

BhTSL, Behavior Trees Specification and Processing

Miguel Oliveira

Centro ALGORITMI, DI, Universidade do Minho, Portugal
miguelmigpt@gmail.com

Pedro Mimoso Silva

Centro ALGORITMI, DI, Universidade do Minho, Portugal
pedro.miguel.mimoso@gmail.com

Pedro Moura

Centro ALGORITMI, DI, Universidade do Minho, Portugal
pedrorpmoura@gmail.com

José João Almeida

Centro ALGORITMI, DI, Universidade do Minho, Portugal
jj@di.uminho.pt

Pedro Rangel Henriques

Centro ALGORITMI, DI, Universidade do Minho, Portugal
prh@di.uminho.pt

Abstract

In the context of game development, there is always the need for describing behaviors for various entities, whether NPCs or even the world itself. That need requires a formalism to describe properly such behaviors. As the gaming industry has been growing, many approaches were proposed. First, finite state machines were used and evolved to hierarchical state machines. As that formalism was not enough, a more powerful concept appeared. Instead of using states for describing behaviors, people started to use tasks. This concept was incorporated in behavior trees. This paper focuses in the specification and processing of Behavior Trees. A DSL designed for that purpose will be introduced. It will also be discussed a generator that produces \LaTeX diagrams to document the trees, and a Python module to implement the behavior described. Additionally, a simulator will be presented. These achievements will be illustrated using a concrete game as a case study.

2012 ACM Subject Classification Theory of computation \rightarrow Tree languages

Keywords and phrases Game development, Behavior trees (BT), NPC, DSL, Code generation

Digital Object Identifier 10.4230/OASICS.SLATE.2020.

Acknowledgements This work has been supported by FCT–Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia within the R&D Units Project Scope: UIDB/00319/2020.

1 Introduction

At some point in the video-game history, NPCs (Non-Playable Characters) were introduced. With them came the need to describe behaviors. And with these behaviors came the need of the existence of a formalism so that they can be properly specified.

As time passed by, various approaches were proposed and used, like finite and hierarchical state machines. These are state-based behaviors, that is, the behaviors are described through states. Although this is a clear and simplistic way to represent and visualize small behaviors, it becomes unsustainable when dealing with bigger and more complex behaviors. Some time later, a new and more powerful concept was introduced: using tasks instead of states to describe behaviors. This concept is incorporated in what we call behavior trees.



© Miguel Oliveira and Pedro M. Silva and Pedro Moura and José J. Almeida and Pedro R. Henriques; licensed under Creative Commons License CC-BY

9.th Symposium on Languages, Applications and Technologies (SLATE 2020).

Editors: Alberto Simões and Ricardo Queirós and Pedro Rangel Henriques; Article No. ; pp. :1–:14

OpenAccess Series in Informatics



OASICS Schloss Dagstuhl – Leibniz-Zentrum für Informatik, Dagstuhl Publishing, Germany

Behavior Trees (BT for short) were first used in the videogame industry in the development of the game *Halo 2*, released in 2004 [5]. The idea is that people create a complex behavior by only programming actions (or tasks) and then design a tree structure whose leaf nodes are actions and the inner nodes determine the NPC's decision making. Not only these provide an easy and intuitive way of visualizing and designing behaviors, they also provide a good way to work with scalability through modularity, solving the biggest issue from state-based design. Since then, multiple gaming companies adopted this concept and, in recent years, behavior trees are also being used in different areas like Artificial Intelligence and Robotics.

In this context, we felt that it could be useful to have a DSL to specify BTs independently of application area and the programming language chosen for the implementation. The language must be compact and easy to use but it should be expressive enough to be applied to real situations. In that sense a new kind of node was included, as will be described.

This paper will introduce the DSL designed and the compiler implemented to translate it to a programming language, in this case Python. Additionally, the compiler also generates L^AT_EX diagrams to produce graphical documentation for each BT specified.

A small example will be described in our language as a case study to illustrate all the achievements attained.

The paper is organized as follow: Concepts and State of the Art frameworks are presented in Section 2. Architecture and language specification are proposed in Section 3. Compiler development is discussed in Section 4. An illustrative case study is presented in Section 5, before concluding the paper in Section 6. The paper also includes one appendix that contains the tokens table.

2 Concepts

This section will be built based on references [1, 4, 3].

Formally, a BT is a tree whose internal nodes are called control flow nodes and leafs are called execution nodes.

A behavior tree executes by periodically sending ticks to its children, in order to traverse the entire tree. Each node, upon a tick call, returns one of the following three states to its parent: **SUCCESS** if the node was executed with success; **FAILURE** if the execution failed; or **RUNNING** if it could not finish the execution by the end of the tick. In the last case, the next tick will traverse the tree until it reaches the running execution node, and will try again to run it.

2.1 Control Flow Nodes

Control flow nodes are structural nodes, that is, they do not have any impact in the state of the system. They only control the way the subsequent tree is traversed. In the classical formulation, there are 4 types of control flow nodes: **Sequence**, **Selector**, **Parallel** and **Decorator**. Even if not standard we use decorators as control flow nodes, according to [1]. A sequence node (figure 1a) visits its children in order, starting with the first, and advancing for the next one if the previous succeeded. Returns:

- **SUCCESS** - if all children succeed;
- **FAILURE** - if a child fails;
- **RUNNING** - if a child returns **RUNNING**.

Like the sequence, the selector node (figure 1c) also visits its children in order, but it only advances if the child that is being executed returns **FAILURE**. Returns:

- 88 ■ SUCCESS - if a child succeeds;
- 89 ■ FAILURE - if all children fails;
- 90 ■ RUNNING - if a child returns RUNNING.

91 A parallel node (figure 1e), as the name implies, visits its children in parallel. Additionally,
 92 it has a parameter M that acts as a success rate. For N children and $M \leq N$, it returns:

- 93 ■ SUCCESS - if M children succeed;
- 94 ■ FAILURE - if $N - M + 1$ children fail;
- 95 ■ RUNNING - otherwise.

96 A decorator (figure 1b) is a special node that has an only one child, and uses a policy (set
 97 of rules) to manipulate the return status of its child, or the way it ticks it. Some examples of
 98 decorator nodes are:

- 99 1. **Inverter** - inverts the SUCCESS/FAILURE return status of the child;
- 100 2. **Max- N -Times** - the child can only fail N times. After that it only returns FAILURE
 101 without ticking the child.

102 2.2 Execution Nodes

103 Execution nodes are the simplest, yet the most powerful. They are the ones that have access
 104 to the state of the system, and can update it. There are two types of execution nodes:
 105 **Action** and **Condition**.

106 Upon the execution of a tick, an action node (figure 1d) runs a chunk of code that can
 107 return either SUCCESS, FAILURE or RUNNING

108 The condition node (figure 1f) verifies a proposition, returning SUCCESS/FAILURE if the
 109 proposition is/is not valid. This node never returns RUNNING.

110 2.3 Control Flow Nodes with memory

111 Sometimes, when a node returns RUNNING, we want it to remember which nodes he already
 112 executed, so that the next tick does not execute them again. We call this nodes with memory.
 113 And they are represented by adding a `_*` to the symbols mentioned previously. This is only
 114 syntactic sugar because we can also represent these nodes with a non-memory BT, but that
 115 will not be discussed here.

116 Please note that, while we avoid the re-execution of nodes with this type of node, we also
 117 lose the reactivity that this re-execution provides.

118 2.4 State of The Art

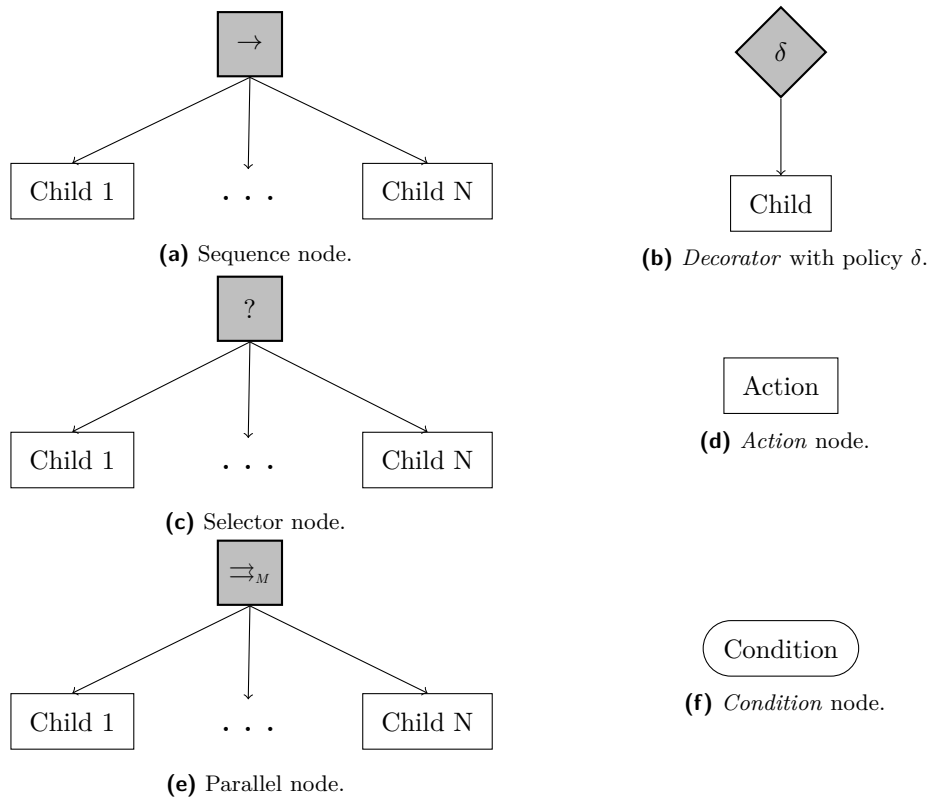
119 In the gaming industry there is some interesting projects that use tools based on Behavior
 120 trees as the main focus to describe NPCs behaviors. Unreal Engine [2] and Unity¹ are two
 121 examples of major game engines that use them. In their case, instead of a language, they offer
 122 a graphical user interface (GUI) to specify the BTs, through a drag and drop tactic. Upon
 123 the creation of an execution node, the programmer needs to specify the action or condition
 124 that will be executed. The nodes mentioned before are all implemented in these engines,
 125 along with some extensions. All the nodes that were mentioned before are implemented in
 126 both of these engines, along with some extensions.

127 In addition to game engines, there are also frameworks like Java Behavior Trees² for Java

¹ <https://unity.com>

² <https://github.com/gaia-ucm/jbt>

XX:4 BbTSL, Behavior Trees

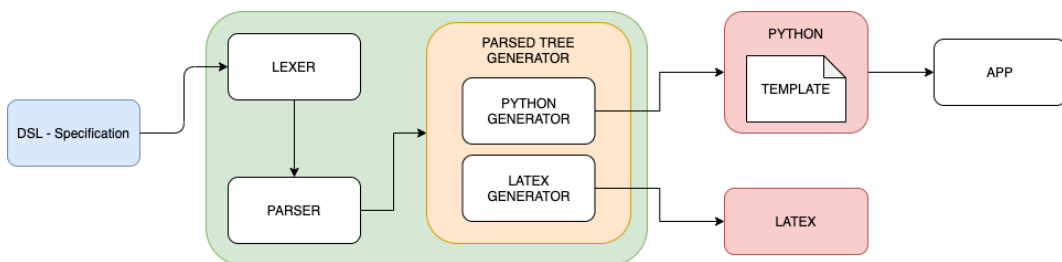


■ **Figure 1** BT Nodes structure.

128 and Owyl³ for Python that implement BTs. In this case, they work as a normal library.

129 **3 Architecture and Specification**

130 In this section, it will be explained the general architecture of our system to process BTs,
131 that is depicted in Figure 2. After introducing its modules, one subsection is devoted to the
BbTSL domain specific language design.



■ **Figure 2** System Architecture.

132 The input for our system, DSL - Specification, is a text file describing the behavior
133 which should follow the language syntax. The compiler, which is represented as the green
134

³ <https://github.com/eykd/owyl>

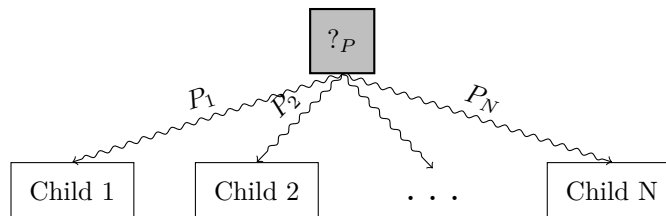
rounded rectangle in the diagram of Figure 2, is composed of the following modules: a **Lexer**, a **Parser** and a **Code Generator**.

This generator has two sub-generators. The **Latex Generator**, that is responsible for the generation of the \LaTeX code to draw the tree diagram representing the behavior specified. And the **Python Generator**, that produces the fragment of Python code that implements the desired behavior according to a template predefined by us in the context of this project; that code fragment can be later imported by any Python application that aims to.

3.1 BhTSL

Before we start describing the DSL, we will introduce a new node, called **Probability Selector** (Figure 3 depicts that concept), that provides us with a relevant extension to the standard formalism for a more powerful behavior specification. This extension improves the expressiveness of BhTSL language.

A probability selector node is like a normal selector node, but instead of visiting its children from left to right, it visits them randomly, taking into account that each child has a probability, defined by the user, of being chosen first.



■ **Figure 3** Probability Selector node.

Example

Now that all nodes have been introduced, let us see an example of a specific behavior.

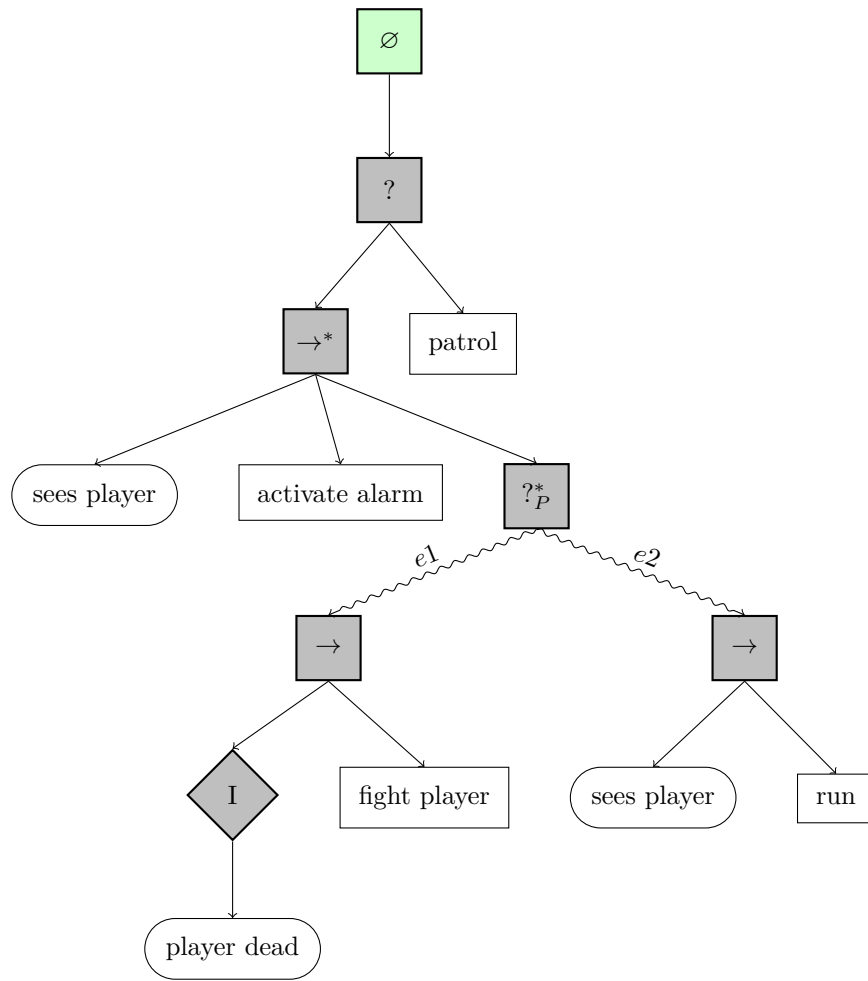
Suppose that in some game, called **TGame**, it is intended to have a *guard that patrols a house*. The guard has the following behavior: while he is patrolling, if he sees the player, activates an alarm and then, depending on the level of courage he has, decides (based on probabilities) whether he runs away or fights the player. In case of running away, he constantly checks if he still sees the player, returning to patrolling in case he does not. If he still sees it, he keeps running. The same thing happens when he chooses to fight the player, only this time he checks if the player is already dead or not.

In Figure 4, we can see a possible tree specification for this behavior.

3.1.1 Syntax

In our language, each specification represents one and only one behavior. An input file, containing the behavior specification text, is divided into 3 components:

- *Behavior* - main behavior tree;
- *Definitions* (optional) - node definitions that can be referenced in other nodes or in the main BT;
- *Code* - Python block that contains the code fragments described the execution nodes, and other code that the programmer wishes to add.



■ **Figure 4** Example: TGame behavior tree diagram automatically generated by our tool

To illustrate our idea about the DSL we plan to design (formally defined by a grammar in section 4), we present below an example of a specification written in the intended language.

```

168 behavior : [
169     sequence : [
170         condition : $cond1,
171         condition : $cond2
172         memory selector : [
173             parallel : $par1,
174             prob_selector : $prob1
175         ]
176     ]
177 ]
178
179
180
181
182 parallel par1 : 10 [
183     action : $action1,
184     action : $action2
185 ]
186
187 prob_selector prob1 : [

```

```

188     $e1 -> decoraror : INVERTER [
189         action : $action1
190     ],
191     $e2 -> action : $action2
192 ]
193
194 %%
195
196 def action1(entity):
197     pass
198
199 def action2(entity):
200     pass
201
202 def cond1(entity):
203     pass
204
205 def cond2(entity):
206     pass
207
208 def e1(entity):
209     pass
210
211 def e2(entity):
212     pass
213

```

4 Tool development

In the next subsection the implementation of the BhTSL processor will be detailed, as well as the language specification will be presented.

4.1 Lexical analysis

The first step in the development of a compiler is the lexical analysis, that converts a char sequence into a token sequence. The tokens table can be seen in Appendix A.

4.2 Syntatic analysis

Syntatic analysis, or parsing, is the process of analyzing a string of symbols conforming the rules of a grammar.

Below we list the context free grammar that formally specifies BhTSL syntax:

```

224 root : behavior CODE
225       | behavior definitions CODE
226       | definition behavior CODE
227
228
229 behavior : BEHAVIOR ':' '[' node ']'
230
231 node : SEQUENCE ':' '[' nodes ']'
232       | SEQUENCE ':' VAR
233       | MEMORY SEQUENCE ':' '[' nodes ']'
234       | MEMORY SEQUENCE ':' VAR
235       | SELECTOR ':' '[' nodes ']'

```

```

236         | SELECTOR ':' VAR
237         | MEMORY_SELECTOR ':' '[' nodes ']'
238         | MEMORY_SELECTOR ':' VAR
239         | PROB_SELECTOR ':' '[' prob_nodes ']'
240         | PROB_SELECTOR ':' VAR
241         | MEMORY_PROB_SELECTOR ':' '[' prob_nodes ']'
242         | MEMORY_PROB_SELECTOR ':' VAR
243         | PARALLEL ':' INT '[' nodes ']'
244         | PARALLEL ':' VAR
245         | DECORATOR ':' INVERTER '[' node ']'
246         | DECORATOR ':' VAR
247         | CONDITION ':' VAR
248         | ACTION ':' VAR
249
250     nodes : nodes ',' node
251           | node
252
253     prob_nodes : prob_nodes ',' prob_node
254                | prob_node
255
256     prob_node : VAR RIGHTARROW node
257
258     definitions : definitions definition
259                 | definition
260
261     definition : SEQUENCE NODENAME ':' '[' nodes ']'
262                | SELECTOR NODENAME ':' '[' nodes ']'
263                | PROB_SELECTOR NODENAME ':' '[' prob_nodes ']'
264                | PARALLEL NODENAME ':' INT '[' nodes ']'
265                | DECORATOR NODENAME ':' INVERTER '[' node ']'
266

```

4.3 Semantic analysis

As usual, from a static semantics perspective, the compiler will check the source text for non-declared variables and variable redeclaration.

A variable can only be accessed if it is declared, either in the *definitions* section (if it represents a control flow node), or in the *code* section (execution node). Additionally, a variable can only be declared once, to avoid ambiguity in the memory access by the processor.

The dynamic semantics is discussed in the next subsection.

4.4 Code generator

The compiler can generate two different outputs: a \LaTeX file, that contains the \LaTeX commands to draw a diagram for the BT specified; and a Python file, that contains the functions that implement the specified behavior.

The Python file is built using a **Template** file which contains markers that the **Code Generator** will fill with the processed data. This file also contains the class **Simulator** which is capable of executing the processed BT.

Due to the lack of time available, we have only been able to generate Python code, but we hope to be able to compile into different languages in the future.

4.5 BT Simulator

In order to test the Python code generated and to help the BT specifier to debug the behavior he is willing to describe, we also developed an interpreter that imports the Python behavior file and simulates its execution. This additional tool proved to be useful.

4.6 Implementation

The project was developed using **Python**. We chose this language due to our previous experience with it, but also due to its simplicity, flexibility and its cutting edge technology; it is also relevant to be a reflective language.

To automatically generate the compiler from the tokens and grammar specifications, we used the **PLY (Python Lex-Yacc)**⁴ library, which is an implementation of the **lex** and **yacc** lexer and parser generator tools for Python. We chose to use PLY because we had prior experience with Lex-Yacc which enabled us to save time to implement the project. Moreover, we realized that the specification is lighter than an equivalent using attribute grammars and because the code produced by those generators is really efficient.

To implement the **Code Generator** module, we resorted to the well-known tree-traversal approach, that upon visiting every node of the parsed tree, produces the corresponding output. For that purpose, some standard libraries were used.

Additionally, we created a **L^AT_EX** library, **behaviortrees.sty**, to draw the trees specified. This library is used in the **L^AT_EX** generator.

5 Case Study

In order to test our tool, we designed a simple game that consists of an entity finding and grabbing a ball in a generated map. This entity has a range of vision that it is used to search the ball. When the entity finds it, it approaches the ball and, if it is within reach, grabs it.

The following code is an example of a specification for this behavior in our DSL, and Figure 5 depicts the behavior tree automatically generated by our tool.

```
behavior : [
  selector : [
    memory sequence : $seq1,
    action : $search_ball
  ]
]

sequence seq1 : [
  condition : $ball_found,
  selector : [
    sequence : [
      condition : $ball_within_reach,
      action : $grab_ball
    ],
    action : $approach_ball
  ]
]
```

⁴ <https://www.dabeaz.com/ply/>

XX:10 BhTSL, Behavior Trees

```
327
328 %%
329
330 def ball_found(player):
331     return player.ball_found
332
333
334 def ball_within_reach(player):
335     return player.ball_within_reach
336
337
338 def grab_ball(player):
339     player.grab_ball()
340     return SUCCESS
341
342
343 def approach_ball(player):
344     player.approach_ball()
345     return RUNNING
346
347
348 def search_ball(player):
349     player.search_ball()
350     return RUNNING
351
```

352 Now that we have the specification, we can generate the **Python** file to use in our code.
353 Suppose that the generated file's name is **behavior.py**, we can import it by writing **import**
354 **behavior**. With this, we can make use of the **Simulator** class to execute the behavior.

355 Below we show the code that exemplifies how to use this class to run the behavior.

```
356
357 game = Game()
358 game.setup()
359 S = behavior.Simulator(game.player1)
360
361 game.render(screen)
362
363 while True:
364
365     game.process_events()
366
367     S.tick()
368     game.update(clock, 2)
369     game.render(screen)
370
```

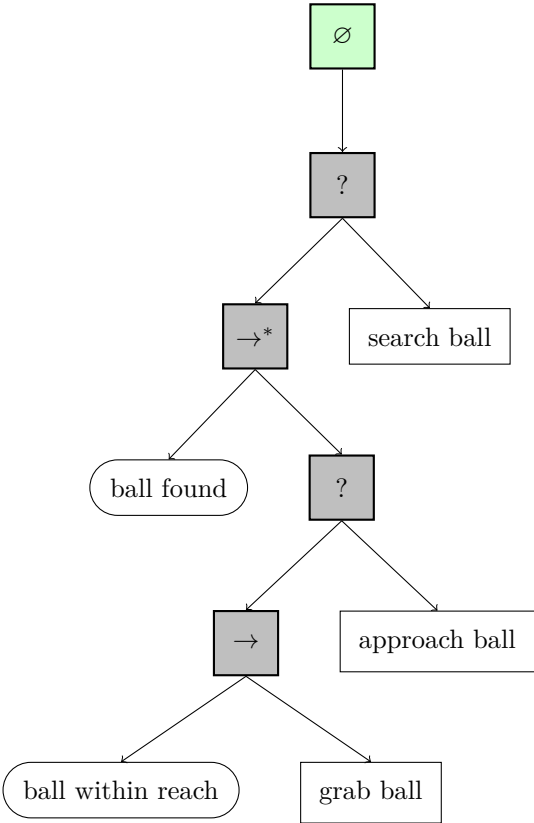
371 According to the specification, our entity can perform 3 different actions: search for the
372 ball, approach the ball, and grab the ball.

373 Searching for the ball occurs in an initial moment, in which the entity does not know yet
374 where the ball is. Figure 6 depicts an example of that moment, where the entity is the blue
375 square and the ball is the red square.

376 Until it finds the ball, the entity roams freely through the map.

377 When it finds it, unless it is within arms reach, the entity will approach it. Figure 7
378 depicts the moment when the entity found the ball.

379 Lastly, when the ball is within reach, the entity grabs it, as it is shown in Figure 8.



■ **Figure 5** Behavior Tree generated from the case study.



■ **Figure 6** Searching for the ball.



■ **Figure 7** Approaching the ball.



■ **Figure 8** Grabbing the ball.

6 Conclusion

As games industry is growing significantly every day, the need for a formal way to describe behaviors is also increasing requiring more and more expressiveness keeping it easy to learn, to use and to understand. After some initial attempts not powerful enough, a new approach called Behavior Trees (BT) appeared. This paper describes a project in which we are working on, aimed at designing a DSL to write BT and developing the respective compiler to generator Python functions to be incorporated in final Python programs created to implement games or other kind of applications.

Along the paper the DSL designed, called BhTSL, was introduced by example and specified by a context free grammar. The architecture of the BhTSL processor was depicted and discussed, and the development of the compiler that produces the Python code library was described. In that context an example of a game specification was presented and the L^AT_EX fragment that is generated to draw the BT was shown.

Although not detailed or exemplified, the simulator developed to help on debugging the BT specified in BhTSL language was mentioned along the paper.

6.1 Future Work

As future work we intend to implement the generation of code for other programming languages, such as Java and C++ so that it can be widely used by the game development community. This should be a fairly standard procedure due to our usage of templates on the **Code Generation** stage of our program.

References

- 1 Michele Colledanchise and Petter Ogren. *Behavior Trees in Robotics and AI: An Introduction*. Chapman & Hall/CRC Press, 07 2018. doi:10.1201/9780429489105.
- 2 Epic-Games. Behavior trees, 2020. Accessed: 2020-05-21.
- 3 Ian Millington and John Funge. *Artificial Intelligence for Games*. 01 2009. doi:10.1201/9781315375229.
- 4 Chris Simpson. Behavior trees for ai: How they work, 2014. Accessed: 2020-05-21.
- 5 Guillem Travila Cuadrado. Behavior tree library, 2018.

A Tokens Table

The following table displays the full set of tokens of BhTSL language defined in terms of regular expressions (REs) as utilized in our compiler.

XX:14 BhTSL, Behavior Trees

<i>Tokens</i>	
Name	Value
literals	([]),:%
RIGHTARROW	->
BEHAVIOR	\bbehavior\b
SEQUENCE	\bsequence\b
SELECTOR	\bselector\b
PROBSELECTOR	\bprobselector\b
PARALLEL	\bparallel\b
DECORATOR	\bdecorator\b
CONDITION	\bcondition\b
ACTION	\baction\b
INVERTER	\bINVERTER\b
MEMORY	\bmemory\b
INT	\d+
VAR	\$_w+
NODENAME	\b\$_w+\b
CODE	%%(. \n)+

■ **Table 1** BhTSL Tokens Table for Lexical Analysis.