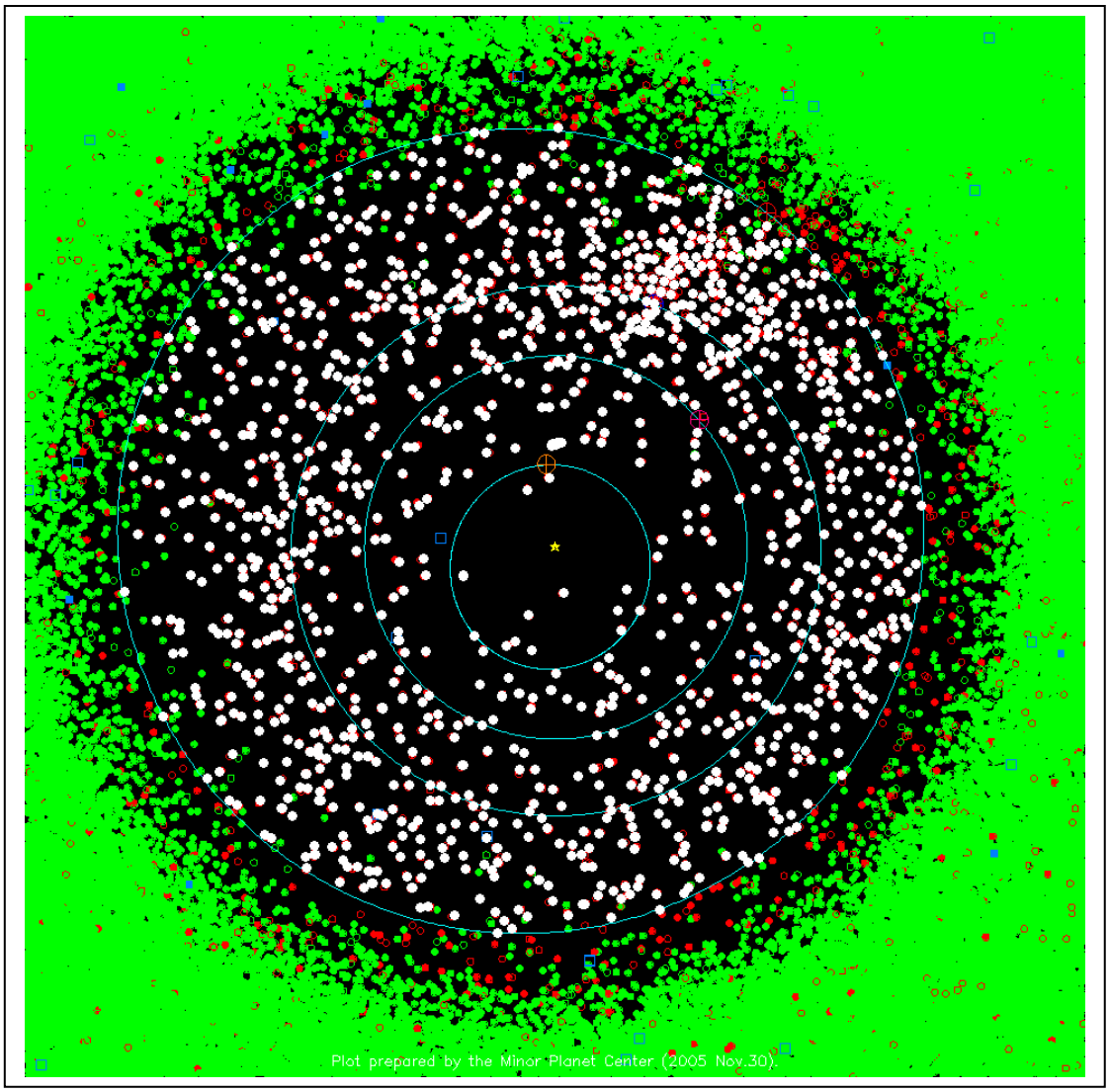
Astronomers have catalogued and determined orbits for 30,000 minor planets in the solar system (asteroids, comets etc). Over 150,000 bodies larger than a few hundred meters across have been spotted and remain to have their orbits exactly determined. Below is a plot made on November 30, 2005 of the locations of all known objects (white dots) within the orbit of Mars whose path skirts the inner edge of the asteroid belt (green dots).



Question 1 – How many minor planets are located inside the orbit of Mercury? Venus? Earth? Mars?

Question 2 – If the radius of Earth's orbit is 150 million km, what is the scale of this figure in millions of km per millimeter?

Question 3 – About how far apart are the minor planets from each other on this particular day? Would they be a hazard for space travel?

Question 4 – How many asteroids crossed Earth's orbit on November 30, 2005?

The plot of the minor planets was obtained from the IAU, Minor Planets Center (http://cfa-www.harvard.edu/iau/lists/InnerPlot2.html.) It shows the location of the known asteroids, comets and other 'minor planets' for November 30, 2005. The plot shows the orbits of Mercury, Venus, Earth and Mars. Objects that have parahelias (closest orbit location to the sun) less than 1.3 AU are shown in white circles. More details can be found at http://www.space.com/scienceastronomy/solarsystem/asteroid_toomany_011019-1.html

Question 1 – How many minor planets are located inside the orbit of Mercury? Venus? Earth? Mars? **Answer:** Students should count the plotted symbols within (or on) the first inner ring (Mercury's orbit) and get **13** symbols (don't include the sun!). For the space between Venus and Mercury, I count 119 spots which makes the total **132** minor planets inside the orbit of Venus. Between Earth and Venus there are about 280 for a total of 412 minor planets inside Earth's orbit. Between Mars and Earth, a careful student may be able to count about 833 which means there are 833+412 = **1245** minor planets inside the orbit of Mars.

Question 2 – What is the scale of this figure in millions of km per millimeter? **Answer:** The radius of Earth's orbit is 150 million kilometers, which corresponds to 70 millimeters, so the scale is 2.1 million km per millimeter.

Question 3 – About how far apart are the minor planets from each other on this particular day? Would they be a hazard for space travel? **Answer:** Although the asteroids are only plotted as though they are located in the same 2-D plane, we can estimate from the average 'eyeball' separation between asteroids of about 2 millimeters, that they are about 4.2 million kilometers apart. A spacecraft would not collide with a typical asteroid unless it was directed to specifically target an asteroid for investigation…or impact. It is a popular myth about space travel that astronauts have to dodge asteroids when traveling to Mars or the outer solar system. Interplanetary dust grains and micro-meteoroids are, however, a much bigger hazard!!

Question 4 – How many asteroids crossed Earth's orbit on November 30, 2005? **Answer:** Just count the number of white spots that touch the line that represents the orbit of Earth. There are about 70 spots that touch the orbit line.

Could the Earth collide with them? Each dot is about 1 mm in radius, so this represents a distance of 2 million kilometers. Since Earth is only 12,000 km across and a typical asteroid is only 1 km across, collision is extremely unlikely even when the diagram seems to show otherwise. There is another way that this diagram makes the situation look worse than it is. Because the asteroid orbits can be several million miles above or below the orbit of Earth as the asteroids cross this location, there are very few close calls between Earth and any given asteroid in the current catalog. Astronomers call the ones that get close 'Near-Earth Asteroids' and there are about 700 of these known. Only **one** of these known NEAs may get close enough to Earth in the next 30 years to be a potential collision problem, but astronomers are still finding dozens more NEAs every year.