

How to catch epistasis: theory and practice

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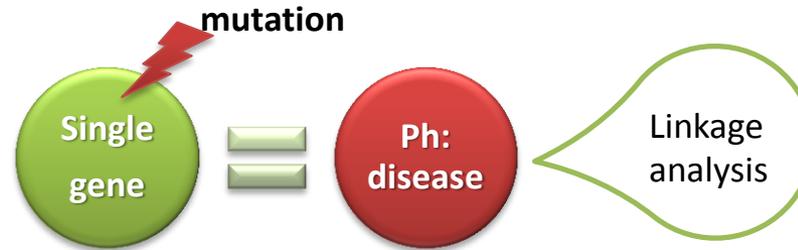
Belgium

- Epistasis: gene interaction and phenotype effects
- Protocol for genome-wide association interaction analysis (GWAI)
 - Data collection
 - Quality control
 - Choosing a strategy for GWAI (exhaustive and selective epistasis screening)
 - Tests of association
 - Interpretation and follow-up (replication analysis and validation)
- GWAI screening: an example on Alzheimer disease

Missing heritability

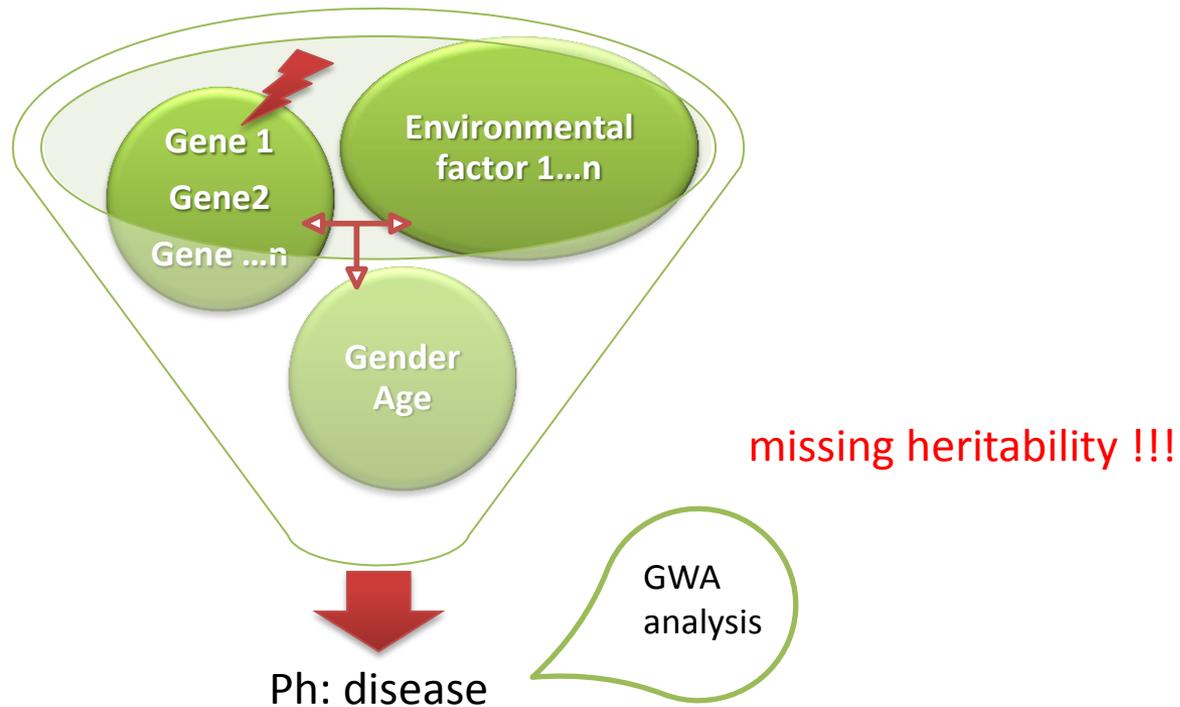
Monogenic disease

- Phenylketonuria (Phenylalanine hydroxylase – *PAH* gene)



Complex disease

- Crohn's disease (99 disease susceptibility loci ~ 25% of heritability of CD)



Biological epistasis

William Bateson, 1909 - “compositional epistasis” driven by biology

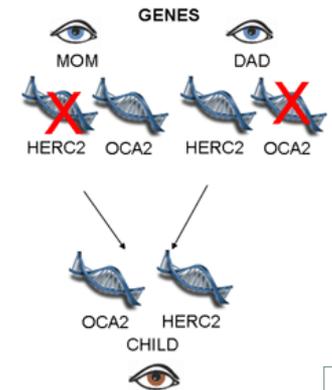
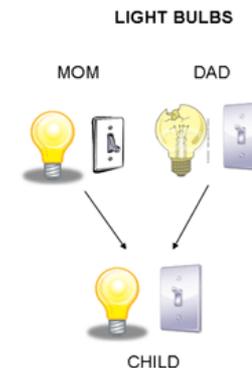
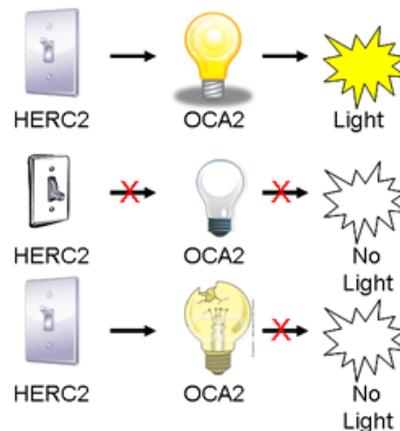
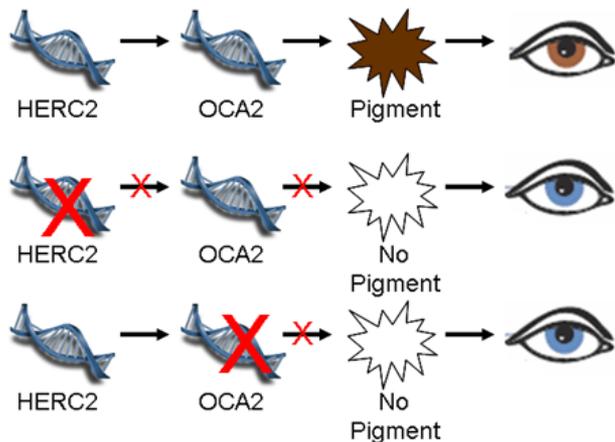
Distortions of Mendelian segregation ratios due to one gene masking the effects of another

- Whenever two or more loci **interact** to create new phenotypes
- Whenever an allele at one locus **masks** or **modifies** the effects of alleles at one or more other loci

Epistasis is an interaction at the **phenotypic** level of organization.

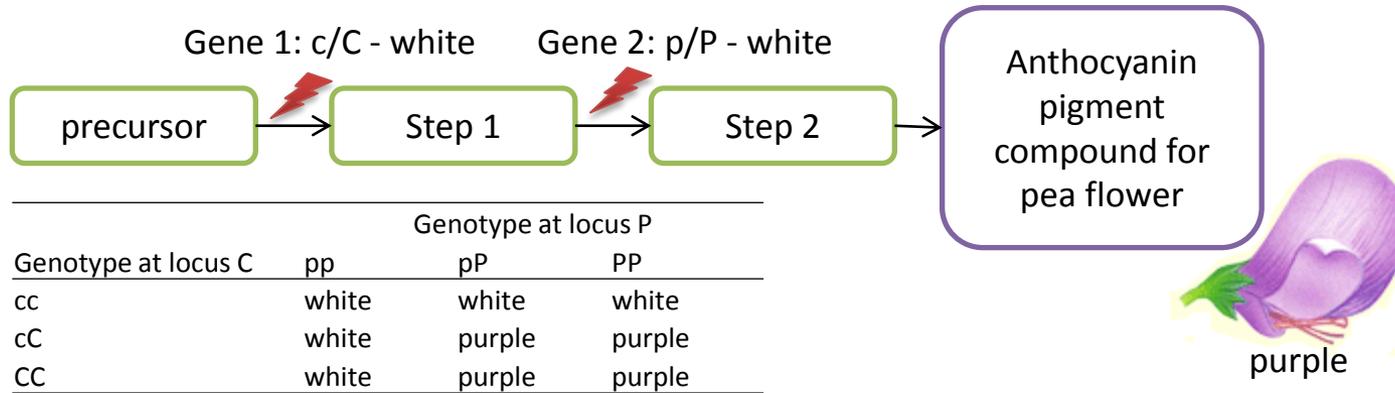
It does not necessary imply biochemical interaction between gene products.

How blue eyed parents can have a brown eyed child?

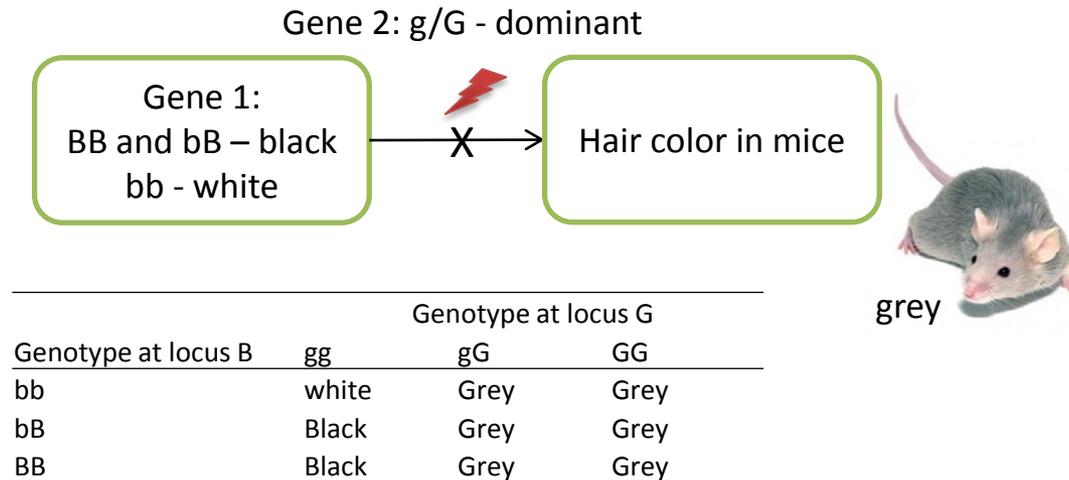


Simple examples of epistasis

Genes interact to create new phenotypes



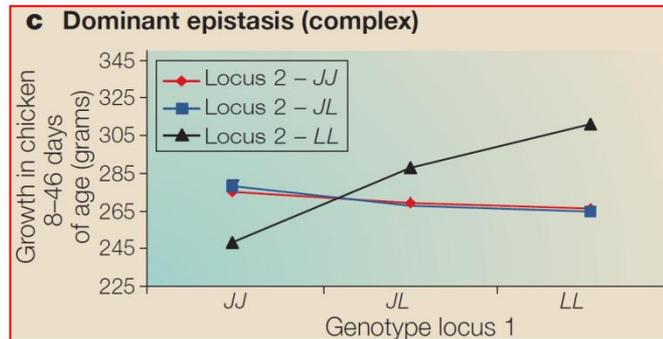
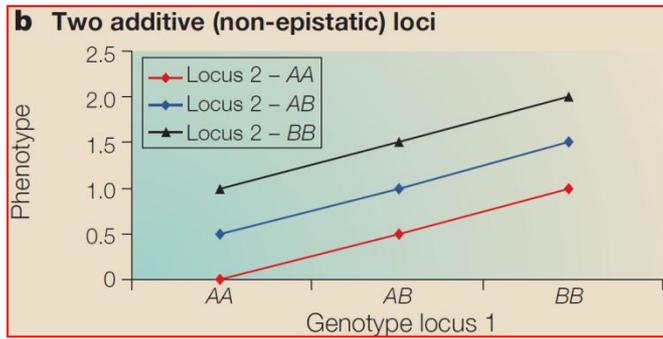
Masking effect of gene



Statistical epistasis

Ronald Fisher, 1918 - “statistical epistasis”

Epistasis is when **two (or more) different genes contribute to a single phenotype** and their effects are not merely additive (deviations from a model of additive multiple effects for **quantitative traits**).



Örjan Carlborg and Chris S. Haley, Nature Reviews Genetics, V 5, 2004

Complications

??? Can we use the **statistical evidence of epistasis at the population level** to infer biological or genetical epistasis in an individual?

??? Does biological evidence of epistasis imply that statistical evidence will be found?

Epistasis can be very complex depending on

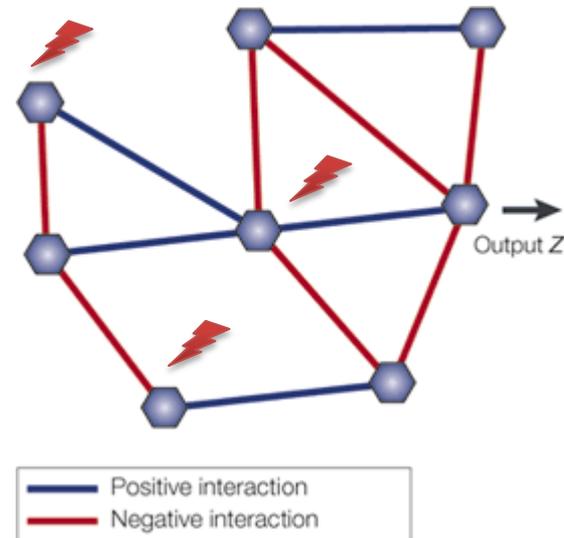
- Number of loci in epistasis (if more than one epistatic interaction occurs to cause a disease, then identifying the genes involved and defining their relationships becomes even more difficult.)
- Manner of inheritance of each particular locus (dominant, co-dominant, recessive, additive)
- Gene penetrance
- Confounding factors: environment, age, gender, etc.
- The trait (phenotype) they contribute to (binary, continuous, complex traits - disease)

Why is there epistasis?

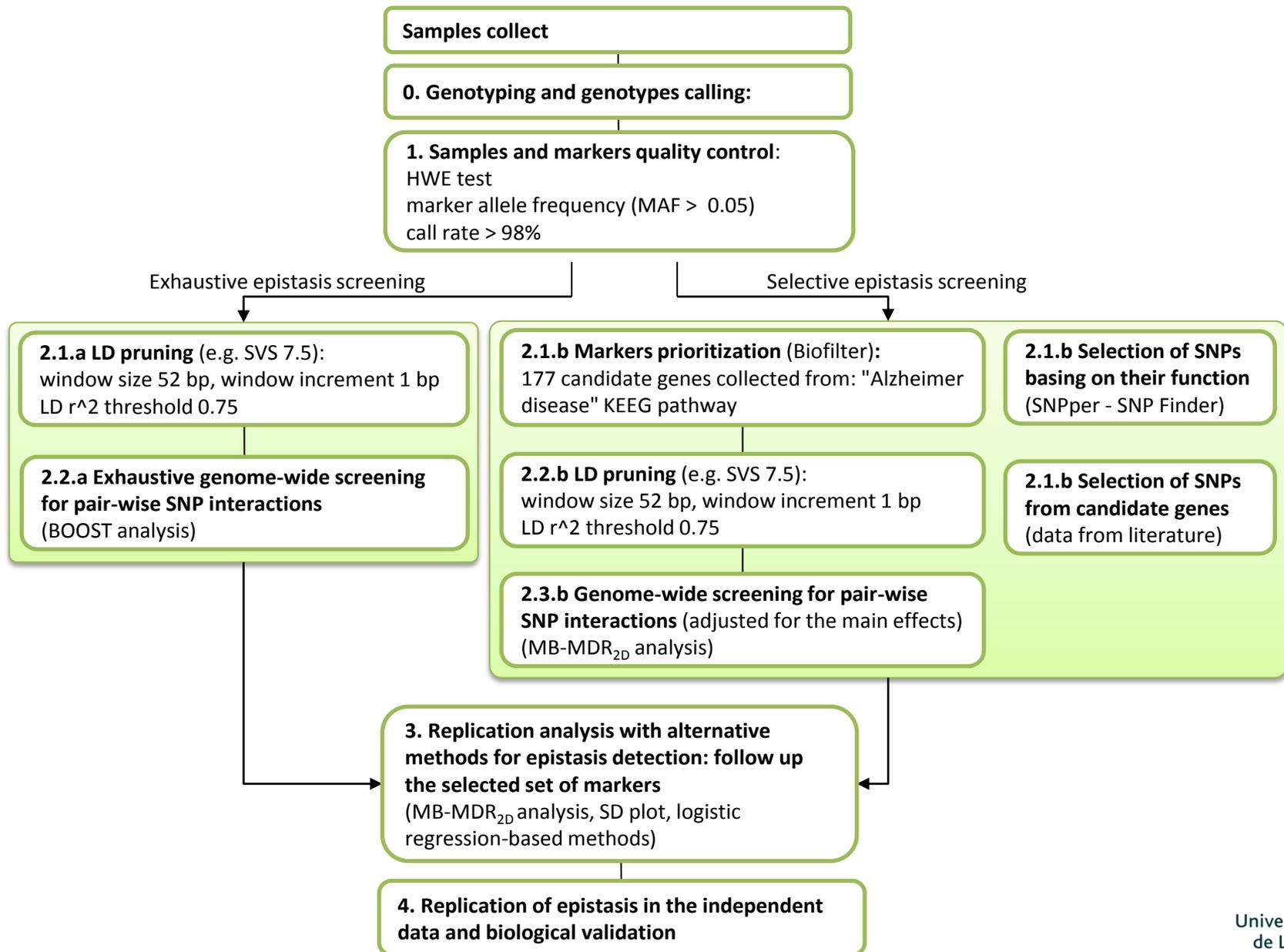
C.H. Waddington, 1942: canalization and stabilizing selection theory:

- Phenotypes are stable in the presence of mutations through natural selection.
- The genetic architecture of phenotypes is comprised of networks of genes that are redundant and robust.
- Only when there are multiple mutational hits to the gene network occur the phenotypes can change dramatically.
- Epistasis create dependencies among the genes in the network and thus keep the stability of the system.

Identification of epistasis is a step to **systems-level genetics** where we can understand all the complexity of underlying biology of the complex traits.



Protocol for GWAI



Selecting strategy for GWA

The **exhaustive screening** includes testing for all possible pair-wise interactions across all genetic markers.

- + all information is used for the analysis
- + new genetic loci can be detected
- computationally demanding
- test statistics has to be quite simple to be run in a reasonable time
- power the analysis has to be very large to pass through stringent multiple testing criteria

The **selective screening**, exploits particular assumptions and/or special methods to substantially reduce number of markers in the analysis and search for pair-wise interactions only across potentially more promising genetic loci.

- + computationally less demanding
- + more robust statistical methods can be applied (including adjustment for confounders)
- + less severe multiple testing correction is needed
- Smaller chance for detection of previously unreported epistasis.

Selection of genetic markers for selective screening

The selection of genetic markers is usually based on prior expert knowledge about a trait/disease under investigation.

- candidate genes/markers
- markers from coding regions of genes that can potentially change protein structure
- selection using filtering tools that take into account the biology behind the trait under investigation

Biofilter uses biological information about gene-gene relationships and gene-disease relationships to construct multi-SNP models before conducting any statistical analysis.

Model production is gene centric.

Biofilter data-sources:

Gene Ontology

KEGG - The Kyoto Encyclopedia of Genes and Genomes

Net Path - source of curated immune signaling and cancer pathways

PFAM - Protein Families Database

Reactome - database of curated core pathways and reactions in human biology

DIP - The Database of Interacting Proteins

Marker LD pruning

LD pruning is a procedure of **filtering genetic markers by linkage disequilibrium** leaving for the analysis only tagging SNPs that are representatives of the genetic haplotype blocks.

+ allow avoiding top ranked SNP-SNP interactions that are redundant and merely due to the high correlation between genetic markers.

+ decrease computational burden

+ relax the excessive multiple testing correction

▪ LD, **correlation between SNPs**, is calculated via **r^2 statistics** - Pearson test statistic for independence in a 2×2 table of haplotype counts.

▪ LD **r^2 filtering threshold > 0.75** (rather conservative but will best minimize the amount of redundant interactions).

LD pruning procedure in SVS (Golden Helix Inc.)

▪ For any pair of markers under testing whose $r^2 > 0.75$, the first marker of the pair is discarded.

▪ Window increment 1 (number of markers by which the beginning window position was incremented).

Exhaustive epistasis screening method

BOOST (BOolean Operation-based Screening and Testing) is a fast two-stage (screening and testing) approach to search for epistasis associated with a binary outcome.

Stage 1: In the screening stage, a non-iterative method is used to approximate the likelihood ratio statistic.

Stage 2: In the testing stage, the classical likelihood ratio test is employed to measure the interaction effects of selected SNP pairs

+ can calculate interaction around over 0.5 millions of SNPs

- can not deal with continuous traits (only for binary traits)
- cannot deal with LD
- does not perform automatically the multiple testing correction
- has limitations with respect to statistical power

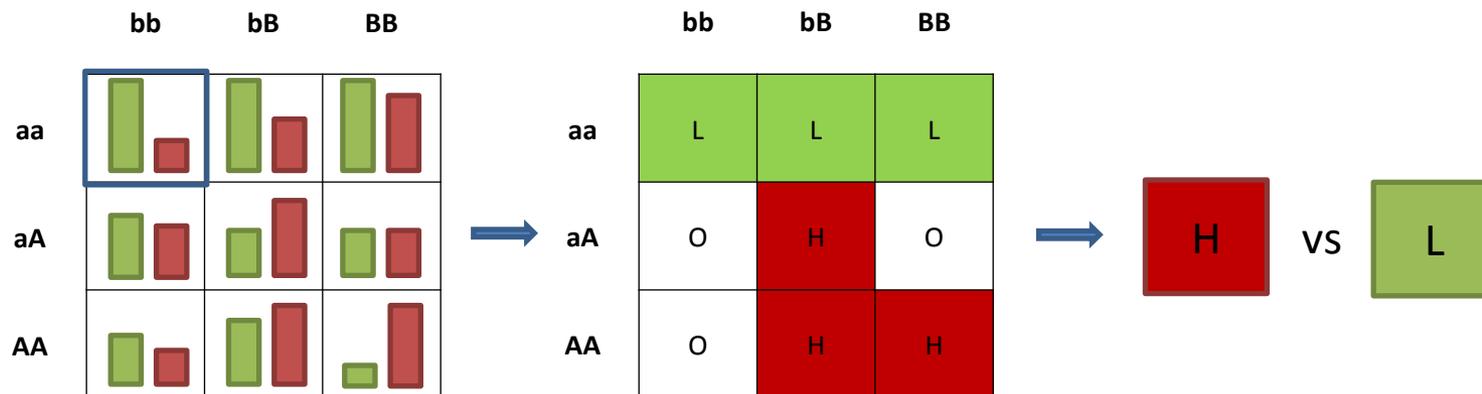
Selective epistasis screening methods: MB-MDR

Model-Based Multifactor Dimensionality Reduction (**MB-MDR**) method implies association testing between a trait and a factor consisting of multilocus genotype information.

Step1: For every pair of markers, each multilocus genotype (MLG) is tested for association with a trait against of the group of other MLGs. Basing on this statistics each MLG is classified as “high risk”, “low risk” or “no evidence for risk” (by default risk threshold = 0.1), and than all MLGs of the same class are merged.

Step2: For each risk category, “high” and “low” (captures summarized information about the importance of the pair of markers), a new association test is performed.

Step3: The significance is explored through a permutation test (1000 permutations) and correction for the multiple testing



- + binary and continuous traits
- + adjustment for covariates
- computationally demanding

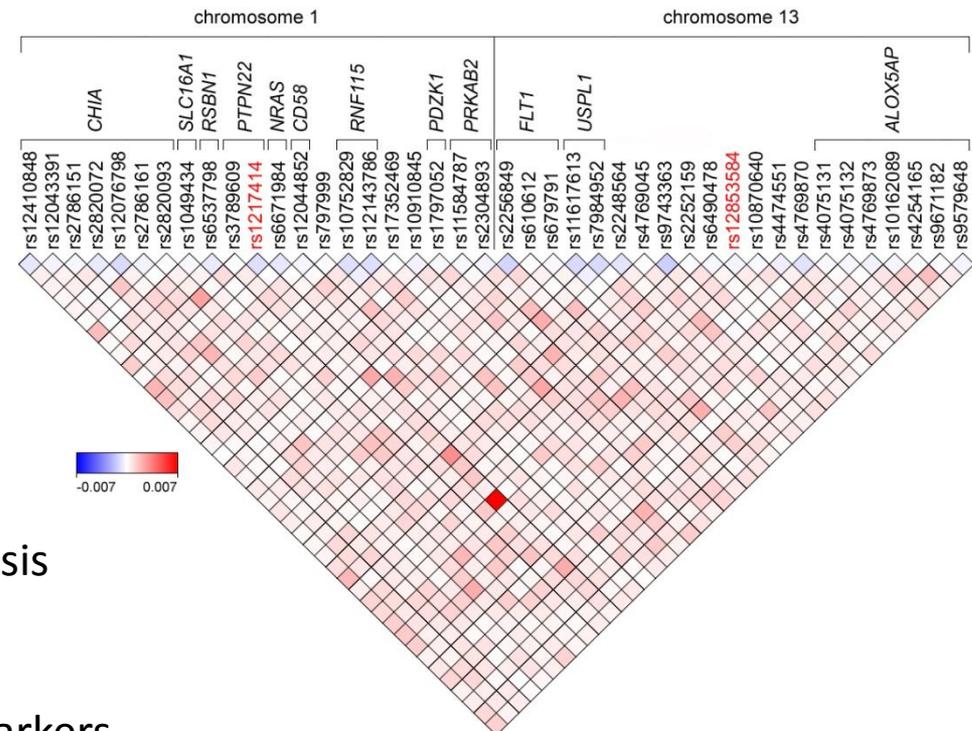
- + different study designs
- + adjust for main effect

Selective epistasis screening methods: SD plot

Synergy disequilibrium (SD) method: to assess interaction in a small set of genetic markers and graphically represent the results

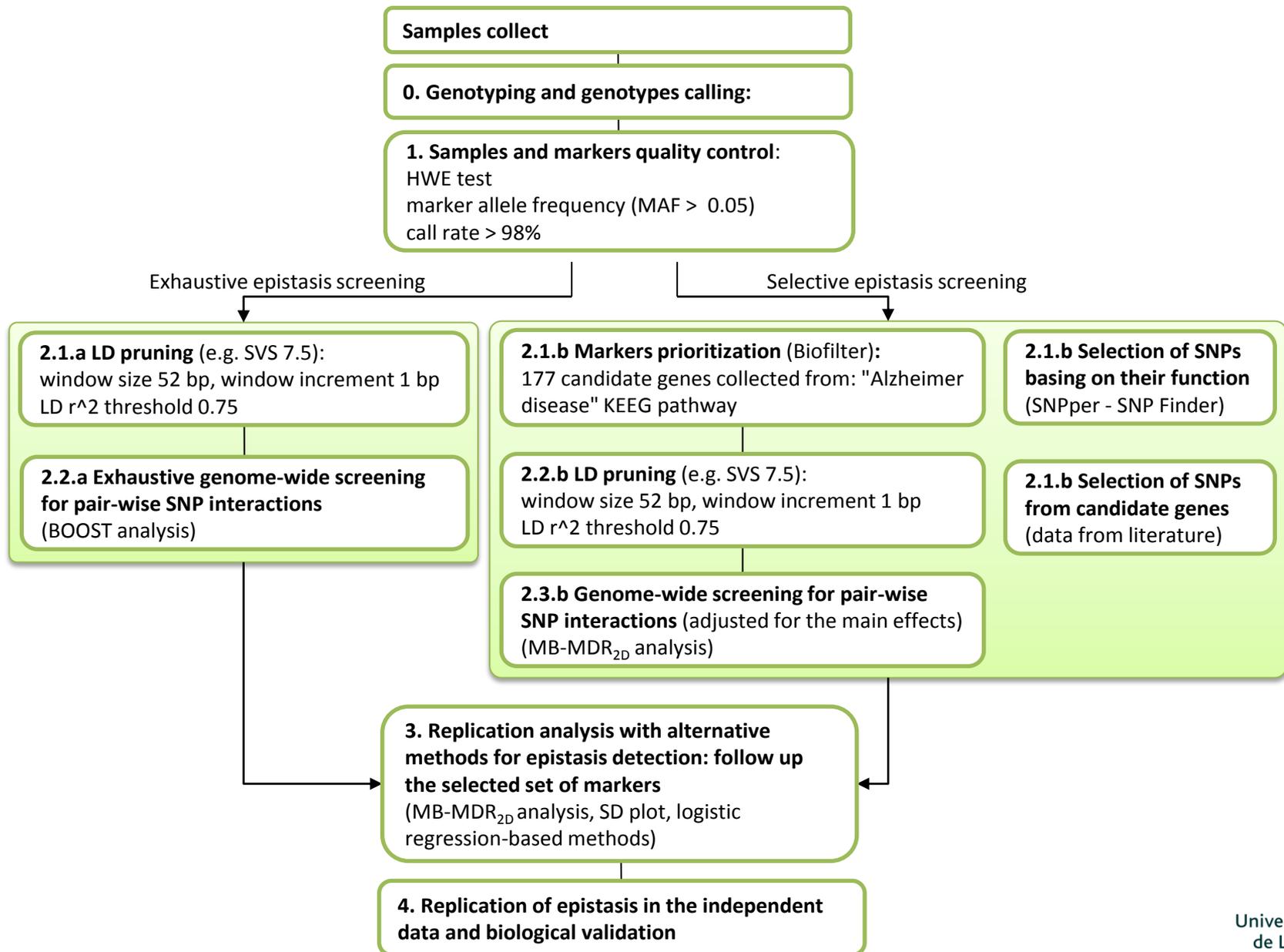
The synergy between two SNPs S_i and S_j with respect to a trait/disease C is defined as the amount of information conveyed by the pair of SNPs about the presence of the disease, minus the sum of the corresponding amounts of information conveyed by each SNP:

$$I(S_i, S_j; C) - [I(S_i; C) + I(S_j; C)]$$



- + can distinguish between LD and epistasis
- + good for results visualization
- does not correct for multiple testing
- can be used for a limited number of markers

Protocol for GWAI

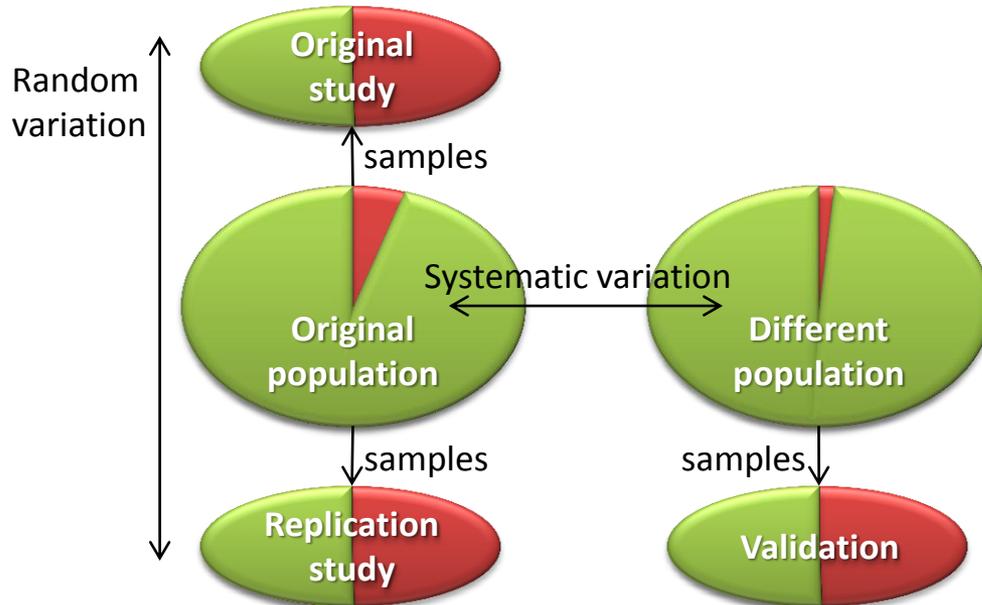


Epistasis replication and validation

Given the availability of a comprehensive meta-analysis toolbox, it may be surprising that hardly any meta-GWAs have been published as the core topic of the publication.



(Mission Impossible @ google)



Igl et al. 2009

Validation:

- Meta-analytic approaches (replication analysis in an independent sample)
- Trustworthy biological validation (systematic literature review, use of structured knowledge from databases, biological experiments)