



BAIR

BERKELEY ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE RESEARCH

Generative Models for Real-World Drug Discovery

Amy X. Lu

April 30th, 2025

PhD Dissertation Talk

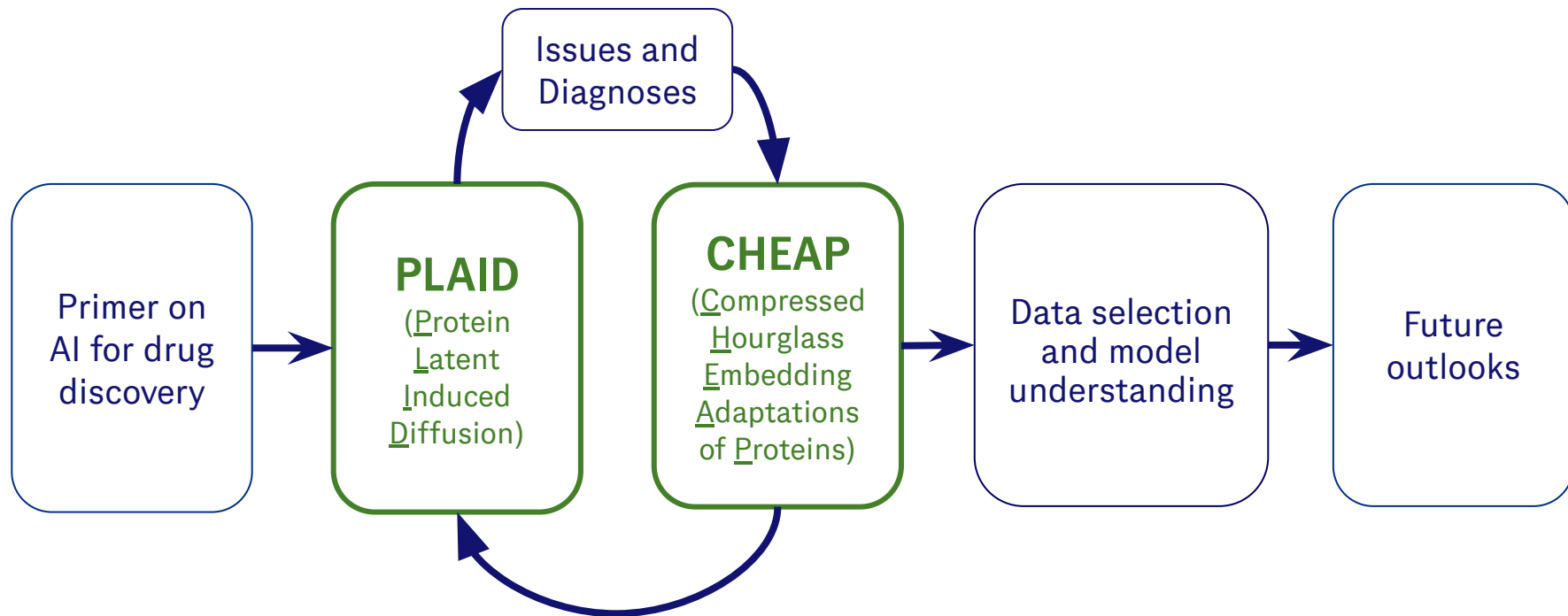
BAIR Seminar

→ biology as a data modality for
generative modeling

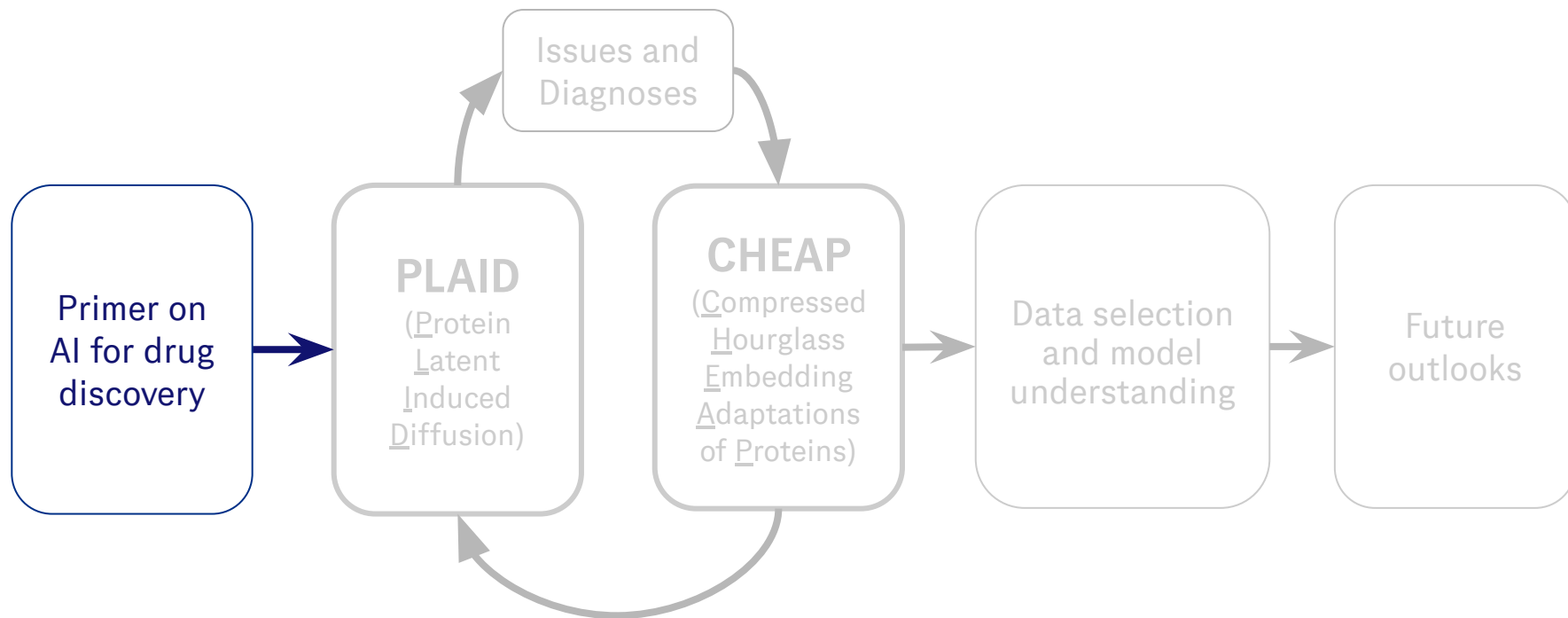
Generative Models for Real-World Drug Discovery

→ evaluations/tasks anchored
around drug discovery for
protein design

Agenda



Agenda



A simplified look at modern drug discovery...

GLOBAL HEALTH

From Jan. 2020: China Identifies New Virus Causing Pneumonialike Illness

The new coronavirus doesn't appear to be readily spread by humans, but researchers caution that more study is needed.



A simplified look at modern drug discovery...



(disease identification)

A simplified look at modern drug discovery...

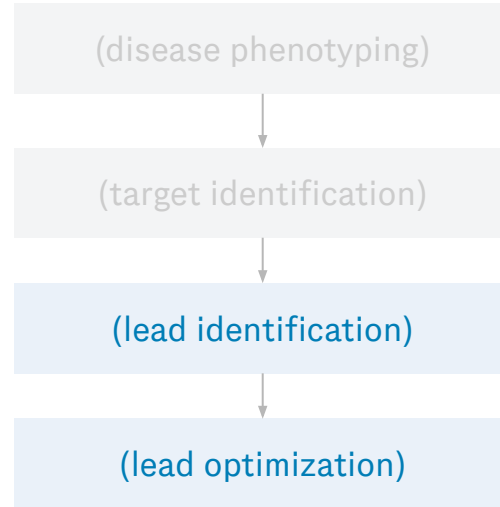


(disease identification)

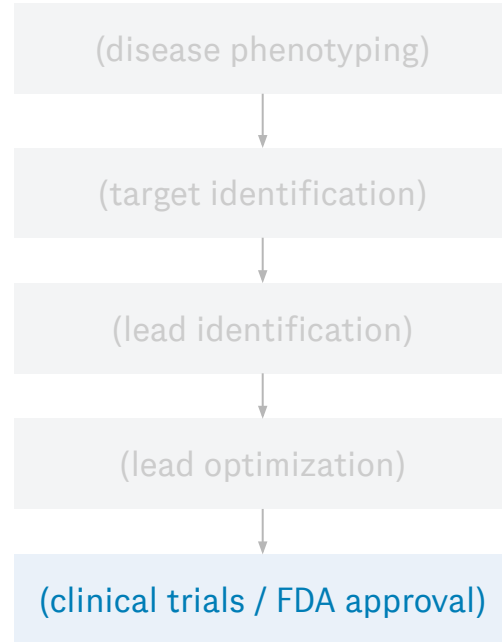


(target identification)

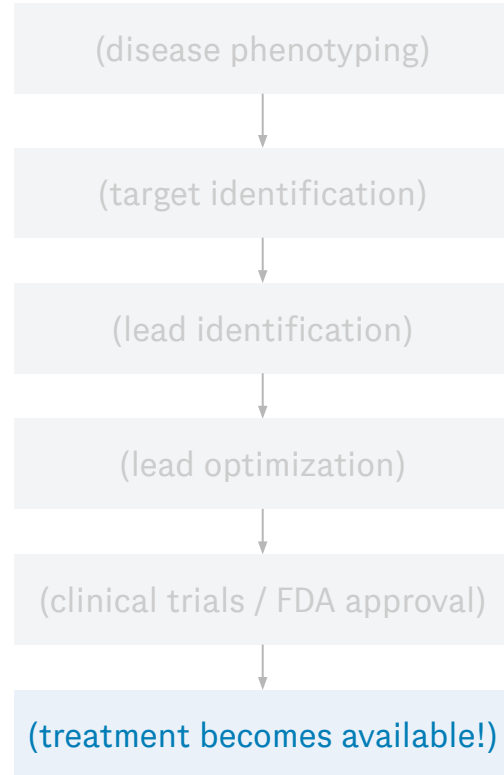
A simplified look at modern drug discovery...



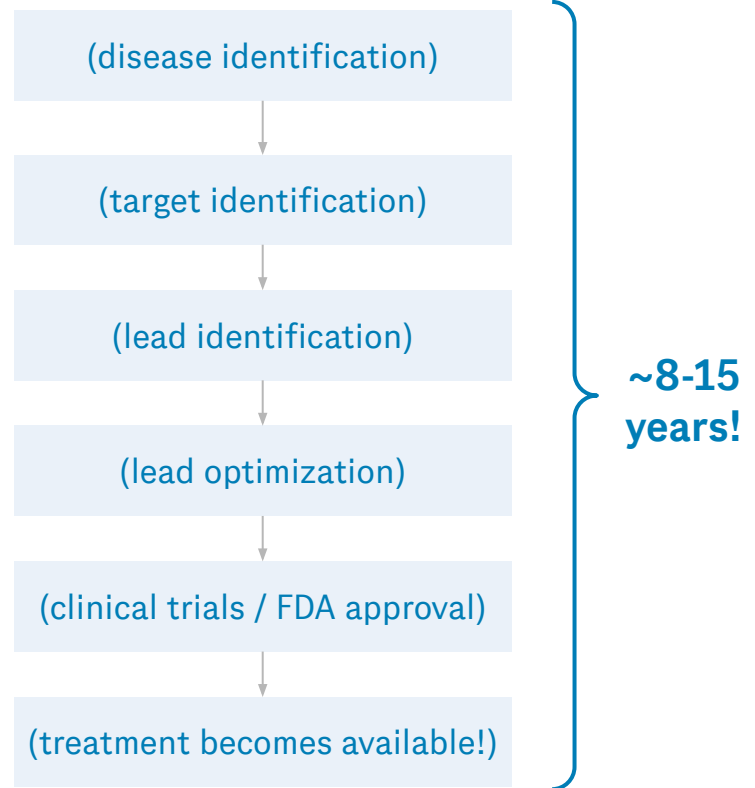
A simplified look at modern drug discovery...



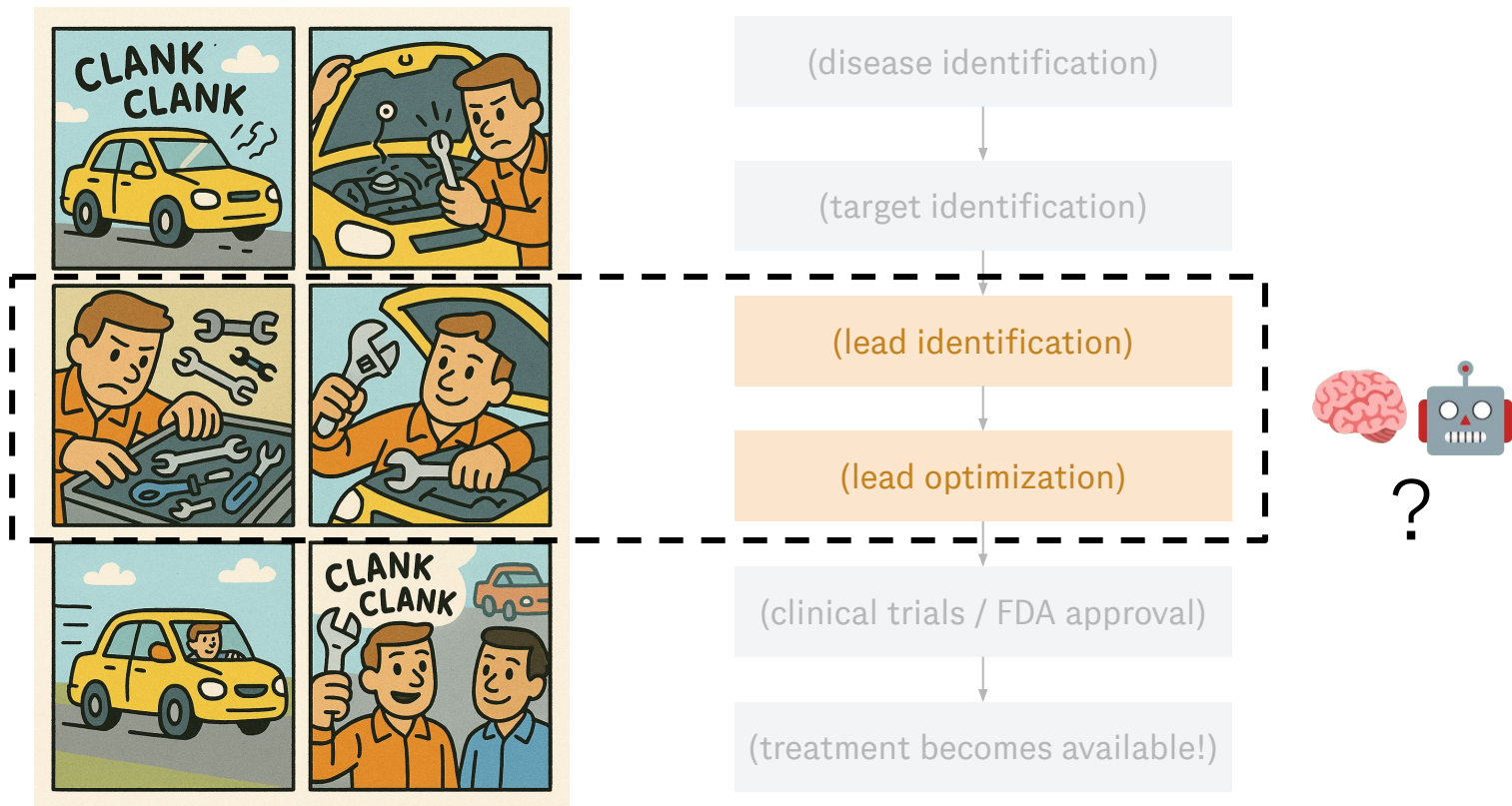
A simplified look at modern drug discovery...



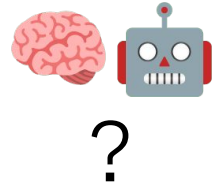
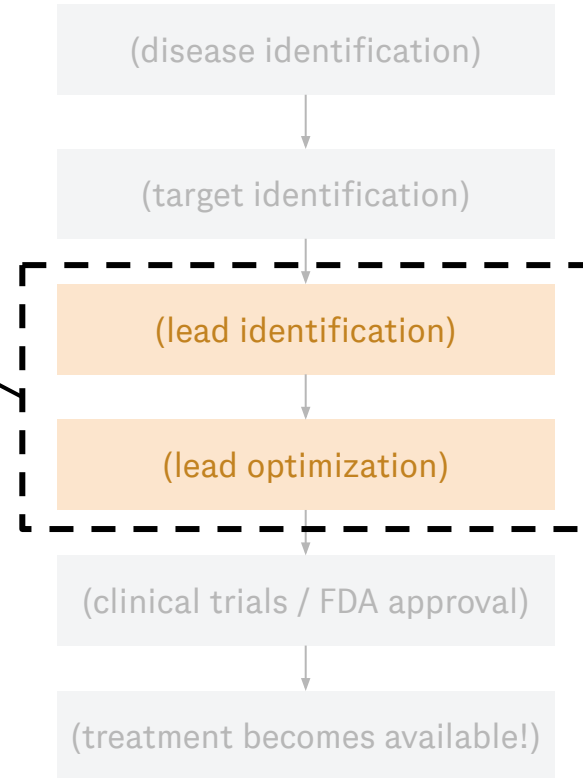
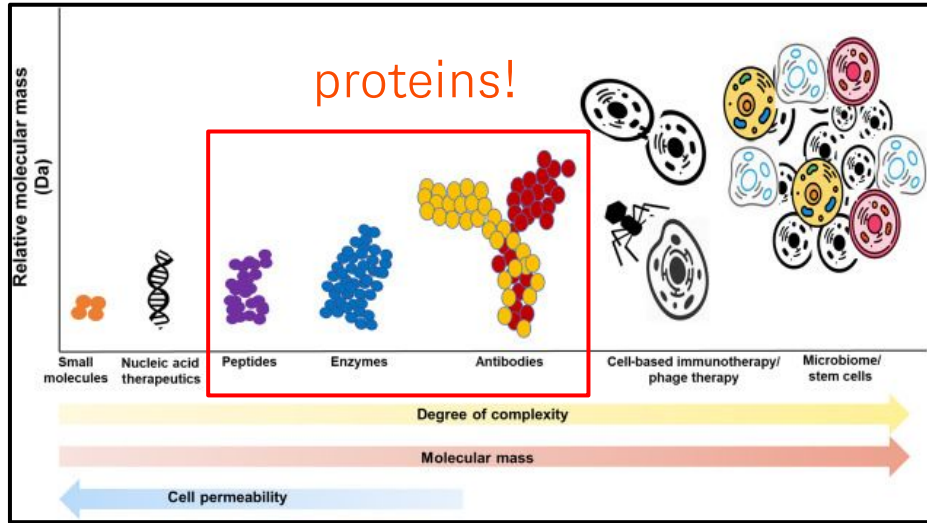
Drug discovery is time-consuming



Accelerating drug discovery with AI?



Accelerating protein design with AI?



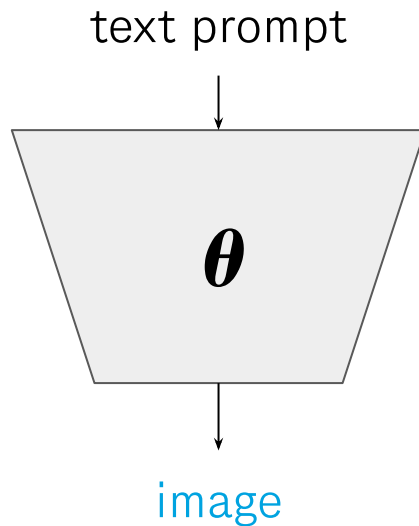
Accelerating protein design with AI?

Please generate a comic about the following. Make it as clear as possible what is happening in the scene; conveying clarity is more important than artistic quality. Make it very clear, like it's a children's book and a 5 year old should be able to understand what's going on

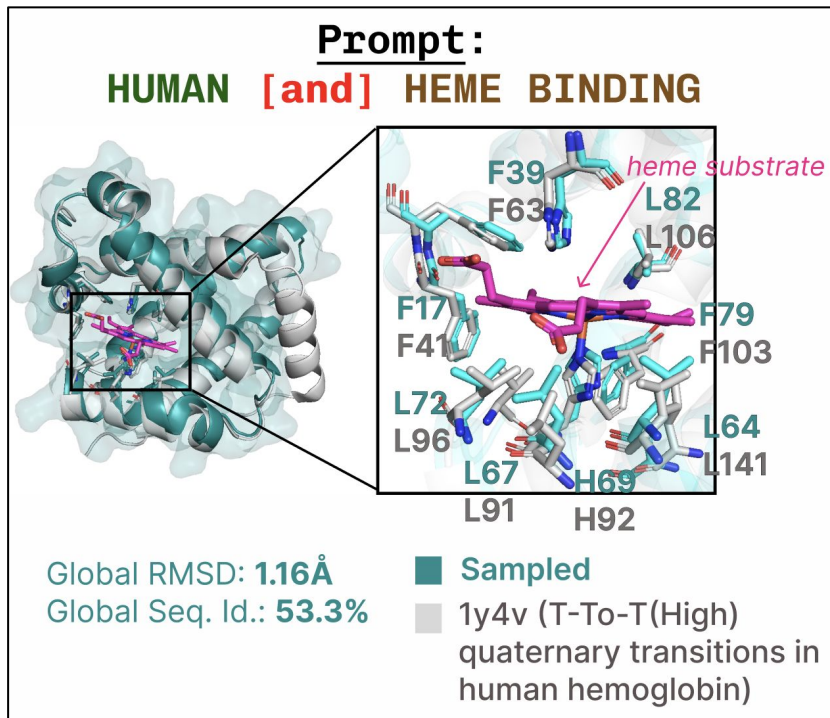
- * A car component is loose and there's a weird sound
- * we open the car hood to look to identify what's wrong. Turns out there is a loose bolt
- * we go through a bunch of tools and hammers and wrenches to find the right tool that will tighten this up
- * after trying a bunch, we finally find the right wrench!
- * we take the car out for a test drive to make sure we didn't break anything else
- * cool, everything works, now we sell this wrench to other people whose cars are also making this sound.



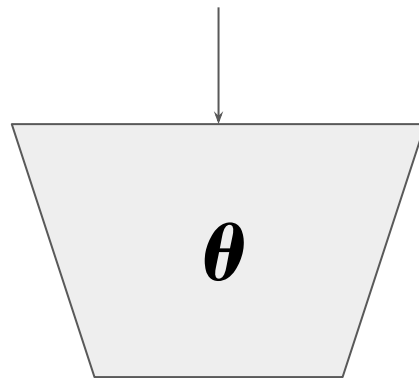
Image created



Accelerating protein design with AI?

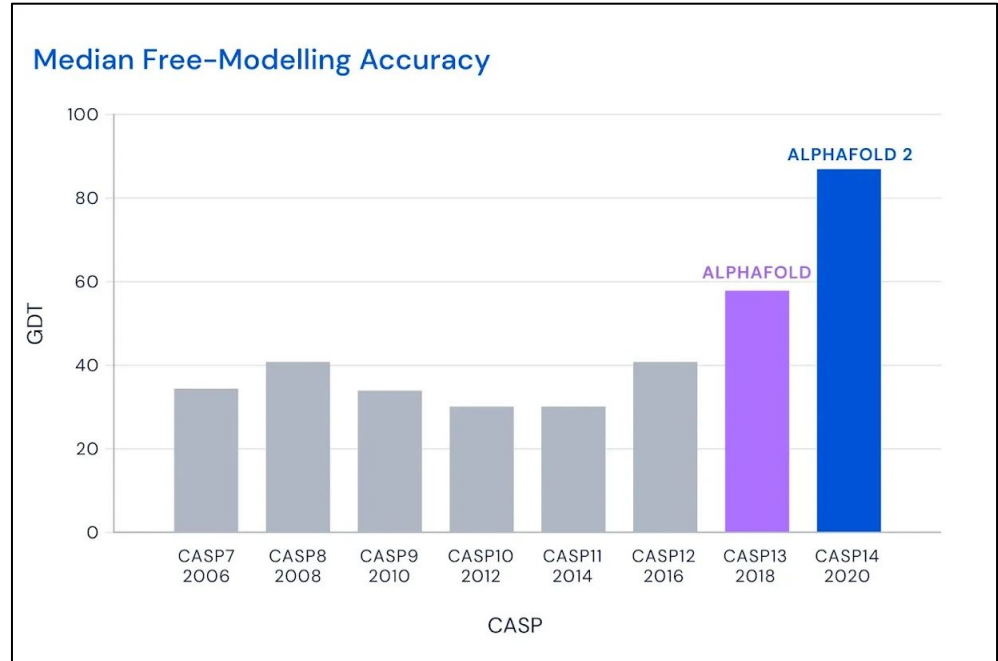
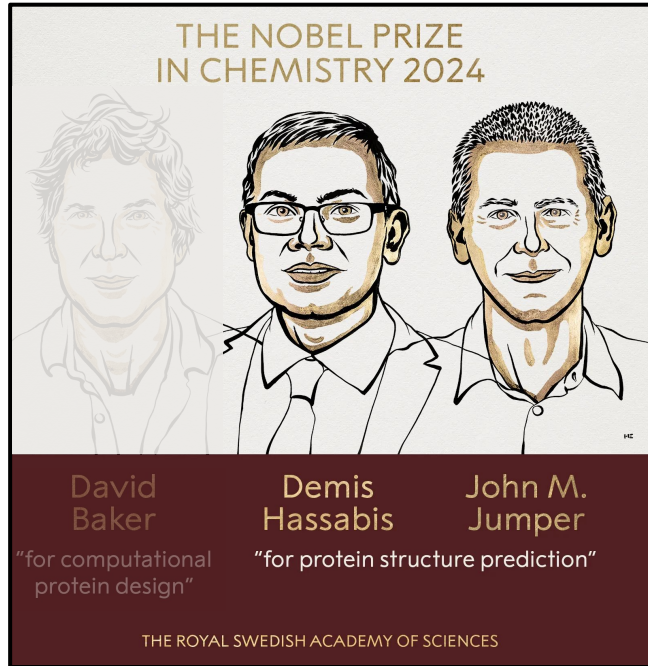


Desired attributes
(ex. “heme binding”)



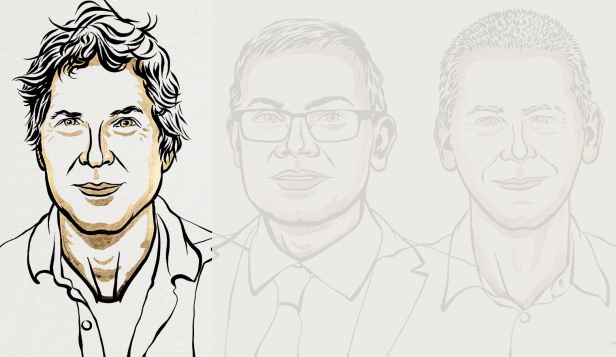
protein / molecule!

The potential of deep learning for protein structure prediction



The potential of deep learning for protein structure generation

THE NOBEL PRIZE
IN CHEMISTRY 2024



David Baker
"for computational protein design"

Demis Hassabis
"for protein structure prediction"

John M. Jumper

THE ROYAL SWEDISH ACADEMY OF SCIENCES

Designing proteins with RFdiffusion

Inspired by deep-learning methods for generating synthetic images.
e.g. Stable Diffusion, DALL-E


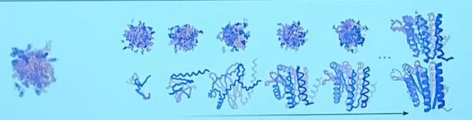


Image: Aash Vahedi and Karsten Kreis (NVIDIA)



Joe Watson, David Juergens, Nathaniel Bennett, Brian Trippe, Jason Yim, Helen Eisenach, Woody Ahern, et al. Nature, 2023

#NobelPrize

THE NOBEL PRIZE

What else might we need for drug discovery?

this talk

Co-generation

→ can we simultaneously generate sequence and structure?

Control

→ how can we specify complex and multi-objective constraints?

Immunogenicity

& antigen expression

→ can we achieve organism specificity?

Deployment

→ can we speed up inference to improve “shots on goal”?

Biosecurity

→ how should we measure and prevent the potential for dual use?

Data curation

→ how should we collect data for model (pre)training in costly acquisition regimes?

other PhD works

What else might we need for drug discovery?

this talk

Co-generation

→ can we simultaneously generate sequence and structure?

Control

→ how can we specify complex functions and constraints?

Immunogenicity

→ can we achieve organism specificity?

Compressed protein representations

(Cell Patterns, to appear)

Latent diffusion for all-atom generation

(in submission)

What else might we need for drug discovery?

other PhD research: **deployment & model understanding**

Model-based
optimization for
protein engineering
(Kolli et al., 2022)

Dense passage
retrieval for
homology search
(Boger et al., 2023)

Guided diffusion
with differentiable
biophysical energies
(*unpublished*)

Effect of training
data compositions
on protein language
model likelihoods
(Gordon et al., 2024)

Evo2 biosecurity
and inference
optimization
(Brix et al., 2025)

**Compressed protein
representations**

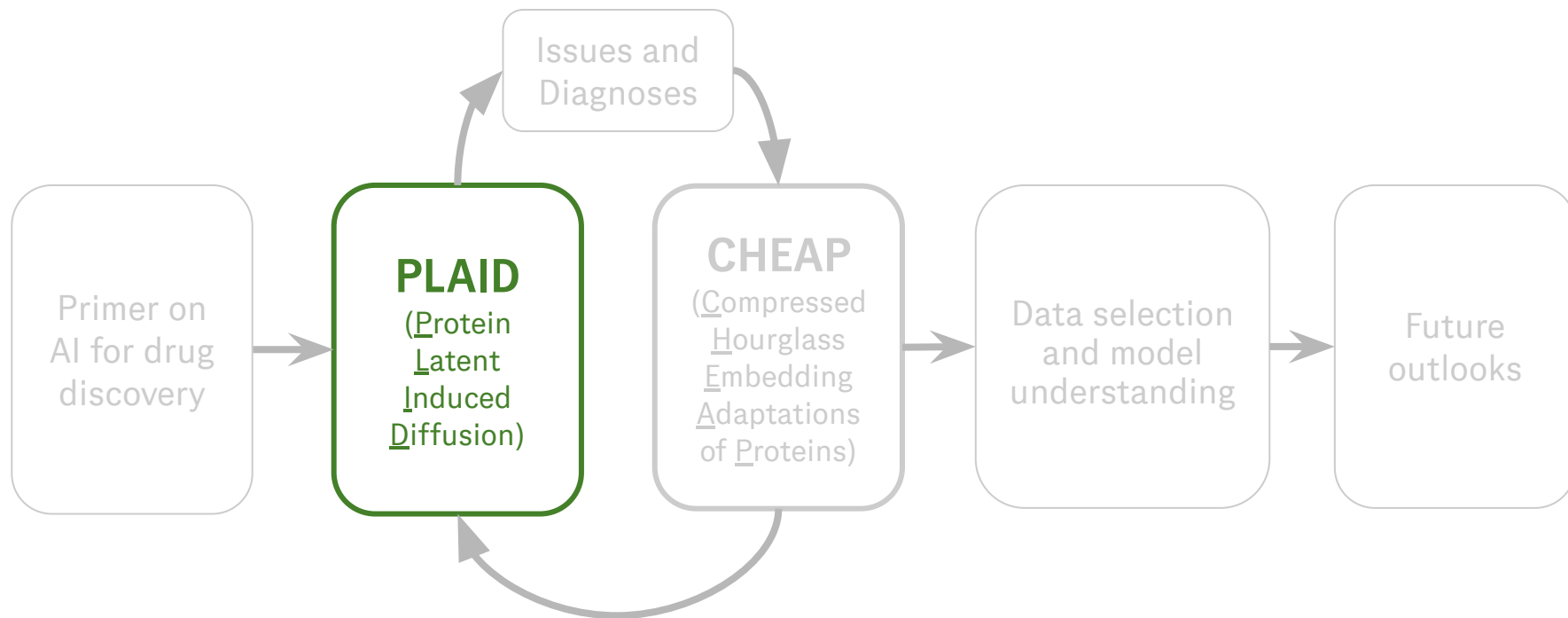
(*Cell Patterns, to appear*)

**Latent diffusion for all-atom
generation**

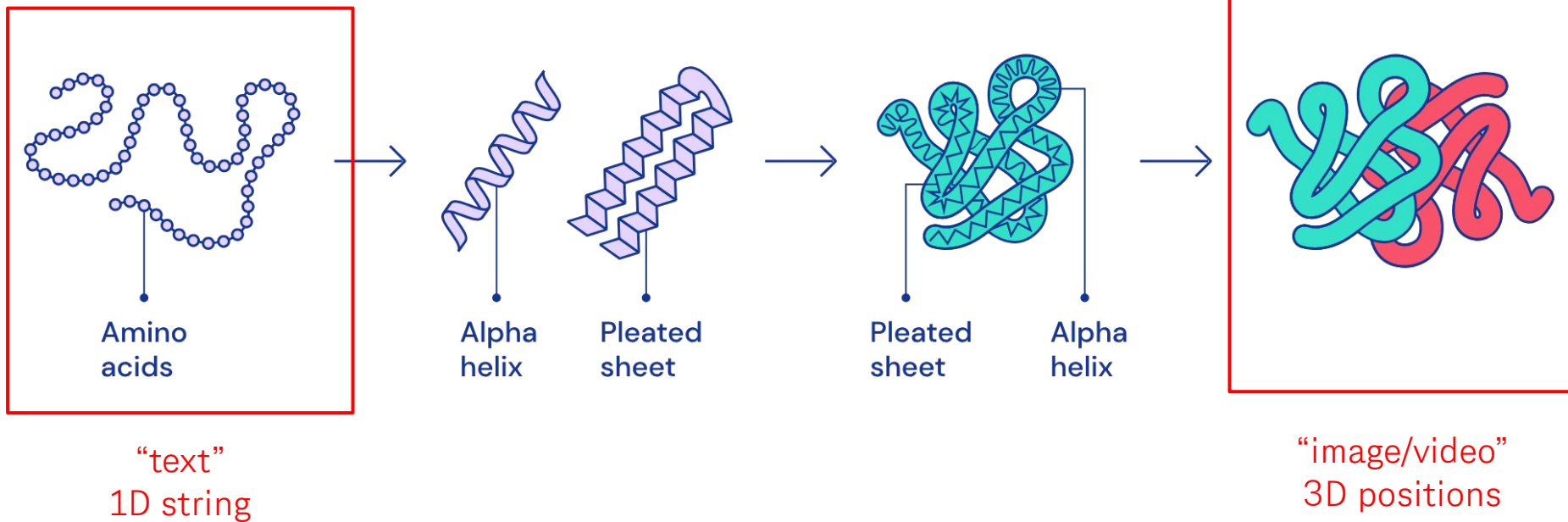
(*in submission*)

Biological data selection from
an information theoretic
perspective
(*in progress*)

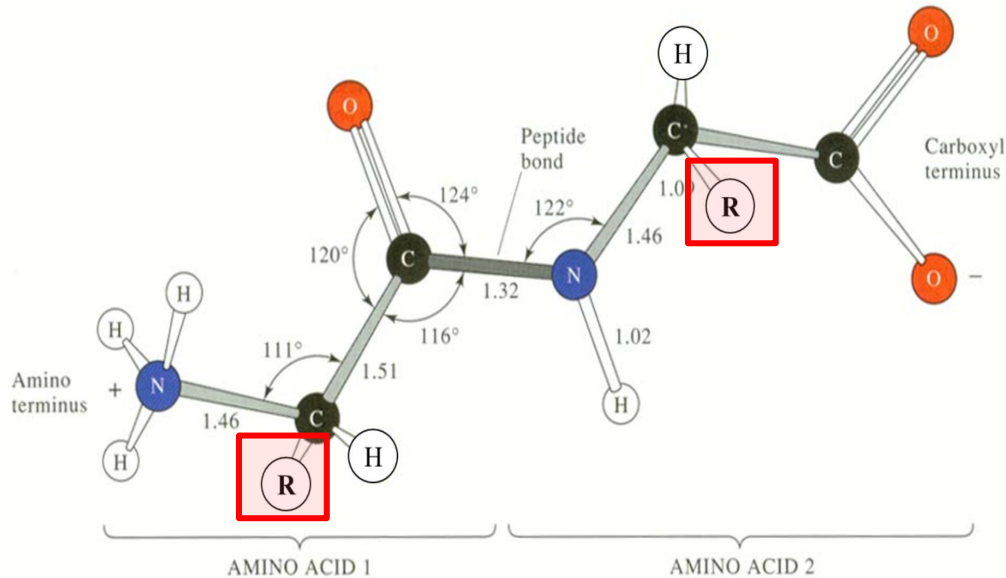
Agenda



What exactly is a protein?



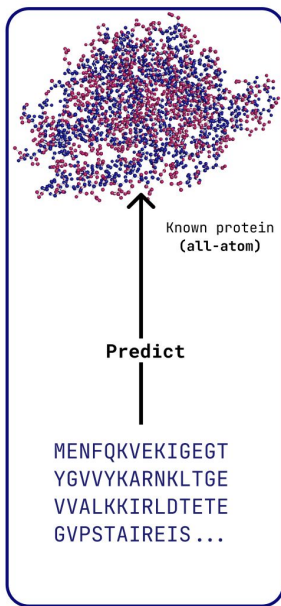
Backbone structure vs. all-atom structure



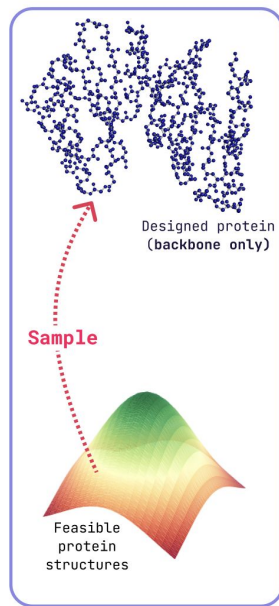
GBYR...

(order of t-shirts => protein sequence)

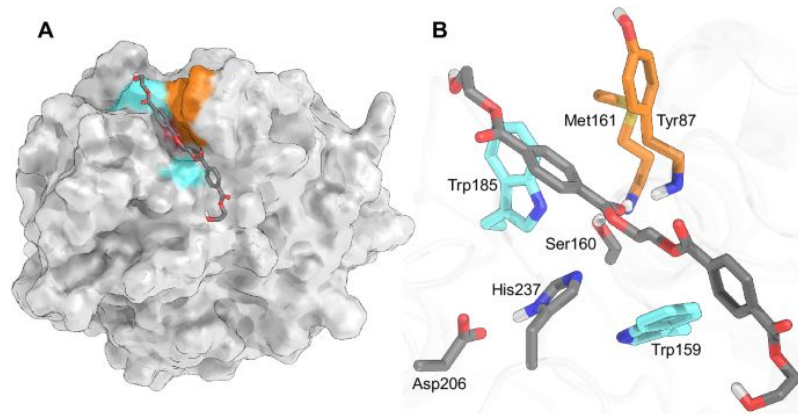
The co-generation problem



**AlphaFold
/ ESMFold**
Prediction only



**Previous
generative
methods**
Backbone-only

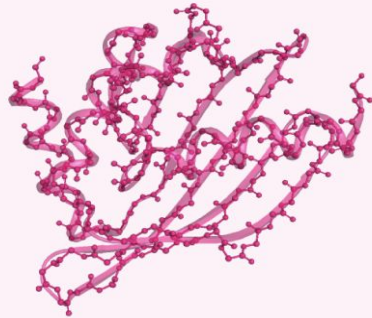


sidechains are crucial for mediating function!

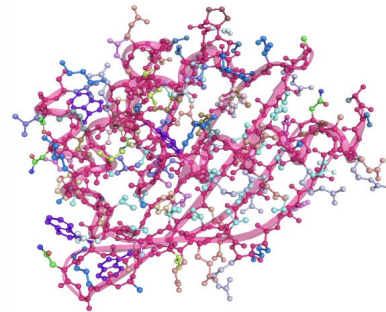


Sidechain atoms generation require knowing the sequence

BACKBONE ATOMS

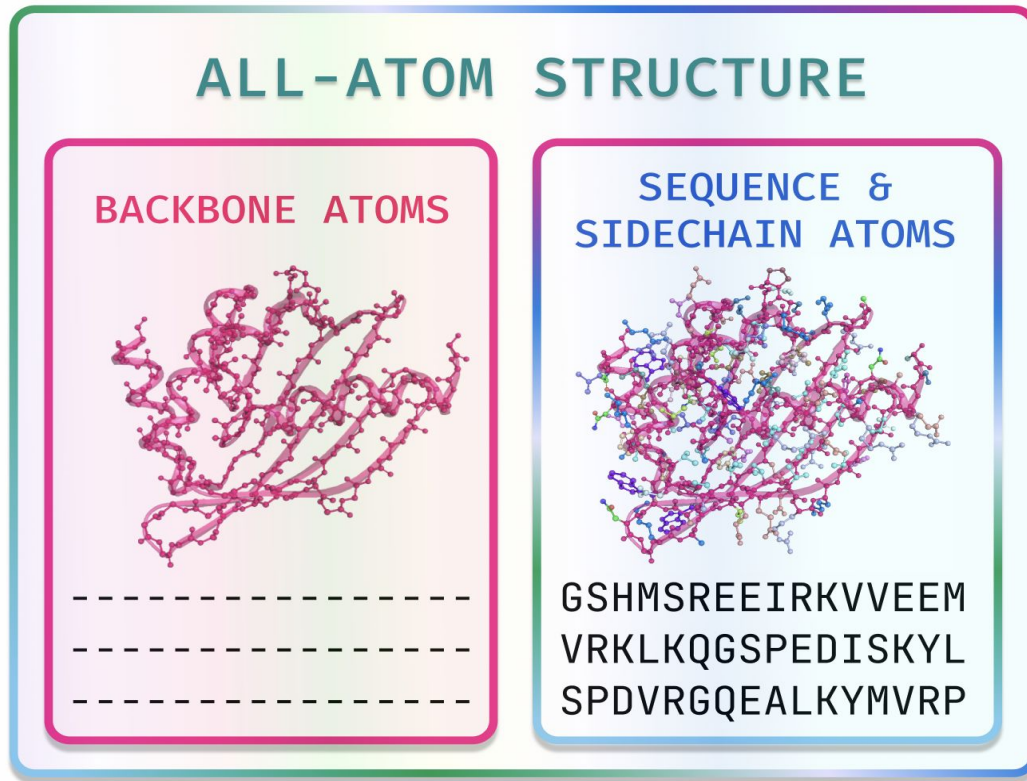


SEQUENCE &
SIDECHAIN ATOMS

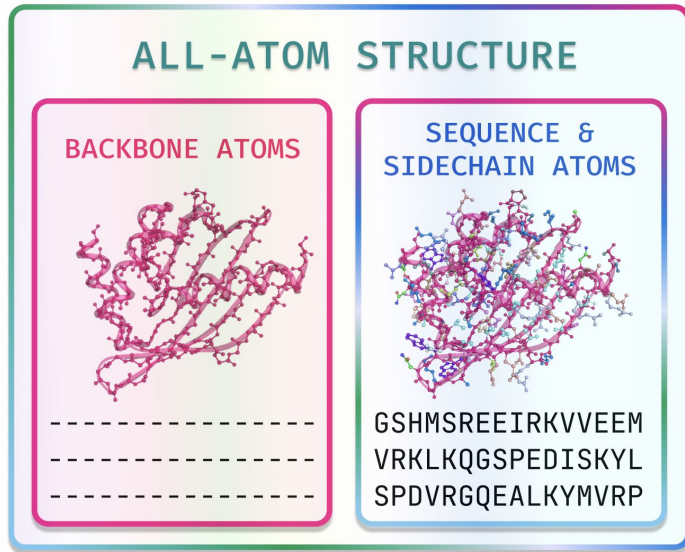


GSHMSREEIRKVVEEM
VRKLKQGSPEDISKYL
SPDVRGQEALKYMVRP

All-atom design as a multimodal generation problem



All-atom design as a multimodal generation problem



e.g. ESMFold

$$p(\text{structure} \mid \text{sequence}) p(\text{sequence})$$

sample
from

$$p(\text{sequence} \mid \text{structure}) p(\text{structure})$$

e.g. ProteinMPNN

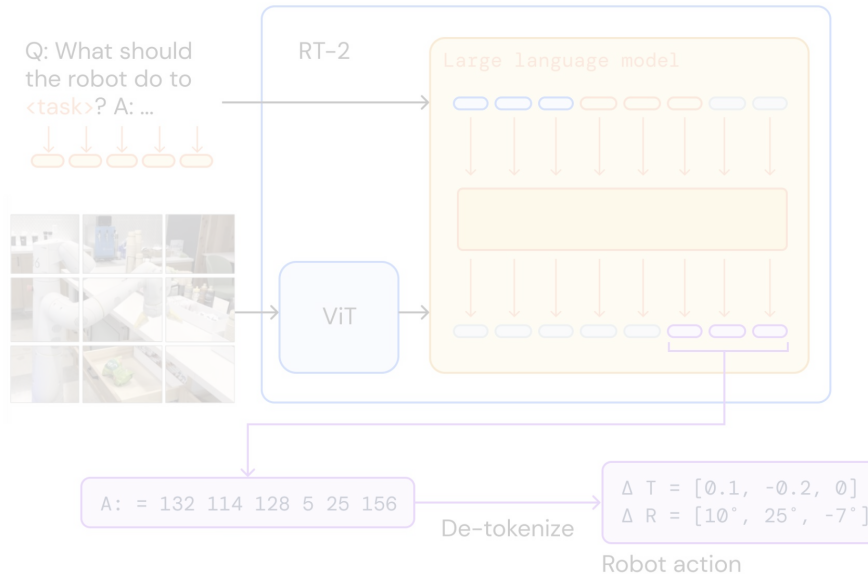
sample
from

Goal:

$$p(\text{sequence}, \text{structure})$$

sample
from

Motivation: Can we repurpose priors from pretrained models?



[RT-2: Vision-Language-Action Models Transfer Web Knowledge to Robotic Control](#)

Vision-language models trained on internet-scale datasets capture useful priors for decision making tasks.

Can we apply this to biology?

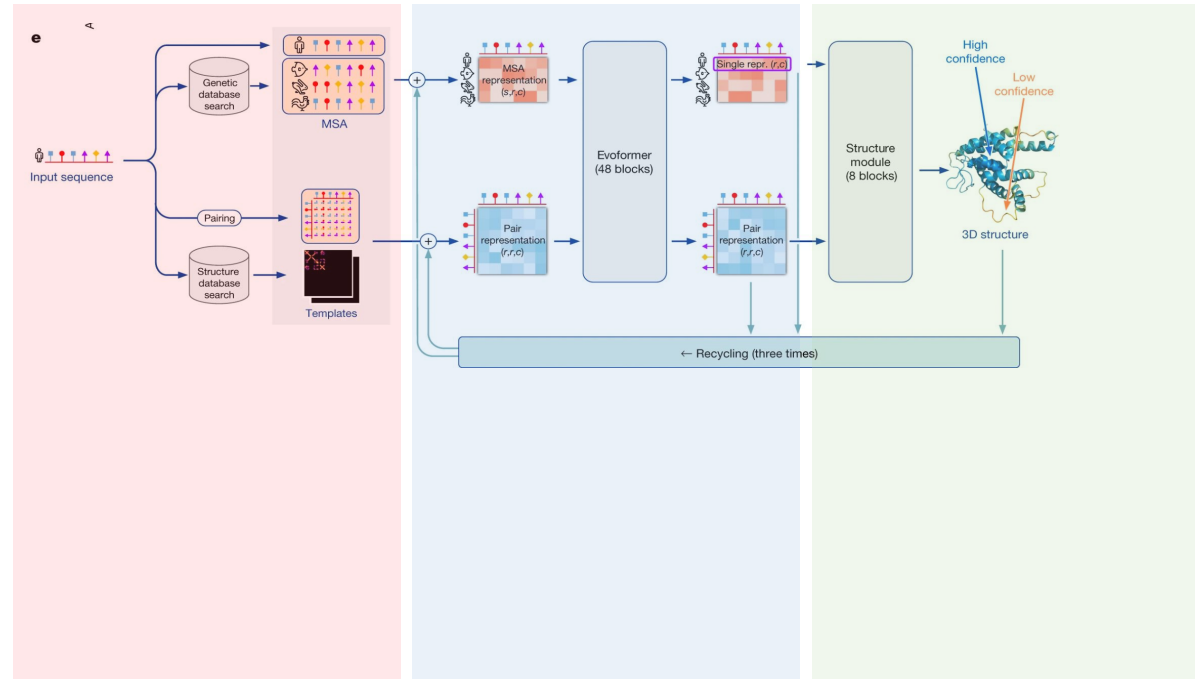
Can we sample all-atom structure from the joint distribution $p(\text{sequence}, \text{structure})$ and use priors from pretrained protein folding models?

The base components: protein folding model architectures



AlphaFold2:

Uses an explicit retrieval step



harness additional
sequence-based priors

learn structural features
from sequence latents

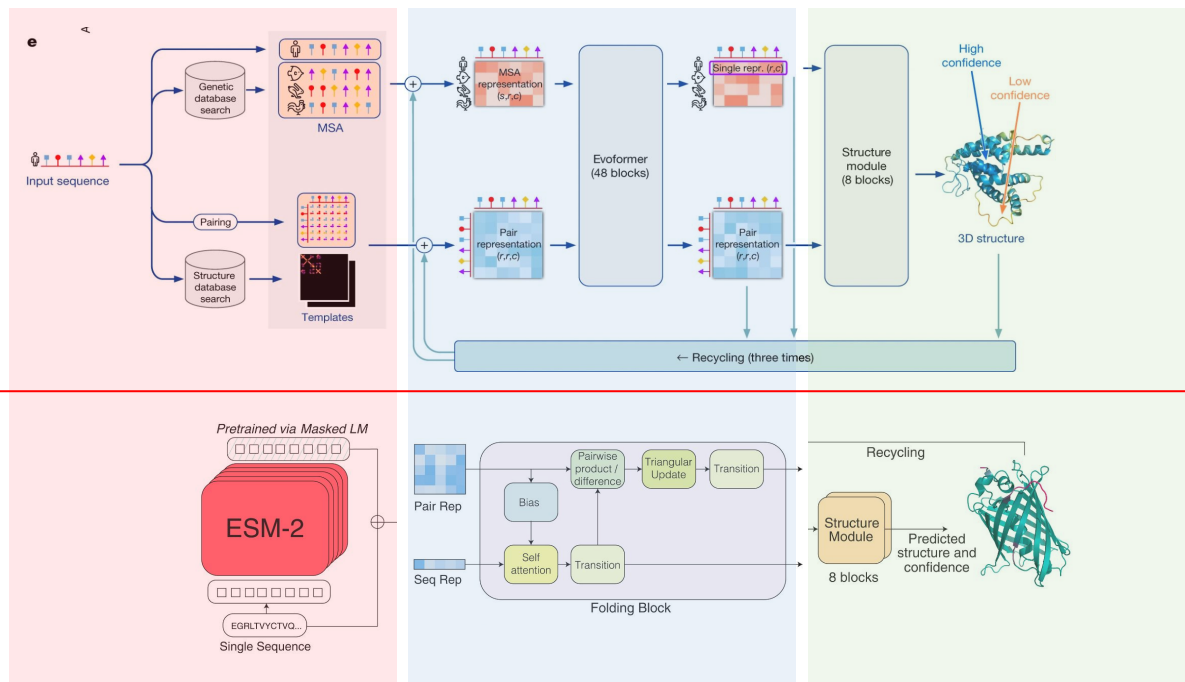
generate structures

The base components: protein folding model architectures



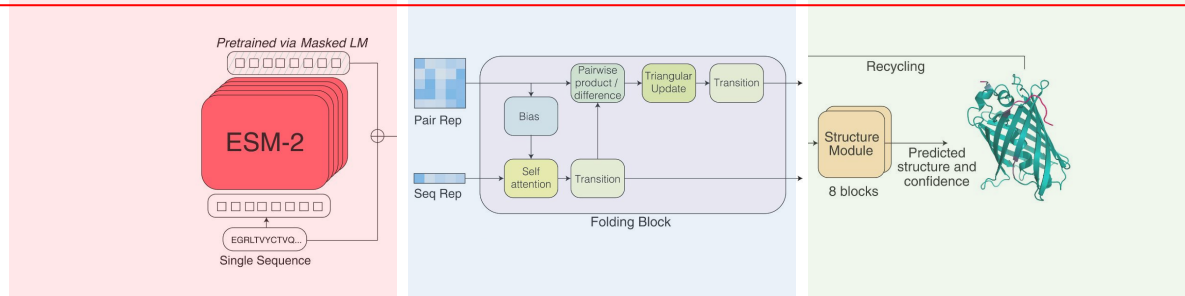
AlphaFold2:

Uses an explicit retrieval step



ESMFold:

Replaces retrieval step with a **language model**



harness additional
sequence-based priors

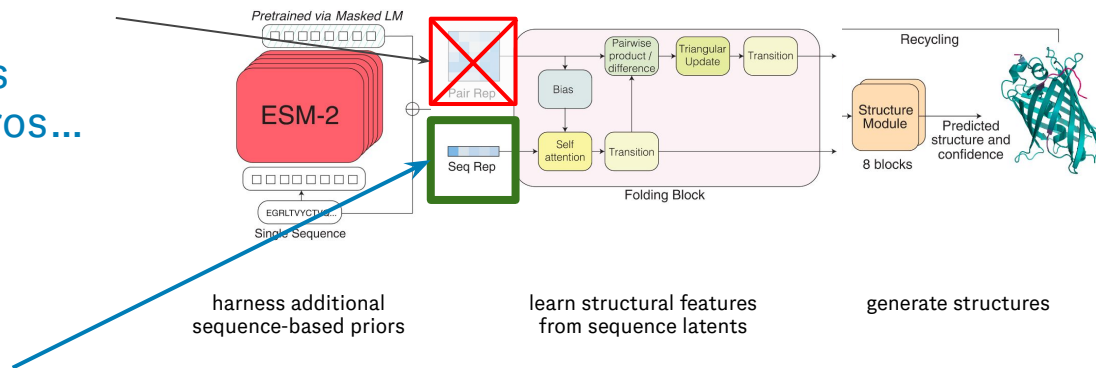
learn structural features
from sequence latents

generate structures



Observation: at inference, the pairwise input is initialized as zeros...

→ Sequence representation contains all information about the structure!

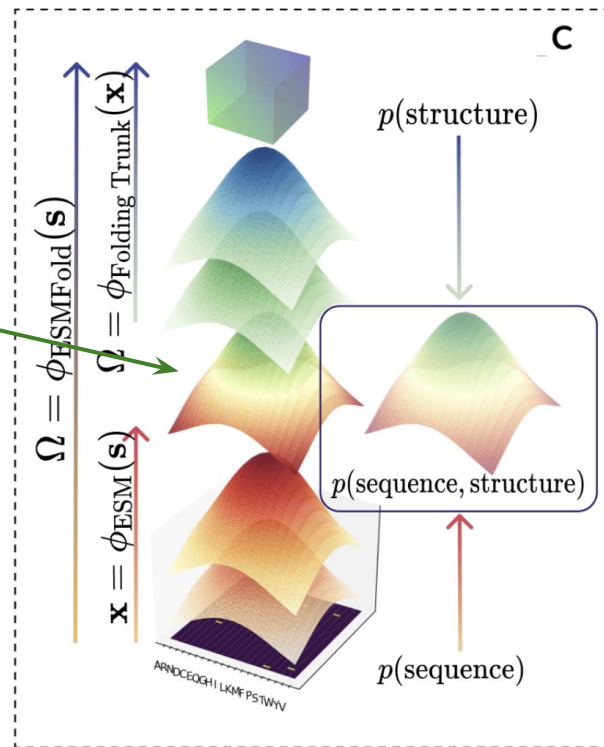
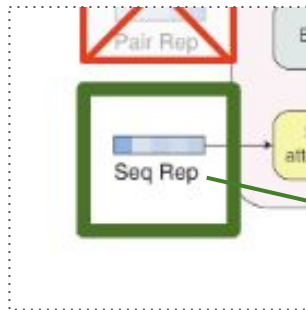


Observation: at inference, the pairwise input is initialized as zeros...

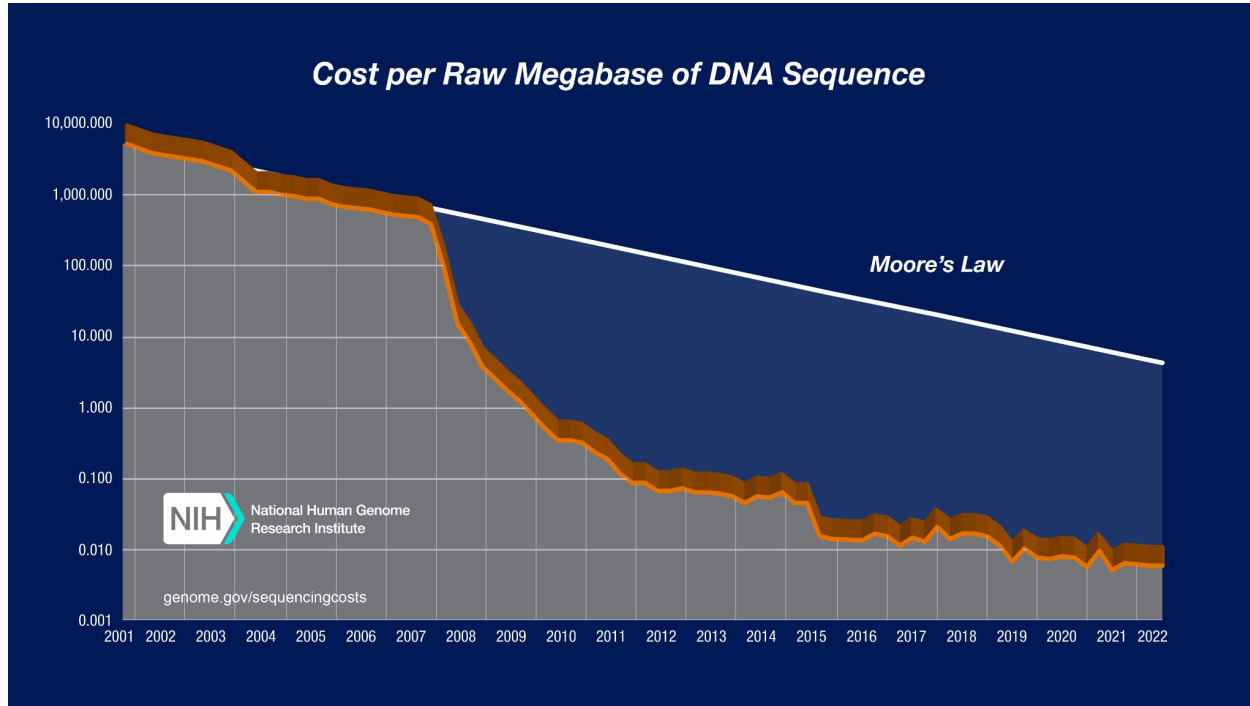
→ Sequence representation contains all information about the structure!



Generating this embedding would only **require the sequence during training (!)**

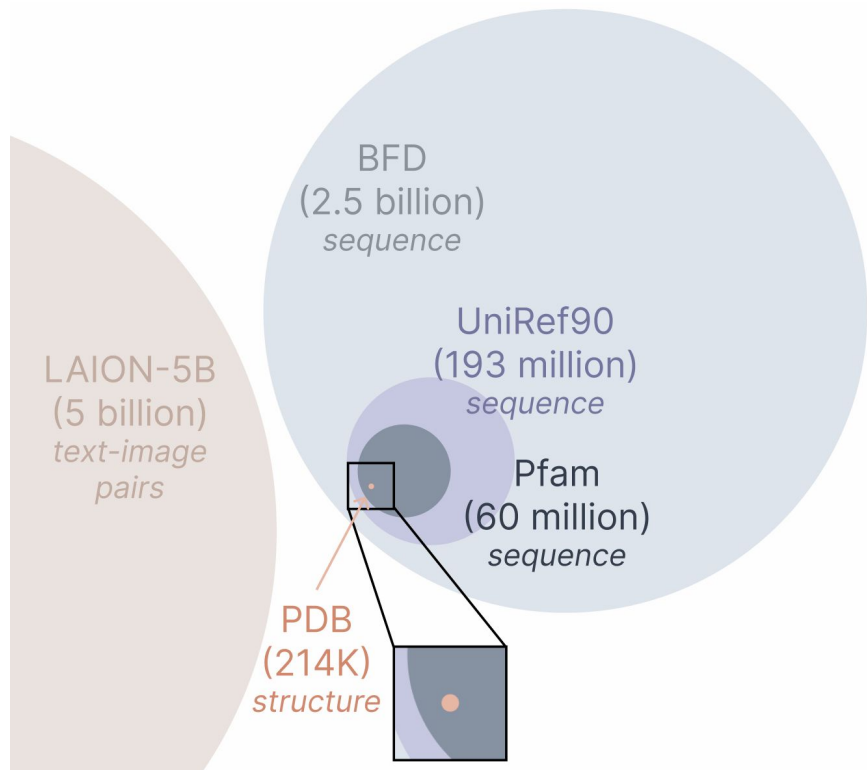


Sequence data is cheaper to collect than structure

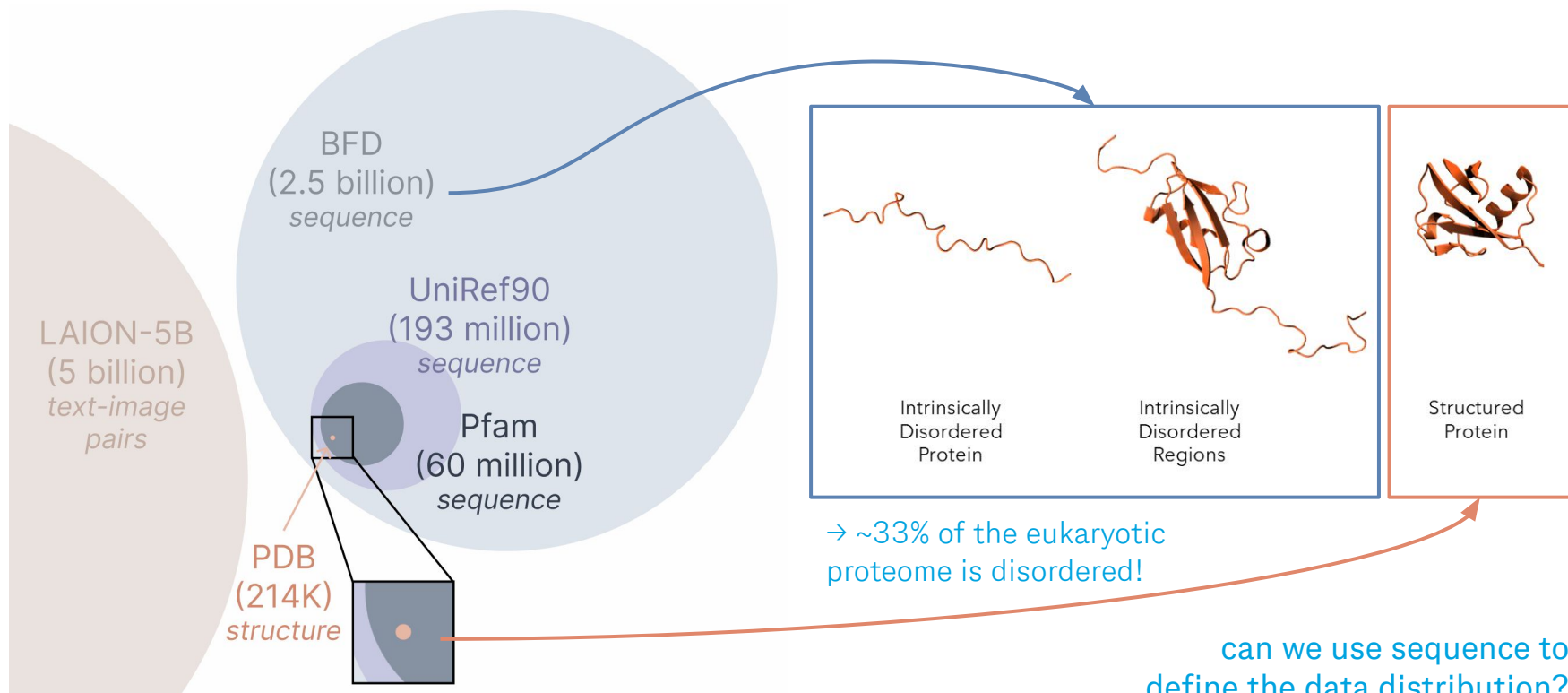


Source: <https://www.genome.gov/about-genomics/fact-sheets/DNA-Sequencing-Costs-Data>

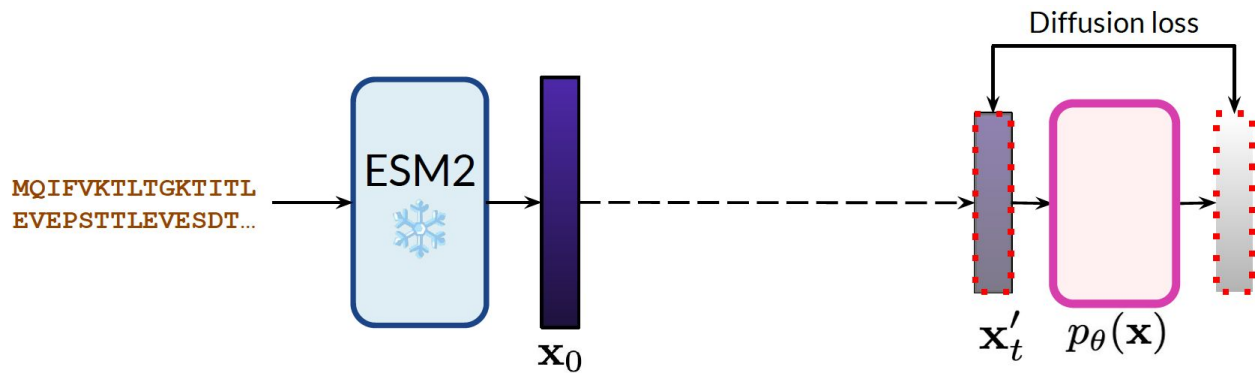
Sequence data is more **abundant** than structure



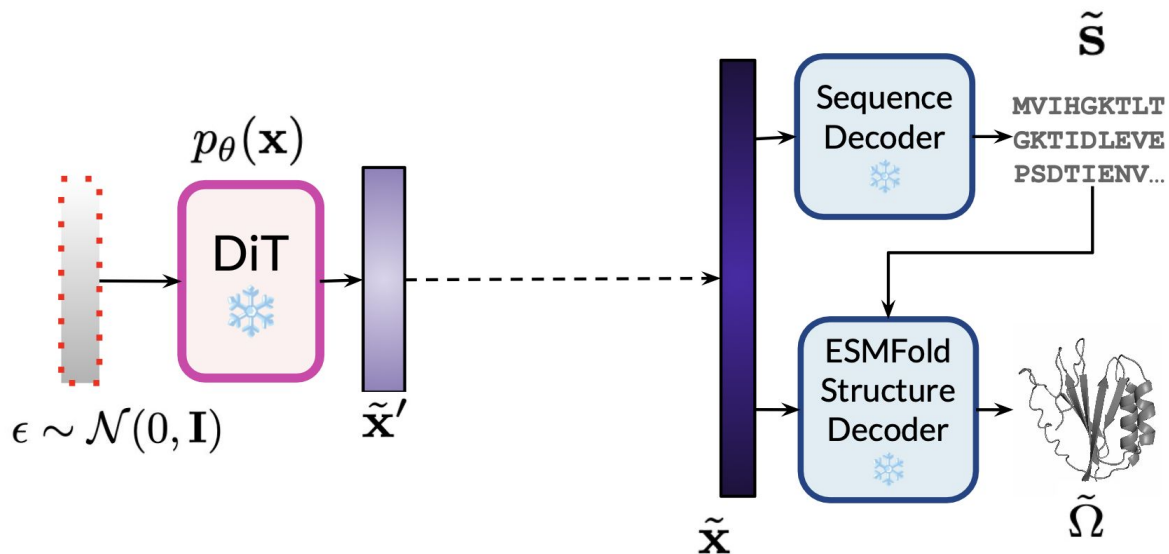
Sequence data has different coverage than structure



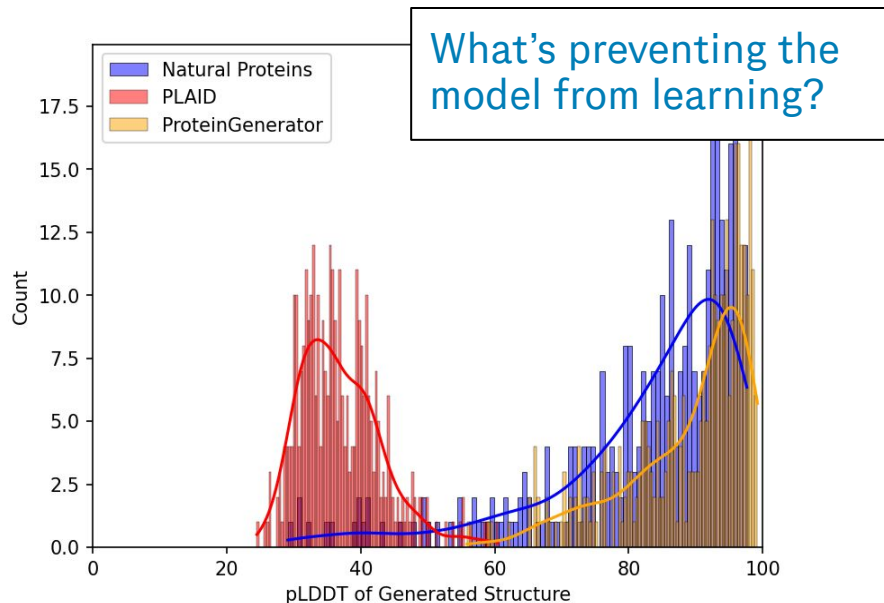
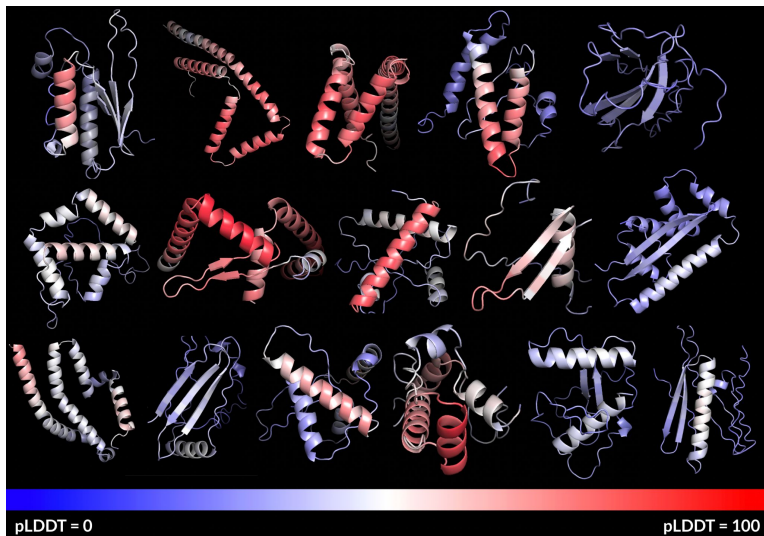
PLAID v0.5: Training a latent diffusion model



PLAID v0.5: Inference-time all-atom generation



PLAID v0.5: Early attempts

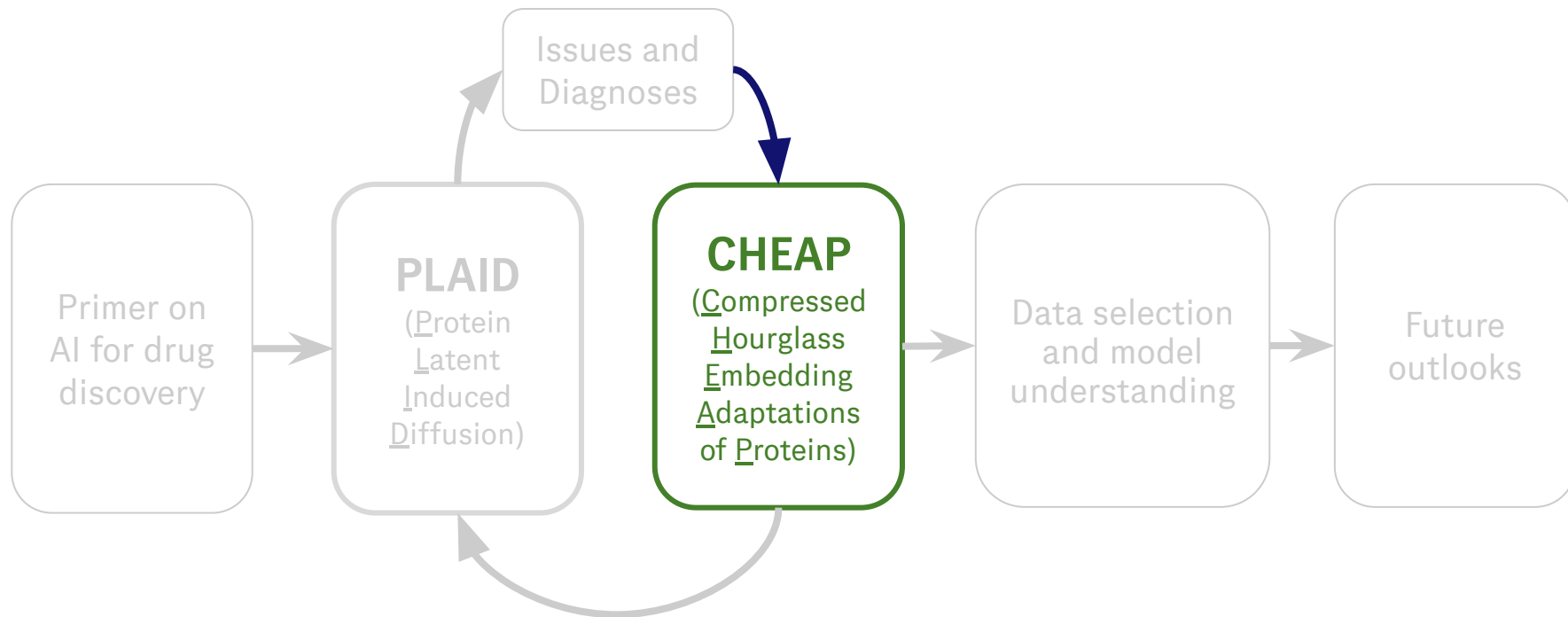


PLAID v0.5: Generating Protein Sequence and Structure Without Structural Training Data

Amy X. Lu, Kevin K. Yang, Pieter Abbeel

ICML 2024 Workshop on Machine Learning for Life and Material Sciences

Agenda



Issues and hypotheses

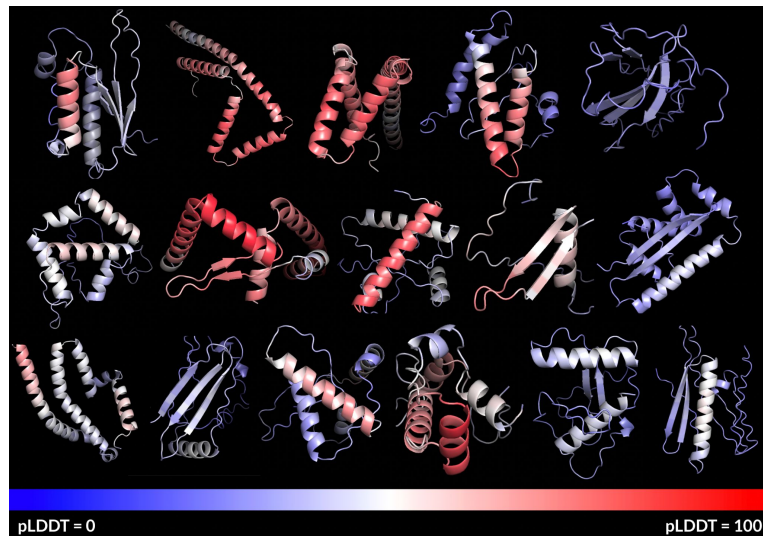
- Latent space requires regularization

In order to avoid arbitrarily high-variance latent spaces, we experiment with two different kinds of regularizations. The first variant, *KL-reg.*, imposes a slight KL-penalty towards a standard normal on the learned latent, similar to a VAE [46, 69], whereas *VQ-reg.* uses a vector quantization layer [96] within the decoder. This model can be interpreted

Rombach et al. [High-Resolution Image Synthesis with Latent Diffusion Models](#), CVPR 2022

Issues and hypotheses

- Latent space requires regularization
- Overcome $O(L^2)$ memory constraints and increase protein length to 512



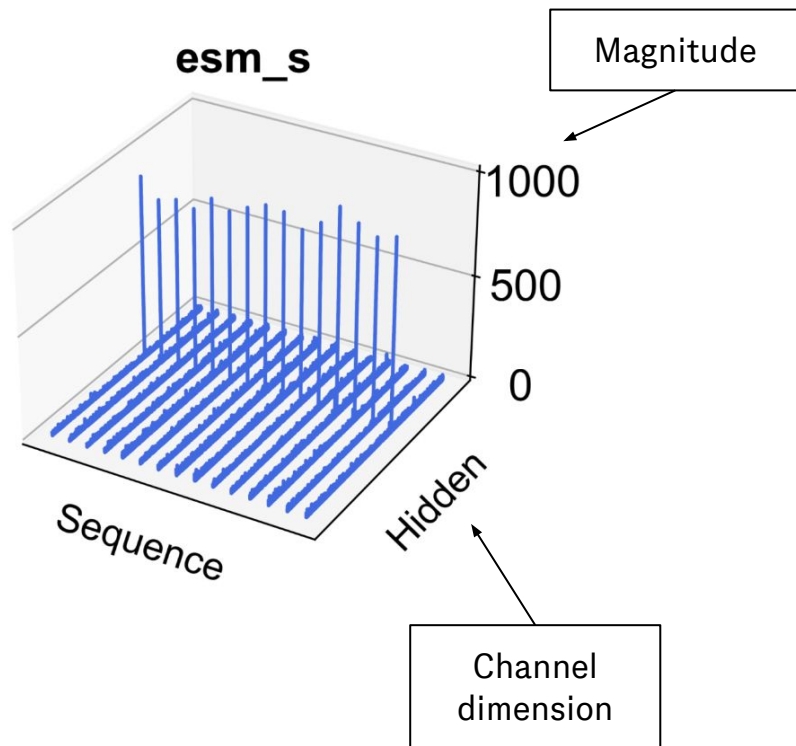
Issues and hypotheses

- Latent space requires regularization
- Overcome $O(L^2)$ memory constraints and increase protein length to 512
- Large latent space corresponds to **high-resolution** image generation
 - Rombach et al. latent space:
 $H \times W \times 4 = 64 \times 64 \times 4$
 - Ours:
 $L \times 1024 = 512 \times 1024$

G. NCSN++ (Song et al., 2021) FFHQ-1024² Reference Samples

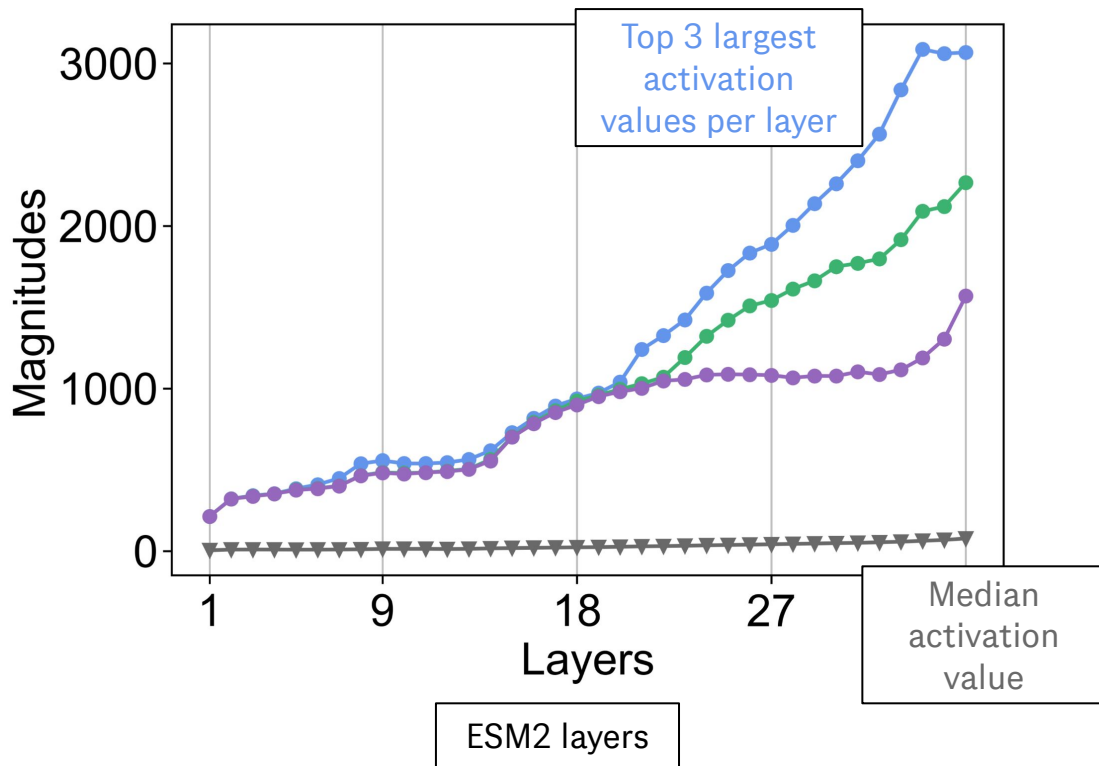


ESMFold latent space exhibits pathologically large values

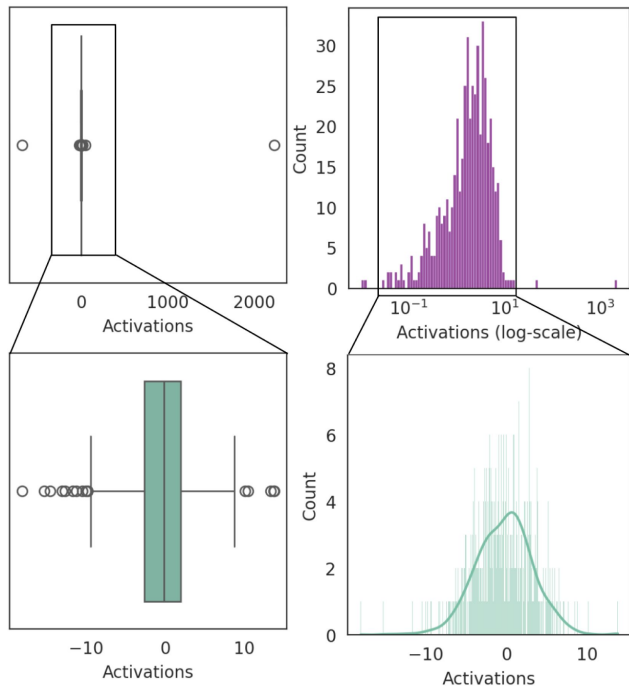


Latent space will require regularization for diffusion to work.

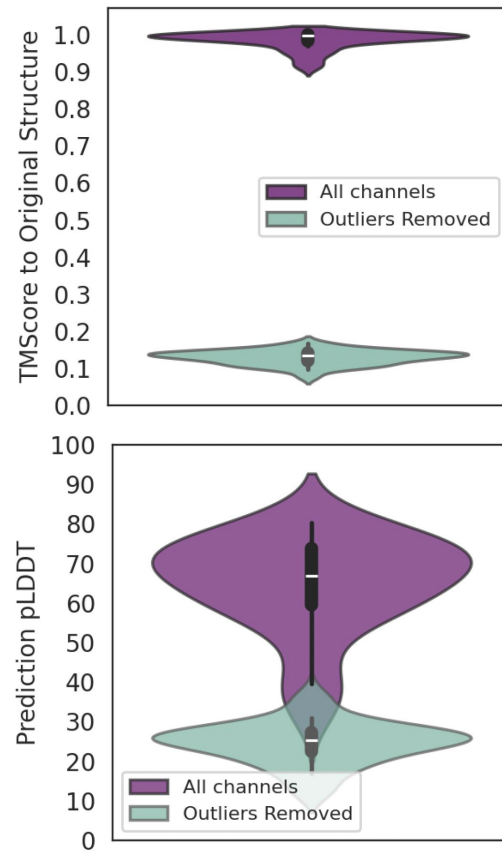
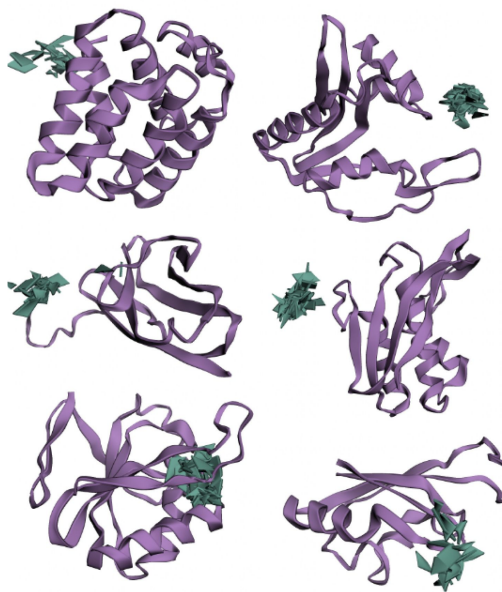
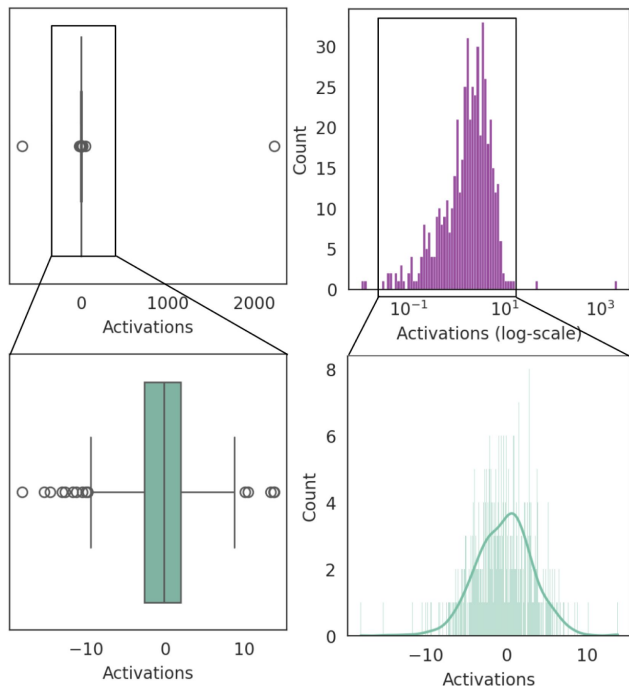
ESM-Fold ESM2 latent space exhibits pathologically large values



What if we just remove these wacky channels?



What if we just remove these wacky channels?



Addressing the hypotheses: embedding compression

Issues and hypotheses

- Latent space requires regularization
- Overcome $O(L^2)$ memory constraints and increase protein length to 512
- Large latent space corresponds to high-resolution image generation
 - Rombach et al. latent space: $H \times W \times 4 = 64 \times 64 \times 4$
 - Ours: $L \times 1024 = 512 \times 1024$

G. NCSN++ (Song et al., 2021) FFHQ-1024² Reference Samples

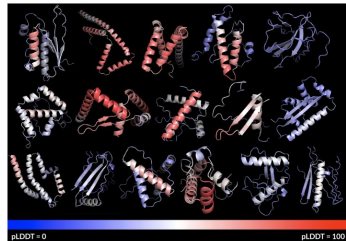


Diffusion models in their naive formulation often fail for 1024×1024 resolution generation.

Since not all channels are necessary, can we compress the embedding?

Issues and hypotheses

- Latent space requires regularization
- Overcome $O(L^2)$ memory constraints and increase protein length to 512

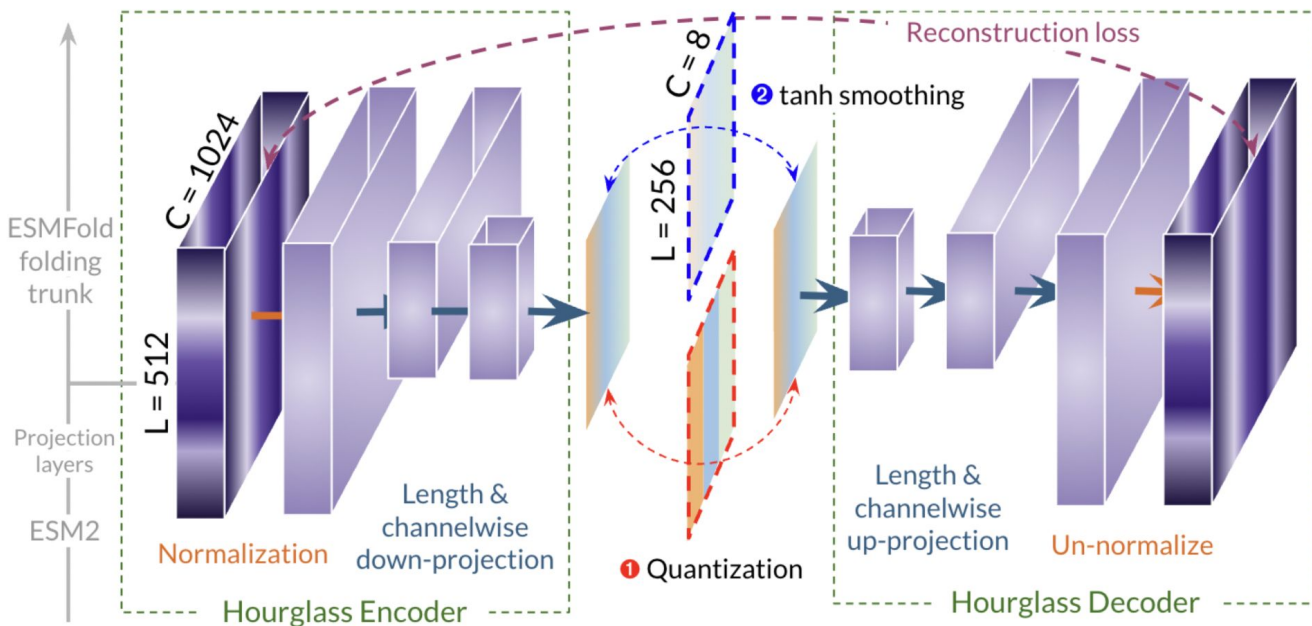


Can we also reduce the protein length?

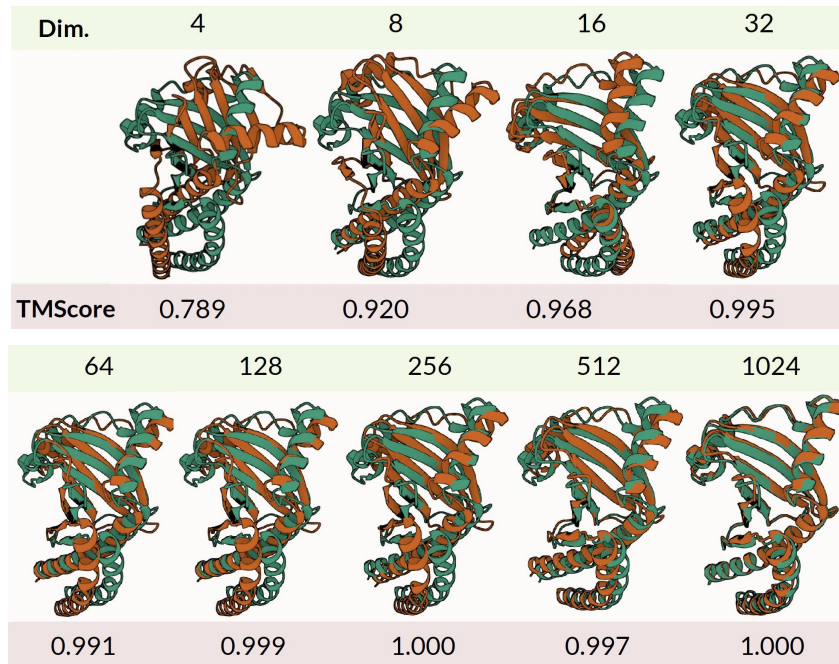
An autoencoder for protein embedding compression

Simple fix for massive activations:
standardize each
channel independently.

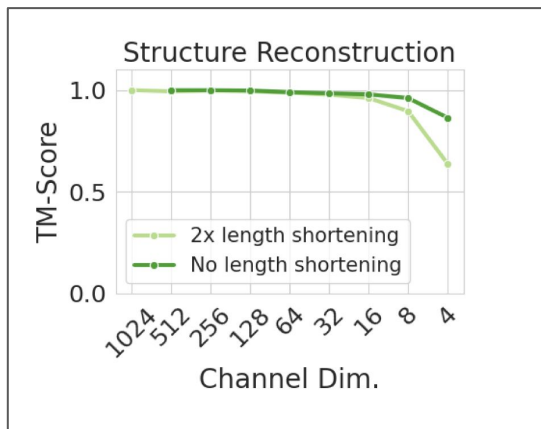
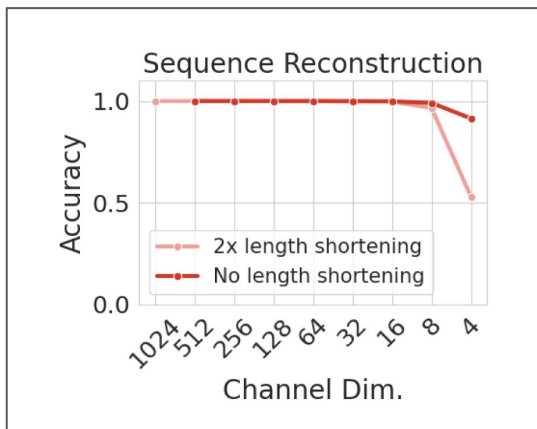
$$\mathbf{x}' = \frac{\mathbf{x} - \mathbf{x}_{\min}}{\mathbf{x}_{\max} - \mathbf{x}_{\min}}$$



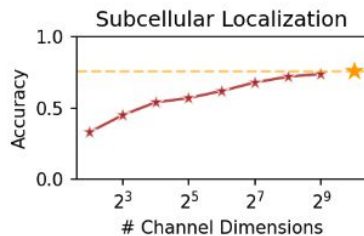
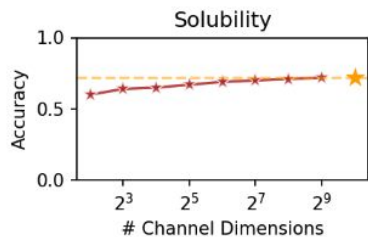
Turns out the latent space is highly compressible!



Turns out the latent space is highly compressible!



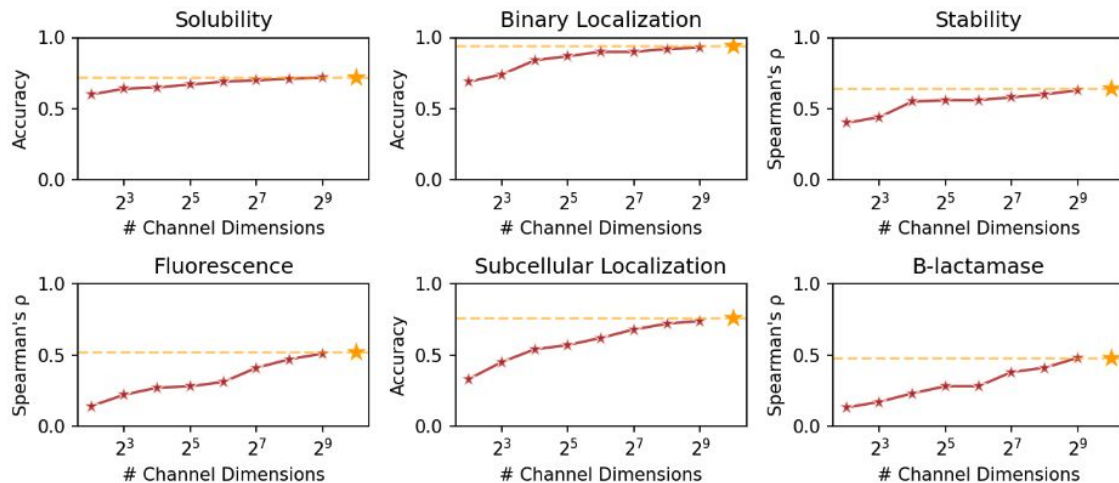
What about function information?



Performance degradation with
compression is more gradual...

...for some functions.

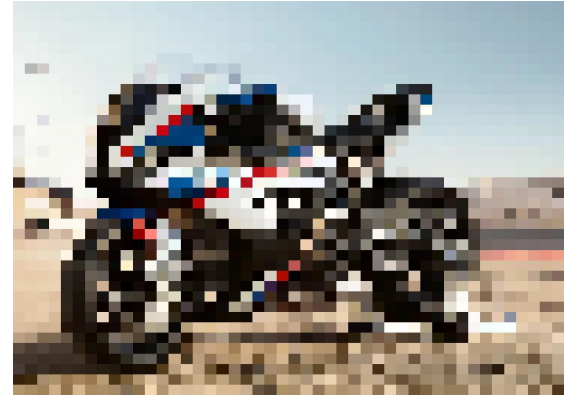
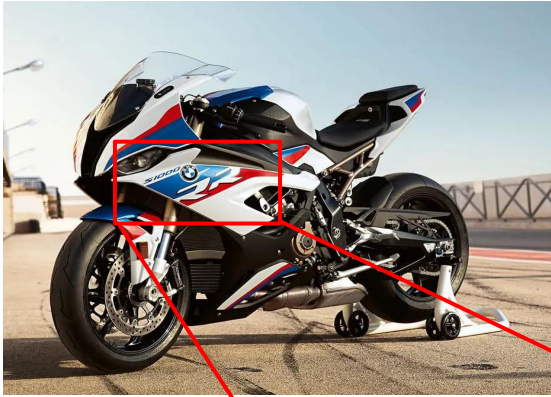
What about function information?



Performance degradation with
compression is more gradual...

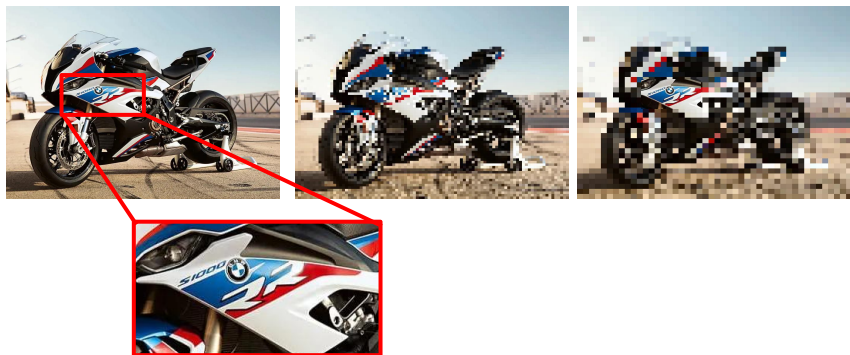
...for some functions.

Intuition: what is the speed of this motorcycle?

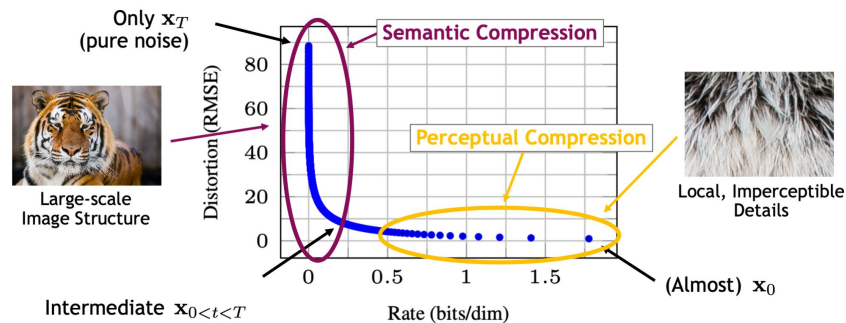


→ BMW S1000RR: 188 mph

Intuition: what is the speed of this motorcycle?

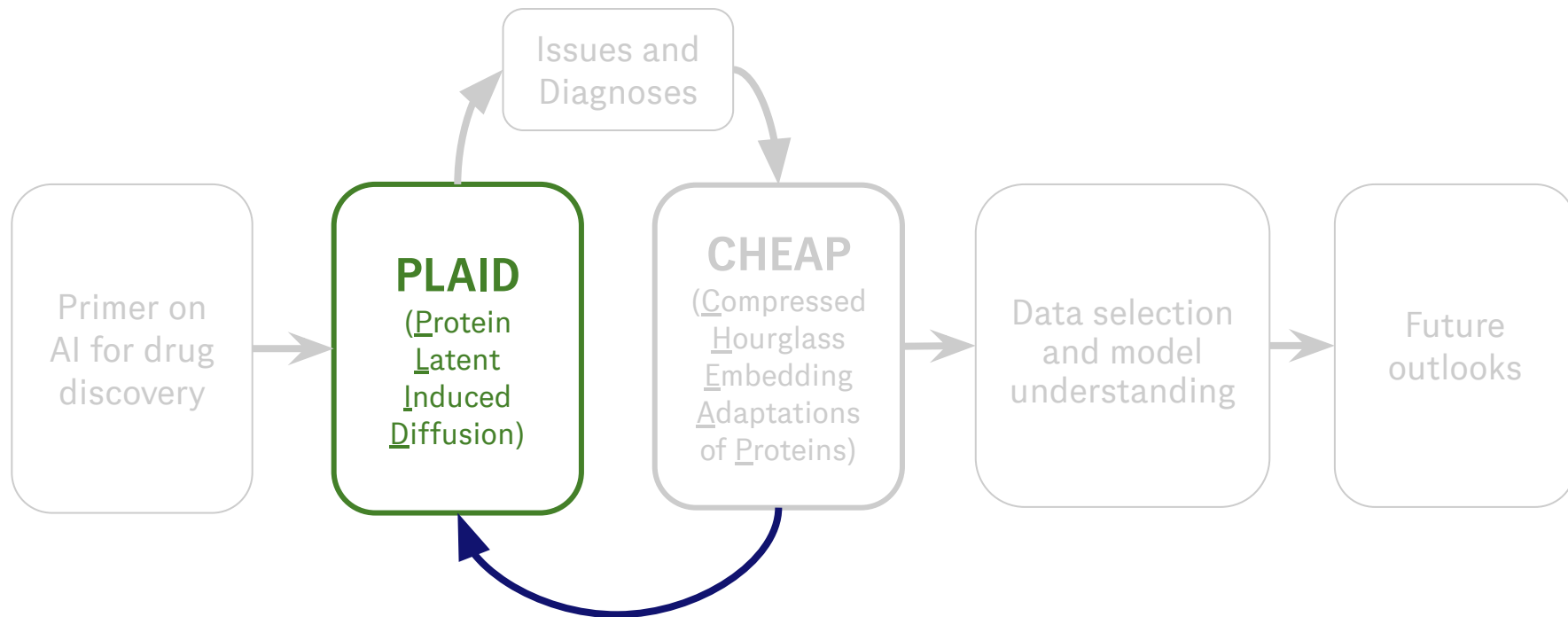


...what level of compression is optimal?

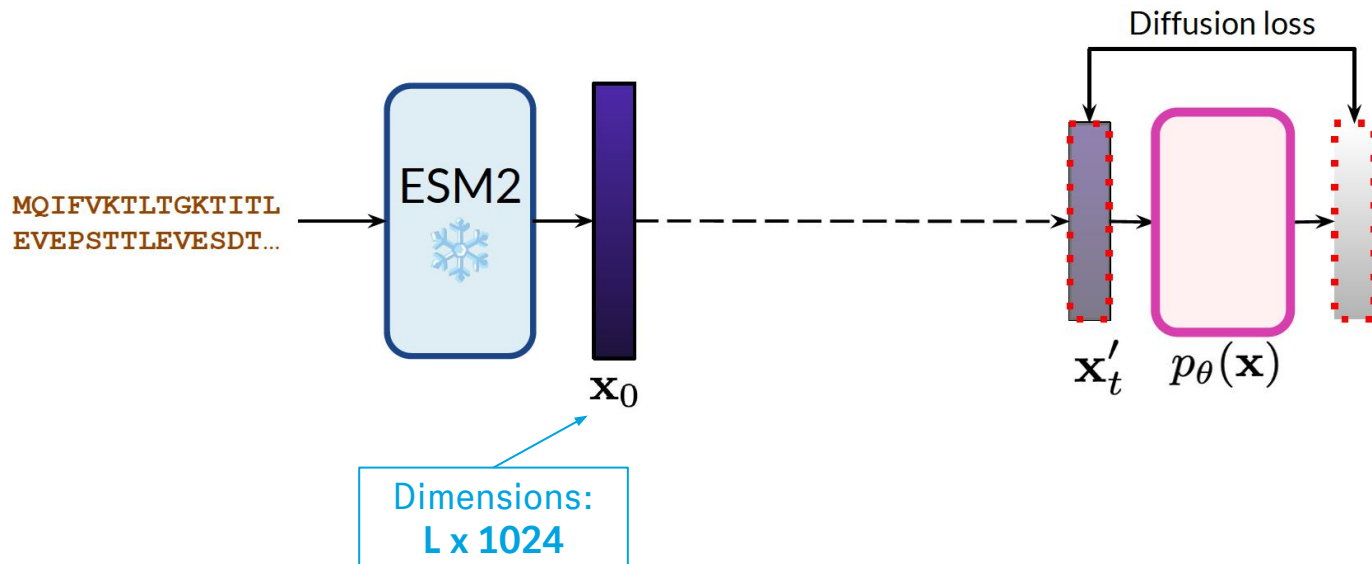


what constitutes semantic vs. perceptual compression for proteins? what level of detail do we need for drug discovery?

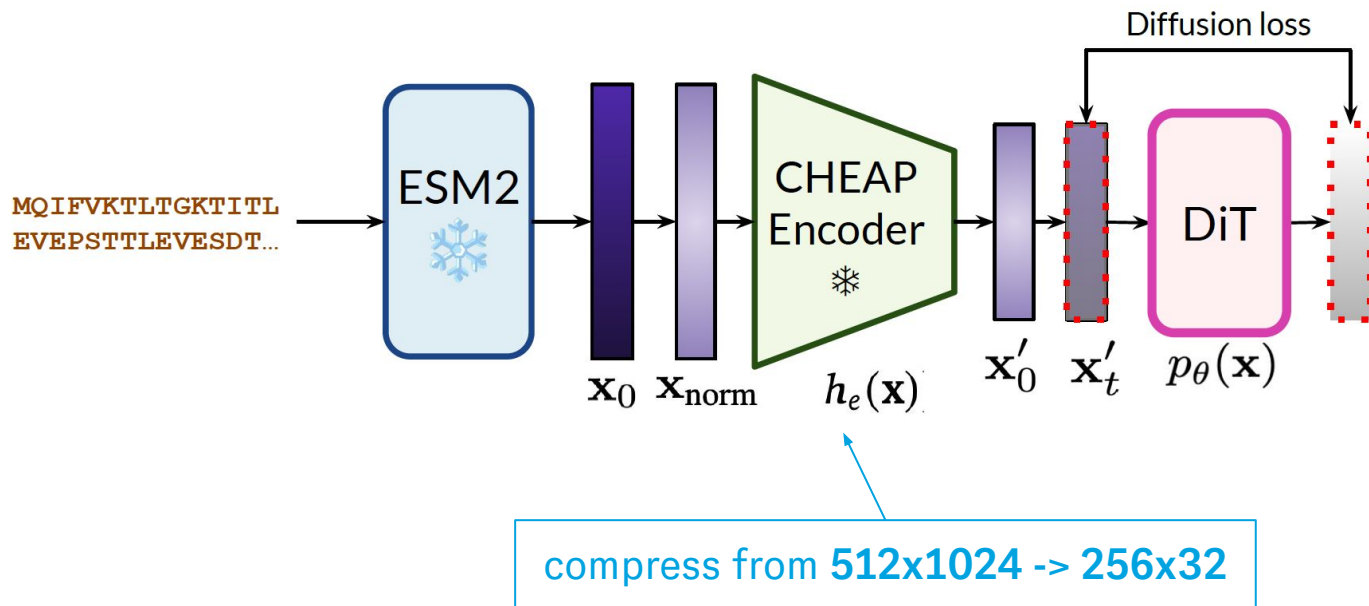
Agenda



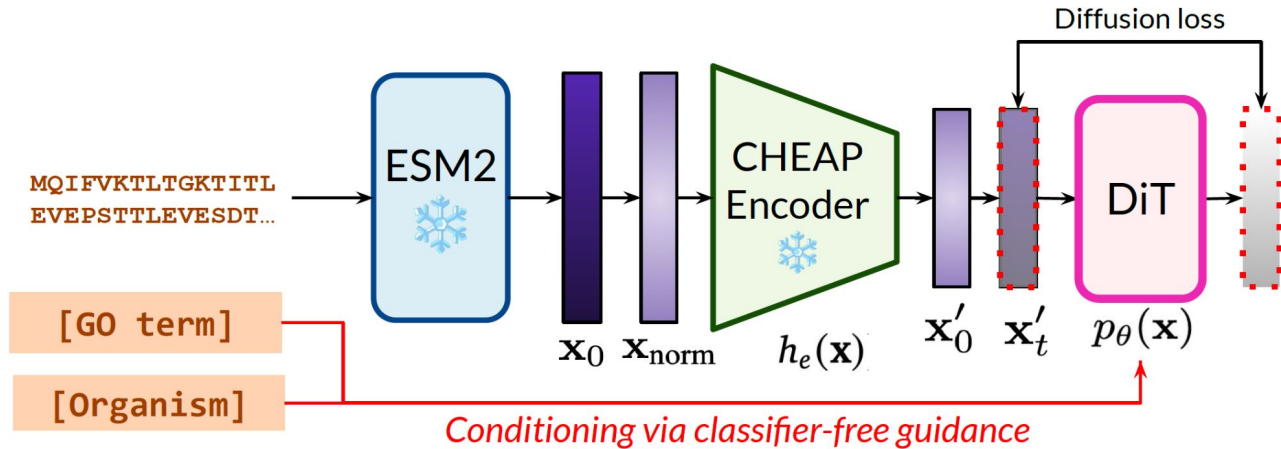
Training the PLAID latent diffusion model...



...but add embedding compression with CHEAP

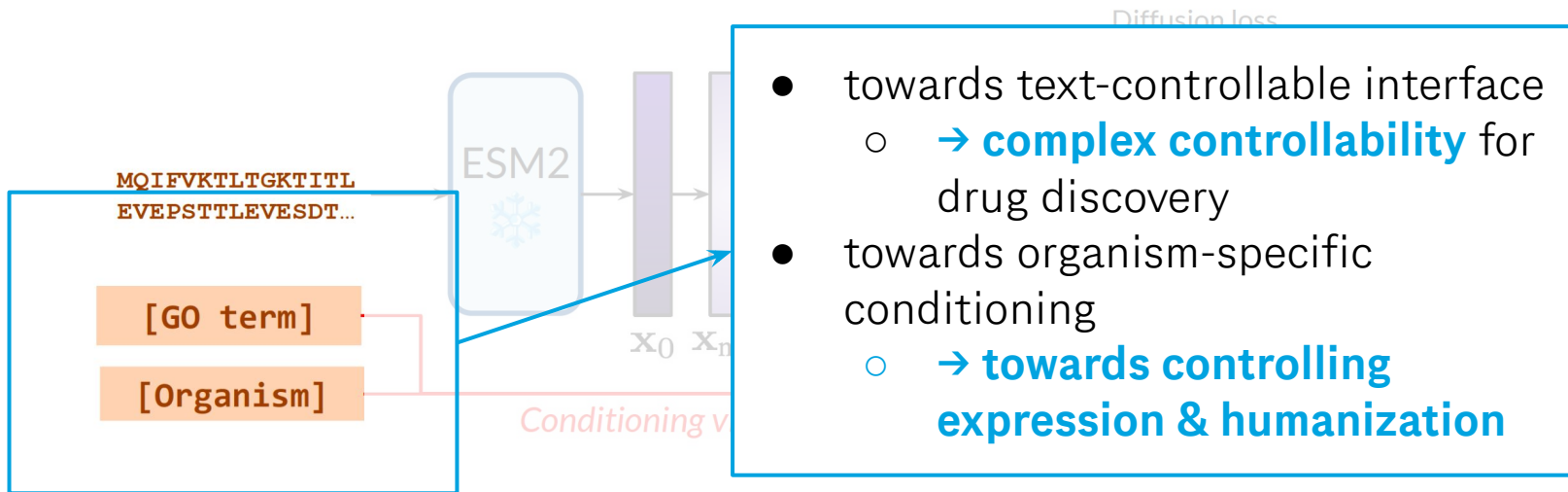


Adding compositional function + taxonomic conditioning



Sequence databases have more sample-annotation pairs!

Adding compositional function + taxonomic conditioning



Sequence databases have more sample-annotation pairs!

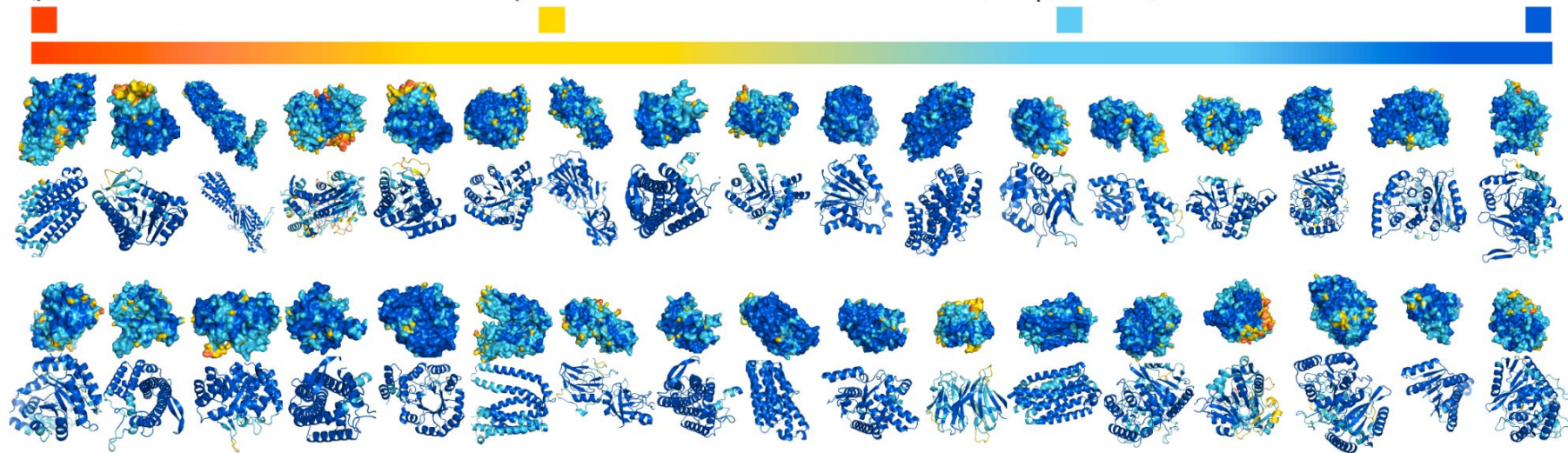
PLAID unconditionally generates diverse all-atom structures

Very Low
(pLDDT < 50)

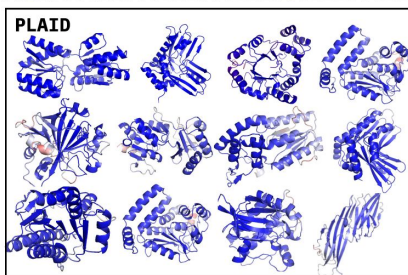
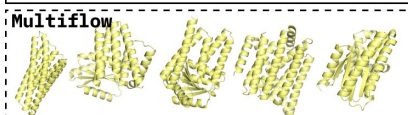
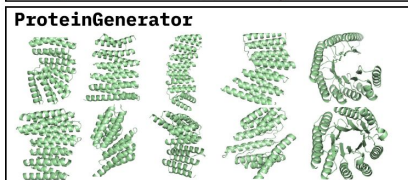
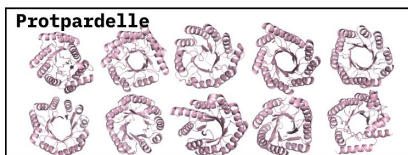
Low
(50 < pLDDT < 70)

High
(70 < pLDDT < 90)

Very High
(pLDDT > 90)



PLAID unconditionally generates diverse, high-quality folds



Protpardelle

```
>len600_samp97
AGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGLGLGLLLPPAGL...
>len600_samp98
PPPPGGAGGGGAAAALAGGSPGGPPGGGGGGGGGGG...
>len600_samp99
PPGPALPPSPGPGGVPPPPPLPPPLPGGAPPAGGGLL...
```

ProteinGenerator

```
>len600_000097
GAAGLTAAAVVGAAAAAGAAAAAALAAAGAGAAAAA...
>len600_000098
AGAAAGAAAAAAAAGAAAAAGAGGGAGGAAAAAAAAG...
>len600_000099
VAAAQAVQGAIAAAAAAATAALGLTAAGIAAPLLALV...
```

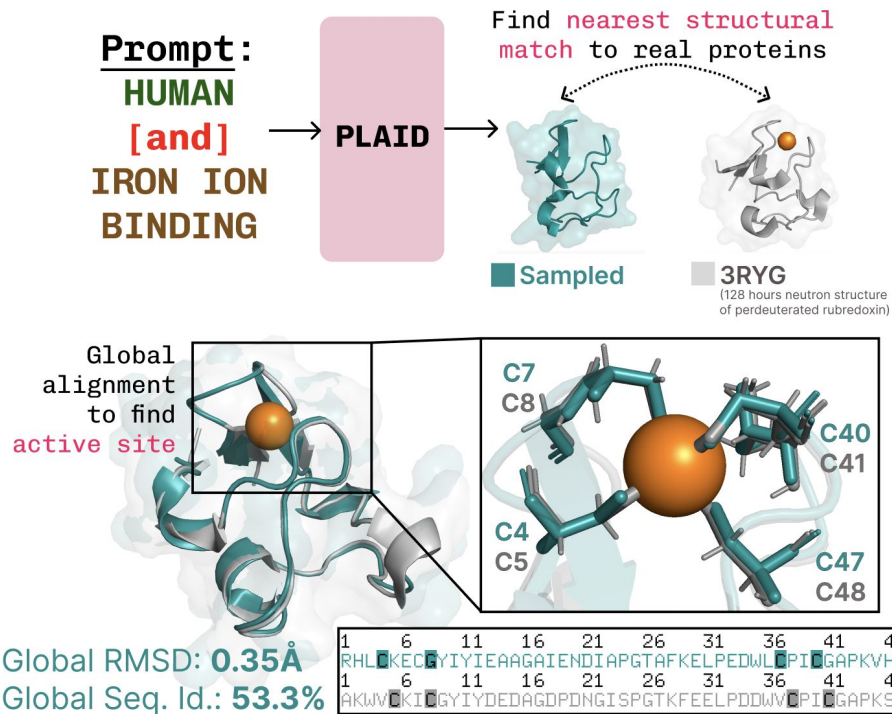
Multiflow

```
>len600_sample_97
LLGGLLGGLLGGAAGGAGAGAAAAGGGAVGVVAGAVT...
>len600_sample_98
ADAATLTVGGGGTGGGGGAGGALGGAAAGGGGRVTLVV...
>len600_sample_99
AGGGAGLAGGAGGAGGAAAAAAAAGAGGGAAAA...
```

PLAID

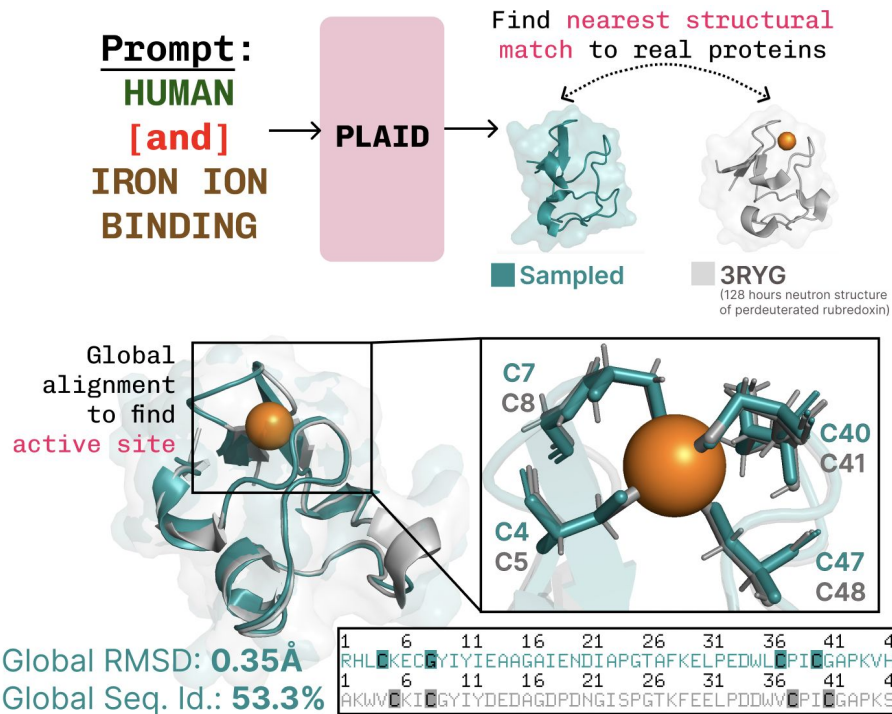
```
>len600_sample97
PDMGTVLGLAHSVGHLDFTKPDLSVADLETNLALLAAH...
>len600_sample98
FEMFDDKGGDLWERAASSGQLLIDVAYLANGLRDGAT...
>len600_sample99
NGGGQARGTDDPLTHALQTLFQSAALDQSLQGDPENAV...
```

Function-prompted generations learn active site sidechains



PLAID not only learns that cysteines coordinate the iron ion, but also the sidechain positioning...

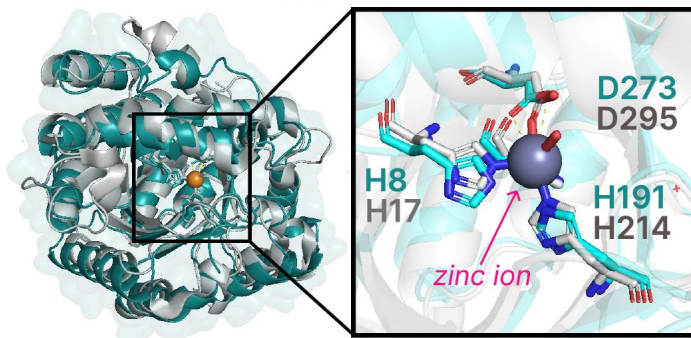
Function-prompted generations learn active site sidechains



PLAID not only learns that cysteines coordinate the iron ion, but also the sidechain positioning...

Function-prompted generations learn active site sidechains

Prompt:
HUMAN [and] DEAMINASE
ACTIVITY

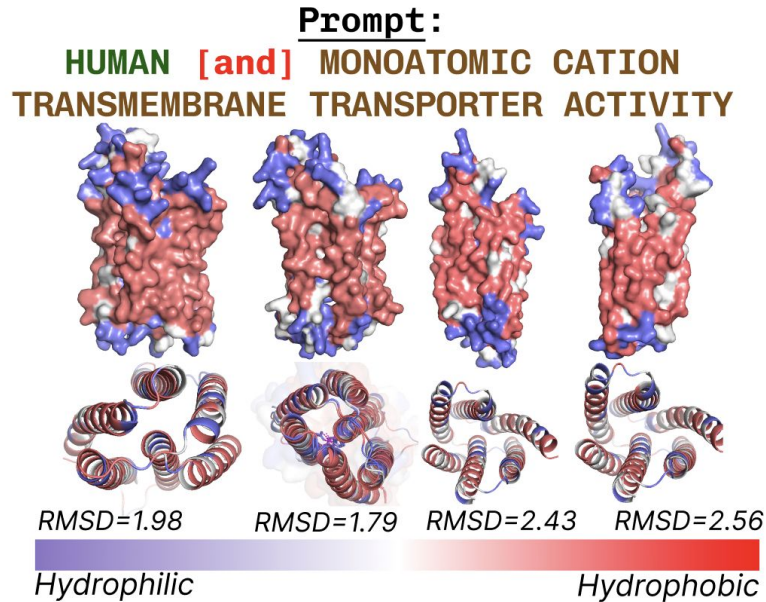


RMSD: 2.25Å
Seq. Id.: 24.3%

■ Sampled
■ 7RTG (Crystal Structure of
the Human Adenosine
Deaminase 1)

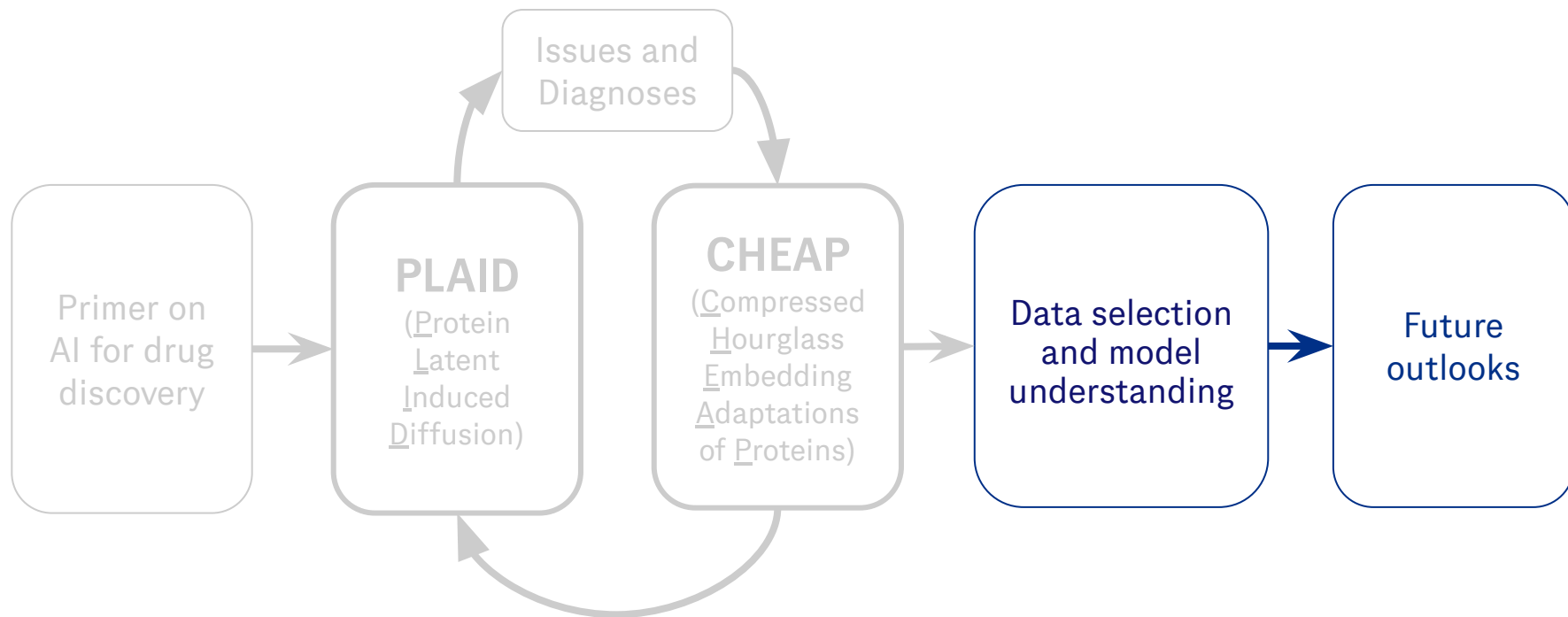
...despite these key
residues not being
adjacent in the
sequence.

Transmembrane proteins exhibit expected hydrophobicity patterns



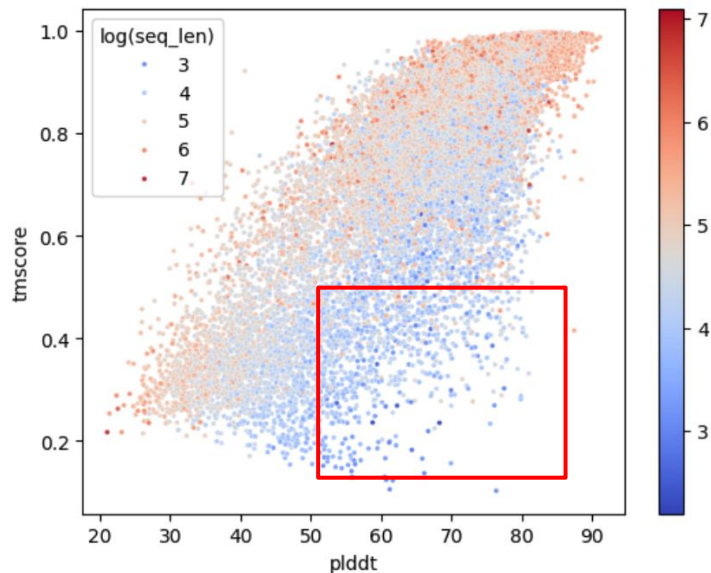
Hydrophobic residues are found at the core, as expected.

Agenda



From proof-of-concept to deployment in AI for drug discovery

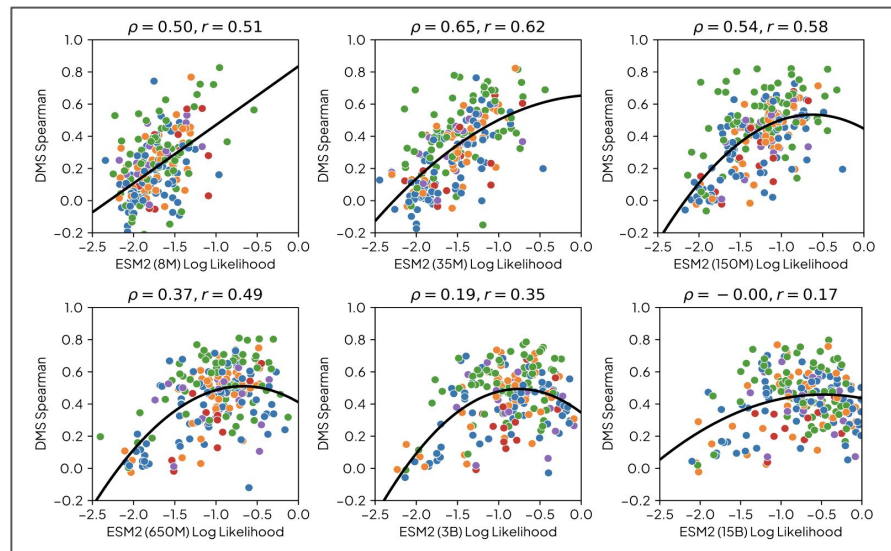
- Is the data learning a “biological world model”, or artifacts of the training data?



Length determines overconfident predictions, but we often use pLDDT for generative model evaluation.

From proof-of-concept to deployment in AI for drug discovery

- Is the data learning a “biological world model”, or artifacts of the training data?



From proof-of-concept to deployment in AI for drug discovery

A Member of the Boehr Group

Genome modeling and design across all domains of life with Evo 2

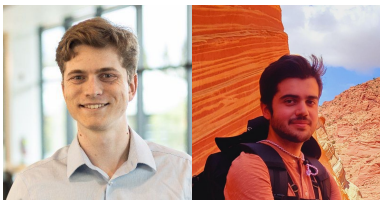
Garyk Brixi^{*,1,2,3}, Matthew G. Durrant^{*,1,2}, Jerome Ku^{*,1,2}, Michael Poli^{*,2,3,5},
Greg Brockman^{**,2,6,8}, Daniel Chang^{**,1,2,3}, Gabriel A. Gonzalez^{**,1,2}, Samuel H. King^{**,1,2,3},
David B. Li^{**,1,2,3}, Aditi T. Merchant^{**,1,2,3}, Mohsen Naghipourfar^{**,1,2,7}, Eric Nguyen^{**,2,3},
Chiara Ricci-Tam^{**,1,2}, David W. Romero^{**,2,4}, Gwanggyu Sun^{**,1,2}, Ali Taghibakshi^{**,2,4},
Anton Vorontsov^{**,2,4}, Brandon Yang^{**,2,6}, Myra Deng⁸, Liv Gorton⁸, Nam Nguyen⁸,
Nicholas K. Wang⁸, Etowah Adams⁹, Stephen A. Baccus³, Steven Dillmann³,
Stefano Ermon³, Daniel Guo^{1,3}, Rajesh Ilango¹, Ken Janik⁴, Amy X. Lu⁷, Reshma Mehta⁶,
Mohammad R.K. Mofrad⁷, Madelena Y. Ng³, Jaspreet Pannu³, Christopher Ré³,
Jonathan C. Schmok¹, John St. John⁴, Jeremy Sullivan¹, Kevin Zhu⁷, Greg Zynda⁴,
Daniel Balsam^{8,10}, Patrick Collison^{1,10}, Anthony B. Costa^{4,10}, Tina Hernandez-
Boussard^{3,10}, Eric Ho^{8,10}, Ming-Yu Liu^{4,10}, Thomas McGrath^{8,10},
Kimberly Powell^{4,10}, Dave P. Burke^{†,1,2,10}, Hani Goodarzi^{†,1,2,10,11},
Patrick D. Hsu^{†,†,1,2,7,10}, Brian L. Hie^{†,†,1,2,3,10}

¹Arc Institute; ²Core Contributor, Evo 2 Team; ³Stanford University; ⁴NVIDIA;

⁵Liquid AI; ⁶Independent Researcher; ⁷University of California, Berkeley;

⁸Goodfire; ⁹Columbia University; ¹⁰Senior Contributor, Evo 2 Team;

¹¹University of California, San Francisco



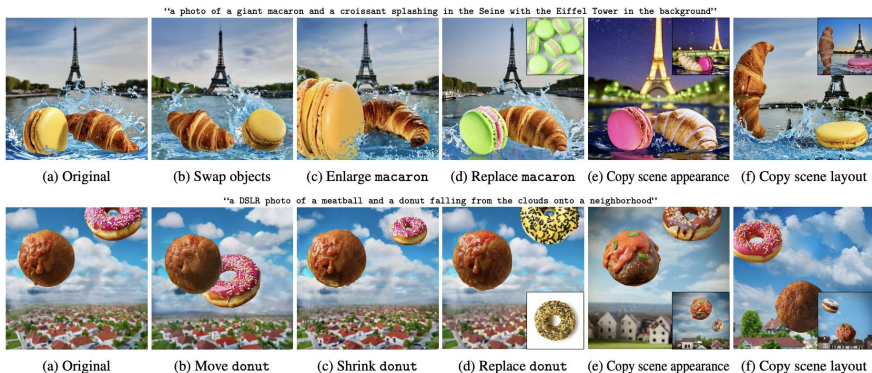
...



Medium-term directions...

Latent diffusion for drug design

- Leveraging “**fuzziness**” in # of atoms and binding position
- Alleviating computational challenges for large complexes with **compression**
- Semantic control in latent space



Diffusion self-guidance for controllable image generation.
Epstein et al., 2023

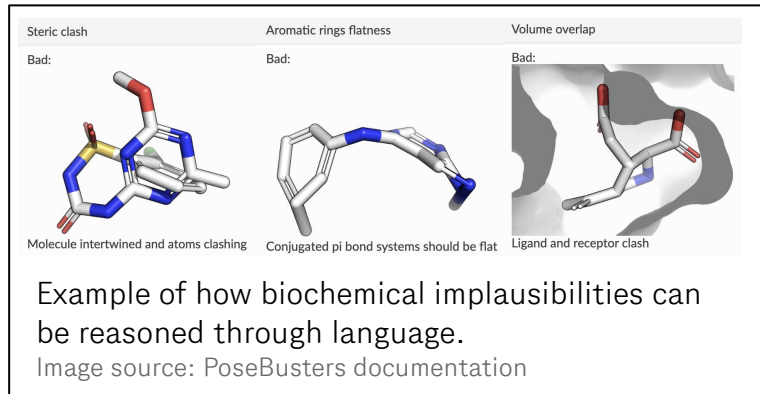
Medium-term directions...

Multimodal biophysical
reasoning / chain-of-thought
“scratchpad”

April 16, 2025 Release

Thinking with images

OpenAI o3 and o4-mini represent a significant breakthrough in visual perception by reasoning with images in their chain of thought.



Long term goals...

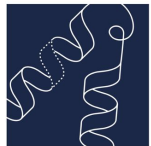
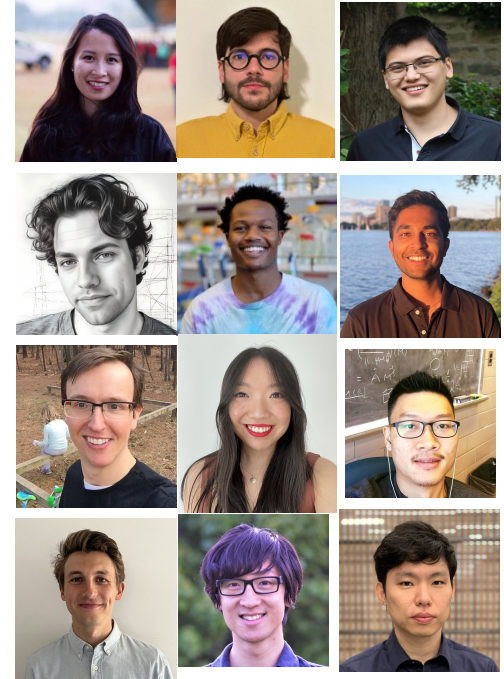
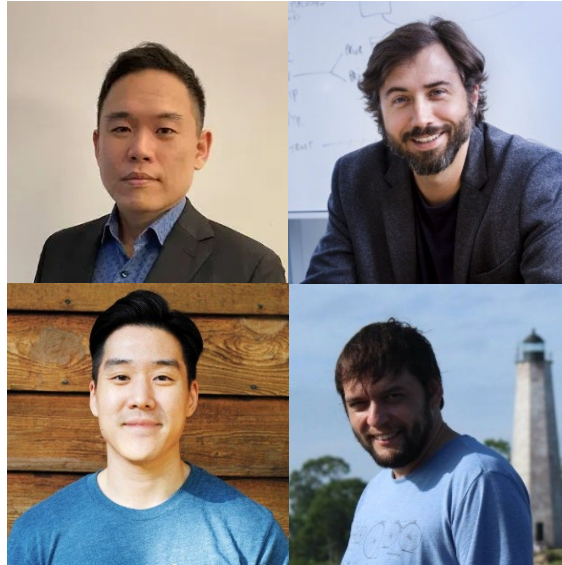
- How can we move to a “target-agnostic” paradigm in drug discovery using advances in task-agnostic AI systems?
 - AI for biology as reasoning about the molecular-level world
- How can we extrapolate / “reason” beyond human intelligence?
 - How does data availability & simulation fidelity affect how this is done?
- How can we work *with* rather than *against* Moravec’s Paradox, using scientific applications as a testbed?

Acknowledgements

Acknowledgements: Pieter!



Acknowledgements: Prescient Design / Genentech



Prescient
Design
A Genentech Accelerator

and very many more Prescient team members!

Acknowledgements: MSR & Google Brain



Microsoft Research



Google Research



Acknowledgements: collaborators



and very many more!

Acknowledgements: committee & other faculty



Arc Institute

 **Innovative
Genomics
Institute**

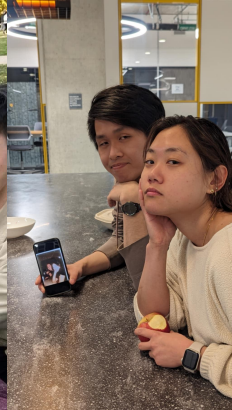
Acknowledgements: RLL labmates



Acknowledgements: admin



Acknowledgements: friends!! berkeley!!



Acknowledgements: friends!! berkeley!!



Acknowledgements: friends!! toronto/sf!!



Acknowledgements: family <3



Acknowledgements: family <3



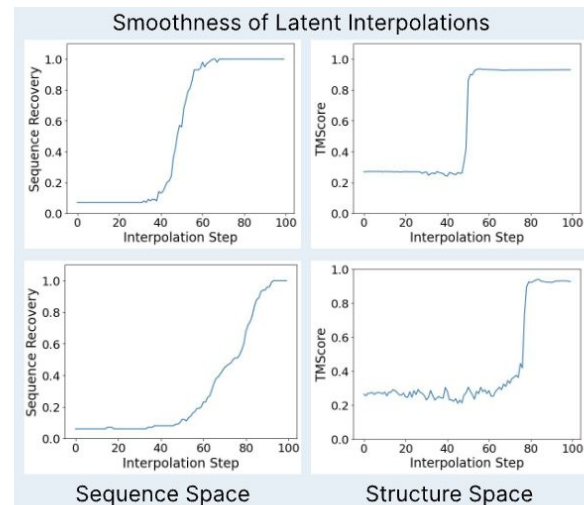
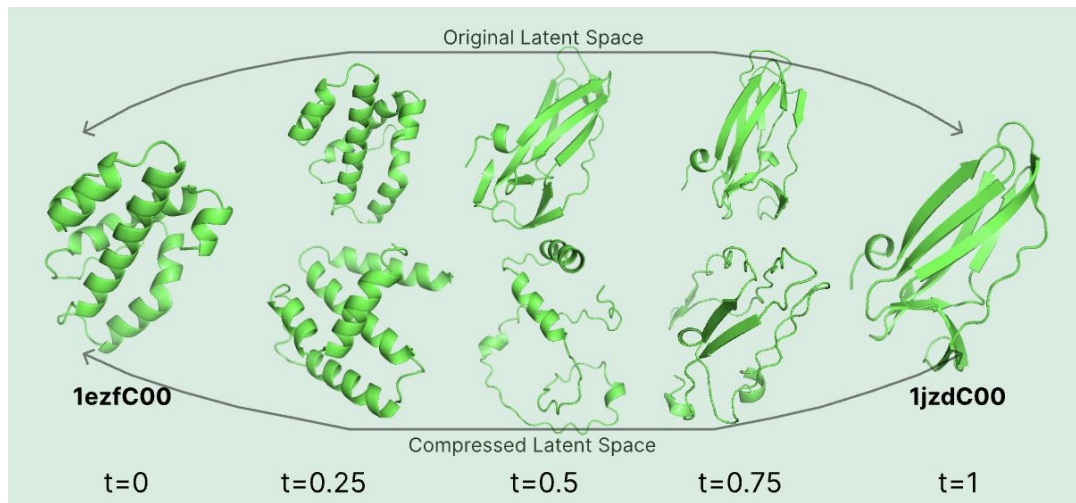
Acknowledgements: family <3



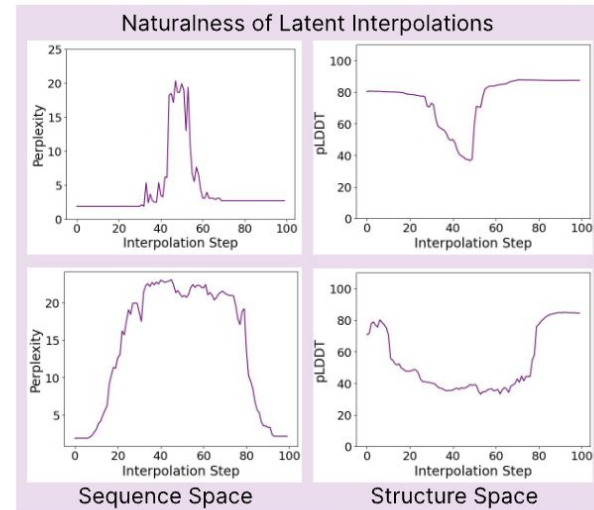
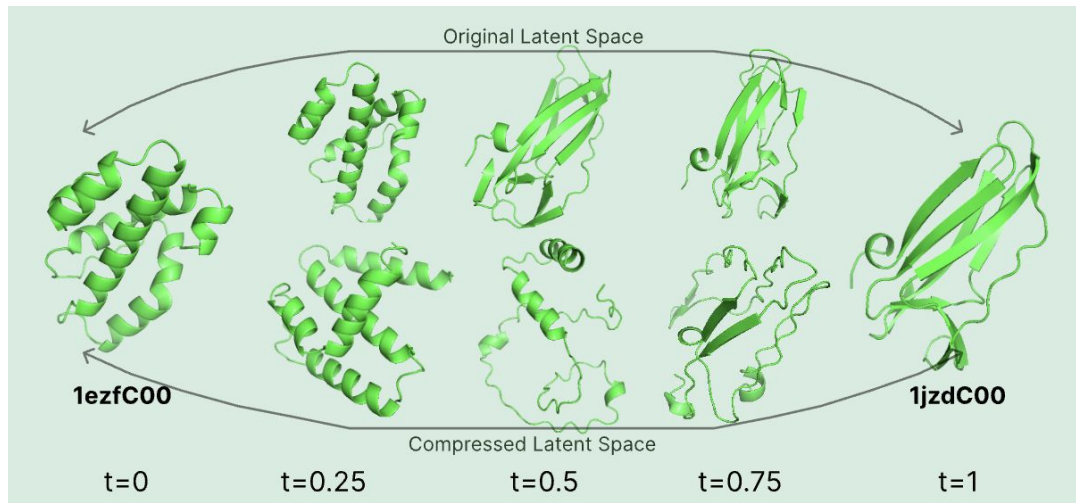
Acknowledgements

the end!!!! 🤝

Linear interpolation in the latent space

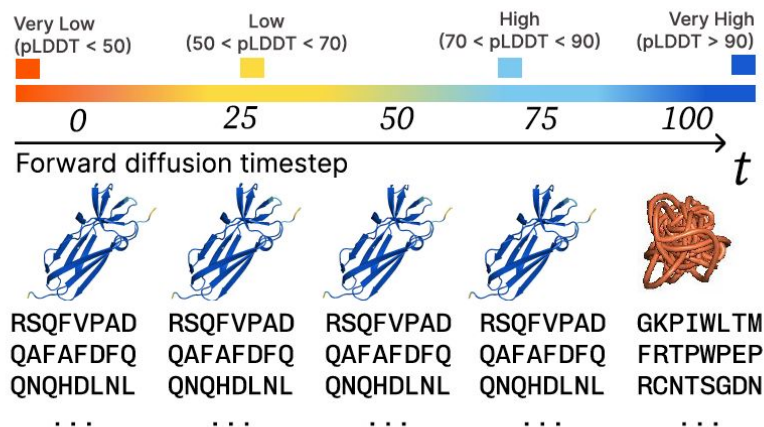
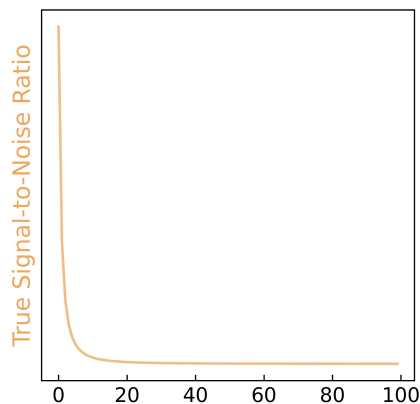


Linear interpolation in the latent space

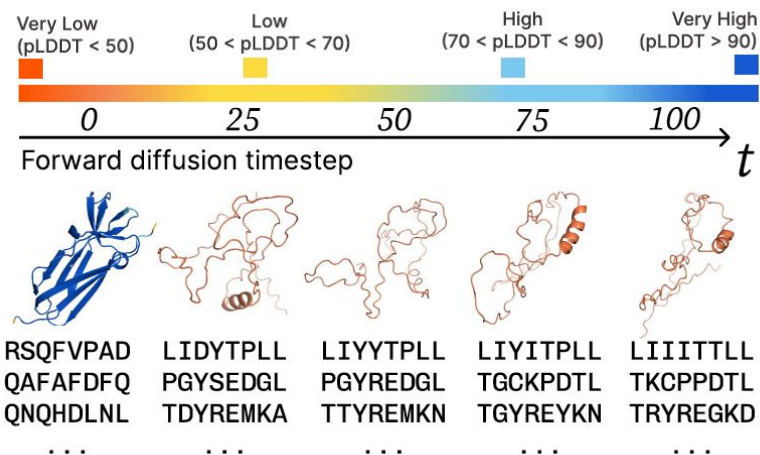
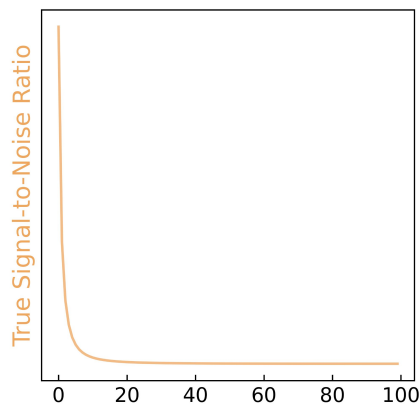


Protein language model latent spaces are less rugged than true fitness landscapes!

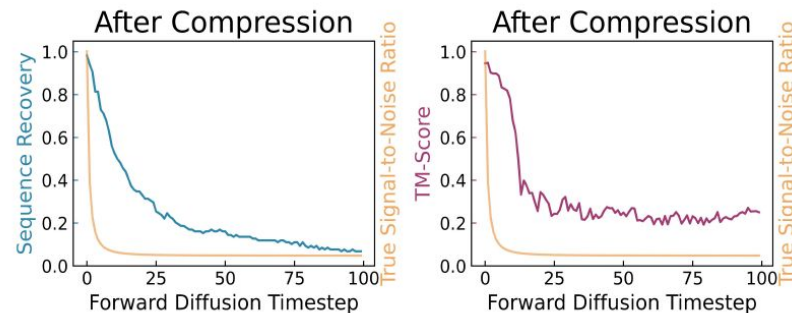
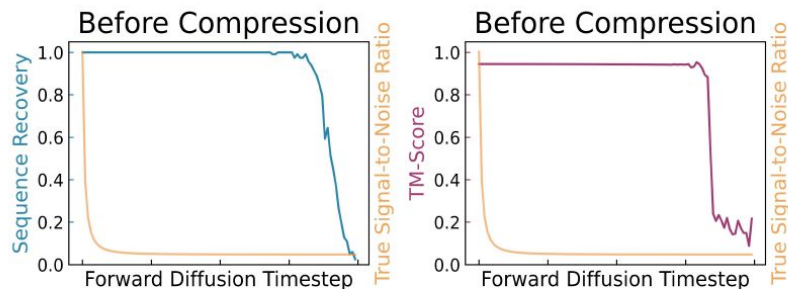
Noising the **original** latent space does not affect the structure...



...noising the compressed latent space does map to corrupted structures



...noising the **compressed** latent space does map to corrupted structures



esm / esm / esmfold / v1 / esmfold.py

Code Blame 364 lines (305 loc) · 13.6 KB

```
152     def forward(
185         # === ESM ===
186         esmaa = self._af2_idx_to_esm_idx(aa, mask)
187
188         if masking_pattern is not None:
189             esmaa = self._mask_inputs_to_esm(esmaa, masking_pattern)
190
191         esm_s, esm_z = self._compute_language_model_representations(esmaa)
192
193         # Convert esm_s to the precision used by the trunk and
194         # the structure module. These tensors may be a lower precision if, for example,
195         # we're running the language model in fp16 precision.
196         esm_s = esm_s.to(self.esm_s_combine.dtype)
197         esm_s = esm_s.detach()
198
199         # === preprocessing ===
200         esm_s = (self.esm_s_combine.softmax(0).unsqueeze(0) @ esm_s).squeeze(2)
201
202         s_s_0 = self.esm_s_mlp(esm_s)
203         if self.cfg.use_esm_attn_map:
204             esm_z = esm_z.to(self.esm_s_combine.dtype)
205             esm_z = esm_z.detach()
206             s_z_0 = self.esm_z_mlp(esm_z)
207         else:
208             s_z_0 = s_s_0.new_zeros(B, L, L, self.cfg.trunk.pairwise_state_dim)
209
210         s_s_0 += self.embedding(aa)
211
212         structure: dict = self.trunk(
213             s_s_0, s_z_0, aa, residx, mask, no_recycles=num_recycles
214         )
```



Observation: at inference,
the pairwise input is
initialized as zeros...

~~ESMFold~~ ~~ESM2~~ Large transformers latent space exhibits pathologically large values

→ a pervasive issue across LLMs, ViTs, etc.

[Submitted on 27 Feb 2024 (v1), last revised 14 Aug 2024 (this version, v2)]

Massive Activations in Large Language Models

Mingjie Sun, Xinlei Chen, J. Zico Kolter, Zhuang Liu

We observe an empirical phenomenon in Large Language Models (LLMs) -- very few activations exhibit significantly larger values than others (e.g., 100,000 times larger). We call them massive activations. First, we demonstrate the widespread existence of

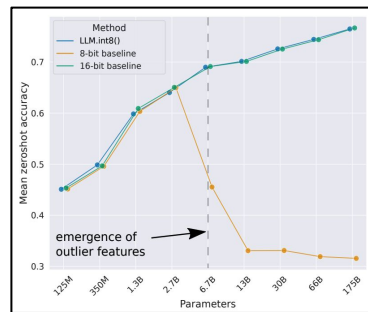
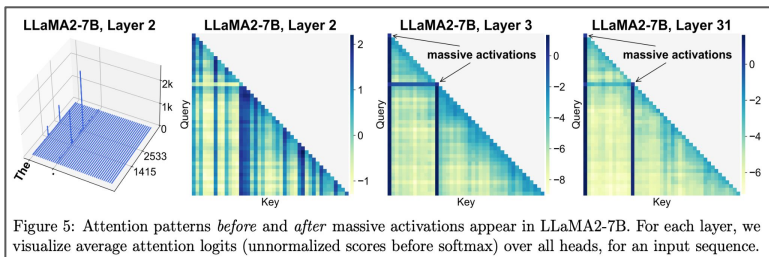
LLM.int8(): 8-bit Matrix Multiplication for Transformers at Scale

Tim Dettmers^{Λ*}

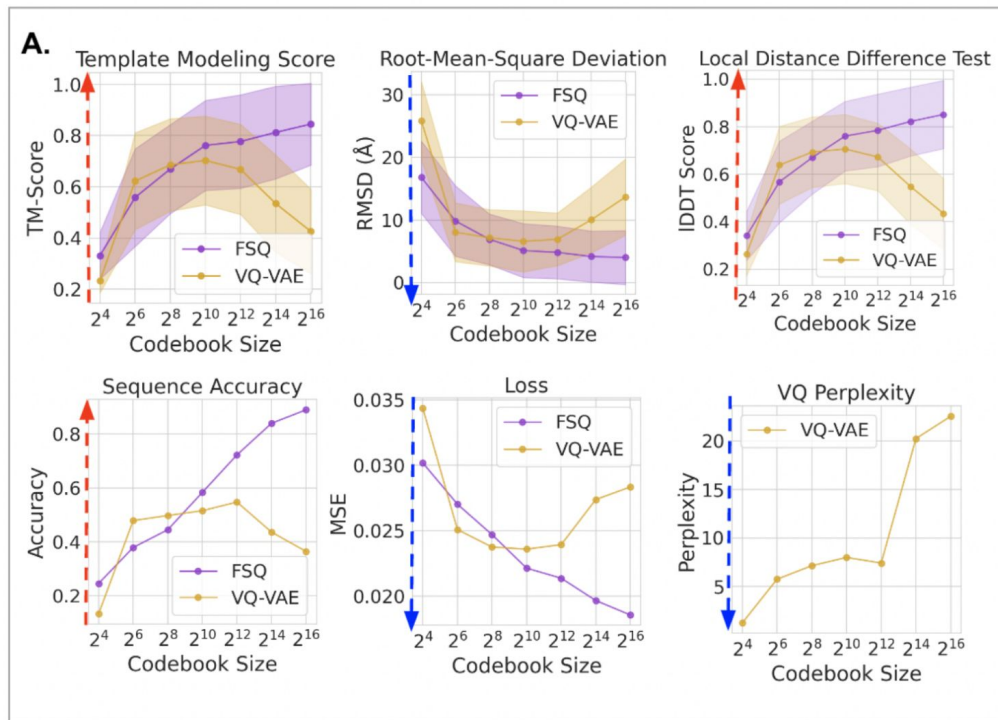
Mike Lewis[†]

Younes Belkada^{§‡}

Luke Zettlemoyer^{†λ}

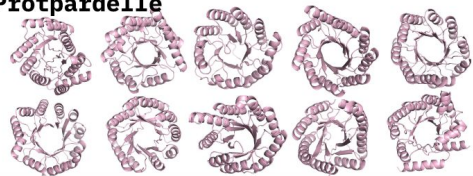


All-atom structural tokenizer, obtained from sequence alone



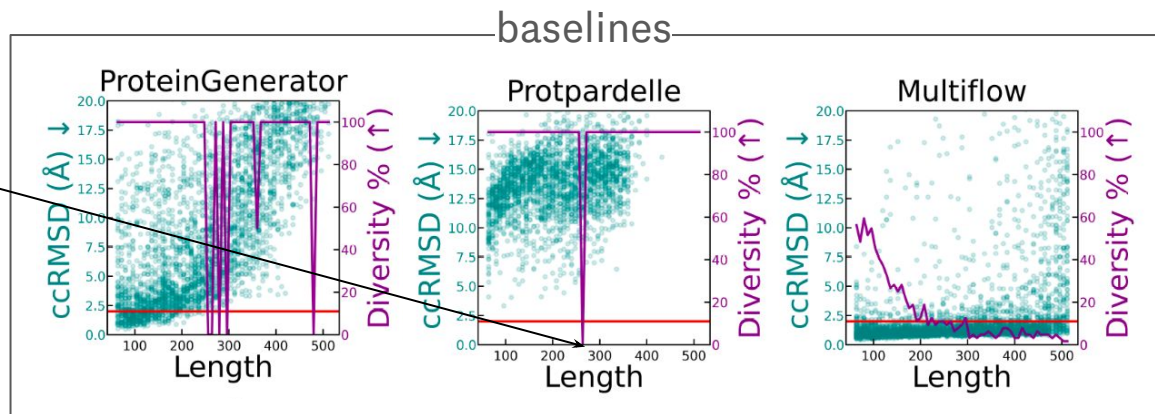
PLAID unconditionally generates diverse, high-quality folds

Protpardelle



Protpardelle

```
>len600_samp97
AGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGLGLGLLLPPAGL...
>len600_samp98
PPPPGGAGGGGAAAAAGGSPGGPPGGGGGGGGGGGG...
>len600_samp99
PPGPALPPSPGGVPPPPPLPPPLPGGAPPAGGGLL...
```

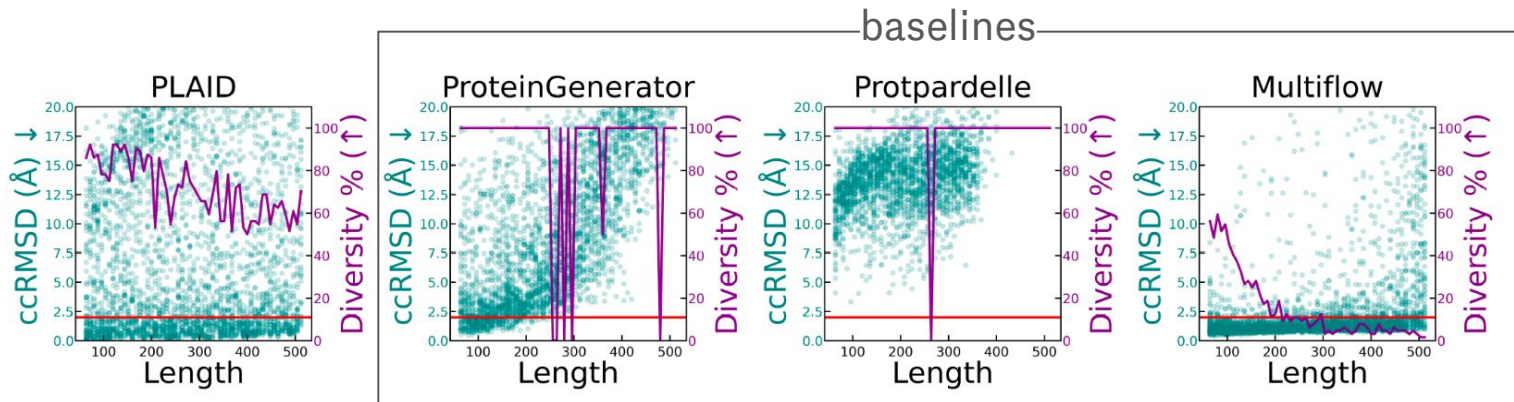


purple: diversity (↑)
(# of foldseek clusters /
of samples)

teal: quality (↓)
(ccRMSD between generated structure and
predicted structure of generated sequence)

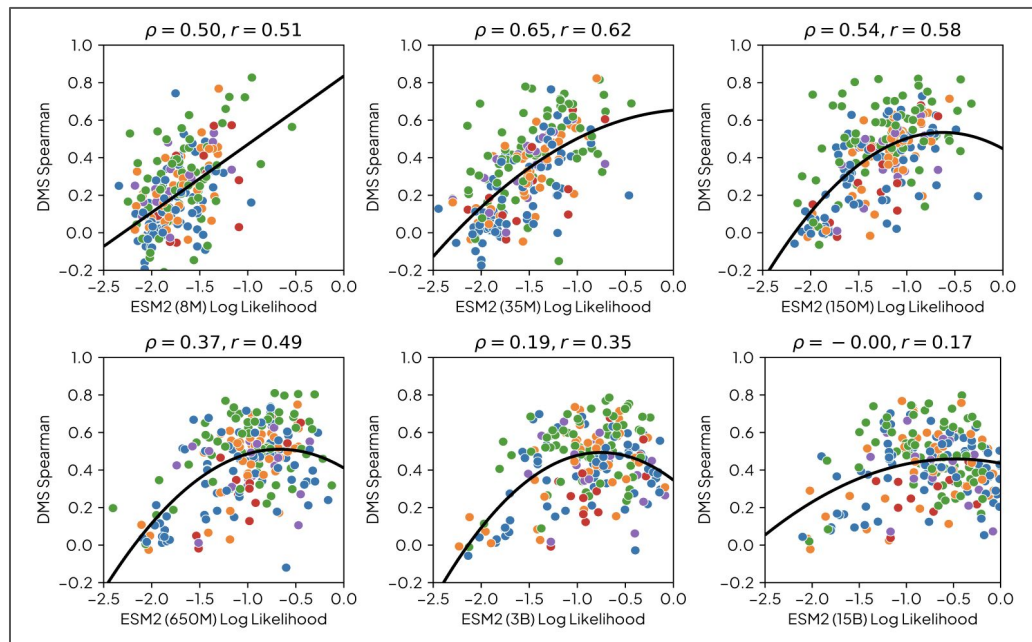
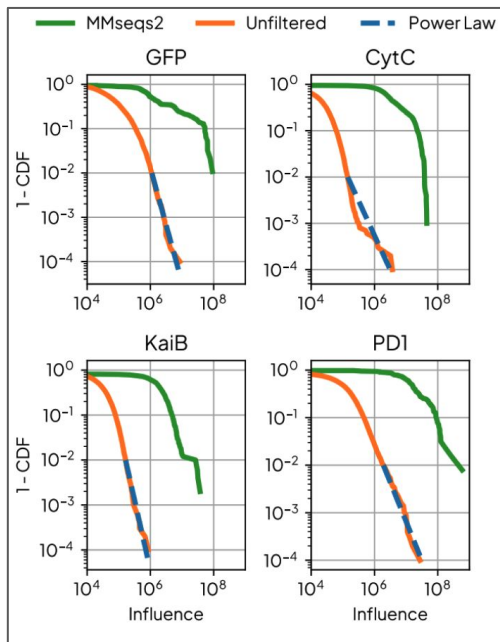
PLAID unconditionally generates diverse, high-quality folds

PLAID better balances diversity and quality, especially at longer sequence lengths.



From proof-of-concept to deployment in AI for drug discovery

A Member of the Roche Group



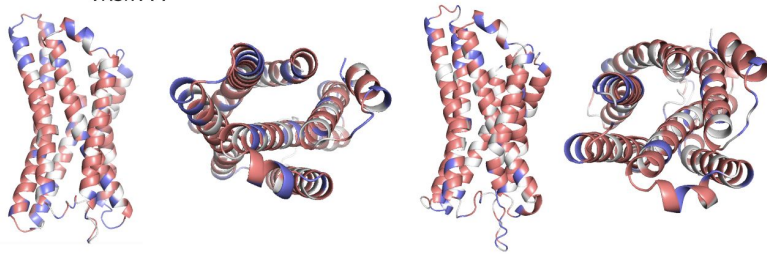
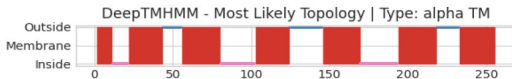
Transmembrane proteins exhibit expected numbers of helices

Prompt:

HUMAN [and]

G PROTEIN-COUPLED RECEPTOR ACTIVITY

GNVLVLIMMILKQREVKSMPNV
WVFNLAISDLLFLLSTPLL VVK
MSDTSWNLGLSPCKITTFLLFL
NLYSSVFFLAQLSLDRYLTVRQ
VRSN . . .



GPCRs have the expected 7-transmembrane topology, both when analyzing the sequence and structure.