Genome analysis

GeneNoteBook, a collaborative notebook for comparative genomics

Rens Holmer 1,2, Robin van Velzen 1, Rene Geurts 1, Ton Bisseling 1, Dick de Ridder 2 and Sandra Smit 2,*

1Laboratory of Molecular Biology and 2Bioinformatics Group, Wageningen University, 6708PB Wageningen, The Netherlands

*To whom correspondence should be addressed.

Abstract

Summary: Analysis and comparison of genomic and transcriptomic datasets have become standard procedures in biological research. However, for non-model organisms no efficient tools exist to visually work with multiple genomes and their metadata, and to annotate such data in a collaborative way. Here we present GeneNoteBook: a web based collaborative notebook for comparative genomics. GeneNoteBook allows experimental and computational researchers to query, browse, visualize and curate bioinformatic analysis results for multiple genomes. GeneNoteBook is particularly suitable for the analysis of non-model organisms, as it allows for comparing newly sequenced genomes to those of model organisms.

Availability and implementation: GeneNoteBook is implemented as a node.js web application and depends on MongoDB and NCBI BLAST. Source code is available at https://github.com/genenotebook/genenotebook. Additionally, GeneNoteBook can be installed through Bioconda and as a Docker image. Full installation instructions and online documentation are available at https://genezinebook.github.io.

Contact: sandra.smit@wur.nl

Supplementary information: Supplementary data are available at Bioinformatics online.

1 Introduction

Browsing, querying and comparing large genomic and transcriptomic datasets are indispensable aspects of genomic research. In recent years the decrease in cost of sequencing DNA or RNA has unlocked the possibility to generate eukaryotic genome assemblies with limited effort. As a result, genome analysis has become a routine exercise for research groups working on non-model organisms. Annotated genome sequences with metadata are used to identify candidate genes that can be targeted in wet lab experiments. An example, integrating information on ortholog groups, protein domains and gene expression levels can provide valuable information on a gene’s hypothetical function. For such integration, it is crucial to be able to browse, query and compare genomic data, and curate automated predictions. This should ideally be a collaborative effort between experimental and computational researchers, and should be an efficient process that requires minimal configuration.

Currently, no efficient tool exists to quickly query, browse and visualize genomic data. Whereas genome browsers such as JBrowse (Buels et al., 2016; Skinner et al., 2009) provide powerful visualizations, they are limited to positional queries and visualizations. As an extension to JBrowse, Apollo allows for the curation of gene structure models (Lee et al., 2013). However, both JBrowse and Apollo are limited to single genomes. Additionally, genome browsers are not very suitable for the integration of various data types, such as gene expression levels and ortholog groups. Data warehouse systems, such as InterMine (Smith et al., 2012), provide more powerful query options but are relatively difficult to configure and generally do not come with data visualization options. Previously, data warehouse systems like InterMine and genome browsers like JBrowse have been combined into custom one-off data portals for model organisms, such as Araport for Arabidopsis thaliana.
GeneNoteBook: a collaborative web-based notebook for comparative genomics

To enable quick and intuitive browsing and querying of genomic data for newly sequenced organisms we have developed GeneNoteBook: a collaborative web-based notebook for comparative genomics. Our application is designed for comparative analysis of genomic data and collaborative annotation of predicted genes with expert knowledge, by integrating genome annotations, gene expression data and gene evolutionary relationships.

2 Features

GeneNoteBook provides users with two views on their genomic data: a spreadsheet-like gene table with customizable fields and queries to browse and visualize information for multiple genes from multiple genomes, and a gene page with all available information for any particular gene.

The gene table is designed such that users can intuitively query genes and visualize attributes of interest for query results. For example, users can quickly inspect the gene models of genes in an ortholog group (Fig. 1) and for the same genes inspect predicted protein domains or expression levels (Supplementary Fig. S1).

The gene page includes general information like chromosomal location, DNA sequence strand and any additional attributes like gene names or Gene Ontology terms (Supplementary Fig. S2). Through the user interface existing attributes can be curated, and new attributes can be added. This allows research groups to add names and update notes for their genes of interest in a collaborative fashion. Data provenance is provided by a version history that keeps track of all manual modifications, allowing them to be reversed if needed. In addition, the gene page offers visualizations of gene structure models, protein domains, ortholog group phylogenetic trees and gene expression levels.

3 Conclusion

GeneNoteBook is specifically geared toward comparative genomics, since it is designed to store multiple genomes. We have successfully used GeneNoteBook for the comparison of several plants from the genera *Parasponia* and *Trema* to study the evolution of rhizobium symbiosis (van Velzen et al., 2018). To demonstrate the potential of GeneNoteBook, a public instance hosting various plant genomes is available through the online documentation. These projects have demonstrated that GeneNoteBook is useful for both experimental biologists and bioinformaticians. This integrative approach facilitates studies of newly sequenced organisms compared with related organisms or well-annotated model organisms. Whereas our examples include plants, GeneNoteBook permits genomic data from any organism, even over large evolutionary distances. Additionally, GeneNoteBook offers several options for a smooth installation and configuration, such as a Bioconda (Grünning et al., 2018) distribution and a Docker image. As such, GeneNoteBook has the potential to be used in a wide range of genome projects.

Acknowledgements

We thank Wouter Kohlen, Eef Jonkheer and Janani Durairaj for feedback on the user interface and for testing installation procedures.

Funding

This work was supported by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research [NWO-VICI 865.13.001 to R.G.] and the European Research Council [ERC-2011-AdG-294790 to T.B.].

Conflict of Interest: none declared.

References

Altschul, S.F. et al. (1990) Basic local alignment search tool. *J. Mol. Biol.*, 215, 403–410.

Buehs, R. et al. (2016) JBrowse: a dynamic web platform for genome visualization and analysis. *Genome Biol.*, 17, 66.

Gonzales, M.D. et al. (2005) The Legume Information System (LIS): an integrated information resource for comparative legume biology. *Nucleic Acids Res.*, 33, D660–D665.

Grüning, B. et al. (2018) Bioconda: sustainable and comprehensive software distribution for the life sciences. *Nat. Methods*, 15, 475–476.

Krishnakumar, V. et al. (2015) AraCPT: the arabidopsis information portal. *Nucleic Acids Res.*, 43, D1003–D1009.
Lee, E. et al. (2013) Web Apollo: a web-based genomic annotation editing platform. *Genome Biol.*, 14, R93.

Skinner, M.E. et al. (2009) JBrowse: a next-generation genome browser. *Genome Res.*, 19, 1630–1638.

Smith, R.N. et al. (2012) InterMine: a flexible data warehouse system for the integration and analysis of heterogeneous biological data. *Bioinformatics*, 28, 3163–3165.

Stein, L. et al. (2001) WormBase: network access to the genome and biology of *Caenorhabditis elegans*. *Nucleic Acids Res.*, 29, 82–86.

van Velzen, R. et al. (2018) Comparative genomics of the nonlegume *Parasponia* reveals insights into evolution of nitrogen-fixing rhizobium symbioses. *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. USA*, 115, E4700–E4709.