Motivation

Suppose you are an independent software developer, and your software package Windows Defeater®, widely available on sourceforge under a GNU GPL license, is getting an international attention and acclaim. One of your fan clubs, located in the Polish city of Łódź (pron. woodge), calls you on a Sunday afternoon, urging you to pay them a visit on Monday morning and give a talk on open source software initiative and standards. The talk is scheduled for 10am Monday at the largest regional university, and both the university President and the city Mayor have been invited to attend, and both have confirmed their arrivals.

What should you do? Obviously, you want to go, but it is not so simple. You are located in a Polish city of Wrocław (pron. vrotslaf), and while only 200 km away from Łódź, there is no convenient morning train connection from Wrocław to Łódź. The only direct train leaves Wrocław at 7:18 in the morning, but arrives 11:27 at Łódź Kaliska, which is across town from the University's Department of Mathematics and Computer Science. An earlier regional train leaves Wrocław at 5am, but with two train switches, you would arrive at Łódź Kaliska at 10:09, which is still not early enough. There are no flights connecting the two cities, but there are numerous buses, which are probably your best choice. And there is still the option of driving, as much as you love it.

What we are dealing with here is a planning problem, with a number of choices, which need to be taken under consideration in turn, their outcomes analyzed and further actions determined, which bring about still more choices. What we in fact do is repeatedly **search** the space of possible actions and their outcomes.
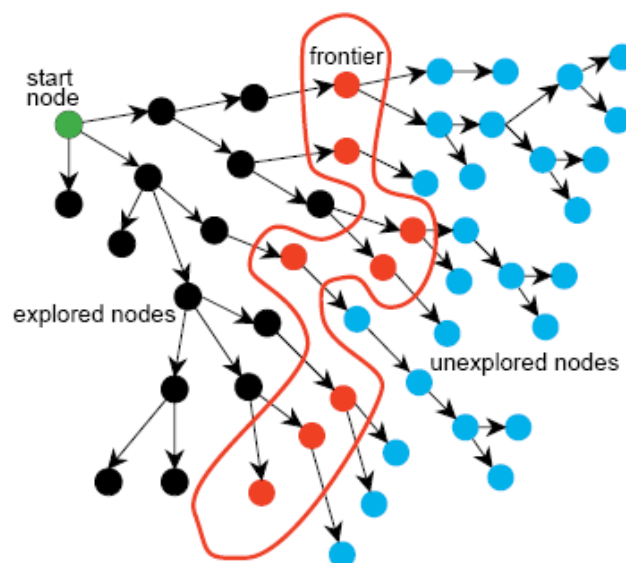
Searching is a component of all methods of artificial intelligence, and the ability of efficient searching seems to be an inherent attribute of the intelligence proper.

State space representation

1. the state space

   - often the state space has the form of a Cartesian product of the domains of the problem description parameters
   - the space can be finite or infinite, although this does not need to correspond to the complexity of the problem (eg. consider that the state space for the game of chess is finite)
   - some states in the state space can be illegal (or unreachable) states

2. the initial state, always explicitly described

3. the goal state, explicit or implicit (goal condition)

4. available state transition operators, also referred to as the successor function

   - eg. as applicability conditions and effect lists
   - operators may be parametrized (eg. consider a maze — one move operator, four operators, or the number of states times four)

$\Rightarrow$ The task is to determine the sequence of operators (and their arguments if parametrized) which lead from the initial state to (one of) the goal state.

General scheme of searching the state space

```
PROCEDURE GT(St)                 ; St - initial state description
BEGIN
UNTIL Term(St) DO                ; St satisfies the goal condition
   BEGIN
      Op := first(ApplOps(St))  ; select operator applicable in state St
      St := Apply(Op, St)       ; the result of applying Op to state St
   END
END
```

Although the above statement of the GT (*Generate-and-Test*) algorithm suggests that it always selects the first operator possible to apply in the St state, it is possible to influence this choice by an appropriate ordering of the operator list. We will call the method of choosing the operator a **strategy**.

To have a good strategy is the key problem in searching.

Blind and informed strategies

A strategy may be completely general, based only on the syntactic properties of the space representation, and thus applicable to any state space search problem. Such strategies are termed **blind**.

Example: a blind (literally), but perfectly useful search strategy for the maze problem is the right hand strategy. If you move along the wall, keeping contact with it using your right hand, then you will find the exit from the maze, if it only exists.

A strategy may also utilize some information about the current state, which is specific to a problem domain, and requires an insight into the problem beyond its syntactic analysis. Such strategies are termed **informed**.

Informed strategies take advantage of information which may not be available in a general case, and may not be understandable to a completely general search algorithm.

Example: suppose we search an exit from a maze, and we know there is noise outside, but no sound sources inside the maze. Then, simply listening in all directions may be a basis for an informed search strategy (although this strategy may be efficient only in the states which are close to the exit).

Short review

1. What are the elements of the state space representation of a problem?

2. What are blind and informed search strategies?
   What is the difference between them?

Backtracking search (BT)

```
FUNCTION BT(st)
BEGIN
   IF Term(st)           THEN RETURN(NIL)    ; trivial solution
   IF DeadEnd(st)        THEN RETURN(FAIL)   ; no solution
   ops := ApplOps(st)                        ; applicable operators
L: IF null(ops)          THEN RETURN(FAIL)   ; no solution
   o1 := first(ops)
   ops := rest(ops)
   st2 := Apply(o1,st)
   path := BT(st2)
   IF path == FAIL       THEN GOTO L
   RETURN(push(o1,path))
END
```

The BT algorithm efficiently searches the solution space without explicitly building the search tree. The data structures it utilizes to hold the search process state are hidden (on the execution stack). It is possible to convert this algorithm to an iterative version, which builds these structures explicitly. The iterative version is more efficient computationally, but lack the clarity of the above recursive statement of the algorithm.

Backtracking search — properties

BT has minimal memory requirements. During the search it only keeps a single solution path (along with some context for each element of the path). Its space complexity of the average case is $O(d)$, where d — the distance from the initial state to the solution (measured in the number of the operator steps).

The time complexity is worse. In the worst case the BT algorithm may visit all the states in the space before finding the solution. However, it permits one to apply a strategy — informed or blind — by appropriately sorting the operator list during its creation.

Another important problem with the BT algorithm is that it does not guarantee to find a solution, even if it exists. If the state space is infinite, the algorithm may select an operator at some point which leads to a subtree of the whole search tree which is infinite but contains no solution states. In this case, the algorithm will never backtrack from the wrong operator choice, and keep searching forever.

Checking for repeating states

One of the problems with the BT algorithm — as well as with all search algorithms — is the potential for looping. If the algorithm ever reaches a state, which it has already visited on its path from the initial state, then it will repeatedly generate the same sequence of states and may never break out of the loop.

It is easy to avoid this problem. The simplest way is to check, after reaching each new state, whether that state is not present in the currently examined path from the initial state.

It is also possible to check more carefully — whether the newly found state has not previously been found, and explored. For this test a set of all visited stated must be kept, a so-called *Closed* list. In the recursive implementation of the algorithm this list needs to be global for all the invocations of the procedure, and all newly generated states must be checked against it.

Both checks incur significant computational overhead. It can be skipped in order to save time, but at the risk of looping.

Search depth limiting with iterative deepening

A serious problem for the BT algorithm are infinite (or very large) spaces, which it generally cannot handle. If the algorithm makes a wrong choice (of an operator), and starts exploring an infinite, or a very large, subtree which contains no solution, it may never backtrack and will not find the solution. Particularly fatal may be wrong choices made at the very beginning of the search.

This is a problem not just with BT but with all "optimistic" algorithms, which prefer to go ahead as long as it is possible, and do not worry about bad moves. For many such algorithms simply limiting the search depth to some "reasonable" value is a general and effective protection against the consequences of taking wrong turns. It is, however, generally not easy to determine such "reasonable" value. Setting it too high reduces the efficiency of this countermeasure, while setting it too low runs the risk of not finding a solution when one exists.

An approach used with BT, and in similar optimistic algorithms (preferring marching forward), is a variant of the above, called **depth limiting with iterative deepening**, or just iterative deepening. With this modification BT is **complete** — as long as a solution for the problem (path to the goal state) exists, the algorithm will find it. However, this modification may make BT very inefficient, for example, when the depth limit is set too low.

Heuristics and static evaluation functions

The algorithms presented so far are simple and do not generally require an informed strategy to work. Having and using such strategy is however always desirable.

A heuristic we will call some body of knowledge about the problem domain which:

- cannot be obtained from a syntactic analysis of the problem description,
- may not be formally derived or justified, and which may even be false in some cases, and may lead to wrong hints for searching,
- but which in general helps make good moves in exploring the search space.

Having a heuristic should permit one to build informed search strategies. A general and often used scheme for constructing strategies using heuristic information is a **static evaluation function**. For each state it estimates its "goodness", or a chance that a solution path exists through this state, and/or the proximity to the goal state on such path.

Hill climbing approaches

An evaluation function can be applied directly in searching. This leads to a class of methods called **hill climbing**. Hill climbing methods generally belong to the class of greedy algorithms.

Direct application of these methods is limited to domains with a very regular evaluation function, eg. strictly monotonic one. Applying hill climbing in practical cases typically leads to the following problems:

1. local maxima of the evaluation function
2. "plateau" areas of the evaluation function
3. oblique "ridges" of the evaluation function
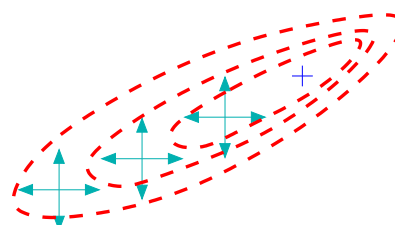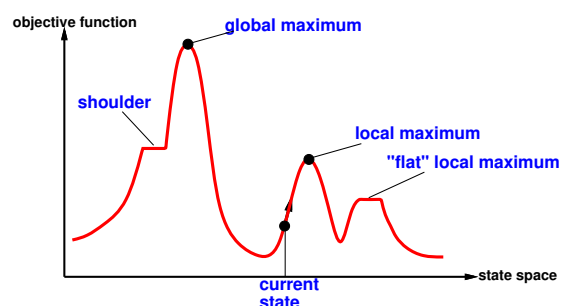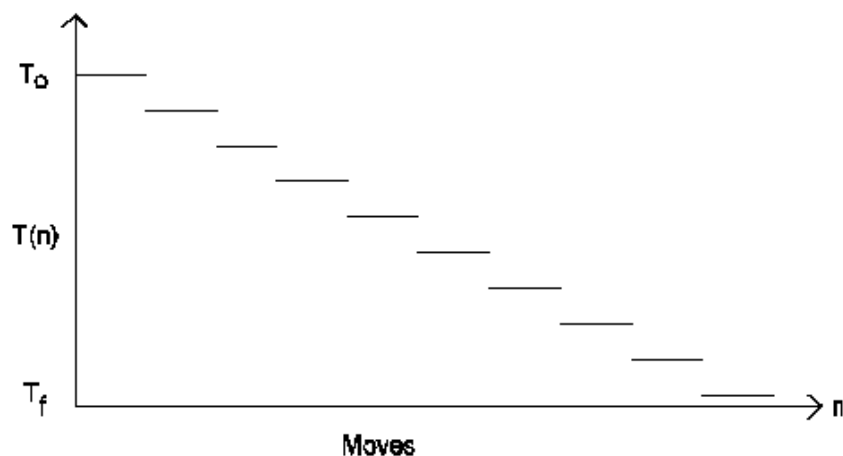
Simulated annealing

An efficient and often used variant of hill climbing is a technique called *simulated annealing*). The name refers to an industrial process of annealing, which means casting a liquid metal with a slow and gradual decreasing of temperature, allowing the metal to achieve the state of global minimum of energy, with a total particle ordering within the whole volume.

The method generates random moves in addition to the basic hill climbing moves, and then decides randomly to execute them, or not, according to the probability distribution shown in the diagram.

As can be seen, if the generated move improves the evaluation function value, then it is always executed. On the other hand, if it worsens the value of the current state, then it is executed with the probability of $p < 1$, which depends on how much the evaluation worsens.
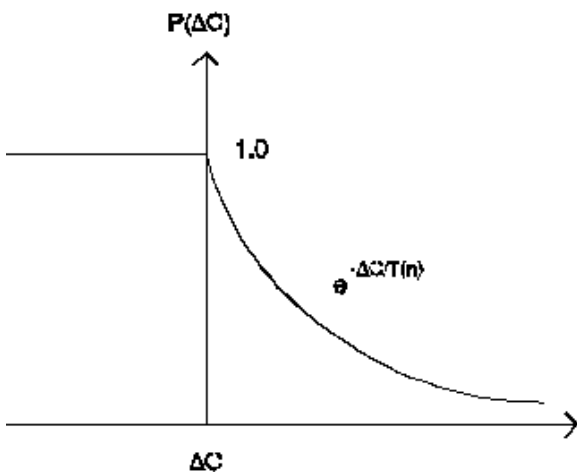
At the same time, during the operation of the algorithm, the "temperature" value is gradually lowered, which decreases the probability of selecting "bad" moves.

The simulated annealing approach has been successfully applied to such problems as designing VLSI circuits and various other networks, allocating resources or tasks in some industrial processes, and other complex optimization processes. An important issue in its application is the selection of its parameters, such as the temperature lowering rate.

Short review

1. Which requirements of the BT algorithm are more critical (important, limiting): computation time, or memory? Justify your answer.

2. Under what circumstances may the BT algorithm NOT find a solution, even though one exists?
   State your answer separately for the finite and infinite search spaces?

3. What is the phenomenon of repeating states in search algorithms?
   What are its possible consequences?

4. What problem is solved by the iterative deepening technique?
   In which cases it is necessary to use it?

5. What are main qualitative problems of gradient search algorithm (ie. excluding the computational complexity)?

Graph searching

Recall the the iterative deepening version of the backtracking (BT) algorithm, and the problem of repeated explorations of the initial part of the search space. In order to avoid such repeated exploration one might introduce an explicit representation of the search graph, and keep in memory the explored part of the search space. Algorithms which do this are called **graph searching** algorithms.

General graph searching strategies (blind):

- breadth-first search strategy (BFS),

- depth-first search strategy (DFS),
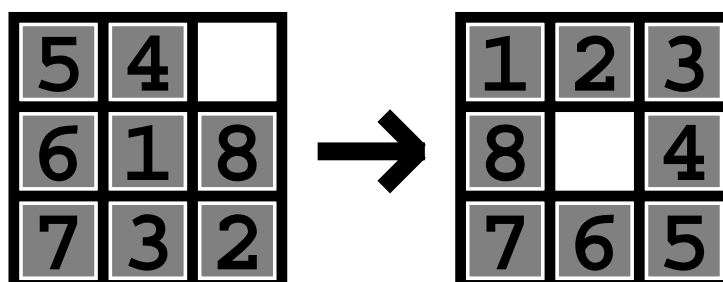
- other strategies.
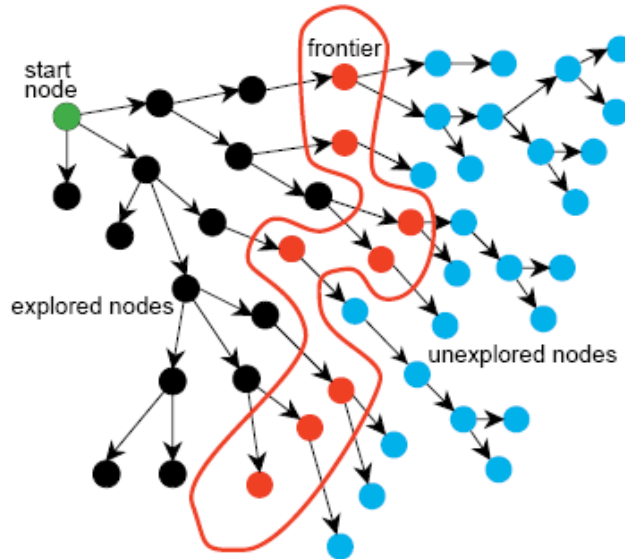
An example: the 8-puzzle

1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8
9	10	11	12
13	14	15	

The 15-puzzle is popular with school children.

8-puzzle — a reduced version, suitable for testing various artificial intelligence algorithms and strategies, and presenting their operation.

Breadth-first search (BFS)

- Explore all the states within the distance of d from the initial state s_0 before exploring any states at the distance $(d+1)$ or more from s_0.

- Always finds a solution if one only exists.

- What's more, always finds the optimal solution (ie. finds the shortest path from the initial state to any state).

- Is not inherently resistant to getting trapped in state loop sequences and may require the use of the *Closed* list.

- The space and time complexity of the algorithm are terrible, both at $O(b^d)$, where:
  b — average number of branches growing from a node (*branching factor*),
  d — distance from the initial state to the solution (operator steps).

- Worst and average case complexity practically equal (best case likewise).

- Implementation note: append newly discovered states to the end of the *Open* list. (Where we talk about lists of nodes, in practice often faster data structures, like hash tables, are used.)
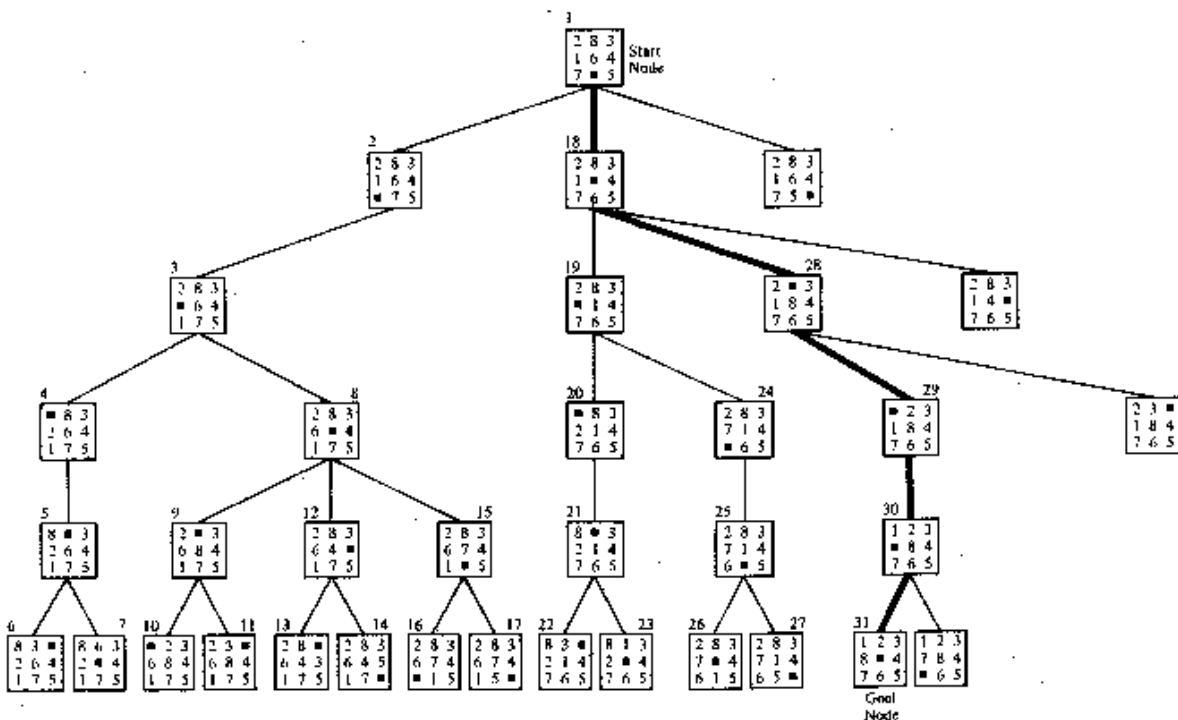
Breadth-first search — an example
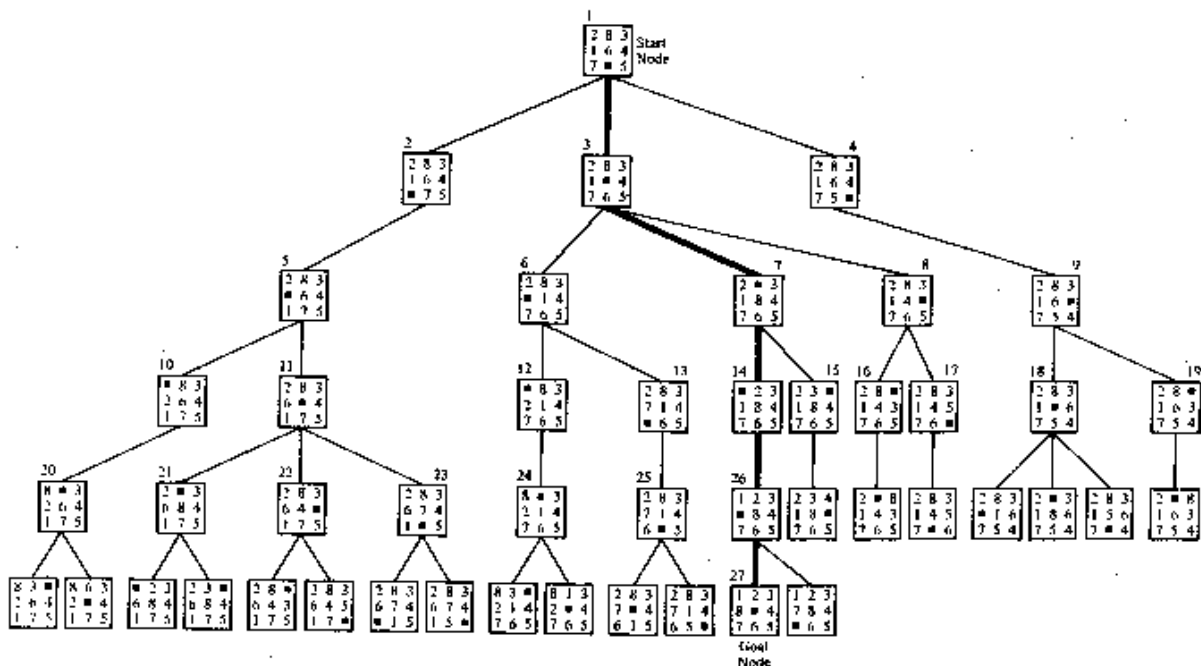
The diagram presents a section of a breadth-first search graph. The numbers above the state miniatures (1–26) show the node selection order for the graph expansion.

Depth-first search (DFS)

- Explore all the newly discovered descendant states of the current state n before returning to exploring the neighbors of the state n.

- Offers none of the BFS' guaranteed properties (finding the best, or any solution).

- Worst case complexity: exploring and storing the whole space.

- Average case complexity: $O(b^d)$ both in time and space.

- For infinite spaces the only practically useful variant of this algorithm is the depth limitation with iterative deepening (but DFS graph searching is not so pathetically wasteful as was the case with the BT algorithm).

- The efficiency of the algorithm may improve dramatically for the cases significantly better than the average case (particularly lucky), so it makes sense to use it when good heuristics are available.

- Implementation note: prepend all the newly discovered states to the front of the *Open* list.

Depth-first search — an example

A section of an "average" depth-first search graph with the depth limit of 5.
The state numbers again show the order of node selection for graph expansion.

Uniform-cost search (UC)

In those cases, when the costs of all moves are not equal, the breadth-first search, which is based on the number of moves, obviously no longer guarantees optimality. A simple extension of the breadth-first algorithm finds the optimal path for any (positive) cost of a single move. This algorithm is called the **uniform-cost** (UC) search, and works by always selecting for expansion the graph node of the lowest path cost.
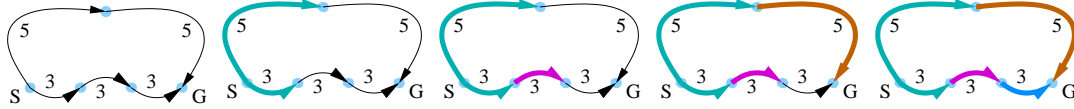

In the case of equal costs, this is identical to breadth-first search.

The optimality of the algorithm can be (trivially) proved as long as the cost of a single move is some positive value ($\geq \epsilon$). But since the algorithm is guided by the path cost, its complexity cannot be characterized as a function of b and d. Instead, if C^* denotes the cost of the optimal solution, the worst case complexity of the algorithm — both time and memory — is $O(b^{1+\lfloor C^*/\epsilon \rfloor})$.

In the case of equal costs, this is $O(b^d)$.

Search termination

The goal of searching might be just to find some path to the goal, or to find the optimal path. In the former case, the algorithm may terminate when it discovers, that the state it has just reached, ie. that has been placed on the *Open* list, is the goal state. But can we do the same when searching for an optimal solution?
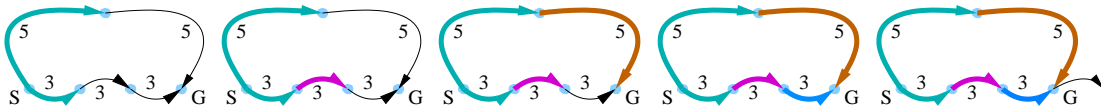
The optimal search should be terminated when the algorithm has just <u>chosen</u> a goal node (possibly one of a few already reached goal nodes) for expansion. The expansion can then be abandoned, and the algorithm terminated, but the best known path to the goal node is the optimal solution. Since the algorithm systematically finds all cheapest paths, a decision to expand a node means, that there may not exist any cheaper paths to it.

Before that happens, however, the algorithm explores cheaper paths, and there is no guarantee that it would not find a new, better path to the goal node.

Adding heuristics: the best-first search

The most straightforward application of a heuristic state evaluation function to graph searching leads to the **best-first search**. At any point, it chooses to expand states with the best heuristic value. With a good evaluation function, such which correctly evaluates states, and decreases in value along the path to the solution, the best-first search algorithm proceeds directly toward the goal state, wasting no time exploring any unnecessary states (graph nodes).

Also with slight defects in the evaluation function, with a few values a little off, but no systematic errors, this scheme works very well in guiding the search space exploration process.

The problems start when the evaluation function is wrong in a larger (perhaps infinite) part of the search space, and consequently indicates as good some states which do not lead to a solution. In such cases the best-first strategy exhibits the same problems as the depth-first search, even if the evaluation function may correctly evaluate many, or most, states.

Implementing graph searching

The graph searching algorithms described here work according to the scheme:

```
PROCEDURE GS(s0)                   ; s0 - start state description
BEGIN
n   := s0
G   := {s0}                        ; search graph: nodes and edges
Open := [s0]; Closed := []         ; lists of new and explored nodes
UNTIL Term(n) DO                   ; does n satisfy the goal condition?
   BEGIN
      Open := Remove(n,Open)
      new := Successors(n)         ; generate all n's successors
      G := AddSuccessors(G,New)    ; add new structure elements to G
      Open += (new-Closed)         ; add newly discovered nodes to Open
      Closed += {n}
      n := SelectNext(Open)        ; select next node for expansion
   END
solution := BuildPath(s0,n,G)      ; reconstruct the path from s0 to n
END
```

The above algorithm for simplicity reasons the operations of computing and revising costs to all nodes have been omitted.

The uninformed BFS and DFS ignore all costs, and may be implemented by simply appending (BFS) or prepending (DFS) new nodes to the *Open* list.

The node selection in the UC and best-first algorithms is based on cost functions (although computed differently). The next node selection is based on the min cost, and a good data structure for the *Open* list is a priority queue, which permits a trivial best node selection, and inexpensive $O(\log(N))$ additions and deletions.

Often useful in an implementation of the UC search is a construction from the Dijkstra's algorithm (1959) finding the single-source shortest paths (all) in a graph. The Dijkstra's algorithm however assumed a finite, completely known graph loaded into the memory.

Short review

1. What is the difference between the uniform-cost and breadth-first search?

2. What is the difference between the depth-first and best-first search?

3. Describe the basic work cycle of the graph searching algorithms.

4. Describe the usage of the Open and Closed lists in graph search algorithms.

A modified node selection — the already incurred cost

Consider the following deterministic state (node) evaluation functions:

$h^*(n)$ – the cost of the cost-optimal path from n to the goal
$g^*(n)$ – the cost of the cost-optimal path from s_0 to n

Therefore:

$f^*(n) := g^*(n) + h^*(n)$
$f^*(n)$ – the cost of the cost-optimal path from s_0 to the goal, going through n

Having access to the $f^*(n)$ function would allow one to always select the nodes on the optimal path from start to the goal. In fact, it would suffice to use the $h^*(n)$ function. In both cases, the agent would go directly to the goal.

Unfortunately, these functions are normally not available. We are forced to use their approximations to select nodes in the graph. However, when using the approximations, then the search based on the $f^*(n)$ function does not necessarily proceed exactly like that based on the $h^*(n)$ function.

A modified node selection — the A* algorithm

Consider the following heuristic (approximate) state evaluation functions:

$h(n)$ – a heuristic approximation of $h^*(n)$
$g(n)$ – the cost of the best <u>known</u> path from s_0 to n; note $g(n) \geq g^*(n)$
$f(n) := g(n) + h(n)$

How does the strategy using the $f(n)$ approximation work? If $h(n)$ estimates the $h^*(n)$ value very well, then the algorithm works perfectly, going directly to the goal. If, however, the $h(n)$ function is inaccurate, and eg. reports some states to be better then they really are, then the algorithm will first head in their direction, lured by the low values of $h(n)$, while $g(n)$ was negligible.

After some time, however, such erroneously estimated paths will stop being attractive, due to the increasing $g(n)$ component, and the algorithm will switch its attention to more attractive nodes. The attraction of a node here is not affected by how far it is from start or from the goal. Instead it is determined only by the combined estimate of the total cost of a complete start-to-goal path running through that node.

An algorithm using a strategy with the above $f(n)$ function is called the **A* algorithm**.

The evaluation function in the A* algorithm

The $h(n)$ and $g(n)$ components of the $f(n)$ function represent the two opposite trends: the optimism ($h(n)$) and the conservatism ($g(n)$). We can freely adjust the strategy one way or the other by using the formula:

$$f(n) := (1 - k) * g(n) + k * h(n)$$

By increasing the weight coefficient k we can bias the search toward more aggressive (and risky) when, eg. we trust the $h(n)$ function and want to proceed rapidly. On the other hand, by decreasing this coefficient, we enforce a more careful exploration of the search space, moving ahead slower, but possibly compensating for some of the $h(n)$ function's errors.

Note that in the extreme cases, $k = 1$ yields the best-first search, while $k = 0$ yields the uniform-cost search.

But it is the quality of the $h(n)$ function that has the biggest influence on the search process.

The h(n) function properties in A*

The heuristic evaluation function $h(n)$ in the A* algorithm is called **admissible** if it bounds from below the real cost function $h^*(n)$, ie. $\forall n \; h(n) \leq h^*(n)$. Admissibility means chronic underestimating of future costs, so it is also referred to as optimism. It can be proved, that whenever there exists a path from the start node to the goal, the A* with an admissible heuristic will always find the best such path.

This sound nice, so is it hard to find such an admissible heuristic? Not necessarily. For example, $h(n) \equiv 0$ indeed bounds $h^*(n)$ from below for any problem. And can such a trivial heuristic be useful? The answer is: not really. Such algorithm always selects the nodes with the shortest path from s_0, so it is equivalent to the breadth-first (more generally: uniform-cost) search which indeed always guarantees to find the optimal solution, but, as we already know, it is not such a great algorithm.

Naturally, the better $h(n)$ approximates $h^*(n)$ the more efficient the search is. In fact, it can be proved that for any two evaluation functions $h_1(n)$ and $h_2(n)$, such that for all states $h_1(n) < h_2(n) \leq h^*(n)$ using h_1 in search leads to the exploration at least the same number of states as it does using h_2.

The h(n) function properties in A* (cntd.)

Admissibility of the heuristic function $h(n)$ is an interesting property, which can frequently be proved for functions coarsely approximating $h*(n)$, but not always can be proved for painstakingly elaborated function, such as using numerical learning from a series of examples (which is one method of constructing heuristic functions, which we will look at later).

An even stronger property of a heuristic evaluation function $h(n)$ is its **consistency**, also called the **monotone restriction**, or simply the triangle property:

$$\mathop{\forall}_{n_i \to n_j} h(n_i) - h(n_j) \leq c(n_i, n_j)$$

It can be proved that for a function h satisfying the monotone restriction the A* algorithm always already knows the best path to any state (graph node) that is chooses for expansion. In practice this makes it possible to simplify the search algorithm implementation, if we know that the evaluation function is consistent.

A* algorithm complexity

For most practical problems the number of nodes of the state space grows exponentially with the length of the solution path. Certainly, an efficient heuristic could decrease the computational complexity of the algorithm.
A good question is: when could we count on such a reduction?

It can be proved, that for this to happen, ie. for the A* algorithm to run in polynomial time, the estimate error of the heuristic evaluation function should not exceed the logarithm of the actual solution length:

$$|h(n) - h^*(n)| \leq O(\log h^*(n))$$

In most practical cases one cannot count on finding such good heuristics, so the A* algorithm should be considered to be exponential. However, most often this bad time performance is not even the biggest problem with A*. Just as with most other graph searching algorithms, it stores all the discovered states in memory, and usually fills up the available computer memory a long time before running out of its time limit.

Memory-considerate variants of A*

There are variants of the A* algorithm which cope with the memory problem.

The IDA* (Iterative-Deepening A*) algorithm sets a limit on the f value to which the algorithm is allowed to proceed. After that the limit is extended, but the explored nodes are deleted from memory.

The RBFS (Recursive Best-First Search) algorithm is more like the recursive version of the BT algorithm. It explores the search graph recursively, always keeping in mind the estimated cost of the second-best option (at all levels of recursion). When the currently explored path estimate exceeds the memorized alternative, the algorithm backtracks. And when it does backtrack, it loses all memory of all the explored part of the space (but keeps the estimate of that path in case it is later necessary to also backtrack from the original alternative).

The SMA* (Simplified Memory-Bounded A*) proceeds just like A*, but only up to the limit of the currently available memory. After that, the algorithm continues, but deleting the least-promising node to make space for each newly encountered state. However, it stores in the parent of each deleted node its heuristic estimate, so in case all preserved nodes get their estimates higher, the algorithm may come back, and re-generate the deleted node.

Algorithm A* in practice

A good question is whether the heuristic search algorithms, such as A*, have important practical applications.

The answer is: yes, in some constrained domains, such as planning the optimal travel path of autonomous vehicles, or finding the shortest paths in computer games.

The A* algorithm is the heuristic version of Dijkstra's algorithm (1959) finding the shortest paths from a selected node to all the other graph nodes.

The Dijkstra's algorithm is also used in many technical applications, such as network routing protocols like OSPF, or finding the routes in the GPS navigation systems. In the latter domain, due to the graph size the Dijkstra's algorithm must be augmented by additional techniques. These can be heuristics, or introducing abstraction and path hierarchy. However, due to the commercial nature of this still developing application, the detailed solutions are rarely published.

Searching backward

Searching the state space can be conducted equally well in the forward or reverse direction. The **backward search** starts with the goal node (or the whole set of them) and in the first step finds all the states from which a goal node can be reached in one step by one of the available operators. The search continues until the starting state is encountered.

Backward search can be equally easy to implement as the forward search, or it can be impeded by the specific representation. In the latter case a change of the problem representation may be needed to efficiently implement backward search.

However, a more important issue is the availability of heuristics. For the forward search, the heuristic should hint which steps to select to move closer to the goal. In some domains appropriate intuitions may be missing. For the backward search the heuristic should give hints which states are closer to the well known starting state. It may be easier to acquire such intuitions guiding our decisions.

Bidirectional search

The idea of backward searching can be extended to **bidirectional search**. If the representation allows that, we may make steps in the search space both in the and direction. As can be seen in the figure below, this may give significant savings:
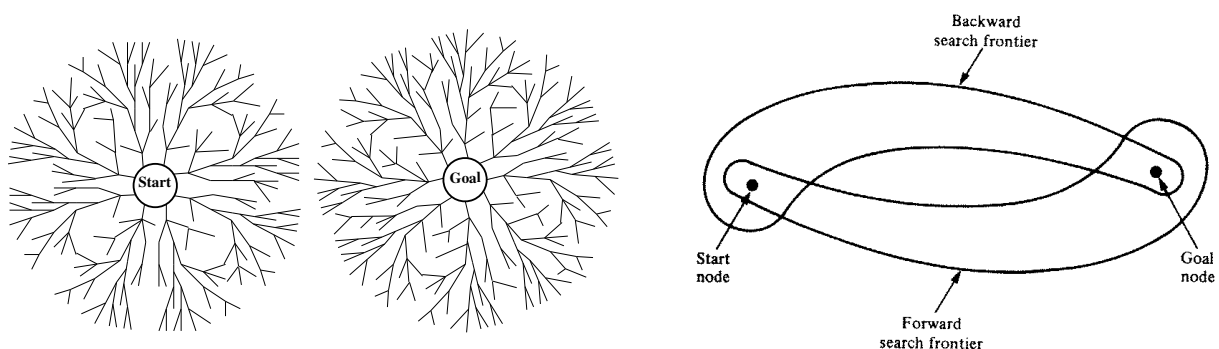
However, as illustrated by the figure on the right, instead of saving we may expend more work. The bi-directional search easily saves work in the cases of the Dijkstra's algorithm (uniform cost), but in the case of highly refined, directional heuristics it may be better to trust and follow it in one direction.

Short review

1. What is the difference between A* and best-first search algorithms? How does this difference affect the search process?

2. What are admissible heuristics for the A* algorithm? What is their practical significance?

3. The heuristic search algorithm A* with an admissible evaluation function h guarantees finding an optimal solution, whenever one exists. Consider the following modifications of the f function, and answer whether they preserve the this optimality property of the A* algorithm. Justify your answer.

   (a) introduction of an upper bound on the value of the h(n) function
   (b) introduction of a lower bound on the value of the g(n) function

Constructing useful heuristics

How in general can one go about constructing a useful heuristic function, without a sufficient knowledge of the problem domain to <u>design it</u> from first principles?

Experiment, experiment, experiment!

Example: heuristics for the 8-puzzle

<u>Heuristic 1:</u> count elements in wrong places, the function $h_1(n) = W(n)$

<u>Heuristic 2:</u> for all the elements in a wrong place, compute and add up their distances from their proper place. The number thus derived will certainly be less than the number of moves of any complete solution (so is a lower bound of the solution). Call it the function $h_2(n) = P(n)$

<u>Heuristic 3:</u> $h_3(n) = P(n) + 3 * S(n)$
where the function $S(n)$ is computed for the elements on the perimeter of the puzzle taking 0 for those elements which have their correct right neighbor (clockwise), and taking 2 for each element which have some other element as their right neighbor. The element in the middle scores 1, if it is present.

In general, neither $S(n)$ nor $h_3(n)$ are lower bounds of the solution length. However, the $h_3(n)$ function is one of the best well-known evaluation functions for the 8-puzzle, resulting in a very focused and efficient search strategy.

On the other hand, the $h(n) \equiv 0$ function is a perfect lower bound solution estimation, satisfying the requirements of the A* algorithm, and always finding the optimal solution. This illustrates the fact, that *technically correct* is not necessarily *heuristically efficient*.

The heuristic function quality vs. the cost of A* search

The table shows a comparison of the search costs and effective branching factors for the ITERATIVE-DEEPENING-SEARCH and A* algorithms with h_1, h_2. Data are averaged over 100 instances of the 8-puzzle for each of various solution lengths d.

d	Search Cost (nodes generated)			Effective Branching Factor		
	IDS	A*(h_1)	A*(h_2)	IDS	A*(h_1)	A*(h_2)
2	10	6	6	2.45	1.79	1.79
4	112	13	12	2.87	1.48	1.45
6	680	20	18	2.73	1.34	1.30
8	6384	39	25	2.80	1.33	1.24
10	47127	93	39	2.79	1.38	1.22
12	3644035	227	73	2.78	1.42	1.24
14	–	539	113	–	1.44	1.23
16	–	1301	211	–	1.45	1.25
18	–	3056	363	–	1.46	1.26
20	–	7276	676	–	1.47	1.27
22	–	18094	1219	–	1.48	1.28
24	–	39135	1641	–	1.48	1.26

(Table copied from the Russell&Norvig textbook.)

An approximate number of IDS nodes for d=24 is 54,000,000,000.

Heuristic search of the 8-puzzle search tree

The presented comparison of the heuristic functions for 8-puzzle does not contain the best h_3 function. Some illustration for its performance is the following example search tree, where the solution is at level 18, and the total number of nodes is 44. Its effective branching factor is 1.09
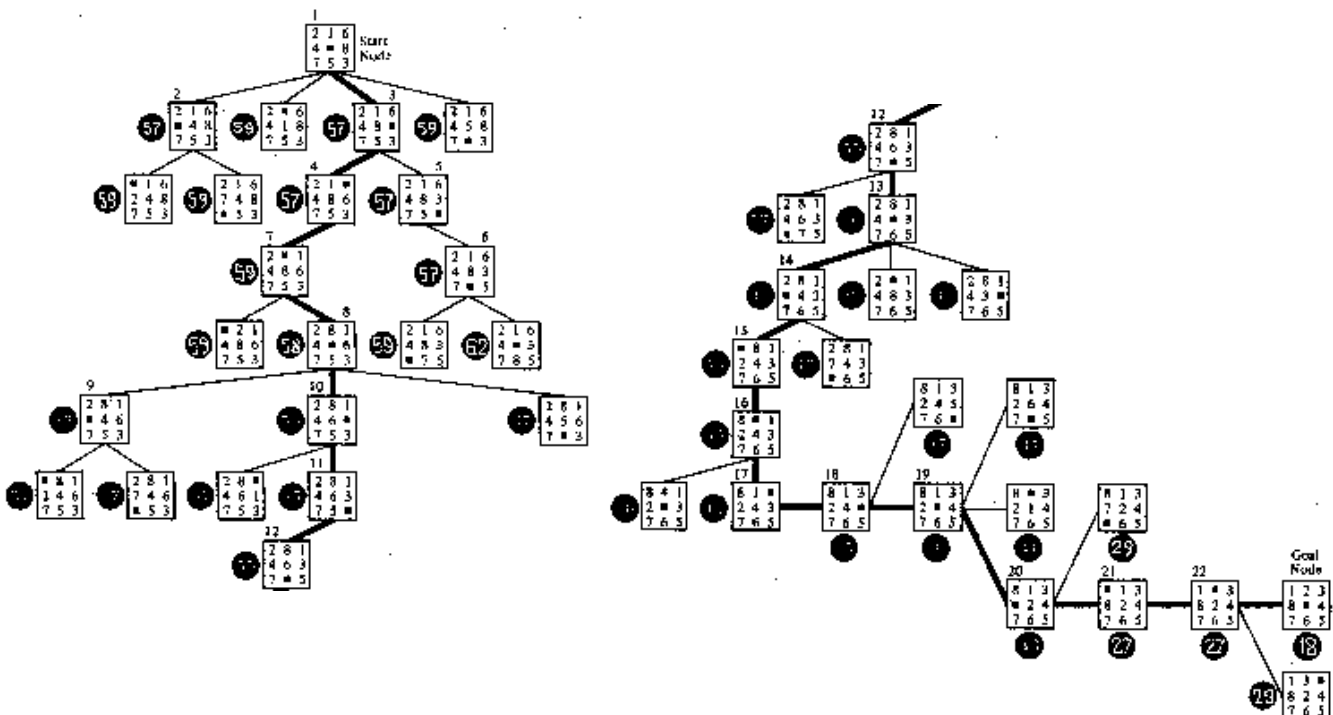
Constructing heuristic functions (cntd.)

One of the general approaches to constructing heuristic functions is the following. Consider a simplified problem, by giving up on some requirement(s), to make finding a solution easy. For each state generated during the search for the original problem, a simplified problem is solved (eg. using a breadth-first search). The cost of the optimal solution for the simplified problem can be taken as an estimation (lower bound) of the solution cost for the original problem.

For example, if the state space is defined with n parameters, so the states are the elements of the n-dimensional space, then one of the parameters can be eliminated, effectively mapping the states to $(n-1)$ dimensions.

If there are a few different ways, that this simplification can be achieved, and we cannot choose between them (eg. which state variable to drop), then we can use their combination for the evaluation function: $h(n) = \max_k(h_1(n), ..., h_k(n))$

Let us note, that in the case of the 8-puzzle heuristics, if one allowed a teleportation of the elements to their proper place in one move, it would be an example of such approach, and give the evaluation function $h_1(n)$. Further, the agreement to move elements by single field, but regardless of other elements possibly in the way, would give the function $h_2(n)$.

Constructing heuristic functions (cntd.)

Another approach to developing a heuristic function is to work it out statistically.

We need first to define some state attributes, which might be related to the distance to the solution. Having these, we take a heuristic function to be a linear combination of such attributes, with some unknown coefficients, which can be learned. This is done by running some experiments to determine some solution distances, using a full search, or another heuristic function.

The derived optimal solution distances can be used to construct a set of linear equations, which can be solved for the unknown coefficients.

Note that this is the way the $h_3(n)$ function for the 8-puzzle could possibly be found. The $W(n)$ and $P(n)$ functions could be assumed useful for constructing a good heuristic. The $S(n)$ function also estimates the difficulty of reaching the goal state. Using the function $h(n) = a * W(n) + b * P(n) + c * S(n)$ and running many experiments to compute $h(n)$, possibly we could have determined the approximate optimal values as: $a \approx 0$, $b \approx 1$ and $c \approx 3$, in effect obtaining the function $h_3(n)$.

Short review

1. Name and briefly describe the methods you know for creating heuristic evaluation functions.

Searching in two-person games

Games are fascinating and often intellectually challenging entertainment. No wonder they have been the object of interest of artificial intelligence.

State space search methods cannot be directly applied to games because the opponent's moves, which are not known, must be considered. The "solution" must be a scheme considering all possible reactions of the opponent.

Additionally, in some games the full state information is not available to either player.

Types of games:

|	deterministic	chance
perfect information	chess, checkers, go, othello	backgammon, monopoly
imperfect information	battleships, blind tictactoe	bridge, poker, scrabble

Two-person game tree
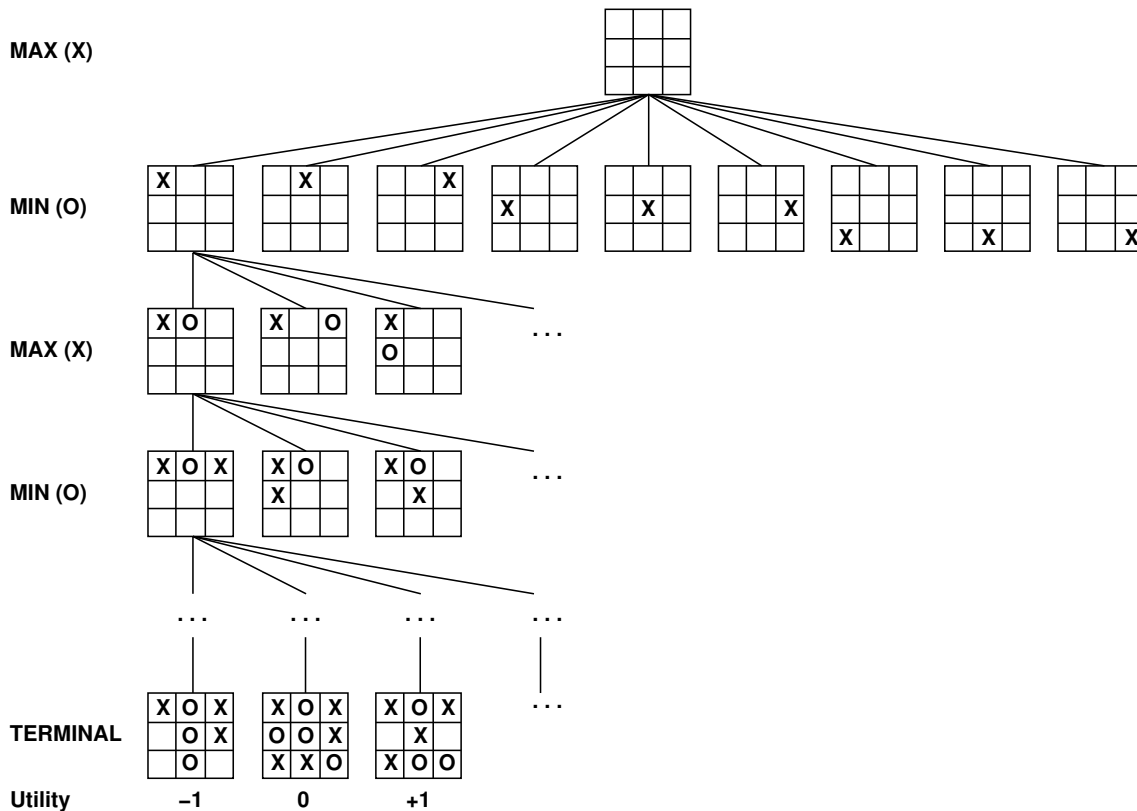
The minimax procedure

A complete strategy for a deterministic perfect information game can be computed using the following **minimax** procedure. It computes the value of the starting node by propagating the final utility values up the game tree:

1. the levels of the tree correspond to the players' moves: MAX's and MIN's; assume the first move is MAX's,
2. assign the MAX's win value to the terminal states in the leaves (negative, if they actually represent a loss to MAX)
3. tree nodes are successfully assigned the values: the maximum of the branches below if the current node corresponds to MAX, and the minimum of the branches below if the node corresponds to MIN,
4. the top tree branch with the highest value indicates the best move for MAX.
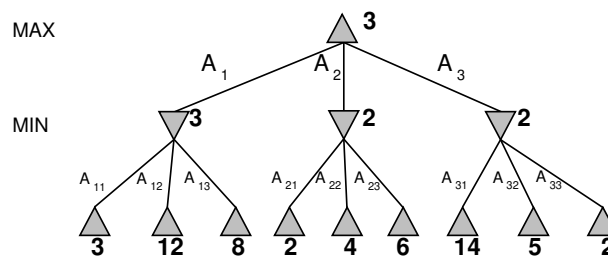
Resource limiting — using heuristics

The minimax procedure defines an optimal strategy for the player, assuming the opponent plays optimally. But only, if it can be fully computed.

> For a real game tree this might be a problem. Eg., for chess $b \approx 35, m \approx 100$ for a reasonable game, and a complete game tree might have about $35^{100} \approx 10^{155}$ nodes. (The number of atoms in the known part of the Universe is estimated at 10^{80}.)

To solve this problem, a heuristic function estimating a position value can be used, like in standard state space search, to determine the next move without having an explicit representation of the full search space. In the case of a two-person game this facilitates applying the minimax procedure to a partial game tree, limited to a few moves.

> For chess, such heuristic function can compute the **material value** of the figures on the board, eg. 1 for a pawn, 3 for a rook or a bishop, 5 for a knight, and 9 for the queen. Additionally, position value can be considered, such as „favorable pawn arrangement", or a higher value of the rook in the end-game (higher yet for two rooks).

Special situations in heuristic-based search

Limiting the depth search sometimes leads to specific issues, which require special treatment.

One of them is the concept of **quiescence search**. In some cases the heuristic evaluation function of some states may be favorable for one of the players, but the next few moves — which extend beyond the minimax search limit — inevitably lead to serious shifts, like exchanging some pieces in chess. It would be useful to detect such situations, and extend the search in the corresponding part of the game tree to reach a more stable configuration, or so-called *quiescent states*.

Another issue is the **horizon effect**. It occurs when an inevitable loss for one of the players approaches, but she can postpone its onset by making insignificant moves.

Minimax search — cutting off the search

What practical effects can be obtained with the heuristic search limited to a few steps?

Eg., for chess, assuming 10^4 nodes per second and 100 seconds for a move, $10^6 \approx 35^4$ positions can be explored, which amounts to 4 moves. Unfortunately, for chess this corresponds to only the most elementary play. Additional techniques for increasing the search efficiency are needed.

It turns out it is easy to make additional savings in the minimax. The most common approach is called the **alpha-beta pruning**.

$\alpha-\beta$ pruning — an example
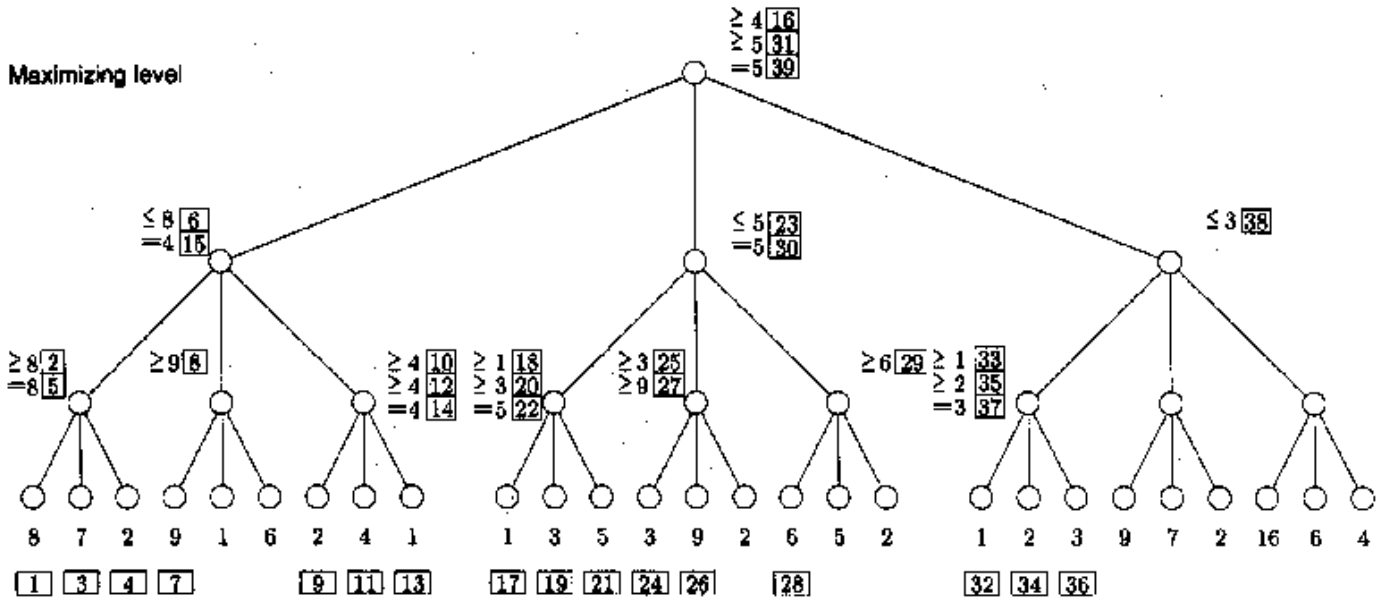
Exercise: find an error in the above tree (source: Patrick Henry Winston, *Artificial Intelligence*, 3rd ed.).

Answer: step [10]

$\alpha-\beta$ pruning — the algorithm

```
PROCEDURE MINIMAX-ALPHA-BETA(n,alpha,beta,depth)
BEGIN
   IF depth==MAXDEPTH THEN RETURN(h(n))

   choices := Descendant_list(n)
   WHILE (NOT Empty(choices)) AND (alpha < beta) DO
   ;; abandon exploring subsequent descendant of node n - means a cut
   BEGIN
      n1 := First(choices)
      choices := Rest(choices)
      w1 := MINIMAX-ALPHA-BETA(n1,alpha,beta,depth+1)

      IF EVEN(depth) THEN                ; for MAX's nodes
         IF w1 > alpha THEN alpha := w1
      IF ODD(depth) THEN                 ; for MIN's nodes
         IF w1 < beta THEN beta := w1
   END

   IF EVEN(depth) THEN RETURN(alpha)    ; MAX's node
                  ELSE RETURN(beta)     ; MIN's node
END
```
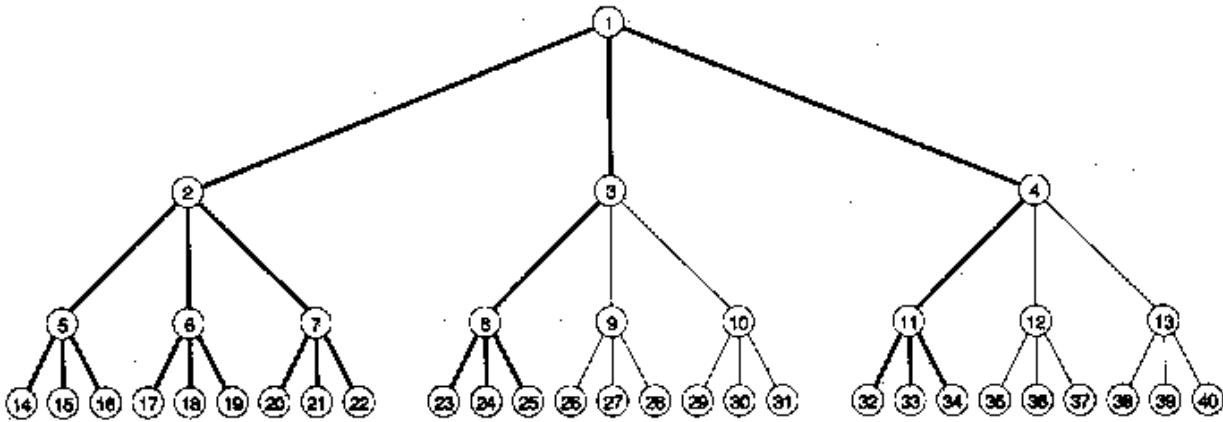
$\Rightarrow$ in the first call we use $\alpha = -\infty$, $\beta = +\infty$

$\alpha{-}\beta$ pruning — the optimal case

The optimal case of the minimax search with the alpha-beta cuts is when at each tree level the nodes are examined starting from the most favorite, for the given player. In such case only one "series" of nodes are evaluated in each subtree, and a cut occurs on each return up the tree.

In the above diagram the savings is 16 nodes. Out of 27 nodes at the lowest level of the tree only 11 must be evaluated.
Source: Patrick Henry Winston, *Artificial Intelligence*, 3rd ed. (note an error: the nodes 18, 19, 21, and 22 could also be cut off).

The properties of the $\alpha{-}\beta$ algorithm

The basic idea of the $\alpha{-}\beta$ algorithm is that the cuts it makes do not affect the optimal move of the player.
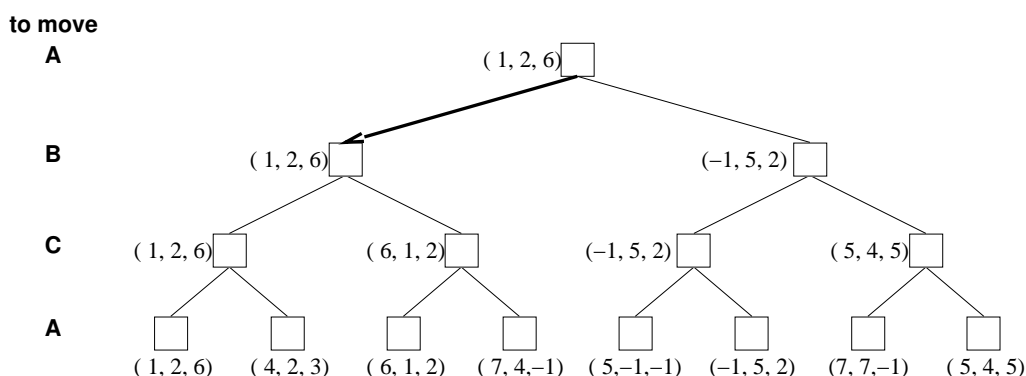
Introducing a favorable ordering allows better cut-off efficiency. In the limit, the optimal cuts achieve $O(b^{m/2})$ algorithm complexity. In practice this doubles the effective search depth.

The results of the min-max/$\alpha{-}\beta$ analysis does not depend on the specific values of the evaluation function, only on their ordering. This means that an arbitrary monotonic transformation of the evaluation function works as well and gives the exact same results.
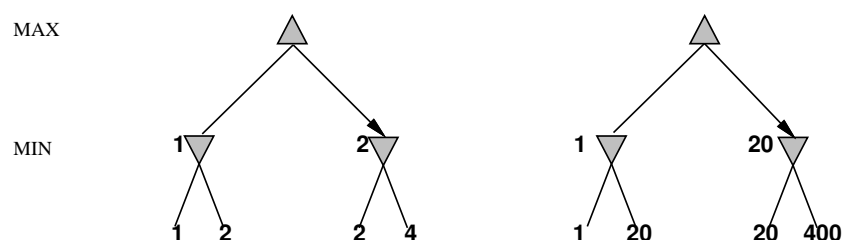
Minimax — a multi-player generalization

The minimax algorithm can be generalized to a multiplayer case. In this case, a vector evaluation function must be employed, which evaluates the position from the point of view of each player. Each player maximizes her element of the vector, and the value propagation proceeds like in two-player case.

```
to move
  A                                      ( 1, 2, 6)□
                                        /            \
  B              ( 1, 2, 6)□                              □ (−1, 5, 2)
                /          \                            /          \
  C   ( 1, 2, 6)□      ( 6, 1, 2)□           (−1, 5, 2)□        □ ( 5, 4, 5)
       /    \          /    \                /    \            /    \
  A   □      □        □      □              □      □          □      □
  ( 1, 2, 6)( 4, 2, 3)( 6, 1, 2)( 7, 4,−1)( 5,−1,−1)(−1, 5, 2)( 7, 7,−1)( 5, 4, 5)
```

There are other factors that have to be considered in multi-player games, such as <u>alliances</u>. Sometimes it is advantageous for players to make alliances against other players, or even change these alliances dynamically during the game.

The practice of two-person computer games

Checkers: the Chinook program terminated in 1994 the 40-year long domination of the world champion Marion Tinsley[1] A year later the program defeated the subsequent champion Don Lafferty.

Chess: during the decade of 1990-2000 the chess programs rose to the level of the best human players. In 1997 Deep Blue first defeated the world master Garri Kasparov in an open tournament. Subsequently, chess programs running on normal computers entered. In 2006 Deep Fritz defeated the world master Vladimir Kramnik. After this, the excitement of the man-machine chess competition started to drop.

Othello: the human masters refuse to play the computers, which are superior.

Go: the human masters refuse to play the computers, which are too weak. Typical games include a handicap made by humans to the computers. The branching factor in go $b > 300$ so instead of a systematic search of the game tree most programs use a rule knowledge base to generate moves.

<u>Lastest news:</u> in March 2016 AlphaGo defeated a 9-dan master in an even game on a full-size board.

---

[1]Although the champion withdrew from the competition for health reasons and died shortly thereafter.

Games with chance elements — expectimax

With chance elements, the set of available actions at each step is dependent on some random variable, such as throwing the dice. The analysis is more complicated and requires considering all the options, and computing the expected values of the distributions of the random variables.

For example: one-person games with chance elements. Every other move is the player's choice, who maximizes her position evaluation, and the other moves are chance (or treated as chance), with a known probability distribution of the results. The algorithm modified to analyze such games is called **expectimax**.

A further generalization — expectiminimax

A complete probabilistic generalization of the minimax algorithm considers alternating moves of the players and random draws. The algorithm for the analysis of such game search tree is called the **expectiminimax**.
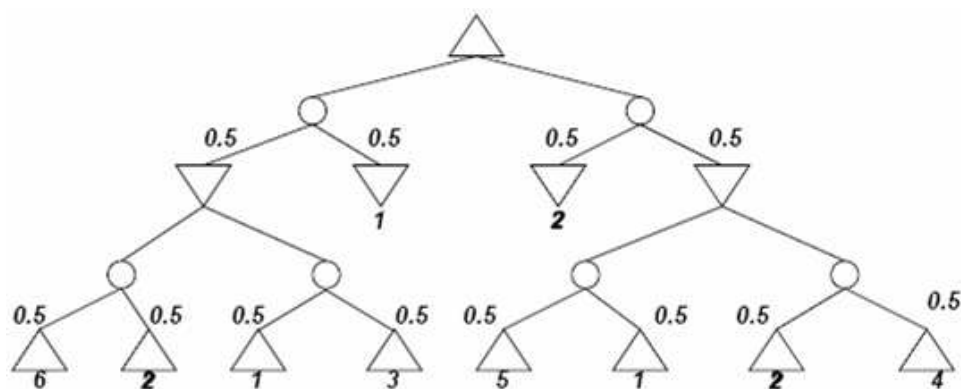
The heuristic evaluation in expectiminimax

Let us note a different property of an evaluation function. For minimax, the move choice is the same for all functions with the same order of the graph nodes. This property does not hold for expectiminimax, as seen in the figure below. The moves designated in the presented trees are different, while it would be identical if not for the chance moves.
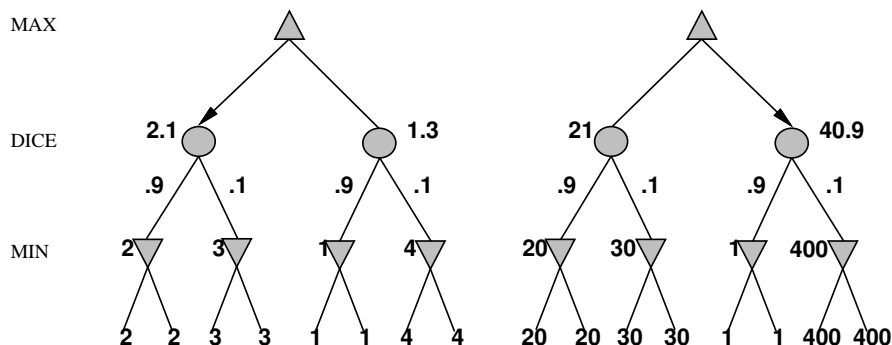
In the case of expectiminimax the evaluation function may not be an arbitrary function correctly sorting the positions. In fact, it should reflect the <u>expected win</u> (or its linear transformation).

# Games with incomplete information

Example: various card games.

One can compute the probability distribution of all combinations of the deal.

The idea: compute the minimax value of each possible action for each possible deal, and then select the action maximizing the expected value computed over all possible deals.

Best bridge programs implement this by generating many deals consistent with the knowledge gained from the bidding and play so far, and select the action which maximize the number of those won.

Short review

1. For the following two-person game search tree, write a precise sequence of the evaluation function values computed by the minimax algorithm with alpha/beta cuts (order left to right).
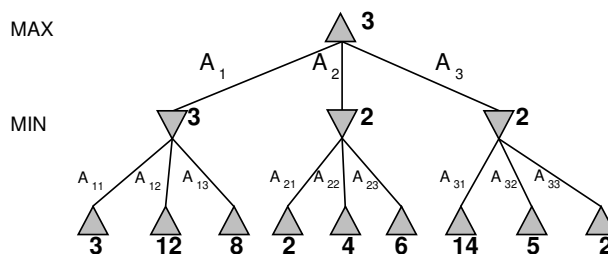
Constraint satisfaction problems

The **Constrained Satisfaction Problems** (CSP) are a special group of state space search problems defined as follows:

- a finite set of variables $X = \{x_1, x_2, ..., x_n\}$

- for each variable x_i, a finite set of its possible values, called its **domain**

- a finite set of **constraints** for the combination of values of the variables, eg. if $x_1 = 5$, then x_2 must be even, and the combination $(x_1 = 5, x_2 = 8, x_3 = 11)$ is disallowed

A solution of a CSP problem is any combination of variable values satisfying all the constraints.

Let us note, that the CSP problems are really a special case of a general state space search problems if we treat the set of constraints as a goal specification, and assigning values to variables as state transition operators. Therefore, all algorithms introduced earlier can be applied to these problems.

Constraint satisfaction problems (cntd.)

Examples of CSP problems are: graph or map coloring, the 8-queen problem, the SAT problem (assigning 0 or 1 values to variables in a logical formula to satisfy the formula), cryptoarithmetic, VLSI design, the node labeling problem (for object recognition in images after edge detection), task queueing, planning, and many others.

Many of them are NP-hard problems.

A CSP problem may have a solution or not, or there may exist many solutions. The goal may be to find one solution, all of the solutions, or the best solution according to some cost function.

The constraints in a CSP problem may be assumed to be binary, ie. constraining pairs of variables. If there are other constraints in a CSP problem, then n-ary constraints (for $n > 2$) can be converted to equivalent binary constraints, and unary constraints can be built into their respective variables' domains and dropped.

Local constraint satisfaction

Let's consider the map coloring problem. We have to assign colors to areas in a given map from the sets of allowed colors, possibly different for different areas, so that adjacent areas have different colors.

D1={R,G,B}

D3={R}

D2={R,G}
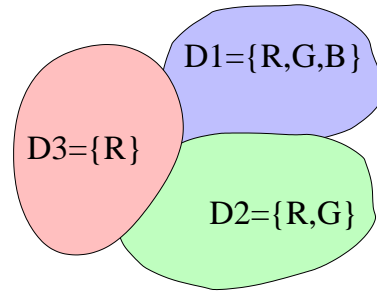
Before we start searching the space of possible value assignments to variables, we can conduct some **local** constraint satisfaction analyzes.

Let's consider the **constraint graph** of a CSP problem, whose nodes correspond to the variables, and edges to the (binary) constraints of the original problem. We consider an edge in this graph as a pair of complementary directed edges, and define a directed edge $x_i \longrightarrow x_j$ of the graph to be **arc consistent** iff $\forall x \in D_i \; \exists y \in D_j$ such that the pair (x, y) satisfies all the constraints existing for the edge.

An inconsistent arc can be brought into consistency by removing specific values from the domains of some variables (specifically, those $x \in D_i$ values for which there does not exist a $y \in D_j$ value satisfying some specific constraint).
This works to reduce and simplify the original problem.
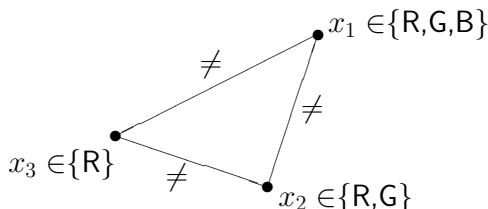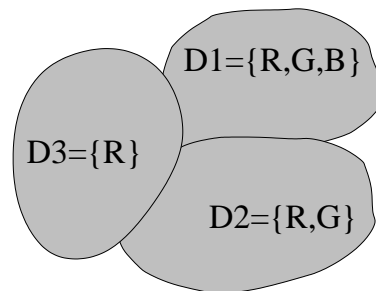
Arc consistency

Let's consider the following example map coloring problem:
$D_1 = \{R, G, B\}$,
$D_2 = \{R, G\}$,
$D_3 = \{R\}$,
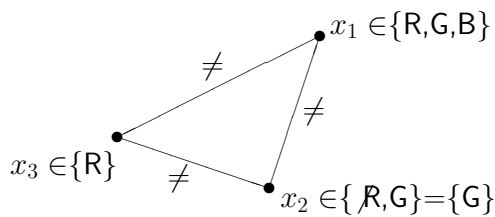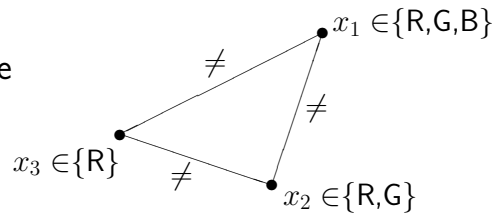$\mathcal{C} = \{x_1 \neq x_2, x_2 \neq x_3, x_1 \neq x_3\}$.

D1={R,G,B}

D3={R}

D2={R,G}

$x_1 \in$\{R,G,B\}

$\neq$

$\neq$

$x_3 \in$\{R\}

$\neq$

$x_2 \in$\{R,G\}

The arc $(x_1\!-\!x_2)$ is arc consistent, since both $\forall x \in D_1 \; \exists y \in D_2 \; x \neq y$ and $\forall y \in D_2 \; \exists x \in D_1 \; x \neq y$ hold.

The fact that arc consistency holds is a mixed blessing. It means that the constraint satisfaction checking of a specific arc in the graph does not contribute to solving the problem. However, a full analysis of the whole CSP constraint graph can sometimes give quite useful results.

An example: map coloring

We again consider the map coloring problem: $D_1 = \{R, G, B\}$, $D_2 = \{R, G\}$, $D_3 = \{R\}$, $\mathcal{C} = \{x_1 \neq x_2, x_2 \neq x_3, x_1 \neq x_3\}$.

Analyzing the first constraint $(x_1 \neq x_2)$ gives nothing because, as previously noted, this edge is arc consistent. (For each value from D_1 there is a value in D_2 which satisfies the constraint, and the other way around.)

$x_1 \in \{R,G,B\}$

$\neq$

$\neq$

$x_3 \in \{R\}$ $\neq$

$x_2 \in \{R,G\}$

$x_1 \in \{R,G,B\}$

$\neq$

$\neq$

$x_3 \in \{R\}$ $\neq$

$x_2 \in \{\cancel{R},G\}=\{G\}$

However, analyzing the second constraint $(x_2 \neq x_3)$ gives some useful results. Even though for $x_3 = R$ there exists corresponding values for x_2, for $x_2 = R$ there is not a value for x_3 satisfying that constraint. So the value R can be removed from the domain of x_2.

An example: map coloring (cntd.)

A similar analysis for the constraint $(x_1 \neq x_3)$ permits to strike from the domain of x_1 the value R:

$x_1 \in \{\cancel{R},G,B\}=\{G,B\}$

$\neq$

$\neq$

$x_3 \in \{R\}$ $\neq$

$x_2 \in \{\cancel{R},G\}=\{G\}$
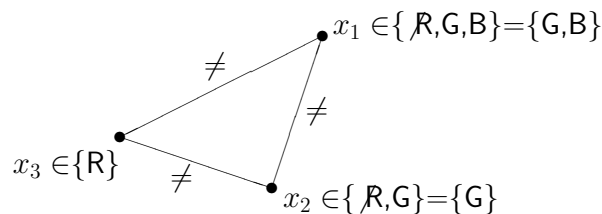
Analyzing all the constraints ended with a partial reduction of the variables' domain. The problem has been simplified (there are fewer possible value assignments to variables), but there still exists more than one potential solution.

But it is easy to observe that the arc consistency checking could, and should, be continued.

Constraint propagation

Since the arc consistency checking results in the reduction of the domains of some variables, it makes sense to repeat the process for the constraint graph edges which were originally consistent, or which have been made consistent. This leads to the **constraint propagation**, which means repeating consistency checking as long as values continue to be removed from variables' domains.

The constraint propagation in the map coloring example causes the edge (x_1, x_2) — originally consistent — to remove the value G from the domain D_1:

$$x_1 \in \{\cancel{R}, \cancel{G}, B\} = \{B\}$$

$$\neq$$

$$\neq$$

$$x_3 \in \{R\}$$
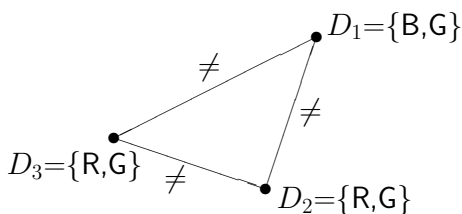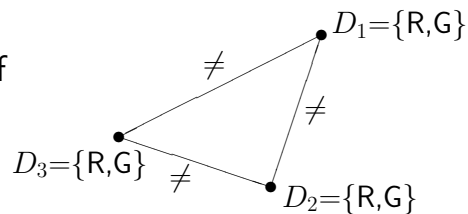
$$\neq$$

$$x_2 \in \{\cancel{R}, G\} = \{G\}$$
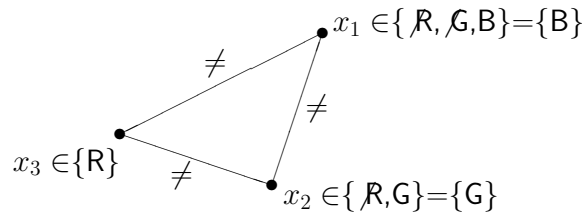
Finally, all the variables have singleton domains, and, furthermore, all the values satisfy all the constraints. Thus the constraint propagation in this case helped solve the problem and determine the unique solution.

In general, consistency checking and constraint propagation lead merely to a simplification, and not necessarily to a complete solution, of a problem.

Constraint propagations — the unsolved cases

It is easy to notice, that in another instance of the map coloring problem presented here, all arcs are consistent. Nevertheless, the problem has no solution.

$$D_1 = \{R, G\}$$
$$\neq$$
$$\neq$$
$$D_3 = \{R, G\}$$
$$\neq$$
$$D_2 = \{R, G\}$$

$$D_1 = \{B, G\}$$
$$\neq$$
$$\neq$$
$$D_3 = \{R, G\}$$
$$\neq$$
$$D_2 = \{R, G\}$$

In still another instance all arcs are again consistent. The problem has two solutions, and the constraint propagation does not help in determining them explicitly, not does it result in any reductions.

By adding to the previous problem the constraint: $(x_1 \neq B) \vee (x_2 \neq R)$, we obtain yet another instance, in which only one solution is valid, but it still cannot be determined by constraint propagation.

$$D_1 = \{B, G\}$$
$$\neq$$
$$\neq$$
$$(x_1 \neq B)$$
$$\vee (x_2 \neq R)$$
$$D_3 = \{R, G\}$$
$$\neq$$
$$D_2 = \{R, G\}$$
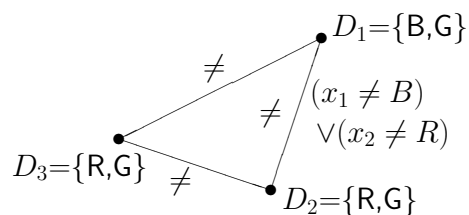
So computing arc consistency and constraint propagation do not by themselves guarantee determining a solution of a CSP problem. It is necessary to search.

Algorithms for computing arc consistency

The easiest approach to compute the arc consistency is to take each constraint, in turn, and testing the logical conditions of the constraints. But since this may have to be repeated due to propagation, even for a single edge, there are a lot of computations. Some savings are possible.

It can be observed, that after a reduction of some domain D_i the propagation can give new results only by checking the edges of the form (D_k, D_i), so just these needs to be checked. What's more, with any reduction in D_k there is no need to check the edge (D_i, D_k), since the elements removed during this reduction from D_k were not necessary for any constraint satisfaction for any of the elements of D_i. The algorithm computing the constraint propagation this way is called AC-3 (1977).

When an arc's consistency is checked again, the same conditions are evaluated for the same pairs of values. Memorizing these verified value pairs (in an proper data structure) could help refrain from recomputing them during subsequent propagations. This is accomplished by yet another algorithm called AC-4 (1986).

Non-binary constraints

We initially assumed to restrict the analysis to binary constraints, ie. such binding exactly two variables. The non-binary constraints can be converted to binary ones.

One of the simplest conversion schemes is the **dual encoding**. It works by introducing a new variable for each constraint of the original problem. The domain of a new variable is the set of n-tuples of values of the original variables satisfying the original constraint.

This way the values contained in the new variables by definition satisfy each constraint (original) in separation. We just need to make sure the values satisfy all the constraints. For this, the dual encoding introduced new constraints, which occur between each pair of new variables, containing the same variables (original). The constraints state, that the same variables (original) must have the same values.
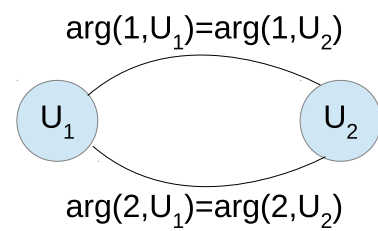
Non-binary constraints — example

Consider a CSP example with three variables: $X = \{x, y, z\}$, their domains $D_{x,y,z} = \{1, 2, 3\}$, and two constraints: $\mathcal{C} = \{x + y = z, x < y\}$. The dual encoding of this problem contains two variables and two constraints:

U_1 : $\langle oc_1, [x, y, z] \rangle, D_{U_1} = \{(1, 2, 3), (2, 1, 3), (1, 1, 2)\}$

U_2 : $\langle oc_2, [x, y] \rangle, \quad D_{U_2} = \{(1, 2), (1, 3), (2, 3)\}$

C_1 : $arg(1, U_1) = arg(1, U_2)$

C_2 : $arg(2, U_1) = arg(2, U_2)$

arg(1,U$_1$)=arg(1,U$_2$)

U$_1$ U$_2$

arg(2,U$_1$)=arg(2,U$_2$)

Unfortunately, the consistency analysis of this problem does not yield anything, because for each value of one variable there exist values of the other with satifying subsequent arguments. However most values othe dual variables are n-tuples failing the original constraints.

Generally, converting multi-variable to binary constraints sometimes leads to problems that do not lend themselves to consistency analysis. For this reason, several algorithms have been developed for arc consistency with multi-variable constraints. These algorithms will not be discussed here.

Path consistency

We define for a CSP constraint graph the notion of **K-consistency**. A graph is K-consistent (for some K), if for any (K-1) variables, which among themselves have all the constraints satisfied, for any (K-1)-tuple of values of these (K-1) variables satisfying all the constraints for the (K-1) variables, in the domain of any selected K-th variable a value such, that the so-obtained K-tuple of values satisfies all the constraints for the K variables.
A constraint graph is **strongly K-consistent** if it is K-consistent for any J, J<K.

Note that the previously defined arc consistency is equivalent to the strong 2-consistency of a constraint graph.

The strong 3-consistency of a graph is also called a **path consistency**.

The significance of K-consistency is such, that if a CSP problem constraint graph with n nodes is strongly n-consistent, then the problem can be solved without searching. However, the algorithms for enforcing K-consistency are exponential, so it is seldom worthwhile to do that. An exception is a weaker version of path consistency — the **restricted path consistency**, for which there is an algorithm which is sometimes computed.

# Searching in the CSP problems

Any of the previously discussed searching algorithms may be used for the CSP problems. However, in most really hard CSP problems, where the constraints have the nature of hard to meet, tight compromises, the most important is just the analysis of these constraints, both syntactic and semantic.

On the other hand it is typically hard to come up with a useful heuristic, capable of guiding the process of searching the space of value assignments to the variables.

Therefore often used is the simplest of the searching algorithms, the backtracking search (BT). In place of a good heuristic prioritizing the best choices to be at the front of the list, this algorithm may be augmented by a local constraint satisfaction checking. This reduces the number of choices for the subsequent steps. In the extreme case, when the domain of some variable got reduced to an empty set, the algorithm would immediately backtrack to the alternative values in earlier assignments.
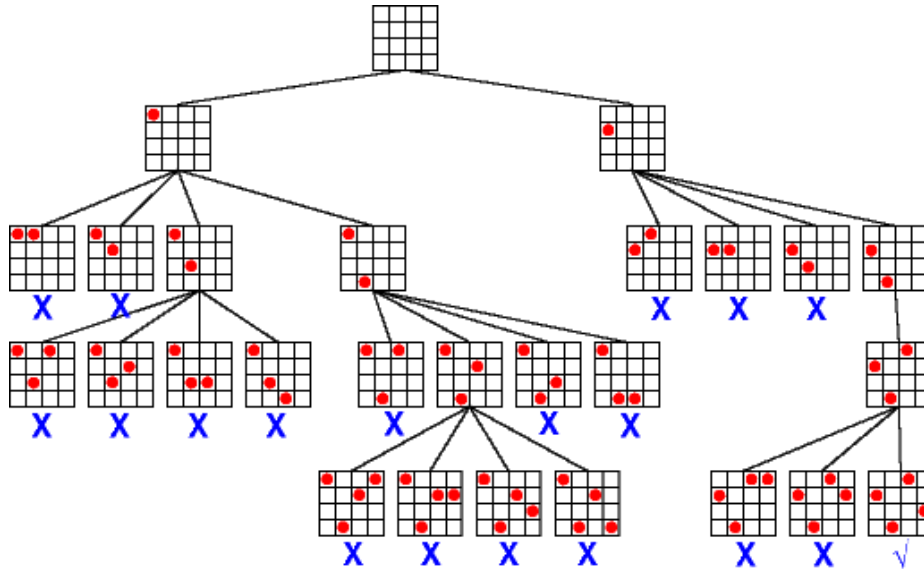
Example: the 4 queen problem

Let's now consider the application of the BT (backtracking) algorithm to the 4 queen problem. We formulate the problem to assign the row positions to the 4 queens belonging to the different columns of the 4×4 chessboard. Note the BT algorithm explores the search tree but does not store it in memory, just the current path.
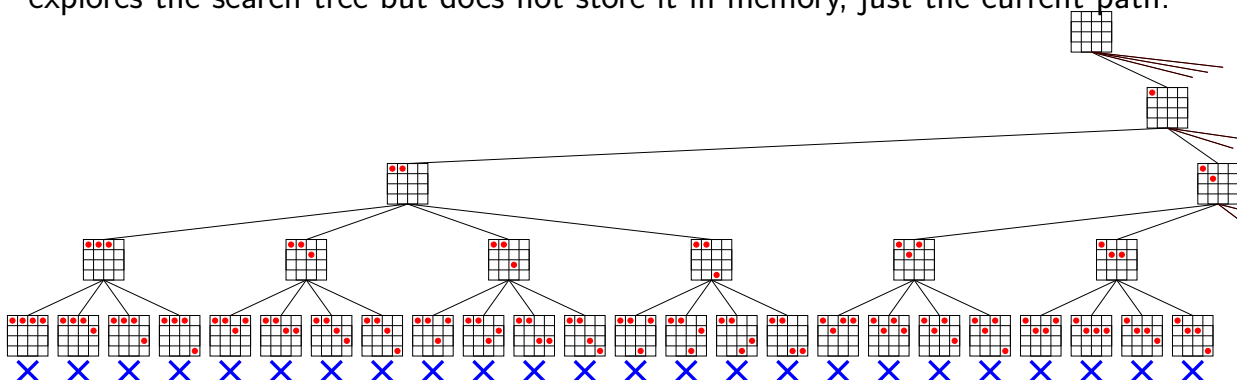
The algorithm checks the constraints after placing all the queens on the board. It will surely solve the problem, but makes many unnecessary steps, which could be eliminated. For example, all the terminal configurations are invalid due to the placement of the second queen. This can be seen at depth level 2 already.
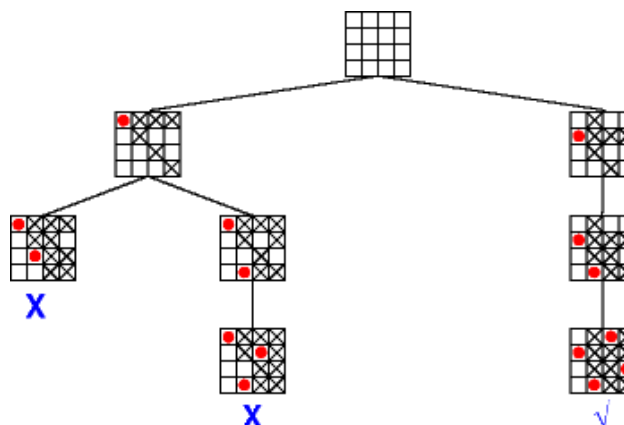
Example: the 4 queen problem (cntd.)

An obvious improvement to the algorithm is then to test the constraints on all variables as soon as they have been assigned values. Should any constraint be found to be violated, the value assignment most recently made would immediately be dropped, and the algorithm would backtrack. This algorithm will be called **early checking** (BT-EC). It is obviously advantageous to the BT algorithm, since the tested constraints would have to be later checked anyway.

Example: the 4 queen problem (cntd.)

Combining the backtracking search with just the minimal form of the local constraint satisfaction checking is called the *forward checking* (BT-FC) algorithm. All the constraints for any variable assigned a value are checked, and only those. In most cases this algorithm is advantageous to BT-EC, and certainly to BT.

Example: the 4 queen problem (cntd.)

It is possible to apply the full arc consistency checking, with propagation. The algorithm doing that is sometimes called the *look-ahead* (BT-LA) algorithm. It may significantly reduce the size of the explored search space, as it does in the 4-queens example here. However, the cost performing those checks is significant, and the BT-LA may not always be advantageous to the BT-FC algorithm.
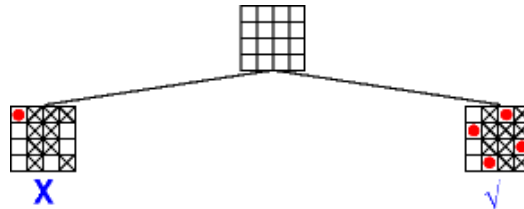
Dependency-directed backtracking

In searching the CSP tree we may encounter a failure, causing the BT algorithm to backtrack, whose cause was not the most recently selected assignment, but one of the earlier steps. In such case the algorithm will continue trying various possibilities, generating only failures, until it backtracks sufficiently, and changes the assignment of the offending variable.

It is possible to detect such cases, when the set of variables involved in constraints with the current variable — the **conflict set** — does not include the most recently assigned variable. In these cases, the algorithm could backtrack, not just a single step, but all the way to the most recently assigned variable from the conflict set. Such algorithm is called **backjumping** (BJ).

Simple backjumping currently has only historical value, since it solves the problem, which does not arise in practice, since the arc consistency checking starting from BT-FC eliminate those cases completely. However, backjumping is still useful with a slightly extended concept of the conflict set, defined as a set of those variables, whose assigned values caused a constraint failure of the current variable, along with the subsequently assigned variables. A version of BJ based on such definition is called **conflict-directed backjumping**, and it is capable of determining the backjumping steps where consistency checking does not help.

Dynamic ordering

We have noted earlier, that is is difficult to obtain good heuristics indicating good moves in searching the space of most CSP problems. There do exist, however, other techniques augmenting this search, based on **dynamic ordering**, both of variables to select those which should first receive assignments, and of values, which should be tried first.

The **most constrained variable** heuristic (or MRV, for Minimum Remaining Values), suggests to first select those variables with the smallest domains. Such choice gives the best chance of encountering inconsistencies, and taking advantage of the resulting reductions. This heuristic also works well within the BT-FC algorithm.

Another heuristic which may be useful in selecting a variable is the **degree heuristic**, suggesting the variable occurring in the highest number of constraints with unassigned variables.

Once a variable to assign is chosen, the **least constraining value** heuristic may be used which prefers to choose those values, which exclude the least values of other variables.

Local search for CSP

Another approach which works well with some CSP problems is based on local search. After more or less random choice of an initial value assignment for all variables, an incremental repair is attempted. Greedy hill-climbing search may be used, which does not explore the search space systematically, unlike the BT family of algorithms.

Often successful in such search for CSP problems is the **min-conflict** heuristic which works by randomly selecting a variable violating some constraint, and selecting another value for it, so that it would minimize conflicts (number of failed constraints) with other variables.

Some CSP problems can be solved with surprising efficiency using this approach. The key element to success is the randomness, which helps to escape the local maxima, and other traps, and to select the right variable to repair, or to skip an unfortunate variable choice, for which the right value would better be assigned later.

Short review

1. Consider the CSP problem with four variables: A, B, C, D, with domains: $\{1, 2, 3\}$ for each, and the set of constraints given below. Draw the constraint graph for the problem, and then try to solve it using constraint propagation (arc consistency). Show each step of the solution (no picture). Show the graph after the termination of constraint propagation. How many possible CSP problem solutions does it represent? Write down one of them.

   The constraint set:
   $\mathcal{C} = \{C \neq D, B > D, B > C\}$

Useful resources

A good elementary introduction to CSP problems by Roman Barták
`http://ktiml.mff.cuni.cz/~bartak/constraints/constrsat.html`