Comprehensible Context-driven Text Game Playing

Camera-ready on IEEE COG’19

Xusen Yin
Information Sciences Institute
University of Southern California
Los Angeles, US
xusenyin@usc.edu

Jonathan May
Information Sciences Institute
University of Southern California
Los Angeles, US
jonmay@isi.edu

Abstract—In order to train a computer agent to play a text-based computer game, we must represent each hidden state of the game. A Long Short-Term Memory (LSTM) model runs over observed texts is a common choice for state representation. However, a normal Deep Q-learning Network (DQN) for such an agent requires millions of steps of training or more to converge. As such, an LSTM-based DQN can take tens of days to finish the training process. Though we can use a Convolution Neural Network (CNN) as a text-encoder to construct states much faster than the LSTM, doing so without an understanding of the syntactic context of the words being analyzed can slow convergence. In this paper, we use a fast CNN to encode position- and syntax-oriented structures extracted from observed texts as states. We additionally augment the reward signal in a universal and practical manner. Together, we show that our improvements can not only speed up the process by one order of magnitude but also learn a superior agent.

Index Terms—text-based games, trajectory, dependency parser, auto-attention

I. INTRODUCTION

Ever since the work of [1] in learning to play Atari games, the question of whether we could also learn to play text-based games has naturally arisen [2–4]. However, the goal of reaching par with human players on these games is still beyond our reach, unlike that shown for Atari games. Text-based games, especially those designed for real human players, are elaborately built and hence sophisticated. Zork [4, 5] is such a game, with more than 30 rooms to explore, and combines a maze, trivia, combat, time-sensitive tasks, puzzles, and stochastic events. Most attempts to automatically learn to play real text games can only explore a few rooms of a game, achieving about 10 percent of the total available score.

Different from Atari games where one uses the joystick to play, and thus has up to 18 different actions available, the player uses brief natural language sentences as actions to interact with text-based games. The number of valid actions is thus theoretically infinite, and even when the vocabulary and maximum action length are limited, can still be in the hundreds or even thousands. This makes policy-based learning quite difficult.

The Deep Q-learning Network (DQN), first introduced by [1], is also the main method used to play text-based games. One key component of the DQN as applied to text games is its encoding of context sentences into hidden states to represent game state. As the length of context sentences can vary from a few words to thousands of words, the LSTM [6] is seemingly a natural choice for this task [4, 7–9].

However, one important limitation of DQN learning is that it usually needs millions of training steps to converge, and this can take days with the LSTM as the encoder, even for a small quest with only tens of actions. Since full-fledged text-based games usually involve multiple quests and have many more actions available to try, training an LSTM-based DQN agent for text-based games such that it may reach a level of quality similar to that observed for Atari games is functionally impossible.

[10] shows that we can use a convolutional neural network (CNN) as a text encoder in classification tasks for faster training. [3] uses a similar CNN encoder to build a DQN agent. However, previous work of building DQN agents care about the DQN architecture [8], [9], [11] or the generation and selection of actions [2], but lack analysis of the observed context sentences.

In this paper, we focus on the analysis of observed texts working with different encoder architectures. We show that both context sentence processing and encoder selection can lead to faster convergence of the DQN training process and result in superior agents. After analyzing the training process, we also find that instant reward manipulation and sample strategies can affect the training process. Furthermore, we observe that the CNN encoder with a max-pooling layer can be treated as an auto-attention mechanism in finding key components in context to make decisions. Our final trained agent on Zork can reach state-of-the-art scores within one million training steps, or about 10 hours.

The novel contributions of our paper are:

1. We compare different encoders for the DQN framework, and determine that using CNN with a max-pooling layer as the encoder is ideal, and has the extra benefit that max-pooling functions as an auto-attention mechanism.
2. We use position embeddings when encoding trajectories to reach the state-of-the-art result on Zork;
3. We use a dependency parser to reorder game context sentences such that syntactically related elements are close to each other, which leads to a halving of our
DQN agent’s convergence time. We use reward shaping methods for further better training results.

II. METHOD

A. Text-based games

When playing a text-based game, the game first outputs a sentence to describe the current environment. Then a player inputs a sentence as the action to the game, and waits for the next game output and a cumulative score from the beginning of the game. An example of taking an egg in Zork is

11: West of House You are standing in an open field west of a white house, with a boarded front door. There is a small mailbox here. (Score: 0, Moves: 0)

12: go north
13: North of House You are facing the north side of a white house. There is no door here, and all the windows are boarded up. To the north a narrow path winds through the trees. (Score: 0, Moves: 1)
14: go north
15: Forest Path This is a path winding through a dimly lit forest. The path heads north-south here. One particularly large tree with some low branches stands at the edge of the path. (Score: 0, Moves: 2)
16: climb tree
17: Up a Tree You are about 10 feet above the ground nestled among some large branches. The nearest branch above you is above your reach. Beside you on the branch is a small bird’s nest. In the bird’s nest is a large egg encrusted with precious jewels, apparently scavenged by a childless songbird. The egg is covered with fine gold inlay, and ornamented in lapis lazuli and mother-of-pearl. Unlike most eggs, this one is hinged and closed with a delicate looking clasp. The egg appears extremely fragile. (Score: 0, Moves: 3)
18: take the egg
19: Taken. (Score: 5, Moves: 4)

We call the game output the master, a player’s input sentence the action, and the gap between two consecutive scores the instant reward. A running log of a text-based game is a master action triple (s,a,r) consisting of the current state s, the action a, and the instant reward r. In text-based games, notice that the state of the game is not a game location such as up a tree, while the l9 the player also at the same location, but with an egg in inventory. With our egg taking example, four training samples exist:

(tj1−1, tj1−3, go north, 0),
(tj1−3, tj1−5, go north, 0),
(tj1−5, tj1−7, climb tree, 0),
(tj1−7, tj1−9, take the egg, 5).

The DQN training is a process of repeatedly playing the game in an exploration-exploitation manner: At every step, the DQN agent chooses a random action to play the game with a probability ε (exploration), or else it chooses the action with the best Q-value (exploitation). The ε decays from 1 to almost zero to anneal this process.

The DQN collects the training sample (s, s′, a, r) at every step into a replay memory. The training process gets samples from the replay memory to update the DQN. The loss function to update the DQN is

\[
(f_{DQN}(s, a) - (r + \gamma \max_{a'} f_{DQN}(s', a')))^2,
\]

which is the square error loss between expected Q values and predicted Q values.

We use the same DQN framework to play text-based games, but encode texts instead of video frames.
C. Trajectory Encoder

The purpose of the trajectory encoder is to determine the hidden states of the game. We initially use the LSTM [6] as the encoder. The LSTM encodes sentences in a recurrent way, with inner states to be updated after consuming each token. At each step, the LSTM reads a token, updates its inner states, and gives an output. [8] uses the result vector from a mean-pooling layer on the output of the LSTM as states, while we use LSTM inner states as our encoded states. Our CNN encoder is inspired by [10], but we also use different pooling layers. The CNN encoder uses multiple one-dimensional convolution filters with different kernel sizes to encode sentences, then uses a mean-pooling layer or a max-pooling layer along the dimension of the sentence, and finally concatenates pooling results into a one-dimensional vector. An example of the max-pooling CNN-DQN is shown in Figure 1.

The fact that the CNN encoder encodes blocks of tokens in a parallel way makes it much faster than the token-by-token LSTM encoder. However, the vanilla CNN encoder loses track of the position relationship between tokens since it treats sentences as bags of words. To mitigate this, we apply position embeddings together with word embeddings to keep the position information, in the same way as [12]. As we will see in experiments, the CNN encoder with the use of position embeddings results in faster training and superior agents.

III. EXPERIMENT SETUP

We experiment using the classic 1979 game Zork I [5]. All experiments are run on a machine with two Tesla K80 GPUs (one for training, the other for evaluation) with four CPU threads. We use Python 3.6.8 and Tensorflow 1.12.0.

A game log collected from an expert player [13] to win all points (350) of Zork I consists of 345 steps with 130 types of actions. We think of the log as a near-optimal solution to solve Zork and use the 130 actions in our experiment.

A. Reward shaping and clipping

Reward shaping can embed common sense into the training process, leading to better agents. For the sake of faster convergence, we add $-0.1$ to all instant rewards. Negative masters such as “you don’t...” and “you can’t...” mean there is something wrong with our chosen actions, so we add a penalty of $-1$ on instant rewards.

We find that reward clipping is important in training the DQN to play text-based games. [8] uses a reward shaping method to make the expected state more noticeable by changing the final scores of quests large enough. In this paper, we use a similar reward clipping method as [11]. We clip the reward between -1 and 1, but keep original rewards between -1 and 1 unchanged, which is a variant of Huber loss [14]. Clipping rewards in this way is robust to outliers and independent of the reward systems introduced by different games, resulting in better generalization ability to all other games.

B. Hyperparameters

Hyperparameters are vital in the stochastic DQN training process. We use 50,000 observation steps, 500,000 replay memories, and decay $\epsilon$ from 1 to 0.0001 in 2,000,000 steps. Since the near-optimal path to solving Zork is 345 steps, we set each episode to have a maximum of 600 steps.

We save a DQN model and run evaluation every 5,000 steps of training (as one epoch). For each evaluation, we use a fixed $\epsilon = 0.05$ as other work did [1], [2], [8] and run 10 episodes with the same number of steps per episodes for training.

We initialize our DQN models with random word embeddings and position embeddings. We use a fixed embedding size of 64. At every training step, we draw a minibatch of 32 samples and use a learning rate of $1e-5$ with the Adam optimizer. We trim trajectories with no more than 21 sentences to avoid unnecessarily long concatenated strings.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Uniform sampling, weight-, and gap-based sampling

Uniform sampling, as first introduced in [1], is the most common method to draw samples from the replay memory to train the DQN. However, it is not a general method that could work well from game to game. From our observation, the distribution of rewards is highly biased in the replay memory: Samples with negative and zero rewards are more likely to appear while those with positive rewards are rare.

In an experiment using only 11 actions, where we collect 43,069 training samples, 98.7% of them receive negative or zero rewards, while only 1.3% of them are positive rewards. For another experiment using 21 actions with 58,608 samples, 99.9% of them are negative or zero samples, and only 0.1% of them are positive ones. Training a DQN agent with uniform sampling on these replay memories can easily miss important samples with positive rewards and lead to a failed agent.

Since uniform sampling will naturally lead to an imbalance favoring zero or negative rewards, we seek a non-uniform sampling method during DQN training. We explore two different weighted sampling strategies in our experiments, fixed-weight...
and priority experience sampling. Fixed-weight sampling is based on the previous observation: positive reward samples are rare but more important. Even though we could use frequency counting as weights, a reward-based weight is more general, and is amenable to scenarios where counting frequency is difficult. We treat the instant reward $r_i$ for the $i$-th sample as the log of weight for sampling, i.e. we let:

$$w_i = \exp(r_i),$$

then the probability of choosing sample $i$ is

$$P(i) = \frac{w_i}{\sum_j w_j}.$$  

Reward clipping needs to be used to avoid samples with very large rewards suppressing all other samples.

Priority experience sampling [15] is based on the gap $|\delta_i|$ between the expected Q-value and the predicted Q-value, i.e. we let:

$$\delta_i = f_{DQN}(s_i, a_i) - \left( r_i + \gamma \max_a f_{DQN}(s'_i, a') \right),$$

then

$$w_i = |\delta_i| + e,$$

where $e$ is a small constant to avoid zero gap. The probability of choosing sample $i$ is

$$P(i) = \frac{w_i^a}{\sum_j w_j^a}.$$  

The hyperparameter $a$ is a choice of randomness of choosing samples. Setting $a = 0$ degrades the sampling method to uniform sampling.

To avoid bias towards samples with high probabilities, the priority experience sampling uses importance weights on the gradient $g$ when updating parameters, i.e.

$$g_i = g_i \left( \frac{1}{N} \frac{1}{P(i)} \right)^b.$$  

The hyperparameter $b$ is annealed from 0 to 1 during training.

We will compare the weighted sampling and the priority experience sampling in later sections.

### B. Choosing encoder

Since we use the exploration-exploitation search method with a decaying parameter $\epsilon$, it is better to let the $\epsilon$ decay to almost zero to see a whole picture of the training process. However, a well-trained LSTM-DQN on Zork could take tens of days. In order to compare encoders faster, we breakdown the whole Zork into two sub-tasks following the methodology of [3] as single-quest games.

**Egg quest**, from the beginning of the game, the player is required to walk to a tree, climb on the tree and take an egg. The optimal action combination to win the task is in four steps.

**Fig. 2:** Evaluation results of LSTM-DQN, CNN-DQN, and CNN-DQN with position embeddings on the egg quest of Zork I (as defined in Section III). In this plot, CNN-based DQNs are trained around 175 epochs, while the LSTM-DQN is trained 14 epochs in the same amount of time. All DQNs converge to reach a score of 25 at the end of training except the mean-pooling CNN-DQN (blue) that jitters even after 10 hours of training. On the contrary, the ones using a max-pooling layer (red and green) show more stable convergence curves, and the red curve converges fastest in half an hour using position embeddings. The LSTM-DQN (purple) converges slower than max-pooling CNN-DQNs on 7 hours.

**Fig. 3:** Evaluation results of LSTM-DQN, CNN-DQN, and CNN-DQN with position embeddings on the troll quest of Zork I. In this plot, CNN-DQNs are trained for 190 epochs, while the LSTM-DQN is trained 25 epochs in the same amount of time. The max-pooling CNN-DQNs (red and green) converges fast with higher scores than others, and the red one using position embeddings is the fastest to converge, at 5 hours. The mean-pooling CNN-DQN (blue) shows convergence at a lower score but with more jitters. The LSTM-DQN (purple) cannot be well-trained in 45 hours of training and shows the worst result.
sub-tasks extracted from Zork: purposes, based on our knowledge that these two quests are we choose to decrease these hyperparameters for fast-testing for the egg quest and the troll quest that we use on whole Zork, there are eight navigation actions.

select 21 complete actions for this task. Among the 21 actions, on lantern | take sword | go east | open window | enter house | go west | take lantern | open trap door | turn on lantern | go down | go north | kill troll with sword”. We select 21 complete actions for this task. Among the 21 actions, there are eight navigation actions.

Even though we can use the same set of hyperparameters for the egg quest and the troll quest that we use on whole Zork, we choose to decrease these hyperparameters for fast-testing purposes, based on our knowledge that these two quests are sub-tasks extracted from Zork:

- For the egg quest we use 5,000 observation steps, 50,000 replay memory size, and we decay $\epsilon$ from 1 to 0.0001 in 500,000 steps. Since the optimal path to solving the egg quest is four steps, we set each episode to have a maximum of 100 steps.
- Since the troll quest has a larger search space than the egg quest, we double the observation steps, replay memory size, and $\epsilon$ decaying steps settings used in the egg quest. The optimal path to solving the troll quest is 13 steps, so we set each episode to have a maximum of 150 steps.

We compare encoders based on the egg quest and the troll quest. As shown in Figure 2 and Figure 3, we compare four types of encoders: the LSTM encoder, the CNN encoder with mean-pooling, the CNN-encoder with max-pooling, and the use of position embeddings on trajectories. Both figures show consistent results toward these four types of DQNs:

- The LSTM-DQNs (purple) run much fewer epochs than CNN-DQNs in the same amount of time. While it can converge in the egg quest with 7 hours, it cannot be well-trained in the troll quest within 45 hours, resulting in the worst result in the troll quest.
- The mean-pooling CNN-DQNs (blue) converge with jitters, and show an inferior result in the troll quest.
- The max-pooling CNN-DQNs (red and green) show better results in both convergences and scores than others. The ones using position embeddings (red) show the best results on both quests.

We compare the weighted sampling and the priority experience sampling on the troll quest, as shown in Figure 4. Both sampling methods lead to the same convergences, but the weighted sampling one is faster. The weighted sampling is suitable for single-quest games with focusing on important positive rewards.

For the following experiments with Zork, we use the max-pooling CNN-DQN.

C. Pooling layer and auto-attention

From Figure 2 and 3, a question arises naturally: Why does the max-pooling lead to a more stable and better result than the mean-pooling?

We find out that the max-pooling layer can be thought of as a kind of attention mechanism [16]. Consider the example shown in Figure 1 where we use the max-pooling CNN-DQN framework to encode the trajectory “go north forest path this is a path ...”. Using a convolution filter that moves on the dimension of tokens, we transform the input embeddings into a feature vector. In the implementation, we need to pad the sentence in the beginning so that it can match the convolution filter size, as used in [12]. E.g. for a size-3 filter, we need to pad two start-of-text tokens ($S$) in the beginning, i.e. “$S$ go north forest path this is a path ...”. Then after the convolution process, we got a vector of floats. The size-3 convolution filter computes over the following word combinations:

$S$ $S$ go | $S$ go north | $S$ go north forest | north forest path | forest path this | path this is | this is a | is a path | ...

Supposing the maximum convolution filter result comes from go north forest. Now, we can use the “max-pooling attention weight” $= [0, 0, 1, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0]$ to multiply the feature vector and get the attention on the feature of “go north forest” in this case.

With the max-pooling DQN, we can trace back through actions to see which part of trajectories affect the final decision most. An example of attention tokens is shown in Figure 5 (left part) with the egg quest. The braced bold texts are the top-3 important attention word-blocks used to make the decision of choosing each action.

D. Zork results

Based on our experience with the egg quest and the troll quest, we choose to use the max-pooling CNN-DQN framework to train agents on Zork. Results are shown in Figure 6. Our base encoder (blue) shows bad results for Zork. In
Fig. 5: The attention tokens extracted by tracing back through the max-pooling layer of CNN-DQN for the egg quest. In this experiment, we use size-3, -4, -5 convolution filters with 32 of each type. With the chosen actions that maximize Q-values, we tracing back the top-3 most important tokens combinations. The weight of arrows show the importance of the tokens. The dotted lines mean pointing to the most important tokens on the previous masters. The right part shows the result using dependency parser reordering.

2,000,000 steps of training, there is no evaluation result higher than 50 points, which means each episode of running only receives 5 points for finishing the egg quest. The evaluation result of the blue curve shows that our agent cannot explore Zork beyond the egg quest part.

Zork is a multi-quest game, which means there are multiple distinct trajectories needed to score points. It is important to use priority experience sampling to train an agent on Zork, otherwise the agent tends to converge to one of the local maxima—the egg quest part in our experiment—instead of exploring more rooms of the game, as shown in Figure 6 comparing the blue curve with the green one.

Furthermore, we apply position embeddings on trajectories as described when playing the egg quest and the troll quest, yielding the red curve with a stable evaluation result of 40 points for a single episode.

E. Dependency parser reordering

The CNN encoder, though running a magnitude order faster than the LSTM, encodes local blocks of tokens, while the LSTM encodes a whole sentence. The fact that local blocks are likely to be related is ubiquitous in the domain of image process, but not in natural language processing. In fact, a token and its syntactic dependencies (e.g. a verb and its descriptive adverbs) could appear many words apart in a sentence. Consider the example sentence: you are facing the north side of a white house. The subject of the sentence could...
be (notice the bold tokens) you are facing the north side of a white house. The token side is far from other main tokens.

Instead of using convolutional filters on trajectories directly, we use dependency parser to reorder each trajectory so that related tokens are right beside each other. Dependency parser rearranges tokens into a tree, with the subject token as the root (R), and its modifier tokens as children (C). Notice that a parsed tree could be a tree with various numbers of children. Take the sentence you are facing the north side of a white house as an example, three subtrees would be generated as

1) facing (R) you (C) are (C) side (C);
2) side (R) the (C) north (C) house (C);
3) house (R) of (C) a (C) white (C).

Reading the subtrees in a breadth-first way, the three subtrees result in three reordered sub-sentences: facing you are side, side the north house, and house of a white. To avoid size-\(N\) convolutional filters striding across boundaries, we add \(N-1\) padding tokens among them. E.g. with padding token “O” for size-3 convolutional filters, we add two padding tokens:

facing you are side O O side the north house O O house of a white

In this way, size-3 convolutional filters cannot stride across each meaningful block.

The result of using dependency parser reordering shows in Figure 3 (purple curve). With dependency parser reordering, the trained agent can converge around 1.2 million steps of training, which is faster half a million steps than the red curve.

F. Repeated bad tries

We observe that agents tend to repeat themselves, as has also been observed in natural language dialogue generation work [17]. Agents tend to ‘get stuck in a place’ and repeat the same action, e.g. “go west | you need a machete to go west | go west | you need a machete to go west | go west | you need a machete to go west”, and so on. These repeated tries with no positive reward we call repeated bad tries. We determine that trained agents tend to get stuck in areas without short- or long-term positive rewards from those states.

In our experiment with Zork, we find out that out of 2,075,356 training steps, there are 181,209 (8.73%) repeated bad tries. This behavior gives us the intuition to add an accumulative negative reward on repeated bad samples as a corrective method. In our experiments, we add a negative reward \(-0.1\) if we see a repeated sample with a negative reward, and we accumulate the penalty if we immediately see the bad sample again.

With the repeated penalty, we can drop the number of repetition to 3.51%: out of 1,596,224 training steps, there are 56,058 repeated bad tries. Comparing using repeated penalty with the previous method (Figure 7 (top) yellow curve), the agent trained with repeated penalty converges much faster, in about half a million training steps. The distribution of repeated bad tries in each training process is plotted in Figure 8. We also compare using repeated penalty with dependency parser reordering, see Figure 7 (bottom). The benefit is additive: incorporating a repeated penalty can also make the convergence with dependency parser reordering faster, in a quarter million steps.

V. RELATED WORK

The following previous research [2], [4], [7]–[9], [11], [17] on building agents of text-based games applies the DQN [1] on playing video games or its variants. One key step of playing text-based games is to represent game states. Instead of using trajectory, [2], [3] use different methods to represent states. Some games allow the use of the special actions look and inventory to describe the current environment and the player’s belongings, and uses the combination of the two instead of the trajectory as states. Our method is more generalized, and avoids the use of look and inventory at every step, which are extra steps that, in certain games (e.g. games with fighting), could lead to a dead state.

Text-based games have a much larger action space to explore than video games of the type evaluated previously [1], which means that the naive application of the DQN leads to slow or even failing convergence. To reduce the action space, action elimination methods that use both reinforcement learning and NLP-related motivation have been applied. [4] use action elimination DQN framework with mathematical bounds to remove unlikely actions, an orthogonal improvement to ours that could be incorporated in future work. [2] explore
affordance by using Word2Vec [18] to generate reasonable actions from words, e.g. eat apple is more reasonable than eat wheel.

However, previous works that attempt to play Zork can only finish a very small portion of the game, far from that achievable by human players. [3] uses the max-pooling CNN-DQN but without position embeddings. Our Zork evaluation result is stable at a score of 40 in one million steps, compared to [3], we get a score of 40 without using the action elimination DQN framework and compared to [7] that use the LSTM-DQN framework without the action elimination method, we have a huge performance gain. Generalized method of reward shaping is important for games with multi-quest. [19] uses random network distillation to change instant reward and get improved results on several hard Atari games that require better exploration.

VI. CONCLUSION

By analyzing the context sentences of text-based games, we find that agents make better decisions when they learn to pay attention to a comprehensive chunk of context sentences. The CNN-DQN with a max-pooling layer is the right tool to reveal the attention information. However, the context is not always a logical chunk of information, so dependency parsing gives the CNN the ability to attend focus on syntactically valid chunks. Our trained agent on Zork can reach the state-of-the-art scores in 10 hours of training.

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