

A Comprehensive Obstacle Avoidance System of Mobile Robots Using an Adaptive Threshold Clustering and the Morphin Algorithm

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Abstract. To solve the problem of obstacle avoidance for a mobile robot in unknown environment, a comprehensive obstacle avoidance system (called ATCM system) is developed. It integrates obstacle detection, obstacle classification, collision prediction and obstacle avoidance. Especially, an Adaptive-Threshold Clustering algorithm is developed to detect obstacles, and the Morphin algorithm is applied for path planning when the robot predicts a collision ahead. A dynamic circular window is set to continuously scan the surrounding environment of the robot during the task period. The simulation results show that the obstacle avoidance system enables robot to avoid any static and dynamic obstacles effectively.

Keywords: adaptive threshold clustering; Morphin algorithm; obstacle detection, obstacle classification, collision prediction, collision avoidance.

1 Introduction

Obstacle avoidance in mobile robots' navigation is a key issue that has attracted much attention from researchers [1-3]. To make right decisions in response to the dynamics of surrounding environments of a robot, the robot should be able to collect data from sensors and do appropriate information processing. Currently, sensors commonly used for obstacle avoidance, include visual sensors [4], ultrasonic sensors [5], infrared sensors [6] and laser sensors [7-8]. Laser sensors are popularly used due to their wide detection range and high measurement accuracy. The obstacle avoidance includes include such steps as obstacle detection, collision prediction, avoidance, and finally plan an appropriate path.

Yu et al. [9] used the confidence distance theory to process the Velodyne data from a 3D laser sensor and the motion state information from a 4-wire laser sensor Ibeo, and thus to derive the position of the moving obstacle in a grid map according to the fusion results. Huang et al. [10] proposed a dynamic obstacle detection, using a support vector machine based on the space-time feature vector to recognize dynamic obstacles. Although these methods are well performed for the detection of obstacles, they didn't show the obstacle's

trajectory prediction and collision avoidance strategy. Liu et al. [11] proposed an improved vector field histogram avoidance algorithm by adjusting the adaptive threshold using the positional relationship between the obstacle and the target point. However, the researchers only discussed the obstacle avoidance of static obstacle without the exploration of dynamic obstacle detection and collision prediction. Yang et al [12] proposed an approach to detecting the speed and direction of an obstacle in terms of least Euclidean distance between the robot and the edge of the obstacle, thus to implement the plan of the robot's obstacle avoidance. But this approach is not appropriate for diversity of obstacles, as the shape of dynamic obstacles is limited to circular objects.

Most of research focused on partial process of obstacle avoidance. There is little exploration on the entire obstacle avoidance system. This does not benefit the performance assessment of the whole robot's navigation process. In this paper, we develop a comprehensive obstacle avoidance system, comprised of laser data acquisition, obstacle detection, collision prediction and avoidance by combining the Adaptive Threshold Clustering, based on the method in [13], and the Morphin algorithm [15][16], named as ATCM.

The basic idea of ATCM is that a mobile robot first constructs a rolling window with the robot as a centre, classifies obstacles in the window using the adaptive-threshold clustering algorithm, predicts possible collision, and uses the Morphin algorithm to avoid obstacles when a collision in front of the robot is predicted; then, the robot updates the state and the dynamic circular window, and move toward the generated local sub-target, until it reaches the global target. Algorithm 1 shows the pseudocode of the ATCM System.

2 Obstacle detection

The dynamic and static obstacles existing in the environment can be recognized based on the data from sensors. The data points within the window are clustered to produce a chain of obstacles, of which the types (static, dynamic or new) will be further classified. For dynamic obstacles, their speed and moving direction will be calculated.

2.1 Laser sensor data acquisition

It is easy to build and maintain a Grid Map with a specified resolution [14]. In this research, a grid map is used to establish the environment model. Assume the robot itself adopts the same coordinate system as the world coordinate system. Namely, the starting point of the robot coincides with the origin of the global coordinate system. To obtain obstacle information, the German company SICK's two-dimensional laser sensor is used to scan the surrounding environment. The distance between a robot to an obstacle is calculated based on the time interval from the time when laser pulse is emitted to hit an object to the time when a laser pulse is received back from the object. The laser scanner is configured to scan the front semicircle of the robot in the range $[0^\circ, 180^\circ]$ with the angular resolution of 0.5° .

Fig. 1 shows the positions of a robot and an obstacle. The location of an obstacle can

Algorithm 1 ATCM($r_w, R, Target$)

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1: Initialise( $R, r_w$ ); /*set window with radius  $r_w$ */;
2:  $t=0$ ;
3: while ( $R$  has not reached  $Target$ ) do
4:    $D=Read\_Data()$ ; /*from laser scanner*/;
5:    $Ob_{chain}(t)=Clustering(D)$ ;
6:   for ( $O_k(t) \in Ob_{chain}(t)$ ) do
7:      $O_{type}=Classification(O_k(t), Ob_{chain}(t-1))$ ;
8:      $O_{info}=Calculate\_Obstacle\_Info(O_k(t), O_{type})$ ;
9:      $Collision=Collision\_Prediction(R, O_{info})$ ;
10:    if ( $Collision \neq NULL$ ) then
11:       $Morphin(R, Collision)$ ; /*collision avoiding*/
12:      Break;
13:    end if
14:  end for
15:   $Update(R, r_w)$ ;
16:   $t=t+1$ ;
17: end while

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be represented with the pair of (ρ_i, α_i) in the local polar coordinates with the robot as an original point, ρ_i is the length of a laser beam, indicating the distance between the obstacle and the robot, $\rho_i \in [0^\circ, 180^\circ]$, i is the index of the laser beam, $i = 0 \dots 360$; α_i is the angle between laser beam and the robot's direction, θ_R is the angle of the robot. The position of the obstacle in the global coordinate system is expressed as Eq. (1). The location (x_o', y_o') in the grid map of an object with global coordinates (x_o, y_o) can be calculated with Eq. (2).

$$\begin{cases} x_o = x_R + \rho_i \cos(\theta_R + \alpha_i) \\ y_o = y_R + \rho_i \sin(\theta_R + \alpha_i) \end{cases} \quad (1)$$

$$\begin{cases} x'_o = \pi r^2 = floor\left(\frac{x_o}{r} + \frac{1}{2}\right) \\ y'_o = floor\left(\frac{y_o}{r} + \frac{1}{2}\right) \end{cases} \quad (2)$$

where, r is the resolution of the grid map (see Fig. 2).

2.2 Barrier point clustering

When a robot is moving in a grid map, a set of data points is obtained by scanning obstacles with the laser sensor. To determine an obstacle (i.e. a cluster), an adaptive threshold nearest neighbor clustering method is developed to separate data points.

The data out of the circular window (i.e. $\rho > r_w$) will not be used for clustering, for instance, O_3 in Fig. 3, as $\rho_3 > r_w$. The distance between two data points is calculated with Euclidean distance. Two available consecutive data points (p_2 and p_4) belong to different obstacles, respectively, if the distance between them is larger than the distance between two neighbouring laser beams with the same length and the scanning resolution 0.5° (e.g. ρ_1 and ρ_2). Therefore, a threshold θ is defined as Eq. (3). It is proportional to the value of $[\rho(t) \sin(0.5)]$, which approximates the distance between two neighbouring data points,

belonging to a cluster. Obviously, the threshold Θ is adaptive to the current laser beam $\rho(t)$. As an obstacle could have an irregular shape, the adaptive rate λ ($\lambda > 1$) is introduced to represent the irregularity of obstacle shapes. The introduction of λ could also allow putting two closed obstacles to one cluster. Hence, the adaptive threshold makes the clustering algorithm robust. We set λ to a value close to 1 for rectangle of obstacles.

$$\theta = \lambda \rho(t) \sin(0.5^\circ) \quad (3)$$

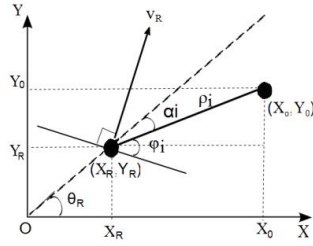


Fig. 1. The robot model

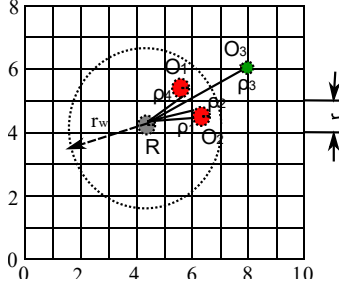


Fig. 2. A Robot and obstacles on the Grid Map

In each step of data clustering, the distance between the current data point and the prior data point is calculated, and compared with the adaptive threshold. If it is larger than the threshold, then the current data point and the prior data point belong to the same cluster, otherwise, the current data point represents a new obstacle. After clustering, a chain of obstacles Ob_chain (Eq. (4)) at time t is obtained. Each obstacle $O_k(t)$ can be expressed with vector of four items as shown in Eq. (5).

$$Ob_chain = \{O_1(t), O_2(t), \dots, O_n(t)\} \quad (4)$$

$$O_k(t) = (Z_k(t), S_k(t), \xi_k(t), V_k(t)) \quad (5)$$

$Z_k(t)$ indicates the centroid of the obstacle; $S_k(t)$ indicates the area that the obstacle occupies in the grid map; $\xi_k(t)$ is the coincidence of data points in cluster C_k to the data points in previous clusters. $V_k(t)$ indicates the speed of the dynamic obstacle. When $V_k(t) = 0$ indicates the obstacle is static. Assume cluster C_k represents obstacle O_k . In the cluster, there are n_k laser beams, $\{l_1, \dots, l_{n(k)}\}$ in the dynamic window of the robot, each laser beam is represented with a pair of (ρ, α) .

The center $Z_k(t)$ of Obstacle O_k can be calculated with Eq. (6), and using the Eq. (1), we can get the global coordinates of the center.

$$\bar{\alpha}_k = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{n(k)} \alpha_i}{n(k)}, \bar{\rho}_k = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{n(k)} \rho_i}{n(k)}. \quad (6)$$

We can get the $\min(\rho)$, and $\max(\rho)$, $\min(\alpha)$, and $\max(\alpha)$ in the cluster C_k . Using Eq. (1), we can calculate $(x_{k,min}, y_{k,min})$, and $(x_{k,max}, y_{k,max})$; Further, using Eq. (2), we can get $(x'_{k,min}, y'_{k,min})$, and $(x'_{k,max}, y'_{k,max})$ in the grid map. Therefore, the area S_k includes all grids within

the ranges of coordinates in Eq. (7).

$$\begin{cases} x'_k \in [x'_{k,min}, x'_{k,max}], \\ y'_k \in [y'_{k,min}, y'_{k,max}]. \end{cases} \quad (7)$$

Using Eq. (1) and (2), we can calculate the grid coordinates of all data points in a cluster C_k at time t . A 3*3 grid template is used, where the data point is in the center of the template. The evaluation if the template of each data point at time t is matched to the templates of data points at time $t-1$ that fall into the area of $S_k(t)$ is done by comparing their coordinates in the grid map. For each data point at time t in C_k , representing O_k , the coincidence is defined as:

$$\zeta_i = \frac{\tau}{9}, \quad i = 1 \dots n(k). \quad (8)$$

where, τ is the overlapped grid number between templates of two data points at times t and $t-1$, respectively. Hence, the coincidence of obstacle O_k is defined as:

$$\xi_k(t) = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{n(k)} \zeta_i}{n_k}. \quad (9)$$

To determine the type of an obstacle, we need to analyse the correlation between two obstacles in current clusters and previous clusters, respectively. Two parameters are used to represent the correlation between two obstacles: the distance between two cluster's centers, denoted as δ , and the non-overlapping rate, denoted as η . The spatial correlation function is shown in Eq. (10), where, δ and η can be calculated with Eq. (11), and $\gamma_\delta, \gamma_\eta$ represent the efficiencies.

$$\varsigma_{k_1, k_2} = \varsigma(O_{k_1}(t), O_{k_2}(t-1)) = \gamma_\delta \frac{1}{\delta+1} + \gamma_\eta \frac{1}{\eta+1} \quad (10)$$

$$\delta = \|Z_{k_1}(t), Z_{k_2}(t-1)\|, \quad \eta = 1 - \frac{S_{O_{k_1}(t)} \cap S_{O_{k_2}(t-1)}}{S_{O_{k_1}(t)} \cup S_{O_{k_2}(t-1)}} \quad (11)$$

When two obstacles at times t and $t-1$ are the same obstacle, they should have the same center, namely $\delta=0$. When two obstacles are complete overlap, $\eta=0$; when two obstacles are complete separated, $\eta = 1$. Therefore, if we set $\gamma_\delta=0.5$, and $\gamma_\eta = 0.5$, when the two obstacles completely overlap, $\varsigma = 1$. The maximum spatial correlation of Obstacle $O_{k(t)}$ is the maximum value among all spatial correlations between $O_{k(t)} \in Ob_chain(t)$ and all obstacles in $Ob_chain(t-1)$, expressed as Eq. (12).

$$\varsigma_{k(t), max} = \max_{k_2=1..n_k(t-1)} (\varsigma_{k(t), k_2}). \quad (12)$$

2.3 Identify the type of an obstacle

An obstacle chain, $Ob_chain = \{O_1(t), O_2(t), \dots, O_k(t)\}$, is produced after clustering. For each obstacle, we can calculate the center $Z_k(t)$, the grid area $S_k(t)$, and the coincidence $\xi_k(t)$, respectively. Then the spatial correlation can be calculated, and the obstacle with maximum spatial correlation $\varsigma_{k(t), max}$ can be obtained. Three possible obstacle types are

static, new and dynamic, as shown in Fig. 3(a)-(c).

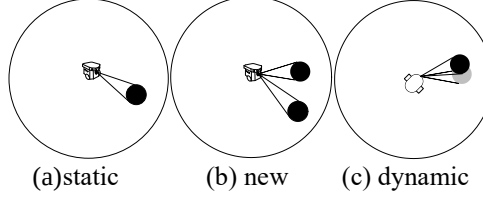


Fig. 3 Different types of obstacles

Two thresholds $\theta_{\zeta 1}$ and $\theta_{\zeta 2}$ of the spatial correlation are set for distinguishing a new or a static obstacle. Fig. 3 (a) shows a static obstacle, when $\zeta_{k,max} > \theta_{\zeta 2}$; Fig. 3 (b) shows a new obstacle, when $\zeta_{k,max} < \theta_{\zeta 1}$; Fig. 3 (c) shows a dynamic obstacle. When the value $\zeta_{k,max} \in [\theta_{\zeta 1}, \theta_{\zeta 2}]$, then the obstacle is possibly a dynamic obstacle. It will be further evaluated in terms of center distance δ ($0 \leq \delta < r_w$) between two obstacles and the coincidence $\xi_k(t)$. A threshold θ_δ is set to distinguish static and dynamic obstacle. If $\delta < \theta_\delta$, the obstacle is static, otherwise, the obstacle is evaluated in terms of the coincidence $\xi_k(t)$. A threshold θ_ξ is set as well. If $\xi_k(t) \geq \theta_\xi$, then the obstacle is static, otherwise, it is dynamic. Fig.4 illustrates the process of the obstacle classification using a simple decision tree.

2.4 Movement of a dynamic obstacle

The dynamic obstacles are further analyzed to calculate the speed and angle of their movement (Fig.5). Assume the time interval of two rounds of laser scanning is T . We can catch up the global coordinates of a moving robot at time t and $t-T$, $R(x(t), y(t))$ and $R(x(t-T), y(t-T))$. Hence, we always can calculate the global coordinates of an obstacle, $O_k(x_k(t), y_k(t))$ and $O_k(x_k(t-T), y_k(t-T))$, given the values from laser beams at time t and $t-T$, using Eq. (1).

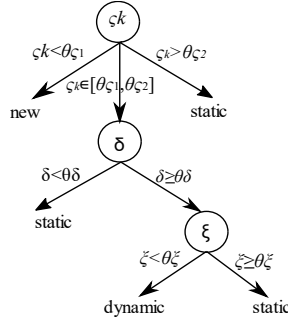
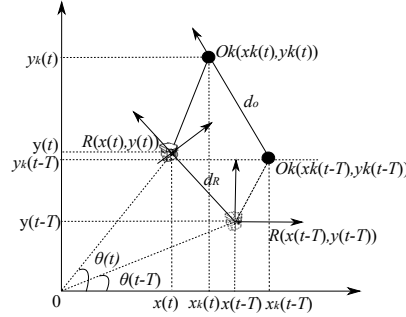


Fig. 4 The decision tree of obstacle classification **Fig. 5** Motion process of an obstacle

The moving distance d_o , speed v_o and the direction angle α_o of the dynamic obstacle from $t-T$ to t can be calculated with Eqs. (13)-(15). Similarly, the distance d_R , speed v_R and the direction angle α_R of the moving robot from $t-T$ to t can be calculated as well.

$$d_o = \sqrt{[x_k(t) - x_k(t-T)]^2 + [y_k(t) - y_k(t-T)]^2} \quad (13)$$

$$v_o = \frac{d_o}{T} \quad (14)$$

$$\alpha_o = \arctan\left(\frac{y_k(t) - y_k(t-T)}{x_k(t) - x_k(t-T)}\right) \quad (15)$$

According to the states of the robot and the obstacle, the robot can predict the potential collisions ahead. There are six scenarios, when a robot is moving in its surrounding environment: (1) a static obstacle is in front of the robot, where the collision is just at the point of obstacle; (2) an obstacle at the probing area, moving at a faster speed than the robot, could pass the path before robot arrives the potential collision point; (3) an obstacle at the probing area, moving slower than the robot, has not arrived at the path, when robot arrives the potential collision point; (4) the robot and the obstacle may collide at the crossing point between robot's path and obstacle's path when the current speed, distance, and position of the robot and the obstacle make them arrive the point at the same time; (5) the robot and the obstacle are running in opposite direction, hence, the robot and the obstacle could collide at a point between the robot and the obstacle; (6) the robot is running in the same direction as an obstacle but is faster than the obstacle, then the robot may collide with the obstacle at some time.

4. Avoiding obstacle collision

We use the classic local path avoidance algorithm --- Morphin algorithm [15,16] to implement the path planning. As shown in **Fig. 6**, an obstacle that may collide with the robot is detected, a few alternative paths to avoid the obstacle are set in the front of the robot, and the optimal obstacle avoidance path is selected according to the current state of the robot and the evaluation function of the alternative paths.

In the Morphin algorithm, the robot is always assumed to face the obstacle (e.g. scenarios (1), (5), (6)). Hence, we can connect the robot's current position and the center of the obstacle to form a centerline, and draw several arcs on the left and right sides of the centerline and evaluate each arc by using Eq. (16).

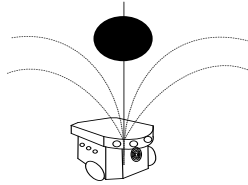


Fig. 6. Alternative paths in the Morphin algorithm

$$y = \begin{cases} \infty, & \text{the obstacle is above the arc,} \\ \varepsilon_1 P + \varepsilon_2 M + \varepsilon_3 \Delta L + \varepsilon_4 W, & \text{others.} \end{cases} \quad (16)$$

where, P represents the length of each arc path; M represents the inflection point parameter of each arc path; ΔL represents the average distance from each grid point to the sub-target point through which the arc passes; W represents the arc endpoint and the number of times the sub-target points intersect the obstacle grid; $\varepsilon_1, \varepsilon_2, \varepsilon_3, \varepsilon_4$ are the weights of the items, respectively. When the obstacle is above the arc, the value of the evaluation function y is infinite, and the arc with the smallest y value represents the local optimal path. For more details about the Morphin algorithm, please refer to the research in [15][16]. In the scenarios (1), (5) and (6), a collision could occur, hence, the Morphin algorithm is called to update the robot's path with the optimal path for collision avoidance. In the scenarios (2) and (3), no collision could occur, hence, the robot will not take any measures and continue to run. In the scenario (4), the robot will stop running until the obstacle passes the predicted collision point.

3 Experiments

To validate the effectiveness of the proposed ATCM system, we conducted some experiments for robot moving from a specific starting point to a specific target. The experimental platform is MATLAB. All parameters in the experiments are set with trial and error method. The simulation environment is set to a 20x20 grid map with many obstacles. Grid resolution $r = 500mm$. The radius r_w of the dynamic window is set to 8 grids. As all obstacles added to the grid map have a regular shape, the adaptive rate λ of the threshold θ is set to 1.2; for simplicity, the parameters in the obstacle classification tree (Fig.4) are set as: $\theta_{c1}=0.30$, $\theta_{c2}=0.7$, $\theta_{\delta}=0.4$, $\theta_{\varepsilon}=0.5$, respectively. The parameters ($\varepsilon_1 \sim \varepsilon_4$) of Morphin Algorithm are set to 1, 1, 1.3 and 0.6, as in [16]. Three experiments are conducted: (1) without dynamic obstacles; (2) adding some dynamic obstacles in the grid environment; (3) a mixed case with static and dynamic obstacles.

3.1 Without dynamic obstacles

Fig. 7 shows the local path planning process of a mobile robot when there are no temporary obstacles in the environment. The mobile robot does not find any dynamic obstacles, except the fixed obstacles in the rolling window in the grid environment. Using the rolling window algorithm, each rolling step draws the rolling window centered on the current position and updates the window map. The mobile robot moves towards the next step. The local sub-targets are rolled forward step by step, and finally a trajectory is formed from the starting point to the target.

3.2 Adding instantly dynamic obstacles

Dynamic obstacle avoidance increases the computing complexity, as the robot needs to predict potential collision point in terms of the dynamics of the obstacle. Fig. 8 shows the simulation of the local path planning process by adding three types of dynamic obstacles to the grid map. The mobile robot starts from the starting point and relies on the sensor, and identifies the dynamic obstacle Ob1 in the current window. The robot calculates the

motion trajectory of Ob1, and predicts that it will not collide with Ob1. Hence, it will keep the original speed and moving direction. When the mobile robot moves and finds Ob2, a moving obstacle, and predicts that it could collide with Ob2. Hence, it stays in the place for a while until Ob2 passes the collision point. After the dynamic obstacle passes the collision point, the robot generates local sub-goal in the current window and moves. When the robot detects the dynamic obstacle Ob3 from the opposite side, the collision is unavoidable, and the collision point is predicted, then the robot calls the Morphin algorithm to get an optimal path, and moves following the path until reaching the specified target.

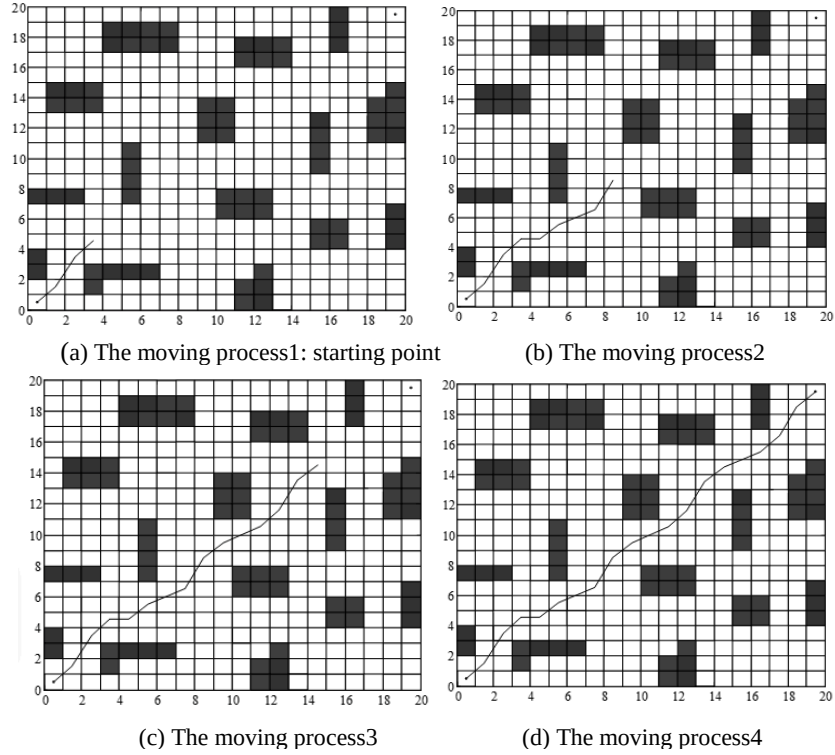


Fig. 7 Local path planning process without dynamic obstacles

3.3 A mixed case

The simulation results are shown in **Fig. 9**. In a real case, the circular window is updated in real time, and the center trajectory of the dynamic circular window is the trajectory of the robot. For demonstration, V_1 , V_2 , V_3 and V_4 denote circular windows, S_1 , S_2 , S_3 and S_4 denote detected static obstacles, and D_1 , D_2 , D_{3-1} , D_{3-2} , D_4 represent the detected dynamic obstacles. At C , E , F , the robot detects dynamic obstacles, and at A and D , the

robot detects the static obstacles, respectively. Table 1 provides the speeds and angles of the four detected dynamic obstacles at different positions in the grid map. Figure 10 shows the obstacle avoidance process in the mixed case.

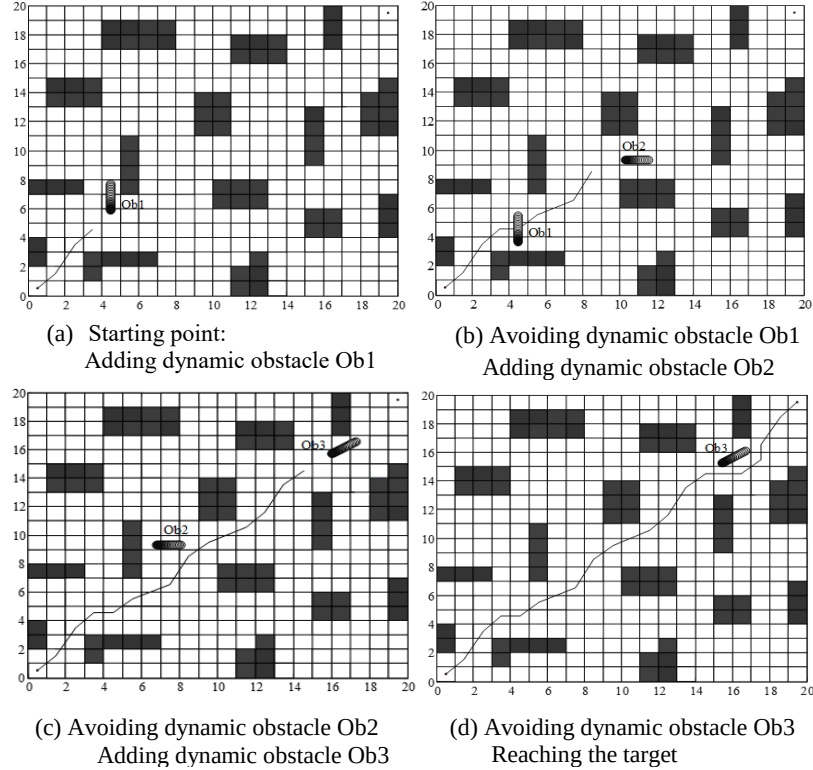


Fig. 8 Local path planning process for adding instantly dynamic obstacles

Table 1 Movement speed and angle of obstacle				
	D1	D2	D3	D4
v	450mm/s	760mm/s	510mm/s	805mm/s
α	80.83°	62.47 °	91.05 °	180.09

As shown in **Fig. 9**, the robot moves within the V1 window and builds a dynamic window map, where, the robot detects obstacle S1 at point A and calls Morphin algorithm to avoid the obstacle S1. In the phase from A to B, the moving obstacle D1 is recognised at the speed of 450mm/s and the angle of 80.83°; once the robot moves beyond the effective area of V1, a circular window of V2 is constructed immediately, and the moving obstacle

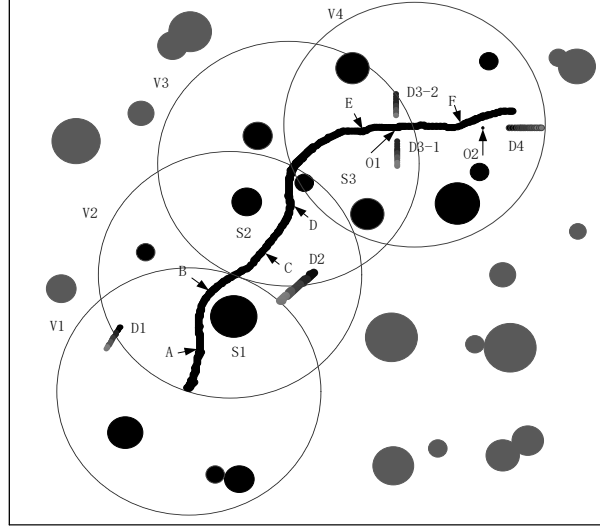


Fig. 9 Simulation results for the mix case

D2 is detected at the phase from C to D, with the speed of 760mm/s and the angle of 62.47° ; a static obstacle S3 is detected at D, hence, the Morphin algorithm is called immediately. Similarly, beyond the valid area of V2, a circular window of V3 is constructed. When reaching at E, the robot obtains the information that obstacle D3-1 is running at a speed of 510 mm/s and the angle of 91.05° , and predicts that a collision could occur at O1. In this case, the robot will stop, and wait for the detected obstacle D3-1 running away from the collision point to become D3-2, and then start running again. In the V4 window, at F, an opposite obstacle is detected, running at the speed of 805mm/s and the angle of 180.05° , which would produce a collision at O2 if robot does not change its direction immediately. In this case, the robot calls the Morphin algorithm immediately to change the path, thus to avoid the collision.

4 Conclusions

This research provided a comprehensive obstacle avoiding system, ATCM, for a mobile robot in unknown environment. A dynamic circular window is updated in real time during the navigation. The laser data in the circular window are clustered with the adaptive threshold nearest neighbor clustering algorithm. Three types of obstacles can be classified in terms of three parameters, spatial correlation, center distance, and coincidence of two obstacles. Then potential collision with detected static and dynamic obstacles is predicted. The Morphin algorithm is applied to find an alternative path when robot detects a potential collision ahead. The simulation results show that the mobile robot can effectively detect obstacles, predict potential collision, and avoid obstacles. The future work is to apply the ATCM system to laboratory robots, and improve the system.

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