Mean-Field Control for Restless Bandits and Weakly Coupled MDPs

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joint work with Bruno Gaujal, Kimang Khun, Chen Yan

Inria

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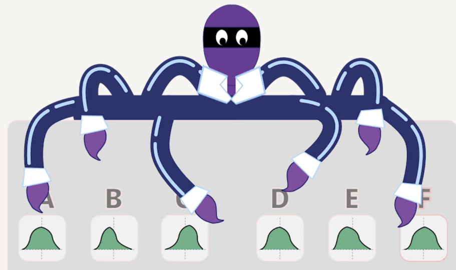
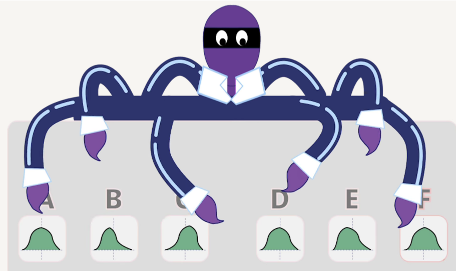
The Markovian bandit problem



Classical bandit problem:

- N arms
- I.i.d. unknown reward
- Goal: identify the best

The Markovian bandit problem



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Markovian bandit:

- N *statistically identical* arms.
- Each arm has a state: you know $P(\cdot|s_n, a_n)$ and $r(s_n, a_n)$.
- Goal: compute a policy $\pi : \mathcal{S}^N \to \mathcal{A}^N$.

Example 1: Applicant screening problem

N applicants, T rounds of interview.
Each round: you can interview up to αN candidates.
Goal: maximize the expected quality of selected candidates.

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Each candidate has an (unknown) quality q_n.

- Result of an interview: Bernoulli(q_n)

Goal: find the βN highest q_n.

Example 2: What to work on?

Job Scheduling

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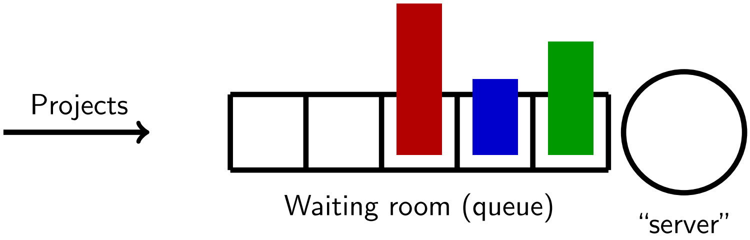
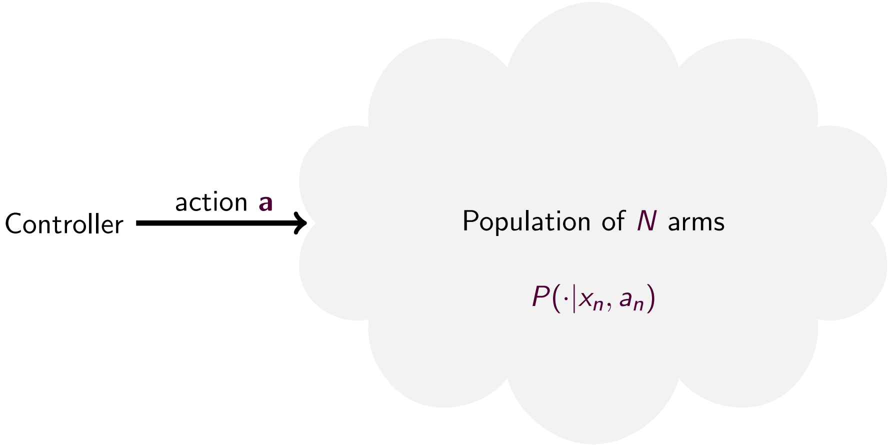


- Examples: research projects, tasks allocations, electric vehicle charging, wireless scheduling,...
- Heuristics: SRPT, EDF,...

We use tools from mean field control



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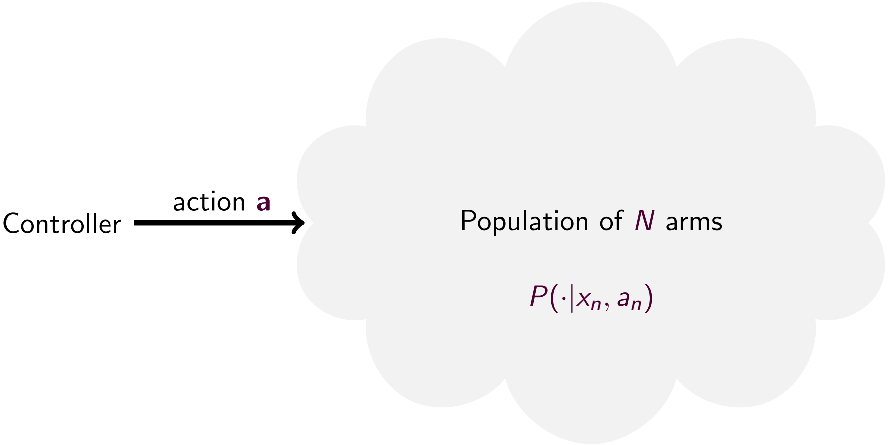

The computational difficulty increases with N but "$N = \infty$" is easy.

- How to use the $N = +\infty$ solution for finite N?
- How efficient is this? (i.e., how fast does it become optimal?)

Outline

1. The mean-field control problem
2. Infinite-horizon and index policies
3. Asymptotic optimality and index computation
4. Finite-horizon restless bandits
5. Conclusion

Original model for finite N

N statistically identical arms

- Discrete time, finite state space.
- $P(\cdot|s_n, a_n)$ and $r(s_n, a_n)$.

Maximize expected reward

$$\frac{1}{T}\sum_{t=1}^{T}\sum_{n=1}^{N} r(s_n(t), a_n(t)).$$

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Hard constraint: $\forall t : \sum_{n=1}^{N} a_n(t) \leq C.$

- If $a_n(t) \in \{0,1\}$: Markovian bandit (this talk)
- If $a_n(t) \in \{0,1\}^d$: Weakly coupled MDP.

The mean-field control problem

Original model: For all t, $\sum_{n=1}^{N} a_n(t) \leq \alpha N$. $\Rightarrow$ PSPACE-hard

The mean-field control problem

Relaxed model: For all t, $\mathbb{E}\left[\sum_{n=1}^{N} a_n(t)\right] \leq \alpha N$. $\Rightarrow$ Independence relaxation.

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- $x_s = \mathbf{P}[s_n = s]$ and $y_{s,a} = \mathbf{P}[s_n = s, a_n = a]$.

$$\max_{x\geq 0, y\geq 0} \sum_{s,a} r_{s,a} y_{s,a}$$

$$\text{s.t.} \quad x_{s'} = \sum_{s} y_{s,a} P(s'|s,a)$$

$$x_s = \sum_{a} y_{s,a}$$

$$\sum_{s} x_s = 1.$$

$$\sum_{s} y_{s,1} = \alpha \qquad \text{relaxed budget contraint}$$

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$$
\begin{aligned}
\max_{x\geq 0, y\geq 0} \quad & \sum_{t=1}^{T} \sum_{s,a} r_{s,a} y_{s,a}(t) \\
\text{s.t.} \quad & x_{s'}(t+1) = \sum_{s} y_{s,a}(t) P(s'|s,a) \\
& x_s(t) = \sum_{a} y_{s,a}(t) \\
& \sum_{s} x_s = x_s(0). \\
& \sum_{s} y_{s,1}(t) = \alpha(t) && \text{relaxed budget contraint}
\end{aligned}
$$

Can I apply this to $N < \infty$?

$$\sum_s a_n(t) \leq \alpha$$

Original problem
(Hard)

$$\longrightarrow$$

$$\sum_s \mathbb{E}\left[a_n(t)\right] \leq \alpha$$

LP relaxation
(Easy)

$$V_N^* \qquad \leq \qquad V_{rel}^*$$

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$$V_N^* \quad \leq \quad V_{rel}^*$$

$$V_{rel}^* \longrightarrow x^*, \; y^*$$

Can I apply this to $N < \infty$?

$$\sum_s a_n(t) \le \alpha \qquad\qquad \sum_s \mathbb{E}\left[a_n(t)\right] \le \alpha$$

Original problem (Hard) $\longrightarrow$ LP relaxation (Easy)

$$V_N^* \quad \le \quad V_{rel}^*$$

$$\wr\wr \qquad\qquad \big\downarrow$$

V_N^π — Can we build π that is close to optimal? — x^*, y^*

Main difficulty: in general $\mathbf{X}^N(t) \neq \mathbf{x}^*(t)$.

- We cannot choose $\mathbf{Y}^N(t) = \mathbf{y}^*(t)$.

Some historical perspective

- Infinite horizon: Index policies (Gittins 60s, Whittle index (89), Nino-Mora, 90s-2000s)
  - Often asymptotically optimal. (Weber and Weiss 91).

1. When they are: exponentially fast. (G, Gaujal, Yan 2021).
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- Finite horizon: LP-index
  - Priority rule not always asymptotically optimal (Brown and Smith 2019), (Frazier et al 2020).

  3. When they are: exponentially fast (G, Gaujal, Yan 2022)

Outline

Penalty and indexability

The $N = \infty$ is a constraint MDP:

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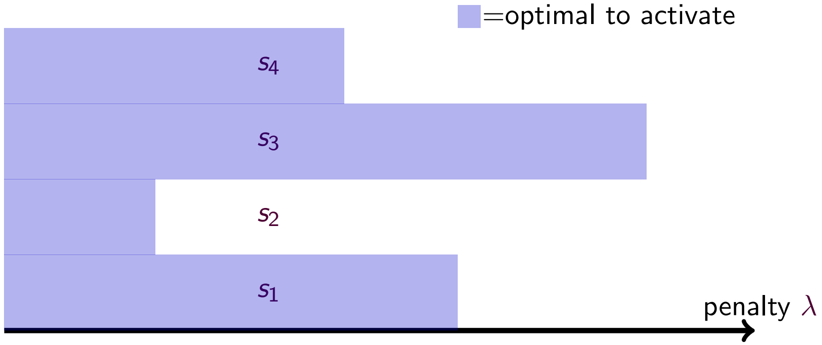
Idea: use a Lagrangian relaxation:

- $P(\cdot|s_n, a_n)$ and $r(s_n, a_n) - \underbrace{\lambda}_{\text{Penalty for activation}} a_n$.

The penaly can be used to define a priority policy



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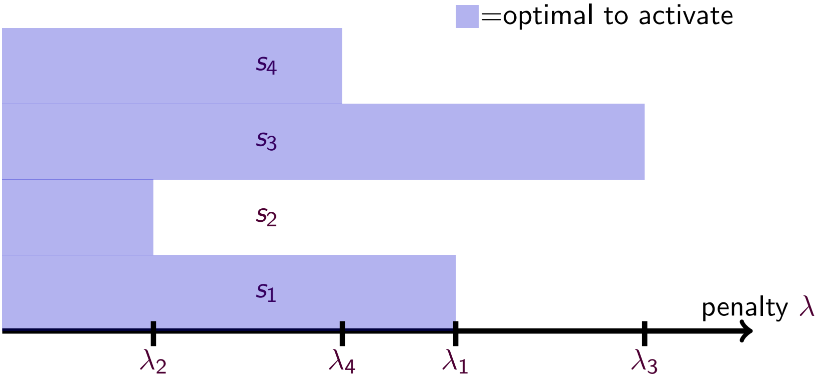

This is Whittle index policy.
For this example: $s_3 \succ s_1 \succ s_4 \succ s_2$.

Definition of Whittle index

Intuitively, for each state, there exists a λ_s such that any optimal policy is such that:

- The optimal action in s is 0 (rest) if $\lambda < \lambda_s$;
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- The optimal action in s is 0 (rest) if $\lambda < \lambda_s$;
- The optimal action in s is 1 (activate) if $\lambda > \lambda_s$.

This is not always true[1].

If the model satisfies this assumption, we say that the model is indexable.
Whittle index policy is the corresponding priority policy.

[1] True with high probability? Yes: (Nino-Mora 01), No (G, Gaujal, Khun 21).

Illustration of what is Whittle policy

(stochastic scheduling)

Jobs of sizes X and Y with:

- $X = 10$
- $Y = \begin{cases} 2 & \text{proba } 1/2 \\ 18 & \text{proba } 1/2 \end{cases}$

Who should you run first to minimize expected completion time?

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Running a job costs 1€/sec and you can stop anytime. If you finish the job, you earn x. Whittle (=Gittins) index is the smallest x so that you start running the job.

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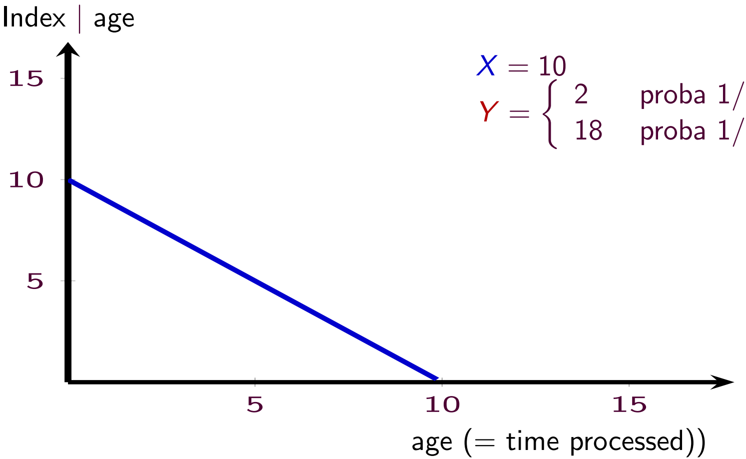

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Index can be computed independently for each job (=arm).

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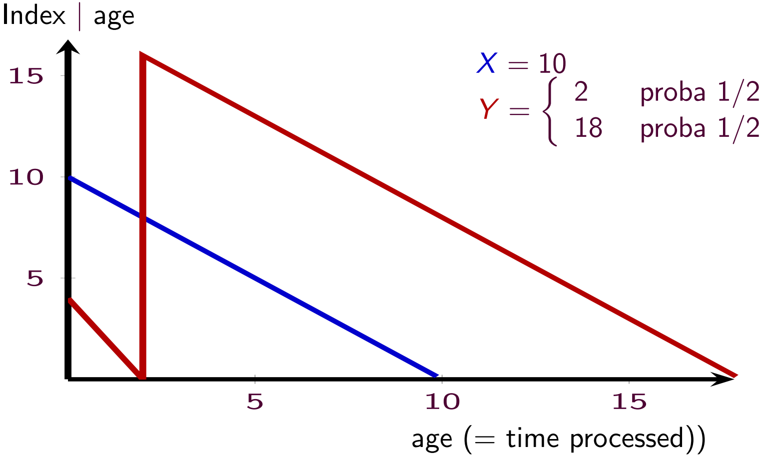

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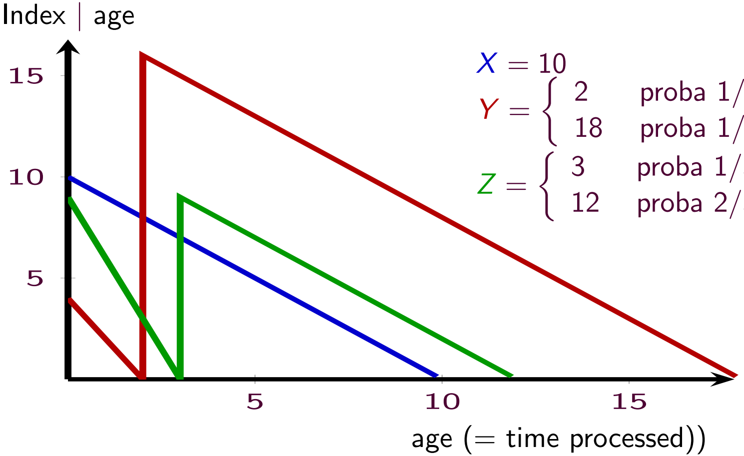

$X = 10$

$Y = \begin{cases} 2 & \text{proba } 1/2 \\ 18 & \text{proba } 1/2 \end{cases}$

$Z = \begin{cases} 3 & \text{proba } 1/3 \\ 12 & \text{proba } 2/3 \end{cases}$

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Outline

Are Whittle index asymptotic optimal?

Assume indexability. For the infinite model, π^{WIP} defines a (piecewise linear) dynamical system:

$$\mathbf{x}(t+1) = \pi^{WIP}(\mathbf{x}(t)).$$

Theorem

1. *If π^{WIP} has a unique attractor, then WIP is asymptotically optimal.* *[Weber Weiss 90s, Verloop 2016]*
2. *For these problems, the suboptimality gap is exponentially small for non-degenerate problems.* *[G. Gaujal Yan 2021]*

Sketch of proof

Recall that $X_s^{(N)}(t) = \frac{1}{N}\#\{\text{arms in state } s \text{ at time } t\}$.

We have:

$$\mathbf{X}^{(N)}(t+1) = \pi^{WIP}(\mathbf{X}^{(N)}(t)) + \underbrace{O(1/\sqrt{N})}_{\text{stochastic noise. CLT}} .$$

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Hence:

1. If π^{WIP} has a unique attractor x^*, then $\mathbf{X}^N(\infty)$ concentrates on x^* (Hoeffding bound / large deviation).
2. Non-degenerate $= \pi^{WIP}$ is locally linear around x^*. We use the linearity of expectation.

How to compute Whittle indices?

Classical definition:

- The index is the penalty λ_s such that that an optimal policy can choose to activate or not the state s when the penalty is λ_s.

How to compute Whittle indices?

Refined definition:

- The index is the (unique) penalty λ_s such that that an (Bellman-)optimal policy can choose to activate or not the state s when the penalty is λ_s.

How to compute Whittle indices?

A Bellman-optimal policies satisfies Bellman equations:

$$g^*(\lambda) + h^*_s(\lambda) = \max_a \underbrace{r(s,a) + a\lambda + \sum_j P(j|s,a)h^*_j(\lambda)}_{q_{s,a}(\lambda)}$$

We define the *active advantage* $b_s(\lambda) := q_{s,1}(\lambda) - q_{s,0}(\lambda)$.

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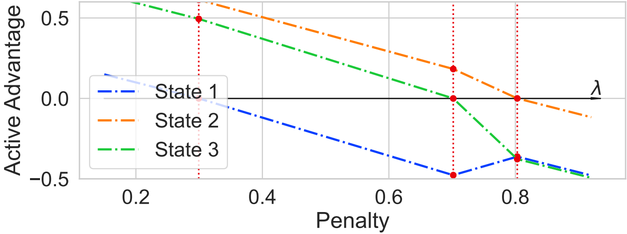
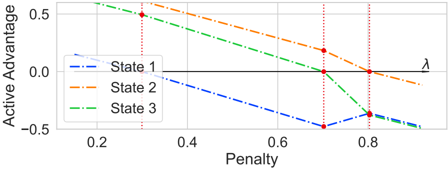


Theorem (G,Gaujal,Khun, 22)

An arm is indexable if and only if for all s: $b_{s,1}(\lambda) = 0$ has a unique solution.

We can use this characterization to build an efficient algorithm



Three ingredients:

1. For MDP, the advantage function is piecewise linear:

$$b^{\pi}(\lambda) = (A^{\pi})^{-1}(r + \lambda\pi).$$

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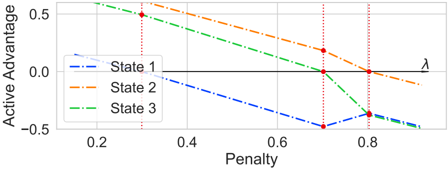

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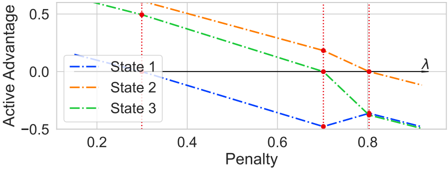

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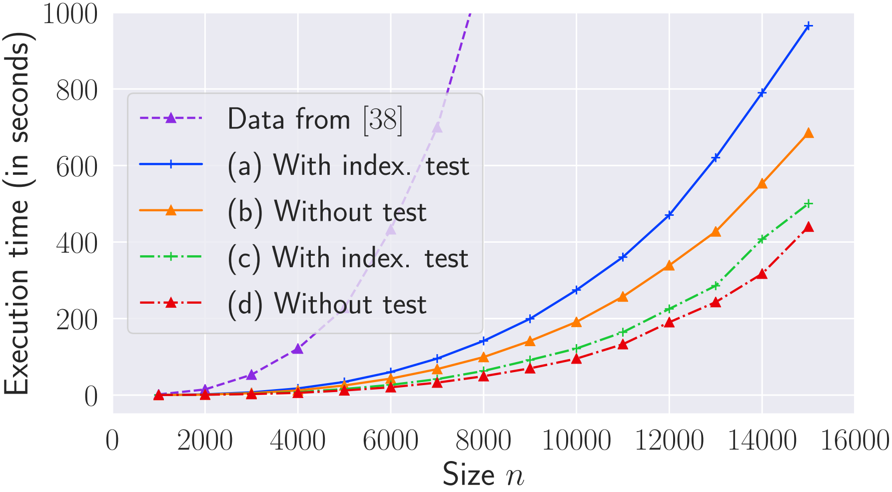
3. We can reorder operations to use Strassen's like operations.

We obtain a theoretical complexity of $O(S^{2.53})$ and an efficient implemenation

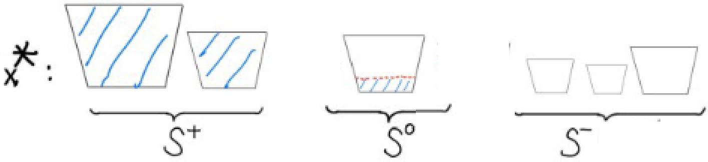
https://pypi.org/project/markovianbandit-pkg/



Outline

How to construct a policy for the original problem?

Relaxed problem: Optimal sequence $x^*_s(t)$, $y^*_{s,a}(t)$.



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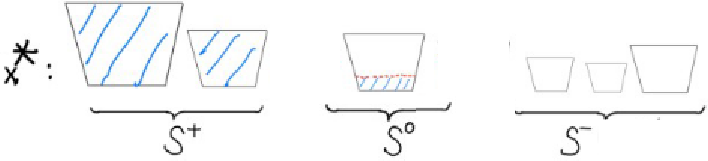
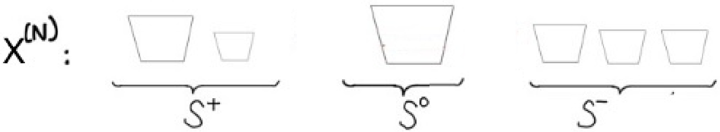


Original problem: Sequence $\pi_t : \mathcal{X} \to \mathcal{Y}$ such that $\pi(x^*) = y^*$.



You can implement π_t as a priority rule iff $|calS^0(t)| = 1$,

- It is locally linear.

Asymptotic optimality

Theorem

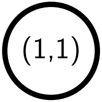
- *There exists an priority rule that is asymptotically optimal if and only if for all* t, $|S^0(t)| \leq 1$.
- *It becomes optimal exponentially fast if for all* t, $|S^0(t)| = 1$.

Proof ingredients.

1. Concentration argument: π continuous implies $\lim_{N\to\infty} X_\pi^{(N)}(t) = x_\pi(t)$.
2. Linearity of expectation.

Many finite-horizon problems do not admit asymptotically optimal priority rules Example: Applicant screening problem (Brown Smith 2020)

Candidates with prior quality Beta(1,1), Interview budget $\alpha=0.25$



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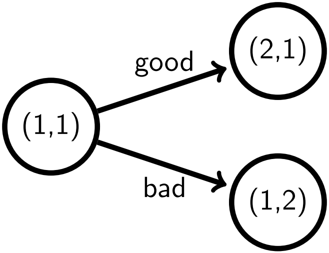

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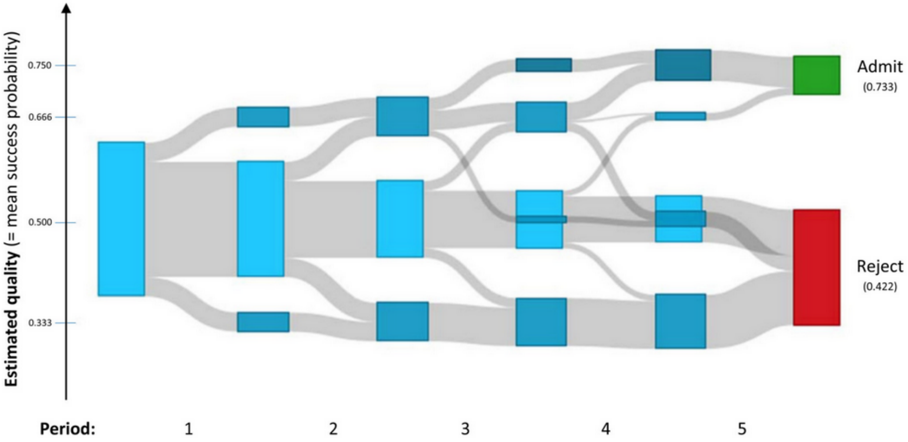

No asymptotically optimal priority policy: after two interviews:

- $x^*_{(1,1)} = 2x^*_{(2,1)} = 2x^*_{(1,2)} = 0.5$.
- $y^*_{(2,1),interview} = y^*_{(1,1),interview} = 0.125$.

Outline

Conclusion

For Markovian bandits, mean-field control can be solved by an LP.

- Can be generalized to weakly coupled MDPs.

Simple policies (priority rule) are not always optimal.

- When they are, they become optimal exponentially fast.
- Index policy (= "right actication price") are very efficient.

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- This talk: finite-state space, computation of policies.
- Open questions: learning, continuous state-spaces.

http://polaris.imag.fr/nicolas.gast/

- *Computing Whittle (and Gittins) Index in Subcubic Time*, G. Gaujal, Khun https://arxiv.org/abs/2203.05207
- *LP-based policies for restless bandits: necessary and sufficient conditions for (exponentially fast) asymptotic optimality*. G. Gaujal Yan. https://arxiv.org/abs/2106.10067