Surface gravity is a basic stellar property, but it is difficult to measure accurately, with typical uncertainties of 25 to 50 per cent if measured spectroscopically\textsuperscript{12,13} and 90 to 150 per cent if measured photometrically\textsuperscript{1}. Asteroseismology measures gravity with an uncertainty of about 2 per cent but is restricted to relatively small samples of bright stars, most of which are giants\textsuperscript{4–6}. The availability of high-precision measurements of brightness variations for more than 150,000 stars\textsuperscript{7,8} provides an opportunity to investigate whether the variations can be used to determine surface gravities. The Fourier power of granulation on a star’s surface correlates physically with surface gravity\textsuperscript{8,10}: if brightness variations on timescales of hours arise from granulation\textsuperscript{11}, then such variations should correlate with surface gravity. Here we report an analysis of archival data that reveals an observational correlation between surface gravity and root mean squared brightness variations on timescales of less than eight hours for stars with temperatures of 4,500 to 6,750 kelvin, log surface gravities of 2.5 to 4.5 (cgs units) and overall brightness variations of less than three parts per thousand. A straightforward observation of optical brightness variations therefore allows a determination of the surface gravity with a precision of better than 25 per cent for inactive Sun-like stars at main-sequence to giant stages of evolution.

Brightness variations of Sun-like stars are driven by many factors, including granulation\textsuperscript{12}, oscillations\textsuperscript{11}, rotation and magnetic activity\textsuperscript{13}. As they evolve from high-surface-gravity (high-g) dwarfs to low-g giants, their convective zones deepen, they rotate more slowly, their magnetic activity diminishes, and their oscillation and granulation timescales increase, all of which change the nature of the brightness variations. It has been previously demonstrated that the power in granulation (as traced by the Fourier spectrum of the brightness variations) is inversely proportional to $v_{\text{max}}$, the peak frequency of Sun-like acoustic oscillations\textsuperscript{8,12,13}. Given that $v_{\text{max}}$ is itself proportional to $g$ (ref. 11), it follows that $g$ should manifest in brightness variations on timescales that trace granulation. Although physically we expect this, it is not immediately apparent that brightness variations can be used as an effective determinant of $g$ because other phenomena not directly related to $g$—most importantly spots, plage and other sources of brightness variations driven by the star’s magnetic activity—probably dominate the observed brightness variations. It is therefore necessary to filter out the brightness variations arising from these phenomena, which occur on timescales of hours to days, while preserving the brightness variations related to granulation and $g$ on timescales of minutes to hours.

Using long-cadence (30 min) light curves from Quarter 9 of NASA’s Kepler Mission\textsuperscript{14}, and representing them using the Filtergraph data visualization tool\textsuperscript{15}, we observe clear patterns in the evolutionary properties of stars encoded in three simple measures of their brightness variations\textsuperscript{8} (Fig. 1): range ($R_{\text{var}}$), number of zero crossings ($X_0$), and root mean square on timescales shorter than 8 h (to which we will refer as ‘8-hr flicker’ or $F_8$). Relating these measures to $g$ determined asteroseismically from a sample of Kepler stars\textsuperscript{8}, we find distinctive features that highlight the way stars evolve in this three-dimensional space, making up an evolutionary diagram of photometric variability. Within this diagram, we find a vertical cloud of points, largely made up of high-$g$ dwarfs, that have large $R_{\text{var}}$, small $X_0$ and low $F_8$ values. We observe a tight sequence of stars—a ‘flicker-floor’ sequence that defines a prominently protruding lower envelope in $R_{\text{var}}$—spanning gravities from dwarfs to giants. Sun-like stars of all evolutionary states evidently move onto this sequence only when they have a large $X_0$, which in turn implies low stellar activity.

We find that $g$ is encoded in $F_8$, yielding a tight correlation between the two (Fig. 2). Moreover, using 11 yr of SOHO Virgo\textsuperscript{16,17} light curves of the Sun and sampling them at the same cadence as the Kepler long-cadence light curves, we find that the Sun’s (constant) $g$ is also measurable using $F_8$, which remains invariant throughout the 11-yr solar activity cycle even while the Sun’s $R_{\text{var}}$ and $X_0$ values change considerably from the spot-dominated solar maximum to the nearly spotless solar minimum (Fig. 1). From the Sun’s behaviour, we infer that a large portion of the Kepler stars’ vertical scatter within the vertical cloud at the left of the diagram (Fig. 1) may be driven by solar–type cyclic activity variations. Most importantly, the Sun’s true $g$ fits our empirical relation (Fig. 2), and the $g$ value of any Sun-like Kepler star from dwarf to giant may be inferred from this relation with an accuracy of 0.06–0.10 dex (Supplementary Information).

Asteroseismic analyses derive $g$ from the properties of stellar acoustic oscillations\textsuperscript{5,18–20}. Given that near-surface convection drives both these oscillations and granulation, and given the brightness variability timescales to which $F_8$ is sensitive, we suggest that a combination of different types of granulation (with typical solar timescales ranging from ~30 min to ~30 h; ref. 21) drives the manifestation of $g$ in this metric. The precise timescales of these phenomena in solar–type stars depend strongly on the stellar evolutionary state and, hence, also on $g$ (refs 5,9,10,22). Acoustic oscillations, whose amplitudes are sensitive to $g$ (ref. 5), may provide an increasingly important contribution to $F_8$ as stars evolve into subgiants and giants and the amplitudes and timescales of these oscillations increase\textsuperscript{9,10}. At some point, the pressure-mode and granulation timescales cross\textsuperscript{5}, which may lead to a breakdown of our $F_8$–$g$ relation at very low values of $g$.

By using $F_8$ to measure $g$, we can construct a photometric variability evolutionary diagram for most stars observed by Kepler, even for stars well beyond the reach of asteroseismic and spectroscopic analysis (Fig. 3). By coding this diagram according to stellar temperature and rotation period, we may trace the physical evolution of Sun-like stars as follows: stars begin as main-sequence dwarfs with large photometric $R_{\text{var}}$ values and small $X_0$ values, presumably driven by simple rotational modulation of spots at relatively short rotation periods. As the stars spin down to longer rotation periods, their brightness variations first become steadily ‘quieter’ (systematically lower $R_{\text{var}}$) but then become suddenly and substantially more complex (larger $X_0$) as they reach the flicker floor. Some stars reach the floor only after beginning their evolution as low-$g$ subgiants, having moved to the right (higher $F_8$) as their effective temperatures begin rapidly dropping. Other stars

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dwarfs to giants. The typically large subgiants, and a tight sequence—the flicker floor—spanning a range of populations of stars: a vertical cloud composed of high-90-d 'quarters'. Our archival data we use to measure (Supplementary Information). To simulate how the solar absolute deviation of 0.06 dex and a root mean squared deviation of 0.10 dex the Kepler stars and through the Sun (large star symbol) shows a median brightness variations. Excluding these outliers, a cubic-polynomial fit through with their simpler light curves (small mean squared error of 0.009 dex (the true solar median solar flicker (R curve). We correct both (Kepmag). Colour represents asteroseismically determined g. We observe two populations of stars: a vertical cloud composed of high-g dwarfs and some subgiants, and a tight sequence—the flicker floor—spanning a range of g from dwarfs to giants. The typically large \( R_{\text{var}} \) values of stars in the cloud, coupled with their simpler light curves (small \( X_0 \)), implies brightness variations driven by rotational modulation of spots. In contrast, large \( X_0 \) values characterize stars on the sequence. The \( F_8 \) values of stars in this sequence increase inversely with g because the physical source of \( F_8 \) is sensitive to g. \( R_{\text{var}} \) also increases with \( F_8 \) along the floor, because \( F_8 \) is a primary contributor to \( R_{\text{var}} \) (as opposed to starspots above the floor). Stars with a given \( F_8 \) value cannot have \( R_{\text{var}} \) less than that implied by \( F_8 \) itself: quiet stars accumulate on the flicker floor because they are prevented from going below it by the statistical definition of the two quantities. Stars above the floor have larger amplitude variations on longer timescales that set \( R_{\text{var}} \). The large star symbol with vertical bars and the inset show the Sun’s behaviour over the course of its 11-yr magnetic cycle. The Sun’s \( F_8 \) value is largely invariant over the course of its cycle, just as its g value is invariant. p.p.t., parts per thousand.

Figure 1 | Simple measures of brightness variations reveal a fundamental ‘flicker sequence’ of stellar evolution. We establish the evolutionary states of stars with three simple measures of brightness variations\(^8\). The abscissa, 8-h flicker \( F_8 \), measures brightness variations on time scales of 8 h or less. The ordinate, \( R_{\text{var}} \) yields the largest amplitude of the photometric variations in a 90-d timeframe. The number of zero crossings, \( X_0 \) (symbol size; ranging from 0.01 to 2.1 crossings per day), conveys the large-scale complexity of the light curve. We correct both \( R_{\text{var}} \) and \( F_8 \) for their dependence on Kepler magnitude (Kepmag). Colour represents asteroseismically determined g. We observe two populations of stars: a vertical cloud composed of high-g dwarfs and some subgiants, and a tight sequence—the flicker floor—spanning a range of g from dwarfs to giants. The typically large \( R_{\text{var}} \) values of stars in the cloud, coupled with their simpler light curves (small \( X_0 \)), implies brightness variations driven by rotational modulation of spots. In contrast, large \( X_0 \) values characterize stars on the sequence. The \( F_8 \) values of stars in this sequence increase inversely with g because the physical source of \( F_8 \) is sensitive to g. \( R_{\text{var}} \) also increases with \( F_8 \) along the floor, because \( F_8 \) is a primary contributor to \( R_{\text{var}} \) (as opposed to starspots above the floor). Stars with a given \( F_8 \) value cannot have \( R_{\text{var}} \) less than that implied by \( F_8 \) itself: quiet stars accumulate on the flicker floor because they are prevented from going below it by the statistical definition of the two quantities. Stars above the floor have larger amplitude variations on longer timescales that set \( R_{\text{var}} \). The large star symbol with vertical bars and the inset show the Sun’s behaviour over the course of its 11-yr magnetic cycle. The Sun’s \( F_8 \) value is largely invariant over the course of its cycle, just as its g value is invariant. p.p.t., parts per thousand.

Figure 2 | Stellar surface gravity manifests in a simple measure of brightness variations. The same stars from Fig. 1 with Kepler Quarter 9 data. Asteroseismically determined g shows a tight correlation with \( F_8 \). Colour represents the \( R_{\text{var}} \) of the stars’ brightness variations; outliers tend to have large brightness variations. Excluding these outliers, a cubic-polynomial fit through the Kepler stars and through the Sun (large star symbol) shows a median absolute deviation of 0.06 dex and a root mean squared deviation of 0.10 dex (Supplementary Information). To simulate how the solar g would appear in the archival data we use to measure g for other stars, we divide the solar data into 90-d ‘quarters’. Our \( F_8-g \) relation measured over multiple quarters then yields a median solar g of 4.442 with a median absolute deviation of 0.005 dex and a root mean squared error of 0.009 dex (the true solar g is 4.438).

A few stars appear as outliers to the basic picture we have presented here; these are seen towards the right of the vertical cloud of points in our evolutionary diagram (Fig. 3). Some active dwarfs have higher \( F_8 \) values than expected for their g values. Frequent strong flares can boost \( F_8 \) as currently defined, and some hotter dwarfs are pulsators with enough power near 8 h to increase their \( F_8 \) values. A few such cases appear also in the asteroseismic sample (Fig. 1). Some lower-g stars have \( R_{\text{var}} \) values above the flicker floor owing to the presence of magnetic
activity, slow radial pulsations or secular drifts. Finally, a few outliers are simply due to data anomalies. As our technique is refined, these exceptions should be treated carefully before assigning a \( F_8 \)-based \( g \) value, particularly for high-\( F_8 \) stars for which \( R_{\text{var}} \) is greater than \( \sim 3 \) parts per thousand. They constitute a small fraction of the bulk sample, and most of them can be identified as one of the above cases.

Common to all of the stars along the flicker floor is the virtual absence of spot activity as compared with their higher-\( R_{\text{var}} \) counterparts; short-timescale phenomena such as granulation and oscillations dominate the brightness variations. Given that spots probably suppress acoustic oscillations in the Sun and other dwarf stars, the large \( X_g \) values of stars along this sequence may partly reflect the ability of short-timescale processes to manifest more strongly now that large spots no longer impede them, along with the increasing complexity of the convective variations. As the stars evolve into full-fledged red giants and beyond, the principal periodicity in their brightness variations increasingly reflects shorter-period oscillations, as opposed to their inherently long-period rotation, because oscillations become dominant over magnetic spots.

It may be possible to differentiate between stars with similar \( g \) values but different internal structures (for example first-ascent red giants versus helium-burning giants) through application of a sliding timescale of \( F_8 \) as a function of \( g \), where the sliding timescale would capture the changing physical granulation timescales with evolutionary state. Moreover, the behaviour of stars on the flicker floor may explain the source of radial velocity ‘jitter’ that now hampers planet detection through radial velocity measurements.

Figure 3 | An integrative view of stellar evolution in a new diagram of brightness variations. Same as Fig. 1, but for Kepler stars lacking asteroseismic \( g \). We include a \( g \) scale at the top (from conversion of the \( F_8 \) scale at bottom via our calibrated relationship). Here we selected stars with Kepler magnitudes between 11.0 and 11.85 to limit the sample to \( \sim 1,000 \) stars for visual clarity (1,012 points are shown). We removed objects that are potentially blended (Kepler flux contamination greater than 0.05) as well as those that may be galaxies (Kepler star/galaxy flag other than 0). Arrows schematically indicate the evolutionary paths of Sun-like stars in this diagram. Stars generally move from bottom to top, as the brightness variations due to spot changes, and then from left to right as their \( g \) values decrease. All stars eventually arrive on the flicker-floor sequence and evolve along it. a. Colour represents effective temperature. Stars cool as they evolve from left to right, from dwarfs to red giants. We restricted the effective temperatures to be 4,500–6,500 K, using the revised temperature scale for Kepler stars. b. Same as a, but colour-coded by the dominant periodicity in the light curve. We limited the sample to stars with dominant periods longer than 3 day (to eliminate very rapidly rotating active stars) and shorter than 45 day (half the Kepler 90-day data interval). This period traces rotation for unevolved stars and pulsations for evolved ones. Dwarfs generally show the expected spin-down sequence with decreasing \( R_{\text{var}} \) (correlated with the level of surface magnetic activity). Subgiants and giants broadly display very slow rotation, as expected.

Received 2 April; accepted 20 June 2013.

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Supplementary Information is available in the online version of the paper.

Acknowledgements The research described in this paper makes use of Filtergraph (http://filtergraph.vanderbilt.edu), an online data visualization tool developed at Vanderbilt University through the Vanderbilt Initiative in Data-intensive Astrophysics. We acknowledge discussions with P. Cargile, K. Carpenter, W. Chaplin, D. Huber, M. Paegert, M. Sinha and D. Weintraub. We thank D. Huber and T. Metcalfe for sharing the average asteroseismic parameters of Kepler stars with us. F.A.B. acknowledges support from a NASA Harriet Jenkins Fellowship and a Vanderbilt Provost Graduate Fellowship. F.A.B. and K.G.S. acknowledge NSF PAARE grant AST-0849736.

Author Contributions F.A.B. and K.G.S. contributed equally to the identification and analysis of the major correlations. F.A.B. principally wrote the first version of the manuscript. K.G.S. prepared the figures. G.B. calculated the variability statistics of the Kepler light curves and performed an independent check of the analysis. J.P. checked against biases in the datasets. All authors contributed to the interpretation of the results and to the final manuscript.

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