A ROS-based Software Framework for the NimbRo-OP Humanoid Open Platform

Philipp Allgeuer, Max Schwarz, Julio Pastrana, Sebastian Schueller, Marcell Missura and Sven Behnke

Abstract—Over the past few years, a number of successful humanoid platforms have been developed, including the Nao [1] and the DARwIn-OP [2], both of which are used by many research groups for the investigation of bipedal walking, full-body motions, and human-robot interaction. The NimbRo-OP is an open humanoid platform under development by team NimbRo of the University of Bonn. Significantly larger than the two aforementioned humanoids, this platform has the potential to interact with a more human-scale environment. This paper describes a software framework for the NimbRo-OP that is based on the Robot Operating System (ROS) middleware. The software provides functionality for hardware abstraction, visual perception, and behavior generation, and has been used to implement basic soccer skills. These were demonstrated at RoboCup 2013, as part of the winning team of the Humanoid League competition.

I. INTRODUCTION

Progress in humanoid robotics research benefits from the availability of robust and affordable platforms that provide a suitable range of out of the box capabilities. Inspired by the success of the DARwIn-OP, a robot developed by the company Robotis, work commenced on the NimbRo-OP in early 2012. The first hardware prototype was displayed and demonstrated at the IROS and Humanoids 2012 conferences. As an open platform, both the hardware and software designs for the robot are committed to being regularly released open source to other researchers and the general public. This hopes to foster interest in the robot, and encourage research collaboration through community-based improvement of the platform. Following the first hardware release of the NimbRo-OP, an initial software release was completed that was heavily based on the framework released by Robotis for the DARwIn-OP. This was however only a transitional release pending an original and improved software framework based on the ROS middleware. The second software release for the NimbRo-OP, available at [3], constitutes exactly such a framework, and is referred to as the NimbRo-OP ROS Framework. The NimbRo-OP robot is shown in Figure 1.

ROS [4], an open source meta-operating system designed for robots, provides features such as hardware abstraction, low-level device control, packages for common functionalities, a communications framework, and a variety of other libraries and tools. It is maintained by the Open Source Robotics Foundation, but is largely a community project in terms of the contribution of packages. As the NimbRo-OP robot is currently predominantly being tested and demonstrated in the setting of humanoid soccer (i.e. RoboCup), numerous aspects of the framework are specific to this domain. By virtue of the modular architecture of ROS and the framework however, this does not prevent the robot from being used in other settings. For example, the soccer nodes can simply be omitted from being launched.

II. RELATED WORK

Due to its modularity, flexibility and portability, ROS has to date proven to be a popular choice in the research community for the implementation of robot control architectures. One of the main attractions of ROS is that it is so widespread, and allows the work of different research groups from around the world to be combined and shared in the form of ROS packages, even across robot hardware barriers. This facilitates collaboration, and allows groups to both benefit from the robotics research community, as well as contribute to it. Examples of wheeled robots that have ROS integration include the PR2 and the TurtleBot. While ROS has many advantages due to its abstraction and modularity, it also increases the communication requirements within the system, with data such as vision detections and behavior commands needing to be transferred via pipes.

Fewer examples of humanoid robots exist that have been integrated with ROS. For example, the DARwIn-OP nominally uses its own custom software framework, even though this framework was written with future ROS integration in mind [2]. To the knowledge of the authors, no open source ROS framework for the DARwIn-OP has become available to date. To a limited extent, a ROS framework for the HUBO robot, a 130 cm tall humanoid robot developed at the Korea Advanced Institute for Science & Technology, has been developed [5]. So far, this has only progressed to simple joint level control.
though, stopping short of implementing ROS-compatible walking or manipulation tasks.

The widely-used Nao robot is a success story when it comes to ROS integration. Based on an initial port by researchers at Brown University, the Humanoid Robots Lab at the University of Freiburg has developed, and continues to maintain, a collection of ROS packages and stacks that wrap the NaoQI API and make it available in ROS. The UChile Robotics Team has published an extensive tutorial on how to build, install and run ROS natively on the latest version of the Nao [6]. This was believed to be the first initiative of its kind for the Nao robot.

III. HARDWARE OVERVIEW

A diagram of the NimbRo-OP that highlights all of the main hardware features is shown in Figure 2. The robot is 95 cm tall and weighs a total of 6.6 kg with the battery. This combination of height and weight was chosen so as to allow the robot to be driven using only a single actuator per joint. This decreases the cost and complexity of the design, and allows the robot to exhibit quite large ranges of motion in its 20 degrees of freedom. Robotis Dynamixel MX series actuators are used for all of the joints, of which there are two in the neck, three in each arm and six in each leg. All of the Dynamixel servos are chained together and addressed using a single one-wire TTL serial bus.

At the heart of the robot is a Zotac Zbox nano XS PC, featuring a dual-core AMD E-450 1.65 GHz processor with 2 GB RAM and a 64 GB solid state disk, and various communication interfaces including USB 3.0, HDMI and Gigabit Ethernet ports. A USB WiFi adapter allows also for wireless networking. Data connections to the robot automatically switch between TCP/IP and UDP depending on whether the connection is wireless or not. The camera in the NimbRo-OP’s right eye, a Logitech C905 model fitted with a wide-angle fisheye lens, is also connected to the PC via USB. The extremely wide field of view is convenient for keeping multiple objects in view at the same time.

A CM730 control board from Robotis, as used in their DARwIn-OP robot, sits at the approximate center of mass of the robot in the trunk. This board incorporates a reprogrammable 32-bit ARM Cortex CPU and an inertial measurement unit, featuring both a three-axis accelerometer and a three-axis gyroscope. Currently this CPU is simply used to relay the sensory data to the computer and interface with the servos. Three buttons and an array of multicolor LED lights are connected to the CM730, and are available for custom use. As a non-standard addition, a three-axis compass has been mounted in the trunk and interfaced to the CM730. This allows the directional heading of the robot to be estimated. Appropriate software for the anytime recalibration of the compass has been developed. More detailed descriptions of the NimbRo-OP hardware can be found in [7] and [8].

IV. SOFTWARE ARCHITECTURE

The NimbRo-OP software architecture makes use of ROS’s native ability to split a software solution into multiple independent processes called nodes. Each node handles a certain aspect of the overall control task, and can be written, compiled and launched separately from the other nodes if required. The nodes are coupled using the ROS communication infrastructure and exchange information in a direct peer-to-peer manner via ROS topics, service calls, shared memory, and more. A decoupled architecture of this type is advantageous in that it can be implemented in a very modular way, with relatively high independence between the various elements of the system. Another advantage is that it naturally can be split along the process boundaries and run on multiple cores, in a fashion dynamically managed by the operating system scheduler.

The NimbRo-OP software framework is implemented almost exclusively in C++, with only miscellaneous use of additional scripting to perform tasks such as setting up a computer for initial use of the framework, compiling the package documentation, and providing framework-specific command line tools for everyday use. XML-based launch scripts exist for all of the main tasks and configurations of the framework, and are executed using the native ROS launch tool. The framework runs on a Linux operating system, nominally Ubuntu. This system constraint is predominantly imposed by the compatibility requirements of ROS itself.

A schematic of the NimbRo-OP ROS framework software architecture is shown in Figure 3. The figure is generally arranged such that the perception and state estimation tasks appear on the left, the lower-level sensor and motion control tasks (i.e. Motion Control Layer; see Section V) appear on the right, and the higher level planning and control tasks appear in the middle.

At the heart of the lower level control section is the Robot Control node, which contains the main real-time control loop that communicates with the sensors and actuators, the camera...
Fig. 3. Diagram of the NimbRo-OP ROS framework software architecture. Boxes with a dashed outline represent hardware elements, boxes with rounded corners represent auxiliary software tools that are not necessarily required for execution of the framework, and the arrows show the flow of information. Boxes with a wavy lower edge represent data files. The visualization tools use information from throughout the entire architecture.

Fig. 4. Schematic of the servo control architecture.

excluded. This communication occurs via the CM730 control board, and an exchangeable software component referred to as the hardware interface. The Robot Control node makes use of the RBDL library for various kinematic and dynamic calculations, which in turn requires a model of the NimbRo-OP in Unified Robot Description Format (URDF) format, loaded from disk. Even though the servos are driven in the Robot Control node, the coordination of the actual robot motions are left to the motion modules. One of these modules, a keyframe motion player, can execute motion trajectories that are read from file. In control of the motion modules and responsible for all higher level planning is the behavior control node. In the case of robot soccer, this reads game state data from the Game Controller node.

A summary of the vision and localization nodes can be seen on the left-hand side of Figure 3. Images from the camera are made available via the camera driver, and forwarded for processing by the color calibration tool and vision processing node. Further tools include the vision graphical user interface, and the image downscaler, described in Section VI-A along with the remainder of the vision system. The detections from the vision processing are read by the behavior control node, and are used to drive the robot localization.

V. MOTION CONTROL LAYER

A. Robot Control Node

As indicated in Figure 3, the Robot Control node is the core of the Motion Control Layer. For the layers that come above it, it serves to abstract away lower level details such as the internal robot model, kinematics and dynamics. To preserve generality and portability, the Robot Control node is extended via a plugin scheme to implement the hardware interface. Two hardware interfaces have been developed within the scope of the NimbRo-OP project, one to implement the communication with the actual robot, and one to simulate such communications with an adjustably noisy and time-delayed model. The latter, referred to as the dummy interface, is advantageous for development in that code can be tested without risking damage to the robot.

Robot Control largely uses the RBDL library for its kinematic and dynamic calculations. In particular, the RBDL Newton-Euler inverse dynamics algorithm is used to estimate the joint torques required for a particular motion. These estimates are passed to a compliant servo controller, based on a detailed model of the servos, that ensures that the robot remains compliant while still following the target trajectories. This servo control architecture is shown in Figure 4.

To avoid latencies, missed cycles and/or jitter, which can lead to undesired robot behavior, the Robot Control loop was designed to be as CPU and resource efficient as possible. Real-time performance of this node is paramount, so it is given real-time privileges and uses the Linux high-precision timerfd API to ensure that timing constraints are met. The timer period is nominally 8 ms, giving rise to a nominal 125 Hz update rate.

B. Motion Modules

In addition to the plugin scheme implemented by Robot Control to determine the robot hardware interface, a second
The task of robot state estimation can be broken down into several components. The pose of the robot—in terms of the configuration of all the body parts relative to one another—is determined from the joint encoders via a kinematic model of the robot and the corresponding forward kinematics. The encoders are located directly on the joint axles, so they already incorporate any servo non-linearities, in particular backlash, into their returned measurements. The robot torso attitude is estimated based on 3D accelerometer and gyroscope measurements by means of an angle estimation filter. This has been demonstrated to provide a low noise, low latency and drift-free attitude estimate. What remains is the requirement for an estimate of the global position of the robot in its environment,
in this case a soccer field. For this purpose, a particle filter is used that processes the landmark detections from the vision node, namely the detected white line crossings and goal posts, as well as the compass readings. The implementation of localization on the NimbRo-OP was ported from the work in [13], and functions satisfactorily, but is currently only in a beta stage. Future work includes the consideration of the landmark orientations and the actual white line segments, as well as general performance tuning of the particle filter.

VII. CONFIGURATION SERVER

Due to the large number of parameters in the NimbRo-OP software, it is highly unpractical or even infeasible to configure and tune the performance of the robot if these parameters are incorporated in the source code as hard-coded constants. Modifying hard-coded constants requires recompilation and redeployment to the robot, potentially a very time-consuming process, and does not allow for runtime changes to parameters. To address this issue, the configuration server was developed. Implemented as a ROS node, the configuration server is a centralized manager and storage location for system parameters. It is similar in idea to the native ROS parameter server, but with many crucial improvements that make it suitable for use in the NimbRo-OP software framework. In particular, much effort was put into ensuring that the runtime reconfigurability of the parameters is well supported, and that parameters can be systematically shared between nodes. The existing dynamic_reconfigure ROS package, which extends the ROS parameter server, was insufficient for the task as it did not allow the reconfigurable parameters to be shared globally between the various nodes of the system. The parameters are stored in a hierarchical structure in the server, with local copies of the relevant parameters being kept in each of the nodes for performance reasons. The appropriate nodes are notified via service calls whenever a parameter is changed on the server. Appropriate functionality exists to be able to load and save the entire parameter hierarchy. The default parameter values on system startup are taken from a well-defined configuration file, stored on each robot.

VIII. BEHAVIOR CONTROL

A. Behavior Frameworks

In order to perform tasks such as the playing of soccer, the NimbRo-OP needs to be able to be programmed with complex agent behaviors. Here, the term behavior is used to refer to an observable and coordinated pattern of activity. As the behaviors constitute the higher-level control of the robot, it is generally desired that such behaviors operate on a suitably abstracted view of the environment, allowing the lower-level layers, such as the Motion Control Layer described in Section V, to take care of the specifics of the walking and servo control aspects for example. Two generic cross-platform C++ frameworks were developed for the implementation of behaviors on the NimbRo-OP robot, the State Controller Library and the Behavior Control Framework [14]. The former is a state-based approach and generalizes the concept of finite state machines to multi-action planning derivatives thereof, while the latter is a behavior-based approach that exploits a hierarchical structure and the concept of inhibitions to allow for dynamic transitioning.

B. Soccer Behaviors

The soccer behaviors of the NimbRo-OP are based on the Behavior Control Framework, with the State Controller Library being used in a supporting role to implement finite state machines within the individual behaviors if and as required. As the lower-level motions are already handled by the Motion Control Layer, the soccer behaviors were split into only three hierarchical behavior layers, the soccer layer, the control layer, and the ROS interface layer. Each non-interface layer contains a pool of robot behaviors that compete dynamically via user-defined inhibitions for control of the robot. The control layer contains skill-oriented behaviors such as Dribble, Kick and Go Behind Ball, the execution of which are resolved at runtime based on the game state and the perceptions of the robot. The soccer layer on the other hand, contains behaviors of even greater abstraction, including in particular Play Soccer. The purpose of the soccer layer is to accommodate the inclusion of additional behaviors, that can address any auxiliary aspects of the soccer game, such as the technical challenges at RoboCup. The ROS interface layer is a special behavior layer with no child behaviors. Instead, it handles the communication of the input and output data of the behavior node over the ROS topics and services. As this allows the implementation of the remaining two behavior layers to be ROS-independent, this makes the behaviors more portable to other systems.

In terms of behaviors, the NimbRo-OP is currently capable of searching for the ball, walking behind it while taking into account any perceived obstacles, dribbling it towards the target half of the field, and kicking the ball towards the goal. Additional behaviors of the control layer that execute in parallel to this include a game control behavior that processes the signals of the RoboCup game controller during a match, and a head control behavior, which ensures that the robot's camera is always pointing in a suitable direction during the game. It is to be noted however, that despite all that has been achieved in terms of behavior control so far, there will be more advanced behaviors to come in the future software releases.

IX. SYSTEM VISUALIZATION

Visualizations are indispensable tools at all stages of the code development cycle, in particular for the purposes of debugging and testing. They can also relay valuable state information to the operator during normal runtime situations. The visualization tools for the NimbRo-OP are all implemented as widgets for the ROS-standard RQT graphical user interface (GUI), and can be seen in Figure 8. The most fundamental of these widgets is the RViz plugin, which provides a highly customizable 3D visualization environment within which the robot can be displayed. The robot is shown in either its current or desired pose, as specified by its joint angles, and at the global location it currently thinks it is at. A virtual soccer field environment can be enabled to augment the view. Many additional features can be displayed in the 3D virtual environment, including custom point markers, line traces, footstep locations, servo torques, link coordinate frames, and object detections such as ball, goal, obstacle and landmark detections. These allow the user to get a quick visual insight into the state of the robot, and detect any obvious problems or discrepancies.

The diagnostics widget, the leftmost widget in Figure 8 displays the robot’s current battery voltage level and maximum
servo temperature. It also displays the current motion state, as defined in Robot Control and the motion modules, and allows the user to fade the servos in and out. The walk control widget, located above RViz in the figure, allows the user to issue manual gait commands and otherwise control the gait module, provided that the currently executing behavior code is not writing values of its own. This is useful for instance, for the testing of the Motion Control Layer. The parameter tuner widget allows the user to view, organize, modify, load and save parameters of the configuration server. Numeric parameters are represented and can be modified using sliders and spin boxes, while checkboxes are used for boolean parameters. This permits the user to manually access the configuration server and modify aspects of the system at runtime, either for testing or tuning purposes.

The final visualization that can be seen in Figure 8 is the plotter widget. This is a plugin that can be used to trace and plot the time history of any nominated variables throughout the entire framework code. The node in which the variable appears just needs to publish its value to the plotter, where it is automatically placed into a circular buffer and made available for display to the user. The plotter variables are stored in a tree hierarchy, which is presented to the user so that a selection of variables to plot can be made. An important feature of the plotter is that the mouse cursor can be used to view the robot’s state at a past time. This affects what is shown in the 3D visualization. The RQT tool had to be modified in order to allow the negative time changes that are observed when the user scrolls back in time. This extension to RQT is encapsulated in the so-called timewarp package. Finally, at any point in time the plotted data can be flushed to a ROS bag using the save feature of the widget.

X. Conclusion

In this paper a ROS-based software framework was presented for the NimbRo-OP robot, a humanoid open platform in development by team NimbRo of the University of Bonn. This is the second software release to be undertaken for this robot, but the first to feature the ROS middleware. All dependencies and inclusions of the original Robotis software framework have been rewritten and/or removed. The decision to release the framework open source was so as to support collaboration and community-based improvements.

The NimbRo-OP ROS framework has been demonstrated publicly on numerous occasions, including at ICRA 2013 and RoboCup 2013, where it scored its first official soccer competition goal. The framework was also demonstrated in an earlier form at the RoboCup German Open 2013, where the NimbRo-OP received the HARTING Open-Source Award. Work on the NimbRo-OP is still an ongoing project however, so accordingly the ROS framework presented in this paper is expected to remain subject to further revisions and additions. Future work on the framework includes the incorporation of a multi-hypothesis Kalman filter for object filtering and tracking, the integration of a physics-based simulator for testing, and the development of more advanced soccer behaviors. Additional goals include the development of a more advanced gait, and the tuning of the localization for improved robustness.

Fig. 8. Screenshot of the RQT visualization tool, showing the RViz, walk control, plotter, parameter tuner and diagnostics widgets.

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