# Ennet: exert enhaner-only somatic mutations to discover potential cancer-driving biological networks

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**Abstract**

Whole genome sequencing technology has facilitated the discovery of a large number of somatic mutations in enhancers (SMEs), whereas the utility of SMEs in tumorigenesis has not been fully explored. Here we present Ennet, a method to comprehensively investigate SMEs enriched networks (SME-networks) in cancer by integrating SMEs, enhancer-gene interactions and gene-gene interactions. Using Ennet, we performed a pan-cancer analysis in 2004 samples from 8 cancer types and found many well-known cancer drivers were involved in SME-networks, including *ESR1*, *SMAD3*, *MYC*, *EGFR*, *BCL2* and *PAX5 et al*. Meanwhile, Ennet also identified many new networks with less characterization but have potentially important roles in cancer, including the biggest SME-network in medulloblastoma (MB), which contains genes enriched in the glutamate receptor and nervous development pathways. Interestingly, SME-networks are specific across cancer types, and the vast majority of the genes identified by Ennet have few mutations in gene bodies. Collectively, our work shows that using enhancer-only somatic mutations can be an effective way to discover potential cancer-driving networks. Ennet provides a new perspective to explore new mechanisms for tumor progression from SMEs.

## BACKGROUND

Enhancer elements act as key regulators of gene expression in biological processes. The Encyclopedia of DNA Elements (ENCODE) Project and other studies have identified millions of enhancers in various tissues [1]. The roles of enhancer in disease have acquired extensive concerns. Most germline risk variants from GWAS studies reside in putative enhancer elements [2]. Recent studies also suggested that enhancer malfunction through somatic mutations could be the cause of tumorigenesis by altering the expression of known cancer genes, including *ESR1* [3], *MYC* [4] and *PAX5* [5] et al. Nowadays, the availability of thousands of tumor whole genomes has paved the avenue for exploring somatic enhancer mutations systematically.

However, system exploring the role of SMEs in cancer development is far more challenging. Cancer-driving elements can be generally detected by comparing their observed mutation frequency to the expected background rate from this region. Such efforts have lead to the discovery of a lot of recurrent mutations in the gene body and promoter regions of genes but

failed to identify many recurrently mutated enhancers, including even two large cohorts whole-genome sequencing studies (560 breast cancer and 150 CLL) [5,6]. These results may be due to two aspects: (1) Mutations occurring in enhancers are too sparse. Unbiased system analysis of mutations in the whole genome can easily pick up mutational hot spots in gene bodies or promoters, but not in enhancers [7]. (2) The size of whole-genome sequenced samples in specific cancer type is still too small. The approach to increase sample size regardless of tumor types is effective for gene bodies and promoters, but not suitable for enhancers, which function in a tissue-specific manner. Hence, new approaches are urgently needed to identify causal enhancer mutations and their downstream consequences.

Knowledge-based network strategies, which assume that complex disease is not caused by individual mutations, nor by genes, but by combinations of genes acting in molecular networks, have been proved to be an effective way in solving the problems of "sparse mutations" and "small sample size" [8–10]. However, these strategies have difficulty in applying to noncoding regulatory elements owing to defective interactions between gene-gene interaction networks and noncoding elements. Recently, the chromosome conformation capture (3C) derived technologies, such as Hi-C [11], Capture Hi-C [12,13], ChIA-PET [14], and many computational methodologies [15–20] offered a lot of appraisal ways to identify the interactions between regulatory elements and genes. These interactions provide us an opportunity to explore the function of sparse mutations in enhancers with an acceptable sample size based on knowledge-based networks.

Here, we present Ennet, a new framework to investigate somatic enhancer mutations enriched biological networks in cancer. Our results across 8 cancer types show that only exerting SMEs can be an effective way to discover potential cancer-driving networks through integrating enhancer-gene interactions with functional molecular networks. More interestingly, almost all of the genes identified by Ennet, whether known or new, are not significantly mutated in their body or promoter regions. It means that these genes may be ignored by the classical gene bodies or promoters focused methods. Collectively, Ennet provides a new perspective to find new mechanisms for tumor development.

## RESULTS

### Overview of Ennet

From the observation that many genes involved in cancer possess little lesions in the gene body and promoter regions, we hypothesized that mutations happened in distal regulatory regions also could play critical roles in tumor progression. As regions with significant functions, enhancers are scattered across chromosomes and regulate the genes through acting on their promoters (Fig. 1A). However, identifying cancer driver genes by only using the mutation information in enhancers is difficult owing to low mutational density in enhancers (Fig. 1C). Here, we devised Ennet, a new method that integrates mutation profiles of enhancers, enhancer-promoter interactions and knowledge-based gene networks (Fig 1D). Unlike conventional cancer driver classifiers, Ennet considers mutations occurred in the enhancers and the main purpose of Ennet is to identify SME-networks. Ennet begins by counting mutations falling within tissue-specific enhancers for each gene. Then sum up all mutation across patients and map the count to a knowledge-based gene network. After network smoothing (this step is optional), Ennet selects recurrent mutated subnetworks as potential cancer-driving subnetworks based on the mutational score. Beside identifying

SMEs enriched subnetworks, Ennet can also pick out a great quantity of potentially new driver enhancers with very low-frequency mutations that might have important roles in cancer. While the functional impacts of mutations on transcription factor binding and target gene expression need more data and experiments to be further investigated.

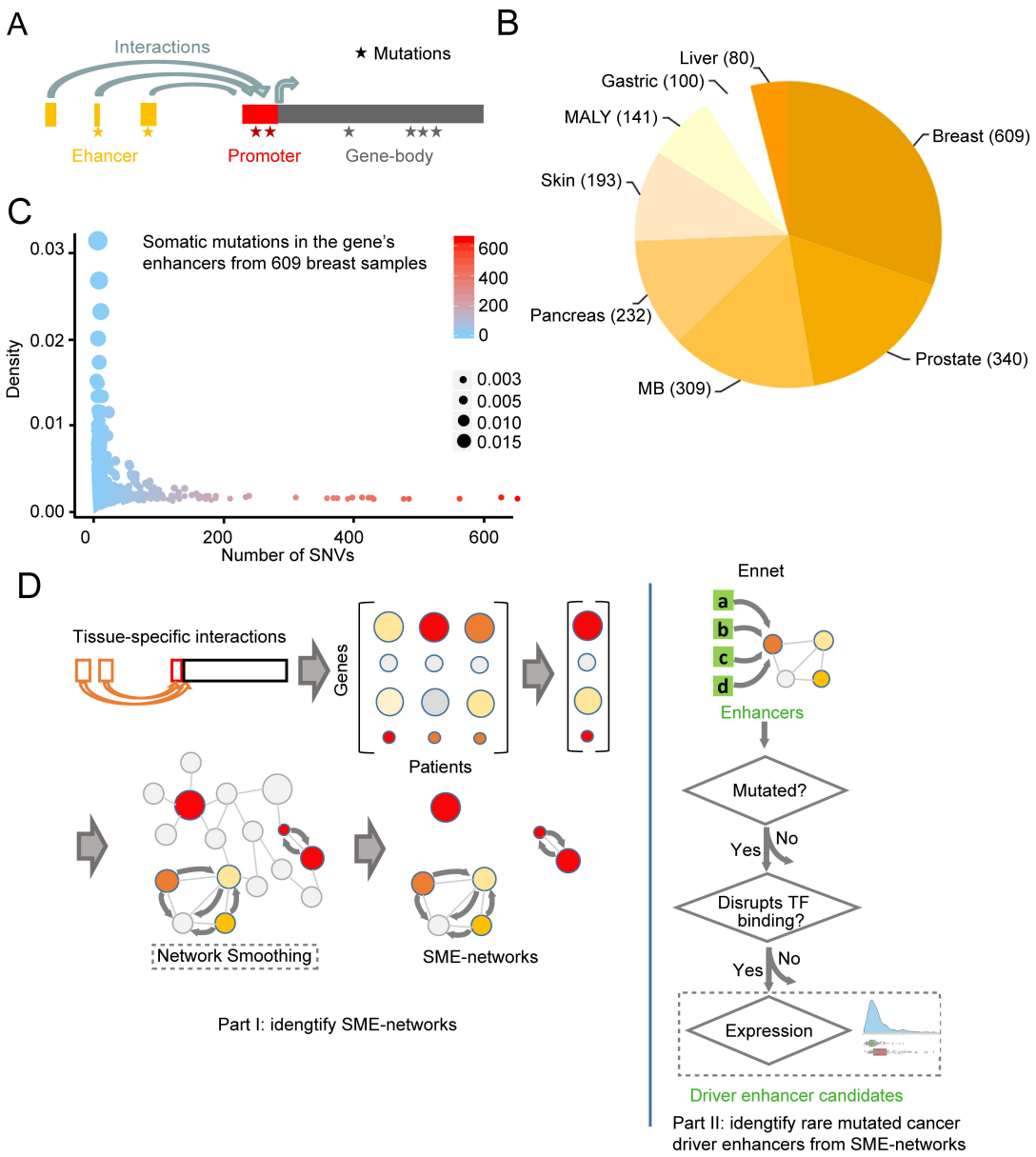


**Figure 1.** Overview of Ennet. (A) Diagram of gene functional regions: enhancer, promoter and gene body. (B) Sample numbers of the 8 cancer types analysed (MALY: malignant lymphoma, MB: medulloblastoma). (C) Somatic mutation density of genes' enhancers from 609 breast cancer samples. (D) Overview of the methodology of Ennet. The steps with dashed lines are optional.

**Overview of SME-networks identified by Ennet**

We perform a pan-cancer analysis of somatic mutations from 2,004 samples in 8 cancer types using Ennet (Fig. 1B). Diverse subnetworks containing 436 genes were found by Ennet in different cancers (node number > 3 are shown in Fig. 2). Compared these genes

with the 125 Mut-driver genes defined by the 20/20 rule [21], 18 genes have been found in both collections (Supplemental Figure 1). Moreover, known cancer driver genes were identified as high node degree genes by Ennet such as *EGFR* [22], *SMAD3* [23] and *YWHAZ* [24]. Importantly, *PAX5* [5] and *ESR1* [3], whose enhancer mutations have been recently reported to promote tumorigenesis, were found by Ennet. Additionally, a number of well-known cancer pathways such as *EGFR*, *BCL2*, and *MYC* signaling pathways were also determined by Ennet. Our data indicate that genes identified by Ennet perform the function in cancer-related pathways.

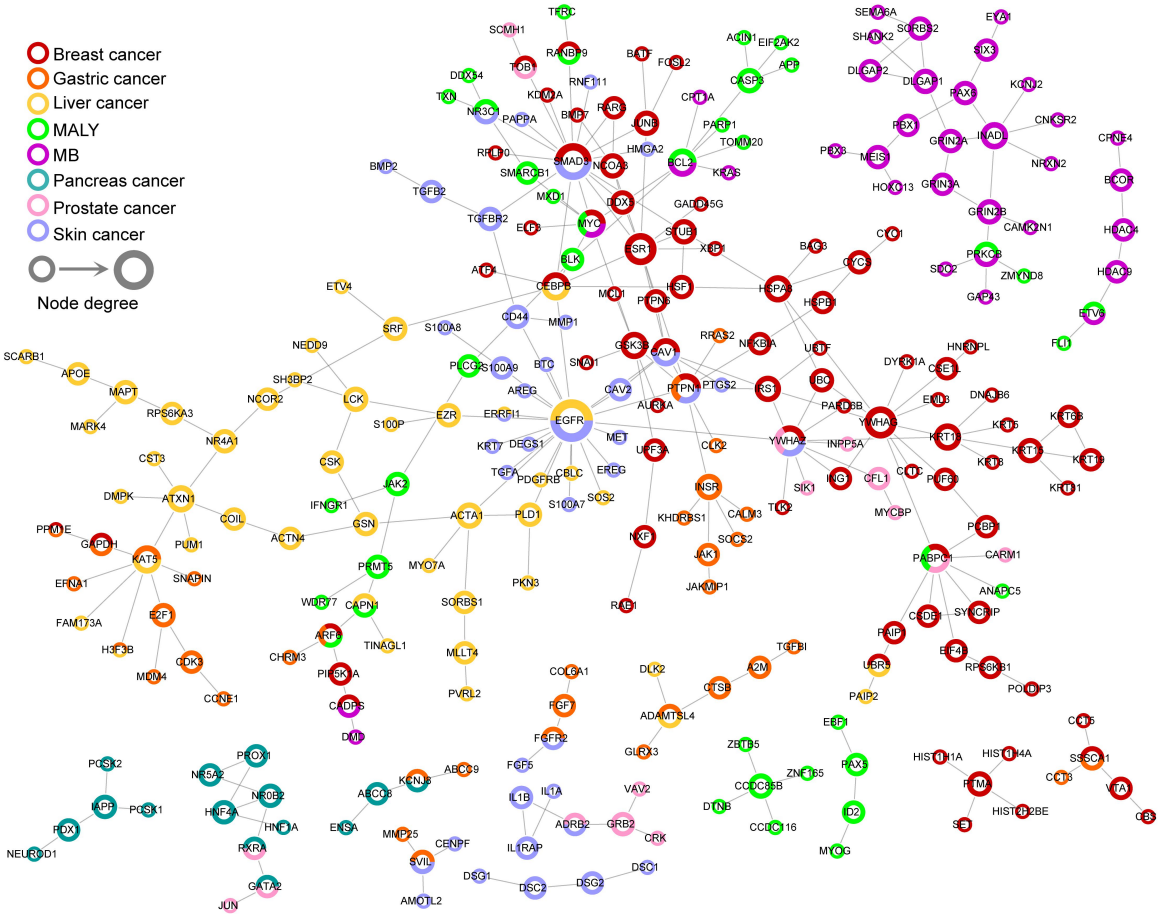


**Figure 2.** Overview of SME-networks identified by Ennet. Subnetworks with node number > 3 are shown.

For distinct cancer types, the subnetworks found by Ennet were very specific. The vast majority (92.6%, 404/436) of genes were unique to only one cancer type, with none gene being in 4 or more cancer types (Fig. 3A). This suggests that tumor from different tissues have different driver events. To further investigate the enriched pathways of Ennet detected genes, we performed a KEGG pathway enrichment analysis. The significant pathways in different cancers were cancer type-specific (Fig. 3B). For example, top two enriched pathways of genes detected in breast cancer were “hippo signaling pathway” and “breast cancer”, and in liver cancer they were “MAPK signaling pathway” and “regulation of actin cytoskeleton”. In addition, several pathways were shared in different cancer types, like PI3K-Akt signaling pathway, MAPK signaling pathway, and ErbB signaling pathway. Taken together, genes identified by Ennet are highly cancer-related and cancer type-specific.

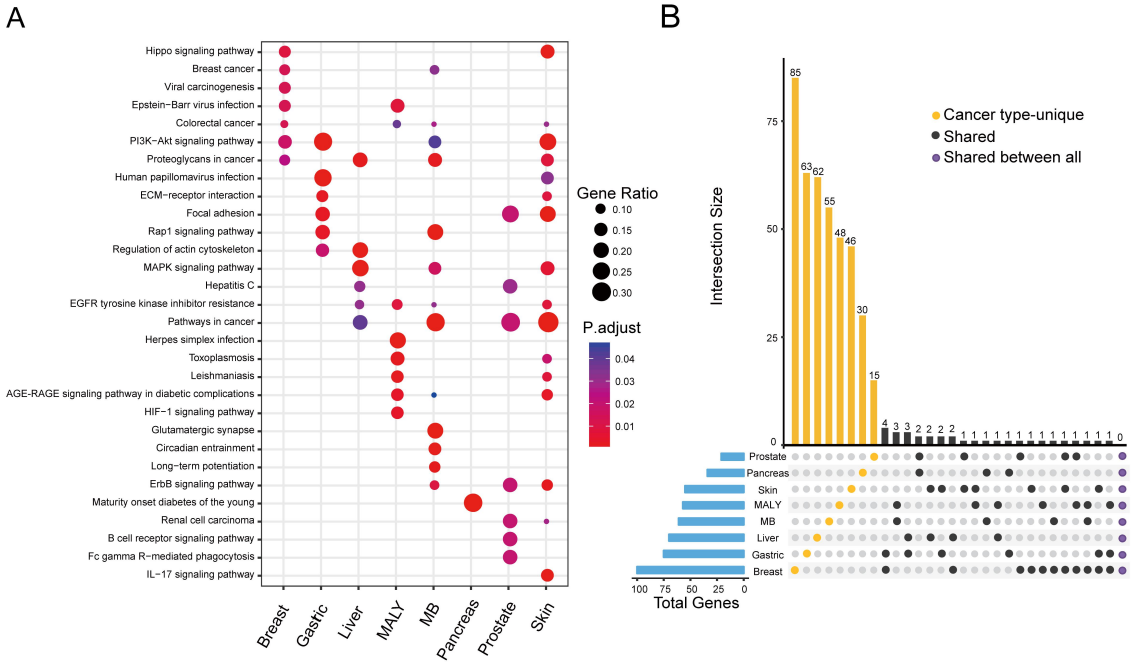


**Figure 3.** Genes detected by Ennet were cancer related and cancer type-specific. (A) KEGG enrichment analysis for genes in SME-networks. (B) Numbers of genes identified by Ennet in 8 cancers.

**Genes in SME-networks have few mutations in gene bodies**

Currently, approaches for discovering driver genes mainly relied on mutational information of gene body regions. In contrast, Ennet uses mutations within enhancer elements, which are typically ignored or unutilized, rather than mutations in gene bodies. To illustrate the differences between Ennet and conventional driver hunters, we compared the genes in SMEs enriched subnetworks and genes predicted by MutSigCV [25], a state-of-art cancer driver caller. MutSigCV and Ennet show few overlap in their predictions within all 8 cancer types (Fig 4A). We next investigated the mutational spectrum of genes identified by the two methods and found large divergences (malignant lymphoma in Fig. 4B, other cancers can be found in Supplemental Figure 2 to Supplemental Figure 8). In malignant lymphoma, genes detected by Ennet all have high mutation rate in their enhancers (from 5.0% to 54.6%), and low mutation rate in their exons (only mutation rates of two genes are more than 20%, *MYC* and *BCL2*). Yet, those found by MutSigCV all have high exon mutation rate (from 3.5% to 40.4%), and have low mutation rates in their distal regions (0%-14.9%, mutations of 9/34 genes only occur in the exons). This indicates that genes in SME-networks have few mutations in gene bodies. Next, we compared these genes discovered in malignant lymphoma versus CGC group and found 9 genes with a strong support having documented as cancer driver genes in CGC (Fig. 4B), suggesting that the other 48 genes may also function in cancer. For example, *CASP3*, an executioner caspase, plays a key role in the execution-phase of cell apoptosis [26] and high levels of uncleaved caspase 3 were associated with decreased in acute myelogenous leukemia [27]. Therefore, genes detected by Ennet and MutSigCV are intrinsically different and Ennet can serve as a complementary to existing methods.

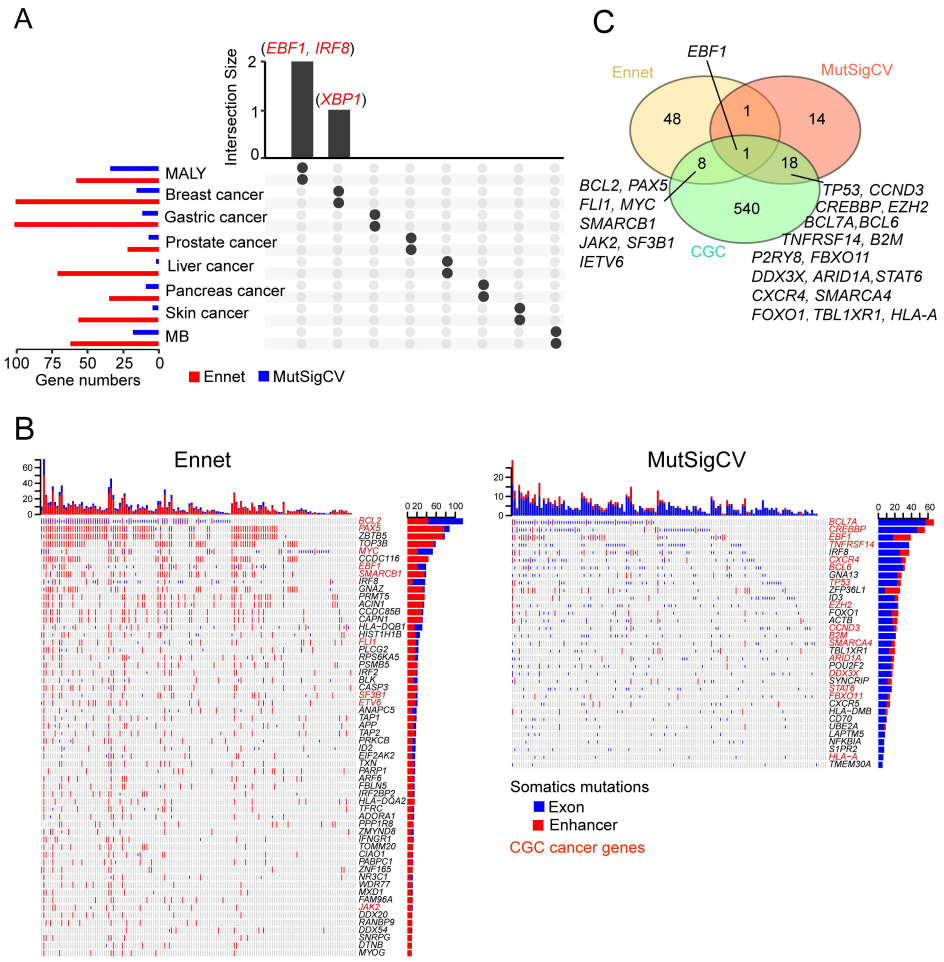


**Figure 4.** Genes in SME-networks have few mutations in gene bodies. (A) The overlap of genes identified by Ennet and MutSigCV across different cancer types. Few genes were detected simultaneously by both methods. (B) Mutation profiles of genes found by Ennet (left) and by MutSigCV (right) in malignant lymphoma (MALY). Almost all genes identified by Ennet have few lesions in their exon regions. (C) Venn diagram of genes in (B) and cancer genes in CGC.

**Ennet is more effective than mutation density-based methods.**

The network-based method employed by Ennet combines mutational information from multiple enhancers and may be more effective than density-based way (Fig. 5A). A recent study unbiasedly analyzed the mutations of 150 chronic lymphocytic leukaemia (CLL) WGS samples using a mutation density-based method, and showed most of hotspots were in the coding regions and in the known target elements of the SHM process [5]. Through similar method, we identified only one hotspot in the enhancer of *PAX5* as observed by Puente *et al.* (Fig. 5B). Then we applied Ennet to the same dataset. Although most genes' enhancers (except those affected by SHM process) have low mutation frequencies (Fig. 5C), Ennet successfully identified 38 genes in 8 SMEs enriched subnetworks, with 3 subnetworks containing more than 3 genes (Fig. 5D). The subnetwork containing *PAX5* included three other genes: *EBF1*, *ID2* and *TCF3*. Early B-cell factor 1 (*Ebf1*) is a transcription factor with documented dose-dependent functions in normal and malignant B-lymphocyte development [28], and a synergistic effect of combined dose reduction of *EBF1* and *PAX5* was observed in mice [29]. The interplay between *PAX5* and *ID2*, *TCF3* in B cell lineage commitment and

leukemia was widely reported [30–32]. These suggest that these three genes may also promote CLL development but might be ignored by density-based methods. Besides, many well-known cancer genes in CLL such as *BCL2*, *MYC*, *BLK* and *LYN* were in the SMEs enriched subnetworks detected by Ennet (Fig. 5D). Collectively, Ennet is more effective than mutation density-based methods.

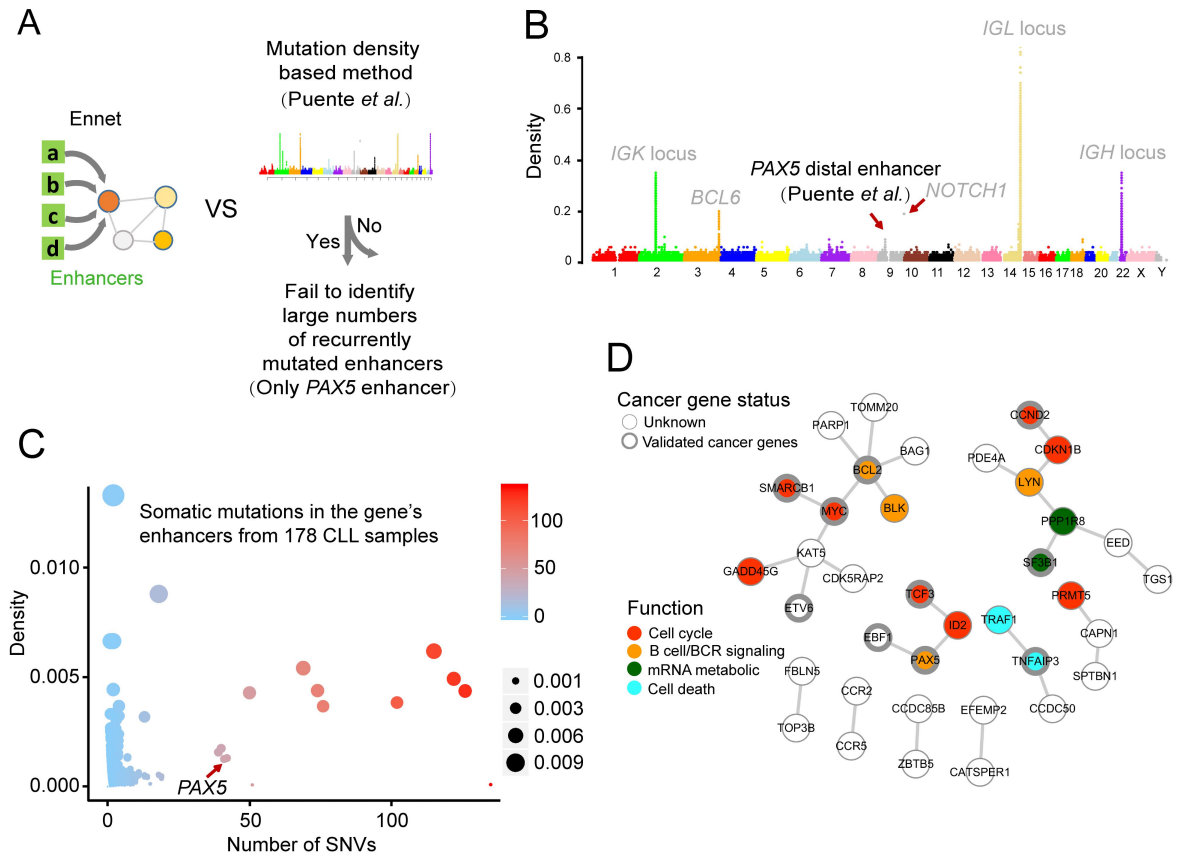


**Figure 5.** Ennet is more effective than mutation density-based methods. (A) Schematic of the comparison between Ennet and mutation density-based methods. (B) Regions with a high density of somatic mutations in 178 CLL samples. Regions correspond to recurrently mutated coding genes (gray), targets of SHM (gray), and enhancers (black). (C) Somatic mutation density of genes' enhancers from 178 CLL samples. (D) SME-networks identified by Ennet in CLL.

**Ennet identified a novel potential cancer-driving network in MB**

MB is the most common malignant brain tumor of children [33]. We noticed that most of the genes in the biggest SMEs enriched subnetworks of MB have less characterized roles in MB (Fig. 6A). Almost no relevant records were found in PubMed when we searched using gene/protein name and medulloblastoma as keywords, except for *PAX6* (4 records), and *EYA1* (1 record) (by November 2017). Pathway analysis demonstrated that these genes were enriched in glutamate receptor signaling and nervous development associated pathways (Fig. 6B). Dysregulation of developmental pathways can be an important mechanism underlying cancer development [34]. Genes in the glutamate receptor signaling pathway, including *GRIN2A*, *GRIN3A*, and *GRIN2B*, are significantly down-regulated in the glioblastoma than the matched normal tissue (Supplemental Figure 9). Taken together, our results suggest that genes dysregulated in these SME-networks may be a novel mechanism to promote MB.

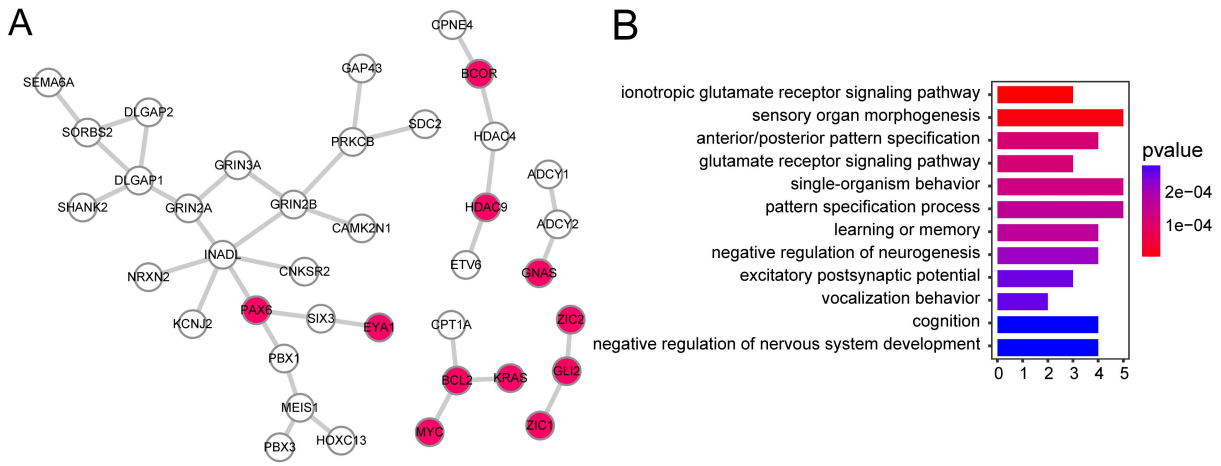


**Figure 6.** Ennet found a new potential pathway in MB. (A) SME-networks identified by Ennet in MB. Red nodes indicate that there were relevant records in the PubMed database. (B) Genes in the biggest SME-networks were enriched in glutamate receptor signaling and nervous development pathways.

## DISCUSSION

Whole-genome sequencing provides us with a large number, but very sparse, somatic mutations in enhancers. Over the past few years, we have learned very little about cancer from these “junk” like mutations. Therefore, we are very curious about several interesting questions. Can we get more information about cancers by only analyzing these sparse enhancer mutations? Are there any genes or pathways which have few mutations in the gene body or promoter regions but many in their enhancers?

In this study, we designed Ennet to answer these questions. We applied Ennet to analyze somatic mutations only in enhancers across 8 cancer types through integrating enhancer-gene interactions with the knowledge-based gene networks. We were surprised to find that these unutilized enhancer-only somatic mutations can help to find many famous cancer driver genes, like *ESR1* in breast cancer [3] and *PAX5* in CLL [5]. Notably, almost all of the genes identified by Ennet, whether known or unknown, are not significantly mutated in gene body or promoter region (identified by MutSigCV, q value < 0.05). Moreover, we found a potential novel cancer-driving biological network in MB. In summary, our work shows that using enhancer-only somatic mutations can be an effective way to discover potential cancer-driving biological networks and Ennet provides a new perspective to find new mechanisms for tumor development.

Enhancer-gene interactions are critical for linking enhancers to knowledge-based networks in Ennet. Although we have integrated enhancer-gene pairs from various sources including both high-throughput experiments and computational prediction, the interaction maps might be incomplete. Hi-C, ChIA-PET and similar experiments [35] have provided a mass of enhancer-gene pairs, but thus far these data are only available for a few human cell types. Several cancer types such as ovary cancer cannot analysis by Ennet owning to no interaction maps in the associated tissues. Fortunately, many excellent works such as the 4D Nucleome program [36] will continue to yield information about the chromosome architecture in diverse cell types in the near future. With the availability of increasing number of whole cancer genomes and more understanding of 3D chromatin structure in different cell types, exploration the role of mutations in regulatory regions is beginning. We expect that

Ennet can serve as a complementary method to exiting driver callers and may lead to new insights in cancer genomic researches and clinical implications.

## METHODS

### Acquisition whole genome somatic mutation data

We obtained precomputed somatic variants from the whole-genome sequences of 1,648 samples across 7 cancer types from the ICGC database (Release 25) [37], 256 samples of 4 cancer types from Alexandrov *et al*. [38], and 100 gastric cancer samples from the supplemental materials of Wang *et al*. [39]. All data from ICGC should be free of a publication moratorium according to the ICGC Publication Policy (http://docs.icgc.org/portal/publication/). All samples in the PanCancer Analysis of Whole Genomes (PCAWG) project were excluded because of usage limitation. For duplicate samples of ICGC database and Alexandrov *et al*., only data from ICGC was kept. Finally, 8 cancer types were included for the subsequent analysis: breast cancer, gastric cancer, liver cancer, malignant lymphoma (MALY), medulloblastoma (MB), pancreas cancer, prostate cancer, and skin cancer (Fig. 1B and Supplemental Table 1).

### Collecting and processing enhancer-promoter interactions

We collected enhancer-promoter interactions from two sources: 1) chromatin interactome from high throughput experiments, including Hi-C, ChIA-PET and Capture Hi-C. 2) interactions predicted by six computational methods: RIPPLE [17], IM-PET [16], PreSTIGE [15], Epitensor [18], PETModule [19], and JEME [20]. Supplemental Table 2 listed all the sources and annotations used in this study. Except for GM12878 cell line with Capture Hi-C data [40], interactions of specific cell type from different studies were merged. Then we performed some filters on the putative distal regulatory elements (DREs). For a given DRE, 1bp overlap with enhancer-like regions annotated by ENCODE were required [1] if the corresponding enhancer annotations was available. To not be affected by coding regions, any DRE overlapping with exons of protein-coding genes were excluded. The annotation we used were GENCODE v24 downloaded from GENCODE's website [41]. Enhancers function by binding with transcription factors. We then divided the DRE regions by transcription factor binding data generated by ENCODE if the corresponding TF binding data was available. The manipulation on genomic features were done using BEDTools [42] and BEDOPS [43]. The integrated enhancer-gene interactions are available here: http://bigdata.ibp.ac.cn/ennet/.

### Knowledge-based gene networks

In principle, knowledge-based gene networks can be any interactions between genes. In this version, Ennet collects protein-protein interaction networks (HPRD [44], iRefIndex [45] and Multinet [46]) and KEGG pathways [47].

### Integrated analysis with Ennet

Three key inputs are required for Ennet: whole genome somatic mutations, enhancer-gene interactions and knowledge-based gene networks. Ennet begins by counting noncoding mutations falling within tissue-specific enhancers for each gene. It then sums up all mutation across patients and map the count to a knowledge based gene network. After mapping, a random walk based network propagation [8,48] is applied to 'smooth' the mutation signal across the network (this step is optional). Finally, Ennet selects subnetworks using a python package NetworkX [49].

**Annotating with cancer driver genes and signaling pathways**

We collected the cancer driver genes from the widely used Cancer Gene Census (CGC, http://cancer.sanger.ac.uk/census) [50] and Network of Cancer Genes database (version 4) [51]. In addition, we also collected genes from cancer signaling pathways annotated in the Netpath database [52].

**Other bioinformatic analysis**

UpSet plots in Figure 3 and Figure 4 were generated by R package UpSetR [53]. Waterfall plots in Figure 4 and Supplemental Figure 2-8 were generated using R package ComplexHeatmap v1.14.0 [54]. Enrichment analysis was done by R package clusterProfiler [55]. For the comparison with MutSigCV [25], we first annotated the mutations using Oncotator v1.9.3.0 [56] and then feed MutSigCV v1.4.1 with MAF files following the instructions (http://archive.broadinstitute.org/cancer/cga/mutsig).

**Acknowledgements**

We thank Dr. Geir Skogerbø for careful reading and valuable suggestions on the manuscript and the staff of the Protein Research Core Facility at the Institute of Biophysics, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Dr. Xiaowei Chen and Dr. Zhen Fan, for their assistance in highthroughput sequencing data analysis and discussion. Data analysis and computing resource was supported by Center of Big Data Research in Health (http://bigdata.ibp.ac.cn), Institute of Biophysics, Chinese Academy of Sciences.

**FUNDING**

This work was supported by grants from the National Key R&D Program of China [2016YFC0901000], the Key Research Program of the Chinese Academy of Sciences [KJZD-EW-L14], and the National High Technology Research and Development Program of China [863 Program, 2015AA020108]. Funding for open access charge: National High Technology Research and Development Program of China [863 Program, 2015AA020108].

**Author Contributions**

Ya Cui, Runsheng Chen, Yiwei Niu and Xueyi Teng conceived the project; Ya Cui, Yiwei Niu and Xueyi Teng developed the method; All authors performed the data analysis; All authors drafted the manuscript and approved the final version.

**Competing Financial Interests**

The authors declare no competing financial interests.

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