Two-player, zero-sum, perfect-information

Games

Instructor: Vincent Conitzer
Game playing

• Rich tradition of creating game-playing programs in AI

• Many similarities to search

• Most of the games studied
  – have two players,
  – are zero-sum: what one player wins, the other loses
  – have perfect information: the entire state of the game is known to both players at all times

• E.g., tic-tac-toe, checkers, chess, Go, backgammon, …

• Will focus on these for now

• Recently more interest in other games
  – Esp. games without perfect information; e.g., poker
    • Need probability theory, game theory for such games
“Sum to 2” game

- Player 1 moves, then player 2, finally player 1 again
- Move = 0 or 1
- Player 1 wins if and only if all moves together sum to 2

Player 1’s utility is in the leaves; player 2’s utility is the negative of this
Backward induction (aka. minimax)

- From leaves upward, analyze best decision for player at node, give node a value
  - Once we know values, easy to find optimal action (choose best value)
Modified game

- From leaves upward, analyze best decision for player at node, give node a value
A recursive implementation

• **Value**(state)
  • If state is terminal, return its value
  • If (player(state) = player 1)
    – \( v := -\infty \)
    – For each action
      • \( v := \max(v, \text{Value(successor(state, action)))} \)
    – Return \( v \)
  • Else
    – \( v := \infty \)
    – For each action
      • \( v := \min(v, \text{Value(successor(state, action)))} \)
    – Return \( v \)

Space? Time?
Do we need to see all the leaves?

- Do we need to see the value of the question mark here?
Do we need to see all the leaves?

• Do we need to see the values of the question marks here?
Alpha-beta pruning

• **Pruning** = cutting off parts of the search tree (because you realize you don’t need to look at them)
  – When we considered A* we also pruned large parts of the search tree

• Maintain **alpha** = value of the best option for player 1 along the path so far

• **Beta** = value of the best option for player 2 along the path so far
Pruning on beta

• Beta at node \( v \) is -1

• We know the value of node \( v \) is going to be at least 4, so the -1 route will be preferred

• No need to explore this node further
Pruning on alpha

- Alpha at node w is 6
- We know the value of node w is going to be at most -1, so the 6 route will be preferred
- No need to explore this node further
Modifying recursive implementation to do alpha-beta pruning

- **Value**(state, alpha, beta)
- If state is terminal, return its value
- If (player(state) = player 1)
  - v := -infinity
  - For each action
    - v := max(v, Value(successor(state, action), alpha, beta))
    - If v >= beta, return v
    - alpha := max(alpha, v)
  - Return v
- Else
  - v := infinity
  - For each action
    - v := min(v, Value(successor(state, action), alpha, beta))
    - If v <= alpha, return v
    - beta := min(beta, v)
  - Return v
Benefits of alpha-beta pruning

• Without pruning, need to examine $O(b^m)$ nodes
• With pruning, depends on which nodes we consider first
• If we choose a random successor, need to examine $O(b^{3m/4})$ nodes
• If we manage to choose the best successor first, need to examine $O(b^{m/2})$ nodes
  – Practical heuristics for choosing next successor to consider get quite close to this
• Can effectively look twice as deep!
  – Difference between reasonable and expert play
Repeated states

• As in search, multiple sequences of moves may lead to the same state

• Again, can keep track of previously seen states (usually called a transposition table in this context)
  – May not want to keep track of all previously seen states…
Using evaluation functions

• Most games are too big to solve even with alpha-beta pruning

• Solution: Only look ahead to limited depth (nonterminal nodes)

• Evaluate nodes at depth cutoff by a heuristic (aka. evaluation function)

• E.g., chess:
  – Material value: queen worth 9 points, rook 5, bishop 3, knight 3, pawn 1
  – Heuristic: difference between players’ material values
Chess example

• White to move

• Depth cutoff: 3 ply
  – Ply = move by one player

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Diagram:

- White
  - Rd8+
  - Kb7
  - Rxf8
  - Re8
  - 2
  - -1

- Black
  -...
  -...
  -...
  -...

- Depth cutoff: 3 ply
  - Ply = move by one player

- White to move
Chess (bad) example

- White to move

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- Depth cutoff: 3 ply
  - Ply = move by one player

- Depth cutoff obscures fact that white R will be captured
Addressing this problem

- Try to evaluate whether nodes are quiescent
  - Quiescent = evaluation function will not change rapidly in near future
  - Only apply evaluation function to quiescent nodes

- If there is an “obvious” move at a state, apply it before applying evaluation function
Playing against suboptimal players

• Minimax is optimal against other minimax players

• What about against players that play in some other way?
Many-player, general-sum games of perfect information

- Basic backward induction still works
  - No longer called minimax

What if other players do not play this way?

Vector of numbers gives each player’s utility
Games with random moves by “Nature”

- E.g., games with dice (Nature chooses dice roll)
- Backward induction still works…
  - Evaluation functions now need to be cardinally right (not just ordinally)
  - For two-player zero-sum games with random moves, can we generalize alpha-beta? How?
Games with imperfect information

- Players cannot necessarily see the whole current state of the game
  - Card games

- Ridiculously simple poker game:
  - Player 1 receives King (winning) or Jack (losing),
  - Player 1 can bet or stay,
  - Player 2 can call or fold

- Dashed lines indicate indistinguishable states

- Backward induction does not work, need random strategies for optimality! (more later in course)
Intuition for need of random strategies

• Suppose my strategy is “bet on King, stay on Jack”
  – What will you do?
  – What is your expected utility?

• What if my strategy is “always bet”?

• What if my strategy is “always bet when given King, 10% of the time bet when given Jack”?
The state of the art for some games

• Chess:
  – 1997: IBM Deep Blue defeats Kasparov
  – … there is still debate about whether computers are really better

• Checkers:
  – Computer world champion since 1994
  – … there was still debate about whether computers are really better…
  – until 2007: checkers solved optimally by computer

• Go:
  – Computers still not very good
  – Branching factor really high
  – Some recent progress

• Poker:
  – Competitive with top humans in some 2-player games
  – 3+ player case much less well-understood
Is this of any value to society?

• Some of the techniques developed for games have found applications in other domains
  – Especially “adversarial” settings
• Real-world strategic situations are usually not two-player, perfect-information, zero-sum, …
• But game theory does not need any of those
• Example application: security scheduling at airports