
Visual Stability Prediction and Its Application to Manipulation

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Abstract

Understanding physical phenomena is a key competence that enables humans and animals to act and interact under uncertain perception in previously unseen environments. Developmental psychology has shown that such skills are acquired by infants from observations at a very early stage. We contrast a more traditional approach of taking a model-based route with explicit 3D representations and physical simulation by an *end-to-end* approach that directly predicts stability from appearance. We explore how such a skill can directly be acquired in a data-driven way—bypassing explicit simulations at run-time. We present a learning-based approach based on simulated data that predicts stability of towers comprised of wooden blocks under different conditions and quantities related to the potential fall of the towers. We evaluate the approach on synthetic data and compared the results to human judgments on the same stimuli. Then we extend this approach to reason about future states of such towers that in turn enables successful stacking.

1 Introduction

Scene understanding requires, among others, understanding of relations between and among the objects. Many of these relations are governed by the Newtonian laws and thereby rule out unlikely or even implausible configurations for the observer. Although objects simply obey these elementary laws, which can very well be captured in simulators, uncertainty in perception makes exploiting these relations challenging in artificial systems. In contrast, humans understand such physical relations naturally, which enables them to manipulate and interact with objects in unseen conditions with ease. We build on a rich set of prior experiences that allow us to employ a type of commonsense understanding that, most likely, does not involve symbolic representations of 3D geometry or physics simulation engines. We rather rely on “naïve physics” or “intuitive physics”, serving as a good enough proxy to make us operate successfully in the real-world.

It has not yet been shown how to equip machines with a similar set of physics commonsense – and thereby bypassing a strong model representation and a physical simulation. In fact, it has been argued that such an approach is unlikely due to e.g., the complexity of the problem [1]. Only recently, several works have revived this idea and reattempted a fully data driven approach to capturing the essence of physical events via machine learning methods [2, 3, 4, 5]. In contrast, studies in developmental psychology [6] have shown that infants acquire knowledge of physical events by observation at a very early age, for example: support, how an object can stably hold another object; collision, how a

Block Numbers				Stacking Depth		Block Size	
(a) 4B	(b) 6B	(c) 10B	(d) 14B	(e) 2D	(f) 3D	(g) Uni	(h) N-Uni

Table 1: Scene parameters in our rendered scenes: number of blocks, stacking depth and block size.

moving object interact with another object. In this work, we focus on support event and construct a model for machines to predict object stability. We revisit the setup in [1] and explore how to predict physical stability directly from appearance cues. We approach this problem by synthesizing a large set of block towers under a range of conditions and then running them through a simulator (*only at training time!*) to generate stability labels. We show for the first time that aforementioned stability can be learned and predicted in a purely data driven way. Further, we successfully guide a robot to stack blocks based on the stability prediction shown in Figure 1. For more details, please refer to [7].

2 Visual Stability Prediction

2.1 Synthetic Data

Scene Parameters As in Table 1, we include scenes with 4, 6, 10 and 14 blocks and vary the depth of the tower from a one layer setting as 2D to a multi-layer setting as 3D. The former only allows a single block along the image plane at all height levels while the latter does not enforce such constraint. We also include: *Uni*, the towers with uniform block size as in [1] and *NonUni*, towers with varying block sizes where two of the three dimensions are randomly scaled with respect to a Normal distribution. In total, there are 16 groups of 1000 scenes in each group.

Simulation We deliberately decided against colored bricks as in [1] in order to challenge perception and make identifying brick outlines and configurations more challenging. The lighting is fixed across scenes and the camera is automatically adjusted so that the whole tower is centered in the rendered image. The final stability label is automatically decide by the displacement of blocks during simulation.

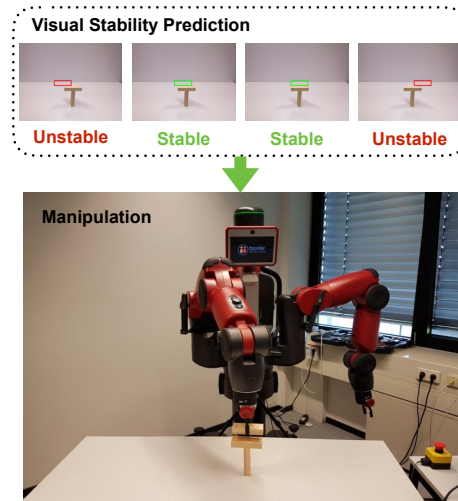


Figure 1: Our model predicts the stability for future states and guides robot for placements.

2.2 Stability Prediction from Still Images

Research in [1] suggests the combinations of the most salient features in the scenes are insufficient to capture people’s judgments, yet, contemporary study reveals human’s perception of visual information, especially some geometric features, like critical angle [8] play an important role in the process. Regardless of the actual inner mechanism for humans to parse the visual input, it seems clear that there is a mapping f involving visual input I to the stability prediction P : $f : I, * \rightarrow P$, where $*$ denotes other possible information, i.e., the mapping can be inclusive, using it along with other aspects, like physical constraint or the mapping is exclusive, using visual cues only.

Here we directly predicts the physical stability from visual input. We use deep convolutional neural networks as they have shown great success on image classification and capable of adapting to various tasks through re-training/fine-tuning. We interchange the image classes labels with the stability labels so that the network can learn “stability salient” features by fine-tuning the pre-trained VGG Net[9].

Intra-Group Experiment We train and test on the scenes by varying only one type of scene parameter at a time: *Number of Blocks*, a consistent drop in performance can be observed with more blocks in the scene; *Block Size*, the performance generally decreases for varying block size over

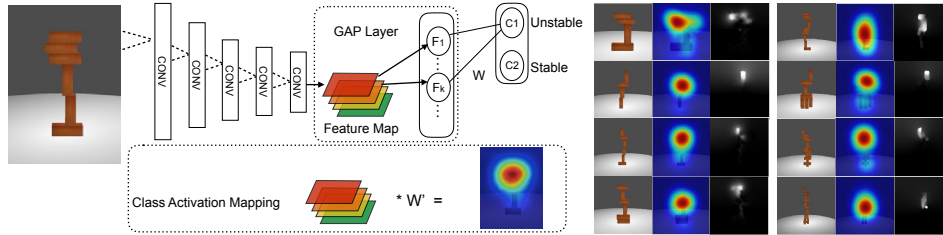


Figure 2: Model interpretation: (left) pipeline, (right) example visualizations.

uniform block size; *Stacking Depth*, for simple scenes, prediction accuracy increases when moving from 2D stacking to 3D but vice versa for the complex scene.

Cross-Group Experiment To see how the learned model transfers across scenes with different complexity, we divide the scene into: a *simple scene* group for scenes with 4 and 6 blocks and a *complex scene* for scenes with 10 and 14 blocks. We investigate: train on simple scenes and predict on complex scenes and vice versa. For the former direction, it gets 69.9%, which is significantly better than random guess at 50%, and for the latter we observe significant performance boost which can be explained by the richer feature learned from the complex scenes with better generalization.

Generalization Experiment Similar to human’s prediction in the task, we use training images from all different scene groups and test on any groups. While the performance exhibits similar trend to the intra-group, namely increasing recognition rate for simpler settings and decreasing rate for more complex settings, there is a consistent improvement over the intra-group for individual groups. Together with the result in the cross-group, it suggests a strong generalization capability of the model.

Human Subject Test 8 human subjects are recruited to predict stability for give scene images. Due to large number of test data, we sample images from different scene groups for human subject test. Each subject is presented with a set of captured images from the test split. Each set includes 96 images where images cover all 16 scene groups with 6 scene instances per group. For each scene image, subject is required to rate the stability from *Definitely Unstable* to *Definitely Stable*.

For simple scenes, human can reach close to perfect performance while for complex scenes, the performance drops significantly to around 60%. The image-based model outperforms human in most scene groups: while showing similar trends in performance with respect to different scene parameters, it is less affected by a more difficult scene parameter setting.

Model Interpretation We apply the technique from [10] to visualize the learned discriminative image regions from CNN for individual category. We investigate discriminative regions for unstable predictions to see if the model can spot the weakness in the structure. We compute the optical flow magnitude between the frame before the physics engine is enabled and afterwards as a coarse ground truth for the structural weakness, assuming the collapse motion starts from such weakness. Though not universal among the unstable cases, we do find significant positive cases showing high correlation between the activation regions in CAM for unstable output and the regions where the collapse motion begins. The pipeline and example visualizations are shown in Figure 2.

3 From Visual Stability Test to Manipulation

We set up a testbed where a Baxter robot stacks one Kapla block on a given block structure over 6 scenes without breaking their stability. We enforce some constraints for simplicity: (1) the structure is restricted to be single layer; (2) the block to be put is limited to {vertical, horizontal} and assumed to be held in robot’s hand before placement; (3) the block has to be placed on the top-most horizontal surface (stacking surface) of the structure; (4) the depth of the structure is calibrated so only the horizontal and vertical displacements to the stacking surface are to be decided.

3.1 Prediction on Real World Data

Considering the significant difference between the synthesized and real world data, we directly apply the model trained on the RGB images to predict stability on the real data in a pilot study, but only got results close to random guessing. Hence we decided to train the visual-stability model on the binary-valued foreground mask on the synthesized data after observing comparable results and deal

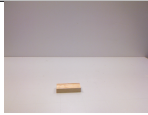
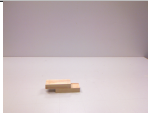




Id.	1	2	3	4	5	6
Scene						
Mani.	9/10	5/6	3/4	4/5	4/7	0/4

Table 2: Manipulation results: $\frac{\#\{\text{successful placements by robot}\}}{\#\{\text{ground truth stable placements}\}}$ with the masks at test time for the real scenes. For each scene, an captured image is first converted to a foreground mask via background subtraction. The top-most horizontal boundary is detected as the stacking surface and then used to generate candidate placements: the surface is divided evenly into 9 horizontal candidates and 5 vertical candidates, resulting in overall 84 candidates. Afterwards, the candidates are put to the visual-stability model for stability prediction. Each candidate’s actual stability is manually tested and recorded as ground truth. The model trained with synthetic data is able to predict with overall accuracy of 78.6% across different candidates in real world.

3.2 Manipulation Test

When the model predicts a given candidate placement as stable, the robot will execute a routine to place the block (Figure 1) with 3 attempts. We count the execution as a success if any of the attempt works. The manipulation success rate is defined as the ratio between the number of successful placements made by the robot and all ground truth stable placements. The manipulation performance (Table2) is generally good across most of the scenes except for the 6-th scene where the classifier predicts all candidates as unstable hence no attempts have been made by the robot.

4 Summary

We propose a model to predict physical stability directly from visual input bypassing explicit 3D representations and physical simulation. The model is evaluated on towers with great variations. To further understand the results, we conduct a human subject study on a subset of our synthetic data, showing our model achieves comparable result to humans. We also investigate the discriminative image regions found by the model and spot correlation between such regions and initial collapse area in the structure. Finally, We apply our approach to a block stacking setting, showing it can guide a robot for placing new blocks by predicting the stability of future states.

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