A navigation software system that implements these algorithms generates a simple graphical user interface, through which the user can specify either waypoints in two or three dimensions or the ground area to be surveyed. Alternatively, the user can load a data file containing waypoint coordinates. The user can also specify other parameters that affect the planned trajectory, including the field of view of the camera and the dynamical parameters, the primary one being the minimum allowable turn radius of the aero-bot. Then assuming constant airspeed, the algorithms compute a minimum-time or minimum-length trajectory that takes account of all of the aforementioned requirements and constraints. Notably, in one of the algorithms, the turning dynamics of the aerobot are represented by a cubic spline that is used to interpolate the trajectory between waypoints.

In some contemplated future versions, the need for intervention by human users would be reduced: Waypoints specified by users could be sup-planted by data generated by onboard artificial-intelligence image-data-processing systems programmed to strive to satisfy mission specifications.

✿ Cliffbot Maestro

NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory, Pasadena, California

Cliffbot Maestro (see figure) permits teleoperation of remote rovers for field testing in extreme environments. The application user interface provides two sets of tools for operations: stereo image browsing and command generation.

The stereo image-browsing feature allows the operator to see images in either 2D or 3D views. This is useful in order to develop a route for the rover to safely drive, as well as identify interesting objects for scientific exploration.
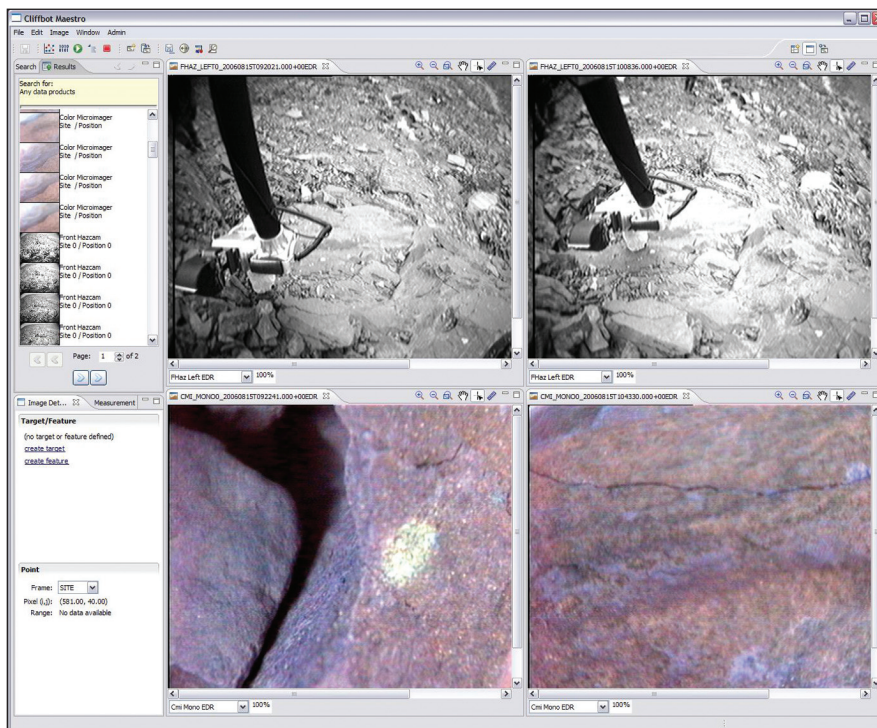
The command-generation tool is used to author a script (using either a drag & drop interface, or a textual command-line one) and send it to the rover. These scripts are not only for driving, but also for sample collection, reconnaissance, imaging, and science data acquisition.

The software runs on dedicated hardware that can withstand extremely cold temperatures. Its test bed is a Panasonic Toughbook (or equivalent) rugged laptop operating in the deep Arctic for extended periods. While the hardware doesn't have to be cutting-edge, it must withstand continued cold.

Cliffbot Maestro also provides engineering metrics about the state of the rover, in order to monitor its health, as well as the condition of the robotic arm. This allows for remote support while in the field.

Cliffbot Maestro User Interfaces.

✿ Tracking Debris Shed by a Space-Shuttle Launch Vehicle

Lyndon B. Johnson Space Center, Houston, Texas

The DEBRIS software predicts the trajectories of debris particles shed by a space-shuttle launch vehicle during ascent, to aid in assessing potential harm to the space-shuttle orbiter and crew. The user specifies the location of release and other initial conditions for a debris particle. DEBRIS tracks the particle within an overset grid system by means of a computational fluid dynamics (CFD) simulation of the local flow field and a ballistic simulation that takes account of the mass of the particle and its aerodynamic properties in the flow field. The computed particle trajectory is stored in a file to be post-