

# MG7: Configurable and scalable 16S metagenomics data analysis – new methods optimized for massive cloud computing

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## 2 ABSTRACT

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

5 Metagenomics data analysis is growing at exponential rate during the last years. The increasing throughput  
6 of massively parallel sequencing technologies, the derived decreasing cost, and the high impact of  
7 metagenomics studies, especially in human health (diagnostics, treatments, drug response, prevention), are  
8 crucial reasons responsible for this growth of Metagenomics. There is a growing interest in sequencing  
9 all kind of microbiomes (gut, mouth, skin, urinary tract, airway, milk, bladder), in different conditions of  
10 health and disease, or after different treatments. Metagenomics is also impacting environmental sciences,  
11 crop sciences, agrifood sector and biotechnology in general. This new possibilities for exploring the  
12 diversity of micro-organisms in the most diverse environments is opening many new research areas but,  
13 due to this wide interest, it is expected that the amount of data will be overwhelming in the short time  
14 (Stephens et al., 2015).

15 Genome researchers have raised the alarm over big data in the past nature news add ref but even a more  
16 serious challenge might be faced with the metagenomics boom/ upswing. If we compare metagenomics  
17 data with other genomics data used in clinical genotyping we find a differential feature: the key role of  
18 time. Thus, for example, in some longitudinal studies, serial sampling of the same patient along several  
19 weeks (or years) is being used for the follow up of some intestinal pathologies, for studying the evolution  
20 of gut microbiome after antibiotic treatment, or for colon cancer early detection (Zeller et al., 2014).  
21 This need of sampling across time adds more complexity to metagenomics data storage and demands  
22 adapted algorithms to detect state variations across time as well as idiosyncratic commonalities of the  
23 microbiome of each individual (Franzosa et al., 2015). In addition to the intra-individual sampling-time  
24 dependence, metagenomic clinical test results vary depending on the specific region of extraction of  
25 the clinical specimen. This local variability adds complexity to the analysis since different localizations  
26 (different tissues, different anatomical regions, healthy or tumour tissues) are required to have a sufficiently

complete landscape of the human microbiome. Moreover, reanalysis of old samples using new tools and better reference databases might be also demanded from time to time.

During the last years other sciences as astronomy or particle physics are facing the big data challenge but, at least, these science have standards for data processing (Stephens et al., 2015). Global standards for converting raw sequence data into processed data are not yet well defined in metagenomics and there are shortcomings derived from the fact that many bioinformatics methodologies currently used for metagenomics data analysis were designed for a scenario very different that the current one. These are some of the aspects that have suffered crucial changes and advances with a direct impact in metagenomics data analysis. i. The first aspect is related to the sequences to be analyzed: the reads are larger, the sequencing depth and the number of samples of each project are considerably bigger. The first metagenomics studies were very local projects, while nowadays the most fruitful studies are done at a global level (international, continental, national). This kind of global studies has yielded the discovery of clinical biomarkers for diseases of the importance of cancer, obesity or inflammatory bowel diseases and has allowed exploring the biodiversity in many earth environments ii. The second aspect derives from the impressive genomics explosion, its effect being felt in this case in the reference sequences. The immense amount of sequences available in public repositories demands new approaches in curation, update and storage for metagenomics reference databases: current models will or already have problems to face the future avalanche of metagenomic sequences. iii. The third aspect to consider for metagenomics data analysis is related to the appearance of new models for massive computation and storage and to the new programming methodologies (Scala, ...) and new cloud models and resources. The immense new possibilities that these advances offer must have a direct impact in the metagenomics data analysis. iv. And finally the new social manner to do science, and especially genomic science is the fourth aspect to consider. Metagenomics evolves in a social and global scenario following a science democratization trend in which many small research groups from distant countries share a common big metagenomics project. This global cooperation demands systems allowing following exactly the same pipelines using equivalent cloud resources to modularly execute the analysis in an asynchronous way of working between different groups. This definitively new scenario demands new methods and tools to handle the current and future volume of metagenomic data with the sufficient speed of analysis. Considering all these aspects we have designed a new open source methodology for analyzing metagenomics data that exploits the new possibilities that cloud computing offers to get a system robust, programmatically configurable, modular, distributed, flexible, scalable and traceable in which the biological databases of reference sequences can be easily updated and/or frequently substituted by new ones or by databases specifically designed for focused projects.

## 2 MATERIALS AND METHODS

### 2.1 Amazon Web Services

### 2.2 Scala

Scala is a hybrid object-functional programming language which runs on Java Virtual Machine. It has support for type-level programming, type-dependent types (through type members) and singleton types, which permits a restricted form of dependent types where types can depend essentially on values determined at compile time (through their corresponding singleton types). Conversely, through implicits one can retrieve the value corresponding to a singleton type.

67 The other key feature for us is Java interoperability, which let us build on the vast number of existing  
68 Java libraries; we take advantage of this when using Bio4j as an API for the NCBI taxonomy.

69 MG7 itself and all the libraries used are written in Scala 2.11.

## 70 2.3 Statika

71 Statika is a Scala library developed by **so and so** which serves as a way of defining and composing  
72 machine behaviors statically. The main component are **bundles**. Each bundle declares a sequence of  
73 computations (its behavior) which will be executed in an **environment**. A bundle can *depend* on other  
74 bundles, and when being executed by an environment, its DAG of dependencies is linearized and run in  
75 sequence. In our use, bundles correspond to what an EC2 instance should do and an environment to an  
76 image (AMI: **A**mazon **M**achine **I**mage) which prepares the basic configuration, downloads the Scala code  
77 and runs it.

## 78 2.4 Datasets

79 Datasets is a Scala library developed by **so and so** to declare datasets and their locations. **Data** is  
80 represented as type-indexed fields: Keys are modeled as singleton types, and values correspond to what  
81 could be called a denotation of the key: a value of type `Location` tagged with the key type. Then a  
82 **Dataset** is essentially a collection of data, which are guaranteed statically to be different through type-level  
83 predicates, making use of the value type correspondence which can be established through singleton types  
84 and implicits. A dataset location is then just a list of locations formed by locations of each data member of  
85 that dataset.

86 Data keys can further have a reference to a **data type**, which, as the name hints at, can help in providing  
87 information about the type of data we are working with. For example, when declaring Illumina reads as a  
88 data, a data type containing information about the read length, insert size or end type (single or paired) is  
89 used.

90 A **location** can be, for example, an S3 object or a local file; by leaving the location type used to denote  
91 particular data free we can work with different “physical” representations, while keeping track of to which  
92 logical data they are a representation of. Thus, a process can generate locally a `.fastq` file representing  
93 the merged reads, while another can put it in S3 with the fact that they all correspond to the “same” merged  
94 reads is always present, as the data that those “physical” representations denote.

## 95 2.5 Loquat

96 Loquat is a library developed by **so and so** designed for the execution of embarrassingly parallel tasks  
97 using S3, SQS and EC2.

98 A **loquat** executes a process with explicit input and output datasets (declared using the *Datasets* library  
99 described above). Workers (EC2 instances) read from an SQS queue the S3 locations for both input and  
100 output data; then they download the input to local files, and pass these file locations to the process to be  
101 executed. The output is then put in the corresponding S3 locations.

102 A manager instance is used to monitor workers, provide initial data to be put in the SQS queue and  
103 optionally release resources depending on a set of configurable conditions.

104 Both worker and manager instances are Statika bundles. In the case of the worker, it can declare any  
105 dependencies needed to perform its task: other tools, libraries, or data.

All configuration such as the number of workers or the instance types is declared statically, the specification of a loquat being ultimately a Scala object. There are deploy and resource management methods, making it easy to use an existing loquat either as a library or from (for example) a Scala REPL.

The input and output (and their locations) being defined statically has several critical advantages. First, composing different loquats is easy and safe; just use the output types and locations of the first one as input for the second one. Second, data and their types help in not mixing different resources when implementing a process, while serving as a safe and convenient mechanism for writing generic processing tasks. For example, merging paired-end Illumina reads generically is easy as the data type includes the relevant information (insert size, read length, etc) to pass to a tool such as FLASH.

## 2.6 Type-safe DSLs for BLAST and FLASH

We developed our own type-safe DSLs (Domain Specific Language) for FLASH and BLAST expressions and their execution.

### 2.6.1 BLAST DSL

In the case of BLAST we use a model for expressions where we can guarantee for each BLAST command expression at compile time

- all required arguments are provided
- only valid options are provided
- correct types for each option value
- valid output record specification

Generic type-safe parsers returning an heterogeneous record of BLAST output fields are also available, together with output data defined using *Datasets* which have a reference to the exact BLAST command options which yielded that output. This let us provide generic parsers for BLAST output which are guaranteed to be correct, for example.

### 2.6.2 FLASH DSL

In the same spirit as for BLAST,

## 2.7 Bio4j

Bio4j is a data platform integrating data from different resources such as UniProt or GO in a graph data paradigm. We use the module containing the NCBI Taxonomy, and the use their Java API from Scala in the assignment phase.

# 3 RESULTS

## 3.1 Overview

To tackle the challenges posed by metagenomics big data analysis outlined in the Introduction,

- AWS resources in Scala (??) - A new approach to data analysis specification, management and specification based on working with it in exactly the same way as for a software project, together with the extensive use of compile-time structures and checks.
- Parallelization and distributed analysis based on AWS, with on-demand infrastructure as the basic paradigm - fully automated processes, data and cloud resources management.
- Static reproducible specification of dependencies and behavior of the different

components using *Statika* and *Datasets* - Definition of complex pipelines using *Loquat* a composable system for scaling/parallelizing stateless computations especially designed for Amazon Web Services (AWS) - Modeling of the taxonomy tree using the new paradigm of graph databases (Bio4j). It facilitates the taxonomic assignment tasks and the calculation of the taxa abundance values considering the hierarchic structure of taxonomy tree (cumulative values). - per-read assignment (??)

## 3.2 16S Reference Database Construction

Our 16S Reference Database is a curated subset of sequences from NCBI nucleotide database **nt**. The sequences included were selected by similarity with the bacterial and archaeal reference sequences downloaded from the **RDP database** (Cole et al., 2013). RDP unaligned sequences were used to capture new 16S sequences from **nt** using BLAST similarity search strategies and then, performing additional curation steps to remove sequences with poor taxonomic assignments to taxonomic nodes close to the root of the taxonomy tree. All the nucleotide sequences included in **nt** database has a taxonomic assignment provided by the **Genbank** sequence submitter. NCBI provides a table (available at <ftp://ftp.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pub/taxonomy/>) to do the mapping of any Genbank Identifier (GI) to its Taxonomy Identifier (TaxID). Thus, we are based on a crowdsourced submitter-maintained taxonomic annotation system for reference sequences. It supposes a sustainable system able to face the expected number of reference sequences that will populate the public global nucleotide databases in the near future. Another advantageous point is that we are based on NCBI taxonomy, the *de facto* standard taxonomic classification for biomolecular data (Cochrane and Galperin, 2010). NCBI taxonomy is, undoubtedly, the most used taxonomy all over the world and the most similar to the official taxonomies of each specific field. This is a crucial point because all the type-culture and tissue databanks follow this official taxonomical classification and, in addition, all the knowledge accumulated during last decades is referred to this taxonomy. In addition NCBI provides a direct connection between taxonomical formal names and the physical specimens that serve as exemplars for the species (Federhen, 2014).

Certainly, if metagenomics results are easily integrated with the theoretical and experimental knowledge of each specific area, the impact of metagenomics will be higher than if metagenomics progresses as a disconnected research branch. Considering that metagenomics data interoperability, which is especially critical in clinical environments, requires a stable taxonomy to be used as reference, we decided to rely on the most widely used taxonomy: the NCBI taxonomy. In addition, the biggest global sequence database GenBank follows this taxonomy to register the origin of all their submitted sequences. Our 16S database building strategy allows the substitution of the 16S database by any other subset of **nt**, even by the complete **nt** database if it would be needed, for example, for analyzing shotgun metagenomics data. This possibility of changing the reference database provides flexibility to the system enabling it for easy updating and project-driven personalization.

## 3.3 Bio4j and Graph Databases

## 3.4 MG7 Pipeline Description

## 3.5 Taxonomic Assignment Algorithms

### 3.5.1 Lowest Common Ancestor based Taxonomic Assignment

For each read:

1. Select only one BLASTN alignment (HSP) per reference sequence (the HSP with lowest e value)
2. Filter all the HSPs with bitscore below a defined BLASTN bitscore threshold  $s_0$
3. Find the best bitscore

value  $S$  in the set of BLASTN HSPs corresponding to hits of that read 4. Filter all the alignments with bitscore below  $p * S$  (where  $p$  is a fixed by the user coefficient to define the bitscore required, e.g. if  $p=0.9$  and  $S=700$  the required bitscore threshold would be 630) 5. Select all the taxonomic nodes to which map the reference sequences involved in the selected HSPs: - If all the selected taxonomic nodes forms a line in the taxonomy tree (are located in a not branched lineage to the tree root) we should choose the most specific taxID as the final assignment for that read - If not, we should search for the (sensu stricto) Lowest Common Ancestor (LCA) of all the selected taxonomic nodes (See Figure X)

In this approach the value used for evaluating the similarity is the bitscore that is a value that increases when similarity is higher and depends a lot on the length of the HSP

### 3.5.2 Best BLAST hit taxonomic assignment

We have maintained the simpler method of Best BLAST Hit (BBH) taxonomic assignment because, in some cases, it can provide information about the sequences that can be more useful than the obtained using LCA algorithm. Using LCA algorithm when some reference sequences with BLAST alignments over the required thresholds map to a not sufficiently specific taxID, the read can be assigned to an unspecific taxon near to the root. If the BBH reference sequence maps to a more specific taxa this method, in that case, gives us useful information.

## 3.6 Using MG7 with some example data-sets

We selected the datasets described in [Kennedy-2014] (??)

## 3.7 MG7 availability

MG7 is open source, available at <https://github.com/ohnosequences/mg7> under an AGPLv3 license.

# 4 DISCUSSION

## 4.1 What MG7 brings

We could summarize the most innovative ideas and developments in MG7:

1. Treat data analysis as a software project. This makes for radical improvements in *reproducibility*, *reuse*, *versioning*, *safety*, *automation* and *expressiveness*
2. input and output data, their locations and type are expressible and checked at compile-time using our Scala library *datasets*
3. management of dependencies and machine configurations using our Scala library *Statika*
3. automation of AWS cloud resources and processes, including distribution and parallelization through the use of *Loquat*
4. taxonomic data and related operations are treated natively as what they are: graphs, through the use of *Bio4j*
5. MG7 provides a sustainable model for taxonomic assignment, appropriate to face the challenging amount of data that high throughput sequencing technologies generate

## 4.2 A new approach to data analysis

General approach. An analysis is defined as a software project. It can evolve in the same way. We can run the analysis in a test phase, review configuration and changes, etc. Key advantages of this approach are

- 219 • **Reproducibility** the same analysis can be run again with exactly the same configuration in a trivial  
220 way.
- 221 • **Versioning** The analysis is a software project so it goes through the same stages, there can be different  
222 versions, stable releases, etc.
- 223 • **Reuse** we can build standard configurations on top of this and reuse them for subsequent data analysis.
- 224 • **Decoupling** We can start working on the analysis specification, without any need for data in a much  
225 easier way.
- 226 • **Expresiveness and safety** choose only from valid Illumina read types, build default FLASH command  
227 based on that, ...

### 228 4.3 Inputs, outputs, data: compile-time, expressive, composable

### 229 4.4 Tools, data, dependencies and machine configurations

### 230 4.5 Parallel cloud execution ??

### 231 4.6 Taxonomy and Bio4j

232 The hierarchic structure of the taxonomy of the living organisms is a tree, and, hence, is also a graph  
233 in which each node, with the exception of the root node, has a unique parent node. It led us to model the  
234 taxonomy tree as a graph using the graph database paradigm. Previously we developed Bio4j [Pareja-  
235 Tobes-2015], a platform for the integration of semantically rich biological data using typed graph models.  
236 It integrates most publicly available data linked with sequences into a set of interdependent graphs to be  
237 used for bioinformatics analysis and especially for biological data.

### 238 4.7 Future-proof

### 239 4.8 MG7 Future developments

240 Other possible uses of the general schema: statika, loquat, ...

#### 241 4.8.1 Shotgun metagenomics

242 It is certainly possible to adapt MG7 to work with shotgun metagenomics data. Simply changing the  
243 reference database to include whole genome sequence data could yield interesting results. This could  
244 also be refined by restricting reference sequences according to all sort of criteria, like biological function  
245 or taxonomy. Bio4j would be an invaluable tool here, thanks to its ability to express express complex  
246 predicates on sequences using all the information linked with them (GO annotations, UniProt data, NCBI  
247 taxonomy, etc).

#### 248 4.8.2 Comparison of groups of samples

#### 249 4.8.3 Interactive visualizations using the output files of MG7 (Biographika project)

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