

# Diffusion and cellular-level simulation

CS/CME/BioE/Biophys/BMI 279

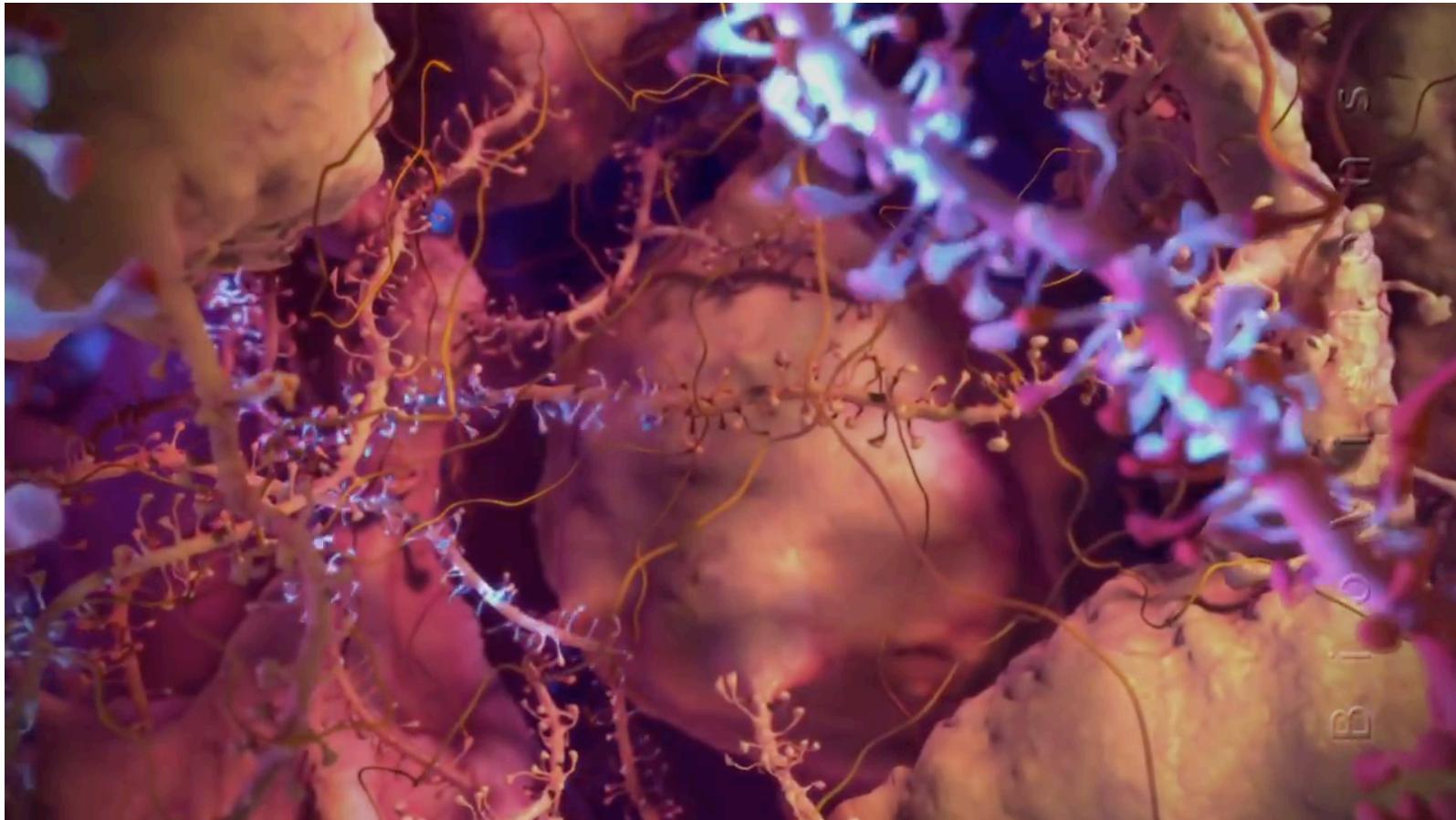
Nov. 7, 2024

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# Outline

- How do molecules move around in a cell? (diffusion)
- Diffusion as a random walk (particle-based perspective)
- Continuum view of diffusion
- Simulating diffusion

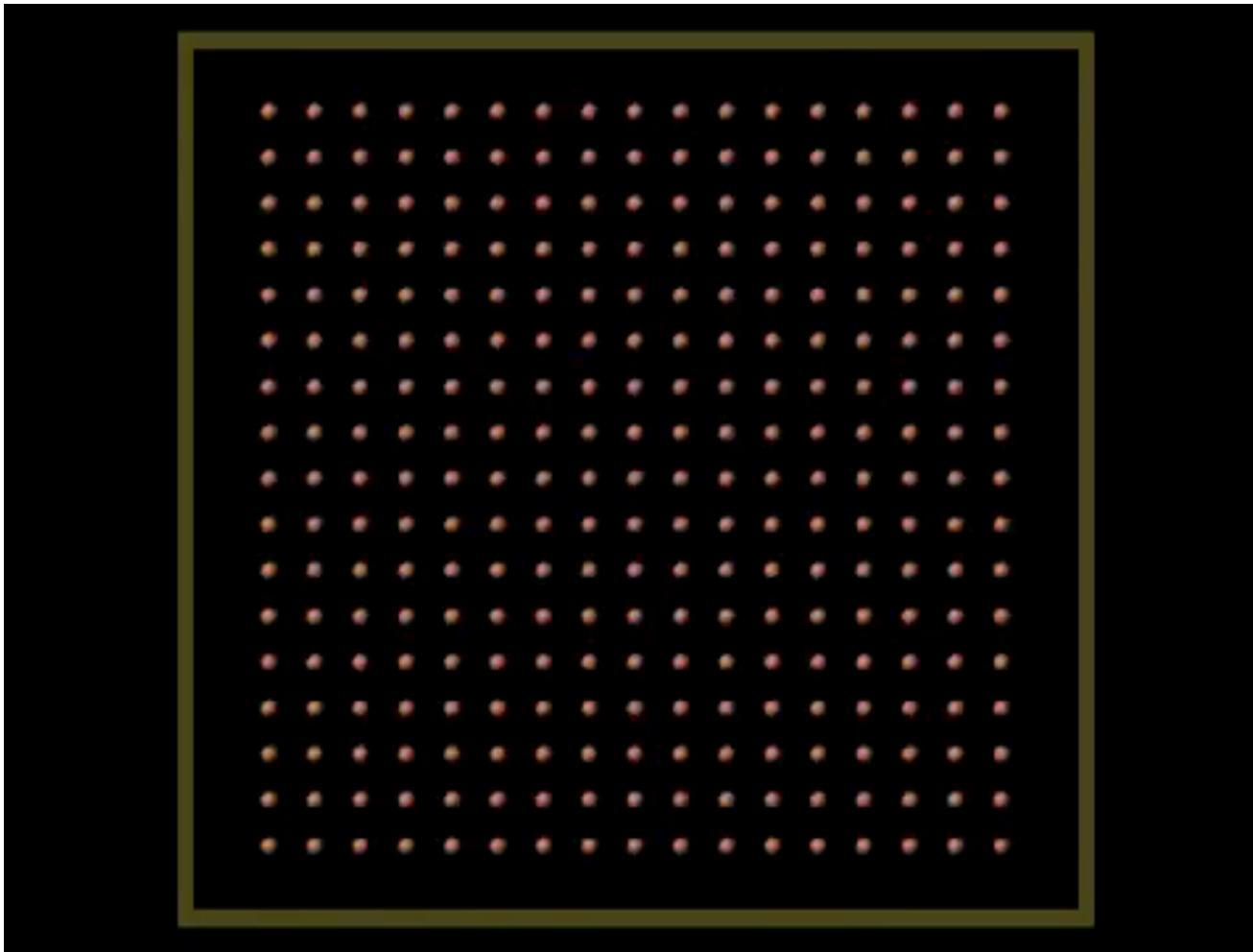
How do molecules move around in a cell?



From *Inner Life of the Cell | Protein Packing*, XVIVO and Biovisions @ Harvard

- The interior of the cell is crowded, and all the molecules jiggle about.
- Note that lots of molecules (e.g., water) aren't even shown in this movie.

# Molecules jiggle about because other molecules keep bumping into them



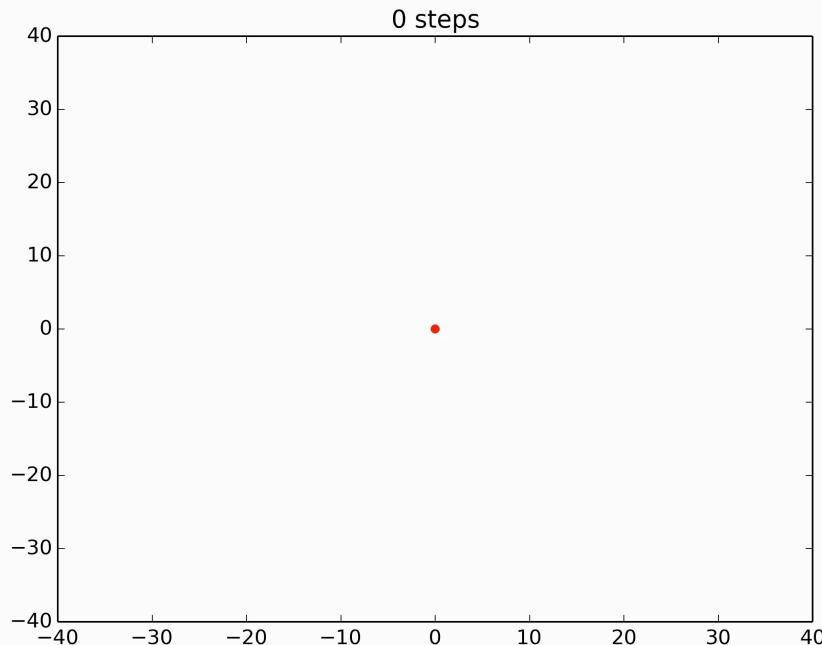
# Diffusion

- This “jiggling about” by lots of molecules leads to diffusion
- Individual molecules follow a random walk, due to collisions with surrounding molecules
- Diffusion = many random walks by many molecules
  - Substance goes from region of high concentration to region of lower concentration
- We will focus on the basic case of random, unconfined, undirected motion. Certain molecules move around in more complicated ways within cells. (e.g. some molecules are confined within the nucleus of a <sup>6</sup> cell, charged molecules in an electric field may tend toward a certain direction, etc.)

# Diffusion as a random walk (particle-based perspective)

# Random walk

- We can model the motion of a molecule as a random walk
  - At each time step, randomly pick a direction, and move one unit in that direction
  - This type of motion (when caused by random collisions with other molecules) is called “Brownian motion”



In the movie, only cardinal directions are chosen, but we could pick diagonal directions as well and still get Brownian motion

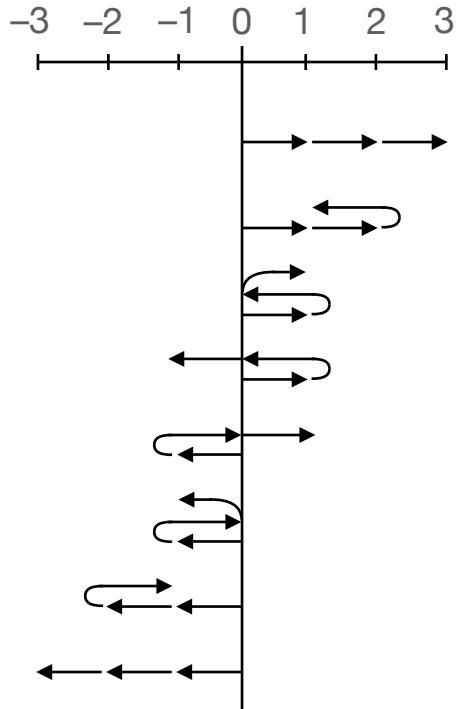
# 1, 2, or 3 dimensions

- In biological systems, a random walk can take place in:
  - 3 dimensions: a protein moving freely within the interior of a cell
  - 2 dimensions: a protein moving within a cell membrane
  - 1 dimension: a protein (e.g., transcription factor) moving along a strand of DNA

# Consider the 1D case (for simplicity)

- A particle starts at  $x_0 = 0$
- At each time step, it has 50% probability of moving one unit forward, and 50% probability of moving one unit backward
- Denote the sequence of positions as  $x_0, x_1, x_2, x_3, \dots$
- Question: if you repeat this process many times and make a histogram of the position  $x_3$ , what will it look like? How about and  $x_{10}$  or  $x_{100}$ ?

# Position after 3 time steps ( $x_3$ )



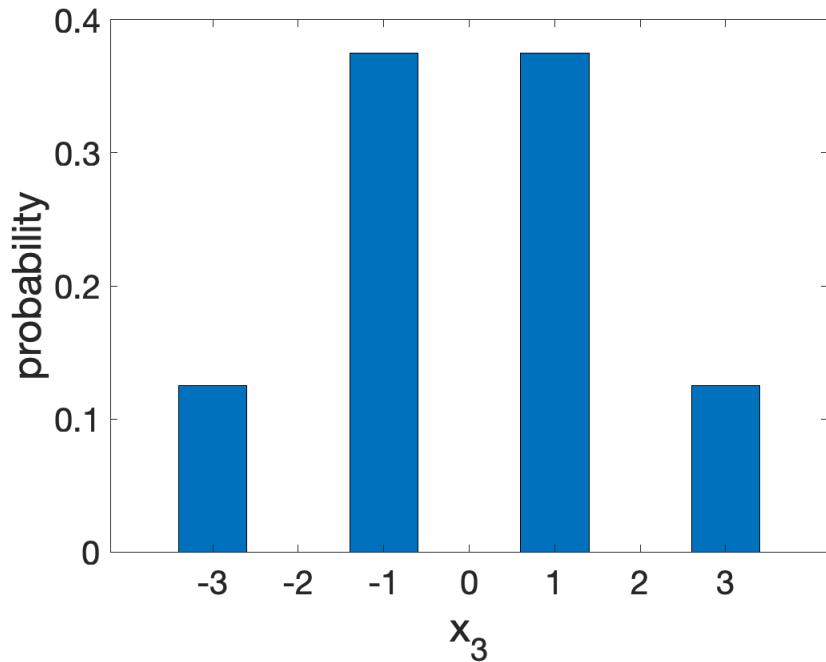
<u>Position (<math>x_3</math>)</u>	<u><math>(x_3)^2</math></u>
+3	+9
+1	+1
+1	+1
-1	+1
+1	+1
-1	+1
-1	+1
-3	+9
<hr/>	
$E[x_3] = 0$	$E[x_3^2] = 3$

After  $N$  steps:  $E[x_N] = 0$

$E[x_N^2] = N$

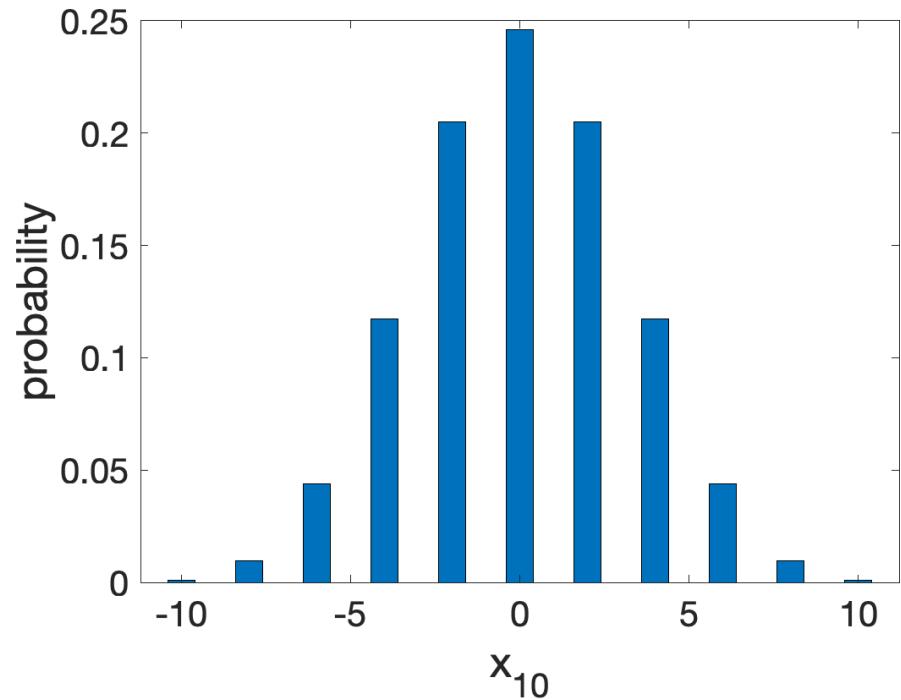
# Position after 3 time steps ( $x_3$ )

- Probabilities:
  - $P(x_3 = -3) = 1/8$
  - $P(x_3 = -1) = 3/8$
  - $P(x_3 = 1) = 3/8$
  - $P(x_3 = 3) = 1/8$
- Mean displacement:  
 $E[x_3] = 0$
- Mean-squared displacement:  
 $E[x_3^2] = 3$



# Position after 10 time steps ( $x_{10}$ )

- Mean displacement:  
 $E[x_{10}] = 0$
- Mean-squared displacement:  
 $E[x_{10}^2] = 10$



# Properties of 1D Brownian motion

- After  $N$  steps:
  - Mean displacement:  $E[x_N] = 0$
  - Mean-squared displacement:  $E[x_N^2] = N$
- More generally, if the particle moves a distance  $L$  at each time step,  $E[x_N^2] = NL^2$
- As  $N$  grows large, the distribution approaches a Gaussian (with mean 0 and variance  $NL^2$ )

# Diffusion as a function of time

- Instead of thinking of position as a function of  $N$ , we might think of it as a function of time.
  - Let  $t$  denote total elapsed time and  $\Delta t$  denote length of each time step. Then:

$$N = \frac{t}{\Delta t}$$

$$E[x(t)^2] = E[x_N^2] = NL^2 = \frac{t}{\Delta t} L^2$$

- In other words, expected mean squared displacement grows linearly with time

# Diffusion coefficient

- To quantify speed of diffusion, we define the diffusion coefficient  $D$ : 
$$D = \frac{L^2}{2\Delta t}$$
 Note: L is average displacement per time step for each coordinate (x, y, or z)
- Then  $E[x(t)^2] = 2Dt$
- In 2D, the diffusion coefficient is defined such that  $E[r(t)^2] = E[x(t)^2] + E[y(t)^2] = 4Dt$   
 $r(t)$  is displacement from initial position at time  $t$
- In 3D,  $E[r(t)^2] = E[x(t)^2] + E[y(t)^2] + E[z(t)^2] = 6Dt$

# Example values

- Diffusion coefficient ( $D$ ):
  - Sugar:  $500 \text{ } (\mu\text{m})^2/\text{s}$
  - Typical protein:  $5 \text{ } (\mu\text{m})^2/\text{s}$
  - Note: Larger molecules generally diffuse more slowly than small ones
- Cell size:
  - Bacterium (*E. coli*):  $1 \text{ } \mu\text{m}$  radius
  - Human neutrophil (white blood cell):  $10 \text{ } \mu\text{m}$  radius
  - A human neuron can be  $100 \text{ } \mu\text{m}$  wide and, in extreme cases, over  $1 \text{ m}$  in length

# Continuum view of diffusion

# Basic intuition

- Although we can't predict the motion of one particle, we can predict the average motion of a large number of particles
  - Particles will move from regions of high concentration to regions of low concentration

# Fick's law (or Fick's 1st law)

- Suppose that particles are uniformly distributed in the  $y$  and  $z$  dimensions, and vary only in  $x$
- Let  $c$  represent concentration (a function of  $x$ )
- Define the flux  $J$  as the rate at which particles diffuse across a boundary
- Then Fick's 1st law states that:  $J = -D \frac{\partial c}{\partial x}$

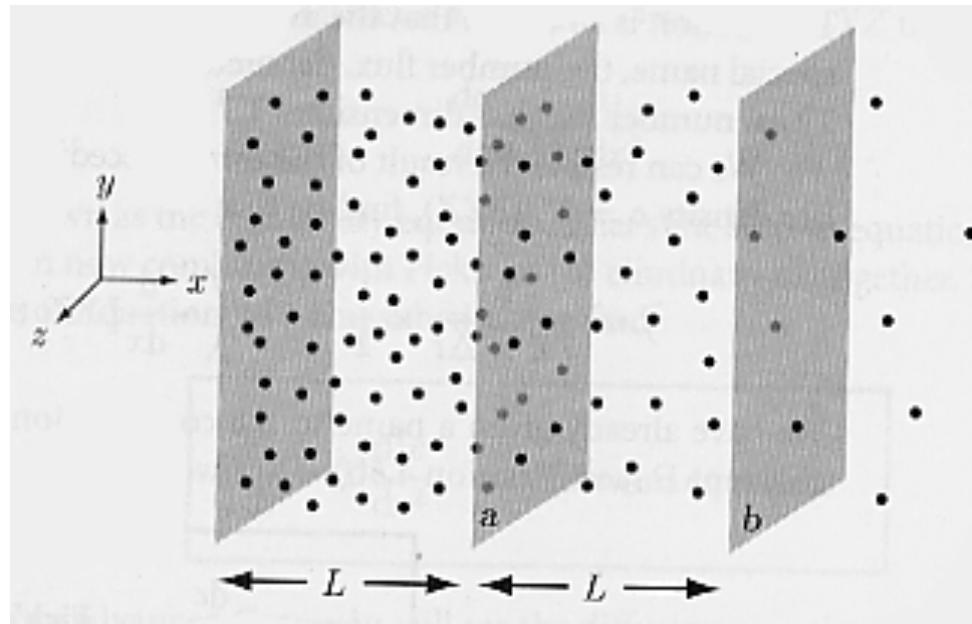
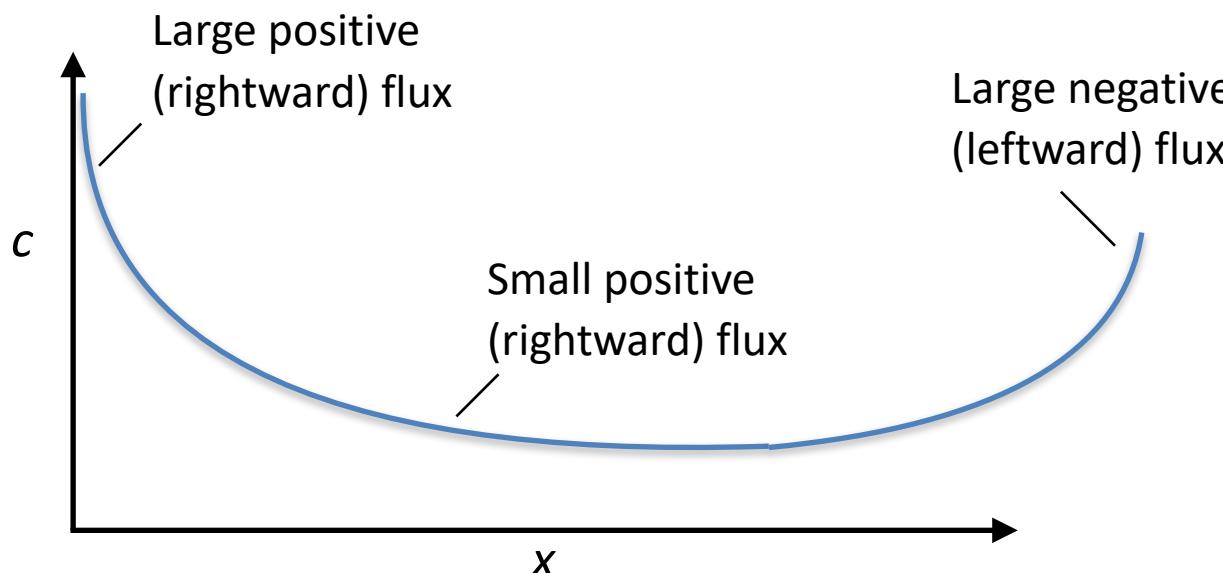


Illustration from  
Chris Burge

# Fick's law (or Fick's 1st law)

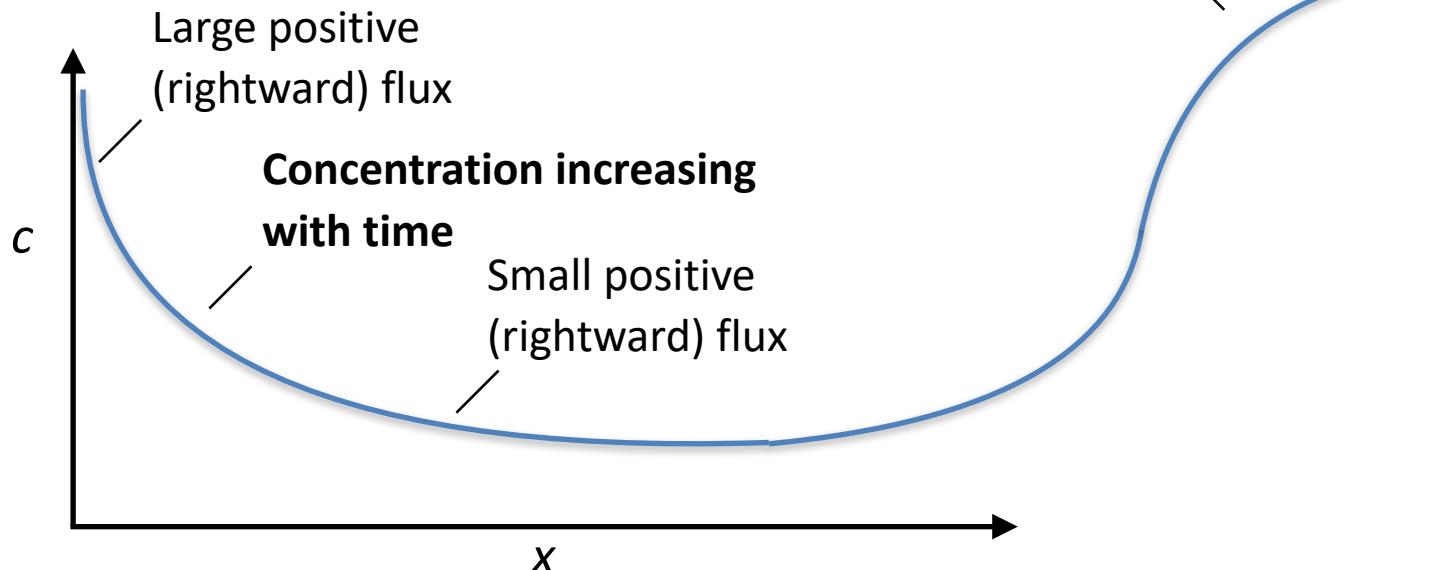
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# How does concentration change with time?

- Now think of concentration and flux as a function of position  $x$  and time  $t$
- The concentration at a particular position goes up with time if there is less flux away from that position than there is coming in to that position (in other words, if the flux at that position is decreasing as one moves in the positive  $x$  direction)

$$\frac{\partial c}{\partial t} = -\frac{\partial J}{\partial x}$$



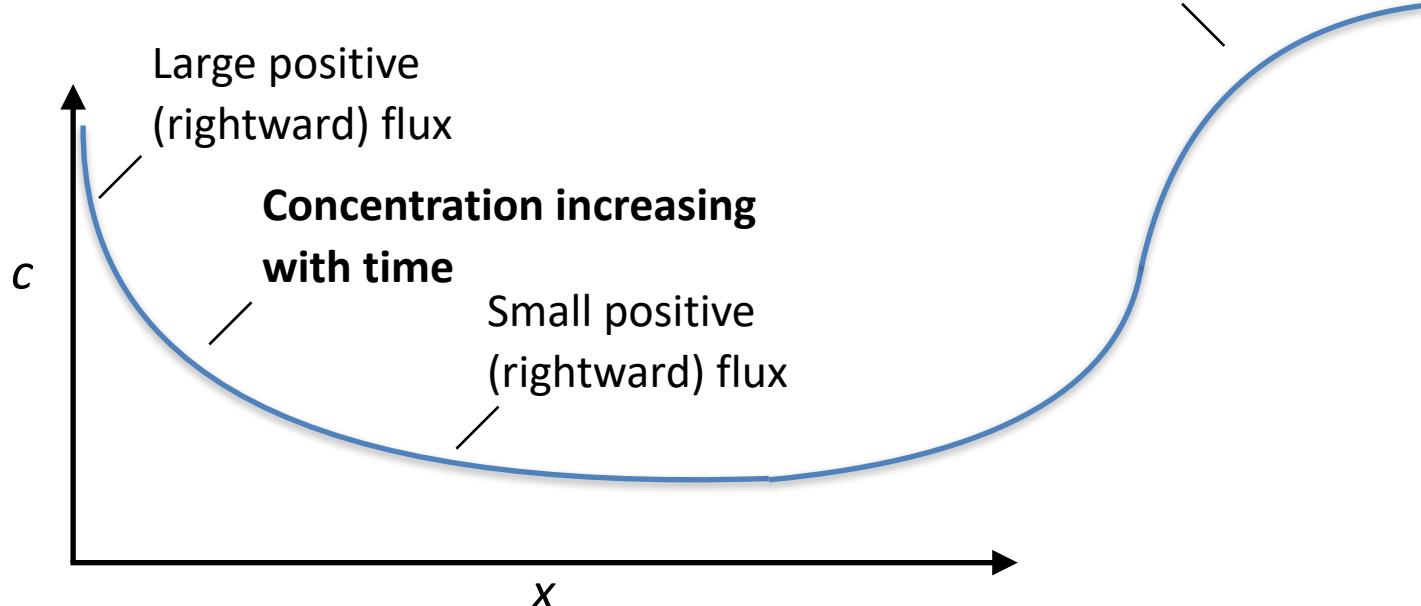
# Diffusion Equation (or Fick's 2nd law)

- Combining these formulae gives us:

$$\frac{\partial c}{\partial t} = -\frac{\partial J}{\partial x} = -\frac{\partial}{\partial x} \left( -D \frac{\partial c}{\partial x} \right) = D \frac{\partial^2 c}{\partial x^2}$$

$$\frac{\partial c}{\partial t} = D \frac{\partial^2 c}{\partial x^2}$$

Concentration decreasing with time



# Example

- Diffusion from a point:
  - Solution to the diffusion equation is a Gaussian whose variance grows linearly with time

bell curve grows wider over time

# In three dimensions ...

- Now suppose concentration varies as a function of  $x$ ,  $y$ ,  $z$ , and  $t$
- The diffusion equation generalizes to:

$$\frac{\partial c}{\partial t} = D \nabla^2 c = D \left( \frac{\partial^2 c}{\partial x^2} + \frac{\partial^2 c}{\partial y^2} + \frac{\partial^2 c}{\partial z^2} \right)$$

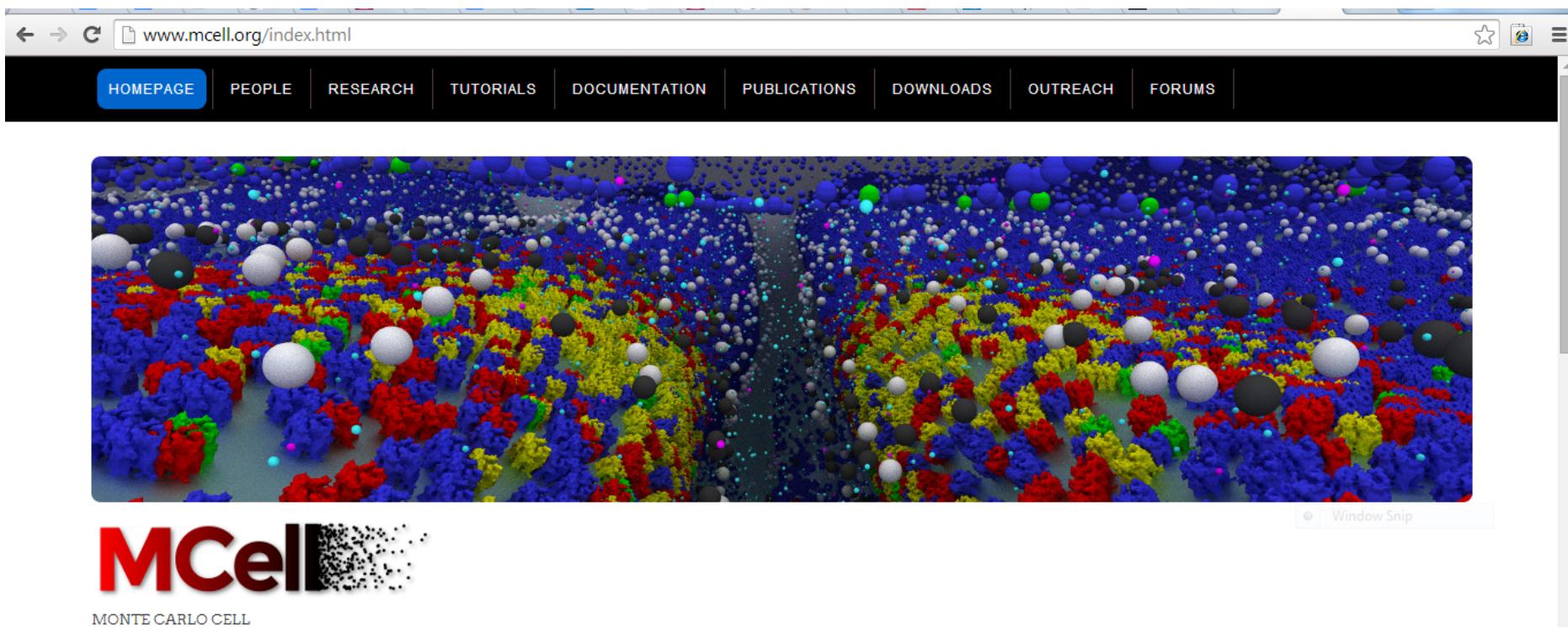
$\nabla^2$  is called the Laplacian operator

# Simulating diffusion

# Reaction-diffusion simulation

- *Reaction-diffusion simulation* is a common way to model how molecules move within the cell
- Basic rules:
  - Molecules move around by diffusion
  - When two molecules come close together, they have some probability of reacting to combine or modify one another
- Two implementation strategies:
  - Particle-based (model individual molecules)
  - Continuum models (model concentrations)

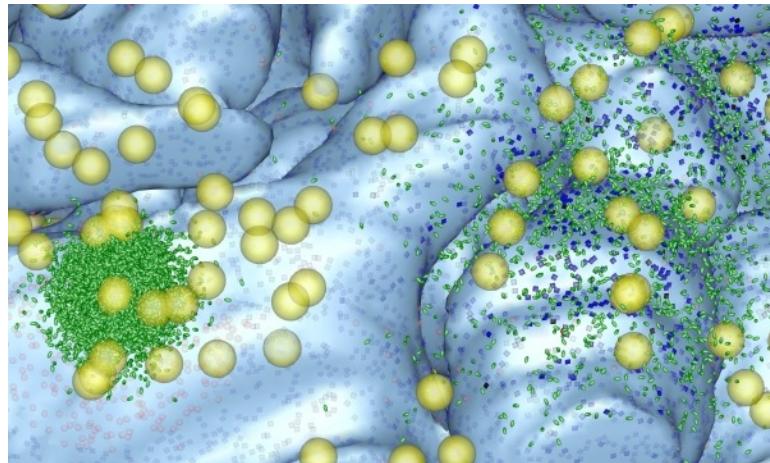
# MCell: one of several particle-based simulation software packages



Other similar software packages: Smoldyn, Chemcell

# How MCell works

- Particles representing molecules move according to a random walk, and react with one another probabilistically when they come into contact
  - MCell uses Monte Carlo algorithms
- Morphology of cell membranes (and other cellular structures) represented by a mesh



<http://www.mcell.cnl.salk.edu/>



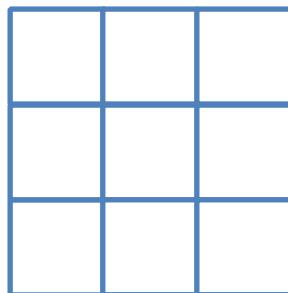
Naomi Latorraca

# MCell applications

- MCell has been widely used in neuroscience, to model phenomena such as synaptic transmission
- A common approach is to perform simulations under various assumptions and see which ones best match experimental data
  - See, for example, Coggan et al., Evidence for Ectopic Neurotransmission at a Neuronal Synapse, *Science* 309:446-451 (2005)

# Continuum approach

- Divide space into finite “voxels”
- Instead of tracking positions of molecules, track concentrations of each type of molecule in each voxel
- At each time step, update concentrations based on reactions of molecules within a voxel, and diffusion between neighboring voxels based on concentration differences (i.e., the diffusion equation)

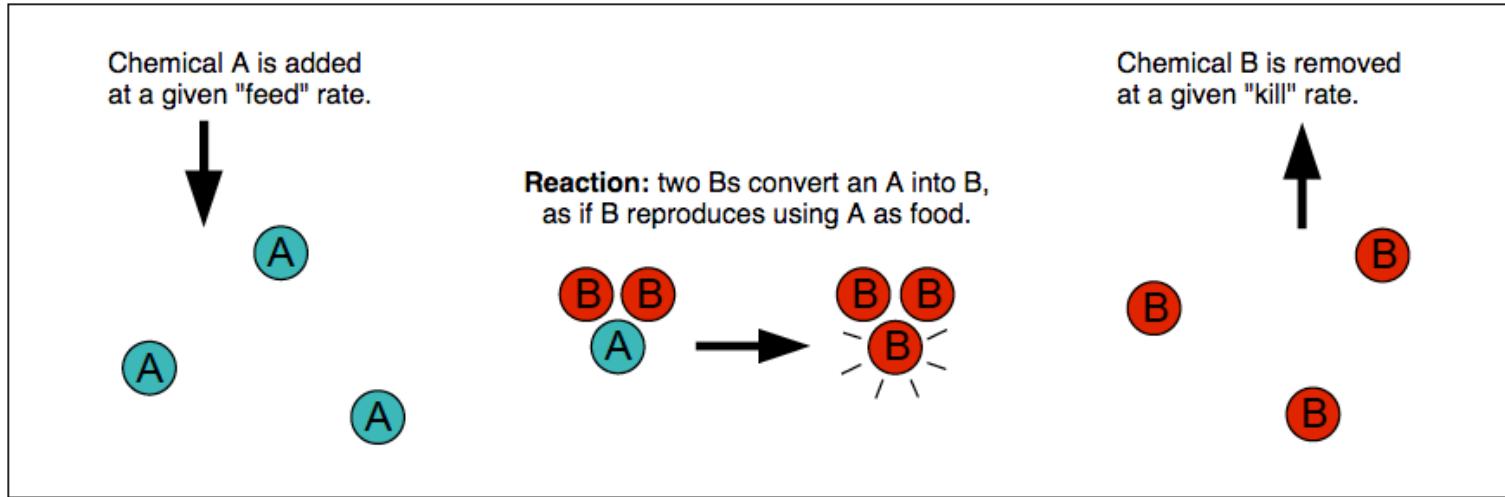


2D grid for illustrative purposes  
In a 3D grid, the individual boxes are “voxels”

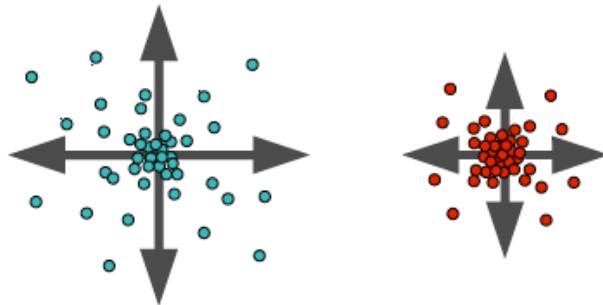
# Continuum approach

- Advantage: faster
- Disadvantage: less accurate for small numbers of molecules
- Unlike the particle-based approach, the continuum approach is deterministic
- Example software: Simmune

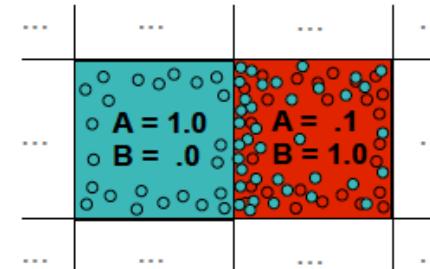
# Example: Gray-Scott model



**Diffusion:** both chemicals diffuse so uneven concentrations spread out across the grid, but A diffuses faster than B.



The system is approximated by using two numbers at each grid cell for the local concentrations of A and B.

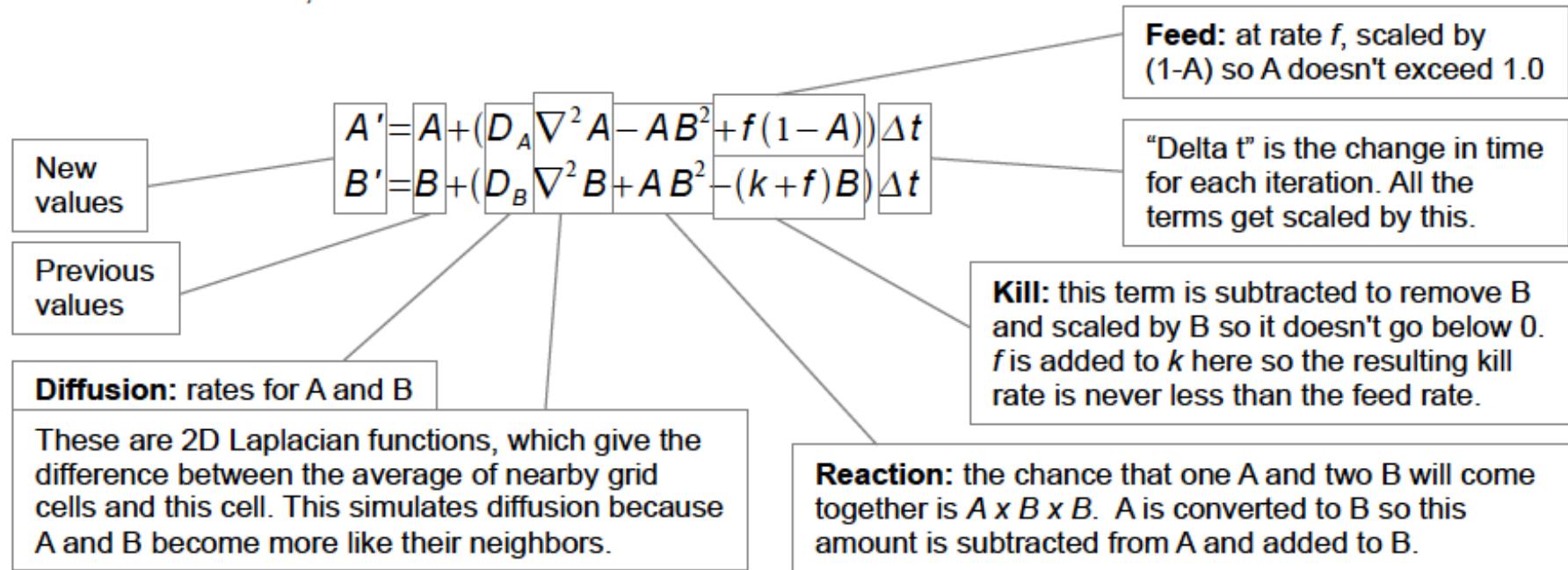


You're not responsible for these details

<http://www.karlsims.com/rd.html>

# Gray-Scott model

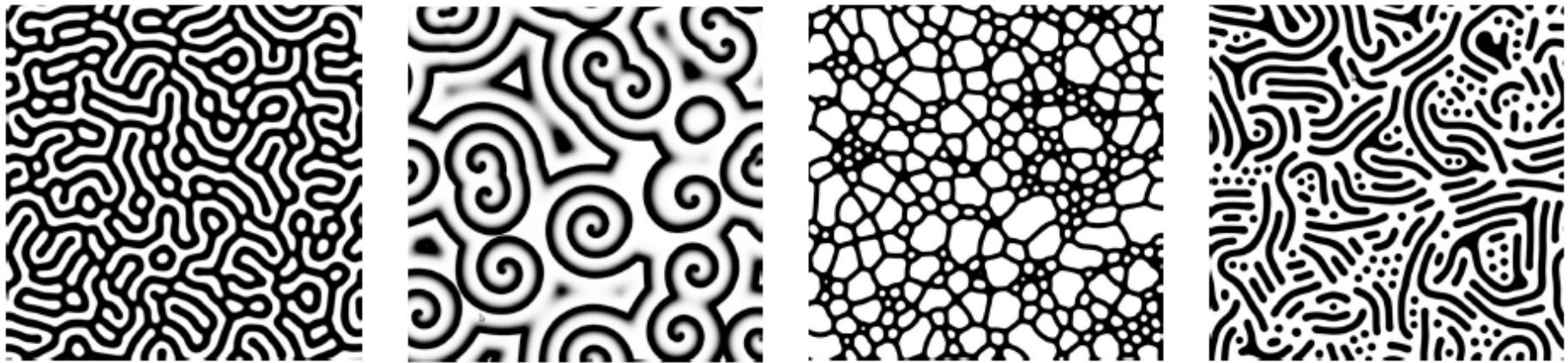
The grid is repeatedly updated using the following equations to update the concentrations of A and B in each cell, and model the behaviors described above.



You're not responsible for these details

<http://www.karlsims.com/rd.html>

# Gray-Scott model



All sorts of interesting patterns emerge as one varies the parameters

Try it out at <https://pmneila.github.io/jsexp/grayscott/>

# Alan Turing proposed a similar reaction-diffusion model for pattern formation in animals

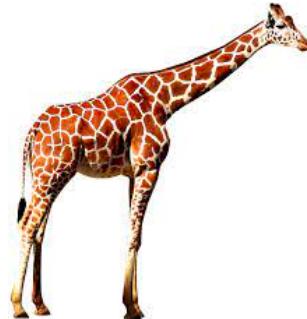
## THE CHEMICAL BASIS OF MORPHOGENESIS

BY A. M. TURING, F.R.S. *University of Manchester*

(Received 9 November 1951—Revised 15 March 1952)

*Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London*

It is suggested that a system of chemical substances, called morphogens, reacting together and diffusing through a tissue, is adequate to account for the main phenomena of morphogenesis. Such a system, although it may originally be quite homogeneous, may later develop a pattern or structure due to an instability of the homogeneous equilibrium, which is triggered off by random disturbances. Such reaction-diffusion systems are considered in some detail in the case of an isolated ring of cells, a mathematically convenient, though biologically unusual system.



# Gray-Scott model

- Demo:

<http://pmneila.github.io/jsexp/grayscott/>