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The complexity ratchet: Stronger than selection!
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Abstract

Using the Aevol digital genetics platform we designed an in silico experiment to study the relationship between molecular complexity and phenotypic complexity: We evolved populations of digital organisms in an environment designed to allow survival of the simplest possible organism: one which genome encodes a single gene. By repeatedly evolving populations in this experimental framework, we observed that >1/3 of the lineages quickly found this simple genome and were then stable for the rest of the experiment. At the same time, most lineages were not able to find this simple solution and showed only gene acquisition along the 250,000 generations of the experiment. Importantly, simple organisms ended up with a very high fitness while complex genomes ended up with a 10x lower fitness. This shows that, even in a simple environment, evolution leads to a complexity ratchet: each gene acquisition creates the potential for the acquisition of further genes, ultimately pushing evolution towards complex solutions even in a simple environment. Moreover, organisms engaged in this complexification process were never able to outcompete the simple ones, showing that selection is not able to invert the complexity ratchet.

Methods

Aevol (www.aevol.fr) is an In Silico Experimental Evolution (ISEE aka digital genetics) platform developed by the Beagle team to study the evolution of genome structure. Aevol is based on three principles that makes it perfectly suited to study the evolution of complexity:

A. Its genotype-phenotype map. Evolution is simulated by a generational algorithm. Organisms’ fitness is based on a curve-fitting task: the protein triangles are summed to compute the organisms’ phenotype that is compared with a target function (red curve below).

B. The emergence of complex organisms in a simple environment is a strong argument in favor of a complexity ratchet, i.e. an irreversible mechanism that adds components to a system but that cannot get rid of existing ones, even though this could be more favorable. Indeed, in our experiments this ratchet clicks and goes on clicking despite the selective advantage of being simple. Evolution of fitness in complex organisms shows that the ratchet is empowered by negative epistasis. Our results show that complex biological structures can flourish in conditions where complexity is not needed and that, reciprocally, the global function of complex structures could very well be simple.