

A* search

CS 480

Intro to Artificial Intelligence

Incorporating Domain Knowledge

We need a formal way to introduce our knowledge about the problem to our agent

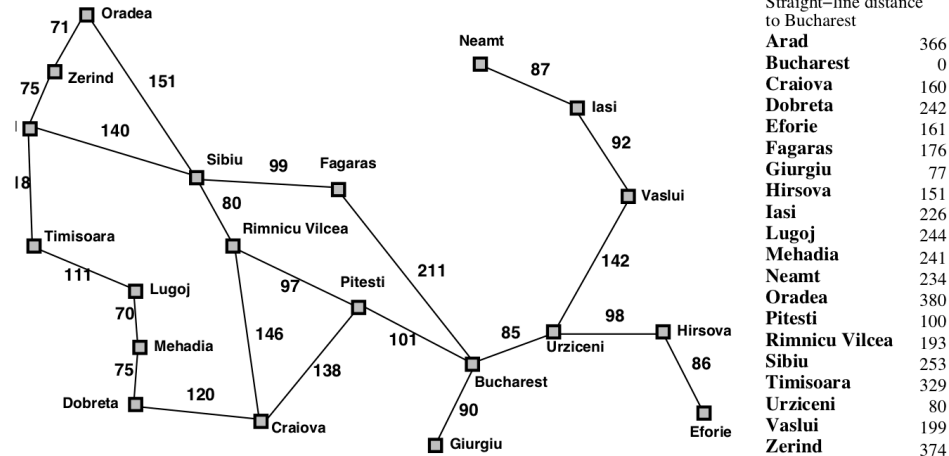
- “Distance by car is **at least** as much as the straight line distance”
- “A completed Sudoku puzzle has to fill in all the empty squares”
- “A TSP solution has to visit each node”

We can encode each of these as a function that maps states to **approximately remaining path cost** to the goal.

Heuristic

$h(s) :=$ approximate cost to goal

Romania with step costs in km



Attempt 1: Greedy Best-first Search

UCS, except use **h** instead of **g** as the priority.

[F(176), R(193)]

[S]

[B(0), R(193)]

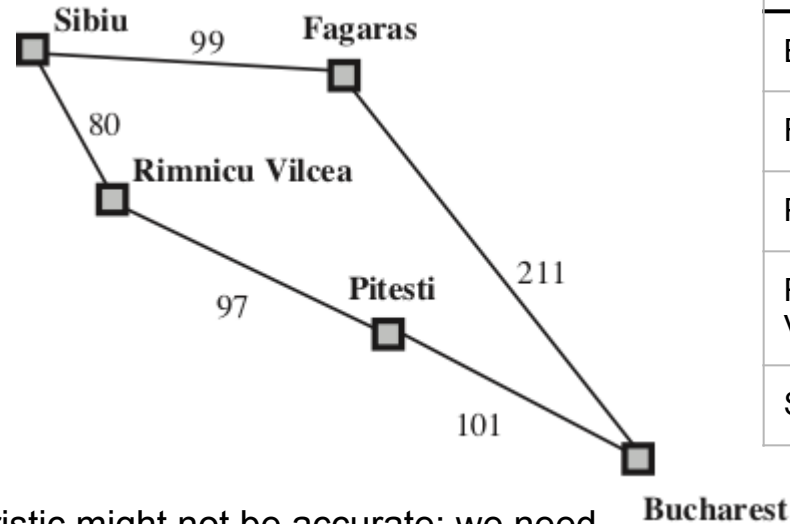
[S,F]

Returned path:

S->F->B (cost: 310)

Optimal path:

S->R->P->B (cost 278)



State	h(State)
Bucharest	0
Fagaras	176
Pitesti	100
Rimnicu Vilcea	193
Sibiu	253

Our heuristic might not be accurate; we need to keep track of the **actual cost** as we go.

A* Search

Define a new function for priority

$$f(n) = h(n) + g(n)$$

The function **f** is an estimate of the “cheapest” solution that passes through *n*.

A* search is exactly the same as UCS, except using **f**(*n*) instead of **g**(*n*) for the priority.

Result: as long as **h** obeys some simple properties, we can **prove** that A* search returns the optimal result!

Simple A* example

[R(273), F(275)]

[S]

[F(275), P(277)]

[S,R]

[P(277), B(310)]

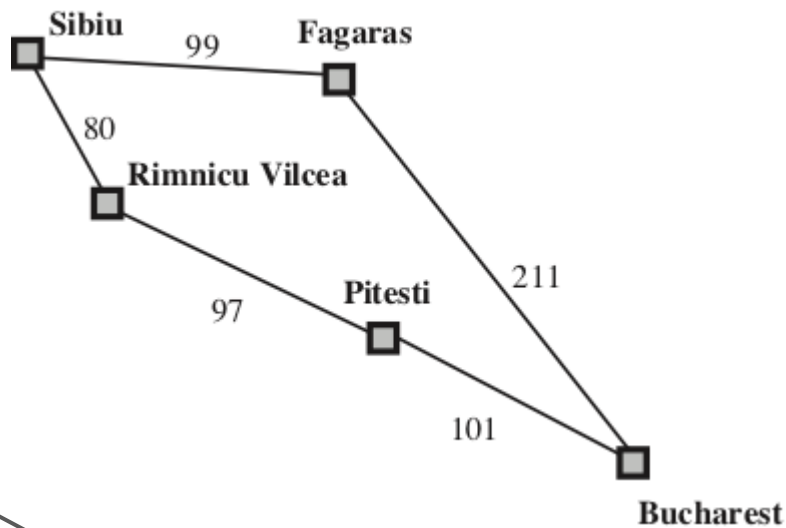
[S,R,F]

[B(278), B(310)]

[S,R,F,P]

Returned Solution:

[S->R, R->P, P->B]



State	h(State)
Bucharest	0
Fagaras	176
Pitesti	100
Rimnicu Vilcea	193
Sibiu	253

Note: we **add** B first from F, but we don't **expand** B until after P. This is why we need to be careful about when we stop searching

Admissibility - Don't overestimate

Let's define the “true cost to go” as h^*

$G_n :=$ the closest goal to n

$h^*(n) :=$ true cost from n to G_n

We say a heuristic is **admissible** if it **never overestimates**

$$h(n) \leq h^*(n), \quad \forall n$$

Notice: UCS is A^* with $h(n) = 0$ (null heuristic)

Admissibility - examples

Which of these are admissible heuristics?

Vacuum world:

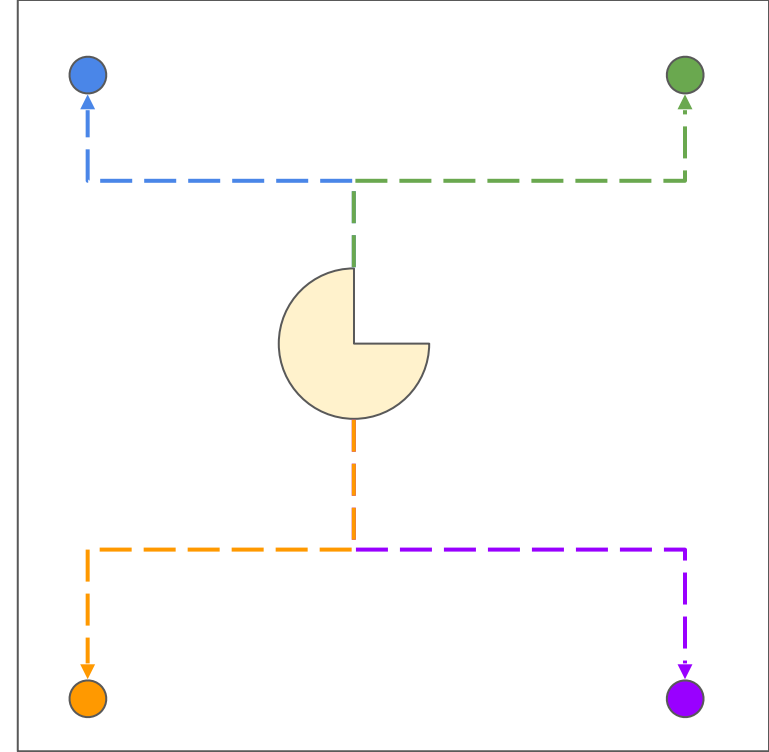
$h(n)$ = “number of cells that are not marked clean”

Romania:

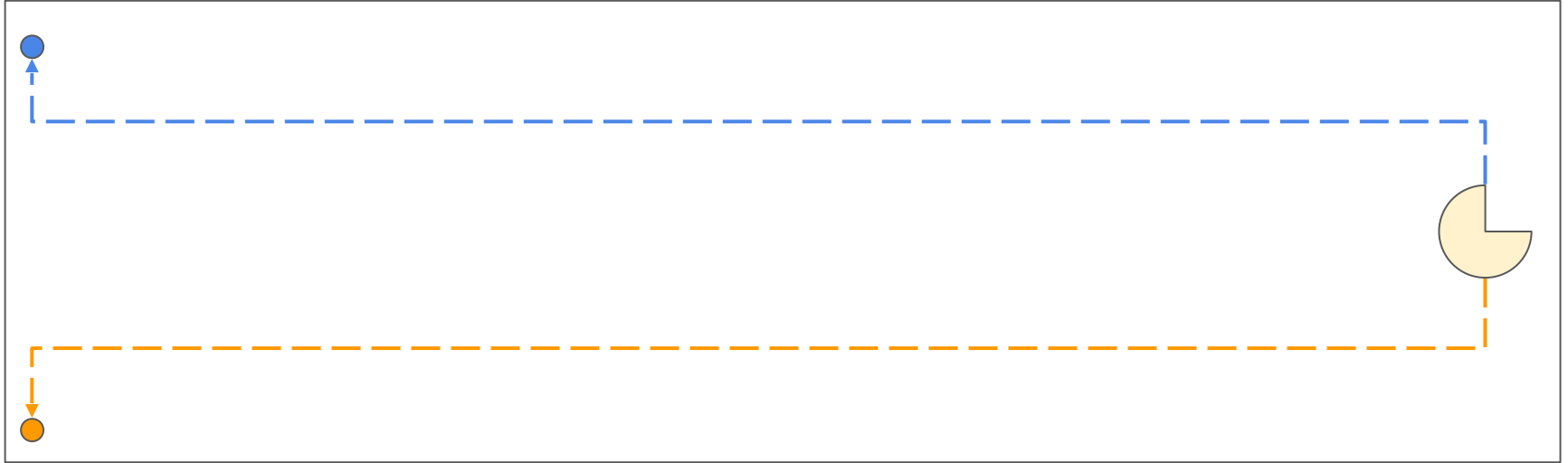
$h(n)$ = “Straight Line Distance to Bucharest”

Pac-Man (eating all the pellets):

$h(n)$ = “Sum of the Manhattan distance to remaining pellets”



Admissibility - Pac-Man



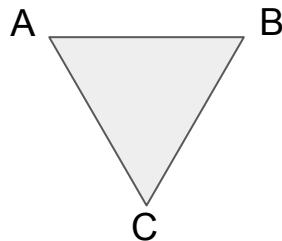
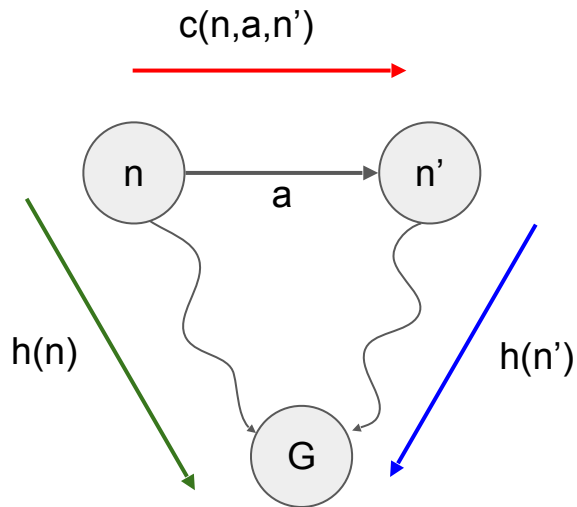
Moving towards one pellet may put you closer to another pellet!

Consistency - the triangle inequality

$$\underbrace{h(n)}_{\forall n, \forall a, \forall n'} \leq \underbrace{c(n, a, n')}_{\text{red}} + \underbrace{h(n')}_{\text{blue}}$$

Any **consistent** heuristic is also **admissible**,
but not all admissible heuristics are consistent.

Consistency is important for ensuring that we
don't have to backtrack to handle shortcuts as
we will soon see



$$AC \leq AB + BC$$

A* optimality - proof sketch (1)

First, note that the sequence of $f(n_i)$ values along **any path** $(S, n_1, n_2, \dots, n_k)$ is non-decreasing

$$f(n_i) = g(n_i) + h(n_i) \quad \text{(definition)}$$

$$\leq g(n_i) + c(n_i, a_i, n_{i+1}) + h(n_{i+1}) \quad \text{(consistency)}$$

$$= g(n_{i+1}) + h(n_{i+1}) = f(n_{i+1}) \quad \text{(definition)}$$

A* optimality - proof sketch (2)

1. Call the optimal path from the start to the goal p^*
2. Assume that A* returns a sub-optimal path ($p' > p^*$) as the solution
3. In order for A* to return p' as the solution, it must reach and expand the goal through p' first.
4. Since A* expands nodes by $f()$ priority ordering, the last leg of p' must have been at the front of the priority queue
5. This means $f(p') < f(\text{every other sub-path found so far})$ (abuse of notation)
6. But by admissibility and consistency, every sub-path of p' must have $f()$ values less than the shortest path. Contradiction!

A* properties

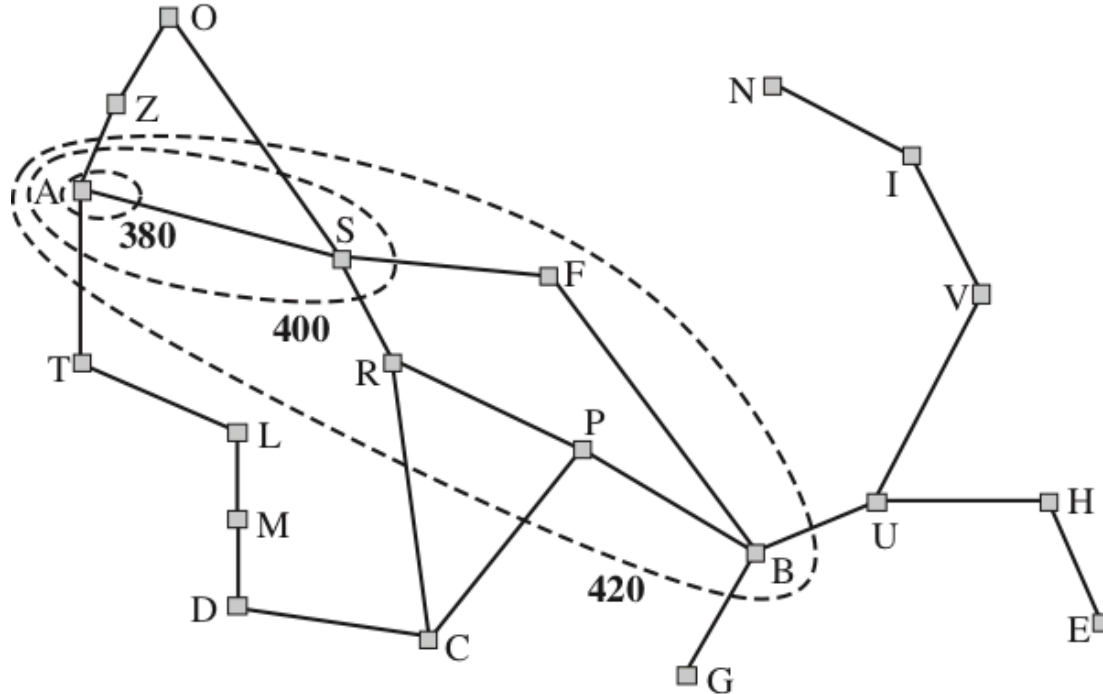
With a consistent heuristic, the following are true about A* (Where C^* is the path cost of the optimal solution)

- A* expands **all nodes** with $f(n) < C^*$
- A* may expand **some nodes** with $f(n) = C^*$
- A* will **not** expand **any** nodes with $f(n) > C^*$
- A* is complete if all step costs are positive and the branching factor is finite
- A* is **optimally efficient** among algorithms that expand all nodes with $f(n) < C^*$

So, is A* with consistent heuristics the answer? Why not always use $h(n)=0$?

Effect of the heuristic on explored states

$h(n)$ “shapes” the search towards the best solution.



Heuristic design - preview

Sometimes, admissible/consistent heuristics just expand too many states

We can still perform A^* with an inadmissible heuristic, we just can't guarantee optimality anymore

Not all admissible/consistent heuristics are created equal: Making a good choice for the heuristic has strong implications for the running time and memory usage, because it impacts the **effective branching factor**.

Summary and preview

Wrapping up

- A^* is like UCS, except using $f(n) = g(n) + h(n)$ for the priority
- In order for A^* to be optimal, we need $h(n)$ to have certain properties:
- **Admissibility**: never over estimates true cost to goal
- **Consistency**: $h(n) \leq c(n, a, n') + h(n')$ (triangle inequality)
- The choice of the heuristic has a big impact on performance

Next time

- Full Romania example
- Dealing with inconsistent heuristics
- Heuristic design techniques