Sequenceserver: a modern graphical user interface for custom BLAST databases

Anurag Priyam¹,²,¹¹, Ben J. Woodcroft³,¹¹,¹², Vivek Rai⁴, Alekhya Munagala⁵, Ismail Moghul¹, Filip Ter⁶, Mark Anthony Gibbins⁷, HongKee Moon⁸, Guy Leonard⁹, Wolfgang Rumpf¹⁰, Yannick Wurm¹,¹¹,¹³,*

1: School of Biological and Chemical Sciences, Queen Mary University of London, London E1 4NS, United Kingdom.
2: Department of Mechanical Engineering, Indian Institute of Technology Kharagpur, Kharagpur 721302, West Bengal, India.
3: Australian Centre for Ecogenomics, School of Chemistry and Molecular Biosciences, University of Queensland, Brisbane 4072, Queensland, Australia.
4: Department of Biotechnology, Indian Institute of Technology Kharagpur, Kharagpur 721302, West Bengal, India.
5: Department of Mathematics, Indian Institute of Technology Kharagpur, Kharagpur 721302, West Bengal, India.
6: School of Electronic Engineering and Computer Science, Queen Mary University of London, London E1 4NS, United Kingdom.
7: Department of Computer Science, Royal Holloway, University of London, Egham, Surrey, TW20 0EX, United Kingdom.
8: Scientific Computing Facility, Max Planck Institute of Molecular Cell Biology and Genetics, Pfotenhauerstr 108, 01307 Dresden, Germany.
9: Biosciences, University of Exeter, Geoffrey Pope Building, Exeter EX4 4QD, United Kingdom.
10: The Graduate School, University of Maryland, University College, Largo, MD, 20774, United States; and The Research Institute at Nationwide Children’s Hospital, Columbus, Ohio, 43205, United States
11: 5Bases Limited, London E9 7DR, United Kingdom.
12: Previous address: Department of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology, Bio21 Molecular Science and Biotechnology Institute, The University of Melbourne, Parkville, 3010, Victoria, Australia.
13: Previous address: Department of Ecology and Evolution and Swiss Institute of Bioinformatics, Université de Lausanne, 1015 Lausanne, Switzerland.

* To whom correspondence should be addressed: y.wurm@qmul.ac.uk
Abstract

The dramatic drop in DNA sequencing costs has created many opportunities for novel biological research. These opportunities largely rest upon the ability to effectively compare newly obtained and previously known sequences. This is commonly done with BLAST, yet using BLAST directly on new datasets requires substantial technical skills or helpful colleagues. Furthermore, graphical interfaces for BLAST are challenging to install and largely mimic underlying computational processes rather than work patterns of researchers.

We combined a user-centric design philosophy with sustainable software development approaches to create Sequenceserver (http://sequenceserver.com), a modern graphical user interface for BLAST. Sequenceserver substantially increases the efficiency of researchers working with sequence data. This is due to innovations at three levels. First, our software can be installed and used on custom datasets extremely rapidly for personal and shared applications. Second, based on analysis of user input and simple algorithms, Sequenceserver reduces the amount of decisions the user must make, provides interactive visual feedback, and prevents common potential errors that would otherwise cause erroneous results. Finally, Sequenceserver provides multiple highly visual and text-based output options that mirror the requirements and work patterns of researchers. Together, these features greatly facilitate BLAST analysis and interpretation and thus substantially enhance researcher productivity.
Introduction

The dramatic drop in cost of DNA sequencing since 2007 (http://genome.gov/sequencingcosts) has led to a rapid increase in the number of researchers working with unpublished sequence data from newly obtained transcriptomes, genomes and metagenomes. This has created many opportunities for novel biological research in fields including medicine (Qin et al., 2010), developmental biology (Santos et al., 2015), microbiology (Hugenholtz & Tyson 2008), ecology and evolution (Ellegren 2014; Seehausen et al., 2014). Pursuing such opportunities often involves querying newly obtained sequence data with specific aims such as determining the presence or absence of a sequence in a specific sample, obtaining sequence to enable molecular cloning, quantitative PCR or phylogenetic analyses, inferring the names or functions of putative genes, and identifying sequence and structural variation within and between species.

At a basic level such analyses involve comparing one or more query sequences with one or more databases each containing between thousands and hundreds of millions of sequences. This is typically performed with BLAST (Basic Local Alignment Search Tool; Altschul et al., 1990, 1997; Camacho et al., 2009), likely the most commonly used bioinformatics tool (>100,000 citations; see also Van Noorden et al., 2014; Korf et al., 2003). For each query sequence, BLAST heuristically identifies database sequences that are similar and outputs relevant comparisons (Camacho et al., 2009). To perform BLAST searches, biologists typically rely on graphical web interfaces provided by large organizations such as the National Center for Biotechnology Information (NCBI; Johnson et al., 2008) or the European Bioinformatics Institute (Goujon et al., 2010). These are valuable resources for published data, but despite efforts to encourage and facilitate early data deposition (Kaye et al., 2009) it can take months or even years before new sequence data is available on such central repositories.

How can researchers perform BLAST queries on new or unpublished data? First, BLAST software can be freely downloaded. However, using it directly requires substantial command-line and Unix skills (http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK52640/) which many biologists lack (Smith, 2013). Furthermore, BLAST outputs are text-based; they lack potentially helpful graphical visualization. Second, queries and interpretation can be outsourced to bioinformatician collaborators or technicians with appropriate skills. Finally, the most appropriate solution for many laboratories would be to have access to a shared graphical user interface to run BLAST on private datasets. Several free and open source software packages make this possible, including ViroBLAST (Deng et al., 2007), GMOD’s BlastGraphic (O’Connor et al., 2008), NCBI’s wwwblast (Tao, 2006), NCBI’s Amazon Cloud BLAST (NCBI, 2014), and Galaxy BLAST (Cock et al., 2015). Unfortunately, setting up such interfaces is challenging: they are either deprecated and no longer maintained, or have complex installation dependencies such as custom configuration of the Apache web server (Fielding & Kaiser, 1997) or CGI paths (Gundavaram, 1996). Commercial software packages overcome some such problems, but their cost makes them inaccessible to many laboratories.

Once set up, a further challenge is using the graphical user interface. For example, users typically must choose between multiple BLAST algorithms (TBLASTX, TBLASTN, BLASTX, BLASTN, BLASTP) before entering query data or choosing search databases (e.g., Tao 2006; Deng et al. 2007; O’Connor et al. 2008; NCBI, 2014; Cock et al. 2015; Johnson et al., 2008). This implicitly requires detailed knowledge of BLAST algorithms and available databases – yet even experienced BLAST users make frequent mistakes and must revisit their decisions. This design could be improved because only a single algorithm is appropriate for most combinations of input sequence and database. Many such inadequacies of BLAST user interfaces exist. This is likely because there is only a limited culture of user interface and user experience design for scientific software (Macaulay et al., 2009) including for bioinformatics (Pavelin et al. 2015; CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 International license is the author/funder. It is made available under a
Here we present Sequenceserver, a free software package designed to help overcome the largest of the aforementioned hurdles. By combining user-centric design (Garrett, 2011; Javahery et al., 2004; Pavelin et al., 2012) with modern software development and visualization approaches, Sequenceserver aims to increase the productivity of bioinformaticians setting up web servers for running BLAST on custom datasets, and for biologists performing and interpreting BLAST searches.

Results

Sequenceserver is a graphical user interface wrapper for BLAST designed with extensive consideration of user experience and user interface (Garrett, 2011; Javahery et al., 2004; Pavelin et al., 2012). Below we provide overviews of Sequenceserver’s major features that facilitate setting up a BLAST server, performing queries and interpreting results.

Assisted installation and configuration

Sequenceserver can be rapidly installed and configured by biologists with only little Unix experience for individual use or for shared use as part of a research group. Entering `sudo gem install sequenceserver` into a terminal will download and install Sequenceserver on standard Unix operating systems including Mac and Linux. Once installed, entering `sequenceserver` into a terminal downloads NCBI BLAST+ (Camacho et al., 2009) if necessary and prompts the user to indicate the location of a directory containing database sequences in the standard FASTA format or in BLAST’s specific BLASTDB database format. Sequenceserver then recursively scans the directory for FASTA files that have not yet been formatted as BLASTDBs. For each such FASTA file, Sequenceserver detects whether the FASTA file contains nucleotide or amino acid sequences and determines a suitable name to display the corresponding BLASTDB in the search form. Sequenceserver then confirms with the user if the FASTA file should be formatted as BLASTDB. Here, the user can modify the proposed name and optionally enter a relevant taxonomic identifier. The location of the directory containing database sequences is stored in a configuration file for subsequent use. Finally, Sequenceserver launches its built in web server (Harris & Haase, 2012) making the graphical user interface (Figure 1 and below) accessible from a web browser locally at `http://localhost:4567` or over the network at `http://user-ip:4567`; it automatically shows all available BLASTDBs, segregated according to nucleotide vs. amino acid sequence type.

Additional configuration possibilities include setting the number of threads to be used by BLAST, integrating Sequenceserver with web servers such as Nginx (Reese, 2008) or Apache (Fielding & Kaiser, 1997), adding password protection, customizing the interface colors and layout, and adding custom links from hits to external resources such as genome browsers (see online documentation).

Assistive BLAST query submission interface

Sequenceserver uses techniques including analysis of user input, interactive feedback and simple algorithms to streamline BLAST query submission and to prevent common errors that can cause BLAST to fail or generate misleading results. The user first types, pastes or drag-and-drops one or multiple FASTA format query sequences into a textfield (Figure 1). In the unlikely event that the user combined nucleotide sequences and amino acid sequences, an
alert message is shown and the BLAST button will remain disabled to avoid BLAST generating meaningless results.

Subsequently, the user selects one or several BLAST databases using checkboxes. Once a first database is selected, additional database selections are limited to those of the same type (i.e., either nucleotide or protein) to eliminate the risk of users combining incompatible databases that would cause BLAST to fail. Once a valid query is entered and a database is selected, the BLAST submission button activates. For most query-database combinations, the single possible basic BLAST algorithm will be used (Supplementary Figure S1). When multiple algorithms are appropriate (e.g., nucleotide query and nucleotide database: BLASTN and TBLASTX are both appropriate), a pull-down in the BLAST submission button allows the user to toggle between them. Sequenceserver’s automatic algorithm selection reduces the risk of attempting to perform impossible BLAST queries. Finally, Sequenceserver includes an “advanced parameters” field providing access to all standard BLAST parameters available in the command-line (Camacho et al., 2009).

Figure 1. Partial screenshot of the query interface. Dark red letters highlight the steps involved and some specific features. A: Three or more sequences were pasted into the query field (typewriter font; only the identifier is visible for the third sequence); a message confirms to the user that these are amino acid sequences. B: The Swiss-Prot protein database was the first database to be selected. As a result, additional database selections are limited to protein databases; nucleotide databases are disabled. C: The user entered (optional) advanced parameters to constrain the results to the 10 strongest hits with evalues stronger than $10^{-10}$. D: The BLAST button is automatically activated and labeled “BLASTP” as this is the only possible basic BLAST algorithm for the given query-database combination. As the user’s mouse pointer hovers over the BLASTP button, a tooltip indicates that a keyboard shortcut exists for this button.

Display of BLAST results

As a result of performing a BLAST query, an HTML report including graphical overviews is shown in the web browser (Figure 2; an interactive version of this figure is at http://sequenceserver.com/paper/fig2interactive). This report will feel familiar to users of NCBI BLAST but includes many additions and revisions for improved navigation, interpretation and follow-up analysis. For example, the report can be downloaded in HTML, XML and tab-delimited table formats; similarly a FASTA file containing all hit sequences can be downloaded. The HTML report clearly brings out the structure of results: If a user submitted multiple query sequences, a clickable index of queries is shown on
one side. All queries, hits and BLAST HSPs (high-scoring segment pairs) are numbered to facilitate navigation. For each query, identified hits are summarized in a table and an overview graphic. This graphic indicates the strength and locations of alignment of each hit (hits with stronger e-values are darker).

Each hit includes multiple links for subsequent analysis. For example, each hit to a sequence with an NCBI or UniProt identifier includes a link to the relevant page; links to private genome browsers or other sites can be added (see online documentation). Additionally, each hit includes one link to download the full sequence in FASTA format and another link to display the sequence in the browser. This sequence viewing interface (Supplementary Figure S2) includes GenBank-style visualization for readability and displays appropriate coordinate information when the mouse pointer hovers over one or selects multiple residues (Gómez et al., 2013). Furthermore, each hit includes a checkbox making it possible to simultaneously download a selection of multiple hit sequences as a single FASTA file.

Discussion

We created Sequenceserver to overcome many of the challenges of performing BLAST on custom datasets. Below we review known applications of Sequenceserver, compare it to alternatives, consider its compatibility with tools for follow-up analyses and discuss future directions.

Applications and relevance

Sequenceserver has accelerated our own research (Gotzek et al., 2011; Ingram et al., 2012; Wurm et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2013; Kulumi et al., 2013; Privman et al., 2013; Mondav et al., 2014; Schrader et al., 2014; Nygaard & Wurm, 2015) and that of others. Indeed, despite this being the first formal publication reporting Sequenceserver, the software has already been cited for research on emerging model organisms (Wurm, 2015) such as sea cucumber (Rowe et al., 2014), starfish (Elphick et al., 2013; Semmens et al., 2013, 2015), falcons (Seim et al., 2015), the sugar-apple tree (Gupta et al., 2015), the Hessian fly Mayetiola destructor (Shreve et al., 2013) and the house plant Streptocarpus rexii (Chiara et al., 2013), as well as for research in bioadhesion (Rodrigues et al., 2014), environmental microbiology (Castro et al., 2015), and general research on BLAST (Sharma & Mantri, 2014).

Google Analytics referral links to http://sequenceserver.com social web statistics, and community engagement through the mailing list indicates growing adoption of Sequenceserver (Table 1). For example, Sequenceserver is among the 10% most frequently downloaded packages on the biogems portal for bioinformatics software (Bonnal et al., 2012 > 28,000 downloads), and is a main querying mechanism for community genomic databases including the SymGRASS database of sugarcane orthologous genes (Belarmino et al., 2013), the Drosophila suzukii genome database (Chiu et al., 2013), the ant genomes database (Wurm et al., 2009), the planarian database (Brandl et al., 2015), the butterfly genomics database (http://blast.lepbase.org), a portal for exploring low-complexity amino acid sequences (Kirmitzoglou & Promponas, 2015), the Amborella database (http://amborella.huck.psu.edu/), a Fusarium database (http://www.fusariumnrpspks.dk/), two ash genome projects (https://geefu.oadb.tsl.ac.uk/) and http://www.ashgenome.org/ and an echinoderm transcriptome database (http://echinodb.uncc.edu/blast/). We are aware of at least 50 publicly accessible Sequenceserver instances, but precise usage statistics are difficult to confirm, as there is no centralized list of deployments. Our experience with deployment suggests that public servers are in the minority with most Sequenceserver instances being created for use by individual researchers or small groups as needed on the personal computers of...
Figure 2. Screenshot of a Sequenceserver BLAST report. An interactive version of this figure is at [http://sequenceserver.com/paper/fig2interactive](http://sequenceserver.com/paper/fig2interactive). Three amino acid sequences were compared against the Swiss-Prot database using BLASTP with an e-value cutoff of $10^{-10}$ and keeping only the 10 strongest hits per query. This screenshot shows a portion of the results for the first query. Dark red letters highlight some of the specific features of this report.

A: An index overview summarizes the query and database information and provides clickable links to query-specific results.

B: Results for the first query are shown. These include a graphical overview indicating which parts of the query sequence aligns to each hit, a tabular summary of all hits, and alignment details for each hit.

C: The first hit is selected for download; its alignment details have been folded away.

D: The user is studying the second hit; the mouse pointer hovers over the link to the hit’s UniProt page.
researchers. For instance, the authors collectively run 12 private servers and only 4 public servers at the time of this writing.

Sequenceserver is also used as an educational resource (e.g., [http://culture-bioinformatics.org/blast](http://culture-bioinformatics.org/blast)) to provide entry-level bioinformatics students a controlled environment to run BLAST queries and explore the effects of changing BLAST parameters on the results. Indeed, SequenceServer allows the students to access their classroom’s BLAST server from anywhere and the instructor to control the software and databases versions so that the results for any given query are consistent and predictable, as is critical for a classroom setting and not feasible using publicly-available servers such as NCBI.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Metric</th>
<th>Statistic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hits to sequenceserver.com in the last 12 months</td>
<td>11,050</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mailing list users</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mailing list threads</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RubyGems downloads</td>
<td>29,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GitHub stars</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter mentions</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sites with publicly available instances</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Usage and impact statistics of Sequenceserver at the time of writing.

Alternatives and compatibility with tools for follow-up analysis

Multiple alternatives to Sequenceserver similarly provide graphical user interfaces (GUIs) for BLAST ([Tao](https://doi.org/10.1101/033142) 2006, [Deng et al.](https://doi.org/10.1101/033142) 2007, [O’Connor et al.](https://doi.org/10.1101/033142) 2008, [Cock et al.](https://doi.org/10.1101/033142) 2015, [NCBI](https://doi.org/10.1101/033142) 2014). However, they have three broad levels of shortcomings (summarized in Supplementary Table S1). First, most of these tools first require other software to be installed and include little or no automation of common tasks such as downloading and configuring BLAST+ software or adding custom databases. Installation of such tools is out of reach of most biologists. In contrast, biologists with only limited Unix experience are able to set up Sequenceserver. Importantly, this ease of setup does not limit possible usage options. Indeed, experienced power users retain the flexibility of deploying Sequenceserver on personal computers, compute clusters and the cloud, customizing all aspects of Sequenceserver, and migrating from its built-in webservice to industry-strength standards.

Second, the query submission interface of alternatives to Sequenceserver are designed around how BLAST is implemented rather than accompanying the user through their thought and work process. For example, in some cases ([Cock et al.](https://doi.org/10.1101/033142) 2015, [Johnson et al.](https://doi.org/10.1101/033142) 2008) users must select a BLAST algorithm even before they have entered the query sequence and selected the databases to search. This is counterintuitive as a user’s thought process generally begins with their query sequence. In other cases ([Tao](https://doi.org/10.1101/033142) 2006, [Deng et al.](https://doi.org/10.1101/033142) 2007, [O’Connor et al.](https://doi.org/10.1101/033142) 2008, [NCBI](https://doi.org/10.1101/033142) 2014), users must select a BLAST algorithm after they have entered the query or after they have selected the databases to search. This is more in-line with users workflow, but both approaches fail to consider that only a single basic BLAST algorithm is applicable for most query-database combinations, thus the users wastes time choosing the appropriate algorithm. Furthermore, none of the alternative GUIs consider that the user may erroneously select an algorithm that is inappropriate for their query-database combination, or consider that the user may erroneously combine nucleotide
and amino acid sequence in a single query. In both scenarios, BLAST will either fail or incorrectly interpret the nucleotides adenine (A), thymine (T), cytosine (C) and guanine (G) as the amino acids arginine, threonine, cysteine and glutamine.

Finally, most GUIs [Tao, 2006; Deng et al., 2007; O’Connor et al., 2008; Cock et al., 2015; NCBI] either present the default HTML output of command-line BLAST or slightly reformat it. They thus lack many of the features of Sequenceserver that facilitate navigation, interpretation and follow-up analyses including exporting analysis results in different formats. Sequenceserver uses an approach that allows exporting a single analysis in many different formats. As part of this, Sequenceserver’s HTML report is generated from scratch, making it much easier to extend it with additional features.

Several commercial providers offer alternatives to Sequenceserver (e.g., BlastStation, Geneious, CLC). While such tools can overcome some of shortcomings listed here, they have other drawbacks. These include costs, risks in terms of reproducibility and long-term sustainability, limited flexibility for sharing with distant colleagues, and limited customization possibilities.

BLAST reports from Sequenceserver (e.g., in XML and tab-delimited formats) can be used as input for analysis tools that work directly with BLAST output. Thus users can access an instance of Sequenceserver running on a high-performance computer to create a BLAST report which they subsequently use with tools that facilitate specific analyses [e.g., MEGAN (Huson et al., 2007), Blast2GO (Conesa et al., 2005), BLAST2GENE (Suyama et al., 2004), EPoS (Griebel et al., 2008)], provide different visualization facilities [e.g., Kablammo (Wintersinger & Wasmuth 2015), BLASTGrabber (Neumann et al., 2014), Circoletto (Darzentas 2010), JAMBLAST (Lagnel et al., 2009), BOV (Gollapudi et al., 2008)] or facilitate importing BLAST results into a spreadsheet application or an SQL database [e.g., MuSeqBox (Xing & Brendel, 2001), Zerg (Paquola et al., 2003), Batch BLAST extractor (Pirooznia et al., 2008), BioParser (Catanho et al., 2006)]. A comparison of tools to interpret and work with BLAST output is provided by Neumann et al. (2013).

Future directions

The community of Sequenceserver developers will continue adding novel functionalities to our software in a public and open manner. We expect improvements along three main lines. First, additional output visualization facilities will be immensely beneficial for making sense of large datasets (Nielsen et al., 2010). In particular, this will involve integrating visualization tools developed by others (Gollapudi et al., 2008; Neumann et al., 2013; Gómez et al., 2013; Wintersinger & Wasmuth 2015) [http://wurmlab.github.io/tools/genevalidator/], while HMMER provides high-sensitivity for comparisons against sequence profiles (Eddy 2009). Similarly, DIAMOND is up to 20,000 times faster than BLASTX or BLASTP; this can be useful when datasets are particularly large (Buchfink et al., 2015, e.g., metagenomics). New versions of Sequenceserver and their features will be announced on Sequenceserver’s mailing list and Github repository.

Conclusion

Recent improvements in DNA sequencing technologies are enabling ever smaller groups of biologists to create previously unimaginable datasets on diverse ranges of species (Koboldt et al., 2015; Ellegren, 2014). Realizing that a major challenge for many biologist researchers is to effectively query such datasets, we built the Sequenceserver graphical front end for BLAST using modern user interface and user experience paradigms. Our software is particularly
enabling for researchers and communities focusing on species for which genomic data is novel as it empowers them to independently and relatively easily perform BLAST queries and share datasets. At the base of this software are modern software development technologies and approaches that have over the last few years become heavily used by the small groups of software developers at the core of many internet startup companies (Ries, 2011; Thiel & Masters, 2014). We are excited that the computational tools underlying basic scientific research can benefit from such technical possibilities (Altschul et al., 2013) and appropriate consideration of user experience (Pavelin et al., 2012). The increased usability, maintainability and sustainability of well-built tools ultimately translate into increased agility and productivity of researchers and in turn the impacts of their breakthroughs.

**Methods**

**Programming environment**

We developed Sequenceserver from scratch rather than basing our work on the NCBI’s initial Perl/CGI www-blast wrapper (Tao, 2006) to reduce technical debt (Lehman, 1980). The core of Sequenceserver is written in the Ruby programming language (Flanagan & Matsumoto, 2008) popular for creating dynamic websites (Ruby & Thomas, 2011) and bioinformatics tools (Goto et al., 2010), while JavaScript and HTML/CSS are used for layout and interactions in the web browser. We use multiple preexisting tools and libraries to facilitate development: The lightweight framework Sinatra (Harris & Haase, 2012) is used to create URL endpoints to load search form and run a BLAST search from the browser. BLAST searches are delegated to the compiled command line version of BLAST (Camacho et al., 2009); we use Ox (https://github.com/ohler55/ox) to parse BLAST XML and create the HTML report. Underscore (http://underscorejs.org/), HTML5 Shiv (https://github.com/afarkas/html5shiv), jQuery (http://jquery.com), jQuery UI (http://jqueryui.com), Webshim (https://afarkas.github.io/webshim/demos/), and Twitter Bootstrap (http://getbootstrap.com) libraries are used to create a uniform scripting environment (for dynamic aspects of the user interface) and a consistent look-and-feel (for visual layout) across most browsers. The d3 (http://d3js.org/) and BioJS (Gómez et al., 2013) libraries are used respectively for generating the graphical overview and the sequence viewing interface.

**Sustainable software development approach**

Throughout the development of Sequenceserver we followed six modern software engineering practices designed to facilitate and accelerate development while improving the long-term sustainability of the software (Prlč & Procter, 2012; Wilson et al., 2014 http://www.software.ac.uk/resources/guides-everything). First, we used an open source and agile development approach (Shore & Warden, 2007) involving frequent incremental improvements, peer review and frequent deployment on our own servers and within the community. Second, we structured the software according to object-oriented paradigm (Weisfeld, 2008), thus leading to a clean separation of different parts of the code. Third, we followed two important software development principles: “don’t repeat yourself” (DRY) leads to fewer lines of code and thus fewer bugs, and makes it easier to read and understand code than if similar commands are repeated in several places (Hunt & Thomas, 2000); “keep it simple, stupid” (KISS) reduces unnecessary complexity and thus lowers risks and leads to higher maintainability (Raymond, 2003). Fourth, we reuse widely established software packages and libraries (see programming environment) to avoid reimplementation. This accelerates our work and reduces the amount of Sequenceserver-specific code, which in turn further reduces the likelihood of adding
bugs (Sametinger, 1997). Fifth, we developed unit tests (Ammann & Offutt, 2008) and integration tests (Ammann & Offutt, 2008) for many parts of Sequenceserver’s code, and used continuous integration (https://travis-ci.org/) to ensure these tests are automatically run whenever any change is made to the code, thus increasing the chances of rapidly detecting errors. Sixth, we use the rubocop code analyser (https://github.com/bbatsov/rubocop) to ensure that our code respects the Ruby community style guide in terms of names of variables and methods, code structure and code formatting. Such respect of style standards makes code more accessible to other programmers and scientists than if code is inconsistently styled or if we had chosen our own conventions (Martin, 2008; Wurm, 2015). Finally, we use the Codeclimate service (http://codeclimate.com) for automatic detection of potential problems with software design.

**Graphical user interface design principles**

To ensure a fluid user experience that increases researcher productivity, we designed Sequenceserver around eight modern user interface design principles. First, the interface contains only essential information so as to minimize distractions for the user. Second, the information is laid out in a clear and hierarchically structured manner. As part of this, we paid special attention to typography, using Roboto (https://www.google.com/fonts/specimen/Roboto) for headings and Open Sans (https://www.google.com/fonts/specimen/Open+Sans) for normal text. These free, contemporary typefaces were designed to maximize legibility and overall aesthetics across electronic devices and print media. Third, we used automation where possible to minimize the number of decisions required from the user. For example, based on query type and databases selection we limit the choices for algorithm selection (except in the case of nucleotide-nucleotide search only a single BLAST algorithm is possible; see Supplementary Figure S1). Fourth, we use interactive visual feedback and cues for step-by-step discovery of the workflow. For example, the BLAST button remains disabled until the user has provided query sequence(s) and selected target databases. If the user tries to click the BLAST button while it is disabled a tooltip indicates that a required input is missing. Similarly, selection of protein databases is automatically disabled if the user has already selected a nucleotide database (and vice versa). Fifth, we remain consistent and contextual with regards to user interaction. For example, notification of sequence type does not depend on how query sequence was provided. This notification is shown below the query sequence input field – where the user’s eyes are likely to go after query input – instead of using a global designated notification area or displaying pop-up windows that can be disruptive or are ignored. Similarly, a “clear query” button is shown only after the user has provided query sequence(s) and is positioned where a user is likely to look for it. Sixth, we try not to let the advantages of a graphical interface and efforts to create an easily accessible user experience limit the scope of what the user can do. For example, all possible advanced BLAST search options can be entered via a generic input field. Similarly, tooltips over report download links are only shown after the mouse pointer has hovered for at least 500ms. This delay means most users won’t be bothered by tooltips after they have used the interface a few times. Seventh, we exploit intuitive human notions of colors. For example, if the user erroneously tries to combine nucleotide and amino acid sequences in the query, the query input-area is gently highlighted using a red border to indicate an error. At a different level, in the graphical overview shown for each query, the color of each hit indicates its strength, with stronger e-values being darker. Finally, the wording of error messages is similar to informal human conversation to create empathy and familiarity, which may also clarify that Sequenceserver is built by a community of scientists. For example, if a user encounters a bug in Sequenceserver, the error popup reads “Oops! Something went wonky. Below is the error detail. Please could you report it to our Google Group.”
Community building

We took four measures to help create a community and allow easy customization of our software. First, we performed all development in an open manner on the GitHub source code sharing/development site (http://github.com). This ensures that bioinformatician users can easily access the source code and customize the software. Indeed, such customization can be easily merged back into the main codebase of the software; several GitHub users are included as coauthors of this manuscript because of such contributions. Second, we provide extensive documentation as part of the source code and on the website http://sequenceserver.com. Third, we created a dialog with users (via GitHub issue tracking as well as a specific Google Groups mailing list); here users ask and answer each other’s questions and help each other regarding issues arising with customization, installation and specific datasets. Finally, we isolated the most commonly used customization code into separate files (a configuration file and a specific file for adding links from BLAST search results to custom databases such as custom genome browsers or other databases). Isolating the parts of code that a bioinformatician is most likely to edit facilitates customization and reduces risks when upgrading the software.

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**Supplementary Information**

**Figure S1. Automatic BLAST algorithm selection.** BLAST includes five basic algorithms (right column). Arrows indicate how Sequenceserver automatically selects an appropriate BLAST algorithm based on the sequence types of query (left column) and selected databases (middle column). For the first three combinations of query and database types, only one algorithm is possible. The circle indicates that for nucleotide query and nucleotide database, the user can choose between BLASTN and TBLASTX.

**Figure S2. Screenshot of viewing interface for a protein hit sequence.** Residues are grouped in multiples of 5, and the coordinates of the first residue of each line are shown in gray. Here, the user selected a range of amino acids; their specific coordinates are shown in a tooltip. The viewing interface for nucleotides is similar.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference and/or URL</th>
<th>ViroBlast</th>
<th>NCBI's wwwblast</th>
<th>GMOD's BlastGraphic</th>
<th>Galaxy Blast</th>
<th>NCBI Amazon Cloud BLAST</th>
<th>Sequenceserver</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Specific software requirements</td>
<td>Apache web server, PHP</td>
<td>Apache web server, CGI</td>
<td>Apache web server, Perl and several Perl modules from CPAN</td>
<td>Galaxy server</td>
<td>Only runs on Amazon Web Services</td>
<td>Ruby programming language¹</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for NCBI's current BLAST+ software</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Updating software while preserving</td>
<td>Involved</td>
<td>Involved</td>
<td>Involved</td>
<td>Involved</td>
<td>Involved</td>
<td>Trivial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>configuration</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can be integrated with standard web servers</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Installation and configuration</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Automatic BLAST algorithm selection</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BLAST query submission</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prevent user from mixing protein and nucleotide query sequences</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prevent user from running BLAST with impossible query-database-algorithm combinations</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to select multiple databases for search</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to enter advanced options</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes³</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BLAST query submission</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graphical overview of hits</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results clearly structured as in the NCBI's public BLAST interface</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to filter results</td>
<td>Yes: by e-value and identity.</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Link hits to custom external resources</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to download hit sequences</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to download BLAST reports</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes⁴: XML</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes⁴: XML &amp; Tab-delimited</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development status</td>
<td>Unclear</td>
<td>Inactive</td>
<td>Inactive</td>
<td>Active, open community</td>
<td>Active, developed only by NCBI</td>
<td>Active, open community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes</td>
<td>¹ Pre-installed on Mac. One-line installation through package managers on Linux.</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>² Through <code>ncbi_blast_plus</code> package from galaxy tool shed</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>³ Default: only e-value; configuration enables more options.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>⁴ The format in which results are desired can be pre-selected from the search form.</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>⁵ Using the command line blast_formatter tool.</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table S1. Alternatives to Sequenceserver. Presence or absence of features in BLAST GUIs is highlighted across four broad categories: Installation and configuration, BLAST query submission, Output, and Development status. Preferred features are indicated in green.
References


Hunt A, Thomas D. 2000. The pragmatic programmer: From journeyman to master. Addison-Wesley Professional, Boston, MA.


