Sequence analysis

Affinity Density: a novel genomic approach to the identification of transcription factor regulatory targets

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ABSTRACT

A new method was developed for identifying novel transcription factor regulatory targets based on calculating Local Affinity Density. Techniques from the signal-processing field were used, in particular the Hann digital filter, to calculate the relative binding affinity of different regions based on previously published in vivo binding data. To illustrate this approach, the complete genomes of Drosophila melanogaster and D. pseudoobscura were analyzed for binding sites of the homeodomain protein Tinman, an essential heart development gene in both Drosophila and Mouse. The significant binding regions were identified relative to genomic background and assigned to putative target genes. Valid candidates common to both species of Drosophila were selected as a test of conservation.

RESULTS: The new method was more sensitive than cluster searches for conserved binding motifs with respect to positive identification of known Tinman targets. Our Local Affinity Density method also identified a significantly greater proportion of Tinman-coexpressed genes than equivalent, optimized cluster searching. In addition, this new method predicted a significantly greater number of genes with previously published RNAi phenotypes in the heart.

Availability: Algorithms were implemented in Python, LISP, R and maxima, using MySQL to access locally mirrored sequence data from Ensembl (D.melanogaster release 4.3) and flybase (D.pseudoobscura). All code is licensed under GPL and freely available at http://www.ohsu.edu/cellbio/dev_biol_prog/affinitydensity.

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1 INTRODUCTION

In coming years much effort will be expended to understand the information encoded in the non-protein coding regions of DNA. The physical recruitment of cellular factors to determine what genes are transcribed into RNA is one of the most important functions of these regions. These cellular factors include the class of proteins called transcription factors. Most transcription factors bind to short, degenerate oligonucleotide sequences of 4-5 bp in length and activate transcription directly or in conjunction with larger protein complexes. To date, efforts to understand how genomic DNA guides this process have focused on de novo motif discovery and known motif mapping (Ji and Wong, 2006). Our concern is with the latter, in which previously characterized binding site motifs are used to predict the genomic targets of a transcription factor. Successful early attempts (Berman et al., 2002; Stathopoulos et al., 2002) at experimentally verified regulatory target predictions have given rise to a modular view of transcriptional regulation. Under this paradigm, islands of regulatory sequences contain clusters of conserved binding sites for two or more transcription factors required for a given process. These sequences, known as cis-regulatory modules (CRMs), are thought to direct the timely expression of downstream target genes as part of a regulatory code. This conceptual advance paved the way for searches for novel transcription factor targets of Ftz-F1 (Bowler et al., 2006) and Tinman (Hal fon et al., 2002).

In spite of these well-documented attempts at reading regulatory DNA, an in depth analysis of the distribution of genomic binding sites and its implications is lacking. The rules governing CRM architecture have not been discoverable by current pattern recognition approaches. As a proxy, functionality is typically inferred from the direct conservation of sequence motifs in cross-species alignments. This approach assumes that unconserved sites play little or no role in transcriptional regulation. We decided to take a fresh look at the distribution of binding sites across an entire genome. Low-affinity sites may serve, for example, to increase the local concentration of factors so that they are more available for recruitment by binding partners, or to increase transcription initiation rates by mass action when conditions allow. In order to achieve this, we abandoned the typical search for short-range clusters in favor of a density map representing the likely occupancy of transcription factors along the sequence. Our approach bears some resemblance to prior analyses (Fridh et al., 2002; Ward and Bussemaker, 2008).

One of the limitations of the most common approach (searching for binding site clusters), is that varying parameters—window size, number of sites, cutoff positional weight matrix score—often results in widely divergent predictions. The quality of these predictions forms the basis for optimization. The cycle of analysis, evaluation and resetting of parameters leads to an arbitrary fitting of parameters to match prior expectation. The process also produces multiple valid prediction sets, whose individual meanings can be difficult to interpret. For example, a smaller window results in higher sensitivity to dense clusters of sites. If a larger cluster window is chosen, specificity decreases but the search is more sensitive to targets whose

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binding sites are distributed more sparsely. Varying parameters can be biologically revealing, as demonstrated by the example of the dorso-ventral patterning transcription factor dorsal, where lower numbers of binding sites were found to be correlated with targets of dorsal repression in the lateral domains of the embryonic blastoderm (Stathopoulos and Levine, 2004; Stathopoulos et al., 2002). However, when only one or two binding sites are available to map, competing optimizations are an impediment to discovery.

In light of the difficulty of separating signal from noise using cluster search methods, a new approach is needed that takes into account both the short-range spacing and regional distribution of sites. We developed a method that addresses these requirements using digital signal processing techniques. We describe here the application of the Hann filter to this problem using the previously characterized binding site for Tinman to illustrate our approach.

2 APPROACH

We designed a search algorithm that assigns a statistic to each region truncated to 2.0 for spacers sized at the strongest dissociation constant measured at 6 bp (52 nM). We interpolated Dimer strength varied slightly with the number of intervening nucleotides. Frasch (2005) reported an 8-fold difference in binding affinity between the incorporated data from electrophoretic mobility shift assays. Zaffran and mammalian ortholog of Tinman, for the sequence ‘TCAAGTG’ than for an the strongest Tinman-monomer/binding-site interaction. Watada homeodomain proteins. We normalized the sequence score by dividing by a positional weight matrix to characterize the Tinman binding site in order to dissociation constant for each known binding site. We chose this method over treating binding affinity as a conserved property of chromatin.

3 METHODS

3.1 Scoring

We scored each genomic locus with a value proportional to the measured dissociation constant for each known binding site. We chose this method over a positional weight matrix to characterize the Tinman binding site in order to leverage the wealth of biochemical data available for Tinman and other NK homodomain proteins. We normalized the sequence score by dividing by the strongest Tinman-monomer/binding-site interaction. Watada et al. (2000) reported a 5-fold higher affinity of the NK homodomain protein Nkd2.2, a mammalian ortholog of Tinman, for the sequence ‘TCAAGTG’ than for an alternative binding site, ‘TTAAGTG’. Thus, we assigned a relative affinity of 1.0 to the sequence ‘TCAAGTG’. We therefore assigned a relative affinity of 0.2 to the sequence ‘TTAAGTG’.

In order to account for cooperativity that has been reported for Tinman homodimers (Kasahara et al., 2001; Zaffran and Frasch, 2005), we incorporated data from electrophoretic mobility shift assays. Zaffran and Frasch (2005) reported an 8-fold difference in binding affinity between the monomer and dimer binding sites (Kd 430 nM versus 52 nM, respectively). A dimer binding site consists of two binding sites in opposite orientation. Dimer strength varied slightly with the number of intervening nucleotides (Zaffran and Frasch, 2005), with the strongest dissociation constant measured at 6 bp (52 nM). We interpolated the intermediate values from 0 bp to 15 bp between binding sites and gave a maximum weight of 8.27 to dimer 0 bp apart. The dimer function was truncated to 2.0 for spacers sized at ≈3 bp or >12 bp, equivalent to no cooperativity.

3.2 Signal processing

We calculated the intensity of binding at each nucleotide of the genome based on a combination of binding affinity data and pattern matching of nucleotide sequences. First, the genome was scanned by a scoring function, which assigned a score φ(S) to each base of the chromosome. In our study, this score was based on binding affinity information for fixed sequences starting at the given base pair. Then, these data were reduced to a regional density over a region of size 2N by filtering the sequence of scores with a convolution filter, a weighted average of the scores at each base pair. Each 2N base pair window overlapped the adjacent windows on either side by N bases.

The particular weighting function (or kernel) that we chose is known as the Hann window, a cosine curve (Hamming, 1998; see Equation (1)). The advantage of this type of convolution kernel is that it is a function not only of the number of binding sites within the window, but also how close together the sites are within the window and where they occur. The resulting statistics makes a reasonable tradeoff between measuring density of affinity and measuring the location where that density occurs. Thus, the affinity density ρi, for the n-th genomic segment of length Ni, is given by

\[ ρ_i = \frac{1}{K} \sum_{n=0}^{N_i} \left( \cos \left( \frac{\pi n}{N_i} \right) + 1 \right) \times φ(S_i) \] (1)

where K is a resolution factor in number of bases, meaning that the information in chromosomes is reduced by a factor of 1/N. The normalization constant K is simply the sum of the weights, which ensures that the statistic does not scale with different window sizes (Ni):

\[ K = \sum_{n=0}^{N_i} \left( \cos \left( \frac{\pi n}{N_i} \right) + 1 \right) \] (2)

For comparison and interpretability purposes the output was multiplied by 1000 to get a value per kilo base.

Unless otherwise indicated, N = 212 for this study, dividing the average Drosophila gene (~10kb) into two or three overlapping regions. Although we used a particular scoring function defined by a set of fixed patterns and their associated binding affinities, φ represents any generic scoring function that assigns a value to the nucleotide sequence Si beginning at position i of the n-th segment for which density ρ is being calculated. Any suitable function, such as a positional weight matrix could be substituted for φ.

3.3 Significance predictions

In order to filter out the expected background noise in the binding site density data, we multiplied each density by a sigmoidal function of the density [see Equation (3)]. Since the weighted density is a continuous function of position and number of sites, we used this continuous version of a threshold to reduce irrelevant background rather than a hard cutoff. The sigmoid can be thought of as a logistic regression curve with two important parameters, one for the location of the 50% transition point, and one for the transition rate. We set the 50% point of the sigmoid at a reference density ρref selected to be approximately three times the expected score, and the transition rate so that the SD of the implied density was equal to the expected score for one binding site in the region. The result is that high-scoring regions are reduced by a negligible amount, whereas regions of lower than average density are reduced to nearly zero all in a continuous manner (e.g., φref = 0.541, and i = 0.110 for D.melanogaster using the Tinman motif).

\[ γ = \frac{1}{1 + e^{-x/(\sigma \cdot ρ)}} \] (3)

This sigmoid was changed for each genome and binding site motif by calculating appropriate expected density and transition rate. Due to the shape, high scoring regions are not sensitive to the parameters of the sigmoid, but the sigmoid parameters do affect how much of the low scoring regions contribute to the score for each gene.

A plot of the sigmoidally filtered Affinity Density data reveals the variation in binding affinity at the level of the whole genome (data not shown). At this
view of a region of interest containing and other mesodermally expressed genes, as might be expected. A detailed resolution, peaks are clearly visible overlapping many known Tinman targets (Table 2).

D. pseudoobscura data (‘cross’). Some of the displayed targets are not conserved between D. melanogaster and D. pseudoobscura and are therefore not among our predictions (Table 2).

The next step is to assign a figure-of-merit to each gene by combining the binding site affinity densities in the regions around the location of the gene in the genome. Our figure of merit was the sum of the sigmoidally filtered binding site affinity density scores for convolution windows that overlap the flybase annotated gene or the region 1 kb to either side of the annotation. We explored various buffer sizes for the regions around the gene, and settled on 1 kb. We use this equally weighted centered window around the gene to reflect the lack of prior information about where the regulatory regions are located relative to genes. If better information were available about the relative locations of regulatory regions across a sample of genes, an unequally weighted sum that reflected these relative probabilities could be used. However, since certain promotor sequences have been found far downstream or upstream of their target genes, we were unwilling to use a more narrow, or informed prior distribution at this time.

3.4 Conserved prediction sets

Most published accounts of genomic binding site searches to date have leveraged sequence conservation with great success. Therefore, we chose to incorporate a test of conservation between two Drosophilid species as a further means of filtering our predictions.

We accomplished this by comparing two independently derived lists of target predictions from parallel searches in two related genomes, D. melanogaster and D. pseudoobscura. We examined various scoring mechanisms that combine two independently derived scores such as adding the scores, multiplying the scores and using the first principle component of the two scores. We settled on making a list of genes for each organism with a cutoff score of >0.7 and taking the intersection of the two lists. This procedure captured the bulk of known Tinman targets (Fig. 2). This ad hoc method was useful for our purposes, but should be replaced with a method based on a systematic approach that optimizes the tradeoff between longer and shorter, or informed prior distribution at this time.

4 RESULTS

4.1 Affinity density measurement increases sensitivity to known Tinman targets

We found that affinity density measured by application of the Hann filter to binding site data provided greater sensitivity than searches for clusters of conserved motifs such as those produced in Target Explorer (Sosinsky et al., 2003) or GenomeSurveyor (Noyes et al., 2008) as a predictor of known Tinman regulatory targets (Fig. 1). One method of measuring the sensitivity of target prediction algorithms is to compare expression patterns between the predicted target list and the transcription factor whose binding site motif was used to derive it.

The Berkeley Drosophila Genome Project (BDGP; http://www.fruitfly.org/) maintains a database of in situ patterns as gene names annotated with a controlled vocabulary of expression terms, plus the images used to assign terms. If our prediction list were valid, we would expect to find associated with these genes the same
expression terms associated with tinman to a greater degree than would be expected for any random selection of genes of equivalent size from the database. Therefore, we compared the expression terms associated with tinman and our prediction set. We observed a greater fraction of genes with tinman-associated expression terms than would be expected in an equivalent-sized random selection of genes from the fly genome (Table 1). Out of top 100 candidates, 33 had associated expression terms in BDGP, and of these 18 had terms equivalent to a subset of those assigned to the Tinman expression pattern. This constituted an enrichment of 54.5% over a background of 33.8% and was statistically significant using the binomial distribution ($P = 0.0071$, Table 1).

Furthermore, we compared our binding affinity-derived target predictions with the results of our optimized conserved-motif cluster searches using TargetExplorer (Sosinsky et al., 2003) and GenomeSurveyor (Noyes et al., 2008). We optimized our cluster searches by varying window size and score-cutoff parameters until we obtained a list with the greatest number of expected Tinman targets with equivalent coexpression terms in the BDGP expression database.

We found greater enrichment of tinman coexpression in the affinity density-derived prediction list than in the conserved-motif cluster list derived from TargetExplorer output and GenomeSurveyor, which uses a different algorithm that is also based on locating clusters of statistically significant conserved binding sites, using a hidden Markov model (Sinha et al., 2003) (Table 1).

Next we determined the sensitivity to known Tinman targets. We identified in the literature all published accounts where the authors present evidence for direct binding of Tinman to the promoter or altered transcript or protein levels of the target gene (under conditions of perturbed or misexpressed Tinman). We then compared how well these genes were predicted by different algorithms.

To compare the approaches, we compared the relative rankings assigned to the predictions by each algorithm. For Affinity Density, genes were ranked by decreasing score, which is a function of the predicted local affinity for the transcription factor around the target gene. For conserved motif-cluster searches, the score reflects the cumulative scores of the positional-weight matrix within a fixed window relative to the gene of interest. Thus, ranking by score also reflects the relative strength of the prediction from cluster-search algorithms, because it is an expression of the likelihood of finding transcription factors associated with that gene.

We therefore ranked the target lists derived by different methods by decreasing score. We evaluated the ranked lists according to two criteria: sensitivity to detect targets that were previously identified by conventional means and relative strength of predictions as determined by rank. Out of a total of 12 published Tinman target genes, affinity density identified 7, including jh1, binous and jelly belly. The conserved motif searches from TargetExplorer (Sosinsky et al., 2003) produced only four (Table 2), only one of which (eve) was not predicted as a target by the affinity algorithm. The GenomeSurveyor (Noyes et al., 2008) search likewise produced only one of the known targets. Together these observations suggest that the local affinity density measurement is more sensitive. In addition, five of the affinity density predictions were ranked higher than 100, compared with only two of the conserved motif cluster predictions that were ranked higher than 200, suggesting higher specificity in the affinity density algorithm.

### 4.2 Enrichment of target genes required for heart development

The gene tinman is one of the earliest factors required for formation of the visceral and heart mesoderm primordia (Arpaci and Frasch, 1993; Bodmer, 1993). Downstream targets of Tinman would thus be expected to affect processes required for the patterning and morphogenesis of the heart.

In a screen for cardiogenic genes using an RNAi approach, Kim et al. (2004) injected embryos with double-stranded RNA representing a large proportion of individual genes in the *Drosophila* genome. RNAi results in the partial or complete knock-down of expression of the gene whose sequence or partial sequence is contained in the double-stranded RNA. And therefore, embryos that have been treated in this manner behave as functional hypomorphs for the gene corresponding to the injected sequence (Misquitta and Paterson, 1999). Kim et al. (2004) assayed for perturbed heart development by scoring injected embryos as wild-type or mutant with respect to the expression of the d-Mef2-lacZ transgene.

To assess our target list for enrichment of genes functionally required for heart development, we cross-referenced our predictions with these data, which are available from the Fly Embryo RNAi project (http://flyembryo.ahlbi.nih.gov/). In this dataset, 126 out of 5730 genes had a phenotype visible in the embryonic heart. In our study, out of 246 predicted target genes from the affinity density algorithm, 105 were also screened in the RNAi mutation project (Kim et al., 2004). Seven of these candidates were defective in heart development (Table 3), a significant increase over background ($P=0.0064$, binomial distance). In contrast, neither TargetExplorer (Sosinsky et al., 2003) nor GenomeSurveyor (Noyes et al., 2008)
Table 3. Predicted Tinman targets with heart phenotypes

| RNAi target | Annotation | Score | Rank |
|-------------|------------|-------|------|
| zh1         | CG1322     | 3.86  | 23   |
| pannier     | CG9378     | 3.49  | 36   |
| branchless  | CG4608     | 3.65  | 52   |
| Traf2       | CG10961    | 2.94  | 65   |
| scribbled   | CG5462     | 2.73  | 76   |
| polychaetoid| CG31349    | 2.75  | 79   |
| Pdp1        | CG17888    | 2.51  | 93   |

Out of 246, 105 predicted targets were also screened in the RNAi mutation project (Kim et al., 2004). Seven were defective in heart development (P < 0.01).

predicted a significant number of RNAi phenotypes. Out of 112 candidates from the TargetExplorer list, 1 had a phenotype (P = 0.2088). Out of 57 candidates that were tested from the GenomeSurveyor predictions, 2 had a phenotype in the RNAi screen (P = 0.2271). This suggests that our algorithm efficiently identified putative heart development genes with the Tinman binding motif, consistent with Tinman’s requirement in heart development, whereas prediction with clustering algorithms did not.

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 Advantages of affinity density measurement over cluster searches.

Many methods exist for analysis of DNA sequence motifs and their distribution. The practice of finding regulatory targets near regions with statistically overrepresented transcription factor binding sites has been referred to as ‘known motif mapping’ (Ji and Wong, 2006). Here, we demonstrated that measurement of regional affinity density offers several advantages over traditional cluster searches. In particular, the model for transcription factor activity that affinity density addresses is that local recruitment of proteins to the chromosome binding sites affects the rate of transcription from nearby loci. Therefore, the greater the binding affinity, the greater the likelihood of transcription when cellular conditions allow.

In order to address this model of regional recruitment, we needed to score each point on the chromosome in a way that takes into account the local density of binding sites, as well as their relative strength of binding. The strength of binding of a site is related to its sequence, whereas the density of sites is related simultaneously to the number of sites, and how close together those sites are. The convolution filter we employed gives a regional score in such a way that the score is a function of the binding affinity of individual sites, the aggregate number of sites and the spacing of sites within the window. Because of the overlapping nature of the windows, every site falls within the center region of one window and hence contributes most strongly to that window.

Second, our method does not rely on sequence alignment algorithms for assessment of conservation and functional specificity. We observed the population of sites and their distribution relative to each gene as a predictor of a regulatory relationship, and compared this property between species (Fig. 2). By comparing the predictions directly instead of aligning individual binding sites and subsequently scoring clusters in which those sites were found, we introduced different assumptions about the functional relevance of unconserved sites. We speculate that the success of our technique relies at least partly on these assumptions. If this view is correct, the benefits of interspecies comparisons of affinity density outweigh the obvious shortcomings from excluding alignments.

In contrast, an equivalent search method that chooses clusters of sites using default parameters leads to an iterative and time-consuming process of optimization. Because these windows are uniformly weighted, the scores are very sensitive to small changes in the window width, since even a single base change in width can increase the total score by the amount associated with one binding site. If we are looking for binding sites where the expected number of sites in a region of interest is small (perhaps 2 or 3) then a single extra score at the edge of our window can change the total score by 33–50%. This is the essence of the problem of aliasing (an artifact that arises in digital signal processing). This problem can only be addressed by using a convolution kernel designed to reduce the effect of aliasing, such as the one we have used here.

The results from comparison of tinman coexpressed genes (Table 1) suggest that Affinity Density predicted a greater proportion of coexpressed genes than TargetExplorer (Sosinsky et al., 2003) and GenomeSurveyor (Noyes et al., 2008) in an equivalent-sized list of predictions. It is difficult to ascertain the performance of TargetExplorer from this test because there were too limited data available (six genes with in situ expression patterns). GenomeSurveyor performed comparably with Affinity Density by this measure, however, although the result was not statistically significant. GenomeSurveyor selects the two nearest genes to each hit region and therefore likely benefits from coregulation. This strikes us as a very reasonable assumption to make when assigning significant regions to target genes. Although our method assigns hit regions to multiple target genes, it relies upon the definition of gene region in the annotations. Future modifications could be made to include additional information about regulatory regions as it becomes available. For example, there is a well-characterized Tinman-enhancer region about 7 kb downstream of the eve locus which effects the transcription of the even-skipped gene (Knirr and Frasch, 2001). This would explain why Affinity Density failed to predict eve as a Tinman target in our hands (Table 2).

In addition to missing certain targets due to overly stringent relative location requirements, it is also known that large genes have a bias towards being falsely predicted simply due to their greater spatial extent and therefore greater chance of being near an unrelated regulatory region (Taber and Ovcharenko, 2009). This is a factor we observed during our analysis, and our initial attempt to subtract the trend reduced sensitivity. Part of the reason for adopting the sigmoid filter is to eliminate the effect of many small signals adding up over a large region to something that compares to a strong signal over a short region.

Even without these considerations, our findings demonstrated a marked improvement of local affinity density over cluster searching as a module detection algorithm. Our method resulted in a significant increase in the representation of known targets from the literature. In addition, we predicted a significant number of genes for which RNAs yields a relevant phenotype in embryos. In contrast, neither TargetExplorer (Sosinsky et al., 2003) nor GenomeSurveyor (Noyes et al., 2008) predicted a significant number of RNAi genes. These data give us increased confidence that our prediction set includes a large number of novel true targets of Tinman (Table 4). Many of these genes are coexpressed with Tinman or in tissues derived from Tinman-expressing precursors.
Table 4. Tinman regulatory target predictions

| I   | II   | III   | IV   |
|-----|------|-------|------|
| Isa  | CG1708 | CG14250 | scitb |
| tin  | CG12772 | ba  | CG1647 |
| mX  | msi  | LgR2 | CG1647 |
| Bag  | fz   | CG7196 | pyd  |
| Gbeta5 | eug  | l(3)482F2 | CDS42 |
| CG1267 | klar | CG30268 | hwt |
| pk  | CG32148 | CG30387 | CG6296 |
| hhn | nae2 | otf413 | CG6295 |
| Rgl1 | CG130301 | ptc  | CG6295 |
| CG18262a | CG10300 | Btk29A | CG6271 |
| sm  | pm  | knf1 | UGP  |
| rol  | Sos2| CG13862 | CG2040 |
| cd  | msh2 | CG5391 | fkd  |
| CG33100 | cnc  | CG14559 | nut  |
| Lnp1 | Satt165 | Fta2 | CG5599 |
| beat-Il1 | aPKC | dve  | faf  |
| dlp1 | Ser64B | jdb  | CG475 |
| eya  | hepl | pros | Pdp1 |
| CG1086 | ferd  | robo3 | gr77a |
| Autos-an | Fas2  | CG18769 | CG7918 |
| CG15336 | D031 | beat-VI | Ero1L |
| CG10950 | CG3502a | Md50 | wU1 |
| rth | Doc100 | CG10882 | CG1221 |
| baz | Argk  | unc-5 | Ggamma30A |
| Sema-1a | Cheln93a | lpf  | CheA7a |

The top 100 predicted targets from Affinity Density algorithm. Superscripts indicate expression data from all available flybase sources; 7 for gut (proventriculus primordium), 6 for mesoderm or somatic muscle, 5 for visceral mesoderm, 4 for heart (dorsal vessel), 3 for visceral mesoderm or somatic muscle, 2 for foregut/clypeolabrum primordium, 1 for heart (dorsal vessel). Known targets (Table 2) are highlighted in boldface.

Ultimately, the goal is to apply this approach to the targets of other transcription factors or groups of factors. As a first-order attempt to determine whether this method is likely to be generally applicable, we conducted a cursory survey with simple regular expressions to identify enhancers, we experimented with different window sizes to represent various other transcription factors with well-characterized binding sites, and without any microbial filtering. Out of nine transcription factors, we were able to enrich coexpressed genes as in Table 1 for five factors including Kruppel, gooseberry, paired, snail and Ultrabithorax, with the remaining four factors, serpent, twin-of-eyes, twist and HLFH5, showing enrichment but not statistical significance. This suggests that the method is broadly applicable even with a very crude motif-recognition algorithm and no background filter. Ward and Bussemaker (2008) successfully used a similar affinity-based approach, and compared their affinity score across yeast genomes. Our method differs in that we measure affinity across entire gene regions instead of narrowly defined promoter sequences, and take advantage of an anti-aliasing kernel procedure to reduce artifacts. Together these results support the use of affinity-density based calculations for the identification of regulatory targets.

5.2 Disadvantages of motif mapping in general

All motif-mapping studies face several challenges that are not addressed by our method. First, among these is that they treat a 3D object, the genome of interest, as 2D. Linear distances in DNA sequence do not accurately represent spatial distances between sites on transcriptionally active DNA. Another limitation is lack of information about transcription factor/DNA interactions for many transcription factors. Also, many transcription factors—especially those with short, frequently occurring binding sites—are not by themselves sufficient to predict gene expression. In such cases, a search for enrichment of binding sites will not yield a specific list of predictions. The comparison of techniques presented in this study were facilitated by the high information content of the Tinman binding site. Tinman motifs occur relatively infrequently (~1 motif per kilobase in the fly genome), ideal for separation of signal from noise.

In addition, many transcription factor binding sites are shared among families of transcription factors, complicating analysis. For example, our choice of Tinman potentially overlaps homeodomain proteins that share the core NK binding motif. Three of the most important NK homeodomain proteins in development, Tinman, Bagpipe and Vnd, are known to bind the consensus sequence ‘TCAAGTG’ (Gehring, 1987; Zaffran and Frasch, 2005) with high affinity. Since Bagpipe acts in concert with Tinman to induce visceral mesoderm (Arpiazi and Frasch, 1993), we assume that its targets are a subset of Tinman’s. However, Vnd is required for cell-fate specification in the developing CNS (Skeath et al., 1994; White et al., 1983). We anticipate that any prediction set exemplified by the one produced in this study necessarily includes targets of other transcription factors in addition to false positives. Indeed, our predictions for Tinman include a number of genes known to be involved in the nervous system development such as Semaphorin-1a (Yu et al., 1998) and robo3 (Simpson et al., 2000), consistent with the expression of Vnd in the central nervous system. To complicate matters further, we cannot rule out overlap of Tinman and Vnd target sets. For example, the NK homeodomain gene ladybird early is involved in both cardiac development (Jagla et al., 1997, 2002; Zikova et al., 2003) and neuronal specification (De Graeve et al., 2004), making it a potential candidate target of either Tinman or Vnd. An additional complication is that some homeobox genes act as repressors. It is almost surprising, given these caveats, that there is any specificity to these computational predictions at all.

Studies of well-characterized pathways in which the authors analyzed several transcription factors simultaneously (Berman et al., 2003; Stathopoulos et al., 2002) have been able to profitably sidestep around these issues. More recently (Segal et al., 2008) predicted the spatial distribution of segmentation genes from the distribution of transcription factors along the anterior-posterior axis of the Drosophila embryo by calculating the free energy of transcription factor binding in enhancer regions. This ‘thermodynamic’ model for expression of gene regulation is conceptually related to our approach, but the emphasis on spatial prediction and the analysis of promoter regions of preselected genes make it difficult to compare. To identify enhancers, we experimented with different window sizes and relative positioning. We tried scoring only the 5' or 3' regions of genes, excluding coding regions, widening the gene region or using fixed windows at the center of the gene. None of these alterations in protocol enriched for known targets, in fact in some cases they resulted in loss of specificity (data not shown), suggesting that functional enhancer sequences are found anywhere within a gene, and the probability of binding sites affecting gene expression decreases with distance from the coding region.

In our study, we used binding-affinity weighted pattern matching, however the signal processing approach used here may theoretically
be used in combination with any of the available motif-detection scoring algorithms, represented as \( \phi \) in Equation (1). If we were to investigate two or more transcription factor binding motifs using this approach, it would be necessary to know more about the relative binding affinities of each, or to assume equal affinity, for better or worse.

5.3 Implications for sequence analysis

For any motif-scanning exercise it is necessary to determine which motifs are likely to be biologically functional. To gauge this property researchers have focused on direct nucleotide conservation because it is one of the most well-researched fields in bioinformatics (Kumar and Filipski, 2007). However, intergenic sequences tend to diverge faster than transcript-encoding sequences, so the study of direct conservation of motifs in non-coding DNA is limited to comparisons among closely related species. Still, since some binding sites are always conserved in closely related species, it makes sense that preselection of conserved sites increases specificity. We submit that regional enrichment of binding sites is a better predictor of regulatory targeting than clusters of individually conserved sites. When such conservation is observable, it is likely the result of strong selection pressures from which the majority of functioning binding sites are exempted.

A test for conservation of aligned nucleotide sequence motifs acts as a filter to remove all other functional binding sites. But factors may bind any reasonably high-affinity site regardless of its conservation between any arbitrary two species. Bowler et al. (2006) described pervasive low-level, non-specific transcription from low affinity sites of the transcription factor Ftz-F1, although the biological significance of this activity remains unclear. Perhaps more significantly, Berman et al. (2004) proposed the existence of ‘preserved’ binding sites, close enough in one genome to the analogous position in a sister genome to substitute functionally, but not close enough in a DNA sequence alignment to be considered conserved. Such sites are critical in distinguishing true cis-regulatory modules from false positive ones (Berman et al., 2004). These observations led us to consider binding affinity as a thermodynamic and spatial property of the chromosome and to try to measure it using signal processing, in a manner similar to the one that inspired (Segal et al., 2008).

By assigning a statistic to binding affinity and selecting shared predictions between \( D. melanogaster \) and \( D. pseudoscelus \), we treated this feature as a potentially conserved structural character of chromatin. If this view is correct it implies that using binding site affinity to approximate the target set of a transcription factor might aid in revealing the evolutionary relationships of regulatory networks amongst closely related families of organisms that are otherwise too distantly related to be analyzed by sequence alignment. We would like to see the application of this principle within \( Drosophila \). In conclusion, the measurement and analysis of the distribution of transcription factor affinities is a promising novel approach for analyzing the distribution of transcription factor binding sites and their targets.

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