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TUTORIAL

Cartesian Genetic Programming: From foundations to recent developments and applications

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Cartesian Genetic Programming: From Foundations to Recent Developments and Applications

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About us

Roman Kalkreuth is an assistant professor at RWTH Aachen University (Germany). Primarily, his research focuses on the analysis and development of algorithms for graph-based genetic programming.

Sylvain Cussat-Blanc is a professor at University Toulouse Capitole, France. He has a junior chair at the Institut Universitaire de France in the use of Cartesian Genetic Programming applied to biomedical data analysis, and in particular biomedical images.

Dennis Wilson is an associate professor at ISAE-Supaero in Toulouse, France. His research focuses on learning and optimization in artificial systems, with applications in climate change.

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Agenda

- Origin and context of graph-based GP
- Overview of CGP
- Practical demonstration in Python¹
- Break
- Applications of CGP
- Status and Future of CGP
- Questions and Discussion

¹<https://github.com/d9w/CGP-tutorial>

Objectives of this Tutorial

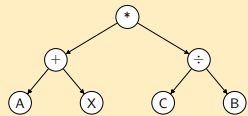
- **Provide a comprehensive introduction to CGP**
 - Historical context and evolution from other GP methods
 - Understanding CGP's position within evolutionary computation
 - Key advantages over other representation schemes
- **Explore the fundamental mechanisms of CGP**
 - Graph-based representation and genotype-phenotype mapping
 - Mutation operators and their effect on search dynamics
 - The role of neutrality and inactive genes
 - Advances in recombination techniques
- **Demonstrate CGP's versatility across applications**
 - Digital circuit design and optimization
 - Image processing and computer vision
 - Machine learning model generation
 - Neuroevolution and biological modeling
- **Provide practical implementation guidance**
 - Parameter selection and tuning strategies
 - Available software tools and resources
 - Common pitfalls and how to avoid them
 - Future research directions and open questions

Introduction and Related Work

General Methodology

Genetic Programming (GP)

- Genetic Programming is a search heuristic
- Inspired by neo-Darwinian evolution
- Method for the synthesis of computer programs
- Traditionally used with parse trees



$$\begin{aligned}\mathcal{F} &= \{ +, -, *, \div \} \\ \mathcal{T} &= \{ A, X, C, B \} \\ \mathcal{E} &= \text{Edges} \\ \Psi &= (A + X) * (C \div B)\end{aligned}$$

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Introduction and Related Work

General Methodology

Definition (Genetic Programming)

Let Θ be a population of $|\Theta|$ individuals and let Ω be the population of the following generation:

- Each individual is represented with a **genetic program** and a **fitness value**
- Genetic Programming transforms $\Theta \mapsto \Omega$ by the adaptation of **selection, recombination** and **mutation**

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Introduction and Related Work

General Methodology

Definition (Genetic Program)

A genetic program \mathcal{P} is an element of $\mathcal{T} \times \mathcal{F} \times \mathcal{E}$:

- \mathcal{F} is a finite non-empty set of functions
- \mathcal{T} is a finite non-empty set of terminals
- \mathcal{E} is a finite non-empty set of edges

Let $\phi : \mathcal{P} \mapsto \Psi$ be a decode function which maps \mathcal{P} to a phenotype Ψ

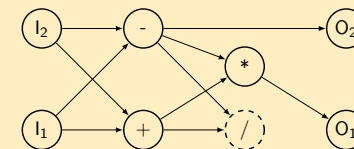
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Introduction and Related Work

General Methodology

What we mean by graph-based

- Genetic Programming \rightarrow traditionally tree representation, which is a **well defined form of graph**
- Graph-based Genetic Programming \rightarrow use of graph representation models that **extend GP beyond trees**
- In the methods we consider, **Directed Acyclic Graphs (DAGs)**, introducing:
 - Reuse of intermediate results.
 - Active and inactive nodes.



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Introduction and Related Work

Historical Background

Graph-based GP Timeline

1990	Koza: Genetic Programming on LISP Syntax Trees
1993	Banzhaf: Precursor to Linear Genetic Programming
1994	Nordin: Compiling Genetic Programming System
1996	Poli: Parallel Distributed Genetic Programming
1996	Teller: Parallel Algorithm Discovery and Orchestration (PADO)
1997	Miller, Thompson, Kalganova, Fogarty: Steps forward Cartesian Genetic Programming
1998	Nordin: Automatic Induction of Machine Code with Genetic Programming
1999	Angeline: Multiple Interacting Programs (MIPs)
1999	Miller, Thompson: Cartesian Genetic Programming
2001	Brameier, Banzhaf: Linear Genetic Programming
2002	Kantschik, Banzhaf: Linear-Graph Genetic Programming
2008	Galvan-Lopez: Multiple Interactive Outputs in a Single Tree (MIOST)
2011	Downey, Zhang: Parallel Linear Genetic Programming
2017	Kelly and Keywood: Tangled Program Graphs (TGP)
2018	Atkinson, Plump, Stepney: Evolving Graphs by Graph Programming

Cartesian Genetic Programming

Historical Background

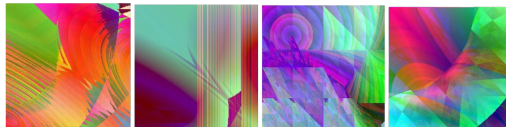
Cartesian GP Timeline

1997	Miller, Thompson, Kalganova, Fogarty: Work towards CGP
1999	Miller, Thompson: Standard CGP
2004	Walker, Miller: Modular CGP
2005	Smith, Leggett, Tyrrell: Implicit Context Representation of CGP
2007	Clegg, Walker, Miller: Real-valued representation of CGP
2008	Walker, Miller: Embedded CGP
2011	Harding, Miller, Banzhaf: Self-Modifying CGP
2011	Harding, Graziano, Leitner, Schmidhuber: Multi-type CGP
2013	Turner, Miller: CGP encoded artificial neural networks
2014	Turner, Miller: Recurrent CGP
2016	Ryser-Welch, Miller, Swan and Trefzer: Iterative CGP
2018	Wilson, Miller, Cussat-Blanc, Luga: Positional CGP

Cartesian Genetic Programming (CGP)

Historical Background

- First work towards CGP was done by Miller, Thompson, Kalganova, and Fogarty [21, 43, 44]
- Represents genetic programs as a two dimensional grid of program primitives
- Loosely inspired by the architecture of digital circuits



Automatically evolved images with CGP (Ashmore and Miller [6])

Cartesian Genetic Programming (CGP)

Representation Model

- Program representation → acyclic and directed graph.
- Genotype-phenotype mapping → encoding-decoding of the graph
- Predominantly used without recombination → mutational $(1+\lambda)$ evolutionary algorithm.

Cartesian Genetic Programming (CGP)

Representation Model

Definition (Cartesian Genetic Program (CP))

A cartesian genetic program \mathcal{P} is an element of $\mathcal{N}_i \times \mathcal{N}_f \times \mathcal{N}_o \times \mathcal{F}$:

- \mathcal{N}_i is a finite non-empty set of input nodes
- \mathcal{N}_f is a finite set of function nodes
- \mathcal{N}_o is a finite non-empty set of output nodes
- \mathcal{F} is a finite non-empty set of functions

Cartesian Genetic Programming (CGP)

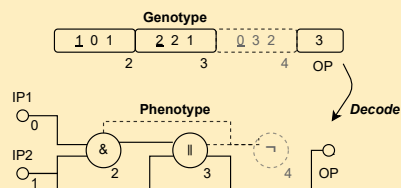
Representation Model

- Nodes of a cartesian genetic program are **continuously indexed**
- Indexing starts with the a value of 0 at the **first input node** and ends at the **last output node**
- At **each node**, the node number is **increased by one**
- Let $N = |\mathcal{N}_i| + |\mathcal{N}_f| + |\mathcal{N}_o|$ be the number of nodes of a CP

Cartesian Genetic Programming

Representation Model

Cartesian Genetic Programming



Function Lookup Table

Index	Symbol	Function
0	¬	Negation
1	&	Logical and
2		Logical or
3	⊕	Exclusive or

Cartesian Genetic Programming (CGP)

Search Algorithm

- CGP is commonly used with a variant of the $(1 + \lambda)$ -EA \rightarrow $(1+\lambda)$ -CGP
- Implements a modified selection strategy called **neutrality**
- Adapts a **genetic drift** to provide diversity during the evolutionary run
- Individuals that have the same fitness are determined, and **one of these same-fitness individuals** is returned **uniformly at random**

Cartesian Genetic Programming (CGP)

Search Algorithm

Algorithm 1 (1+λ)-EA variant used in CGP

```

1: initialize( $\mathcal{P}$ )                                ▷ Initialize parent individual
2: repeat                                          ▷ Until termination criteria not triggered
3:    $\mathcal{Q} \leftarrow \text{breed}(\mathcal{P})$                   ▷ Breed  $\lambda$  offspring by mutation
4:   Evaluate( $\mathcal{Q}$ )                                ▷ Evaluate the fitness of the offspring
5:    $\mathcal{Q}^+ \leftarrow \text{best}(\mathcal{Q}, \mathcal{P})$            ▷ Get individuals which have better fitness as the parent
6:    $\mathcal{Q}^- \leftarrow \text{equal}(\mathcal{Q}, \mathcal{P})$         ▷ Get individuals which have the same fitness as the parent
7:   ▷ If there exist individuals with better fitness
8:   if  $|\mathcal{Q}^+| > 0$  then
9:     ▷ Choose one individual from  $\mathcal{Q}^+$  uniformly at random
10:     $\mathcal{P} \leftarrow \mathcal{Q}^+[r], r \sim U[0, |\mathcal{Q}^+| - 1]$ 
11:    ▷ Otherwise, if there exist individuals with equal fitness
12:   else if  $|\mathcal{Q}^-| > 0$  then
13:     ▷ Choose one individual from  $\mathcal{Q}^-$  uniformly at random
14:     $\mathcal{P} \leftarrow \mathcal{Q}^-[r], r \sim U[0, |\mathcal{Q}^-| - 1]$ 
15:   end if
16: until  $\mathcal{P}$  meets termination criterion
17: return  $\mathcal{P}$ 
    
```

Cartesian Genetic Programming (CGP)

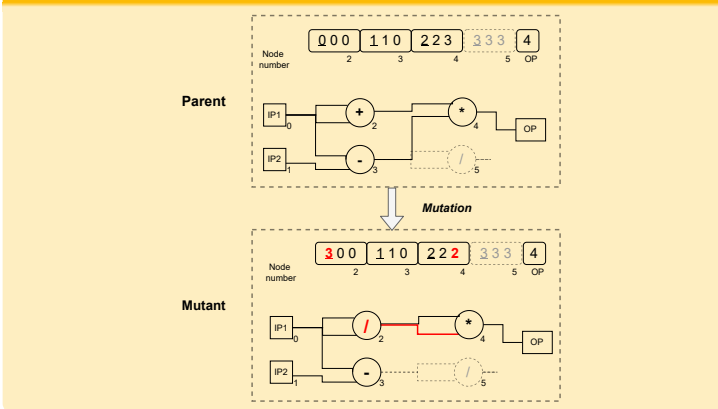
Mutation

- Standard genetic operator → probabilistic **point mutation**
- Genes are **selected uniformly at random** in the genotype
- **Exchange of gene values** in the valid range by chance
- Genetic **variation of functionality and connectivity**

Cartesian Genetic Programming (CGP)

Mutation

Example of standard point mutation in CGP



Cartesian Genetic Programming (CGP)

Mutation

Algorithm 2 Probabilistic point mutation

Input: Genome \mathcal{G} , Function set \mathcal{F} , Number of function nodes N_f , Number of input nodes N_i , Mutation rate \mathcal{P}

Output: Mutated Genome $\hat{\mathcal{G}}$

```

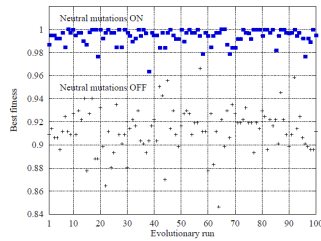
1: foreach  $g \in \mathcal{G}$  do                                ▷ Iterate over the genome
2:    $X \sim \text{Ber}(\mathcal{P})$                             ▷ Bernoulli random variable
3:   if  $X = 1$  then                                    ▷ Control the mutation strength with  $X$ 
4:     if  $g$  is a connection gene then
5:       ▷ Determine the node number of the gene
6:        $n \leftarrow \text{NodeNumber}(g)$ 
7:       ▷ Select  $g$  in the range of previous node indexes by chance
8:        $g \leftarrow r, r \sim U[0, n - 1]$ 
9:     else if  $g$  is a function gene then
10:      ▷ Select  $g$  in the range of the function indexes by chance
11:       $g \leftarrow r, r \sim U[0, |F| - 1]$ 
12:     else                                           ▷  $g$  is a output gene
13:      ▷ Select  $g$  in the range of the function and input nodes by chance
14:       $g \leftarrow r, r \sim U[0, |N_f| + |N_i| - 1]$ 
15:     end if
16:   end if
17: end foreach
18: return  $\hat{\mathcal{G}}$ 
    
```

▷ Return the mutated genome

Cartesian Genetic Programming (CGP)

Mutation

- A number of studies [56, 55, 45] have demonstrated the importance of **neutral mutations** that are based on **functional redundancy**
- Functional redundancy refers to many different programs representing the same function



Evolution of three-bit Boolean multiplier: Obtained fitness is shown for each of 100 runs of 10 million generations with neutral mutations enabled (blue) compared with disabled neutral mutations (+)

Cartesian Genetic Programming (CGP)

Mutation

- **Single active gene mutation (SAM)** is a variant of standard point mutation introduced by Goldman and Punch [17].
- SAM mutates the genome until an active gene is hit
- Major advantage → **no parametrization** of the mutation rate is **needed**
- Let $g_a = n_a * (1 + a) + n_o$ be the number of active genes, the active gene which will be mutated is selected uniformly at random with probability $\frac{1}{g_a}$
 - n_a is the number of active nodes.
 - n_o is the number of outputs.
 - a is the maximum arity of a function node.

Cartesian Genetic Programming (CGP)

Mutation

Algorithm 3 Single active gene mutation

Input: Genome \mathcal{G} , Function set \mathcal{F} , Number of function nodes N_f , Number of input nodes N_i

Output: Mutated Genome $\tilde{\mathcal{G}}$

```
1: active ← false
2: repeat
3:    $g \leftarrow \mathcal{G}[r], r \sim U[0, |\mathcal{G}| - 1]$            ▷ Select a gene by chance
4:    $n \leftarrow \text{NodeNumber}(g)$                    ▷ Determine the node number of the gene
5:    $active \leftarrow \text{NodeActive}(n)$                ▷ Check whether gene is active or not
6:   if  $g$  is a connection gene then
7:     ▷ Select  $g$  in the range of previous node indexes by chance
8:      $g \leftarrow r, r \sim U[0, n - 1]$ 
9:   else if  $g$  is a function gene then
10:    ▷ Select  $g$  in the range of the function indexes by chance
11:     $g \leftarrow r, r \sim U[0, |F| - 1]$ 
12:   else                                           ▷  $g$  is a output gene
13:    ▷ Select  $g$  in the range of the function and input nodes by chance
14:     $g \leftarrow r, r \sim U[0, |N_f| + |N_i| - 1]$ 
15:   end if
16: until active is true
```

Cartesian Genetic Programming (CGP)

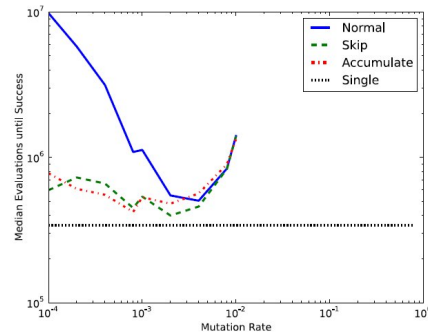
Mutation

- Goldman and Punch [17] compared several mutation strategies on a set of Boolean functions → Standard, Skip, Accumulate and SAM
- **Standard** is the standard (probabilistic) point mutation
- **Skip** sets the offspring fitness to parent's fitness if phenotypes are identical
- **Accumulate** mutates multiple genes until some active genes are changed

Cartesian Genetic Programming (CGP)

Mutation

- SAM was close to the best performance of the other strategies on the majority of the tested problems
- Showed good performance on the 3 bit parallel multiplier problem



Cartesian Genetic Programming (CGP)

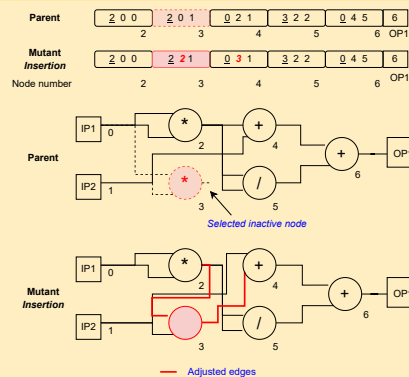
Mutation

- Kalkreuth [22, 24, 25, 27] adapted a set of chromosomal mutations: **insertion**, **deletion**, **inversion** and **duplication**
- **Insertion** selects an **inactive** node and changes one or more connection genes in the genotype to make it **active**
- **Deletion** alters connections to an active node so that the node becomes inactive
- **Inversion** permutes the function gene values of a set of successive active function nodes
- **Duplication** adapts chromosomal duplication by replacing active function genes

Cartesian Genetic Programming (CGP)

Mutation

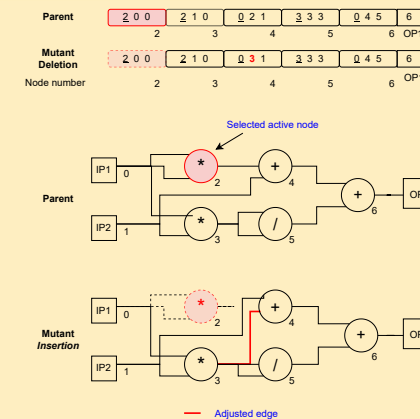
Insertion Mutation



Cartesian Genetic Programming (CGP)

Mutation

Deletion Mutation



Cartesian Genetic Programming (CGP)

Mutation

- Evaluation on a diverse set of Boolean function problems
- Search performance improved significantly on the majority of the tested problems
- Insertion and deletion **increase** the mean **active node range** of the evolutionary search



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Cartesian Genetic Programming (CGP)

Recombination or not? A long and ongoing story...

- Miller [44] investigated **genotypic recombination** but observed that **it does not seem to add anything**
- Recombination on **multiple chromosomes** with **independent fitness assessment** has been found **highly beneficial**
- Clegg et al. [10] proposed a **floating point representation** of CGP and suggested that **intermediate recombination** might be useful for **symbolic regression**
- **Cone-based crossover** has been proposed for modular CGP by Kaufmann et al. [33]
- da Silva et al. [13] proposed **path recombination** for Boolean **multiple-output problems** and obtained better search performance on the **single-chromosome representation**
- Kalkreuth [30, 23] found that **subgraph** [28] and **function gene recombination** [20] can improve the search performance for various **symbolic regression problems**

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Cartesian Genetic Programming (CGP)

Recombination or not? A long and ongoing story...

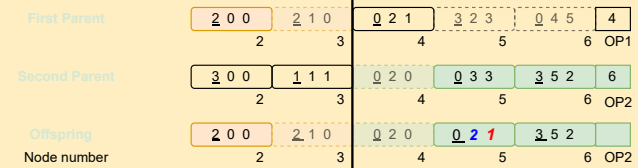
- Kalkreuth [26] proposed **discrete recombination**
 - Improved search performance was obtained on a set of symbolic regression problems
- Cui [12] **compared** the use of **various crossover operators** to **mutation-only CGP**
 - Better performance metrics were obtained for CGP **with crossover**
 - **No universally best-performing** crossover operator
 - Hyperparameter optimization is essential
 - CGP with recombination might not negatively impact its evolutionary search process
 - When CGP (with or without recombination) **uses tournament selection** on logic synthesis benchmarks, the **performance strongly degrades**

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Cartesian Genetic Programming (CGP)

Recombination or not? A long and ongoing journey...

Subgraph Crossover



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Cartesian Genetic Programming (CGP)

Parametrization: Population size

- Various hyperparameter settings have been extensively investigated [31, 32, 30]
- Evaluating Boolean functions and symbolic regression problems it was found:
 - $\lambda = 1$ was often the most effective setting for the tested Boolean function problems
 - Higher settings (greater than 4) of λ performed effective on various symbolic regression problems

Cartesian Genetic Programming (CGP)

Parametrization: Benchmarking CGP

- The *General Boolean Function Benchmark Suite* (GBFS) has been proposed as a benchmark for (C)GP in logic synthesis [29]
 - Covers different types of Boolean functions commonly used in the field of GP
 - Thoughtfully selected Boolean functions from seven popular categories
 - GBFS provides **38 benchmark functions** in total²

Identifier	Name	Category
add	Adder with carry	Arithmetic
mul	Multiplier	Arithmetic
dec	One-hot decoder	Transmission
enc	One-hot encoder	Transmission
icomp	Identity Comparator	Comparison
mcomp	Magnitude Comparator	Comparison
count	Ones' counter circuit	Counting
alu	Arithmetic Logic Unit	Mixed
egar	Parity Even	Parity
bent	Bent	Cryptography
bal	Balanced	Cryptography
res	Resilient	Cryptography
mask	Masking	Cryptography

²<https://github.com/boolean-function-benchmarks>

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Parametrization: Benchmarking CGP

- Confirmed previous findings related to CGP's efficiency on a larger benchmark
 - Merely focused on mutation-only CGP
- HPO experiments indicate that setting $\lambda = 1$ is a general effective choice
- Number of function nodes (genotype length) appears to be strongly problem dependent
 - Large genotypes performed best
- Performing HPO for each problem is highly recommended to ensure fair conditions in comparative studies

Cartesian Genetic Programming (CGP)

Example in Python

<https://github.com/d9w/CGP-tutorial>

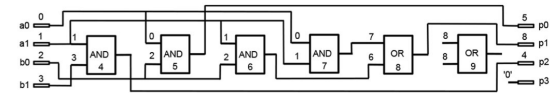
Applications of CGP

Outline

- Digital circuit synthesis
- Machine learning
- Neural architecture search
- Image processing

Digital circuit synthesis

- Original application of CGP [46]
- Widely used in the literature as benchmark [53, 18, 54, 34, 49, 19]
- Function library composed of logic gates (AND, OR, NOT)
- The graph represents the logic circuit
- Potential room for multi-objective optimization [8]:
 - Correctness: matching against a given truth table
 - Cost: Number of gates used or power consumption
- Recent extension to quantum logic [15]
- Multiple prizes won at the Humies Awards
 - Silver Medal at GECCO 2011 [53]
 - Bronze Medal at GECCO 2014 [18]
 - Gold Medal at GECCO 2015[54]



Machine learning

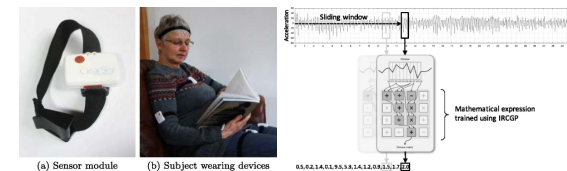
Regression - Classification

- Symbolic regression is a straight forward application of CGP
- Function library usually composed of basic mathematical function:
 - $+$, $-$, $*$, $/$,
 - \sin , \cos , \tan ,
 - \log , \exp , $\sqrt{\quad}$, pow ,
 - \min , \max .
- Fitness function usually based on MSE or MAE

Machine learning

Regression - Classification

- Many scientific and industrial applications:
 - System control [7]
 - Space [42]
 - Physical model discovery and improvement [14]
- Humies Gold Medal Award at GECCO 2018 when applied to Parkinson's Dyskinesia classification[40]



Machine learning

Feature selection & construction

- CGP has been successful for automated feature engineering
- Functions effectively as preprocessing step before traditional ML algorithms
- Advantages over manual feature engineering:
 - Automatic exploration of large feature space
 - Discovery of non-intuitive feature combinations
 - Reduction of dimensionality while preserving information
- Applications:
 - Biomarker identification in medical data
 - Signal processing and time-series analysis
 - Classification with interpretable features
 - Noise filtering and preprocessing
- Search space includes mathematical operations, filters, and transformations applied to raw input features

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Applications in Evolutionary Robotics

- Control of legged robots and autonomous vehicles
 - Evolving gait controllers for quadruped and hexapod robots
 - Navigation in complex environments without precise world models
 - Adaptation to hardware failures (e.g., broken legs or sensor malfunctions)
- Swarm robotics and multi-agent coordination [9]
 - Distributed control with limited communication
 - Self-organization and emergent behaviors
 - Task allocation and resource management
- Advantages over traditional control approaches:
 - No need for analytical models of the robot or environment
 - Robust to noise and uncertainty
 - Can discover novel control strategies beyond human design
 - Adaptable to changing environments and robot configurations

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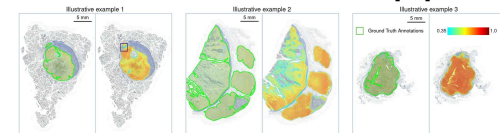
Neural architecture search - CGPANN

- Typically used to produce CNN architectures [37, 36, 51, 35]
- Neural architecture encoded inside a CGP genome [52, 50, 41, 38]
 - Each node represents a layer (conv, pooling, dense, etc.)
 - Connection between (active) nodes represent connection between layers
- Potential room for multi-objective optimization [16]
- Evolution of neural development rules [47]
- Many fields of applications:
 - Financial [57]
 - Medical [2, 1, 3, 4]
 - Client prediction [5]
 - Networks [48]
 - etc.

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Image processing

- Segmentation or instance segmentation of images [?, 39, 11]
- Function library composed of:
 - standard functions (*min*, *max*, *mean*, *add*, etc.)
 - mask processing functions (*bitwise_{not, or, and, mask}*, *threshold*, etc.)
 - image processing functions (*sobel*, *canny*, *gabor*, etc.)
 - morphologic functions (*morph_{gradient, tophat, blackhat}*, *erode*, *dilate*, *fill_hole*, etc.)
- Fitness functions based on IOU or AP
- Requires very small amount of annotated images (10) for optimization
- Humies Gold Medal Award at GECCO 2024[11]



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Questions and Discussion

Open research questions in CGP

- **Mutation strategies:**
 - What is the optimal balance between exploration and exploitation?
 - When should we use single active gene mutation vs. point mutation?
 - Are there domain-specific mutation operators that could improve performance?
- **Recombination:**
 - When is crossover beneficial in CGP and when is it detrimental?
 - What are the most effective crossover methods for specific domains?
 - How can we design recombination operators that respect the graph structure?
- **Search algorithms:**
 - Beyond $(1 + \lambda)$ -ES, what search strategies are promising?
 - Is neutrality always beneficial or are there cases where it hinders search?
 - How to balance between genotype size and search efficiency?

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Questions and Discussion

Challenges and future directions

- **Scalability issues:**
 - How to evolve larger programs efficiently?
 - Techniques for handling high-dimensional input/output spaces?
 - Parallelization and distributed evolution strategies?
- **Interpretability:**
 - Tools for analyzing evolved CGP programs
 - Automatic simplification of evolved solutions
 - Visualization techniques for complex graphs
- **Hybrid approaches:**
 - Combining CGP with deep learning
 - Using CGP as a meta-optimizer for other ML methods
 - Multi-objective optimization in CGP

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Questions and Discussion

Research opportunities and applications

- **Hardware implementation:**
 - Designing energy-efficient circuits for IoT and embedded systems
 - Evolvable hardware for adaptive systems
 - Specialized hardware accelerators for CGP
- **Explainable AI:**
 - CGP as an alternative to black-box deep learning
 - Generating human-readable decision processes
 - Application in regulated domains (healthcare, finance, etc.)

Roman Kalkreuth Sylvain Cussat-Blanc Dennis G. Wilson Cartesian Genetic Programming

Questions and Discussion

Getting started with CGP

- **Available software and libraries:**
 - CGP Library (in C) by Andrew Turner
 - CGP for Python, Julia, MATLAB implementations
 - Domain-specific implementations (e.g., for neural networks)
- **Recommended benchmarks:**
 - Boolean function synthesis (even-parity, multiplier)
 - Symbolic regression problems
 - Classification tasks
 - Control problems
- **Tips for practical implementation:**
 - Start with small genotypes and gradually increase size
 - Carefully select function set for your domain
 - Monitor neutral drift during evolution
 - Consider computational costs in fitness evaluation

Roman Kalkreuth Sylvain Cussat-Blanc Dennis G. Wilson Cartesian Genetic Programming

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Roman Kalkreuth Sylvain Cussat-Blanc Dennis G. Wilson Cartesian Genetic Programming

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Roman Kalkreuth Sylvain Cussat-Blanc Dennis G. Wilson Cartesian Genetic Programming

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Roman Kalkreuth Sylvain Cussat-Blanc Dennis G. Wilson Cartesian Genetic Programming

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