Cobweb: a Java applet for network exploration and visualisation
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ABSTRACT
Summary: Cobweb is a Java applet for real-time network visualisation; its strength lies in enabling the interactive exploration of networks. Therefore, it allows new nodes to be interactively added to a network by querying a database on a server. The network constantly rearranges to provide the most meaningful topological view.
Availability: Cobweb is available under the GPLv3 and may be freely downloaded at http://bioinformatics.charite.de/cobweb.
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Supplementary Information: A tutorial, interactive examples, a downloadable example implementation of the applet and a video showing the applet are available at http://bioinformatics.charite.de/cobweb.

1 INTRODUCTION
Network based techniques are used today to tackle a wide variety of scientific questions, ranging from interaction mechanisms in protein networks to signalling pathway analysis (Barabási and Oltvai 2004). Consequently there is a strong need to have tools to visualise and explore networks like Cytoscape (Shannon et al. 2003), Gephi (Bastian et al. 2009) and ProViz (Iragne et al. 2005). However, these programs aim at visualizing large networks and offer many features. They cannot be integrated into websites and have a significant learning curve. Therefore, we have developed Cobweb as a Java applet that has fewer features but can be easily used from any webpage. Cobweb offers uncomplicated real-time visualisation of networks up to a few hundred nodes. In contrast to earlier web-based approaches such as Medusa (Hooper and Bork 2005) and jSquid (Klammer et al. 2008), Cobweb stresses interactive features. Thus it is possible to interactively add new nodes to the network at which time the network topology changes to provide the most uncluttered view.

2 THE APPLET
Cobweb’s strength lies in its ease of use and ability to be adapted to new tasks.

2.1 Features
- Can be easily integrated into web pages
- The user interface is easily customizable using JavaScript (see 2.2 User Interface)
- The user can interactively load new nodes (e.g., from a database) (see 2.3 Interactively add nodes)
- Network conformation changes for best viewing (see 2.4 Network arrangement)
- Networks can be input and output as XGMML and GraphML files (see 2.5 Input and output)
- Pictorial representation of nodes

2.2 User Interface
The user interface consists of three parts: a network view, a status bar and a side bar (see Figure 1). The network view is the actual applet, where the network is drawn. Here nodes can be clicked, dragged and visualisation options (like how to depict nodes, the length of edges, etc.) chosen.

The other parts, the side and status bars, are not part of the applet but of the HTML-content of the page. The status bar gives some information about the actions the applet is performing while the side bar offers possibilities for interacting with the network, e.g., to add new nodes or to perform basic analyses. The content of these bars is generated by JavaScript functions, so it is possible to add additional features to the side bar just by changing the JavaScript code without touching the applet code.

2.3 Interactively add nodes
The applet supports interactive exploration of the network displayed by adding new nodes to the network. Nodes are added either by double-clicking on existing nodes in the network view or through buttons in the side bar.

To add a new node to the network, the Java applet calls a script (e.g., written in PHP) that returns detailed information (like neighbours, description, etc.) about the node. This information is then parsed by Cobweb and the node is added to the network. If the
script is stored on the same server as the applet, this works without having to sign the applet.

2.4 Network arrangement

The network is represented internally as a particle system, where each node in the network is represented by one particle. Each particle is connected by spring-like forces to all other particles in a pairwise manner. If two nodes in the network are connected by an edge, the force between the corresponding particles is attractive, otherwise repellent. The positions of all particles are constantly recomputed based on these forces using a fourth-order Runge-Kutta method (Press et al. 2007). As such, the network automatically returns to a favourable position after nodes are added or moved by the user. Additionally, single nodes can be given a fixed position to improve clarity.

2.5 Input and output

The applet is able to read and write networks as valid XGMML (eXtensible Graph Markup and Modeling Language) and GraphML documents. XGMML and GraphML are widely used file formats; this allows users to open the networks using other software, e.g., Cytoscape and Gephi.

3 CONCLUSIONS

Cobweb is a tool for uncomplicated real-time network visualisation and particularly suited to interactive exploration of datasets accessed from websites. Cobweb is able to open and save documents in XGMML- and GraphML-format and thus is suited to preliminary viewing before loading into more complicated and detailed analytical software.

We are currently using Cobweb in our project PROMISCUOUS (von Eichborn et al. 2011); incorporation into other projects is ongoing.

Cobweb is written in Java and based on the Processing framework (Reas and Fry 2010) and the G4P library (http://lagers.org.uk/g4p) by Peter Lager. Being object-oriented makes it straightforward to add new functionality (e.g., new node and edge properties) to the applet.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We want to mention J.T. Bernstein’s physics library from which our particle system for Cobweb evolved (http://traer.cc/physics). Funding: J.v.E. was supported by the International Research Training Group on Genomics and Systems Biology of Molecular Networks (GRK1360).

REFERENCES


