# Analysis

### Introduction

The solar system is an important part of the physics curriculum, and it’s something that children often find more interesting than other core physics topics such as circuits or mechanics. I think it’s important to teach the solar system because it’s fun, and because it can also help students understand the more boring topics, such as forces or energy, as forces and conservation of energy can be demonstrated with the solar system.

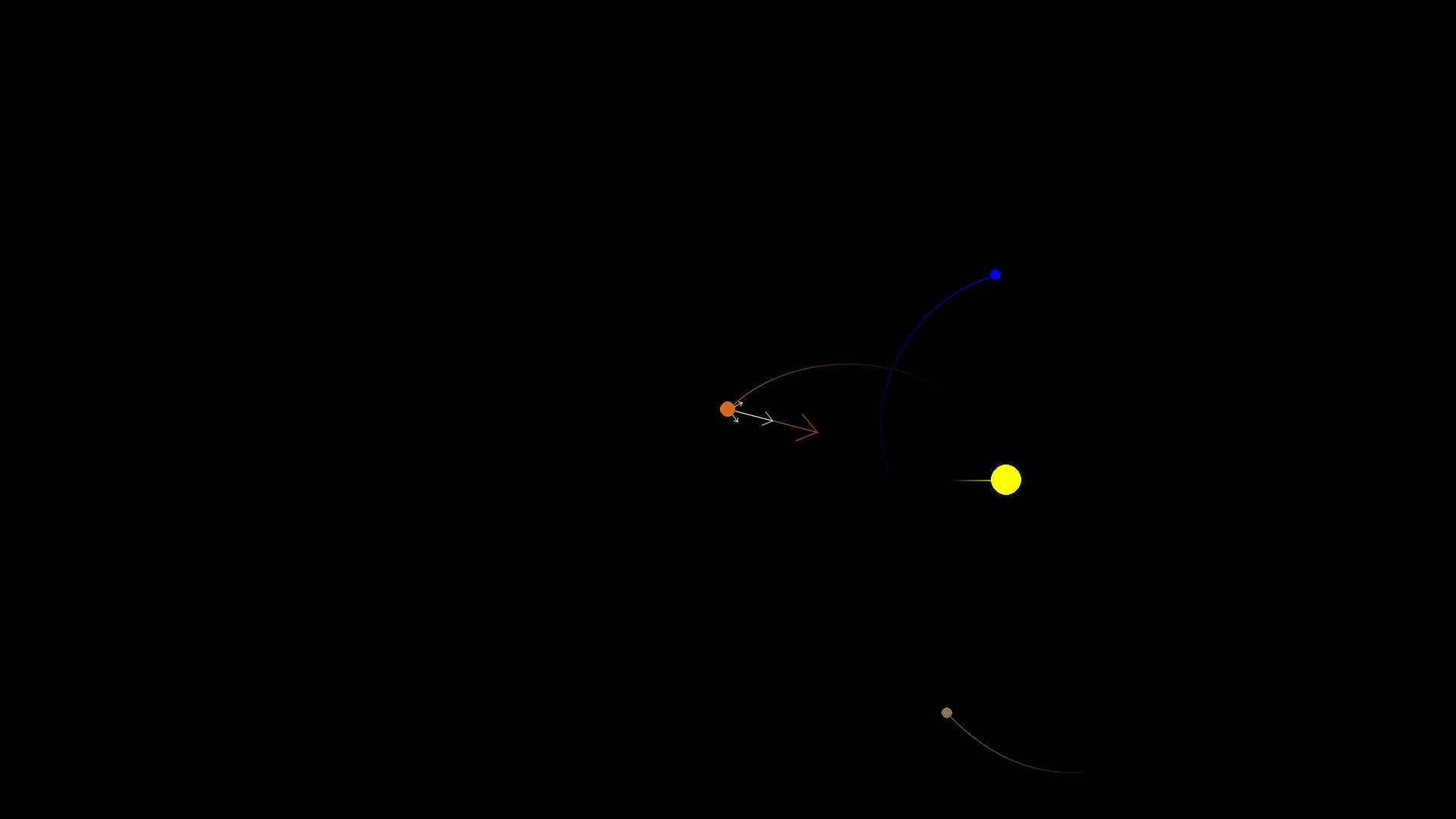
However, there is a lack of interactive tools available for teaching the solar system that also incorporate other physics topics such as energy. It would be useful to teachers, and students, to have an application that can use an interesting topic like space that also teaches important concepts from other topics such as conservation of momentum or Newton’s laws.

### How a simulation of the solar system works

The orbits of the planets are governed by two fundamental laws of physics:

* Newton’s second law of motion: , where F is the force acting on a body, m is the mass of a body, and a is the acceleration of the body
* Newton’s law of universal gravitation: once again F is the force, G is something called the “gravitation constant”, M and m represent the masses between two bodies, and r2 is the distance between them.

To demonstrate this, a force diagram is attached.



The orange planet has 4 arrows around it. These are the forces acting on it. The arrow shows the direction of each force and the length of the arrow represents the strength of the force. The white arrows are individual forces, you can see one pointing towards the brown planet, one pointing towards the blue planet, and one pointing towards the yellow sun. The arrow pointing towards the sun is much longer than the other arrows, representing that it has a stronger effect. This is because the sun has a much larger mass, and so the force of gravity due to it is a lot stronger.

The brown arrow is the resultant force. This is what happens when you pull the planet in the direction of all three arrows at the same time. Because the force from the sun is so much stronger than the force due to the other planets, the resultant force is pretty similar to the force from the sun.

This simulation works fine, until planets collide. How collisions are handled will be explained later, as it’s rather technical.

### What teachers want in a simulation of the solar system

These are extracts from an interview with the South Wilts physics department

Question:

“What content is covered when teaching lower school classes?”

Answer:  
 “We do a little bit of work with Y7 looking at the order of the planets in the Solar System and the properties of some of the planets. They need to understand why we have days, seasons and years.”

“In Y11 we look at the objects in the solar system and orbital motion. They need to know that gravity provides a centripetal force and how closer planets orbit faster. Usually they get asked about orbital motion in the context of satellites – low polar vs geostationary”

How this impacts the project:

Showing the orbital motions of the planets is definitely useful, but I also need another view to show the motion of satellites around the Earth for the year 11s. This would require a 3D model of the Earth. If I included a light source in this model of the Earth, emulating the Sun, it would also help explain the days and seasons for the year 7s.

Question:

Do you currently use any interactive tools when teaching the solar system? If so, which, and how do you use them? Do you think there’s anything they’re lacking that would help kids learn better?

Answer:

Not with Y11.

Y7 have the opportunity to complete independent research on a planet in the solar system and we share this link <https://eyes.nasa.gov/apps/orrery/#/home.> It has easy links to extra information and a size comparison.

It would be good to see this combined with something that shows the orbital motion of satellites.

<https://phet.colorado.edu/sims/html/my-solar-system/latest/my-solar-system_all.html>

This simulator is great to show the effect of changing mass on the theoretical solar system. I wonder if there could be a simulator which enabled us to ‘play’ with the masses in our actual solar system to see what happens – probably this would be more useful Y11 onwards.

How this impacts the project:

I need to create something that shows the motion of planets, as well as having size comparisons, like in the link above, but also shows the motion of satellites around the Earth. Should be possible to edit the masses of objects to show the effect it has too.

Question:

What other features would you want in an interactive program that would make it useful for teaching?

Answer:

With younger students it is good to be able to direct them to suitable sources of information when setting them independent tasks to avoid them just copying and pasting things they don’t understand.

Impact on project:

Planets, satellites and other celestial objects should have links to reliable, easy to digest sources of information about them when clicked on.

Question:

Should the program focus entirely on the solar system, or would it be useful to also use the orbits to demonstrate concepts like Newton’s laws, conservation of energy and conservation of momentum?

Answer:

We look at the solar system right at the end of Y11 so if there was a program which linked to key Newtonian Physics, it would be a great way to re-visit these laws in a different context.

Impact on project:

Should include things such as force diagrams and total energy to link the solar system to these concepts.

A review of the features requested:

1. Links to extra information
2. Size comparison
3. Showing days, seasons, years
4. Showing satellite orbits orbits
5. Interactively changing the mass of the planets
6. Demonstrating concepts of Newtonian physics

Feature 1 is very simple to implement. Celestial bodies will be stored as objects. It would be very easy to add a link to a reliable source as an attribute for each object, and then display it when the object is clicked on.

Feature 2 should also be rather simple. It can be done by splitting the screen in half, displaying the chosen object in the left half, and scaling the left half so that it fits the chosen object. Then display the other chosen object for comparison in the right half at the same scale.

I will lump features 3 and 4 together, as they both require the same thing. Making the model of the solar system 3D. This is challenging, 3D graphics are difficult, particularly in python. These would be great features to have, but may be beyond the scope of the project. The best way to approach them seems to be through Panda3D.

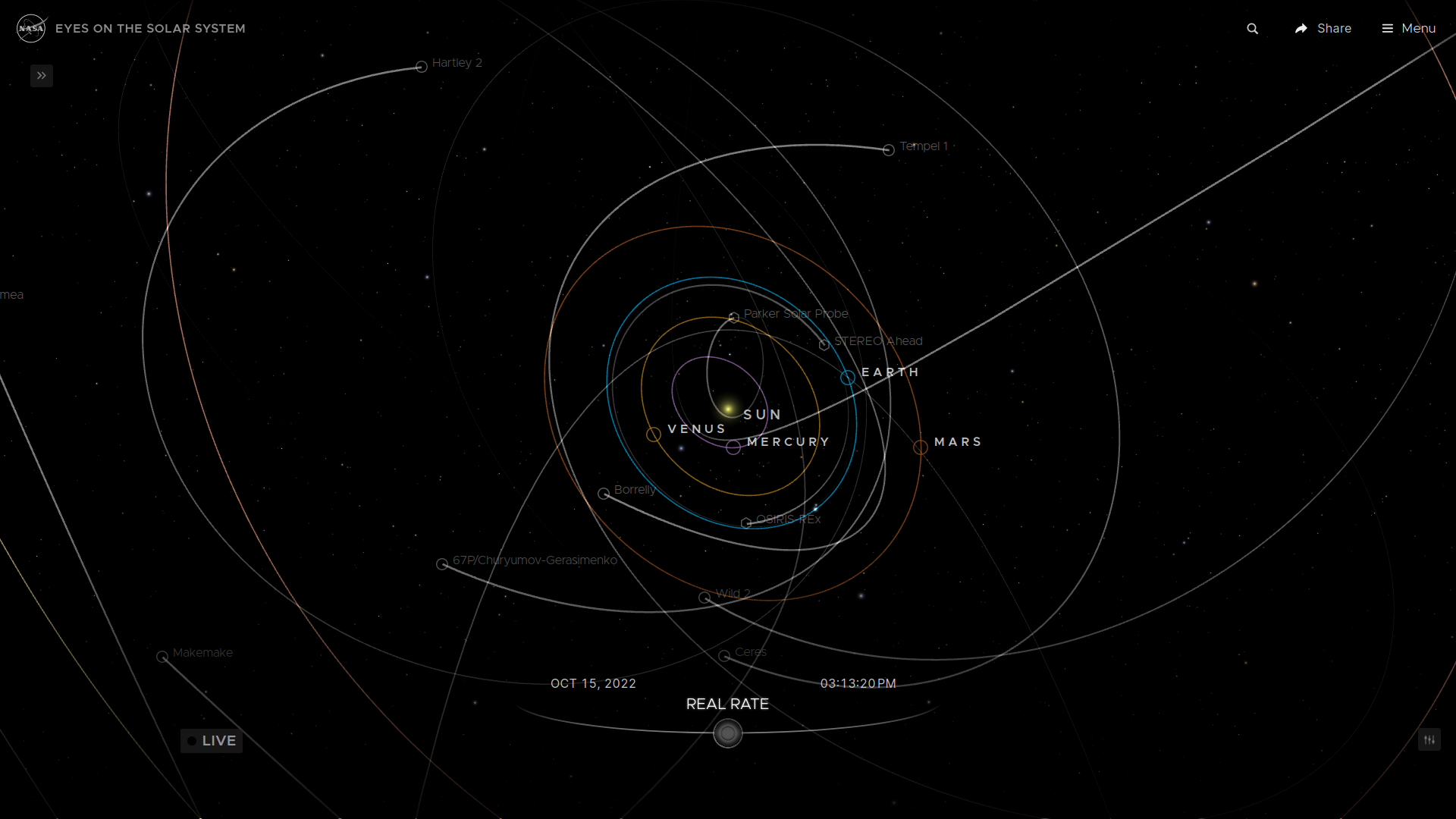
Feature 5 is doable. The mass of planets is already stored as an attribute for them. All that needs to be done is to let users edit the mass of said planets.

For feature 6 the challenge is figuring out how to do it in a way that a 12 year old can understand. The program already conserves momentum, energy, and uses Newton’s laws of motion because it’s supposed to be an accurate simulation. The hard bit is trying to make it clear to kids how those things are happening in the program, and help them get a better understanding of it. I will have some back and forth on the best way to do this with the client

## Current alternatives

### NASA’s Eyes

<https://eyes.nasa.gov/apps/orrery/#/home>

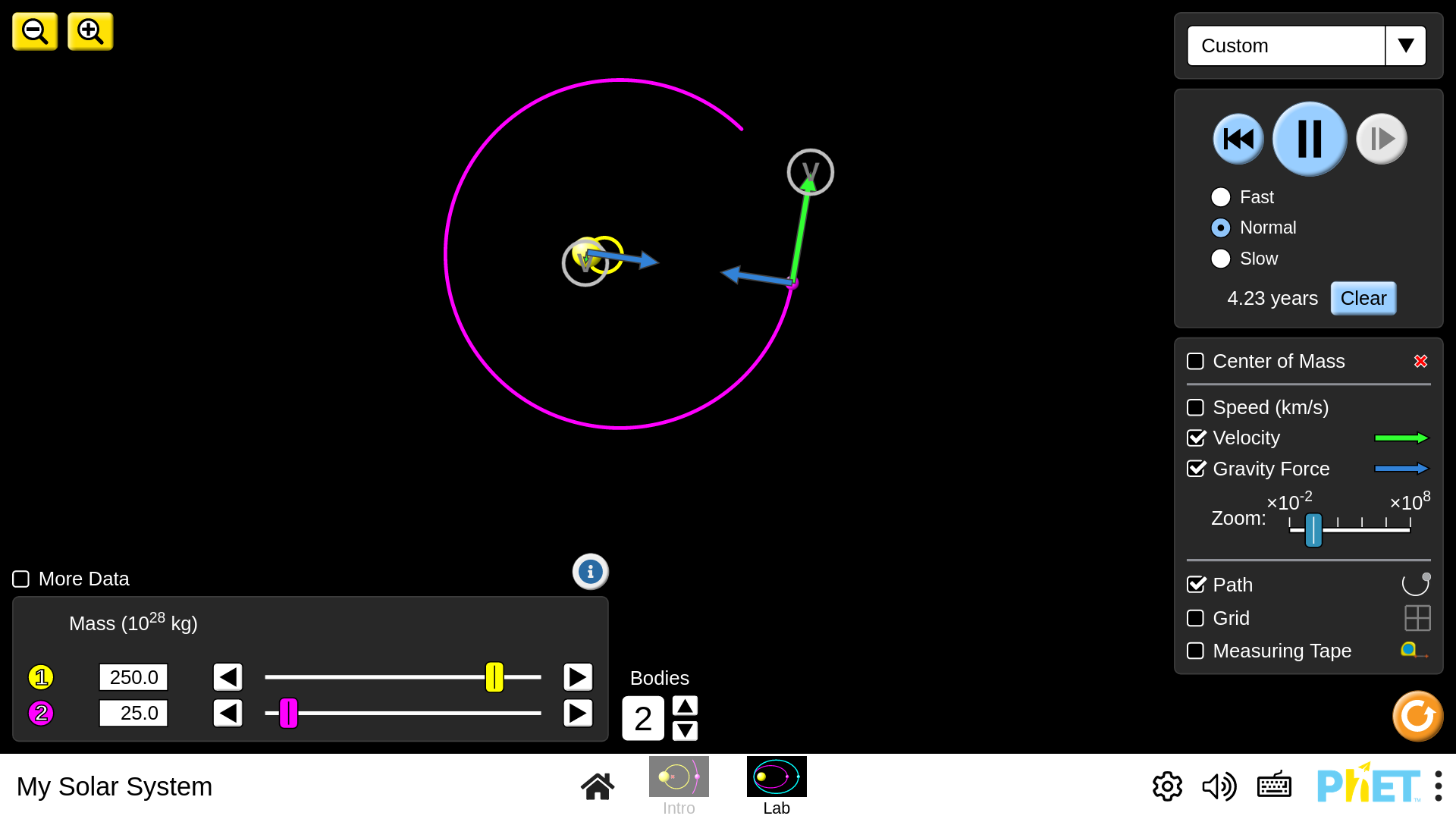


Eyes is a suite of products developed by NASA used for visualising their data. Their orrery, shown in the figure above, demonstrates the orbits of planets, asteroids, comets, and certain satellites. It is freely available from any browser, no download required, which is very convenient. My school currently uses this to teach year 7’s, primarily because it has links to further reading for their research project. It also accurately shows the trajectories of planets and other celestial bodies. Since the planets are 3d it can also be used to explain the days and seasons. This makes it a useful teaching tool.

However, the site lacks a few things. There are very few satellites shown orbiting Earth, and not enough to explain the different kind of satellite orbits like geostationary, polar etc. There is also no connection to Newtonian mechanics, nothing demonstrating it, and no way to change the mass of the planets.

### PhET: My Solar System

<https://phet.colorado.edu/sims/html/my-solar-system/latest/my-solar-system_all.html>



PhET (Physics Education Technology) is a website hosting a large amount of interactive physics simulations where students can tweak parameters and see the effects in real time. Its simulations are used by schools all around the world, and mine is no exception. As mentioned in the interview, my school finds the PhET simulation for the solar system useful because it lets you change the masses of the bodies in the solar system. It also includes force and velocity vectors, which can be used to help link back to Newtonian mechanics.

The drawback is that it’s all on a fictional solar system. You can’t put it into context with our actual planets. This would both be entertaining for students (who doesn’t want to know what would happen if the Moon weighed as much as Jupiter?) and help them visualise the effects of changing mass.

### Orbtrack

<https://www.orbtrack.org/>



Orbtrack is a tool for tracking satellites. It’s not an educational tool, but I’m including it here as showing satellite orbits was a requested feature from my physics department. Orbtrack allows you to select any satellite and show its path across a flat, 2d map. The reason for this is because showing it on a 2d map is more practical for users that want to see when satellites will pass over them.

The drawbacks of this is that it’s 2d, which is not good for teaching as students will find the strange patterns made by orbital paths projected onto a 2d surface hard to understand, and it can only show one satellite at a time. I will aim to use a 3d model in my program.

## What I’ve learned from the alternatives

* A website is by far the most accessible format for teachers
* Interactivity and being able to edit parts of the system is beneficial to learning and should be in the program
* The program should show the actual solar system, not a fictional one
* Arrows and other visual tools should be used to intuitively show physical quantities such as force and velocity