The dynamics of spatial behavior: how can robust smoothing techniques help?

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Received 24 July 2003; received in revised form 8 October 2003; accepted 13 October 2003

Abstract

A variety of setups and paradigms are used in the neurosciences for automatically tracking the location of an animal in an experiment and for extracting features of interest out of it. Many of these features, however, are critically sensitive to the unavoidable noise and artifacts of tracking. Here, we examine the relevant properties of several smoothing methods and suggest a combination of methods for retrieving locations and velocities and recognizing arrests from time series of coordinates of an animal’s center of gravity. We accomplish these by using robust nonparametric methods, such as Running Median (RM) and locally weighted regression methods. The smoothed data may, subsequently, be segmented to obtain discrete behavioral units with proven ethological relevance. New parameters such as the length, duration, maximal speed, and acceleration of these units provide a wealth of measures for, e.g., mouse behavioral phenotyping, studies on spatial orientation in vertebrates and invertebrates, and studies on rodent hippocampal function. This methodology may have implications for many tests of spatial behavior.

Keywords: Path smoothing; Velocity; Exploratory behavior; Rodent; LOWESS; Repeated Running Median; Open field behavior

1. Introduction

In the neurosciences, data on locomotor behavior, spatial orientation, navigation, spatial memory, and even social behavior often consist of a time series of coordinates representing the organism’s location. Common experimental setups collecting such data include the Open Field Test, the Photobeam Cage, the Morris Swim Task, the Elevated Plus Maze, the Holeboard, and a variety of other spatial mazes. Most of the studies performed in these setups focus on the animal’s location, ignoring velocity and acceleration (see, however, Kafkafi et al., 2001; Pierce-Shimomura et al., 1999; Tchernichovski and Golani, 1995; Tchernichovski et al., 1998; Wallace et al., 2002; Whishaw et al., 2001).

The benefits of moment-to-moment record of velocity and acceleration cannot, however, be overestimated. Within a dynamic framework, the acceleration and velocity of the animal are the outcome of all the concurrent endogenous and exogenous “forces” acting upon it. Conversely, the attraction or repulsion exerted by a wall, a cliff, a familiar place, a partner or a chemical gradient is revealed by the momentary values of these parameters. In rodent open field studies, for example, the forces exerted by the animal’s home base (Eilam and Golani, 1989), or any other familiar place (Tchernichovski et al., 1996), are reflected in the animal’s velocity and acceleration. The momentary velocity of an animal can tell us whether it “thinks” it is running away or toward its home base, or how familiar the immediate environment is (Tchernichovski and Golani, 1995; Tchernichovski et al., 1998), or what method of navigation it uses (Wallace et al., 2002; Whishaw et al., 2001).

One ethologically-relevant point regarding velocities is that involving zero or close-to-zero velocities, i.e., stops. An organism’s locomotor behavior often consists of an al-
ternation between progression and stopping, be it a nemato
tode (Pierce-Shimomura et al., 1999), an insect (Collins et al., 1994, 1995; Miller, 1979), a fish (Nilsson et al., 1993; O’Brien et al., 1989; Winberg et al., 1993), a lizard (Pietruska, 1986), a bird (Pienkowski, 1983), or a mammal (Golani et al., 1993; Kenagy, 1974). The movements it per
dorns during a stop, be it foraging movements, scanning or
movements related to any other form of information gather-
ing, are reflected indirectly in the spatiotemporal properties of
the stop, (e.g., Drai et al., 2000). Mouse inbred strains, for
example, may differ substantially in the rate, type, rhythm, and
number of scans they perform during a stop. These dif-
fences in the manner and intensity of information gath-
ering are indirectly reflected in the duration, spatial spread, and average velocity of movement during stopping behav-
ior (Drai and Golani, 2001). Characterizing the stop-and-go
behavior should therefore be both ethologically meaningful and results-wise fruitful.

As elaborated in this study, however, the data acquired
by the above listed mazes and setups suffer from noise and
artifact problems, which are inherent to all tracking sys-
tems and critically affect the results. Even a straightforward
measure such as the overall distance traveled by the animal
is highly sensitive to these problems, but they have a partic-
ularly devastating effect on the derivation of velocities and
accelerations. Smoothing the raw data is required to obtain
a smooth path, correct computation of velocities when the
animal is moving, and an isolation of arrests (zero velocity)
when stopping. As we show, however, the sometimes-erratic
nature of animal movement requires the correct application
of the appropriate smoothing methods. Furthermore, those
methods appropriate when the animal is on the go become
inappropriate when it stops. Therefore, a combination of
methods must be used. An automated high-throughput
analysis of moment-to-moment velocities becomes proper
only after the data have been carefully smoothed by such
combination of methods.

2. Methods of testing

As a test case for investigation of the noise sources and
of performances of smoothing methods we used the Open
Field test (Hall, 1934) with mice of several common in-
bred strains, tracked with Noldus EthoVision® video track-
ing system (Noldus et al., 2001; Spink et al., 2001) at a rate
of 25 records (frames) per second. The diameter of the arena
was 250 cm and the spatial resolution about 1.3 cm per video
pixel (for detailed description of methods and analysis see
Kafkafi et al., 2003a). In the tracking system, the arena was
specified as slightly larger than its actual boundaries, in or-
der to prevent any change in the spatial distribution of the
noise when the animal is at the very edge of the arena. The
image from the same video camera that was used for the
tracking was recorded, in parallel, on time-coded videotapes.
The output data files containing the records of locations at
time t, each involving the values at two perpendicular coor-
dinates (X(t), Y(t)), were exported from the tracking system
into SEE (Software for the Exploration of Exploration, see
Drai and Golani, 2001), which enables a large repertoire of
visualizations and calculations. Path plots and the location
and velocity series, processed with the optional smoothing
methods with different parameter values, were compared to
each other and to the video record of the same behavior, us-
ing controls that enabled the observer to run the videotape
frame-by-frame or in any required speed.

While our approach is implemented in the present study
on data borrowed from rodent locomotor and exploratory
behavior, a video tracking system, our findings clearly
pertain to any study of an organism’s behavior making use
of spatial data, using many types of tracking.

3. Sources of noise in tracking spatial behavior

Most current tracking systems (either photobeam, photo-
cell or video systems) are constrained by the resolution of a
recording system using pixels or “tiles”. The recorded loca-
tion is therefore of discrete nature—two records cannot be
closer than the resolution level unless they are at exactly the
same location. Furthermore, since the typical pixel length
is smaller than the animal, the system actually records the
location of the animal’s “center of gravity”.

Whatever the noise level of the location measurement, it
will be even higher for estimating the velocity (the first
derivative of location) in the same time resolution. This is
clearly demonstrated in Fig. 2 (compare noise levels be-
tween top and bottom graphs in raw data and within each
smoothing method). For example, when estimating veloc-
ity by differencing the locations measurements at successive
time points, the variance of the noise level of a difference
of independent measurements is the sum of the individual noise
level variances. Estimating the acceleration (the derivative
of velocity or the second derivative of location) will, for
the same reason, increase the noise level even further.
In general, as measures of behavior become increasingly com-
plex and depend on more coordinates, they accumulate more
noise terms, and it is very easy to reach a situation where the
signal-to-noise ratio is lower than 1, even when the original
noise appears to be small.

The proper smoothing method should be suitable to the
type of noise in the system. By comparing tracking results
with the videotape of the actual movement, we found that
the sources of tracking noise can be categorized into three
main groups: precision level noise, tracking system erratic
noise (mostly in the form of outliers) and body wobble. In
the following subsections we describe and illustrate these
three sources of noise.

3.1. Precision level noise

As noted above, tracking systems of most kinds actu-
ally see the arena as a paved area of “tiles” or (with video
...ed, progression segment length, etc. The considerable many measures of behavior such as the total distance traveled, this observer-based definition becomes impractical. When the data are automatically tracked and analyzed, how-ever, this observer-based definition becomes impractical. Outliers might have, of course, a devastating effect on many smoothing methods that are required in order to deal with the previous problem of precision level noise (Fig. 3).

3.3. Body wobble

This source of "noise" is due to the animal’s own movements. By "body wobble" we refer to all movements of the animal that are not part of its whole-body progression, e.g., head movements or incipient shifts of weight, which affect the "center of gravity" measured by the tracking system. Body wobble may, depending on the goal of the study, be the very subject of investigation, but for the purpose of obtaining the animal’s path or its velocity it is an undesired effect and thus should be treated as noise. As in our case, the researcher may want to filter out body wobble during the animal’s progression but retain it during stops, where it is indicative of rearing, scanning movements and other ethologically-relevant behaviors (the word "stop" is used in this study in the sense of "lingering", see Drai et al. (2000), i.e., staying in place while possibly executing non-locomotor movements, while the word "arrest" is reserved for complete immobility or zero velocity). This again calls for a combination of different smoothing methods for progression and stopping. Note that although, as in our situation, the same smoothing procedures may be used in order to remove both precision level noise and body wobble, these two types of noise have different sources, and might be of different magnitudes depending on the animal size, animal speed, spatial resolution and other factors. In such situations, the parameters of the smoothing method need to be adjusted differently to remove the two different sources of noise.

4. Common smoothing techniques and their properties

Most current photobeam and photo-cell systems and some video tracking systems do not employ any form of smoothing, and are therefore exposed to the noise sources described in Section 3. We are not aware of any serious attempt to evaluate the results of such systems against the actual behavior. Some video systems try to cope with the problem by reducing the sampling rate (also known as down sampling), for example, by using only every other recorded location. The purpose of down-sampling is to separate body wobble from true location. However, it is not a true smoothing method, in its statistical meaning, as the level of the other sources of variation that are described in Section 3 is not being reduced. The down-sampling also affects the analysis of short arrests.

Some video tracking systems do employ different methods of smoothing. Not all smoothing methods, however, were created equal. The current section gives a general...
overview of some of the most commonly used smoothing techniques and their properties in view of the research goals.

The most common smoothing technique is the Moving Average (MA, see Box and Jenkins, 1970; Velleman and Hoaglin, 1981). In MA, the smoothed location at time $t$ is the average over a time “window” centered on this point and $2h + 1$ points wide, ($h$ denotes the “half window width”). By increasing window width a ‘stronger’ smoothing is achieved, reducing the noise variability at the cost of reduced time resolution. MA can be further improved by using a Moving Weighted Average (MWA), which assigns larger weights to data points in the center of the time window. For the same window width, MWA follows the original data more closely than MA. Numerical differentiation of the MA or MWA smoothed series usually leads to much more realistic velocities when compared to numerical differentiation of raw locations (Fig. 2, top).

For the purpose of dynamic analysis of behavior, however, both MA and MWA have a disadvantage: they tend to lower speed peaks while increasing the speed during slowing down or arrest (Fig. 2, top). The latter especially has grave consequences, as it shortens the duration of arrests and even eliminates abrupt arrests entirely, erroneously joining two movement segments into a single longer one (Table 1). MA and MWA are thus unsuitable for the analysis of arrests and progression segments.

Another commonly used smoothing technique is the Local Polynomials method (LP, see Fan and Gijbels, 1996). As
Table 1: Identification of 4 frames arrest embedded within 20 frames artificially produced series, as performed by Moving Average (MA) method (fourth and fifth columns) and Running Median (RM) method (sixth and seventh columns)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time (t) (frames)</th>
<th>Raw X(t) location (cm)</th>
<th>True move/arrest</th>
<th>MA smooth location</th>
<th>MA move/arrest conclusion</th>
<th>RM smooth location</th>
<th>RM move/arrest conclusion</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Move</td>
<td>–</td>
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<td>–</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Move</td>
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<td>–</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Move</td>
<td>28.2</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>27</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Move</td>
<td>26.4</td>
<td>Move</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Arrest</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Move</td>
<td>23.8</td>
<td>Move</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Move</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Move</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>Move</td>
<td>23</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Move</td>
<td>19.2</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Arrest</td>
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<td>Arrest</td>
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<td>Arrest</td>
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<td>21</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Both MA and RM were applied with a half-window of \( h = 2 \), and an “arrest” was considered as no change in location from the previous record. The “arrest” conclusion of the RM in frame no. 4 is a boundary effect and can therefore be disregarded.

In MA, LP uses a time window centered on each time point, but instead of using the average location over the window, it fits a low-order polynomial (usually a straight line or a parabola) of location in time to the data at the window. Once such a polynomial is fitted (using simple or weighted least squares) the smoothed location at time \( t \) is the value of the polynomial at that point. LP can also provide an estimation of the velocity by using the derivative of the fitted polynomial at time \( t \). The strength of LP smoothing is controlled mainly by choosing the window’s width (as in MA) but also by the degree of the polynomial. With a proper choice of these parameters, the LP method is more flexible than the MA or MWA, in the sense that it can accommodate better to the pattern of the data within a window (Fig. 2, bottom) while still producing a smooth series.

Another advantage of LP over MA is as follows: if an animal moves along the (circular) edge of the arena, its path will generally curve towards the arena’s center. The linear MA will “pull” such a path away from the edge towards the center. LP, in contrast, will better capture the curvature of the path and reduce the effect of this artifact. LP somewhat reduces the problem of eliminating arrests or shortening them, although it does not solve the problem completely (Fig. 2, top).

MA, MWA and LP all share, however, another crucial disadvantage: they are not robust in handling system outliers. They typically form a “dent” in the direction of the outlier (Fig. 3, bottom) and a wave-like form in the velocity time series (Fig. 3, top). These artifacts stretch over a range of data that is wider than the original outlier (as wide as the window width, in fact). More dangerously, these artifacts (as opposed to the original outliers in the raw data) are often visually indistinguishable from the natural movement, so that the researcher might fail to identify them as artifacts when examining the smoothed series.

A seemingly very different set of smoothing tools is the Smoothing Splines (SS, see Hardle, 1991). The location versus time, as filtered by SS, balances between the following two contradicting tasks: minimizing the sum of squares of deviations between the data and the filtered function on the one hand, and minimizing a penalty which is proportional to the sum of squares of accelerations, on the other hand. Obviously, the less smooth the filtered function is as a function of time, the larger the squared acceleration is. However, SS is very similar in its outcome to LP, where the constant of proportion in the penalty is proportional to the sum of squares of accelerations, on the other hand. Obviously, the less smooth the filtered function is as a function of time, the larger the squared acceleration is. However, SS is very similar in its outcome to LP, where the constant of proportion in the penalty is proportional to the sum of squares of accelerations, on the other hand. Obviously, the less smooth the filtered function is as a function of time, the larger the squared acceleration is. However, SS is very similar in its outcome to LP, where the constant of proportion in the penalty is proportional to the sum of squares of accelerations, on the other hand. Obviously, the less smooth the filtered function is as a function of time, the larger the squared acceleration is. However, SS is very similar in its outcome to LP, where the constant of proportion in the penalty is proportional to the sum of squares of accelerations, on the other hand. Obviously, the less smooth the filtered function is as a function of time, the larger the squared acceleration is. However, SS is very similar in its outcome to LP, where the constant of proportion in the penalty is proportional to the sum of squares of accelerations, on the other hand. Obviously, the less smooth the filtered function is as a function of time, the larger the squared acceleration is. However, SS is very similar in its outcome to LP, where the constant of proportion in the penalty is proportional to the sum of squares of accelerations, on the other hand.

Finally, the Fast Fourier Transform (FFT) approach to smoothing takes a different direction (Efrosenovich, 1999). The raw data are represented as a weighted sum of periodic functions. The terms involving higher frequencies are then dropped, and the result is back transformed to the original scale, producing a smoother series. The FFT is excellent for smoothing periodic functions and remains very useful for other smooth functions. It nevertheless fails to cope with inhomogeneous functions of differing smoothness levels at different parts of the time series (Ramsey and Silverman, 1997) as is the case with the path of the mouse, although sometimes this failure can be overcome (Tchernichovski et al., 2001). It is also not robust enough to cope with outliers.
5. LOWESS: a robust smoothing technique

In order to solve both the precision noise and outliers problems we have incorporated the method of Locally Weighted Scatter Plot Smoothing (LOWESS, see Cleveland, 1977) into our smoothing algorithm. This is an iterative procedure combining the ideas of LP smoothing with robustness to outliers (see Appendix A for the detailed algorithm and choice of parameters). As in the weighted LP, the first iteration of LOWESS fits a polynomial to the data in a time-window centered at \( t \). The resulting polynomial, however, is used only as a first estimation. Each original data point is then assigned a weight according to its difference from its first estimation (residual). A larger residual (indicating a poorer fit) results in a smaller weight for the corresponding data point, implying it will be less relevant for computing the next fitted polynomial. At the extreme, a very large residual indicates that the point is an outlier, and it is assigned a zero weight, implying it will have no effect at all on the next iteration. In the second iteration of LOWESS the raw data in the window is fitted again with weighted LP, but this time using also the weights according to the residuals. In the original algorithm these iterations continue as above until no further change occurs, but practically we found that two iterations suffice. At this stage the fitted polynomial is used to derive the LOWESS smoothed location and velocity at time \( t \). As with LP, LOWESS can be also employed for estimating the velocity, by using the derivative of the fitted polynomial at each time point. As Fig. 3 demonstrates, LOWESS is robust to outliers, but like LP (Fig. 2, top) it still tends to eliminate very short arrests and shorten longer arrests. Hence, LOWESS is inappropriate for the task of identifying arrests. To this end it would be preferable to complement it with an even more robust
method that can cope with the abrupt changes in the location as a function of time exhibited near the arrests. Such a method is discussed in the following section.

6. Identifying arrests with Repeated Running Median

The simplest robust smoother is the Running Median (RM, see Tukey, 1977). The RM procedure is similar to the MA, but instead of replacing an observation with the average of its neighboring observations, one uses their median. This seemingly small change has enormous effect on the performance, as the median is a robust function of the data. In simple words, in any window containing more than two observations a single outlier, however wild, will have no effect on the median. Generally speaking, the disadvantage of the RM is that if there is a sequence of values repeating for more than \( h \) times (at least half the data points in the window), then the median would be fixed at that value. Visually, the resulting estimator is not that smooth and thus is not recommended for evaluating velocities in general. This disadvantage, however, becomes an advantage for the purpose of identifying arrests (see the example in Table 1). RM is usually used in an iterated manner called the Repeated Running Median (RRM, see Tukey, 1977): first smooth the measured data with a RM, next smooth the resultant smoothed series with another RM, possibly with a different window width, and so forth. Such repetitions have an effect of giving more weight to locations closer in time to the center of the window. A proper choice of parameters (the window widths of the Repeated Running Medians, see Appendix A) was found to yield identification of arrests that coincides very well with the identification by several experienced observers that examined each arrest several times in the videotape (and see Fig. 2). The choice of the window sizes in the sequence was done by a trial-and-error but also followed Tukey’s guidelines, who recommended repeating the RM steps starting from wider window width to smaller or same size window widths (Tukey, 1977). Once obtaining a final smoothed set of locations, a run of at least \( f \) locations that are not different by more than a small distance \( \varepsilon \) are marked as arrests. We found that \( f = 5 \) (equivalent to 0.2 s at a rate of 25 frames/s) and a very small \( \varepsilon \) (practically 0) yield an identification of arrests almost identical to that done by an experienced human observer (see Section 8 and Fig. 2). For more details see Appendix A.

7. SEE Path Smoother: a combined smoothing algorithm

The smoothing algorithm we constructed combines the advantages of LOWESS for robust smoothing and velocity estimation during progression with the advantages of RRM for robust identification of arrests. The algorithm smoothes the raw data with both methods in parallel. For locations the LOWESS-smoothed results are used during movement, but during arrests (as identified by the RRM) the locations are set to a linear interpolation between the (LOWESS-smoothed) start coordinate and end coordinate of the arrest. For velocity estimation the LOWESS-computed velocities are used during movement, but in data points that were identified as arrests by the RRM the velocity is reduced to 0. The values of the LOWESS and RRM parameters, and the arrests defining parameters \( l \) and \( \varepsilon \) are all user-defined (see Appendix A for detailed definitions and parameter values). The algorithm is implemented as an executable program called “SEE Path Smoother” (SPSM) which is available from the authors. A typical output of the velocity is seen in Fig. 7.

When used in the framework of SEE, SPSM is employed as the first stage of analysis, and is followed by separation of non-arrest segments into two intrinsically distinct populations: progression segments and “local” movements (Drai et al., 2000). Series of arrests separated by only local movement are then joined into stops (“lingering episodes”, see Fig. 7). SPSM is therefore essential for treating spatial behavior as a string of discrete, ethologically relevant behavioral units, each having reliable dynamic properties.

8. Examples and experimental evaluation

In this section, we evaluate the previously described smoothing methods side-by-side, using typical examples and samples out of the behavior of mice from several inbred strains. Fig. 2 displays 6 s (150 frames) from the movement of a DBA/2 mouse. For the sake of simplicity we consider only the movement along the X dimension (the same analysis is also performed in the Y dimension). It is not hard to identify from the raw data (or from watching the video) that during this period the mouse stopped five times. Note the (most probably) precision level noise effect in the form of small upward and downward bumps. Retrieving velocities from the raw data without any smoothing (i.e., by numerical differentiation of successive raw data locations) yields very erratic and unrealistic velocities (Fig. 2, top). Attempting to identify arrests in the figure by searching for zero velocity segments would miss the second arrest, and the fourth arrest is shortened to a length that is hardly discernible.

Clearly, using MA or LP reduces the noise substantially. LOWESS smoothing is, in the absence of outliers, nearly identical to the LP smoothing. The velocities smoothed by both methods present a much more realistic picture than the non-smoothed velocity, but still cause arrests to look shorter than what they really are (Note especially the second and fourth arrests.) Note that if we would have chosen to define arrests by introducing a cutoff on the smoothed velocity, this cutoff would have to be almost \( \pm 0.10 \text{ cm/s} \) in order to avoid shortening the arrests, and this means that a large part of the behavior, mainly slow progression and small movements inside “lingering” (Drai et al., 2000), would have been masked.
over-smooth the path and produce longer distance traveled than SPSM, as reflected by positive
activity. That is, LOWESS generally reduces movement distance by 4% relative to SPSM. Even the most active mice, however, are still part of this linear relationship which intersects 0 distance at a difference close to that found with the anesthetized mouse. This suggests that SPSM properly takes account of arrests in active mice as well. We further compared the SPSM to the LOWESS (Fig. 5), and found that LOWESS = 14.7 + 0.98 SPSM ($r^2 > 0.999$).

That is, LOWESS generally reduces movement distance by only 2% relative to SPSM. Note in Fig. 5 that the difference in distance traveled between the LOWESS and MA is larger in moving mice than in the anesthetized mouse and, furthermore, this difference increases with the increase in activity.
To assess the extent of the outliers problem we analyzed 30 min sessions of mice from three strains of different colors: FVB/N, C3H/He and DBA/2, and checked how many outliers were recorded. For this purpose we defined an outlier as a time point at which the residual (i.e., distance of raw data from the smoothed result) is larger than six times the median of all the absolute values of the residuals in the window (corresponding to 4 standard deviations in normally distributed noise). The fraction of outliers out of the overall data points was slightly more than 4% in all three strains. We estimated the ability of the methods to recognize stops by comparing the number of stops recorded in a 5 min session of a FVB/N mouse. While MA, LP and LOWESS recognized only 40, 25 and 29 stops respectively, SPSM recognized 97 stops. An experienced observer (blind to these results) went over the video record of the same sequence three different times, in which she recognized 89, 96 and 102 stops.

9. Potential applications

As demonstrated in the previous sections, a combination of the appropriate smoothing methods must be employed for correct analysis of spatial behavior. This is true even for simple measures such as the distance traveled, but is especially critical for dynamic analysis involving higher derivatives of locations and the identification of stops. Automatic high-throughput recording of undistorted velocities and accelerations has wide implications for ethology and the various branches of behavioral neuroscience.

One such application is in behavioral phenotyping. Rapid advances in bioinformatics have created a demand for tests of mouse behavior having high discriminatory power across strains and preparations, high replicability across laboratories, and high-throughput for mass screening (Wahlsten et al., 2001). In response to this demand, behavior geneticists now employ a variety of measures including a richer array of behavioral tests (Lederhendler and Schulkin, 2000), standardization of these tests (Crabbe et al., 1999), and establishment of a Mouse Phenome Database (Paigen and Eppig, 2000). A complementary measure, suggested by our group, is automated recognition and measurement of a large number of ethologically relevant patterns reflecting motor, motivational and cognitive functions, all derived from open field behavior, using SEE (Drai and Golani, 2001; Kafkafi et al., 2003a,b). This automation process is based on an algorithmic recognition of patterns, and must be preceded by smoothing the data.

To appreciate the effect of the smoothing compare the two graphs in Fig. 6, which represent the path and velocity-trajectory traced by a DBA/2 mouse in the course of half a minute. The path and the velocity-trajectory on the top graph are based on the measured location. From this type of noisy data one can only get the distance traveled along and away from the wall, and the amount of winding of the path (all contaminated with noise). In contrast, the path and velocity-trajectory at the bottom were obtained by SPSM. This plot uncovers a sequence consisting of an alternation between progression and lingering segments—discrete behavioral units with proven ethological relevance for rodents (Drai et al., 2000). These units can be characterized by simple measures such as their length, duration, maximal speed, acceleration and other measures derived from these (see Fig. 7). Treating the path as a string of discrete building blocks rather than a continuous series of coordinates allows a more straightforward analysis of complex structures (Drai and Golani, 2001; Kafkafi et al., 2001, 2003a,b). We presently have some 32 carefully designed endpoints that characterize these building blocks. The endpoints are computed by SEE Endpoint Calculator, a publicly available software. This framework can also be applied to other spatial mazes, such as the Morris water maze (Morris, 1984) and the elevated plus maze, if they are conducted with video tracking.

Since velocity betrays the forces acting on the animal, it can be used to uncover attractors, such as familiar places in the environment, or repellors, such as the same...
Wallace et al. (2002) and Whishaw et al. (2001) compared the exploratory behavior of control rats and rats with fimbria-fornix lesions. They have shown that while control and fimbria-fornix rats had similar outward segments, the last progression segment on the way home was significantly faster (and straighter) in the controls, when compared with that of the lesioned rats. This result was independent of testing in light or dark conditions, suggesting that rats employ dead reckoning navigational strategies to conclude the homeward portion of exploratory movements. Using the methodology outlined in this study, it is now possible to extend the analysis to whole-session velocity trajectories as well as to other derived measures (e.g., Kafkafi et al., 2003b).

places later on, when the animal becomes disinterested in them and avoids them (Tchernichovski and Golani, 1995; Tchernichovski et al., 1998). In using this framework, Wallace et al. (2002) and Whishaw et al. (2001) compared the exploratory behavior of control rats and rats with fimbria-fornix lesions. They have shown that while control and fimbria-fornix rats had similar outward segments, the last progression segment on the way home was significantly faster (and straighter) in the controls, when compared with that of the lesioned rats. This result was independent of testing in light or dark conditions, suggesting that rats employ dead reckoning navigational strategies to conclude the homeward portion of exploratory movements. Using the methodology outlined in this study, it is now possible to extend the analysis to whole-session velocity trajectories as well as to other derived measures (e.g., Kafkafi et al., 2003b). This is important because the resolution and information content of these trajectories would finally match that used in electrophysiological studies of the hippocampus (e.g., Best et al., 2001), enabling a common framework for phenomenology, lesion and electrophysiological studies. In addition, the record would reflect not only the attractive properties of the home base during the first exposure to a novel environment, but also predictable changes (such as from attraction to repulsion) embodying spatial memory and habituation during later exposures (Tchernichovski et al., 1998).

Could the hippocampal place-cells and their corresponding place-fields (e.g., Best et al., 2001; Mittelstaedt, 2000; Wood et al., 2001) define operational places in the environment rather than locations? There is now a substantial amount of literature on how place cell firing corresponds to different behavioral contexts such as direction of movement relative to a start box and goal (Riedish et al., 2000), progressive changes in the shape of places (Ekstrom et al., 2001), regions of particular behavioral significance even when these regions are completely unmarked (Hollup et al., 2001), and the relationship between multi-sensory processing, head direction cells and place cell firing (Wiener et al., 2002). Place cell firing thus appears to represent constructs that are more complex than location. Given the new tools for moment-to-moment computation of velocities, the identification of arrests and the separation of lingering movements from progression it should now be possible to study the correspondence between place and direction cell firing and behaviorally defined places of freely moving rats.

Acknowledgements

This study is part of the project “Phenotyping mouse exploratory behavior” supported by NIH 1 R01 NS40234-03. We thank two anonymous reviewers for substantial comments that helped improve this paper considerably. We thank Noldus Information Technology for the use of their EthoVision® system in Tel-Aviv University. SEE Path Smoother and other SEE related programs can be downloaded at http://www.tau.ac.il/~ilan99/see/help.

Appendix A

We outline the algorithms of LOWESS smoothing for finding locations and velocities and the RRM, which is used for recognizing arrests. Location is composed of two coordinates (X(t), Y(t)), and the two algorithms are being applied separately for X(t) and Y(t). We then explain how to combine the two sets of smoothed locations to obtain velocity and identify arrests.

A.1. The LOWESS algorithm

The LOWESS algorithm requires several parameters:

\( d \) Polynomial degree. The same degree is used in each window.

\( h \) “half window”, the number of records in the window to the side of the center data point, so that the total number of data points in the window is \( 2h + 1 \).

\( r \) The number of iterations for the robust smoothing.

For a given choice of these parameters and a given data set, \( \{X_t\}_{t=1}^{P} \), we define operational places in the environment rather than locations? There is now a substantial amount of literature on how place cell firing corresponds to different behavioral contexts such as direction of movement relative to a start box and goal (Riedish et al., 2000), progressive changes in the shape of places (Ekstrom et al., 2001), regions of particular behavioral significance even when these regions are completely unmarked (Hollup et al., 2001), and the relationship between multi-sensory processing, head direction cells and place cell firing (Wiener et al., 2002). Place cell firing thus appears to represent constructs that are more complex than location. Given the new tools for moment-to-moment computation of velocities, the identification of arrests and the separation of lingering movements from progression it should now be possible to study the correspondence between place and direction cell firing and behaviorally defined places of freely moving rats.

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A.2. Estimating velocities

In Step B of LOWESS, estimation of the Local Polynomial means estimating the \( d + 1 \) coefficients of the polynomial. The derivative of the polynomial at each time, which is the estimated coefficient of the linear term, gives an estimate of the velocity. If \( V_x \) and \( V_y \) are the estimates of the velocities in directions \( X \) and \( Y \), respectively, at time \( t \), we estimate the velocity at time \( t \) by \( \sqrt{V_x^2 + V_y^2} \). This is done for all \( t \)’s to get the velocities at all times.

A.3. Repeated Running Median (RRM)

The RRM algorithm in its role of identifying arrests requires several parameters:

- \( h_1 \geq h_2 \geq \cdots \geq h_r \) “half windows” of the Running Median iterations
- \( l \) minimal length of arrests
- \( \varepsilon \) ‘closeness’ parameter

The RRM algorithm is based on repeated iterations (applications) of Running Median smoothing, which requires a single parameter \( h \), the “half” window width of the smoothing. The Running Median algorithm is as follows: given a data set \( \{X_t\}_{t=1}^n \), the smoothed location at time \( t \) is the median of the \( 2h + 1 \) \( X_t \)’s closest in time to \( X_t \).

The RRM result is a sequence of smoothed locations. When a rodent stops, the smoothed sequence at the relevant time has the same value. We need to decide how many successive repetitions of the same values would be considered as an arrest. This is done by the parameter, \( l \). The last parameter needed is the ‘Closeness’ parameter \( \varepsilon \) (a small number), determining how far from each other data points can be, within the window of length \( l \), in order to still count them as the same point.

This procedure is done separately on \( \{X_t\}_{t=1}^n \) and on \( \{Y_t\}_{t=1}^n \). We identify an arrest when the mouse does not progress on both directions at the same time.

The values of smoothing parameters we are using are:

- Half window widths \( h_r \): the sequence of windows widths for the RRM follows Tukey’s recommendations (Tukey, 1977). The algorithm was verified against the video to make sure we identify arrests correctly. We use four repetitions: \( h_1 = 3 \), \( h_2 = 2 \), \( h_3 = h_4 = 1 \).
- Minimal length of arrests \( l \): 5 frames.

On the choice of smoothing parameters:

Number of iterations \( r \): the LOWESS can be repeated until convergence, or by specifying a number of iterations. We are using two iterations \( r = 2 \), which for most cases is sufficient. This saves computation time.

Half window width \( h \): the wider the window is, the smoother the output will be. There are statistical procedures for automatically choosing the width of the window (e.g., cross-validation, Fan and Gijbels, 1996). In our data, however, we are using \( h = 10 \). This choice came from trial-and-error where the output data looked relatively smooth on the one hand, and on the other hand, it still kept the important features of the data. This was done by trying different window widths and comparing the output to the actual video.

Polynomial degree \( d \): the higher the degree of the polynomial is, the smoother the output is. Since each window is very short in time (less than a second), it is reasonable to assume that a mouse behavior is pretty smooth, reflecting a low degree polynomial. We are using a second degree polynomial, as this allows us to estimate the acceleration as well as the velocity. Note that although the degree of the polynomial affects the amount of smoothing, the window width has a larger effect.

The RRM algorithm in its role of identifying arrests requires several parameters:
Closeness parameter (ε): for mice 0 (practically 0.0001). However, for larger animals (say a rat) a larger parameter is needed.

References


