A biomimetic reaction diffusion network simulates C. elegans motion

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Abstract

The nematode *Caenorhabditis elegans* is a popular model organism, with a very simple, well-mapped neuronal structure (302 neurons). It moves using undulatory, quasi-sinusoidal motion, apparently generated by a simple central pattern generator (CPG). We aimed to simulate the dynamics of its CPG with a network of the simplest biomimetic model neurons, FitzHugh-Nagumo (FHN) neurons, using the SciPy ODE solver. The FHN model consists of two differential equations - membrane potential and a slow inhibitor. Gap junctions and inhibitory synapses were modeled with one-way diffusion, the latter with a negative diffusion constant. The network drove a simulated muscle structure which generated undulations resembling *C. elegans*. We also developed a prototype analog electronic implementation based on Keener's circuit, mimicking FHN dynamics, and found coupling mechanisms which reproduced key features of *C. elegans* dynamics. The next goal is to simulate *C. elegans* undulation with analog circuits. This work was performed at the Hastings lab (Simons Rock), collaborating with Jenny Magnes VAOL lab (Vassar).

The FitzHugh-Nagumo model

The FitzHugh-Nagumo equations have the form:

$$\frac{dv}{dt} = v - \frac{v^3}{3} - w + I$$
$$\frac{dw}{dt} = \epsilon(v - \gamma w + \beta)$$

where v is the membrane potential, and w is a slow inhibitor variable. D can be positive (excitatory synapses, gap junctions) or negative (inhibitory junctions). Implementation of diffusion coupling leads to the addition of a term $D \cdot \max(\Delta V,\ 0)$ to the membrane potential.

The worm

Caenorhabditis elegans is a small nematode with a well-known neuronal layout. Its central pattern generator can be sufficiently approximated by a network of only six neurons, arranged as such:

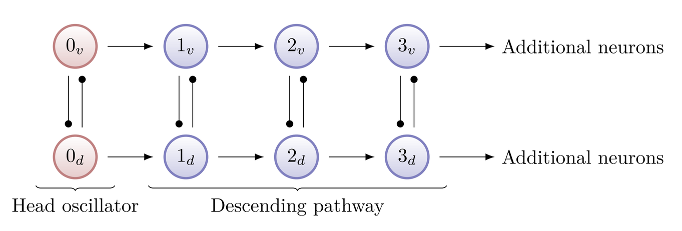


Fig. 1: Central pattern generator simplified

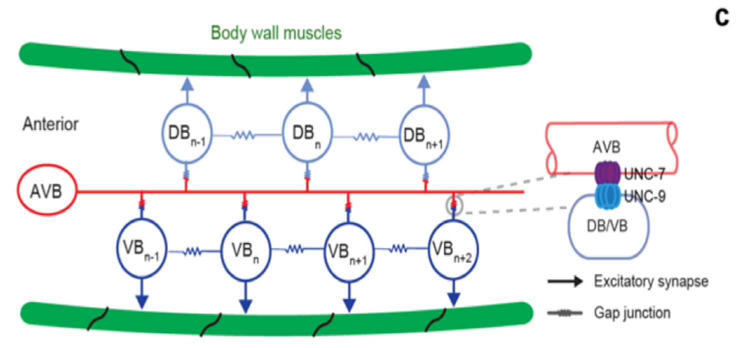
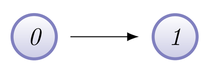
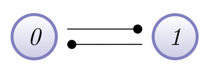


Fig. 2: CPG from Xu *et al*

wherein  represents unidirectional diffusion coupling, and  represents bidirectional diffusion coupling.

Simulations

We solved these differential equations with different parameter sets using SciPy's ODE solver.

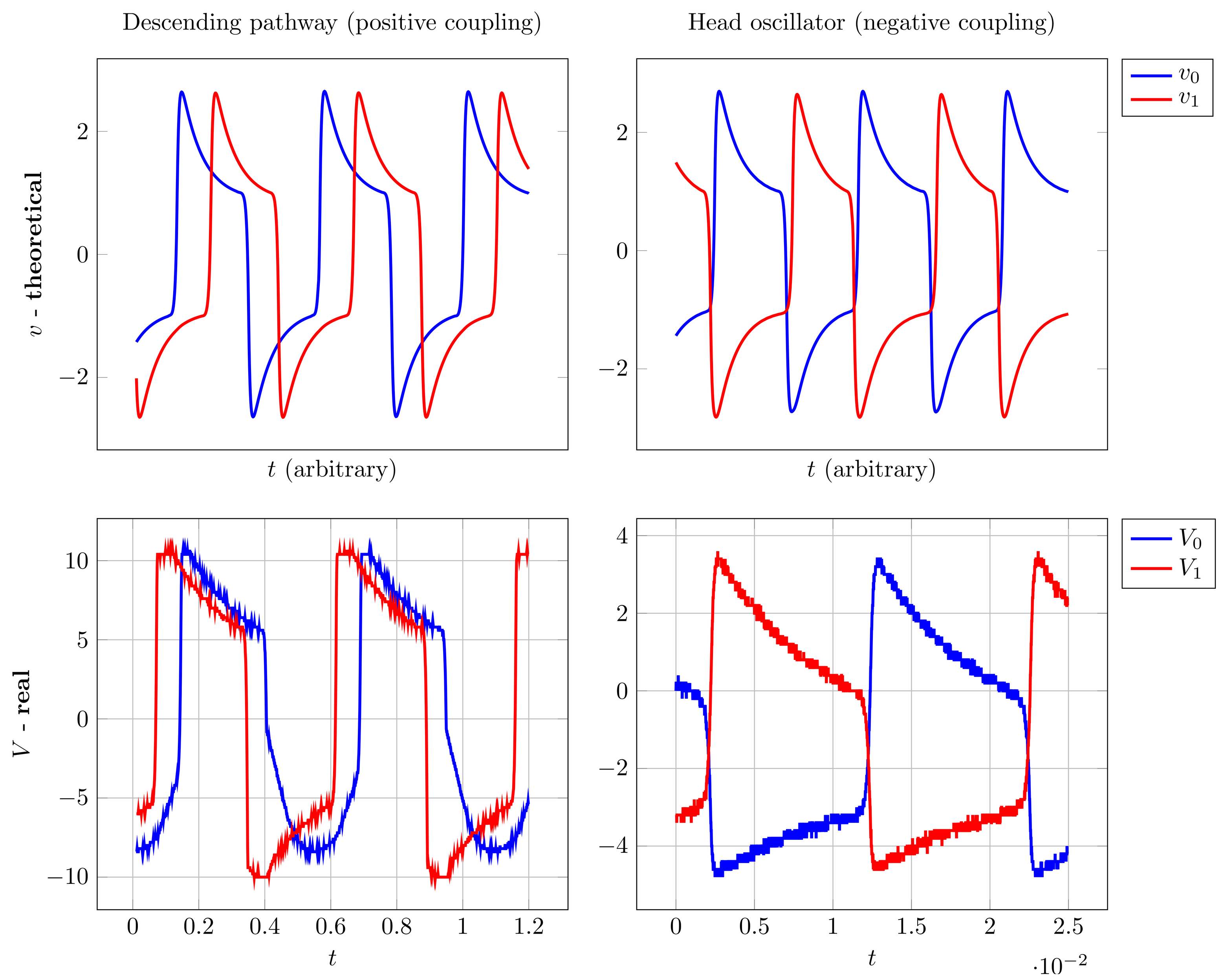


Fig. 3: Responses to coupling

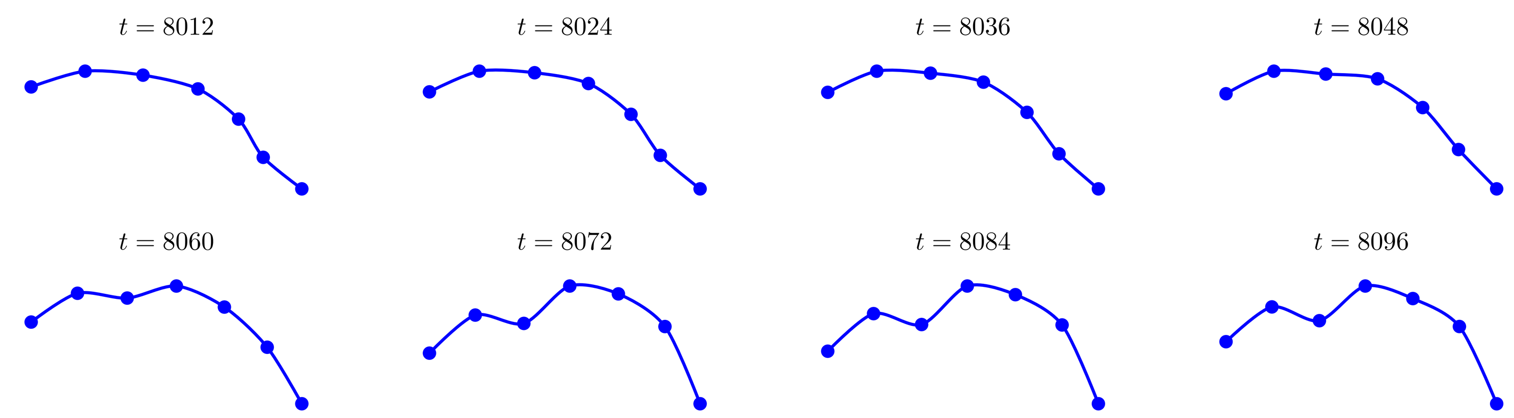


Fig. 4: Simulated worm motion

The circuit

The FitzHugh-Nagumo equations translate directly into a circuit that uses inductors, as $L = \frac{dI}{dt}$; however, that is an expensive and impractical solution due to mutual inductance effects. Keener's circuit proposes a simulation of the inductors with operational amplifiers, which make the circuit considerably cheaper, stabler and allows for a linear piecewise voltage response rather than a cubic one, resolving the issue of long-term stability.

Frequency of oscillation changes with bias voltage, but is approximately 2 Hz with the circuit values here.

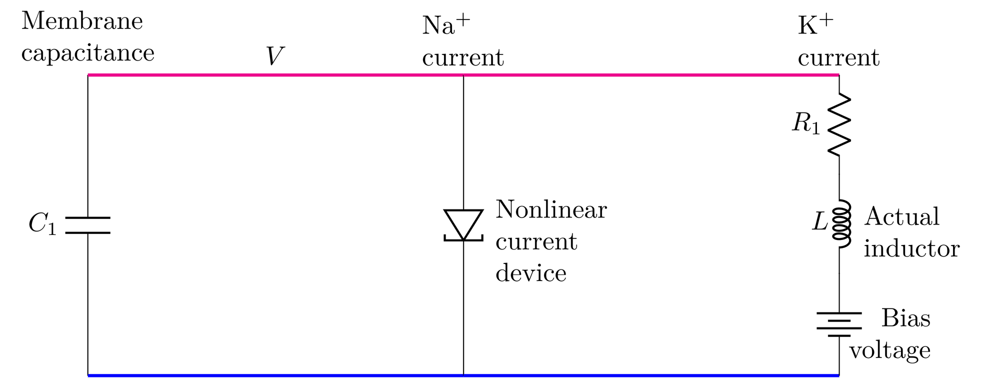


Fig. 5: Nagumo circuit layout

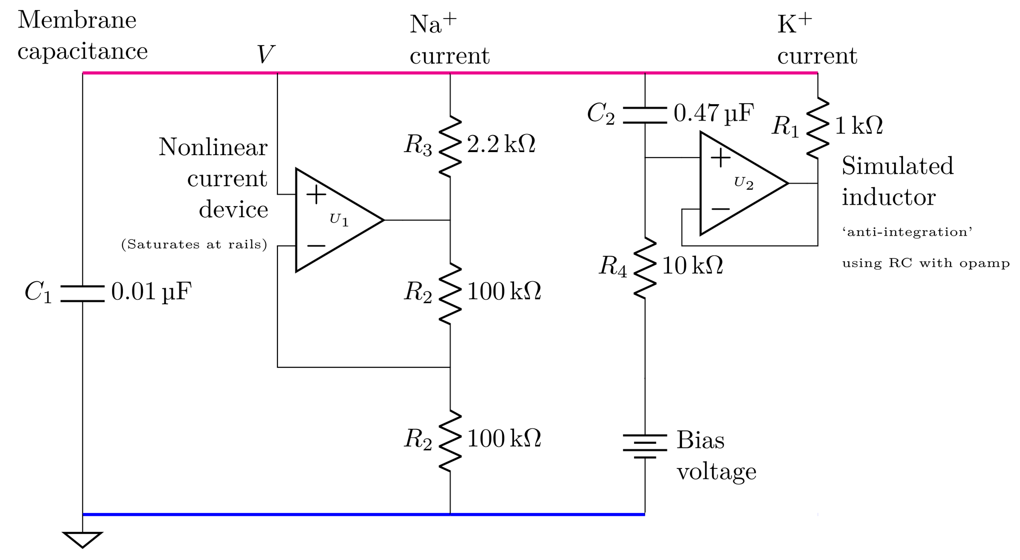


Fig. 6: Keener circuit layout

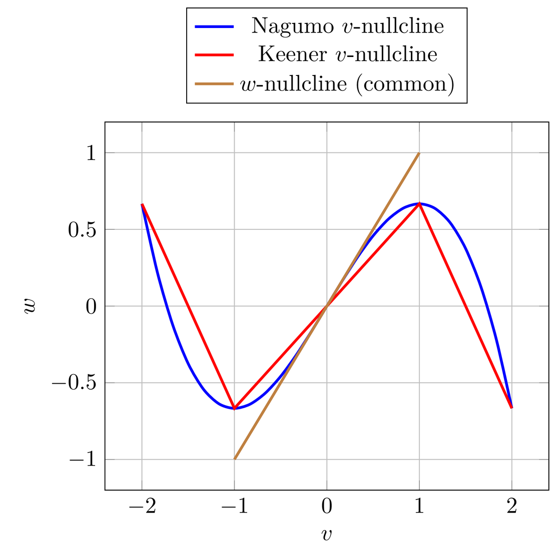


Fig. 7: Nullclines

This represents a single neuron.

We have implemented a time-delay unidirectional diffusion using an R-C circuit (to simulate diffusion of neurotransmitter across a membrane), as well as negative unidirectional diffusion coupling using an inverting amplifier:

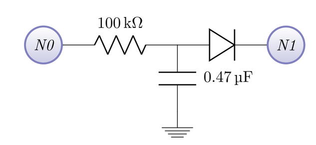


Fig. 8: Time-delay diffusion

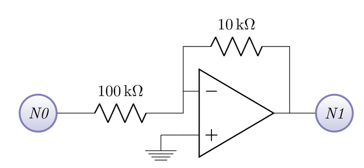


Fig. 9: Negative diffusion

Selected References

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