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Computerised Modelling for Developmental Biology

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An exploration with case studies

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To my dad

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	9
CHAPTER 1	
MODELLING TECHNIQUES FOR DEVELOPMENTAL BIOLOGY – AN OVERVIEW	11
1.1 MODELLING IN BIOLOGY	11
1.2 MODELLING PROPERTIES	12
1.3 VERBAL AND VISUAL MODELS	15
1.3.1 <i>Verbal models</i>	15
1.3.2 <i>Visual models</i>	18
1.4 ALGORITHMIC AND EQUATION BASED MODELS	22
1.4.1 <i>Algorithmic process models</i>	23
1.4.2 <i>Equation based models</i>	26
CHAPTER 2	31
A VISUAL MODEL: 3D RECONSTRUCTIONS OF CARDIAC DEVELOPMENT IN THE TURTLE <i>EMYS ORBICULARIS</i>	
2.1 INTRODUCTION	32
2.2 CURRENT KNOWLEDGE OF THE ADULT TURTLE HEART	33
2.3 MATERIALS AND METHODS	38
2.4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION	40
2.5 CONCLUSION	53
CHAPTER 3	57
A VISUAL MODEL AT HIGH RESOLUTION: OUTFLOW TRACT DEVELOPMENT IN THE TURTLE SPECIES <i>EMYS ORBICULARIS</i>	
3.1 INTRODUCTION	58
3.1.1 <i>Current knowledge of outflow tract development in reptiles</i>	58
3.2 MATERIALS AND METHODS	60
3.3 RESULTS	62
3.3.1 <i>Developmental origin of the cavum pulmonale and its relation to the outflow tract</i>	63
3.3.2 <i>Development and fusion of distal and proximal cushions</i>	66
3.3.3 <i>Development of the arterial arches and semilunar valves by means of the aortopulmonary septum</i>	67
3.4 CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION	71

CHAPTER 4	73
A VERBAL MODEL: AN ONTOLOGY SYSTEM FOR THE VERTEBRATE HEART	
4.1 INTRODUCTION	74
4.2 BIOLOGICAL BACKGROUND INFORMATION	75
4.2.1 <i>Anatomy</i>	76
4.2.2 <i>Physiology: shunting</i>	77
4.2.3 <i>Development</i>	78
4.3 ARCHITECTURE OF THE SYSTEM	78
4.3.1 <i>The anatomy ontology</i>	79
4.3.2 <i>Properties used in the anatomy ontology</i>	81
4.3.3 <i>The development ontology and its properties</i>	83
4.3.4 <i>Instances for specific species</i>	84
4.4 CASE STUDIES	85
4.4.1 <i>Cross-species comparisons</i>	85
4.4.2 <i>Developmental studies</i>	86
4.4.3 <i>Context-dependent queries for physiology</i>	87
4.4.4 <i>Querying using the interface and 3D visualisation of results</i>	90
4.5 CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK	92
CHAPTER 5	95
AN ALGORITHMIC PROCESS MODEL: MODELLING GRADIENTS USING PETRI NETS	
5.1 INTRODUCTION	96
5.2 PT-NETS WITH ACTIVATOR ARCS	96
5.3 BIOLOGICAL BACKGROUND AND MODELLING DECISIONS	99
5.3.1 <i>Mechanisms of biological gradient formation</i>	99
5.3.2 <i>Modelling decisions</i>	100
5.3.3 <i>Implementation</i>	102
5.4 GRADIENTS AND PETRI NETS	103
5.4.1 <i>Modelling solution</i>	103
5.4.2 <i>Implementation</i>	105
5.5 CONCLUSION	108
CHAPTER 6	111
COMBINING ASPECTS FROM ALGORITHMIC AND EQUATION BASED MODELLING: COMPLEMENTING DIFFERENTIAL EQUATION MODELS OF BIOLOGICAL GRADIENTS WITH PETRI NETS	
6.1 INTRODUCTION	112
6.2 DERIVATION OF PETRI NET MODEL PARAMETERS FROM A DISCRETISED DE MODEL	114
6.3 MODELLING SOLUTION	116

6.4 A CASE STUDY OF DPP GRADIENT FORMATION TO VALIDATE THE PETRI NET MODEL	120
6.5 CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION	122
CHAPTER 7	125
INTEGRATION OF MODELLING TECHNIQUES	
7.1 VERBAL AND VISUAL: COMBINING ONTOLOGIES WITH DIAGRAMS AND 3D MODELS	126
7.2 VERBAL AND ALGORITHMIC: COMBINING ONTOLOGIES WITH PETRI NETS	128
7.3 ALGORITHMIC AND VISUAL: COMBINING PETRI NETS WITH 3D MODELS	129
7.4 EQUATION BASED AND ALGORITHMIC: COMBINING DIFFERENTIAL EQUATIONS WITH PETRI NETS	130
7.5 INTEGRATING MODELS OF THE SAME MODELLING APPROACH	131
BIBLIOGRAPHY	135
SAMENVATTING	149
PUBLICATIONS	153
CURRICULUM VITAE	155
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	157

INTRODUCTION

Many studies in developmental biology rely on the construction, simulation and analysis of models. These models vary from schematic drawings, representing *e.g.* regulatory pathways, to complex systems of equations, enabling accurate quantitative analyses of processes. New modelling techniques are constantly being developed, as well as new applications for already existing techniques. In particular, a growing interest can be observed in employing computational modelling approaches to biological phenomena, exemplified by the recently emerged field of computational biology.

This dissertation presents a broad view of modelling approaches for developmental biology. In the first chapter an overview is given of modelling properties, relevant when selecting a particular modelling approach, followed by a review of frequently used modelling techniques in the field of developmental biology.

The first chapter establishes a context for the subsequent chapters, 2 to 6, in which a series of case studies is presented for various modelling approaches. The approaches have been selected on the basis of their particular merits for developmental biology and each represents a different category from the review in chapter 1. Since computation is becoming increasingly important for developmental biology, the case studies presented in this dissertation make use of computational and/or computer-assisted techniques. In chapters 2 and 3, 3D reconstructions are used to study heart development in the turtle. Chapter 4 describes a general ontology system for vertebrate heart development, incorporating the use of 3D reconstructions. Finally, chapters 5 and 6 present a modelling solution for the formation of biological gradients, using the algorithmic approach of Petri nets, combined with the equation based approach of differential equations.

In each of the case studies, optimization of captured knowledge and functionality was strived after, by taking advantage of the specific characteristics of the modelling approach. As a result, new ways of utilizing the techniques were developed, in particular for ontologies and Petri nets (*cf.* chapters 4, 5 and 6), and new insights were gained into biological phenomena, in particular for the cardiac development of the turtle (*cf.* chapter 2 and 3). Furthermore, attention was paid to integration of modelling approaches, in order to extend the functionality of the resulting models. Chapter 7 addresses this aspect of integration, for each of the separate instances. In this way the dissertation presents a broad investigation of new approaches to modelling structures and processes in developmental biology.

