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Minimum-time control of flexible joints with input and output constraints

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Abstract— **The paper proposes a linear programming approach to the feedforward minimum-time control of flexible joints. Taking into account both input and output constraints, the optimal bang-bang control is computed by discretizing a continuous-time joint model and by solving a sequence of linear programming feasibility problems. The resulting joint motion is a smooth rest-to-rest motion without oscillations. Experimental results illustrate the proposed open-loop technique.**

I. INTRODUCTION

Time minimization is an important issue in robotics applications where production rates cover a relevant role. Unfortunately, any minimum time performance is usually achieved by maximizing the actuator dynamic efforts. This can lead, in the case of standard feedback controllers, to undesirable results, such as saturations with consequent output overshoots and oscillations. These effects are even more relevant in robotic applications showing a significant elastic coupling between joints. A typical application could be represented, for example, by robots sharing their workspace with human beings: the use of elastic joint increases the system safety by reducing the arm stiffness. For such kind of robots, any sudden torque change, an implicit requirement of minimum-time motions, can excite the oscillatory dynamics. It is therefore important to introduce, together with the usual input constraints considered in the robotic literature, also output constraints. In this paper a time-optimal solution for an electrically driven flexible joint arm is proposed. Explicit bounds on the motor feeding voltage are considered but, at the same time, a zero overshoot solution is required.

The minimum-time problem is solved by discretizing the continuous-time system and formulating an equivalent discrete-time optimization problem solved by means of linear programming techniques. Indeed, in the discrete-time case, input and output constraints can be written as linear inequalities and the minimum number of steps needed for a rest-to-rest transition can be found with a sequence of feasibility tests of an appropriate linear programming problem.

The use of linear programming techniques for solving minimum-time problems for linear discrete-time systems subject to bounded inputs dates back to Zadeh [1]. Subsequently, many contributions have appeared focusing on various improvements. For example a faster algorithm is proposed in [2]: it can compute the minimum-time optimal control in a single run. The work [3] presents a more general linear programming algorithm for solving optimal control problems for linear systems under general constraints. In [4] a feasibility test is presented to improve the algorithm speed. For what concerns time-optimal control for continuous time systems, a related result, under different hypotheses, is presented in [5]. It applies a comparison principle to a time-optimal control problem for a class of state-constrained second-order systems.

The paper is organized as follows. In §II the dynamic model of a flexible joint is devised. It will be used for the synthesis and the validation of the proposed control technique. In §III the control problem is proposed and a solution is obtained in the subsequent section by means of a linear programming algorithm. An experimental test case is discussed in §V, while §VI draws the final conclusions.

II. FLEXIBLE JOINT MODEL

The flexible joint system considered in this paper is an educational mechatronic device designed by Quanser Consulting. Fig. 1 shows the top view of the experimental device: a rigid arm is connected, through a flexible joint, to a rotating "body", which is actuated by a servo motor. Both the body and the arm can rotate around vertical axis *"O"* of Fig. 1. The elastic coupling between the body and the arm is obtained by means of two springs whose stiffness is K_e and whose unstretched length is l_0.

The control technique proposed in §IV is based on the knowledge of the system model. For this reason, an accurate nonlinear model, mainly used for simulation purposes, is proposed in the following. The linearized version of the same model, to be used for the controller synthesis, is then devised.

Spring forces $\mathbf{f}_1$ and $\mathbf{f}_2$ cover an important role in the system dynamics. In order to evaluate their amplitude, let us assign a reference frame $\{1\}$ whose origin is located in *"O"* and integral with the body. Moreover, let us assign a further frame $\{2\}$, located in *"O"* but integral with the arm, and indicate by θ_2 the joint angle between the two frames. Angle θ_2 is counterclockwise positive. In the same way, let us indicate by θ_1 the counterclockwise positive joint angle between the body frame $\{1\}$ and a given stationary frame.

The three points *"A"*, *"B"*, and *"C"* shown in Fig. 1 can be described with respect to frame $\{1\}$ by means of three vectors $\mathbf{p}_a := [-d_m \; h]^T$, $\mathbf{p}_b := [d_m \; h]^T$, and $\mathbf{p}_c := [-R\sin\theta_2 \; R\cos\theta_2]^T$ where d_m, h, and R are the geometrical dimensions reported in the same figure.

The spring force norms, i.e., $f_1 := \|\mathbf{f}_1\|$ and $f_2 := \|\mathbf{f}_2\|$,

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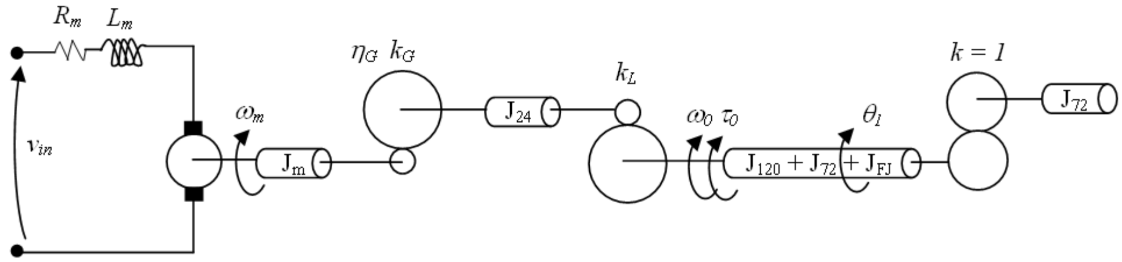

Fig. 2. Inertia and gearboxes ratio chain view from motor rotor axis

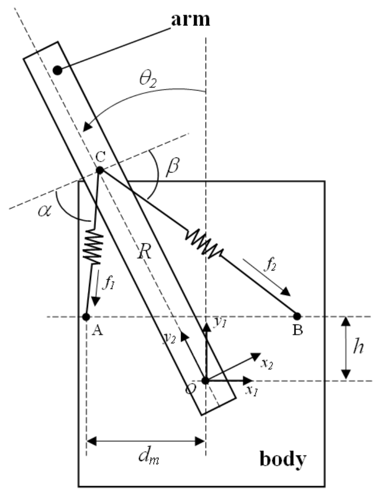

Fig. 1. Flexible joint experiment: Top view.

depend on the spring lengths l_1 and l_2 according to equations

$$f_1 = K_e(l_1 - l_0) , \quad (1)$$
$$f_2 = K_e(l_2 - l_0) , \quad (2)$$

where l_1 and l_2 can be evaluated as follows

$$\begin{aligned} l_1 &= \|\mathbf{p}_c - \mathbf{p}_a\| \\ &= \sqrt{R^2 + d_m^2 + h^2 - 2R(d_m \sin\theta_2 + h\cos\theta_2)} , \quad (3) \\ l_2 &= \|\mathbf{p}_c - \mathbf{p}_b\| \\ &= \sqrt{R^2 + d_m^2 + h^2 + 2R(d_m \sin\theta_2 - h\cos\theta_2)} . \quad (4) \end{aligned}$$

Forces acting on point *"C"* can be described with respect to frame $\{2\}$ leading to

$$\begin{bmatrix} f_{1_x} \\ f_{1_y} \end{bmatrix} = \begin{bmatrix} f_1 \cos(\alpha) \\ f_1 \sin(\alpha) \end{bmatrix} = \begin{bmatrix} -K_e(l_1 - l_0)\cos(\alpha) \\ -K_e(l_1 - l_0)\sin(\alpha) \end{bmatrix}$$

and

$$\begin{bmatrix} f_{2_x} \\ f_{2_y} \end{bmatrix} = \begin{bmatrix} f_2 \cos(\beta) \\ f_2 \sin(\beta) \end{bmatrix} = \begin{bmatrix} K_e(l_2 - l_0)\cos(\beta) \\ -K_e(l_2 - l_0)\sin(\beta) \end{bmatrix}$$

where $\alpha, \beta \in \mathbb{R}^+$ are the two auxiliary angles shown in Fig. 1 which can be evaluated by means of the following equations

$$\alpha(\theta_2) = \arctan\left[\frac{R\cos(\theta_2) - h}{d_m - R\sin(\theta_2)}\right] - \theta_2 ,$$
$$\beta(\theta_2) = \arctan\left[\frac{R\cos(\theta_2) - h}{d_m + R\sin(\theta_2)}\right] + \theta_2 .$$

Elastic forces induce an elastic nonlinear torque in the arm that can be expressed as

$$\tau_e = [-f_{1_x}(\theta_2) - f_{2_x}(\theta_2)]\, R . \quad (5)$$

It is worth noting that components f_{1_y} an f_{2_y} do not generate any torque with respect to *"O"*.

It is now possible to propose the dynamic equation of the rigid arm described with respect to *"O"*

$$J_{load}(\ddot{\theta}_2 + \ddot{\theta}_1) = [-f_{1_x}(\theta_2) - f_{2_x}(\theta_2)]\, R - B_{eq}^L \dot{\theta}_2 \quad (6)$$

where J_{load} is the arm inertia evaluated with respect to *"O"*, while B_{eq}^L is the friction coefficient associated to angular velocity $\dot{\theta}_2$. Practically, arm dynamics takes into account torques which are due to inertia, friction and elasticity.

Similarly, it is possible to devise the dynamic equation of the "body". It is made of an inertial load joined to an electric motor by means of a chain of reduction gears according to the scheme shown in Fig. 2. Even in this case, the system is affected by torques deriving from inertia, friction and elasticity

$$J_{eq}^0 \ddot{\theta}_1 = \tau^0 - B_{eq}^0 \dot{\theta}_1 - [-f_{1_x}(\theta_2) - f_{2_x}(\theta_2)]\, R + B_{eq}^L \dot{\theta}_2 , \quad (7)$$

where J_{eq}^0 is the equivalent inertia of the system composed by motor, reduction gears, and "body", τ^0 is the motor torque, while B_{eq}^0 is the friction coefficient associated to angular velocity $\dot{\theta}_1$. All the quantities in (7) are referred to the output shaft of the system. For a system like that shown in Fig. 2 the equivalent inertia can be expressed as

$$J_{eq}^0 = \left[J_m k_g^2 k_l^2 \eta_g + J_{24} k_l^2 + J_{120} + 2J_{72} + J_{FJ}\right]$$

where k_g and k_l are gearbox reduction rates, J_{24}, J_{72}, and J_{120} are gearboxes inertias, J_{FJ} is the body inertia, J_m is the motor inertia, while η_g represents the efficiency of the motor gearbox.

Output torque τ_0 depends on the motor characteristics and on characteristics of the power train. It is possible to verify that it can be expressed as

$$\tau^0 = \frac{k_g k_l k_m \eta_g \eta_m}{R_m} v_{in} - \frac{k_g^2 k_l^2 k_m^2 \eta_g \eta_m}{R_m} \dot{\theta}_1 \quad (8)$$

where η_m is the motor efficiency, k_m is the motor electric constant, R_m is the motor winding resistance, and v_{in} is the motor feeding voltage.

Bearing in mind (8), it is possible to rewrite (7) as follows

$$J_{eq}^{0}\ddot{\theta}_1 = -G\dot{\theta}_1 + B_{eq}^{L}\dot{\theta}_2 - \left[-f_{1_x}(\theta_2) - f_{2_x}(\theta_2)\right] R + H v_{in} \;, \quad (9)$$

where

$$G = \frac{k_g^2 k_l^2 k_m^2 \eta_g \eta_m}{R_m} + \beta_{eq}^{0} \;, \quad (10)$$

$$H = \frac{k_g k_l k_m \eta_g \eta_m}{R_m} \;. \quad (11)$$

Equations (6) and (9) represent the complete nonlinear dynamic model of the flexible joint system and are used to simulate the system behaviour. For the synthesis of the control technique proposed in §IV an equivalent linear model is devised. Elastic torque τ_e is the sole nonlinear term which appears in (6) and (9). It can be linearized in $\theta_2 = 0$ leading to $\tau_e \simeq -K_{stiff}\theta_2$, where K_{stiff} is an equivalent stiffness constant. Consequently, (6) and (9) can be rewritten as

$$J_{eq}^{0}\ddot{\theta}_1 = -G\dot{\theta}_1 + B_{eq}^{L}\dot{\theta}_2 + K_{stiff}\theta_2 + H v_{in} \;, \quad (12)$$

$$J_{load}(\ddot{\theta}_2 + \ddot{\theta}_1) = -B_{eq}^{L}\dot{\theta}_2 - K_{stiff}\theta_2 \;. \quad (13)$$

Finally, it is possible to rewrite (12) and (13) into a state-space form $\dot{\mathbf{x}} = \mathbf{A}\mathbf{x} + \mathbf{b}\, v_{in}$ by assuming $\mathbf{x} := [x_1 x_2 x_3 x_4]^T = [\theta_1 \theta_2 \dot{\theta}_1 \dot{\theta}_2]^T$ and defining

$$\mathbf{A} := \begin{bmatrix} 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 \\ 0 & \frac{K_{stiff}}{J_{eq}^{0}} & -\frac{G}{J_{eq}^{0}} & \frac{B_{eq}^{L}}{J_{eq}^{0}} \\ 0 & -\frac{K_{stiff}(J_{load}+J_{eq}^{0})}{J_{load}J_{eq}^{0}} & \frac{G}{J_{eq}^{0}} & -\frac{B_{eq}^{L}(J_{load}+J_{eq}^{0})}{J_{load}J_{eq}^{0}} \end{bmatrix} \quad (14)$$

$$\mathbf{b} := \begin{bmatrix} 0 \\ 0 \\ \frac{H}{J_{eq}^{0}} \\ -\frac{H}{J_{eq}^{0}} \end{bmatrix} \;. \quad (15)$$

III. Problem Formulation

In this section, the minimum-time feedforward control problem is stated for discrete-time systems in a general case and then it is restated for the flexible-joint control problem.

A. General formulation

A linear discrete-time system Σ_d is described by the scalar transfer function

$$H(z) = \frac{b(z)}{a(z)} = \frac{b_m z^m + b_{m-1} z^{m-1} + \cdots + b_0}{a_n z^n + a_{n-1} z^{n-1} + \cdots + a_0} \;. \quad (16)$$

Σ_d is stable, and its static gain $H(1) \neq 0$. The system input and output sequences are denoted by $u(k)$ and $y(k)$ respectively, $k \in \mathbb{Z}$.

The behavior $\mathcal{B}_d$ of system Σ_d is the set of all input-output pairs $(u(\cdot), y(\cdot))$, where $u(\cdot), y(\cdot) : \mathbb{Z} \to \mathbb{R}$, satisfying the difference equation:

$$a_n y(k+n) + a_{n-1} y(k+n-1) + \cdots + a_0 y(k) = b_m u(k+m) + b_{m-1} u(k+m-1) + \cdots + b_0 u(k) \;. \quad (17)$$

The set of input-output equilibrium points of Σ_d is $\mathcal{E} := \{(u,y) \in \mathbb{R}^2 : y = H(1)u\}$ and the set $\mathcal{K}_{\mathbf{p}} \subset \mathcal{B}_d$ of all rest-to-rest constrained transitions from $(0,0) \in \mathcal{E}$ to $(\frac{y_f}{H(1)}, y_f) \in \mathcal{E}$ is defined as follows.

Definition 1: Given the parameter set $\mathbf{s} := \{U_c, Y_c, y_f\}$ where $U_c = [U_c^-, U_c^+]$ and $Y_c = [Y_c^-, Y_c^+]$ are the constraint intervals for the input and output respectively and y_f is the final rest value of the output, $\mathcal{K}_{\mathbf{s}}$ is the set of all pairs $(u(\cdot), y(\cdot)) \in \mathcal{B}_d$ for which there exists $k_f \in \mathbb{N}$ such that:

$$u(k) = 0 \quad \forall k < 0 \;, \quad u(k) = \frac{y_f}{H(1)} \;\; \forall k \geq k_f \;, \quad (18)$$

$$u(k) \in U_c \;\; \forall k \in \mathbb{Z} \;, \quad (19)$$

$$y(k) = 0 \quad \forall k < 0 \;, \quad y(k) = y_f \;\; \forall k \geq k_f \;, \quad (20)$$

$$y(k) \in Y_c \;\; \forall k \in \mathbb{Z} \;. \quad (21)$$

The minimum-time feedforward constrained control problem for discrete-time systems consists in finding the optimal input sequence $u^*(k)$, $k = 0, 1, \ldots, k_f^* - 1$ for which the pair $(u^*(\cdot), y^*(\cdot)) \in \mathcal{K}_{\mathbf{s}}$ is a minimizer for the optimization problem:

$$k_f^* = \min_{(u(\cdot),y(\cdot)) \in \mathcal{K}_{\mathbf{s}}} K_f(u(\cdot), y(\cdot)) \;. \quad (22)$$

$K_f(u(\cdot), y(\cdot))$, the rest-to-rest transition time associated to pair $(u(\cdot), y(\cdot))$, is defined as follows

$$K_f(u(\cdot), y(\cdot)) := \min\{k_1 \in \mathbb{N} : u(k) = \frac{y_f}{H(1)},\; y(k) = y_f \;, \forall k \geq k_1\} \;.$$

B. An approximated solution to the continuous time problem using discretization

Given a continuous system $H(s)$ a time-optimal control problem can be converted to a discrete-time one through the following procedure:

- find the discretized system $H_T(z)$ using a zero-order equivalence, with sampling period T, by applying relation $H_T(z) = (1 - z^{-1})\mathcal{Z}\{\frac{H(s)}{s}\}$;
- find the time-optimal input sequence $u^*(k)$;
- use for the continuous system the input function $u(t)$ obtained from the discrete sequence with a zero-order hold $u(t) = u^*(\lfloor \frac{t}{T} \rfloor)$, where $T \in \mathbb{R}$ is the sampling period.

C. Flexible-joint specific formulation

Consider the discrete system obtained by discretizing the rotary flexible joint system introduced in §II. Given two real intervals U_c, Y_c find the input sequence $u(k)$ that minimizes the time required for the rest-to-rest transition of the output $y(k)$ from the initial angle 0 to the final angle y_f, while satisfying the input and output constraints

$$u(k) \in U_c, \; y(k) \in Y_c, \; \forall k > 0 \;.$$

IV. Problem Resolution

The key result upon which to build the solution to (22) is given by the next proposition. The unit impulse response of Σ_d is denoted by $h(k) := \mathcal{Z}^{-1}[H(z)]$ and $\mathbf{1}_n$ denotes the k-dimensional vector whose components are all equal to 1.

Theorem 1: Set $\mathcal{K}_s$ is not empty if

$$\{0, \frac{y_f}{H(1)}\} \subset (U_c^-, U_c^+) \quad \text{and} \quad \{0, y_f\} \subset (Y_c^-, Y_c^+) \,. \tag{23}$$

Proof. For brevity the proof is omitted.It can be found in [6].

Proposition 1: The set $\mathcal{K}_s$ of all rest-to-rest constrained transitions is not empty if and only if there exist $k_f \in \mathbb{N}$ and a vector $\mathbf{u} \in \mathbb{R}^{k_f}$ for which the following LP problem is feasible:

$$Y_c^- \cdot \mathbf{1}_{k_f} \le \mathbf{H}\mathbf{u} \le Y_c^+ \cdot \mathbf{1}_{k_f} \tag{24}$$

$$U_c^- \cdot \mathbf{1}_{k_f} \le \mathbf{u} \le U_c^+ \cdot \mathbf{1}_{k_f} \tag{25}$$

$$\bar{\mathbf{H}} \left[\begin{array}{c} \mathbf{u} \\ \hline \frac{y_f}{H(1)} \cdot \mathbf{1}_n \end{array} \right] = y_f \cdot \mathbf{1}_n \tag{26}$$

where $\mathbf{H} \in \mathbb{R}^{k_f \times k_f}$ is defined by $\mathbf{H}_{ij} := h(i-j)$ and $\bar{\mathbf{H}} \in \mathbb{R}^{n \times (k_f+n)}$ by $\bar{\mathbf{H}}_{ij} := h(i+k_f-j)$.

Proof.(Necessity) Assume that there exists a vector $\mathbf{u}$ for which equations (24)–(26) are satisfied. Define the input sequence

$$u(k) = \begin{cases} 0 \text{ if } k < 0 \\ \mathbf{u}(k) \text{ if } 0 \le k < k_f \\ \frac{y_f}{H(1)} \text{ if } k \ge k_f \,, \end{cases} \tag{27}$$

which satisfies Properties (18) and (19) of Definition 1. The output is given by $y(k) = \sum_{i=0}^{\infty} u(k-i)h(i)$, where $h(k)$ is the impulse response of the discrete system. Setting $\mathbf{y} \in \mathbb{R}^{k_f}$: $\mathbf{y}(i) = y(i)$ and $\bar{\mathbf{y}} \in \mathbb{R}^n : \bar{\mathbf{y}}(i) = y(k_f+i)$, it is

$$\mathbf{y} = \mathbf{H}\mathbf{u} \,,\; \bar{\mathbf{y}} = \bar{\mathbf{H}} \left[\begin{array}{c} \mathbf{u} \\ \hline \frac{y_f}{H(1)} \cdot \mathbf{1}_n \end{array} \right] \,,$$

and, by (24), $y(k)$ satisfies Property (21) of Definition 1, $\forall k < k_f$. It remains to show that $y(i) = y_f$, $\forall i \ge k_f$. To prove this, consider the input-output pair $(u_1(k),\, y_1(k)) = (\frac{y_f}{H(0)},\, y_f)$, $\forall k \in \mathbb{Z}$. Consider the input $u_2(k) = u(k) - u_1(k)$, which is null if $k \ge k_f$. By linearity, the corresponding output is given by $y_2(k) = y(k) - 1$, with $y_2(\kappa + i) = 0$, $\forall i \in 0, \dots, n-1$, therefore at sample time k_f, the output that corresponds to the input u_2 is the solution of a degree n homogeneous difference equation with null initial conditions, therefore $y_2(k) = y(k) - 1 = 0$ is identically zero for $k \ge k_f$ and $y(k) = 1$, $\forall k \ge k_f$.

(Sufficiency) Assume that for a given k_f, the set $\mathcal{K}_s$ is non empty, therefore it contains a couple $(u(k), y(k))$. If $\mathbf{u}$ and $\mathbf{y}$ are defined as above, by properties (19) and (21) it follows that

$$U_c^- \cdot \mathbf{1}_{k_f} < \bar{u} < U_c^+ \cdot \mathbf{1}_{k_f}$$
$$Y_c^- \cdot \mathbf{1}_{k_f} < \bar{y} < Y_c^+ \cdot \mathbf{1}_{k_f} \,,$$

moreover, being $y(k) = \sum_{i=0}^{+\infty} h(k-i)u(i)$,

$$\left[\begin{array}{c} \mathbf{y} \\ \hline \bar{\mathbf{y}} \end{array} \right] = \left[\begin{array}{c} \mathbf{H} | 0 \\ \hline \bar{\mathbf{H}} \end{array} \right] = \left[\begin{array}{c} \bar{u} \\ \hline \frac{y_f}{H(1)} \cdot \mathbf{1}_n \end{array} \right] \,,$$

therefore equations (24)–(26) are satisfied. □

By virtue of Proposition 1, the minimum-time k_f^* and an associated optimal feedforward input $u^*(k)$, $k = 0, 1, \dots k_f^* - 1$ can be determined by means of a sequence of LP feasibility tests (the problem defined at (24)-(26)) through a simple bisection algorithm reported below. In this algorithm $LPP(\mathbf{s}, k_f, \mathbf{u})$ denotes a linear programming procedure that solves problem (24)-(26): if the problem is feasible it returns a Boolean true value along with a solution $\mathbf{u}$.

Algorithm: MTC

Compute the minimum-time feedforward control with input and output constraints for discrete-time systems

```
input  : H(z) and s
output: k_f* and u*(k), k = 0,1,...,k_f* − 1
begin
    k_f ⟵ 1;
    l ⟵ 0;
    while ~LPP(s,k_f,u) do
        l ⟵ k_f;
        k_f ⟵ 2k_f
    h ⟵ k_f;
    while h − l > 1 do
        k_f ⟵ ⌊(h+l)/2⌋;
        if ~LPP(s,k_f,u) then
            l ⟵ k_f;
        else
            h ⟵ k_f
    k_f* ⟵ h;
    u*(k) ⟵ u
end
```

Remark 1: Differently from the continuous case, the discrete minimum-time solution $u^*(k)$ is not unique (see [7]).

V. Simulation and Experimental Results

Simulation are executed on a P4 3.0Ghz computer within Matlab programming environment. The freely available library QSopt is used as linear programming solver. Experimental results are obtained by interfacing the flexible joint device to Matlab through the Quanser Q4 PCI data acquisition board governed by WinCon real-time software.

By substituting the flexible joint parameters in state-space model, described in (14) and (15), the following numerical representation for the plant is achieved

$$\mathbf{A} := \begin{bmatrix} 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 \\ 0 & 379.9 & -56.65 & 2.956 \\ 0 & -512.9 & 56.65 & -3.99 \end{bmatrix}$$

$$\mathbf{b} := \begin{bmatrix} 0 \\ 0 \\ 93.74 \\ -93.74 \end{bmatrix} \tag{28}$$

The time-optimal feedforward control $u^*(t)$ has been obtained with the algorithm described in §IV, to get a rest-to-rest transition from $y = 0$ to $y = \pi/4 (= y_f)$. Since the maximum bidirectional output voltage of the amplifier used to control the flexible joint is equal to 5 *Volts*, the input

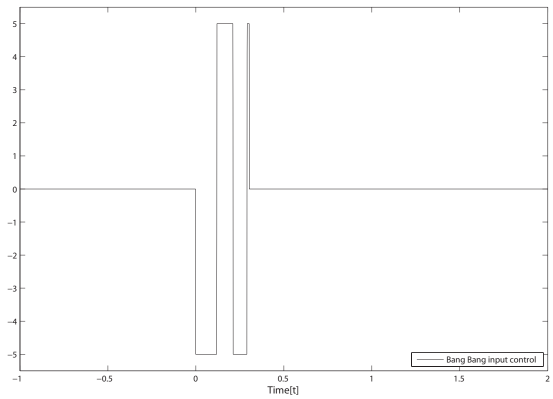

Fig. 3. Optimal reference input signal

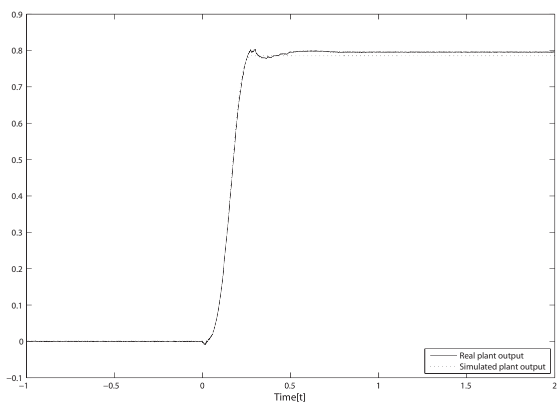

Fig. 4. Expected system output y (dashed line) and measured plant output (solid line)

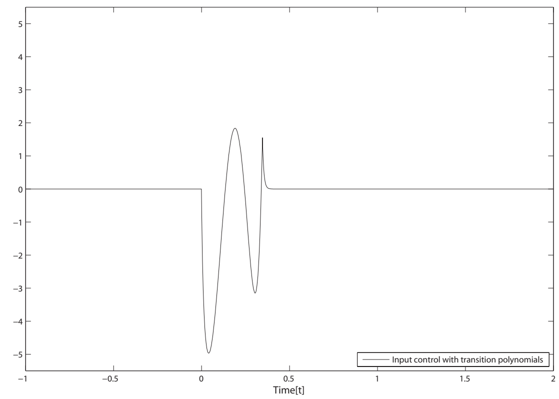

Fig. 5. Optimal transition polynomial input signal

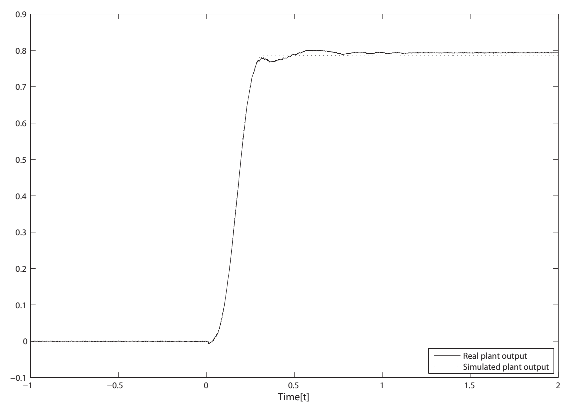

Fig. 6. Expected system output y (dashed line) and measured plant output (solid line)

constraint is given by $\|u(t)\|_\infty \leq 5$, so that $U_c = [-5, +5]$. A strong requirement has been set on the output function: a maximum of 0.1% overshoot and undershoot on y is allowed, so that $Y_c = [-7.8539e-4, \pi/4 + 7.8539e-4]$. The simulation sampling time is given by $T_s = 0.001$ s and the results are presented in Figures 3 and 4. Figure 3 shows the bang-bang control input that allows to obtain a rest-to-rest transition time of $t_f^* = 0.31$ s. Figure 4 plots a comparison between the ideal simulated output signal and the real behaviour of the flexible joint. The real output shows a small overshoot and undershoot: this is due to the small mismatch existing between the real plant and the flexible joint model devised in §II where all the nonlinearities of the mechatronic device are linearized.

In table I are shown the computation time needed by the proposed approach in order to devise the time-optimal control sequence. The symbol $\Delta\theta$ has been used for the overall rest-to-rest transition required for the system, while T_s indicate the sample time used in the discretization phase. As you can see performances are poorly related to the amplitude of the transition and they strongly depend on the sampling time used in the discretization phase: the higher is the sampling time the shorter is the computation time. Generally the time needed by the algorithm to obtain the time-optimal control is in the order of magnitude of a few seconds. Thus the proposed approach can be used in a real-time context since performances are predictable once the sampling time is set and, moreover, they can be improved if the algorithm is coded directly in C/C++.

The previously described approach has been compared with the one presented in [8] and [9], where a specific type of time-optimal control is found by means of dynamic inversion from inputs built on "transition polynomials" (see [8] for details). For brevity we recall here only the general

TABLE I
ALGORITHM PERFOMANCES

$\Delta\theta$ (rad)	$T_s(s)$	Execution Time (s)
$\pi/4$	0.001	4.229
	0.010	0.5
	0.050	0.437
$\pi/2$	0.001	5.213
	0.010	0.6
	0.050	0.453

expression of this type of interpolating polynomials that allows an arbitrarily smooth transition between two constant output values (in this case 0 and $\pi/2$):

$$y(t;\tau) = \begin{cases} 0 \quad \text{if} \quad t \le 0, \\ \frac{(2k+1)!}{k!\tau^{2k+1}} \sum_{i=0}^{k} \frac{(-1)^{k-i}}{i!(k-i)!(2k-i+1)} \tau^i t^{2k-i+1} \quad \text{if} \quad 0 \le t \le \tau, \\ \pi/2 \quad \text{if} \quad t \ge \tau \end{cases}$$

where y is the desired output function, k is the relative order of the plant transfer function and τ is the minimum transition time. In this case the plant transfer function, from (28), is equal to:

$$H(s) = \frac{-96.97s - 1.247 \cdot 10^4}{s^4 + 60.64s^3 + 571.5s^2 + 7534s}$$

thus the relative order is $k = 3$.

Results obtained with this last technique are presented in Figures 5 and 6. The time optimal rest-to-rest transition is performed in $t_f^* = 0.36$ s. The minimum-time approach based on "transition polynomials" allows to generate a smoother input control at a price of a longer task activity time, even for a small transition angle as the one showed here.

Experimental results are also shown in the video accompanying this paper.

VI. Conclusions

The paper has proposed a linear programming algorithm to compute the globally optimal minimum-time control for rest-to-rest constrained transitions of flexible joints. A comparison with the alternative inversion-based feedforward control has confirmed the effectiveness of the new approach. Moreover this approach applies to any stable linear plant so that it is foreseeable the extension of the technique to the more challenging cases of systems with unstable zero-dynamics such as, for example, flexible links [10].

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