Backtracking, Search, Heuristics

- Many problems require an approach similar to solving a maze
  - Certain mazes can be solved using the “right-hand” rule
  - Other mazes, e.g., with islands, require another approach
  - If you have “markers”, leave them at intersections, don’t explore the same place twice

- What happens if you try to search the web, using links on pages to explore other links, using those links to ...
  - How many web pages are there?
  - What rules do webcrawlers/webspiders follow?
    - Who enforces the rules?
- Keep track of where you’ve been don’t go there again
  - Any problems with this approach?
Classic problem: N queens

- Can queens be placed on a chess board so that no queens attack each other?
  - Easily place two queens
  - What about 8 queens?
- Make the board N x N, this is the N queens problem
  - Place one queen/column
  - # different tries/column?
- Backtracking
  - Use “current” row in a col
  - If ok, try next col
  - If fail, back-up, next row
Backtracking idea with N queens

- **Try to place a queen in each column in turn**
  - Try first row in column $C$, if ok, move onto next column
  - If solved, great, otherwise try next row in column $C$, place queen, move onto the next column
    - Must unplace the placed queen to keep going

- **What happens when we start in a column, where to start?**
  - If we fail, move back to previous column (which remembers where it is/failed)
  - When starting in a column anew, start at beginning
    - When backing up, try next location, not beginning

- **Backtracking in general, record an attempt go forward**
  - If going forward fails, undo the record and backup
Basic ideas in backtracking search

- We need to be able to enumerate all possible choices/moves
  - We try these choices in order, committing to a choice
  - If the choice doesn’t pan out we must undo the choice
    - This is the backtracking step, choices must be undoable

- Process is inherently recursive, so we need to know when the search finishes
  - When all columns tried in N queens
  - When we have found the exit in a maze
  - When every possible moved tried in Tic-tac-toe or chess?
    - Is there a difference between these games?

- Summary: enumerate choices, try a choice, undo a choice, this is *brute force* search: try everything
bool Queens::SolveAtCol(int col)
// pre: queens placed at columns 0,1,...,col-1
// post: returns true if queen can be placed in column col
//       and N queen problem solved (N is square board size)
{
    int k; int rows = myBoard.numrows();
    if (col == rows) return true;

    for(k=0; k < rows; k++) {
        if (NoQueensAttackingAt(k,col)) {
            myBoard[k][col] = true;  // place a queen
            if (SolveAtCol(col+1)) {
                return true;
            }
            myBoard[k][col] = false;  // unplace the queen
        }
    }
    return false;
}
Computer v. Human in Games

- Computers can explore a large search space of moves quickly
  - How many moves possible in chess, for example?

- Computers cannot explore every move (why) so must use heuristics
  - Rules of thumb about position, strategy, board evaluation
  - Try a move, undo it and try another, track the best move

- What do humans do well in these games? What about computers?
  - What about at Duke?
Backtracking, minimax, game search

• **We’ll use tic-tac-toe to illustrate the idea, but it’s a silly game to show the power of the method**
  ➢ What games might be better? Problems?

• **Minimax idea: two players, one maximizes score, the other minimizes score, search complete/partial game tree for best possible move**
  ➢ In tic-tac-toe we can search until the end-of-the game, but this isn’t possible in general, why not?
  ➢ Use static board evaluation functions instead of searching all the way until the game ends

• **Minimax leads to alpha-beta search, then to other rules and heuristics**
Minimax for tic-tac-toe (see ttt.cpp)

- Players alternate, one might be computer, one human (or two computer players)

- Simple rules: win scores +10, loss scores -10, tie is zero
  ➢ X maximizes, O minimizes

- Assume opponent plays smart
  ➢ What happens otherwise?

- As game tree is explored is there redundant search?
  ➢ What can we do about this?
int Game::bestMove(Board::Player p, int & move)
{
    // check for game over or too deep in search first
    int best = (p == Board::X ? COMPUTER_WIN : HUMAN_WIN);
    int score;
    int dontCareMove;
    for (k = 0; k < myBoard.size(); k++) {
        if (myBoard.isClear(k)) { // can we move here?

            myBoard.place(k, p);
            score = bestMove(opposite(p), dontCareMove);
            myBoard.unplace(k);

            if (scoreIsBetter(score, best, p)) {
                best = score;
                move = k;
            }
        }
    }
    return best;
}
Caching or Memoization

- In Tic-Tac-Toe do we see the same board more than once?

  \[
  \begin{array}{ccc}
  X & O & . \\
  X & ? & . \\
  . & . & . \\
  \end{array}
  \quad \begin{array}{ccc}
  X & ? & . \\
  X & O & . \\
  . & . & . \\
  \end{array}
  \]

- Repercussions in terms of search tree?
  - Does avoiding search result in significant savings?
  - How can we easily do this? Hint: maps!

- Lessons applied more widely
  - More storage results in lower runtime, general tradeoff
  - Can we have too much of a good thing?
The words above represent a simple substitution cypher

- Each letter mapped to one other letter, no inconsistencies
- Often used in cryptogram puzzles (newspaper, online, ...)
- How can we write a computer program to solve this?

Ideas for solving the problem? Benchmark/ballpark idea to accept (or not)

Problems on the horizon?
One possible solution in docrypto.cpp

- **Study this for an example of backtracking**
  - Similar to N queens: make move, recurse, undo as needed
  - What’s a move in this problem?

- **Illustrates a few C++ and OO concepts**
  - Static variables and functions: belong to class not object
  - Also called “class variables”, don’t need object to access
  - Must be careful when initializing static variables because order of initialization can be important

- **See WordSource object shared by all CryptoMap objects, how and when is the WordSource initialized?**
Heuristics

- A heuristic is a rule of thumb, doesn’t always work, isn’t guaranteed to work, but useful in many/most cases
  - Search problems that are “big” often can be approximated or solved with the right heuristics

- What heuristic is good for cryptograms?
  - Solve small words first
  - Solve large words first
  - Do something else?

- What other optimizations/improvements can we make?
  - See program, cryptomap.cpp and docrypto.cpp
Anita Borg 1949-2003

- “Dr. Anita Borg tenaciously envisioned and set about to change the world for women and for technology. ... she fought tirelessly for the development technology with positive social and human impact.”
- “Anita Borg sought to revolutionize the world and the way we think about technology and its impact on our lives.”