

Alpha-Beta (/Alpha-Beta)

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Alpha
Beta ^[2]

The **Alpha-Beta** algorithm (Alpha-Beta Pruning, Alpha-Beta Heuristic ^[1]) is a significant enhancement to the [minimax](#) search algorithm that eliminates the need to search large portions of the [game tree](#) applying a [branch-and-bound](#) technique. Remarkably, it does this without any potential of overlooking a better [move](#). If one already has found a quite good move and search for alternatives, **one refutation** is enough to avoid it. No need to look for even stronger refutations. The algorithm maintains two values, [alpha](#) and [beta](#). They represent the minimum score that the maximizing player is assured of and the maximum score that the minimizing player is assured of respectively. Consider the following example...

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How it works

Say it is White's turn to move, and we are searching to a [depth](#) of 2 (that is, we are consider all of White's moves, and all of Black's responses to each of those moves.) First we pick one of White's possible moves - let's call this Possible Move #1. We consider this move and every possible response to this move by black. After this analysis, we determine that the result of making Possible Move #1 is an even position. Then, we move on and consider another of White's possible moves (Possible Move #2.) When we consider the first possible counter-move by black, we discover that playing this results in black winning a Rook! In this situation, we can safely ignore all of Black's other possible responses to Possible Move #2 because we already know that Possible Move #1 is better. We really don't care *exactly* how much worse Possible Move #2 is. Maybe another possible response wins a Queen, but it doesn't matter because we know that we can achieve *at least* an even game by playing Possible Move #1. The full analysis of Possible Move #1 gave us a [lower bound](#). We know that we can achieve at least that, so anything that is clearly worse can be ignored.

The situation becomes even more complicated, however, when we go to a search [depth](#) of 3 or greater, because now both players can make choices affecting the game tree. Now we have to maintain both a [lower bound](#) and an [upper bound](#) (called [Alpha](#) and [Beta](#).) We maintain a lower bound because if a move is too bad we don't consider it. But we also have to maintain an upper bound because if a move at depth 3 or higher leads to a continuation that is too good, the other player won't allow it, because there was a better move higher up on the game tree that he could have played

to avoid this situation. One player's lower bound is the other player's upper bound.

Savings

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The savings of alpha beta can be considerable. If a standard minimax search tree has **x** [nodes](#), an alpha beta tree in a well-written program can have a node count close to the square-root of **x**. How many nodes you can actually cut, however, depends on how well ordered your game tree is: if you always search the best possible move first, you eliminate the most of the nodes. Of course, we don't always know what the best move is, or we wouldn't have to search in the first place. Conversely, if we always searched worse moves before the better moves, we wouldn't be able to cut any part of the tree at all! For this reason, good [move ordering](#) is very important, and is the focus of a lot of the effort of writing a good chess program. As pointed out by [Levin](#) in 1961, assuming constantly **b** moves for each node visited and search depth **n**, the maximal number of leaves in alpha-beta is equivalent to minimax, **b** ^ **n**. Considering always the best move first, it is **b** ^ [ceil\(n/2\)](#) plus **b** ^ [floor\(n/2\)](#) minus one. The minimal number of [leaves](#) is shown in following table which also demonstrates the [odd-even effect](#):

number of leaves with depth n and b = 40		
depth	worst case	best case
n	b^n	$b^{\lceil n/2 \rceil} + b^{\lfloor n/2 \rfloor} - 1$
0	1	1
1	40	40
2	1,600	79
3	64,000	1,639
4	2,560,000	3,199
5	102,400,000	65,569
6	4,096,000,000	127,999
7	163,840,000,000	2,623,999
8	6,553,600,000,000	5,119,999

History

Alpha-Beta was invented independently by several researchers and pioneers from the 50s ^[3], and further research until the 80s, most notable by

- [John McCarthy](#) proposed the idea of Alpha-Beta in [1955](#) at the [Dartmouth Conference](#) ^[4]
- [Allen Newell](#) and [Herbert Simon](#) Approximation in [1958](#)
- [Arthur Samuel](#) Approximation in [1959](#)
- [Daniel Edwards](#) and [Timothy Hart](#), Description in 1961 ^[5]
- [Alexander Brudno](#), Description in [1963](#)
- [Samuel Fuller](#), [John Gaschnig](#), [James Gillogly](#), Analysis 1973 ^[6]
- [Donald Knuth](#), Analysis in [1975](#)
[Knuth and Moore's famous Function F2, aka AlphaBeta](#)
[Knuth already introduced an iterative solution](#) , see [Iterative Search](#)
[Knuth's node types](#)
- [G rard M. Baudet](#), Analysis in 1978

Quotes

McCarthy

[Quote](#) by [John McCarthy](#) from *Human-Level AI is harder than it seemed in 1955* ^[7]:

Chess programs catch some of the human chess playing abilities but rely on the limited [effective branching](#) of the chess move [tree](#). The ideas that work for chess are inadequate for [go](#). [Alpha-beta pruning](#) characterizes human play, but it wasn't noticed by [early chess programmers](#) - [Turing](#), [Shannon](#), [Pasta](#) and [Ulam](#), and [Bernstein](#). We humans are not very good at identifying the heuristics we ourselves use. Approximations to alpha-beta used by [Samuel](#), [Newell](#) and [Simon](#), McCarthy. Proved equivalent to minimax by [Hart](#) and [Levin](#), independently by [Brudno](#). [Knuth](#) gives details.

Ershov and Shura-Bura

[Quote](#) from *The Early Development of Programming in the USSR* by [Andrey Ershov](#), [Mikhail R. Shura-Bura](#) ^[8]

At the end of the 1950's a group of Moscow mathematicians began a study of computerized chess. Sixteen years later, the studies would lead to victory in the [first world chess tournament for computer programs](#) held in Stockholm during the 1974 [IFIP](#) Congress. An important component of this success was a deep study of the problems of information organization in [computer memory](#) and of various [search heuristics](#). [G. M. Adelson-Velsky](#) and [E. M. Landis](#) invented the [binary search tree](#) ("dichotomic inquiry") and [A. L. Brudno](#), independent of [J. McCarthy](#), discovered the [\( , \)-heuristic](#) for reducing search times on a game tree.

Knuth

[Quote](#) by [Knuth](#) ^[9] :

It is interesting to convert this [recursive](#) procedure to an iterative (non-recursive) form by a sequence of mechanical transformations, and to apply simple optimizations which preserve program correctness. The resulting procedure is surprisingly simple, but not as easy to prove correct as the recursive form.

Implementation

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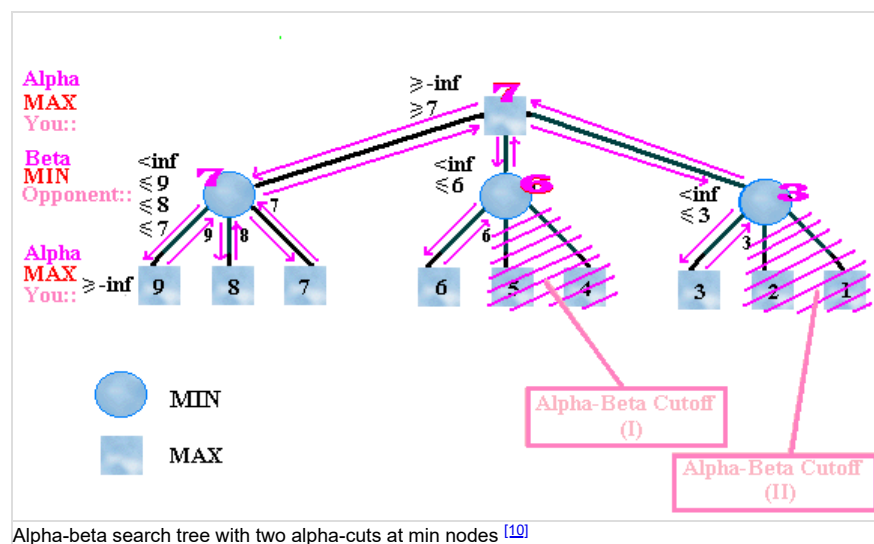
A C-like pseudo code implementation of the alpha-beta algorithm with distinct indirect [recursive](#) routines for the max- and min-player, similar to the [minimax](#) routines. [Making](#) and [unmaking moves](#) is omitted, and should be done before and after the recursive calls. So called [beta-cutoffs](#) occur for the max-play, alpha-cutoffs for the min-player.

```
int alphaBetaMax( int alpha, int beta, int depthleft ) {
    if ( depthleft == 0 ) return evaluate();
    for ( all moves ) {
        score = alphaBetaMin( alpha, beta, depthleft - 1 );
        if( score >= beta )
            return beta; // fail hard beta-cutoff
        if( score > alpha )
            alpha = score; // alpha acts like max in MiniMax
    }
    return alpha;
}

int alphaBetaMin( int alpha, int beta, int depthleft ) {
    if ( depthleft == 0 ) return -evaluate();
    for ( all moves ) {
        score = alphaBetaMax( alpha, beta, depthleft - 1 );
        if( score <= alpha )
            return alpha; // fail hard alpha-cutoff
        if( score < beta )
            beta = score; // beta acts like min in MiniMax
    }
    return beta;
}
```

With this call from the [Root](#):

```
score = alphaBetaMax(-oo, +oo, depth);
```



Alpha-beta search tree with two alpha-cuts at min nodes [\[10\]](#)

Negamax Framework

Inside a [negamax](#) framework the routine looks simpler, but is not necessarily simpler to understand. Despite negating the returned score of the direct recursion, alpha of the min-player becomes minus beta of the max-player and vice versa, and the term alpha-cutoff or alpha-pruning is somehow diminished.

```
int alphaBeta( int alpha, int beta, int depthleft ) {
    if( depthleft == 0 ) return quiesce( alpha, beta );
    for ( all moves ) {
        score = -alphaBeta( -beta, -alpha, depthleft - 1 );
        if( score >= beta )
            return beta; // fail hard beta-cutoff
        if( score > alpha )
            alpha = score;
    }
}
```

```
alpha = score; // alpha acts like max in MiniMax
```

```
}
```

```
return alpha;
```

```
}  
    It's time for us to say farewell... Regretfully, we've made the tough decision to close Wikispaces. Find out why, and what will  
    happen, here (http://blog.wikispaces.com)
```

Note #1: Notice the call to `quiesce()`. This performs a [quiescence search](#), which makes the alpha-beta search much more stable.

Note #2: This function only returns the score for the position, not the [best move](#). Normally, a different (but very similar) function is used for searching the [root node](#). The `SearchRoot` function calls the `alphaBeta` function and returns both a score and a best move. Also, most search functions collect the [principal variation](#) not only for display purposes, but for a good guess as the leftmost path of the next iteration inside an [iterative deepening](#) framework.

Fail hard

Since alpha and beta act as hard [bounds](#) of the return value if depth left is greater zero in the above code samples, this is referred to a [fail-hard](#)-framework.

Outside the Bounds

[Fail-Soft](#) Alpha-Beta ^[1] may return scores outside the [bounds](#), that is either greater than beta or less than alpha. It has to keep track of the best score, which might be below alpha.

```
int alphaBeta( int alpha, int beta, int depthleft ) {  
    int bestscore = -oo;  
    if( depthleft == 0 ) return quiesce( alpha, beta );  
    for ( all moves ) {  
        score = -alphaBeta( -beta, -alpha, depthleft - 1 );  
        if( score >= beta )  
            return score; // fail-soft beta-cutoff  
        if( score > bestscore ) {  
            bestscore = score;  
            if( score > alpha )  
                alpha = score;  
        }  
    }  
    return bestscore;  
}
```

Enhancements

The alpha-beta algorithm can also be improved. These enhancements come from the fact that if you restrict the [window](#) of [scores](#) that are interesting, you can achieve more cutoffs. Since [move ordering](#) is so much important, a technique applied outside of the search for this is [iterative deepening](#) boosted by a [transposition table](#), and possibly [aspiration windows](#). Other enhancements, applied within the search function, are further discussed.

Obligatory

- [Transposition Table](#)
- [Iterative Deepening](#)
- [Aspiration Windows](#)

Selectivity

- [Quiescence Search](#)
- [Selectivity](#)

Scout and Friends

- [Scout](#)
- [NegaScout](#)
- [Principal Variation Search](#)

Alpha-Beta goes Best-First

- [Alpha-Beta Conspiracy Search](#)
- [MTD\(f\)](#)
- [NegaC*](#)
- [SSS* and Dual* as MT](#)

See also

- [Alpha](#)
- [Beta](#)

- [Beta-Cutoff](#)
- [Bound](#)
- [CPW-Engine search](#)
- [Fail-Low](#)
- [Fail-High](#)
- [Gamma-Algorithm](#)
- [Iterative Search](#)
- [KC Chess](#)
- [MCoß](#)
- [Minimax](#)
- [Negamax](#)
- [Node Types](#)
- [Odd-Even Effect](#)
- [Parallel Alpha-Beta](#)
- [Parallel Alpha-Beta in Cilk](#)
- [Search Explosion](#)
- [Theorem-Proving and M & N procedure](#)
- [Window](#)

Videos

- [Patrick Winston - Video Lecture 6](#)
- [The History of Computer Chess - an AI Perspective - Video](#)

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1993 ...

- [computer chess](#) by [Paul W Celmer](#), [rgc](#), September 10, 1993
- [Re: Computer Chess \(LONG\)](#) by [Andy Walker](#), [rgc](#), September 16, 1993
- [Computer Chess and alpha-beta pruning](#) by [Rickard Westman](#), [rgc](#), September 21, 1993
- [Re: Computer Chess and alpha-beta pruning](#) by [Johannes Fürnkranz](#), [rgc](#), September 22, 1993 » [Iterative Deepening alpha-beta pruning != brute force](#)
- [Re: Computer Chess and alpha-beta pruning](#) by [Feng-hsiung Hsu](#), [rgc](#), September 22, 1993 » [Brute-Force](#)
- [Re: Computer Chess and alpha-beta pruning](#) by [Robert Hyatt](#), [rgc](#), September 25, 1993
- [Alpha-beta inconsistencies](#) by [Chua Kong Sian](#), [rgc](#), February 19, 1994

1995 ...

- [Alpha-Beta explained?](#) by [Brian](#), [rgcc](#), October 15, 1996
- [New improvement to alpha/beta + TT?](#) by [Heiner Marxen](#), [rgcc](#), January 13, 1997 » [Fail-Soft](#)
- [Re: Argument against Alpha-Beta searching](#) by [Robert Hyatt](#), [rgcc](#), March 19, 1997
- [computer chess "oracle" ideas...](#) by [Robert Hyatt](#), [rgcc](#), April 1, 1997 » [Oracle](#)
- [Re: computer chess "oracle" ideas...](#) by [Ronald de Man](#), [rgcc](#), April 3, 1997
- [Re: computer chess "oracle" ideas...](#) by [Ronald de Man](#), [rgcc](#), April 7, 1997
- [Basic alpha-beta question](#) by [John Scalo](#), [CCC](#), January 06, 1998
- [alpha-beta is silly?](#) by [Werner Inmann](#), [CCC](#), June 02, 1998
- [Re: Basic questions about alpha beta](#) by [Bruce Moreland](#), [CCC](#), September 28, 1998

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- [Another Alpha-Beta algorithm question](#) by [Jeff Anderson](#), [CCC](#), February 18, 2000
- [A Question on simple Alpha-Beta versus PVS/Negascout](#) by [Andrei Fortuna](#), [CCC](#), March 21, 2000 » [Principal Variation Search](#), [NegaScout](#)
- [outline for alpha beta](#) by [John Coffey](#), [CCC](#), May 12, 2000
- [Alpha-Beta explanation on Heinz's book?](#) by [Severi Salminen](#), [CCC](#), October 05, 2000 ^[14]
- [Who invented the Alpha-Beta-algorithm?](#) by [Rafael B. Andrist](#), [CCC](#), April 09, 2001
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- [Fail soft alpha-beta](#) by [Russell Reagan](#), [CCC](#), September 08, 2003 » [Fail-Soft](#)
- [Complexity Analyses of Alpha-Beta](#) by [Renze Steenhuisen](#), [CCC](#), October 07, 2003
- [Mixing alpha-beta with PN search](#) by [Tord Romstad](#), [CCC](#), January 18, 2004 » [Proof-Number Search](#)
- [Question for Hyatt about Alpha/Beta](#) by [Bob Durrett](#), [CCC](#), February 05, 2004

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- [Iterative alpha-beta search?](#) by [Andrew Wagner](#), [CCC](#), January 11, 2006 » [Iterative Search](#)
- [Trivial alfa-beta question](#) by [Jouni Uski](#), [CCC](#), February 18, 2006

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- [Dumb question about alpha-beta](#) by [Daylen Yang](#), [CCC](#), March 04, 2014

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- [Search algorithm in it's simplest forum](#) by [Mahmoud Uthman](#), [CCC](#), February 25, 2015
- [Negative alpha/beta windows: Are they useful?](#) by [Thomas Dybdahl Ahle](#), [CCC](#), March 06, 2015

- [Stuck on Alphabeta](#) by kuket15, [OpenChess Forum](#), December 07, 2015
- [Alpha-Beta woes, textbook-like resources, etc.](#) by [Meni Rosenfeld](#), [CCC](#), January 14, 2016
- [Search](#) by [Louis Tunney](#), [CCC](#), Jan 24, 2016
- [It's time for us to say farewell.: Regretful, we've made the tough decision to close Wikispaces. Find out why, and what will happen, here \(http://blog.wikispaces.com\)](#)
- [Alpha-Beta as a rollouts algorithm](#) by [Daniel Shawul](#), [CCC](#), January 25, 2018 » [MCAß](#), [Monte-Carlo Tree Search](#), [Scorpio](#)

External Links

- [Alpha-beta Pruning from Wikipedia](#)
- [Branch-and-bound from Wikipedia](#)
- [Integer programming from Wikipedia](#) ^[15]
- [The alpha-beta heuristic](#) from [Alex Bell](#) (1972). *Games Playing with Computers* . [Allen & Unwin](#) , ISBN-13: 978-0080212227
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- [G13GAM -- Game Theory - alpha-beta pruning](#) by [Andy Walker](#)
- [Alpha-Beta](#) from [How Rebel Plays Chess](#) by [Ed Schröder](#)
- [Alpha-Beta search](#) from [Paul Verhelst's Computer Chess Sites](#)
- [The Minimax Algorithm and Alpha-Beta Pruning](#) from [The Computer History Museum](#)
- [Alpha-Beta Slide Show in 18 steps](#) by [Mikael Bodén](#)
- [Alpha Beta](#) - [Astral Abuse](#) , 1971, [YouTube](#) Video

Alpha Beta are [Vilma Lado](#) , [Vangelis Papathanassiou](#), [Argyris Koulouris](#) and [Giorgio Gomelski](#)

Alpha Beta - Astral Abuse (with Vangelis)



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2. [^] [Alpha Beta - Astral Abuse](#) a look at the music of [Vangelis Papathanassiou](#)
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