A High-Throughput Luminescence-Based Live Cell Assay to Measure ß-Arrestin Recruitment in Real Time

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Abstract

Characterizing protein:protein interactions (PPI) in relation to G protein-coupled receptor signaling (GPCR) is of great interest to those investigating potential druggable targets, however, endpoint assays lack valuable information about the cellular interactions over time. By incorporating a novel high-throughput assay workflow with hands-free kinetic luminescence-based measurements over time, PPI dynamics in living cells can be more fully defined in an efficient manner.

Introduction

G protein-coupled receptors (GPCRs) and their involvement in cellular signaling remain a focal point of concerted efforts to identify druggable targets. Investigation of protein:protein interactions (PPIs) involved in GPCR signaling, such as the GPCR:ß-arrestin2 interaction, provides a means to better understand pathways involved with inflammatory diseases, fibrosis, and cancer¹.

Kinetic live cell measurements of these interactions capture important real-time information that may be otherwise missed using end point measurements. NanoLuc® Binary Technology (NanoBiT®) from Promega Corporation is a two-component structural complementation reporter that enables real-time measurement of PPI dynamics in living cells in the Nano-Glo® Live Cell Assay System and uses a simple bioluminescence readout. In the assay, large BiT (LgBiT; 18 kDa) and small BiT (SmBiT; 11 amino acid peptide) subunits are fused to proteins of interest as indicated by Protein A and Protein B in Figure 1. As the tagged proteins interact, the NanoBiT subunits come together to form an active enzyme that generates a bright luminescent signal detectable by a luminescence-based microplate reader. The non-lytic assay allows real-time measurements of protein interaction dynamics for one to two hours.

Figure 1. NanoBiT assay overview.

Here, we use specialized NanoBit CX3CR1/ARRB2 cells, derived from the stable expression of CX3CR1/ARRB2 in HEK293 cells, and activated by CX3CL1 ligand (fractalkine) addition, to demonstrate the GPCR: ß-arrestin2 recruitment assay (Figure 2). The assay is performed in 1536-well microplate format, using an automated liquid handler and the luminescence mode of a multimode microplate reader. A dose response titration of CX3CL1, as well as Z’-factor determination, are used to assess automated assay performance.

Figure 2. NanoBit CX3CR1/ARRB2 cells. NanoBit CX3CR1/ARRB2 cells, derived from the stable expression of CX3CR1/ARRB2 in HEK cells, allow the real-time investigation of GPCR: ß-arrestin2 recruitment.
Materials and Methods

Materials

Cells and Reagents

NanoBit CX3CR1/ARRB2 cells (Catalog No. CS208104A) and the Nano-Glo Live Cell Assay System (Catalog No. N2012), consisting of Nano-Glo Live Cell Substrate and Nano-Glo LCS Dilution Buffer, were generously donated by Promega Corporation (Madison, WI). Blasticidin S HCl (Catalog No. A11139-03), TrypLE™ Express Enzyme (1x), phenol red, and Opti-MEM™ reduced serum medium (Catalog No. 11058-021) were purchased from Thermo Fisher Scientific (Waltham, MA). Recombinant human fractalkine (CX3CL1, Catalog No. 300-31) was obtained from PeproTech, Inc., (Rocky Hill, NJ).

Synergy™ Neo2 Hybrid Multi-Mode Reader

The Synergy Neo2 Multi-Mode Reader is designed for speed and ultra-high performance, incorporating BioTek’s patented Hybrid Technology™, with independent optical paths that ensure uncompromised performance. Continuously variable bandwidth quadruple monochromators, sensitive high transmission filter-based optics and up to four photomultiplier tubes (PMTs) provide ultra-fast measurements with excellent results. Advanced environment controls, including available CO₂/O₂ control, incubation to 65 °C and variable shaking, support live cell assays while cell-based detection is optimized with direct bottom illumination.

MultiFlo™ FX Multi-Mode Dispenser

MultiFlo FX is an automated multi-mode reagent dispenser for 6- to 1536-well microplates. MultiFlo FX incorporates several unique technologies in its modular design, such as Parallel Dispense, RAD™ (Random Access Dispense) and the patent-pending AMX™ (Automated Media Exchange) modules to facilitate a variety of liquid handling applications from 2D and 3D cell culture to concentration normalization assays, ELISA, bead-based assays and more. A fully configured MultiFlo FX replaces up to five liquid handlers, saving space, time and instrumentation budgets. MultiFlo FX integrates to the BioSpa™ 8 Automated Incubator and a BioTek imager or multi-mode reader, for complete workflow automation for many cell imaging and biochemical applications.

Methods

Cell Preparation

NanoBit CX3CR1/ARRB2 cell line, HEK293 were cultured using standard tissue culture methods per the manufacturers recommendations. Blasticidin, prepared at a concentration of 5 μg/mL, was used to maintain selective pressure. Cells were harvested at 80-90% confluence using TrypLE dissociation reagent with gentle handling. The cells were then collected by centrifugation and resuspended at the desired cell density in Opti-MEM media for serum starvation during incubation at 37 °C, 5% CO₂ for 4-6 hours.

NanoBit Assay Workflow

Nano-Glo Live Cell Reagent was prepared as a 5x stock by diluting the Nano-Glo Live Cell Substrate with the Nano-Glo LCS Dilution Buffer per the manufacturers recommendations and added to the cell suspension with mixing. The MultiFlo FX was used to dispense cells into a 1536-well, solid white microplate in a volume of 5 μL at a concentration of 600,000 cells/mL resulting in 3000 cells/well.

Baseline luminescence measurements were taken for approximately 10 minutes, at ambient temperature using a Synergy Neo2 with the parameters listed in Table 1, before proceeding with agonist addition.

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<tr>
<th>Synergy Neo2 Parameters</th>
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<th>Lum</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Light Path</td>
<td>Single PMT</td>
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<td>Optic Position</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gain (PMT1, PMT2)</td>
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<td>Delay</td>
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Table 1. Synergy Neo2 Reader Parameters. Synergy Neo2 equipped with a luminescence filter cube fitted with a 1536-well aperture (3.5 mm) was used, with the above settings, to rapidly capture kinetic measurements.
The known CX3CR1 agonist, fractalkine, was prepared as an 8-point 1:3 serial dilution series ranging from 30-0 nM in Opti-MEM media at 2x concentration and added as eight replicates in an equal 5 μL volume using MultiFlo™ FX. Luminescence measurements were taken using Synergy™ Neo2 and the minimal read time interval of approximately every 90 seconds for 60 minutes.

**NanoBiT Calculations**

Data normalization to account for cell plating differences was performed by dividing each data point, relative luminescence units (RLUs) post-fractalkine addition, by the final RLU measurement taken just prior to fractalkine addition. The integral under the curve was then calculated using kinetic measurement data post-fractalkine addition.

Z’-factor was calculated using thirty-six replicate data points for negative and positive control wells using vehicle alone and the highest concentration of fractalkine from the dose response titration, 0 and 30 nM, respectively.

**Results**

**Fractalkine Titration**

The EC<sub>50</sub> concentration was determined using a four-parameter dose-response curve fit in Prism as shown in Figure 3 (GraphPad Software, Inc., La Jolla, CA). The EC<sub>50</sub> value of 0.75 nM correlates well with previously published data<sup>2</sup> (Table 2).

![Figure 3. Agonist titration. (A.) Raw kinetic luminescence data. (B.) Fractalkine titration dose response curve-based on integral of area under the kinetic curve post fractalkine addition.](image)

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<tr>
<th>Fractalkine EC&lt;sub&gt;50&lt;/sub&gt; (nM)</th>
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<tr>
<td>1536-well assay</td>
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Table 2. EC<sub>50</sub> value for the agonist fractalkine was determined in a high-throughput, 1536-well assay format.

**Z’-Factor Determination**

The Z’-Factor was calculated using 36 replicate measurement of +/- fractalkine at the 30 nM concentration (Figure 4). The assay resulted in a Z’-Factor of 0.81, which is indicative of very robust assay performance with low variability (Table 3).

![Figure 4. Z’-Factor determination. (A.) Raw kinetic luminescence data. (B.) Control measurement based on integral of area under the kinetic curve post fractalkine addition.](image)

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<th>Z’-Factor</th>
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<td>1536-well assay</td>
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Table 3. Z’-factor value was determined in a high-throughput, 1536-well assay format.
Conclusions

The live-cell NanoBiT assay allows for the investigation of dynamic receptor recruitment within a biologically relevant environment in a format amenable to high-throughput screening efforts. A dose response of fractalkine performed using CX3CR1-LgBiT:SmBiT-AARB2 in a HEK293 background resulted in an EC50 value of 0.75 nM which correlates with previous reported values. The Synergy™ Neo2 provides rapid detection which is necessary for high-throughput assay formats. Read time was less than 8 minutes for 1536-wells while still providing a highly robust assay, with a Z’-factor of 0.81. The combination of assay and instrumentation provide an ideal solution for high-throughput detection of protein:protein interactions.

References
