

Oregon State University

Autonomous Aerial Robotics Team

2014 International Aerial Robotics Competition

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ABSTRACT

The Oregon State University Aerial Robotics Team will compete in the 2014 International Aerial Robotics Competition with a custom quadrotor based on our 2013 design. Our robot will be capable of locating and tagging mobile ground robots for a sustained duration of 10 minutes in an unspecified indoor environment. A custom flight control board built around a 32-bit STM32F405 microcontroller allows for a 1 kHz flight stabilization and control loop. We will use a PX4Flow camera to localize the robot within the arena and a wide-angled camera, such as a GoPro, to target ground robots. An array of rare earth magnets mounted below the vehicle will be used to trigger the magnetic influence sensors aboard the ground vehicles.

INTRODUCTION

Our goal for this year is to accurately track and target ground robots and be able to intelligently guide at least one robot to the goal line.

Our 2014 quadrotor, based on our 2013 design, has been designed with four goals in mind: lightweight, small, strong, and simple. The smallest stock carbon tubes, minimalist aluminum center brackets, and lightweight 3D printed motor mounts have been integrated in order to meet these goals.

Two 4S 1000 mAh lithium polymer batteries power the quadrotor's four Turnigy D2830-11 brushless DC motors and 8x6 3-blade propellers. A 5V switching regulator powers a custom flight control board (built around the STM32F405 microcontroller) and an onboard Odroid-X2 mini-PC clocked at 2Ghz, which perform computer vision tasks and run high-level navigation algorithms. A simple, isolated killswitch mechanism allows for reliable cutoff of motor power in case of malfunction.

A camera system, which includes the PX4Flow optical flow smart camera, will be used to localize the quadrotor in the arena and to provide a bird's-eye view of the playing field. Location data will be fed back to the flight controller, which will be responsible for path planning.

High-level control algorithms running on the Odroid will send waypoints to the flight control board, which will maintain a desired orientation of the quadrotor with a 1 kHz cascading PID control loop tuned with the help of a compact test mount designed as a low-friction safety catch to protect the quad during testing and demonstrations.

CHASSIS

The first decision when custom designing a multi-rotor is how many rotors to have. A three-rotor design was briefly considered for its smaller number of motors, but we ultimately decided to continue with a quadrotor since the additional weight of a tricopter's servo counteracts any weight savings and adds a mechanical linkage that may break. In addition, the inherently tilted steady state of a tricopter while hovering adds unnecessary complexity to vision and control systems that is not present on a quadrotor.

We optimized our combination of motors and propellers for flight at 1.5 kg. General consensus among RC enthusiasts on web forums indicate that most multirotor flight is most efficient if hover throttle duty cycle is around 50% of the maximum. We tested motor and propeller combinations and narrowed our selection down to those capable of providing thrust at this ratio. With a second and third parameter of size and weight, the resulting motor and propeller combination is Turnigy D2830/11 1000kV outrunners with master airscrew 8x6 3-blade propellers. This combination provides a maximum thrust of over 750g per motor.

Lightweight, small, strong, and simple were the four most important requirements set before designing the frame. The arms of the quadrotor use the narrowest carbon tubes that could be guaranteed to be straight by the manufacturer. The arms are attached in an X formation wrapped in the center with a carbon-aramid weave. Two aluminum rings that clamp around the arms provide a supporting moment on each arm and serve as a mounting plate for the electronics.

Motor mounts designed as plugs to the carbon tubes were optimized for weight and strength using finite element analysis (FEA, see Figures 5 and 2). The motor mounts are capable of accepting any motor up to 40mm in diameter. The design allows for multiple orientations of the motor and propeller. Care was taken to minimize the torque exerted on the carbon tubes by the motor and propeller (Figure 4), as otherwise (Figure 3) the quad suffered from excessive vibration. The current configuration decreases vibrations by minimizing the moment arm of the propellers to the motor mounts. Testing revealed that the joint with the carbon fiber tube was prone to failure. This was remedied with a bolt inserted through the center of the plug.

For safety, a propeller guard made of a Divinycell foam core sandwiched between a carbon-aramid mesh was installed. Divinycell is a foam typically used in boat and aerospace applications, which carried over well to aerial vehicles. The carbon-aramid mesh was chosen for its high strength-to-weight ratio and stiffness.

Our first landing gear design was a two-stage telescoping carbon fiber tube, held under tension by an internal spring. The landing gear mount was 3D printed using low strength ABS plastic. We quickly discovered that the plastic mounts were too weak and were prone to breaking during rough landings. We revised the design with aluminum mounts and verified the strength in simulation. We then switched to a second design in which four loops of spring steel are mated to the propeller guard. This gave us the damping we wanted without fragile components.

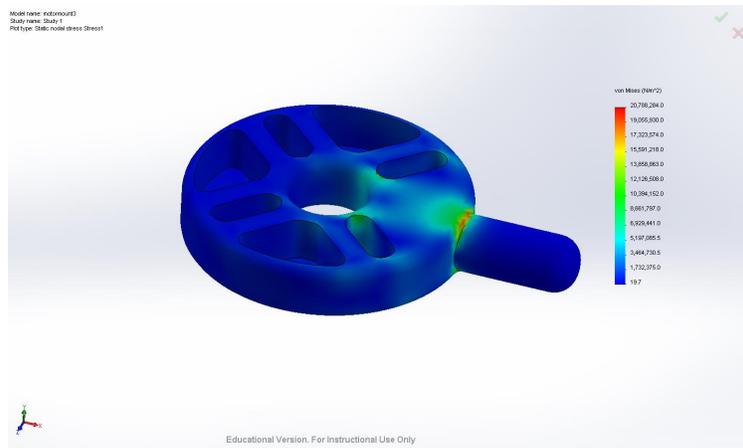


Figure 1: FEA with red indicating high levels of stress. Forces applied perpendicular to flat mount.

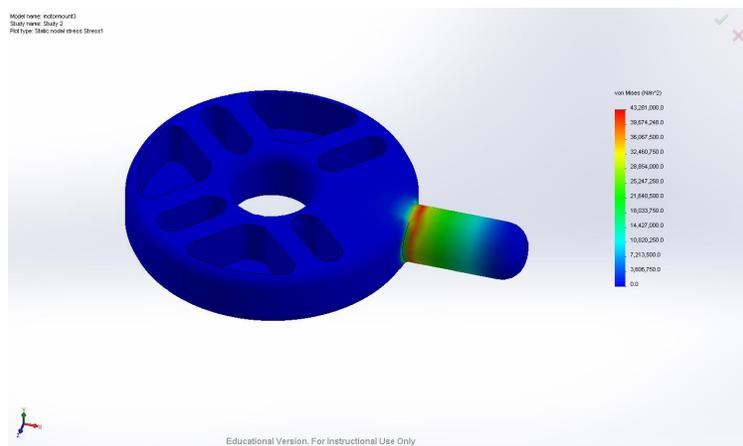


Figure 2: FEA with red indicating high levels of stress. Forces applied torsionally simulating torques from Figure 3.



Figure 3: Initial motor mount configuration. The longer moment arm made the mount prone to vibrations.



Figure 4: Final motor mount configuration. Having the two rotating masses on either side of the mount reduces vibration.

ELECTRONICS

Power

All electronics on the quadrotor are powered by two 4S 1000 mAh lithium polymer batteries wired in parallel. While using a single 2000 mAh battery would have been ideal, we were unable to find such a battery with the desired dimensions.



Figure 5: Propeller guard with landing gear mounted.

Four Turnigy D2830-11 1000kv brushless motors powered by Turnigy Plush 18A ESCs turning 8x6 Master Airscrew 3-blade propellers provide us with our performance characteristic of 50% throttle hover.

The Texas Instruments PTN78020WAH wide-input voltage-adjustable switching regulator provides steady 5V power at up to 6A for onboard logic and small actuators. The regulator is integrated into our flight control board and also powers a linear regulator that in turn supports a 3.3V logic bus.

Onboard Computing: Odroid-X2

In 2012, many teams, including our own, were wracked by wireless interference due to overusage of the 2.4 GHz band in the competition arena. We decided to work around this issue by confining all computation to the quadrotor itself, with only a 900 MHz downlink for killswitch activation.

The Odroid-X2 is a 4"-square mini-PC built around the Samsung Exynos 4412 quad-core processor clocked at 2 GHz (Figure 6). Each quadrotor is built with a single Odroid onboard. In 2013 we planned to use two Odroids due to the demanding computational task of processing a 3D map, but the 2014 mission presents a much simpler computational task for which only a single Odroid is needed.

Localization: Pixhawk PX4Flow

The PX4Flow is an optical flow camera capable of processing images at 752x480 at up to 250 Hz. It operates in much the same way as a modern optical mouse sensor, comparing

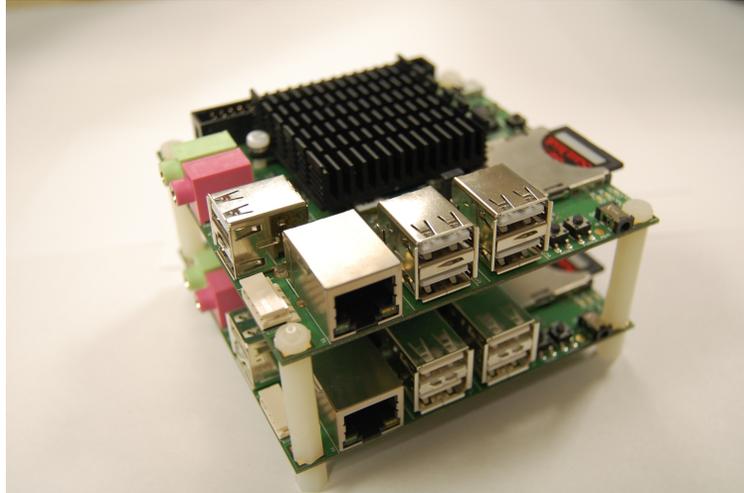


Figure 6: Stack of two Odroids.

subsequent video frames to measure motion. It features an onboard sonar sensor coupled with an IMU to measure vehicle altitude while accounting for tilt.

The data from the PX4Flow is sent to the flight control board, which fuses the measurement with other sensor data to determine the quadrotor's current location. It then uses navigation data from the Odroid to plan a path to the desired position.

Flight Control Board (STM32F405)

The 2012 flight control board built around the ATXmega128a3, while sufficient for basic flight, was scrapped in favor of using the much more powerful STM32F405 in order to achieve 1 kHz flight stabilization. Although we do not yet take full advantage of this higher control loop frequency, it effects lower gyroscopic drift and allows for higher PID gains and tighter control.

The flight control board controls four ESCs with 400 Hz PWM signals and has four SPI connectors available for future use of a custom 1 kHz-capable, SPI-enabled ESC. The flight control board receives flight commands from either:

- The Odroid over a 460800 baud USART bus for autonomous control, or
- The XBee over a 38400 baud USART bus for manual control.

Orientation estimates are calculated using feedback from an InvenSense MPU-6000 six-axis gyroscope/accelerometer chip, which is polled at 1 kHz in sync with the flight control loop. In order to best isolate the IMU from chassis vibrations and to mitigate sensor drift caused by board flex, it is mounted on a separate board above the rest of the flight control board.



Figure 7: The latest revision of the flight control board.

Killswitch and Wireless Communication

The killswitch is located between the STM32F405 and the ESCs. The signal required to keep the killswitch closed is generated by a 900 MHz XBee Pro and is not associated with the flight control software at all. The killswitch must be armed for the ESCs to receive any signal from the STM32F405.

The onboard XBee is paired with another XBee held by a human operator. A pair of pins between the two XBees are configured to mirror each other such that the state of the pin on both XBees can be changed by a switch held by the operator. This minimizes the amount of software and electronics involved, thereby maximizing reliability.

SOFTWARE

The Odroid will run software to detect ground robots, make high-level decisions, and perform high-level obstacle avoidance and path planning. Flight commands will be sent to the flight control board, which maintains the quadrotor at the desired orientation with a 1 kHz control loop.

Robot Operating System

Robot Operating System (ROS) is a collection of libraries and tools that allows developers from around the world to contribute software packages such as device drivers, messaging libraries, and visualizers in a consistent format for others to use.

We have developed our high-level control systems to operate within this software architecture. This allows us to use third-party joystick drivers, path planning libraries, and general purpose algorithms, which frees us from having to reimplement solved problems.

In addition, due to ROS's exclusive use of TCP/UDP network protocols for inter-process communication, we can easily debug live data from a remote base station over a network.

Ground Robot Detection

We will design a vision system that is able to detect both ground robots and obstacle robots. This vision system will need to have predictive capabilities for when robots are outside the camera's frame. Due to the requirement of a lens with a very short focal length, the software will need to rectify the image so as to not interpret lens distortion as robot motion. Due to the angular and translational motion of the quadrotor, the software will need to be aware of the vehicle's current orientation to maintain the locations of ground robots in a global frame.

Strategy Algorithm

The robot location data needs to be processed to determine what action the quadrotor should take. The strategy software will factor in the quadrotor's location, the ground robots' locations and directions of travel, and the current state of the playing field to make an intelligent decision.

Through our competition simulator, we have found a simple algorithm that produces good results. The highest priority goal is to keep robots from leaving the arena, so the quadrotor should always attempt to change the direction of those robots closest to the white or red edges of the field. It can then work its way inward to lower priority robots.

Flight Control

In order to mitigate the added complexity of the STM32F4 over the ATXmega128 used on our 2012 quadrotor, we write our controllers as processes within ChibiOS, a real-time operating system for embedded devices. ChibiOS provides basic functionality for managing threads, mutexes, and a hardware abstraction layer. We run two main threads: a 1 kHz flight control loop and a 100 Hz communications loop. Since these threads are created in the same generic format such as the following control loop thread, we can easily add more processes:

```

/*
 * Control loop
 */
static WORKING_AREA(wa_control_thread, 128);
static msg_t control_thread(void *arg)
{
    (void) arg;
    chRegSetThreadName("control");

    systime_t time = chTimeNow();

    /* DCM of body in global frame. */
    float dcm_bg[3][3];
    m_init_identity(dcm_bg);

    /* Motor duty cycles */
    float motor_dc[4];

    while (TRUE) {
        time += MS2ST(CONTROL_DT*1000); // Next deadline in 1 ms.

        update_ahrs(CONTROL_DT, dcm_bg);
        run_controller(dcm_bg, motor_dc);
        update_motors(motor_dc);

        chThdSleepUntil(time);
    }

    return 0;
}

```

The 1 kHz control loop stabilizes the quadrotor in the air by doing the following in succession:

1. Read IMU (gyroscope and accelerometer)
2. Update orientation estimate
3. Run cascading PID controllers on current and desired orientations
4. Update ESC duty cycles appropriately

This code was largely ported over from code used in our 2012 tricopter (built experimentally, not used for competition). The higher loop frequency lends improved stability and reduced gyroscopic drift, thus making higher-speed maneuvers feasible.

TESTING AND SAFETY

Competition Simulator

To gain a better understanding of the Mission 7 rules, we created a competition simulator that simulates the ground robot and obstacle robot behavior (Figure 8). This allows us to prototype our ground robot selection and path planning algorithms quickly without the need for hardware.

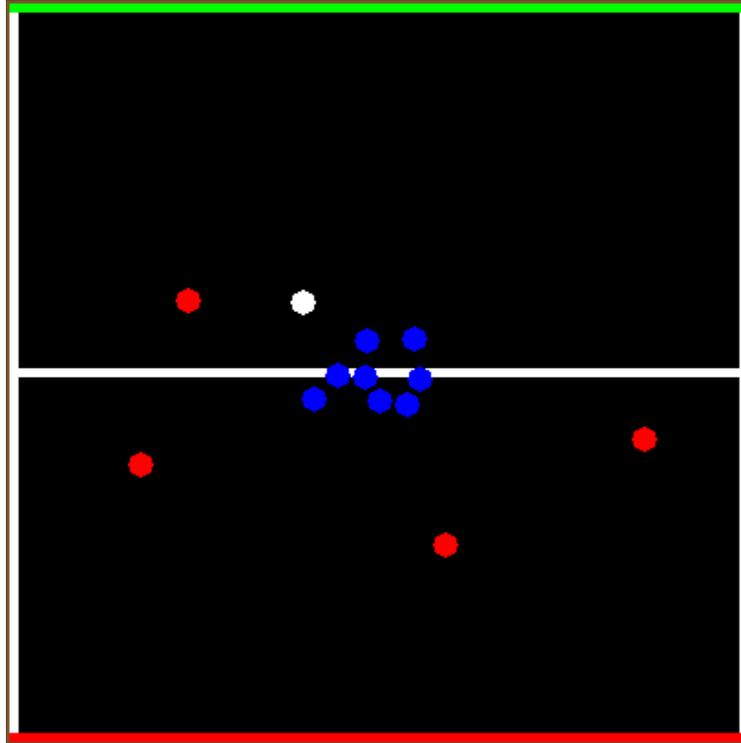


Figure 8: Competition simulator.

Table Mount

A restrictive three-dimensional arm was built to safely test and demonstrate the quadrotor (Figure 9). The arm limits the quadrotor's ability to move. This was developed in response to previous crash tests that resulted in hours of wasted time fixing broken hardware.

Several design solutions were explored culminating in the current telescoping arm design. One such alternative was a C-shape frame structure, with a pulley system that was able to move the quadrotor horizontally and vertically. This idea was deemed impractical due to its unwieldy size and weight.

Our final design is capable of being collapsed when not in use and extended during testing. The arm, when clamped to a table, is able to rotate 360 degrees and provides the quadrotor with a freedom of motion 4 feet in diameter and 2 feet in height. The test stand helps prevent catastrophic damage to the quadrotor during testing.

CONCLUSION

The OSU Autonomous Aerial Robotics Team has constructed an ambitious entry to the Mission 7 challenge. With custom flight control breakout board, onboard processing for



Figure 9: Quadrotor on test mount.

vision and navigation, a lightweight chassis for longer flight time, and comprehensive safety features, the quadrotor is a completely autonomous and untethered flying machine.

Porting over flight control software to the real time operating system ChibiOS allowed us to take advantage of the ARM processor and its capability to multithread.

Optimizing the chassis to meet competition requirements gave us new challenges. We applied root cause failure analysis to determine vibrations were caused by long moment arms from the propellers. In addition we developed a way to safely perform full flight tests without fear of damaging the quadrotor.

Developing a solution to radio interference problems introduced the hurdle of onboard processing. We have found a lightweight computation platform capable of delivering the processing power we require.

We will measure our success at the 2014 competition by our ability to maintain flight for the full competition time, avoid obstacle robots, and herd a few ground robots to the goal.

Next year we will concentrate on Mission 7b and explore strategies for avoiding and cooperating with other aerial vehicles.

THANK YOU

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