

# Strategy Complexity of Zero-Sum Games on Graphs

Pierre Vandenhove<sup>1,2</sup>

Thesis supervised by Patricia Bouyer<sup>2</sup> and Mickael Randour<sup>1</sup>

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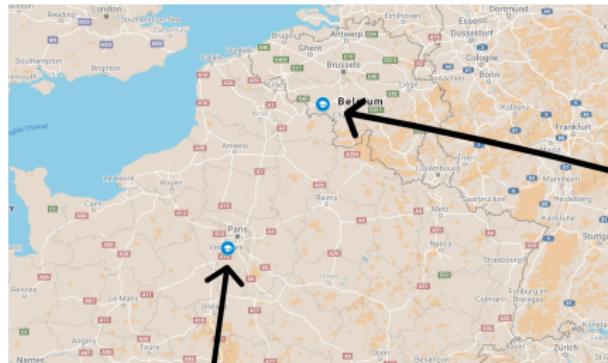
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April 26, 2023 – PhD Public Defense



# Context

- Thesis started in **October 2019**.
- Thesis **supervised** by...



Mickael Randour,  
Université de Mons



Patricia Bouyer,  
Laboratoire Méthodes Formelles

- **Public thesis defense.**

# Plan

1 Motivate the fields of **verification** and **synthesis**.

2 Explain the focus of my thesis:

**Strategy Complexity of Zero-Sum Games on Graphs.**

3 Give some intuition about our **results**.

# Reactive systems

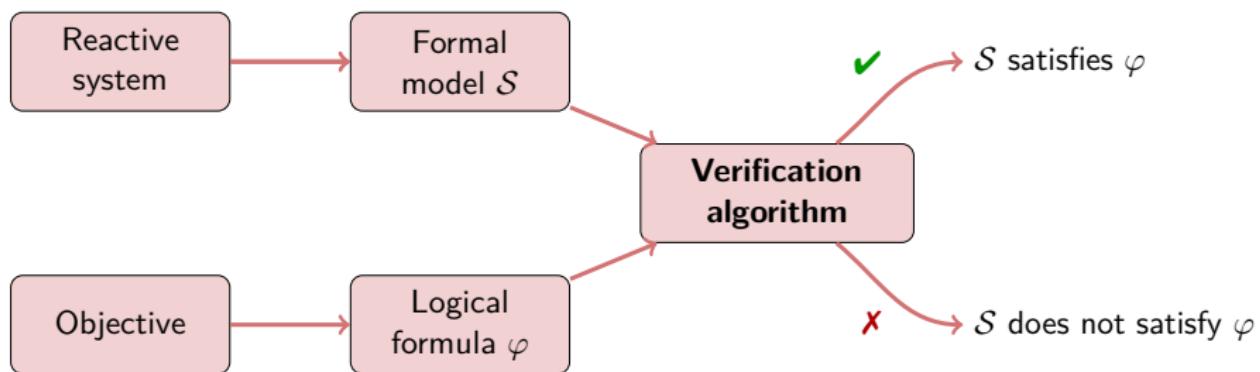
- **Reactive systems** = systems that continuously interact with their environment (elevator, web server, *robot vacuum cleaner*...).



- Must achieve an **objective**
  - ▶ using their capabilities (*controllable events*);
  - ▶ while **reacting** to events from their environment (*uncontrollable events*).
- Subject to bugs and **errors**, sometimes serious.
- Solution 1: **tests**? Efficient, but not exhaustive.
- Solution 2: **verification** and **synthesis**.

# Verification

- **Verification** aims for a formal **proof** that a system achieves its objective, *no matter what happens in the environment*.
- The **objective** describes the desired behaviors.
- Works with abstractions/**models** of systems.

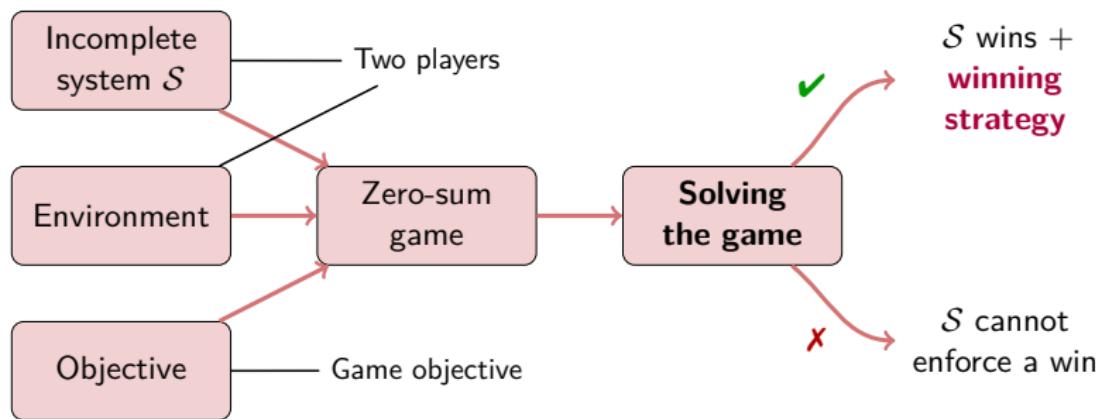


- Downside: requires a “complete” system as an input.

# Synthesis

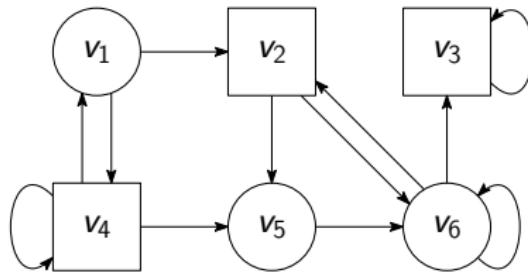
- **Synthesis** seeks to **generate a controller** achieving the objective.
- Accepts an “**incomplete**” description of the system.
- Correct controller **by construction**.
- System and environment are players; the environment is **antagonistic**.

~~ Modeling through a *zero-sum game*.



# Zero-sum games on graphs

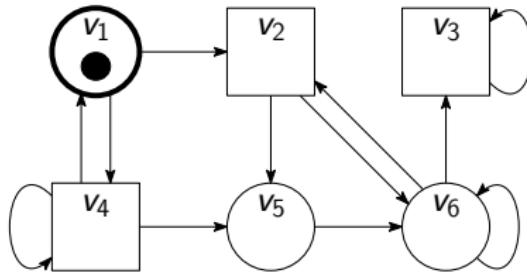
- **Graph** (called **arena**) describing the states of the system.



- Two **players**:
  - ▶  $\mathcal{P}_1$  (the system) controls the  $\circ$ s;
  - ▶  $\mathcal{P}_2$  (the environment) controls the  $\square$ s.
- Interaction of **infinite duration** between the players.

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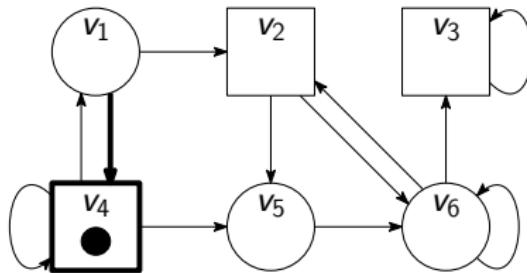
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$\mathcal{P}_1$

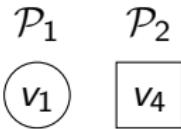
$v_1$

# Zero-sum games on graphs

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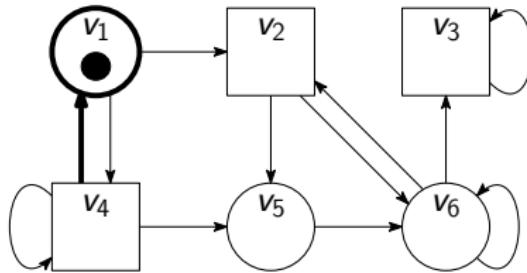


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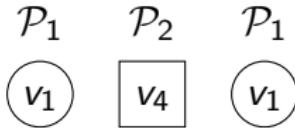


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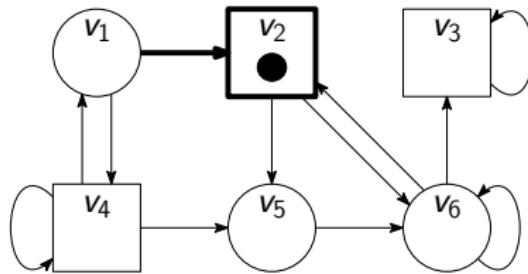


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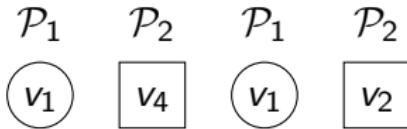


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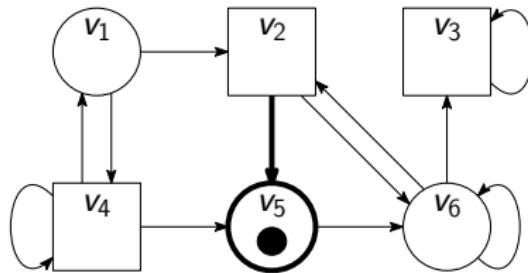


- Two **players**:
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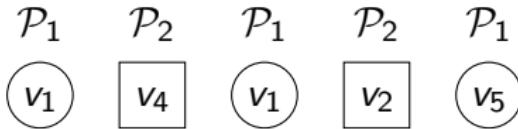


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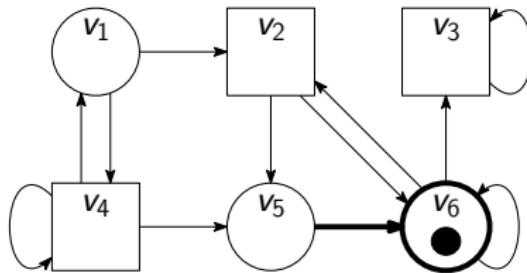


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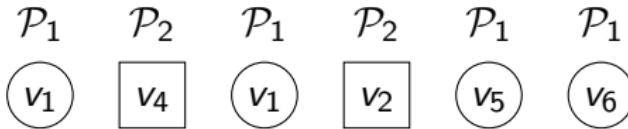


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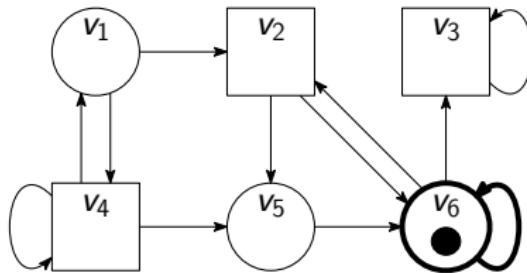


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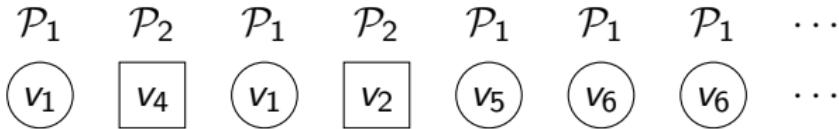


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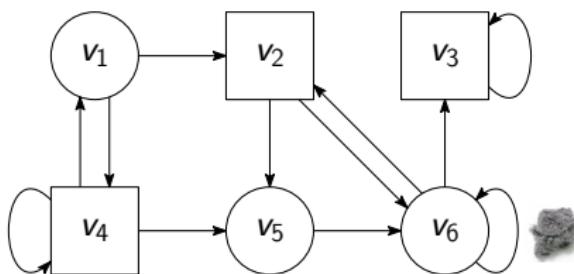
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## Example of objective

**Game objective:**  $\mathcal{P}_1$  should win if and only if the system achieves its objective. We add *events* to the edges.

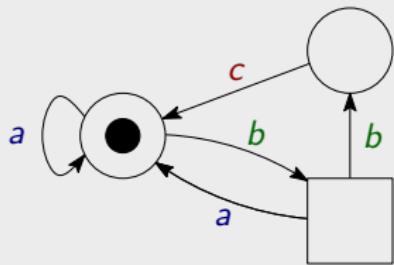
Objective for : *reach some*  . (Lazy but a good start!)



- Can  $\mathcal{P}_1$  guarantee this **from  $v_1$**  by making decisions only in  $\circlearrowleft$ s?  
**Yes**, for instance by going to  $v_2$ , and then from  $v_5$  to  $v_6$  if necessary.
- Can  $\mathcal{P}_1$  guarantee this **from  $v_4$**  by making decisions only in  $\circlearrowleft$ s?  
**No**, because the opponent may stay in  $v_4$ .

# Formally

## Zero-sum turn-based games on graphs



- **Colors** (events)  $C$ , **arena**  $\mathcal{A} = (V_1, V_2, E)$ .
- Two **players**  $\mathcal{P}_1$  ( $\circlearrowleft$ ) and  $\mathcal{P}_2$  ( $\square$ ).
- **Objective** of  $\mathcal{P}_1$  is a set  $W \subseteq C^\omega$ .
- **Zero-sum**: objective of  $\mathcal{P}_2$  is  $C^\omega \setminus W$ .

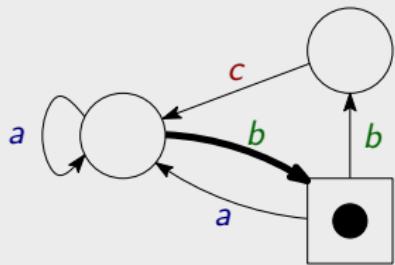
In the previous example:

$$C = \{ \text{gravel}, \text{wood} \},$$

$$W = \text{Reach}(\text{gravel}) = \{c_1 c_2 \dots \in C^\omega \mid \exists i \geq 1, c_i = \text{gravel}\}.$$

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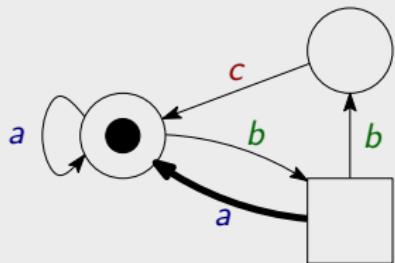
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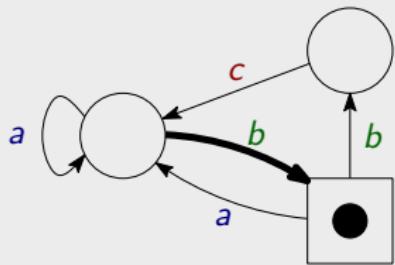
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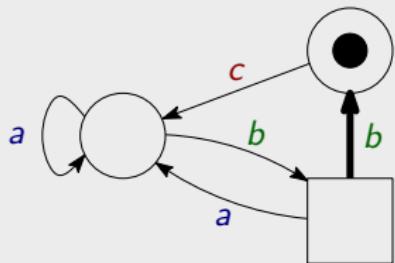
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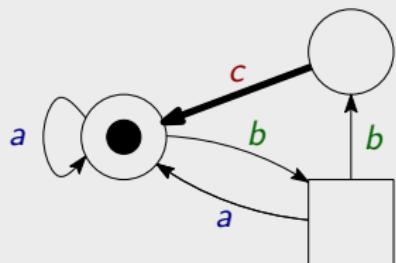
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### Zero-sum turn-based games on graphs



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- **Objective** of  $\mathcal{P}_1$  is a set  $W \subseteq C^\omega$ .
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### Synthesis

Given an arena (with an initial vertex) and an objective, we want to know if  $\mathcal{P}_1$  has a *strategy* **winning** against all strategies of the opponent.

# Central object: **strategies**

In general, a strategy is an object that makes decisions using information about the **past interaction**.

A **history** is a sequence  $v_0 \xrightarrow{c_1} v_1 \xrightarrow{c_2} \dots \xrightarrow{c_n} v_n$  of vertices/edges of  $\mathcal{A}$ .

## Definition

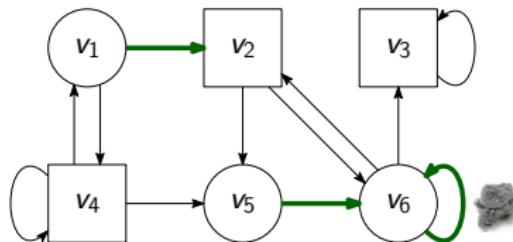
A **strategy** of  $\mathcal{P}_1$  is a function

$$\sigma: \{\text{histories of } \mathcal{A} \text{ ending in } \bigcirc\} \rightarrow E.$$

To solve a game, try to exhibit a winning strategy to show that a player wins. But...

- strategies may be **hard to describe** (set of histories is infinite 😐);
- there are **infinitely many** strategies (cannot try them all 😞).

# Describing strategies



In the example, a winning strategy only looks at the current ○:

$$\sigma : \{ \text{histories of } A \text{ ending in } \circlearrowright \} \{v_1, v_5, v_6\} \rightarrow E.$$

Easy to describe. Such a strategy is called **memoryless**.

**Not a coincidence!**

## Memoryless determinacy

For a **reachability** objective, in **all** arenas, when winning is possible for a player, it is always possible to win with a **memoryless strategy**!

# Memoryless determinacy

## Property

An objective has the property of

### **memoryless determinacy**

if, whenever a player has a **winning strategy**, this player even has a **memoryless winning strategy** (no matter the arena).

This strong property also holds for many other (complex) objectives!

# Why is memoryless determinacy nice?

**Main advantage:** easy **algorithm** to solve the games

~~ solves the synthesis problem for memoryless-determined objectives!

## Algorithm (for a finite arena $\mathcal{A}$ )

- $\mathcal{P}_1$  and  $\mathcal{P}_2$  have only **finitely many** memoryless strategies.
- Enumerate the *memoryless* strategies of  $\mathcal{P}_1$ , and check if **there is one** that wins against **all** *memoryless* strategies of  $\mathcal{P}_2$ .

~~ Not the most efficient for Reach() , but not bad for more complex objectives!

But unfortunately, memoryless strategies **do not** always suffice to win 😞.

## Memoryless strategies do not always suffice (1/2)

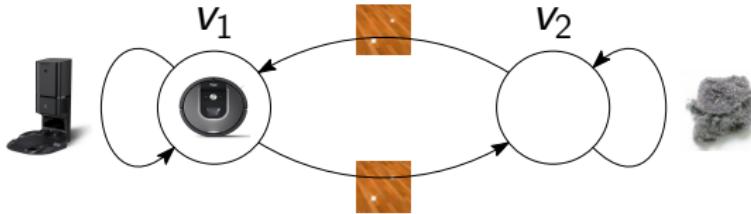
More complex objective for the **vacuum cleaner**:

see both  and  infinitely often. (Still a bit simple but good effort!)

Formally,  $C = \{ \text{vacuum cleaner icon}, \text{dust icon}, \text{wooden floor icon} \}$ ,

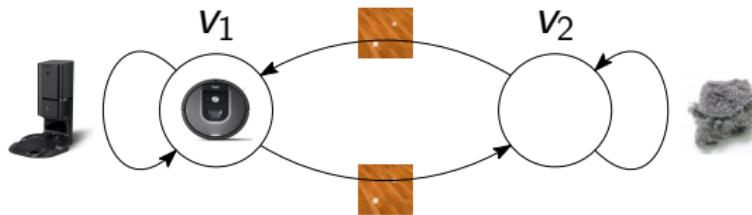
$$W = \{c_1 c_2 \dots \in C^\omega \mid \exists^\infty i, c_i = \text{vacuum cleaner icon} \wedge \exists^\infty j, c_j = \text{dust icon} \}.$$

In this arena,  $\mathcal{P}_1$  **can win** from  $v_1$ , but **not** with a memoryless strategy.



## Memoryless strategies do not always suffice (2/2)

Objective: see both  and  infinitely often.



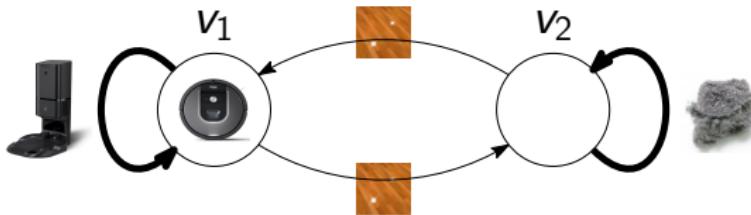
There are **4 memoryless strategies**, inducing from  $v_1$ :

- 
- 
- 
- 

Compromise: use memory, but a **finite** amount.

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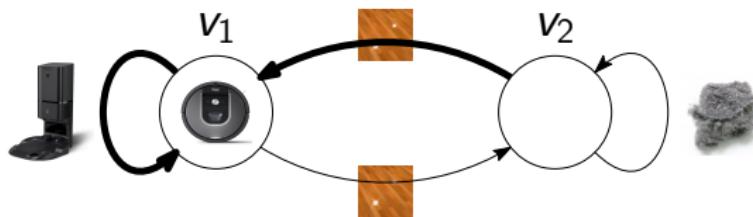
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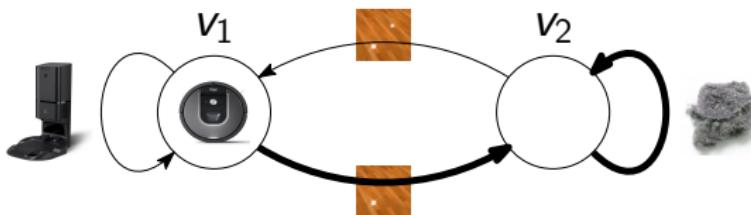
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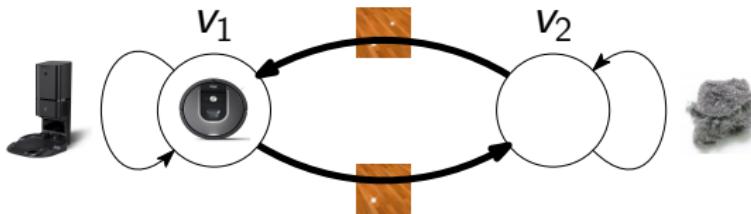
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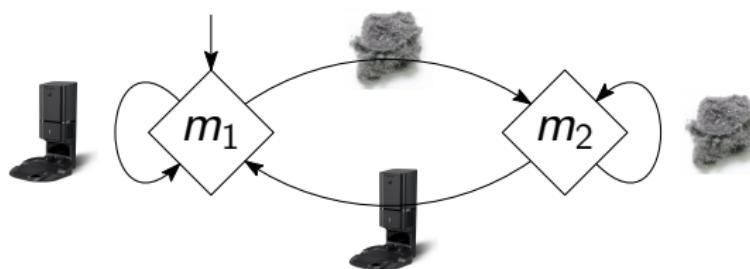
-  ...  $\notin W$
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Compromise: use memory, but a **finite** amount.

## Finite-memory strategies

- Even if memoryless strategies do not suffice to win, can we condense the information used by winning strategies **in a finite way?**
- Loss of information (not the full history), but hopefully sufficient!

We store information in finite **memory structures**.

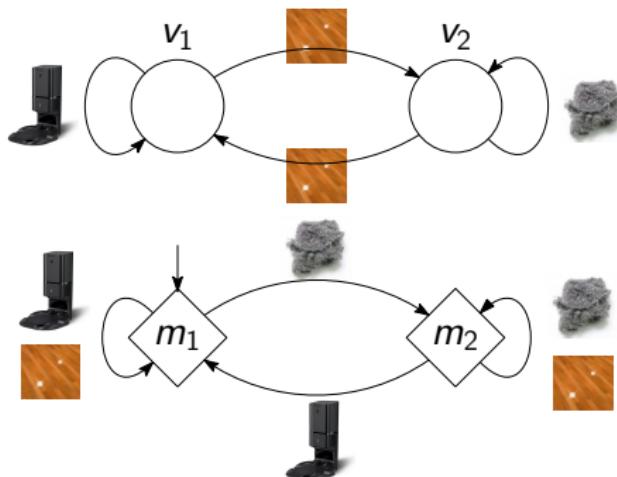


- Their state is **automatically updated** given the events from game.
- The current **state** gives information to help make decisions.

## Back to the previous example

We define a winning strategy

$$\sigma: \{v_1, v_2\} \times \{m_1, m_2\} \rightarrow E.$$



$$\sigma(v_1, m_1) = \xrightarrow{\text{orange}} v_2$$

$$\sigma(v_2, m_1) = \xrightarrow{\text{brown}} v_2$$

$$\sigma(v_2, m_2) = \xrightarrow{\text{orange}} v_1$$

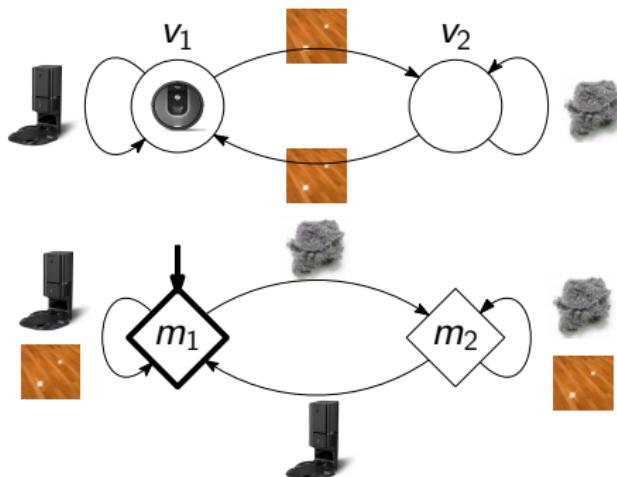
$$\sigma(v_1, m_2) = \xrightarrow{\text{brown}} v_2$$

- This memory structure **suffices to win** in this arena.
- In **all** arenas, if winning is possible, **finite memory** suffices to win!

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We define a winning strategy

$$\sigma: \{v_1, v_2\} \times \{m_1, m_2\} \rightarrow E.$$



$$\sigma(v_1, m_1) = \xrightarrow{\text{monitor}} v_2$$

$$\sigma(v_2, m_1) = \xrightarrow{\text{wood panel}} v_2$$

$$\sigma(v_2, m_2) = \xrightarrow{\text{grey cloud}} v_1$$

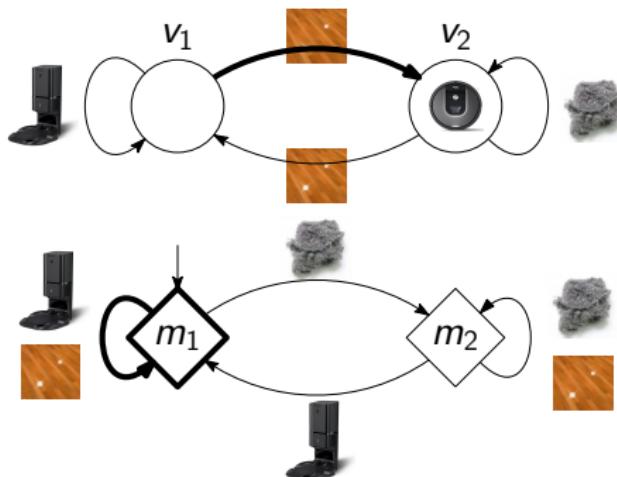
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$$\sigma(v_1, m_1) = \xrightarrow{\text{wood}} v_2$$

$$\sigma(v_2, m_1) = \xrightarrow{\text{grey}} v_2$$

$$\sigma(v_2, m_2) = \xrightarrow{\text{wood}} v_1$$

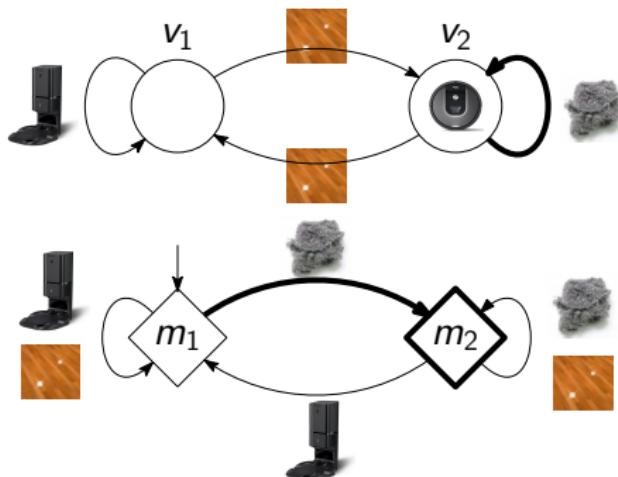
$$\sigma(v_1, m_2) = \xrightarrow{\text{dark grey}} v_2$$

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$$\sigma(v_1, m_1) = \xrightarrow{\text{dot}} v_2$$

$$\sigma(v_2, m_1) = \xrightarrow{\text{cloud}} v_2$$

$$\sigma(v_2, m_2) = \xrightarrow{\text{dot}} v_1$$

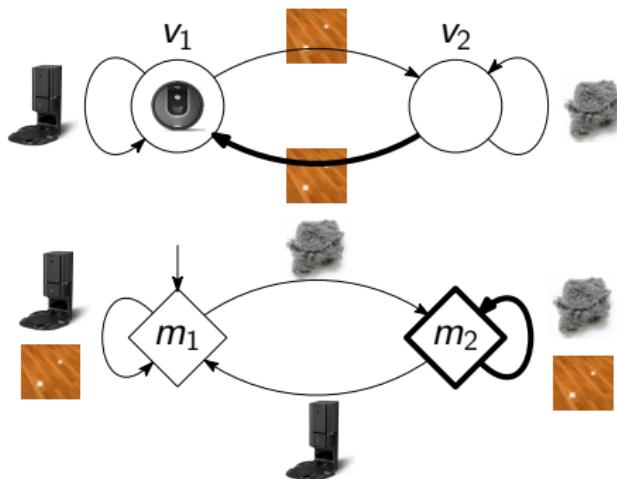
$$\sigma(v_1, m_2) = \xrightarrow{\text{monitor}} v_2$$

- This memory structure **suffices to win** in this arena.
- In **all** arenas, if winning is possible, **finite memory** suffices to win!

## Back to the previous example

We define a winning strategy

$$\sigma: \{v_1, v_2\} \times \{m_1, m_2\} \rightarrow E.$$



$$\sigma(v_1, m_1) = \xrightarrow{\text{brown block}} v_2$$

$$\sigma(v_2, m_1) = \xrightarrow{\text{grey block}} v_2$$

$$\sigma(v_2, m_2) = \xrightarrow{\text{brown block}} v_1$$

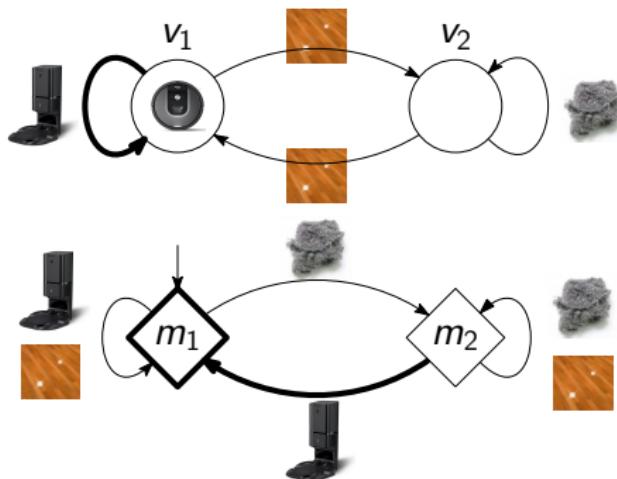
$$\sigma(v_1, m_2) = \xrightarrow{\text{black monitor}} v_2$$

- This memory structure **suffices to win** in this arena.
- In **all** arenas, if winning is possible, **finite memory** suffices to win!

## Back to the previous example

We define a winning strategy

$$\sigma: \{v_1, v_2\} \times \{m_1, m_2\} \rightarrow E.$$



$$\sigma(v_1, m_1) = \xrightarrow{\text{brown}} v_2$$

$$\sigma(v_2, m_1) = \xrightarrow{\text{grey}} v_2$$

$$\sigma(v_2, m_2) = \xrightarrow{\text{brown}} v_1$$

$$\sigma(v_1, m_2) = \xrightarrow{\text{grey}} v_2$$

- This memory structure **suffices to win** in this arena.
- In **all** arenas, if winning is possible, **finite memory** suffices to win!

# Finite-memory determinacy

An objective has the property of

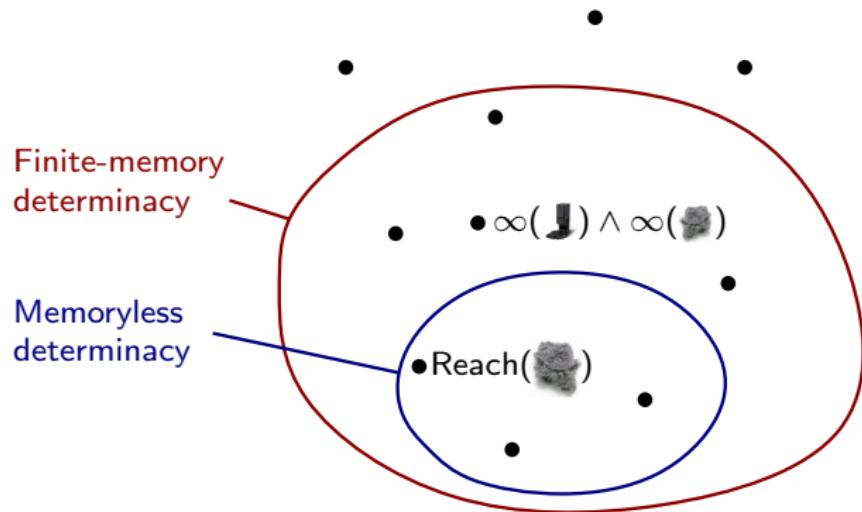
## **finite-memory determinacy**

if, whenever a player has a winning strategy, this player also has a **finite-memory** winning strategy.

### Why is it nice?

When the memory structure is known, **finite-memory determinacy** also makes the **synthesis problem** solvable!

# Classifying objectives



# Strategy complexity

Given an **objective**, understand if **simple** strategies suffice to win,  
or if **complex** strategies are required to win *when possible*.

**Memoryless determinacy** is well-understood.<sup>1,2,3,4,5,6</sup>

~~ Easy to prove that an objective is memoryless-determined or not.

**Finite-memory determinacy** is less well-understood.

---

<sup>1</sup>Aminof and Rubin, "First-cycle games", 2017.

<sup>2</sup>Kopczyński, "Half-Positional Determinacy of Infinite Games", 2006.

<sup>3</sup>Bianco et al., "Exploring the boundary of half-positionality", 2011.

<sup>4</sup>Gimbert and Zielonka, "Games Where You Can Play Optimally Without Any Memory", 2005.

<sup>5</sup>Colcombet and Niwiński, "On the positional determinacy of edge-labeled games", 2006.

<sup>6</sup>Ohlmann, "Characterizing Positionality in Games of Infinite Duration over Infinite Graphs", 2023.

# Contributions

In the thesis: focus on **finite-memory strategies**.

## Research agenda

- 1 Understand for which **objectives** finite-memory strategies suffice.
- 2 When they suffice, find **small** sufficient **memory structures**  
(i.e., the minimal amount of information to make optimal decisions).

### Part I

#### Theoretical results $\rightsquigarrow$

characterizations, boundaries;  
as few hypotheses as possible.

### Part II

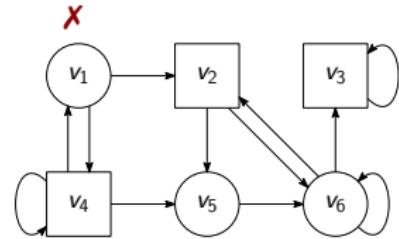
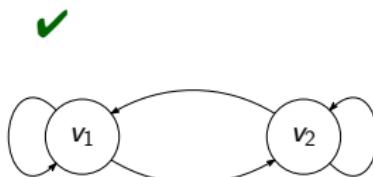
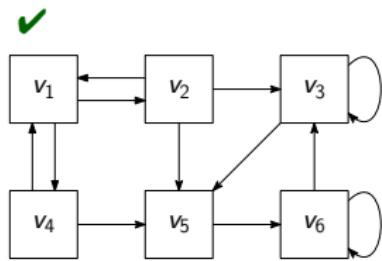
#### Practical results $\rightsquigarrow$

automatically compute  
small memory structures  
for concrete classes of objectives.

# Part I: General conditions for finite-memory determinacy

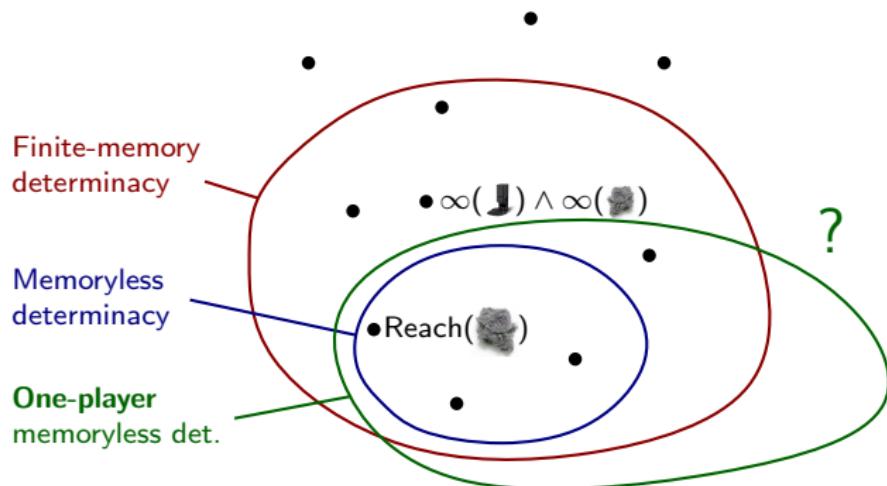
# One-player games

- A simpler kind of game is a **one-player game**, in which a **single player** controls **all the vertices** (roughly, a graph).



# One-player games

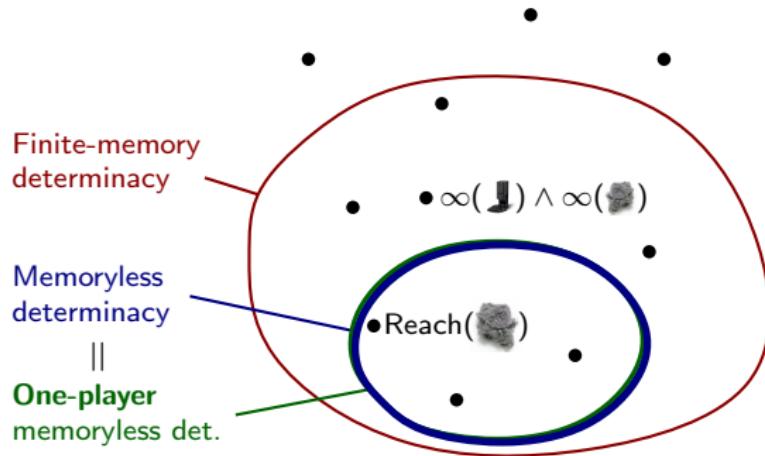
- A simpler kind of game is a **one-player game**, in which a **single player** controls **all the vertices** (roughly, a graph).
- Easier to prove memoryless determinacy in one-player games, but seemingly weaker than in two-player games:



Yet...

# Nice reduction for memoryless determinacy

... they coincide [GZ05]<sup>7</sup>!



~~ **Reduces** a problem about strategy complexity in **two-player** games to a problem in **one-player** games! Very useful.

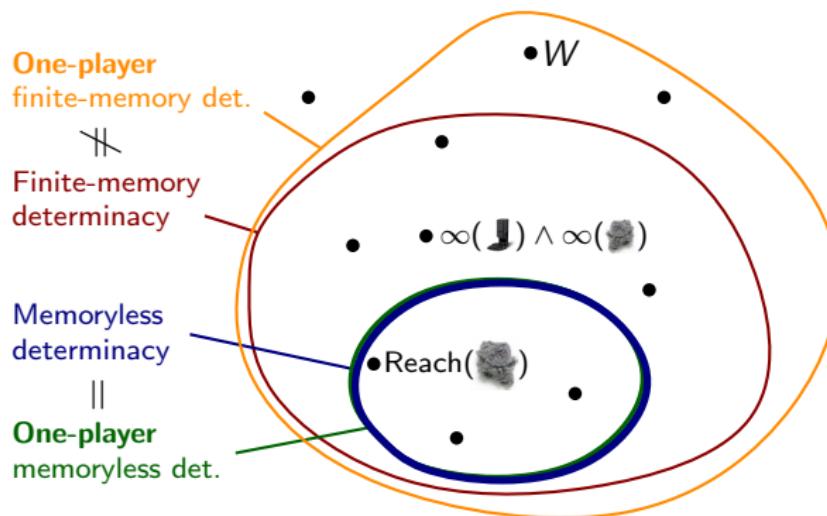
What about **finite-memory** determinacy?

<sup>7</sup> Gimbert and Zielonka, "Games Where You Can Play Optimally Without Any Memory", 2005.

# Not as nice 😞

We found an objective  $W$  such that:

- finite-memory strategies suffice in all **one-player** games,
- but infinite memory is required in a **two-player** game.



For  $W$ , the **size of the memory** depends on the **size of the arena**...

# Restriction of finite-memory determinacy

Let  $W$  be an objective.

## Reminder: finite-memory determinacy

Objective  $W$  is **finite-memory determined** if

**for all** arenas  $\mathcal{A}$ , **there exists** a finite memory structure  $\mathcal{M}$   
such that  $\mathcal{M}$  suffices to win in  $\mathcal{A}$ .

## Arena-independence

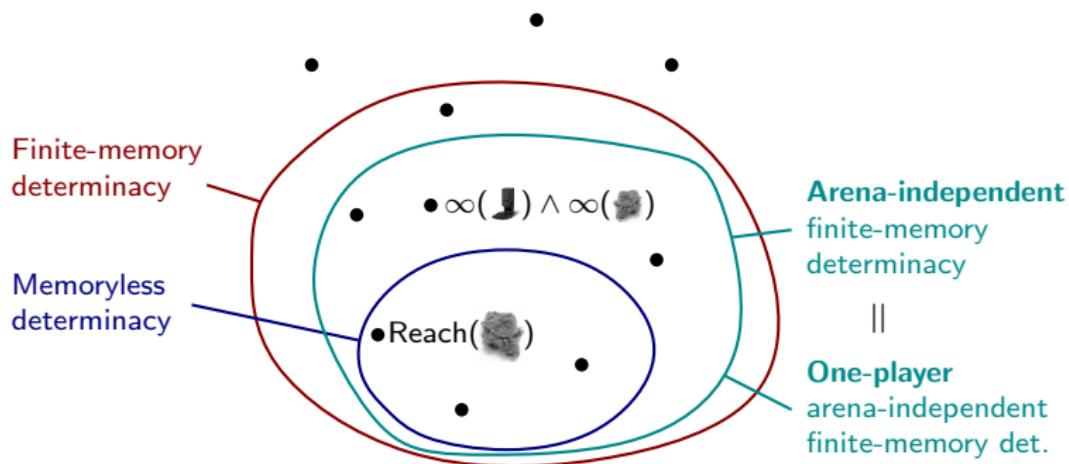
Objective  $W$  is **arena-independent finite-memory determined** if

**there exists** a finite memory structure  $\mathcal{M}$  such that **for all** arenas  $\mathcal{A}$ ,  
 $\mathcal{M}$  suffices to win in  $\mathcal{A}$ .

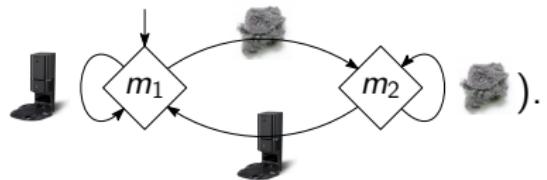
**Stronger** property ( $\mathcal{M}$  cannot depend on  $\mathcal{A}$ ).

# Arena-independent finite-memory determinacy

Between memoryless and finite-memory determinacy:



It contains  $\infty(\text{black tower}) \wedge \infty(\text{grey tower})$  (with  $\mathcal{M} =$



**Also reducible to the same property, but over one-player games!**

## Nice property

### One-to-two-player arena-independent finite-memory lift

Let  $W$  be an objective and  $\mathcal{M}_1, \mathcal{M}_2$  be memory structures. If

- in **one-player** arenas of  $\mathcal{P}_1$ ,  $\mathcal{P}_1$  has winning strategies using  $\mathcal{M}_1$ ,
- in **one-player** arenas of  $\mathcal{P}_2$ ,  $\mathcal{P}_2$  has winning strategies using  $\mathcal{M}_2$ ,

then both players have winning strategies using  $\mathcal{M}_1 \otimes \mathcal{M}_2$  in **two-player** arenas.

Robust property: holds over the classes of **finite** and **infinite** arenas.

### Applicability?

Even if stronger than finite-memory determinacy, still encompasses many objectives. Not the least being...

# $\omega$ -regular objectives

## Important class of objectives

The  **$\omega$ -regular languages** are a natural generalization of regular languages to languages of **infinite** words.

## Theorem<sup>8</sup>

The  $\omega$ -regular objectives are *arena-independent* finite-memory determined.

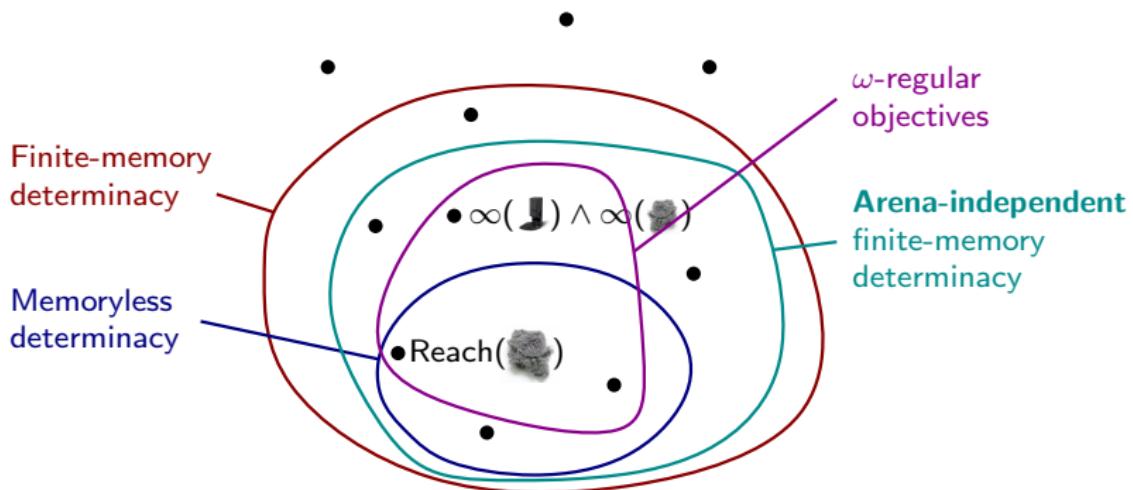
~~~ Synthesis with such objectives can be done!

---

<sup>8</sup>Büchi and Landweber, "Definability in the Monadic Second-Order Theory of Successor", 1969; Rabin, "Decidability of Second-Order Theories and Automata on Infinite Trees", 1969; Gurevich and Harrington, "Trees, Automata, and Games", 1982.

# $\omega$ -regular objectives

Using this theorem,  $\omega$ -regular objectives are somewhere there:



# Strategic characterization

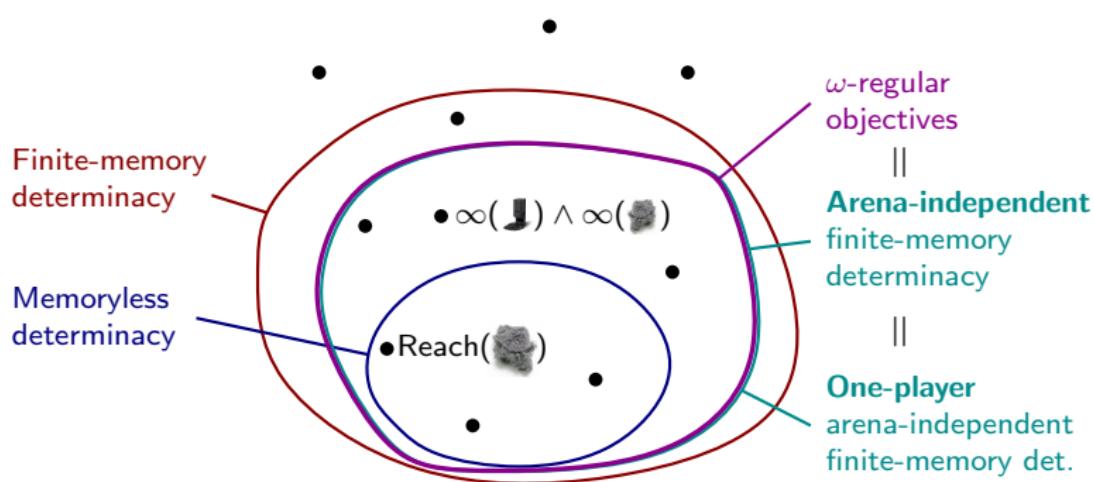
Over games played on *infinite arenas*, we have:

## Contribution

An objective is  $\omega$ -regular



it is **arena-independent finite-memory determined**.



# Summary of Part I

## Contributions

- **Characterizations** of kinds of finite-memory determinacy in various contexts.
- *Strengthens the links between memory structures and representations of the objectives.*
- Generalizes [GZ05],<sup>9</sup> [CN06]<sup>10</sup> (about memoryless strategies).

## Related publications

- Bouyer, Le Roux, Oualhadj, Randour, V. (CONCUR'20 & LMCS) “Games Where You Can Play Optimally with Arena-Independent Finite Memory”
- Bouyer, Randour, V. (STACS'22 & TheoretiCS) “Characterizing Omega-Regularity through Finite-Memory Determinacy of Games on Infinite Graphs”

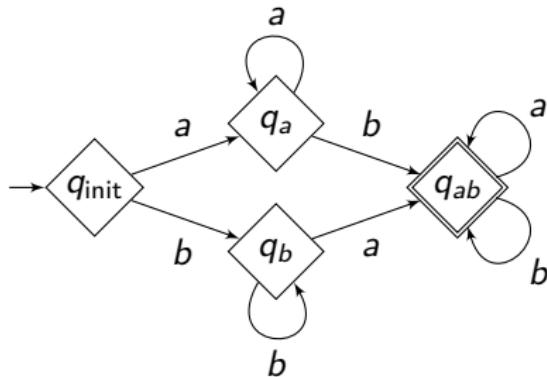
<sup>9</sup>Gimbert and Zielonka, “Games Where You Can Play Optimally Without Any Memory”, 2005.

<sup>10</sup>Colcombet and Niwiński, “On the positional determinacy of edge-labeled games”, 2006.

## Part II: How many memory states for precise objectives?

# Regular languages (1/2)

**Automata** are used to define sets of finite words. They accept the finite words that can be read from the initial state  $\rightarrow \square$  to the final state  $\square$ .



This automaton

- accepts  $aab$  ✓
- rejects  $aa$  ✗
- accepts  $baab$  ✓
- ...

This automaton accepts exactly finite words that see both  $a$  and  $b$ .

## Regular languages (2/2)

Sets of words that can be defined by an automaton are called **regular**.

### Regular objectives

Assume the objective of  $\mathcal{P}_1$  is to achieve a word from a regular language  $L$  (i.e.,  $W = LC^\omega$ ).

What is a **minimal** memory structure that suffices in all arenas?

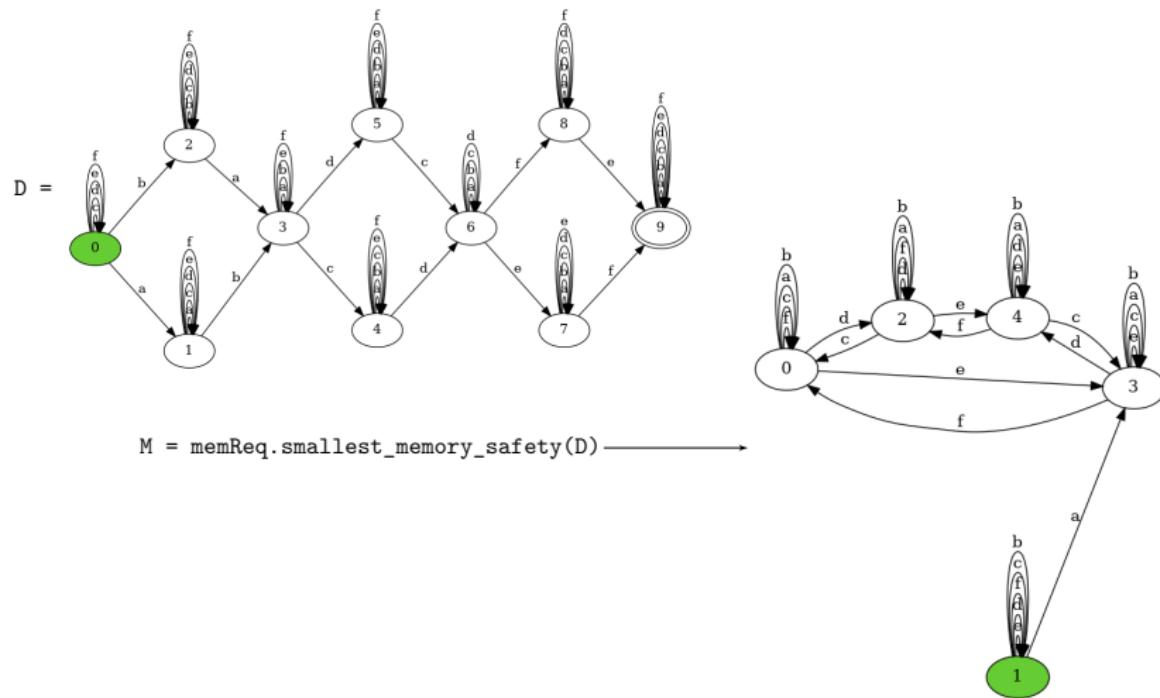
The whole automaton suffices as a memory structure, but not necessary!

### Contributions

- **Characterization** of the memory structures through properties of the language.
- This problem **can be solved** with an algorithm, but **not in an efficient way** (*the related decision problem is NP-complete*).

# Implementation

Algorithms that find **minimal memory structures** for regular objectives for both players, starting from an automaton, *using a SAT solver*.



# Summary of Part II

## Contributions

- Ways to **automatically compute** the smallest memory structures for classes of  $\omega$ -regular objectives.
- Work on regular objectives and on *deterministic Büchi automata*.

## Related publications

- Bouyer, Fijalkow, Randour, V. (Accepted to ICALP'23)  
“How to Play Optimally for Regular Objectives?”
- Bouyer, Casares, Randour, V. (CONCUR'22) “Half-Positional Objectives Recognized by Deterministic Büchi Automata”

# Conclusion

## Future works

- More expressive **game models** (e.g., what if both players can make decisions *at the same time?*).
- More expressive **strategy models** (beyond *finite-state machines*).
- Compute minimal memory structures of **all**  $\omega$ -regular objectives.

Thank you  
for your attention!