An Evaluation of Uninformed and Informed Search Algorithms on the k-puzzle Problem*

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Abstract. K-puzzle is often used as test problems for new search algorithms in artificial intelligence [4, p71]. This paper evaluates the use of iterative deepening search (IDS) and A^* search. Since A^* search uses heuristic functions to guide its search, this paper also evalutes the heuristic functions Euclidean Distance, Manhattan Distance, and linear conflict.

1 Problem Specification

1. **State:** For $k \in \{3, 4, 5\}$, a $k \times k$ matrix M with each entry $m_{i,j}$ being a unique integer from $\{0, 1, \cdots, 8\}$ where 0 represents the blank tile.
2. **Initial State:** Puzzle can start in any state *s*.
3. **Actions or *Actions(s)*:** Let $m_{k,l} \in M$ denote the blank tile and $m_{i,j} \in M$ denote the tile **adjacent** to the blank tile $m_{k,l}$. Actions are movements of the adjacent tile $m_{i,j}$ towards the blank tile $m_{k,l}$. For example, the action *Left* moves the adjacent tile $m_{k,l+1} \in M$ to the blank tile $m_{k,l}$.
4. **Transition Model or *Result(s,a)*:** $Result(s, a)$ swaps the pair of tiles specified in action a in the current state s and returns this new state *s'*.
5. **Goal State:**
$$M_{goal} = \begin{bmatrix} 1 & 2 & \cdots & k \\ k+1 & k+2 & \cdots & 2k \\ \vdots & \vdots & \vdots & \\ k^2-k+1 & k^2-k & \cdots & 0 \end{bmatrix}$$
6. **Path Cost:** Every step cost *c(s, a, s') = 1*, and the path cost is the summation of the step costs from the initial state to the goal state.

2 Technical Analysis of the Selected Algorithms and Heuristics

2.1 Rule to Check if k-puzzle is Solvable

Definition: [2]. A pair of tiles form an *inversion* if the values on tiles are in the reverse order of their appearance in the goal state.

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Rules [2]. Let M denote a $k \times k$ matrix, $m_{i,j}$ denote a blank tile in M, and n_i denote the number of inversions in the intial state $M_{initial}$. Puzzle is solvable if (1) k is odd and n_i is even or (2) k is even, the sum of n_i and i is odd.

2.2 Uninformed Search

1. **Implementation:** Graph-based IDS. Step costs are equal, thus it is optimal [4, p88]. Furthermore, since the search space is large and the depth of the solution is not known, IDS is preferred [4, p90].
2. **Correctness:** Branching factor $b \leq 4$ is finite, thus IDS is complete [4, p88-90].
3. **Time Complexity:** $O(b^d)$ [4, p88-90].
4. **Space Complexity:** $O(bd)$ [4, p88-90].

2.3 Informed Search

1. **Implementation:** Graph-based A^* search. It improves on greedy best first search (ie $f(n) = h(n)$) as it avoids expanding paths that are already expensive (ie $f(n) = g(n) + h(n)$).
2. **Correctness:** Since the search space is finite, A^* search will be complete.
3. **Time Complexity:** $O(b^{h^*(s_0)-h(s_0)})$ [4, p93-99].
4. **Space Complexity:** $O(b^m)$ [4, p93-99].

2.4 h_1 : Manhattan Distance

Justification: Manhattan Distance is theoretically more efficient than Euclidean Distance [4, p104] (since the former dominates the latter) and is consistent.
Definition: Manhattan Distance heuristic is defined as the sum of the distance of the tiles from their goal positions [4, p103] . Note that this sum only includes horizontal and vertical distances as *Actions* do not allow diagonal movements.
Proof for Consistency: Refer to Appendix A.

2.5 h_2 : Euclidean Distance

Justification: Euclidean Distance is theoretically more efficient than number of misplaced tiles heuristic [4, p104] (since the former dominates the latter) and is consistent.
Definition: Euclidean Distance heuristic is defined as the straight line distance between the tiles from their goal position [3].
Proof for Consistency: Refer to Appendix B.

2.6 h_3 : Linear Conflict

Justification: Linear Conflict is theoretically more efficient than Manhattan Distance [4, p104] (since the former dominates latter [1, p25]) and it is consistent.
Definition: Two tiles t_j and t_k are in a linear conflict if t_j and t_k are in the same line, the goal positions of t_j and t_k are both in that line, t_j is to the right of t_k, and the goal position of t_j is to the left of the goal position of t_k [1, p13].
Derivation. For any state s,

1. For each tile t_j in r_i, let $C(t_j, r_i)$ denote the number of tiles conflicting with t_j in row r_i.
2. While there is a non-zero $C(t_j, r_i)$ value,
   (a) Move out the tile with the most conflicts from r_i. Let this tile be t_k.
   (b) Set $C(t_k, r_i) = 0$.
   (c) For every tile t_j in conflict with t_k, decrement $C(t_j, r_i)$ by 1.
   (d) Let $lc(s, r_i)$ denote the number of tiles that must be removed from row r_i in order to resolve the linear conflicts in r_i. Increment $lc(s, r_i)$ by 1.
3. Repeat Step 1 and 2 for other rows and columns and sum the values of all $lc(s, r_i)$ and $lc(s, c_i)$.
4. Let $LinearConflict(s)$ denote the minimum number of additional moves necessary to resolve the linear conflicts in state s. $LinearConflict(s) = 2$ x result from Step 3.

$$h_3(s) = ManhattanDistance(s) + LinearConflict(s)$$

Proof for Consistency: Refer to Appendix C.

3 Experimental Setup

3.1 Experiment Goals

1. **Time Complexity** shows the theoretical time efficiency of the algorithm in minimising the number of nodes expanded before reaching the goal state.
2. **Space Complexity** shows the maximum amount of memory required while running the algorithm.
3. **Actual Time Taken** shows the amount of real time needed for the algorithm to reach the goal sate.

3.2 Experiment Implementation Description

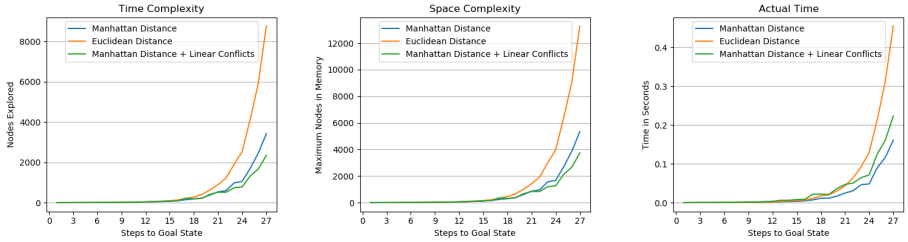
Time Complexity is measured by the number of nodes generated during the search (ie number of the explored states) [4, p80].
Space Complexity is measured by the maximum number of nodes stored in memory during the search [4, p80]. This is measured by the largest summation of number of nodes in the explored set and frontier size during the search.
Actual time taken is measured by the number of seconds needed by the algorithm to reach the goal state.

For n = $\{1 \dots 27\}$

1. Generate 3×3 matrix M that has n number of steps to reach the goal state.
2. Perform search algorithm on matrix M.
3. Plot the number of nodes generated, maximum nodes in memory, and time against n.
4. To minimise bias, for each iteration, the puzzle solves 30 different puzzles of n steps and the average number of nodes and maximum nodes in memory are taken.

3.3 Results and Discussion

Fig. 1. Performance of the 3 heuristics under 27 levels of k-puzzle difficulty.



In the analysis we denote the Euclidean, Manhattan, and Linear Conflicts heuristics as E, M and L respectively.

From the Time and Space Complexity graphs in Fig 1 above, for step values above 15, we observe that M and L outperform E. This is in line with the theoretical explanation of how M and L dominate E, accounting for the performance difference. In addition, for step values higher than 22, we observe that L outperforms M in terms of both time and space complexity. This is also in line with the theoretical explanation of how L dominates M which translates directly into time and space efficiency [4, p104].

In terms of actual running time (in seconds), it is interesting to note that while it is no surprise that both M and L outperforms E in terms of actual time taken, L actually takes longer time to solve the puzzle (in seconds) compared to when M is used. This is contrary to our preliminary expectation that L will be more time efficient than M in theory and practice.

This contradiction may be attributed to the extra time (in seconds) required to calculate the L heuristic for each node before it is put in the frontier, hence overall causing L to take a longer time to solve the puzzle than M.

In conclusion, our experiment has shown that in general, while more dominant heuristics tend to be more efficient in terms of time and space complexity in both theory and practice, there are exceptions such as the case of M and L (actual time) as stated above which are due to the additional computational time needed to compute the heuristic.

References

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A Proof for Manhattan Distance Consistency

Proof. Proof by Cases

1. $|h(n') - h(n) = 1|$ ($\because c(n, a, n') = 1$, any node n' is 1 step away from node n)
2. Case 1: $h(n') = h(n) + 1$
   (a) $h(n) \leq h(n) + 1 + 1 \implies h(n) \leq h(n') + c(n, a, n')$
3. Case 2: $h(n') = h(n) - 1$
   (a) $h(n) \leq h(n) - 1 + 1 \implies h(n) \leq h(n') + c(n, a, n')$
4. For both cases of $h(n')$, $h(n)$ is consistent. ($\bullet$)

B Proof for Euclidean Distance Consistency

Proof. Proof by Construction.
Euclidean Distance is a form general triangle inequality, given that the Euclidean Distance from start state S to end state G (1 side of the triangle) cannot be longer than the sum of the 2 sides (the actual distance from S to middle state N and the Euclidean Distance from N to G) as the Euclidean Distance from S to G is already the shortest path. Since general triangle inequality fulfills the definition of consistency [4, p95], Euclidean Distance is consistent.

C Proof for Linear Conflict

Proof. Proof by Cases.
To prove consistency, we must prove that for all state s and s', $f(s') \geq f(s)$, where s' is the successor of s.

$$f(s) = g(s) + h(s)$$

where $g(s') = g(s)+1$ and $h(s) = ManhattanDistance(s)+LinearConflict(s)$. Assume that tile t_k moves from row r_i to row r_j and stays in the same column. Let $ManhattanDistance(s)$ be $MD(s)$ and $LinearConflict(s)$ be $LC(s)$.

1. **Condition 1:** Both r_i and r_j are not the goal row of t_j.
   $MD(s') = MD(s) \pm 1$. $LC(s)$ is unchanged. Thus, $h(s') = h(s) \pm 1$ and $f(s') = f(s) + 1 \pm 1 \geq f(s)$.
2. **Condition 2:** r_j is the goal row of t_j.
   As t_j moves to its goal row, $MD(s') = MD(s) - 1$. Since r_i is not the goal row of t_j, $lc(s', r_i) = lc(s, r_i)$. As r_j is the goal row, the conflicts in row r_j may or may not increase; so it is either $lc(s', r_j) = lc(s, r_j)$ or $lc(s', r_j) = lc(s, r_j) + 2$. Hence, $h(s') = h(s) \pm 1$ and $f(s') = f(s) + 1 \pm 1 \geq f(s)$.
3. **Condition 3:** r_i is the goal row of t_j.
   As t_j moves away from its goal row, $MD(s') = MD(s) + 1$. As r_i is the goal row, the conflicts in row r_i may or may not decrease; so it is either $lc(s', r_i) = lc(s, r_i)$ or $lc(s', r_i) = lc(s, r_i) - 2$. Since r_j is not the goal row of t_j, $lc(s', r_j) = lc(s, r_j)$. Therefore, $h(s') = h(s) \pm 1$ and $f(s') = f(s) + 1 \pm 1 \geq f(s)$.

All 3 cases show that $f(s') \geq f(s)$. Thus, for any tile which moves from column c_i to c_j while remaining in the same column, $f(s') \geq f(s)$ will still hold by the symmetry of the puzzle.