

Optimal path planning for autonomous underwater gliders in time-varying flow fields

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

at the

School of Mechanical and Mechatronic Engineering
Faculty of Engineering and Information Technology
University of Technology Sydney

June 2021

Certificate of Original Authorship

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

This research is supported by the Australian Government Research Training Program.

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Abstract

Marine robots perform various oceanic missions for commercial, scientific and military purposes. Some of these tasks include resource tracking, environmental surveying and coastal surveillance. Underwater gliders are a special class of marine robots that do not use active propulsions to move forward. This property makes the gliders more energy-efficient compared to other marine robots, and thus well-suited for long-duration missions. These missions benefit from autonomous operations that are either energy-optimal or time-optimal to maximising glider operation time and minimise human interactions. Such a level of automation is difficult to achieve, however. The underwater glider operates under a high-dimensional dynamic model with non-linear control, making it difficult to model mathematically. Optimal navigation in a flow field environment, known as Zermelo's Problem, is also a century-old open problem. This research introduces a trim-based model that reduces the glider control problem to a simpler 6D kinodynamic problem. We address this simpler problem using a state-of-the-art sampling-based algorithm to demonstrate full 3D underwater glider motion planning over various static flow fields and obstacles.

For real-world applications, it is also essential to consider the dynamics of the environment. Therefore it is natural to expect planning algorithms for underwater gliders to handle variations in flow fields. As the glider's performance heavily depends on the surrounding

flow field, planning involves the time-dependent shortest path (TDSP) problem, which has been open since the original work on graph search problem in the 1960s. This research introduces a new special case of the TDSP problem for vehicles in dynamic ocean currents. An optimal policy is solved for a time-dependent discrete graph over a dynamic flow field in polynomial time. Integrating both the trim-based and TDSP work addresses the path planning problem for underwater gliders by synthesising a continuous path from the optimal policy using the trim-based model.

The significance of this research is that it introduces an increased level of autonomy in underwater robots. The theoretical work allows for more accurate glider navigation, and considering dynamic ocean currents allows the glider to exploit the environment for practical advantages. These results also improve autonomous operation so that it requires less manual intervention from humans. This thesis shows examples of these ideas, and we are currently planning a long-duration field deployment to demonstrate these results in practice.

Acknowledgements

The submission of this dissertation marks the conclusion of a major life goal, which would not have been possible without the support of many extraordinary people. First and foremost, I would like to give praise to God, for nothing would be possible without Him. I would like first to thank my supervisor, Professor Robert Fitch, who has been a fantastic supervisor during my PhD degree. Rob's leadership skills, tactics, encouragement and patience were all instrumental in providing the best PhD experience that I could receive. Another whom I want to thank is my co-supervisor, Chanyeol Yoo, for his invaluable assistance in writing papers, and offering constant support during some of the most uncertain times of my candidature. This thesis could have never been completed without his help. A special abrupt thanks also go to Felix Kong who, despite arriving near the end of my candidature, has been a tremendous help during the final writing period. I would also like to thank Stuart Anstee (DSTG) for providing me with a wonderful opportunity to work with underwater gliders, which has become one of the main topics of my thesis.

Outside my superiors, I want to express my biggest gratitude to the *Gumnut Crew*: Jeremy Chang, Kevin Hendrawan, Kelvin Hsu, and Andrew Mak, for being my anchor to sanity throughout my academic journey since high school. I would also like to thank my church group for being patient with me for the last four years, and for their prayer for my wellbeing. Thank you also to all my friends: Rocky Pang, Stephanie Gunadi, Gloria Wang, Kranthi Baddam, David Shalavin, Cadmus To, Stefan Kiss, Giuseppe Riggio, Julien Collart, Mitchell Usayiwevu, Lan Wu, Anna Lidfors Lindqvist, Hasti Hyt, Jasprabhjit Mehami, Karthick Thiyagarajan, and so many others that I can't name due to the page limit. Thank you all for sticking by me after all these years despite my many short fallings. Without you guys, I would be fumbling in my depression, probably flipping burgers at a fast-food restaurant.

Lastly, I want to dedicate this thesis to my family: my Mom, my Dad, Jacob, Grandpa, Grandma, Jin, Min, Peter, my Cousins, my Aunts and my Uncles. Thank you for all your unconditional love and support for the past 27.5 years. I would not have even attempted a PhD if not for your trust in my abilities and my decisions. I love you all.

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Acronyms & Abbreviations

1D One-Dimensional

2D Two-Dimensional

3D Three-Dimensional

6D Six-Dimensional

12D Twelve-Dimensional

AO Asymptotically optimal

ASV Autonomous Surface Vessel

AUV Autonomous Underwater Vehicle

Dec-MCTS Decentralised monte carlo tree search

Dec-POMDP Decentralised partially observable markov decision process

dRRT Discrete rapidly-exploring random tree

DSLX Discrete search leading continuous exploration

DSTG Defence Science and Technology Group

EAC East Australian Current

FIFO First-in-First-Out

FMT Fast marching tree

KPIECE Kinodynamic motion planning by interior-exterior cell exploration

MCTS Monte carlo tree search

PF Piecewise-constant function

PRM Probabilistic roadmap

RRT Rapidly-exploring random tree

SBL Single-query, bi-directional, lazy in checking collision

TDSP Time-dependent shortest path

UCB Upper confidence bound

UTS University of Technology, Sydney