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Motion Planning in Dynamic Environments: Obstacles Moving Along Arbitrary Trajectories

Zvi Shiller[1], Frederic Large[2] and Sepanta Sekhavat[2]
[1] Mechanical and Aerospace Engineering
University of California
Los Angeles, CA 90095
[2] INRIA Rhone-Alpes
38330 Grenoble, France

Abstract

This paper generalizes the concept of velocity obstacles [3] to obstacles moving along arbitrary trajectories. We introduce the non-linear velocity obstacle, which takes into account the shape, velocity and path curvature of the moving obstacle. The non-linear v-obstacle allows selecting a *single* avoidance maneuver (if one exists) that avoids any number of obstacles moving on any known trajectories. For unknown trajectories, the non-linear v-obstacles can be used to generate local avoidance maneuvers based on the current velocity and path curvature of the moving obstacle. This elevates the planning strategy to a second order method, compared to the first order avoidance using the linear v-obstacle, and zero order avoidance using only position information. Analytic expressions for the non-linear v-obstacle are derived for general trajectories in the plane. The non-linear v-obstacles are demonstrated in a complex traffic example.

1 Introduction

Dynamic environments represent an important and a growing segment of modern automation, in applications as diverse as, intelligent vehicles negotiating freeway traffic, air and sea traffic control, automated wheel chairs [2], automated assembly, and animation. Common to these applications is the need to quickly select avoidance maneuvers that avoid potential collisions with moving obstacles.

There has been a sizable body of work on this problem (see [3] for an extended survey). However, until recently, the problem was largely addressed in what we consider to be a *zero order* approach because it relies explicitly on the positions of both robot and obstacles to determine potential collisions. A *first order*, velocity based, approach was presented in [3], introducing the concept of Velocity Obstacles (v-obstacles). The v-obstacle allows to efficiently select a *single* velocity by the robot that avoids *any number* of moving obstacles (if such a solution exists), given that they maintain their current velocities. A similar approach was developed separately in [1] collision detection between moving obstacles of arbitrary shapes, based on results from missile guidance. Other related recent works include the use of game theory for conflict resolution in air traffic management [4]. This approach assumes a competitive game that ensures safety by computing the worst case strategies for the pursuer and evader. While based on a nice theoretical foundation, this approach seems difficult to practically extend to more than two players.

This paper focuses on a unified representation of static and moving obstacles, and not on the avoidance strategy problem. This representation assumes a single avoiding intelligent agent and any number of apatetic (neither competitive nor cooperative) obstacles. This paper extends the concept of linear v-obstacles [3] to obstacles moving along arbitrary trajectories.

Although only first order, the linear v-obstacle was shown to successfully handle obstacles moving on arbitrary trajectories [3]. However, if the obstacles are moving along *known* trajectories, then deriving the v-obstacle to reflect their exact trajectories can result in fewer adjustments by the avoiding vehicle. In addition, the exact (non-linear) v-obstacle may be needed in cases where the linear v-obstacle indicates a collision, when

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in fact there is none because of the curved motion of the other vehicle. For example, using the linear v-obstacle, a vehicle moving along a curved road, turning right, appears to be on a collision course with the vehicles on the opposite lane, when in fact there is no imminent collision if the vehicle follows the turn. The v-obstacle that takes into account the road curvature should eliminate this confusion.

2 Review of the Linear V-Obstacle

A major advantage of the v-obstacle is that it is represented directly in the configuration space [3]. It represents the forbidden velocity "vectors" of a robot, or equivalently, the "velocity obstacle," at a given time, which are represented by a set of "points" in the configuration space. The geometry of this set of points can be precisely and easily defined, as is briefly discussed below (for details see [3]). For simplicity, we consider circular robots and obstacles. Growing the obstacles by the radius of the robot transforms the problem to a point robot avoiding circular obstacles. It is also assumed that the instantaneous states (position, velocity, and acceleration) of obstacles moving along arbitrary trajectories are either known or measurable.

A few words about notation: henceforth, A denotes a point robot, and $\mathcal{B}$ denotes the set of points defining the geometry of an obstacle. Since the obstacle is solid, $\mathcal{B}$ does not depend on t. $B(t)$ denotes the set of points occupied by the obstacle B at time t. Thus, if $b \in \mathcal{B}$ is some representative point (usually the center) of $\mathcal{B}$, and it coincides with some point $c(t)$ at time t, then $B(t) = c(t) + \mathcal{B}$. a/b denotes a *ray* that consists of the half line that originates at a, passes by b, and does not include a. Similarly, a/v denotes a ray that originates at a and is parallel to v.

The linear v-obstacle is demonstrated for the scenario shown in Figure 1, where, at time t_0, obstacle $B(t_0)$, moving at some linear velocity v_b, is to be avoided by a point robot A. It is constructed by first generating the so called *relative velocity cone* (RVC) by sweeping a half line from A along ∂B, the boundary of B. RVC is thus defined as the union of all rays originating from A and passing through $\partial B(t_0)$:

$$RVC = \cup A/b, \;\; b \in \partial B(t_0). \tag{1}$$

RVC is the set of all velocities, $v_{a/b} \neq 0$, of A *relative* to B that would result in collision at some time $t \in (0, \infty)$, assuming that the obstacle stays on its current course at its current speed. Consequently, relative velocities outside of RVC ensure avoidance of B at all times under the same assumptions. Translating RVC by v_b produces the *velocity obstacle*, VO [3]:

$$VO = v_b + RVC \tag{2}$$

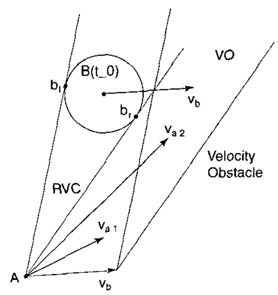

Figure 1: The Linear Velocity Obstacle.

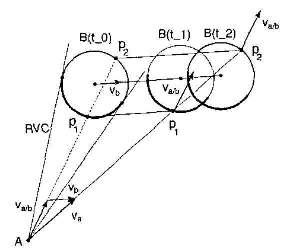

Figure 2: Collision points between A and B.

where in this context, "+" denotes the Minkowski sum:

$$VO = \{x | x = y + v_b, y \in RVC\}. \tag{3}$$

Thus, VO represents a set of *absolute* velocities, v_a, of A that would result in collision at some time $t \in (0, \infty)$. Geometrically, each point $x \in VO$ represents a vector originating at A and terminating at x.

We call VO a *linear* v-obstacle because it ensures avoidance using a *single* maneuver at time t_0 under the assumption that the obstacle maintains its current course and speed. For an obstacle moving on a curved path, its current velocity represents a first order approximation of its actual trajectory at time t_0. Similarly, the linear v-obstacle represents a first order approximation of the non-linear v-obstacle presented later.

By construction, RVC is a convex cone with extreme rays tangent to $B(t_0)$, as shown in Figure 1. The extreme rays represent the set of relative velocities that would result in A grazing $\mathcal{B}$ at some future time. Denoting λ the ray $A/v_{a/b}$, the point of contact, p, between A and B is the first (closest to A) intersection between λ and $\partial B(t_0)$, as stated in the following Proposition. The time of contact is determined by the magnitude of $v_{a/b}$.

Proposition 1: Let A and $\mathcal{B}$ be moving at constant velocities such that $v_{a/b} \in RVC$. Let λ be the ray $A/v_{a/b}$. Assuming $A \cap B(t_0) = \emptyset$ at $t = t_0$, A penetrates $\mathcal{B}$ at some point $p = \lambda \cap \partial B(t_0), (A, p) \cap B(t_0) = \emptyset$.

Proposition 2: Let $\mathcal{B}$ be a circular obstacle, moving at a constant velocity v_b, and A be a point robot. Also, let the right and left extreme rays of RVC be λ_r and

λ_l, and their right and left tangency points with $B(t_0)$ be b_r and b_l, respectively. A will graze $\mathcal{B}$ at point b_r iff $v_{a/b}$ belongs to λ_r. The same holds for point b_l and ray λ_l.

Proof: This is a direct result of Proposition 1, where b_r is the only point (for a circular $\mathcal{B}$) at which the ray $A/v_{a/b}$, $v_{a/b} \in \lambda_r$, intersects $B(t_0)$. Contact at other points (resulting from $v_{a/b} \notin \lambda_r$ but $v_{a/b} \in RVC$) results in A penetrating $\mathcal{B}$. □

Observing that points b_r and b_l partition $\partial B(t_0)$ into two subsets: ∂U (farthest from A) and ∂L (closest to A), we state the following Proposition (see Figure 2):

Proposition 3: Let A and $\mathcal{B}$ be moving at constant velocities such that $v_{a/b}$ is interior to RVC. Assuming $A \cap B = \emptyset$ at $t = t_0$, A penetrates $\mathcal{B}$ through some point $p \in \partial L$.

VO represents the velocities of A that would result in collision at any time $t = (0, \infty)$. It is useful to identify a subset of VO that would result in collision at a specific time. The time to collision, t_c, for any $v_{a/b} \in RVC$ is simply

$$t_c = t_0 + \frac{||p||}{||v_{a/b}||}, \quad p = \partial L \cap A/v_{a/b}. \tag{4}$$

where $||\cdot||$ is the Euclidian norm, and p is a point (and vector) in a coordinate frame centered at A.

Using (4), we obtain the set $RVC(t)$ of all relative velocities, in a frame centered at A, that would result in collision with any point of $\mathcal{B}$ at time $t > t_0$:

$$RVC(t) = \frac{c(t_0) + \mathcal{B}}{t - t_0}, \quad t > t_0. \tag{5}$$

where $c(t_0)$ represents the position of $\mathcal{B}$ at time t_0.

The shape of $RVC(t)$ thus depends on $\mathcal{B}$ and its relative position to A at time t_0, as shown in Figure 3. Translating $VC(t)$ by v_b produces the set $AVC(t)$ of all *absolute* velocities that would result in collision with any point of $\mathcal{B}$ at time $t > t_0$:

$$AVC(t) = v_b + RVC(t). \tag{6}$$

This leads to the following formal statement of the linear v-obstacle, $VO = \bigcup_{t>t_0} AVC(t)$:

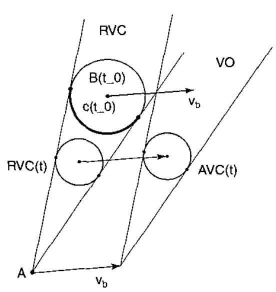

Figure 3: A Temporal Element of VO.

Theorem 1: Consider at time t_0 a point robot A, located at the origin, and an obstacle $\mathcal{B}$ centered at $c(t_0)$ with a constant velocity v_b. The linear v-obstacle, VO, represents the set of all linear velocities of A that would collide with $\mathcal{B}$ at some time $t > t_0$:

$$VO = v_b + \bigcup_{t>t_0} \frac{c(t_0) + \mathcal{B}}{t - t_0}. \tag{7}$$

Clearly, the linear v-obstacle can be truncated to reflect collisions within a specified time interval $[t_1, t_2]$ simply by defining the time interval in (7):

$$VO(t_1, t_2) = v_b + \bigcup_{t_2 \geq t > t_1} \frac{c(t_0) + \mathcal{B}}{t - t_0}. \tag{8}$$

Truncating VO to reflect specific time limits allows to focus the motion planning problem on imminent collisions occuring within some given time horizon [3]. It also allows the consideration of large static obstacles, such as surrounding walls and highway barriers, with v-obstacles for $(0, \infty)$ each covering half of the velocity space.

3 The Non-Linear V-Obstacle

The non-linear v-obstacle ($NLVO$) applies to the scenario shown in Figure 4, where, at time t_0, a point robot, A, attempts to avoid a circular obstacle, $\mathcal{B}$, located at $c(t_0)$, and is following a general known trajectory, $c(t)$. $NLVO$ thus consists of all velocities of A at t_0 that would result in collision with the obstacle at any time $t > t_0$. Selecting a *single* velocity, v_a, outside $NLVO$ should therefore avoid collision at all times, or

$$(A + v_a^{t_0} t) \notin (c(t) + \mathcal{B}) \quad \forall t > t_0 \tag{9}$$

where $v_a^{t_0}$ denotes the velocity of A at time t_0.

The non-linear v-obstacle is constructed by first determining the absolute velocities of A, v_a, that would result in collision at a specific time t. Referring to Figure 4, $v_a^{t_0}(t, p)$ that would result in collision with point

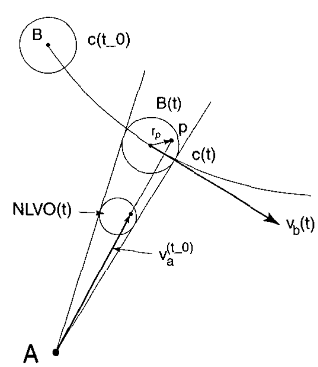

Figure 4: Construction of the non-linear v-obstacle.

$p \in B(t)$ at time $t > t_0$, expressed in a frame centered at $A(t_0)$, is simply

$$v_a^{t_0}(t,p) = \frac{c(t) + r_p}{t - t_0}, \tag{10}$$

where r_p is the vector to point p in the obstacle's fixed frame.

Similarly, the set, $NLVO(t)$ of all absolute velocities of A that would result in collision with any point in $B(t)$ at time $t > t_0$ is:

$$NLVO(t) = \frac{c(t) + \mathcal{B}}{t - t_0} \tag{11}$$

Geometrically, $NLVO(t)$ is a scaled $\mathcal{B}$, bounded by the cone formed between A and $B(t)$. Note that $NLVO(t)$ is independent of $v_b(t)$, since it applies only to $B(t)$ and not to its future positions. This leads to the construction of the linear v-obstacle, as stated in the following Theorem:

Theorem 2: Let A be a point robot, located at time $t = t_0$ at the origin, and B be an obstacle that is moving along a general trajectory $c(t), t = [t_0, \infty)$. The non-linear v-obstacle, $NLVO$, representing the set of all linear velocities of A that would collide with $B(t)$ at time $t = (t_0, \infty)$ is defined by

$$NLVO = \bigcup_{t > t_0} \frac{c(t) + \mathcal{B}}{t - t_0}, \tag{12}$$

The non-linear v-obstacle is a warped cone with apex at A. The boundaries of $NLVO$ represent velocities that would result in A grazing $\mathcal{B}$. The tangency points between A and $B(t)$ are determined by the equivalent linear v-obstacle, as stated in the following Lemma. We first define the equivalent linear v-obstacle:

Definition 1: Let $B(t)$ be at $c(t)$, and moving at $v_b(t)$ at time $t > t_0$. Its equivalent linear v-obstacle, $ELVO(B,t)$, is the linear v-obstacle of a virtual $\mathcal{B}$ that reaches $c(t)$ by moving at a constant $v_b(t)$ over $[t_0, t]$. $ELVO(B,t)$ is constructed at time t_0 of the linear trajectory.

Referring to Figure 5, $ELVO(B,t)$ is constructed by integrating $v_b(t)$ backwards in time to t_0, constructing $ERVC$ (the equivalent relative velocity cone) at point $c_0 = c(t) - v_b(t)(t - t_0)$, then translating $ERVC$ by $v_b(t)$.

Lemma 1: Let A be a point robot and $\mathcal{B}$ be a circular obstacle, moving along a general trajectory, $c(t)$. A will graze $B(t)$ iff

$$v_a^{t_0}(t) \in NLVO(t) \cap \partial ELVO(B,t)$$

with $\partial ELVO(B,t)$ being the extreme rays of $ELVO(B,t)$.

Proof: The proof is based on the fact that A grazing $B(t)$ at t is a contact of first order and therefore depends only on the relative position and velocity at t. We begin by proving that the direction (not necessarily the magnitude) of the relative velocity $v_{a/p}$ at the tangency point p at contact is not affected by the rotation of $B(t)$.

Referring to Figure 6, consider an arbitrary point, $p \in \partial B(t)$. If $v_b(t)$ is the velocity of $c(t)$, then the velocity of p, v_p is $v_p = v_b + r \times \omega$, where ω satisfies $v_b = \rho \times \omega$, ρ is the instantaneous radius of curvature (here we use it as a vector), and r is the position vector of p on $B(t)$. The relative velocity $v_{a/p}$ is

$$v_{a/p} = v_a - v_p = v_a - v_b - r \times \omega. \tag{13}$$

For p to be a tangency point, it is necessary that $v_{a/p}$ be tangent to $B(t)$, or $v_{a/p}$ be perpendicular to r:

$$v_{a/p} \cdot r = (v_a - v_b - r \times \omega) \cdot r = 0. \tag{14}$$

where $(\cdot)$ denotes the inner product. It follows that:

$$v_{a/p} \cdot r = 0 \Longleftrightarrow v_{a/b} \cdot r = 0. \tag{15}$$

Thus, p is a tangency point at t iff A makes a contact with p at t, and $v_{a/b}$ is tangent to $B(t)$ at p. In other words, $p \in \partial B(t)$ and $(v_a^{t_0}(t,p) - v_p(t)) \perp r_p(t)$. From (15) this is equivalent to $p \in \partial B(t)$ and $(v_a^{t_0}(t,p) - v_b(t)) \perp r_p(t)$.

Since c_0 is a translation of $c(t)$, $r_p(t) // r_p^{\,0}$ (the relative position of p on the virtual $\mathcal{B}$ at c_0). Therefore a velocity $v_a^{t_0}$ leads to A grazing $\mathcal{B}$ at time t iff $v_{a/b}^{t_0} \in \partial RVC(t)$ (leading to a collision with $p \in \partial B(t)$) and $v_{a/b}^{t_0} \perp r_p^{\,0}$. There are two and only two such relative velocities which are the elements of $RVC(t)$ belonging to the extremal rays of $ERVC(B,t)$. It follows that $v_a^{t_0} \in NLVO(t) \cap \partial ELVO(B,t)$, which proves the Lemma. □

The following Theorem, regarding the boundary of $NLVO$, follows from the proof of Lemma 1:

Theorem 3: Let A be a point robot and $\mathcal{B}$ be a circular obstacle moving along an arbitrary curve $c(t)$. Let also $b_l(t)$ and $b_r(t)$ be the respective left and right tangency points between $ERVC(B(t))$ and $\mathcal{B}$ at c_0. The

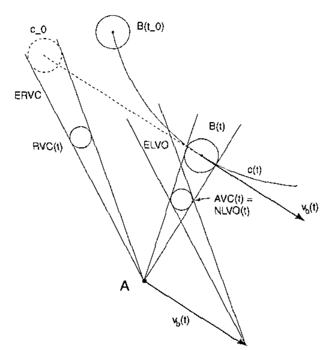

Figure 5: The Equivalent Linear V-Obstacle.

boundary of $NLVO$ consists of the curves:

$$\frac{b_l(t)}{t-t_0}+v_b, \qquad \frac{b_r(t)}{t-t_0}+v_b$$

where $b_l(t), b_r(t)$ are the vectors to the respective points on $B(t)$ in a coordinate frame centered at A.

4 An Analytic Approximation of $NLVO$

A conservative representation of the boundary of $NLVO$ can be derived using complex numbers. The trajectory, $c(t)$, followed by the obstacle, $\mathcal{B}$, can be represented by the complex number

$$c(t) = d(t)e^{i\theta(t)}. \tag{16}$$

where $i = \sqrt{-1}$, and $d(t)$ and $\theta(t)$ are measured in a coordinate frame centered at A (see Figure 7). Differentiating (16) yields $v_b(t)$. Dividing (16) by t yields the center, $c_v(t)$, of $NLVO$, assuming $t_0 = 0$:

$$c_v(t) = \frac{d(t)}{t}e^{i\theta(t)}. \tag{17}$$

By Theorem 3, the boundary of $NLVO$ consists of the tangency points between $ELVO$ and $RVC(t)$. For simplicity, let $\mathcal{B}$ be circular, although the following applies, with minor modifications, to $\mathcal{B}$ of any shape. $ELVO$ is a cone with a center line passing through $c_v(t)$ and an apex at $v_b(t)$. The center line, $c_l(t)$, of this cone is therefore

$$\begin{aligned} c_l(t) &= c_v(t) - v_b(t) \\ &= [(\frac{1}{t} - i\dot{\theta}(t))z(t) - \dot{z}(t)]e^{i\theta(t)}. \end{aligned} \tag{18}$$

The exact boundary of $NLVO$ is traced by the tangency points between $ELVO$ and $RVC(t)$. For simplicity, we approximate the exact tangency points by a simpler procedure that computes instead the tangency points, $vo_r(t)$ and $vo_l(t)$ between $RVC(t)$ and the two tangents passing parallel to $\hat{c}_l(t)$:

$$vo_r(t) = c_v(t) + i\frac{r}{t}\hat{c}_l(t) \tag{19}$$

$$vo_l(t) = c_v(t) - i\frac{r}{t}\hat{c}_l(t), \tag{20}$$

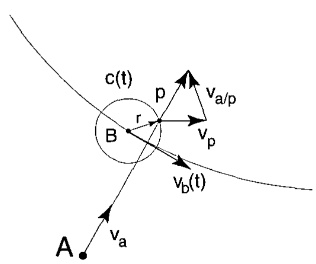

Figure 6: Tangency Points for a General Trajectory.

where $\hat{c}_l(t)$ is the unit vector parallel to $c_l(t)$, r is the radius of $\mathcal{B}$. The points $vo_r(t)$ and $vo_l(t)$ are exterior to the true $NLVO$ because $(b_r, b_l) \cap (vo_r(t), vo_l(t))$, where (a, b) represent the boundary arc between a and b. Thus, using $vo_r(t)$ and $vo_l(t)$ yields a conservative representation of $NLVO$, except near singularity points, where $A \in RVC(t)$, as discussed later.

We now apply the preceding formula to a circular obstacle of radius r that moves along a circular trajectory of radius R, centered at point $O = De^{i\phi}$ in a coordinate frame centered at A, at angular speed ω, starting at $\theta(t_0) = \theta_0$:

$$\begin{aligned} c(t) &= De^{i\phi} + Re^{i\theta(t)} && (21)\\ c_v(t) &= \frac{1}{t}[De^{i\phi} + Re^{i\theta(t)}] && (22)\\ v_b(t) &= i\omega Re^{i\theta(t)} && (23)\\ c_l(t) &= \frac{1}{t}[De^{i\phi} + (1-i\omega t)Re^{i\theta(t)}] && (24)\\ \theta(t) &= \omega t + \theta_0 && (25)\\ & && (26) \end{aligned}$$

5 Singularities

The boundary of $NLVO$ consists of the tangency points between $ERVC$ and $RVC(t)$ (also $ELVO$ and $AVC(t)$). This assumes that the apex of $ERVC$ (A) is outside of $RVC(t)$, for otherwise $ERVC$ is not defined. There are cases when $A \in RVC(t)$, as shown in Figure 8. This occurs when $B(t)$ moves away from A such that when translated to the virtual point c_0, it includes A. Although $ERVC$ is not defined at such singularities, $NLVO(t)$ is, and so is $RVC(t) = NLVO(t) - v_b$. The only consequence of $ERVC$ not being defined is that we cannot identify tangency points between A and $B(t)$. This implies that A cannot be tangent to $B(t)$. Therefore, any attempt to reach $B(t)$ at a singularity would result in A penetrating $B(t)$, for *all* $v_a^{t_0}(t) \in NLVO(t)$.

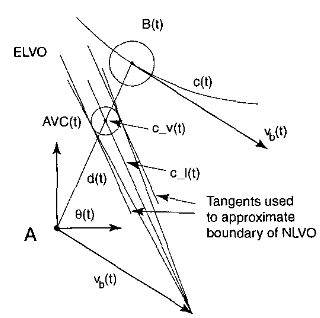

Figure 7: Construction of the approximate non-linear v-obstacle.

6 Examples

Figure 9 shows the use of the NLVO to solve a difficult traffic merging problem. Robot A, coming from the left, wishes to merge tangentially with the traffic in the right lane of a curved road after crossing the left lane with opposing traffic, using a constant velocity. The vehicles on the curved lanes move at constant speeds.

In Figure 9, (a) represents the initial configuration with the trajectories and the velocities of the robots; (b) represents the same situation as (a), but with the NLVO drawn. The complexity of this situation is apparent from the many discontinuous sets of avoiding velocities. The choice of a velocity in the free space in (b) permits to perform the entire maneuver safely at a constant speed, as shown in the remaining snapshots.

7 Conclusions

The concept of velocity obstacles was generalized to consider obstacles moving on arbitrary trajectories. The nonlinear v-obstacle consists of a warped cone that is a time-scaled map of the obstacle along its trajectory. Selecting a single velocity vector outside the nonlinear v-obstacle guarantees avoidance of the obstacle during the time interval for which the v-obstacle has been generated. Analytic expressions of the non-linear v-obstacle for general planar obstacles were derived. They can be used to approximate unknown trajectories by using the current velocity and path curvature of the moving obstacle. Such second order approximations yield more efficient avoidance maneuvers (fewer adjustments) than the first approximation offered by the linear v-obstacle.

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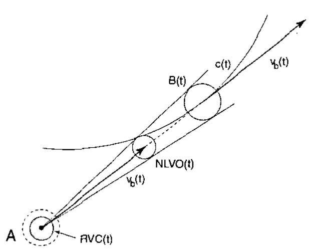

Figure 8: A singularity.

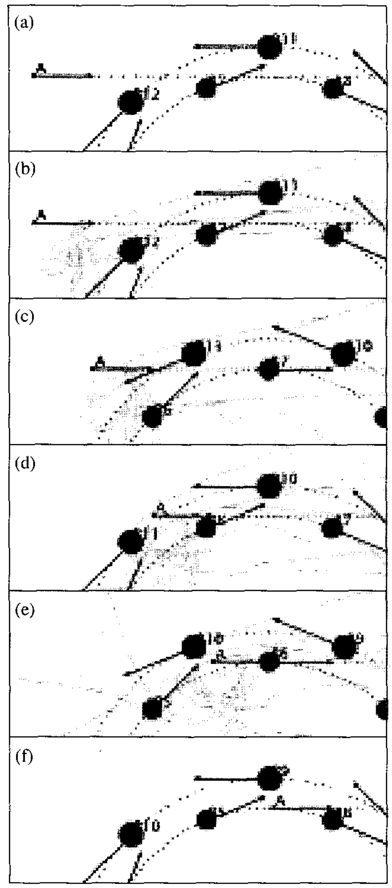

Figure 9: Merging with traffic along a curved road at a constant speed.

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