The Scientific Status of Mobile Robotics: Multi-Resolution Mapbuilding as Case Study

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Abstract

We present a novel approach to mapbuilding and navigation in mobile robotics – its emphasis being on the efficiency of representation and goal area identification. After presenting and analysing the experimental results, we examine the scientific status of the research carried out, and of the field of mobile robotics in general. We argue that there is an implicit paradigm of mobile robotics, but that – for the future health of the discipline – it needs to be made explicit through the development of a theoretical language and formal models. After exploring the relationship between design, engineering, and science, we argue that mobile robotics still lacks *falsifiable theories* of robot-environment interaction. This leads us to propose some desirable future directions for mobile robotics as a maturing science.

Keywords: multiple resolution mapbuilding, computational efficiency, philosophy of science

1 An experiment in mobile robotics

Below we describe and analyse a project which develops a novel approach to topological mapping for mobile robotics. The central idea is to develop a hierarchical "multiple resolution" representation from the robot's perceptions of its environment, computing only at a relevant level of detail for a given navigation task. The robot may then perform the task of *efficiently* navigating to a specified location. The resulting system is efficient since computation occurs only over the simplest representations necessary for each stage of the navigation. "Zooming" to a higher resolution of representation is map-driven, and the different resolutions are achieved by a uniform method using very small artificial neural networks of 4 nodes. Thus, as well as allowing efficient navigation, the robot's development of its map also uses few computational resources.

1.1 Motivation for the project

In concert with the topological mapping community in mobile robotics (eg: [4, 6]), we claim that a strategy for mapping a robot's environment should not, in the first instance, rely on information about odometry. Such dead reckoning navigation systems rely on proprioception (perception of internal states), and are subject to incorrigible errors due to wheel slippage. Instead, we argue that representations must be anchored in "perceptual landmarks", obtained through exteroception (perception of the external environment). Such perceptual landmarks will represent those features of the environment which are salient with respect to the robot's own perceptual apparatus. The concept of "multiple resolution" in mapping an environment seems a natural choice to us, and we conjecture that it will result in increased efficiency of navigation (both with regard to time and energy resources). Multiple resolution mapping facilitates the allocation of *minimum* resources for the task at hand. To increase resolution (and thus demands on computation and memory) is only required under specific circumstances, such as the approach of a goal location.

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1.2 The mapping paradigm

Many researchers (most notably [11]) have asked what constitutes a "good" robot map of an environment. This issue of map quality is, of course, relative to particular tasks (see eg: [15]). We claim that details of computational efficiency of using topological maps have largely been neglected in appraisals of their suitability. Thus we argue for a modification, or enhancement, of the current "paradigm". We consider the following criteria relevant to mapbuilding:

1. Spatial consistency: the map should faithfully represent the topology of some portion of the robot's environment. (i.e. the description provided by the map should be consistent with the actual environment.)

2. Coverage: the map should represent as much of the environment as is required for completion of the task.

3. Relevant detail: the map should only represent the environment in as much detail as is required for completion of the task.

4. Perception-based ontology: the map should only be constructed on the basis of primitives which the robot is able to perceive reliably.

5. Computational efficiency: the map-building process should use minimal computational resources for completion of the task.

Various proposals in the literature fail to meet at least one of the above criteria. As far as we know, none of them meet our requirement on relevant detail. For instance, in a long uniform corridor which the robot must reach the end of, it simply is not necessary to represent and compute over many separate locations along that path. More efficient journeys can be made if more detailed topology is only computed around target locations. Thus we claim that a modification of the existing research paradigm is in order here.

Some theoretical results on topological mapping (eg: [4]) fail to meet the last criterion, by relying on information that is difficult, if not impossible, to obtain from a real robot (for example the assumption that there is an enumeration of all path directions leading from each location). In contrast to this, the results presented below are obtained from experimental data.

As far as we are aware, no other multiple-resolution approach to topological mapping exists. However, "hierarchical" representations of space have been proposed before, although in a quite different sense to that which we suggest. For instance Kuipers [9] advocates the use of a hierarchy of spatial representations, moving from topological to geometrical information, but this hierarchy consists of different classes of representation, rather than of different levels of resolution within the same representation scheme.

Various proposals also exist with regard to the use of self-organising feature maps (SOFM) [5] in mapping strategies. Typically, sonar and infrared readings are fed into (computationally costly) high-dimensional (e.g. 10x10) SOFMs in order to develop a single representation of the environment. In contrast, our approach uses just three linear 4 by 1 SOFMs to map feature space at three levels of detail. Tree-structured feature mappings are employed by [7] (although they are not maps in our sense), and are known to facilitate search algorithms of low computational complexity.

1.3 Our hypothesis

Our hypothesis, then, is that a mobile robot can identify a location specified by the user, within an explored and mapped territory, by using a multi-resolution, perception-based mapping algorithm based on self-organisation.

The claim is that the robot's perceptions alone, used in the fashion described above, suffice to achieve target area identification, and that no external frame of reference (Cartesian coordinate system) needs to be used.

Our approach thus has the following features:

- Topological mapping.

- Multiple resolution, determined by the requirements of the task.

- Computational efficiency of representation.
- Perception-based representation.
- Use of data from a real robot.

1.4 Specification

Having generated our hypothesis, we now proceed to specify a particular task for the robot. It must –

1. be able to develop a multiple-resolution perception-based topological map over a canonical path in an environment containing objects of different shapes and sizes, and made of different materials, and
2. use this ability to identify to a specified location on the path, using higher resolution mapping only to disambiguate locations or when the target location might lie within its current region.

Now that we have specified the goal of our research, the precise experimental details can be described.

2 Experimental set-up

2.1 Robot and environment

The robot used for these experiments was a Nomad 200 mobile robot (see figure 1), named (after its serial number) "FortyTwo".

Figure 1: The Nomad 200 mobile robot "FortyTwo"

This hexagonal robot is equipped with sixteen ultrasonic range-finding sensors (range up to 6.5 m), sixteen infrared (IR) sensors (range up to 60 cm), twenty tactile sensors and a monochrome CCD camera. The robot is driven by three independent AC motors for translation, steering and turret rotation. A 486 PC is the main controller with several slave processors (Motorola 68HC11) handling the robot's sensors.

As stated above, the robot's task was to recognise a user-specified target region within an environment consisting of walls of varying texture and colour, and a smooth, level floor.

2.2 Experimental Procedure

First, "FortyTwo" was left to follow the wall of the environment that was to be mapped, using a wall following behaviour which had been acquired through unsupervised learning earlier, using an artificial neural network to associate perceptions with actions [18]. Sensor signals of all sixteen sonar sensors, all sixteen infrared sensors and odometric information were logged during this exploration. Sonar and infrared sensors were later used to obtain the multi-resolution mapping, the odometry information was used solely for manual analysis of the results obtained. The robot therefore mapped its environment as perceived along one canonical path, but it should be noted that multiple resolution mapping is independent of canonical paths or particular exploration strategies.

Data from two different environments (a lab and an untreated corridor), for two independent experiments was obtained in this manner, and subsequently used to construct the multi resolution mapping off line. Through this procedure we ensure that results are relevant to robot mapbuilding (because "live"

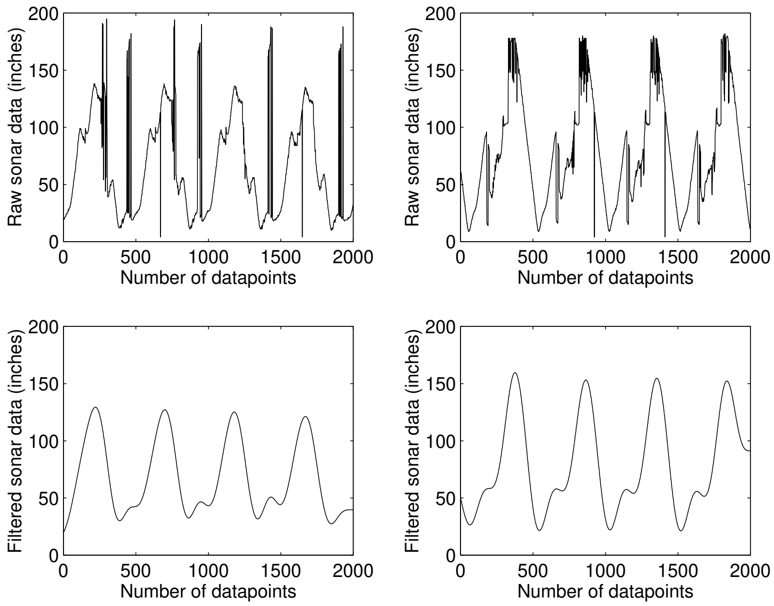

Figure 2: Raw (top) and filtered (bottom) sonar data for two different sonar sensors, before and after smoothing using a low pass filter. Spurious sonar signals, for example at datapoints 700 and 1700 (left) or datapoints 900 and 1400 (right) are removed, as is the high frequency content of the sensor signature.

data obtained from a robot, interacting with its environment, was used), but also that a comparison between the different levels of resolution is possible, because in each experiment all three maps are trained using identical data.

2.3 Preprocessing of data

It is well known that sonar sensor readings are subject to noise. For example, "specular reflections" occur when the sonar pulse hits a smooth surface at too shallow an angle to be reflected directly. The reflection of the sonar burst by some other object in the environment generates a reading that indicates a larger free space than is actually available. Likewise, "crosstalk" (receiving another sensor's sonar burst) can indicate shorter distances to the nearest object than actually present. In figure 2 (top left) such freak signals are visible, for example at datapoints 700 and 1700, which should exhibit identical sonar readings.

In order to remove of this noise, we filtered the sonar readings with a digital low pass filter before starting the mapbuilding. The results for two arbitrary sensors are shown in figure 2. As can be seen, the noise has been successfully removed, without throwing away too much of the information content of the signal. The filtering operation causes an end-transient effect in the signal (see figure 2, bottom right, datapoint 2000), which can pose problems for the mapping mechanism, which we eliminated by removing the last 20 datapoints.

2.4 The mapping mechanism

The concepts of topological and multiresolutional maps, and their advantages, have been explained. We now focus on our particular approach. Self-organising feature maps (SOFM) [5] have previously been used for mapping strategies (e.g. [20, 10]): sonar and infrared readings were fed into high-dimensional (e.g. 10x10) SOFM's, requiring a constant high level of computation. Here, we propose three levels of resolution, on each level we use a linear 4 by 1 SOFM to map feature space, thus providing a possible $4^3 = 64$ different place signatures. (A comparable single resolution mechanism would have to compute over 8×8 nodes). Each increase in resolution may multiply the number of recognised regions by 4, so the size of a complete high resolution map of an area is bounded by that of the initial low resolution representation. Whenever necessary, we can switch from a lower resolution to a higher one, always increasing the information content of the input signal. The computational cost can therefore be reduced a large amount in certain "uninteresting" regions. Target regions, which the robot is to explore to the highest resolution, are specified externally to the system.

For the neural net training we used predefined "Matlab" functions from the neural net toolbox. The size of the linear (i.e. one-dimensional) self organising feature map was four units, neighborhood size decreased from three to one over the training period. The learning rate decreased exponentially from 1 to (almost) 0. The SOFMs were trained over 5000 epochs (although fewer would almost certainly have sufficed), and each epoch consisted of an input chosen randomly from the data set.

On the resolutionally lowest level, the *whole* of the explored space is mapped into distinct regions (see figure 3). As input to the lowest level SOFM we use four infrared sensors only, spaced 90^o apart. The trained SOFM (training is completed after 5000 learning steps) then responds with one of four responses to perceptual stimuli received anywhere along the path.

A goal region is then specified externally by the human operator, and at places that produce the same (low-resolution) output as this goal place a second network is trained at middle-resolution level (e.g. if the specified goal produces node "2" as the winning node at low resolution, sensor signals perceived at all locations generating "2" at the low-resolution level are used to train the middle-resolution network). At the middle resolution level, four sonar sensors, again spaced 90^0 apart, are used to train the SOFM. Regions that have been developed in this middle level now each have a signature like for example "2/1" or "2/4".

To differentiate further within those regions, a third 4x1 SOFM is trained, now using all 16 infrared sensor signals and all 16 sonar sensor signals of the robot.

The three levels of mapping resolution are thus developed by:

- Low level: 4 infrared sensors
- Medium Level: 4 sonar sensors
- High level: 16 sonar and 16 infra-red sensors

Through this process a tree-like topological map is constructed, where each low level region can be subdivided into smaller regions at a higher level of resolution.

3 Experimental Results

3.1 Experiment 1

In the first experiment a circular path of 13.5m was traversed 4 times, and 2000 sensor readings (sonar, infrared and odometry) obtained in a laboratory environment containing brick walls and cloth covered screens were used to produce the multi resolution mapping of the environment. Figure 3 shows the mapping of the entire environment at the lowest resolution level.

The "goal" location of the robot was externally specified as a location near the coordinates (0,800). At the lowest resolution level, the perceptual signature is "2", therefore all regions having this perceptual signature were subsequently mapped at medium resolution level (see figure 4). The goal region then has the perceptual signature "2/1", and is, in this environment, already uniquely identified. However, a further increase in resolution shows that the goal region can be specified even more accurately (see figure 5). The complete signature for the goal location is "2/1/3" in this case.

3.2 Experiment 2

In a second experiment, "FortyTwo" was used to explore an untreated environment outside the laboratory, consisting of corridors, open spaces, doors, and irregularly distributed items of furniture. In total, a path of 35m was traversed once, and 2000 datapoints were logged and used for subsequent multi-resolution mapping.

Figure 6 shows the perceptual signatures at the lowest resolution level, obtained along the robot's path in this environment. The goal region was specified to be at a distance of 360 inches from the beginning of the path. The perceptual signature at the lowest resolution level is "4", so that all regions having that signature were subsequently mapped at a medium resolution level (see figure 7).

The perceptual signature of the goal location now becomes "4/3", so that all regions exhibiting that signature were then mapped at the highest resolution level (see figure 8). As can be seen from figure 8, the goal location is uniquely identified by the perceptual signature "4/3/3"

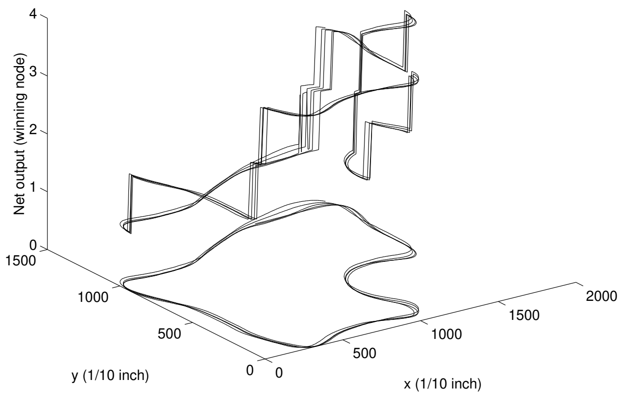

Figure 3: Coarse resolution mapping of the entire experimental area. The robot's path through the environment is plotted "underneath" the signature map, on the x-y axes. The eventual goal region (specified in a later stage of the experiment) is near location (0,800), the perceptual signature obtained there is "2".

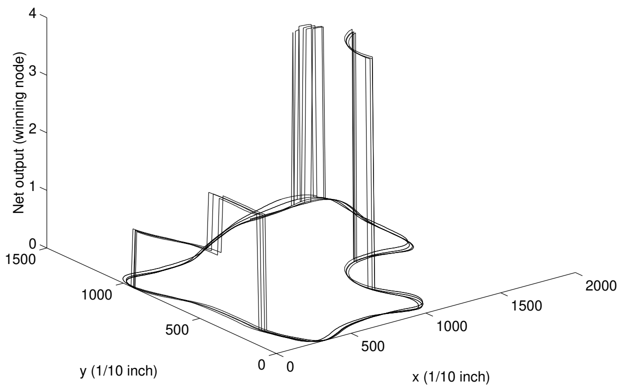

Figure 4: Medium resolution mapping of all regions giving response "2" at the low resolution level. The goal region now has a perceptual signature of "2/1" and is, in this case, already uniquely identified by this signature.

4 Analysis of the experimental results

Various requirements on mapping mechanisms in mobile robotics were presented in subsection 1.2. We raised the issue of minimal resource use in the development of perception-based topological maps. Our criterion of "relevant detail" and thus computational efficiency of such a mapping strategy is one which, to the best of our knowledge, has not been noted before. The results presented above show that effective multiple resolution maps can be built from data obtained from a real robot, using a uniform mapping method. Efficiency arises not only in the development of the multiple-resolution map, but also in map-based navigation.

Thus we have, to some extent, satisfied our requirements (subsection 1.2) and confirmed our initial hypothesis, in two experimental environments. This confirmation serves to reinforce the paradigm in which we are working.

As mentioned above, the computational cost of developing each level of representation is small (using only 4-node SOFMs) in comparison to other approaches. Further, the computational cost of planning routes over a small number of locations, in the low-resolution representation, is clearly less than that of the same problem over a more detailed representation. One might expect that this benefit could be obscured by the cost of developing a hierarchical representation, but since the more complex representations are developed only when required in order to complete the task (i.e. when the robot is in a target area), it is only in quite "uninteresting" environments (where perceptual aliasing is common, so that there are many target areas to be explored and disambiguated at higher resolutions) that computational costs

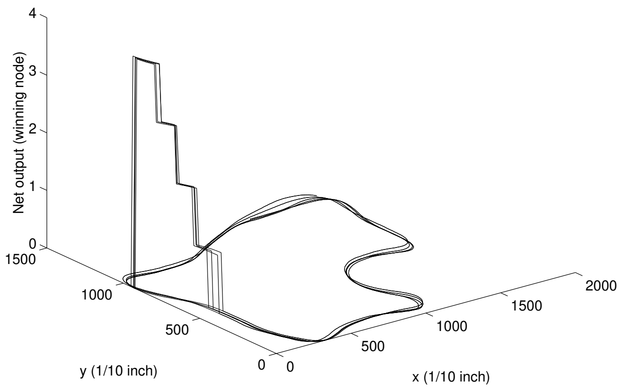

Figure 5: A further increase in resolution shows that the region “2/1” can be subdivided into four further distinct regions, pinpointing the goal location even more accurately.

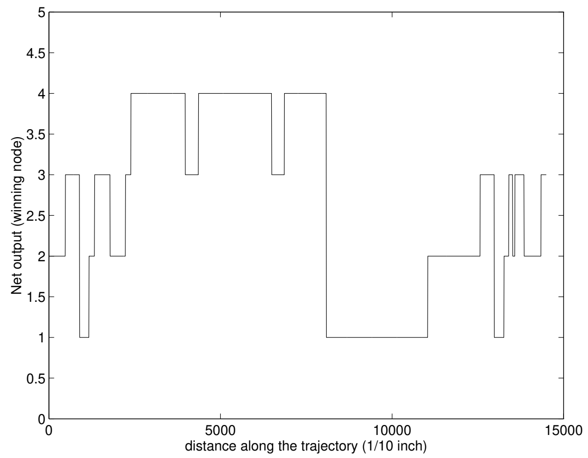

Figure 6: Coarse resolution mapping of the second environment in its entirety.

might outweigh benefits. Thus, navigation should be faster, and more energy efficient, than in existing topological navigation methods.

Secondly, all landmark-based mapping algorithms suffer from perceptual ambiguities, largely due to the limited resolution of robot sensors. Focussing the high-resolution perceptions on areas of interest, rather than the whole environment, will reduce the impact of these perceptual ambiguities, leading to more robust localisation systems. However, such comparative studies are for future research at the present time.

5 Analysis of the project

Our experimental results have demonstrated that a multi-resolution mapbuilding process can achieve reliable target area detection. But how did we arrive at this particular solution? Was it the result of good luck and clever engineering, or was the final system the result of applied systematic, methodological principles? In this project, as in current mobile robotics research in general, much credit has to be given to the former, but we argue that our debt and responsibility to scientific theory must also be acknowledged.

In this final section of the paper we make two claims:

1. That every type of engineering (i.e. robot engineering, too) benefits from scientific theory.
2. That an *implicit* theory of robot-environment interaction exists already, and that some research effort in mobile robotics should be directed at making this theory *explicit*.

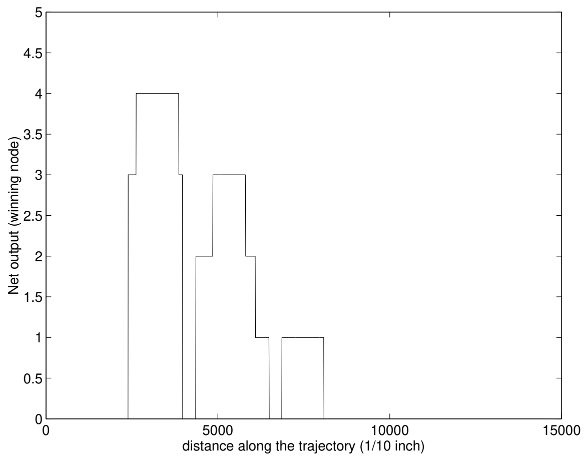

Figure 7: Medium resolution mapping of all regions of the second environment that have a perceptual signature of "4" at the lowest level. The selected goal area now attains signature "4/3".

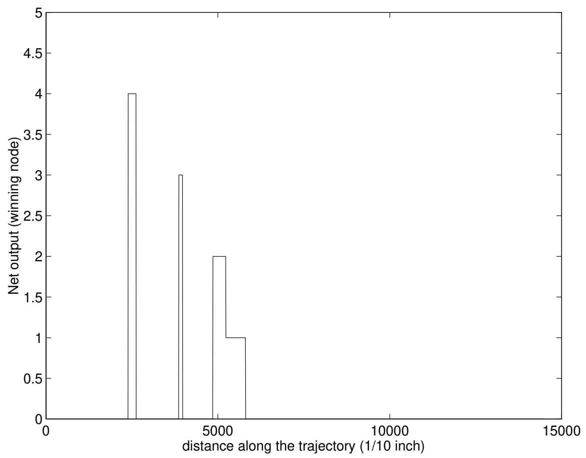

Figure 8: High resolution mapping of those regions of the second environment that have a perceptual signature of "4/3" at the preceding two levels. The goal area is identified by the signature "4/3/3".

5.1 The benefits of scientific theory

Readers may need to be persuaded as to the advantages of having a scientific theory of mobile robotics. Designing robots that are capable of performing a specified task in a target environment is, in the first instance, dependent upon competent engineering - but engineering itelf rests upon, and applies, scientific knowledge. Science is therefore at the heart of good engineering, but there are other reasons to be attracted. In particular, having a good theory of some domain allows us to make accurate predictions about behaviour without having to go into the costly process of doing experimental work. Thus, having a scientific theory of some domain often dramatically reduces the search space that must be explored for possible solutions to a problem. Further, if we are interested in understanding *how* mobile robots function well, when they do so, then we are in the business of *explaining* their behaviour – and scientific theory is explanation *par excellence*.

It is difficult to see how any major engineering design ever accomplished could have been achieved without some scientific knowledge – be it the knowledge of aerodynamics and mechanics in the case of aeronautical engineering, or of mechanics, physics and material science in the case of civil engineering, to name but two examples. We claim that a similar situation obtains in robotics – while it is certainly possible to design working robots purely on an engineering basis, it is a necessity for the progress of the field that deeper general theories of robot-environment interaction are developed. Such an understanding can only lead to the better design and better engineering of better robots. In our view, scientific theorizing, of the most general nature, is central to good engineering and design, not separate from it. Good engineering is applied science.

5.2 Evaluation of the project as a scientific venture

This project, as well as research in robotics in general, exhibits the following stages of development:

1. Specification: of the problem or question, i.e. the environment, the robot, and the task, within a body of background literature and common practice (see section 1.2).
2. Synthesis: building a robot that is expected to succeed in the specified task (prediction!).
3. Experiment: conducting relevant empirical studies.
4. Analysis: interpretation of the experimental results.
5. Conclusion: judgement regarding success or failure of the synthesis, and its possible modification.

Synthesizing a possible approach to a particular problem (step 2) implies that some underlying theory must exist, even if it cannot be expressed explicitly (yet). The roboticist designs the robot with the expectation (or prediction) that this particular robot, thus designed, is able to solve the particular problem in the target environment.

We also observe that the project took place within a research paradigm which has its own vocabulary and methodology, and some care was taken with respect to precision and repeatability of the experiments. Note, however, that the following hallmarks of a scientific theory were lacking:

1. Explicit universal generalizations and general predictions concerning robot-environment interaction.
2. Explicit formal models of robot-environment interaction.

Thus, it is worth asking what, precisely, we learnt about mobile robotics by way of the project? Did we establish any general principles, or refute any theoretical claim? No. We showed how to build a robot conforming to a particular design specification. Thus the status of the claim established by the project is existential, rather than universal. However, it does fit into some broadly theoretical context – an emerging paradigm of mobile robotics research.

Similar research efforts can be observed in fields such as cognitive science, where researchers will specify a task which they find interesting for various theoretical reasons, and then implement a computer program or neural network, or whatever, such that it produces the desired behaviour. But this functionalist approach to explanation (that reproduction of input-output behaviour counts as an explanation) is unconvincing unless it takes place within a wider theoretical context. No physicist would claim to have explained motion by constructing a vehicle which moves in a particular way. But if the observed motion can be predicted precisely, and linked to other, well understood theoretical concepts (friction, gravitation, and thermodynamics, for example) then the physicist's experiment will be seen to have deeper theoretical import. This, we claim, is what is generally lacking in experimental mobile robotics, as well as in other "emerging sciences".

6 Towards a science of mobile robotics

It is clear that robotics cannot be considered a *natural* science – an inquiry into natural phenomena – for robots are human-built artifacts, and the goal of robotics research is to create functioning robots rather than to understand some pre-existing system. However, in order to construct better machines in general, we argue, one must understand them at some level of generality and abstraction. Not only that, but in order to create a working system, we have to be able to *predict*, at least to some degree, how its various components function and interact. Thus, while robotics is certainly not a natural science, we can sensibly place it amongst the sciences of the artificial, by which we mean theories of artifacts and technologies. Like Lelas [12], we believe that creating a functioning robot requires more than a description and understanding as provided by physics or engineering.

The research project presented and analysed here illustrates each of these claims. Indeed, we claim that the community of researchers knows how to do robotics – how to carry it out as a practice, but not how to articulate what it is they are achieving, or how their experiments bear on general theoretical issues. Indeed, it seems that there is currently little articulation of what these "general theoretical issues" actually are.

Because of observable design methods within the mobile robotics community (e.g. choice of sensors, use of sensors, choice of actuators, choice of control algorithm) we believe that an *implicit* theory of mobile robotics already exists, influencing the way mobile robots are built and experiments are conducted. However, as yet the theory has not be made *explicit*, such that specific predictions can be derived from a theoretical framework. In other words: mobile robotics still lacks *falsifiable theories* of robot-environment interaction [22].

Since any falsifiable theory has to be expressed in some language, we believe that the next step in the maturing science of mobile robotics has to be the establishment of a formal language in which to discuss different architectures, environments, and theories of robot-environment interaction. Notable attempts at providing design criteria and methodological principles for mobile robotics can be found in [21, 24]. A more formal, information theoretic approach to robot-environment interaction can be found in the field of "cognitive robotics" [23]. It seems that a future science of mobile robotics may be founded on a general theory which incorporates elements of each of these approaches – the fundamental task being to develop valid generalizations about robot-environment interaction from which specific details of the behaviour of particular systems can be predicted. Finding the right levels of abstraction and generalization, and a sound theoretical vocabulary for the discussion, are the central issues here. A formalism, perhaps along the lines of [23], is worth developing in this regard.

Secondly, following Popper's notion that significant advances in knowledge are achieved either through the falsification of weak hypotheses, or the confirmation of bold ones, we believe that mobile robotics will advance as a science by careful analysis of our failures — judging from the number of reported failures, current practice appears to be not to report unsuccessful experiments at all — and by proposing (and evaluating) bold conjectures. Such a bold conjecture would be a general theory of robot-environment interaction.

7 Conclusion

By presenting and analysing an efficient multi-resolution mapbuilding and goal-area identification process, we argue that a) successful robot controller designs are not the result of luck, but that an implicitly and partially known theory of robot-environment interaction guides the researcher, and b) that future advances in the science of mobile robotics, both in terms of efficiency and general competence, require a theoretical understanding of the processes that govern robot-environment interaction, in other words: a falsifiable, scientific theory of robot-environment interaction.

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