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A Bioinformatics Approach to
Synthetic Lethal Interactions in
Breast Cancer with Gene
Expression Data

S. Thomas Kelly

a thesis submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
at the University of Otago, Dunedin,
New Zealand.

18 June 2017

Abstract

Background

Synthetic lethal genetic interactions are re-emerging in the post-genomics era due to their potential for precision medicine against cancers. Synthetic lethal drug design exploits the functional redundancy of genes disrupted in cancers (including tumour suppressors) to develop specific treatments against them. *CDH1*, which encodes [E-cadherin](#), is a tumour suppressor gene with loss of function in breast and stomach cancers. Experimental screens have identified candidate synthetic lethal interactions for drug target triage, which can be further supported with bioinformatics analysis. Furthermore, gene expression data enables investigation of synthetic lethal pathways and graph structure of synthetic lethal genes within them.

Approach

A computational methodology, the Synthetic Lethal Prediction Tool ([SLIPT](#)) has been developed to detect synthetic lethal interactions in gene expression data. This methodology was demonstrated on interactions with *CDH1* in breast and stomach cancer data from The Cancer Genome Atlas ([TCGA](#)) project. Synthetic lethal genes and pathways were further investigated with unsupervised clustering, gene set over-representation analysis, metagenes, and permutation resampling. In particular, analyses focused on comparing [SLIPT](#) gene candidates to an experimental [siRNA](#) screen [Telford *et al.* \(2015\)](#). Network analysis methods were applied to the most supported pathways to test for pathway structure among between synthetic lethal candidates. Simulation and modelling was used to assess the statistical performance of [SLIPT](#), including simulated data with correlation structures derived from graph structures.

Findings

Many candidate synthetic lethal partners of *CDH1* were detected in both [TCGA](#) breast cancer. These genes clustered into several distinct groups, with distinct biological functions and elevated expression in different clinical subtypes. While the number of genes detected by both approaches was not significant, these contained significantly enriched pathways. In particular, $G_{\alpha i}$ signalling, cytoplasmic microfibres, and extracellular fibrin clotting were robustly supported by both approaches, which is consistent with the known cytoskeletal and cell signalling roles of [E-cadherin](#) and validation of [GPCR](#) pathways performed by [Telford *et al.* \(2015\)](#). Many of these pathways were replicated in stomach cancer data. The pathways supported only by [SLIPT](#) included regulation of immune signalling and translational elongation which were not expected to be detected in an isogenic cell line model but are still candidates for further investigation.

Synthetic lethal candidates detected by [SLIPT](#) and [siRNA](#) were compared within graph structures of the candidate synthetic lethal pathways. These genes did not differ with respect to network metrics of importance or connectivity in the pathway. There was little support, across pathways, that [SLIPT](#) gene candidates were consistently upstream or downstream of [siRNA](#) gene candidates with pathways.

A model of synthetic lethality was used to simulate gene expression data with synthetic lethal partners of a gene. The [SLIPT](#) methodology had high statistical performance, detecting few synthetic lethal partners, which diminished with more synthetic lethal partners or lower sample size. The [SLIPT](#) methodology performed better than Pearson correlation or the χ^2 -test. In particular, it performed well with high specificity for datasets containing thousands of genes or genes positively correlated with the query gene (as expected to occur in expression data). [SLIPT](#) was robust across correlation structures, including those derived from complex pathway structures and often distinguished synthetic lethal genes from those positively or negatively correlated with them. Therefore [SLIPT](#) is appropriate to identify synthetic lethal genes within pathways and use candidate synthetic lethal genes (and their correlates) to identify synthetic lethal pathways.

Summary

Thus my thesis has developed, evaluated, and refined a bioinformatics approach to discovery of synthetic lethal genes solely from gene expression data. This approach has been demonstrated to detect biologically informative and clinically relevant candidate partners for *CDH1* in breast and stomach cancers. These investigations have also involved the development of network analysis and simulation procedures which may be more widely applicable.

Research Contributions During Candidature

Publications

Kelly, S. T. and Spencer, H. G. (2017) Population-Genetics Models of Sex-Limited [Genomic](#) Imprinting. *Theoretical Population Biology* **115**:35-44
doi:[10.1016/j.tpb.2017.03.004](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tpb.2017.03.004)

Manuscripts Submitted

Kelly, S. T., Single, A. B., Telford, B. J., Beetham, H. G., Godwin, T. D., Chen, A., Black, M., A., and Guilford, P. J. (2017) Towards HDGC chemoprevention: vulnerabilities in [E-cadherin](#)-negative cells identified by [genomic](#) interrogation of isogenic cell lines and whole tumors. Submitted to *Cancer Prevention Research*.

Kelly, S. T., Chen, A., Guilford, P. J., and Black, M. A. (2017) Synthetic lethal interaction prediction of target pathways in [E-cadherin](#) deficient breast cancers. Submitted to *BMC Genomics*.

Conference Presentations

Consortium of Biological Sciences 2017 (Kobe) December TBC

eResearch 2017 (Queenstown) February 20th-22nd

Research Bazaar 2016 (Dunedin) February 2nd-4th

eResearch 2016 (Queenstown) February 9th-11th

Genetics Otago Symposium 2016 (Dunedin) March 7th-8th

DunDead: Zombie Science and Culture Festival 2014 (Dunedin) August 16th-17th

eResearch 2014 (Hamilton) June 30th-July 2nd (Supported by Google)

Poster Presentations

Next Generation Sequencing Asia 2016 (Singapore) October 11th-12th (Supported by the University of Otago Division of Health Sciences; Maurice and Phyllis Paykel Trust)

Research Bazaar 2015 (Melbourne) February 16th-18th (Supported by the New Zealand eScience Infrastructure)

Otago School of Medical Sciences Postgraduate Symposium 2015 (Dunedin) April 28th-29th

QMB Cancer Drugs Satellite 2014 (Queenstown) August 24th-25th

Seminar Presentations

University of Otago Department of Biochemistry 2017 (Dunedin) November TBC

Tōhoku University 2016 (Sendai) November 11th

Okinawa Institute of Science and Technology 2016 (Onna) November 1st

Sōkendai Graduate University 2016 (Hayama) October 25th

Tōkyō University Institute of Medical Science 2016 (Shirokanedai) October 24th

National Institute of Genetics 2016 (Mishima) October 21st

RIKEN Division of [Genomic](#) Technologies 2016 (Yokohama) October 20th

Software Packages

Software packages in the R language have been released. Please refer to the appropriate GitHub repository for more information (including documentation, vignettes, and installation instructions), on the following account: <https://github.com/TomKellyGenetics>

- [slipt](#) to accompany the synthetic lethal publication above and release SLIPT (Synthetic Lethal Interaction Prediction Tool)
- [vioplotx](#) to provide enhanced violin plots
- [heatmap.2x](#) to provide annotated heatmaps
- [igraph.extensions](#) metapackage for the packages for iGraph objects:
 - [plot.igraph](#) to provide plotting for directed graphs
 - [info.centraliity](#) to compute network analysis metrics
 - [pathway.structure.permutation](#) for resampling within pathways
 - [graphsim](#) to simulate expression ([mvtnorm](#)) from pathway structures

The [slipt-app](#) GitHub repository also hosts an application for [Synthetic Lethal Interaction Prediction Tool \(SLIPT\)](#) developed in the R [shiny](#) environment as part of a related project. There is a digital copy of this thesis, including high resolution full-colour figures, hosted at:

<https://github.com/TomKellyGenetics/thesis/blob/master/thesis.pdf>

Acknowledgements

I thank my supervisors A/Prof. Mik Black and Prof. Parry Guilford for their support and guidance throughout this my postgraduate studies. It has been a great experience, I look forward to seeing what your research groups produce in the future, may this not be the end for us.

I am also thankful for the guidance and mentorship of Prof. Hamish Spencer for career advice throughout my studies and time in his research group.

I am also grateful to the past and current members of these research groups, and my peers at the laboratory benches and computers across campus. The peer support, camaraderie, and guidance of newer students has been an incredible part of my time at Otago and has made my thesis studies not just easier but possible at all. The postgraduate community is very special here and I have truly made some lifelong friends from all over the world. You are talented researchers and amazing people. May we meet again some day. Where-ever you may end up, its small world and there's always time to catch up. I'd be delighted to host some visits while working abroad.

I cannot thank my friends, flatmates, family, and diligent proofreaders enough for their patience and support during such as massive, challenging, and (I'm sure you've heard too often) stressful undertaking during both my PhD and the study leading up to it. There are too many of you to name everyone here without leaving someone out, so thank you all for everything you've done, both the good times and the tough. Thank you for at least pretending to understand complex math oft brought up at the wrong moment. Thank you for checking my writing or slides, even when sprung on you last minute. Thank for your time when what I really needed was a chat, a walk, a drink with "the guys", or a moment to think clearly.

I thank the various organisations that supported this research project:

- This thesis was supported by the Postgraduate Tassell Scholarship in Cancer Research, a University of Otago Doctoral Scholarship.
- The New Zealand eScience Infrastructure (NeSI) provided access to the Intel Pan high-performance computing cluster, support, and training to use it effectively. Various aspects of this thesis would not have been possible without access to such an incredible national resource.
- The Health Research Council (HRC) of New Zealand provided funding for experimental research in the Cancer Genetics Laboratory. Some aspects of this project would not have been possible without access to the data and findings funded by this grant.
- The Allan Wilson Centre and Otago School of Biomedical Sciences provided funding for summer research placements which was a valuable opportunity to gain experience and training used in this thesis project.

I thank the following organisations for support towards presenting findings in this thesis at conference and seminars:

- Google (eResearch 2014, Hamilton)
- NeSI (Software Carpentry training and Research Bazaar 2015, Melbourne)
- REANNZ, NZGL, and NeSI (eResearch 2016, Queenstown)
- Otago Division of Health Sciences, Oxford Global, and Maurice and Phyllis Paykel Trust (NGS Asia 2016, Singapore)
- RIKEN Division of Genomic Technologies and the Okinawa Institute of Science and Technology (seminar visits in Japan)

Thanks most of all to my fiancé, Dr Yui Kawagishi, you've been an inspiration. Thank you for your support and encouragement, every day, even from afar: it has always made a difference. It's been incredible to see you flourish in your career and I look forward to joining you again soon. May the next chapter of our adventures involve a bit less Skype across timezones.

どうもありがとう由ちゃん。また来月。頑張った！行きます！

Contents

Glossary	xxi
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Acronyms	xxviii
----------	--------

1 Introduction and Literature Review	1
1.1 Cancer Research in the Post-Genomic Era	1
1.1.1 Cancer is a Global Health Issue	2
1.1.1.1 The Genetics and Molecular Biology of Cancers	3
1.1.2 The genomic Revolution in Cancer Research	4
1.1.2.1 High-Throughput Technologies	4
1.1.2.2 Bioinformatics and Genomic Data	6
1.1.3 Genomics Projects	6
1.1.3.1 The Cancer Genome Project	6
1.1.3.2 The Cancer Genome Atlas Project	7
1.1.4 Genomic Cancer Medicine	9
1.1.4.1 Cancer Genes and Driver Mutations	9
1.1.4.2 Precision Cancer Medicine	10
1.1.4.3 Molecular Diagnostics and Pan-Cancer Medicine	10
1.1.4.4 Targeted Therapeutics and Pharmacogenomics	10
1.1.5 Systems and Network Biology	11
1.1.5.1 Network Medicine and Polypharmacology	13
1.2 A Synthetic Lethal Approach to Cancer Medicine	14
1.2.1 Synthetic Lethal Genetic Interactions	14
1.2.2 Synthetic Lethal Concepts in Genetics	15
1.2.3 Synthetic Lethality in Model Systems	16
1.2.3.1 Synthetic Lethal Pathways and Networks	16
1.2.3.2 Evolution of Synthetic Lethality	17
1.2.4 Synthetic Lethality in Cancer	18
1.2.5 Clinical Impact of Synthetic Lethality in Cancer	19
1.2.6 High-throughput Screening for Synthetic Lethality	21
1.2.6.1 Synthetic Lethal Screens	22
1.2.7 Computational Prediction of Synthetic Lethality	25
1.2.7.1 Bioinformatics Approaches to Genetic Interactions	25
1.2.7.2 Comparative Genomics	26
1.2.7.3 Analysis and Modelling of Protein Data	29
1.2.7.4 Differential Gene Expression	31

1.2.7.5	Data Mining and Machine Learning	32
1.2.7.6	Mutually Exclusive Bimodality	35
1.2.7.7	Rationale for Further Development	36
1.3	E-cadherin as a Synthetic Lethal Target	36
1.3.1	The <i>CDH1</i> gene and its Biological Functions	36
1.3.1.1	Cytoskeleton	37
1.3.1.2	Extracellular and Tumour Micro-environment	37
1.3.1.3	Cell-Cell Adhesion and Signalling	37
1.3.2	<i>CDH1</i> as a Tumour (and Invasion) Suppressor	38
1.3.2.1	Breast Cancers and Invasion	38
1.3.3	Hereditary Diffuse Gastric Cancer and Lobular Breast Cancer	38
1.3.4	Cell Line Models of <i>CDH1</i> Null Mutations	40
1.4	Summary and Research Direction of Thesis	40
1.4.1	Thesis Aims	42
2	Methods and Resources	43
2.1	Bioinformatics Resources for Genomics Research	43
2.1.1	Public Data and Software Packages	43
2.1.1.1	Cancer Genome Atlas Data	44
2.1.1.2	Reactome and Annotation Data	45
2.2	Data Handling	45
2.2.1	Normalisation	45
2.2.2	Sample Triage	46
2.2.3	Metagenes and the Singular Value Decomposition	46
2.2.3.1	Candidate Triage and Integration with Screen Data	48
2.3	Techniques	49
2.3.1	Statistical Procedures and Tests	49
2.3.2	Gene Set Over-representation Analysis	50
2.3.3	Clustering	50
2.3.4	Heatmap	50
2.3.5	Modeling and Simulations	51
2.3.5.1	Receiver Operating Characteristic (Performance)	52
2.3.6	Resampling Analysis	52
2.4	Pathway Structure Methods	53
2.4.1	Network and Graph Analysis	53
2.4.2	Sourcing Graph Structure Data	54
2.4.3	Constructing Pathway Subgraphs	54
2.4.4	Network Analysis Metrics	55
2.5	Implementation	56
2.5.1	Computational Resources and Linux Utilities	56
2.5.2	R Language and Packages	57
2.5.3	High Performance and Parallel Computing	60

3	Methods Developed During Thesis	62
3.1	A Synthetic Lethal Detection Methodology	62
3.2	Synthetic Lethal Simulation and Modelling	65
3.2.1	A Model of Synthetic Lethality in Expression Data	65
3.2.2	Simulation Procedure	69
3.3	Detecting Simulated Synthetic Lethal Partners	72
3.3.1	Binomial Simulation of Synthetic Lethality	72
3.3.2	Multivariate Normal Simulation of Synthetic Lethality	74
3.3.2.1	Multivariate Normal Simulation with Correlated Genes	77
3.3.2.2	Specificity with Query-Correlated Pathways	84
3.3.2.3	Importance of Directional Testing	84
3.4	Graph Structure Methods	86
3.4.1	Upstream and Downstream Gene Detection	86
3.4.1.1	Permutation Analysis for Statistical Significance	87
3.4.1.2	Hierarchy Based on Biological Context	88
3.4.2	Simulating Gene Expression from Graph Structures	89
3.5	Customised Functions and Packages Developed	93
3.5.1	Synthetic Lethal Interaction Prediction Tool	93
3.5.2	Data Visualisation	94
3.5.3	Extensions to the iGraph Package	97
3.5.3.1	Sampling Simulated Data from Graph Structures	97
3.5.3.2	Plotting Directed Graph Structures	97
3.5.3.3	Computing Information Centrality	98
3.5.3.4	Testing Pathway Structure with Permutation Testing	98
3.5.3.5	Metapackage to Install iGraph Functions	99
4	Synthetic Lethal Analysis of Gene Expression Data	100
4.1	Synthetic Lethal Genes in Breast Cancer	101
4.1.1	Synthetic Lethal Pathways in Breast Cancer	103
4.1.2	Expression Profiles of Synthetic Lethal Partners	104
4.1.2.1	Subgroup Pathway Analysis	107
4.2	Comparing Synthetic Lethal Gene Candidates	110
4.2.1	Primary siRNA Screen Candidates	110
4.2.2	Comparison with Correlation	110
4.2.3	Comparison with Primary Screen Viability	112
4.2.4	Comparison with Secondary siRNA Screen Validation	114
4.2.5	Comparison to Primary Screen at Pathway Level	116
4.2.5.1	Resampling Genes for Pathway Enrichment	118
4.2.6	Integrating Synthetic Lethal Pathways and Screens	121
4.3	Metagene Analysis	123
4.3.1	Pathway Expression	124
4.3.2	Somatic Mutation	126
4.3.3	Synthetic Lethal Pathway Metagenes	130
4.3.4	Synthetic Lethality in Breast Cancer	131
4.4	Replication in Stomach Cancer	132
4.5	Discussion	133

4.5.1	Strengths of the SLIPT Methodology	133
4.5.2	Synthetic Lethal Pathways for E-cadherin	134
4.5.3	Replication and Validation	136
4.5.3.1	Integration with short interfering RNA (siRNA) Screen- ing	136
4.5.3.2	Replication across Tissues	137
4.6	Summary	137
5	Synthetic Lethal Pathway Structure	139
5.1	Synthetic Lethal Genes in Reactome Pathways	139
5.1.1	The PI3K/AKT Pathway	140
5.1.2	The Extracellular Matrix	142
5.1.3	G Protein Coupled Receptors	145
5.1.4	Gene Regulation and Translation	145
5.2	Network Analysis of Synthetic Lethal Genes	146
5.2.1	Gene Connectivity and Vertex Degree	147
5.2.2	Gene Importance and Centrality	148
5.2.2.1	Information Centrality	148
5.2.2.2	PageRank Centrality	150
5.3	Relationships between Synthetic Lethal Genes	152
5.3.1	Hierarchical Pathway Structure	152
5.3.1.1	Contextual Hierarchy of PI3K	152
5.3.1.2	Testing Contextual Hierarchy of Synthetic Lethal Genes	152
5.3.2	Upstream or Downstream Synthetic Lethality	156
5.3.2.1	Measuring Structure of Candidates within PI3K	156
5.3.2.2	Resampling for Synthetic Lethal Pathway Structure . .	158
5.4	Discussion	160
5.5	Summary	162
6	Simulation and Modeling of Synthetic Lethal Pathways	164
6.1	Synthetic Lethal Detection Methods	165
6.1.1	Performance of SLIPT and χ^2 across Quantiles	165
6.1.1.1	Correlated Query Genes affects Specificity	169
6.1.2	Alternative Synthetic Lethal Detection Strategies	171
6.1.2.1	Correlation for Synthetic Lethal Detection	171
6.1.2.2	Testing for Bimodality with BiSEp	173
6.2	Simulations with Graph Structures	174
6.2.1	Performance over Graph Structures	175
6.2.1.1	Simple Graph Structures	175
6.2.1.2	Constructed Graph Structures	177
6.2.2	Performance with Inhibitions	180
6.2.3	Synthetic Lethality across Graph Structures	185
6.2.4	Performance within a Simulated Human Genome	189
6.3	Simulations in More Complex Graph Structures	193
6.3.1	Simulations over Pathway-based Graphs	194
6.3.2	Pathway Structures in a Simulated Human Genome	197

6.4	Discussion	200
6.4.1	Simulation Procedure	200
6.4.2	Comparing Methods with Simulated Data	201
6.4.3	Design and Performance of SLIPT	202
6.4.4	Simulations from Graph Structures	204
6.5	Summary	205
7	Discussion	207
7.1	Synthetic Lethality and <i>CDH1</i> Biology	207
7.1.1	Established Functions of <i>CDH1</i>	208
7.1.2	The Molecular Role of <i>CDH1</i> in Cancer	208
7.2	Significance	209
7.2.1	Synthetic Lethality in the Genomic Era	209
7.2.2	Clinical Interventions based on Synthetic Lethality	211
7.3	Future Directions	212
7.4	Conclusions	214
	Bibliography	216
A	Sample Quality	240
A.1	Sample Correlation	240
A.2	Replicate Samples in The Cancer Genome Atlas (TCGA) Breast	242
B	Software Used for Thesis	246
C	Mutation Analysis in Breast Cancer	255
C.1	Synthetic Lethal Genes and Pathways	255
C.2	Synthetic Lethal Expression Profiles	256
C.3	Comparison to Primary Screen	259
C.3.1	Resampling Analysis	261
C.4	Compare SLIPT genes	263
C.5	Metagene Analysis	265
C.6	Expression of Somatic Mutations	266
C.7	Metagene Expression Profiles	269
D	Intrinsic Subtyping	272
E	Stomach Expression Analysis	274
E.1	Synthetic Lethal Genes and Pathways	274
E.2	Comparison to Primary Screen	278
E.2.1	Resampling Analysis	280
E.3	Metagene Analysis	282
F	Synthetic Lethal Genes in Pathways	283
G	Pathway Connectivity for Mutation SLIPT	291

H	Information Centrality for Gene Essentiality	295
I	Pathway Structure for Mutation SLIPT	298
J	Performance of SLIPT and χ^2	301
	J.1 Correlated Query Genes affects Specificity	307
K	Simulations on Graph Structures	313
	K.0.1 Simulations from Inhibiting Graph Structures	314
	K.1 Simulation across Graph Structures	317
	K.2 Simulations from Complex Graph Structures	321
	K.2.1 Simulations from Complex Inhibiting Graphs	324
	K.3 Simulations from Pathway Graph Structures	330

List of Tables

1.1	Methods for predicting genetic interactions	26
1.2	Methods for predicting synthetic lethality in cancer	27
1.3	Methods used by Wu <i>et al.</i> (2014)	28
2.1	Excluded samples by batch and clinical characteristics.	46
2.2	Computers used during thesis	56
2.3	Linux utilities and applications used during thesis	57
2.4	R installations used during thesis	58
2.5	R Packages used during thesis	58
2.6	R packages developed during thesis	60
4.1	Candidate synthetic lethal gene partners of <i>CDH1</i> from SLIPT	102
4.2	Pathways for <i>CDH1</i> partners from SLIPT	104
4.3	Pathways for clusters of <i>CDH1</i> partners from SLIPT	108
4.4	ANOVA for synthetic lethality and correlation with <i>CDH1</i>	112
4.5	Comparing SLIPT genes against secondary siRNA screen	115
4.6	Pathways for <i>CDH1</i> partners from SLIPT and siRNA	117
4.7	Pathways for <i>CDH1</i> partners from SLIPT	120
4.8	Pathways for <i>CDH1</i> partners from SLIPT and siRNA primary screen .	122
4.9	Candidate synthetic lethal metagenes against <i>CDH1</i> from SLIPT	131
5.1	ANOVA for synthetic lethality and vertex degree	148
5.2	ANOVA for synthetic lethality and information centrality	150
5.3	ANOVA for synthetic lethality and PageRank centrality	152
5.4	ANOVA for synthetic lethality and PI3K hierarchy	155
5.5	Resampling for pathway structure of synthetic lethal detection methods	159
B.1	Complete list of R packages used during this thesis	246
C.1	Candidate synthetic lethal gene partners of <i>CDH1</i> from mtSLIPT	255
C.2	Pathways for <i>CDH1</i> partners from mtSLIPT	256
C.3	Pathways for clusters of <i>CDH1</i> partners from mtSLIPT	258
C.4	Pathways for <i>CDH1</i> partners from mtSLIPT and siRNA	260
C.5	Pathways for <i>CDH1</i> partners from mtSLIPT	261
C.6	Pathways for <i>CDH1</i> partners from mtSLIPT and siRNA primary screen	262
C.7	Candidate synthetic lethal metagenes against <i>CDH1</i> from mtSLIPT . .	265
D.1	Comparison of intrinsic subtypes	272

E.1	Synthetic lethal gene partners of <i>CDH1</i> from SLIPT in stomach cancer	274
E.2	Pathways for <i>CDH1</i> partners from SLIPT in stomach cancer	275
E.3	Pathways for clusters of <i>CDH1</i> partners in stomach SLIPT	277
E.4	Pathways for <i>CDH1</i> partners from SLIPT and siRNA	279
E.5	Pathways for <i>CDH1</i> partners from SLIPT in stomach cancer	280
E.6	Pathways for <i>CDH1</i> partners from SLIPT in stomach and siRNA	281
E.7	Synthetic lethal metagenes against <i>CDH1</i> in stomach cancer	282
G.1	ANOVA for synthetic lethality and vertex degree	294
G.2	ANOVA for synthetic lethality and information centrality	294
G.3	ANOVA for synthetic lethality and PageRank centrality	294
H.1	Information centrality for genes and molecules in the Reactome network	296
I.1	ANOVA for synthetic lethality and PI3K hierarchy	298
I.2	Resampling for pathway structure of synthetic lethal detection methods	300

List of Figures

1.1	Synthetic genetic interactions	15
1.2	Synthetic lethality in cancer	19
2.1	Read count density	47
2.2	Read count sample mean	47
3.1	Framework for synthetic lethal prediction	63
3.2	Synthetic lethal prediction adapted for mutation	64
3.3	A model of synthetic lethal gene expression	66
3.4	Modeling synthetic lethal gene expression	67
3.5	Synthetic lethality with multiple genes	68
3.6	Simulating gene function	70
3.7	Simulating synthetic lethal gene function	70
3.8	Simulating synthetic lethal gene expression	71
3.9	Performance of binomial simulations	73
3.10	Comparison of statistical performance	73
3.11	Performance of multivariate normal simulations	75
3.12	Simulating expression with correlated gene blocks	78
3.13	Simulating expression with correlated gene blocks	79
3.14	Synthetic lethal prediction across simulations	80
3.15	Performance with correlations	81
3.16	Comparison of statistical performance with correlation structure	82
3.17	Performance with query correlations	83
3.18	Statistical evaluation of directional criteria	84
3.19	Performance of directional criteria	85
3.20	Simulated graph structures	89
3.21	Simulating expression from a graph structure	91
3.22	Simulating expression from graph structure with inhibitions	92
3.23	Demonstration of violin plots with custom features	95
3.24	Demonstration of annotated heatmap	95
3.25	Simulating graph structures	98
4.1	Synthetic lethal expression profiles of analysed samples	106
4.2	Comparison of SLIPT to siRNA	110
4.3	Compare SLIPT and siRNA genes with correlation	111
4.4	Compare SLIPT and siRNA genes with correlation	112
4.5	Compare SLIPT and siRNA genes with viability	113

4.6	Compare SLIPT genes with siRNA viability	114
4.7	Resampled intersection of SLIPT and siRNA candidates	118
4.8	Pathway metagene expression profiles	125
4.9	Expression profiles for constituent genes of PI3K	127
4.10	Expression profiles for estrogen receptor related genes	128
4.11	Somatic mutation against the PI3K metagene	129
5.1	synthetic lethality in the PI3K cascade	141
5.2	synthetic lethality in Elastic Fibre Formation	143
5.3	Synthetic lethality in Fibrin Clot Formation	144
5.4	Synthetic lethality and vertex degree	147
5.5	Synthetic lethality and centrality	150
5.6	Synthetic lethality and PageRank	151
5.7	Hierarchical structure of PI3K	153
5.8	Hierarchy score in PI3K against synthetic lethality in PI3K	154
5.9	Structure of synthetic lethality in PI3K	156
5.10	Structure of synthetic lethality resampling in PI3K	157
6.1	Performance of χ^2 and SLIPT across quantiles	167
6.2	Performance of χ^2 and SLIPT across quantiles with more genes	168
6.3	Performance of χ^2 and SLIPT across quantiles with query correlation	169
6.4	Performance of χ^2 and SLIPT across quantiles with query correlation and more genes	170
6.5	Performance of negative correlation and SLIPT	172
6.6	Simple graph structures	175
6.7	Performance of simulations on a simple graph	176
6.8	Performance of simulations is similar in simple graphs	178
6.9	Performance of simulations on a pathway	179
6.10	Performance of simulations on a simple graph with inhibition	181
6.11	Performance is higher on a simple inhibiting graph	182
6.12	Performance of simulations on a constructed graph with inhibition	183
6.13	Performance is affected by inhibition in graphs	185
6.14	Detection of synthetic lethality within a graph structure	187
6.15	Performance of simulations including a simple graph	190
6.16	Performance on a simple graph improves with more genes	191
6.17	Performance on an inhibiting graph improves with more genes	193
6.18	Performance of simulations on the PI3K cascade	196
6.19	Performance of simulations including the PI3K cascade	198
6.20	Performance on pathways improves with more genes	199
A.1	Correlation profiles of removed samples	240
A.2	Correlation analysis and sample removal	241
A.3	Replicate excluded samples	242
A.4	Replicate samples with all remaining	243
A.5	Replicate samples with some excluded	244
C.1	Synthetic lethal expression profiles of analysed samples	257

C.2	Comparison of mtSLIPT to siRNA	259
C.3	Compare mtSLIPT and siRNA genes with correlation	263
C.4	Compare mtSLIPT and siRNA genes with correlation	263
C.5	Compare mtSLIPT and siRNA genes with siRNA viability	264
C.6	Somatic mutation against PIK3CA metagene	266
C.7	Somatic mutation against PI3K protein	267
C.8	Somatic mutation against AKT protein	268
C.9	Pathway metagene expression profiles	269
C.10	Expression profiles for p53 related genes	270
C.11	Expression profiles for BRCA related genes	271
E.1	Synthetic lethal expression profiles of stomach samples	276
E.2	Comparison of SLIPT in stomach to siRNA	278
F.1	Synthetic lethality in the PI3K/AKT pathway	283
F.2	Synthetic lethality in the PI3K/AKT pathway in cancer	284
F.3	Synthetic lethality in the Extracellular Matrix	285
F.4	Synthetic lethality in the GPCRs	286
F.5	Synthetic lethality in the GPCR Downstream	287
F.6	Synthetic lethality in the Translation Elongation	288
F.7	Synthetic lethality in the Nonsense-mediated Decay	289
F.8	Synthetic lethality in the 3' UTR	290
G.1	Synthetic lethality and vertex degree	291
G.2	Synthetic lethality and centrality	292
G.3	Synthetic lethality and PageRank	293
H.1	Information centrality distribution	297
I.1	Synthetic lethality and heirarchy score in PI3K	298
I.2	Heirarchy score in PI3K against synthetic lethality in PI3K	299
I.3	Structure of synthetic lethality in PI3K	299
I.4	Structure of synthetic lethality resampling	300
J.1	Performance of χ^2 and SLIPT across quantiles	301
J.2	Performance of χ^2 and SLIPT across quantiles	303
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J.3	Performance of χ^2 and SLIPT across quantiles with more genes	305
J.4	Performance of χ^2 and SLIPT across quantiles with query correlation	307
J.5	Performance of χ^2 and SLIPT across quantiles with query correlation	309
J.6	Performance of χ^2 and SLIPT across quantiles with query correlation and more genes	311
K.1	Performance of simulations on a simple graph	313
K.2	Performance of simulations on an inhibiting graph	314
K.3	Performance of simulations on a constructed graph with inhibition	315
K.4	Performance of simulations on a constructed graph with inhibition	316
K.5	Detection of synthetic lethality within a graph structure	317

K.6	Detection of synthetic lethality within an inhibiting graph	319
K.7	Detection of synthetic lethality within an inhibiting graph	320
K.8	Performance of simulations on a branching graph	321
K.9	Performance of simulations on a complex graph	322
K.10	Performance of simulations on a large graph	323
K.11	Performance of simulations on a branching graph with inhibition	324
K.12	Performance of simulations on a branching graph with inhibition	325
K.13	Performance of simulations on a complex graph with inhibition	326
K.14	Performance of simulations on a complex graph with inhibition	327
K.15	Performance of simulations on a large constructed graph with inhibition	328
K.16	Performance of simulations on a large constructed graph with inhibition	329
K.17	Performance of simulations on the $G_{\alpha i}$ signalling pathway	330
K.18	Performance of simulations including the $G_{\alpha i}$ signalling pathway	331

Glossary

allele	A gene variant with a specific sequence and phenotype.
bioinformatics	Statistical or computational approaches to biological data or research tools.
Bisulfite-Seq	Epigenomic data from sequencing bisulfite treated DNA.
CAGE-Seq	Transcriptome data from cap analysis of gene expression.
cancer	A class of diseases, formally “malignant neoplasm”, of abnormal cellular growth and spread to other organs.
cancer gene	A gene which is involved in the malignancy of some cancers, encompassing oncogenes and tumour suppressors , which have molecular aberrations in cancer or variants which predispose individuals to cancer.
centrality	A network metric which identifies important vertices .
chemoprevention	The use of cytotoxic drugs to prevent early-stage cancers, generally applied to high-risk mutation carriers.
chemotherapy	The use of cytotoxic drugs to treat cancers, in combinations, generally applied to advanced stage cancers.
ChIP-Seq	Epigenome data from chromatin immunoprecipitation sequencing.
compound screen	A high-throughput screen performed using a library of chemical compounds.
computational biology	Applying computational or mathematical modelling to understanding biological systems and relationships.

conditional essentiality	A gene becoming essential to viability under certain environmental conditions, including presence of compounds which inactivate other genes.
copy number	The number of copies of DNA, typically two copies for diploid organisms but subject to variation.
<i>de novo</i>	A bioinformatics sequence assembly conducted entirely from raw genomics data without a reference sequence.
diagnosis	The identification of disease by clinical, cellular, and molecular characteristics.
driver mutation	A mutation which promotes cancer growth.
E-cadherin	Epithelial cadherin (calcium-dependent adhesion), a cell-adhesion protein encoded by <i>CDH1</i> .
edge or link	A relationship connecting a pair of elements of a graph structure or network, may be weighted or directional.
epigenome	An analysis of epigenetic modifications of all genes in the genome.
epistasis (biological)	The effects of a gene modifying or masking the phenotype of another gene.
epistasis (statistical)	A divergence of the observed double mutant phenotype from that expected based on the respective phenotypes of single mutant (Fisher, 1919).
essential	A gene which is required to be functional or expressed for a cell or organism to be viable, grow or develop.
exome	A sequencing approach designed to generate data enriched for coding genes within the genome.
familial	A trait recurrently occurring in families, not necessarily with a genetic cause.
functional redundancy	Genes which perform a common function, also known as genetic redundancy.

gene expression	A measure of the relative expression of each gene from the mRNA extracted from (pooled) cells.
genetic robustness	A system of biological pathways which (has evolved to) continue to function as a whole under various conditions, including the inactivation of various individual genes.
genome	An analysis of all of the DNA sequence in the genome.
genomic	An approach or technology designed to generate or use data from all genes in the genome.
genomic medicine	The use of genomic information to tailor medicine treatment to the genetics of an individual.
germline mutation	A mutation that occurred in germline cells and is passed between generation.
graph or network	A mathematical structure modelling or depicting the relationships between elements.
hallmark of cancer	An underlying characteristic of cancer as part of a rational approach devised by (Hanahan and Weinberg, 2000).
hereditary	A trait or disease which has a genetic cause and is inherited from family members.
high-throughput screen	An experimental procedure to perform a large scale series of chemical, genetic, or pharmacological tests.
hub	A central or highly connected component of a network.
<i>in silico</i>	An investigation conducted using computations, typically simulations or analyses.
<i>in vitro</i>	An investigation conducted using a controlled experimental system to examine biomolecules.
<i>in vivo</i>	An investigation conducted using in the context of a biological cell or organism, including pre-clinical models and clinical trials.
induced essentiality	A gene becoming essential to viability under certain conditions, including inactivation of a synthetic lethal partner.

information centrality	A network centrality metric which uses the impact of removing a vertex or node on connections in the network.
intrinsic subtype	Distinguishing cancer by molecular and genetic features.
MCF10A cell line	A non-tumorigenic epithelial cell line derived from breast tissue.
metabolome	An analysis of all the metabolites and enzymes in the cell.
metagene	A consistent signal of expression for a collection of genes such as a biological pathway, derived from singular value decomposition.
metagenome	An analysis of all of the genes and genomes in a community.
metastasis	A secondary growth of a tumour or spread of cancer to other organs.
microarray	A high-throughput technique to measure presence or abundance of nucleic acid sequences from binding to probes.
microRNA	Short RNA molecules generally regarded to regulate gene expression by binding to mRNA.
molecular profile	A combination of genetic and biochemical measures which identifies characteristic traits of a tumour.
molecular subtype	A classification of cancers based on an identification using molecular properties.
mutant	A variant or dysfunctional phenotype arising from a mutation in a gene.
mutation	A change in DNA sequence that disrupts gene function.
network biology	The application mathematical and computational approaches to networks in understanding biological relationships.
network medicine	The use of network biology to understand, prevent, or treat diseases.
non-oncogene addiction	The dependence of a cancer cell on functioning non-mutant genes.
'omics	A combination of approaches to generating biological data with high-throughput procedures such as genomics, proteomics or metabolomics.

oncogene	A gene that potentially causes cancer, typically by over-expression or mutant gene variants.
oncogene addiction	The dependence of a cancer cell on a specific oncogenic pathway.
PageRank centrality	A network centrality metric which uses eigenvectors with a scaling factor (Brin and Page, 1998).
pan cancer	A focus on the molecular and genetic features across cancers in different tissues.
passenger mutation	A mutation that occurs in cancers but does not affect the growth of cancers.
pathway	A series of biomolecules that produces a particular product or biological function.
pleiotropy	A gene which has multiple biological functions.
polypharmacology	The design of drugs to target multiple molecular targets or biological pathways.
precision medicine	The application of prevention and treatment measures to target diseases by molecular and genetic features.
prognosis	The estimation of disease progression and patient outcome.
proteome	An analysis of all the proteins expressed from the genome.
proto-oncogene	The non-mutant variant or precursor to a mutant oncogene .
recurrent mutation	The repeated occurrence of mutations in a particular gene across cancers.
RNAi screen	A high-throughput screen performed using a RNA interference (RNAi).
RNA-Seq	Transcriptome data from sequencing RNA.
Sanger sequencing	A dideoxy chain termination method for DNA sequencing (named after Fred Sanger).
scale-free	A property of a network which has a power law vertex degree distribution, that is several highly connected hub genes and many with very few connections.

shortest path	A path with the fewest possible edges which connects two particular vertices .
small world	A property of a network which is highly connected and has a low characteristic path length, derived from the mean shortest path length across all pairs of nodes.
somatic mutation	A mutation that occurs in somatic cells, during a patient's lifespan.
sporadic cancer	Cancers which do occur in patients with a family history or carry a high-risk genetic variant.
synergy	When multiple drugs have more effect than expected from the effect of each separately.
synthetic dosage lethal	A synthetic genetic interaction (SGI) analogous to synthetic lethality where where one gene is inactivated and the other over-expressed.
synthetic lethal	Genetic interactions where inactivation of multiple genes is inviable (or deleterious) which are viable if inactivated separately.
synthetic lethal screen	A high-throughput screen performed on isogenic cell lines to detect genes for which inhibition specifically deleterious to the null mutant genotype.
synthetic rescue	A synthetic genetic interaction when the combined mutations restores the wild-type the phenotype of one of the mutations .
synthetic sick	Genetic interactions where inactivation of multiple genes is deleterious which are viable if inactivated separately.
synthetic suppression	A synthetic genetic interaction when the combined mutations (partially) suppresses the mutant phenotype of one of the mutations .
targeted therapy	Cancer treatment that specifically acts against a molecular target, in contrast to standard chemotherapy.
transcriptome	An analysis of all of the genes expressed in the genome.
treatment	Medical procedures for a disease to improve patient outcomes.

tumour	An abnormal lump of tissue or growth of cells, may be cancerous.
tumour suppressor	A gene potentially causes cancer, typically by disruption of functions which protect the cell from cancer.
vertex degree	A network metric of connectivity of vertices which uses the number of edges connected to each vertex or node .
vertex or node	An element of a graph structure or network.
wild-type	A natural phenotype of a trait or the normally functional allele which encodes it.

Acronyms

1KGP	1000 genomes project.
ADP	Adenosine Diphosphate.
AMP	Adenosine Monophosphate.
AMPK	AMP -activated Protein Kinase.
ANOVA	Analysis of Variance.
ATP	Adenosine Triphosphate.
AUROC	Area Under the Receiver Operating Characteristic (curve).
BioPAX	Biological Pathway Exchange.
BiSEp	Bimodal Subsetting Expression.
BMP	Bone Morphogenic Protein.
cAMP	Cyclic AMP .
CCL	Cancer Cell Line Encyclopaedia.
cDNA	Complementary DNA (from mRNA).
CGP	Cancer Genome Project.
ChIP	Chromatin Immunoprecipitation.
ChIP-Seq	Chromatin Immunoprecipitation Sequencing.
CNV	Copy Number Variation.
COSMIC	Catalogue Of Somatic Mutations In Cancer.
CpG	5'-C-phosphate-G-3'.
CRAN	comprehensive R archive network.
CXCR	Chemokine Receptor.
DAISY	Data Mining Synthetic Lethal Identification Pipeline.
DDBJ	DNA Data Bank of Japan.
DNA	Deoxyribonucleic Acid.
EMBL	European Molecular Biology Laboratory.
EMT	Epithelial-Mesenchymal Transition.
ENA	The European Nucleotide Archive.
ENCODE	Encyclopaedia of DNA Elements.

ER	Estrogen Receptor.
exprSL	Synthetic Lethality (expression).
FANTOM	Functional Annotation Of Mammalian genome.
FDR	False Discovery Rate.
GEO	Gene Expression Omnibus.
GO	Gene Ontology.
GPCR	G Crotein Coupled Receptor.
HDAC	Histone Deacetylase.
HDGC	Hereditary Diffuse Gastric Cancer.
HLRCC	Hereditary Leiomyomatosis and Renal Cell Carcinoma.
HPC	High Performance Computing.
ICGC	International Cancer Genome Consortium.
InDel	Insertion or Deletion (in DNA sequence).
JAK	Janus Kinase.
lncRNA	Long Non-Coding RNA.
METABRIC	Molecular Taxonomy of Breast Cancer International Consortium.
microRNA	Micro RNA.
mRNA	Messenger RNA.
MSI	Microsatellite Instability.
mtSL	synthetic Lethality (mutation).
mtSLIPT	Synthetic Lethal Interaction Prediction Tool (against mutation).
NCBI	National Center for Biotechnology Information (in the USA).
NCI	National Cancer Institute (in the USA).
NeSI	New Zealand eScience Infrastructure.
NGS	Next-Generation Sequencing.
NHGRI	National Human Genome Research Institute (in the USA).

NIG	National Institute of Genetics (in Japan).
NIH	National Institutes of Health (in the USA).
NMD	Nonsense-Mediated Decay.
PAM50	Prediction Analysis of Microarray 50.
PARP	Poly-ADP-Ribose Polymerase.
PCR	Polymerase Chain Reaction.
PDE	Phosphodiesterase.
PI3K	Phosphoinositide 3-kinase.
PIP ₂	Phosphatidylinositol-(4,5)-bisphosphate.
PIP ₃	Phosphatidylinositol-(3,4,5)-trisphosphate.
PPI	Protein-Protein Interaction.
PR	Progesterone Receptor.
qPCR	Quantitative (real-time) Polymerase Chain Reaction.
RFLP	Restriction Fragment Length Polymorphism.
RGS	G-protein Signalling.
RHO	Ras Homolog Family.
RMA	Robust Multiarray Averaging (normalisation).
RNA	Ribonucleic Acid.
RNAi	RNA Interference.
ROC	Receiver Operating Characteristic (curve).
RPPA	Reverse Phase Protein Arrays.
RRBS	Reduced Representation Bisulfite Sequencing.
rRNA	Ribonucleic acid.
RSEM	RNA-Seq by Expectation Maximization (normalisation).
SGA	Synthetic Gene Array (technique).
SGI	Synthetic Genetic Interaction.
shRNA	Short Hairpin RNA.
siRNA	Short Interfering RNA.
SL	Synthetic Lethal.
SLIPT	Synthetic Lethal Interaction Prediction Tool.
Slurm	Simple Linux Utility for Resource Management.
SNP	Single Nucleotide Polymorphism.
SR	Synthetic Rescue (or viability).
SS	Synthetic Suppression.

SSL	Synthetic Sick.
TCGA	The Cancer Genome Atlas (genomics project).
TGF α	Transforming Growth Factor α .
tRNA	Transfer RNA.
UCSC	University of California, Santa Cruz.
UTR	Untranslated Region (of mRNA).
WNT	Wingless-Related Integration Site.

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