Principles of Computer Game Design and Implementation

Lecture 20
Agents and Virtual Player

• Agents, no virtual player
  – Shooters, racing, ...

• Virtual player, no agents
  – Chess, ...

• Both
  – Strategy games, team sport games, ...
Agents

• Act as
  – enemies, allies, neutral characters

• Constantly go through a
  – Sense – Think – Act cycle
    • Sometimes can learn new behaviours

• Example: first-person shooter enemies, other car drivers, units in strategies
Outline for today

• Sense-Think-Act Cycle:
  – Thinking
  – Acting
Sense-Think-Act Cycle: Thinking

• Sensed information gathered
• Must process sensed information
• Two primary methods
  – Process using pre-coded expert knowledge
  – Use search to find an optimal solution
Thinking: Expert Knowledge

• Many different systems
  – Finite-state machines
  – Production systems
  – Decision trees
  – Logical inference

• Encoding expert knowledge is appealing because it’s relatively easy
  – Can ask just the right questions
  – As simple as if-then statements

• Problems with expert knowledge
  – Not very scalable
Thinking: Search

• Employs search algorithm to find an optimal or near-optimal solution

• E.g.
  – A* pathfinding
  – Game search
Thinking: Machine Learning

• If imparting expert knowledge and search are both not reasonable/possible, then machine learning might work

• Examples:
  – Reinforcement learning
  – Neural networks
  – Decision tree learning

• Not often used by game developers
  – complexity of learning techniques
  – reproducibility and quality control
  – impossible to test if it performs correctly and locate bugs.
Thinking: Flip-Flopping Decisions

- Must prevent flip-flopping of decisions
- Reaction times might help keep it from happening every frame
- Must make a decision and stick with it
  - Until situation changes enough
  - Until enough time has passed
Sense-Think-Act Cycle: Acting

• Sensing and thinking steps invisible to player
• Acting is how player witnesses intelligence
• Numerous agent actions, for example:
  – Change locations
  – Pick up object
  – Play animation
  – Play sound effect
  – Converse with player
  – Fire weapon
Acting: Showing Intelligence

- Adeptness and subtlety of actions impact perceived level of intelligence
- Enormous burden on asset generation
- Agent can only express intelligence in terms of vocabulary of actions
- Current games have huge sets of animations/assets
  - Must use scalable solutions to make selections
Extra Step in Cycle: Learning and Remembering

• Optional 4\textsuperscript{th} step
• Not necessary in many games
  – Agents don’t live long enough
  – Game design might not desire it
Learning

• Remembering outcomes and generalizing to future situations
• Simplest approach: gather statistics
  – If 80% of time player attacks from left
  – Then expect this likely event
• Adapts to player behavior
Remembering

• Remember hard facts
  – Observed states, objects, or players

• For example
  – Where was the player last seen?
  – What weapon did the player have?
  – Where did I last see a health pack?

• Memories should fade
  – Helps keep memory requirements lower
  – Simulates poor, imprecise, selective human memory
Remembering within the World

• All memory doesn’t need to be stored in the agent – can be stored in the world

• For example:
  – Agents get slaughtered in a certain area
  – Area might begin to “smell of death”
    • Agent’s path planning will avoid the area
  – Simulates group memory
Virtual Player Example: Game Playing

• Recall from COMP219:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>deterministic</th>
<th>chance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>perfect information</td>
<td>chess, checkers, go, othello</td>
<td>backgammon monopoly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>imperfect information</td>
<td>battleships, blind tictactoe</td>
<td>bridge, poker, scrabble nuclear war</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Problem Formulation

• Initial state
  – Initial board position, player to move.

• Successor function
  – Returns list of (move, state) pairs, one per legal move.

• Terminal test
  – Determines when the game is over.

• Utility function
  – Numeric value for terminal states
    – E.g. Chess +1, -1, 0
    – E.g. Backgammon +192 to -192
Game Tree
Game Tree

• Each level labelled with **player to move**
• Each level represents a **ply**
  – Half a turn
• Represents what happens with **competing agents**
Minimax Value

Formally:

\[
\text{MinimaxValue}(n) = \begin{cases} 
\text{Utility}(n) & \text{Terminal} \\
\max_{s \in \text{Successors}(n)} \text{MinimaxValue}(s) & \text{MAX} \\
\min_{s \in \text{Successors}(n)} \text{MinimaxValue}(s) & \text{MIN}
\end{cases}
\]
Minimax Algorithm

- Calculate minimax value of each node recursively
- Depth-first exploration of tree
- Game tree as minimax tree
  - Max Node:
  - Min Node
Minimax Tree

Min takes the lowest value from its children
Max takes the highest value from its children
Extension: Nondeterministic Games

• Consider Naughts and Crosses game with an element of chance:

• **Before** each move, a player tosses a coin
  – Head: you play crosses
  – Tail: you play naughts
Game Tree With Chance Nodes
Backgammon

• Admittedly, this Naughts and Crosses modification is weird

• Backgammon is a better example of a chance game
ExpectiMinimax

\[ EMV(n) = \begin{cases} 
\text{Utility}(n) & \text{Terminal} \\
\max_{s \in \text{Successors}(n)} EMV(s) & \text{MAX} \\
\min_{s \in \text{Successors}(n)} EMV(s) & \text{MIN} \\
\sum_{s \in \text{Successors}(n)} \text{Prob}(s)EMV(s) & \text{CHOICE} 
\end{cases} \]
Playing Cards

• Chance + Imperfect information

• Idea: Chance nodes for all possible deals
  – (compatible with the revealed information)

• Use ExpectiMinimax
Summary

• Game artificial intelligence differs in that it sets a different goal
  – Appear intelligent rather than be one

• Game agent & Virtual player
  – Virtual player is closer to traditional AI
  – Game agents correspond to the modern view on AI

• Next, we look more on agents than on the VP.