

Flexible Scientific Data Management for Plant Phenomics Research

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Abstract. In this paper, we expand on the design and implementation of the Phenomics Ontology Driven Data repository [1] (PODD) with respect to the capture, storage and retrieval of data and metadata generated at the High Resolution Plant Phenomics Centre (Canberra, Australia). PODD is a schema-driven Semantic Web database which uses the Resource Description Framework (RDF) model to store semi-structured information. RDF allows PODD to process information about a range of phenomics experiments without needing to define a universal schema for all of the different structures. To illustrate the process, exemplar datasets were generated using a medium throughput, high resolution, three-dimensional digitisation system purposely built for studying plant structure and function simultaneously under specific environmental conditions. The High Performance Compute (HPC), storage and data collection publication aspects of the workflow and their realisation in CSIRO infrastructure are also discussed along with their relationship to PODD.

1 Introduction

Since the genomics era, biology has become a data-driven science. Advances in robotics, automation and imaging, in combination with high performance computing have permitted the rapid production of large and complex biological datasets. Currently, high volumes of heterogeneous image data, physiological and morphological measurements are being acquired by a range of new phenotyping platforms located in purpose built phenomics centres across the world. These large datasets of phenotypic characters such as growth rate, plant architecture, photosynthetic performance, yield must be stored and related to genotype. This link is essential for expediting the identification of genetic variation in natural and derived genetic populations (e.g. germplasm collections, association genetic panels, recombinant inbred lines), understanding the dynamic relationship between phenotype, genotype and environment and delivering the increase in productivity necessary for feeding the world.

To achieve this goal, the vast array of phenotypic data collected from a variety of phenomics platforms must be combined with metadata explaining how the raw information was collected. This process forms structured digital objects containing the raw information. These objects are then delivered to a range of analysis pipelines, which transform the raw information into aggregated multi-phase datasets, each phase representing a new aggregation or inference from the original raw data. This reduction process converts the raw multi-dimensional data into information which is conceptually interpretable by a human being, i.e. new knowledge. The details about the steps taken are recorded to give context to the data.

To make sense of this large amount of information, sophisticated storage, archiving, searching and analysis capabilities are required. To date solutions to this problem have been handled essentially by private companies, and no suitable solution exists in the public domain. Lack of systems, both to manage linked metadata, and controlled vocabularies to describe plant growth and experimental conditions, have severely hampered sharing of plant phenomics data, comparison of results between laboratories and the capacity to carry out meta-analysis of existing data sets.

Thus, to support publicly-funded phenomics activities in Australia, the Phenomics Ontology Driven Data repository (PODD) has been developed as a repository for data produced by the variety of plant imaging and phenotyping platforms available at the High Resolution Plant Phenomics Centre, as well as for recording the contextual metadata associated with plant genotypes, treatments and environmental conditions [1].

In this paper, we describe the workflow management that the High Resolution Plant Phenomics Centre (HRPPC) has implemented for keeping track of its phenomics data, metadata and experimental processes. This complex challenge was addressed by building a multi-disciplinary group of information technology experts and embedding users of phenomics technologies into it. The result of the approach is a state of the art computational and data mining environment, optimised for data access, data discovery and data sharing, which also provides the flexibility for linking genomic information through the use of RDF triples. In this context, we also describe the role of the CSIRO Data Access Portal (DAP) [2] to annotate and store raw and processed datasets. DAP also provides long term secure storage for data collections and the ability to search for, control access to, and cite them via Digital Object Identifiers. PODD manages the mapping of collections located in DAP to PODD projects, providing for the storage of large images and documents unsuited to RDF databases. Figure 1 shows the relationship between components and key data flows.

2 Phenomics Ontology Driven Data repository

2.1 Semantic science for phenomics data management

Scientists have focused on including semantics into datasets, typically using the foundations of RDF and OWL, from two main directions. Some focus on defin-



Fig. 1. HRPPC component relationships and data flow

ing ontologies based on hierarchies of scientific concepts and properties, while others have focused on mapping complex scientific datasets to RDF using syntax transformations without initially defining the semantic meaning of the results. In reality, most efforts fall somewhere in the middle, with ontological annotations attached to some data points while other nearby data points are syntactically represented using RDF, without links to ontologies of scientific concepts.

Increasingly however, providers of scientific datasets are focusing on enhancing their datasets using curated scientific concepts from ontologies. For example, scientists have used the Gene Ontology [3] to link well known concepts to represent common elements across genomics datasets, while the Plant Ontology [4] allows the description of plant based datasets.

2.2 Redesign of the Phenomics Ontology Driven Data repository

The PODD repository relies on semantic web technologies to manage phenomics data and metadata. Although both ontologies and mappings are essential, in PODD it was necessary to build the system with a relaxed ontological vocabulary to allow scientists to generate datasets before they were certain about the semantic meaning of their work. In addition, it was necessary for PODD to allow scientists to continue to maintain projects containing curated scientific concepts alongside raw experimental data. The PODD repository was redesigned based on an evaluation of the original software [1] that found it was not able to scale sufficiently well to suit the HRPPC needs. The major differences to the software implemented by [1] is that projects are no longer the only supported top object type, and projects are not stored in multiple parts, as that approach was not able to scale as was originally hypothesised.

The basic PODD project is structured as a tree, which, when used with PlantScanTM, represents the different components of a scientific project as top-level branches. These include a branch for raw data, along with separate branches for results, analysis, and publications related to the project. In the case of raw data, the semantics are not clear and cannot be defined by the platforms collecting the data. For example, they may annotate images of a plant with a trait in only one case, without annotating other images. These horizontal links are not constrained by the basic scientific project structure, so they are able to entail novel meanings independent of the ontology, including untested hypotheses, process annotations and meaningful scientific results.

2.3 Semantic validation

PODD validates experiments using independently configurable rules based on OWL (Web Ontology Language) schemas. Although PODD currently only supports OWL as a rules language, it could be easily extended in other cases to use different systems such as N3, RDFS, SPARQL, or SPIN as rules languages [5].

OWL is used to determine whether projects are both internally consistent, with all objects having an explicit RDF type, and whether they are consistent with the ontologies that they import. The main points that PODD focuses on for validation is determining that mappings are consistent with the basic PODD predicates and classes, so that they can be used to render both static HTML pages and provide HTML based editing facilities. For example, any OWL object property that has been defined to link from image acquisition runs to images can be used to define the purpose of an image. This may include any combination of the defined properties, without requiring all of the properties to be used. General scientific properties and phenotype specific properties are defined in larger extension ontologies as illustrated in Figure 2.

3 CSIRO Data Access Portal

CSIRO's Research Data Service (RDS) has developed the Data Access Portal (DAP), an open source web application that enables research data to be discovered, managed and shared. [2]

Researchers can describe a data collection, deposit data, choose a license, and add attribution details. Access to a collections description and/or data can be restricted to CSIRO or a set of individuals (within CSIRO or partner organisations) or it can be made public, becoming searchable by anyone via the Internet. In the case where a collection and its data are public, a Digital Object Identifier (DOI) is issued and can be used to formally cite the collection in a publication. Collections can either be one-time, self-serve deposits or automated, ongoing deposits and can be changed over time through versioning. Whole datasets or specific files within a collection can be downloaded. A machine-to-machine REST interface permits programmatic search and collection download.



Fig. 2. PODD ontology hierarchy

DAP is the visible part of the system. Other than standard web servers, databases and application servers, additional required server-side infrastructure includes petabyte-level, multi-decade, backed-up disk storage, integrity checking, and automated migration of data collections to and from tape storage.

4 The PlantScanTM digitisation platform

4.1 BagIt

BagIt is defined by an Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF) document as an “hierarchical file packaging format for storage and transfer of arbitrary digital content” [6]. A payload manifest details content and MD5 or SHA hashes for content integrity verification. Data file related metadata can be stored in pre-defined files as key-value pairs.

For PlantScanTM, file-level metadata includes plant barcodes, batch numbers, and plant type, although the BagIt specification does not mandate a particular archiving strategy, with the focus being upon the directory structure, special files, and integrity checking. BagIt-conforming tools [7] [8] were assessed and where necessary, improvements were implemented and tested to ensure that the tools were scalable with the size of the collections being created.

4.2 Bag preparation for a DAP collection

CSIRO ASC shared facilities [9] are used to process the raw PlantScanTM data to derive data products (meshes). Raw data and meshes are collected using the BagIt format [6] and stored in the ASC archival system. ASC High Performance Compute (HPC) hosts (systems with high processor count and large memory) are taken advantage of to create and verify bags more rapidly than would be

possible on conventional computer systems. The DAP to store collections of PlantScanTM raw images and processed mesh data as bags. Currently, one bag is equivalent to a single batch scanned on the PlantScanTM local software system, which usually means the same kind of plant with different genotypes scanned under one experiment configuration profile.

Raw data from PlantScanTM local storage (HRPPC-Store) and data processed on HPC hosts are transferred to ASC bulk storage where image and mesh files are organised in folders by batch, then barcode number, then subfolders for each image file type (e.g. RGB images, IR images, LiDAR) and meshes. Bag creation is carried out via an allocated ASC HPC job. The metadata required for a DAP publication is created and the bag transferred to the DAP staging area via SFTP (SSH File Transfer Protocol). After publication of the DAP collection, the data from PlantScanTM for the given project becomes discoverable via DAP. In addition, experiment reports, published papers, and sensor configurations can either be made accessible via a DAP collection’s “related materials” links, other metadata fields, or within the collection’s data (e.g. bag).

4.3 Heterogeneous data streams

PlantScanTM is a medium throughput high resolution phenotyping platform, which brings together a number of imaging sensors—light detection and ranging, far-infrared imaging, and multi-wavelength imaging—to non-invasively measure plant growth and function using in-silico approaches. Raw data is captured with its contextual information (e.g. system configuration, time of acquisition, batch number and project) and is stored in a purpose-built database as the data is being generated. The various data streams are collated and used to produce full 3D representation of each plant with overlaid spectral information. The metadata collected during image acquisition are necessary inputs for the computer vision techniques which are used to create the 3D representation of the plant. The 3D meshes are then automatically segmented in order to semantically identify the different parts of the plants (Paprocki et al, 2012). A longitudinal 3D matching pipeline for plant mesh parts is then used to evaluate temporal changes at the whole plant and/or organ level.

4.4 Metadata

Each acquisition on PlantScanTM includes metadata (in addition to the raw data streams), such as plant genus and species, project and experiment metadata, a unique identifier for each image (Globally Unique Identifier), imaging angle, environmental temperature of the imaging chamber, location of optical and colour calibration datasets for each acquisition run, LiDAR (Light Detection and Ranging Sensors) calibration files. The metadata associated with each acquisition is automatically generated when setting up the configuration on the platform. This information is paramount to validate and process the raw image data, and for the post-processing phases. This information currently resides in the PlantScanTM database.

4.5 Data volume

Digitisation systems such as PlantScanTM generate huge amounts of data including raw image data, registration metadata, sensor configurations and plant metadata. For example, PlantScanTM generates around 500GB of raw image data, representing in excess of 200,000 database records, per day. Sufficient storage space (usually at remote locations) and fast network transfer rates were thus necessary to facilitate data movement for processing using high performance computers (HPC). Because an RDF database structure is not suitable for handling large data sets of images, it was necessary to package the raw information into elementary units with permanent addresses which could be retrieved using PODD. The CSIRO Data Access Portal (DAP) [2] and Advanced Scientific Computing (ASC) storage and compute facilities [9] are key resources used by PlantScanTM to process and store bulk data.

5 Semantic integration

The PODD ontology enables plant phenomics researchers to link from mesh results to the raw data that they were generated from. It also allows researchers to link from both mesh results and their recorded conclusions to shared phenomics ontologies which describe specific features of the plants. When used together, this enables scientists to trace the provenance of their results and conclusions based on well known concepts in phenomics ontologies.

External ontologies must currently be mapped into the PODD system to define the expected status of the classes and properties with respect to the basic PODD concepts. The basic concepts are used to both verify that each PODD project has a single valid tree structure, and render HTML pages for both browsing and editing. PODD also supports an RDF-based HTTP REST interface that clients may use to fetch and update objects without using the HTML pages.

6 Semantic publication

PODD provides a secure mechanism for publishing both human and machine readable descriptions of scientific experiments. It utilises the well-known DOI mechanism for publishing raw data files using DAP, and uses HTTP URIs to publish experiments using the PODD web interface.

Scientific journals increasingly require the data and provenance for articles to be available in a machine readable format. The DOI registrar that DAP uses, DataCite [10], was setup to provide unique identifiers for data items that can be attached to publications, which in turn may have their own DOIs.

By providing machine readable descriptions of scientific experiments, including semantic references to shared ontologies where possible, PODD enables the output from PlantScanTM to be interpreted and extended by others. The use of PODD URIs in other RDF documents enables scientists to extend the initial work using the Linked Data paradigm [11].

7 Conclusion

This paper described how the Phenomics Ontology Driven Data repository integrates with the PlantScanTM platform and CSIRO Data Access Portal to manage the complex workflows at the High Resolution Plant Phenomics Centre. This workflow keeps track of phenomics data, metadata and experimental processes and also provides a secure mechanism to share and publish scientific experiments in both human and machine readable formats.

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