

A Novel Triad Twisted String Actuator for Controlling a Two Degrees of Freedom Joint: Design and Experimental Validation

Damian Crosby, Joaquin Carrasco, *Member, IEEE*, William Heath, *Member, IEEE*, and Andrew Weightman

Abstract—Actuated universal joints, or equivalent joint systems, are found in a number of robotic applications, in particular mobile snake robots, snake-arm robots and robotic tails. These joints have two degrees of freedom on two axes, each perpendicular to a third axis and to themselves. Such joints use a variety of actuation methods, including direct drive motors, linear screw drives, cable based systems, and hydraulics/pneumatics. In this paper the authors design and validate a mechanism that uses the Twisted String Actuator (TSA) in an antagonistic triad to actuate the universal joint, using orientation sensors and load cells to create a robust cascading closed loop control system. This results in a light, compact, high-performance actuation system that avoids the extra mass and hardware complexity that alternative actuation methods present, with the additional challenge of nonlinearity.

Index Terms—???

I. INTRODUCTION

Actuated Universal Joint (AUJ) mechanisms are found in a wide range of robotic applications, such as confined space inspection using snake-arm robots [1], highly manoeuvrable mobile snake robots [2], and biomimetic robot tails for stability [3]. Mobile snake robots must usually incorporate electric actuators inline with their joints. This results in an AUJ having to shift the mass of the follower segments and all the actuators inside the follower segments, which results in high torque requirements. Snake-arm robots and robotic tails can reduce the mass and size of the AUJ by moving their actuators away from the AUJs and use cables to transfer the force to the joints, or use hydraulic or pneumatic actuators which tend to be lighter than equivalent electric motors. This comes at the expense of increased mass and bulk at the base of the arm or tail.

First developed by Würtz, May, Holz, *et al.* [4] in 2010, the Twisted String Actuator (TSA) uses two or more strings between two fixtures as a linear actuator. When one fixture is rotated (typically by an electric motor), the looped string twists into a helix, decreasing the distance between them. TSA actuators have been used for a hand orthosis [5], elbow joint [6] and foldable robot arm [7] among other functions.

The primary advantage of TSA over similar linear actuators such as a leadscrew is the reduction the TSA provides is not proportional (or even slightly inversely proportional)

to the mass of the actuator. By decreasing the string cross-section radius (plus half the gap between any two strings that intersects the axis of rotation when there are more than two strings) the reduction increases for a constant l_u and θ_s , resulting in a greater reduction with no increase, or even a slight decrease, in actuator mass. While the reduction in a leadscrew can be increased by decreasing the lead on the thread, which also has no increase in mass, this has a limited range and can quickly run up against manufacturing tolerances or material strength requirements. In order to achieve greater or more robust reductions, the screw radius has to be increased, or the driving motor has to have a larger reduction before driving the screw, both of which usually result in more material (typically steel) and therefore more mass.

However, TSA does have some disadvantages, the most significant of which is a non-linear reduction equation, which is also dependent on the motor angle θ_s (and therefore actuator position). The reduction decreases in a non-linear fashion as the angle increases, with the derivative decreasing as the angle increases. There is also the compliance of the strings to consider, depending on the thickness and material chosen, which becomes a significant factor under high forces. Both of these issues can be addressed with accurate modelling [8] and/or a robust control strategy, as demonstrated in [4]. What is more of an issue is the unidirectional force of the TSA, which can only impart force in tension. This means that for an AUJ, which is a two degree of freedom joint, a minimum of three TSA are required for unless spring return mechanisms are used, which would impart additional force on the TSA and therefore reduce performance. However, the potential high force to mass ratio of the TSA due to the non-proportional reduction may adequately compensate for the additional actuator requirement.

The focus of this research is to investigate if the TSA is a suitable candidate for control of an AUJ considering both the benefits and drawbacks. To this end, the first objective is to simulate a model and then construct a physical experimental prototype to validate the proposed control system. Then, the second objective is to compare the results from both the simulation and experimental prototype with other inline actuation methods for an AUJ to analyse and discuss the potential advantages and disadvantages of TSA actuation against alternatives.

understudied area of research. [9] have proposed a similar design using a flexible core with continuous curvature as opposed to a rigid universal joint, however currently this research has not demonstrated control of both axes of motion with multiple TSA.

A. Twisted String Actuator

First developed by Würtz, May, Holz, *et al.* [4] in 2010, TSA uses two or more strings between two fixtures as a linear actuator. When one fixture is rotated (typically by an electric motor), the strings twist into a helix, decreasing the distance between the fixtures. Given the unwound length l_u and the cross-section radius of the string r_s , the actuator length is given by

$$l_s(\theta_s) = \sqrt{l_u^2 - \theta_s^2 r_s^2} \quad (1)$$

where θ_s is the motor angle. This equation assumes an infinite string stiffness, so is only reasonably accurate under low tension. Although theoretically the stroke of the TSA can be the entire domain of $[0, l_u]$, in reality the thickness of the string prevents a geometric helix from forming once the helix pitch $q < 4r_s$ (or $q < 2nr_s$ for n strings). This limits the lower bound of the stroke as follows,

$$l_{min} = \frac{l_u}{\sqrt{\frac{\pi^2}{2} + 1}} \approx 0.46 l_u \quad (2)$$

or approximately 46% of l_u for a two string TSA.

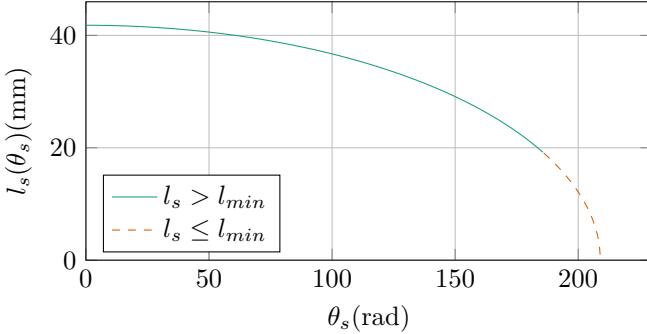


Fig. 1: TSA string length against motor angle with coefficients from table I.

B. Antagonistic Triad

As mentioned in the introduction, because the TSA provides only tensile force, a minimum of three actuators are required. These can be arranged in a triangular configuration to create an “antagonistic triad”, akin to the antagonistic pairs of muscles found in animals. Where a revolute joint would be found between the connecting ends of the actuator, a universal joint is found instead. The geometric structure of the system can be described with two equilateral triangles of inradius r on two planes separated in the z axis. The centroids are then connected

via a universal joint from each plane normal to an intersecting point, let the vector $\boldsymbol{\theta} = [\theta_1 \ \theta_2]$ denote the rotation of the second plane relative to the first, in the x and y axes around the intersecting point, and let l_1 and l_2 denote the normal distance from the intersection to the first and second plane centroids respectively. When $\boldsymbol{\theta} = [0 \ 0]$ the triangles are parallel to each other. The distance between the vertex pairs of each triangle is then denoted as $[\lambda_1 \ \lambda_2 \ \lambda_3]$ for the “top”, “left” and “right” vertices of the triangles. When $\boldsymbol{\theta}$ is changed, this will change λ_1 , λ_2 and λ_3 respectively. Figure 2 illustrates this antagonistic triad.

To calculate the lengths of the strings for a given $\boldsymbol{\theta}$ of the universal joint, we define a vector function $\Lambda(\boldsymbol{\theta}) = [\lambda_1(\boldsymbol{\theta}) \ \lambda_2(\boldsymbol{\theta}) \ \lambda_3(\boldsymbol{\theta})]$ as follows.

$$\begin{aligned} \lambda_1(\boldsymbol{\theta}) &= \sqrt{(l_1 + l_2 \cos \theta_1 \cos \theta_2 + r \cos \theta_1 \sin \theta_2)^2 \\ &\quad + (r - r \cos \theta_2 + l_2 \sin \theta_2)^2 \\ &\quad + (l_2 \cos \theta_2 \sin \theta_1 + r \sin \theta_1 \sin \theta_2)^2} \\ \lambda_2(\boldsymbol{\theta}) &= \sqrt{(a - b + c)^2 + (l_1 - d)^2 + e^2} \\ \lambda_3(\boldsymbol{\theta}) &= \sqrt{(a + b - c)^2 + (l_1 + d)^2 + e^2} \end{aligned} \quad (3)$$

where:

$$\begin{aligned} a &= -\frac{\sqrt{3}r(\cos \theta_1 - 1)}{2} \\ b &= l_2 \cos \theta_2 \sin \theta_1 \\ c &= \frac{r \sin \theta_1 \sin \theta_2}{2} \\ d &= \frac{\sqrt{3}r \sin \theta_1}{2} + l_2 \cos \theta_1 \cos \theta_2 - \frac{r \cos \theta_1 \sin \theta_2}{2} \\ e &= \frac{r \cos \theta_2}{2} - \frac{r}{2} + l_2 \sin \theta_2 \end{aligned}$$

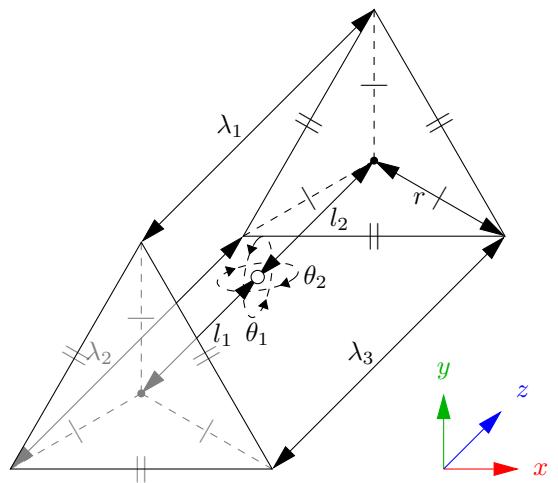


Fig. 2: Kinematic diagram of the antagonistic triad, where the universal joint rotation is defined by $\theta_{1,2}$ on the x and y axes respectively, and the string lengths are defined by $\lambda_{1,2,3}$ for the “Top”, “Left” and “Right” strings. r and $l_{1,2}$ define the anchor points of the strings.

II. CONTROL SYSTEM

The control system is a four layer cascade design, using feedback of the joint position from the accelerometers and

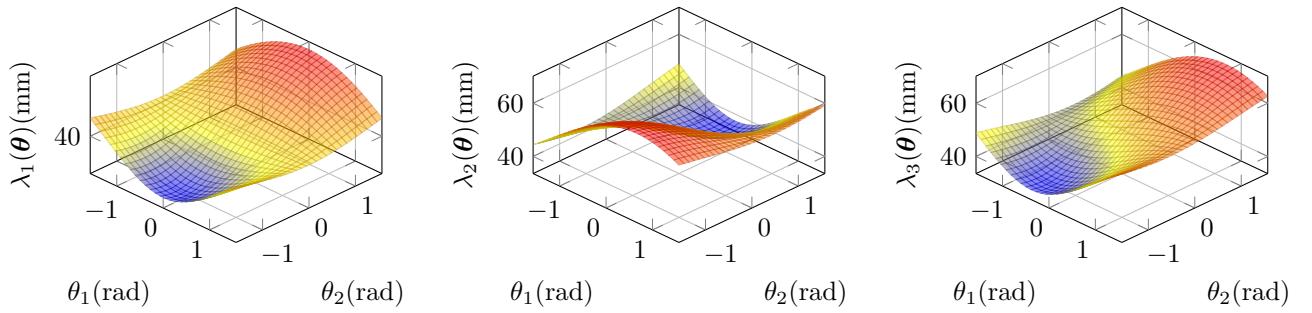


Fig. 3: Surface plots of each element of the vector function $\Lambda(\theta)$, assuming coefficient values from table I.

TSA force from the load cells. It uses a second order set-point trajectory q as input, which can either be pre-defined or generated dynamically from user input. Feedback is provided by the AUJ angular position θ , angular velocity $\dot{\theta}$, and TSA tension force \hat{f} .

- 1) C_1 AUJ Position PID Controller
- 2) C_2 Inverse Dynamics
- 3) C_3 TSA Force Optimisation Algorithm
- 4) C_4 TSA Force P Controller

Functions $C_{1\ldots 4}$ are then combined into a cascade function $C_4(C_3(C_2(C_1(\ldots), \ldots), \ldots), \ldots)$.

A. Actuated Universal Joint Position PID Controller with Acceleration Feedforward

Firstly, a PID controller is used to generate a control signal u with the input q as the setpoint, and the AUJ angular position θ and velocity $\dot{\theta}$ as feedback, plus the addition of a feedforward term for the input acceleration \ddot{q} , i.e.

$$u = k_p(q - \theta) + k_i \left(\int_0^t q - \theta \right) dt + k_d (\dot{q} - \dot{\theta}) + \ddot{q}. \quad (4)$$

In the discrete implementation used for fixed step simulation and experimental model control, the integral term is replaced by the trapezoidal rule.

$$K_I \int_0^t \epsilon \approx \sum_{i=0}^N \frac{\epsilon(t_i) + \epsilon(t_{i-1})}{2} \Delta t \quad (5)$$

B. Inverse Dynamics

The control signal u from the PID controller is then converted to the desired AUJ torque τ as follows

Firstly the affine transformation matrix T for a coordinate frame between the AUJ pivot and the centre of mass of the follower segment can be defined. The order of R_x and R_y can be reversed, but this requires other terms to be reversed as well.

$$T(\theta) = R_x(\theta_1) R_y(\theta_2) P_z(l_2) \quad (6)$$

Then the linear velocity jacobian J_v is simply the jacobian of the translation vector of T .

$$J_v(\theta) = \begin{bmatrix} \frac{\partial t_{14}}{\partial \theta_1} & \frac{\partial t_{24}}{\partial \theta_1} & \frac{\partial t_{34}}{\partial \theta_1} \\ \frac{\partial t_{14}}{\partial \theta_2} & \frac{\partial t_{24}}{\partial \theta_2} & \frac{\partial t_{34}}{\partial \theta_2} \end{bmatrix} \quad (7)$$

The angular velocity jacobian J_ω is calculated using the first joint angle relative to the base frame, and the second in the frame of the first. If R_x is the first rotation in T then the first column of the jacobian is $[100]^\top$ (to represent the pitch angle) and the second column is $R_x [010]^\top$.

$$J_\omega(\theta) = \begin{bmatrix} 1 & r_{x_{11}} \\ 0 & r_{x_{21}} \\ 0 & r_{x_{31}} \end{bmatrix} \quad (8)$$

Then the mass matrix D can be created from the jacobian, the mass for the follower segment m and its inertia tensor $I \in \mathbb{R}^{3 \times 3}$, and R_x and R_y to express the inertia in the correct frame.

$$D(\theta) = m J_v^\top J_v + J_\omega^\top (R_x R_y) I (R_x R_y)^\top J_\omega^\top \quad (9)$$

The centrifugal/coriolis matrix C is created from the christoffel symbols of D , along with the AUJ velocity vector $\dot{\theta}$.

$$C(\theta, \dot{\theta})_{k,j} = \sum_{i=1}^N \frac{1}{2} \frac{\partial d_{kj}}{\partial \theta_i} + \frac{\partial d_{ki}}{\partial \theta_j} - \frac{\partial d_{ij}}{\partial \theta_k} \dot{\theta}_i \quad (10)$$

Then the gravity term G . As the gravity vector direction is the same as the z axis as in figure 2, the height is equal to $-l_2 \cos \theta_1 \cos \theta_2$, therefore the potential energy is $mg(-l_2 \cos \theta_1 \cos \theta_2)$. The jacobian of this then becomes the gravity term.

$$G(\theta) = \begin{bmatrix} \frac{\partial mg - l_2 \cos \theta_1 \cos \theta_2}{\partial \theta_1} \\ \frac{\partial mg - l_2 \cos \theta_1 \cos \theta_2}{\partial \theta_2} \end{bmatrix} \quad (11)$$

D , C and G are then combined to form the dynamics equation C_2 , along with the AUJ position and velocity vectors. C_1 is used as the acceleration term. This results in a setpoint joint torque which can be used in the optimisation algorithm.

$$\tau = D(\theta) u + C(\theta, \dot{\theta}) \dot{\theta} + G(\theta). \quad (12)$$

C. Twisted String Actuator Force Optimisation Algorithm

This uses a modified algorithm from [10] to select an optimal force vector from the desired joint torque. A force matrix F is created from the torque input τ , jacobian J_Λ from the vector function Λ as defined in equation 3, and minimum force constant f_{min} . f_{ii} is equal to f_{min} , while the other elements in the column are based on a calculation using $J_{\Lambda_{-i,*}}$ where $-i$ is a row removed from the matrix.

$$\begin{aligned} J_\Lambda &= \begin{bmatrix} \frac{\partial \lambda_1}{\partial \theta_1} & \frac{\partial \lambda_2}{\partial \theta_1} & \frac{\partial \lambda_3}{\partial \theta_1} \\ \frac{\partial \lambda_1}{\partial \theta_2} & \frac{\partial \lambda_2}{\partial \theta_2} & \frac{\partial \lambda_3}{\partial \theta_2} \end{bmatrix} \\ F(\tau, \theta) &= \begin{cases} f_{i,i} = f_{min} \\ f_{-i,i} = -J_{\Lambda_{-i,*}}^{-T} (J_{\Lambda_{i,*}}^T f_{min} + \tau) \end{cases} \quad (13) \\ &= \begin{bmatrix} f_{min} & f_{12} & f_{13} \\ f_{21} & f_{min} & f_{23} \\ f_{31} & f_{32} & f_{min} \end{bmatrix} \end{aligned}$$

The following algorithm then selects one column of F to be the output force vector f .

```

1:  $s \leftarrow [\mathbf{T} \quad \mathbf{T} \quad \mathbf{T}]$ 
2: if  $f_{23} > f_{min}$  then  $s_2 \leftarrow \mathbf{F}$  else  $s_3 \leftarrow \mathbf{F}$  end if
3: if  $f_{31} > f_{min}$  then  $s_3 \leftarrow \mathbf{F}$  else  $s_1 \leftarrow \mathbf{F}$  end if
4: if  $f_{12} \geq f_{min}$  then  $s_1 \leftarrow \mathbf{F}$  else  $s_2 \leftarrow \mathbf{F}$  end if
5: for  $i = 1$  to  $3$  do
6:   if  $s_i \rightarrow \mathbf{T}$  then  $f \leftarrow f_{*,i}$  end if
7: end for
```

D. Twisted String Actuator Force Proportional Controller

The selected forces are then used as an input to a P controller using the measured load cell forces \hat{f} as feedback. The output from this can then be used to control the top, left and right TSA motors.

1) *Simulation Current Control:* In the simulation, each TSA was modelled as a state-space system which takes motor current u as an input and outputs y as the TSA tension force. [4] defines it as such, where J is the motor inertia, C is the motor coulomb friction (modified from viscous friction as the 1724TSR only has dry friction), K_t is the motor torque constant, and K_L is the load stiffness. As the original definition is for a fixed load l_u distance from the motor a modified model is required which takes into account the varying length between the motor and load defined by $\Lambda(\theta)$. A saturation function is used to prevent incorrect compression forces when the string is slack. All of the motor coefficients were taken from the Faulhaber 1724TSR datasheet [11] as this is the motor used in the experimental model. An estimated value is used for the load stiffness, this was chosen to be a high number as the model is expected to be very stiff.

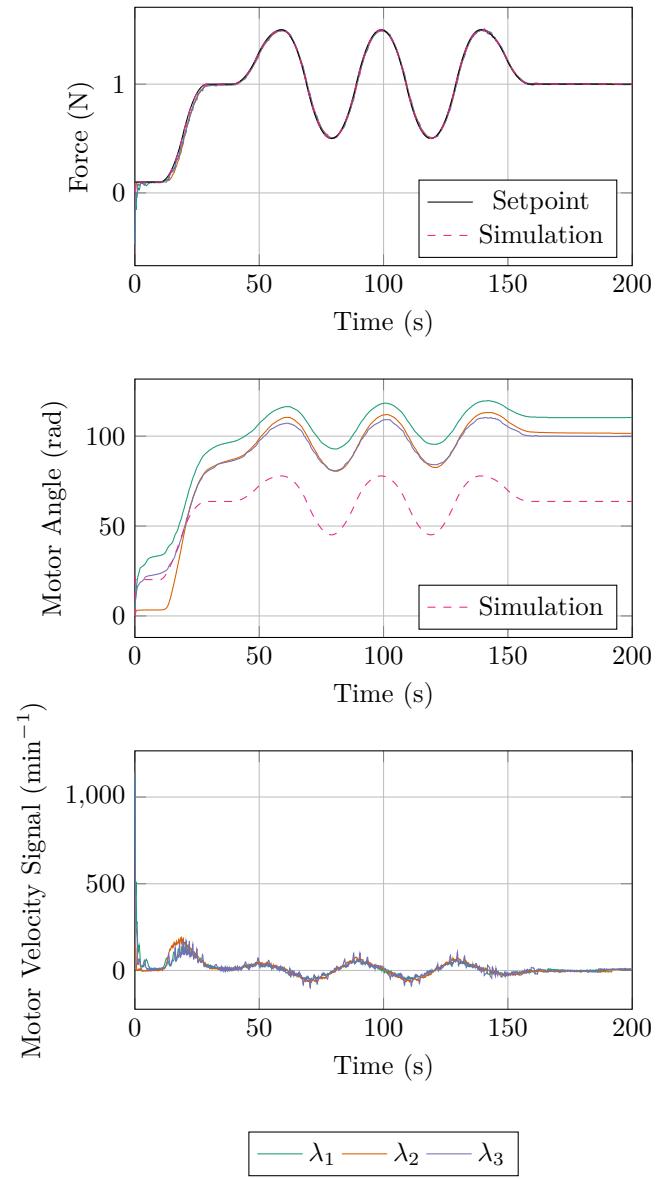


Fig. 4: Load cell plot from each string using the velocity control strategy.

$$\begin{aligned} h(\theta_s) &= \frac{\theta r_s^2}{\sqrt{l_u^2 - \theta_s^2 r_s^2}} \\ k(\theta_s, \theta) &= \lambda_n(\theta) - \sqrt{l_u^2 - \theta_s^2 r_s^2} \\ \dot{x} &= \begin{bmatrix} x_2 \\ -\frac{K_L}{J} h(x_1) k(x_1, \theta) - \frac{C}{J} \operatorname{sgn}(x_2) \end{bmatrix} + \begin{bmatrix} 0 \\ \frac{K_t}{J} \end{bmatrix} u \\ y &= K_L \operatorname{sat}_0^\infty k(x_1, \theta) \end{aligned} \quad (14)$$

The state space model was then adapted to include constraints on motor velocity and acceleration set by the motor controller in order to keep the motor within design limits, by replacing \dot{x} with \dot{x}' which contains saturation functions for maximum motor velocity v_s and acceleration α_s .

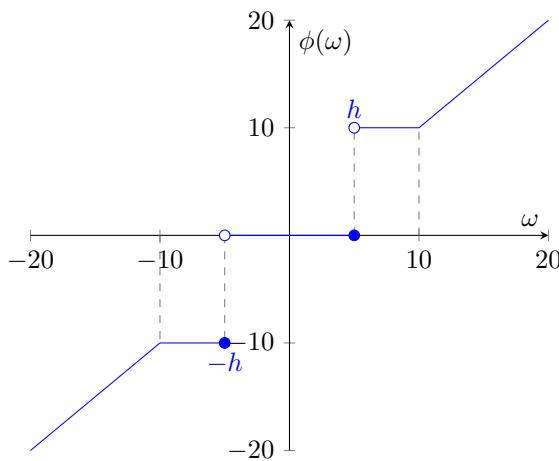


Fig. 5: Graph plotting the function of equation 16.

$$\dot{\mathbf{x}}' = \begin{bmatrix} \text{sat}_{\omega_s} \dot{x}_1 \\ \text{sat}_{\alpha_s} \dot{x}_2 \end{bmatrix} \quad (15)$$

2) *Experimental Velocity Control with Deadband Compensation:* In the experimental model, current control did not result in a stable output, so instead the P controller output would be the motor velocity as ω (each motor controller has a hardware velocity PI controller). Due to a motor deadband within $\pm 10 \text{ min}^{-1}$, an adjustable deadband compensator is used,

$$\phi_i(\omega_i) = \begin{cases} 10 & 10 \leq \omega_i < h \\ -10 & -h < \omega_i \leq -10 \\ 0 & h \leq \omega_i \leq -h \\ \omega_i & \text{otherwise} \end{cases} \quad (16)$$

where ϕ_i is the compensator for the controller i . An adjustment value $h \in [0, 10]$ changes the threshold at which the compensator switches on and off, allowing for a small deadband to remain.

The result from the TSA is then a compressive force acting between each of the three TSA and its corresponding endpoint on the Antagonistic Triad, imparting a torque on the axes of the universal joint.

3) *Direct Current Control (DCC):* This mode takes a preset velocity $\dot{\theta}_{set} \in [0, 4220]$ and uses a hardware PI controller with velocity feedback $\dot{\theta}_{act}$ to generate a control voltage. This voltage \mathbf{V} is then multiplied by the signum of the result from the cascade function in order to ensure the motor spins in the right direction, and then passed to a current limiter with the current error (the result with the actual current I_{act} subtracted) as the limit, before being sent to the motor. This ensures the motor stops spinning when the target current is reached.

$$\boldsymbol{\epsilon}_c = \dot{\theta}_{set} - \dot{\theta}_{act}$$

$$\mathbf{V} = \left(K_{P_c} \boldsymbol{\epsilon}_c + K_{D_c} \int_0^t \boldsymbol{\epsilon}_c \right) \text{sgn}(C_4(\dots)) \omega(C_4(\dots) - \mathbf{I}_{act}) \quad (17)$$

TABLE I: Model coefficients.

Coefficient	Value	Coefficient	Value
l_1	41.8 mm	J	$1 \times 10^{-6} \text{ kg m}^{-2}$
l_2	0 mm	K_L	1000 N m^{-1}
r	13 mm	f_{min}	3 N
l_u	41.8 mm	ω_s	441.9 rad s^{-1}
r_s	200 μm	I_s	0.19 A
m	72.619 13 g	K_t	$0.0263 \text{ N m A}^{-1}$
C	0.1315 N mm	τ_s	4.5 mN m
α_s	$1 \times 10^5 \text{ rad s}^{-2}$		
Coefficient	Value		
I	$\begin{bmatrix} 3 \times 10^{-5} & 0 & 0 \\ 0 & 3.2 \times 10^{-5} & 0 \\ 0 & 0 & 1.4 \times 10^{-5} \end{bmatrix} \text{ kg m}^{-2}$		

TABLE II: PID gains in the simulation and experiment.

Gain	Value	
	Simulation	Experiment*
k_p	800	3×10^4
k_i	3000	350
k_d	50	50
k_{p_s}	19	100

* Tracking mode, see section III-B.

Where $\omega(\dots) \in [0, 1]$ is an unknown hardware limiting function that controls the motor speed depending on the current error.

4) *P Current Controller:* This strategy is a more direct method of current control, using a software P controller to directly set the voltage of the motor, using the MCDC 3002 as simply a passive amplifier. In this case the current error is passed directly to a P controller which has its output limited to prevent damage to the motors.

$$\mathbf{V} = K_{P_c} C_4(\dots) - \mathbf{I}_{act} \quad (18)$$

5) *Velocity Control:* This strategy simply uses the result from the cascade function as a velocity setpoint using the hardware velocity PI controller as in the DCC.

$$\mathbf{V} = K_{P_c} \boldsymbol{\epsilon}_c + K_{D_c} \int_0^t \boldsymbol{\epsilon}_c \quad (19)$$

III. SIMULATION & EXPERIMENTAL RESULTS

To design and refine the parameters of the control system, a Simscape Multibody™ model of the antagonistic triad and control system was created in MATLAB®/Simulink™. This allowed for model design coefficients l_1, l_2 and controller gains k_p, k_i, k_d, k_{p_s} to be modified in order to have the most stable control within design limits.

A. Experimental Setup

For the experimental validation, a physical prototype of the mechanism was constructed with coefficients from table I as design parameters. This was mounted vertically, in order for the Inertial Measurement Unit (IMU) to measure the orientation of the universal joint. The TSA

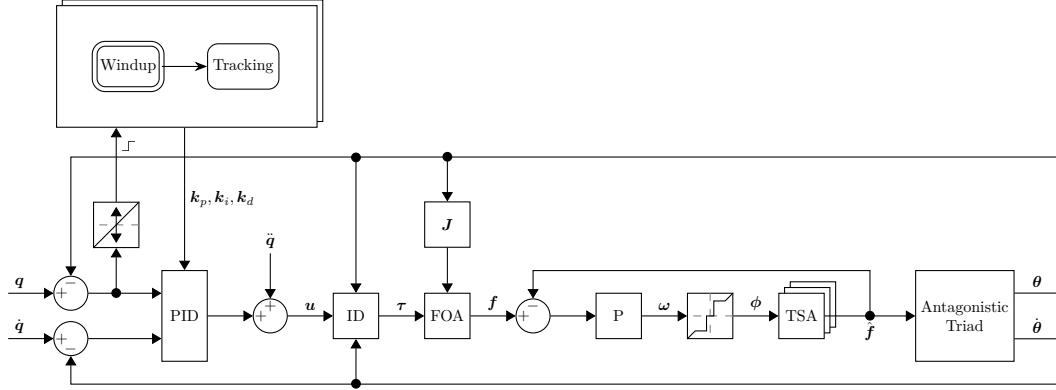


Fig. 6: Block diagram of the complete experimental control system, excluding the hardware velocity controllers for the motors.

mechanisms consist of a high torque motor attached to the base segment, with a string clamp attached to the motor shaft. On the follower segment, a load cell is mounted on top of a universal joint to ensure a purely axial load, with a capstan bolt attached to the load cell. The string itself is attached to the clamp at both ends using two grub screws for extra security and easy adjustment, and looped through the hole in the capstan bolt.

The motors to be used would be Faulhaber 1724T024SR micromotors, selected for their compact size but high torque. These would be controlled by Fauhaber MCDC3002 motor controllers, which could interface with a National Instruments MyRIO via the USB port, using a USB to serial converter. The load cells would be Futek LCM100 miniature load cells, selected for their small size. The signals from these would be amplified using Flyde FE-359-TA instrumentation amplifiers and decoded using an external AD7606 ADC before being fed into the MyRIO using SPI. The orientation of the AUJ would be

B. Windup & Tracking States

When the mechanism is started with the TSA in a completely unwound state, before it can begin tracking a motion trajectory, the TSA strings must “wind up” to closely match the intial state of f . During this phase, the outer PID gains k_p, k_i are unsuitable and can result in damage to the mechanism. To mitigate this, two sets of PID gains are chosen, one for the windup state, and another for the tracking state, which the windup state transitions to once suitable stability is achieved. This transition trigger is defined on a per-axis basis, as the first zero crossing of the angle error (as $q = 0$ this is effectively θ).

C. Results

Figure 9 plots the tracking response of both the simulation and experiment. Three trajectories were created to test the capabilites of the mechanism. Two were only in one axis of the Universal Joint, and the third was in both

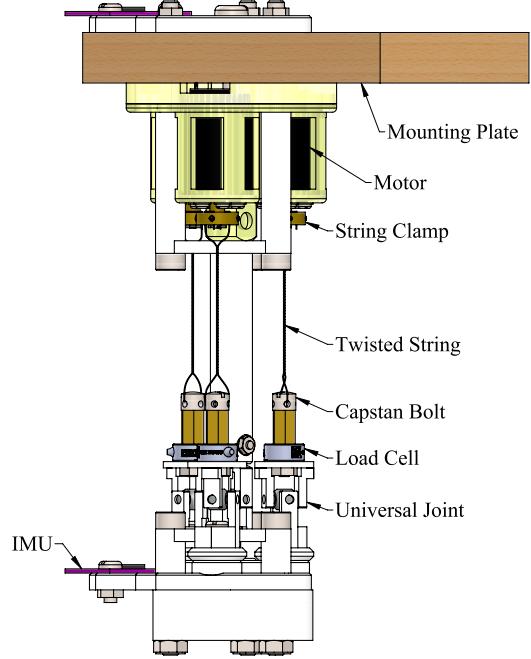


Fig. 7: Schematic of the experimental model with labelled components.

TABLE III: PID constants for both states.

Gain	Value	
	Windup	Tracking
k_p	800	3×10^4
k_i	3000	350

axes. The deflection angle range was limited due to the low value of l_u , but can easily be extended by increasing this value. A low l_u was chosen as it resulted in easier installation.

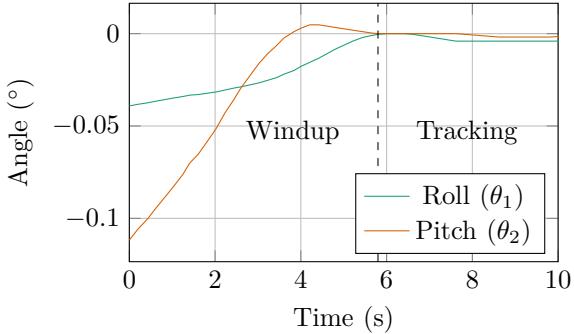


Fig. 8: The initial startup of the mechanism showing the transition between “windup” and “tracking” states.

D. Twisted String Actuator Control System & Motor Characterisation

Before verifying robust control of the AUJ, the control of each individual TSA needed to be tested in order to characterise the performance of the motors and to ensure the inner loop control system was robust. This would involve selecting the control strategy that gave the best performance. A test trajectory consisting of a smooth ramp followed by a sine wave was fed into the inner loop of the cascade function as $[f(t) \ f(t) \ f(t)]$. Each control strategy was tested, and in the end the velocity control strategy proved most optimal, as is shown in figure 12.

IV. PERFORMANCE COMPARISON

To compare the performance of a TSA AUJ against alternatives, we can measure two metrics, the maximum tension force f_{max} and maximum stroke velocity \dot{p}_{max} . The alternatives chosen for comparison are leadscrews of various rod diameters d_m and pitches λ , and a “direct drive” where the motor is rotating the universal joint directly without any reduction or motion transformation.

A. Twisted String Actuator

For the TSA metrics, the equations from [4], in particular $h(\theta)$ and $k(\theta)$ as used for the state space, which can be used to determine f_{max} and \dot{p}_{max} . By extracting coefficient r_s as an input to make $f(p, r_s)$ and $\dot{p}(\dot{\theta}, p, r_s)$ the performance of different string thicknesses can be compared for a given unwound length l_u and τ_{max} , $\dot{\theta}_{max}$ over the range of the contraction length p .

$$\begin{aligned} k^{-1}(p) &= \pm \frac{\sqrt{p(2l_u - p)}}{r_s} \\ h^{-1}(\theta) &= \frac{\sqrt{l_n^2 - r_s^2\theta^2}}{r_s^2\theta} \\ f(p) &= h^{-1}(k^{-1}(p)) = \pm \frac{\sqrt{(l_u - p)^2}}{r_s\sqrt{p(2l_u - p)}} \\ f_{max} &= f(p)\tau_{max} \end{aligned} \quad (20)$$

$$\begin{aligned} k(\dot{\theta}, \theta) &= \frac{\dot{\theta}r_s^2\theta}{\sqrt{l_n^2 - r_s^2\theta^2}} \\ \dot{p}(\dot{\theta}, p) &= \dot{k}(\dot{\theta}, k^{-1}(p)) = \pm \frac{\dot{\theta}r_s\sqrt{p(2l_n - p)}}{\sqrt{(l_n - p)^2}} \\ \dot{p}_{max} &= \dot{p}(\dot{\theta}_{max}, p) \end{aligned} \quad (21)$$

B. Leadscrew

For the leadscrew metrics, the raising torque calculation [12] can be used as the absolute value of f_{max} , since the TSA only operates in tension, which can be used to determine the same metrics. The performance of different screw diameters d_m and leads λ can then be compared for a given τ_{max} and coefficient of friction μ . \dot{p}_{max} is then calculated by multiplying λ with $\dot{\theta}_{max}$. The performance of different λ can then be compared for a given $\dot{\theta}_{max}$.

$$\begin{aligned} |\tau(f)| &= \frac{d_m f(\lambda + \pi d_m \mu)}{2(\pi d_m - \lambda \mu)} \\ |f(\tau)| &= \frac{2\tau(\pi d_m - \lambda \mu)}{d_m(\lambda + \pi d_m \mu)} \\ f_{max} &= |f(\tau_{max})| \end{aligned} \quad (22)$$

$$\begin{aligned} \dot{p}(\dot{\theta}) &= \lambda \frac{\dot{\theta}}{2\pi} \\ \dot{p}_{max} &= \dot{p}(\dot{\theta}_{max}) \end{aligned} \quad (23)$$

C. Direct Drive

The direct drive metrics are trivially calculated using the lever force and tangential velocity that would be generated at the endpoint of a linear actuator able to impart equivalent angular velocity and torque on the universal joint.

$$f_{max} = \frac{\tau_{max}}{\sqrt{l_2^2 + r^2}} \quad (24)$$

$$\dot{p}_{max} = \dot{\theta}_{max} \sqrt{l_2^2 + r^2} \quad (25)$$

D. Comparison

As the values for τ_{max} and $\dot{\theta}_{max}$ for the TSA depend on p , but remain constant for the leadscrew, the performance of the TSA is going to be better or worse than a given leadscrew depending on the value p . Figure 11 compares the TSA configuration using the coefficients from table I against a number of common leadscrew configurations that are practical for the dimensions of the AUJ. The TSA outperforms or underperforms different leadscrew configurations depending on p .

V. CONCLUSION

This research has demonstrated the robust control of the orientation of a universal joint using TSA in an antagonistic triad configuration. It has also compared the performance of the system to alternative actuation methods. Future developments would include improvements to the orientation sensors, the data from the IMU proved to be unreliable and of poor resolution, so either a superior IMU should be used or an alternative method for sensing the universal joint orientation should be investigated, such as Linear Variable Differential Transformers (LVDTs), hall effect sensors or potentiometers. Alternative control algorithms that are less or not dependant on the dynamic properties of the follower segments (mass and inertia) will also be considered, in order to improve the robustness of the control system to external forces. The 1724TSR motors also had poor performance at low speeds, necessitating the deadband compensator. Investigating the use of similar size and torque brushless motors with sinusoidal commutation for stable low speed control could eliminate the need for the compensator, and allow for smoother AUJ motion. Eventually, we wish to develop a system comprised of multiple segments, to demonstrate its suitability for applications such as mobile snake robots or snake-arm robots. This can use a embedded controller for each segment, controlled by a master controller for individual joint control or inverse kinematics.

REFERENCES

- [1] R. O. Buckingham and A. C. Graham, "Dexterous manipulators for nuclear inspection and maintenance — case study," in *2010 1st International Conference on Applied Robotics for the Power Industry*, 2010, pp. 1–6.
- [2] M. Luo, R. Yan, Z. Wan, *et al.*, "Orisnake: Design, fabrication, and experimental analysis of a 3-d origami snake robot," *IEEE Robotics and Automation Letters*, vol. 3, no. 3, pp. 1993–1999, 2018.
- [3] W. S. Rone, W. Saab, and P. Ben-Tzvi, "Design, Modeling, and Integration of a Flexible Universal Spatial Robotic Tail," *Journal of Mechanisms and Robotics*, vol. 10, no. 4, Apr. 2018, 041001, ISSN: 1942-4302. DOI: 10.1115/1.4039500. eprint: https://asmedigitalcollection.asme.org/mechanismsrobotics/article-pdf/10/4/041001/6259163/jmr_010_04_041001.pdf. [Online]. Available: <https://doi.org/10.1115/1.4039500>.
- [4] T. Würtz, C. May, B. Holz, C. Natale, G. Palli, and C. Melchiorri, "The twisted string actuation system: Modeling and control," in *2010 IEEE/ASME International Conference on Advanced Intelligent Mechatronics*, 2010, pp. 1215–1220. DOI: 10.1109/AIM.2010.5695720.
- [5] P. Muehlbauer, M. Schimbera, K. Stewart, and P. P. Pott, "Twisted string actuation for an active modular hand orthosis," in *ACTUATOR; International Conference and Exhibition on New Actuator Systems and Applications 2021*, VDE, 2021, pp. 1–4.
- [6] J. Park, J.-i. Park, H.-T. Seo, Y. Liu, K.-S. Kim, and S. Kim, "Control of tendon-driven (twisted-string actuator) robotic joint with adaptive variable-radius pulley," in *2020 20th International Conference on Control, Automation and Systems (ICCAS)*, IEEE, 2020, pp. 1096–1098.
- [7] B. Suthar and S. Jung, "Design and feasibility analysis of a foldable robot arm for drones using a twisted string actuator: Frad-tsa," *IEEE Robotics and Automation Letters*, 2021.
- [8] S. Nedelchev, I. Gaponov, and J. Ryu, "Accurate dynamic modeling of twisted string actuators accounting for string compliance and friction," *IEEE Robotics and Automation Letters*, vol. 5, no. 2, pp. 3438–3443, 2020. DOI: 10.1109/LRA.2020.2970651.
- [9] D. Bombara, R. Coulter, R. Konda, and J. Zhang, "A twisted string actuator-driven soft robotic manipulator,"
- [10] F. Dessen, "Coordinating control of a two degrees of freedom universal joint structure driven by three servos," in *Proceedings. 1986 IEEE International Conference on Robotics and Automation*, vol. 3, 1986, pp. 817–822. DOI: 10.1109/ROBOT.1986.1087559.
- [11] *Dc micromotors - precious metal commutation*, Dr. Fritz Fauhaber GmbH & Co. KG, Feb. 2020. [Online]. Available: https://www.faulhaber.com/fileadmin/Import/Media/EN_1724_SR_DFF.pdf.
- [12] J. Shigley, C. Mischke, and R. Budynas, *Mechanical Engineering Design* (McGraw-Hill series in mechanical engineering). McGraw-Hill, 2004, ISBN: 9780072520361. [Online]. Available: <https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=j8xscqTxWUgC>.



Damian J. Crosby is a PhD student in the school of Mechanical, Aerospace and Civil Engineering, University of Manchester, Manchester, U.K. He received a B.Sc. in Special Effects Development from The University of Bolton, U.K., in 2010, and a M.Res. in Robotics from The University of Plymouth, U.K., in 2012. He worked as a Research Technician at The University of Manchester from 2013 to 2017, before commencing his PhD.



Joaquin Carrasco is a Lecturer at the School of Electrical and Electronic Engineering, University of Manchester, UK. He was born in Abarn, Spain, in 1978. He received the B.Sc. degree in physics and the Ph.D. degree in control engineering from the University of Murcia, Murcia, Spain, in 2004 and 2009, respectively. From 2009 to 2010, he was with the Institute of Measurement and Automatic Control, Leibniz Universitt Hannover, Hannover, Germany. From 2010 to 2011, he was a research associate at the Control Systems Centre, School of Electrical and Electronic Engineering, University of Manchester, UK.



William P. Heath is Chair of Feedback and Control in the School of Electrical and Electronic Engineering, University of Manchester, Manchester, U.K. He received the B.A. and M.A. degrees in mathematics from Cambridge University, U.K., in 1987 and 1991, and the M.Sc. and Ph.D. degrees in systems and control from the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology, U.K., in 1989 and 1992, respectively. He was with Lucas Automotive from 1995 to 1998 and was a Research Academic at the University of Newcastle, Australia from 1998 to 2004. His research interests include absolute stability, multiplier theory, constrained control, and system identification.



Dr. Andrew Weightman graduated in 2006 with a PhD in Mechanical Engineering form the University of Leeds. Whilst at the University of Leeds he developed rehabilitation robotic technology for improving upper limb function in adults and children with neurological impairment which was successfully utilised in homes, schools and clinical settings. In 2013 he moved to the University of Manchester, School of Mechanical, Aerospace and Civil Engineering as a Lecturer in Medical Mechatronics. Dr Weightman has research interests in biomimetic mobile robotics, rehabilitation robotics, robotics for nuclear decommissioning and collaborative robotics.

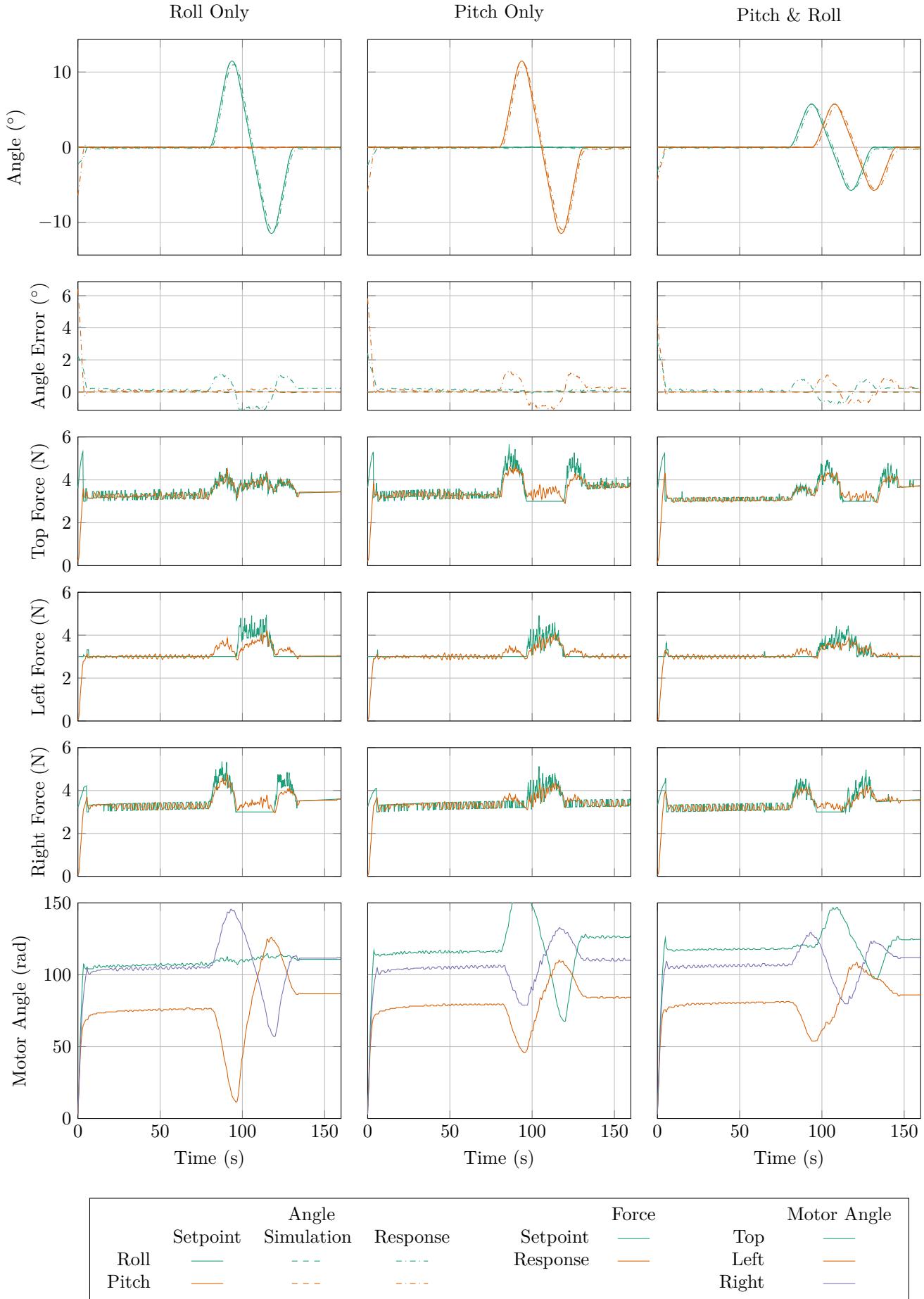


Fig. 9: Plots of the response for three different trajectories, one on only the roll axis, one on only the pitch axis, and one on both axes.

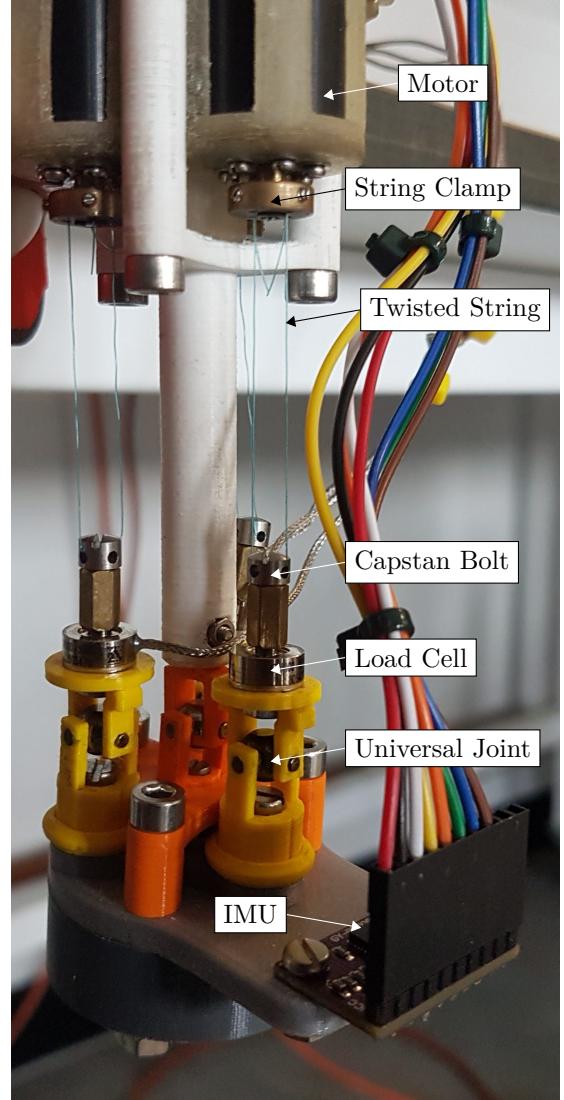
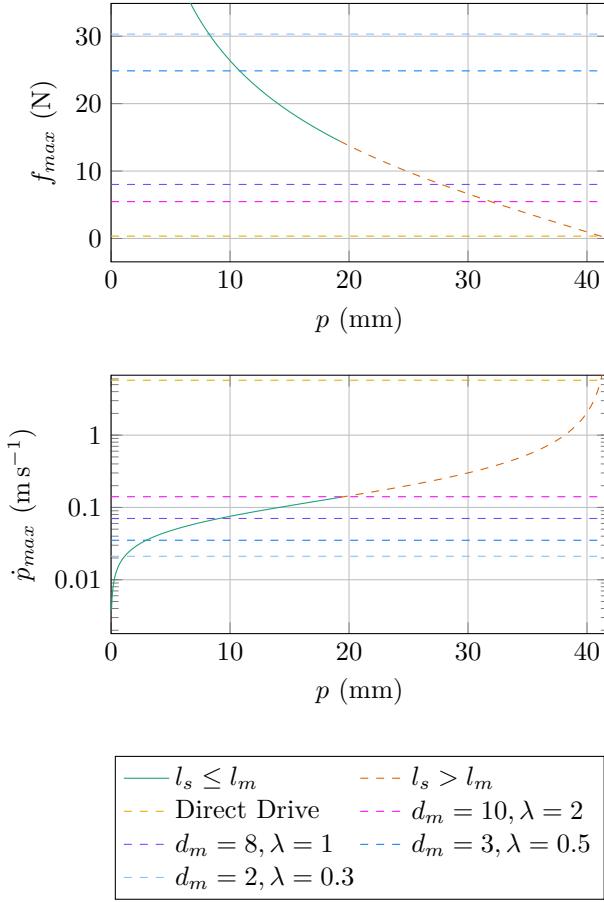


Fig. 11: Annotated photograph of the experimental model.

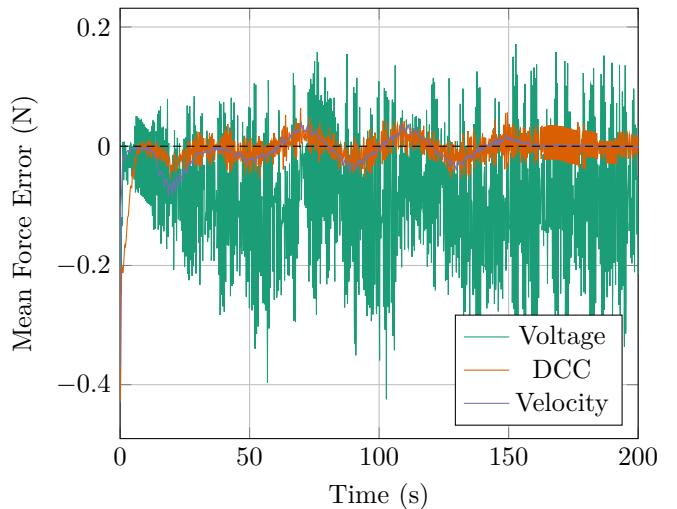


Fig. 12: Mean tracking error for each control strategy.

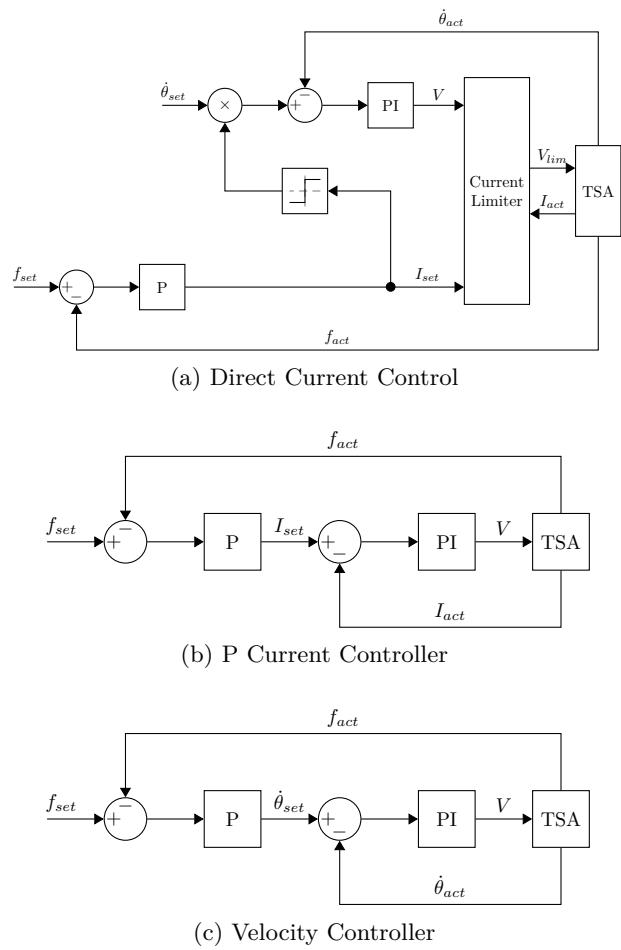


Fig. 13: Block diagrams of each control strategy.

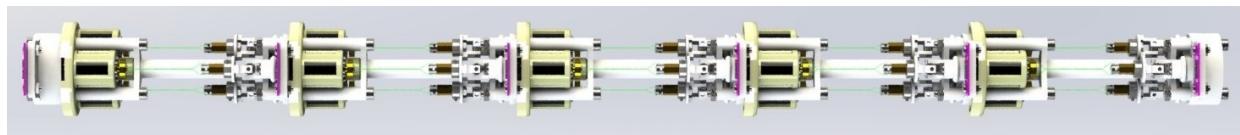


Fig. 14: Visualisation of several TSA AUJ chained together to form a robotic snake or tail.