In Search of Telomeric Fusions in Telomere Mutants of Tetrahymena thermophila

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Summary

The ends of eukaryotic chromosomes are protected by nucleoprotein structures called telomeres consisting of GC-rich repeat sequences. Studies have shown that mutated telomeres are detrimental to the cell, causing chromosomal fusions and increased genomic instability (Dandjinou et al., 1999). Previous research in our lab on Tetrahymena thermophila (T. thermophila) has shown a severe anaphase arrest (Kirk et al., 1997) and extensive loss of telomeric sequences in response to telomeric DNA mutations. In other eukaryotes, telomere loss results in telomeric fusions (Tong et al., 2001). Therefore, in our telomeric mutants I hypothesize the existence of telomeric fusions. In order to test our hypothesis, I developed a polymerase chain reaction (PCR) assay that can detect telomere fusions. Primers were designed from the sequences just adjacent to the telomere called telomere-associated sequences (TAS). I designed a positive control to ensure that our assay could overcome the typical difficulties encountered in amplifying long GC-rich PCR products. Clones of T. thermophila TAS sequences were cut and ligated to mimic potential in vivo fusion events. PCR on my positive control demonstrated that our assay can amplify telomeric fusions up to 841 bp. Preliminary assays of the mutant DNA did not amplify any fusion products. However, reamplification of the products from PCR on digested DNA yielded products. Southern blot analysis of these products using a telomeric probe showed signals that indicate fusions. However, sequence analysis showed the signals to be artifacts produced by the reamplification. The study suggests that micronuclear fusions up to 841 bp may not exit in our mutants and if they do, the number of such fusion events is beyond the amplification limit of my assay.

Introduction

The Beginning of the End: The World of Telomeres

Milestones of Telomere History

In the field of modern molecular biology, telomere is a common word that resonates with the terms ageing and cancer. By definition, telomeres are the end sections of chromosomes. Although the era of contemporary molecular biology starts with Watson and Crick’s discovery of DNA in the early 50s of the twentieth century, the history of telomeres goes further back. The concept of telomeres originated from a set of simple genetic experiments in the early part of the twentieth century by legendary cytologists Herman Muller and Barbara McClintock in 1938.

The Terminal Gene Hypothesis by Herman Muller

The first person to notice the uniqueness of chromosomal ends was Herman Muller (Muller, 1938). When observed under a microscope with high magnifying power, chromosomes, the genetic material of cells, appear as linear structures with no apparent difference at their tips. Muller changed this idea in 1938 through his classical study, which for the first time created artificial mutation in chromosomes by exposing fruit flies (Drosophila melanogaster) to X-rays. His mutants demonstrated several chromosomal aberrations, such as translocations, deletions, and reversions throughout the chromosomes, except in the very ends (Muller, 1938). This intriguing observation led him to propose that chromosomal ends have a specialized structure (Muller, 1938). In his classical lecture at the Woods Hole Marine Biological Laboratory, he concluded that “…the terminal gene must have a special function that of sealing the end of the chromosome, so to speak, and that for some reason a chromosome cannot persist indefinitely without having its ends thus sealed.” (Muller, 1938).

The Chromosome Healing Hypothesis by Barbara McClintock

After Muller, Barbara McClintock, another veteran cytologist and Nobel Laureate further developed the idea of the specialized chromosomal ends by demonstrating their potential function as a healer for aberrations in the ends. In her classical study, she observed that broken chromosomes fused to form dicentric chromosomes by a process called breakage-bridge fusion cycle (McClintock, 1938). However, to her surprise the ends of the chromosomes were never subjected to this process and she called this process “chromosome healing” (McClintock, 1941). Two decades later, Muller gave the term ‘telomere’ to the specialized chromosomal ends (Muller, 1962).

Telomeres and End-Repetition Problem

The interest in chromosomal ends or telomeres further expanded when Olovnikov (1971) and Watson (1972) independently proposed the end-replication problem. DNA polymerases synthesize DNA only in the 5’ to 3’ direction (Alberts, 1997). Therefore, the lagging strand of the replication fork is created in discontinuous segments also known as Okasaki fragments, where an RNA primer initiates each segment formation (Alberts, 1997). However, at telomeric ends, there is no sequence for the primer to bind and therefore after each division the chromosomes get shorter (Alberts, 1997). This issue became known as the end-replication problem (Alberts, 1997) and was fascinating for the time of Olovnikov and Watson, since, the mechanism that single-celled organisms and germ cells used to maintain their chromosome length after each cycle of replication was unknown. However, the solution that nature had evolved to solve this problem remained a mystery for another decade.
Discovery of Telomeric DNA by Elizabeth Blackburn

Probably the most fascinating part of telomeric history was the discovery of the uniqueness of telomeric DNA. In 1978, Elizabeth H. Blackburn and Joseph G. Gall showed that in *T. thermophila*, unlike normal DNA sequences consisting of nucleotides sequences with no apparent pattern, telomeres consist of short repeats of GGGTT (Blackburn and Gall, 1978). After her discovery, similar results were reported from several organisms, such as yeast (Shampay and Blackburn, 1984), *Arabidopsis thaliana* (A. thaliana) (Richards and Ausubel, 1988), and humans (Moynis et al., 1988). The discovery of telomeric DNA by Blackburn, besides being fascinating for its uniqueness also intrigued scientists, since it provided an intellectual foundation upon which novel hypotheses that explain the eld replication problem can be made.

Research for the last two decades, since the discovery of telomeric DNA by Blackburn and Gall (1978) has further expanded our understanding of telomere structure. By definition, telomeres are now considered as DNA-protein complexes. Either component is vital for the proper functioning of the telomeres.

**Telomeric DNA**: Studies have shown that telomeric repeats do not vary much between different species (McEachern et al., 2000). For example, a number of species, such as *Aspergillus nidulans* (Bhattacharya et al., 1997), have the vertebrate telomere sequence TTAGGG. The reason why there are similar telomere sequences between diverse species is still an intriguing aspect of telomeres. Potential explanations include the conservation of DNA binding domains between the telomere maintenance proteins of different species (McEachern et al., 2000). Although telomeric sequences are similar between several species, they can also vary in size and type. The number of telomeric repeats ranges from several thousands, as in humans, which consist of ≈60,000 TTAGGG sequences, to a few hundred GGGTT repeats, as in the macronucleus of *T. thermophila* (Kirk and Blackburn, 1995). Another significant variation observed in telomeric tracts is the existence of more than one type of repeat in the same chromosome (McEachern et al., 2000). For instance, micronuclear telomeres of *T. thermophila* have an internal G4T3 telomeric tract (0.6 -1.0 kb) along with the external G4T2 tract (1.4 - 2.1 kb; Kirk and Blackburn, 1995). In some cases, such as with *Saccharomyces cerevisiae* (S. cerevisiae), *Saccharomycodes pombe* (S. pombe) (Shampay and Blackburn, 1984) and Chlorarachinophyte algae (Gilion and McFadden, 1995), the complete set of telomere sequences also can vary between the chromosomes.

**Telomere Protein Components**: The telomere components of telomeres, also known as telomeric proteins, form parts of the telomeric nucleo-protein complex and are well characterized in humans, mouse, yeast, and ciliated protozoa (McEachern et al., 2000). They are differentiated on the basis of the type binding to telomeric sequences. The two main classes of telomeric proteins are the single and double-stranded DNA binding proteins. They are well characterized in S. cerevisiae (Klobuchar et al., 1981; Shore and Nasmyth, 1987 & Larson et al., 1994), S. pombe (Copper et al., 1997 & Vassetzky et al., 1999) and humans (Broccoli et al., 1997; Chong et al., 1995). The significance of these proteins for the stability of telomere structures (Conrad et al., 1990), telomere length regulation (Lustig et al., 1990; Steensel and de Lange, 1997), and the requirement of having an optimal amount of these proteins for telomere maintenance and stability (Steenesel et al., 1998) has been well demonstrated.

**Discovery of Telomerase by Carol Griender and Elizabeth Blackburn**

A decade after the discovery of telomeric DNA by Blackburn (1985), she also formulated the solution to the end replication along with her graduate student Carol Griender by the discovery of the enzyme terminal transferase (telomerase) in *T. thermophila* (Griender and Blackburn, 1985). They showed that telomerase is a ribonucleoprotein complex with an RNA template called telomerase RNA later called TR (Griender and Blackburn, 1987) with complimentary sequences to the respective telomere sequence (Lentz et al., 1990).

Telomerase uses RNA as the template to synthesize novel telomere repeats (Fig. 1). The synthesis of telomeres is conducted by telomerase Reverse Transcriptase (TERT), the reverse transcriptase that forms the enzymatic core of the telomerase, which is characterized in several species, including *T. thermophila* (Collins and Gandhi, 1998) and humans (Lingner et al., 1997 & Nakamura et al., 1997).

Even though eukaryotic telomere length is maintained by telomerase, non-telomerase based mechanisms or alternate lengthening of telomeres (ALTs) also exist.

For example, both *S. cerevisiae* (Lundblad and Blackburn, 1993 & Mangahas et al., 2001) and *K. Lactis* (McEachern and Blackburn, 1996) is shown to maintain their telomeres without telomerase through chromosomal recombination pathways (Bechter et al., 2003).

Another example is *Drosophila melanogaster*, where telomeres are extended by insertion of specific DNA sequences called retro-transposons (Bisessm and Mason, 1997).

**The Telomeres-Ageing-Cancer Connection**

The link between telomeres, telomerase, and the end-replication problem also resulted in the formulation of novel ideas regarding ageing and cellular immortality. Ageing refers to the limited replicative potential of the cell. This phenomenon was first demonstrated by Hayflick and Moorehead (1961) in skin fibroblast cells, which had a replicative potential of 50 cell divisions. In 1989, the connection between telomeres and ageing was first demonstrated in *S. cerevisiae*, where a defect in telomere elongation resulted in cellular senescence (Lundblad and Szostak, 1989). The study showed that in the absence of telomerase, chromosomes shortened after each cycle of replication and lead to chromosome instability that subsequently activates the programmed cell death machinery (Lundblad and Szostak, 1989).

Cancer refers to uncontrolled cell growth or the ability of the cells to bypass ageing. Conceptually, cells with active telomerase will maintain their telomere length and will therefore be immortal. In fact, several studies have demonstrated that cells will become immortal and cancerous, when telomerase is active (Griender, 1998; Multani et al., 1999). In general, telomerase is inactive in all somatic cells (Harley et al., 1990; Kim et al., 1994) and therefore their telomeres will shorten as we age (Allsopp et al., 1992). The exceptions are germ line cells (Kim et al., 1994) and...
embryonic cells (Kilian et al., 1998) that need to
maintain their telomere length. Many scientists also
propose that telomerase activity is an excellent marker
for certain type of cancers (McKenzie et al., 1999).
Interestingly, this topic has been further investigated
due to the recent discovery of shortened telomeres and
their corresponding shortened life spans in cloned
organisms (Shiels et al., 1999).

Discovery of the D-Loop-T-Loop
After the discovery of telomeric DNA, telomerase, and
consequently the revelation of the telomere-ageing-
cancer connection, one of the most fascinating discoveries of chromosome biology is the telomere-loop
or t-loop. The first hint for this discovery came from
Henderson and Blackburn (1989), who showed that the
end of T. thermophila telomeres consists of a 3’ single
stranded overhang. In humans, the G-overhang
consists of 75-300 bp of TTAGGG repeats (Wright et
al., 1999). A decade later, the examination of telomere
structure using electron microscopy by Griffith and de
Lange (1999) showed that the very end of telomeres
form a large loop of ~10-20 kb. The study also showed
that the 3’ overhang of the telomere invades the double
stranded DNA and base pairs with a homologous
telomeric strand to form a smaller loop (~100-200 bp)
called the D-loop (Fig. 2; adapted from Grieder, 1999).
Further studies have revealed that the D-loop provides
a binding site for the telomere binding protein TRF2 and
stabilizes the loop structure (Grieder, 1999). Structurally,
the present model proposes that both the t-
loop and the D-loop provide binding sites for several
telomere-binding proteins (Grieder, 1999).
The discovery of the t-loop with proteins bound to it was
so profound that it immediately proposed an
architectural model to the mechanisms that protected
telomeres from being degraded or fused. The model
also explained how telomere shortening is linked to
senescence and apoptosis (Evans and Lunblad, 2000).
When telomere length becomes shorter than the
minimal amount (~300-500 bp) to form the t-loop,
proteins like TRF1 and TRF2 will not bind to it. This, in
turn will expose the free telomeric ends to DNA
degradation (Evans and Lunblad, 2000), which can lead
to apoptosis in a p53-dependent DNA-damage
response pathway (Evans and Lunblad, 1999).

Although the discovery of the t-loop-D-loop
was intriguing, classical telomere biology was explained
completely on the basis of linear telomeres.
Conceptually, therefore it was necessary to propose a
mechanism that exposed telomeres to telomerase by
uncapping the telomere protein-loop structure (Grieder,
1999). The present model suggests that the t-loop
complex and its proteins exist as a feedback system
that regulates telomere length by controlling the
availability of telomeres to telomerase (Dubrana et al.,
2001). The model proposes the existence of two
physical states for telomeres—a closed and open state
(Dubrana et al., 2001). During the open state, DNA-
binding proteins in general forms a high order complex
that prevent the accessibility of telomeres to telomerase
and vice-versa in closed state (Dubrana et al., 2001).

The Puzzle of Double-Strand Breaks
Although, several of the telomere puzzles have been
resolved, there is one that still fascinates and haunts
telomere researchers from McClintock’s time. In 1941,
McClintock demonstrated the phenomenon of
‘chromosome healing,’ where the ends of the
chromosomes behaved differently from ends created by
chromosomal breakage. When chromosomes break,
the free ends are known as double-strand breaks
(DSBs), which are repaired by a mechanism known as
non-homologous recombination (NHEJ) (Blackburn,
2001). The major molecular players of the NHEJ
pathway are the Ku heterodimer, Sir family of proteins
and the Mre11p-Rad50-Xrs2 complex (Bertuch and
Lundblad, 1998). Being the ends of the chromosomes,
telomeres often become uncapped during replication
and are structurally the same as DSBs (Blackburn,
2001). However, they do not fuse by the repair
mechanisms activated by NHEJ, since most cells
posses an unknown molecular machinery that prevent
telomeres from being identified as DSBs (Blackburn,
2001).

Initially, scientists thought of the existence of
a special mechanism that inactivates NHEJ machinery
on telomeres. Paradoxically, the NHEJ protein Ku is

Figure 1. Model for Telomere repeat addition by T. thermophila telomerase
The structure of telomerase consists of TER (RNA component) and TERT (catalytic core). The TERT acts us a reverse transcriptase and
uses the TER for the de novo addition of telomeric repeats using the telomerase RNA template (picture by Kirk (1996).
Figure 2. Telomere t-Loop-D-Loop (adapted from Grieder, 1999)

The figure shows the current model for the looping end of telomeres (Grieder, 1999). The model proposes that both the t-loop and D-loop provide binding sites for several telomere-binding proteins (Grieder, 1999). Studies have shown that the stability of the D-loop depends on the binding of TRF2.

DNA Binging Proteins

also found to be a telomere binding protein (Haber, 1999), that is essential for nuclear organization of telomeres (Laroche et al., 1998), telomere length maintenance (Gasser and Susan, 2000) and most importantly for telomere protection from DNA degradation (Baumann, 2000), fusions (Hsu et al., 2000). DNA cross-linking assays and immunofluorescence have demonstrated that Ku can bind to telomere heterochromatin and to telomere repeats (Hsu, 1999). When there is a DSB, Ku gets delocalized from telomeres and activates the NHEJ repair machinery (Gasser and Susan, 2000).

To make matters more complicated, similar to Ku mutations, mutations in other NHEJ proteins including Mre11p (Gasser and Susan, 2000) and DNA-Pkcs (Gilley et al., 2001) can also result in telomere length impairment. This suggests that the DNA repair machinery for DSBs and telomere maintenance overlaps at several stages. Studies have also shown that this enzymatic sharing of the DSB repair and telomere maintenance is conserved from yeasts to humans (Gasser and Susan, 2000). Nevertheless, no one knows why the same molecular machinery repairs telomeres and DSBs.

Many of the insights to the puzzle associated with the overlap in the molecular mechanisms that repair DSBs and maintain telomere length came from the genetic experiments on yeast (Gasser, 2000). They showed that the Ku heterodimer, Sir family of proteins and the Mre11p-Rad50-Xrs2 complex that are necessary for DSB and telomere maintenance are regulated by the S-phase checkpoint proteins Tel1p (yeast) or ATM (humans) (Craven et al., 2002). This discovery quickly provided a hypothetical solution to the "DSB-Telomere-NHEJ" dilemma. The study suggested that it is advantageous for the cell to have the same machinery acting differently for both DSBs and telomere dysfunction and therefore maintaining chromosome stability, since, both events take place during or after DNA replication (Gasser and Susan, 2000).

The other major question in the field of telomeres and DNA repair is the ways and means by which the cell differentiates open-ended telomeres from DSBs. Answers to this question also came from the genetic studies on yeast have that led to the discovery of two NHEJ proteins Taz1 (Ferreira et al., 2001) and NEJ1 (Liti et al., 2003). Taz1 is a telomere binding protein, whereas NEJ1 works with NHEJ ligases LIF1 and DNL4 (Liti et al., 2003). Both interact with telomeres and prevent them from being treated as DSBs (Liti et al., 2003). Although, extensive research is being done in this field, to this day, the detailed molecular and cellular processes underlying the DSB-telomere dilemma or McClintock’s ‘chromosome healing’ phenomenon is still a mystery.

Telomeres and Cell Cycle

In addition to the protective function, telomeres have recently been found to play an important role in meiosis. The potential link between telomeres and cell cycle was first demonstrated by Chikashige et al., (1994), who showed the clustering of telomeres during prophase in S. cerevisiae. Further investigation of this link demonstrated that alteration of telomere sequences (Kirk et al., 1997) or deletion of telomere associated meiotic proteins like NDJ1 (Conrad et al., 1997) or Tam1 (Chua and Roeder, 1997) can result in abnormal phenotype and growth patterns. Within the last seven years, several other links between telomeres and meiosis had been characterized such as the nucleolus-associated clustering of telomeres before the formation of synapses (Armstrong et al., 2001) and the requirement of functional telomeres for successful chromosomal alignments (Funabiki et al., 1993) and for the integrity of spindles (Lu et al., 2002).

Current Status of Telomere Biology and Our Lab’s Goal

Within the last two decades, telomeres have thus emerged as one of the most well studied fields of cell and molecular biology. The t-loop and its structural modifications on a timely basis for telomere maintenance has been one of the major focuses of research for the last five years (Evans et al., 1999). The complexity of telomerase structure, its regulation and its associate components other than hTERT and TER are also being investigated extensively (Evans et al., 1999). Along with research on telomerase mediated telomere maintenance, scientists are also investigating ALTs in yeasts and Drosophila (Evans et al., 1999).

Initial studies on telomeres were based completely on
single celled eukaryotes like *T. thermophila*. However, the last decade has also witnessed an expansion by including worms (*C. elegans*) and plants (*Arabidopsis thaliana*) (Evans et al., 1999). And as previously mentioned, the connection of DNA repair pathways, cell cycle progression and telomeres is also a growing area of extensive research (Gasser et al., 2000).

Our lab’s goal is to study the DNA component of telomeres in *T. thermophila*. Most recent studies in the lab have been focused on telomeres and cell cycle. A common way to approach this is by altering the telomere sequence using a telomerase with a mutated RNA template sequence that can create sequence specific mutations at the telomeric termini (Yu et. al., 1990). The different *T. thermophila* mutants created in our lab are 43A, 43AA & 44+AA and are so called because of the specific telomeric sequence alterations (Petcherskaia et. al, 2003). Previous studies by Kirk et. al. (1997) on these mutants showed an arrest at anaphase with absence of chromosome segregation. We have further characterized the cell’s response to the mutation and have investigated the molecular basis for the defect. Examination of cell continues despite the block in anaphase demonstrated a dramatic increase in the proportion of micronuclei with condensed chromatin, as well as an increase in the proportion of cells with an intact mitotic spindle apparatus (Christ, 2002). Further investigation of the 43AA mutant by southern blot analysis revealed that telomere sequence mutations have also resulted in extensive degradation of the micronuclear telomeric DNA (unpublished).

**My Senior Thesis Project**

The purpose of my study was to further extend the investigation of the molecular basis of anaphase arrest we observed in our telomere mutants. Although, we have demonstrated extensive micronuclear telomere degradation, we do not know whether the degraded DNA is treated as DSBs. I predicted that the mutations we induced in the telomeric DNA inhibited the binding of the terminal telomere binding proteins thereby destabilizing the t-loop-D-loop cap structure of telomeric ends. Therefore, the exposed telomere would be subject to the activity of exonucleases resulting in extensive DNA degradation, as we have observed. However, we are unaware of the extent, to which the DNA has been degraded and we predict the existence of three types of degraded chromosomes (Fig. 3).

Several studies have shown that shortened telomeres (McEachern and Iyer, 2001) and sequence specific telomeric mutations (McEachern et. al., 2000) can result in telomere fusions. The formation of fusions might occur because degraded telomere is no different from DSBs and will, therefore be modified by the NHEJ machinery leading to the fusion of chromosomes. Therefore, I hypothesize that in our *T. thermophila* telomere mutants, the extensive micronuclear DNA degradation resulted in the formation of telomeric fusions. Based on previous studies in the lab (unpublished), I have excluded existence of the fusions of non-degraded telomeres (Fig. 3) and hypothesize the existence of three types of fusions (Fig. 3).

In order to test our hypothesis of telomere fusions, we investigated the possibilities of several candidate techniques used in other studies to detect chromosomal fusions, such as pulse field gel electrophoresis (Liti, 2003), polymerase chain reaction (PCR) (Hackett et. al., 2001; Chan et. al., 2003), and fluorescent in situ hybridization (FISH) (Espejel et. al., 2002). However, pulse field gel electrophoresis and FISH assay cannot be applied because they are incapable of specifying telomeric fusions. In addition, our lab lacks the technical facilities to conduct pulse field gel electrophoresis, and FISH antibodies specific to the *T. thermophila* have not been developed. Therefore, we developed a PCR assay that can detect telomeric fusions. Primers were designed from the sequences just adjacent to the telomere of *T. thermophila* called telomere-associated sequences (TAS) (Fig. 3), which were cloned by Kirk et. al. (1995). We also designed a positive control to ensure that our assay could overcome the typical difficulties encountered in amplifying long GC-rich PCR products. PCR on the positive control demonstrated the ability of our assay in detecting telomeric fusions up to 841 bp. Among the different types of fusions listed in Fig. 3, we are capable of detecting Types II and III, since our primers are designed from TAS sequences. Although, preliminary assays of the mutant DNA did not amplify any fusion products, reamplification of the products from PCR on digested DNA yielded potential fusion bands. However, sequencing of these bands showed them to be non-telomeric sequences.

**Results**

**Creation of Artificial Telomere Fusions**

To investigate the existence of telomeric fusions, I used PCR with primers designed from TAS sequences. Unfortunately, telomeres are notoriously difficult to amplify by PCR because a) the high GC content of telomeres can prevent the double stranded template of the PCR from being denatured completely thereby preventing the efficient binding of the primers and enzymes and b) telomeres can inhibit PCR by the formation of secondary structures. Therefore, to test the potential of our PCR assay in detecting telomere fusions, we developed a positive control by creating artificial fusions and testing our primers on it. To accomplish this, we used the *T. thermophila* TAS sequences cloned by Kirk et. al. (1995). We cut out the TAS sequences with telomeric tracts by restriction digest with Sac I and EcoR V and were ligated to create artificial fusions. The TAS sequences I selected were called TAS A & TAS C, with sizes 296 bp and 511 bp, respectively (Fig. 4). TAS A has 9 G4T3 and 23 G4T2 repeats, and TAS C has 37 G4T3 and 26 G4T2 repeats (Fig. 4). The expected sizes of the different fusions of TAS C & TAS A were 606 bp, 841 bp, and 1056 bp for the artificial telomeric fusions types: a) TAS A & TAS A, b) TAS C & TAS C, and c) TAS C & TAS A, respectively (Fig. 4).

The next goal of the project was to test the artificial fusions with the primers we designed from the TAS sequences. We conducted PCR on the artificial fusions using the respective primers and the products were run on a 1.5% agarose gel. The gel (Lane 1, Fig. 5) shows two bands of expected sizes for the artificial fusions A & A11 (606bp) and C & A (841bp). However, we were unable to amplify the C & C fusion band. This suggests the existence of a potential size barrier for the PCR assay. We predict this to be due to the longer stretches of the telomere tracts of TAS C & C artificial fusion, when compared to the other two types of artificial fusions (Fig. 4), thereby making the PCR vulnerable to all the issues that is related to the amplification of GC-rich sequences.
The wild type micronuclear DNA (a) consists of a telomeric tract of size ~2.7 kb with the internal and external telomeric tracts G4T3 and G4T2, respectively. In our T. thermophila telomere mutants, previous studies have suggested the types of degraded telomeres potentially existing (b), based on which I hypothesized the existence of three types of chromosomal fusions (c). Among these (c), we are searching for Type II and Type III, since our primers are designed from the TAS sequence.

Figure 3. Different types of fusions that can potentially exist. The figure of T. thermophila was adapted from Asai et al., (2000).
As expected, the nested PCR demonstrated a decrease in the prevalence of artificial fusions (Fig. 5; Lanes 1 & 2).

### Optimization of the PCR Assay

To determine the minimum amount of the artificial fusions and optimal annealing temperature that are required for our PCR assay, different dilutions (1:10, 1:100 & 1:1000) of the artificial fusions were tested using TAS C and TAS A primers (Materials & Methods) at temperatures ranging between 56°C and 58°C (Fig. 5). The PCR products were run on a 1.5% agarose gel (Fig. 5) and it shows the ability of the PCR in amplifying telomeric fusions: a) A & A (606 bp), b) C & A (841 bp) and c) C & C (1056 bp) at annealing temperature 56°C from all the three dilutions (Fig. 5; Lanes 1, 2, & 3). But at 58°C, the efficiency of the PCR to detect fusions from the 1:1000 dilution dramatically decreased (Fig. 5; Lanes 5, 6, and 7). This optimization experiment indicated that our assay was most efficient, with minimal non-specific binding at an annealing temperature of 56°C and with a template concentration of 1:10 or 100 of the artificial fusions (Fig. 5; Lanes 1 & 2).

Although, my assay was successful in detecting two artificial fusions with expected sizes (Fig. 5), the PCR also amplified several bands of unexpected sizes. The prevalence of these bands was less dramatic with decrease in the concentration of the artificial fusion (Lanes 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, & 7; Fig. 5), suggesting that they were due to the non-specific binding of the primers. However, the existence of non-specific products questions the specificity of the PCR products. Therefore, we conducted a nested PCR using primers PRX TAS C and PRX TAS A. These primers were designed 3’ to the primers TAS A and TAS C. As expected, the nested PCR demonstrated a decrease in

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**Figure 4. Types of Artificial Telomere Fusions**

TAS sequences with telomeric tracts were cut out by restriction digest with TAS A and TAS C having a size of 296 bp and 511 bp, respectively. They were ligated to create three types of fusions: a) TAS A & A Fusion (606 bp), b) TAS A & C Fusion (841 bp), and c) TAS C & C Fusion (1056 bp). The sizes of the images are scaled to 10 mm for 1 bp.

**Figure 5. Thermal & Volumetric Optimization of the PCR assay**

PCR was conducted on the different dilutions of the A & C artificial fusions at annealing temperatures 56.00°C & 58.00°C and was run on an agarose gel. The content of each lane is labeled with the respective annealing temperature and template dilution used for each PCR. The gel shows the A & A and A & C fusions with expected sizes 841 bp and 606 bp (blue arrows), but lacks the C & C fusion band of size 1056 bp.
the sizes of the PCR products we predicted to be artificial (Fig. 6; Lanes 1 & 2). The C & A (841bp) and A & A fusion products (606bp) show a decrease of 94 bp and 140 bp to give a 735 bp and a 546 bp fragment, respectively (Fig. 6; Lanes 1 & 2). In addition, the non-specific bands produced by the assay were not reproducible and those that did reappear did not drop down (Fig. 6), thereby further confirming the specificity of our assay.

43AA genomic DNA can inhibit the efficiency of our PCR assay

My assay succeeded in detecting artificial telomere fusions. However, I anticipated that when repeated in the presence of genomic DNA, the PCR efficiency would decrease. This is because genomic DNA can act as a competitor by providing multiple sites for primer binding or can inhibit the reaction due to its complex structure and sequence complexity. Therefore, it was necessary to test the PCR efficiency in the presence of genomic DNA. I aimed to mimic the in vivo situation, where my assay needs to amplify the fusions from a large amount of genomic DNA. Ultimately, my goal was to estimate the minimum number of fusions the assay requires to amplify it from the maximum amount of the genomic DNA. I addressed this issue in two steps.

Firstly, I was interested in examining the minimal amount of 43AA genomic DNA that could compete or inhibit the PCR reaction. Therefore, PCR was conducted on 1:10 dilution of the artificial fusion mixed with different dilutions (Materials & Methods) of the 43AA genomic DNA. The products were run on a 1.5% agarose gel (Fig. 7). The absence of any bands in Lane 1 (Fig. 7) demonstrated that either the genomic DNA itself or an unknown factor present with the genomic DNA inhibited PCR drastically. However, as we decreased the amount of genomic DNA in serial dilutions, the artificial fusion bands of expected sizes (841 bp & 606 bp) were amplified (Lanes 2 through 7).

Figure 6. Nested PCR

PCR was conducted on the 1:10 dilution of the C & A ligates at 56.00C. One µl of the product was then used for the nested PCR. Both products were run on an agarose gel. The content of each lane is as follows, Lane 1: PCR on 1:10 dil. of C & A ligate at 56.00C, Lane 2: Nested PCR, Lane 3: 100 bp PCR Ladder.

Secondly, I estimated the minimum amount of artificial fusions that the assay required as templates in the presence of 1:10 dilution of genomic DNA. PCR was conducted on non-diluted artificial fusion and on different dilutions of the artificial fusions in the presence of 1:10 dilution of 43AA genomic DNA. The gel for the PCR products (Fig. 8) shows successful amplification of fusions (841 bp & 606 bp) from non-diluted and 1:10 dilution of the artificial fusion in the presence of genomic DNA. However, the PCR was unable to amplify any fusions from dilutions above 1:10 (Fig. 8; Lanes 4 through 7). Thus, I demonstrated that my assay had a concentration limit to successfully amplify telomeric fusions. The experiment shows that 1:10 dilution of the artificial fusion was the minimum amount of the artificial fusion that could give rise to a fusion product by PCR in the presence of 1:10 dilution of 43AA genomic DNA (Fig. 8).

Considering the results of the two experiments (Fig. 7 & Fig. 8), I anticipated the molecular problems caused by the inhibitory roles of genomic DNA and the minimum number of fusions that are required for our assay to amplify. The first experiment (Fig. 7) suggests that any dilutions less than 1:10 of genomic DNA can inhibit the PCR. The second

Figure 7. Diluted 43AA Genomic DNA did not affect PCR efficiency

PCR was conducted on the different dilutions of the 43AA genomic DNA along with C & A ligate at 56.00C and was run on an agarose gel. Lane 9 consists of 10 µl of the 100 bp PCR Ladder. Lanes 2 to 7 consist of products from PCR on 1:10 dilution of the artificial fusion mixed with: non-diluted genomic DNA (Lane1), 1:10 (Lane 2), 1:100 (Lane 3), 1:1000 (Lane 4), 1:10,000 (Lane 5), 1:100,000 (Lane 6), and 1:1,000,000 (Lane 7) dilutions of the 43AA genomic DNA.
PCR was conducted on the different dilutions of C & A ligate along with 1:10 dilution of 43AA genomic DNA at 56.00C and was run on an agarose gel. Lane 1 consisted of 100bp PCR Ladder. Lanes 2 to 7 consist of products from PCR on 1:10 dilution of the 43AA genomic DNA mixed with: non-diluted (Lane 2), 1:10 (Lane 3), 1:100 (Lane 4), 1:1000 (Lane 5), 1:10,000 (Lane 6), and 1:100,000 (Lane 7) dilutions of the artificial fusion.

Experiment (Fig. 8) shows that any dilution above 1:10 might by pass the minimum number of template fusions required for the PCR to amplify. Based on these two results, I concluded that to yield the maximum efficiency of the PCR, I should use 1:10 dilution of the 43AA genomic DNA to investigate the existence of telomeric fusions.

PCR on 43AA DNA does not give any PCR Products
Our PCR assay was able to detect fusions up to 841 bp long. Therefore, I anticipated the possibility of detecting fusions from the 43AA genomic DNA within this size range. For PCR, I used a 1:10 dilution of 43AA genomic DNA, since, non-diluted genomic DNA demonstrated to be inhibitory to PCR. All the primers combinations possible from the different primers (TAS A, TAS B, TASC, TAS D, TAS E, and TAS F) were used for the PCR. However, we did not see any products (data not shown). Similar kinds of results were seen when PCR was conducted on 1:1000 dilution of 43AA genomic DNA (data not shown).

PCR on digested 43AA DNA does not give any PCR Products
The absence of fusion products from 43AA genomic DNA by PCR suggested several possibilities, such as: a) micronuclear telomeric fusions may not exist, b) the size of the telomeric fusions existing are larger than the amplification potential of our PCR assay, and c) the genomic DNA itself is inhibiting the efficiency of the PCR due to its sheer size. To resolve last issue, I decided to digest the 433AA genomic DNA with the enzyme Mse I. We anticipated that the digestion would reduce the secondary structure formation of the genomic DNA, if it were the causative agent for reducing PCR efficiency, thereby increasing its availability for PCR. Another issue that concerned the assay was the low GC content and short lengths of the primers we used (Table 1). Therefore, we designed new primers (last 3 rows; Table 1) with longer size and high GC content that could anneal to the template for longer periods thereby increasing the efficiency of PCR.

PCR was then conducted on the digested 43AA genomic DNA using the new primers. The positive control consisted of the artificial fusion with digested non-diluted 43AA genomic DNA. The PCR did not detect any fusion products (Fig. 9; Lane 3 through 8), as we did not see any bands. However, PCR on the artificial fusions in the presence of non-diluted 43AA DNA did show the expected band (Fig. 9; Lane 1). This was an encouraging result. Because, previous parts of this study had shown the inability of the assay to detect artificial fusions in the presence of non-diluted genomic DNA (Fig. 7, Lane 2). This suggests that the digestion of the DNA and the new primers had indeed increased the efficiency of the PCR. The absence of any telomeric fusion bands from mutant genomic DNA might be because of their low numbers.

![Figure 8](image8.png)

Figure 8. 43AA Genomic DNA did not inhibit PCR on 1:10 dilution of artificial fusions.

![Figure 9](image9.png)

Figure 9. PCR on digested 43AA genomic DNA does not give products.

PCR was conducted on Mse I digested 43AA genomic DNA and was run on an agarose gel. Newly designed primers with high GC content and longer size were used (Materials & Methods). Annealing Temperature: 65.00C. Lanes 1 & 2 consists of PCR on 1:10 dilution of artificial fusion with primers NEW TAS A & NEW TAS C and 100 bp PCR Ladder, respectively. Lane 3 to 9 consist products from PCR on Mse I digested 43AA genomic DNA with the “NEW TAS” primers: Lane 3: A alone, Lane 4: A & C, Lane 5: A & E, Lane 6: C alone, Lane 7: C & E, Lane 8: E alone.

Detection of Potential Fusions After the Reamplification of the PCR Products
The initial set of experiments had demonstrated that my PCR assay requires a certain number of telomeric fusion events as the minimum number to amplify them. Therefore, a potential reason for the absence of any products by PCR on 43AA genomic DNA (Fig. 9) might...
have been the low number of fusion events. To resolve this problem, the PCR products from 43AA genomic DNA were reamplified by a second cycle of PCR. I predicted that the additional recycling should yield the potential fusion bands that are amplified to the PCR’s minimum template level by the initial 30 cycles. However, I also anticipated the amplification of a number of non-specific products due to non-specific binding of the primers during reamplification. Therefore, the experiment was repeated on wild type (WT) genomic DNA, which according to our hypothesis does not possess any telomeric fusions.

Surprisingly, PCR yielded products from both WT (Fig. 10; Bottom row) and 43AA genomic DNA (Fig. 10; Top row) templates. Lanes 4, 7, and 10 in each row (Fig. 10) are followed by the corresponding reamplification products. The reamplification of the positive control (Fig. 10; Lane 4; Row 1) shows several non-specific bands. Overall, each of the lanes containing the reamplification products demonstrates extensive smearing suggesting the amplification of several non-specific products. Interestingly, none of the products from WT DNA template is of the same size as the ones from 43AA genomic DNA suggesting that either telomeric fusions exist in low number in both WT and 43AA genomic DNA or that the PCR products are due to the non-specific binding of the primers at different sites of the template DNA.

In order to confirm whether the bands were due to telomeric fusions, we conducted southern blot analysis on the gel from Fig. 10 (Fig. 11) using a telomeric probe specific to micronuclear telomere sequence G4T3 (Fig. 4). The southern blot exhibited strong telomeric (G4T3) signals at those sections of the gel (Fig. 10; Lanes 6, 9, & 12) that corresponds to the reamplification products from both WT (Fig. 11; Bottom Row) and 43AA genomic DNA (Fig. 11; Top Row). A closer analysis shows that the intensity of the signals increases at those points in the Southern Blot (Fig. 11) where a potential fusion band was observed in Fig. 10. The strong presence of G4T3 signals further suggests that the PCR products from both WT and 43AA genomic DNA might be fusions.

For further verification, it was decided to sequence the PCR products. The experiment was repeated. In both the top and the bottom rows (Fig. 12), lanes 8, 11, and 14 consist of the reamplified PCR products. Compared to Fig. 10, we observed extra bands for each of the reamplification reaction. I decided to clone those PCR products that do not repeat themselves in the WT row (Bottom; Fig. 12). I also avoided products less 200 bp long, since they could either be formed due to primer dimers or due to the non-specific binding of the primers. Arrows with specific colors indicate the PCR products selected for cloning (Fig. 12). The names and sizes of these products are summarized in Table 3, with respect to their colored arrow. Figure 13 shows successful cloning and sequencing of the fusion products Mut. A1, Mut. C1, and WT. A1 (Figure 13). The respective primers used are matched to the cloned sequences (Figure 13). And lastly, sequencing of plasmids to which the PCR products Mut. A2, Mut. E1, WT, A2, and WT. C1 were cloned showed the absence of any inserts (Data not shown). The sequencing results suggests none of the PCR products we sequenced were telomeric fusions, thereby demonstrating them to be formed by the non-specific binding of the primers during the reamplification cycle.

Discussion
My study demonstrates that the PCR assay I developed can amplify telomere fusions up to 841 bp. The absence of any fusion bands from PCR on mutant
genomic DNA suggests that telomere fusions up to 841 bp may not exist in the telomere mutants we created.

Table 3. The names and sizes of potential fusion bands from Figure 12

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>~Size (bp)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mu t.</td>
<td>Mu t.</td>
<td>Mu t.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A1</td>
<td>A2</td>
<td>C1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>369</td>
<td>320</td>
<td>263</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 12. Reamplification of PCR on digested 43AA genomic DNA

The contents of the gel (above) is similar to Fig. 10. Potential fusion bands that are present in either rows were selected for cloning. The names and sizes of these bands are matched to the respective arrow and are summarized in the Table 2 (below).

If they do exist, I predict the number of such fusion events to be below the amplification limit of our assay. The possibilities of telomeric fusions larger than 841 bp cannot also be ruled out, since, our assay has a size barrier of ~841 bp.

Telomeres: the Nemesis of PCR and the Significance of a Positive Control

PCR is one of the most significant and useful techniques of biotechnology. It is a fast and efficient method to amplify known DNA sequences. However, in my study, I demonstrated that telomeric fusions are DNA templates that are extremely difficult to be detected by PCR. The PCR assay demonstrated its ability to detect telomere fusions with sizes 606 bp & 841 bp, but it failed to amplify the TAS C & C fusion, which has a size of 1056 bp. From a molecular perspective, studies have shown that the efficiency of PCR is affected by several parameters such as template complexity, and template sequence, primer sequence and stability, polymerase type, buffer type, (Innis, 1999). Among these, one or more of factors may provide insights to the inherent size barrier of our assay as summarized below.

GC-Content of the template: The high GC content of telomeres might be one of the primary reasons for this.

thermal energy required to denature GC rich strands for PCR are much higher than conventional DNA sequences (Moreau et al., 1994). The issue of GC content worsens, when telomeric sequences need to be amplified by PCR, since, it consists of tandem GC repeats (Pherson, 2000). To resolve this issue, most studies recommend elevated denaturation temperature of 98°C from conventional conditions of 95°C to ensure efficient denaturation of long stretches of telomeres (Pherson, 2000). Although, I used 98°C as the denaturation temperature, during the primer binding and extension phases of PCR, the reaction temperature lowers to ~60°C. This might have affected the PCR efficiency due to potential of single stranded telomeric sequences to form secondary structures such as hairpins as demonstrated by Henderson et al., (1987) and Gualberto et al., (1992) that can lead to premature primer binding and the inhibition of the DNA polymerase from synthesizing new DNA.

Size and GC Content of the Primer: I also propose that the primers I designed (Table 1) might have contributed to the inefficiency of the PCR assay in amplifying the 1056 bp artificial fusion. If the size of the template to be amplified is long, the respective primers must stay on its binding site for a longer time period, which is chiefly determined by high GC content and large size of the primers (Beasley et al., 1999). However, the primers I designed were short (20-22 bp) and low in GC content (25-60%) that may have resulted in premature primer binding.

Primers and Secondary Structures: In addition to GC content and size, studies have shown that the ability of the primers to form secondary structures, like self-duplexes, can also lead to premature primer-template binding (Breslauer et al., 1986 & Kolmodin and Williams, 1997). Table 1 shows that several of the primers had secondary structure formation properties indicating its potential along with the other factors in inhibiting the PCR. Although, the primers TAS C and TAS A were able to amplify the telomeric fusions of 606 bp and 841 bp, either of them could also form self-duplexes. Therefore, it is possible that their primer binding ability is competing with the secondary structure formation, in which self-duplex formation might be the dominating while amplifying the 1056 bp telomeric fusion. Consequently, at a fixed time period, the number of primers available for efficient primer-template binding would be lower resulting in the amplification of less number of the 1056 bp telomeric fusions.
$T_p$ and $T_m$ of Primers: The other factor that may have played a role in reducing the efficiency of the PCR is the drastic difference $T_p$ and $T_m$. Several studies have shown that if $T_m > 3^\circ C$ than $T_p$, the primer with higher

![Figure 13. Sequences of Reamplified PCR Products](image)

The PCR products selected from Fig. 12 were cloned and sequenced and they showed to be non-telomeric. The sequences of Mut.A1, Mut.C1, and WT.A1 are matched to the primers used (bolded & underlined), while the sequences of Mut. A2, Mut. E1, WT. A2, and WT. C1 showed no inserts in their respective plasmids.

Enzyme Fidelity: Although the enzyme, (ThermAce) is shown to be a high fidelity enzyme (Barnes, 1992) that is able to amplify GC-rich templates of size (Barnes, 1994), the study has not demonstrated the enzyme’s ability in amplifying large telomeric tracts. In addition, the enzyme has an inherent limit of ~850 bp for amplifying telomeric tracts, which also might have affected the efficiency of our PCR assay. Studies have also shown that the efficiency of the enzyme can vary with changes in the concentrations of MgCl₂ (Innis et al., 1990 & Erlrich et. al., 1989) and other buffers such as EDTA in the PCR reaction mixture (Zangenberg et. al., 1999). The buffers and the different salts present in reaction mixture determine the ionic strength and buffering capacity required for the fidelity of the enzyme (Zangenberg et al., 1999). However, we have not examined the effects of changing the salt concentrations of the buffer in product specificity.

Due to the afore-mentioned reasons, it was very crucial to create artificial telomere fusions as positive control upon which our PCR assay could be tested. This is because, if the assay cannot demonstrate its ability to amplify telomeric fusions from the positive control, a negative result from the real experiment on mutant genomic DNA cannot be used to differentiate between the absence of fusions and the limitations of the PCR assay.

Genomic DNA’s Inhibitory Properties against PCR Our goal was to detect fusions from mutant genomic DNA and our positive control was capable of amplifying telomeric sequences up to 841 bp. Nevertheless, from the view point of PCR, the reaction scenarios of using the positive control and genomic DNA as templates are drastically different. When using artificial fusions as templates, the primers and the enzymes are faced with only the DNA sequences ranging from 606 bp to 1056 bp or more created by multiple ligation reactions. Conversely, the genomic DNA is the collection of the entire genome of $T$. thermophila, which is in the order of 2x10⁶ kb for the micronucleus (Yao et. al., 1974) and 9x10⁶ kb for the macronucleus (Woodard et. al., 1972). Consequently, there are several factors the PCR needs to overcome to detect fusions from genomic DNA in addition to those already mentioned (Cheng and Kolmodin, 1997). Firstly, the complexity of genomic DNA in the reaction can provide numerous non-specific binding sites for the primers (Cheng and Kolmodin, 1997). And secondly, the tendency of genomic DNA to undergo intra-molecular rearrangements, such as super coiling (Alberts, 2002), formation of self-duplexes
studies the telomere mutants

Therefore, to create an ideal positive control, it was crucial to test the efficiency of our assay in detecting telomeric fusions in the presence of genomic DNA. By doing so, I mimicked a “real” experiment, where the PCR needs to amplify telomeric fusions from genomic DNA. I conducted PCR on different mixtures of the artificial fusion and the mutant genomic DNA that varied in the amount of each reaction. The experiment suggested to us the minimum amount of the artificial fusion the PCR assay required to amplify it in the presence of the maximum amount of the genomic DNA. When the amount of genomic DNA was decreased by serial dilutions, the assay succeeded in detecting artificial telomeric fusions from its 1:10 dilution. Furthermore, when the experiment was repeated with different dilutions of the artificial fusion in the presence of the genomic DNA, the assay was unable to detect artificial fusions from dilutions above 1:10. These results clearly demonstrate the inhibitory effects of the genomic DNA.

When we did the “real” experiment on 43AA genomic DNA with no addition of artificial fusions, we did not see any products (data not shown). This might be because one or more of the reasons that have been discussed. Similar to our results, other studies (Moreau et al., 1994) have also shown reduction in the efficiency of PCR on telomeric DNA due to its ability to form secondary structures. Several studies have solved the inhibitory roles of genomic DNA on PCR by digesting it with an endonuclease (Hackett et al., 2001; Chan et al., 2003). Theoretically, the concept works on the premise that digestion of genomic DNA will reduce the formation of secondary structures and increases the accessibility of the primers to the binding sites. I decided to conduct PCR on 43AA genomic DNA digested with Mse I because: a) it can digest AT-rich templates like that of T. thermophila and b) it does not possess any restriction sites 5’ to the primers we had designed thereby preventing the digestion of potential fusions that could be detected by our assay. Along with digested DNA, I also designed longer primers with higher GC content as recommended by other studies (Hackett, 2001; Chan, 2003). PCR on MseI digested DNA with the new primers also did not yield any products. However, the experiment shows that the usage of digested DNA or the new primers or both had increased the efficiency of the assay. Because PCR on digested and non-diluted 43AA genomic DNA with the new primers yielded the expected products, whereas the same experiment with non-digested and non-diluted 43AA DNA with the old primers did not.

Frequency of Fusion Events in our T. thermophila telomere mutants

Although usage of digested genomic DNA increased the efficiency of the PCR, the assay did not detect any fusion bands. One possible cause for this might have been the absence of the optimal number of fusions in mutants that the assay requires to amplify. In fact, studies in S. cerevisiae (Chan et al., 2003 and Liti et. al., 2003) and Arabidopsis thaliana (Riha et al., 2003) have shown that the number of telomeric fusions events that occur due to telomeric mutations are very small, although mutated telomeres are highly recombinogenic (McEachern and Iyer, 2001). These studies have suggested that in S. cerevisiae and A. thaliana, proteins such as NEJ1 and Ku, respectively prevents NHEJ-dependent telomere fusions. In my study, if telomere fusions are created by the activation of NHEJ machinery that was activated to repair our mutant’s degraded telomeres, adjacent molecular pathways using proteins with similar functions as NEJ1 might also be in work to prevent NHEJ, resulting in low numbers of fusions.

Therefore, we decided to reamplify our PCR products. Reamplification of the PCR yielded products from both 43AA genomic DNA. Surprisingly, the PCR amplified products from wild type DNA yielded too. Southern blot analysis of these bands showed strong signals in those lanes containing the reamplification products. This suggested to us either that telomeric fusions might be present in both wild type and 43AA genomic DNA in low number, or that what we observed were artifacts of reamplification. However, cloning of these bands showed them to be non-telomeric sequences. From the perspective of PCR, the cloning result was not surprising, since, studies have demonstrated the formation of unwanted non-specific products when the number of PCR cycles is increased due to the non-specific primer binding (Innis et al., 1990 & Erlich et al., 1989). The strong signals observed in the Southern Blot might be due to the presence of the non-specific binding of the telomeric probe to the background DNA. Interestingly, such signals were not seen in those lanes containing non-reamplified PCR products, which suggest that the reamplification has produced a large amount of artifacts that provides non-specific binding sites to the telomeric probe.

Summary & Future Research

In conclusion, I have created a PCR assay that can amplify telomeric fusions. Nevertheless, due to the several factors that have been discussed, the assay also has a size limit of 841 bp. The absence of any PCR products suggests that either telomeric fusion up to 841 bp may not exist or their numbers are below the amplification potential of the assay. Nevertheless, when compared to other studies (Chan et al., 2003), this study demonstrates its potential in detecting telomeric fusions by PCR that are much larger than the conventional telomeric fusions detected by PCR, which is between 100-150 bp (Chan et al., 2003).

Our assay was unable to detect artificial fusions above 841 bp. Therefore, further studies should be conducted on the existence of larger telomeric fusions and non-telomeric fusions. To further increase the efficiency of the assay, varying the concentrations of MgCl2 (Innis, 1990 & Erlich, 1989) of the PCR buffer and the application of co-solvents such as dimethyl sulfoxide (DMSO) (Winship, 1989), formamide (Sarkar, 1990), glycerol (Landre, 1995), and tetramethylammonium chloride (TEMAC) (Hung, 1990) to melt secondary structures are options that could be explored. Technique wise, pulse field gel electrophoresis is a potential method that could be applied to investigate the existence of chromosomal fusions, although it cannot differentiate between chromosomal and telomeric fusions.
For future research, we are also interested in exploring whether telomeric fusions exist in the macronucleus. Previous studies in the lab have shown that the sequence specific telomeric mutations had not resulted in the macronuclear telomeric degradation unlike the micronucleus. However, whether macronuclear telomeric fusions exist or not in our mutants remain unanswered. Conceptually, the same assay could be applied for the investigation using primers designed from the macronuclear TAS sequences.

The study by Kirk et al., (1997) have demonstrated that sequence specific telomeric mutations display an acute mitotic chromosome segregation defect at anaphase, which eventually result in cell death. Nevertheless, further research must be conducted to explore whether the mutants are undergoing apoptosis or some other kind of cell death mechanism such as necrosis. In addition, the molecular mechanisms activated by the mutations that caused the cell death are also another area that needs to be examined. Further characterization of the mitotic defect observed by Kirk et al., (1997) in our lab established more evidence for the anaphase arrest (Christ, 2002) and extensive micronuclear DNA degradation (unpublished) by monitoring the progression of cell cycle. In these mutants, we are also interested in the in examining molecular indicators such as the over expression of anaphase and checkpoint specific proteins.

Experimental Procedures

Creation of Artificial Fusions

pUC19 plasmids containing T. thermophila TAS sequences with telomeric tracts were cloned by Kirk et. al., (1995). Frozen clones of TAS A and TAS C were thawed at room temperature for a few seconds and inoculated into LB/Amp cultures (1.0% Bacto-Tryptone, 0.5% Bacto-Yeast Extract, 1.0% Sodium Chloride, 1% Ampicillin in sterile nano pure H2O). The pUC19 plasmids were isolated (Qiagen Plasmid Purification Kit; Valencia, CA.) and digested with Sac I (New England BioLabs; Beverly, MA) and EcoR V (New England BioLabs; Beverly, MA) as recommended by Kirk et. al. (1995). The reaction recipe consists of 62% sterile nano pure water, 10% NEB Buffer 2 (New England BioLabs; Beverly, MA), 10% BSA (New England BioLabs; Beverly, MA), 10% pUC19 plasmids, 4% of Sac I and EcoR V in a total reaction volume of 20 µl. The restriction products were extracted (QiAquick Gel Extraction Kit by Qiagen; Valencia, CA) from a 1.5% agarose gel and joined by ligation to created artificial fusions. The ligation reaction consisted of 1 µl of T4 DNA ligase (Invitrogen, Carlsbad, CA), 1 µl of the respective templates, 1 µl of ligation buffer, and 4 µl of sterile nano pure water at 14 C for ~14hrs.

Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR)

A PCR assay was designed to amplify telomeric fusions. In order to denature the telomeric templates and any secondary structures, the PCR assay we designed has a higher denaturation temperature (98 C; Pherson, 2000) and longer denaturation time (3 min), when compared to the conventional denaturation temperature and time of 95 C and 1 minute. The melting temperatures of the primers were 65.8 C and 67.26 C and therefore the annealing temperature was maintained between 56 C–58 C. The size of micronuclear telomeres is ~6.0 kb (Kirk et al., 1995). To amplify such large fusion fragments of size above 3.0 kb, the extension time of the PCR was maintained at 7 minutes. And finally, a special enzyme called ThermAce (Invitrogen; Carlsbad, CA) that can amplify GC-rich templates and stabilize at higher denaturation temperatures and longer extension times was used for the PCR. The amounts of the buffers, primers, sterile nano pure water and template used were adapted from the ThermAce Enzyme Kit. The PCR was conducted in a MJ Research PTC-200 Peltier Thermal Cycler with denaturation at 98 C for 3.0 minutes, annealing temperature was maintained 10°C less than the primer melting temperature) for 30 cycles, extension at 72 C for 7.0 minutes and final extension at 72 C for 10.0minutes.

Design of Primers

The primers were designed from the T. thermophila TAS sequences (Table 1). The 11 primers were labeled as TAS A, TAS B, TAS C, TAS D, TAS E, and TAS F (Table 1). To conduct nested PCR, sequences 3’ to the primers TAS A and TAS C were used to develop PRX TAS A and PRX TAS C (Table 1). The last three primers (NEW TAS A, NEW TAS C, and NEW TAS E) were created with higher GC-content and melting temperature to increase the efficiency of the PCR (Table 1) and were labeled as per the name of the respective TAS sequence used (Table 1). The annealing temperature was calculated using the algorithm developed by Wu et. al., (1991) and the melting temperatures were calculated using the Mac Vector Software.

DNA Gel Electrophoresis

For a 1.5% gel, 1.5 g of agarose was dissolved in 100 ml of 1X TBE (54.0 g of Tris Base, 27.5 g of Boric acid and 20 ml of 0.5 M EDTA (pH 8.0) in 1.0 L of nano pure H2O) buffer by microwaving. The agarose gel was poured into the gel tray containing the appropriate gel comb and was allowed to solidify. The gel tray was then kept on the gel box, and enough 1X TBE was added to cover the gel. The respective DNA solutions were added to each well with loading dye. The gel was run at the appropriate voltage (~95-120V) and time until the loading dyes were seen next to positive end of the gel. The gels were then stained with ethidium bromide and analyzed by BioRad Versa Doc Imaging System and Quantity One Software.

Transformation of T. thermophila and Isolation of Genomic DNA

Transformation of T. thermophila was performed by electroporation as described by Gaertig and Gorovsky (1992). Cell lines CU42B.1 were grown in PPYS-PSF media (2% Protease peptone, 0.2% Bacto-Yeast Extract, 0.003% Sequestrine with 500 µl of PSF (45 ml of sterile nano pure water was added to a vial of lyophilized Penicillin/Streptomycin (Sigma, St. Louis, MO)) followed by 5 ml of Fungizone; Gibco) at 30°C, while shaking at 100 rpm for 48 hours. The cells were then washed twice in 10 mM Tris-HCl buffer (pH 7.4), combined in equal ratios, and shaken at 150 rpm at 30°C for another 12–18 hours to prevent the cells from pairing until a desired time. Cells were washed again twice 10.5 hours later in 10 mM Heps buffer (pH 7.4). The cells were then transformed with plasmid DNA containing the desired telomerase RNA template mutation (43AA) purified from previously transformed Escherichia coli cells using a BTX Electroporation System/Electro Cell Manipulator 600 at settings previously determined by Gaertig and Gorovsky (1992). Electroporated cells were drugged with paromomycin (Sigma Chem Co., St. Louis, MO) at a final concentration of 120 µg/ml to select for transformed cells.

One ml of the transformed CU42B.1 strains was inoculated in 50 ml of PPYS-PSF media in a 250 ml conical flask for ~48 hrs at 30°C. The 43AA genomic DNA was then isolated (by Christina Christ ‘03, Lake Forest College, IL, USA) from the cultures using the Genomic DNA Maxi Isolation Kit supplied by Qiagen (Valencia, CA) and was run on a 1.5% agarose gel to check the presence of the genomic DNA. For creating the ideal positive control, PCR was conducted on different mixtures of the artificial fusions and the 43AA genomic DNA. The concentrations of their different dilutions are summarized in Table 2.

Restriction Digestion of 43AA DNA

The 43AA DNA was digested with the restriction enzyme MseI (New England BioLabs; Beverly, MA). The digestion reaction consisted of 10% NEB Buffer 2, 10% BSA, 7.5% MseI, 25% template and 47.5% of sterile nano pure water in a total reaction volume of 20 ml at 37°C for ~24hrs. MseI was selected as restriction enzyme because of two reasons. Firstly, MseI's
restriction site is ideal for templates that are AT-rich like T. thermophila genome. Secondly, none of the TAS sequences possessed a restriction site for MseI according to sequence analysis conducted by Mac Vector software.

Table 1: The names, sequences, melting temperatures, length & GC content of the primers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primer Name, Sequence (3<code>-5</code>) &amp; Ability to form Secondary Structures: Hair Pin, Primer Dimer and Self Duplex</th>
<th>Length</th>
<th>Annealing Temperature (°C)</th>
<th>Melting Temperature (°C)</th>
<th>% GC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>T A S A: AATAGGTGATAGATTAGTACTG GC Forms Self-Duplex</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>67.26</td>
<td>48.8</td>
<td>34.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRX T A S A: ATGATTGCGAAGCATCATTAA AC Form hairpin and Self Duplex</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>65.80</td>
<td>59.1</td>
<td>25.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>T A S B: AAATATTTTATGGAAGTACAGG Forms Self-Duplex</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>65.80</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRX T A S C: GCCACAGTTGTTGTAGGAAC Forms Self-Duplex</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>67.26</td>
<td>57.2</td>
<td>55.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T A S D: CGCAAGCDAGCCAACCATACCAACCC Form hairpin and Self Duplex</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>67.26</td>
<td>59.0</td>
<td>47.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRX T A S E: G T C C GAACACAGCCACACAGGC Forms Self-Duplex</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>68.72</td>
<td>65.3</td>
<td>60.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T A S F: CGCATAGTGATTAAACCAGC Forms Self-Duplex</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>67.26</td>
<td>57.3</td>
<td>40.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEW T A S C: GTTCCGAACAGGCCACTAGGTGGTGAGGAACG Forms Hairpin and Self Duplex</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>67.26</td>
<td>57.3</td>
<td>40.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEW T A S E: CGGGCAACAGGCCAAGGTCTGAGGAACG Forms Hairpin and Self Duplex</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>67.26</td>
<td>57.3</td>
<td>40.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Concentrations of the different dilutions of artificial fusions and 43AA genomic DNA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Non-Diluted (µg/ml)</th>
<th>1:10 Dilution (µg/ml)</th>
<th>1:100 Dilution (µg/ml)</th>
<th>1:1,000 Dilution (µg/ml)</th>
<th>1:10,000 Dilution (µg/ml)</th>
<th>1:100,000 Dilution (µg/ml)</th>
<th>1:1,000,000 Dilution (µg/ml)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C &amp; A Ligate</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>20.5</td>
<td>2.05</td>
<td>2.05 x 10^-1</td>
<td>2.05 x 10^-2</td>
<td>2.05 x 10^-3</td>
<td>2.05 x 10^-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43AA Genomic DNA</td>
<td>1215</td>
<td>121.5</td>
<td>12.15</td>
<td>1.215</td>
<td>1.215 x 10^-1</td>
<td>1.215 x 10^-2</td>
<td>1.215 x 10^-3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Southern Blotting
The PCR products to be analyzed were run on a 1.5% agarose gel and the gel was used for the following procedures:

a) Alkali Transfer gel Treatment Protocol - The gel was treated with 0.125 M HCl for 10.0 minutes for depurination (Amersham Biosciences, Piscataway, NJ). Enough 0.125 M HCl was added to a tray containing the gel to cover it. After complete depurination, as indicated by the change in the color of the bromophenol dye from blue to yellow, the gel was submerged for 30 minutes in fresh denaturation buffer (87.66 g of NaCl and 20 g of NaOH in 1.0 L of nano pure H2O) for denaturation (Amersham Biosciences). The content of the gel was then transferred to a Hybond-N+ membrane by Capillary Blotting (Amersham Biosciences). The blot (Hybond-N+ membrane) was then used for hybridization with a telomeric probe.

b) Hybridization - The blot was pre-hybridized by submerging in hybridization buffer (1 mM EDTA, 7.0% of 1 M Na2HPO4, (pH 7.2), 7.0% of 20.0% SDS and 1% BSA) in a tray at 37°C for 1 hr (Church and Gilbert, 1984). For hybridization, the blot was added to a hybridization jar containing the probe (Mix 1.0 µl of oligonucleotide (5`-end radiolabeled oligonucleotide, 5`-GGGGTTT)), 6.0 µl of sterile nano pure H2O, 1 µl of 10X
buffer, 1 µl of 32P label, and 1 µl of kinase at 37°C for 20 minutes) mixed with 3 ml of hybridization buffer (Church and Gilbert, 1984) and was rotated gently in a hybridization oven at 55°C (Kirk et al., 1995) for ~16 hours.

c) Washing & Analysis- After hybridization, the blot was washed with wash buffer (1 mM EDTA, 40Mm of 1 M Na2HPO4, (pH 7.2), and 1% SDS in nano pure H2O) five times at 60°C for 5 minutes each. The blot was then analyzed for telomeric signals using the BioRad Personal Molecular Imager and Quantity One Software.

Cloning & Sequencing Fusion Fragments
The cloning of the fusion fragments was conducted using the TA Cloning Kit (Invitrogen, Carlsbad, CA). PCR products to be sequenced were cut out (QiAgel Quick Gel Extraction Kit by Qiagen; Valencia, CA), ligated to pUC19 plasmids (Invitrogen) and were used for transforming One Shot® competent Escherichia coli (E. coli) cells (Invitrogen, Carlsbad, CA) by heat shocking. The plasmid DNA was then isolated (Qiagen Plasmid Purification Kit; Valencia, CA) and verified for the presence of the insert by restriction digest using EcoR V (New England Biolabs; Beverly, MA) as recommended by Invitrogen. The reaction recipe for the digestion consists of 76% sterile nano pure water, 10% NEB Buffer 3 (New England BioLabs; Beverly, MA), 10% BSA (New England BioLabs; Beverly, MA), 10% pUC19 plasmid, and 4% of EcoR V in a total reaction volume of 20 µl. Plasmids with the inserts were sequenced at the Sequencing Facility at University of Chicago, IL, USA.

Acknowledgement
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