Week 6: Intelligent Agents

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# Intelligent Agents

The North American electrical network is the world’s most massive machine, spanning across the continent (Wildberger, 1996). Making predictions across this example system is exceptionally complex due to the variability and inter-relationship of black box decisions. Traditionally, physicists and statisticians approach these issues with very sophisticated equations that seek to model the problem domain. However, those methods are challenging to scale, expensive to operate, and updates require expertise. In contrast, businesses desire elegant solutions that promote agility through experimentation with low entry barriers and minimal economic overhead. Meeting those expectations requires a different paradigm for simulating the environment.

# Definitions and Terminologies

Engineers consistently find that maintaining monolithic technologies requires substantial overhead. Alternatively, using microsystem architectures enables them to build and replace components rapidly in isolation. A similar idea exists with simulations with a decomposition of the environment into multiple intelligent agents (see Table 1).

Table 1: Principal Components

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| --- | --- |
| Aspect | Definition |
| Intelligence | The ability to reason about a problem |
| Simulation | An experiment that produces a statistical model |
| Environment | The universe contains the agents |
| Agent | An automaton that follows a predefined script |
| Objective | The goal of the agent |
| Tasks | The steps necessary to complete the objective |
| Notification | A collaborative or competing message between agents |
| Swarm | A group of agents |
| Choice | The random decision of an agent within its action space |
| Aggregate Choice | The net effect of multiple independent agent decisions |

A simulation experiment first identifies the environment, participants, and one or more objectives. Each participant, called an agent, attempts to complete its objective under a set of guiding rules and principles. For instance, NetLogo’s BeeSmart environment contains multiple bees that attempt to maximize food production from various honey pots within a given scene (Wilensky, 2014). Initially, the swarm fumbles around until discovering a couple of locations. After some time, the colony will divide across multiple honey pots and compare site values with neighboring peers. Eventually, the bees converge to the optimal configuration that provides the maximum food for the hive. While no individual agent understands the ideal distribution across the environment, the aggregate of independent decisions enables analysts to extract sophisticated observations about the broader system.