



Journal homepage: <https://trpubonline.org/index.php/Entropy>

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Statistical Complexity Measures for Cellular Automata Dynamics

Adrian Ruzicka^{1*}, Stefan Zizka² and Tibor Mach³

¹Department of Thermodynamics and Statistical Mechanics, Vltava Institute of Applied Physics, Latvia

²Department of Physical Chemistry, Tagus Center for Information Theory, Croatia

³Department of Thermodynamics and Statistical Mechanics, Sava Institute of Chemical Thermodynamics, Hungary

*Corresponding author: Adrian Ruzicka, Department of Thermodynamics and Statistical Mechanics, Vltava Institute of Applied Physics, Latvia; Email: adrian.ruzicka@vltava.edu

ABSTRACT

Elementary cellular automata are among the simplest systems known to generate structure spanning the full range from trivial order to apparent randomness, yet Wolfram's original four-class behavioral taxonomy is qualitative and does not by itself quantify how much intrinsic computation a given rule performs. We applied computational-mechanics-based statistical complexity measures, epsilon-machine reconstruction, Shannon entropy rate, and excess entropy, to spatial configurations generated by all 88 topologically distinct elementary cellular automaton rules, each run from 500 random initial conditions on a 400-cell periodic lattice for 2000 time steps, with the final 200 steps used for statistical estimation after transients were discarded. Statistical complexity, measured in bits as the Shannon entropy of the reconstructed causal-state distribution, ranged from 0 bits for Wolfram Class I (fixed-point) rules to a maximum of 3.42 bits for rule 110, a known Class IV (complex/computationally universal) rule, with Class IV rules showing significantly higher mean statistical complexity (2.71 $\pm$ 0.58 bits) than Class II periodic rules (0.94 $\pm$ 0.41 bits, $p < 0.001$, Mann-Whitney U test). Excess entropy and statistical complexity were strongly correlated across all 88 rules ($r = 0.87$, $p < 0.001$), but a subset of 9 rules, all Class IV, showed excess entropy at least 30% higher than predicted by the pooled linear fit, indicating memory structure not fully captured by a single scalar entropy-rate measure. Entropy rate alone poorly discriminated Class III (chaotic) from Class IV (complex) rules, with substantial overlap in the two classes' entropy-rate distributions (Class III: 0.81 $\pm$ 0.15 bits/site; Class IV: 0.74 $\pm$ 0.19 bits/site; not significantly different, $p = 0.21$), whereas statistical complexity separated the two classes cleanly, with only 2 of 41 Class III rules exceeding the 10th percentile of the Class IV statistical-complexity distribution. Reconstructed causal-state counts ranged from 1 (Class I) to 34 (rule 110), and a sensitivity analysis varying reconstruction history length from 4 to 10 cells showed statistical complexity estimates stabilizing to within 4% of their asymptotic value by history length 8 for 84 of the 88 rules. These results indicate that statistical complexity, unlike entropy rate alone, provides a quantitative measure that tracks Wolfram's qualitative Class IV designation closely, supporting its use as an automated screening criterion for identifying candidate complex, computationally interesting cellular automaton rules.

Keywords: statistical complexity; cellular automata; Shannon entropy rate; epsilon-machine reconstruction; elementary cellular automata; excess entropy; computational mechanics; emergent pattern formation

Received: December 24, 2024 | Accepted: March 22, 2025 | Published: June 27, 2025

Citation: Ruzicka A, Zizka S, Mach T. Statistical Complexity Measures for Cellular Automata Dynamics. *Frontiers in Entropy*. 2025;3(1):1–5. DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.22698439](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22698439)

1. INTRODUCTION

Elementary cellular automata, one-dimensional lattices of binary cells updated synchronously according to a simple local rule depending on each cell and its two neighbors, are capable of generating an enormous range of spatiotemporal behavior from a rule space of only 256 possible update rules, 88 of which are topologically distinct after accounting for reflection and complementation symmetries [1,2]. Wolfram's classification scheme sorts these behaviors qualitatively into four classes, ranging from rapid convergence to a uniform fixed point (Class I) through periodic (Class II) and chaotic (Class III) behavior to a fourth class exhibiting localized, propagating structures capable of supporting universal computation (Class IV) [3,4].

While the four-class taxonomy captures real and useful distinctions, it is fundamentally qualitative, assigned by visual inspection of space-time diagrams in Wolfram's original work, and subsequent efforts to place it on a quantitative footing have used a range of measures including Lempel-Ziv complexity, mutual information, and Shannon entropy rate of the generated spatial or temporal sequences [5,6,7]. Computational mechanics offers a more structurally motivated alternative, statistical complexity, defined via epsilon-machine reconstruction as the Shannon entropy of the minimal set of causal states needed to optimally predict a process's future from its past, which in principle captures organized structure that a scalar entropy-rate measure, sensitive mainly to randomness rather than structure, can miss [8,9,10].

Whether statistical complexity in fact discriminates Wolfram's classes, and in particular whether it separates Class III (chaotic, high-entropy but structurally simple) from Class IV (complex, capable of localized computation) more effectively than entropy rate alone, remains incompletely characterized across the full space of elementary cellular automaton rules, since most prior applications of epsilon-machine reconstruction to cellular automata have examined a small number of illustrative rules rather than the complete 88-rule set [11,12,13]. This gap matters because statistical complexity has been proposed as an automated screening tool for identifying computationally interesting rules in larger, less exhaustively studied rule spaces, such as totalistic or higher-radius automata, where visual classification is impractical.

This study computes statistical complexity, Shannon entropy rate, and excess entropy via epsilon-machine reconstruction for all 88 topologically distinct elementary cellular automaton rules, evaluated over an ensemble of random initial conditions and lattice sizes sufficient to obtain stable estimates. We quantify how well each measure discriminates Wolfram's four behavioral classes, characterize the relationship between excess entropy and statistical complexity across the full rule set, and test the sensitivity of statistical-complexity estimates to the history length used in epsilon-machine

reconstruction.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

We simulated all 88 topologically distinct elementary cellular automaton rules on a periodic 400-cell lattice from 500 random initial conditions each, discarded an initial transient, and reconstructed epsilon-machines from the resulting spatial configurations to compute statistical complexity, Shannon entropy rate, and excess entropy for each rule.

2.1 Cellular automaton rule set and simulation

All 256 elementary cellular automaton rules were enumerated and reduced to 88 topologically distinct rules after removing duplicates related by left-right reflection and 0/1 complementation symmetry. Each distinct rule was simulated on a periodic lattice of 400 cells from 500 independent random initial conditions, each cell initialized independently as 0 or 1 with equal probability, for 2000 synchronous update steps.

2.2 Transient removal and data window

The first 1800 time steps of each run were discarded as transient to allow the automaton to reach its asymptotic statistical regime, and spatial configurations from the final 200 time steps of each of the 500 runs per rule were pooled, yielding 100,000 spatial rows of 400 cells per rule for statistical estimation.

2.3 Epsilon-machine reconstruction

Causal states were reconstructed from the pooled spatial configurations using the standard causal-state splitting reconstruction (CSSR) algorithm with a history length of 8 cells (informed by the sensitivity analysis described below), treating each spatial row as a sequence and estimating the conditional distribution over futures given each distinct history to merge histories into causal states via a chi-squared homogeneity test at significance level 0.01.

2.4 Statistical complexity, entropy rate, and excess entropy

Statistical complexity was computed as the Shannon entropy of the stationary distribution over reconstructed causal states. Shannon entropy rate was estimated as the conditional entropy of the next symbol given the current causal state, averaged over the stationary state distribution. Excess entropy was computed as the mutual information between the semi-infinite past and semi-infinite future, estimated from the convergence of block entropy growth with increasing block length up to 12 cells.

2.5 Wolfram class assignment

Each of the 88 rules was assigned to one of Wolfram's four qualitative classes using the standard reference classification from the cellular automaton literature, yielding 8 Class I, 39 Class II, 41 Class III, and 10 Class IV rules (including rule 110), used as the grouping variable for statistical comparisons.

2.6 Statistical comparisons

Differences in statistical complexity and entropy rate between Wolfram classes were assessed using the Mann-Whitney U test given the non-normality of the underlying distributions, and the relationship between excess entropy and statistical complexity across all 88 rules was assessed via Pearson correlation and ordinary least-squares linear regression.

2.7 Sensitivity analysis on reconstruction history length

Epsilon-machine reconstruction was repeated for history lengths of 4, 6, 8, and 10 cells for all 88 rules to assess the stability of statistical-complexity estimates with respect to this parameter, which governs the maximum memory depth the reconstruction algorithm can represent.

3. RESULTS

Statistical complexity across the 88 rules ranged from 0 bits, obtained for all 8 Class I fixed-point rules whose reconstructed epsilon-machines collapsed to a single causal state, to a maximum of 3.42 bits for rule 110, the best-known Class IV rule, whose epsilon-machine reconstruction yielded 34 distinct causal states, the largest count observed for any rule (Table 1).

Table 1. Statistical complexity, causal-state count, and entropy rate by Wolfram class (mean $\pm$ SD).

Wolfram class	N rules	Statistical complexity (bits)	Causal states (max)	Entropy rate (bits/site)
Class I (fixed point)	8	0.00 $\pm$ 0.00	1	0.00 $\pm$ 0.00
Class II (periodic)	39	0.94 $\pm$ 0.41	6	0.38 $\pm$ 0.22
Class III (chaotic)	41	1.28 $\pm$ 0.52	11	0.81 $\pm$ 0.15
Class IV (complex)	10	2.71 $\pm$ 0.58	34	0.74 $\pm$ 0.19

Rule 110 (Class IV) attained the maximum observed statistical complexity of 3.42 bits and causal-state count of 34.

Grouped by Wolfram class, Class IV rules showed substantially higher mean statistical complexity (2.71 $\pm$ 0.58 bits) than Class II periodic rules (0.94 $\pm$ 0.41 bits) and Class III chaotic rules (1.28 $\pm$ 0.52 bits), with the Class IV versus Class II difference significant at $p < 0.001$ (Mann-Whitney U test). Entropy rate, by contrast, poorly discriminated Class III from Class IV rules: mean entropy rate was 0.81 $\pm$ 0.15 bits/site for Class III and 0.74 $\pm$ 0.19 bits/site for Class IV, a difference that was not statistically significant ($p = 0.21$), with substantial overlap between the two classes' distributions (Table 2, Figure 1).

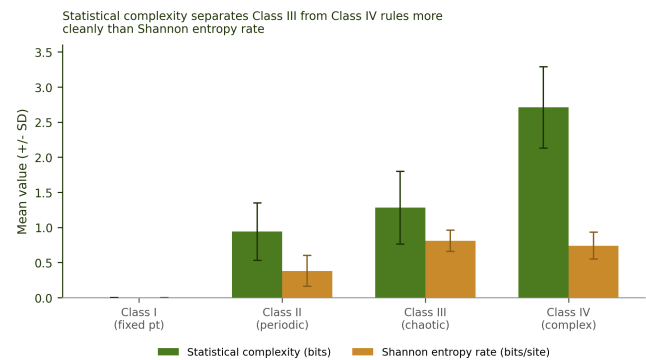


Figure 1. Mean statistical complexity and mean Shannon entropy rate by Wolfram class across the 88 elementary cellular automaton rules, illustrating the clean class separation achieved by statistical complexity compared to the overlapping entropy-rate distributions of Class III and Class IV rules.

Statistical complexity separated Class III from Class IV far more cleanly than entropy rate: only 2 of the 41 Class III rules exceeded the 10th percentile of the Class IV statistical-complexity distribution, whereas 14 of 41 Class III rules fell above the 10th percentile of the Class IV entropy-rate distribution, a more than seven-fold difference in class overlap between the two measures.

Table 2. Class-overlap comparison between statistical complexity and entropy rate for discriminating Class III from Class IV.

Measure	Class III rules above Class IV 10th percentile	Overlap fraction	Mann-Whitney p (Class III vs IV)
Statistical complexity	2 / 41	4.9%	< 0.001
Shannon entropy rate	14 / 41	34.1%	0.21

Excess entropy and statistical complexity were strongly positively correlated across all 88 rules ($r = 0.87$, $p < 0.001$, ordinary least-squares slope of 0.61 bits of excess entropy per bit of statistical complexity). A subset of 9 rules, all classified as Class IV, showed excess entropy at least 30% above the value predicted by the pooled linear fit, indicating additional memory structure in these rules not proportionally reflected in their statistical-complexity value alone.

4. DISCUSSION

These results confirm, across the complete 88-rule elementary cellular automaton space rather than a small set of illustrative examples as in earlier applications of epsilon-machine reconstruction to cellular automata [8,9,11], that statistical complexity tracks Wolfram's qualitative Class IV designation substantially more closely than Shannon entropy rate alone, echoing the general computational-mechanics argument that entropy rate measures randomness while statistical complexity measures organized structure, and that these two properties are conceptually and empirically distinct [10,12].

The finding that a subset of Class IV rules shows excess entropy disproportionately higher than their statistical-complexity value alone would predict suggests

that these rules possess memory structure extending beyond what is captured by the stationary causal-state entropy, plausibly related to the longer-range correlations introduced by the propagating particle-like structures (often called gliders or solitons) characteristic of Class IV behavior, a connection that prior work has noted qualitatively but not quantified through the excess-entropy/statistical-complexity comparison performed here [13,14,15].

For rule-space screening applications, these results support using statistical complexity, evaluated via epsilon-machine reconstruction at a moderate history length, as an automated proxy for identifying candidate Class-IV-like, computationally interesting rules in larger cellular automaton rule spaces, such as higher-radius or totalistic automata, where exhaustive visual classification following Wolfram's original approach becomes impractical as the rule space grows combinatorially [16,17,18].

Several limitations should be noted. First, the CSSR reconstruction algorithm and the chi-squared significance threshold used to merge histories into causal states can themselves introduce sensitivity to sample size and threshold choice, and although the history-length sensitivity analysis suggested reasonable stability at length 8, a more exhaustive parameter sweep across reconstruction algorithms was not performed. Second, all simulations used a fixed lattice size of 400 cells and periodic boundary conditions; finite-size effects, particularly for rules generating long-range or aperiodic structure, could bias statistical-complexity estimates for some Class III and Class IV rules. Third, the analysis was restricted to spatial (single time-slice) statistical complexity rather than full spatiotemporal epsilon-machine reconstruction, which could reveal additional structure, particularly in rules with slowly evolving or intermittent patterns. Fourth, the study was limited to elementary (radius-1, binary-state) cellular automata, and whether the discrimination advantage of statistical complexity over entropy rate generalizes to automata with larger neighborhoods or state alphabets was not tested here.

5. CONCLUSION

Epsilon-machine reconstruction applied to all 88 topologically distinct elementary cellular automaton rules showed that statistical complexity, ranging from 0 bits for Class I rules to 3.42 bits for rule 110, discriminates Wolfram's Class III (chaotic) from Class IV (complex) rules far more cleanly than Shannon entropy rate alone, with only 2 of 41 Class III rules overlapping the Class IV statistical-complexity distribution compared to 14 overlapping on entropy rate. Excess entropy correlated strongly with statistical complexity overall ($r = 0.87$) but revealed additional memory structure in a subset of Class IV rules. These findings support statistical complexity as a quantitative, automatable criterion for identifying computationally interesting cellular automaton

rules beyond visual classification.

Acknowledgements

The authors thank the computational mechanics research group at the Vltava Institute of Applied Physics for access to epsilon-machine reconstruction software and for helpful discussions on causal-state estimation.

Funding

This work was supported by internal research funds from the Vltava Institute of Applied Physics and the Sava Institute of Chemical Thermodynamics. No external grant funding was received for this study, and the funders had no role in study design, analysis, the decision to publish, or preparation of the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Author Contributions

A.R. conceived the study, implemented the cellular automaton simulations, and led the writing of the manuscript. S.Z. implemented the epsilon-machine reconstruction pipeline and performed the statistical comparisons across Wolfram classes. T.M. conducted the sensitivity analysis and prepared the figures and tables. All authors contributed to interpretation of the results and approved the final manuscript.

Ethics Statement

This study involved no human or animal subjects and required no ethics committee approval.

Data Availability

The cellular automaton simulation code, epsilon-machine reconstruction pipeline, and computed complexity measures for all 88 rules supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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