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ÍNDICE

Autoridades	
UNLaM	1
RedUNCI	2
Comité Organizador	3
Escuela Internacional de Informática.....	3
Comité Académico	4
Comité Científico.....	6
WORKSHOPS	
WASI – Agentes y Sistemas Inteligentes	9
Modeling Human Decision Making with Defeasible Logic Programming (13337). Maximiliano Sapino, Edgardo Ferretti, Luciana Mariñelarena Dondena, Marcelo Errecalde	10
A Real Case of Multi-Period Water Distribution Network Design solved by a Hybrid Simulated Annealing (13346/13477). Carlos Bermudez, Hugo Alfonso, Gabriela Minetti, Carolina Salto	20
Image augmentation for object detection of grapevines (13354). Maximiliano Sapino ^{1,2,3} , Edgardo Ferretti, Luciana Mariñelarena Dondena, Marcelo Errecalde	30
Navegación autónoma mediante aprendizaje por refuerzo (13383). Ignacio Agustín Costa, Esteban José De Leo, Iris Inés Sattolo, Marisa Daniela Panizzi	40
Manejo de Diversidad en CHC aplicado a la optimización del costo energético en parques eólicos (13412). Martín Bilbao, Guillermo Leguizamón.....	50
Particle Swarm Optimization with Adaptive Inertia Weight using Fuzzy Logic for Large- Scale Problems (13433). Fabiola Patricia Paza, Guillermo Leguizamón, Efrén Mezura- Montes.....	60
WPDP – Procesamiento Distribuido y Paralelo.....	70
Comparación de un Algoritmo de Bidiagonalización para su Utilización en la Recuperación de Información (13380). Osvaldo Spositto, Viviana Ledesma, Gastón Procopio, Hugo Ryckeboer, Victoria Saizar y Alexis Vainberg	71
Comparación de Arquitecturas HPC para Computar Caminos Mínimos en Grafos. Intel Xeon Phi KNL vs NVIDIA Pascal (13405). Manuel Costanzo, Enzo Rucci, Ulises Costi, Franco Chichizola, Marcelo Naiouf	81
WTIAE – Tecnología Informática Aplicada en Educación.....	92
Sistema de Comunicación y Armado Multimedial de Material Pedagógico para Estudiantes Regulares y Diversos Funcionales en la Educación Superior (13338). Vanina Cecilia Chiavetta, Luis Mariano Mongelo, Marcela Dávila, María Laura Villarruel, Gisela Díaz, Néstor Ariel Pan, Elías Biscaia	94
Educación Virtual con Alumnos de Primer Año de Ingeniería en tiempos de aislamiento social obligatorio (13341). Artemisa Trigueros, Mabel Compagnoni, Larisa Toro.....	103
Formación de Competencias de la Industria 4.0 en Estudiantes de 1er. Año de Ingeniería (13342). Artemisa Trigueros, Mabel Compagnoni, Larisa Toro, Sabrina Gómez.....	113

Framework para configuración de batallas históricas: Generando a través del juego un espacio de aprendizaje (13345). Christian Parkinson, Roxana Martínez, Pablo Vera, Rocío Rodríguez	123
Juego serio de realidad virtual para acercar figuras importantes de la historia de la Informática (13381). Mariano Mazza, Cecilia Sanz, Verónica Artola	133
La Producción de Juegos Serios Móviles. Posibilidades y Desafíos para el Docente de Nivel Superior (13386). Edith Lovos, Iván Basciano, Evangelina Gil, Cecilia Sanz.....	144
Prácticas educativas STEAM para fomentar el desarrollo de competencias científico-tecnológicas (13390). Silvina Manganelli.....	154
Herramientas de model finding para asistir en la Construcción de Especificaciones Formales (13397). Sonia Permigiani, María Marta Novaira, Gastón Scilingo, Marcelo Arroyo.....	165
Experiencia Educativa con Tecnologías Emergentes (13436). Mariela Zuñiga, Claudia Liendo, María Rosas, Graciela Rodríguez, Nicolás Jofré, Yoselie Alvarado, Myriam Villegas, Jacqueline Fernandez, Roberto Guerrero	175
MEHI – Material Educativo Hipermedial Interactivo para un curso de Química General. Resultados de una experiencia áulica (13441). García Ricardo, Gorga Gladys , Bertone Rodolfo.....	186
WCGIV – Computación Gráfica, Imágenes y Visualización	197
Simulation of High-Visual Quality Scenes in Low-Cost Virtual Reality (13411). Matías N. Selzer, M. Luján Ganuza, Dana K. Urribarri, Martín L. Larrea, Silvia M. Castro	198
NATUS. A Physically-Based Rendering Engine with Real-Time Global Illumination (13415). Ignacio del Barrio, María Luján Ganuza, Silvia M. Castro	208
Towards defining a CAVE like system performance evaluation (13426). Nicolás Jofré, Graciela Rodríguez, Yoselie Alvarado, Jacqueline Fernández, Roberto Guerrero	218
ARPOT: An Augmented Reality Platform for Outdoor Teaching (13439). Matías N. Selzer, Dana K. Urribarri, Nicolás F. Gazcón Martín L. Larrea, Claudia Sereno, Antonela Volonté, Aldana Mastrandrea, Silvia M. Castro.....	229
WBDMD – Bases de Datos y Minería de Datos.....	239
Seguimiento de rodeos en establecimientos agropecuarios (13335). Pablo Rafael Palmero, Edilma Olinda Gagliardi, Maria Gisela Dorzán	240
Conducting a systematic review: Trends in machine learning and text mining (13372). Mariana Falco, Ignacio Berdiñas	250
Una Aplicación de Espacios Métricos en el Ámbito del Comercio Electrónico (13377). Libertad Speranza, María de los Ángeles de la Torre, Norma Herrera	260
Análisis del Desempeño de Clustering y Árboles de Decisión en la Evaluación Clínica de Microbiomas de Pacientes con Cáncer Colorrectal (13384). Laura Avila, Victoria Santa María, Luis López, Marcelo Soria, Cristóbal R. Santa María	270
Decisiones y lecciones aprendidas en un proceso ETL aplicado a sistemas con testimonios de delitos de lesa humanidad (13387). David Troncoso *, Agustina Buccella, Alejandra Cechich.....	279

SMOTE, Algoritmo para balanceo de clases en un estudio aplicado a la ganadería (13396). Osvaldo Spositto, Gabriel Blanco, Lorena Matteo, Marcelo Levi y Julio Bossero.....	289
Análisis de performance en Bases de Datos NoSQL y Bases de Datos Relacionales (13428). Luciano Marrero, Verena Olsowy, Fernando Tesone, Pablo Thomas, Lisandro Delia, Patricia Pesado.....	299
Smart Grids Challenge: A competitive variant for Single Objective Numerical Optimization (13435). Fabricio Loor, M. Guillermo Leguizamón, Efrén Mezura-Montes	310
Representación del Trie de Sufijo: Una Evaluación Empírica (13437). Darío Ruano, Jesica Cornejo, Paola Azar, Norma Herrera	318
WIS – Ingeniería de Software	328
Transferencia de Conocimiento en la Gestión de Calidad de la Ingeniería de Software (13327). Mauricio Rozo, Inés Casanovas, Ma. Florencia Pollo Cattaneo.....	329
ScrumGame: A Serious Game to Initiate Software Trainees in Scrum (13331). Guillermo Rodriguez, Matías Glessi, Alfredo Teyseyre, Pablo Gonzalez	339
Revisión sistemática de la literatura sobre implementación de arquitecturas software para sistemas críticos (13332). Joaquín Acevedo, Andrea Lezcano, Emanuel Irrazábal.....	350
A Parallel Tableau Algorithm for BIG DATA Verification (13334). Fernando Asteasuain, Luciana Rodriguez Caldeira	360
Evaluación de un Modelo Ontológico basado en la Adecuación Funcional de la Norma ISO 25010 para la Elicitación de Requisitos de Software (13344). Rebeca Yuan, Carlos Salgado, Mario Peralta, Alberto Sánchez	370
Impacto de una debilidad de ciberseguridad en la arquitectura de un sistema electromédico (13353). Diego Coulombie, Agustín Reyes, Alberto Miguens	380
TAPIR: An Object-Oriented Programming Testing Framework based on Message Sequence Specification with Aspect-Oriented Programming (13357). Martín L. Larrea, Dana K. Urribarri.....	389
Risk Refinement in the Deployment Process of Software Systems: A Case Study (13358). Felipe Ortiz, Marisa Panizzi, Rodolfo Bertone.....	399
Aplicaciones Móviles 3D: un estudio comparativo de performance y consumo de energía (13375). Federico Cristina, Sebastián Dapoto, Pablo Thomas, Patricia Pesado, Jefferson Perez Altamirano, Martín De la Canal Erbetta.....	408
Modelo de evaluación de datos utilizando el enfoque GQM (13414). Julieta Calabrese, Silvia Esponda, Ariel Pasini, Patricia Pesado	418
WARSO – Arquitectura, Redes y Sistemas Operativos.....	429
Parámetro H: Análisis de la Autosimilaridad de un Tráfico VoIP (13333). Sergio A. Villiani, Diego R. Rodríguez Herlein	430
Interfaz Humano-Máquina web amigable para dispositivo IoT (13355). Rocío Madou, Federico N. Guerrero, Enrique M. Spinelli	440
Extended Petri Net Processor for Embedded Systems (13367). Luis Orlando Ventre, Orlando Micolini, and Emiliano Daniele.....	450

Análisis de rendimiento y consumo para sistema embebido con requisitos de tiempo explícitos (13376). Esteban Carnuccio, Graciela De Luca, Waldo Valiente, Mariano Volker, Raúl Villca, Matías Adagio	460
Arquitectura Cliente-Servidor de Alto Rendimiento para servicio RTK (13389). José H. Moyano, Karina M. Cenci, Jorge R. Ardenghi.....	470
WISS – Innovación en Sistemas de Software	480
Motor de Reglas Desacoplado Orientado a Formato JavaScript Object Notation (13359). Marcos Maciel.....	481
Reconocimiento de emociones a través de expresiones faciales con el empleo de aprendizaje supervisado aplicando regresión logística (13374). Carlos Barrionuevo, Jorge Ierache , Iris Sattolo	491
Proposal of a Multimodal Model for emotional assessment within affective computing in gastronomic settings (13379). Jorge Ierache, Facundo Nervo, Iris Sattolo, Rocio Ierache, Gabriela Chapperón	501
Estrategias a nivel de macro y micro-planificación en un prototipo de verbalización de ontologías (13392). Martín Bermudez, Sandra Roger	512
GeoPerfil Profesional: una herramienta automática de información sobre profesionales (13393). Emanuel Balcazar, Lucas Bobadilla, Waldo Fusiman, Leo Ordinez.....	522
COVID-19: un análisis comparativo de Apps (13408). Juan Fernández Sosa, Verónica Aguirre, Lisandro Delía, Pablo Thomas, Leandro Corbalán Patricia Pesado	532
A Language for the Specification of the Schema of Spreadsheets for the Materialization of Ontologies (13420). Sergio Alejandro Gómez, Pablo Rubén Fillottrani.....	546
Genvi: propuesta de un desarrollo tecnológico para abordar la violencia de género (13427). Juan Pablo Quiñones, Viviana Harari, Ivana Harari	556
Sistema para el registro de factores psicológicos que inciden en los trastornos gastrointestinales funcionales. “Digestivamente” (13442). Juan Zaragoza, Jorge Ierache, Nicolas Domínguez, Hernan Merlino, Milagros Celleri, Florencia Koutsovitits, Cristian Garay	569
WPSTR – Procesamiento de Señales y Sistemas de Tiempo Real	579
Diseño y desarrollo de un sistema embebido para una trampa pitfall con data logger (13339). Mariano Droz, Juan Ramos, Pedro Benitez, Luz Zapata, Beatriz Díaz	580
Dispositivo GPS para monitoreo del rendimiento deportivo (13368). Luisina Santos, Marcelo Guiguet, Pablo Luengo, Mónica Sarobe, Eduardo Alvarez, Gustavo Useglio, Federico Gómez, Matías Capelli, Carlos Di Cicco	590
Simplifying concurrency and monitoring on Arduino for Internet of Things (13370). Ricardo Moran, Matías Teragni, Gonzalo Zabala	599
Control de cámara de germinación hidropónica mediante IoT, broker Mosquitto y placas SBC en invernaderos de la provincia de Misiones (13373). Marcelo Marinelli, Myriam Kurtz, Rubén R. Urquijo, Guillermo Wurm.....	609

Análisis de una plataforma de simulación para Cloud Computing. Un caso de estudio (13402). Tomás Rosales, Julián Spinelli, Marcos Di Nardo, Román Bond, Daniel Rosatto, Diego Encinas, Fernando Romero	619
Administración del Tiempo Ocioso Mediante Slack Stealing en FreeRTOS (13416). Francisco E. Páez, José M. Urriza, Javier D. Orozco	629
Análisis Comparativo de Implementaciones HLS de Filtro Sobel en SoC (13440). Roberto Millon, Enzo Rucci, Emmanuel Frati.....	639
WIE – Innovación en Educación en Informática	649
Compilador para traducir ubicaciones geográficas en instrucciones atómicas en una aplicación de aprendizaje ubicuo de programación (13336). Denis Acosta, Margarita Alvarez, Elena Durán	650
Estrategias para trabajar competencias en una asignatura masiva de Informática. El caso de Seminario de Python (13378). Claudia Banchoff, Viviana Harari, Sofía Martin	660
Actividades de Investigación Científica con docentes y alumnos de grado en Informática y Ciencias de la Computación (13382). Germán Bianchini, Paola Caymes-Scutari, Patricia Ontiveros, Carina Rotella, Sandra Tagarelli, Sergio Salinas, Mariela Galdamez, Pamela Chirino, Karvin Díaz, Alejo Ponce de León, Renzo Suarez	670
Experiencias de articulación para formar emprendedores en los ciclos lectivos 2019 y 2020 (13406). Sonia I. Mariño y Viviana R. Bercheñi	680
Estrategias de evaluación formativa en la enseñanza de programación en modalidad remota de emergencia (13422). Gladys Dapozo, Cristina Greiner, Raquel Petris, María Fernanda Piragine, Ana María Company, María Cecilia Espíndola	690
Relevamiento de demandas formativas e innovación educativa en el nivel medio y superior en el DIIT- UNLaM (13430). Santiago Igarza, Bettina Donadello, Mariana Cipic, Nicolás Kotliar	700
Didáctica de las Ciencias de la Computación: Experiencias y Percepciones de Docentes de Educación Primaria (13431). Francisco Bavera, Marcela Daniele, Flavia Buffarini, Teresa Quintero, Cecilia De Dominici	708
WSI – Seguridad Informática.....	718
Riesgos/vulnerabilidades de una red informática en un Laboratorio EDI (13385). Fabián A. Gibellini, Roberto Muñoz, Analía L. Ruhl, Juliana Notreni, Milagros N. Zea Cárdenas, Ignacio Sánchez Balzaretto, Cecilia Sanchez	719
Exploración de correlaciones internas de los parámetros temporales generados en dinámicas de teclado (13394). Nahuel González, Germán M. Concilio, Jorge S. Ierache, Enrique P. Calot, y Waldo Hasperue	726
Implementación de Blockchain para aseguramiento de evidencia digital en entornos Forensic Readiness (13418). Javier Díaz, Mónica D. Tugnarelli, Lucas Barboza, Mauro F. Fornaroli, Facundo N. Miño	736
Track de Gobierno Digital y Ciudades Inteligentes	745
Prototipo para la gestión de agua de lluvia para la descarga de sanitarios (13347). Leandro Marín Crespi, Cristian Schiffino, Iris Inés Sattolo, Marisa Daniela Panizzi	746

Marco de vinculación de datos abiertos aplicado al contexto de datos medioambientales (13388). Juan Santiago Preisegger, Alejandro Greco , Ariel Pasini, Marcos Boracchia, Patricia Pesado.....	756
Validando las dos primeras etapas de metodo_SCGE en un organismo gubernamental (13398). Marcelo Castro, Claudia Fabiana Pons, Rocío Andrea Rodríguez.....	767
Improving a Low-Cost Surveillance System (13401). Carlos Sebastián Castañeda, María José Abásolo.....	777
Desarrollo de un prototipo para estación de monitoreo de un dispositivo híbrido de termotanques solar y a gas natural instalado en la Sede Atlántica de la Universidad Nacional de Río Negro (13429). Javier Valsecchi, Guillermo Malpeli, Juan Cruz Martinez Luquez, Héctor Luis Vivas.....	787
Innovación en el Sector Público para Ciudades Inteligentes Sostenibles (13438). Rocío Muñoz, Ariel Pasini, Patricia Pesado.....	797
New technologies for innovation in public services: A review of case studies (13444). Ana Inés Dennehy, Elsa Estévez, and Pablo R. Fillotrani.....	807

Workshop Computación Gráfica, Imágenes y visualización

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Simulation of High-Visual Quality Scenes in Low-Cost Virtual Reality

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Abstract. With the increasing popularity of virtual reality, many video games and virtual experiences with high-visual quality have been developed recently. Virtual reality with a high-quality representation of scenes is still an experience linked to high-cost devices. There are currently low-cost virtual reality solutions by using mobile devices, but in those cases, the visual quality of the presented virtual environments must be simplified for running on mobile devices with limited hardware characteristics. In this work, we present a novel Image-Based Rendering technique for low-cost virtual reality. We have conducted a performance evaluation of three mobile devices with different hardware characteristics. Results show that our technique represents high-visual quality virtual environments with considerably better performance compared to traditional rendering solutions.

Keywords: Virtual Reality, Low-Cost VR, Navigation, Image-Based Rendering

1 Introduction

Virtual Reality (VR) is a technology already established in many different markets and platforms around the globe. One of the main factors in the rise of VR was the possibility of experiencing VR with low-cost mobile devices. This low-cost VR, when properly implemented, can not only enable people to experience this technology by using their mobile phones but also brings a new world of possibilities to those users who cannot afford a high-end VR system.

The games and experiences designed for this type of VR are usually graphically very simple, and rendering complex 3D scenes in these devices is a challenging problem. This is partly due to mobile device limitations in hardware and graphical processing (compared to modern gaming computers).

In this paper, we introduce a novel technique to display high-visual quality 3D scenes in low-cost VR devices. More specifically, the work presented here yields the following benefits and contributions:

- Our technique simulates a 3D environment by using a spherical panorama 3D texture matrix and dynamic image warping.
- We designed a novel image warping technique that enables a smooth transition between image points.
- Our technique was compared to traditional rendering of the same scene, obtaining better performance for multiple hardware configurations.
- Our technique allows a fully 3D VR navigation.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 gives an overview of the related work. Section 3 presents the details of the proposed technique and the proposed algorithm description. The experimental setup is described in Section 4. The experiment results are shown in Section 5 and discussed in Section 6. Finally, we draw our conclusions and point out the future work in Section 7.

2 Related Work

In recent years there has been tremendous growth in the number and variety of GPU-intensive mobile applications, enabling users to interact and navigate in high-visual quality virtual environments. To get a suitable system for mobile phones, many approaches vary both in the degree of realism of the virtual environment and the navigation technique.

The most popular render techniques for this purpose are those belonging to traditional geometry rendering and those oriented to image-based rendering (IBR). In the first case, the most viable alternatives to having high-visual quality virtual worlds are those that integrate progressive meshes, caching and restricted objects resolution techniques, thus allowing to overcome, to different degrees, the limitations of mobile devices in regards to processing, memory and power consumption [1–5]. In those cases, rendering high-visual quality 3D scenes on limited mobile devices obtained a very low performance.

Currently, Image-Based Rendering (IBR) is emerging as the most promising approach since the rendering process requires less computational resources than traditional geometry rendering. These techniques emerged in the late 1990s to overcome the severe limitations that exist for the representation of photo-realistic 3D scenes in real-time [6–8].

While more recent methods, running on PC, can synthesize new views based on captured panoramas from both video and images, the new generated views do not allow free navigation. Furthermore, they are based on the capture of a few panoramas and the synthesis of the intermediates is done by computationally intensive warping and interpolation algorithms [9, 10]. More recent approaches based on image interpolation for free navigation were proposed in the literature [11–15] but they only run on PC.

To represent high-visual quality 3D scenes with mobile devices, IBR is more suitable because it uses images as input and the rendering cost does not depend on the scene complexity, but on the final image resolution. Different approaches have been proposed that provide a variety of image types and qualities [6,

16]. More recently approaches, based on high-quality synthetic scenes generated in the server, have been presented in [17,18]. However, in all these cases, a significant latency is observed.

3 Our Proposal

In this article, we present a novel Image-Based Rendering technique based on spherical panoramic images to simulate high-visual quality 3D environments for low-cost VR devices. An overview of the technique's main components and their interaction is depicted in Figure 1. This process is continuously repeating as the user is moving, creating the sensation of a smooth transition through the virtual environment. All these components are detailed next.

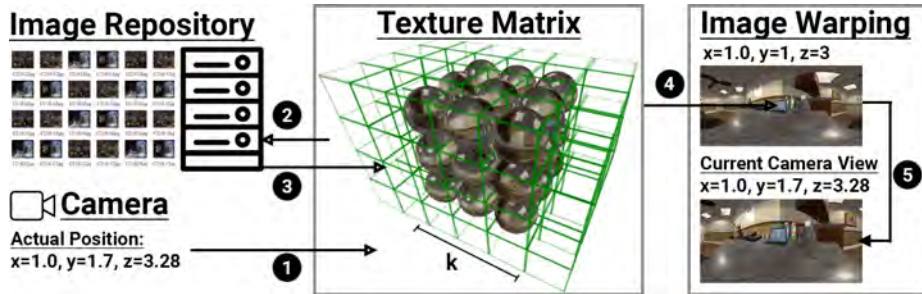


Fig. 1. Technique overview. (1) The camera sends its current position to the Texture Matrix component. (2) A set of images is requested to the Image Repository. (3) The Image Repository sends the requested images. (4) The nearest image that corresponds to the camera current position is sent to the Image Warping component. (5) The Image Warping component calculates and generates the image that corresponds to the camera exact current position.

3.1 Requirements

Our technique requires a set of 360° panoramic images captured from the original 3D environment to be simulated. The environment has to be sampled by capturing 360° panoramic images, each one from a different and specific position. If the environment has a dimension of dim_x in the x-axis, dim_y in the y-axis, and dim_z in the z-axis, and all images are separated by a distance Δ , then all the images can be represented as an abstract 3D matrix with dimension $N \times M \times R$ as shown in Figure 3 (right), where $N = dim_x/\Delta$, $M = dim_y/\Delta$, and $R = dim_z/\Delta$. These 360° panoramic images are then stored in the Image Repository, which provides the images to the Texture Matrix component of our technique.

3.2 Local Image Management - Texture Matrix

The Texture Matrix component is in charge of loading, storing, and managing the 360° panoramic images recovered from the Image Repository. The number of cells in the Texture Matrix depends on the size of the original 3D environment and the distance Δ between samples. The Texture Matrix dimension is $N \times M \times R$, where N , M , and R are specified in Section 3.1. Therefore, this matrix is eventually capable of storing every sample of the scene.

In our approach, we provide efficient management of images. At any time, the Texture Matrix maintains a small number of images loaded in memory that correspond to the samples captured in a delimited neighborhood regarding the current position of the camera. As the camera moves, the Texture Matrix is updated. Finally, the matrix is regularly cleaned by removing those images captured in positions located at a certain distance of k from the current position of the camera.

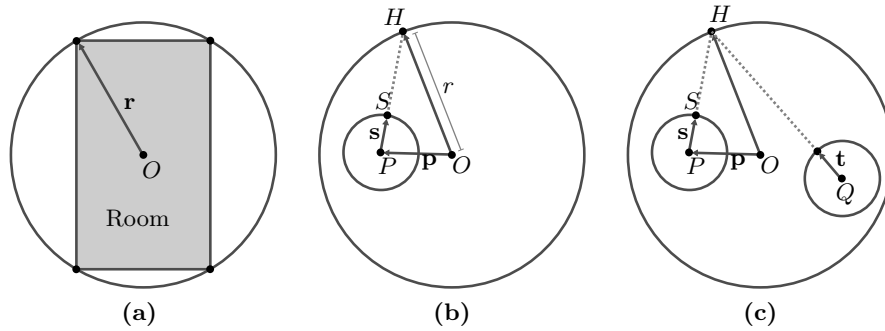


Fig. 2. Cross-section of a room centered at O and two unitary spheres centered at P and Q . (a) Cross-section of the sphere with center O and radius r containing a room. (b) Point H over the room corresponding to the projection S . The unitary sphere is centered at P , where the equirectangular panoramic image \mathcal{I}_P was taken. (c) Projection of point H over the unitary sphere centered at Q , where no image was taken.

3.3 Image Warping

In order to avoid the user noticing jumps between the samples, we implemented a function to smoothen that transition. Let us assume that two contiguous spherical panoramic images \mathcal{I}_A and \mathcal{I}_B were taken at points A and B , then if the user stands at one of those points the system shows the corresponding image. However, while the user is moving from point A to B the system should show an intermediate image that smoothly switches from \mathcal{I}_A to \mathcal{I}_B .

We consider that the spherical panoramic images correspond to an equirectangular projection of a circular room that fully contains the original one (see Figure 2a). Let O be the center of the circle of radius r that contains

the room, Q be the point where the user stands and P be the point where the nearest panoramic image \mathcal{I}_P was taken. The strategy is to warp \mathcal{I}_P to match the panoramic image that should have been taken from the point of view of Q . If $(u, v) \in [0, 1]^2$ is a texture coordinate over the panoramic image \mathcal{I}_P , we invert the projection to obtain the point S over a unitary sphere centered at P that projects onto (u, v) (see Figure 2b). Since the panoramic image is the result of a equirectangular projection, the vector \mathbf{s} between P and S is: $\mathbf{s} = (x, y, z) = (\sin(\phi) \cos(\theta), \sin(\theta) \sin(\phi), \cos(\phi))$, where $\theta = 2u\pi$ and $\phi = v\pi$. Now, let H be the point over the room of radius r that projects on S . Then, $H = k\mathbf{s} + \mathbf{p}$ where $\mathbf{p} = Q - O$, $|k\mathbf{s} + \mathbf{p}| = r$ and $k = \frac{-(\mathbf{p} \cdot \mathbf{s}) + \sqrt{(\mathbf{p} \cdot \mathbf{s})^2 - |\mathbf{s}|^2(|\mathbf{p}|^2 + r^2)}}{|\mathbf{s}|^2}$.

To warp the image to match the point of view of Q , we find the projection \mathbf{t} of H over the unitary sphere centered at Q (see Figure 2c), $\mathbf{t} = \frac{H-Q}{|H-Q|}$. Finally, the 2D projection (u, v) of $\mathbf{t} = (x, y, z)$ over the equirectangular texture is $(u, v) = (\frac{\theta}{2\pi}, \frac{\phi}{\pi})$ where $\theta = \text{atan2}(y, x)$ and $\phi = \text{atan2}(\sqrt{x^2 + y^2}, z)$.

4 Experimental Setup

To study the benefits of our technique compared to a traditional 3D rendering approach, a performance experiment was conducted. Since performance depends on the used hardware, we designed an experiment to test our technique with three different hardware configurations. Here, the same scenario is presented in two different treatment conditions: a traditional rendering approach and by using our technique. This section details the experiment designed to evaluate our technique.

4.1 Virtual Environment

We used ‘‘Doctor’s Office’’ scenario[19] as the 3D virtual scenario for the test. This scenario is designed to run in Unity3d[20] in which we developed our technique. It consists of a representation of a doctor’s office with 2.1 million triangles, 2.3 million vertices, and it is rendered with high-level graphics techniques.

4.2 Images Dataset

The image dataset was created by using Unity360ScreenshotCapture[21]. This tool generates a 360° panoramic image based on the position of the virtual camera. The whole dataset is created automatically by iterating along the desired volume. Figure 3 shows an example of the sampling process.

4.3 Hardware Configurations

The proposed technique is specifically designed for low-cost VR, i.e., by using mobile phones. Since we want to show that our technique works for both low-end and high-end mobile phones, the current study evaluates and compares



Fig. 3. Image capture example. For each specified camera position, the application captures a 360° panoramic screenshot. (Left) The whole virtual environment is sampled. (Center) Column A shows the camera current view. Column B shows the 360° picture captured at that position. (Right) All the environment is sampled and an image corresponding to each cell of an abstract 3D matrix is generated.

the performance of our technique in the three different hardware configurations presented in Table 1.

In the rest of the paper, we use the letter H (high-end) to refer to the Le Eco Max 2 mobile phone, the letter M (mid-end) to refer to the Motorola Moto G mobile phone, and the letter L (low-end) to refer to the Google Nexus 7 tablet.

Table 1. Hardware specification of the three mobile devices used in the experiment.

Name	Le Eco Max 2	Motorola Moto G 2	Asus Google Nexus 7
OS	Android 6.0.1 / API-23	Android 6.0 / API-23	Android 6.0.1 / API.23
Screen	2560x1440@59Hz	1280x720@60Hz	1280x800@60Hz
Graphics API	OpenGL ES 3.1	OpenGL ES 3.0	OpenGL ES 2.0
GPU	Adreno (TM) 530	Adreno (TM) 305	NVIDIA Tegra 3
VRAM	2048 MB	256 MB	256 MB
Max texture size	16384px	4096px	2048px
Shader level	50	35	30
CPU	Quad-core 2.1 GHz Snapdragon-820	Quad-core 1.2 GHz Cortex-A7	Quad-core 1.2 GHz Cortex-A9
RAM	5774 MB	890 MB	971 MB

4.4 Variables

In this study, we consider one independent variable, which is the technique used to render the virtual environment. This variable takes two values and the two treatment conditions of this study are explained as follows:

- Treatment Condition 1 (TC1) - Traditional Rendering: The virtual scenario is exported and rendered with a traditional graphic configuration.
- Treatment Condition 2 (TC2) - Our Technique: The application only contains the required elements for our technique.

The system response time is the time between the user's actions and the perceived response [22]. Several studies suggest that this latency degrades the sensation of presence [23,24], and it is suggested that the latency should not be greater than 100 ms [25]. However, more recent studies suggest that latency should be under 20 ms [26]. The frames-per-second (FPS) are a measure of how many frames the hardware can render in one second. Since the FPS represent a good measure of performance, this measure has been widely used to compare the performance between two or more different graphical techniques. For this reason, this study uses FPS as a measure of performance in both treatment conditions.

4.5 Procedure

Even though both treatment conditions allow the user to freely navigate the virtual environment, to compare the performance between both treatment conditions, a specific path through the virtual environment was defined. This path has a total distance of 30 meters and it is shown in Figure 4.



Fig. 4. The path followed by the virtual camera in the experiment. The camera travels from point A to point B in 300 seconds.

The duration time for the camera to get to point B is 5 minutes (or 300 seconds). At every 0.5 seconds, the current FPS value is recorded. Thus, for each test run, a total of 600 samples are generated. This test was performed by the three different hardware configurations in both treatment conditions. The results are presented in the next section.

5 Results

The results of the performance experiment among the treatment conditions are depicted in Figure 5. Figure 6 presents the average, lower, and higher FPS scores obtained for both treatment conditions for the three hardware configurations. Based on these values, the H configuration obtained a performance improvement of 514%; the M configuration a performance improvement of 682%; and the L configuration a performance improvement of 352%.

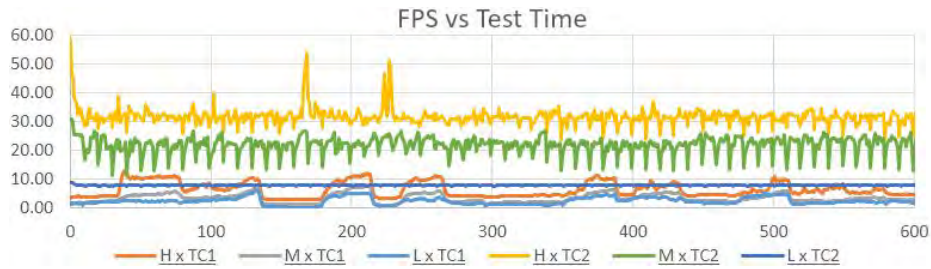


Fig. 5. Performance Results Overview. The plot’s horizontal axis depicts the measured FPS during the 600 time samples of the total duration of the trial (300 seconds, one sample every 0.5 seconds) for each one of the hardware configurations. The histogram shows the average FPS of each trial.

To test the limits of the image warping effect beyond the 4 cm distance between samples, some informal user tests were also performed. Results showed that using a distance between samples up to 40 cm still proves an acceptable user experience. Higher values produced higher deformations in the images that induced cybersickness symptoms in the user. The implications of these results are discussed in the next section.

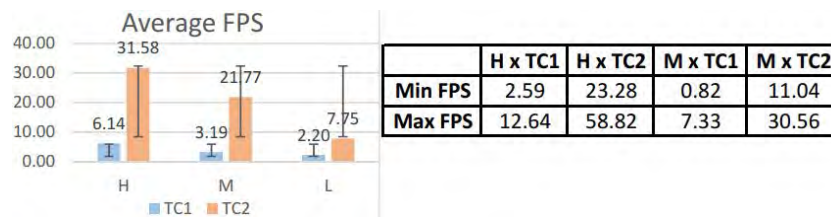


Fig. 6. (Left) Average FPS scores. (Right) Lower and Higher FPS scores comparison grouped by hardware configuration.

6 Discussion

The results obtained in the performance test are remarkable. For each one of the hardware configurations, there is a clear difference in FPS measured during the test. Each one of the hardware configurations obtained a performance improvement of at least 352% with an average FPS increment of 516%. These results suggest that our technique outperforms the traditional rendering technique regardless of the used mobile phone. This performance improvement was expected since a traditional rendering approach invests a lot of resources on rendering vertices, polygons, meshes, materials, calculating dynamic illumination

and shadows, among other things. In our technique, on the contrary, all such things are implicitly included in the images used to simulate the 3D environment.

Figure 6 shows the higher and lower FPS values obtained of each treatment condition and for each hardware configuration. For each one of the used mobile phones, the higher FPS value obtained while using traditional rendering was still lower than the lower value obtained by using our technique. If for example, we consider the middle hardware configuration used in this study, the average FPS value measured during the traditional rendering test was 3.19, which is equivalent to 1 image every 310 ms approximately. That is something unfeasible for VR in which the images presented to the user have to be displayed as fast as possible. On the contrary, by using our technique, the average measured FPS value was 21.77, which is equivalent to 1 image every 46 ms approximately. These results are more suitable for VR and satisfy the suggested values.

7 Conclusions and Future Work

This study presents a new Image-Based Rendering technique specially designed to enable the representation of high-quality virtual environments in low-cost VR devices. This work evaluated the performance of our technique compared to a traditional rendering approach. For this reason, image size optimizations were not investigated. Future work should, therefore, evaluate image optimizations for improving the performance.

One of the main benefits of our technique is that it does not depend on the visual quality or complexity of the virtual environment. Furthermore, this technique will also work with real-world pictures. If we are able to take 360° panoramic spherical pictures of the real world separated by a defined distance, this technique will allow virtual navigation through a total realistic environment. Future work should investigate the use of this kind of image dataset.

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