Novel approach to quantitative spatial gene expression uncovers cryptic evolution in the developing *Drosophila* eye

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ABSTRACT

Robustness in development allows for the accumulation of cryptic variation, and this largely neutral variation is potentially important for both evolution and complex disease phenotypes. However, it has generally only been investigated as variation in the response to large genetic perturbations. Here we use newly developed methods to quantify spatial gene expression patterns during development of the *Drosophila* eye disc, and uncover cryptic variation in wildtype developmental systems. We focus on four conserved morphogens, *hairy*, *atonal*, *hedgehog*, and *Delta*, that are involved in specifying ommatidia in the developing eye. We find abundant cryptic variation within and between species, genotypes, and sexes, as well as cryptic variation in the regulatory logic between *atonal* and *hairy* and their regulators, *Delta* and *hedgehog*. This work paves the way for a synthesis between population and quantitative genetic approaches with that of developmental biology.

36 **Introduction**

37 Natural genetic variation within populations has long been the purview of evolutionary and
38 population geneticists, while developmental biologists focus on the effect of large mutations in
39 otherwise isogenic backgrounds (Paaby and Gibson 2016). This dearth of work on developmental
40 variation in wildtype genetic backgrounds is in part because developmental approaches have long
41 been restricted to data that is at best semi-quantitative (i.e. *in situ* hybridization, antibody staining).
42 Indeed, gene expression studies are generally spatial or quantitative, but not both. Without
43 quantitative replication, there can be no rigorous statistical testing when developmental processes are
44 compared among conditions, including health versus disease. This is especially important given the
45 potential for cryptic variation to result in disease phenotypes, for example the complex disease
46 phenotypes seen in humans after their recent, rapid change in lifestyle (Gibson and Reed 2008;
47 Gibson 2009; Felix 2012; Ward and Kellis 2012; Hu et al. 2016). Here we use hybridization chain
48 reaction (HCR) to bridge this gap between developmental and quantitative or population genetics by
49 quantitatively measuring spatial gene expression in multiple genotypes from two sexes of two species
50 (*Drosophila melanogaster* and *D. simulans*). This is essentially the first 'population genetics of
51 development' as we are able to evaluate wild type differences in spatial and quantitative gene
52 expression at the level of genotype, species and sex. This includes the ability to multiplex four genes,
53 as more commonly co-expression is inferred across samples. We use this enormous developmental
54 dataset to focus on the well-known morphogens driving ommatidia specification in *Drosophila* (Li et
55 al. 1995; Raj et al. 2008; Tsachaki and Sprecher 2011; Atkins et al. 2013; Shah et al. 2016).

56 The *Drosophila* eye is formed from an imaginal disc, which is initially patterned by a wave of
57 differentiation marked by a visible indentation of the tissue, termed the morphogenetic furrow (MF).
58 The MF passes from the posterior to the anterior of the disc over a period of two days (90 minutes per
59 adjacent row), giving each disc an element of both time and space in development (Fig 1) (Roignant
60 and Treisman 2009). The furrow is initiated by *hedgehog,* which both represses (short range) and
61 activates (long range) *hairy* (Fig 1) (Felsenfeld and Kennison 1995; Strutt and Mlodzik 1997). *hairy*
62 represses *atonal*, preventing precocious neural development anterior to the MF (though this role has

been recently contested) (Brown et al. 1991; Brown, Sattler, Paddock, and Carroll 1995a; Bhattacharya and Baker 2012). *hedgehog* activates the expression of *atonal*, driving the MF anteriorly (Fig 1) (Heberlein et al. 1993; Ma et al. 1993; Struhl 1999). *atonal* is the proneural gene in *Drosophila*, establishing the competency to become photoreceptor cells (Jarman et al. 1994). The relationship between *Delta*/*Notch* and the other members of the pathway is not entirely clear, although in cells posterior to the furrow *Delta/Notch* repress *atonal* (Fig 1) (Firth and Baker 2005; Gavish et al. 2016). There is also some evidence that *Delta*/*Notch* repress negative regulators of *atonal* at the furrow, such as *hairy* (Brown, Sattler, Paddock, and Carroll 1995b; Freeman 2001; Bhattacharya and Baker 2009). In addition, there is some evidence suggesting that *Notch/Delta* are involved in the early stages of *atonal* induction, and alternatively that *atona*l activates its own transcription (Baker and Yu 1997; Dominguez and Hafen 1997; Dominguez et al. 1998; others 1998; Sun et al. 1998; Li and Baker 2001). There are many other genes involved in the specification of the eye disc that will not be mentioned here, in favor of focusing on the genes we have assayed. We analyze the spatial quantitative expression of *hedgehog*, *hairy*, *atonal*, and *Delta* to understand the evolving regulatory logic of the gene network and changes in spatial dynamics between sexes and species.

Variation in gene expression within a species that has no phenotypic effect is termed cryptic variation, and is thought to be a potential source of adaptive mutations when exposed to selection by changing environmental factors (Dworkin et al. 2003; Gibson and Dworkin 2004; Gibson and Reed 2008; Duveau and Felix 2012; Kienle and Sommer 2013; Paaby and Rockman 2014; Lavagnino and Fanara 2015; Taylor and Ehrenreich 2015a). Cryptic variation accumulates due to the robustness of developmental systems to mutational perturbation (Duveau and Felix 2012; Felix 2012; Felix and Barkoulas 2012; Kienle and Sommer 2013; Paaby and Rockman 2014; Paaby and Gibson 2016). Although the final phenotype is the same, the presence of this cryptic variation effects the response to mutational or environmental perturbation, and thus the evolutionary potential of the phenotype. In the past cryptic variation has been experimentally exposed through the use of synthesized genetic backgrounds with large perturbations that prevent buffering of variation (Braendle et al. 2010; Woodruff et al. 2010; Duveau and Felix 2012; Chandler et al. 2014; Taylor and Ehrenreich 2015b).

90 While this work provides valuable insights into the importance of cryptic variation, cryptic variation in
91 developmental processes in natural genotypes has not been experimentally observed. Here, we will
92 investigate cryptic genetic variation with genotypes and sexes of *D. melanogaster* and *D. simulans*
93 using the four genes from the eye patterning network described above.

94 When cryptic genetic variation has fixed between species it has been called developmental
95 systems drift, compensatory evolution, and cryptic evolution, here we will refer to it as cryptic evolution
96 (True and Haag 2001; Landry et al. 2005; Felix 2007). These fixed differences do not necessarily
97 result from the fixation of cryptic variation, it can also be due to selection or compensatory mutation (or
98 both) (McGregor et al. 2001; Landry et al. 2005; Goncalves et al. 2012; Martinez et al. 2014; Szamecz
99 et al. 2014; Thompson et al. 2015; Fear et al. 2016). Most often it is investigated in the form of
100 homologous structures that are patterned by different genes, or homologous regulatory regions that
101 have evolved in the composition and placement of binding sites. The most well-known case of
102 homologous structures that are patterned by different genes comes from nematodes, where
103 homologous cells form phenotypically identical adult vulva in different species but are regulated by
104 different molecular mechanisms (Braendle et al. 2010; Duveau and Felix 2012; Felix and Barkoulas
105 2012; Barkoulas et al. 2013). In the latter case of homologous regulatory regions with conserved
106 expression patterns the most well-known case is the *even-skipped stripe 2* enhancer, where the
107 output is conserved between multiple species of *Drosophila* but the composition and placement of
108 binding sites has diverged (Ludwig et al. 1998; Ludwig et al. 2000). Here we will investigate cryptic
109 evolution on a more micro-evolutionary scale than previously (though it is still a comparison among
110 species) as rather than different genes or enhancer composition evolving between species we will
111 examine spatial quantitative expression level and evolution of the quantitative relationship between
112 genes in the eye patterning network.

113 We interpret cryptic variation and evolution in quantitative spatial patterns of gene expression in
114 light of regulatory relationships among them. We approach a spatial and quantitative analysis of these
115 gene expression patterns in three ways, first by explicitly creating a spatial gene expression profile
116 and comparing between genotypes, sexes, and species. Second, we were interested in examining if

117 the regulatory relationship between these genes had evolved between species or harbors variation
118 within a species. Lastly, we investigated the possibility that the spatial relationship between these
119 genes relative to the MF had evolved or harbors variation within populations.
120

121 **Methods**

122 *Fly stocks*

123 *D. simulans* were collected from the Zuma organic orchard in Zuma beach, CA in the spring of 2012
124 (Signor et al. *in press*). They were inbred by 15 generations of full sib crosses. *D. melanogaster* were
125 collected in Raleigh, North Carolina and inbred for 20 generations (Mackay et al. 2012).

126 **Image acquisition**

127 *Staging and dissection of larvae*

128 All flies were reared on a standard medium at 25° C with a 12-h light/12-h dark cycle. 120 hours after
129 hatching, 3rd instar larva were placed in phosphate buffered saline (PBS) and separated by sex. Their
130 guts were carefully removed posteriorly and their body was inverted anteriorly to expose the brains,
131 eye discs and mouth hooks. After fixation and labeling (described below), eye discs were isolated and
132 mounted.

133 *Hybridization Chain Reaction (HCR)*

134 HCR is unique in that it produces gene expression patterns that are both quantitative and spatial
135 (Supplementary Materials). The DNA probes were designed and synthesized by Molecular
136 Instruments (Choi et al. 2014) (Table S1). Four genes were multiplexed in each preparation as
137 orthogonally-designed hairpins allowed the simultaneous amplification of their target sequences (Fig
138 1, S1). Each target mRNA was detected using five DNA probes to annotate the position and
139 expression levels for each of the four assayed genes (*hairy, atonal, Delta and hedgehog*).
140 Each probe contained two-initiator sequences (I1 and I2) that bound to a specific amplifier.
141 While other approaches such as FISH can be adapted to detect individual transcripts, HCR has a
142 linear signal that is 20x brighter than FISH, it reduces non-specific background staining, and it can
143 detect 88% of single RNA molecules in a cell with an appropriately low false discovery rate (Ma and

144 Moses 1995; Pan and Rubin 1995). It is also highly repeatable, with different sets of probes targeted
145 to the same gene showing correlations of .93-.99 (S. Fraser, pers. comm.).
146 The protocol for HCR was modified from (Choi et al. 2014) and is described briefly. The full
147 protocol is available in File S2. Inverted 3rd instar larva were fixed in 4% paraformaldehyde diluted with
148 PBS containing .2% Tween 20 (PBST). After fixation, larva were washed with PBST, then increasing
149 concentrations of methanol (30%, 70% and 100%) at 25° C. Larva were stored in 100% methanol at -
150 20° C. Methanol-fixed samples were thawed, washed with ethanol, re-permeabalized in 60% xylene,
151 washed with ethanol, then methanol and rehydrated with PBST. Samples were permeabalized with
152 proteinase K (4 mg/mL), fixed in 4% formaldehyde then washed with PBST at 25° C. Finally, at 45° C,
153 samples were pre-hybridized for 2 hours before the addition of all the probes. The probe-hybridized
154 larva were placed in wash buffer (Molecular Instruments) at 45° C to remove excess probes.
155 Fluorescently labeled hairpins were snap-cooled then added to the samples at 25° C and placed in the
156 dark to amplify the signal. Afterwards, samples were washed in 5X SSCT solution, isolated in PBST,
157 then placed in Prolong Gold anti-fade mounting medium (Molecular Probes).
158 *Microscopy*
159 Three dimensional images of mounted, HCR stained 3rd instar larva eye discs were acquired on a
160 Zeiss LSM 780 laser scanning microscope (Carl Zeiss MicroImaging, Inc., Thornwood, NY, USA) with
161 Objective Plan-Apochromat 63x/1.40 Oil. The gain was adjusted to avoid pixel saturation.
162 **Extraction of gene expression profiles**
163 *Overview*
164 The first steps in the image analysis is bringing each image to the same orientation and segmenting it.
165 Image segmentation produces a mask in which pixels are assigned to objects or background. Here
166 the objects are one or several mRNA molecules. Then the cellular structure of the imaginal disc is
167 approximated using a hexagonal array. Though the real underlying cell structure of the imaginal disc is
168 technically able to be recognized, this was unsatisfactory in our data due to imaging noise. Thus, at
169 the second step using the R package hexbin we constructed a partition of the imaginal disc area into
170 elements that represent pseudo-cells and have a biologically-relevant hexagonal shape (Brennan et

al. 1998). The number of pseudo-cells was selected by visual inspection of the combined image in which the hexagonal structure was overlaid onto the *atonal* channel to verify fit. We are primarily interested in expression profiles around the MF, providing us a convenient landmark to align images from different preparations, thereby assigning coordinates to the pseudo-cells. However, deformations of the eye disc during growth and preparation sometimes distorts the MF. We used splines to correct for any bending or deformation of the MF. Next, using the histograms of cumulative pixel intensities of objects in expression domains and non-expressing areas we estimated the typical intensity of a transcript and typical background signal, respectively. Consequently, the cumulative intensities greater than the background are divided by the intensity attributed to single mRNA molecule to yield counts of mRNA molecules. This normalizes the expression profiles and corrects for differences in microscope gain between images. Finally, the gene expression profiles are estimated for every pseudo-cell.

Morphological reconstruction and contrast mapping segmentation

To detect gene transcripts within the image stacks we applied a version of the MrComas method that was modified for processing 3D images (Kozlov et al. 2017). This approach first enhances contrast within the image and reduces noise. The images were enlarged by a factor of four with the nearest-neighbor algorithm. They were processed by morphological reconstruction using both opening and closing, where closing (opening) is dilation (erosion) that removes extraneous dark (bright) spots and connects bright (dark) objects (Vincent 1993). The contrast mapping operator assigns each pixel the maximum value between the pixel-by-pixel difference of the reconstructed images and their pixel-by-pixel product and produces the rough mask for each channel. An image, *I*, is mapping from a finite rectangular subset *L* onto the discrete plane Z^2 into a discrete set 0, 1, …, N - 1 of gray levels. Let the dilation δ_B and erosion ϵ_B by structural element *B* be defined as:

$$\delta_B(I) = \bigvee_{\gamma\epsilon_B} I(\gamma) = I \oplus B \qquad \epsilon_B(I) = \bigwedge_{\gamma\epsilon_B} I(\gamma) = I \ominus B$$

Where ∨ and ∧ denote infimum and supremum respectively. Then formulae:

$$\delta^1_{I,B}(J) = (J \oplus B) \wedge I \qquad \epsilon^1_{I,B} = (J \ominus B) \vee I$$

denote geodesic dilation $\delta^1_{I,B}$ and erosion $\epsilon^1_{I,B}$. Binary reconstruction extracts those connected components of the mask image which are marked on the marker image, and in grayscale it extracts

198 the peaks of the masked image marked by the marker image. Using the dilated masks image I as the
199 marker J: $J = \delta_B(I)$ defines closing by reconstruction:

200 $$\gamma_B(I) = \epsilon^1_{I,B}\epsilon^1_{I,B} \dots \epsilon^1_{I,B}[\delta_B(I)]$$

201 Opening by reconstructions uses eroded mask I as a marker J:

202 $$\phi_B(I) = \delta^1_{I,B}\delta^1_{I,B} \dots \delta^1_{I,B}[\epsilon_B(I)]$$

203 Then the difference between closing and opening by reconstruction has the meaning of the gradient:

204 $$\nabla_B(I) = \gamma_B(I) - \phi_B(I)$$

205 To create strong discontinuities at object edges and flatten signal with the objects the contrast
206 mapping operator takes a maximum between the difference and the pixel-by-pixel produce of the
207 reconstructed images and produces a rough mask for each channel:

208 $$R = \max\{\nabla_B(I), \gamma_B(I) \odot \phi_B(I)\}$$

209 Subsequently, this mask was subjected to distance transform, which substituted each pixel value with
210 the number of pixels between it and the closest background pixel. This operation creates 'peaks' and
211 'valleys' of intensity inside foreground objects. To split erroneously merged objects watershed
212 transform was applied, which treats the whole image as a surface and intensity of each pixel as its
213 height and determines the watershed lines along the tops of ridges separating the catchment basins
214 (Meyer 1994). The quality of segmentation is assessed visually by inspection of the object boarders
215 overlaid with the original image. Finally, each mask is returned to its original size and quantitative
216 measures are made of shape and intensity characteristics such as the number of pixels, as well as
217 their mean and standard deviation in the detected object. MrComas is free and open source software
218 available at http://sourceforge.net/p/prostack/wiki/mrcomas.

219 *Approximating the MF*

220 We defined the position of the MF as the middle of overlap between *hairy* and *atonal* expression. The
221 shape of the MF was approximated with a spline using function smooth.spline in R. The degrees of
222 freedom and other parameters were chosen to make the approximation coincide visually with a MF
223 image.

224 *Inferring counts of transcript number*

225 Segmentation of the image provided a table of coordinates and the shape and intensity characteristics
226 of detected transcripts. Here, we applied filtering steps to remove false positives and determine the
227 count of mRNA transcripts. First, we assumed the object we detected as least intense but most
228 frequent corresponds to a single mRNA molecule. Then, we inferred background intensity for objects
229 outside of well-annotated domains of expression of the four genes. Assuming that the majority of true
230 objects contain a single molecule, we compare the distribution of cumulative intensities of particles in
231 expression domains and areas of known non-expression to obtain the typical intensity of a true single
232 molecule and a false positive, respectively. All detected signals that were lower than the typical
233 intensity of a false positive were removed from the dataset. The number of removed objects is
234 typically less then 10%. All other cumulative pixel intensities were divided by the typical intensity of a
235 true single molecule as normalization coefficient to yield an estimate of the number of mRNA
236 transcripts.

237 *Image registration*

238 We applied an affine coordinate transformation to each eye disc to make the corresponding maxima
239 and the width of expression patterns of four genes in different eyes coincide as closely as possible. To
240 do so, we shifted the coordinate system of each eye to its center and also scaled them in the A-P
241 direction. The center of the pattern in A-P direction is the MF.

242 We mapped the expression patterns to a unified hexagonal structure in order to make
243 comparisons between pseudo-cells from individual imaginal discs. The unified cell structure was
244 constructed using the R package hexbin. Each cell in the unified grid represents an 'average' cell from
245 individual eyes. The size of a hexagon in the unified grid is greater or equal than the cell size in the
246 individual eye. Thus, the number of molecules in each unified cell in the mapped pattern equals the
247 mean over the cells from native pattern that are covered by this unified cell. After such coordinate
248 transformation, the MF region is defined as 20 cells on either side of the MF, to focus the analysis on
249 the area of interest (the MF).

250 *Filtering and quality controls for each eye disc*

251 Some eye imaginal discs were damaged or deformed in the process of dissection or mounting, resulting
252 in regions of erroneous gene expression, such as disruptions to the MF. The expression profile of each
253 disc was examined by eye and these regions were individually trimmed out of the final dataset. At the
254 edges of each eye disc the pattern of the MF was also degraded, so each eye disc was trimmed dorso-
255 ventrally prior to analysis. Outliers were excluded from the dataset, determined as a single member of
256 the five replicates with more than a 3x difference in expression values. This resulted in a final dataset
257 of 55 eye discs.

258 **Modeling sources of expression variation and evolution**

259 *Analysis of individual spatial gene expression patterns*

260 We were primarily interested in variation in gene expression profiles across the eye disc, that is using
261 differences in expression averaged across rows along the *x*-axis. While the *y*-axis is of interest,
262 variation in the shape, size, degree of deformation, and occasional damage to the disc made this
263 analysis intractable. We fit curves to each gene expression profile using the mgcv package in R, using
264 a generalized additive model with integrated smoothness estimation. Smoothing terms are
265 represented using penalized regression splines. predict.gam was used to fit the curves to the original
266 range of values and down sample the curves to eight points. MANOVAs were performed using the
267 "Pillai" test for genotype x sex and species x sex.

268 *Modeling framework to understand variation and evolution of the eye patterning gene network*

269 We wanted to understand if cryptic variation existed within the regulatory logic of *hairy*, *atonal*, *Delta*,
270 and *hedgehog*, or if there had been cryptic evolution between species. To understand the regulatory
271 logic between genes we focused on biologically relevant relationships, such as the regulation of *hairy*
272 by *Delta* and *hedgehog*, but excluded such relationships as *hairy* and *atonal*. This was due to the low
273 overlap between *hairy* and *atonal* expression domains, where including cells where only one or
274 another was expressed would artificially create a relationship between expression levels. Both *hairy*
275 and *atonal* are downstream, directly or indirectly, of *Delta* and *hedgehog* thus it was these
276 relationships that were modeled. We limited the analysis to cells where all genes included were
277 expressed in at least ten molecules.

In the previous analysis, we investigated variation in the cryptic spatial quantitative expression pattern of genes in the MF. Here, we will investigate the possibility that genes in the MF have evolved, or harbor variation, for how they affect each other in particular cells. For example, is high *atonal* expression associated with high expression of *hedgehog*, given that *hedgehog* activates *atonal*? We used the following equations to determine the relationship between the expression of these genes:

$$hairy(i,s) = k^{Dl} \times Dl(i,s) + k^{hh} \times hh(i,s) + \alpha$$

$$atonal(i,s) = k^{Dl} \times Dl(i,s) + k^{hh} \times hh(i,s) + \alpha$$

The coefficient k and constant α were fit using standard methods for multiple regression. Here $hairy(i,s)$ and $atonal(i,s)$ are the measured expression level of each gene in cell i in individual s. $Dl(i,s)$ and $hh(i,s)$ are vectors containing the corresponding expression levels of *hairy* and *atonal*'s regulators *Delta* and *hedgehog*. To determine if the regulatory logic is the same between genotypes and species we can then use the regression coefficients from these models in a MANOVA. We note that we cannot exclude the possibility that other unmeasured genes are responsible for producing this variation.

Model for understanding overall variation and evolution of MF structure

Lastly, we wanted to understand if there is cryptic variation and/or evolution for the relationship between the MF and gene expression, or if cryptic variation and/or evolution existed for the size of the MF overall. For example, the MF was called as the position of overlap between *atonal* and *hairy* expression, but it is unclear how the overall gene expression pattern of these genes relates to their overlap. For example, is the position of maximum expression of each always the same relative to the MF? Two processes occurred to make the MF comparable between samples, they were shifted to occupy the same position depending upon the position of overlap of *hairy* and *atonal*, and they were scaled to occupy the same total area. The amount required to scale will depend both on the size of the original disc and the width of the MF relative to the disc. To account for differences in size we include

305 the number of rows in the original disc prior to any transformations as a cofactor and perform ANOVA
306 in R.
307
308 **RESULTS**
309 *Individual spatial gene expression patterns*
310 First, to characterize the spatiotemporal dynamics of transcriptional activity along the anterior-
311 posterior axis, we took the spatial average of signal across the dorsal-ventral axis and compared
312 between genotypes, sexes, and species (Fig 2A). We found abundant cryptic spatial quantitative
313 variation in expression profiles (Fig 2-3). The expression profile of *hairy* around the MF harbors cryptic
314 variation between genotypes and there is an interaction between genotype and sex (Table 1, $p = 2 \times$
315 10^{-3}, $p = 0.02$). There has also been cryptic evolution between species for *hairy* (Table 1, $p = 3 \times 10^{-4}$).
316 While *atonal* has not evolved between species, there is cryptic variation in expression profile between
317 genotypes, sexes, and there is an interaction between genotype and sex (Fig 3A-C, Table 1, $p = 4 \times$
318 10^{-4}, $p = .02$, $p = .02$). Surprisingly, given the conservation of *Delta* in general, *Delta* harbors variation
319 in spatial quantitative expression behind the MF between genotypes and sexes (Table 1, $p = 2 \times 10^{-3}$,
320 $p = 7 \times 10^{-4}$) and there are significant interactions between genotype and sex (Fig 2B-C, Table 1, $p = 2$
321 $\times 10^{-3}$). There has also been cryptic evolution of *Delta* between species, and evolution of the
322 interaction between species and sex (Table 1, $p = .03$, $p = 3 \times 10^{-4}$). *hedgehog* is not different between
323 species but is significantly different between genotypes, sexes, and there is an interaction between
324 the two (Table 1, $p = 5 \times 10^{-4}$, $p = .05$, $p = 1 \times 10^{-3}$). There is also a significant interaction between
325 species and sex (Table 1, $p = .01$).
326 Thus, *hairy* and *Delta* have cryptically evolved different spatial quantitative expression patterns
327 between species, while *hairy*, *atonal*, *Delta*, and *hedgehog* harbor cryptic variation within species and
328 sexes. Given that there are regulatory relationships between these genes, it is interesting to see that
329 they do not all harbor variation for the same factors. This could potentially be due to the influence of
330 other unmeasured regulatory factors, or to variation in the relationship between these genes and other
331 components in the gene regulatory network.

Variation and evolution of the eye patterning gene network

There has been cryptic evolution in the regulatory logic of *hairy* and its upstream regulators *Delta* and *hedgehog* between species (Fig 4A-C, Table 2, p = .03). There is also cryptic variation between sexes in the regulatory logic of *hairy* and its upstream regulators *Delta* and *hedgehog* (Table 2, p = .03). There has been significant evolution of the regulatory logic of *atonal*, in a significant interaction between species and sex ($p = 1 \times 10^{-3}$). Furthermore, while there was no significant effect of genotype for *hairy*, there is for *atonal*, indicating that there is cryptic variation segregating in the population effecting the relationship between *atonal, hedgehog*, and *Delta* ($p = 1.6 \times 10^{-5}$). There is also a significant interaction between genotype and sex ($p = 1 \times 10^{-3}$). Thus, the relationship between *hairy* and *atonal* and their regulators has cryptically evolved between species and sexes in *hairy*, and between genotypes and sex in *atonal* (cryptic variation). We illustrate this difference between species in Figure 3, where a different relationship between *hairy* and *hedgehog* is visible between *D. melanogaster* and *D. simulans*. In brief, the frequency of cells with a given log transformed level of expression are plotted against one another for *hairy* and *hedgehog*. *hairy* is primarily expressed anterior to the MF and *hedgehog* posterior, and they have a different regulatory relationship in each region with *hedgehog* activating *hairy* long range (anterior) and repressing it short range (posterior). This is reflected in the frequency of cells expressing both genes for *D. melanogaster*, where anterior to the MF there is a high frequency of *hairy* expressing cells and a low frequency of co-occurring high *hedgehog* expression. Posterior to the MF the opposite is true, with high expression of *hedgehog* lacking concordance with any expression of *hairy*. In *D. simulans*, posterior to the MF, this relationship is the same as in *D. melanogaster*. However, in anterior to the MF this is not the case. Expression of *hairy* and *hedgehog* both increase as the other increases, with widespread co-occurrence.

Variation and evolution of MF structure

The amount that they were shifted is not significant for genotype, sex, or species, suggesting that the relationship of maximum gene expression with the MF does not vary. However, the amount that they were scaled is, after accounting for original differences in size, between species ($p = 1.38 \times 10^{-6}$).

359 This suggests that the total relative width of the MF varies between species, but not between
360 genotypes or sexes. This is also suggestive of evolving interrelationships among genes that could
361 result in broader or narrower areas in which they enhance or suppress expression of one another.

362 **Discussion**

363 Our results summarize a complicated pattern of variation sorting in the gene network involved in
364 patterning the MF. For example, the overall shape of the expression of *hedgehog* across the eye disc
365 is different between genotypes, sexes, and there is an interaction between species and sex and
366 genotype and sex. *hedgehog* upregulates *hairy*, but *hairy* has differences in expression between
367 species (which *hedgehog* does not), genotypes, and there is an interaction between genotype and
368 sex. Thus, there is no propagation of the pattern seen in *hedgehog* through the network. In another
369 example, *Delta/Notch* is expected to repress *atonal*, but while *Delta/Notch* is significant for all
370 categories tested *atonal* is only significant for genotype, sex, and their interaction. It is possible that
371 this variation is being mitigated or dampened by other regulatory factors not assayed here, or that
372 certain aspects of genetic background are more or less sensitive to variation. For example, that fixed
373 variation between species dampens variation at *Delta/Notch* but sorting variation remains sensitive
374 between genotypes, which propagates to *atonal*.

375 It may be that all of this variation is within levels tolerated by the network, as it has been shown
376 that gene networks can have thresholds of variation, below which differences in expression are
377 effectively neutral. These thresholds can also be two sided, creating a sigmoidal curve the center of
378 which is neutral phenotypic space (Felix and Barkoulas 2015). Many studies have shown a relative
379 insensitivity to variation in gene dosage, for example in *Drosophila* early embryos the *bicoid* gradient
380 results in normal development at one to four dosages of the gene, but markedly abnormal
381 development at six or more (Namba et al. 1997; Liu et al. 2013; Lucas et al. 2013). It is also possible
382 that the cryptic evolution documented in these genes is in fact deleterious, and is being compensated
383 for elsewhere in the network. While most deleterious mutations are purged by selection, they may rise
384 in frequency due to genetic drift or hitchhiking, among other possible causes (McKenzie and Clarke
385 1988; Burch and Chao 1999; Estes and Lynch 2003; Chun and Fay 2011). This type of compensatory

386 mutation has been documented in microbial and animal systems (McKenzie et al. 1982; McKenzie
387 1993; Burch and Chao 1999; Moore et al. 2000; Estes and Lynch 2003; Maisnier-Patin and Andersson
388 2004; Stoebel et al. 2009; Brown et al. 2010; Charusanti et al. 2010; Estes et al. 2011; Szamecz et al.
389 2014). Recently cell cycle heterogeneity has been implicated in the appearance of widespread noise
390 in development, though that is less of problem here given that cell division is synchronized posterior
391 the MF and cells are at GI arrest within the MF (Kumar 2013; Keren et al. 2015).

392 Other than differences in the allometric relationship of eyes between males and females there has
393 been no documentation of sexual dimorphism in *Drosophila* eyes, which could potentially contribute to
394 the differences between sexes seen for some of the genes in the MF. However, we note that we
395 controlled for size of the imaginal disc in this study and the difference between males and females
396 seems to largely be driven by differences in maximum expression. Furthermore, the size of the eye
397 disc was not consistently significantly different between sexes. By one account female eyes in *D.*
398 *melanogaster* are smaller than expected based on allometry, while other work finds that the opposite
399 is the case in both *D. melanogaster* and *D. simulans* (Cowley and Atchley 1988; Posnien et al. 2012).
400 Body size is at least in part controlled by *Sex-lethal,* and sex specific development in somatic tissues
401 are governed by *doublesex* (Rideout et al. 2010; Mathews et al. 2017). We have detected *doublesex*
402 expression in the eye anterior to the MF, in cells prior to cell cycle arrest at the MF (Fig S2). It is
403 possible that an interaction between *doublesex* and *hairy*, *atonal*, *Delta*, or *hedgehog* is mediating the
404 change in cryptic evolution in regulatory logic between sexes. It is also possible that some of this
405 variation is not cryptic, and in fact has an undocumented effect on sex-specific development of the
406 eyes.

407 There have been other semi-quantitative approaches to studying spatial gene expression
408 patterns. In another study on *orthodenticle*, the authors found that the spatial and temporal pattern of
409 gene expression was conserved but the amount of gene product was not, though this work was not
410 strictly quantitative given that measurements were from *in situ* hybridization and reporter constructs
411 (Palsson et al. 2014). This is in contrast to our results which showed significant differences in the
412 spatial relationship between gene expression patterns between species. Other semi-quantitative

works on the *Drosophila* embryo using *in situ* hybridization found that the regulatory relationship between genes in the anterior-posterior blastoderm patterning network were conserved, despite differences between species in their spatio-temporal pattern (Fowlkes et al. 2011; Wunderlich et al. 2012). Here we find that the regulatory relationship between *atonal* and *hairy*, and their regulators *hedgehog* and *Delta*, has evolved between species, sexes, and genotypes.

In the past, the developmental approach to understanding gene networks has been to analyze large effect mutations and their qualitative downstream effects. This results in robust data on perturbed regulatory networks, but obfuscates information on more normal interrelationships among genes. Similarly, the evolutionary approach to development generally targets large changes that have occurred over broad phylogenetic distances (Kopp et al. 2000; Jeong et al. 2008; Rosenblum et al. 2010; Reed et al. 2011; Ito et al. 2013; Signor, Li, et al.; Yassin et al.). Here we take an entirely different approach by focusing on small, quantitative variation between genotypes and closely related species (Johnson 2006; Nunes et al. 2013). Using this approach, we were able to quantify the regulatory relationships among genes and to observe how these relationships are altered between genotypes, sexes and species. Reconciling the speed of this cryptic developmental evolution with the patterns of molecular evolution in the underlying genes will yield new insights on the rules governing microevolution of gene regulatory networks.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS: S. A. performed the staining and imaging of the eye discs, K. K. processed the imaging data, S.S. conceived of the experiment, analyzed the processed data and wrote the paper, S. N. conceived of the experiment, coordinated the research, and co-wrote the paper.

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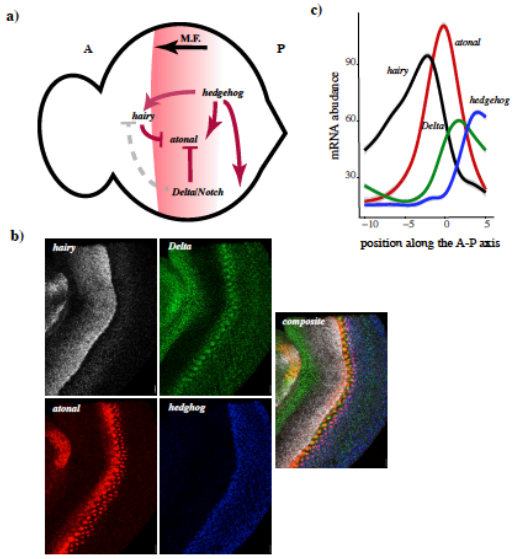

Figure 1. **a)** A summary of the eye patterning genes and pathway explored in this paper. The position of the MF is shown in red, and its direction of movement indicated below. Regulatory relationships are illustrated either as repression (bar) or activation (arrow). Regulatory relationships which are unclear are shown as gray dotted lines. **b)** Example images from the dataset, illustrating gene expression patterns of each gene. The composite image makes the additional point that we were able to analyze co-expression patterns of all four genes without needing to stain each gene in different samples and infer gene co-expression patterns. **c)** An illustration of the general expression pattern of each of the four genes in the study, along the anterior-posterior axis of the eye disc.

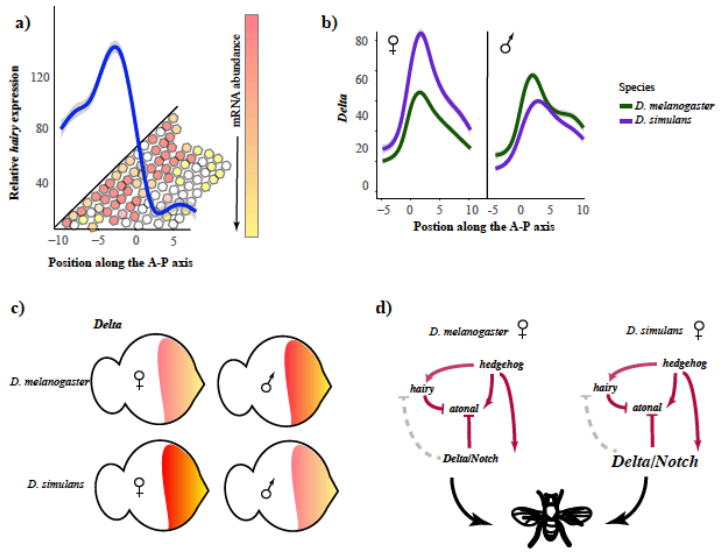

Figure 2. **a)** This is an example of a curve being fitted to the gene expression profiles, though note that the curve corresponds to the average in a given row (*x*-axis). The hexagons are intended to represent cells with varying amounts of *hairy* expression, from the highest (red) to the lowest (white). **b)** An illustration of variation in *Delta* expression between species and sexes. Curves shown are fitted to all genotypes within a sex and species with confidence intervals indicated in gray. **c)** An illustration using the imaginal disc of how *Delta* expression varied between species and sexes, with lower expression in *D. melanogaster* females and *D. simulans* males **d)** Cryptic evolution of *Delta* illustrated within the context of the gene network, illustrating how changes in *Delta* expression are not perturbing the gene network and result in phenotypically normal *Drosophila*.

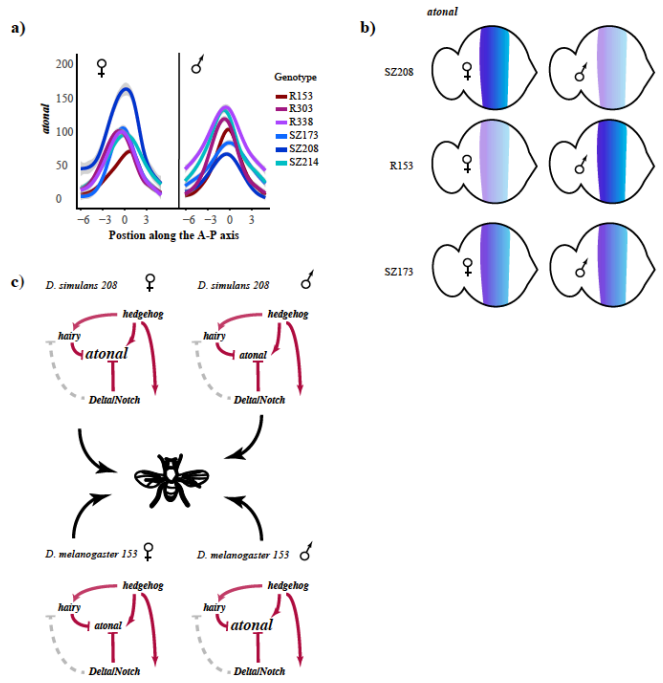

Figure 3. **a)** An illustration of cryptic variation in *atonal* expression between genotypes and sexes. Curves shown are fitted to each genotype and sex with confidence intervals indicated in gray. **c)** An illustration using the imaginal disc of how *atonal* expression varied between genotypes, with lower expression in females of *D. melanogaster* R153 and males of *D. simulans* Sz208. *D. simulans* Sz173 has lower expression than females of Sz208 but it is not sexually dimorphic. **d)** Cryptic evolution of *atonal* illustrated within the context of the gene network, illustrating how changes in *atonal* expression are not perturbing the gene network and result in phenotypically normal *Drosophila*.

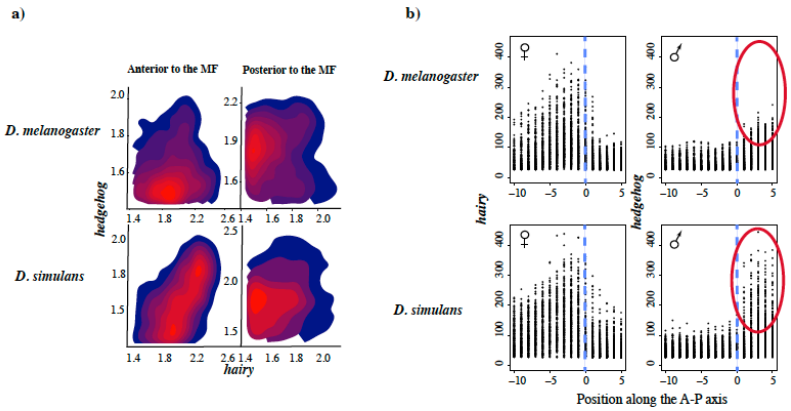

Figure 4. **a)** An example of cryptic variation in regulatory logic between *D. simulans* and *D. melanogaster* for *hairy* and *hedgehog*. The heat map illustrates the density of points, and thus reflects the frequency of a given co-expression profile between *hairy* and *hedgehog*. Gene expression values were log-transformed to better illustrate lower values and split between anterior to the MF and posterior to the MF. The split between the two regions was to investigate the possibility that *hedgehog* had a different regulatory relationship with *hairy* depending upon its relationship to the MF, given that *hedgehog* is thought to activate *hairy* long range and repress *hairy* short range. **b)** An illustration of the change in quantitative spatial expression of *hairy* and *hedgehog* between species and sexes, with the position of the center of the MF marked with a dotted blue line. The red circle emphasizes a large change in maximum *hedgehog* expression in males of the two species.

hairy

Effect	*numDF*	*denDF*	F-value	*p*-value
Species	8	35	5.1	**3×10^{-4}**
Genotype	32	152	2.07	**2×10^{-3}**
Sex	8	35	1.08	0.32
Species x Sex	8	35	1.94	0.08
Genotype x Sex	32	152	1.73	**0.02**

atonal

Effect	*numDF*	*denDF*	F-value	*p*-value
Species	8	35	1.53	0.18
Genotype	32	152	2.31	**4×10^{-4}**
Sex	8	35	2.6	0.02
Species x Sex	8	35	1.91	0.09
Genotype x Sex	32	152	1.73	**0.02**

Delta

Effect	*numDF*	*denDF*	F-value	*p*-value
Species	8	35	2.43	**0.03**
Genotype	32	152	2.07	**2×10^{-3}**
Sex	8	35	4.55	**7×10^{-4}**
Species x Sex	8	35	5.03	**3×10^{-4}**
Genotype x Sex	32	152	2.03	**2×10^{-3}**

hedgehog

Effect	*numDF*	*denDF*	F-value	*p*-value
Species	8	35	0.87	0.55
Genotype	32	152	2.28	**5×10^{-4}**
Sex	8	35	2.23	0.05
Species x Sex	8	35	2.88	0.01
Genotype x Sex	32	152	2.17	**1×10^{-3}**

Table 1: The results of the full model for each gene, significant *p*-values are indicated in bold, with gray shading.

hairy

Effect	*numDF*	*denDF*	F-value	*p*-value
Species	2	41	4.03	**0.25**
Genotype	8	84	1.2	0.31
Sex	2	41	3.95	**0.027**
Species x Sex	2	41	0.78	0.46
Genotype x Sex	8	84	1,11	0.37

atonal

Effect	*numDF*	*denDF*	F-value	*p*-value
Species	2	41	2.64	0.08
Genotype	8	84	5.43	**1.6×10^{-5}**
Sex	2	41	0.67	0.52
Species x Sex	2	41	8.09	**1×10^{-3}**
Genotype x Sex	8	84	2.41	**0.02**

Table 2: The results of the full model investigating changes in the regulatory relationship between *hairy*, *Delta*, and *hedgehog*, and *atonal*, *Delta*, and *hedgehog*. Significant *p*-values are indicated in bold, with gray shading.

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