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In Praise of an Alternative BRDF Parametrization

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Abstract

In this paper, we extend the work of Neumann et al. \cite{NNSK99} and Stark et al. \cite{SAS05} to a pair of 4D BRDF parameterizations with explicit changes of variables. We detail their mathematical properties and relationships to the commonly-used halfway/difference parametrization, and discuss their benefits and drawbacks using a few analytical test functions and measured BRDFs. Our preliminary study suggests that the alternative parametrization inspired by Stark et al. \cite{SAS05} is superior, and should thus be considered in future work involving BRDFs.

1. Motivation and previous work

Bidirectional reflectance distribution functions (BRDFs) are playing an increasingly important role in physically-based rendering engines. The choice of their parametrization is essential: it has the potential to cleverly guide the acquisition process; it should align with main material effects for BRDF modeling; and it may provide a structure for efficient importance sampling strategies during rendering.

Most recent BRDF models (e.g., \cite{LKYU12, BSH02}) are based on the halfway/difference parametrization for which a change of variables has been given by Rusinkiewicz \cite{Rus98}. A few alternative parameterizations have been presented in the literature, but they all fall short of providing an explicit, bijective change of variables. Neumann et al. \cite{NNSK99} use orthographic projections of unnormalized vectors, which amounts to a 2D parametrization. Low et al. \cite{LKYU12} have recently shown that these dimensions better account for iso-reflectance lines of glossy materials, even though they raise issues for Fresnel effects. Stark et al. \cite{SAS05} proposed three 2D parameterizations and analyzed their ability to represent BRDFs with only two dimensions. Edwards et al. \cite{EBJ06} introduced yet another parametrization based on projections but with the major inconvenience that it does not ensure reciprocity.

The contribution of this paper is twofold. We first extend the work of Neumann et al. \cite{NNSK99} and Stark et al. \cite{SAS05} to provide a pair of alternative 4D BRDF parameterizations with explicit changes of variables (Section 2). We then study their mathematical properties and relationships with the halfway/difference parametrization by means of analytical test functions and analyze their distortions with a few representative materials from the MERL.
A simple way to parametrize a BRDF is to make use of the incoming \( \omega_i \) and outgoing \( \omega_o \) directions, for instance via their azimuth/elevation angular coordinates defined with respect to the tangent/bi-normal/normal frame \( \{ t, b, n \} \). The BRDF is then written as \( \rho(\theta, \phi, \theta_o, \phi_o) \). For isotropic BRDFs (invariant to rotations about \( n \), the BRDF dimensionality can be reduced to 3D using the absolute difference of azimuth:

\[
\rho(\theta, \phi, \theta_o, \phi_o) \rightarrow \rho(\bar{\theta_i}, \bar{\phi_i}, \bar{\theta_o}, \bar{\phi_o})
\]

However, this parametrization makes it difficult to study very specular materials because of its dependence on both \( \omega_i \) and \( \omega_o \) [SO07].

The use of the normalized halfway vector \( \hat{h} = \frac{h}{\|h\|} \) where \( h = \omega_i - \omega_o \), solves this issue. The halfway vector is used in microfacets theory to define the distribution of the microsce surface normals, which adequately models specular effects. The following parameterizations all use either \( \hat{h} \) or \( h \), and obtain remaining dimensions via a change of variables. In all three cases, an isotropic BRDF is invariant to the halfway azimuth angle \( \phi_h \), independently of its norm \( \|h\| \).

**Halfway/difference parametrization.** Most BRDF models make use of the normalized halfway vector \( \hat{h} \) given by \((\theta_h, \phi_h)\) in angular coordinates. To obtain a full change of variables, Rusinkiewicz [Rus98] introduced the normalized difference vector \( \hat{d} \) given by \((\theta_d, \phi_d)\) in angular coordinates. It describes the direction of \( \omega_o \) in a frame where \( \hat{h} \) is the north pole, which can obtained by rotations:

\[
\hat{d} = \text{rot}_{\hat{n}} \omega_o \cdot \text{rot}_{\hat{n}} \omega_i \cdot \omega_i
\]

The BRDF is given by \( \rho(\theta_h, \phi_h, \theta_o, \phi_o) \) or \( \rho(\phi_h, \theta_o, \phi_o) \) for isotropic BRDFs. Reciprocity is ensured by a symmetry under \( \phi_d \rightarrow \phi_d + \pi \) (equivalently \( \hat{k} \rightarrow -\hat{k} \)). The inverse mapping from this halfway/difference parametrization to \( (\omega_o, \omega_i) \) is straightforward:

\[
\omega_i = \theta_i + \sqrt{1 - \|\omega_i\|^2} \hat{n}, \quad (3)
\]
\[
\omega_o = \theta_o + \sqrt{1 - \|\omega_o\|^2} \hat{n}, \quad (4)
\]

where \( \theta_o = \hat{h} + \hat{k} \) and \( \omega_o = \hat{h} - \hat{k} \) are the orthographically projected incoming and outgoing directions respectively.

**Hybrid parametrization.** Stark et al. [SAS05] introduced three 2D BRDF parameterizations, the last of which was found to produce the best dimensionality reduction results. This so-called \((\alpha, \sigma)\) parametrization is related to the orthographic parametrization by \( \alpha = \|k\|^2 \) and \( \sigma = \|\hat{h}\|^2 \) (Equations 35 and 36 in their paper).

We thus suggest an hybrid parametrization using \( \|k\| \) instead of \( \|\hat{h}\| \), with the BRDF given by \( \rho(\|\hat{h}\|, \phi_i, \|k\|, \phi_k) \). As before, \( \phi_k \) is dropped for isotropic BRDFs and reciprocity is ensured by a symmetry under \( \phi_k \rightarrow \phi_k + \pi \) (equivalently \( \hat{k} \rightarrow -\hat{k} \)). The inverse mapping from this hybrid parametrization to \( (\omega_o, \omega_i) \) is more involved though. We first express \( \hat{h} \) and \( k \) in terms of parametric coordinates as explained in the Appendix. We then obtain \( \omega_o \) and \( \omega_i \) using:

\[
\omega_o = \text{rot}_{\hat{n}} \omega_i \cdot \text{rot}_{\hat{n}} \omega_o \cdot \hat{d}, \quad (1)
\]
\[
\omega_i = 2(\omega_o \cdot \hat{h}) \hat{h} - \omega_i. \quad (2)
\]

Although not mentioned by Low et al. or Neumann et al., a change of variables is easily obtained by expressing \( \hat{h} \) and \( \hat{k} \) in 2D polar coordinates. We thus write \( \rho(\|\hat{h}\|, \phi_i, \|k\|, \phi_k) \), dropping \( \phi_k \) for isotropic BRDFs as before. Reciprocity is ensured by a symmetry under \( \phi_k \rightarrow \phi_k + \pi \) (equivalently \( \hat{k} \rightarrow -\hat{k} \)).

The middle row of Figure 1 visualizes \( \|\hat{h}\| \) (in red) and \( \|k\| \) (in green) for various values of \( \phi_o \). At grazing angles, reddish isolines around the mirror direction reveal less distortions compared to the halfway/difference parametrization [LKYU12]. The parametrization exhibits greenish isolines around the back direction, with the same type of distortions as reddish isolines since their formula are identical.

**Orthographic parametrization.** Low et al. [LKYU12] have recently shown that \( \theta_h \) is not an optimal choice for the fitting of glossy lobes. Instead, they propose to use the unnormalized halfway vector \( \hat{h} \) *orthographically* projected in the tangent plane \( \hat{h} = h - (n \cdot h)n \). This transformation dates back to Neumann et al. [NNSK99] who also introduced an unnormalized back vector \( k = \frac{h - n}{\|h - n\|} \) and used its projection in the tangent plane \( \hat{k} = k - (n \cdot k)n \) for retro-reflection.

Although not mentioned by Low et al. or Neumann et al., a change of variables is easily obtained by expressing \( \hat{h} \) and \( \hat{k} \) in 2D polar coordinates. We thus write \( \rho(\|\hat{h}\|, \phi_i, \|k\|, \phi_k) \), dropping \( \phi_k \) for isotropic BRDFs as before. Reciprocity is ensured by a symmetry under \( \phi_k \rightarrow \phi_k + \pi \) (equivalently \( \hat{k} \rightarrow -\hat{k} \)). The inverse mapping from this orthographic parametrization to \( (\omega_o, \omega_i) \) is straightforward:

\[
\omega_i = \theta_i + \sqrt{1 - \|\omega_i\|^2} \hat{n}, \quad (3)
\]
\[
\omega_o = \theta_o + \sqrt{1 - \|\omega_o\|^2} \hat{n}, \quad (4)
\]

where \( \theta_o = \hat{h} + \hat{k} \) and \( \omega_o = \hat{h} - \hat{k} \) are the orthographically projected incoming and outgoing directions respectively.

The middle row of Figure 1 visualizes \( \|\hat{h}\| \) (in red) and \( \|k\| \) (in green) for various values of \( \theta_o \). At grazing angles, reddish isolines around the mirror direction reveal less distortions compared to the halfway/difference parametrization [LKYU12]. The parametrization exhibits greenish isolines around the back direction, with the same type of distortions as reddish isolines since their formula are identical.

We thus suggest an hybrid parametrization using \( \|k\| \) instead of \( \|\hat{h}\| \), with the BRDF given by \( \rho(\|\hat{h}\|, \phi_i, \|k\|, \phi_k) \). As before, \( \phi_k \) is dropped for isotropic BRDFs and reciprocity is ensured by a symmetry under \( \phi_k \rightarrow \phi_k + \pi \) (equivalently \( \hat{k} \rightarrow -\hat{k} \)). The inverse mapping from this hybrid parametrization to \( (\omega_o, \omega_i) \) is more involved though. We first express \( \hat{h} \) and \( k \) in terms of parametric coordinates as explained in the Appendix. We then obtain \( \omega_o \) and \( \omega_i \) using:

\[
\omega_o = \hat{h} + \hat{k}, \quad (5)
\]
\[
\omega_i = \hat{h} - \hat{k}. \quad (6)
\]

The bottom row of Figure 1 visualizes \( \|\hat{h}\| \) (in red) and \( \|k\| \) (in green) for various values of \( \theta_o \) (or \( \theta_o \)). Reddish isolines are obviously identical to those obtained with the orthographic parametrization. Greenish isolines around the back direction are similar to the halfway/difference parametrization: they are concentric (albeit with a different spacing).

**Analysis**

We now study how analytic or measured isotropic BRDFs (i.e., assuming \( \phi_k = 0 \)) map to the different dimensions of each parametrization. In particular, we study the variations of the mapping as a function of \( \phi_h \) or \( \phi_o \), which permits to visualize 2D BRDF slices as seen in Figures 2 through 5. Observe that in all figures, the orthographic and hybrid parameterizations are identical at \( \phi_k = 90^\circ \). This is because \( \hat{k} \) then lies in the tangent plane and is equal to \( \hat{K} \).
Figure 2: Top: test functions (S in red, G in blue, F in white) at three viewing elevations. Bottom: the halfway/difference parametrization (1st row) exhibits strong distortions of both S and G; the orthographic parametrization (2nd row) shows distortions of both F and G; the hybrid parametrization (3rd row) only shows slight distortions of G.

Test functions. We begin our study with three analytic 1D test functions that characterize typical BRDF effects, all shown at once using a color code in Figure 2.

Our Fresnel test function is shown in white and given by
\[ F(\omega_i, \omega_o) = 1 - \cos \theta_d. \]
It is naturally aligned with the vertical axis of the halfway/difference parametrization. However, it also seems to be aligned with the vertical axis of the hybrid parametrization. Indeed, as explained in the Appendix (see also [SAS05]),
\[ \cos^2 \theta_d = 1 - \|k\|^2. \]
In contrast in the orthographic parametrization, the isolines of F bend toward the anti-diagonal when \(\phi_k\) departs from 90°, which might explain why modeling Fresnel effects was found to be problematic in this parametrization [NNSK99, LKYU12].

Our specular test function is shown in red and given by
\[ S(\omega_i, \omega_o) = 1 - (\omega_i \cdot \mathbf{n})/(\omega_o \cdot \mathbf{n}), \]
with its 0-isoline corresponding to hemispherical boundaries. All parameterizations exhibit distortions of G to different degrees, with those of the halfway/difference (resp. hybrid) parametrization being the most (resp. least) pronounced. Isolines of G are circular in both the orthographic and hybrid parameterizations at \(\phi_k = 90°\), since
\[ (\omega_i \cdot \mathbf{n})(\omega_o \cdot \mathbf{n}) = 1 - \|\mathbf{h}\|^2 - \|k\|^2(1 + \cos^2 \theta_k) \]
as detailed in the Appendix.

Taken together, the equations relating \(\|\mathbf{h}\|\) and \(\|k\|\) to \(\theta_h\) and \(\theta_d\) seem to imply that there is a simple warping relating the hybrid to the halfway/difference parametrization. As shown in the Appendix, this warping is 2D since \(\phi_k = \phi_h + \phi_d\); in other words, any slice in the hybrid parametrization corresponds to a warped slice in the halfway/difference parametrization. This means in particular that reducing a BRDF dimensionality to 2 by means of projection will yield the exact same approximations in both parametrizations.

BRDF data. Next, we examine three isotropic BRDF samples from the MERL database [MPBM03], mapping them to each parametrization. We chose a metallic paint (Figure 3), a finished wood (Figure 4), and a textile (Figure 5).
as they exhibit different combinations of Fresnel, specular and grazing effects. Each material is shown rendered on a sphere in three environment illuminations: Eucalyptus Grove, Uffizi Gallery and Galileo’s Tomb. We superimpose luminance isolines on top of reflectance data to better visualize distortions due to each parametrization.

Figure 3 shows gold-metallic-paint3, which exhibits a glossy material appearance. Luminance isolines are clearly similar to our specular test function $S$. In particular, they are strongly distorted irrespective of $\phi_d$ in the halfway/difference parametrization. These observations are similar to those made by Low et al. [LKYU12].

Figure 4 shows colonial-maple-223, a finished wood with diffuse reflectance and significant material sheen. As before, distortions similar to those observed with $S$ appear in the halfway/difference parametrization. However, material sheen (top left corner) remains relatively stable across changes in $\phi_d$. In contrast, the orthographic parametrization exhibits distortions in this region away from $\phi_k = 90^\circ$. The hybrid parametrization does the best job of keeping distortions minimal. These observations are likely to be connected to those made on the Fresnel function $F$.

Figure 5 shows pink-felt, a textile with diffuse reflectance and grazing angle effects. This example best illustrates the variability of each parametrization along their respective $\phi$ dimension. The halfway/difference parametrization well captures grazing effects along the hemispherical boundaries except at $\phi_d = 90^\circ$ where they become exaggeratedly distorted. The orthographic parametrization reasonably captures these effects at $\phi_k = 90^\circ$; but they get compressed for other values of $\phi_k$. The hybrid parametrization provides the best trade-off, even though some distortions remain as was observed when studying $G$.

4. Discussion and future work

Our preliminary study strongly suggests that the hybrid parametrization inspired by the work of Stark et al. [SAS05] better aligns with common material properties. We believe this should have important consequences on the acquisition and modeling of BRDFs. For instance, a good choice of
parametrization could lead to an optimal repartition of samples that cover most known effects of materials. This could not only lead to more accurate data interpolation or fitting, but also provide guidance for material acquisition using a gonio-reflectometer. An optimal parametrization also has the potential of inspiring new BRDF models with dimensions better aligned with real-world material properties.

In future work, we plan to run a quantitative validation on publicly available databases, for both isotropic and anisotropic BRDFs. In particular, we would like to study other (e.g. bilateral) symmetries and understand how they relate to BRDF parametrizations. However, care should be taken with measured data at grazing and retro-reflection angles depending on the device employed. An alternative research direction we would like to pursue is the simulation of BRDF acquisition using a virtual gonio-reflectometer. This should allow us to draw connections between subsets of a parametrization and the corresponding subset of light paths.

Acknowledgements

Figures 1 and 2 (visualizations) have been made with Gratin (gratin.gforge.inria.fr). Figures 3 through 5 have been made using materials from the MERL database (www.merl.com/brdf/) and environment lightings from Paul Debevec’s website (www.paulDebevec.com/Probes/).

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