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William A. Barrett
william_barrett@byu.edu

Kirk L. Duffin

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Fast Focal Length Solution in Partial Panoramic Image Stitching

Kirk L. Duffin
Northern Illinois University
duffin@cs.niu.edu

William A. Barrett
Brigham Young University
barrett@cs.byu.edu

Abstract

Accurate estimation of effective camera focal length is crucial to the success of panoramic image stitching. Fast techniques for estimating the focal length exist, but are dependent upon a close initial approximation or the existence of a full circle panoramic image sequence. Numerical solutions of the focal length demonstrate strong coupling between the focal length and the angles used to position each component image about the common spherical center.

This paper demonstrates that parameterizing panoramic image positions using spherical arc length instead of angles effectively decouples the focal length from the image position. This new parameterization does not require an initial focal length estimate for quick convergence, nor does it require a full circle panorama in order to refine the focal length. Experiments with synthetic and real image sets demonstrate the robustness of the method and a speedup of 5 to 20 times over angle based positioning.

Keywords: *Focal length estimation, image stitching, partial panoramas, zoom lenses*

1 Introduction

Image stitching or *image mosaicing* is the process of transforming and compositing a set of images, each a subset of a scene, into a single larger image. The transformation for each image maps the local coordinate system present in each image onto the global coordinate system in the final composite.

There are several image transformation types reported in the literature. *Panoramic transformations*, where the images are acquired from a single view point, are most common. Panoramic mosaics can be made on cylinders, as found in QuickTime VR[3, 2] and plenoptic modeling [11]. Full panoramas can be placed on piecewise planar surfaces[7, 19]. Composition of image strips onto planar surfaces under affine transformations has also been investigated[14, 8]. Arbitrary images of planar surfaces can also be composited[10].

In the field of aerial photogrammetry, solution techniques for finding projective transformations are well developed[1]. However, correspondence with global points of known coordinates is used to give accuracy to the final composition.

Image stitching can be *incremental* or *global*. Incremental stitching adds images one at a time to a cumulative composite with a fixed coordinate system. A drawback of incremental stitching is the accumulation of error in the image transformation parameters. This is often seen as ghosting of image features in the final composite. Global stitching attempts to find the simultaneous solution of transformations for all images in the image set[16, 4]. Globally optimized stitching greatly reduces the ghosting errors in the final composite image.

A necessary step in creating panoramic composites is estimating the focal length of the camera. This can be done as an *a priori* camera calibration step or as an error correction after creating a transformation solution. Both [19] and [9] demonstrate ways of correcting the focal length estimate based on the error of matched features on opposite ends of the panorama. Of necessity, a *full* 360° panorama must be acquired and stitched in order to determine the error and the focal length correction.

1.1 High Resolution Partial Panoramas

Most of the stitching work mentioned above is used to create hemispherical panoramas using a relatively large camera field of view and small (≈ 50) number of images. This paper examines the more restrictive problem of creating high resolution partial panoramas with zoom lenses. In this problem, the camera field of view is very narrow ($< 10°$), there are a large number of images (often 100 or more) and the resulting composite fills only a small part of the hemispherical field of view.

Focal length estimates in these situations are often nonexistent. An appropriate zoom lens setting is chosen as a compromise between speed in the image acquisition and the amount of image detail desired. Because a full circle image sequence does not exist, focal length estimates can-not be directly calculated. In addition, the narrow field of view makes an estimate from overlapping image pairs very inaccurate.

The rest of this paper describes a reparameterization of the standard panoramic stitching formulas using spherical arc length rather than angles to position the images in the composite. The reparameterization allows for a relatively quick solution with no initial focal length estimate.

Comparison of the two parameterizations is illustrated with three image sets, one of which is synthetic.

2 Image Transformation and Solution

Creating a panoramic image from an image set is the same as finding a position on the surface of a sphere for every image in the set such that when the images are reprojected onto the sphere, the original view from the center of the sphere is recreated.

Projective matrix transformations[6] are used to transform points in the coordinate system of each image into points surrounding the sphere. Mann and Picard[10] and others have shown how arbitrary views of planar surfaces and panoramic views of a 3D scene can be described as 2D projective transformations.

Full projective transforms offer eight degrees of freedom per image[18]. Panoramic image transforms, as developed in Section 2.1, require only four degrees of freedom per image: three for rotation and one for focal length. It is reasonable to assume however, that the focal length is common for *all* images in a panoramic set.

The global solution of the parameters describing the matrix transformations is known as *bundle adjustment*[16] and is arrived at in an iterative fashion. In bundle adjustment, a set of point pairs $(\mathbf{p}_{i_k}, \mathbf{p}_{j_k})$ is identified in overlapping images i and j such that when the points are transformed to their final positions, $\mathbf{p}'_{i_k}$ and $\mathbf{p}'_{j_k}$ and normalized, the distance between the points in each pair is minimized. An overall metric of the value of the solution is given by sum of squares of the point pair distances after transformation:

$$\varepsilon(\cdot) = \sum_{i,j,k} \left\| \mathrm{norm}(\mathbf{p}'_{i_k}) - \mathrm{norm}(\mathbf{p}'_{j_k}) \right\|^2 \qquad (1)$$

where i and j range over pairs of overlapping images and k ranges over a set of matched point pairs for each image pair (i, j). In this metric, the transformations are from individual image coordinate systems to the composite coordinate system.

Levenberg-Marquardt minimization [15, 13], a generalization of gradient descent and the Newton-Raphson solution of a quadratic form, is used to find the solution.

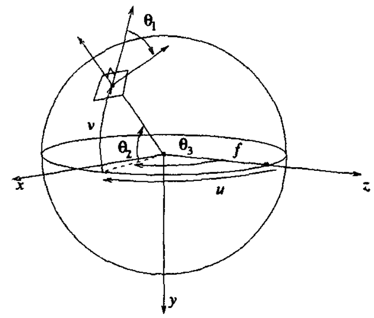

Figure 1. Panoramic image transformation. Both position angle and arc distance parameterizations shown.

2.1 Panoramic Image Transformation

This section presents a detailed description of the transformation from 2D image coordinates to the 3D coordinate system of the panoramic image. This description is given solely as a point of reference for describing the reparameterization of section 2.2.

Figure 1 illustrates the transformation. The composition coordinate system is 3D, Cartesian, and right handed, with x positive to the right; y positive down, coincident with standard image pixel ordering schemes; z positive into the scene. The optic center of the image to be transformed is placed at the origin with x and y image axes parallel to those of the scene. Image pixel coordinates are renumbered to place the image origin at the optic center.

The image is translated in z by the focal length f in pixels and then rotated about the origin. The rotation is almost universally parameterized as a set of three angles. A notable exception to this practice is [4] who use quaternions to avoid the singularities that occur when using position angles. The rotation decomposition used here is first a rotation θ_1 about the optic axis in the xy plane, followed by θ_2 in the yz plane and θ_3 in the xz plane.

The transformation of an image point $\mathbf{p}$ to a 3D composite coordinate system point $\mathbf{p}'$ is

$$\mathbf{p}' = \mathbf{M}\mathbf{p} = \mathbf{R}\mathbf{T}\mathbf{p} \qquad (2)$$

where $\mathbf{R}$ is a 3D rotation matrix and $\mathbf{T}$ is a translation of f along the z axis.

Because a homogeneous initial image point $\mathbf{p}$ is always of the form $(x,y,0,1)^T$ and the transformed point $\mathbf{p}'$ of the form $(x',y',z',1)^T$, the third column and fourth row of $\mathbf{M}$ can be eliminated, creating a 2D homogeneous transformation from $(x,y,1)^T$ to $(x',y',z')^T$.

Matched points in different images have different distances along rays from the center of the sphere. Consequently, the transformed points must be normalized before they can be properly compared.

The points can not be normalized to a sphere of radius f because the radius is changing as part of the solution process. As the solution f moves towards zero, the distance between normalized point pairs decreases as well, providing a false solution. These problems can be ameliorated with modified distance error metrics. [5] presents such a metric that prevents individual image scaling parameters from converging to zero.

A much better solution, used in bundle adjustment, is to normalize the transformed point pairs to lie on the unit sphere before comparison. Because the transformation is a rigid body transformation, the magnitude of the point $(x',y',z')^T$ is the same as that of the point $(x,y,f)^T$. So the normalization can be done using untransformed points instead of transformed points which greatly simplifies the derivative calculations needed in each non-linear solution step.

The final error metric used is thus

$$\varepsilon(\theta_1,u,v,f) = \sum_{i,j,k} \left\| \frac{\mathbf{p'}_{i_k}}{\sqrt{x_{i_k}^2+y_{i_k}^2+f^2}} - \frac{\mathbf{p'}_{j_k}}{\sqrt{x_{j_k}^2+y_{j_k}^2+f^2}} \right\|^2 \quad (3)$$

where k ranges over the matched points for image pair (i,j) and the $\mathbf{p}'$ are transformed as in Equation 2.

Bundle adjustment as presented converges very slowly due to the strong coupling between the focal length and the position angles. Such coupling implies that a change in focal length estimate needs corresponding changes in angle positions to counterbalance and minimize the distance of matched point pairs. Image fragments that would normally overlap seamlessly in a stitching solution are torn apart when angle positions remain constant and the focal length is changed.

This effect is demonstrated in Figure 2. In an iterative solution technique, the strong coupling constrains changes in focal length to be small because changes in focal length drastically increase the final error measurements.

2.2 Arc Distance Parameterization

The key point to this paper is that position parameters can be decoupled from the focal length by using arc distance along the sphere surface instead of angles. These distances, labeled as u and v and measured in pixels, are used as parameters for image position on the sphere. The parameter v is equivalent to distance along a longitude line from the equator while u is the distance from the longitude line, along a parallel. The new transformation parameters are also illustrated in Figure 1.

Only the rotation matrix $\mathbf{R}$ in Equation 2 is changed by the u and v parameters. Angle θ_2 is replaced by v/f while θ_3 is replaced by u/f.

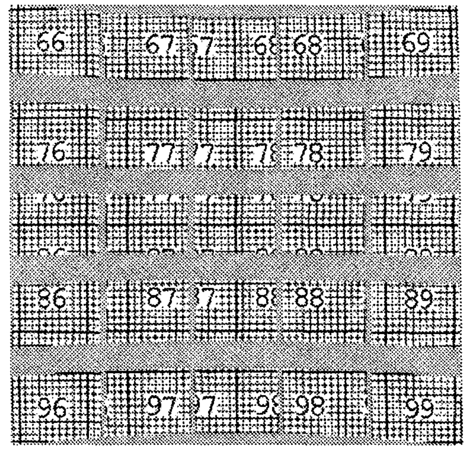

Figure 2. An illustration of the error induced by a change of focal length but constant angle positions.

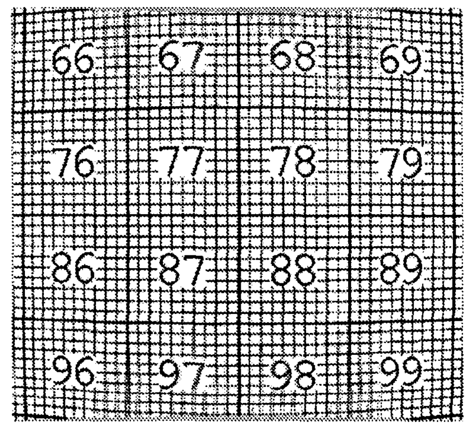

Figure 3. An illustration of the error induced by a change of focal length but constant arc distance positions.

Using an arc distance parameterization, the relative distances between images remain comparatively unaffected by changes in focal length. A helpful analogy is to envision a flexible sheet of images wrapped around the sphere that readjusts as the sphere changes radius. Figure 3 demonstrates the uncoupled nature of the new parameterization. The same image set is used as in Figure 2. The same change in focal length is used, but in this example, the arc distances used for image position are left constant. Compared with the image breakup of the prevoius example, the only indication of solution error is some ghosting where

Image Set	Image	Point	Trans.		Final	Final	Pan.
Images	Pairs	Pairs	Steps		f (Pixels)	SSQ Error	Steps
Grid				angle	2747.548	9913.592	384
100	180	10235	22	arc	2747.548	9913.592	51
Bonampak 1				angle	3378.902	22657.818	598
91	163	1507	16	arc	3378.902	22657.818	50
Bonampak 2				angle	3427.450	2265.846	828
65	114	759	17	arc	3427.450	2265.846	53
Bonampak 3				angle	3866.855	18138.216	658
89	171	1040	16	arc	3866.855	18138.216	41
Mountain				angle	4993.679	42452.350	1112
177	364	4401	16	arc	4933.679	42452.350	53

Table 1. A comparison of panoramic stitching over several image sets. The number of iterative steps to obtain an initial translation-only solution are given. The number of additional steps to obtain a panoramic solution is also given for both the angular and arc distance parameterizations.

the individual image components overlap.

3 Application and Discussion

This section compares the arc distance parameterization with the standard angle-based bundle adjustment method. Panoramic transformations are computed for several image sets using both parameterizations and the focal length convergence is examined. All panoramic transformations in this section were computed by Levenberg-Marquardt minimization with an extremely conservative stopping criterion — no change in the parameter vector to within 10^{-9}.

In each image set, point pairs are chosen from overlapping image pairs. In the synthetic image set to be shown, salient feature point pairs are chosen automatically. In the real world image sets, matched point pairs are chosen by hand. In all cases, point coordinates are refined to subpixel precision using intensity based matching in a small region about each pair point. The region average is subtracted out during the matching to help compensate for large scale, spatially varying bias in the sensor.

For each image set, an initial solution of image positions is computed in a plane, allowing only translation. No focal length estimate is used in this step. This same initial solution is used for both angular and arc distance methods. Both methods start out with an initial focal length estimate of 100,000 pixels in all cases. Table 1 summarizes the results of the experiments.

The Grid image set is a panorama of a synthetic grid. The image set has a 10° field of view with a stepping angle of 8° between images. Images are 640 by 480 pixels, and the true focal length is 2743.213 pixels.

Figure 4 shows the convergence of the focal length estimation in the Grid image set. Both angle and arc distance methods arrive at the same focal length estimate, but the arc distance method converges with over 7.5 times fewer iterations. The decoupling of the focal length and the image positions leads to oscillations in the estimate. But the same decoupling allows the estimate settle down to within .1 pixel of the final value after only 30 iterations. Residual oscillations dampen out until no change occurs within 10^{-9}.

The final focal length estimate in this image set is 2747.548 pixels. The actual focal length is 2743.213 pixels. The relatively low focal length error of 0.16% is due to the coincidence of eyepoint and center of rotation. Stein [17] has shown the estimation error that results when the two points are not coincident. The relative error is not zero because of inaccuracies in refining the point coordinates by matching small image regions. When exact *a priori* priori coordinates are used, the focal length error is within 3.1×10^{-4} pixels. And sum squared solution error drops to within 0.002448.

Figure 5 shows the sum squared error for the solution of the Grid image set. It should be noted that the initial plateau in the error curves is due to the error from the initial translation solution. The initial dropoff is the start of the panoramic solution.

The Bonampak image sets are three infrared panoramas of contiguous sections of a mural from a Mayan archaeological site in Bonampak, Mexico[12]. (The Bonampak image sets are courtesy of Mary Miller, Yale University; Stephan Houston, Brigham Young University Anthropology Department; and the Bonampak Documentation Project.) The images contain complex, low contrast, background texture. The images were captured with a video camera with a zoom lens and an IR filter. The heavy filter pushed the image sensor close to its threshold of operation, resulting in noisy images with accentuated spatially dependent bias. Our approach of hand picking matched point pairs was designed in

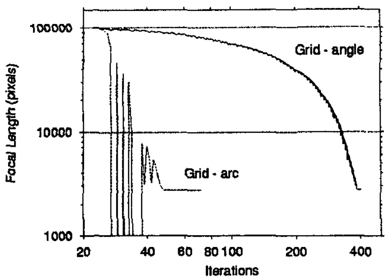

Figure 4. Focal length estimation in the Grid image set.

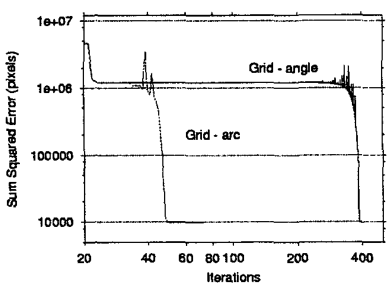

Figure 5. Sum squared error in the Grid image set.

direct response to these image sets. During image acquisition, at each imaging position, the zoom was maximized to focus on the wall and then reduced slightly to fit more content into each frame. Consequently, the true focal length is unknown and varies with each set; within each set, f is assumed to remain constant.

Figures 6 and 7 show the progression of focal length estimates and total SSQ error for the three Bonampak image sets. The focal length estimate for the arc distance parameterization converges 12 to 16 times faster to its final value than the angular parameterization.

The Mountain data set is a video composite of a mountain peak. High zoom magnification was used to acquire these images, resulting in a very narrow field of view of $\approx 5°$. The true focal length is again unknown. The full resolution size of this image is 16126 by 3210 pixels.

Figures 8 and 9 show the focal length estimates and total SSQ error for the Mountain image set. In this example, The arc distance based estimate converges over 20 times faster than the solution based on angle parameterization.

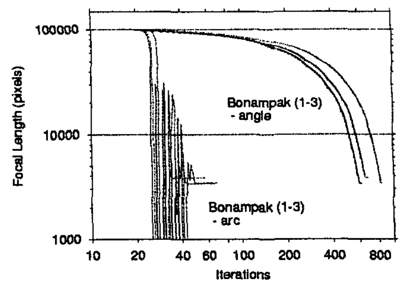

Figure 6. Focal length estimation in the Bonampak image sets.

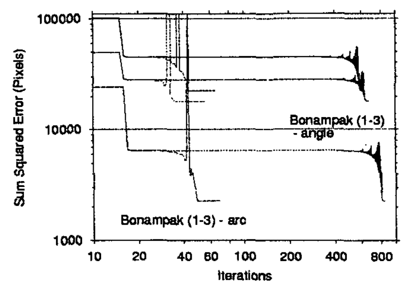

Figure 7. Sum squared error in the Bonampak image sets.

4 Conclusion

In this paper, we have presented a reparameterization of the partial panoramic stitching problem based on arc distance. We have shown how the new formulation results in robust estimates of system focal length without the need for approximate initial estimates. We have also demonstrated a significant increase (roughly an order of magnitude) in the rate of convergence of focal length estimates over standard angle based parameterizations.

Quick, robust convergence of focal length estimates extends image stitching techniques to the use of zoom lenses, where focal lengths are unknown.

Initial work implementing the ideas in this paper showed that arc distance parameterization alone is responsible for the freedom of movement exhibited by the focal length parameter.

Future work will include applying the spherical distance parameterization to intensity based error metrics, determining whether or not such a change will reduce the need for *a priori* focal length estimates for this important class of metrics.

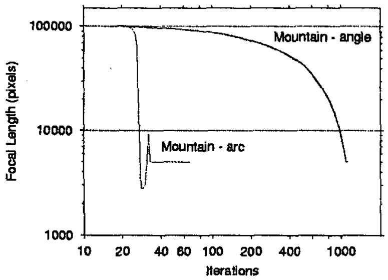

Figure 8. Focal length estimation in the Mountain image set.

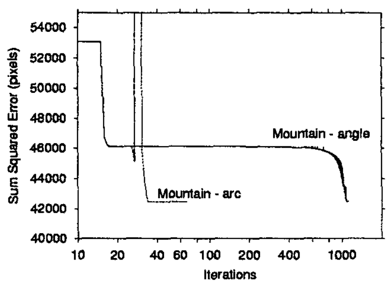

Figure 9. Sum squared error in the Mountain image set.

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