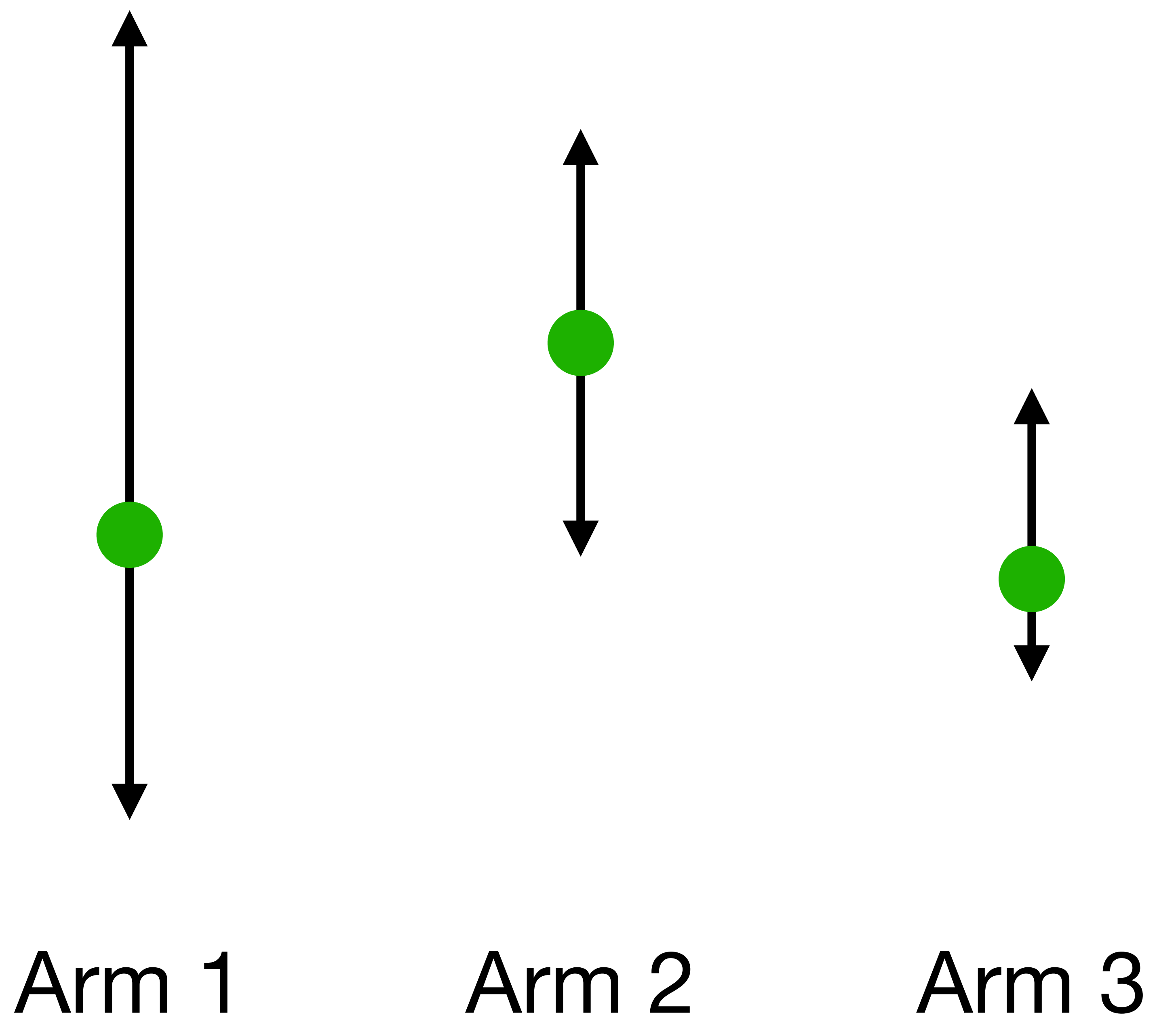
Exploration in Tabular MDPs

Kaiwen Wang and Wen Sun

CS 6789: Foundations of Reinforcement Learning

Recap:

Multi-armed Bandits and UCB Algorithm



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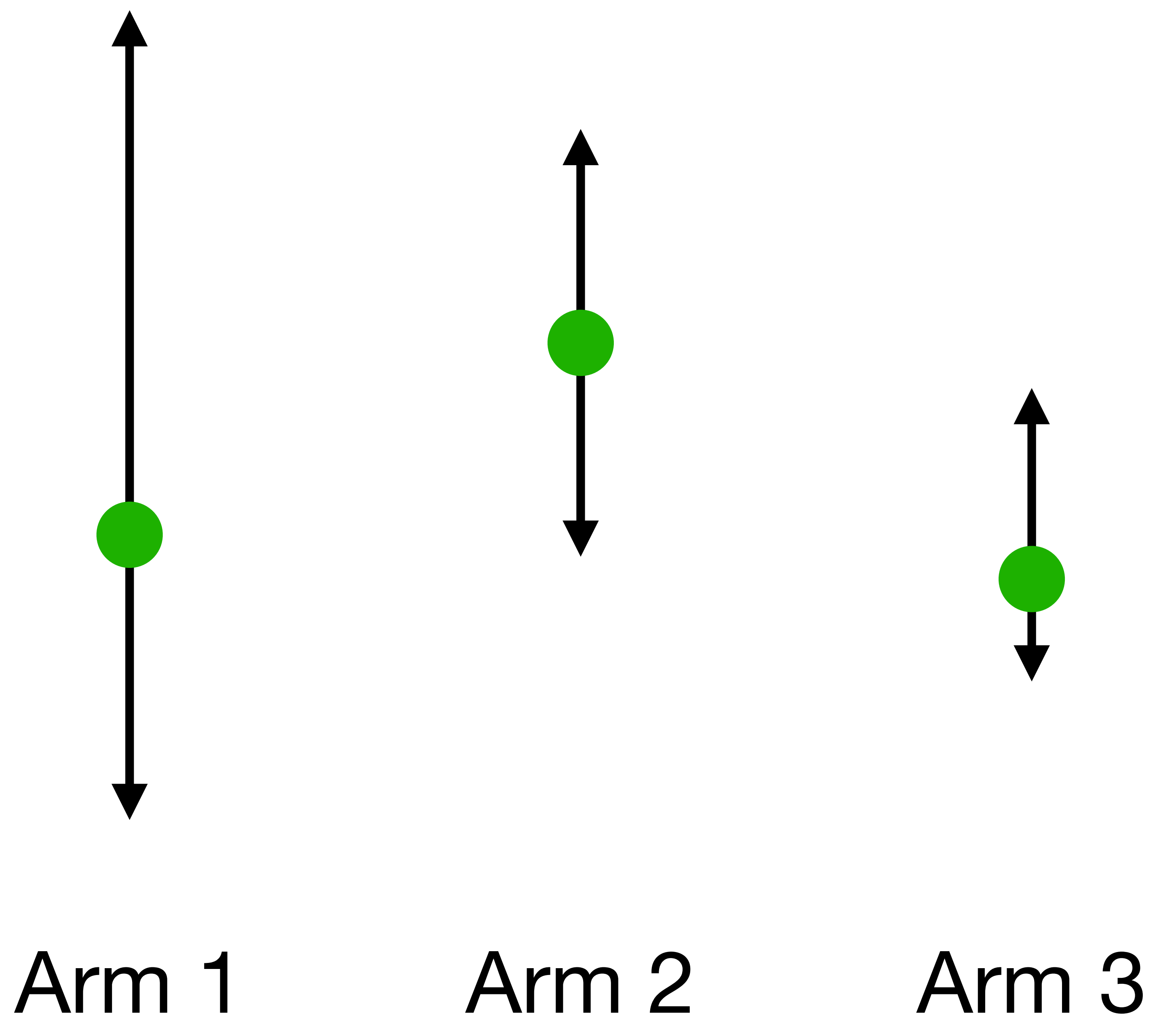

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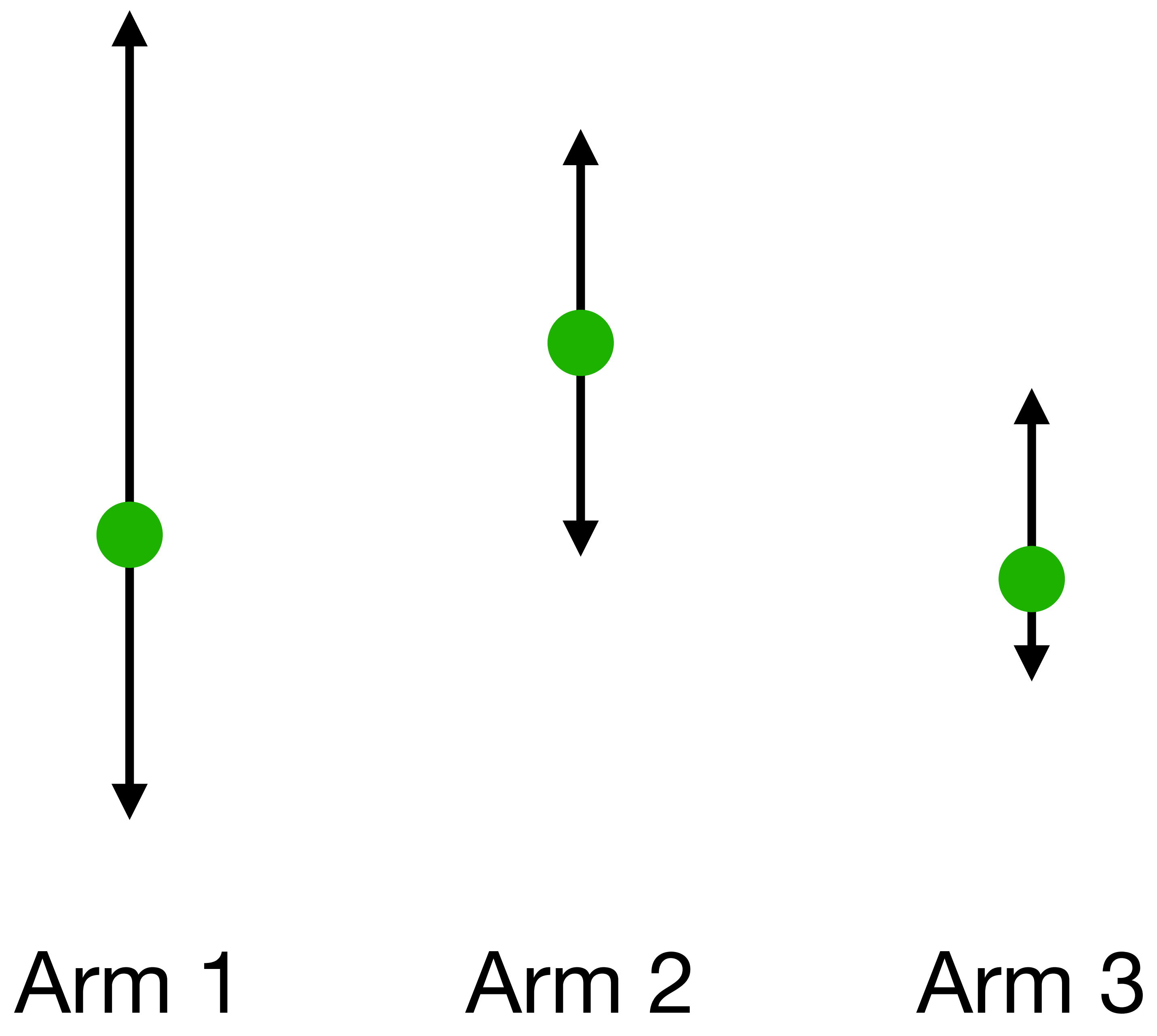

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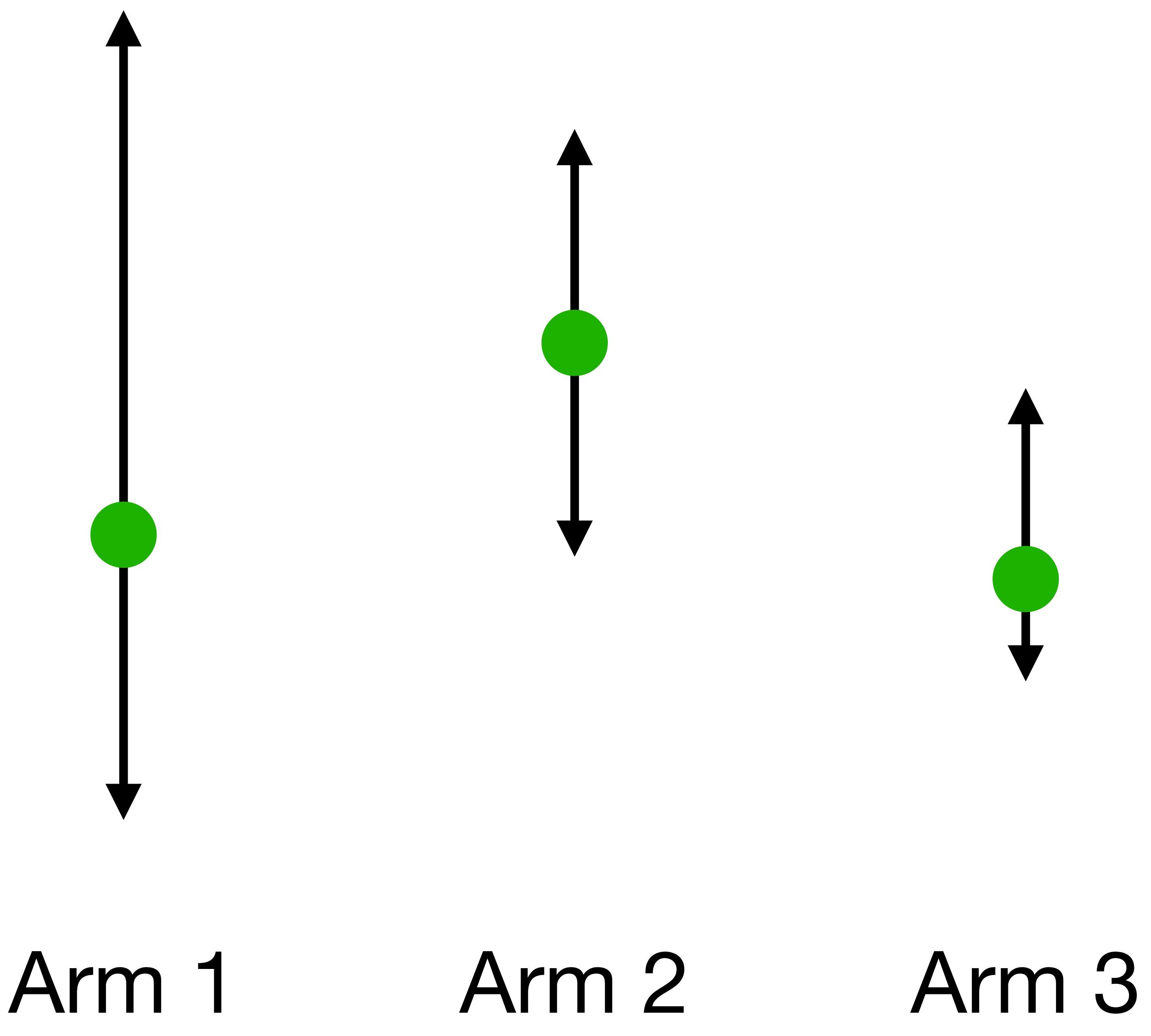

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$$\mathbb{E}\left[N\mu(a^\star) - \sum_{n=1}^{N}\mu(a^n)\right] \leq \widetilde{O}(\sqrt{KN})$$

Key step in the proof:

$$\mu(a^\star) - \mu(a^n) \leq \widehat{\mu}(a^n) + \sqrt{\frac{\ln(KN/\delta)}{N^n(a_n)}} - \mu(a^n)$$

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Finite horizon episode (time-dependent) discrete MDP $\mathcal{M} = \left\{ \{r_h\}_{h=0}^{H-1}, P, H, \mu, S, A \right\}$

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EXPLORATION!

Why we need strategic exploration?

Initialization: s_0

Length of chain is H

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Probability of random walk hitting reward 1 is $(1/3)^H$

Learning Protocol

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2. At episode n, learner executes π^n:
$\{s_h^n, a_h^n, r_h^n\}_{h=0}^{H-1}$, with $a_h^n = \pi^n(s_h^n), r_h^n = r(s_h^n, a_h^n),\ s_{h+1}^n \sim P(\cdot \mid s_h^n, a_h^n)$

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Performance measure: REGRET

$$\mathbb{E}\left[\sum_{n=1}^{N}\left(V^\star - V^{\pi^n}\right)\right] = \text{poly}(S, A, H)\sqrt{N}$$

Notations for Today

$$\mathbb{E}_{s' \sim P(\cdot|s,a)}\left[f(s')\right] := P(\cdot \mid s, a) \cdot f$$

$d_h^\pi(s, a)$: state-action distribution induced by π at time step h
(i.e., probability of π visiting (s, a) at time step h starting from s_0)

$$\pi = \{\pi_0, \ldots, \pi_{H-1}\}$$

Outline for Today

1a. Attempt 1: Treat MDP as a Multi-armed bandit problem and run UCB

1b. Attempt 2: The Upper Confidence Bound Value Iteration Algorithm (UCB-VI)

2. UCB-VI’s regret bound and the analysis

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Key lesson: shouldn’t treat policies as independent arms — they do share information

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Optimistic planning with learned model: $\pi^n = \text{Value-Iter}\left(\widehat{P}^n, \{r_h + b_h^n\}_{h=1}^{H-1}\right)$

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Optimistic planning with learned model: $\pi^n = \text{Value-Iter}\left(\widehat{P}^n, \{r_h + b_h^n\}_{h=1}^{H-1}\right)$

Collect a new trajectory by executing π^n in the real world P starting from s_0

UCBVI—Part 1: Model Estimation

Let us consider the **very beginning** of episode n:

$$\mathscr{D}_h^n = \{s_h^i, a_h^i, s_{h+1}^i\}_{i=1}^{n-1}, \forall h$$

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Estimate model $\widehat{P}^n(s' \mid s,a), \forall s,a,s'$:

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$$\left\| \widehat{V}_h^n \right\|_\infty \leq H, \forall h, n$$

UCBVI: Put All Together

For $n = 1 \to N$:

1. Set $N^n(s,a) = \sum_{i=1}^{n-1} \sum_h \mathbf{1}\{(s_h^i, a_h^i) = (s,a)\}, \forall s, a$

2. Set $N^n(s,a,s') = \sum_{i=1}^{n-1} \sum_h \mathbf{1}\{(s_h^i, a_h^i, s_{h+1}^i) = (s,a,s')\}, \forall s, a, s'$

3. Estimate model: $\widehat{P}^n(s' \mid s,a) = \frac{N^n(s,a,s')}{N^n(s,a)}, \forall s, a, s'$

4. Plan: $\pi^n = VI\left(\widehat{P}^n, \{r_h + b_h^n\}_h\right)$, with $b_h^n(s,a) = cH\sqrt{\frac{\ln(SAHN/\delta)}{N^n(s,a)}}$

5. Execute $\pi^n : \{s_0^n, a_0^n, r_0^n, \ldots, s_{H-1}^n, a_{H-1}^n, r_{H-1}^n, s_H^n\}$

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Theorem: UCBVI Regret Bound

With probability $1-\delta$, we have

$$\text{Regret}_N := \sum_{n=1}^{N} \left(V^\star - V^{\pi^n}\right) \leq \widetilde{O}\left(H^{1.5}\sqrt{S^2 A N \log(1/\delta)}\right)$$

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High probability regret implies bound on the expected regret by integrating over δ.

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Dependency on H and S are suboptimal; but the **same** algorithm can achieve $H^{1.5}\sqrt{SAN}$ in the leading term [Azar et.al 17 ICML, and the book Chapter 7]

Outline of Proof

Bonus $b_h^n(s,a)$ is related to $\left(\left(\widehat{P}^n(\cdot \mid s,a) - P(\cdot \mid s,a)\right) \cdot V_{h+1}^\star\right)$

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VI with bonus inside the learned model gives optimism, i.e., $\widehat{V}^n_h(s) \geq V^\star_h(s), \forall h, n, s, a$

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Upper bound per-episode regret: $V_0^\star(s_0) - V_0^{\pi^n}(s_0) \leq \widehat{V}_0^n(s_0) - V_0^{\pi^n}(s_0)$

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Apply simulation lemma: $\widehat{V}_0^n(s_0) - V^{\pi^n}(s_0)$

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Given a fixed function $f : S \mapsto [0,H]$, w/ prob $1-\delta$:

$$\left| \left(\widehat{P}^n(\cdot|s,a) - P(\cdot|s,a) \right)^\top f \right| \leq O(H\sqrt{\ln(SAHN/\delta)/N^n(s,a)}), \forall s,a,N$$

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2. Note $\widehat{P}^n(\cdot \mid s, a) \cdot f = \frac{1}{N^n(s, a)} \sum_{i=1}^{n-1} \sum_h \mathbf{1}[(s_h^i, a_h^i) = (s, a)] f(s_{h+1}^i)$

2. Proving Optimism via Induction

Lemma [Optimism]: $\widehat{V}_h^n(s) \geq V_h^\star(s), \forall n, h, s$

Recall Bonus-enhanced Value Iteration at episode n:

$$\widehat{V}_H^n(s) = 0, \quad \widehat{Q}_h^n(s,a) = \min\left\{ r_h(s,a) + b_h^n(s,a) + \widehat{P}^n(\cdot \mid s,a) \cdot \widehat{V}_{h+1}^n, H \right\}$$

$$\widehat{V}_h^n(s) = \max_a \widehat{Q}_h^n(s,a), \quad \pi_h^n(s) = \arg\max_a \widehat{Q}_h^n(s,a), \forall s$$

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$$\widehat{V}_H^n(s) = 0, \quad \widehat{Q}_h^n(s,a) = \min\left\{ r_h(s,a) + b_h^n(s,a) + \widehat{P}^n(\cdot \mid s,a) \cdot \widehat{V}_{h+1}^n, H \right\}$$

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2. Proving Optimism via Induction

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$$\geq b_h^n(s,a) - b_h^n(s,a) = 0, \quad \forall s, a$$

3. Upper Bounding Regret using Optimism

per-episode regret $:= V_0^\star(s_0) - V_0^{\pi_n}(s_0) \leq \widehat{V}_0^n(s_0) - V_0^{\pi_n}(s_0)$

This is something we can control! And this is related to our policy π^n

4. Upper bounding Regret via Simulation Lemma

$$\widehat{V}^n_H(s) = 0, \quad \widehat{Q}^n_h(s,a) = \min\left\{ r_h(s,a) + b^n_h(s,a) + \widehat{P}^n_h(\cdot \mid s,a) \cdot \widehat{V}^n_{h+1}, H \right\}$$

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Lemma [Simulation lemma]:

$$\widehat{V}^n_0(s_0) - V^{\pi^n}_0(s_0) \leq \sum_{h=0}^{H-1} \mathbb{E}_{s,a\sim d^{\pi^n}_h}\left[b^n_h(s,a) + (\widehat{P}^n(\cdot \mid s,a) - P(\cdot \mid s,a)) \cdot \widehat{V}^n_{h+1} \right]$$

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Lemma [Simulation lemma]:

$$\widehat{V}_0^n(s_0) - V_0^{\pi^n}(s_0) \leq \sum_{h=0}^{H-1} \mathbb{E}_{s,a \sim d_h^{\pi^n}} \left[b_h^n(s,a) + (\widehat{P}^n(\cdot \mid s,a) - P(\cdot \mid s,a)) \cdot \widehat{V}_{h+1}^n \right]$$

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$$\leq r_0(s_0, \pi^n(s_0)) + b^n_h(s_0, \pi^n(s_0)) + \widehat{P}^n(\cdot \mid s_0, \pi^n(s_0)) \cdot \widehat{V}^n_1 - r_0(s_0, \pi^n(s_0)) - P(\cdot \mid s_0, \pi^n(s_0)) \cdot V^{\pi^n}_1$$

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per-episode regret $:= V_0^\star(s_0) - V_0^{\pi_n}(s_0) \leq \widehat{V}_0^n(s_0) - V_0^{\pi_n}(s_0)$

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$$\leq 4H\sqrt{S \ln(SAHN/\delta)} \left(\sum_{n,h} \sqrt{\frac{1}{N^n(s_h^n, a_h^n)}} + H \log(N/\delta) \right)$$

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Remember we had two failure events for bounding transitions errors.

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High-level Idea: Exploration or Exploitation Tradeoff

Upper bound per-episode regret: $V_0^\star(s_0) - V_0^{\pi^n}(s_0) \leq \widehat{V}_0^n(s_0) - V_0^{\pi^n}(s_0)$

1. What if $\widehat{V}_0^n(s_0) - V_0^{\pi^n}(s_0) \leq \epsilon$?

Then π^n is close to $\pi^\star$, i.e., we are doing exploitation

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We collect data at steps where bonus is large or model is wrong, i.e., exploration