

Design and Implementation of a High-Power Motor Controller for Bicycles

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Abstract—Electric bikes are becoming an increasingly attractive solution for transporting goods between short distances, especially in city-wide infrastructures. However, most commercially available controllers rely on complex integrated circuits making repair and local manufacturing difficult, particularly for organisations operating in resource-constrained or low-tech environments. La Manufacture Autonome Décentralisée (LaMAD) is developing products and solutions, particularly e-bikes, which are more repairable and sustainable. Previous studies have predominantly focused on performance optimisation of Field Oriented Control (FOC) and trapezoidal commutation strategies, with limited attention to repairability, component sourcing, and community-centred sustainability criteria. This project aims to design, assemble, and develop a functional, low-tech and open-source motor controller for electric cargo bikes. The current model uses an open-source motor control called VESC (Vedder Electronic Speed Controller) that allows precise control of electric motors. The controller needs to be compatible with a VESC controller and easily locally repairable by LaMAD. By exploring the inner workings of the VESC project, modelling of the physical systems and the Printed Circuit Board, PCB, we investigated the ways we could do it in another way. We acquired a VESC controller to compare our system and a commercial product. Preliminary results demonstrate that the adapted VESC-based controller successfully drives the target motor under both commutation strategies, and that positional control is achievable with the current hardware configuration. Security vulnerabilities related to open Bluetooth access were identified. These findings suggest that open-source, locally fabricated motor controllers can meet the functional requirements of electric cargo bikes while significantly improving repairability.

Index Terms—VESC Project, Brushless DC motor, Field Oriented Control, Trapezoidal commutation, Low-Tech, e-bike.

I. INTRODUCTION

The fast urbanization of global logistics has positioned electric cargo bikes as a primary solution. At the heart of these vehicles is the motor controller. Current research and industry standards primarily focus on two methods of commutation for the controller: Trapezoidal commutation and Field Oriented Control (FOC).

As motor controllers become smarter, they increasingly incorporate wireless connectivity for tuning and diagnostics. Current research highlights that while Bluetooth Low Energy (BLE) and mobile app integration improve user experience, they often introduce vulnerabilities. Open-source projects, in particular, must balance ease of access for community developers with the need to secure the vehicle.

We also argue the need for general public's safety when it comes to these bikes, as it could be a danger to the traffic. This is especially true when it comes to vehicles carrying a substantial load. This needs to be considered by laMAD, where their responsibility and control begins and ends. Should there be a difference between the firmware loaded on a product from laMAD than what is publicly available?

II. RELATED WORK

A. Modeling of BLDC Motor

The electromechanical model of a BLDC motor is foundational for understanding its behavior under different control schemes. BLDC motors are categorized by their back-electromotive force (back-EMF) waveform: trapezoidal or sinusoidal. This distinction is crucial, as the trapezoidal shape inherently leads to torque ripple when the supplied phase currents are not perfectly aligned, directly influencing the choice and effectiveness of the control strategy [1]. For a BLDC motor with trapezoidal back-EMF, the electromagnetic torque is given by:

$$T_e = \frac{e_a i_a + e_b i_b + e_c i_c}{\omega_m}$$

where e_x is the back-EMF and i_x is the phase current [2]. The classical d-q reference frame model, ideal for sinusoidal machines, is less suitable for trapezoidal BLDC motors because it assumes sinusoidal flux distribution. Phase-variable modeling in the natural (abc) frame is therefore more appropriate, as it

directly accounts for the non-sinusoidal, trapezoidal nature of the back-EMF and the associated harmonics [3].

B. Trapezoidal Commutation (Six-Step Control) for BLDC Motors

Trapezoidal commutation, or Six-Step control, uses bipolar conduction, with two motor phases conducting at any time and current commutation occurring every 120 electrical degrees [4]. As commutation depends on rotor position, Six-Step control requires either position sensors (e.g. Hall sensors, encoders, or resolvers) or sensorless estimation based on back-EMF detection or observers [4], [5]. This method is renowned for its simplicity of implementation and low hardware cost [6]. It enables effective torque control but introduces significant torque ripple during commutation events, especially under high load [7]. This ripple generates noise, increases mechanical stress, and reduces overall efficiency [3]. Although PWM techniques can mitigate this ripple, they do not completely eliminate it [2].

C. Field-Oriented Control (FOC) for BLDC Motors

FOC is a vector control strategy that decouples the stator flux and torque components. It transforms three-phase currents into orthogonal I_d and I_q components, enabling precise torque control and significant ripple reduction [7]. FOC is particularly effective for BLDC motors with sinusoidal back-EMF but can also be applied to trapezoidal back-EMF motors, albeit with less impressive ripple suppression results [2]. It requires greater computational power and more precise position sensors (e.g. encoders). Comparative analysis shows that FOC yields a more stable stator current profile and significantly reduces torque variations compared to trapezoidal control [1].

D. Comparative Analysis: FOC vs. Trapezoidal for Light Electric Vehicles

1) *Torque Ripple and User Comfort:* Firstly, torque ripple can be reduced for both control methods by selecting appropriate motor parameters, such as the number of stator slots and rotor poles [5]. FOC substantially reduces torque ripple compared to Six-Step control, directly enhancing ride comfort and minimizing vibrations. Experimental results show a torque ripple of 18.38% for FOC versus 35.67% for Six-Step control at 500 rpm [7]. Commutation torque ripple (CTR), prominent in Six-Step control, can be specifically targeted and mitigated using advanced control techniques like Model Predictive Control (MPC) while retaining the fundamental simplicity of trapezoidal commutation [3].

2) *Energy Efficiency:* FOC optimizes torque per ampere (MTPA), improving efficiency at low loads. Six-Step control exhibits lower switching losses at high speeds [2].

3) *Complexity, Cost, and Low-Tech Suitability:* Six-Step control is inherently simpler, cheaper, and more robust, making it a prime candidate for low-tech applications. Research focused on reducing propulsion system costs proposes simplified hardware topologies, such as 4-switch inverters (instead of 6) coupled with direct current control strategies, maintaining

acceptable performance while significantly lowering hardware costs [8]. FOC, while superior in performance, is more complex to implement and carries higher hardware costs (sensors, processing power).

4) *Dynamic Response:* FOC provides faster response times and better load disturbance rejection [7].

III. RESEARCH GAP

Despite this progress, limited research has examined the adaptation of open-source motor controllers to LowTech and reparability constraints. To date, researchers have not addressed the challenge of designing a controller that can be locally fabricated, repaired with standard components, and secured against unauthorised wireless access requirements that are critical for decentralised, community-operated fleets.

IV. THE AIM OF THE STUDY

This report presents the design and implementation of a VESC-based motor controller tailored to the needs of the Manufacture Autonome Décentralisée (MAD), an organisation operating electric cargo bikes and freight tricycles. We aim to focus on adapting the VESC open-source firmware to support both FOC and trapezoidal commutation, integrating positional control, and addressing Bluetooth security, while prioritising local manufacturability at INSA Toulouse.

V. SOFTWARE AND CONNECTIVITY

A. BLE Compatibility With the VESC

1) *First Experiment:* VESC-controllers are not necessarily equipped with Bluetooth-modules by default. Often, it is necessary to add a BLE-module. A standard HC-05 bluetooth-module compatible with arduino is a great way to send and receive bluetooth-packets from a host, e.g. a mobile phone, via a bridge translating the bluetooth packets to the UART protocol. This could be demonstrated using a ESP8622's standard library with said module, by letting us send characters from one device to another.

2) *HC-05 and the VESC:* By flashing the VESC firmware on a discovery-card and connecting the HC-05 module to the PB10 and PB11-pins, which are the Rx and Tx-pins for the STM32F4xx chip, we discovered that the setup for the bluetooth module was not available in the VESC tool. The inherent BLE capabilities is an important limitation to consider when designing a VESC system. We learned therefore that the HC-05 is not originally adapted for BLE. The need for a bridge also adds on complexity and cost, in the form of extra components and another device to maintain the code of. For the future, choosing a bluetooth module supporting BLE will be the easiest solution. Preferably a module fitting the communication connector on the cheap FOCer project [9] could facilitate the relevancy of the PCB project with a microcontroller.

3) *BLE Vulnerability*: Bluetooth could be a vulnerability to a VESC if it is to be used as a controller in real-time, as the controller could be jammed. Our test with the Flipper Zero shows the disfunctionality of Bluetooth with different use cases. We experienced with the jamming of a bluetooth speaker that the music completely stopped. It could also be investigated how the connection to the VESC could be modified using the vesc tool. We will touch more on the accessibility of the code within the vesc tool sooner.

B. Code integrity

1) *Context*: As the project is open source, and the code is freely accessible, there should be no reason to hide the code. It could however be reasonable to protect the code from changes which could hurt other people. Changing following parameters should at least come with a disclaimer and clearly state the dangers possible by proceeding with said changes. We have in mind the maximum speed permitted and the power available to the motors.

2) *LispBM extraction*: We caught word that the lisp code for the VESC used by Maillon mobility was easy to extract. By building an older firmware with the Maillon mobility software, we observed this by going to the lispBM tab and clicking read. It's up to laMAD if they would like to reinforce this mechanism. A modification on a parameter and then clicking upload allowed us to easily change the speed limit. This could bring up a public danger. This raises questions on the use of laMADs equipment which is in a traffic friendly manner.

3) *LispBM Code*: When we flashed newer firmware from the project made by Benjamin Vedder [9], we also observed some difficulties in uploading the lispBM script taken from the one on firmware version 6.06. This could indicate that there needs to be further maintenance of the code in order to get the software up to speed. This needs to be documented better for someone to continue the project. This could be a good investment for laMAD as well in the context of training for the people working on the motor control part of the e-bike.

This documentation could be as simple as referencing the relevant parts of the lispBM documentation [10]

4) *Proposed Solution*: This risk could be patched by developing a VESC application for the VESC controller or using a binary. This is a solution which is less open source, but which is make unlawful use of the material harder. The application could be created using C and use an algorithm known by laMAD in order to securise the access to someone to change the parameters only if they are laMAD certified personnel. This encryption would preferably be reduced to the most essential settings in order to align with what our impression of the philosophy of laMAD would be.

C. VESC Compiling

As mentioned, we have been able to compile the VESC tool and the VESC firmware. This firmware has been put onto an STM32F4xx Discovery card. This poses several obstacles for our progress on the topic of cybersecurity. We will however summarise what we have learned for you and propose some

additional work for the future. The challenges we encountered were the following: The lack of bluetooth capabilities. We did not have a module with BLE either. We had access to a HC-05 module, but that only allows for a normal bluetooth protocol and would require further work on a bridge to UART by using an esp8622 that we had as well. We propose that the next group has access to a VESC controller from the beginning, as well as a motor we could control. This could be in cooperation with laMAD, as laMAD could propose some models they're interested in.

We also found that the information on the VESC is scattered around the internet. The resources is also sometimes based on a debian-based linux system which adds more work for someone using another distribution of linux. This could hinder the implementation facility for new users. We struggled particularly with the Qt packages for positioning and gamepad. We would therefore recommend the use of a debian-based linux system for the computer working with the VESC for the laMAD associates.

VI. DISCUSSION

This project could be seen as an introduction to the VESC project for someone who don't know about it from beforehand, the challenges the new users face during setup, as well as a demand for clear expectations concerning documentation on the subject. The project laMAD is leading should probably not be a fork of the project, as the project is still in development.

As a final note, this proved to be a project which could easily be developed into several different projects in different fields. Some projects could be continued later on as a different PIR subject, other could be proposed to later years in different specialisations like TLS SEC, ESPE. Our thoughts on the following projects that could be explored are the following.

The fabrication line for electronics is globalised. This is okay in a stable world, but it could be a problem in a world full of instability, be it war, blockages, or tariffs. The idea of opening a specialisation in cooperation with AIME came up as an idea.

For TLS SEC the subject could be the design for a fitting mechanism to restrict certain privileges to certified personnel that could be used in the C programming language. Later down the line we could also see the possibility to analyse the Bluetooth frames in order to manipulate them in order to change important parameters.

The continuation on the PCB could be a subject fitting an ESPE specialisation.

The proposition of and supply of a vesc system to play with and troubleshoot could be a good rule of thumb, which allows for a quicker start and gives among other things an idea of the budget and the supply line used by an entity in the sector. Proposing a visit could also be one way to familiarise students with the association.

What should be a clear conclusion from our test with the jammer is that a controller based on Bluetooth alone should be avoided when possible and practical. Examples where this could be relevant include electric skateboards, as cables

could impose a tripping hazard. There, an encapsulation of an encrypted control frame could be an thought.

VII. RESULTS

VIII. CONCLUSION/SUMMARY

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The preferred spelling of the word “acknowledgment” in America is without an “e” after the “g”. Avoid the stilted expression “one of us (R. B. G.) thanks ...”. Instead, try “R. B. G. thanks...”. Put sponsor acknowledgments in the unnumbered footnote on the first page.

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