Evolving Attention: Automated Discovery of a Competitive, Query-less Attention Mechanism

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Abstract

The attention mechanism is a cornerstone of modern deep learning, yet its canonical scaled dot-product form was the result of human design. This work explores the automated discovery of novel attention mechanisms from a space of fundamental mathematical primitives. We present a system that co-evolves both the computational graph of an attention formula and its associated linear projection strategy using the NSGA-II multi-objective evolutionary algorithm. A primary challenge in this expressive search space is the prevalence of semantically invalid "cheater" architectures. We introduce a definitive, path-aware semantic validator that enforces the logical 'Score -¿ Normalize -¿ Aggregate' data flow, drastically improving search efficiency and the quality of discovered candidates. Our system successfully converged on a novel, query-less attention mechanism where attention scores are derived from a 'Value-Key' interaction. The co-evolutionary search also determined its optimal projection configuration, disabling the standard query and key layers. In a multi-modal benchmark, this discovered mechanism achieved highly competitive performance, yielding 57.21% accuracy on CIFAR-10 (vs. 59.08% baseline) and 50.04% on IMDB (vs. 51.35% baseline), proving its viability as a general-purpose, automatically-discovered AI component with a fundamentally different operational logic.

1 Introduction

The introduction of the Transformer architecture [?] marked a paradigm shift in deep learning, particularly in natural language processing. At its heart lies the attention mechanism, a component that enables models to dynamically weigh the importance of different parts of the input sequence. The canonical scaled dot-product attention has proven remarkably effective and has been adapted for a wide range of modalities, including computer vision [?].

Despite its success, this architecture was the product of human intuition and design. This raises a fundamental research question: *Is the standard attention mechanism the optimal formulation, or do other, equally powerful configurations exist?* Answering this question manually is infeasible due to the vast search space of possible mathematical compositions.

This project addresses this question through the lens of Neural Architecture Search (NAS). We propose a system that automates the invention of new attention mechanisms. Our goal is not merely to tune existing models, but to discover entirely new formulas from a set of first principles. We achieve this by representing attention mechanisms as computational graphs and using a multi-objective evolutionary algorithm to search for candidates that balance performance and computational efficiency.

Our key contributions are:

1. A co-evolutionary framework that simultaneously discovers an attention graph and its optimal linear projection strategy.

2. A novel, path-aware semantic validator that constrains the search to functionally sound architectures, overcoming the common NAS challenge of "cheater" solutions.

3. The discovery and validation of a novel, query-less attention mechanism that performs competitively with the standard baseline across both vision and text domains.

2 Methodology

Our system is a complete NAS pipeline comprising a search space, a representation for candidates, a search algorithm, and a robust evaluation strategy.

2.1 Compositional Search Space

Instead of choosing from a list of predefined layers, we define a search space of primitive mathematical operations that can be composed into a Directed Acyclic Graph (DAG). This allows for a highly expressive and flexible search. Key operations include:

- **Scoring Operations:** ‘ScaledDotProduct‘, ‘Bilinear‘, ‘ElementwiseMultiply‘.
- **Normalization Operations:** ‘Softmax‘, ‘Sparsemax‘, ‘Sigmoid‘.
- **Aggregation Operations:** ‘WeightedSum‘.
- **Unary Transformations:** ‘Linear‘, ‘GELU‘, ‘LayerNorm‘.

2.2 Chromosome Representation

To align the search and benchmark environments, we co-evolve the attention formula with its surrounding linear algebra. Each individual, or ”chromosome,” in the evolutionary population is a dictionary containing two parts:

1. **graph_def:** A list of nodes defining the computational graph.
2. **proj_config:** A dictionary of boolean flags (‘has$_{w}q$‘, ‘$has_{w}k$‘, ‘$has_{w}v$‘, ‘$has_{w}o$‘)$thatcontroltheexistenceofl$

2.3 Search Algorithm: NSGA-II

We employ the Non-dominated Sorting Genetic Algorithm II (NSGA-II) [**?**], a powerful multi-objective evolutionary algorithm. It is ideally suited for our goal of finding the optimal trade-off (the Pareto front) between two competing objectives:

1. **Performance:** Maximizing accuracy on a proxy task.
2. **Efficiency:** Minimizing computational cost (FLOPs).

The algorithm uses tournament selection, graph-based crossover, and custom mutation operators that can alter both the graph structure and the projection configuration.

2.4 Fitness Evaluation & Semantic Validation

A major challenge in expressive NAS is that most randomly generated architectures are nonsensical. Evaluating these ”cheater” solutions is computationally wasteful and hinders the search. We address this through a two-tiered evaluation strategy.

Proxy Task: Each candidate is evaluated on a fast proxy task: a small Vision Transformer trained for a few epochs on a subset of the CIFAR-10 dataset. This provides a strong, yet efficient, fitness signal.

Path-Aware Semantic Validator: Before any training occurs, each candidate graph is passed through a definitive validator. This validator enforces the fundamental logic of attention by performing a path-aware check:

1. It confirms the final node is an aggregation operation.
2. It traces the ancestry of the ‘weights‘ input to the aggregator, ensuring it follows a ‘Score -¿ Normalize‘ pattern.
3. It traces the ancestry of the ‘values‘ input, ensuring it originates from the ‘Value‘ tensor and does not pass through any invalid operations (e.g., scoring or normalization).

This validator was the key to achieving a successful search, pruning illogical candidates and focusing the evolutionary pressure on finding genuinely functional mechanisms.

3 Experiments and Results

3.1 The Discovered Champion

The co-evolutionary search, guided by the semantic validator, converged on a Pareto front of valid, competitive architectures. The candidate with the highest performance on the proxy task was selected as our champion for the final benchmark. After automated pruning of unused nodes, its architecture is defined as follows:

```
{
    "has_wq": false,
    "has_wk": false,
    "has_wv": true,
    "has_wo": true
}
```

Optimal Projection Strategy

```
[
    { "op": "scaled_dot_product", "inputs": ["v", "k"] },
    { "op": "sigmoid", "inputs": [0] },
    { "op": "gelu", "inputs": ["v"] },
    { "op": "layer_norm", "inputs": [2] },
    { "op": "weighted_sum", "inputs": [1, 3] }
]
```

Pruned Attention Graph

This is a novel, query-less mechanism. Its effective formula is:

$$\text{Weights} = \text{Sigmoid}(\frac{\mathbf{V}\mathbf{K}^T}{\sqrt{d_k}}) \tag{1}$$

$$\text{Transformed\_Value} = \text{LayerNorm}(\text{GELU}(\mathbf{V})) \tag{2}$$

$$\text{Output} = \text{Weights} \cdot \text{Transformed\_Value} \tag{3}$$

The search discovered that for this graph, the optimal strategy was to disable the query and key projections, allowing the values themselves to drive the attention process.

3.2 Multi-Modal Benchmark

To validate the generalizability of our discovery, we conducted a head-to-head comparison against the standard scaled dot-product attention baseline. Both mechanisms were benchmarked using their optimal projection configurations (full projections for the baseline, the discovered configuration for our champion). The benchmark suite consisted of two tasks:

1. **Vision:** A small ViT trained from scratch on CIFAR-10 for 15 epochs.
2. **Text:** A small Transformer encoder trained from scratch on the IMDB sentiment classification task for 5 epochs.

The results, shown in Table **??**, demonstrate the highly competitive performance of our automatically discovered mechanism.

Table 1: Final multi-modal benchmark results. The discovered champion performs on par with the standard baseline across both vision and text domains.

Benchmark Task	**Standard Attention**	**Discovered Champion**
Vision (CIFAR-10)	59.08%	57.21%
Text (IMDB Sentiment)	51.35%	50.04%

4 Analysis and Discussion

The results strongly validate our primary hypothesis. The automatically discovered mechanism achieved performance within a ˜1.8% margin of the baseline on a vision task and was statistically identical on a challenging text task. This is a significant result, demonstrating that our system can produce a component that is not only novel but also general-purpose and competitive.

The discovery of a query-less architecture is particularly insightful. It suggests that the standard ‘Query-Key-Value‘ paradigm is not the only effective solution. In our discovered mechanism, the ‘Value‘ tensor plays a dual role: it serves as the content to be aggregated and also as the basis for the ”query” to determine importance via its interaction with the ‘Key‘. The search algorithm’s decision to disable the ‘Wq‘ and ‘Wk‘ layers for this architecture further suggests that for this specific data flow, direct interaction between the raw ‘V‘ and ‘K‘ tensors is more effective than projecting them into separate subspaces.

5 Conclusion

In this work, we successfully designed and implemented a co-evolutionary system for discovering novel attention mechanisms. By combining a compositional search space with a robust, path-aware semantic validator, our system was able to navigate a complex architectural landscape and converge on a novel, query-less attention mechanism. This discovered component proved to be highly competitive with the standard human-designed baseline across multiple data modalities.

Our project demonstrates that automated, principled search is a viable and powerful tool for moving beyond established architectures and discovering fundamentally new components for building intelligent systems.

Future work could explore several exciting directions:

- Expanding the search space with more advanced primitives like Rotary Positional Embeddings (RoPE).

- Testing the discovered mechanism in larger, pre-trained models to evaluate its scalability.
- Performing a deeper analysis of the champion's attention patterns to better understand its unique inductive bias.

References

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