Visual Explanation using Attention Mechanism in Actor-Critic-based Deep Reinforcement Learning

Abstract

Deep reinforcement learning (DRL) has great potential for acquiring the optimal action in complex environments such as games and robot control. However, it is difficult to analyze the decision-making of the agent, i.e., the reasons it selects the action acquired by learning. In this work, we propose Mask-Attention A3C (Mask A3C) that introduced an attention mechanism into Asynchronous Advantage Actor-Critic (A3C) which is an actor-critic-based DRL method, and can analyze decision making of agent in DRL. A3C consists of a feature extractor that extracts features from an image, a policy branch that outputs the policy, value branch that outputs the state value. In our method, we focus on the policy branch and value branch and introduce an attention mechanism to each. In the attention mechanism, mask processing is performed on the feature maps of each branch using mask-attention that expresses the judgment reason for the policy and state value with a heat map. We visualized mask-attention maps for games on the Atari 2600 and found we could easily analyze the reasons behind an agent's decision-making in various game tasks. Furthermore, experimental results showed that higher performance of the agent could be achieved by introducing the attention mechanism.

1 Introduction

Reinforcement learning (RL) problems seek optimal actions to maximize cumulative rewards. Unlike supervised learning problems, RL problems collect training data by exploring the environment. Therefore, it is achieving high performance in specific tasks (e.g., controlling autonomous systems (Kober et al., 2013; Gu et al., 2017; Rajeswaran et al., 2018) and video games (Tessler et al., 2017; Justesen et al., 2017; Shao et al., 2019)) that difficult to create training data. In Go, AlphaGo, a computer Go program that Silver *et al.* proposed, is defeated a professional Go player (Silver et al., 2016). In 2015, the deep Q-network (DQN), a method that combines Q-learning (Watkins & Dayan, 1992) and deep neural network (DNN), achieved a score higher than human players on the Atari 2600 (Mnih et al., 2015). Since the advent of DQN, deep RL (DRL), a method that combines deep learning and RL, has become mainstream, and it is now possible to solve problems featuring a huge number of states, such as images.

In general, deep learning can solve complex tasks by training using a large number of network parameters. However, it is difficult to understand the reasoning behind the decision-making of the trained network because the network parameters used to make the decision are enormous. This problem occurs in DRL as well. The reason for judging the acquired action is unclear, since agents collect training data by searching the environment and the calculation inside the network is complicated. Therefore, in order to prove that the trained network is sufficiently reliable, it is important to analyze the reason for the judgment of the action that it outputs.

One approach to interpreting the decision-making of a network, visual explanation, has been studied in the field of computer vision (Zhou et al., 2016; Selvaraju et al., 2017; Fukui et al., 2019). Visual explanations analyze the factors of the network output by using an attention map that highlights the important regions in an input image. Visual explanation methods have also been applied to DRL models to help with understanding the decision-making of an agent (Sorokin et al., 2015;

Greydanus et al., 2018). These methods can be categorized into two approaches: bottom-up and top-down. Bottom-up visual explanations compute attention maps by using the gradient information of a network. Because the bottom-up approach does not need to re-train a network, it can be applied to any trained network and is commonly used in computer vision and DRL. However,the disadvantage is that back-propagation is required to calculate the gradient information. Top-down visual explanations generates attention maps by using the response values in a network. Unlike the bottom-up approach,the top-down approach generates attention maps with only forward pass.

In this paper, we propose Mask-Attention A3C (Mask A3C) which introduce an attention mechanism into Asynchronous Advantage Actor-Critic (A3C) of an actor-critic-based DRL method. Mask A3C is calculates an mask-attention that an attention map of policy and state value, and then a visual explanation for these values is achieved by visualizing the acquired mask-attention. Our method also learn the policy and state value while considering mask-attention by implementing the attention mechanism, thereby improving the performance of the agent.

Contributions. The main contributions of this paper are as follows.

- We propose a top-down visual explanation method that implements an attention mechanism in the DRL model. In the proposed method, mask-attention, which is an attention map for the outputs, can be obtained simply by forward pass.

- In the proposed method, the decision-making of the agent after learning can be analyzed by visualizing the acquired mask-attention. We conducted an experiment with games on the Atari 2600 and analyzed which information influences the agent's decision-making.

- By implementing the attention mechanism in the policy branch and value branch of the actor-critic method, a different mask-attention can be obtained depending on the policy and state value. In this way, it is possible to analyze an agent's decision-making from the two viewpoints of policy value and state value.

- The proposed method outputs the control value of the agent while considering mask-attention by implementing the attention mechanism. Therefore, the performance of the agent can be improved by emphasizing the area related to the control value.

2 RELATED WORKS

2.1 DEEP REINFORCEMENT LEARNING

The deep Q-network (DQN) (Mnih et al., 2015), which is a typical method of DRL, expresses the action value function $Q(a|s; \theta)$ by using a neural network and acquires the optimum action by training the network parameters θ. DRL methods that learns the optimal action by a value function such as DQN is called value-based DRL, and have been studied extensively (Van Hasselt et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2016; Bellemare et al., 2017; Hessel et al., 2018). There is also a policy-based DRL that directly learns the policy by expressing the policy $\pi(a|s; \theta)$ with a neural network (Lillicrap et al., 2016; Schulman et al., 2015; 2017; Haarnoja et al., 2018). The actor-critic method (Konda & Tsitsiklis, 2000), which is a policy-based method, consists of an actor that output the policy $\pi(a|s; \theta)$ and a critic that output the state value $V(s; \theta)$. Here, the state value $V(s; \theta)$ numerically expresses how the current state s contributes to the reward. The actor selects and performs an action according to a policy $\pi(a|s; \theta)$ that is a probability distribution from a state s to an action a. The critic estimate the state value $V(s; \theta)$ as the evaluation value of the policy $\pi(a|s; \theta)$ that is output by the actor. To update the network parameters in the actor-critic method, the actor parameter update by the policy gradient method and the critic parameter update by the TD error are performed in parallel.

Other approaches include distributed DRL, which improves learning efficiency by constructing multiple environments and agents (Nair et al., 2015; Jaderberg et al., 2017; Kapturowski et al., 2019). Asynchronous Advantage Actor-Critic (A3C) (Mnih et al., 2016) is a distributed DRL method that utilizes the actor-critic method. A3C introduces Asynchronous that is an asynchronous parameter update in distributed learning and Advantage that learns while considering rewards several steps ahead. Experiments with the Atari 2600 showed that A3C could achieved a high score in a short training time by executing the generation of experiences used for learning in parallel.

In this study, we acquire mask-attention, which is an attention map for policy and state value, by implementing an attention mechanism in A3C. By visualizing mask-attention at the time of inference, the decision-making of the agent acquired by learning is analyzed from the visual explanation of the policy and state value.

2.2 VISUAL EXPLANATIONS

Visual explanations are applied in various tasks. Section 2.2 describes a visual explanation method for image recognition and DRL.

Visual Explanations in Image Recognition.

In the field of image recognition, several methods utilizing an attention map have been proposed for analyzing the reason for judgments on the inference result of the network. Attention map is a map that visualized the network gazed area at the time of inference as a heat map. Zhou *et al.* proposed a class activation mapping (CAM) (Zhou et al., 2016), which acquires the attention map of a specific class from the response value of the convolutional layer and the weight of the fully connected layer. However, the recognition performance of CAM deteriorates because it is necessary to change a part of the network structure, such as by introducing global average pooling (GAP) between the convolution and fully connected layers. For that problem, Selvaraju *et al.* proposed gradient-weighted CAM (Grad-CAM) (Selvaraju et al., 2017), which acquires an attention map by using the response value of the convolutional layer during forward pass and the gradient during back-propagation. Grad-CAM avoids the problem that the recognition performance deteriorates by generating an attention map from the gradient information. In image recognition, the recognition accuracy is known to improve by using an attention map during learning. Fukui *et al.* proposed an attention branch network (ABN) (Fukui et al., 2019) that applies the attention map to the attention mechanism. This method provides a visual explanation of the reason for judgment by the attention map simultaneously improves the recognition accuracy.

Visual Explanations in Deep Reinforcement Learning.

In DRL, several works have examined how to analyze the reason for judging an action that output of the network. Sorokin *et al.* proposed the deep attention recurrent Q-network (DARQN) (Sorokin et al., 2015), which implements an attention mechanism in DQN, a representative value-based method. In the network structure of DARQN, the attention mechanism is implemented before the LSTM. In the present study, we implement an attention mechanism in the actor-critic-based A3C to enables a visual explanation in the decision-making of agent from the two viewpoints of policy and state value. In DARQN, the softmax function is applied to the output of the attention map, but in our method, we can acquire an attention map that does not focus on unimportant frames by using the sigmoid function. Moreover, our method can obtain an attention map that includes time series information by changing from LSTM to convolutional LSTM (ConvLSTM) (Xingjian et al., 2015).

Greydanus *et al.* has acquired a saliency map in A3C by calculating a perturbation image utilizing an applied Gaussian filter from the gradient at during back-propagation (Greydanus et al., 2018). This method takes a bottom-up approach is similar to Grad-CAM, and therefore it is necessary to perform back-propagation to acquire the saliency map. In contrast, our method takes a top-down approach that implement an attention mechanism in the network structure of A3C. Therefore, the attention map can be obtained simply by forward pass.

Zhang *et al.* proposed attention guided imitation learning (AGIL), which guides the focus area of a network on the basis of human gaze information (Zhang et al., 2018). They trained a model to replicate human attention with supervised gaze heat maps. The input state was then augmented with this additional information. This style of attention fundamentally differs from that used in our work as it incorporates hand crafted features as input.

3 MASK-ATTENTION A3C

We propose Mask-Attention A3C (Mask A3C), that introduces an attention mechanism into A3C, which is an actor-critic-based distributed DRL method. In Mask A3C, by implementing an attention mechanism for the policy branch and value branch, we can acquire an attention map that expresses

Figure 1: **Detailed network structure of Mask-Attention A3C.**

the focus area of the network for the output of each branch. In our study, this attention map is called mask-attention. By visualizing the mask-attention of each branch, we obtain a visual explanation of the reason for the judgment on the policy and state value. In addition, our method learns while considering the mask-attention by implementing the attention mechanism, which improves the performance of the agent.

3.1 OVERVIEW OF MASK A3C STRUCTURE

Figure 1 shows the network structure of the proposed Mask A3C. It consists of a feature extractor, policy branch, value branch, and attention mechanism. The feature extractor calculates the feature map for the input image using the convolutional layer, the policy branch outputs policies, and the value branch outputs the state value function. In A3C, temporal information can be considered by utilizing LSTM, which greatly improves the performance of the agent. However, LSTM cannot consider the spatial information for the input image, so if it is used in Mask A3C, mask-attention cannot be calculated. We therefore employ convolutional LSTM (ConvLSTM) (Xingjian et al., 2015), which can considers spatiotemporal information. Mask-attention is calculated by applying the sigmoid function and one convolutional layer of $1 \times 1 \times$ # of channels to the feature map calculated by the feature extractor.

3.2 ATTENTION MECHANISM

Mask A3C implements an attention mechanism in the policy branch and value branch so that the policy and state value function are learned in consideration of the acquired mask-attention. The attention mechanism performs mask processing to the feature map of the middle layer in each branch using mask-attention. With this mask processing, the area that contributes to the optimum action and state value can be emphasized. This mask processing using mask-attention for the feature map is calculated as

$$F'(\mathbf{s}_t) = F(\mathbf{s}_t) \cdot M(\mathbf{s}_t), \tag{1}$$

where, $\mathbf{s}_t$ is the state, $F(\mathbf{s}_t)$ is the feature map of the middle layer in each branch, $M(\mathbf{s}_t)$ is mask-attention, and $F'(\mathbf{s}_t)$ is the feature map after mask processing.

4 EXPERIMENTS

To evaluate the effectiveness of Mask A3C, we conducted an experiment using the game task of OpenAI gym (Brockman et al., 2016). Three games were used: "Breakout", "Ms.Pac-Man", and

"Space Invaders". The comparison methods were A3C, Mask A3C policy , Mask A3C value, and Mask A3C double, for a total of four patterns. Mask A3C policy and Mask A3C value refer to a Mask A3C in which the attention mechanism implemented in one side of branch (i.e., policy branch or value branch). Mask A3C double is a Mask A3C with an attention mechanism implemented in both branches. The learning conditions were 35 for the number of workers, 0.0001 for the learning coefficient, and 0.99 for the discount rate. The termination condition of learning was when the global steps reached 1.0×10^8. The termination condition of an episode was the end of one play in the game and the case where the number of steps reached 1.0×10^4. We used the following three evaluation methods.

- Visual explanations using mask-attention

- Score comparison on the Atari 2600

- Score comparison by inverting the gaze area of mask-attention

4.1 IMPLEMENTATION DETAILS

The input was a grayscale image of the game screen and the output was the action in each game. The image used as input was resized to 80×80. The output dimension of feature extractor was 32-dimensional for the first two convolutional layers and 64-dimensional for the remaining one convolutional layer. For the hidden state in ConvLSTM, the output dimension was 64-dimensional. The policy branch consisted of one convolutional layer, one fully connected layer, and a softmax function. The output dimension of the convolution layer were 32 dimensional and the number of output units of the fully connected layer was the number of actions in each game. The value branch consisted of one convolutional layer with 32-dimensional output dimension and one fully connected layer with the number of output units of 1. The network structure of A3C in this experiments was the structure excluded the attention mechanism from Mask A3C.

4.2 VISUAL EXPLANATIONS USING MASK-ATTENTION

Figure 2 shows a visualization example of mask-attention in Atari 2600. Below is our analysis of the DRL agent using mask-attention of the policy and state value in "Breakout", "Ms.Pac-Man", and "Space Invaders".

Breakout. Breakout is a game in which the player hits the ball with a paddle to destroy various block. The actions of the agent that is the paddle are "Noop", "Left", and "Right". As shown in Policy in figure 2(a), the agent in Frame 1 attended to the traveling direction of the ball. In Frame 2, the agent attended to the right side of the paddle, and the action was "Right". Frame 3 after the ball was hit back shows no gaze area. From these results, we can see that the agent controlled the paddle according to the traveling direction of the ball. In State value in figure 2(a), the agent of Point 1 was attending to the entire block, and we can see from the graph that the state value increased with the destruction of the blocks. In Point 2, the ball reached the top of the block and destroyed many blocks. At that time, the gaze area of mask-attention was significantly reduced according to the blocks. After Point 2, the state value decreased according to the number of blocks that were destroyed. These results demonstrate that the agent recognized the blocks as the score source.

Ms.Pac-Man. Ms.Pac-Man is a game in which the player collects scattered cookies while avoiding enemies. The actions of the agent that is the Pac-Man are "Noop","Up","Down","Left","Right","Up + Left","Up + Right","Down + Left", and "Down + Right". In Policy in figure 2(b), the agent of Frame 1 was attending around Pac-Man. The agent of Frame 2 was attending to the cookies remaining on the screen. In Frame 3, Pac-Man moved to the gazed area of Frame 2 and acquired the cookie. These results demonstrate that the agent controlled Pac-Man toward the cookies while simultaneously attending to the surroundings of Pac-Man. In State value in figure 2(b), Point 1, which was the beginning of the game, was attending at the entire screen. In contrast, Point 2 is reduced the gaze area according to the decreases of cookies. Also, from Point 1 to Point 2, the state value decreased as the cookies on the screen decreased. These results demonstrate that the agent recognized the cookies as the score source.

(a) **Breakout**: The white arrow shows the direction of travel of the ball.

(b) **Ms.Pac-Man**: The white arrow shows the direction of travel of Pac-Man.

(c) **Space Invaders**: The red circles in Frame 2 show the beam that is the attack of agent in Frame 1, and the red circles in Frame 3 show the destroyed invaders. The white arrow shows the direction of travel of the beam that is the attack of the agent.

Figure 2: **Visualization example of mask-attention in Atari 2600.**: The controller in Policy is action that is output by the DRL model. The green broken line in the State value shows the transition to the next stage.

Space Invaders. Space Invaders is a shooting game in which the player repels the enemy invaders. The actions of the agent that is the cannon are "Noop","Left","Right","Attack","Left + Attack", and "Right + Attack". In Policy in figure 2(c), the agent in Frame 1 is attended to the invaders and the action was "Attack". In Frame 2, we can see that the beam in Frame 1 was heading toward the invader, and in Frame 3, the beam was repelling the invaders that were attended at in Frame 1. In all frames, the agent attended around itself while avoiding the defensive walls. From these results,

Table 1: **Max / mean scores over 100 episodes on Atari 2600.**: Scores of models that had the highest average score among five trials in each method are shown.

Attention mechanism		Breakout		Ms.Pac-Man		Space Invaders	
Policy branch	Value branch	max	mean	max	mean	max	mean
		864	**662.0**	5380	4573.3	19505	18531.8
✓		**864**	595.8	6330	4833.8	**19860**	19102.8
	✓	**864**	606.9	4830	4044.5	19675	18537.8
✓	✓	**864**	640.0	**6610**	**5314.1**	19810	**19212.5**

Table 2: **Score comparison by inverting the gaze area of mask-attention**: Normal and inverse are the scores when the gaze area is not inverted and is inverted, respectively. Random is the score when the action is randomly selected. Max / mean = maximum and average scores over 100 episodes.

Attention mechanism			Breakout		Ms.Pac-Man		Space Invaders	
Policy branch	Value branch		max	mean	max	mean	max	mean
✓		normal	864	595.8	6630	4833.8	19860	19102.8
		inverse	4	2.2	290	268.9	805	306.9
✓	✓	normal	864	640.0	6610	5314.1	19810	19212.5
		inverse	5	1.8	410	194.4	915	420.2
random			5	1.2	1080	247.8	460	142.1

we can see that the agent repelled the invaders while simultaneously avoiding the defensive wall. In State value in figure 2(c), the agent in Point 1 was attending to the all of the invaders and the agent in Point 2 was shrinking the gaze area according to the decreasing number of invaders. In addition, from Point 1 to Point 2, the state value is decreased according to the number of invaders. These results demonstrate that the agent recognized the invaders as the score source.

Discussion. The policy represents the probability distribution of the action selection in the current state. Therefore, the mask-attention of the policy is indicates the area that contributes to the action of the agent. Also, the state value represents the expected value of the return in the current state. Here, return is the sum of rewards during one episode. Therefore, the mask-attention of the state value indicates the area that represents the property of the game. In this way, we obtained different mask-attentions in the policy and state value by implementing an attention mechanism for each branch.

4.3 SCORE COMPARISON ON THE ATARI 2600

Table 1 shows the max and mean scores over 100 episodes on the Atari 2600. As we can see, the mean score in Breakout was lower Mask A3C (policy, value, double) than the A3C. In contrast, the max score in Breakout was 864 for all methods. This score is the best score that can be obtained in Breakout. Breakout is a simple game with no external factors: it simply consists of the player hitting the ball back with a paddle. Therefore, we are consider that A3C and Mask A3C got the same score. In Ms.Pac-Man, the max and mean scores of Mask A3C (policy, double) improved compared to those of A3C. The control of agent in Ms.Pac-Man is complex because it needs to select an action while considering external factors(e.g., the enemy). Mask A3C (policy, double), which implements an attention mechanism on the policy branch, can emphasize the areas that contribute to the action (e.g., cookies and enemies), which is why Mask A3C (policy, double) obtained a higher score than A3C. In Space Invaders, Mask A3C (policy, double) improved the max and mean scores compared to A3C. Also, the max and mean scores of Mask A3C value is almost the same as the A3C. The agent in Space Invaders needs to select actions in consideration of external factors (e.g, enemies), the same as in Ms.Pac-Man. Mask A3C (policy, double), which implements an attention mechanism in the policy branch, can emphasize the areas that contribute to the action (e.g, defensive walls and invaders), which is why Mask A3C (policy, double) obtained a higher score than A3C.

Table 3: **Decrease rate of score due to inverse of gaze area in mask-attention** (%). : Max / mean = maximum and average scores over 100 episodes.

Attention mechanism		Breakout		Ms.Pac-Man		Space Invaders	
Policy branch	Value branch	max	mean	max	mean	max	mean
✓		99.53	99.63	95.41	94.43	95.94	98.39
✓	✓	99.42	99.71	93.79	96.34	95.38	97.80

4.4 COMPARISON OF SCORES BY INVERTING GAZE AREA IN MASK-ATTENTION

In visually explaining the decision making of an agent using Mask A3C, we want to verify whether mask-attention represents an effective gaze area for the optimum action. For this verification method, we create a map in which the gaze area of the mask-attention in the policy branch is inverted and then calculate the score on Atari 2600 when the created map is used for the attention mechanism. We determine whether mask-attention is effective for the visual explanation of an action by comparing the scores when the gaze area is inverted and when it is not inverted. The map in which the gaze area of the mask-attention is inverted is created by

$$M_{\text{inverse}}(\mathbf{s}_t) = 1 - M(\mathbf{s}_t), \tag{2}$$

where, $\mathbf{s}_t$ is the state (grayscale image in the experiment), $M(\mathbf{s}_t)$ is mask-attention, and $M_{\text{inverse}}(\mathbf{s}_t)$ is the map after inverting the gaze area of mask-attention.

Table 2 shows the score comparison by inverting the gaze area of mask-attention. (Also, the table 3 shows for the decrease ratio from the normal score to the inverse score.)

As shown in table 2, the inverse score was significantly lower than the normal score in all games. In addition, the inverse score in Breakout was equivalent to a random score, and the inverse score of Mask A3C double in Ms.Pac-Man was 53.4 lower than random. In contrast, we can see that the inverse score in Space Invaders was higher than a random score. However, from the table 3, we can see that the decrease ratio in Space Invaders was of 95% or more, as with the other games. Therefore, we conclude that the gaze area of mask-attention in the policy branch can represents a useful area for action to obtain a high score.

5 CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have proposed Mask-Attention A3C (Mask A3C) which introduces an attention mechanism into Asynchronous Advantage Actor-Critic (A3C) that the distributed deep reinforcement learning method based on the actor-critic method. In the proposed Mask A3C, we acquired a mask-attention that expresses the important area for the policy and state value by implementing an attention mechanism in the policy branch and value branch. This enables a visual explanation of the judgment reason in the decision-making of the agent, from the two viewpoints of policy and state value, by visualizing mask-attention. We also emphasize which areas contribute to the optimal action and state value by implementing an attention mechanism, and improves the performance of the agent.

Experiments with the Atari 2600 confirmed the acquisition of different mask-attentions in the policy and value branches. The results demonstrate that the the mask-attention of the policy branch indicates the area that contributes to action while that of the value branch indicates the area that expresses the property of the game. We provided a useful analysis for the decision-making of agents in game tasks from the two viewpoints of policy and state value by visualizing these mask-attentions. A comparison of game scores showed that the score improved when the attention mechanism was implemented in the policy branch. However, our experiments were conducted with game tasks that are easy to analyze visually. Our future work will entail the visual analysis of agents using mask-attention is a future work for complex tasks (e.g., robot control and autonomous driving).

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