Multiple Collision Avoidance between Human Limbs and Robot Links Algorithm in Collaborative Tasks

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Abstract: In this paper a real-time collision avoidance approach useful for human-robot interaction was presented and tested. This approach is based on a collision avoidance algorithm and a distance calculation algorithm. The collision avoidance algorithm was developed to avoid possible collisions between the upper part of the human body and the links of the robot. The positions of 25 characteristic points of the body of the human operator are acquired by two vision sensors. The distances between the robot and the operator are evaluated with the proposed distance calculation algorithm. These algorithms permit a real-time control of a collaborative robot. The collision avoidance approach was tested with two kinds of experiments. The results of the tests are presented.

1 INTRODUCTION

Collaborative robotics is becoming a more and more interesting topic. It implies the removal of the fences that divide the working area of the industrial robots from that of human operators. In this way humans and robots can share the same workspace and they can also perform shared tasks. The idea behind the collaborative robotics is to simultaneously take advantage of the superior performances of the robot in terms of precision, repeatability, speed and payload and of the adaptability of a human operator (Borzelli et al., 2017; Spada et al., 2017).

Several European projects have analysed the potentialities and the problems related to the collaborative robotics, as the SAPHARI project, that faced the problems related to the safety of the human operators, or the ROBO-PARTNER project, that studied the collaboration between humans and robots in operations of logistical support and inline assembly.

In these years, some collaborative robotics applications appeared in industries. In the BMW factory in Spartanburg (USA), UR robots are used for sealing of car doors against noise and water infiltrations and the human operators check the quality of the operations performed by the robots.

This work considers a case in which a human operator and a robot share the same workspace, but they carry out different tasks. So, it is crucial to analyse the issue of the safety of the human operator. In fact, it is fundamental that the robot doesn't hurt the operator during the operations. To avoid any unintentional contact between robot and human, several collision avoidance algorithms have been developed in the last decades. The collision avoidance topic was firstly introduced in (Khatib, 1986). In this work the author introduced the collision avoidance method through artificial potentials. The idea is to associate an attractive potential field to the target of the robot and repulsive potential fields to the sources of danger, that can be generic obstacles in the workspace or human operators. This approach was applied in different forms, (Lacevic et al., 2008; Polverini et al., 2014; Polverini et al., 2017; Flacco et al., 2012; Flacco et al., 2015; Mauro et al., 2017; Mauro et al., 2018). In this work a collision avoidance algorithm based on the artificial potentials method that permits to prevent any unintentional contacts between all the moving parts of the robot and the upper part of a human operator is presented.

In the collision avoidance scenario, a key factor is the determination of the position of the obstacles**.** In (Polverini et al., 2017; Flacco et al., 2015; Mauro et al., 2018) vision sensors have been used for this purpose. In (Takeda et al., 2014; Agostini et al., 2017) the human tracking was performed using wearable sensors This methodology avoids occlusions that can occur with vision systems.

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However, the positioning of sensors on the human is required. The Microsoft Kinect™ v1 and v2 were widely used as vision sensors, because they have an accurate depth camera and can estimate the spatial positions of characteristics points of a human being. The authors have used two Kinect v2 to determinate the position of the human being, to overcome the problems related to the occlusions of the sensors.

The position of the obstacles is a crucial information for the calculation of the distances between the robot and the obstacles (in this work case, between the robot and the human operator). In different papers (Fischer et al., 2009; Pan et al, 2013; Fetzner et al., 2014; Kaldestad et al., 2014) the distance calculations are based on a heavy and time-consuming reconstruction of the space acquired by different vision sensors. In this work the authors have developed a distance calculation algorithm that is easy to implement and doesn't need a powerful hardware for the scene reconstruction.

The paper is organized as follows. The reference layout is described in Sect. 2. The planned trajectory is analysed in Sect. 3. The distance calculation algorithm and the problems related to movement acquisition are discussed in Sect. 4 and in Sect. 5 the collision avoidance algorithm is described. The test to perform and the results are described and discussed in Sect. 6. The conclusions of this paper are presented in Sect. 7.

2 HRI LAYOUT

This work considers a case study in which a human operator and a robot share the same workspace and perform different tasks. The operator is sitting in front of a table, where the robot is positioned on. The idea is to recreate an industrial scenario in which the operator is building a mechanical component and the robot is performing another task. In the real industrial case, the operator wears a coverall. In this case study, it is possible that the human operator is near the robot and cross the path that the robot has to follow. The safety of the operator must be guaranteed.

To study this problem, the authors developed a simulated layout in the V-REP environment and a model of the robot in the MathWorks environment. The layout in V-REP can be seen in Figure 1.

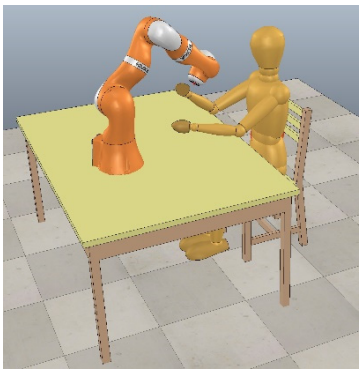

Figure 1: Layout of the human-robot interaction case developed in V-REP.

The position of the operator is acquired by two Microsoft Kinect™ devices and the dummy in V-REP is moved using the information about spatial positions of characteristic joints of the human body.

The communication between MathWorks environment, used for the calculation part, and V-REP is performed by RemoteAPI functions.

The kinematic layout of KUKA LBR iiwa was considered as a reference robot. The issue of the redundancy of the robot was not faced and the third joint was blocked so to work with a standard anthropomorphic manipulator.

In the real case, the algorithms described in this paper will run on a PC that communicates with the controller of the robot.

3 TRAJECTORY

The task that the robot must carry out is to follow a planned trajectory. In Figure 2 the curved path that the end-effector has to follow is shown. The stick diagram of the robot was obtained with the Corke Robotics Toolbox (Corke, 2017).

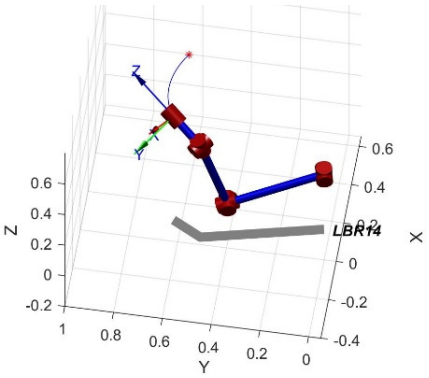

Figure 2: In blue the path that the robot has to follow, in red the initial position of the end-effector.

The final and initial pose of the end-effector are

$$ {}^{0}\hat{A}_{EE,in} = \begin{bmatrix} 0.25 & -0.866 & 0.433 & 0.3524 \\ 0.433 & 0.5 & 0.75 & 0.6105 \\ -0.866 & 0 & 0.5 & 0.5779 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 \end{bmatrix} $$

$$ {}^{0}\hat{A}_{EE,fin} = \begin{bmatrix} 0.25 & -0.866 & 0.433 & -0.0476 \\ 0.433 & 0.5 & 0.75 & 0.6105 \\ -0.866 & 0 & 0.5 & 0.6779 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 \end{bmatrix} $$

The robot has to perform this path in 15 s.

4 DISTANCE CALCULATION ALGORITHM

The estimation of the position of the human operator and the calculation of the distance between the robot and the operator are fundamental steps in the collision avoidance scenario.

In this work, the Microsoft Kinect™ v2 was used to estimate the position of the operator. It gives the spatial coordinates of 25 joints of a skeleton associated to the human being.

An important problem is the occlusion of the cameras. In the case of the Microsoft Kinect™, the occlusions of the device can determinate an erroneous estimation of the joints position or a complete loss of this kind of information. To avoid this problem two or more Kinect are usually used (Lenz et al., 2012; Yeung et al., 2013; Moon et al., 2016). In these papers, the spatial information given by the Kinect devices are opportunely combined and an optimal skeleton is obtained. The authors developed an algorithm that executes the merger of the skeletons given by two Kinect v2. This algorithm performs this operation in 4 ms. The analysis of the skeletons merging algorithm will be carried out in another paper.

Another crucial element to face is the accuracy of the determination of the position of the human joints performed by the Microsoft Kinect™ v2. Several papers (Zennaro et al. 2015; Otte et al. 2016) report the results of tests conducted to determinate the precision of such sensor. The reported averaged errors for the upper part of the human body are 50 mm, so this kind of sensor is acceptable for the purpose of this work.

The Kinect v2 works with a frequency of 30 Hz. Therefore, it is essential, in order to have a collision avoidance real-time strategy, to perform in 33 ms the merging of the skeletons of the two Kinects, to estimate the distances between the robot and the human operator, to calculate the collision avoidance terms and to send this information to the controller of the robot. Considering 4 ms for the skeletons merging, 8 ms for the communication between the external PC and the robot, the distance calculation and the collision avoidance algorithms must perform the necessary calculations in not more than 21 ms. The distance calculation algorithm is the bottleneck in this kind of control, while the collision avoidance algorithm calculates the joint velocities in 2 ms. The authors developed a distance calculation algorithm that is easy to implement and can gives all the useful distances in not more than 9 ms, so to obtain a real-time control for the robot. The logic of the distance calculation algorithm is explained in the remaining part of this section.

The robot is on a table and the operator is sitting in front of it, so the parts of the human being that the robot can hit are the torso, the head and the arms. For this reason, only the joints of the upper body are considered in the following. In Figure 3 red dots represent the Kinect points. The points on the human body are divided into eight parts, that are reported with dashed lines in Figure 3. Extra markers are assumed as middle points for each body segments (black dots in Figure 3).

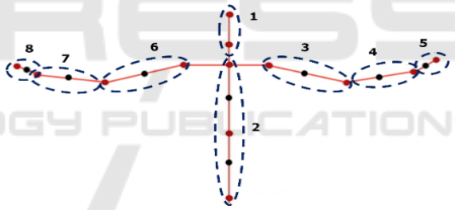

Figure 3: Points considered for the distances calculation and the eight parts in which they are divided (dashed lines). In red the points obtained with the Kinect, in black the extra points considered by the authors.

On the robot side, nine points are considered for the distance calculation algorithm. These points are positioned in the joints centers and in the middle point between each couple of joints. No points have been considered for the base and the first link of the robot, because they have a limited or an absent capability of motion. The points are divided in three sets. The first four points (the first one is the middle point between the second and the third joint, the fourth point is the center of the fourth joint) are in the first set, called "L1". The second four points are in the "L2" set. Finally, the last point is the end effector, "EE" set. This division is necessary for the proper application of the collision avoidance algorithm, as it will be explained later.

After the acquisition of the position of the human body joints and the calculation of the position of the points of the robot, the distances between each part of the robot and each part of the human are computed. To explain the calculation of the distances, a generic human part *h* and a generic robot part *r* are considered, as can be seen in Figure 4.

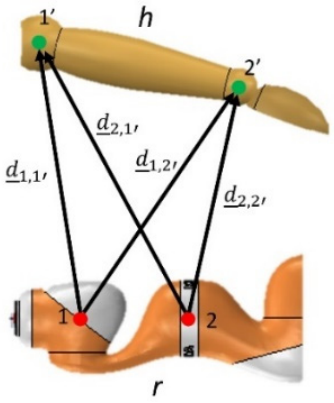

Figure 4: Determination of the distances between the *r* part of the robot and the *h* part for the human, with two points of interest for each one.

The algorithm calculates the distance vector between each point of *h* and each point of *r* and then calculate the vector with the minimum norm among them. This distance vector will be then considered as the characteristic distance of the couple *h* – *r*.

The results of the distance calculation for the set *i* of the robot are vectors in a matrix $[\underline{d}^*_{i,j}]$, where $\underline{d}^*_{i,j}$ is the distance vector, *i* is one of the robot set and *j* is the index related to the eight parts of the human body, numbered as in in Figure 3.

These distances are simple point to point distances and they don't consider the geometry of the robot and the dimensions of the human body. To introduce these elements, the authors considered the points of the robot and the ones of the human body as centres of spheres that cover the links of the robot and the parts of the human body. In Figure 5 the spheres of robot and human body are shown.

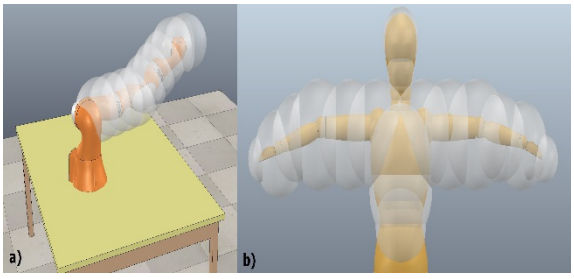

Figure 5: a) spheres centred in the points of the robots; b) spheres centred in the points of the human body.

The norm of the distances reported in the matrices previously seen are then subtracted by the radii of the spheres. The expression of the norm of the distances considering the radii of the spheres are reported below

$$\|\underline{d}_{i,j}\| = \|\underline{d}^*_{i,j}\| - r_R - r_i \quad (1)$$

where r_R is the radius of the spheres of the robot and r_i is the radius of the spheres of the eight parts of the human body. These distances $\underline{d}_{i,j}$ are then used by the collision avoidance algorithm.

5 COLLISION AVOIDANCE ALGORITHM

The distances previously calculated are fundamental elements of the collision avoidance algorithm. The algorithm was developed considering the three sets in which the robot was divided. The algorithm will be explained considering each single part of the robot and then how the algorithm influences the motion of the robot and modifies the planned trajectory.

5.1 Robot Set L1

The set L1 consists of the first four, starting from the middle point between the second joint and the third.

This part has a reduced possibility of motion because it has only two joints, since the third joint is blocked. In this case the algorithm works in order to reduce the maximum velocities of the first two joints as the distance between L1 and the human being became smaller. For this set, the collision avoidance algorithm works with the minimum distance between L1 and the operator.

To reduce the maximum velocities, a factor *f* is calculated. The equation of *f* is

$$f = \frac{1}{\left(1+e^{\left(\|\underline{d}_{L1,H}\|\left(\frac{2}{\rho}\right)-1\right)\alpha}\right)} \quad (2)$$

where $\underline{d}_{L1,H}$ is the minimum distance between L1 and the human operator, ρ is a reference distance and α is a shape factor. In Figure 6 the factor *f* versus the distance is reported.

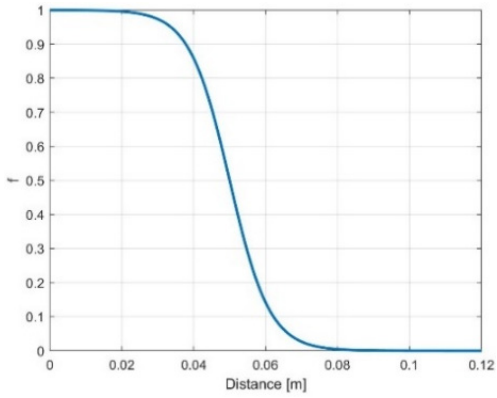

Figure 6: The factor *f* versus distance with ρ equal to 0.1m and α equal to 9.

The chosen values are ρ = 0.1 m and α = 9.

The factor *f* is then used to reduce the maximum velocity for the two joints in this way

$$\dot{q}_{i,max,r} = \pm\, \dot{q}_{i,max}(1 - f) \tag{3}$$

where $\dot{q}_{i,max}$ is the velocity limit for the joint *i* and $\dot{q}_{i,max,r}$ is the new limit, considering the distance between L1 and the operator.

5.2 Robot Set L2

The set L2 consists of the second four points, from the middle point between the fourth and the fifth joint to the wrist center point.

As for L1, the algorithm considers the minimum distance between L2 and the human body. In this case the collision avoidance algorithm is different respect to L1. In fact, the algorithm calculates a repulsive velocity that pushes away the robot from the obstacle, avoiding a possible collision.

The equation of this velocity is

$$v_{L2} = \frac{V_{max}}{\left(1+e^{\left(\|\underline{d}_{L2,H}\|\left(\frac{2}{\rho}\right)-1\right)\alpha}\right)} \tag{4}$$

$$\underline{v}_{rep,L2} = v_{L2}\frac{\underline{d}_{L2,H}}{\|\underline{d}_{L2,H}\|} \tag{5}$$

as in (Flacco et al., 2012), where V_{max} is the maximum admissible velocity and $\underline{d}_{L2,H}$ is the minimum distance.

To convert this velocity in the operative space to velocities in the joint space, the partial Jacobian related to the point of L2 of minimum distance is calculated:

$$\underline{\dot{q}}_{L2} = J_{L2}^{-1} \cdot \underline{v}_{rep,L2} \tag{6}$$

In fact, the distance calculation algorithm determinates the minimum distance between L2 and the human body and calculates also which of the points of L2 is the one involved. This point is essential for the calculation of the Jacobian J_{L2}.

5.3 Robot Set EE

The set EE consists of the last point on the robot, that is the end-effector of the robot.

In this case, all the distances are used, not only the minimum one. For each distance $\underline{d}_{EE,i}$ the algorithm calculates the repulsive velocity with the same expression of the equation (4) and (5), obtaining several $\underline{v}_{EE,i}$.

The repulsive velocities calculated for each distance are then added up to obtain the repulsive velocity vector

$$\underline{v}_{EE} = \sum_i \underline{v}_{EE,i} \tag{7}$$

5.4 Modified Trajectory

The repulsive velocities calculated for L2 and EE and the factor *f* of L1 are then used to modify the planned trajectory of the robot so to avoid collisions between robot and operator.

In fact, the inverse kinematics algorithm is modified in this way

$$\underline{\dot{q}} = J^{-1} \cdot \left(\underline{v}_{PL} + K\underline{e} + \underline{v}_{EE}\right) \tag{8}$$

$$\underline{\dot{q}}(1:3) = \underline{\dot{q}}(1:3) + \underline{\dot{q}}_{L2} \tag{9}$$

The velocities $\underline{\dot{q}}$ in (8) permit to avoid collisions between the end-effector and the human operator, instead the contribution of $\underline{\dot{q}}_{L2}$ in (9) takes account of the collision avoidance between L2 and the robot.

The factor *f*, as seen in 5.1, modifies the maximum velocities of the first two joints. The approach developed in this work provides to stop the entire robot if the values of *f* is bigger than 0.8. This is a threshold value when a collision between the robot and the operator is not avoidable and stop the robot is the last resort.

The robot is stopped also when the distance between L2 and the operator or between EE and the operator is $\leq 0.05\ m$.

6 TESTS

Two tests have been conducted to show the effectiveness of the on-line developed algorithms. In the first one the human operator moves his right hand near the EE and the L2 sets of the robot. In the second test, the hand is near the set L1. In both cases the human was acquired with two Kinect and the robot was controlled considering the optimal human skeleton.

6.1 Test 1

In Figure 7 three frames related to the test 1 are shown. In Figure 7a), the robot can follow the planned path because the operator is outside the safety volume. In Figure 7b), the operator moves his hand near the L2 and the EE sets of the robot and the collision avoidance algorithm generates the joints velocities necessary to modify the trajectory of the end-effector and avoid any contact. In Figure 8, 9, 10 and 11 it is possible to notice the time interval in which the hand of the operator is near the robot and the repulsive velocities are not null. In Figure 7c) the operator withdraws the hand and the robot can return to follow the planned path reaching at the end its final destination.

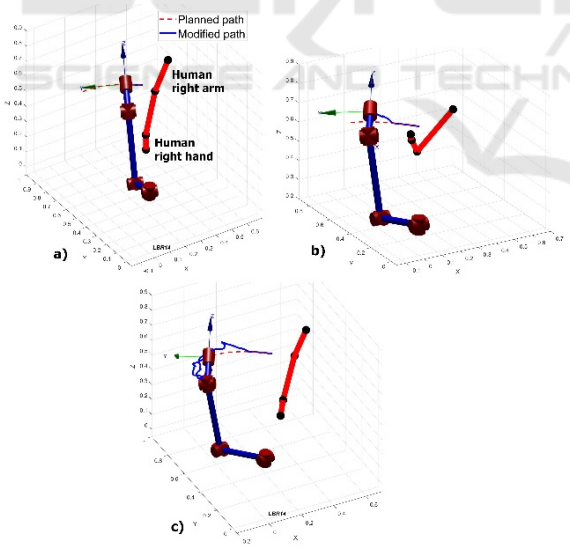

Figure 7: a) the robot follows the planned path because the operator is not near; b) the operator puts the hand inside the safety volume and the robot reacts to that action; c) the operator is far and the robot is able to reach the desired destination.

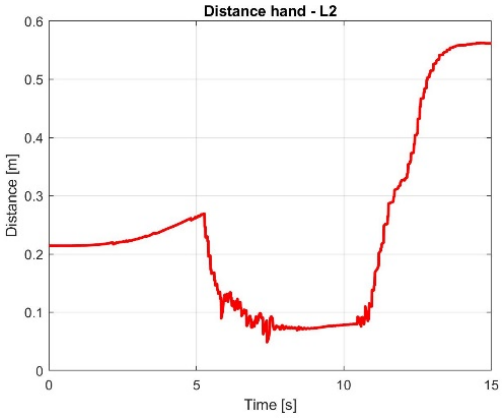

Figure 8: Distance between the hand of the operator and the L2 set of the robot.

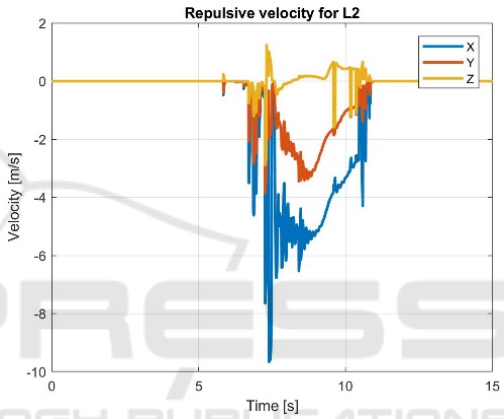

Figure 9: Repulsive velocity for L2.

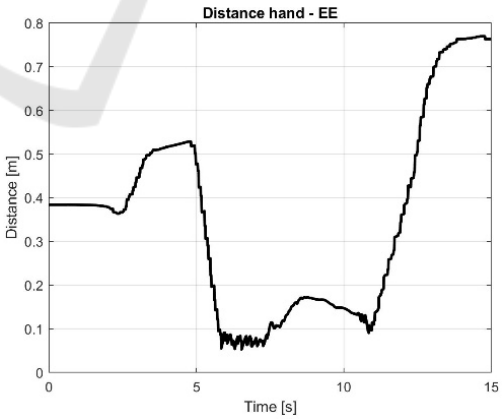

Figure 10: Distance between the hand and the set EE.

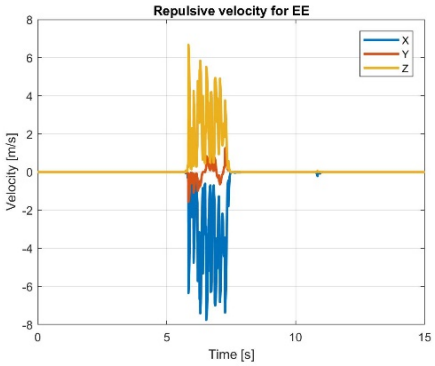

Figure 11: Repulsive velocity for EE.

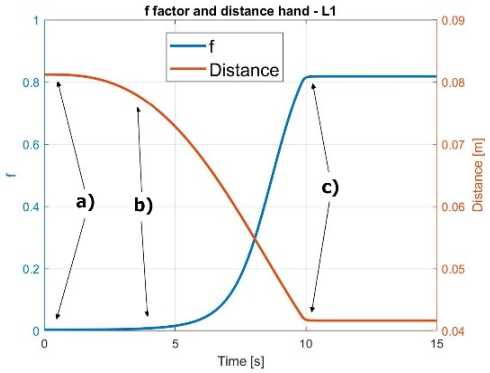

Figure 13: The *f* factor and distance between the hand and the part L1 of the robot versus time in the case of Test 2.

6.2 Test 2

Three frames related to the test 2 are reported in Figure 12 with an upper side view, and the corresponding factor *f* (in blue) is shown in Figure 13. In Figure 12a), the robot is far from the operator and the factor *f* is equal to 0. In Figure 12b) the hand of the operator is inside the safety volume and *f* increases its value. In Figure 12c) the robot stops its motion because *f* is bigger than 0.8. Figure 13 shows also the distance between the set L1 and the hand of the operator. It can be clearly visible when the robot stops and the distance becomes constant.

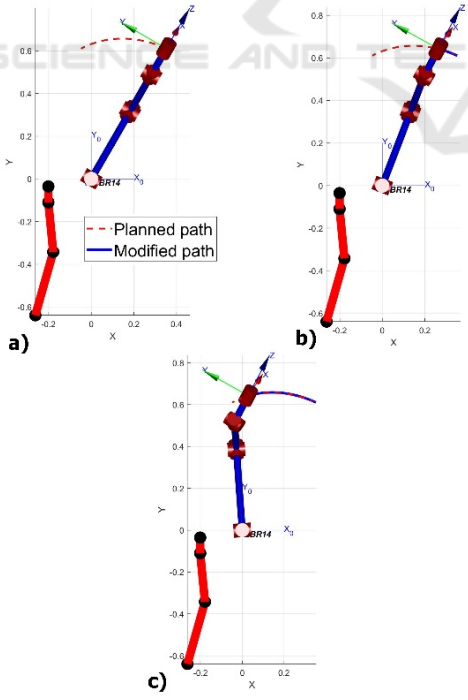

Figure 12: a) the hand of the operator is outside the safety volume; b) the hand enters in the volume and *f* increases its value; c) *f* is bigger than 0.8 and the robot stops.

7 CONCLUSIONS

In this paper a collision avoidance algorithm was presented and tested in a simulation environment. The algorithm permits to modify the planned trajectory of a robot and to avoid undesired collisions against a human operator. This algorithm considers possible collision with six of the eight links of the robot. 21 points on the human body and 9 on the robot were considered to estimate the distances between the operator and the robot.

Two different kind of tests were performed to study the capabilities of the collision avoidance algorithm. In the first one, the hand of the human operator was near the L2 and the EE sets of the robot, in the second one the hand is near the base of the robot. In both cases, the algorithm modified the planned trajectory and avoids possible collisions between human and robot.

Future works will involve the study of the redundancy of 7 axes robot and the potentialities of the null space of the Jacobian for the collision avoidance.

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