

# Reinforcement Learning

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Lara J. Martin (she/they)

<https://laramartin.net/interactive-fiction-class>

*Modified from slides by Cassandra Kent, Yejin Choi, Bill Yuchen Lin, & Valentina Pyatkin*

# Learning Objectives

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Define a Markov Decision Process

Distinguish between model-based and model-free RL

Compare and contrast the effects of exploration and exploitation

Extend Q-tables to real-world scenarios

Determine how RL is applied to language modeling

# Reinforcement Learning

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Learning by interacting with an environment

An algorithm for approximating a solution to a Markov Decision Process (MDP)

- “Stochastic sequential decision process” [1]

[1] <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0927050705801720>

# MDP Problem Definition

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State space ( $S$ ) All states the agent can be in, with **initial state**  $s_0$

Actions ( $A(s)$ ) Set of applicable actions agent can execute in each state  $s$

Transition model ( $T(s, a, s')$ )

Function describing how actions change states;  
modeled as probability distribution  $P(s' \mid s, a)$

Reward function ( $R(s)$ ) The value of being in state  $s$

Discount factor ( $\gamma$ ) How much to prioritize current rewards over future rewards  $0 \leq \gamma \leq 1$

It's solution? A policy;  $\pi: S \rightarrow A$

# MDP Definition via Example

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Consider a complex task environment: *Dungeons & Dragons* battle



Screen cap from Netflix's *Stranger Things* via <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/dungeons-and-dragons-fans-enter-the-land-of-popularity-i0q53lkcw>

# MDP D&D

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An MDP has 5 components:  $(S, A(s), T(s, a, s'), R(s), \gamma)$

State  $S$ :

- Character stats, health, injuries, inventory, location, skills
- Monster stats, health, location
- Not too bad, all of this is finite and known to players

Actions  $A(s)$ :

- Any combination of weapons/spells in inventory used on a certain # of monsters
- Spells to help team
- But also...using items
- Starts to get complicated if you include saying things as the character, but we can ignore this for now



# MDP D&D

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An MDP has 5 components:  $(S, A(s), T(s, a, s'), R(s), \gamma)$

Transition function  $T(s, a, s')$ :

- Some sort of model of the rules of the game
  - E.g., What happens when I cast fireball on this goblin?

Reward  $R(s)$ :

- What do we need to define this for our agent?
- The experience we get for slaying the monsters?
  - What if we wanted to spare them or they got away?
- Did we have any other objectives?
  - E.g., Did we get the magical amulet?
- Note that these rewards don't occur at every step, just at the end!

Discount factor  $\gamma$ : No problem, just a parameter



# How can we solve this type of MDP?

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How can we avoid difficult-to-specify transition functions?

- The world is our transition function!
- We can try an action, and see what happens
- No need to specify everything

How can we avoid difficult-to-specify reward functions?

- Similar idea as above
- Find a way to observe a reward signal
- No need to formulate a function



# Intuition Behind RL

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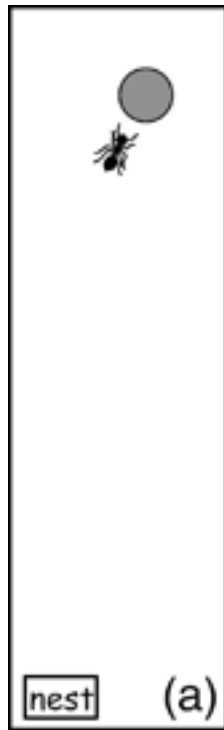
Learning by **trial-and-error**

1. Try doing something
2. Leverage the real world or a simulator to observe the transition function and reward function
3. Record the results
4. Repeat, focusing more on what worked in past trials



# Analogy: Ants

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<https://resjournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1365-3032.2008.00658.x>

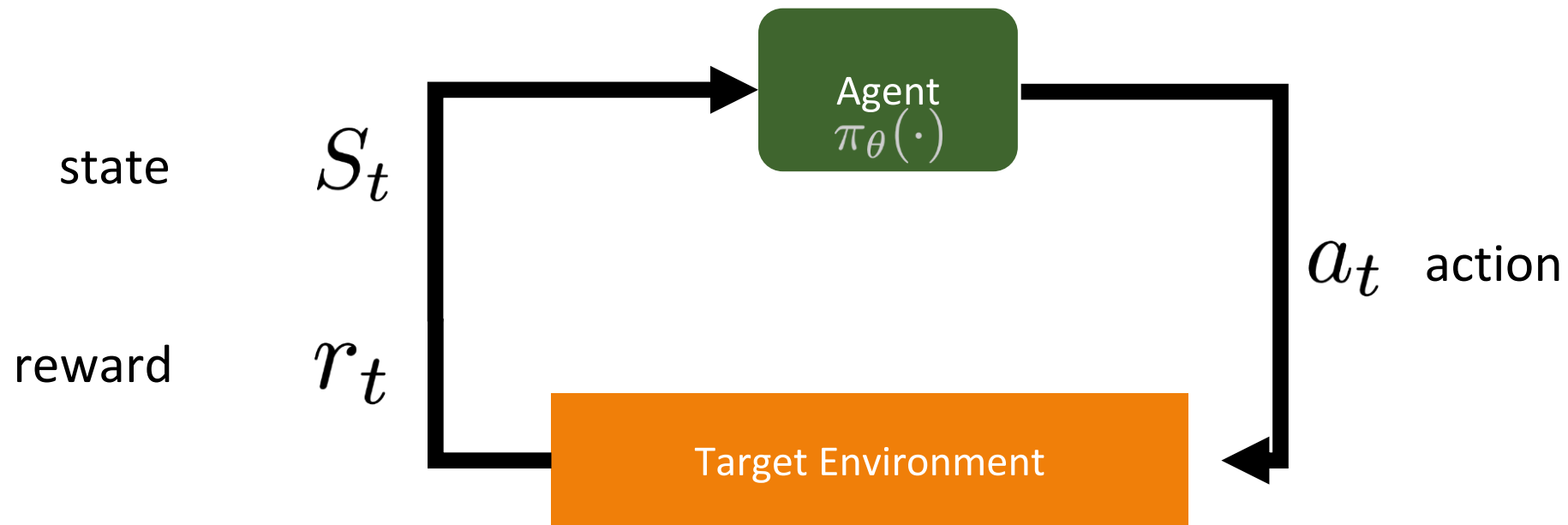


10/21/2025

<https://i.makeagif.com/media/6-14-2016/3eCU2f.gif>

# Reinforcement Learning

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$$a_t \sim \pi_{\theta}(S_t) : \text{policy}$$

# High-Level RL Algorithm

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**Goal:** Compute a policy  $\pi(s) \rightarrow a$

1. Start in initial state  $s_t$  ( $t = \text{current time}$ )
  2. Observe the reward  $r$
  3. Pick an action  $a_t$  to execute
  4. Executing  $a_t$  will cause the agent to go to state  $s_{t+1}$
  5. Repeat steps 1-4, until we have a lot of data
  6. Compute the best policy  $\pi(s)$  we can given what we've observed
- 
- We call this  
a **trial**

# Model-Based vs. Model-Free

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**Model-Based RL:** learn  $T(s, a, s')$ , then compute  $\pi(s)$

Interacting with the environment produces samples of the transition function and the reward function

Build **explicit** models of  $T$  and  $R$

- $p(s'|s, a) = (\# \text{ times doing } a \text{ in } s \text{ led to } s') / (\# \text{ times tried } a \text{ in } s)$
- $R(s) = \text{average reward for } s$

Compute  $\pi(s)$  with value/policy iteration

# Model-Based vs. Model-Free

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**Model-Free RL:** don't try to learn  $T(s, a, s')$ , but compute  $\pi(s)$  directly

Interacting with the environment produces samples of the transition function and the reward function

We **only** care about  $T$  and  $R$  as a means of computing utility and an optimal policy

**Directly compute optimal policy** from samples of  $T$  and  $R$

# Model-Based vs. Model-Free

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## Model-based RL

- Useful if we need to know the transition function
- Many model-based approaches
- Not really used with language

## Model-Free RL

- More straightforward approach if all you want is a policy
- Approach we will focus on in detail
- Commonly used model-free approaches: Q-learning & policy optimization (PPO, A2C)


# D&D Q-Table Example

	Use Sword	Move forward	Move back	Heal
<b>S1</b> <i>Have sword</i> <i>Monster alive</i>	5	2	0	0
<b>S2</b> <i>No sword</i> <i>Monster alive</i>	0	0	10	11
<b>S3</b> <i>Have sword</i> <i>Monster dead</i>	0.001	2	1	5
<b>S4</b> <i>No Sword</i> <i>Monster dead</i>	0	1	0	3



# The Q-Learning Algorithm

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1. Start in initial state  $s_t$  ( $t$  = current time)
2. Observe the reward  $r$
3. Pick an action  $a_t$  to execute 
4. Executing  $a_t$  will cause the agent to go to state  $s_{t+1}$
5. Update Q-value for  $Q(s_t, a_t)$
6. Repeat steps 1-5, until we have a lot of data
7. Compute  $\pi(s)$  from  $Q(s, a)$   $\pi^*(s) = \arg \max_a Q^{\pi^*}(s, a)$

# Selecting Actions during Trials

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Option 1: Random Actions

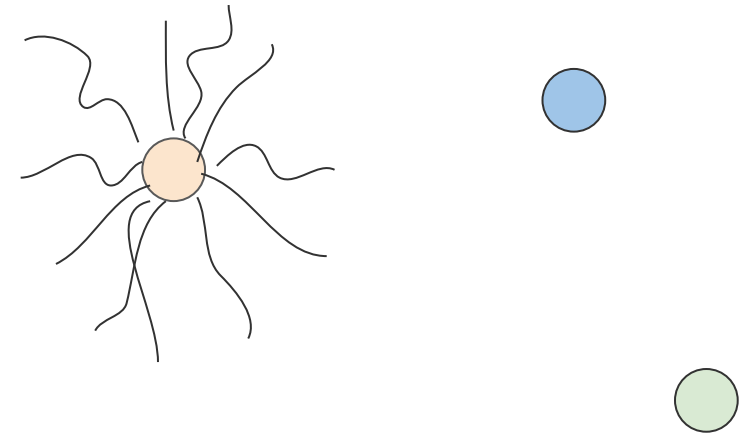
Always pick an action at random

This provides the extensive **exploration** of the state space

Start

Medium reward

High reward



# Selecting Actions during Trials - Example

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Scenario: We just moved to a new city for college. We need to learn a policy for ourselves to get from our apartment to campus.

Option 1: Random Actions

Always pick an action at random

***Every day, we'll take a random turn at every intersection.***

What's going to happen in this case?

# Selecting Actions during Trials

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## Option 1: Random Actions

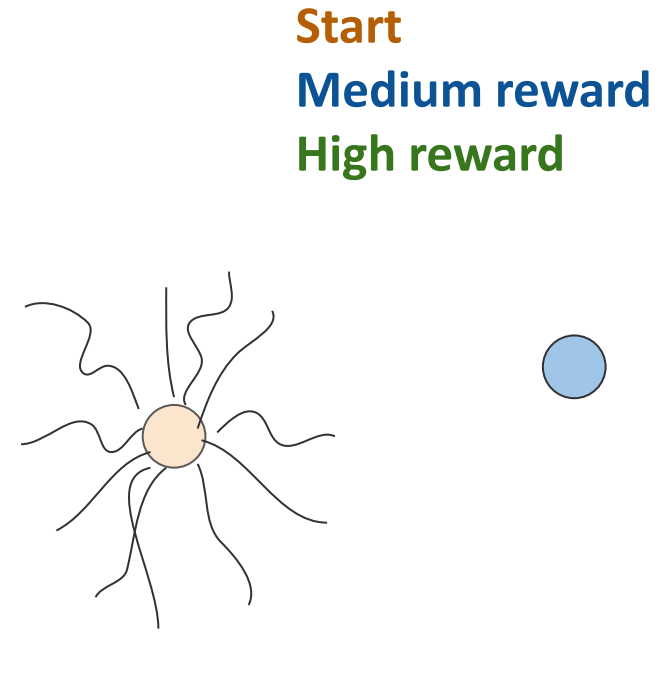
Always pick an action at random

This provides the extensive **exploration** of the state space

Eventually cover the state-action space

May not see the same states multiple times  
(problem if we have stochastic actions)

Biased towards seeing states near start state more often



# Selecting Actions during Trials

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## Option 2: Greedy Actions

Always pick action  $a = \underset{a}{\operatorname{argmax}} Q(s, a)$

This provides **exploitation** of the Q-values and rewards we have seen in past trials



# Selecting Actions during Trials - Example

---

Scenario: We just moved to a new city for college. We need to learn a policy for ourselves to get from our apartment to campus.

Option 2: Greedy Actions

Always pick action  $a = \underset{a}{\operatorname{argmax}} Q(s, a)$

*As soon as we find a route through random wandering, then every day we'll take the turn that got us the best result in the past*

What's going to happen in this case?

# Selecting Actions during Trials

## Option 2: Greedy Actions

Always pick action  $a = \underset{a}{\operatorname{argmax}} Q(s, a)$

This provides **exploitation** of the Q-values and rewards we have seen in past trials

Starts by exploring randomly

Over time, bias towards states with reward

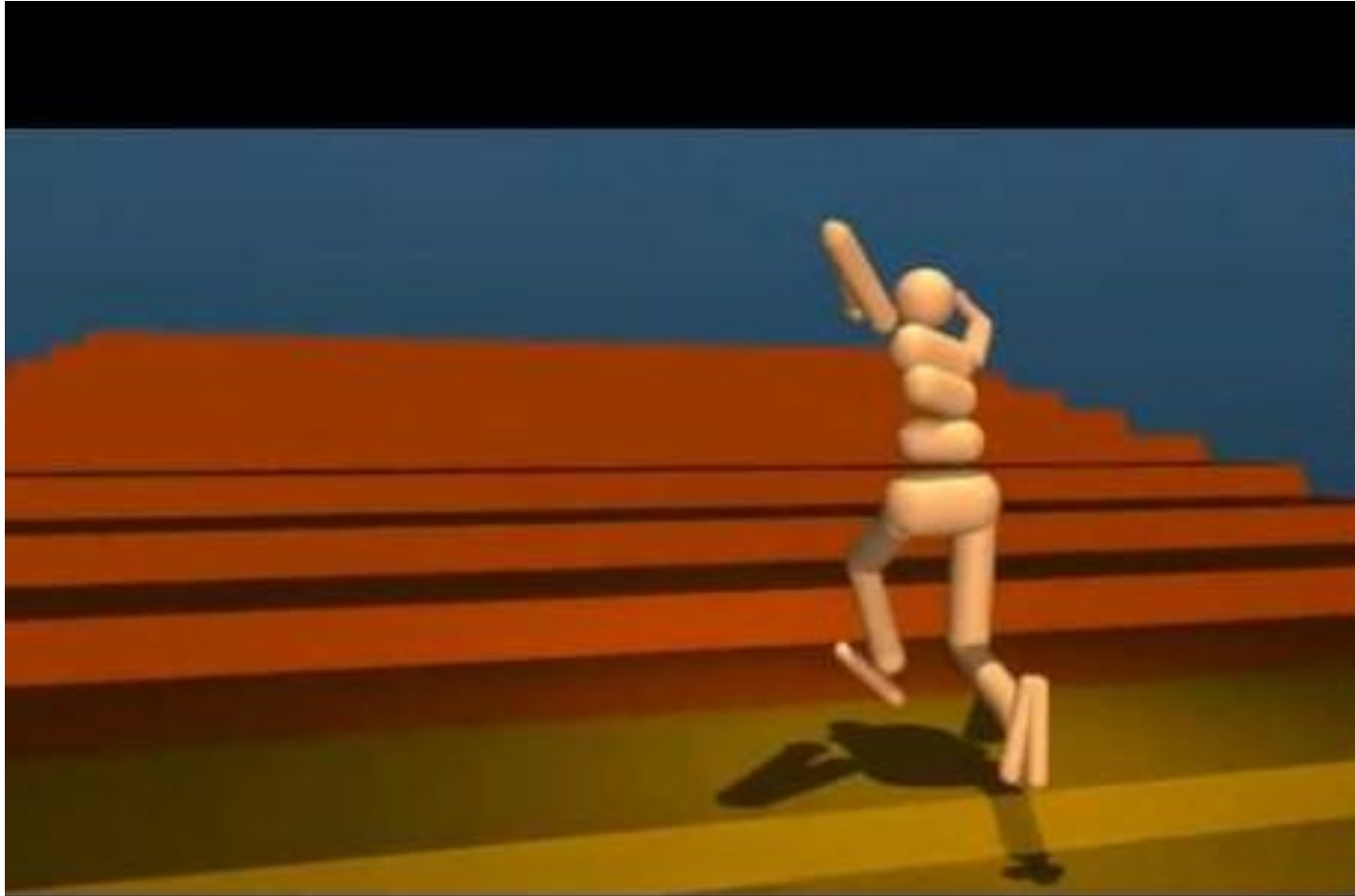
May focus in on sub-optimal reward states

May focus on repeating sub-optimal policies



# Suboptimal Paths

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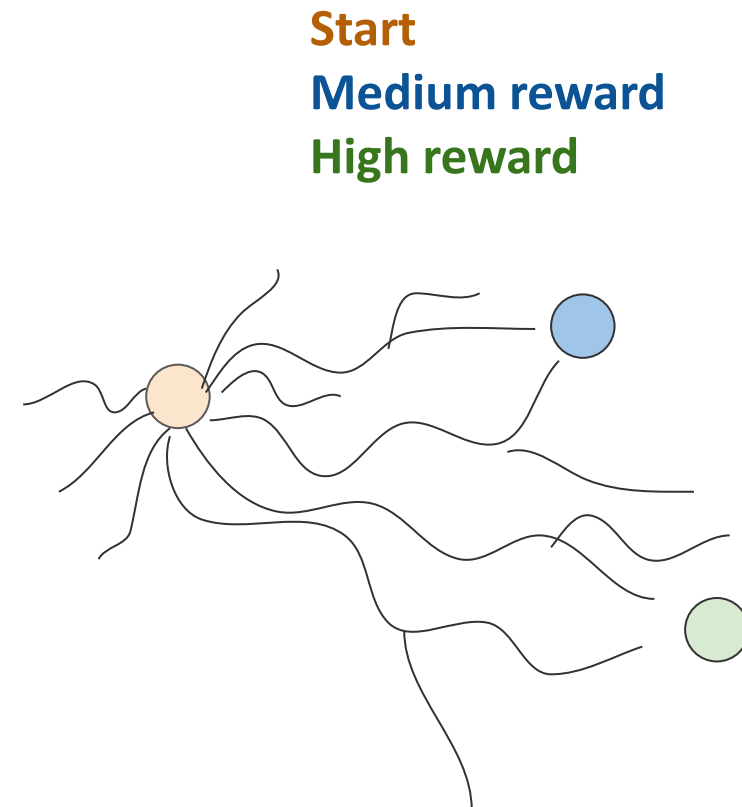
# Selecting Actions during Trials

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## Option 3: $\epsilon$ -Greedy Action Selection

With probability  $\epsilon$ , pick a random action  
Otherwise, pick action  $a = \operatorname{argmax}_a Q(s, a)$

Simple way to trade off **exploration** and **exploitation**



# Selecting Actions during Trials - Example

---

Scenario: We just moved to a new city for college. We need to learn a policy for ourselves to get from our apartment to campus.

## Option 3: $\epsilon$ -Greedy Action Selection

With probability  $\epsilon$ , pick a random action  
Otherwise, pick action  $a = \underset{a}{\operatorname{argmax}} Q(s, a)$

What's going to happen in this case?

*Every day, we'll usually take turns that gave us the best results in the past, but sometimes we'll try something new or retry something less efficient*

# Selecting Actions during Trials

## Option 3: $\epsilon$ -Greedy Action Selection

With probability  $\epsilon$ , pick a random action

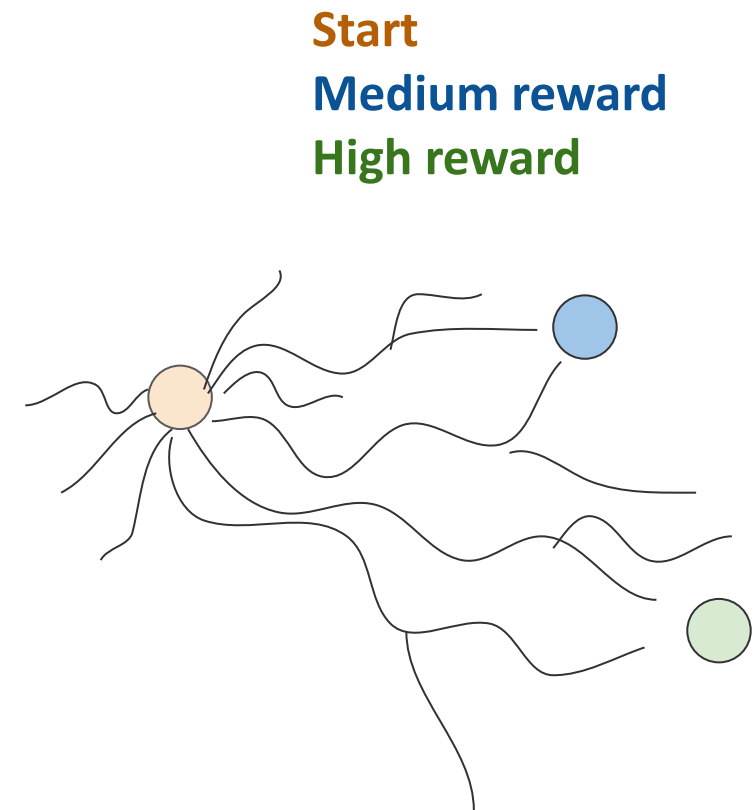
Otherwise, pick action  $a = \operatorname{argmax}_a Q(s, a)$  Simple

way to trade off **exploration** and **exploitation**

Can explore at any time


Tends to move towards rewards (i.e. spend time exploring relevant areas of state space)

**GLIE**: Greedy in the Limit of Infinite Exploration – Guaranteed to converge to optimal  $\pi(s)$ !



# The Q-Learning Algorithm

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1. Start in initial state  $s_t$  ( $t$  = current time)
2. Observe the reward  $r$
3. Pick an action  $a_t$  to execute
4. Executing  $a_t$  will cause the agent to go to state  $s_{t+1}$
5. Update Q-value for  $Q(s_t, a_t)$  
6. Repeat steps 1-5, until we have a lot of data
7. Compute  $\pi(s)$  from  $Q(s, a)$   $\pi^*(s) = \arg \max_a Q^{\pi^*}(s, a)$

# Updating Q-Values

The Q-value update equation:

$$Q(s_t, a_t) \leftarrow Q(s_t, a_t) + \alpha(r + \gamma \max_{a'}(Q(s_{t+1}, a')) - Q(s_t, a_t))$$

Diagram illustrating the Q-value update equation with annotations:

- $Q(s_t, a_t)$ : Update the state we came from
- $\alpha$ : Learning rate,  $0 < \alpha \leq 1$
- $r$ : Observed reward
- $\gamma \max_{a'}(Q(s_{t+1}, a'))$ : The best value of doing  $a'$  in  $s_{t+1}$  (All actions available from  $s_{t+1}$ )
- $- Q(s_t, a_t)$ : Temporal difference

# Updating Q-Values

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The Q-value update equation:

$$Q(s_t, a_t) \leftarrow Q(s_t, a_t) + \alpha \underbrace{\left( r + \gamma \max_{a'} Q(s_{t+1}, a') \right)}_{\substack{\text{New measurement} \\ \text{of } Q(s_t, a_t)}} - Q(s_t, a_t)$$

**We're updating the Q-Value based on its observed change in value**

# Updating Q-Values

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The Q-value update equation (for terminal states):

$$Q(s_t, a_t) \leftarrow Q(s_t, a_t) + \alpha(r + \gamma \max_{a'} Q(s_{t+1}, a')) - Q(s_t, a_t)$$

$$Q(s_t, a_t) \leftarrow Q(s_t, a_t) + \alpha(r - Q(s_t, a_t))$$

Why not set this directly to the observed reward?

- We can set  $Q(s_t, a_t) = r$  if our rewards are deterministic
- We should use the update equation if our rewards are stochastic!

# What are we “Learning” in Q-Learning?

Instead of specifying a complex transition function and reward function, we are learning a table of Q-values:

	Use Sword	Move forward	Move back	Heal
<b>S1</b> <i>Have sword Monster alive</i>	5	2	0	0
<b>S2</b> <i>No sword Monster alive</i>	0	0	10	11
<b>S3</b> <i>Have sword Monster dead</i>	0.001	2	1	5
<b>S4</b> <i>No Sword Monster dead</i>	0	1	0	3



# Why a lookup table?

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Learning a table is better than specifying it by hand

Easy to interpret

But can we learn a more concise representation?

We can use **function approximation** to approximate the values in the Q-value table.

# Function Approximation for Q-Learning

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**Function approximation:** using a parameterized representation to generate approximate values instead of using a **table of exact values**

Example: use a weighted linear function to approximate Q-values

$$Q_{\theta}(s, a) = \theta_1 f_1(s, a) + \theta_2 f_2(s, a) + \theta_3 f_3(s, a) + \cdots + \theta_n f_n(s, a)$$

Approximate Q-value

Weight parameter, which  
we can learn using linear  
regression or online  
learning

Feature calculated from  
state and action

# Function Approximation for Q-Learning

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What does this do for us?

We don't have to store a table of size  $|S| \times |A|$

We can calculate Q-functions for states and actions that we **haven't seen before!**

$$Q_{\theta}(s, a) = \theta_1 f_1(s, a) + \theta_2 f_2(s, a) + \theta_3 f_3(s, a) + \cdots + \theta_n f_n(s, a)$$

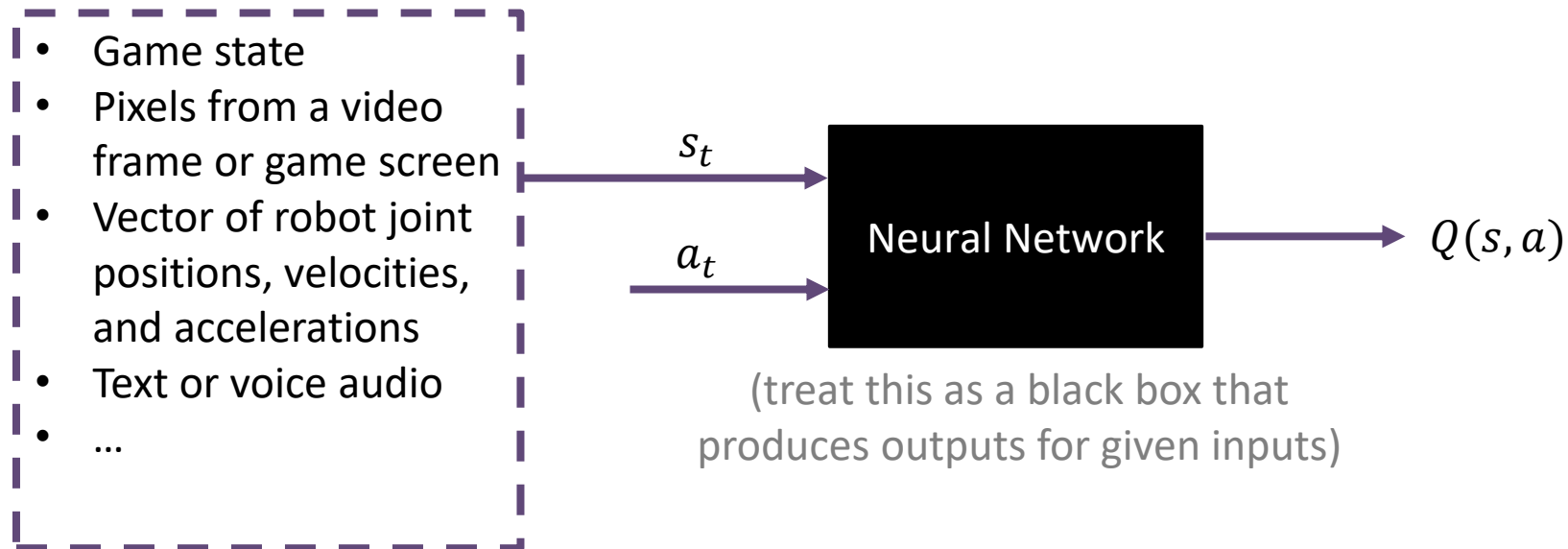
Function approximation **generalizes** to unexplored states and actions.

# Getting Deep: Modern Function Approximation

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Instead of a linear function, we can use a deep neural network as a function approximator for the Q-values.

Goal: learn a neural network to replace the Q-value table:



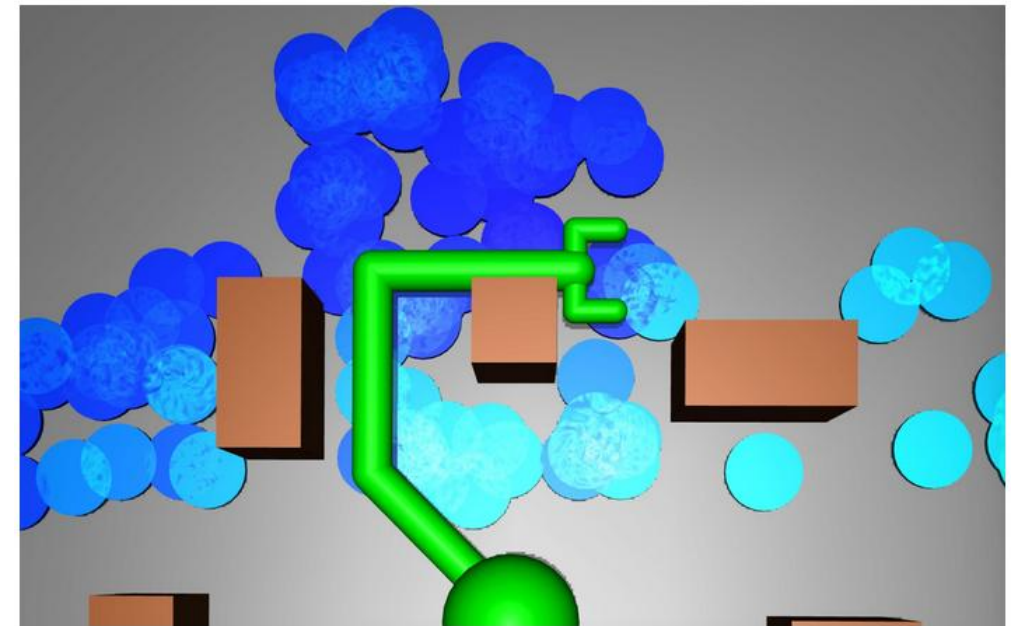
# Why is Deep Learning Effective for RL?

Advantage of neural networks for function approximation:

Can be designed *without* the assumption that nearby states should generalize to similar values

Models are large enough to encode complex relationships between agent and environment

Example on right: similar colored positions are states that are “close” to each other



A distance metric learned by a neural network [3]. **Lighter blue** → **more distant**. The agent, which was trained to grasp objects using the robotic arm, takes into account obstacles and arm length when it measures the distance between two states.

# RL for Game Playing

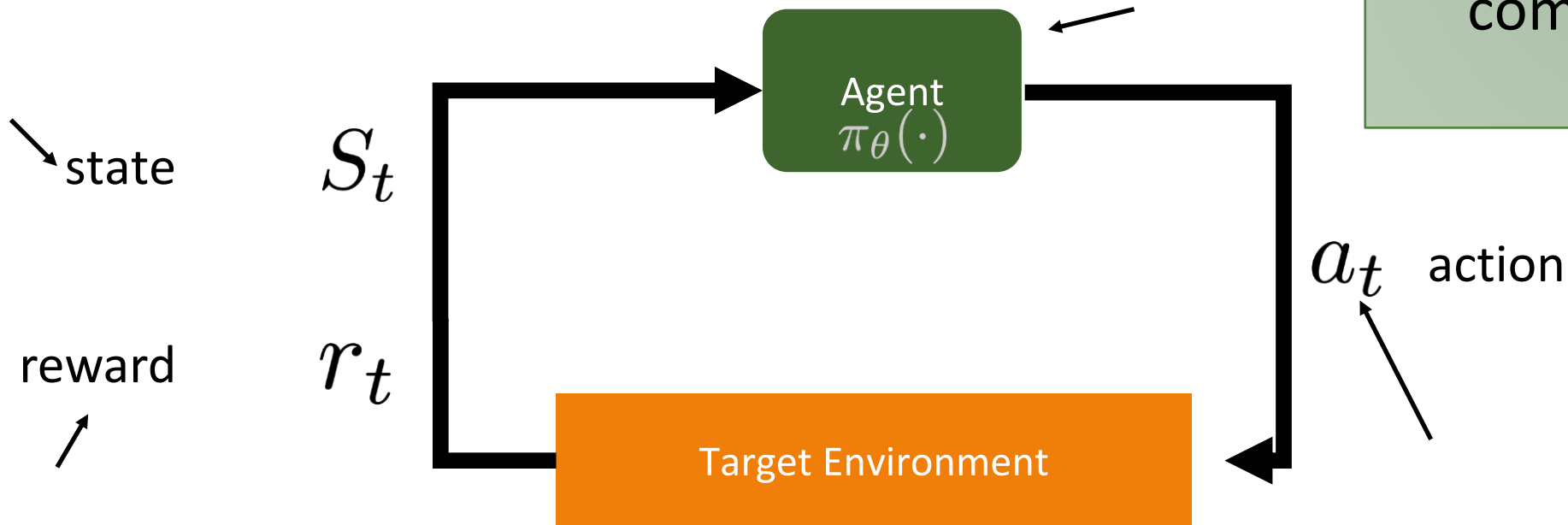
RL has been used for game playing for a while but it wasn't until recently that it has been used for language modeling



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V1eYniJ0Rnk>

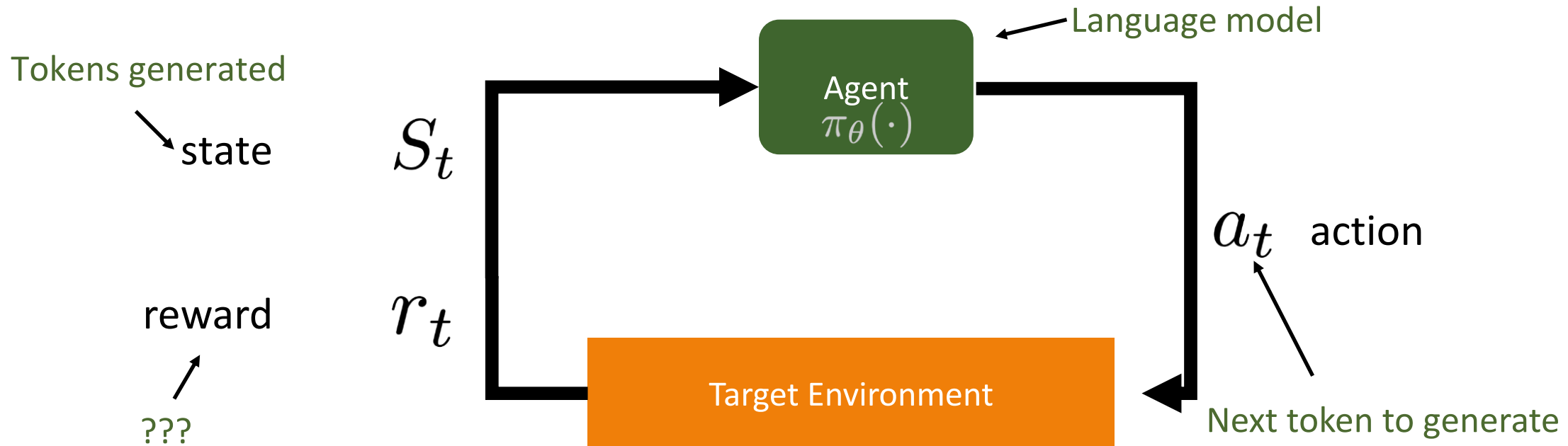
# Think-Pair-Share

If we were using RL with language models, what would these four components be?



$$a_t \sim \pi_{\theta}(S_t) : \text{policy}$$

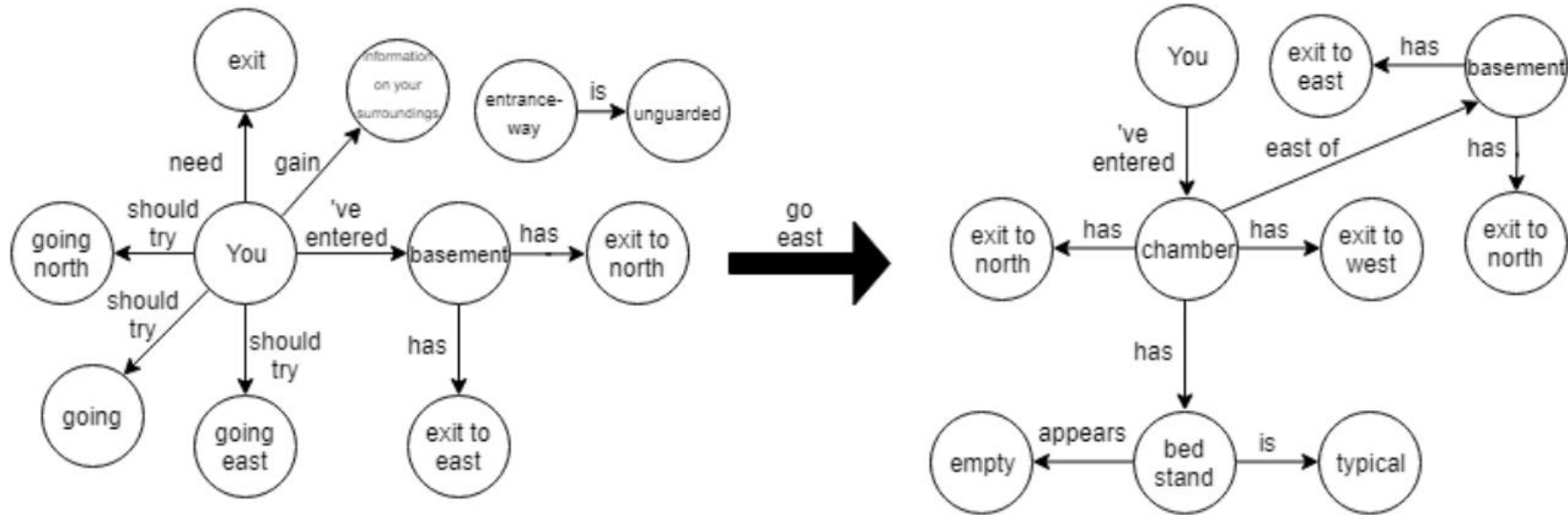
# RL in the Context of Language Models...



$$a_t \sim \pi_{\theta}(S_t) : \text{policy}$$



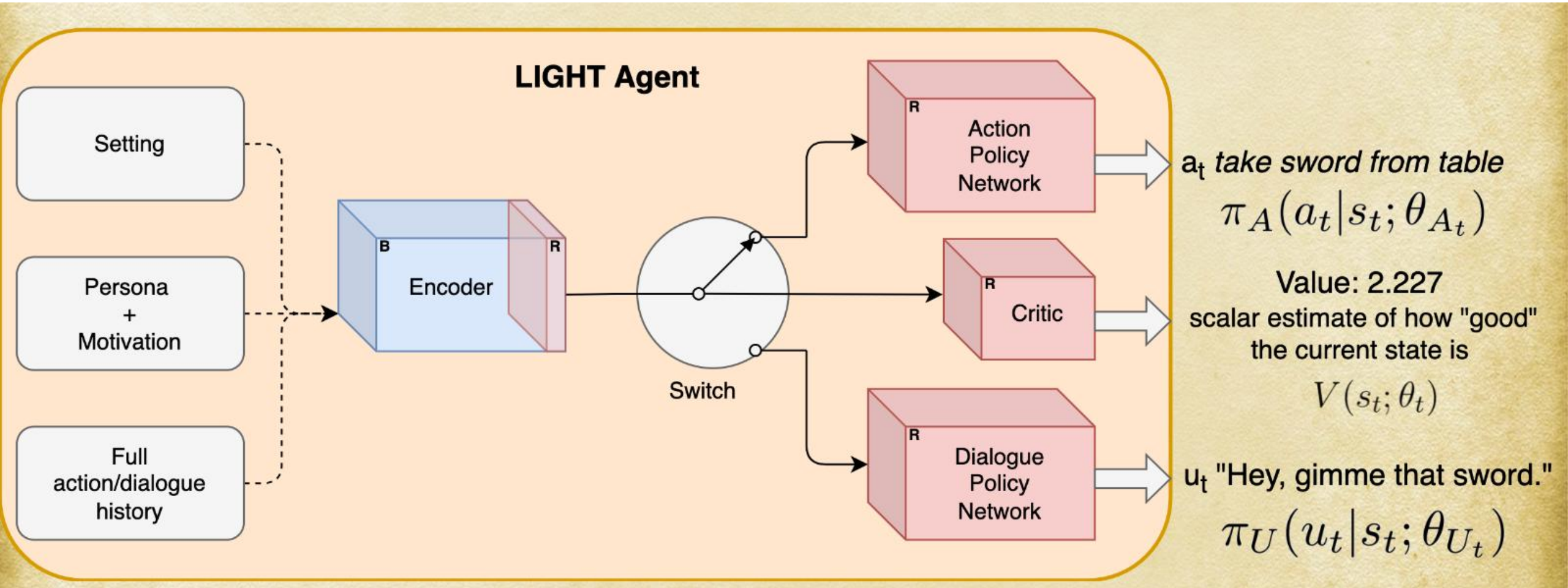
# RL for IF Playing



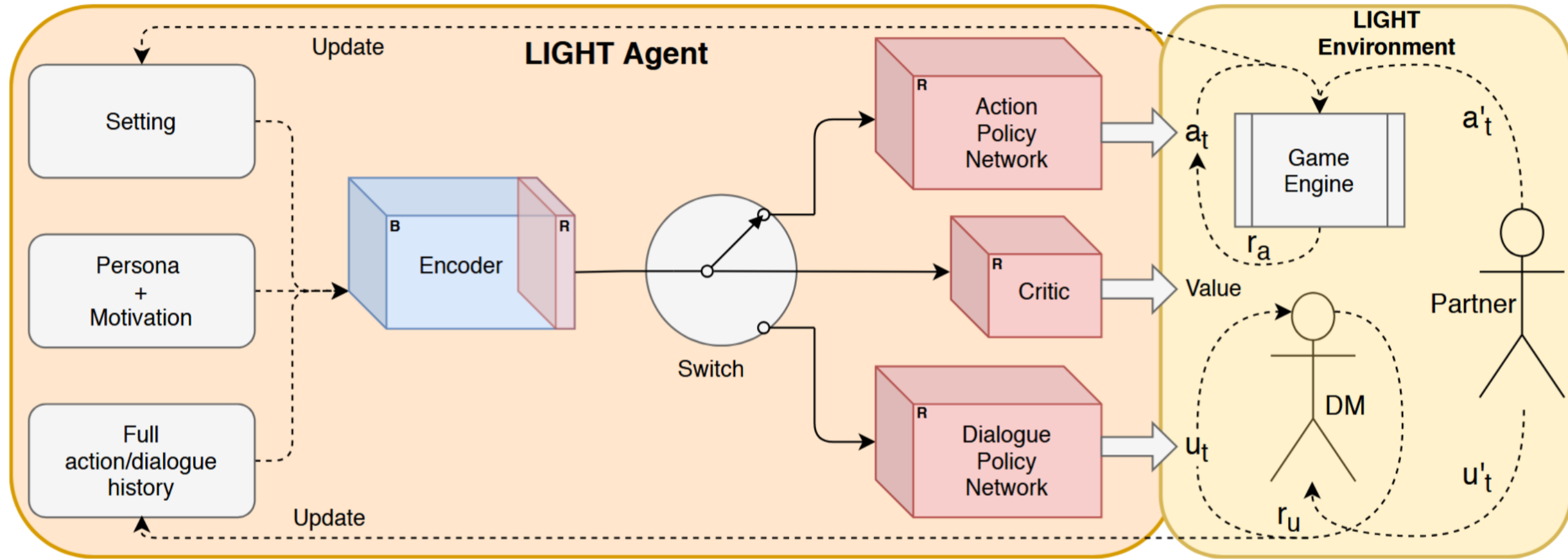
You've entered a basement. You try to gain information on your surroundings by using a technique you call "looking." You need an unguarded exit? You should try going east. You don't like doors? Why not try going north, that entranceway is unguarded.

You've entered a chamber. You can see a bed stand. The bed stand is typical. The bed stand appears to be empty. There is an exit to the north. Don't worry, it is unblocked. There is an unblocked exit to the west.

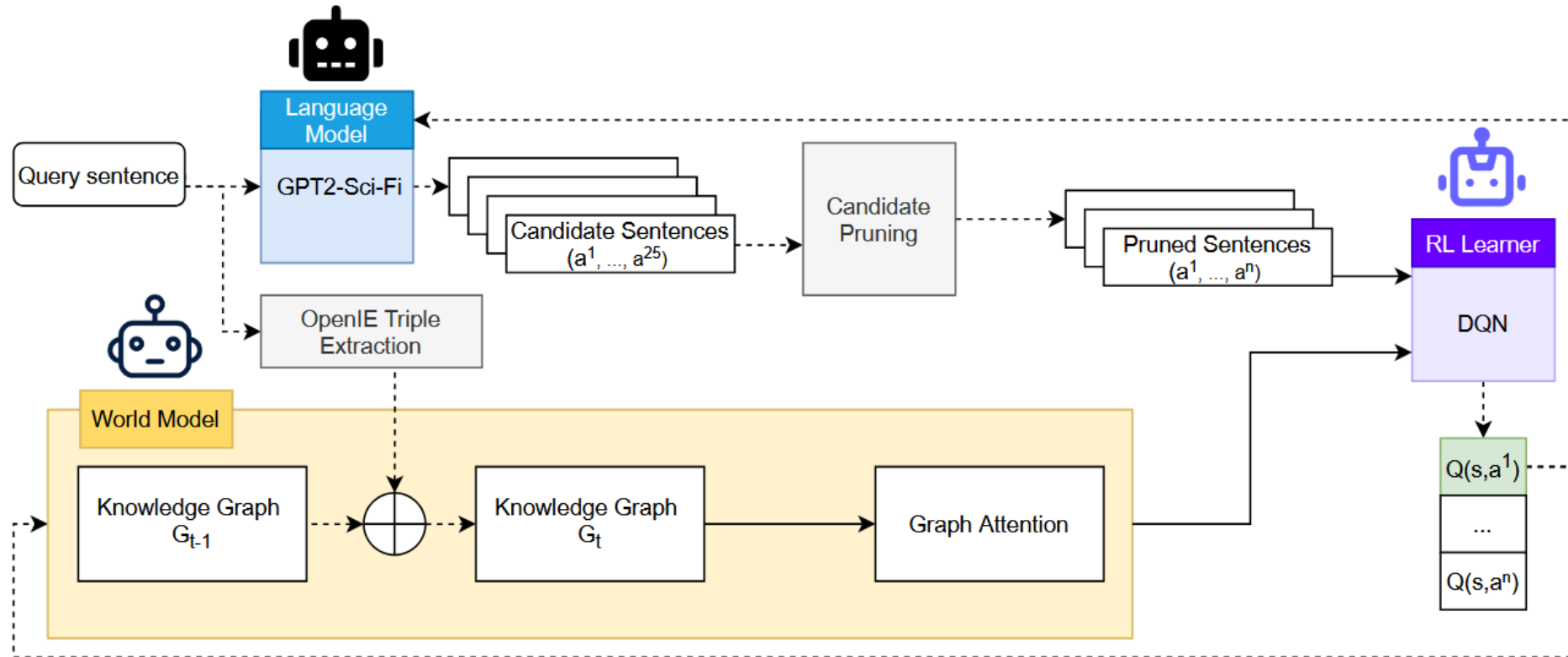
# RL for Action & Dialog



# RL for Action & Dialog



# RL for Story Generation



# Reinforcement Learning from Human Feedback

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## **Fine-Tuning Language Models from Human Preferences**

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**Daniel M. Ziegler\*   Nisan Stiennon\*   Jeffrey Wu   Tom B. Brown  
Alec Radford   Dario Amodei   Paul Christiano   Geoffrey Irving**

OpenAI

`{dmz,nisan,jeffwu,tom,alec,damodei,paul,irving}@openai.com`

arxiv in Sep 2019  
NeurIPS 2020

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## **Learning to summarize from human feedback**

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**Nisan Stiennon\*   Long Ouyang\*   Jeff Wu\*   Daniel M. Ziegler\*   Ryan Lowe\***

**Chelsea Voss\*   Alec Radford   Dario Amodei   Paul Christiano\***

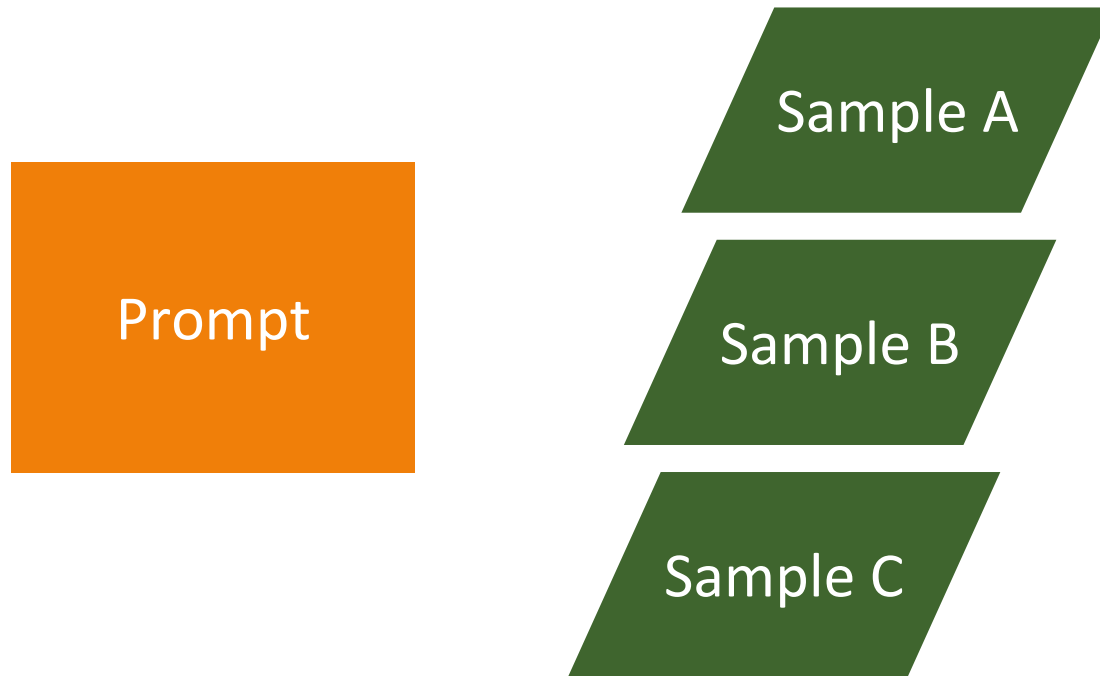
OpenAI

arxiv in Sep 2020  
NeurIPS 2020

# Human Preferences

A set of sampled completions  
for a prompt

Triples



$$D = \{x^i, y_w^i, y_l^i\}$$

Prompt  $\nearrow$  Preferred Response  $\nearrow$  Dispreferred Response  $\nearrow$



Can you help me write a resignation letter to my current employer, while leaving on good terms and expressing gratitude for the opportunities provided?

## Example: Annotation



Here are two responses from the chatbot. (Please scroll down on the content to see the entire response if it is too long)

A

Sure, here is a resignation letter template that you can use:

Dear [manager],

It is with a heavy heart that I submit this letter of resignation from my position as [position] at [company]. I have enjoyed my time here and am grateful for the opportunities that have been provided to me.

I have accepted a new opportunity that presents a greater challenge and is more aligned with my long-term career goals. I have learned so much during my time at

B

Of course! Here is a sample resignation letter that you can use as a guide:

Dear [Manager's Name],

I am writing to inform you that I have decided to resign from [Company Name]. This was not an easy decision, as I have enjoyed my time here and have learned a lot from my colleagues.

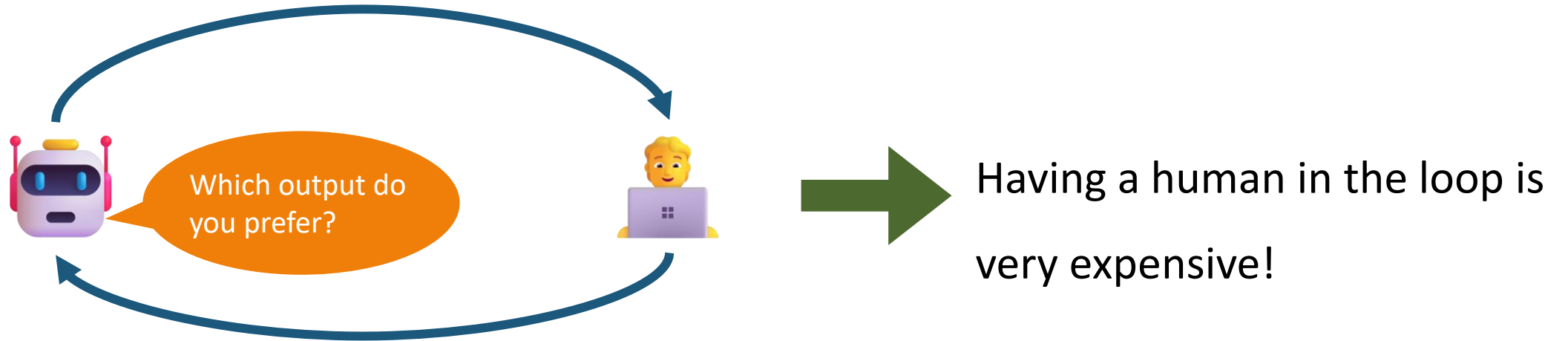
I want to express my sincere gratitude for the opportunities and support that [Company Name] has provided me over the years. I have grown both

Annotator needs to choose whether they prefer A or B.

# But..

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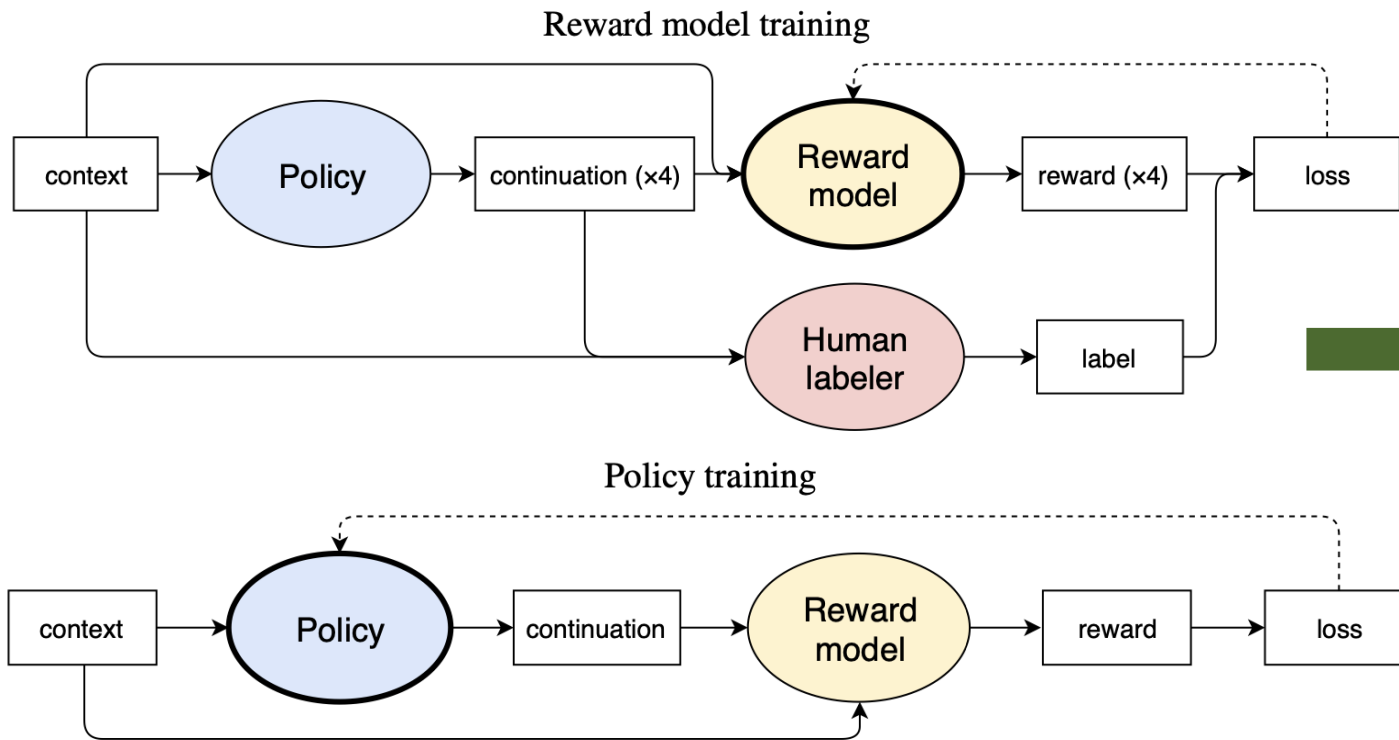
How do we get feedback for the reward while training our RL model?





# But..

How do we get feedback for the reward while training our RL model?



**Instead:** train a Reward Model (RM) on preference data to predict preferences!

*Ziegler et al., 2019 "Fine-Tuning Language Models from Human Preferences"*

# Reward Modeling

$$p(y_w > y_l | x) = \frac{\exp(r(x, y_w))}{\exp(r(x, y_w)) + \exp(r(x, y_l))}$$

Train on preference data.

Minimizing negative log likelihood.



$$\mathcal{L}_R(\phi, D) = -\mathbb{E}_{(x, y_w, y_l) \sim D} [\log \sigma(r(x, y_w) - r(x, y_l))]$$

Bradley-Terry Model



equivalent to

Train an LLM with an additional layer to minimize the neg. log likelihood

# Fun Facts about Reward Models

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Trained for 1 epoch (to avoid overfitting)!

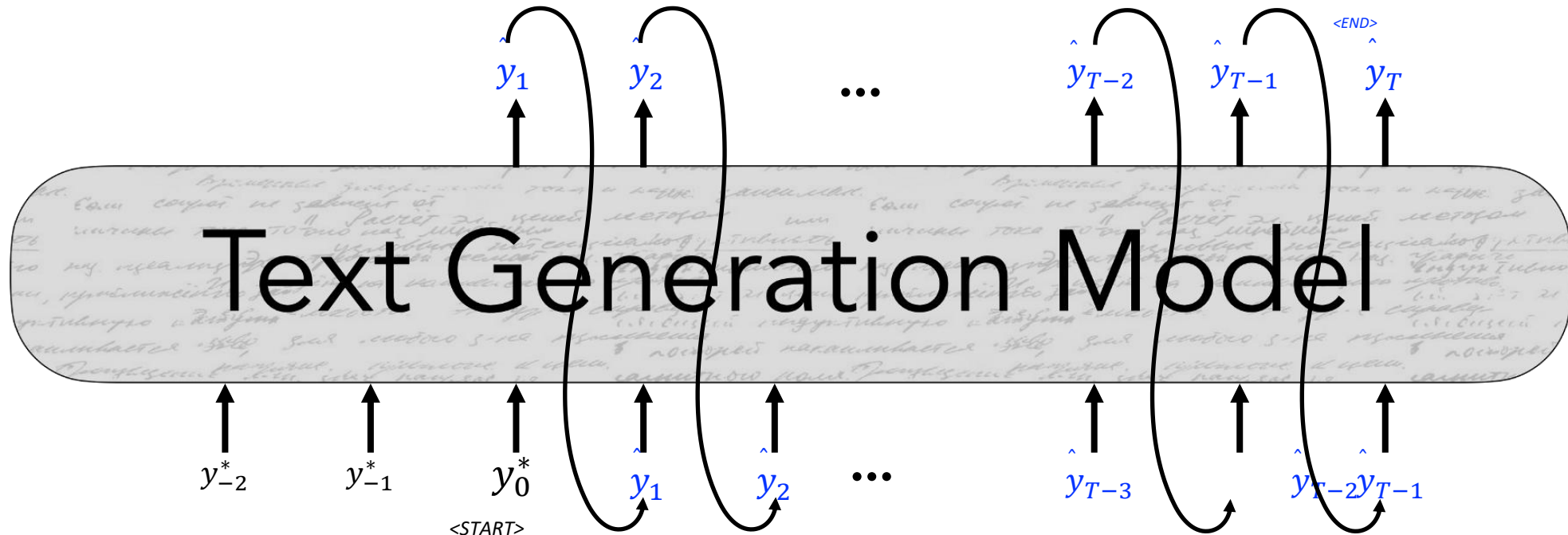
Evaluation often only has 65% - 75% agreement

*Lambert et al., 2023*

# REINFORCE

Sample a sequence from your model, score the sequence, and use the score to train the model.

$$L_{RL} = - \sum_{t=1}^T r(\hat{y}_t) \log P(\hat{y}_t | \{y^*\}; \{\hat{y}\}_{<t})$$



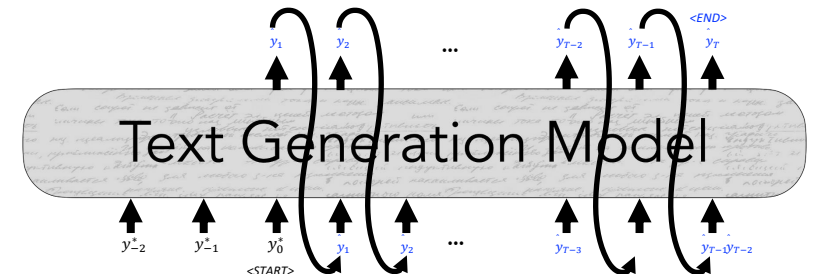
# REINFORCE

- Sample a sequence from your model, score the sequence, and use the score to train the model.

$$L_{RL} = - \sum_{t=1}^T \underbrace{r(\hat{y}_t)}_{\text{... but increase it more if I get a higher reward from the reward function.}} \log P(\hat{y}_t | \{y^*\}; \{\hat{y}\}_{<t})$$

Next time, increase the probability of this sampled token in the same context.

- $r(\cdot)$ : Your reward model
- $y^*$ : Input sequence given to the model
- $\hat{y}$ : The sequence sampled from the model given  $y^*$



# Summary of Policy Gradient for RL

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REINFORCE Update:

$$\theta_{t+1} := \theta_t + \alpha \frac{1}{m} \sum_{i=1}^m R(S_i) \nabla_{\theta_t} \log p_{\theta_t}(S_i)$$

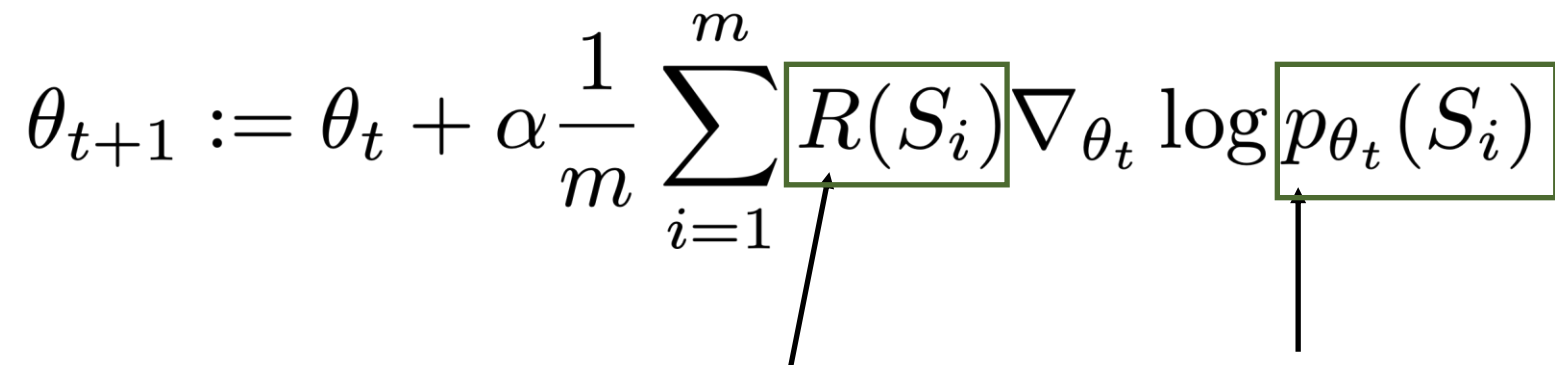
Simplified Intuition: good actions are reinforced and bad actions are discouraged

*Williams, 1992*

# Summary of Policy Gradient for RL

---

REINFORCE Update:

$$\theta_{t+1} := \theta_t + \alpha \frac{1}{m} \sum_{i=1}^m \boxed{R(S_i)} \nabla_{\theta_t} \log \boxed{p_{\theta_t}(S_i)}$$


If: Reward is high/positive

Then: maximize this

Simplified Intuition: good actions are reinforced and bad actions are discouraged

*Williams, 1992*

# Summary of Policy Gradient for RL

---

REINFORCE Update:

$$\theta_{t+1} := \theta_t + \alpha \frac{1}{m} \sum_{i=1}^m \boxed{R(S_i)} \nabla_{\theta_t} \log \boxed{p_{\theta_t}(S_i)}$$

If: Reward is negative/low

Then: minimize this

Simplified Intuition: good actions are reinforced and bad actions are discouraged

*Williams, 1992*



# Policy

---

**We have:** Reward Model

**Next step:** learn a **policy** to maximize the reward (minus KL regularization term) using the reward model

$$\max_{\pi_{\theta}} \mathbb{E}_{x \sim D, y \sim \pi_{\theta}(y|x)} [\underline{r_{\phi}(x, y)}] - \beta \underline{\mathbb{D}_{KL}[\pi_{\theta}(y|x) || \pi_{ref}(y|x)]}$$


Sampling from policy



Reward given prompt  
and sampled generation



KL-divergence between original model's  
generation and the sampled generation



# Policy

**We have:** Reward Model

**Next step:** learn a **policy** to maximize the reward (minus KL regularization term) using the reward model

$$\max_{\pi_{\theta}} \mathbb{E}_{x \sim D, y \sim \pi_{\theta}(y|x)} [\underbrace{r_{\phi}(x, y)}_{\text{Reward}}] - \underbrace{\beta \mathbb{D}_{KL}[\pi_{\theta}(y|x) || \pi_{ref}(y|x)]}_{\text{KL-divergence}}$$

Sampling from policy

Reward given prompt  
and sampled generation



*Should be high!*

KL-divergence between original model's  
generation and the sampled generation



*Should be low!*