PhyloPi: an affordable, purpose built phylogenetic pipeline for the HIV drug resistance testing facility.

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Abstract

Phylogenetic analysis plays a crucial role in quality control in the HIV drug resistance testing laboratory. If previous patient sequence data is available sample swaps can be detected and investigated. As Antiretroviral treatment coverage is increasing in many developing countries, so is the need for HIV drug resistance testing. In countries with multiple languages, transcription errors are easily made with patient identifiers. Here a self-contained blastn integrated phylogenetic pipeline can be especially useful. Even though our pipeline can run of any unix based system, a Raspberry Pi 3 is used here as a very affordable and integrated solution.

The computational capability of this single board computer is demonstrated as well as the utility thereof in the HIV drug resistance laboratory. Benchmarking analysis against a large public database

shows excellent time performance with minimal user intervention. This pipeline also contains utilities

to find previous sequences as well as phylogenetic analysis and a graphical sequence mapping utility

against the *pol* area of the HIV HXB2 reference genome. Sequence data from the Los Alamos HIV

database was analyzed for inter- and intra-patient diversity and logistic regression was conducted on

the calculated genetic distances. These findings show that allowable clustering and genetic distance

between viral sequences from different patients is very dependent on subtype as well as the area of

the viral genome being analyzed.

The Raspberry Pi image for PhyloPi, source code of the pipeline, sequence data, bash-, python- and

R-scripts for the logistic regression and benchmarking are available at

http://scholar.ufs.ac.za:8080/xmlui/handle/11660/7638.

The PhyloPi image and the source code are published under the GPLv3 license. A demo version of

the PhyloPi pipeline is available at http://phylopi.hpc.ufs.ac.za/.

Introduction

The use of combined Antiretroviral Therapy (cART) has dramatically decreased the mortality and

morbidity of HIV infected people. It was estimated that 12.9 million people were receiving

antiretroviral treatment (ART) by the end of 2013 worldwide. The number of HIV infected individuals

not receiving ART dropped from 90% in 2006 to 63% in 2013 globally [1]. Since 2010 the number of

people living with HIV on antiretroviral therapy increased from 7.5 million to 17 million in 2015,

whereas people infected with HIV only increased from 33.3 million to 36.7 million in the same time

period [2]. However, inadequate adherence on ART, especially when low genetic barrier regimens

such as NNRTI-based combination therapies are prescribed, often results in virologic failure with the

emergence of drug resistance. In contrast, in cases with virologic failure of high genetic barrier

regimens, such as boosted protease inhibitor- or dolutegravir- containing regimens drug resistance is

often absent [3,4]. Drug resistance testing can differentiate patients, with persisting failure, who

require adherence support from those who require a regimen switch and to select appropriate third-

line regimens [5,6]. It has been demonstrated by numerous investigators that not only is drug

resistance on the rise in South Africa and other countries, but that transmitted resistance is also on

the increase (Manasa *et al.*, 2016; Huang *et al.*, 2009; Rhee *et al.*, 2015; Boender *et al.*, 2015;

Steegen *et al.*, 2016a; Steegen *et al.*, 2016b). As a result this will increase the amount of sequence

data which will become available. We believe the work done here can help individual drug resistance

facilities to cope with the quality assurance requirements this increase will infer.

Phylogenetic analysis is typically used in molecular HIV drug resistance testing facilities to detect

gross cross contamination during nucleic acid extraction, reverse transcription, polymerase chain

reaction or sequencing. In some cases samples swaps can be detected if the patient has more than

one viral sequence. However, in busy clinics and diagnostic facilities transcription errors can be

made and errors are introduced in patient identification information, like names and date of birth. Also,

from experience in our South African setting, patients can have multiple names which can be used

interchangeably based on the ethnicity and language preference of the healthcare worker/patient pair.

This makes it difficult and laborious to find previous viral sequences to use in phylogenetic analysis.

Our pipeline includes a self-updating blast database which is used to find most similar past

sequences to include in the phylogenic analysis.

Although, the comparison of current and past viral sequences does not guarantee that no sample

swaps occurred, it does offer a valuable screen. The ability to include previous isolates in the drug

resistance genotypic inference provides the resistance mutation history of the patient. It is probable

that after treatment changes the circulating viral population changed and previous resistance

mutations have reverted or have been displaced by wild type amino acid [12,13]. The archived

proviral resistance can become important when formulating a 3rd line treatment regimen in most third

world settings.

Phylogenetic inference can be broken down into 4 consecutive steps [14]. The first step is a multiple

alignment of sequences. This alignment is then curated, especially to look for and exclude alignment

overhangs and in some cases gaps. This can dramatically improve the accuracy of the phylogenetic

inference [15]. The curated alignment is then used as the input data for phylogenetic analysis and the

phylogenetic tree is finally rendered. Combining these steps into an automated pipeline has opened

phylogenetic analysis to the non-specialist and has created a convenient solution even for the

specialist. This is very well demonstrated by the popular Phylogeny.fr web server, available at

http://www.phylogeny.fr/index.cgi   [14].   Also, the plethora of software available to conduct

phylogenetic analysis can be daunting to the casual user as can be appreciated from Felsentein's

inventory available at http://evolution.genetics.washington.edu/phylip/software.html. Another very well

cited and freely available software package for phylogenetic analysis is Mega [16]. The one thing

which these 'Swiss army knife' implementations have in common is that already well-established and

-cited software or algorithms are used to conduct the various steps.   We demonstrate a purpose

build, ultra-low cost, self-contained and portable solution to phylogenetic inference in the HIV drug

resistance genotyping laboratory. Our pipeline is implemented on a Raspberry Pi 3. These pocket

sized single board computers are the brain child of Eben Upton and colleagues form the Cambridge

University Computer Laboratory [17]. We furthermore conducted logistic regression on publically

available HIV sequence data from the Los Alamos HIV sequence database in order to demonstrate

the variations between inter- and intra-patient genetic distances.

97 Usage and general description

When powered on, PhyloPi broadcasts a WiFi hotspot to which another device can connect. It serves

a simple web interface which is used as a graphical user front end. Here the user can set up the

initial BLAST [18,19] database by formatting a blastn database from a cumulative fasta file of all viral

sequences sequencing data done previously. After this initial step the BLAST database gets updated

every time the user submits new sequences for analysis, thus maintaining a rolling, up to date

database. Before uploading the fasta file for phylogenetic inference, the user can choose how many

most similar sequences from the BLAST sequence database must be included for analysis.

The result for every analysis is stored in a SQL database which makes it possible to retrieve previous

analysis as a compressed archive.

These past results can either be queried by a query sample used in the analysis, the subject sample

found by blastn in any specific analysis or by name of the analysis. If all fields are left empty, all

previous analyses will be listed. Every step of the pipeline is stored in a compressed result folder

which allows the user to intervene on the phylogenetic inference from any step and to inspect each

step.   The phylogenetic tree rendering is available in portable network graphics (PNG) format,

scalable vector graphics (SVG) format and portable document format (PDF). Also included in the

result folder is a HTML R rendered heatmap showing the isolates in a distance matrix. This distance

matrix is also available as a comma separated values file. Other files in the results folder include a

fasta file containing the query sequences submitted for analysis combined with the subject samples

retrieved by blastn, as well as the MAFFT [20] aligned fasta files pre and post TrimAl [15] curation.

TrimAl also outputs a HTML file which annotates its actions on the MAFFT alignment; this is also
included in the results archive.

The user can search for previous isolates by entering a comma separated list of full or partially
matched identifiers depending and how they set a check box. This makes it easy to retrieve previous
samples in case the user is interested on the resistance profile of the previous isolates.

Also, a 'sanity check' has been implemented which the user can use to determine if the input
sequences are suitable for phylogenetic inference, or more generally are the sequences capable of
generating a sensible alignment. It is conceivable, that in a busy drug resistance testing facility, the
user might end up with sequences in a file which cover areas of the HIV genome which does not
overlap. PhyloPi will not be able to handle such data and will fail after the TrimAl step. The 'sanity
check' provides a crude way of mapping the individual entries in the fasta file to the POL region of
HXB2 (Fig 1). Since blastn is already available on PhyloPi, it was used for the mapping against the
HXB2 reference. From Fig 1, it is easy to find the sequences not suitable for inclusion in the
phylogenetic inference by PhyloPi or any software. The sequence covering the protease only region
cannot produce a sensible alignment with the sequences covering the reverse transcriptase only. A
sequence covering the integrase area was also included for illustrative purposes. This graphic is
rendered in SVG format, thus allowing very high resolution. This is important if the user has a fasta
file with many entries. We have tested this on 105 sequences and were able to zoom in and quickly
find sequences not making sense in the alignment.

Fig 1. A graphical representation of input sequences mapped against the reference, HXB2.
The legend bar at the bottom shows the protease, reverse transcriptase and integrase in green, blue
and red respectively. It is clear from this that the selected sequences do not qualify for phylogenetic
inference.

Considerations on software implemented

When choosing software for this pipeline the following factors were considered. The source code of
the software must be available to allow for compilation. This is essential in order to obtain binary
executables capable of running on the Raspberry Pi 3 ARM Cortex-A53 processor. The openness
and availability of source code also provides transparency and the possibility of scrutiny, thus no

'black boxes'. Since the Raspberry Pi 3 has only 1 GB of random access memory, the software used

must have a lightweight memory footprint. For the computationally intensive tasks we selected

software capable of parallelizing in order to maximize the use of the ARM Cortex-A53 quad core

processor. Lastly, we only used well cited software with a command line interface.

The pipeline

When the user uploads a new fasta file for analyses our pipeline first determines whether any unique

entries were uploaded not yet present in the master fasta file. If a unique header is found in the fasta

entry then that sequence is added to the master fasta file. Thus, if two or more sequences are

identical, but the headers differ they will be added to the master fasta file. After new sequences have

been added to the master fasta file, it gets formatted to a nucleic acid BLAST database with

makeblastdb [19]. This updated BLAST database can now be used to retrieve the most relevant

sequences for the analysis. In case different sequences as queries retrieve the same result

sequence, these duplicates are removed. This combined input and blast retrieved sequences are

saved as a fasta file which is used as the input for the multiple sequence alignment. The alignment is

conducted using MAFFT [20], this is followed by removal of overhangs in the multiple sequence

alignment using TrimAl [15]. The phylogenetic inference is conducted by FastTree 2 [21] and finally

the ETE3 Python API (Application Program Interface) is used for tree rendering [22]. A block diagram

of the PhyloPi pipeline is illustrated in Fig 2. The R programming language is used to calculate the

genetic distances from the MAFFT aligned multiple sequence alignment using the packages seqinr

and APE [23,24].

Fig 2. A block diagram illustrating the PhyloPi pipeline. A web interface offers control over the

pipeline. With each sequence submission the master fasta file is updated and a BLAST database is

formatted, thus maintaining a rolling blastn database. Duplicate entries are removed from the

combined input and BLAST retrieved isolates and this is aligned with MAFFT. Overhangs are

removed from the alignment before phylogenetic inference with FastTree. Finally, the tree is

rendered with ETE3.

176 The heatmap is available in a comma separated values file as well as an interactive HTML file with

177 colours corresponding to the genetic distances. The blocks of the heatmap are shaded from green to

178 yellow to red and provide information such as sequence identifiers and genetic distances. The

179 heatmap gives additional support to find close clustering of sequences. The heatmap colours are

180 scaled such that closely related isolates are coloured red and distant related isolated are coloured

181 green. This interactive HTML heatmap is rendered using the D3heatmap R package.

182 As can be seen from Fig 2, the entire pipeline is completely self-contained and the only additional

183 requirement is a WiFi capable device to be used for input. This provides extra security, in that the

184 data is not available on the internet. Other noteworthy software used are shown in Table 1.

186 **Table 1. Other software used for PhyloPi.**

Software	Use/Purpose	Link to software
Hostapd and udhcpd	WiFi hotspot and DHCP server. Enables devices to connect to PhyloPi.	https://w1.fi/hostapd/ and https://udhcp.busybox.net/
Lighttpd 1.4.35	Web server.	https://www.lighttpd.net/
SQLite 2.8.17	SQL database engine. To store results.	https://www.sqlite.org/
R 3.3.3 and rpy2	R and a python interface for the R language.	https://www.r-project.org/ and https://pypi.python.org/pypi/rpy2/2.8.2
Open MPI	Message Passing Interface for mutli threading.	https://www.open-mpi.org/
Python 2.7.9	Used for the pipeline.	https://www.python.org/
Xvfb and PyVirtualDisplay	X11 display server implementation for performing graphical operations and a python wrapper.	https://www.x.org/archive/X11R7.6/doc/man/man1/Xvfb.1.xhtml and https://pypi.python.org/pypi/PyVirtualDisplay

Application of PhyloPi in the HIV drug resistance testing laboratory

The HIV genotyping drug resistance facility at Department of Medical Microbiology and Virology, University of the Free State / National Health Laboratory Services has been using the PhyloPi pipeline for approximately a year. The following case reports are examples of applications of the PhyloPi in this facility where situations were resolved using this tool.

Case 1

A sample for an HIV drug resistance test was processed and released for patient A (adult female) without any quality control problems. About a month and a half later a sample from the same clinic was processed for patient B. Our analysis with PhyloPi revealed a genetic distance of 0 between patient A and B. The requesting clinician was contacted and the situation explained. The clinician reported that patient B was seen at the clinic while patient A's folder was still on the desk for review. When a nurse fetched patient B for phlebotomy the wrong file (that of patient A) was taken as the file for patient B, thus the identity of patient A was used for patient B on the sample. If only per-batch phylogenetic analysis were performed here, this mistake would have been missed.

Case 2

A sample was processed for HIV drug resistance testing before the viral load which was taken on the same day was available. When the viral load became available it was <150 RNA copies/mL. The HIV drug resistance sample was resubmitted for viral load testing to exclude a sample swap during viral load testing; the same viral load result was however reported. Analysis with PhyloPi revealed a genetic distance of 0.006 in the genetic distance heatmap with a sample processed approximately 9 months earlier. Even though the name of the patient was spelled differently, the date of birth matched as well as the address. We thus concluded both samples belonged to the same patient.

Vertical transmission and archived resistance

Also, mother and child pairs can be found with PhyloPi. Although this does not have obvious significant clinical meaning it does show that the pipeline works. In cases where patients have been genotyped before, it is possible that the patient's viral population has lost drug resistance mutations due to the lack of selective pressure because of regimen changes. Here it can become important to

217   include previous results, as it will give the clinician an idea of the archived drug resistance. Either

218   way, PhyloPi reliably detects previously samples from same patients or mother to child transfer.

Performance benchmarks

In order to demonstrate the capability of this small single board computer we performed benchmarks

in terms of the time each step in the pipeline takes. Instead of using CPU time to illustrate the

performance of the software used, we rather gathered the real time required to complete each step.

Thereby we show the time requirements in relevance to the workings of the laboratory.

Table 2. Descriptive summary of the sequence lengths from the Los Alamos database used for

benchmarking.

Min	1st Quartile	Median	Mean	3rd Quartile	Max
1764	3003	3012	3010	3012	3176

We downloaded HIV-1 sequences of the POL CDS region from the Los Alamos HIV public database

(http://www.hiv.lanl.gov/). At the time of this analysis, 11 337 sequences were available. A

descriptive summary of the sequence lengths used for this benchmarking is illustrated in Table 2. For

this analysis we used the Python bindings for the Selenium WebDriver API. In short, our test script,

pseudo-randomly selected sequences from the above mentioned fasta file. The number of

sequences selected was incremented by one sequence at time, in a loop ranging from 1 to 50. The

Selenium WebDriver was used for fasta selections through the PhyloPi web interface the same way a

human would have done. Timestamps were taken at each step in the pipeline and this data was used

to produce Fig 3 and Table 3.

Fig 3. Regression analysis of benchmarking PhyloPi on the Los Alamos HIV sequences. (a)

The number of sequences retrieved by BLAST vs. the number of input (query) sequences. (b) Time

(s) vs. the number of input (query) sequences. (c) Time (s) vs. the number of sequences included by

BLAST, thus the total number of sequences in the alignment. (d) Time (s) for phylogenetic inference

with fastTree vs. the total number of sequences in the alignment.

From all the steps in our pipeline the time requirements for the most time consuming steps are plotted

in Fig 3. All but the alignment step has a linear relationship of time required vs. number of

sequences. The multiple sequence alignment has a near quadratic relation (Fig 3c) as can be

expected. FastTree2 on the other hand, employs heuristics to change the $O(N^2)$ problem to a $O(N)$

problem, thus the linearity illustrated in Fig 3d [21].

Many genotyping laboratories are confined to 96 well plates for the sequencing reactions and most

use 2 or 3 times coverage of the area of interest. This means that most laboratories will be able to fit

16 or 24 patient samples on a plate considering the target for genotyping is the protease and reverse

transcriptase drug resistance relevant area. In our analysis we have included the whole POL coding

region which is thus an overestimation. However, including the 5 most significant sequences in our

analysis we can demonstrate the time requirements for 24 sequences as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Time requirements for the various steps in the PhyloPi pipeline.

Step (Software)	N query sequences	N Total sequences	Time (mm:ss)
Retrieving related sequences (blastn)	24	110	04:24
MSA (MAFFT)	NA	110	21:11
Phylogenetic inference (FastTree)	NA	110	01:12
All other steps combined	NA	110	00:27
Total time	NA	110	27:14

It is worth mentioning that implementing a combined protease, reverse transcriptase as well as

integrase resistance testing assay is possible. This would however require more sequencing primers

and reduce the number of patient samples being processed per 96 well plate. Due to the way

sequences are retrieved by blastn, our pipeline can handle mixed sequences in the BLAST database.

Most laboratories perform a combined protease and reverse transcriptase assay and only do an

integrase assay on patients exposed to integrase inhibitors. It is necessary however, to submit

queries of different areas separately, i.e. the sequences being submitted for analysis should be

capable of producing a sensible alignment. Thus if a query containing integrase sequences is

submitted, blastn will retrieve only sequences of integrase.

Inter- and intra-patient genetic distances of important coding regions

In order to gauge inter- and intra- patient variability and how to display this in a colour scaled heatmap we again examined sequences from the Los Alamos HIV database. In short, to look at inter and intra patient genetic distances of HIV isolates, sequences for the protease and reverse transcriptase coding regions, as a combined sequence (PR_RT), and sequences for the integrase genes were downloaded for the two subtypes, B and C, separately. The fasta files for the 2 subtypes were parsed with python scripts. One script was used to keep only one sequence per patient while another python script was used to put sequences from same patients in to separate fasta files; which we refer to here as patient clusters. This inter- and intra-patient filtering was done based on the Los Alamos HIVdb 'Patient id'. Any sequence where this data was not available was excluded from the analysis. The inter-patient fasta files were aligned as one file, while the intra-patient clusters were aligned separately by the use of a bash script; again using MAFFT as aligner. A breakdown of the number of sequences and patient clusters is shown in Table 4. As for the phylogenetic inference, for the genetic distance calculations the K80 [25] substitution model was used. The genetic distances from all the clusters were calculated with seqinr and ape as described above.

Table 4. Breakdown of sequences used in the inter- and intra-patient genetic distance analysis.

Subtype	Coding region	Type Inter	Type Intra
B	PR_RT	1969 sequences	359 sequence clusters
	INT	2461 sequences	405 sequence clusters
C	PR_RT	1753 sequences	455 sequence clusters
	INT	1171 sequences	217 sequence clusters

The violin plots (Fig 4a) shows overlap between types inter- and intra-patient for both subtypes and for both the integrase (INT) as well as the protease reverse transcriptase (PR_RT) coding regions.

From the violin plots, it is clear that for type inter-patient the INT coding region is more conserved than

the PR_RT coding region.

Fig 4. Genetic distance analysis of type inter and intra. (a) Genetic distances depicted in violin

graphs of both subtype A and B for patient comparisons, type Intra en Inter separately showing INT

(integrase) and PR_RT (protease reverse transcriptase) coding regions. (b) Logistic regression

models showing predicted probability of sequences being of type inter or intra. A probability of one

correlates strongly with type intra where a probability of zero strongly correlates with type inter. The

dotted lines show the distance intercepts of a 0.5 probability cut-off.

Logistic regression was performed using the R glm library and modeled results are plotted in Fig 4b.

From this it is clear that subtype B is more conserved compared to subtype C for the coding regions

analyzed here. Also the INT part of the POL gene for both subtypes is more conserved compared to

the PR_RT part of the POL gene. Our findings here are in agreement with Li *et al* (2015), who have

found that the integrase protein sequence is the most conserved among the 15 proteins they

analyzed followed by the rest of the viral enzymes. Comparing the distance intercepts for a predicted

probability of 0.5 for either type inter or intra, we can see there is a noticeable difference between

subtypes and coding regions. Thus, from the results shown in Fig 4, it is difficult to select one genetic

distance cutoff that will fit all subtypes and coding regions. It is also conceivable that the probability of

finding transmission clusters will increase as the blastn database increases.

Discussion

We have demonstrated that this affordable single board computer is capable of performing

phylogenetic inference in an impressively short time and is capable of retrieving the most significant

sequences from its automatically maintained blastn database without requiring any additional user

intervention. Also the utility of this self-contained pipeline was shown in our case studies.

Additionally, PhyloPi provides a search interface for retrieving sequences by name as well as past

analysis stored in a SQL database. PhyloPi also provides a tool with which the user can easily map

sequences in a fasta file against HIV HXB2 using blastn. This quickly gives a result showing the

areas the sequences cover in the POL region, which can be useful to determine whether input

sequences are suitable for alignment.

The logistic regression showed that there is no clear cutoff between inter- and intra-patient HIV

sequences and that this is dependent on the subtype and area being sequenced. Furthermore, as

the blastn database grows in size, the likelihood of finding closely related sequences from different

patients' increases. There are different sources of sample contamination. Cross contamination

between samples may rather create an abnormally high number of mixed bases in the resulting

sequence and it is standard practice to repeat these samples. If a sample with a very high viral load

contaminated an adjacent sample or a sample in the same batch with a very low viral load, this may

not result in large numbers of mixed bases, but these samples will rather have a genetic distance of

zero or very close to it. Amplicon carryover contamination could also either result in a high number of

mixed bases or identical sequences that are clustered together in time. The true power of PhyloPi is

its ability to detect and trigger inspection of sequencing results from patients where there is no

apparent trigger for such investigation from routine quality assurance or clinical information provided

as illustrated in the section 'Application of PhyloPi in the HIV drug resistance testing laboratory', case

1. Human error is inevitable and any safety net to catch these mistakes is worthwhile, PhyloPi

provides such a safety net.

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AB023804
AB081152

Position relative to HXB2

Multiple sequence alignment (MAFFT)

Cleaned/Trimmed Multiple sequence alignment (TrimAl)

Phylogenetic inference and rendering (fasttree and ETE3)

BLAST results

Unified BLAST results

blastn search

BLASTdb

Formating blast db

Web based user input and control

fasta sequence submission

Master fasta file

Result storage

SQLite DB

Heatmap of genetic distances