

Evolutionary Techniques for Neural Network Optimization

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Abstract. The idea of evolving artificial networks by evolutionary algorithms is based on a powerful metaphor: the evolution of the human brain. The application of evolutionary algorithms to neural network optimization is an active field of study. The success and speed of training of neural network is based on the initial parameter settings, such as architecture, initial weights, learning rates, and others. A lot of research is being done on how to find the optimal network architecture and parameter settings given the problem it has to learn. One possible solution is use of evolutionary algorithms to neural network optimization systems. We can distinguish two separate issues for it: on the one hand weight training, and on the other hand architecture optimization. Next, we will focus on the architecture optimization and especially on the comparison of different strategies of neural network architecture encoding for the purchase of the evolutionary algorithm.

1 Genetic background for network topology optimization

The typical network considered here is a directed acyclic graph of simple neurons or units. Each unit has a state, represented by a real number, a set of input connections, and a set of output connections to other units. The connections themselves have real-valued weights, w_{ij} . A unit's state, o_i is computed as a nonlinear function of the weighted sum of the states of units from which it receives inputs. The nonlinear activation function is a sigmoid, effectively endowing the unit with a threshold action; the position of the threshold is controlled with a bias or „threshold weight“, θ_i . This is summarized in equations:

$$s_i = \sum_{j=1}^n w_{ij} o_j + \theta_i \quad (1)$$
$$o_i = (1 + e^{-s_i})^{-1}$$

A subset of the units is designated as *input units*. These units have no input connections from other units; their states are fixed by the problem. Another subset of units is designated as *output units*; the states of these units are considered the result of the computation. Units that are neither input nor output are known as *hidden units*.

A problem will specify a *training set* of associated pairs of vectors for the input units and output units.

The full specification of a network to solve a given problem involves enumerating all units, the connections between them, and setting the weights on those connections. The first two tasks are commonly solved in an ad hoc or heuristic manner, while the final task is usually accomplished with the aid of a learning algorithm, such as *backpropagation*. Backpropagation [3], [5] is a supervised learning technique that performs gradient descent on a quadratic error measure to modify connection weights. A network begins with small random weights on its connections and is trained by comparing its response to each stimulus in the training set with the correct one and altering weights accordingly. The learning algorithm introduces new design variables, such as the parameters to control rate of descent.

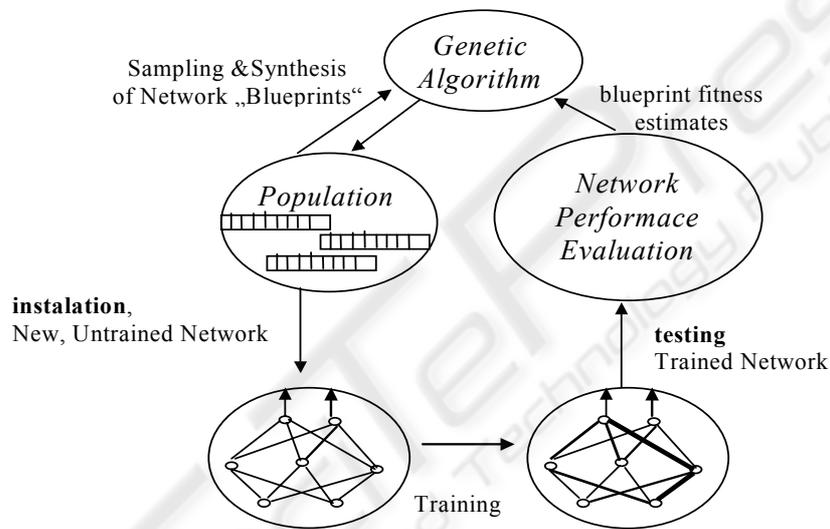


Fig. 1. A population of „blueprints“ designs for different neural networks - is cyclically updated by the genetic algorithm based on their fitness scores. Fitness is estimated by instantiating each blueprint into an actual neural network, training, and then testing the network on the given task.

We use the genetic algorithm [2], [4] to search a space of possible neural network architectures. In most of these experiences, the system begins with a population of randomly generated networks. The structure of each network is described by a chromosome or genetic blueprint - a collection of genes that determine the anatomical properties of the network structure and the parameter values of the learning algorithm. We use backpropagation to train each of these networks to solve the problem and then evaluate the fitness of each network in a population. We define fitness to be a combined measure of worth on the problem, which may take into account learning speed, accuracy, and cost factors such as the size and complexity of the network. Network blueprints from a given generation beget offspring according to

a reproductive plan that takes into consideration the relative fitness of individuals. In this respect, application of the genetic algorithm is little different from any other function optimization application. A network spawned in this fashion will tend to contain some attributes from both of its parents. A new network may also be a mutant, differing in a few randomly selected genes from a parent. Novel features may arise in either case: through synergy between the attributes of parents or through serendipitous mutation. The basic cycle is illustrated in Figure 1 [2]. This process of training individual networks, measuring their fitness, and applying genetic operators to produce a new population of networks is repeated over many generations. If all goes well, each generation will tend to contain more of the features that were found useful in the previous generation.

2 Encoding strategies for neural network topology

We address two major shortcomings of this heuristic approach here. *First*, the space of possible artificial neural network architectures is extremely large and most of applications are unexplored. *Second*, what constitutes a good architecture is dependent on the application. Both the problem that is to be solved and the constraints on the neural network solution need to be considered, but at present we have no techniques or methods for doing so. Optimal architecture is necessary achieved by amount of manual trial-and-error experimentation. The problem of optimising neural network structure for a given set of performance criteria is a complicated one. There are many variables, both discrete and continuous, and they interact in a complex manner. The evaluation of a given design is a noisy affair, since the efficacy of training depends on starting conditions that are typically random. In short, the problem is a local application for the genetic algorithm that is used to synthesise appropriate network structures and values for learning parameters. Thumb rules like: “*the harder the problem the more units you need*“ are of little practical use to the design problem. It is known that a neural network with at least one hidden layer can approximate every function. Almost always a fully interconnected architecture is used. But what is the optimal number of units and their organization into layers? With the exception of some simple task (e.g. the XOR-problem) humans cannot foresee the optimal network topology.

Such complex spaces cannot be explored efficiently by enumerative, random or even heuristic knowledge-guided search methods. In contrast, the adaptive features of genetic algorithms (building blocks, step-width control by crossover) provide a more robust and faster search procedure. Additionally, it is easy to speed-up the genetic search by means of parallel processing.

Before we discuss the differences between several approaches we want to give a basic genetic algorithm for topology optimization, which is common to all these approaches. It is assumed that two representations of the networks are distinguished: A) *genotypes*, which are modified by the genetic algorithm’s operators (e.g. mutation and crossover); B) *phenotypes*, which are trained by a conventional learning procedure (e.g. backpropagation) used for performance evaluation or selection. Roughly two basic representation schemes can be distinguished: *low-level genotypes*

and *high-level genotypes*. While the first one is transparent and easy to use, there are two variants of second representation scheme.

Low-level genotypes. Low-level genotypes directly code the network topology. Each unit and each connection is specified separately. In [6] the following classification of the encoding strategies of a neural network topology is proposed (the classes are roughly ordered to the complexity of the strategies), e.g. direct encoding strategies:

- *Connection-based encoding.* The genome is a string of weight values or pure connectivity information. The requires a fixed maximal architecture, which is typically either fully-connected or layered [7]:
- *Node-based encoding.* The genome is a string or tree of node information. The code for each node may include relative position, backward connectivity, weight values, threshold function and more. An advantage over previous approach is that more flexibility can be obtained by using nodes as basic units. The literature [8] describe the genetic programming paradigm, which genetically breeds populations of computer programs to solve problems, where the individuals in the population are hierarchical compositions of functions and arguments of various sizes and shapes (i.e. LISP symbolic expressions: S - expression).
- *Layer-based encoding.* With layer-based encoding we can obtain larger networks [9]. The encoding scheme is a complicated system of descriptions of connectivity between a list of layers.
- *Pathway-based encoding.* Pathway-based encoding is proposed in [10], [11] for recurrent neural network. The network is viewed as a set of paths from an input to an output node.

High-level genotypes. High-level genotypes are more complex coded representations of network architectures. They can be further divided into parametric and recipe genotypes. There are the networks splitted into modules of units which are specified by parameters and which are coupled by parametric connectivity patterns, in parametric genotypes. Even through this representation is more compact and thus well suited to code large network architectures, it is difficult to choose the relevant parametric shapes.

- The *graph generation grammar* (GGG) developed by [13] is an early grammar encoding method based on context-free and deterministic *Lindenmayer systems*, e.g. *L-systems* [12]. The grammar contains productions rules in the special form.
- Nolfi and Parisi in [14] described a method for encoding neural network architecture into a genetic string, which is inspired by the characteristics of neural development in real animals. The neurons are encoded with coordinates in a two-dimensional space. The mapping from genes to neurons is direct in a sense, but the connections are grooving in a special manner.
- In [15] are proposed main theoretical advantages of the use of L – systems to code network topologies over “blueprint representations” where the evolutionary algorithm specifies every single connection in neural networks. They used a version of L - systems to grow the networks (e.g. the context-sensitive L - system to rewrite neurons and modules of neurons). Here is each neuron/module by

default connected to the next adjacent neuron/module, and missing connections are denoted by comma.

- Channon and Damper in [16] investigated evolving of behaviors of artificial life creatures with natural selection. They decided to evolve neural networks and they used L-systems for encoding of the topology. Precisely, a context-free L - system was designed for the evolution of neural networks. Specific attention was paid to producing a system in which children’s networks resemble aspects of their parents.
- In [17] is proposed a method based on L-system that directs neural mass growth inspired in biology. Rules are then applied in 2-dimensional cell matrix, instead of a string.
- Gruau’s [18] *cellular encoding method* uses a *grammar tree* to encode a cellular developmental process to grow neural networks. The decoding starts from a network with a single hidden “cell” that is connected all input and output neurons of the network. The cell starts reading the grammar tree from its root. The nodes of the tree are instructions that control how the cell is divided, etc. The child cells of a differentiate by moving their “read-heads” to different branch of the grammar tree.

Over the last decade many systems have been developed that evolve not only a neural network topology but both the topology and the parametric values of a neural network [19], [20] etc.

3 Theoretical basis

We can choose any combination of the n hidden neurons to flip their weight signs so there are (see Formula 2) structurally different but functionally identical networks generated by this transformation.

$$\sum_{i=0}^n \binom{n}{i} = 2^n \quad (2)$$

Suppose that we have a network with $h_1 h_2 \dots h_n$ as hidden nodes. The mapping implemented by the network does not change if a particular hidden node with all its incoming and outgoing weights is exchanged with another neuron and its weights. For instance the networks $h_1 h_2 \dots h_n$ and $h_2 h_1 \dots h_n$ are equivalent, even though the first and second neuron have changed their position in the hidden layer. Obviously we can permute any of the n neurons so the total number of functional equivalent networks by this transformation is $n!$.

Since the two transformations are independent of each other, there is a total of $2^n n!$ functional equivalent but structurally different networks. Recently it has also been proven that at least in the case of a single hidden layer, one output neuron and a tangent hyperbolic transfer function the weights within this group of symmetries is unique, so there are exactly $2^n n!$ redundant networks for a specific mapping.

Suppose a we would tell that h hidden units and l hidden layers are necessary for a given problem. Now, we have to distribute the hidden units into these layers. We will derive a recursive formula which allows to compute the number of possible partitions $p(h,l)$. It is evident that:

1. If $l = 1$ or if $h = l$ then $p(h, l) = 1$.
2. If $h < l$ then $p(h, l) = 0$, because empty partitions are not reasonable.
3. If $h > l$ we get $p(h, l) = p(h - 1, l - 1) + p(h - 1, l)$.

By this formula we can compute the number of possible partitions from that number of a less complex architecture with $h - 1$ units. The first term counts the number of partitions if the boundary of an additional layer separates the additional unit itself. The second term means that the additional unit is placed into the last hidden layer of a less complex architecture which has already l layers.

If we have decided for a specific partition we are confronted with the problem of optimizing connectivity. For h hidden units the number of possible connections is limited by two extreme topologies which are fully interconnected from input layer (m units) to output layer (n units):

- A topology that has as much as possible hidden layers with one hidden unit each. We will refer to that topology as TALL.
- A topology that has just one hidden layer. It forms a look-up table and we will refer to it as WIDE.

While the TALL-architecture contains (see Formula 3) connections, the WIDE-architecture has only (see Formula 4) connections, but in most practical applications neither the TALL - nor the WIDE - architecture will be best suited. Thus, have to find a connectivity pattern, which is adapted to a particular task.

$$C_T = \frac{h^2 - h}{2} + h \cdot (m + n) + m \cdot n \quad (3)$$

$$C_W = h \cdot (m + n) + m \cdot n \quad (4)$$

4 Conclusion

Genetic algorithms are an effective optimisation, search and machine learning technique, suitable for a large class of problems, especially for NP-complete state space problems, which cannot easily be reduced to close form. Genetic algorithms have been applied largely to the problem of training a neural net, as an alternate technique to more traditional methods like backpropagation.

Neural network adaptation. Neural networks solve XOR problem that is not linearly separable and in this case we cannot use neural network without hidden units. Each network architecture is 2 - 2 - 1 (e.g. two units in the input layer, two units in the hidden layer, and one unit in the output layer). The nets are fully connected. If the XOR problem is solved with genetic algorithm (GA), we need the following parameters: number of generation was 500, probability of mutation is 0.01 and probability of crossover is 0.5. The initial population contains 30 neural networks with randomly generated weight values. Every weight value is written in a code as well as in [21]. Genetic operators (mutation and crossover) also are defined in [21]. History of the average error function of the whole population during calculation is shown in the Figure 2. Global search such as genetic algorithms are usually computationally expensive to run. If the XOR problem is solved with the method backpropagation (BP), we need the following parameters: learning rate is 0.4 and momentum is 0.1. History of its error function during whole calculation is shown in the Figure 2. There is shown an average value of the error function, because the adaptation with backpropagation algorithm was applied 30 during 500 cycles. If the XOR problem is solved with a method that combines genetic algorithm and backpropagation, then all parameters and genetic operators are the same as stated above. And besides that we have to define the following parameters: number of backpropagation's iterations is 10 and probability of backpropagation is 0.2. If the input condition of backpropagation is fulfilled (e.g. if a randomly number is generated, that is equal to the defined constant), all individuals are then adapted with 10 cycles of BP. History of the average error function of the whole population during calculation is shown in the Figure 2.

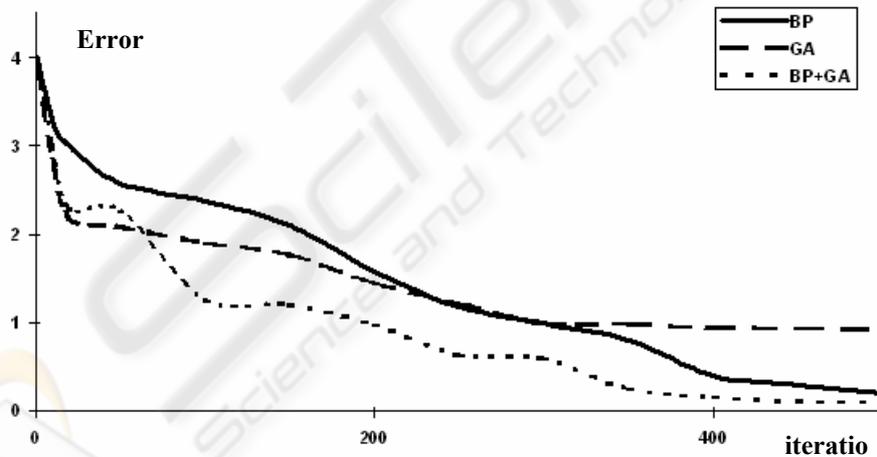


Fig. 2. History error function during calculation, where BP is adaptation with backpropagation, GA is adaptation with genetic algorithm, BP+GA is adaptation with method that combines genetic algorithm and backpropagation.

This paper also introduces theoretical proposes of neural network configuration by using genetic algorithms [1], [7], [8], [9] etc. In this participation has been done simple initial study on neural network optimization by means of evolutionary

techniques and given positive results has showed that evolutionary techniques can be used in this way. In the future more complex study on neural network optimization are going to be done by means of another evolutionary algorithms.

Neural network architecture. Neural networks solve XOR problem. The Figure 3 illustrates the best representation of neural network for the solution of XOR problem (a) that was found with genetic algorithm [21] and its following adaptation with backpropagation (b).

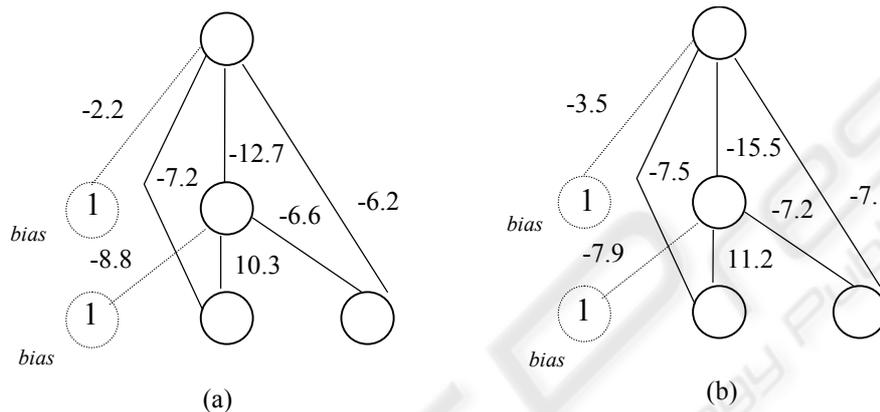


Fig. 3. The best representation of neural network for solution of XOR problem with genetic algorithm (a) and its following adaptation with backpropagation (b).

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