Rapidly-Exploring Random Trees: Progress and Prospects

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We present our current progress on the design and analysis of path planning algorithms based on Rapidly-exploring Random Trees (RRTs). The basis for our methods is the incremental construction of search trees that attempt to rapidly and uniformly explore the state space, offering benefits that are similar to those obtained by other successful randomized planning methods. In addition, RRTs are particularly suited for problems that involve differential constraints. Basic theoretical properties of RRT-based planners are established. Several planners based on RRTs are discussed and compared. Experimental results are presented for planning problems that involve holonomic constraints for rigid and articulated bodies, manipulation, nonholonomic constraints, kinodynamic constraints, kinematic closure constraints, and up to twelve degrees of freedom. Key open issues and areas of future research are also discussed.

1 Introduction

Given the vast, growing collection of applications that involve the design of motion strategies, the successes of motion planning algorithms have just begun to scratch its surface. The potential for automating motions is now greater than ever as similar problems continue to emerge in seemingly disparate areas. The traditional needs of roboticists continue to expand in efforts to automate mobile robots, manipulators, humanoids, spacecraft, etc. Researchers in computer graphics and virtual reality have increasing interests in automating the animations of life-like characters or other moving bodies. In the growing field of computational biology, many geometric problems have arisen, such as studying the configuration spaces of flexible molecules for protein-ligand docking and drug design. Virtual prototyping is a rapidly-expanding area that allows the evaluation of proposed mechanical designs in simulation, in efforts to avoid the costs of constructing physical prototypes. Motion planning techniques have already been applied to assembly problems in this area [9]. As the power and generality of planning techniques increase, we expect that more complicated problems that include differential constraints can be solved, such as the evaluation of vehicle performance and safety through dynamical simulation conducted by a virtual "stunt driver."

As we approach applications of increasing difficulty, it becomes clear that planning algorithms need to handle problems that involve a wide variety of models, high degrees of freedom, complicated geometric constraints, and finally, differential constraints. Although existing algorithms address some of these concerns, there is relatively little work that addresses all of them simultaneously. This provides the basis for the work presented in this paper, which presents randomized, algorithmic techniques for path planning that are particularly suited for problems that involve differential constraints.

We present an overview of the progress on our development of Rapidly-exploring Random Trees (RRTs) [29]. The results and discussion presented here summarize and extend the work presented in [30, 22]. In [30], we presented the first randomized approach to kinodynamic trajectory planning, and applied it to problems that involve up to twelve-dimensional state spaces with nonlinear dynamics and obstacles (for problems with moving obstacles, a similar randomized approach has been proposed more recently, in [20]). In [22], we presented and analyzed a holonomic path planner that gives real-time performance for many challenging problems. RRTs build on ideas from optimal control theory [5], nonholonomic planning (see [27] for an overview), and randomized path planning [1, 19, 36]. The basic idea is to use control-theoretic representations, and incrementally grow a search tree from an initial state by applying control inputs over short time intervals to reach new states. Each vertex in the tree represents a state, and each directed edge represents an input that was applied to reach the new state from a previous state. When a vertex reaches a desired goal region, an open-loop trajectory from the initial state is represented.

For problems that involve low degrees of freedom, classical dynamic programming ideas can be employed to yield numerical optimal control solutions for a broad class of problems [5, 24, 28]. Since control theorists have traditionally preferred feedback solutions, the representation takes the form of a mesh over which cost-to-go values are defined using interpolation, enabling inputs to be selected over any portion of the state space. If open-loop solutions are the only requirement, then each cell in the mesh could be replaced by a vertex that represents a single state within the cell. In this case, control-theoretic numerical dynamic programming techniques can often be reduced to the construction of a tree grown from an initial state (referred to as forward dynamic programming [24]). This idea has been proposed in path planning literature for nonholonomic [4] planning and kinodynamic planning in [13]. Because these methods are based on dynamic programming and systematic exploration of a grid or mesh, their application is limited to problems with low degrees of freedom.

We would like to borrow some of the ideas from numerical optimal control techniques, while weakening the requirements enough to obtain methods that can apply to problems with high degrees of freedom. As is common in most of path planning research, we forego trying to obtain optimal solutions, and attempt to find solutions that are "good enough," as long as they satisfy all of the constraints. This avoids the use of dynamic programming and systematic exploration of the space; however, a method is needed to guide the search in place of dynamic programming.

Inspired by the success of randomized path planning techniques and Monte-Carlo techniques in general for addressing high-dimensional problems, it is natural to consider adapting existing planning techniques to our problems of interest. The primary difficulty with many existing techniques is that, although powerful for standard path planning, they do not naturally extend to general problems that involve differential constraints. The randomized potential field method [3], while efficient for holonomic planning, depends heavily on the choice of a good heuristic potential function, which could become a daunting task when confronted with obstacles, and differential constraints. In the probabilistic roadmap approach [1, 19], a graph is constructed in the configuration space by generating random configurations and attempting to connect pairs of nearby configurations with a local planner that will connect pairs of configurations. The assumption is that the same roadmap will be used for *multiple queries*. For planning of holonomic systems or steerable nonholonomic systems (see [27] and references therein), the local planning step might be efficient; however, in general the connection problem can be as difficult as designing a nonlinear controller, particularly for complicated nonholonomic and dynamical systems. The probabilistic roadmap technique might require the connections of thousands of configurations or states to find a solution, and if each connection is akin to a nonlinear control problem, it seems impractical many problems with differential constraints.

2 Problem Formulation

The class of problems considered in this paper can be formulated in terms of six components:

1. **State Space:** A topological space, X
2. **Boundary Values:** $x_{init} \in X$ and $X_{goal} \subset X$
3. **Collision Detector:** A function, $D : X \to \{true, false\}$, that determines whether global constraints are satisfied from state x. This could be a binary-valued or real-valued function.
4. **Inputs:** A set, U, which specifies the complete set of controls or actions that can affect the state.
5. **Incremental Simulator:** Given the current state, $x(t)$, and inputs applied over a time interval, $\{u(t')|t \leq t' \leq t + \Delta t\}$, compute $x(t + \Delta t)$.
6. **Metric:** A real-valued function, $\rho : X \times X \to [0, \infty)$, which specifies the distance between pairs of points in X.

Path planning will generally be viewed as a search in a state space, X, for a continuous path from an initial state, x_{init} to a goal region $X_{goal} \subset X$ or goal state $x_{goal} \in X$. It is assumed that a complicated set of global constraints is imposed on X, and any solution path must keep the state within this set. A collision detector reports whether a given state, x, satisfies the global constraints. We generally use the notation X_{free} to refer to the set of all states that satisfy the global constraints. Local, differential constraints are imposed through the definition of a set of inputs (or controls) and an incremental simulator. Taken together, these two components specify possible changes in state. The incremental simulator can be considered as the response of a discrete-time system (or a continuous-time system that is approximated in discrete time). Finally, a metric is defined to indicate the closeness of pairs of points in the state space. This metric will be used in Section 3, when the RRT is introduced. It will generally be assumed that a single path planning query is presented, as opposed to performing precomputation for multiple queries, as in [1, 19].

Basic (Holonomic) Path Planning Path planning can generally be viewed as a search in a configuration space, $\mathcal{C}$, in which each $q \in \mathcal{C}$ specifies the position and orientation of one or more geometrically-complicated bodies in a 2D or 3D world [33, 25]. The path planning task is to compute a continuous path from an initial configuration, q_{init}, to a goal configuration, q_{goal}. Thus, $X = \mathcal{C}$, $x_{init} = q_{init}$, $x_{goal} = q_{goal}$, and $X_{free} = \mathcal{C}_{free}$, which denotes the set of configurations for which these bodies do not collide with any static obstacles in the world. The obstacles are modeled completely in the world, but an explicit representation of X_{free} is not available. However, using a collision detection algorithm, a given configuration can be tested. (To be more precise, we usually employ a distance-computation algorithm that indicates how close the geometric bodies are to violating the constraints in the world. This can be used to ensure that intermediate configurations are collision free when discrete jumps are made by the incremental simulator.) The set, U, of inputs is the set of all velocities $\dot{x}$ such that $\|\dot{x}\| \leq c$ for some positive constant c. The incremental simulator produces a new state by integration to obtain, $x_{new} = x + u\Delta t$, for any given input $u \in U$.

Nonholonomic Path Planning Nonholonomic planning [26] addresses problems that involve nonintegrable constraints on the state velocities, in addition to the components that appear in the basic path planning problems. These constraints often arise in many contexts such as wheeled-robot systems [27], and manipulation by pushing [35]. A recent survey appears in [27]. The constraints often appear in the implicit form $h_i(\dot{q}, q) = 0$ for some i from 1 to $k < N$ (N is the dimension of $\mathcal{C}$). By the implicit function theorem, the constraints can also be expressed in control-theoretic form, $\dot{q} = f(q, u)$, in which u is an input chosen from a set of inputs U. Using our general notion, x replaces q to obtain $\dot{x} = f(x, u)$. This form is often referred to as the *state transition equation* or *equation of motion*. Using the state transition equation, an incremental simulator can be constructed by numerical integration (using, for example Runge-Kutta techniques).

Kinodynamic[1] Path Planning For kinodynamic planning, constraints on both velocity and acceleration exist, yielding implicit equations of the form $h_i(\ddot{q}, \dot{q}, q) = 0$ [6, 8, 10, 11, 13, 12, 14, 45, 46]. A state, $x \in X$, is defined as $x = (q, \dot{q})$, for $q \in \mathcal{C}$. Using the state space representation, this can be simply written as a set of m implicit equations of the form $G_i(x, \dot{x}) = 0$, for $i = 1, \ldots, m$ and $m < 2N$. The implicit function theorem can again be applied to obtain a state transition equation. The collision detection component may also include global constraints on the velocity, since $\dot{q}$ is part of the state vector.

Other Problems A variety of other problems fit within our problem formulation, and can be approached using the techniques in this paper. In general, any open-loop trajectory design problem can formulated because the models are mostly borrowed from control theory. For example, the planner might be used to compute a strategy that controls an electrical circuit, or an economic system. In some applications, a state transition equation might not be known, but this does not present a problem. For example, a physical simulator might be developed by engineers for simulating a proposed racing car design. The software might simply accept control inputs at some sampling rate, and produce new states. This could serve directly as the incremental simulator for our approach. Other minor variations of the formulation can be considered. Time-varying problems can be formulated by augmenting the

[1] In nonlinear control literature, kinodynamic planning for underactuated systems is encompassed by the definition of nonholonomic planning. Using control-theoretic terminology, the task is to design open-loop trajectories for nonlinear systems with drift.

state space with a time. State-dependent inputs sets can also be considered. For example, a robot engaged in a grasping task might have different inputs available than while navigating. Depending on the state, different decisions would have to be made. Problems that involve kinematic closure constraints can also be addressed; an example is shown in Figure 14.

3 Rapidly-Exploring Random Trees

The Rapidly-exploring Random Tree (RRT) was introduced in [29] as a planning algorithm to quickly search high-dimensional spaces that have both algebraic constraints (arising from obstacles) and differential constraints (arising from nonholonomy and dynamics). The key idea is to bias the exploration toward unexplored portions of the space by sampling points in the state space, and incrementally "pulling" the search tree toward them. At least two other randomized path planning techniques have been proposed that generate an incremental search tree in the configuration space (for holonomic path planning): the Ariadne's clew algorithm [37, 36] and the planners in [18, 50]. Intuitively, these planners attempt to "push" the search tree away from previously-constructed vertices, contrasting the RRT, which uses the surrounding space to "pull" the search tree, ultimately leading to uniform coverage of the state space. To the best of our knowledge, a randomized search tree approach has not been proposed previously for nonholonomic or kinodynamic planning. Perhaps the most related approaches are [47, 44], in which the probabilistic roadmap method is combined with nonholonomic steering techniques to plan paths for wheeled mobile robot systems.

The basic RRT construction algorithm is given in Figure 1. A simple iteration in performed in which each step attempts to extend the RRT by adding a new vertex that is biased by a randomly-selected state. The EXTEND function, illustrated in Figure 2, selects the nearest vertex already in the RRT to the given sample state. The "nearest" vertex is chosen according to the metric, ρ. The function NEW_STATE makes a motion toward x by applying an input $u \in U$ for some time increment Δt. This input can be chosen at random, or selected by trying all possible inputs and choosing the one that yields a new state as close as possible to the sample, x (if U is infinite, then an approximation or analytical technique can be used). In the case of holonomic planning, the optimal value for u can be chosen easily by a simple vector calculation. NEW_STATE also implicitly uses the collision detection function to determine whether the new state (and all intermediate states) satisfy the global constraints. For many problems, this can be performed quickly ("almost constant time") using incremental distance computation algorithms [16, 31, 38] by storing the relevant invariants with each of the RRT vertices. If NEW_STATE is successful, the new state and input are represented in x_{new} and u_{new}, respectively. Three situations can occur: *Reached*, in which the new vertex reaches the sample x (for the nonholonomic planning case, we might instead have a threshold, $\|x_{new} - x\| < \epsilon$ for a small $\epsilon > 0$); *Advanced*, in which a new vertex $x_{new} \neq x$ is added to the RRT; *Trapped*, in which NEW_STATE fails to produce a state that lies in X_{free}. The left column of Figure 3 shows an RRT for a holonomic planning problem, constructed in a 2D square space. The right column shows the Voronoi diagram of the RRT vertices; note that the probability that a vertex is selected for extension is proportional to the area of its Voronoi region.

```
BUILD_RRT(x_init)
  T.init(x_init);
  for k = 1 to K do
      x_rand ← RANDOM_STATE();
      EXTEND(T, x_rand);
  Return T
```

```
EXTEND(T, x)
  x_near ← NEAREST_NEIGHBOR(x, T);
  if NEW_STATE(x, x_near, x_new, u_new) then
      T.add_vertex(x_new);
      T.add_edge(x_near, x_new, u_new);
      if x_new = x then
          Return Reached;
      else
          Return Advanced;
  Return Trapped;
```

Figure 1: *The basic RRT construction algorithm.*

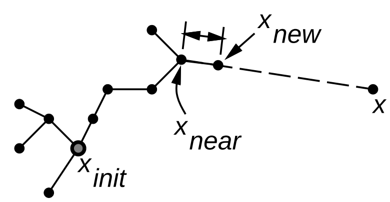


Figure 2: *The EXTEND operation.*

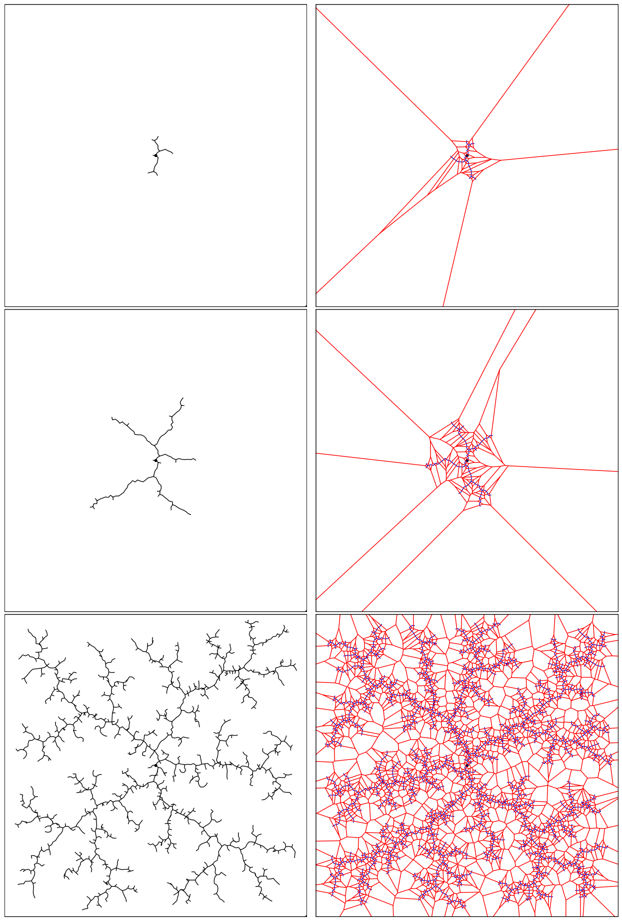


Figure 3: *An RRT is biased by large Voronoi regions to rapidly explore, before uniformly covering the space.*

This biases the RRT to rapidly explore. In Section 4 it is shown that RRTs also arrive at a uniform coverage of the space.

4 Analysis of RRTs

This section provides some analysis of RRTs, and indicates several open problems for future investigation. A key result shown so far is that the distribution of the RRT vertices converges to the sampling distribution, which is usually uniform. This currently has been shown for holonomic planning in a nonconvex state space. We have also verified the results through simulations and chi-square tests. We have generally had many experimental successes, indicated in Section 6, that far exceed our current analysis capabilities. Considerable effort remains to close the gap between our experimental success, and the analysis that supports the success.

The limiting distribution of vertices Let $D_k(x)$ denote a random variable whose value is the distance of x to the closest vertex in G, in which k is the number of vertices in an RRT. Let d_k denote the value of D_k. Let ϵ denote the incremental distance traveled in the EXTEND procedure (the RRT step size).

Consider the case of a holonomic planning problem, in which $\dot{x} = u$ (the incremental simulator permits motion in any direction). The first lemma establishes that the RRT will (converging in probability) come arbitrarily close to any point in a convex space.

Lemma 1 *Suppose X_{free} is a convex, bounded, open, n-dimensional subset of an n-dimensional state space. For any $x \in X_{free}$ and positive constant $\epsilon > 0$,* $\lim_{k\to\infty} P[d_k(x) < \epsilon] = 1$.

The proofs for all propositions, except Theorems 5-7, appear in [22].

The next lemma extends the result from convex spaces to nonconvex spaces.

Lemma 2 *Suppose X_{free} is a nonconvex, bounded, open, n-dimensional connected component of an n-dimensional state space. For any $x \in X_{free}$ and positive real number $\epsilon > 0$, then $\lim_{n\to\infty} P[d_n(x) < \epsilon] = 1$.*

For holonomic path planning, this immediately implies the following:

Theorem 3 *Suppose x_{init} and x_{goal} lie in the same connected component of a nonconvex, bounded, open, n-dimensional connected component of an n-dimensional state space. The probability that an RRT constructed from x_{init} will find a path to x_{goal} approaches one as the number of RRT vertices approaches infinity.*

This establishes probabilistic completeness, as considered in [19], of the basic RRT.

The next step is to characterize the limiting distribution of the RRT vertices. Let $\mathbf{X}$ denote a vector-valued random variable that represents the sampling process used to construct an RRT. This reflects the distribution of samples that are returned by the RANDOM_STATE function in the EXTEND algorithm. Usually, $\mathbf{X}$ is characterized by a uniform probability density function over X_{free}; however, we will allow $\mathbf{X}$ to be characterized by any continuous probability density function. Let $\mathbf{X}_k$ denote a vector-valued random variable that represents the distribution of the RRT vertices after k iterations.

Theorem 4 *$\mathbf{X}_k$ converges to $\mathbf{X}$ in probability.*

We now consider the more general case. Suppose that motions obtained from the incremental simulator are locally constrained. For example, they might arise by integrating $\dot{x} = f(x, u)$ over some time Δt. Suppose that the number of inputs to the incremental simulator is finite, Δt is constant, no two RRT vertices lie within a specified $\epsilon > 0$ of each other according to ρ, and that EXTEND chooses the input at random. It may be possible eventually to remove some of these restrictions; however, we have not yet pursued this route. Suppose x_{init} and x_{goal} lie in the same connected component of a nonconvex, bounded, open, n-dimensional connected component of an n-dimensional state space. In addition, there exists a sequence of inputs, u_1, u_2, $\ldots$, u_k, that when applied to x_{init} yield a sequence of states, $x_{init} = x_0$, x_1, x_2, $\ldots$, $x_{k+1} = x_{goal}$. All of these states lie in the same open connected component of X_{free}.

The following establishes the probabilistic completeness of the nonholonomic planner.

Theorem 5 *The probability that the RRT initialized at x_{init} will contain x_{goal} as a vertex approaches one as the number of vertices approaches infinity.*

Overview of Proof: The argument proceeds by induction on i. Assume that the RRT contains x_i as a vertex after some finite number of iterations. Consider the Voronoi diagram associated with the RRT vertices. There exists a positive real number, c_1, such that $\mu(Vor(x_i)) > c_1$ in which $Vor(x_i)$ denotes the Voronoi region associated with x_i. If a random sample falls within $Vor(x_i)$, the vertex will be selected for extension, and a random input is applied; thus, x_i has probability $\mu(Vor(x_i))/\mu(X_{free})$ of being selected. There exists a second positive real number, c_2 (which depends on c_1), such that the probability that the correct input, u_i, is selected is at least c_2. If both x_i and u_i have probability of at least c_2 of being selected in each iteration, then the probability tends to one that the next step in the solution trajectory will be constructed. This argument is applied inductively from x_1 to x_k, until the final state $x_{goal} = x_{k+1}$ is reached. $\triangle$

Convergence Rate Theorems 6 and 7 express the rate of converge of the planner. These results represent a significant first step towards gaining a complete understanding of behavior of RRT-based planning algorithms; however, the convergence rate is unfortunately expressed in terms of parameters that cannot be easily measured. It remains an open problem to characterize the convergence rate in terms of simple parameters that can be computed for a particular problem. This general difficulty even exists in the analysis of randomized path planners for the holonomic path planning problem [18, 23].

For simplicity, assume that the planner consists of a single RRT. The bidirectional planner is only slightly better in terms of our analysis, and a single RRT is easier to analyze. Furthermore, assume that the step size is large enough so that the planner always attempts to connect x_{near} to x_{rand}.

Let $\mathcal{A} = \{A_0, A_1, \ldots, A_k\}$ be a sequence of subsets of $\mathbf{X}$, referred to as an *attraction sequence*. Let $A_0 = \{x_{init}\}$. The remaining sets must be chosen with the following rules. For each A_i in $\mathcal{A}$, there exists a *basin*, $B_i \subseteq \mathbf{X}$ such that the following hold:

1. For all $x \in A_{i-1}$, $y \in A_i$, and $z \in \mathbf{X} \setminus B_i$, the metric, ρ, yields $\rho(x, y) < \rho(x, z)$.
2. For all $x \in B_i$, there exists an m such that the sequence of inputs $\{u_1, u_2, \ldots, u_m\}$ selected by the EXTEND algorithm will bring the state into $A_i \subseteq B_i$.

Finally, it is assumed that $A_k = X_{goal}$.

Each basin B_i can intuitively be considered as both a safety zone that ensures an element of B_i will be selected by the nearest neighbor query, and a potential well that attracts the state into A_i. An attraction sequence should be chosen with each A_i as large as possible and with k as small as possible. If the space contains narrow corridors, then the attraction sequence will be longer and each A_i will be smaller. Our analysis indicates that the planning performance will significantly degrade in this case, which is consistent with analysis results obtained for randomized holonomic planners [17]. Note that for kinodynamic planning, the choice of metric, ρ, can also greatly affect the attraction sequence, and ultimately the performance of the algorithm.

Using μ to represent measure, let p be defined as

$$p = \min_i \{\mu(A_i)/\mu(\mathbf{X}_{free})\},$$

which corresponds to a lower bound on the probability that a random state will lie in a particular A_i.

The following theorem characterizes the expected number of iterations required to find a solution.

Theorem 6 *If a connection sequence of length k exists, then the expected number of iterations required to connect q_{init} to q_{goal} is no more than k/p.*

Proof: If an RRT vertex lies in A_{i-1}, and a random sample, x, falls in A_i, then the RRT will be connected to x. This is true because using the first property in the definition of a basin, it follows that one of the vertices in B_i must be selected for extension. Using the second property of the basin, inputs will be chosen that ultimately generate a vertex in A_i.

In each iteration, the probability that the random sample lies in A_i is at least p; hence, if A_{i-1} contains an RRT vertex, then A_i will contain a vertex with probability at least p. In the worst-case, the iterations can be considered as Bernoulli trials in which p is the probability of a successful outcome. A path planning problem is solved after k successful outcomes are obtained because each success extends the progress of the RRT from A_{i-1} to A_i.

Let $C_1, C_2, \ldots, C_n$ be i.i.d. random variables whose common distribution is the Bernoulli distribution with parameter p. The random variable $C = C_1 + C_2 + \cdots + C_n$ denotes the number of successes after n iterations. Since each C_i has the Bernoulli distribution, C will have a binomial distribution,

$$\binom{n}{k} h^k (1-h)^{n-k},$$

in which k is the number of successes. The expectation of the binomial distribution is n/p, which also represents an upper bound on the expected probability of successfully finding a path. $\triangle$

The following theorem establishes that the probability of success increases exponentially with the number of iterations.

Theorem 7 *If an attraction sequence of length k exists, for a constant $\delta \in (0,1]$, the probability that the RRT finds a path after n iterations is at least $1 - exp(-np\delta^2/2)$, in which $\delta = 1 - k/(np)$.*

Proof: The random variable C from the proof of Theorem 6 has a binomial distribution, which enables the application of a Chernoff-type bound on its tail probabilities. The following theorem [39] is directly applied to establish the theorem. If C is binomially distributed, $\delta \in (0,1]$, and $\mu = E[C]$, then $P[C \leq (1-\delta)\mu] < exp(\mu\delta^2/2)$. $\triangle$

An RRT in a Large Disc In the limit as the number of iterations approaches infinity, the RRT becomes uniformly distributed, but what happens when the RRT is placed in a "large" space? Intuitively, it seems that the best strategy would be to grow the tree away from the initial state as quickly as possible. To determine whether this occurs, we performed many simulation experiments (each with hundreds of thousands of iterations) to characterize how an RRT grows in the limit case of a disc with a radius that approaches infinity. Consider the case of a 2D state space and holonomic planning. Figure 4.a shows a typical result, in which the RRT has three major branches, each roughly 120 degrees apart. This behavior was repeatedly observed for the 2D case, although the orientation of the branches is random. In higher dimensions, we have observed that the RRT makes $n+1$ branches in an n-dimensional space. The branches also have equal separation from each other (they appear to touch the vertices of a regular $(n+1)$-simplex, centered at the origin. This gives experimental evidence that in the expected sense, the RRT grows outward from the origin at a rate that is linear in the number of iterations, and decreases moderately with the number of dimensions. It remains an open question to confirm these observations by proving the number and directions of these branches.

Relationship to optimality Another observation that we have made through simulation experiments is that the paths in a holonomic RRT, while jagged, are not too far from the shortest path (recall Figure 3). This is not true for paths generated by a simpler technique, such as Brownian motion. For paths in the plane, we have performed repeated experiments that compare the distance of randomly-chosen RRT vertices

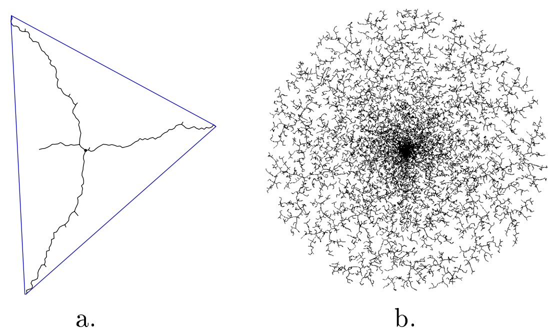


Figure 4: *a) The convex hull of an RRT in an "infinitely" large disc; b) a 2D RRT that was constructed using biased sampling.*

to the root by following the RRT path to the Euclidean distance to the root. Experiments were performed in a square region in the plane. The expected ratio of RRT-path distance to Euclidean distance is consistently between 1.3 and 1.7. It remains an open question to prove an upper bound on the expected path length, with respect to optimal solutions (e.g., such as a ratio bound of two).

5 Designing Path Planners

Sections 3 and 4 introduced the basic RRT and analyzed its exploration properties. Now the focus is on developing path planners using RRTs. We generally consider the RRT as a building block that can be used to construct an efficient planner, as opposed to a path planning algorithm by itself. For example, one might use an RRT to escape local minima in a randomized potential field path planner [3]. In [48], an RRT was used as the local planner for the probabilistic roadmap planner. We present several alternative RRT-based planners in this section. The recommended choice depends on several factors, such as whether differential constraints exist, the type of collision detection algorithm, or the efficiency of nearest neighbor computations.

Single-RRT Planners In principle, the basic RRT can be used in isolation as a path planner because its vertices will eventually cover a connected component of X_{free}, coming arbitrarily close to any specified x_{goal}. The problem is that without any bias toward the goal, convergence is often slow. An improved planner, called RRT-GoalBias, can be obtained by replacing RANDOM_STATE in Figure 2 with a function that tosses a biased coin to determine what should be returned. If the coin toss yields "heads", then x_{goal} is returned; otherwise, a random state is returned. Even with a small probability of returning heads (such as 0.05), RRT-GoalBias usually converges to the goal much faster than the basic RRT. If too much bias is introduced; however, the planner begins to behave like a randomized potential field planner that is trapped in a local minimum. An improvement called RRT-GoalZoom replaces RANDOM_STATE with a decision, based on a biased coin toss, that chooses a random sample from either a region around the goal or the whole state space. The size of the region around the goal is controlled by the closest RRT vertex to the goal at any iteration. The effect is that the focus of samples gradually increases around the goal as the RRT draws nearer. This planner has performed quite well in practice; however, it is still possible that performance is degraded due to local minima. In general, it seems best to replace RANDOM_STATE with a sampling scheme that draws states from a nonuniform probability density function that has a "gradual" bias toward the goal. Figure 4.b shows an example of an RRT that was constructed by sampling states from a probability density that assigns equal probability to concentric circular rings. There are still many interesting research issues regarding the problem of sampling. It might be possible to use some of the sampling methods that were proposed to improve the performance of probabilistic roadmaps [1, 7].

One more issue to consider is the size of the step that is used for RRT construction. This could be chosen dynamically during execution on the basis of a distance computation function that is used for collision detection. If the bodies are far from colliding, then larger steps can be taken. Aside from following this idea to obtain an incremental step, how far should the new state, x_{new} appear from x_{near}? Should we try to connect x_{near} to x_{rand}? Instead of attempting to extend an RRT by an incremental step, EXTEND can be iterated until the random state or an obstacle is reached, as shown in the CONNECT algorithm description in Figure 5. CONNECT can replace EXTEND, yielding an RRT that grows very quickly, if permitted by collision detection constraints and the differential constraints. One of the key advantages of the CONNECT function is that a long path can be constructed with

```
CONNECT(T, x)
repeat
    S ← EXTEND(T, x);
until not (S = Advanced)
Return S;
```

Figure 5: *The CONNECT function.*

```
RRT_BIDIRECTIONAL(x_init, x_goal)
1  T_a.init(x_init); T_b.init(x_goal);
2  for k = 1 to K do
3      x_rand ← RANDOM_STATE();
4      if not (EXTEND(T_a, x_rand) = Trapped) then
5          if (EXTEND(T_b, x_new) = Reached) then
6              Return PATH(T_a, T_b);
7      SWAP(T_a, T_b);
8  Return Failure
```

Figure 6: *A bidirectional RRT-based planner.*

only a single call to the nearest-neighbor algorithm. This advantage motivates the choice of a greedier algorithm; however, if an efficient nearest-neighbor algorithm (e.g., [2]) is used, as opposed to the obvious linear-time method, then it might make sense to be less greedy. After performing dozens of experiments on a variety of problems, we have found CONNECT to yield the best performance for holonomic planning problems, and EXTEND seems to be the best for nonholonomic problems. One reason for this difference is that CONNECT places more faith in the metric, and for nonholonomic problems it becomes more challenging to design good metrics.

Bidirectional Planners Inspired by classical bidirectional search techniques [41], it seems reasonable to expect that improved performance can be obtained by growing two RRTs, one from x_{init} and the other from x_{goal}; a solution is found if the two RRTs meet. For a simple grid search, it is straightforward to implement a bidirectional search; however, RRT construction must be biased to ensure that the trees meet well before covering the entire space, and to allow efficient detection of meeting.

Figure 5 shows the RRT_BIDIRECTIONAL algorithm, which may be compared to the BUILD_RRT algorithm of Figure 1. RRT_BIDIRECTIONAL divides the computation time between two processes: 1) exploring the state space; 2) trying to grow the trees into each other. Two trees, $\mathcal{T}_a$ and $\mathcal{T}_b$ are maintained at all times until they become connected and a solution is found. In each iteration, one tree is extended, and an attempt is made to connect the nearest vertex of the other tree to the new vertex. Then, the roles are reversed by swapping the two trees. Growth of two RRTs was also proposed in [30] for kinodynamic planning; however, in each iteration both trees were incrementally extended toward a random state. The current algorithm attempts to grow the trees into each other half of the time, which has been found to yield much better performance.

Several variations of the above planner can also be considered. Either occurrence of EXTEND may be replaced by CONNECT in RRT_BIDIRECTIONAL. Each replacement makes the operation more aggressive. If the EXTEND in Line 4 is replaced with CONNECT, then the planner aggressively explores the state space, with the same tradeoffs that existed for the single-RRT planner. If the EXTEND in Line 5 is replaced with CONNECT, the planner aggressively attempts to connect the two trees in each iteration. This particular variant was very successful at solving holonomic planning problems. For convenience, we refer to this variant as RRT-ExtCon, and the original bidirectional algorithm as RRT-ExtExt. Among the variants discussed thus far, we have found RRT-ExtCon to be most successful for holonomic planning [22], and RRT-ExtExt to be best for nonholonomic problems. The most aggressive planner can be constructed by replacing EXTEND with CONNECT in both Lines 4 and 5, to yield RRT-ConCon.

Through extensive experimentation over a wide variety of examples, we have concluded that, when applicable, the bidirectional approach is much more efficient than a single RRT approach. One shortcoming of using the bidirectional approach for nonholonomic and kinodynamic planning problems is the need to make a connection between a pair of vertices, one from each RRT. For a planning problem that involves reaching a goal region from an initial state, no connections are necessary using a single-RRT approach. The gaps between the two trajectories can be closed in practice by applying steering methods [27], if possible, or classical shooting methods, which are often used for numerical boundary value problems.

Other Approaches If a dual-tree approach offers advantages over a single tree, then it is natural to ask whether growing three or more RRTs might be even better. These additional RRTs could be started at random states. Of course, the connection problem will become more difficult for nonholonomic problems. Also, as more trees are considered, a complicated decision problem arises. The computation time must be divided between attempting to explore the space and attempting to connect RRTs to each other. It is also not clear which connections should be attempted. Many research issues remain in the development of this and other RRT-based planners.

It is interesting to consider the limiting case in which a new RRT is started for every random sample, x_{rand}. Once the single-vertex RRT is generated, the CONNECT function from Figure 5 can be applied to every other RRT. To improve performance, one might only consider connections to vertices that are within a fixed distance of x_{rand}, according to the metric. If a connection succeeds, then the two RRTs are merged into a single graph. The resulting algorithm simulates the behavior of the probabilistic roadmap approach to path planning [19]. Thus, the probabilistic roadmap can be considered as an extreme version of an RRT-based algorithm in which a maximum number of separate RRTs are constructed and merged.

6 Implementations and Experiments

In this section, results for four different types of problems are summarized: 1) holonomic planning, 2) nonholonomic planning, 3) kinodynamic planning, and 4) planning for systems with closed kinematic chains. Presently, we have constructed two planning systems based on RRTs. One is written in Gnu C++ and LEDA, and experiments were conducted on a 500Mhz Pentium III PC running Linux. This implementation is very general, allowing many planning variants and models to be considered; however, it is limited to planar obstacles and robots, and performs naive collision detection. The software can be obtained from *http://janowiec.cs.iastate.edu/~lavalle/rrt/*. The second implementation is written in SGI C++ and SGI's OpenInventor library, and experiments were conducted on a 200MHz SGI Indigo2 with 128MB. This implementation considers 3D models, and was particularly designed inclusion in a software platform for automating the motions of digital actors [21]. Currently, we are constructing a third implementation, which is expected to be general-purpose, support 3D models, and be based on freely-available collision detection and efficient nearest neighbor libraries.

Holonomic planning experiments Through numerous experiments, we have found RRT-based planners to be very efficient for holonomic planning. Note that our planners attempt to find a solution without performing precomputations over the entire state space, and are therefore suited for single-query path planning problems, in contrast to the probabilistic roadmap method. It is easy to construct single-query examples on which an RRT-based planner will be superior by terminating before covering the entire state space, and it is easy to construct multiple-query problems in which the probabilistic roadmap method will be superior by repeatedly using its precomputed roadmap.

Most of the experiments in this section were conducted on the 200MHz SGI Indigo2. More holonomic planning experiments are presented in [22]. The CONNECT function is most effective when one can expect relatively open spaces for the majority of the planning queries. We first performed hundreds of experiments on over a dozen examples for planning the motions of rigid objects in 2D, resulting in 2D and 3D configuration spaces. Path smoothing was performed on the final paths to reduce jaggedness. Figure 7 depicts a computed solution for a 3D model of a grand piano moving from one room to another amidst walls and low obstacles. Several tricky rotations are required of the piano in order to solve this query.

Figure 8 shows a human character playing chess. Each of the motions necessary to reach, grasp, and reposition a game piece on the virtual chess board were generated using the RRT-ExtCon planner in an average of 2 seconds on the 200 MHz SGI Inidigo2. The human arm is modeled as a 7-DOF kinematic chain, and the entire scene contains over 8,000 triangle primitives. The 3D collision checking software used for these experiments was the RAPID library based on OBB-Trees developed by the University of North Carolina [32]. The speed of the planner allows for the user to interact with the character in real-time, and even engage in an interactive game of "virtual chess".

The final holonomic planning example, shown in Figure 9, was solved using the RRT-ExtExt planner. This problem was presented in [7] as a test challenge for randomized path planners due to the narrow passages that exist in the configuration space when the "U"-shaped

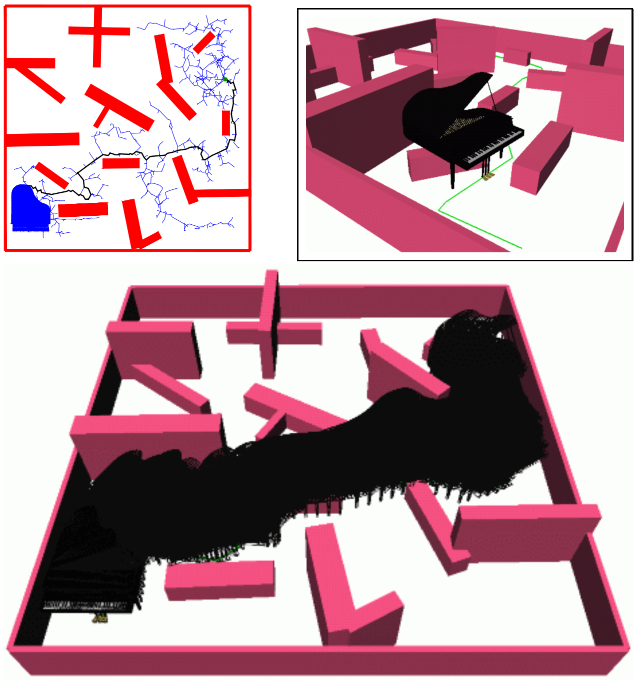


Figure 7: *Moving a Piano*

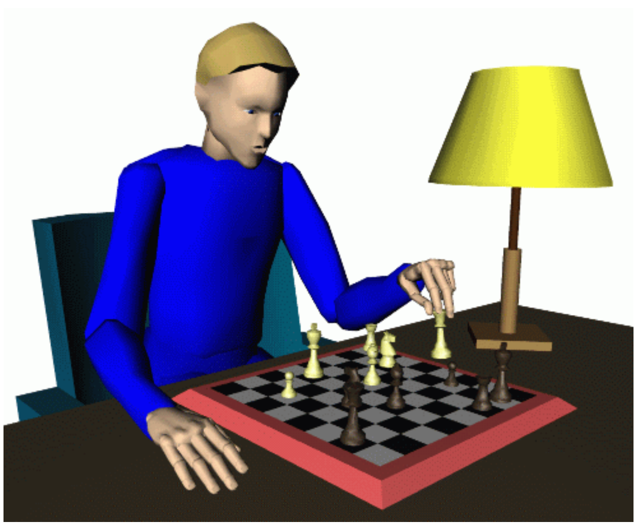
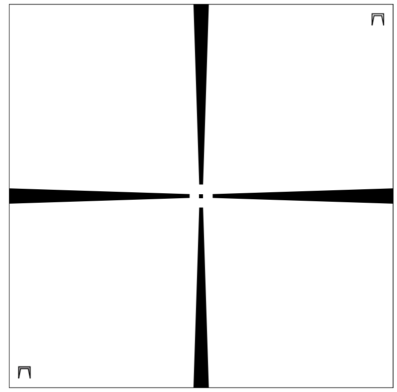


Figure 8: *Playing a game of virtual chess*

object passes through the center of the world. In the example shown, the RRT does not explore to much of the surrounding space (some of this might be due to the lucky placement of the corridor in the center of the world). On average, about 1500 nodes are generated,



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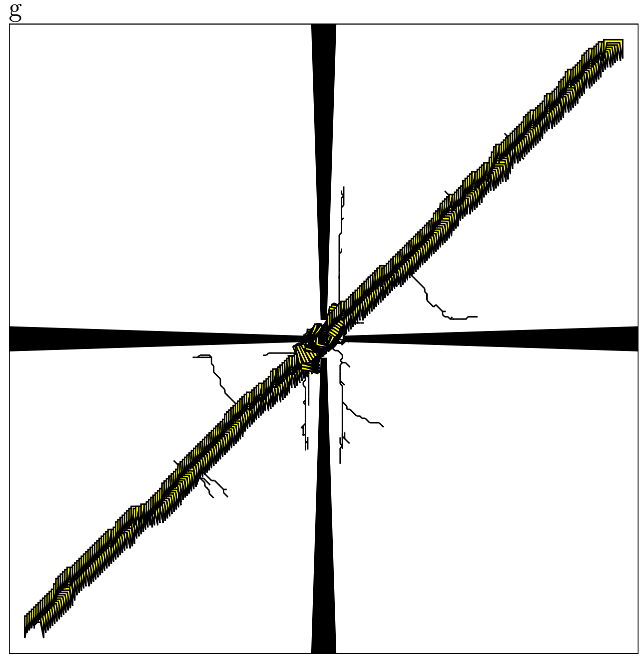

Figure 9: *A narrow-corridor example.*

and the problem is solved in two seconds on the PC using naive collision checking.

Nonholonomic planning experiments Several nonholonomic planning examples are shown in Figures 10 and 11. These examples were computed using the RRTExtExt planner, and the average computation times were less than five seconds on the PC using naive collision detection. The four examples in Figure 10 involve car-like robots that moves at constant speed under different nonholonomic models. A 2D projection of the RRTs is shown for each case, along with the com-

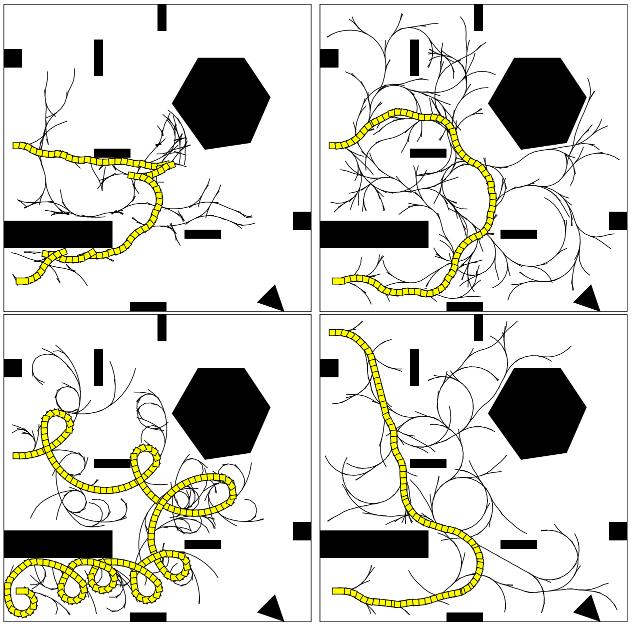

Figure 10: *Several car-like robots.*

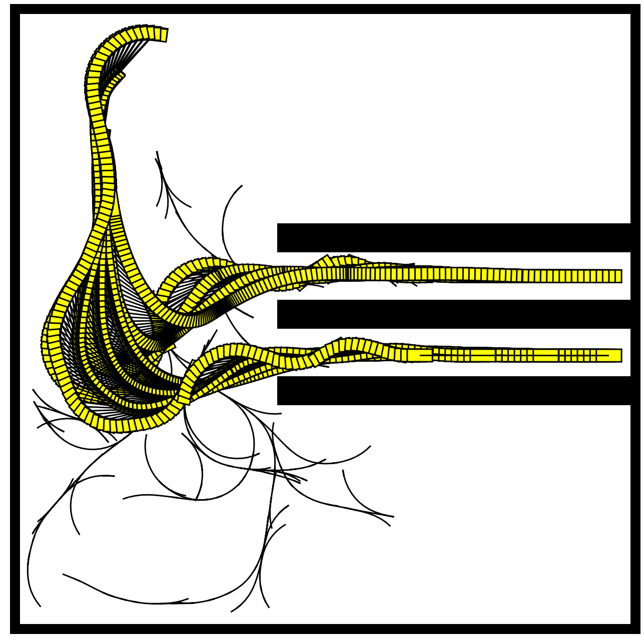

Figure 11: *A 7-DOF nonholonomic planning example.*

puted path from an initial state to a goal state. The top two pictures show paths computed for a 3-DOF model, using the standard kinematics for a car-like robot.

In the first example, the car is allowed to move in both forward and reverse. In the second example, the car can move forward only. In the first example in the second row in Figure 10, the car is only allowed to turn left in varying degrees! The planner is still able to overcome this difficult constraint and bring the robot to its goal. The final example uses a 4-DOF model, which results in continuous curvature paths [43].

The final nonholonomic planning problem involves the 4-DOF car pulling three trailers, resulting in a 7-DOF system. The kinematics are given in [40]. The goal is to pull the car with trailers out of one stall, and back it into another. The RRTs shown correspond to one of the best executions; in other iterations the exploration was much slower due to metric problems.

Kinodynamic planning experiments Several kinodynamic planning experiments have been performed for both non-rotating and rotating rigid objects in 2D and 3D worlds with velocity and acceleration bounds obeying L^2 norms. For the 2D case, controllability issues were studied recently in [34]. All experiments utilized a simple weighted L^2 metric on X, and were performed using variants of the RRT_BIDIRECTIONAL planner. More experiments were presented in [30]. Recently, RRTs have been applied to automating the flight of helicopters in complicated 3D simulations that contain obstacles [15].

Consider the case of a fully-orientable satellite model with limited translation. The satellite is assumed to have momentum wheels that enable it to orient itself along any axis, and a single pair of opposing thruster controls that allow it to translate along the primary axis of the cylinder. This model has a 12-dimensional state space. The task of the satellite, modeled as a rigid cylindrical object, is to perform a collision-free docking maneuver into the cargo bay of the space shuttle model amidst a cloud of obstacles. Figure 12 shows the candidate solution found after 23,800 states were explored. The total computation time was 8.4 minutes on the SGI.

The final result, given in Figure 13, shows a fictitious, underactuated spacecraft that must maneuver through two narrow gates and enter a hangar that has a small entrance. There are five inputs, each of which applies a thrust impulse. The possible motions are: 1) forward, 2) up, 3) down, 4) clockwise roll, 5) counterclockwise roll. There are 4000 triangles in the model. Path plan-

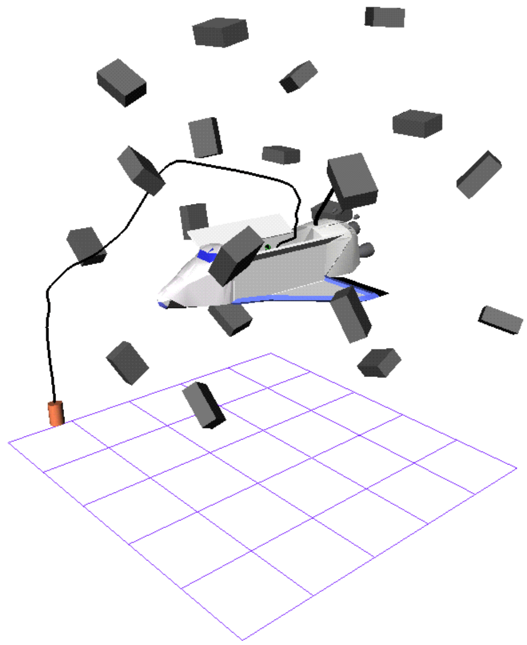

Figure 12: *A 12-DOF kinodynamic planning example.*

ning is performed directly in the 12-dimensional state space. A typical run requires about 12 minutes on an R12000.

Planning for closed kinematic chains Figure 14 shows a problem that involves a kinematic closure constraint that must be maintained in addition to performing holonomic path planning. Many more examples and experiments are discussed in [49]. In the initial state, the closure constraint is satisfied. The incremental simulator performs local motions that maintain with closure constraint within a specified tolerance.

7 Discussion

We have presented a general framework for developing randomized path planning algorithms based on the concept of Rapidly-exploring Random Trees (RRTs). After extensive experimentation, we are satisfied with the results obtained to date. There is, however, significant room for improvement given the complexity of problems that arise in many applications. To date, we believe we have presented the first randomized path planning techniques that are particularly designed for

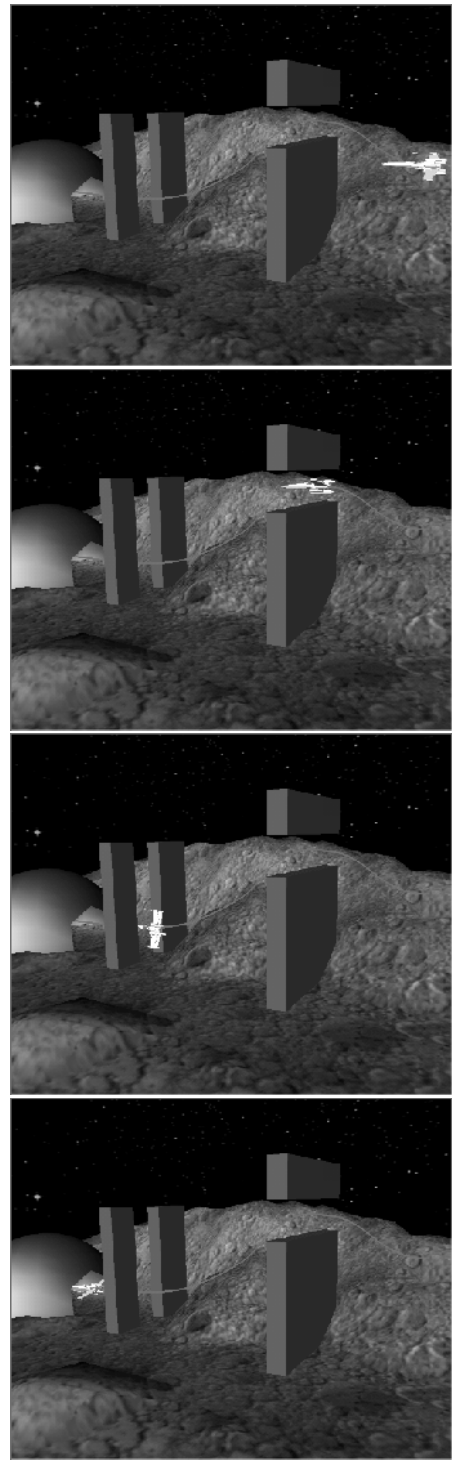

Figure 13: *An underactuated spacecraft that performs complicated maneuvers. The state space has twelve dimensions, and there are five inputs.*

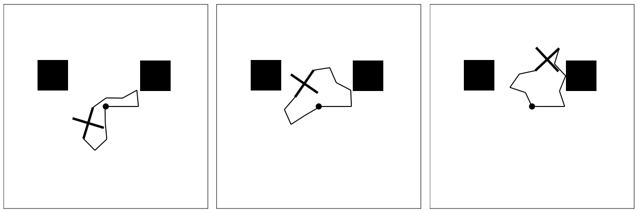

Figure 14: *Two manipulators transport a cross-shaped object while maintaining kinematic closure.*

handling differential constraints (without necessarily requiring steering ability). RRTs have also led to very efficient planners for single-query holonomic path planning. Several issues and topics are mentioned below, which are under current investigation.

Designing Metrics The primary drawback with the RRT-based methods is the sensitivity of the performance on the choice of the metric, ρ. All of the results presented in Section 6 were obtained by assigning a simple, weighted Euclidean metric for each model (the same metric was used for different collections of obstacles). Nevertheless, we observed that the computation time varies dramatically for some problems as the metric is varied. This behavior warrants careful investigation into the effects of metrics. This problem might seem similar to the choice of a potential function for the randomized potential field planer; however, since RRTs eventually perform uniform exploration, the performance degradation is generally not as severe as a local minimum problem. Metrics that would fail miserably as a potential function could still yield good performance in an RRT-based planner.

In general, we can characterize the ideal choice of a metric (technically this should be called a pseudometric due to the violation of some metric properties). Consider a cost or loss functional, L, defined as

$$L = \int_0^T l(x(t), u(t))dt + l_f(x(T)).$$

As examples, this could correspond to the distance traveled, the energy consumed, or the time elapsed during the execution of a trajectory. The optimal cost to go from x to x' can be expressed as

$$\rho^*(x, x') = \min_{u(t)} \left\{ \int_0^T l(x(t), u(t))dt + l_f(x(T)) \right\}.$$

Ideally, ρ^* would make an ideal metric because it indicates "closeness" as the ability to bring the state from x to x' while incurring little cost. For holonomic planning, nearby states in terms of a weighted Euclidean metric are easy to reach, but for nonholonomic problems, it can be difficult to design a good metric. The ideal metric has appeared in similar contexts as the nonholonomic metric (see [27]), and the cost-to-go function [5]. Of course, computing ρ^* is as difficult as solving the original planning problem! It is generally useful, however, to consider ρ^* because the performance of RRT-based planners seems to generally degrade as ρ and ρ^* diverge. An effort to make a crude approximation to ρ^*, even if obstacles are neglected, will probably lead to great improvements in performance. In [15], the cost-to-go function from a hybrid optimal controller was used as the metric in an RRT to generate efficient plans for a nonlinear model of a helicopter.

Efficient Nearest-Neighbors One of the key bottlenecks in construction of RRTs so far has been nearest neighbor computations. To date, we have only implemented the naive approach in which every vertex is compared to the sample state. Fortunately, the development of efficient nearest-neighbor for high-dimensional problems has been a topic of active interest in recent years (e.g., [2]). Techniques exist that can compute nearest neighbors (or approximate nearest-neighbors) in near-logarithmic time in the number of vertices, as opposed to the naive method which takes linear time. Implementation and experimentation with nearest neighbor techniques is expected to dramatically improve performance. Three additional concerns must be addressed: 1) any data structure that is used for efficient nearest neighbors must allow incremental insertions to be made efficiently due to the incremental construction of an RRT, and 2) the method must support whatever metric, ρ, is chosen, and 3) simple adaptations must be made to account for the topology of the state space (especially in the case of S^1 and P^3, which arise from rotations).

Collision Detection For collision detection in our previous implementations, we have not yet exploited the fact that RRTs are based on incremental motions. Given that small changes usually occur between configurations, a data structure can be used that dramatically improves the performance of collision detection and distance computation [16, 31, 38, 42]. The incorporation of such approaches into our RRT-based planners should cause dramatic performance benefits.

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