

Xolotl: An Intuitive and Approachable Neuron & Network Simulator in MATLAB

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An Intuitive Neuronal Simulator

2 ABSTRACT

`xolotl` is a free and open-source neuronal simulator written in C++ with MATLAB wrappers. Biophysically-detailed models of networks can be designed efficiently using an intuitive language tightly coupled to the object-based architecture of the underlying C++ code. Models can be specified by adding conductances to compartment objects. The structure is modular, serialized, and searchable, permitting high-level programmatic control over nearly all features of the models. C++ templates are provided for developing new conductances, compartments, and integration schemata. It also includes a customizable graphical user interface (GUI) for rapid prototyping and hand-tuning conductances in real-time. The modular structure and accessibility to all parameters, variables, and dynamics of the model network in MATLAB facilitate rapid construction and assessment of model networks. `xolotl` is freely available at <https://github.com/marderlab/xolotl>. This tool provides straightforward implementation and fast simulation of neuronal models while permitting full control over every aspect of the network and integration.

Keywords: simulator, MATLAB, C++, conductance-based, neuron, network, keyword

1 INTRODUCTION

`xolotl` (<https://github.com/marderlab/xolotl>) is a fast single-compartment and multi-compartment simulator in C++ with MATLAB wrappers. Written with an emphasis on ease-of-use, `xolotl` can simulate single-compartment conductance-based models, networks of these, and detailed

multi-compartment models. `xolotl` exploits a novel automatic type system, `cpplab`, which binds MATLAB code to C++ header files, creating objects and classes *ad libitum* in MATLAB which reflect the underlying object-oriented code. `xolotl` implements `cpplab` to represent the nested structure of conductance-based models, and exploits the computational efficiency of the low-level programming language to quickly integrate models. For this reason, models can be implemented entirely in MATLAB with a few lines of code.

Models are specified in MATLAB by a nested structure. The `xolotl` object contains compartments which themselves contain conductances. Synapses belong to the `xolotl` object and connect compartments together. The high-level specification supports arbitrarily large network and multi-compartment morphologies.

The software has been implemented in MATLAB due to its ease-of-use and popularity among neuroscientists. `cpplab` provides a powerful backend for specifying and integrating models without relying on the significantly slower and limiting MATLAB `codegen`. While automated C++ transpiling from MATLAB using the proprietary `codegen` can drastically improve performance over loops through strong typing and memory pre-allocation, supervenience of MATLAB over C++ prevents efficient use of low-level features, such as passing by reference and object-oriented programming. Minimal experience with MATLAB is required to use `xolotl`, and all equations and integration methods are provided transparently to the end user. No string parsing of equations is required (Sherfey et al. 2018; Stimberg, D F M Goodman, et al. 2014; Stimberg, D F Goodman, et al. 2013)

`xolotl` comes packaged with visualization functions and a graphical user interface (GUI) for real-time manipulation of model parameters. Plotting of voltage, intracellular calcium, conductance gating functions, and time constants is provided by built-in `xolotl` methods. The GUI permits real-time tuning of any network parameters using numerical sliders in a graphical interface which displays the resultant membrane potential and intracellular calcium traces. The ease-of-use of these tools lends them to pedagogical applications and rapid exploration of toy models. This tool aims to simplify the investigation of dynamics of complex neural network models, facilitate collaborative modeling, and complement other tools being developed in the neuroinformatics community.

2 DESIGN GOALS

`xolotl` is designed to be easy-to-use without sacrificing speed.

The software has been designed in MATLAB due to its popularity among neuroscientists for pedagogy and research. `xolotl` capitalizes on MATLAB's straightforward structure array syntax to permit rapid prototyping and experimentation, especially for small neuronal networks of complex models. Parameters of conductances, neuronal compartments, and simulations may all be edited in the structure before any calls to integration functions. The underlying code is written in C++ for speed and memory optimization, and while models can indeed be integrated using the compiled binary, symbolic manipulations can be readily performed in MATLAB without ever touching the foundational code.

2.1 FEATURES

MATLAB provides a high level programmatic and graphical interface for implementing, manipulating, and visualizing models without sacrificing the enhancements of the underlying C++ code.

Modular structure. Models are specified by adding compartments and synapses to the `xolotl` object. Conductances are added to compartments and controllers can be added to conductances. This modular structure recapitulates the biophysics of the Hodgkin-Huxley formalism and obviates the need to explicitly write out equations, which in `xolotl` are contained within the conductance header files.

Interface between C++ and MATLAB. `xolotl` relies on `cpplab` constructions, which allow the user to exploit the efficiency of low-level C++ code. MATLAB treats `cpplab` objects as fully-typed variables allowing for symbolic manipulation using only the high-level programming language and graphical interfaces. `xolotl` is fast because all time-intensive code is written in C++. While automated C++ transpiling from MATLAB using the proprietary `codegen` can drastically improve performance over loops through strong typing and memory pre-allocation, supervenience of MATLAB over C++ prevents efficient use of low-level features, such as passing by reference and object-oriented programming. C++ provides speed improvements beyond the benefits of translating MATLAB features into low-level code. For this reason, `cpplab` has been designed to provide an interface for constructing, transpiling, and compiling C++ code to be called from within MATLAB. `xolotl` simulations are run entirely from C++ executables.

Automatic and efficient compiling. `xolotl` automatically handles transpiling and compiling MATLAB code into C++. The MD5 algorithm hashes the network to compile a new binary and MEX bridge file only if needed and to confirm that the correct binary fetched during execution.

2.2 SYNTAX

MATLAB can easily control the `cpplab` objects using the standard, flexible data structure notation popular in high-level scripting languages.

Adding features. The `add` function creates a compartment, conductance, or controller and affixes it as a field in the `xolotl` network structure. This function generates a MATLAB `struct` that faithfully represents the underlying C++ code. Compartments add to the `xolotl` object and conductances add to compartments. Specific properties can be specified using key-value pair arguments (e.g. Figure 1A).

Finding features. `cpplab` comes with several features which simplify the handling of complexly-nested models. The `find` function acquires a cell array of all properties of the network which satisfy a search condition. For example, one can find all paths to maximal conductances within the 'HH' compartment by:

```
x.find('HH*gbar');
```

To extract a vector of the maximal conductances:

```
gbars = x.get('HH*gbar');
```

87 To set the maximal conductances all at once:

```
88 x.set('HH*gbar', gbars)
```

89 *Compartments.* A model neuron consists of one or more compartments, each representing a section of
90 membrane with capacitance and surface area. Isopotential models require one compartment, whereas
91 models with multiple neurons, units, or non-trivial morphology require multiple compartments. All
92 specifiable properties of compartments are shown in Supplementary Table 1.

93 *Synapses.* xolotl provides some features for generating complex models. Synapses can be added
94 with the connect function. At minimum synapses possess identifiers to presynaptic and postsynap-
95 tic compartments and default to electrical synapses. All specifiable properties of synapses are shown in
96 Supplementary Table 2. To create axons or transport chains, the slice function splits a compartment
97 into n discrete segments and adds these compartments to the network connected by electrical synapses.

98 *Conductances and controllers.* All conductances contain fields for maximal conductance and reversal
99 potential. Conductances with activation and inactivation variables include them as m and h respectively.
100 Gating functions and their respective time constants are contained within the conductance header file.
101 xolotl comes packaged with conductances from several dozen papers (Supplementary Table 3).

102 *Creating custom cpplab objects.* xolotl contains template header files for producing custom con-
103 ductances. The template contains instructions on how to design novel conductances with arbitrary
104 specifications.

105 *Simulation.* Models are simulated in xolotl with the integrate function which outputs as time series
106 the membrane potentials, intracellular calcium concentrations, controller states, intrinsic currents, and
107 synaptic currents. The integrate function also accepts an argument which specifies injected current or
108 clamped voltage.

109 *Numerical integration.* xolotl uses the exponential Euler method for single compartment models, for-
110 ward Euler for gating variables, and a Crank-Nicholson regime for electrically-coupled compartments
111 (Butcher 2016; Dayan and Abbott 2001; Oh and French 2006) These defaults provide a mix of speed,
112 accuracy, and stability, and are built into the cpplab header files. Custom cpplab header files can
113 be customized with any iterative integration method. The simulation time-resolution can be specified to
114 target arbitrary precision, and an output time step can be selected to support automatic down-sampling for
115 memory considerations.

116 *‘Closed-loop’ vs. ‘open-loop.’* Simulations can be run in ‘closed-loop’ mode where each simulation be-
117 gins by resetting all dynamical variables to their initial conditions at instantiation, or ‘open-loop’ mode
118 which begins simulation with the current network state.

119 *Using the graphical interface to manipulate parameters.* xolotl comes packaged with a graphical user
120 interface for visualizing parameter changes in real-time. The manipulate function opens the GUI,
121 which displays a figure plotting the membrane potential and intracellular calcium concentration of all

122 compartments as time series, and a dialog box with customizable sliders for all parameters of the model,
123 much like the `Manipulate` function in Wolfram Mathematica. Moving the sliders integrates the
124 model in ‘open-loop’ mode with the new parameters. The parameters available in the sliders can be cus-
125 tomized by passing a cell array to `manipulate`. For example, to only see sliders for maximal conductances
126 of the HH compartment, call `x.manipulate('HH*gbar')`. Closing the GUI saves the network state
127 of the model to the `xolotl` object. This is particularly helpful for rapid prototyping of models.

128 *Optimizing parameters.* `xolotl` can use the Global Optimization toolbox for MATLAB to optimize any
129 accessible `xolotl` parameters. The toolbox is algorithm-agnostic and accepts any function in MATLAB
130 with a scalar first output as the objective function. Simulations run on multi-core processors or high-
131 performance computing clusters using the Parallel Computing toolbox.

2.3 LIMITATIONS

132 The focus on ease-of-use and speed means some features were elided in the streamlining process.

133 *Reliance on compiled C++ code.* While MATLAB comes with robust features for compiling C and C++
134 code, `xolotl` cannot run without C++ compilation. For users, this necessitates the additional step of
135 setting up the `mex` compiler which can be problematical, especially for nonstandard (e.g. Arch-based
136 Linux). Secondly, compilation adds a small amount to total processing time. Longer simulations (> 1000
137 time-steps) minimizes this effect. Adding new conductances also requires writing some C++ code. For
138 model conductances in the Hodgkin-Huxley formalism (Dayan and Abbott 2001; Hodgkin, Huxley, and
139 Katz 1952) adjustments consist of changing default values in a template C++ header file. Implementing a
140 new integration scheme requires much more in-depth usage of C++.

141 *Limited to conductance-based models.* `xolotl` has been developed specifically for conductance-based
142 models. It does not currently support rate- or current-based models.

143 *Limited numerical integration strategies.* While the exponential Euler method performs well in neuronal
144 models (Dayan and Abbott 2001; Oh and French 2006) it may be desirable to use other methods un-
145 der certain conditions. `xolotl` does not currently support other integration schemes for its built-in
146 conductances, nor does the software support error-sensitive variable step-sizes ‘out-of-the-box.’

147 *Inefficient tools for handling large networks.* While `xolotl` can integrate large networks (> 1000 com-
148 partments), `xolotl` uses string-based comprehension for labeling compartments which is suited to
149 descriptive naming, but prohibits vector operations over compartments.

3 USAGE EXAMPLES

150 In MATLAB, users create a `xolotl` object and populate it with `cpplab`-generated objects which describe
151 compartments, conductances, synapses, and controllers. The model is integrated with the `integrate`
152 function where the membrane potential, intracellular calcium concentration, controller states, intrinsic
153 currents, and synaptic currents can be outputs.

xolotl comes packaged with a library of pre-existing conductance and synapse objects which greatly simplify the task of constructing model neurons. These objects can be referenced by name and added directly to a compartment. Novel conductance dynamics can be easily written by modifying a template header file contained in the xolotl distribution, or designed entirely from scratch.

3.1 SIMULATING A HODGKIN-HUXLEY MODEL

The seminal Hodgkin-Huxley model of action potentials in the squid giant axon (Hodgkin and Huxley 1952; Hodgkin, Huxley, and Katz 1952) contains a fast inactivating sodium conductance (NaV), a non-inactivating delayed rectifier (Kd), and a passive leak current (Figure 1A). A compartment, `HH`, with membrane capacitance (C_m) and surface area (A) can be specified by Figure 1B. Network properties can be set during construction or afterwards using dot-notation in MATLAB (e.g. `x.HH.Cm`). Figure 1C shows the MATLAB command prompt after invoking the xolotl object `x`, displaying the hierarchical structure inherent in conductance-based treatments of neurodynamics.

This model was constructed using conductances from Liu et al. 1998 based on electrophysiological recordings from the lobster stomatogastric ganglion (Turrigiano, LeMasson, and Marder 1995). In the absence of applied positive current, the model is quiescent. When 0.2 nA is injected, the model tonically spikes (Figure 1D). The `integrate` function takes the applied current as an argument (e.g. `x.integrate(Iapp)`), so that the xolotl object is agnostic to integration-specific perturbations. The `plot` function generates voltage and intracellular calcium traces, where the voltage trace is colored by the dominant current. If the membrane potential is increasing, the strongest instantaneous inward current colors the trace. Conversely, if the membrane potential is decreasing, the strongest outward current colors the trace instead. Figure 1F-I display the results of the `show` function. Activation and inactivation steady-states and the voltage-dependent time constants of these gating variables describe the conductance dynamics in absence of other channel types.

3.2 PERFORMING A VOLTAGE CLAMP EXPERIMENT *IN-SILICO*

xolotl can recapitulate the results of voltage clamp experiments (Destexhe and Bal 2009; Swensen and Marder 2000, 2001; Turrigiano, LeMasson, and Marder 1995). Figure 2 displays steps in the procedure to clamp the membrane potential of a cell with delayed rectifier potassium conductance. During an *in-vitro* experiment, confounding currents would be pharmacologically-blocked and two-electrode voltage clamp used to record tail currents at fixed membrane potential (Connor and Stevens 1971a,b).

A single-compartment model with a delayed-rectifier conductance is simulated at stepped membrane potentials. The model is simulated using the `integrate` function. The second argument determines the clamped voltage and the fourth output is the current trace.

```
[V, Ca, ~, I] = x.integrate([], clamped_voltage)
```

Currents under voltage clamp approach the steady-state holding current (Figure 2D-E). The current-voltage relation is the steady-state current over the clamped voltage, and the effective conductance is the derivative of that relation (Figure 2F-G). Since the effective conductance is the product of the maximal conductance and the gating variables (Dayan and Abbott 2001; Turrigiano, LeMasson, and Marder

189 1995) and the tail current is monotonically-increasing with time under voltage clamp, the current can be
 190 represented as non-inactivating. Fitting a sigmoid to various powers yields a model for the current dy-
 191 namics (Figure 2H-I). These figures describe graphically the theoretical underpinnings of current analysis
 192 through voltage clamp and can serve as an effective pedagogical tool for computational and quantitative
 193 neuroscience.

3.3 SIMULATING NETWORK MODELS

194 Network models in `xolotl` consist of compartment objects connected by synapses. Synapses are stored
 195 in a vector array as a field of the `xolotl` object in MATLAB. Presynaptic and postsynaptic labels in-
 196 dicate the connectivity of the synapse. Figure 3 implements a model of the triphasic pyloric
 197 rhythm in the stomatogastric ganglion of crustaceans. The pyloric model contains three compartments
 198 and seven synapses (Figure 3A). This structure is reciprocated in the hierarchy of the `xolotl` object,
 199 where conductances are contained within compartments (Figure 3B).

200 Representing the network in `xolotl` requires constructing three compartments and eight conductances
 201 in each using the `add` function.

```
202     x.add('AB', 'compartment', 'Cm', 10, 'A', 0.628, ...)
203     x.AB.add('prinz/NaV', 'gbar', 1000, 'E', 50)
204     ...
```

205 Synapses are upper-level properties of the network which point between two compartments (Figure 3C).
 206 This exploits vectorized operations in MATLAB and does not require each synapse to possess a unique
 207 name. The `connect` function adds synapses to the network.

```
208     x.connect('AB', 'LP', 'Chol', 'gbar', 30)
```

3.4 SIMULATING INTEGRAL CONTROL

209 `xolotl` can implement homeostatic tuning rules as integral control. The controller computes an error
 210 signal (typically a function of intracellular calcium concentration), and adjusts the conductance or synapse
 211 it controls accordingly (O’Leary et al. 2013) In `xolotl`, integral controllers are `cpplab` objects added
 212 to the conductance or synapse they regulate.

213 In a demonstration adapted from O’Leary et al. 2013, integral control changes maximal conductances to
 214 bring a neuron from quiescence into a bursting regime. Calcium sensors supervene on maximal con-
 215 ductance density (Figure 4) to change neuronal activity. Each conductance in the `xolotl` structure
 216 contains a calcium-sensitive controller (Figure 4B-C). Maximal conductances increase from random ini-
 217 tial conditions to a set which elicits the desired network output by minimizing the error signal (Figure
 218 4D-F).

4 BENCHMARKS

To assess speed and accuracy, `xolotl`, `DynaSim` (Sherfey et al. 2018) and `NEURON` (Hines and Carnevale 1997) were compared in simulations over varied simulation time and number of compartments (Figure 5).

Single-compartment Hodgkin-Huxley-like models were generated using conductance dynamics from Liu et al. 1998 in the simulation environments. Models were simulated with a time-resolution of 0.1 ms over increasing simulation time (Figure 5B). The speed factor was defined as the ratio between time represented in the simulation and actual runtime (simulation-time). Therefore, the speed factor represents how many times faster the simulation is than a real-time observation.

`xolotl` uses the exponential euler method for integrating membrane potential (Dayan and Abbott 2001) `DynaSim` was implemented with a 2nd-order Runge-Kutta integration scheme as recommended for high-performance in the documentation.

`xolotl` and `DynaSim` performed with comparable accuracy at high time-resolution. At low time-resolution, `xolotl` significantly outperforms `DynaSim` in both accuracy and speed.

To test whether transient overhead effects had a significant effect on performance, `xolotl` and `DynaSim` were tested with time-step $dt = 0.1$ ms for varied lengths of time. `xolotl` and `DynaSim` both performed best during longer simulations, approaching maximal performance at $> 10^5$ time steps. `xolotl` is about 20 times faster for short simulation times and 3.5 times faster for arbitrarily large ones.

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 REPRODUCIBILITY

`xolotl` fosters reproducibility in science. While the availability of hosting sites with version control (viz. GitHub (<https://github.com>), GitLab (<https://gitlab.com/>), and Open Science Framework (<https://osf.io/>)) and the push for reproducibility in computational science (Baker 2016; Eklund, Nichols, and Knutsson 2016; Stodden et al. 2016) has resulted in the availability of source code, much of this code base is bespoke and difficult to implement (Sedano 2016; W Xu, D Xu, and Deng 2017)

To this end, `xolotl` provides an environment with readability and reproducibility in mind. Each network is hashed to provide a unique alphanumeric identifier. Conductance header files are easily viewed in the `xolotl` source files; conductances in MATLAB contain links to the full path of the generating file.

5.2 CIRCUMVENTING LANGUAGE TRADEOFFS

Executing C/C++ code in higher-level languages such as MATLAB or Python often provides speed improvements for iterative code in algorithms.

C is statically-typed, with procedural syntax that provides low-level access to memory (Kernighan and Ritchie 1978) providing significant advantages for time-intensive computations. Unfortunately, automatic code-generation is limited by the supervening language. MATLAB, for instance, cannot use pointers or pass

249 by reference, which limits the efficiency of C code automatically generated from MATLAB. Conversely,
250 custom C/C++ code provides significant increases in performance and memory conservation, but lacks
251 the ease-of-use and flexibility of scripting languages.

252 `xolotl` handles this problem through symbolic manipulation of C++ objects in MATLAB. Built from
253 the ground up in C++, `xolotl` maintains all the advantages of custom compiled code, but can run in
254 MATLAB without the user having to touch the C++ code. `xolotl` represents compartment, conductance,
255 synapse, and controllers as `cpplab` objects, which map to underlying C++ header files. In this way,
256 properties of the `xolotl` network can be examined and changed using object-oriented paradigms. The
257 object specifies the `integrate` function, not the other way around.

5.3 APPLICATIONS OF CPPLAB

258 NEED TO WRITE THIS

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

259 The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial
260 relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

261 SG-S designed and implemented the core of the `xolotl` toolbox. AH contributed to the code base,
262 created the online user documentation, and wrote the manuscript. EM supervised the project. All authors
263 reviewed the paper.

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SUPPLEMENTAL DATA

268 Tables including all conductances packaged with `xolotl` should be put in the supplementary material.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The code to generate all figures is available at (<https://github.com/marderlab/xolotl-paper>). xolotl is freely available at (<https://github.com/marderlab/xolotl>).

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FIGURE CAPTIONS

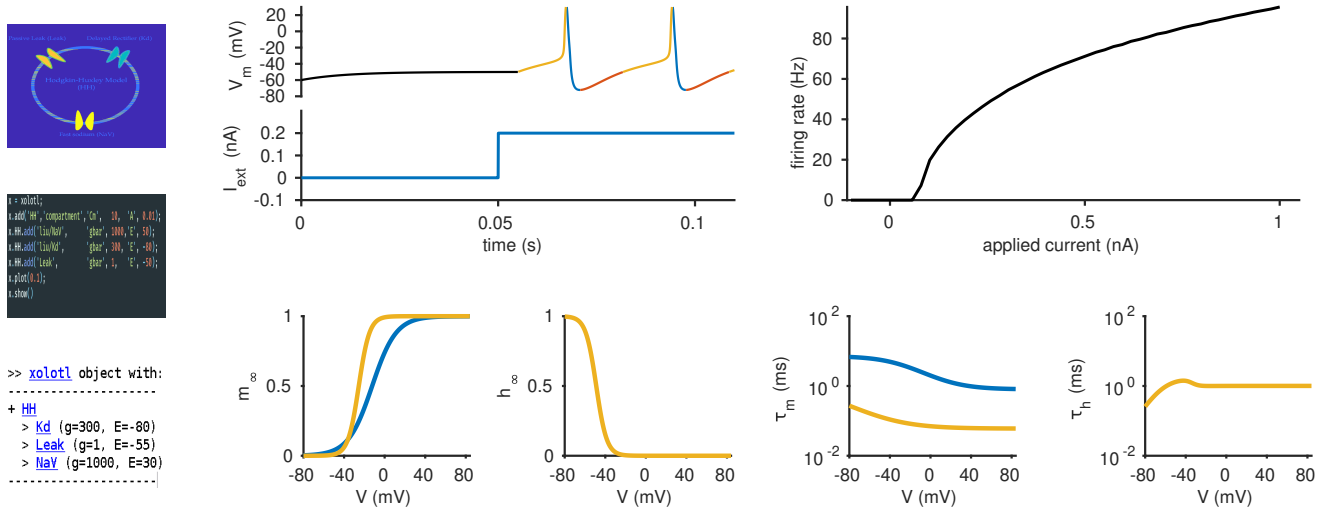


Figure 1: `xolotl` can quickly set up and simulate conductance-based models. (A) Cartoon of a Hodgkin-Huxley single-compartment neuron model with fast sodium, delayed rectifier, and leak currents. (B) Code snippet in MATLAB used to implement D, F-I. (C) `xolotl` schematic displayed in the MATLAB command prompt. (D) Simulated voltage trace of a Hodgkin-Huxley model with three conductances and 0.2 nA of injected current. Colors indicate the dominant current (gold is fast sodium, blue is delayed rectifier, red is leak). (E) Firing rate-input relation displaying firing rate as a function of injected current. (F-G) Steady-state gating functions for activation (m) and inactivation (h) gating variables. (H-I) Voltage-dependence of time constants for activation (m) and inactivation (h) gating variables.

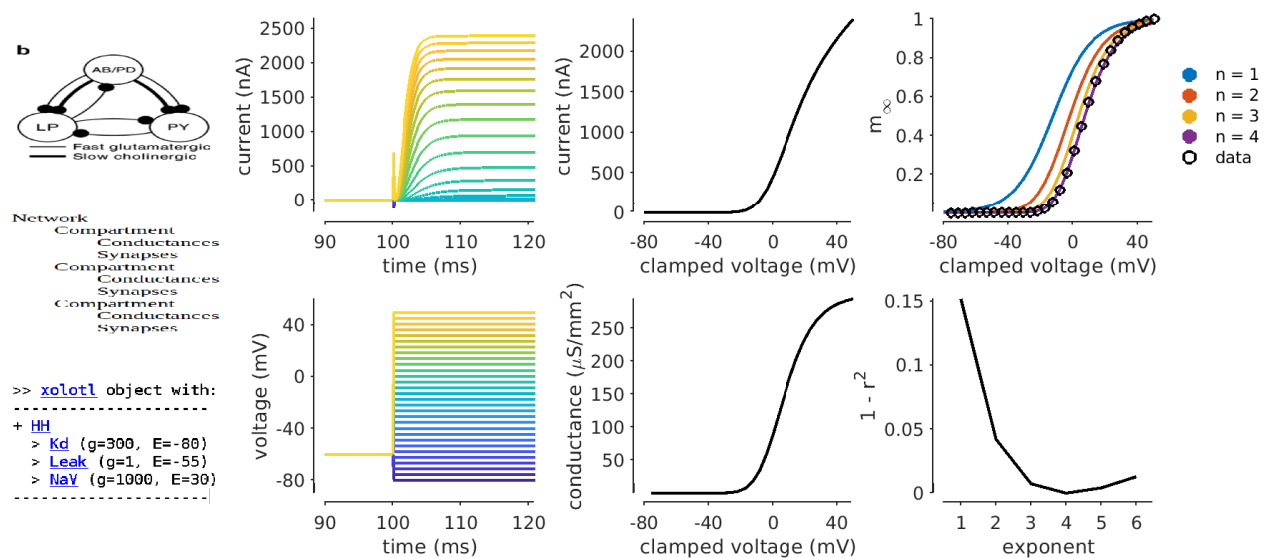


Figure 2: Simulating a voltage-clamp experiment. (A) Cartoon of a cell with delayed rectifier potassium conductance (Liu et al. 1998) with experimentally-fixed voltage. (B) Structure of `xolotl` object in A. (C) Code snippet depicting integration under voltage clamp. (D-E) Current response to steps in voltage from a holding potential of $V_m = -60$ mV. (F) Current-voltage relation of the steady-state current ($t = 400$ ms) indicating a reversal potential of $E = -80$ mV and no inactivation. (G) Conductance-voltage relation at steady-state takes the form of a sigmoid. (H) Sigmoids m fit to the model as m^n data indicating that $n = 4$ is the best fit. (I) Goodness of fit vs. exponent n , suggesting $n = 4$ as the best fit to the data.

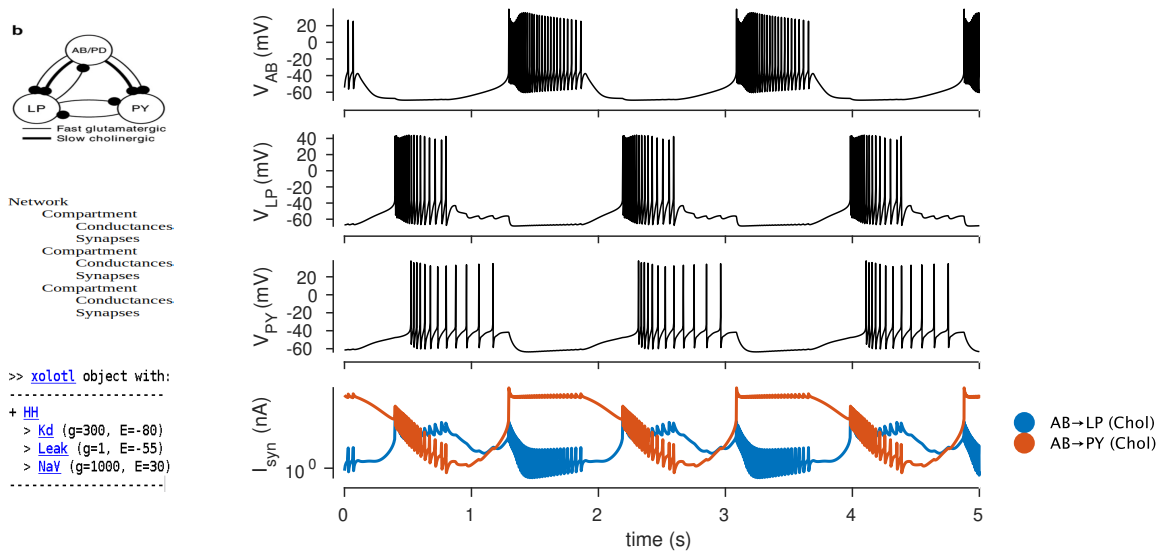


Figure 3: Simulating a network of conductance-based model neurons. (A) Diagram of a network model of the pyloric rhythm in the crustacean stomatogastric ganglion (Prinz *et al.* 2004). (B) Each neuron is modeled as a single compartment with 7-8 intrinsic conductances and 1-3 post-synaptic conductances. (C) *xolotl* implements conductances as fields of compartments and synapses as connections between compartments. (D-F) Simulated voltage trace of a model network for the three compartments. (G) Time series of synaptic currents in the simulated network can be obtained from the integration.

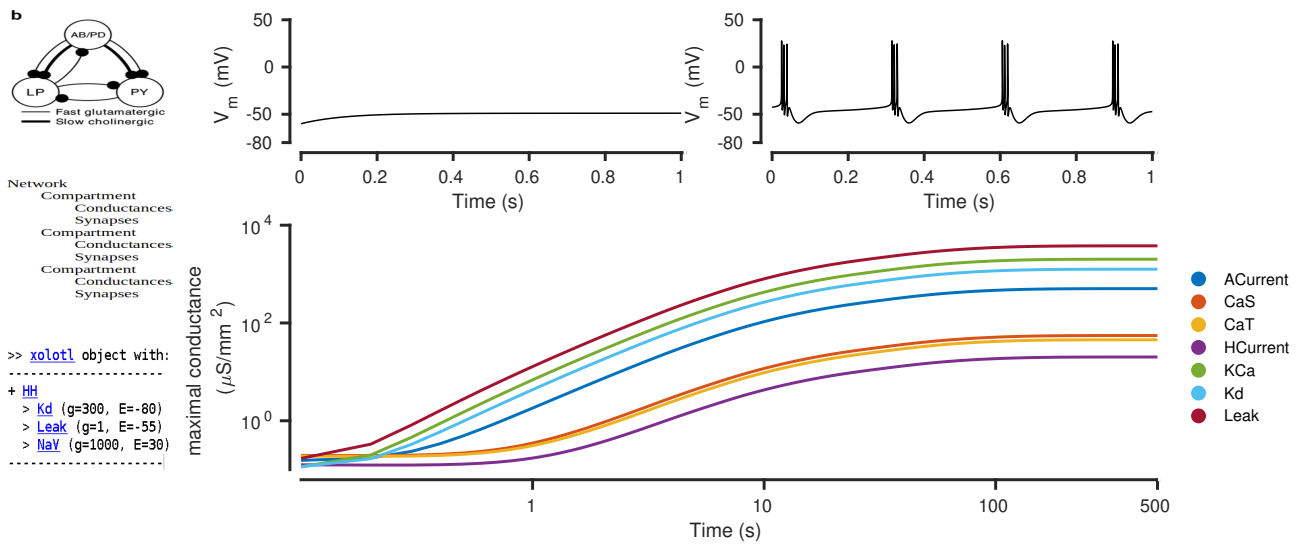


Figure 4: Simulating neurons under homeostatic regulation. (A) Cartoon of a model neuron (Liu *et al.* 1998) with integral control (O'Leary *et al.* 2013). (B) Hierarchical structure of a neuronal network considers controllers as components of compartments which act on conductances. (C) *xolotl* implements controllers XYZ. (D) Calcium sensors change maximal conductances to move a neuron from quiescence to a bursting state. (E) Voltage trace shows regular bursting activity after integral control.

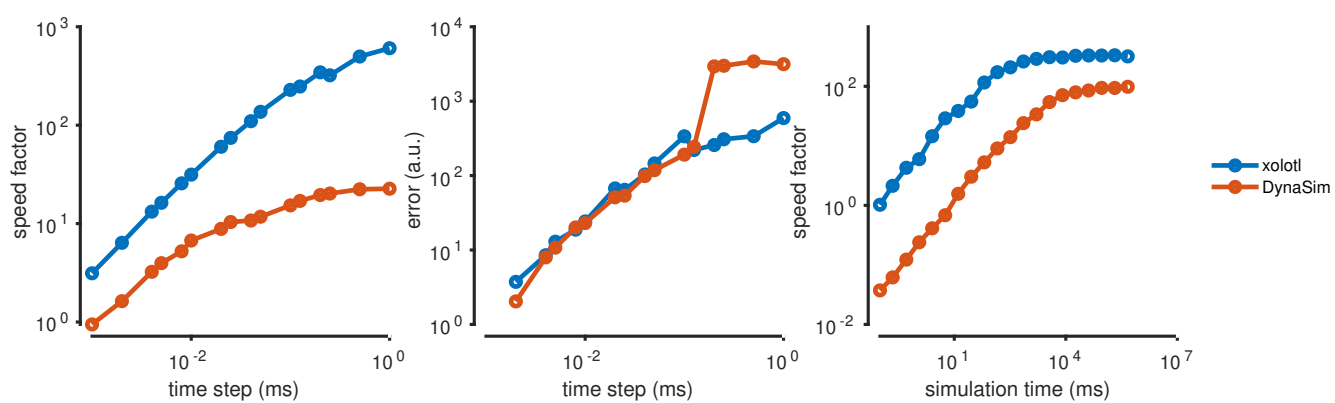


Figure 5: xolotl benchmarked against DynaSim.