

Three-way reactions in MCell

The rate of reaction of a molecule that can engage in a three-way reaction with reactants I and J at concentrations ρ_I and ρ_J is $\kappa\rho_I\rho_J$. Suppose that a single molecule moves a distance R while sweeping out an interaction area of δA . Then the expected number of hits, assuming that the concentration of I and J is low, is

$$n_{\text{hits}} = R\delta A\rho_I \cdot R\delta A\rho_J$$

Thus, the expected number of hits for a molecule with a diffusion length constant of λ is

$$n = \int_0^\infty \rho_I\rho_J\delta A^2 R^2 \frac{4\pi R^2}{\pi^{3/2}\lambda^3} e^{-R^2/\lambda^2} dR = \frac{3}{2}\rho_I\rho_J\delta A^2\lambda^2$$

If we let p be the probability of reaction, then

$$\kappa\rho_I\rho_J\Delta t = p \cdot n = p \cdot \frac{3}{2}\rho_I\rho_J\delta A^2\lambda^2$$

Solving for p gives

$$p = \frac{\kappa}{6D\delta A^2}$$

If we let all three reactants move and react—let us number them 1, 2, and 3—then we matching the total rate gives

$$\kappa\rho_1\rho_2\rho_3\Delta t = \frac{3}{2}\rho_1\rho_2\rho_3\delta A^2 (p_1\lambda_1^2 + p_2\lambda_2^2 + p_3\lambda_3^2)$$

and we can decide to let $p_1 = p_2 = p_3 = p$ to give

$$p = \frac{\kappa}{6(D_1 + D_2 + D_3)\delta A^2}$$

This solution also works for the cases where some of the reactants can't move (as D_i will be zero and will drop out of the equation).

Now suppose that the reaction takes place near a surface such that for a fraction a of the distance, the molecule sweeps out $\delta A^* < \delta A$ of area instead of δA . The expected number of hits is then

$$n_{\text{hits}}^* = R\rho_I ((1-a)\delta A + a\delta A^*) R\rho_J ((1-a)\delta A + a\delta A^*)$$

which we can rewrite as

$$n_{\text{hits}}^* = n_{\text{hits}} \left((1-a)^2 + 2a(1-a)\frac{\delta A^*}{\delta A} + a^2 \left(\frac{\delta A^*}{\delta A} \right)^2 \right)$$

where the first term occurs when both hits are in the unconstrained space, the second when one target molecule is in the unconstrained space and one is in the constrained space, and the third when both targets are in the constrained space. If we multiply the probability of reaction by the inverse of the fractional areas for each target, i.e., by $\delta A/\delta A^*$ if one target is in the constrained space and $(\delta A/\delta A^*)^2$ when both are in the constrained space, we then find that the total rate of reaction is

$$pn_{\text{hits}} \left((1-a)^2 \cdot 1 \cdot 1 + 2a(1-a)\frac{\delta A^*}{\delta A} \cdot 1 \cdot \frac{\delta A}{\delta A^*} + a^2 \left(\frac{\delta A^*}{\delta A} \right)^2 \cdot \frac{\delta A}{\delta A^*} \cdot \frac{\delta A}{\delta A^*} \right) = pn_{\text{hits}}$$

That is, the reaction rate is unchanged, which is exactly what we want. Since a is arbitrary, we can make a differentially small and thus the result holds for arbitrary restrictions of the swept area.