

Expanding horizons in reinforcement learning for curious exploration and creative planning

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Abstract

Curiosity and creativity are expressions of the tradeoff between leveraging that with which we are familiar or seeking out novelty. Through the computational lens of reinforcement learning, we describe how formulating the value of information seeking and generation via their complementary effects on *planning horizons* formally captures a range of solutions to striking this balance.

Ivancovsky, Baror, & Bar propose fruitful connections between curiosity and creativity under an exploration-exploitation trade-off. The explore-exploit trade-off is the decision between a familiar option with known value or an unfamiliar option with unknown or uncertain value (Addicott, Pearson, Sweitzer, Barack, & Platt, 2017). Choosing unfamiliar options is risking time, energy, and foregone reward in return for information (Rubin, Shamir, & Tishby, 2012).

These ideas have history in reinforcement learning. For example, novelty-seeking is important to prevent failures of learning where subpar solutions are settled on prematurely (Fox, Pakman, & Tishby, 2015). Despite the benefits of novelty-seeking, seeking novel information can also carry a high cost when forgoing familiar opportunities and accruing a burdensome amount of information (Wilson, Bonawitz, Costa, & Ebitz, 2021). Thus one must manage costs by taking “sensible risks” which balance exploring to learn novel information about the environment with accruing increasingly complex information for different tasks at hand (Sternberg & Lubart, 1996). One way to encourage taking on these risks for exploration is to use heuristics which locally track what has and has not been seen (Tang et al., 2017; Wittmann, Bunzeck, Dolan, & Düzel, 2007; Wittmann, Daw, Seymour, & Dolan, 2008). By contrast, preferring familiarity can manifest as a form of perseverative information seeking that was associated with deprivation curiosity (Lydon-Staley, Zhou, Blevins, Zurn, & Bassett, 2021), a drive to reduce uncertainty and acquire missing information (Litman, 2008; Kashdan et al., 2018). This preference for familiarity has been seen as prevalent in people with greater depressed mood and anxiety (Zhou et al., 2023), and may be an important heuristic strategy to reduce uncertainty for better reliability of future-oriented decisions (Jiang, Kulesza, Singh, & Lewis, 2015; Harhen & Bornstein, 2023). However, in large environments, such local heuristics are impoverished, particularly when higher-order associations are needed for planning. This need for richer measurements motivates the use of network science tools to formalize both local and global relationships as internal representations of the environment (Zhou, Lydon-Staley, Zurn, & Bassett, 2020; Yoo, Bornstein, & Chrastil, 2023). Thus, we propose expansions of the novelty-seeking model using reinforcement learning approaches to exploration and network science perspectives on information complexity and compression.

Ivancovsky & colleagues rightly note that curiosity and creativity must involve a dynamic policy of behavior that adaptively alternates between modes of exploration and exploitation. Reinforcement learning approaches reveal what behavior pattern, or policy, is appropriate for a given task and environment, for instance adapted to the sparsity of rewarding solutions (Gershman & Niv, 2015). To this end, the reinforcement learning approach of Harada (2020) was described. However, notably this paper reported that divergent and convergent thinking measures of creativity and the personality trait of openness to experience (a proxy for being “inventive/curious”) were *not* robustly associated to exploration and exploitation behavior based on model-free reinforcement learning (Harada, 2020). This finding, and others (Jach et al., 2023; Molinaro, Cogliati Dezza, Bühler, Moutsiana, & Sharot, 2023), highlights the need for more sophisticated models of the value of exploration.

The value of information is sometimes treated as a simple heuristic for predisposing choices towards exploration (Gottlieb, Oudeyer, Lopes, & Baranes, 2013; Kidd & Hayden, 2015), but the value can also be formally expanded as the change in future expected value that results from increasing certainty over representations of the environment and sequence of choices (Kaelbling, Littman, & Cassandra, 1998). These planning and policy iteration approaches aim for more global knowledge about the environment, and thereby differ from the local count-based reward functions to encourage exploration (Oudeyer & Kaplan, 2007; Wittmann et al., 2008; Tang et al., 2017; Masís, Chapman, Rhee, Cox, & Saxe, 2023). Here we focus on approaches that balance the increased long-run discounted expected value of knowledge with the cost of sampling (exploration) (Kaelbling et al., 1998). To this end, the focus of choices shifts from an explore-or-exploit distinction to the iterative improvement of knowledge of the environment by testing predictions and simulations of future outcomes according to a given action policy (Gruber & Ranganath, 2019; Kobayashi, Ravaioli, Baranès, Woodford, & Gottlieb, 2019; Wilson, Wang, Sadeghiyeh, & Cohen, 2020; Dubey & Griffiths, 2020; Liquin & Gopnik, 2022).

We describe two areas of future research. First, creative insights can emerge from expanded planning horizons. Planning is commonly implemented as a search over a decision tree, wherein expanded horizons entail a deeper search in the tree. When the internal representation of information about the causal structure of the environment is accurate, longer planning horizons are useful. However, when the representation is incomplete, a smaller planning horizon compresses the policy space and prevents overfitting

to past observations (Jiang et al., 2015). Humans can search over more complex structures in knowledge representations (Yoo et al., 2023). That knowledge may be more modular and compressible, allowing for the grouped representation of a more diverse chain of actions (Schapiro, Rogers, Cordova, Turk-Browne, & Botvinick, 2013; Stachenfeld, Botvinick, & Gershman, 2017; Momennejad, 2020; Lai & Gershman, 2021; Patankar et al., 2023). The ability to use more complex knowledge structures may involve a spatial-like ability to navigate those structures (Rmus, Ritz, Hunter, Bornstein, & Shenhav, 2022), as well as a metacognitive ability to balance knowledge uncertainty with deeper planning (Schulz & Bonawitz, 2007; Wade & Kidd, 2019, 2020; Nussenbaum et al., 2023). Indeed, a form of mental navigation that spans diverse spaces has been proposed to be linked with both creativity and curiosity (Aru, Drüke, Pikamäe, & Larkum, 2023; Zhou et al., 2023; Eysenbach, Gupta, Ibarz, & Levine, 2018). Although such diversity and depth can decrease knowledge uncertainty, it comes at the cost of time and computational resources to accrue and update information. Computational cost motivates the next direction of research.

Second, creatively recombining knowledge benefits from unlearning or updating outdated knowledge. This form of creativity complements a type of curiosity that is characterized by deconstructing and rebuilding current structures (Zurn, 2021). When an agent seizes onto a supposedly optimal choice that is actually suboptimal, future resources must be used to unlearn those experiences (Fox et al., 2015). This is precisely a problem that deprivation curiosity can exacerbate (Kruglanski & Webster, 2018; Zedelius, Gross, & Schooler, 2022). A solution to this problem involves aiming for simpler, compressed policies by chunking actions (Lai & Gershman, 2021). Compression involves smartly discarding some information to efficiently redescribe the information, such as by describing an elephant and a chicken with one joint description rather than describing each alone (Cover & Thomas, 1991; Mack, Preston, & Love, 2020). In order to modulate the planning horizon, policies could be compressed to increase certainty, albeit over an impoverished model. This idea is related to strategically decomposing, aggregating, and reducing sequences of actions into a hierarchy of “options” (Botvinick, Niv, & Barto, 2009; Sutton, Precup, & Singh, 1999) to balance the growing cost of planning (Botvinick, 2012; Correa, Ho, Callaway, Daw, & Griffiths, 2023). The idea also relates to a computational form of curiosity that involves improving prediction of expected long-term value (Schmidhuber, 2008; Gruber & Ranganath, 2019). Prediction is related to compression because the best compression is the true data generating model, and the true data generating model is the most predictive (Shannon, 1948). Notably, neural activity has been measured to be most compressed in the default-mode network (Zhou et al., 2022; Mack et al., 2020), a network of regions central to the proposed novelty-seeking model. Default-mode activity is also associated with the simulation of hypothetical episodes (Schacter & Addis, 2007) and the replay of episodic memories (Schapiro, McDevitt, Rogers, Mednick, & Norman, 2018), which can help to plan or update actions from new experiences (Wilson et al., 2020; Kauvar, Doyle, Zhou, & Haber, 2023).

In conclusion, curiosity could be thought of computationally as actions taken to justify the expansion one’s planning horizon. The consequent cost of increased complexity can be managed by creatively compressing action policies, which further support the pursuit of long-term goals.

Competing interests

Competing interests: none.

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Citation Diversity Statement

Recent work in several fields of science has identified a bias in citation practices such that papers from women and other minority scholars are under-cited relative to the number of such papers in the field (Mitchell, Lange, & Brus, 2013; Dion, Sumner, & Mitchell, 2018; Caplar, Tacchella, & Birrer, 2017; Maliniak, Powers, & Walter, 2013; Dworkin et al., 2020; Bertolero et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2021;

Chatterjee & Werner, 2021; Fulvio, Akinola, & Postle, 2021). Here we sought to proactively consider choosing references that reflect the diversity of the field in thought, form of contribution, gender, race, ethnicity, and other factors. First, we obtained the predicted gender of the first and last author of each reference by using databases that store the probability of a first name being carried by a woman (Dworkin et al., 2020; Zhou, Cornblath, et al., 2020). By this measure (and excluding self-citations to the first and last authors of our current paper), our references contain 11.86% woman(first)/woman(last), 10.63% man/woman, 25.93% woman/man, and 51.57% man/man. This method is limited in that a) names, pronouns, and social media profiles used to construct the databases may not, in every case, be indicative of gender identity and b) it cannot account for intersex, non-binary, or transgender people. Second, we obtained predicted racial/ethnic category of the first and last author of each reference by databases that store the probability of a first and last name being carried by an author of color (Ambekar, Ward, Mohammed, Male, & Skiena, 2009; Sood & Laohaprapanon, 2018). By this measure (and excluding self-citations), our references contain 4.07% author of color (first)/author of color(last), 13.90% white author/author of color, 28.32% author of color/white author, and 53.71% white author/white author. This method is limited in that a) names and Florida Voter Data to make the predictions may not be indicative of racial/ethnic identity, and b) it cannot account for Indigenous and mixed-race authors, or those who may face differential biases due to the ambiguous racialization or ethnicization of their names. We look forward to future work that could help us to better understand how to support equitable practices in science.

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