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Tutorial on Using DESPOT

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1. Overview

DESPOT[1] is an anytime online POMDP planning algorithm. To use our solver package, the user first need to represent the POMDP in one of the following two ways:

- specify the POMDP in the POMDPX format as described in the [POMDPX documentation](#), or
- specify a deterministic simulative model [1] for the POMDP in C++ according to the [DSPOMDP](#) interface included in the solver package ([Section 2](#)).

Which type of model is better? A POMDPX model requires relatively less programming, and some domain-independent bounds are provided to guide the policy search in DESPOT. However, POMDPX can only be used to represent POMDPs which are not very large, and an exact representation of the POMDP is needed. A C++ model may require more programming, but it comes with the full flexibility of integrating user's domain knowledge into the policy search process. In addition, it can represent extremely large problems, and only a black-box simulator - rather than an exact representation of the POMDP - is needed. To enjoy the full power of DESPOT, a C++ model is encouraged.

In this tutorial, we will work with a very simple POMDP problem. We first introduce the simple POMDP problem and explain how DESPOT can solve a POMDP given its C++ model using this example for illustration ([Section 2.1](#)), and then explain how to code a C++ model for a POMDP ([Section 2.2](#) and [Section 2.3](#)). [Section 3](#) gives some pointers to other example problems.

2. Coding a C++ Model

We explain and illustrate how a deterministic simulative model of a POMDP can be specified according to the [DSPOMDP](#) interface. The ingredients are the following:

- representation of states, actions and observations,
- the deterministic simulative model,
- functions related to beliefs and starting states,
- bound-related functions, and
- memory management functions.

We shall start with the minimal set of functions that need to be implemented in a C++ model ([Section 2.2](#)), and then explain how to implement additional functions which can be used to get better performance ([Section 2.3](#)).

2.1. Problem

We will use a simplified version of the *RockSample* problem [2] as our running example. You can read the complete C++ model of this example in `examples/cpp_models/simple_rock_sample`. It models a rover on an exploration mission and it can achieve rewards by sampling rocks in its immediate area. Consider a map of size 1×3 as shown in Figure 1, with one rock at the left end and the terminal state at the right end. The rover starts off at the center and its possible actions are $A = \{\text{West, East, Sample, Check}\}$.

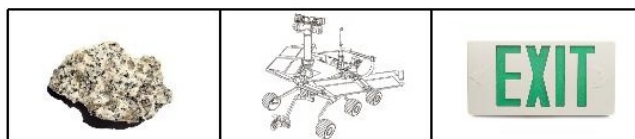


Figure 1. The 1×3 *RockSample* problem world.

As with the original version of the problem, the *Sample* action samples the rock at the rover's current location. If the rock is good, the rover receives a reward of 10 and the rock becomes bad. If the rock is bad, it receives a penalty of -10 . Moving into the terminal area yields a reward of 10. A penalty of -100 is imposed for moving off

the grid and sampling in a grid where there is no rock. All other moves have no cost or reward. The *Check* action returns a noisy observation from $O = \{Good, Bad\}$. If the rover is at the rock's location, its observation is correct with probability 1, 0.8 otherwise. The rover knows exactly the rock's location and its own location. Moving into the terminal area or off the grid terminates the task. Sampling in the grid where there is no rock also terminates the task.

2.1.1 Using C++ Models

DESPOT can be used to solve a POMDP specified in C++ according to the **DSPOMDP** interface in the solver package. Assume for now that a C++ model for the *RockSample* problem has been implemented as a class called **SimpleRockSample**, then the following code snippet shows how to use DESPOT to solve it.

Listing 1. Code snippet for running simulations using DESPOT

```

1  class TUI: public SimpleTUI {
2  public:
3      TUI() {
4      }
5
6      DSPOMDP* InitializeModel(option::Option* options) {
7          DSPOMDP* model = new SimpleRockSample();
8          return model;
9      }
10
11     void InitializeDefaultParameters() {
12     }
13 };
14
15 int main(int argc, char* argv[]) {
16     return TUI().run(argc, argv);
17 }
```

The users only need to write something like the above code to run DESPOT to solve the *RockSample* problem. To solve other problems, say *Tiger* [3] problem, after you have implemented the *Tiger* **DSPOMDP** interface as a class called **Tiger**, you only need to change Line 7 in Listing 1 to:

```
DSPOMDP* model = new Tiger();
```

If you have parameters to set for the problem, you can specify them in the **InitializeDefaultParameters()** (Line 11 in Listing 1).

2.2. Essential functions

The following code snippet shows the essential functions in the **DSPOMDP** interface. **Note that we do not cover functions that have to be implemented (pure virtual) but are not required by the solver to work correctly, such as the **PrintAction** and **PrintState** in the **DSPOMDP** class.** You will need to check the definition of **DSPOMDP** class in the include/despot/core/pomdp.h file to see what functions are compulsory to be implemented.

Listing 2. Essential functions in the DSPOMDP interface

```

1  class DSPOMDP {
2  public:
3      /* Returns total number of actions.*/
4      virtual int NumActions() const = 0;
5
6      /* Deterministic simulative model.*/
7      virtual bool Step(State& state, double random_num, int action,
8          double& reward, OBS_TYPE& obs) const = 0;
9
10     /* Functions related to beliefs and starting states.*/
11     virtual double ObsProb(OBS_TYPE obs, const State& state, int action) const = 0;
12     virtual Belief* InitialBelief(const State* start, string type = "DEFAULT") const = 0;
13     virtual State* CreateStartState(string type = "DEFAULT") const = 0;
14
15     /* Bound-related functions.*/
16     virtual double GetMaxReward() const = 0;
17     virtual ValuedAction GetMinRewardAction() const = 0;
18
19     /* Memory management.*/
20     virtual State* Allocate(int state_id, double weight) const = 0;
21     virtual State* Copy(const State* particle) const = 0;
22     virtual void Free(State* particle) const = 0;
23 };
```

The following declaration of the **SimpleRockSample** class implements the above **DSPOMDP** interface. It is the same as the **DSPOMDP** interface except that the functions are no longer pure virtual, and a **MemoryPool** object is declared for memory management. We explain the functions and their implementation in detail in the following paragraphs.

Listing 3. Declaration of the SimpleRockSample class

```

1  class SimpleRockSample : public DSPOMDP {
2  public:
3      /* Returns total number of actions.*/
4      int NumActions() const;
5
6      /* Deterministic simulative model.*/
7      bool Step(State& state, double random_num, int action,
8          double& reward, OBS_TYPE& obs) const;
9
10     /* Functions related to beliefs and starting states.*/
11     double ObsProb(OBS_TYPE obs, const State& state, int action) const;
12     Belief* InitialBelief(const State* start, string type = "DEFAULT") const;
13     State* CreateStartState(string type = "DEFAULT") const;
14
15     /* Bound-related functions.*/
```

```

16     double GetMaxReward() const;
17     ValuedAction GetMinRewardAction() const;
18
19     /* Memory management.*/
20     State* Allocate(int state_id, double weight) const;
21     State* Copy(const State* particle) const;
22     void Free(State* particle) const;
23     int NumActiveParticles() const;
24
25 private:
26     mutable MemoryPool<SimpleState> memory_pool_;
27 };

```

2.2.1. States, Actions and Observations

A state is required to be represented as an instance of the `State` class or its subclass. The generic state class inherits `MemoryObject` for memory management, as will be discussed more later. It has two member variables: `state_id` and `weight`. The former is useful when dealing with simple discrete POMDPs, and the latter is used when using the `State` object to represent a weighted particle.

Listing 4. The generic state class

```

1  class State : public MemoryObject {
2  public:
3      int state_id;
4      double weight;
5
6      State(int _state_id = -1, double _weight = 0.0) :
7          state_id(_state_id),
8          weight(_weight) {
9      }
10
11     virtual ~State() {
12     }
13 };

```

For `SimpleRockSample`, we can actually use the generic state class to represent its states by mapping each state to an integer, but we define customized state class so as to illustrate how this can be done.

Listing 5. The state class for `SimpleRockSample`

```

1  class SimpleState : public State {
2  public:
3      int rover_position; // takes value 0, 1, 2 starting from the leftmost grid
4      int rock_status; // indicates whether the rock is good
5
6      SimpleState() {
7      }
8
9      SimpleState(int _rover_position, int _rock_status) :
10         rover_position(_rover_position),
11         rock_status(_rock_status) {
12     }
13
14     ~SimpleState() {
15     }
16 };

```

Actions are represented as consecutive integers of `int` type starting from 0, and the user is required to implement the `NumActions()` function which returns the total number of actions.

Listing 6. Implementation of `NumActions()` for `SimpleRockSample`.

```

1  int SimpleRockSample::NumActions() const {
2      return 4;
3  }

```

For the sake of readability, we shall use an `enum` to represent actions for `SimpleRockSample`

Listing 7. Action enum for `SimpleRockSample`

```

1  enum {
2      A_SAMPLE = 0,
3      A_EAST = 1,
4      A_WEST = 2,
5      A_CHECK = 3
6  };

```

Observations are represented as integers of type `uint64_t`, which is also named as `OBS_TYPE` using `typedef`. Unlike the actions, the set of observations need not be consecutive integers. For `SimpleRockSample`, we use an `enum` to represent the observations as well.

Listing 8. Observation enum for `SimpleRockSample`

```

1  enum {
2      O_BAD = 0,
3      O_GOOD = 1,
4  };

```

2.2.2. Deterministic Simulative Model

A deterministic simulative model for a POMDP is a function $g(s, a, r) = \langle s', o \rangle$ such that when random number r is randomly distributed in $[0, 1]$, $\langle s', o \rangle$ is distributed according to $P(s', o | s, a)$. The deterministic simulative model

is implemented in the `Step` function. `Step` function takes a state s and an action a as the inputs, and simulates the real execution of action a on state s , then outputs the resulting state s' and the corresponding reward. The argument names are self-explanatory, but note that

- there is a single `State` object which is used to represent both s and s' ,
- the function returns true iff executing a on s results in a terminal state.

Listing 9. A deterministic simulative model for SimpleRockSample

```

1  bool SimpleRockSample::Step(State& state, double rand_num, int action,
2      double& reward, OBS_TYPE& obs) const {
3      SimpleState& simple_state = static_cast< SimpleState& >(state);
4      int& rover_position = simple_state.rover_position;
5      int& rock_status = simple_state.rock_status;
6      if (rover_position == LEFT) {
7          if (action == A_SAMPLE) {
8              reward = (rock_status == R_GOOD) ? 10 : -10;
9              obs = O_GOOD;
10             rock_status = R_BAD;
11         } else if (action == A_CHECK) {
12             reward = 0;
13             // when the rover at LEFT, its observation is correct with probability 1
14             obs = (rock_status == R_GOOD) ? O_GOOD : O_BAD;
15         } else if (action == A_WEST) {
16             reward = -100;
17             // moving does not incur observation, setting a default observation
18             // note that we can also set the default observation to O_BAD, as long
19             // as it is consistent.
20             obs = O_GOOD;
21             return true; // Moving off the grid terminates the task.
22         } else { // moving EAST
23             reward = 0;
24             // moving does not incur observation, setting a default observation
25             obs = O_GOOD;
26             rover_position = MIDDLE;
27         }
28     } else if (rover_position == MIDDLE) {
29         if (action == A_SAMPLE) {
30             reward = -100;
31             // moving does not incur observation, setting a default observation
32             obs = O_GOOD;
33             return true; // sampling in the grid where there is no rock terminates the task
34         } else if (action == A_CHECK) {
35             reward = 0;
36             // when the rover is at MIDDLE, its observation is correct with probability 0.8
37             obs = (rand_num > 0.20) ? rock_status : (1 - rock_status);
38         } else if (action == A_WEST) {
39             reward = 0;
40             // moving does not incur observation, setting a default observation
41             obs = O_GOOD;
42             rover_position = LEFT;
43         } else { //moving EAST to exit
44             reward = 10;
45             obs = O_GOOD;
46             rover_position = RIGHT;
47         }
48     }
49     if (rover_position == RIGHT) return true;
50     else return false;
51 }

```

2.2.3. Beliefs and Starting States

Our solver package supports arbitrary belief representation: The user can implement their own belief representation by implementing the `Belief` interface, which is only required to support sampling of particles, and belief update.

```

1  class Belief {
2  public:
3      Belief(const DSPOMDP* model);
4
5      virtual vector<State*> Sample(int num) const = 0;
6      virtual void Update(int action, OBS_TYPE obs) = 0;
7  };

```

You can customize your own belief representation by implementing your belief class inheriting from the abstract `Belief` class (see [2.3.1 Custom Belief](#)). Alternatively, you can use the `ParticleBelief` class already implemented in the solver package.

`ParticleBelief` class implements SIR ([sequential importance resampling](#)) particle filter, and inherits from `Belief` class. It is used as the default belief. To use `ParticleBelief` class, the only thing you need to do is to implement the `ObsProb` function. The `ObsProb` function is required in `ParticleBelief` for belief update. It implements the observation function in a POMDP, that is, it computes the probability of observing `obs` given current state `state` resulting from executing an action `action` in previous state.

Listing 10. Observation function for SimpleRockSample

```

1  double SimpleRockSample::ObsProb(OBS_TYPE obs, const State& state,
2      int action) const {
3      if (action == A_CHECK) {
4          const SimpleState& simple_state = static_cast< const SimpleState& >(state);
5          int rover_position = simple_state.rover_position;
6          int rock_status = simple_state.rock_status;
7
8          if (rover_position == LEFT) {
9              // when the rover at LEFT, its observation is correct with probability 1
10             return obs == rock_status;

```

```

11         } else if (rover_position == MIDDLE) {
12             // when the rover at MIDDLE, its observation is correct with probability 0.8
13             return (obs == rock_status) ? 0.8 : 0.2;
14         }
15     }
16
17     // when the actions are not A CHECK, the rover does not receive any observations.
18     // assume it receives a default observation with probability 1.
19     return obs == O_GOOD;
20 }

```

The following code shows how the initial belief for `SimpleRockSample` can be represented by `ParticleBelief`. This example does not use the parameter `start`, but in general, one can use `start` to pass partial information about the starting state to the initial belief, and use `type` to select different types of initial beliefs (such as uniform belief, or skewed belief), where `type` is specified using the command line option `--belief` or `-b`, with a value of "DEFAULT" if left unspecified.

Listing 11. Initial belief for `SimpleRockSample`

```

1 Belief* SimpleRockSample::InitialBelief(const State* start, string type) const {
2     vector<State*> particles;
3
4     if (type == "DEFAULT" || type == "PARTICLE") {
5         SimpleState* good_rock = static_cast<SimpleState*>(Allocate(-1, 0.5));
6         good_rock->rover_position = 1;
7         good_rock->rock_status = 1;
8         particles.push_back(good_rock);
9
10        SimpleState* bad_rock = static_cast<SimpleState*>(Allocate(-1, 0.5));
11        bad_rock->rover_position = 1;
12        bad_rock->rock_status = 0;
13        particles.push_back(bad_rock);
14
15        return new ParticleBelief(particles, this);
16    } else {
17        cerr << "Unsupported belief type: " << type << endl;
18        exit(1);
19    }
20 }

```

The `CreateStartState` function is used to sample starting states in simulations. The starting state is generally sampled from the initial belief, but it may be sampled from a different distribution in some problems. Users may use the argument `type` to choose how the starting state is sampled.

Listing 12. Sample a starting state from the initial belief for `SimpleRockSample`

```

1 State* SimpleRockSample::CreateStartState(string type) const {
2     return new SimpleState(1, Random::RANDOM.NextInt(2));
3 }

```

2.2.4. Bound-related Functions

The heuristic search in DESPOT needed to be guided by upper and lower bounds on the infinite-horizon value that can be obtained on a set of scenarios. The `DSPOMDP` interface requires implementing the `GetMinRewardAction` function and the `GetMaxReward` function to construct the simplest such bounds.

The `GetMinRewardAction` function returns (a, v) , where a is an action with largest minimum reward when it is executed, and v is its minimum reward. The minimum infinite-horizon value that can be obtained on a set of scenarios with total weight W is then bounded below by $Wv / (1 - \gamma)$, where γ is the discount factor.

Listing 13. Implementation of `GetMinRewardAction` for `SimpleRockSample`

```

1 ValuedAction SimpleRockSample::GetMinRewardAction() const {
2     return ValuedAction(A_EAST, 0);
3 }

```

The `GetMaxReward` function returns the maximum possible reward R_{max} in a step, and the maximum infinite-horizon value that can be obtained on a set of scenarios with total weight W is then bounded above by $W R_{max} / (1 - \gamma)$, where γ is the discount factor.

Listing 14. Implementation of `GetMaxReward` for `SimpleRockSample`

```

1 double SimpleRockSample::GetMaxReward() const {
2     return 10;
3 }

```

2.2.5 Memory Management

DESPOT requires the creation of many `State` objects during the search. The creation and destruction of these objects are expensive, so they are done using the `Allocate`, `Copy`, and `Free` functions to allow users to provide their own memory management mechanisms to make these operations less expensive. We provide a solution method based on the memory management technique in David Silver's [implementation](#) of the POMCP algorithm. The idea is to create new `State` objects in chunks (instead of one at a time), and put objects in a free list for recycling when they are no longer needed (instead of deleting them). The following code serves as a template of how this can be done.

Listing 15. Memory management functions for `SimpleRockSample`.

```

1 State* SimpleRockSample::Allocate(int state_id, double weight) const {

```

```

2     SimpleState* state = memory_pool_.Allocate();
3     state->state_id = state_id;
4     state->weight = weight;
5     return state;
6 }
7
8 State* SimpleRockSample::Copy(const State* particle) const {
9     SimpleState* state = memory_pool_.Allocate();
10    *state = *static_cast<const SimpleState*>(particle);
11    state->SetAllocated();
12    return state;
13 }
14
15 void SimpleRockSample::Free(State* particle) const {
16     memory_pool_.Free(static_cast<SimpleState*>(particle));
17 }

```

2.3. Optional Functions

Accurate belief tracking and good bounds are important for getting good performance. An important feature of the DESPOT software package is the flexibility that it provides for defining custom beliefs and custom bounds. This will be briefly explained below.

2.3.1 Custom Belief

The solver package can work with any belief representation implementing the abstract **Belief** interface. A concrete belief class need to implement two functions: the **Sample** function returns a number of particles sampled from the belief, and the **Update** function updates the belief after executing an action and receiving an observation. To allow the solver to use a custom belief, create it using the **InitialBelief** function in the **DSPOMDP** class. See `examples/cpp_models/` for examples.

```

1 class Belief {
2 public:
3     Belief(const DSPOMDP* model);
4
5     virtual vector<State*> Sample(int num) const = 0;
6     virtual void Update(int action, OBS_TYPE obs) = 0;
7 };

```

2.3.2 Custom Bounds

The lower and upper bounds mentioned in [Section 2.2.4](#) are non-informative and generally only works for simple problems. This section gives a brief explanation on how users can create their own bounds. We shall focus on the lower bounds. Creating an upper bound is similar, and examples can be found in the code in `examples/cpp_models` directory.

A new type of lower bound is defined as a child class of the **ScenarioLowerBound** class shown in Listing 16. A **ScenarioLowerBound** object computes a lower bound for the infinite-horizon value of a set of weighted scenarios (as determined by the particles and the random number streams) given the action-observation history. The first action that need to be executed in order to achieve the lower bound value is also returned together with the value, using a **ValuedAction** object. The random numbers used in the scenarios are represented using a **RandomStreams** object.

Listing 16. The ScenarioLowerBound interface

```

1 class ScenarioLowerBound {
2 protected:
3     const DSPOMDP* model_;
4
5 public:
6     ScenarioLowerBound(const DSPOMDP* model);
7
8     /**
9      * Returns a lower bound to the maximum total discounted reward over an
10     * infinite horizon for the weighted scenarios.
11     */
12     virtual ValuedAction Value(const vector<State*>& particles,
13                               RandomStreams& streams, History& history) const = 0;
14 };

```

You can customize your own lower bound by implementing your lower bound class inheriting from the abstract **ScenarioLowerBound** class. Alternatively, you can use **ParticleLowerBound** or **Policy** that already implemented in the solver package.

ParticleLowerBound and **Policy** are two types of lower bounds inheriting from **ScenarioLowerBound** class. A **ParticleLowerBound** simply ignores the random numbers in the scenarios, and computes a lower bound for the infinite-horizon value of a set of weighted particles given the action-observation history. A **Policy** defines a policy mapping from the scenarios/history to an action, and runs this policy on the scenarios to obtain a lower bound. The random number streams only has finite length, and a **Policy** uses a **ParticleLowerBound** to estimate a lower bound on the scenarios when all the random numbers have been consumed.

Listing 17 shows the interface of **ParticleLowerBound**. To use **ParticleLowerBound**, you need to implement **Value** function shown below.

Listing 17. The ParticleLowerBound interface

```

1 class ParticleLowerBound : public ScenarioLowerBound {
2 public:
3     ParticleLowerBound(const DSPOMDP* model);

```

```

4
5
6     /**
7     * Returns a lower bound to the maximum total discounted reward over an
8     * infinite horizon for the weighted particles.
9     */
10    virtual ValuedAction Value(const vector<State>& particles) const = 0;

```

Listing 18 shows the interface of `Policy`. To use `Policy`, you need to implement `Action` function shown below.

Listing 18. Code snippet from the `Policy` class.

```

1 class Policy : public ScenarioLowerBound {
2 public:
3     Policy(const DSPOMDP* model, ParticleLowerBound* bound, Belief* belief = NULL);
4     virtual ~Policy();
5
6     virtual int Action(const vector<State*>& particles,
7                       RandomStreams& streams, History& history) const = 0;
8 };

```

As an example of a `Policy`, the following code implements a simple fixed-action policy for `SimpleRockSample`.

Listing 19. A simple fixed-action policy for `SimpleRockSample`.

```

1 class SimpleRockSampleEastPolicy : public policy {
2 public:
3     SimpleRockSampleEastPolicy(const DSPOMDP* model, ParticleLowerBound* bound)
4         : Policy(model, bound) {}
5
6     int Action(const vector<State*>& particles,
7               RandomStreams& streams, History& history) const {
8         return A_EAST; // move east
9     }
10 };

```

You can read the code in `examples/cpp_models` directory for more lower bound classes implemented for other tasks, for example, `PocmanSmartPolicy`, the policy implemented for Pocman [4] task.

After you have implemented the lower bound class, you need to add your lower bound to the solver. The `DSPOMDP` interface allows user-defined lower bounds to be easily added by overriding the `CreateScenarioLowerBound` function in the `DSPOMDP` interface. The default implementation of `CreateScenarioLowerBound` only supports the creation of the `TrivialParticleLowerBound`, which returns the lower bound as generated using `GetMinRewardAction`.

Listing 20. `DSPOMDP` code related to supporting user-defined lower bounds.

```

1 class DSPOMDP {
2 public:
3     virtual ScenarioLowerBound* CreateScenarioLowerBound(string name = "DEFAULT",
4                 string particle_bound_name = "DEFAULT") {
5         if (name == "TRIVIAL" || name == "DEFAULT") {
6             scenario_lower_bound_ = new TrivialParticleLowerBound(this);
7         } else {
8             cerr << "Unsupported scenario lower bound: " << name << endl;
9             exit(0);
10        }
11    }
12 };

```

The following code adds this lower bound to `SimpleRockSample` and sets it as the default scenario lower bound.

Listing 21. Adding `SimpleRockSampleEastPolicy`.

```

1 ScenarioLowerBound* SimpleRockSample::CreateScenarioLowerBound(string name = "DEFAULT",
2 string particle_bound_name = "DEFAULT") {
3     if (name == "TRIVIAL") {
4         scenario_lower_bound_ = new TrivialParticleLowerBound(this);
5     } else if (name == "EAST" || name == "DEFAULT") {
6         scenario_lower_bound_ = new SimpleRockSampleEastPolicy(this,
7             new TrivialParticleLowerBound(this));
8     } else {
9         cerr << "Unsupported lower bound algorithm: " << name << endl;
10        exit(0);
11    }
12 }

```

Once a lower bound is added, and the package is recompiled, then users can choose to use it by setting the `-l` option when running the package. For example, both of the following commands use `SimpleRockSampleEastPolicy` (assume the name of the task package is `simple_rs`).

```

1 ./simple_rs --runs 100
2 ./simple_rs --runs 100 -l EAST

```

3. Other Examples

See `examples/cpp_models` for more model examples. We implemented the cpp models for Tiger [3], Rock Sample [2], Pocman [4], Tag [5], and many other tasks in `examples/cpp_models`.

4. References

- [1] A. Somani and N. Ye and D. Hsu and W.S. Lee. DESPOT: Online POMDP Planning with Regularization. In Advances In Neural Information Processing Systems, 2013.
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