Meta-learning in evolutionary reinforcement learning: some paths forward

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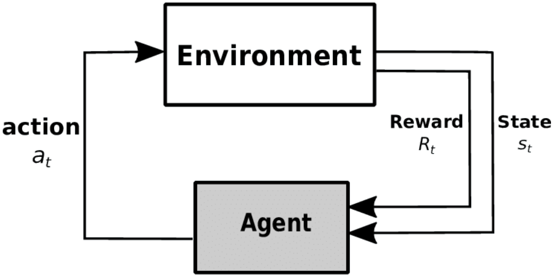
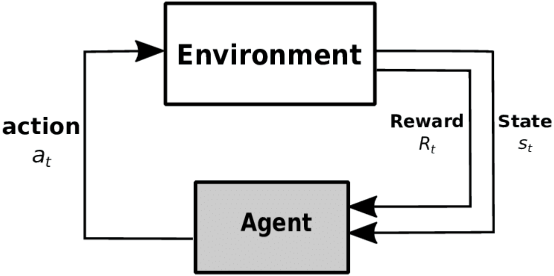
Introduction - reinforcement learning (RL)



- A decision-maker (**the agent**) interacts with some **environment** that changes states
- The agent observes state S_t, selects action A_t which produces reward R_{t+1} and influences S_{t+1}, etc.
- Its behavior is given by a policy π mapping states to actions (deterministic) or probability distributions over the action space (stochastic)
- Trial-and-error interaction yields trajectories $(S_0, A_0, R_1, ..., S_t, A_t, R_{t+1}, ...)$ based on which learning is done

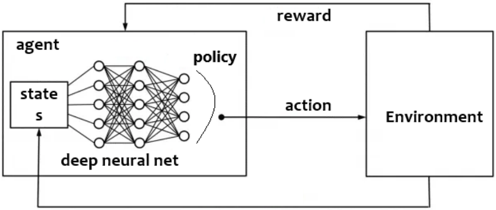
Introduction - reinforcement learning (RL) (cont.)



- The agent tries to maximize the expected return: $G_t = R_{t+1} + \gamma R_{t+2} + \ldots = \sum_{k=0}^{\infty} \gamma^k R_{t+k+1}$ by selecting actions given states
- $0 \leq \gamma \leq 1$ is a discount factor: $\gamma = 0 \rightarrow$ myopic agent, $\gamma = 1 \rightarrow$ long-termist
- Finding **the optimal policy** π^* that maximizes the expected return
- Formally, modeled as a Markov Decision Process (MDP), given by the tuple: $(\mathcal{S}, \mathcal{A}, \mathcal{P}, \mathcal{R}, \gamma)$ where $\mathcal{S}$ is a set of states, $\mathcal{A}$ is a set of actions, $\mathcal{P}$ the probability transition matrix, $\mathcal{R}$ the reward function
- Markov property: S_{t+1} depends only on S_t and A_t and not the history of states/actions

Deep reinforcement learning (DRL)

- The use of deep neural networks (DNNs) as **function approximators** in RL
  - used to approximate entities of interest, commonly the policy π, parametrized as π_θ, where θ denotes the DNN parameters



- Astonishing accomplishments in multiple domains: games [1], robotics [2], etc.

Meta-reinforcement learning (metaRL)

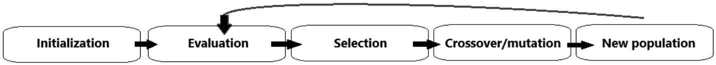
- In meta-RL [5, 6], instead of solving a single task (environment), the goal is quick adaptation to different, unseen tasks (environments)
- Using knowledge from previous tasks to tackle new ones
- Represent [6] some meta-knowledge (meta-parameters) as ω. Now we search for:

$$\omega^* = \arg\max_{\omega} \mathbb{E}_{\mathcal{M}\sim p(\mathcal{M})}\mathbb{E}_{\tau\sim\mathcal{M},\pi_{\theta^*}}\left[G_T\right] \tag{1}$$

  where $\mathcal{M}$ denotes an MDP, $p(\mathcal{M})$ a distribution over MDP-s, τ a trajectory /an episode, and T the total number of time-steps in an episode
- Essentially bi-level optimization:
  - the inner level (loop) optimizes **the objective** (i.e., RL policy **parameters** θ)
  - the outer level optimizes **the meta-objective** (e.g., reward formulation, initialization, any type of **meta-parameter** ω)

Evolutionary reinforcement learning (evoRL)

- Evolutionary reinforcement learning (evoRL) includes any method integrating evolutionary computation (EC) into RL, including metaRL
  - Directly finding (near-)optimal policies π^* (*policy search*)
  - Finding a wide array of policies exhibiting mutually diverse behaviors (*diversity encouragement*)
  - Finding the optimal initialization of policy parameters (*meta-learning*)
  - Reward shaping (also *meta-learning*)
  - etc.
- Why evoRL?
  - Papers showing that evolutionary strategies (ES) [3] and genetic algorithms (GA) [4] offer a competitive alternative to gradient-based approaches
  - Simple, can also work with deterministic policies, reducing the noise



Meta evolutionary reinforcement learning (meta-evoRL)

- Optimizing the outer loop (meta-objective) in a gradient-free manner [5, 6]
  1. no need for explicit bi-level optimization
  2. works with non-differentiable meta-objectives
  3. avoid the high computational overhead of high-order gradients
  4. scalable: easy parallelization (population-based)
- Example: population-based evolution via a genetic algorithm, where each solution (individual) is given by:

$$x = (\theta_1, \theta_2, \ldots, \theta_n, \omega_1, \omega_2, \ldots, \omega_m) \tag{2}$$

  where n (resp. m) is the number of parameters (resp. meta-parameters).
- The parameters and meta-parameters then coevolve
- Search in the union of the space of parameters and meta-parameters ($\Theta \cup \Omega$)

FERLUDE SMASH and meta-learning

- As part of my recently started SMASH project FERLUDE (**Few-shot evolutionary reinforcement learning under uncertain and dynamic environments**), we are particularly interested in exploring the intersection of *evolutionary computation, reinforcement learning, and meta-learning*
- We are particularly interested in investigating underemployed evolutionary/biological mechanisms and principles in the context of evoRL and meta-evoRL - these are **not** novel meta-heuristics
- We hypothesize that the use of evolutionary concepts/principles such as evolvability and higher-order mutation rates can lead to more robust evoRL agents, especially when facing dynamic (non-stationary) environments

Principle 1: evolvability

- While many definitions of **evolvability** exist, it is commonly defined as *the ability of an individual or population to produce offspring with mutually diverse behaviors/phenotypes*
- From an EC/ERL perspective, two separate functions are needed:
  - the fitness function $f : \Theta \mapsto \mathbb{R}$ mapping solutions to fitness values
  - the behavior function $b : \Theta \mapsto \mathcal{B}$ mapping solutions to their corresponding behaviors/phenotypes
- Used in quality-diversity (QD) and novelty search (NS) families of approaches
- Example: given robot parameters $\boldsymbol{\theta}$, $f(\boldsymbol{\theta})$ is the robot's speed, and $b(\boldsymbol{\theta})$ the type of its gait (e.g. one-legged, symmetric, etc.)

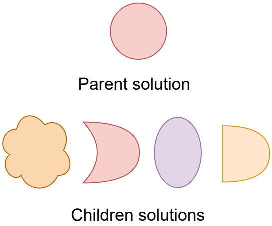


Figure: Phenotypically evolvable solution where phenotype = [color, shape]

Principle 1: evolvability (cont.)

- A solution $\boldsymbol{\theta}$ is phenotypically evolvable if small perturbations of $\boldsymbol{\theta}$ (representing its children) lead to significant changes in the corresponding phenotypes/behaviors ($\boldsymbol{\theta}' \approx \boldsymbol{\theta}$, $b(\boldsymbol{\theta}') \not\approx b(\boldsymbol{\theta})$)
- Highly evolvable solutions might serve as good starting points (initializations) when facing dynamic environments, as only a few mutations are needed to obtain different behaviors, each of which might perform well under different circumstances

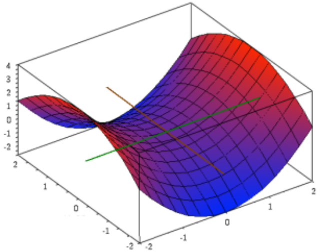
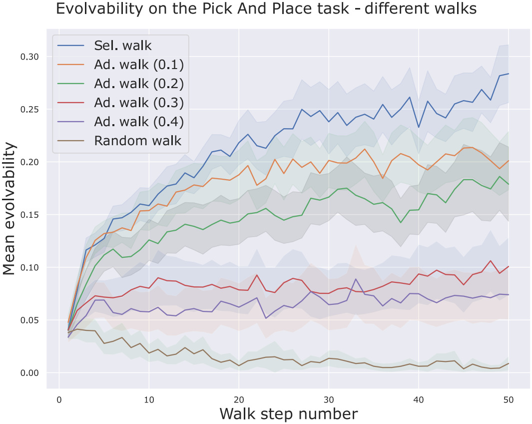


Figure: Imagine evolvable solutions as saddle points in the $\Theta \mapsto \mathcal{B}$ mapping

Principle 1: evolvability (cont.)

- Some prior research: Gasperov *et al.* [7] study evolvability in the context of neuroevolutionary divergent search (a form of novelty search) on an evoRL robotics task, finding that more pressure for novelty means higher evolvability
- Similar prior findings by Doncieux *et al.* [8] with novelty search promoting evolvability



Principle 1: evolvability - future work

- Current research assumes that the variation (mutation) operators are static, and themselves exempt from the evolutionary process, which is not the case with biological evolution
- General idea: ideally, no operators are fixed, **everything evolves**!
- Rethinking evolvability...

> **We will focus on finding solutions that are not only evolvable in producing diverse offspring, but are also tied to mutation operators that promote long-term evolvability.**
> $\rightarrow$ **We aim to find evolvable solutions within the $\Theta \cup \Omega$ space, enhancing the evolutionary potential of the system.**

Principle 2: higher-order mutation rates

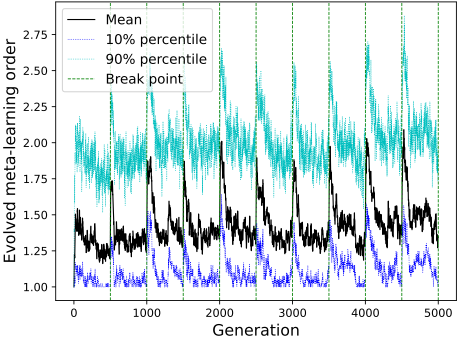
- We also investigate the use of higher-order mutation rates; while meta-mutation rate corresponds to meta-learning, higher-order mutation rates represent higher-order meta-learning
- Idea: mutation rate is not fixed, but its variance is controlled by a meta-mutation rate, which is in turn controlled by a meta-meta-mutation rate, etc.
- A tower of (meta)-mutations
- In a Gaussian case:

$$\begin{aligned}
\theta' &\sim \mathcal{N}\left(\theta, \sigma_1^2\right), \\
\sigma_i' &\sim \mathcal{N}\left(\sigma_i, \sigma_{i+1}^2\right), 1 \leq i < n, \\
\sigma_n' &\sim \mathcal{N}\left(\sigma_n, \sigma_{\text{meta}}^2\right),
\end{aligned} \tag{3}$$

where θ denotes the solution, σ_i the mutation rate of order i, σ_{meta} the fixed top meta-mutation rate, and $\mathcal{N}(\cdot, \cdot)$ the Gaussian mutation operator parametrized by the mean and variance. The order is given by n - the tower height.

Principle 2: higher-order mutation rates (cont.)

- We also study what happens if we let the meta-learning order itself evolve.
- Some preliminary results indicate that the mean meta-learning order in the order increases precisely when dynamic changes in the environment take place.
- The system adjusts the mean meta-learning order accordingly!



Conclusion (with further principles and ideas)

The exploration of different evolutionary principles for the development of more robust, high-performing, sample-efficient RL agents, especially in uncertain and dynamic environments - the essence of the FERLUDE project.

- Much remains to be investigated
  - Self-adaptivity in general: dynamic (evolving) evolutionary operators - co-evolution of agents, environments, and operators themselves
  - For example, evolving the amount of selective pressure, instead of setting it exogenously ("selecting for selection") [9]
  - New types of regularization (e.g. sparsity, binary mask overlaid over DNN weights)
  - Links between risk-aversion and exploration strategies

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