ABSTRACT: Proteins carry out the most fundamental processes of life such as cellular metabolism, regulation, and communication. Understanding these processes at a molecular level requires knowledge of their three-dimensional structures. Experimental techniques such as X-ray crystallography, NMR spectroscopy, and cryogenic electron microscopy can resolve protein structures but are costly and time-consuming and do not work for all proteins. Computational protein structure prediction tries to overcome these problems by predicting the structure of a new protein using existing protein structures as a resource. Here we present TopSuite, a web server for protein model quality assessment (TopScore) and template-based protein structure prediction (TopModel). TopScore provides meta-predictions for global and residue-wise model quality estimation using deep neural networks. TopModel predicts protein structures using a top-down consensus approach to aid the template selection and subsequently uses TopScore to refine and assess the predicted structures. The TopSuite Web server is freely available at https://cpclab.uni-duesseldorf.de/topsuite/.

INTRODUCTION
Proteins carry out their functions by virtue of their complex three-dimensional (3D) structures. Knowing the 3D structure of a protein is key to predicting and understanding important properties, particularly its function and potential interactions with other proteins or ligands. Experimental methods for structure determination include X-ray crystallography, NMR spectroscopy, and cryogenic electron microscopy, but these are both costly and time-consuming. Consequently, computational protein structure prediction is an essential part of knowledge-based protein engineering, drug design and discovery, and function assignment. In the last decades, many approaches have been developed for computational protein structure prediction, and the results of CASP competitions have shown the benefit of using consensus methods, which employ complementary algorithms to improve prediction quality. Consensus methods generally employ majority voting for template selection and model averaging during refinement, which can improve quality if primary methods converge on the native fold but can drive the model away from the native fold if they diverge or converge on the wrong fold.

Recently we presented TopScore and TopModel. TopScore is a deep neural network (DNN) meta-predictor of whole-protein and residue-wise model quality that has been trained on a massive model ensemble and produces more accurate and consistent superposition-independent quality predictions than any of its constituent primary predictors. Building on the development of TopScore, TopModel is a fully automated meta-method for protein structure prediction. TopModel first submits the target sequence to 12 different primary threading methods and then uses DNNs trained on sequence features, threading scores, and the single-template model quality predicted by TopScore to predict the template modeling score (TM-Score, bounded between 0 and 1 with smaller values indicating lower structural similarity between a template and the native structure) of each template. On the basis of the predicted TM-Scores, TopModel then uses top-down consensus to remove false-positive templates. Top-down consensus is advantageous over traditional majority-voting consensus used in other meta-servers like the I-TASSER server, particularly for difficult systems where the majority of templates are false positives produced because primary predictors find similar wrong templates and/or alignments. In such cases, top-down consensus can discard all of the false-positive templates provided that the identified reference template has the correct fold. After template identification, TopModel uses 18 different primary alignment programs to
generate an ensemble of multiple sequence alignments (MSAs) between the templates and the target sequence. These alignments are then modeled, and the models are scored with TopScore. Finally, the highest-ranked single-template and multitemplate models are selected for refinement. During refinement, model regions predicted by TopScore to contain errors are iteratively removed, and the remaining model pieces are put together into a final refined model. Unlike traditional model averaging and/or energy minimization refinement protocols used in other meta-servers such as I-TASSER\textsuperscript{16} and MULTICOM,\textsuperscript{17} which also use majority-voting consensus in the form of clustering, this strategy optimizes the TopScore (a DNN-based score rather than an energy function) to overcome the problems of majority voting mentioned earlier. TopScore and TopModel have been used prospectively and successfully in several applications\textsuperscript{2,18–27}.

Until now, applying TopModel and TopScore has required the user to download and install the software suite, which requires \(\sim 3\) TB of hard drive space because of the many primary predictors and databases required for their use. To avoid this hurdle and improve user-friendliness, we present the TopSuite web server, which enables users to easily access TopScore and TopModel and inspect the results of a model quality prediction or structure prediction task.

## METHODS

**TopScore.** The TopScore server submission page is shown in Figure 1A. The server accepts either a single model or multiple models of the same protein in the form of different PDB files (Figure 1A.1). The files must be submitted as an archive in .zip, .tgz, or .tar.gz format. The maximum sequence length of a single model is 1000 residues, and all of the models must contain the same residues. The maximum number of models that can be submitted in a single evaluation run is 50, and the archive must not be larger than 10 MB.

To be notified when calculations have finished, the user has the option to provide an email address (Figure 1A.2). The email is not used for any purpose other than notification. Jobs are kept on the server for up to 7 days before being removed. To guide the user, a documentation page is available, and an example run is provided with different models of the human hemoglobin \(\beta\)-subunit evaluated with TopScore.

**TopModel.** The TopModel server submission page is shown in Figure 1B. The user must enter a protein sequence (Figure 1B.1), a fasta file content, or upload a fasta file. The server will not accept multiple sequences or sequences longer than 1000 residues. If the inputted sequence contains nonstandard amino acids, these will be mutated to alanine in the final model.

To help identify the job and to be notified when calculations have finished, the user has the option to provide a job name and an email address (Figure 1B.2). The email is not used for any purpose other than notification. Jobs are kept on the server for up to 7 days before being removed. Four different job options are available (Figure 1B.3):

1. The “Normal Run” job type requires only a target sequence and starts the default TopModel workflow consisting of the following steps: (I) template identification and single-template modeling; (II) generation of alignment ensembles for multiple templates and multitemplate modeling; (III) model quality assessment with TopScore and TopScoreSingle; (IV) model combination and refinement by removing parts of the models predicted by TopScore or TopScoreSingle that contain errors and combining the remaining parts into a final model. A detailed description of the TopModel workflow can be found in ref 14.

2. The “Protect Templates” job type allows the user to provide PDB IDs that will be protected from being removed by the redundancy and scoring filters in TopThresher. This does not guarantee that these templates will be used if any primary threader does not identify them. However, if the user knows that a specific template has the desired conformation or functional state, this template can be protected.

3. Similar to the “Protect Templates” option, the “Exclude Templates” job type forcibly removes the provided PDB IDs at the threading step. This is useful for benchmarking or for the removal of templates with undesirable conformations or known false positives.

4. The “Specify Template” job type is an additional feature of the TopModel server. This option skips the template identification step and the refinement step (steps I and IV) of a normal TopModel run and produces alignments and models using only the provided PDB IDs as templates. This therefore requires the additional information on chains for every PDB ID. Model generation in that way is much faster than a regular TopModel job because template identification and...
refinement are the most time-consuming steps of the workflow. However, this job type should be used only when it is known that the templates provided are strongly homologous to the target sequence because alignments are made without using primary threaders to guide the match between the target sequence and the template.

A documentation page is accessible to explain the necessary inputs and the output results to guide the user. Additionally, a precalculated example run with the sequence of human hemoglobin beta subunit (HBB) is available. The runtime depends on the given sequence length and the chosen job type. A webpage reports on the progress of a given job and provides a runtime estimate after the job has started. Since TopModel does not include domain parsing or ab initio folding tools, it may be less suitable for modeling of large multidomain proteins or proteins without any available template with the correct fold. We are currently in the process of extending TopSuite to include these functionalities.

Implementation. The TopSuite Web server has been implemented in PHP, HTML, and Python, as have the underlying routines of TopScore and TopModel. All molecular structures are visualized with NGL Viewer. Given the computational demand of our approaches, jobs are queued on the server, and it may take some time before calculations start depending on the server load.

RESULTS

TopScore. The TopScore results page is partitioned into two sections, as shown in Figure 2. The first section contains a table of the model names and their corresponding TopScores and TopScoreSingles (Figure 2A.1). TopScore is a measure of the error in the protein that uses clustering information from an ensemble of models; TopScoreSingle is a measure of the error that uses only information from a single model. Therefore, the latter measure is independent of the model ensemble and estimated solely on the basis of the model 3D structure itself. Both scores are defined as 1-IDDT28 (IDDT = local Distance Difference Test), are bounded by [0, 1], and indicate how uncertain the interatomic distances in the model are. Lower scores thus indicate models of better quality. In turn, highly flexible structures or mobile regions of a structure

![Figure 2. TopScore results webpage. (A) The global TopScore and TopScoreSingle for each model are presented (1) along with links for downloading the scoring information and PDB files of the models with b-factors colored by the residue-wise TopScore. (B) The models are provided as interactive NGL Viewer applets and colored according to the residue-wise TopScores (blue for low errors and red for high errors). Some data have been omitted for clarity, as indicated by three consecutive dots.](https://dx.doi.org/10.1021/acs.jcim.0c01202)
can be expected to have a higher uncertainty and a higher score. An in-depth explanation of TopScore and TopScoreSingle is provided in ref 13. The models are ranked according to their TopScores. The table and an archive of the model files with the residue-wise TopScore written in the b-factor column are offered for download (Figure 2A). The second section (Figure 2B) shows all of the model structures, ordered according to their respective TopScores, with the NGL Viewer.29,30 The structures are colored according to the residue-wise TopScore, with blue indicating a low error and red a high error.

**TopModel.** The TopModel results page is divided into three sections, as shown in Figure 3. The first section (Figure 3A) presents modeling accuracy metrics in the form of TopScore and TopScoreSingle,13 further containing an NGL Viewer window with the predicted structure colored according to the residue-wise TopScore (Figure 3A.1). The predicted structure, the template information, and an archive containing all available information, including the multiple templates are provided as interactive NGL Viewer applets, colored according to residue index. Some data have been omitted for clarity, as indicated by three consecutive dots.

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**Figure 3.** TopModel results webpage. (A1) The predicted structure is presented as an interactive NGL Viewer applet. The residues are colored according to the residue-wise TopScores. (A2) A PDB file of the predicted structure is available for download, along with a file containing information about the templates identified by meta-threading. (B1) All template sequences are presented as a multiple-sequence alignment to the target model. Conserved residues are colored according to their physicochemical properties by the ClustalX coloring scheme. (B2) A conservation score indicates the normalized fraction of conserved amino acids (with 9 indicating 100% conservation and 0 indicating 0% conservation). (C1) An overview of the best templates is provided along with sequence identities, target coverages, predicted TM scores, and a list of primary threaders that identified the template. (C2) The templates are provided as interactive NGL Viewer applets, colored according to residue index. Some data have been omitted for clarity, as indicated by three consecutive dots.
The second section (Figure 3B) shows a multiple sequence alignment. This section is produced by aligning all identified compatible templates (TM-Score > 0.5) to the final model using TopAligner. The templates are ordered according to the predicted TM-Score with respect to the native structure. Colors are used to group the residues according to their physicochemical properties (Figure 3B.1). A row with conservation scores (Figure 3B.2) indicates the normalized fraction of amino acids equal to the one in the target sequence at a given position (9 indicating 100% conservation and 0 indicating 0% conservation). A download link for the multiple sequence alignment is provided.

The third section (Figure 3C) gives an overview of the best five templates used for model generation. These templates are ranked and ordered according to their predicted TM-Scores with respect to the native structure. The PDB ID, chain identifier, sequence identity, sequence coverage, and predicted TM-Score and a list of primary threaders that identified the template are provided (Figure 3C.1). The structure of each template is presented with the NGL Viewer, colored according to residue number (Figure 3C.2).

Example Case. To demonstrate the utility of the Web server, we used the nisin resistance protein (NSR) from *Streptococcus agalactiae* as a test case. NSR belongs to the S41 protease family and hydrolyzes the antimicrobial peptide nisin.20 As one crystal structure of NSR is available (PDB ID 4Y68), we used the “Exclude Template” job type and excluded this PDB ID to avoid solving a trivial task with a perfect template. The resulting model showed a root-mean-square deviation of 3.5 Å relative to the crystal structure (Figure 4), demonstrating the strength of TopModel in predicting good models despite having no close homologues (the highest sequence identity is 17%). The region with the highest predicted error is the linker between the two protein domains (Figure 4, red box), which is not found to be helical in any of the primary threading models and not predicted to be helical by secondary structure prediction with PSIPRED.4 As a result, TopModel also fails to predict these residues as helical.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this work, we have presented TopSuite, a web server for convenient access to TopModel and TopScore. TopScore is a deep-learning-based meta-method for protein model quality assessment that has higher and more consistent performance than any of its constituent primary predictors on different data sets and quality criteria. TopModel is a template-based meta-method for protein structure prediction that uses top-down consensus for template selection and optimizes TopScore during model refinement, mitigating the drawbacks of traditional majority-voting consensus, model clustering, and model averaging during template selection and refinement. The TopScore server accepts up to 50 models for a single run. The TopModel server allows sequence inputs of up to 1000 residues and provides various options for job types to meet the needs of the user. The servers present the results in an easy-to-overview style, enable visual inspection of structures using the NGL Viewer, and provide scoring information, multiple sequence alignments, and download links. We provided an example case by applying TopModel to the nisin resistance protein from *S. agalactiae* and presented the structural results compared to the crystal structure to illustrate the method’s predictive power. We expect that the easy access to the TopScore and TopModel servers will aid researchers from the life sciences who are not bioinformatics experts in predicting protein structures and evaluating the quality of protein structure models.

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Author Contributions

D.M. and H.G. jointly conceived the study. D.M. developed and implemented the methods and wrote the manuscript. F.K. implemented the Web servers and wrote the manuscript. H.G. supervised and managed the project, secured funding and resources for the project, and revised the manuscript. All of the authors reviewed and approved the manuscript.

Notes

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work was supported by the Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung (BMBF) (Förderkennzeichen 031L0182/InCelluloProtStruct) and in part by the Deutsche...
Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) (Projektnummer 267205415/SFB 1208, Project A03). We are grateful for the computational support and infrastructure provided by the Zentrum für Informations- und Medientechnologie (ZIM) at Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf.

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