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Monte Carlo study of efficiency roll-off of phosphorescent organic light-emitting diodes: Evidence for dominant role of triplet-polaron quenching

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Excitonic processes play a key role in organic optoelectronic devices. The ultimately attainable internal quantum efficiency (IQE) in, e.g., organic light-emitting diodes (OLEDs), organic photovoltaic devices, and light-emitting field-effect transistors is determined by the complex interplay of exciton radiative and non-radiative decay, diffusion, and dissociation. At high excitation densities, additional quenching can occur due to exciton-exciton and exciton-charge interactions. These bimolecular processes present a considerable challenge to the development of electrically pumped organic lasers, and cause in phosphorescent OLEDs a decrease in efficiency (IQE) in, e.g., organic light-emitting diodes: Evidence for dominant role of triplet-polaron quenching.

We present an advanced molecular-scale organic light-emitting diode (OLED) model, integrating both electronic and excitonic processes. Using this model, we can reproduce the measured efficiency roll-off for prototypical phosphorescent OLED stacks based on the green dye tris[2-phenylpyridine]iridium (Ir(ppy)₃) and the red dye octaethylporphine platinum (PtOEP) and study the cause of the roll-off as function of the current density. Both the voltage versus current density characteristics and roll-off agree well with experimental data. Surprisingly, the results of the simulations lead us to conclude that, contrary to what is often assumed, not triplet-triplet annihilation but triplet-polaron quenching is the dominant mechanism causing the roll-off under realistic operating conditions. Simulations for devices with an optimized recombination profile, achieved by carefully tuning the dye trap depth, show that it will be possible to fabricate OLEDs with a drastically reduced roll-off. It is envisaged that J₉₀, the current density at which the efficiency is reduced to 90%, can be increased by almost one order of magnitude as compared to the experimental state-of-the-art. © 2014 AIP Publishing LLC. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1063/1.4897534]
based on the green phosphorescent emitter tris[2-phenylpyridine]iridium (Ir(ppy)_3) and the red phosphorescent emitter octaethylporphine platinum (PtOEP). As the triplet radiative lifetime of Ir(ppy)_3 is much shorter than that of PtOEP (~1 µs vs ~100 µs), a comparison between both devices will reveal to what extent the relative contributions of TPQ and TTA to the roll-off are sensitive to the emissive lifetime. The layer structures are shown in Fig. 1(a). Both dyes are embedded in a matrix consisting of 4,4'-bis[9-carbazolyl]-2,2'-biphenyl (CBP). This emissive layer is sandwiched between other layers that facilitate electron and hole injection, transport, and blocking. The electrodes consist of indium tin oxide (ITO) and lithium fluoride/aluminum (LiF/Al). The simulation results are compared to the experimental data presented by Giebink and Forrest.

The simulation parameters used were chosen as follows. The highest occupied molecular orbital (HOMO) energies were obtained from ultraviolet photoemission spectroscopy (UPS), and the lowest unoccupied molecular orbital (LUMO) was obtained by adding the measured optical gap. The values are given in Fig. 1(a). This neglects the exciton binding energy; if taken equal for all materials, the resulting underestimation of the LUMO would result in a horizontal shift of the J(V) curve. We note that we do take the exciton binding energy into account (1.0 eV for all materials) for calculating exciton generation and dissociation rates. Due to a lack of detailed information on the charge transport parameters, we adopt for all materials and for both electrons and holes the same approximate approach, viz. Miller-Abrahams (MA) hopping in a random Gaussian Density of States (DOS) with a width σ = 0.1 eV, a site density N_s = 10^{27} m^{-3}, a wavefunction decay length of λ = 0.3 nm and a hopping attempt frequency to a first nearest neighbor (at 1 nm distance) equal to 3.3 \times 10^{10} s^{-1} at 300 K. The latter value is a typical attempt frequency of holes in α-NPD. The same MA formalism is employed to describe exciton generation and dissociation. Instantaneous intersystem crossing is assumed, so that only triplets are considered. The radiative (non-radiative) decay rates used are \Gamma_{\text{radi}} = 1.0 (0.3) \mu s^{-1} for Ir(ppy)_3 and 0.010 (0.051) \mu s^{-1} for PtOEP, corresponding to a photoluminescence quantum efficiency (PLQE) equal to 77% and 16%, respectively. Triplet diffusion between the dye molecules is described as a sum of long-range Förster processes with a Förster radius equal to \( R_{\text{F,eff}} = 1.5 \, \text{nm} \), the approximate range found in Ref. 25 for various materials, and short-range Dexter processes with an exp(-2R/\lambda) distance (R) dependence and with a rate equal to the Förster rate at \( R = 1.5 \, \text{nm} \). The same rate was assumed for the Dexter transfer between the host and guest molecules. The triplet energy levels—determining the exciton diffusion—were taken from experiment and Gaussian excitonic energetic disorder of 0.1 eV was assumed. At least 124 possible neighbors were considered for each charge or exciton hop. More details on the simulation method and an overview of all parameters can be found in the Section S1 of the supplementary material (SM).

The microscopic mechanisms of TPQ and TTA are not well established. Both Förster and Dexter mediated mechanisms have been proposed in the literature. The overall rate may be due to a multiple-step diffusion process preceding the final quenching or annihilation step occurring within a small capture radius. We assume that for TPQ and TTA the final step occurs instantaneously upon formation of a nearest neighbor pair and neglect any direct long-range
interaction. This could be viewed as a lower bound for the actual quenching rate, in which long-range interaction most likely will also play a role. In the case of TTA, of the two triplets one randomly selected triplet remains after the annihilation.

Figure 2(a) shows that for both devices, the calculated current density vs voltage (\(J(V)\)) characteristics are reasonably close to the experimental curves, considering the assumptions made for the modeling of the charge transport. As discussed above, a shift of the LUMO levels to take the exciton binding energies properly into account would lead to a reduced current density, and hence to a reduced difference with the experimental curves. As the focus is on obtaining a general understanding of the roles of TPQ and TTA, we have chosen not to improve the agreement by further adapting the transport or energy level parameters. Instead, we discuss in Section S2 of the SM\(^{31}\) the sensitivity of the simulation results to various parameter values. The results suggest that the \(J(V)\) characteristics of the complete device stack are strongly determined by the charge-transport barriers due to the energy-level differences of the materials, and the dye trap depths. Varying the charge carrier mobilities of the individual materials has a comparatively small effect. Figure 2(b) shows that for Ir(ppy)\(_3\) also the calculated and experimental roll-off curves agree within the error margin of the simulations. For PtOEP, the roll-off is somewhat underestimated at high current densities. This could indicate that our nearest-neighbor assumption for the quenching processes is too limited.

Figures 1(b) and 1(c) show the contribution of the various excitonic loss processes in the EML in both devices. At low voltages, the only significant loss process is non-radiative decay. As the voltage increases, the losses due to TPQ become significant. The losses due to TTA remain marginal. This may be understood as a result of the very small triplet diffusion lengths in the dilute systems studied, combined with a very small fraction of EML sites occupied by triplet excitons, shown in Fig. 2(c). However, for the green devices not all losses are confined to the EML: the electron blocking in the devices is found to be insufficient, leading to a reduced recombination efficiency and some emission from the \(\alpha\)-NPD hole transporting layer (HTL). This was experimentally observed as a small blue spectral contribution by Giebink and Forrest.\(^6\) Moreover, the triplet energy level of the \(\alpha\)-NPD is lower than the triplet energy of Ir(ppy)\(_3\)), resulting in the transfer of triplets from the dye to the non-emissive electron transport layer. The contribution of these two loss mechanisms to the total efficiency of the green device is shown in Fig. 1(d). It can be seen that this not only causes the IQE at low voltages to be lower than the theoretically expected 77\%, as was already suggested by Giebink and Forrest,\(^6\) but also completely dominates the roll-off at higher voltages. For the red devices, loss of electrons to the HTL also plays a role, albeit only at higher voltages (Section S3, SM).\(^{31}\) This can be understood by the lower LUMO and triplet energy of PtOEP: Blocking of electrons transported via the dye is more effective, and loss of triplets by diffusion into \(\alpha\)-NPD does not occur.

The simulations can be employed to explore the benefits of various modifications of the layer stack to the roll-off. Figure 3(a) shows the cumulative stepwise improvement of the performance of the Ir(ppy)\(_3\) devices as obtained by (1) increasing the LUMO energy of the HTL (avoiding electron loss), (2) increasing the triplet level in the HTL (avoiding exciton loss), and (3) eliminating injection barriers, symmetrizing the layer and energy level structure and reducing the guest HOMO and LUMO trap depths, \(\Delta\), to 0.3 eV (Fig. 3(b)). The beneficial effects of steps 1 and 2 have already been implemented by using thin exciton blocking layers (e.g., in Ref. 27) at the HTL/EML interface. Step 3 provides an idealized but potentially realizable OLED layer stack, with, for \(\Delta = 0.2–0.4\) eV, a quite uniform recombination profile across the EML (Fig. 3(c)), a high current density at any given voltage (and hence a drastic reduction of the overvoltage), and a high value of \(J_{\text{0}}\) (the current density at which the efficiency is reduced to 90\%) of \(1.5 \times 10^3\) A/m\(^2\). This value is almost one order of magnitude larger than the highest value reported to date for phosphorescent OLEDs.\(^3\) Also for these improved devices,
we find that the dominant contribution to the roll-off is TPQ (Section S4, SM).31

The result that a nonzero value of the dye trap depth is beneficial for the efficiency may seem counterintuitive at first. The effect of the dye trap depth on the efficiency of the symmetric devices is shown in Fig. 4. While the relative IQE, $\eta_{\text{IQE}} / \eta_{\text{IQE, max}}$ (closed symbols), increases significantly up to $\Delta = 0.2$ eV, there is very little effect for deeper traps. The increased trapping does, however, lead to an increase of the overvoltage. The open symbols in the figure show that the net result is a rather constant power efficiency up to the overvoltage. The open symbols in the device of step 3, with perfect electron and hole blocking.

![Graph showing IQE reduction and roll-off improvement](image)

**Fig. 3.** (a) IQE and reduction of the roll-off after each improvement step (cumulative), compared to the reference case (black squares). (b) Energy levels in the device of step 3, with perfect electron and hole blocking. (c) Normalized recombination profile for the reference case and after step 3, for various levels of the dye trap depth $\Delta$.

In conclusion, a fully integrated electronic-excitonic 3D Monte Carlo OLED device model has been developed. Using experimentally determined parameters, the model reproduces measured roll-off curves of intensively studied phosphorescent OLEDs with strongly different efficiencies and emissive lifetimes, based on Ir(ppy), and PtOEP. An analysis of the excitonic processes contributing to the roll-off reveals that—under the assumption of instantaneous nearest-neighbor quenching—TPQ is the dominant process and that TTA only plays a marginal role. As a next step, we will study the effect of long-range quenching processes on the roll-off. We have also shown that by symmetrizing the stack and by using the dye as trap, we can optimize the recombination profile, thereby reducing the roll-off. This approach may lead to OLEDs in which the $J_{90}$ value can be drastically increased beyond the values reported up till now. The excess energy released upon quenching has been linked to degradation, so reducing the roll-off is also expected to improve the lifetime. The model presented in this letter can be readily applied to any arbitrary OLED layer stack, to study the molecular-scale consequences of varying the charge and excitonic interaction processes (e.g., thermally activated delayed fluorescence), and the operational conditions including, e.g., the temperature and a time-dependent current density, potentially leading to further improved designs.

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14 Measured at Philips Research Aachen.
17 This value is based on the experimental singlet and triplet energies for Ir(ppy)$_3$, and an estimate of the singlet exciton binding energy. See Section S1 of the supplementary material presented in Ref. 31.
20 This approach avoids using the Marcus formalism, within which an additional and unknown parameter (the reorganization energy) is employed; it was found in Ref. 21 that only a small difference is expected between the mobilities as obtained within the Miller-Abrahams and Marcus formalisms.
31 See supplementary material at http://dx.doi.org/10.1063/1.4897534 for information regarding details of the simulation and overview of parameters (S1), sensitivity to parameter values (S2), composition of the roll-off for the PoOEP device (S3), and $J(V)$ curves and roll-off composition in idealized OLED layer stacks (S4).