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Distributed Autonomous Robotic Experiments and Simulations (DARES): Program Review

by Srikanth Saripalli, Susan Toth, and Kristin E. Schaefer

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Distributed Autonomous Robotic Experiments and Simulations (DARES): Program Review

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14. ABSTRACT The Distributed Autonomous Robotic Experiments and Simulation (DARES) cooperative agreement (CA) has completed its first three option years and is set to enter the final option year in October 2025. The DARES CA focused on six research areas covering the linking of proving grounds, semantic representations of environments, autonomy and perception, distributed and collaborative autonomous systems, and artificial intelligence algorithms. This report provides an overview of the programs and critical outcomes from the first three option years, followed by an initial proposal for the last year.					
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1. Introduction

The Distributed Autonomous Robotic Experiments and Simulations (DARES) cooperative agreement (CA) was initiated to advance foundational science in the areas of distributed autonomy, robotics, and simulation. Three main technical areas were selected:

- Technical Area 1: Develop and demonstrate the remote operation and real-time control of multiple autonomous agents operating in a synthetic environment that is synergistically shared with the Robotics Research Collaboration Campus (R2C2) facility in Maryland and the Texas A&M University (TAMU) RELIS* Starlab Facility in College Station, Texas.
- Technical Area 2: Develop a user-friendly methodology to seamlessly parameterize lower-fidelity, computationally efficient physics-based dynamics models from currently available (but computationally intensive) medium-fidelity and ultra-high-fidelity models. Evaluate them in the synthetic environment developed in Technical Area 1.
- Technical Area 4[†]: Develop robust object detection and tracking algorithms under foggy, rainy, and other degraded visual environments; develop algorithms to plan optimal trajectories for an air vehicle with motion, fuel, and resource constraints; develop threat/anomaly detection algorithms and define evaluation criteria for concept demonstration of developed algorithms in further years.

Within this agreement, the U.S. Army Combat Capabilities Development Command Army Research Laboratory provided expertise and recommended collaborators in associated technologies including artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, synthetic environments, sensors, embedded systems, and positioning, navigation, and timing. Together TAMU and the DEVCOM Army Research Laboratory continuously evaluated research priorities and requirements to assess if additional technology areas need to be explored to fully accomplish the research goals and collaborated to plan, organize, conduct, and assess all aspects of the research effort.

*RELIS is an innovation and technology campus. Its name stands for Texas A&M's core values: Respect, Excellence, Leadership, Loyalty, Integrity, and Selfless Service.

[†]Technical Area 3 was not selected for funding.

2. Initial Program Goals and Outcomes

Under the selected technical areas, there were specific research goals and deliverables, which are discussed below.

2.1 Technical Area 1: Distributed and Virtual Proving Grounds

This area had two main deliverables: initial simulation setup and connection between RELLIS Starlab and R2C2; and algorithms and middleware support for integrating simulated, emulated, and real components over a lossy network.

2.1.1 Deliverable 1: Initial Simulation Environment Setup in Starlab and Connection with R2C2

The principal investigators (PIs) for this deliverable were Drs. Hubbard, Saripalli, Hasnain, and Walsh. The ARL point of contact (POC) on this work was Dr. Kristin E. Schaefer-Lay. The goal of this deliverable was a demonstration of robotic platforms operating in shared, augmented-reality scale environments produced using ARL's Unity simulation with ARL's Ground Autonomy Stack. The initial plan was to have live robots operating at R2C2 where their behavior could be observed using a virtual reality setup that projects the actual vehicle dynamics and motion measured at RELLIS Starlab. Due to network and cyber requirements, this deliverable was demonstrated in the opposite manner, where researchers at R2C2 were able to control and interact with live robots at RELLIS Starlab.

2.1.1.1 Task 1: Integration of the Unity Simulation and ARL Ground Autonomy Stack with RELLIS Starlab Motion Capture System

The high-fidelity motion capture facilities of RELLIS Starlab were integrated with a Robot Operating System (ROS) platform. This enabled precision state estimation of the autonomous agents that will be needed for operating in scaled environments.

2.1.1.2 Task 2: Develop Architecture for Synchronizing Environments between RELLIS Starlab and R2C2

A custom plug-in was designed for ARL's Ground Autonomy Stack, which allowed for seamless communication of environments over standard internet networks between the two locations. This communication architecture was responsible for transmitting information about the environment from the host (where the environment is created) to the client (remote location where operations are performed).

2.1.2 Deliverable 2: Algorithms and Middleware Support for Integrating Simulated, Emulated, and Real Components over a Lossy Network

The PIs for this deliverable were Drs. Kumar and Shakkottai. The ARL POC was Dr. Ananthram Swami. TAMU developed a base implementation of an in-house sensor network architecture that can support simulated, emulated, and real sensors over a given communication network. The architecture is based on automata called “components” that are named, possess state, contain algorithms, and can be composed into data generation, processing, and consumption chains. This deliverable involved the development of algorithms for maximizing the utility of information developed in a network. This included algorithms for ensuring a high value of information while minimizing network load via rate selection of information generation.

2.1.2.1 Task 1: Optimization of Sensor Network

The goal of this task was to optimize the sensor network to maximize the utility of the system by choosing the sensor transmission resolution and rates according to the available network resources. On the algorithmic side, TAMU designed a distributed algorithm that can tune the sensing resolution and frequency using a utility gradient-based feedback control scheme. The systems side included the development of application programming interfaces to enable a feedback control loop between sensors and recipients. Gradient-based algorithms were instantiated over the feedback control loop using video resolution and frame rate as the dimensions of control to ensure high utility across recipients.

2.1.2.2 Task 2: Maximize Utility of Information

The goal of this task was to develop algorithms that would transmit high-value information at the appropriate rates to ensure accurate computed functions. With the goal of ensuring highly accurate function computation using multiple sources of information, TAMU developed algorithms that determine the correct rate of transmission for different classes of functions in a distributed manner. Next, TAMU developed value-aware components capable of determining the tradeoff between the quality of information and transmission rate to send the correct feedback to the sensing nodes to minimize the network load while ensuring highly accurate function computation.

2.2 Technical Area 2: Semantic Representation and Modeling

This area had two main deliverables related to physics-based dynamic models and semantic perception models.

2.2.1 Deliverable 1: Parameterization of Lower-fidelity, Physics-based Dynamics Models

The PIs for this deliverable were Drs. Reddy, Srinivasa, and Wilkerson. The DEVCOM Ground Vehicle Systems Center (GVSC) POC was Dr. Paramsothy Jaykumar. The goal of this deliverable was to develop an automated, user-friendly methodology to seamlessly parameterize lower-fidelity, physics-based dynamics from currently available medium-fidelity or high-fidelity models.

2.2.1.1 Task 1: Viscoelastic-ribbon or Narrow Shell Model for Deformation of Multi-material Tires and Terrain Surfaces

The central idea behind the model was that the tire is treated as a “supported ribbon or narrow ring shell” subject to longitudinal and lateral shear, bending and twisting relative to the rigid hub. In a similar vein, the ground surface is also modeled as a thin strip surface layer supported by a rigid underlying terrain. In addition, the slip between the road and terrain can be modeled using a local friction circle or ellipse model that needs to be separately calibrating (including the effect of tire tread). TAMU’s homogenized inelastic narrow shell model for multi-material tires was validated against high-fidelity finite element analysis (FEA) calculations of a strip of tire subject to axial torsional, shear, and bending loads. We aim to demonstrate a greater than 95% agreement between our plate theory and the FEA for axial displacement and curvature.

2.2.1.2 Task 2: Near Real-time Simulation of Terrain, Contact Patch, and Contact Traction Distribution

TAMU proposed to develop an in-house medium-fidelity finite element model (MF-FEM) of the tire that makes use of only two layers of shell elements contacting a terrain strip model. The outer layer of shell elements captures the inelastic behavior of the tread. A suite of MF-FEM calculations was carried out for various mesh resolutions to determine the coarsest mesh resolution that results in adequate (>85%) agreement between the MF-FEM and a high-fidelity finite element model (HF-FEM). The FEM simulations consisted of tire contact at a prescribed normal force using various substrates modeling. Additionally, a few simulations were conducted to assess the MF-FEM predictions in challenging 3D geometries (e.g., a tire climbing an irregularly shaped boulder). A benchmarking database was developed that documents the single-processor run time of each MF-FEM simulation as well as its associated deviation from HF-FEM predictions.

2.2.2 Deliverable 2: Initial Semantic Models from LiDAR and Imagery Data

The PIs for this deliverable were Drs. Hasnain and Krishnamurthy. The ARL POC was Dr. John Fossaceca. The goal of this deliverable was to develop the initial semantic models from LiDAR and imagery data, and to validate them using data collected at RELLIS Starlab.

2.2.2.1 Task 1: Canonical Representation of Annotated Semantic Model of Environments

The goal of this task was to reduce large-scale labelled environmental datasets into compressed format for transmission, and recover and reproduce the environment on the client end with enough fidelity to support fully autonomous and efficient operations of robotic platforms irrespective of network quality. A sample labeled dataset of the RELLIS campus, RELLIS-3D was processed and converted to the reduced form. Transmission of this dataset over standard internet connection was performed in support of a mission in which a vehicular platform would autonomously navigate a set of waypoints in an environment with obstacles.

2.2.2.2 Task 2: Multi-level-of-detail (M-LOD) Geometric Modeling of Natural Scenes

The objective of this task was to determine a geometric representation of the environment that (1) is compressible for transmission over lossy networks, (2) represents different objects in a scene at different levels of detail, and (3) respects temporal variations in the scene as the vehicle moves. TAMU used the RELLIS-3D dataset to develop our M-LOD modeling framework. The approach was based on the observation that the red-green-blue (RGB) and LiDAR representations in a multimodal dataset offer different types of information. TAMU used an *ontology-aware topological representation* for M-LOD modeling of natural scenes. Based on user input, the proposed method was able to generate a specific level of detail for identified semantic labels in a scene.

2.3 Research Outcomes: Option Years 1–3

2.3.1 Robotics Research Collaboration Campus Digital Twin

The TAMU team developed a comprehensive high-fidelity virtual model of ARL's R2C2 Military Operations on Urban Terrain site. This approach combined LiDAR scans, photogrammetry, and geospatial data into a unified real-time simulation supporting visualization and robotics testing in Unreal Engine. Currently, 200 acres

have been covered where all directly scanned areas have a digital twin placement of trees and terrain features (Figure 1).

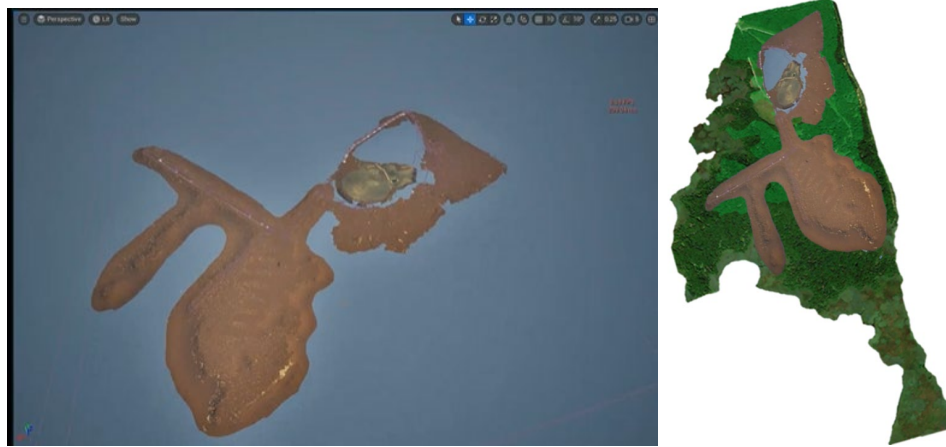


Figure 1. R2C2 areas modeled with high-fidelity LiDAR and photogrammetry. The left figure is the virtual area. The right figure is the virtual area overlaid on the full R2C2 peninsula.

A combination of the LiDAR and photogrammetry processes along with Gaussian splats provides a very high-fidelity virtual environment of R2C2 (Figure 2). Terrain graphics, such as tree species, do not identically match the tree species in Maryland. Available models of European trees were leveraged at this time. For the areas scanned, placement of real-world trees were identified and integrated. The areas outside the current scan scope were procedurally generated. The current model is in winter.



Figure 2. Visual depictions of the high-fidelity virtual environment in Unreal 5.4. The figure on the left was created using the LiDAR and photogrammetry procedures while the picture on the right uses Gaussian splats.

The underlying assets maintain compatibility with the Unity Game Engine, Omniverse, and other digital simulation platforms, establishing a scalable foundation for future site modeling (Figure 2). The R2C2 environment in the Unreal Engine has been integrated into ARL's Live, Virtual, Constructive Toolkit and is currently in testing for a plug-in into GVSC's ProjectGL Unreal autonomy simulation. In addition to using this environment for in-house ARL research, the

Unreal R2C2 Environment is being leveraged by ARL-NVIDIA collaborations for autonomy research, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) TIAMAT program exploring the Sim-2-Real gap (including MITRE; University of Texas at Austin; GE Aerospace; University of Pennsylvania; University of Washington; University of California, Berkeley; University at Buffalo; Duke University; and Carnegie Mellon University), and an international partnership agreement with Singapore for disaster relief research.

2.3.2 RELLIS-3D Multimodal Off-road Dataset

In collaboration with Dr. Maggie Wigness and Mr. Phil Osteen (ARL), the DARES team developed RELLIS-3D, the first and most comprehensive multimodal dataset for off-road autonomous navigation, addressing a critical gap in existing autonomy datasets that primarily represent urban environments.¹⁻⁴ This groundbreaking dataset includes annotations for 13,556 LiDAR scans and 6,235 images, along with full-stack sensor data in ROS bag format containing RGB camera images, LiDAR point clouds, stereo image pairs, high-precision GPS measurements, and inertial measurement unit data. RELLIS-3D has become an essential resource for researchers developing advanced algorithms to enhance autonomous navigation in challenging off-road environments. RELLIS-3D* is the only densely annotated multimodal off-road dataset for autonomous navigation, including annotations of 2D images and corresponding 3D point clouds. The public release of RELLIS-3D has filled a gap in the autonomy research community, who previously relied on datasets that are heavily focused on urban environments or lack dense multimodal annotations.

RELLIS-3D has been featured on the Army's home page and has garnered interest in the wider research community, with over 200 citations, and 317 stars and 51 forks on GitHub. Since it became available for open-source access on 4 March 2021, the dataset has resulted in 256 articles including 201 peer-reviewed articles, two master's theses, and seven dissertations. Publications, as documented in the Appendix, have leveraged the dataset for their research endeavors making it an internationally used dataset aligned to critical research advancements with LiDAR, perception, semantic segmentation, or off-road driving autonomy.

In 2022 and 2023, this dataset was leveraged by ARL as a foundation for the DoD-wide Deep Green Autonomous All-Terrain Model Challenge. This DoD-wide challenge is considered the premier Army data science competition. The competition structure forces algorithms to exhibit adaptive properties which are critical for Army systems operating in unstructured environments, tasking DoD

*<https://github.com/unmannedlab/RELLIS-3D>

teams with developing perception algorithms that perform pixel-level classification on data taken from new, undisclosed environments using image and depth information. The outcomes from this event resulted in a novel evaluation framework for comparing perception algorithms, evaluating over 100 candidate algorithms. In addition, the widespread adoption and utility of RELLIS-3D has culminated in the organization of a combined workshop at the Robotics: Science and Systems (RSS) conference, titled “RSS 2025 Workshop on Resilient Off-road Autonomous Robotics (RSS-ROAR 2025),” demonstrating the dataset’s continued relevance and the growing research momentum in off-road autonomous navigation.

2.3.3 Semantic Data over Loss Networks

Working with ARL POC Dr. Suyu You, the DARES team created innovative Voronoi-based methods for simplifying raw RGB and semantically segmented images to generate scene abstractions, while also developing hierarchical representations of LiDAR point cloud data for off-road environments.⁵⁻⁸ Most prominent is how this geometric-statistical algorithm generates computationally inexpensive multilevel scene abstractions for robot decision-making with a low network transmission footprint, winning the best paper award at the 2024 American Society of Mechanical Engineers IDETC/CIE conference in the advanced vehicle technologies track.

2.3.4 Augmented-/Virtual-Reality-based Structural Damage Assessment

The DARES team improved autonomous navigation, structural damage assessment, and simulation realism through extensive friction coefficient analysis, model-based verification frameworks using the Vinnicombe metric, and automated structural damage detection algorithms.⁹⁻¹³ These approaches achieved a 20%–55% accuracy improvement over existing methods, validated across synthetic and realistic scenarios, thus enhancing rapid structural assessment capabilities.

2.3.5 Air–Ground Simulation in Unreal Engine 5

Through a collaboration with ARL, the DARES team developed a high-fidelity Collaborative Air–Ground Simulation Environment in Unreal Engine 5, extending Unreal/AirSim to support ground vehicles with realistic LiDAR sensor models and environmental effects including rain and wind. This outcome included successfully integrating ARL’s ROS2 Ground and ARL’s ROS 2 Maverick autonomy stacks, enabling seamless testing of perception, planning, and control algorithms across multiple autonomous platforms, and air–ground teaming in the same virtual environment.¹⁴ This technical advancement has been tested by the ARL team and is currently being integrated as a core capability within ARL’s Live, Virtual,

Constructive Toolkit. It will become available to all researchers partnering with ARL air-ground autonomy.

3. Upcoming Option Year 4 Planning

The DARES CA has the option of a final option year beginning 1 October 2025. Three proposed research areas moving forward in line with ARL research goals are discussed below.

3.1 Digital Twin as a Service

The DARES team plans to scale our digital twin pipeline to further extend the R2C2 peninsula and the R2C2 model to include seasonal environmental variations (Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter) for enhanced realism, and to extend to additional Army sites where relevant. Custom vegetation models based on ARL’s detailed site surveys will enable accurate representation of native flora, further improving simulation fidelity and analysis capabilities.

3.2 Generative Semantic Segmentation

The DARES team plans to apply structure-guided adaptive hierarchical clustering to develop novel point cloud convolution operators for learning semantic segmentation from LiDAR data. Comprehensive hierarchical representations will be generated for RELLIS-3D and other off-road datasets to create both generative and nongenerative models (similar to convolutional neural networks, generative adversarial network, diffusion, and transformers) over these representations, overcoming challenges related to partial data and computational efficiency.

3.3 Augmented-/Virtual-Reality-based Testing of Off-Road Air-Ground Autonomy

The DARES team is interested in developing Physics-Informed Neural Networks to establish motion equivalency maps for autonomous air and ground vehicles across diverse terrains, incorporating physics-informed priors to enforce physical symmetries and promote generalizability. Additionally, using Unreal Engine 5 enhances visual and physical realism to support navigation in unstructured environments including water bodies and marshes, with capabilities for complex fluid-structure interactions, realistic tire deformations, and detailed terrain, wind, and weather modeling for complex air-ground autonomous interactions.

4. Conclusions

This collaboration between TAMU and ARL has successfully demonstrated remote operation and real-time control of autonomous agents across geographically separated facilities while developing algorithms for network optimization under communication constraints.

The creation of RELLIS-3D stands as one of the project's most impactful contributions, representing the first comprehensive multimodal dataset for off-road autonomous navigation and addressing a critical gap in existing research that previously relied heavily on urban-focused datasets. Since its open-source release in March 2021, this dataset has achieved remarkable adoption with over 200 citations, significant GitHub engagement (>30,000 downloads, 317 stars, 51 forks). The dataset's comprehensive scope includes 13,556 annotated LiDAR scans and 6,235 annotated images with full-stack sensor data, democratizing access to high-quality off-road navigation data for researchers worldwide.

Complementing the dataset achievements, the development of the R2C2 Digital Twin represents a significant contribution in simulation capability, creating a comprehensive 200-acre high-fidelity virtual model that combines LiDAR scanning, photogrammetry, and geospatial data into unified real-time simulation platforms. This digital twin maintains compatibility across multiple platforms including Unity Game Engine, Omniverse, and Unreal Engine, and has been successfully integrated into ARL's Live, Virtual, Constructive Toolkit while supporting major research initiatives including ARL-NVIDIA collaborations, the DARPA TIAMAT program, and international partnerships. The project's advanced air-ground simulation capabilities in Unreal Engine 5 provide testing environments for multi-platform autonomous systems, while algorithmic innovations including physics-based modeling achieve greater than 95% agreement with high-fidelity models while enabling near real-time simulation capabilities.

The project's emphasis on open-source data sharing and multi-platform compatibility ensures continuing influence on autonomous systems development, while the proposed Option Year 4 activities position the initiative to maintain leadership in emerging research frontiers including generative semantic segmentation and physics-informed neural networks.

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Appendix. RELLIS-3D Citations

Included is the current reference list for publications citing RELIS-3D (sorted by data and then alphabetically).

2025

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List of Symbols, Abbreviations, and Acronyms

2D/3D	two-/three-dimensional
ARL	Army Research Laboratory
CA	cooperative agreement
DARES	Distributed Autonomous Robotic Experiments and Simulations
DARPA	Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency
DEVCOM	U.S. Army Combat Capabilities Development Command
DoD	Department of Defense
FEA	finite element analysis
GPS	global positioning system
GVSC	Ground Vehicle Systems Center
HF-FEM	high-fidelity finite element model
IDETC/CIE	International Design Engineering Technical Conferences & Computers and Information in Engineering
LiDAR	Light Detection and Ranging
MF-FEM	medium-fidelity finite element model
M-LOD	multi-level-of-detail
PI	principal investigator
POC	point of contact
R2C2	Robotics Research Collaboration Campus
RELLIS	Respect, Excellence, Leadership, Loyalty, Integrity, and Selfless Service
RGB	red–green–blue
ROS	Robot Operating System
RSS	Robotics: Science and Systems
TAMU	Texas A&M University
TIAMAT	Transfer from Imprecise and Abstract Models to Autonomous Technologies

1 DEFENSE TECHNICAL
(PDF) INFORMATION CTR
DTIC OCA

1 DEVCOM ARL
(PDF) FCDD RLB CI
TECH LIB