APPROVAL SHEET

Title of Thesis: A Framework for Predicting and Controlling System-Level Properties of Agent-Based Models

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ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: A Framework for Predicting and Controlling System-Level Properties of Agent-Based Models

Donald P. Miner, PhD in Computer Science, 2010

Thesis directed by: Dr. Marie desJardins, Associate Professor
Department of Computer Science and
Electrical Engineering

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A Framework for Predicting and Controlling System-Level Properties of Agent-Based Models

by

Donald P. Miner

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of the University of Maryland in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Computer Science
2010

This is my dedication.

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These will be written out later:

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- Bill Rand: introducing me to NetLogo
- Forrest Stonedahl: working on a similar problem; a conversation which was a turning point in my research focus to ABMs; introduced me to the term 'meta-model'
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION AND MOTIVATION

The behavior of individual agents in an agent-based model (ABM) is typically well understood because the agent's program directly controls its local behaviors. What is typically not understood is how changing these programs' agent-level control parameters affect the observed system-level behaviors of the ABM. The aim of this dissertation is to provide researchers and users of ABMs insight into how these agent-level parameters affect system-level properties. In this dissertation, I discuss a learning framework named the ABM Meta-Modeling Framework (AMMF) that I have developed that can be used to predict and control system-level behaviors of agent-based models. With this framework, users can interact with ABMs in terms of intuitive system-level concepts, instead of with agent-level controls that only indirectly affect system-level behaviors.

1.1 Agent-Based Models

Agent-based models are used by scientists to analyze system-level behaviors of complex systems by simulating the system bottom-up. At the bottom of these simulations are individual agents that locally interact with other agents and the environment. All the behavior in an ABM, from agent-level local interactions to system-level behaviors, emerge from these local interactions, which are governed by the individual *agent programs*. ABMs can be used to understand how changes in individuals' *agent-level parameters* affect *system-level properties*.

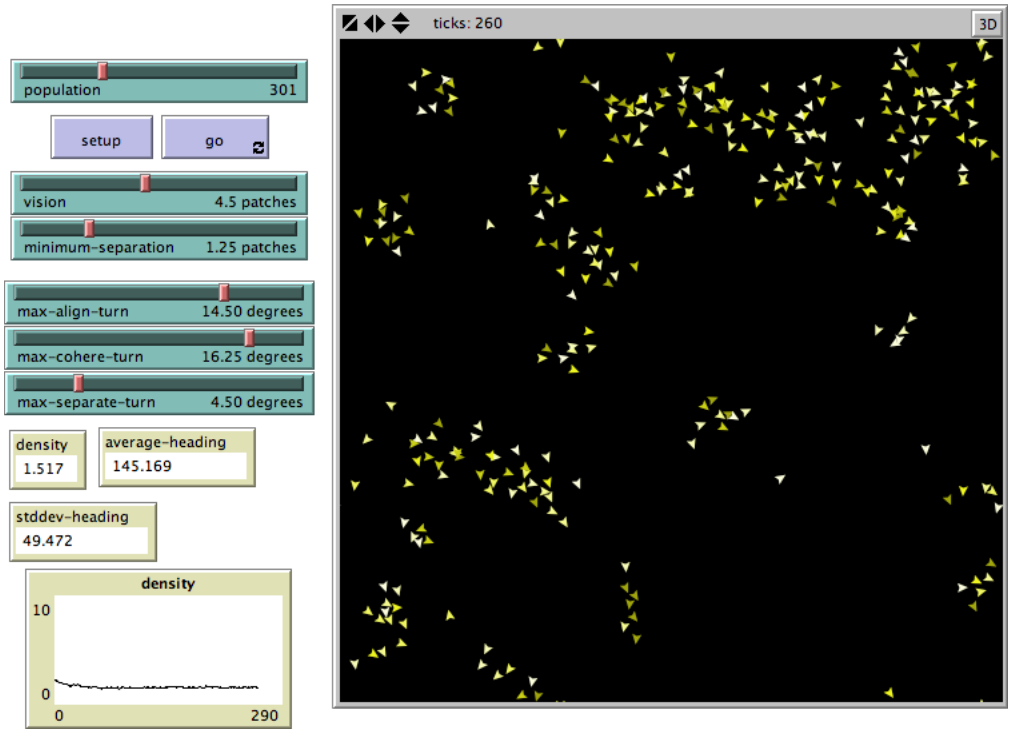

FIG. 1.1. A screenshot of NetLogo's graphical user interface while executing a flocking simulation.

Agent-level control parameters adjust the behaviors of agent-based programs. However, scientists are not typically interested in the local interactions between agents— they are interested in the resulting system-level behaviors that result. For example, researchers that studied agent-based models of lane formations in army ants were interested in the traffic patterns of the lanes, not the individual behaviors of the ants (Couzin & Franks 2003). In other work, researchers that studied locusts were interested in determining at what critical density locusts begin to swarm and destroy crops (Buhl *et al.* 2006). Typically, scientists analyze ABMs by viewing visualizations of the environment or gathering statistical data on the simulation. For instance, NetLogo, an agent-based modeling programming environment (Tisue & Wilensky 2004), has monitors, plots and visualizations to convey system-level properties to the user. In Figure 1.1, monitors are displaying *density*, *average-heading* and *stddev-heading* statistics for a flocking domain. In addition, a plot of density shows how it has changed over time. These tools are used by a researcher to generate a mental model of how the agent-level control parameters of the flocking domain (the sliders seen in the user interface) affect these system-level properties.

Although using ABMs for researching agent-based systems has been proven useful in a number of domains, there is a glaring conceptual disconnect from the user's perspective, between the agent-level controls and the system-level properties. The classical ABM control method of adjusting agent-level properties is unintuitive because they only indirectly affect the system-level properties through emergence. With the current methodology, a simulation has to be executed in order to observe what the values of the system-level properties will be. A time consuming iterative process of guess-and-check is the only way to configure the system to have it exhibit a desired system-level behavior. A determination of what an ABM will do at a system-level, given only the agent-level parameters, is not possible with current software.

The main goal of the ABM Meta-Modeling Framework is to bridge the gap between agent-level parameters and system-level properties. AMMF reduces the learning curve of an agent-based model since users are interacting with the system at the system-level, instead of at the agent-level. Qualitative analysis of an ABM's system-level properties will be a more efficient process since researchers deal with an abstraction of the system's controls. In addition, the models learned by AMMF can be inspected to gather quantitative data about the correlations between system-level properties and agent-level parameters.

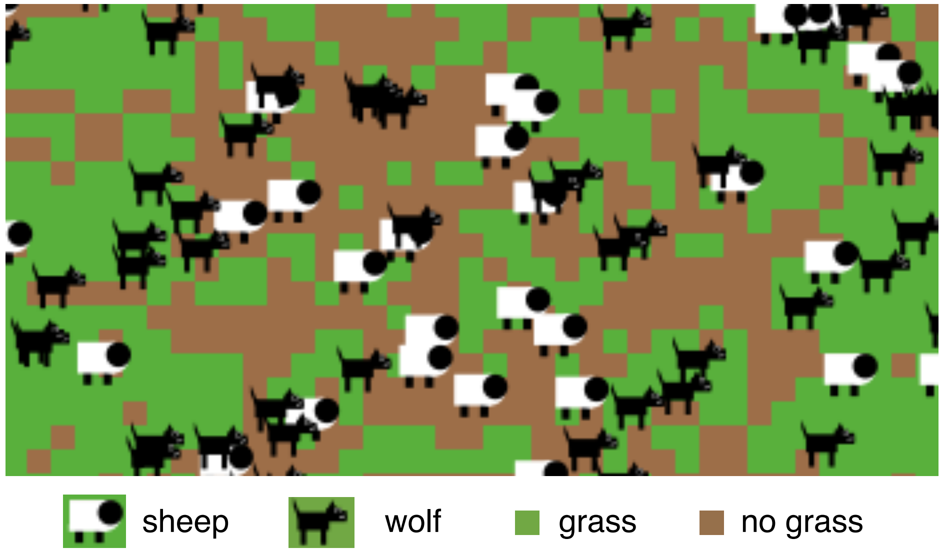

FIG. 1.2. A screen shot from NetLogo's Wolf Sheep Predation model.

1.2 Wolves, Sheep and Grass

Throughout this dissertation, I will use NetLogo's Wolf Sheep Predation model (Wilensky 1997), which is bundled with NetLogo's standard Model Library,[1] as an example to explain concepts. A snapshot of its NetLogo visualization is shown in Figure 1.2. This multi-agent model simulates a food chain consisting of wolf agents, sheep agents and grass in a two-dimensional space. The model is controlled by seven agent-level control parameters, which directly affect the following agent behaviors:

- The system is initialized with *initial-number-sheep* sheep and *initial-number-wolves* wolves.
- Wolves and sheep move randomly though the space.
- Wolves and sheep die if they run out of energy.

[1]http://ccl.northwestern.edu/netlogo/models/WolfSheepPredation

- Wolves eat sheep if they occupy the same space in the environment. Wolves gain *wolf-gain-from-food* units of energy from eating sheep. The sheep dies.

- Sheep eat grass if they are on a location of the environment that has grass. Sheep gain *sheep-gain-from-food* units of energy from eating grass. The grass dies in that grid location.

- Every time step, each sheep and each wolf has a chance (*sheep-reproduce* and *wolf-reproduce*) to reproduce asexually. Both the parent and the child split the parent's original energy evenly (i.e., parent's energy divided by two).

- Grass regrows after *grass-regrowth-time* number of time steps.

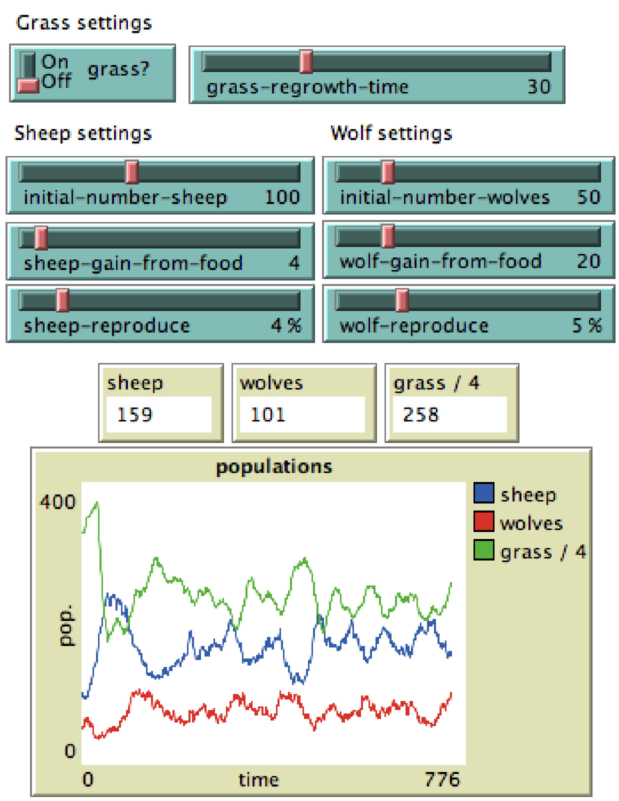

FIG. 1.3. The control and monitor interface for the Wolf Sheep Predation model.

The system-level concepts we are interested in are the number of sheep, the number of wolves and the number of grid locations containing grass. In NetLogo, these properties are displayed with monitors and a plot, as seen in Figure 1.3. The number of each population of agents may change continuously, but the average number of sheep converges. Another interesting feature is some ecosystems fail: either sheep or both sheep and wolves go extinct.

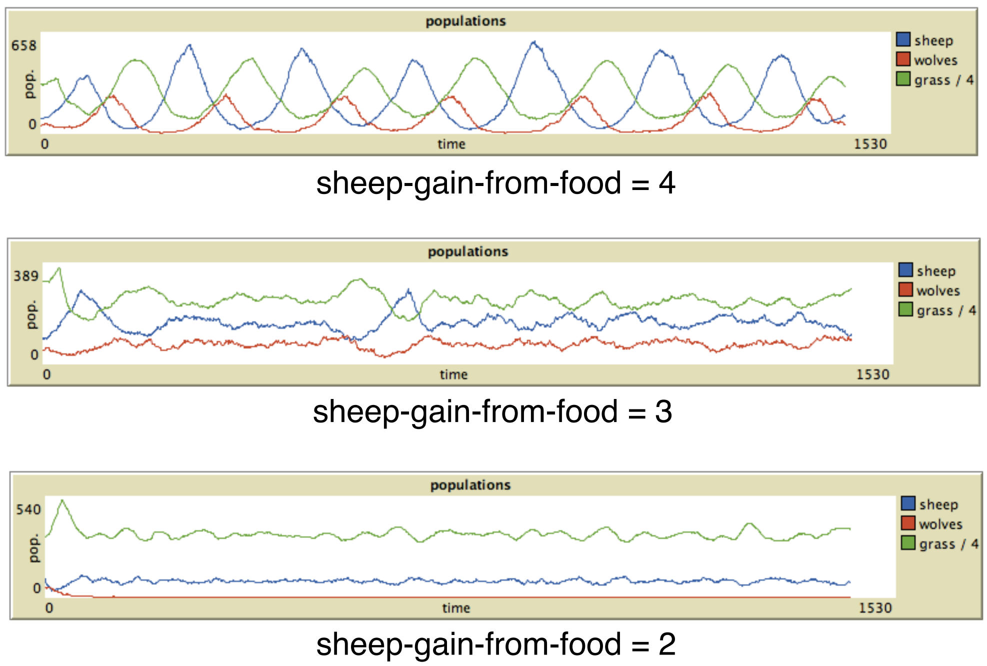

FIG. 1.4. Differences in populations based on changes of the *sheep-gain-from-food* parameter.

After working with this ABM for some time, a user will begin to realize that changes in the control parameters will yield different types of behavior. For example, by setting *sheep-gain-from-food* to 2, 3, and then 4, major differences in system-level behavior are apparent by viewing the graphs in Figure 1.4. When the value of *sheep-gain-from-food* is 4, the system rhythmically exhibits major changes in all three agent populations. When the value is 2 or 3, the population remains relatively stable, but the average population values are different. When the value is low enough (e.g., 2) the wolves go extinct.

The Wolf Sheep Predation model is a good example of the intuitive disconnect between agent-level parameters and system-level properties. There is no clear *explicit* relationship between the controls presented in the user interface and the resulting system-level properties. An experienced user may have a qualitative understanding of the correlations, but would not be able to predict quantitative concepts, such as the average number of sheep after 2000 time steps. In Chapter 8: Results, I will show that the intuitive disconnect in this domain can easily be solved by AMMF.

1.3 Overview of The ABM Meta-Modeling Framework

The foundation of this work is framing the problem of building a meta-model of an ABM as two sub-problems: the *forward-mapping problem* and the *reverse-mapping problem*. In Chapter 5: The Forward-Mapping Problem, I will discuss how AMMF maps given values of the agent-level parameters to expected system-level property values with standard regression approaches. In Chapter 6: The Reverse-Mapping Problem, I will discuss how AMMF maps a set of desired system-level property values to a set of agent-level parameters that would generate this behavior. My general approach to solving the reverse-mapping problem is to interpolate configurations using the forward mapping to approximate a smooth and continuous surface. This interpolated surface represents the space of configurations that would satisfy the system-level requirements set out by the user. Also, in Chapter 6, I will discuss alternative methods for solving the revers-mapping problem.

AMMF is simple and has only a few configuration points. This allows researchers to focus on the analysis of the system, instead of on the details of AMMF. The framework consists of three major steps: sampling, solving the forward-mapping problem and solving the reverse-mapping problem. In these three steps, the only configurations the user must perform are: define how to measure system-level properties of interest, provide the ranges of parameters to be sampled, and plug in a regression algorithm.

I will show in Chapter 8: Results that my framework is able to generate models of system-level behavior. For example, AMMF is able to predict the number of sheep and wolves in the Wolf Sheep Predation model, given the configuration parameter values (the forward-mapping problem). Also, AMMF is able to make suggestions for the values for the control parameters, given the the desired system-level property outcome (the reverse-mapping problem).

A more comprehensive overview of AMMF is provided in Chapter 2: The ABM Meta-Modeling Framework.

1.4 Summary of Contributions

My main contribution presented in this dissertation is an in-depth analysis of meta-models of agent-based models. This analysis includes a discussion of methods for using regression to build models of the correlations between agent-level parameters and system-level properties. In addition, this dissertation contains a survey of ways that that meta-models can be used to inspect system-level behaviors of agent-based models.

The ABM Meta-Modeling Framework encapsulates my methodology for building meta-models of ABMs. The implementation of AMMF as software serves as a proof-of-concept to show that my approach is implementable and applicable to a variety of domains. The software itself is a contribution, since it is available to be used by researchers interested in building meta-models of NetLogo ABMs. The design of the general framework is a contribution as well, since it could be implemented to interact with other agent-based modeling systems similar to NetLogo, or totally independent agent-based models.

1.5 Dissertation Organization

This dissertation is divided into nine chapters, including this one. Chapter 2: The ABM Meta-Modeling Framework explains each framework component in detail, explains how a new user would tailor AMMF to a new ABM, discusses implementation details and gives an introduction to the forward- and reverse-mapping problems. Chapter 3: Related Work compares and contrasts approaches similar to AMMF in motivation, with AMMF. Chapter 4: Background provides information about NetLogo and regression algorithms that is useful for understanding AMMF completely. Chapters 5 and 6 discuss my solutions to the forward- and reverse-mapping problems. Chapter 7: Using Meta-Models is a survey of different ways the meta-models generated by AMMF can be used to analyze system-level properties of ABMs. Chapter 8: Results evaluates AMMF on a domain-by-domain basis and provides explicit examples of how AMMF has been used. Chapter 9: Conclusions and Future Work summarizes this dissertation, provides additional thoughts I have regarding this work and possible directions for future work.

Chapter 2

THE ABM META-MODELING FRAMEWORK

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2.1 Design Goals of The ABM Meta-Modeling Framework

My specific goal in designing AMMF is to make controlling and interacting with agent-based models more intuitive. In addition to this central goal, AMMF strives to be:

- Domain independent – the design of AMMF should minimize the amount of configuration for each domain,
- Algorithm independent – any regression algorithm should be able to be plugged into AMMF,
- Accurate – AMMF should generate accurate predictions and control suggestions,

- Fast for the user – interactions with the models generated by AMMF should require minimal computational time.

Domain independence is paramount because of the variety in which ABMs come. I have designed AMMF such that the same general approach would work for any ABM. Also, I strove to minimize the amount of configuration needed to apply AMMF to a new domain. These constraints I have set on the design make AMMF broadly applicable to a number of domains, without the need of in-depth domain knowledge. To reinforce this claim, I have tested AMMF on a number of diverse domains and used the same general approach for each.

Algorithm independence in a learning framework is important because different algorithms are more effective for modeling different agent-based models. In general, the learning algorithms that will be discussed in this dissertation will satisfy the requirements for modeling most agent-based models. However, an in depth analysis of which types of algorithms should be used for different classes of ABMs is outside the scope of this dissertation research. In addition, algorithm independence allows AMMF to scale with new advances in machine learning research, since future state-of the art regression algorithms can be plugged in just as easily as current approaches.

Accuracy and fast user response time appear to be obvious design goals. However, AMMF requires that the user spends a significant amount of computational time sampling different configurations of the target ABM. These large training sets can be used to build static meta-models of ABMs that are both accurate and fast to query. In contrast, an active learning approach would be able to learn models faster, but would require interaction with the user, increasing the amount of user interaction. Likewise, optimization approaches could be used to generate arbitrarily accurate results, but typically require numerous iterations and would significantly increase the response time for a user's query. In summary, I am making the assumption that users studying ABMs with AMMF are more interested in achieving more accurate results for their research, than generating their results faster. I discuss this trade off in more detail in Chapter 6: The Reverse Mapping Problem.

2.2 Analysis of Implementation vs. Design Goals

Chapter 3

RELATED WORK

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Chapter 4

BACKGROUND

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Chapter 5

THE FORWARD MAPPING PROBLEM

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Chapter 6

THE REVERSE MAPPING PROBLEM

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Chapter 7

USING META-MODELS

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Chapter 8

RESULTS

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Chapter 9

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

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