

Real-time safety assessment of trajectories for autonomous driving

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Abstract

Autonomous vehicles (AVs) must always have a safe motion to guarantee that they will not cause any accidents. In an AV system, the motion of the vehicle is represented as a trajectory. A trajectory-planning component is responsible for computing such a trajectory during run-time, taking into account perceived information about the environment, the dynamics of the vehicle, the predicted future states of other road users and a number of safety aspects.

Due to the enormous amount of information to be considered, trajectory-planning algorithms are complex, which makes it complicated to guarantee the safety of all planned trajectories. This is why it is necessary to have an extra component to assess the safety of the planned trajectories during run-time. Such a trajectory safety assessment component gives diverse observations of the safety of AV trajectories, and ensures that the AV only follows safe trajectories. Here we use the term “trajectory checker” to refer to the trajectory safety assessment component. The trajectory checker must evaluate planned trajectories against various safety rules, taking into account a large number of possibilities, including the worst-case behavior of other road users. This must be done while guaranteeing actual real-time performance, as the safety assessment is carried out while the vehicle is moving and in constant interaction with the environment.

In this paper, we present a prototype of the trajectory checker we have developed at IVEX. We show how our approach works smoothly and accomplishes real-time constraints embedded in an Infineon AURIX™ TC397 automotive platform. Finally, we measure the performance of our trajectory checker prototype against a set of NCAPS-inspired scenarios.

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Introduction

Safety is crucial for autonomous driving. To achieve safety, an autonomous vehicle (AV) must guarantee that its trajectories never cause any accident. Nevertheless, trajectory planning is a complex problem. The trajectory planning component of an AV must take into account an enormous amount of information to compute a trajectory, such as perceived information about the environment, the dynamics of the AV, the predicted future states of other road users, the accomplishment of traffic and safety rules, etc. At the same time, the trajectory planning component must guarantee a low computation time so that it can be used during run-time.

Because of the complexity of the problem, trajectory-planning algorithms are complex too, with many different steps and techniques, making it difficult to guarantee the safety of all planned trajectories. For an overview of state-of-the-art trajectory-planning algorithms for AVs, we refer to [1, 2]. To ensure that an AV will only follow safe trajectories, we propose an additional component to assess the safety of planned trajectories. We call this component a trajectory checker, and it is responsible for evaluating whether the planned trajectories satisfy a set of predefined safety rules, or not. Figure 1 shows how a trajectory checker is integrated into the general architecture of an AV.

At each decision-making cycle, the trajectory-planning component receives information from the perception component and computes one or several candidate trajectories. The trajectories are then sent to the trajectory checker, which assesses the safety of the candidate trajectories against a set of formalized rules. The safety assessment results are next sent to the risk analyzer component, which computes and weighs the risk of each trajectory. Based on the computed risk of each trajectory, the decider component makes a decision on which trajectory the AV should follow. If no candidate trajectory is safe enough to follow, the decider will select an emergency maneuver trajectory from a predefined trajectory library. The selected trajectory is then sent to the control component, which in turn interacts with the actuators of the AV.

The trajectory checker is a crucial component in an AV. It allows different safety rules to be formalized transparently, providing an overview of the safety rules that the AV must respect. At the same time, the trajectory checker provides a real-time guarantee of the computation time.

In this paper, we present the first prototype trajectory checker we have developed at IVEX. As safety rules are often written in natural language, which can be ambiguous, we additionally formalize the safety rules using our proprietary formal language. To ensure the formal specification of the rules is correct before they are deployed, their consistency is checked in an iterative process by our solver, the IVEX's solver. If the formalized rules are found to be inconsistent, the solver reports the conflict situations in which no behavior of the AV exists that could satisfy the safety rules. Finally, once the specification is validated as consistent, the IVEX solver generates a correct-by-construction safety policy in C++, which is the core of our trajectory checker.

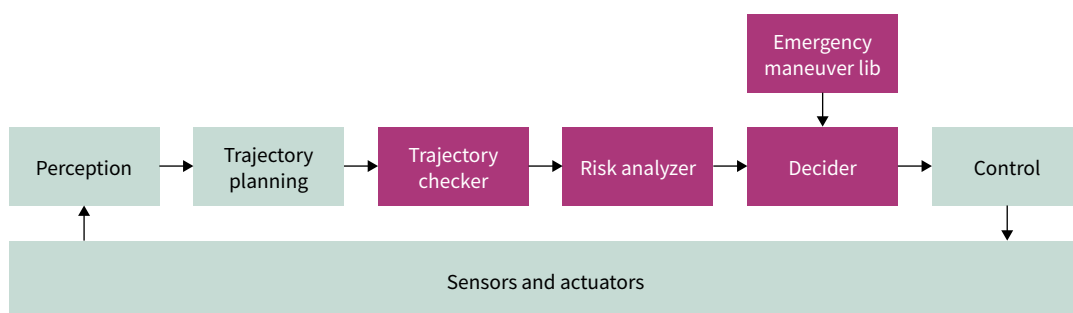


Figure 1: Example AV architecture with integrated trajectory checker. The trajectory checker receives candidate trajectories from the trajectory planning components, assesses whether they violate any safety rules and sends the results to the risk analyzer component.

The trajectory checker can be then deployed and executed on an embedded computer such as the Infineon AURIX™ TC397 automotive platform to assess the safety of trajectories in real time.

The trajectory checker prototype has similar safety rules to those from the Responsibility-Sensitive Safety paper [3] from Mobileye. It also consists of several additional safety rules defined by IVEX internally. Note that rules from different resources such as OEMs or safety authorities can be integrated easily into our trajectory checker thanks to the use of IVEX's toolchain during the development.

We benchmark the trajectory checker on a set of scenarios inspired by the European New Car Assessment Programme (Euro NCAP) scenarios. We evaluate the computation performance of the trajectory checker on an Infineon AURIX™ platform with respect to different trajectory lengths, numbers of trajectories and numbers of obstacles. The results show the feasibility of our trajectory checker prototype and its ability to guarantee the hard real-time constraint.

This paper is organized as follows. Section 2 presents a typical architecture of a trajectory checker integrated into an AV. Section 3 describes the development process of our trajectory checker, which is evaluated in Section 4. Finally, Section 5 draws conclusions.

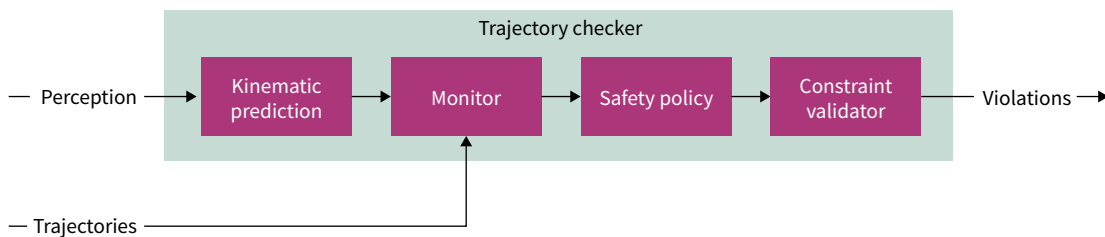


Figure 2: The software architecture of the trajectory checker with four modules. The input of the trajectory checker includes perceived information and candidate trajectories. The output of the trajectory checker is a list of violations, if there are any, at each trajectory point.

Trajectory checker

We define a trajectory as a list of desired future states of the AV, named trajectory points, through a fixed horizon – for example 5 seconds. To check the safety of a trajectory, along with the generated trajectory points of candidate trajectories, our trajectory checker receives possibly redundant perceived information on the state of surrounding objects. As output, we obtain a list of safety violations at each trajectory point. Figure 2 illustrates the proposed software architecture of the trajectory checker.

To perform safety checks on each trajectory point, our trajectory checker first predicts the future states of each surrounding obstacle. We perform this using a specific kinematic prediction module. Given a future time associated with a trajectory point, our kinematic prediction module computes, for each obstacle, all the possible states based on a set of assumptions about their worst-case behaviors.

Following Figure 2, in the next step both the predicted states of obstacles and the checked trajectory are discretized to semantically meaningful information by the monitor module. The discrete information is then used by the safety policy module, which contains all the encoded safety rules. Based on its inputs and safety rules, this module decides which motion constraints must be respected by each trajectory point. Finally, given the motion constraints provided by the safety policy, the constraint validator module checks which ones are violated by the trajectory points, outputting them as violations.

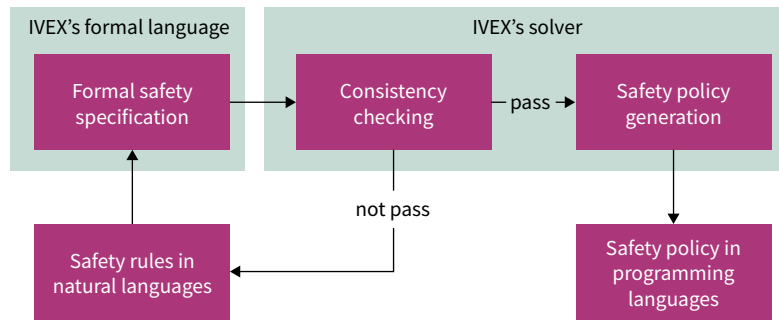


Figure 3: Safety policy development process. The process is iterative and makes use of IVEX’s formal language and solver. The input of the process is a set of safety rules in natural language. The output of the process is a generated safety policy in programming language such as C++.

Safety policy

At the heart of the trajectory checker is a safety policy. During run-time, the safety policy decides which motion constraints a trajectory must satisfy given the current situation. Developing a safety policy is complicated. On one hand, it needs to take into account many possible situations that might occur. On the other hand, it needs to correctly enable motion constraints per situation concerning the safety rules.

In this section, we describe the development process of a safety policy starting from a set of safety rules written in natural language, as illustrated in Figure 3. To guarantee the correct implementation of the safety policy, we use different formal approaches in this development process.

First, given a set of safety rules defined in natural languages, we formalize them using a formal language developed at IVEX. The formal safety specification is then checked for consistency by IVEX’s solver. If the safety specification is found to be inconsistent, the situations in which any inconsistency happens are reported to the developers, so that they can inspect and correct the safety rules. Once the safety specification is consistent, IVEX’s solver generates a correct-by-construction safety policy in C++.

IVEX’s formal language is based on first-order logic, which is declarative. This is a fundamental aspect of the approach and makes the specification of safety rules more manageable and adaptable. Our formal language represents the capability of the AV systems by using a specific construct named action. The environment and the internal states of the AV are represented by a set of discrete state variables. The language allows the formalization of safety rules as goals based on the value of the discrete state variables and the actions. It also allows the specification of the preconditions and the expected effects of each action, as well as mutually exclusive constraints among actions. Safety rules can be prioritized in the language and enforced in parallel. More details on the formal language and a concrete safety model will be published in a follow-up paper.

IVEX’s solver uses advanced techniques in formal verification and artificial intelligence such as automated planning, constraint satisfaction and model checking to inspect the consistency of a safety specification. Consistency means that no situation exists in which two safety rules are in conflict, so that no action can be taken to avoid a safety violation. For example, if one safety rule requires the vehicle to change to the left lane while another safety rule requires the vehicle to change to the right lane, it is impossible for the AV to satisfy both safety rules at the same time. If such a situation exists, the safety specification is inconsistent. It means that there is a mistake in the specified safety rules to be revised by the safety engineers.

Once the safety specification is validated as consistent, IVEX's solver generates a safety policy in the C++ programming language. The generated safety policy is guaranteed to be correct-by-construction with respect to the formalized safety rules. IVEX's solver also uses advanced techniques such as logic minimization to optimize the computational performance of the safety policy. The safety policy is a tree-like data structure with a known maximum depth, which is critical for guaranteeing the hard real-time execution requirement. As input to any safety policy, we have the values of the discrete state variables provided by the monitor module. The safety policy then maps each possible situation, defined in terms of its inputs, to a set of safety constraints to be respected by the trajectory.

Kinematic prediction

To assess the safety of a trajectory, the future states of all the surrounding objects must be predicted. We use a conservative approach to compute the possible future states of these objects based on assumptions on their worst-case behavior. As a non-limiting example, the current prototype includes the following assumptions:

- › Maximum and minimum longitudinal velocity
- › Maximum and minimum lateral velocity
- › Maximum acceleration
- › Maximum braking deceleration

Given the assumptions and the current state of each object, the kinematic prediction module computes its future worst-case position and velocity. The information is then used by the safety policy to decide which safety constraints must be respected by the trajectory.

Validation and benchmarking

We execute the developed trajectory checker on the Infineon AURIX™ TC397¹ automotive platform to validate, measure and benchmark its performance. The AURIX™ TC397 is a high-performance and safety microcontroller specifically suited to automotive applications. We benchmark the execution of the trajectory checker against 24 scenarios based on the Euro NCAP scenarios. These benchmarking scenarios include a variety of safety-critical traffic situations such as cut-in, cut-out, sudden stop and traffic jam.

1 https://www.infineon.com/cms/en/product/evaluation-boards/kit_a2g_tc397_5v_tft/

Experiment setup

Figure 4 describes our experiment setup. The testing scenarios are run by the Carla [4] simulator on a Windows PC. The trajectory checker is running on the AURIX™ TC397 application kit. The Windows PC and the AURIX™ application kit communicate via an Ethernet connection. We use Google's Protobuf as the message exchange format between the Windows PC and the AURIX™ application kit.

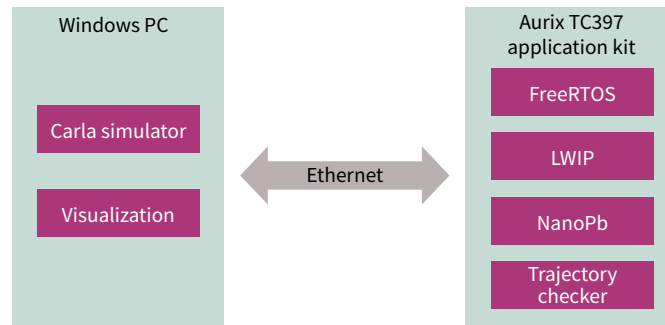


Figure 4: Experiment setup. The trajectory checker is executed on the AURIX™ TC397 application kit together with other libraries for communication. The Carla simulator runs on a Windows PC and communicates with the AURIX™ kit via an Ethernet connection.

There are four software components running on the AURIX™ application kit, including FreeRTOS – an operating system, LWIP – a driver for lightweight IP communication, and Nanopb – a library to serialize and deserialize Protobuf messages and the trajectory checker. All software components run on a single core (cpu0) of the AURIX™ application kit and are compiled by the HighTec compiler v4.9.3.0. We use the perception and localization data provided by Carla as ground-truth. Every 100 ms, this ground-truth information from Carla along with the future trajectory of the AV are sent from the Windows PC to the AURIX™ application kit as a Protobuf message. After the application kit receives the data, the received Protobuf message is decoded and the trajectory checker is invoked to perform the safety assessment. Once the results are ready, they are sent back to the Windows PC for visualization and data collection.

Scenario description

The scenarios in our testing set are inspired by the NCAPS scenarios. We specify them in OpenSCENARIO format and they are executed in the Carla simulator. All the scenarios take place on a straight road with four lanes, numbered from 0 to 3 from right to left. This default setting was chosen to resemble highway driving conditions. Next we explain the details of some scenarios.

> Cut-in

This scenario is designed to validate the predictive capability of the trajectory checker. In this scenario, two vehicles are involved: the ego vehicle and a guest vehicle. At the beginning of the scenario, the ego vehicle is driving along lane 2, while the guest vehicle is driving in lane 3. During the scenario execution, the guest vehicle suddenly moves to the lane of the ego vehicle, generating the cut-in situation. Three different scenario variants are considered based on the distance between the ego vehicle and the guest vehicle at the cut-in moment.

› Cut-out

This scenario is designed to validate longitudinal velocity and acceleration safety rules of the trajectory checker. In this scenario three vehicles are involved: the ego vehicle, a moving guest vehicle and a stopped guest vehicle. At the beginning of the scenario, all the vehicles are in lane 2. The moving guest vehicle is in between the stopped vehicle and the ego vehicle. During the scenario execution, the ego vehicle and the moving guest vehicle drive towards the stopped vehicle. When the guest moving vehicle approaches the stopped vehicle, it suddenly changes its lane to avoid the stopped vehicle. Three different scenarios are considered based on the distance between the moving guest vehicle and the stopped vehicle at the moment the moving vehicle changes lane.

› Traffic jam

This scenario is designed as a stress test for measuring how the trajectory checker scales with the number of objects. In this scenario, 31 vehicles are involved: the ego vehicle and 30 guest vehicles. At the beginning of the scenario, the ego vehicle is driving along lane 2 and all the vehicles are distributed over the remaining lanes. During scenario execution, all the vehicles move straight ahead. At a specific moment, one guest vehicle changes from lane 1 towards lane 2, ending up just in front of the ego vehicle. This scenario is similar to the cut-in scenario but the ego vehicle will need to consider a larger number of guest vehicles in the scene.

› Lane change due to obstacles

This scenario is designed to validate lateral velocity and acceleration safety rules of the trajectory checker. In this scenario two vehicles are involved: the ego vehicle and a stopped guest vehicle. At the beginning of the scenario, the two vehicles are both in lane 2. The stopped vehicle is in front of the ego vehicle. During the scenario execution, the ego vehicle starts approaching the stopped vehicle. The ego vehicle needs to perform a lane change to avoid the stopped vehicle.

› Double cut-in

This scenario is designed to validate the trajectory checker when two dangerous maneuvers happen at the same time. In this scenario, three vehicles are involved: the ego vehicle and two moving guest vehicles. At the beginning of the scenario, the ego vehicle is driving along lane 2, while the other two vehicles are in lanes 1 and 3, respectively. During the scenario execution, the ego vehicle drives straight ahead. At a specific moment, both the two guest vehicles change to the ego vehicle's lane at the same time.

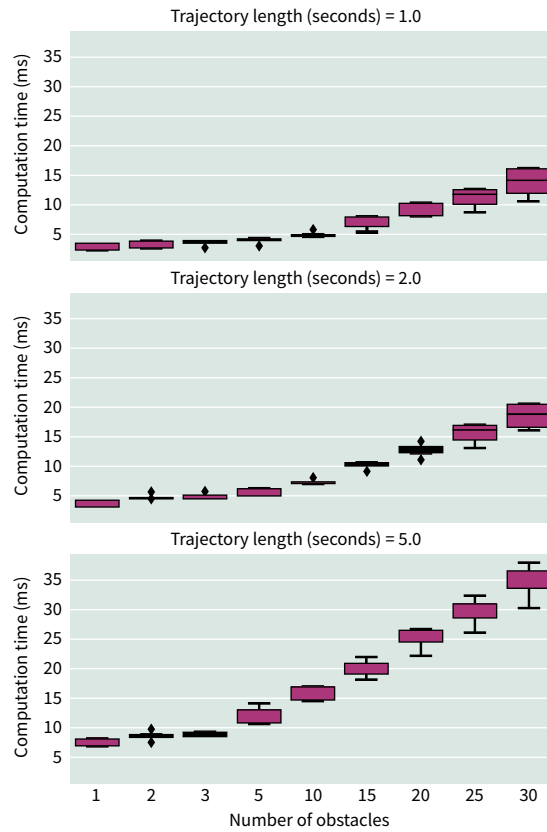


Figure 5: The computation time of the trajectory checker on IVEX's scenarios.

Benchmarking results

We measure the computation time of the trajectory checker against different input sizes, defined in terms of the length of the trajectory and the number of objects. We only measure the time that the trajectory checker is invoked, not accounting for the communication and the message serialization/deserialization times.

Figure 5 presents the computation time of the trajectory checker for a single trajectory. The results show that the computation time of the trajectory checker increases linearly with respect to the number of obstacles. When dealing with 1 s trajectories, the trajectory checker can perform a safety assessment in situations with 30 obstacles in around 15 ms. For 2 s trajectories, the computation time when there are 30 obstacles increases to about 20 ms.

Finally, it can be observed that for a 5 s trajectory and 30 obstacles, it takes less than 40 ms for the trajectory checker to perform the safety assessment.

Additionally, we also benchmark the performance of the trajectory checker with respect to multiple possible trajectories. As the Carla simulator provides only one trajectory for the simulated AV, instead of performing checks on different trajectories, we configure the trajectory checker to analyze the input trajectory multiple times in a sequential manner. From Figure 6, it can be seen that, in situations with five obstacles, the trajectory checker can perform 10 trajectory safety checks in less than 40 ms.

Notice that, since the trajectory checker is executed together with FreeRTOS, LWIP and Nanopb on a single CPU, it could be the case that the execution of those libraries increases the computation time of the trajectory checker.

Safety assessment examples

We now present two different safety assessment examples with results reported by the trajectory checker.

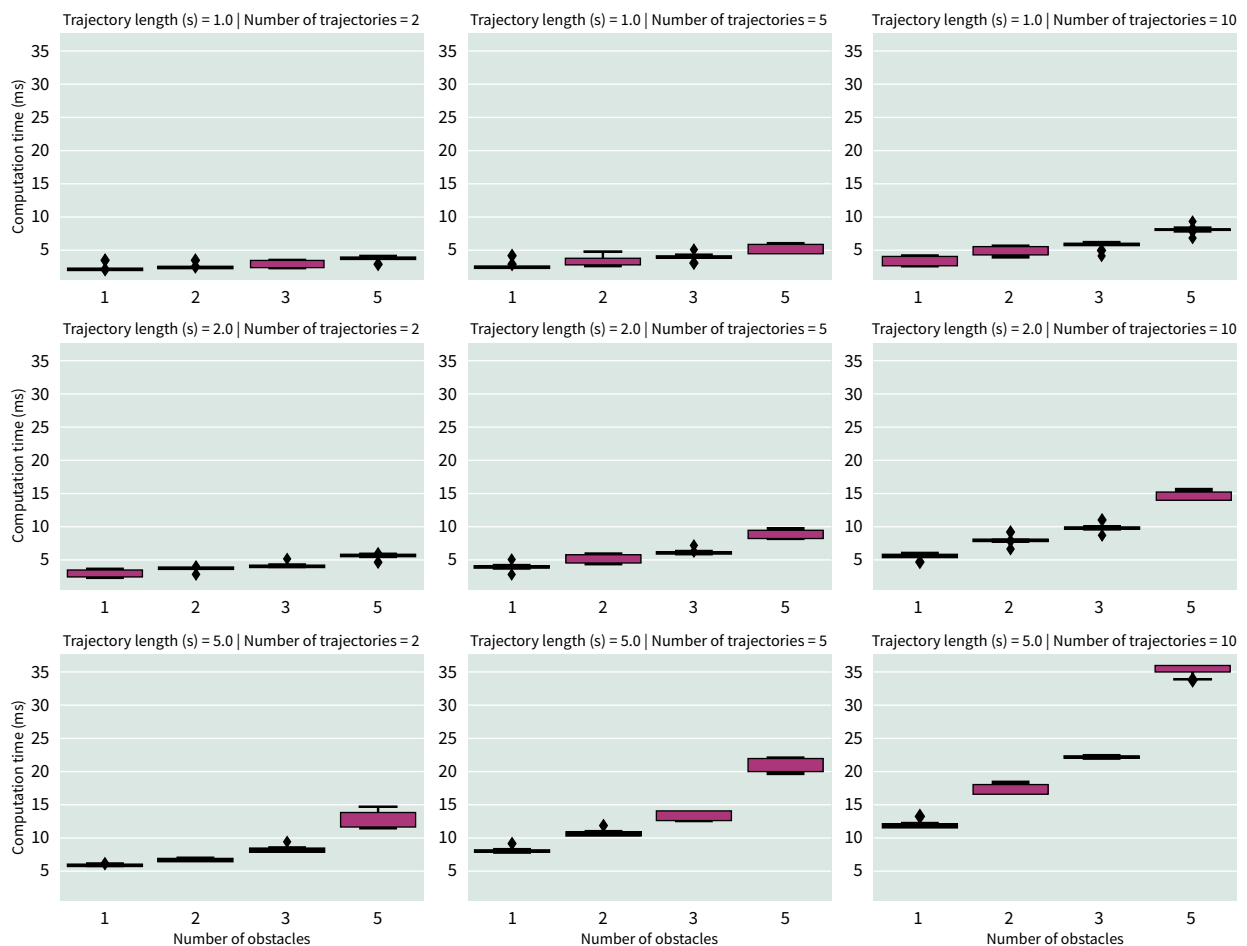


Figure 6: The computation time of the trajectory checker with respect to multiple trajectories.

Overtake and cut-in example analysis: Our first example consists of two vehicles, the ego vehicle and a guest vehicle. In this scenario, the guest vehicle overtakes from the right and cuts in on the ego vehicle at a short distance, which poses a dangerous situation. Figure 7 illustrates the safety assessment results in this scenario.

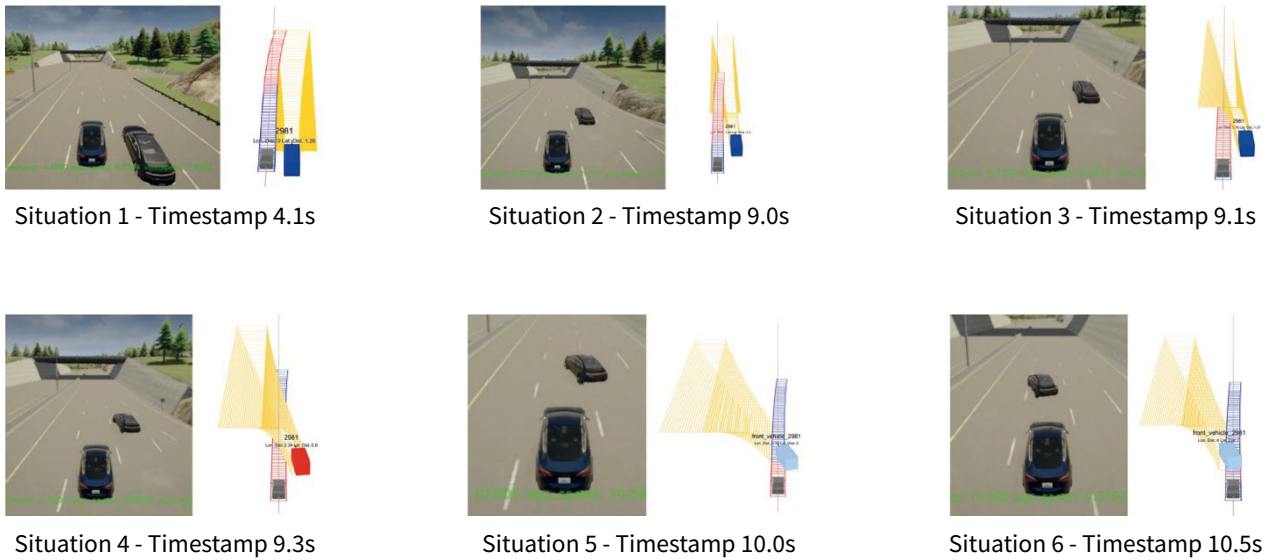


Figure 7: Safety assessment results in a cut-in scenario.

In situation 1 at timestamp 4.1 s, the guest vehicle is on the right of the ego vehicle. At this timestamp, the trajectory checker foresees that there might be a safety violation after 2.5 s on the trajectory of the ego vehicle if the guest vehicle performs the worst-case behavior; that is, cutting in and then braking strongly. Because of that possibility, the ego vehicle should be cautious. However, the current situation is still safe and no specific actions are required.

Situation 2 occurs at timestamp 9.0 s. Here, based on the kinematic state of the guest vehicle, the trajectory checker predicts that it will create a cut-in situation in front of the ego vehicle. The ego vehicle must be extremely cautious as there might be a safety violation in the next 1.1 s if it keeps following the current trajectory and the guest vehicle brakes after cutting in.

In situation 3 at timestamp 9.1 s, the guest vehicle makes the predicted aggressive move. The trajectory checker observes that if the ego vehicle keeps its current trajectory, it will need to perform a hard brake by about $3.7 \text{ m} = s_2$ in the next 0.2 s, which is critical.

In situation 4 at timestamp 9.3 s, because the ego vehicle keeps following the current trajectory, without performing the necessary brake, the trajectory checker reports that a safety constraint is violated. According to the safety policy, at this time the ego vehicle should brake by at least $3.64 \text{ m} = s_2$ but it does not. The closer the ego vehicle gets to the guest vehicle, the higher the braking threshold that the trajectory checker reports. In this way, in situation 5 at timestamp 10.0 s, the ego vehicle is meant to brake by at least $5.08 \text{ m} = s_2$ to not violate the safety rule. Because the ego vehicle does not brake more than that threshold, another violation is reported.

Fortunately in this scenario, after cutting in on the ego vehicle, the guest vehicle increases its speed. At timestamp 10.5 s, the trajectory checker reports that given the current speed of the guest vehicle, there is no further braking requirement for the ego vehicle. However, a collision could have occurred if the guest vehicle had not speeded up and the ego vehicle did not brake as required by the trajectory checker.

Overtake and double cut-in example analysis: We additionally demonstrate our trajectory checker results in a scenario with three vehicles, accounting for the ego vehicle and two guest vehicles. In this scenario, both guest vehicles overtake and cut in on the ego vehicle at short distances. This poses a dangerous situation, as the ego vehicle needs to react to two dangerous maneuvers simultaneously. Figure 8 illustrates the safety assessment results in this scenario.

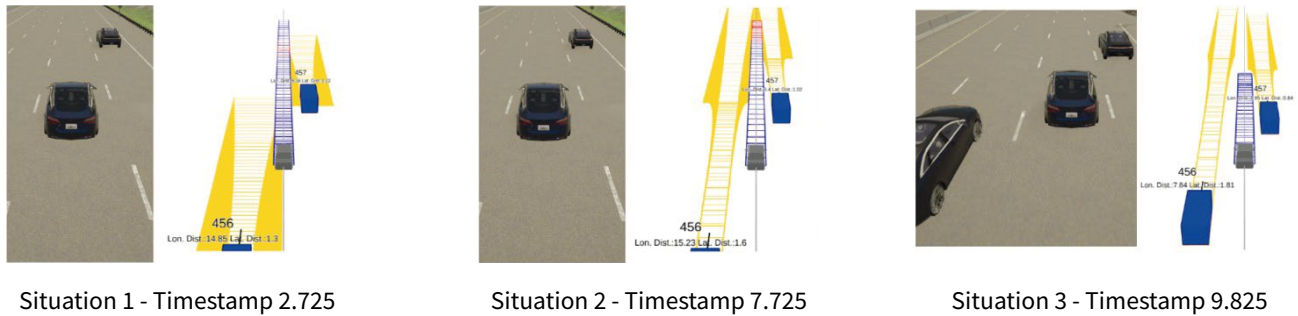


Figure 8: The safety assessment results in a two-vehicle scenario.

Initially, the two guest vehicles are on the left and the right lane of the ego vehicle, respectively. In situation 1 (timestamp 2.725 s), the trajectory checker predicts that there might be a safety violation on the trajectory of the ego vehicle in 2.4 s if the guest vehicle in the right lane performs the worst-case behavior, which is cutting in and then braking strongly. Because of that, the ego vehicle must be cautious, although it still has time to react.

In situation 2 (timestamp 7.725 s), a potential safety violation after 2.9 s is predicted on the trajectory of the ego vehicle if the vehicle in the right lane cuts in and then brakes strongly. In addition, a second safety violation is predicted to happen in 3.3 s if the vehicle in the left lane also performs the same dangerous maneuver. Although the ego vehicle must take into account the behavior of multiple guest vehicles at the same time, it is still safe and no actions are required.

In situation 3 (timestamp 9.825 s), the trajectory checker shows no violation because the ego vehicle decided to decrease its speed. The trajectory of the ego vehicle is now considered safe, regardless of all possible future behaviors of the guest vehicles. The lateral distances between the ego vehicle and the guest vehicles decreased rapidly over time and this induced the ego vehicle to brake, avoiding possible collisions. Had the ego vehicle not decelerated, the trajectory checker would have shown clearly the unsafe behavior and would have suggested that the ego vehicle slow down.

Conclusion

In this paper we have demonstrated the IVEX prototype development of a trajectory checker, together with its benchmarking results on the Infineon AURIX™ TC397 platform. We have also shown and analyzed the safety assessment results reported by the prototype in two different scenarios. The prototype is developed using many advanced techniques to guarantee the correctness of the embedded software. The validation results show the feasibility of executing the prototype on the AURIX™ TC397 microcontroller. We show that the trajectory checker can assess the safety of a 5 s trajectory in situations with 30 obstacles within less than 40 ms. It can also assess the safety of 10 different trajectories with five obstacles within less than 40 ms. The formal safety model used in the prototype will be published in a follow-up study.



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