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Visual Search in Familiar Environments using Reinforcement Learning
– with a subtitle

En himla bra svensk titel

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Abstract

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Acknowledgments

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Contents

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1 Introduction

In this thesis project, the problem of searching for targets in unknown but familiar environments is addressed. This chapter presents the motivation behind the project, the research questions that are addressed, and the delimitations.

1.1 Motivation

The ability to visually search for targets in an environment is crucial to many parts of our daily lives. We are constantly looking for things, be it the right book in the bookshelf, a certain keyword in an article or blueberries in the forest. In many cases, it is important that this search is efficient and fast. Animals need to quickly identify predators, and drivers need to be able to search for pedestrians crossing the road they are driving on.

While searching for targets is often seemingly effortless to humans, it is a complex process. How humans and animals search for things has been extensively studied in neuroscience and neurobiology [2, 5, 4]. In the computer vision field, there has been several attempts to mimic the way humans search in machines []. It is of great interest to automate visual search. Applications range from search and rescue to ...

Problematically, it is difficult to manually create search algorithms. The appearance and distribution of targets in an environment varies greatly, and may be subtle. If one could instead learn the underlying from a limited set of sample environments and generalize to unseen similar environments this problem would be circumvented.

In many real-world visual search scenarios the field-of-view is limited. This means that the search process is split into two steps: directing the field of view, and locating targets within the view. Much work has been focused on latter, locating targets within the field of view []. Often, only a fraction of the environment is visible. In these cases where to move the field of view becomes an important decision.

The characteristics of the searched environment can often be used to find targets quicker. For example, if one is foraging for blueberries it makes sense to search the ground rather than the trees. Similarly, if one is searching a satellite image for boats it is reasonable to focus on ocean shores.

The exact characteristics of the environment need not be constant - forests with blueberries can vary greatly in appearance and boats can be found in all of the seven seas. In many cases, the environment is familiar in that it has characteristics that are similar to previously seen environments. Humans are able to generalize in such cases.

This work tries to address these issues, focusing on strategic scans of larger environments where the field of view is small relative to the environment. This is a problem that has been less studied in the literature than visual search in smaller environments. There are other factors that become increasingly important. The field-of-view of the observer is often limited, and she has to move it efficiently to find the target.

1.2 Aim

The aim of this thesis is to implement and evaluate an autonomous agent that intelligently searches its environment for targets. The agent should learn common characteristics of environments and utilize this knowledge to search for targets in new environments more effectively. Furthermore, the agent should be able to

A specific instance of the visual search problem is considered, where the environment is searched by a pan-tilt camera fixed in place. The camera has a limited view of the environent. Automating this task is of interest for multiple reasons. Manually controlling a camera may be costly, and the performance of a human operator may be suboptimal. Crucial to the problem is generalization.

1.3 Research questions

This thesis will address the following questions:

1. How can a learning agent that does efficient visual search in familiar environments be implemented?
2. How can a simulator that tests the ability of an agent to solve the presented problem be implemented?
3. How can a learning agent generalize to unseen but familiar environments?
4. How does memory affect the agent's ability to search an environment?
5. How does the learning agent compare to common non-learning methods?
6. How does the learning agent compare to an exhaustive search of the environment, and a human searcher?

1.4 Delimitations

This thesis will be focused on the behavioral aspects of the presented problem. To train and test agents, a simplified environment will be used. This will test the desired characteristics of the agent as presented above, but will not simulate realistic environments.

2 Theory

This chapter introduces relevant theory and related work

2.1 Visual Search

Visual search is a perceptual task which involves seeking out targets among distractors. Eckstein (2011) [2] identifies four factors that limit performance of visual search in animals:

- Foveated vision.
- Variability in visual environment and uncertainty about target parameters.
- Stochasticity of neural processing.
- Limitations of covert attention and memory.

The brain utilizes a set of strategies to optimize visual search performance:

- Calculation of the visibility of different regions (saliency).
- Knowledge about the visual properties of the environment, including targets, distractors and noise.

There are a set of statistical regularities that reduce uncertainty of the target location:

- Target probabilities varying across locations and predictive cues.
- Contextual cuing

Interestingly, studies in humans have shown

- We do not use memory during visual search
- We have easier to differentiate unknown distractors from targets (or vice versa?)

An alternative model of visual search is *guided search* by Wolfe (2021).
Wolfe also presents a simulation of the model. Simulates some mechanics of the search

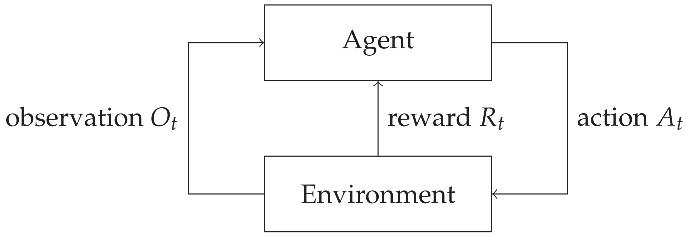

Figure 2.1: Partially observable Markov decision process.

2.1.1 Active Vision

Much of current research in computer vision studies problems with passive observers where images are passively sampled. The problem considered in this project contains an *active vision* [1] system. The observer (agent) can manipulate the viewpoint of the camera in order to investigate the environment and get better information from it. This closer to human perceptual activity which is both exploring and searching. A study of basic problems of vision shows that active vision systems have several computational advantages over passive ones for common perceptual tasks [1].

2.2 Reinforcement Learning

Reinforcement learning (RL) is a subfield of machine learning concerned with learning from interaction how to achieve a goal. An *agent* and its *environment* interact continually over discrete time steps. At each time step the agent selects some *action* that updates the state of the environment, and gives it a *reward*. The agent selects actions using a stochastic *policy* with the goal of maximizing the *return* which is usually defined as the discounted sum of future rewards.

2.2.1 Markov Decision Process

The RL setup is usually formalized as a (finite) Markov decision process (MDP).

The problem of learning from interaction to achieve a goal is usually framed as a (finite) Markov Decision Process (MDP). For regular MDPs it is assumed that the learning agent has access to some representation of the underlying *state* of the environment which it uses to select *actions*. For many problems this is not true. A partially observable Markov decision process (POMDP) is a generalization of an MDP in which it is assumed that the environment has some well defined underlying latent state, but the agent only perceives a partial *observation* of it from the environment.

A POMDP is formally defined as a 7-tuple $\langle \mathcal{S}, \mathcal{A}, \mathcal{O}, \mathcal{R}, \mathcal{T}, \Omega, \gamma \rangle$, where

- $\mathcal{S}$ is a finite set of states,
- $\mathcal{A}$ is a finite set of actions,
- $\mathcal{T}$ is a set of conditional state transition probabilities,
- $\mathcal{R} : S \times A \to \mathbb{R}$ is a reward function,
- Ω is a finite set of observations,
- $\mathcal{O}$ is a set of conditional observation probabilities, and
- $\gamma \in [0, 1]$ is a discount factor.

The agent interacts with the environment at discrete time steps $t = 0, 1, 2, \ldots T$. At each time step t, the agent receives an observation of the environment's state $O_t \in \Omega$ and selects some action $A_t \in \mathcal{A}$. In the next time step the agent receives a reward

action $a \in \mathcal{A}$ which causes the environment to transition to state s' with probability $\mathcal{T}(s'|s, a)$. It receives an observation $o \in \Omega$ with probability $\mathcal{O}(o|s', a)$, as well as a reward r given by $\mathcal{R}(s, a)$.

This interaction is repeated until the end of the episode at time step T. The goal of the agent is to maximize the *discounted return*, defined as the discounted sum of future rewards $G_t \doteq \sum_{k=t+1}^{T} \gamma^{k-t-1} R_k$ where γ reflects the uncertainty of the environment.

Planning in a POMDP is undecidable, and solving them is often computationally intractable. Approximate solutions are more common.

2.2.2 Policies and Value Functions

Most RL algorithms estimate both a *value function* that tells the agent how good it is to be in a given state, and a

2.2.3 Policy Optimization

This work will focus on policy optimization algorithms.

2.2.4 Actor Critic Models

2.2.5 Exploration and Exploitation

2.2.6 Generalization

Kobbe et al. (2020) [] study generalization in RL. They introduce a benchmark of procedurally generated i.i.d. environments, and find that this is essential to

2.3 Automating Visual Search

2.4 Deep Reinforcement Learning

Ghesu et al. () [3] use XXX

3 Method

In this chapter, the method is described.

3.1 Environment

The environments to be searched are drawn from a distribution, with varying but similar appearance, target locations and appearances. For all environments, the appearance correlates to the probability of targets.

3.1.1 Action Space

3.1.2 Observation Space

3.1.3 Reward Signal

3.1.4 Algorithm

3.1.5 Feature extraction

3.2 Experiments

3.2.1 Hyperparameters

3.2.2 Generalization

3.2.3 Memory

4 Results

This chapter presents the results. Note that the results are presented factually, striving for objectivity as far as possible. The results shall not be analyzed, discussed or evaluated. This is left for the discussion chapter.

In case the method chapter has been divided into subheadings such as pre-study, implementation and evaluation, the result chapter should have the same sub-headings. This gives a clear structure and makes the chapter easier to write.

In case results are presented from a process (e.g. an implementation process), the main decisions made during the process must be clearly presented and justified. Normally, alternative attempts, etc, have already been described in the theory chapter, making it possible to refer to it as part of the justification.

5 Discussion

This chapter contains the following sub-headings.

5.1 Results

Are there anything in the results that stand out and need be analyzed and commented on? How do the results relate to the material covered in the theory chapter? What does the theory imply about the meaning of the results? For example, what does it mean that a certain system got a certain numeric value in a usability evaluation; how good or bad is it? Is there something in the results that is unexpected based on the literature review, or is everything as one would theoretically expect?

5.2 Method

This is where the applied method is discussed and criticized. Taking a self-critical stance to the method used is an important part of the scientific approach.

A study is rarely perfect. There are almost always things one could have done differently if the study could be repeated or with extra resources. Go through the most important limitations with your method and discuss potential consequences for the results. Connect back to the method theory presented in the theory chapter. Refer explicitly to relevant sources.

The discussion shall also demonstrate an awareness of methodological concepts such as replicability, reliability, and validity. The concept of replicability has already been discussed in the Method chapter (3). Reliability is a term for whether one can expect to get the same results if a study is repeated with the same method. A study with a high degree of reliability has a large probability of leading to similar results if repeated. The concept of validity is, somewhat simplified, concerned with whether a performed measurement actually measures what one thinks is being measured. A study with a high degree of validity thus has a high level of credibility. A discussion of these concepts must be transferred to the actual context of the study.

The method discussion shall also contain a paragraph of source criticism. This is where the authors' point of view on the use and selection of sources is described.

In certain contexts it may be the case that the most relevant information for the study is not to be found in scientific literature but rather with individual software developers and open source projects. It must then be clearly stated that efforts have been made to gain access to this information, e.g. by direct communication with developers and/or through discussion forums, etc. Efforts must also be made to indicate the lack of relevant research literature. The precise manner of such investigations must be clearly specified in a method section. The paragraph on source criticism must critically discuss these approaches.

Usually however, there are always relevant related research. If not about the actual research questions, there is certainly important information about the domain under study.

5.3 The work in a wider context

There must be a section discussing ethical and societal aspects related to the work. This is important for the authors to demonstrate a professional maturity and also for achieving the education goals. If the work, for some reason, completely lacks a connection to ethical or societal aspects this must be explicitly stated and justified in the section Delimitations in the introduction chapter.

In the discussion chapter, one must explicitly refer to sources relevant to the discussion.

6 Conclusion

This chapter contains a summarization of the purpose and the research questions. To what extent has the aim been achieved, and what are the answers to the research questions?

The consequences for the target audience (and possibly for researchers and practitioners) must also be described. There should be a section on future work where ideas for continued work are described. If the conclusion chapter contains such a section, the ideas described therein must be concrete and well thought through.

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