

VBASR: The Vision System

Vision-Based Autonomous Security Robot

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this project is to develop a computer vision system that enables a robot to navigate the hallways of Bradley University's engineering building using a generic webcam as the only sensor. OpenCV2.0 programmed in C++ is the primary tool used to develop the vision system software.

Three algorithms were developed to identify the center of the hallway and guide the robot in the correct direction. The first two algorithms use a generic filter (normal, median, or Gaussian) followed by edge detection and then corner detection on the edge-detected image. The first algorithm identifies the strongest vertical lines on an image. Averaging the horizontal coordinates of the vertical lines indicates the location of the center of the hallway relative to the robot. The second algorithm utilizes the trapezoidal shape of the hallway formed where the floor meets the walls, as seen from the perspective of the robot. The y-coordinates associated with the trapezoid's legs are then compared to estimate robot orientation with respect to the walls. The third algorithm uses color to segment the floor from the rest of the features in the image (walls, ceiling, and obstacles). Once again, the trapezoidal shape appears and the center of the hallway is determined based on the location of the highest y-valued pixels identified as floor pixels.

Test data indicates that none of these algorithms is singularly sufficient; however, combining their results they can identify the direction a robot must turn to remain in the center of the hallway with 96.6% accuracy. Furthermore, leveraging the results of multiple algorithms produces more robust navigation, where one algorithm covers over the shortcomings of another. The vision system architecture is designed to execute algorithms in parallel. Such a structure enables the addition and removal of algorithms without adversely affecting the system as a whole. Further algorithms may be developed and easily added to improve navigation. Additionally, the system may intelligently ignore results from algorithms that are recognized as inappropriate for certain situations.

KEYWORDS

Machine Vision, Image Processing, Mobile Robot Navigation, Autonomous Vehicles

1. INTRODUCTION

VBASR (Vision-Based Autonomous Security Robot) is designed to patrol the second floor hallway of the engineering building during the after-hours of a regular school day. Essentially, VBASR is a mobile, intelligent security camera able to locate and navigate to specific rooms and photograph any intruders it encounters. VBASR: The Vision System is a proof-of-concept for the design and development of the machine vision system necessary to implement VBASR. The primary goal for this project is a robust, vision-based navigation system.

Sage et al. [1] performed similar work using computer vision to detect motion for security systems. DeSouza and Kak [2] present an exhaustive survey of computer vision techniques, which provided inspiration for VBASR. Other excellent resources for familiarization with foundational computer vision concepts and terminology include [3], [4], and [5].



Figure 1. iRobot Create and accessories

1.1 Platform

VBASR is primarily a machine vision project; therefore, a chassis that requires little modification is desirable. Figure 1 shows the iRobot Create chassis selected as the robot platform. A simple webcam mounted in the cargo bay and an onboard computer are the only additional hardware necessary for VBASR. Microsoft Robotics Developers Studio (MRDS) is used to control the iRobot Create and OpenCV2.0 computer vision libraries programmed in C++ are utilized to implement the vision algorithms. Since VBASR is currently a proof-of-concept, no mountable onboard computer was selected. Ideally, a single-board computer running

MRDS in a Windows environment should be employed. For development, a generic HP laptop running the Windows 7 OS was used.

1.2 Problem Description

Given an image of the hallway, such as the one shown in Figure 2, how would a robot choose which direction to turn to travel down the center of the hall? Humans can solve this problem using vision intuitively without a concentrated effort. VBASR must make such decisions using similar information, but must accomplish it within the limitations of electronic circuitry.



Figure 2. Example image of hallway

One obvious difficulty with the image in Figure 2 is the lack of depth perception. Stereoscopic vision could be used to ascertain depth information [6], but VBASR is designed to use a single webcam, making depth perception on a single image extremely difficult. Other interesting methods include utilizing tri-nocular (peripheral) vision [7] or wide-angle sensors in addition to peripheral information [8]. Further research has been done involving omnidirectional vision [9], [10], however, all these methods are outside the scope of VBASR. Depth can also be determined using infrared or ultrasonic sensors to measure the distance to walls or the end of the hallway, but is it possible to navigate only using machine vision?

Three different algorithms were developed to navigate using a webcam as the only sensor. The compilation of those three algorithms constitutes VBASR: The Vision System. Each algorithm independently determines the direction VBASR should navigate, selecting from one of seven general directions: Hard Left, Left, Slight Left, Straight, Slight Right, Right, and Hard Right. Each direction is given an integer representation: 0=Hard Left through 6=Hard Right. A resolver function then considers information from each individual algorithm and determines the final direction of travel.

A library of three hundred hallway images was used to test the accuracy of the VBASR's vision system. These three hundred images represent a cleaned data set where markedly similar images were removed to prevent redundancy. Biasing the data with such redundancy could lead to an overly optimistic or pessimistic evaluation of the system. Additionally, images taken within one foot of the wall were discarded. Given that VBASR is successfully navigating its environment, VBASR should rarely encounter situations where it is in close proximity to a wall. The library was preprocessed to assign an ideal direction to each

image, which was encoded in the filename. Every image was examined and the desired direction assigned by human observation.

Each algorithm in the vision system was tested on all three hundred images in the library. The results calculated by the algorithms were then compared to the desired navigation results to evaluate the success rate of each individual algorithm. The algorithm's final decision was considered successful if it was within one step of the correct direction. For the image shown in Figure 3, the ideal direction is Slight Right. However, if VBASR decides to go Straight or Right, in this case it will still be travelling in a proper direction. The resulting accuracy rating is normalized by calculating the success rate for each direction and then averaging the percentages. This prevents an unequal number of images for each direction from noticeably influencing the outcome.

A final requirement for VBASR is that it should be able to react faster than humans so that it can function properly in its environment. To do so, VBASR must be able to process an image and begin responding within 190ms [11]. Currently, VBASR processes about ten images per second which meets the requirement.



Figure 3. Slight Right example



Figure 4. Lines algorithm theory

2. LINES ALGORITHM

2.1 Theory

The first approach attempted was to find the strongest vertical lines in the image. Main vertical lines in a hallway include windows, doors, pictures, etc. All of these are found on the walls.

Thus, if the wall locations can be determined on either side, then the average of the wall locations should be the approximate center of the hallway, as shown in Figure 4. (Note that the lines shown on Figure 4 were added with an image editing program and are not mathematically accurate. The lines were added solely to demonstrate the theory of the lines algorithm.) Red lines represent 'strong' vertical lines and the maroon line represents the average of the x-values of the red lines.

2.2 Feature Extraction

To find the strongest vertical lines of the image, a line (edge) detection algorithm is required. A filter must be used on the image as a prerequisite for the line detection algorithm. Without the use of a blurring filter shown in Figure 5, the edge detection algorithm detects many artifacts that are undesirable, as seen in Figure 6. Example blurring filters are the normal blur, median blur, and Gaussian blur. Each of these filters has a similar effect to the one shown in Figure 5. The differences between the filters are simply the mathematical methods utilized to achieve the desired end result: a blurred image. For example, the normal blur shown in Figure 5 uses a box filter to normalize the pixels over the given neighborhood. The best overall VBASR algorithm utilizes a median blur, which returns the median of the neighborhood of the given pixel. Figure 7 shows the desired result when using edge detection on a filtered image. In Figure 7, there are few artifacts and the image is considerably clearer than Figure 6. The Canny algorithm [12] is used for all the edge detection required by VBASR.



Figure 5. Example of a normal blur (compare to Figure 2)



Figure 6. Edge detection on an un-blurred image

One major problem with the image in Figure 7 is that the computer still has no simple way of identifying the strongest vertical lines. Therefore, corner detection is used for the final stage of feature extraction. Corner detection performed on the edge-detected image enables the program to obtain data points on the lines, which can be used to find the strongest vertical lines. Figure 8 shows all of the corners detected by the algorithm marked with small white circles. The x and y coordinates of each corner is output to an array for further processing.

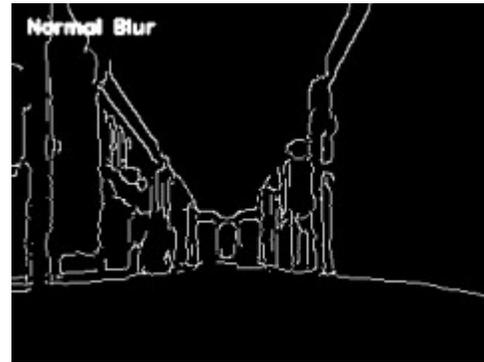


Figure 7. Edge detection on a blurred image



Figure 8. Corner Detection on image in Figure 7

2.3 Processing

The next step is to find the strongest vertical lines using the corners identified in Figure 8. First, the image from the webcam is split into sixteen vertical bins. These bins allow a histogram-like transformation by counting the number of corners found within the different bins. The result is a sum of the number of corners located in each bin. The number of corners in each bin is compared to a constant value, and, if the number of corners is greater than that threshold, the bin is considered to have a strong vertical line.

The image shown in Figure 9 is the same image used in all the previous figures of this section. The thin white lines delineate each bin, the black lines represent the strongest vertical lines (as determined by the corners in Figure 8), and the thick white line represents the x-value average of the strongest vertical lines.



Figure 9. Lines algorithm processing example

To determine the direction found by the lines algorithm, the average of the strong vertical lines is found and compared to seven equally distributed direction bins (hard left, left, etc.). If the thick white line in Figure 9 were located on the left edge of the image, then it would evaluate to Hard Left. Likewise, if it were in the center of the image, it would evaluate to Straight. The particular image shown in Figure 9 evaluates to Slight Left, as shown in Figure 10.



Figure 10. Direction bins displayed

2.4 Results and Shortcomings

In practice, the optimized lines algorithm has an accuracy rating of 79.3%. The algorithm performed worst on images requiring the action of Hard Right, where it achieved a success rate of only 26%. However, the parameters used to optimize the entire vision system did not optimize the lines algorithm, as explained in Section 6.

One shortcoming with this method appears when vertical lines fall directly on the separation line for a bin. When this happens, the corners found on that line may be split in between two bins and the line may be ignored completely. Notice the leftmost vertical line in Figure 11. This line falls directly on a bin line marked in Figure 12. The corners are split between the bins and the strong vertical line is ignored.

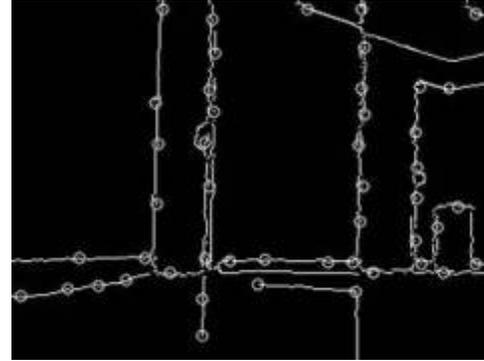


Figure 11. Lines shortcoming example

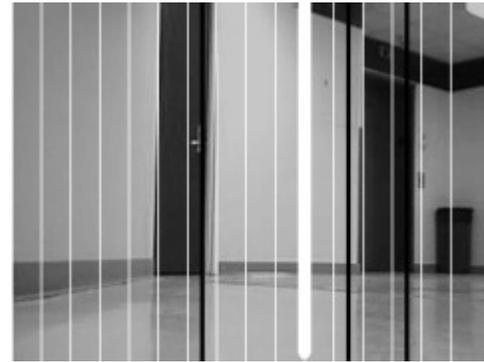


Figure 12. Lines shortcoming results from Figure 11

A second shortcoming occurs when VBASR is oriented directly at a wall (i.e. the image does not contain the center of the hallway at all). In these cases, the algorithm generally finds only one or two strong vertical lines. Depending on where these few lines are found, it may determine a wildly inaccurate direction. If the lines algorithm only detects one or zero strong lines, the algorithm fails and the resolver function ignores the lines algorithm when deciding the final direction for VBASR.

Incidentally, the lines algorithm did not work as originally intended. In practice, most corners for an image are found in the center of the hallway, not along the walls. As a result, the bins near the center of the hallway are all marked as strong vertical lines, which enables the lines algorithm to perform well regardless of this unexpected outcome.

3. CORNERS ALGORITHM

3.1 Theory

After observing several images of the hallway, it was noted that the floor in most images forms a trapezoidal shape, as outlined in Figure 13. The trapezoid is created by the intersection between the floor and the walls. Shi and Samarabandu [13] called these lines corridor lines and used the intersection of the corridor lines to aid navigation. VBASR utilizes the corridor lines differently to develop the corners algorithm. If one corridor line is higher on the image than the other, then VBASR is facing the longer, lower corridor line's wall and needs to adjust in the opposite direction.

In Figure 13, the corridor lines are marked in orange and the top of the trapezoid is blue. In practice, the edge detection algorithm

actually finds the edge of the colored tile rather than the corner of the floor and wall.



Figure 13. Corners algorithm theory

3.2 Feature Extraction

The feature extraction for the corners algorithm is similar to that of the lines algorithm. First, a blur is used on the image to eliminate artifacts from the Canny line-detection algorithm. After the Canny algorithm, corner detection is performed on the line-detected image. In Figure 14, the lower left and right-hand sections of the image are boxed off to aid viewers in understanding how the corners algorithm operates. These boxes denote the regions where the algorithm searches for corridor lines.

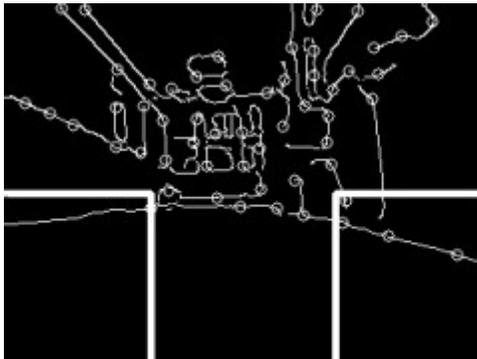


Figure 14. Feature extraction for the corners algorithm

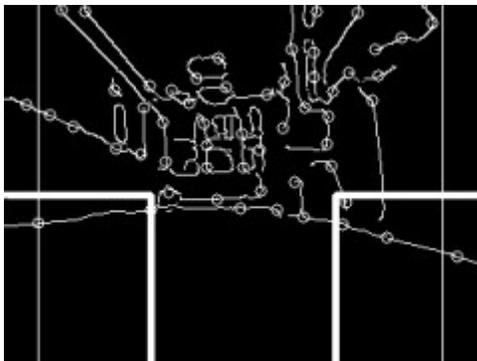


Figure 15. Extra vertical lines (compare to Figure 14)

Frequently, the lines detected by the Canny algorithm accurately define the corridor lines, but the corner-detection algorithm fails to find a corner (denoted by white circles) on the corridor lines. (Note that the left-hand box in Figure 14 is an example of such a case.) To aid the corners algorithm, two vertical lines are drawn on the image frame on both sides of the image. The extra vertical lines help the algorithm locate corners on the corridor lines, as shown in Figure 15. (Interestingly, no corner was found at the intersection of the lines in the right-hand box.)

3.3 Processing

Each of the corners found within the boxed-off sections of the image are generally on the legs of the trapezoid (i.e. along the border where the floor meets the wall). For each of the corners within a box, the x and y-values are averaged to minimize the effect of outliers. The average y-values are then compared and the leg with the higher y-value indicates the direction VBASR should turn. The distance between these final averages also indicates the strength of the turn.

Figure 16 shows an example of the complete corners algorithm. The target marks indicate the averages of the corners located in each box. When y-values for the two target marks are compared, Figure 16 evaluates to Slight Left.



Figure 16. Corners algorithm example

3.4 Results and Shortcomings

The corners algorithm has an accuracy rating of 66.6%. Even though the percentage is low, the corners algorithm still improves the overall performance of the system because it sometimes finds the correct direction for images on which the other two algorithms fail.

Surprisingly, the corners algorithm fails the most for Slight Right and Slight Left images. Because the corners algorithm averages all the corners found within the boxes it is more likely to find large differences rather than smaller ones. As such, the corners algorithm performs better for large misalignments and, thus, complements the lines algorithm well, since the lines algorithm tends to fail on the Hard Left and Hard Right turns.

An obvious shortcoming of this algorithm is that not all of the corners found within the boxed-off regions of the image are directly on the trapezoidal legs. As shown in Figure 17, extra corners pull the target mark off of the desired position and effect the decision made by the corners algorithm.

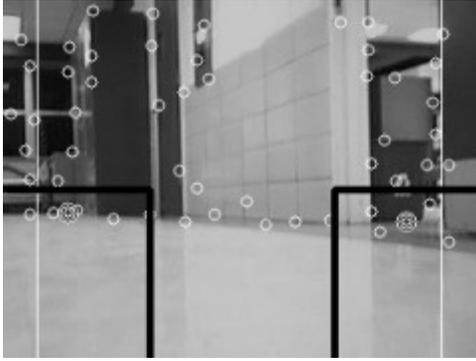


Figure 17. Corners algorithm shortcoming

The corners algorithm fails altogether if no corners are found within either of the boxed-off regions. If the corners algorithm fails, then the resolver function ignores the corners algorithm when calculating the final direction for VBASR.

4. COLORS ALGORITHM

4.1 Theory

The third algorithm implemented takes advantage of the color difference between the floor and the walls. In most buildings, the floor color is distinguishable from the wall color. Bradley University's engineering building is no exception, as seen in Figure 2. If the floor can be identified and marked, then the image becomes a binary image of "floor" and "not-floor."



Figure 18. Example of the flood fill command

4.2 Feature Extraction

An OpenCV library command called "flood fill" is used for the colors algorithm. A single pixel is picked as the seed point and then the neighborhood of that pixel is evaluated. If the neighboring pixels are similar enough to the seed point then all of the similar neighboring pixels are set to a predefined value, such as the red shown in Figure 18. The command continues to expand outward until no more similar pixels are found. Flood fill only evaluates outward from the seed pixel and does not evaluate the entire image. As a result, the ceiling is not painted red even though it is a similar color to the floor. The seed pixel for Figures 18 through 24 is shown as blue circles.

4.3 Processing

After a binary image is achieved the resulting image is scanned from the top down. The first row with more than twenty red pixels

is selected and the x-values for those pixels are averaged. The result is considered the center of the hallway, as shown in Figure 19 where the thick pink line indicates the decision line. Finally, the direction is determined by comparing the location of the decision line with the seven direction bins, in the same manner as the lines algorithm discussed above. This particular example evaluates to Straight, as shown in Figure 20.



Figure 19. Example of the colors algorithm

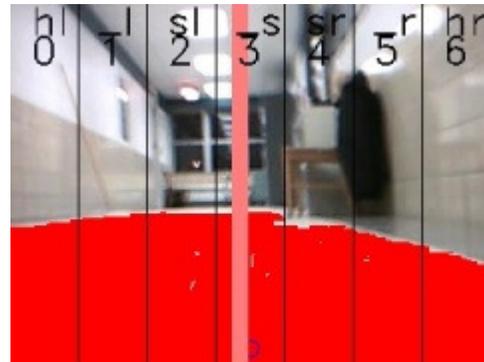


Figure 20. Colors algorithm with direction bins

If the center of the hallway is not in frame, then the highest row of red pixels still indicates the correct direction to navigate. In Figure 21, a hard right is required and the colors algorithm finds the correct direction successfully.



Figure 21. Colors algorithm for off-center images

4.4 Results and Shortcomings

Easily the best of the three algorithms, the colors algorithm has an accuracy rating of 94.8%. This algorithm has no particular category of images for which it performs poorly. Unfortunately, many shortcomings still exist for this algorithm.

The first shortcoming is that the seed point cannot be adjusted once it is set. It is possible for the seed point to fall on the wall instead of the floor. If this occurs, the flood fill command will paint the walls red, which is clearly undesirable. Due to the mounting configuration of the camera on the robot platform and the lack of inclines on the hallway floors, the horizon line for the camera should not deviate significantly. If the camera is placed such that the horizon line is approximately halfway up the image, any red pixels found above the horizon line indicate that something other than the floor has been marked red. In this case, the colors algorithm fails and is ignored when the resolver processes the final direction for VBASR.

The second shortcoming is that tiles of different colors can confuse the algorithm. The orange tiles in Figure 22 are correctly identified as not-white, however, they are still part of the floor. Likewise, if the seed point falls on an orange tile, only the orange tile is filled while the rest of the floor is ignored as “not-orange,” see Figure 23.



Figure 22. Discolorations in the floor



Figure 23. Seed point location causing algorithm failure

Lastly, reflections on the floor pose another challenge. The flood fill command may not recognize the reflections if they contrast strongly with the neighboring pixels. Notice that in Figure 24 many reflections cause gaps in the red floor.



Figure 24. Colors algorithm and reflections

To work around these shortcomings several different seed points are used. The pixel value at each seed point is identified and if that point is either white or orange (to catch the occasional orange tile) then it is evaluated using flood fill. Figure 25 shows the benefit of adding extra seed points. (Note: Black seed points indicate those evaluated using flood fill.)

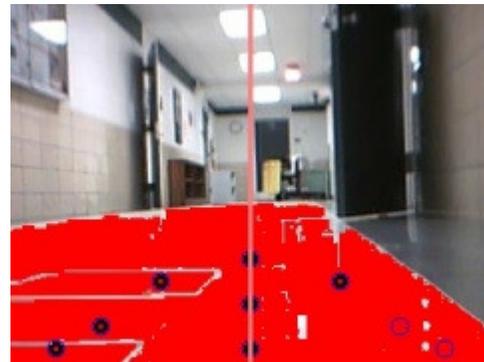


Figure 25. Many seed points

5. RESOLVER

After all three algorithms independently determine a direction to navigate, they are resolved into a single direction for the entire system. The resolver ignores algorithms when it detects a failure (e.g. the color algorithm is ignored if it paints the walls or ceiling red). Since the resolver evaluates each algorithm in parallel, the system architecture is such that algorithms can be added and removed without compromising the integrity of the system as a whole. Because of the parallel architecture, failed algorithms can easily be ignored in the following computations.

The direction determined by each algorithm is given a numerical value (0=Hard Left through 6=Hard Right). The numerical values are then averaged to determine the final direction value. Normally, integer division truncates, which biases the system towards the left. To address this issue, VBASR's averaging algorithm is biased towards the center, favoring outcomes closer to driving straight. If the average is greater than three (straight), then it is rounded down. If the final average is less than three, it is rounded up. Thus, the resolver biases VBASR to travel straight rather than biasing in one direction or the other. Averaging the results of

several algorithms and favoring the center also buffers the robot from erratic directional swings in its navigation decisions.

6. RESULTS

Resolving the lines algorithm, corners algorithm, and colors algorithm enables VBASR to achieve an overall accuracy rate of 96.6%, as shown in Table 1. Table 1 also details the success rates associated with each algorithm in the seven general navigation directions. Individually, the colors algorithm outperforms both lines and corners algorithms, however, if either of these algorithms is eliminated then the resolver's success rate decreases.

Table 1. Final Vision System Results (%)

	Lines	Corners	Colors	Resolved
Hard Left	33.3	13.3	93.3	93.3
Left	87.9	55.2	93.1	100.0
Slight Left	97.1	28.6	91.4	94.3
Straight	96.4	48.2	96.4	98.2
Slight Right	97.6	29.3	92.7	100.0
Right	57.1	46.9	96.9	95.9
Hard Right	26.3	21.1	100.0	94.7
Totals	70.8	34.7	94.8	96.6

Due to the nature of the resolving function, the values for the lines and corners algorithm shown in Table 1 are not the highest percentages achieved for each individual algorithm. This phenomenon occurs because of the interplay between the various algorithms during resolution. The highest accuracy ratings for the lines and corners algorithms are 79.3% and 66.6% respectively. If the parameters are set to optimize the lines or corners algorithms, the total resolved percentage decreases, as demonstrated in Table 2. As stated above, when either of the lower percentage algorithms is removed, the resolved accuracy rating lowers, which demonstrates the benefit of using multiple algorithms in the vision system's parallel architecture.

Table 2. Optimized Corners Algorithm (%)

	Lines	Corners	Colors	Resolved
Hard Left	73.3	46.7	93.3	73.3
Left	79.3	89.7	93.1	98.3
Slight Left	100.0	68.6	91.4	97.1
Straight	100.0	69.6	96.4	100.0
Slight Right	97.6	51.2	92.7	100.0
Right	45.9	87.8	96.9	90.8
Hard Right	10.5	52.6	100.0	57.9
Totals	72.4	66.6	94.8	88.2

Initial testing of the vision system on the iRobot Create platform yielded promising results. A webcam was mounted to the cargo bay of the robot and the robot was manually controlled to follow the real-time decisions of the resolver. Observing the resulting navigation behavior, it was determined that with the addition of

control software VBASR will be capable of autonomously navigating down the center of the hallway.

7. FUTURE WORK

The discussion in this paper focuses on navigation of a hallway where obstacles are located only along the walls. Although not generally observed in the halls of the engineering building, it is possible that obstacles may be placed in the center of the hallway, obstructing the path of the robot. To handle these situations, obstacle avoidance will be implemented utilizing an algorithm similar to the colors algorithm. Creating a binary image of "floor" and "not-floor" enables simple detection of obstacles because the obstacles should generally be a different color than the floor. The orange tiles in Figure 22 that are not marked red give a general feel for how the algorithm could identify obstacles. These orange tiles also pose a challenge as they should be identified as "floor" rather than "not-floor." Using the more robust colors algorithm shown in Figure 25, the floor can be identified, and, thus, the obstacles will be isolated. The colors algorithm shown in Figure 25 evaluates the seed points for either orange or white. Any other color would be identified as an obstacle. Other possibilities for obstacle avoidance have been explored by Marques and Lima [14] as well as Ohya et al. [15]

After adding obstacle avoidance, the vision system will be integrated with Microsoft Robotics Developers Studio to enable autonomous control of the iRobot Create, completing VBASR's primary navigational requirements. From here, more sophisticated work, such as motion detection (to locate intruders), will begin.

8. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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