Monte-Carlo Tree Search vs. Model-Predictive Controller: A Track-Following Example

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Abstract

Monte-Carlo Tree Search (MCTS) has achieved remarkable success in the game of Go. However, most success of MCTS is in games where actions are discrete. For automous driving, the vehicle action such as throttle and steering angle is continuous. To fill the gap, we propose an MCTS algorithm for continuous actions, and used it specially for a track-following scenerio. We compared MCTS with a standard Model Predictive Controller (MPC) on the Udacity simulator. Using the same cost function and system model, this MCTS algorithm achieves a much lower cost than MPC. MCTS drives with an adaptive speed, as well as exhibits a braking behavior in sharp turns. MPC drives almost a constant speed regardless of the curvy track.

1 Introduction

Autonomous driving aims to make cars safer. Nearly 1.3 million people die in road crashes each year, on average 3,287 deaths a day. Road crashes cost USD $518 billion globally, costing individual countries from 1-2% of their annual GDP. [1] So far there are three major avenues for autonomous driving. **The classical approach** extracts perception and localization results from sensors, summarizing into geometry relationship of the car with its environment. Based on the *geometry representation* of the world, a controller is built. This approach is so far the most popular and widely adopted by industrial leaders such as Google, Uber and Baidu. **The learning-from-demonstration approach**, started from the simple full-connected neural networks [Pomerleau, 1989] in the old days to recent deep convolution layers by NVIDIA [Bojarski et al., 2016], regresses the steer angle given the camera view. This approach leads to a simpler architecture for autonomous driving. **The affordance approach**[Chen et al., 2015] predicts relevant geometry features (called "affordances") from images. Based on the predicted features, a controller can be developed. This approach bears some similarity to Palovian control in which animals map predictions of events into behaviors[Modayil and Sutton, 2014].

Besides these exciting progress, it is interesting to bring reinforcement learning to autonomous driving. Reinforcement learning achieved remarkable success in Atari games [Mnih et al., 2015] and Go [Silver et al., 2016]. Recently, Mobileye proposed an interesting architecture for autonomous vehicles. Similar to the classical approach, their achitecture also has two layers. In particular, their high-level path planning is implemented using a recurrent neural network over the trajectory of the car [Shalev-Shwartz et al., 2016]. The low-level control is a model-based approach that learns a model for the state transition in response to the car's action. Mobileye's efforts stand for extending model-based reinforcement learning [Sutton et al., 2008, Yao and Szepesvári, 2012, Grünewälder et al., 2012] to autonomous driving. Modeling the state that the car sees next turns out to be very

[1] http://asirt.org/initiatives/informing-road-users/road-safety-facts/road-crash-statistics

Submitted to 30th Conference on Neural Information Processing Systems (NIPS 2016). Do not distribute.

important for cars although there has not been convincing applications published yet. However, considerable progress was made in video prediction [Zeng et al., 2017, Oh et al., 2015], which can be possibly used on cars. The reward function is also a fundamental issue to bring reinforcement learning to autonomous driving. In games, the reward signal is noise free since win or loss signals can be observed as a delayed but groundtruth reward. Although how to learn a reward function for autonomous driving is still an open problem, Hadfield-Menell et al. explored teaching a car to align with a human driver with his reward function.

In this paper, we study Monte-Carlo Tree Search (MCTS) for an autonous driving setting. MCTS is especially advantageous for large and complex decision making problems, as demonstrated in the competition of AlphoGo against Mr. Lee Sedol [2]. MCTS is well practised and relatively easy to implement. All the top Go programs have used MCTS for a decade, e.g., [Coulom, 2007, Silver, 2009, Enzenberger et al., 2010]. So far the success of MCTS is largely in board games where actions are discrete. However, in autonomous driving a car's actions like throttle, braking and steer angles are all continuous. We consider a simple motion planning setting where a car has been given a trajectory to follow, and its goal is to drive within track boundary. Note in our problem, motion planing is by no means to be realistic. Practical motion planning also considering avoiding obstacle, e.g., [Kuwata et al., 2008]. We aim to have an environment that renders a simple cost function and vehicle model under which comparing the performance of MCTS and MPC is easy.

2 Background

The classical approach is so far the most practiced and mature. A two-level architecture for autonomous vehicle is often used: path planning at a high level and vehicle control (with a target path and speed) at a low level [Paden et al., 2016, Berntorp, 2017]. There are a spectrum of methods for each of the problems. For example, Rapid-exploring Random Trees finds feasible tracjectories for robots with high degress with freedom [Lavalle, 1998, Kuwata et al., 2008]. MPC is classical control method [Garcia et al., 1989], and has been used for motion planning in a short time horizon [Paden et al., 2016, Kim et al., 2014, Omar et al., 1998, Yim and Oh, 2004, Raffo et al., 2009, Ng et al., 2003, Bakker et al., 1987, Kong et al., 2015, Rajamani, 2011, Besselmann and Morari, 2009, Levinson et al., 2011, Urmson et al., 2007].

2.1 Model Predictive Controller

MPC defines a cost function that considers N steps ahead. This cost function is essentially the undiscounted, N-step truncated return. With a dynamics model of the car and an initial state (and optionally some constraints), MPC produces a sequence of N actions to maximize the return by calling a large-scale nonlinear programming algorithm called *Ipopt* .

The state of the problem is given by $[x, y, \psi, v]$, where x, y are the x-y coordinates of the car, ψ and v are the orientation and speed of the car. Let δ denote the distance of the car center to the track axis (defined by the regressed line from the reference points), and ω denotes the angle between the car and the track axis. The reward function has the following form:

$$r(s_k, a) = -(w_{tr}\delta_{k+1}(a)^2 + w_{ang}\omega_{k+1}(a)^2 + w_v(v_{k+1}(a) - v^*)^2 + w_{st}a[\text{steer}]^2 + w_{thr}a[\text{throttle}]^2 + w_{steerd}(a[\text{steer}] - a_{k-1}[\text{steer}])^2 + w_{throtd}(a[\text{throttle}] - a_{k-1}[\text{throttle}])^2) \quad (1)$$

where v^* is the target speed.

At each time step t, MPC receives a number of reference points which are usually provided by a high-level behavior planner. A polynomial line fitting the reference points is estimated. The model used by MPC is a system of equations:

$$\begin{aligned} x_{k+1} &= x_k + v_k cos(\psi_k) t_\delta \\ y_{k+1} &= y_k + v_k sin(\psi_k) t_\delta \\ \psi_{k+1} &= \psi_k + \frac{a_k[steer] v_k}{L_f} t_\delta \\ v_{k+1} &= v_k + a_k[throttle] t_\delta, \end{aligned}$$

[2] https://deepmind.com/research/alphago/

input : An action model A and a return function that considers N steps of future rewards.
output : A policy that maximizes the return function.
Initialize the state s_0 and the action a_0.
for $t = 0, 1, \ldots$ **do**
  Observe state s_t
  Receive a number of reference points, and fit a polynomial line
  /* Search over N_p paths*/
  for $p = 0, \ldots, N_p$ **do**
    Set $\tilde{s}_0 = s_t, a' = a_t$ /* each path starts with the current state and action */
    Set $R(p) = 0$
    /* planning into future N steps */
    for *k = 0,. . . , N* **do**
      Sample a from a distribution $u(a')$
      Predict the next state, $\tilde{s}_{k+1} = A(\tilde{s}_k, a)$
      Compute the reward r according to $\tilde{s}_{k+1}$, a, a', and deviation from the reference line
      Update $R(p) = \gamma R(p) + r$
      Set $a' = a$
    end
  end
  Select the best path (with highest return R)
  Set a_t to the first action in the best path.
  Take action a_t
end

Algorithm 1: Continuity-preserved (Monte-Carlo) Tree Search (CPTS for short). This CPTS algorithm generates a number of paths expanded from continuous actions. In expanding the child trees from a state, we enforce the continuity in the actions going down a tree. The algorithm makes sure that driving action does not change abruptively and reduces the search space significantly.

where t_δ is the latency between two time steps. Based on the fitted line and the model, the deviation measures δ and ω can both be computed after each of all the forward N actions. In a summary, MPC solves an optimization problem (using Ipopt) to obtain a sequence of N actions:

$$a_{0:N-1} = \arg\max_{a_{0:N-1}} R = \arg\max_{a_{0:N-1}} \sum_{k=0}^{N-1} r(\tilde{s}_k, a),$$

where $\tilde{s}_0$ was set to the current state s_t. In practice of MPC, usually only the first action a_0 was used (so MPC calls the optimization procedure every time step).

2.2 Monte-Carlo Tree Search

MCTS is a special policy search algorithm. Policy search algorithms search in the action space directly. Comparing to policy gradient methods, policy search algorithms can find global optima [**??**], while policy gradient methods usually suffer from local minima [**??**].

Continuity-preserved Monte-Carlo Tree Search (MCTS).

MCTS search exploration issue. UCT.

3 Experiments

In this experiment, we used Udacity simulator [3]. The simulator is developed in Unity and supports self driving car development. The reward function is computed from equation (1). In the experiment, the target speed (in the reward function) was set to 70 km/h. As shown in Figure 1 (left plot), MCTS achieved a much smaller cost than MPC. The cost function is a linear combination of seven cost components. MCTS achieved both a smaller velecity cost and a smaller trackPos cost (deviation from the track center) as shown in the second plot. The third plot in Figure 1 shows the velocity on the track. MCTS's speed is more variable due to that the track has quite a few sharp turns. MPC, on the

[3] `https://github.com/udacity/self-driving-car-sim`

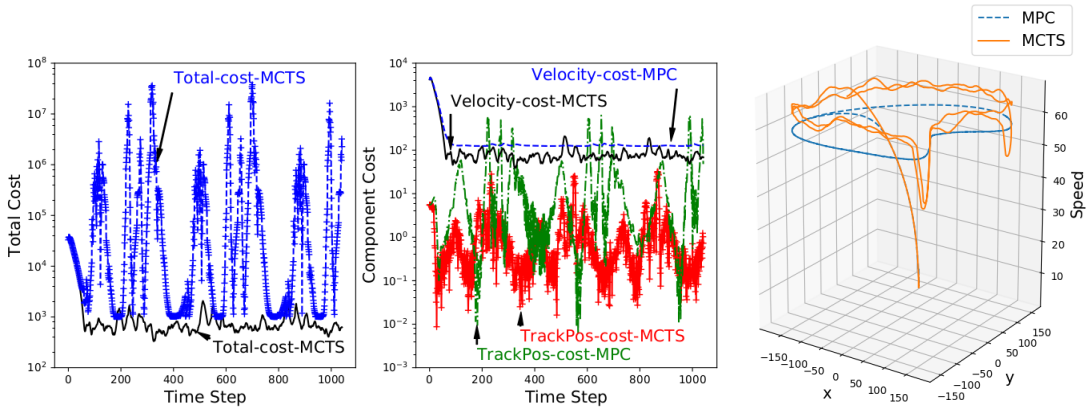

Figure 1: MCTS vs. MPC. The left plot shows the total cost over the next 8 time steps of the two algorithms. The middle plot shows the cost of the velocity component and the trackPos (distance to the center of the lane) component in the same run as the left plot. The right plot shows the velocity on the track, which shows that (a) MCTS accelerates faster in the beginning (the ascending curves from bottom), (b) MCTS drives closer to the target speed (70 km/h) than MPC most of the time. and (c) MCTS's control is more adaptive to curvature in the track. In particular, at sharp turns we see speed dip in the orange line while MPC drives at almost a constant speed (58 km/h).

Figure 2: MCTS braking in front of a sharp turn in Udacity Simulator. MPC never shows braking behavior in the experiment.

other hand, drives almost a constant speed. In particular, after the beginning acceleration period, MPC drove between 57.8 km/h and 58.6 km/h with an average speed of 58.4 km/h. MCTS drove between 42.8 km/h and 67.5 km/h, averaging at 62.3 km/h. Interestingly, MCTS shows braking behavior (continually negative throttles) ahead of sharp turns (Figure 2) although it was never explictly trained to do so. In contrast, MPC never braked.

For MCTS, 10000 paths were generated with random samples of action (both steer angle and throttle). In generating the actions, uniform samples in the small range of last steer angle and last throttle were independently drawn. Simulation were run with lookahead depth of 8 (same as MPC). We used exactly the same model and reward function as MPC. The weights for the reward function are, $w_{tr} = 10.0, w_{ang} = 50.0, w_v = 1.0, w_{st} = 10.0, w_{thr} = 3000.0, w_{steerd} = 10.0, w_{throtd} = 3000.0$.

Video of MPC driving:

`http://youtube.com/mpc.mp4`

Video of MCTS driving:

`http://youtube.com/pure_mcts_gamm0.9_steerthrotchaining.mp4.mp4`

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