SOFTWARE TOOL ARTICLE

CyTargetLinker app update: A flexible solution for network extension in Cytoscape [version 1; referees: 1 approved]

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Abstract
Here, we present an update of the open-source CyTargetLinker app for Cytoscape (http://apps.cytoscape.org/apps/cytargetlinker) that introduces new automation features. CyTargetLinker provides a simple interface to extend networks with links to relevant data and/or knowledge extracted from so-called linksets. The linksets are provided on the CyTargetLinker website or can be custom-made for specific use cases. The new automation feature enables users to programmatically execute the app’s functionality in Cytoscape (command line tool) and with external tools (e.g. R, Jupyter, Python, etc). This allows users to share their analysis workflows and therefore increase repeatability and reproducibility. Three use cases demonstrate automated workflows, combinations with other Cytoscape apps and core Cytoscape functionality. We first extend a protein-protein interaction network created with the stringApp, with compound-target interactions and disease-gene annotations. In the second use case, we created a workflow to load differentially expressed genes from an experimental dataset and extend it with gene-pathway associations. Lastly, we chose an example outside the biological domain and used CyTargetLinker to create an author-article-journal network for the five authors of this manuscript using a two-step extension mechanism. With 300 downloads per month in the last year and over 12,000 downloads in total, CyTargetLinker shows the adoption and relevance of the app in the field of network biology. In April 2018, the original publication was cited in 57 articles demonstrating the applicability in biomedical research.

Keywords
Cytoscape, CyTargetLinker, network extension, network visualization, regulatory networks, data integration

This article is included in the Cytoscape Apps gateway.
This article is included in the ELIXIR gateway.

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**Introduction**

The CytargetLinker app provides a flexible and simple way to extend networks in Cytoscape with links to (prior) knowledge from external sources. Since its first release in 2013, CyTargetLinker has been downloaded more than 12,000 times and used in numerous studies. These applications in biological studies range from the creation of a microRNA-gene association network for lipid diseases or Alzheimer’s disease to the application of algorithms for drug sensitivity prediction.

While the app was originally intended to be used for the extension of biological networks with regulatory interactions, researchers have used CyTargetLinker to integrate knowledge about many different types of relationships (e.g., pathway associations and disease annotations). Therefore, we renamed the previously used Regulatory Interaction Networks (RegINs) to linksets to make the broader applicability more explicit. Moreover, the generation of linksets, either manually or in an automated manner, has become more user-friendly.

In this new version of CyTargetLinker, we introduce an automation feature that allows programmatic access to the app functionality. In the Results section, we present three use cases that highlight the app’s purpose, how it can be easily combined with other Cytoscape apps and the advantages of the automation. Whereas the first two use cases have a biological nature, the third use case demonstrates the broader applicability with a non-biological example.

**Methods**

The newest version of CyTargetLinker (4.0.0+) was developed for Cytoscape (3.6.0+) which introduces a new interface for automation that can make apps callable as services by the Cytoscape Command scripts, Python and R. This promotes open and reproducible data analysis, and simple integration with other apps. CyTargetLinker can be installed through the Cytoscape app store.

**LinkSets**

On the CyTargetLinker website, we provide a variety of linksets for regulatory interactions, pathway associations and disease annotations (https://projects.bigcat.unimaas.nl/cytar-getlinker/linksets/). Additionally, we deliver a simple Java program to convert tab delimited text files into XGMML linksets that can be used with CyTargetLinker (https://github.com/CyTargetLinker/linksetCreator). Using BridgeDb, a framework for finding and mapping database identifiers, the script enables the support of multiple identifier systems for biological entities.

**Application programming interface**

While CyTargetLinker can still be used through the Cytoscape graphical user interface (see online tutorials), we would like to highlight the novel application programming interface (API) that allows the programmatic execution of the app’s functionality.

CyTargetLinker provides a set of API methods to automate the extension of networks, see Table 1. The key function is the “extend” function, which parses the provided LinkSets and extracts relevant interactions for the selected network. The user can then choose to use the CyTargetLinker visual style and the force-directed layout. Often, users want to integrate knowledge for the same interaction type from different resources. With the “filterOverlap” function, users can visualise only those interactions that are supported by multiple resources.

**Use cases**

The broad applicability of CyTargetLinker will be demonstrated in three different use cases. The focus lies on the automation of the analysis and the R scripts for each use case are provided in the tutorial repository on GitHub. We chose to present two biological and one non-biological use cases to demonstrate the flexibility of the app.

**Use cases highlighting the new automation functionality**

**Use case 1: Investigating drug-targets and disease associations for a Rett syndrome protein-protein interaction network.**

Rett syndrome is a rare disease caused by a mutation in the methyl-CpG-binding protein 2 (MECP2) gene. In this use case, we used the stringApp of Cytoscape to create a protein-protein interaction (PPI) network for Rett syndrome (Disease Query). The PPI network is then extended using

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>API Method</th>
<th>Parameters</th>
<th>Task</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>version</td>
<td></td>
<td>Returns the version of the CyTargetLinker app</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>extend</td>
<td>direction, idAttribute, linkSetDirectory, linkSetFiles, network</td>
<td>Extend network with interactions from linksets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>applyVisualStyle</td>
<td>network</td>
<td>Apply the CyTargetLinker visual style to the extended network</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>applyLayout</td>
<td>network</td>
<td>Apply a force-directed layout</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>filterOverlap</td>
<td>network, overlap</td>
<td>Filter extension and show only links supported by n linksets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>showPanel</td>
<td>show</td>
<td>Show the CyTargetLinker result panel</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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CyTargetLinker with compound-target interactions from ChEMBL\textsuperscript{9,10} and disease-gene associations from a manually curated subset for rare diseases from OMIM\textsuperscript{11}. ChEMBL is an open online bioactivity database containing information about compounds, their bioactivity and their possible targets (including proteins). OMIM is a comprehensive collection of human genetic phenotypes and their associated human genes. Both linksets are available on the linkset download page on the CyTargetLinker website.

First, the stringApp was used to create a Rett syndrome PPI (query=“Rett syndrome”, cutoff=0.4, limit=20). Using CyTargetLinker, the network was extended with 37 compound-target interactions from ChEMBL and 18 gene-disease associations from OMIM (see Figure 1).

**Use case 2: Pathway associations for differentially expressed genes in Rett syndrome.** For this use case, we selected a list of differentially expressed genes in the Purkinje cells located in the cerebellar cortex of the brain of a MeCP2\textsuperscript{−/−} mouse model\textsuperscript{12,13} for Rett syndrome. Next, we investigated in which biological processes these altered genes are involved. Using the pathway annotations from the WikiPathways database\textsuperscript{14}, CyTargetLinker adds the pathway information and creates a pathway-gene network.

From the dataset, we extracted 65 genes with an absolute log2 fold change larger than 1. Only 16 genes are present in one or more pathways of the curated mouse pathway collection from WikiPathways. Figure 2 shows the resulting gene-pathway network. Genes without pathway annotations have been removed.

**Legend**
- Protein
- Compound
- Disease

*Figure 1. Compound-gene-disease network for Rett Syndrome.* The protein-protein interaction network for Rett syndrome was created using the disease query option of the stringApp for Cytoscape. The proteins are represented as gray circles. Then, CyTargetLinker was used to extend the network with compounds from ChEMBL (purple diamonds) and disease annotations from OMIM (blue octagons).
Differential gene expression is shown on the gene nodes (blue = down, red = up) and green border color of the pathway nodes indicates that the pathway has been identified as significantly affected through overrepresentation analysis in the pathway analysis tool PathVisio\(^5\).

**Use case 3: Author-publication-journal network.** This example uses two custom made linksets for author-article and article-journal relationships from Wikidat\(^1\)–\(^2\). After loading the initial five author nodes in Cytoscape, we performed a two-step extension with CyTargetLinker. We first added publications from the author-article linkset and then the journals from the article-journal linkset, see Figure 3. Author nodes are colored in gray, articles in yellow and journals in green. The network clearly shows the collaborations and diversity between the authors. Layout and visual style was slightly adapted manually in the graphical user interface to improve the readability of the network.

**Discussion**

One of the major challenges in science is the reproducibility of results presented in articles. Besides the challenges in reproducibility of experiments, the computational analyses are also often unclear and insufficiently described\(^1\). Automation of analysis workflows enables researchers to share the details of their computational analyses and enables simple reproducibility of the results.

Here, we introduce the new version of the CyTargetLinker app, which provides full programmatic execution of the functions from within Cytoscape (command line tool) and external tools (e.g. R, Jupyter, Python, etc). The network
extension is therefore reproducible and repeatable with other input data. Consequently, users can build scripts that run common analysis workflows and combine CyTargetLinker with other apps, as shown in Use case 1 (stringApp). The integration of CyTargetLinker in Cytoscape gives access to a powerful set of visualization options, as demonstrated in Use case 2.

As part of the Cytoscape tutorials collection for online presentations, we developed a CyTargetLinker tutorial presentation using Reveal.js. This tutorial presentation can be reused and adapted for specific teaching activities. Together with our tutorials for the Cytoscape desktop application and the automation example scripts, relevant documentation for users is provided to get familiar with the functionality of CyTargetLinker.

The generic nature of CyTargetLinker has been highlighted by renaming RegINs to linksets, and we now provide a variety of different linksets on our website. The XGMML structure

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**Figure 3. Author-Article-Journal network.** For the five authors of this manuscript, two custom linksets were used to first add author-article relationships and in a second step add article-journal relationships.
of the linksets is simple, instructions how to create them from tab-delimited text files are available, and CyTargetLinker could therefore be used for non-biological networks as well (shown in use case 3).

Conclusions

In this paper, we showcase the latest update of the CyTargetLinker app for Cytoscape and its new automation feature. The ability to programmatically execute the app’s functionality opens up the possibility to build complex workflows that are repeatable and reproducible. We also explored the broader applicability of the app besides the originally intended use for regulatory network extension. Due to the flexible design of the app and the linksets, we are now also showcasing other use cases, including non-biological networks.

Data availability

Linksets, tutorials and link to source code (app and linkset creator) are available from the CyTargetlinker app website: https://projects.bigcat.unimaas.nl/cytargetlinker/.

Software availability

1. The app is available from the Cytoscape app store: http://apps.cytoscape.org/apps/cytargetlinker.

References

The CyTargetLinker Cytoscape app presented here provides a useful mechanism for extending existing biological networks. The rationale for this functionality is well explained by the authors and the general utility is demonstrated by the citation of several previous studies using the tool and the variety of use cases presented.

The API interface, which is the focus of this update, is a very useful addition which allows the scripting and hence reproducibility of this kind of analysis. The API is simple, but covers the fundamental use case of the app. I can only find partial documentation of the API method parameters however. They are named in Table 1, but I could not find more extensive documentation on the app website (https://projects.bigcat.unimaas.nl/cytargetlinker/) which mostly refers to an earlier version of the app from what I can tell. The API methods should be documented somewhere more completely. This is why I have answered 'Partly' to 'Are sufficient details of the code, methods and analysis (if applicable) provided to allow replication of the software development and its use by others?'.

The interpretation of the results and conclusions about the tool are straightforward. I have not tested the performance of the app outside the use cases the authors provide, but in those contexts performance is perfectly adequate. Perhaps the authors could comment on whether the app has performance limits on the size of network that can be annotated in this way and how that compares to Cytoscape's underlying limits.

I tested the first use case script with Cytoscape 3.6.1, stringApp 1.1.1 and CyTargetLinker 4.0.1 (the latest versions at time of writing). This revealed a small API incompatibility. The script attempts to link on idAttribute 'display name', but no such attribute comes from this version of stringApp. Changing the idAttribute to 'name' allows the script to work. I can't find which version of stringApp the authors are using, but maybe it needs to be specified or the script updated. This is why I have marked 'Partly' to the question 'Are sufficient details of the code, methods and analysis (if applicable) provided to allow replication of the software development and its use by others?' Otherwise the use case reproduced fine.

I have not tested the CyTargetLinker Java program, but it seems reasonably well documented and straightforward to run.

**Is the rationale for developing the new software tool clearly explained?**
Yes
Is the description of the software tool technically sound? Yes

Are sufficient details of the code, methods and analysis (if applicable) provided to allow replication of the software development and its use by others? Partly

Is sufficient information provided to allow interpretation of the expected output datasets and any results generated using the tool? Yes

Are the conclusions about the tool and its performance adequately supported by the findings presented in the article? Yes

**Competing Interests:** No competing interests were disclosed.

I have read this submission. I believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

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