



## contextual: Simulating Contextual Multi-Armed Bandit Problems in R

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### Abstract

Over the past decade, contextual bandit algorithms have been gaining in popularity due to their effectiveness and flexibility in the evaluation of sequential decision problems - from online advertising and recommender systems to clinical trial design and personalized medicine. At the same time, there are as of yet surprisingly few options that enable researchers and practitioners to simulate and compare the wealth of new and existing bandit algorithms in a standardized way. To help close this gap between analytical research and practical evaluation the current paper introduces the object-oriented R package **contextual**: a user-friendly and, through its object-oriented structure, easily extensible framework that facilitates parallelized comparison of contextual and non-contextual Bandit policies through both simulation and offline analysis.

*Keywords:* contextual multi-armed bandits, simulation, sequential experimentation, R.

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## 1. Introduction

There are many real-world situations in which we have to decide between a set of options and have to learn the best course of action by choosing one way or the other sequentially, learning one step at a time. In such situations, the basic premise is the same for each and every renewed decision: do you stick to what you already know and receive an expected result ("exploit") or choose an option you do not know all that much about and potentially learn something new ("explore")? As we all encounter such dilemma's on a daily basis (Wilson, Geana, White, Ludvig, and Cohen 2014), it is easy to come up with examples - for instance:

- When going out to dinner, do you explore new restaurants, or do you exploit familiar ones?
- As a website editor, do you keep the same article at the top of your news site, or alternate between articles?

- As a doctor, do you treat your patients with tried and tested medication, or do you prescribe a new and promising experimental treatment?

Let's delve a little deeper into one last example: you received some gambling money, and now have to decide which out of  $k$  slot machines or "one-armed bandits"<sup>1</sup> to play<sup>2</sup>. In this scenario, each "bandit" is similar but differs in its average payout over time. So you need to come up with a strategy or "policy" for which bandit's arm to play. One option would be to try every arm once and then go with the arm that offered you the biggest winnings. However, those winnings might have been nothing more than a lucky fluke. On the other hand, every time you explore another arm, you may potentially lose out compared to the arm that had been doing well up till then—a classic balancing act known as the "explore-exploit dilemma". To get a better grip on this set of decision problems, and to learn if and when specific strategies might be more successful than others, such explore/exploit dilemmas have been studied extensively since the 1930s<sup>3</sup> under the umbrella of the "Multi-Armed Bandit" (MAB) problem (Auer, Cesa-Bianchi, and Fischer 2002; Lai and Robbins 1985; Bubeck, Cesa-Bianchi *et al.* 2012).

A recent MAB generalization known as the *contextual* Multi-Armed Bandit (cMAB) builds on the previous by adding one crucial element: contextual information (Langford and Zhang 2008). Contextual multi-armed bandits are known by many different names in about as many different fields of research (Tewari and Murphy 2017)—for example as "bandit problems with side observations" (Wang, Kulkarni, and Poor 2005), "bandit problems with side information" (Lu, Pál, and Pál 2010), "associative reinforcement learning" (Kaelbling, Littman, and Moore 1996), "reinforcement learning with immediate reward" (Abe, Biermann, and Long 2003), "associative bandit problems" (Strehl, Mesterharm, Littman, and Hirsh 2006), or "bandit problems with covariates" (Sarkar 1991). However, the term "contextual Multi-Armed Bandit," as conceived by Langford and Zhang (2008), is the most generally used—so that is the term we will use in the current paper.

Still, however named, all cMAB policies differentiate themselves, by definition, from their MAB cousins in that they are able to make use of features that reflect the current state of the world—features that can then be mapped onto available arms or actions<sup>4</sup>. This access to side information makes cMAB algorithms yet more relevant to many real-life decision problems than their MAB progenitors (Langford and Zhang 2008). To follow up on our previous examples: do you choose the same type of restaurants in summer and winter? Do you prescribe the same treatments to male and female patients? Do you place the same news story at the top featured position of your website for both young and old visitors? Probably not—in the real world, it appears no choice exists without at least some contextual information to be mined or mapped. So it may be no surprise that cMAB algorithms have found applications in many different areas: from recommendation engines (Lai and Robbins 1985) to advertising (Tang, Rosales, Singh, and Agarwal 2013) and (personalized) medicine (Tewari and Murphy 2017)—inspiring a multitude of new, often analytically derived bandit algorithms or policies, each with their strengths and weaknesses.

<sup>1</sup>The term "one-armed bandit" actually refers to a type of slot machine found in casino's, where the "arm" is a lever that the gambler pulls on feeding it a quarter.

<sup>2</sup>Or one big slot machine or "bandit" with  $k$  arms, which is how this problem would be formalized in the Multi-Armed Bandit literature.

<sup>3</sup>As Dr. Peter Whittle famously stated "[the problem] was formulated during the [second world] war, and efforts to solve it so sapped the energies and minds of Allied analysts that the suggestion was made that the problem be dropped over Germany, as the ultimate instrument of intellectual sabotage." (Whittle 1979)

<sup>4</sup>That is, before making a choice, the learner receives information on the state of the world or "context" in the form of a  $d$ -dimensional feature vector. After making a choice the learner is then able to combine this contextual information with the reward received to make a more informed decision in the next round.

Regrettably, though cMAB algorithms have gained both academic and commercial acclaim, comparisons on simulated, and, importantly, real-life, large-scale offline “partial label” data sets (Li, Chu, Langford, and Wang 2011) have relatively lagged behind. To this end, the current paper introduces the **contextual** R package. **contextual** aims to facilitate the simulation, offline comparison, and evaluation of (Contextual) Multi-Armed bandit policies. There exist a few other frameworks that enable the analysis and comparison of either on- or offline datasets in some capacity, such as Microsoft’s Vowpal Wabbit (Langford, Li, and Strehl 2007), the online evaluation platform StreamingBandit (Kaptein and Kruijswijk 2016), and the MAB focussed python packages Striatum (NTUCSIE-CLLab 2018) and SMPyBandits (Besson 2018). But, as of yet, no extensible and widely applicable R (R Core Team 2018) package that can analyze and compare, respectively, K-armed, Continuum and Contextual Multi-Armed Bandit Algorithms on both simulated and offline data.

In the following paper, we further introduce the **contextual** package. Section 2 presents a formal definition of the contextual Multi-Armed Bandit problem and shows how this formalization can be translated into a clear and concise object-oriented implementation. Section 3 gives an overview of **contextual**’s predefined contextual and non-contextual bandit and policy classes and shows how to apply these to solve some basic (c)MAB problems. Section 4 delves a little deeper into the implementation of **contextual**’s core classes—in preparation for Section 5, which shows how to extend these classes to be able to create custom bandits and policies. Section 6 focusses on the analysis of offline “partial label” data sets. Section 7 brings all of the previous sections together in the example of a partial replication of a seminal contextual bandit paper. We conclude with some comments on the current state of the package and potential future enhancements.

This organization enables the reader to peruse the paper according to their background and needs. If you have a passing knowledge of R and would like to jump right in and run a simulation, the introduction and section 3 should get you up and running. If you are also looking for a more formal introduction into cMAB problems or would like a helicopter view of the structure of the package, add section 2. Include section 6 and possibly 7 if you want to run one of **contextual**’s policies on an offline data set. Finally, if you know your way around R and would like to extend **contextual** to run your own custom bandits and policies, it is probably best to read the whole paper—with a focus on section 4 and 5.

## 2. Differentiation, formalization and implementation

In the current section, we first set out to differentiate bandit learning from other areas of machine learning. Next, we present a more formal definition of the contextual Multi-Armed Bandit problem. And finally, we show how this formalization can be translated into a clear and concise class structure.

### 2.1. Differentiation

Before continuing with a formalization of contextual Multi-Armed Bandit problems, it may be useful to locate MAB in the greater area of machine learning. Generally, machine learning is divided into three main areas: supervised learning, unsupervised learning and reinforcement learning (Li 2017). Each can be differentiated in how data is presented to the learning algorithm:

- Unsupervised learning (such as clustering) makes no use of labels or rewards but searches for structure in its input data.

- Supervised learning (such as classification and regression) maps inputs to an outputs by training on pre-labeled example data.
- Reinforcement learning is by trial and error - that is, in contrast to supervised learning, it only receives partial feedback: one reward for every sequential choice.

Within this division, bandit problems are to be found within reinforcement learning. focusses on algorithms hatlearn by trial and error, but where context and state do not feed back on previous actions [Agarwal, Hsu, Kale, Langford, Li, and Schapire \(2014\)](#).

## 2.2. Formalization

On further formalization of the contextual Bandit problem, a (k-armed) **bandit**  $B$  can be defined as a set of  $k$  distributions  $B = \{D_1, \dots, D_k\}$ , where each distribution is associated with the I.I.D. rewards generated by one of the  $k \in \mathbb{N}^+$  arms. We now define an algorithm or **policy**  $\pi$ , that seeks to maximize its total **reward** (that is, to maximize its cumulative reward  $\sum_{t=1}^T r_t$  or minimize its cumulative regret—see equations 1, 2 and 3). This **policy** observes information on the current state of the world represented as a  $d$ -dimensional contextual feature vector  $x_t = (x_{1,t}, \dots, x_{d,t})$ . Based on earlier payoffs, the **policy** then selects one of **bandit**  $B$ 's arms by choosing an action  $a_t \in \{1, \dots, k\}$ , and receives reward  $r_{a_t,t}$ , the expectation of which depends both the context and the reward history of that particular arm. With this observation  $(x_{t,a_t}, a_t, r_{t,a_t})$ , the policy now updates its arm-selection strategy.

In practice, for scalability reasons, **policies** generally use a limited set of parameters  $\theta_t$ . This set of paramaters summarizes all historical interactions  $H_{t'} = (x_{t',a_t}, a_t, r_{t,a_t})$  over  $t = \{1, \dots, t'\}$ , ensuring that the dimensionality of  $\theta_{t'} \ll H_{t'}$ .

These steps are then repeated  $T$  times, where  $T$  is generally defined as a bandit's **horizon**.

Schematically, for each round  $t = \{1, \dots, T\}$ :

- 1) Policy  $\pi$  observes state of the world as contextual feature vector  $x_t = (x_{1,t}, \dots, x_{d,t})$
- 2) Bandit  $B$  generates reward vector  $r_t = (r_{t,1}, \dots, r_{t,k})$
- 3) Policy  $\pi$  selects one of bandit  $B$ 's arms  $a_t \in \{1, \dots, k\}$
- 4) Policy  $\pi$  gets reward  $r_{t,a_t}$  from bandit  $B$  and updates its arm-selection strategy with  $(x_{t,a_t}, a_t, r_{t,a_t})$

The goal of the policy  $\pi$  is to optimize its *cumulative reward* over  $t = \{1, \dots, T\}$

$$\text{Reward}_T^\pi = \sum_{t=1}^T (r_{a_t^\pi, x_t}) \quad (1)$$

Though *cumulative reward* offers a first estimate of a policy's learning performance, as a performance measure, *cumulative regret*—defined as the sum of rewards that would have been received by choosing optimal actions  $a$  at every  $t$  subtracted by the sum of rewards awarded to the actually chosen actions  $a^\pi$  for every  $t$  over  $t = \{1, \dots, T\}$ —offers several advantages.

Firstly, with cumulative regret, you can shift a bandit's rewards by some arbitrary constant, and still arrive at the same total cumulative regret over  $T$ .

Secondly, as *cumulative regret* grows only on selecting non-optimal arms, a good policy's cumulative regret ought to be growing less and less over  $T$ .

$$R_T^\pi = \max_{a=1,\dots,k} \sum_{t=1}^T (r_{a,x_t}) - \sum_{t=1}^T (r_{a_t^\pi, x_t}) \quad (2)$$

See for example Figure 4 in section 4.3 for an illustrative example of how cumulative regret tends to work better as a performance measure than cumulative reward. Or, in practice, policies' *expected* cumulative regret:

$$\mathbb{E}[R_T^\pi] = \mathbb{E} \left[ \max_{a=1,\dots,k} \sum_{t=1}^T (r_{a,x_t}) - \sum_{t=1}^T (r_{a_t^\pi, x_t}) \right] \quad (3)$$

As expectation  $\mathbb{E}[\cdot]$  is generally taken with respect to random draws of both rewards assigned by a bandit and arms as selected by a policy.

### 2.3. Implementation

We set out to develop an implementation that stays close to the previous formalization while offering maximum flexibility and extensibility. As a bonus, this kept the class structure of the package elegant and straightforward, with six classes forming the backbone of the package (see also Figure 1):

- **Bandit:** The R6 class `Bandit` is the parent class of all `Bandits` implemented in **contextual**. Classes that extend the abstract superclass `Bandit` are responsible for both the generation of `d` dimensional `context` vectors `X` and the `k` I.I.D. distributions each generating a `reward` for each of its `k` arms at each time step `t`. `Bandit` subclasses can (pre)generate these values synthetically, based on offline data, etc.
- **Policy:** The R6 class `Policy` is the parent class of all `Policy` implementations in **contextual**. Classes that extend this abstract `Policy` superclass are expected to take into account the current `d` dimensional `context`, together with a limited set of parameters denoted `theta` (summarizing all past contexts, actions and rewards), to choose one of a `Bandit`'s arms at each time step `t`. On choosing one of the `k` arms of the `Bandit` and receiving its corresponding `reward`, the `Policy` then uses the current `context`, `action` and `reward` to update its set of parameters `theta` (which summarize all historical interactions).
- **Agent:** The R6 class `Agent` is responsible for the state, flow of information between and the running of one `Bandit/Policy` pair. As such, multiple `Agents` can be run in parallel with each separate `Agent` keeping track of `t` and the parameters in `theta` for its assigned `Policy` and `Bandit` pair.
- **Simulator:** The R6 class `Simulator` is the entry point of any **contextual** simulation. It encapsulates one or more `Agents` (in parallel, by default), clones them if necessary, runs the `Agents`, and saves the log of all of the `Agents` interactions to a `History` object.
- **History:** The R6 class `History` keeps a log of all `Simulator` interactions in its internal `data.table`. It also provides basic data summaries, and can save and load simulation data.

- **Plot:** The R6 class `Plot` generates plots based on `History` data. It is usually actually invoked by calling the generic function `plot(h)`, where `h` is an `History` class instance.

From these building blocks, we are now able to put together a basic five line MAB simulation:

```
policy    <- EpsilonGreedyPolicy$new(epsilon = 0.1)
bandit    <- SyntheticBandit$new(weights = c(0.9, 0.1, 0.1))
agent     <- Agent$new(policy, bandit)
simulator <- Simulator$new(agents = agent, simulations = 100, horizon = 80)
history   <- simulator$run()
```

In these lines, we start out by instantiating the `Policy` subclass `EpsilonGreedyPolicy` (covered in section 4.3) as object `policy`, with its parameter `epsilon` set to `0.1`. Next, we instantiate the `Bandit` subclass `SyntheticBandit` as `bandit`, with three Bernoulli arms, each offering a reward of one with probability  $p$ , and otherwise an reward of zero. For the current simulation, the `bandit`'s probability of reward is set to respectively 0.9, 0.1 and 0.1 per arm through its `weight` parameter. We then assign both our `bandit` and our `policy` to `Agent` instance `agent`. This `agent` is then added to a `Simulator` that is set to one hundred simulations, each with a `horizon` of one hundred—that is, `simulator` runs one hundred simulations, each with a different random seed, for one hundred time steps  $t$ .

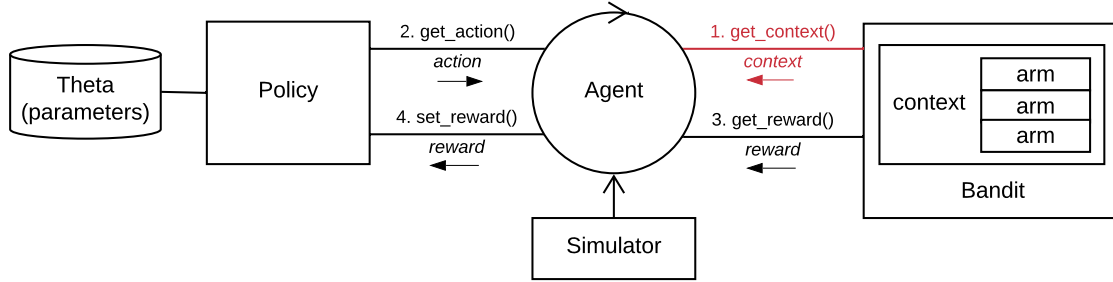


Figure 1: Diagram of `contextual`'s basic structure. The context feature vector returned by `get_context()` (colored red in the figure) is only taken into account by cMAB policies, and is ignored by MAB policies.

On running the `Simulator` it starts several (by default, the number of CPU cores minus one) worker processes, splitting simulations as efficiently as possible over each parallel worker. For each simulation, for every time step  $t$ , an `agent` clone then loops through each of the four function calls that constitute its main interior loop. Though we will delve deeper into the setup of each of `contextual`'s main classes in section 3, the current overview enables us to demonstrate how these four function calls relate to the four steps we defined in our cMAB formalization in section 2.1:

- 1) `agent` calls `bandit$get_context(t)`, which returns named list `list(k = n_arms, d = n_features, X = context)` containing the current  $d$  dimensional context feature vector  $X$  together with the number of arms  $k$ .
- 2) `agent` calls `policy$get_action(t, X)`, whereupon `policy` relays which arm to play based on the current context vector  $X$  (in MAB policies,  $X$  is ignored) and `theta` (the named list

holding the parameters summarizing past contexts, actions and rewards). `policy` then returns a named list `list(choice = arm_chosen_by_policy)` that holds the index of the arm to play.

- 3) `agent` calls `bandit$get_reward(t, context, action)`, which returns a named list `list(reward = reward_for_choice_made, optimal_reward_value = optimal_reward_value)` that contains the reward for the action returned by policy in [2] and, optionally, the optimal reward at the current time `t` — if and when known.
- 4) `agent` calls `policy$set_reward(t, context, action, reward)` and uses the action taken, the reward received, and the current context to update the set of parameter values in `theta`

On completion of all of its simulation runs, `Simulator` returns an `history` object that contains a complete log of all interactions, which can, among others, be printed, plotted, or summarized:

```
> summary(history)
```

Agents:

EpsilonGreedy

Cumulative Regret:

	agent	t	sims	cum_regret	cum_regret_var	cum_regret_sd	cum_regret_ci
	EpsilonGreedy	80	100	10.82	78.41172	8.855039	1.735556

Cumulative Reward:

	agent	t	sims	cum_reward	cum_reward_var	cum_reward_sd	cum_reward_ci
	EpsilonGreedy	80	100	28.35	104.9975	10.24683	2.008341

Relative Cumulative Reward / Click Through Rate:

	agent	t	sims	ctr_reward	ctr_reward_var	ctr_reward_sd	ctr_reward_ci
	EpsilonGreedy	80	100	0.354375	1.312468	0.1280853	0.02510427

### 3. Basic use

Though **contextual** really comes into its own when you start building your own bandit and policy classes, you can also use one of the package's build-in policies, and run them on one of **contextual**'s synthetic or offline bandits (see Table 1 for an overview of available policies).



	$\epsilon$ -Greedy	UCB	Thomson Sampling	Other	Special
MAB	$\epsilon$ -Greedy $\epsilon$ -First	UCB1 UCB-tuned	Thompson Sampling BootstrapTS	Softmax Gittins	Random Oracle
cMAB	Epoch-Greedy	LinUCB COFIBA	LinTS LogitBTS		LiF

Table 1: An overview of **contextual**'s predefined policy classes.

You may, for instance, want to compare bandit policies for selecting the most effective of two ads for your new web store. One option would, for example, be to show both ads at random (explore) for a set period of time and thereafter go with the ad that has the best Click-Through Rate (exploit). This policy is known as an Epsilon First policy or, more commonly, as an A/B test. Another option might be to randomly show either one of the ads 20 percent of the time (explore), and show the best ad 80 percent of the time (exploit). This type of policy is known as an "Epsilon Greedy" policy. In other words, an Epsilon First policy starts out with a full-time exploration, then switches to full-time exploitation—while an Epsilon Greedy policy keeps on exploring. What policy does best in this simple case?

Let's see how to answer this question with **contextual**:

```
# Load and attach the contextual package.
library(contextual)
# Define for how long the simulation will run.
horizon <- 300
# Define how many times to repeat the simulation.
simulations <- 400
# Define the probability that each ad will be clicked.
click_probabilities <- c(0.8, 0.2)
# Initialize a SyntheticBandit, which takes probabilities per arm for an argument.
bandit <- SyntheticBandit$new(weights = click_probabilities)
# Initialize an EpsilonGreedyPolicy with a 20% exploration rate.
eg_policy <- EpsilonGreedyPolicy$new(epsilon = 0.2)
# Initialize an EpsilonFirstPolicy with a 50 step exploration period.
ef_policy <- EpsilonFirstPolicy$new(first = 50)
# Initialize two Agents, binding each policy to a bandit.
ef_agent <- Agent$new(ef_policy, bandit)
eg_agent <- Agent$new(eg_policy, bandit)
# Assign both agents to a list.
agents <- list(ef_agent, eg_agent)
# Initialize a Simulator with the agent list, horizon, and number of simulations.
simulator <- Simulator$new(agents, horizon, simulations)
# Now run the simulator.
history <- simulator$run()
# And plot the cumulative reward rate (equals Click Through Rate)
plot(history, type = "cumulative", regret = FALSE, rate = TRUE)
```

In this very simple scenario, Epsilon First is the clear winner. The Epsilon Greedy policy starts out strong, but the Epsilon First policy is able to select the best arm within its fifty steps of exploration. Thereafter, it keeps exploiting this arm all the time, while the Epsilon Greedy policy spends twenty percent of the time on exploring.

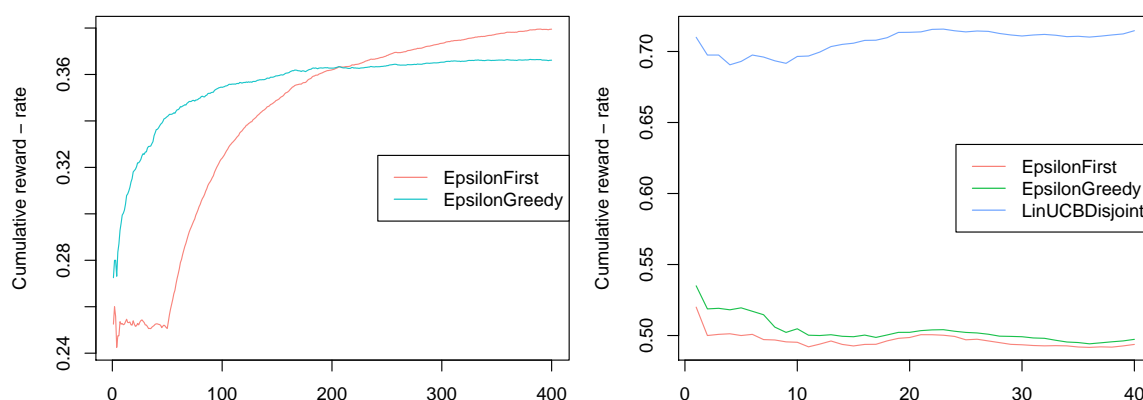


But maybe you also know that half of the visitors to your website is younger than forty, and half older. And that one of your ads is more effective for younger visitors, while the other ad works better for older visitors. We can simulate this scenario by continuing where the previous script left off:

```
#                                     +-----+-----> two different ads
#                                     |         |
click_probabilities <- matrix( c( 0.8, 0.2, # --> context: older (p=.5)
                                0.2, 0.8 ), # --> context: young (p=.5)

                               nrow = 2, ncol = 2, byrow = TRUE)

# Initialize a SyntheticBandit with the *contextual* click probabilities
context_bandit <- SyntheticBandit$new(weights = click_probabilities)
# Initialize a contextual LinUCBDisjointPolicy with an alpha of 0.6
lu_policy <- LinUCBDisjointPolicy$new(0.6)
# Initialize three Agents, binding each policy to a bandit.
ef_agent <- Agent$new(ef_policy, context_bandit)
eg_agent <- Agent$new(eg_policy, context_bandit)
lu_agent <- Agent$new(lu_policy, context_bandit)
# Assign all agents to a list.
agents <- list(ef_agent, eg_agent, lu_agent)
# Horizon can be much shorter here
horizon <- 40
# Initialize a Simulator with the agent list, horizon, and number of simulations.
simulator <- Simulator$new(agents, horizon, simulations)
# Now run the simulator.
history <- simulator$run()
# And plot the cumulative reward rate again.
plot(history, type = "cumulative", regret = FALSE, rate = TRUE)
```



In this second simulation, neither non-contextual policy (Epsilon Greedy and Epsilon First) does better than chance. That makes sense, as on average, both arms are equally likely to produce a click. On the other hand, contextual policies such as LinUCB do really well here, as these are able to map rewards to contextual features.

Of course, the simulations in the current section are not very realistic. One way to generate more realistic Bandit data would be to write a Bandit subclass with a more complex generative model that

fits your particular use case. Another option would be to test policies against an offline data set. Either way, the next sections should be able to get you on your way there.

## 4. R6 class structure

Since it is the **contextual**'s explicit goal to offer researchers and developers an easily extensible framework to develop, test and compare their own **Policy** and **Bandit** implementations, the current section offers additional background information on **contextual**' class structure—both on the R6 class system and on each of the six previously introduced core **contextual** classes.

### 4.1. R and the R6 Class System

Statistical computational methods, in R or otherwise, are regularly made available through single-use scripts or basic, isolated code packages. Usually, such code examples are meant to give a basic idea of a statistical method, technique or algorithm in the context of a scientific paper. Such code examples offer their scientific audience a rough inroad towards the comparison and further implementation of their underlying methods. However, when a set of well-researched interrelated algorithms, such as MAB and cMAB policies, find growing academic, practical and commercial adoption, it becomes crucial to offer a more standardized and more accessible way to compare such methods and algorithms.

It is against this background that we decided to develop the **contextual** R package—a package that would offer an easily extendible and open bandit framework together with extensible bandit and policy libraries. To us, it made the most sense to create such a package in R, as R is currently the de facto language for the dissemination of new statistical methods, techniques, and algorithms—while it is at the same time finding ever-growing adoption in industry. The resulting lively exchange of R related code, data, and knowledge between scientists and practitioners offers precisely the kind of cross-pollination that **contextual** hopes to facilitate.

Though widely used as a procedural language, R offers several Object Oriented (OO) systems, which can significantly help in structuring the development of more complex packages. Out of the OO systems available (S3, S4, R5 and R6), we settled on R6, as it offered several advantages compared to the other options. Firstly, it implements a mature object-oriented design when compared to S3. Secondly, its classes can be accessed and modified by reference—which offers the added advantage that R6 classes are instantly recognizable for developers with a background in Java or C++. Finally, when compared to the older R5 reference class system, R6 classes are lighter-weight and (as they do not make use of S4 classes) do not require the methods package—which makes **contextual** substantially less resource-hungry than it would otherwise have been.

### 4.2. Main classes

In this section, we go over each of **contextual**'s six main classes in some more detail—with an emphasis on the **Bandit** and **Policy** classes. To clarify **contextual**'s class structure, we also include two UML diagrams (UML or "Unified Modeling Language" is a modeling language that presents a standard way to visualize the overall class structure and general design of a software application or framework). The UML class diagram shown in Figure 7 on page 32 visualizes **contextual**'s static object model, showing how its classes inherit from, and interface with, each other. The UML sequence diagram in figure Figure 8 on page 33, on the other hand, illustrates how **contextual**'s classes interact dynamically over time.

## Bandit

In **contextual**, any bandit implementation is expected to subclass and extend the Bandit superclass. It is then up to these subclasses themselves to provide an implementation for each of its abstract methods. Bandit subclasses are furthermore expected to set instance variable `self$k` to the number of arms, and `self$d` to the number of context features. On meeting this requirement, a Bandit is then required to implement `get_context()` and `do_action()`:

```
#' @export
Bandit <- R6::R6Class(
  portable = TRUE,
  class    = FALSE,
  public   = list(
    k      = NULL,      # Number of arms (integer)
    d      = NULL,      # Dimension of context feature vector (integer)
    ...
    precaching = FALSE, # Pregenerate context & reward matrices? (boolean)
    class_name = "Bandit", # Bandit name - required (character)
    initialize = function() {
      # Initialize Bandit. Generally, set self$d and self$k here.
    },
    ...
    get_context = function(t) {
      stop("Bandit subclass needs to implement bandit$get_context()", call. = FALSE)
      # Return a list with self$k, self$d and, where applicable, a context matrix X.
      list(X = context, k = arms, d = features)
    },
    get_reward = function(t, context, action) {
      stop("Bandit subclass needs to implement bandit$get_reward()", call. = FALSE)
      # Return a list with the reward and, if known, the reward of the best arm.
      list(reward = reward_for_choice_made, optimal = optimal_reward_value)
    },
    ...
  )
)
```

Bandit's functions can be described as follows:

- `new()` Generates and initializes a new Bandit object.
- `pre_calculate()` Called right after Simulator sets its seed, but before it starts iterating over all time steps `t` in `T`. If you need to initialize random values in a Policy, this is the place to do so.
- `get_context(t)` Returns a named list `list(k = n_arms, d = n_features, X = context)` with the current `d` dimensional context feature vector `X` together with the number of arms `k`.
- `get_reward(t, context, action)` Returns the named list `list(reward = reward_for_choice_made, optimal = optimal_reward_value)` containing the reward for the action previously returned by policy and, optionally, the optimal reward at the current time `t`.

- `generate_bandit_data()` A helper function that is called before `Simulator` starts iterating over all time steps `t` in `T`. This function is called when `bandit$precaching` has been set to `TRUE`. Pregenerate contexts and rewards here.

Where possible, it is advisable to pregenerate or precache `Bandit` contexts and rewards, as this is (as is generally the case in R) computationally much more efficient than the repeated generation of reward vectors and context matrices. This pregeneration can be implemented in `generate_bandit_data()`. It is called during a `Bandit`'s initialization—if and when the `Bandit`'s `self$precaching` variable is `TRUE`.

We also made several `Bandit` subclasses available. For each `Bandit`, there is at least one example script, to be found in the package's demo directory:

- `BasicBandit`: this basic (non-contextual)  $k$ -armed bandit synthetically generates rewards based on a weight vector. It returns a unit vector for context matrix  $X$ .
- `SyntheticBandit`: an example of a more complex and versatile synthetic bandit. It pregenerates both a randomized context matrix and reward vectors
- `ContextualBandit`: a contextual bandit that synthetically generates contextual rewards based on randomly set weights. It can simulate mixed user (cross-arm) and article (arm) feature vectors, generated from parameters  $k$ ,  $d$  and `num_users`.
- `ContinuumBandit`: a basic example of a continuum bandit.
- `LiBandit`: a basic example of a bandit that makes use of offline data - here, an implementation of Li's [reference].

Each of these bandits can be used to run policies without further ado. They can, however, also be used as superclasses for custom `Bandit` subclass implementations. Or as templates for `Bandit` implementation(s) that directly subclass `contextual`'s `Bandit` superclass.

### *Policy*

`Policy` is another central and often subclassed contextual superclass. Just like `Bandit`, this abstract class declares methods without itself offering an implementation. Any `Policy` subclass is therefore expected to implement `get_action()` and `set_reward()`. Also, any parameters that keep track or summarize context, action and reward values are required to be saved to `Policy`'s public named list `theta`.

```
#' @export
Policy <- R6::R6Class(
  portable = FALSE,
  class = FALSE,
  public = list(
    action      = NULL,      # action results (list)
    theta       = NULL,      # policy parameters theta (list)
    theta_to_arms = NULL,    # theta to arms "helper" (list)
    class_name  = "Policy",  # policy name - required (character)
    initialize = function() {
```

```

self$theta <- list() # initializes theta list
self$action <- list() # initializes action list
},
get_action = function(t, context) {
  # Selects an arm based on self$theta and context, returns it in action$choice
  stop("Policy$get_action() has not been implemented.", call. = FALSE)
},
set_reward = function(t, context, action, reward) {
  # Updates parameters in theta based on reward awarded by bandit
  stop("Policy$set_reward() has not been implemented.", call. = FALSE)
},
set_parameters = function(context_params) {
  # Policy parameter (not theta!) initialisation happens here
  stop("Policy$set_parameters() has not been implemented.", call. = FALSE)
},
initialize_theta = function(k) {
  # Called during contextual's initialisation.
  # Copies theta_to_arms k times, makes the copies available through theta.
  ...
}
)
)

```

Bandit's functions can be described as following:

- `set_parameters()` This helper function, called during a Policy's initialisation, assigns the values it finds in list `self$theta_to_arms` to each of the Policy's `k` arms. The parameters defined here can then be accessed by arm index in the following way: `theta[[index_of_arm]]$parameter_name`.
- `get_action(t, context)` Calculates which arm to play based on the current values in named list `theta` and the current context. Returns a named list `list(choice = arm_chosen_by_policy)` that holds the index of the arm to play.
- `set_reward(t, context, action, reward)` Returns the named list `list(reward = reward_for_choice_made, optimal = optimal_reward_value)` containing the reward for the action previously returned by policy and, optionally, the optimal reward at the current time `t`.

### Agent

To ease the encapsulation of parallel Bandit and Policy simulations, `Agent` is responsible for the flow of information between and the running of one Bandit and Policy pair, for example:

```

policy      <- EpsilonGreedyPolicy$new(epsilon = 0.1, name = "EG")
bandit      <- SyntheticBandit$new(weights = c(0.9, 0.1, 0.1))
agent      <- Agent$new(policy, bandit)

```

It does this by keeping track of `t` through its private named list variable `state` and by making sure that, at each time step `t`, all four main Bandit `t` and Policy `cMAB` methods are called in correct order:

```

Agent <- R6::R6Class(
  public = list(
    #...
    do_step = function() {
      t <- t + 1
      context = bandit$get_context(t)
      action = policy$get_action(t, context)
      reward = bandit$get_reward(t, context, action)
      theta = policy$set_reward(t, context, action, reward)
      list(context = context, action = action, reward = reward, theta = theta)
    }
    #...
  )
)

```

Its main function is `do_step()`, generally called by the worker of a `Simulator` object that takes care of the running of a particular agent instance:

- `do_step()` Completes one time step `t` by consecutively calling `bandit$get_context()`, `policy$get_action()`, `bandit$get_reward()` and `policy$set_reward()`.

### Simulator

A `Simulator` instance is the entry point of any **contextual** simulation. It encapsulates one or more `Agents`, clones them if necessary, runs the `Agents` (in parallel, by default), and saves the log of all of the `Agents` interactions to a `History` object:

```
history <- Simulator$new(agents = agent, horizon = 10, simulations = 10)$run()
```

By default, for performance reasons, a `Simulator` does not save `context` matrices and the (potentially deeply nested) `theta` list to its `History` log. But with its `save_context` and `save_theta` arguments set to `TRUE`, a the above `history` data.table object would be structured as follows:

```
print(history)
```

\$ t	: int	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 ...	# time step
\$ sim	: int	1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 ...	# simulation index number
\$ choice	: num	3 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 ...	# arm chosen by policy
\$ reward	: num	0 1 0 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 ...	# reward awarded by bandit
\$ choice_is_optimal	: int	0 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 ...	# chosen arm optimal one?
\$ optimal_reward_value	: num	1 1 0 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 ...	# best reward at t
\$ propensity	: num	0.9 0.9 0.033 0.9 0.9 ...	# propensity of chosen arm
\$ agent	: chr	'ThompsonSampling' ...	i# agent name
\$ context	: List of 100 matrices		# list of context matrices
\$ theta	: List of 100 Lists		# list of (nested) thetas

To specify how to run a simulation and which data is to be saved to a `Simulator` instance's `History` log, a `Simulator` object can be configured through the following parameters:

- **agents** An Agent instance, or a list of Agent instances to be run by the instantiated Simulator.
- **horizon** The T time steps to run the instantiated Simulator.
- **simulations** How many times to repeat each agent's simulation with a new seed on each repeat (itself deterministically derived from `set_seed`).
- **save\_context** Save context matrices **X** to the History log during a simulation?
- **save\_theta** Save the parameter list **theta** to the History log during a simulation?
- **do\_parallel** Run Simulator processes in parallel?
- **worker\_max** Specifies how many parallel workers are to be used, when `do_parallel` is TRUE. If unspecified, the amount of workers defaults to `max(workers_available)-1`.
- **continuous\_counter** Of use to, among others, offline Bandits. If `continuous_counter` is set to TRUE, the current Simulator iterates over all rows in a data set for each repeated simulation. If FALSE, it splits the data into `simulations` parts, and a different subset of the data for each repeat of an agent's simulation.
- **set\_seed** Sets the seed of R's random number generator for the current Simulator.
- **write\_progress\_file** If TRUE, Simulator writes `progress.log` and `doparallel.log` files to the current working directory, allowing you to keep track of workers, iterations, and potential errors when running a Simulator in parallel.
- **include\_packages** List of packages that (one of) the policies depend on. If a Policy requires an R package to be loaded, this option can be used to load that package on each of the workers. Ignored if `do_parallel` is FALSE.
- **reindex\_t** If TRUE, removes empty rows from the History log, re-indexes the `t` column, and truncates the resulting data to the shortest simulation grouped by agent and simulation.

## History

A Simulator aggregates the data acquired during a simulation in a History object's private `data.table` log. It also calculates per agent average cumulative reward, and, when the optimal outcome per `t` is known, per agent average cumulative regret. It is furthermore possible to `plot()` a History object, `summarize()` it, and, among others, obtain either a `data.frame()` or a `data.table()` from any History instance:

```
history      <- Simulator$new(agent)$run()
dt           <- history$get_data_table()
df           <- history$get_data_frame()
cumulative_regret <- history$cumulative(regret = TRUE)
```

Some other History functions:



- `save(index, t, action, reward, policy_name, simulation_index, context_value = NA, theta_value = NA)` Saves one row of simulation data. `save()` is generally not called directly, but through a `Simulator` instance.
- `save_data(filename = NA)` Writes the History log file in its default `data.table` format, with `filename` as the name of the file which the data is to be written to.
- `load_data = function(filename, nth_rows = 0)` Reads a History log file in its default `data.table` format, with `filename` as the name of the file which the data are to be read from. If `nth_rows` is larger than 0, every `nth_rows` of data is read instead of the full data file. This can be of use with (a first) analysis of very large data files.
- `reindex_t(truncate = TRUE)` Removes empty rows from the History log, reindexes the `t` column, and, if `truncate` is `TRUE`, truncates the resulting data to the shortest simulation grouped by agent and simulation.
- `print_data()` Prints a summary of the History log.
- `cumulative(final = TRUE, regret = TRUE, rate = FALSE)` Returns cumulative reward (when `regret` is `FALSE`) or regret. When `final` is `TRUE`, it only returns the final value. When `final` is `FALSE`, it returns a `data.table` containing all cumulative reward or regret values from 1 to `T`. When `rate` is `TRUE`, cumulative reward or regret are divided by column `t` before any values are returned.

## Plot

The `Plot` class takes an `History` object, and offers several default types of plot:

- **average**: plots the average reward or regret over all simulations per Agent (that is, each Bandit and Policy combo) over time.
- **cumulative**: plots the average reward or regret over all simulations per Agent over time.
- **optimal**: if data on optimal choice is available, "optimal" plots how often the best or optimal arm was chosen on average at each timestep, in percentages, over all simulations per Agent.
- **arms**: plots ratio of arms chosen on average at each time step, in percentages, totaling 100

`Plot` objects can be instantiated directly, or, more commonly, by calling the `plot()` function. In either case, make sure to specify a `History` instance and one of the plot types specified above:

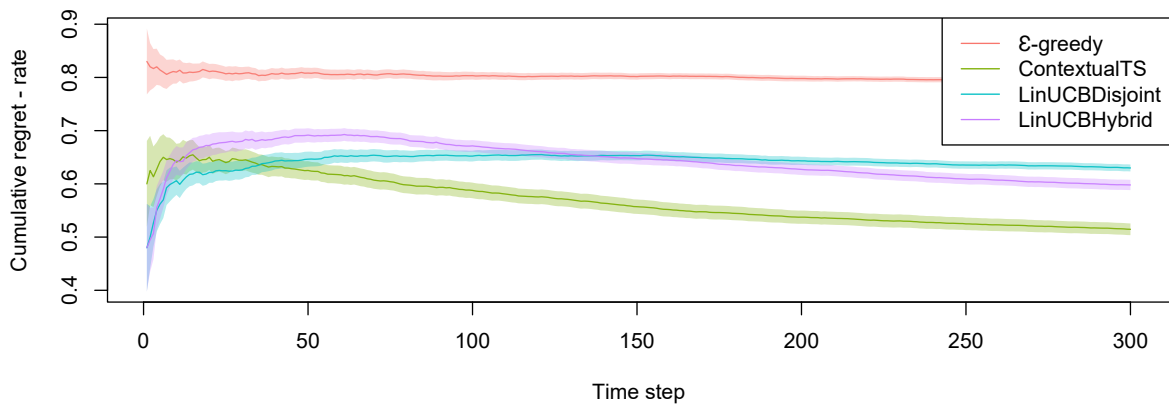
```
# plot a history object through default generic plot() function
plot(history, type = "arms")

# or use the Plot class directly
p1 <- Plot$new()$cumulative(history)
p2 <- Plot$new()$average(history)
```

Also, multiple agents can be combined into one plot:

```
bandit <- ContextualBandit$new(k = 5, d = 6, num_users = 7)
agents <- list(
  Agent$new(EpsilonGreedyPolicy$new(0.1, "\U190-greedy"), bandit),
  Agent$new(ContextualThompsonSamplingPolicy$new(name = "ContextualTS"), bandit),
  Agent$new(LinUCBDisjointPolicy$new(0.7, "LinUCBDisjoint"), bandit),
  Agent$new(LinUCBHybridPolicy$new(0.7, 6, "LinUCBHybrid"), bandit)
)
history <- Simulator$new(agents, 300, 100)$run()

# plot using contextual - faster, less code and configuration
plot(history, type = "cumulative", ci = TRUE, rate = TRUE)
```



## 5. Implementing and extending Policy and Bandit subclasses

Though section 3 provides an introduction to all of **contextual**'s main classes, in practice, researchers will mostly focus on subclassing Policies and Bandits. The current section therefore first demonstrates how to implement some well-known bandit algorithms, and, secondly, how to create Policy and Bandit sub-subclasses.

### 5.1. BasicBandit: a Minimal Bernoulli Bandit

Where not otherwise noted, all Bandit implementations in the current paper refer to (or will be configured as) multi-armed Bandits with Bernoulli rewards. For Bernoulli Bandits, the reward received is either a zero or a one: on each  $t$  they offer either a reward of 1 with probability  $p$  or a reward of 0 with probability  $p - 1$ . In other words, a Bernoulli Bandit has a finite set of arms  $a \in \{1, \dots, k\}$  where the rewards for each arm  $a$  is distributed Bernoulli with parameter  $\mu_a$ , the expected reward of the arm.

One example of a very simple non-contextual Bernoulli bandit is **contextual**'s minimal Bandit implementation, **BasicBandit**:

```
BasicBandit <- R6::R6Class(
  inherit = Bandit,
  public = list(
    initialize = function(weights = NULL) {
      self$set_weights(weights) # arm weight vector
    }
  )
)
```

```

    private$X <- array(1, dim = c(self$d, self$k, 1)) # context matrix of ones
  },
  # ...
  get_weights = function() {
    private$W
  },
  set_weights = function(local_W) {
    private$W <- matrix(local_W, nrow = 1L)           # arm weight vector
    self$d <- as.integer(dim(private$W)[1])           # context dimensions
    self$k <- as.integer(dim(private$W)[2])           # arms
    private$W
  },
  get_context = function(t) {
    contextlist <- list(k = self$k, d = self$d, X = private$X)
    contextlist
  },
  get_reward = function(t, context, action) {
    private$R <- as.double(matrix(runif(self$k) < get_weights(), self$k, self$d))
    rewardlist <- list(
      reward = private$R[action$choice],
      optimal_reward_value = private$R[which.max(private$R)]
    )
    rewardlist
  }
  # ...
)
)

```

BasicBandit expects a weight vector of probabilities, where every element in weight represents the probability of BasicBandit returning a reward of 1 for one of its  $k$  arms. Also, observe that, at every  $t$ , BasicBandit sets private context matrix  $X$  to an unchanging, neutral  $d$  features times  $k$  arms unit matrix, which alludes to the fact that BasicBandit does not generate any covaried contextual cues related to its arms.

## 5.2. Epsilon First

An important feature of **contextual** is that it eases the conversion from formal and pseudocode policy descriptions to clean R6 classes. We will give several examples of such conversions in the current paper, starting with the implementation of the Epsilon First algorithm. In this non-contextual algorithm, also known as AB(C) testing, a pure exploration phase is followed by a pure exploitation phase.

In that respect, the Epsilon First algorithm is actually equivalent to a randomized controlled trial (RCT). An RCT, generally referred to as the gold standard clinical research paradigm, is a study design where subjects are allocated at random to receive one of several clinical interventions. On completion of an RCT, the most successful intervention up till that point in time is suggested to be the superior "evidence-based" option from then on.

A more formal pseudocode description of this Epsilon First policy:

**Algorithm 1** Epsilon First**Require:**  $\eta \in \mathbb{Z}^+$ , number of time steps  $t$  in the exploration phase $n_a \leftarrow 0$  for all arms  $a \in \{1, \dots, k\}$  (count how many times an arm has been chosen) $\hat{\mu}_a \leftarrow 0$  for all arms  $a \in \{1, \dots, k\}$  (estimate of expected reward per arm)**for**  $t = 1, \dots, T$  **do**  **if**  $t \leq \eta$  **then**    play a random arm out of all arms  $a \in \{1, \dots, k\}$   **else**    play arm  $a_t = \arg \max_a \hat{\mu}_{t=\eta, a}$  with ties broken arbitrarily  **end if**  observe real-valued payoff  $r_t$    $n_{a_t} \leftarrow n_{a_{t-1}} + 1$    $\hat{\mu}_{t, a_t} \leftarrow \frac{r_t - \hat{\mu}_{t-1, a_t}}{n_{a_t}}$ **end for**

And the above pseudocode converted to an EpsilonFirstPolicy class:

```

EpsilonFirstPolicy <- R6::R6Class(
  public = list(
    first = NULL,
    initialize = function(first = 100) {
      super$initialize(name)
      self$first <- first
    },
    set_parameters = function() {
      self$theta_to_arms <- list('n' = 0, 'mean' = 0)
    },
    get_action = function(context, t) {
      if (sum_of(theta$n) < first) {
        action$choice <- sample.int(context$k, 1, replace = TRUE)
        action$propensity <- (1/context$k)
      } else {
        action$choice <- max_in(theta$mean, equal_is_random = FALSE)
        action$propensity <- 1
      }
      action
    },
    set_reward = function(context, action, reward, t) {
      arm <- action$choice
      reward <- reward$reward

      inc(theta$n[[arm]]) <- 1
      if (sum_of(theta$n) < first - 1)
        inc(theta$mean[[arm]]) <- (reward - theta$mean[[arm]]) / theta$n[[arm]]

      theta
    }
  )
)

```

To evaluate this policy, instantiate both an `EpsilonFirstPolicy` and a `SyntheticBandit` (a contextual and more versatile `BasicBandit` subclass). Then add the `Bandit/Policy` pair to an `Agent`. Next, add the `Agent` to a `Simulator`. Finally, run the `Simulator`, and `plot()` the its `History` log:

```
horizon      <- 100
simulations  <- 1000
weights      <- c(0.6, 0.3, 0.3)

policy       <- EpsilonFirstPolicy$new(first = 50)
bandit       <- SyntheticBandit$new(weights = weights)

agent        <- Agent$new(policy, bandit)

simulator    <- Simulator$new(agents = agent,
                              horizon = horizon,
                              simulations = simulations,
                              do_parallel = FALSE)

history      <- simulator$run()

par(mfrow = c(1, 2), mar = c(2, 4, 1, 1))
plot(history, type = "cumulative", no_par = TRUE)
plot(history, type = "arms", no_par = TRUE)
```

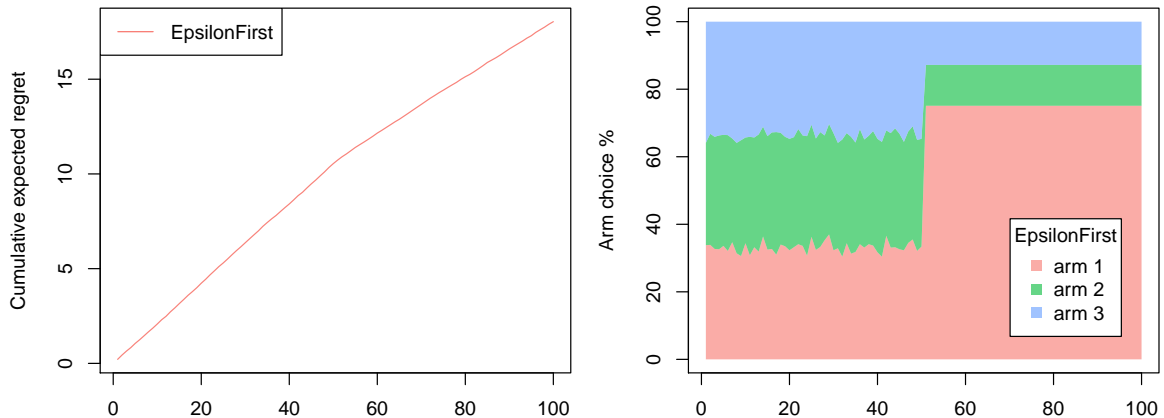


Figure 2: Epsilon Greedy

### 5.3. The Epsilon Greedy Policy

Contrary to the previously introduced Epsilon First policy, an Epsilon Greedy algorithm does not divide exploitation and exploration into two strictly separate phases—it explores with a probability of *epsilon* and exploits with a probability of  $1 - \textit{epsilon}$ , right from the start. That is, an Epsilon Greedy

policy with an *epsilon* of 0.1 explores arms at random 10% of the time. The other  $1 - \text{epsilon}$ , or 90% of the time, the policy "greedily" exploits the currently best-known arm.

This can be formalized in pseudocode as follows:

---

**Algorithm 2** Epsilon Greedy

---

**Require:**  $\epsilon \in [0, 1]$  - exploration tuning parameter

$n_a \leftarrow 0$  for all arms  $a \in \{1, \dots, k\}$  (count how many times an arm has been chosen)

$\hat{\mu}_a \leftarrow 0$  for all arms  $a \in \{1, \dots, k\}$  (estimate of expected reward per arm)

**for**  $t = 1, \dots, T$  **do**

**if** sample from  $\mathcal{N}(0, 1) > \epsilon$  **then**

    play arm  $a_t = \arg \max_a \hat{\mu}_{t-1,a}$  with ties broken arbitrarily

**else**

    play a random arm out of all arms  $a \in \{1, \dots, k\}$

**end if**

  observe real-valued payoff  $r_t$

$n_{a_t} \leftarrow n_{a_{t-1}} + 1$

$\hat{\mu}_{t,a_t} \leftarrow \frac{r_t - \hat{\mu}_{t-1,a_t}}{n_{a_t}}$

**end for**

---

Converted to an EpsilonGreedyPolicy class:

```
EpsilonGreedyPolicy <- R6::R6Class(
  public = list(
    epsilon = NULL,
    initialize = function(epsilon = 0.1) {
      super$initialize(name)
      self$epsilon <- epsilon
    },
    set_parameters = function() {
      self$theta_to_arms <- list('n' = 0, 'mean' = 0)
    },
    get_action = function(context, t) {
      if (runif(1) > epsilon) {
        action$choice <- max_in(theta$mean)
        action$propensity <- 1 - self$epsilon
      } else {
        action$choice <- sample.int(context$k, 1, replace = TRUE)
        action$propensity <- epsilon*(1/context$k)
      }
      action
    },
    set_reward = function(context, action, reward, t) {
      arm <- action$choice
      reward <- reward$reward
      inc(theta$n[[arm]]) <- 1
      inc(theta$mean[[arm]]) <- (reward - theta$mean[[arm]]) / theta$n[[arm]]
      theta
    }
  )
}
```

```
)
)
```

Assign the new class, together with `SyntheticBandit`, to an `Agent`. Again, assign the `Agent` to a `Simulator`. Then run the `Simulator` and `plot()`:

```
horizon          <- 100
simulations      <- 1000
weights          <- c(0.6, 0.3, 0.3)

policy           <- EpsilonGreedyPolicy$new(epsilon = 0.1)
bandit           <- SyntheticBandit$new(weights = weights)

agent            <- Agent$new(policy, bandit)

simulator        <- Simulator$new(agents = agent,
                                   horizon = horizon,
                                   simulations = simulations,
                                   do_parallel = FALSE)

history          <- simulator$run()

par(mfrow = c(1, 2), mar = c(2, 4, 1, 1))
plot(history, type = "cumulative", no_par = TRUE)
plot(history, type = "arms", no_par = TRUE)
```

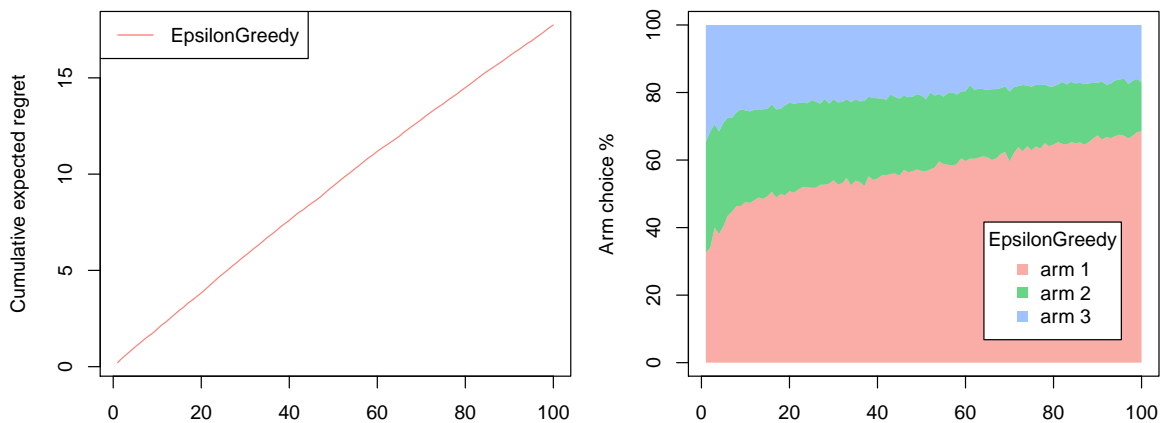


Figure 3: Epsilon Greedy

#### 5.4. Contextual Bandit: LinUCB with Linear Disjoint Models

As a final example of how to subclass `contextual`'s `Bandit` superclass, we move from non-contextual algorithms to a contextual one. As described in section 1, contextual bandits can make use of side



information to help them choose the current best arm to play. For example, contextual information such as a website visitors' location may be related to which article's headline (or arm) on the frontpage of the website will be clicked on most.

Here, we show how to implement and evaluate probably one of the most cited out of all contextual policies, the LinUCB algorithm with Linear Disjoint Models. The policy is more complicated than the previous two bandits, but when following its pseudocode description to the letter, it translates nicely to yet another Bandit subclass.

The LinUCBDisjoint algorithm works by running a linear regression with coefficients for each of  $d$  contextual features on the available historical data. Then the algorithm observes the new context and uses this context to generate a predicted reward based on the regression model. Importantly, the algorithm also generates a confidence interval for the predicted payoff for each of  $k$  arms. The policy then chooses the arm with the highest upper confidence bound. In pseudocode:

---

**Algorithm 3** LinUCB with linear disjoint models

---

**Require:**  $\alpha \in \mathbb{R}^+$ , exploration tuning parameter

```

for  $t = 1, \dots, T$  do
  Observe features of all arms  $a \in \mathcal{A}_t : x_{t,a} \in \mathbb{R}^d$ 
  for  $a \in \mathcal{A}_t$  do
    if  $a$  is new then
       $A_a \leftarrow I_d$  (d-dimensional identity matrix)
       $b_a \leftarrow 0_{d \times 1}$  (d-dimensional zero vector)
    end if
     $\hat{\theta}_a \leftarrow A_a^{-1} b_a$ 
     $p_{t,a} \leftarrow \hat{\theta}_a^T + \alpha \sqrt{x_{t,a}^T A_a^{-1} x_{t,a}}$ 
  end for
  Play arm  $a_t = \arg \max_a p_{t,a}$  with ties broken arbitrarily and observe real-valued payoff  $r_t$ 
   $A_{a_t} \leftarrow A_{a_t} + x_{t,a_t} x_{t,a_t}^T$ 
   $b_{a_t} \leftarrow b_{a_t} + r_t x_{t,a_t}$ 
end for

```

---

Next, translating the above pseudocode into a well organized Bandit subclass:

```

#' @export
LinUCBDisjointPolicy <- R6::R6Class(
  public = list(
    alpha = NULL,
    initialize = function(alpha = 1.0) {
      super$initialize(name)
      self$alpha <- alpha
    },
    set_parameters = function() {
      self$theta_to_arms <- list( 'A' = diag(1,self$d,self$d), 'b' = rep(0,self$d))
    },
    get_action = function(context, t) {
      expected_rewards <- rep(0.0, context$k)
      for (arm in 1:self$k) {
        X          <- context$X[,arm]

```

```

    A      <- theta$A[[arm]]
    b      <- theta$b[[arm]]
    A_inv  <- solve(A)

    theta_hat <- A_inv %*% b
    mean      <- X %*% theta_hat
    sd        <- sqrt(tcrossprod(X %*% A_inv, X))
    expected_rewards[arm] <- mean + alpha * sd
  }
  action$choice <- max_in(expected_rewards)
  action
},
set_reward = function(context, action, reward, t) {
  arm <- action$choice
  reward <- reward$reward
  Xa <- context$X[,arm]

  inc(theta$A[[arm]]) <- outer(Xa, Xa)
  inc(theta$b[[arm]]) <- reward * Xa

  theta
}
)
)

```

Now it is possible to evaluate the `LinUCBDisjointPolicy` using a Bernoulli `SyntheticBandit` with three arms and three context features. In the code below we define each of `SyntheticBandit`'s arms to be, on average, equally probable to return a reward. However, at the same time, the presence of a random context feature vector exercises a strong influence on the distribution of rewards over the arms per time step  $t$ : in the presence of a specific feature, one of the arms becomes much more likely to offer a reward. In this setting, the `EpsilonGreedyPolicy` does not do better than chance. But the `LinUCBDisjointPolicy` is able to learn the relationships between arms, rewards, and features without much difficulty:

```

horizon      <- 100L
simulations  <- 300L

# k=1 k=2 k=3          -> columns represent arms

weights      <- matrix(c(0.8, 0.1, 0.1, # d=1 -> rows represent
                        0.1, 0.8, 0.1, # d=2   context features
                        0.1, 0.1, 0.8), # d=3
                      nrow = 3, ncol = 3, byrow = TRUE)

bandit       <- SyntheticBandit$new(weights = weights, precaching = TRUE)

agents       <- list(Agent$new(EpsilonGreedyPolicy$new(0.1), bandit, "EGreedy"),
                    Agent$new(LinUCBDisjointPolicy$new(1.0), bandit, "LinUCB"))

simulation   <- Simulator$new(agents, horizon, simulations, do_parallel = FALSE)

```

```
history <- simulation$run()

par(mfrow = c(1, 2), mar = c(2, 4, 1, 1))
plot(history, type = "cumulative", regret = FALSE, no_par = TRUE)
plot(history, type = "cumulative", no_par = TRUE)
```

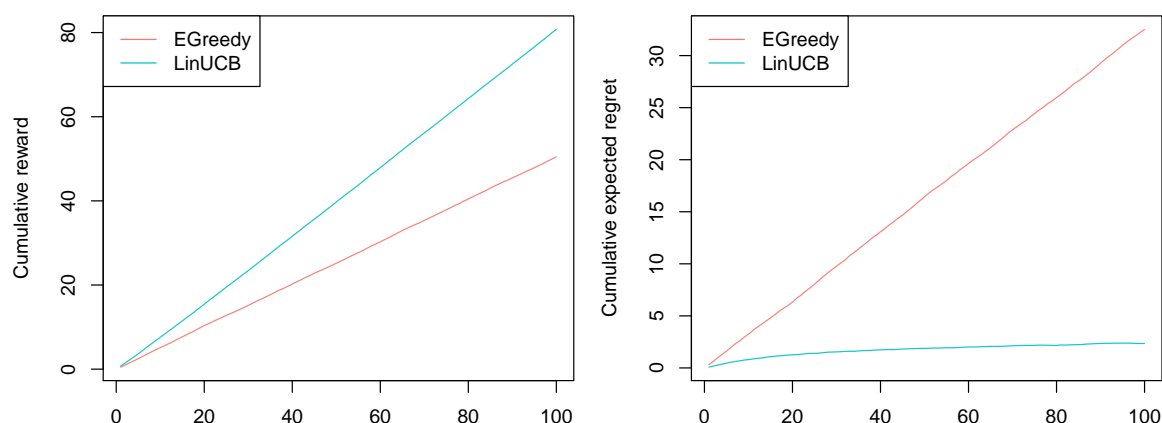


Figure 4: The contextual LinUCB algorithm with linear disjoint models, following Li et al. (2010), compared to a non-contextual basic EpsilonGreedy policy tested on data generated by a contextual synthetic Bandit for two performance measures: left cumulative reward, right expected cumulative regret.

## 5.5. Subclassing Policies and Bandits

**contextual**'s extensibility does, of course, not limit itself to the subclassing of **Policy** classes. Through its R6 based object system it is easy to extend and override any **contextual** super- or subclass. Below, we demonstrate how to apply that extensibility to sub-subclass one **Bandit** and one **Policy** subclass. First, we extend **BasicBandit**'s `codePoissonRewardBandit`, replacing **BasicBandit**'s Bernoulli based reward function with a Poisson based one. Next, we implement an **EpsilonGreedyAnnealingPolicy** version of the Epsilon Greedy policy introduced in section 4.2—where its **EpsilonGreedyAnnealingPolicy** subclass introduces a gradual reduction ("annealing") of the policy's *epsilon* parameter over  $T$ , in effect moving the policy from more explorative to a more exploitative over time.

```
PoissonRewardBandit <- R6::R6Class(
  # Class extends BasicBandit
  inherit = BasicBandit,
  public = list(
    class_name = "PoissonRewardBandit",
    initialize = function(weights) {
```

```

    super$initialize(weights)
  },
  # Overrides BasicBandit's get_reward to generate Poisson based rewards
  get_reward = function(t, context, action) {
    reward_means = c(2,2,2)
    rpm <- rpois(3, reward_means)
    private$R <- matrix(rpm < self$get_weights(), self$k, self$d)*1
    list(
      reward = private$R[action$choice],
      optimal_reward_value = private$R[which.max(private$R)]
    )
  }
)
)
EpsilonGreedyAnnealingPolicy <- R6::R6Class(
  # Class extends EpsilonGreedyPolicy
  inherit = EpsilonGreedyPolicy,
  portable = FALSE,
  public = list(
    class_name = "EpsilonGreedyAnnealingPolicy",
    # Override EpsilonGreedyPolicy's get_action, use annealing epsilon
    get_action = function(t, context) {
      self$epsilon <- 1 / log(t + 0.0000001)
      super$get_action(t, context)
    }
  )
)
weights <- c(7,1,2)
horizon <- 200
simulations <- 100
bandit <- PoissonRewardBandit$new(weights)
agents <- list(Agent$new(EpsilonGreedyPolicy$new(0.1), bandit, "EG Annealing"),
              Agent$new(EpsilonGreedyAnnealingPolicy$new(0.1), bandit, "EG"))
simulation <- Simulator$new(agents, horizon, simulations, do_parallel = FALSE)

history <- simulation$run()

par(mfrow = c(1, 2), mar = c(2,4,1,1))
plot(history, type = "cumulative", no_par = TRUE)
plot(history, type = "average", regret = FALSE, no_par = TRUE)

```

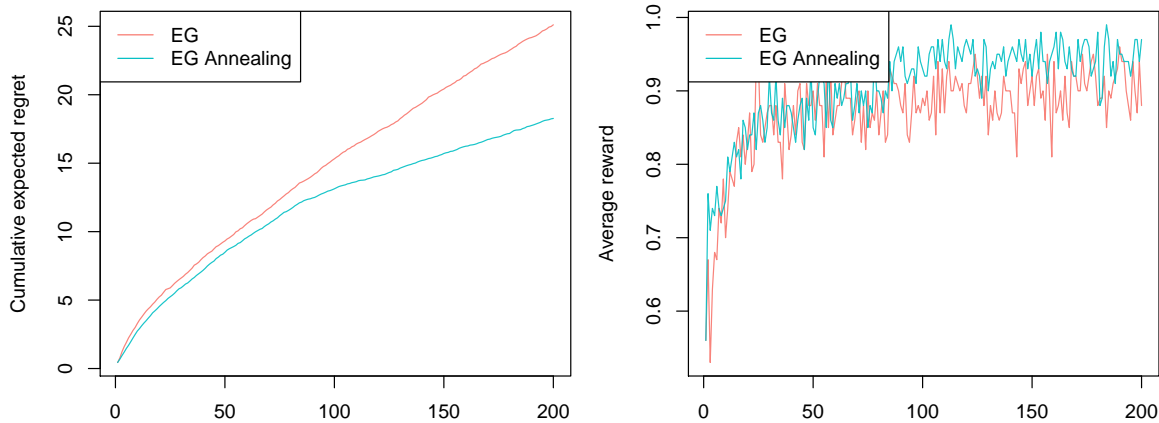


Figure 5: Extending BasicBandit and EpsilonGreedyPolicy

## 6. Offline evaluation

Though it is, as demonstrated in the previous section, relatively easy to create basic synthetic Bandits to test simple MAB and cMAB policies, the creation of more elaborate simulations that generate more complex contexts for more demanding policies can become very complicated very fast. So much so, that the implementation of such simulators regularly becomes more intricate than the analysis and implementation of the policies themselves. Moreover, even when succeeding in surpassing these technical challenges, it remains an open question if an evaluation based on simulated data reflects real-world applications since modeling by definition introduces bias.

It would, of course, be possible to evaluate policies by running them in a live setting. Such live evaluations would undoubtedly deliver unbiased, realistic estimates of a policy's effectiveness. However, the use of live data makes it more difficult to compare multiple policies at the same, as it is not possible to test multiple policies at the same time with the same user. Using live data is usually also much slower than an offline evaluation, as online evaluations are dependent on active user interventions. Furthermore, the testing of policies on a live target audience, such as patients or customers, with potentially suboptimal policies, could become either dangerous or very expensive.

Another unbiased approach to testing MAB and cMAB policies would be to make use of offline historical data or logs. Such a data source does need to contain observed contexts and rewards, and any actions or arms must have been selected either at random or with a known probability per arm  $D = (p_1, p_2, p_3, \dots, p_k)$ . That is, such data sets contain at least  $D = (x_{t,a_t}, a_t, r_{t,a_t})$ , or, in the case of known probabilities per arm  $D = (x_{t,a_t}, a_t, r_{t,a_t}, p_a)$ . Not only does such offline data pre-empt the issues of bias and model complexity, but it also offers the advantage that such data is widely available, as historical logs, as benchmark data sets for supervised learning, and more.

There is a catch though; when we make use of offline data, we miss out on user feedback every time a policy under evaluation suggests a different arm from the one that was initially selected and saved to the offline data set. In other words, offline data is "partially labeled" in respect to evaluated Bandit policies. However, as shown in the following subsections, it is possible to get around this partial

labeling problem by discarding part of the data, and by making the most of any additional information in offline data sets.

### 6.1. Offline Evaluation of Policies through LiSamplingBandit

The first, and most important, step in using offline data in policy evaluation is to recognize that we need to limit our evaluation to those rows of data where the arm selected is the same as the one that is suggested by the policy under evaluation. In pseudocode:

---

#### Algorithm 4 Li Policy Evaluator

---

**Require:** Policy  $\pi$

Data stream of events  $S$  of length  $T$

$h_0 \leftarrow \emptyset$  An initially empty history log

$R_\pi \leftarrow 0$  An initially zero total cumulative reward

$L \leftarrow 0$  An initially zero length counter of valid events

**for**  $t = 1, \dots, T$  **do**

    Get the  $t$ -th event  $(x_{t,a_t}, a_t, r_{t,a_t})$  from  $S$

**if**  $\pi(h_{t-1}, x_{t,a_t}) = a_t$  **then**

$h_t \leftarrow \text{CONCATENATE}(h_{t-1}, (x_{t,a_t}, a_t, r_{t,a_t}))$

$R_\pi = R_\pi + r_{t,a_t}$

$L = L + 1$

**else**

$h_t \leftarrow h_{t-1}$

**end if**

**end for**

Output: rate of cumulative regret  $R_\pi/L$

---

Converted to a contextual BasicBandit subclass and run on a large data set:

```
BasicLiBandit <- R6::R6Class(
  "BasicLiBandit",
  inherit = BasicBandit,
  portable = TRUE,
  class = FALSE,
  private = list(
    S = NULL
  ),
  public = list(
    initialize = function(data_stream, arms) {
      self$k <- arms
      self$d <- 1
      private$S <- data_stream
    },
    get_context = function(index) {
      contextlist <- list(
        k = self$k,
        d = self$d,
        X = matrix(1, self$d, self$k) # no context
      )
    }
  )
)
```

```

    contextlist
  },
  get_reward = function(index, context, action) {
    reward_at_index <- as.double(private$$$reward[[index]])
    if (private$$$choice[[index]] == action$choice) {
      list(reward = reward_at_index)
    } else {
      NULL
    }
  }
)
)

library(data.table)
library(RCurl)
library(foreign)

url <- "https://raw.githubusercontent.com/Nth-iteration-labs/"
url <- paste0(url, "contextual_data/master/PersuasionAPI/persuasion.csv")

website_data <- getURL(url)
website_data <- setDT(read.csv(textConnection(persuasion_data)))
horizon <- 350000L
simulations <- 100L
bandit <- BasicLiBandit$new(website_data, arms = 4)
agent <- Agent$new(UCB1Policy$new(), bandit)
history <- Simulator$new(agent, horizon, simulations, reindex_t = TRUE)$run()

par(mfrow = c(1, 2), mar = c(2, 4, 1, 1))
plot(history, type = "cumulative", regret = FALSE,
      rate = TRUE, ylim = c(0.0105, 0.015))

```

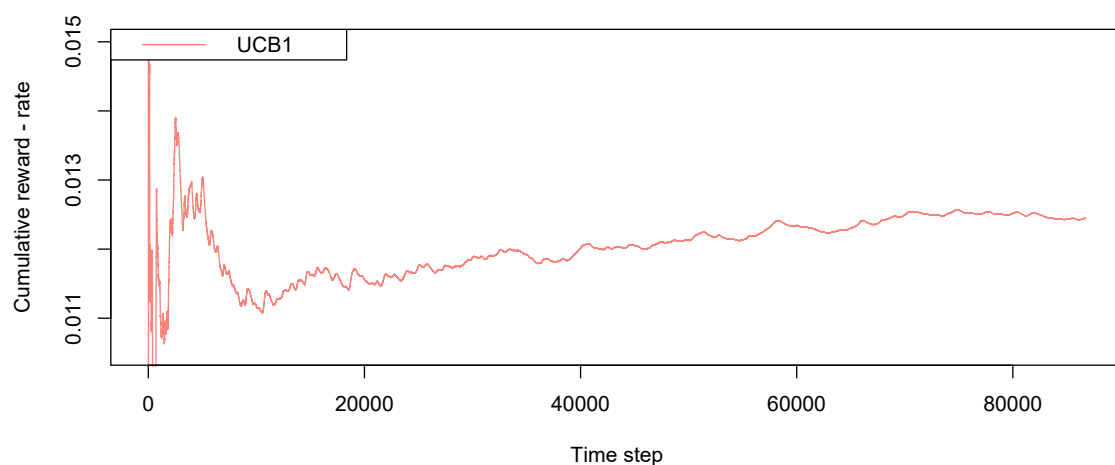


Figure 6: An UCB1 policy evaluated on a Li Bandit. The Bandit samples from 350000 rows with clicks for rewards and the display of one of four “persuasive strategies” to users of an online store representing the offline Bandit’s four arms.



## 7. Replication of LinUCB

In the current section we aim to demonstrate how **contextual** facilitates the comparison of bandit policies on big offline data sets by replicating the main results of [Li, Chu, Langford, and Schapire \(2010\)](#)'s seminal "A Contextual-Bandit Approach to Personalized News Article Recommendation". The paper describes how the authors ran an offline Li bandit such as the one outlined in the previous section to evaluate the effectiveness of several contextual and non-contextual policies by training and comparing them on click through data drawn from the Today news module on the Yahoo! homepage over the course of several days in May 2009. With a data set of 45,811,883 separate, random and unbiased events (made available at the Yahoo! lab's website<sup>5</sup>) it is a perfect candidate for showcasing **contextual**'s ability to evaluate multiple policies in parallel.

For the details on the data structure and the general setup of the experiment, I refer the reader to [Chu, Park, Beaupre, Motgi, Phadke, Chakraborty, and Zachariah \(2009\)](#) and to the original [Li et al. \(2010\)](#) paper. In brief, each row in the Yahoo! data set describes an interaction event (click or no click) of users shown a randomly chosen article. Each of these events contains information on (I) a random article chosen to be positioned at the story position on top of the Today module on Yahoo!'s website (II) six features per article for each of the articles shown below the article at the main story position (III) six user features, where each event contains another, distinct user (IV) information on whether the user clicked on the article at the story position, or not.

More formally, for each event  $t$  an article represents one of  $k$  arms (that is, one of the 271 articles observed within the course of the 10 days covered by the data set) with  $\mathbb{R}^6$  features  $X_{t,a}$  per arm, and another  $\mathbb{R}^6$  features  $X_{t,u}$  per unique visitor. Together, the flattened outer product of the user and article feature vector creates an  $\mathbb{R}^{36}$  feature vector  $X_t$  for each user and article pair with the outcome value or reward  $r_t$  click (1) or no click (0).

As the Yahoo data was too large to fit into memory, we imported most<sup>6</sup> of the data set's CSV files into a MonetDB [Idreos, Groffen, Nes, Manegold, Mullender, and Kersten \(2012\)](#) instance—a very fast, open source column-oriented database management system with great R support<sup>7</sup>. The import script, example import scripts for several other databases (MySQL, SQLite, Postgresql), this replication's Bandit and Policy subclasses, and more can be found in the package's `demo/replication_li_2010` directory.

With the Yahoo! data imported into the MonetDB server, the next steps were the creation of a Bandit subclass that would be able to query it, and the creation of Policy subclasses according to their description in the [Li et al. \(2010\)](#) paper. Since most of these Policies are already available in **contextual**, it would stand to reason that we would only have had to implement these. But as only a subset of all 271 articles or arms were shown for each separate event, we had to make some minor changes to each of these Policy classes to make them run smoothly on the constantly shifting pool of available arms. We solved this by simply adding an "arms" vector containing the indexes of all currently active arms to the context list created by the Bandit. That is, in our YahooBandit we first create a `self$arm_lookup` table containing all arms, and then return the following in YahooBandit's `get_context()`:

<sup>5</sup>At <https://webscope.sandbox.yahoo.com/catalog.php?datatype=r&did=49>

<sup>6</sup>The first two CSV files of the Yahoo! data set contained irregularities, so we left those out of the import. That means that our simulations had 37,450,196 events available to them, instead of all 45,811,883. Still more than enough to replicate the original paper.

<sup>7</sup>MonetDB can be downloaded at <https://www.monetdb.org/>

```

get_context = function(index) {
  ...
  # Retrieve the index of all arms this row/event.
  arm_indices_this_event <- seq(10, 184, by = 7)
  article_ids            <- row[arm_indices_this_event]
  article_ids            <- article_ids[!is.na(article_ids)]
  article_ids            <- match(article_ids, self$arm_lookup)
  ...
  contextlist <- list(
    k = self$k,
    d = self$d,
    unique = self$unique, # <-- Indexes of all disjoint arms (user features)
    shared = self$shared, # <-- Indexes of all shared arms (article features)
    arms = article_ids,   # <-- Indexes of arms this event.
    X = X
  )
}

```

And adapted each Policy accordingly, for example, in YahooEpsilonGreedyPolicy's `get_action()`:

```

get_action = function(t, context) {
  if (runif(1) > self$epsilon) {
    # get the max of context$arms *currently in play*
    max_index <- context$arms[max_in(theta$mean[context$arms])]
    self$action$choice <- max_index
  } else {
    # sample from the arms *currently in play*
    self$action$choice <- sample(context$arms, 1)
  }
  self$action
}

```

## 8. Conclusion

## 9. UML Diagrams

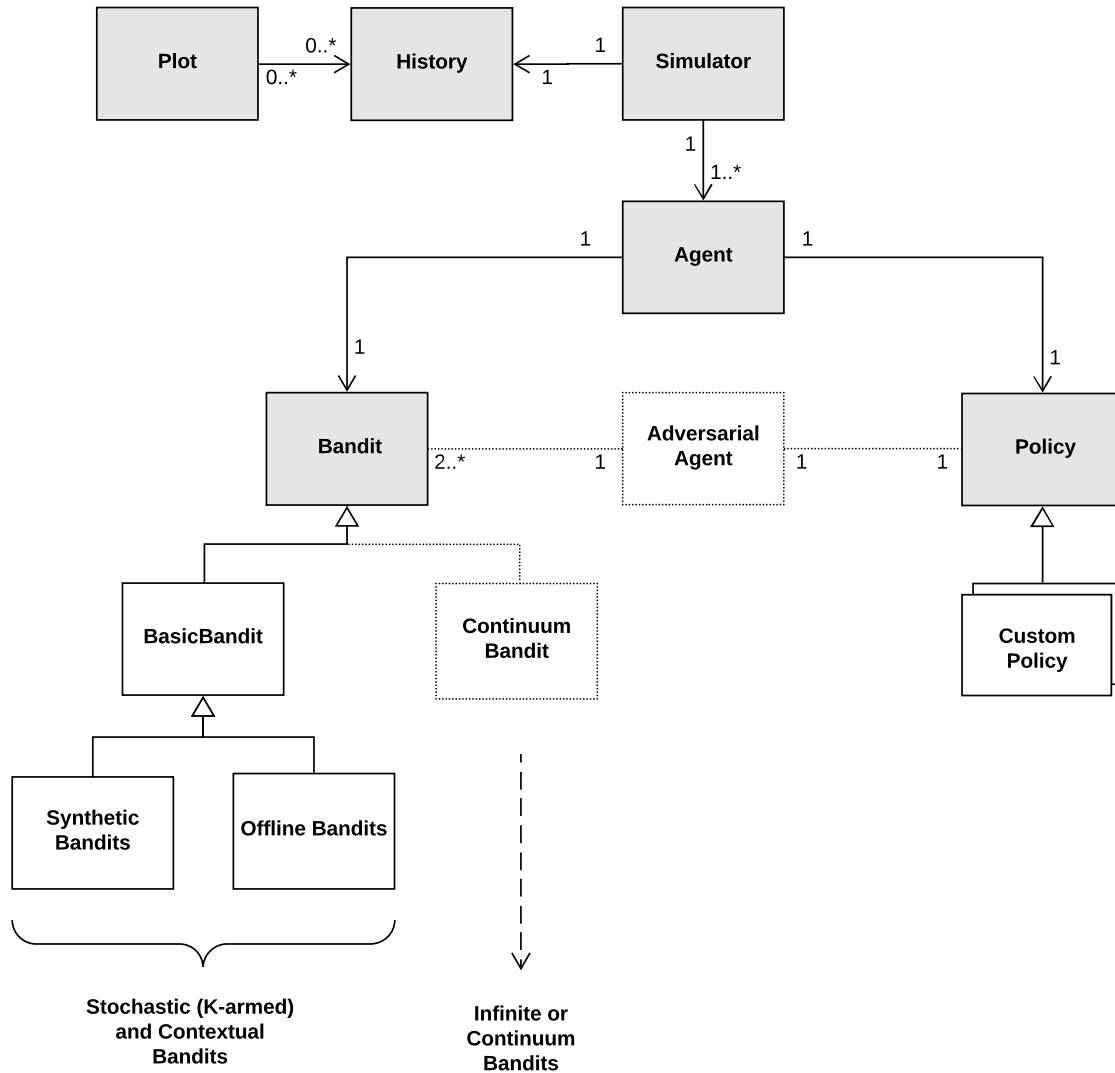


Figure 7: **contextual** UML Class Diagram

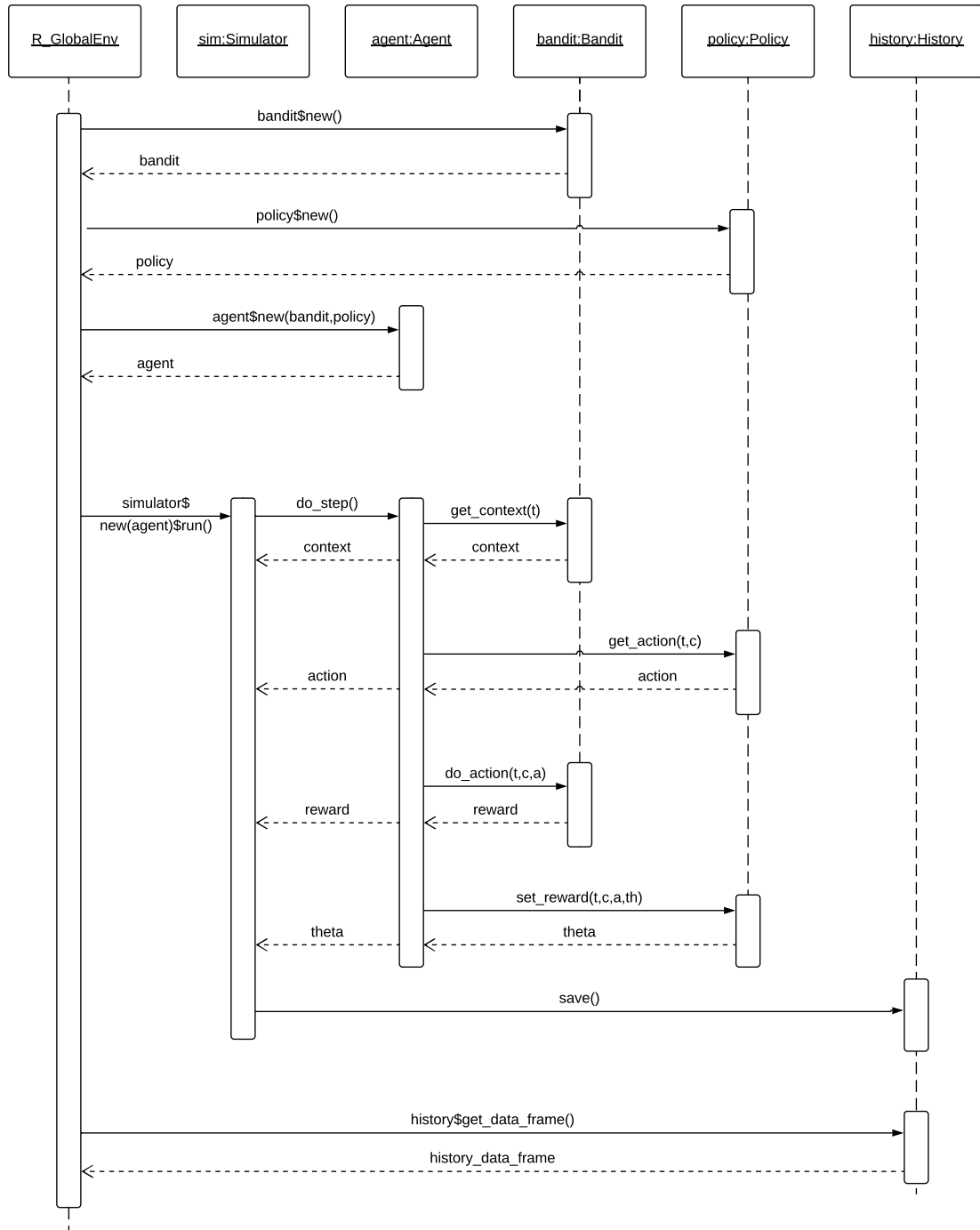


Figure 8: contextual UML Sequence Diagram

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