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eyetools: an R package for open-source analysis of eye data

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10 Abstract

- Abstract goes here
- 12 Keywords: eye-tracking; fixations; saccades; areas-of-interest

eyetools: an R package for open-source analysis of eye data 13 Eye tracking is now an established and widely used technique in the behavioural sciences. 1 Psychology is perhaps the scientific discipline which has seen the most sustantial adoption of eye-data research, where eye-tracking systems are now commonplace in centres of academic research. Beyond academic institutions, eye-tracking continues to be a useful tool in understanding consumer behaviour, user-interface design, and in various forms of entertainment. By recording the movement of an individual's gaze during research studies, researchers can quantify where and how long individual's look at particular regions of space (usually with a focus on stimuli presented on a 2D screen, but also within 3D space). Eye-tracking provides a rich stream of continuous data and therefore can offer powerful insights into real-time cognitive processing. Such data allow researchers to inspect the interplay of cognitive processes such as 10 attention, memory, and decision making, with high temporal precision (Beesley et al., 2019). 11 While there are abundant uses and benefits of collecting eye-movement data in psychology 12 experiments, the continual stream of recording can lead to an overwhelming amount of raw data: 13 modern eye-trackers can record data at 1000 Hz and above, which results in 3.6 million rows of 14 data per hour. The provision of suitable computational software for data reduction and processing 15 is an important part of eye-tracking research. The companies behind eye-tracking devices offer 16 licensed software that will perform many of the necessary steps for eye-data analysis. However, 17 there are several disadvantages to using such proprietary software in a research context. Firstly,

the software will typically have an ongoing license cost for continual use. Secondly, the
algorithms driving the operations within such software are not readily available for inspection.
Both of these important constraints mean that the use of proprietary analysis software will lead to
a failure to meet the basic open-science principle of analysis reproduction, for example as set out
by the UK Reproducibility Network: "We expect researchers to... make their research methods,
software, outputs and data open, and available at the earliest possible point...The reproducibility

of both research methods and research results ...is critical to research in certain contexts,

²⁶ particularly in the experimental sciences with a quantitative focus..."

In the current article we introduce a new toolkit for eye-data processing and analysis called 27 "eyetools", which takes the form of an R package. R packages (like R itself) are free to use 28 without licence and are therefore available for any user across the world. The package provides a 29 (growing) number of functions that provide an efficient and effective means to conduct basic 30 eye-data analysis. eyetools is built with academic researchers in the psychological sciences in 31 mind, though there is no reason why the package would not be effective more generally. The 32 functions within the package reflect steps in a comprehensive analysis workflow, taking the user 33 from initial handling of raw eye data, to summarising data for each period of a procedure, to the visualisation of the data in plots. We hope that the functions are simple enough to mean that the package is easy to use for researchers who are unfamiliar with working with eye data. It should also appeal to researchers accustomed to working with eye data in other environments who wish to transfer to working in R.

eyetools is, of course, not the only package in R that allows users to work with eye data. A 39 recent assessment of available packages on CRAN identified six other packages that offer relevant 40 functions for the analysis of eye data. eyeTrackr, eyelinker, and eyelinkReader, all offer 41 functionality for data only from experiments that have used 'EyeLink' trackers (S-R Research). In contrast, eyetools provides functions that are hardware-agnostic, relying on a format of data that can be achieved from any data source. The eyeRead package is designed for the analysis of eye data from reading exercises. The emov package offers a limited set of functions and is primarily designed for fixation detection, using the same dispersion method employed in eyetools. Finally, **eyetrackingR** is perhaps the most comprehensive alternative package available on CRAN. eyetrackingR offers a large suite of functionality and, like eyetools, can be applied across the entire pipeline. It has functions for cleaning data and various plotting functions, including analysis over time. It does not feature algorithms regarding the detection of events such as saccades or fixations. This limits the ability to conduct more bespoke analysis steps and it means that analysis needs to be conducted on raw data. This is disadvantageous both in terms of computing time and in the open sharing of data (event data are an order of magnitude smaller in

- size than raw data). In comparison, eyetools enables easier data processing up to data analyses,
- making core tasks in the eye data processing easier and standardised.

		Hardware-		Data	Identifies		Inferential
56	Package	agnostic	Data Impor	processing	events	Plotting	Analysis
57	eyetools	✓	~ *	✓	✓	✓	
58	eyeTrackr		✓	✓	✓		
59	eyelinker		✓				
60	eyelinkReader		✓		✓	✓	
61	eyeRead	✓		✓	* **		
62	emov	~		✓	✓		
63	eyetrackingR	✓		✓		~	~

* for Tobii data only, ** for text reading experiments only

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In this tutorial we demonstrate the pipeline of analysis functions within *eyetools*. The
package has been designed to be simple to use by someone with basic knowledge of data handling
and analysis in R. This tutorial is separated into five distinct sections. In the first section, we
briefly describe the basic methodology of collecting eye data in general, and in regard to the
specific dataset we use to illustrate all the functionality of the *eyetools* package. The second
section covers the process for getting data from an eye tracker into an *eyetools*-friendly format.

The third section introduces the foundational functions of the *eyetools* package, from repairing
and smoothing eye data, to calculating fixations and saccades, and detecting time spent in Areas
of Interest (AOIs). The fourth section takes the processed data, and applies basic analysis
techniques commonplace in eye data research. In the fifth and final section, we reflect on the
benefits of the *eyetools* package, including contributions to open science practices,
reproducibility, and providing clarity to eye data analysis.

77 Installing eyetools

eyetools is available on CRAN and can be installed with the command
install.packages("eyetools"). Instructions for installing development versions can be
found at the package repository: https://github.com/tombeesley/eyetools/. Once installed, the
package can be loaded into R with the command library(eyetools).

Preparing data for eyetools

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Since there is a wide range of eye tracking hardware available for researchers to use,

eyetools currently offers only a limited number of functions for converting raw data from specific

hardware. The hdf5_to_dataframe() function is designed to work with output from PsychoPy

experiments connected to modern Tobii hardware, and will take this default format of raw data

and convert it into the simplified raw data format required for eyetools.

The *eyetools* package has been developed primarily with the analysis of experimental psychology data in mind. To this end, many of the functions expect a "trial" variable in the data, such that the algorithms will operate over multiple trials and produce output that retains this trial information. Similarly, data in psychology experiments tends to come from multiple participants, and to facilitate analysis, a participant ID column can be included (though this isn't necessary). This allows many functions to be run automatically across multiple participants (rather than running the same function on each participant's data). It is also necessary to select the relevant "periods" of data within the recording. It is quite typical in psychology experiments for there to be multiple periods within a trial, e.g., fixation; stimulus presentation; response feedback; inter-trial-interval. *eyetools* does not interpret these changes, and so it is necessary to first select the data for the period or periods that are of interest for analysis. Analysis on each period would be conducted separately using the functions in *eyetools*.

The starting point for the analysis pipeline is the preparation of the raw eye data, which will consist of recorded samples from the eye-tracker, with each row in the data reflecting a single time-stamped recording. If the eye-tracker is set at 1000Hz, then consecutive recordings will be 1 millisecond of time apart; at 300Hz, the recordings are 3.33 milliseconds apart. The only

requirement for the time column is that the values reflect a consistent and increasing set of values. 104 There is no need to specify the sampling rate, since *eyetools* functions will calculate this 105 automatically. eyetools expects raw data to have the following columns, with all columns set as 106

type numeric: 107

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- x = horizontal spatial coordinate of the estimated eye position
- y = vertical spatial coordinate of the estimated eye position 109
- time = timestamp of the recording 110
 - trial = the index of the current trial in the data

Missing values in the x and y columns of the raw data should be expressed as "NA". An optional 5th column can be included, with encodes the participant ID, which can be numeric or character type:

• pID = an index of the current participant in the data

For many of the functions in *eyetools* the *participant_ID* column allows the user to run the function across data from multiple participants. This functionality means that the user can avoid having to generate additional programming steps to analyse and combine the data from multiple participants

For many methods of eye-tracking, binocular data will be produced. In such cases, since 120 the primary aim of our analyses is the estimation of the spatial coordinates of gaze, the function combine eyes () should be used to combine the data to form a set of monocular data. This function takes raw data with coordinates for each eye (i.e., left_x, right_x, left_y, right_y), and 123 converts the data into single x and y coordinates. By default, the function does this by taking an average of the coordinates from the two eyes of each timestamp, but it is also possible to select 125 data from the eye with the lowest proportion of missing samples. This returns a flattened list of 126 participant data that has x and y variables in place of the left_* and right_* variables.

head(HCL,4) # first 4 rows of the built-in data

```
# A tibble: 4 x 7
128
              time left_x left_y right_x right_y trial
     pNum
129
                                                 <dbl> <dbl>
     <chr> <dbl>
                     <dbl>
                              <dbl>
                                       <dbl>
130
   1 118
                 0
                      909.
                              826.
                                       1003.
                                                  808.
                                                            1
131
   2 118
                  3
                      912.
                              829.
                                       1001.
                                                  812.
                                                            1
132
   3 118
                 7
                              826.
                                                  813.
                      912.
                                       1010.
                                                            1
                10
                      908.
   4 118
                              824.
                                       1006.
                                                  807.
                                                            1
```

```
data <- combine_eyes(HCL) # create monocular data
head(data, 4) # first 4 rows of the monocular data</pre>
```

```
pNum time trial
                                 х
                                           У
135
   1
       118
               0
                      1 955.8583 816.5646
136
   2
       118
               3
                      1 956.5178 820.6221
137
       118
               7
                      1 960.7383 819.7616
138
              10
      118
                      1 956.9727 815.3331
139
```

140 Repairing missing data and smoothing data

Despite the best efforts of the researcher, there are occasional failures in the accurate recording of the eye position during data collection (e.g., blinks). This results in missing data within the stream of samples, which must be represented in eyetools as NA values for the x and y coordinates. To mitigate the impact of missing data on further analysis, the interpolate() function can estimate the missing gaze data, based upon the eye coordinates before and after the missing data, and perform a repair. The default method of linear interpolation ("approx") replaces missing values with a line of constant slope and evenly spaced coordinates reaching the existing data (alternatively a cubic "spline" method can be applied).

When using interpolate(), a report can be requested on the proportion of missing data that has been replaced. This parameter changes the output format of the function, and returns a list of both the data and the report. The report alone can be easily accessed in the following way:

```
interpolate(data,
    method = "approx",
    participant_ID = "pNum",
    report = TRUE)[[2]]
```

As shown, not all missing data has been replaced, since there are certain periods in which the missing data span a period longer than the default setting of the "maxgap" parameter, which is 150 ms.

Once interpolation has been performed, a common step is to smooth the eye data to minimise the effect of measurement error on the data. The function smoother() reduces the noise in the data by applying a moving average function. The degree of smoothing can be specified, and a plot can be generated (using data from a randomly selected trial) to observe how well the smoothed data fits the raw data.

Working with eyetools

Having explained these rudimentary steps of getting the data ready analysis, we will now describe the core functions available in the latest version of eyetools. For illustration, eyetools has a built in data set that meets the required format. The data set consists of data from two participants from a human causal learning study (Beesley et al., 2015). The nature of this experiment is largely unimportant for the current purposes, but for clarity, the data were collected from the decision period of the procedure, where two rectangular cue stimuli were presented in the top half of the screen, one on the left side and one on the right side. Two smaller response options were presented in the lower half of the screen, one above the other. Participants simply had to look at the cues and choose a response. These raw data can be accessed by calling HCL and the associated "areas of interest" (described later) can be called by using HCL AOIs.

174 Counterbalanced designs

Many psychology experiments will counterbalance the position of important stimuli on the screen. For example, in the example data we are using, there are two stimuli, with one of these appearing on the left side of the screen and the other on the right. In the design of the experiment, one of these stimuli can be considered a "target" and the other a "distractor", and the experiment counterbalances whether these are positioned in a left/right or a right/left arrangement across trials. In order to provide a meaningful analysis of the eye position over all trials, it is necessary to standardise the data, such that the resulting analyses reflect meaningful eye gaze on each type of stimulus (target or distractor).

eyetools has a built in function, conditional_transform(), which allows us to transform the x and/or y values of the stimuli so as to take into account a counterbalancing variable. This function currently allows for a single-dimensional transformation, across either the horizontal or vertical midline. It can be used on raw data or fixation data; we simply need to append a column to the data to reflect the counterbalancing variable. The result of the function is a set of data in which the x (and/or y) position is consistent across counterbalanced conditions (e.g., in our example, we can transform the data so that the target cue is always on the left). This

transformation is especially useful for future visualisations and calculation of time on areas of
interest. Note that conditional_transform() operates on trials independently, and so does not
discriminate between multi-participant and single-participant data and so no participant_ID
parameter is required.

In our example data, the stimuli were presented on either the left or the right side of the screen. Here we have merged the eye data with a set of "trial_events" data that describe the events on each trial. We can apply conditional_transform() and specify the relevant column (cue_order) that controls the counterbalancing, and the relevant value that signals a switch of position (here the value "2"). The resulting transformation of the data will mean that the data is normalised such that the target stimulus is always positioned on the left side of the screen.

Fixations

Once the data has been repaired and smoothed, a core step in eye data analysis is to
identify fixations (Salvucci & Goldberg, 2000). Broadly, a fixation is defined as a period in which
gaze stops in a specific location for a given amount of time. The period in which the eyes are
moving between fixations reflects a "saccade". As such, raw data can be transformed into these
meaningful eye data characteristics. These different properties of eye-data have important
implications for behavioural research (see X for a review). Beyond their importance for

understanding psychological processes, transforming the data into fixations and saccades leads to greater computational efficiency. For example, the built in HCL data in eyetools is 479 kb, which contains 31,041 rows of data (12 trials of data). After processing the data for fixations, the resulting data is 269 rows and can be saved as 3.8 kb (less than 1% the size of the raw data). Not only is this more computationally efficient, but it also means the data are now in a far more practical format for storage in online data repositories.

There are two fixation algorithms offered in the *eyetools* package, both based on methods presented by (Salvucci & Goldberg, 2000). The first, fixation_dispersion() seeks periods of low variability in the spatial component of the data; the algorithm looks for sufficient periods of time in which the gaze position remains within a tolerated maximum range of dispersion. Once this range is exceeded, this is deemed to be the end of a possible period of fixation. If the total time of this fixation period is longer than the minimum required (set by the min_dur parameter), then the fixation is stored as a record in the returned object.

The second algorithm, fixation_VTI(), employs a velocity-threshold approach to identifying fixations, based on the algorithm described in (Salvucci & Goldberg, 2000). Since points of fixation occur when the eye is not in consistent motion, the algorithm computes the euclidean distance between points and then determines the velocity of the eye. Periods in which this velocity is consistently below the velocity threshold (for which the default is 100 degrees of visual angle per second) are identified as a potential period of fixation. The algorithm then applies a dispersion check to ensure that the eye maintains a relatively stable position across this period. Fixations must be of a minimum length for classification (by default 150 ms).

Here we can see the example data passed to the fixation_dispersion() algorithm and the resulting fixations that are returned.

```
NA_tol = 0.25, # proportion of NAs tolerated
progress = FALSE, # toggle progress bar
participant_ID = "pNum")
head(fixations, 4)
```

```
pNum trial fix_n start
                                 end duration
                                                         y prop_NA min_dur disp_tol
                                                    Х
230
                1
       118
                       1
                              0
                                  173
                                            173
                                                  959 811
                                                                  0
                                                                         150
                                                                                    100
231
   2
       118
                       2
                            197
                                  397
                                            200
                                                  961 590
                                                                  0
                                                                         150
                                                                                    100
232
                       3
       118
                1
                            400
                                 653
                                            253
                                                  958 490
                                                                  0
                                                                         150
                                                                                    100
233
                       4
                            803 1083
                                            280 1372 839
                                                                  0
                                                                         150
                                                                                    100
   4
      118
                1
234
```

235 Saccades

Between periods of fixation, the velocity of the eye increases rapidly as it makes a saccade towards the next point of fixation. The saccade_VTI() function will extract saccades using the velocity threshold algorithm described above. Details of each saccade are given, such as the timing of the saccade onset, duration, and the origin and terminal coordinates.

Visualisations

The eyetools package has a number of visualisations that allow for functional plot of the
data, with minimal effort. All plots use the dominant graphical R package ggplot, which means

that the resulting plots are ggplot objects and can be customised using the full suite of options for ggplot and its extensions.

plot_spatial() offers a simple means to view

Area of interest (AOI) analysis

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A critical component of much eye gaze analysis is the assessment of time spent in regions of space. eyetools has a number of functions for assessing the time spent in Areas of Interest (AOIs), as well as the sequence in which the eye enters and exits these areas. AOIs will typically reflect regions of space in which critical stimuli appear. AOIs are defined in eyetools using a dataframe object, which codes the centrepoint of the AOI in x, y coordinates along with the width and height (if the AOIs are rectangular) or just the radius (if circular). This object can be created using the function create_AOI_df():

```
# set areas of interest

AOI_areas <- create_AOI_df(3)

AOI_areas[1,] <- c(460, 840, 400, 300) # Left rectangualar AOI

AOI_areas[2,] <- c(1460, 840, 200, NA) # Right circular AOI

AOI_areas[3,] <- c(960, 840, 200, 400) # Right circular AOI
```

In combination with the fixation data, the AOI information can be used to determine the sequence of AOI entries using the AOI_seq() function. This function checks whether a fixation is detected within an AOI, and if not, it is dropped from the output, and then provides a list of the sequence of AOI entries, along with start and end timestamps, and the duration.

Time spent in AOIs can also be calculated from fixations or raw data using the
AOI_time() function available. This calculates the time spent in each AOI in each trial, based on
the data type given, in our case fixation data.

If choosing to work with the raw data, there is also the option of using

AOI_time_binned() which allows for the trials to be split into bins of a given length, and the

time spent in AOIs calculated as a result.

Visualisations

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eyetool assumptions [I DON'T KNOW WHERE THIS SHOULD GO JUST YET]

As with any data processing or analysis, there are certain assumptions made when developing the eyetools package. Some of these are built into the package directly, either as errors or warnings, such as the assumption that data is ordered by participant ID (if present) and trial, and some are not built in because they would limit the flexibility of the package functionality. One built-in assumption is the handling of missing data. eyetools expects track loss to be represented as NA within the data, and so any system that provides a different convention for recording track loss needs to be changed prior to using eyetools functions.

During development, eyetools was tested using data collected from a Tobii Pro Spectrum
eye tracker recording at 300Hz. Screen resolutions were constant at 1080x1920 pixels, and the
timestamps were recorded in milliseconds. Whilst most of the functions were designed to work
with any hardware provided the data is formatted to eyetools expectations (with the exception of
hdf5_to_df() and hdf5_get_event() as these convert Tobii data), as well as not relying on

specific frequencies or resolutions (either through the function behaviour, or by supplying parameters for specificity), eyetools has not been tested on a diverse set of datasets.

Some default behaviours are in-built, but are easily overrided such as parameters for resolution in the plotting functions. Similarly saccade_VTI() and fixation_VTI() were tested with 300Hz data. For these functions, as the frequency increases, the relative saccadic velocities will be lower meaning that the thresholds need to be reduced. This is important to note when working with data that is not recorded at 300Hz. To circumvent the potential issue of sample rates being an issue, by default functions that require a sample rate will deduce the frequency from the data rather than needing it to be specified.

Visualisations made easy

When working with eye data, it can be beneficial for the researcher to familiarise themselves with the dataset. Visualising the data through graphics can help to identify meaningful patterns that are obscured when relying on statistical analyses alone (Kabacoff, 2022). Graphics are also very effective at conveying information in a way that is easily grasped by a diverse audience, eyetools offers a selection of in-built plotting functions that work with data at most stages of processing. These plots are designed to aid in the researcher's processing and data analysis.

The plot_AOI_growth() function offers the representation of how an individual (on a single trial) spends their time looking at the different AOIs. This can be useful to see how AOIs are interacted with over time, and this can be presented as either a cumulative over time, or as a proportion of the time spent in the trial.

```
# plot absolute and then proportional
plot_AOI_growth(data = data, AOIs = HCL_AOIs, type = "abs", trial_number = 1)
plot_AOI_growth(data = data, AOIs = HCL_AOIs, type = "prop", trial_number = 1)
```

Figure 1

Examples of the absolute and proportional time plots from plot AOI growth()

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A heatmap of eye gaze positions can be generated using plot heatmap() which takes 299 raw data as an input. As a function, and unlike many of the processing steps, it does not 300 differentiate between trials or participants and plots any coordinate data it is given. This 301 behaviour is allowed as the heatmap offers an excellent and fast "sanity check" that participants 302 were, on the whole, looking at the expected areas of the experiment screen during the trials. As 303 can be seen in Figure ?@fig-heatmap, we can be reassured that participants do indeed spend 304 most of their time looking at the stimuli on screen rather than in the empty space. 305 plot heatmap() also allows for the modification of the amount of data displayed, using the 306 alpha_control parameter. By decreasing alpha_control in Figure 307 ?@fig-heatmap-alpha-update, we gain more visualised information and we can still see that the 308 majority of the data is kept within the stimuli and saccades between these areas.

```
plot_heatmap(data, bg_image = "images/HCL_sample_image.jpg")
plot_heatmap(data, alpha_control = .001)
```

The plot_seq() function allows for the plotting of raw data to visualise the gaze pattern from a single trial and where the gaze fell on the screen across the entire trial. **?@fig-seq** offers an example trial split into time bins of 5000ms. This plot shows the time dimension as a change in colour that overlaps older data. This plot serves as a useful check, similar to plot_heatmap(), as to where the eyes spent their time, but plot_seq() has the benefit of showing the time dimension compared to a simple heatmap.

```
# plot raw data with bins
plot seq(data = data[data$pNum == 118,], AOIs = HCL AOIs, bin time = 5000, trial number
```

The final plotting function in eyetools is plot_spatial(). This can plot raw data,

fixations, and saccades, either separately or in combination. plot_spatial() plots the location

of the eye gaze of a trial, and when given raw data is very similar to the output of plot_seq(),

when using fixation data, then an additional parameter can be used to label the fixations in their temporal order, enabling a better presentation of how fixations arise. Finally, providing saccade data allows for the length and direction of saccades to be presented.

```
plot_spatial(raw_data = data[data$pNum == 118,], trial_number = 1)

# plot just fixation data together

plot_spatial(fix_data = fixations[fixations$pNum == 118,], trial_number = 1)

#plot saccades

plot_spatial(sac_data = saccades[saccades$pNum == 118,], trial_number = 1)
```

Figure 2

The three types of plot that can be created using plot_spatial()

Analysing eye data

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Discussion Discussion

In the present tutorial, we began by identifying the current gap in available tools for working with eye data in open-science pipelines. We then provided an overview of the general data collection process required for eye tracking research, before detailing the conversion of raw eye data into a useable *eyetools* format. We then covered the entire processing pipeline using functions available in the *eyetools* package that included the repairing and normalising the data, and the detection of events such as fixations, saccades, and AOI entries.

@SOMETHING ON THE ANALYSIS GOES HERE.

From a practical perspective, this tutorial offers a step-by-step walkthrough for handling eye data using R for open-science, reproducible purposes. It provides a pipeline that can be relied upon by novices looking to work with eye data, as well as offering new functions and tools for experienced researchers. By enabling the processing and analysis of data in a single R environment it also helps to speed up data analysis.

Advantages of Open-Source Tools

eyetools offers an open-source toolset that holds no hidden nor proprietary functionality.

The major benefits of open-source tools are extensive, but the main ones include the ability to

explore and engage with the underlying functions to ensure that

A collaborative community - with open source tools, if an unmet need is identified, then
the community can work to provide a solution.

Good Science Practices with eyetools

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Creating savepoints (like having processed raw data, and then post-fixation calculation).

Reduces the need to completely rework workflows if an issue is detected as savepoints can be used to ensure that computationally-intense or time-heavy processes are conducted as infrequently as possible.

Data Availability

The data required for reproducing this tutorial is available at: @URL. A condensed version of the dataset (starting with the combine_eyes() function) is a dataset in the *eyetools* package called HCL.

Code Availability

The code used in this tutorial is available in the reproducible manuscript file available at:(IF STORING IN GITHUB, THEN WE NEED TO CREATE A ZENODO SNAPSHOT FOR A DOI RATHER THAN JUST A GITHUB LINK)

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