Interactive Visualization of Metric Distortion in Nonlinear Data Embeddings using the `distortions` Package

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Abstract

Nonlinear dimensionality reduction methods like UMAP and ***t***-SNE can help to organize high-dimensional genomics data into manageable low-dimensional representations, like cell types or differentiation trajectories. Such reductions can be powerful, but inevitably introduce distortion. A growing body of work has demonstrated that this distortion can have serious consequences for downstream interpretation, for example, suggesting clusters that do not exist in the original data. Motivated by these developments, we implemented a software package, `distortions`, which builds on state-of-the-art methods for measuring local distortion and displays them in an intuitive and interactive way. Through case studies on simulated and real data, we find that the visualizations can help flag fragmented neighborhoods, support hyperparameter tuning, and enable method selection. We believe that this extra layer of information will help practitioners use nonlinear dimensionality reduction methods more confidently. The package documentation and notebooks reproducing all case studies are available online at https://krisrs1128.github.io/distortions/site/.

1 Background

Nonlinear dimensionality reduction methods like UMAP and t-SNE are central data visualization tools in modern biology. By projecting high-dimensional molecular profiles into lower dimensions, they reveal salient biological variation across cells. These methods support diverse applications, including developmental trajectory analysis, reference atlas construction, and disease characterization. They are included in widely used data analysis workflows like Scanpy [62] and Seurat [55] and have been popular in practice, reflecting their utility in modern biological research. Nonetheless, these methods have been controversial [5, 25, 32], because they can introduce distortions and artefacts. These shortcomings include exaggerating cluster differences, failing to capture density variation, and suggesting non-existent trajectories [10, 7, 60, 59, 17], which can complicate and cast doubts on the biological interpretation of the observed patterns, potentially leading to false discoveries.

Although alternative dimensionality reduction methods have been proposed that are arguably more principled, their adoption remains limited. For this reason, recent research has focused on wrapper methods designed to prevent artefacts and to support accurate embedding interpretation. These include improved method initialization [22], adaptations for visualization faithfulness [38, 29], automatic hyperparameter selection [63, 26], and statistical tests to flag problematic embedding regions [63, 26]. These methods provide valuable guidance for creating embedding visualizations. However, their static nature limits the amount of contextual information they can display. Nonlinear embedding distortions are local, direction-dependent –

stretching in some directions while contracting in others – and spatially variable, changing gradually from point to point or abruptly between clusters. This complexity makes it difficult for static visualizations to faithfully represent distortion context without inducing information overload. Moreover, while existing diagnostic methods can highlight problematic regions, the reasons underlying their selection (e.g., warped neighbor distances) must remain hidden to avoid visual clutter. Further, existing methods vary in their capacity to remove distortions or provide quantitative measures of the associated improvements.

To address these limitations, we introduce the `distortions` package, which uses interactive visualization to display the sources of distortion in nonlinear embeddings. We adopt a mathematically rigorous definition of local metric distortion, which is not tied to any particular data embedding algorithm [35], available in our package as `local_distortions()`. Our paper applies this measure to biological data for the first time. To render the rich information returned by `local_distortions()`, we introduce a version of the *focus-plus-context principle* [15, 46, 11], supporting the progressive and user-controlled disclosure of sources of distortion (like fragmented neighborhoods, defined below) based on user interaction, while maintaining the overall query context. This approach helps users interactively flag algorithmic artefacts and answer questions about them that are impossible to answer in full detail with static visualizations. Further, by introducing a new method for interactively isometrizing an embedding, we make it possible to obtain a distortion-free view of the underlying data's intrinsic geometry in the vicinity of the region of interest.

In summary, this paper makes the following contributions:

1. Applying state-of-the-art measures of local distortion from the manifold learning literature [44, 34, 35] to single-cell data for the first time. These methods reveal systematic differences in the interpretation of embedding distances across cell types and highlight contiguous neighborhoods that become fragmented during dimensionality reduction.
2. Demonstrating the practical utility of distortion measures in choosing between algorithms and hyperparameters. We find that these metrics support objective comparison of embedding results, and the accompanying visualizations provide insight into qualitatively different types of distortion.
3. Developing interactive visualizations that highlight distorted regions and enable local corrections. We introduce an isometrization method that allows users to interactively correct distortions locally within regions of interest. Additional focus-plus-context approaches reveal distorted neighborhoods based on user queries of summary visualizations.

We validate this functionality using data with known low-dimensional structure, then apply the package to three single-cell datasets, showing the potential for improved biological interpretation and nonlinear embedding method application. The package is hosted at https://pypi.org/project/distortions/ and documented at https://krisrs1128.github.io/distortions/site/.

1.1 Distortion estimation

To set up our results, we briefly review distortion estimation. Embedding methods aim to learn a low-dimensional, potentially nonlinear manifold on which the data lie. This manifold hypothesis is motivated by the fact that only certain patterns of gene expression are plausible, due to regulatory constraints. Geometrically, every point on the manifold can be mapped to a local coordinate system, called a *chart*. Biologically, the local coordinates are directions of shifting activity of latent biological processes. An ideal embedding method would perfectly recover these intrinsic charts, ensuring that distances on the biological manifold $\mathcal{M}$ are reflected in the embedding. Such a distance-preserving manifold embedding is called an *isometry*.

Even in linear dimensionality reduction, distances require careful interpretation. For example, in principal component analysis (PCA) plots, it is recommended that the axes be rescaled to reflect the relative variances explained by each component [39]. This issue becomes more difficult in nonlinear settings, where the interpretation of relative distances can vary locally across regions of the visualization [44]. Practical algorithms inevitably introduce distortion, systematically dilating some directions while compressing others. Depending on the direction of movement and the starting point, traveling the same distance in the embedding space might correspond to different distances along the manifold. Though we may not be able to avoid distortion, we can at least estimate it. Here we will call this estimate RMetric (Section 4.3 explains this name) and can be represented in various equivalent ways, as shown in Fig 1. For instance, the function `local_distortions()` returns RMetric as a matrix $\mathbf{H}^{(i)}$. The matrix $\mathbf{H}^{(i)}$ gives a quantitative measure of

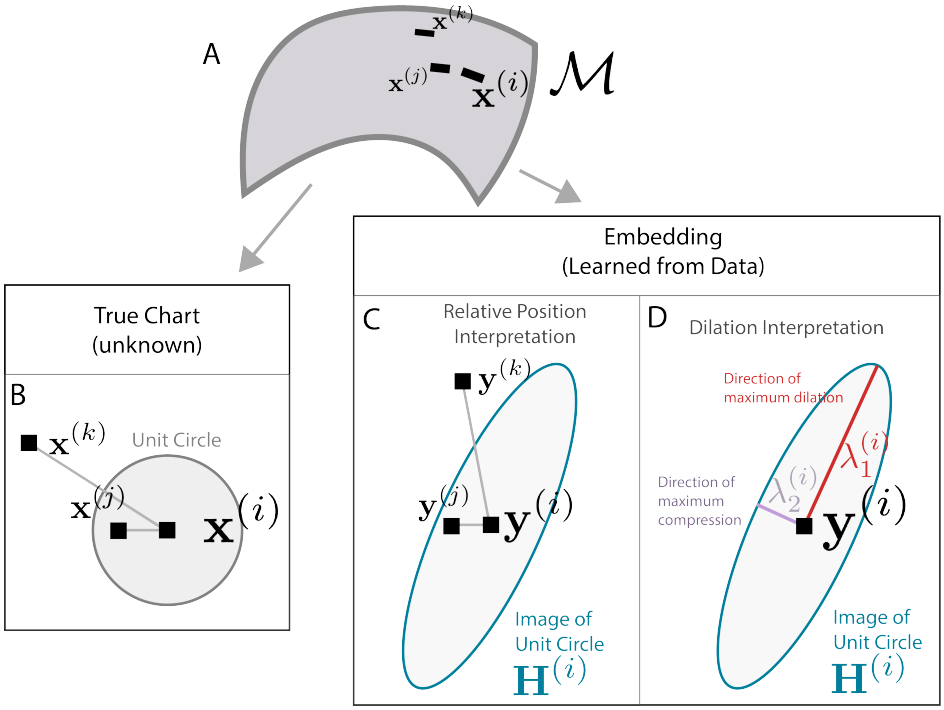

Fig. 1: Interpreting the matrices $\mathbf{H}^{(i)}$ generated by the RMetric algorithm. A. Three points on a hypothetical manifold $\mathcal{M}$. B. The three points from panel A arranged on one of the charts that defines $\mathcal{M}$. A unit circle with respect to the intrinsic metric around $\boldsymbol{x}^{(i)}$ is overlaid. C. The embedding algorithm distorts the unit circle from A. Though the distances and angles between samples have changed, the ratios of their distances to the unit circle have not. Though the true distortion around $\boldsymbol{y}^{(i)}$ is unknown, it can be estimated using $\mathbf{H}^{(i)}$ (blue ellipse). D. The same $\mathbf{H}^{(i)}$ as panel C, but emphasizing the directions and degree of maximum dilation and compression.

local distortion induced by an embedding method. A mathematical treatment is provided in the Methods section, and we refer to [36] for an in-depth discussion.

We visually encode the local distortions $\mathbf{H}^{(i)}$ with ellipses, displayed at each embedded point. Ellipses with circular shapes reflect regions where the embedding approximates an isometry. Thus the size and orientation of ellipses gives the principal directions of stretch/compression around point i, and the ellipse itself can be seen as a polar plot of the stretch (or compression) associated to each direction from point i (Fig 1). Specifically, larger ellipses appear when distances have been inflated and the major axes appear in the direction of most extreme dilation. This approach generalizes Tissot's indicatrix from cartography [23] to high-dimensional embedding algorithms.

2 Results

2.1 Detecting cluster-specific differences in local metrics

This section gives two examples where local metric visualization highlights systematic differences in embedding interpretation across clusters.

2.1.1 Gaussian mixtures with different variances We evaluate the recovery of intrinsic geometry in an embedding of a mixture of two Gaussians. We sampled 500 points each from two components: $\mathcal{N}\left(\mu_k, \sigma_k^2 I_2\right)$ where $\mu_A = (0,0)^\top$, $\mu_B = (30,0)^\top$, $\sigma_A = 10$, and $\sigma_B = 1$. The resulting mixture is shown in Fig 2A. We applied UMAP with 50 neighbors and a minimum distance of 0.5. Despite the large differences in variance, UMAP returned clusters with comparable sizes and densities (Fig 2B). We applied the RMetric algorithm with a geometric graph Laplacian constructed from the 50-nearest neighbor graph and rescaling $\epsilon = 1$. The affinity kernel radius was set to the mean of the original data distances between neighbors on this

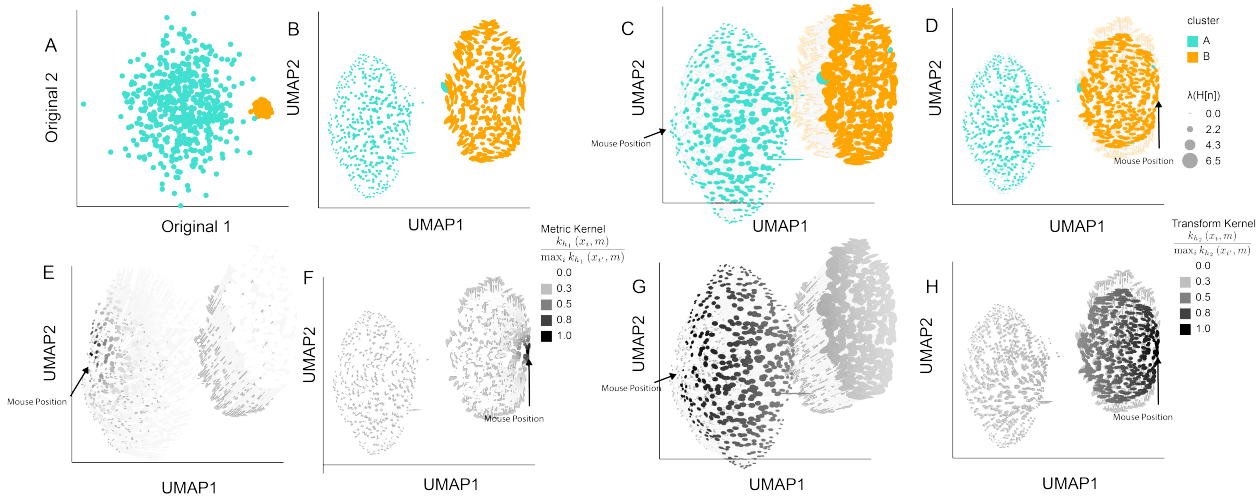

Fig. 2: Interactive isometrization partially restores density differences in an Gaussian mixture embedding. A. Original simulated data. Cluster B has smaller variance compared to Cluster A. B. Ellipse orientation and sizes encode differences in local metrics in the UMAP embedding. Smaller ellipses mean that the same distance in the embedding space corresponds to larger distances in the original data space. C. The isometrization interaction updates ellipse size and positions to reflect the local metric in the hovered-over region. This partially restores the difference between cluster variances that were lost in the initial embedding. D. The analogous isometrization when hovering over Cluster B (orange). Cluster B slightly shrinks, while Cluster A (blue) remains at its original size. E. The normalized kernel similarities defining the contribution of each $\mathbf{H}^{(i)}$ to the $\mathbf{H}^*$ used in the isometrization from panel B, as given in equation (4). F. The analog of panel E for the mouse interaction in Panel D. G. The normalized kernel similarities describing the extent to which each point is moved from its original position, as given in equation (5). The analog of panel G for the mouse interaction in panel D.

graph. To prevent samples with outlying $\left(\lambda_1^{(i)}, \lambda_2^{(i)}\right)$ from obscuring variation among the remaining points, we truncated $\lambda^{(i)}$ at a maximum value of 5; this affects 6 samples. To ensure that isometrization does not uniformly contract or expand neighborhoods across the visualization, we further divided all $\mathbf{H}^{(i)}$ by a scaling factor $\frac{1}{4N}\sum_{i'}\sum_{k,k'}\mathbf{H}^{(i')}_{kk'}$.

The resulting local metrics $\mathbf{H}^{(i)}$ are overlaid as ellipses in Fig 2B-H. Fig 2B shows that Cluster A has smaller ellipses than Cluster B, correctly reflecting the differences in cluster variance lost by the UMAP embedding. Fig 3 shows the coordinates of the truncated $\lambda^{(i)}$ plotted against one another. The clear separation in singular values across clusters reinforces the qualitative differences in ellipse sizes from Fig 2A. Fig 2C-D show the isometrized versions of Fig 2B when hovering over samples in Cluster A and B, respectively. These interactions recalculate the embedding locations and ellipse sizes to bring the local metrics $\mathbf{H}^{(i)}$ near the viewer's mouse position closer to the identity I_2, resulting in more circular ellipses. Thin grey lines connect the isometrized and the original embedding coordinates. When hovering over Cluster A, the samples in that cluster become spread further apart, while those in Cluster B are translated to the right but remain at their original density. In contrast, when hovering over Cluster B, the samples in that cluster contract while those in Cluster A remain close to their original positions.

More precisely, Fig 2C calculates a "local" metric $\mathbf{H}^*$ based on the weights in Fig 2E, which are high (darker) near the viewer's mouse position. An exact isometrization with respect to the current region of interest would update embedding coordinates $\boldsymbol{y}^{(i)}$ to $(\mathbf{H}^*)^{-\frac{1}{2}}\boldsymbol{y}^{(i)}$ [44] across the entire visualization. We instead restrict the transformation to areas close to the viewer's current interaction region. Informally, the darker points in Fig 2G are allowed to be updated more aggressively than the lighter points; the formal transformation is detailed in equation (5). The analogs of Fig 2E and G for the interaction in Fig 2D are given in Fig 2F and H.

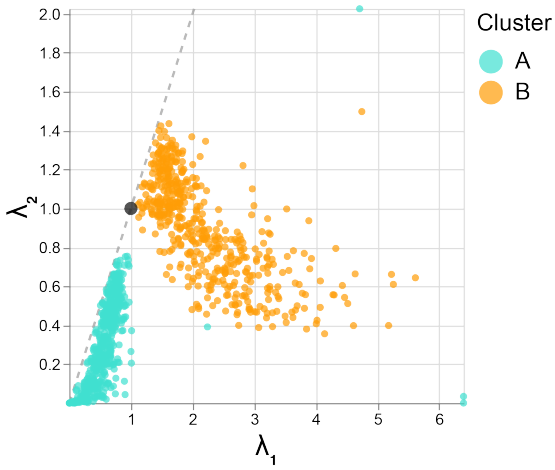

Fig. 3: Singular values $\lambda_1^{(i)}$ and $\lambda_2^{(i)}$ of the $\mathbf{H}^{(i)}$ estimated in Figure 2. The larger $\left(\lambda_1^{(i)}, \lambda_2^{(i)}\right)$ in Cluster B results in the larger ellipse sizes for that cluster, indicating that embedding distances for this cluster have been "spread out" relative to original, pre-embedding distances. This effect is consistent with the data shown in Figure 2A.

2.1.2 Local metrics vary across cell types in a PBMC atlas We next analyze peripheral mononuclear blood cell (PBMC) single-cell genomics data (2683 cells, 1838 genes) from 10X Genomics, with default processing from scanpy [50, 62], which included total sum scaling (TSS), a $\log(1+x)$ transformation, and highly variable gene filtering. We then applied UMAP (50 neighbors, minimum distance 0.5) to the PCA-denoised data (top 40 components). Cell types were identified with Leiden clustering and canonical marker genes CD79A and MS4A1 (B cells), FCER1A and CST3 (dendritic cells), GNLY and NKG7 (NK cells), FCGR3A (monocytes), IGJ (plasma cells), and CD3D (T cells). To estimate the data's intrinsic geometry, we applied RMetric using the geometric graph Laplacian constructed from the 50-nearest neighbor graph and rescaling $\epsilon = 5$. The affinity kernel radius was set to three times the mean of the original data distances within this graph. To prevent a few highly skewed ellipses from influencing the remaining points, we truncated the singular values $\left(\lambda_1^{(i)}, \lambda_2^{(i)}\right)$ from above at 2.5. We divide by the same $\frac{1}{4N}\sum_{i'}\sum_{k,k'}\mathbf{H}_{kk'}^{(i')}$ scaling factor as in Gaussian mixture example above.

The resulting ellipse-enriched embedding Fig 4A reveals systematic metric differences across cell types. T cells ellipses are oriented with major axes in the northwest/southeast direction, suggesting that distances orthogonal to this direction compressed in the embedding. In contrast, dendritic cells are generally oriented in the southwest/northeast direction, suggesting greater spread away from the monocytes than the embedding alone indicates. Fig 4D displays the truncated and rescaled singular values $\left(\lambda_1^{(i)}, \lambda_2^{(i)}\right)$. Points closer to the x-axis correspond to ellipses that are more eccentric than those near the center of the plot. Cell types differ systematically in this view as well, reinforcing our conclusion that local metrics are associated with cell type. The panel also draws attention to the high condition numbers among subsets of the T and NK cells. In contrast, many monocytes lie in the middle of the panel; these are the more circular embeddings in Fig 4A. Further, zooming into Fig 4D, Appendix Fig A1 reveals a second monocyte subset with smaller singular values. This pattern matches the bimodality in monocyte size distribution in Figure 4A. The UMAP embedding appears to have collapsed the two monocyte subsets, compressing distances for smaller points and dilating them for larger points. Though changing the visual markers from circles to ellipses is a small difference, the associated local metrics reveals valuable context about how UMAP warps intrinsic geometry across the visualization.

Fig 4 illustrates isometrizations for two cell types. Fig 4B - C show the embedding after placing the mouse over the cluster of NK cells (Fig 4B) and dendritic cells (Fig 4C), respectively. In both panels, the solid ellipses represent the updated embedding, while transparent ellipses and thin lines indicate the original positions and metrics. Isometrization over the NK cells expands the main NK cluster and increases the distance from the main cluster and the subset bridging T cells and NK cells, consistent with the northwest/southeast

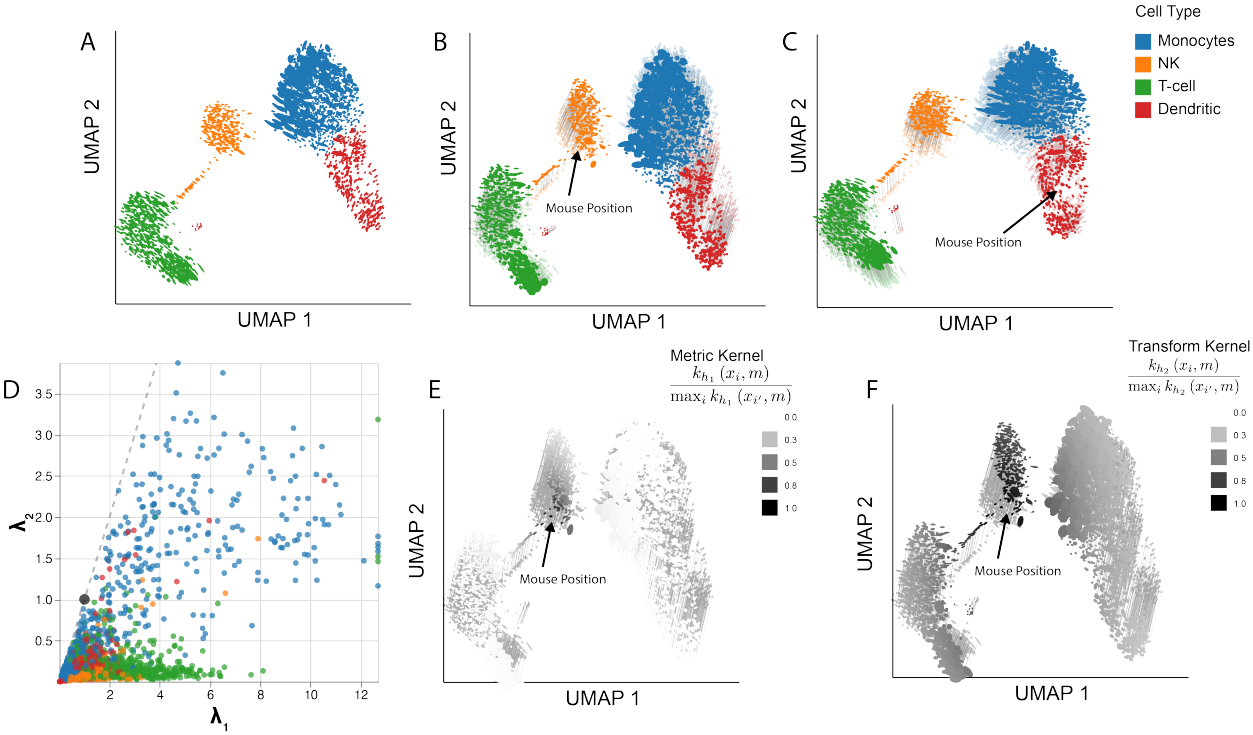

Fig. 4: Isometrization of the PBMC UMAP embeddings. A. Ellipse orientation and sizes vary systematically across regions of the embedding, indicating differences in local metrics within and between cell types. B. An updated version of panel A when the mouse is positioned over a subset of NK cells. Transparent ellipses mark the cells' original positions, and lines connect the original and updated locations. C. Isometrization when hovering over dendritic cells. D. The windsorized singular values $\lambda_1^{(i)}, \lambda_2^{(i)}$ associated with $\mathbf{H}^{(i)}$ across cells. Ellipse size is determined by $\lambda_1^{(i)}\lambda_2^{(i)}$ and eccentricity by $\lambda_1^{(i)}/\lambda_2^{(i)}$. A version that zooms into the region near the origin is given in Appendix Fig A1. E. The normalized kernel similarities defining the local metric $\mathbf{H}^*$ (equation (4)) when the mouse is placed as in panel C. F. The analog of panel E when the mouse is placed as in panel G. The normalized kernel similarities defining the region of transformation (equation (5)) when the mouse is placed as in panel C. H. The analog of panel G when the mouse is placed as in panel D.

orientation of ellipses in Fig 4A. Figs 4E - F display the normalized kernel similarities used to define the local metric $\mathbf{H}^*$ and the regions of transformation. The interaction over the dendritic cells (Fig 4C) increases the spread of cells close to the mouse position. Monocyte orientations are shifted slightly, but other cell types remain largely unchanged. Together, this suggests that the distortion of NK cells is more severe than that of dendritic cells in this choice of UMAP embedding.

2.2 Identifying fragmented neighborhoods

There is emerging evidence that nonlinear dimensionality reduction methods can introduce embedding discontinuities [26], meaning that some points that are nearby in the original space end up being embedded as far from one another as those that are originally very different. In particular, points that lie in the same neighborhood in the original space may be fragmented into different embedding regions, complicating the interpretation of between-cluster relationships. To address this, `distortions` provides metrics for quantifying fragmentation at the neighborhood and pair levels, based on the relationship between observed vs. embedding distances among nearby points in the original data space, as detailed in the Methods ("Identifying fragmented neighborhoods"). A focus-plus-context visualization approach [15, 24, 46] then allows viewer interactions to progressively reveal the extent of fragmentation within different embedding regions. We provide examples below.

2.2.1 Mammoth skeleton We evaluate this strategy on UMAP embeddings of a three-dimensional mammoth skeleton point cloud (Fig 5A) generated by the Smithsonian Museums in an effort to digitize their collection [40]. This dataset has been used to study the artifacts introduced by UMAP [7]. It has the advantage of being directly visualizable in three dimensions (Fig 5A). Further, the data exhibit patterns at both global and local scales. For example, a successful dimensionality reduction method must preserve global relationships, like the relative positions of tusk, skull, and legs, and also fine-scale differences, like the distinction between bones in the rib cage. We applied UMAP (50 neighbors, minimum distance 0.5) to embed the 10,000 samples available in these data. The RMetric algorithm was applied using a geometric graph Laplacian constructed from the 50-nearest neighbor graph and a rescaling $\epsilon = 5$. The affinity kernel radius was set to 3 times the mean of the original data distances between neighbors on this graph. The resulting $\mathbf{H}^{(i)}$ are directly encoded using ellipse dimensions without any post-processing. To identify distorted pairs, we used the boxplot display with outlier threshold set to 10×IQR. To identify distorted neighborhoods, we applied the bin-based screening metric (see Methods) with $\kappa = 0.1$ and $\sigma = 3$, requiring that at least 10% of neighbor distances be poorly preserved. This flags 425 potentially fragmented neighborhoods.

Fig 5B shows the boxplot widget overlaid on the UMAP. Reassuringly, the median embedding distances increase monotonically as the distances in the original space increase. However, within each bin, the distribution of embedding distances is skewed, especially for small distances in the original data space. Many pairs of points within these bins appear much further apart in the embedding than expected. In the current display, the viewer has selected the outliers within the three leftmost bins, highlighted in pink. The corresponding pairs are linked together in the main embedding view. These pairs include points on the left and right shoulders of the mammoth. These points are close to one another in three dimensions, but have been spread apart by the embedding. UMAP appears to reflect geodesic rather than Euclidean distance, effectively "flattening" the mammoth skeleton. In addition to the left and right shoulder pairs, the highlighted outliers include neighbors where one point lies on the last right-side rib bones and the other on the right side of the pelvis. UMAP embeds these adjacent bones further apart than appropriate, another distortion of the original structure.

The fragmented neighborhoods displays in Fig 5C confirms these findings. For example, the flattening of the shoulder is evident in the chain of fragmented neighborhoods in this region. Points further along the rib on the right and pelvis are also highlighted, as in the boxplot view. In this case, the viewer's mouse lies over the right shoulder of the mammoth. Unlike the boxplot view, this allows us to view all the neighbors of distorted points near the mouse, showing the neighbors along the chest and arm whose distances are not outlying in the boxplot. This view also reveals more isolated fragmentations, for example on the skull, arms, and tail. Hovering over these points shows that a large fraction of their neighbors have also been spread apart (e.g., left and right hand sides of the skull), even if their absolute embedding distances are not large enough to stand out in the boxplot interactions.

2.2.2 PBMC gene expression We next identify distorted embedding pairs in the PBMC example. The boxplot widget again reveals outliers when the original distances are small (Fig 5D). The viewer has brushed the top outliers within the two leftmost bins. This selection highlights pairs of T cells and monocytes that are close despite the apparent embedding separation. This view distinguishes between two regions with distorted pairs within the T cell cluster. Unlike the NK cells, which visibly cluster into two subtypes, these two subtypes of distorted T cells do not stand out from the main T cell cluster. Nonetheless, both subtypes are near the boundary of the overall cluster. This suggests that in high dimensions, the T cell cluster may be curved in a way that allows these subgroup to be closer to the monocytes than is visible in the embedding.

We next identify fragmented neighborhoods using the bin-based strategy ($L = 10$, $\kappa = 0.2$, $\sigma = 2$ threshold), resulting in 72 cells with fragmented neighborhoods. Fig 5E highlights fragmented NK cell neighborhoods that are separated from the main NK cluster. These distorted neighborhoods are centered on cells that are connected to both T cells and monocytes. These cells appear to bridge several cell types. Fig 5F shows a different subgroup of distorted NK cells. These cells lie along the NK cluster periphery, with many links to monocytes but few to T cells. This suggests that the sharp separation between the NK cells and monocytes may be an embedding artifact. A subset of dendritic cell are flagged as distorted, and hovering over them shows that they are neighbors with distant monocytes. Two subtypes of T cells are flagged as distorted; these largely overlap with those highlighted by the boxplot visualization in Fig 5D. Only four monocytes with fragmented neighborhoods are flagged, suggesting that this cluster does not suffer from

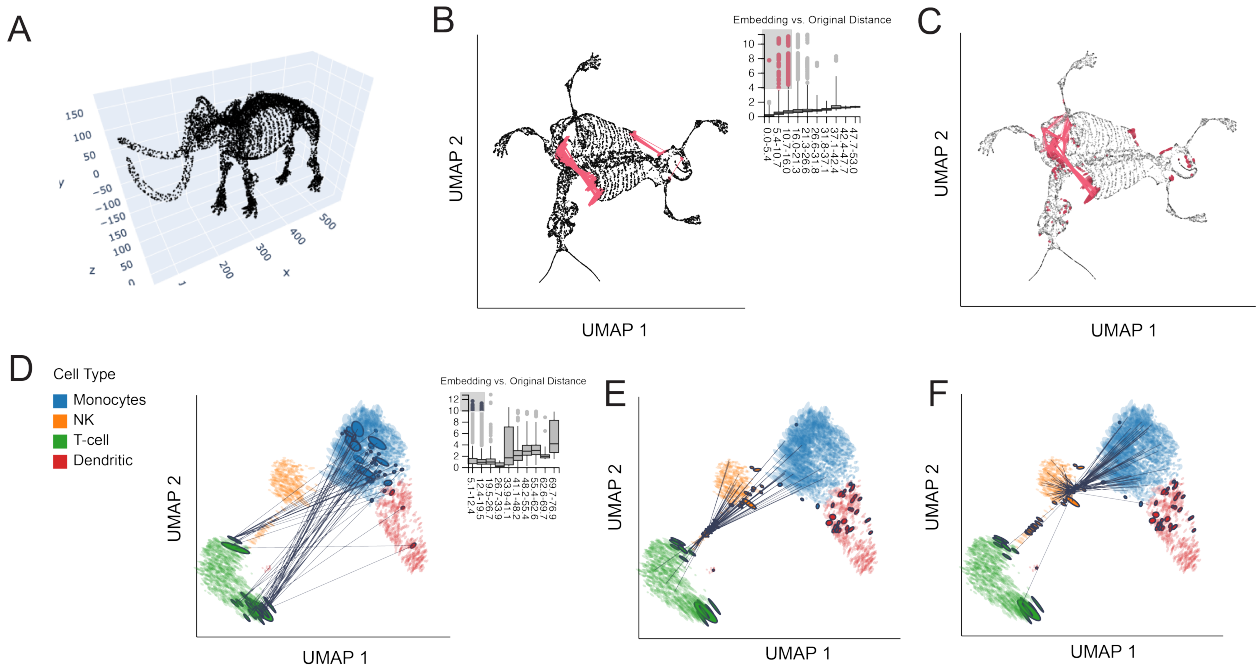

Fig. 5: Fragmented neighborhoods and links. A. The original mammoth point cloud, before applying any dimensionality reduction. B. Pairs with poorly preserved distances in the mammoth data. The viewer has selected pairs of points that are close to one another in the original space, but which are far apart in the embedding. C. Analogous poorly fragmented neighborhoods defined using the quantile smoothing criteria. D. Pairs with poorly preserved distances in the PBMC data. Distances between NK cells, T cells, and monocytes have been exaggerated by the UMAP embedding. E. A subgroup of NK cells with poorly preserved neighborhoods in the PBMC data. Cells close to the viewer's mouse interaction have neighbors spread across T cells, NK cells, and monocytes. F. A different subgroup of NK cells with fragmented neighborhoods. These cells often have neighbors lying on the far boundary of monocytes.

fragmentation as severely as the others. Interactive distortion visualization can reveal different degrees and types of distortion across and within cell types.

2.3 Guiding method selection and tuning

In addition to interpreting individual embedding visualizations, distortion metrics can be used to compare different embedding methods and hyperparameter choices. They give a quantitative way to judge how well competing embeddings preserve the original data's structure. Further, the interactivity implemented in `distortions` makes it possible to explore why distortions arise, without overwhelming viewers with all contextual information at once. In this section we use three example datasets to illustrate how distortion visualization can guide method selection and tuning.

2.3.1 Clarifying how hyperparameter choice impacts distortion Hyperparameters in nonlinear dimensionality reduction methods like UMAP and t-SNE can substantially influence results [22, 3, 60]. Distortion visualization can reveal the trade-offs imposed by specific choices. We evaluate this using the hydra cellular differentiation data from [53]. This study used single-cell RNA sequencing to measure gene expression of a developing hydra polyp, an organism notable for its regenerative ability. Fig 1 of their paper is a t-SNE that clarifies the cellular composition of hydra tissue as well as the differentiation paths from stem and progenitor cells to specialized cell types. To create a setting with greater statistical instability and where hyperparameters may play a more important role, we take a random sample of 2000 of the original 24,985 cells. As in the analysis of the PBMC data, we apply TSS normalization, a $\log(1+x)$ transformation, and filter to the top 1000 highly variable genes.

We apply t-SNE to the PCA denoised data (30 components) with perplexity values of either 80 or 500. To estimate distortion we use the RMetric algorithm with a geometric graph Laplacian with 50 nearest neighbors and a rescaling $\epsilon = 5$. The radius for the affinity kernel was set to three times the average original data distance in the 50-nearest neighbor graph. Both the boxplot widget and the neighborhood fragmentation visualizations suggest qualitatively different types of distortion across the two perplexity settings. At a perplexiy of 80, the fragmented neighborhoods occur in the gaps between cell type clusters (Fig 6A). Hovering over these neighborhoods reveals connections to adjacent cell types (Fig 6C), suggesting that some transitions in gene expression programs between cell types may in fact be more gradual. These blurrier transitions are captured at a perplexity of 500 (Fig 6B). However, at this hyperparameter value, many fragmented neighborhoods appear along the top and bottom boundaries of the embedding. Interacting with the display reveals that at this hyperparameter choice, the embedding fails to preserve distances between peripheral neighborhoods. For example, the viewer's selection in Fig 6D highlights neighbors that have been split across opposite sides of the visualization.

This reveals a basic trade-off: higher perplexity better reflects distances between main cell types but arbitrarily places rarer types, while lower perplexity correctly places these rare clusters correctly at the cost of inflating distances between common cell types. This additional context gives confidence in the conclusions drawn within specific regions of separate visualizations. These conclusions can still be reliable even when no single view preserves all relevant properties of the original high-dimensional data. Further, though the qualitative differences between hyperparameter choices would be difficult to obtain through manual inspection of the distances within the embedding output, the interactive display allows the differences to pop out naturally.

2.3.2 Comparing initialization strategies using distortion metrics Nonlinear dimensionality reduction methods can be sensitive to initialization strategies. Indeed, most single cell analysis packages use a preliminary dimensionality reduction step, like PCA or Laplacian eigenmaps [1], to initialize the optimization [22, 48]. We next study whether distortion metrics can detect issues arising due to poor initialization. To this end, we rerun the UMAP analysis of the PBMC data and consider a random, rather than the default spectral, initialization. All other dimensionality reduction and visualization hyperparameters remain as before. Fig 7 presents the results. Compared to Fig 4A, Fig 7A separates the NK cells into distinct groups falling on opposite sides of a main cluster of dendritic cells and monocytes. Brushing outlying neighbor distance pairs in the boxplot in Fig 7C highlights the fact that these two groups share many neighbors, and that the gap is artificial: many NK cells are neighbors with T cells despite lying on opposite sides of the plot. This suggests that the spectral initialization, which places T cells and NK cells adjacent to one another, better preserves their neighborhood relationships.

Fig 7D displays the fragmented neighborhoods, analogous to Fig 5E. Though some T-cell-adjacent NK cells had been flagged in the spectrally-initialized embedding, a larger number are distorted in the random initialization, including many with neighbors in the monocyte cluster. Further, the reduced y-axis range in Fig 7B relative to Fig 4D draws attention the greater eccentricity of ellipses in the random initialization, indicating larger distortion of local metrics. Importantly, none of these issues with the random initialization are detectable from the embedding coordinates alone. Both ellipse eccentricity and interaction with distortion summary metrics add context for understanding the importance of effective UMAP initialization.

2.3.3 Analyzing density preservation in a *Caenorhabditis elegans* cell atlas We applied our package to a single-cell atlas of *Caenorhabditis elegans* development [41], originally gathered to characterize the gene programs activated during different phases of embryogenesis in the *C. elegans* model system. These data include measurements on 86,024 cells, of which 93% have been manually annotated with cell types by the authors. Nonlinear embeddings applied to this dataset are known to obscure meaningful differences in local density, causing biologically meaningful cell types to appear sparser or denser than appropriate [38]. Therefore, we compared UMAP with the density-preserving algorithm DensMAP and use `distortions` to evaluate the improvement in local metric preservation. By utilizing our package's distortion summaries, we can highlight neighborhoods that are artificially fragmented in the embeddings and quantify the reduction in distortion made possible through the DensMAP algorithm.

Before applying either method, we applied a PCA denoising step which reduced the data to 100 dimensions. We applied both UMAP and DensMAP with 10 neighbors and a minimum distance of 0.5. To simplify the distortion analysis, we considered a random sample of 5000 cell embeddings from each of 10 randomly

chosen cell types (arcade, glia, pharyngeal neuron, intestinal and rectal muscle, M, excretory duct and pore, hypodermis, intestine, and rectal gland). This restriction is analogous to focusing on a subset of cell types when testing whether putative cell types are truly distinct or a visualization artifact [54, 12]. We used RMetric to estimate local metric distortion using a geometric graph Laplacian based on the 10-nearest neighbor graph and affinity kernel radius set to three times the average original neighbor distance in this graph. To identify distorted neighborhoods associated with each method, we apply the the bin-based strategy with $L = 10, \kappa = 0.4, \sigma = 3$ to flag points where a fraction of at least 40% of neighbors have embedding distance at least $3 \times$ IQR away from the median within the corresponding bin of original distances.

Fig 8A-B shows the resulting fragmented neighborhoods. In both embeddings, the degree of fragmentation varies by cell type. For example, pharyngeal neuron neighborhoods are often fragmented by both algorithms, while few fragmented neighborhoods are centered on hypodermis cells. Qualitatively, the DensMAP embedding is less compressed into tight clusters than UMAP, suggesting that UMAP may artificially inflate the embedding space densities. Despite using the same graphical encoding scales, the UMAP ellipses also appear to be less uniformly sized. The more compact "hair" plots reinforce this conclusion (Fig 8D-E). Each segment corresponds to one ellipse in panels A - B. The segments are oriented along the minor axis of the ellipses, and their lengths encode condition number $\lambda_1^{(i)}/\lambda_2^{(i)}$. We note that these hair-like graphical marks can be substituted for ellipses in all visualizations and interactions discussed above, including the boxplot and isometrization displays.

Further, the distortion metrics provide quantitative support of DensMAP's ability to preserve intrinsic geometric information. For example, the histogram in Fig 8C shows that the UMAP resulted in systematically larger metric condition numbers, suggesting more systematic metric distortion. Further, Fig 8F shows that across choices of κ, the DensMAP results in fewer fragmented neighborhoods than UMAP. In this case, the distortion metrics led to a stable conclusion across hyperparameters. However, more generally, whether a neighborhood is flagged as fragmented can be dependent on the choices (L, κ, σ), and local metric estimates like $\lambda^{(i)}$ can depend on the graph Laplacian neighborhood and radius hyperparameter choices. We have followed the recommendations discussed in [44], but it is worth considering that the estimated degree of distortion can be dependent on hyperparameter choices.

2.4 Software architecture and extensibility

Considering that no single definition of distortion exists for nonlinear dimensionality reduction, the `distortions` package adopts a "loosely coupled" design to ensure extensibility [14]. Each visualization accepts viewer-provided specifications of fragmented neighborhoods or links. Alternative distortion metrics can be implemented in independent functions as long as their formats are consistent. Similarly, visualizations can composed from viewer-specified graphical marks and interactions, similar in spirit to ggplot2 [61] and altair [57]. For example, consider the interactions with fragmented neighborhoods of the PBMC data in Fig 5E - F. If the distorted neighborhoods are stored in a dictionary `N`, then the interactive plot can be created with

```
dplot(embedding)\
    .mapping(x="embedding_0", y="embedding_1", color="cell_type")\
    .geom_ellipse()\
    .inter_edge_link(N=N)
```

and the result will appear in a jupyter notebook cell.

This loose coupling also simplifies the application of our visualization to other distortion summarization approaches. We illustrate this by using the scDEED algorithm [63] to flag dubious cells in a t-SNE embedding of the PBMC data (Fig 9A). This figure was generated by applying the default scDEED workflow to the PBMC data, adding local metrics $\mathbf{H}^{(i)}$ to the resulting embeddings, and replacing `embedding` and `N` in the call with the corresponding scDEED output. The resulting visualization is consistent with expectations – by hovering the mouse close to the scDEED flagged cells, we see the these cells often have neighbors in the original space that are placed far apart in the embedding space (Fig 9B). We note that no such interactive display has previously been available for output from the scDEED package.

We can also customize the graphical marks, styling, and labels in a format familiar to to ggplot2 and altair users. For example, the visualization from the code block above can be customized using

```
dplot(embedding, width=440, height=340)\ # custom plot size
    .mapping(x="embedding_0", y="embedding_1", color="cell_type")\
    .geom_ellipse(radiusMax=15, radiusMin=1)\ # custom point size
    .inter_edge_link(N=N, threshold=.1, strokeWidth=0.4)\ # narrower interaction window
    .scale_color(legendTextSize=15)\ # increase legend size
    .labs(x="UMAP 1", y="UMAP 2") # custom labels
```

Further, we can switch from the fragmented neighborhood to the boxplot interaction (Fig 5D) by simply substituting the `inter_edge_link` call with `inter_boxplot`. This modular approach also enables the specification of new graphical marks and interactivity. For example, for large datasets, ellipses can be replaced with line segments, as in Fig 8D - E. This more compact encoding of local distortions is accomplished by substituting the `geom_ellipse` mark with `geom_hair`.

3 Summary and conclusions

Nonlinear embedding visualizations have been essential to progress in high-throughput biology, offering visual overviews that have guided advances in diverse applications like cell atlas construction [9, 45], cell differentiation trajectories [4, 13], and functional diversity mapping in metagenomes [51]. However, their potential for misinterpretation is well-documented [10, 60, 5, 22]. The community has made significant progress in characterizing and minimizing distortion [38, 63, 26, 29, 18], and the `distortions` package offers an interactive visualization toolbox that draws from manifold learning concepts and complements these advances.

Moderate distortions are accurately characterized by the RMetric algorithm, whose results can be graphically encoded in ellipse or hair plots, while more severe distortions are flagged via fragmented neighborhood plots. RMetric emphasizes how the intrinsic geometry is warped across different regions of the embedding space, alerting analysts to failures in density preservation and compression/dilation in certain embedding directions (Fig 2). Further, by flagging fragmented neighborhoods, we could identify clusters that are more closely related in the original data space than the embedding suggests. In the PBMC fragmentation example (Fig 5D-F), we found that a subset of T cells had many neighbors coming from the monocyte cluster, despite these clusters appearing on the opposite sides of the embedding visualization. Further, interaction with distortion metrics highlighted trade-offs between the types of distortion introduced by different hyperparameter choices (Fig 6). Finally, local isometrization offers the scientist a kind of magnifying glass into the local geometry of the original data, making it possible to zoom in and query low-level sample relationships that can be lost in global reductions.

We acknowledge limitations in our approach. For instance, our summaries depend on viewer-specified hyperparameters, like the number of bins L or neighborhood fraction κ in the bin-based fragmented neighborhood definition Regarding distortion, while the local distortion RMetric is a well-defined differential geometric quantity, measuring distortions at larger scales is open to subjective preferences. For example, the fragmented neighborhood definition relies on distances in the original high-dimensional space, while alternatives could consider geodesic distances along the original manifold embedded in the high-dimensional spaces. Pairs of points could be flagged by outlierness, or by constructing a neighborhood graph in the embedding space and comparing the two.

Future work should ensure that a variety of long-range distortion measures are covered. Our modular software architecture will support straightforward extensions to new definitions and visualization layers. We expect that continued effort in this space will result in visualization techniques that can allow analysts to gain valuable insights from exploratory overviews while contextualizing their inherent limitations. While nonlinear dimensionality reduction methods cannot fully preserve all metric properties from the original data space, these exploratory views can guide more appropriate interpretation, allowing scientists to communicate results confidently and avoid the pitfalls of false discoveries due to algorithmic artefacts. By overlaying quantitative summaries of the distortion introduced by embedding algorithms, the `distortions` package aids researcher

intuition and facilitates critical evaluation of the embedding visualizations that have become standard in modern biological analysis.

4 Methods

4.1 Notation

In the following, matrices will be denoted in bold uppercase letters, e.g. $\boldsymbol{A}$, vectors in bold lowercase, e.g. $\boldsymbol{v}$, vector and matrix elements by additional subscripts, e.g. $\boldsymbol{A}_{ii'}$, and other scalars by unbolded Latin and Greek letters. The index i will be reserved for denoting the ith data point, and it will be used as a superscript on vectors and matrices associated with it. Thus, the original data is $\boldsymbol{x}^{(1)}, \ldots \boldsymbol{x}^{(i)}, \ldots \boldsymbol{x}^{(n)} \in \mathbb{R}^D$, where n is the sample size and D is the dimension of the data. The embedded data points are denoted $\boldsymbol{y}^{(1)}, \ldots\ldots \boldsymbol{y}^{(n)} \in \mathbb{R}^d$, where $d \leq D$ is the *embedding dimension*. Here we formally define the variables that underlie the algorithms in the `distortions` package. For more background on the statistical and mathematical basis of embedding algorithms, the reader is referred to the [35] review.

4.2 Neighborhood graph

Embedding algorithms such as UMAP [33], Isomap [56], t-SNE [30], DiffusionMaps [8], or LTSA [58] each output different embeddings $\boldsymbol{y}^{(1:n)}$, but they all start from the same data representation, which is the *neighborhood graph*. Specifically, the first step in embedding data as well as in analyzing an embedding is to find neighbors of each data point $\boldsymbol{x}^{(i)}$. This leads to the construction of the neighborhood graph as follows. Every data point $\boldsymbol{x}^{(i)}$ represents a node in this graph, and two nodes are connected by an edge if their corresponding data points are neighbors. We use $\mathcal{N}_i$ to denote the neighbors of $\boldsymbol{x}^{(i)}$ and $k_i = |\mathcal{N}_i|$ be the number of neighbors of $\boldsymbol{x}^{(i)}$. This graph, with suitable weights that summarize the local geometric and topological information in the data, is the typical input to a nonlinear dimension reduction algorithm.

There are two usual ways to define neighbors. In the *k-nearest neighbor (k-NN) graph*, $\boldsymbol{x}^{(i')}$ is the neighbor of $\boldsymbol{x}^{(i)}$ iff $\boldsymbol{x}^{(i')}$ is among the closest k points to $\boldsymbol{x}^{(i)}$. In a *radius-neighbor graph*, $\boldsymbol{x}^{(i')}$ is a neighbor of $\boldsymbol{x}^{(i)}$ iff $||\boldsymbol{x}^{(i)} - \boldsymbol{x}^{(i')}|| \leq r$, with r a parameter that defines the neighborhood scale. The k-NN graph has many computational advantages since it is connected for any $k > 1$ and each node has between k and $2k - 1$ neighbors (including itself). Many software packages are available to construct (approximate) k-NN graphs fast for large data [16, 6, 37].

The distances between neighbors are stored in the distance matrix $\mathbf{A}$, with $\mathbf{A}_{ii'}$ being the distance $||\boldsymbol{x}^{(i)} - \boldsymbol{x}^{(i')}||$ if $\boldsymbol{x}^{(i')} \in \mathcal{N}_i$, and infinity if $\boldsymbol{x}^{(i')}$ is not a neighbor of $\boldsymbol{x}^{(i)}$. For biological data analysis, specialized distance functions can replace the generic Euclidean distance [27, 21, 64, 19]. From $\mathbf{A}$, another data representation is calculated, in the form of an $n \times n$ matrix of weights that are decreasing with distances. This is called the *similarity matrix*. The weights are given by a *kernel function* [52], for example, the Gaussian kernel, defined as

$$\mathbf{K}_{ii'} := \begin{cases} \exp\left(-\frac{||\boldsymbol{x}^{(i)} - \boldsymbol{x}^{(i')}||^2}{h^2}\right), & \boldsymbol{x}^{(i')} \in \mathcal{N}_i, \\ 0, & \text{otherwise.} \end{cases} \tag{1}$$

In the above, h, the kernel width, is another hyperparameter that must be tuned. Note that, even if $\mathcal{N}_i$ would trivially contain all the data points, the similarity $\mathbf{K}_{ii'}$ would be vanishingly small for faraway data points. Therefore, (1) effectively defines a radius-neighbor graph with $r \propto h$. Hence, a rule of thumb is to select r to be a small multiple of h (e.g., $r \approx 3h$–$10h$) [35]. [1]

The neighborhood graph augmented with the distance matrix $\mathbf{A}$ or with similarity matrix $\mathbf{K}$ has many uses:

1. As stated above, it serves as a starting point for embedding algorithms.
2. In this paper, $\mathbf{K}$ is used to calculate the local distortion.
3. In this paper, $\mathbf{A}$ is used to detect the fragmented neighborhoods.

[1] Sometimes, the simple similarity

$$\mathbf{K}_{ii'} := \begin{cases} 1, & \boldsymbol{x}^{(i')} \in \mathcal{N}_i, \\ 0, & \text{otherwise} \end{cases} \tag{2}$$

is used. This similarity matrix $\mathbf{K}$ is the unweighted adjacency matrix of the neighborhood graph, and completely ignores the distances.

4. Neighborhood graphs are also used in estimating the intrinsic dimension, in Topological Data Analysis, namely in finding the loops and hollows in the data, as well as in other Geometric Data Analysis tasks.

While most embedding algorithms can take as input both types of neighborhood graphs (or resulting distance or similarity matrices), the embeddings obtained will be influenced by the type of graph and by the hyperparameter value used with it. For other uses, one type of graph or another may be optimal. In particular, for the purpose of estimating distortion, it is necessary to use the radius-neighbor graph, as this guarantees the distortion estimated is unbiased.

4.3 Distortion estimation with the Dual Pushforward Riemannian Metric

The distortion estimation function `local_distortions()` implements the algorithm introduced by [43]. Given an embedding $\boldsymbol{y}^{(1:n)}$ of data $\boldsymbol{x}^{(1:n)}$ with similarity matrix $\mathbf{K}$ computed from radius-neighbor graph, `local_distortions()` outputs for each embedding point $\boldsymbol{y}^{(i)}$ a $d \times d$ matrix $\mathbf{V}^{(i)}$ whose column $\boldsymbol{v}_1^{(i)}, \dots \boldsymbol{v}_d^{(i)}$ represent the *principal directions* of distortion at data point i. The stretch in direction $\boldsymbol{v}_j^{(i)}$ is given by $\lambda_j^{(i)}$. When $\lambda_j^{(i)} = 1$ there is no stretch, for $\lambda_j^{(i)} > 1$ the embedding stretches the data in direction $\boldsymbol{v}_j^{(i)}$, and for $0 < \lambda_j^{(i)} < 1$ the embedding shrinks the data along this direction. Thus, the principal directions are orthogonal directions in the embedding where the algorithm induces pure stretch. Intuitively, the values $\lambda_j^{(i)}$ represents the local unit of length in direction $\boldsymbol{v}_j^{(i)}$.

The principal directions and stretch values result from the eigendecomposition of the symmetric, positive definite matrix $\mathbf{H}^{(i)} = \mathbf{V}^{(i)} \operatorname{diag}\{\lambda_1^{(i)}, \dots \lambda_m^{(i)}\} \mathbf{V}^{(i^\top)}$ For an embedding with no distortion, namely an *isometric* embedding, $\mathbf{H}^{(i)} = \mathbf{I}_d$ the unit matrix.

The local correction at $\boldsymbol{y}^{(i)}$ is the inverse $\mathbf{G}^{(i)}$ of $\mathbf{H}^{(i)}$; in techical terms $\mathbf{G}^{(i)}$ is known as the *embedding (push-forward) Riemannian metric*. Obviously, the eigendecomposition of $\mathbf{G}^{(i)}$ is given by $\mathbf{V}^{(i)}$ and $1/\lambda_1^{(i)}, \dots 1/\lambda_m^{(i)}$. Thus, to correct the distortion in direction $\boldsymbol{y}^{(i')} - \boldsymbol{y}^{(i)}$, one calculates $\mathbf{G}^{(i)}(\boldsymbol{y}^{(i')} - \boldsymbol{y}^{(i)})$. The orientation and length of this vector with origin in $\boldsymbol{y}^{(i)}$ are the corrected direction and distance to nearby point $\boldsymbol{y}'$.

Hence, for any data embedding, it is sufficient to estimate, at all points $\boldsymbol{y}^{(1:n)}$, the matrices $\mathbf{G}^{(1:n)}$, which represent the auxiliary information enabling correct distance computations, as if working with the original data, even though the embedding may not have preserved them. The same $\mathbf{G}^{(1:n)}$ can be used to preserve not only geodesic distances but also other geometric quantities such as angles between curves in $\mathcal{M}$ or volumes of subsets of $\mathcal{M}$. Further uses of the distortion and correction matrices are described in [35, 43, 20], and here we present a corrected visulalization based on $\mathbf{G}^{(i)}$.

4.4 Computational complexity of RMetric

The complexity of the RMetric computation is dominated by the construction of the neighborhood graph. Since this graph is already computed for the purpose of embedding the data, we will only consider the overhead. Obtaining the similarity $\mathbf{K}$ involves a fixed set of operations per graph edge (i.e. calculating the kernel value), hence order m operations total, where m is the number of edges in the neighborhood graph. Further computations also are proportional to m. Computing the RMetric at point i requires $\sim k_i d^2$ operations, where k_i is, as above, the number of neighbors of i. Hence, obtaining the RMetric at all points requires $\sim md^2$ operations.[2] Further eigendecompositions and inversion of $\mathbf{H}^{(i)}$ are order d^3 per data point, hence nd^3 total.

Since the optimal neighborhood graph is a sparse graph (since it should only capture distance to nearby points and ignore the distances to far-away points), m is much smaller than the maximum value $n(n-1)/2$. In practice, on large data sets, we have always found that computing the RMetric is much faster than computing the embedding itself. The same is true for the isometrization algorithm, in which the overhead after RMetric computation is to apply a simple transformation to every embedded point.

[2] Since $\sum_i k_i = 2m$.

4.5 Selecting the hyperparameter h

We recommend [35] for a tutorial on the choice of parameters k and/or h (with r being a small multiple of h). An automatic method for choosing these parameters, reminiscent of cross-validation, was introduced by [43] and can be found in the `megaman` package https://mmp2.github.io/megaman/.

As a general rule of thumb, if a neighborhood graph results in a good embedding, then the neighborhood scale is the appropriate one for the RMetric as well. Hence, if the embedding is obtained via a radius-neighbor graph, then the same graph, or same $\mathbf{K}$ matrix should be used for `local_distortions()`. If a k-NN graph was used, then we recommend selecting h so that the row sums of $\mathbf{K}$ average k, the neighborhood parameter of the k-NN graph.

4.6 Identifying fragmented neighborhoods

To compare distances across the original and embedding space, let:

$$\mathcal{D} := \cup_{i=1}^{N} \left\{ \left(\|\boldsymbol{x}^{(i)} - \boldsymbol{x}^{(i')}\|, \|\boldsymbol{y}^{(i)} - \boldsymbol{y}^{(i')}\| \right) \in \mathbb{R}^2 \text{ for } i' \in \mathcal{N}_i \right\}$$

The `distortions` package supports two strategies for flagging neighbors with poorly preserved distances, which form the basis for defining fragmented neighborhoods.

Bin-based strategy

This approach partitions the original space distances into L evenly-sized bins and detects outliers in the embedding distances within each bin. Let $\pi_O(\mathcal{D})$ and $\pi_E(\mathcal{D})$ extract the original and embedding distances from $\mathcal{D}$, respectively. With $d_{\min} = \inf \pi_O(\mathcal{D})$ and $d_{\max} = \sup \pi_O(\mathcal{D})$, set the binwidth $w = \frac{1}{L}(d_{\max} - d_{\min})$ and partition the original data distances into intervals $I_l = [d_{\min} + w(l-1), d_{\min} + wl)$. The embedding distances within bin l are,

$$\mathcal{D}_l := \{d \in \mathcal{D} : \pi_O(d) \in I_l\}$$

where we have abused notation and applied the projection π_O to an individual distance tuple d. For each bin, we compute the interquartile range of associated embedding distances,

$$\mathrm{IQR}_l = Q_{0.75}(\pi_E(D_l)) - Q_{0.25}(\pi_E(D_l))$$

where Q_α extracts the α-quantile. A distance tuple $d \in \mathcal{D}$ is considered outlying if,

$$\pi_E(d) \notin [Q_{0.5}(\pi_E(D_l)) - \sigma\mathrm{IQR}_l, Q_{0.5}(\pi_E(D_l)) + \sigma\mathrm{IQR}_l]$$

where σ is controls the outlier threshold. Note that neighborhood distances can be considered outlying for two qualitatively different reasons. The embedding distance may be either too large, where truly neighboring points may be artificially spread apart. This is labeled $\mathcal{O}_l^+$ in Fig 10. Alternatively, they may be too small, where distant points are inappropriately collapsed on top of one another ($\mathcal{O}_l^-$ in Fig 10). All bin-l outliers are collected into the set $\mathcal{O}_l = \mathcal{O}_l^- \cup \mathcal{O}_l^+$.

We define fragmented neighborhoods using the outlier sets $\mathcal{O}_l$. We consider $\boldsymbol{y}^{(i)}$ to be the center of a fragmented neighborhood if,

$$\frac{\left| \left\{ i' : \left(\|\boldsymbol{x}^{(i)} - \boldsymbol{x}^{(i')}\|, \|\boldsymbol{y}^{(i)} - \boldsymbol{y}^{(i')}\| \right) \in \cup \mathcal{O}_l \right\} \cap \mathcal{N}_i \right|}{|\mathcal{N}_i|} \geq \kappa, \tag{3}$$

that is, if at least a fraction κ of the distances to its neighbors belong to at least one outlier set $\mathcal{O}_l$. This procedure is illustrated graphically in Fig 10.

Window-based strategy

The window-based strategy parallels the bin-based approach but uses running windows centered at each point. For each $d_0 \in \mathcal{D}$, we define a window $\mathcal{D}_{\text{win}}$ of the Δ nearest points with respect to $\pi_O(d_0)$. Within

each window, we compute the interquartile range (IQR) of the embedding distances and flag $d \in \mathcal{D}$ as an outlier if its embedding distance is more than σ IQRs from the median embedding distance in the window,

$$\pi_E(d) \notin [Q_{0.5}(\pi_E(\mathcal{D}_{\text{win}}(d_0))) - \sigma\text{IQR}(d_0),\ Q_{0.5}(\pi_E(\mathcal{D}_{\text{win}}(d_0))) + \sigma\text{IQR}(d_0)]$$

where $\text{IQR}(d)$ is the interquartile range of $\pi_E(\mathcal{D}_{\text{win}}(d))$. As with the bin-based strategy, a neighborhood is fragmented if at least a fraction κ of its neighbor pairs are flagged as outliers. This approach leads to smoother IQR boundaries compared to the bin-based approach, but is more computationally involved.

4.7 Focus-plus-context visual interaction

Adding distortion information to standard nonlinear embedding visualizations is challenging because the additional context can overwhelm an already complex visualization, making them even more difficult to understand. The `distortions` package addresses this challenge through the focus-plus-context principle [15, 24, 46]. This approach displays distortion information locally ("focus") while maintaining the broader visual overview ("context"). The region within which to display additional information is set by the viewer's interactions. We implement three forms of focus-plus-context interactivity, adapted to visualize fragmented neighborhoods, distance preservation, and local isometries, respectively.

4.7.1 Mouseover interactions to reveal fragmented neighborhoods This visualization supplements the original embedding overview by highlighting fragmented neighborhoods when their centers are hovered over. The centers may be defined using either the bin-based or window-based strategies described above. Before interaction, the fragmented neighborhood centers are highlighted with a distinctive stroke and color, guiding attention to regions of the embedding that are enriched with fragmentation. When the viewer's mouse is moved to a location $m \in \mathbb{R}^2$, all fragmented neighborhoods with centers within a distance δ of m are highlighted. Specifically, an edge is drawn between $\boldsymbol{y} \in \mathbb{R}^2$ and $\boldsymbol{y}' \in \mathbb{R}^2$ if:

1. $\|\boldsymbol{y} - m\| \leq \delta$.
2. $\boldsymbol{y}$ satisfies the fragmented neigorhood criterion (Equation 3).
3. $\boldsymbol{y}'$ is one of the top k neighbors of $\boldsymbol{y}$ in the original data space.

The neighbors $\boldsymbol{y}'$ are highlighted when their corresponding edge links are visible. The hyperparameters δ and k must be specified by the viewer. We default to the k used in the original embedding. Since the neighborhoods are fragmented, the associated edge links typically span large regions of the embedding space, making interactive updates necessary to prevent occlusion from overlapping edges.

4.7.2 Brush interactions to visualize distance preservation The focus-plus-context principle supports visualization of individual edges with poorly preserved distances, rather than entire neighborhoods. A brushable widget is placed alongside the main embedding visualization and displays boxplots that compare binned distances in the original data space (x-axis) with the distances in the embedding space (y-axis). This boxplot overview builds on the static approach of [22]. Boxplot whiskers are capped at σ times the IQR, with outliers beyond this range drawn as distinct points. The number of bins and σ are user-specified hyperparameters. As the brush is moved, the embedding visualization updates to highlight edges between neighbors with brushed and outlying embedding distances. The coordinated display allows viewers to focus on specific distorted neighbor pairs within the context given by the overview boxplots.

4.7.3 Mouseover interactions to update local isometries The `distortions` package supports interactions that provide an intuitive understanding of local metric differences induced by the embedding. In this view, the mouse's position is used to isometrize neighborhoods centered around it, providing an interactive, local version of the isometrization algorithm from [43]. Rather than modifying the entire embedding to induce an isometry around a selected point, this view updates the region around the mouse position. To isometrize the embedding with respect to sample i', [43] suggest the transformation,

$$\boldsymbol{y}^{(i)} \to \left(\mathbf{H}^{(i')}\right)^{-1} \boldsymbol{y}^{(i)}$$

For focus-plus-context interaction, we isometrize only samples near the mouse position m and smoothly interpolate the transformation as the mouse moves between samples. We implement,

$$\boldsymbol{y}^{(i)} \to k_{h_1}\left(\boldsymbol{y}^{(i)}, m\right)\tilde{\boldsymbol{y}}^{(i)} + \left(1 - k_{h_1}\left(\boldsymbol{y}^{(i)}, m\right)\right)\boldsymbol{y}^{(i)} \tag{4}$$

where,

$$\tilde{\boldsymbol{y}}^{(i)} := (\mathbf{H}^*)^{-1}\left(\boldsymbol{y}^{(i)} - m\right) + m \tag{5}$$

$$\mathbf{H}^* = \sum_{j=1}^{N}\left[\frac{k_{h_2}\left(\boldsymbol{y}^{(j)}, m\right)}{\sum_{j'=1}^{N} k_{h_2}\left(\boldsymbol{y}^{(j')}, m\right)}\right]\mathbf{H}^{(j)}. \tag{6}$$

and k_{h_g} denotes the Gaussian kernel with bandwidth h_g and $\mathbf{H}^*$ represents a local average of $\mathbf{H}^{(i)}$. The parameter h_1 controls the size of the region affected by isometrization, and h_2 controls the the region defining $\mathbf{H}^*$. This interactive coordinate system update is related to fisheye distortion [47], where local geometries are deliberately distorted to focus on specfic samples.

4.8 Package software architecture

The `distortions` software architecture must support low-level graphical marks, like ellipses, and interactions, like updating fragmented neighborhood links on mouseover, that are unavailable in existing visualization software. These customizations cannot come at the cost of support for higher-level data structures from modern computational biology software. To this end, we have defined a standalone javascript package (`distortions-js`, https://www.npmjs.com/package/distortions) for visual components and interactions, and a separate python package (`distortions`, https://pypi.org/project/distortions/) for higher-level algorithms and distortion computation. The javascript implementation is built around a `DistortionPlot` class, which exports a `mapping` method to encode dataset fields in the visual channels from each `geom*` element, as well as methods for each interaction type. All graphical marks are rendered as SVG elements on a parent canvas. This is necessary, as standard javascript plotting libraries like `vega` [49] and `observable plot` [42] do not support ellipse visualization. Brush events are implemented using the d3-brush library [2], and legends are drawn using d3-legend [28].

The python package connects to `distortions-js` through the `anywidget` [31] package, allowing interactive javascript execution within Jupyter and Quarto notebooks. This approach converts python dictionary objects storing data and plot specifications into javascript data structures for visualization in the browser or notebook cell. The embeddings can be passed in through an `AnnData` experimental object [62]. For intrinsic geometry estimation, we use the `megaman` package [34], which is designed for scalable nonlinear dimensionality reduction and supports estimation of the local metrics $\mathbf{H}^{(i)}$ for each sample i. Open source code can be found at https://github.com/krisrs1128/distortions and https://github.com/krisrs1128/distortions-js, documentation is given at https://krisrs1128.github.io/distortions/site/. We note that the packages can be used independently.

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A Supplementary Figures

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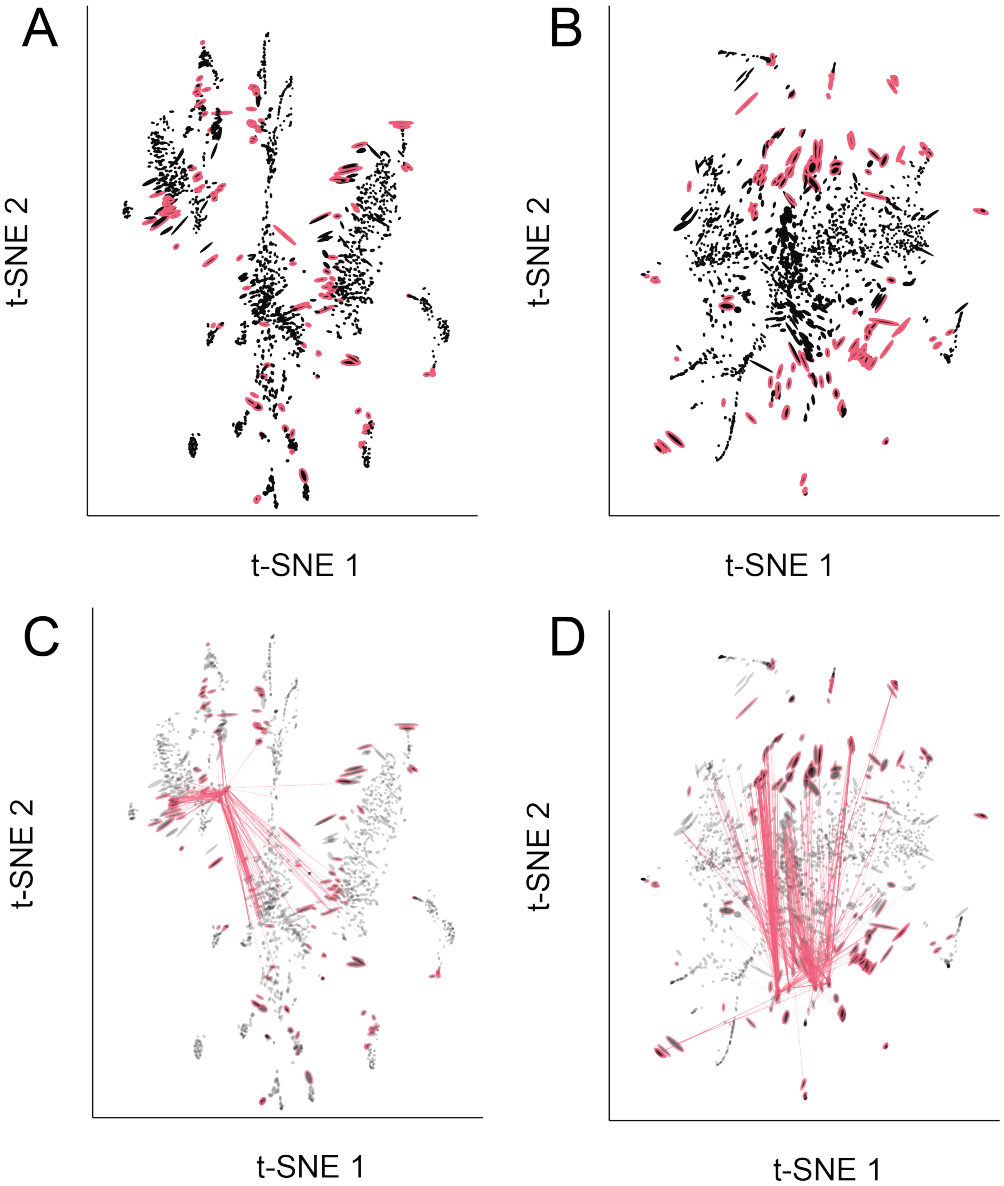

Fig. 6: Salient characteristics of distortion vary across hyperparameter settings. A. The *t*-SNE embedding of the hydra cell atlas dataset when perplexity hyperparameter is set to 80. This embedding exaggerates the distinction between cell type clusters. B. The analogous view when the *t*-SNE perplexity is set to 500. At this hyperparameter value, the main clusters are now more overlapping, but the distances along the periphery of the embedding are less well preserved. C. Hovering over fragmented neighborhoods near the bottom-left of the embedding in panel A shows that neighbors are often shared between clusters. D. Hovering over a fragmented neighborhood in Panel B shows that points near the periphery can be neighbors with points spread throughout the visualization.

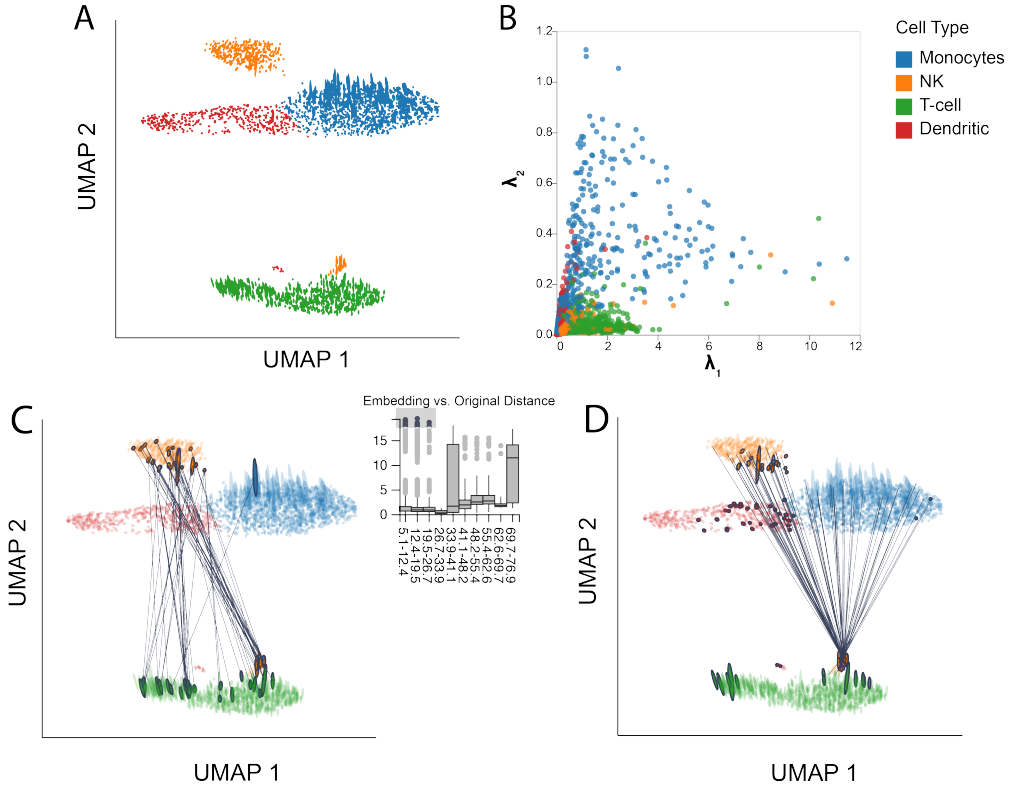

Fig. 7: Distortion visualizations highlight problems with randomly initialized UMAP. A. UMAP embedding of the PBMC data when applying random initialization. B. The analog of Fig 4D in the random initialization setting. The systematically larger condition numbers $\frac{\lambda_1}{\lambda_2}$ correspond to more eccentric ellipses in panel A. C. Brushing over pairs with large embedding vs. original distances highlights T-NK cell neighbors whose relative distances are poorly preserved. These cell types are placed close to one another in the spectral initialization of Fig 4. D. Hovering over the fragmented neighborhoods in the bottom right corner of the plot highlights NK cells with more neighbors among monocytes and NK cells, despite their close placement to T cells. This subtype of NK cells bridges the main NK cell cluster and the T cells in Figure 4.

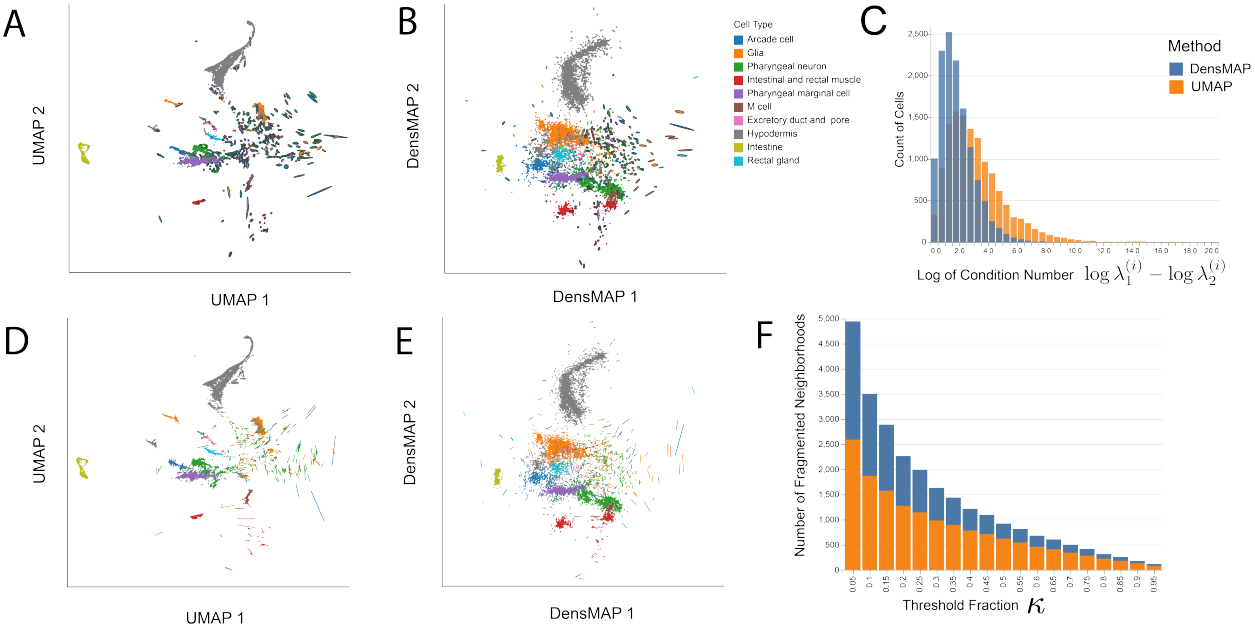

Fig. 8: Distortion metrics support comparison of UMAP and DensMAP embeddings. A. A UMAP embedding of the *C. elegans* dataset, subsampled as described in the main text. Ellipses represent the local metric $\mathbf{H}^{(i)}$ across observations. B. The analogous DensMAP visualization. C. Distribution of the (log-)condition numbers $\lambda_1^{(i)}/\lambda_2^{(i)}$ for the UMAP and DensMAP embeddings. Note that the two colors are semi-transparent and partially overlap in the range of low-condition numbers. A value of 0 indicates that the dilation/contraction is the same in all directions, while ce larger condition numbers correspond to more extreme eccentricity; hence this view indicates that DensMAP is more isotropic. D. The analog of panel A using "hair" graphical marks in place of ellipses, to reduce overplotting. The orientation of each segment is orthogonal to the ellipses' major axes, and the length encodes the condition numbers $\lambda_1^{(i)}/\lambda_2^{(i)}$. E. The analogous "hair" plot of panel B. F. A stacked barplot of the number of fragmented neighborhoods when applying DensMAP and UMAP when varying the threshold parameter κ used in neighborhood definition. Across a range of thresholds, DensMAP results in fewer fragmented neighborhoods compared to UMAP.

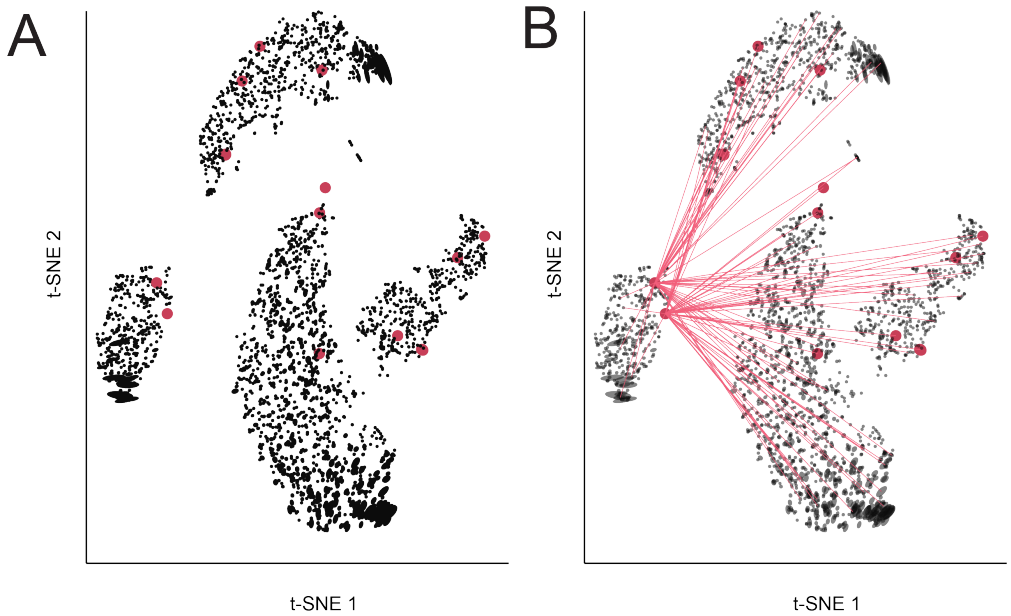

Fig. 9: Integrating scDEED dubious embeddings into visualizations made with the `distortions` package. A. The PBMC data with dubious cells flagged by scDEED. B. Hovering over the far left cluster reveals that the scDEED flagged cells have neighbors lying across multiple cell types that are distant in the embedding space. Our visualization functions are designed to accommodate alternative definitions of nonlinear embedding distortion.

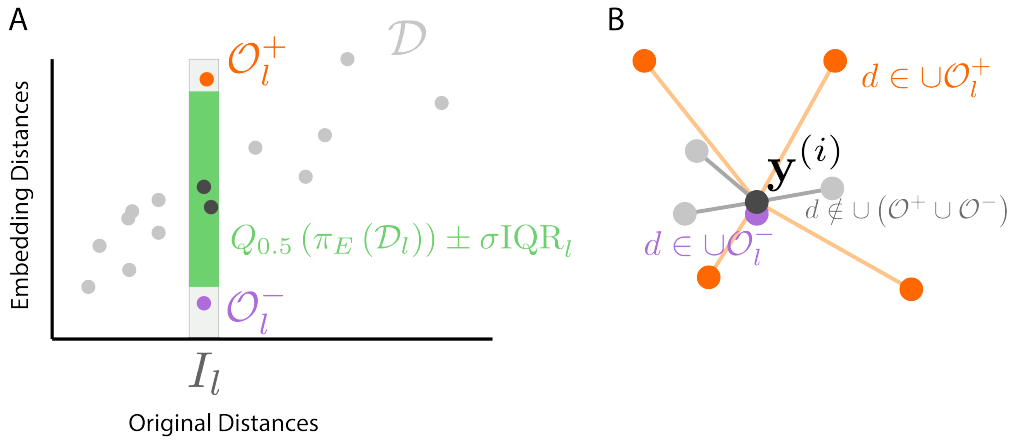

Fig. 10: A graphical illustration of strategies used to flag fragmented neighborhoods. A. In the bin-based strategy, the original distances are partitioned into evenly-sized intervals I_l. Within each bin, the interquartile range of embedding distances is computed. Original vs. embedding distance pairs that do not fall within a factor of σ times the IQR of the median embedding distance for that bin are flagged as outliers $\mathcal{O}_l$. B. In either the bin or window-based strategies, samples with many neighbor links belonging to $\cup_l \mathcal{O}_l$ are flagged as being the center of a fragmented neighborhood.

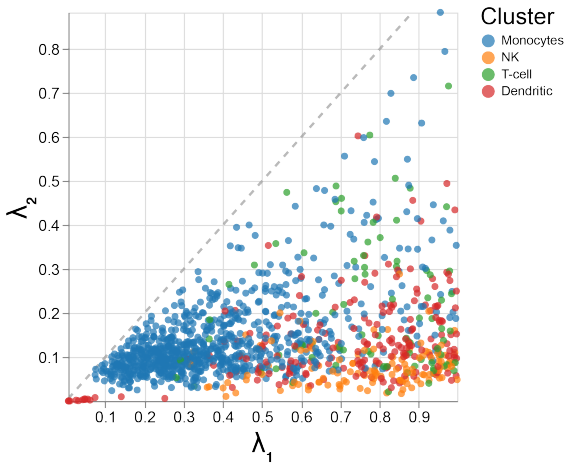

Fig. A1: A zoomed-in version of Fig 4D. We have restricted to cells with $\lambda_j^{(i)} < 1$. A second mode of smaller, less eccentric monocytes is visible in this view and contrasts with those that occupy the top right region of Fig 4D. We also see a small cluster of dendritic cells with singular values near the origin, corresponding to the small cluster placed near T cells in Figure 4A-C.