

CS 378: Computer Game Technology

Path Planning, Waypoints, Search
Spring 2012



Path Finding

- **Problem Statement:** Given a start point A and a goal point B, find a path from A to B that is clear
 - Generally want to minimize a cost: distance, travel time, ...
 - Travel time depends on terrain, for instance
 - May be complicated by dynamic changes: paths being blocked or removed
- **Very common problem in games:**
 - In FPS: How does the AI get from room to room?
 - In RTS: User clicks on units, tells them to go somewhere. How do they get there? How do they avoid each other?
 - Chase games, sports games, ...



Search or Optimization?

- Path planning (also called route-finding) can be phrased as a search problem:
 - Find a path to the goal B that minimizes $\text{Cost}(\text{path})$
 - There are a wealth of ways to solve search problems, and we will look at some of them
- Path planning is also an optimization problem:
 - Minimize $\text{Cost}(\text{path})$ subject to the constraint that path joins A and B
 - State space is paths joining A and B, kind of messy
 - There are a wealth of ways to solve optimization problems
- The difference is mainly one of terminology: different communities (AI vs. Optimization)
 - But, search is normally on a discrete state space



Brief Overview of Techniques

- Discrete algorithms: BFS, Greedy search, A*, ...
- Potential fields:
 - Put a “force field” around obstacles, and follow the “potential valleys”
- Pre-computed plans with dynamic re-planning
 - Plan as search, but pre-compute answer and modify as required
- Special algorithms for special cases:
 - E.g. Given a fixed start point, fast ways to find paths around polygonal obstacles



Graph-Based Algorithms

- Ideally, path planning is point to point (any point in the world to any other, through any unoccupied point)
- But, the search space is complex (space of arbitrary curves)
- The solution is to discretize the search space
 - Restrict the start and goal points to a finite set
 - Restrict the paths to be on lines (or other simple curves) that join points
- Form a graph: Nodes are points, edges join nodes that can be reached along a single curve segment
 - Search for paths on the graph

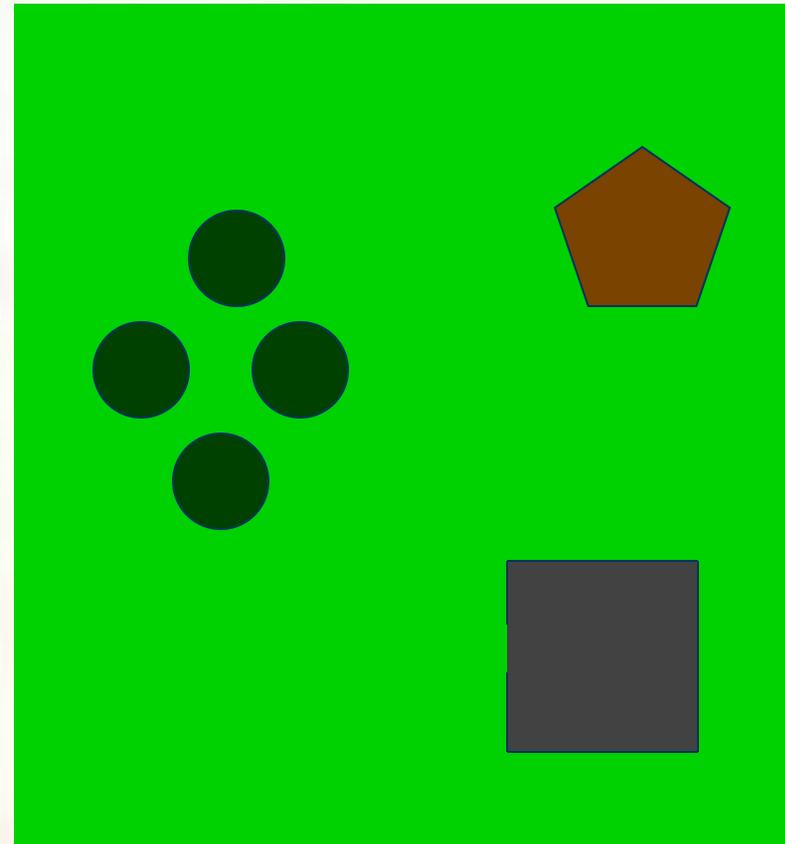
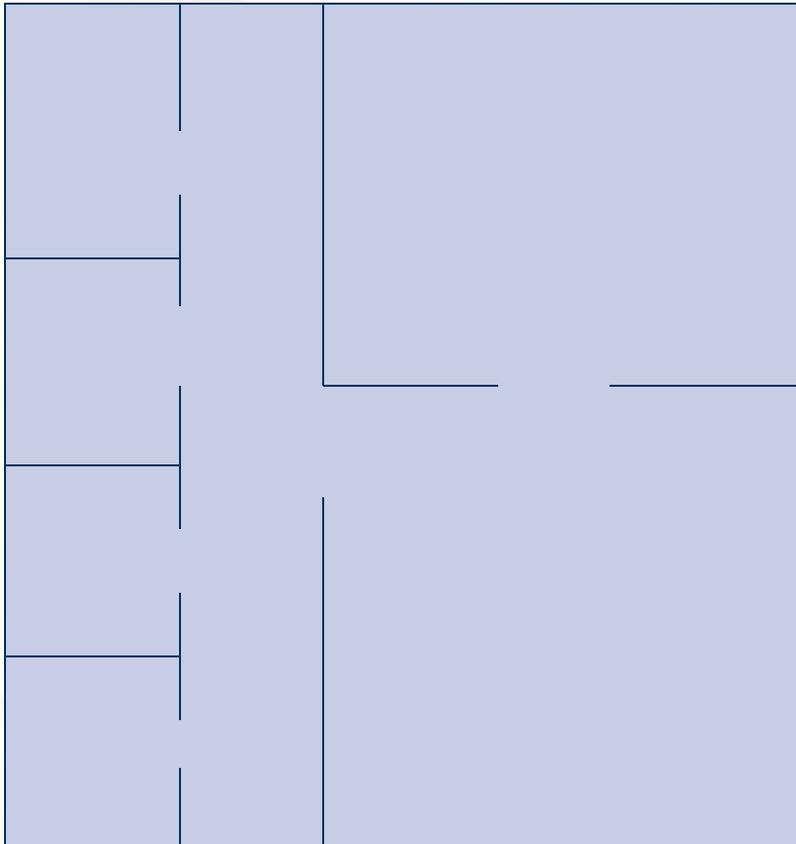


Waypoints (and Questions)

- The discrete set of points you choose are called *waypoints*
- Where do you put the waypoints?
 - There are many possibilities
- How do you find out if there is a simple path between them?
 - Depends on what paths you are willing to accept - almost always assume straight lines
- The answers to these questions depend very much on the type of game you are developing
 - The environment: open fields, enclosed rooms, etc...
 - The style of game: covert hunting, open warfare, friendly romp, ...



Where Would You Put Waypoints?





Waypoints By Hand

- Place waypoints by hand as part of level design
 - Best control, most time consuming
- Many heuristics for good places:
 - In doorways, because characters have to go through doors and, as we learned in visibility, straight lines joining rooms always go through doors
 - Along walls, for characters seeking cover
 - At other discontinuities in the environments (edges of rivers, for example)
 - At corners, because shortest paths go through corners
- The choice of waypoints can make the AI seem smarter

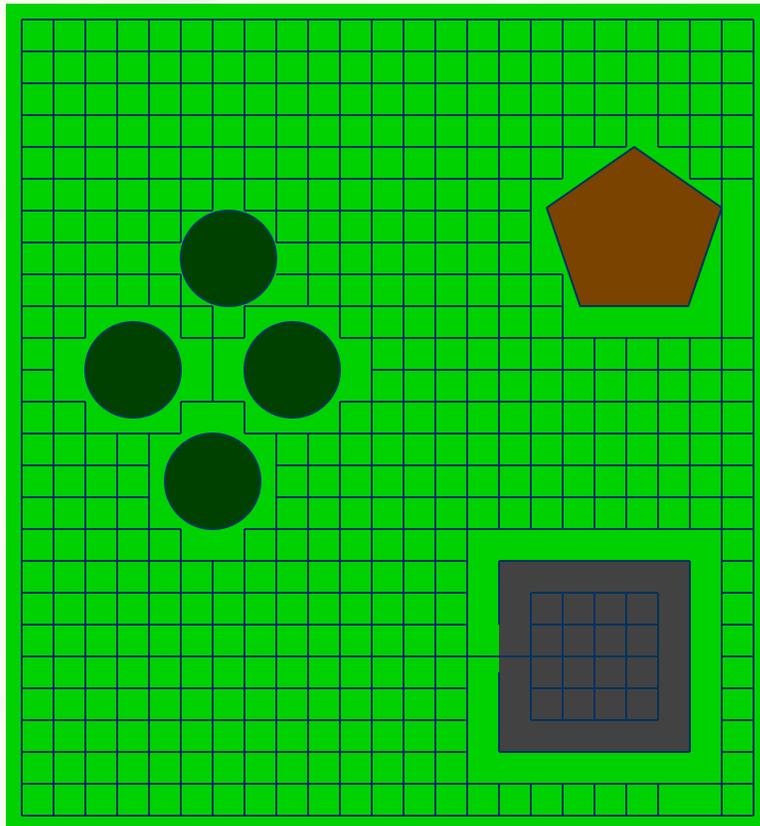


Waypoints By Grid

- Place a grid over the world, and put a waypoint at every gridpoint that is open
 - Automated method, and maybe even implicit in the environment
- Do an edge/world intersection test to decide which waypoints should be joined
 - Normally only allow moves to immediate (and maybe corner) neighbors
- What sorts of environments is this likely to be OK for?
- What are its advantages?
- What are its problems?



Grid Example

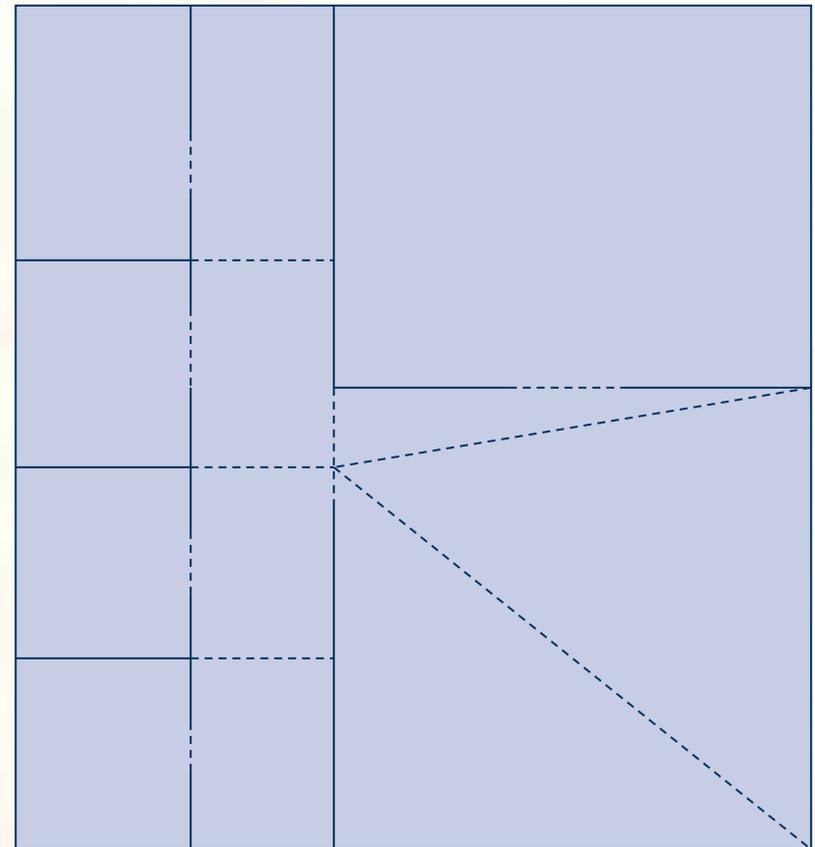


- Note that grid points pay no attention to the geometry
- Method can be improved:
 - Perturb grid to move closer to obstacles
 - Adjust grid resolution
 - Use different methods for inside and outside building
 - Join with waypoints in doorways



Waypoints From Polygons

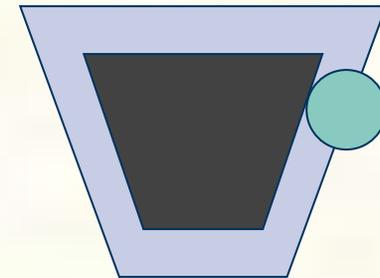
- Choose waypoints based on the floor polygons in your world
- Or, explicitly design polygons to be used for generating waypoints
- How do we go from polygons to waypoints?
 - Hint: there are two obvious options





Waypoints From Corners

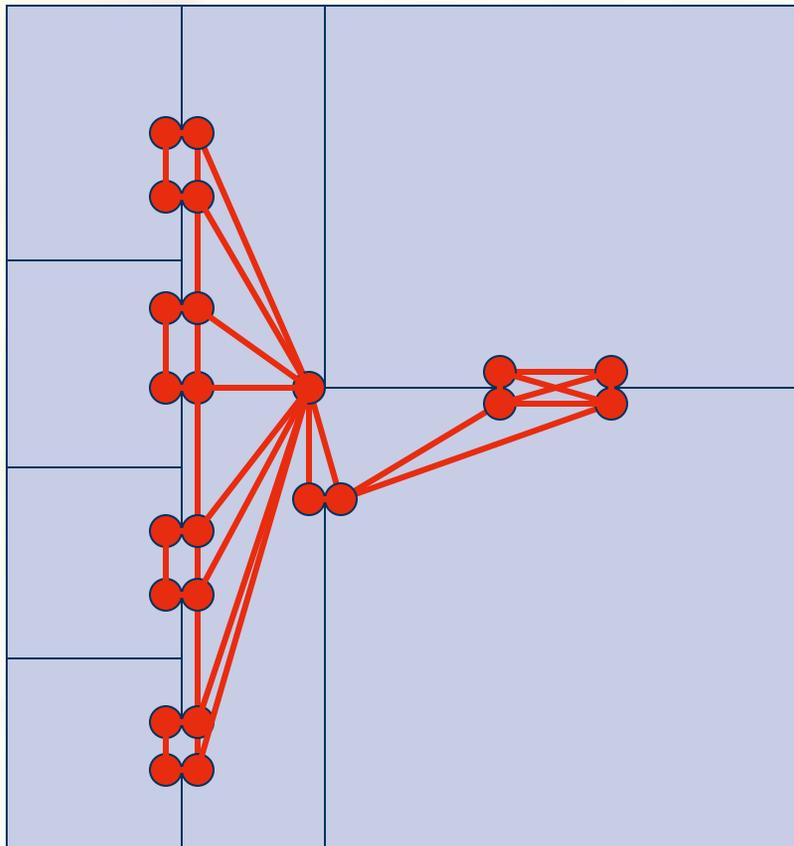
- Place waypoints at every convex corner of the obstacles
 - Actually, place the point away from the corner according to how wide the moving objects are
 - Or, compute corners of offset polygons



- Connects all the corners that can see each other
- Paths through these waypoints will be the shortest
- However, some unnatural paths may result
 - Particularly along corridors - characters will stick to walls



Waypoints From Corners



- NOTE: Not every edge is drawn
- Produces very dense graphs

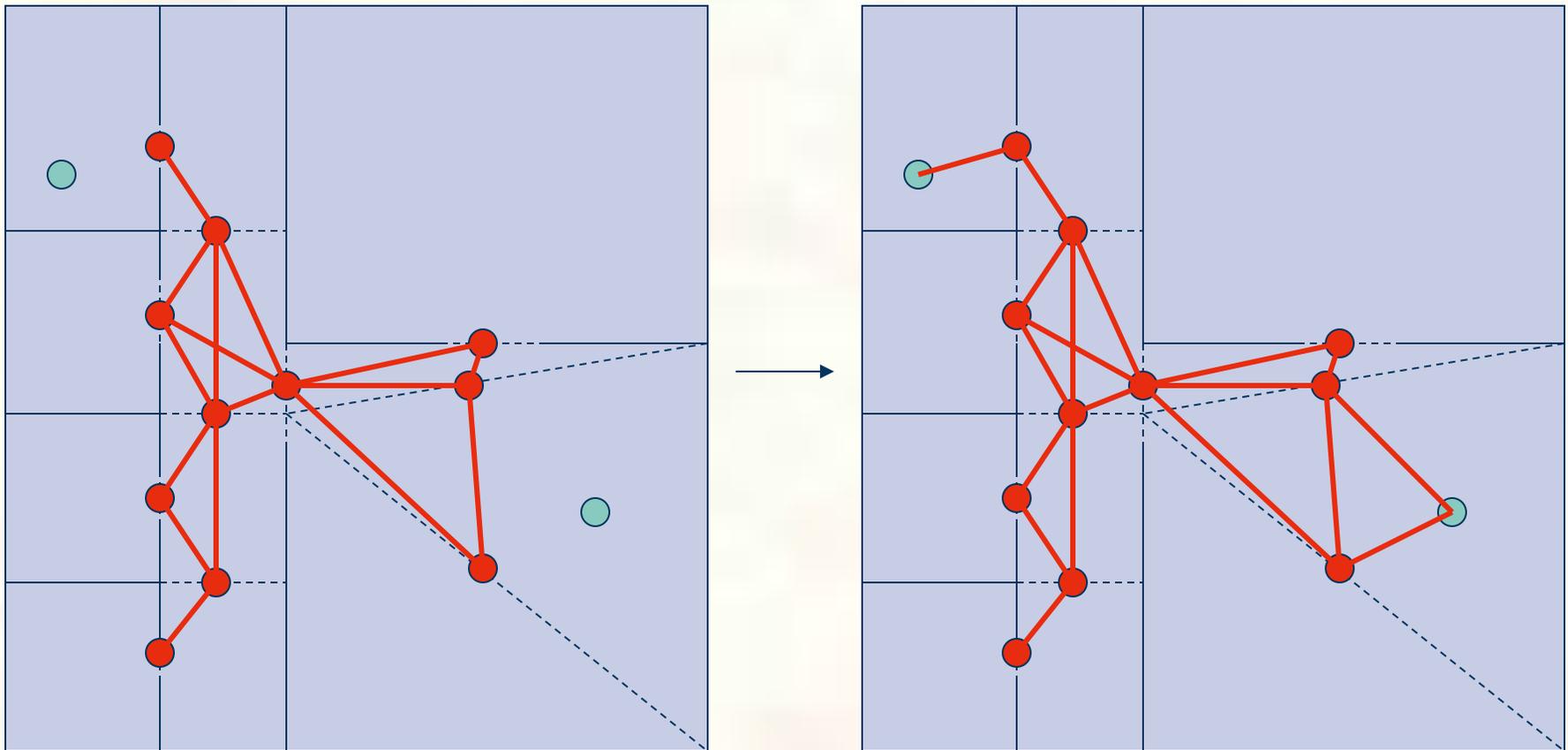


Getting On and Off

- Typically, you do not wish to restrict the character to the waypoints or the graph edges
 - Not a problem, necessarily, with grid methods
- When the character starts, find the closest waypoint and move to that first
 - Or, find the waypoint most in the direction you think you need to go
 - Or, try all of the potential starting waypoints and see which gives the shortest path
- When the character reaches the closest waypoint to its goal, jump off and go straight to the goal point
- Best option: Add a new, temporary waypoint at the precise start and goal point, and join it to nearby waypoints



Getting On and Off





Best-First-Search

- Start at the start node and search outwards
- Maintain two sets of nodes:
 - Open nodes are those we have reached but don't know best path
 - Closed nodes that we know the best path to
- Keep the open nodes sorted by cost
- Repeat: *Expand* the “best” open node
 - If it's the goal, we're done
 - Move the “best” open node to the closed set
 - Add any nodes reachable from the “best” node to the open set
 - Unless already there or closed
 - Update the cost for any nodes reachable from the “best” node
 - New cost is $\min(\text{old-cost}, \text{cost-through-best})$

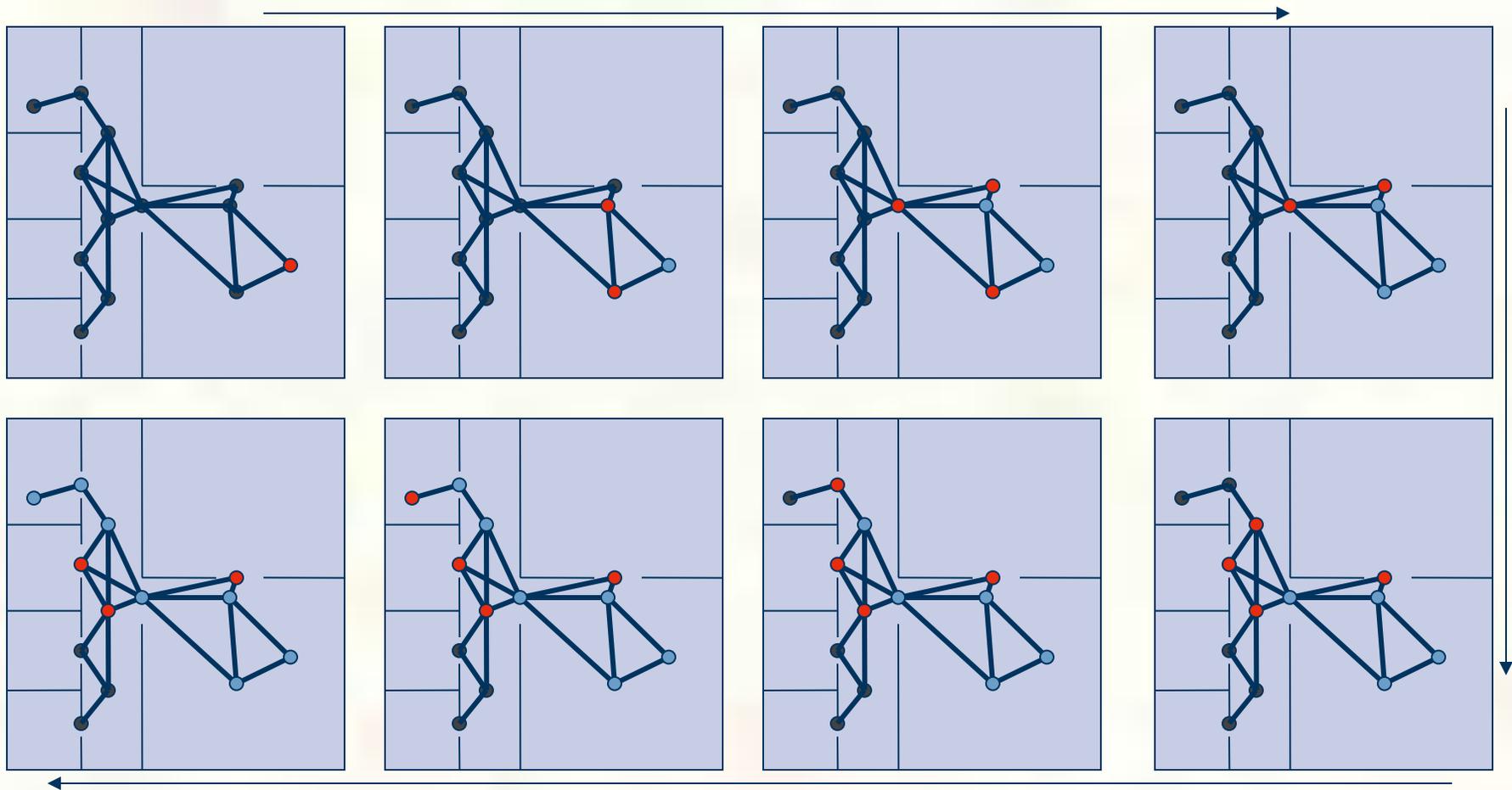


Best-First-Search Properties

- Precise properties depend on how “best” is defined
- But in general:
 - Will always find the goal if it can be reached
 - Maintains a *frontier* of nodes on the open list, surrounding nodes on the closed list
 - Expands the best node on the frontier, hence expanding the frontier
 - Eventually, frontier will expand to contain the goal node
- To store the best path:
 - Keep a pointer in each node n to the previous node along the best path to n
 - Update these as nodes are added to the open set and as nodes are expanded (whenever the cost changes)
 - To find path to goal, trace pointers back from goal nodes



Expanding Frontier





Definitions

- $g(n)$: The current known best cost for getting **to** a node from the start point
 - Can be computed based on the cost of traversing each edge along the current shortest path to n
- $h(n)$: The current estimate for how much more it will cost to get **from** a node to the goal
 - A *heuristic*: The exact value is unknown but this is your best guess
 - Some algorithms place conditions on this estimate
- $f(n)$: The current best estimate for the best path through a node: $f(n) = g(n) + h(n)$

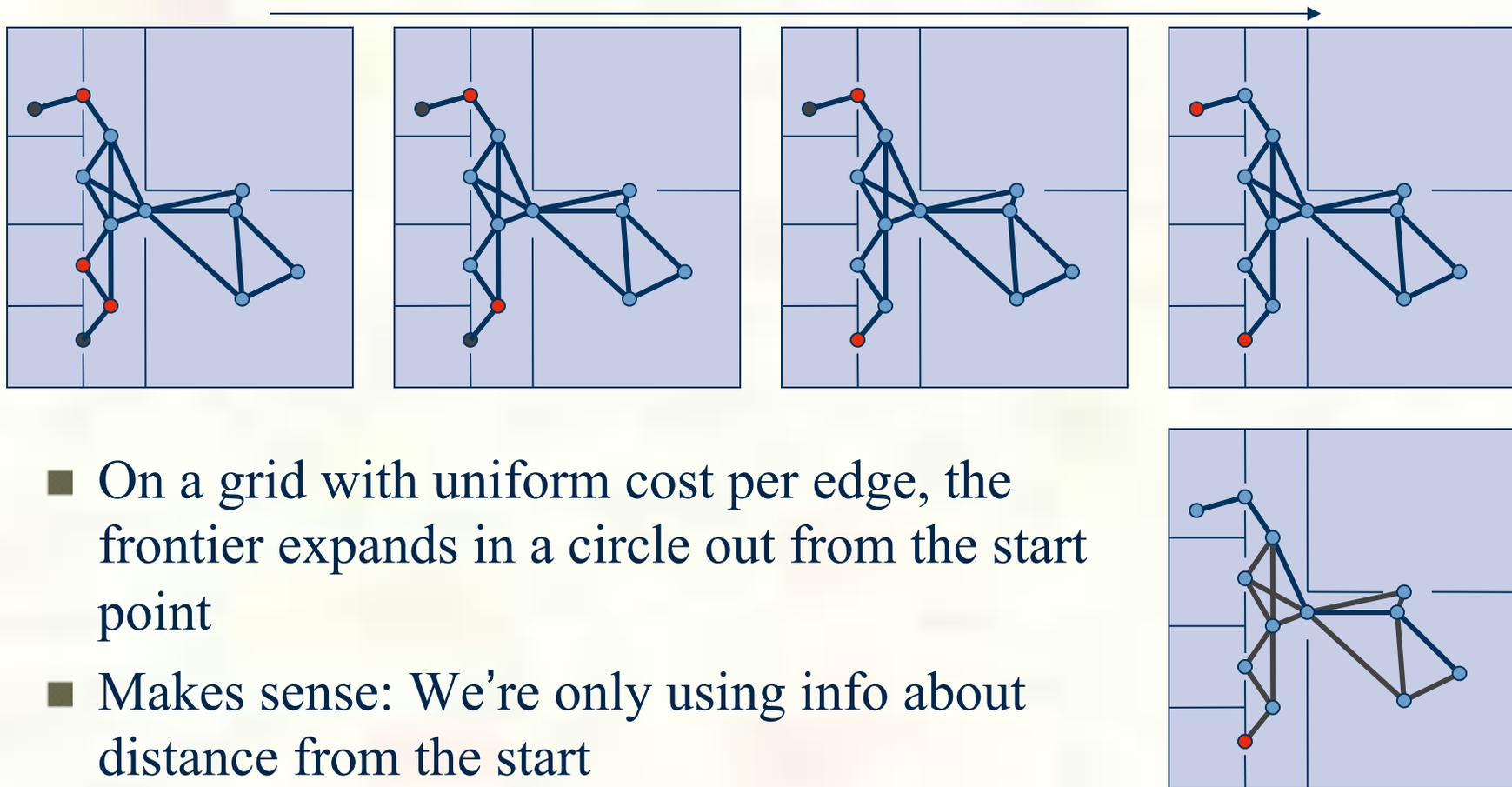


Using $g(n)$ Only

- Define “best” according to $f(n)=g(n)$, the shortest known path from the start to the node
- Equivalent to breadth first search
- Is it optimal?
 - When the goal node is expanded, is it along the shortest path?
- Is it efficient?
 - How many nodes does it explore? Many, few, ...?
- Behavior is the same as defining a constant heuristic function: $h(n)=const$
 - Why?



Breadth First Search



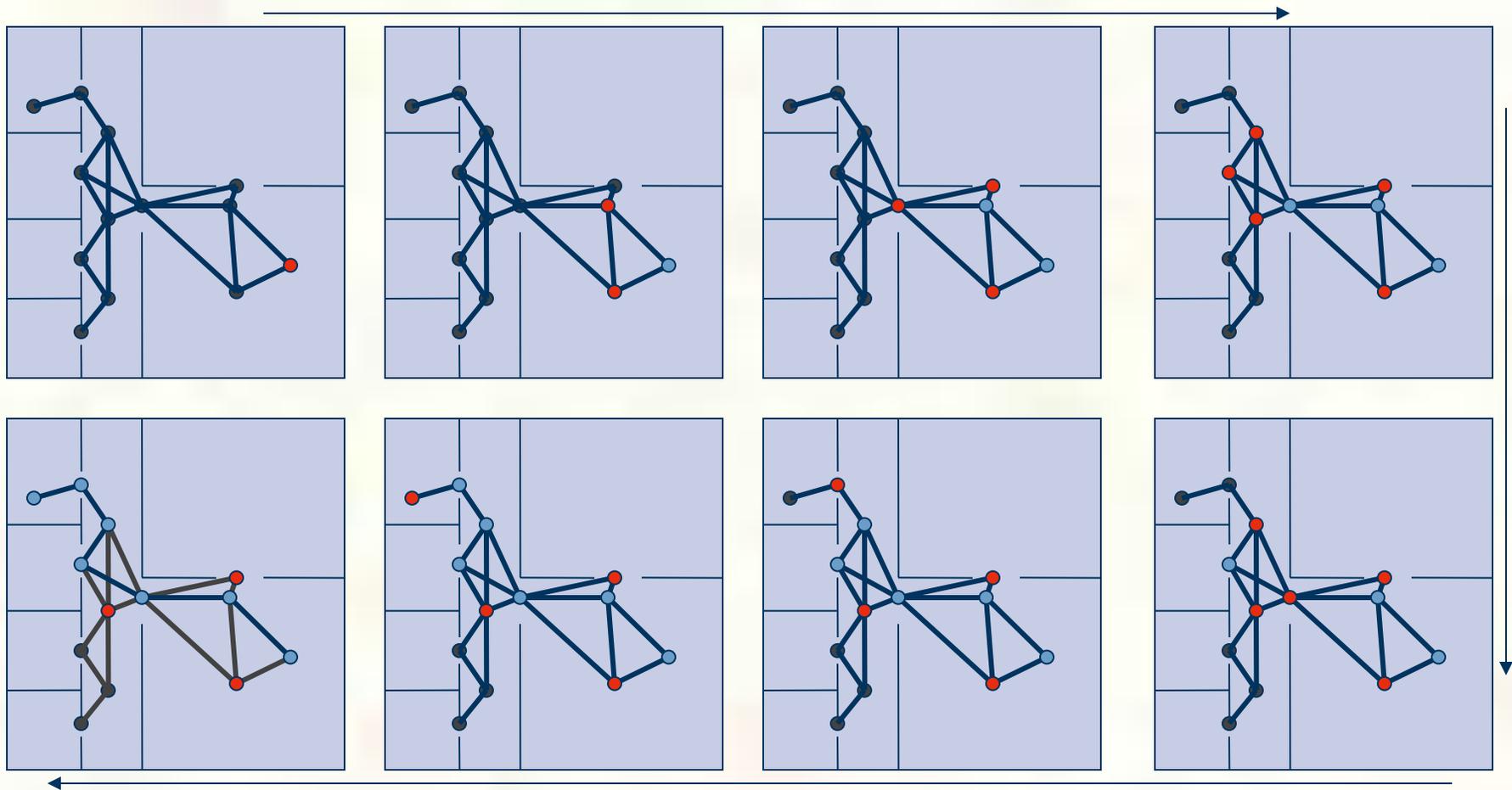


Using $h(n)$ Only (Greedy Search)

- Define “best” according to $f(n)=h(n)$, the best guess from the node to the goal state
 - Behavior depends on choice of heuristic
 - Straight line distance is a good one
- Have to set the cost for a node with no exit to be infinite
 - If we expand such a node, our guess of the cost was wrong
 - Do it when you try to expand such a node
- Is it optimal?
 - When the goal node is expanded, is it along the shortest path?
- Is it efficient?
 - How many nodes does it explore? Many, few, ...?



Greedy Search (Straight-Line-Distance Heuristic)



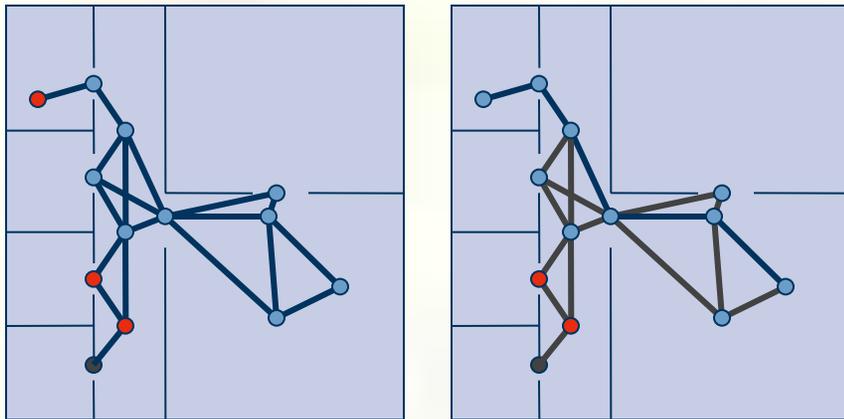


A* Search

- Set $f(n) = g(n) + h(n)$
 - Now we are expanding nodes according to best estimated total path cost
- Is it optimal?
 - It depends on $h(n)$
- Is it efficient?
 - It is the most efficient of any optimal algorithm that uses the same $h(n)$
- A* is the ubiquitous algorithm for path planning in games
 - Much effort goes into making it fast, and making it produce pretty looking paths
 - More articles on it than you can poke a stick at



A* Search (Straight-Line-Distance Heuristic)



- Note that A* expands fewer nodes than breadth-first, but more than greedy
- It's the price you pay for optimality
- Keys are:
 - Data structure for a node
 - Priority queue for sorting open nodes
 - Underlying graph structure for finding neighbors



Heuristics

- For A* to be optimal, the heuristic must underestimate the true cost
 - Such a heuristic is admissible
- The $f(n)$ function must monotonically increase along any path out of the start node
 - True for almost any admissible heuristic, related to triangle inequality
 - If not true, can fix by making cost through a node $\max(f(\text{parent}) + \text{edge}, f(n))$
- Combining heuristics:
 - If you have more than one heuristic, all of which underestimate, but which give different estimates, can combine with: $h(n) = \max(h_1(n), h_2(n), h_3(n), \dots)$



A* Problems

- **Discrete Search:**
 - Must have simple paths to connect waypoints
 - Typically use straight segments
 - Have to be able to compute cost
 - Must know that the object will not hit obstacles
 - Leads to jagged, unnatural paths
 - Infinitely sharp corners
 - Jagged paths across grids
- **Efficiency is not great**
 - Finding paths in complex environments can be very expensive



Path Straightening

- Straight paths typically look more plausible than jagged paths, particularly through open spaces
- Option 1: After the path is generated, from each waypoint look ahead to farthest unobstructed waypoint on the path
 - Removes many segments and replaces with one straight one
 - Could be achieved with more connections in the waypoint graph, but that would increase cost
- Option 2: Bias the search toward straight paths
 - Increase the cost for a segment if using it requires turning a corner
 - Reduces efficiency, because straight but unsuccessful paths will be explored preferentially



Smoothing While Following

- Rather than smooth out the path, smooth out the agent's motion along it
- Typically, the agent's position linearly interpolates between the waypoints: $p = (1-u)p_i + up_{i+1}$
 - u is a parameter that varies according to time and the agent's speed
- Two primary choices to smooth the motion
 - Change the interpolation scheme
 - "Chase the point" technique

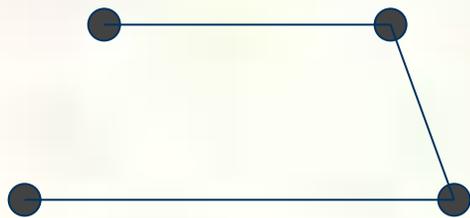


Different Interpolation Schemes

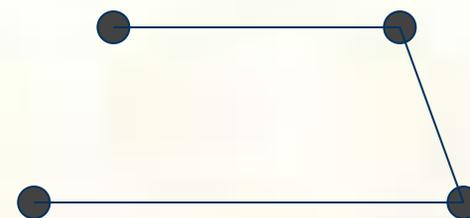
- View the task as moving a point (the agent) along a curve fitted through the waypoints
- We can now apply classic interpolation techniques to smooth the path: splines
- Interpolating splines:
 - The curve passes through every waypoint, can specify the directions at the interpolated points
- Bezier or B-splines:
 - May not pass through the points, only approximate them



Interpolation Schemes



Interpolating



B-Spline (Bezier)

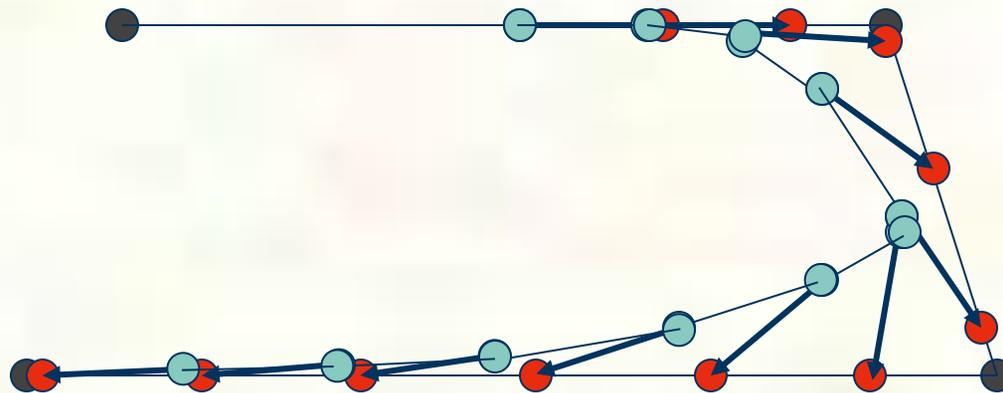


Chase the Point

- Instead of tracking along the path, the agent chases a target point that is moving along the path
- Start with the target on the path ahead of the agent
- At each step:
 - Move the target along the path using linear interpolation
 - Move the agent toward the point location, keeping it a constant distance away or moving the agent at the same speed
- Works best for driving or flying games



Chase the Point Demo





Still not great...

- The techniques we have looked at are path post-processing: they take the output of A^* and process it to improve it
- What are some of the bad implications of this?
 - There are at least two, one much worse than the other
 - Why do people still use these smoothing techniques?
- If post-processing causes these problems, we can move the solution strategy *into* A^*

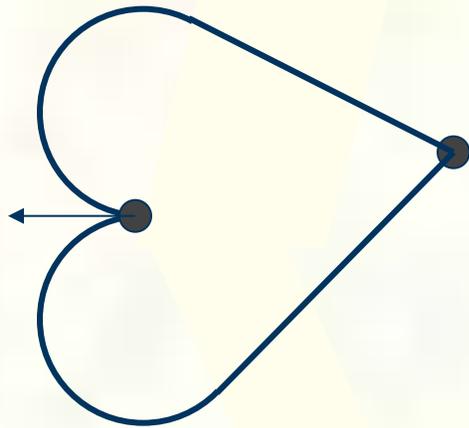


A* for Smooth Paths

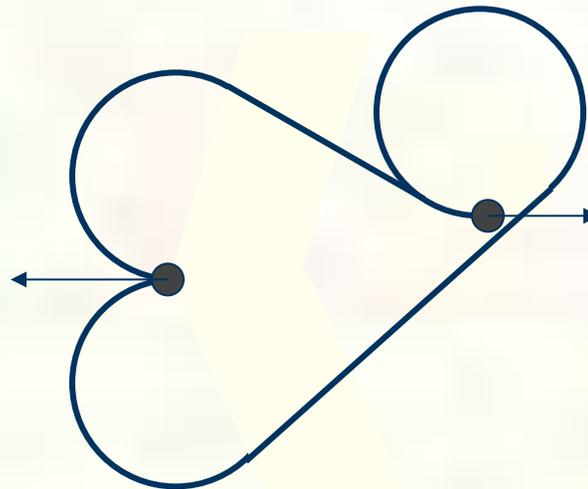
- You can argue that smoothing is an attempt to avoid infinitely sharp turns
- Incorporating turn radius information can fix this
- Option 1: Restrict turn radius as a post-process
 - But has all the same problems as other post processes
- Option 2: Incorporate direction and turn radius into A* itself
 - Add information about the direction of travel when passing through a waypoint
 - Do this by duplicating each waypoint 8 times (for eight directions)
 - Then do A* on the expanded graph
 - Cost of a path comes from computing bi-tangents ...



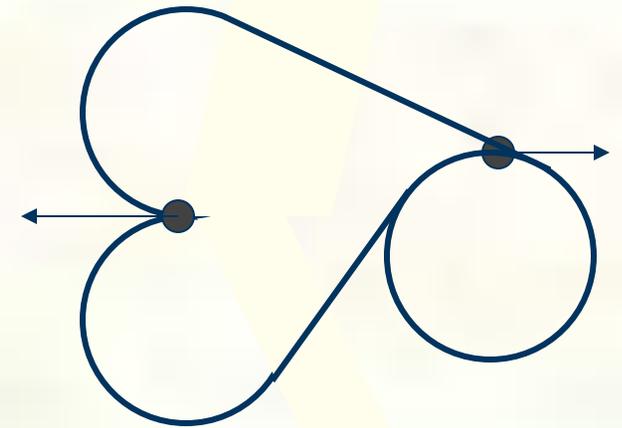
Using Turning Radius



Fixed start direction, any
finish direction: 2 options



Fixed direction at both
ends: 4 options



Curved paths are used to compute cost, and also to determine whether the path is valid (avoids obstacles)



Improving A^* Efficiency

- Recall, A^* is the most efficient optimal algorithm for a given heuristic
- Improving efficiency, therefore, means relaxing optimality
- Basic strategy: Use more information about the environment
 - Inadmissible heuristics use intuitions about which paths are likely to be better
 - E.g. Bias toward getting close to the goal, ahead of exploring early unpromising paths
 - Hierarchical planners use information about how the path must be constructed
 - E.g. To move from room to room, just must go through the doors



Inadmissible Heuristics

- A^* will still give an answer with inadmissible heuristics
 - But it won't be optimal: May not explore a node on the optimal path because its estimated cost is too high
 - Optimal A^* will eventually explore any such node before it reaches the goal
- However, inadmissible heuristics may be much faster
 - Trade-off computational efficiency for path-efficiency
 - Start ignoring “unpromising” paths earlier in the search
 - But not always faster – initially promising paths may be dead ends
- Recall additional heuristic restriction: estimates for path costs must increase along any path from the start node



Inadmissible Example

- Multiply an admissible heuristic by a constant factor
- Why does this work?
 - The frontier in A* consists of nodes that have roughly equal estimated total cost: $f = cost_so_far + estimated_to_go$
 - Consider two nodes on the frontier: one with $f=1+5$, another with $f=5+1$
 - Originally, A* would have expanded these at about the same time
 - If we multiply the estimate by 2, we get: $f=1+10$ and $f=5+2$
 - So now, A* will expand the node that is closer to the goal long before the one that is further from the goal



Hierarchical Planning

- Many planning problems can be thought of hierarchically
 - To pass this class, I have to pass the exams and do the projects
 - To pass the exams, I need to go to class, review the material, and show up at the exam
 - To go to class, I need to go to 1221 at 2:30 TuTh
- Path planning is no exception:
 - To go from my current location to slay the dragon, I first need to know which rooms I will pass through
 - Then I need to know how to pass through each room, around the furniture, and so on

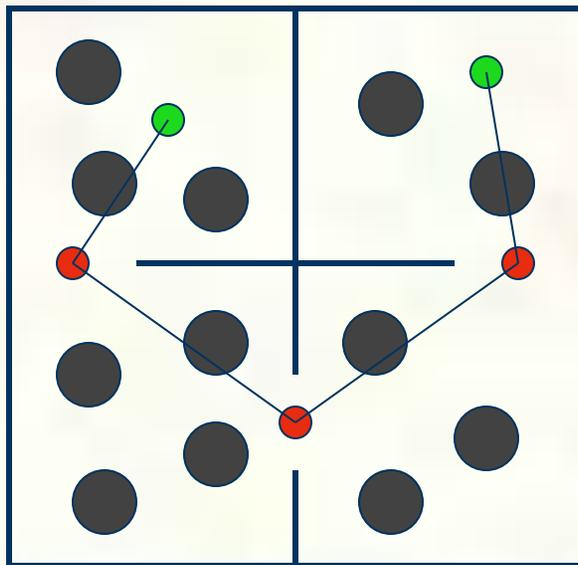


Doing Hierarchical Planning

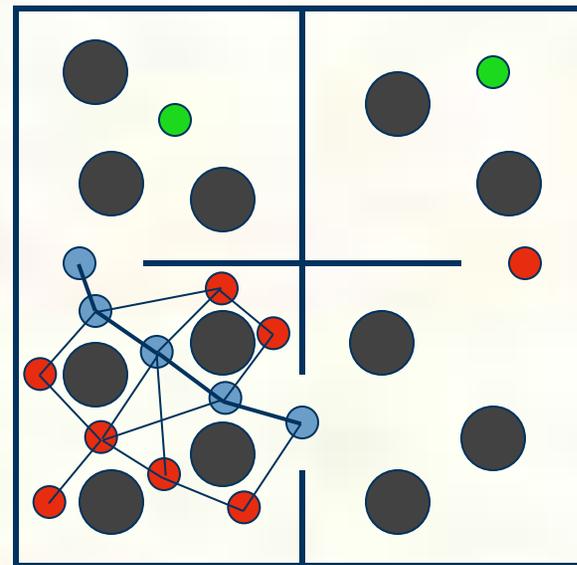
- Define a waypoint graph for the top of the hierarchy
 - For instance, a graph with waypoints in doorways (the centers)
 - Nodes linked if there *exists* a clear path between them (not necessarily straight)
- For each *edge* in that graph, define another waypoint graph
 - This will tell you how to get between each doorway in a single room
 - Nodes from top level should be in this graph
- First plan on the top level - result is a list of rooms to traverse
- Then, for each room on the list, plan a path across it
 - Can delay low level planning until required - smooths out frame time



Hierarchical Planning Example



Plan this first



Then plan each room
(second room shown)



Hierarchical Planning Advantages

- The search is typically cheaper
 - The initial search restricts the number of nodes considered in the latter searches
- It is well suited to partial planning
 - Only plan each piece of path when it is actually required
 - Averages out cost of path over time, helping to avoid long lag when the movement command is issued
 - Makes the path more adaptable to dynamic changes in the environment



Hierarchical Planning Issues

- **Result is not optimal**
 - No information about actual cost of low level is used at top level
- **Top level plan locks in nodes that may be poor choices**
 - Have to restrict the number of nodes at the top level for efficiency
 - So cannot include all the options that would be available to a full planner
- **Solution is to allow lower levels to override higher level**
 - Textbook example: Plan 2 lower level stages at a time
 - E.g. Plan from current doorway, through next doorway, to one after
 - When reach the next doorway, drop the second half of the path and start again



Pre-Planning

- If the set of waypoints is fixed, and the obstacles don't move, then the shortest path between any two never changes
- If it doesn't change, compute it ahead of time
- This can be done with all-pairs shortest paths algorithms
 - Dijkstra's algorithm run for each start point, or special purpose all-pairs algorithms
- The question is, how do we store the paths?

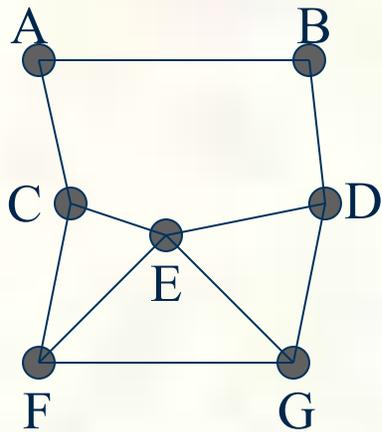


Storing All-Pairs Paths

- Trivial solution is to store the shortest path to every other node in every node: $O(n^3)$ memory
- A better way:
 - Say I have the shortest path from A to B: A-B
 - *Every* shortest path that goes through A on the way to B must use A-B
 - So, if I have reached A, and want to go to B, I *always* take the same next step
 - This holds for any source node: the **next step** from any node on the way to B **does not** depend on how you got to that node
 - But a path is just a sequence of steps - if I keep following the “next step” I will eventually get to B
 - Only store the next step out of each node, for each possible destination



Example



If I'm at:

And I want to go to:

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
A	-	A-B	A-C	A-B	A-C	A-C	A-C
B	B-A	-	B-A	B-D	B-D	B-D	B-D
C	C-A	C-A	-	C-E	C-E	C-F	C-E
D	D-B	D-B	D-E	-	D-E	D-E	D-G
E	E-C	E-D	E-C	E-D	-	E-F	E-G
F	F-C	F-E	F-C	F-E	F-E	-	F-G
G	G-E	G-D	G-E	G-D	G-E	G-F	-

To get from
A to G:
+ A-C
+ C-E
+ E-G



Big Remaining Problem

- So far, we have treated finding a path as *planning*
 - We know the start point, the goal, and everything in between
 - Once we have a plan, we follow it
- What's missing from this picture?
 - Hint: What if there is more than one agent?
- What might we do about it?