

Planning and Scheduling External Occulter Space Missions.

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Abstract

This paper introduces the reader to a new class of space science missions employing a telescope and one or more mobile external occulter. Issues important for proper science and mission planning are discussed in light of the inherent mission constraints. Recommendations for software to analyze and optimize mission efficiency and construct integrated long-range plans are provided. ©

Introduction

External occulter space missions are a class of space science astronomy missions whose primary purpose is to obtain imaging and spectroscopy of high-contrast, faint targets such as extra-solar planets. The general concept is implemented by deploying a starlight-suppressing screen far out in front of a telescope. The screen must be small enough to allow planets (which are less than an arcsecond away from their parent stars) to be distinguished from the star's glare, but larger than the telescope aperture. These two requirements imply a very great telescope-occulter separation to allow the exoplanets to be viewable beyond the screen edge. The great separation drives system placement into space and far from earth.

The concept has been described and refined extensively over the last 5 decades, with a wide range of occulter sizes, shapes, telescope-occulter separations, and mission designs (Spitzer 1962, Woodcock 1974, Marchal 1985, Copi and Starkman 2000, Schultz et.al. 1999, Cash 2005). Perhaps foremost, a *Discovery* mission proposal to fly an external occulter in concert with JWST was submitted to NASA in the spring of 2006 (Semeniuk 2006).

External occulter missions introduce a unique set of constraints on mission planning driven by the technology. Since a free-flying external occulter mission has never yet flown, we begin by introducing the reader to the general concept of an external occulter space mission and point out important constraints. Then, discussion will turn to the elements defining the planning and scheduling topology of likely external occulter missions.

External Occulter: Fundamental Mission Constraints

There are fundamental constraints driving the design of proposed external occulter space missions as specified below.

- science requirements
- cost,
- launch vehicle constraints,
- space dynamics and orbital geometry,
- communications,
- power,
- propulsion.

The science requirements define the basic capability needed in external occulter missions. Here, we consider only extra-solar planet investigations. Extra-solar planets are intrinsically faint (6-12 or more powers of 10 times fainter than their host stars) and conventional telescopes have not been able to isolate them for spectroscopic study except for a very small class of such objects. In order to obtain adequate signal on exoplanets like those in our solar system, moderately large aperture telescopes (1-metre-plus) are required.

However this alone does not solve the high-contrast problem. With telescopes smaller than 20-30 metres, it is essentially impossible to resolve conventional exoplanets without extraordinary means to suppress the diffracted and scattered starlight. External occulter offer a way to achieve this without requiring near-perfect optics simply because the starlight is blocked prior to entering the telescope aperture, where its control is otherwise be a significant technological problem. This technique offers an alternative to more conventional architectures such as internal occulter (coronagraphs) and long-baseline interferometry (Beichman, Woolf, and Lindensmith 1999).

The required scale of the external occulter-telescope system drives the placement of the system into space (Fig. 1). External occulter concepts for exoplanet studies on

the moon and ground-space configurations have been discussed, but we will focus on systems placed far from the earth-moon system, but not so far as to introduce data downlink rate issues. Cost and launch vehicle limits further constrain the basic requirements for the telescope(s) required to perform the science mission and the size and packaging techniques for the occulter.

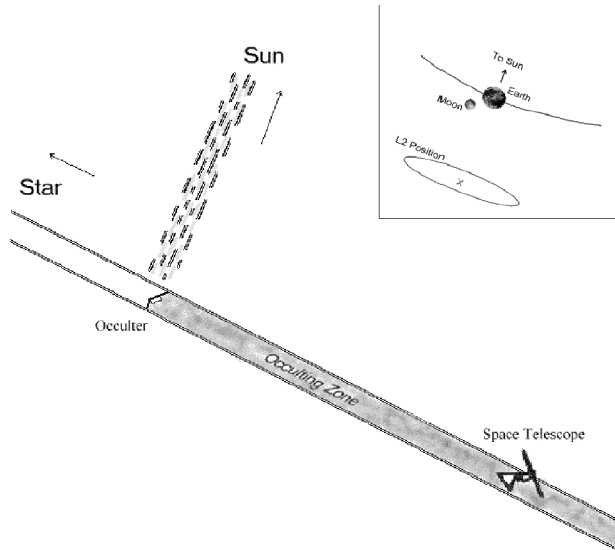


Figure 1: The general (not-to-scale) layout of the important components and aspects of an external occulter mission are portrayed in the above two panels. At upper-right, the blue oval orbit shows a track relative to the earth-moon upon which the space telescope is likely to lie for near-term external occulter missions. The remainder of the cartoon shows a zoomed view on the orbit of the occulter in-line with a target star and the telescope (not to scale). The occulter casts a shadow of the star onto the telescope while remaining oriented to keep scattered sunlight to a minimum.

With a science requirement of telescope and occulter separated by tens of thousands of kilometers and a need to realign the two for each sequentially observed target widely separated on the sky, propulsion capability becomes a major factor defining the number of targets and mission duration. To move the occulting screen around the telescope and observe a large number of targets periodically in reasonable spans of time requires expenditure of a large fraction and quantity of propellant. To minimize propellant use, *solar-electric propulsion*-(SEP)-which then power-limits such a mission—may be employed. One way around the stressful power and propulsion requirements is to opt for multiple occulters. However, the mass-savings due to relaxed propulsion requirements is partially offset by greater launch and manufacturing costs.

Typical Occulter Mission Designs

Despite the tradeoffs involved, a number of reasonable occulter mission designs have been put forth. As examples of external occulter missions we may draw upon to allow a concrete definition of the planning and scheduling issues, we point the reader to two examples:

- ASA+O (*Apodized-Square-Aperture + Occulter*)
- NWD (*New Worlds Discoverer*)

ASA+O (Jordan et.al. 2004) was a concept for using simple, low-performance rectangular occulters in conjunction with specially shaped telescope apertures (square, unobstructed off-axis design) to achieve sufficient light suppression to allow a search for and study of terrestrial planets around the nearest stars. ASA+O employs at least two occulters launched in tandem with a 4-metre class space telescope. By using more than one occulter, the propellant demands on any single occulter are lowered, driving down each individual occulter's launch mass (Jordan, 2003).

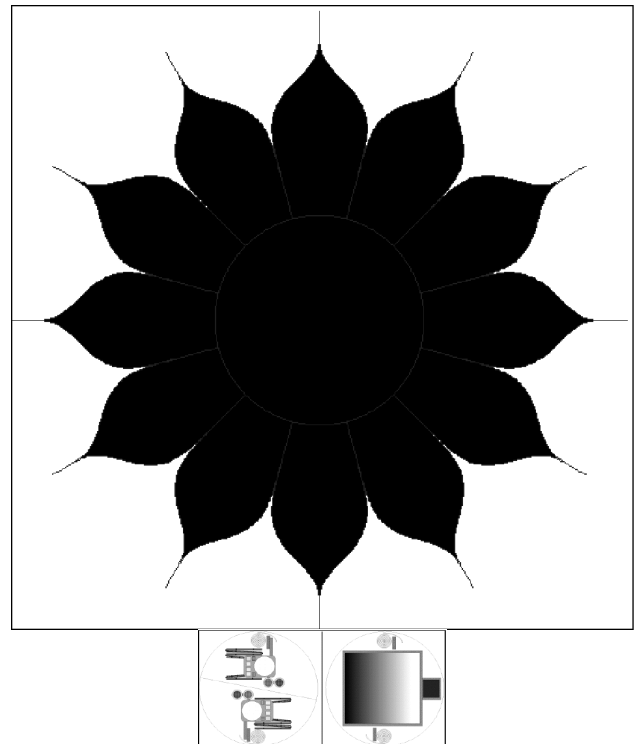


Figure 2: Two possible external occulter mission hardware sets are portrayed above. At top is one possible screen shape (shown in a deployed configuration) for an external occulter that might fly with JWST to search for earthlike planets around the nearest stars. At bottom are two fairing cross-sections (for a single launch vehicle) for two occulter spacecraft (left panel), and a 4-m diameter, square aperture telescope plus the two rolled rectangular screens (right fairing cross-section) for each occulter. The two diagrams are disproportionate in size to show approximate relative-scale for these two different architectures.

NWD (Cash 2006) is a proposed high-performance occulter that would fly with JWST (James Webb Space Telescope). A conceptual screen design similar to that proposed is shown in Figure 2. Figure 3 shows a similar, elongated screen that is a candidate for use in extended spectroscopic observations of extra-solar planets.

Although these screen designs span the range of starlight suppression performance, and the techniques for packaging differ, each has an expected mission profile similar enough to be encompassed by the discussion that follows. Fig. 3 shows an advanced screen design that might be used for a follow-on mission specifically for characterizing atmospheres of objects found with earlier external occulter missions.

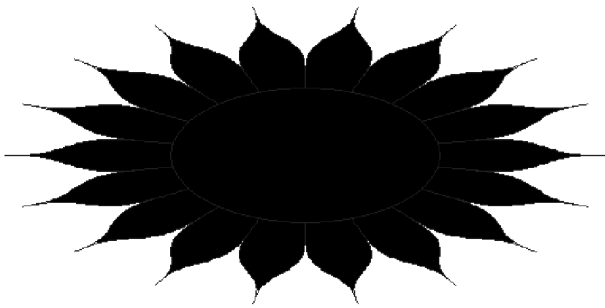


Figure 3: This advanced, elongated, starflower screen is designed to allow up to 4 months of continuous spectroscopic observations on ecliptic target stars. The screen may be as large as 100-metres across.

External Occulter Mission Planning Topology

Most external occulter missions are driven by technology requirements to suppress scattered sunlight, which places restrictions on spacecraft and occulting screen design. These requirements constrain the operating geometries between telescope, occulter and bodies such as the sun, earth and moon. As a result, most occulter missions require the sun-telescope-occulter angle to lie within some limited range of 90-degrees. Few realistic external occulter concepts can have sun-telescope-occulter angles near 180-degrees because the telescope-ward side of the occulting screen cannot be shaded from the sun (an anti-solar avoidance zone). Additionally, there is an inherent telescope solar-avoidance zone to be obeyed.

The telescope-occulter range may also have limits, which—combined with the other restrictions—creates an annular shaped region known as the *quadrature ring* (QR) wherein the occulter must lie during target observations. The QR is not inertially fixed, but instead rotates about the ecliptic axis with a period commensurate with the

telescope-occulter’s solar orbit. Figure 4 conceptually shows the QR.

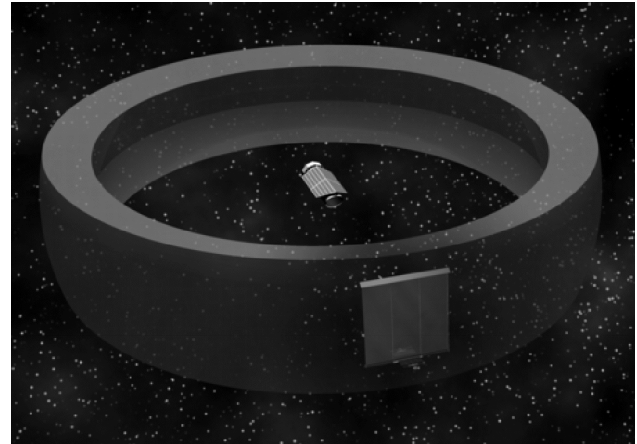


Figure 4: The QR of allowable operations is conceptually shown here (not to scale), courtesy of E. Rowles. The blue-colored ring defines a region where the occulter could be placed for use by observations of targets by the telescope. The sun is in the direction directly above.

The QR defines the basic topology of scheduling—the occulter must move from one location to another within the QR, arriving at a given *target-telescope line-of-sight* (TTLOS) in time to perform the observations while the ring still contains the TTLOS. Occulter system architectures, which allow large QR widths, are preferred as they allow more flexible scheduling.

Occulter missions conceived for the foreseeable future employ chemical or electric propulsion to transit between sequential TTLOSs. With such mission concepts, the occulter propels itself between targets while the telescope remains in a free-fall orbit, changing only its pointing. Because of the large distances the occulter must travel (thousands to tens of thousands of kilometers or more) and the science requirement that observations be in near-stellar-inertial reference frames, significant amounts of propellant and/or long transit times between sequential TTLOSs result.

Advanced mission planning for optimizing the number of lines of sight visited is then very important. This requires some ability to plan what the best sequence of some set of targets which may have differing desired observing cadences based upon previous observing histories, stellar properties, and geometry (Brown 2006). Some targets will only require a single observation—which may not be known in advance--while others will need two to four or more observations during the discovery phase of the mission, and the number may depend upon what is discovered during each visit to the target.

Oculter Mission Phases

It is important to introduce the notions of differing mission phases. An oculter mission may have two or more distinct phases—*discovery* and *characterization*. Here, ‘discovery’ refers to a search for interesting objects, and ‘characterization’ means that any interesting objects are revisited for extended study. Discovery observations may require only days on target station, while characterization could last for weeks. Any target may have both of these two phases, but a given target may have no characterization phase at all. The discovery phase will have varying lengths depending on the properties of the system that have been determined during the discovery phase. Most systems will start out in the discovery phase of visitation. Discovery and characterization thus are interleaved, with most characterization occurring nearer to the end of the mission.

Target-to-Target Cadence

For the oculter, there is also a different class of mission phases characterized by how the oculter spends its time—either in transit or on-target. There are significant periods of time where the oculter cannot be used for science observations (inter-target transits). During these periods, other science programs may execute onboard the telescope. Figure 5 shows the reconfigurations and phases that one type of oculter spacecraft goes through.

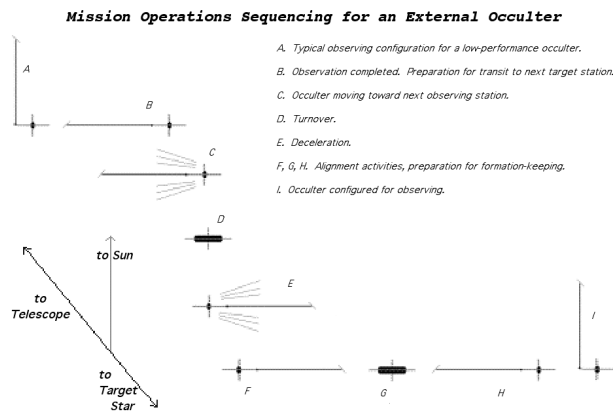


Figure 5: An external oculter will have its own operations flow. Above, one example oculter is shown at sequential operational phases as it is moved from observing one target to another. At phases “A” and “I”, the oculter is on-station at different target lines of sight with respect to the telescope. Phases in-between show reconfigurations and movement between the two TTLOSs.

As a result, the oculter observations are interleaved with other science. When constructing a science plan in advance based upon some periodic planning *Cycle* (a period in which approved observing programs are densely

packed in expectation of execution. E.g. HST’s yearly guest observer time allocation award and subsequent integrated year-long-plus science plan), planning 1-2 years of the oculter observations in advance may be desired. With each oculter observation, however, the long-term planned use of the oculter may be subject to change.

The reasoning behind this are that there are two fundamental limits on oculter operations—fuel consumption, and mission duration. These two constraints in some sense oppose each other: One would like to perform as many *LOSs* (lines-of-sight) as possible, however due to fuel limitations, performing them over the maximum mission time possible would be the result. On the other hand, planned mission duration or the race against hardware failure dictates that one perform the *LOSs* as quickly as possible. This latter approach results in much faster fuel consumption rates. This conflict sets up a science mission optimization problem.

The number of surveyable targets is fundamentally limited by the amount of propellant carried and by the life of the mission. Target-to-target cycling defines the character of oculter missions and drives many constraints. Moving the oculter from one target to another must be done efficiently to maximize the number of targets visited during the mission and minimize propellant usage. Careful planning of the sequence of visits to targets is needed. Once observations on a target are complete, the oculter is commanded to move to its next destination.

Previous Evaluations of Mission Operations Planning Tools

It has been suggested that three software components are needed to facilitate planning and scheduling of oculter-telescope observations (Kochte, Hart, Fraquelli, et.al. 2004):

- a *Visibility Predictor* (VP),
- an *Accessibility Predictor* (AP), and
- a *Sequence Planner* (SP).

All three of these tools were posited as necessary during the mission operations phase for planning target-to-target sequencing in order to maximize the use of the oculter. The VP, given any date, provides target visibility for the oculter. The AP will provide fuel estimates and transit times on a per target basis given a particular set of configurations of the telescope-oculter.

The most complex of the three tools would be the SP. The SP determines if the oculter can stay longer on the

current target and how that may affect a subsequent target. The SP should be able to generate, rank, and display different target sequencing scenarios. Over the course of 6 months the entire sky will pass through the QR, although the entire sky is never instantaneously accessible.

Although it was stated that it might be necessary to update and/or modify the observing plan on timescales of a few days, subsequent examination of the planning problem suggests that this may not be necessary for some occulter missions. If the time on target is lengthened, the tools outlined earlier will help mission operations determine how to maximize efficiency.

New Science Optimization Tools and Paradigms

In addition to previously discussed planning tools, applying mission planning tools in advance of operations can help optimize different observing and target sequencing strategies. With such tools, the goal would be to provide the capacity to statistically assess various different occulter use strategies. One approach would be to run multiple usage simulations and apply scoring metrics to each simulation. This would allow assessment of how best to employ the occulter both from a general strategic standpoint for long-range planning, and from specific conditions during the mission. In this way, one would be able to evaluate the impact of possible changes to the usage plan and construct optimal plans. Such tools may use the AP, VP, and SP as components.

It is likely that the science team will have more targets on their wish list than can be observed during the occulter mission, and a subset will need to be chosen for execution. Each simulation of target and visit sequencing could change working assumptions such as telescope-occulter operating range, thrust level between LOSs, specific target sequencing, target subset selection, and differing operation wait-times. Using different scoring algorithms would also allow the science team to judge which algorithm was best applied at different parts of the occulter mission.

Perhaps the greatest benefit in having this capability in the near-term would be in providing a science team the opportunity of optimizing the design of an external occulter mission in advance of its proposal or hardware definition phases. Performing many simulations with different subsets of targets would allow a search for the theoretically optimum use of the occulter. Because the science capability of the telescope-plus-occulter system is intimately intertwined with the mission architecture,

being able to examine different scenarios in advance may also be useful for architecture optimization as well.

The science optimization problem is driven by a number of basic factors:

- optimizing science (function of T-O range and queuing)
- optimizing number of visits to each target
- optimizing number of targets surveyed
- target-to-target 'slew' rate of the occulter-telescope
- propulsion capability

The impact of each of these will be discussed in the following sections in the context of an example of modifying an existing planning tool, and how some of these factor into constructing a science plan.

Application of Existing Planning Packages

Many space astronomy planning packages and tools exist which might be adapted to external occulter mission planning. Here, we will discuss conceptually how one particular tool could be adapted to help construct optimal science plans. Comparatively minor modifications to the SPIKE (*Science Planning Intelligent Knowledge Engine*) software package (Johnston and Miller 1994, Giuliano 1998, Kramer 2000, Zimmerman and Asson 2002, Ferdous and Giuliano 2006) would transform it into a long-range planning tool for external occulter missions. An enhanced SPIKE would allow integrated planning of external occulter observations along with other science programs that do not require use of the occulter. In effect, these changes would allow the current software architecture of a single-spacecraft planning tool to be transformed into a simultaneous single-plus-multiple spacecraft observation planner.

An occulter *Design Reference Mission* (DRM) provides context for discussing how occulter observations would be integrated with non-occulter observations. The *Oculter DRM* (ODRM) would consist of a subset of desired targets having visit and linkset specifications. The occulter DRM visits would likely consist of a special identifier to single out planning for algorithm checks unique to the occulter component of the science mission in order that it can be integrated in with the non-occulter DRM. Visit specifications would consist of minimum and maximum times required on target, minimum and maximum allowed Telescope-Occulter separations, and timing-link spacings and tolerances between repeat visits to individual targets or period-phase constraints to emulate desired discovery-space mapping. Other user specifications might be applied with lesser impact on

general plannability of the visits, such as roll specification.

The targets and observation pool would then be fed to the long-range planning software to plan concurrently with other science observations or separately. SPIKE modifications would include--effectively--a slew-constraint between adjacently planned occulter pointings to capture the minimum transit time for targets widely separated on the sky. During planning of individual occulter observations, the planning software would compute accessibility of the sequential occulter observations to ensure that constraints such as the ability of the occulter to move from one target station to the next are obeyed.

Resource Consumption: Fuel, Time-on-Target, and Transit-Time

Addition of an algorithm to integrate fuel consumption for different transit profiles would allow the planning tool to keep track of the fuel constraint and provide a measure of remaining fuel after planning the existing target pool. This would be particularly useful for allowing the science planners to assess the best of several different plans generated as it would allow project managers to decide between prime and extended mission science trades.

In addition to consuming telescope time, fuel carried by the external occulter is an important resource that must be tracked, as noted in the previous section. Besides fuel for transit between stations, external occulters also expend fuel for formation-keeping activities during the intervals that individual targets are being observed. At least part of this consumable used can be predicted in advance for a given geometric configuration between telescope, occulter and the major solar system objects (the gravitational influence of which are major factors).

For inter-target SEP, occulter spacecraft design could have an impact on inter-target thrust-levels. Movement of the occulter may be further power-constrained if the spacecraft solar arrays cannot be pointed directly at the sun to gain maximum power for propulsion for particular target sequences. As a geometry problem depending upon spacecraft design and target-occulter-sun geometries, this would presumably be straightforward to implement as well. Other built-in parameters that characterize the transit algorithm might be ‘turnover time’, maximum occulter transit velocity, arrival and departure configuration times, and possibly alignment tolerancing. Modeling spacecraft characteristics such as directed propellant leak rates, and photon pressure acceleration would be enhancements for more sophisticated simulations.

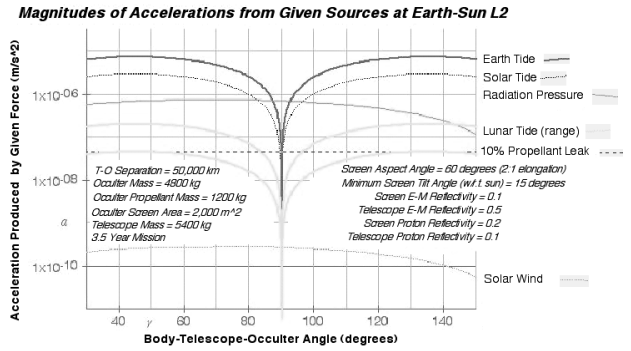


Figure 6: Time spent formation-keeping (on-target time) does require fuel consumption and cannot always be ignored. The consumption rate depends upon the geometry, separation, and design characteristics of the telescope and occulter. In the figure above, the magnitudes of the individual components of cross-TTLOS accelerations for a particular occulter mission as a function of sun-telescope-occulter geometry are plotted.

In Figure 6, the magnitudes of the cross-TTLOS accelerations (which are far more important for the science mission than the along-TTLOS accelerations) are shown for a particular telescope-occulter mission design. The most significant accelerations are the gravitational tides (*an expression for which is given in Eq. 1, where G is the Newtonian gravitational constant, θ is the body-telescope-occulter angle, z is the telescope-occulter separation, M_{body} is the body mass, $r_{Tel-body}$ is the distance to the body, and a_{\perp} is the cross-TTLOS acceleration*) and solar radiation pressure. The magnitude of the tidal force grows linearly with telescope-occulter separation, so that formation-keeping thrust is proportionately higher at greater ranges (and thus more expensive propellant-wise). The angular rates as seen from the telescope due to the tides is independent of the range and only a function of distance from the gravitating body. For the region where solar radiation pressure is important, its magnitude is independent of range.

$$a_{\perp} = \frac{3GM_{body} \sin(\theta) \cos(\theta) z}{r_{Tel-body}^3} \quad (1)$$

New criteria to score different possible observing windows for individual visits could be implemented such as one for fuel consumption and target observing rate. Planning an occulter mission concurrently with other science could necessitate differences in operational software use. One might wish to plan guaranteed time occulter observations stretching over a longer duration than normal Cycle-based occulter-less science observations.

Telescope-Occulter Range Optimization: Science vs. Fuel

In a previous section, the issue of minimum and maximum range between telescope and occulter was brought up in terms of the DRM. One could ask, ‘why not operate the occulter at its minimum distance if doing so would maximize the amount of fuel available for the mission?’ There is a down-side to this because a smaller telescope-occulter range yields a larger apparent size of the occulter and larger inner working angle (IWA), which may result in more targets of interest being blocked by the occulter. For certain targets, such as stars furthest from our sun, whose planets are therefore proportionately closer in apparent separation, this could be a serious science degradation.

$$n^3 v^4 z^2 F_{\max}^2 \propto f(\text{obs_strategy}, M_{\text{init}}, M_{\text{final}}, I_{\text{sp}}) \quad (2)$$

In Eq. 2, stated without proof is a statistical trade relationship that is derivable between mission and spacecraft parameters for a large class of external occulter missions. Mission parameters such as the number of targets visited ‘n’, the number of visits per target ‘v’, the mean telescope-occulter separation, and the inter-target thrust F_{\max} , appear on the left while details of the observing strategy, initial and final spacecraft mass, and propulsion system efficiency appear on the right.

The point of this relationship is not its exact validity, but to hint at the importance of a general relationship for assessing mission trades. Mission duration does not appear explicitly in Eq. 2, and is not conserved when varying any of the quantities, but varies approximately as the square root of the telescope-occulter separation. As an example of how such trade relationships are useful, if one were to choose greater separations, then without changing the propulsion system or observing strategy, either number of pointings or acceleration between targets would have to decrease to compensate. Such relationships allow evaluation of mission planning trades.

If the occulter operates closer to the telescope, it blocks more of the region of interest around the target star. In doing so, more visits to the target are required in order to achieve the same level of ‘completeness’ in a search of the target system. Because the benefits of range (fuel) and discovery efficiency offset each other, a careful evaluation of the net benefit based upon actual target subsets and particular sequencing strategies is indicated to optimize the science mission plan. Figures 7 & 8 show the effect of obscuration on need to revisit for approaching a given level of completeness. It will be up to the project managers to decide the appropriate trade levels.

Probability of Detecting a Randomly Oriented, Circular Orbiting Exoplanet

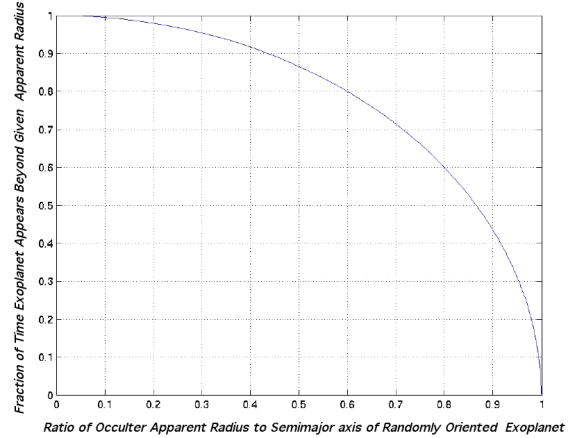
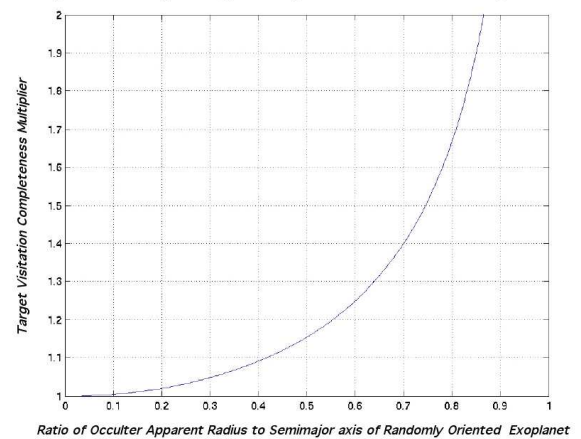


Figure 7 & 8: Science capability of external occulters is sensitive to separation between the telescope and occulter. Above is a diagram showing the fraction of time a planet on a randomly oriented circular orbit would appear beyond the occulter edge, with the x-ordinate representing the ratio of the apparent radius of the occulter to the apparent semimajor axis of the planet. At bottom is shown the multiplying factor for which one would need more than 3 independent observations to determine the orbit of an extra-solar planet versus the apparent-occulter-radius-to-semimajor-axis ratio assuming that the planet would be lost behind the occulter for the fraction of time given by the diagram above.

Required Visits-per-Target Multiplier for a Given Blocking Fraction



Target Queuing Strategies

A coherent visitation strategy must be planned in advance in order that time and propellant are not wasted flitting back and forth across the sky. Over the lifetime of the occulter, propellant mass will be shed, increasing available acceleration, decreasing necessary thrust, or decreasing travel time between targets. Since transit time is proportional to the inverse square root of the acceleration, mass shedding does not provide a tremendous performance gain over the course of the mission except for craft having a large propellant mass

fraction. Below, we consider the efficiency of two possible queuing strategies to demonstrate that mission planning is a critical aspect of occulter operations and utilization.

An important aspect of single occulter missions is that one ideal queuing strategy from a fuel consumption standpoint is probably not optimal for a science perspective. For example, if the occulter was used only to observe near-ecliptic targets as they sun-telescope-target angle was decreasing, only particular ‘phases’ of the orbital environment of the star would be sampled. If a sun-like star were observed and a planet with a period near 1-year were orbiting it, there is roughly a 50% chance that it would always be missed in the survey because the time sampling of the small set of observations would have an in-built bias. For more complete time- and orbital-parameter space sampling, it may be necessary for the occulter to ‘hop’ to the other side of the QR to observe a target that was observed about 6 months earlier. These long transits are fuel-per-target inefficient, so minimizing their frequency will likely be very important for overall mission efficiency.

It also may not be possible to plan out an entire occulter mission without frequent changes to the targets and their sequence. As one possible example for why this might occur, after one or two visits to a high-priority target, there will either be features of interest around it or there will not. If there are no targets of interest because the level of zodiacal light is found to be higher than expected, precluding detection of targets of interest by the mission, the target might be dropped from the repeat list or reduced in re-visit priority and replaced with another lower-priority target.

Priority-based Scheduling: Examples and Comparison of Efficiencies

In what follows, we will demonstrate the sequence of target visitations is very important to overall mission efficiency by comparing two different queuing schemes. First, consider a scheme of target visitation where priority is paramount: suppose 14 targets are chosen as highest in priority, and 10 targets of intermediate priority. If the targets are scattered uniformly (which they will not be in actuality) over the sky, then there would be $\sim 45^\circ$ of arc on average between nearest neighbors. Suppose that 3-4 visitations (e.g., 49 total stops) to the high-priority targets are scheduled. Suppose that the second tier of targets, is selected for visitation 1-2 times (15 stops). While there are 24 distinct targets visited, there are 64 stops scheduled. To simplify analysis and make a fair comparison, we assume mean telescope-occulter ranges are the same between the two schemes.

In a scheme of *Monolithic Priority-Based* (MPB) scheduling, the highest priority targets are to receive visits prior to lower priority targets. However, the average separation between nearest neighbor highest priority targets is 64-degrees and the average separation between low-priority targets is 72-degrees. The occulter spends more than the average amount of time slewing between targets.

The MPB scheme does not provide the optimum time and propellant usage and this can be demonstrated by comparison with another mission planning concept. In many ways, multiple visits to all of a randomly distributed subset of targets before moving on to a fresh subset is a poor choice--the occulter could more efficiently survey different parts of the sky sequentially, clustering targets for greater productivity. In such a *Sequential Regional Survey* (SRS) scheme, high-priority targets in some regions of the sky might well be delayed until later in the mission in favor of clustering targets--including those of lower priority--to minimize total transit time (propellant consumed). With SRS, the occulter would make short hops between clustered targets before a longer jump to another region of the sky, where it would visit a cluster of targets before moving on to another region. In this way, the occulter spends less average time in transit and reaches more targets over the long term.

Since the two examples differ by a factor of nearly 2 in mean effective target separation, the MPB scheme would require the occulter spending about 1.4-times longer in transit and consuming more propellant. This comparison demonstrates that some queuing strategies are inherently more efficient than others. A drawback with the SRS approach is that some high-priority targets do not get visited at all until late in the mission. Areas of the sky could be prioritized to offset this shortcoming.

Conclusion

Important interrelated parameters in designing an occulter mission are telescope-occulter range, target observation rate, spacecraft mass, thrust, power available, and propellant specific impulse. An operations model coupled with knowledge of occulter capabilities can be implemented to study science mission efficiency with modest extensions of existing planning software. Understanding proper target sequence planning is important for maximizing occulter science and possibly choosing among candidate architectures. Long-range science plan comparisons with different target subsets offer a way to maximize science mission efficiencies.

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