Properties of galaxies reproduced by a hydrodynamic simulation

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Previous simulations of the growth of cosmic structures have broadly reproduced the 'cosmic web' of galaxies that we see in the Universe, but failed to create a mixed population of elliptical and spiral galaxies, because of numerical inaccuracies and incomplete physical models. Moreover, they were unable to track the small-scale evolution of gas and stars to the present epoch within a representative portion of the Universe. Here we report a simulation that starts 12 million years after the Big Bang, and traces 13 billion years of cosmic evolution with 12 billion resolution elements in a cube of 106.5 megaparsecs a side. It yields a reasonable population of ellipticals and spirals, reproduces the observed distribution of galaxies in clusters and characteristics of hydrogen on large scales, and at the same time matches the 'metal' and hydrogen content of galaxies on small scales.

The initial conditions for structure formation in the Universe are tightly constrained from measurements of anisotropies in the cosmic microwave background radiation1. However, previous attempts to reproduce the properties of the observed cosmological structures with computer models have shown only limited success. No single, self-consistent simulation of the Universe was able to simultaneously predict statistics on large scales, such as the distribution of neutral hydrogen or the galaxy population of massive galaxy clusters, together with galaxy properties on small scales, such as the morphology and detailed gas and stellar content of galaxies. The challenge lies in following the baryonic component of the Universe using hydrodynamic simulations2-4, which are required to model gas, stars, supermassive black holes (SMBHs) and their related energetic feedback. The vast computational challenges of these simulations have forced previous attempts to focus either on simulating only small portions of the Universe or to employ a coarse resolution such that internal characteristics of galaxies could not be resolved. Furthermore, the large dynamic range of length scales in the problem forces common hydrodynamic solvers to sacrifice accuracy. Finally, poorly understood small-scale processes such as star formation and accretion onto SMBHs are coupled to galactic and super-galactic scales, introducing large uncertainties into modelling techniques.

Rapid advances in computing power combined with improved numerical algorithms and more faithful models of the relevant physics have allowed us to produce a simulation (named Illustris) that simultaneously follows the evolution of dark matter and baryons in detail. Starting approximately 12 million years (Myr) after the Big Bang, our simulation tracks the evolution of more than 12 billion resolution elements in a volume of $\left(106.5\,\text{Mpc}\right)^3$ up to the current epoch (redshift $z = 0$). This allows us to achieve a dark-matter mass resolution of $6.26 \times 10^9$ times that of the Sun ($M_\odot$), and a baryonic mass resolution of $1.26 \times 10^8 M_\odot$. The smallest scale over which the hydrodynamics is resolved is 48 pc, whereas gravitational forces are resolved down to 710 pc at $z = 0$ and to even smaller scales at high redshifts (for example, 473 pc at $z = 2$). Our calculation therefore overcomes the problems of previous hydrodynamic simulations which either did not cover a large enough portion of the Universe to be representative, lacked adequate resolution, or failed to reach the present epoch. Apart from having a large volume and improved resolution, our simulation is evolved with the novel hydrodynamic algorithm AREPO5, which uses a moving unstructured Voronoi tessellation in combination with a finite volume approach (Methods). Finally, we employ a numerically well-posed and reasonably complete model for galaxy formation physics, which includes the formation of both stars and SMBHs, and their effects on their environments in forms of galactic super-winds driven by star formation, as well as radio bubbles and radiation proximity effects caused by active galactic nuclei (AGNs; see Methods).

Unlike previous attempts, we find a mix of galaxy morphologies ranging from blue spiral galaxies to red ellipticals, with a hydrogen and 'metal' (that is, all elements other than hydrogen and helium) content in good agreement with observational data. At the same time, our model predicts correctly the large-scale distribution of neutral hydrogen, and the radial distribution of satellite galaxies within galaxy clusters. Our results therefore demonstrate that the $\Lambda$ cold dark matter (LCDM) model can correctly describe the variety of observational data on small and large scales in our Universe. It also predicts a strong, scale-dependent impact of baryonic effects on the dark-matter distribution, at a level that has significant implications for future precision probes of cosmology.

Observing the model Universe
The simulation volume contains 41,416 galaxies at $z = 0$ that are resolved with more than 500 stellar resolution elements. Our model yields a population of non-star-forming elliptical galaxies, star-forming disk galaxies, and irregular galaxies (Fig. 1a). We find that galaxies with low star-formation rates contain about 52% of all the stellar mass that is in galaxies more massive than $M_* = 10^9 M_\odot$, which agrees well with observations6 (54%–60%). Simulating the formation of realistic disk galaxies, like our own Milky Way, has remained an unsolved problem for more than two decades. The culprit was an angular momentum deficit leading to too high central concentrations, overly massive bulges and unrealistic rotation curves5,6. The fact that our calculation naturally produces a morphological mix of realistic disk galaxies coexisting with a population of ellipticals resolves this long-standing issue. It also shows that previous futile attempts to achieve this were not due to an inherent

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flaw of the ΛCDM paradigm, but rather due to limitations of numerical algorithms and physical modelling. As our simulation follows the evolution of galaxies starting relatively shortly after the Big Bang, we can construct virtual mock observations that mimic the conditions that the Hubble Space Telescope encounters as it images galaxies across cosmic time in very deep surveys, such as the Ultra Deep Field (UDF), and the continuing Frontier Fields programme. These observations capture a large variety of galaxy luminosities, sizes, colours, morphologies and evolutionary stages, providing remarkable benchmarks for galaxy formation theories. We have constructed a mock UDF and compare it side by side with data from the HST eXtreme Deep Field (XDF) compilation (Fig. 1b, c). Galaxies in the mock UDF appear strikingly similar to the observed population in terms of number density, colours, sizes and morphologies. Our model is the first hydrodynamic simulation from which a faithful deep UDF-like observation could be constructed, thanks to its combination of large volume and high resolution, along with the new numerical techniques that allow it to reproduce realistic galaxy morphologies.

**Satellite galaxies in clusters**

This qualitative agreement also extends to many quantitative probes of the distribution and internal structure of galaxies. The abundance and spatial distribution of satellite galaxies forms an important observational test of the ΛCDM paradigm, as it is very sensitive both to details of the hierarchical structure formation process and to galactic-scale baryonic processes. In fact, two of the most acute challenges to the ΛCDM model are related to satellite galaxies on galactic scales, giving rise to the 'missing satellite' and 'too-big-to-fail' problems. A particularly taxing problem is the radial distribution of satellite galaxies within galaxy clusters, which are the largest gravitationally bound objects in the Universe.

Recently, large Sloan Digital Sky Survey cluster samples have made it possible to measure accurate radial satellite profiles. Theoretical models have so far struggled to reproduce the shapes and normalizations of these profiles. Semi-analytic models have resorted to ad hoc prescriptions for mass-stripping and tuned approximations for satellite orbits because they are missing the gravitational effects of the stellar component. Despite the freedom offered by the adopted coarse parameterizations, most semi-analytic models consistently find radial profiles that are too steep, and in particular overestimate the number of satellites in the inner regions of clusters (radius r < 100–200 kpc). Previous hydrodynamic simulations, on the other hand, found inner radial profiles that are too shallow and in most cases could not reproduce the observed normalization, owing both to limited resolution and to an over-production of stars in satellites due to missing physical processes.

For the most massive haloes, which host the largest accumulations of galaxies in the Universe, we have calculated a stacked projected galaxy count profile and compared it to results from a sample of satellite galaxies with r-band magnitude < −20.5, for host systems at 0.15 ≤ z ≤ 0.4 extracted from 55,121 Sloan Digital Sky Survey groups and clusters (10^{13.7} M_⊙ < M_{500, crit} < 10^{15.0} M_⊙, where M_{500, crit} is the characteristic mass enclosed in a radius with mean density 500 times the critical density for closure) centred on luminous red galaxies (Fig. 2). Having higher resolution than previous hydrodynamic simulations, and more realistic feedback models that suppress the stellar masses of satellites, we obtain a good agreement with both the observed profile shape and its normalization, as well as with the mean galaxy colour as a function of cluster-centric distance. The radial distribution of dark-matter subhaloes from a corresponding dark-matter-only simulation ('Illustris-Dark') flattens towards the centre. This difference is due to dissipational processes of galaxy formation that make the stellar component more resistant to tidal disruption close to cluster centres. This directly demonstrates that neglecting baryonic physics causes inaccuracies in the spatial distribution of satellite galaxies which in turn can lead to errors in estimates of galaxy merger rates.

**Metals and neutral hydrogen in galaxies**

The high mass resolution of the simulation makes it possible to study the internal characteristics of galaxies. It allows us, for example, to make clear predictions for the stellar and gaseous contents of galaxies, and for the baryonic cycle operating between them. Our model predicts the present-day H I mass, M_{HI}, of galaxies in the local Universe, which can be compared to observations as revealed by the Arecibo Legacy FAST ALFA Survey (ALFALFA; Fig. 3a). As stars form out of cold gas which is largely neutral, the H I richness is a good probe of the reservoir of gas available for star formation in a galaxy. The H I-selected samples of ALFALFA are typically biased towards the most gas-rich star-forming galaxies; that is, the major limitation of H I-selected samples is that they will miss the most gas-poor elliptical galaxies.

Our results recover the trend of decreasing H I richness with increasing stellar mass. For the most massive galaxies, the full simulated galaxy sample deviates from the observed mean relation. Many of these massive galaxies have been quenched through AGN feedback and therefore contain little amounts of gas; that is, they would not be detected by ALFALFA given their low H I content. If we focus instead on star-forming galaxies, we find significantly better agreement even at higher masses, and we reproduce the observed H I richness relation over nearly four orders of magnitude in stellar mass. We also include a separate H I richness relation for the satellites of the most massive cluster and compare this to H I measurements of galaxies in the Virgo cluster where ram pressure removes gas from infalling galaxies (Fig. 3a). Such hydrodynamic
processes are not directly accessible to semi-analytic models but are captured in our simulation. We can therefore recover the observed trend: satellites in cluster environments have a lower H i content compared to the whole population. The predicted difference is not as pronounced as in the observations, but this may well be caused by the fact that our volume does not contain a galaxy cluster as massive as Virgo.

Every dynamical time, a small fraction of the galactic cold neutral gas turns into stars, which inherit the chemical composition of the gas. Stellar metallicities therefore probe different processes intrinsic to galaxy formation: chemical enrichment, feedback, and in- and outflows. Hydrodynamic cosmological simulations have so far been unable to produce correct stellar metallicities; measures such as the mean stellar metallicity or the cosmic density of total metal mass locked up in stars, \( \rho_{Z,\star} \), were discrepant from the observed values by almost a factor of two\(^{21-22} \). Our model, on the other hand, produces \( \rho_{Z,\star} = 7.75 \times 10^{-3} M_\odot \) Mpc\(^{-3} \), in agreement with the observed value\(^{23} \) of \( \rho_{Z,\star} = (7.1 \pm 2) \times 10^{-3} M_\odot \) Mpc\(^{-3} \).

Recent observations find a relation where more massive galaxies contain a larger proportion of metals\(^{24-26} \). Our predictions agree well with these observations, and, most importantly, the simulation recovers the flattening of the relation above \( M_\star \approx 10^{11} M_\odot \) (Fig. 3b). The observed trend is reproduced over nearly five orders of magnitude in stellar mass. These agreements with observations are driven by the combination of our accurate hydrodynamic scheme together with realistic effective feedback models and a complete stellar evolution prescription, a combination that was lacking in previous studies.

Figure 2 | Projected number density profile of satellite galaxies in galaxy clusters. Symbols show a simulation sample as a function of cluster-centric projected radius, considering 10 haloes more massive than \( M_{500,crit} = 10^{13.7} M_\odot \) and all their satellite galaxies brighter than \( r < -20.5 \) mag within \( 3 \times R_{500,crit} \) along the line of sight from the cluster centre. \( \sum g \) is the projected galaxy number density, \( r_p \) is the projected distance from the halo centre and \( <r_{500,crit}> \) is the mean radius, which encloses \( M_{500,crit} \). The symbol colour reflects the average \((g-r)\) colour for galaxies at that distance (see key).

A reddening towards the cluster centre is clearly visible. Observational data\(^{13} \) two\(^{21,22} \), Our model, on the other hand, produces a reddening towards the cluster centre that was lacking in previous studies.

The left blue region marks the area of incompleteness in the observed number density profiles due to obscuration from the brightest cluster galaxy (BCG). The green shaded region marks the observational uncertainties: outside the region of contamination of the BCG the scatter within the observational stack dominates, whereas Poisson errors are shown within that region.

Figure 3 | Neutral hydrogen and metal content of galaxies as a function of their stellar mass. a, Predicted H i richness of galaxies (\( M_{HI} \) is the mass in neutral hydrogen) compared to the \( z \leq 0.4 \) sample of the ALFALFA survey. Filled regions mark bins with more than 20 galaxies (red, ALFALFA; green, all galaxies; blue, star-forming galaxies). Error bars indicate s.e.m. for individual galaxies. A separate H i richness relation for the satellites of the most massive cluster is included and compared to H i measurements of Virgo satellites\(^{20} \) to demonstrate the strong effect of environment on the H i content of satellites. b, Stellar metal content of simulated galaxies, \( Z_\star \), in units of solar metallicity, \( Z_\odot \) (black line and grey shaded squares), compared to observations\(^{24-26} \) (green). Reassuringly, the trend of the median relation including the flattening above the stellar mass \( M_\star \approx 10^{11} M_\odot \) is well recovered. The green shaded region represents the s.d. The error bars represent the s.e.m. for individual galaxies.

Large-scale characteristics of neutral hydrogen

The space between galaxies, the intergalactic medium, is filled with low-density, warm gas, mainly composed of ionized hydrogen. Observationally, the intergalactic medium can be probed through the forest of Lyman-\( \alpha \) absorption lines in quasar spectra. The corresponding distribution of hydrogen column densities is well-constrained\(^{27,28} \) over a wide dynamic range. At high gas densities, hydrogen becomes self-shielded from the ionizing ultraviolet background and forms dense neutral clouds with a distinctive spectral absorption signature, the so-called damped Lyman-\( \alpha \) absorbers (DLAs), which are observed mostly at redshift \( z \approx 2 \) and probe initial stages of galaxy formation.
Early hydrodynamic simulations successfully predicted the lowcolumn-density statistics of the Lyman-\(\alpha\) forest\(^\text{37,39}\), whereas describing the main properties of higher-density absorbers and DLAs correctly only became feasible over the past few years\(^\text{30,31}\). However, recent numerical calculations have failed to explain the metallicity distribution of DLAs, which is now reasonably well constrained by data\(^\text{32}\). The outcomes of most simulations gave metallicities for DLAs that are too high or yielded a metallicity distribution that is too broad, in disagreement with observations\(^\text{33,34}\).

We contrast our predicted \(\text{H}^\text{i}\) column density distribution function (CDDF; Fig. 4a) and the metal content of DLAs (Fig. 4b) with observations.

**The impact of baryons on dark matter**

The discussion thus far has stressed that a direct modelling of baryonic physics is essential to soundly connect cosmological predictions to galaxy observations. Even beyond that, baryonic processes can actually affect and modify the dark-matter distribution, and therefore alter the matter power spectrum \(P(k)\). Measuring \(P(k)\) as a function of wave-number, \(k\), provides a powerful cosmological probe, because theoretical models can be used to connect the present-day \(P(k)\) to the initial power spectrum. Such measurements come, for example, from weak lensing studies, galaxy clustering surveys and the analysis of the Lyman-\(\alpha\) forest. However, the interpretation of upcoming weak lensing surveys such as EUCLID, which will measure \(P(k)\) on scales of \(0.1\ h\ Mpc^{-1} < k < 10\ h\ Mpc^{-1}\), must consider the impact of baryons in order to achieve
the required level of ~1% accuracy. This effect has often been neglected, even though it is not restricted to just the smallest spatial scales.

We have calculated the dimensionless matter power spectrum, \( \delta^2(k) = k^3 P(k)/(2\pi^2) \), along with the corresponding dark-matter-only result (Fig. 5). The dynamic range of our simulation allows us to probe \( P(k) \) on a wider range of scales than possible before through a single hydrodynamical simulation. On scales smaller than \( k \approx 1 h \text{Mpc}^{-1} \), AGN-driven outflows reduce the total power in a scale-dependent way by up to ~30–40% compared to the dark-matter-only prediction. This impact is even larger than found in previous studies, which is most probably related to the strong radio-mode AGN feedback in our simulation needed to match the stellar mass content of massive haloes. On smaller scales, gas cooling processes become important and enhance the power on scales smaller than \( k \approx 100 h \text{Mpc}^{-1} \). Here, the power spectrum can deviate by a factor of a few compared to collisionless results.

Measuring this fundamental statistic precisely hence requires high-resolution hydrodynamical simulations in large volumes; it cannot be done by dark-matter-only simulations or semi-analytic modelling. We also present in Fig. 5 the predictions of commonly employed empirical fitting models for the nonlinear evolution of \( P(k) \). These models have been calibrated on dark-matter-only simulations and clearly fail to describe the results of full hydrodynamical calculations, rendering their use impractical for the precision requirements of upcoming surveys.

Looking ahead

Although our simulation provides a significant step forward in modelling galaxy formation by reproducing simultaneously many disparate observations on large and small scales, there are still outstanding problems. One such problem lies in the formation of low-mass galaxies: our simulation tends to build up the stellar mass of low-mass galaxies below \( M_* \approx 10^{10} M_\odot \) too early, resulting in stellar populations that are too old, with mean ages a factor of two to three larger than observed. This tension is shared by semi-analytic models and other recent hydrodynamical simulations alike, pointing towards an open problem in low-mass galaxy formation. It remains to be seen whether new stellar feedback models that, for example, include effects of radiation pressure on dust can resolve this issue. It will clearly be challenging to test new schemes that also directly treat the stellar radiation fields with statistically meaningful samples of galaxies, as this poses extremely high computational demands that go significantly beyond what was achieved in the present work. Nevertheless, such new generations of large-scale high-resolution hydrodynamical simulations might become feasible within the next decade.

METHODS SUMMARY

The equations of gravity and hydrodynamics are evolved using the moving-mesh code AREPO combined with a galaxy formation model which includes: gas cooling with radiative self-shielding corrections; star formation; energetic feedback from H II regions; AGN feedback consisting of three components: thermal quasar-mode feedback; star formation; energetic feedback from H II regions; and radiation proximity effects for AGNs. The equations of gravity and hydrodynamics are evolved using the moving-mesh code AREPO combined with a galaxy formation model which includes: gas cooling with radiative self-shielding corrections; star formation; energetic feedback from H II regions; AGN feedback consisting of three components: thermal quasar-mode feedback; star formation; energetic feedback from H II regions; and radiation proximity effects for AGNs.
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Author Contributions M.V., L.H., D.S., V.S. and S.G. conceived and planned the project. M.V., S.G., D.S. and P.T. developed the galaxy formation model. V.S. developed the AREPO code. M.V. performed the main analysis, G.S. and P.T. constructed the mock images. S.B. provided statistical analyses for the inter-galactic medium. D.X. and D.N. provided post-processing tools. M.V., S.G., V.S., P.T. and L.H. interpreted the results. M.V. performed the main analysis. G.S. and P.T. constructed the mock images. S.B. provided statistical analyses for the inter-galactic medium. D.X. and D.N. provided post-processing tools. M.V., S.G., V.S., P.T. and L.H. interpreted the results. M.V. and S.G. wrote the manuscript with contributions from co-authors.

Author Information Reprints and permissions information is available at www.nature.com/reprints. The authors declare no competing financial interests. Readers are welcome to comment on the online version of the paper. Correspondence and requests for materials should be addressed to M.V. (mvogelsb@mit.edu).
**METHODS**

**Simulation code.** Our simulation code, AREPO, uses an unstructured Voronoi tessellation of the simulation volume, where the mesh-generating points of this tessellation are moved with the gas flow. The adaptive mesh is used to solve the equations of ideal hydrodynamics with a finite volume approach using a second-order unsplit Godunov scheme with an exact Riemann solver. This approach is under most circumstances superior to traditional smoothed particle hydrodynamics (SPH), and also to Eulerian adaptive mesh refinement (AMR)\textsuperscript{41–51}. This scheme naturally produces extended disc galaxies without invoking extreme forms of stellar feedback or star formation\textsuperscript{52}, which was a major problem of previous galaxy formation simulations. The gravity calculation employs a Tree–PM scheme\textsuperscript{53}, where long-range forces are determined with a particle-mesh method (PM) while short-range forces are computed via a hierarchical tree algorithm\textsuperscript{54}.

**Galaxy formation physics.** Our simulation accounts for a variety of astrophysical processes known to be relevant for galaxy formation\textsuperscript{44}.

Gas cooling rates are calculated as a function of gas density, temperature, metallicity, the radiation fields of active galactic nuclei and the spatially uniform but time-dependent ionizing background radiation from galaxies and quasars\textsuperscript{55}, which completes H\textsubscript{I} reionization at a redshift of \( z = 6 \). We use a self-consistent calculation of the primordial cooling and complement it with the cooling contribution of the metals, based on pre-calculated cooling rate tables using CLOUDY\textsuperscript{56}. All cooling rates include self-shielding corrections\textsuperscript{57}.

We employ a sub-resolution model of the interstellar medium to achieve numerical closure below our resolution scale. Gas with hydrogen number density above 0.13 \( \text{cm}^{-3} \) follows an effective equation of state with a stochastic prescription for star formation following the Kennicutt–Schmidt law\textsuperscript{58} and adopting a Chabrier initial mass function\textsuperscript{59}. The effective equation of state assumes that the interstellar medium has a two-phase structure that is predominantly composed of cold clouds embedded in a tenuous, supernova-heated phase\textsuperscript{60}.

Once stellar populations are born, they can lose mass, for example through stellar winds or supernovae. This mass is returned to the gas phase and enriches the gas resulting parameter settings have been tested on smaller-scale simulations\textsuperscript{43} and been adjusted within the allowed range to roughly reproduce the relation between the minimum dark-matter particle number was set to 32 for the FOF identification. Non-dark-matter particles are attached to these FOF primaries in a secondary linking stage\textsuperscript{61}. Subsequently, gravitationally bound substructures are identified using the SUBFIND algorithm\textsuperscript{62}. We derive the various galaxy properties from the gravitationally bound mass that is contained within a radius\( r_s \) that equals twice the stellar half-mass radius of each SUBFIND (sub)halo. Using this definition, the galactic stellar mass does not significantly differ from the total stellar mass for low-mass systems, but some of the intra-cluster light for massive systems is excluded. We have checked this definition against surface brightness cuts in different bands and find it to give similar results to more elaborate methods for excluding intra-cluster light. We have extended this radius by 50\% for measuring the galactic H\textsubscript{I} masses. Stellar population synthesis models\textsuperscript{63} were used to associate the stars in our simulation with observable broad band luminosities. Producing stellar images of galaxies requires assigning colour values to specific bands. Specifically, we make an RGB mapping of the (g,r,i) bands using a commonly employed asinh scaling\textsuperscript{64}.

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