# W-learning: A simple RL-based Society of Mind *

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**Abstract**

W-learning is a self-organising action-selection scheme for systems with multiple parallel goals, such as autonomous mobile robots. It uses ideas drawn from the subsumption architecture for mobile robots (Brooks), implementing them with the Q-learning algorithm from reinforcement learning (Watkins). Brooks explores the idea of multiple sensing-and-acting agents within a single robot, more than one of which is capable of controlling the robot on its own if allowed. I introduce a model where the agents are not only autonomous, but are in fact engaged in direct competition with each other for control of the robot. Interesting robots are ones where no agent achieves total victory, but rather the state-space is fragmented among different agents. Having the agents operate by Q-learning proves to be a way to implement this, leading to a local, incremental algorithm (W-learning) to resolve competition. I present a sketch proof that this algorithm converges when the world is a discrete, finite Markov decision process. For each state, competition is resolved with the most likely winner of the state being the agent that is most likely to suffer the most if it does not win. In this way, W-learning can be viewed as 'fair' resolution of competition. In the empirical section, I show how W-learning may be used to define spaces of agent-collections whose action selection is learnt rather than hand-designed. This is the kind of solution-space that may be searched with a genetic algorithm.

**Keywords:** mobile robots, subsumption architecture, action selection, reinforcement learning, Q-learning, multi-module learning, genetic algorithms

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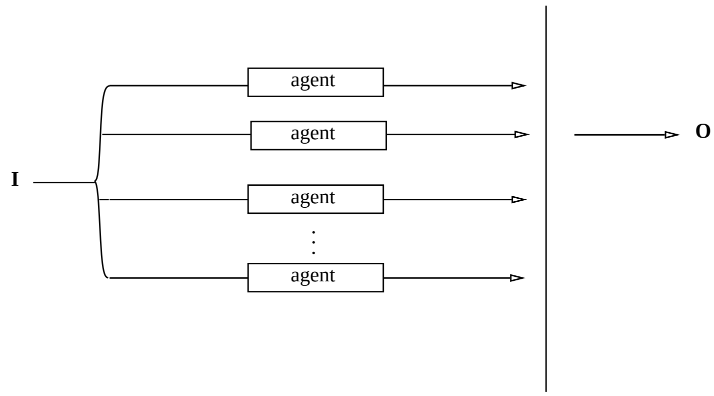


Figure 1: Competition among selfish peer agents in a horizontal architecture. Each agent suggests an action, but only one action is executed. Which agent is obeyed changes dynamically.

# 1 Autonomous mobile robots

## 1.1 The subsumption architecture

Brooks [Brooks, 1986, Brooks, 1991] introduces an architecture for building autonomous mobile robots which he calls the *subsumption architecture*.

He builds in layers: layer 1 is a simple complete working system, layers 1-2 together form a complete, more sophisticated system, layers 1-3 together form a complete, even more sophisticated system, and so on. Lower layers do not depend on the existence of higher layers, which may be removed without problem. The subsumption architecture develops some interesting ideas:

- The concept of default behavior. e.g.the 'Avoid All Things' layer 1 takes control of the robot by default whenever the 'Look For Food' layer 2 is idle.
- Multiple parallel goals. There are multiple candidates competing to be given control of the robot, e.g. control could be given to layer 1, which has its own purposes, or to layer 5, which has different purposes (and may use layers 1-4 to achieve them). Which to give control to may not be an easy decision - one can imagine goals which are directly-competing peers. Multiple parallel goals are seen everywhere in nature, e.g.the conflict between feeding and vigilance in any animal with predators.
- The concept of multiple independent channels connecting sensing to action.

## 1.2 Competition among selfish agents

I introduce a model (Figure 1) with the following features:

- Make the layers peers, so that each can function in the absence of *all* the others. Now they are fully autonomous sensing-and-acting *agents*

[Minsky, 1986], not ordered in any hierarchy, but rather in a loose *collection*.

- Have them compete for control, having to make a case that they should be given it. One will *win*, having its action executed, then they will compete again for the next action to be executed, and so on indefinitely.

A simple scheme would be one where each agent suggests its action with a strength (or *Weight*) $W$, expressing how important it is to their purposes that they be obeyed at this moment, and the robot executes the action that comes with the largest $W$.

To be precise, each agent $A_i$ maintains a table of *W-values* $W_i(x)$. Given a state $x$, each agent $A_i$ suggests some action $a_i(x)$ with weight $W_i(x)$, The robot executes action $a_k(x)$ where:

$$W_k(x) = \max_{i \in 1,\ldots,n} W_i(x)$$

We call $A_k$ the *leader* in the competition for state $x$ at the moment, or the *owner* of $x$ at the moment.

We can draw a map of the state-space, showing for each state $x$, which agent succeeds in getting its action executed. Clearly, a robot in which one agent achieves total victory (wins the whole state-space) is not very interesting. Rather, interesting robots are ones where the state-space is fragmented among different agents.

For agents to be able to generate their own W-values, we need a scheme whereby they attach some kind of numerical 'fitness' value to the actions they wish to take. Previous work in action selection has regarded assigning such values as a problem of design. In the literature, one sees formulas taking weighted sums of various quantities in an attempt to estimate the utility of actions.

In fact, there is a way that these utility values can come for free. Learning methods that automatically assign values to actions are common in the field of reinforcement learning.

# 2 Reinforcement Learning

## 2.1 Q-learning

The agent exists within a world that can be modelled as a Markov decision process (MDP). It observes discrete states of the world $x$ ($\in X$, a finite set) and can execute discrete actions $a$ ($\in A$, a finite set). Each discrete time step, it observes state $x$, takes action $a$, observes new state $y$, and receives immediate reward $r$. $P_{xa}(y)$ is the probability that doing $a$ in $x$ will lead to state $y$ and $P_{xa}(r)$ is the probability that doing $a$ in $x$ will generate reward $r$.

The agent is not interested just in immediate rewards, but in the *total discounted reward*. In this measure, rewards received $n$ steps into the future are worth less than rewards received now, by a factor of $\gamma^n$ where $0 \leq \gamma < 1$:

$$R = r_t + \gamma r_{t+1} + \gamma^2 r_{t+2} + \cdots$$

The strategy that the Q-learning agent adopts is to build up *Quality-values* (Q-values) for each pair $(x, a)$. In 1-step Q-learning, after each experience, we update:

$$Q(x,a) := (1-\alpha)Q(x,a) + \alpha(r + \gamma \max_{b \in A} Q(y,b)) \qquad (1)$$

where the *learning rate* $\alpha$, $0 \leq \alpha \leq 1$, takes decreasing (with each update) successive values $\alpha_1, \alpha_2, \alpha_3 \ldots$, such that $\sum_{i=1}^{\infty} \alpha_i = \infty$ and $\sum_{i=1}^{\infty} \alpha_i^2 < \infty$.

If each pair $(x, a)$ is visited an infinite number of times, then Q-learning converges to a unique set of values $Q(x,a) = Q^*(x,a)$ which define a stationary deterministic optimal policy [Watkins and Dayan, 1992].

The optimal policy is defined by $\pi^*(x) = a^*(x)$ where:

$$\begin{aligned} V^*(x) &= Q^*(x, a^*(x)) \\ &= \max_{b \in A} Q^*(x,b) \end{aligned}$$

## 2.2 Competition among selfish Q-learners

I use Q-learning as the mode of operation of the competing selfish agents in my model. Each agent is a Q-learning agent, with its own set of Q-values and more importantly, with its own reward function.

To formalise, each agent $A_i$ receives rewards $r_i$ from a personal distribution $P_{xa}^i(r)$. The distribution $P_{xa}(y)$ is a property of the world - it is common across all agents. Each agent $A_i$ maintains personal Q-values $Q_i(x,a)$ and W-values $W_i(x)$.

The agent updates its W-values based on what happens when it is not obeyed. If it is not obeyed, the actions chosen will not be random - they will be actions desirable to other agents. It will depend on the particular collection what these actions are, but they may overlap in places with its own suggested actions. If another agent happens to be promoting the same action as it, then it does not need to be obeyed. Or more subtly, the other agent might be suggesting an action which is almost-perfect for it, while if its exact action succeeded, it would be disastrous for the other agent, which would fight it all the way.

### 2.2.1 $\mathbf{W} = (\mathcal{P} - \mathcal{A})$

What we really need to express in $W$ is the difference between predicted reward $\mathcal{P}$ (what is predicted if we are listened to) and actual reward $\mathcal{A}$ (what actually happened). What happens when we are not listened to depends on what the other agents are doing.

# 3 W-learning

Consider Q-learning as the process:

$$\mathcal{P} := (1-\alpha_Q)\mathcal{P} + \alpha_Q(\mathcal{A})$$

Then W-learning is:

$$W := (1-\alpha_W)W + \alpha_W(\mathcal{P} - \mathcal{A})$$

For updating the Q-values, only one agent (the leader $A_k$) suggested the executed action $a_k$. However, all agents can learn from the transition (under their own different reward functions). We update for all $i$:

$$Q_i(x, a_k) := (1 - \alpha_Q) Q_i(x, a_k) + \alpha_Q (r_i + \gamma \max_{b \in A} Q_i(y, b)) \tag{2}$$

For the W-values, we only update the agents that were not obeyed. We update for $i \neq k$:

$$W_i(x) := (1 - \alpha_W) W_i(x) + \alpha_W (Q_i(x, a_i) - (r_i + \gamma \max_{b \in A} Q_i(y, b))) \tag{3}$$

The reason why we do not update $W_k(x)$ is explained later (Section 3.3). In (object-oriented) pseudo-code, the W-learning system is, every time step:

```
state x := observe();
for ( all i )
 a[i] := A[i].suggestAction(x);
find k
execute ( a[k] );
state y := observe();

for ( all i )
{
 r[i] := A[i].reward(x,y);
 A[i].updateQ ( x, a[k], y, r[i] );
 if (i != k)
  A[i].updateW ( x, a[i], y, r[i] );
}
```

### 3.1 After $Q$ has been (somewhat) learnt

As $Q$ is learnt, the update for $A_i$, $i \neq k$, is approximated by:

$$W_i(x) := (1 - \alpha_W) W_i(x) + \alpha_W (V_i^*(x) - (r_i + \gamma V_i^*(y)))$$

We can write this as:

$$W_i(x) := (1 - \alpha_W) W_i(x) + \alpha_W d_{ki}(x)$$

where the random variable $d_{ki}(x)$ is the 'deviation' (difference between predicted $\mathcal{P}$ and actual $\mathcal{A}$) that $A_k$ causes for $A_i$ in state $x$ if both are converged to their respective $Q^*$. Note that:

$$\begin{aligned} E(d_{ki}(x)) &= V_i^*(x) - (E(r_i) + \gamma E(V_i^*(y))) \\ &= V_i^*(x) - \left( \sum_r r P_{xa}^i(r) \quad + \quad \gamma \sum_y V_i^*(y) P_{xa}(y) \right) \end{aligned}$$

where $a = a_k^*(x)$. We expect:

$$E(d_{kk}(x)) = 0$$

and we expect for $i \neq k$:

$$E(d_{ki}(x)) \geq 0$$

If $A_k$ leads from the start to infinity, then:

$$\begin{aligned} W_i(x) &\to E(d_{ki}(x)) \\ &\geq 0 \end{aligned}$$

Of course, it may be interrupted, as some new agent takes the lead. If $A_i$ itself takes the lead, then W-learning stops for it until (if ever) it loses it. If another agent $A_l$ takes the lead, then $A_i$ will suddenly be taking samples from the distribution $d_{li}(x)$. If we update forever from *this* point, then $W_i(x)$ eventually converges to the expected value of the new distribution:

$$W_i(x) \to E(d_{li}(x))$$

## 3.2 Convergence of W-learning

Essentially, the reason why W-learning converges is that for the leader to keep on changing, $W$ must keep on rising. And while there may be statistical variations in any finite sample, in the long run the expected values must emerge. Competition will be resolved when some agent $A_k$, as a result of the deviations it suffers in the earlier stages of W-learning, accumulates a high enough W-value $W_k(x)$ such that:

$$\forall i, i \neq k, \quad W_i(x) \to E(d_{ki}(x)) < W_k(x)$$

$A_k$ wins because it has suffered a greater deviation in the past than any expected deviation it is now causing for the other agents.

## 3.3 Scoring $W_k(x)$

Should we score $W$ if obeyed as well? If we do, then:

$$\begin{aligned} W_k(x) &\to E(d_{kk}(x)) \\ &= 0 \end{aligned}$$

The leader's $W$ is converging to zero, while the other agents' $W$'s are converging to $E(d_{ki}(x)) \geq 0$. They are guaranteed to catch up with it. So there will be no resolution of the competition ever.

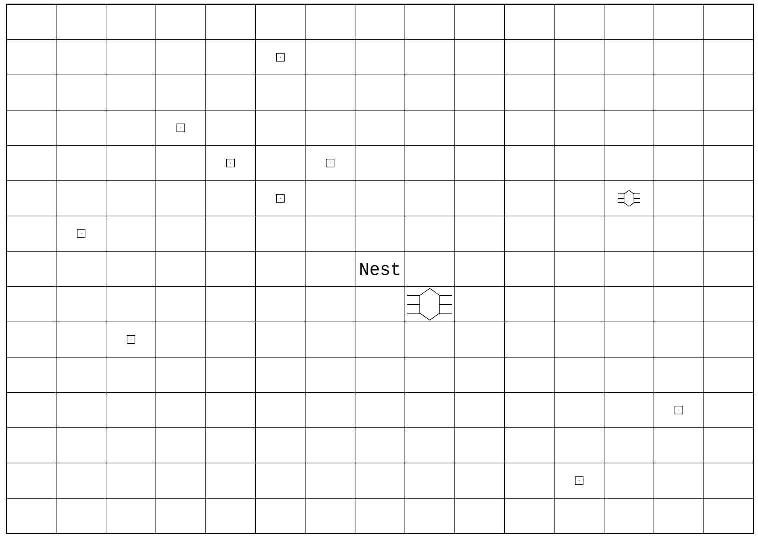


Figure 2: The toroidal gridworld.

# 4 Empirical Work

Starting with any $n$ agents with any reward functions (leading to any converged Q-values), W-learning will eventually converge and the agents will have permanently divided up state-space between them. So we can define spaces of possible robot architectures where every point in the space represents a robot that can be built and tried out (for the best exposition of this concept see [Dawkins, 1986, Ch.3]). Such a space can be searched in a systematic manner, or in a stochastic manner similar to evolution by natural selection [Langton, 1989].

## 4.1 The Simulated World

The problem I set for my W-learning simulated robot is the conflict between seeking food and avoiding moving predators on a simple simulated landscape (Figure 2). The world is a toroidal (SIZE x SIZE) gridworld containing a nest, a number (NOFOOD) of stationary, randomly-distributed pieces of food, and a number (NOPREDATORS) of randomly-moving dumb predators. World, evolution and learning are all implemented in C++.

Each timestep, the robot can move one square or stay still. When it finds food, it picks it up. It can only carry one piece of food at a time, and it can only drop it at the nest. The task for the robot is to forage food (i.e. find it, and bring it back to the nest) while avoiding the predators.

The robot senses $x = (i, n, f, p)$. $i$ is whether the robot is carrying food or not, and takes values 0 (not carrying) and 1 (carrying). $n$ is the direction (but not distance) of the nest, and takes values 0-7 (the eight main compass directions), 8 (when at the nest) and 9 (when the nest is not visible within a small radius of RADIUS squares). Similarly, $f$ is the direction of the nearest visible food, taking values 0-9, and $p$ is the direction of the nearest visible predator, also taking values 0-9.

The robot takes actions $a$, which take values 0-7 (move in that direction) and 8 (stay still).

## 4.2 Systematic search

We carry out a systematic search of various combinations of agents, looking for combinations whose W-converged situation is adaptive.

We want to define a space of agent-collections which will encompass a very broad range of robot behaviors. Consider the space of collections of 3 agents $A_f, A_n, A_p$, one of each of these types:

```
FoodSensingAgent
x = (i,f), state-space size 20
reward function:
 reward()
 {
  if (just picked up food) return r1
  else return 0
 }

NestSensingAgent
x = (n), state-space size 10
reward function:
 reward()
 {
  if (just arrived at nest) return r2
  else return 0
 }

PredatorSensingAgent
x = (p), state-space size 10
reward function:
 reward()
 {
  if (just shook off predator (no longer visible)) return r3
  else return 0
 }
```

for different values of $r_1, r_2, r_3$ in the range $r_{min} = 0$ to $r_{max} = 1$. That is, we're only interested in food-seekers, nest-seekers and predator-avoiders (we assume that food-avoiders, predator-seekers, etc. are of no interest). Even so, the range of possible behaviors of such a collection is vast. The behavior of the collection as a whole will depend upon the relative sizes of each agent's reward (hence how strong the agent will be in W-competitions, and how much of the statespace it will win).

We do a systematic search of all combinations of $r_1, r_2, r_3 \in \{0.1, 0.3, 0.5, 0.7, 0.9\}$ (a total of $5^3$ combinations). In the test, we calculate the average amount of food foraged per 100 steps $F$ and the average number of predator encounters per 100 steps $P$. Here are the 10 best foragers:

```
                                                   F       P
robot=[food(0.700),nest(0.100),predator(0.500)] scores: 7.220   0.050
robot=[food(0.700),nest(0.100),predator(0.300)] scores: 6.970   0.210
robot=[food(0.500),nest(0.100),predator(0.700)] scores: 6.670   0.090
robot=[food(0.900),nest(0.100),predator(0.300)] scores: 6.510   0.160
robot=[food(0.500),nest(0.100),predator(0.300)] scores: 5.860   0.050
robot=[food(0.500),nest(0.100),predator(0.900)] scores: 3.790   0.010
robot=[food(0.300),nest(0.100),predator(0.300)] scores: 3.300   0.030
robot=[food(0.700),nest(0.300),predator(0.500)] scores: 3.060   0.090
robot=[food(0.700),nest(0.300),predator(0.900)] scores: 2.380   0.080
robot=[food(0.900),nest(0.300),predator(0.700)] scores: 2.230   0.140
```

and the joint best predator-avoiders (all encountered no predators, they are sorted in order of food foraged):

```
                                                   F       P
robot=[food(0.300),nest(0.100),predator(0.900)] scores: 0.050   0.000
robot=[food(0.900),nest(0.100),predator(0.700)] scores: 0.060   0.000
robot=[food(0.300),nest(0.700),predator(0.900)] scores: 0.090   0.000
robot=[food(0.100),nest(0.300),predator(0.900)] scores: 0.150   0.000
robot=[food(0.300),nest(0.100),predator(0.700)] scores: 0.150   0.000
robot=[food(0.100),nest(0.100),predator(0.900)] scores: 0.300   0.000
robot=[food(0.100),nest(0.100),predator(0.500)] scores: 0.330   0.000
robot=[food(0.700),nest(0.100),predator(0.900)] scores: 0.340   0.000
robot=[food(0.700),nest(0.100),predator(0.700)] scores: 0.370   0.000
robot=[food(0.500),nest(0.500),predator(0.700)] scores: 1.090   0.000
```

### 4.2.1 MPEG Movie demo

An MPEG Movie demo of the best forager above can be viewed on the internet at `http://www.cl.cam.ac.uk/users/mh10006/w.html`

## 4.3 Evolutionary search

Alternatively, we can use a Genetic Algorithm (GA) (from [Holland, 1975], for an introduction see [Goldberg, 1989]) to search the space.

In this experiment, food does not grow. Instead, the robot makes a number of runs, each of length STEPSPERRUN timesteps. At the start of each run, the robot, NOFOOD pieces of food, and the predator are placed randomly. Writing $F$ as the average amount of food foraged per run and $P$ as the average number of predator encounters per run:

$$\text{fitness} = C_F F - C_P P$$

### 4.3.1 Evolved W-collections

We consider the space of collections of 3 agents $A_f, A_n, A_p$, one of each of these types:

```
FoodSensingAgent
 reward()
 {
  if (just picked up food) return r1
  else return r2
 }

NestSensingAgent
 reward()
 {
  if (just arrived at nest) return r3
  else return r4
 }

PredatorSensingAgent
 reward()
 {
  if (just shook off predator (no longer visible)) return r5
  else return r6
 }
```

for $r_1, \ldots, r_6$ in the range $r_{min} = 0$ to $r_{max} = 2$.

After only quick evolutionary searches we found the following W-collections. The table shows, for the different fitness functions, the best solution (set of 6 rewards) found by evolution, and in each solution, the division of the full (size 1800) statespace between the agents:

| CF | CP | max fitness | best evolved W-collection | r1 | r2 | r3 | r4 | r5 | r6 | percentage ownership Af-An-Ap | F | P | fitness |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 100 | 1 | 400 | EVO1 | 1.73 | 0.11 | 0.41 | 0.26 | 1.37 | 1.20 | 49-35-16 | 3.650 | 0.410 | [364.590] |
| 10 | 1 | 40 | EVO1 | 1.73 | 0.11 | 0.41 | 0.26 | 1.37 | 1.20 | 49-35-16 | 3.650 | 0.410 | [36.090] |
| 1 | 1 | 4 | EVO1 | 1.73 | 0.11 | 0.41 | 0.26 | 1.37 | 1.20 | 49-35-16 | 3.650 | 0.410 | [3.240] |
| 1 | 10 | 4 | EVO2 | 1.93 | 0.28 | 0.26 | 0.07 | 1.99 | 0.76 | 35-16-49 | 2.990 | 0.015 | [2.840] |
| 1 | 100 | 4 | EVO3 | 1.46 | 0.62 | 0.22 | 0.07 | 1.92 | 0.12 | 20-16-63 | 2.605 | 0.000 | [2.605] |

### 4.3.2 Analysis of EVO1

Our first level of analysis produces no surprises: $r_1 > r_2$, $r_3 > r_4$ and $r_5 > r_6$ throughout.

The next level of analysis looks at who finally wins each state. In EVO1, $A_f$ wins almost the entire space where $i = 0$ (not carrying). In the space where $i = 1$ (carrying), $A_n$ wins if $p = 9$ (no predator visible). Where a predator is visible, the space is split between $A_n$ and $A_p$.

For example, here are the owners of the area of statespace where $p = 7$. The agents $A_f, A_n, A_p$ are represented by the symbols `o, NEST, pred` respectively. States which have not (yet) been visited are marked with a dotted line:

```
---- p=7: ----
i=0:
f=0     o       o       o       o       o       o       o       o       o
f=1     o       o       o       o       o       o       o       o       o
f=2     o       o       o       o       o       o       o       o       o
f=3     o       o       o       o       o       o       o       o       o
f=4     o       o       o       o       o       o       o       o       o
f=5     o       o       o       o       o       o       o       o       o
f=6     o       o       o       o       o       o       o       o       o
f=7     o       o       o       o       o       o       o       o       o
f=8     ------------------------------------------------------------------------
f=9     o       o       NEST    o       NEST    o       o       o       o
        n=0     n=1     n=2     n=3     n=4     n=5     n=6     n=7     n=8
i=1:
f=0     NEST    pred    NEST    pred    NEST    NEST    NEST    NEST    --------
f=1     NEST    NEST    NEST    pred    NEST    pred    NEST    NEST    --------
f=2     pred    NEST    NEST    pred    NEST    pred    NEST    pred    --------
f=3     NEST    pred    NEST    NEST    NEST    pred    NEST    pred    --------
f=4     NEST    pred    NEST    NEST    NEST    NEST    NEST    pred    --------
f=5     NEST    pred    NEST    pred    NEST    pred    NEST    NEST    --------
f=6     NEST    pred    NEST    NEST    NEST    pred    NEST    pred    --------
f=7     NEST    pred    NEST    pred    NEST    pred    NEST    NEST    --------
f=8     NEST    NEST    NEST    pred    NEST    pred    NEST    NEST    --------
f=9     NEST    o       NEST    NEST    NEST    pred    NEST    NEST    --------
        n=0     n=1     n=2     n=3     n=4     n=5     n=6     n=7     n=8
```

The next level of analysis is what actions the robot actually ends up executing as a result of this resolution of competition. When not carrying food, $A_f$ is in charge, and it causes the robot to wander, and then head for food when visible. $A_n$ is constantly suggesting that the robot return to the nest, but its W-values are too weak. Then, as soon as $i = 1$, $A_f$'s W-values drop below zero, and $A_n$ finds itself in charge. As soon as it succeeds in taking the robot back to the nest, $i = 0$ and $A_f$ immediately takes over again. In this way the two agents combine to forage food, even though both are pursuing their own agendas.

In fact, when $i = 1$ (carrying food), $A_f$ is a long way off from getting a reward, since it has to lose the food at the nest first. And it cannot learn how to do this since $(n)$ is not in its statespace. $A_f$ ends up in a state of dependence on $A_n$, which actually knows better than $A_f$ the action that is best for it.

### 4.4 Discussion

Given some collection of agents, there are a large number of ways in which they can divide up the statespace between them. This defines a large space of possible agent-combinations. As conditions change, we can move continuously through this space by varying the numerical rewards (their size, and the differences between them), so varying each agent's possession of state-space in a continuous manner. This is an alternative to the programmed approach where we have to specify and hand-code perhaps quite different logic for each situation.

## 5 Summary and conclusion

We have shown that for any given collection of Q-learners, there is what can be described as a 'natural' action-selection scheme. We avoid the problem of defining the flow of control by having it follow naturally once the collection of agents is specified.

W-learning resolves competition without any $W \rightarrow \infty$, and in fact with normally most $W \ll W_{max}$.

Finally, W-learning is fair resolution of competition - the most likely winner of a state is the agent that is most likely to suffer the highest deviation if it does not win.

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