

Saturday 5 July 2003

I'm starting to get a good feel for the floor plan of the RoboCup venue; I can always find the UvA team behind their laptops in the middle of the hall, I can get my cappuccino behind the soccer fields for the middle sized robots, and the seminars are held upstairs at the back of the hall from where you have a great view over all the activities on the ground. Most robots that I have watched do not seem to have these abilities. They are totally lost when they are outside their predefined world. They need the green field, the white lines, the orange ball, the blue and yellow goals, otherwise they wander aimlessly in a world that does not mean anything to them. Their owners usually wear black clothes so that they do not distract the robots. I even heard of a Japanese team that has one member with a black cape; he quickly unfolds it in front of an audience member with orange clothing.

Today there are lots of talks, but I already knew when I saw the first one that I would not have enough patience to see them all. I attended the workshop "Synthetic simulation and robotics to mitigate earthquake disaster" and the first few talks gave me some understanding of earthquake response in Italy and Japan. Both countries are trying hard to find better methods of dealing with these unpredictable nuisances. The improvements are being researched on all levels, from designing PDAs for rescue workers to improving the organization of the crisis centers. The emphasis in the talks was of course on rescue robots and they showed some interesting examples: snake-like robots that can wiggle their way through the rubble, robots that can free themselves when they are stuck by jumping, and an intriguing cube-like structure that can fold and unfold itself.

At the end of the morning I went to the main stage for the opening ceremony. I was curious how they would handle this, given the cultural diversity of the attendants. In her introduction, the woman who moderated the ceremony alternated between English and Italian. Behind her on the podium was a lineup of VIPs who were signing their autographs on orange balls and then exchanged the balls among themselves. The first speaker was the president of the PadovaFiere and to my astonishment he started speaking Italian and rambled on for about 5 minutes. The moderator saved the day by summarizing his speech in about 10 seconds in extremely clear English. This was repeated with the Mayor of Padova, the vice president of the University of Padova, and a professor from the department of Computer Science. The last speaker was Minoru Asada, the president of the RoboCup International Federation; he gave the audience a warm smile, welcomed everyone, and simply wished us a good time. Now it was time for the official kick-off; a bipedal robot took the stage and walked towards the ball to fire the opening shot. And missed. And cheered anyway.

In the Rescue Simulation area, I met the two Dutch teams. Arnoud's team, consisting of Stef Post and Maurits Fassaert, call themselves UvA Rescue C2003. The BanzAI team from Utrecht, led by Silvain van Weers, were proudly wearing their T-shirts with the logos of their sponsors on the back: TNO and DECIS. I watched a few simulation runs; basically the challenge for the teams is to program police, fire brigade, and ambulance agents that have to help out after an earthquake in a simulated city. They can score point by saving as many civilians as possible, and also saving buildings from being burnt down. During a simulation run, the teams are gathered around the displays on the wall. To the outsider's eye it is only a bunch of red, green, white, and black dots moving over what seems to be the map of a town. After seeing many simulations, I slowly start to understand what is going on and what the colored dots are actually doing. I joined Stef and Maurits for their talk in the workshop in which they explained their method of dividing the map of the simulated city into sectors, and devising teams of agents that coordinate their work within

their own sector. I thought their talk was quite good, and only found out afterwards that they had never given a presentation at a conference before.

Later that afternoon, I watched some games with my friend Lucia Regolin, who is a researcher in the Department of Psychology at the University of Padova. She brought two colleagues and they are all studying animal cognition, so we discussed the differences between robots and animals. Lucia claimed that the chicks she studies are much better in navigation than the robots she has observed here. Together we came up with a plan to train pigeons how to play soccer and let them compete against the robots in the Small Size league.

At the end of the day I realized that I had been in Padova for 24 hours without seeing anything of the city itself. I had spend some weeks here many years ago and strolling over the beautiful squares brought back some good memories. I got some food and wine and decided that Italy is not a bad place at all.