

## Communication

## Quantitative Super-Resolution Imaging Reveals Protein Stoichiometry and Nanoscale Morphology of Assembling HIV-Gag Virions

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**Quantitative Super-Resolution Imaging Reveals Protein Stoichiometry and Nanoscale Morphology  
of Assembling HIV-Gag Virions**

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**Abstract**

The HIV structural protein Gag assembles to form spherical particles of radius ~70 nm. During the assembly process, the number of Gag proteins increases over several orders of magnitude, from a few at nucleation to thousands at completion. The challenge in studying protein assembly lies in the fact that current methods such as standard fluorescence or electron microscopy techniques cannot access all stages of the assembly process in a cellular context. Here, we demonstrate an approach using super-resolution fluorescence imaging that permits quantitative morphological and molecular counting analysis over a wide range of protein cluster sizes. We applied this technique to the analysis of hundreds of HIV-Gag clusters at the cellular plasma membrane, thus elucidating how different fluorescent labels can change the assembly of virions.

**Keywords:** Super-resolution imaging; protein assembly; protein counting; HIV-Gag

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3 Viruses represent a major class of pathogens, whose assembly in the cellular context contains  
4 important information about the complex processes governing viral infection. Viruses are nanoscale  
5 objects that assemble from small nucleation complexes to ensembles containing thousands of  
6 molecules. In the case of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), the viral components are targeted to  
7 the plasma membrane of infected cells where they assemble and eventually form spheres ~70 nm in  
8 radius. Viral assembly is widely studied using HIV-Gag, the main structural protein of HIV, which is  
9 sufficient to drive the assembly of virus-like particles (VLPs) in the absence of other viral components  
10 <sup>1, 2</sup>. Fluorescence imaging has been used to follow the time-dependent increase in the intensity of  
11 Gag clusters in living cells<sup>3, 4</sup>, revealing the time scale of virion formation. Electron microscopy (EM)  
12 has elucidated the spatial arrangement of Gag in fully formed virions<sup>5-8</sup>. However, studying the  
13 complete assembly process requires nanoscale resolution over a large dynamic range, since the size  
14 of a cluster ranges from a few molecules to several thousand. This cannot be achieved with standard  
15 fluorescence imaging methods since they lack both the necessary resolution to determine cluster  
16 morphology, and the sensitivity to detect smaller clusters. EM-based methods in turn lack  
17 information on protein identity; thus, complexes composed of small numbers of Gag proteins are  
18 difficult to identify, precluding the first step toward quantitative analysis. As an alternative approach,  
19 super-resolution fluorescence imaging based on single molecule localization (SR)<sup>9-11</sup> offers nanoscale  
20 resolution of structures formed by specific proteins. Here, we use an SR-based approach to  
21 quantitatively image hundreds of forming HIV-Gag virions in different stages of cluster formation.  
22 With this information, we could extract protein stoichiometries as well as the nanoscale  
23 morphologies of Gag clusters, and detect differences in assembly for Gag proteins tagged with  
24 different fluorescent labels.  
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33 Gag proteins interact to form ordered assemblies of up to thousands of proteins, densely packed into  
34 nanoscale particles. Their high protein density and sub-diffraction limited sizes necessitate carefully  
35 adapted SR image acquisition procedures. This is because SR imaging relies on temporal separation  
36 of the fluorescence emission of each molecule within a diffraction-limited region, followed by  
37 molecular localization by fitting of the photon distribution, to finally yield over many frames the  
38 locations of multiple molecules per cluster. Thus, the fluorescence emission of single molecules  
39 within one cluster should be well separated temporally to guarantee maximal detection of  
40 molecules. Nanoscale clusters of proteins such as those formed by Gag must be imaged at a rate of  
41 less than one molecule per frame, since their size is smaller than a single diffraction-limited region.  
42 To fulfill these requirements, tight control of the fluorescence activation of single molecules is  
43 needed.  
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49 The necessary control of fluorescence activation can be achieved by using photoactivatable  
50 fluorescent proteins (PA-FPs). We labeled Gag with two widely used versions of the PA-FP Eos  
51 (EosFP), the monomeric mEos2<sup>12</sup> and the larger, tandem-dimeric tdEos<sup>13</sup>. EosFP irreversibly  
52 photoconverts from a green fluorescent to a red fluorescent state upon activation with UV light and  
53 the intensity of UV light controls the density of activated molecules in a sample. When expressing  
54 Gag-mEos2 or Gag-tdEos in cells, Gag-enriched clusters appear in the green fluorescence channel as  
55 diffraction limited puncta at the plasma membrane<sup>14</sup> (Figure 1A). We imaged Gag in the activated red  
56 fluorescence channel under intermediate-angle total internal reflection (TIR) illumination and applied  
57 extremely low UV intensities to activate less than one molecule per cluster per raw image  
58 (Supporting Figure 1A, B). We used continuous wave (CW) activation to minimize long-lived  
59 fluorescent dark states<sup>15</sup>. The individual molecules were subsequently localized and their positions  
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3 rendered as the envelope of the molecular probability distribution to create an SR image of Gag  
4 (Figure 1B). We rendered our data this way for visual representation only. Indeed, any image  
5 processing performed on rendered images can be biased by the rendering procedure itself<sup>16</sup>.  
6 Moreover, rendering obscures information on the number of molecules as well as the internal  
7 molecular organization of clusters. Therefore we performed quantitative analysis using the molecular  
8 positions themselves.  
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11 We extracted HIV-Gag clusters, representing assembling virions, from the list of molecular positions  
12 based on the proximity of molecules using the Hoshen-Kopelman algorithm<sup>17</sup>. Neighboring Gag  
13 molecules were defined as belonging to the same cluster if their intermolecular distance was less  
14 than 50 nm. This cutoff, at least 5 times smaller than the average intermolecular distance measured  
15 in non-clustered regions of the SR images, serves to prevent false cluster identifications. Using this  
16 empirically determined parameter, all Gag clusters observed in the diffraction-limited as well as the  
17 SR image were correctly identified by an automated algorithm (Figure 1C).  
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22 In quantifying the number of Gag proteins per cluster, one must account for the impact of  
23 fluorescent protein photophysics on molecular counting. Reversible photoconversion and  
24 photoblinking can result in overcounting. We used irreversibly photoactivatable fluorophores to  
25 avoid overcounting due to multiple photoconversions of a single dye. Photoblinking of the converted  
26 mEos2 fluorophore has previously been characterized, and we used the 2 sigma value of the  
27 empirical dark-state lifetime distribution<sup>18</sup> of mEos2 as an input parameter to our software to  
28 identify and group signals from single blinking molecules (Supporting Information, Supporting Figure  
29 1). Simultaneous activation of multiple dyes in turn can result in undercounting. We use very low UV  
30 intensities to avoid simultaneous activation, but the tandem-dimeric version of Eos contains two  
31 chromophores, which due to their linkage and close proximity could still be correlated in activation. If  
32 this were the case, the number of identified tdEos molecules would correspond to the number of  
33 Gag-tdEos proteins. In the uncorrelated scenario, each tdEos molecule would be detected twice  
34 leading to double counting of the number of Gag proteins. Correlated activation of a single label  
35 should result in an increase in fluorescence upon activation followed by two photobleaching steps.  
36 Molecular traces of activated Gag-tdEos molecules were collected and analyzed (Figure 2A,  
37 Supporting Information), and individual activation and bleaching steps were observed. Of a total of  
38 2,000 traces, 95% were imaged as molecules that bleached in a single step; thus the contribution  
39 from simultaneous activations of the two chromophores composing tdEos is negligible. As a result,  
40 we estimate that each Gag-tdEos molecule can be detected twice, corresponding to a pair of dyes.  
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48 Another requirement for quantitative SR imaging is an estimation of the fraction of molecules that  
49 has been detected. This is important when directly comparing objects of potentially different sizes or  
50 labeling densities. Because the proteins in a single nascent virion must be imaged and bleached  
51 literally one at a time, the number of molecules composing it directly determines the minimum  
52 number of raw images needed for complete imaging. To quantify the molecular counting process,  
53 cells were imaged until all fluorophores had been activated and bleached. For EosFPs the complete  
54 imaging was evidenced by a lack of signal in both the unconverted green and activated red channels.  
55 Plots of the cumulative number of molecules in individual HIV-Gag assembling sites (Figure 2B, C)  
56 show an initial rise that flattens to reach an apparent final plateau value.  
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3 We modeled the cumulative number of molecules counted by considering that SR relies on the  
4 stochastic activation of molecules. This stochasticity implies that the probability of activating a given  
5 molecule has a constant value,  $c$ , over time. Then, on average the number of activated molecules at  
6 any given time  $t$  is this constant  $c$  multiplied by the number of non-activated molecules. This gives  
7 rise to a relationship between the total number of molecules detected at time  $t$  and the number  
8 detected in the subsequent time step. Consequently, for a structure with a total number of  
9 molecules  $N_{total}$ , the number of detected molecules  $N_{det}$  as a function of the total imaging time  $t$  and  
10 the exposure time  $\alpha$  is given by an exponential form

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17 (see Supporting Information for more details). This model, applied with  $c$  and  $N_{total}$  as free  
18 parameters, captures the data well (Figure 2B, C) and allows us to estimate the number of molecules  
19 in the structure without requiring complete imaging. For nascent HIV-Gag virions, this analysis shows  
20 that by acquiring 10'000 frames we imaged on average 90% of detectable molecules. This model  
21 precludes a determination of the absolute number of molecules because it cannot account for  
22 molecules that escape detection due to misfolding, failed photoconversion or premature  
23 photobleaching. However, under the assumption that the fluorescent proteins used have similar  
24 folding efficiency it allows us to make direct, quantitative comparisons between different objects  
25 imaged using different fluorophores.

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30 Since we measured similar levels of detection for Gag-mEos2 and Gag-tdEos fluorophores,  
31 distributions of the number of Gag molecules per cluster can be directly compared with no further  
32 consideration of differences in dye behavior. This corresponds to the number of mEos2 fluorophores  
33 detected and half the number of tdEos fluorophores detected. We observed that the distribution of  
34 the number of molecules per assembling virion was shifted to lower values for Gag-tdEos relative to  
35 Gag-mEos2, with the mean value reduced by a factor of 0.5 (Figure 2D). We note that we can identify  
36 for both labels small nucleation complexes composed of a few molecules as well as dense clusters  
37 corresponding to HIV-Gag virions (Figure 2E), likely near the final state of assembly. Intriguingly, 43%  
38 (41%) of the detected Gag-mEos2 (Gag-tdEos) clusters contain between 32 (our minimum cutoff  
39 number for cluster identification) and 100 molecules. These small clusters would not be reliably  
40 identified or detected with standard fluorescence or EM imaging. Their presence indicates that the  
41 nucleation process that initiates virion formation may represent a considerable fraction of the total  
42 time for virion assembly, as the observed population likely represents a snapshot of the steady-state  
43 assembly process.

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49 Gag clusters were further analyzed to extract quantitative measures of their size and morphological  
50 features. To extract the shape characteristics of each cluster, we study the distribution of its  
51 molecules in 16 angular sectors centered in the cluster's center of mass. To have sufficient statistics  
52 on the smallest clusters, we require on average two points per sector, which translates into a  
53 minimum of 32 Gag molecules per cluster. We used this approach to extract quantitative data such  
54 as the mean radius and its coefficient of variation and the aspect ratio (Supporting Information,  
55 Supporting Figure 2A, B). We defined the radius of each cluster by the average over all sectors of the  
56 mean distance of a molecule from the center of mass (Supporting Information, Supporting Figure  
57 2A). To judge how well this estimator reflects the cluster size, we performed our sector-based  
58 analysis on simulated clusters of points with known localization precision and radius. We note that  
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3 the performance of our estimator is comparable to standard image based size extraction methods  
4 such as Gaussian profile fitting to histograms of molecular positions (Supporting Information,  
5 Supporting Figure 3). However, the information on molecular distances from the center of mass per  
6 sector thus obtained also allowed us to extract more subtle morphological features such as the  
7 aspect ratio and the standard deviation from the mean radius for each sector (Figure 3D, E). The  
8 coefficient of variation of the radius reflects how isotropic clusters are, with higher values  
9 corresponding to more anisotropic morphologies (Figure 3E, inset). Working directly with the  
10 molecular position list enables this morphological analysis, which would be obscured if it were  
11 rendered as an image.

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16 Interestingly, the distribution of the coefficient of variation (Figure 3E) showed a double-peaked  
17 distribution for both Gag-FP fusions. The first peak is on the order of the anisotropy induced by the  
18 imprecise localization of single molecules observed for simulated data (Supporting Figure 3). The  
19 second peak, however, corresponds to clusters diverging from a circular shape (Figure 3E, insets).  
20 Performing our sector based analysis on HIV-Gag clusters also revealed striking differences between  
21 the sizes of assembling virions formed with Gag-mEos2 or Gag-tdEos (Figure 3A, B, C). The average  
22 radius was 53 +/- 12 nm for Gag-mEos2<sup>5,19</sup> versus 86 +/- 26 nm for Gag-tdEos (Figure 3C), differing by  
23 a factor of 1.6. For comparison with previous measurements of fully formed virions, we examined  
24 the largest 10% of clusters, and found an average diameter of 166 +/- 26 nm for Gag-mEos2 and 302  
25 +/- 90 nm for Gag-tdEos. For Gag-mEos2 this is in good agreement with EM of budded VLPs, reported  
26 in different studies to be 100-200 nm or 145 +/- 25 nm in size<sup>5,19</sup>. It moreover indicates that the Gag-  
27 tdEos particles are unusually large.

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33 The dramatic change in nascent virion size distribution together with the difference in the mean  
34 number of Gag proteins per cluster indicates a change in the nanoscale organization within clusters  
35 for different fluorescent labels. HIV-Gag assembles into a hexagonal lattice as observed with  
36 cryoEM<sup>20,21</sup>. It is proposed that this hexameric lattice grows from a nucleation point by incorporating  
37 more Gag proteins during assembly, with an inherent curvature set by protein-protein interactions.  
38 But on a sphere thus formed, hexamers further from the nucleation point must pack at increasing  
39 density<sup>20</sup> (Supporting Figure 4), with an energetic cost. As a consequence, at some point during  
40 assembly it should become more energetically favorable to leave gaps in the lattice than to pack  
41 proteins at higher densities; consistent with this, the Gag lattice covers only 60% of the virion  
42 surface<sup>20</sup>. This is similar to the coverage values of 40-70% that we estimate based on size and protein  
43 number for the largest 10% of Gag-mEos2 clusters, which likely correspond to fully formed VLPs. In  
44 this context, our data suggest how the fusion of a fluorescent protein to Gag can interfere with  
45 assembly. Gag-tdEos (the larger fluorescent label) may disrupt hexameric ordering closer to the  
46 nucleation point due to its increased steric hindrance; this would translate into smaller ordered  
47 domains. In support of this, we estimate based on our measurements of nascent virion size and  
48 protein number that the Gag-tdEos forms a patchy lattice covering only ~10-20% of the virion  
49 surface, based on the lattice spacing measured by EM. As further evidence, a separate study of  
50 elongated Gag proteins revealed an increase in virion size and a discontinuous density of Gag<sup>19</sup>.  
51 However, our data allow us to go further, in showing that these differences in packing exist  
52 throughout most of the assembly process.

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60 The assembly of proteins into functional nanoscale structures is a ubiquitous process in cellular  
systems. We have demonstrated that SR imaging combined with the quantitative measurements

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3 described here allow us to characterize virion assembly at many intermediate stages, revealing  
4 differences in protein packing and cluster morphologies. In principle, the same procedure can be  
5 applied to other biological processes. In particular, morphological analysis from molecular positions  
6 can help to quantify changes in the spatial arrangement of proteins. Complete imaging of structures  
7 coupled with morphological and molecular counting analysis can allow one to detect whether, and  
8 quantify how the nanoscale organization of proteins is affected by protein structure.  
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### 11 **Acknowledgement**

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15 plasmid mEos2, Joerg Wiedenmann for the gift of tdEos plasmids and purified proteins, Daniel Blair  
16 for the clustering algorithm and Vinoth Sundar Rajan for additional experiments during the review  
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19 243016-PALMassembly. TP also received support from the Brazilian Swiss Joint Research Program.  
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### 23 **Supporting information available**

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25 This material is available free of charge via the Internet at <http://pubs.acs.org>.  
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Figure 1: SR imaging and identification of HIV-Gag virions at different stages of assembly

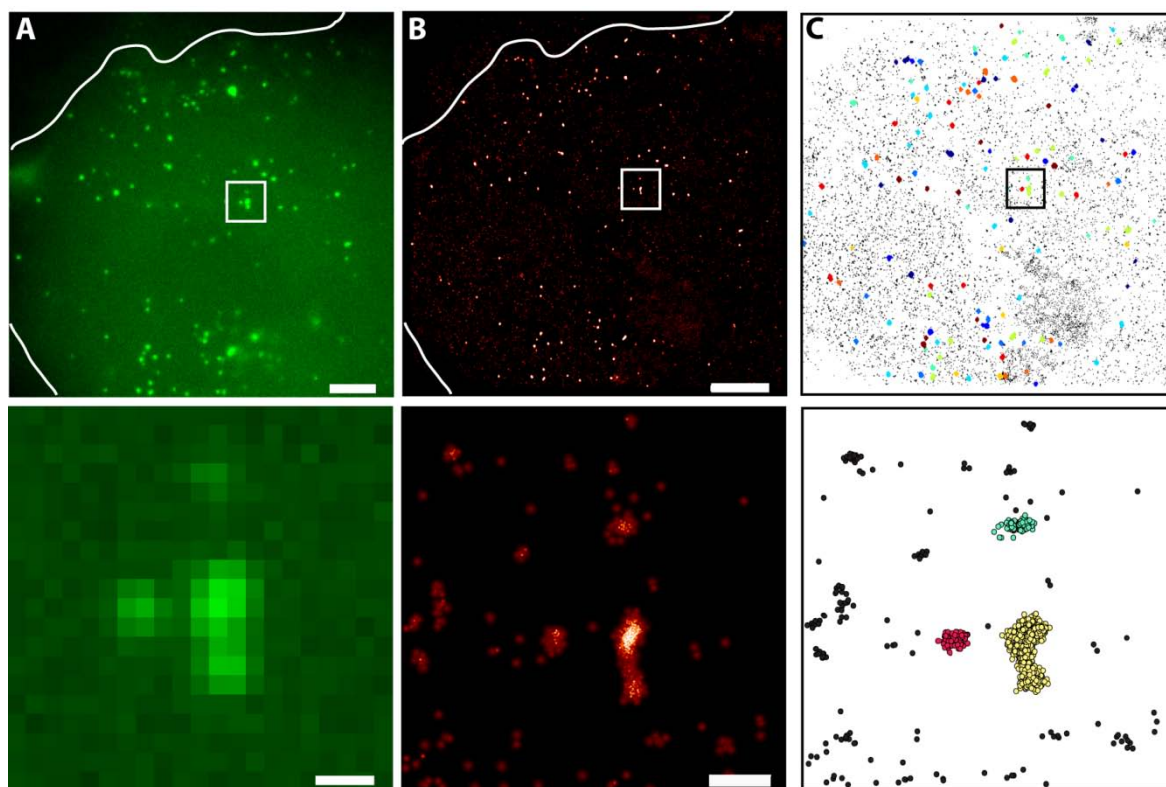


Figure 1: SR imaging and identification of HIV-Gag virions at different stages of assembly. (A) Cos7 cells transfected with Gag-mEos2, fixed and imaged using wide-field epi-fluorescence imaging (top) and zoom of the boxed region (bottom). (B) The same cell imaged with SR (10'000 images, total recording time 5 min) rendered as the envelope of the molecular probability distribution to emphasize molecular locations (top). Higher magnification view of the boxed region (bottom). (C) HIV-Gag clusters identified by the clustering algorithm (top) and zoom of the boxed region (bottom), colors are used to distinguish individual clusters. Scale bars: 5  $\mu$ m (A, B, top), 500 nm (A, B, bottom)

Figure 2: Complete molecular imaging and counting.

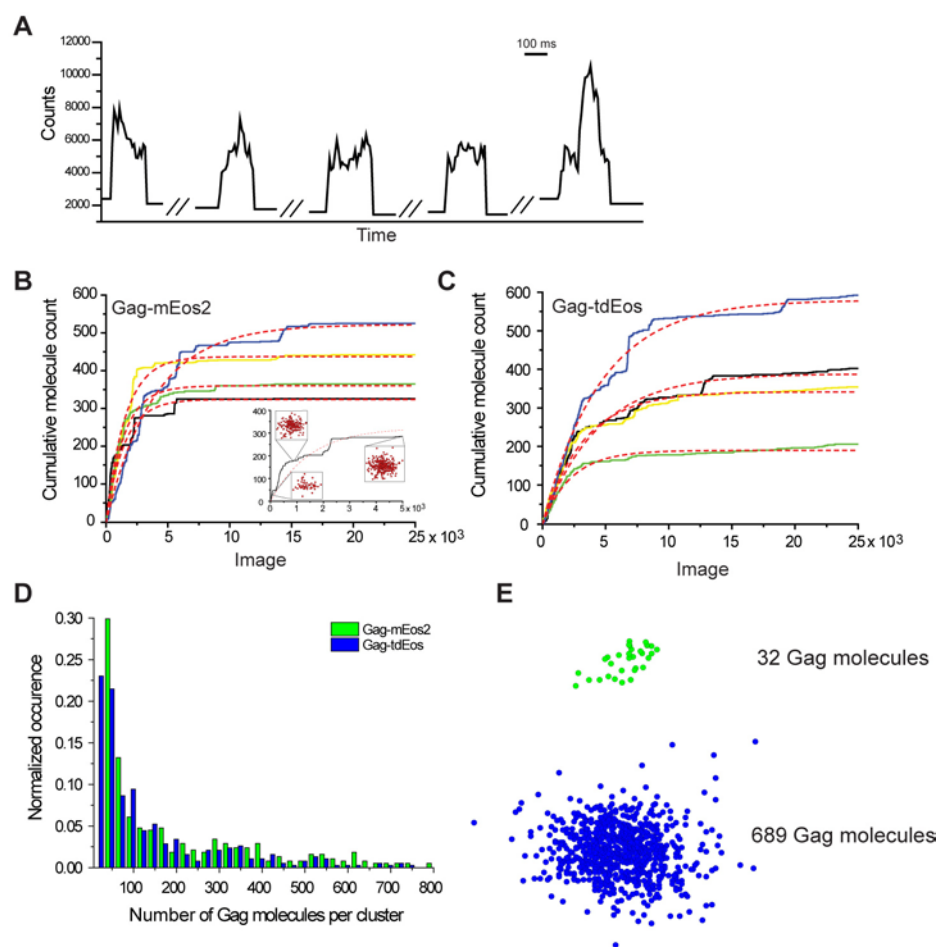


Figure 2: Complete molecular imaging and counting. (A) Single molecule time-intensity traces for Gag-tdEos. (B) Cumulative molecule count for four Gag-mEos2 virions in assembly (solid lines) and fits to the model (dashed red lines) as a function of the number of acquired images. The inset shows the cumulative molecule count during the first 5'000 images for the black Gag-mEos2 curve, the fit to our model (dashed red line) and the spatial maps of the detected molecules after 100, 1'000 and 5'000 images. (C) Cumulative molecule count for four Gag-tdEos clusters (solid lines) and fits to the model (dashed red lines). (D) Normalized histogram of molecules detected per cluster for Gag-mEos2 and Gag-tdEos. (E) Examples of clusters of different sizes.

Figure 3: Morphological and statistical analysis of individual assembling virions labeled with Gag-mEos2 or Gag-tdEos.

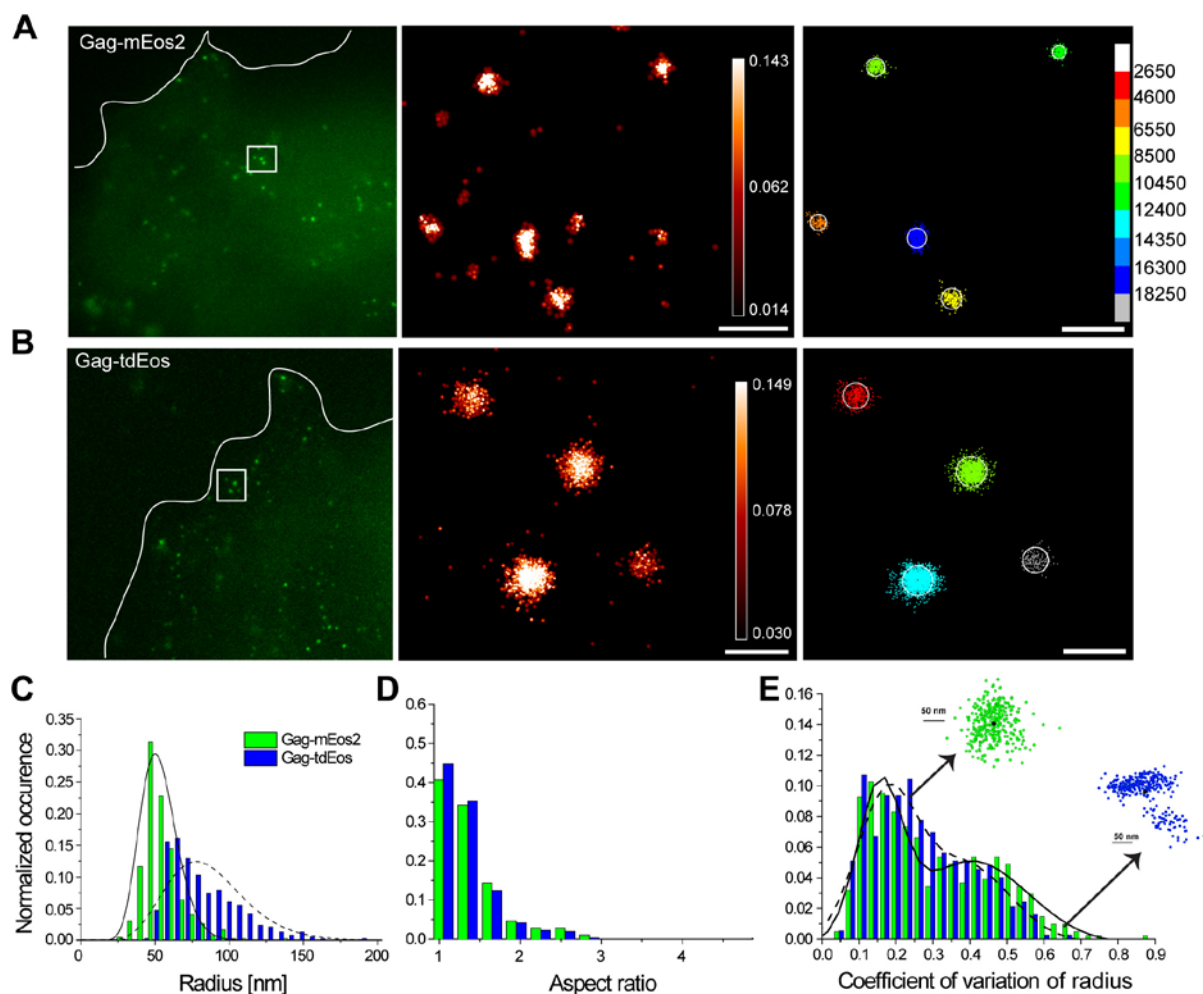


Figure 3: Morphological and statistical analysis of individual assembling virions labeled with Gag-mEos2 or Gag-tdEos. (A) Gag-mEos2 clusters at the plasma membrane. Diffraction-limited image with the white line corresponding to the cell edge (left), SR image of the boxed region (center) where color indicates the local molecular probability density ( $\times 100/\text{nm}^2$ ) as indicated by the color bar. Cluster map with diameter overlaid in white (right), the color indicates the overall cluster density in molecules/ $\mu\text{m}^2$  as indicated by the color scale. (B) Corresponding images for Gag-tdEos. Normalized histograms of (C) the radius, (D) the aspect ratio, and (E) the coefficient of variation of the mean radius. The inset shows typical clusters with different coefficients of variation. Curves show the fit to gamma distributions for (C) and a double peak distributions for (E). Gag-mEos2,  $n > 400$  clusters and Gag-tdEos,  $n > 400$  clusters. Scale bar: 500 nm (A, B)

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TOC graphic

