Synthetic biology: Engineering new functions, cells, and even life?

BCH394P/364C Systems Biology / Bioinformatics

Edward Marcotte, Univ of Texas at Austin

Synthetic Biology = design and engineering of biological systems that aren't found in nature

Why would we want to do this?

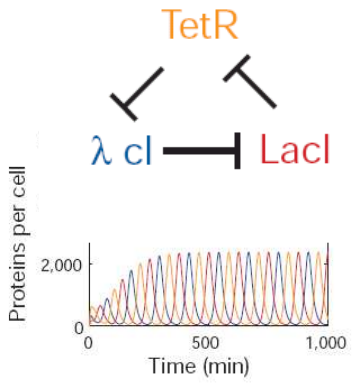
- Want to understand natural systems. One of the best ways to understand a system is to change it or make new, related ones

- To fully "understand" a system, we should be able to predict the outcome when we change the system

- For molecular biology, this means:
  - designing new gene circuits and networks
  - modeling the designed systems & predicting their properties
  - making & testing the designs
  - updating our understanding from the model/test agreement

The Repressilator = engineered genetic circuit designed to make bacteria glow in a oscillatory fashion = "repressor" + "oscillator"

Transcriptional repressors

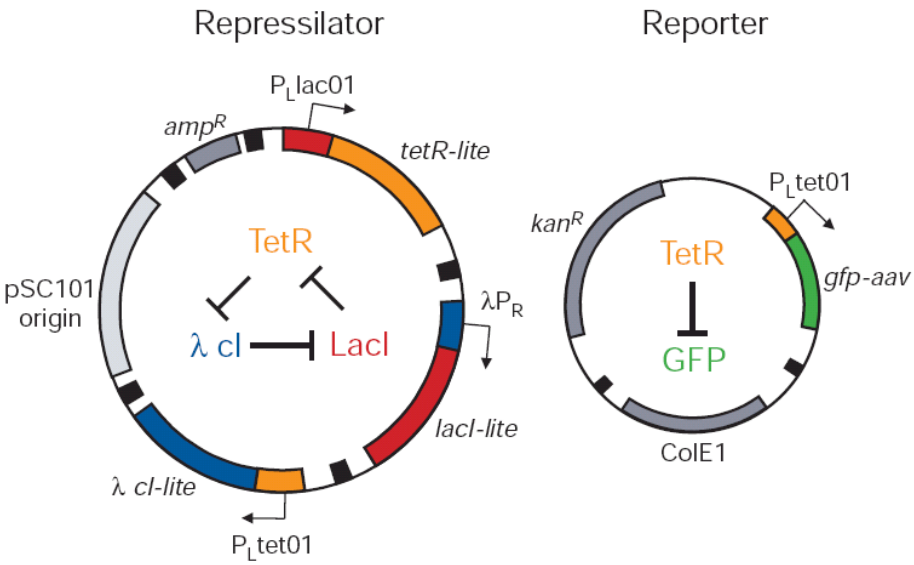




Green fluorescent protein

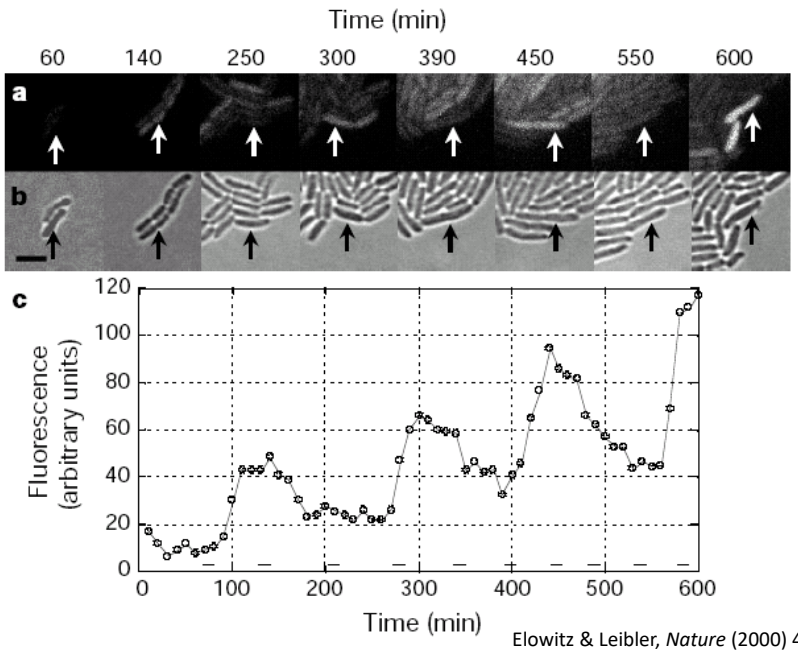
Elowitz & Leibler, *Nature* (2000) 403:335-8

The Repressilator = engineered genetic circuit designed to make bacteria glow in a oscillatory fashion



Elowitz & Leibler, *Nature* (2000) 403:335-8

The repressilator in action...



Elowitz & Leibler, *Nature* (2000) 403:335-8

iGEM: A synthetic biology contest

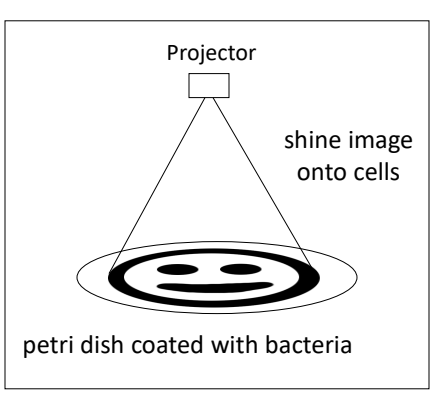
Can simple biological systems be built from standard, interchangeable parts and operated in living cells?

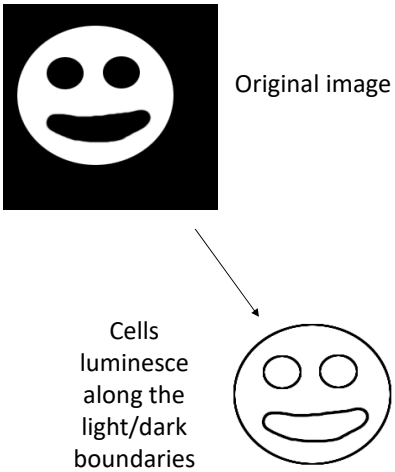
2004: MIT, UT, Princeton, Boston University, Cornell
2005: 13 teams (the above + UK, Germany, more...)
2006: 32 teams, incl. Japan, Latin America, Korea, India, more Europe

54 teams in 2007, 112 in 2009, 165 in 2011, and 245 in 2013...

...now roughly 6,000 entrants / year

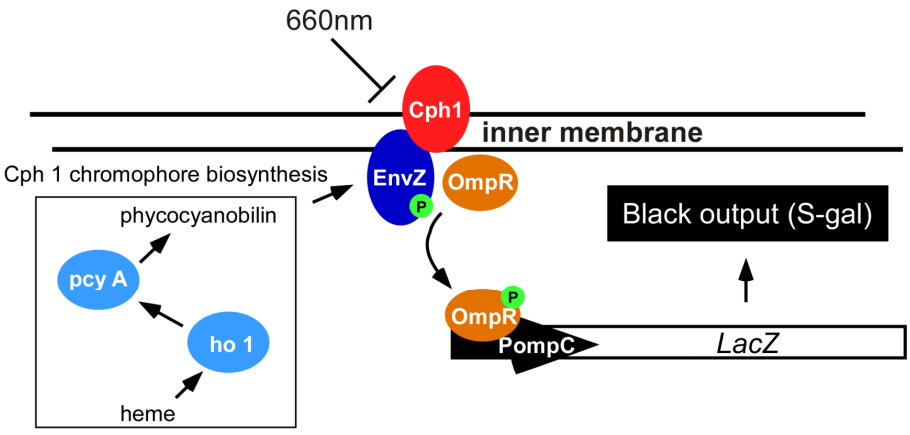
A little local history to illustrate the field:
UT's 2004/2005 iGEM project – build bacterial edge detector





Adapted from Zack Simpson

Bacterial photography



Levskaya *et al. Nature*, 438(7067):441-2 (2005)



"Light cannon" developed by Aaron Chevalier, UT undergraduate

Mask	Cph1/EnvZ
Hello World	
Hello World	

Levskaya *et al. Nature*, 438(7067):441-2 (2005)

The first bacterial photograph (coliroid?)...





Levskaya *et al. Nature*, 438(7067):441-2 (2005)

Escherichia darwinia

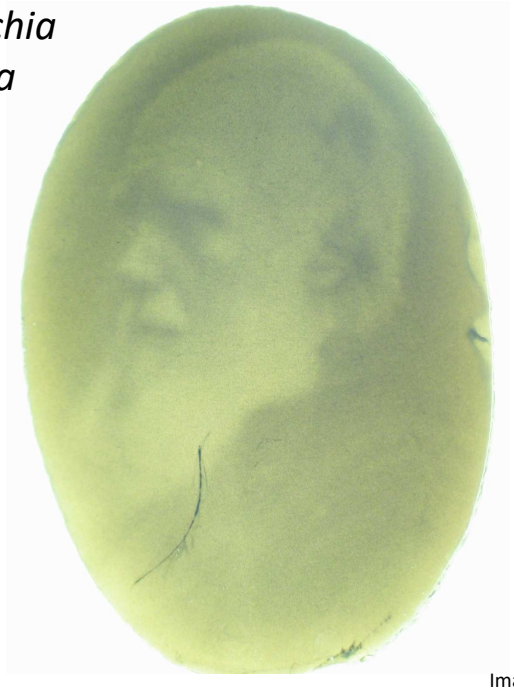
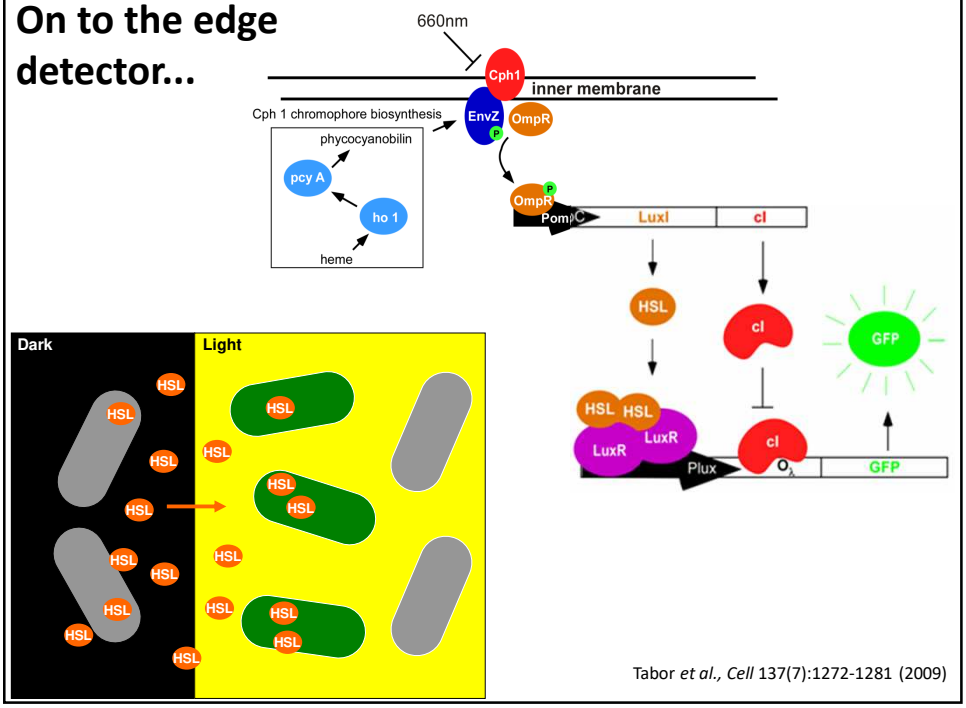


Image: Aaron Chevalier

On to the edge detector...



Tabor *et al.*, *Cell* 137(7):1272-1281 (2009)

It works!

Projected Mask



Photo strain

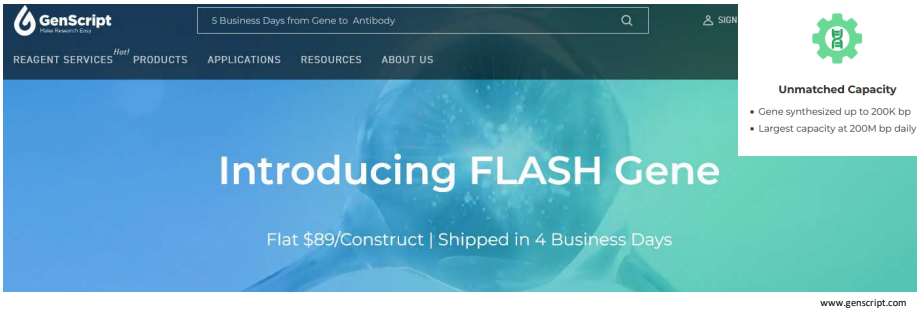


Edge detector strain



Tabor *et al.*, *Cell* 137(7):1272-1281 (2009)

Who needs nature?
Made-to-order, designer organisms



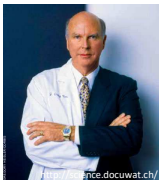
We can now <u>manufacture</u> a complete genome from commodity chemicals

Therefore, we can program whatever changes we want, assuming we can get it into cells…

Creation of a Bacterial Cell Controlled by a Chemically Synthesized Genome

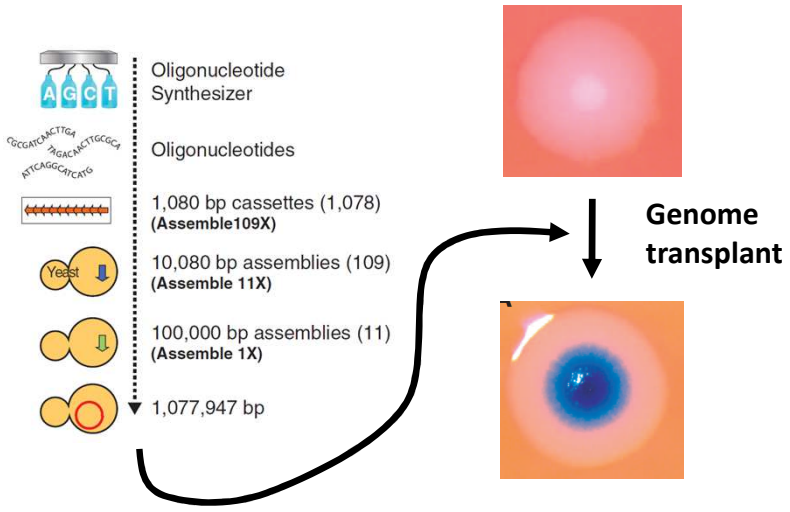
Daniel G. Gibson,[1] John I. Glass,[1] Carole Lartigue,[1] Vladimir N. Noskov,[1] Ray-Yuan Chuang,[1] Mikkel A. Algire,[1] Gwynedd A. Benders,[2] Michael G. Montague,[1] Li Ma,[1] Monzia M. Moodie,[1] Chuck Merryman,[1] Sanjay Vashee,[1] Radha Krishnakumar,[1] Nacyra Assad-Garcia,[1] Cynthia Andrews-Pfannkoch,[1] Evgeniya A. Denisova,[1] Lei Young,[1] Zhi-Qing Qi,[1] Thomas H. Segall-Shapiro,[1] Christopher H. Calvey,[1] Prashanth P. Parmar,[1] Clyde A. Hutchison III,[2] Hamilton O. Smith,[2] J. Craig Venter[1,2]*

"We report the design, synthesis, and assembly of the 1.08–mega–base pair *Mycoplasma mycoides* JCVI-syn1.0 genome starting from digitized genome sequence information and its transplantation into a *M. capricolum* recipient cell to create new *M. mycoides* cells that are controlled only by the synthetic chromosome."



2 JULY 2010 VOL 329 SCIENCE

"Rebooting" bacteria with synthetic genomes



2 JULY 2010 VOL 329 SCIENCE

But, wait! They only changed DNA, not the rest of the cell!

However…

In biology, *<u>software encodes the hardware</u>*.
Most (all?) of the cell is specified by the DNA.

It's as though you bought a old Blackberry…

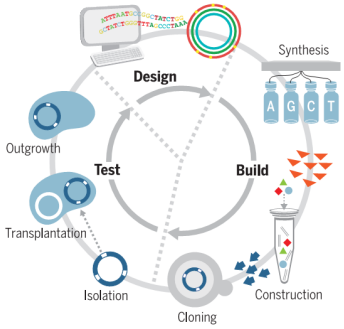


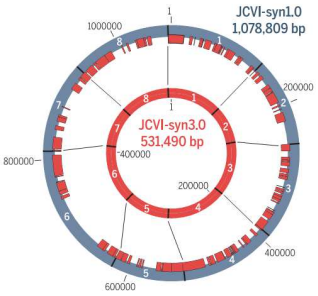
installed the Android operating system…

& your phone physically morphed into a Galaxy S26…

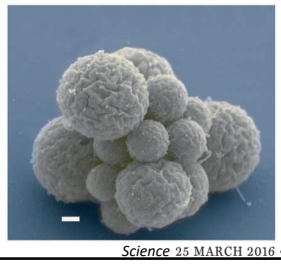


In 2016, Hutchison, Chuang, *et al.* reported making living mycoplasma after cutting the genome by ½ the genes



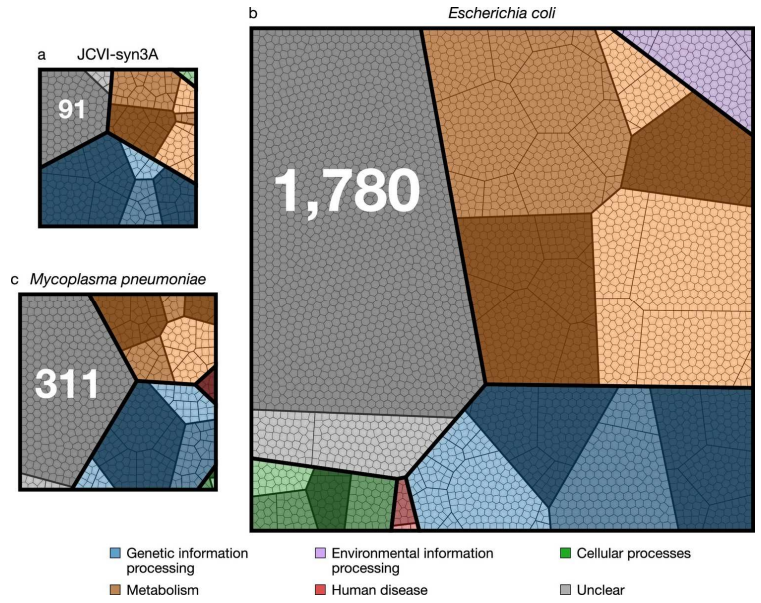


Four design-build-test cycles produced JCVI-syn3.0. (**A**) The cycle for genome design, building by means of synthesis and cloning in yeast, and testing for viability by means of genome transplantation. After each cycle, gene essentiality is reevaluated by global transposon mutagenesis. (**B**) Comparison of JCVI-syn1.0 (outer blue circle) with JCVI-syn3.0 (inner red circle), showing the division of each into eight segments. The red bars inside the outer circle indicate regions that are retained in JCVI-syn3.0. (**C**) A cluster of JCVI-syn3.0 cells, showing spherical structures of varying sizes (scale bar, 200 nm).



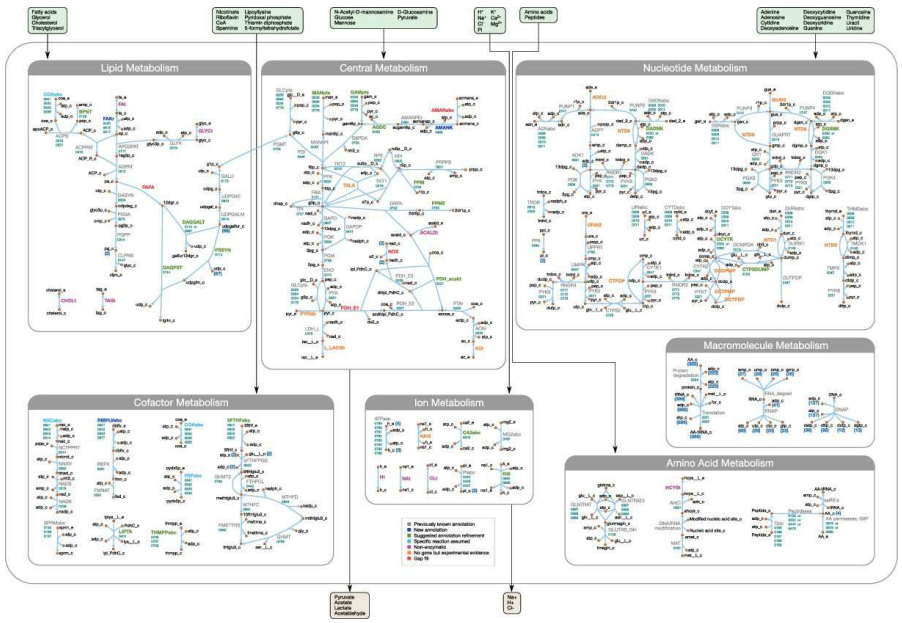
Science 25 MARCH 2016 • VOL 351 ISSUE 6280

JCVI-syn3.0 now makes for a remarkably compact, engineerable, free living cell "chassis" to study



Breuer *et al.*, *eLife* 2019;8:e36842 DOI: 10.7554/ELIFE.36842

…which now has a rich metabolic reconstruction…



Breuer *et al.*, *eLife* 2019;8:e36842 DOI: 10.7554/ELIFE.36842

…and highly defined composition, to the extent one can write its biomass reaction equation:

Protein

(27)	L-glutamate
(36)	L-leucine
(23)	L-alanine
(23)	L-aspartate
(21)	Glycine
(11)	L-proline
(16)	L-phenylalanine
(12)	L-arginine
(23)	L-serine
(22)	L-threonine
(24)	L-valine
(5)	L-histidine
(3)	L-tryptophan
(36)	L-isoleucine
(39)	L-lysine
(7)	L-methionine
(13)	L-tyrosine
(15)	L-glutamine
(2)	L-cysteine
(27)	L-asparagine
(21.2)	ATP hydrolyzed

DNA

(38)	dAMP
(12)	dGMP
(12)	dCMP
(38)	dTMP
(0.24)	ATP hydrolyzed

RNA

(27)	AMP
(25)	GMP
(20)	CMP
(28)	UMP
(0.14)	ATP hydrolyzed

Lipogalactan

(88)	Galactose
(1)	Diacylglycerol

Amino acids

(5.75×10^{-3})	L-glutamate
(8.53×10^{-3})	L-leucine
(8.66×10^{-3})	L-alanine
(5.44×10^{-3})	L-aspartate
(9.02×10^{-3})	Glycine
(3.02×10^{-3})	L-proline
(2.96×10^{-3})	L-phenylalanine
(2.48×10^{-3})	L-arginine
(6.71×10^{-3})	L-serine
(6.00×10^{-3})	L-threonine
(7.07×10^{-3})	L-valine
(1.21×10^{-3})	L-histidine
(4.15×10^{-4})	L-tryptophan
(8.75×10^{-3})	L-isoleucine
(9.07×10^{-3})	L-lysine
(1.77×10^{-3})	L-methionine
(2.28×10^{-3})	L-tyrosine
(3.28×10^{-3})	L-glutamine
(6.21×10^{-4})	L-cysteine
(6.27×10^{-3})	L-asparagine

Nucleotides

(3.29×10^{-3})	ATP
(2.19×10^{-3})	UTP
(2.19×10^{-3})	GTP
(1.10×10^{-3})	CTP
(6.8×10^{-5})	dTTP
(5.7×10^{-5})	dATP
(3.8×10^{-5})	dCTP
(2.2×10^{-5})	dGTP

Lipids

(3.97×10^{-2})	Cholesterol
(3.94×10^{-2})	Phosphatidylglycerol
(2.30×10^{-2})	Diacylglycerol
(2.10×10^{-2})	Cardiolipin
(2.04×10^{-2})	Free fatty acids
(1.73×10^{-2})	Gal-DAG
(6.48×10^{-5})	Triacylglycerol

(1.26×10^{-2}) **protein** + (1.78×10^{-3}) **DNA** + (5.04×10^{-3}) **RNA** + (4.29×10^{-3}) **lipogalactan** + (10^{-6}) **dUTPase** + (2.1×10^{-5}) **ACP** + (9.93×10^{-2}) **amino acids** + (8.95×10^{-3}) **nucleotides** + (0.167) **lipids** + (7.45×10^{-3}) **cofactors** + (1.00) **ions** + (25) **ATP** + (25) H_2O ⟶ **biomass** + (25) **ADP** + (25) P_i + (25) H^+

Ions

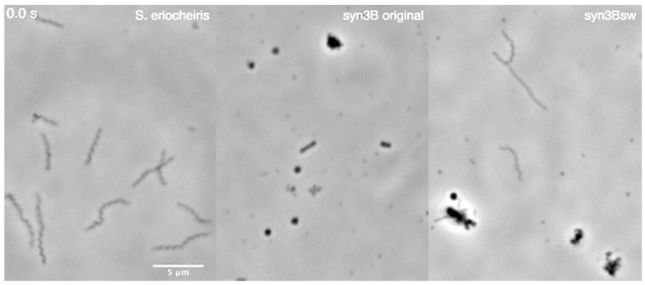
(0.840)	K^+
(5.72×10^{-2})	Na^+
(5.59×10^{-2})	Cl^-
(3.91×10^{-2})	HPO_4^{2-}
(7.76×10^{-3})	Mg^{2+}
(4.66×10^{-3})	Ca^{2+}

Cofactors

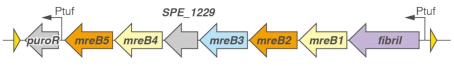
(6.34×10^{-3})	Spermine
(2.1×10^{-4})	Pyridoxal phosphate
(2.1×10^{-4})	FAD
(2.1×10^{-4})	5,10-MeTHF$(Glu)_3$
(2.1×10^{-4})	Thiamin diphosphate
(1.58×10^{-4})	CoA
(1.05×10^{-4})	$NADP^+$

Breuer *et al.*, *eLife* 2019;8:e36842 DOI: 10.7554/ELIFE.36842

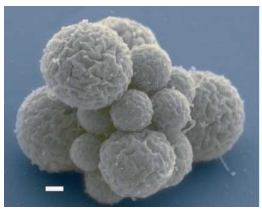
…and even engineered motility



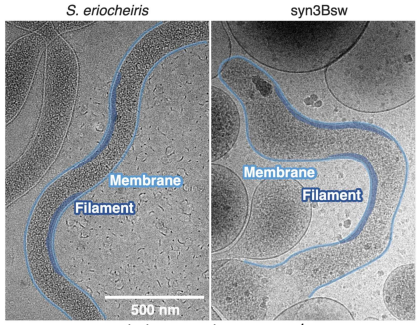
***Spiroplasma* actin operon**



+

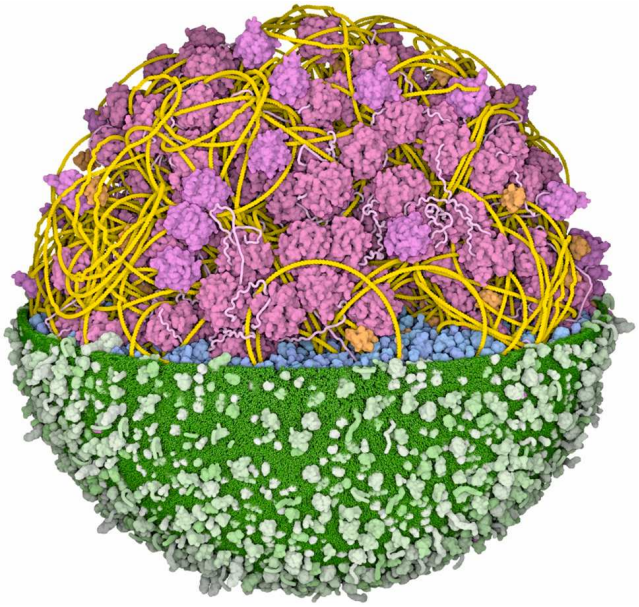


JCVI-syn3.0B



Kiyama *et al.*, *bioRxiv*, doi:10.1101/2021.11.16.468548

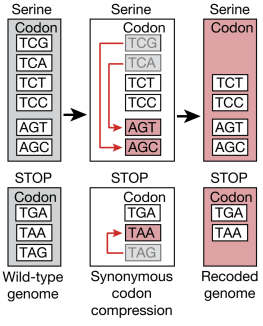
…and now a 3D whole cell model



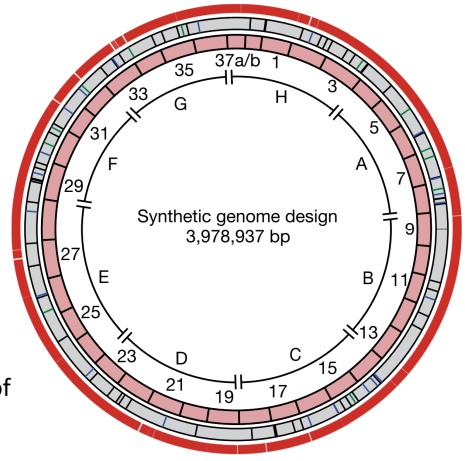
https://doi.org/10.1515/jib-2022-0013
David S. Goodsell, Integrative illustration of a JCVI-syn3A minimal cell

E. coli has also been completely synthesized & "rebooted"

→ Recoded 18,214 codons to make a 61 codon genome:
59 for the 20 amino acids + 2 stops



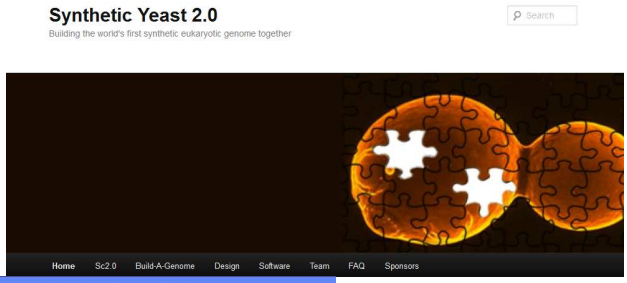
"…demonstrates that life can operate with a reduced number of synonymous sense codons"



Nature 569:514 (2019)

How about eukaryotes?
"rebooting" yeast with synthetic chromosomes

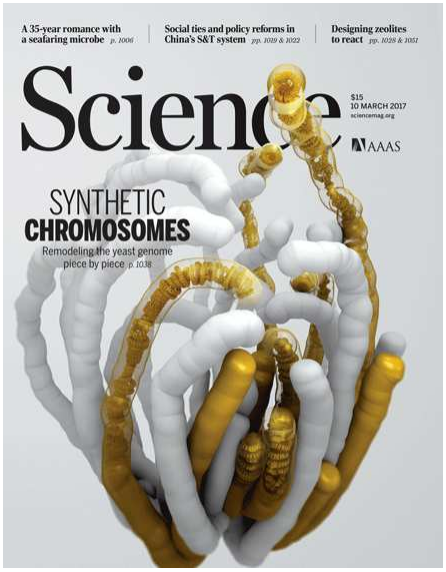
Turns out chromosomes can be synthesized and replaced for yeast too…





The Sc2.0 consortium's goal is a complete synthetic yeast genome

In 2017, the Synthetic Yeast Genome Project (Sc2.0) reported on five newly constructed synthetic yeast chromosomes:



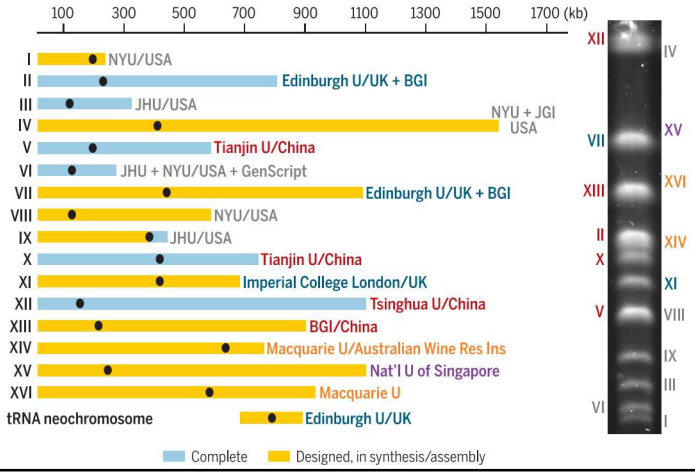
How the cover was made: http://science.sciencemag.org/content/355/6329/eaan1126

Design of a synthetic yeast genome

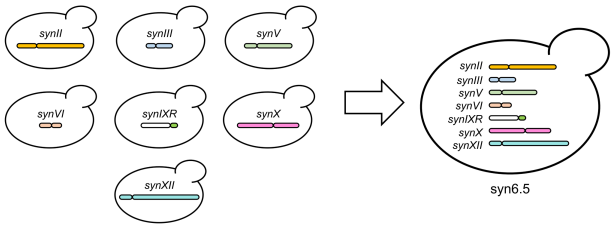
Sarah M. Richardson,[1,2*‖] Leslie A. Mitchell,[2,3‖] Giovanni Stracquadanio,[1,2,4‖] Kun Yang,[1,2‖] Jessica S. Dymond,[2†] James E. DiCarlo,[2‡] Dongwon Lee,[1§] Cheng Lai Victor Huang,[2] Srinivasan Chandrasegaran,[5] Yizhi Cai,[2,6] Jef D. Boeke,[2,3#] Joel S. Bader[1,2#]

We describe complete design of a synthetic eukaryotic genome, Sc2.0, a highly modified *Saccharomyces cerevisiae* genome reduced in size by nearly 8%, with 1.1 megabases of the synthetic genome deleted, inserted, or altered. Sc2.0 chromosome design was implemented with BioStudio, an open-source framework developed for eukaryotic genome design, which coordinates design modifications from nucleotide to genome scales and enforces version control to systematically track edits. To achieve complete Sc2.0 genome synthesis,

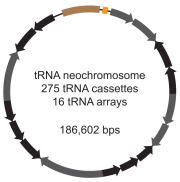
- Delete subtelomeric repeats
- Delete tRNA introns
- Add recombination sites
- Disperse high copy repeats
- Refactor for easy synthesis



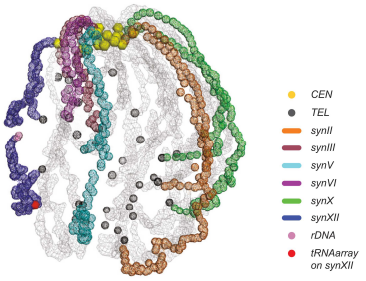
The consortium constructed all pairwise combinations of 7 synthetic chromosomes→the vast majority show no growth defects at 30C, modest at 37C



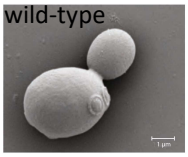
& moved all 275 tRNAs to a separate chromosome

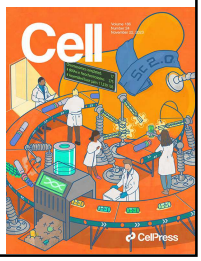


Cell *186*, 5237–5253, November 22, 2023



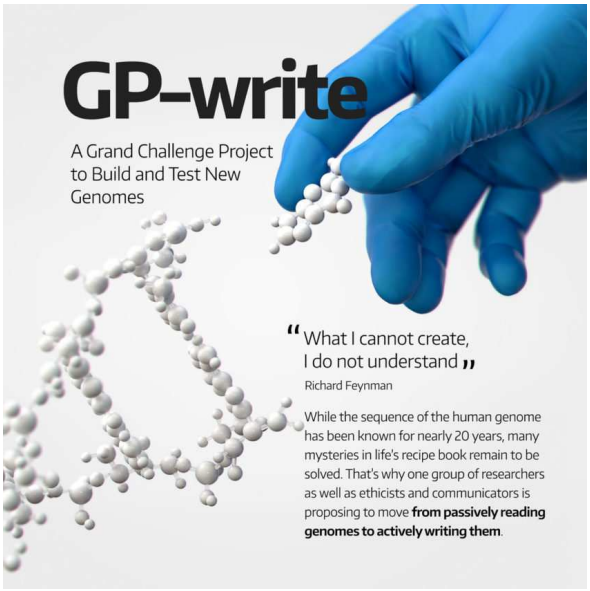




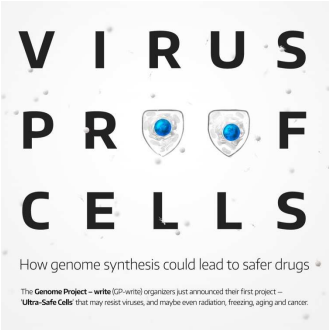


Zhao et al., 2023, Cell *186*, 5220–5236
https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cell.2023.09.025

Inevitably (!), the human synthetic genome project:



First major project: Recoding human codons (~200K edits?) to create virus-resistant cells



https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Genome_Project-Write
https://engineeringbiologycenter.org/

Let's end the lectures on a fun note, with some speculative near-future synthetic biology experiments



Science fiction? or not?
You be the judge!

"De-extincting" extinct species



Remember Dolly, the cloned sheep?

What if the cells being cloned came from an extinct animal and were put into a surrogate mother? Would that resurrect the species?

This was tried in 2009 for the Pyrenean ibex, and almost worked…



Cloned goat dies after attempt to bring species back from extinction

Groundbreaking experiment fails, but scientists pave way for 'return' of other creatures

But now there's another way!

- We can sequence a genome in a few days for a few $K
- We can synthesize or alter big pieces of the DNA
- We can (almost) "reboot" cells with this DNA
- We can convert cells to stem cells to embryos
- We can *in vitro* fertilize animals

So why not just "edit" the genomes of the closest living animals to be like their extinct relatives?

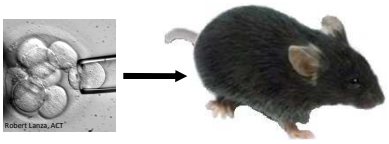


Sound familiar?

http://jurassicpark.wikia.com

Besides the genome engineering, this hinges on iPS:

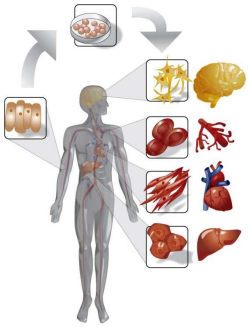
From <u>embryonic stem cells</u>, we can grow an entire organism or any cells/tissues in it





Shinya Yamanaka
Nobel Prize, 2012

& thanks to Yamanaka, we can convert <u>skin</u> cells back into <u>stem</u> cells



www.regenexx.com

There's a serious proposal to resurrect the woolly mammoth. Here's the process:

- ✓ Mammoth genome sequence
- ➢ Make ~100K DNA changes in elephant skin cells to convert elephant skin cells→ mammoth skin cells
- ✓ Convert skin cells to stem cells
- ✓ Convert stem cells to embryos
- ➢ *In vitro* fertilize elephants

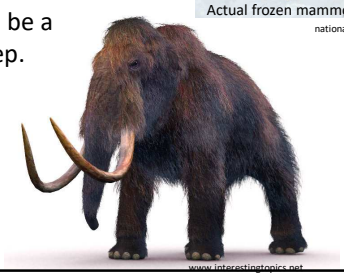


Actual frozen mammoth!

nationalgeographic.com

This might be a hard step.





A New Company With a Wild Mission: Bring Back the Woolly Mammoth

With $15 million in private funding, Colossal aims to bring thousands of woolly mammoths back to Siberia. Some scientists are deeply skeptical that will happen.

Give this article 669



The biologist George Church unearthing woolly mammoth remains in Siberia. Eriona Hysolli

A team of scientists and entrepreneurs announced on Monday that they have started a new company to genetically resurrect the woolly mammoth.

The company, named Colossal, aims to place thousands of these magnificent beasts back on the Siberian tundra, thousands of years after they went extinct.

Sept. 13, 2021

https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/13/science/colossal-woolly-mammoth-DNA.html



https://colossal.com/mammoth/

Colossal grabs $60 million Series A for moonshot mammoth project

THE CIA JUST INVESTED IN WOOLLY MAMMOTH RESURRECTION TECHNOLOGY

While skeptics doubt the prospects for de-extinction, the CIA's venture capital firm deems powerful genetic manipulation tools worth the money.

COLOSSAL PROBLEM

The De-Extinction of the Woolly Mammoth Is a Legal and Regulatory Nightmare

A biotech firm wants to resurrect the Pleistocene mammal in Alaska—and it's not clear the U.S. government can stop them.

Andy Lamey
December 15, 2022

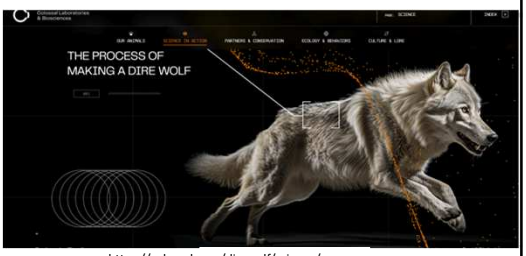
species via biotechnology. The region of Siberia Colossal had in mind, Sakha, has a thriving underground trade in mammoth tusks. Specimens preserved in ice and riverbeds can be passed off as elephant ivory: One find can generate enough income for a hunter to feed his family for a year. So George Church, a Harvard geneticist and co-founder of Colossal, told CNN that in order to avoid its creations being poached, Colossal was considering bringing them back without tusks.

Colossal's big project so far was the dire wolf

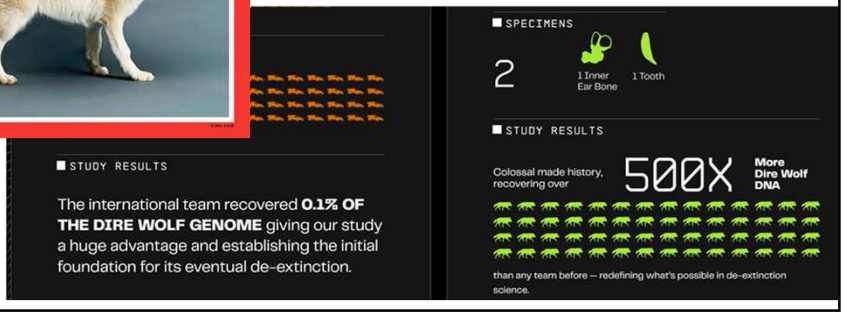


https://time.com/7274542/colossal-dire-wolf/

The claims

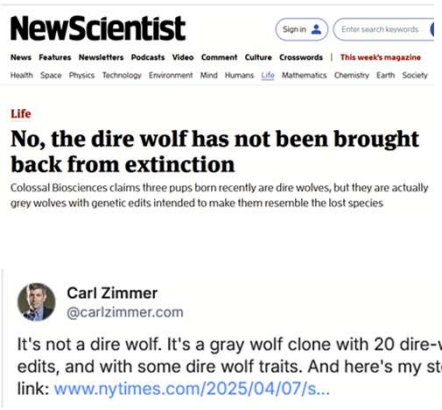


https://colossal.com/direwolf/science/



Colossal's big project so far was the dire wolf

The critiques


NewScientist

News Features Newsletters Podcasts Video Comment Culture Crosswords | This week's magazine

Health Space Physics Technology Environment Mind Humans Life Mathematics Chemistry Earth Society

Life

No, the dire wolf has not been brought back from extinction

Colossal Biosciences claims three pups born recently are dire wolves, but they are actually grey wolves with genetic edits intended to make them resemble the lost species

Carl Zimmer
@carlzimmer.com

It's not a dire wolf. It's a gray wolf clone with 20 dire-wolf gene edits, and with some dire wolf traits. And here's my story! Gift link: www.nytimes.com/2025/04/07/s...



"It's like claiming to have brought Napoleon back from the dead by asking a short French man to wear his hat."

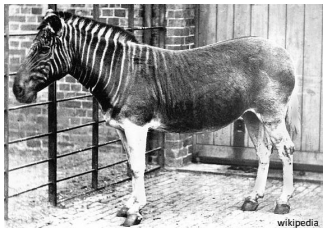
https://theconversation.com/why-de-extinct-dire-wolves-are-a-trojan-horse-to-hide-humanitys-destruction-of-nature-254309

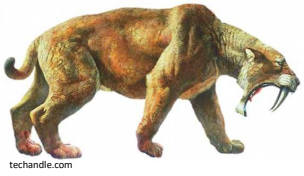
Which animal would you resurrect?

The dodo?



The quagga?

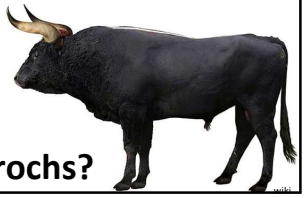




Saber-toothed tiger?

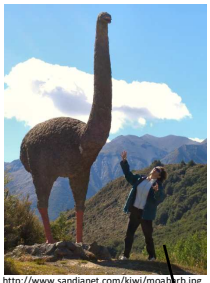
In principle, only need the DNA sequence (so, no dinosaurs)

Aurochs?



I vote for some crazy Australasian animals:

The 12' tall moa

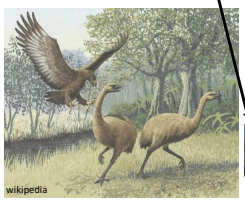


& of, course, the marsupial Tasmanian tiger



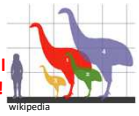
>90° !!!

The moa-eating Haast's eagle





Actual scale!



[redacted]

And sure enough!

Colos as the
Tasmania Has Been

In partnershi one species, which was hur for Tasmania

"Our family remains dedicated to supporting conservationist efforts around the world and protecting Australia's biodiversity is a high priority. The Tassie Tiger's extinction had a devastating effect on our ecosystem and we are thrilled to support the revolutionary conservation efforts that are being made by Dr Pask and the entire Colossal team."

CHRIS HEMSWORTH
Actor/Activist & Colossal Investor





(Photo: Colossal Biosciences)

What about neanderthal?
It's achievable. But should we do it?

Svante Pääbo



- ✓ Human and neanderthal genome sequence
- ➢ Edit DNA in human skin cells to convert
  convert human skin cells→ neanderthal skin cells
  →*I give this step 10 years max before we can do this*
- ✓ Convert skin cells to stem cells
- ✓ Convert stem cells to embryos
- ✓ *In vitro* fertilize
  a surrogate mother

So many ethical questions!
Where to start?

