Draft version May 1, 2023
Typeset using LaTeX default style in AASTeX631

On a Downward Spiral: Understanding the Morphological Changes of M33 Under the Tidal Influence of M31*

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ABSTRACT

Spiral arms have been observed to be induced by tidal interactions between galaxies, particularly in the case of M31 and M33 in the Local Group. The tidally induced spiral arms of M33 are an important topic of research because their proximity to our galaxy is convenient for us to observe and build upon our theory of galaxy evolution and galactic morphological changes. Our project uses N-body simulations to track the evolution of spiral arms in M33 to see when the spiral arms first sprang up and how long they would last as M33 orbits M31. These details will allow us to construct a complete evolutionary picture of how M33's spiral arms developed. We find that our simulated M33 begins to show traces of spiral arm densities at around 6 Gyr, but it is not until M33 reaches pericenter at 10 Gyr that the arms become stable. This suggests a strong correlation between the magnitude of the tidal force (which is inversely proportional to the cube of distance) and the formation and stability of spiral arms.

Keywords: Local Group — Spiral Galaxy — Satellite Galaxy — Tidal Stripping/Sharing — Galaxy Interaction

1. INTRODUCTION

The Local Group is a group of galaxies of which the three largest members in terms of extension are M31 (also known as the Andromeda Galaxy), the Milky Way, and M33 (also known as the Triangulum Galaxy), respectively. All three have been confirmed to be spiral galaxies, exhibiting structures that consist of stars, gas and dust while extending from the galaxy's center to the flat, rotating disk. M33, in particular, is also believed to be a satellite galaxy of M31 because it orbits the much more massive M31 on gravitationally bound orbits; however, details are not clear regarding the history of their interaction (van der Marel et al. 2012; Tepper-García et al. 2020). By interaction, we are referring to the gravitational effects that galaxies can have on one another due to their proximity, including tidal effects wherein a galaxy's material is pulled towards or away from the other galaxy due to the other galaxy's tidal forces.

The topic of galaxy interaction is currently a focus in astronomical research as it offers insights into galaxy evolution. For the term "galaxy" itself, we are adopting the definition by Willman & Strader (2012) wherein a galaxy is a gravitationally bound system of stars "whose properties cannot be explained by a combination of baryons and Newton's laws of gravity" (Willman & Strader 2012). With this definition in mind, we also define galaxy evolution to be the changes of these bound systems of stars over time, not just in their kimenatics and stellar components but also in their size and their morphology, most notably the formation of spiral arms like those in the Local Group. If a connection is found between the evolution of a Local Group galaxy like M33 and its interactions with its neighbors, we will be able to construct a vivid picture of the Local Group's history, where the shapes that we observe today can be traced back to distant points in time where processes in and between galaxies triggered changes in their morphology.

There are works in the current literature which demonstrate that morphological structures like spiral arms can be induced by tidal interactions between galaxies. Hydrodynamic simulations of the grand spiral galaxy M51 by Dobbs et al. (2010) have shown that M51's spiral arms are most realistically the result of tidally-induced kinematic density

* Completed on May 1st, 2023

waves that wind up over time. Other N-body simulations by Semczuk et al. (2017) found that when a Milky Way-like galaxy orbits a Virgo-like cluster, that galaxy can develop two temporary spiral arms during pericenter passages, as seen in Fig. 1. While M33 does not possess well-defined grand design spirals like M51 and is not similar in size to the Milky Way, it has been observed to possess a two-armed spiral structure. Semczuk et al. (2018) has shown from their simulations of the Local Group that these arms of M33 were mostly likely excited by tides from its host galaxy, M31.

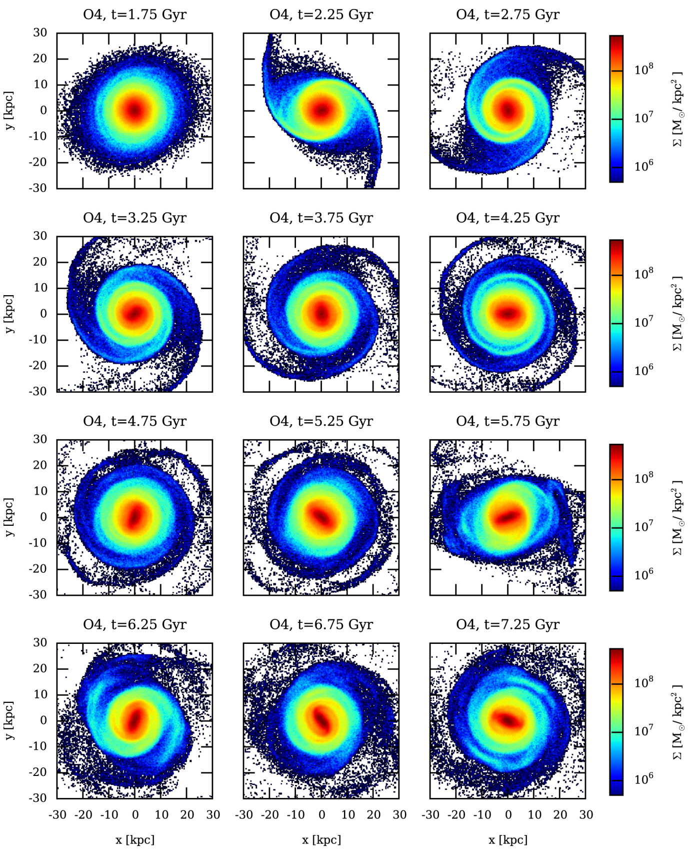


Figure 1: Face-on view of the surface density distribution of stars in the Milky Way-like galaxy from Semczuk et al. (2017), showing two distinct spiral arms.

As of today, the process through which the two-armed spiral structure of M33 was induced by tides from M31 has not been fully understood. Using N-body simulations that took into account star formation, feedback and cooling processes, Semczuk et al. (2018) noted that a pericenter passage of M33 near M31 could induce spiral arms and tidal distortion features in the gaseous and stellar disks that lasted 0.75 Gyr after M33 left the pericenter. This result does confirm what simulations of galaxies more massive than M33 have shown, which is that spiral arms could be induced during pericenter passages. However, it is unclear as to what happens after M33's pericenter passage, or even after the period of 0.75 Gyr that Semczuk et al. (2018) mentioned. Do M33's spiral arms gradually dissipate until the next pericenter massage, where the galaxy is once again spiralized? Such re-spiralizations have been observed by Dobbs et al. (2010) in simulated Milky Way-mass galaxies, but have yet been focused upon in the current literature on M33.

2. THIS PROJECT

In this project, we will focus only on the evolution of M33's spiral structures. We aim to track changes in M33's morphology at the same time as its distance with regards to M31, which, according to our expectations, will be tidally interacting with M33.

The goal of the project, as evidenced from the previous paragraph, will be to fill in the gaps in our understanding of what happens to M33's tidally induced spiral arms over time. Do they dissipate as M33 gets further, only to form again during the next pericenter passage? If they do dissipate, how long do they last in our simulations compared to the 0.75 Gyr noted by Semczuk et al. (2018)? On the other hand, if they do not dissipate, how are the spiral arms retained as M33 gets further away, thus experiencing less tidal force from M31 because the tidal force is inversely proportional to the cube of the distance?

Our study, despite its limited focus only on M33's spiral arms, is expected to contribute to the understanding of galaxy evolution. With technological advances, from more detailed simulations to the proposed launch of the Nancy Grace Roman Space Telescope in 2027, astronomers will be able to observe more galaxies with various morphological structures. Being able to retrace such structures to the history of the Local Group not only improves our understanding of our own cosmic neighborhood, but also provides the theoretical and empirical basis to reconstruct the history of the more distant systems that we will come across with more cutting-edge equipment.

3. METHODOLOGY

For the project, we will be using a set of models of the Local Group from van der Marel et al. (2012). The models are "N-body simulations", meaning that they simulate the behavior of a dynamical system of N particles as these particles interact amongst themselves gravitationally. In our simulations, the motions of M31, M33 and the Milky Way will be tracked over all snapshots across time.

Motivated by such results as those of Dobbs et al. (2010) and Semczuk et al. (2018), we aim to study the morphology of M33 during and after its pericenter passage with respect to M31. This morphology will be examined visually by plotting the distribution of the stellar particles in cylindrical coordinates and then using density contours to delineate any possible structures like spiral arms. An example of a density contour plot of M33 in our simulations, albeit in x-y coordinates, can be found as Fig. 2. Our goal is that by keeping track of this stellar particle distribution at different points between M33's pericenter and apocenter with respect to M31, we will be able to make inferences regarding how the galaxy's structures appear and disappear along its orbit around M31.

To locate the pericenter and apocenter of M33's orbit, we first compute the center of mass (COM) of both M33 and M31 in the x, y and z directions at each snapshot. This COM can be computed as:

$$x_{COM} = \frac{\sum x_i m_i}{\sum x_i} \tag{1}$$

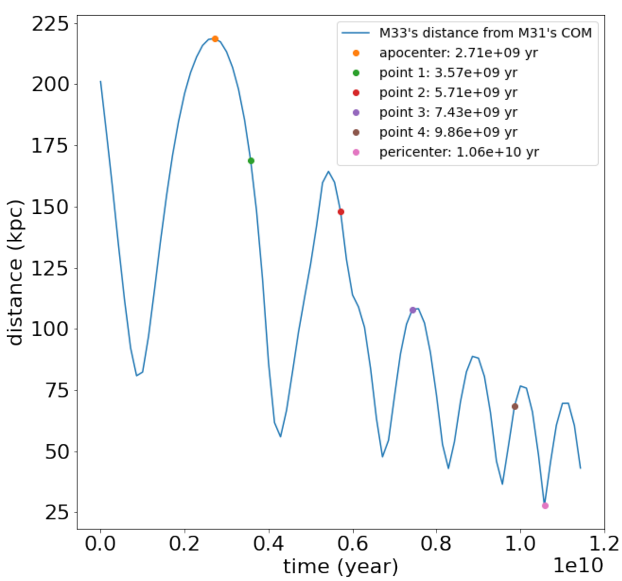


Figure 3: M33's distance from M31 in kpc with respect to time in years. The six dots are the apocenter, the pericenter and the four points in-between that we picked. We find that M31 is slowly falling into M33.

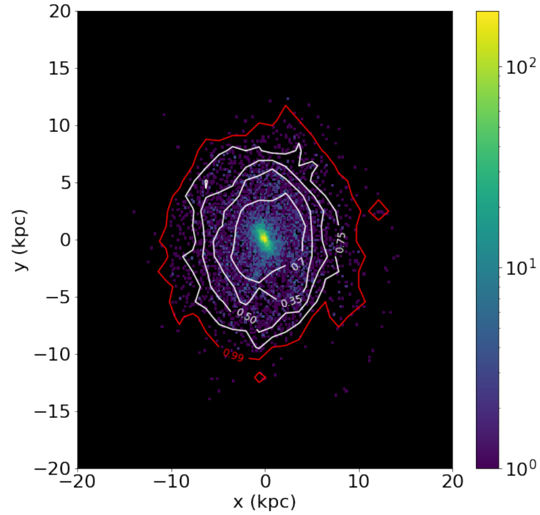


Figure 2: Plot of M33 in x-y coordinates, including density contours. The numbers next to the contour lines show the ratio of the star's mass that is enclosed by each line.

where x_i is the distance of a particle within the disk of each galaxy as measured in the x, y and z direction from the center of said galaxy, and m_i is the mass of said disk particle. Both x_i and m_i have been provided in the simulations' output data files. With the COMs of both galaxies calculated, we subtract the position of M31's COM by the position of M33's COM for each snapshot to obtain the separation of the two galaxies. From all the separations at all snapshots, we find the smallest separation (the pericenter) and the greatest separation (the apocenter), as well as choose four more points between these extremes to keep track of M33's morphological changes. Finally, we reuse the COM calculations to correct the disk particle vector measurements in both galaxies. With the vector measurements corrected, we rotate them such that the disk angular momentum is aligned with the z axis. This last step allows us to plot the particle distribution in 2D.

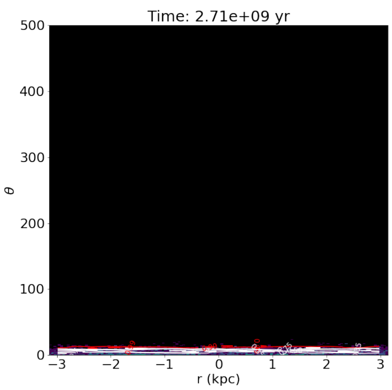
In the end, we should be expecting at least two types of plot. The first plot is of M33's separation from M31 with respect to time, and also includes the six points that we have chosen to investigate (the pericenter, the apocenter, and the four arbitrary points in-between). This plot is to help visualize where all the points are along M33's orbit, which will facilitate the analysis of M33's shape at said point. The second plot, or type of plot, is the stellar particle distribution of M33 at each of the six points in cylindrical coordinates. It is on these plots that we will fit density contour lines and look for signs of spiral arms.

Generally, we expect to find traces of spiral arms at the pericenter, just like Dobbs et al. (2010) and Semczuk et al. (2018) have noted in their simulations. These traces will not look as distinct as M33 gets further away from M31, because the tidal force will then be reduced gradually and have less effect on M33, thus destabilizing the tidally induced spiral structure. By the time M33 is at apocenter, we expect there to be little to no sign of spiral arm densities on the stellar particle distribution plot.

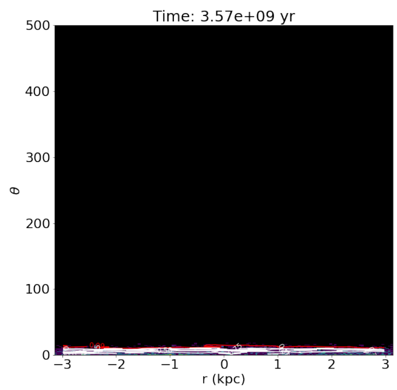
4. RESULTS

The plot of M33's separation from M31 with respect to time is provided as Fig. 3. We see from the figure that M33 reaches its apocenter early in its orbit (2.71 Gyr) and gets closer to M31 with time, not without bouncing back in its orbit and returning to a further position from M31. The pericenter is very recent (10.6 Gyr). Lastly, the four points in-between represent different stages in M33's orbit: at points 1 and 2, the galaxy is approaching from its apocentric distances (i.e. distances that look like how the apocenter appears on the plot but are not actually the apocenter), whereas at point 3, it is at an apocentric distance, and at point 4, it is on the way to the last apocentric distance before the true pericenter. Generally, we find that M33's orbit is bringing the galaxy closer to M31 with time.

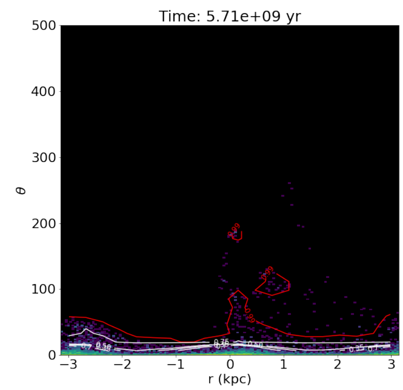
Fig. 4 shows the stellar particle distribution of M33 at the six points in Fig. 3. We see that when M33 is at apocenter, there does not seem to be any peculiar density structure. However, starting from 5.71 Gyr (Fig. 4c), some clumps of



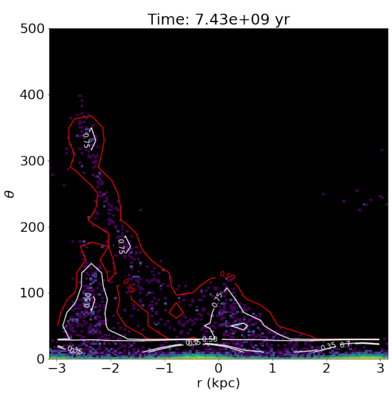
(a) M33 at apocenter (2.71 Gyr)



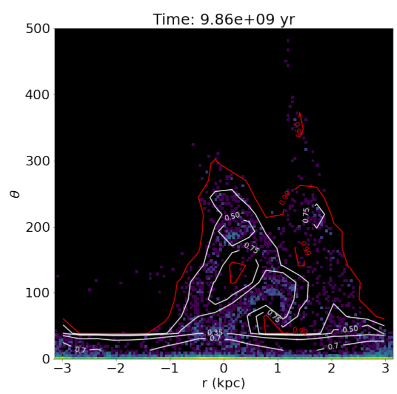
(b) M33 at point 1 (3.57 Gyr)



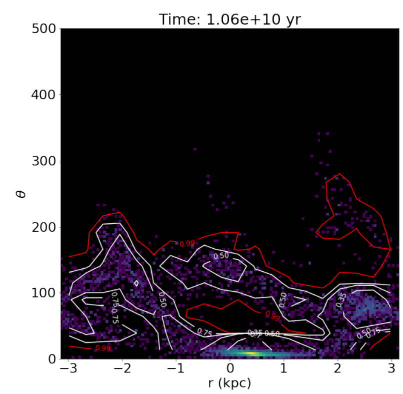
(c) M33 at point 2 (5.71 Gyr)



(d) M33 at point 3 (7.43 Gyr)



(e) M33 at point 4 (9.86 Gyr)



(f) M33 at pericenter (10.6 Gyr)

Figure 4: Stellar particle distribution of M33 at different snapshots with density contours added. The axes are in cylindrical coordinates: the horizontal axis is r, the magnitude of distance of each particle from M33, and the vertical axis is θ, representing the angle that the particle of distance r makes with the x-axis of the Cartesian coordinates. The contour lines have their own numbers indicating the ratio of number of particles enclosed by each line. We find that as M33 approaches M31, star particle densities on both sides of the galaxy increase, indicating spiral arm structures.

star particles begin to form, flaring up on different sides of the galaxy at 7.43 Gyr (Fig. 4d) and 9.86 Gyr (Fig. 4e) When M33 is at pericenter, there are regions of dense star particles extending from both sides of the galaxy, indicating the presence of stable spiral arms (see Fig. 4f).

5. DISCUSSION

Our results agree with our initial hypothesis that spiral arm structures would form as M33 approaches pericenter. This is the same result that Semczuk et al. (2018) have found. In the broader context of galaxy evolution, this similarity of results strengthens the idea that galactic tidal interactions can induce spiral arms. However, we are unable to confirm whether the tidally induced spiral arms in M33 remain at least 0.75 Gyr after it has left the pericenter like Semczuk et al. (2018) says, as the time between the pericenter passage (1.06 Gyr) and the end of our simulation is already less than 0.75 Gyr. We also cannot determine whether the spiral arms dissipate after the pericenter passage, because said passage is too close to the end of the simulation. It seems possible that as demonstrated in Fig. 3, our simulated M33 is not going to return to another apocenter at all, as it is slowly falling into M31. In brief, our results do confirm the possibility of M33's spiral arms being tidally induced as the galaxy approaches pericenter, but due to the pericenter being so late in time, we cannot reproduce the lifespan of the spiral arms that previous authors have mentioned. Nor can we determine if these spiral arms will disappear completely as the galaxy leaves pericenter, as in our simulation, M33 is falling into M31.

There are some noticeable uncertainties in our analysis. Firstly, only six points are picked along M33's orbit around M31, so it is possible that we are missing out on relevant morphological changes that happen at other points in time. Secondly, because the analysis is done by eye and by simple contour lines, there might also be subtle morphological changes that we cannot detect.

6. CONCLUSIONS

M33 is a satellite galaxy of M31 and is known to exhibit tidally induced spiral arms in simulations (Semczuk et al. 2018). Researching M33 thus provides us with an opportunity to understand how spiral arms evolved in the universe and whether tidal forces could influence this process.

In our project, we discovered density regions of stellar particle distribution that flared up on both sides of M33 as it approached M31, which implies not only the formation of spiral arms, but also a trigger by tidal force, which is inversely proportional to the cube of distance. This agrees with not only our hypothesis, but also studies in the current literature like that of Semczuk et al. (2018). Unfortunately, we are unable to produce the lifespan of the spiral arm after pericenter as suggested in these studies because the pericenter is just too close to the end of the simulation. As a result, more needs to be done to look into the conditions that might have caused the pericenter to be so close to the end.

In the future, we are hoping to understand why the time of pericenter passage is different between our simulations and that of Semczuk et al. (2018). We are also interested in looking at more snapshots across time. Last but not least, we want to find distinct characteristics of spiral arm particle distributions to automate the code and reduce the human factor when we have to look at the visualizations and determine the results. We hope that by following these directions onward, our analysis will become more thorough and bring us to a more in-depth understanding of how M33's spiral arms behave.

We thank Professor Gurtina Besla and TA Hayden Foote of ASTR400B for suggestions on how to plot the stellar particle distribution and for troubleshooting codes in general. We would also like to thank those who made the packages that we used, including astropy (Astropy Collaboration et al. 2018), matplotlib (Hunter 2007) and numpy (van der Walt et al. 2011).

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