BioNetGen: software for rule-based modeling of signal transduction based on the interactions of molecular domains

Michael L. Blinov, James R. Faeder, Byron Goldstein and William S. Hlavacek

Theoretical Biology and Biophysics Group, Theoretical Division, Los Alamos National Laboratory, Los Alamos, NM 87545, USA

Received on May 17, 2004; revised on June 8, 2004; accepted on June 19, 2004
Advance Access publication June 24, 2004

ABSTRACT

Summary: BioNetGen allows a user to create a computational model that characterizes the dynamics of a signal transduction system, and that accounts comprehensively and precisely for specified enzymatic activities, potential post-translational modifications and interactions of the domains of signaling molecules. The output defines and parameterizes the network of molecular species that can arise during signaling and provides functions that relate model variables to experimental readouts of interest. Models that can be generated are relevant for rational drug discovery, analysis of proteomic data and mechanistic studies of signal transduction.

Availability: http://cellsignaling.lanl.gov/bionetgen

Contact: bionetgen@lanl.gov

COMBINATORIAL COMPLEXITY

A problem that one confronts when attempting to model signal transduction is combinatorial complexity, which is caused by the many ways that signaling molecules can combine and be modified (Hlavacek et al., 2003). For example, a protein that contains \( n \) sites at which phosphate can be added or removed through the activities of kinases and phosphatases can occupy \( 2^n \) different phosphoforms. Adding further to this problem, post-translational modifications typically regulate the reversible assembly of heterogeneous signaling complexes, e.g. through protein–protein interactions that depend on phosphorylation. Even when only a few proteins are considered, as in a model for activation of the protein tyrosine kinase Syk (Faeder et al., 2003), the enzymatic activities, potential modifications and interactions of the molecules imply a large number of possible molecular species, hundreds to thousands for systems we have considered. This complexity is unavoidable if we wish to develop predictive models that incorporate details at the level of molecular domains, the fundamental components of signal transduction systems (Goldstein et al., 2004).

RULE-BASED DOMAIN-ORIENTED MODELING

As part of our effort to study signaling by FcεRI, the high-affinity receptor for IgE antibody, we have developed a rule-based domain-oriented approach to modeling that addresses the problem of combinatorial complexity (Goldstein et al., 2002, 2004; Faeder et al., 2003; Hlavacek et al., 2003). In this approach, the possible states of molecular domains and rules for the activities and interactions of domains are specified. The rules are then used in a computer program to generate a reaction network comprised of all chemically distinct species and reactions implied by the specified properties of the molecular domains. An individual reaction is parameterized by the rate constant assigned to its class of reaction, each of which is defined by a rule. This approach to modeling is facilitated by BioNetGen, which allows a user to create multidomain objects and specify reaction rules based on these objects through a text-based interface. Models appropriate for chemical reaction kinetics in spatially homogenous reaction compartments can be generated for a variety of systems.

SYNTAX OF MODEL SPECIFICATION

A BioNetGen input file defines (1) rate constants and concentrations; (2) molecular components, such as protein interaction domains and the potential states of these domains; (3) reaction rules, one for each type of reaction to be considered; and (4) output functions. The conventions of model specification are illustrated in Figure 1. Sample input files are available at our website, as well as a user’s guide, a quick reference guide and an online tutorial.

The molecular species in a model are specified as follows. A user can declare individual molecular species (Fig. 1a), multistate species (Fig. 1b) and complexes comprised of two

*To whom correspondence should be addressed.
Fig. 1. Illustrated declarations in the input file (fceri_net.in) that specifies the model and output functions of Faeder et al. (2003). Boxes enclose text of the input file. (a) Declarations of six individual molecular species. (b) A multistate species declaration of 48 individual molecular species that contain one receptor (R). Each of these species is characterized by three domains, which have two, four and six possible states. (c) Declaration of complexes that contain two receptors (left) and a reference to one of the 300 individual molecular species in this class (right). (d) The reaction rule for ligand–receptor binding, which implies 24 distinct forward reactions and the same number of reverse reactions. All forward (reverse) reactions are assigned the rate constant $k_+ (k_-)$. (e) Declaration of an output function, a weighted sum of 98 concentrations, used to calculate the total concentration of autophosphorylated Syk.

A user can define cumulative quantities that relate model variables to experimental readouts (Fig. 1e), such as the phosphorylation level of a particular protein. The ability to define such output functions is important because observable quantities typically reflect an ensemble of difficult-to-distinguish molecular species.

**CAPABILITIES AND LIMITATIONS**

BioNetGen, which is implemented in Perl, translates the high-level specification of a model, described above, into a chemical reaction network, i.e. a comprehensive list of the species and reactions implied by the user’s declarations. The output can be read by other programs in the BioNetGen distribution, including a C program called Network that translates the list of reactions into a set of coupled ordinary differential equations (ODEs) and solves the ODEs using routines from the CVODE library (Cohen and Hindmarsh, 1996). Network sends the time-courses of concentrations and output functions in tabular format to files that can be imported into visualization software, such as Grace (http://plasma-gate.weizmann.ac.il/Grace), for which an interface is provided. BioNetGen also exports models in systems biology markup language (SBML) format (Hucka et al., 2003). As a result, models are usable not only by programs in the BioNetGen distribution but also by the various software tools that support SBML (http://sbml.org). These tools include not only ODE solvers...
but also programs that implement discrete-event Monte Carlo algorithms for simulating stochastic chemical reaction kinetics (Gillespie, 1976).

The conventions of BioNetGen provide a concise language for specifying models that account for the modifications and interactions of molecular domains. For example, the input file that specifies the model of Faeder et al. (2003) consists of 95 declarations of parameter values, reaction rules and output functions and requires 7 kB of memory. In contrast, the SBML file that specifies this model requires the explicit declaration of 3680 unidirectional reactions and is more than a megabyte in size (because of both the verbose XML encoding and the number of reactions). BioNetGen may serve as a guide for the development of standards for representing and exchanging rule-based models in systems biology, which are currently being discussed and developed (Finney and Hucka, 2003; Franza, 2004).

We have used BioNetGen to generate models for early membrane-proximal signaling events triggered by antigen (Goldstein et al., 2002; Faeder et al., 2003), epidermal growth factor, erythropoietin and interleukin-1 in mammals. We have also generated models for mitogen-activated protein kinase cascades involved in responses of yeast to α-factor pheromone and osmotic stress. These models are available at our website, and they illustrate a range of BioNetGen capabilities.

Most software tools for modeling signal transduction require a user to make a declaration of some type for each species and reaction in a model, which is a severe limitation for systems marked by combinatorial complexity. In contrast, BioNetGen interprets a small number of user-specified rules to generate a large reaction network. Rule-based generation of reaction networks is also facilitated by Cellerator (Shapiro et al., 2003), STochSim (Le Novère and Shimizu, 2001) and other tools in development (see links to related software projects on our website). An advantage of BioNetGen over the tools reported in the literature is the ability to handle aggregation of multistate species, a critical feature of many systems (Goldstein et al., 2004). However, a general treatment of multicomponent complexes will require further software development, because BioNetGen is currently limited to complexes of two multistate species. Allowing three or more such species to aggregate requires additional inputs that significantly complicate model specification. Another limitation of BioNetGen at present is that it enumerates all possible species and reactions prior to simulation of the network dynamics. When the number of species is sufficiently large, it may be more practical to generate new species and reactions on-the-fly during a simulation (Hlavacek et al., 2003), which will require an integration of the rule evaluation and simulation capabilities. Extensions of BioNetGen are planned and will be announced on our website.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank Ed Stites, Aileen Vandenberg and Jin Yang for beta testing. This work was supported by grants GM35556 and RR18754 from the National Institutes of Health and by the Department of Energy through contract W-7405-ENG-36.

NOTE ADDED IN PROOF

BioNetGen can now handle complexes of more than two multistate species. See the BioNetGen web site for details.

REFERENCES


