

Cellular Automata and Computational Universality

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Abstract

Cellular automata are discrete models with the ability to not only give rise to beautiful, intricate patterns, but also to be used as powerful tools of computation, with applications in cryptography, error-correction coding, and simulation of computer processors, to name a few. They also raise profound questions about the nature of our reality, asking whether our universe could be one such automaton. This paper provides a discussion into these automata, exploring the various power and limitations of a number of specific rule sets, covering John Conway’s well-known “Game of Life” to the more obscure “Langton’s ant” and “Wireworld”. In particular, it explores the notion of computational universality, or Turing completeness, an automaton’s ability to simulate any conceivable computation, and considers their potential in the context of solving two specific problems, the Firing Squad Synchronisation Problem and the Majority Problem. Existing solutions to these problems are explored, and their existing avenues for optimisation are discussed. In order to fully appreciate the complex structures that can arise from such simple beginnings, this project also presents software to visualise and probe further into the nature of the automata highlighted.

1 Introduction

A cellular automaton is a discrete model of computation which consists of a finite collection of “cells”, each in one of a finite number of states. The state of each of these cells may evolve over the discrete progression of time in discrete steps, and may do so according to a deterministic set of rules specifying the state to which each cell is to progress, taking into account the states of cells in its neighbourhood. Their inherently discrete nature allows for strong analogies to be made with digital computers, and gifts them the ability to simulate digital processes and the potential to solve problems in this area.

Consider the cellular automaton defined by the simple rule:

$$a_i^{t+1} = a_{i-1}^t + a_{i+1}^t \mod 2 \quad (1)$$

For any automaton, in each time step the rule is applied to all cells in the automaton simultaneously and simultaneously. In this case, our set of states is 0, 1, and for each cell we look at the cells immediately preceding and succeeding it: if exactly one of them is in state 1, then this cell will be in state 1 in the next time step. Otherwise it will be in state 0.

1.1 Self-similarity

Figure 1 shows a visualisation of Eq. 1. A cell is filled white if it has the value 1, and black otherwise. Note that each new “line” of the visualisation represents the automaton in the next successive time-step from the one before; this automaton is one-dimensional, and so we

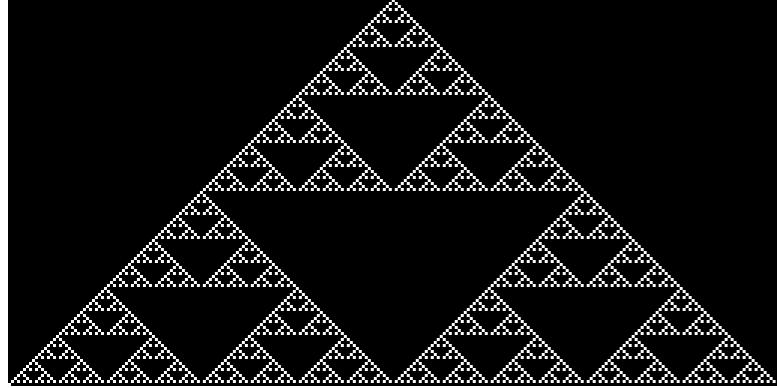


Figure 1: Pattern generated from applying Eq. 1 over 129 generations

may represent it in its entirety as a single row of cells. This pattern exhibits two important characteristics, the first of which is “self-similarity”, meaning that portions of the pattern generated are indistinguishable from the whole when magnified. As Wolfram states, in this way “the pattern is therefore invariant under rescaling... and may be characterised by a fractal dimension” [1]. One such definition of this is the Hausdorff-Besicovitch dimension[2].

As an example, suppose we have a cube with some mass, and we wish to find out how the mass scales when we try to make the same cube out of smaller copies of the original. Intuitively, one way to do this require eight smaller cubes, each of whose side length is half that of the original cube. So with the scaling factor of $\frac{1}{2}$, the mass of each smaller cube is $\frac{1}{8} = (\frac{1}{2})^3$. So we arrive at the equation $N = S^D$, where N is the number of smaller copies that can be stuck together to make the original, S is the scaling factor of these smaller copies, and D is the dimension. In this example, we compute that the dimension of a cube is 3, which is obviously correct. Back to the dimension of the Sierpinski Triangle, we can see that each larger triangle is made up of three smaller triangles, each of whose side lengths are half that of the larger triangle. So we calculate the dimension as:

$$\begin{aligned} \frac{1}{3} &= \left(\frac{1}{2}\right)^D \\ \log \frac{1}{3} &= D \log \frac{1}{2} \\ D &= \frac{\log 3}{\log 2} \approx 1.585 \end{aligned} \tag{2}$$

Many naturally-occurring systems exhibit fractal structures, from snowflakes to pine cones to Romanesco broccoli, and raises the possibility that these are generated through the evolution of some natural cellular automata or similar processes.



(a) Snowflake



(b) Romanesco broccoli

Figure 2: Snowflakes and Romanesco broccoli exhibit fractal structures

1.2 Self-organisation

Second of the characteristics exhibited by this cellular automaton is “self-organisation”, whereby from an initial disorderly or chaotic state there appear ordered structures seemingly spontaneously. Figure ?? has the beginning configuration such that each cell in the automata has an even chance of being a 0 or 1. From this initial randomness emerges similar triangles as in 1, and it is therefore easy to draw comparison to figure 3, raising the possibility that structures in nature obey rules and processes modelled by cellular automata.



Figure 3: The shell of a cone snail, showing similar structures to that of Fig. ??

2 Classifying automata

In order to classify automata, we can take into account both the size of the neighbourhood each cell considers going into the next generation, as well as the number of possible states in which a cell may be. Call these N and Q respectively; in the case of Eq. 1, $N = 3$ and $Q = 2$, and so the total number of different “transitions” from one state to the next is $N^Q = 8$. We may write out all of these transitions as follows:

$$\begin{array}{cccccccc} 111 & 110 & 101 & 100 & 011 & 010 & 001 & 000 \\ 0 & 1 & 0 & 1 & 1 & 0 & 1 & 0 \end{array}$$

3 Examples

4 Applications

5 Computational Universality

6 Firing Squad Synchronisation Problem

7 Majority Problem

References

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