
VROOM: Virtual Robot Overlay for Online Meetings

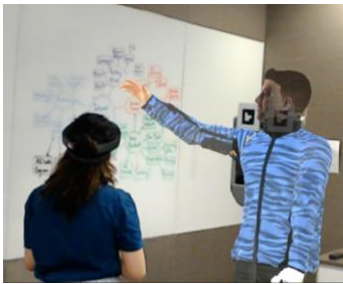


Figure 1: A local (left) and remote (right) user using VROOM to collaborate on a whiteboard.

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Abstract

Telepresence robots allow users to freely explore a remote space and provide a physical embodiment in that space. However, they lack a compelling representation of the remote user in the local space. We present VROOM (Virtual Robot Overlay for Online Meetings), a two-way system for exploring how to improve the social experience of robotic telepresence. For the local user, an augmented-reality (AR) interface shows a life-size avatar of the remote user overlaid on a telepresence robot. For the remote user, a head-mounted virtual-reality (VR) interface presents an immersive 360° view of the local space with mobile autonomy. The VR system tracks the remote user's head pose and hand movements, which are applied to an avatar. This provides the remote user with an identifiable self-embodiment and allows the local user to see the remote user's head direction and arm gestures.

Author Keywords

Telepresence; remote collaboration; video communication; mixed reality; augmented reality; virtual reality; remote embodiment; avatar; awareness

CSS Concepts

• **Human-centered computing~Mixed / augmented reality**

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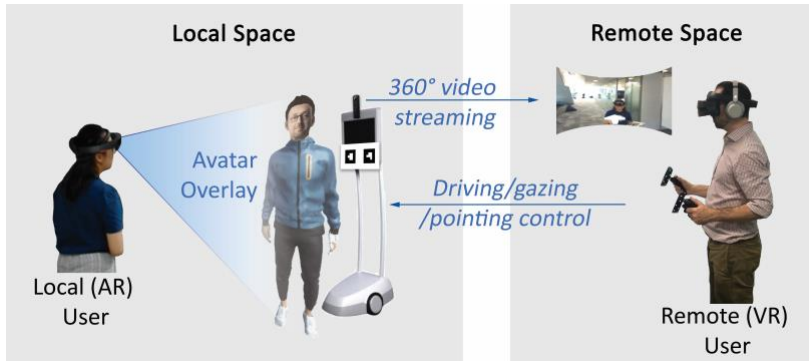


Figure 2: An overview of the VROOM system.

Introduction

Video communication has enabled global lifestyle and distributed access to a range of services. However, traditional 2D video communication constrains our abilities to achieve common ground [18], maintain awareness and control [12,18], and share experiences [23]. People work around these constraints, but the physical and spatial limitations are inescapable. There are currently two ways to add physical and spatial experiences into video communication. The first is to use telepresence robots (e.g., [25,41,42]) — effectively video-chat-on-wheels. These are increasingly common in the workplace (e.g., [43]) but are not yet widely adopted in domestic contexts. The second is to use augmented reality (AR) systems in which users wear head-mounted displays (HMDs) to see one another as 3D avatars in their respective local spaces (e.g., [44]). These avatars scale in realism from cartoonish to photorealistic, scale in animation from manual to parametric, and have some level of ‘canned’ procedural animations to fill in representational gaps, such as idle, moving, gestural, or facial animations.

Both methods are a step ahead of traditional video communication, but they still have limitations. Telepresence robots allow for autonomous mobility, but they have similar limitations on conveying bodily gestures as traditional video communication [22] because users are still locked into 2D screens and constrained fields of view. AR systems enable 3D bodily views at all endpoints, and while 3D avatars are currently still quite crude, users can freely use large gestures and spatial bodily arrangements. However, an AR avatar cannot roam around a remote location by itself at any time. AR systems require a meeting instance with at least one person per endpoint, and avatar mobility is limited to the physical area seen in the view of the HMD at each endpoint.

The question, then, is whether combining robotic telepresence with an AR avatar will provide the ‘best of both worlds’? To answer this, we designed *VROOM* (*Virtual Robot Overlay for Online Meetings*; Figures 1 and 2). To enhance the remote user’s sense of immersion we provide a 360° view of the local activity space, and to enhance their self-projection into that space we provide a first-person view of their own avatar. To enhance the local user’s sense of co-location with the remote user, a full-size full-body avatar of the remote user overlays the telepresence robot.

Background

As well as enabling more distributed work and personal activities, improvements in video communication and allied infrastructure such as Wi-Fi and mobile data are empowering greater inclusion for people who cannot travel due to responsibilities, disabilities, or financial reasons, or those who do not wish to travel for reasons of sustainability or quality of life.

However, video communication is rife with inequalities. For example, in hybrid meetings [32], remote users are often restricted to the view from a static room camera. The lack of viewpoint control makes it difficult for remote users to contribute [12]. While some activities are not hampered by such issues, remote participation becomes more difficult as physicality increases (e.g., sketching on whiteboards or using sticky notes [10], referring to objects [7], or using bodily gestures [7]). Solutions exist in both research and products, such as giving users the ability to refer to objects in the other space [2,4,5,6,8,15], giving people richer or wider views into the space [11,13,35], and giving users more control of their viewpoint with mechanical or digital movable cameras or automated field of view framing [16,17]. However, these are acute fixes for a chronic problem, forever hampered by the basic architecture of traditional 2D video communication.

Telepresence robots and AR systems change the nature of distributed presence, albeit with some limitations of their own. Telepresence robots (e.g., [25,41,42]) are remotely-controlled movable robots with a screen, speakers, microphone, and at least one camera. Telepresence robots afford *physical autonomy* to explore a remote environment and a *physical embodiment* in that remote environment [30]. Both remote and local users thus have places that belong to them in the local activity space. Usage of telepresence robots has been studied by researchers in collaborative and social contexts such as museum visits [31], remotely attending academic conferences [22,29], outdoor activities [9], and long-distance relationships [39,40]. Telepresence robots are still hampered by their obviously robotic appearance, their lack of physical methods for deictic indication (and, indeed,

lack of manipulators for interacting with physical objects), and their constrained representation of the remote user on a small 2D screen.

The field of view is critical in telepresence. The widest field of view is that of 360° cameras, which have been explored for video conferencing [13,19,20,35] and telepresence robots [9,11]. Viewing a 360° live video through a VR HMD can lead to a higher sense of immersion and emotional investment in the remote location [3], which could result in a remote user contributing more to, or getting more out of, a shared activity in that space. However, simply adding a larger field of view for a remote user does not provide a way for local users to know where a remote person is looking in the local activity space [35].

Mixed reality (MR), including AR and virtual reality (VR), provides ways to improve the communicative presence of remote collaborators by showing 3D full or half-body avatars, which have the concomitant advantages of being able to represent deictic gesture as well as other head and bodily gestures [21,24,36]. However, as we noted in our introduction, the lack of mobile physical autonomy in a remote is a common limit in pure AR systems.

Overcoming such limitations is the province of the Telexistence field, arising out of robotics, which explores immersive methods for humans to interact naturally in remote environments [33,37,38]. Telexistence and VR share three requirements: life-size spatiality, real-time interaction, and self-projection. Telexistence has explored both one-way and mutual telexistence [34]. Mutual telexistence research tends to explore the experience of symmetrical systems at each



Figure 3: Avatar representation in the local (AR) user's view.



Figure 4: Avatar representation in the remote (VR) user's view.

endpoint, but recent research has also explored using asymmetrical technologies at each endpoint. Piumsomboon et al. explored adding a mini avatar of the remote user to the local space, viewable through an AR HMD [26] and attaching a mini avatar to a 360° camera with a tracker, providing immersion in the local activity space to the remote user via a VR HMD [27].

System Design

We built VROOM as an asymmetrical system to enhance the mutual experience of telepresence for both local (AR) and remote (VR) users.

Avatar Representation

We created an avatar representing the remote user's appearance. This avatar is displayed in both the local (AR) user's view (Figure 3), and remote (VR) user's view (Figure 4). In the local user's view, the avatar is overlaid on a telepresence robot using marker tracking. In the remote user's view, the avatar is seen in first-person (shoulders, arms, torso, legs, and feet), mimicking the user's view of their own body.

The avatar's appearance and actions are mapped to the remote user. A 2D image of the remote user's face is mapped onto a 3D avatar's head (Figure 5). The avatar is rigged to respond to the remote user's head and body actions. The head pans and tilts as the remote user's head does, detected by the gyroscope in the HMD. The head's mouth flaps in time with speech. A blink animation is applied periodically. The hands and arms are articulated to move as the user moves Windows Mixed Reality controllers. Driving the robot triggers a full body walk animation. An idle animation is applied when no locomotion or arm gesture input is detected. The avatar's movements in both the local and

remote views are synchronized (Figure 6), so where the remote user looks or points maps to where the avatar looks and points. This full-body avatar is meant to heighten the local user's sense that the remote user is present in the activity space with them. At the same time, the remote user's first-person view of their avatar body immersed in a 360° view of the space is intended to heighten the sense that the remote user is present with the local user in the activity space.

Local Activity Space

Local (AR) User Interface: The local user wears a Microsoft HoloLens, through which they can see the remote user's avatar representation overlaid on the telepresence robot. Pointing by the remote user is limited to arm gestures (Figure 7).

Robot: The telepresence robot has fiducial markers for tracking [14] and a 360° camera attached to it to stream a view to the remote user. The markers are tracked by a HoloLens app to overlay the avatar on the robot in the AR view. In this version we used front and rear markers to enable the avatar to face in the same direction as the robot. This worked reasonably well, but future versions might include more markers for smoother tracking. We used a telepresence robot with a screen so that we could run a comparison between standard robotic telepresence and VROOM (to be reported in a future paper), but the screen would be unnecessary if all local users wore HMDs. A future iteration could use any driveable robot with a 360° camera on a pole reaching head-height.

Remote Space

Remote User (VR) Interface: The remote user wears a Windows Mixed Reality HMD. This displays the 360°



Figure 5: The avatar’s appearance is made from a 2D image of the remote user’s face.

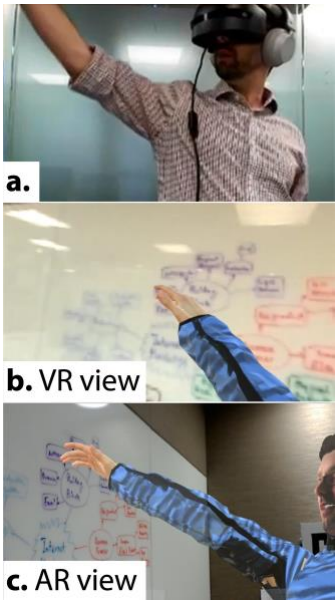


Figure 6: The remote user gesturing at a white board. **a.** Remote (VR) user’s action. **b.** Remote (VR) user’s view. **c.** Local (AR) user’s view.

view from the perspective of the robot, as well as a first-person view of the avatar. The user also holds Windows Mixed Reality controllers in each hand. One thumbstick drives the robot. Standard tracking of both controllers animates the avatar’s arm gestures. Since the remote user’s hands are holding controllers, fully-articulated hand pose is not available to enable finger pointing or other fine-grained hand gestures.

Robot: We used the built-in audio and driving capabilities of the Beam telepresence robot. When using VROOM, since the remote user was wearing a HMD, they could not use the Beam’s visual driving UI in which downward-facing view shows blue lines to indicate the projected direction of travel. We replaced these in the VR view with a white arrow that was locked to the forward direction of the robot.

Implementation

VROOM was constructed largely from existing technologies. In the local space, we use a Microsoft HoloLens (version 1) AR headset, running a custom Unity application. This application tracks the robot and overlays the avatar. The avatar’s head is made from an image of the user’s face, using the *Avatar Maker Pro* Unity library [45], and attached to an animated human-body model available as a standard asset in Unity. To track the robot, the HoloLens app uses the HoloLensARToolKit library [1,28] to track fiducial marker patterns that we printed and placed on the robot (Figure 8). The robot we use is a BeamPro telepresence robot [42]. On this robot, we attached a RICOH Theta V 360° camera [46], connected to a small laptop attached to the base of the robot. This laptop runs another application that streams the 360° video from the camera to the VR application running on the

remote side. On the remote side, we implemented the VR application with Unity and using an HP Windows Mixed Reality headset and controller set [47] connected to a Windows desktop PC. This application displays the 360° live video in the headset, and a first-person view of the avatar. The VR application also sends the remote user’s head orientation and hand position data to the AR application via HTTP polling. In addition, we implemented another application, running on the PC in the remote space, allowing the user to drive the robot using a thumbstick on one of the Windows Mixed Reality hand controllers. This app sends the controller commands to the Beam’s normal controller app.

Usage Scenario

Amy is a design director in a motorcycle manufacturing company. She is in Seattle, USA, but she has teammates in Shanghai, China. With VROOM, she has a virtual ‘key to the door’ of the Shanghai studio, engaging with the office on her own timetable and without the need to organize meeting with a particular Shanghai colleague. Her colleagues, each wearing a HoloLens, can see her avatar present in any room, moving around the building, and if they call out when behind her, as she looks back over her shoulder in VR they can see her avatar’s head naturally back over its shoulder too. Amy can ‘walk’ around the studio to check project progress from team to team, hold a 1:1s in her manager’s office, and engage in ad hoc ‘watercooler’ conversations with people she comes across. In a specific design session, a team shows several life size clay maquettes of new motorcycle designs. Amy and her colleagues are all able to move around the room discussing the designs, huddling around each model and pointing at various design elements. As people move, Amy is always able to know



Figure 7: The remote user can express meaning with gazing and arm gestures.



Figure 8: An earlier version of the robot setup with the marker pattern (bottom) and 360° camera (top).

whether others are looking at her, where others are looking, and can also direct her attention to anything else in the room. At the end of the session, as everyone exits the room and returns to their desks, Amy continues conversations with a couple of colleagues on the move. At the end of that days' visit, Amy docks the robot ready for another user. An hour later Red, who works in the Brisbane, Australia, office, calls into the robot and can move around like Amy. Although the robot itself is identical, all of Robert's Shanghai colleagues are able to know it is him at a glance because they can see his avatar is different to Amy's.

Future Work

We are interested in understanding how VROOM affects social and spatial presence for remote and local users. A future paper will report on an exploratory study comparing standard robotic telepresence with VROOM. Questions to be answered include:

- How does VROOM affect users' collaborative and social interactions, compared to standard robotic telepresence?
- How do remote users make use of VROOM to explore and make sense of the environment?
- How do local users understand and perceive the remote user while using VROOM?

Although VROOM places a lot of value on access to shared physical reality in the local activity space, a shared virtual workspace (similar to [44]) would also be a very useful and straightforward addition. Both remote and local users should be able to spawn and use virtual objects (such as 3D models, documents, etc.) that could be pinned to locations in the real environment or decoupled from the physical environment as necessary.

Although we only illustrated one local user and one remote user, VROOM might also be used in scenarios with multiple local and remote users. Scaling up the number of robots would be the largest expense, but as both VR and AR HMDs become cheaper and more comfortable the biggest issues may be logistical and organizational ROI. It would be also be interesting to consider whether two users could share one robot at once. More explorations can be done looking at how multiple users interact with each other, how to have multiple remote users see each other's avatars, and how to reduce cost with cheaper robots.

Finally, it might be also be interesting to consider more exotic asymmetrical immersion technologies, such as room-scale tracking and matching, treadmill locomotion, or 3D reconstructions of remote spaces. These would increase the complexity and cost of building a flexible system, but they would be valuable in considering how to increase the physical activity levels of remote users, and improve remote user's sense of self-projection into local activity space. VROOM robots could also provide remote users with augmented capabilities (e.g. sensors for light outside the visible spectrum, RFID sensors etc.), which might have AR animated representations so that local users could know when a remote user was using them.

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