

BIRKBECK COLLEGE

MSC COMPUTER SCIENCE PROJECT PROPOSAL

**Reinforcement Learning and Video
Games: Implementing a Platformer AI
with Evolutionary Methods**

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*MSc Computer Science project proposal, Department of Computer Science
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Abstract

Placeholder.

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1 Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) is a core tenant of video games, traditionally utilised as adversaries or opponents to human players. Likewise, game playing has long been a staple of AI research. However, academic research has traditionally focused mostly on board and card games and advances in game AI and academic AI have largely remained distinct.

The primary focus of game AI is enhance the experience and entertain. Investing time and resources into advanced AI research is infeasible and wasteful when simpler systems act well (if not perfectly). Furthermore, the games industry is driven by users, most of whom are not interested in advanced AI techniques.[1]

The first video game opponents were simple rule-based, discrete algorithms, such as the computer paddle in *Pong*. In the late 1970s video game AIs became more advanced, utilising search algorithms and reacting to user input. In *Pacman*, the ghost displayed distinct personalities and worked together against the human player [2]. In the mid 90s, Finite State Machines (FSMs) emerged as a dominant game AI technique, as seen in games like *Half-Life* [3]. Later, in the 2000s, Behaviour Trees gained preeminence, as seen in games such as *F.E.A.R.* [4] and *Halo 2* [5]. These later advances borrowed little from contemporary development in academic AI and remained localised to the gaming industry.

However, with increases in processing power and the complexity of games over the last ten years many academic techniques have been harnessed by developers. For example, Monte Carlo Tree Search techniques developed for use in Go AI research has been used in *Total War: Rome II* [6] and in 2008's *Left 4 Dead*, Player Modelling was used to alter play experience for different users [7, p. 10]. Furthermore, AI and related techniques are no longer only being used as adversaries. There has been a rise in intelligent Procedural Content Generation in games in recent years, in both a game-world sense (for example *MineCraft* and *Terraria*) and also a story sense (*Skyrim's* Radiant Quest System) [8].

Moreover, games have recently enjoyed more consideration in academic research. Commercial games such as *Ms. Pac Man*, *Starcraft*, *Unreal Tournament* and *Super Mario Bros.* and open-source games like *TORCS* [24] and *Cellz* [10] have been at the centre of recent competitions and papers [11] [12].

These competitions are the forefront of research and development into reinforcement learning techniques in video games, and will be explored in more detail in section 2.3.

The aim of this project is to explore the topic of reinforcement learning in video games. This will be realised through the implementation of a game-playing AI.

2 Background

Reinforcement learning has long been a staple of academic research into AI and Dynamic Programming, especially in robotics and board games. However, it has also had success in more niche problems, such as helicopter control [15] and human-computer dialogue [16].

2.1 Concept Definitions

At this point it is useful to introduce some high level descriptions/definitions of some concepts key to this project.

2.1.1 Game Specific

Rules Sets [TODO] [Is this needed?]

Behaviour Trees (BTs) Behaviour Trees are a construct which encodes progressively more specific actions. From the top of the tree broad behaviours are broken down into subtrees. BTs are executed by traversing the tree and executing nodes.

Nodes of the tree can either be *control* nodes or *leaf* nodes. *Control* nodes affect how their children will be executed, for example a **Sequence** node asserts that its children be executed in order from left to right (akin to AND) and a **Selector** node executes children in order from left to right until one succeeds (akin to OR). *Leaf* nodes can be **Conditions**, which succeed if the game state passes the condition and **Actions**, which carry out a set of moves or decisions. [32]

2.1.2 Learning

Online/Offline

Offline An offline (or batch) learner trains on an entire dataset before applying changes.

Online A online learner reacts/learns from data immediately after each datapoint.

(reference?)

Reinforcement Learning A reinforcement learning agent focuses on a learning problem, with its goal to maximise *reward*. Given a current *state* the agent chooses an *action* available to it, which is determined by a *policy*. This action maps the current *state* to a new *state*. This *transition* is then evaluated for its *reward*. This *reward* often affects the *policy* of future iterations, but *policies* may be stochastic to some level. [13, s. 1.3]

Genetic Algorithms (GAs) Genetic Algorithms are an subset of Evolutionary Methods and model the solution as a *population* of *individuals*. Each *individual* has a set of *chromosomes*, which can be thought of as simple pieces of analogous information (most often in the form of bit strings). Each *individual* is assessed by some *fitness function*. This assessment is used to cull the *population*, akin to survival of the fittest. Then a new *population* is created (possibly containing the fittest from the previous *population*) using *crossover* of *chromosomes* from two (or more) *individuals* (akin to sexual reproduction), *mutation* of *chromosomes* from one *individual* (akin to asexual reproduction) and *re-ordering* of *chromosomes*. Each new *population* is called a *generation*. [14, p. 7]

Grammatical Evolution (GE) The solution in Grammatical Evolution is a program or program fragment. This program is described by a context-free grammar. The search space of the problem consists of integer strings, which are normally evolved using a GA. These integer strings encode a program tree using the context-free grammar. Decoding starts with the start symbol or expression and continues with the left most nonterminal. Imagining each symbol has an ordered list of possible choices, the next integer in the string is calculated modulo the length of the choice list, this value is then the index of the symbol's replacement. This continues until the grammar is in a terminal state. [32]

2.2 Reinforcement Learning and Commercial Games

Desirability

Ventures in utilising reinforcement learning in commercial video games have been limited and largely ineffectual. However, there are many reasons why good execution of these techniques is desirable. Firstly, modern games have large and diverse player bases, having a game that can respond and personalise to a specific player can help cater to all. Secondly, learning algorithms produce AI that can respond well in new situations (over say FSMs or discrete logic), hence making new content easy to produce or generate. Lastly, humans must learn and react to environments and scenarios during games. Having non-playable characters do the same may produce a more believable, immersive and relatable AI, which is one of the key criticisms with current games. [11, p. 7, p. 13]

Issues

The main issue with constructing effectual learning (or learnt) AI in game is time and money. Game development works on strict cycles and have limited resources to invest into AI research. Furthermore, one player playing one game produces a very small data set, making learning from the player

challenging. Moreover, AI that is believably human is a field still in it's infancy. [17]

2.3 Reinforcement Learning and Game AI Competitions

Despite the lack of commercial success, video games can act as great benchmark for Reinforcement Learning AI. They are designed to challenge humans, and therefore will challenge AI methods; games generally have some level of learning curve associated with playing them (as a human); games mostly have some notion of scoring suitable for a fitness function and they are generally accessible to students, academic and the general public alike. [11, p. 9] [12, p. 1] [21, p. 2]

Over the last few years several game based AI competitions have begun, over a variety of genres. These competitions challenge entrants to create an agent that plays a game and is rated according to the competitions specification. They have attracted both academic [21, p. 2] and media interest [12, p. 2]. Hence, several interesting papers have been published into the application of Reinforcement Learning in video games have emerged. Approaches tend to vary widely, modelling and tackling the problem very differently and combining and specialising techniques in previously unseen ways. [21, p. 11]

Some brief details of the competitions which are of relevance to this project are compiled in to Table 1. The Mario AI Competition is also explored in more detail below.

2.3.1 The Mario AI Competition

The Mario AI Competition, organised by Sergey Karakovskiy and Julian Togelius, ran between 2009-2012 and used an adapted version of the open-source game Infinite Mario Bros. From 2010 onwards the competition was split into four distinct 'tracks'. We shall focus on the unseen Gameplay track, where agents play several unseen levels as Mario with the aim to finish the level (and score highly). [12] [21]

Infinite Mario Bros. Infinite Mario Bros (IMB) [28] is an open-source clone of Super Mario Bros. 3, created by Markus Persson. The core gameplay is described as a *Platformer*. The game is viewed side-on with a 2D perspective. Players control Mario and travel left to right in an attempt to reach the end of the level (and maximise score). The screen shows a short section of the level, with Mario centred. Mario must navigating terrain and avoid enemies and pits. To do this Mario can move left and right, jump, duck and speed up. Mario also exists in 3 different states, *small*, *big* and *fire* (the latter of which enables Mario to shoot fireballs), accessed by finding powerups. Touching an enemy (in most cases) reverts Mario to a previous state. Mario dies if he touches an enemy in the *small* state or falls into a pit,

Genre	Game	Description
<i>The Simulated Car Racing Competition</i>		
Racing	TORCS (Open-source) [24]	Competitors enter drivers, that undergo races against other entrants which include qualifying and multi-car racing. The competition encourages the use of learning techniques (but doesn't ban non-learning agents). [25]
<i>The 2K BotPrize</i>		
First Person Shooter (FPS)	Unreal Tournament 2004	Competitors enter 'bots' that play a multi-player game against a mix of other bots and humans. Entrants are judged on Turing test basis, where a panel of judges attempt to identify the human players. [26]
<i>The Starcraft AI Competition</i>		
Real Time Strategy (RTS)	Starcraft	Competitors play against each other in a 1 on 1 knockout style tournament. Implementing an agent involves solving both micro objectives, such as path-planning, and macro objectives, such as base progression. [27]
<i>The Mario AI Competition</i>		
Platformer	Infinite Mario Bros (Open-source)	Competitors submit agents that attempt to play (as a human would) or create levels. The competition is split into 'tracks', including Gameplay, Learning, Turing and Level Generation. In Gameplay, each agent must play unseen levels, earning a score, which is compared to other entrants. [21]

Table 1: This table summarises some recent game AI competitions [23]

at which point the level ends. Score is affected by how many coins Mario has collected, how many enemies he has killed (by jumping on them or by using fireballs or shells) and how quickly he has completed the level. [21, p. 3]

Suitability to Reinforcement Learning The aforementioned level generation and speed-up properties of the Mario benchmark makes it a great testbed for reinforcement learning. The ability to learn from large sets of diverse data makes learning a much more effective technique. [21, p. 3]

Besides that, the Mario benchmark presents an interesting challenge for reinforcement learning algorithms. Despite only a limited view of the “world” at any one time the state and observable space is still of quite high-dimension. Though not to the same extent, so too is the action space. Any combination of five key presses per timestep gives a action space of 2^5 [21, p. 3]. Hence part of the problem when implementing a learning algorithm for the Mario benchmark is reducing these search spaces. This has the topic of papers by Handa [29] and Ross and Bagnell [30].

Lastly, there is a considerable learning curve associated with Mario. The

simplest levels could easily be solved by agents hard coded to jump when they reach an obstruction, whereas difficult levels require complex and varied behaviour. For example, traversing a series of pits may require a well placed series of jumps, or passing a group of enemies may require careful timing. Furthermore, considerations such as score, or the need to backtrack from a dead-end greatly increase the complexity of the problem. [21, p. 3, p. 12]

2.4 Previous Agents

2.4.1 Overview

In 2009 A* based agents dominated the competition. Modelling the screen as a search problem allowed agents to sweep through levels with speed and precision. The best A* agent was Robin Baumgarten’s [22, p. 5].

With the additions of more difficult levels in 2010, A* agents fell from prominence (Baumgarten’s agent came 3rd) [21]. Unfortunately, there were not enough entrants into the 2011 and 2012 competition to run it.

Below are some details on learning based agents in the 2009 and 2010 competitions. Two 2010 agents, Perez et al. [32] and REALM [31], will be explored in more detail.

2009

M. Erickson used a crossover-heavy Genetic Algorithm to evolve expression trees, using competition score for fitness. [22, p. 6]

S. Polikarpov used reinforcement learning to develop a “Cyberneuron architecture” where neurons correspond to action sequences. Neurons are punished or rewarded based on Mario’s performance when executing the action sequence [22, p. 6]. S. Polikarpov returned for the 2010 competition and took 2nd place.

E. Speed used a Genetic Algorithm to evolve a rule set, using the entire 22x22 grid as the observation space. This lead to a genome size of over 100Mb and the agent ran out of memory during the competition, cementing the need to reduce the observation space when implementing a GA.

2010

L. Villalobos used genetic programming to evolve tree-based agent. She did not enter the unseen Gameplay track, focusing on the Learning track. [21, pp. 10-11]

FEETSIES Team used a biologically based stochastic search mechanism called “Cuckoo Search via Lévy Flights” to optimise E. Speed’s 2009 entry. [21, p. 10] [33]

2.4.2 D. Perez et al.

[TODO]

- Used Grammatical Evolution to develop behaviour trees.
- BTs expressed as by context free grammars, GAs to evolve Integer strings that translate into BTs.
- BTs were made up of a limited number of high level behaviour subtrees.
- Sub-trees were made up of conditions followed by a mix of high level action sequences and simply fundamental actions.
- No use of A*, but able to exhibit planning style behaviour.
- Finished 4th in 2010.

2.4.3 REALM

The REALM agent, developed by Slawomir Bojarski and Clare Bates Congdon, was the winner of the 2010 competition, in both the unseen and learning Gameplay tracks. REALM stands for **R**ule Based **E**volutionary **C**omputation **A**gent that **L**earns to Play **M**ario. REALM went through two versions (V1 and V2), with the second being the agent submitted to the 2010 competition. REALM serves as the main inspiration for this project.

Rule-based

Rules map carefully chosen conditions (a simplification of the available environment information) to actions in a simple look up table. Rule preference over binary conditions are either TRUE, FALSE or DONT_CARE [31, p. 85]. Each time step a rule is chosen that best fits the current condition, with ties being settled by rule order [31, p. 86].

Actions in V1 were explicit key-press combinations, whereas in V2 two they are high-level plans. These plans were passed to a simulator, which reassessed the environment and used A* to produce the key-press combination. This was done in part to reduce the search space of the learning algorithm. [31, pp. 85-87]

Learning

REALM starts with a random ruleset and evolves it using a GA over 1000 generations. The best performing rule set from the final generation was chosen to act as the agent for the competition. Hence, REALM is an agent focused on offline learning. [31, pp. 87-89]

Population Populations have a fixed size of 50 individuals, with each individual being a rule set. Each rule represents a genome and each individual has 20. Initially rules are randomised, with each condition having a 40%, 30%, 30% chance to be DONT_CARE, TRUE, FALSE respectively.

Evaluation Individuals are evaluated by running through 12 different levels. The fitness of an individual is a modified score, averaged over the levels. Score focuses on distance, completion of level, Mario’s state at the end and number of kills. Each level an individual plays increases in difficulty. Levels are predictably generated, with the seed being recalculated at the start of each generation. This is to avoid over-fitting and to encourage more general rules.

Breeding The breeding phase takes the five best individuals from the population and produces 9 offspring each. These parents are then also included in the next generation. Offspring are exposed to: **Mutation**, where rule conditions and actions may change value; **Crossover**, where a rule from one child may be swapped with a rule from another child and **Reordering**, where rules are randomly reordered. These occur with probabilities of 10%, 10% and 20% respectively.

Performance

The REALM V1 agent saw a larger improvement over the evolution, but only scored 65% of the V2 agents score on average. It is noted that V1 struggled with high concentrations of enemies and large pits. The creators also assert that the V2 agent was more interesting to watch, exhibiting more advanced and human-like behaviours. [31, pp. 89-90]

The ruleset developed from REALM V2 was entered into the 2010 unseen Gameplay track. It not only scored the highest overall score, but also highest number of kills and was never disqualified (by getting stuck in a dead-end). Competition organisers note that REALM dealt with the more difficult levels better than other entrants. [21, p. 10]

3 Project Specification

3.1 Aims

The primary aim of the project is to create an agent, or agents, that plays the Mario AI benchmark. The agent will be implemented with the Mario AI benchmark software. The agent will be rule-based, mapping conditions to key-presses. Rulesets will be evolved using Genetic Algorithms and similar evolutionary concepts. It will adhere to the following stipulations:

- The agent will follow the rules of the Mario AI competition: Using only the Environment interface for sensory information and no use of reflection.
- As the project is concerned primarily with learning concepts there will be no use of search and planning algorithms such as A*.
- No simulation of the game engine to predict enemy movements.

The goal of the project is not to produce the best possible Mario AI agent, but to explore the use of evolutionary techniques in creating a game playing AI. The project will attempt to customise and expand on the REALM V1 agent.

3.2 Expansions

REALM V1 data shows that rules mapping to explicit key presses is not an optimal strategy, and that some level of higher order planning produces better results. Perez et al.'s agent showed that this behaviour could be achieved using evolved Behaviour Trees. Possible incorporation of the Grammatical Evolution and Behaviour Tree application into the Rule-Based architecture will be explored, as it seems an elegant way to avoid using search and planning algorithms.

[Add point about reduction in state space as explored in research papers [29] and [30]]

3.3 Codebase

The intention is that Scala will be the main language of this project. The Mario AI benchmark is coded in Java. Given that Scala is backwards compatible with Java there should not be a significant time penalty in integrating these two languages.

3.4 Libraries

There are several Genetic Programming libraries available for Java. This project will consider the use of two: ECJ [34] and JGAP [35].

3.5 Evaluation

The agent (or agents) will be evaluated in the style of the unseen Gameplay track of the 2010 Mario AI Competition. After the learning, the best individual will be chosen to be evaluated by the *GamePlayTrack* class. Here the agent will play 512 unseen levels (generated by a random seed). This will allow to compare against the results of the 2010 Competition, although the levels played will be different.

As the evaluation class allows multiple agents evaluation over the same levels (by passing the same seed) further comparisons can be drawn against other available agents:

- A hand-made rule-set agent, based on the format used in this project, will be made. This will show whether learning has a significant effect on the proficiency of the full agent.
- The benchmark software includes several example agents, including a simple, hard-coded agent called *ForwardJumpingAgent*, which was used for similar comparisons in the 2009 competition. [22]
- Baumgarten’s A* agent, which contains no learning and was the winner in 2009. It is open-source and available online [36].

The agent(s) will also be assessed by the increase in fitness over time during learning. A steeper increase in fitness shows an effective learning process.

3.6 Timeline

Work will begin on June 10th, and run until the 14th of September, when the report will be submitted. The writing of the report will be a continual process over the 96 days.

June 10th – July 1st

1 day Integration of the existing Java codebase with the Scala language.

10 days Rule set interpretation testing and implementation, including the creation of a hand-made agent.

10 days Evolutionary Methods library integration and learning set-up.

July 1st – September 7th

- Decision on conditions to be used for rule sets and their translation from the *Environment* interface.

- Experimentation and assessment of evolutionary methods to evolve rulesets. This may include reassessing conditions.
- Possible expansions as spelled out in subsection 3.2.

August 24th – September 7th

- Evaluation of agent(s) as specified in subsection 3.5.

September 7th – September 14th

- Finishing touches to the project report.

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