

**Mixed Yee-Crank-Nicolson Finite-Difference Time-Domain
Scheme for 1D Maxwell's Equations**

Ashwati Sanjay*

Physics Department, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada.

†

(Dated: December 12, 2025)

Abstract

Maxwell's equations form the foundation of classical electromagnetism and the basis for a wide range of modern technologies such as wireless communications and precision sensing. Accurate and efficient numerical solutions of these equations are therefore of significant importance. In this paper, a one-dimensional formulation of Maxwell's equations is solved using a mixed finite-difference time-domain (FDTD) approach. The magnetic field is advanced explicitly using the standard Yee leapfrog scheme, while the electric field is evolved using the Crank–Nicolson (CN) method to achieve unconditional stability. This hybrid approach combines the simplicity and efficiency of explicit FDTD with the improved stability properties of implicit time integration. Reflection coefficients at material interfaces can be computed using Fourier analysis and compared against analytical results to validate accuracy. Additional benchmarks, including convergence studies and energy conservation tests, can be used to confirm second-order accuracy and physical consistency of the scheme.

* Also at Physics Department, University of Alberta.; Contact author: ashwati@ualberta.ca

†

⁷ **CONTENTS**

⁸	I. Physical Problem	3
⁹	II. Computational Methods	3
¹⁰	A. Standard Yee FDTD	3
¹¹	B. Crank-Nicolson	4
¹²	C. Mixed Explicit-Implicit Scheme	5
¹³	D. Fourier Analysis	6
¹⁴	III. Validation and Analytical benchmarks	6
¹⁵	A. Reflection Coefficient	6
¹⁶	B. Convergence Study	7
¹⁷	C. Energy Conservation	7
¹⁸	IV. Discussion	7
¹⁹	Acknowledgments	10
²⁰	References	11

21 I. PHYSICAL PROBLEM

22 Maxwell's equations were an important development in nineteenth-century physics,
23 demonstrating that electricity and magnetism are intrinsically linked, unified as one fun-
24 damental force, electromagnetism. This unified theory stated that electromagnetic waves
25 propagate at the constant speed of light, which later influenced Einstein while he was
26 working on his theory of relativity. This was an essential step in modern physics and
27 engineering[1][2].

28 Accurately modelling Maxwell's equations is critical for current technologies such as mo-
29 bile phones, GPS, and the internet. It plays an important role in optimization and predicting
30 electromagnetic phenomena. The first step towards developing a numerical solution of these
31 equations is starting with the basics and studying a 1D system. An algorithm can be built
32 to accurately describe the coupling between the electric and magnetic fields as they evolve
33 through time. Then more complexities can be added into the system with multiple mediums,
34 interfaces, and various initial conditions[1][2].

35 This is motivated by prior research into eddy current dampers, where a deep under-
36 standing and accurate handling of electromagnetism is crucial in modelling the interaction
37 between a moving magnetic field and a conducting medium to optimize the geometry and
38 achieve the required damping. Similar techniques are used to develop damping mechanisms
39 for ultralight dark-matter and gravitational wave detectors, automotive suspension, braking
40 systems, tuned-mass dampers for buildings in earthquake prone areas, and aerospace appli-
41 cations where long-lasting dampers need to handle extreme conditions. These cases are few
42 of many that require robust numerical solutions of Maxwell's equations.

43 II. COMPUTATIONAL METHODS

44 A. Standard Yee FDTD

45 The finite difference time domain (FDTD) method, or Yee's method, is a widely used
46 technique to solve complex time-dependent differential equations, such as Maxwell's equa-
47 tions. The spatial domain is a discretized grid with the spatial and time derivatives replaced
48 with difference quotients, calculating a finite difference to evaluate instead[3][4].

49 In the typical FDTD setup, a staggered grid is used, evaluating different functions at

50 different spatial locations. In 1D, the electric field is evaluated at the traditional, main
 51 points as without a staggered grid, and the magnetic field at the half-integer points. This
 52 is known as the leapfrog method, where the arrangement reduces the numerical artifacts
 53 and improves the stability of the solution while remaining accurate to second-order in both
 54 space and time when using centred differences[3][4].

An important condition that needs to be met is the Courant–Friedrichs–Lewy (CFL) condition, where the numerical scheme is limited in speed to ensure it doesn't travel faster than the physical wave speed[4][5]. For the 1D Maxwell equations, this is written as:

$$\alpha = \frac{c\Delta t}{\Delta x} \leq 1$$

where c is the wave speed in a specific medium, Δx is the spatial step, and Δt is the time step. Typically, α is chosen to be ≤ 0.9 to provide a safety buffer[4][3]. This explicit method is what is used to calculate the magnetic field component B_y , coming from Maxwell's curl equation in 1D:

$$\frac{\partial B_y}{\partial t} = \frac{-1}{\mu} \frac{\partial E_z}{\partial x}$$

For second-order accuracy, centred differences in time and space is used to generate the update equation:

$$\frac{B_{i+1/2}^{n+1/2} - B^{n-1/2}i + 1/2}{\Delta t} = \frac{-1}{\mu} \frac{E^n i + 1 - E_i^n}{\Delta x}$$

55 The FDTD method is incredibly useful for its simplicity, computational efficiency, and
 56 straightforward explicit time-stepping, allowing it to be used in a variety of cases. However,
 57 the stability is conditional on the CFL constraint, restricting how fine the grid mesh can
 58 be. This also means that fine geometrical features, such as a wire, and long propagation
 59 distances are difficult to model without the fine grid, leading to expensive computational
 60 time.

61 B. Crank-Nicolson

The Crank-Nicolson (CN) method, like Yee's method, is another FD scheme to solve PDEs. It is an implicit FD scheme, relying on the trapezoidal rule, allowing it to be second-order accurate for both space and time. Using both the explicit and implicit Euler formulas, a tridiagonal linear system representing the physical system can be solved at each time

step[6][7].

$$\frac{\partial E_z}{\partial t} = \frac{-1}{\epsilon} \frac{\partial B_y}{\partial x}$$

From the curl Maxwell equation for the magnetic field and using the equation above, one can isolate for the electric field. The system to be solved is $A E_{interior} = b$, where A is a tridiagonal matrix, b is the known values of the system at the previous time step, and $E_{interior}$ is a matrix of the E values, excluding the boundaries which are enforced separately.

Equation for unknown E^{n+1} , with $\alpha = \frac{c^2 \Delta t^2}{2 \Delta x^2}$:

$$E_i^{n+1} - \alpha (E_{i+1}^{n+1} - 2E_i^{n+1} + E_{i-1}^{n+1}) = 2E_i^n - E_i^{n-1} + \alpha (E_{i+1}^{n-1} - 2E_i^{n-1} + E_{i-1}^{n-1})$$

The known vector b from previous time steps and enforced boundary conditions:

$$b_i = (1 + 2\alpha)E_i^{n+1} - \alpha E_{i+1}^{n+1} - \alpha E_{i-1}^{n+1}$$

The elements in tridiagonal matrix A are:

$$a_{i,i} = 1 + \alpha_{i-1} + \alpha_i, \quad a_{i,i-1} = -\alpha_{i-1}, \quad a_{i,i+1} = -\alpha_i$$

The CN method offers unconditional stability and high accuracy even with larger time steps and when running long time simulations, this is much more computationally efficient compared to an explicit method[7].

However, it also has its issues, one being that spurious oscillations can occur if $\Delta t / \Delta x^2$ is too large. In addition, solving a sparse linear system can save on memory, but when dealing with highly complex systems such as introducing higher dimensions or sharp edges, the computational cost is generally not worth it[7].

73 C. Mixed Explicit-Implicit Scheme

Combining the explicit Yee update and the CN update for the magnetic and electric field respectively, allows the use of the benefits of both methods. The electric field has improved stability while the magnetic field is computationally cheap. This is particularly useful when the simulation time is long or larger steps are needed.

78 **D. Fourier Analysis**

79 In order to compute the reflection coefficient at an interface, the incident and reflected
80 wave need to be studied against the wave in a homogeneous cavity. By choosing a spe-
81 cific spatial position, the time-domain data for both simulations can be extracted. The
82 homogeneous run can be subtracted from the interface run to isolate the reflected wave[8].

83 Then the time-domain data can then be transformed using an FFT to be in the frequency
84 domain. There are various signal processing techniques that can be used to improve the
85 result. Hann windowing tapers the ends of the signal to zero, which avoids sharp cuts
86 from false high frequencies and any spectral leakage, improving the frequency resolution[9].
87 Zero-padding increases the frequency resolution without changing the signal by appending
88 zeros to the time domain signal before performing a discrete Fourier transform (DFT). The
89 spectrum looks much smoother and can be easier to visually analyze without changing the
90 physics. However, this method assumes that the signal outside of the window is actually
91 zero, and if not it can introduce artifacts[8].

92 Peaks in the frequency spectrum can be identified and, if necessary, refined using cross-
93 correlation or fitting techniques

94 **III. VALIDATION AND ANALYTICAL BENCHMARKS**

95 **A. Reflection Coefficient**

96 The reflection and transmission coefficients, R and T respectively, are specific to an
97 interface between two mediums. Briefly, the coefficients represent how much of an incident
98 wave on an interface gets reflected and how much gets transmitted, following $R + T = 1$.
99 The below would be Fresnel's equations for the reflection and transmission coefficients for
100 the 1D case, 2D would require choosing the normal component of the plane wave to the
101 interface[1].

$$R = \frac{\eta_2 - \eta_1}{\eta_2 + \eta_1} \quad T = \frac{2\eta_2}{\eta_2 + \eta_1}$$

102 Where η is the impedance of a medium, $\eta_i = \sqrt{\frac{\mu_i}{\epsilon_i}}$. This is a clean and straightforward
103 way to test the validity of a simulation. The computational value from the FFT should

¹⁰⁴ closely match the analytical value from the above equation.

¹⁰⁵ **B. Convergence Study**

The second-order accuracy can be checked via a convergence study, by comparing the result from a simulation in a homogeneous medium and the same scenario analytically, such as with a propagating Gaussian pulse[7]:

$$E(x, t) = \exp\left(-\frac{(x - x_0 - ct)^2}{2\sigma^2}\right)$$

For each time step, the electric field can be computed for all x and c , with c being spatially dependent[7]. The root mean squared error can then be computed for each time:

$$L_2(\Delta x) = \sqrt{\sum E_{num} - E_{exact}^2}$$

¹⁰⁶ This can be computed for various finer spatial step values ($\Delta x, \Delta x/2, \Delta x/4$), and plotted
¹⁰⁷ on a log-log plot. As it is second-order accurate, the slope of the plot should be roughly
¹⁰⁸ equal to 2[7]. This would be an excellent validation for the accuracy of the algorithm.

¹⁰⁹ **C. Energy Conservation**

Assuming a lossless media, the electromagnetic energy throughout should be conserved.
The total energy as a function of time is a great diagnostic:

$$U(t) = \int (\epsilon E^2 + \mu B^2) dx$$

¹¹⁰ A constant value of $U(t)$ shows strong evidence that the numerical scheme adheres to the
¹¹¹ physical conservation laws[10][4].

¹¹² **IV. DISCUSSION**

¹¹³ The figures 1 and figure 2 both showcase that the FDTD framework accurately describes
¹¹⁴ the physics of electromagnetic wave propagation in both dimensions. When an interface
¹¹⁵ between two mediums is present, the resulting reflected and transmitted wave look consist-
¹¹⁶ ent with the impedance mismatch without distortion. Comparing the Gaussian, Ricker,

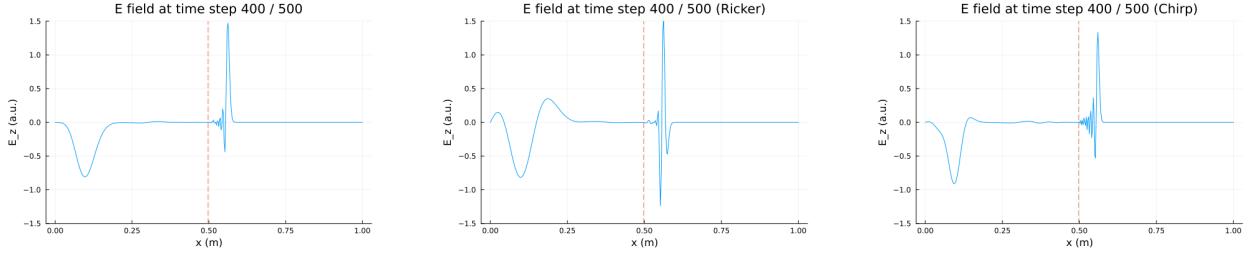


FIG. 1. The z component of the electric field in the 1D case with three different initial wavelets. From left to right, the Gaussian, Ricker, and chirp wavelets were used.

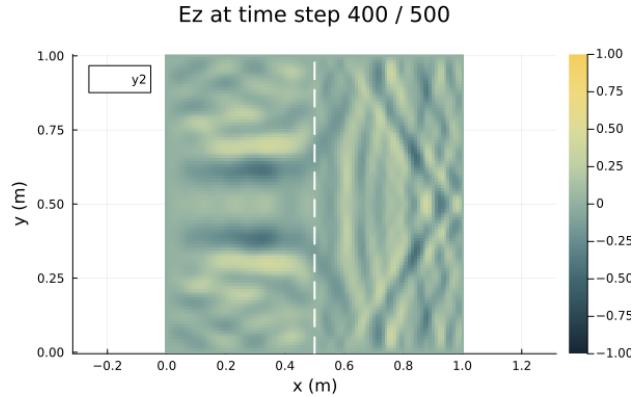


FIG. 2. The z component of the electric field in the 2D case with a Gaussian pulse as the initial condition.

and chirped sources show the increased numerical dispersion, expected from broader-band excitations.

Boundary conditions (BCs), such as a perfect electric conductor (PEC) further test the scheme. When PEC BCs are present, the tangential electric field gets set to zero while the normal component gets inversely reflected, and the normal magnetic field also goes to zero. If perfect magnetic conductor (PMC) BCs were implemented, the normal electric field gets reflected, but unlike before, the sign stays preserved[4]. The PEC result is as expected from the analytical case for electromagnetic waves, giving confidence in the update equations.

There is a clear benefit to using the mixed Yee–Crank–Nicolson approach as compared to one of either. In the magnetic field, the explicit method is simple and computationally efficient. The CFL constraint doesn't weigh as heavy due to using the CN method for the electric field, providing the stability from the implicit evolution through time and allowing for larger time steps and longer simulations. This does mean that if the spatial and time

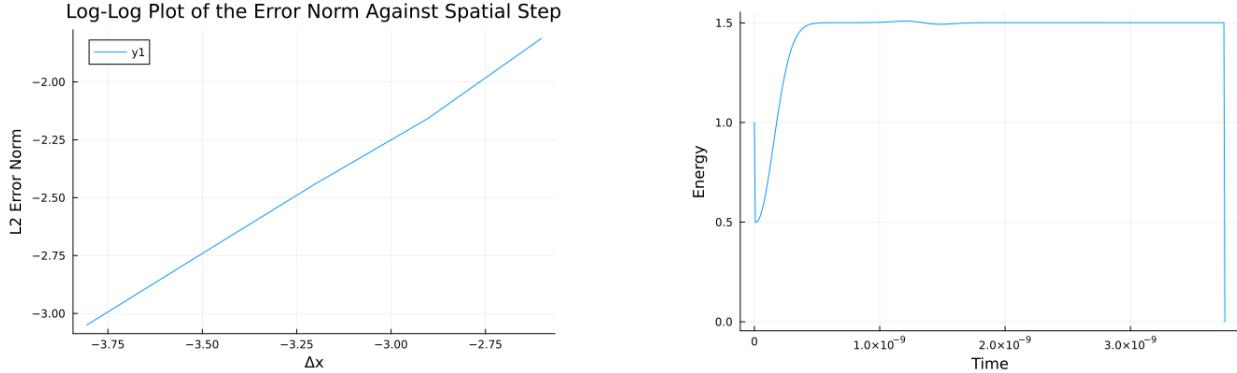


FIG. 3. The result from the convergence and energy validations. The slope from the convergence test is roughly $p = 1.02$, which show it is only first-order accurate. The total energy is divided by the initial value, starting at 1 but later holds steady through time at 1.5 times the initial value. This shows that once the source added additional energy to the bare cavity, the energy held constant and so was conserved.

₁₃₀ steps aren't chosen wisely, as mentioned in an earlier section, spurious oscillations can occur
₁₃₁ if $\Delta t/\Delta x^2$ is too large.

₁₃₂ The validation of the scheme by testing the convergence and energy conservation was
₁₃₃ observed, though not as strongly as expected (figure 3).

₁₃₄ Ideally, the trends would show that the second-order convergence would lead to a slope
₁₃₅ of two, however the slope was numerically calculated to be 1.02. However, the trend can
₁₃₆ still provide some information as to what went wrong. Deviations may have arisen due to
₁₃₇ finite domain size, boundary reflections, errors in the phase or time, and other numerical
₁₃₈ dispersion issues. This result emphasizes the practical challenges of numerical validation
₁₃₉ and the need for incredible care when it comes to setting up these frameworks.

₁₄₀ The reflection coefficient and energy conservation diagnostics proved much more success-
₁₄₁ ful. The initial energy would be that of the empty cavity, then the addition of the source
₁₄₂ adds more energy to the system but it holds constant, showing that the energy remains
₁₄₃ conserved after the initial introduction of the wave pulse. The reflection coefficient also
₁₄₄ showed promise, where the analytical and numerical results agreed to four significant fig-
₁₄₅ ures, 0.7988. These qualitative validation tools are helpful even when awry, as information
₁₄₆ about the system can still be gleaned, as the case was with the convergence study.

₁₄₇ The extension into a 2D simulation showcases a good foundation for flexibility within the

¹⁴⁸ framework, where in the future it can be used to model more complex, realistic geometries.
¹⁴⁹ Various other boundary conditions, such as perfectly matched layer (PML) BCs can be used
¹⁵⁰ to model absorption, dispersive, and lossy media. Within my own research investigating elec-
¹⁵¹ tromagnetic wave propagation around superconductors, modelling the flow of field around a
¹⁵² superconducting torus, including complexities like skin effects and screening currents due to
¹⁵³ the Meissner effect, would have been incredibly useful. The mixing is a more stable method
¹⁵⁴ than Yee's method alone, and more computationally efficient than the CN method alone,
¹⁵⁵ providing a good structure to investigate the subtleties present in electromagnetic effects in
¹⁵⁶ real physical systems.

¹⁵⁷ **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

¹⁵⁸ I'd like to thank my peers Keiran and Tyler, who were immensely helpful in discussing
¹⁵⁹ the topics covered in class, and our TAs who were incredibly helpful during the help sessions
¹⁶⁰ and over email. Additionally, I would like to thank my professor, Dr. Sacchi, who taught
¹⁶¹ an incredibly thorough course with interesting assignments, there was a lot I learned that I
¹⁶² will be taking with me later on.

-
- 163 [1] D. J. Griffiths, *Introduction to electrodynamics* (Cambridge University Press, 2023).
- 164 [2] R. P. Feynman, R. B. Leighton, M. Sands, and E. M. Hafner, The feynman lectures on physics;
- 165 vol. i, American Journal of Physics **33**, 750 (1965).
- 166 [3] K. Yee, Numerical solution of initial boundary value problems involving maxwell's equations
- 167 in isotropic media, IEEE Transactions on antennas and propagation **14**, 302 (1966).
- 168 [4] A. Taflove, The finite difference time domain method., Computational electromagnetics
- 169 (1995).
- 170 [5] W. C. Chew, E. Michielssen, J. Song, and J.-M. Jin, *Fast and efficient algorithms in compu-*
- 171 *tational electromagnetics* (Artech House, Inc., 2001).
- 172 [6] J. Crank and P. Nicolson, A practical method for numerical evaluation of solutions of partial
- 173 differential equations of the heat-conduction type, in *Mathematical proceedings of the Cam-*
- 174 *bridge philosophical society*, Vol. 43 (Cambridge University Press, 1947) pp. 50–67.
- 175 [7] R. J. LeVeque, *Finite difference methods for ordinary and partial differential equations: steady-*
- 176 *state and time-dependent problems* (SIAM, 2007).
- 177 [8] A. V. Oppenheim, *Discrete-time signal processing* (Pearson Education India, 1999).
- 178 [9] F. J. Harris, On the use of windows for harmonic analysis with the discrete fourier transform,
- 179 Proceedings of the IEEE **66**, 51 (2005).
- 180 [10] J. S. Hesthaven and T. Warburton, *Nodal discontinuous Galerkin methods: algorithms, anal-*
- 181 *ysis, and applications* (Springer, 2008).