

# Solving Normal-Form Games

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# Recap: Normal-Form Games

		Fist	Hand	Rock
		0.2	-1	+1
0.5	Fist	+1	0	-1
	Hand	-1	+1	0
	Rock	+1	-1	0

★ SIMULTANEOUS

(No turns)

★ Strategy for a player  
is just a probability  
distribution over  
actions

# Two-Player Zero-Sum Normal-Form Games

- NE doesn't have problems as in general-sum or multiplayer games
- In a sense, NE is optimal in that no opponent can exploit you
  - If I were to play any other strategy than  $\frac{1}{3}, \frac{1}{3}, \frac{1}{3}$  in rock paper scissors, you could exploit me
- NE can leave utility on the table against imperfect opponents
  - If you always play Rock, NE will still just play  $\frac{1}{3}, \frac{1}{3}, \frac{1}{3}$
- But this is a price usually worth paying when playing experts or other AI programs

	R	P	S
R	0	-1	1
P	1	0	-1
S	-1	1	0

# Computing NE in Two-Player Zero-Sum Normal-Form Games (This Lecture)

1. LP for small games
2. Iterative Approaches
  - Best-Response Dynamics (doesn't converge)
  - Fictitious Play aka Follow the Leader (FTL)
3. No-Regret Algorithms
  - Follow the Regularized Leader (FTRL)
  - Regret Matching
4. Optimistic regret minimization

*Running example:  
Weighted RPS*

	R	P	S
R	0	-2	1
P	2	0	-1
S	-1	1	0

# LP Approach

$$\max_{x \in \Delta^m} \min_{y \in \Delta^n} x^\top A y$$

		y			
		1/4	1/4	1/2	
		R	P	S	
x	1/4	R	0	-2	1
	1/4	P	2	0	-1
	1/2	S	-1	1	0

# LP Approach

$$\max_{x \in \mathbb{R}^m} \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \min_{y \in \mathbb{R}^n} x^\top A y \\ \text{s.t. } \mathbf{1}^\top y = 1, \\ \quad y \geq 0 \end{array} \right.$$

$$\text{s.t. } \mathbf{1}^\top x = 1, \\ x \geq 0$$

find the largest value  $v$  s.t.

every strategy of the opponent gives us expected value at least  $v$

↓

LP duality

$$\max_{v \in \mathbb{R}} v$$

$$\text{s.t. } A^\top x \geq \mathbf{1}v$$

		$y$			
		1/4	1/4	1/2	
$x$	1/4	R	P	S	
	1/4	R	0	-2	1
		P	2	0	-1
	1/2	S	-1	1	0

# LP Approach

$$\max_{x \in \mathbb{R}^m} v$$

$v \in \mathbb{R}$

s. t.  $\mathbf{1}^\top x = 1,$   
 $x \geq 0$

$$A^\top x \geq \mathbf{1}v$$

find the largest value  $v$  s.t.

every strategy of the opponent gives us expected value at least  $v$

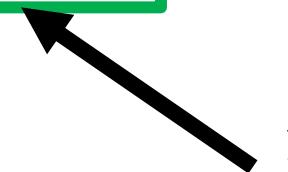
find the largest value  $v$  s.t.  
for some  $x$

$x$  is a valid mixed strategy

every strategy of the opponent gives us expected value at least  $v$

$$\max_{v \in \mathbb{R}} v$$

s. t.  $A^\top x \geq \mathbf{1}v$



		R	P	S	
	1/4	R	0	-2	1
x	1/4	P	2	0	-1
y	1/2	S	-1	1	0

# LP Approach

- Solving our game results in the following
- We maximize the value that the opponent can get against us
- Any deviation would allow the opponent to exploit us more

		R	P	S
1/4	R	0	-2	1
1/4	P	2	0	-1
1/2	S	-1	1	0



	R	P	S
EV	0	0	0

For P2's strategy: take dual values of constraint  $A^T x \geq 1v$ , or solve

$$\min_{y \in \Delta^n} \max_{x \in \Delta^m} x^T A y$$

# Iterative Approaches

- Only relatively small games can be solved via LP
- For larger games we need iterative approaches
- Most iterative approaches *approach* a NE *on average*
  - Can be stopped any time
- What we'll cover
  - Best Response Dynamics (doesn't converge to NE)
  - Fictitious Play aka Follow the Leader (isn't no-regret)
  - Follow the Regularized Leader (*e.g.*, gradient descent, multiplicative weights)
  - Regret Matching
  - Regret Matching Plus
  - Optimistic regret minimization

We'll make this  
precise soon



# Best Response Dynamics

$$x_i^{t+1} = \arg \max_{x_i} u_i(x_i, x_{-i}^t)$$

*Best respond to the opponent's **last** strategy*

Question: Does

$$\frac{1}{T} \sum_{t=1}^T x_i^t \xrightarrow{T \rightarrow \infty} \text{NE}?$$

No!

$$\frac{1}{T} \sum_{t=1}^T x_i^t \rightarrow \begin{bmatrix} 1/3 \\ 1/3 \\ 1/3 \end{bmatrix} \neq \text{NE} = \begin{bmatrix} 1/4 \\ 1/4 \\ 1/2 \end{bmatrix}$$

	R	P	S
R	0	-2	1
P	2	0	-1
S	-1	1	0

The diagram shows a 3x3 matrix game between two players. The columns represent Player 1's strategies (R, P, S) and the rows represent Player 2's strategies (R, P, S). The payoffs are listed in the matrix. Blue arrows indicate best responses: from (R,R) to (P,P), from (P,P) to (S,S), and from (S,S) back to (R,R). Red arrows indicate the cycle between (R,P), (P,S), and (S,R).

# Fictitious Play (Follow the Leader)

$$x_i^{t+1} = \arg \max_{x_i} \frac{1}{t} \sum_{\tau=1}^t u_i(x_i, x_{-i}^{\tau})$$

*Best respond to the opponent's **average** strategy*

Question: Does

$$\frac{1}{T} \sum_{t=1}^T x_i^t \xrightarrow{T \rightarrow \infty} \text{NE}$$

**Yes!** (for zero-sum games)  
[Robinson 1951]

...but possibly with very slow rate  $T^{-1/n}$   
if the tiebreaking is done adversarially  
[Daskalakis & Pan 2014]

**Open question** (“Karlin’s weak conjecture”, Karlin 1959):  
Does FP with *non-adversarial tiebreaking* converge with  
rate  $O_n(T^{-1/2})$  in all zero-sum normal-form games?

# No-Regret Algorithms

- What if I'm playing a repeated game against someone who knows I am playing fictitious play?
- Then they would know exactly what my next move will be and could choose a best response every time
- Can we find iterative algorithms that will not be *too bad* even when the opponent knows the algorithm?
- No-regret algorithms do exactly this
  - And achieve faster convergence than FP as well!

# Regret Minimization

for  $t = 1, \dots, T$ :

- Agent chooses an *action distribution*  $\mathbf{x}^t \in X := \Delta^n$
- Environment chooses a *utility vector*  $\mathbf{u}^t \in [0, 1]^n$
- Agent observes  $\mathbf{u}^t$  and gets utility  $\langle \mathbf{u}^t, \mathbf{x}^t \rangle$

$\Delta^n$  = set of distributions on  $n$  things  
=  $\{\mathbf{x} \in \mathbb{R}^n : \mathbf{x} \geq 0, \sum \mathbf{x}_i = 1\}$

Agent goal: Minimize *regret*.

"How well do we do against best, fixed strategy in hindsight?"

$$R^T := \max_{\hat{\mathbf{x}} \in X} \left\{ \sum_{t=1}^T \langle \mathbf{u}^t, \hat{\mathbf{x}} \rangle \right\} - \sum_{t=1}^T \langle \mathbf{u}^t, \mathbf{x}^t \rangle$$

Maximum utility that was achievable by the **best fixed** action in hindsight      Utility that was actually accumulated

★ Goal: have  $R^T$  grow sublinearly with respect to time  $T$ , e.g.,  $R^T = O_n(\sqrt{T})$

No assumption on utilities!  
Must be able to handle adversarial environments

# What does regret minimization have to do with zero-sum games?

Nash equilibrium in a 2-player 0-sum normal-form game with payoff matrix  $A$ :

$$\max_{x \in \Delta^m} \min_{y \in \Delta^n} x^\top A y$$

✿ IDEA: Self-play. Make two regret minimizers play each other

for  $t = 1, \dots, T$ :

- $x^t \leftarrow$  request strategy from P1's regret minimizer
- $y^t \leftarrow$  request strategy from P2's regret minimizer
- Pass utility  $Ay^t$  to P1's regret minimizer
- Pass utility  $-A^\top x^t$  to P2's regret minimizer

$$R_1^T := \max_{\hat{x} \in \Delta^m} \left\{ \sum_{t=1}^T \langle Ay^t, \hat{x} \rangle \right\} - \sum_{t=1}^T \langle Ay^t, x^t \rangle \leq O_m(\sqrt{T})$$

$$R_2^T := \max_{\hat{y} \in \Delta^n} \left\{ \sum_{t=1}^T \langle -A^\top x^t, \hat{y} \rangle \right\} - \sum_{t=1}^T \langle -A^\top x^t, y^t \rangle \leq O_n(\sqrt{T})$$

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$$\max_{\hat{x} \in \Delta^m} \{\hat{x}^\top A \bar{y}\} - \min_{\hat{y} \in \Delta^n} \{\bar{x}^\top A \hat{y}\} \leq O_{m,n} \left( \frac{1}{\sqrt{T}} \right)$$

where  $\bar{x} = \frac{1}{T} \sum_{t=1}^T x^t$  and  $\bar{y} = \frac{1}{T} \sum_{t=1}^T y^t$

Add these two lines and divide by  $T$  to get the average

✿ TAKEAWAY

The average strategies converge to a Nash equilibrium!

# Regret Minimization: Follow the Leader (Fictitious Play)

First attempt: Follow the leader. That is, play the best action in hindsight so far:

$$x^{t+1} = \arg \max_{x \in X} \sum_{\tau \leq t} \langle u^\tau, x \rangle$$

**This does not work!**

Counterexample:  $n = 2$  actions,

$$u^t = \begin{cases} [1/2, 0] & t = 1 \\ [0, 1] & t > 1, \text{ even} \\ [1, 0] & t > 1, \text{ odd} \end{cases}$$

Best action in hindsight has utility  $\approx T/2$

Follow-the-leader always plays the wrong action and therefore gets utility  $\approx 0$

*More generally: No algorithm outputting only pure actions can have no regret*

# Follow the *Regularized* Leader

**Idea:** Add a strictly convex *regularizer*  $R : X \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$

$$x^{t+1} = \arg \max_{x \in X} \sum_{\tau \leq t} \langle u^\tau, x \rangle - \frac{1}{\eta} R(x)$$

- This prevents each iterate from being deterministic
- The resulting algorithm **is no-regret** (for  $\eta \propto 1/\sqrt{T}$ )
- Intuitively, **updates toward high-regret actions, but not too much**



Follow the leader will always play deterministic actions



Follow the regularized leader will mix

# Follow the Regularized Leader

**Idea:** Add a strictly convex *regularizer*  $R : X \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$

$$x^{t+1} = \arg \max_{x \in X} \sum_{\tau \leq t} \langle u^\tau, x \rangle - \frac{1}{\eta} R(x)$$

**Example 1: quadratic**

$$R(x) = \frac{1}{2} \|x\|_2^2$$

Closed-form optimization:

$$x^{t+1} = \Pi_X \left( \eta \cdot \sum_{\tau=1}^t u^\tau \right)$$

a.k.a. gradient descent!



Follow the leader will  
always play  
deterministic actions



Follow the regularized  
leader will mix

# Follow the *Regularized* Leader

**Idea:** Add a strictly convex *regularizer*  $R : X \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$

$$x^{t+1} = \arg \max_{x \in X} \sum_{\tau \leq t} \langle u^\tau, x \rangle - \frac{1}{\eta} R(x)$$

**Example 2: negative entropy**

$$R(x) = \sum_a x[a] \log x[a]$$

Closed-form optimization:

$$x^{t+1} \propto \exp \left( \eta \cdot \sum_{\tau=1}^t u^\tau \right)$$

a.k.a. multiplicative weights update (MWU),  
hedge, (discrete-time) replicator dynamics,  
randomized weighted majority, ...



Follow the leader will  
always play  
deterministic actions



Follow the regularized  
leader will mix

# A Common Template for Regret Minimizers

- Given utility vectors  $\mathbf{u}^1, \dots, \mathbf{u}^t$ , we compute the empirical regrets up to time  $t$  of each action:

$$r^t[a] := \sum_{\tau=1}^t (u^\tau[a] - \langle \mathbf{u}^\tau, \mathbf{x}^\tau \rangle)$$

- Then, intuitively the next strategy  $\mathbf{x}^{t+1}$  gives mass to actions in a manner related to how much regret they have accumulated

# A Common Template for Regret Minimizers

Empirical regret:

$$r^t[a] := \sum_{\tau=1}^t (u^\tau[a] - \langle u^\tau, x^\tau \rangle)$$

Hyperparameter  
("learning rate")

Algorithm	Rule
Gradient descent	$x^{t+1} = \Pi_X(\eta \cdot r^t)$
Multiplicative weights update (MWU) (aka Hedge, Randomized Weighted Majority, ...)	$x^{t+1} \propto \exp(\eta \cdot r^t)$
Regret matching (RM) [Hart & Mas-Colell 2000]	$x^{t+1} \propto \max\{0, r^t\}$

No learning rate.  
Scale-invariant!

# RM Regret Bound Proof

$$\mathbf{x}^{t+1} \propto [\mathbf{r}^t]^+$$

where

$$\begin{aligned}\mathbf{r}^t &:= \mathbf{r}^{t-1} + \mathbf{g}^t \\ \mathbf{g}^t &:= \mathbf{u}^t - \langle \mathbf{u}^t, \mathbf{x}^t \rangle \cdot \mathbf{1}\end{aligned}$$

Note:  $\langle \mathbf{g}^t, \mathbf{x}^t \rangle = 0$

$$\|[\mathbf{r}^{t+1}]^+\|_2^2 \leq \|[\mathbf{r}^t]^+ + \mathbf{g}^{t+1}\|_2^2 \quad \text{using inequality } [x+y]^+ \leq |[x]^+ + y| \text{ for } x, y \in \mathbb{R}$$

$$= \|[\mathbf{r}^t]^+\|_2^2 + \|\mathbf{g}^{t+1}\|_2^2 + 2(\mathbf{g}^{t+1})^\top [\mathbf{r}^t]^+ \xrightarrow{0}$$

↓  
induction

$$\|[\mathbf{r}^T]^+\|_2^2 \leq \sum_{t=1}^T \|\mathbf{g}^t\|_2^2 \leq nT \quad \text{since } \mathbf{g}^t \in [-1,1]^n$$

$$R^T := \max_a r^T[a] \leq \|[\mathbf{r}^T]^+\|_2 \leq \sqrt{nT} \quad \square$$

# A Common Template for Regret Minimizers

**Empirical regret:**  $r^t := \mathbf{r}^{t-1} + \mathbf{g}^t$

**Simple modification:**  $\mathbf{r}_+^t := [\mathbf{r}_+^{t-1} + \mathbf{g}^t]^+$

(Floor regrets at 0 after every iteration)

Algorithm	Rule
Gradient descent	$\mathbf{x}^{t+1} = \Pi_X(\eta \cdot \mathbf{r}^t)$
Multiplicative weights update (MWU) (aka Hedge, aka Randomized Weighted Majority)	$\mathbf{x}^{t+1} \propto \exp\{\eta \cdot \mathbf{r}^t\}$
Regret matching (RM) [Hart & Mas-Colell 2000]	$\mathbf{x}^{t+1} \propto [\mathbf{r}^t]^+$
Regret matching plus (RM+) [Tammelin 2014]	$\mathbf{x}^{t+1} \propto [\mathbf{r}_+^t]^+$

*(Regret bound proof is identical)*

# A Common Template for Regret Minimizers

All of these algorithms guarantee that after seeing any number  $T$  of utilities  $\mathbf{u}^1, \dots, \mathbf{u}^T$ , the regret cumulated by the algorithm satisfies

$$R^T \leq C \sqrt{T}$$

Constant that depends on number of actions

$$\text{MWU: } C = \sqrt{\log n}$$

$$\text{RM, RM+, GD: } C = \sqrt{n}$$

## Remember:

This holds without any assumption about the way the utilities are selected by the environment!

**Consequence:** when using these algorithms in self-play in 2-player 0-sum games, the **average strategy** converges to a Nash equilibrium at a rate of  $C/\sqrt{T}$

## Reminder: Self-play

- ```
for  $t = 1, \dots, T$ :
```
- $x^t \leftarrow$  request strategy from P1's regret minimizer
  - $y^t \leftarrow$  request strategy from P2's regret minimizer
  - Pass utility  $\mathbf{A}y^t$  to P1's regret minimizer
  - Pass utility  $-\mathbf{A}^T x^t$  to P2's regret minimizer

# State-of-the-art variant in practice: Discounted RM (DRM)

- Linear RM (LRM)
  - Weight iteration  $t$  by  $t$  (in regrets and averaging)
  - RM+ floors regrets at 0. Can we combine this with linear RM? Theory: Yes. Practice: No! Does very poorly.
- But less-aggressive combinations do well: **Discounted RM**
  - On each iteration, multiply positive regrets by  $t^\alpha / (t^\alpha + 1)$
  - On each iteration, multiply negative regrets by  $t^\beta / (t^\beta + 1)$
  - Weight contributions toward average strategy on iteration  $t$  by  $t^\gamma$
  - Worst-case convergence bound only a small constant worse than that of RM
  - RM:  $\alpha = \beta = +\infty$
  - RM+:  $\alpha = +\infty, \beta = -\infty$
  - For  $\alpha = 1.5, \beta = 0, \gamma = 2$ , consistently outperforms RM+ in practice

# What Regret Minimizers are Used in Practice?

Follow the Regularized Leader (FTRL)  
(e.g., gradient descent, multiplicative weights)

- ✓ Works for general convex sets
- ✓ Widely used & understood
- ✗ Slow in practice
- ✗ Has hyperparameters (stepsize)

✓ Can incorporate optimism about future losses to converge faster in 2-player 0-sum games

Regret Matching (RM)  
& Regret Matching+ (RM+)

- ✗ Only for **simplex** domains
- ✗ Not as well studied theoretically
- ✓ Fast in practice
- ✓ No hyperparameters

✿ Modern variants of this, such as DCFR, are the standard in extensive-form game solving!

? Unknown  
...until recently ✓

# Optimistic (Predictive) Regret Minimizers

| Algorithm | Standard (non-optimistic) rule                             | Optimistic (aka Predictive) rule                          |
|-----------|------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| GD        | $\mathbf{x}^{t+1} = \Pi_X(\eta \cdot \mathbf{r}^t)$        |                                                           |
| MWU       | $\mathbf{x}^{t+1} \propto \exp\{\eta \cdot \mathbf{r}^t\}$ | Replace $\mathbf{r}^t$ with $\mathbf{r}^t + \mathbf{g}^t$ |
| RM        | $\mathbf{x}^{t+1} \propto [\mathbf{r}^t]^+$                |                                                           |
| RM+       | $\mathbf{x}^{t+1} \propto [\mathbf{r}_+^t]^+$              |                                                           |

Typically, one-line change in implementation

All of these algorithms guarantee that after seeing any number  $T$  of utilities  $\mathbf{u}^1, \dots, \mathbf{u}^T$ , the regret cumulated by the algorithm satisfies

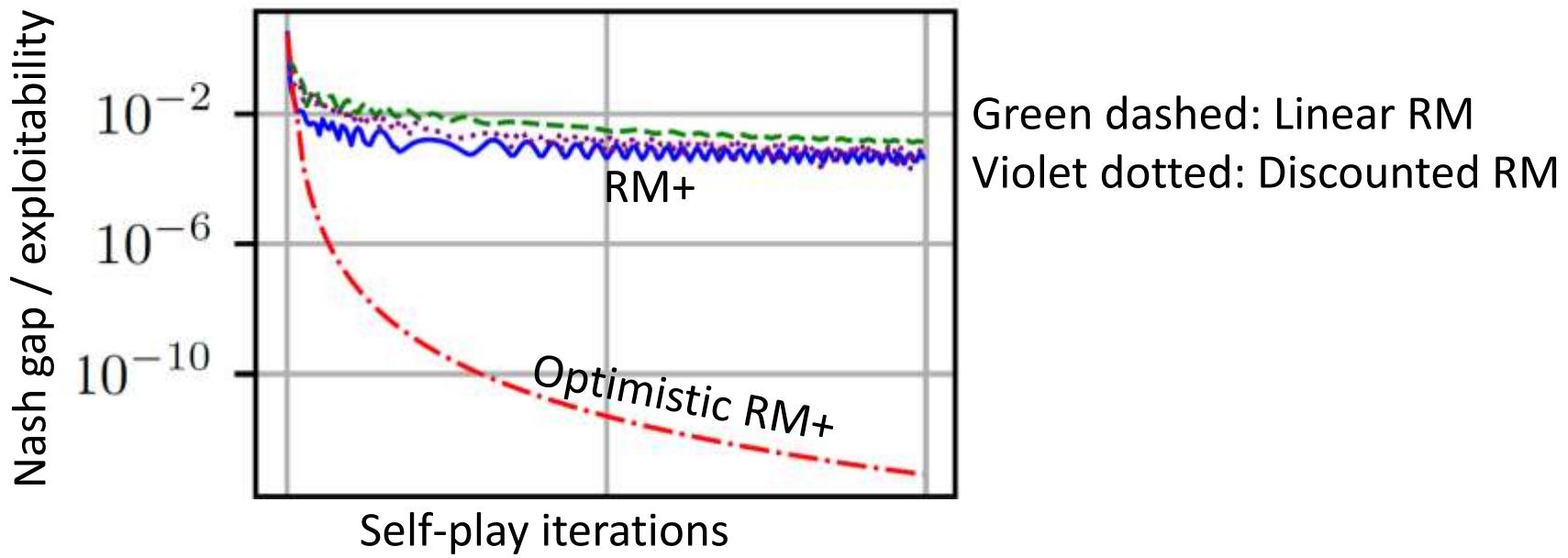
$$R^T \leq C \sqrt{\sum_{t=1}^T \|\mathbf{g}^t - \mathbf{g}^{t-1}\|_2^2} \quad (\text{where } \mathbf{g}^0 := \mathbf{0})$$

**Remember:**

This holds without any assumption about the way the utilities are selected by the environment!

**Takeaway message:** still  $\approx \sqrt{T}$  regret, but much smaller when there is little change to the utilities over time

# Empirical Performance



(RM was omitted as it is typically much slower than RM+)

# Practical State-of-the-Art

- In general, Discounted RM and Optimistic RM+ are the fastest in practice
  - For some games, like poker, Discounted RM is empirically consistently faster than Optimistic RM+
  - For many other games, Optimistic RM+ is significantly faster

# Beyond Zero-Sum Games

Correlated strategy profile:

$$\mu^T := \frac{1}{T} \sum_{t=1}^T (x_1^t \otimes x_2^t \otimes \cdots \otimes x_n^t) \in \Delta(A_1 \times \cdots \times A_n)$$

Note: not  $\Delta(A_1) \times \cdots \times \Delta(A_n)$

the product distribution in  $\Delta(A_1) \times \cdots \times \Delta(A_n)$   
whose marginal on  $A_i$  is  $x_i^t \in \Delta(A_i)$

Regret guarantee: for all players  $i$ :

$$\begin{aligned} & \max_{x_i^*} \frac{1}{T} \sum_{t=1}^T [u_i(x_i^*, x_{-i}^t) - u_i(x_i^t, x_{-i}^t)] \leq O_n\left(\frac{1}{\sqrt{T}}\right) \\ & = \max_{x_i^*} \mathbb{E}_{x \sim \mu^T} [u_i(x_i^*, x_{-i}) - u_i(x_i, x_{-i})] \end{aligned}$$

$\mu^T$  is an  $\epsilon$ -“coarse-correlated equilibrium” (CCE) where  $\epsilon = O_n(1/\sqrt{T})$

Note: A CCE that happens to be a product distribution ( $\mu^T \in \Delta(A_1) \times \cdots \times \Delta(A_n)$ ) is a Nash equilibrium

# References

## Fictitious play:

- J Robinson (*Ann. Math.* 1951), “An iterative method of solving a game”
- C Daskalakis, Q Pan (*FOCS* 2014), “A Counter-Example to Karlin’s Strong Conjecture for Fictitious Play”
- S Karlin (1959), *Mathematical Methods and Theory in Games, Programming, and Economics*

## Blackwell Approachability (used in the original correctness proof of RM/RM+):

- D Blackwell (*Pacific J. of Math.* 1956), “An analog of the minmax theorem for vector payoffs”

## Regret Matching and Regret Matching Plus:

- S Hart, A Mas-Colell (*Econometrica* 2000), “A Simple Adaptive Procedure Leading to Correlated Equilibrium”
- O Tammelin (*arXiv* 2014), “Solving large imperfect information games using CFR+”
- N Brown, T Sandholm (*AAAI* 2019), “Solving Imperfect-Information Games via Discounted Regret Minimization”
- **Simple proof of correctness presented in this lecture due to G Farina (2023),**  
[https://www.mit.edu/~gfarina/2023/6S890f23\\_L05\\_learning\\_algorithms/L05.pdf](https://www.mit.edu/~gfarina/2023/6S890f23_L05_learning_algorithms/L05.pdf)

## Predictivity:

- CK Chiang et al. (*COLT* 2012), “Online optimization with gradual variations”
- A Rakhlin, K Sridharan (*COLT* 2013), “Online Learning with Predictable Sequences”
- G Farina, C Kroer, T Sandholm (*AAAI* 2021), “Faster Game Solving via Predictive Blackwell Approachability: Connecting Regret Matching and Mirror Descent”