

Visual Display Aid for Orbital Maneuvering: Design Considerations

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This paper describes the development of an interactive proximity operations planning system that allows on-site planning of fuel-efficient multiburn maneuvers in a potential multispacecraft environment. Although this display system most directly assists planning by providing visual feedback to aid visualization of the trajectories and constraints, its most significant features include 1) the use of an "inverse dynamics" algorithm that removes control nonlinearities facing the operator, and 2) a trajectory planning technique that separates, through a "geometric spreadsheet," the normally coupled complex problems of planning orbital maneuvers and allows solution by an iterative sequence of simple independent actions. The visual feedback of trajectory shapes and operational constraints, provided by user-transparent and continuously active background computations, allows the operator to make fast, iterative design changes that rapidly converge to fuel-efficient solutions. The planning tool provides an example of operator-assisted optimization of nonlinear cost functions.

Introduction

Orbital Environment

THE proximate orbital environment of future spacecraft in low Earth orbit (LEO) may include a variety of spacecraft co-orbiting in close vicinity. Most of these spacecraft will be "parked" in a stable location with respect to each other, i.e., they will be on the same circular orbit. However, some missions will require unforeseen repositioning or transfers among them as in the case of the retrieval of an accidentally released object. In this case, complex maneuvers are anticipated involving a variety of spacecraft that are not necessarily located at stable locations and thus have relative motion between each other.

This multivehicle environment poses new requirements for control and display of their relative positions. Conventional scenarios involve proximity operations between two vehicles only. In these two-spacecraft missions, the maneuver may be optimized and precomputed in advance of the time of the actual mission. However, since the variety of possible scenarios in a multivehicle environment is large, a future spacecraft environment could require astronauts to execute maneuvers that may not have been precomputed. This demand will require an on-site planning tool that allows the fast, interactive, informal creation of fuel-efficient maneuvers meeting all constraints set by safety rules.

The difficulties encountered in planning and executing orbital maneuvers originate from several causes.¹⁻³ First, the orbital motions are expressed and tend to be perceived in a coordinate frame attached to a large proximate vehicle such as the space station and, thus, represent relative rather than

absolute motions. The curved relative motion trajectories, resulting from maneuvering burns and the acting orbital mechanics forces, are counterintuitive and differ from common motion patterns experienced on Earth. This difficulty is compounded by the fact that a completed maneuver, which essentially is a timed orbital change, involves a potentially third-order or higher-order control process with departing, maneuvering, and braking thrusts. Even without considering the counterintuitive dynamics, these higher-order processes are difficult to control.⁴ Furthermore, the interaction between corrective thrust direction and magnitude on the one hand, and the time of arrival and resulting spacecraft position and velocity on the other is highly nonlinear, complicating iterative, manual efforts to drive a spacecraft to a desired stable position.

Second, the operation might involve targets that are not at a stable location and are drifting under the influence of orbital mechanics forces. This requires both the rendezvous position and the rendezvous time to be chosen in accordance with the target's anticipated relative motion trajectory.

Third, multivehicle orbital missions are subject to safety constraints, such as clearance from existing structures, allowable approach velocities, angles of departure and arrival, and maneuvering burn restrictions due to plume impingement or payload characteristics. Design of a fuel-efficient trajectory that satisfies these constraints is a nontrivial task.

It is clear that visualization of the relative trajectories and control forces in an easily interpretable graphical format will greatly improve the feel for orbital motions and control forces and provide direct feedback of the operators' control actions. Furthermore, visualization of the constraints in a pictorial format will enable interactive, graphical trajectory planning in which the design may be iteratively modified until all constraints are satisfied.

Typical in-plane maneuvers about a space station in LEO are the R-bar burn along the orbital radius vector and the V-bar burn along the orbital velocity vector. An outward R-bar burn (upward) will result in a relative trajectory in the backward direction, with a closed elliptical shape, which, after one orbit, will return the spacecraft to its original location. In contrast, a forward V-bar burn will result in an open trajectory, along which the spacecraft will initially move forward, but later on gain altitude and fall behind. After one orbit the spacecraft will have returned to the V-bar, 16,957 m behind

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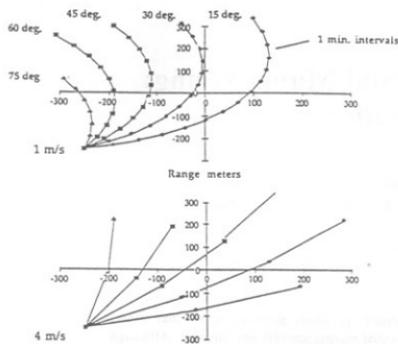


Fig. 1 Relative orbital trajectories for different thrust magnitudes (1 and 4 m/s) and angles measured upward from the +V-bar for an insertion point below the space station's orbit and behind its center of mass. The space station is located with its center of mass at the origin. Note that the effects of the orbital dynamics can be overpowered by increasing thrust at the cost of increased relative velocity that must be canceled for a successful rendezvous.

the original location, for a 1-m/s burn and 480-km circular orbit.

In general, a chasing vehicle's maneuvers in the orbital plane need not have solely V-bar or R-bar components but components of both. In addition, it may also have out-of-plane components. Furthermore, its initial position may not be stable, i.e., offset with respect to its target's V-bar, and the desired flight time may be a fraction of an orbital period, i.e., 10–20 min. Under these circumstances, the full effects of orbital dynamics are not given sufficient time to completely manifest themselves, but still are experienced as a kind of "variable orbital wind" blowing the controlled vehicle off a desired straight path. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the kinds of deflections the "orbital wind" may produce for more generic maneuvers. In particular, Fig. 1 shows how the deflections caused by orbital dynamics can be partially overcome by using stronger thrusts. This brute force technique, however, can be very costly due to the fuel required for both departure and braking on arrival.

Limitations of Present Techniques

The present maneuvering techniques are well established and rely in most cases on visual contact and the use of a V- or R-bar reference in a crewman optical alignment sight (COAS).^{1,2} In a V-bar approach toward a target in the positive V-bar direction, the initial burn is made in a direction slightly depressed downward with respect to the V-bar. After a short while, the spacecraft will "ascend" again and cross the V-bar. At the V-bar crossing, a small downward R-burn is initiated, which again "depresses" the spacecraft below the V-bar. This process is repeated several times. The spacecraft thus proceeds along the V-bar in small "hops" until the target is reached. However, this technique is highly restricted, is not fuel-optimal, and may not conveniently satisfy other operational constraints of a multivehicle environment.

It is clear from the preceding examples that orbital motion can be complex, highly counterintuitive, and involve tightly interacting parameters. A burn toward the target might have an unintended opposite result. Relative motion is, in particular, difficult to visualize for a combined R-V-bar burn that has a component out of the orbital plane and that occurs at a nonstationary location off the V-bar. It is therefore very useful to graphically visualize the relative motion trajectories. Providing predictors on planning displays that foretell the final consequences of a maneuvering burn is, however, not sufficient symbolic enhancement to enable an operator to plan

a timed maneuver. The nonlinear interaction between thrust magnitude and direction, with time of arrival and final relative position and velocity, preclude tractable manual control over the position and time of the predictor's endpoint.

Orbital Maneuvers Planning System

Design Considerations

The purpose of the interactive orbital planning system is to enable the operator to design an efficient complex multiburn maneuver, subject to the stringent safety constraints of a future space station traffic environment. The constraints include clearances from structures, relative velocities between spacecraft, angles of departure and arrival, approach velocity, and plume impingement. The basic idea underlying the system is to present the maneuver as well as the relevant constraints in an easily interpretable pictorial format. This format does not just provide the operator with immediate visual feedback on the results of his design actions to enable him to meet the constraints on his flight path, but goes beyond conventional approaches by introducing geometric, symbolic, and dynamic enhancements that bring the intellectual demands of the design process within normal human capacity.^{1,5-9} The specific methods for enabling interactive trajectory design and visualization of constraints have been discussed in detail elsewhere and will not be repeated here.¹⁰⁻¹² Though the display also can handle planning out-of-plane maneuvers, the discussion will be limited to maneuvers in the orbital plane.

Example of a Three-Burn Maneuver

An illustrative example of an in-plane three-burn maneuver is shown schematically in Fig. 3. The trajectory originates from relative position *A* at time $t = t_0$ and is composed of two waypoints *B* and *C* that specify the location in space station coordinates at which the chaser spacecraft will pass at a given time. At a waypoint the orbital maneuvering system or other reaction control system can be activated, creating a thrust vector of a given magnitude for a given duration in a given direction, in or out of the orbital plane. The duration of the burn is considered to be very short in comparison with the total duration of the mission. In the orbital dynamics computations, this means that a maneuvering burn can be considered a velocity impulse that alters the direction and magnitude of the instantaneous orbital velocity vector of the spacecraft, inserting it into a new orbit.

Since the initial location *A* is not necessarily a stationary point, the magnitude and direction of the relative velocity of the chaser at point *A* are determined by the parameters of its orbit. If no maneuvering burn were initiated at $t = t_0$, the chaser would continue to follow the relative trajectory 1, subject to the parameters of its original orbit; see the dotted line in Fig. 3. However, a maneuvering burn at $t = t_0$ will alter

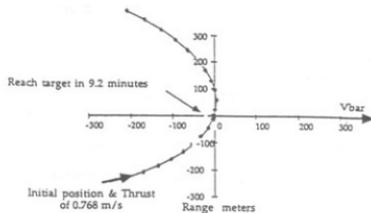


Fig. 2 Rendezvous initiated by control of thrust and direction of a maneuvering burn, i.e., the forward method. By using a planning tool that provides a forward predictor of the effects of a planned maneuvering burn, a subject can find by trial and error a combination of thrust and insertion angle that will produce a trajectory to return to the space station from an offset position. Planning for a particular arrival time or selecting a fuel-optimal maneuver is, however, manually very difficult, with only a forward predictor to assist the operator.

the original orbit so that the chaser will follow the relative trajectory 2, subject to the parameters of this new orbit.

In Figure 3 v_1 and v_2 indicate the relative velocity vector of the chaser just before and after the maneuvering burn, respectively, where v_1 and v_2 are tangential to the relative trajectories 1 and 2, respectively. The vector difference between v_1 and v_2 , v_b , is the velocity vector change initiated by the burn and corresponds to the direction and magnitude or duration at which the orbital maneuvering system is activated. Likewise, at waypoint B the burn v_3 alters the orbit from orbit 2 to orbit 3.

Location C is the terminal waypoint and is in this case the location where the target will arrive at the final time $t = t_f$. Since the target has an orbit of its own, orbit 4, it will have a terminal relative velocity vector v_{4f} at $t = t_f$. The relative velocity between target and chaser is the vector difference between v_3 and v_{4f} , v_c . This vector determines the retro-burn that is needed at the target location to bring the relative velocity between chaser and target to the minimum required for the docking operation.

Inverse Method of Solving Orbital Motion

Interactive trajectory design demands that the operator be given free control over the positioning of waypoints. However, the usual input variables of the equations of orbital motion are the magnitude and direction of the burn, rather than the time and relative position of waypoints. Since it is difficult to control the positioning of waypoints by these usual inputs, an "inverse method" is required to compute the values of a burn necessary to arrive at a given waypoint positioned in time and space by the operator. This method is outlined here.

The orbital motion can be computed from its momentary position and velocities, relative to a reference spacecraft with a known circular orbit.^{10,11,13-15} Thus, for a given initial relative position A with $x(t_0)$ and an initial relative velocity $v(t_0)$ at $t = t_0$, the relative position and velocities of a waypoint at time $t = t_1$ can be computed. However, a maneuvering burn at $t = t_0$ will cause a change in the direction and magnitude of the relative velocity vector $v(t_0)$. As a result of this maneuvering burn, the position of the waypoint at time t_1 will change as well.

Consider v_b and α_b to be the magnitude and direction of the velocity change due to the maneuvering burn. Then the relative position and velocity at $t = t_1$, $x(t_1)$, will be a complex nonlinear function of v_b and α_b ,^{10,11} hereafter referred to as the "forward" solution. Consider now that the operator is given direct control over v_b and α_b by slaving these variables, respectively, to the x and y motions of a controller such as a joystick or tracking ball. A controller command in either the x or y direction will result in a complex nonlinear motion pattern of $x(t_1)$. Furthermore, this motion pattern will change with the initial conditions. This arrangement is highly undesirable in an interactive trajectory design process in which the operator must have direct, unconstrained, and intuitive control over the positioning of waypoints.

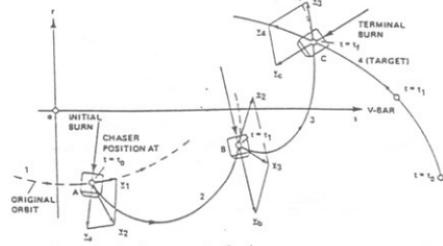


Fig. 3 Example of a three-burn maneuver. Relative trajectories are altered by maneuvering burns. The final burn v_c brings the relative velocity between chaser and target to zero.

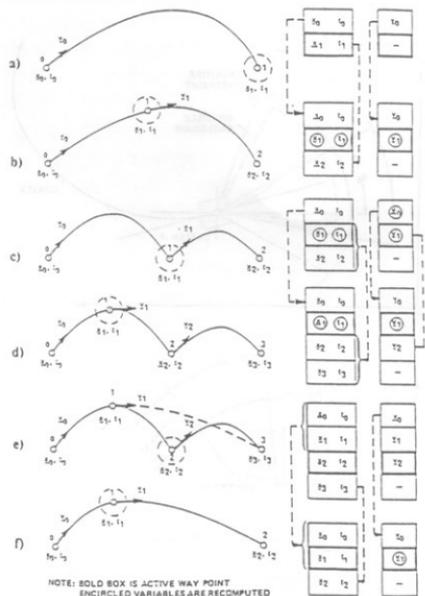


Fig. 4 Editing of waypoints. The waypoint stack is altered by creating, changing, or deleting waypoints. The active waypoint parameters are in the boldly drawn box.

It is therefore essential to give the operator direct control over the position and relative time of waypoints, rather than the magnitude and direction of the burn. The inverse method by which this is accomplished computes the magnitude and direction of the burn required to bring the spacecraft from initial location $x(t_0)$ to the waypoint $x(t_1)$ at $t = t_1$. This inverse technique contrasts with conventional display aids for proximity operations that are generally forward looking and provide a predictor.^{6,7} Although forward-looking displays are probably well suited as flying aids for real-time, out-the-window control, a planning system need not conform to this style of aiding. A Newton-Raphson iterative scheme has been employed for computing the inverse solution.^{10,11} However, for small deviations from near-circular orbit, the relative motion between two co-orbiting spacecraft in close proximity can be simplified by a first-order approximation, which allows simple closed-form solutions both for the forward and inverse problem, known as the Clohessy-Wiltshire equations¹⁶ or the Euler-Hill equations.¹⁷⁻¹⁹

Active Waypoint Concept

Although a trajectory may be composed of several waypoints, only one waypoint at a time, the active waypoint, is controlled by the operator. Although the position and time of arrival (TOA) of the active waypoint can be varied, the position and time of arrival of all other waypoints remain unchanged. However, variations in the active waypoint will cause changes in the trajectory sections and waypoint maneuvering burns just preceding and just following the active waypoint. The on-line solution of the inverse algorithm enables these changes to be visualized almost instantaneously and provides the operator with on-line feedback on his design actions. In the display three modes for changing the parameters of the active waypoint were adapted: 1) "unlocked" posi-

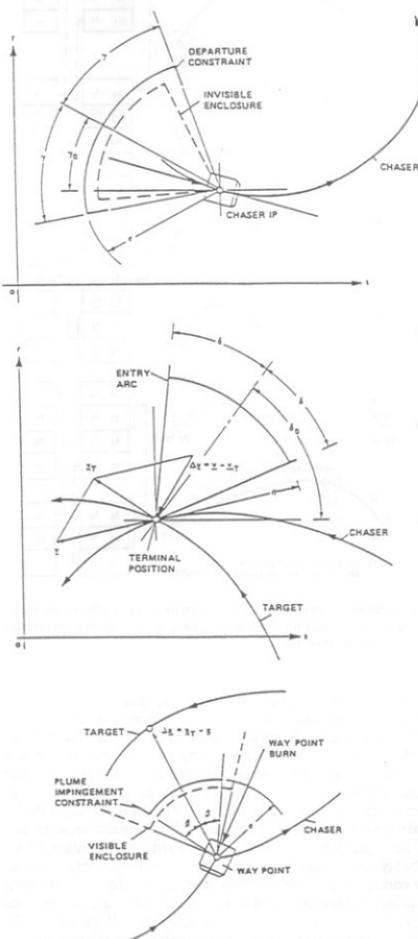


Fig. 5 Visualization of operational constraints. Angular and magnitude constraints on maneuvering thrusts at departure (top), at arrival (middle), and on plume impingement during the maneuver (bottom).

tioning mode, in which the waypoint can be moved around freely in three-dimensional space while its TOA remains fixed; 2) "locked" position mode, in which only its TOA is changed; and 3) "locked-on-trajectory" mode, in which the waypoint is moved along the unpowered trajectory of its neighboring waypoints by changing its TOA. In the last case, the waypoint is unpowered. This mode is useful in particular for first-time positioning of intermediate waypoints and for checking whether operational constraints, such as approach velocity constraints, are violated.

Waypoint Editing

The trajectory design process involves changes in existing waypoints, addition of new points, or deletion of existing undesired points. An illustrative example of this waypoint editing process is shown in Fig. 4. The waypoints are most conve-

niently managed by a waypoint stack, which includes an up-to-date sequential list of the waypoint data. Similar to a spreadsheet, the waypoint stack allows modification, addition, or deletion of "cells," while at all times satisfying the boundary conditions with neighboring cells. Each cell includes the position x , time of arrival t , and relative velocity v , just after initiating the burn, of a given waypoint. The method by which the waypoint stack is managed is described next.

Figure 4a shows two waypoints: the initial point x_0 and terminal point x_1 . The initial waypoint is defined by the initial conditions of the situation and cannot be activated or changed by the operator. The terminal waypoint x_1 is thus the active waypoint that can be changed and placed at a required location. The corresponding waypoint stack is shown on the right. The active waypoint box is drawn in bold. The relative velocity stack shows only the velocity v_0 , which is the relative velocity just after the burn at waypoint 0, computed by the inverse algorithm and required to reach point x_1 at time t_1 .

Figure 4b shows the addition of a new waypoint. Although its time of occurrence may be manually adjusted later, the new waypoint is at first added halfway in time on the trajectory section just preceding the active waypoint. Thus, its time of arrival is chosen to be $t = 0.5(t_i + t_{i-1})$, where i is in this case 1 and relates to the stack before modification. The new position x_1 and relative velocity v_1 are computed by a conventional "forward" method, by computing the relative position at the new time t_1 , using the existing orbital parameters previously computed with x_0 , v_0 , and t_0 . The newly computed waypoint position, time, and relative velocity are inserted between points 0 and 1 of the stack before modification and the new waypoint is chosen to be the active one. The dotted lines in Fig. 4 indicate variables that are transferred without modification and the encircled variables are the newly computed ones. It is important to note that since the relative velocity vectors v_0 and v_1 are matched to the required waypoints x_1 and x_2 , respectively, the inverse algorithm does not need to make any adjustments.

Figure 4c shows the results of changes in the newly created waypoint on the waypoint stack. Since x_1 and t_1 are varied, the relative velocity at waypoint 0, v_0 , will be readjusted by the inverse algorithm and likewise the relative velocity v_1 .

Figure 4d shows the creation of an additional new waypoint. Since the active waypoint prior to the addition was point 1, the new point is added halfway between points 0 and 1 and its position and relative velocity are computed with the forward method. The new values are inserted between points 0 and 1 of the stack before modification and the new waypoint is again set to be the active one.

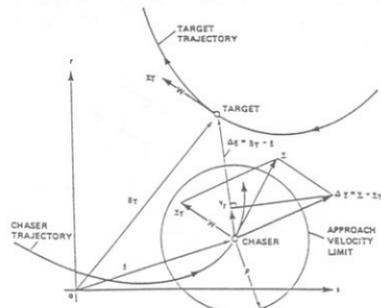


Fig. 6 Approach velocity constraint limit circle. The allowable approach velocity is considered to be proportional to the range to the target so that when the constraint is defined, allowable relative velocity decreases as the target is approached. If the target is contained within the circle, the approach velocity constraint has been exceeded.

In Fig. 4e waypoint 2 is activated. Apart from the shift in active waypoint, the stack remains unchanged. The dotted line shows the direct-path section between points 1 and 3 without the intermediate burn at point 2. Deletion of the waypoint 2 will remove this point from the stack and after that close the gap; see Fig. 4f. However, v_1 has to be readjusted to fit the new direct-path section. This adjustment is made on-line by the inverse algorithm.

The repetitive use of the inverse algorithm to calculate the trajectories linking each triad of waypoints presents the planner with a kind of "geometric spreadsheet" that preserves certain relationships between points in space, namely, that they are connected by unpowered (coasting) trajectories for their particular separation in time, whereas their other properties, namely, their relative position in space, may be freely varied. To the best of our knowledge, this application of inverse dynamics to such a display problem is new and has some very helpful side effects. The continuously active background computation to preserve the relative position and time of each waypoint creates an illusion of an inertially stable space that assists planning of relative movements about a target spacecraft. Since changes in the relative position and time of a waypoint only propagate to adjacent trajectory sections and maneuvering burns, this technique assists planning by allowing, to some extent, separable solutions to the plume impingement, velocity limit, and traffic conflict problems. For instance, once a waypoint has been positioned immediately after departure to bring departure velocities within prescribed limits, subsequent waypoints can be positioned freely. For instance, additional burns can be inserted to clear a structure, without disturbing the earlier solution found for the departure constraint. Likewise, the effect of adjustments of a waypoint positioned immediately before rendezvous to satisfy the terminal situation can be isolated from the effect of adjustments in preceding waypoints. This isolation of the solutions of the separate problems is an essential characteristic since without it, the solution to one aspect of the maneuver problem would undo a solution to another.

Operational Constraints

The multispacecraft environment will require strict safety rules regarding clearance from existing structures. Thus, spatial "envelopes" through which a spacecraft is not allowed to pass can be visualized on the display by the construction of graphic icons whose shape and dynamic behavior inform the planner which flight rules are violated and what actions need to be taken to satisfy them.

Restrictions on angles of departure and arrival may originate from structural constraints at the departure gate or the orientation of the docking gate or grapple device at the target craft. Limits for the allowable angles of departure or arrival can be visualized as bracketed arcs or cones on the display; see the top and middle of Fig. 5. In addition, the magnitude of the terminal approach velocity at the target might be limited by the target characteristics. Limits for the allowable start and end velocities can be visualized as limit arcs associated with the approach or departure cones. The limit arc symbols shown in Fig. 5 graphically indicate allowable ranges of magnitude and direction for thrusts and relative velocities. Three levels of display are considered. If the burn vector is not enclosed within the solid arc (the top of Fig. 5), the arc is drawn brightly yellow to indicate that the constraint has been violated. On the other hand, if the burn vector is within the dotted enclosure, the departure burn is well within the prescribed limits, and the departure arc is not shown. In all other cases, the arc is drawn dimly yellow to indicate that it is close to being violated.

Waypoint maneuvering burns are subject to plume impingement constraints. Hot exhaust gases of the orbital maneuvering systems may damage the reflecting surfaces of sensitive optical equipment such as telescopes or infrared sensors. Even cold nitrogen jets might disturb the attitude of the target sat-

ellite. Maneuvering burns toward this equipment are restricted in direction and magnitude, where limits for the allowable direction and magnitude are a function of the distance to the equipment and plume characteristics. These limits can be visualized as bracketed limit arcs on the display; see the bottom of Fig. 5. If the burn vector does intersect the solid arc, it is drawn brightly yellow to indicate that the plume impingement constraint is violated. Similar to the departure constraint, if the burn vector does not intersect the dotted arc, it is well within limits and the arc is not shown, and for all other cases, it is drawn dimly yellow.

Flight safety requires that the relative velocity between spacecraft is subject to approach velocity limits. In conventional docking procedures, this limit was proportional to the range.^{1,2} A previously used rule of thumb is to limit the relative approach velocity to 0.1% of the range. This conventional rule is quite conservative and originates from visual procedures in which large safety margins are taken into account to correct for human or system errors. Although the future traffic environment will be more complex and therefore demand large safety margins, more advanced and reliable measurement and control systems may somewhat relax these demands.

In this display the relative approach velocity is defined as the component of the relative approach velocity vector between the two spacecraft along their mutual line of sight; see Fig. 6. The limit on this relative approach velocity is a function of the range between the spacecraft. This function will depend on the environment, the task and reliability of measurement and control equipment and cannot be determined at this stage. For this display a simple proportional relation has been chosen. The approach velocity limit is visualized on the display as a circle drawn around the chaser indicating the minimum range between the two spacecraft allowed for the present approach velocity; see Fig. 6. If the target craft appears within this circle, the approach limit has been violated.

Discussion

The proposed interactive orbital planning system constitutes a preliminary attempt to determine a display format that may be useful in a future dense spacecraft traffic environment. The examples shown deal with the most general situation, which involves departures from or arrival at nonstationary locations. Such missions may represent worst-case situations, but these are the ones most likely to require customized maneuvering.

The basic principle of graphical-interactive planning could be extended to other problems involving tightly coupled variables and complex situation-dependent constraints, such as terminal air-traffic control, fuel-efficient aircraft flight-path planning, the path planning of a remotely controlled terrain vehicle, e.g., the Mars rover, or the planning of "gestures" for robot manipulators. The "geometric spreadsheet" approach will allow solution by an iterative sequence of simple independent steps.

The constraints considered encompass in a broad sense the general type of restrictions that are expected in the multivehicle environment, e.g., limitations on departure and approach velocities, plume impingement, and clearance from structures. The basic principle of the graphical-interactive visualization of constraints can be used for visualizing other task-related state variables, control functions, and restrictions as well.

In the present display, only pure impulse maneuvering burns are considered, in which the duration of the burn is negligible with respect to the duration of the mission and these burns cause major changes in the relative trajectories. Station-keeping or fly-by missions, however, require a more sustained type of activation, such as periodic small burns with several-second intervals over a time span of several minutes. A more "distributed" way of activating the orbital maneuvering system could be introduced in which the burn profile is computed in the background for carrying out certain fly-by or station-keeping missions requested by the operator. Visualization and

activation of this type of control should follow guidelines similar to those used in the present display.

Trivial and repetitive actions such as the the optimal positioning of a local waypoint to clear a spatial constraint, or satisfy departure constraints, could very well be automatically performed by the system. This possibility calls for the need to introduce partially automated design steps that unburden the operator from unnecessary actions and might speed up the design process. A design criterion for these automated actions is that they should be performed within several seconds after the operator's request. The described display will be useful in fully automated design procedures as well, if such procedures are at least one order of magnitude faster than the operator performing the action manually. In this case, the display will allow the operator to review and edit the automated design quickly and request corrective action, if unique mission features or failures demand it.

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