







Solving Normal-Form Games

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Recap: Normal-Form Games

			
0.2 	0	-1	+1
0.5 	+1	0	-1
0.3 	-1	+1	0

✿ SIMULTANEOUS

(No turns)

✿ Strategy for a player
is just a probability
distribution over
actions

Two-Player Zero-Sum Normal-Form Games

- NE doesn't have problems as in general-sum or multiplayer games
- In a sense, NE is optimal in that no opponent can exploit you
 - If I were to play any other strategy than $\frac{1}{3}, \frac{1}{3}, \frac{1}{3}$ in rock paper scissors, you could exploit me
- NE can leave utility on the table against imperfect opponents
 - If you always play Rock, NE will still just play $\frac{1}{3}, \frac{1}{3}, \frac{1}{3}$
- But this is a price usually worth paying when playing experts or other AI programs

	R	P	S
R	0	-1	1
P	1	0	-1
S	-1	1	0

Computing NE in Two-Player Zero-Sum Normal-Form Games (This Lecture)

1. LP for small games
2. Iterative Approaches
 - Best-Response Dynamics (doesn't converge)
 - Fictitious Play aka Follow the Leader (FTL)
3. No-Regret Algorithms
 - Follow the Regularized Leader (FTRL)
 - Regret Matching
4. Optimistic regret minimization

Running example:
Weighted RPS

	R	P	S
R	0	-2	1
P	2	0	-1
S	-1	1	0

LP Approach

$$\max_{x \in \Delta^m} \min_{y \in \Delta^n} x^\top A y$$

				y	
			$1/4$	$1/4$	$1/2$
			R	P	S
	$1/4$	R	0	-2	1
x	$1/4$	P	2	0	-1
	$1/2$	S	-1	1	0

LP Approach

$$\max_{x \in \mathbb{R}^m} \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \min_{y \in \mathbb{R}^n} x^T A y \\ \text{s.t. } \mathbf{1}^T y = \mathbf{1}, \\ y \geq \mathbf{0} \end{array} \right.$$

$$\text{s.t. } \mathbf{1}^T x = \mathbf{1}, \\ x \geq \mathbf{0}$$

LP duality

$$\max_{v \in \mathbb{R}} v$$

$$\text{s.t. } A^T x \geq \mathbf{1}v$$

find the largest value v s.t.

every strategy of the opponent gives us expected value at least v

		y			
		1/4	1/4	1/2	
		R	P	S	
x	1/4	R	0	-2	1
	1/4	P	2	0	-1
	1/2	S	-1	1	0

LP Approach

$$\max_{\substack{x \in \mathbb{R}^m \\ v \in \mathbb{R}}} v$$

$$\text{s. t. } \mathbf{1}^\top \mathbf{x} = \mathbf{1}, \\ \mathbf{x} \geq \mathbf{0}$$

$$A^\top \mathbf{x} \geq \mathbf{1}v$$

find the largest value v s.t.
for some x

x is a valid mixed strategy

every strategy of the
opponent gives us
expected value at least v

find the largest
value v s.t.

every strategy of
the opponent
gives us expected
value at least v

$$\max_{v \in \mathbb{R}} v$$

$$\text{s. t. } A^\top \mathbf{x} \geq \mathbf{1}v$$

		y			
		1/4	1/4	1/2	
		R	P	S	
x	1/4	R	0	-2	1
	1/4	P	2	0	-1
	1/2	S	-1	1	0

LP Approach

- Solving our game results in the following
- We maximize the value that the opponent can get against us
- Any deviation would allow the opponent to exploit us more

		R	P	S
1/4	R	0	-2	1
1/4	P	2	0	-1
1/2	S	-1	1	0



	R	P	S
EV	0	0	0

For **P2's** strategy: take dual values of constraint $A^T x \geq \mathbf{1}v$, or solve

$$\min_{y \in \Delta^n} \max_{x \in \Delta^m} x^T A y$$

Iterative Approaches

- Only relatively small games can be solved via LP
- For larger games we need iterative approaches
- Most iterative approaches *approach* a NE *on average*
 - Can be stopped any time
- What we'll cover
 - Best Response Dynamics (doesn't converge to NE)
 - Fictitious Play aka Follow the Leader (isn't no-regret)
 - Follow the Regularized Leader (*e.g.*, gradient descent, multiplicative weights)
 - Regret Matching
 - Regret Matching Plus
 - Optimistic regret minimization

*We'll make this
precise soon*



Best Reponse Dynamics

$$x_i^{t+1} = \arg \max_{x_i} u_i(x_i, x_{-i}^t)$$

Best respond to the opponent's **last** strategy

Question: Does

$$\frac{1}{T} \sum_{t=1}^T x_i^t \xrightarrow{T \rightarrow \infty} \text{NE?}$$

No!

$$\frac{1}{T} \sum_{t=1}^T x_i^t \rightarrow \begin{bmatrix} 1/3 \\ 1/3 \\ 1/3 \end{bmatrix} \neq \text{NE} = \begin{bmatrix} 1/4 \\ 1/4 \\ 1/2 \end{bmatrix}$$

	R	P	S
R	0	-2	1
P	2	0	-1
S	-1	1	0

Fictitious Play (Follow the Leader)

$$x_i^{t+1} = \arg \max_{x_i} \frac{1}{t} \sum_{\tau=1}^t u_i(x_i, x_{-i}^{\tau})$$

Best respond to the opponent's **average** strategy

Question: Does

$$\frac{1}{T} \sum_{t=1}^T x_i^t \xrightarrow{T \rightarrow \infty} \text{NE?}$$

Yes! (for zero-sum games)

[Robinson 1951]

...but possibly with very slow rate $T^{-1/n}$
if the tiebreaking is done adversarially

[Daskalakis & Pan 2014]

Open question [“Karlin’s weak conjecture”, Karlin 1959]:
Does FP with non-adversarial tiebreaking converge with
rate $O_n(T^{-1/2})$ in all zero-sum normal-form games?

No-Regret Algorithms

- What if I'm playing a repeated game against someone who knows I am playing fictitious play?
- Then they would know exactly what my next move will be and could choose a best response every time
- Can we find iterative algorithms that will not be *too bad* even when the opponent knows the algorithm?
- No-regret algorithms do exactly this
 - And achieve faster convergence than FP as well!

Regret Minimization

for $t = 1, \dots, T$:

- Agent chooses an *action distribution* $\mathbf{x}^t \in X := \Delta^n$
- Environment chooses a *utility vector* $\mathbf{u}^t \in [0, 1]^n$
- Agent observes \mathbf{u}^t and gets utility $\langle \mathbf{u}^t, \mathbf{x}^t \rangle$

$\Delta^n =$ set of distributions on n things
 $= \{\mathbf{x} \in \mathbb{R}^n: \mathbf{x} \geq 0, \sum x_i = 1\}$

Agent goal: Minimize *regret*.

“How well do we do against best, fixed strategy in hindsight?”

$$R^T := \max_{\hat{\mathbf{x}} \in X} \left\{ \sum_{t=1}^T \langle \mathbf{u}^t, \hat{\mathbf{x}} \rangle \right\} - \sum_{t=1}^T \langle \mathbf{u}^t, \mathbf{x}^t \rangle$$

Maximum utility that was achievable by the **best fixed** action in hindsight

Utility that was actually accumulated

✿ Goal: have R^T grow sublinearly with respect to time T , e.g., $R^T = O_n(\sqrt{T})$

No assumption on utilities!
Must be able to handle adversarial environments

What does regret minimization have to do with zero-sum games?

Nash equilibrium in a 2-player 0-sum normal-form game with payoff matrix A :

$$\max_{x \in \Delta^m} \min_{y \in \Delta^n} x^\top A y$$

✿ **IDEA: Self-play. Make two regret minimizers play each other**

for $t = 1, \dots, T$:

- $x^t \leftarrow$ request strategy from P1's regret minimizer
- $y^t \leftarrow$ request strategy from P2's regret minimizer
- Pass utility $A y^t$ to P1's regret minimizer
- Pass utility $-A^\top x^t$ to P2's regret minimizer

$$R_1^T := \max_{\hat{x} \in \Delta^m} \left\{ \sum_{t=1}^T \langle A y^t, \hat{x} \rangle \right\} - \sum_{t=1}^T \langle A y^t, x^t \rangle \leq O_m(\sqrt{T})$$

$$R_2^T := \max_{\hat{y} \in \Delta^n} \left\{ \sum_{t=1}^T \langle -A^\top x^t, \hat{y} \rangle \right\} - \sum_{t=1}^T \langle -A^\top x^t, y^t \rangle \leq O_n(\sqrt{T})$$

Add these two lines and divide by T to get the average

$$\max_{\hat{x} \in \Delta^m} \{ \hat{x}^\top A \bar{y} \} - \min_{\hat{y} \in \Delta^n} \{ \bar{x}^\top A \hat{y} \} \leq O_{m,n} \left(\frac{1}{\sqrt{T}} \right)$$

where $\bar{x} = \frac{1}{T} \sum_{t=1}^T x^t$ and $\bar{y} = \frac{1}{T} \sum_{t=1}^T y^t$

✿ **TAKEAWAY**

The average strategies converge to a Nash equilibrium!

Regret Minimization: Follow the Leader (Fictitious Play)

First attempt: Follow the leader. That is, play the best action in hindsight so far:

$$x^{t+1} = \arg \max_{x \in X} \sum_{\tau \leq t} \langle u^\tau, x \rangle$$

This does not work!

Counterexample: $n = 2$ actions,

$$u^t = \begin{cases} [1/2, 0] & t = 1 \\ [0, 1] & t > 1, \text{ even} \\ [1, 0] & t > 1, \text{ odd} \end{cases}$$

Best action in hindsight has utility $\approx T/2$

Follow-the-leader always plays the wrong action and therefore gets utility ≈ 0

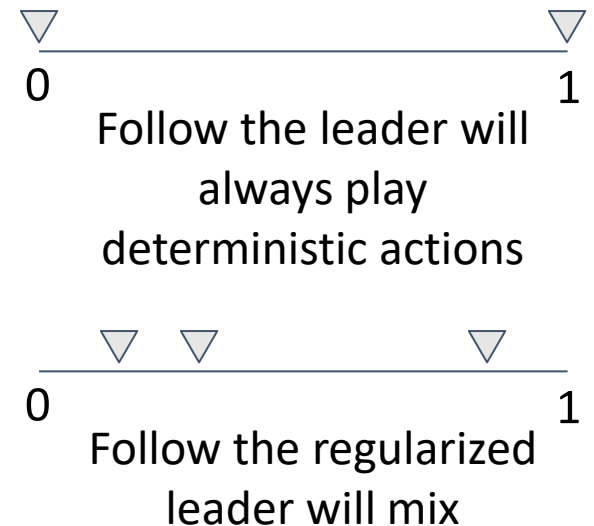
More generally: No algorithm outputting only pure actions can have no regret

Follow the *Regularized* Leader

Idea: Add a *strictly convex regularizer* $R : X \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$

$$\mathbf{x}^{t+1} = \arg \max_{\mathbf{x} \in X} \sum_{\tau \leq t} \langle \mathbf{u}^\tau, \mathbf{x} \rangle - \frac{1}{\eta} R(\mathbf{x})$$

- This prevents each iterate from being deterministic
- The resulting algorithm is no-regret (for $\eta \propto 1/\sqrt{T}$)
- Intuitively, **updates toward high-regret actions, but not too much**



Follow the *Regularized* Leader

Idea: Add a *strictly convex regularizer* $R : X \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$

$$\mathbf{x}^{t+1} = \arg \max_{\mathbf{x} \in X} \sum_{\tau \leq t} \langle \mathbf{u}^\tau, \mathbf{x} \rangle - \frac{1}{\eta} R(\mathbf{x})$$

Example 1: *quadratic*

$$R(\mathbf{x}) = \frac{1}{2} \|\mathbf{x}\|_2^2$$

Closed-form optimization:

$$\mathbf{x}^{t+1} = \Pi_X \left(\eta \cdot \sum_{\tau=1}^t \mathbf{u}^\tau \right)$$

$\Pi_X =$ projection onto X

a.k.a. gradient descent!



Follow the leader will always play deterministic actions



Follow the regularized leader will mix

Follow the *Regularized* Leader

Idea: Add a *strictly convex regularizer* $R : X \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$

$$\mathbf{x}^{t+1} = \arg \max_{\mathbf{x} \in X} \sum_{\tau \leq t} \langle \mathbf{u}^\tau, \mathbf{x} \rangle - \frac{1}{\eta} R(\mathbf{x})$$

Example 2: *negative entropy*

$$R(\mathbf{x}) = \sum_a x[a] \log x[a]$$

Closed-form optimization:

$$\mathbf{x}^{t+1} \propto \exp \left(\eta \cdot \sum_{\tau=1}^t \mathbf{u}^\tau \right)$$

a.k.a. multiplicative weights update (MWU),
hedge, (discrete-time) replicator dynamics,
randomized weighted majority, ...



Follow the leader will
always play
deterministic actions



Follow the regularized
leader will mix

A Common Template for Regret Minimizers

- Given utility vectors $\mathbf{u}^1, \dots, \mathbf{u}^t$, we compute the empirical regrets up to time t of each action:

$$r^t[a] := \sum_{\tau=1}^t (u^\tau[a] - \langle \mathbf{u}^\tau, \mathbf{x}^\tau \rangle)$$

- Then, intuitively the next strategy \mathbf{x}^{t+1} gives mass to actions in a manner related to how much regret they have accumulated

A Common Template for Regret Minimizers

Empirical regret:

$$r^t[a] := \sum_{\tau=1}^t (u^\tau[a] - \langle \mathbf{u}^\tau, \mathbf{x}^\tau \rangle)$$

Hyperparameter
("learning rate")

Algorithm	Rule
Gradient descent	$\mathbf{x}^{t+1} = \Pi_X(\eta \cdot \mathbf{r}^t)$
Multiplicative weights update (MWU) (aka Hedge, Randomized Weighted Majority, ...)	$\mathbf{x}^{t+1} \propto \exp(\eta \cdot \mathbf{r}^t)$
Regret matching (RM) [Hart & Mas-Collel 2000]	$\mathbf{x}^{t+1} \propto \max\{0, \mathbf{r}^t\}$

No learning rate.
Scale-invariant!

RM Regret Bound Proof

$$\mathbf{x}^{t+1} \propto [\mathbf{r}^t]^+ \quad \text{where}$$

$$\begin{aligned} \mathbf{r}^t &:= \mathbf{r}^{t-1} + \mathbf{g}^t \\ \mathbf{g}^t &:= \mathbf{u}^t - \langle \mathbf{u}^t, \mathbf{x}^t \rangle \cdot \mathbf{1} \end{aligned}$$

Note: $\langle \mathbf{g}^t, \mathbf{x}^t \rangle = 0$

$$\begin{aligned} \|[r^{t+1}]^+\|_2^2 &\leq \| [r^t]^+ + \mathbf{g}^{t+1} \|_2^2 && \text{using inequality } [x+y]^+ \leq |[x]^+ + y| \text{ for } x, y \in \mathbb{R} \\ &= \| [r^t]^+ \|_2^2 + \| \mathbf{g}^{t+1} \|_2^2 + 2(\mathbf{g}^{t+1})^\top [r^t]^+ && \rightarrow 0 \end{aligned}$$

induction

$$\|[r^T]^+\|_2^2 \leq \sum_{t=1}^T \|\mathbf{g}^t\|_2^2 \leq nT \quad \text{since } \mathbf{g}^t \in [-1,1]^n$$

$$R^T := \max_a r^T[a] \leq \|[r^T]^+\|_2 \leq \sqrt{nT} \quad \square$$

A Common Template for Regret Minimizers

Empirical regret: $r^t := r^{t-1} + g^t$

Simple modification: $r_+^t := [r_+^{t-1} + g^t]^+$

(Floor regrets at 0 after every iteration)

Algorithm	Rule
Gradient descent	$x^{t+1} = \Pi_X(\eta \cdot r^t)$
Multiplicative weights update (MWU) (aka Hedge, aka Randomized Weighted Majority)	$x^{t+1} \propto \exp\{\eta \cdot r^t\}$
Regret matching (RM) [Hart & Mas-Colell 2000]	$x^{t+1} \propto [r^t]^+$
Regret matching plus (RM+) [Tammelin 2014]	$x^{t+1} \propto [r_+^t]^+$

(Regret bound proof is identical)

A Common Template for Regret Minimizers

All of these algorithms guarantee that after seeing any number T of utilities $\mathbf{u}^1, \dots, \mathbf{u}^T$, the regret cumulated by the algorithm satisfies

$$R^T \leq C \sqrt{T}$$

Constant that depends on number of actions

$$\text{MWU: } C = \sqrt{\log n}$$

$$\text{RM, RM+, GD: } C = \sqrt{n}$$

Remember:

This holds without any assumption about the way the utilities are selected by the environment!

Consequence: when using these algorithms in self-play in 2-player 0-sum games, the **average strategy** converges to a Nash equilibrium at a rate of C/\sqrt{T}

Reminder: Self-play

for $t = 1, \dots, T$:

- $\mathbf{x}^t \leftarrow$ request strategy from P1's regret minimizer
- $\mathbf{y}^t \leftarrow$ request strategy from P2's regret minimizer
- Pass utility $\mathbf{A}\mathbf{y}^t$ to P1's regret minimizer
- Pass utility $-\mathbf{A}^\top \mathbf{x}^t$ to P2's regret minimizer

State-of-the-art variant in practice: Discounted RM (DRM)

- Linear RM (LRM)
 - Weight iteration t by t (in regrets and averaging)
 - RM+ floors regrets at 0. Can we combine this with linear RM? Theory: Yes. Practice: No! Does very poorly.
- But less-aggressive combinations do well: **Discounted RM**
 - On each iteration, multiply positive regrets by $t^\alpha / (t^\alpha + 1)$
 - On each iteration, multiply negative regrets by $t^\beta / (t^\beta + 1)$
 - Weight contributions toward average strategy on iteration t by t^γ
 - Worst-case convergence bound only a small constant worse than that of RM
 - RM: $\alpha = \beta = +\infty$
 - RM+: $\alpha = +\infty, \beta = -\infty$
 - For $\alpha = 1.5, \beta = 0, \gamma = 2$, consistently outperforms RM+ in practice

What Regret Minimizers are Used in Practice?

Follow the Regularized Leader (FTRL)
(e.g., gradient descent, multiplicative weights)

- ✓ Works for general convex sets
 - ✓ Widely used & understood
 - ✗ Slow in practice
 - ✗ Has hyperparameters (stepsize)
-
- ✓ Can incorporate optimism about future losses to converge faster in 2-player 0-sum games

Regret Matching (RM)
& Regret Matching+ (RM+)

- ✗ Only for **simplex** domains
- ✗ Not as well studied theoretically
- ✓ Fast in practice
- ✓ No hyperparameters

✿ Modern variants of this, such as DCFR, are the standard in extensive-form game solving!

? Unknown
...until recently ✓

Optimistic (Predictive) Regret Minimizers

Algorithm	Standard (non-optimistic) rule	Optimistic (aka Predictive) rule
GD	$\mathbf{x}^{t+1} = \Pi_X(\eta \cdot \mathbf{r}^t)$	Replace \mathbf{r}^t with $\mathbf{r}^t + \mathbf{g}^t$
MWU	$\mathbf{x}^{t+1} \propto \exp\{\eta \cdot \mathbf{r}^t\}$	
RM	$\mathbf{x}^{t+1} \propto [\mathbf{r}^t]^+$	
RM+	$\mathbf{x}^{t+1} \propto [\mathbf{r}_+^t]^+$	

Typically, one-line change in implementation

All of these algorithms guarantee that after seeing any number T of utilities $\mathbf{u}^1, \dots, \mathbf{u}^T$, the regret cumulated by the algorithm satisfies

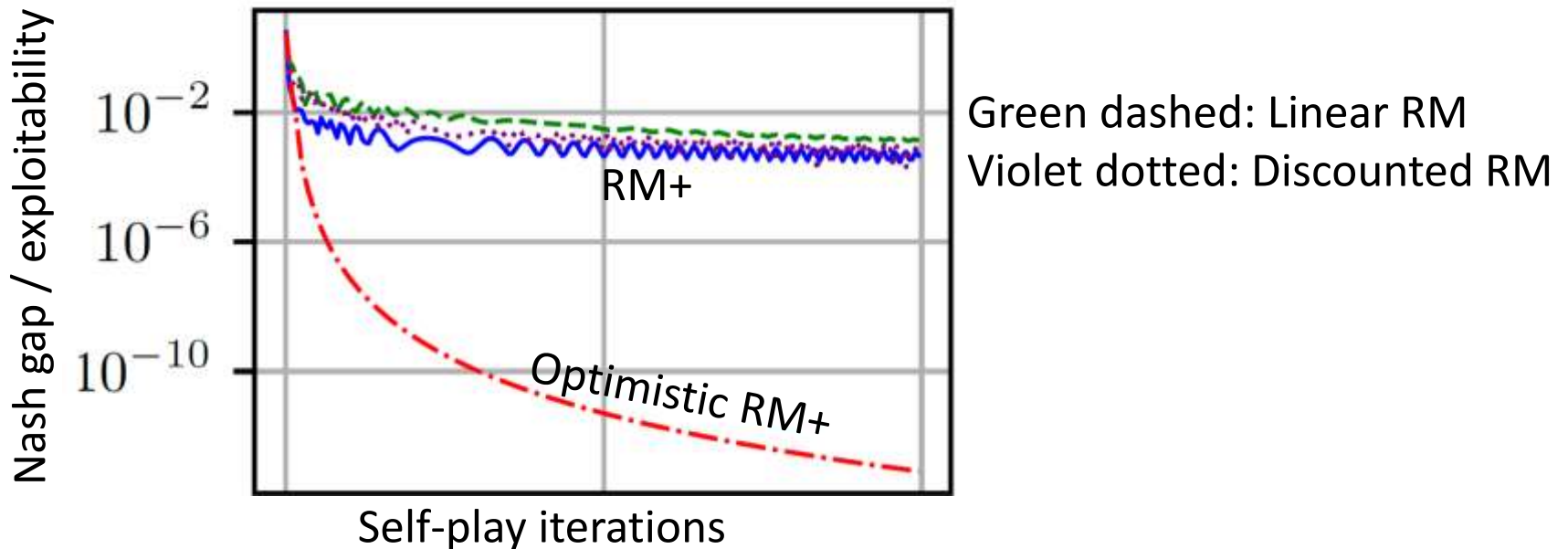
$$R^T \leq C \sqrt{\sum_{t=1}^T \|\mathbf{g}^t - \mathbf{g}^{t-1}\|_2^2} \quad (\text{where } \mathbf{g}^0 := \mathbf{0})$$

Remember:

This holds without any assumption about the way the utilities are selected by the environment!

Takeaway message: still $\approx \sqrt{T}$ regret, but much smaller when there is little change to the utilities over time

Empirical Performance



(RM was omitted as it is typically much slower than RM+)

Practical State-of-the-Art

- In general, Discounted RM and Optimistic RM+ are the fastest in practice
 - For some games, like poker, Discounted RM is empirically consistently faster than Optimistic RM+
 - For many other games, Optimistic RM+ is significantly faster

Beyond Zero-Sum Games

Correlated strategy profile:

$$\mu^T := \frac{1}{T} \sum_{t=1}^T \underbrace{(x_1^t \otimes x_2^t \otimes \cdots \otimes x_n^t)}_{\text{the product distribution in } \Delta(A_1) \times \cdots \times \Delta(A_n)}$$

Note: not $\Delta(A_1) \times \cdots \times \Delta(A_n)$

whose marginal on A_i is $x_i^t \in \Delta(A_i)$

Regret guarantee: for all players i :

$$\begin{aligned} \max_{x_i^*} \frac{1}{T} \sum_{t=1}^T [u_i(x_i^*, x_{-i}^t) - u_i(x_i^t, x_{-i}^t)] &\leq O_n \left(\frac{1}{\sqrt{T}} \right) \\ &= \max_{x_i^*} \mathbb{E}_{x \sim \mu^T} [u_i(x_i^*, x_{-i}) - u_i(x_i, x_{-i})] \end{aligned}$$

μ^T is an ϵ -“coarse-correlated equilibrium” (CCE) where $\epsilon = O_n(1/\sqrt{T})$

Note: A CCE that happens to be a product distribution ($\mu^T \in \Delta(A_1) \times \cdots \times \Delta(A_n)$) is a Nash equilibrium

References

Fictitious play:

- J Robinson (*Ann. Math.* 1951), “An iterative method of solving a game”
- C Daskalakis, Q Pan (*FOCS* 2014), “A Counter-Example to Karlin’s Strong Conjecture for Fictitious Play”
- S Karlin (1959), *Mathematical Methods and Theory in Games, Programming, and Economics*

Blackwell Approachability (used in the original correctness proof of RM/RM+):

- D Blackwell (*Pacific J. of Math.* 1956), “An analog of the minmax theorem for vector payoffs”

Regret Matching and Regret Matching Plus:

- S Hart, A Mas-Colell (*Econometrica* 2000), “A Simple Adaptive Procedure Leading to Correlated Equilibrium”
- O Tammelin (*arXiv* 2014), “Solving large imperfect information games using CFR+”
- N Brown, T Sandholm (*AAAI* 2019), “Solving Imperfect-Information Games via Discounted Regret Minimization”
- **Simple proof of correctness presented in this lecture due to G Farina (2023),**
https://www.mit.edu/~gfarina/2023/6S890f23_L05_learning_algorithms/L05.pdf

Predictivity:

- CK Chiang et al. (*COLT* 2012), “Online optimization with gradual variations”
- A Rakhlin, K Sridharan (*COLT* 2013), “Online Learning with Predictable Sequences”
- G Farina, C Kroer, T Sandholm (*AAAI* 2021), “Faster Game Solving via Predictive Blackwell Approachability: Connecting Regret Matching and Mirror Descent”