OptGene – a framework for *in silico* metabolic engineering

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Introduction

In metabolic engineering problems, due to the complexity of metabolic networks, it is often difficult to identify *a priori* which genetic manipulations will originate a given desired phenotype. Genome-scale metabolic models (Patil et al., 2004), available for several microorganisms, can be used to simulate the metabolic phenotype and therefore help the tasks of metabolic engineering. This simulation can be performed by calculating the fluxes through all metabolic reactions using techniques like the Flux Balance Analysis (FBA) (Edwards et al, 2002) or the MOMA (Segre et al., 2002 approaches, among others.

Several algorithms, like the framework OptKnock (Burgard et al., 2003) have been developed that use metabolic models to enable the identification of gene knockout strategies for obtaining improved phenotypes. However, the problem of finding optimal gene deletion strategy is combinatorial and consequently the computational time increases exponentially with the size of the problem.

OptGene Algorithms and Software

We have proposed the use of bio-inspired algorithms, namely Evolutionary Algorithms (EAs) and Simulated Annealing for the optimisation of the set of gene deletions to apply to a microorganism, in order to maximize a given objective function, associated with a given industrial objective (Patil et al., 2005) and (Rocha et al., 2007). The proposed algorithms enable solving large gene knockout problems in relatively short computational time and also allow the optimization of non-linear objective functions and additionally provide a family of close to optimal solutions.

Each mutant strain is evaluated by resorting to the simulation of its phenotype using the Flux-Balance Analysis approach, together with the premise that microorganisms have maximized their growth along natural evolution (Ibarra et al., 2002). The application of this methodology to several case-studies allowed to identify directed genetic modifications for the construction of improved bacterial and yeast strains for the production of valuable chemical compounds such as succinate. The results suggest that non-intuitive genetic modifications spanning several different pathways may be necessary for solving challenging metabolic engineering problems.

Based on these validated approaches, the user-friendly software framework *OptGene* was designed and developed that includes a number of tools to support *in silico* metabolic engineering. The application allows the user to load a genome-scale stoichiometric model of a given organism. This serves as the basis to simulate the phenotype of the wild type and of mutant strains. The simulation of these strains is conducted using a number of approaches (e.g. Flux-Balance Analysis or MOMA) that allow the set of fluxes in the organism's metabolism to be determined, given a set of environmental constraints. The core of the software tool is, however, the identification of metabolic engineering targets, performed by a number of optimization methods that allow to reach the best set of gene deletions given an objective function.

This application is complemented by an independent visualization tool, named *BioVisualizer*, that allows the visualization of graphs representing metabolic networks. These graphs have a number of distinct node types (e.g. metabolites, enzymes,

reactions) and connections. One of the major features of this tool is the ability to associate numerical values to the different types of nodes and edges in the graph.
The integration of the two applications allows the visualization of the metabolic network, superimposed by the values of the fluxes of a given simulation. The values of the fluxes for the wild type and different mutants can, therefore, be adequately visualized in this way, providing useful analysis tools for the researchers.
Additionally, this software is compatible with several SBML (Systems Biology Markup Language) standards (Hucka et al., 2003), allowing the use of models stored in public databases or built in other software tools both for simulation and visualization.
The *OptGene* application is being developed taking as a basis the *AIBench* framework. This is an environment for the development of Data Mining / Bioinformatics tools, using the Java programming language. The details of this project, a collaboration between the universities of Minho (Portugal) and Vigo (Spain), as well as updated documentation can be found at the web site www.aibench.org.

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