DART: Diversity-enhanced Autonomy in Robot Teams

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Abstract This paper defines the research area of Diversity-enhanced Autonomy in Robot Teams (DART), a novel paradigm for the creation and design of policies for multi-robot coordination. While current approaches to multi-robot coordination have been successful in structured, well understood environments, they have not been successful in unstructured, uncertain environments, such as disaster response. The reason for this is not due to limitations in robot hardware, which has advanced significantly in the past decade, but in how multi-robot problems are solved. Even with significant advances in the field of multi-robot systems, the same problem-solving paradigm has remained: assumptions are made to simplify the problem, and a solution is optimized for those assumptions and deployed to the entire team. This results in brittle solutions that prove incapable if the original assumptions are invalidated. This paper introduces a new multi-robot problem-solving paradigm which relies on a diverse set of control policies that work together synergistically to make multi-robot systems more resilient in unstructured and uncertain environments.

1 Introduction

The field of multi-robot systems (MRS) is growing at a rapid pace. Research in MRS spans many different areas, including automated delivery [1–3], surveillance [4], and disaster response [5,6]. There have also been many successful demonstrations of increasing numbers of robots [7–12]. MRS have also been successfully deployed in the field including in warehousing [13], manufacturing [14], and entertainment [15]. While these outcomes show the promise of MRS, the environments in which MRS have been successful are highly controlled, and some are highly instrumented, enabling precise tuning of controllers and nearly perfect knowledge of environmental conditions.

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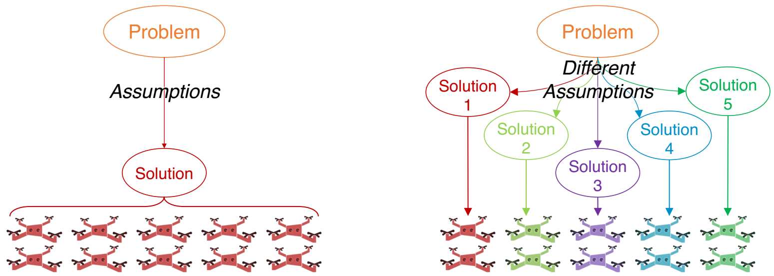
Many environments where MRS could be beneficial are not highly controlled or equipped with the extensive infrastructure often necessary to coordinate large teams of robots with state-of-the-art algorithms. For example, containing wildfires, searching collapsed buildings, patrolling borders, monitoring infrastructure, and containing oil spills all occur in highly dynamic and unique environments (no two collapsed buildings are the same), with high uncertainty and little control over other non-robot agents in the environment. One of the most desirable benefits of MRS is *robustness*, wherein robots can compensate for loss of capabilities by relying on other robots in the team. However, the uncertainty of many real-world environments renders current algorithms, even those designed for robustness, ineffectual. *The reason for this is not due to limitations in robot hardware, but in how multi-robot problems are solved.* Many controllers are so specialized and optimized for specific capabilities and conditions that they cannot cope with uncertainty. Thus, the true benefits of robustness in teams of robots have yet to be achieved.

2 Motivation

In disaster response alone, the potential impact of autonomous MRS is substantial: 60,000 people die each year in natural disasters [16]. This makes robots an ideal tool for disaster response. In fact, DJI announced that *one* properly equipped drone can find a missing person more than *five times faster* than traditional search methods [17]. However, most robots used in search and rescue today are teleoperated [18], requiring trained operators which may not be nearby. Disaster response that is autonomous, without the need for an expert operator, can reduce response time and save more lives, especially when a trained operator may be hours away.

The potential applications of autonomous MRS go well beyond disaster response, including military, agriculture, transportation, manufacturing, and fulfillment applications. However, current solutions for MRS have not successfully transitioned from controlled environments such as laboratories or warehouse facilities to the inherently high uncertainty in these complex environments. Without infrastructure that provides communication and localization, and without knowledge of or control over the environment, current state-of-the-art methods fail.

While the field of MRS has advanced significantly, the same problem-solving paradigm has remained. First, the problem is defined. Next, complexity is reduced by making several assumptions to simplify the problem, such as terrain and communication range. Finally, an optimal solution to that specific problem is designed and applied to all the robots in the team. This paradigm (Fig. 1a) limits the capability of MRS to cope with real-world environments. The solutions are brittle, as the assumptions made are easily invalidated and the optimized controller is not designed for real environments. In the best case, the controller is able to overcome these challenges, but it is not a good solution to the problem. In the worst case, the controller cannot cope, causing mission failure, loss of high-value assets, and casualties; after all, if the same failed controller is applied to all robots, all of them will fail.



(a) Curent MRS Paradigm (b) Proposed MRS Paradigm

Fig. 1: (a) The current MRS problem-solving paradigm is linear, applying the same solution to all robots. (b) The proposed novel paradigm takes advantage of diversity in controllers to handle various scenarios

3 A Potential Solution

Instead of applying the same controller to all robots, a new approach leveraging diversity in policies within the robot team can allow MRS to better cope with uncertain environments. Using an ensemble of diverse control policies to accomplish a coordinated task within a single team of robots can enable the team to adjust to different conditions. For example, with two unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) on a large security task, a natural result of using an ensemble of controllers is for one UAV to position itself high, to view the entire area, while the other UAV takes a closer look at areas of interest.

Diversity is well established as a way to improve the performance of human workgroups: studies have shown repeatedly that diverse groups outperform homogeneous groups [19–22]. Thus, *the current problem-solving paradigm in MRS does not reflect an effective approach to working in groups*. Instead of the current paradigm of solving problems and uniformly applying the solution to all robots as in Fig. 1a, several solutions to the problem under different assumptions and different styles of interaction should be developed and the best approaches combined to take advantage of their strengths under different conditions, as in Fig. 1b.

4 Current State of the Art

While diversity of robots with different physical embodiment or capabilities has previously been studied [23–26], there has been relatively little exploration into diversity in control policies within a single team of robots. Most research in this area is a result of studying ants that take different roles in foraging and house hunting [27–29] or collective transport [30], and applied to similar problems in robotics.

Unfortunately, in trying to model ant algorithms closely, these works do not take advantage of robot capabilities, including communication, sensing, and computation.

In Tang and Parker's ASyMTRe, robots take different roles depending on environmental conditions [31, 32], but the robots are all programmed to react the same. This leaves them vulnerable to unforeseen changes in capabilities or the environment, and does not enable robots to individually adjust their approaches.

A majority of work exploring control diversity in robots exists in behavior-based systems, most notably Balch's work in learning behavioral specialization for robot teams [33, 34]. Goldberg and Matarić evaluate multi-robot controllers based on the amount of interference and describe caste arbitration, where all robots have the same capabilities, but have different conditions for activating behaviors [35].

More recently, evolutionary robotics and agent-based systems have been appearing as a method for encouraging behavioral diversity and plasticity (individuals changing roles over time). Mouret and Doncieux review and benchmark published approaches to behavioral diversity, and show that fostering behavioral diversity substantially improves the evolutionary process in the investigated experiments, regardless of task [36]. Pugh *et al.* review quality diversity algorithms, which have resulted in a new class of algorithms that return an archive of diverse, high-quality behaviors in a single run [37]. Vassiliades and Christodoulou design behaviorally plastic agents (capable of switching between different behaviors in response to environmental changes) [38] and Umedachi *et al.* attempt to understand the underlying mechanism of the behavioral diversity of animals, then use the findings to build truly adaptive robots [39]. However, all of these approaches focus on training agents to act independently in the environment, and thus are not directly applicable to multi-robot problems where task completion relies on tight coordination, such as box-pushing, shape formation, wildfire containment, cooperative transport, etc. Furthermore, agents are trained in the environments where they will be used, which, especially in natural disasters, may not be possible.

Heterogeneity has also been studied extensively in insect and animal behavior. Jandt *et al.* study personality at multiple levels with regard to behavioral syndromes and insect societies, discussing fitness consequences of intra-colony behavioral variation [40]. Specifically, under varying environmental conditions, maintaining a mixture of individuals with different behavioral types may be more effective than individuals switching between behavioral types, which might be costly and inefficient. Slower, more accurate individuals can bring large quantities of food back to the colony when good abundance is constant, whereas faster "sloppier" individuals might be more efficient at exploiting resources in more frequently changing environments [41]. Burns and Dyer [42] found that ant colonies that maintain a mixture of different foraging types within a group allows colonies to respond more quickly to environmental fluctuation. On the other hand, maintaining a mixture of inflexible behavioral types can incur costs to the colony, such as overly aggressive types being aggressive to their own nestmates [43].

These results in insect and animal behavior studies point strongly to behaviorally heterogeneous teams having higher fitness in uncertain and dynamic environments, which has inspired many multi-robot approaches. However, there is a need to further the use of diversity as a tool for MRS, especially in tightly-coordinated tasks.

5 Some Open Problems in Diversity-enhanced Autonomy for Robot Teams

Much as human workgroups, as well as insects and animals, benefit from diversity in composition of the group, such variation of behavior would be beneficial for teams of robots operating in uncertain and unstructured environments. There exist many open problems in DART; some of the challenging open problems that must be addressed by the community are described here.

1. **Learning from Humans:** Humans provide a pool of diverse resources that can be tapped to develop diverse controllers that work well together. However, due to differences in human and robot capabilities (communication, locomotion, sensing, etc.), it is difficult to learn controllers by observing human in-person interaction. By limiting interaction to an interface (such as a mobile phone, tablet, or laptop), communication, locomotion, and sensing can be restricted to robot-like capabilities [44]. A major benefit of human-inspired controllers is the ability to communicate with and easily motivate study participants, as opposed to animal-inspired controllers. However, learning from human cooperation requires multi-agent learning tools for many agents. This is an area that is not yet well represented in the literature, save for several works [45–47].
2. **Deep Learning for MRS:** In order to learn from humans, or to learn directly from simulations, new machine learning tools must be developed for multi-agent systems. While some solutions exist in multi-agent learning, some focus on tasks that can be learned and completed alone [48, 49], and those that are suitable for tight coordination for a few (2-3) agents, are intractable for large numbers of agents that must tightly coordinate [50–52]. Tight coordination between a large team of agents, for example in wildfire containment, currently presents a significant computational challenge for existing multi-agent learning tools.
3. **Measures of Diversity and Fitness:** Taking inspiration from the study of behavioral diversity in social insect colonies, there is a need for understanding the impact of behavioral diversity on MRS in tightly coordinated tasks. To that end, measures of diversity and fitness must be developed that apply to MRS, such as Balch's Hierarchic Social Entropy [34]. Such tools will likely be task-specific at first, while the science of diversity-enhanced autonomy is established.
4. **Adjusting Policies Online:** To successfully utilize a diverse set of controllers, the team of robots must collectively reason about the role that each team member plays and automatically adjust their own roles to achieve an appropriately diverse team with an effective skill set. To do so, they must have the ability to measure the success of individual agents on a coordinated task, learning from their own and others' shortcomings and successes.

6 Discussion

This paper proposes a new research thrust that represents a paradigm-shift in problem-solving for multi-robot systems from a linear paradigm, where policies are optimized for a specific set of assumptions and applied to the entire team, to one where policies are developed with multiple sets of assumptions and exist synergistically within a team of robots. Such diversity in control policies will better prepare the team of robots for challenging environments, much like diversity in the knowledge base in human workgroups leads to higher quality solutions. Adoption of this new paradigm may lead to expanded success of multi-robot systems in the field, especially in unstructured and uncertain environments.

A small sample of open problems were discussed, but there exist many open problems in this space. By explicitly defining Diversity-enhanced Autonomy for Robot Teams, we hope to inspire the development of new tools for coping with uncertain, unstructured environments such as first response, precision agriculture, surveillance, and others.

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