point we can have the activation of the constraint  $g(q_i, q_j) \leq \delta$  and consequently the control will switch to the mode relative to the unsafe space. The control law in this mode makes  $\nabla v_i = \nabla v_j = 0$  and consequently, by the previous conclusion, the constraints are preserved. Therefore, given the initial conditions,  $g(q_i, q_j) \leq 0$ , for all  $1 \leq i \leq n$  and  $R_j$  essential neighbor of  $R_i$ , and the fact that the derivatives  $\dot{g}(q_i, q_j) \leq 0$  when this constraint is active, the proposition is proved. ■

**Proposition 3** *If the robots initial and goal positions are valid configurations and during the motion the gradient of the navigation function of two neighbor robots can be considered the same, the switched control law represented by (4), (5) and (6) leads the robots to their goals.*

*Proof:* Observe by the proof of Proposition 2 that if the robots' initial configuration satisfy  $g(q_i, q_j) \leq \delta$  and  $v_i = v_j$ , then they will never enter in the unsafe configuration space. In that way, only equations (6) and (5) will be used as control inputs. Thus, notice by Proposition 1 that  $V_i(q_i)$  is a common Lyapunov function for these control modes since constraints (7) guarantee  $\eta_i$  such as the term added to the normalized gradient of the navigation function is non-negative and smaller than or equal to 3, and  $k_2 > 3k_1$ . ■

One may question the assumption  $v_i(q_i) = v_k(q_k)$  that underlies the validity of Proposition 3. However, it is a good assumption when the robots are far away from their respective destinations, as discussed in Section 3.3. Also, is important to notice that convergence to the goal will only be guaranteed if the constraints are satisfied when the robots are at the goal position. More specifically:

$$(q_1^{goal}, q_2^{goal}, \dots, q_n^{goal}) \in \mathcal{C}_{R_1}(t) \times \mathcal{C}_{R_2}(t) \times \dots \times \mathcal{C}_{R_n}(t) ,$$

for  $t \rightarrow \infty$ . If this constraint is not satisfied, the robots would eventually need to violate the formation constraints in order to reach their goals. Since this is not allowed by our controllers, as shown in the proof of Proposition 2, the robots will be stuck in a local minima introduced by the mode of the controller relative to their unsafe configuration spaces. If this behavior is not acceptable, a high level planner should act and change the cooperation graph,  $G$ , during the task execution.

### 3.5 Neighborhood Assignment

The problem of neighborhood assignment is a difficult task to be executed in a decentralized fashion mainly because global knowledge of the robots position is necessary. It consists basically in specifying the graph  $G$  that is a representation of the cooperation network. Thus, it is very dependent on the task the robots are performing. In this paper we propose a heuristic that is based on two steps (i) selecting the Hamiltonian graph and (ii) selecting the desirable edges.

#### 3.5.1 $HG$ Selection

Selecting the  $HG$  is an operation that involves global knowledge of the group positions. Therefore more resources, such as communication bandwidth, processing time, power, etc, need to be used. Because of this we suggest the algorithm to be used only once, or when it is necessary during the execution of the task (ex: one of the robots fails or a new robot is incorporated).

In the first step of the algorithm the robots discover the graph topology by “flooding” packages on the network and listening to the answers. This is a traditional way to determine network topologies and may be substituted by more efficient ones [24]. Based on this topology, each robot determines  $n$  (or what they think it is) and the IDs of its teammates. One of the robots is then chosed to execute the computation, in case of centralized algorithms, or coordinate it, in case of parallel ones. Leader election algorithms such the presented in [20] can be used in this processes.

Exact algorithms for finding a Hamiltonian Cycle are  $NP$ -complete. However, some heuristics and parallel algorithms can be used to improve the computation [25]. The only necessary condition for the algorithms is that there is at least one  $HC$ . In this case, if no solution is found in a given time, it is assumed that there is no  $HC$  in the graph and the robots need to move in order to create more connections.

#### 3.5.2 Desirable edges selection

An easy and obvious way of determining which edges of the graph are desirable is considering all existing edges as so. In this way the robots try to maintain only the current edges and consequently as soon as a edge is broken it is not consider desirable any more. As simple as the previous solution is considering that only the  $m$  closest robots are important. In this case, because the gradient of the desirable edge constraints are summed together in (6), smaller is  $m$  greater is the probability of maintaining the edges.

A more complex way of selecting the edges is based on routing and communication algorithms. In this case desirable edges are those which turn the communication simpler and more efficient. In certain tasks, for example, it could be necessary to increase the bandwidth between two specific nodes and some specific vertex could be pointed as desirable.

### 3.6 *Extension to Real Robots*

Our control laws were derived under Assumptions 1–3. However, most of real robots cannot be represented by at least one of these assumptions and therefore it is natural to ask whether our methodology can be used or not for other kinds of robots.

Assumption 1 cannot be entirely relaxed in applications where the formation constraints depend on the physical characteristics of the robots. It happens because our proofs need the constraints for both neighbor robots be active at the same time and then, they need to be identical. However, a simple way to avoid the problem is to choose common constraints for each pair of robots. For example, consider a group of robots maintaining communication constraints. In this case, it is important that the robots' antennas have the same characteristics. If they do not, a very good approximation is using the constraints related to the weakest antenna in the pair of neighboring robots. For this specific situation, other differences such as mobility, size of the robots, etc do not affect the algorithm.

Assumption 2 is easily relaxed if the obstacles are grown of the size of the robots during the navigation function construction.

Assumption 3 is more difficult to deal with. For non-holonomic robots,  $u_i$ , which is a two dimensional vector, can be used as a set-point for controllers that take in account the non-holonomic constraints. Experimental results will show that the methodology works in several cases. A different approach is shown in [12] where dipolar potential fields are used to generate potential fields for non-holonomic systems. This is a promising direction for future research.

Next section will show experiments with small teams of both holonomic and non-holonomic robots in order to illustrate the proposed methodology.

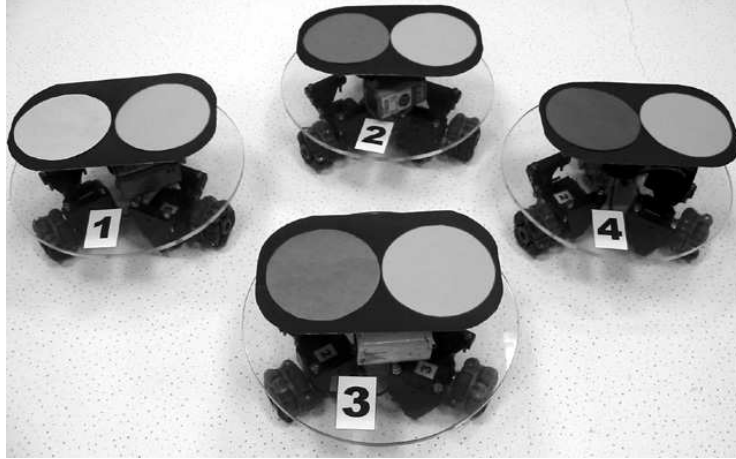


Fig. 4. The VERLab holonomic robots.

## 4 Experiments

### 4.1 Flocking

The first group of experiments presented in this paper was performed with a team of holonomic robots. Each holonomic robot has three omnidirectional wheels mounted in a circular, 10 cm radius, plexiglass platform as shown in Fig. 4. They do not have any local sensors or communication devices and are controlled remotely by a computer that relies on an overhead camera to localize the robots in the environment.

We want to control the holonomic robots to perform a task known by *flocking* [26]. In this task a group of robots is suppose to move from a initial region of the free configuration space to another region. In order to move as a group the robots must keep a maximum distance from their neighbors and also avoid possible collisions with static obstacles and with other robots. These behaviors can be modeled as relative constraints to the robots' motion. Such constraints are very similar to real world communication and sensing constraints as shown in Section 4.2.

In the experiments shown in this section, three holonomic robots were used and the graph  $G$  was set to be a complete triangular graph (see Fig. 5) with two constraints per edge: (i) an avoidance constraint represented by a circle with 24 cm of diameter and (ii) a maximum distance constraint represented by a circle with 45 cm of diameter. Inside the first and outside the second circle, which are centered in each of its neighbors, each robot is in the unsafe region of its configuration space.

Figure 6 shows trajectories of the three holonomic robots flocking from a

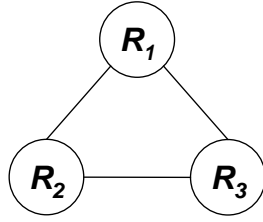


Fig. 5. Constraint graph for the experiment in Figure 6.

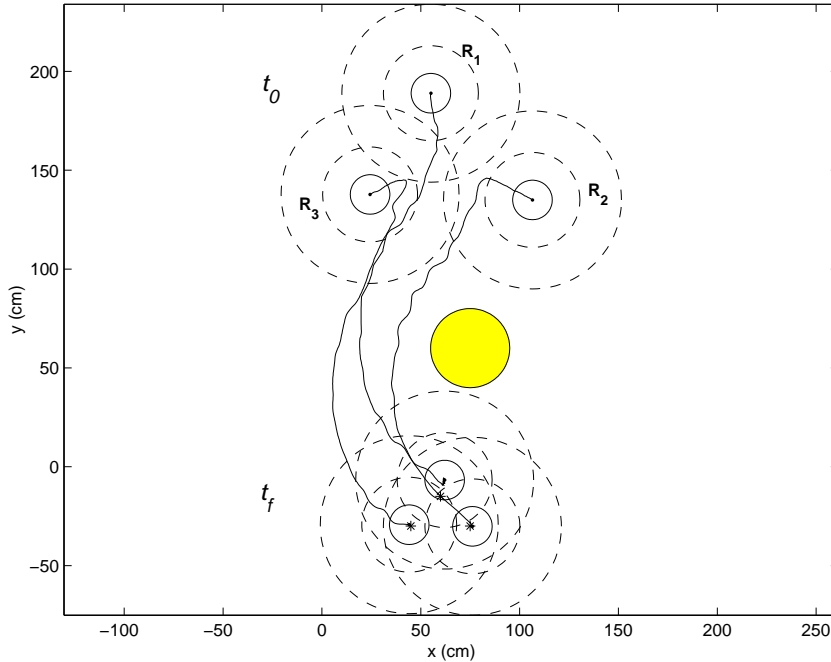


Fig. 6. Three holonomic circular robots flocking from initial configurations to a target region avoiding a single circular obstacle. The dashed lines represent both the collision and the maximum distance constraints.

initial position at time  $t_0$ , to a final goal at  $t_f$  in an environment with a single circular obstacle. Observe that in the initial configuration the constraints are not satisfied and the robots need to move towards to each other. As proposed in our methodology, a navigation function was independently constructed for each robot. Because the navigation function defines paths from every free configuration to the desirable configuration, observe in Fig. 6 that at  $t_0$ ,  $R_2$  could move towards the goal taking either sides of the obstacle. However, due to formation constraints the robots travel together to the goal area.

In order to evaluate the effect of possible differences in gradients of navigation functions for each robot (what is contrary to Assumption 4), and also the effect of different values of the threshold  $\delta$ , we have executed several trials and obtained quantitative results. We have chosen four sets of values for  $\delta$ . In the first set, the robots enter in the critical region of the configuration space when they are outside a circle with diameter of 37 cm or inside a circle with diameter of 33 cm, centered in their neighbors. In the second set of values these

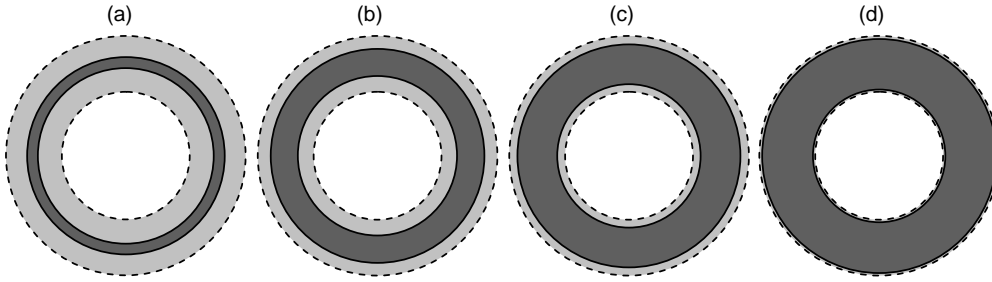


Fig. 7. The four different sets of values for  $\delta$  used in the experiments. The dashed lines delimit the configuration space represented by  $g(q_i, q_j) < 0$ , and the continuous lines represent  $g(q_i, q_j) = \delta$ . The shadowed dark areas represent the safe configuration spaces and the shadowed light regions are the critical configuration spaces. (a) – Set 1, (b) – Set 2, (c) – Set 3, and (d) – Set 4.

circles were set to have 40 cm and 30 cm of diameter respectively, and in the third set they have diameters 42 cm and 27 cm. In the fourth set, the critical configuration space was made very small with circles diameters set be 44 cm and 25 cm respectively. The differences among these four sets of values can be visualized in Fig. 7, where the regions of the configuration space were plotted to scale.

For each value of  $\delta$  we have performed 20 runs in a single obstacle environment (Fig. 6). In all runs the robots were initialized in the same region of the workspace but not in the same exact configuration (due to positioning errors). After entering for the first time in the critical or safe regions of their respective configuration spaces (and therefore satisfying the constraints), the percentage of time each robot spent in each region was computed and is shown in Table 1. An average of these values for each experiment is plotted in Fig. 8. Despite the time the three robots stayed in their unsafe spaces, in all 80 runs (20 for each set) the robots successfully completed their tasks and reached their goals.

The first observation from Table 1 is that Assumption 4 is either a good approximation or it is actually not necessary when the robots have enough time to respond to an active constraint. Observe that, except for set 4 where the critical region is very small, the control laws relative to the critical region of the configuration space are sufficient to prevent the system to move to its unsafe space. This conclusion comes from the small percentage of time that the robots stay in their unsafe regions of the configuration space.

The results also show that robots behaviors change when the relative sizes of their configuration space regions vary. When the critical region is relatively large (set 1), the robots stay a large percentage of time in their critical space. Apparently this is not a big problem since we have proved that the relative control law is still following their navigation functions. However, the time of completion for the whole mission can be compromised, since they are not moving in the best direction, given by the gradient of the navigation function.

Table 1

Percentage of time in each region of the configuration space for four different sets of values for  $\delta$ : Set 1 – big  $\delta$ , large critical regions; Sets 2 and 3 – intermediate values of  $\delta$ ; Set 4 – small  $\delta$ , small critical regions.

	Configuration Space	$R_1$	$R_2$	$R_3$
Set 1	Safe (%)	21.16	19.71	16.08
	Critical (%)	77.24	79.80	83.05
	Unsafe (%)	1.60	0.49	0.87
Set 2	Safe (%)	63.77	67.66	60.94
	Critical (%)	33.76	31.78	36.81
	Unsafe (%)	2.47	0.56	2.25
Set 3	Safe (%)	78.10	81.08	77.62
	Critical (%)	20.30	18.39	21.08
	Unsafe (%)	1.60	0.53	1.30
Set 4	Safe (%)	76.81	77.17	78.17
	Critical (%)	10.22	10.56	10.91
	Unsafe (%)	12.98	12.27	10.92

Table 2

Time of completion for each set of experiments.

	Set 1	Set 2	Set 3	Set 4
Mean time (s)	38.67	34.90	34.60	41.64
Standard deviation (s)	2.46	1.55	1.74	5.74

This can be observed in Table 2 where the mean completion time for each set of experiments is shown. Observe, by comparing experiment sets 1, 2 and 3 that smaller is the time the robots stay in their critical space, smaller is the time of completion. By Table 2 one can also notice that time of completion is very compromised when the robots enter in their unsafe configuration spaces, as is the case in the fourth set of experiments. It happens because, in this space, the robots completely forget the navigation function they are following in order to rapidly satisfy the constraints. By acting like this, the robots may even move in a direction contrary to the gradient of the navigation function.

#### 4.2 Sensing and communication constraints

In the previous subsection we have demonstrated our methodology with simple, global localized holonomic robots. We will now exemplify how the pro-

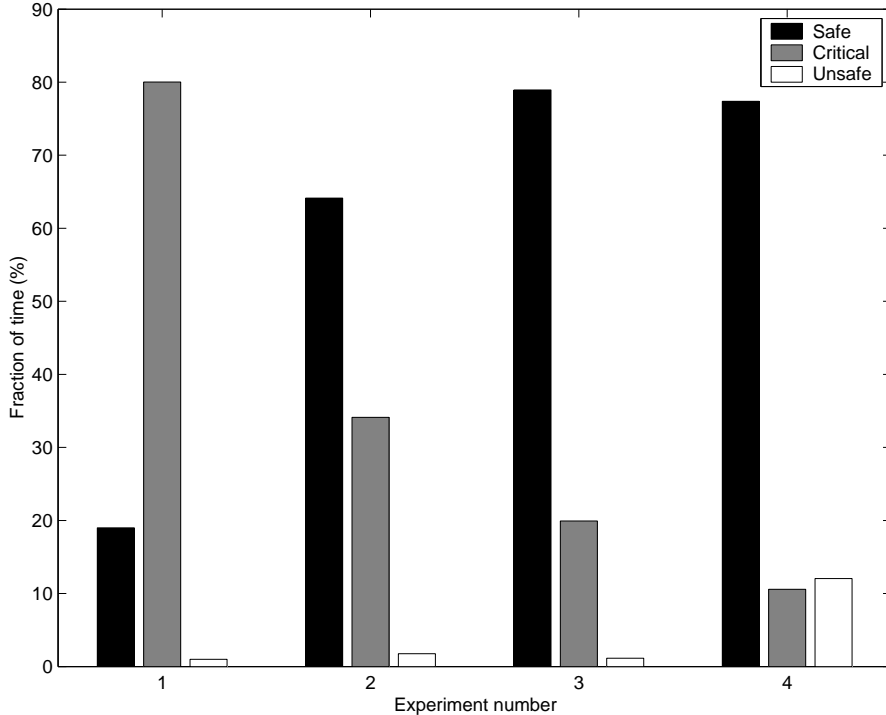


Fig. 8. Effect of  $\delta$  in the mean time the robots spend in each region of their configuration spaces. The value of  $\delta$  increases from experiment 1 to 4.

posed methodology can be used in a more attractive, real world application involving non-holonomic robots. Here the formation constraints are directly obtained by the robots characteristics in applications that involve sensing or communication. We assume that sensing and communication devices have a  $360^\circ$  field of view and can be represented by circles centered at  $q_i$  and radius  $r_i$ . Therefore, the set of constraints induced by each robot in its neighbors can be represented by a single function  $g(q_i, q_k) = (x_i - x_k)^2 + (y_i - y_k)^2 - r_k^2$ .

We will consider that a generic robot  $R_k$  induces three constraints in  $R_i$ . First, we have a hard sensing or communication constraint given by  $g(q_i, q_k) \leq \delta_1$ , beyond which the connectivity between  $R_k$  and  $R_i$  is broken. While  $\delta_1$  can be taken to be zero, it is best, in order to be robust to sensing errors, to keep it at a small, negative value. Second, we have a soft sensing or communication constraint given by  $g(q_i, q_k) \leq \delta_2$ . This is assumed to delineate a range within which the performance of the communication or sensing link is optimal. Finally, we have the collision constraint  $g(q_i, q_k) \geq \delta_3$ . Observe that  $\delta_3 < \delta_2 < \delta_1 < 0$ . Figure 9 shows a picture of  $R_i$  constraints induced by  $R_k$ . Each neighbor of  $R_i$  induces a similar set of constraints.

The platforms we used in this subsection are car-like robots equipped with omnidirectional cameras as their primary sensors. The robots can be seen in Fig. 10. The communication among the robots relies on IEEE 802.11b networking. A calibrated overhead camera is used to localize the robots in the

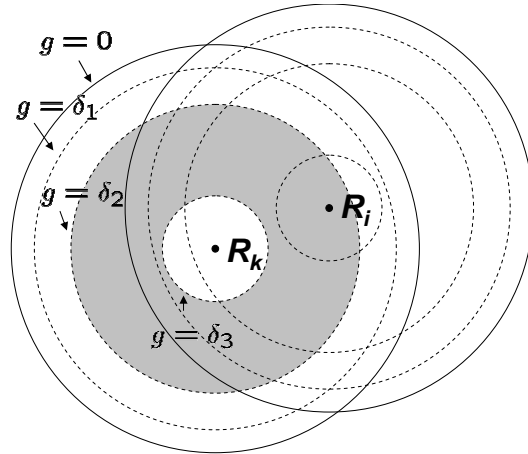


Fig. 9. Sensing/communication constraints:  $R_k$  induces constraints on the position of  $R_i$ . If  $R_i$  is inside the circumference defined by  $g \leq \delta_1$  (outer dashed circle), connectivity with  $R_k$  is guaranteed. The shadowed area defined by  $g > \delta_3$  and  $g < \delta_2$  is a “safe” configuration space for  $R_i$  where collisions are avoided and connectivity is maintained.

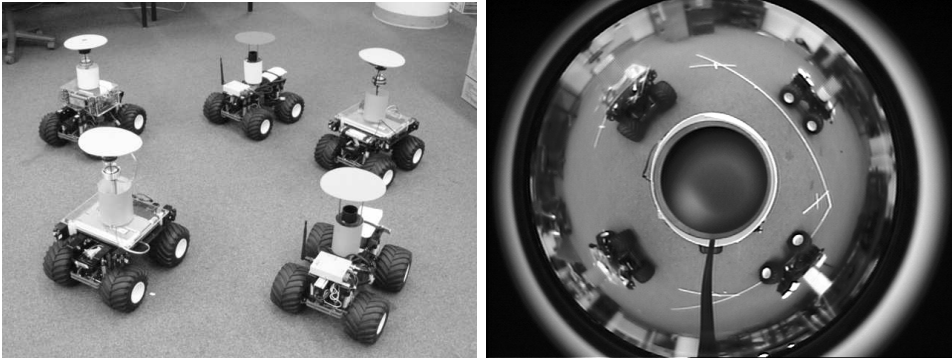


Fig. 10. The GRASP Lab. ClodBusters (left) and an omnidirectional image from their cameras (right).

environment. Because with this camera we are not able to estimate the robots’ orientation, we use communication among the robots in order to construct a complete knowledge of the robots configuration. The communication is essentially used for sensing algorithms but is not used for control or decision making.

A limitation of the omnidirectional cameras used by the robots is that their resolution decrease with the distance of the objects. At  $2\text{ m}$ , for instance, the projection of an observed robot in the image plane is only one pixel in size. For this reason three robots were programmed to keep sensing constraints with their neighbors and therefore localize themselves with respect to each other.

Figure 12 shows six snapshots of our first experiment. In this experiment  $G$  was specified such that  $R_1$  and  $R_3$  are neighbors of  $R_2$  but they are not neighbors of each other as shown in Fig. 11. The equipotential contours of the

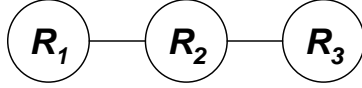


Fig. 11. Constraint graph for the experiment in Fig. 12.

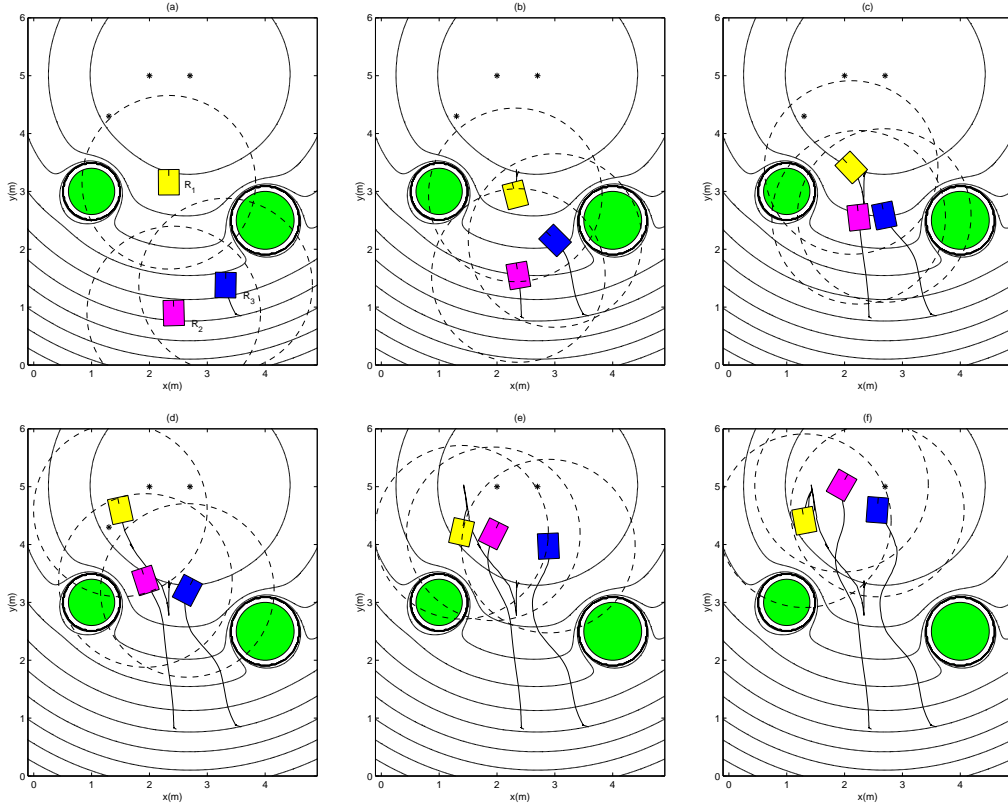


Fig. 12. Three robots following their navigation functions while maintain sensing constraints with at least one other robot. Ground truth data is overlaid on the equipotential contours of the navigation function for  $R_3$ .

navigation function for  $R_3$  is shown in all snapshots. Figure 12(a) shows that  $R_1$  was initialized outside the sensing region of  $R_2$ , which was set to be  $1.5\text{ m}$ , and hence in an unsafe configuration space. Observe that this region is smaller than the one where the robots cannot actually detect the others (a circle of approximately  $2\text{ m}$ ), and therefore immediately outside its critical region of the configuration space they still can perform localization. The next snapshot shows that the robots move to satisfy this constraint. Figure 12(c) shows  $R_2$  and  $R_3$  very close two each other. The activation of the avoidance constraints is then followed by a repulsion (Fig. 12(d)).

In another experiment we consider the deployment of a sensing network of 5 robots. One of the robots is static and is considered to be a fixed base. Figure 13 shows four snapshots of the experiment where all the robots follow the same navigation function. Observe that because of the sensing constraints, a chain like formation is obtained from the base to the goal.

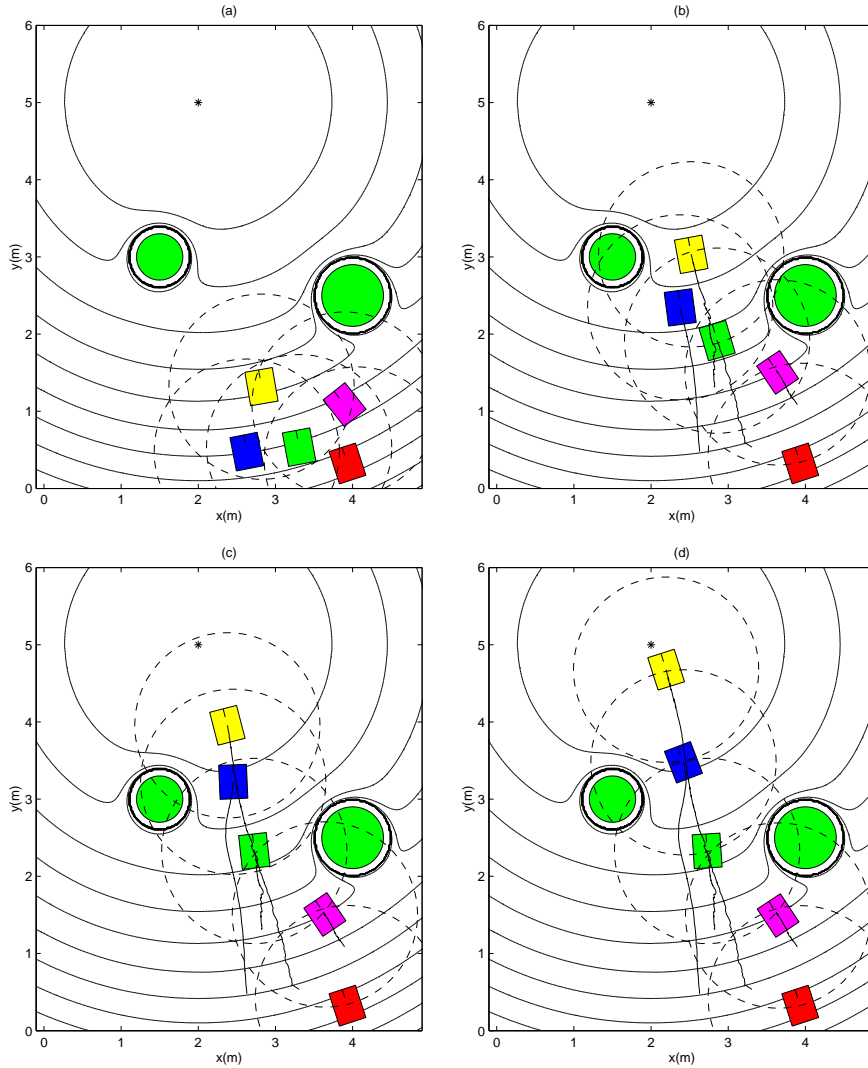


Fig. 13. Deploying a mobile sensor network with 5 nodes. Figures (a)–(d) show four snapshots of the same experiment. One of the robots is static and is considered a basis. Ground truth data is overlaid on the equipotential contours of the navigation function for the robots.

## 5 Conclusions and Future Work

We developed a suite of decentralized reactive controllers for the cooperative motion control of a group of mobile robots. Our approach is based on the online modification of pre-computed navigation functions in order to satisfy formation constraints. Proofs of convergence are presented in the case of holonomic robots. Although we have only presented here results with sensing and communication constraints, we have shown in previous work that the approach can be extended to other constraints such as the derived from manipulation [1] and formation control [21].

There are two main advantages of our approach. The decentralized algorithms mainly rely on the robots' ability to estimate the positions of their neighbors. Because robots are easily instrumented (in our case, this is done by tagging them with colored collars), this is relative easy even in an unstructured environment. Also, no communication is required, allowing the operation in communication faulty situations. Therefore, our methodology is potentially scalable for larger groups of robots operating in unstructured environments.

The main limitations of the algorithms used here include (i) the requirement of a high level, centralized planning for neighborhood assignment; (ii) guarantees for up to two neighbor robots; and (iii) the assumption of identical navigation functions for two neighbor robots. All these are important theoretically but have not been a problem in our practical implementations. The neighborhood assignment problem, for example, will only be a problem when we consider groups of hundreds or thousands of robots.

There are important directions of future work. Firstly, it is necessary to explicitly model the non-holonomic constraint of the robots. Although we have presented encouraging results with non-holonomic robots following the holonomic inputs generated by our method, our proofs are not applicable to these systems. Secondly, it is important to develop decentralized algorithms for numbering the robots and selecting the cooperation graph, what currently has been made by a centralized planner. Finally, it will be valid to test the robustness of the methodology in outdoor environments where communication and sensing constraints are really important for the task completion.

## Acknowledgments

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