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Automated Image Analysis for Quantifying Fungus-host Interactions

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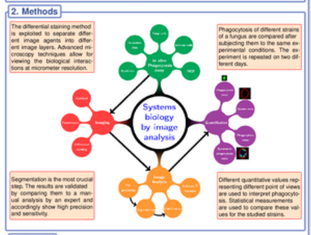
1. Introduction

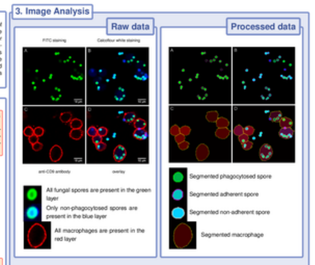
Fungus-host interactions have gained a lot of interest in the last decade. This is due to the increasing number of life-threatening infections caused by different human-pathogenic fungi in immunocompromised patients, and due to the limitation of available therapies. Therefore, inspecting the pathobiology of these fungi is of key importance for ultimately possible treatments. As the last advances of microscopy techniques allow for viewing the pathogen-host interactions (micrometer resolution) and consequently for generating a lot of images, automated image analysis raises as the most adequate approach for quantifying these interactions. We here show how we exploit automated image analysis to quantify the interaction between the fungi *Lichtheimia corymbifera* and *Aspergillus fumigatus* confronted with murine alveolar macrophages [1,2]. As the results are objective, it is expected that this kind of studies will play a crucial role in exploring the different strategies used by fungi during an infection process.

2. Methods

The differential staining method is exploited to separate different image agents into different image layers. Advanced microscopy techniques allow for viewing the biological interactions at micrometer resolution.



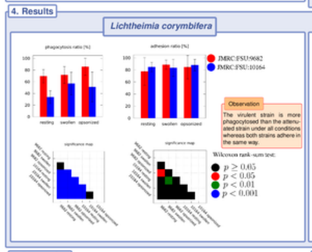
3. Image Analysis



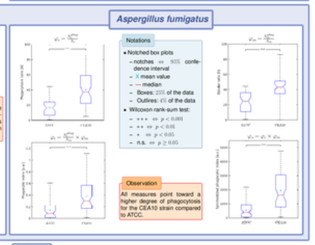
The automated image analysis algorithm uses a combination of filtering processes, thresholding, watershed segmentation and feature-based object classification. The algorithm allows for the segmentation of individual macrophages in the images and this enables us to compute the distribution of phagocytosed and macrophage-adherent conidia over all macrophages. The novel automated image-based analysis provides access to all cell-cell interactions in the assay and thereby represents a framework that enables comprehensive computation of diverse characteristic parameters and comparative investigation for different strains.

4. Results

Lichtheimia corymbifera



Aspergillus fumigatus



5. Discussion

- In both examples, the more virulent strain is significantly more phagocytosed. The question arises: is there a direct correlation between the observed difference in virulence and phagocytosis ratio? In case the spores are able to inhibit killing after being phagocytosed they could use macrophages as a survival niche and escape from the phagocyte by germination [3]. However, further experiments would have to be performed to prove this hypothesis.

- The algorithm here is generally applicable to assays of cells with close-to circular morphology and can be straightforwardly extended to assays for more than two different cell types. In contrast to techniques based on flow cytometry, approaches based on microscopy images do provide a richer amount of information, e.g., on spatial correlations and morphological properties of cells.

Outlook

- Quantitative answers to biological questions by an image-based systems biology approach
- High-throughput screening for different strains to perform comparative studies in an automated fashion
- A quantitative data base for the development of mathematical models that enable realistic simulations of biological processes on the computer

Acknowledgements

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References

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