

SigTree: An Automated Meta-Analytic Approach to Find Significantly Responsive Branches in a Phylogenetic Tree

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Abstract

The *SigTree* package provides tools to identify branches in a phylogenetic tree that are significantly responsive to some intervention. Given the phylogenetic tree (as a .tre file) and p-values corresponding to each tip (or OTU, on which the intervention's effect has been tested), these tools obtain p-values for each branch of the tree using a meta-analysis framework. The tree is then visualized with branches and tip labels colored according to significance, with options in place to control the family-wise error rate across the entire tree. These tools also allow additional exploration of the significance results.

Note: If you use this package please cite Stevens, Jones, and Lefevre (2014).

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1 Introduction

The *SigTree* package provides tools to identify branches in a phylogenetic tree that are significantly responsive to some intervention. It is designed for studies that meet the following criteria:

1. Multiple operational taxonomic units (OTUs) are of interest.
2. A significance test has been performed on each OTU, assessing the degree of its response to some intervention (such as in a treatment vs. control situation).
3. The phylogenetic tree representing the relationships among the OTUs (tips in the tree) is available.
4. The research question is which branches of the phylogenetic tree exhibit an overall significant response to the intervention.

Note that this *SigTree* package does not test the significance of the existence of branches (or how strongly the phylogenetic structure is supported by experimental data or evolutionary theory), but rather tests how each branch responds to some treatment or intervention.

The inputs required for the use of this package are the phylogenetic tree file and a spreadsheet file summarizing the results of the significance test on each OTU. The phylogenetic tree must be provided as a .tre file, in either NEXUS or Newick format. (Basically any tree file exported from FigTree (Rambaut, 2009) can be used.) The spreadsheet file must have one row for each OTU, and two columns – the first recording the name of the OTU, and the second recording the p-value for the OTU’s significance test. The OTU names must match in both files.

This tutorial document includes sample R code with a brief discussion of an example.

2 Getting Started

First, make sure you are running the most recent version of R. Windows users can use the following link:

<http://cran.r-project.org/bin/windows/base/release.htm>

Next, set the file path to the two input files referred to in Section 1. Let’s assume both files are in the same directory. In practice, if the file path to that directory were “C:/folder1/folder2”, you’d run this at the command prompt in R:

```
> tre.path <- "C:/folder1/folder2"
```

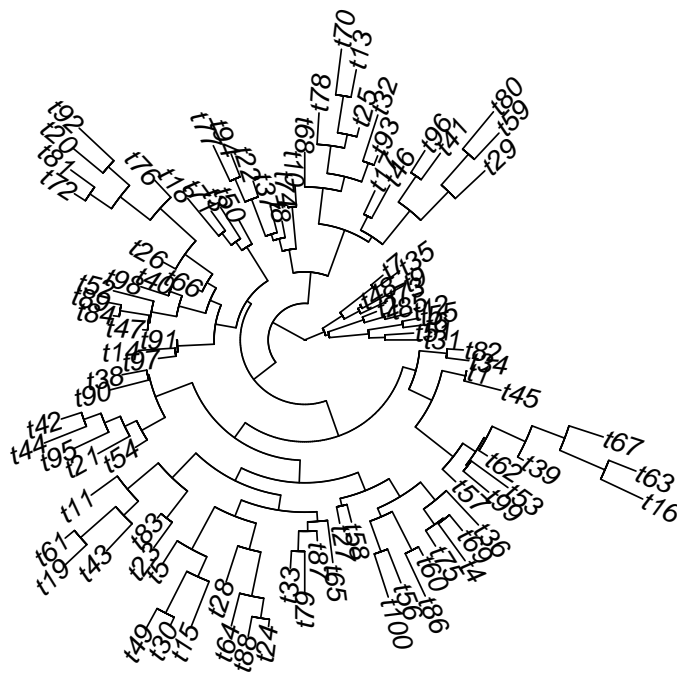
For this tutorial example, we'll use some sample files that come with the *SigTree* package, so our file path will be different:

```
> tre.path <- system.file("sample", package="SigTree")
```

2.1 Reading in Phylogenetic Tree

There is a `sample.tre` file in the *SigTree* package. In this example, there are 100 OTUs, named for convenience `t1`, ..., `t100`. This file is in Newick format; files may also be in NEXUS format (see Section 4.1). To read it in and look at this phylogenetic tree, we'll first load the *ape* package (Paradis *et al.*, 2004).

```
> library(ape)
> tree.file <- paste(tre.path, "sample.tre", sep="/")
> tree <- read.tree(tree.file)
> plot(tree, type="fan")
```



2.2 Reading in Significance Results

In the same directory as our `sample.tre` file, there is a `sample.csv` file summarizing the significance test on each of the 100 OTUs. In this sample study, each OTU can be thought of as a strain of bacteria found in the gut of mice. The abundance of each OTU was assessed (using 16s rRNA sequencing) in each of 10 treatment samples (mouse diet T) and 10 control samples (mouse diet C). A Wilcoxon rank-sum test was performed on each OTU individually, corresponding to the hypotheses

$$\begin{aligned} H_0 &: \mu_C = \mu_T \\ &\text{vs.} \\ H_A &: \mu_C < \mu_T, \end{aligned}$$

where μ_C and μ_T are the mean abundances of the OTU in the control and treatment populations, respectively.

```
> sig.file <- paste(tre.path, "sample.csv", sep="/")
> frame <- read.csv(sig.file)
> head(frame)
```

	OTU	pval
1	t31	0.8862966
2	t51	0.3907253
3	t6	0.1390846
4	t55	0.9905042
5	t12	0.3339162
6	t85	0.3064087

Notice that our `sample.csv` file has only two columns – the first for OTU names, and the second for the p-values from the significance test of the OTUs. While this tutorial example focuses on a simple treatment vs. control example, the flexibility of the *SigTree* package allows for any experimental design. The only input required here is this file of p-values for all OTUs of interest. It is the user's responsibility to ensure the appropriateness of statistical methods used to produce these p-values.

3 Sample Analysis in SigTree

First, load the *SigTree* package:

```
> library(SigTree)
```

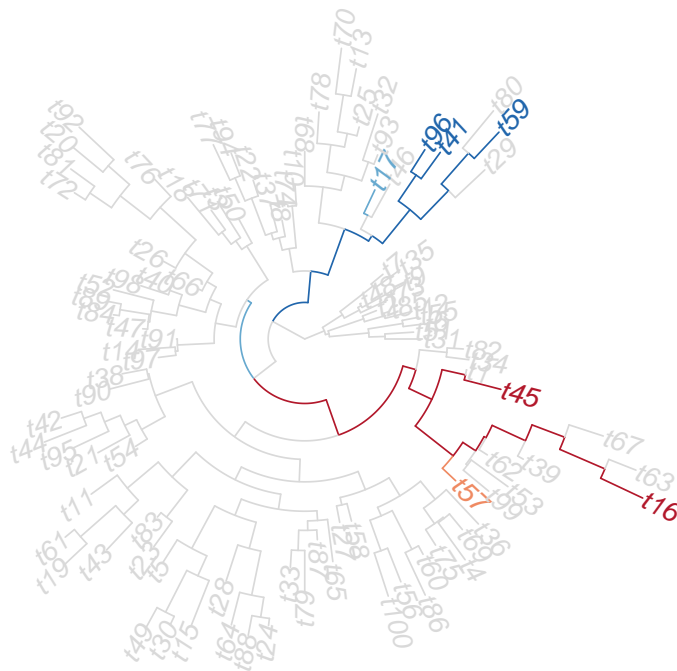
The *SigTree* package has the following three main functions:

- `plotSigTree`
- `export.inherit`
- `export.figtree`

All three rely on the same main inputs and arguments and are demonstrated in this package tutorial.

Run the `plotSigTree` function with default arguments:

```
> plotSigTree(tree, frame)
```



The `plotSigTree` package relies on a meta-analysis framework to systematically combine the p-values for all OTUs within each branch in the phylogenetic tree, resulting in a

single p-value for each branch. The resulting plot colors each branch (and tip label) according to its p-value. For much more discussion on this meta-analysis framework and function options, see Jones (2012). Briefly, there are two competing meta-analysis approaches to combine p-values used here:

- Fisher’s method (Fisher, 1932). In the context of the current example (where $H_0 : \mu_C = \mu_T$ vs. $H_A : \mu_C < \mu_T$ is tested for each OTU separately in a given branch), this method tests the null “ $\mu_C = \mu_T$ for all OTUs in the branch” vs. the alternative “ $\mu_C < \mu_T$ for at least one OTU in the branch.”
- Stouffer’s method (Stouffer *et al.*, 1949; default in *SigTree*). This approach focuses on finding a consensus (Rice, 1990; Whitlock, 2005) among p-values in the branch. It can be considered to test the null “ $\mu_C = \mu_T$ for all OTUs in the branch” vs. the alternative “there is a consensus among OTUs in the branch that $\mu_C < \mu_T$.”

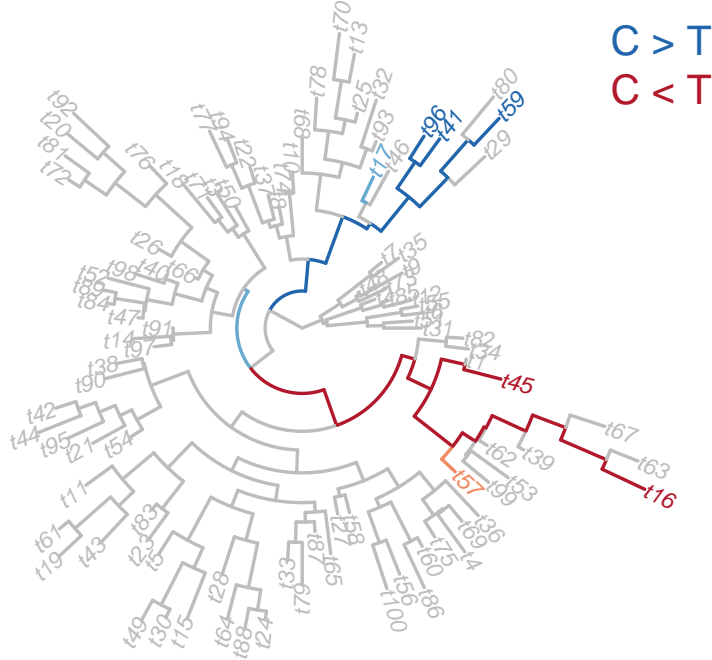
Because the intent of the *SigTree* package is to aid in identifying “which branches of the phylogenetic tree exhibit an overall significant response to the intervention” (Section 1), Stouffer’s method is the recommended (and default) p-value combination method. Fisher’s method can be used instead using the `test` argument in the `plotSigTree` function.

3.1 Package Features

3.1.1 Color Palette

The default color palette (for one-sided p-values as in the current example) is from dark red for low p-values to dark blue for high p-values. The following example shows how to change this palette and also make the tree more clear. A legend can also be added to highlight conclusions – here, that OTUs in a particular branch in the tree (dark red, with very low p-values) tend to be overall less abundant in diet C than in diet T, while those in another branch (dark blue, with very high p-values) tend to be overall more abundant in diet C than in diet T.

```
> library(RColorBrewer)
> RdBu <- brewer.pal(7, "RdBu")
> RdBu[4] <- brewer.pal(7, "Greys")[3]
> plotSigTree(tree, frame, pal=RdBu, tip.label.size=.8, edge.width=2)
> legend("topright", c("C > T", "C < T"), cex=1.5, text.col=RdBu[c(7,1)], bty="n")
```



For one-sided tests, the default p-value cutoffs for the various colors are 0.01, 0.05, 0.10, 0.90, 0.95, and 0.99. These can be changed using the `p.cutoffs` argument of the `plotSigTree` function.

3.1.2 P-value Sidedness

Because of the one-sided alternative in the current example ($H_A: \mu_C < \mu_T$), it is worth mentioning here that the resulting one-sided p-values can be compared to two different significance thresholds – one near zero and another near one. P-values below the smaller threshold (say $\alpha_0 = 0.05$) provide evidence to support $\mu_C < \mu_T$. On the other hand, p-values above the upper threshold (say $1 - \alpha_1 = 0.95$) provide evidence to support the other direction, $\mu_C > \mu_T$. Whatever thresholds α_0 and α_1 are used, the actual Type I error rate is $\alpha = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1$. One of the reasons that Stouffer's method is preferred to Fisher's in *SigTree* is that Stouffer's approach symmetrically preserves this sidedness interpretation while Fisher's does not.

In cases where a two-sided test was made on each OTU, then the `side` argument of

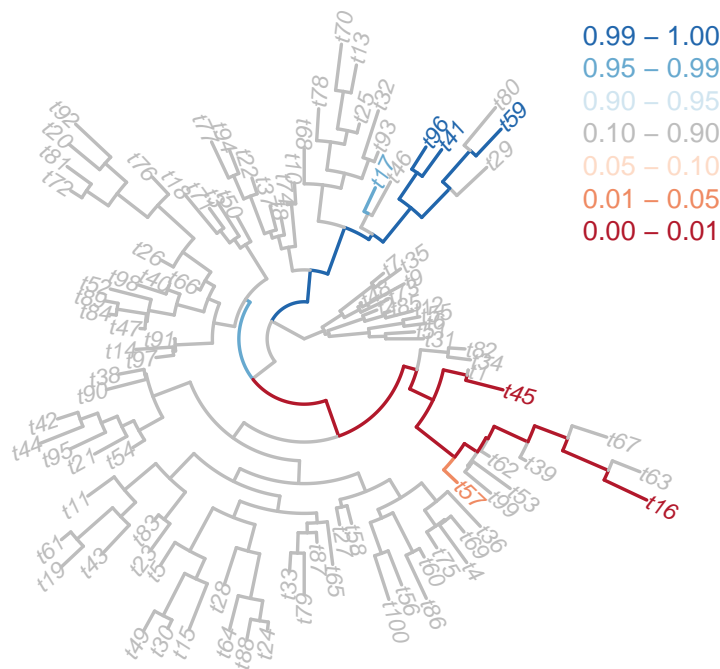
`plotSigTree` can be used to specify the situation. (The following code is not run here.)

```
> plotSigTree(tree, frame, side=2)
```

In such a case, there is only one significance threshold α , and p-values below that threshold provide evidence to support the (two-sided) alternative.

Returning to the current example (with its one-sided alternative), a legend can be added to the plot to communicate the translation of color to p-value range:

```
> plotSigTree(tree, frame, pal=RdBu, tip.label.size=.8, edge.width=2)
> p.cut.leg <- c("0.00 - 0.01", "0.01 - 0.05", "0.05 - 0.10",
+               "0.10 - 0.90", "0.90 - 0.95", "0.95 - 0.99", "0.99 - 1.00")
> legend("topright", rev(p.cut.leg), text.col=rev(RdBu), bty="n", cex=1)
```



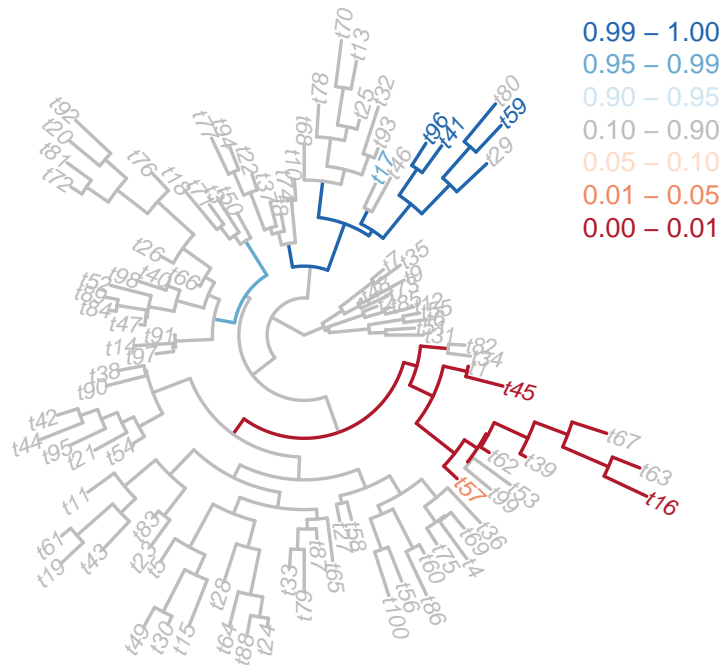
3.1.3 Branch Definition and Color

In the *SigTree* package, branches within the phylogenetic tree are colored based on their p-value. A “branch” can be defined in one of two ways, using the **branch** argument of the three main *SigTree* functions. While this argument will not affect the meta-analysis p-values obtained for groups of OTUs, it will affect which part of the phylogenetic tree is colored based on these p-values.

- When **branch="edge"** (the default in package version 1.2 and later), each tip label and the single edge leading to it (away from the root) will be colored based on the tip OTU’s p-value. Neighboring tips’ edges are not necessarily the same color because the tip OTUs could have different p-values. Neighboring tips’ edges join at an interior node, and the single edge leading to that node (from the root direction) is colored based on the combined p-values of the OTUs below that edge and interior node (away from the root). The two edges from any given interior node (away from the root) would not necessarily be the same color, because they include different sets of tips. Thus the default definition of “branch” is the collection of all tips below an edge (away from the root) in the phylogenetic tree.
- When **branch="node"**, a “branch” is instead defined as the collection of all tips below the interior node in each of the two edges extending from the interior node (away from the root). For example, in the following plot, the highest-level red interior node has two edges – one (on the left) leading to a large collection of grey sub-branches, and the other (on the right) leading to a collection of largely red sub-branches. Both of these edges from that interior node are colored according to the p-value from Stouffer’s combination of the p-values of all tips (OTUs) below that interior node (where the two edges meet).

Compare the following plot (where **branch="node"**) with the final plot of Section 3.1.2 (where by default **branch="edge"**). See Section 3.2.1 for a discussion of how to explore OTUs within a given branch.

```
> plotSigTree(tree, frame, pal=RdBu, tip.label.size=.8, edge.width=2,  
+             branch="node")  
> p.cut.leg <- c("0.00 - 0.01", "0.01 - 0.05", "0.05 - 0.10",  
+               "0.10 - 0.90", "0.90 - 0.95", "0.95 - 0.99", "0.99 - 1.00")  
> legend("topright", rev(p.cut.leg), text.col=rev(RdBu), bty="n", cex=1)
```



3.1.4 Multiple Testing Adjustment

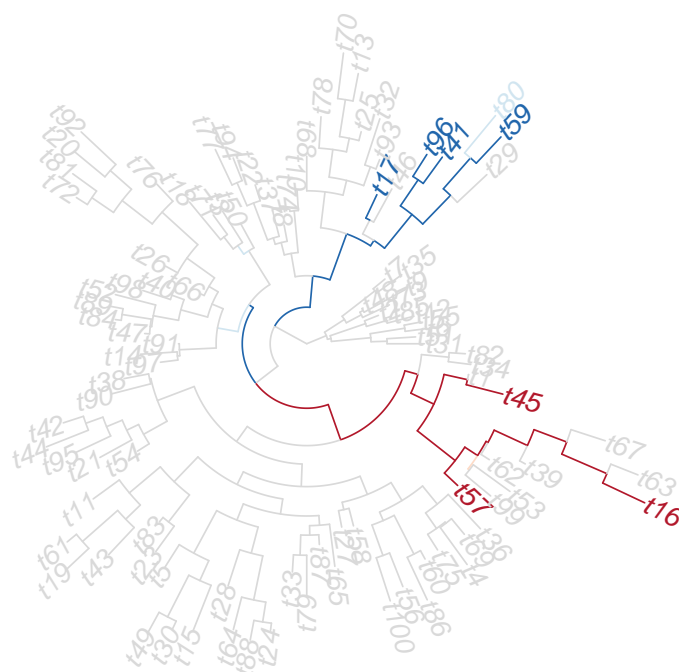
In a phylogenetic tree with n OTUs (tips), there will be $n - 1$ interior branches at which p-value combination will be done. This will result in a total of $2n - 1$ p-values (one for each branch). In order for a tree-wide significance threshold α (see discussion in Section 3.1.2) to be meaningful, some kind of adjustment must be made to account for this multiple testing problem, while allowing for dependency among p-values (as the interior branch p-values are not independent of the tip p-values). Any of the adjustments implemented in the `p.adjust` function can be called by the `method` argument in the functions of the *SigTree* package:

```
> p.adjust.methods
```

```
[1] "holm"          "hochberg"      "hommel"        "bonferroni"    "BH"
[6] "BY"            "fdr"           "none"
```

The default in the *SigTree* package is to make Hommel's correction (Hommel, 1988) because, among these options in `p.adjust`, it provides the best strong control of the family-wise error rate under dependency (Blakesley *et al.*, 2009). If instead the user wanted to control the false discovery rate while allowing dependency among p-values, the adjustment of Benjamini and Yekutieli (2001) could be used:

```
> plotSigTree(tree, frame, method="BY")
```



3.2 Exploring Results Further

Once the phylogenetic tree has been visualized with branches and tip labels colored to represent significance, the results can be explored in greater detail, both in R as well as in FigTree.

Alternatively, we could look at the contents of this file in R by using the `frame=TRUE` option:

```
> temp <- export.inherit(tree, frame, frame=TRUE)
```

This `temp` object is a data frame, with a row for each branch (or tip) in the tree, and columns for the branch number (or tip name), p-value, and members. Branch 176 can be explored:

```
> br176 <- temp[temp$Branch=="176",]
> t <- !is.na(br176[1,])
> br176[1,t]
```

Branch	Stouffer's p-value	X1	X2	X3	X4	X5	X6	X7	X8	X9	X10	X11	X12	
189	176	8.6934e-11	t57	t99	t53	t62	t39	t16	t63	t67	t45	t1	t34	t82

The OTUs in branch 176 are t57, t99, t53, t62, t39, t16, t63, t67, t45, t1, t34, and t82. Overall, this family of OTUs has significant consensus (Hommel-adjusted p-value $\approx 8.7\text{e-}11$) that $\mu_C < \mu_T$.

This result can be compared with the larger (and less significant) family of OTUs corresponding to branch 106:

```
> br106 <- temp[temp$Branch=="106",]
> t <- !is.na(br106[1,])
> br106[1,t]
```

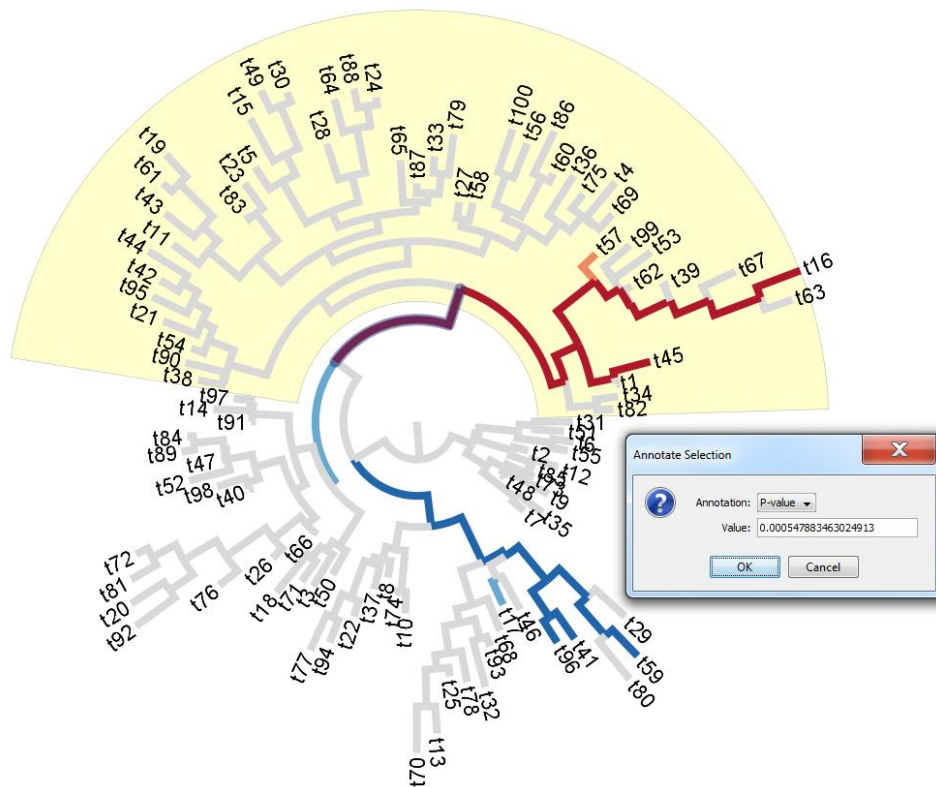
Branch	Stouffer's p-value	X1	X2	X3	X4	X5	X6	X7	X8	X9	X10	X11	X12							
154	106	0.0005478835	t38	t90	t42	t44	t95	t21	t54	t11	t61	t19	t43	t83						
			X13	X14	X15	X16	X17	X18	X19	X20	X21	X22	X23	X24	X25	X26	X27	X28	X29	X30
154	t23	t5	t49	t30	t15	t28	t64	t88	t24	t33	t79	t87	t65	t27	t58	t100	t56	t86		
			X31	X32	X33	X34	X35	X36	X37	X38	X39	X40	X41	X42	X43	X44	X45	X46	X47	
154	t60	t75	t4	t69	t36	t57	t99	t53	t62	t39	t16	t63	t67	t45	t1	t34	t82			

3.2.2 Display Results In FigTree

The p-values and corresponding branch colors generated by the statistical methods of *SigTree* can be exported in a format that can be viewed in FigTree (Rambaut, 2009) by using the `export.figtree` function (with default `branch="edge"`):

```
> export.figtree(tree, frame, pal=RdBu, file="sigsample.tre")
```

The resulting `sigsample.tre` file will be in NEXUS format. It can be opened and explored in FigTree. For example, the p-values of a selected branch can be viewed in FigTree by selecting “Annotate” and then “Annotation = P-value”. The following screenshot shows a sample result for branch 106 (showing the same combined p-value as at the end of Section 3.2.1):



Note that the root edge visible in the screenshot above can also be plotted in R using the `root.edge=TRUE` option in the `plotSigTree` function.

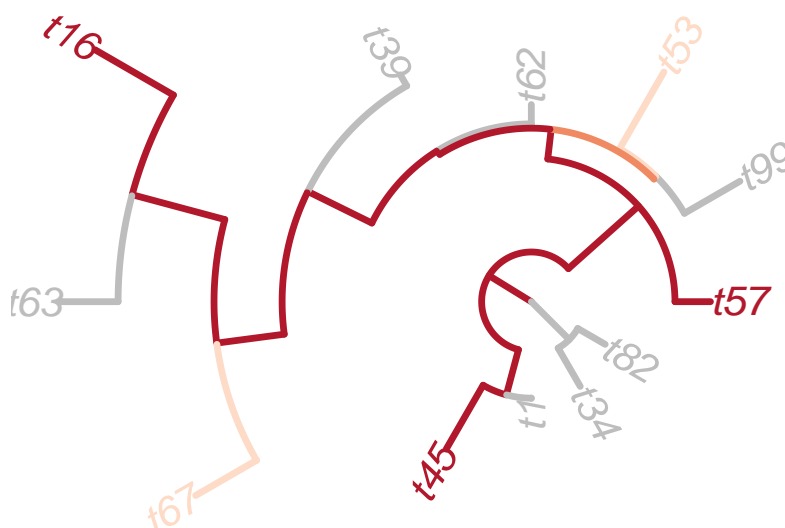
3.3 Testing on Only a Subset of a Tree

If p-values are available for only a subset of the tips in a given phylogenetic tree, or if there is some filter that is applied to restrict attention to such a subset, the tree can be “pruned” to include only those tips. This first uses the `prune_species` function of the *phyloseq* package to obtain the new tree:

```
> keep.taxa <- c("t57", "t99", "t53", "t62", "t39", "t16",
+               "t63", "t67", "t45", "t1", "t34", "t82")
> library(phyloseq)
> new_tree <- prune_taxa(keep.taxa, tree)
```

In the functions of the *SigTree* package, the data frame containing the p-values for each OTU must have exactly the same OTU names as the tips in the tree:

```
> t <- is.element(frame$OTU, keep.taxa)
> new_frame <- frame[t,]
> plotSigTree(new_tree, new_frame, pal=RdBu, tip.label.size=1.5,
+             edge.width=4)
```



4 Misc. Issues Dealing with Reading in Tree Files

4.1 NEXUS Format

The `.tre` file created by the `export.figtree` function in Section 3.2.2 can be read back in to R, but using the `read.tree` function will result in an error:


```
> sig_tree <- read.tree("sigsample.tre")
Error in if (tp[3] != "") obj$node.label <- tp[3] :
  missing value where TRUE/FALSE needed
```

This error is due to the NEXUS format of the .tre file. Use `read.nexus` to read in this format of .tre file:

```
> sig_tree <- read.nexus("sigsample.tre")
```

4.2 Singleton Node Error

If a tree has a singleton node, it cannot be read in to R in the usual way. There is such a `singletonsample.tre` file with the *SigTree* package.

```
> singletontree.file <- paste(tre.path,"singletonsample.tre",sep="/")
> tree <- read.tree(singletontree.file)
Error in read.tree(singletontree.file) :
  The tree has apparently singleton node(s): cannot read tree file.
  Reading Newick file aborted at tree no. 1
```

This problem is not exactly a *SigTree* issue, but since we have experienced it with sample analyses, we wanted to post its solution in case package users experience it. Briefly, the problem is an unexpected "(" at the beginning and "num:num)" at the end of the .tre file. A regular expressions solution for this problem is presented here:

```
> t1 <- read.table(singletontree.file)
> # remove initial (
> t1.split <- strsplit(as.character(t1$V1), "")[[1]]
> t2 <- paste(t1.split[-1], collapse="")
> # remove last ) and the num:num preceding it
> t2.split <- strsplit(t2, " ")[[1]]
> t2.len <- length(t2.split)
> t3.split <- t2.split[c(1:(t2.len-2), t2.len)]
> t3 <- paste(t3.split, collapse="")
> # write to file (fixed now) and read in again
> newtree.file <- paste(tre.path, "fixedsinglesample.tre", sep="/")
> write.table(t3, file=newtree.file, quote=F, col.names=F, row.names=F)
> t4 <- read.tree(newtree.file)
```

This `fixedsinglesample.tre` file will contain the exact same structure as in the original `singletonsample.tre` file without the problematic singleton node.

References

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