

Chapter 1

Introduction

Nowadays every aspect of life is characterized by the need to make choices. Each choice is conditioned by a variable number of parameters. In many applicative domains (recommendation systems, medical analysis tools, real time game engines, speech recognizers...), this number could be very high. The possibility to manage in an efficient way such a number of parameters is guaranteed by a significant number of mathematical techniques increasingly performing and refined.

Every decisional problem can be translated into a *mathematical model* that represents the essence of the problem itself. A crucial step in formulating a model is the construction of the *objective function*. This requires developing a quantitative measure of performance relative to each of the decision maker's ultimate objectives that were identified while the problem was being defined. [HL01]

However we know that it is not always possible to define the objective function in advance. It is possible that objective function is unknown or, at least, partially unknown at the time the problem is dealt with. In these cases the optimization process of the objective function takes the name of *black-box optimization*.

Mathematically, we are considering the problem of finding a global maximizer (or minimizer) of an unknown objective function f :

$$x^* = \arg \max_{x \in \mathcal{X}} f(x) \quad (1.1)$$

where \mathcal{X} is some design space of interest. In global optimization, \mathcal{X} is often a compact subset of \mathbb{R}^d [SSW⁺16].

Bayesian optimization is one of the best known black-box optimization techniques. It is a powerful tool for the joint optimization of design choices that is gaining great popularity in recent years. It is a sequential model-based approach to solving problem [AS08]. We prescribe a prior beliefs over the possible objective functions and then sequentially refine this model as data are observed via Bayesian posterior updating. The Bayesian Posterior represents our updated beliefs -given data- on the likely objective function we are optimizing [SSW⁺16].

In this thesis I propose an innovative approach to black-box optimization based on the Reinforcement Learning (RL) technique.

Reinforcement Learning (RL) is the problem faced by a learner that must behaviour through trial-and-error interactions with a dynamic environment. It can be considered the problem of mapping situations to actions in order to maximize a numerical reward signal [KLM96].

In the first part of this work I will compare the state of the art performances of the Bayesian model with those obtained through the implementation of a Reinforcement Learning (RL) agent in the same order.

In the last part of the thesis I will explain how RL and Bayesian optimization can be joined to emulate human brain learning process.

Chapter 2

Background

2.1 Markov Decision Process

Markov Decision Processes (MDPs) are a classical formalization of sequential decision making under uncertainty, where actions influence not just immediate responses, but also subsequent situations. Hence an MDP can be described as a controlled *Markov chain*¹, where the control is given at each step by the chosen action. In this chapter we will present the structure of an MDP and many techniques to solve its.

Markov Decision Process Markov decision processes are defined as controlled stochastic processes satisfying the *Markov property*² and assigning reward values to state transitions [Put94]. Formally, they are described by the 5-tuple (S, A, T, p, r) where:

- S is the state space in which the process' evolution takes place;
- A is the set of all possible actions which control the state dynamics;
- T is the set of time steps where decisions need to be made;
- $p()$ denotes the state transition probability function;
- $r()$ provides the reward function defined on state transitions.

¹A sequence of random variables X_0, X_1, \dots with values in a countable set S is a *Markov chain* if at any time n , the future states (or values) X_{n+1}, X_{n+2}, \dots depend on the history X_0, \dots, X_n only through the present state X_n [Kon09].

²A stochastic process has the *Markov property* if the probabilistic behaviour of the chain in the future depends only on its present value and discards its past behaviour.

States The set of environmental states S is defined as the finite set $\{s_1, \dots, s_N\}$ where the size of the state space is N , i.e. $|S| = N$ [WvO12]. Each state $s \in S$ is a vector of attributes (*state variables*) that describes the current configuration of the system [NFK06]. More specifically, a state variable is the minimally dimensioned function of history that is necessary and sufficient to compute the "state of knowledge" [Pow07].

Actions The set of actions A is defined as the finite set $\{a_1, \dots, a_K\}$ where the size of the action space is K , i.e. $|A| = K$. Actions can be used to control the system state. The set of actions that can be applied in some particular state $s \in S$, is denoted $A(s)$, where $A(s) \subseteq A$. In more structured representations the fact that some actions are not applicable in some states, is modelled by a precondition function : $S \times A \rightarrow \text{true}, \text{false}$, stating whether action $a \in A$ is applicable in state $s \in S$ [WvO12].

Time Steps The set of time steps T is defined as the finite set $\{t_1, \dots, t_M\}$ where the size of the action space is M , i.e. $|T| = M$. Speaking about time we have to distinguish between *epochs* and *episodes*. An episode is made of a fixed number Z of epochs. An epoch is the smallest time unit in an MDP.

Transition Probability The transition probabilities $p()$ characterize the state dynamics of the system, i.e. indicate which states are likely to appear after the current state. For a given action a , $p(s'|s, a)$ represents the probability for the system to transit to state s' after undertaking action a in state s . This $p()$ function is usually represented in matrix form where we write P_a the $|S| \times |S|$ matrix containing elements $\forall s, s', P_{a, s, s'} = p(s'|s, a)$. Since each line of these matrices sums to one, the P_a are said to be stochastic matrices. The $p()$ probability distributions over the next state s' follow the fundamental property which gives their name to Markov decision processes. If we write $h_t = (s_0, a_0, \dots, s_{t-1}, a_{t-1}, s_t)$ the history of states and actions until time step t , then the probability of reaching state s_{t+1} consecutively to action a_t is only a function of a_t and s_t , and not of the entire history h_t [SB10]. We can resume this concept through the following equation :

$$\forall h_t, a_t, s_{t+1} \quad P(s_{t+1}|h_t, a_t) = P(s_{t+1}|s_t, a_t) = p(s_{t+1}|s_t, a_t) \quad (2.1)$$

Reward Function The reward function specifies rewards for being in a state, or doing some action in a state. The state reward function is defined as $R : S \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$, and it specifies the reward obtained in states. The

reward function is an important part of the MDP that specifies implicitly the *goal* of learning. Thus, the reward function is used to give direction in which way the system, i.e. the MDP, should be controlled [WvO12]. It is critical that the rewards we set up truly indicate what we want accomplished. If we reward the achievement of subgoals , then the agent might find a way to achieve them without achieving the real goal. Reward signal is our way of communicating the agent *what* we want to achieve, not *how* it achieved [SB18].

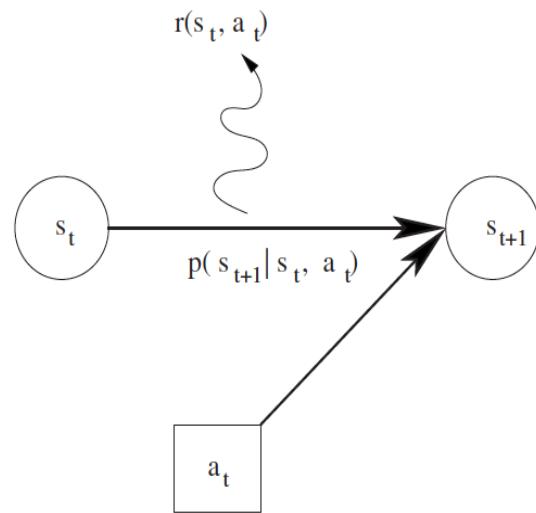


Figure 2.1: Markov decision process [SB10].

Markov decision processes allow us to model the state evolution dynamics of a stochastic system when this system is controlled by an agent choosing and applying the actions a_t at every time step t . The procedure of choosing such actions is called an action policy, or strategy, and is written as π [SB10]

Policy Formally, given an MDP $\langle S, A, p(), r() \rangle$, a policy is a computable function that outputs for each state $s \in S$ an action $a \in A(s)$ [WvO12] A policy can decide deterministically upon the action to apply or can define a probability distribution over the possible applicable actions. Then, a policy can be based on the whole history h_t (history-dependent policy) or can only consider the current state s_t . Thus, we can obtain four main families policies, as shown in table 2.1.

Policy π_t	Deterministic	Stochastic
Markov	$s_t \rightarrow a_t$	$a_t, s_t \rightarrow [0, 1]$
History-dependent	$h_t \rightarrow a_t$	$h_t, s_t \rightarrow [0, 1]$

Table 2.1: Different policy families for MDPs [SB10]

For a deterministic policy, $\pi_t(s_t)$ or $\pi_t(h_t)$ defines the chosen action a_t . For a stochastic policy, $\pi_t(a, s_t)$ or $\pi_t(a, h_t)$ represents the probability of selecting $a \in A$ for a_t [SB10]. The sets so defined are included in each other, from the most general case of stochastic, history-dependent policies, to the very specific case of deterministic, Markov policies, as shown in figure 2.2.

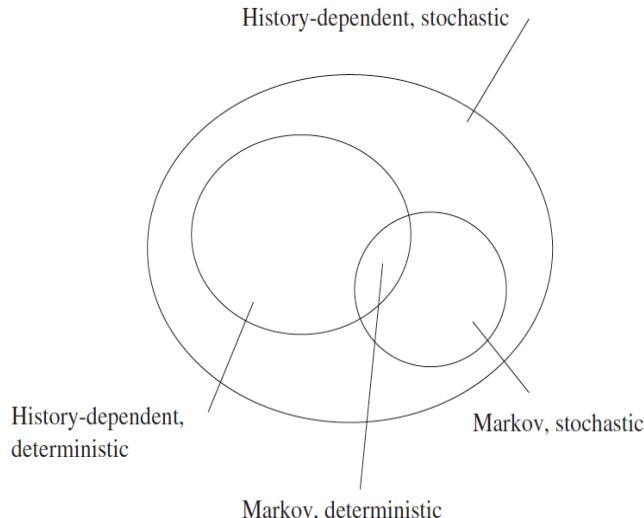
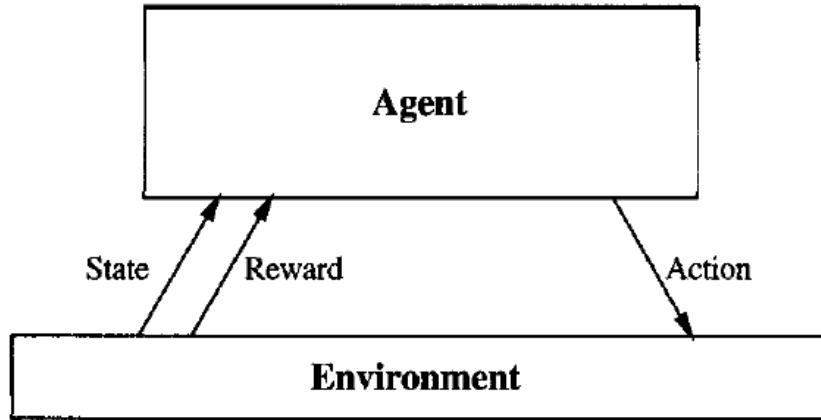


Figure 2.2: Relationship between the different sets of policies [SB10].

Application of a policy to an MDP is done in the following way. As shown in figure 2.3 each time an agent performs an action a_t in a state s_t , it receives a real-valued reward t_t that indicates the immediate value of this state-action transition. This produces a sequence of states s_i , actions a_i , and immediate rewards r_i as shown in the figure. The agent's task is to learn a control policy, $\{\pi : S \rightarrow A\}$, that maximizes the expected sum of these rewards, with future rewards discounted exponentially by their delay [Mit97].

As already said the goal of learning in an MDP is to gather rewards. There are several ways of taking into account the future in how to behave



$$s_0 \xrightarrow[a_0]{r_0} s_1 \xrightarrow[a_1]{r_1} s_2 \xrightarrow[a_2]{r_2} \dots$$

Figure 2.3: Policy application schema [SB18].

now. There are basically three models of optimality in the MDP, which are sufficient to cover most of the approaches in the literature :

$$E\left[\sum_{t=0}^h r_t\right] \quad E\left[\sum_{t=0}^{\infty} \gamma^t r_t\right] \quad \lim_{h \rightarrow \infty} E\left[1/h \sum_{t=0}^h r_t\right]$$

Figure 2.4: Optimality : **a)** finite horizon, **b)** discounted, infinite horizon, **c)** average reward

Discount Factor The *finite horizon* model simply takes a finite horizon of length h and states that the agent should optimize its expected reward over this horizon. In the *infinite-horizon model*, the long-run reward is taken into account, but the rewards that are received in the future are discounted according to how far away in time they will be received. A

discount factor γ , with $0 \leq \gamma \leq 1$ is used for this. Note that in this discounted case, rewards obtained later are discounted more than rewards obtained earlier. Additionally, the discount factor, ensures that, even with infinite horizon, the sum of the rewards obtained is finite. In episodic tasks, i.e. in tasks where the horizon is finite, the discount factor is not needed or can equivalently be set to 1. If $\gamma = 0$ the agent is said to be myopic, which means that it is only concerned about immediate rewards. The last optimality model is *average-reward* model, maximizing the long-run *average-reward*. Sometimes this is called the *gain optimal* policy and in the limit, it is equal to the infinite-horizon discounted model [WvO12]

Bellman Equation The concept of *value function* is the link between optimality criteria and policies. Most learning algorithms for MDPs compute optimal policies by learning value functions. The value of a state s under policy π , denoted $V^\pi(s)$ is the expected return when starting in s and following π thereafter. Using the infinite-horizon, discounted model :

$$V^\pi(s) = E_\pi \left\{ \sum_{k=0}^{\infty} \gamma^k r_{t+k} | s_t = s \right\} \quad (2.2)$$

A similar state-action value function : $Q : S \times A \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$ can be defined as the expected return starting from state s , taking action a and thereafter following policy π :

$$Q^\pi(s, a) = E_\pi \left\{ \sum_{k=0}^{\infty} \gamma^k r_{t+k} | s_t = s, a_t = a \right\} \quad (2.3)$$

For any policy π and any state s the expression 2.3 can recursively be defined in terms of a so-called *Bellman Equation* :

$$\begin{aligned} V^\pi(s) &= E_\pi \{ r_t + \gamma r_{t+1} + \gamma^2 r_{t+2} + \dots | s_t = t \} \\ &= E_\pi \{ r_t + \gamma V^\pi(s_{t+1}) | s_t = s \} \\ &\quad \sum_{s'} T(s, \pi(s), s') (R(s, a, s') + \gamma V^\pi(s')) \end{aligned} \quad (2.4)$$

It denotes that the expected value of state is defined in terms of immediate reward and values of possible next state weighted by the transition probabilities, and additionally a discount factor. Note that multiple policies can have the same value function, but for a given policy π , V^π is unique. The goal for any MDP is to find a best policy, i.e. the policy that receives the

most reward. This means maximizing the value function of equation 2.3 for all states $s \in S$. An optimal policy, denoted π^* , is such that $V^{\pi^*}(s) \geq V^\pi(s)$ for all $s \in S$ and all policies π :

$$V^*(s) = \max_{a \in A} \sum_{s'} T(s, \pi(s), s') (R(s, a, s') + \gamma V^\pi(s')) \quad (2.5)$$

This expression is called the *Bellman optimality equation*. It states that the value of a state under an optimal policy must be equal to the expected return for the best action in a state [WvO12].

Value Iteration vs Policy Iteration Before studying how to solve MDPs let's clarify main differences between two key concepts we will recursively find : *value iteration* and *policy iteration*.

Both value iteration and policy iteration compute the same thing (all optimal values), i.e. they work with Bellman updates. In Value iteration we start with a random value function and then we find a new (improved) value function in an iterative process, until reaching the optimal value function. Value iteration computation of Bellman Equation is:

$$V_{k+1}(s) \leftarrow \max_a \sum_{s'} T(s, a, s') [R(s, a, s') + \gamma V_k(s')] \quad (2.6)$$

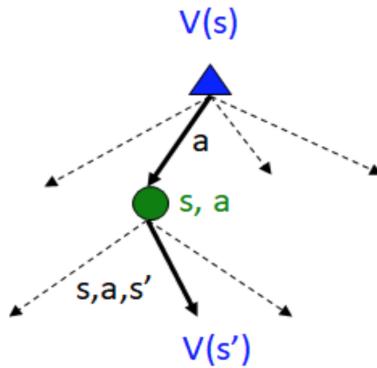


Figure 2.5: Value Iteration Schema

Value iteration has three disadvantages: it is slow ($O(S^2A)$ per iteration), the max at each state rarely changes, the policy often converges long

before the values.

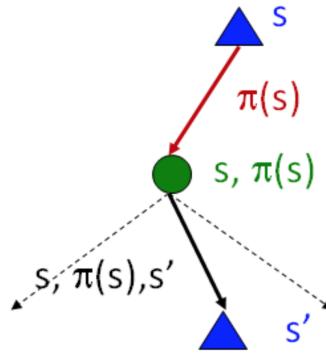
Instead, policy iteration computations of Bellman Equation are:

- Evaluation : for a fixed current policy p , find values with policy evaluation:

$$V_{k+1}^{\pi_i}(s) \leftarrow \sum_{s'} T(s, \pi_i(s), s')[R(s, \pi_i(s), s') + \gamma V_k^{\pi_i}(s')] \quad (2.7)$$

- Improvement : for fixed values, get a better policy using policy extraction :

$$\pi_{i+1}(s) = \arg \max_a \sum_{s'} T(s, a, s')[R(s, a, s') + \gamma V^{\pi_i}(s')] \quad (2.8)$$



Complexity of policy iteration is $O(S^2)$.

Summarizing what said until now we can write:

In value iteration :

- Every iteration updates both the values and implicitly the policy;
- We don't track the policy, but taking the max over actions implicitly recomputes it.

In policy iteration :

- We do several passes that update utilities with fixed policy;
- After the policy is evaluated, a new policy is chosen;
- The new policy will be always better until the end.

2.2 Solving MDP

Now that we have defined MDPs, policies, optimality criteria and value functions, it is time to consider the question of how to solve an MDP computing an optimal policy π^* . Several dimensions exists along which algorithms have been developed for this purpose. The most important distinction is that between *model-based* and *model-free* algorithms [WvO12].

	Model-based algorithms	Model-free algorithms
General name	DP	RL
Basic assumption	A model of the MDP is known beforehand, and can be used to compute value functions and policies using the Bellman equation.	Rely on interaction with the environment. Because a model of the MDP is not known, the agent has to explore the MDP to obtain information.
Planning	Yes	Yes
Learning	No	Yes

Table 2.2: Main differences between model-based and model-free algorithms.

2.2.1 Dynamic Programming

The term Dynamic Programming (DP) refers to a class of algorithms that is able to compute optimal policies in the presence of a perfect model of the environment described as a Markov Decision Process. These algorithms are known as *planning algorithms*. In planning, the idea is that we are given some description of a starting state or states; a goal state or states; and some set of possible actions that the agent can take; we want to find the sequence of actions that get us from the start state to the goal state. We search through a tree that is the sequences of actions that we can take, and we try to find a nice short plan. In so doing two of the possible planning algorithms are **BFS algorithm** and **DFS algorithm**.

The method of Dynamic Programming systematically records solutions for all sub-problems of increasing lengths. Using this programming paradigm

the optimal policy is defined through the step-by-step definition of optimal sub-policies. According to Bellman optimality principle, all optimal sub-policies of an optimal policy are optimal sub-policies. DP algorithms are obtained by turning Bellman equations into update rules for improving approximations of the desired value functions.

Studying DP we can distinguish two different main methods. *Policy evaluation* refers to the typically iterative computation of the value functions for a given policy. *Policy improvement* refers to the computation of an improved policy given the value function for that policy. Either of these can be used to reliably compute optimal policies and value functions for finite MDPs given complete knowledge of the MDP.

Classical DP methods operate in sweeps through the state set, performing an *expected update* operation on each state. Each such operation updates the value of one state based on the values of all possible successor states and their probabilities of occurring. Expected updates are closely related to Bellman equations: they are little more than these equations turned into assignment statements. When the updates no longer result in any changes in value, convergence has occurred to values that satisfy the corresponding Bellman equation [SB18].

The assumption that a model is available will be hard to ensure for many applications, however DP algorithms are very relevant because they define fundamental computational mechanism which are also used when no model is available.

2.2.2 Reinforcement Learning

Dynamic Programming's methods compute optimal policies for an MDP assuming that a perfect model is available. Reinforcement Learning (or *approximate dynamic programming*, or *neuro-dynamic programming*) is primarily concerned with how to obtain an optimal policy when such a model is not available. RL adds to MDPs a focus on approximation and incomplete information, and the need for sampling and exploration. In contrast with DP's algorithms, model-free methods do not rely on the availability of priori known transition and reward models. The lack of the model generates a need to *sample* the MDP to gather statistical knowledge about this unknown model. Many model-free RL techniques exist that probe the environment by doing actions, thereby estimating the same kind of state value and state-action value functions as model-based techniques [WvO12].

Roughly speaking Reinforcement Learning (RL) is the problem faced by a learner that must behaviour through trial-and-error interactions with a dynamic environment. It can be considered a problem of mapping situations to actions in order to maximize a numerical reward signal [KLM96].

In RL the learner must select an action to take in each time step: every choice done by the agent changes the environment in an unknown fashion and receives a reward which value is based on the consequences. The objective of the learner is to choose a sequence of actions based on observations of the current environment that maximizes cumulative reward or minimizes cumulative cost over all time steps [LM16]. The general class of algorithms that interact with the environment and update their estimates after each experience is called *online* RL.

Algorithm 1: A general algorithm for online RL [WvO12]

```

1 foreach episode do
2   s  $\in S$  is initialized as the starting state;
3   t := 0;
4   repeat
5     choose an action a  $\in A(s)$ ;
6     perform action a ;
7     observe the new state s' and received reward r update  $\tilde{T}$ ,  $\tilde{R}$ ,  $\tilde{Q}$ 
      and/or  $\tilde{V}$  using the experience  $\langle s, a, r, s' \rangle$ ;
8     s := s';
9   until s' is a goal state;
10 end
```

Studying RL, one of the first problems we have to face with is the distinction between *direct* and *indirect* Reinforcement Learning. We will explain the difference between these two approaches in figure 2.7.

RL is different both from *supervised learning* and from *unsupervised learning*. It is not a sample of learning from a training set of labelled examples provided by a knowledgeable external supervisor (*supervised learning*) and it is not a sample of searching and finding structure hidden in a collection of unlabelled data (*unsupervised learning*). More specifically we can say that RL can be distinguished from other forms of learning based on the following characteristics :

- Reinforcement Learning deals with temporal sequences. In contrast

REINFORCEMENT LEARNING		
	Model Based / Indirect	Model Free / Direct
Basic Assumption	First to learn the transition and reward model from interaction with the environment. After that, when the model is (approximately or sufficiently) correct, all the DP methods from the previous section apply.	Step right into estimating values for actions, without even estimating the model of the MDP.

Figure 2.7: RL's approaches classification.

with non-supervised learning problems where the order in which the examples are presented is not relevant, the choice of an action at a given time step will have consequences on the examples that are received at a subsequent time steps [SB10].

- In contrast with supervised learning, the environment does not tell the agent what would be the best possible action. Instead, the agent may just receive a scalar reward representing the value of its action and it must *explore* the possible alternative actions to determine whether its action was the best or not [SB10].

According to what just said, one of the challenges that arise in RL, and not in other kind of learning, is the trade-off between *exploration* and *exploitation*. To obtain an higher reward, an RL agent must prefer actions that it has tried in the past and found to be effective in producing reward. In order to discover such actions, it has to try actions that it has not selected before. The agent *exploits* what it has already experienced in order to obtain reward, but it has also to *explore* in order to eventually make better action selections in the future [SB18]. In other words *exploitation* consists of doing again actions which have proven fruitful in the past, whereas *exploration* consists of trying new actions, looking for a larger cumulated reward, but eventually leading to a worse performance. Dealing with the exploration/exploitation trade-off consists of determining how the agent should explore to get as fast as possible a policy that is optimal or close enough to the optimum. The most basic exploration strategy is the ϵ -greedy policy, i.e. the learner takes its current best action with probability $(1 - \epsilon)$ and a (randomly selected) other action with probability ϵ . [SB10].

Monte Carlo Methods Monte Carlo Methods (MC) represent a first instance of model-free RL's algorithms. They are one way solving the Reinforcement Learning problem based on averaging sample returns.

The Monte Carlo approach consists of performing a large number of trajectories from all states s in S , and estimating $V(s)$ as an average of the cumulated rewards observed along these trajectories. In each trial, the agent records its transitions and rewards, and updates the estimates of the value of the encountered states according to a discounted reward scheme. The value of each state then converges to $V^\pi(s)$ for each s if the agent follows policy π .

More formally, let (s_0, s_1, \dots, s_N) be a trajectory consistent with the policy π and the unknown transition function $p()$, and let (r_1, \dots, r_N) be the rewards observed along this trajectory. In MC method, the N values $V(s_t)$, $t = 0, \dots, N - 1$ are updated according to :

$$V(s_t) \leftarrow V(s_t) + \alpha(s_t)(r_{t+1} + r_{t+2} + \dots + r_N - V(s_t)) \quad (2.9)$$

with the learning rates $\alpha(s_t)$ converging to 0 along the iterations [SB10] . MC algorithms treat the long-term reward as a random variable and take as its estimate the sampled mean. Because the sampling is dependent on the current policy π , only returns for actions suggested by π are evaluated. Thus, *exploration* is of key importance here, just as in other model-free methods. One way of ensuring enough exploration is to use exploring starts, i.e. each state-action pair has a non-zero probability of being selected as the initial pair.

A distinction can be made between *every-visit* MC, which averages over all visits of a state $s \in S$ in all episodes, and *first-visit* MC, which averages over just the returns obtained from the first visit to a state $s \in S$ for all episodes. Both variants will converge to V^π for the current policy π over time [WvO12] .

Studying RL methods we have to distinguish between *on-policy methods* and *off-policy methods*. On-policy methods attempt to evaluate or improve the policy that is used to make decisions. Off-policy methods evaluate or improve a policy different from that used to generate the data. MC methods can be used for both on-policy and off-policy control, and the general pattern complies with the generalized policy iteration procedure.

	On-policy methods	Off-policy methods
Basic assumption	They attempt to evaluate or improve the policy that is used to make decisions.	We do not need to follow any specific policy; our agent could even behave randomly and despite this it can still find the optimal policy.

Table 2.3: Difference between on-policy and off-policy methods.

Temporal Difference Learning An important problem faced by RL is the so called *temporal credit assignment problem*. In model-free contexts it is difficult to assess the utility of some action, if the real effects of this particular action can only be perceived much later. One possibility is to wait until the "end" (e.g. of an episode) and punish or reward specific actions along the path taken. However, this will take a lot of memory and often, with ongoing tasks, it is not known beforehand whether, or when, there will be an "end". Instead, one can use similar mechanisms as in value iteration to adjust the estimated value of a state based on the immediate reward and the estimated (discounted) value of the next state. This is generally called *temporal difference learning* which is a general mechanism underlying the model-free methods [WvO12].

We can formally represent this concept modifying equation 2.9 as follow:

$$V(s_t) \leftarrow V(s_t) + \alpha(s_t)(\delta_t + \delta_{t+1} + \dots + \delta_{N-1}) \quad (2.10)$$

defining the temporal difference error δ_t by :

$$\delta_t = r_{t+1} + \gamma V(s_{t+1}) - V(s_t), \quad t = 0, \dots, N-1. \quad (2.11)$$

The error δ_t must be interpreted in each state as a measure of the difference between the current estimation $V(s_t)$ and the correct estimation $r_{t+1} + V(s_{t+1})$.

Like Monte Carlo methods, TD ones performs estimation of action-value functions based on the experience of the agent and can do without a model of the underlying MDP; however, they combine this estimation using local estimation propagation mechanisms coming from dynamic programming, resulting in their incremental properties. Thus TD methods, which are at the heart of most reinforcement learning algorithms, are characterized by this combination of estimation methods with local updates incremental properties [SB10].

Sarsa Algorithm : On-policy TD Control Knowing the exact value of all states is not always enough to determine what to do. If the agent does not know which action results in reaching any particular state, i.e. if the agent does not have a model of the transition function, knowing V does not help it determine its policy. To solve this problem, Watkins [WD92] introduced the action-value function Q , whose knowledge is similar to the knowledge of V when p is known. The action-value function of a fixed policy π whose value function is V^π is :

$$\forall s \in S, a \in A, \quad Q^\pi(s, a) = r(s, a) + \gamma \sum_{s'} p(s'|s, a) V^\pi(s'). \quad (2.12)$$

The value of $Q^\pi(s, a)$ is interpreted as the expected value when starting from s , executing a and then following the policy π afterwards. We have $V^\pi(x) = Q^\pi(x, \pi(x))$ and the corresponding Bellman equation is :

$$\forall s \in S, a \in A \quad Q^*(s, a) = r(s, a) + \gamma \sum_{s'} p(s'|s, a) \max_b Q^*(s', b) \quad (2.13)$$

Than we have :

$$\forall s \in S, \quad V^*(s) = \max_a Q^*(s, a), \quad \pi^*(s) = \arg \max_a Q^*(s, a). \quad (2.14)$$

The SARSA algorithm works on state-action pairs rather than on states. Its update equation is :

$$Q(s_t, a_t) \leftarrow Q(s_t, a_t) + \alpha[r_{t+1} + \gamma Q(s_{t+1}, a_{t+1}) - Q(s_t, a_t)]. \quad (2.15)$$

the information necessary to perform such an update is $(s_t, a_t, r_{t+1}, s_{t+1}, a_{t+1})$, hence the name of the algorithm : SARSA. This algorithm suffers from one conceptual drawback: performing the updates as stated above implies knowing in advance what will be the next action a_{t+1} for any possible next state s_{t+1} . As a result, the learning process is tightly coupled to the current policy (the algorithm is called "on-policy") and this complicates the exploration process. As a result, proving the convergence of SARSA was more difficult than proving the convergence of "off-policy" algorithms such as Q-learning. Empirical studies often demonstrates the better performance of SARSA compared to Q-learning [SB10].

Algorithm 2: SARSA Algorithm : On-policy TD Control

```

1 Initialize  $Q(s, a)$  arbitrarily;
2 Repeat the next cycle until  $s$  is terminal;
3 foreach episode do
4   Initialize  $s$ ;
5   Choose  $a$  from  $s$  using policy derived from  $Q$  (e.g.  $\epsilon$ -greedy);
6   foreach step of episode do
7     Take action  $a$ , observe  $r, s'$ ;
8     Choose  $a'$  from  $s'$  using policy derived from  $Q$  (e.g.  $\epsilon$ -greedy);
9      $Q(s, a) \leftarrow Q(s, a) + \alpha[r + \gamma Q(s', a') - Q(s, a)]$  ;
10     $s \leftarrow s'$  ;
11     $a \leftarrow a'$  ;
12  end
13 end

```

Q-learning Algorithm : Off-policy TD Control The Q-Learning Algorithm can be seen as a simplification of the algorithm, given that it is no more necessary to determine the action at the next step to calculate updates. Its update equation is :

$$Q(s_t, a_t) \leftarrow Q(s_t, a_t) + \alpha[r_{t+1} + \gamma \max_a Q(s_{t+1}, a) - Q(s_t, a_t)] \quad (2.16)$$

The main difference between SARSA and Q-Learning lies in the definition of the error term. The $Q(s_{t+1}, a_{t+1})$ term in the equation 2.15 is replaced by $\max_a Q(s_{t+1}, a)$ in equation 2.16. Updates are based on instantaneously available information. In this algorithm, the T_{tot} parameter corresponds to the number of iterations. There is here one learning rate $\alpha_t(s, a)$ for each state-action pair, it decreases at each visit of the corresponding pair. The **Simulate** function returns a new state and the corresponding reward according to the dynamics of the system. The choice of the current state and of the executed action is performed by functions **ChooseState** and **ChooseAction**. The **Initialize** function initializes the Q function with Q_0 , which is often initialized with **null** values, whereas more adequate choices can highly improve the performance [SB10].

SARSA(λ) Previous algorithms only perform one update per time step in the state that the agent is visiting. This update process is particularly slow. Indeed, an agent deprived of any information on the structure of the

Algorithm 3: Q-learning Algorithm [SB10]

```

1  $\alpha_t$  is the learning rate ;
2 Initialize ( $Q_0$ );
3 for  $t = 0$  ;  $t \leq T_{tot} - 1$  ;  $t++$  do
4    $s_t \leftarrow \text{ChooseState};$ 
5    $a_t \leftarrow \text{ChooseAction};$ 
6    $s_{t+1}, r_{t+1} \leftarrow \text{Simulate}(s_t, a_t);$ 
7   update  $Q_t$  ;
8   begin
9      $Q_{t+1} \leftarrow Q_t;$ 
10     $\delta_t \leftarrow r_{t+1} + \gamma \max_b Q_t(s_{t+1}, b) - Q_t(s_t, a_t)$  ;
11     $Q_{t+1}(s_t, a_t) \leftarrow Q_t(s_t, a_t) + \alpha_t(s_t, a_t)\delta_t$  ;
12  end
13 end
14 return  $Q_{Tot}$ 

```

value function needs at least n trials to propagate the immediate reward of a state to another state that is n transitions away. Before this propagation is achieved, if the initial values are `null`, the agent performs a random walk in the state space, which means that it needs an exponential number of steps as a function of n before reaching the reward "trail". A naive way to solve the problem consists of using a memory of trajectory and to propagate all the information backwards along the performed transitions each time a reward is reached. Such a memory of performed transitions is called an "eligibility trace". A problem with this naive approach is that the required memory grows with length of trajectories, which is obviously not feasible in the infinite horizon context. In SARSA(λ) algorithm a more sophisticated approach that addresses the infinite horizon context.

As we already saw Q-learning integrates the temporal difference error idea. With the update rule of Q-learning :

$$Q_{t+1}(s_t, a_t) = Q_t(s_t, a_t) + \alpha_t \{r_{t+1} + \gamma V_t(s_{t+1}) - Q_t(s_t, a_t)\} \quad (2.17)$$

for transition $s_t, a_t, s_{t+1}, r_{t+1}$, and in the case where action a_t executed in state s_t is the optima action for Q_t , then the error term is $r_{t+1} + \gamma V_t(s_{t+1}) - V_t(s_t)$. For a generic parameter $\lambda \in [0, 1]$ we can generalize as follow:

Algorithm 4: SARSA (λ) Algorithm [SB10]

```

1 /*  $\alpha$  is a learning rate */ ;
2 Initialize  $Q_0$  ;
3  $z_0 \leftarrow 0$  ;
4  $s_0 \leftarrow \text{ChooseState}$  ;
5  $a_0 \leftarrow \text{ChooseAction}$  ;
6  $t \leftarrow 0$  ;
7 while  $t \leq T_{tot} - 1$  do
8    $(s'_t, r_{t+1}) \leftarrow \text{Simulate}(s_t, a_t)$  ;
9    $a'_t \leftarrow \text{ChooseAction}$  ;
10  update  $Q_t$  and  $z_t$  ;
11  begin
12     $\delta_t \leftarrow r_{t+1} + \gamma Q_t(s'_t, a'_t) - Q_t(s_t, a_t)$  ;
13     $z_t(s_t, a_t) \leftarrow z_t(s_t, a_t) + 1$  ;
14    for  $s \in S, a \in A$  do
15       $| Q_{t+1}(s, a) \leftarrow Q_t(s, a) + \alpha_t(s, a)z_t(s, a)\delta_t$  ;
16       $| z_{t+1}(s, a) \leftarrow \gamma\lambda z_t(s, a)$ 
17    end
18    if  $s'_t$  non absorbing then
19       $| s_{t+1} \leftarrow s'_t$  and  $a_{t+1} \leftarrow a'_t$  ;
20    end
21    else
22       $| s_{t+1} \leftarrow \text{ChooseState}$  ;
23       $| a_{t+1} \leftarrow \text{ChooseAction}$  ;
24    end
25  end
26 end
27 return  $Q_{Tot}$ 

```

where $z_t(s, a)$ and is the eligibility trace and *absorbing state* means terminal state [SB10].

Chapter 3

Black-Box Optimization

One of the most exciting challenges in optimization practice is the possibility to optimize in absence of an algebraic model of the system to be optimized. This kind of optimization is known as *black-box optimization* and it is the subject matter of this dissertation.

A black-box function $f(x) : \mathbb{R}^n \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$ is a function for which the analytic form is not known. Nowadays there are lots of mathematical models to succeed in optimize this kind of functions. One of the best known of these methods is the *Bayesian Optimization Model* (BO).

In this chapter we will first analyse how BO works and than we will propose an innovative, Reinforcement Learning based approach to solve the same problem.

Gaussian Processes Before introducing BO we have to describe what *Gaussian Processes* (GPs) are. GPs are an alternative approach to regression problems. GP is a *non-parametric* approach (we don't have a priori knowledge of how many parameters will be useful for the regression) to find a distribution over the possible functions $f(x)$ that are consistent with observed data. A GP is a generalization of the Gaussian probability distribution. Whereas a probability distribution describes random variables which are scalars or vectors (for multivariate distributions), a *stochastic process* governs the properties of functions.

GP is a convenient and powerful prior distribution on functions, which we will take here to be of the form

$$f : \mathcal{X} \leftarrow \mathbb{R}. \quad (3.1)$$

The GP is defined by the property that any finite set of N points $\{x_n \in \mathcal{X}\}_{n=1}^N$ induces a multivariate Gaussian distribution on \mathbb{R}^N . The n th of these points is taken to be the function value $f(x_n)$ [SLA12]. The support and properties of the resulting distribution on functions are determined by a mean function

$$m : \mathcal{X} \leftarrow \mathbb{R} \quad (3.2)$$

and by a positive definite covariance function

$$k : \mathcal{X} \times \mathcal{X} \leftarrow \mathbb{R}. \quad (3.3)$$

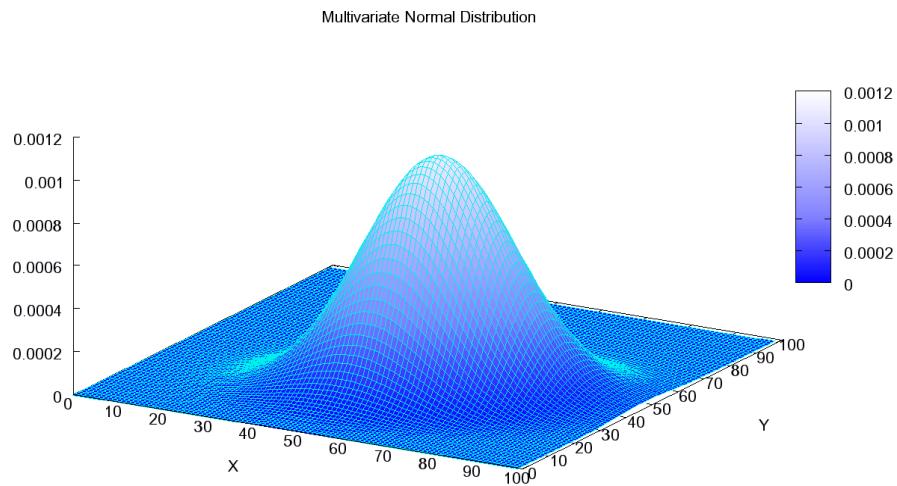


Figure 3.1: Multivariate Gaussian Distribution [MND].

Acquisition Functions for Bayesian Optimization Let's assume that the function $f(x)$ is drawn from a GP prior and that our observation are of the form $\{x_n \in \mathcal{X}\}_{n=1}^N$, where $y_n \sim \mathcal{N}(f(x_n), v)$ and v is the variance of noise introduced into the function observations. This prior and these data

induce posterior over functions; the acquisition function, which we denote by

$$a : \mathcal{X} \leftarrow \mathbb{R}^+, \quad (3.4)$$

determines what point in \mathcal{X} should be evaluated next via a proxy optimization

$$x_{\text{next}} = \arg \max_x a(x), \quad (3.5)$$

where several different functions have been proposed. There are several popular choices of acquisition functions. Under the Gaussian process prior, these functions depend on the model solely through its predictive mean function $\mu(x; \{x_n, y_n\})$ and predictive variance function $\sigma^2(x; \{x_n, y_n\})$ [SLA12].

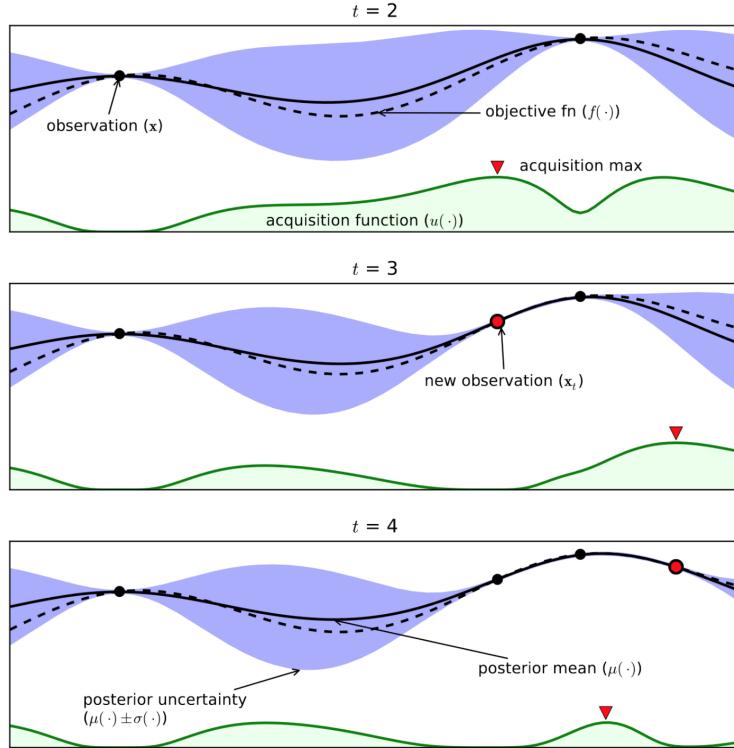


Figure 3.2: 2-d Bayesian Optimization Process Example [Bay]

An RL Approach To Black-Box Optimization As previously said, the aim of this thesis is to describe an innovative RL approach to the black-box function optimization problem. The process to reach this goal has required about three months of work. We made a lot of attempts. A full, detailed chronology of the development of the method presented in this chapter is described in **Appendix A**. Here we describe the final product of our efforts.

Let's consider the following scenario :

- **Agent** : The Reinforcement Learning agent has to maximize a black-box bivariate function. The function is continuously defined over a specific domain. The function is mapped on a space of 600×600 pixels. The agent has to complete its job having exactly 100 epochs for each one of the 150 episodes. In each epoch the agent has a specific position in space described through the two coordinates (x, y) . Each time the agent makes an action the angle between (x, y) and (x', y') and the value of the function $f(x', y')$ are computed.
- **State** : The state is represented by two lists: the first one contains the last two computed *angles* and the second one contains the correspondent last two *actions*.
- **Actions** : In each epoch the agent can make one of four different actions : *move north*, *move south*, *move east*, *move west*. Each time the agent moves itself of 40 pixels in one of the previously described directions. The resultant effective movement over function is computed as shown in algorithm 5.
- **Reward** : In the context just described, a real terminal state doesn't exist. Cause we are working with black-box functions we cannot specify two coordinates (x, y) and the corresponding value function z as maximum, that is, as the terminal state. For this reason every action of the agent is rewarded. The simulation ends after 1000 episodes are completed. In each explored state we define a Δ computed as follow:

$$\Delta = \max f(x_n, y_n) - f(x, y) \quad (3.6)$$

where $f(x, y)$ is the value function computed in the *current state*. Reward at each epoch is equal to Δ .

Algorithm 5: From pixels to real values

```

1 /* knowing pixel_X and pixel_Y */;
2 /* knowing pixel_X_Range and pixel_Y_Range */ ;
3 /* knowing the function */;
4
5 domain = function.getDomain() ;
6 x_Range = domain.max_X - domain.min_X ;
7 y_Range = domain.max_Y - domain.min_Y ;
8
9 x_Real = domain.min_X + (pixel_X * x_Range) / pixel_X_Range ;
10 y_Real = domain.min_Y + (pixel_Y * y_Range) / pixel_Y_Range ;
11
12 return x_Real, y_Real

```

The nature of the movement the agent can make in each epoch can be of two different types : *linear movement* or *parametric movement*. A linear movement can be thought as a crow flies one. In this case the structure of the function is not really considered. On the other hand, a parametric movement can be thought as a real movement over the function curves. In this case the structure of the function influences the amount of the movement really done.

If the movement is linear we compute angles as follow :

Algorithm 6: Angle computation in linear movement case.

```

1 /* knowing (x, y) */ ;
2 /* knowing (x', y') */ ;
3 /* movementAmount = M */ ;
4 /* currentMax = max f(xn, yn) */ ;
5
6 z = f(x, y) ;
7 z' = f(x', y');
8
9 δ = ((x' - x), (y' - y)) ;
10 α = arctan(δ / movementAmount)
11
12 Δ = z' - currentMax

```

We can explain this algorithm briefly recalling some trigonometry. Let's suppose to be in a simple 2d-case like the one represented in figure 3.3.

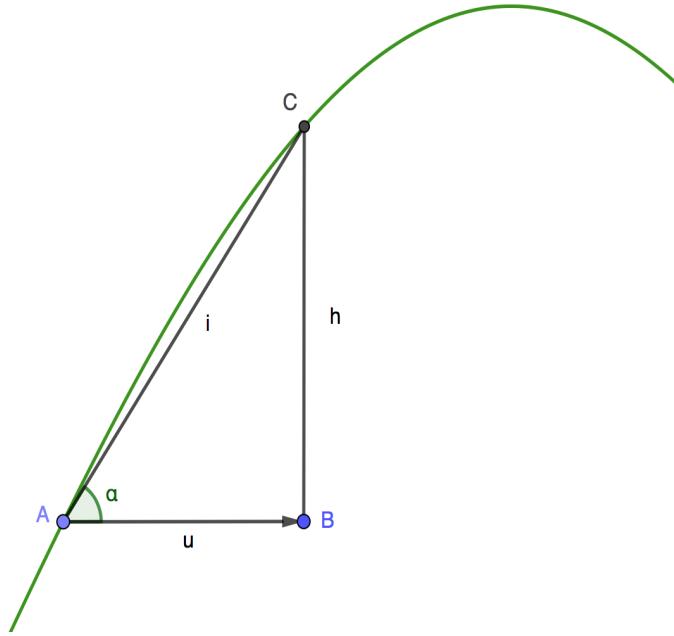


Figure 3.3: Linear movement computations.

Let's suppose that the starting point of our RL agent at epoch e is the point A with coordinates (x, y) . In the 2d-case the agent can make only one of two actions for each epoch : *move on* and *go back*. Making a linear movement of the type *move on* the arriving point at epoch e' is B with coordinates (x', y) . Knowing that the objective function is $f(x) = \sin(2x)$, we can compute $f(x')$. At this time we should know point C with coordinates $(x', f(x'))$. u is the **movement amount** and \overline{CB} equals to $f(x') - f(x)$ is the δ . From trigonometry

$$\tan \alpha = \frac{\delta}{\text{movementAmount}}, \quad (3.7)$$

so we can finally compute the angle α as follow :

$$\alpha = \arctan \frac{\delta}{\text{movementAmount}} \quad (3.8)$$

If the movement is parametric we have to be more specific about the amount of movement over the function. We do this using the following algorithm :

Algorithm 7: Angle computation in parametric movement case.

```

1 /* knowing  $(x, y)$  */ ;
2 /* knowing  $(x', y')$  */ ;
3 /* movementAmount =  $M$  */ ;
4 /* currentMax =  $\max f(x_n, y_n)$  */ ;
5
6  $z = f(x, y)$  ;
7  $z' = f(x', y')$  ;
8
9  $\delta = ((x' - x), (y' - y))$  ;
10  $\alpha = \arctan\left(\frac{\delta}{\text{movementAmount}}\right)$  ;
11
12  $\text{hypotenuse} = \frac{\text{movementAmount}}{\cos \alpha}$  ;
13
14  $\text{projectionOnHypotenuse} = \frac{\text{movementAmount} * \text{movementAmount}}{\text{hypotenuse}}$  ;
15
16  $\text{realMovementAmount} = \text{projectionOnHypotenuse} * \cos \alpha$  ;
17
18  $\Delta = z' - \text{currentMax}$ ;
```

We can easily explain this algorithm looking at figure 3.4.

As previously done, let's suppose that the starting point of our RL agent at epoch e is the point A with coordinates (x, y) . In the $2d$ -case the agent can make only one of two actions for each epoch : *move on* and *go back*. Making a linear movement of the type *move on* the arriving point at epoch e' is B with coordinates (x', y) . Knowing that the objective function is $f(x) = \sin(2x)$, we can now compute $f(x')$. We should now know point C with coordinates $(x', f(x'))$. u is the *movement amount* and CB equals to $f(x') - f(x)$ is δ . Using trigonometry we can compute α . Our objective is to know the real amount of movement done by the agent on the function. We want to know how much is \overline{AE} . From the first theorem of Euclid we know that *in a right-angled triangle, the square constructed on a cathetus is equivalent to the rectangle that has for dimensions the hypotenuse and the projection of*

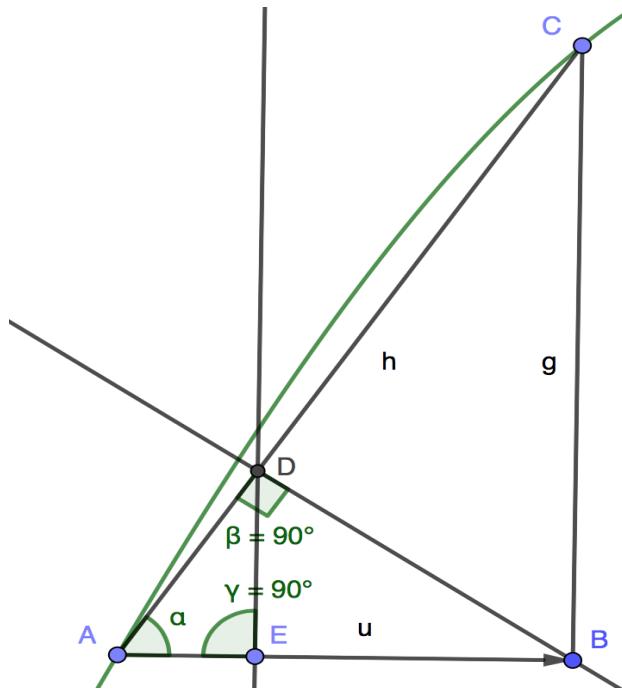


Figure 3.4: Parametric movement computations.

the cathetus on the hypotenuse. This means that in a right-angled triangle, the cathetus is proportional medium between the hypotenuse and its own projection on it. According to this we can write the following proportion :

$$h : u = u : AD. \quad (3.9)$$

So :

$$AD = \frac{u * u}{h}, \quad (3.10)$$

that is the same of :

$$\text{projectionOnHypotenuse} = \frac{\text{movementAmount} * \text{movementAmount}}{\text{hypotenuse}} \quad (3.11)$$

of algorithm 7. Now we have all elements in order to compute the *real movement amount* represented by segment \overline{AE} . It is computed as :

$$\overline{AE} = \overline{DA} \cos \alpha \quad (3.12)$$

Both parametric and linear approach are effective. Therefore the question is why select one method instead of the other one. The answer to this question is simple. Adopting the parametric approach the optimization process is longer but more accurate. This depends on the fact that the real amount of movement depends on the angle so it is lesser each time.

On the other hand using the parametric approach, we could ideally train our agent on a set of specific functions and then it should have very good performances also on a generic, never previously explored, function using its knowledge about angles, actions and slope.

Adopting the linear approach the optimization process is slower but less accurate. This depends on the fact that the movement is as the crow flies. Using the linear approach we cannot abstract from the concept of function. This means that we have to train our agent for every specific function in order to optimize its. Any change on a specific function, however small, invalidates the previous training.

3.0.1 Implementation

In order to formalize and solve the problem previously described adopting an RL approach, we use the BURLAP (Brown-UMBC Reinforcement Learning and Planning) Java library developed and maintained by James MacGlashan of Brown University.

BURLAP uses a highly flexible system for defining states and actions of nearly any kind of form, supporting discrete continuous, and relational domains. Planning and learning algorithms range from classic forward search planning to value function-based stochastic planning and learning algorithms [BUR].

In order to define customized MDPs, BURLAP offers a set of classes and interfaces (figure 3.5).

The main features offered by BURLAP are :

- **State** : implementing this interface we define the state variables of our MDP state space. An instance of this object will specify a single state from the state space [BUR] .
- **Action** : implementing this interface we define a possible action that the agent can select. If our MDP action set is discrete and unparametrized, we may consider using the provided concrete imple-

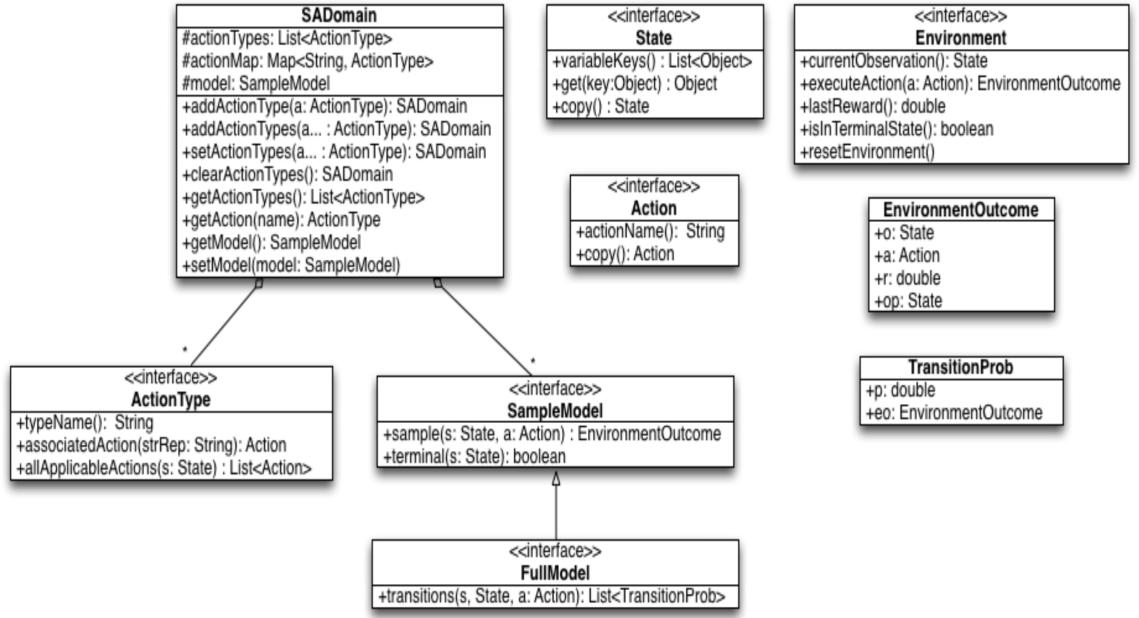


Figure 3.5: UML Diagram of the Java interfaces/classes for an MDP definition.

mentation `SimpleAction`, which defines an action entirely by a single string name [BUR].

- **SampleModel** : implementing this interface we define the model of our MDP. This interface only requires us to implement methods that can sample a transition: spit back out a possible next state and reward given a prior state and action taken [BUR].
- **Environment** : An MDP defines the nature of an environment, but ultimately, an agent will want to interact with an actual environment, either through learning or to execute a policy it computed from planning for the MDP. An environment has a specific state of the world that the agent can only modify by using the MDP actions. Implement this interface to provide an environment with which BURLAP agents can interact. If we define the MDP ourselves, then we'll probably don't want to implement `Environment` ourselves and instead use the provided concrete `SimulatedEnvironment` class, which takes an `SADomain` with

a `SampleModel`, and simulates an environment for it [BUR].

An extended definition of classes and interfaces can be found at <http://burlap.cs.brown.edu/doc/index.html>.

in order to model the problem described above, starting from features offered by BURLAP, we extend interfaces and implement abstract classes as shown in figure 3.6.

Because of the detailed explanation of choices made to model the problem given in the first section of this chapter and in **Appendix A**, the mere analysis of architectural definition is left to the reader. The full code can be found at (...).

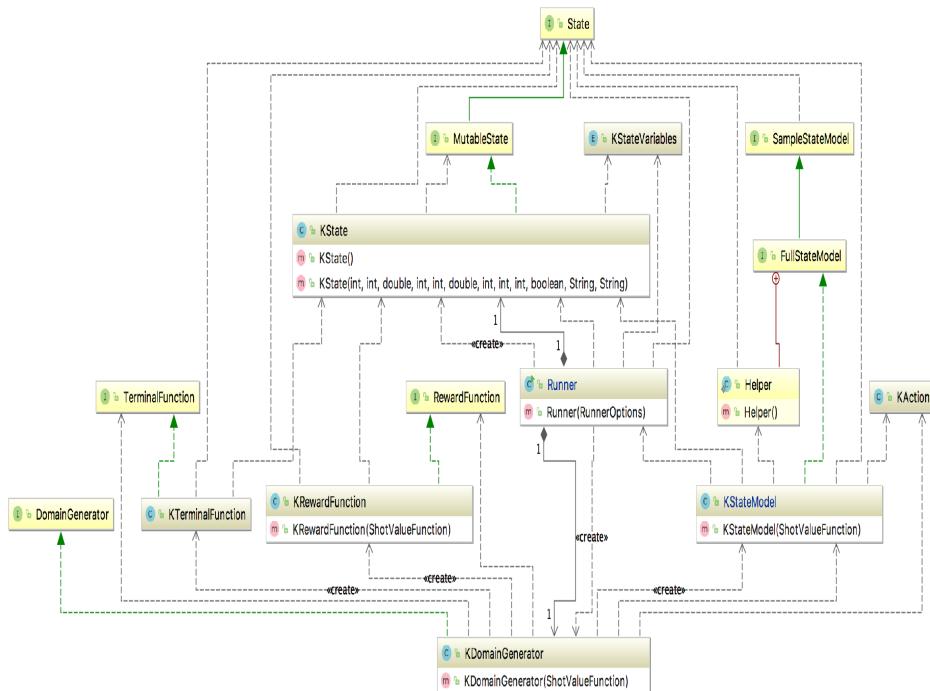


Figure 3.6: Class diagram of RL based optimization approach.

Chapter 4

Experimental Setting

The current chapter is divided into two sections. In the first one we will describe the benchmark of the experiment regarding the creation of the RL agent and its results. In the second one we will describe the same experiment applied to humans and its results.

4.1 Benchmark

Test Functions As already explained, the experiment described in this work is about maximize black-box functions adopting an RL based approach. The first important choice is about selecting suitable *test functions*. In applied mathematics, test functions, also known as *artificial landscapes*, are useful to evaluate characteristics of optimization algorithms. We have chosen four test functions for this work:

- Himmelblau' s Function;
- Paraboloid of Revolution;
- Beale Function;
- Styblinski-Tang' s Revised Function.

Himmelblau' s Function In mathematical optimization, Himmelblau' s function is a continuous, bivariate, multi-modal function introduced by David Mautner Himmelblau (1924–2011). The original function is defined by:

$$f(x, y) = (x^2 + y - 11)^2 + (x + y^2 - 7)^2 \quad (4.1)$$

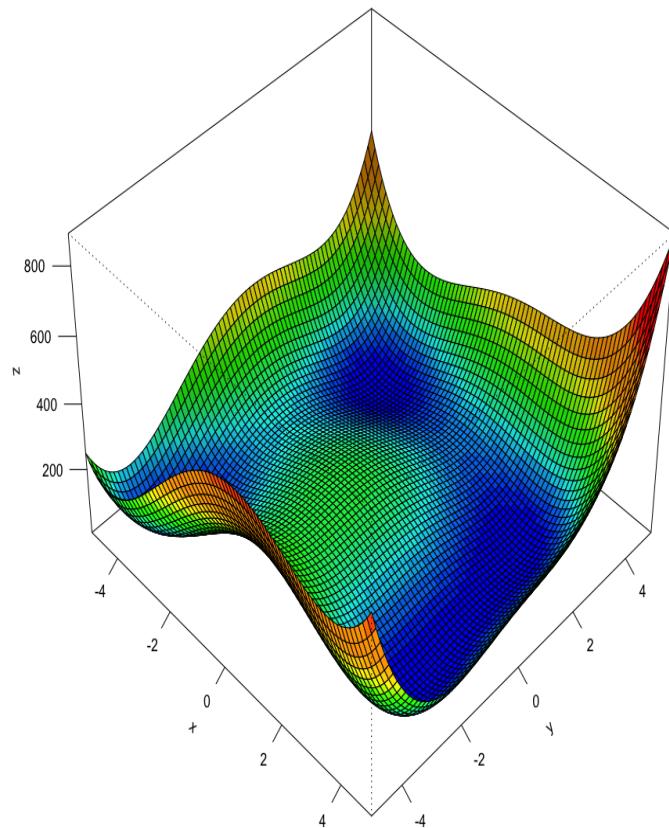


Figure 4.1: Original Himmelblau' s Function.

It has four local minima :

- $f(3.0, 2.0) = 0.0$;
- $f(-2.805118, 3.131312) = 0.0$;
- $f(-3.779310, -3.283186) = 0.0$;
- $f(3.584428, -1848126) = 0.0$.

The function can be defined on any input domain but it is usually evaluated on $x \in [-5, 5]$ and $y \in [-5, 5]$.

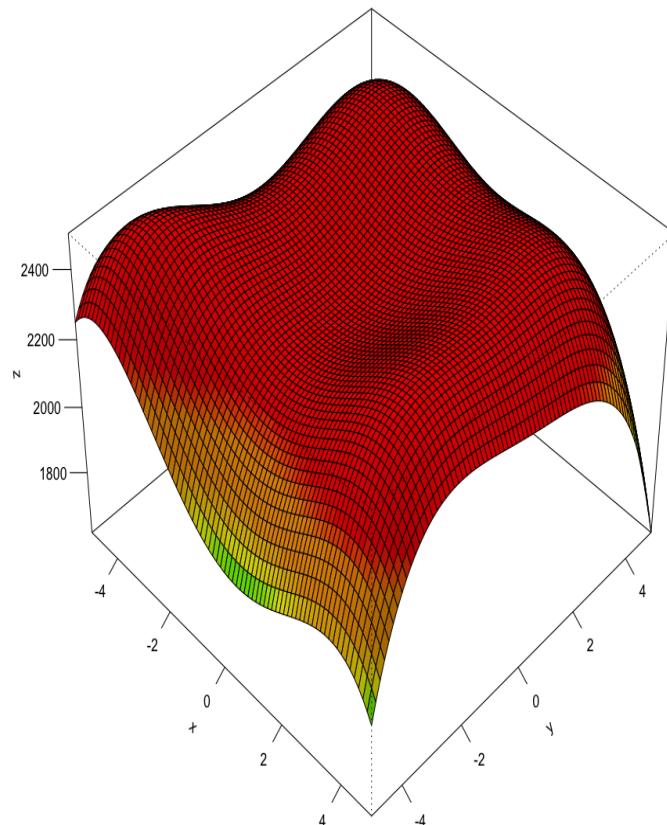


Figure 4.2: Customized Himmelblau' s Function.

Because of our aim to maximize we inverted the function as follow :

$$f(x, y) = -(x^2 + y - 11)^2 + (x + y^2 - 7)^2 \quad (4.2)$$

and we picked it up of 2500 units in order to have as less as possible negative values. So the final adopted function is :

$$f(x, y) = -(x^2 + y - 11)^2 + (x + y^2 - 7)^2 + 2500 \quad (4.3)$$

This function has its global maximum in $f(x, y) = 2500$.

In order to represent this customized version of Himmelblau' s Function using Java Graphical Environment, we mapped it in a space of 600×600 pixels and we properly rotated it. The resulting contour plot is the one represented in figure 4.3.

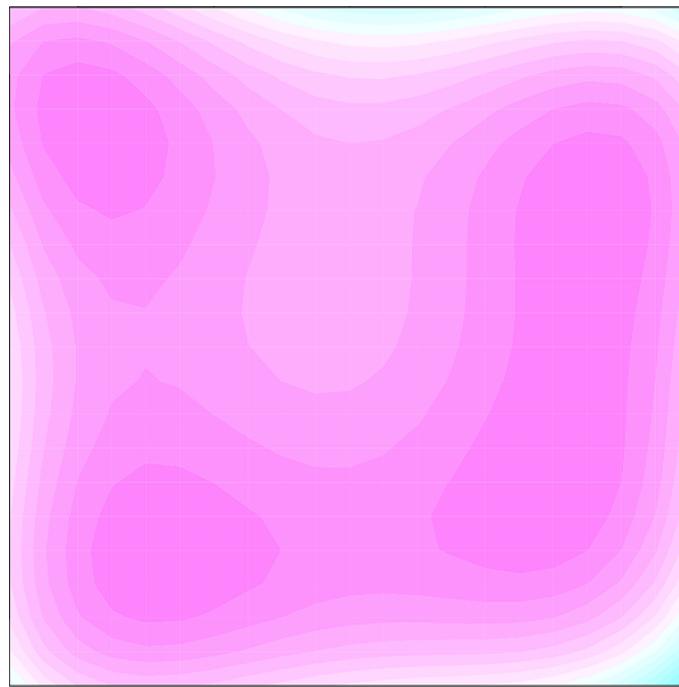


Figure 4.3: Contour plot of customized version of Himmelblau' s Function.

Paraboloid of Revolution In mathematical optimization, Paraboloid of Revolution is a continuous, bivariate, multi-modal function.

The original function is defined by:

$$f(x, y) = (x^2 + y^2) \quad (4.4)$$

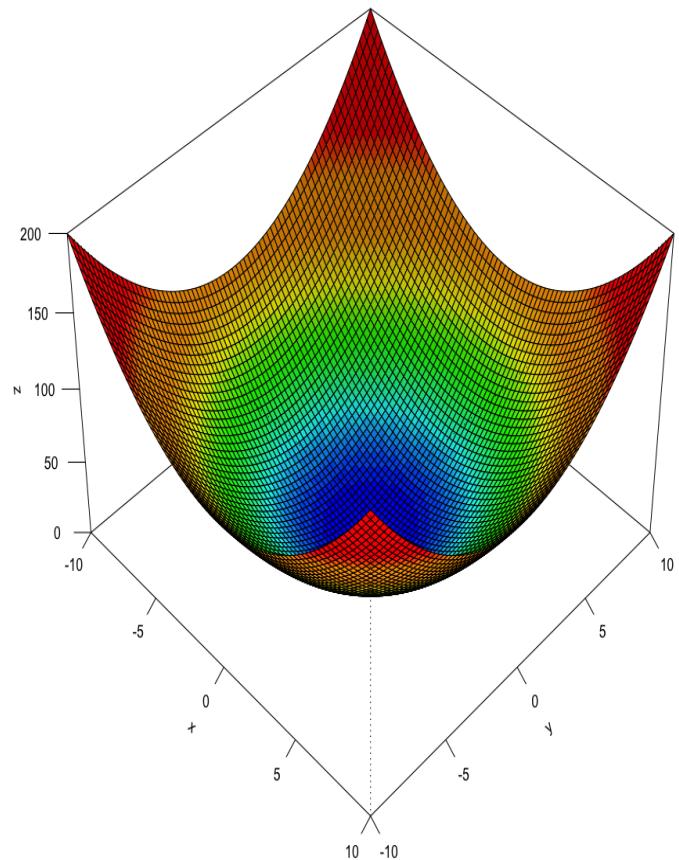


Figure 4.4: Original Paraboloid of Revolution.

It has a global minimum in $f(x, y) = 0$.

The function can be defined on any input domain but it is usually evaluated on $x \in [-10, 10]$ and $y \in [-10, 10]$.

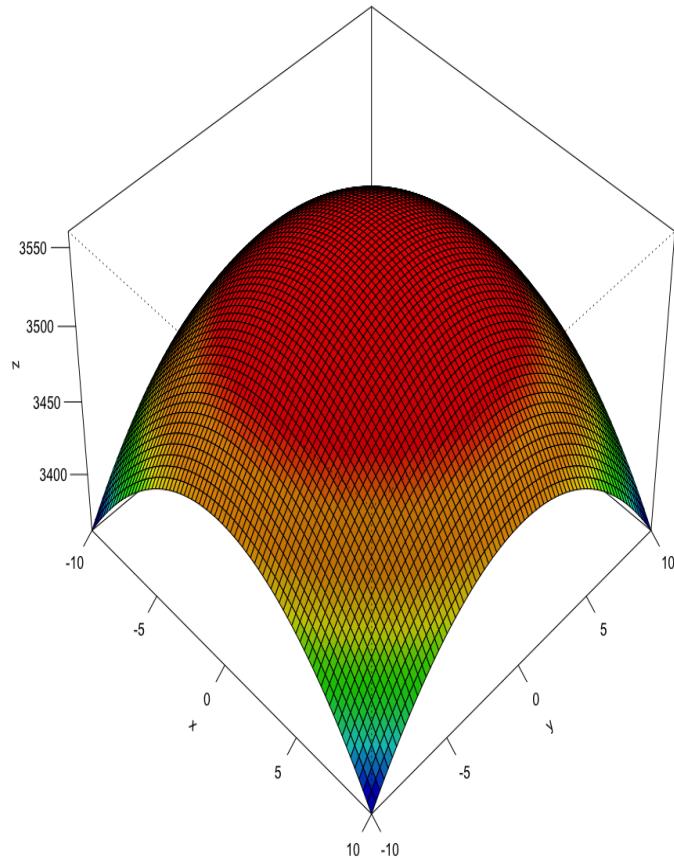


Figure 4.5: Customized Paraboloid of Revolution.

Because of our aim to maximize, we inverted the function as follow :

$$f(x, y) = -(x^2 + y^2) \quad (4.5)$$

and we picked it up of 3560 units in order to have as less as possible negative values. So the final adopted function is :

$$f(x, y) = -(x^2 + y^2) + 3560 \quad (4.6)$$

This function has its local maximum in $f(x, y) = 3560$.

In order to represent this customized version of Paraboloid of Revolution function using Java Graphical Environment, we mapped it in a space of 600×600 pixels and we properly rotated it. The resulting contour plot is the one represented in figure 4.6

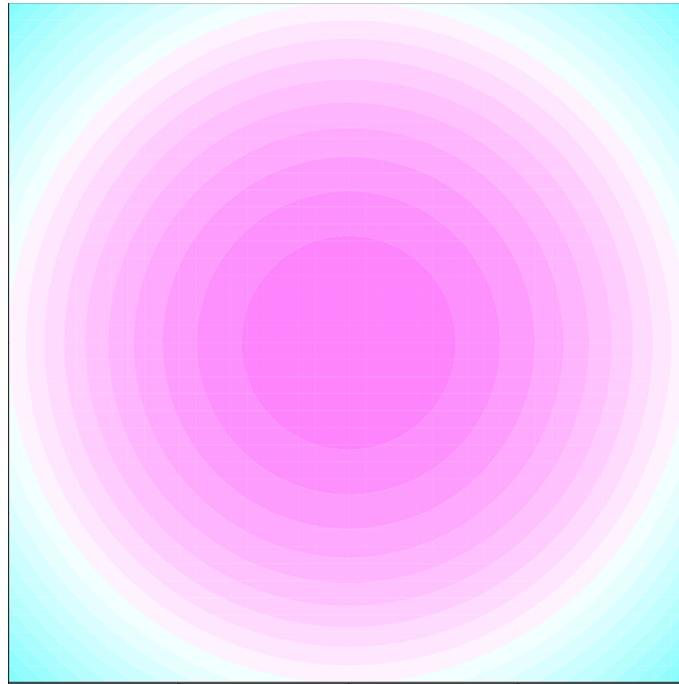


Figure 4.6: Contour plot of customized Parabolic Function.

Beale Function In mathematical optimization, Beale Function is a continuous, multi-modal function defined on a two-dimensional space. The function is defined by:

$$f(x, y) = (1.5 - x + xy)^2 + (2.25 - x + xy^2)^2 + (2.625 - x + xy^3)^2 \quad (4.7)$$

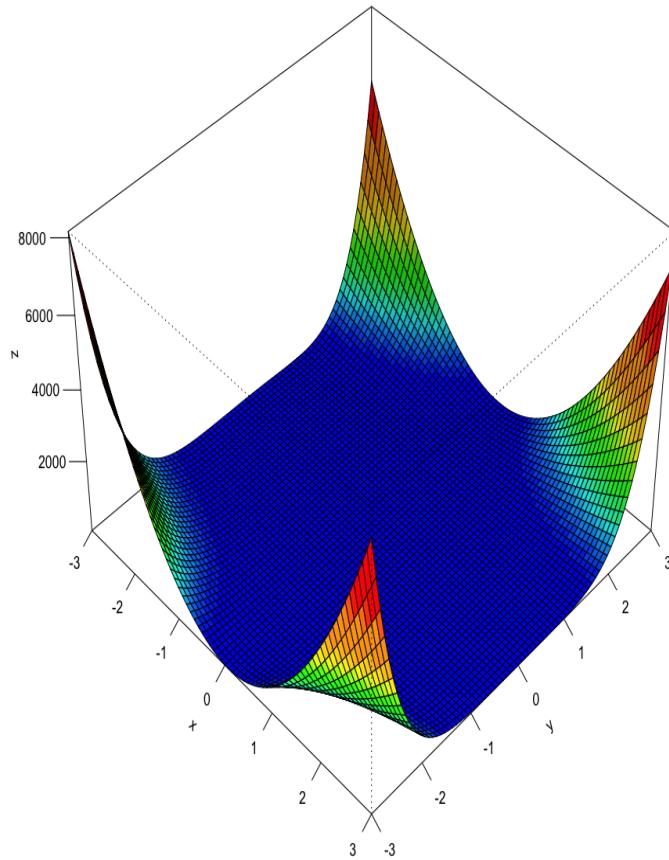


Figure 4.7: Original Beale Function.

The function can be defined on any input domain but it is usually evaluated on $x \in [-3, 3]$ and $y \in [-3, 3]$.

It has one global minimum at: $f(x, y) = 0$.

In this thesis our aim is to maximize. In order to do this we inverted the function as

$$f(x, y) = -((1.5 - x + xy)^2 + (2.25 - x + xy^2)^2 + (2.625 - x + xy^3)^2) \quad (4.8)$$

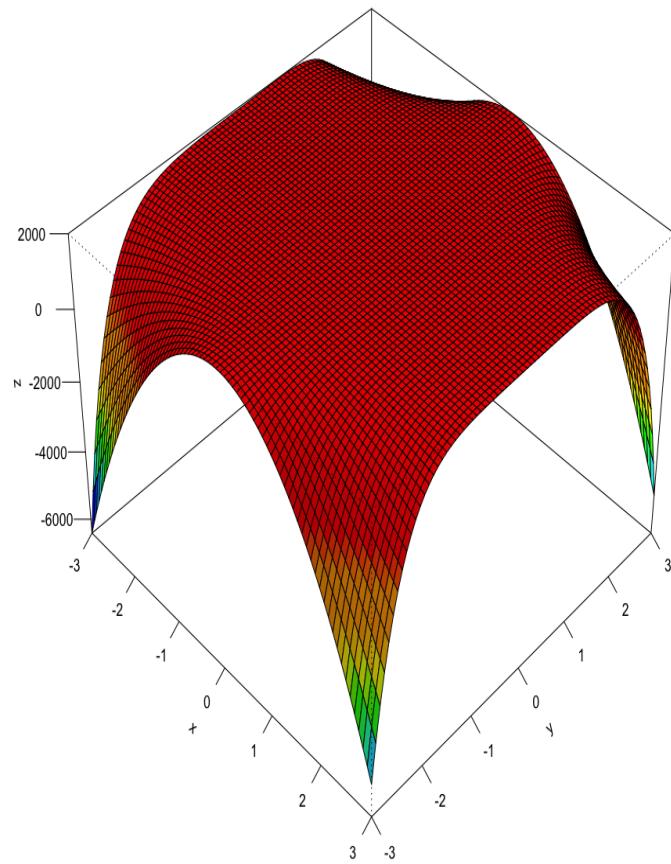


Figure 4.8: Customized Beale Function.

and we picked it up of 2000 units in order to have as less as possible negative values. So the final adopted function is :

$$f(x, y) = -((1.5 - x + xy)^2 + (2.25 - x + xy^2)^2 + (2.625 - x + xy^3)^2) + 2000 \quad (4.9)$$

This customized function has its global maximum in $f(x, y) = 1000$.

In order to represent this function using Java Graphical Environment we mapped it in a space of 600×600 pixels and we properly rotated it. The resulting contour plot is the one represented in figure 4.9

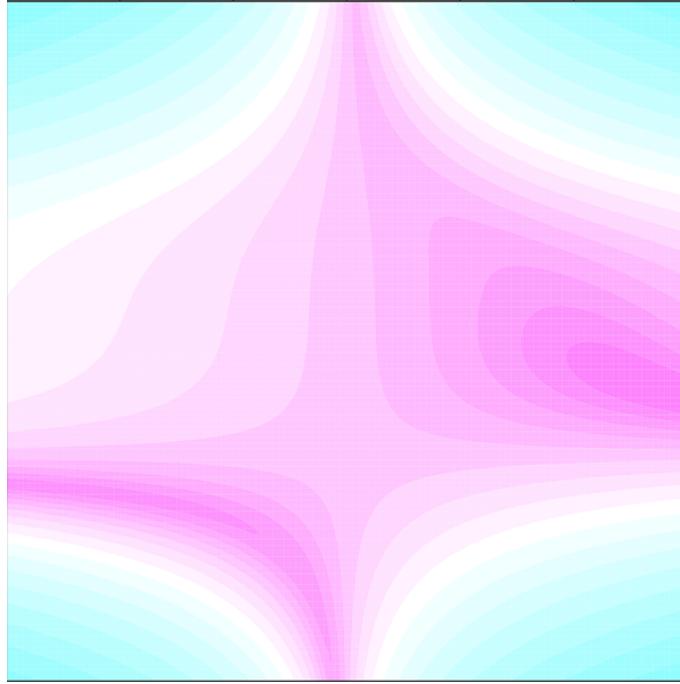


Figure 4.9: Contour plot of customized Beale Function.

Styblinski-Tang Revised Function In mathematical optimization, Styblinski-Tang Function is a continuous, multi-modal function defined on a multi-dimensional space. The original function is defined by :

$$f(x) = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^n x_i^4 - 16x_i^2 + 5x_i}{2} \quad (4.10)$$

In this thesis we consider the bivariate version of the original function multiplied by two in order to make it less flattened :

$$f(x, y) = (x^4 - 16x^2 + 5x) + (y^4 - 16y^2 + 5y). \quad (4.11)$$

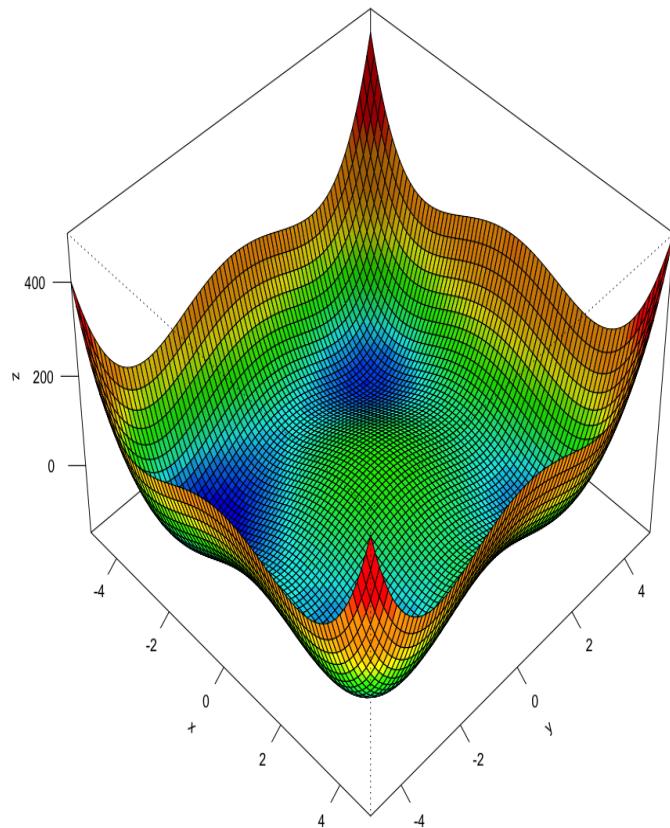


Figure 4.10: Original Styblinski Function.

The function can be defined on any input domain but it is usually evaluated on $x \in [-5, 5]$ and $y \in [-5, 5]$.

In this thesis our aim is to maximize. In order to do this we inverted the function as

$$f(x, y) = -((x^4 - 16 * x^2 + 5 * x) + (y^4 - 16 * y^2 + 5 * y)) + 5000 \quad (4.12)$$

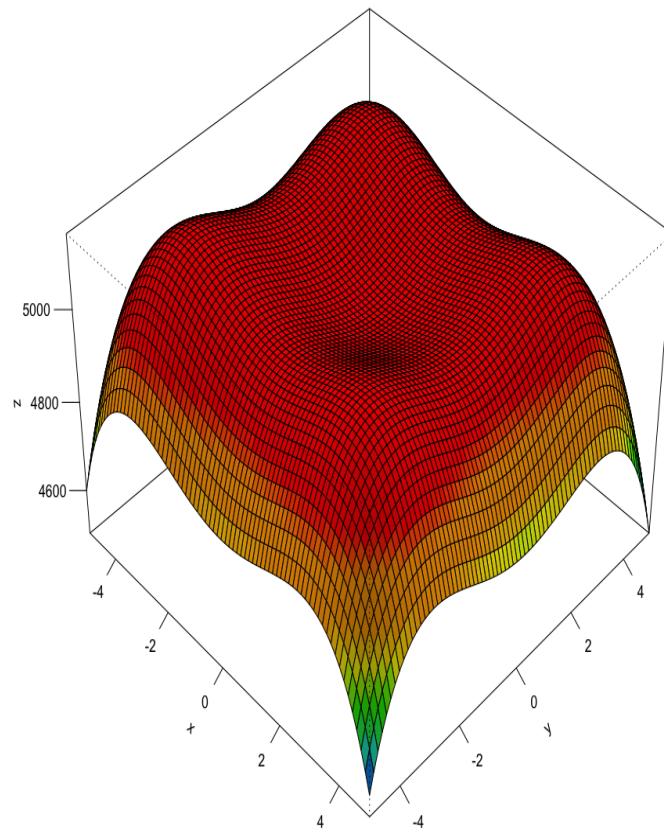


Figure 4.11: Customized Styblinski Function.

and we picked it up of 5000 units in order to has as less as possible negative values. So the final adopted function is:

$$f(x, y) = -((x^4 - 16 * x^2 + 5 * x) + (y^4 - 16 * y^2 + 5 * y)) + 5000 \quad (4.13)$$

This customized function has its global maximum in $f(x, y) = 5156.6638$. In order to represent this function using Java Graphical Environment we mapped its in a space of 600×600 pixels and we properly rotated its. The resulting contour plot is the one represented in figure 4.12.

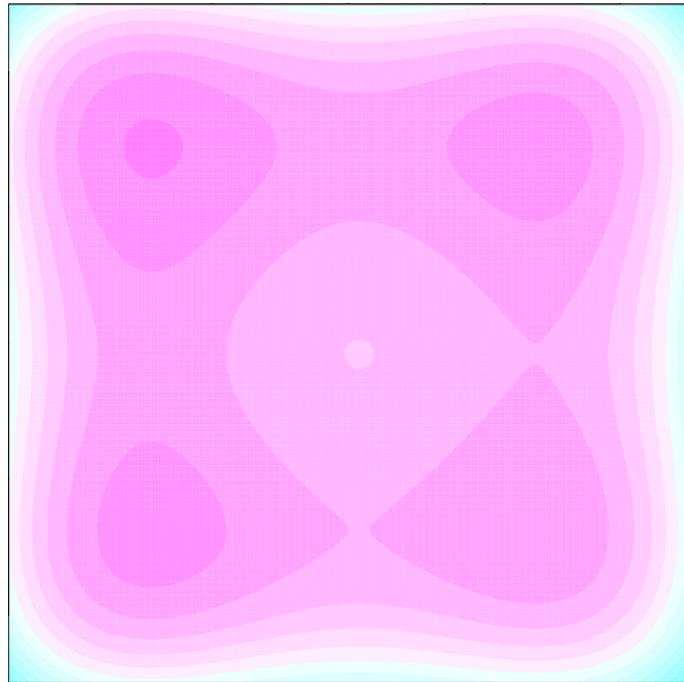
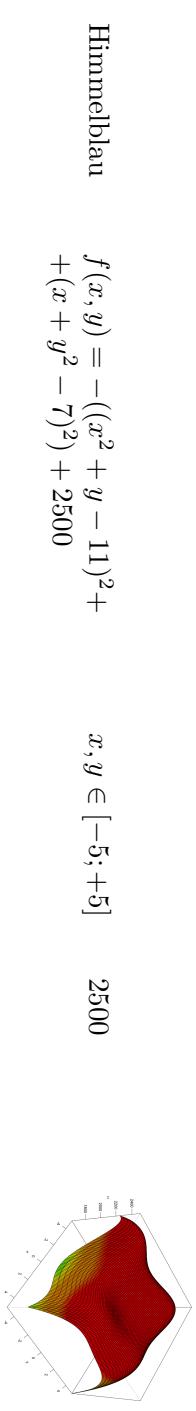
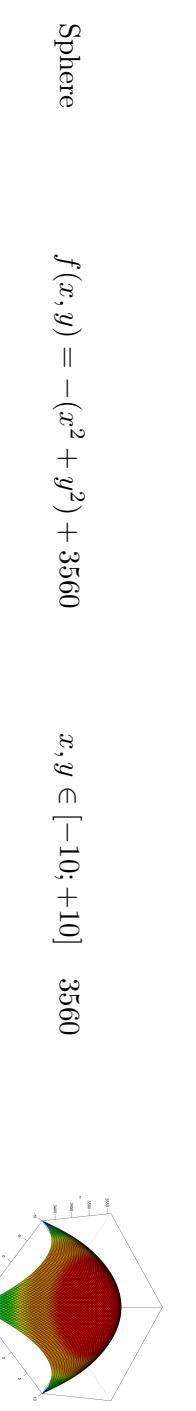
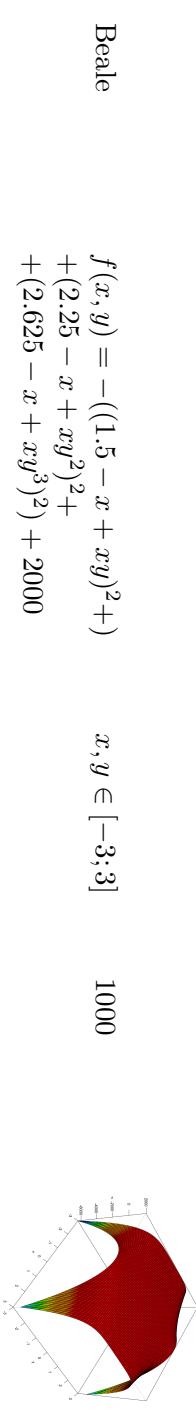
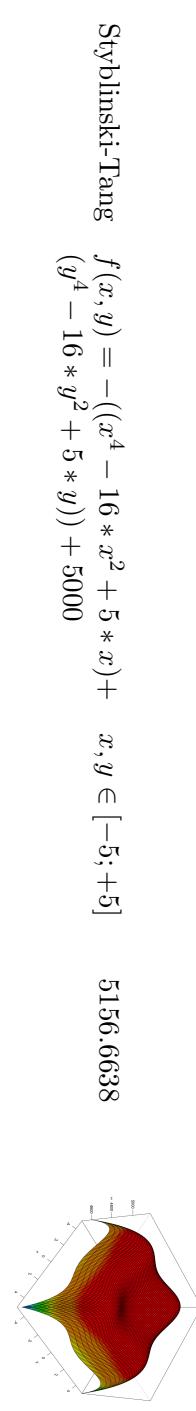


Figure 4.12: Contour plot of customized Styblinski Function.

Name	Formula	Domain	Optimal f	Sketch
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Himmelblau	$f(x, y) = -((x^2 + y - 11)^2 + (x + y^2 - 7)^2) + 2500$	$x, y \in [-5; +5]$	2500	
Sphere	$f(x, y) = -(x^2 + y^2) + 3560$	$x, y \in [-10; +10]$	3560	
Beale	$f(x, y) = -((1.5 - x + xy^2)^2 + (2.25 - x + xy^2)^2 + (2.625 - x + xy^2)^2) + 2000$	$x, y \in [-3; 3]$	1000	
Styblinski-Tang	$f(x, y) = -((x^4 - 16 * x^2 + 5 * x) + (y^4 - 16 * y^2 + 5 * y)) + 5000$	$x, y \in [-5; +5]$	5156.6638	

Algorithm Configuration The RL algorithm employed in the described tests is the $\text{SARSA}(\lambda)$ algorithm. Two different configurations are chosen to conduct tests. Both of them are summarized in the following table.

	λ	ϵ	qInit	Learning Rate	Episodes	Epochs
Configuration 1	0.1	0.1	0	1	150	100
Configuration 2	0.1	0.1	5	1	150	100

In both configurations we used a low λ value. The reason is simple. Typically we should use lower learning rates when we have a higher value of λ . However, in this case, we decide to use the highest possible learning rate. The logical consequence to this choice is to decrease the λ value.

Also the ϵ value is equal in both configurations. An ϵ value equals to 0.1 means that 90% of selected actions depends on the history, whereas the remaining 10% represent a random choice having absolutely no relations with the previous history.

The number of episodes and epochs is the same for both configurations. Our goal is to compare human optimization performances with $\text{SARSA}(\lambda)$ ones in a context of uncertainty. Assuming that each try has an higher cost, the number of possible tries must be as low as possible assuring, at the same time, a reasonable training space. Note that in addition to training episodes we also have a greedy one. In this case the ϵ value and the *learning rate* parameter are equals to 0. Instead, the number of epochs is still the same.

The only difference between the two configurations is the value of the *qInit*. Since SARSA is an iterative algorithm, it implicitly assumes an initial condition before the first update occurs. Initial action values can be used as a simple way of encouraging exploration. Setting the *qInit* to a value higher than 0 we introduce a sort of *optimism*. This optimism encourages action-value methods to explore. Whichever actions are initially selected, the reward is less than the starting estimates; the learner switches to other actions, being "disappointed" with the rewards it is receiving. The result is that all actions are tried several times before the value estimates converge. We call this technique for encouraging exploration *optimistic initial values*. We regard it as a simple trick that can be quite effective on stationary problems, but it is far from being a generally useful approach to encouraging exploration. For example, it is not well suited to non-stationary problems because its drive for exploration is inherently temporary. If the task changes,

creating a renewed need for exploration, this method cannot help. Indeed, any method that focuses on the initial state in any special way is unlikely to help with the general non-stationary case. The beginning of time occurs only once, and thus we should not focus on it too much. This criticism applies as well to the sample-average methods, which also treat the beginning of time as a special event, averaging all subsequent rewards with equal weights. Nevertheless, all of these methods are very simple, and one of them or some simple combination of them is often adequate in practice [SB18].

4.2 Human Case

The test conducted on humans affects a cross-section of thirty people. In the selection process of test subjects we considered the following three parameters with corresponding bounds :

- **Sex** $\in \{Male, Female\}$
- **Age** $\in [4, 52]$
- **Calculus Knowledge** $\in \{Null, Basic, Advanced\}$

Each of the test subjects was placed in front of a personal computer. The following rules have been proposed for individuals over the age of seven:

- *You will be offered four different levels.*
- *The first three levels will need to be repeated three times.*
- *The last level can be executed only once.*
- *Look carefully at the legend before starting the experiment.*
- *At each click you will receive a score with a colour associated with it.*
- *The goal is to make as many points as possible with 15 clicks available for each game.*
- *No further explanation will be provided.*

After that a chromatic scale indicating how positive the reward was for each click was proposed.

A white screen (with a specific hidden function) of 600×600 pixels with which to interact according to the rules previously listed was finally proposed



Figure 4.13: Chromatic Scale.

. For those under the age of seven the selected approach was different. The rules have been explained to them verbally. At each interaction with the environment, in addition to the colour, they were verbally encouraged or discouraged.

Chapter 5

Appendix A

One of the most interesting aspect of the work presented in this thesis is the manner in which it has been reached. Starting from now I want to clarify that during the first days it was not easy to understand the real objective of our work. Because of this initial misunderstanding we implemented some both strange and wrong solutions. Even if some of these solutions were not useful for the objective described in this thesis, they were very efficient in other context. For this reason we will here recall all the history of the work. We identify ten different main steps.

First Step In the first attempt to reach the solution of the problem we allowed the agent to make five different actions :

- Move North
- Move South
- Move West
- Move East
- Dig

It is clear that we distinguished between the possibility for the agent to make a *movement action* and a *dig action*. In this choice we were inspired from the possibility of the human to make movement without doing nothing. We later understood that this implementation was absolutely redundant. Humans move themselves without doing nothing before decide to do something. A RL agent *decide* what to do in the next step immediately

after have finished the previous action without needing *time to think*.

In this step the state was represented by three elements :

- Coordinate x ;
- Coordinate y ;
- Number of remaining function soundings.

As already mentioned, such a state representation prevents from the possibility to generalize the training. Given two different bivariate functions $f(x, y)$ and $g(x, y)$ and supposing to have trained the RL agent using function $f(x, y)$ if we decide to sound $g(x, y)$ on point x and y already sounded in $f(x, y)$ the result will be completely different (see figures 5.1 and 5.2). In addition to this the number of remaining function soundings is redundant and it does not add any information to our knowledge.

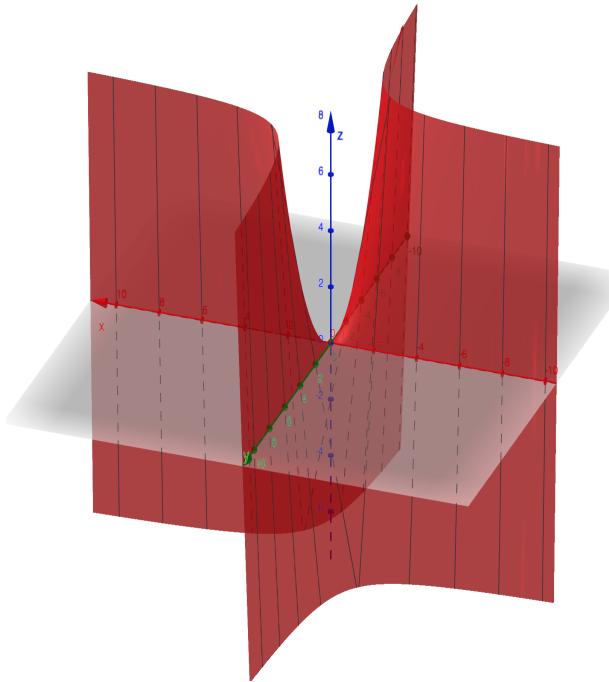


Figure 5.1: $f(x, y) = 2xy, \quad f(1, 1) = 2$

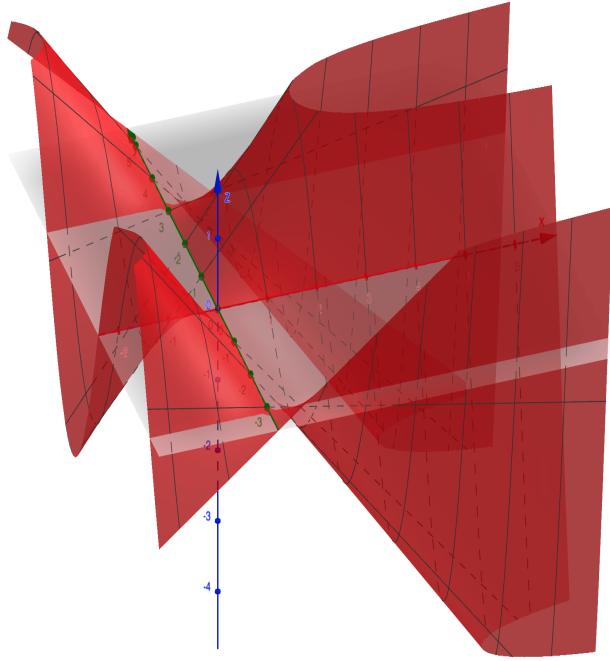


Figure 5.2: $g(x, y) = x * \sin(y)$, $g(1, 1) = 0.017$

In this first step the reward was computed as the value of the function computed in x and y at time t . The agent is in a terminal state when the number of remaining function soundings is equal to zero.

Second Step The second step is globally equals to the first one except for two fundamental aspects. In this step we introduced the possibility for the agent to make movements of different sizes. This possibility given to the agent allowed its to reach the goal in less time. We also redefined the reward function. In this step it was equal to the percentage of proximity to the maximum of the function. Obviously a so defined reward function is completely wrong because in a context of black-box optimization the maximum of the function is not known and we are not able to compute its maximum. This approach is useful in case of a priori known function.

Third Step In the third step we made an additionally change to the previous step. Here, at the end of each epoch, the agent was artificially forced to restart from the coordinates of the best rewarded from the corresponding

episode. Results given by the combination of the last two approaches were very good in the context of optimization of well-known functions. Obviously in the context described in this thesis they are not correct. In this specific case, we are forcing the agent to do a specific action, breaking, in so doing, for at least one time the concept of environment formalized through a Markov Decision Process.

Fourth Step In the fourth step we improved performance obtained through changes made in step two and three. We succeeded in do this imposing the agent to start each episode from the best status between the previous episodes.

Fifth Step The fifth step is one of the most important because of innovations introduced starting from its. The first changes regard actions. In this step we introduced the possibility for the agent to choose the size of the movement. There are still four different possible *movement actions* :

- Move North
- Move South
- Move West
- Move East

but the agent could select to move itself in one direction of :

- *movement amount*;
- *movement amount* \times 2;
- *movement amount* \times 3.

The unit of measurement of *movement amount* is the *pixel*. The real amount of movement over function is then computed through algorithm 12 in Chapter 3. Using this set of *action movements* the algorithm converges more quickly to the maximum of the problem.

In addition to these changes we have also deleted the possibility for the agent to distinguish between *move actions* and *sounding action*. Each time the agent makes a movement it also sounds the function obtaining a reward. The reward is computed as positive if its precision in percentage is $\geq 75\%$. As already said the disadvantage of the last choice is that in the context described in this thesis the objective function is unknown so we are not able to compute the percentage of proximity to the maximum.

Sixth Step In this step we introduced the concept of *delta*. *delta* was computed as the difference between the value of the function sounded at time t and the maximum value sounded until time t .

In this step we also tried to reach an higher control about *exploration* and *exploitation*. In order to do this we tried to introduce a decreasing ϵ factor between episodes. We tried different decreasing functions and we noticed that the best one was a logarithmic one.

In this step the reward was still based on the concept of percentage with an engagement of the *delta*. To be more specific if the *delta* was ≤ 0 or the percentage was ≤ 78 the reward was negative, otherwise it was positive.

Seventh Step In this step we corrected the reward function of the RL agent. We deleted the concept of reward based on percentage of proximity to maximum and we introduced the concept of reward based exclusively on the difference between the sounded value function at time t and the maximum until time t . This is a little but fundamental adjustment because it delete an important mistake from the project.

Eighth Step We can define this step as an experimental one. In this step we concentrated our attention on the possibility to make more exploration. In order to do this we introduced the possibility to start each episode from a random point. More exploration gave the possibility to prevent many limit cases but it did not always entail an improvement in algorithm performances.

Ninth Step Parametric movement. In this step we inserted the *stop action*. When this action was selected as the next one the simulation of the current episode was interrupted. Consequences from introduction of this new action were very interesting.

Tenth Step This is the last step before the final version of the project. In this version the state was revolutionised. It was now composed of the last three angles of improvements as described in chapter 3. Angles varies between $-\pi$ and $+\pi$ because also a worsening is here considered. Angles were rounded to the nearest multiple of two. The choices introduced in this step were unexpectedly not fruitful. The failure depended on two factors. The angles as unique component of state were not enough. The rounding could not be chosen a priori. This depends on the *Lipschitz Constant*.

Let's consider a single-variable function $f(x)$ for x inside its domain D . The magnitude of the slope of $f(x)$ for 2 points $(x_1, f(x_1))$ and $(x_2, f(x_2))$

is thus

$$\left| \frac{f(x_1) - f(x_2)}{x_1 - x_2} \right|. \quad (5.1)$$

A non-negative real number L , which is the smallest upper bound of the slope is called the *Lipschitz Constant* :

$$L = \left| \frac{f(x_1) - f(x_2)}{x_1 - x_2} \right| = \sup \left| \frac{df}{dx} \right|. \quad (5.2)$$

That is, the Lipschitz Constant limit how fast the function can change. If there is no Lipschitz Constant, the function can change extremely fast without border, that is, the function becomes discontinuous.

For multivariate function the *Lipschitz Constant* is defined as:

$$L_{x_n} = \sup \left| \frac{\partial f}{\partial x_n} \right|. \quad (5.3)$$

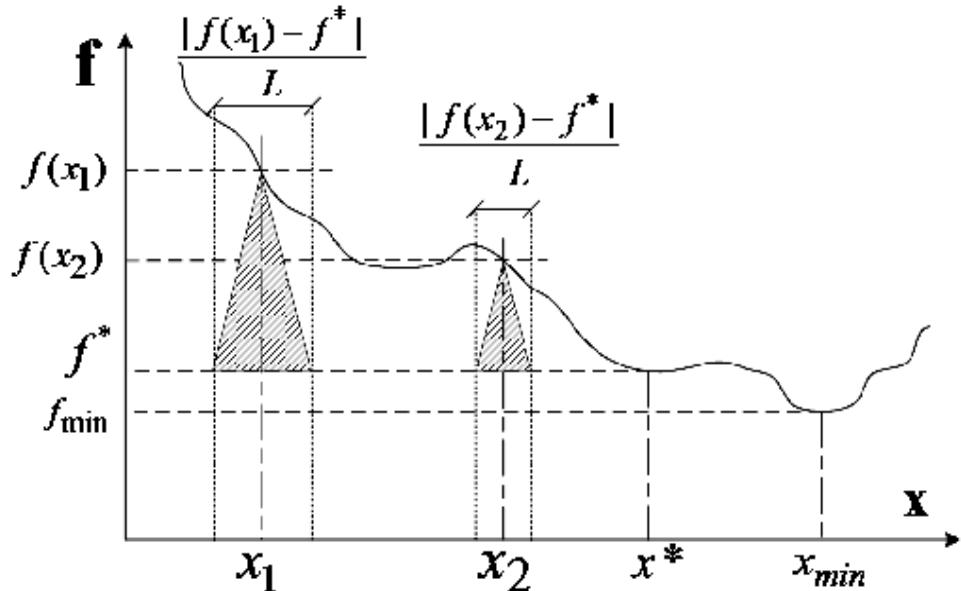


Figure 5.3: A Lipschitz function with Lipschitz Constant L . f^* is the minimal value achieved so far. By evaluating the function at a single point x , a neighbourhood region with radius $\frac{|f(x) - f^*|}{L}$ can be eliminated without losing the true global minimum x_{\min} [RGL].

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