ICBS: The Improved Conflict-based Search algorithm for Multi-Agent Pathfinding

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1 Introduction and Overview

A Multi-Agent Path Finding (MAPF) problem is defined by a graph, $G = (V, E)$ and a set of $k$ agents labeled $a_1 \ldots a_k$, where each agent $a_i$ has a start position $s_i \in V$ and a goal position $g_i \in V$. At each time step an agent can either move to an adjacent location or wait in its current location. The task is to plan a sequence of move/wait actions for each agent $a_i$, moving it from $s_i$ to $g_i$ such that agents do not conflict, i.e., occupy the same location at the same time.

Conflict-Based Search (CBS) [Sharon et al., 2012], is an effective optimal MAPF solver. CBS has two levels. The low-level of CBS searches the constraint tree (CT). The high-level of CBS performs a best-first search on the CT where nodes are ordered by their costs ($N.cost$). Given a CT node $N$, the low-level search is invoked for individual agents to return an optimal path that is consistent with their individual constraints in $N$.

Resolving a conflict - the split action: Given a non-goal CT node, $N$, whose solution, $N.solution$, includes a conflict, $⟨a_i, a_j, v, t⟩$, we know that in any valid solution at most one of the conflicting agents, $a_i$ or $a_j$, may occupy vertex $v$ at time $t$. Therefore, at least one of the constraints, $⟨a_i, v, t⟩$ or $⟨a_j, v, t⟩$, must be satisfied. Consequently, CBS splits $N$ and generates two new CT nodes as children of $N$, each adding one of these constraints to the previous set of constraints, $N.constraints$.

3 Improving the Merge Operation

Previous work: MA-CBS($B$) [Sharon et al., 2015] generalizes CBS by adding the option to merge the conflicting agents $a_i$ and $a_j$ into a meta-agent instead of the split action. A meta-agent is logically treated as a single composite agent, whose state consists of a vector of locations, one for each individual agent. A meta-agent is never split in the subtree of the CT below the current node; it may, however, be merged with other meta-agents when beneficial. In this paper we introduce Improved-CBS (ICBS) which further adds three new improvements to MA-CBS.

Drawback: Merging agents into meta-agents reduces the size of the CT at the cost of higher computational effort by the low-level solver. In MA-CBS this tradeoff is handled locally for each node. As a result, MA-CBS might duplicate much search effort.

ICBS Improvement 1 - Merge and Restart (MR): Had we known that a pair of agents are due to be merged, significant computational effort would have been saved by performing the merge at the root node of the CT. Once a merge decision has been reached inside a CT node $N$, we suggest to discard the current CT and restart the search from a new root node, where these agents are merged into a meta-agent at the beginning of the search.

MR is simple to implement, and saves much of the effort duplicated in the multiple CT nodes. In most cases the gains outweigh the additional overhead. As it is very hard to model these quantities theoretically, we tested MR empirically, and indeed it speeds up the search by a significant factor.
4 Improving the Split Operation

ICBS Improvement 2 - Prioritize Conflicts (PC): CBS arbitrarily picks a conflict for splitting, and its performance is very sensitive to the conflicts chosen, as these can significantly influence the number of CT nodes.

We distinguish between three types of conflicts: Cardinal conflict. A conflict $C = (a_1, a_2, v, t)$ is cardinal for a CT node $N$ if adding any of the two constraints derived from $C$ ($\langle a_1, v, t \rangle$, $\langle a_2, v, t \rangle$) to $N$ and invoking the low-level on the constrained agent, the cost of its path is increased when compared to its cost in $N$. A conflict $C$ is semi-cardinal for a CT node $N$ if adding one of the two constraints derived from $C$ increases $N.cost$ but adding the other leaves $N.cost$ unchanged. A conflict is non cardinal for a CT node $N$ if neither of the constraints derived from $C$ increases $N.cost$.

When a node $N$ with $N.cost = c$ is chosen for expansion by CBS, we examine all its conflicts. If a cardinal conflict is encountered, it is immediately chosen for the split action. This generates two children with cost $> c$. In this case if another node $N'$ in OPEN has cost $c$, then $N'$ can be immediately chosen for expansion next without further developing nodes below $N$. If no cardinal conflicts exist, the next preference is to choose semi-cardinal conflicts. Here, we know that at least the cost of one child will immediately increase. If only non-cardinal conflicts exist, one is chosen arbitrarily.

ICBS Improvement 3 - Bypassing Conflicts (BP): CBS is sensitive to the paths found by the low level. BP provides a way to bypass conflicts by modifying the chosen path of one of the agents, thereby preventing a split and reducing the CT.

For each CT node $N$ we use $N.NC$ to denote the total number of conflicts of the form $\langle a_i, a_j, v, t \rangle$ between the paths in $N.solution$. A path $P'_{i}$ is a valid bypass to path $P_i$ for agent $a_i$ with respect to a conflict $C = (a_i, a_j, v, t)$ and a CT node $N$, if: (i) Unlike $P_i$, $P'_i$ does not include conflict $C$, (ii) $cost(P'_i) = cost(P_i)$ and (iii) $P_i$ and $P'_i$ are both consistent with $N.constraints$.

Adopting path $P'_i$ by a CT node $N$ means replacing $P_i$ with a valid bypass $P'_i$ for agent $a_i$. Adopting a valid bypass may introduce more conflicts compared to the original path and potentially lead to worse overall runtime. Thus, we only allow adopting helpful bypasses that reduce $N.NC$.

For a given CT node $N$, BP peeks at either of the immediate children of $N$ in the CT. If the path of a child includes a helpful bypass for the conflict of $N$, this path is adopted by $N$ without splitting $N$ and adding new nodes to the CT. This can potentially save a significant amount of search due to a smaller size CT. Valid bypasses can only be found for semi- or non-cardinal conflicts and not for cardinal conflicts. Therefore if PC found a cardinal conflict BP is skipped.

5 Experimental Results

We fine-tuned a number of leading algorithms with the best parameters. We compare ICBS(25) (=MA-CBS(25)+BP+PC+MR), to the following other MAPF solvers: (1) MA-CBS(25)+BP, the former best CBS variant. (2) MA-CBS(25) (3) EPEA* [Goldenberg et al., 2014], an enhanced version of A* designed for cases with large branching factors, the best A* variant. (4) ICTS+p [Sharon et al., 2013], the best ICTS variant.

Figure 1 presents the success rate (left) and runtime (right) for the three standard benchmark maps (brc202d:top, ost003d:middle, den520d:bottom) of the game Dragon Age: Origins (DAO) [Sturtevant, 2012] that were used by Sharon et al. [2013; 2015], 100 instances per map.

In all three maps, ICBS is clearly the best CBS variant. ICBS’ runtime is also the best amongst the ones compared here. ICBS is also the best in success rate for brc202d and for den520d, while ICBS, EPEA* and ICTS are tied in the success rate in ost003d.

6 Conclusions and Future Work

ICBS is the best solver on standard benchmarks, or ties with other solvers. Future work will further study the relations between these enhancements, find a better merge policy than a fixed $B$ parameter and study the pros and cons of the various MAPF algorithms under different circumstances.

References