

A Multifeatured Objective Function for Highly Generalized Computer Adaptive Item Selection

Harold Doran
Testsuhiro Yamada
Ted Diaz
Emre Gonulates
Vanessa Culver

Human Resources Research Organization
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Corresponding author: hdoran@humrro.org

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Abstract

Computer adaptive testing (CAT) is an increasingly common mode of test administration offering improved test security, better measurement precision, and the potential for shorter testing experiences. This paper presents a new CAT algorithm based on a multifeatured objective function that is highly generalizable to multiple types of testing conditions to support principled assessment design. The behavior of the algorithm and the types of tests it can build is a function of user-defined constraints, thus freeing software developers from needing to alter code to achieve those variants. The paper comprehensively defines the algorithm, its components, and provides a highly detailed computational implementation. The paper consolidates all information needed to build and scale a CAT so that software developers and psychometricians can use this document as a self-contained specification document to build and deploy an operational CAT platform.

Keywords: computer adaptive testing; computational psychometrics; item response theory

Introduction

The main purpose of computer adaptive testing (CAT) is to construct a unique test form for an examinee by adapting test items around their unique level of ability on the construct being measured

(Reckase, Ju, & Kim, 2019). In theory, the form that yields the maximum precision for the examinee is one where the test information function (TIF) is maximized at the examinee's true level of ability (Babcock & Weiss, 2009) and is best in the sense that it ensures a psychometric alignment between examinee ability and statistical characteristics of the items (Chang, 2015). Because true ability varies by individual, this implies a unique test form for each examinee where test items are carefully curated by a selection algorithm for administration. When item selection is tailored to examinees, an adaptive test can provide more information regarding examinee ability with fewer items relative to a fixed form test (W. J. van der Linden, 2005b; Yao, 2019) and by providing a unique form, test security is improved as examinees in similarly proctored settings will have forms with different test items when item exposure is well-controlled (Yasuda, Hull, & Mae, 2022).

A challenge in adaptive testing is that the true ability is latent and the best indicator of the true ability, the observed ability, changes as examinees provide responses to new items as they progress through a test. In general, few items provide very little information regarding the true ability and more items provide more information (W. J. van der Linden & Pashley, 2010). As a consequence, an adaptive test can iteratively improve its choice of items with a selection algorithm as more information is provided about the examinee in order to form the best possible test form.

Implicit in the description above is the idea that the term "best" is well-understood for item selection (Kingsbury & Zara, 1989) and that some transparent machinery is available to choose those items from a test bank. In fact, "best" can be used differently depending on the test purpose. Therefore, it's key to begin with an operational definition of "best" and then create a mechanism that chooses the best items to uniquely construct a test form for an examinee.

All adaptive algorithms share the common feature that they adapt items on ability, usually on the individual examinee (W. J. van der Linden, 2005a), but optionally the algorithm may maximize information near a critical point, such as a cutscore for classification. In this way, CATs minimize the individual error variance and provide greater measurement precision. However, adaptive algorithms can vary in how they define "best" in the sense of choosing the items for administration (Ho & Dodd, 2012). For instance, if there is no test blueprint, then "best" might be considered exclusively on the psychometric properties of the items vis-à-vis the individual tester. If there is a content blueprint with requirements to choose items from different dimensions of that blueprint, then perhaps "best" can be defined to include content characteristics of the items. If both factors are important (i.e., psychometric and content balance), then the best item is one where the algorithm simultaneously considers the measurement properties of the items and their non-statistical content characteristics to identify which are best on both dimensions at each step.

Perhaps the idea of "best" shouldn't be strictly defined by the capabilities of the algorithm. Test designers should follow theories of principled assessment design (Mislevy & Riconscente, 2006) and the algorithm itself should be able to administer any type of test form developers can imagine, a concept that has been formerly well-articulated (Stocking & Swanson, 1993). In this case, "best" is situationally defined and the algorithm is nothing more than a means to an end and is free to select items from any construct-relevant criteria the test developers wish to impose. This generalized flexibility is one means by which the validity claims regarding test scores arising from CATs can be enhanced (Luecht, De Champlain, & Nungester, 1997; Wise, 2023).

There are many examples of operational CATs used across the education, selection, licensure, and certification fields. The Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) is one large-scale example with military selection applications (DMDC, 2008), the Smarter Balanced Consortium deploys millions of adaptive tests across states in the U.S. in educational testing applications

(Cohen & Albright, 2014), and the National Council Licensure Examination (NCLEX) uses adaptive tests for licensure and certification for medical professionals (Seo, 2017). Some jurisdictions in the U.S. have even codified CATs as a required mode of test administration for educational testing (Florida State Statute §1008.25, 2023; Virginia State Statute §22.1-253.13:3, 2021).

The vast literature on adaptive testing commonly addresses a particular component within the CAT algorithm, such as item exposure (Huebner, Wang, Quinlan, & Seubert, 2015; Leung, Chang, & Hau, 2002; Sympton & Hetter, 1985), ability estimation (Bock & Mislevy, 1982; T. A. Schmitt & Walker, 2010), information functions (Chang & Ying, 1996), or optimization approaches (Choi, Moellering, Li, & van der Linden, 2016). Less common in the literature are thorough, end-to-end, descriptions of the inner workings of a computer adaptive engine providing enough detail such that an independent team can identify all necessary psychometric and computational components in a complete, self-contained location to build a CAT platform for operational use, although van der Linden (2022) provides a complete example of a shadow test approach and Han (2018) provides a review of many common components included within a CAT algorithm.

Most often, descriptions of CAT algorithms provide a procedural schema describing steps for the algorithm but lack a highly detailed computational algorithm and decision details needed to deploy operational infrastructure (Wainer, Dorans, Flaugher, Green, & Mislevy, 2000). For example, some describe adaptive technologies and their heuristics (Straetmans & Eggen, 1998) but do not provide thorough algorithmic descriptions. Others provide computational details but limit focus to a particular computational component, such as exposure control or optimal methods for computing psychometric information (Ma et al., 2023). One example provides seemingly complete details for an item selection algorithm using Monte Carlo methods (Belov, Armstrong, & Weissman, 2008), though details on its scalability and computational complexity are not evaluated. Hence, we cannot know the degree to which this is scalable for large-scale design, but Monte Carlo methods are in general very computationally time consuming.

Purpose and Organization

This paper intends to serve as an end-to-end resource bringing transparency to a new generalized item selection algorithm. The ideas proposed in this paper combine psychometric and test design concepts that simultaneously work to build adaptive forms with test developer constraints in mind one item at a time.

Some examples of what our proposed algorithm can achieve include: 1) adapt only on ability to minimize individual error, 2) simultaneously adapt on ability and provide content or feature balancing to match constraints defined in a test blueprint, 3) only control for feature constraints in which case the test form is linear-on-the-fly (LOFT), 4) limit the algorithm to administer items from a subset of the bank without bifurcating the bank such as when item enemies might exist, 5) administer a collection of items nested within any common grouping structure, and 6) flexibly administer operational and experimental field test items spiraled together. These examples are just a subset of possibilities and the proposed algorithm can broadly support an array of adaptive test forms to include different content dimension targets, cognitive complexity demands, item enemy targets, types of items administered, psychometric measurement targets, among others can all be managed within our proposed framework without having to alter software code to achieve those variants.

Our specific aim is to achieve four objectives in this manuscript. First, we propose and fully describe a generalizable CAT algorithm. Second, we include complete end-to-end requirements for deploying a CAT of this form for operational testing. The intent is that this document can serve as a specification document with enough detail allowing an expert psychometric and software development team to build and deploy an operational instance of a CAT by following the guidance contained here. Third, we describe a scalable computational approach for implementation of the ideas such that the algorithm can be deployed in large settings with minimal latency at the test taker level. Fourth, we demonstrate the behavior of the algorithm with some test trial cases to document its behavior in simulated settings.

The Generalized Item Selection Algorithm

Let the general item selection function for item $j = \{1, \dots, J\}$ for examinee $i = \{1, \dots, P\}$ at step $t = \{1, \dots, T\}$ needed for test feature $g = \{1, \dots, G\}$ be

$$\lambda_{jit} = \pi_j I'_j(\hat{\theta}_{it}) + \sum_{g=1}^G v_g w_{jg} m_{igt} + \sum_{g=1}^G h_g w_{jg} \alpha_{igt}, \quad (1)$$

where the function is a weighted linear composite of three additive components on the right hand side including: 1) the item information function, 2) the value of the content balancing constraint parameter needed to fulfill other test developer features, and 3) a stochastic content parameter to randomly boost and potentially vary the administrative sequence of test items by dimension. Table (1) provides an overview and brief description of the notation used in Equation (1). However, each term in this objective function is fully described in complete detail in the remaining sections.

In this context the term λ_{jit} is a scalar-valued statistic describing the potential for an item to fulfill the constraints necessary to meet test form criteria for a given examinee at each iteration of the test process. The maximum value of this objective function, $\max \lambda_{jit}$, is the item with the most potential at step t to fulfill the objectives of the test selection algorithm.

Throughout this manuscript we differentiate between two terms, *algorithmic* details and *decision* details. The term “algorithmic details” is used to mean the specific components in Equation (1) and “decision details” are how those ideas are implemented. For example, the item information function is an algorithmic component of the objective function. How item information is computed is a decision detail.

Computational Implementation

The scalar-based expression in Equation (1) is useful for general consideration of the idea, but not a useful computational representation. Equivalently, let the objective function be

$$\lambda_{it} = f(\boldsymbol{\pi}, \mathbf{I}'(\boldsymbol{\theta}_{it}), \mathbf{W}, \mathbf{m}) = \boldsymbol{\pi} \odot \mathbf{I}'(\boldsymbol{\theta}_{it}) + \mathbf{W}\mathbf{m}, \quad (2)$$

where the space and dimensions are $\boldsymbol{\pi} = \{\pi_1, \dots, \pi_J\} \in \mathbb{R}_{[0, \infty]}^J$, $\mathbf{I}'(\boldsymbol{\theta}_{it}) = \{I'_1(\hat{\theta}_{it}), \dots, I'_J(\hat{\theta}_{it})\} \in \mathbb{R}_{[0, 1]}^J$, $\mathbf{W} \in \mathbb{R}_{[0, 1]}^{J \times G}$ is an indicator matrix where the rows are the test items in the bank and the columns are values linking the j th item with the g th item feature, h_g is a binary indicator, and $\mathbf{m} = \{(v_1 m_{i1t} + h_1 \alpha_{1it}), \dots, (v_G m_{iGt} + h_G \alpha_{Git})\} \in \mathbb{R}_+^G$. Here the notation $\mathbb{R}_{[a, b]}$ is used to mean

Parameter	Description
π_j	User-defined importance weight associated with information for the j th item.
$I'_j(\hat{\theta}_{it})$	Item information function for item j evaluated at the ability estimate for examinee i at step t rescaled to be on same unit space as m_{igt} .
v_g	User-defined importance feature weight associated with dimension g of test blueprint.
w_{jg}	Indicator value linking item j to feature g of a test blueprint.
m_{igt}	Value of content priority index for examinee i at step t for feature g .
h_g	Binary indicator to toggle content sequence parameter on ($h_g = 1$) or off ($h_g = 0$).
α_{igt}	Random draw from a uniform distribution to balance content administration.
$\hat{\theta}_{it}$	Estimated ability for examinee i at step t .

Table 1: Notation for CAT Algorithm in Equation (1)

a continuous number on the interval $[a, b]$ including endpoints, $\pi \odot I'(\theta_{it})$ is the Hadamard product yielding a vector of length J , and $\mathbf{W}\mathbf{m}$ is the ordinary matrix product also yielding a vector of length J . Equation (2) is simply a more concise expression of Equation (1) and in the same way yields a vector of values $\lambda_{it} = \{\lambda_{1it}, \lambda_{2it}, \dots, \lambda_{Jit}\}$.

Note that \mathbf{W} has dimensions $J \times G$, meaning a test item can be linked to many different features. In doing so, it is important to normalize the rows in the matrix \mathbf{W} to account for the number of features an item is associated with. Without the normalization, items linked to many features would be more attractive to the item selection algorithm given that the resulting value for λ_{jit} is the row sum over all columns in this matrix. The elements of \mathbf{W} before normalization assume values of $w_{jg} = 1$ if item j is associated with feature g and 0 otherwise. Then, the original rows of the matrix \mathbf{W} , denoted as $\mathbf{w}_j = \{w_{j1}, \dots, w_{jG}\}$, are normalized where each element becomes $w_{jg}^* = w_{jg} / \sum_{g=1}^G w_{jg}$ and $\sum_{g=1}^G w_{jg}^* = 1$.

Equation (2) could treat $\pi_j = \pi \forall j$ as a constant information weight applied in the same way to all items. However, its treatment as a vector offers broader application where different weights for information could be applied such that they vary over some types of items. This could be useful in situations where the psychometric properties of items could be exploited as weights. For example, it could be useful to make use of the item-specific variances, σ_j^2 , and use their reciprocals as weights such as $\pi = \{\frac{1}{\sqrt{\sigma_1^2}}, \dots, \frac{1}{\sqrt{\sigma_J^2}}\}$ mimicking weighting strategies used in survey design for complex samples (Wolter, 1985). Though interesting, some caution on this strategy is needed as this would clearly cause for the algorithm to prefer items with smaller standard errors and lead to some potential item overexposure. A second potential use of the vector could be to achieve a quasi a -stratification approach (Huebner, Wang, Daly, & Pinkelman, 2018) where $\pi_j = a_j^{-1}$ is set to the reciprocal of the a -parameter causing the algorithm to use items with smaller slopes more often in early item administration. Last, a third option could be to set $\pi_j = 1$ for operational items and then set $\pi_j = 0$ for experimental field test items. In this way, the algorithm offers a natural embedded field test design where trial items are randomly seeded alongside operational items.

Optimization Approach

The goal of the objective function is to yield a value denoting which item is best for test administration. Our objective function and constraints could be formulated as a mixed integer linear programming (MILP) problem as commonly used in the automated test assembly literature (W. J. van der Linden, 2005c). MILP has been demonstrated for the shadow test method (Choi et al., 2016) and the weighted deviation method (Stocking & Swanson, 1993). However, MILP is computationally expensive, challenging to implement in applied settings, and is not guaranteed to find an optimal solution. Additionally, the mathematical complexity for linear programming almost always requires an external commercial or open-source optimizer (W. van der Linden, 2022) instead of code written and owned by the development team building the CAT engine. This layers in one additional factor development teams need to manage as application programming interfaces (APIs) often change in which case live testing could be interrupted if using a web-based API or code would need to be modified to accommodate API changes.

Here we propose optimization in a different way using a sort-and-search algorithm and later show how to reduce the search space to achieve a more scalable option. First, the input values in $f(\pi, \mathbf{I}'(\theta_{it}), \mathbf{W}, \mathbf{m})$ are treated as known, fixed quantities for computing the elements of λ_{it} . We do not search over the parameter space of $f(\pi, \mathbf{I}'(\theta_{it}), \mathbf{W}, \mathbf{m})$ and find which of their values cause for λ_{it} to reach a maximum. Instead, the input values for the known elements are used to directly compute Equation (2) and the aim is to find the maximum value in the set λ_{it} , or $\max f(\pi, \mathbf{I}'(\theta_{it}), \mathbf{W}, \mathbf{m})$.

When λ_{it} is sorted in descending order, the first item in the vector is best for selection in the sense that it contributes best to the objectives defined by the test developer (e.g., psychometric information and content scalability constraints). We later justify the use of a quick sort algorithm via its time complexity and suggest the search space for computing the values in λ_{it} can be reduced to achieve improved scalability.

Tuning Parameters

What makes the objective function configurable is the set of tuning parameters that allow for the different components of the function to be emphasized differently depending on the needs of the testing application. The values for π_j and v_g are scalar-valued importance weights defined as $\mathbb{R}_{0 \leq \omega \leq \infty} = \{\omega \in \mathbb{R} | 0 \leq \omega \leq \infty\}$ which is used to mean any importance weights in the set $\omega \in \{\pi_j, v_g\}$ can be any positive real number, including 0. Note that importance weights of $\pi_j = 0 \forall j$ cause for the algorithm to be either driven entirely by content constraints (linear on the fly) and when $v_g = 0 \forall g$ the algorithm is purely adaptive on ability and all content constraints are ignored. The term h_g is a binary indicator allowing for the random sequence component to be toggled as needed. The most primitive form of an adaptive algorithm is a special case of Equation (1) when $\{v_g, h_g\} = 0 \forall g$ and $\pi_j = 1 \forall j$.

These weights are simply user-defined importance values that cause for the algorithm to place more or less weight on components in the algorithm as needed by the test developer. In some respects, the actual values used are arbitrary, but they are real numbers to reflect gradations of their importance and can be configured in multiple ways to account for custom test design. It is important to clarify that these weights are relative to each other. If $v_g < \pi_j$, for any particular j and g then the algorithm places greater emphasis on adapting on the measurement properties

than it does on the content balancing features for that particular dimension. If $\pi_j < v_g$, then the algorithm would place more emphasis on the content features in g of the test than it would on adapting towards the individual's ability. Last, if $\pi_j = v_g \forall j$ and g , then equal emphasis is placed on both. Finally, note that the feature weights are subscripted, indicating they are configurable by content feature giving the algorithm greater preference in some feature areas and less in others.

For example, $\pi_j = 1$ and $v_g = 1$ places equal weight on ability and content in the objective function. This could also be $\pi_j = 10$ and $v_g = 10$ and it would behave in the same way as if they were both 1. Alternatively, the values of $\pi_j = 2$ and $v_g = .5$ might be used to weight information with greater importance than blueprint features or conversely, $\pi_j = 1$ and $v_g = 3$ place more weight on feature constraints than on ability in the objective function.

Methods for Adapting on Examinee Ability

The first term in Equation (2) is the item information function used to adapt on examinee ability. This is typically done when items are drawn from a calibrated item pool and the item information function is evaluated at $\hat{\theta}_{it}$ and is then used to determine the next best candidate item (Chen, Ankenmann, & Chang, 2000; Han, 2009). Achieving this can be accomplished using multiple approaches as noted below.

One of the greater challenges in CAT is that $\hat{\theta}_{it}$ early in the test is a poor approximation of the true latent trait given that the estimate is based on a small subset of test items (Chen et al., 2000). That is, for initial item selection we effectively have no information regarding the examinee's true ability. However, the asymptotic properties of the estimator, $\hat{\theta}_{it}$, imply that as more items are administered at each additional step t , the observed estimate approaches its true value, θ_i , and is asymptotically consistent, $\lim_{t \rightarrow \infty} \Pr(|\hat{\theta}_{it} - \theta_i|) > e = 0$. For this reason, evaluating the item information function at the point estimate $\hat{\theta}_{it}$ early in the test may prove less than ideal because that point estimate is swamped with measurement error (Chang, 2015).

However, as more items are administered, perhaps the point estimate can be plugged in to compute item information. This suggests a possible switching strategy could be employed to account for the uncertainty in the ability estimate early in the test but then switch to a method that directly uses the point estimate later in the test. Below we describe three approaches for computing item information and then describe how switching between them could be an advantage to balance computational overhead with statistical precision.

Maximum Fisher Information

The item information function for a consistent estimator is generally defined from item response theory (IRT) for binary items as

$$I_j(\hat{\theta}_{it}) = D^2 a_j^2 \left[\frac{(\Pr_j(\hat{\theta}_{it}) - c_j)^2}{(1 - c_j)^2} \right] \left[\frac{1 - \Pr_j(\hat{\theta}_{it})}{\Pr_j(\hat{\theta}_{it})} \right], \quad (3)$$

where $\Pr_j(\hat{\theta}_{it})$ is the probability of response from a 3-parameter logistic model given the triplet of $\{a_j, b_j, c_j\}$ denoting the IRT parameters of item slope, item location, and item guessing, respectively (Lord, 1980). The maximum Fisher information (MFI) computes item information from the

provisional point estimate obtained at each step of the algorithm and items can be sorted according to the MFI choosing the item providing the most (or largest) MFI given the provisional ability estimate (Chang & Ying, 1996).

Integrating over the Information Function

A second option is to account for the uncertainty in the point estimate and calculate information averaged over the function as

$$I_j(\tilde{\theta}_{it}) = \int_{\hat{\theta}_{it}-\delta_t}^{\hat{\theta}_{it}+\delta_t} D^2 a_j^2 \left[\frac{(\text{Pr}_j(\theta) - c_j)^2}{(1 - c_j)^2} \right] \left[\frac{1 - \text{Pr}_j(\theta)}{\text{Pr}_j(\theta)} \right] d\theta. \quad (4)$$

The limits for integration can be formed using confidence intervals from the conditional standard errors, $\sigma(\hat{\theta}_{it})$, as $\delta_t = \Phi^{-1}(p)\sigma(\hat{\theta}_{it})$ where $\Phi^{-1}(\cdot)$ is the inverse of the normal cumulative distribution function and p is the nominal coverage probability (Veerkamp & Berger, 1994). Equation (4) is computed using Gauss-Legendre quadrature as shown in Appendix A.

Kullback-Leibler Information

A third approach is via the Kullback-Leibler information method (Cover & Thomas, 1991), who informally describe this as a distance metric between two distributions. It has been found to be potentially useful in adaptive testing (Belov & Armstrong, 2011; Chen et al., 2000) and for binary items takes the form

$$KL_j(\hat{\theta}_{it}) = \int_{\hat{\theta}_{it}-\delta_t}^{\hat{\theta}_{it}+\delta_t} \sum_{l=0}^1 \log \left[\frac{\text{Pr}(x_j = l|\theta)}{\text{Pr}(x_j = l|\hat{\theta}_{it})} \right] \text{Pr}(x_j = l|\theta) d\theta, \quad (5)$$

where x_j is the response to item j and θ is true ability (Chang & Ying, 1996). These authors choose $\delta_t = \frac{p}{\sqrt{t}}$ where p is chosen to reflect a nominal coverage probability. This is an impressive implementation relying on the well-documented asymptotic properties of the estimator where the integration limits becomes smaller with increasing t . Our implementation is similar, but instead of using $\frac{p}{\sqrt{t}}$, we draw the limits of integration using δ_t in the same way described for Equation (4). We again approximate this integral using Gauss-Legendre quadrature as shown in Appendix A.

Information Switching Strategy

The KL procedure and the method for averaging over the information function have greater computational expense than directly computing the MFI as they both involve an integral. However, they make better use of the uncertainty in the estimate than the MFI which uses the noisy point estimate. Balancing the two ideas suggests a trade-off approach where one could rely on the asymptotic properties of the estimator and begin early item selection with either the more expensive KL or averaging functions for some initial item selection and then later in the test rely more on the point estimate for computing information.

This idea is originally credited to Chang and Ying (1996). However, our understanding of their approach is that they compute KL over all items, but with increasing values of t , the limits

of integration around the observed estimate becomes smaller, thus treating the observed score as a better estimate at each step. This remains computationally expensive as each step still involves evaluating the integral.

An efficient computational alternative, but theoretically consistent approach, would be to switch to the MFI from either the KL or the average information function after a fixed number of items is administered given the asymptotic expectations for $\hat{\theta}$. For example, we might initially compute item information using KL for t steps and then switch to the MFI or, rather than depending on fixed t , switch to the MFI after reaching a desired level of precision.

The notation $I_j(\hat{\theta}_{it})$, $I_j(\tilde{\theta}_{it})$, and $KL_j(\hat{\theta}_{it})$ is used to describe different ways to compute information for item j . This is useful to denote the differences in the approach. Going forward, we now generically use $I_j(\hat{\theta}_{it})$ to describe a method for computing information and describe in narrative which approach is used simply for the convenience of notation.

Content Balancing

The second and third components of the algorithm are related to the content targets to be administered if a test blueprint exists. This component is often critical to support claims of construct validity from an adaptive test. While the term “content balance” is used here, it is perhaps more suitable to refer to them as “feature constraints.” These components provide the framework by which expert test developers can appropriately define the construct to be measured and then implementation via the following priority index ensures the test form balances both the psychometric and construct-relevant components simultaneously. Others have proposed managing feature constraints alongside psychometric information within the objective function (Mao & Xin, 2013; Stocking & Swanson, 1993) and this algorithm aligns with that notion in spirit but differs substantially in computational implementation.

The first content component described here is an index that determines which aspects of the test blueprint should be prioritized at each step while the second component is intended to introduce some randomization such that items have a “boost” to ensure the forms reach their blueprint minimum or maximum expectations.

Content Index

The content balancing *priority index* parameter can be generally defined as in Equation (6), which contributes to the objective function at step t . The term priority index is used to mean that the resulting value contributes to the item selection function adding some priority to improve the chance that item j associated with feature g will be chosen at step t

$$m_{igt} = \begin{cases} 1 + \frac{N_l - n_{igt}}{N_l} & \text{if } n_{igt} < N_l \\ \frac{N_u - n_{igt}}{N_u - N_l} & \text{if } N_l \leq n_{igt} < N_u \\ -p & \text{otherwise.} \end{cases} \quad (6)$$

The values N_l and N_u represent blueprint minimum and maximum values for a particular area of the blueprint. Hence, they are considered boundaries for a particular test constraint and are used to mean the range of items on the test form necessary to fulfill that constraint, and the value n_{igt} is the number of items with feature g that have been administered to examinee i up to step t .

The value of m_{igt} initiates at $2 \forall g$ when $n_{igt} = 0$ and the value approaches unity as $n_{igt} \rightarrow N_l$. Once a test feature is satisfied by meeting its minimum requirements (i.e., when $n_{igt} = N_l$), the function of m_{igt} resets to 1 and then the value approaches 0 as $n_{igt} \rightarrow N_u$. The parameter includes a penalty once the algorithm achieves the maximum, thus lowering the algorithm's preference to use items with this attribute in future selections. This penalty value p might be $p = -1$ or perhaps any other negative number. In doing so, the item is not eliminated from potential use, but it adds a negative constant to m_{igt} , which will lower its position in the sorted vector λ_{it} . Hence, when $N_u = n_{igt}$, the chance that such an item would be chosen is minimized and the algorithm will prevent test blueprint requirements from being exceeded.

The way in which the priority index operates is such that items below their test requirement minimum always have a larger contribution to the objective function than items between their minimum and maximum. That is, items are most attractive to the algorithm when they are below their minimum blueprint requirement and decrease in attractiveness as they approach their maximum.

The function m_{igt} resembles the constraint CAT (CCAT) of Kingsbury and Zara (1989). However, the normalization process described for the rows in the matrix \mathbf{W} walks this approach closer in principle to other ways in which content balancing might occur with items containing multiple content features that are not mutually exclusive (Segall & Davey, 1995; Stocking & Swanson, 1993). In this way, if each item in the test bank is a member of one and only one content feature, then $w_{jg} = 1$ and the CCAT is a special case of the approach we implement. If an item belongs to multiple content features, then $0 < w_{jg}^* < 1$ is a normalized value to ensure items that disproportionality share many content features relative to others would not be systematically preferred by the algorithm if these normalized weights were not used.

The allowance for a minimum and maximum creates a blueprint boundary to allow for some variability in the nature of the test form at the subtest level, although an overall test length feature is implemented. For instance, we could enforce a total test length of N but have variability at the subset level. In this way, examinees' i and i' would both have tests of length N . But, they would have different numbers of items at the subtest level making up that total test length. If every test is expected to be exactly the same in terms of length at the subtest level, then $N_l = N_u$ would create tests with different items, but with the same number of items at each lower level.

Content Sequence Balance Parameter

The term m_{igt} in the objective function could cause for the algorithm to be somewhat deterministic and more systematically prefer items with larger values of m_{igt} during item administration with certain types of blueprints. To potentially mitigate this effect, the term α_{igt} is introduced as a stochastic parameter to randomly vary the preference of the algorithm for different areas of the content as the test progresses. This parameter adds a small stochastic component to the function at each iteration of the test which has the effect of randomly varying the chances for an item with feature g of being selected at step t .

Some approaches, such as the modified multinomial model (Leung, Chang, & Hau, 2003), have been proposed to deal with the effects of predictable sequencing. Our approach is to add a small stochastic component to the content priority index as

$$\alpha_{igt} = \begin{cases} u_{ig} & \text{if } \gamma < m_{igt} \\ 0 & \text{otherwise,} \end{cases} \quad (7)$$

where $u_{ig} \sim U(0, 2)$. Note that we draw from $U(0, 2)$ to be commensurate with the values produced by the priority index, m_{igt} . The value set for γ in Equation (7) can assume different values with different meaningful consequences. One option is to set $\gamma = 0$, effectively causing the algorithm to randomly prioritize different blueprint features until any given feature reaches its blueprint maximum. A second option is to set $\gamma = 1$, causing the algorithm to accelerate its preference for items associated with a content feature below its blueprint minimum. In this way, it offers some assurance that content feature minimums are met with higher priority than feature maximums. A third option is to set $\gamma = u_{ig}$. In this variant, as m_{igt} tends to 0, the probability that u_{ig} adds to the priority index also decreases given that $\Pr(u_{ig} < m_{igt}) = \frac{m_{igt}}{2}$ from properties of the uniform cumulative distribution function. In this way, the algorithm will tend to boost values for features with larger values of m_{igt} . This third option might cause for more intentional sequencing of items in a feature group.

Feature Scaling

The item information function and content priority index in Equation (1) are unique metrics each on a different scale. Hence, summation over those terms without any normalization would cause for one metric to have larger influence than another simply as a function of the different metric space. As such, both metrics are normalized using feature scaling resulting in a continuous number in the $[0, 1]$ space for each. We use min-max feature scaling for each term and the information function, for example, is rescaled as $I'_j(\hat{\theta}_{it}) = \frac{I_j(\hat{\theta}_{it}) - I(\hat{\theta}_{it, \min})}{I(\hat{\theta}_{it, \max}) - I(\hat{\theta}_{it, \min})}$ where $I(\hat{\theta}_{it, \max})$ and $I(\hat{\theta}_{it, \min})$ denote the maximum and minimum item information functions of all items evaluated for examinee i at step t , respectively. This rescaling is similarly applied to m_{igt} . Without this rescaling, the difference in the ranges between $I_j(\hat{\theta}_{it})$ and m_{igt} would arbitrarily cause for one of them to play a larger role in the objective function. Note that if $\sum_{g=1}^G v_g = 0$, (i.e., all blueprint weights are 0) then feature rescaling is not performed on the content index. In this case, the denominator in the rescaling would be 0 and min/max feature scaling would be undefined.

Exposure Control

Item exposure control is perhaps one of the most widely studied topics in CAT. Here, we limit consideration to only two methods for implementation in our work, but other methods could easily be incorporated as decision variables for building a CAT engine. The first approach requires no prior knowledge about the items or the population of examinees and is simple to implement. The second is an IRT-based approximation to prevent items with large a -parameters from being selected too often. We acknowledge that the Sympson-Hetter method (Sympson & Hetter, 1985) is an important exposure control method in the CAT literature. Its implementation requires some work to establish an exposure control parameter whereas the randomesque requires no prior knowledge or exposure limits on items. For this reason, we focus on the two methods below, but the Sympson-Hetter method could very easily fit into our algorithmic framework.

Randomesque Approach

The randomesque approach is implemented by computing the value of λ_{jit} for all items in the bank at the current, provisional, value of $\hat{\theta}$ which forms a vector, sorted in descending order, $\lambda_{it} = \{\lambda_{1it}, \lambda_{2it}, \dots, \lambda_{Nit}\}'$ where N is the number of (remaining) items in the bank. In this way, the first item in the vector provides the most information and the final item in the vector provides the least. Implementation begins by setting a configurable parameter $w = \{1, 2, 3, \dots, N\}$ and randomly choose one item from $\{\lambda_{1it}, \lambda_{2it}, \dots, \lambda_{wit}\}$. If $w = 1$, the algorithm always chooses the top, best item, and if $w = N$ the algorithm is effectively taking a random draw from all available items in the bank. Pragmatically, setting $w = 5$ (or approximately so) ensures some balance between randomization and selection of the best next item (Georgiadou, Triantafillou, & Economides, 2007; Kingsbury & Zara, 1989). This randomization also adds a security feature for examinees in similar proctored settings. This approach mitigates the potential for individuals in similar settings to engage in answer copying since items are partially random even for those with similar ability estimates.

The Impact of Item Slopes

All things being equal, items with large a -parameters provide the most psychometric information conditional on θ and algorithms using IRT-based information functions are likely to overexpose those items (Hau & Chang, 2001). Some approaches consider stratification methods to form bins such that items with smaller slopes are administered earlier in the test and items with larger slopes would be administered later (Huebner et al., 2018). Our algorithm could manage a -stratification using the reciprocal of the a -parameters as weights as described under Equation (2). Here we propose a simpler method to minimize exposure risk of items with large a -parameters by provisionally setting $a_j = 1 \forall j$ as a pseudo-value only when computing the item information for purposes of item selection. That is, we use this approximation in item selection, but use the estimated (actual) a -parameter when generating ability estimates, both provisional and final. This approximation on the a -parameter is one additional exposure control parameter that mitigates overexposure of highly informative items in certain populations with similar abilities.

Provisional Scoring Options

A CAT progressively updates $\hat{\theta}_{it}$ and its precision after a response is submitted to each new item (Wang & Vispoel, 1998). With IRT, this is generally based on concepts of maximum likelihood estimation (MLE) or Bayesian methods (Bock & Mislevy, 1982; Spray & Reckase, 1996), with the latter being preferred. The challenge with MLE scoring in CAT is that ability estimates cannot be provided for response strings with perfect answers or completely wrong answers as the likelihood function has no maximum. Some tricks can be implemented for MLE methods to adjust score strings or to supplement the response with a fake item response, sometimes referred to as “fences” (Han, 2016). Instead, Bayesian methods do not suffer from this same problem and can be used to generate ability estimates in a broader case of scenarios.

The choice between MLE and Bayesian approaches, however, is not purely the computational advantage, but also based on the theoretical properties of the estimators themselves commonly using the bias/variance trade-off as consideration. MLE methods tend to provide less bias (and in

some cases no bias) than Bayesian approaches, but at the expense of larger overall mean squared error (MSE). Bayesian methods are biased but are also known to have smaller overall MSE. However, estimators with smaller MSE will, on average, be closer to the true parameter than an unbiased estimator with larger MSE (Greene, 2000).

Termination Criteria

Termination of the algorithm may occur under multiple conditions (Babcock & Weiss, 2009), two of which are considered here. The first option is to stop when $\sigma(\hat{\theta}_{it}) \leq \varepsilon$ where ε is a user-defined tolerance for stopping. In this way, the algorithm may terminate without meeting test developer constraints. A second option is to stop when the test reaches a fixed length. In this way, all test developer constraints have been satisfied. It is also possible to combine them both such that the algorithm repeatedly draws items from content dimensions until the precision target and blueprint targets have both been reached.

Item Selection Process

With all individual components of the algorithm now described, we can provide a high-level schema for item selection as a set of steps as shown in Algorithm (1).

Algorithm 1 Procedural Schema for CAT Algorithm

Input: Choose initial item j from bank and administer to examinee i at step $t = 0$.

- 1: Form provisional ability estimate after examinee responds, $\hat{\theta}_{it}$.
 - 2: Update m_{igt} based on item administered at step t and then set $t := t + 1$.
 - 3: Recompute $I'_j(\hat{\theta}_{it})$ given new estimate, $\hat{\theta}_{it}$.
 - 4: Compute λ_{it} using Equation (2) for remaining items in the bank excluding previously administered items.
 - 5: Sort vector λ_{it} in descending order.
 - 6: Apply exposure control procedure and select one item.
 - 7: If termination criteria are satisfied, stop. Else, return to (1).
 - 8: After test termination, generate final θ_{it} for reporting.
-

Runtime Considerations for Scaling the Algorithm

Choi et al (2016) explore an improved computation of the shadow test and make the claim that cloud-based infrastructures for computing are “scalable without limit.” This is true in the sense that cloud-based structures provide virtually limitless access to fast computers. This is untrue in the sense that it comes with increasing monetary cost and when building operational environments for industry, that monetary cost indeed has limits. Consequently, it is important to find the best algorithm for computing and only then pass that into larger cloud-based systems.

It has been shown that MILP algorithms have time complexity of $n^2 2^{\mathcal{O}(n)}$ (Dadush, Eisenbrand, & Rothvoss, 2023) but sorting algorithms as used here have complexity $\mathcal{O}(n \log(n))$, letting n

in this case represent the collection of inputs used for the model. It is common when building psychometric applications to see reports of simulation runtimes as evidence for computational speed, however we do not follow this practice in our simulations. First, these times are local to the machine used and computational time depends on factors unique to that machine and the way in which the coder implemented the problem. Hence, reporting runtime results is not generalizable or useful to demonstrate the potential benefit of an algorithm. Instead, time complexity should be reported using Big \mathcal{O} notation as that metric is invariant to the machine and is the accepted manner by which algorithm time is evaluated (Chivers & Sleightholme, 2015). On balance, MILP solvers are substantially improving (Koch, Berthold, Pedersen, & Vanaret, 2022) but the runtimes for even the most popular solvers such as CPLEX remains an open question depending on the specific problem (IBM, 2023). It is also important to state that any runtimes observed in simulation settings are well-controlled environments. Real world servers are hit with large numbers of simultaneous users in live testing. The notion of “elastic cloud computing” manages these loads by scaling up more servers on demand. This would permit for slower algorithms to “work”, but at the additional monetary cost associated with scaling up those additional server instances.

Equation (1) simultaneously computes the information function and the content priority index at each step over all items in the bank for each examinee to provide the overall value of λ_{jit} . It is already an efficient implementation given that we treat the inputs as fixed values and the values for λ_{jit} are directly realized. However, computing information for all J items in Equation (1) has some computational cost and the sorting algorithm itself has cost. Both of those issues can be addressed to reduce the search space and improve computational speed. As a brief aside, one fundamental difference between our approach and the shadow test is our computational cost is limited to the selection of only the next item needed to satisfy constraints. The shadow test builds an entire form of items at each step that must satisfy all constraints, but then chooses only one item from that form to administer at each step.

We begin with the notion that realizing computational speed is not a function of bigger computing environments, per se. The first objective is to analyze the complexity of the algorithm and then make use of distributed computing concepts or cloud-based structures for faster computing. Hence, we could make use of two common ideas. One could be to precompute values of information for all items at fixed increments of θ and use a precompute, store, and recall approach to create a lookup table. This could be useful, but given that $\theta \in \mathbb{R}$, these values would never be exact for the examinee. Another option is to use parallel processing and distribute the computing of information for J items over multiple cores. This has significant potential, but the split, apply, combine problem brings with it some overhead of reassembling components and this should be evaluated (Wickham, 2011).

Because the algorithm’s runtime is proportional to its inputs—specifically computing over the number of items in the test bank, reducing the number of computations over the space of J reduces overhead substantially (Doran, 2023). Here we describe an option to reduce the number of inputs for computational scaling.

A Feasible Computational Approximation with Reduced Inputs

Our proposed computational option is to compute λ_{jit} in smaller components instead of simultaneously over the entire search space. Those steps could be outlined as two steps. First compute the value of the function based initially on the content features over all items in the bank

$\lambda_{jit}^1 = \sum_{g=1}^G v_g w_{jg} m_{igt} + \sum_{g=1}^G h_g w_{jg} \alpha_{igt}$. Following this step, sort the items with the configurable parameter $s = \{1, 2, \dots, S\}$ as $\lambda_{jit}^1 = \{\lambda_{1it}^1, \lambda_{2it}^1, \dots, \lambda_{sit}^1\}$ and then compute the information value only for the items in this small subset $\lambda_{jit}^2 = \pi_j I'_j(\hat{\theta}_{it}) + \lambda_{jit}^1 \forall j \in \{1, \dots, s\}$. Then, update the sorted values based on λ_{jit}^2 and implement an exposure control approach to choose one item from the smaller set in the new space.

This approximation significantly reduces the computational overhead relative to the more costly component (i.e., the information function) by reducing the space over which it is computed. Specifically, we now compute item information only for S items at each step rather than over all J items and when $S \ll J$ the cost savings is substantial. Additionally, the sort algorithm searches over a smaller space. Consequently, the idea realizes two computational cost savings. However, this approach implicitly places greater emphasis on the content features of the test than the measurement properties. There could be items with larger values for information outside the set of λ_{jit}^2 that would be ignored with smaller values for s .

If the content features are not used by the algorithm for choosing items, an approximation to reduce the search space only based on the item measurement properties could be to initially compute the item information for all items in the bank. Then, after t steps, use an approximate b-matching procedure (Han, 2018) to compute the item information function only for the subset of items in some range of the provisional ability estimate. The b-matching process is equivalent to using the item information with the Rasch model, but with more general IRT models this would only be an approximation to reduce the search space.

To illustrate, consider that an initial ability estimate is obtained after administering t items, $\hat{\theta}_{it}$. Now, because items and examinees are on the same scale, locate items in the bank where $b_j \in \{\hat{\theta}_{itl}, \dots, \hat{\theta}_{itu}\}$ where the terms l and u are used to mean some lower and upper boundaries around the provisional ability. Then, compute information only for items within this space for next item selection. This technique also implicitly assumes a common a -parameter and would also help with exposure control.

One possible consideration, although not explored in this work, is to consider updating the information function only up to step t of the test, where t is some point of stability in $\hat{\theta}_{it}$. It doesn't take long for an adaptive test to zero in on the ability estimate, often only a few items. But, administering a form with many content features is what requires the longer test length. Hence, it could be possible to update the provisional ability estimate for say, half of the test, and then only update the objective function based on λ_{jit}^1 , but then estimate the final $\hat{\theta}_i$ using all responses. This is left for others to explore.

Demonstrating the Model Under Variable Conditions

Some behaviors of the algorithm using a simulated item bank and blueprint are provided in this section. Because the algorithm is designed to be highly generalizable to various testing conditions, we can only provide a few reasonable permutations to explore. For this reason, we have also provided a complete testing environment for this algorithm in a web-based tool where all simulations and ideas expressed in this manuscript can be independently verified or users can test their own unique item banks, blueprint, and constraints to further explore the ideas discussed. The web-based application is available at https://catsim.shinyapps.io/humrro_cat_engine/.

Simulated Data

The following simulations are based on an item bank of 1000 items from a 2-parameter logistic model items with a -parameters generated from $a_j \sim U[.5, 1.5]$ and $b_j \sim U[-4, 4]$. Items are equally assigned to one of four content features and a blueprint (BP) with minimum (N_l) and maximum (N_u) values as in Equation (6) is created as provided in Table (2). This yields 250 items per dimension with item parameters uniformly distributed within each dimension.

Dimension	Minimum	Maximum
Dimension 1	5	15
Dimension 2	5	20
Dimension 3	5	10
Dimension 4	5	15

Table 2: Blueprint for Simulation

The simulation generates 100 replicates at each true value of θ_q between $q = \{-3, -2.5, \dots, 3\}$ in increments of .5. Hence, the total number of replicates is 1,300. Using this uniform distribution permits for us to capture and report the root mean squared error and the bias at each θ_q . The observed response to each item is generated by first computing the true probability of response, $\Pr(\theta_q) = (1 + \exp[a_j(\theta_q - b_j)])^{-1}$, and then computing an observed binary response, x_{ijt} , for examinee i to item j at step t where $x_{ijt} = 1$ if $\Pr(\theta_q) < u_{ijt}$ and 0 otherwise where $u_{ijt} \sim U[0, 1]$.

The fixed length simulations using the content blueprint are run with a test of length 50 drawing from the various blueprint dimensions. The statement “100% blueprint match” is used to mean every one of the simulated individual tests has 50 total items and has item counts within the minimum and maximum boundaries for each dimension of the blueprint. Any deviation from this expectation is considered to not meet blueprint. In all simulations, we compute the EAP as the provisional estimate and the final score is the MLE.

Exploring Constraints on the Tuning Parameters

We begin with a few logic tests to evaluate whether the algorithm can behave as a generally adaptive item selection algorithm consistent with adaptive theory. Specifically, we explore four conditions and capture a few measures of adaptivity. The first measure will be the root mean squared error (RMSE) at each true value of θ_q . The second will be a ratio of test information functions (TIFs) compared to a theoretical maximum (Wyse & McBride, 2021). The theoretical maximum is determined by computing item information at each true value θ_q and taking their sum over the 50 most informative items at each θ_q . This is only a “theoretical” maximum in the sense of what this specific simulated bank could support.

The first condition will be a test that chooses items from the bank entirely randomly. This serves as a general baseline condition that has no adaptiveness to either the examinee or the test blueprint. Hence, under this condition we would expect large RMSE relative to adaptive conditions and we expect match to blueprint at rates only equal to random chance, which will be effectively 0%. Recall that our definition of “meeting blueprint” is one where total test length is 50 and the number of items by dimension are within the min/max boundaries. Achieving this randomly would have

a probability roughly equal to $(n_g/250)^4$ where n_g is the number of items within each dimension, although n_g can vary by dimension. The second condition is a linear on the fly (LOFT) variant that adheres to a content blueprint. In this condition we would expect the algorithm to choose items based on their content features and return a blueprint match rate of 100%. Because there is no adapting to examinee ability, LOFT chooses items randomly within each dimension as a stratified random sampling approach, and so we expect the RMSE to be comparable in magnitude to the random condition. The third condition is purely item adaptive and ignores content constraints. In this condition we expect match to blueprint rates equal to what would occur under random chance and very small RMSE relative to non-adaptive conditions as items are now selected based on examinee ability. Our fourth condition is both item adaptive and content adaptive. Here we expect 100% match to blueprint and, like the item adaptive condition, we expect RMSEs that are comparable in size to the item adaptive condition. These measures and the logic are similar to those used by van der Linden (2022).

Table (3) provides a description of the constraints imposed on the algorithm tuning parameters to yield each result. Additionally, the table shows the observed blueprint match rate from each of the simulated conditions.

Tuning Parameters	Condition	Observed BP Match Rate
$\pi = 0, v_g = 0 \forall g, h_g = 0$	Random Condition (Condition 1)	0%
$\pi = 0, v_g = 1 \forall g, h_g = 1$	Linear on the Fly (LOFT) (Condition 2)	100%
$\pi = 1, v_g = 0 \forall g, h_g = 0$	Item Adaptive (Condition 3)	0%
$\pi = 1, v_g = 1 \forall g, h_g = 1$	Item and Content Adaptive (Condition 4)	100%

Table 3: Tuning Parameter Configurations for Simulation

Figure (1a) shows the RMSE for each tested condition at the increments of θ_q used in the simulation and Figure (1b) shows the ratio of the TIFs. Results in both figures match *a priori* expectations for the RMSE and TIF ratios such that RMSEs for item adaptive conditions are smaller than non-adaptive and the TIF ratios approach 100% for the adaptive conditions. Both suggest that the item selection algorithm described in Equation (1) achieves its two primary objectives. First, it is appropriately adapting on examinee ability in Conditions (3) and (4) as observed in the smaller RMSE and larger TIF ratios. Second, small changes to the tuning parameters achieve very different testing conditions and the match to blueprint rates indicate the content priority index achieves its objectives to adhere to a content blueprint.

The Potential of Information Switching

A second question explored is whether the notion of switching information after t steps offers benefits. The idea here is that ability estimates early in the item selection process have large amounts of uncertainty. Hence, using the MFI may be less than ideal as it treats the point estimate as a well-known quantity. The average information function and KL procedure account for some of the uncertainty in the estimate. In this portion of the simulation, we implement a stopping criterion using the conditional standard errors of measurement, $\sigma(\hat{\theta})$, such that each test terminates once $\sigma(\hat{\theta}_{it}) < .2$. Here five conditions are explored to assess this question. Condition 1 (MFI) uses the MFI for computing item information for all items administered. Condition 2 (Switch15) uses the



(a) RMSE of Four Simulated Conditions.



(b) Ratio of Four Simulated TIFs.

Figure 1: Two Measures of Adaptivity

KL procedure for the first 15 items and then switches to the MFI. Condition 3 (Switch20) uses the KL procedure for the first 20 items and then switches to the MFI. Condition 4 (CY) computes the KL information demonstrated by Chang and Ying (1996) where we use $d = .95$ as the coverage probability. Last, Condition 5 (KL) uses the KL procedure for all items and always uses a one standard error boundary around the provisional ability estimate. This concept has been explored to assess recovery on the estimated latent trait (Chang & Ying, 1996), but here we explore its impact on the test length.

Both Conditions 1 and 5 intend to provide upper and lower bound limits in terms of what we might expect in terms of total test length, given limits of this specific item bank. If Conditions 2 or 3 offer any benefit, we expect to observe that the test would reach its termination criteria with a fewer number of test items relative to Condition 1 and approach the test length observed in Condition 5. Figure (2a) shows the mean total number of test items for each of the conditions over values of θ_q . Here we observe that over the entire range of ability, Condition 2 reaches the termination criteria with fewer test items relative to Condition 1, typically between 2 to 3 fewer items, effectively reducing test length by about 4% relative to Condition 1. Additionally, we observe Condition 3 even further reduces test length beyond Condition 2 by about one more test item. It is useful to note that the CY condition seems on par with the KL procedure even though it tends to rely on the observed score more as the test increases in length.

These simulations suggest the idea of switching how information is computed helps to reduce test length by capturing the uncertainty in the ability estimate early in the test. We almost certainly do not want to compute the KL for all items as this is computationally expensive relative to the MFI, although doing so seems to provide the shortest test length. Hence, by choosing a value of t where switching occurs, we approach the lower bound result of Condition 5 while reducing computational overhead as we switch to the MFI. This is a promising result for test developers wishing to even further reduce test length when termination depends on the standard errors of measurement.



(a) Mean Total Number of Test Items by Condition.

(b) Observed Bias by Condition.

Figure 2: Impact of Switching and Pseudo Item Slope Impact on Bias

Exposure Control with Approximate Item Slopes

One of the decision variables described is a proposed constraint on the a -parameters to use an approximation in lieu of the actual a -parameter. The idea is that using a_j will cause for the algorithm to prefer certain items and lead to overexposure. Instead, we propose to set $a_j = 1$ for purposes of choosing items, but to use a_j when performing the actual scoring, both provisional and final scores.

This section explores the overexposure by running the simulation with two conditions. In Condition 1, the actual a -parameter is used and we measure the proportion of the bank that is used across all replicates in the simulation. In Condition 2, the approximate a -parameter is used for item selection and the proportion of the bank is again measured. Additionally, the final test score is captured as the maximum likelihood estimate under both conditions and the bias between both conditions is considered.

Figure (2b) illustrates the bias at all true values of θ_q between both conditions. This figure shows that both conditions have no real differences in bias indicating the approximate a -parameter does not tend to compromise the final test score in a negative way. Additionally, and importantly, the approximate a -parameter tends to use a larger proportion of the item bank. In Condition 1, the simulation shows the exact a -parameter results in usage of 83% of the bank and the approximate a -parameter results in usage of 96.4% of the bank.

Item Enemy Administration

Item enemies are a set of items that cannot be administered to an examinee on the same test form. Constructing fixed forms to avoid item enemies is straightforward as known pairs of enemies can be intentionally avoided in form construction. Here we demonstrate that the proposed algorithm can handle item enemy detection as a feature constraint without needing to create a bifurcated item bank. While we demonstrate this using item enemies, really the intent is to show that the feature constraints can be any arbitrary grouping structure defined by test developers. The potential here is virtually unlimited.

The example is constructed by forming a cluster of ten items that are considered to be enemies

with each other. Practically speaking, this means if one of these ten items is administered on a test form, then none of the remaining nine can appear on the same test form because they are enemies. We do this by forming a binary indicator in the item metadata associated with each item in the bank denoting a 1 if the items are in the enemy cluster group and 0 otherwise. Second, we modify the original test blueprint in Table (2) to have two new feature constraints. We add Group 1 with a min/max of 0/1 and Group 2 with a min/max of 49/50. The min/max of 0 to 1 for Group 1 instructs the algorithm to choose no more than one item from within this “enemy” cluster, but it can optionally choose none and Group 2 instructs the algorithm where to choose the other 49 (or 50) items.

We again run the simulation with this new feature constraint which results in a 100% match to blueprint over all replicates and also no test form contains more than one item from Group 1 as expected by our new structure.

A Note on Items Crossed with Multiple Features

The modified blueprint used for the enemy example provides insight into how the algorithm can behave in complex ways. The term “Enemy Group” is used only as a descriptor for the example as those could be any conceivable grouping. The Group 1 min/max in the enemy example is set to 0 and 1, respectively, to ensure no more than one item in Group 1 is administered together. However, a maximum larger than 1 would cause for multiple items from within this group to be administered. Here we offer an explanation of how the algorithm extends from nested features to scenarios where items are linked to multiple features.

First, when items are linked to one and only one feature, we say they are nested and the algorithm freely chooses n_g items from within each feature until test requirements are satisfied. For example, referencing Equation (1) and considering the nested simulation examples with four mutually exclusive dimensions, there would be four values of m_g , one for each Dimension. So, the feature-relevant portion for the j th item (in simplified scalar form and ignoring item information for now) is $w_{j,d1}m_{d1} + w_{j,d2}m_{d2} + w_{j,d3}m_{d3} + w_{j,d4}m_{d4}$. Recall that larger values of m_g as defined by Equation (6) cause for items linked to feature g to have greater appeal to the item selection algorithm and when a feature maximum has been realized, then $m_g = -p$. For example, suppose Dimension 4 has reached its max but the others have not. Then $m_4 = -p$ and items in Dimension 1 to 3 would have positive values for m_g and be sorted higher in λ_{it} than any item associated with Dimension 4.

In more complex scenarios, items can be linked with multiple features and not simply nested. For example, an item can simultaneously be linked with Dimension 1 and also Group 1 or Group 2. As such, there would now be six values of m_g , one for each of the four Dimensions and the two for Groups 1 and 2. So, the feature-relevant portion of the equation is $w_{j,d1}^*m_{d1} + w_{j,d2}^*m_{d2} + w_{j,d3}^*m_{d3} + w_{j,d4}^*m_{d4} + w_{j,g1}^*m_{g1} + w_{j,g2}^*m_{g2}$. Once Group 1 reaches its maximum, then $m_{g1} = -p$ and a negative term is added to items linked with this feature. However, if Group 2 has not reached its maximum, m_{g2} is a positive term added to items linked with this feature. For example, $w_{j,d1}^*m_{d1} - w_{j,g1}^*p$ is the value for an item linked to Dimension 1/Group 1 when Group 1 has reached its max and $w_{j,d1}^*m_{d1} + w_{j,g2}^*m_{g2}$ is the value for an item in Dimension 1/Group 2 when Group 2 has yet to reach its max. This is where the value of the penalty term, p , is used so that $w_{j,d1}^*m_{d1} - w_{j,g1}^*p < w_{j,d1}^*m_{d1} + w_{j,g2}^*m_{g2}$, thus causing items associated with Dimension1/Group 2 to be sorted higher in the vector λ_{it} than those associated with Dimension 1/Group 1.

The addition of the min/max for Group 2 is not critical in this specific example as $w_{j,d1}^* m_{d1} - w_{j,g1}^* p < w_{j,d1}^* m_{d1}$ would be true causing the algorithm to prefer items in Dimension 1 that are not in Group 1. It is used here only to complete the example where there could be other min/max conditions for many more than two groups where this would be needed.

Discussion

This manuscript provides thorough details of a generalizable item adaptive algorithm that can be used to fit an array of custom test designs. The results of the simulations indicate its behavior is consistent with the stated expectations demonstrating it can support an array of custom adaptive designs. The primary benefit of this idea is that the algorithm can be used as a means to an end allowing test developers to formally define the construct and the algorithm simply implements their design. This differs from other CAT implementations where test banks might be designed to exclude item enemies, or a separate field test algorithm might be used to seed experimental items, or where content balancing is achieved by administering adaptive tests separately by content dimension. It is only possible to test a few ways in which the algorithm can operate and so the manuscript is complimented with a web-based application that implements this algorithm so that interested users can test and explore the potential it has for operational or research-based scenarios.

Second, we offer a thorough and complete treatment of CAT so that an expert psychometric and software development team can collaborate to build an instance of an operational CAT treating this manuscript as a specification document. Specifically, Equation (2) could be implemented directly or the alternative variant that reduces the search space can be used. The goal is to specifically propose a computational framework that can be deployed for operational testing such that item refresh latency rates on the screen are not bogged down by complex computational overhead. Not only does latency disrupt an examinee’s experience, but the vendor providing the test platform may also be subject to financial damages if they occur, what are commonly termed “liquidated damages”.

While we purport that the algorithm is highly configurable and useful for many different testing situations, we note that these claims are based on our experiences and the typical uses cited in the literature. The world of test designs and optimization approaches with machine learning technologies is rapidly changing and our claims are based on practices commonly used at this time. Additionally, the ideas explored here are based on unidimensional IRT models. While potentially a limit, multidimensional IRT to date has not become common in large scale assessment and unidimensional IRT models continue to be the most common in real world applications.

Going forward, a few ideas can be further explored. One idea to consider is whether optimization can be performed with complexity better than $\mathcal{O}(n \log n)$. This is not a current bottleneck, but systems deploying millions of tests could realize faster item refresh speeds if this could be improved. Of course, one might consider throwing these algorithms into larger computational environments such as big cloud-based structures as these can be used to rapidly compute things. This is true, but comes with added real monetary cost and so we recommend that the first goal be to find the more optimal algorithm and only then pass the algorithm into a bigger computing environment. A second idea to explore is if other ways to compute item information could be used in the information switching idea to even further reduce test length. The idea we demonstrated has promise, and with concerns over testing time being generally too long, this could help reduce that

concern. In particular, the newer notion of “through-year” designs in education could benefit from shorter, more precise tests, to provide diagnostic information at the examinee level. In fact, the State of Virginia in the U.S. passed legislation in 2021 requiring through year designs with a CAT (Virginia State Statute §22.1-253.13:3, 2021).

Perhaps a lofty third idea could be to explore if CAT algorithms can be combined with automated item generation (AIG), item forecasting, and personalized learning platforms to be a complete environment for tailored assessment and instruction. Imagine an examinee sitting with a device that automatically generates a test item with forecasted item parameters, administers the item, collects and scores the examinee response, uses AIG to develop a new item based on the examinee’s response to the prior item, and iterates this process until completion of the test. Then, once the test is complete, offers up tailored, personalized learning content based on the way in which the examinee performed on the test. Future integrations of large language models within psychometric platforms have tremendous promise.

Appendix A: Some Computational Statistics

We can approximate the integrals expressed in Equation (4) and Equation (5) using Gauss-Legendre quadrature as follows. Let θ_q be the node at quadrature point q and w_q is its corresponding weight.

$$I_j(\tilde{\theta}_{it}) \simeq \left(\frac{u-l}{2}\right) \sum_{q=1}^Q D^2 a_j^2 \left[\frac{(\text{Pr}_j(\theta_q) - c_j)^2}{(1 - c_j)^2} \right] \left[\frac{1 - \text{Pr}_j(\theta_q)}{\text{Pr}_j(\theta_q)} \right] w_q$$

$$KL_j(\hat{\theta}_{it}) \simeq \left(\frac{u-l}{2}\right) \sum_{q=1}^Q \left(\sum_{l=0}^1 \log \left[\frac{\text{Pr}(x_j = l | \theta_q)}{\text{Pr}(x_j = l | \hat{\theta}_{it})} \right] \text{Pr}(x_j = l | \theta_q) w_q \right)$$

For both integrals, the limits of integration fall outside the $[-1, 1]$ space, so the change of variable is applied as $\theta_q = .5(u-l)(f_q+1) + l$ where l and u are the lower and upper bounds for integration, respectively, and f_q is the original node at point q .

The simulations capture the bias and mean squared error as $\text{bias}(\hat{\theta}) = N^{-1} \sum_{k=1}^K (\hat{\theta}_{k,q} - \theta_q)$ and $\text{mse}(\hat{\theta}) = N^{-1} \sum_{k=1}^K (\hat{\theta}_{k,q} - \theta_q)^2$ where $\hat{\theta}_{k,q}$ is the estimated value at replicate k .

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