Interplanetary Mission Analysis and Design

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With CD-ROM

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Preface

One of the enduring legacies of the twentieth century will be the advent of space travel. This achievement has changed the way we think about our presence in the Universe and now offers the possibility to explore beyond our own world. Nobody experiencing the Apollo missions of the 1960s and 70s could be unaffected by the magnitude of those achievements. Now, nearly forty years later, space travel is almost commonplace, although man's personal presence in space is still limited.

The pioneering edge of space exploration now lies beyond Earth and its moon, as numerous spacecraft over the last thirty years have visited most of the planets of the Solar System. Mars remains the focus of many such missions and is likely to be the first planet that man visits personally, not just through robotic craft. Perhaps the most fascinating interplanetary missions to date have been the Voyagers. Launched in the late 1970s, these spacecraft were flung out of the Solar System after flying by the outer planets. They have now passed far beyond Pluto as they leave the Sun's domain behind.

These technical achievements have inspired numerous science fiction stories, which in turn have themselves perhaps influenced the drive for new space missions and exploration. Although 'warp drives' remain for the present in the realm of science fiction, more adventurous missions to explore our Solar System are being planned. These include an initiative to place a man on Mars and also for a detailed robotic exploration of Jupiter and its family of moons. This later system has already been inspected by the Galileo spacecraft and revealed a fascinating 'micro solar system' with a rich variety of features. Also, both current (Messenger) and planned future missions (Bepi–Colombo) to Mercury will undertake the difficult route to the innermost planet of the Solar System. In addition to the planets, the minor bodies of the Solar System are being explored. A challenging example is ESA's Rosetta mission, following a complex route to achieve a rendez-vous with a comet.

MISSION ANALYSIS AND DESIGN

This diverse range of missions require numerous techniques for their analysis and design. These aspects will be considered in this book, including the key issues of escaping from a planet, interplanetary transfer, and capture at a target planet. Certain 'classical' methods for the design of such trajectories have been employed for many years. As missions became more demanding, then new techniques were developed to enable more efficient designs to be realised. These allow the efficient utilisation of newly evolving propulsion technologies. This theme is continuing, as both new mathematical and computational ideas are considered for the solution of these problems.

The objective of this book is to describe a selection of techniques that may be applied to the analysis and design of interplanetary missions. The focus is on methods that enable the efficient solution of the problems considered. Details of the methods are given. However, this text is not intended as a reference on astrodynamics. Summaries of key derivations are included.

The terms 'mission analysis' and 'mission design' can have several meanings. The one taken here is that of the analysis and design of spacecraft transfers. Therefore, the focus is on techniques in orbital mechanics and trajectory optimisation that may be applied to the objective. The aspects of mission analysis particularly relevant to interplanetary missions are considered here.

This book is divided into five major chapters. The first chapter focuses on 'conventional' analysis and design techniques for interplanetary missions. This includes the basic ideas of Hohmann transfers, the solution of Lambert's problem and the fundamentals of planetary escape and capture. These basic ideas of interplanetary transfers are then extended to consider return missions to the planets. The issue of escape from Earth is also considered in more detail, in the context of the efficient utilisation of launch vehicle capabilities. This subject is also further expanded in Appendix 4.

The second chapter briefly considers aspects of spacecraft propulsion systems. These systems are a fundamental factor in the nature of interplanetary mission designs and therefore warrant some consideration in a book such as this.

The third chapter focuses on optimisation. In particular, methods for obtaining solutions to local optimisation problems are considered. These generally require gradient evaluations and are often called 'gradient based' methods. These methods are essential for the efficient design of interplanetary missions. As more complex propulsion system types are considered, so the complexity of the optimisation problems increases. Many developments are taking place in this area. Only gradient-based methods are considered here. However, it should be noted that alternative techniques such as evolutionary computing offer very interesting prospects for the identification of globally optimal solutions. In addition to trajectory optimisation problems, the nature of spacecraft optimisation is discussed, where the design of the propulsion installation may be optimised together with the transfer trajectory.

The fourth chapter considers a range of 'special' methods that may be employed for mission analysis and design. These methods allow the planning of more efficient transfers. A consequence of the improved efficiency is the increased complexity of the transfer routes. Some of these methods take advantage of interesting features of astrodynamics. A good example of this is the phenomenon of gravitational escape or capture at a planet, which has been observed for comets in the Solar System. Consequently, this chapter contains an outline description of the three-body problem and mission designs that can utilise three-body effects. Many of the techniques considered in this chapter allow the efficient utilisation of advanced propulsion system concepts. This is particularly true for low-thrust systems. The effect of low thrust systems on orbit evolution is considered via the application of perturbation equations. Considerable attention is paid to 'gravity assist'. This technique allows the utilisation of combined gravity fields to enable a spacecraft to significantly modify its orbital energy, without the need for manoeuvre.

The final chapter describes a series of mission examples that utilise the methods described in the previous sections. These include missions using gravity assist, low-thrust propulsion, gravitational escape and capture. Many of the examples are generic, in that they consider typical transfers between planets. However, certain examples are relevant to actual missions, either past, current, or future.

The appendices describe the basics of orbital mechanics, orbital reference frames, and also the properties of the planets. The data is intended as a source of reference for the material in the book.

A CD is included to give some examples of interplanetary missions. A simulation tool is included. This is used to generate animated sequences that show interplanetary transfers. The missions illustrated include both transfers to the inner and outer planets. Instructions for use are contained on the CD. The software runs on Windows based PC systems.

Although every effort has been made to eliminate mathematical and factual errors in the material in this book, complete accuracy cannot be guaranteed. Please send any errors found and suggested corrections to the author.

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Figures