

## Article

# Electrocatalytic Oxygen Reduction to Hydrogen Peroxide on Graphdiyne-Based Single-Atom Catalysts: First-Principles Studies

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**Abstract:** The electrocatalytic oxygen reduction reaction ( $2e^-$  ORR) via a two-electron process is a promising pathway for the production of hydrogen peroxide ( $H_2O_2$ ). Here, we systematically investigated the  $2e^-$  ORR process on graphdiyne (GDY) supported single transition metal atoms ( $TM_1@GDY$ ) using density functional theory (DFT) calculations. Among the 23  $TM_1@GDY$  catalysts,  $Pt_1@GDY$  showed the best performance for the  $H_2O_2$  product with an overpotential as low as 0.15 V. The electronic structure analysis, on the one hand, elucidates that the electron transfer between  $Pt_1@GDY$  and the adsorbed  $O_2$  facilitates the activation of  $O_2$ , and, on the other hand, reveals that the high  $2e^-$  ORR activity of  $Pt_1@GDY$  lies in the transfer of electrons from the filled Pt-3d orbitals to the 2p antibonding orbitals of  $OOH^*$ , which effectively activates the O–O bond. This work provides insights to design efficient electrocatalysts for  $H_2O_2$  generation.

**Keywords:** ORR; density functional theory (DFT); graphdiyne (GDY); electrocatalytic; single-atom catalysts;  $H_2O_2$



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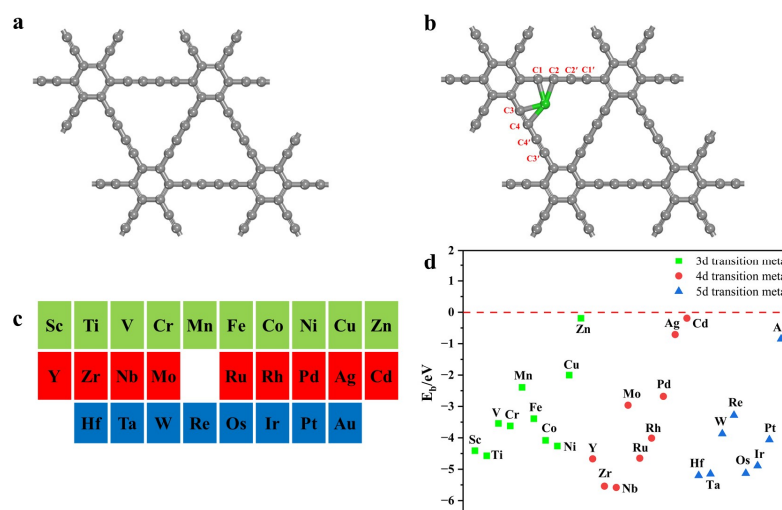
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## 1. Introduction

Hydrogen peroxide ( $H_2O_2$ ) is an important green chemical with various applications in industrial processes such as paper bleaching, textiles, water treatment [1–4] and chemical synthesis [5]. More importantly, COVID-19, which is currently sweeping the world, has intensified the demand for  $H_2O_2$  for medical purposes. Global production of  $H_2O_2$  was close to 4.5 million tons in 2020, and the market demand is expected to reach approximately 5.7 million tons by 2027 [6]. However, current industrial  $H_2O_2$  production relies mainly on the anthraquinone oxidation (AO) process, which is costly and highly polluting [7]. In addition, transporting, storing and handling high concentrations of  $H_2O_2$  is dangerous and expensive. Hence, it has become urgent to develop a simple, low-cost and environmentally friendly method for  $H_2O_2$  production. In recent years, electrocatalytic reduction of  $O_2$  has been considered as a promising method for the production of  $H_2O_2$  [8–10]. In this case,  $H_2O_2$  can be produced on-site, which is both safe and convenient. The electrocatalytic  $O_2$  reduction reaction (ORR) involves multiple electron steps, where  $O_2$  can be reduced to  $H_2O_2$  via the  $2e^-$  pathway or to  $H_2O$  via the  $4e^-$  route. Therefore, the main challenge in  $H_2O_2$  production with the electrocatalytic ORR is how to control the selectivity of the reaction.

An increasing number of catalysts for the electrocatalytic synthesis of  $H_2O_2$  have been reported recently, including noble metal [11,12] and their alloy catalysts [9,13,14], single-atom catalysts and carbon-based catalysts [15–17]. Among these, carbon-based catalysts are of great interest due to their abundant sources and easy tunability. In particular, graphene-based single-atom catalysts (SACs) have been designed and applied for the preparation of  $H_2O_2$ . For example, previous studies have reported that metal–nitrogen–carbon SACs can promote the selectivity of the electrocatalytic  $2e^-$  ORR while

maintaining high activity [18–20]. As a member of the carbon material family, graphdiyne (GDY) has recently been reported in various fields [21]. Importantly, single metal atoms can be stably anchored on the GDY surface [22,23] due to the in-plane conjugated network of alkyl and aryl groups and the inhomogeneous charge distribution of GDY. More importantly, the pristine GDY monolayer (Figure 1a) has an excellent electron mobility, reaching  $10^5 \text{ cm}^2/(\text{Vs})$  at 300 K [24]. These advantages of GDY make it of great potential as a substrate for electrocatalysts.



**Figure 1.** (a) Structure of GDY monolayer. (b) Structure of TM<sub>1</sub>@GDY single-atom catalyst with different C sites labeled. Gray represents C atoms while green represents transition metal atoms. (c) The transition metal atoms investigated in this work. (d) Calculated binding energy ( $E_b$ ) of TM<sub>1</sub> over different TM<sub>1</sub>@GDY.

In this work, we have investigated the activity of a series of single transition metal atoms (TM<sub>1</sub>) supported on GDY (TM<sub>1</sub>@GDY) for the  $2e^-$  ORR using density functional theory (DFT) calculations under acidic conditions (pH = 0). Of all the TM<sub>1</sub>@GDYs, calculations showed that Pt<sub>1</sub>@GDY has the best activity and selectivity in the  $2e^-$  ORR. Encouragingly, the predicted activity of Pt<sub>1</sub>@GDY is comparable to that of known commercial catalysts. Electronic structure analysis further revealed the origin of the high activity of Pt<sub>1</sub>@GDY towards the  $2e^-$  ORR. This work provides insight into the design of efficient electrocatalysts for the production of H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>.

## 2. Results and Discussion

### 2.1. Catalyst Structure and Stability

As the stability of a catalyst is a prerequisite for its application, we first assessed the thermal stability of TM<sub>1</sub>@GDY by calculating the binding energy ( $E_b$ ) of TM<sub>1</sub> on GDY. As shown in Figure 1b, TM<sub>1</sub> prefers to adsorb on corners near the six-membered carbon ring and is bonded to four carbon atoms. TM<sub>1</sub> involves all 3d, 4d and 5d transition metal elements except for radioactive technetium (Tc), lanthanides (La~Lu) and the liquid metal mercury (Hg), as shown in Figure 1c. The  $E_b$  of TM<sub>1</sub> was calculated as follows:

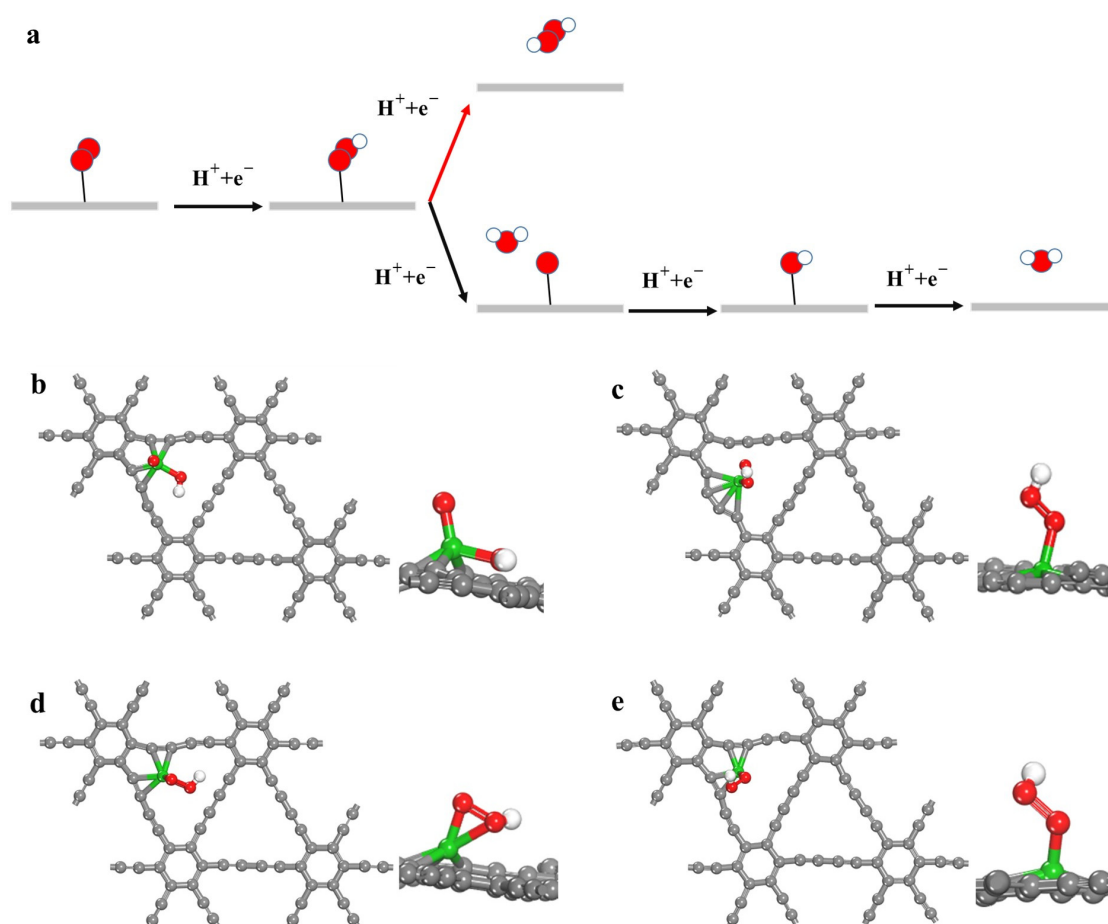
$$E_b = E_{\text{TM}_1\text{@GDY}} - E_{\text{TM}_1} - E_{\text{GDY}} \quad (1)$$

where  $E_{\text{TM}_1\text{@GDY}}$  and  $E_{\text{GDY}}$  represent the total energy of TM<sub>1</sub>@GDY and GDY, respectively, and  $E_{\text{TM}_1}$  represents the energy of the single transition metal atom. The  $E_b$  of all TM<sub>1</sub>@GDY are shown in Figure 1d and Table S1 from Supplementary Materials, and the  $E_b < 0$  indicated that the single metal atom can be stably supported on GDY. It is found that the  $E_b$  of single atoms of zinc (Zn), cadmium (Cd), argentine (Ag) and aurum (Au) are less than 0 eV but greater than −1 eV. Their optimized structures are shown in Figure S1 from Supplementary

Materials. However, it is found that the Zn and Cd on GDY are not at the corners of the acetylene ring but at the center of the ring. They are far from the GDY plane at distances of 2.32 and 3.03 Å, respectively, indicating that  $\text{Cd}_1\text{@GDY}$  and  $\text{Zn}_1\text{@GDY}$  are unstable. The  $E_b$  of both  $\text{Ag}_1$  and  $\text{Au}_1\text{@GDY}$  are very close to 0 eV, indicating that they are also unstable. Meanwhile, the  $E_b$  of  $\text{Cu}_1\text{@GDY}$  was calculated to be  $-2.00$  eV. Notably, Li et al. synthesized Cu single atoms anchored to GDY and demonstrated that the supported  $\text{Cu}_1$  is very stable [25]. Therefore, we consider the supported single atoms with  $E_b$  more negative than  $-2.00$  eV to be stable by using  $\text{Cu}_1\text{@GDY}$  as a criterion. Accordingly, Zn, Cd, Ag and Au single atoms are relatively unstable because their  $E_b$  is more positive than  $-2.00$  eV.

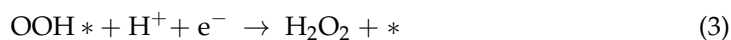
## 2.2. Catalyst Performance

The ORR performance of  $\text{TM}_1\text{@GDY}$  under acidic conditions ( $\text{pH} = 0$ ) was investigated. The scheme of the reaction process is shown in Figure 2a. Firstly, the adsorbed  $\text{O}_2$  on  $\text{TM}_1\text{@GDY}$  obtained one (electron ( $e^-$ ) and proton ( $\text{H}^+$ )) pair from the aqueous solution, producing an  $\text{OOH}^*$  intermediate. Followed by the further reduction of  $\text{OOH}^*$  by ( $\text{H}^+ + e^-$ ), this step can generate either  $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$  ( $2e^-$  ORR) or  $\text{H}_2\text{O}$  ( $4e^-$  ORR), and the product depends on if the O–O bond is broken. The steps of the ORR are as follows, the \* in the following steps represents the adsorption site on the catalyst [26]:



**Figure 2.** (a) Scheme of the  $2e^-$  ORR and  $4e^-$  ORR pathways. Different adsorption types of intermediate  $\text{OOH}$ : (b) O–O bond cleavage after  $\text{OOH}$  adsorption to form a  $^*(\text{O} + \text{OH})$  intermediate on  $\text{TM}_1\text{@GDY}$  ( $\text{TM} = \text{Re}, \text{W}, \text{Nb}, \text{Ta}$  and  $\text{Mo}$ ), (c) after  $\text{OOH}$  adsorption, a single atom is transferred to the acetylene chain on  $\text{TM}_1\text{@GDY}$  ( $\text{TM} = \text{Sc}, \text{Y}$  and  $\text{Hf}$ ), (d) side-on adsorption pattern of  $\text{OOH}$  on  $\text{TM}_1\text{@GDY}$  ( $\text{TM} = \text{Ti}, \text{V}, \text{Mn}, \text{Zr}, \text{Rh}$  and  $\text{Ir}$ ), and (e) end-on adsorption mode of  $\text{OOH}$  on  $\text{TM}_1\text{@GDY}$  ( $\text{TM} = \text{Pt}, \text{Pd}, \text{Cu}, \text{Co}, \text{Ni}, \text{Ru}, \text{Os}, \text{Cr}$  and  $\text{Fe}$ ). Color scheme: H: White; C: Gray; O: Red; Transition metals (TM): Green.

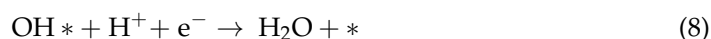
The 2e<sup>−</sup> ORR pathway:



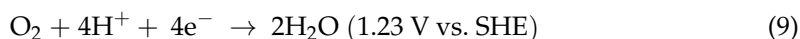
The complete reaction can be expressed as:



The 4e<sup>−</sup> ORR pathway:



The complete reaction can be expressed as:

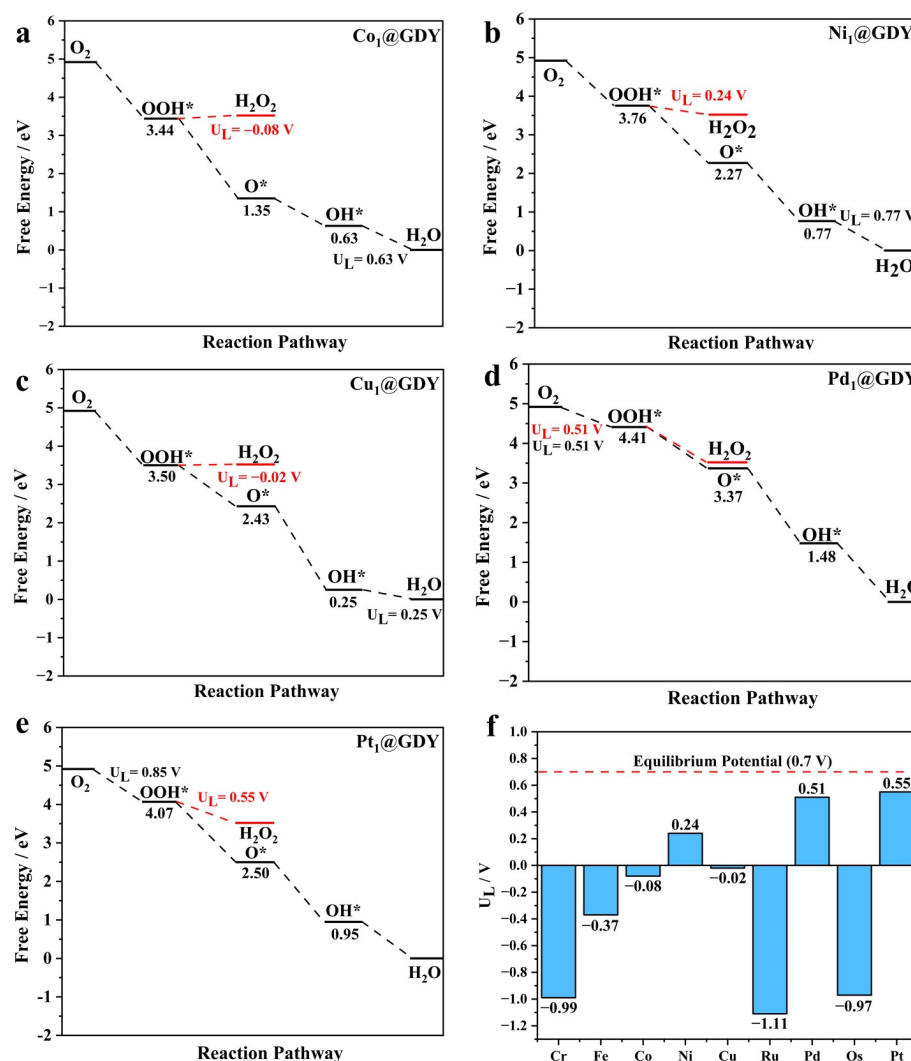


From the above ORR reaction pathway, it is clear that the 4e<sup>−</sup> ORR and 2e<sup>−</sup> ORR are two competing reactions during the electrochemical synthesis of H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>, which depends on the type of O<sub>2</sub> adsorption [26]. The adsorption of O<sub>2</sub> on the catalyst surface can be generally classified into two types: end-on and side-on modes [27]. Obviously, in both the 4e<sup>−</sup> and 2e<sup>−</sup> pathways, the intermediate OOH\* is formed in the first step of oxygen adsorption and hydrogenation, so we first calculated the free energy of OOH\* (G<sub>OOH\*</sub>) (Table S2 from Supplementary Materials). As shown in Equations (5) and (6), the ΔG of each electron step in the 2e<sup>−</sup> ORR under ideal conditions is 0.70 eV (G<sub>OOH\*</sub> = 4.22 eV), so the change in free energy of the whole reaction is 1.40 eV (G<sub>H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub></sub> = 3.52 eV).

In general, the adsorption conformations of OOH\* on these TM<sub>1</sub>@GDYs can be divided into four types, as shown in Figure 2b–e. The first one (TM = Re, W, Nb, Ta and Mo) is shown in Figure 2b, where the O–O bond of OOH\* undergoes spontaneous cleavage due to strong interactions between OOH\* and TM<sub>1</sub>@GDY, indicating the poor selectivity of these TM<sub>1</sub>@GDYs (TM = Re, W, Nb, Ta and Mo). For the second one shown in Figure 2c (TM = Sc, Y and Hf), the G<sub>OOH\*</sub> of OOH\* are all less than 3.52 eV (Table S1 from Supplementary Materials), which indicates that Sc<sub>1</sub>, Y<sub>1</sub> and Hf<sub>1</sub>@GDY have strong adsorption of OOH. In addition, after OOH adsorption, a facile migration of the single atom to the C–C triple bond site (located between C2 and C2') can be observed, indicating that the single atom is unstable during the catalysis. In the third one (TM = Ti, V, Mn, Zr, Rh and Ir), OOH\* is in the side-on mode (Figure 2d); it can be seen that the G<sub>OOH\*</sub> of the laterally adsorbed OOH\* are all less than 3.52 eV (Table S1), which means that ΔG<sub>OOH\*</sub> are greater than 1.40 eV, which is not favorable for the 2e<sup>−</sup> ORR. For the last one (TM = Pt, Pd, Cu, Co, Ni, Ru, Os, Cr and Fe, Figure 2e), OOH\* is following the end-on pattern. The G<sub>OOH\*</sub> are all greater than 3.52 eV, which means that these TM<sub>1</sub>@GDYs have strong adsorption of OOH, and is, therefore, favorable for the 2e<sup>−</sup> ORR pathway. Therefore, the structures in Figure 2e were used for the subsequent studies.

Next, we compared the electrocatalytic ORR performance of TM<sub>1</sub>@GDYs (TM = Pt, Pd, Cu, Co, Ni, Ru, Os, Cr and Fe). The free energy curves, as well as the corresponding η and potential limiting steps, are given in Figure 3 and Figure S2 from Supplementary Materials to further clarify the catalytic activity and selectivity. We can see that the G<sub>OOH\*</sub> on Cr<sub>1</sub>@GDY, Fe<sub>1</sub>@GDY, Co<sub>1</sub>@GDY, Cu<sub>1</sub>@GDY, Ru<sub>1</sub>@GDY and Os<sub>1</sub>@GDY are 2.53 eV, 3.15 eV, 3.44 eV, 3.50 eV, 2.41 eV and 2.55 eV, respectively (Figure S2 from Supplementary Materials and Figure 3a,c), which are all lower than 3.52 eV, implying that they all have a strong adsorption for OOH\*. Therefore, this strong adsorption of OOH\* leads to the second

elementary step of the  $2e^-$  ORR being uphill and becoming PDS. In contrast, the  $G_{OOH^*}$  of the other three catalysts ( $Ni_1@GDY$ ,  $Pd_1@GDY$  and  $Pt_1@GDY$ ) are 3.76 eV, 4.41 eV and 4.07 eV, respectively (Figure 3b,d–f), which are all above 3.52 eV. In particular, the  $G_{OOH^*}$  of  $Pd_1@GDY$  and  $Pt_1@GDY$  (4.41 eV and 4.07 eV) are very close to 4.22 eV, which indicates that the adsorption strength of OOH is moderate on both catalysts with the first and second elementary step as PDS, respectively. In contrast, the  $G_{OOH^*}$  of  $Ni_1@GDY$  is lower than 4.22 eV, which indicates a stronger adsorption of  $OOH^*$ , leading to the second step as PDS and thus unfavorable to the  $2e^-$  ORR pathway.



**Figure 3.** Free energy diagrams of the  $2e^-$  and  $4e^-$  ORR on (a)  $Co_1@GDY$ , (b)  $Ni_1@GDY$ , (c)  $Cu_1@GDY$ , (d)  $Pd_1@GDY$  and (e)  $Pt_1@GDY$ . Red curve: the  $2e^-$  ORR pathway. Black curve: the  $4e^-$  ORR pathway. The potential-determining step (PDS) of the  $2e^-$  and  $4e^-$  ORR on  $Co_1@GDY$ ,  $Ni_1@GDY$  and  $Cu_1@GDY$  is the second step, respectively. The PDSs of the  $2e^-$  and  $4e^-$  ORR on  $Pd_1@GDY$  are the first step. The PDSs of the  $2e^-$  and  $4e^-$  ORR on  $Pt_1@GDY$  are the second and first step, respectively. (f) Limiting potential ( $U_L$ ) of the  $2e^-$  ORR on  $TM_1@GDY$  (TM = Co, Ni, Cu, Pd, and Pt) catalysts. The red dashed line represents the equilibrium potential which is equal to 0.70 V.

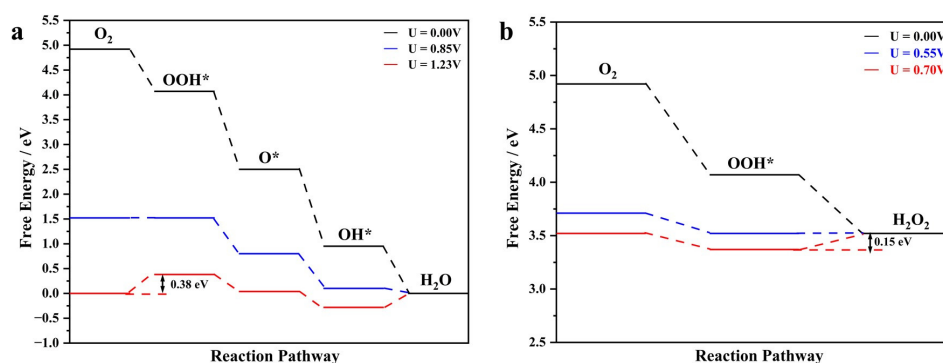
In addition, we can see the  $4e^-$  ORR pathway on each  $TM_1@GDY$  in Figure 3 and Figure S2 from Supplementary Materials. The PDSs of  $Cr_1@GDY$ ,  $Fe_1@GDY$ ,  $Ru_1@GDY$  and  $Os_1@GDY$  are the fourth step (Figure S2 from Supplementary Materials), which are all uphill in energy with  $\Delta G$  equal to 0.90 eV, 0.23 eV, 0.72 eV and 0.94 eV, respectively. This suggests that the  $4e^-$  ORR process cannot be spontaneous. As can be seen from



Figure 3a–c, the PDS of  $\text{Co}_1\text{@GDY}$ ,  $\text{Ni}_1\text{@GDY}$  and  $\text{Cu}_1\text{@GDY}$  is the last reaction step with  $\Delta G$  of  $-0.63$  eV,  $-0.77$  eV and  $-0.25$  eV, respectively, while the PDS of the  $4e^-$  ORR on  $\text{Pd}_1\text{@GDY}$  and  $\text{Pt}_1\text{@GDY}$  (Figure 3d,e) is the first reaction step with  $\Delta G$  of  $-0.51$  eV and  $-0.85$  eV, respectively.

For the  $2e^-$  ORR pathway, it is well known that a good catalyst for the electrochemical generation of  $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$  should have a  $U_L$  close to  $U_{\text{equilibrium}}$ . Therefore,  $U_L$  can be used as a descriptor to evaluate its  $2e^-$  ORR activity. To better understand the ORR ability of catalysts, we calculated the  $U_L$  of the  $2e^-$  and  $4e^-$  ORR for these nine catalysts ( $\text{Cr}_1\text{@GDY}$ ,  $\text{Fe}_1\text{@GDY}$ ,  $\text{Co}_1\text{@GDY}$ ,  $\text{Ni}_1\text{@GDY}$ ,  $\text{Cu}_1\text{@GDY}$ ,  $\text{Ru}_1\text{@GDY}$ ,  $\text{Pd}_1\text{@GDY}$ ,  $\text{Os}_1\text{@GDY}$  and  $\text{Pt}_1\text{@GDY}$ ) by using the  $U_L$  formula and plotted Figure 3f and Figure S3 from Supplementary Materials with the red dashed lines representing the standard  $U_{\text{equilibrium}}$ , which are  $0.7$  V and  $1.23$  V, respectively. Theoretically, the closer the  $U_L$  is to  $U_{\text{equilibrium}}$ , the closer the  $G_{\text{OOH}^*}$  is to  $4.22$  eV, implying a higher  $2e^-$  ORR activity of the catalyst. The reason is that  $G_{\text{OOH}^*}$  is lower than  $3.52$  eV when  $U_L < 0$ , i.e., the adsorption of OOH is too strong. In addition,  $\eta$  can be used more intuitively to evaluate the activity because  $\eta = U_{\text{equilibrium}} - U_L$ . It can be seen from Figure 3f that the catalysts with  $U_L > 0$  are favorable catalysts for the  $2e^-$  ORR. The results show that the  $U_L$  values of  $\text{Ni}_1\text{@GDY}$ ,  $\text{Pd}_1\text{@GDY}$  and  $\text{Pt}_1\text{@GDY}$  are  $0.24$  V,  $0.51$  V, and  $0.55$  V, corresponding to  $\eta$  of  $0.46$  V,  $0.19$  V, and  $0.15$  V, respectively. As a result,  $\text{Pt}_1\text{@GDY}$  and  $\text{Pd}_1\text{@GDY}$  have the smallest and second smallest  $\eta$ , which are comparable to those on  $\text{Au}(100)$  and  $\text{Au}(111)$  [28] and  $\text{PtHg}_4$  electrocatalysts [29], indicating that they have good  $2e^-$  ORR activity.

In the ORR process, selectivity is a key indicator to evaluate the catalytic performance of the catalyst for  $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$  synthesis. Figure 4 shows the Gibbs free energy diagrams of the  $2e^-$  and  $4e^-$  ORRs on  $\text{Pt}_1\text{@GDY}$ . At  $U = 0$  V (black curve), the reaction steps in both the  $2e^-$  and  $4e^-$  ORR proceed spontaneously, as their  $\Delta G$  are negative. The results also show that  $\Delta G_{\text{PDS}}$  is  $0.55$  eV for the  $2e^-$  ORR and  $0.85$  eV for the  $4e^-$  ORR. Thus, for the  $2e^-$  ORR and  $4e^-$  ORR, the free energy of the PDS changes to zero when the applied potential is equal to  $0.55$  V (blue curve) and  $0.85$  V (red curve), respectively, while the other steps remain downhill in energy. The PDS steps of both the  $2e^-$  and  $4e^-$  ORR are uphill when the applied potential is equal to  $U_{\text{equilibrium}}$ . The results also show that  $\eta$  is  $0.15$  V and  $0.38$  V for the  $2e^-$  and  $4e^-$  ORR, respectively, indicating that the  $2e^-$  ORR exhibits higher selectivity over the  $4e^-$  ORR on  $\text{Pt}_1\text{@GDY}$ . In conclusion, it is predicted that  $\text{Pt}_1\text{@GDY}$  is an ideal catalyst for the catalytic synthesis of  $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$ .

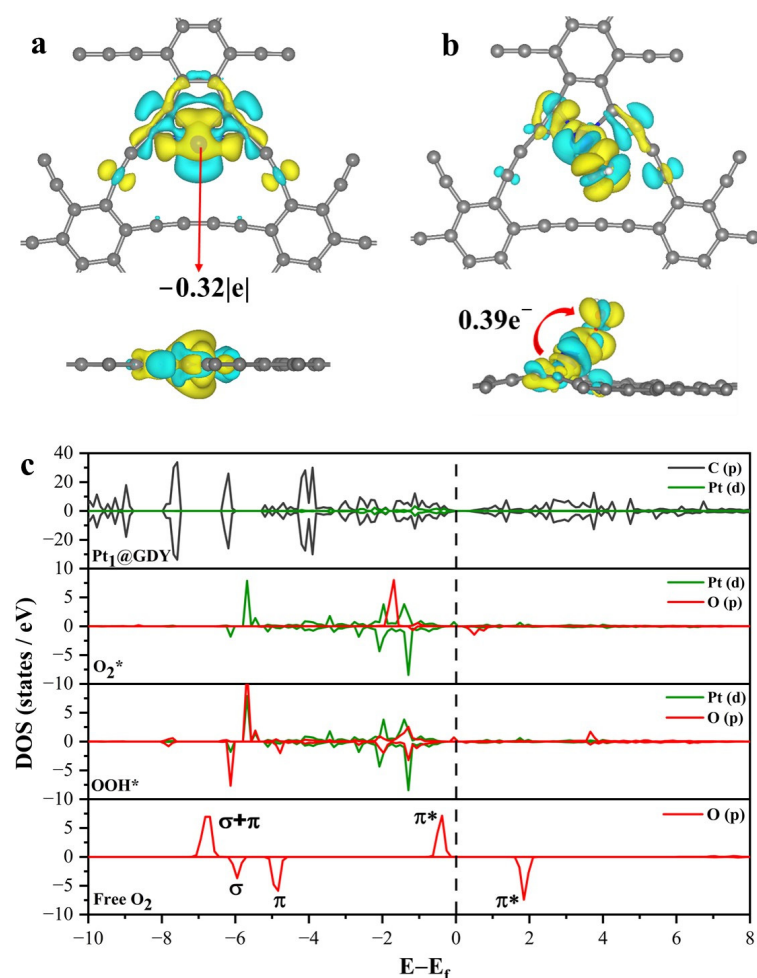


**Figure 4.** Free energy changes in the (a)  $4e^-$  ORR and (b)  $2e^-$  ORR on  $\text{Pt}_1\text{@GDY}$  with different voltages.

### 2.3. Origin of the $2e^-$ ORR Activity

Essentially, catalytic properties, such as activity, stability and selectivity, are often determined by the electronic structure of the catalyst [30]. Previously, we discussed in detail the effect of catalyst structure on the activity and selectivity of the  $2e^-$  ORR. In order to better design catalysts for the  $2e^-$  ORR, we further discussed the origin of catalytic activity using electronic structure analysis. First, we calculated the Bader charge and charge differential density (CDD). As shown in Figure 5a, the CDD results show that there is

significant electron transfer between Pt<sub>1</sub> and C atoms of Pt<sub>1</sub>@GDY. From the Bader charge analysis, we find that about 0.32 e<sup>−</sup> are transferred from Pt<sub>1</sub> to the C atom of GDY. This indicates that the interaction between Pt<sub>1</sub> and the C atoms allows Pt<sub>1</sub> to be stabilized on the GDY support. In addition, the CDD plot (Figure 5b) shows a significant charge transfer between Pt<sub>1</sub> and OOH when OOH species are adsorbed on Pt<sub>1</sub>@GDY. This leads to an elongation of the O–O bond length of OOH from 1.21 Å to 1.45 Å (Figure S4 from Supplementary Materials). Moreover, the Bader charge analysis further confirms that there is about 0.39 e<sup>−</sup> transferred from Pt<sub>1</sub> to the adsorbed OOH. This implies that the Pt single atom effectively activates the O–O bond, which facilitates the subsequent hydrogenation of OOH\* to generate the final H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> product.



**Figure 5.** Top and side views of charge differential density (CDD) plots of (a) Pt<sub>1</sub>@GDY and (b) OOH\* on Pt<sub>1</sub>@GDY. The blue and yellow areas represent positive and negative charge accumulation, respectively. The isosurface value is set to 0.002 e/Bohr<sup>3</sup>. (c) Partial density of states (PDOSs) of the free O<sub>2</sub> and O<sub>2</sub>\*/OOH\* on Pt<sub>1</sub>@GDY. The Fermi level is set to zero.

Finally, we determined the activation mechanism of the O<sub>2</sub> molecule from the perspective of molecular orbital theory. First, as shown in Figure 5c, the obvious orbital overlap between Pt<sub>1</sub> 3d and C 2p indicates a strong interaction between the anchored Pt<sub>1</sub> and the surrounding C atoms, which further demonstrates the stability of Pt<sub>1</sub>@GDY. Second, we investigated spin-polarized PDOSs to elucidate the interactions between Pt<sub>1</sub> and O atoms in O<sub>2</sub>\* and OOH\* species. It is seen from Figure 5c that the 2p antibonding orbital  $\pi^*$  and the bonding orbital  $\pi$  of the free O<sub>2</sub> are near the Fermi level, which indicates that they are the most active orbitals of O<sub>2</sub>. When the free O<sub>2</sub> is adsorbed onto Pt<sub>1</sub>@GDY, the  $\pi^*$  antibonding orbitals of O<sub>2</sub> orbitals shift to the lower energy region and hybridize with the d orbitals of

Pt<sub>1</sub>. On the other hand, the empty  $\pi^*$  of O<sub>2</sub><sup>\*</sup> is partially occupied, which indicates that the d electrons of Pt<sub>1</sub> are partially transferred to the empty  $\pi^*$  of O<sub>2</sub>, allowing O<sub>2</sub> to be activated. As shown in the PDOS diagram for OOH<sup>\*</sup>, the 3d orbital of Pt<sub>1</sub> couples simultaneously with the bonding and antibonding orbitals of 2p of O, which leads to a moderate activation of the O–O bond in OOH. Thus, the electronic structure analysis suggests that the ORR process on Pt<sub>1</sub>@GDY tends to follow the 2e<sup>−</sup> pathway.

### 3. Materials and Methods

#### Computational Details

All spin-polarized DFT calculations were performed using the Vienna Ab-initio Simulation Packages (VASP.5.4.4) [31], and the electron–ion interaction was described with the projector-augmented wave (PAW) method [32,33]. The exchange–correlation potential was treated by the Perdew–Burke–Ernzerhof (PBE) version of the generalized gradient approximation (GGA) [34]. The valence electrons were expanded in a plane-wave basis set with an energy cutoff of 450 eV. The optimized monolayer GDY has a lattice constant of 18.74 Å (Figure 1a). The 2 × 2 supercells of GDY were adopted for the subsequent calculations. A 15 Å vacuum space was adopted along the z-direction to avoid interactions between periodic slabs. K-points mesh was set to 3 × 3 × 1 for Brillouin zone sampling in structural optimization and electronic structure calculations. The DFT-D3 method with zero-damping [35] was introduced to describe van der Waals weakly dispersive interactions (vdW). All the structures were relaxed until the forces on each ion were less than 0.05 eV/Å, and the convergence criteria for the energy was set as 10<sup>−4</sup> eV.

Based on Nørskov's computational hydrogen electrode model [36,37], we calculated the Gibbs free energy change ( $\Delta G$ ) for each elementary step as follows:

$$\Delta G = \Delta E + \Delta E_{\text{zpe}} - T\Delta S + eU \quad (10)$$

where  $\Delta E$  refers to the energy difference directly calculated with DFT before and after each elementary reaction step;  $\Delta E_{\text{zpe}}$  and  $T\Delta S$  are the differences in the zero-point energies and entropies at 298.15 K, respectively; and the value of  $eU$  was determined using the applied potential ( $U$ ).

In addition, we defined a descriptor of limiting potential ( $U_L$ ) to describe the activity of the electrocatalytic ORR with the free energy change of the potential-determining step (PDS):

$$U_L = -\Delta G_{\text{PDS}}/e \quad (11)$$

where the  $\Delta G_{\text{PDS}}$  is the Gibbs free energy change of PDS.

The overpotential ( $\eta$ ) was calculated as:

$$\eta = U_{\text{equilibrium}} - U_L \quad (12)$$

where the equilibrium potentials ( $U_{\text{equilibrium}}$ ) are 1.23 V and 0.70 V for the 4e<sup>−</sup> ORR and 2e<sup>−</sup> ORR, respectively.

### 4. Conclusions

In summary: the 2e<sup>−</sup> ORR catalyzed by the GDY-supported single transition metal atom catalysts in an acidic environment was investigated using first-principles DFT calculations. The results show that Pt<sub>1</sub>@GDY has good stability and the best activity for the 2e<sup>−</sup> ORR, as it exhibits the lowest thermodynamic  $\eta$  (0.15 V) among the 23 catalysts studied. In addition, the electronic structure analysis of the interactions between O<sub>2</sub><sup>\*</sup>, OOH<sup>\*</sup> and Pt<sub>1</sub>@GDY provides an in-depth understanding of the 2e<sup>−</sup> ORR pathway to produce H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>. The high activity of Pt<sub>1</sub>@GDY is attributed to the electron transfer between the 3d orbital of Pt<sub>1</sub> and the antibonding orbital  $\pi^*$  of the 2p orbital of O in OOH<sup>\*</sup>, allowing the efficient activation of the O–O bond. This work provides theoretical insights into the design of efficient electrocatalysts for the generation of H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>.



**Supplementary Materials:** The following supporting information can be downloaded at: <https://www.mdpi.com/xxx/s1>, Figure S1: Top and side views of the (a) Zn atom, (b) Cd atom, (c) Ag atom and (d) Au atom supported on GDY. Color scheme: C: Gray; Zn: Pink; Cd: Purple; Ag: Blue; Au: Yellow; Figure S2: Free energy diagrams of  $2e^-$  and  $4e^-$  ORR on (a):  $Fe_1@GDY$ ; (b):  $Cr_1@GDY$ ; (c):  $Ru_1@GDY$ ; (d):  $Os_1@GDY$ ; Figure S3: Limiting potentials of  $4e^-$  ORR on  $TM_1@GDY$  ( $TM = Cr, Fe, Co, Ni, Cu, Ru, Pd, Os, \text{ and } Pt$ ) catalysts. The red line represents the equilibrium potential of  $4e^-$  ORR.; Figure S4: The adsorption structure of  $OOH^*$  on  $Pt_1@GDY$  and the O–O bond length; Table S1: The  $E_p$  on  $TM_1@GDY$ ; Table S2: The  $G_{OOH^*}$  on  $TM_1@GDY$ .

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