EpiExplorer: live exploration and global analysis of large epigenomic datasets
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Figure S1. EpiExplorer readily rediscovers known epigenetic characteristics of CpG islands
(A) Bar chart summarizing the percent overlap (y-axis) between CpG islands and various genomic datasets (x-axis) in H1hESC cells.
(B) Bubble chart plotting the percent overlap (y-axis) between CpG islands and H3K4me3 peaks in specific tissues (color-coded) against the total genomic coverage of all corresponding peaks (x-axis).
(C) Neighborhood plot illustrating the percent overlap (y-axis) with histone H3K4me3 peaks in the vicinity of CpG islands (x-axis). Line colors correspond to histone modification data for different cell types.
(D) Neighborhood plot illustrating the percent overlap (y-axis) with histone H3K27me3 peaks in the vicinity of CpG islands (x-axis). Line colors correspond to histone modification data for different cell types.
(E) Percent overlap (y-axis) of 13,519 CpG islands located within one kilobase from a gene transcription start site (orange) and 2,327 CpG islands located at least 20 kilobases from the nearest gene (gray) with genome and epigenome annotation data (x-axis).
(F) Percent overlap (y-axis) of 15,377 constitutively unmethylated CpG islands (orange, less than 30% methylation in seven tissues) and 3,171 constitutively methylated CpG islands (grey, more than 60% methylation in the same seven tissues) with genome and epigenome annotation data (x-axis).
(G) Overview of the length distribution of constitutively unmethylated CpG islands (left) and constitutively methylated CpG islands (right).
(H) Histogram illustrating the distribution of CpG dinucleotide frequencies among constitutively unmethylated CpG islands (orange) and among constitutively methylated CpG islands (grey).
(I) Histogram illustrating the distribution of TpG dinucleotide frequencies among constitutively unmethylated CpG islands (orange) and among constitutively methylated CpG islands (grey).

Figure S2. EpiExplorer encodes genomic data in a format that is suitable for efficient text search
Schematic outline of genomic regions encoded as text and represented in an efficient index structure. Genomic region files are uploaded to EpiExplorer in the UCSC Genome Browser’s BED format [1], with mandatory col-
columns specifying the chromosome, start and end positions of each region (step 1). The EpiExplorer middleware annotates the uploaded regions with qualitative and quantitative attributes such as overlap with CpG islands and distance to the nearest CpG island (step 2). A text document is created for every genomic region, and its annotations are encoded in a semi-structured text format (step 3). To enable alphanumeric search for numeric attributes, heading zeros are added until all numbers have the same number of digits. Two sorted lists are created, one containing document identifiers and the other containing keyword identifiers (step 4). Finally, CompleteSearch creates a text index connecting sorted word identifier ranges with sorted document-word pairs, which handles text search queries in a highly efficient fashion (step 5).

Figure S3. EpiExplorer implements a parallelized and scalable software architecture

Schematic outline of EpiExplorer’s software architecture, consisting of a web-based user interface, a query processing and annotation mapping middleware, and a text-search backend. The user interface is a dynamic web-based frontend implemented in PHP and JavaScript. The middleware is implemented in Python and translates between genomic analyses requested by the user interface and text search queries sent to the backend. It also performs annotation of user-uploaded datasets using BEDTools [2] and manages CompleteSearch engine instances that are running in the backend. The backend of EpiExplorer consists of an annotation database implemented using SQLite and a collection of CompleteSearch server instances (one for each region set) that respond to text search queries sent by the middleware. The backend can be parallelized across multiple servers to increase performance. Unused CompleteSearch instances are automatically suspended to disk, from where they can be reactivated with minimal delay.
| Step | Description | Representation |
|------|-------------|----------------|
| 1. Upload | The user uploads a set of genomic regions (in standard BED format) | **region** | **chrom** | **start** | **end** |
| | Region 1 | chr1 | 1000 | 4240 |
| | Region 2 | chr2 | 500 | 1545 |
| | Region 3 | chr1 | 8300 | 8850 |
| | Region 4 | chr5 | 3100 | 3400 |
| 2. Annotate | Each genomic region is annotated with a broad range of genomic attributes | **Region** | **chrom** | **Length** | **Frequency of CpG** | **Overlap with CGI** | **Distance to nearest CGI** |
| | Region 1 | chr1 | 3240 | 0.07 | 34% | 0 |
| | Region 2 | chr2 | 1045 | 0.02 | 0% | 521 |
| | Region 3 | chr1 | 550 | 0.05 | 5% | 0 |
| | Region 4 | chr5 | 300 | 0.16 | 80% | 0 |
| 3. Convert to text | Every region is represented as a text document and its annotations are translated into words | **Region 1**<br>chr1 length:3240 frequency:CG:07 overlapratio:CGI:34 overlap:CGI | **Region 2**<br>chr2 length:1045 frequency:CG:02 distanceTo:CGI:521 | **Region 3**<br>chr1 length:0550 frequency:CG:05 overlapratio:CGI:05 overlap:CGI | **Region 4**<br>chr5 length:0300 frequency:CG:16 overlapratio:CGI:80 overlap:CGI |
| 4. Sort | Words and documents are sorted & assigned unique identifiers | **Doc ID** | **Document** | **Word ID** | **Word** | **Word ID** | **Word** |
| | D1 | Region 1 | W1 | chr1 | W9 | length:0300 |
| | D2 | Region 2 | W2 | chr2 | W10 | length:0550 |
| | D3 | Region 3 | W3 | chr5 | W11 | length:1045 |
| | D4 | Region 4 | W4 | distanceTo:CGI:521 | W12 | length:3240 |
| | | W5 | frequency:CG:02 | W13 | overlap:CGI |
| | | W6 | frequency:CG:05 | W14 | overlapratio:CGI:05 |
| | | W7 | frequency:CG:07 | W15 | overlapratio:CGI:34 |
| | | W8 | frequency:CG:16 | W16 | overlapratio:CGI:80 |
| 5. Create index | Sorted lists are stored in memory such that blocks correspond to ranges of word IDs and contain all pairs of document/word IDs in a given range | **Block** | **Word ID range** | **Corresponding words** | **document-word pairs** |
| | B1 | W1 - W3 | chr1, chr2, chr5 | (D1,W1) (D2,W2) (D3,W3) (D4,W1) |
| | B2 | W4 - W8 | distanceTo:CGI:521, frequency:CG:02, frequency:CG:05, frequency:CG:07, frequency:CG:16 | (D1,W7) (D2,W4) (D2,W5) (D3,W6) (D4,W8) |
| | B3 | W9 - W12 | length:0300, length:0550, length:1045, length:3240 | (D1,W13) (D1,W15) (D3,W13) (D3,W14) (D4,W13) (D4,W16) |
| | B4 | W13- W16 | overlap:CGI, overlapratio:CGI:05, overlapratio:CGI:34, overlapratio:CGI:80 | (D1,W13) (D1,W15) (D3,W13) (D3,W14) (D4,W13) (D4,W16) |
- Upload custom datasets
- Explore diverse visualizations
- Refine the dataset
- Compare to other datasets
- Export filtered datasets

Implemented in PHP and JavaScript using jQuery and Google Chart Tools

Middleware

Query processing
- Translate analysis requests into text queries
- Interpret results obtained from text-search engine
- Manage CompleteSearch instances

Implemented in Python

Annotation mapping
- Annotate region properties
- Preprocess region datasets to CompleteSearch format
- Export results in a variety of data formats

Implemented in Python using BEDTools

Backend

Text search server instances
1. CompleteSearch instance for 5hmC hotspots
2. CompleteSearch instance for CpG islands
3. CompleteSearch instance for Gene promoters
4. CompleteSearch instance for transcription start sites

Using the CompleteSearch engine

Annotations database
Stores default and custom genome and epigenome annotations
Implemented using SQLite

User Interface

EpiExplorer

Implemented in XML-RPC and XML

Stores default and custom genome and epigenome annotations

- Search 5hmC peaks
- CpG islands (specific)
- Gene promoters (-5kb > +1kb)
- Gene transcription start sites

Implemented in Python and SQLite

Query processing

CompleteSearch instance for transcription start sites
CompleteSearch instance for Gene promoters
CompleteSearch instance for CpG islands
CompleteSearch instance for 5hmC hotspots
Supplementary Text

Text S1. Case study of EpiExplorer applied to the epigenetic characterization of CpG islands

CpG islands account for some of the most important regulatory regions in the human genome [3]. These regions exhibit highly non-random epigenetic characteristics: On the one hand, most CpG islands are enriched for histone modifications indicative of open chromatin (e.g., H3K4me1 and H3K4me3), and they exhibit low levels of DNA methylation. On the other hand, specific subsets of CpG islands have been described as highly methylated or enriched for the repressive histone modification H3K27me3 [4-9]. In order to validate EpiExplorer on the well-studied topic of epigenetic regulation at CpG islands, here we analyze the characteristics of CpG islands across the human genome, using EpiExplorer’s functionality for exploring genomic region sets in the context of public genome and epigenome datasets.

CpG islands are already available as one of EpiExplorer’s default region sets; hence it is not necessary to upload any new dataset to perform this analysis. Once we select “CpG islands (specific)” from the exploration menu on the left of EpiExplorer’s start screen, EpiExplorer displays a summary of genome and epigenome annotations that CpG islands co-localize with (Figure S1A in Additional File 1). According to this diagram, more than half of all CpG islands overlap with Ensembl-annotated gene promoter regions, which is a well-established observation in the literature [10, 11]. Furthermore, we observe that two-thirds of all CpG islands overlap with the promoter-associated histone H3K4me3 mark in ES cells (Figure S1A in Additional File 1) and in other tissues (Figure S1B in Additional File 1). This observation underlines that a large subset of CpG islands indeed carry the key chromatin mark indicative of active promoters, and it constitutes a substantial enrichment as genomic regions carrying this mark cover only two to four percent of the genome (Figure S1B in Additional File 1). Furthermore, EpiExplorer’s neighborhood plot (Figure S1C in Additional File 1) highlights how strongly and specifically the H3K4me3 mark is enriched at CpG islands compared to the broader genomic neighborhood of these regions.

While association with open chromatin appears to be the default state of most bona fide CpG islands in the human genome [4, 8], it has been shown that a subset of CpG islands are frequently associated with the repressive histone H3K27me3 mark [12, 13]. CpG islands have also even been reported to play a role in recruiting Polycomb proteins and the H3K27me3 mark in ES cells [7]. An EpiExplorer neighborhood plot shows specific and localized enrichment of the H3K27me3 mark in a human ES cell line, with an enrichment peak that ranges from one kilobase upstream of the annotated CpG island borders to one kilobase downstream (Figure S1D in Additional File 1). This ES-cell specific enrichment peak is only marginally broader than the one observed for the H3K4me3 mark (Figure S1C in Additional File 1). In contrast, for cell types other than ES cells, we observe elevated levels of H3K27me3 in a broad neighborhood surrounding CpG islands, consistent with the observation that localized peaks of H3K27me3 in ES cells are resolved into broad H3K27me3-enriched BLOCs in differentiated cells [14].

Despite the strong overlap of CpG islands with gene promoters and other genic regions (Figure S1A in Additional File 1), almost a quarter of CpG islands (6,705 in total) do not overlap with any annotated promoter regions or genes and are therefore categorized as intergenic CpG islands [15]. Some of these intergenic CpG islands may be linked to genes and promoters that are currently missed by genome annotations (e.g. lincRNAs), but others may have non-canonical roles for example as distal enhancers or as anchor points in the maintenance of three-dimensional genome organization. Using the refinement tools of EpiExplorer, we can dynamically reduce the set of all CpG islands to those that are clearly intergenic (i.e. located at least 20 kilobases distant from the nearest gene) and compare their properties to a set of promoter-associated CpG islands (i.e. located within a kilobase of an annotated transcription start site). The results show that intergenic CpG islands less frequently exhibit the promoter-associated H3K4me3 mark and the transcription-associated H3K36me3 mark than promoter-associated CpG islands (Figure S1E in Additional File 1), consistent with their intergenic nature. On the other hand, they are associated more frequently with H3K27me3 peaks and insulator elements (Figure S1E in Additional File 1), which is suggestive of a structural role in the organization of chromatin.
We also explored the distribution of DNA methylation among CpG islands. While most CpG islands appear to be unmethylated in the germline and thus protected from the increased C-to-T mutation rates associated with cytosine methylation [5, 16, 17], a subset of CpG islands becomes methylated during somatic tissue differentiation [18, 19]. Furthermore, certain types of repeat-associated and exonic CpG islands appear to be methylated in all tissues and retain their moderate levels of CpG density by means other than the absence of DNA methylation in the germline [5, 20]. To compare the genomic characteristics of methylated and unmethylated CpG islands, we derived within EpiExplorer a test set of constitutively unmethylated CpG islands and a reference set of constitutively methylated CpG islands (Figure S1F in Additional File 1). Comparison of both types (unmethylated CpG islands shown in orange, methylated ones in grey) identified striking enrichment for open-chromatin associated marks (H3K4me1, H3K4me3, DNaseI hypersensitive sites) among unmethylated CpG islands. In contrast, methylated CpG islands were strongly associated with the transcription-linked H3K36me3 mark and exhibited a similar level of evolutionary conservation and gene association as unmethylated CpG islands.

The characteristic differences between unmethylated and methylated CpG islands are not limited to their genomic location relative to genes and chromatin marks, but also include the genomic DNA sequence of the CpG islands themselves. Consistent with previous reports that identified high CpG island length and CpG density as strong predictors of low DNA methylation levels [8, 9, 16, 21], the EpiExplorer analysis shows that unmethylated CpG islands tend to be longer (Figure S1G in Additional File 1) and exhibit a CpG density distribution that is substantially shifted toward increased CpG densities compared to their methylated counterparts (Figure S1H in Additional File 1). In contrast, the TpG density distribution shows an opposite trend (Figure S1I in Additional File 1), supporting the notion that high levels of DNA methylation are directly linked to the accumulation of C-to-T mutations in the germline.

In summary, these observations suggest that CpG islands are regulated in different ways by three epigenetic marks, histone H3K4me3, histone H3K27me3 and DNA methylation. The presence of H3K4me3 is strongly correlated with low levels of DNA methylation. Furthermore, H3K27me3 overlaps with H3K4me3 at a subset of CpG islands (in particular for ES cells), while co-localization between H3K27me3 and DNA methylation is rare and only observed at CpG islands that are not particularly CpG-rich. All of these results are easy to verify using EpiExplorer, as described in a step-by-step tutorial on the Supplementary Website [22].
Supplemental References

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