

# TRANSITIONS IN THE MODEL OF EPITHELIAL PATTERNING

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## ABSTRACT

We analyze pattern formation in the model of cell communication in *Drosophila* egg development. The model describes the regulatory network formed by the Epidermal Growth Factor Receptor (EGFR) and its ligands. The network is activated by the oocyte-derived input that is modulated by feedback loops within the follicular epithelium. We analyze these dynamics within the framework of a recently proposed mathematical model of EGFR signaling (Shvartsman et al., 2002). The emphasis is on the large-amplitude solutions of the model that can be correlated with the experimentally observed patterns of protein and gene expression. Our analysis of transitions between the major classes of patterns in the model can be used to interpret the experimentally observed phenotypic transitions in eggshell morphology. The existence of complex patterns in the model can be used to account for complex eggshell morphologies in related fly species.

## INTRODUCTION

Half a century ago, Alan Turing suggested that chemical blueprints guiding the morphogenesis can arise from the interplay between chemical reactions and diffusion (Turing, 1952). Within this paradigm, pattern formation is self-organized, in a sense that it does not require prepatterns for its initiation and guidance. The importance of self-organized pattern formation in development is still debated (Wolpert et al., 1998; Freeman, 2000; Monk, 2000). The extent to which patterns in development are hard-wired or self-organized is one of the main issues in this debate. Pattern formation, whereby inductive signals strongly interact with secondary refinement processes, is a hybrid between the purely hard-wired and self-organized mechanisms. Here, we analyze such a mechanism in a recently proposed mathematical model of cell communication in *Drosophila* oogenesis (Shvartsman et al., 2002). The model describes the intermediate stages of oogenesis, when the Gurken signal released from the oocyte is modulated by autocrine loops in follicular epithelium, Figure 1A; (Sapir et al., 1998; Wasserman and Freeman, 1998; Nilson and Schupbach, 1999; Peri et al., 1999).

The primary response, the localized pattern of EGFR signaling that mirrors the Gurken input, is sequentially amplified and inhibited by the network of feedback loops within the follicular epithelium (Sapir et al., 1998; Wasserman and Freeman, 1998; Peri et al., 1999). As a result of this modulation, the original pattern of EGFR activity is transformed into a pattern with two maxima, Figure 1B. Cells with the elevated levels of EGFR signaling activate the transcriptional program eventually leading to the formation of the dorsal appendages, Figure 1C (Deng and Bownes, 1997; Deng and Bownes, 1998; Stevens, 1998; Dobens and Raftery, 2000). The feedback loops modulating the Gurken input rely on secreted EGFR ligands, Figure 1D,E. The positive feedback is formed by the receptor, its stimulatory ligands (Spitz and Vein), and a ligand-releasing protease (Rhomboid) (Ruohola-Baker et al., 1993; Wasserman and Freeman, 1998; Lee et al., 2001; Tsruya et al., 2002). The negative feedback is composed by the receptor and its inhibitory ligand Argos (Golembio et al., 1996; Morimoto et al., 1996; Wasserman and

Freeman, 1998). Argos is the only secreted EGFR inhibitor in *Drosophila* (Perrimon and Perkins, 1997).

Extensive studies of the *Drosophila* EGFR system have enabled the formulation of a mechanistic model of this signaling circuit (Shvartsman et al., 2002). Recently, we have used this model to validate the peak-splitting mechanism of Wasserman and Freeman (Wasserman and Freeman, 1998). We have found that the mechanism is sufficient to convert a single-peaked extracellular input into a two-peaked pattern. The mechanism can also account for a number of observed phenotypic transitions. Furthermore, we have found that the mechanism predicts the existence of complex signaling patterns with more than two peaks of receptor activity. Here, we report a comprehensive analysis of these complex patterns and discuss the problem of pattern selection.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The mathematical model of the EGFR patterning network, the selection of model parameter values, and the description of numerical methods have been described in a previous paper (Shvartsman et al., 2002).

### Main classes of large amplitude patterns in the model

The analysis of stationary patterns in the model reveals five major classes characterized by the different number of maxima, Figure 2. In the case of a two-peaked pattern (Figure 2C), a single-peaked input induces a pattern in which signaling is localized to the two narrow domains with high levels of Rhomboid and Argos production. Signaling is essentially “off” outside of these two domains. The number of appendages corresponds to the number of peaks in the EGFR signaling pattern (Wasserman and Freeman, 1998). Accordingly, different phenotypes can be interpreted in terms of the qualitatively different stationary patterns in the model. We correlate the two-peaked pattern in Figure 2C with the two-striped patterns of *rhombo* expression and EGFR activity (Ruohola-Baker et al., 1993; Neuman-Silberberg and Schupbach, 1994; Wasserman and Freeman,

1998; Peri et al., 1999). Similarly, the low amplitude pattern in Figure 2A would correspond to the eggshell with no dorsal appendages, while the pattern with a single narrow peak in Figure 2B would correspond to the phenotype with a single dorsal appendage. These phenotypes have been robustly observed in fruit flies with defects in genes responsible for the generation of Gurken signal, reviewed in (Nilson and Schupbach, 1999). A pattern with a single broad peak (Figure 2F) can be correlated with strongly dorsalized eggshells with a single broad appendage observed in two experimental systems with the elevated levels of Gurken (Neuman-Silberberg and Schupbach, 1994; Ghiglione et al., 2002).

The patterns with three and four peaks shown in Figures 2D,E indicate the presence of phenotypes with more than two appendages. While the eggs of *Drosophila melanogaster* have two appendages, eggshells of related fly species may exhibit more complex morphology (Hinton, 1981). Furthermore, genetic manipulations of *Drosophila melanogaster* can also yield more complex phenotypes (Roth et al., 1999). For example, eggs with binuclear oocytes and, hence, two sources of Gurken can have four dorsal appendages. Even more remarkably, manipulation of the level of *dpp* gene yields eggs with three appendages even with a single source of Gurken (Deng and Bownes, 1997). (*dpp*, among its other functions, mediates the positive feedback by Rhomboid (Dobens and Raftery, 2000; Peri and Roth, 2000)). The ability of our model to predict patterns with more than two peaks can be interpreted in several ways. First, if it is a real feature of the mechanism, it indicates that the pattern forming capabilities of the *r-a-s* signaling network may have been conserved across species (Deng and Bownes, 1997; Peri et al., 1999; Shvartsman et al., 2002). Second, it suggests new experiments aimed at creating such phenotypes in *Drosophila melanogaster*.

We have numerically mapped the regions of existence and the transitions between different classes of patterns. Figures 3A,B present the two-parameter diagrams computed upon variation of the input parameters and the strength of the negative feedback. Experimentally, such parameter variation can be realized in flies with mutations in the components localizing and releasing Gurken and in those controlling the expression of

*argos* (Golembio et al., 1996; Wasserman and Freeman, 1998; Nilson and Schupbach, 1999; Zhao and Bownes, 1999; Hsu and Schulz, 2000). We have found that transitions between different patterns are discontinuous and hysteretic. We believe that it is the abruptness of these transitions that enables the classification of a large number of experimental results in terms of a relatively small number of well-defined phenotypes.

### The problem of pattern selection

Qualitatively different patterns can coexist for a wide range of parameters, Figures 3,4A. It is important to consider this result in connection with the problem of pattern selection in dorsal appendage morphogenesis. Specifically, 100% of the eggs laid by the wild-type fruit flies have two dorsal appendages. This means that the real system can robustly select the right pattern over a naturally occurring range of Gurken doses and egg chamber geometries. In terms of our model, this would imply that the two-peaked pattern (Figure 2C) is invariably selected from several patterns that are realized for a range of input and feedback parameters.

One mechanism that might explain this robustness requires the existence of a region of the parameter space in which the two-peaked pattern is the unique attractor. This is not what we see in our analysis. In fact, the two-peaked patterns always coexist with other large amplitude solutions, either one- or three-peaked, Figures 3,4A. An alternative mechanism for pattern selection relies on the input history that guides the system to the “right” pattern. In one scenario of dorsal appendage morphogenesis, the Gurken signal is slowly increasing (Shvartsman et al., 2002); this can be realized by the adiabatic increase of the input strength. (A similar scenario relies on the slowly increased strength of the positive feedback (Guichet et al., 2001)).

We have found that the slow variation of the input robustly selects the two-peaked signaling pattern for a wide range of input widths and amplitudes. Specifically, upon slow variation of the input strength, the pattern is transformed between the zero- , the

one-, and the two-peaked pattern. The existence of this 1→2 transition is realized over a wide range of model parameters.

We have numerically analyzed the dynamical properties of the inputs that are necessary for inducing the two-peaked patterns. We have parameterized the time dependence of the input amplitude by its asymptotic value, and the time scale on which this value is attained. Focusing on the region where the two- and three-peaked solutions are the only large-amplitude patterns, we have mapped out the dependence of the final pattern on these two parameters, Figure 4B. We have then computed the domains of asymptotically attained patterns in the space of these parameters, Figure 4C. In our case, the initial condition of the initial value problem with time-dependent input is fixed to the unique (“off”) steady state in the absence of input. The question of pattern selection reduces to determining the eventual outcome (two- vs. three-peaked pattern) of the transient induced by the increasing and saturating input (a model of increasing and saturating Gurken stimulus).

Figure 4C presents the parametric dependence of the steady states asymptotically attained in these transients. The diagram can be summarized as follows. First, slow inputs promote the selection of two-peaked patterns. Second, the domains of reachability of the two- and three-peaked solutions are separated by well-defined boundaries; overstepping these boundaries qualitatively changes the pattern attained in the transient. Third, the domains of reachability of the three-peaked solutions can be disconnected.

As a consequence of the disconnected nature of the domains of the asymptotically attained patterns, the pattern selected by an increasing and saturating input can exhibit nonmonotonic dependence on the input parameters. An example of such nonmonotonic dependence on the time scale of the input is shown in Figure 4D. We found that the connectedness of reachability domains in the space of inputs parameters depends on the initial conditions for the transient. In particular, when the transient is induced from the steady states realized for a higher value of the input strength (a well-formed one-peak pattern, Figure 2B), the domain becomes simply connected.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Each domain within the two-peaked pattern of EGFR activity marks the appendage-producing cells (Wasserman and Freeman, 1998). These solutions can indeed be realized over a wide range of parameters in our model (Shvartsman et al., 2002). Here, we report that, at least within the framework of our model, the two-peaked patterns *always* coexist with other solutions, Figure 3. The coexistence with the zero- and one-peaked patterns fits well with the phenotypes observed at lowered levels of Gurken input or EGFR activity (Nilson and Schupbach, 1999). The coexistence of the two-peaked patterns with more complex solutions is a robust feature of the mechanism with a single diffusing inhibitor. It suggests that perturbations of the EGFR regulatory network in oogenesis can generate more complex dorsal appendage phenotypes.

Our results motivate future experiments on generation of eggshells with more than two appendages. Currently, there are only two reports of such phenotypes in mutants of *D. melanogaster* (Deng and Bownes, 1997; Reich et al., 1999). Given the wide range of the model parameters where different patterns coexist, it is important to explore the mechanisms by which the egg can robustly select the wild-type two-appendage morphology over a range of developmental conditions.

The pattern-forming capability of nonlinear reaction-transport mechanisms is rich. Generically, a number of patterns can coexist for a wide range of model parameters. Recently, this feature has been emphasized in a model of a neurogenic network in *Drosophila* (Meir et al., 2002). There, the lateral inhibition network could simultaneously generate a variety of patterns. It was suggested that this property of the model signals the high evolvability potential of the real network (Kirschner and Gerhart, 1998). Specifically, small variations in the parameters of the module may generate patterns of higher complexity at other stages of development or in related species. In the case of appendage producing network, this versatility might account for wild type eggshells in

related fly species. We suggest that new morphologies may be realized without the introduction of additional molecular components.

The evolvability of regulatory modules must be balanced by their robustness in performing specific tasks (Kirschner and Gerhart, 1998). For the neurogenic network, it was suggested that patterns are selected by variations in initial conditions (Meir et al., 2002). For the dorsal appendage producing network, the dynamic regulation of the Gurken input might be the key to robust selection of the two-peaked phenotype, Figure 4C. Most of the experimental work in this direction focused on genes regulating nuclear migration and Gurken release (Nilson and Schupbach, 1999; Guichet et al., 2001). An additional layer of control might be provided by the system for the vitelline membrane production (Waring, 2000; Andrenacci et al., 2001). While it is believed that the Gurken input to the follicle cells is reduced by this process, its role in patterning of the follicular epithelium is largely unexplored (Stevens, 1998; Waring, 2000). Experiments with transient Gurken stimuli indirectly suggest that dorsal appendages should be fully induced prior to the onset of the vitelline membrane formation (Guichet et al., 2001). Dorsal appendage morphogenesis tightly depends on the spatial regulation of Gurken. It will be interesting to examine the role of temporal regulation of the same input.

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## FIGURE CAPTIONS

**Figure 1:** (A) Geometry of cell communication at the intermediate stages of oogenesis. Diffusing signal released from the dorsal-anterior cortex of the oocyte stimulates the EGFR in the overlying follicle cells. Feedback loops within the follicular epithelium establish a two-peaked pattern of EGFR activity (B). This pattern provides a blueprint for the formation of two dorsal appendages (C). (D,E) Summary of the regulatory network captured by the model.

**Figure 2:** Six major classes of stationary patterns in the model, represented by the pattern of Rhomboid,  $r(x)$ .

**Figure 3:** The classification of the stationary patterns in the model. Each region contains a different combination of stable patterns (see the color map on the right). The lines represent transitions between different patterns. (A) Two-parameter diagram computed as a function of the input strength ( $g_0$ ) and width ( $x_0$ ). (B) Two-parameter diagram computed as a function of the relative strength of negative feedback ( $\lambda$ ) and the input amplitude ( $g_0$ ). (A,B): Other parameters:  $c_r=0.4, b_r=0.2, c_a=0.5, b_a=0.05, x_0=3, \varepsilon=0.1, \tau_a=1, \tau_s=0.1$ . Notation is described in (Shvartsman et al., 2002).

**Figure 4:** (A) Dependence of the number of peaks in the pattern on the amplitude of the input signal. (B) The time-dependence of the input amplitude is parameterized by the asymptotic value ( $g_0$ ) and the time scale on which it is attained ( $\tau_g$ ). (C) Distribution of the different classes of patterns of the model in the space of the input design parameters. The input amplitude is restricted with only two- and three-peaked patterns. Gray (white) areas correspond to parameters realizing the two- (three-peaked) patterns, respectively. (D) The spatiotemporal patterns of Rhomboid computed for several values of  $\tau_g$  show the nonmonotonic dependence of the attained pattern on the time scale of the input. The gray scale corresponds to the level of Rhomboid. Parameters:  $\lambda=1.6$ , Other parameters:  $c_r=0.4, b_r=0.2, c_a=0.5, b_a=0.05, x_0=3, \varepsilon=0.1, \tau_a=1, \tau_s=0.1$ .

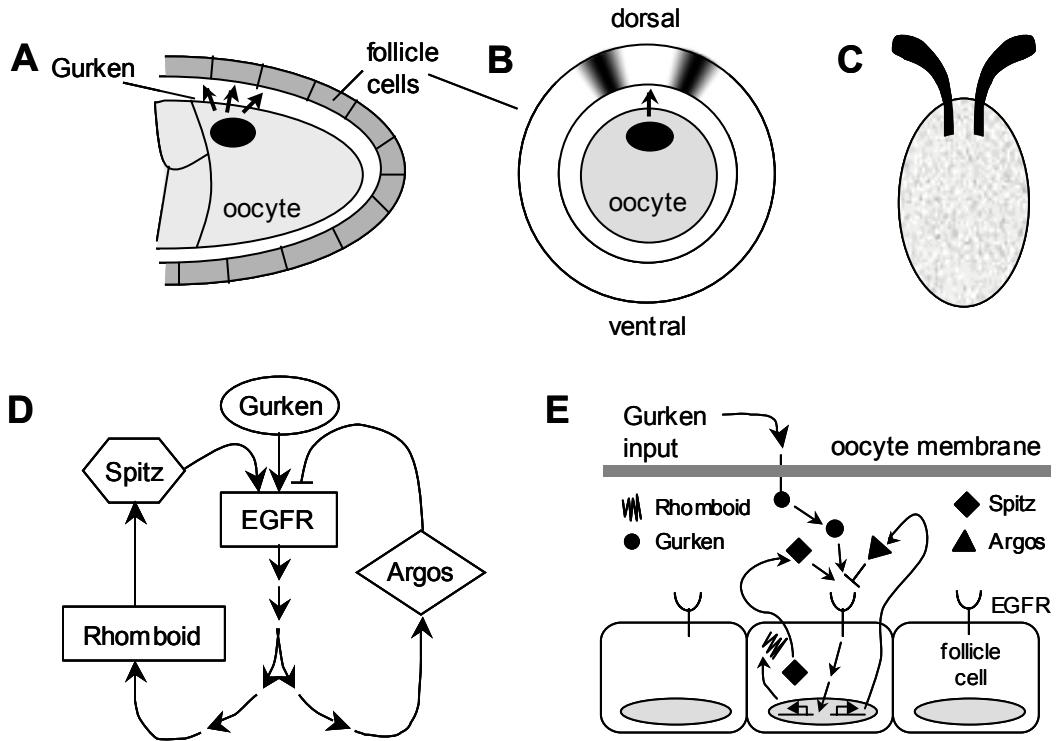
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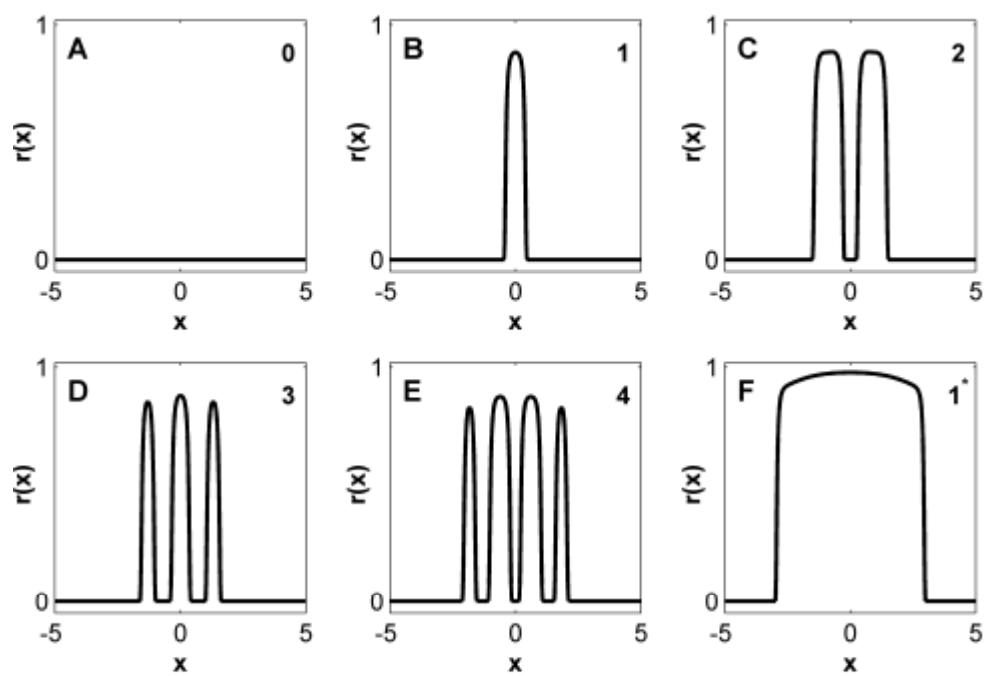
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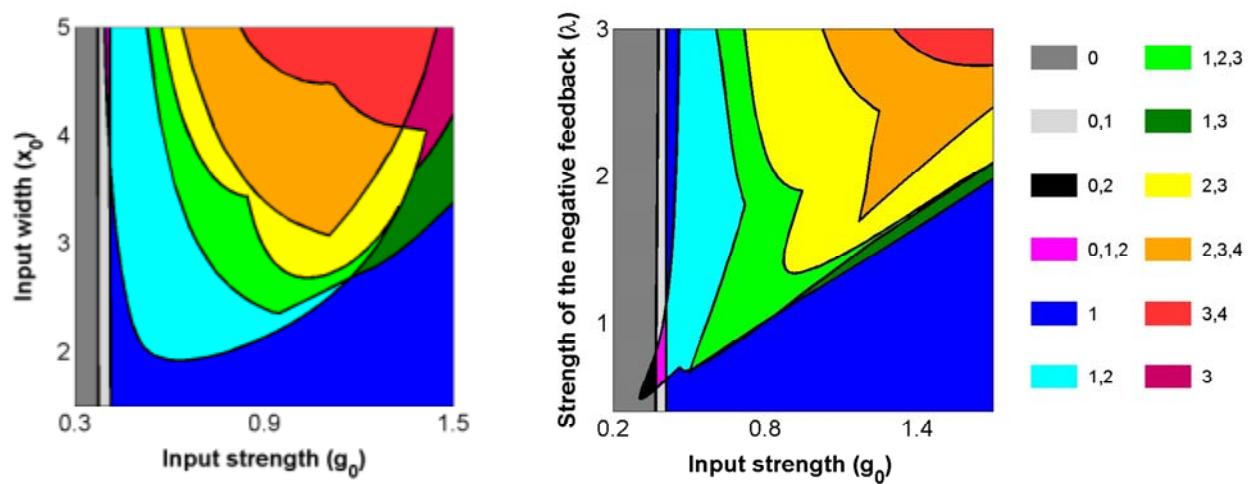
**Figure 1**



**Figure 2**



**Figure 3**



**Figure 4**

