

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

UVA DEPARTMENT OF ASTRONOMY · DOCTORAL PROGRAM · FALL 2024

SUMMARY OF OBJECTIVES

My first simulation study at NASA's Flight Sciences Lab produced puzzling results. Unexpected bifurcations had emerged in the dispersed spacecraft trajectories, and with hundreds of models integrated by thousands of engineers, the cause was unclear. I have since learned to consult previous studies, and isolate models to explain emergent dynamical effects. Now, I hope to design and execute large-scale simulations to explain and predict observations of galaxy & stellar evolution, the universe's large-scale structure, and other astrophysical phenomena.

Astrophysical simulations produce domain-specific results, but their development demands expertise across many computational and scientific disciplines. With cultivated expertise in computational labs, and scientific research teams, MIT is uniquely prepared to drive this moment in astronomy and train the next generation of astrophysicists. I hope you will consider me for admission to this training as part of the MIT Department of Physics' Doctoral Program. My experience across multiple disciplines, including scientific software development and nonlinear dynamics, has prepared me for the interdisciplinary work of computational astrophysics research.

ROBOTICS RESEARCH

I led software development in Dr. Dave Akin's Space Systems Lab (SSL) for four years cumulatively as an undergraduate student, and as a graduate Dean's Fellowship recipient and research assistant. SSL's primary application, an 8DOF dexterous manipulator known as Ranger, required consis-

tently fast and precise control loops. As I developed kinematic solvers and Cartesian controllers for Ranger, I learned techniques for improving mathematical software: parallelism for reducing jitter, in-place calculations for avoiding allocation, and careful benchmark design for algorithm selection. I presented benchmarks for one such selection in a research paper: analytical Jacobian codes, generated with my personal contributions to Julia's `Symbolics.jl`, which halved computation time relative to iterative methods. After applying these techniques, Ranger successfully completed spacecraft manipulation demos, and I developed fluency in scientific software development.

DYNAMICS RESEARCH

I had always enjoyed courses related to dynamical systems, but I thrived when my graduate astrodynamics coursework encouraged computational methods. My Interplanetary Navigation & Guidance term project replicated halo orbit and invariant manifold solvers, as summarized by Megan Rund's [thesis](#). Multiple differential correction flavors are documented in literature, but I found no guidance for algorithm selection. My final paper mapped desired orbit characteristics to compatible solvers, announced several open-source Julia [packages](#), and presented over 130k [initial conditions](#) for periodic orbits. I was thrilled to find true low-energy trajectories throughout our solar system with laptop-scale computation. After presenting this work at [JuliaCon 2021](#), I was invited to join the JuliaSpace organization to collaborate with other astrodynamics researchers across the world, including Germany and Japan.

NUMERICAL SIMULATIONS

As my engineering research and professional interests shifted toward nonlinear dynamics, computation quickly became my most productive tool. **Julia's** open-source modeling, simulation, and symbolic manipulation packages were particularly helpful for exploring smaller dynamical systems' structure and solutions. I am proud to have brought several astrophysical models into Julia's ecosystem with **AstrodynamicalModels.jl** and **GalacticPotentials.jl**; after professionally developing similar capabilities for the Artemis Program, I received a Superior Achievement Award from the NASA Johnson Space Center (JSC) Director.

As a flight dynamics engineer, I was primarily responsible for characterizing and improving integrated spacecraft performance with numerical simulations. This work required all relevant dynamical effects to be modeled, including flexible structure & separation dynamics, propellant slosh, and sensor noise. I routinely modified dynamical models, and executed tens of thousands of Monte Carlo simulations to determine the vehicle performance's sensitivity; one such simulation study found control parameter values which substantially improved vehicle performance. I independently documented the new parameters' macro-dynamical effects with more than 150 pages of technical reports.

RESEARCH ASPIRATIONS

In my three years at NASA, I have come to understand the space industry's shrinking — and astronomy's growing — need for computational methods. My interest in space science has long been fueled by astronomers' social media posts, and popular science magazines. I have been thrilled to recently learn that my technical skill-set may serve the cause of discovery through computational as-

tronomy & astrophysics research.

NASA's flight dynamics simulations echo elements of Dr. Vogelsberger's massive astrophysical **simulations**; both study macro-dynamical consequences of known or hypothesized physical laws. After conducting dynamical sensitivity studies as an engineer, I have been encouraged to find similar methods used in astrophysics research, such as Dr. Josh Borrow's **characterization** of the impact of the epoch of reionization on early galaxy formation during his post-doctorate tenure at MIT. I hope to discuss similar such studies with my advisor, and quantify the impact of other feedback effects, e.g. galaxy evolution's sensitivity to radiation pressure and stellar winds, gas flows, galaxy clustering, and possible properties of dark matter. I am similarly excited by the opportunity to contribute to Dr. Necib's study of dark matter, and its intersections with galactic dynamics and structure formation.

MIT's position as a leader of astrophysics research is further strengthened by its breadth of cultivated technical expertise, including that within the **Julia Lab**. I am interested in exploring how Julia's revolutionary modeling & simulation codes may accelerate astrophysical simulations, and aid projects such as Dr. Millholland's data-driven approach to stellar formation modeling. If my advisor found similar ideas promising, I would welcome cross-department collaborations in the pursuit of novel science.

FUTURE ASPIRATIONS

With leaders in computational research, physics, mathematics, and other technical fields, MIT is uniquely suited to drive this moment in astronomy. I hope to have the opportunity to learn from this expertise. Thank you for your consideration.