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Analysis

# Description

The aim of this project is to create a virtual version of the game Tic-Tac-Toe with an AI that learns from past matches.

Tic-tac-toe is a 2-player game played on a 3x3 grid. One player will play as the ‘X’ piece, while the other player is the ‘O’ piece. Each player takes a turn to place their piece on the grid. The aim of the game is for one of the players to get 3 of their pieces next to each other in a row; which can be done vertically, horizontally, or diagonally.

This project however, will provide an AI to substitute as a second player, and the aim is for this AI to learn from its previous experiences to try to figure out what is a likely way of it being able to win.

The AI should look at its past history of matches, and use this data to figure out the best way to continue during a match. However, the AI won’t always have enough data to use (it learns while it plays games, so if it hasn’t played many games, there’s not a lot of data) so it should also have a way to deal with such a situation, such as doing a move completely at random. The AI could then use this new data in future matches, giving it more variety in how it can play.

# Target Audience/Stakeholders

There is no specific audience due to the simple/casual nature of the game, and the fact that most people seem to know what tic-tac-toe is means it is very accessible to a large number of people. This means that the stakeholders will most likely be anyone who is 6 years or older.

The game should provide instructions however, in the case someone does not know how to play tic-tac-toe.

There is no need for technical expertise when playing the game, so it is accessible to most people.

# Why a computer is suitable for the task

Computers are very fast at performing calculations, and the only errors they make are generally due to human errors (coding mistakes, or errors intentionally put in, for example). For a game as simple as tic-tac-toe, a computer is more than capable of calculating what it should do in a reasonable amount of time, and can possibly be almost impossible to beat.

As an example, when two human players are playing against each other, Player 1 may be one move away from winning the match with Player 2 not noticing they can stop them; however, when a human is against an AI, the AI can be made so it will always block the human from winning, if there’s a chance to. This is due to the point made earlier, the only errors a computer can make are usually due to human errors, so if a human tells the computer to always (or to never) block the other player, then it will do so without fail (assuming there’s no errors in the code).

As another example, for a simple game like tic-tac-toe, the computer may be able to plan ahead of time and think of the most optimal route to take, similar to a human. The difference is that a computer can analyse the possible paths it can take significantly faster than a human, and a computer will be able to ‘remember’ them all perfectly, whereas a human might forget something or make mistakes in their logic.

# Research

While researching on what algorithms I might use when writing the AI for the game, I came upon the Minimax [1] algorithm.

After further research, I came upon a website [2] where a programmer describes how they used the Minimax algorithm with tic-tac-toe. The general idea is, they calculated every possible route the AI could take, and used points to weigh between which route will have the least chance for the AI to lose, and which ones would make the AI win/tie (with some other tweaks to make the algorithm work well).

The issue with this algorithm is, it creates an unbeatable AI, which is not fun for the human to fight against (nor does it seem terribly interesting to code). The upside is, this algorithm is a perfect example of how a computer is suitable for playing tic-tac-toe, and can be better at it than humans.

The idea of weighing which path is most likely to win/lose was interesting to me, and my tutor during an earlier session was discussing about possibly using machine learning, where the computer stores data of past games and then uses that data to determine which moves have led to a win in the past.

The advantage of the AI using past data, instead of calculating the best moves to make on the spot, is that it can attempt to ‘learn’ the best way to win which I see as an acceptable compromise between ‘impossible to beat’ and ‘impossible to lose against’. At the start, when the AI lacks data, it should be pretty easy to beat; but as time goes on the AI will gradually get more data and will be able to perform better than when it started.

Similar to how the minimax algorithm would create a tree of moves to analyse, my AI can store the data of its past games in a tree. For example, it may be formatted like:

“empty grid” -> “X is placed in the top-middle slot” -> “O is placed in the bottom-right slot”  
 -> “X is placed in the top-left slot” -> “O is placed in the bottom-middle slot” etc.

[1] <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minimax>

[2] <http://neverstopbuilding.com/minimax>

# Features and limitations

The game must provide a GUI. This GUI must display the 3x3 grid which shows the current up-to-date state of the match. The GUI must at the very least allow the player to play multiple matches without having to restart the game. Finally, The GUI must allow the player to interact with the 3x3 grid, following the rules of how you’re allowed to play pieces in tic-tac-toe.

The game should provide a message box that details how to play tic-tac-toe. Ideally this should be shown when the game is opened for the first time, and whenever the user presses some sort of “help” button.

The game will require having to store data on previous games, and being able to load this data when it is opened. The game should use a binary format, as it allows for more compact file sizes, but there is a trade-off of a human (me in particular) being able to easily read and debug the data as would be possible using a text format.

Multiplayer, while a desirable feature, is not the focus point of the project; that would be the AI. Therefore, multiplayer capabilities won’t be added to the game until sometime in the far future, if at all.

The game will require an AI for a human to fight against. This AI should make use of its past matches with humans to aid it with choosing what moves to make during a match. The AI should not be unbeatable, as it would be unfun to fight against.

An animated GUI that comes with sound effects is quite a bit of effort with very little worth considering how simple a game tic-tac-toe is, so I have decided to go with a very simple, soundless GUI.

Due to the reason that the AI learns as it plays, it will start off being incredibly easy to beat, but over time it will become more challenging. Theoretically, it should only end up either winning or tying after a while (something I wish to avoid, due to it being unfun); however, this will require over two-hundred thousand unique games to have been played. [1]

[1] <https://www.jesperjuul.net/ludologist/255168-ways-of-playing-tic-tac-toe>

# Requirements

OS: Windows Vista SP2 (with .Net 4.5 installed) or later (Any Windows OS that can run WPF [1])

CPU: 2GHz or faster.

GPU: Integrated graphics card, or better.

The project will be built and tested against .Net 4.5, so .Net 4.5 must be installed on the computer. The project *might* work with older versions of .Net, but it is not guaranteed. .Net 4.5 comes preinstalled with Windows 8 and later versions of the Windows operating system.

A Windows operating system must be used, and it must include support for WPF [1].

[1] <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Windows_Presentation_Foundation>

# Success Criteria

To be deemed a success, the game must provide:

* A user-friendly, responsive GUI that provides, the 3x3 grid with an up-to-date view of the game board’s state, text informing the player which piece they’re playing as, text that displays whether it is the player’s or AI’s turn, and allows the player to place their piece via the 3x3 grid.
* An AI that is not impossible to win against, and is capable of analysing the data from its past matches to determine which move it should take.
* The game must not crash unexpectedly, and in the event something’s goes wrong, it must simply show the user an error box saying something’s gone wrong.
* The game must be stable and free of any major bugs (for example, if the GUI suddenly stopped functioning, this is a major bug and should not happen). Certain features of the game, and small parts of the code can and should be tested. The preferred method of testing is unit testing, where a small piece of code is written to test a very specific part of the code. Features of the game that are tricky to test via code (such as how the GUI functions) should be manually tested and documented.

Design

# Decomposition of the problem

[TODO]

# Proposed structure of the program

[TODO]

# Algorithms

[TODO]

# Usability

[TODO]

# Key variables and data structures

[TODO]

# Test Data for development

[TODO]

# Test Data for beta testing

[TODO]

Development

# Iterations of development

[TODO] (Self note, remember to use Git to ‘go back in time’)

# Prototypes

[TODO]

# Evidence of modular code

[TODO]

# Evidence of validation

[TODO]

# Review

[TODO]

Evaluation

# Testing

[TODO]

# Testing of usability features

[TODO]

# Overall evaluation

[TODO]

# Future Maintenance

[TODO]