gRNA design for CRISPR activation (CRISPRa)

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Introduction

This tutorial will demonstrate how to use **crisprDesign** to design gRNAs for CRISPR activation (CRISPRa). Specifically, we will target the human KRAS gene and use the SpCas9 nuclease.

Installation

See the Installation tutorial to learn how to install the packages necessary for this tutorial: crisprDesign, crisprDesignData

Terminology

See the CRISPRko design tutorial to get familiar with the terminology used throughout this tutorial.

CRISPRa design

For CRISPR activation (CRISPRa) and interference (CRISPRi) applications, the CRISPR nuclease is engineered to lose its endonuclease activity, and should therefore not introduce double-stranded breaks (DSBs). We will use the dead SpCas9 (dSpCas9) nuclease as an example here. Note that users don't have to distinguish between dSpCas9 and SpCas9 when specifying the nuclease in the crisprVerse as they do not differ in terms of the characteristics stored in the CrisprNuclease object.

In CRISPRa, dSpCas9 is used to activate gene expression by coupling the dead nuclease with activation factors. Several CRISPRa systems have been developed (see Kampmann (2018) for a review). For optimal activation, gRNAs are usually designed to target the region directly upstream of the gene transcription start site (TSS).

crisprDesign provides functionalities to be able to take into account design rules that are specific to CRISPRa applications. The queryTss function allows for specifying genomic coordinates of promoter regions. The addTssAnnotation function annotates gRNAs for known TSSs, and includes a column dist_to_tss that gives the distance in nucleotides between the TSS position and the PAM site of the gRNA. For CRISPRa, we recommend targeting the region 75-150bp upstream of the TSS for optimal activation; see Sanson et al. et al. (2018) for more information. Finally, the function addCrispraiScores adds on-target activity scores based on the work of (Horlbeck et al. et al. 2016).

Creating the GuideSet

We first start by loading the required packages:

library(crisprBase)
library(crisprDesign)
library(crisprDesignData)
library(BSgenome.Hsapiens.UCSC.hg38)

To demonstrate CRISPRa design, we will design gRNAs to activate the human KRAS gene using the SpCas9 nuclease. To accomplish this, we want our gRNAs to target the region upstream of the KRAS TSS; let's consider the window containing 500bp immediately upstream of the TSS. We first need to retrieve the TSS coordinates for KRAS. These data are conveniently stored in the crisprDesignData package as the dataset tss_human. For more information on tss_human and how to create similar TSS annotation objects, see the Building a gene annotation object tutorial.

We load the TSS coordinates stored in the tss_human object

```
data("tss_human", package="crisprDesignData")
```

and query for KRAS using the queryTss function from crisprDesign:

```
target_region
## GRanges object with 1 range and 9 metadata columns:
##
              seqnames
                                  ranges strand |
                                                      score peak_start peak_end
##
                                         <Rle> | <numeric> <integer> <integer>
                 <Rle>
                               <IRanges>
##
                 chr12 25250929-25251428
                                               - 1
                                                               25250928 25250928
     region_1
                                                     5.20187
##
                                                              promoter
                        tx_id
                                      gene_id
                                                    source
##
                  <character>
                                  <character> <character> <character>
##
     region_1 ENST00000256078 ENSG00000133703
                                                   fantom5
##
                              ID gene symbol
##
                     <character> <character>
##
     region_1 ENSG00000133703_P1
##
     seqinfo: 25 sequences from an unspecified genome; no seqlengths
```

We load the crisprNuclease object storing information about the SpCas9 nuclease from the crisprBase package:

```
data(SpCas9, package="crisprBase")
```

We then find all candidate protospacer sequences in our target region with findSpacers:

```
gs
## GuideSet object with 146 ranges and 5 metadata columns:
##
                                                     protospacer
                segnames
                            ranges strand |
                                                                             pam
##
                   <Rle> <IRanges> <Rle> |
                                                   <DNAStringSet> <DNAStringSet>
##
       spacer_1
                   chr12 25250927
                                        - | GCTCGGAGCTCGATTTTCCT
                                                                             AGG
##
                   chr12 25250944
                                         - | CCCGAACTCATCGGTGTGCT
                                                                             CGG
       spacer 2
##
       spacer_3
                   chr12 25250953
                                        - | CCGCCCGGCCCCGAACTCAT
                                                                             CGG
                                        + | TCCGAGCACACCGATGAGTT
                                                                             CGG
##
       spacer_4
                   chr12 25250961
                   chr12 25250962
                                        + | CCGAGCACACCGATGAGTTC
##
       spacer_5
                                                                             GGG
##
                    . . .
                               . . .
                                                                              . . .
##
     spacer_142
                   chr12 25251419
                                        - | AGGCCGACCCTGAGGGTGGC
                                                                             GGG
                                        - | TAGGCCGACCCTGAGGGTGG
                                                                             CGG
##
     spacer_143
                   chr12 25251420
##
                   chr12 25251423
                                        - | GTATAGGCCGACCCTGAGGG
                                                                             TGG
     spacer_144
     spacer_145
                   chr12 25251429
                                        + | AAGAGCACCCGCCACCCTC
                                                                             AGG
```

```
##
     spacer_146
                   chr12 25251430
                                         + | AGAGCACCCCGCCACCCTCA
                                                                               GGG
##
                 pam_site cut_site
                                          region
##
                <numeric> <numeric> <character>
##
       spacer 1
                25250927
                           25250930
                                        region 1
##
       spacer 2
                 25250944
                           25250947
                                        region_1
##
                 25250953
                           25250956
       spacer 3
                                        region_1
##
       spacer_4
                 25250961
                           25250958
                                        region_1
##
       spacer 5 25250962
                           25250959
                                        region_1
##
                       . . .
##
     spacer_142
                 25251419
                           25251422
                                        region_1
##
     spacer 143
                 25251420
                           25251423
                                        region_1
##
     spacer_144
                 25251423
                           25251426
                                        region_1
     spacer_145
##
                 25251429
                           25251426
                                        region_1
##
     spacer_146
                 25251430
                           25251427
                                        region_1
##
##
     seqinfo: 640 sequences (1 circular) from hg38 genome
##
     crisprNuclease: SpCas9
```

Annotating the GuideSet

Next, we annotate our candidate gRNAs to assess quality. There are several functions in crisprDesign that provide annotation for features that are not specific to CRISPRa, for which we refer the reader to the CRISPRko design with Cas9 tutorial for more information. The sections below will cover annotation functions that are of particular interest to CRISPRa applications.

Adding TSS annotation

As the name implies, the addTssAnnotation function annotates gRNAs with TSS context such as the distance between the gRNA and the TSS, as well as which TSS is targeted (many genes contain different TSSs corresponding to different isoforms).

The function requires a tssObject object, and the tss_window values that we used earlier to define the target region. We can then retrieve the appended annotation with the accessor function tssAnnotation:

```
gs <- addTssAnnotation(gs,
                       tssObject=tss_human,
                       tss_window=target_window)
tssAnnotation(gs)
## DataFrame with 146 rows and 15 columns
##
                   chr anchor_site
                                     strand
                                                 score peak_start peak_end
                         <integer> <factor> <numeric> <integer> <integer>
              <factor>
                          25250930
                                               5.20187
                                                         25250928 25250928
## spacer_1
                 chr12
## spacer_2
                 chr12
                          25250947
                                               5.20187
                                                         25250928 25250928
                                               5.20187
## spacer 3
                          25250956
                                                         25250928 25250928
                 chr12
## spacer 4
                 chr12
                          25250958
                                               5.20187
                                                         25250928 25250928
                          25250959
                                               5.20187
                                                         25250928 25250928
## spacer_5
                 chr12
                   . . .
                                               5.20187
## spacer_142
                 chr12
                          25251422
                                                         25250928
                                                                   25250928
## spacer_143
                 chr12
                          25251423
                                               5.20187
                                                         25250928
                                                                   25250928
                                               5.20187
## spacer_144
                 chr12
                          25251426
                                                         25250928 25250928
## spacer_145
                 chr12
                          25251426
                                           +
                                               5.20187
                                                         25250928 25250928
## spacer_146
                 chr12
                          25251427
                                           +
                                               5.20187
                                                         25250928 25250928
##
                        tx_id
                                       gene_id
                                                              promoter
                                                    source
##
                              <character> <character> <character>
                  <character>
```

```
## spacer_1
              ENST00000256078 ENSG00000133703
                                                    fantom5
              ENST00000256078 ENSG00000133703
                                                                     P1
## spacer_2
                                                    fantom5
## spacer_3
              ENST00000256078 ENSG00000133703
                                                                     P1
                                                    fantom5
## spacer 4
              ENST00000256078 ENSG00000133703
                                                   fantom5
                                                                     P1
## spacer 5
              ENST00000256078 ENSG00000133703
                                                   fantom5
                                                                     P1
## ...
                                                                     . . .
## spacer_142 ENST00000256078 ENSG00000133703
                                                                     P1
                                                   fantom5
## spacer_143 ENST00000256078 ENSG00000133703
                                                   fantom5
                                                                     P1
## spacer 144 ENST00000256078 ENSG00000133703
                                                                     P1
                                                   fantom5
                                                                     P1
## spacer_145 ENST00000256078 ENSG00000133703
                                                    fantom5
## spacer_146 ENST00000256078 ENSG00000133703
                                                    fantom5
                                                                     P1
##
                           tss_id gene_symbol tss_strand
                                                             tss_pos dist_to_tss
##
                     <character> <character> <character> <integer>
                                                                        <numeric>
## spacer_1
              ENSG00000133703_P1
                                         KRAS
                                                            25250928
                                                                               -2
## spacer_2
              ENSG00000133703_P1
                                         KRAS
                                                            25250928
                                                                              -19
## spacer_3
              ENSG00000133703 P1
                                         KRAS
                                                            25250928
                                                                              -28
## spacer_4
              ENSG00000133703_P1
                                         KRAS
                                                            25250928
                                                                              -30
## spacer 5
              ENSG00000133703 P1
                                         KRAS
                                                            25250928
                                                                              -31
## ...
## spacer_142 ENSG00000133703_P1
                                         KRAS
                                                            25250928
                                                                             -494
## spacer 143 ENSG00000133703 P1
                                         KRAS
                                                            25250928
                                                                             -495
## spacer 144 ENSG00000133703 P1
                                         KRAS
                                                            25250928
                                                                             -498
## spacer_145 ENSG00000133703_P1
                                                                             -498
                                         KRAS
                                                            25250928
## spacer_146 ENSG00000133703_P1
                                         KRAS
                                                            25250928
                                                                             -499
```

Adding spacer alignments with TSS annotation

As with all CRISPR applications, off-targets is an important concern in assessing gRNA quality. While this concern is somewhat moderated for CRISPRa, since the dead CRISPR nuclease does not make DSBs, we should be aware of off-targets occuring in the promoter regions of other genes. This can be handled by passing our tssObject to the addSpacerAlignments function. We will search for up to 2 mismatches and increase the size of our tss_window to err on the safe side.

Similar to the CRISPRko design tutorial, we need to specify a Bowtie index of the human referenge genome; see the Building genome indices for short read aligners tutorial to learn how to create such an index.

Here we specify the index that was available to us when generating this tutorial:

```
index_path <- "/Users/fortinj2/crisprIndices/bowtie/hg38/hg38"</pre>
```

(this needs to be changed by users). We are now ready to add on- and off-target alignments:

```
GuideSet object with 146 ranges and 13 metadata columns:
##
                segnames
                            ranges strand |
                                                      protospacer
                   <Rle> <IRanges> <Rle> |
##
                                                   <DNAStringSet> <DNAStringSet>
##
       spacer_1
                   chr12 25250927
                                         - | GCTCGGAGCTCGATTTTCCT
                                                                              AGG
##
       spacer_2
                   chr12 25250944
                                         - | CCCGAACTCATCGGTGTGCT
                                                                              CGG
```

```
##
               chr12 25250953 - | CCGCCCGGCCCCGAACTCAT
                                                              CGG
     spacer_3
##
     spacer_4
               chr12 25250961
                                + | TCCGAGCACACCGATGAGTT
                                                              CGG
##
                               + | CCGAGCACACCGATGAGTTC
     spacer_5
               chr12 25250962
                                                              GGG
##
      . . .
               ...
                                                              . . .
##
    spacer_142
               chr12 25251419
                               - | AGGCCGACCCTGAGGGTGGC
                                                              GGG
##
               chr12 25251420
                                - | TAGGCCGACCCTGAGGGTGG
                                                              CGG
    spacer_143
               chr12 25251423
##
    spacer_144
                                - | GTATAGGCCGACCCTGAGGG
                                                              TGG
##
               chr12 25251429
                                + | AAGAGCACCCGCCACCCTC
                                                              AGG
    spacer_145
##
               chr12 25251430
                                + | AGAGCACCCGCCACCCTCA
                                                              GGG
    spacer_146
##
             pam_site cut_site
                                region
                                             tssAnnotation
                                                              n0
##
             <numeric> <numeric> <character> <SplitDataFrameList> <numeric>
##
     spacer_1 25250927 25250930 region_1 chr12:25250930:-:...
     spacer_2 25250944 25250947 region_1 chr12:25250947:-:...
spacer_3 25250953 25250956 region_1 chr12:25250956:-:...
##
##
##
     spacer_4 25250961 25250958 region_1 chr12:25250958:+:...
##
     spacer_5 25250962 25250959 region_1 chr12:25250959:+:...
##
                      ...
         . . .
                 . . .
    ##
                                                              1
    ##
    ##
    ##
##
    region_1 chr12:25251427:+:...
                                n0_p
##
                     n2
                  n1
                                        n1_p
##
             <numeric> <numeric> <numeric> <numeric> <numeric>
              0 0
##
     spacer 1
                              1
##
     spacer 2
                   0
                          0
                                  1
                                            0
                                                    0
##
     spacer_3
                  0
                          0
                                  1
                                            0
                                                    0
                  0
##
     spacer_4
                           0
                                   1
                                            0
                                                    0
                  0
                          0
##
     spacer_5
                                   1
                                            0
                                                    0
##
        . . .
                 . . .
                         . . .
                  0
##
    spacer_142
                          1
                                  1
                                           0
                                                    0
                         0
0
0
##
    spacer_143
                  0
                                  1
                                            0
                                                    0
                 0
                                  1
##
    spacer_144
                                            0
                                                    0
                                            0
##
    spacer_145
                 0
                                                    0
                   0
##
    spacer_146
                                                    0
                                   1
##
                               alignments
##
                             <GRangesList>
##
     spacer 1
                          chr12:25250927:-
##
     spacer_2
                          chr12:25250944:-
##
     spacer_3
                           chr12:25250953:-
##
     spacer_4
                          chr12:25250961:+
##
     spacer_5
                          chr12:25250962:+
##
    spacer_142 chr12:25251419:-,chr16:88925550:+
##
##
    spacer_143
                 chr12:25251420:-
##
    spacer_144
                          chr12:25251423:-
    spacer_145
##
                          chr12:25251429:+
##
    spacer_146
                          chr12:25251430:+
##
##
    seqinfo: 640 sequences (1 circular) from hg38 genome
    crisprNuclease: SpCas9
```

Including a tssObject parameter in the addSpacerAlignments function appends columns to the GuideSet that tallies the alignments restricted to the defined (via tss_window) promoter regions: nO_p, n1_p, and

n2_p (the _p suffix denotes "promoter").

Adding CRISPRai scores

The CRISPRai algorithm was developed by the Weissman lab to score SpCas9 gRNAs for CRISPRa and CRISPRi applications for the human genome (Horlbeck et al. et al. 2016). The function addCrispraiScores implements this algorithm to add scores to the GuideSet. Compared to other on-target scoring algorithms, it requires several additional inputs:

- The gr argument is the GRanges object derived from the queryTss function and used to create the GuideSet object. In our example, this is the object named target_region.
- The tssObject argument is a GRanges object that contains TSS coordinates and annotation. It must also contain the following columns: ID, promoter, tx_id, and gene_symbol. Our tssObject in this instance is tss_human.
- geneCol indicates which column of tssObject should be used as the unique gene identifier.
- modality is the modality of the CRISPR application, in our case, CRISPRa.
- fastaFile is the path of a FASTA file containing the sequence of the human reference genome in hg38 coordinates. This file is available here.
- chromatinFiles is a vector of length 3 specifying the path of files containing the chromatin accessibility data needed for the algorithm in hg38 coordinates. The chromatin files can be downloaded from Zenodo here

We first prepare all needed inputs for addCrispraiScores. We start by specifying the location of the FASTA file on our local machine:

```
fastaPath <- "/Users/fortinj2/crisprIndices/genomes/hg38/hg38.fa"</pre>
```

This corresponds to the path where the downloaded file from here is stored. Next, we specify the location of the chromatin files:

This should correspond to the files that were downloaded from here.

We are now ready to add the scores:

Let's look at the results:

```
## GuideSet object with 146 ranges and 14 metadata columns:
                                                                            pam
##
               seqnames
                           ranges strand |
                                                    protospacer
##
                  <Rle> <IRanges> <Rle> |
                                                 <DNAStringSet> <DNAStringSet>
                  chr12 25250927
                                      - | GCTCGGAGCTCGATTTTCCT
##
      spacer 1
                                                                            AGG
                                        - | CCCGAACTCATCGGTGTGCT
##
       spacer 2
                  chr12 25250944
                                                                            CGG
##
      spacer_3
                  chr12 25250953
                                       - | CCGCCCGGCCCCGAACTCAT
                                                                            CGG
```

```
##
               chr12 25250961 + | TCCGAGCACACCGATGAGTT
                                                               CGG
     spacer_4
##
     spacer_5
               chr12 25250962
                                 + | CCGAGCACACCGATGAGTTC
                                                               GGG
##
        . . .
##
    spacer 142
               chr12 25251419
                                - | AGGCCGACCCTGAGGGTGGC
                                                               GGG
##
    spacer_143
               chr12 25251420
                                - | TAGGCCGACCCTGAGGGTGG
                                                               CGG
##
    spacer_144
               chr12 25251423
                                - | GTATAGGCCGACCCTGAGGG
                                                               TGG
               chr12 25251429
                               + | AAGAGCACCCGCCACCCTC
##
    spacer_145
                                                               AGG
##
    spacer 146
               chr12 25251430
                                + | AGAGCACCCCGCCACCCTCA
                                                               GGG
##
             pam site cut site
                                region tssAnnotation
                                                               n0
##
             <numeric> <numeric> <character> <SplitDataFrameList> <numeric>
##
     spacer_1 25250927 25250930 region_1 chr12:25250930:-:...
##
     spacer_2 25250944 25250947 region_1 chr12:25250947:-:...
     spacer_3 25250953 25250956 region_1 chr12:25250956:-:...
##
                                                               1
     spacer_4 25250961 25250958 region_1 chr12:25250958:+:...
##
##
     spacer_5 25250962 25250959 region_1 chr12:25250959:+:...
##
                      ...
         . . .
               . . .
    ##
##
    1
##
    spacer_144 25251423 25251426 region_1 chr12:25251426:-:...
##
    ##
                                region 1 chr12:25251427:+:...
                                                               1
##
                  n1
                           n2
                                n0_p
                                          n1_p
                                                  n2_p
##
             <numeric> <numeric> <numeric> <numeric> <numeric>
##
                0 0
                                  1
                                           0
     spacer_1
     spacer 2
                   0
                           0
                                    1
                                            0
                                                     0
##
                  0
##
     spacer 3
                          0
                                   1
                                            0
                                                     0
##
     spacer 4
                          0
                                   1
                                            0
                                                     0
##
     spacer_5
                  0
                          0
                                            0
                                                     0
                                    1
##
         . . .
                  . . .
                          . . .
                                   . . .
                                           . . .
##
                 0
                                           0
                                                     0
    spacer_142
                         1
                                   1
                  0
                          0
##
    spacer_143
                                   1
                                            0
                                                     0
                          0
##
    spacer_144
                  0
                                   1
                                            0
                                                     0
                 0
0
                         0
##
    spacer_145
                                    1
                                            0
                                                     0
##
    spacer_146
                          0
                                    1
                                            0
##
                                alignments score_crispra
##
                             <GRangesList> <numeric>
##
     spacer 1
                           chr12:25250927:-
                                             0.439319
##
     spacer 2
                           chr12:25250944:-
                                            0.392932
##
                           chr12:25250953:-
                                             0.477453
     spacer_3
##
     spacer 4
                           chr12:25250961:+
                                             0.437693
##
     spacer_5
                           chr12:25250962:+
                                             0.437368
##
                                             . . .
##
    spacer 142 chr12:25251419:-,chr16:88925550:+
                                             0.339499
##
    spacer 143
                           chr12:25251420:-
                                             0.377727
##
    spacer 144
                          chr12:25251423:-
                                             0.387729
##
    spacer_145
                          chr12:25251429:+
                                             0.362817
    spacer_146
##
                           chr12:25251430:+
                                             0.363131
##
##
    seqinfo: 640 sequences (1 circular) from hg38 genome
##
    crisprNuclease: SpCas9
```

You can see that the column score_crispra was added to the GuideSet. Note that this function works identically for CRISPRi applications, with the modality argument replaced by CRISPRi.

Session Info

```
sessionInfo()
## R version 4.2.1 (2022-06-23)
## Platform: x86_64-apple-darwin17.0 (64-bit)
## Running under: macOS Catalina 10.15.7
## Matrix products: default
## BLAS:
          /Library/Frameworks/R.framework/Versions/4.2/Resources/lib/libRblas.0.dylib
## LAPACK: /Library/Frameworks/R.framework/Versions/4.2/Resources/lib/libRlapack.dylib
##
## locale:
## [1] en_US.UTF-8/en_US.UTF-8/en_US.UTF-8/C/en_US.UTF-8/en_US.UTF-8
## attached base packages:
## [1] stats4
                 stats
                           graphics grDevices utils
                                                          datasets methods
## [8] base
## other attached packages:
## [1] BSgenome.Hsapiens.UCSC.hg38_1.4.4 BSgenome_1.65.2
## [3] rtracklayer_1.57.0
                                          Biostrings_2.65.2
## [5] XVector_0.37.0
                                          GenomicRanges_1.49.1
## [7] GenomeInfoDb_1.33.5
                                          IRanges_2.31.2
## [9] S4Vectors_0.35.1
                                          crisprDesignData_0.99.17
## [11] crisprDesign_0.99.133
                                          crisprScore_1.1.14
## [13] crisprScoreData_1.1.3
                                          ExperimentHub_2.5.0
## [15] AnnotationHub_3.5.0
                                          BiocFileCache_2.5.0
## [17] dbplyr_2.2.1
                                          BiocGenerics_0.43.1
## [19] crisprBowtie_1.1.1
                                          crisprBase_1.1.5
## [21] crisprVerse_0.99.8
                                          rmarkdown_2.15.2
##
## loaded via a namespace (and not attached):
## [1] rjson_0.2.21
                                      ellipsis_0.3.2
## [3] Rbowtie 1.37.0
                                      bit64 4.0.5
## [5] lubridate_1.8.0
                                      interactiveDisplayBase_1.35.0
## [7] AnnotationDbi_1.59.1
                                      fansi_1.0.3
## [9] xml2_1.3.3
                                      codetools_0.2-18
## [11] cachem_1.0.6
                                      knitr_1.40
## [13] jsonlite_1.8.0
                                      Rsamtools_2.13.4
                                      shiny_1.7.2
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```

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