

Query-efficient Black-box Adversarial Examples

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Abstract

Current neural network-based image classifiers are susceptible to adversarial examples, even in the black-box setting, where the attacker is limited to query access without access to gradients. Previous methods — substitute networks and coordinate-based finite-difference methods — are either unreliable or query-inefficient, making these methods impractical for certain problems.

We introduce a new method for reliably generating adversarial examples under more restricted, practical black-box threat models. First, we apply natural evolution strategies to perform black-box attacks using two to three orders of magnitude fewer queries than previous methods. Second, we introduce a new algorithm to perform targeted adversarial attacks in the partial-information setting, where the attacker only has access to a limited number of target classes. Using these techniques, we successfully perform the first targeted adversarial attack against a commercially deployed machine learning system, the Google Cloud Vision API, in the partial information setting.

1. Introduction

Neural network-based image classifiers, despite surpassing human ability on several benchmark vision tasks, are susceptible to *adversarial examples*. Adversarial examples are correctly classified images that are minutely perturbed to cause misclassification. Targeted adversarial examples cause misclassification as a chosen class, while untargeted adversarial examples cause just misclassification.

The existence of these adversarial examples and the feasibility of constructing them in the real world [9, 1] points to potential exploitation, particularly in the face of the rising popularity of neural networks in real-world systems. For commercial or proprietary systems, however, adversarial examples must be considered under a much more restrictive threat model. First, these settings are *black-box*, meaning that an attacker only has access to input-output pairs of the

classifier, often through a binary or API. Furthermore, often the attacker will only have access to a subset of the classification outputs (for example, the top k labels and scores); to our knowledge this setting, which we denote the *partial-information* setting, has not been considered in prior work.

Prior work considering constrained threat models have only considered the black-box restriction we describe above; previous work primarily uses *substitute networks* to emulate the attacked network, and then attack the substitute with traditional first-order white-box methods [13, 14]. However, as discussed thoroughly in [4], this approach is unfavorable for many reasons including imperfect transferability of attacks from the substitute to the original model, and the computational and query-wise cost of training a substitute network. Recent attacks such as [4] have used finite difference methods in order to estimate gradients in the black-box case, but are still expensive, requiring millions of queries to generate an adversarial image for an ImageNet classifier. Effects such as low throughput, high latency, and rate limiting on commercially deployed black-box classifiers heavily impact the feasibility of current approaches to black-box attacks on real-world systems.

We present an approach for generating black-box adversarial examples based on Natural Evolutionary Strategies [18]. We provide motivation for the algorithm in terms of finite difference estimation in random Gaussian bases. We demonstrate the effectiveness of the method in practice, generating adversarial examples with several orders of magnitude fewer queries compared to existing methods. We consider the further constrained partial-information setting, and we present a new algorithm for attacking neural networks under these conditions. We demonstrate the effectiveness of our method by showing that it can reliably produce targeted adversarial examples with access to partial input-output pairs.

We use the newfound tractability given by these methods to both (a) generate the first transformation-tolerant black-box adversarial examples and (b) perform the first targeted attack on the Google Cloud Vision API, demonstrating the effectiveness of our proposed method on large, commercial systems: the GCV API is an opaque (no published enumera-

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tion of labels), partial-information (queries return only up to 10 classes with uninterpretable “scores”), several-thousand-way commercially deployed classifier.

Our contributions are as follows:

- We propose a variant of NES inspired by the treatment in [18] as a method for generating black-box adversarial examples. We relate NES in this special case with the finite difference method over Gaussian bases, providing a theoretical comparison with previous attempts at black-box adversarial examples.
- We demonstrate that our method is effective in efficiently synthesizing adversarial examples; the method does not require a substitute network and is 2-3 orders of magnitude faster than optimized finite difference-based methods such as [4]. We reliably produce black-box adversarial examples for both CIFAR-10 and ImageNet classifiers.
- We propose an approach for synthesizing targeted adversarial examples in the “partial information” setting, where the attacker has access only to top- k outputs of a classifier, and we demonstrate its effectiveness.
- We exploit the increased efficiency of this method to achieve the following results:
 - **Robust black-box examples.** In [1], the inability of standard-generated adversarial examples to remain adversarial under transformation is noted, and the *Expectation over Transformation (EOT)* algorithm is introduced. By integrating EOT with the method presented in this work, we generate the first transformation-tolerant black-box adversarial examples.
 - **Targeted adversarial examples against a several-thousand-way commercial classifier.** We use our method to generate adversarial examples for the Google Cloud Vision API, a commercially-deployed system. An attack against a commercial classifier of this order of magnitude demonstrates the applicability and reliability of our method.

2. Approach

We outline the key technical components of our approach allowing us to attack the constructed threat model. First we describe our application of Natural Evolutionary Strategies [18]. Then, we outline the strategy used to construct adversarial examples in the *partial-information* setting.

2.1. Natural Evolutionary Strategies

Rather than taking component-wise finite differences as in previous state-of-the-art methods [4], we use natural evolutionary strategies [18]. Natural evolutionary strategies (NES) is a method for derivative-free optimisation based on the idea of a *search distribution* $\pi(\theta|x)$. In particular, rather than maximizing the objective function $F(x)$ directly, NES maximizes the expected value of the loss function under the search distribution. As demonstrated in Section 4, this allows for gradient estimation in far fewer queries than typical finite-difference methods. Concretely, for a loss function $F(\cdot)$ and a current set of parameters x , we have from [18]:

$$\begin{aligned}\mathbb{E}_{\pi(\theta|x)}[F(\theta)] &= \int F(\theta)\pi(\theta|x) d\theta \\ \nabla_x \mathbb{E}_{\pi(\theta|x)}[F(\theta)] &= \nabla_x \int F(\theta)\pi(\theta|x) d\theta \\ &= \int F(\theta)\nabla_x \pi(\theta|x) d\theta \\ &= \int F(\theta) \frac{\pi(\theta|x)}{\pi(\theta|x)} \nabla_x \pi(\theta|x) d\theta \\ &= \int \pi(\theta|x) F(\theta) \nabla_x \log(\pi(\theta|x)) d\theta \\ &= \mathbb{E}_{\pi(\theta|x)}[F(\theta) \nabla_x \log(\pi(\theta|x))]\end{aligned}$$

In a manner similar to that in [18], we choose a search distribution of random Gaussian noise around the current image x ; that is, we have $\theta = x + \sigma\mathcal{N}(0, I)$. Evaluating the gradient above with this search distribution yields the following variance-reduced gradient estimate:

$$\nabla \mathbb{E}[F(\theta)] \approx \frac{1}{\sigma n} \sum_{i=1}^n \epsilon_i F(\theta + \sigma \epsilon_i)$$

Similarly to [15], we employ *antithetic sampling* to generate batches of ϵ_i values; rather than generating n values $\epsilon_i \sim \mathcal{N}(0, 1)$, we instead draw these values for $i \in \{1 \dots \frac{n}{2}\}$, and set $\epsilon_j = -\epsilon_{n-j+1}$ for $j \in \{(\frac{n}{2} + 1) \dots n\}$. This optimization has been empirically shown to improve performance of NES.

Finally, we perform a projected gradient descent update [11] with momentum based on the NES gradient estimate.

2.1.1 NES as Finite Differences

A closer inspection of the special case of NES that we have described here suggests an alternative view of the algorithm. In particular, note that when antithetic sampling is used, the gradient estimate can be written as the following, where D_v represents the directional derivative in the direction of v :

$$\begin{aligned}
\nabla \mathbb{E}[F(x)] &\approx \frac{1}{n\sigma} \sum_{i=1}^n F(x + \sigma \epsilon_i) \epsilon_i \\
&= \frac{1}{n/2} \sum_{i=1}^{n/2} \frac{F(x + \sigma \epsilon_i) - F(x - \sigma \epsilon_i)}{2\sigma} \epsilon_i \\
&\approx \frac{1}{n/2} \sum_{i=1}^{n/2} D_{\epsilon_i}(x) \epsilon_i \\
&= \frac{1}{n/2} \sum_{i=1}^{n/2} (\nabla F \cdot \epsilon_i) \epsilon_i
\end{aligned}$$

Now, the ϵ_i are effectively randomly drawn Gaussian vectors of size $\text{width} \cdot \text{height} \cdot \text{channels}$. By a well-known result, these vectors are nearly orthogonal; a formalization of this is in [7], which says that for an n -dimensional space and N randomly sampled Gaussian vectors $v_1 \dots v_N$,

$$N \leq e^{\frac{\delta^2 n}{4}} [-\ln(\theta)]^{\frac{1}{2}} \implies \mathbb{P} \left\{ \frac{v_i \cdot v_j}{\|v_i\| \|v_j\|} \leq \delta \forall (i, j) \right\} = \theta$$

Thus, one can “extend” the randomly sampled vectors into a complete basis of the space $[0, 1]^n$; then we can perform a basis decomposition on $\nabla F(x)$ to write:

$$\nabla F(x) = \sum_{i=1}^n \langle \nabla F, \epsilon_i \rangle \epsilon_i$$

Thus, the NES gradient can be seen as essentially “clipping” this space to the first N Gaussian basis vectors and performing a finite-differences estimate.

More concretely, considering a matrix Θ with ϵ_i being the columns and the projection $\Theta(\nabla F)$, we can use results from concentration theory to analyze our estimate, either through the following simple canonical bound or a more complex treatment such as is given in [5]:

$$\mathbb{P} \{ (1 - \epsilon) \|\nabla\|^2 \leq \|\Theta \nabla\|^2 \leq (1 + \epsilon) \|\nabla\|^2 \} \geq 1 - 2e^{-c\epsilon^2 m}$$

Note that even more rigorous analyses of such “Gaussian-projected finite difference” gradient estimates and bounds have been demonstrated by works such as [12], which detail the algorithm’s interaction with dimensionality, scaling, and various other factors.

2.2. Partial-Information Setting

Next, we consider the partial-information setting described in the previous section. In particular, we now assume access to both probabilities and gradient approximations through the methods described in Section 2.1, but only

for the top k classes $\{y_1, \dots, y_k\}$. In normal settings, given an image and label (x_i, y) , generating an adversarial example (x_{adv}, y_{adv}) for a targeted y_{adv} can be achieved using standard first-order attacks. These are attacks which involve essentially ascending the estimated gradient $\nabla P(y_{adv}|x)$. However, in this case $P(y_{adv}|x_i)$ (and by extension, its gradient) is unavailable to the classifier.

To resolve this, we propose the following algorithm. Rather than beginning with the image x_i , we instead begin with an image x_0 of the *original target class*. Then y_{adv} will be in the top- k classes for x_0 . We perform the following iterated optimization:

$$\begin{aligned}
\epsilon_t &= \min \epsilon \text{ s.t. } \text{rank}(P(y_{adv}|\Pi_\epsilon(x_{t-1}))) < k \\
x_t &= \arg \max_x P(y_{adv}|\Pi_{\epsilon_{t-1}}(x))
\end{aligned}$$

where $\Pi_\epsilon(x)$ represents the ℓ_∞ projection of x onto the ϵ -box of x_i . In particular, we concurrently perturb the image to maximize its adversarial probability, while projecting onto ℓ_∞ boxes of decreasing sizes centered at the original image x_i , maintaining that the adversarial class remains within the top- k at all times. In practice, we implement this iterated optimization using backtracking line search to find ϵ_t , and several iterations projected gradient descent (PGD) to find x_t . Alternatingly updating x and ϵ until ϵ reaches the desired value yields an adversarial example that is ϵ -away from x_i while maintaining the adversarial classification of the original image.

3. Threat model

Our threat model is chosen to model the constraints of attacking deep neural networks deployed in the real world.

- **No access to gradients, logits, or other internals.** Similar to previous work, we define *black-box* to mean that access to gradients, logits, and other network internals is unavailable. Furthermore, the attacker does not have knowledge of the network architecture. The attacker only has access to the output of the classifier: prediction probabilities for each class.
- **No access to training-time information.** The attacker has no information about how the model was trained, and the attacker does not have access to the training set.
- **Limited number of queries.** In real-time models like self-driving cars, the format of the input allows us to make a large number of queries to the network (e.g. by disassembling the car, overriding the input signals, and measuring the output signals). In most other cases, proprietary ML models like the Google Cloud Vision API are rate-limited or simply unable to support a large

number of queries to generate a single adversarial example.

- **Partial-information setting:** As discussed in Section 1, we also consider in this work the case where the full output of the classifier is unavailable to the attacker. This more accurately reflects the state of commercial systems where even the list of possible classes is unknown to the attacker, such as in the Google Cloud Vision API, Amazon’s Rekognition API, or the Clarifai API.

Attackers can have one of two goals: untargeted or targeted misclassification, where targeted attacks are strictly harder. A successful targeted adversarial example is one that is classified as a specific target class. An untargeted adversarial example is one that is misclassified.

Notably, we omit wall-clock time to attack as a security parameter in our threat model. This metric is more indicative of hardware resources used for the attack than the efficacy of an attack itself, for which query count is a realistic and practical measure.

4. Evaluation

4.1. Targeted black-box adversarial examples

We evaluate the effectiveness of our black-box attack in generating targeted adversarial examples for neural networks trained on CIFAR-10 and ImageNet. We demonstrate our attack against the CIFAR-10 network of Carlini and Wagner [3] and the InceptionV3 network [16] in the black-box setting, assuming access to the output probabilities of the classifiers. For each of the classifiers, we randomly choose 1000 examples from the test set, and for each example, we choose a random target class. We then use projected gradient descent (PGD) [11] with NES gradient estimates, maximizing the log probability of the target class while constraining to a maximum ℓ_∞ perturbation of $\epsilon = 0.05$. We use a fixed set of hyperparameters across all attacks on a single classifier, and we run the attack until we produce an adversarial image or until we time out (at a maximum of 1 million queries).

Table 1 summarizes the results of our experiment. Our attack is highly effective and query-efficient, with a **99.6%** success rate on CIFAR-10 with a mean of 4910 queries to the black-box classifier per example, and a **99.2%** success rate on ImageNet with a mean of 24780 queries to the black-box classifier per example. Figures 1 and 2 show a sample of the adversarial examples we produced. Figures 3 and 4 show the distribution of number of queries required to produce an adversarial example: in most cases, the attack requires only a small number of queries.

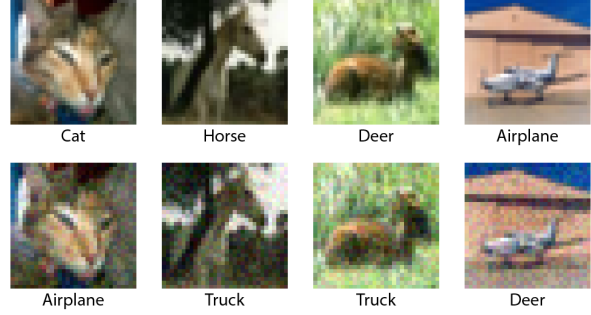


Figure 1. Randomly chosen samples from the 1000 adversarial examples for the CIFAR-10 network.

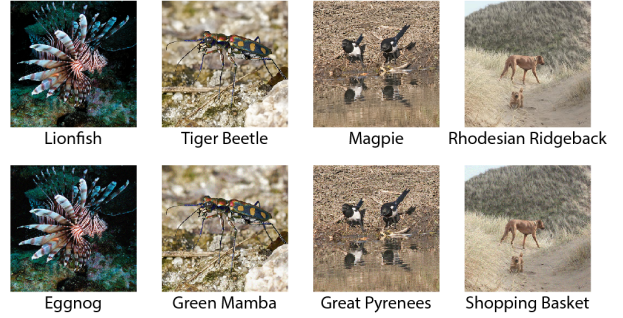


Figure 2. Randomly chosen samples from the 1000 adversarial examples for the InceptionV3 network.

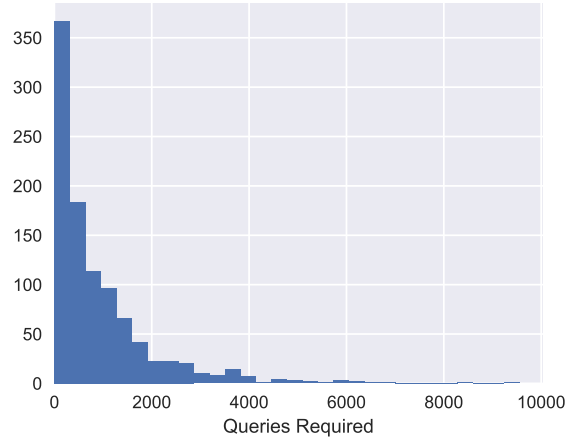


Figure 3. Distribution of number of queries required to generate an adversarial image with a randomly chosen target class for the CIFAR-10 network over the 1000 test images.

4.2. Robust black-box adversarial examples

We evaluate the effectiveness of our black-box attack in generating adversarial examples that fool classifiers over a distribution of transformations using Expectation-Over-Transformation (EOT) [1]. In this task, given a distribution of transformations T and ℓ_∞ constraint ϵ , we attempt to find the adversarial example x' (for some original input x) that

Dataset	Original Top-1 Accuracy	Attack Success Rate	Mean Queries
CIFAR-10	80.5%	99.6%	4910
ImageNet	77.2%	99.2%	24780

Table 1. Quantitative analysis of targeted adversarial attacks we perform on 1000 randomly chosen test images and randomly chosen target classes. The attacks are limited to 1 million queries per image, and the adversarial perturbations are constrained with $l_\infty, \epsilon = .05$. The same hyperparameters were used for all images in each dataset.

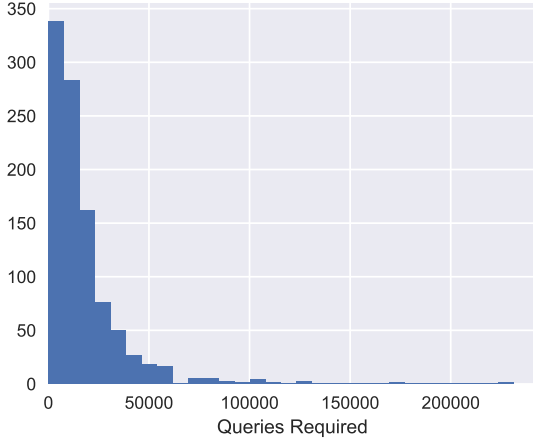


Figure 4. Distribution of number of queries required to generate an adversarial image with a randomly chosen target class for the **InceptionV3 ImageNet** network over the 1000 test images.

maximizes the classifier’s expected output probability of a target class y over the distribution of inputs $T(x')$:

$$x' = \arg \max_{x', \|x-x'\|_\infty \leq \epsilon} \mathbb{E}_{t \sim T} [\log P(y|t(x'))]$$

We use the PGD attack of [11] to solve the EOT optimization problem, using NES to estimate the gradient of the classifier. Note that $P(y|\cdot)$ is the classifier’s output probability for label y given an input. In our evaluation we randomly choose 10 examples from the ImageNet validation set, and for each example we randomly choose a target class. We choose our distribution of transformations to be a θ degree rotation for $\theta \sim \text{unif}(-30^\circ, 30^\circ)$, and set $\epsilon = 0.1$. We use a fixed set of hyperparameters across all attacks, and perform the PGD attack until we achieve greater than 90% adversariality on a random sample of 100 transformations.

Table 2 shows the results of our experiment. We achieve a mean attack success rate (where attack success rate is defined for a single adversarial example as the percentage of randomly transformed samples that classify as the target class) of **95.7%** on our 10 attacks, and use a mean of 3780000 queries per example. Figure 5 shows samples of the adversarial examples robust up to $\pm 30^\circ$.

4.3. Targeted partial-information adversarial examples

We evaluate the effectiveness of our partial-information black-box attack in generating targeted adversarial examples for the InceptionV3 network when given access to only the top 10 class probabilities out of the total of 1000 labels. We randomly choose 1000 examples from the test set, and for each example, we choose a random target class. For each source-target pair, we find an example of the target class in the test set, initialize with that image, and use our partial-information attack to construct a targeted adversarial example. We use PGD with NES gradient estimates, constraining to a maximum l_∞ perturbation of $\epsilon = 0.05$. We use a fixed set of hyperparameters across all attacks, and we run the attack until we produce an adversarial example or until we time out (at a maximum of 1 million queries).

The targeted partial-information attack achieves a **95.5%** success rate with a mean of 104342 queries to the black-box classifier.

4.4. Attacking Google Cloud Vision

In order to demonstrate the relevance and applicability of our approach to real-world system, we attack the Google Cloud Vision API, a commercially available computer vision suite offered by Google. In particular, we attack the most general *object labeling* classifier, which performs n -way classification on any given image. This case is considerably more challenging than even the typical black-box setting. The number of classes is large and unknown — a full enumeration of labels is unavailable. The classifier returns “confidence scores” for each label it assigns to an image, which seem to be neither probabilities nor logits. The classifier does not return scores for all labels, but instead returns an unspecified-length list of labels that varies based on image. Despite these challenges, we successfully demonstrate the ability of the system to generate black-box adversarial examples, in both an untargeted attack and a targeted attack.

4.4.1 Untargeted attack

Figure 6 shows an unperturbed image being correctly labeled as several rifle/rifle-related classes, including “weapon” and “firearm.” We run the algorithm presented in this work, but rather than maximizing the probability of a target class, we write the following loss function based

Original Top-1 Accuracy	Mean Attack Success Rate	Mean Queries
80.0%	95.7%	3780000

Table 2. Mean attack success rate and mean required queries across the 10 generated adversarial examples on InceptionV3 robust up to $\pm 30^\circ$ rotations.

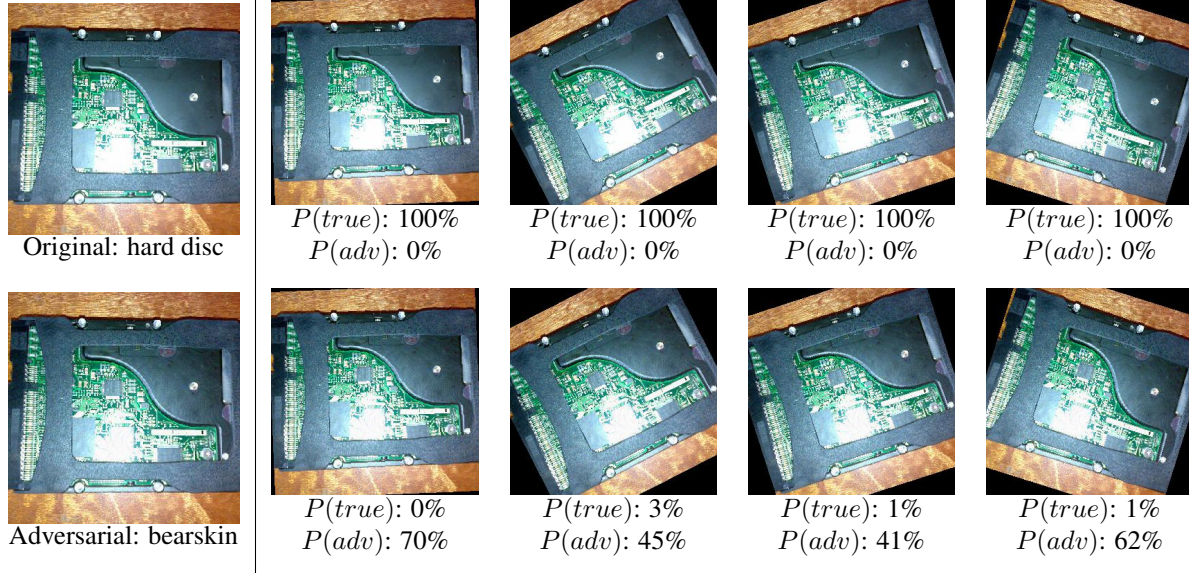


Figure 5. Random sample of adversarial examples robust up to $\pm 30^\circ$ rotations along with classifier probabilities of the adversarial and natural classes.

on the classification $C(x)$ to minimize the maximum score assigned to any label semantically similar to “gun”:

$$F^*(x) = \max_{C(x)[\text{“label”}] \sim \text{“gun”}} C(x)[\text{“score”}]$$

Note that we expand the definition of “misclassification” to encompass semantic similarity—that is, we are uninterested in a modification that induces a classification of “persian cat” on a “tabby cat.” Applying the presented algorithm to this loss function with $\epsilon = 0.1$ yields the adversarial example shown in Figure 7, definitively demonstrating the applicability of our method to real-world commercial systems.

4.4.2 Targeted attack

Figure 8 shows an unperturbed image being correctly labeled as several skiing-related classes, including “skiing” and “ski”. We run our partial-information attack to force this image to be classified as “dog”. Note that the label “dog” does not appear in the output for the unperturbed image. We initialize the algorithm with a photograph of a dog (classified by GCV as a dog) and use our partial-information attack to synthesize an image that looks like the skiers but is classified as “dog”.

5. Related work

Szegedy et al. (2014) [17] first demonstrated that neural networks are vulnerable to adversarial examples. A number of techniques have been developed to generate adversarial examples in the white-box case [6, 3, 9], where an attacker is assumed to have full access to the model parameters and architecture.

Previous work has shown that adversarial examples can be generated in the black-box case by training a substitute model, and then exploiting white-box techniques on the substitute [13, 14]. However, this attack is unreliable because it assumes the adversarial examples can transfer to the target model. At best, the adversarial images are less effective, and in some cases, attacks may entirely fail to transfer and ensembles of substitute models need to be used [10]. Our attack does not require the transferability assumption.

Recent attempts use finite differences to estimate the gradient instead of training substitute models [4]. However, even with various query reduction techniques, a large number of queries are required to generate a single attack image, potentially rendering real-world attacks and transformation-tolerant adversarial examples intractable. In comparison, our method uses several orders of magnitude fewer queries.

Prior work has demonstrated that black-box methods can feasibly attack real-world, commercially deployed systems, including image classification APIs from Clarifai,

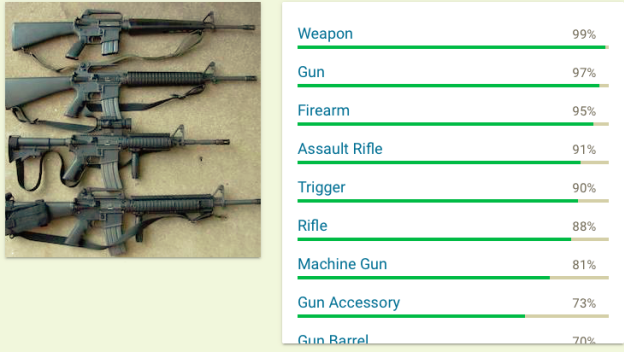


Figure 6. The Google Cloud Vision Demo labelling on the unperturbed image.

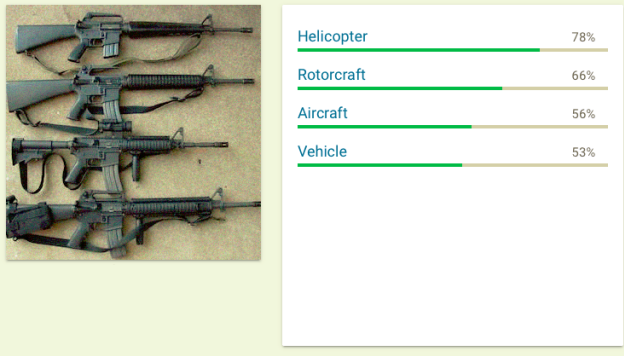


Figure 7. The Google Cloud Vision Demo labelling on the adversarial image generated with ℓ_∞ bounded perturbation with $\epsilon = 0.1$: the original class is no longer a returned label.

Metamind, Google, and Amazon [10, 14, 8], and a speech recognition system from Google [2]. Our work advances prior work on machine learning systems deployed in the real world by demonstrating a highly effective and query-efficient attack against the Google Cloud Vision API in the partial-information setting, a scenario that has not been explored in prior work.

6. Conclusion

In this work, we present an algorithm based on natural evolutionary strategies (NES) which allows for the generation of adversarial examples in the black-box setting without training a substitute network. We also introduce the partial-information setting, a more restricted black-box situation that better models large-scale commercial systems, and we present an algorithm for crafting targeted adversarial examples for this setting. We motivate our algorithm through the formulation of NES as a set of finite differences over a random normal projection, and demonstrate the empirical efficacy of the method by generating black-box adversarial examples orders of magnitude more efficient (in terms of number of queries) than previous work on both the CIFAR-10 and ImageNet datasets. Using a combination of the described algorithm and the EOT algorithm, we gener-

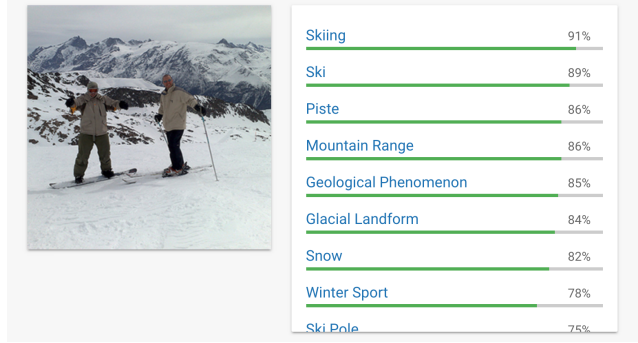


Figure 8. The Google Cloud Vision Demo labelling on the unperturbed image.

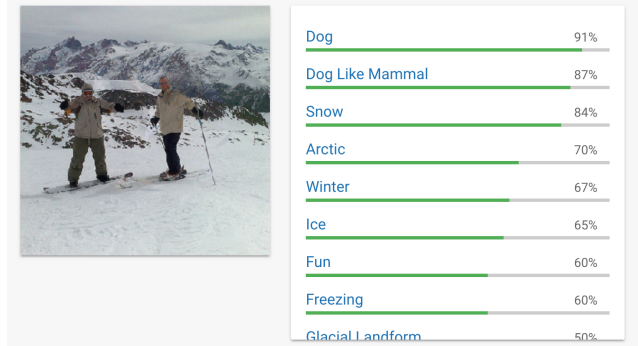


Figure 9. The Google Cloud Vision Demo labelling on the adversarial image generated with ℓ_∞ bounded perturbation with $\epsilon = 0.1$: the image is labeled as the target class.

ate the first robust black-box adversarial examples, which constitutes a step towards attacking real-world systems. We also demonstrate the efficacy of our partial-information attack. Finally, we synthesize targeted adversarial examples for the commercial Google Cloud Vision API, demonstrating the first targeted attack against a partial-information system. Our results point to a promising new method for efficiently and reliably generating black-box adversarial examples.

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