



How to enhance the robotic experience with Scratch

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Abstract

The paper shows how deep a robotic experience can be using the Scratch environment. After some motivating reflections and remarks, the paper presents a sequence of demonstrative examples exploiting most of the Scratch commands able to promote such an experience. In the conclusions the possibility of using external hardware is also mentioned.

Keywords

Educational robotics, Scratch, Constructionism, IBSE

Introduction

When you read a paper or a report on the educational use of robotics, most times it is put in connection with the constructionist approach (Bers et. al., 2002; Goldman et. al., 2004, Chang et. al., 2010). This is not surprising: the original Papert's turtle was a drawing robot, basic educational robots like Bee-bot and Pro-bot (see <http://www.tts-group.co.uk>) are programmed with Logo-like primitives, and very often simple robot motion examples are based on commands very similar to the turtle's motion commands. Moreover most researchers agree on considering constructionism the correct and effective way both to introduce elementary robotics and to exploit all the educational potential that robotics can convey (Demo et. al., 2012).

In this sense Scratch (<http://Scratch.mit.edu/>) is not an exception: this successful legacy of LOGO tradition has various relations with robotics: it includes several commands to give sprites a stronger robotic apparatus, it is interfaced with external devices like Picoboard and LEGO WeDo useful for realizing physical robotic constructions, it has been extended to control a LEGO Mindstorms NXT or an Arduino system (<http://www.arduino.cc/>). Through a sequence of documented examples, this paper presents motivations for using Scratch to have an initial, deeper robotic experience before starting with a physical robot. Coming from our previous experience in Educational Robotics, this is a preliminary result of our research that, without denying the fundamental value of working with real robots in a real environment, can show how it is possible to have a rewarding experience in a known and widespread virtual environment, anticipating most of the competences successively developed with a real robot. A teacher could promote this approach designing a constructionist progression from Scratch as an authoring system, from Scratch as a virtual robotic environment, from Scratch with external devices for teaching control principles, towards the use of an autonomous real robot to face the uncertainties of the real world.

In the second section we provide some general motivations and discuss critical aspects that the



literature and our personal experiences show. The third section is dedicated to the set of examples: as an auxiliary compact notation for this paper to present Scratch code, we will use a textual language which is defined and used in the official Scratch wiki and forums (http://wiki.Scratch.mit.edu/wiki/Block_Plugin/Syntax). Some final remarks conclude the paper.

Robotics at school: motivations and criticalities

Papert's great contribution was to build a educative “medium” specially adapted for children to make learning processes compliant with the psycho-genetic theories of Piaget (Piaget, 1972). The medium was a cinematic object: the LOGO turtle and a structured language of commands and functions to manage its behaviour, the LOGO language. Papert actually designed (without knowing it) one of the first educational robots (Papert, 1980).

The educational proposals based on Piaget's theories were initially radical: they were based on his proposition that “every time we teach a child something, we prevent him from finding it out by himself”. Here we see the initial foundations of an active-autonomous learning through self-discovery that will be transformed, with Vygotsky's social contributions (Vygotsky, 1968), in active-driven learning through exploration/inquiry, i.e. what we identify today as social constructivist learning. Thus we see that the genesis of robotics at school, and of the methodological reasons for its introduction, derives from the conjunction between Piaget and Papert.

Enabling students to have “real” learning experiences (in the Piaget's sense) has been the main motivation of the development of LOGO in compulsory education. It is the methodology, rather than the content of learning, that matters, and the last educational goal was “learning to learn”. The direct examination of physical objects by the child, according to Piaget, allows him to build logical schemas of concrete operations and to gain an equilibrium in the scope of his interaction with the environment.

But the exploration of the turtle exhibits substantial differences. You don't touch the LOGO turtle, you cannot directly interact with it, but only through its programming language. A “physical” exploration in the behaviour of the turtle is done through the linguistic exploration of its formal programming language. It is an indirect exploration, mediated by language. Though being a concrete exploration activity it is applied on a formal context, and in this case the discovering activity of the child allows him to build their own logic schemas of formal operations. The benefit of young people working with LOGO programming environment is to allow extending the same Piagetian methodology of learning through discovery to the construction of cognitive patterns of formal operations.

Clearly, in this first stage of “robotic learning” the greatest interest is in the functional and constructivist learning of the programming language as a vehicle for a constructivist learning of the formal spaces and their rules for the representation and communication of the world, for making students access the formal competences.

Common implementations of LOGO provide a working scenario (the environment) where we can control “actors”. The language allows the interaction between actors, but does not realize the interaction between actors and environment. The environment is a purely decorative stage, a drawing of pixels, and an actor (turtle) can only detect the colour of the pixel on which is currently located. This leads to the design of microworlds usually without a stage, where the requested tasks and procedures are not dependent on the environment and deal with how to construct certain completely pre-determined geometric paths. If you consider the usual LOGO



procedure to draw a regular polygon, the task of the turtle is not conditioned by the environment. Consequently LOGO primitives commonly used in this kind of problems are commands and arithmetic functions for the movement of the turtle and the control statement "repeat". On the contrary, the conditional statement "if" is much more rare.

But an hypothetical-deductive thinking can be more complex, and it reaches a second level of abstraction when formulating and validating hypotheses about appropriate "behavioral conditions". They are hypotheses about the variables expressing interactions with the environment: sensorized robots interact continuously with the environment.

Scratch offers advantages as an evolution of LOGO. While promoting, like LOGO, basic hypothetical thinking, its design moves around a more advanced interactive language and may allow, on the one hand, the simulation of "physical" environments and, on the other hand, the enrichment of its "sprites" with simulated sensors, i.e. it permits to work on the second level of the hypothetical-deductive thinking. This will be exemplified in the following sections.

Similarly as the LOGO turtle, a Scratch "virtual robot" has some advantages over physical robots, which are worth considering if you are more interested in a school constructivist work. These advantages regard the unavoidable uncertainty of a physical robot when translating into actions a given task. There are unavoidable differences between the values of the real structural parameters of a robot (influencing the actual behavior of the robot) and the theoretical parameters of the robot model (which are taken into account when solving the requested tasks). For example, common differences are in the actual wheel radius, in the actual width of the shaft between the driven wheels, etc.). There are also limitations on the engine power, the measurement accuracy of the sensors, there is uncertainty in the trajectory due to the inertia and friction, ... This causes a physical robot to implement a "conceptual" macro-task with imprecision. For example, it is hard to make the robot move straight and turn on the perimeter of a perfect hexagon, reaching a final state that is identical to its initial state. This is not due to an error in the formulation of the task (in the programme coding), but to an inaccuracy which is usually more significant in less sophisticated robots, such as in educational robots.

Scratch virtual robots, such as LOGO turtles, have not this problem because its accuracy is of the order of the density of pixels on the screen, which at present is high enough to consider it as an ideally perfect robot, at least in their 2D motions.

The immediate availability of the robot contributes greatly to maintain the motivation to advance in the constructivist process and to realize an effective learning. Conversely, the difficulty of having a personal physical robot (or one robot for a small group of students) sometimes makes hard, or even cancels it, a true exploratory learning. The requirement for direct interaction with the robot (even mediated by the programming language) is also here, in a "formal" constructivist learning, as important as it is in a "concrete" constructivist learning.

Robotics in Scratch

We present here a sequence of small demonstrative examples which show how deep the 'robotic' experience with Scratch could be. These examples were developed using the current 1.4 version. In some cases scripts were defined with the role of parameterized functions: thus a BYOB (<http://byob.berkeley.edu/>) implementation would be even more effective.

Simple motion

In (Alimisis et. al., 2009) the first examples proposed regard a simple straight-line motion in



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order to have a first deepening of the basic involved physical entities: space, time, linear and angular speeds. Scratch provides two ways to finely control motion: the *glide* basic command and using the *timer* support.

Starting from the simple example of a bus which has to stop in front of bus stops at fix distance (fig. 1, labels are independent, not moving sprites), let us set the *stopDis* variable to this distance and *busSpeed* to the requested bus speed, (space is measured in steps, the unit used by Scratch; time in seconds, thus speed is measured in steps/s), *numStops* the number of stops and *waitStop* the time the bus must stay at the stop before moving to the next one. The main loop to implement the travel is the following:

<pre>repeat (numStops) glide ((stopDis)/(busSpeed)) secs to x: ((x position)+(stopDis)) y: (y position) wait (waitStop) secs end</pre>	
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Figure 1. Simple bus motion

Unfortunately, there is no *glide* version where motion is specified in a relative form, i.e. using direction and distance, more reasonable for an autonomous robot which usually cannot refer to absolute Cartesian coordinates. Thus in our simulation we must calculate them.

When stops are in random positions, you can use the *point towards* to re-orient the moving sprite towards the next fixed stop, whereas the *distance* command evaluates the distance to be travelled for the next tract. These two commands can be seen as sensors of the robot sprite that return respectively the relative direction and distance of an object. Destinations are identified by sprite names, suitable chosen to facilitate their enumeration. The absolute coordinates of each target sprite are now calculated using the *x position of sprite* and *y position of sprite* commands (fig. 2).

<pre>repeat (numStops) change (i) by (1) set [stopName v] to (join [Stop] (i)) point towards (stopName) glide ((distance to (stopName)) / (busSpeed)) secs to x: ([x position v] of (stopName)) y: ([y position v] of (stopName)) point in direction (90 v) wait (waitStop) secs end</pre>	
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Figure 2. Random positions of stops

When bus stops are on a straight line but not at known distance, and we want the robot to recognize stop labels, we should provide it of a suitable sensor. This can be simulated using the *color <color1> is touching <color2> ?* boolean block. For example, if we add a small red filled rectangle in front of the bus 'costume' (shape) and we know that the label pedestals are black, the following code works (fig. 3, notice the color codes):

<pre>repeat (numStops) repeat until <color [#FF0000] is touching [#000000] ?> glide (((busStep)/(busSpeed)) -(0.06)) secs to x: ((x position) + (busStep)) y: (y position) end wait (waitStop) secs move (busStep) steps end</pre>	
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Figure 3. Sensorized bus



The bus moves through a small amount of *busSteps* steps and the speed is correspondingly tuned, including a 0.06 s of delay. The final move shifts the bus over the current label pedestal.

Obstacle avoidance

Obstacle avoidance is a very typical robotic challenge: we present here some examples of increasing complexity to show the wide spectrum of possibilities.

In the first example we assume to know the name of the ‘obstacle’ sprite. *touching <obstaclesprite> ?* returns true when the current sprite touches the other one in any point of their respective shape boundaries. With the code of fig. 4, if you put the robot sprite below the obstacle on its vertical, when the sprite reaches it, the sprite moves aside to avoid the obstacle.

<pre>repeat until <(y position) > (180)> change y by (3) repeat until < not <touching [ObstacleSprite v] ?>> change x by (10) end end end</pre>	
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Figure 4. Simple obstacle avoidance

In the second example we have several obstacles in unknown positions but with known colors. In this case it is not even necessary that obstacles are sprites: they are directly drawn on the stage. *touching color <color> ?* reveals the obstacle proximity. We use also the *touching edge ?* block to make the sprite to remain within the stage boundaries. The red ball, i.e. the robot sprite, ‘dances’ bouncing on the encountered obstacles and on the edges (fig. 5).

<pre>forever // main script move (3) steps if <touching color [#000000] ?> turn right (180) degrees repeat (10) move (2) steps end turn right (pick random (10) to (260)) degrees end if <touching [edge v] ?> turn right (pick random (70) to (160)) degrees move (4) steps end end end</pre>		<pre>forever // secondary script if <(distance to [mouse-pointer v]) < (10)> turn right (180) degrees move (30) steps turn right (150) degrees end end</pre>
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Figure 5. Bouncing ball

The interaction with the user is increased by the secondary script of the figure: if you move the mouse pointer near the moving sprite, it jumps a little. These two segments of code can (and must) be defined as independent, concurrent scripts, both activated with the *when green flag clicked* command. This adds a flavour of concurrency, an important aspect in robot controlling.

Next, we present a more structured solution, though the avoidance strategy is still elementary. The *touch* function returns 1 in *touch_yes* if the sprite touches one of the obstacles. To check this, we use *touching <obstaclename> ?* and again *numObst* obstacles have known, easily enumerable names (fig. 6). For conciseness we define a *glidedistt* function that executes a *glide* for *glidedistt_time* seconds and for a distance of *glidedistt_dist* steps in the current sprite direction.



<pre> when I receive [touch v] set [i v] to (1) set [touch_yes v] to (0) repeat (numObst) if < touching (join [Obst] (i)) ?> set [touch_yes v] to (1) stop script end change [i v] by (1) end //----- when I receive [glidedistt v] glide (glidedistt_time) secs to x: ((x position) + ((glidedistt_dist) * ([sin v] of (direction)))) y: ((y position) + ((glidedistt_dist) * ([cos v] of (direction)))) </pre>	
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Figure 6. Touch and glidedistt functions

The avoidance algorithm could be straightforward: when during the motion in small steps the sprite touches an obstacle (*touch_yes* is true after calling *touch*), it tries to go around it and then it goes forward along the initial direction. In the following example we want that the ‘going around dance’ of the robot is performed when the minimum distance of the objects, which are in the angle of $\pm 15^\circ$ with respect to the robot’s axis, is lower than a given threshold. To evaluate such distances we simulate a distance sensor (ultrasonic sensor) through the the *dist* function in fig. 7.

<pre> when I receive [dist v] set [i v] to (1) set [dist_d v] to (3000) repeat (numObst) set [dir_x v] to (<[x position v] of (join [Obst] (i))> - (x position)) set [dir_y v] to (<[y position v] of (join [Obst] (i))> - (y position)) </pre>	<pre> broadcast [dir v] and wait if < ([abs v] of ((direction) - (dir_ang))) < (15) > if < (distance to (join [Obst] (i))) < (dist_d) > set [dist_d v] to (distance to (join [Obst] (i))) end end change [i v] by (1) end </pre>
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Figure 7. The dist function

The minimum distance is returned into the *dist_d* variable. The *dir* function (fig. 8) receives in *dir_x* and *dir_y* respectively the x and y components of a bi-dimensional vector and returns in *dir_ang* its direction, i.e. the angle of its polar representation. In *dist* it is called to calculate the direction of the conjunction of the sprite and the obstacle centres, relative to the sprite direction.

<pre> when I receive [dir v] if < (dir_y) > (0) > // to distinguish quadrants because sin/cos are not completely invertible set [dir_ang v] to <[asin v] of ((dir_x)/[sqrt v] of (((dir_x)*(dir_x)) + ((dir_y)*(dir_y)))> >> else set [dir_ang v] to <[acos v] of ((dir_y)/[sqrt v] of (((dir_x)*(dir_x)) + ((dir_y)*(dir_y)))> >> if < (dir_x) < (0) > set [dir_ang v] to ((0) - (dir_ang)) end </pre>	<pre> // main script repeat until << (x position) > (236) > or <(y position) > (176) >> set [glidedistt_time v] to (0.4) broadcast [dist v] and wait if < (dist_d) < (minDist) > // go around end set [glidedistt_time v] to [0.2] set [glidedistt_dist v] to [10] broadcast [glidedistt v] and wait end </pre>
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Figure 8. The dir function

The unspecified ‘go around’ section can be easily improved with respect to the previous example, using the *dist* function to avoid to go to the side of the first obstacle where another obstacle is very close (possibly declaring a failure if both sides have close obstacles).



We only mention a further example where we have provided a *scan* function which returns in two lists the distances and the directions, relative to the robot position and direction, of each one of the *numObst* obstacle sprites which are in the range of directions $-90^{\circ} \div +90^{\circ}$ (i.e. obstacles that lie before the robot). This function can be thought as the equivalent of a “range scanner” sensor, providing distances and angles.

Other sensing

When you know the name of the target sprite, the two commands *point towards <sprite>* and *distance to <sprite>*, simulating the information usually given by a range scanner, give a sort of aligning sensor. Such tool can be used to realize simple forms of approaching and following other objects or moving robots.

The PC microphone is interfaced with Scratch so that it acts as a sound sensor. The level of the perceived sound can condition a script through the *loudness* sensor returning a value in the range $0 \div 100$. Another possibility we suggest for simulating a robot equipped with a sound sensor, or a phonometer, is to imagine a source, represented by one sprite, emitting a sound with a given power and the robot that measures a certain acoustic pressure level which depends on the source power and the distance. For a spherical propagating sound, acoustics defines a pressure level at distance r , measured with the logarithmic scale of dB, as follows:

$$L_p = L_w - 20 \cdot \log_{10} r - 11 \text{ (dB)}$$

$$L_w = 10 \cdot \log_{10} (W/W_0)$$

where L_w is the acoustic (constant) power level, that depends from the source, W is the source sound power, W_0 is the power of the minimum audible source, conventionally set at 10^{-12} W(att) . In your program you can assume a certain value for L_w and calculate L_p with the formula above.

Line following is one of the basic robot application using a light sensor: pointing it towards the floor, it makes the robot to distinguish a light area from a dark area and therefore, suitably modifying the direction of the robot, you can maintain it along the border of a black shape on a white plane. We simulate the comparison of the level measured by the light sensor with a certain threshold with the on-off response of the *touching color <color> ?* boolean block. Consider this simple solution (fig. 9).

<pre>goto x: (-170) y: (0) point in direction (0 v) forever move (1) steps if < touching color [#000000] ? > turn left (2) degrees say [Lt] else turn right (2) degrees say [Rt] end end</pre>		
	a) Around a circle	b) Complex shape

Figure 9. Line follower

The robot, represented by a very small red circle, moves clockwise around the black circle near its boundary. Unfortunately, even not surprisingly, this simple solution suffers of a certain instability which makes sometimes the robot fluctuating more or less far from shape boundary. This is more evident on a more complex shape like the one in fig 4b.

Simulation of a motorized robot

Now we attempt to more precisely simulate a physical robot with one or two motors, two wheels



for imparting the motion energy and assuming that the robot can turn like a robot turtle.

In the first example we have a one-motor robot running on a straight line. We have realized a motor command, similar to that realized in NXT-G for the LEGO Mindstorms NXT robot. It receives 4 parameters: motor_power, regulating the motor angular speed, motor_dir specifying the direction (forward or backward), motor_dur specifying a generic duration which depends on its type motor_durtype as follows: when rot, motor_dur is the number (with fraction) of full rotations; when sec, it is a time measured in seconds; when deg, it is the number (with fraction) of degrees to be swept. The robot configuration parameters are the maximum angular speed (maxangspeed) and the wheel radius (radius). The motor implementation first calculates in ang the requested motion angle and in angspeed the angular speed, proportional to motor_power so that speed is maxangspeed when motor_power is 100. The motion is performed in a certain number of steps long astep units each. So the total distance (dist) and the corresponding time quantum (tstep) are evaluated. To permit to stop the movement in any moment, a stop flag is used, set by the concurrent stop command. We also add an lmotor command which receives a linear distance parameter (lmotor_dist) instead of the motor_durtype/motor_dur couple. Setting the motor parameters you can move forward or backward the robot in a finely controlled way, for example with the distance stops bus problem (fig. 1). You can also add the equivalent of a color sensor to the robot, putting a small colored square on the tip of a protuberance that comes out from the robot body (fig. 10).

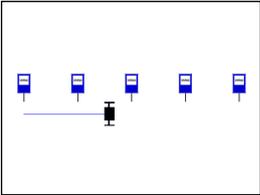
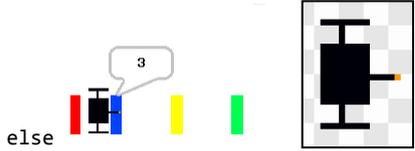
<pre> when I receive [motor v] set [stop v] to (0) set [angspeed v] to (((maxangspeed)*(motor_power))/(100)) if < (motor_durtype) = [rot] > set [ang v] to ((motor_dur)*(360)) else if < (motor_durtype) = [sec] > set [ang v] to ((angspeed)*(motor_dur)) else set [ang v] to (motor_dur) // degrees end end set [dist v] to (((ang)*(3.1416))*(radius))/(180) set [astep v] to (2) // linear step set [tstep v] to (((ang)*(astep))/((angspeed)*(dist))) set [time v] to ((tstep)-(0.1)) // final instant reset timer repeat ((dist)/(astep)) move ((astep)*(motor_dir)) steps wait until < (timer) > (time) if < (stop)=(1) > stop script end change [time v] by (tstep) end end </pre>	<pre> when I receive [lmotor v] set [motor_durtype v] to [deg] set [motor_dur v] to (((lmotor_dist)*(180))/((3.1416)*(radius))) broadcast [motor v] and wait when I receive [color v] if < color [#FF9400] is touching [#FFFFFF] ? > set [color_color v] to (0) // white else if < color [#FF9400] is touching [#000000] ? > set [color_color v] to (1) // black else if < color [#FF9400] is touching [#FF0000] ? > set [color_color v] to (2) // red else . . . end </pre>
	

Figure 10. The motor command and a color sensor

The color function returns in color_color a color code. The relative complexity of this coder is due to the fact that in the current version of Scratch we cannot refer directly to color codes.

The last example is the most complex one because it tries to simulate a steering robot with 2 drive wheels with separate motors. The move command receives parameters similar to motor, plus move_steer representing the steering level, (0 = no steering, 10 = pivoting). With move_steer=0 the robot go straight and this part of the implementation is equal to the motor command. When move_steer>0, we assume that $\omega_l > \omega_r$ (ω_l and ω_r angular speed respectively of the left and right



wheel) and that ω is set on the basis of *move_power*, whereas ω_r depends on the steering value. Say d the distance between the two wheels; the radius R drawn by the internal wheel is given by (for a detailed description of the theory, see Alimisis et. al., 2009)

$$R = d \cdot \omega_r / (\omega_l - \omega_r) = d \cdot (\omega_r / \omega_l) / (1 - \omega_r / \omega_l)$$

For simplicity, we assume a reasonable linear relation between the ω_r / ω_l ratio and the steering s .

$$\omega_r / \omega_l = 1 - 1/5 \cdot s \quad R = d \cdot (1 - 1/5 \cdot s) / (1 - (1 - 1/5 \cdot s)) = d \cdot (5 - s) / s$$

Say $a_l = \alpha_{wl} \cdot r$ the length of the arc in radians of radius $R+d$ drawn by the external wheel, and r the wheel radius. In the motion the steering radius draws an angle Θ and for its measure it holds:

$$\Theta = a_l / (R+d) = \alpha_{wl} \cdot r / (R+d) = \alpha_{wl} \cdot r / ((d \cdot (5 - s) / s) + d) = \alpha_{wl} \cdot r \cdot s / (d \cdot 5)$$

Θ is the angle drawn also by the two other radius, R for the internal wheel and $R+d/2$ for the robot centre. Thus this latter must draw an arc a_c of length:

$$a_c = \Theta \cdot (R+d/2) = \Theta \cdot d \cdot (10-s) / (2 \cdot s) = \alpha_{wl} \cdot r \cdot (10-s) / 10 \quad (\alpha_{wl} \text{ in radians})$$

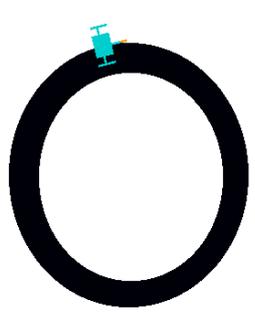
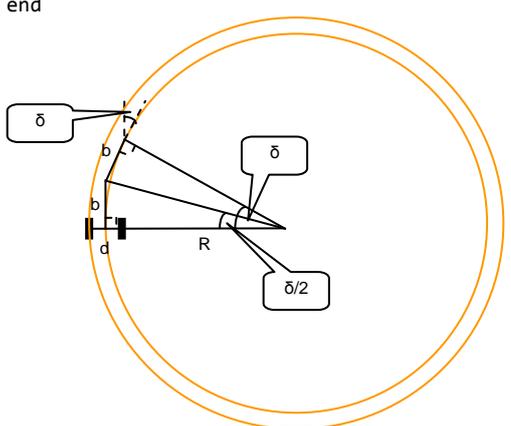
<pre>// stop, angspeed and ang as in motor command set [dir v] to (1) if < (move_steer) < (0) > set [dir v] to (-1) // dir gives the turning side +1=right -1=left set [move_steer v] to ((0) - (move_steer)) end if < (move_steer) = (0) > // this is equal to motor reset timer else set [theta v] to (((ang)*(radius))*(move_steer)) / ((wdist)*(5))) set [astep v] to ((([tan v] of (1))*(wdist))*((10)- (move_steer))*(move_dir)) / ((move_steer)*(2))) set [tstep v] to (((ang)*(2)) / ((angspeed)*(theta))) set [time v] to ((tstep)-(0.1)) reset timer repeat ((theta)/(2)) move (astep) steps turn right ((2)*(dir)) degrees move (astep) steps wait until < (timer) > (time) > if < (stop) = (1) > stop script end change [time v] by (tstep) end change [time v] by ((0) - (tstep)) end end</pre>	<pre>// line follower application set [move_dir v] to (1) set [move_durtype v] to (sec) set [move_dur v] to (6000) set [move_power v] to (100) forever broadcast [stop v] and wait if <color [#FF9400] is touching [#FFFFFF] ?> set [move_steer v] to (-2) broadcast [move v] else set [move_steer v] to (2) broadcast [move v] end end end</pre>
 <p>b) line follower</p>	 <p>a) the path</p>

Figure 11. The steering robot

We execute this motion of the sprite centre on a arc of circle, which produces a total rotation of Θ of the sprite axis, repeating Θ/δ small angular steps of δ units. We approximates this micro-



motion with a sequence of move-turn-move commands so that, after one small step, the position and direction of the robot are the expected ones with a real arc of δ units. It results:

$$b = R_c \cdot \text{tg}(\delta/2) = (R+d/2) \cdot \text{tg}(\delta/2) = d \cdot (10-s) \cdot \text{tg}(\delta/2) / (2 \cdot s)$$

So the sprite, executing a *move(b)*, *turn(δ)*, *move(b)*, reaches the correct position and orientation after one step. Experimentally we chose $\delta=2$ as its minimum feasible value. Fig. 11 shows an application, a line follower with the robot equipped with the equivalent of a light sensor. The stop command provides a way to resetting a previous *move* command (*broadcast* without *wait*).

Conclusions

As shown in this paper, Scratch includes several features which can be attributed to usual robotic behaviours. Carefully exploiting these features makes it possible for a student to have a significant experience of ‘virtual’ robotics in a ‘virtual’ environment which is a probably already known and not complex authoring system. Therefore, before working with a real robot, most important aspects of robotics having an educative value can be easily transferred.

Interfacing an authoring system like Scratch with external hardware can further improve the user robotic experience and make her closer to the positive learning potential that a real, full-featured robot exhibits. Scratchboard, LEGO WeDo but especially the low-cost Arduino system are currently interfaced with Scratch (for example see *Scratch for Arduino* (S4A), <http://seaside.citilab.eu/scratch/arduino>). The smooth learning progression from basic robotics to experiences with external hardware is more effective when we start with the ‘robotics’ features of Scratch like the ones we exploited in our experimentation.

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