Multi-contact Locomotion of Legged Robots in Complex Environments – The Loco3D project

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Abstract—Planning, adapting and executing multi-contact locomotion movements on legged robots in complex environments remains an open problem. In this proposal, we introduce a complete pipeline to address this issue in the context of humanoid robots inside industrial environments. This pipeline relies on a multi-stage approach in order to simplify the process flow and to exploit at best state-of-the-art techniques both in terms of contact planning, whole-body control and perception. The main challenges lie in the choice of the different modules composing this pipeline as well as their mutual interactions: e.g. at which frequency rates each module has to work in order to allow safe and robust locomotion? or which information must transit between the modules? We named this project Loco3D standing for Locomotion in 3D, in contrast to the classic locomotion on quasi-flat terrains, where the motion of the center of mass of the robot is mostly limited to a 2D plane.

I. MOTIVATION

As mentioned by Chris Atkeson et al. in [1], “Except for egress, no robots in the DRC Finals used the stair railings or any form of bracing” and they also add that “In programming robots we avoid contacts and the resultant structural changes in our models and in reality.”. Then, multi-contact locomotion of legged robots in complex environments remains a challenge for the whole robotics community. Such task involves numerous expertise:

- in perception for physical localization and stabilization of the robot but also for building a semantic map of the environment;
- in planning to determine reachable contact areas and to compute a rough path avoiding collisions with the environment;
- in control to follow this rough path while authorizing dynamic movements that respect robot hardware constraints, provide robustness with respect to uncertainties and unexpected interactions;
- in robotic hardware and architecture to build or exploit a suitable and effective platform to achieve complex motions.

To solve the multi-contact locomotion problem, we propose a multi-stage approach that decouples the global but hard problem into various subproblems of smaller dimensions, simpler to solve. We aim to apply this pipeline on our two humanoid robots, namely HRP-2 and TALOS, the new humanoid platform from PAL robotics [12].

II. PIPELINE DESCRIPTION

This pipeline is composed of five main modules that are summarized below. We refer to their reference papers for further details.

1) Contact sequence planner: the first stage consists in an interactive acyclic contact planner [14] able to compute a sequence of contacts for various scenarios, from a matter of few hundreds of milliseconds up to few seconds depending on the complexity of the environment. This planner reduces the complexity of the problem by considering only the root of the robot together with the reachability sets of the end-effectors. More precisely, it verifies that the root configuration of a robot is close, but not too close from obstacles: close to allow contact creation, not too close to avoid collision. With this approximation of the space of admissible root configurations we decompose the hard contact planning problem into simpler sub-problems: first, to plan a guide path for the root without considering the whole-body configuration; then, to generate a discrete sequence of whole-body configurations in static equilibrium along this path. The complete workflow is depicted in Fig. 1. We recently extended this framework to also take into account dynamic transition [9].

2) Centroidal pattern generator: we introduced in [4] an optimal control formulation based on the centroidal dynamics and using contact forces as control inputs. This formulation takes as input the contact sequence (generated by stage 1) and the initial state of the robot and tries to minimize a tailored cost function to obtain a smooth control while satisfying the friction cone constraints. In addition to that, the formulation seeks a final state that is viable [15]. To be effective, we proposed to translate this optimal control problem into a multiple-shooting formulation. This approach is fast enough to be implemented in a receding horizon way.

We recently improved our formulation to directly take into account the constraints [5] due to the whole-body when relying on reduced models. It allows for example to directly
such approaches. Such approach seems to be sufficient and predict the motion of landmarks inside classic SLAM optimal estimator approach which enables us to accurately localize the robot inside its environment. We made the choice to rely on vision and inertial measurements.

In addition to that, the exteroception can fuse some information provided by the proprioception in order to build a global and robust estimator of the robot state.

6) Hardware: currently, all our efforts are targeted on two humanoid robots, namely HRP-2 and TALOS. Therefore, we make all our software developments independent from the hardware in order to be compatible with these two robots and with most existing humanoid robots or even with quadrupedal robots.

III. Conclusion

In this proposal, we have introduced a complete pipeline to address the multi-contact locomotion problem of legged robots inside complex environments. This pipeline relies on a multi-stage strategy enabling us to exploit state-of-the-art solutions: interactive computation of contact placements that ensure collision avoidance, real-time computations of the CoM trajectory followed by a robust inverse-dynamics controller together with a fast torque controller and an optimal estimator to track and precisely localize the robot inside its environment.

REFERENCES


Fig. 2: Illustration of the centroidal pattern generator applied on various contexts and robots.


