Bilateral Teleoperation of Groups of Mobile Robots with Time-Varying Topology

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Abstract—In this paper, a novel decentralized control strategy for bilaterally teleoperating groups of (possibly heterogeneous) mobile robots from different domains (aerial, ground, marine and underwater) is proposed. By using a decentralized control architecture, the group of robots, treated as the slave-side, is made able to navigate in a cluttered environment while avoiding obstacles, inter-robot collisions and following the human motion commands. Simultaneously, the human operator acting on the master side is provided with a suitable force feedback informative of the group response and of the interaction with the surrounding environment. Using passivity based techniques, we allow the behavior of the group to be as flexible as possible with arbitrary split and join events (e.g., due to inter-robot visibility/packet losses or specific task requirements) while guaranteeing the stability of the system. We provide a rigorous analysis of the system stability and steady-state characteristics, and validate performance through human/hardware-in-the-loop simulations and experiments by considering a fleet of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) as case study.

I. INTRODUCTION

For several applications like surveillance of large perimeters, search and rescue in disaster regions, and exploration of wide or unaccessible areas, the use of a group of simple robots rather than a single complex robot has proven to be very effective, and the problem of coordinating a group of agents has received a lot of attention by the robotics and control community over the last decade, see [1] for a survey. Indeed, such a fruitful interplay has resulted in significant advances in the mathematical formalization, theoretical analysis and actual realization of complex multi-robot systems for diverse applications, like exploration [2], coverage [3], cooperative transportation [4], formation control [5], distributed estimation [6] and sensing [7], [8]. Nevertheless, when the tasks become extremely complex and high-level cognitive-based decisions are required online (e.g., during exploration of very cluttered, dynamic and unpredictable environments for search and rescue applications), complete autonomy is still far from being reached and human’s intervention/assistance is necessary. In this context, teleoperation systems, where a human operator commands a remote robot through a local interface, allow to exploit human’s intelligence to solve tasks too complex for nowadays robots. Symmetrically, the enhancement of human perceptions and actions via a group of remote multiple robots, in order to operate rapidly and precisely at the macroscopic, microscopic, and planetary scales, constitutes a novel and challenging topic in the broad field of human–robot interfaces and telepresence applications.

In this paper, we study the problem of establishing a bilateral teleoperation system for remotely controlling the motion of groups of (possibly heterogeneous) mobile robots in a decentralized way. Instead of being focused on a particular class of robot, we aim for an approach general enough to allow for a straightforward application to any kind of mobile robot, such as aerial, ground, space, naval, or underwater vehicles. Indeed, the fundamental problem addressed in this work consists in establishing a bilateral teleoperation channel for remote navigation purposes, i.e., a necessary premise for any other specific objective, such as tele-exploration, -transport, or -manipulation. In our envisaged teleoperation system, the remote mobile robots (the slave-side from now on) should possess some minimum level of local autonomy and act as a group, e.g., by maintaining some desired inter-distances and avoiding collisions by means of decentralized controllers. At the same time, the human operator, acting on the master device, should be in control of the overall group motion and receive, through haptic feedback, suitable cues informative enough of the remote robot/environment state. On top of this remote navigation layer, the group should still be allowed to perform additional local tasks by exploiting the internal slave side redundancy w.r.t. the master device commands.

Bilateral teleoperation of (multiple) mobile robots presents several differences w.r.t. conventional teleoperation systems: first, there exists a structural kinematic dissimilarity between master and slave sides, i.e., the master possesses a limited workspace while the slave an unbounded one. Second, in a typical scenario, there is no physical contact with the environment since this would represent a dangerous situation (e.g., a crash) for the robots. Therefore, the interaction forces with the external world, such as contact forces, must be fabricated and, to some extent, a redefinition of standard concepts related to telepresence is required to properly assess the human operator immersiveness. In this respect, we refer the reader to some preliminary studies which are exploring the human perception point of view in these uncommon teleoperation scenarios [9], [10]. Lastly, the slave-side possesses large motion redundancy w.r.t. the master-side because of the mismatch between the degrees of freedom (DOFs) of the master (usually in the range...
of 3–6), and the DOFs of the slave (in the range of 6N for N robots, when considered as rigid bodies). In addition to these issues, a proper design of a multi-robot slave-side must also cope with the typical requirements of decentralized sensing and control for guaranteeing robustness to failures, achieving actual feasibility, and ensuring low computational load: roughly speaking, one should avoid the presence of any central sensing, communication or control unit in the network [1], [11], [12]. Finally, the design of a navigation-oriented teleoperation should allow for the possibility of adding extra-tasks at the slave side independent of the main navigation command received from the human operator. Therefore, stability w.r.t. time-varying interaction topology within the slave side network should also be granted.

A. Contribution and Relation to Previous Work

A lot of interest is recently arising in the robotics community in the bilateral teleoperation of mobile robots, see, for instance, [13], [14], [15], [16], [17], where the haptic teleoperation of a single mobile robot is considered. In fact, it has been widely proven that the use of a force information allows to obtain superior performance with respect to the case where no haptic feedback is present, see, e.g., [18], [19], [20], [21]. In [22], a conventional multi-master/multi-slave teleoperation system with no delay is developed and a centralized strategy for controlling the cooperative behavior of the robots is proposed. In [23], [24], two approaches for controlling multiple ground robots through a master device are presented, while in [25], an impedance controller for teleoperating a group of slaves in a leader-follower modality is proposed. Finally, in [26], a bilateral control strategy that allows to coordinate the motion between the master and the slaves under arbitrary time delay is proposed, while in [27] a related (still passivity-based) work that considers fixed topology and deformable but fixed shape is also presented.

The main limitation of these approaches are the centralization (every robot needs to communicate with the master and/or with all the other robots), and the rigidity of the fleet which is not allowed, for example, to actively reshape the formation or to vary its topology online because of (arbitrary) internal decisions. Moreover, some of the cited works do not address the master/slave kinematic dissimilarity and consider a standard position-position teleoperation architecture which is not particularly suited for a bilateral teleoperation of mobile robots.

We also note that, although many existing leader-follower concepts could be seen as examples of unilateral teleoperation of multiple mobile robots (e.g., see [11], [28]) in this work we are considering the case of bilateral teleoperation of multiple mobile robots. This does not constitute a straightforward extension of the unilateral teleoperation case: indeed, the bilateral case establishes an additional coupling between the motion of the slave and the forces applied to the master device which, in turn, affect again the slave motion (as well-known from the standard bilateral teleoperation literature). Finally, similarly to our work, in [29] the possibility of splitting or joining the formation for double-integrator agents is also considered, and stability of the resulting switching system is formally proven. However, the authors considered the possibility of splits and joins only for excessive inter-robot distances: from the slave-side stability point of view, this is a quite simplified situation w.r.t. the case considered in this work where split and join decisions can be taken at any time and because of any internal criterium. We refer the reader to Rem. 5 in Sect. II-A for more details on this point.

To the best of our knowledge, this paper is the first attempt in proposing a framework able to address most of the aforementioned points by implementing a bilateral teleoperation system for remotely controlling a group of robots in a highly flexible and decentralized way. The theoretical foundation on top of which the paper is built is passivity-based control: on one side, passivity theory is exploited for guaranteeing a stable behavior of the slave group per se despite of autonomous maneuvers, time-varying fleet topology, and interaction with remote obstacles in a clean and powerful manner. On the other side, passivity theory is also instrumental for characterizing the stability of the ‘feedback interconnection’ among the environment/slave-side/master-side/human-operator as classically done in many previous teleoperation works [30].

A preliminary version of this paper has been published in [31]. Here, we extend that work by rigorously analyzing the steady-state behavior of the teleoperation system (Sec. III), by improving the overall presentation, scientific motivations, technical machinery, and reference to related works, by performing additional more thorough human/hardware-in-the-loop simulations of normal operations and steady-state regimes, and by adding a further experimental evaluation with a group of 4 real UAVs as slave side in order to prove the effectiveness and robustness of the proposed theoretical framework.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: after presenting the teleoperation architecture in Sec. II, Sec. II-A introduces one of the main contributions of the paper, i.e., a passivity-based modeling of the group of mobile robots and its interaction with the environment. Then, Sec. II-B briefly describes the model of the master device and Sec. II-C describes the master/slave passive interconnection and summarizes the whole teleoperation system, while Sec. III presents a formal characterization of the steady-state regime. Finally, results of several human/hardware-in-the-loop simulations and experiments using UAVs (quadrotors) as case study are reported in Sec. IV, and Sec. V concludes the paper.

II. The Teleoperation System

For the reader’s convenience, we will informally summarize the architecture of our teleoperation system which will be then rigorously detailed in the next Sects. II-A, II-B, and II-C. In our scheme, depicted Fig. 1, the slave side consists of a group of N agents among which a leader is chosen (denoted by the subscript l). The motion of an agent depends on the motion of the locally surrounding agents and obstacles by means of the action of nonlinear elastic-like couplings. The leader is a special agent that is also subject to the master control represented by the additional external force $F_s$. The remaining agents (not controlled by the master) are also referred to as...
followers. We let the spring coupling between a pair of agents to be broken and/or reestablished at any time. In this way, we ensure high flexibility w.r.t. possible additional tasks, and adequate maneuverability within cluttered environments as the group shape does not result overly constrained. The design and stability analysis of the slave side will be thoroughly illustrated in Sec. II-A and represents one of the main contributions of this paper.

The velocity-like quantity \( r_M \), (almost) proportional to the position of the master device, acts as velocity setpoint for the leader at the slave side thanks to the master/slave coupling force \( F_s \) (as explained in Sec. II-C). This allows to address the aforementioned master-slave kinematic dissimilarity. Conversely, the mismatch between \( r_M \) and the actual leader velocity \( v_l \) is transformed into the force \( F_m \) at the master side, in order to transmit to the user a feeling of the remote side (see Sec. II-B). This force will be shown in Sec. III to carry information about the total number and velocity of agents in the group, and about the interaction with the surrounding environment since the followers at the slave side will influence the velocity of the leader.

Passivity will be the leitmotif throughout the whole design and analysis phase. In fact, in order to ensure the stability of the system, our primary goal will be to design the master and slave side as passive systems joined by a passive interconnection. In this way, the bilateral teleoperation system will be characterized by a stable behavior in case of interaction with passive environments and passive human users. The choice of relying on the passivity framework is motivated by the following reasons: (i) in classical bilateral teleoperation settings, passivity is a well-established tool for proving stability of the human/master/slave/environment interconnection, see [30], [32] for a survey; (ii) because of the flexible behavior that will be described in Sect. II-A, the slave-side behaves as a switching system. Passivity provides a powerful and elegant tool to enforcing its stability under arbitrary switching (see PassiveJoin Procedure in Sec. II-A), while, if not using passivity, one should still design other strategies for guaranteeing stability of the slave-side switching dynamics; (iii) finally, providing a strategy that could make the slave-side stable but not passive would nullify the benefits discussed in point (i). Indeed, in this case one should explicitly prove the stability of the master/slave feedback interconnection rather than exploiting the well-known result of stable interconnection of a (passive) master with a (passive) slave.

Remark 1. We also note that our aim is to provide a strategy for implementing a stable decentralized bilateral teleoperation regardless of the leader identity. Therefore, the leader can be any robot which is in communication with the master side — the only requirement is that such a robot does exist at all times. Nevertheless, any specific strategy for choosing the leader robot can also be adopted depending on the particular application or task. For instance, [33] illustrates a way to choose a leader by maximizing the tracking performance of the slave.

A. The Slave Side

The slave side consists of a group of \( N \) robots coupled together. In this Section we detail a control strategy for obtaining a flexible cohesive behavior of the group (i.e., allowing arbitrary split and join) and, at the same time, to avoid inter-robot and obstacle collisions.

Every agent is modeled as a floating mass in \( \mathbb{R}^3 \), that is, an element storing kinetic energy:

\[
\begin{align*}
\dot{p}_i &= F_a^i + F_e^i - B_i M_i^{-1} p_i \\
\dot{v}_i &= \frac{\partial K_i}{\partial p_i} = M_i^{-1} p_i
\end{align*}
\]

where \( p_i \in \mathbb{R}^3 \) and \( M_i \in \mathbb{R}^{3\times3} \) are the momentum and (symmetric positive definite) inertia matrix of agent \( i \), respectively, \( K_i = \frac{1}{2} p_i^T M_i^{-1} p_i \) is the kinetic energy stored by the agent during its motion, and \( B_i \in \mathbb{R}^{3\times3} \) is a positive definite matrix representing an artificial damping added for asymptotically stabilizing the behavior of the agent\(^1\). Force \( F_a^i \in \mathbb{R}^3 \) represents the interaction of agent \( i \) with the other agents and will be designed in the following, while \( F_e^i \in \mathbb{R}^3 \) represents the interaction of agent \( i \) with the “external world”, i.e., the environment (obstacles) and the master side through the teleoperation channel (Sec. II-C). Finally, \( v_i \in \mathbb{R}^3 \) denotes the velocity of the agent, and \( x_i \in \mathbb{R}^3 \) its position in space, with \( \dot{x}_i = v_i \).

Note that terms \( M_i \) allow to model different inertial properties depending on the direction of motion (e.g., a quadrotor whose vertical dynamics is usually faster than the horizontal one). Furthermore, we can enforce heterogeneity in the group by providing different inertial characteristics \( M_1, \ldots, M_N \) and fluid resistances \( B_1, \ldots, B_N \) (e.g., aerodynamic versus hydrodynamic drag).

Remark 2. Depending on the context, (1) can be easily recast in \( \mathbb{R}^2 \) to, e.g., model ground or naval vehicles. We also assume that the robots under consideration are endowed with a controller able to track the smooth Cartesian trajectory generated by (1) with small/negligible tracking errors. This is the case, for example, of all the systems with a cartesian flat output [34], i.e., a point in \( \mathbb{R}^3 \) which algebraically defines,

\(^1\)This can represent typical physical phenomena such as wind/automatic drag for aerial robots, or hydrodynamic drag for underwater robots.
with its derivatives, the state and the control inputs of the system. Many mobile robots, including the usual nonholonomic ground robots, exhibit this property; for instance, [35] gives a non-exhaustive list of differentially flat mechanical systems, as nonholonomic vehicles or submarines. However, the description of particular trajectory tracking controllers is outside the scope of this paper. As an example, we refer the reader to [36], [37] where related control strategies for a class of UAVs are discussed².

We now give a formal definition of neighboring agents that will be used later on to define a suitable interaction graph for the group.

**Definition 1.** Let \( d_{ij} = \|x_i - x_j\| \) be the inter-distance among agents \( i \) and \( j \), and \( \sigma_{ij}(t) : \mathbb{R} \to \{0, 1\}, i \neq j \), represent a time-varying boolean condition satisfying at least the following requirements:

1) \( \sigma_{ij}(t) = 0 \), if \( d_{ij} > D \in \mathbb{R}^+ \);
2) \( \sigma_{ij}(t) = \sigma_{ji}(t) \).

Then, two agents \( i \) and \( j \) are defined as being neighbors if and only if \( \sigma_{ij}(t) = 1 \). Furthermore, two agents \( i \) and \( j \) are said to join if they become neighbors \( (\sigma_{ij} = 1 \Rightarrow \sigma_{ij} = 1) \) and, conversely, are said to split if they become non-neighbors \( (\sigma_{ij} = 1 \Rightarrow \sigma_{ij} = 0) \).

This neighboring definition is purposely stated in a very general form in order to account for any additional task requirement independent of the main navigation command. In this sense, item 1) is meant to model a generic limited range capability of onboard sensors and/or communication complexity of the robot network: whatever the task at hand, two agents are never allowed to interact if their interdistance overcomes a certain threshold \( D \). However, Def. 1 also leaves the possibility for a \( \sigma_{ij}(t) = 0 \) even though \( d_{ij} \leq D \). This captures our intention of admitting the presence of additional subtasks or constraints the agents may be subject to during their motion. For instance, in our teleoperation framework, the fleet could decide to separate in different logical subgroups in order to accomplish different objectives, but the separation decision could take place when the interdistances are less than \( D \). Similarly, the agents could be equipped with sensors not always able to provide their mutual position even if \( d_{ij} < D \) (e.g., visibility sensors such as cameras affected by occlusions, or wireless communication undergoing temporary packet losses), resulting in unwanted but unavoidable disconnections with their neighbors. Nevertheless, when two agents are actually interacting, we also require that they keep some preferred interdistance in order to avoid collisions and to achieve a cohesive behavior of the fleet. Finally, item 2) represents the fact that we aim for a symmetric neighboring condition: two agents always agree on their interaction state.

According to Def. 1, we then denote with \( \mathcal{N}_i \) the set of neighbors of \( i \). Since the relationship is symmetrical, \( j \in \mathcal{N}_i \Leftrightarrow i \in \mathcal{N}_j \). Finally, we also denote with \( \mathcal{G}(t) = (\mathcal{V}, \mathcal{E}(t)) \) the undirected graph induced by this neighboring relationship where the vertices \( \mathcal{V} \) represent the agents and \( \mathcal{E}(t) = \{(i, j) \in \mathcal{V} \times \mathcal{V} \mid \sigma_{ij}(t) = 1 \Rightarrow j \in \mathcal{N}_i \} \).

1) **Inter-Agent Coupling:** We now proceed to define the interaction force acting among two neighboring agents. In order to achieve a collision free, flexible and cohesive behavior of the fleet, we take inspiration from the inter-agent coupling proposed in [11] which, in turn, stemmed from the natural behavior of flocks of animals [39]. Let \( d_0 < D \) be a desired distance between the agents. If \( j \in \mathcal{N}_i \), agent \( i \) computes an interaction force \( F_{ij}^a \) whose magnitude and direction depends on the relative distance \( d_{ij} \) and bearing \( \eta_{ij} := (x_i - x_j) / d_{ij} \) between \( i \) and \( j \). In particular, the force is always directed along the bearing: if \( d_{ij} < d_0 \) a repulsive force is generated; if \( d_{ij} = d_0 \) a null force is produced; and if \( d_0 < d_{ij} \leq D \) an attractive force is computed. We also assume that, if \( d_{ij} > D \), a null force is generated since in this case \( j \notin \mathcal{N}_i \) by definition. Notice that, according to the previous definitions, it is \( F_{ij}^a = -F_{ji}^a \).

This inter-agent coupling can be modeled as the gradient of a nonlinear elastic element (virtual spring) that interconnects a pair of agents whenever they are neighbors. A possible potential function \( V(d_{ij}) \) with such a desired behavior is shown in Fig. 2. Note that the shape of the potential goes to infinity as \( d_{ij} \) approaches zero for providing an effective inter-agent repulsive force³. As proposed in [40], we then model the elastic coupling between two agents \( i \) and \( j \) as a (potential) energy storing element

\[
\begin{align*}
\dot{x}_{ij} &= v_{ij} \\
F_{ij}^a &= \frac{\partial V(x_{ij})}{\partial x_{ij}}
\end{align*}
\]

where \( x_{ij}, v_{ij}, F_{ij}^a \in \mathbb{R}^3 \) are, respectively, the state, the input, and the output (i.e., the generated force) of the virtual spring, and \( V(x_{ij}) = \bar{V}(\|x_{ij}\|) \) is the spring energy function.

Whenever \( j \in \mathcal{N}_i \), the virtual coupling (2) is connected (i.e., exchanges energy) with the dynamics (1) of agents \( i \) and \( j \). This formally means that the state \( x_{ij} \) is initialized to \( x_i - x_j \), \( v_{ij} = x_i - x_j = v_i - v_j \) in (2), and \( F_{ij}^a \) contributes to \( F_i^a \) in (1) as:

\[
F_i^a = \sum_{j \in \mathcal{N}_i} F_{ij}^a := \sum_{j \in \mathcal{N}_i} \frac{\partial \bar{V}}{\partial d_{ij}} \frac{\partial d_{ij}}{\partial x_{ij}} = \sum_{j \in \mathcal{N}_i} \frac{\partial \bar{V}}{\partial d_{ij}} \eta_{ij}.
\]

³In general, any lower bounded potential (e.g., the one proposed in [26]) having similar features would be a suitable choice.
Symmetrically, when \( j \notin N_i \), the virtual coupling is disconnected from the agent dynamics, that is, \( v_{ij} = 0 \) and \( F^a_{ij} \) does not contribute to \( F^a_t \).

**Remark 3.** We note that the interaction force \( F^a_i \) can be computed by agent \( i \) in a decentralized way. In fact, the computation is based on the shape of the inter-agent potential (which is known from the design phase), and on the distance and bearing of agents \( j \in N_i \) w.r.t. agent \( i \).

In order to write the overall agent/spring dynamics (slave-side) in a compact form, define \( p = (p_1^T, \ldots, p^T) \in \mathbb{R}^{3N} \), \( B = \text{diag}(B_i) \in \mathbb{R}^{3N \times 3N} \), \( x = (x_{1N}^T, x_{2N}^T, \ldots, x_{N-1N}^T)^T \in \mathbb{R}^{2(NN-1)} \) and \( F^e = (F_{11}^e, \ldots, F_N^e)^T \in \mathbb{R}^{3N} \), and let \( \mathcal{I}_G(t) \in \mathbb{R}^{N \times (N-1)} \) be the incidence matrix of the graph \( G(t) \) with the edge numbering and orientation induced by the entries of vector \( x \). Notice that \( \mathcal{I}_G(t) \) has a constant size despite of the time-varying nature of \( G(t) \). Indeed, \( j \notin N_i \) will result in a column of all zeros for \( \mathcal{I}_G(t) \) in correspondence of the edge \((i, j)\). It is then possible to model the slave side as a mechanical system described by:

\[
\begin{align*}
\dot{\mathcal{I}}(t) &= \begin{bmatrix} 0 & -I \end{bmatrix} \mathcal{I}(t) - \begin{bmatrix} B & 0 \end{bmatrix} \begin{bmatrix} \frac{\partial H}{\partial x} \\ \frac{\partial H}{\partial p} \end{bmatrix} + GF^e \\
v &= GH^T \begin{bmatrix} \frac{\partial H}{\partial x} \\ \frac{\partial H}{\partial p} \end{bmatrix}
\end{align*}
\]

where

\[
H = \sum_{i=1}^N \mathcal{K}_i + \sum_{i=1}^{N-1} \sum_{j=i+1}^N V(x_{ij})
\]

is the total energy of the system, \( \mathcal{I}(t) = \mathcal{I}_G(t) \otimes I_3 \), and \( G = (I_N \otimes I_3)^T \begin{bmatrix} 0 & 0 \end{bmatrix} \), with \( I_3 \) and \( I_N \) being the identity matrices of order 3 and \( N \) respectively, 0 representing a null matrix of proper dimensions, and \( \otimes \) denoting the Kronecker product.

**Proposition 1.** Assuming \( \mathcal{I}(t) = \text{const} \), i.e., no splits and joins are taking place because \( \sigma_{ij}(t) \equiv \text{const} \forall i, \forall j \neq i \), system (4) is passive with respect to the input/output pair \((F^e, v)\) with storage function \( H \).

**Proof:** The potential reported in Fig. 2 is a lower bounded function of the scalar distance among the agents \( \|x_{ij}\| \) and, as a consequence, a lower bounded function of \( x_{ij} \). Evaluating the time derivative of the storage function (5)

\[
\dot{H} = \begin{bmatrix} \frac{\partial^T H}{\partial p} & \frac{\partial^T H}{\partial x} \end{bmatrix} \begin{bmatrix} \dot{p} \\ \dot{x} \end{bmatrix}
\]

along the system trajectories in (4), and by noting that \( B \) is positive definite, it follows that

\[
\dot{H} = -\frac{\partial^T H}{\partial p} B \frac{\partial H}{\partial p} + v^T F^e \leq v^T F^e
\]

which concludes the proof.

Since (4) is a passive system, its interaction with any passive environment will still preserve passivity. This easily allows to include in inputs \( F^e_t \) in (1) an obstacle avoidance action. Indeed, as usual in applications involving mobile agents in unknown environments, we assume that, when they are detected, obstacles are treated as repulsive potentials producing a force that vanishes if the robot is far enough and grows as the robot comes closer to the obstacle. Such potentials can also be modeled as virtual springs, that is, passive systems, and their action is considered to be embedded in the terms \( F^e_t \).

2) **Split and Join While Preserving the Slave-Side Passivity:** Having established passivity of the slave-side with a constant interaction graph topology \( G = \text{const} \), we now analyze the general case of a time-varying \( G(t) \) because of the join and split decisions of Def. 1.

**Proposition 2.** If two agents \( i \) and \( j \) split according to Def. 1, then passivity of (4) is preserved.

**Proof:** If agent \( i \) and agent \( j \) split, the behavior of the slave side can be described by a subgraph of \( G, G' = (V', E') \), where \( V' = V \) and \( E' \) is obtained by \( E \) by erasing the edge connecting vertex \( i \) with vertex \( j \). The behavior of the slave side in case of split can be modeled by replacing, in (4), the incidence matrix \( \mathcal{I} \) with a new incidence matrix \( \mathcal{I}' = \mathcal{I}_G' \otimes I_3 \). The passivity of the system then follows from the same arguments of Proposition 1.

**Remark 4.** The fact that passivity of the slave-side is preserved despite of changes in \( \mathcal{I} \) in (4) due to split decisions depends on the fact that \( \mathcal{I} \) enters in the definition of a skew-symmetric matrix which leads to a null term in the energy balance (6). Also, during a split between two agents \( i \) and \( j \), the elastic element \( x_{ij} \) becomes isolated from the dynamics of the agents and keeps on storing the same energy \( V(x_{ij}) \) that was storing before the split decision, while the agents keep on interacting with the rest of the system.

A join decision, on the other hand, can lead to a violation of the slave side passivity: allowing two agents to join means instantaneously switching from a state characterized by no interaction to the inter-agent interaction of (2). This results in a new edge in \( E \), and in a corresponding update of the overall incidence matrix \( \mathcal{I} \). While, as per Prop. 2, a change in \( \mathcal{I} \) does not threaten passivity, some extra energy can still be produced during the join procedure. In fact, in the general case, the relative distance of two agents at the join decision can...
be different from their relative distance at the split decision, and this can result in a non passive behavior as shown in the illustrative example of Fig. 3 where some extra energy is produced when the agents join.

Remark 5. Note that in the particular case of a split because \( d_{ij} > D \) followed by a join because \( d_{ij} = D \) (see Def. 1), the join decision never threatens passivity: indeed, when the two agents split it is \( \dot{V}(d_{ij}) = \dot{V}(D) \) and, necessarily, when they join it is again \( \dot{V}(d_{ij}) = \dot{V}(D) \). Therefore, no extra energy is produced in this case.

In order to implement the join procedure in a passive way, we then propose to keep track of the energy dissipated by each agent: to this end, we introduce a local variable \( t_i \in \mathbb{R} \), called tank, along with an associated energy function \( T_i = \frac{1}{2}t_i^2 \) for storing the energy dissipated by the agent. This energy reservoir can then be used for compensating excess of energy in the slave side and, thus, for implementing join decisions without violating the passivity of the system. Using (1), the energy dissipated by agent \( i \) because of the damping is

\[
D_i = p_i^T M_i^{-1} T_i B_i M_i^{-1} p_i.
\]

(7)

Considering the tank variables, we then propose to adopt the following extended dynamics for the agents and elastic elements:

\[
\begin{align*}
\dot{p}_i &= F^{a}_i + F^{c}_i - B_i M_i^{-1} p_i \\
\dot{t}_i &= (1 - \beta_i) \left( \alpha_i t_i + \sum_{j=1}^{N} w_{ij}^T F^{a}_{ij} \right) + \beta_i c_i \\
\dot{y}_i &= \left( M_i^{-1} p_i \right) \\
\dot{x}_{ij} &= v_{ij} - w_{ij} t_i + w_{ji} t_j \\
F^{a}_{ij} &= \frac{\partial V(x_{ij})}{\partial x_{ij}}
\end{align*}
\]

(8)

The quantity \( \alpha_i \in \{0,1\} \) is a design parameter that disables/enables the storage of \( D_i \), the energy dissipated by the system. The quantity \( \beta_i \in \{0,1\} \) is a design parameter which allows to switch the behavior of the tank element from a storage mode (i.e., the energy dissipated by the agent is stored) to a consensus mode (i.e., a consensus algorithm is run among the tanks). The role of inputs \( w_{ij} \in \mathbb{R}^3 \) is to allow for an energy exchange among the tank energy \( T_i \) and the elastic elements \( V(x_{ij}) \). Indeed, by setting

\[
w_{ij} = \gamma_{ij}(1 - \beta_i) t_i F^{a}_{ij},
\]

(10)

where \( \gamma_{ij} \in \mathbb{R} \) is a modulation parameter, it is possible to implement a lossless energy transfer among the storages \( T_i \) and \( V(x_{ij}) \) [17], [41]. In particular, if \( \gamma_{ij} > 0 \), some energy is extracted from \( V(x_{ij}) \) and injected into \( T_i \), while the opposite behavior is obtained with \( \gamma_{ij} < 0 \). The magnitude of \( \gamma_{ij} \) dictates the rate of this exchange, with \( \gamma_{ij} = 0 \) implying no energy exchange taking place. Note that, while by construction it is \( F^{a}_{ij} = -F^{c}_{ij} \), in general \( w_{ij} \neq w_{ji} \) and \( \gamma_{ij} \neq \gamma_{ji} \). Furthermore, in order to comply with our decentralization guidelines, in (8) we allow for a \( \gamma_{ij} \neq 0 \) only if \( j \in N_i \). The use of \( w_{ij} \) will be illustrated later on.

Procedure PassiveJoin

Data: \( x_i, x_j, x^*_{ij}, t_i, t_j \)

1. Compute \( \Delta E = V(x_i - x_j) - V(x^*_{ij}) \);
2. if \( \Delta E \leq 0 \) then
   3. Store \( -\Delta E/2 \) in the tank through input \( w_{ij} \);
else
   4. if \( T_i(t_i) + T_j(t_j) < \Delta E + 2\varepsilon \) then
      5. Run a consensus on the tank variables;
     6. if \( 2T_i(t_i) < \Delta E + 2\varepsilon \) then
        7. Dampen until \( T_i(t_i) + T_j(t_j) \geq \Delta E + 2\varepsilon; \)
     8. Extract \( \frac{T_i(t_i)}{T_i(t_i) + T_j(t_j)} \Delta E \) from the tank through input \( w_{ij} \);
9. Join;

When the system is in storage mode (\( \beta_i = 0 \)), we have that:

\[
\dot{T}_i = \alpha_i D_i + t_i \sum_{j \in N_i} w_{ij}^T F^{a}_{ij}.
\]

(11)

If \( \alpha_i = 1 \) and \( \gamma_{ij} = 0 \), all the energy dissipated because of the damping injection on the dynamics of agent \( i \) is stored back into the tank. This is the energy that can be “used” in the system without violating the passivity constraint. Because of the reasons reported in [42], it is wise to disable the energy storage for avoiding an excess of internal energy that would allow to implement unstable behaviors in the system. Thus, we set:

\[\alpha_i = \begin{cases} 0 & \text{if } T_i \geq \bar{T}_i \\ 1 & \text{otherwise} \end{cases} \]

(12)

where \( \bar{T}_i \) is a proper bound to be selected depending on the particular application. In order to avoid singularities in (8) (i.e., \( t_i = 0 \)), we also set a threshold \( \varepsilon > 0 \) below which it is forbidden to extract energy from the tank.

When the system switches to consensus mode (\( \beta_i = 1 \)), the terms \( c_i \) are used for redistributing the energy among the tanks. A decentralized strategy is implemented for equally leveling the energy stored in the tanks just before the join. This is done by running a consensus algorithm [11]

\[
\dot{T}_i = -\sum_{j \in N_i} (T_i - T_j)
\]

(13)

Such energy redistribution can be implemented acting on the variable \( t_i \). In fact, since \( \dot{T}_i = l_i t_i \), (13) is equivalent to setting in (8)

\[
c_i = -\frac{1}{t_i} \sum_{j \in N_i} (T_i(t_i) - T_j(t_j)).
\]

(14)

We will now detail a strategy, called PassiveJoin Procedure, to allow for a safe implementation of join decisions. When agent \( i \) and \( j \) split, the one with the lower ID between \( i \) and \( j \) stores \( x_{ij} \) in a local variable \( x^*_{ij} \) which represents the state of the virtual spring at the split time. If agents \( i \) and \( j \) never split before, \( x^*_{ij} \) is initialized such that \( V(x^*_{ij}) = V(D) = \dot{V}(x^*_{ij})(\infty) \). When two agents \( i \) and \( j \) want to join, the PassiveJoin Procedure is preliminary run on agent \( i \) (and on agent \( j \) with proper modifications on the notation), and the actual join decision (i.e., the update of matrix \( T \)) is slightly postponed after its completion. The procedure requires \( x_{ij}^* \) (which is shared by the agent with lower ID via local
communication) and \(x_j\) and \(t_j\) that can be sent via local communication by agent \(j\) to agent \(i\). First, agent \(i\) computes the quantity \(\Delta E = V(x_i - x_j) - V(x_j)\) (line 1). If \(\Delta E \leq 0\), the energy needed for implementing the join is lower than the energy previously stored in the spring and, therefore, the join process is actually dissipating energy. Half of the dissipated energy, \((-\Delta E)/2\), can be stored back in the tank of agent \(i\) by means of the input \(w_{ij}\) (line 3), and the other half will be stored in the tank of the agent \(j\) by means of the input \(w_{ji}\). Then, the agents can safely join (line 9).

If \(\Delta E > 0\), extra energy is needed for implementing the join decision and, at this point, the energy stored in the tanks is exploited. First, the agents check if there is enough energy in their tanks to cover for \(\Delta E\) (line 4). If this is the case, the amount of energy \(\Delta E_{ij}\)

\[
\Delta E_{ij} = \frac{T(t_i) + T(t_j)}{T(t_i) + T(t_j)} \Delta E
\]

is extracted from the tank of agent \(i\) by means of the input \(w_{ij}\). At the same time agent \(j\) will extract \(\Delta E_{ji}\) from its tank using \(w_{ji}\). Then, the join is safely implemented (line 9).

If the energy stored in the tanks of the two agents is not sufficient, there is still a chance to passively join the agents without intervening directly on the dynamics of the robots. In fact, it may happen that the tanks of the rest of the fleet, in average, contain enough energy. Thus (line 5), agent \(i\) asks the fleet to activate the \(\beta_i\) in order to switch consensus modes. Then, the consensus is run until the redistribution of the energy among the tanks is completed. Eventually, all the agents switch back to normal mode (\(\beta_i = 0\)): all the tanks will contain the same amount of energy, but the total tank energy will remain unchanged. After this redistribution, agents \(i\) and \(j\) check again if there is enough energy in the tanks for joining (line 6). If this is the case, the tank of agent \(i\) is updated by means of the input \(w_{ij}\) in order to extract the amount of energy in (15) (and symmetrically on agent \(j\)), and the join decision is implemented (lines 8, 9). If, after all, the energy in the tanks is not yet sufficient, it is necessary to act directly on the robots to refill the tanks. This is always possible by augmenting the artificial damping on the agents for increasing the energy dissipation rate. The damping is augmented until \(T(t_i) + T(t_j) \geq \Delta E + 2\epsilon\), so that the join decision can be passively implemented extracting the needed amount of energy through the input \(w_{ij}\) (lines 7, 8, 9).

**Remark 6.** We assume the convergence time of the consensus to be fast enough compared to the dynamics of the fleet for joining the agents and re-establishing the desired behavior as quickly as possible. In fact, if the algorithm is too slow, the agents may come very close to each other without feeling any repulsive force. If the consensus is not fast enough and some dangerous situation is detected, it can be switched off for dampening the system in order to refill the tanks.

4Formally speaking, the action of inputs \(w_{ij}\) and \(w_{ji}\) corresponds to moving the state of (9) from \(x_j\) to the new actual inter-agent displacement \(x_i - x_j\).

5This can be done by using a decentralized procedure (e.g., the classic flooding algorithm [43]) so that all the agents belonging to the same connected component of the communication graph set \(\beta_i = 1\).

Remark 7. When the damping of the agents is augmented, some time may be needed to refill the tanks up to the desired energy value. During this period, agents \(i\) and \(j\) can still move because of the interaction with the rest of the group: in this case, their relative distance \(d_{ij}\) and the amount of energy necessary for implementing the join will change. Therefore, it is necessary to continuously update \(\Delta E\) when the agents are in damping mode.

The behavior of the slave side when the PassiveJoin Procedure is implemented can be described by the following system:

\[
\begin{pmatrix}
\dot{p} \\
\dot{x}
\end{pmatrix}_i = 
\begin{pmatrix}
\begin{bmatrix}
0 & I(t) & 0 \\
0 & 0 & -\Gamma \\
\end{bmatrix} \\
\begin{bmatrix}
B & 0 & 0 \\
0 & 0 & 0 \\
\end{bmatrix} \\
\end{pmatrix}
\begin{pmatrix}
\frac{\partial \Psi}{\partial p} \\
\frac{\partial \Psi}{\partial x} \\
\end{pmatrix} + \Gamma GF^e + v
\]

\[v = G^T \begin{pmatrix}
\frac{\partial \Psi}{\partial p} \\
\frac{\partial \Psi}{\partial x} \\
\end{pmatrix}
\]

where

\[
\mathcal{H} = \sum_{i=1}^{N} K_i + \sum_{i=1}^{N-1} \sum_{j=i+1}^{N} V(x_{ij}) + \sum_{i=1}^{N} T_i
\]

is the augmented total energy of the system. The matrix \(\Gamma \in \mathbb{R}^{N \times 2N(N-1)}\) represents the interconnection among tanks and elastic elements mediated by inputs \(w_{ij}\). From (8), one can readily verify that matrix \(\Gamma\) has a structure “equivalent” to the incidence matrix \(\mathcal{I}_G\) with the \((i, j)\)-th element being replaced by the (row) vector \(w_{ij}^T\). Formally, by letting \(\Gamma_{ij}\) and \(\mathcal{I}_{Gij}\) represent the \((i, j)\)-th elements of \(\Gamma\) and \(\mathcal{I}_G\), respectively, it is \(\Gamma_{i,(3j-2)3j} = \mathcal{I}_{Gij}, w_{ij}^T, \forall i = 1 \ldots N, \forall j = 1 \ldots N(N-1)/2\).

Finally, \(\alpha = diag(\alpha_i)\) and \(\beta = diag(\beta_i)\) are matrices containing the mode switching parameters, \(P = diag(t_i^T M_i^{-T})\), \(t = (t_1, \ldots, t_N)^T\), and \(c = (c_1, \ldots, c_N)^T\).

**Proposition 3.** The system represented in (16) is passive with respect to the input/output pair \((F^e, v)\) with storage function \(\mathcal{H}\).

**Proof:** By evaluating the time derivative of the storage function

\[
\dot{\mathcal{H}} = \left( \frac{\partial^T \mathcal{H}}{\partial p} \frac{\partial^T \mathcal{H}}{\partial x} \frac{\partial^T \mathcal{H}}{\partial t} \right) \left( \begin{pmatrix}
\dot{p} \\
\dot{x} \\
\dot{t}
\end{pmatrix} \right)
\]

along the system trajectories, we obtain:

\[
\dot{\mathcal{H}} = -\frac{\partial^T H}{\partial p} B \frac{\partial \mathcal{H}}{\partial t} + \frac{\partial^T H}{\partial t} (I-\beta) \alpha P B \frac{\partial \mathcal{H}}{\partial p} + \frac{\partial \mathcal{H}}{\partial t} c + v^T F^e =
\]

\[
h_1 + h_2 + h_3 + v^T F^e
\]

The system is passive if the sum of the first three terms of (19) is lower or equal than 0. The first term \(h_1\) is always non positive because \(B\) is positive definite. The parameter \(\beta\) can either be equal to the null or identity matrix.
When $\beta = 0$, $h_3 = 0$ and the second term

$$h_2 = \frac{\partial T}{\partial t} \alpha P B \frac{\partial H}{\partial p} = (t_1 \ldots t_N) \alpha \left( \begin{array}{c} \frac{1}{m} D_1 \\ \vdots \\ \frac{1}{m} D_N \end{array} \right) = \sum_{i=1}^{N} \alpha_i D_i$$

(20)

is, because of (12), at most equal to the energy dissipated by the agents, i.e., $-h_1$. Therefore, $\mathcal{H} \leq v^T F^c$.

When $\beta = I$, $h_2 = 0$ and the consensus is running among the tanks. By recalling (14), $h_3$ can be written as

$$h_3 = \frac{\partial H}{\partial \alpha} = \sum_{i=1}^{N} \bar{T}_i.$$  

(21)

Because of the property of the consensus, the overall energy stored in the tanks remains the same and, therefore, $h_3 = 0$ and $\mathcal{H} \leq v^T F^c$.

Remark 8. Note that, although (16) has a switching dynamics because of the time-varying nature of $\mathcal{T}(t)$ arising from the neighboring conditions $\sigma_{ij}(t)$ of Def. 1, stability issues are avoided thanks to the action of the PassiveJoin Procedure which prevents positive jumps in $\mathcal{H}$ at any switching time.

B. The Master Side

The master can be a generic mechanical system modeled by the following Euler-Lagrange equations:

$$M_M(x_M) \ddot{x}_M + C_M(x_M, \dot{x}_M) \dot{x}_M + D_M \dot{x}_M = F_M$$  

(22)

where $x_M$ and $\dot{x}_M$ represent the position and the velocity of the end-effector, $M_M(x_M)$ represents the inertia matrix, $C(x_M, \dot{x}_M)$ is a term representing the centrifugal and Coriolis effects, $D_M$ is matrix representing both the viscous friction present in the system and any additional damping injection via local control actions. As often happens for master devices, we also assume that gravity effects are locally compensated. A system described by (22) is passive with respect to the force-velocity pair $(r, F_M)$ [44], where $v_M := \dot{x}_M$. This kind of passivity is well suited in standard passivity-based bilateral teleoperation, where the velocity of the master and the velocity of the slave need to be synchronized.

Nevertheless, in our setting, in order to consider the difference between the workspace of the master and that of the robots at the slave side, it is necessary to synchronize the position of the master with the velocity of the leader. Unfortunately, a mechanical system is not passive w.r.t. the position-force pair but, following [45], it is possible to render the master (22) passive w.r.t. the pair $(F_M, r)$ with storage function $V_M = \frac{1}{2} r^T M_M r$ and $r = v_M + \lambda x_M$, $\lambda > 0$.

This is obtained by a suitable pre-feedback action requiring knowledge of the matrices $M_M$ and $C_M$ in (22). By further introducing a scaling into this strategy, one can also render the master passive w.r.t. the scaled pair $(F_M, r_M)$ where

$$r_M = \rho r = \rho v_M + \rho \lambda x_M = \rho v_M + K x_M, \quad \rho > 0, \quad \lambda > 0,$$

(23)

and new (scaled) storage function $\bar{V}_M = \rho V_M$. The following result then easily follows:

\begin{proposition}
A mechanical system which has been made passive with respect to the pair $(r, F_M)$ is also passive with respect to the pair $(\bar{r}_M, \bar{F}_M)$.
\end{proposition}

\textbf{Proof:} Since the system is passive with respect to the pair $(r, F_M)$ it is

$$r^T F_M \geq \dot{V}_M$$

(24)

Using (23), we have that

$$r_M^T F_M = \rho r^T F_M \geq \rho \dot{V}_M = \dot{\bar{V}}_M.$$  

(25)

Therefore, the system is passive w.r.t. the lower bounded function $\bar{V}_M$.

\end{proposition}

C. Master-slave Interconnection

Exploiting the results developed so far, we have that both master and slave sides are passive systems. Thus, by designing a proper passive interconnection between the local and the remote systems, we will obtain a passive bilateral teleoperation system characterized by a stable behavior in case of interaction with passive environments (as the obstacles, modeled as potentials, with which the fleet is interacting).

Suppose that agent $l$ is chosen as the leader. It is possible to write $F^e_l = F_s + F^e_{l,env}$, where $F^e_{l,env}$ is the component of the force due to the interaction with the external environment (obstacles) and $F_s$ is the component due to the interaction with the master side. Similarly, we can decompose $F_M$ as $F_M = F_m + F_h$, where $F_h$ is the component due to the interaction with the user and $F_m$ is the force acting on the master because of the interaction with the slave.

For achieving the desired teleoperation behavior, we propose to join master and slave using the following interconnection:

$$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} F_s = b_T (r_M - v_l) \\ F_m = -b_T (r_M - v_l) \end{array} \right., \quad b_T > 0$$

(26)

This is equivalent to joining the master and the leader using a damper which generates a force proportional to the difference of the two velocity-like variables of the master and the leader. Since $r_M$ is “almost” the position of the master, we have that the force fed back to the master and the control action sent to the leader are the desired ones. The overall teleoperation system is represented in Fig. 1 and consists of the interconnection of a passive master side, a damper-like interconnection and a passive slave side. By letting 

$$F^e = \left( F^{e, T}_1 \ldots F^{e,env, T}_1 \ldots F^{e, T}_N \right)$$

be the vector of the forces due to the interaction with the external environment, the following Proposition holds:

\begin{proposition}
The teleoperation system composed by the precompensated master side presented in Sec. II-B, the slave side reported in (16), and the interconnection (26) is passive with respect to the pair $((F^e)^T, (F^r_h)^T, (v^T, r_M^T))^T$.
\end{proposition}
by construction. We then let $G$ the following preliminary definitions are needed: we assume $v$ in which all the agents possess the same velocity $G$ tions, the robots belonging to $G$ value will be determined in the following.

A. Steady-state during free motion

We first consider the free-motion case and denote with $\bar{L}$ the connected component of $G$ containing the leader. In this situation, we assume that (i) the agents are sufficiently far away from any obstacle so that $F_{i}^{pm} = 0, \forall i$, (ii) there exists a certain time $\bar{t}$ after which no splits and joins take place in $\bar{G}_L$ and tanks are fully charged at their maximum value $\bar{T}_t$, and (iii) the master device is kept at a constant position $\bar{x}_M \equiv \text{const}$ by a suitable human force $F_t$, whose steady-state value will be determined in the following.

The following Proposition shows that, under these assumptions, the robots belonging to $\bar{G}_L$ reach a steady-state regime in which all the agents possess the same velocity $v_{ss} \in \mathbb{R}^3$ as a function of $\bar{x}_M$. In addition, it also indicates the steady-state value of the force $F_t$ exerted by the human operator to keep the master device at $\bar{x}_M$. Before stating this result, the following preliminary definitions are needed: we assume that $G_L$ contains $1 \leq N_L \leq N$ agents whose indexes are collected into the set $L$, so that $|L| = N_L$. Note that $1 \in L$ by construction. We then let $p_L \in \mathbb{R}^{3N_L}$, $x_L \in \mathbb{R}^{3N_L(N_L-1)\over2}$, $t_L \in \mathbb{R}^{N_L}$ represent the entries of $p$, $x$ and $t$ associated to this component, and $\bar{p}_L \in \mathbb{R}^3(N_N-N_L)$, $\bar{x}_L \in \mathbb{R}^{3(N-N_L)(N-N_L-1)\over2}$ and $\bar{t}_L \in \mathbb{R}^{N-N_L}$ the remaining ones, where $\bar{L}$ denotes the complement of $L$. Accordingly, we let $H_L$ and $H_{ss}$ be the components of the total energy $H$ which depend on $(\bar{p}_L, \bar{x}_L, \bar{t}_L)$ and $(\bar{p}_L, \bar{x}_L, \bar{t}_L)$, respectively. Furthermore, we let $L_{N_{env}} = 1_{N_L} \otimes I_3$ with $1_{N_L} \in \mathbb{R}^{N_L}$ being a column vector of all ones, and $B_L \in \mathbb{R}^{3N_L \times 3N_L} = \text{diag}(B_{L1})$, with $B_{L1} = B_1 + b_T I_3$ and $B_{L_i} = B_i, i \in \bar{L}, i \neq 1$. Finally, we define with $v_{ss}$ and $F_{ss}$ the (sought) steady-state values for the agents in $L$ and for the force exerted by the human operator.

Proposition 6 (Steady-state in free motion). Under assumptions (i), (ii), and (iii), the system (16) reaches a steady-state characterized by $(\bar{p}, \bar{x}, \bar{t}) = (0, 0, 0)$ in which:

1) every robot belonging to $\bar{L}$ comes to a full stop;
2) every robot belonging to $L$ has the same velocity $v_{ss} = (1_{N_L}^{T} B_{L1} 1_{N_{env}})^{-1} b_T K \bar{x}_m$;
3) the human operator needs to apply a force $F_t = (I_3 - b_T (1_{N_L}^{T} B_{L1} 1_{N_{env}})^{-1}) b_T K \bar{x}_m$ to keep the master device at $\bar{x}_M$.

Proof: We start by noting that $\forall i \neq \bar{i}$ not included in $x_L$ and $\bar{x}_M$, $\bar{x}_{ij} = 0$ as it necessarily represents the state of a disconnected virtual spring. Furthermore, the subsystem $(\bar{p}_L, \bar{x}_L, \bar{t}_L)$ not belonging to $L$ is governed by the dynamics

\[
\begin{pmatrix}
\dot{\bar{p}}_L \\
\dot{\bar{x}}_L \\
\dot{\bar{t}}_L
\end{pmatrix} = \begin{pmatrix}
-B_{\bar{L}} & I_{\bar{L}} & 0 \\
-I_{\bar{L}}^T & 0 & 0 \\
0 & 0 & 0
\end{pmatrix} \begin{pmatrix}
\frac{\partial H_{\bar{L}}}{\partial \bar{p}} \\
\frac{\partial H_{\bar{L}}}{\partial \bar{x}} \\
\frac{\partial H_{\bar{L}}}{\partial \bar{t}}
\end{pmatrix}
\]

(30)

for some $I_{\bar{L}}$ and positive definite $B_{\bar{L}}$ of proper dimensions. Since the tanks are supposed to be full (Assumption (ii)), no energy exchange takes place among tanks and elastic elements, and $\bar{t}_L = 0$. Therefore, by evaluating the rate of change of $H_{\bar{L}}$ along (30), one obtains

\[
\dot{H}_{\bar{L}} = -\frac{\partial H_{\bar{L}}}{\partial \bar{p}} B_{\bar{L}} \frac{\partial H_{\bar{L}}}{\partial \bar{p}} \leq 0,
\]

that is, the system is output strictly passive, implying that the system will converge towards the condition $\frac{\partial H_{\bar{L}}}{\partial \bar{p}} = v_{ss} \equiv 0 \Rightarrow \bar{p}_L = 0 \Rightarrow \bar{\bar{p}} = 0$. From the second row of (30), this further implies $\dot{\bar{x}}_L = 0$, resulting in a steady-state $(\bar{\bar{p}}_L, \bar{\bar{x}}_L, \bar{\bar{t}}_L) = (0, 0, 0)$ where all the agents in $\bar{L}$ eventually reach a full stop ($\bar{v}_{ss} = 0$). This proves item 1) of the Proposition.

Coming to items 2) and 3), note that, because of assumption (iii), we have $\bar{x}_M = \bar{x}_M = 0$ and $\bar{r}_M = K \bar{x}_M$. By splitting $F_t$ into the two components $b_T K \bar{x}_M$ and $-b_T v_1$, the subsystem $(\bar{p}_L, \bar{x}_L, \bar{t}_L)$ belonging to $L$ becomes

\[
\begin{pmatrix}
\dot{\bar{p}}_L \\
\dot{\bar{x}}_L \\
\dot{\bar{t}}_L
\end{pmatrix} = \begin{pmatrix}
-B_{L} & I_{L} & 0 \\
-I_{L}^T & 0 & 0 \\
0 & 0 & 0
\end{pmatrix} \begin{pmatrix}
\frac{\partial H_{L}}{\partial \bar{p}} \\
\frac{\partial H_{L}}{\partial \bar{x}} \\
\frac{\partial H_{L}}{\partial \bar{t}}
\end{pmatrix} + \begin{pmatrix}
u \\
0
\end{pmatrix}
\]

(31)

where $I_{L} = (I_{\bar{G}_L} \otimes I_3)$, $I_{\bar{G}_L}$ being the incidence matrix associated to $\bar{G}_L$, and $u \in \mathbb{R}^{3N_L}$ is a constant vector whose first 3 entries are $b_T K \bar{x}_M$ and the remaining ones are zero. In
order to draw conclusions on the asymptotical (steady-state) behavior of (31) when excited with a constant $u$, we resort to the arguments illustrated in Proposition 8.1.1 of [47]. To this end, consider the constant input $u$ as being generated by the following neutrally stable exosystem

$$\dot{\omega} = 0, \quad u = \omega,$$

(32)

Note also that, since system (31) is again output strictly passive, when $u = 0$ one obtains

$$\mathcal{H}_L = -\frac{\partial T\mathcal{H}_L}{\partial p_L} B_L^T \frac{\partial \mathcal{H}_L}{\partial p_L} \leq 0,$$

yielding an asymptotically stable equilibrium point corresponding to a (local) minimum of its energy. Therefore, the assumptions required by Proposition 8.1.1 are met and system (31) admits a steady-state regime. This is characterized by a map $\pi(\cdot)$

$$\pi : \omega \mapsto \left(\frac{p_L}{x_L}\right), \quad \pi(\omega) = \left(\frac{\pi_1(\omega)}{\pi_2(\omega)}\right)$$

(33)

satisfying the following condition

$$0 = \left(\begin{array}{cc} -B_L^T & \mathcal{I}_L \\ -\mathcal{I}_L^T & 0 \end{array}\right) \left(\begin{array}{c} M_L^{-1}\pi_1(\omega) \\ \nu(\pi_2(\omega)) \end{array}\right) + \left(\begin{array}{c} \omega \\ 0 \end{array}\right)$$

(34)

where $\nu(\cdot) := \frac{\partial \mathcal{H}_L}{\partial p_L}(\cdot)$ and $M_L$ is the inertia matrix associated to the agents in $L$. Now, rewrite (34) as

$$B_L M_L^{-1}\pi_1(\omega) - \mathcal{I}_L^T \nu(\pi_2(\omega)) = \omega$$

(35)

$$\mathcal{I}_L^T M_L^{-1}\pi_1(\omega) = 0.$$  

(36)

As the group of agents that we are considering is connected, it is well known that $\text{rank}(\mathcal{I}_L^T) = N_L - 1$ and $\text{ker}(\mathcal{I}_L^T) = 1_{N_L}$, see, e.g., [28]. Then from (36) it follows that

$$M_L^{-1}\pi_1(\omega) = 1_{N_L} v_{ss},$$

(37)

for a certain $v_{ss} \in \mathbb{R}^3$. Plugging (37) into (35), we obtain

$$\mathcal{I}_L^T \nu(\pi_2(\omega)) = B_L 1_{N_L} v_{ss} - \omega.$$  

(38)

This is a linear equation in the unknowns $\nu(\pi_2(\omega))$ and it admits a solution iff the rhs belongs to $\text{Im}(\mathcal{I}_L)$. Since, from standard linear algebra, $\text{Im}(\mathcal{I}_L) = \ker(\mathcal{I}_L^T) = \text{ker}(\mathcal{I}_L^T)^\perp = \text{span}(1_{N_L})$, the rhs of (38) must satisfy

$$1_{N_L} \mathcal{I}_L^T (B_L 1_{N_L} v_{ss} - \omega) = 0.$$  

This condition yields the sought solution for the steady-state agent velocities

$$v_{ss} = (1_{N_L}^T B_L 1_{N_L})^{-1} 1_{N_L}^T \omega = (1_{N_L}^T B_L 1_{N_L})^{-1} b_T K \bar{x}_M.$$  

(39)

Therefore, by taking $v_{ss}$ as in (39), it is always possible to solve (38) for some $\nu(\pi_2(\omega))$ whose specific value is, however, not required for this analysis. Thus, the steady-state for system (31) is given by:

$$\left(\begin{array}{c} p_{Lss} \\ x_{Lss} \end{array}\right) := \pi(\omega) = \left(\begin{array}{c} M_L 1_{N_L} v_{ss} \\ \nu(\pi_2(\omega)) \end{array}\right) = \text{const}$$

(40)

as $\omega = \text{const}$ by definition. Furthermore, expanding (40), for each agent $i \in L$ at steady-state it is $v_i = M_i^{-1} p_i = M_i^{-1} M_i v_{ss} = v_{ss}$, that is, all the agents in $L$ will reach the same steady-state velocity $v_{ss}$, proving item 2).

Finally, note that (22) and the assumption $\bar{x}_M(0) = 0$ imply $0 = F_M = F_m + F_h$. Therefore, at steady-state we have

$$F_h = -F_m = F_{ss} := t_T (K \bar{x}_M - v_{ss}) = (I_3 - b_T (1_{N_L}^T B_L 1_{N_L})^{-1}) b_T K \bar{x}_M$$

(41)

which proves item 3) and concludes the proof. □

**Remark 9.** Note that (39) is always well-posed because $B_L$ is a positive definite matrix. In the particular case of damping terms taking the form $B_i = b_i I_3$, $b_i > 0$, (39) reduces to

$$v_{ss} = \frac{b_T K \bar{x}_M}{b_T + \sum_{i \in L} b_i}$$

(42)

and (41) becomes

$$F_{ss} = \frac{b_T K \bar{x}_M \sum_{i \in L} b_i}{b_T + \sum_{i \in L} b_i}.$$  

(43)

It is easy to check that, as $(\sum_{i \in L} b_i) / b_T \to 0$ (small $b_i$, large $b_T$), $v_{ss} \to K \bar{x}_M = r_M$ and $F_{ss} \to 0$, thus approaching perfect synchronization with the commanded velocity $r_M$. The same, however, holds also for the more general forms (39) and (41).

At steady-state, the human operator needs to apply a force $F_h = F_{ss}$ proportional to the commanded velocity $K \bar{x}_M$ by a factor which depends on the number of agents $N_L$ belonging to the connected component of the leader $L$, and on the magnitude of their damping terms in $B_i$. For a given $L$, force $F_h$ will mimic a spring centered on a zero velocity command (see (41)–(43)). Thus, if the number of agents in $L$ is constant, this force cue will increase/decrease proportionally to the steady-state absolute speed of the whole group: this can provide an haptic cue informative of the overall group velocity.

On the other hand, for a given fixed commanded velocity $K \bar{x}_M$, $F_h$ will still vary with the size of $L$ because of the term $\sum_{i \in L} b_i$ in (43). Figure 4 shows an illustrative behavior of $F_h$ in this case with $\bar{x}_M \equiv 2$, $K = 1$, and $b_T = 5$. One can then check that the force $F_h$ needed to keep a constant velocity $K \bar{x}_M$ increases with the size of $N_L$. This behavior can also be intuitively explained by considering the followers as a passive
envelope the leader is interacting with. In fact, it is known from standard bilateral teleoperation (see, e.g., [46]) that in this case perfect steady-state ‘synchronization’ between master and slave velocities cannot be achieved resulting in a residual non-null steady-state force.

However, we believe that this behavior can constitute a beneficial feature of our teleoperation design. In fact, the force $F_h$ resulting from such master/slave velocity mismatch can provide the user with an additional information about the status of the group. Consider the illustrative example where the operator is moving the whole fleet with a constant cruise speed by firmly keeping the master device at a certain constant position $x_M$. By virtue of (41), whenever a robot disconnects from the group $L$ the human operator would feel a decrease in the force needed to keep the master device at $x_M$. This negative slope in $F_h$ can be informative of the fact that the number of robots in the connected component of leader has decreased. Similarly, when a robot connects to the group, the user would feel a positive slope in $F_h$, thus informing him/her about the increased number of robots in $L$.

### B. Steady-state during hard contact with obstacles

We now proceed to analyze the hard contact situation corresponding to the case where, in addition to assumptions (ii) and (iii), we also assume that (iv) $\frac{\partial H_{\mathcal{L}}}{\partial p_{\mathcal{L}}} \equiv v_{\mathcal{L}} \equiv 0$ despite $r_M \neq 0$ (e.g., because the obstacles are obstructing the agent motion).

**Proposition 7** (Hard contact with obstacles). Under the assumptions (ii), (iii) and (iv), the system (16) reaches a steady-state characterized by $(\dot{p}, \dot{x}, \dot{t}) = (0, 0, 0)$ in which:

1. every robot belonging to $\mathcal{L}$ comes to a full stop;
2. there is a perfect force reflection on the human operator of the cumulative environmental forces stopping the robots belonging to $\mathcal{L}$, that is $F_h = -\sum_{i \in \mathcal{L}} F_{env}^i$.

**Proof**: Proof of Item 1) follows from the same arguments used in Prop. 6. Because of assumption (iv) ($v_{\mathcal{L}} = 0$), the first row of (31) reduces to

$$0 = I_{\mathcal{L}} \frac{\partial H_{\mathcal{L}}}{\partial x_{\mathcal{L}}} + u,$$

where now $u \in \mathbb{R}^{3N_{\mathcal{L}}} = (\ldots, u_i^T, \ldots), i \in \mathcal{L}$, with $u_i = F_s + F_{env}^i$ and $u_i = F_{env}^i$, $i \neq 1$. By left-multiplying (44) with $1_{N_{\mathcal{L}}}^T$ and by exploiting again the fact that $\ker(I_{\mathcal{L}}) = \text{span}(1_{N_{\mathcal{L}}})$, we get $1_{N_{\mathcal{L}}}^T u = 0$ that can be expanded as $F_s = -\sum_{i \in \mathcal{L}} F_{env}^i$. Furthermore, because of assumption (iii), it is again $0 = F_M = F_h + F_m$ and, by using (26), we finally obtain

$$F_h = -F_m = F_s = -\sum_{i \in \mathcal{L}} F_{env}^i.$$

This proves Item 2) and concludes the proof.

### IV. Simulation and Experimental Results

In this Section, we will report the results of several human/hardware-in-the-loop (HHL) simulations and experiments conducted to validate the theoretical framework developed so far. A picture representing our testbed is shown in Fig. 5.

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**Fig 5**: The Human/Hardware-in-the-Loop simulative and experimental setup. Fig. 5(a): The Omega-3 force-feedback master device handled by the human operator. Figs. 5(b,d): 3 screenshots of a physical simulation involving a fleet of 8 quadrotors in a cluttered environment. The leader is highlighted by a transparent red ball; inter-agent visibility and distance are considered as neighboring criteria; neighbor agents are linked by blue segments. Fig. 5(e): a screenshot of an experiment with 4 real quadrotors in a cluttered environment where the leader is highlighted by a transparent red ball.

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1. [http://www.forcedimension.com](http://www.forcedimension.com)
and computational geometry calculations, and PhysX\(^9\) for simulating the physical interaction between the UAVs and the environment (Fig. 5a,b,d). A low-level PID attitude controller has been implemented for controlling the pitch, roll, thrust and yaw-rate DOFs of the UAVs. Each UAV trajectory controller runs, in a decentralized way, as a separate process. This design facilitates the porting of the whole implementation on real quadrotors. Every process is in charge of (1) communicating with the other UAVs, (2) communicating with the master device (only the process controlling the leader), (3) implementing the inter-agent behavior described in Sec. II-A, (4) retrieving the current UAV state and the surrounding obstacle points from the simulator, and (5) implementing the trajectory tracking controller mentioned in Remark 2. All the communication is implemented with the UDP protocol since it is less prone to congestions and delay issues compared to the TCP protocol.

In the experiments, the slave side is composed of 4 quadrotors\(^10\) equipped with an embedded ATMega microcontroller and a standard integrated IMU (Fig. 5e). The microcontroller implements a low-level PID attitude controller by estimating the current attitude from the IMU measurements (via a complementary filter), and by controlling the pitch, roll, thrust and yaw-rate dofs of the UAV. This PID controller runs at about 450 Hz. Every quadrotor is also equipped with an additional Qseven single-board GNU-Linux machine\(^11\) running a C++ program which implements a higher-level cartesian-control module: this computes the desired attitude and thrust commands and sends them to the low-level microprocessor via a serial interface whose baud rate is set to 115200. As opposite to the simulation case, the Qseven board (1) retrieves the current UAV position (and numerically estimates its velocity) from an external tracking system\(^12\), and (2) receives the obstacle positions form the simulation environment where the physical obstacles are simulated in parallel. All the ethernet communication is again implemented with the UDP protocol.

In all simulations and experiments, we simulated the presence of a visibility sensor for retrieving the position of neighboring agents. Therefore, compatibly with the requirements of Def. 1, we also set \(\sigma_{ij} = 0\) whenever the line of sight between agents \(i\) and \(j\) was occluded. The agents were then forced to split either because of too large interdistances \((d_{ij} > D)\), or because of occlusions on their line of sights, an event which can also occur when \(d_{ij} < D\). Of course, different choices for deciding splits are possible, but they are equivalent w.r.t. the conceptual behavior of the PassiveJoin Procedure. We also assumed w.l.o.g. that the leader is agent 1. The reader is encouraged to watch the video clip attached to the paper where both simulations and experiments in cluttered environments with frequent split and join decisions can be fully appreciated.

\subsection{A. Simulation Results}

In the first HHL simulation, reported in Figs. 6(a–e), we tested the overall performance of the teleoperation scheme during free-motion (i.e., sufficiently away from obstacles). The goal was to validate the claims of Prop. 6 about stability and steady-state characteristics of our teleoperation system. We considered a leader and 7 followers, and teleoperated the leader with (almost) piece-wise constant velocity commands \(r_M\), as shown in Fig. 6(a). During the simulation, we kept all the 7 agents within the connected component containing the leader \(\mathcal{L}\), and chose \(b_T = 4.5 \text{ [N s/m]}\), \(B_1 = 1 \text{[Ns/m]}\), \(B_i = 2.3I_3 \text{[Ns/m]}\) for \(i = 2 \ldots 8\), and \(K = 15 \text{[1/s]}\).

Figure 6(b) shows the superimposition of the actual leader velocity \(v_1\) (dashed lines) and the predicted steady-state velocity \(v_{ss}\) (solid lines); as clear from the plot, when \(r_M\) is kept constant \(v_1\) converges to \(v_{ss}\) after short transients due to the interaction with the rest of the group. This is also evident from Fig. 6(c) where the superimposition of the velocities of all the agents (leader included) is shown: one can then verify that all the UAV velocities converge to the same steady-state

\footnotesize{\(^9\)http://www.nvidia.com/object/physx_new.html \(^{10}\)http://www.mikrokopter.com \(^{11}\)http://www.seco.it \(^{12}\)http://www.vicon.com}
value $v_{ss}$. In order to quantify this convergence, we show in Fig. 6(d) the norm of $e_v = v - 1_4 v_{ss}$, i.e., the velocity error of the overall slave-side w.r.t. the steady-state value $v_{ss}$. As expected, $\|e_v\|$ goes to zero whenever the master command $r_M$ is kept constant. Finally, figure 6(e) reports the behavior of $F_m$ over time: one can note that $F_m$ (dashed lines) converges to the predicted steady-state value of Prop. 6 (solid lines). As explained in the previous Section, this force cue is useful to inform the operator about the absolute velocity and total number of agents being teleoperated.

In the second HHL simulation, we report the teleoperation of 8 UAVs (1 leader and 7 followers) moving in an environment cluttered with obstacles, thus enabling the possibility of several split and rejoin decisions. We set $T_i = 8$[J] as maximum value for the tank energies $T_i$. Figure 7(a) shows the evolution of the 8 reservoirs $T_i$ from which one can appreciate the several negative jumps due to the execution of the PassiveJoin Procedure. We also show in Figs 7(b-c) a detailed view of the tank evolutions during a few consecutive consensus phases in which the tank energies are quickly leveled. Finally, Fig. 7(d) shows the behavior of $E_{ext}(t) = \int_{t_0}^t u^T(\tau) F_c(\tau) d\tau$ (blue line) and $E_{in}(t) = H(t) - H(t_0)$ (dashed red line) over time. One can then check that $E_{in}(t) \leq E_{ext}(t)$, $\forall t \geq t_0$, as required by the slave-side passivity condition (19).

B. Experimental Results

Experiments have been carried on with a team of 4 quadrotors in the environment depicted in Fig. 5e. The results of a representative experiment are shown in Fig. 8. The velocity command $r_M(t)$ set by the human operator is depicted in Fig. 8c, while Fig. 8a illustrates the behavior of the positions $x_i$ of the leader agent with dynamics (1) (3 solid lines) and the corresponding real positions $x_{i,\text{real}}$ of the associated quadrotor (3 dashed line). As can be noticed, the dashed lines are basically indistinguishable from the solid lines, indicating that the robot could track the ‘virtual’ position of (1) with a negligible error. Similarly, Fig. 5b shows the behavior of $\|e_{x_i}\|$ over time, that is the average norm of the position error $x_i - x_{i,\text{real}}$, $i = 1, \ldots, 4$: This plot confirms again that the overall tracking performance of the 4 quadrotors w.r.t. their simplified dynamics (1) was quite satisfactory as this error norm keeps small during the whole operation.

Figure 8e shows the force-feedback signal applied to the haptic device computed from (26): here, the largest peaks...
correspond to the largest mismatches between the commanded and actual leader velocity due to the interaction with the followers and the obstacles. Figure 8d reports the behavior of the task energies over time during several split and join decisions. Negative jumps in $T_i(t)$ correspond to energy exchanges between tanks and link potentials in order to ensure passivity of the slave-side (see again the PassiveJoin Procedure). Finally, Fig. 8f validates the slave side passivity condition (19) also during the experiments, by showing that the energy provided to the system $E_{ext}(t)$ (blue line) is always lower bounded by $E_{in}(t) = H(t) - H(t_0)$ (red line).

Figure 9 depicts 4 different screenshots of the experiment (the leader robot, agent 1, is encircled by a red ball). The human operator action is shown on the left column while the central column shows the motion of the group and the right column gives a corresponding top-view from a 3D visualizer. The edges of the interaction graph are represented by blue links: one can appreciate the time-varying nature of the interaction topology since the interconnection graph changes depending on the relative position between robots and because of occlusions by the obstacles. At the beginning (first row) the interaction graph is a chain, while at the end (fourth row) it is a clique (complete graph). The 2 middle rows show again two different graph topologies resulted during the teloperation of the robots. Note how the group is able to seamlessly adapt to the cluttered nature of the environment thanks to its varying interaction topology.

V. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK
In this paper we have proposed a decentralized control strategy based on passivity for teleoperating a team of, possibly heterogeneous, mobile robots. By monitoring the exchange of energy among the robots, we were able to obtain a flexible behavior of the group that could smoothly modify the shape of its formation and the communication topology in a stable way. By properly passifying the master robot, a passive bilateral teleoperation system that couples the position of the master to the velocity of the slave side has been developed. The steady-state free motion and contact behaviors of the teleoperation system have been analytically characterized. Finally, the performance of the system has been validated through human/Hardware-in-the-Loop simulations and real experiments considering a group of UAVs as case study.

In recent works, we considered the issue of connectivity maintenance in the case of distance-visibility neighboring conditions, see [48], and of decentralized velocity synchronization thanks to a suitable variable damping actions, see [49]. We also started to run an extended psychophysical evaluation to study the human perceptual awareness and maneuverability in the teleoperation of a group of mobile robots [9], [10]. As additional extensions of this framework, we are considering the possibility to allow the presence of variable multiple leaders to increase the controllability of the fleet. In the future, we also plan to explicitly take into account inter-robot communication delays so as to formally study the corresponding teleoperation stability issues, and to change online the elasticity of the couplings among the followers in order to adapt the behavior of the group to particular environments or tasks.

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