

1. Geometry of the unit tangent bundle

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The paper is organized into the following sections:

1. *Geometry of the unit tangent bundle.* We describe the metric in two ways, and when the base space is a round sphere, we see that geodesics in its unit tangent bundle project to spherical helices on the sphere.
2. *Geodesics in US^2 .* Some of the phenomena show up in this case.
3. *Helices in S^3 .* Frenet equations, curvature, torsion and writhe.
4. *Sasaki's equations.* A general calculus for geodesics in the unit tangent bundle UM of any Riemannian manifold M .
5. *Proof of the Fundamental Constraint.* A blend of the Sasaki and Frenet equations.

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1. GEOMETRY OF THE UNIT TANGENT BUNDLE

Let M be an n -dimensional Riemannian manifold, and $(p(t), v(t))$ a path in its unit tangent bundle UM . It is customary to give UM the Riemannian metric in which arc length $s(t)$ along this path is given by the formula

$$s'(t)^2 = |p'(t)|^2 + |v'(t)|^2,$$

where

$p'(t)$ = tangent vector to the curve $p(t)$ in M ,

$v'(t)$ = covariant derivative of $v(t)$ along $p(t)$ in M ,

and the norms of these vectors are measured in the given Riemannian metric on M .

When M is flat, and hence parallel translation is independent of path, the above metric on UM is simply the product metric of $M \times S^{n-1}$. So the constant speed geodesics in UM , for example, are just the paths $(p(t), v(t))$ for which $p(t)$ and $v(t)$ are themselves constant speed geodesics in their respective spaces. In particular, each geodesic in UM certainly projects to a geodesic in M .

But when M is curved, the story is quite different. A geodesic in the unit tangent bundle UM need not project to a geodesic in M . We can already see this when M is a round two-sphere.

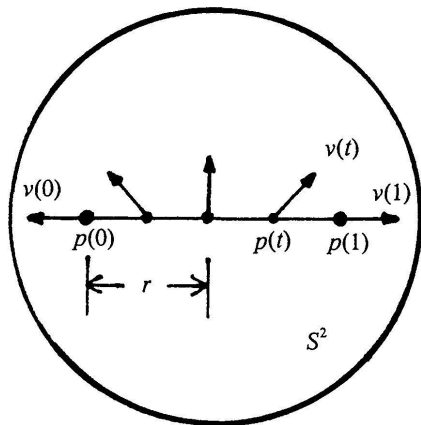


FIGURE 1

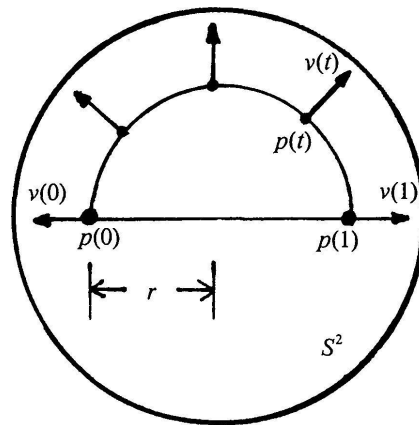


FIGURE 2

In each of Figures 1 and 2, we depict a path $(p(t), v(t))$ in the unit tangent bundle US^2 of a round two-sphere S^2 of radius 1. Though the paths are different, their initial points are the same and their terminal points are the same.

In the first path, the point $p(t)$ travels at constant speed along a geodesic of length $2r$ on S^2 . At the same time the tangent vector $v(t)$ rotates at constant speed with respect to a parallel coordinate frame, turning through a total angle π from beginning to end. The length of this path $(p(t), v(t))$ is

$$\sqrt{\pi^2 + 4r^2}.$$

If the base space were R^2 instead of S^2 , this path in the unit tangent bundle would be a geodesic, indeed a shortest connection between its endpoints.

In the second path, the point $p(t)$ travels at constant speed along a semicircle of length $\pi \sin r$. At the same time the tangent vector $v(t)$ rotates at constant speed with respect to a parallel coordinate frame, turning through a total angle somewhat less than π because of the curvature in the base space S^2 . The savings is half of the area $2\pi(1 - \cos r)$ inside the small circle. Hence the total angle that $v(t)$ turns through is $\pi \cos r$. It follows that the length of this second path $(p(t), v(t))$ is π .

So the second path is shorter than the first. Indeed, it is a minimizing geodesic in US^2 between its endpoints, whose distance apart is therefore π .

Yet its projection on the base space S^2 is a small circle, not a geodesic.

Immediately one asks: *which curves on S^n are projections of geodesics in US^n ?*

In answering this, we use another approach to the geometry of US^n , viewing it as the homogeneous space $SO(n+1)/SO(n-1)$. Here, the special orthogonal group $SO(n+1)$ is given the usual bi-invariant Riemannian metric, and then the inner products in directions orthogonal to the cosets of $SO(n-1)$ are transferred to the coset space $SO(n+1)/SO(n-1)$. This makes the projection map from $SO(n+1)$ to US^n a Riemannian submersion. We leave it as an exercise to show that this Riemannian metric on US^n coincides with the one described earlier.

A geodesic in $SO(n+1)$ which starts out orthogonal to one of the cosets of $SO(n-1)$ remains orthogonal to all the cosets, and projects to a geodesic in $SO(n+1)/SO(n-1) = US^n$. Furthermore, all the geodesics in US^n are obtained this way.

Suppose, for example, that $n = 3$. If $(p(t), v(t))$ is a geodesic in US^3 , then by the above, there must be a geodesic $h(t)$ through the identity in $SO(4)$ such that

$$h(t)(p(0)) = p(t) \quad \text{and} \quad h(t)(v(0)) = v(t).$$

But every such geodesic $h(t)$ in $SO(4)$ consists of independent, constant speed rotations in a pair of orthogonal two-planes in four-space. Hence $p(t)$ travels along a spiral on an invariant torus, that is, along a spherical helix.

Notice that the isometry $h(t)$ which takes $p(0)$ to $p(t)$ and $v(0)$ to $v(t)$, also takes the entire helix $\{p(t)\}$ to itself. Hence it takes the Frenet frame of the helix at $p(0)$ to the Frenet frame at $p(t)$. It follows that

$$v(t) = aT(t) + bN(t) + cB(t)$$

has constant coefficients with respect to this Frenet frame.

Beyond S^3 , nothing new happens for geodesics: it is easy to see that every geodesic in US^n lies inside a totally geodesic submanifold US^3 . Indeed, if (p, v) and (q, w) are nearby points on the geodesic, then the vectors p, v, q and w determine the corresponding S^3 .

When it comes to proving the Fundamental Constraint, we will capitalize on this observation by restricting our attention to S^3 .

We conclude: *the only curves on S^n which can be projections of geodesics on US^n are spherical helices (allowing great and small circles and points as special cases) which lie on great 3-spheres. All such spherical helices will appear in this way.*