
Controlling multiple drones autonomously inspired by birds ability to keep formation



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Bachelor Thesis

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Todo list

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Implementation:	Less calculations on the drone, better to move to another computer/- cluster with more power than the drone has available from its battery	7
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Until now drones keeps getting bigger and larger to carry bigger batteries with more capacity and to lift heavier payloads. This leads to drones getting less efficient, less responsive and gets more dangerous. Instead it has become popular to make drones smaller and increase the number of drones needed to solve a task.

Materials & methods

This thesis describes how to make three drones follow a leader drone with a preprogrammed path as an example of drones cooperating. A Linux PC running MarkerLocator tracks each drones position and wirelessly transmits, using Xbee, the drones positions to all drones. The position of each drone is spoofed into the drone using the CAN-bus and thereby overwriting the onboard GPS. An outdoor test has been made using the onboard GPS to test the leader-follower algorithm in a bigger scale. A small PCB has been developed and mounted on each drone to route packages from the Xbee module to the CAN-bus of the drone and to measure the local altitude of the drone using a ultrasonic sensor. The PCB carries an AT90CAN128 as microcontroller which build-in CAN support making it obsolete to carry an external USB CAN-controller.

Results -> discussion

The accuracy of the vision based localisation is measured using a laser pointer pointing out the drones 2D position on the floor making it possible to measure the variance of the drones position. The leader-follower algorithm was also tested outside using the onboard GPS. The performance of the leader-follower algorithm is measured and discussed using plots that reveals the distance between the drones.

Conclusion -> perspective

It is shown that it is possible to implement the leader-follower algorithm using a vision and ultrasonic based positioning system. The distance between all drones when flying indoor was +/- 10 cm which is less than the maximum accepted error. It was possible to add 5 follower-drones without editing the code showing it is a generic system. The system can further be used to indoor testing of navigation algorithms and explore the many possibilities drones has to offer. If drones at some point needs to fly indoor to help eg. Mobile robots navigating, vision might be a way to obtain a absolute indoor position for the drones.

Thanks to:

- Kjeld Jensen
- Anna ..
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Reading Guide

CHAPTER 1

List of Abbreviations

AQ AutoQuad

Drones are more and more used in different applications in different areas because they make it relatively easy to get a quick or more in depth overview of a situation. A less positive thing of the drones is the amount of energy they are capable of carrying. A drone designed with long time-flight flying in mind is capable of flying approximately 20 minutes depending on weather and payload. If the drone is equipped with a heavy camera or other kind of payload, then the flight time starts to decrease rapidly. So far the solution has been to increase the size of the drones to mount bigger batteries, but this might not be right way of doing it. Drones become less efficient, less responsive and gets more dangerous due to increase in weight.

By looking at the nature, one can easily see how small animals like ants and birds manage to cooperate and thereby build or move bigger things that they would not be able to do on their own. This way of small independent, decentralized units working together is called a swarm.

By making drones smaller, they get more efficient, their flight time increase and they get cheaper but of the cost of their ability to lift. Therefore it seems like an idea to make small drones cooperate to solve more complex tasks.

SDU is currently using a platform called AutoQuad which is supported by large and small drones. Solving a task as a swarm is complex, and is not in the scope of this project. This project intend to implement a Leader-follower principle inspired by birds flocking behaviour. The leader-drone will have a preprogrammed flight path and the follower-drones will have no knowledge about the flightpath. Each follow-drone will try to keep a distance of 50 cm within plus minus 10 cm to its neighbours and the leader-drone. A computer program will be written to control each drone and tell them where to go without colliding. This will be developed in an indoor controlled environment. Since GPS is unavailable indoor, this project will be using vision, e.g. Henrik Midtiby's MarkerLocator to get the location of each drone. When the Follow-leader has been implemented it should in theory work outside as well, though with larger distances due to GPS inaccuracy.

2.0.1 Related Work

2.0.2 Problem Statement

The current AutoQuad does not support vision as source of 2D position which is required for the indoor Leader-follower to work. The relative height of the drone is measured using the build-in barometer in each drone providing the third dimension to the drones position. In case the barometer turns out to be too inaccurate due to drift other sensors might be used e.g ultrasound. The computer has to send waypoints wirelessly to all of the drones. A PCB for each drone has

to be developed for the drones to carry as payload. The PCB will be responsible for receiving messages from the computer and translate them into the CAN-bus of the drone. Hypothesis If each drone's 2D position is obtained using vision and spoofed into the drone using CAN, then it is possible for at least 3 drones to follow a leader drone with a preprogrammed flight path and keep a euclidean distance at 50 cm within plus minus 10 cm to the leader and its neighbours.

2.0.3 Hypothesis

If each drone's 2D position is obtained using vision and spoofed into the drone using CAN, then it is possible for at least 3 drones to follow a leader drone with a preprogrammed flight path and keep a euclidean distance at 50 cm within plus minus 10 cm to the leader and its neighbours.

CHAPTER 3

Materials and methods

CHAPTER 4

Leader-followers

Implementation

This chapter concerns the most important parts about how this project has been implemented. It has been split into several sections.

Mathias: Implementation: Write shortly about the implementation Chapter.

Mathias: Implementation: Less calculations on the drone, better to move to another computer/cluster with more power than the drone has available from its battery

Mathias: Implementation: Image of camera and drone seen from the side. Show what happens to the drones position estimation when it drifts down/up

5.1 Vision based localization

- Introduction to section(chapter)
- Why use vision as localization. cheap, no expensive sensors.
- About the MarkerLocator(out of scope), how it works,(Overview - not in depth, why it's slow, how window-mode works) how it's implemented, scalability.
- Quality measure, why is it necessary.
- How I arrived to a good way of measuring the found marker.
- One drone detection
- Two drones detection, different ways of detecting orders.
- Implementation in ROS, splitting into different nodes. optimization

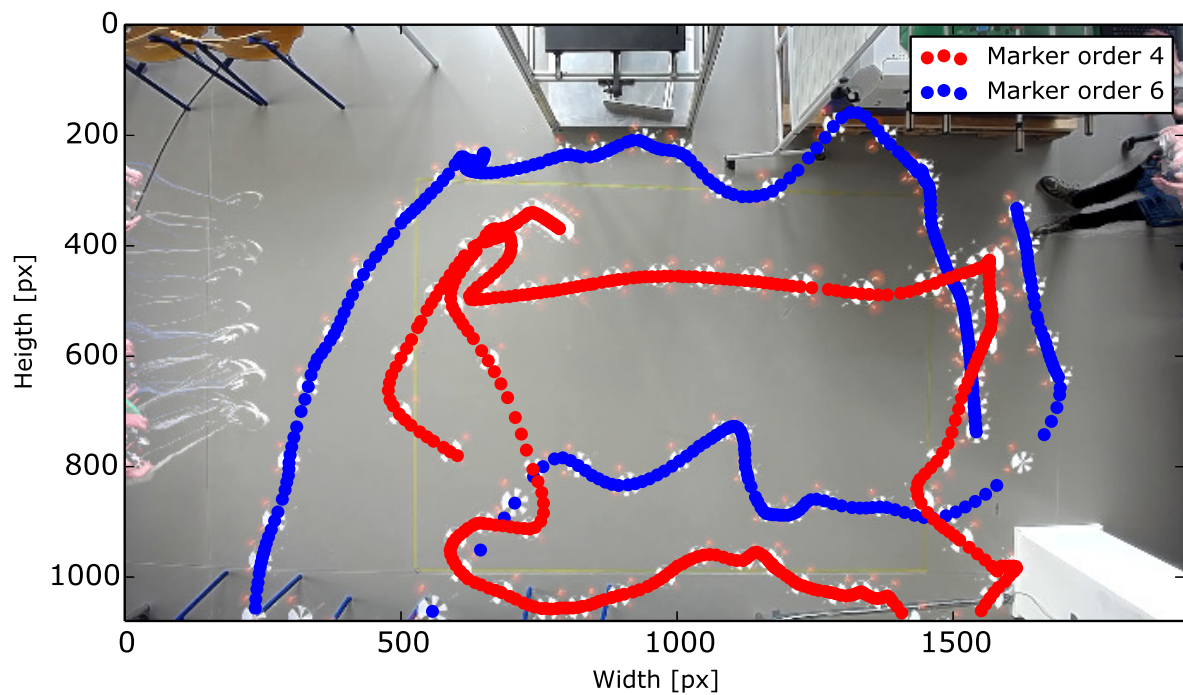


Figure 5.1 *Figure showing every 7th frame merged into one frame combined with the tracked positions of the drones*

Mathias: Vision based localization: Smaller dot size - almost impossible to see the drone in the frames..

Mathias: Vision based localization: Red is above blue, not because the drone wasn't detected

Mathias: Vision based localization: Wifi test distance, see what happens to latency

5.2 Hardware

5.2.1 Introduction

This section will go in depth about the extensionboard created as an add-on to the AQ M4 board. The extensionboard was developed to act as a bridge between the PC and the CAN-bus using wireless communication.

The block schematic shown in figure 10.1 was created by the author of the report. It was then given to Carsten Albertsen who created the schematic and did the rest of the creation of the PCB.

5.2.2 Block schematic

Mathias: Block schematic:	Create schematic appendix
Mathias: Block schematic:	Add GPS, WIFI, PCB, PC to forkortelses liste
Mathias: Block schematic:	Thanks to Carsten Albertsen for PCB development

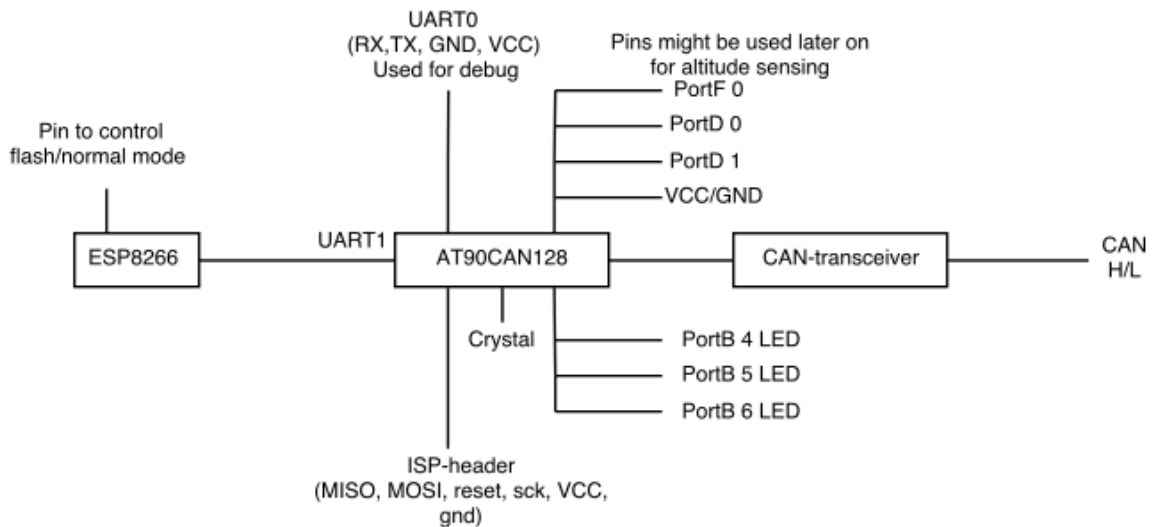


Figure 5.2 Block schematic of the WIFI-extensionboard developed to AQ M4

ATmega

Wireless Communication

An important part of the hardware is the wireless communication used between the PC and the drones. The wireless communication module has several requirements it needs to fulfill in order to make the whole system work as expected. A comparison table has been made in table 5.1 to find the wireless communication module that is best suited for the task.

The following wireless modules were considered and compared.

- ESP8266

ESP8266 is a general purpose 32 bit SOC with integrated WIFI 802.11 b/g/n support and builtin TCP/IP stack. It can be setup its own access point or it can connect to an existing wireless network. It runs at 80MHz and can be flashed with a custom firmware. The SOC is sold as modules with different pinouts and features such as extra flash memory ¹ and different antennas. The chip has been on the market for about two years and costs approximately 7\$. It has been widely used in DIY-projects due to its low price and because it requires a minimum of network knowledge to get up and running.² When the SOC is shipped, it comes with a preloaded firmware which either accepts AT commands or LUA scripting depending on the version of the module. These simple programming interfaces makes it quick and easy to interface the cheap. This leads to a large community where most of the problems have been found and solved already. Arduino has been ported to ESP8266 which makes it even easier to get it up and running. Their official Arduino GitHub has 2125 commits on their master branch at the time of writing³

- **EMW3165**

EMW3165 is a SOC much like the ESP8266 supporting 802.11 b/g/n WIFI with builtin TCP/IP stack. As with ESP8266 it supports setting up an access point as well as connecting to an existing network. It has a Cortex-M4 μ C which run at 100MHz. It supports custom firmware and can be as well be bought as different modules with different pinouts and antennas. It differentiates itself from the ESP8266 by its higher frequency its 5 volts compatible pins ⁴ which makes it easier to connect other hardware which run 5 volt without the need of a logic level shifter. It has been on the market for only one year and costs approximately 9\$. Since it is a newer board than ESP8266 it has not been used in the same number of applications and thereby has a smaller community behind⁵. Their most active GitHub has 147 commits on their master branch at the time of writing⁶.

- **nRF51822**

nRF51822 is also a SOC, but it is using Bluetooth instead of WIFI. The nRF51822 μ C is implementing BLE which is a power efficient way of sending and receiving data. The μ C can be bought as a standalone component or mounted on modules as the two other μ Cs. Different modules offers different types of antenna connectors or builtin antenna on the PCB. It has not been possible to find an Arduino ported firmware that supports this μ C. To write a firmware for the μ C it has to be done using their proprietary SDK which.

- **XBee**

XBee is a module that implements the Zbee standard. The Xbee modules work as a wireless serial connection. The Xbee modules supports mesh networking which means the modules by themselves figure out which module is closest and makes the connection. This idea makes sense in this application since there will be multiple drones and one computer. If one drone gets too far from the PC, it can just connect to one of the other drones closer to the PC.

The Xbee solution is ready to use and requires a minimum of programming to get up and running. The modules also support GPIO for digital in and output and analog input.

¹<https://www.olimex.com/Products/IoT/MOD-WIFI-ESP8266/open-source-hardware>

²<http://www.esp8266.com/> - 43.000 posts in forum.

³<https://github.com/esp8266/Arduino>

⁴<https://hackaday.com/files.wordpress.com/2015/07/emw3165.pdf>

⁵<http://www.emw3165.com/> - 200 posts in forum

⁶<https://github.com/SmartArduino/WiFiMCU>

Mathias: Wireless Communication: ⁷footnotemark til at referere til samme fodnote flere gange

Product	Size	Weight	Price	Usability	Power consumption	Range
ESP8266	24x16mm ⁷	{7}	MES			
EMW3165	32x16mm ⁸	{6}	5g ⁹			
nRF51822	20x12mm ¹⁰	{8}	-			30 Meters ¹¹
XBee	24.38x27.61mm ¹²	{3}	3g ¹³	{4}		

Table 5.1 Comparison table used to compare different wireless communication modules

The products compared in 5.1 are chosen to have approximately same specs. Onboard antenna, breakout for easy pin access.

Pins

A few pins where made available through solder pads for easy access if needed later on.

The following pins where available as solder pads:

- PortF 0 - Alternative function as ADC, channel 0
- PortD 0 - Alternative function as interrupt, INT0
- PortD 1 - Alternative function as interrupt, INT1

In case the onboard barometer isn't accurate enough, an alternative distance could be used to measure the drones altitude with respect to the ground. PortF0 has been made available since some distance sensors give output as an analogue value. An example of such sensor is an Infrared proximity sensor.¹⁴

As an alternative type of distance sensor, a ultrasonic could be used such as HCSR04. As output it gives a binary output with high-time proportional with the distance.¹⁵. To detect the high-time, one of PortD1/0 would be useful.

Which type of sensor suits best as a distance sensor to provide altitude information to the drone is out of the scope of this report. The PCB has just been made ready to different types of sensors.

Debug/ISP

In the final schematic UART0 and ISP pins where combined in one pinheader for easy access through one cable.

Mathias: Debug/ISP: Refer to image of board

To program the AtMega the ISP pins where required to be easy accessible. UART0 was made accessible to be used as debug and programming of the ESP8266 board. The plan was to setup the AtMega as UART passthrough from UART0 to UART1. Due to a mistake¹⁶ in the

¹⁴http://www.sharpsma.com/webfm_send/1208

¹⁵<http://www.micropik.com/PDF/HCSR04.pdf>

¹⁶The wrong pair of MISO/MOSI pins where made available in the ISP-header. The correct pair of MISO/MOSI is also RXD0/TXD0 as alternative function

final schematic, both UART0 and UART1 where made accessable trough the ISP/debug header. This ended up making it easier to program the ESP8266-board without using the AtMega as UART passthrough.

CHAPTER 6

Test Descriptions

Mathias: Test Descriptions: Maybe a chapter called "Test Descriptions here"

CHAPTER 7

Results

CHAPTER 8

Discussion

CHAPTER 9

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Future work

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Appendices

10.1 Test of spoofed CAN

This test was split into two subtests.

This test was conducted in order to test if the GPS spoofing using the CAN-bus works when the drone is airborne. (REFERERE til test hvor dronen ligger på bordet og dronen flyver rundt om SDU.) The second test was conducted to see if the drone can be controlled more accurately when the position of the drone is obtained using an RTK GPS, and then spoofed into the drone using the CAN-bus.

Test 1

To test if the coordinates is read probably by AutoQud, when fed into the CAN-bus, a Rpi, GPS and CAN adaptor needs to be mounted on the EduQuad drone. Figure x shows how the parts was connected. The RPI will receive the drones position from the GPS mounted on the drone. It will then extract the longitude and latitude from the NMEA string, and transmit the position to the drone using the CAN-bus. If this works, it shows that the UKF works with the spoofed coordinates as expected, and that the author of the report can spoof the GPS position from a vision based localization system.

To get the NMEA strings from the GPS, an already existing Frobomind component will be used. It reads from a serial port, and publishes the parsed NMEA string to a topic. The code written by the author will then subscribe to that topic and publish the CAN-messages to another topic. A third node which is also a part of Frobomind will then subscribe and send the CAN-messages it to the CAN adaptor. Figure Y shows the waypoint list uploaded to the drone. It is expected that the drone will behave as if it was using its onboard GPS. The GPS positions will be gathered in a rosbag to be used later on in test2. A flight with the onboard GPS will be done in order to have a reference flight.

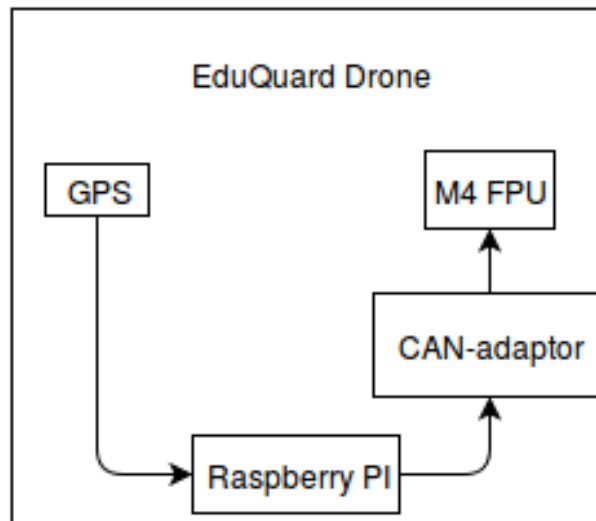


Figure 10.1 Block schematic of the connected components on the EduQuad drone

Test2 Test two will be conducted much the same way as test1. However the GPS will be replaced with a lightweight RTK GPS. The RTK GPS positions will also be saved in a rosbag for later analyse. Is is expected that when using the RTK GPS the drone is closer to its waypoints shown in figure Y, than when using a normal GPS.