Galaxy Zoo: the fraction of merging galaxies in the SDSS and their morphologies

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ABSTRACT
We present the largest, most homogeneous catalogue of merging galaxies in the nearby Universe obtained through the Galaxy Zoo project – an interface on the World Wide Web enabling large-scale morphological classification of galaxies through visual inspection of images from the Sloan Digital Sky Survey (SDSS). The method converts a set of visually inspected classifications for each galaxy into a single parameter (the ‘weighted-merger-vote fraction,’ \( f_m \)) which describes our confidence that the system is part of an ongoing merger. We describe how \( f_m \) is used to create a catalogue of 3003 visually selected pairs of merging galaxies from the SDSS in the redshift range 0.005 < \( z \) < 0.1. We use our merger sample and values of \( f_m \) applied to the SDSS Main Galaxy Spectral sample to estimate that the fraction of volume-limited (\( M_r < -20.55 \)) major mergers (1/3 < \( M_1/M_2 < 3 \)) in the nearby Universe is 1–3 \( \times C \) per cent, where \( C \sim 1.5 \) is a correction factor for spectroscopic incompleteness. Having visually classified the morphologies of the constituent galaxies in our mergers, we find that the spiral-to-elliptical ratio of galaxies in mergers is higher by a factor of \( \sim 2 \) relative to the global population. In a companion paper, we examine the internal properties of these merging galaxies and conclude that this high spiral-to-elliptical ratio in mergers is due to a longer time-scale over which mergers with spirals are detectable compared to mergers with ellipticals.

Key words: catalogues – galaxies: elliptical and lenticular, cD – galaxies: evolution – galaxies: general – galaxies: interactions – galaxies: spiral.

1 INTRODUCTION
Galaxy mergers and interactions are connected to many pressing questions concerning the origin, evolution and properties of cosmic structures. These issues include the formation of galaxies (White & Rees 1978; Lacey & Cole 1993; Conselice 2006a; De Lucia et al. 2006), environmental effects on morphology (Capak et al. 2007; Park et al. 2007; Ball, Loveday & Brunner 2008; Van der Wel 2008) and the distribution of the dark matter that drives the merger process.

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To date though, such studies have concentrated mostly on merger rates (Carlborg et al. 2000; Le Fevre et al. 2000; Patton et al. 2002; Conselice et al. 2003; Bundy, Ellis & Conselice 2005; Bell et al. 2006; Conselice, Rajgor & Myers 2008; Lin et al. 2008; Lotz et al. 2008a; Hsieh et al. 2008; Patton & Atfield 2008), with comparatively little carried out to examine their morphologies and internal properties (though see Li et al. 2008; Ellison et al. 2008) for reasons to be discussed (Section 1.1). This is unfortunate – to understand the exact role played by mergers in galaxy evolution, it is inadequate to measure their rates alone since the processes that determine the morphological outcomes of mergers are still not fully understood.

It has been widely believed since the simulations of Toomre & Toomre (1972) that two spirals can merge to form an elliptical but this does not mean that they must. On the contrary, recent studies have argued convincingly that, in some cases at least, disc galaxies are able to survive (multiple) major mergers (Hopkins et al. 2009). Where this does happen, the probability of disc survival must be assessed to depend on the properties of its progenitors, such as environment, gas content and feedback mechanisms. These in turn correlate with galactic morphology. There is also a good reason to think that the time-scales over which mergers are detectable depend on the internal properties of the progenitors (Lotz et al. 2008b). Ideally then, calculations that convert merger fractions into merger rates as part of some hierarchical-structure scheme (such as modelled by Khochfar & Burkert 2003) should take the properties and morphologies of their sample into account. Only then can models of hierarchical galaxy formation be fully tested.

The Galaxy Zoo project contributes to this important task by providing a snapshot of mergers as they appear in the local Universe (in this study we focus on the range 0.005 < z < 0.1). Plans are also underway to apply the same merger-locating system to higher redshift surveys. In this paper, we present a simple but powerful method for identifying mergers using the World Wide Web and a robust sample of 3003 merging systems obtained by it (Section 2.1).1 We then discuss three important ratios revealed by this study: the merger fraction of the local Universe (Sections 3.1 and 3.3), the fraction of spectral pairs in merging systems in the Sloan Digital Sky Survey (SDSS) (relevant to discussions for the close-pair technique; Section 3.4) and the spiral-to-elliptical ratio of galaxies that are in merging systems (Section 3.5). In the companion paper, (Darg et al. 2009, hereafter D09b), we present the environment and internal properties of these merging galaxies.

Galaxy Zoo is a new player in the game of merger-location techniques. Before describing our results, we begin with a description of current methods used to find mergers so that the role and value of Galaxy Zoo can be understood in the context of contemporary research.

1 We have labelled this catalogue Galaxy-Zoo Mergers 1 (GZM1).

1.1 Locating mergers: past methods

Visual inspection remains the most trustworthy way of determining whether or not a galaxy is merging. However, the advent of large galaxy surveys such as the SDSS (York et al. 2000) involving ~10⁶ objects has rendered classification by individual researchers impractical. Automated methods have therefore been developed to approximate the human decision-making process but, being only approximations, encounter certain difficulties that Galaxy Zoo can help overcome.

1.1.1 Close-pair statistics

Accurate measures of position and redshift in large-scale surveys have made the task of finding close pairs in the (local) Universe straightforward. However, the peculiar velocities of the individual galaxies can significantly offset their redshift-inferred line-of-sight separation producing spectral pairs of non-interacting systems which may or may not merge. One can apply statistical arguments as to what fraction of close pairs within some ensemble will soon merge, but no single system can be safely assumed to be merging without cross-examination. The method is best used, therefore, to estimate merger rates parametrized by the convention: merger rate ∼(1 + z)².

Another limitation of close-pair methods in surveys such as the SDSS is the requirement that both galaxies have spectra. This requires a delicate act of deblending by the data-reduction pipeline. The SDSS will convert the photometry of an extended body like a galaxy (the ‘parent’) into individual photometric ‘objects’ (the ‘children’) depending on how many peaks are present in the blended image (Stoughton et al. 2002). Iterations are performed allotting different magnitudes to the child objects until an optimal distribution is attained so that all children sum to give the total flux of the parent.

Any photometric child object with Petrosian magnitude r < 17.77 is designated as a spectral target by the SDSS pipeline. It follows that only when a contiguous body, such as two interacting galaxies, is deblended into (at least) two photometric objects both having r < 17.77 can it contain two spectral targets. Therefore, mergers with only one deblended object of r < 17.77 cannot be identified by the close-pair technique (Strauss et al. 2002; Patton & Atfield 2008). This will occur for many minor mergers or for late-stage mergers where the cores have drawn close to each other and the pipeline reads them as a single peak. Fig. 1 shows examples of strongly perturbed systems with only one spectral target.

Even when two objects are deblended in a contiguous image and registered as spectral targets – relatively few systems will obtain spectra on both objects due to fibre collisions within the spectrometer. Two SDSS spectroscopic targets cannot acquire spectra simultaneously if they are within 55 arcsec of each other and so only systems contained within ‘tile overlap regions’ can have spectral objects with an angular separation less than this (Strauss et al. 2002; Blanton et al. 2003). Only about ~30 per cent of the SDSS sky rests within overlap regions thus limiting the sample size of such systems.

Conversely, a system deblended into multiple targets, as in Fig. 2, can acquire too many spectral objects so that a single galaxy might appear as a close pair or a binary merger might appear as a multi-merger. Close-pair studies typically limit the redshift and magnitude ranges in order to avoid this effect. Woods & Geller (2007), for example, limit their close-pair sample to ~0.027 < z < 0.17 and require >20 per cent of the galaxy’s total flux land within the fibre
1.1.2 Automated quantification of morphological disturbance

Pattern recognition techniques applied to galaxy images pose a formidable programming challenge. Background noise and contaminants first need to be removed, then an automated technique needs to quantify how ‘disturbed’ a morphology is independent of viewing angle. This might not be so difficult if it were not the case that unperturbed galaxies themselves vary so much from the structurally simple (ellipticals) to the complex (spirals). In particular, filtering asymmetric systems like mergers from spirals with extended star formation requires great finesse.

None the less, promising automated techniques have been developed in recent years that generate parameters related to morphology. A common technique has been to measure concentration (C), asymmetry (A) and, in some cases, clumpiness/smoothness (S). One then partitions CA(S) space into morphological categories and identifies an object as a merger if it lies within the designated subvolume (see Conselice 2003 and Conselice et al. 2003 on the use of the ‘CAS’ system to locate mergers).

Another pair of parameters used in this fashion is the Gini-coefficient (G) (Abraham, van den Bergh & Nair 2003) and second-moment of the brightest 20 per cent of the galaxy’s light \(M_{20}\), most notably by Lotz et al. (2008a). (For a concise description of how to calculate C, A, S, G and \(M_{20}\) see Conselice et al. 2008.) It is argued in Lotz, Primack & Madau (2004) that this technique operates better at low signal-to-noise ratios and is more sensitive to late-stage morphologies than the CAS system (though see Lisker 2008 for a critique of its effectiveness). More recent studies have combined and compared the two techniques (e.g. Scarlata et al. 2007; Conselice et al. 2008; Lotz et al. 2008b). Artificial Neural Nets are another promising technique for identifying morphologies (Lahav et al. 1996; Ball et al. 2004) though they have not yet been applied to merger studies specifically.

CAS and \(M_{20}\) remain effective at high redshifts so long as the image quality remains high and, since they are automated, can process images quickly once the pipeline has been established. However, these techniques also require visual examination to cross-check results and to fine-tune the partition boundaries that define a merger.

Systematic uncertainties usually remain. Jogee et al. (2008) recently report that the CAS criterion failed to pick up 37–58 per cent of their visually classified ‘strongly disturbed’ morphologies while including a ‘significant number of relatively normal galaxies’ – an effect that was predicted by simulations in Conselice (2006b). Conselice et al. (2008) recently classified 993 images from the Hubble Ultra Deep Field by visual inspection, the CAS volume and the \(M_{20}\) area. They found some notable disagreements, in particular some systems identified as mergers by their location in \(M_{20}\) space are not identified as mergers using the CAS system and vice versa (see e.g. Figs 8 and 9 plus captions). Within the 0.4 < z < 0.8 range, only 44 ± 6 per cent of the galaxies mapped into the \(M_{20}\) merger region were visually classified as ‘peculiar.’

Recently, Lotz et al. (2008b) performed an extensive study on the merger-detection sensitivity of the CA, \(M_{20}\) and close-pair techniques using simulations. They find that C, A, G and \(M_{20}\) methods are only sensitive to mergers at specific stages of the process, particularly the first pass and final coalescence of the galaxies. The study also confirms that the merger time-scales and parameters (such as gas fractions, pericentric distance and relative orientation), for which these three techniques remain sensitive, differ significantly.
Evidently then, much work remains before we can confidently do away with visual inspection of images in merger studies.2

1.1.3 Visual inspection by research groups

In the pre-digital age, surveys of morphological classification by visual inspection were mostly limited to studies based on cluster images (Oemler 1974; Dressler 1980). With the modern development of large surveys and high-resolution imaging, the potential to extract large samples of morphologically classified galaxies in differing environments has vastly improved. The largest visual classification project by a research group is Schawinski et al. (2007) who visually examined 48 023 SDSS galaxies in compiling the MOSES catalogue (Morphologically Selected Ellipticals in the SDSS). They found a significant blue population that had been excluded by studies such as Bernardi et al. (2003) which identified morphologies by their presumed properties. Selecting morphologies by a priori assumptions is often pragmatic and necessary but ultimately begs the question as to what the properties of a given morphology actually are. Unless we can be certain that a set of properties maps one to one with morphology, we must continue with visual examination.

Studies to select mergers by visual selection have not reached such scales as MOSES until this work. Le Fevre et al. (2000) visually examined 285 Hubble images and found a merger fraction of 10 ± 2 per cent over 0 < z < 1.2. Nakamura et al. (2003) visually classified 2418 images of SDSS galaxy objects with Petrosian r < 16.0 (i.e. low redshift) finding that 35/1875 of their morphological classifications were Im (‘highly irregular’ following Hubble’s notation). A similar study by the same group, Fukugita et al. (2007), visually classified 2658 images from the SDSS with Petrosian r < 15.9 and found that 1.5–1.7 per cent of these nearby magnitude-limited galaxies were ‘interacting’. Thus, until now, merger studies have been limited to catalogues of ∼105 galaxies due to the time-consuming and monotonous nature of the task. By contrast, Galaxy Zoo (GZ) allows us to acquire effective visual classification for morphologies and mergers for samples of ∼106 galaxies with relative ease.

1.2 Locating mergers with Galaxy Zoo

GZ is a user interface on the World Wide Web3 drawing upon images from the SDSS. Volunteers from the public are instructed and commissioned with the collective task of visual classification of ∼900 000 galaxies from the SDSS DR6. A complete description of the project including design details and initial data reduction is given by Lintott et al. (2008). It is also shown that public users are, in large numbers, about as good as ‘experts’ at identifying morphologies.

The project has proved to be a tremendous success. To date, over 140 000 volunteers have participated and collectively offered classifications for all ∼900 000 images, on average, 50 times over. Data from the project has already been employed to find the statistical properties of spiral-galaxy–spin orientation (Land et al. 2008; Slosar et al. 2009), the relationships between environment, morphology and colour (Bamford et al. 2009; Skibba et al. 2009), to study optically blue early-type galaxies at very low redshift (Schawinski et al. 2009) and has also lead to some serendipitous discoveries (Lintott et al. 2009; Cardamone et al. 2009). This work concentrates on the results of the merger-location functionality of GZ whose details we now describe.

2 THE GALAXY ZOO DATA

2.1 Constructing a merging pairs catalogue

GZ users are asked to classify an SDSS target as

(i) elliptical (e)
(ii) spiral (s)4
(iii) star/bad image (b) or
(iv) merger (m).

The GZ project is the first of its kind and so, not knowing how well it would be taken up by the public, the design of the interface prioritized simplicity over detail. A single button labelled ‘merger’ is all that was offered.

The raw data we use to build our catalogue are what we call the weighted-merger-vote fraction (fm). GZ has obtained a value for this parameter for 893 292 SDSS galaxies from DR6. The fm values are calculated by taking the number of merger classifications (nfm) for a given GZ object and dividing it by the total number of classifications (ntotal) for that object multiplied by a weighting factor W that measures the quality of the particular users that have assessed the object. The quality of an individual user is determined by measuring to what extent that person agrees with the majority opinion for all objects the individual has viewed. The weighting factor, W, thereby represents all the iterations carried out by equations (1) and (2) of Lintott et al. 2008.5

\[
f_m = \frac{W n_{fm}}{n_{e,s,b,m}}
\]  

The parameter fm ranges from 0 to 1 so that an object with fm = 0 should look nothing like a merger and fm = 1 should look unmistakably so. Fig. 3 shows some example images taken from GZ labelled by their fm values. It is interesting to see how low fm is when these images start to look, at least superficially, like mergers (fm ∼ 0.2–0.4). Evidently, users were rather conservative in calling something a merger.

Fig. 4 shows the distribution of fm for the entire GZ catalogue. In building our first merger catalogue, we determined a cut-off point for fm above which most systems will be proper galactic mergers and involve a sample size manageable by a research team. By comparing the merger-vote fraction with images like those in Fig. 3, we decided to build our first catalogue using only systems with fm > 0.4 and only using GZ objects with spectra whose spectroscopic redshift lies in the range 0.005 < z < 0.1. SDSS spectroscopic targets are selected for galaxies with apparent magnitude r < 17.77 which corresponds to Mr < −20.55 at z = 0.1. This absolute magnitude corresponds to a minimum stellar mass of ∼1010 M⊙ (see Fig. 8).

4 More specifically, users are asked to specify whether a spiral galaxy is rotating clockwise, anticlockwise or is edge-on/unclear.
5 Similar parameters are calculated for the other categories such that fe + f i + fs + fm = 1.
6 This is the same parent population obtained after 6 months of running GZ that is used in Lintott et al. (2008), Land et al. (2008), Bamford et al. (2009) and Schawinski et al. (2009).
7 W here is not the wq of Lintott et al. 2008. wq is the weighting of each individual user whereas W represents their combined weighting for each individual GZ object.

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2 ‘Men trust their ears less than their eyes’. Herodotus, _The Histories_, 5th c. B.C., 1.8, trans D. Godley.
3 http://www.galaxyzoo.org/
so that our upper limit ($z = 0.1$) of our volume-limited sample will be inclusive of intermediate-size galaxies. The resolution of images beyond $z > 0.1$ is rapidly diminishing which would lead to unreliable visual classifications of morphology.

The lower limit $z = 0.005$ is to minimize the number of mergers that go undetected due to an incomplete field of view. These cases are rare since the number of SDSS objects peaks near $z = 0.08$ and only a few per cent have $z < 0.02$.

After applying the cut to only those objects with spectral redshifts between $0.005 < z < 0.1$, we have 304 182 objects (see Fig. 4). To find mergers within this set, we apply the cut $0.4 < f_m \leq 1.0$ leaving 4198 GZ objects with spectra. We exclude those SDSS targets which are yet to acquire spectra as we desire accurately measured redshifts.

Although the purpose of the GZ project is to significantly reduce the need for research teams to visually inspect large catalogues, it is still necessary at this stage to double check the results. Visual re-examination of the sample by our group allowed us to

(i) remove any non-merging systems,

(ii) visually select an appropriate SDSS object to represent the merging partner and

(iii) assign morphologies to the galaxies in each merging system.

We briefly describe our methods for each of these tasks.

2.2 Removing non-merging systems

The examples of Fig. 3 demonstrate that the weighted-merger-vote fraction is strongly correlated with how ‘merger like’ an image appears to be. The outcomes of GZ are therefore similar in effect to automated methods like CAS and GM20 which also map images to parameter spaces. In our case though $f_m$ is a single parameter (making it easier to divide up ‘merger’ and ‘non-merger’ zones) and, by utilizing the pattern-recognition capacity of many human minds, overcomes the need to remove background noise, recognize anomalies, etc. We find that for $f_m \geq 0.6$ all systems are robust mergers. However, three causes for misclassification begin to emerge as $f_m$ decreases and become common for $f_m \lesssim 0.4$:

- For clarity, the merger catalogue that we construct is not volume limited, i.e. the systems are redshift limited ($0.005 < z < 0.1$) but the absolute magnitude ($M_r$) is subject to no formal constraint in order for that object to belong to the catalogue, although its apparent magnitude must have been such that the SDSS pipeline deblended the system into a spectral target (with $r < 17.77$). For certain investigations, however, it is important to impose an absolute-magnitude cut of $M_r = -20.55$ on the catalogue in order to ensure completeness across the redshift range we are using. We state when we do this and refer to such a subset as a ‘volume-limited’ sample.

- This arises because GZ images are scaled for viewing according to the Petrosian radius of the object’s model magnitude. The photometry of very large and close-by galaxies is often deblended into multiple SDSS objects. The more deblended objects there are, the less the Petrosian radius of any single deblended object represents the galaxy as a whole and this brings about an inappropriately small image scale for viewing some close-by galaxies. Such systems would be viewed by users as nothing but a galaxy core and not, consequently, voted as a merger.

- Mergers are inherently ‘messy’ systems and so photometric redshifts calculated by comparison to standard templates are prone to error. In fact, we found the mean absolute difference between all the photometric and spectroscopic redshifts in our merger sample to be $\sim 0.051$ – more than half of our redshift range!
(i) projection of galaxies along the line of sight,
(ii) projection of nearby stars on to distant galaxies and
(iii) cases which are ‘border-line’ mergers.

Galactic projections occur when two galaxies have similar celestial coordinates but are separated by a significant radial distance. We can easily spot projections when both galaxies have spectral redshifts. However, many of our candidate systems have only one redshift. Spotting a projection in such cases can only be done through visual examination of the image for signs of interaction. Our choice to use only systems with $f_m > 0.4$ meant, however, that the need for such difficult decisions was rare.

Stellar projections were the more common problem. We were able to eliminate stars easily from our sample though by their characteristic point spread function (PSF) using the associated parameter ‘type’ from the SDSS PhotoTag table. This is a discrete label given to every photometric object in the SDSS data base that indicates whether an object is ‘point like’ or ‘extended’ and can, on this basis, reliably determine (>98 per cent) whether a luminous object is a star or not (Strauss et al. 2002).

‘Border-line’ cases involve galaxies that are morphologically disturbed but do not necessarily merit the term ‘merger.’ All galaxies are merging with something which can range from molecules (accretion) to a small galaxy (minor merger) to a galaxy roughly its own size (major merger). Deciding where in this spectrum of possibilities the term ‘merger’ becomes appropriate is rather subjective. At this stage, therefore, our strategy was simply to decide by visual inspection whether a given GZ galaxy had a ‘strongly perturbed’ morphology. By ‘strongly perturbed’ here, we mean that a galaxy was in a morphological state that was unlikely to have occurred without some external interaction. Starting with this inclusive criterion allows us obtain completeness for anything deserving the term ‘merger.’ We found in fact that border line cases were as again rare for systems with $f_m > 0.4$. However, difficult decisions regarding projections and border-line cases are abundant for systems where $0.05 < f_m < 0.4$ (e.g. the image of Fig. 3 with $f_m = 0.175$) and it will therefore require a great deal of care if we wish to expand our catalogue into the $f_m < 0.4$ range in the future.

We then examine each ‘strongly perturbed’ system with the aim of selecting an SDSS object to represent the body responsible for the disruption caused to the galaxy labelled with $f_m > 0.4$ (if any is identifiable). The details of this procedure are discussed below. With photometric objects representing the ‘perturber’, we can distinguish major mergers more objectively and their completeness can be assumed since they are a subset of ‘strongly perturbed’ systems.

### 2.3 Visual selection of merging partner

As mentioned, in order to create a catalogue of merging pairs, we needed to manually select an appropriate SDSS object for the object supplied by GZ with $f_m > 0.4$. We did this using an IDL routine that allows for the rapid examination of the image and photometry of all objects within 30 arcsec of the GZ object given by the Neighbors table in the SDSS data base. We choose whichever object appears to be the most ‘plausible’ representation of the body responsible for the morphological disruption to the galaxy represented by the GZ object. Plausibility was judged on the basis of object brightness (with brighter objects in the r-band being preferable) and visual ‘common sense.’ See Fig. 5 for examples of this procedure. For most systems, which are binary mergers, this choice was straightforward as they usually have either

(a) spectra centred on both galaxies or
(b) a spectral object centred on one galaxy and only photometry on the other.

However, not all ‘strongly perturbed’ systems appear as simple binary mergers. Additionally, there are cases where
(c) galaxies are in the final stages of a merger and its progenitors are no longer distinguished by the SDSS pipeline (‘post-mergers’),
(d) a galaxy has been perturbed by a close encounter with a neighbour no longer in view (‘fly-by’) and, occasionally,
(e) a merging system involves three or more galaxies.

The wide range of possibilities makes merger taxonomy a difficult task. In constructing a merging pairs catalogue, we therefore proceed as follows for these various cases.

For case (a), we usually choose these two spectral objects to represent our merging pair (see Fig. 5). If the merger companion does not have spectra then we visually select the best photometric object available to represent the merging partner (case b). Cases (c) and (d) are sometimes difficult to distinguish and usually occur when only one galaxy core is apparent with the peripheries undergoing extensive tidal disruption. This usually means that no photometric object is available to plausibly represent the perturbing body and so, in such cases, we simply decline to select a merging partner. They remain in the category of ‘strongly perturbed’ systems (and are included in our calculation of the merger fraction; see Sections 3.1 and 3.3) but are not included in the merging pairs catalogue. Fig. 1 shows examples of these two categories.

In the case of (e), where several galaxies are merging at once, we decided to first note them and then include them in the merging pairs catalogue by selecting the closest and brightest object to the GZ-supplied galaxy. Fig. 6 shows examples of such systems.
The catalogue is technically a mix between ‘binary-mergers’ and ‘multimers’ and so we call it the ‘merging pairs’ catalogue since it contains 3003 pairs of galaxy objects which are all in merging systems.

To summarize, through this refining and pairing process we converted 4198 objects to 681 pairs where both objects have spectra (case a) and 2322 pairs where only one object has spectra (case b). These make the 3003 pairs of the catalogue. 370 of the 4198 systems were considered strongly perturbed but unsuitable to be put into a pair (cases c and d). Only 39 of the 3003 pairs are confirmed to be multimers (case e). The remaining 144 objects were discarded because they were deemed to be in non-strongly perturbed systems (mainly stellar overlaps).

### 2.4 Assigning morphologies

Morphologies were assigned to each SDSS object in our merging pairs catalogue by a single classifier (DWD) working with consultation. We use four classifications for the merging galaxies: E, S, EU and SU. The E and S classifications, respectively, label those galaxies which are clearly elliptical and spiral by morphology. No appeal to colour should be necessary. The EU and SU are those ellipticals and spirals about which we are ‘unsure,’ in other words, this is our best guess. The ‘unsure’ morphologies are usually more distant objects whose image resolution is too poor to distinguish features like spiral arms. Choosing between EU and SU can be very difficult and is based mostly on apparent surface-brightness profile and, in very difficult cases, on colour. (See Fig. 7 for examples and further details of our decision-making criteria.)

A simple means to select morphology in the SDSS is via the SDSS fracdev parameter measured in the $r$ band that ranges from 0 to 1. This is a measure of the goodness of fit of a galaxy’s surface brightness to a de Vaucouleur profile. Ellipticals tend to have a fracdev $\sim 1$ whereas spirals have a wide distribution. We find that our morphological categories S, SU, EU and E have mean fracdev values of 0.48, 0.85, 0.93 and 0.94, respectively, fitting qualitatively with expectation. The high value of 0.85 for the SU category suggests there is contamination by bulge-dominated discs or ellipticals as discussed in Section 3.5. This is expected since distant, poorly resolved spirals can look like ellipticals (Bamford et al. 2009). To avoid such contamination, we can restrict ourselves at anytime to using only the ‘sure’ morphologies.

### 3 THE MERGER FRACTION OF THE LOCAL UNIVERSE

Our large merging pairs catalogue and $f_{\text{in}}$ values given by GZ for 893 292 spectral objects enables us to address two distinct and important questions which are highly relevant to the field of galaxy evolution:

(i) what is the fraction of merging galaxies in the local Universe?

and

(ii) what is the ratio of spirals to ellipticals ($N_s/N_e$) in mergers in the local Universe?

#### 3.1 Estimating the merger fraction (I)

Our merger-location technique is different to those before it and is suited therefore to a different procedure for finding a meaningful ‘merger fraction’ which we make explicit here. First, we must find the fraction of volume-limited galaxies in the local Universe currently in a ‘strongly perturbed’ state. To accomplish this, we use the subset of our 893 292 GZ spectral objects that are members of the Main Galaxy Spectral sample (MGs; Strauss et al. 2002) in the SDSS and estimate what fraction of them are ‘strongly perturbed.’ By using only objects with spectra, we are able to volume limit the sample (by the usual $M_r < -20.55$ constraint) which is necessary...
for a meaningful merger fraction.

$$f_{\text{MGS}} = \frac{\sum (\text{‘Strongly perturbed’ volume-limited MGS spectral objects in SDSS})}{\sum (\text{All volume-limited MGS spectral objects in SDSS})}.$$ (2)

The use of only those spectral objects which are in the MGS leads to a good approximation for the real merger fraction, $f_{\text{real}}$, so long as an appropriate factor $C$ is applied to correct for spectroscopic incompleteness, i.e. $f_{\text{real}} = C f_{\text{MGS}}$ where we estimate $C \sim 1.5$. Justification for this claim with a brief discussion of the MGS and spectroscopic targeting in the SDSS is given in Appendix A.

The merging pairs catalogue produced in Section 2 is large but incomplete since it is constructed only from systems with $f_m > 0.4$. Finding $f_{\text{MGS}}$ therefore requires extrapolation into the $0 < f_m < 0.4$ region. To find the numerator of (2), we therefore took volume-limited samples of 100 GZ spectral objects from the bins $0 < f_m \leq 0.05$, $0.05 < f_m \leq 0.20$ and $0.20 < f_m \leq 0.40$ which are also in the MGS. By visually inspecting each set of 100 galaxies twice (the first time round we made our decisions very conservatively, the second round very liberally), we obtained estimates for the percentages of ‘strongly perturbed’ galaxies within these bins. These were 0–2, 18–34 and 50–59 per cent for the $0 < f_m \leq 0.05$, $0.05 < f_m \leq 0.20$ and $0.20 < f_m \leq 0.40$ bins, respectively.13 There are, of course, many more objects in these bins than in those with $f_m > 0.4$ (see Fig. 4) and so end up contributing to at least two thirds of all ‘strongly perturbed’ systems. We assumed that no GZ object with $f_m = 0$ would be ‘strongly perturbed.’

Applying these estimated fractions to the total number of MGS objects in each bin and adding the ‘strongly perturbed’ and volume-limited MGS objects from the 4198 GZ objects with $f_m > 0.4$ gives us the numerator for equation (2). The denominator of equation (2) is found to be 157 801. Dividing these gives the fraction $f_{\text{real}}$ in the following way:

The merger fraction (weak statement)

$\sim$4–6 × $C$ per cent of all galaxies in a volume-limited sample ($M_r < -20.55$) in the local Universe ($0.005 < z < 0.1$) are ‘strongly perturbed.’

We call this the weak statement because of the subjective nature of deciding whether or not a system is ‘strongly perturbed’. The error in this percentage arises from the upper and lower bounds estimated for the three samples of 100 images (before the correction factor $C \sim 1.5$ is applied). In Section 3.3, we use the 3003 systems from the merging pairs catalogue (plus a few more plausible assumptions) to offer a stronger statement giving the fraction of major mergers in the local Universe.

### 3.2 The stellar masses of merging galaxies

Of the ‘strongly perturbed’ systems, we need to find what subset comprises major mergers. For this study, we define a major merger to be two merging galaxies of stellar masses $M_1^∗$ and $M_2^∗$ where $1/3 < M_1^*/M_2^* < 3$ and so, to estimate the subset of major mergers, we need to calculate stellar masses for the galaxies in the merging pairs catalogue.

We do this by fitting the SDSS photometry for each object in our catalogue to a library of photometries produced by a variety of two-component star formation histories. The approach is similar to that of Schawinski et al. (2007) except that we do not use the information contained in the stellar absorption indices. The library spectral energy distributions are generated using the Maraston (1998, 2005) stellar models. Both components have stellar populations with variable age with fixed solar metallicity and Salpeter initial mass function (Salpeter 1955). The first (older) burst is a simple stellar population, the second (more recent) burst is modelled by an exponential with variable e-folding time. The purpose of the varying e-folding times is to account for galaxies with extended star formation histories. This is especially important for mergers which are likely to have undergone recent star formation episodes. Dust is implemented using a Calzetti et al. law (Calzetti 2000) that is free to vary for $E(B-V) > 0$. It should be noted that mergers, by their very nature, are prone to mix and overlap and this could lead to additional reddening.

It is important that our cut for the merger fraction be based upon magnitude and not mass since it is the photometric brightness of the object that determines whether or not it will end up in the MGS (which is integral to our definition of the merger fraction). In Fig. 8, we examine the effect of imposing our volume-lmiting cut on the mass distributions. Mass scales with brightness though the scatter is substantial such that the magnitude limit $M_r < -20.55$ removes all galaxies with $<10^{10} M_\odot$ and some as massive as $\sim 7 \times 10^{10} M_\odot$. It is therefore undesirable to estimate the merger fraction using a mass cut (instead of a magnitude cut) for this redshift range since one would need to cut at no less than $\sim 7 \times 10^{10} M_\odot$ to ensure completeness and this would greatly reduce the sample size. It would also make a calculation of the merger fraction impractical since we would then need masses calculated for the entire MGS sample to

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13 We also double checked our results with an additional interface on the World Wide Web designed to re-examine all objects within the range $0.2 < f_m < 0.4$. After a few months, enough users had reclassified these images of interest in order that a new-weighted-merger-vote fraction, $f_{\text{MGS}}^{\prime}$, could be calculated for each image based upon clicks of the ‘merger,’ ‘not-merger’ and ‘do not know’ buttons. By then volume limiting all spectral objects from this sample as before with $0.005 < z < 0.1$ and $M_r < -20.55$, we are able to filter out more actual ‘strongly perturbed’ systems. However, we again needed to decide a cut-off for the vote fraction, $f_m^{\prime}$. We examined 20 sets of 10 images across the entire $f_m$ range and estimated how many of these were genuine ‘strongly perturbed’ systems. We found that $\geq 80$ per cent of images were actual ‘strongly perturbed’ systems for $f_m^{\prime} > 0.6$ and, following Lintott et al. (2008), made this number the cut-off. The fraction of objects with $f_m^{\prime} > 0.6$ is $\sim 53$ per cent which is in good agreement with our estimate that 50–59 per cent of objects in this range are ‘strongly perturbed.’

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Figure 8. Relation between stellar mass and absolute magnitude in the r-band. The solid horizontal line at $M_r = -20.55$ corresponds to the cut used to obtain our volume-limited samples. This cut removes virtually all galaxies with mass $M < 10^{10} M_\odot$ as well as galaxies up to a mass of $M \sim 7 \times 10^{10} M_\odot$. 

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both major and minor mergers. We find that \( \sim \) more massive pairs in our catalogue with the magnitude limit imposed on the space for all the merging pairs where the more massive galaxy in the pair. This criterion allows us to view 'strongly perturbed' systems as expressed in the weak statement, we needed to estimate how many of these systems as expressed in the weak statement, we needed to estimate how many of these 'strongly perturbed' systems will be the same for all strongly perturbed systems in the range \( f_m < 0.4 \). This is certain to be an overestimate since there are bound to be a higher portion of major mergers in systems with high \( f_m \). The reason for this is that most 'strongly perturbed' systems obtain a low \( f_m \sim 0.2 \) precisely because they are mostly 'border-line' cases (i.e. perturbations caused by interactions or very minor mergers). Fig. 10 confirms this expected relationship over the range of \( f_m \) for our catalogue, i.e. the order of magnitude cut to all systems therein \( (M_r < -20.55) \) in the local Universe \( (0.005 < z < 0.1) \).

Fig. 9 illustrates the occupation of the mass space of the merging pairs catalogue over the 0.4 range. The trend indicates that major mergers are more likely to get merger votes than minor mergers. Minor mergers only outnumber major mergers in the 0.4 < \( f_m \) < 0.5 bin. The effect is similar for both volume- and non-volume-limited samples.

get the denominator of equation (2) and this would be an enormous computational task. In D09b, we examine the distributions of these stellar masses in more detail and in comparison to a control sample.

3.3 Estimating the merger fraction (II)

We now apply the information obtained in Section 3.1 (the fraction of 'strongly perturbed' galaxies) with that obtained in Section 3.2 (stellar mass estimates for objects in the merging pairs catalogue) in order to estimate the fraction of major mergers in a volume-limited sample \( (M_r < -20.55) \) in the local Universe \( (0.005 < z < 0.1) \).

Fig. 9 illustrates the occupancy of regions in mass–mass space for all the merging pairs where the more massive galaxy has \( M_r < -20.55 \). Points between the 1 : 1 and 1 : 3 lines are major mergers. We only assume completeness within this strip in this study. The boxes in the upper panel divide the sample by morphology.

To get a merger fraction, we again need to apply our analysis solely to volume-limited objects within the MGS. Of the 3864 spectral objects in our 3003 binary–merger pairs, 2306 have \( M_r < -20.55 \). Of these, 1243 are in major mergers leaving 1063 in minor mergers. We therefore find that 1243/2306 \( \sim \) 54 per cent of the volume-limited objects with spectra taken from our catalogue (which all have \( f_m > 0.4 \) according to how they were selected) are in major mergers.

We can now estimate an upper limit for the fraction of major mergers in the local Universe by supposing that this fraction of major mergers \( (\sim 54 \text{ per cent}) \) from what was originally classified as a set of 'strongly perturbed' systems will be the same for all strongly perturbed systems in the range \( f_m < 0.4 \). This is certain to be an overestimate since there are bound to be a higher portion of major mergers in systems with high \( f_m \). The reason for this is that most 'strongly perturbed' systems obtain a low \( f_m \sim 0.2 \) precisely because they are mostly 'border-line' cases (i.e. perturbations caused by interactions or very minor mergers). Fig. 10 confirms this expected relationship over the range of \( f_m \) for our catalogue, i.e. the

14 As a reminder, the catalogue of 3003 merging pairs is not volume limited, i.e. there is no formal constraint for either object in the pair to have a minimum absolute brightness. This means that in order to get a sample that is complete over the redshift range in use we need to impose an absolute magnitude cut to all systems therein \( (M_r < -20.55) \) since, at \( z = 0.1 \), this will select all galaxies with \( r < 17.77 \), the minimum brightness needed to be designated as a spectral target). However, for mergers where we have two objects, one can choose to impose this absolute-magnitude constraint either on both objects in the pair or only on the largest/brightest object. We choose the latter option for this particular graph since it is more inclusive of minor mergers.

15 Mergers between systems with \( M_1^*/M_2^* > 1000 \) are of course abundant in the Universe (every galaxy is merging with something small) but will not, by their very nature, get spotted in a merger study. We would therefore not be able to derive the abundance of minor mergers in the local Universe here with much confidence.

16 As opposed to a purely subjective decision based upon visual inspection of the image.

17 Since we use the MGS to establish the denominator of equation (2).

18 Recall that, when we estimated the fraction of 'strongly perturbed' systems as expressed in the weak statement, we needed to estimate how many MGS objects with \( f_m < 0.4 \) would be classified as 'strongly perturbed.' Some of these will be major mergers, the rest minor. By assuming that the fraction of major mergers in our catalogue (with \( f_m > 0.4 \)) is the same for all the rest \( (f_m < 0.4) \), we obtain an upper limit for how many major mergers are in the local Universe.
ratio of major-to-minor mergers in our sample is seen to increase with $f_m$. In other words, users tended to more readily spot mergers involving galaxies of roughly equal mass. Applying this fraction of 54 per cent to the upper limit of our $f_{\text{MGS}}$ gives $0.54 \times 6$ per cent = 3.24 per cent, which, being an overestimate, we can plausibly round down to $\sim 3$ per cent.

We can also obtain a lower limit to the major-merger fraction by supposing that the major mergers in our catalogue comprise all of the major mergers in the local Universe. That is, we can suppose that there are no major mergers at all in the range $f_m < 0.4$ for our volume-limited sample. This is of course an underestimate since there are bound to be at least some major mergers in, for example, the range $0.2 < f_m < 0.4$. Applying this assumption gives the lower limit of $1243/157801 \sim 0.8$ per cent. As expected this is indeed an underestimate, we can plausibly round this limit up to $\sim 1$ per cent. We summarize this working in the following way.

The merger fraction (strong statement)

$\sim 1\times 3 \times C$ per cent of all galaxies in a volume-limited sample ($M_r < -20.55$) in the local Universe (0.005 $< z < 0.1$) are observed in a major merger.  

The large error obtained here arises due to the simplicity of the GZ interface. The recently released Galaxy Zoo Two project, which focuses on more specific questions (e.g. is the system ‘merging’ or ‘interacting’) and removes the dichotomy of describing either the morphology or the merger likeness of the system, should lead to a much more exact figure for the merger fraction in the near future.

### 3.4 Close-pair comparison

Comparing the percentage in this strong statement with close-pair studies is difficult because few of them present their results in terms of merger fractions. They also use different criteria for their volume-limiting bounds and for accounting for errors which are important in such studies (such as fibre collisions, false pairs and non-gravitationally bound pairs). For example, Patton et al. (2000) concluded that $\sim 1.1$ per cent of nearby galaxies with $-21 < M_B < -18$ are undergoing a merger (but not necessarily a major merger by our definition). Our percentage is similar but the definitions are so diverse as to render comparison obsolete.

A more recent study by Patton & Atfield (2008) on SDSS close pairs measures the number of ‘close companions’ per spectral object which satisfy three constraints: physical separation ($r_p < 5 < r_p < 20$ h$^{-1}$); rest-frame velocity ($\Delta v < 500$ km s$^{-1}$) and absolute magnitude difference ($|\Delta M_r| < 0.753$). Again though, there are significant differences between their samples and ours. Their magnitude limits are $-22 < M_r < -18$ and they define a major merger by luminosity (at 1:2), not by mass as we do (at 1:3). More significantly, only approximately half of the pairs satisfying their criteria are ‘known to exhibit morphological signs of interactions’ whereas our sample is selected on the basis of visually established interactions. So, although the number of close companions they calculate ($N_m \sim 0.02$) is similar to our major-merger fraction ($\sim 1\times 3 \times C$ per cent), the differences between the two techniques make claims of corroboration difficult to substantiate.

We performed our own comparison of GZ with a close-pair catalogue of all SDSS spectral objects within a projected separation of 30 kpc of each other and a line-of-sight velocity difference of $<500$ km s$^{-1}$. For a consistent comparison with our catalogued mergers, we examine only those objects which are within the volume-limited boundaries (0.005 $< z < 0.1$; $M_r < -20.55$) and the MGS. This gives 2308 individual close-pair objects. Many of these will be part of a false pair arising from the automated deblending of a single galaxy into two or more spectral targets (see Section 1.1.1). Some pairs will also appear well separated (relative to their size) and show no signs of interaction. Therefore, we visually examined all 2308 objects in order to determine which ones are in a ‘strongly perturbed’ state brought about by the galaxy represented by the other spectral object in the close pair. This led to the removal of 654 ($\sim 28$ per cent) of the close-pair objects in our volume-limited MGS sample.

The 1654 remaining spectral objects are all GZ objects and so we can examine how users voted for them. We found that a significant portion ($\sim 64$ per cent) of these close-pair spectral objects which are in ‘strongly perturbed’ systems (by our reckoning) had $f_m < 0.4$ and were therefore excluded from our catalogue. However, we also found that there is a strong correlation between $f_m$ for close-pair objects and their projected separation such that the further apart close-pair objects are the less likely users were to label it a merger (see Fig. 11). This means that the GZ technique selects systems which are generally more advanced in the merger process and therefore undergoing more extensive interactions than a typical system in close-pair studies. Only $\sim 600$ of these objects are in our catalogue of $\sim 3000$ pairs which fits with the claim that only $\sim 20$ per cent of (relatively advanced) merging systems are spectral pairs in the SDSS, the rest being systems with only a single spectral object within our magnitude-limited volume.

We conclude that, like the CAS and GM$_{20}$ techniques, the GZ method for detecting mergers is sensitive to different stages of a merger compared to the close-pair technique (Lotz et al. 2008b).

### 3.5 Estimating the spiral-to-elliptical ratio in merging systems

#### 3.5.1 Uncertainties and user bias

Having established an estimate of what fraction of galaxies in the local Universe are merging, we now turn to the more difficult task of
estimating the spiral-to-elliptical ratio of galaxies that are merging ($N_s/N_e$). In addition to the uncertainties associated with identifying actual mergers, there are now the uncertainties associated with varying image resolution leading to ‘sure’ and ‘unsure’ morphologies (see Section 2.4). Bamford et al. (2009) have studied extensively the dependence of GZ morphological classifications on redshift and found that the proportion of elliptical classifications increases with $z$. The same problem arose for our classifications: over the range $0.005 < z < 0.03$, the fraction of ‘unsure’ morphologies (EU, SU) to ‘sure’ morphologies (E, S) is $\sim 10$ per cent but this fraction rises to $\sim 25$ per cent as we vary over $0.03 \rightarrow 0.1$. In short, the more distant a galaxy is the more ‘featureless’ it appears bringing about a visual misclassification that inflates the recorded number of ellipticals. For details of the quantification and correction to this effect, see Bamford et al. (2009).

A further unknown peculiar to GZ is mass-user psychology. A natural concern of ours was that users would be more likely to call a system a ‘merger’ if it involves two spirals (which generally look more dramatic) than if it involves two ellipticals. We therefore examine how the ratio of spirals to ellipticals in our merging pairs catalogue varies with $f_m$ as shown in Fig. 12. Whether we use just the ‘sure’ morphologies (E+S sets) or whether we include the ‘unsure’ morphologies (E+S+EU+SU sets), the $N_s/N_e$ ratios appear to follow curves that start high for $f_m \sim 1.0$ and decay towards a constant as $f_m \rightarrow 0.4$. This confirmed the suspicion that the systems compelling users to click the merger button the most tend to involve spirals. However, the majority of mergers are located in the bins where the ratios level off at roughly a constant ($\sim 0.4 < f_m < 0.6$). Inclusion of the EU and SU categories slightly decreases $N_s/N_e$ as expected (some ‘unsures’ are really spirals but get mistaken for ellipticals). The horizontal lines of Fig. 12 indicate the mean $N_s/N_e$ ratios for the E+S and E+S+EU+SU samples over the whole range $0.4 < f_m < 1.0$. These $N_s/N_e$ means are $\sim 5$ and $\sim 3$, respectively. The true mean over this range must surely be $N_s/N_e > 3$ therefore since the ‘unsure’ morphological categories deflate $N_s/N_e$ through false inclusion of ellipticals as discussed earlier.

3.5.2 Towards an $N_s/N_e$ estimate for merging galaxies

We proceed now by extrapolating this value $N_s/N_e > 3$ (found for the range $f_m > 0.4$) to the entire range of $f_m$, i.e. we assume $N_s/N_e > 3$ for all galaxies in mergers for our volume-limited ranges. We compare this ratio with the global spiral-to-elliptical ratio for all galaxies in our redshift range determined using the corrections of Bamford et al. (2009) to debias the high occurrence of ellipticals with increasing redshift. This debiasing leads to the estimate that there are $\sim 3.2$ spirals to ellipticals for all galaxies with $M_r < -20.55$ in our redshift range. Our extrapolated estimate of $N_s/N_e > 3$ for $f_m > 0.4$ is significantly higher in comparison, i.e. our extrapolation would suggest that spirals feature in mergers roughly twice as often as they should if selected randomly from the global population.

To test the accuracy of this extrapolation, we examined the morphologies of the same 59 systems from the 100 images of 0.2 $< f_m < 0.4$ (used in Section 3.1) that were deemed to be ‘strongly perturbed’. We found that 42/59 of these ‘strongly perturbed’ galaxies were either S or SU and the remaining E or EU. Taking $N_s/N_e < 1.5$ for the global estimate to give null binomial probabilities $p(\text{spiral}) = 0.6$ and $p(\text{elliptical}) = 0.4$, the expected outcome of 59 galaxy morphologies would be $35.4 \pm 3$ spirals with standard deviation $\sigma \sim 3.8$. The observed number, 42, is just within two standard deviations of the expected value. This observation therefore supports the claim that, even in the range $0.2 < f_m < 0.4$, $N_s/N_e$ in mergers is higher than the global mean. This also does not take into account the fact that our observations are still biased by inclusion of ‘unsure’ morphologies (which inflates the number of ellipticals) whereas the estimate $N_s/N_e \sim 1.5$ for the global population has been debiased.

To summarize, we find that $N_s/N_e > 3$ over the range of our merging pairs catalogue ($f_m > 0.4$). This is at least twice the global ratio ($N_s/N_e \sim 1.5$). There is no evidence to suggest that mergers in the range $f_m < 0.4$ will compensate this effect with an excess of ellipticals relative to their global population. The high $N_s/N_e$ ratio is especially likely to stand up to scrutiny for major mergers since they have been shown to favour higher values of $f_m$ (see Fig. 10) where the spiral excess has been robustly confirmed.

3.5.3 Implications of a high $N_s/N_e$ ratio in mergers

We now discuss possible reasons for a high $N_s/N_e$ ratio in mergers. It is well established that spirals tend to occupy less dense environments than ellipticals (verified as early as Oemler 1974 and as recently as, for example, Ball et al. 2008). The discrepancy might therefore be the result of a preference for mergers to occur in field environments where spirals are more populous relative to the global population. Alternatively though, the disproportionate number of spirals in our ‘snapshot’ of the local Universe could indicate that the time-scales over which spiral galaxies remain detectable in mergers exceeds that of ellipticals.

Studies have been carried out to estimate the time-scales of mergers using dynamical-friction arguments (e.g. Conselice 2006a) and simulations (e.g. Bell et al. 2006; Conselice 2006a; Lotz et al. 2008b). Lotz et al. (2008b), in particular, focus on this question and find that the gas fraction of galaxies in mergers is one of several factors determining the time-scale of detectability. One such
simulation comparing two equal-mass mergers with different gas fractions showed that the system with the higher gas fraction ($f_{\text{gas}} \sim 50$ per cent) remained ‘morphologically disturbed’ (i.e. flagged as a merger by the standard criteria of G, MGS, C, A combinations) for two to four times longer than the system with a lower gas-fraction ($f_{\text{gas}} \sim 20$ per cent).

In practice, any variation in $N_s/N_e$ for merging galaxies will depend on a combination of these two explanations since, a priori, it seems certain that the merger frequency will have some dependence on environment and that the merger time-scale of detectability will have some dependence on the internal characteristics that distinguish spirals from ellipticals (such as gas-content and overall mass). We examine these two effects in more detail in the companion paper D09b and conclude that, in fact, the latter explanation seems to be the most likely, that is, that mergers involving spirals remain detectable for longer times than mergers with involving ellipticals.

4 SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

GZ is a new and powerful strategy for locating mergers. The technique is similar in its effect to the CAS and GM20 methods in that it converts images to numbers that provide a measure of how ‘merger like’ a galaxy is (in this case the weighted-merger-vote fraction $f_m \in [0, 1]$). The method is highly apt at locating mergers because $f_m$ is the averaged product of human minds (which are highly adept at pattern recognition) and is therefore extremely sensitive to details while doing away with the major programming challenges associated with automated methods. It is also easier to partition merger spaces in this method since $f_m$ is a single parameter unlike CAS and GM20 which demand more fine-tuning. The technique is also not limited to objects with spectra as the close-pair method is (by definition) and we find in fact that only $\sim 20$ per cent of our merging systems have spectra on both galaxies. This is mostly due to the large fraction of the SDSS sky that suffers from fibre collisions ($\sim 70$ per cent; Strauss et al. 2002; Blanton et al. 2003). It also means that the method is effective at the broader task of finding ‘strongly perturbed’ systems including minor mergers. The drawbacks to GZ are time and repeatability. The results presented in this paper are derived from about six months of web activity.

It is worth emphasizing that the results of this paper are entirely derived from the pressing of a single button labelled ‘merger.’ The simplicity of this interface lead to an unfortunate dichotomy whereby users were often unsure whether to emphasize the merger aspect or the morphological aspect of a given system. Now that the competence and eagerness of the public to assist in extragalactic astronomy is known and tested, we expect greatly improved results whereby users were often unsure whether to emphasize the merger aspect or the morphological aspect of a given system.

We then discussed possible reasons for this observed spiral excess suggesting that either (1) mergers tend to occupy environments that favour spirals or (2) the time-scale for a merger to reach a relaxed state (i.e. the time over which it is detectable) is longer for spirals than for ellipticals.

We disentangle these effects in the companion paper D09b by exploring the role of the environment and the internal properties of this merger sample. We find in fact that mergers occupy the same (if not slightly denser) environments as a randomly selected control sample of galaxies. We conclude there that the best explanation of an apparently high spiral-to-elliptical ratio in mergers, as we find here, must be due to varying time-scales of detectability. The properties of spirals and ellipticals that affect merger detectability are therefore an important issue that the GZ catalogue can help us understand.

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22 The probability, $p_{\text{merg}}$, of observing a galaxy merging at any general time is proportional to the probability of its merging at that time, $p_m$, multiplied by the time-scale, $\tau$, over which it is detectable, $p_m \propto p_m \tau$. The probability of merging should only depend on the system’s mass and environment [$p_m = p_m(M, \mu)$] whereas the time-scale of detectability, $\tau$, must be assumed a priori to depend on the internal properties of the merging galaxy such as gas content and mass distribution. Our high $N_s/N_e$ ratio therefore suggests that either $p_m(M, \mu) < p_m(M, \rho)$ or $\tau$ is large for spirals compared to ellipticals.
National Aeronautics and Space Administration, the Japanese Monbukagakusho, the Max Planck Society and the Higher Education Funding Council for England. The SDSS web site is http://www.sdss.org/. The SDSS is managed by the Astrophysical Research Consortium for the Participating Institutions. The Participating Institutions are the American Museum of Natural History, Astrophysical Institute Potsdam, University of Basel, University of Cambridge, Case Western Reserve University, University of Chicago, Drexel University, Fermilab, the Institute for Advanced Study, the Japan Participation Group, Johns Hopkins University, the Joint Institute for Nuclear Astrophysics, the Kavli Institute for Particle Astrophysics and Cosmology, the Korean Scientist Group, the Chinese Academy of Sciences (LAMOST), Los Alamos National Laboratory, the Max-Planck-Institute for Astronomy (MPA), the Max Planck Institute for Astrophysics, New Mexico State University, Ohio State University, University of Pittsburgh, University of Portsmouth, Princeton University, the United States Naval Observatory and the University of Washington.

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APPENDIX A: ESTIMATING THE MERGER FRACTION USING SPECTRAL OBJECTS

Here, we clarify some of the subtle issues that arise when attempting to estimate the merger fraction of the Universe. It was claimed in Section 3.1 that one could use spectral objects alone to obtain an accurate estimate of the merger fraction. This is true even though a sizable number of galaxies in the Universe are strongly perturbed but do not have spectra due to fibre collisions (two spectral targets within 55 arcsec both cannot obtain spectra in regions with only a single tiling). In overlap regions, there is near spectral completeness for spectral targets (Strauss et al. 2002; Blanton et al. 2003; see Fig. A1).

In calculating the merger fraction, we only use spectral objects belonging to the MGS in the SDSS. This is the collection of targets identified photometrically as galaxies (but not quasars or luminous red-galaxies; Stoughton et al. 2002; Strauss et al. 2002) with $r < 17.77$ and is intended for statistical sampling of galaxies from a uniform population (Strauss et al. 2002).

Fig. A1 depicts a simple tiling scheme analogous to that employed by the SDSS (Blanton et al. 2003). The shaded area represents the
overlap which we say covers a fraction $k_{\text{sky}}$ of the tiled area (for the SDSS $k_{\text{sky}} \sim 30\%$). Two objects within 55 arcsec in non-overlap regions suffer from fibre collision so that only one can get measured. Within overlap regions, virtually all targets get measured due to multiple tiling opportunities. Altogether about 6 per cent of all MGS targets do not obtain spectral measurements due to fibre collisions (Strauss et al. 2002). These are, of course, the objects most likely to be of interest in a mergers study though many might be projections, so one cannot assume they are part of a perturbed system.

We argue now that our estimate for the fraction of ‘strongly perturbed’ volume-limited MGS objects ($f_{\text{mgs}}$) is, up to a correction factor close to unity, a good approximation to the ‘real’ fraction of volume-limited galaxies ($f_{\text{real}}$). For simplicity, let us begin with a sky as depicted in Fig. A1 involving only galaxies which are bright enough to be spectral targets and where some of these might be in the process of a binary merger such that they are within 55 arcsec of another spectral target. We assume that mergers are randomly distributed with respect to tile-overlap regions. Let the number of single (i.e. non-perturbed) galaxies be $N_s$ and the number of binary–merger pairs be $N_m$. The merger fraction that we calculated, $f_{\text{MGS}}$, would therefore be

$$f_{\text{MGS}} = \frac{2k_{\text{sky}}N_m + (1-k_{\text{sky}})N_m}{2k_{\text{sky}}N_m + (1-k_{\text{sky}})N_m + N_s}$$  \hspace{1cm} (A1)

$$= \frac{N_m(1+k_{\text{sky}})}{N_m(1+k_{\text{sky}}) + N_s}.$$  \hspace{1cm} (A2)

The real merger fraction ($f_{\text{real}}$) should take account of everything regardless of overlap regions so that the fraction of strongly perturbed spectral targets is

$$f_{\text{real}} = \frac{2N_m}{2N_m + N_s}.$$  \hspace{1cm} (A3)

Now, we let the ratio of binary–merger pairs $N_m$ to single galaxies in the local Universe equal $p$. Taking the ratio of (A2) and (A3) and substituting $N_m = pN_s$ will give the corrective factor, $C$, relating our fraction to the real fraction:

$$C(k_{\text{sky}}, p) = \frac{f_{\text{real}}}{f_{\text{mgs}}} = \frac{2(1 + pk_{\text{sky}} + p)}{(2p + 1)(1 + k_{\text{sky}})}.$$  \hspace{1cm} (A4)

When $k_{\text{sky}} = 1$ (i.e. when the whole sky is an overlap region), we get $f_{\text{real}} = f_{\text{mgs}}$. For realistic values like $k_{\text{sky}} \sim 30\%$, $p \sim 5\%$, we get a ratio $C(k_{\text{sky}} = 0.3, p = 0.05) \sim 1.5$ and find that (A4) is not very sensitive to changes in $p$. Multimergers have the affect of increasing $C$ but are rare enough to be ignored (only comprising $\sim 1\%$ of the merging pairs catalogue) and so we can take our corrective factor to be $C = 1.5$.