Lecture 4: Model-Free Prediction

David Silver

Outline

Model-Free Reinforcement Learning

- Last lecture:
  - Planning by dynamic programming
  - Solve a *known* MDP
- This lecture:
  - Model-free prediction
  - Estimate the value function of an *unknown* MDP

policy evaluation

- Next lecture:
  - Model-free control
  - Optimise the value function of an *unknown* MDP

policy improvement

If a model is not available, it is particularly useful to estimate action values rather than state values.

Confer the text

Monte-Carlo Reinforcement Learning

- MC methods learn directly from episodes of experience
- MC is *model-free*: no knowledge of MDP transitions / rewards
- MC learns from *complete* episodes: no bootstrapping
- MC uses the simplest possible idea: value = mean return
- Caveat: can only apply MC to *episodic* MDPs
    - All episodes must terminate

Monte-Carlo Policy Evaluation

- Goal: learn v_π from episodes of experience under policy π

$$S_1, A_1, R_2, ..., S_k \sim \pi$$

- Recall that the *return* is the total discounted reward:

$$G_t = R_{t+1} + \gamma R_{t+2} + ... + \gamma^{T-1} R_T$$

- Recall that the value function is the expected return:

$$v_\pi(s) = \mathbb{E}_\pi \left[G_t \mid S_t = s \right]$$

- Monte-Carlo policy evaluation uses *empirical mean* return instead of *expected* return

There are two different ways to do this.
- First-Visit MC
- Every-Visit MC

First-Visit Monte-Carlo Policy Evaluation

- To evaluate state s
- The first time-step t that state s is visited in an episode,
- Increment counter $N(s) \leftarrow N(s) + 1$
- Increment total return $S(s) \leftarrow S(s) + G_t$
- Value is estimated by mean return $V(s) = S(s)/N(s)$
- By law of large numbers, $V(s) \rightarrow v_\pi(s)$ as $N(s) \rightarrow \infty$

independence of the size of state space |S| : this is the reason why MC is nice.

We can visit every states following the policy \pi.
(it depends on the policy. We may visit very small parts of whole states.)

We introduce the way how to visit the states later (even the states which is less efficient). --> SALSA, off-policy, ...

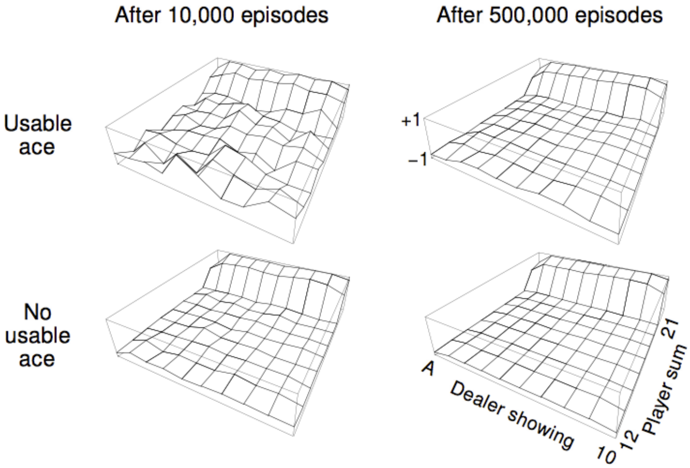
Every-Visit Monte-Carlo Policy Evaluation

- To evaluate state s
- Every time-step t that state s is visited in an episode,
- Increment counter $N(s) \leftarrow N(s) + 1$
- Increment total return $S(s) \leftarrow S(s) + G_t$
- Value is estimated by mean return $V(s) = S(s)/N(s)$
- Again, $V(s) \rightarrow v_\pi(s)$ as $N(s) \rightarrow \infty$

Blackjack Example

- States (200 of them):
  - Current sum (12-21)
  - Dealer's showing card (ace-10)
  - Do I have a "useable" ace? (yes-no)
- Action stick: Stop receiving cards (and terminate)
- Action twist: Take another card (no replacement)
- Reward for stick:
  - $+1$ if sum of cards $>$ sum of dealer cards
  - 0 if sum of cards $=$ sum of dealer cards
  - -1 if sum of cards $<$ sum of dealer cards
- Reward for twist:
  - -1 if sum of cards > 21 (and terminate)
  - 0 otherwise
- Transitions: automatically twist if sum of cards < 12

Blackjack Value Function after Monte-Carlo Learning



Policy: stick if sum of cards ≥ 20, otherwise twist

Incremental Mean

The mean $\mu_1, \mu_2, ...$ of a sequence $x_1, x_2, ...$ can be computed incrementally,

$$
\begin{aligned}
\mu_k &= \frac{1}{k} \sum_{j=1}^{k} x_j \\
&= \frac{1}{k} \left(x_k + \sum_{j=1}^{k-1} x_j \right) \\
&= \frac{1}{k} \left(x_k + (k-1)\mu_{k-1} \right) \\
&= \mu_{k-1} + \frac{1}{k} \left(x_k - \mu_{k-1} \right)
\end{aligned}
$$

Incremental Monte-Carlo Updates

- Update $V(s)$ incrementally after episode $S_1, A_1, R_2, ..., S_T$
- For each state S_t with return G_t

$$N(S_t) \leftarrow N(S_t) + 1$$
$$V(S_t) \leftarrow V(S_t) + \frac{1}{N(S_t)} \left(G_t - V(S_t)\right)$$

- In non-stationary problems, it can be useful to track a running mean, i.e. forget old episodes.

$$V(S_t) \leftarrow V(S_t) + \alpha \left(G_t - V(S_t)\right)$$

Temporal-Difference Learning

- TD methods learn directly from episodes of experience
- TD is *model-free*: no knowledge of MDP transitions / rewards
- TD learns from *incomplete* episodes, by *bootstrapping*
- TD updates a guess towards a guess

MC and TD

- Goal: learn v_π online from experience under policy π
- Incremental every-visit Monte-Carlo
  - Update value $V(S_t)$ toward *actual* return G_t

$$V(S_t) \leftarrow V(S_t) + \alpha \left(G_t - V(S_t) \right)$$

- Simplest temporal-difference learning algorithm: TD(0)
  - Update value $V(S_t)$ toward *estimated* return $R_{t+1} + \gamma V(S_{t+1})$

Bellman Equation

$$V(S_t) \leftarrow V(S_t) + \alpha \left(R_{t+1} + \gamma V(S_{t+1}) - V(S_t) \right)$$

  - $R_{t+1} + \gamma V(S_{t+1})$ is called the *TD target*
  - $\delta_t = R_{t+1} + \gamma V(S_{t+1}) - V(S_t)$ is called the *TD error*

it can immediately update before the worst return.

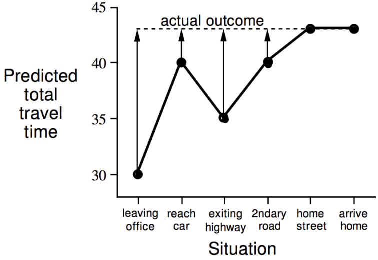
Driving Home Example

State	Elapsed Time (minutes)	Predicted Time to Go	Predicted Total Time
leaving office	0	30	30
reach car, raining	5	35	40
exit highway	20	15	35
behind truck	30	10	40
home street	40	3	43
arrive home	43	0	43

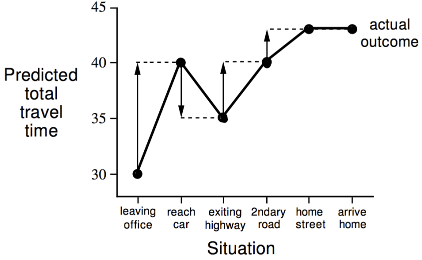
Driving Home Example: MC vs. TD

difference b/w MC and TD

Changes recommended by Monte Carlo methods (α=1)



Changes recommended by TD methods (α=1)



MC: Every moment has the prediction what the total time would be.

Advantages and Disadvantages of MC vs. TD

- TD can learn *before* knowing the final outcome
  - TD can learn online after every step
  - MC must wait until end of episode before return is known
- TD can learn *without* the final outcome
  - TD can learn from incomplete sequences
  - MC can only learn from complete sequences
  - TD works in continuing (non-terminating) environments
  - MC only works for episodic (terminating) environments

because it's feeding off itself in this way. (bootstrapping)

Bias/Variance Trade-Off

- Return $G_t = R_{t+1} + \gamma R_{t+2} + ... + \gamma^{T-1} R_T$ is *unbiased* MC estimate of $v_\pi(S_t)$
- True TD target $R_{t+1} + \gamma v_\pi(S_{t+1})$ is *unbiased* estimate of $v_\pi(S_t)$ best guess so far (we may not have true value - model free)
- TD target $R_{t+1} + \gamma V(S_{t+1})$ is *biased* estimate of $v_\pi(S_t)$
- TD target is much lower variance than the return:
  - Return depends on *many* random actions, transitions, rewards
  - TD target depends on *one* random action, transition, reward

Intuition (of TD target is much lower variance than the return) :
The return of MC should have the trajectory to the terminal and each step until the terminal, there may be many noises.

Advantages and Disadvantages of MC vs. TD (2)

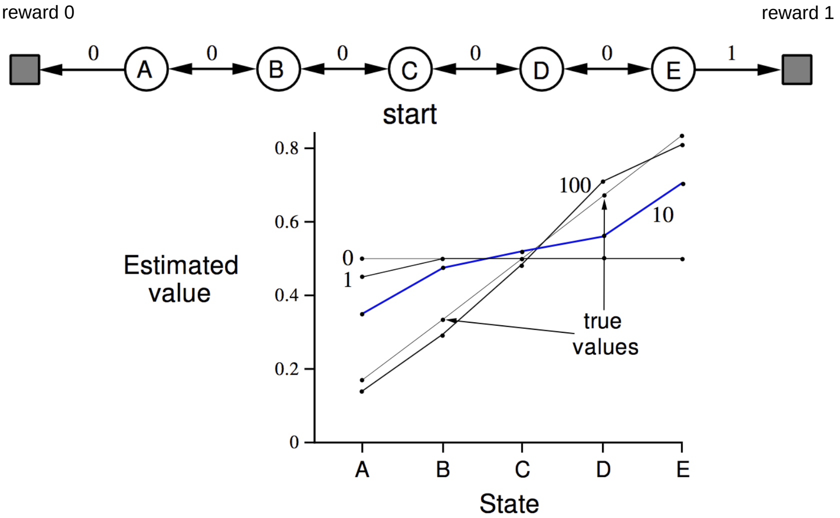
- MC has high variance, zero bias
  - Good convergence properties
  - (even with function approximation)
  - Not very sensitive to initial value
  - Very simple to understand and use

because we're not bootstrapping the from the initial value

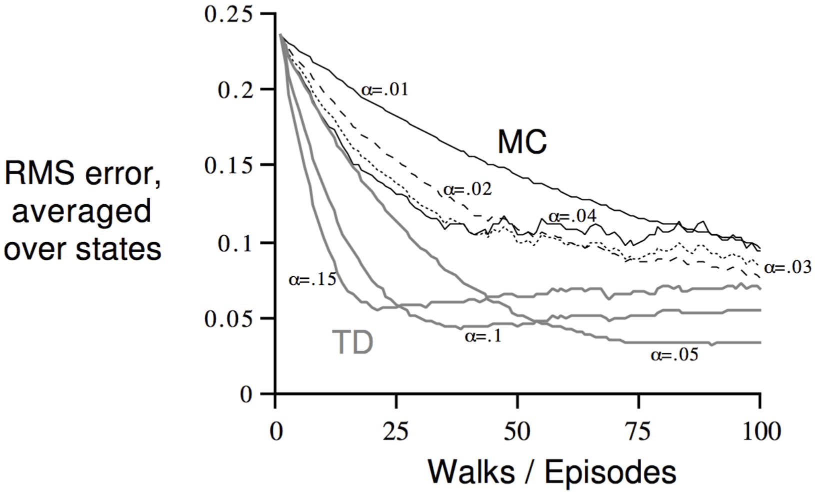
- TD has low variance, some bias
  - Usually more efficient than MC
  - TD(0) converges to $v_\pi(s)$
  - (but not always with function approximation)
  - More sensitive to initial value

because it's feeding off itself in this way (bootstrapping)

Random Walk Example



Random Walk: MC vs. TD



Batch MC and TD

- MC and TD converge: $V(s) \to v_\pi(s)$ as experience $\to \infty$
- But what about batch solution for finite experience?

$$s_1^1, a_1^1, r_2^1, \ldots, s_{T_1}^1$$
$$\vdots$$
$$s_1^K, a_1^K, r_2^K, \ldots, s_{T_K}^K$$

  - e.g. Repeatedly sample episode $k \in [1, K]$
  - Apply MC or TD(0) to episode k

AB Example

Two states A, B; no discounting; 8 episodes of experience

$\mathrm{A}, 0, \mathrm{B}, 0$
$\mathrm{B}, 1$
$\mathrm{B}, 1$
$\mathrm{B}, 1$
$\mathrm{B}, 1$
$\mathrm{B}, 1$
$\mathrm{B}, 1$
$\mathrm{B}, 0$

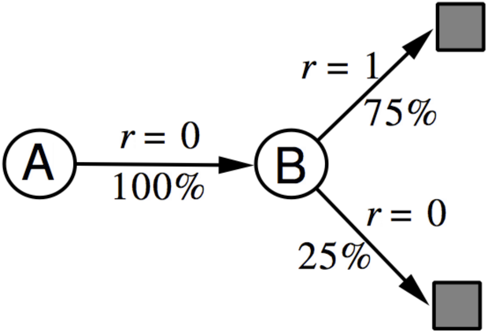
What is $V(A), V(B)$?

6/8 = 0.75

AB Example

Two states A, B; no discounting; 8 episodes of experience

A, 0, B, 0
B, 1
B, 1
B, 1
B, 1
B, 1
B, 1
B, 0



What is $V(A), V(B)$?

This MDP is the best explanation and the maximum likelihood MDP that explains this data in the best possible way.

Certainty Equivalence

- MC always converges to solution with minimum mean-squared error
  - Best fit to the observed returns

$$\sum_{k=1}^{K} \sum_{t=1}^{T_k} \left(G_t^k - V(s_t^k) \right)^2$$

  - In the AB example, $V(A) = 0$
- TD(0) converges to solution of max likelihood Markov model
  - Solution to the MDP $\langle \mathcal{S}, \mathcal{A}, \hat{\mathcal{P}}, \hat{\mathcal{R}}, \gamma \rangle$ that best fits the data

$$\hat{\mathcal{P}}_{s,s'}^{a} = \frac{1}{N(s,a)} \sum_{k=1}^{K} \sum_{t=1}^{T_k} \mathbf{1}(s_t^k, a_t^k, s_{t+1}^k = s, a, s')$$

$$\hat{\mathcal{R}}_{s}^{a} = \frac{1}{N(s,a)} \sum_{k=1}^{K} \sum_{t=1}^{T_k} \mathbf{1}(s_t^k, a_t^k = s, a) r_t^k$$

indicator function

  - In the AB example, $V(A) = 0.75$

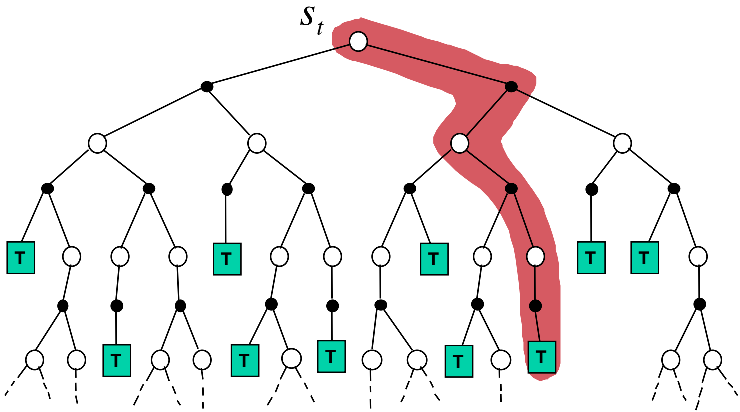
Advantages and Disadvantages of MC vs. TD (3)

- TD exploits Markov property
  - Usually more efficient in Markov environments
- MC does not exploit Markov property
  - Usually more effective in non-Markov environments

Monte-Carlo Backup

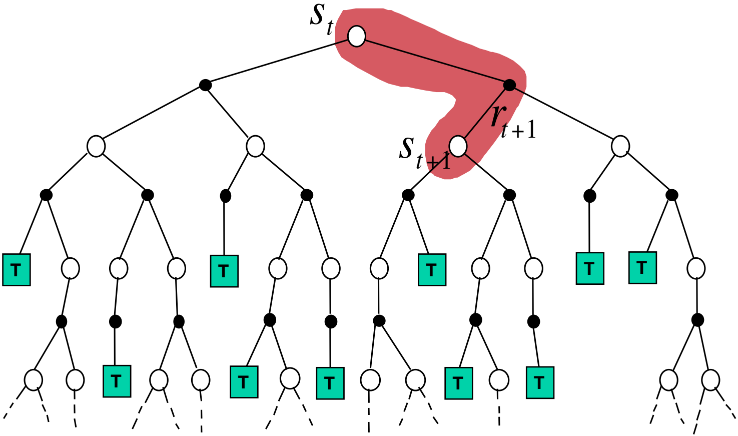
pictorial summary

$$V(S_t) \leftarrow V(S_t) + \alpha \left(G_t - V(S_t) \right)$$



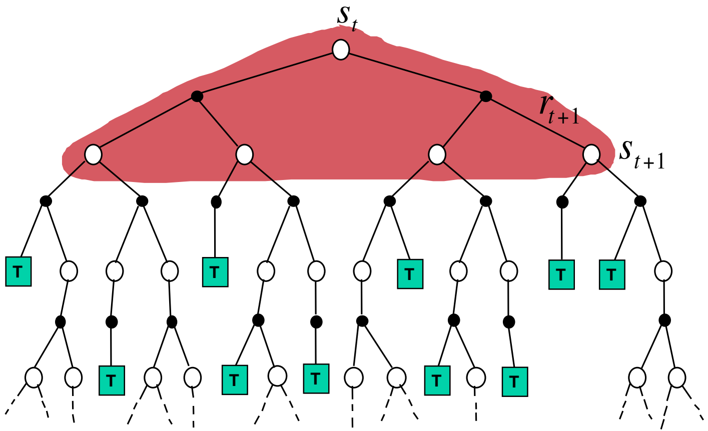
Temporal-Difference Backup

$$V(S_t) \leftarrow V(S_t) + \alpha \left(R_{t+1} + \gamma V(S_{t+1}) - V(S_t) \right)$$



Dynamic Programming Backup

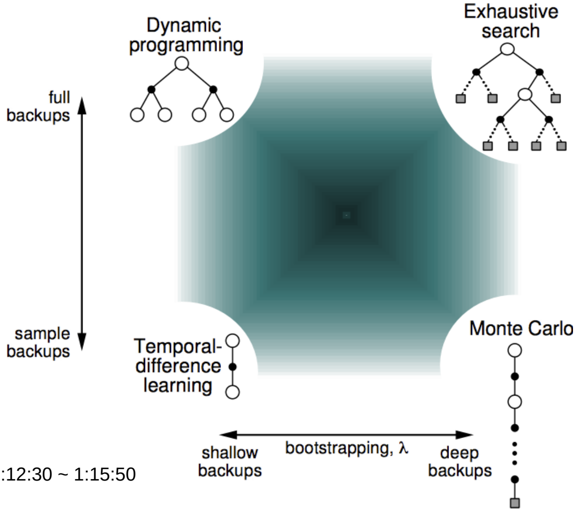
$$V(S_t) \leftarrow \mathbb{E}_\pi \left[R_{t+1} + \gamma V(S_{t+1}) \right]$$



Bootstrapping and Sampling

- Bootstrapping: update involves an estimate
  - MC does not bootstrap
  - DP bootstraps
  - TD bootstraps
- Sampling: update samples an expectation
  - MC samples
  - DP does not sample full width update
  - TD samples

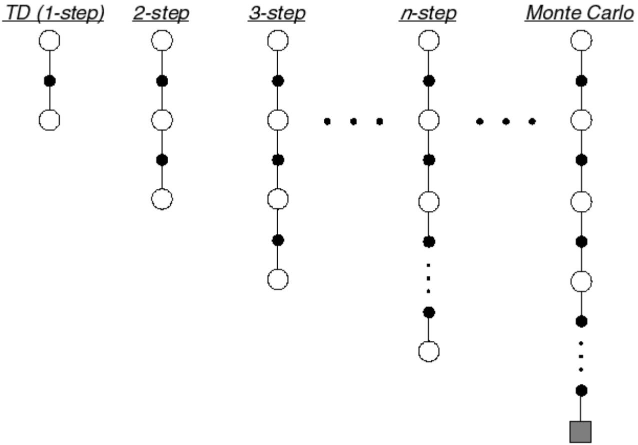
Unified View of Reinforcement Learning



Good question - 1:12:30 ~ 1:15:50

n-Step Prediction

- Let TD target look n steps into the future



n-Step Return

- Consider the following n-step returns for $n = 1, 2, \infty$:

$$
\begin{array}{lll}
n = 1 & (TD) & G_t^{(1)} = R_{t+1} + \gamma V(S_{t+1}) \\
n = 2 & & G_t^{(2)} = R_{t+1} + \gamma R_{t+2} + \gamma^2 V(S_{t+2}) \\
\vdots & & \vdots \\
n = \infty & (MC) & G_t^{(\infty)} = R_{t+1} + \gamma R_{t+2} + ... + \gamma^{T-1} R_T
\end{array}
$$

estimated return from that point onwards

- Define the n-step return

$$G_t^{(n)} = R_{t+1} + \gamma R_{t+2} + ... + \gamma^{n-1} R_{t+n} + \gamma^n V(S_{t+n})$$

estimated value, current value function in the state we end up after n steps

- n-step temporal-difference learning

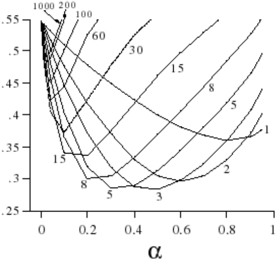
TD target

$$V(S_t) \leftarrow V(S_t) + \alpha \left(G_t^{(n)} - V(S_t) \right)$$

TD error

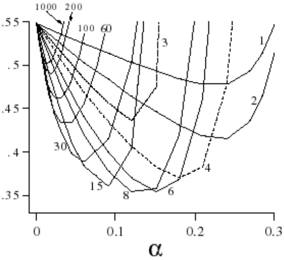
Then, which n is the best? This is natural question.

Large Random Walk Example



The difference b/w on-line update and off-line update is whether we immediately update our value function.

3 or 5 are sweet spots



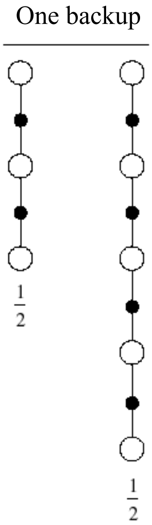
Averaging n-Step Returns

- We can average n-step returns over different n
- e.g. average the 2-step and 4-step returns

$$\frac{1}{2}G^{(2)} + \frac{1}{2}G^{(4)}$$

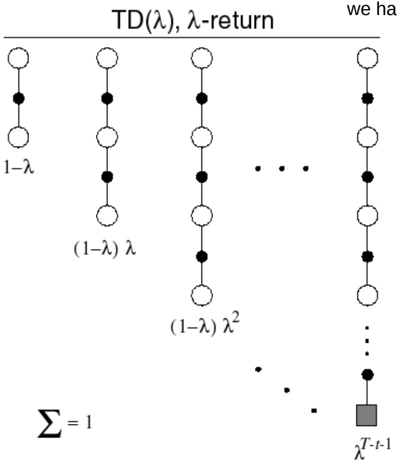
- Combines information from two different time-steps
- Can we efficiently combine information from all time-steps?

Answer is "Yes we can do efficiently by using the algorithm TD(\lamda)."



λ-return

The constant lambda tells us how much we're going to decay weighting we have each successive n.



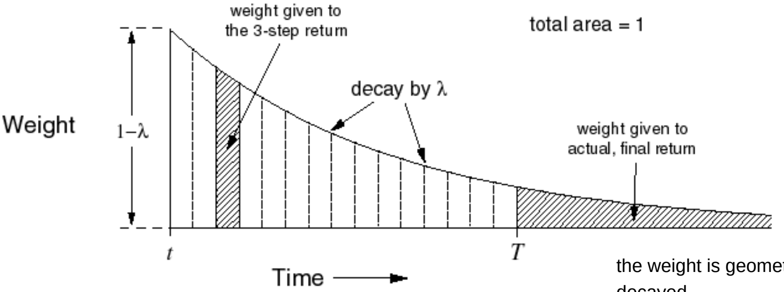
- The *λ-return* G_t^λ combines all n-step returns $G_t^{(n)}$
- Using weight $(1-\lambda)\lambda^{n-1}$

$$G_t^\lambda = (1-\lambda)\sum_{n=1}^{\infty} \lambda^{n-1} G_t^{(n)}$$

- Forward-view TD(λ)

$$V(S_t) \leftarrow V(S_t) + \alpha\left(\overset{\text{TD target}}{G_t^\lambda} - V(S_t)\right)$$

TD(λ) Weighting Function



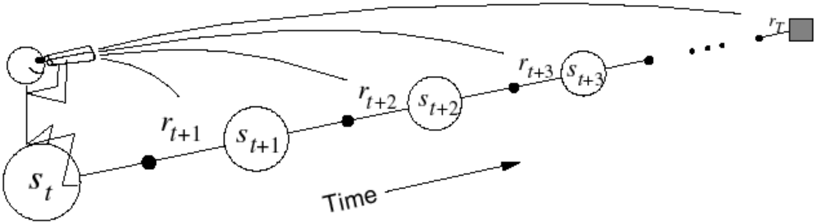
the weight is geometrically decayed.

$$G_t^{\lambda} = (1 - \lambda) \sum_{n=1}^{\infty} \lambda^{n-1} G_t^{(n)}$$

Why do we use the geometric weight? why not some other weighting?
- The anwser is (that it makes)for efficiently computable algorithm.

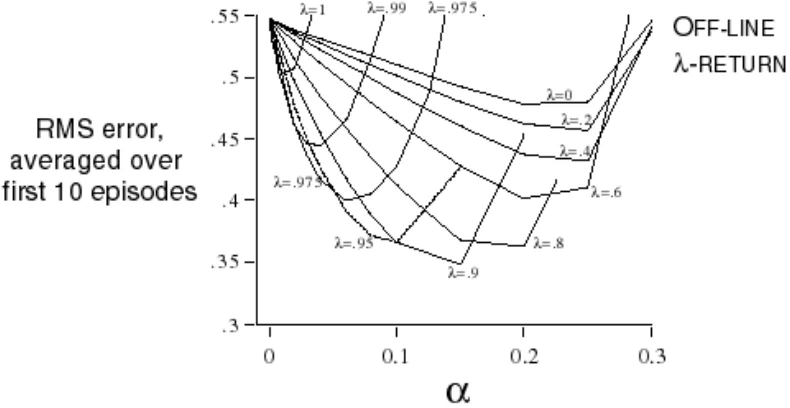
same cost as TD(0)

Forward-view TD(λ)



- Update value function towards the λ-return
- Forward-view looks into the future to compute G_t^λ
- Like MC, can only be computed from complete episodes

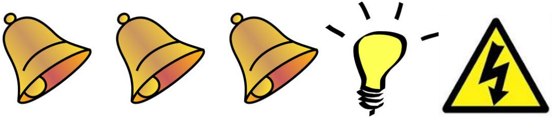
Forward-View TD(λ) on Large Random Walk



Backward View TD(λ)

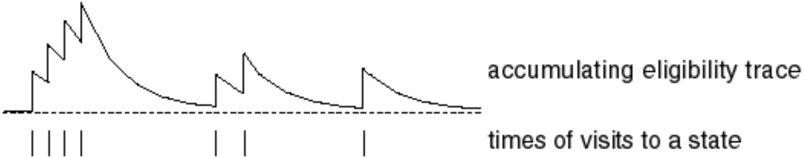
- Forward view provides theory
- Backward view provides mechanism
- Update online, every step, from incomplete sequences

Eligibility Traces



- Credit assignment problem: did bell or light cause shock?
- Frequency heuristic: assign credit to most frequent states
- Recency heuristic: assign credit to most recent states
- *Eligibility traces* combine both heuristics

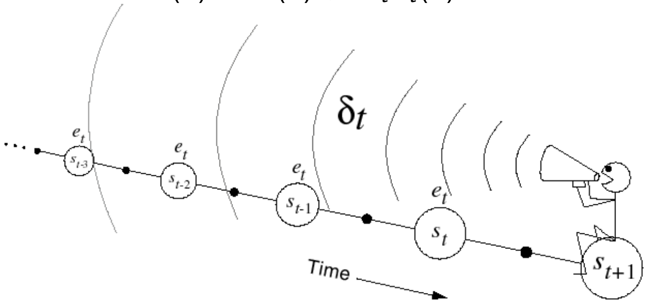
$$E_0(s) = 0$$
$$E_t(s) = \gamma\lambda E_{t-1}(s) + \mathbf{1}(S_t = s)$$



Backward View TD(λ)

- Keep an eligibility trace for every state s
- Update value $V(s)$ for every state s
- In proportion to TD-error δ_t and eligibility trace $E_t(s)$

$$\delta_t = R_{t+1} + \gamma V(S_{t+1}) - V(S_t)$$
$$V(s) \leftarrow V(s) + \alpha \delta_t E_t(s)$$



TD(λ) and TD(0)

- When $\lambda = 0$, only current state is updated

$$E_t(s) = \mathbf{1}(S_t = s)$$
$$V(s) \leftarrow V(s) + \alpha \delta_t E_t(s)$$

- This is exactly equivalent to TD(0) update

$$V(S_t) \leftarrow V(S_t) + \alpha \delta_t$$

TD(λ) and MC

- When $\lambda = 1$, credit is deferred until end of episode
- Consider episodic environments with offline updates
- Over the course of an episode, total update for TD(1) is the same as total update for MC

Theorem

The sum of offline updates is identical for forward-view and backward-view TD(λ)

$$\sum_{t=1}^{T} \alpha \delta_t E_t(s) = \sum_{t=1}^{T} \alpha \left(G_t^{\lambda} - V(S_t) \right) \mathbf{1}(S_t = s)$$

on-line update vs off-line update

MC and TD(1)

- Consider an episode where s is visited once at time-step k,
- TD(1) eligibility trace discounts time since visit,

$$
\begin{aligned}
E_t(s) &= \gamma E_{t-1}(s) + \mathbf{1}(S_t = s) \\
&= \begin{cases} 0 & \text{if } t < k \\ \gamma^{t-k} & \text{if } t \geq k \end{cases}
\end{aligned}
$$

- TD(1) updates accumulate error *online*

$$
\sum_{t=1}^{T-1} \alpha \delta_t E_t(s) = \alpha \sum_{t=k}^{T-1} \gamma^{t-k} \delta_t = \alpha \left(G_k - V(S_k) \right)
$$

- By end of episode it accumulates total error

$$
\delta_k + \gamma \delta_{k+1} + \gamma^2 \delta_{k+2} + ... + \gamma^{T-1-k} \delta_{T-1}
$$

Telescoping in TD(1)

When $\lambda = 1$, sum of TD errors telescopes into MC error,

$$
\begin{aligned}
&\delta_t + \gamma \delta_{t+1} + \gamma^2 \delta_{t+2} + ... + \gamma^{T-1-t} \delta_{T-1} \\
= \; & R_{t+1} + \gamma V(S_{t+1}) - V(S_t) \\
+ \; & \gamma R_{t+2} + \gamma^2 V(S_{t+2}) - \gamma V(S_{t+1}) \\
+ \; & \gamma^2 R_{t+3} + \gamma^3 V(S_{t+3}) - \gamma^2 V(S_{t+2}) \\
& \quad \vdots \\
+ \; & \gamma^{T-1-t} R_T + \gamma^{T-t} V(S_T) - \gamma^{T-1-t} V(S_{T-1}) \\
= \; & R_{t+1} + \gamma R_{t+2} + \gamma^2 R_{t+3} ... + \gamma^{T-1-t} R_T - V(S_t) \\
= \; & G_t - V(S_t)
\end{aligned}
$$

TD(λ) and TD(1)

- TD(1) is roughly equivalent to every-visit Monte-Carlo
- Error is accumulated online, step-by-step
- If value function is only updated offline at end of episode
- Then total update is exactly the same as MC

Telescoping in TD(λ)

For general λ, TD errors also telescope to λ-error, $G_t^\lambda - V(S_t)$

$$
\begin{aligned}
G_t^\lambda - V(S_t) = -V(S_t) \quad & + \quad (1-\lambda)\lambda^0 \left(R_{t+1} + \gamma V(S_{t+1})\right) \\
& + \quad (1-\lambda)\lambda^1 \left(R_{t+1} + \gamma R_{t+2} + \gamma^2 V(S_{t+2})\right) \\
& + \quad (1-\lambda)\lambda^2 \left(R_{t+1} + \gamma R_{t+2} + \gamma^2 R_{t+3} + \gamma^3 V(S_{t+3})\right) \\
& + \quad \dots \\
= -V(S_t) \quad & + \quad (\gamma\lambda)^0 \left(R_{t+1} + \gamma V(S_{t+1}) - \gamma\lambda V(S_{t+1})\right) \\
& + \quad (\gamma\lambda)^1 \left(R_{t+2} + \gamma V(S_{t+2}) - \gamma\lambda V(S_{t+2})\right) \\
& + \quad (\gamma\lambda)^2 \left(R_{t+3} + \gamma V(S_{t+3}) - \gamma\lambda V(S_{t+3})\right) \\
& + \quad \dots \\
= \quad & \quad\quad (\gamma\lambda)^0 \left(R_{t+1} + \gamma V(S_{t+1}) - V(S_t)\right) \\
& + \quad (\gamma\lambda)^1 \left(R_{t+2} + \gamma V(S_{t+2}) - V(S_{t+1})\right) \\
& + \quad (\gamma\lambda)^2 \left(R_{t+3} + \gamma V(S_{t+3}) - V(S_{t+2})\right) \\
& + \quad \dots \\
= \delta_t + \gamma\lambda\delta_{t+1} & + (\gamma\lambda)^2\delta_{t+2} + \dots
\end{aligned}
$$

Forwards and Backwards TD(λ)

- Consider an episode where s is visited once at time-step k,
- TD(λ) eligibility trace discounts time since visit,

$$
\begin{aligned}
E_t(s) &= \gamma\lambda E_{t-1}(s) + \mathbf{1}(S_t = s) \\
&= \begin{cases} 0 & \text{if } t < k \\ (\gamma\lambda)^{t-k} & \text{if } t \geq k \end{cases}
\end{aligned}
$$

- Backward TD(λ) updates accumulate error *online*

$$
\sum_{t=1}^{T} \alpha\delta_t E_t(s) = \alpha \sum_{t=k}^{T} (\gamma\lambda)^{t-k}\delta_t = \alpha\left(G_k^\lambda - V(S_k)\right)
$$

- By end of episode it accumulates total error for λ-return
- For multiple visits to s, $E_t(s)$ accumulates many errors

Offline Equivalence of Forward and Backward TD

Offline updates

- Updates are accumulated within episode
- but applied in batch at the end of episode

Onine Equivalence of Forward and Backward TD

Online updates

- TD(λ) updates are applied online at each step within episode
- Forward and backward-view TD(λ) are slightly different
- NEW: Exact online TD(λ) achieves perfect equivalence
- By using a slightly different form of eligibility trace
- Sutton and von Seijen, ICML 2014

Summary of Forward and Backward TD(λ)

Offline updates	$\lambda = 0$	$\lambda \in (0, 1)$	$\lambda = 1$
Backward view	TD(0)	TD(λ)	TD(1)
	$\parallel$	$\parallel$	$\parallel$
Forward view	TD(0)	Forward TD(λ)	MC
Online updates	$\lambda = 0$	$\lambda \in (0, 1)$	$\lambda = 1$
Backward view	TD(0)	TD(λ)	TD(1)
	$\parallel$	$\nparallel$	$\nparallel$
Forward view	TD(0)	Forward TD(λ)	MC
	$\parallel$	$\parallel$	$\parallel$
Exact Online	TD(0)	Exact Online TD(λ)	Exact Online TD(1)

$=$ here indicates equivalence in total update at end of episode.