

Molecular Dynamics Project

FYS-MEK1110 - Mechanics

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Part 1 Introduction

In this project you will learn the basics of a simulation technique called molecular dynamics (MD). Molecular dynamics is a method actively used in research here at the Department of Physics, yet its basic principle can be understood and implemented with the background of a first-year physics student.

Molecular dynamics is based on the assumption that even atoms move according to the laws of Newton, given the correct model for interactions. The goal of this project is to model an argon gas, where the atoms interact according to the famous Lennard-Jones potential,

$$U(r) = 4\epsilon \left(\left(\frac{\sigma}{r} \right)^{12} - \left(\frac{\sigma}{r} \right)^6 \right), \quad (1)$$

where r is the distance between two atoms, $r = \|\vec{r}_i - \vec{r}_j\|$. σ and ϵ are parameters which determine which chemical compound is modelled. This potential is a good approximation for noble gases.

1a) Understanding the potential

- i. Plot the potential as a function of r with $\epsilon = 1$ and $\sigma = 1$.
- ii. The behaviour of $U(r)$ is vastly different for $r \ll \sigma$ and $r \gg \sigma$. Which term in the potential, equation (1), dominates in each case and what is the effect?
- iii. Find and characterise the equilibrium points of the potential.
- iv. Describe qualitatively the motion of two atoms which start at rest separated by a distance of 1.5σ . What if they start with a separation of 0.95σ ? (hint: use the graph of the potential).
- v. Characterise the shape of the potential around $r = 1.0\sigma$. Can you think of other force(s) with the same behaviour?

1b) Forces and equations of motion

- i. Find the force on atom i at position \vec{r}_i from atom j at position \vec{r}_j .
- ii. Show that the equation of motion for atom i is

$$\frac{d^2\vec{r}_i}{dt^2} = \frac{24\epsilon}{m} \sum_{j \neq i} \left(2 \left(\frac{\sigma}{\|\vec{r}_j - \vec{r}_i\|} \right)^{12} - \left(\frac{\sigma}{\|\vec{r}_j - \vec{r}_i\|} \right)^6 \right) \frac{\vec{r}_j - \vec{r}_i}{\|\vec{r}_j - \vec{r}_i\|^2}. \quad (2)$$

1c) Units

As you may remember from MAT-INF1100, numerical accuracy is reduced when computing with values which are many orders of magnitude apart. This is often an issue in physics, and molecular

dynamics is no exception. For example, the mass of argon is smaller than 10^{-25} kg, while typical length scales are on the order of nanometres, 10^{-9} m.

The remedy is to change units so that most quantities are close to 1. From equation (1) on the previous page it is clear that σ and ε are the typical scale for length and energy.

- i. Introduce the scaled coordinates $\vec{r}_i' = \vec{r}_i/\sigma$ and show that the equation of motion can be rewritten in terms of these coordinates as

$$\frac{d^2\vec{r}_i'}{dt'^2} = 24 \sum_{j \neq i} \left(2\|\vec{r}_j' - \vec{r}_i'\|^{-12} - \|\vec{r}_j' - \vec{r}_i'\|^{-6} \right) \frac{\vec{r}_j' - \vec{r}_i'}{\|\vec{r}_j' - \vec{r}_i'\|^2}, \quad (3)$$

where $t' = t/\tau$ for a suitable choice of τ .

- ii. What is the characteristic time scale τ , and what is its value for argon, which has $\sigma = 3.405 \text{ \AA}$ ($1 \text{ \AA} = 1 \cdot 10^{-10} \text{ m}$), $m = 39.95 \text{ u}$ ($1 \text{ u} = 1.66 \cdot 10^{-27} \text{ kg}$) and $\varepsilon = 1.0318 \cdot 10^{-2} \text{ eV}$ ($1 \text{ eV} = 1.602 \cdot 10^{-19} \text{ J}$)?

Part 2 Two-atom simulations

2a) Implementation

- i. Write a function which solves equation (3) for two atoms and finds the positions and velocities of the atoms as a function of time. Implement three different integration methods: Euler, Euler-Cromer and Velocity-Verlet (see appendix C on page 6 for a description of the latter).

2b) Motion

- i. Simulate the motion of two atoms which start at rest separated by a distance of 1.5σ . Use $\Delta t' = 0.01$.
- ii. Plot the distance between the atoms as a function of time.
- iii. How does the motion fit with your expectations from exercise 1a) on the preceding page?

2c) Energy

- i. Plot the kinetic, potential and total energy as a function of time. Specify your choice of parameters.
- ii. Should the total energy be conserved? Why, or why not?
- iii. Does your program fulfill this? If not, what could be the cause?
- iv. Simulate the same system as in exercise 2b) with the Euler, Euler-Cromer and Velocity Verlet algorithms for a total time $t' = 5.0$, and compare graphs of the total energy as a function of time.

- v. Find the largest time step that conserves energy for all three methods (fluctuations are allowed as long as they are periodic and doesn't spin out of control). Discuss your results.
- vi. Link your experimentation to a brief discussion of the pros and cons of the three methods, both physically and computationally.

2d) Different motion

- i. Repeat exercise 2b) on the preceding page with an initial separation of 0.95σ . Explain your results.

2e) Visualisation

- i. Extend your implementation such that it writes to an xyz-file at each timestep (see appendix A on page 6).
- ii. Visualise the results of your simulations using Ovito (see appendix B on page 6).

Part 3 Large systems

3a) Implementation

- i. Implement a solver of equation (3) on the previous page for N atoms, given initial positions and velocities.
- ii. Use Newton's third law to reduce the number of force calculations.

As you will experience, it takes a lot longer to simulate N atoms than two — in fact the time increases as N^2 . One very simple way to reduce simulation times is to look at the expression (or plot) of $U(r)$ and see that it goes very rapidly towards zero as r increases. This means that atoms far apart interact weakly, and the forces between them can be ignored.

- iii. Extend your implementation such that atoms more than 3σ apart do not interact.

This effectively sets the potential energy $U(r)$ to be 0 for $r \geq 3\sigma$. Since $U(3\sigma)$ is not exactly equal to 0, the potential energy becomes discontinuous, which breaks energy conservation. The solution is to use a shifted potential, i.e. adding a constant such that $U(3\sigma)$ is exactly zero.

- iv. Plot the shifted potential and the corresponding force to verify your implementation of the cut-off.
- v. Does the shift of the potential described above impact the force calculations?

3b) Verification

- i. Reproduce your results for the 2-atom model from the previous section to verify your implementation.
- ii. Simulate the motion of four atoms starting at rest from the positions $[1, 0, 0]$, $[0, 1, 0]$, $[-1, 0, 0]$ and $[0, -1, 0]$.
- iii. Visualise the results in Ovito, describe and explain the motion.
- iv. Plot the potential, kinetic and total energy as a function of time, and comment on the energy conservation.
- v. Repeat the above exercises with a small perturbation in the initial positions, such that the first atom starts at $[1, 0.01, 0]$.

3c) Initialisation

While we are interested in simulating liquid argon, which will not be in an ordered structure, the simplest choice of initial positions is a regular crystal structure. Our choice of structure is the face-centred cubic lattice, as this is the crystal structure of solid argon.

The smallest repeating unit is called a unit cell, and each unit cell contains four atoms. When creating a structure of $n \times n \times n$ unit cells, the atoms should be placed at

$$\begin{bmatrix} i & j & k \\ i & 0.5 + j & 0.5 + k \\ 0.5 + i & j & 0.5 + k \\ 0.5 + i & 0.5 + j & k \end{bmatrix} \cdot d$$

where i, j and k run from 0 to $n - 1$ and d is the size of the unit cell. This structure will contain $4n^3$ atoms in total.

- i. Write a function which takes n and d as arguments and returns the positions of $4n^3$ atoms on a face-centred cubic lattice.
- ii. Verify your implementation by calling your function for $n = 4$, writing the resulting positions to an xyz-file and looking at the result in Ovito. Your system should contain $4 \cdot 4^3 = 256$ atoms.
- iii. Show that the unit cell size corresponding to the correct density $\rho = 1.374 \text{ g/cm}^3$ is $d = 1.7\sigma$.

3d) Many atoms, open boundary

- i. Simulate 256 atoms starting from rest, and visualise the results.
- ii. Plot the potential, kinetic and total energy as a function of time. What is the main difference from the energy graphs for two and four atoms?

3e) Boundary conditions

In the previous exercise, you probably observed that the atoms immediately spread out into a large volume, possibly with some continuing to infinity (and beyond). This is not the behaviour we want. Ideally, we would like to model the bulk behaviour of argon by the use of periodic boundary conditions, but the implementation of this is a bit finicky.

Instead, we will model atoms which are forced to remain inside the initial box by the use of reflective boundary conditions. This gives reasonable results for the quantities that we want to measure. Reflective boundary conditions simply means that atoms that would otherwise leave the box, are turned around.

- i. Implement reflective boundary conditions in your program.
- ii. Run a simulation with 84 atoms and verify visually that your implementation works.

Part 4 Science

By now, you will have a well-functioning (if not terribly efficient) set of tools for running molecular dynamics simulations. It is now time to apply these tools to real problems. The goal is to reproduce some of the main results from the first article containing proper molecular dynamics (“landmark simulations” according to Wikipedia¹), written by A. Rahman in 1964[1].

¹https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Molecular_dynamics#History

Appendix

A Data file format

The xyz-format is a semi-standard format for storing data from molecular dynamics simulations. Each time step is stored in the following format, and there are no blank lines between timesteps:

- A line containing the number of atoms (an integer).
- An ignored line (this line is usually written as a header for the subsequent columns).
- One line for each atom, containing the atom type and the x -, y - and z -coordinates.

For two atoms simulated over three timesteps, where x_{ij} represents the x -coordinate of atom j at timestep i , the file would look like this:

```
2
type x y z
Ar x11 y11 z11
Ar x12 y12 z12
2
type x y z
Ar x21 y21 z21
Ar x22 y22 z22
2
type x y z
Ar x31 y31 z31
Ar x32 y32 z32
```

B Visualisation

Files written in the xyz-format can be read using the Ovito visualisation tool. It can be downloaded and installed from <https://ovito.org/index.php/download>.

When the installation has finished, simply open Ovito and click “File” → “Load File” and choose your xyz-file. Edit the column mapping in the dialogue if necessary. When the atoms have appeared on your screen, check the box named “File contains time series” on the right-hand side, press \triangleright and watch your atoms move around!

C Velocity-Verlet

The Velocity-Verlet integration scheme is based on a second order Taylor polynomial. With $\vec{r}_i(t)$ denoting the position of atom i at a time t , the second order Taylor expansions of position and velocity can be written as

$$\vec{r}_i(t + \Delta t) \approx \vec{r}_i(t) + \vec{v}_i(t)\Delta t + \frac{1}{2}\vec{a}_i(t)\Delta t^2$$

$$\vec{v}_i(t + \Delta t) \approx \vec{v}_i(t) + \vec{a}_i(t)\Delta t + \frac{1}{2}\vec{a}'_i(t)\Delta t^2.$$

There is no explicit expression for $\vec{a}'(t)$. It can, however, be approximated using our old friend

$$\vec{a}'(t) \approx \frac{\vec{a}(t + \Delta t) - \vec{a}(t)}{\Delta t}.$$

Since the acceleration is independent of the velocity, the newly updated position, $\vec{r}(t + \Delta t)$, is sufficient to calculate $\vec{a}(t + h)$. Inserting this into the expression for $\vec{v}(t + \Delta t)$, we get

$$\begin{aligned}\vec{v}_i(t + \Delta t) &\approx \vec{v}_i(t) + \vec{a}_i(t)\Delta t + \frac{1}{2}(\vec{a}_i(t + \Delta t) - \vec{a}_i(t))\Delta t \\ &= \vec{v}_i(t) + \frac{1}{2}(\vec{a}_i(t) + \vec{a}_i(t + \Delta t))\Delta t.\end{aligned}$$

The discretised algorithm then becomes

$$\begin{aligned}\vec{r}_{i,j+1} &\approx \vec{r}_{i,j} + \vec{v}_{i,j}\Delta t + \frac{1}{2}\vec{a}_{i,j}\Delta t^2 \\ \vec{v}_{i,j+1} &\approx \vec{v}_{i,j} + \frac{1}{2}(\vec{a}_{i,j} + \vec{a}_{i,j+1})\Delta t,\end{aligned}$$

where $\vec{r}_{i,j}$ is the position of atom i at timestep j . In your implementation, you should avoid having to calculate the acceleration more than once per timestep.

References

- [1] Aneesur Rahman. "Correlations in the Motion of Atoms in Liquid Argon". In: *Physical Review* 136.2A (Oct. 1964), A405–A411. DOI: 10.1103/physrev.136.a405. URL: <https://doi.org/10.1103/physrev.136.a405>.