

# Scout and NegaScout

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# Abstract

- It looks like alpha-beta pruning is the best we can do for an **exact generic searching procedure**.
  - What else can be done generically?
  - Alpha-beta pruning follows basically the “intelligent” searching behaviors used by human when domain knowledge is not involved.
  - Can we find some other “intelligent” behaviors used by human during searching?
- Intuition: **MAX node**.
  - Suppose we know currently we have a way to gain at least 300 points at the first branch.
  - If there is an efficient way to know the second branch is at most gaining 300 points, then there is no need to search the second branch in detail.
    - ▷ *Alpha-beta cut algorithm is one way to make sure of this by returning an exact value.*
    - ▷ *Is there a way to search a tree by only returning a bound?*
    - ▷ *Is searching with a bound faster than searching exactly?*
- Similar intuition holds for a **MIN node**.

# SCOUT procedure

- It may be possible to verify whether the value of a branch is greater than a value  $v$  or not in a way that is faster than knowing its exact value [Judea Pearl 1980].
- High level idea:
  - While searching a branch  $T_i$  of a MAX node, if we have already obtained a lower bound  $v_\ell$ .
    - ▷ First TEST whether it is possible for  $T_i$  to return something greater than  $v_\ell$ .
    - ▷ If FALSE, then there is no need to search  $T_i$ .  
⇒ This is called **fails the test**.
    - ▷ If TRUE, then search  $T_i$ .  
⇒ This is called **passes the test**.
  - While searching a branch  $T_j$  of a MIN node, if we have already obtained an upper bound  $v_u$ .
    - ▷ First TEST whether it is possible for  $T_j$  to return something smaller than  $v_u$ .
    - ▷ If FALSE, then there is no need to search  $T_j$ .  
⇒ This is called **fails the test**.
    - ▷ If TRUE, then search  $T_j$ .  
⇒ This is called **passes the test**.

# How to TEST $> v$

procedure TEST $_>$ (position  $p$ , value  $v$ )

*// test whether the value of the branch at  $p$  is  $> v$*

- determine the successor positions  $p_1, \dots, p_b$  of  $p$
- if  $b = 0$ , then *// terminal*
  - ▷ if  $f(p) > v$  then *// f(): evaluating function*
  - ▷ return TRUE
  - ▷ else return FALSE
- if  $p$  is a MAX node, then
  - for  $i := 1$  to  $b$  do
    - ▷ if TEST $_>(p_i, v)$  is TRUE, then  
return TRUE *// succeed if a branch is  $> v$*
  - return FALSE *// fail only if all branches  $\leq v$*
- if  $p$  is a MIN node, then
  - for  $i := 1$  to  $b$  do
    - ▷ if TEST $_>(p_i, v)$  is FALSE, then  
return FALSE *// fail if a branch is  $\leq v$*
  - return TRUE *// succeed only if all branches are  $> v$*

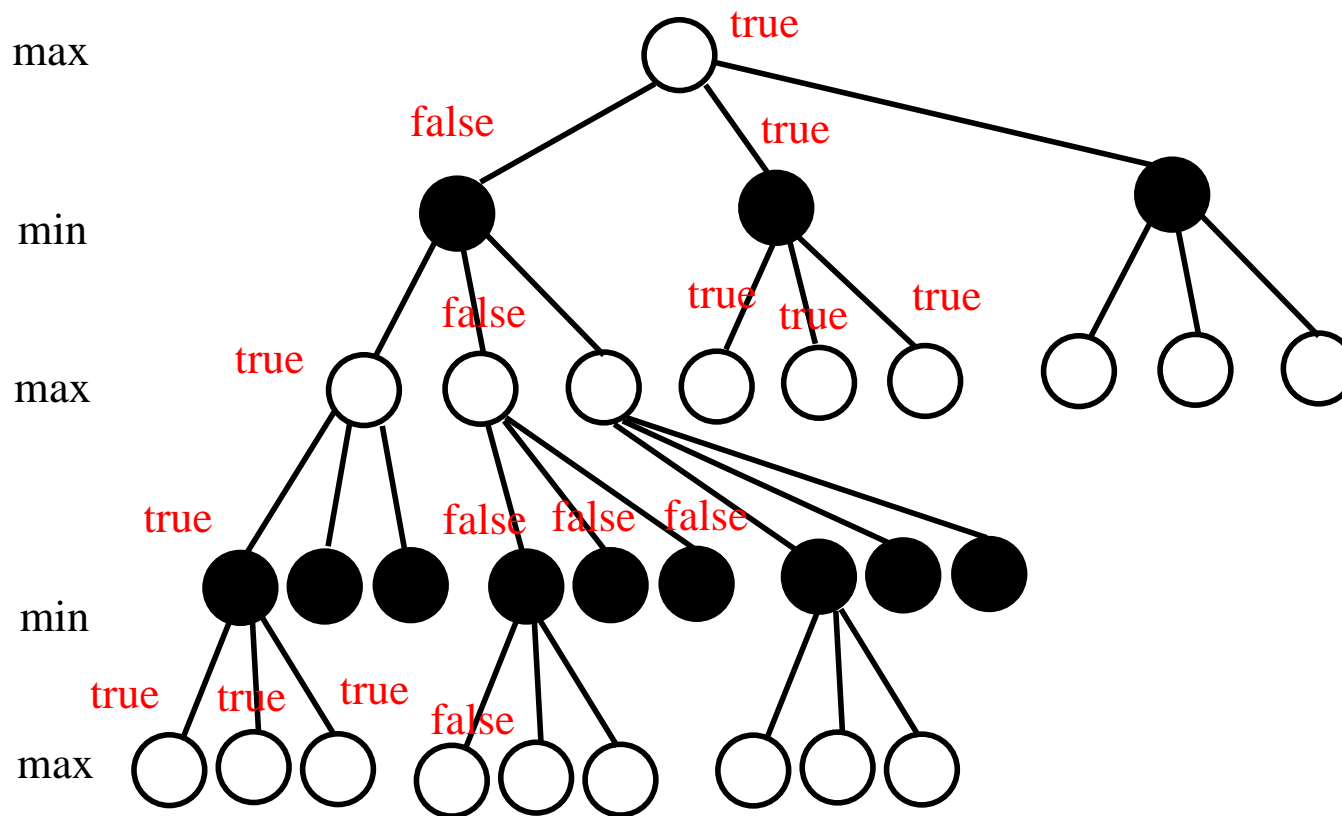
# How to $\text{TEST} < v$

procedure  $\text{TEST}_{<}$ (position  $p$ , value  $v$ )

*// test whether the value of the branch at  $p$  is  $< v$*

- determine the successor positions  $p_1, \dots, p_b$  of  $p$
- if  $b = 0$ , then *// terminal*
  - ▷ if  $f(p) < v$  then *// f(): evaluating function*
  - ▷ return *TRUE*
  - ▷ else return *FALSE*
- if  $p$  is a **MAX** node, then
  - for  $i := 1$  to  $b$  do
    - ▷ if  $\text{TEST}_{<}(p_i, v)$  is *FALSE*, then  
return *FALSE // fail if a branch is  $\geq v$*
  - return *TRUE // succeed only if all branches  $< v$*
- if  $p$  is a **MIN** node, then
  - for  $i := 1$  to  $b$  do
    - ▷ if  $\text{TEST}_{<}(p_i, v)$  is *TRUE*, then  
return *TRUE // succeed if a branch is  $< v$*
  - return *FALSE // fail only if all branches are  $\geq v$*

# Illustration of TEST<sub>></sub>



# Short circuit operations for TEST >

- **For a MAX node:**
  - if a branch is **TRUE**, then there is no need to do further testing;
  - if a branch is **FALSE**, then we need to do more testing on other branches.
  - It is better to test branches with better probabilities of being **TRUE** first.
- **For a MIN node:**
  - if a branch is **FALSE**, then there is no need to do further testing;
  - if a branch is **TRUE**, then we need to do more testing on other branches.
  - It is better to test branches with better probabilities of being **FALSE** first.

# How to TEST — Discussions

- Sometimes it may be needed to test for “ $\geq v$ ”, or “ $\leq v$ ”.

- $\text{TEST}_{>}(p,v)$  is TRUE  $\equiv$   $\text{TEST}_{\leq}(p,v)$  is FALSE

- $\text{TEST}_{>}(p,v)$  is FALSE  $\equiv$   $\text{TEST}_{\leq}(p,v)$  is TRUE

- $\text{TEST}_{<}(p,v)$  is TRUE  $\equiv$   $\text{TEST}_{\geq}(p,v)$  is FALSE

- $\text{TEST}_{<}(p,v)$  is FALSE  $\equiv$   $\text{TEST}_{\geq}(p,v)$  is TRUE

- Practical consideration:

- Set a depth limit and evaluate the position's value when the limit is reached.



# Main SCOUT procedure

## Algorithm SCOUT(position $p$ )

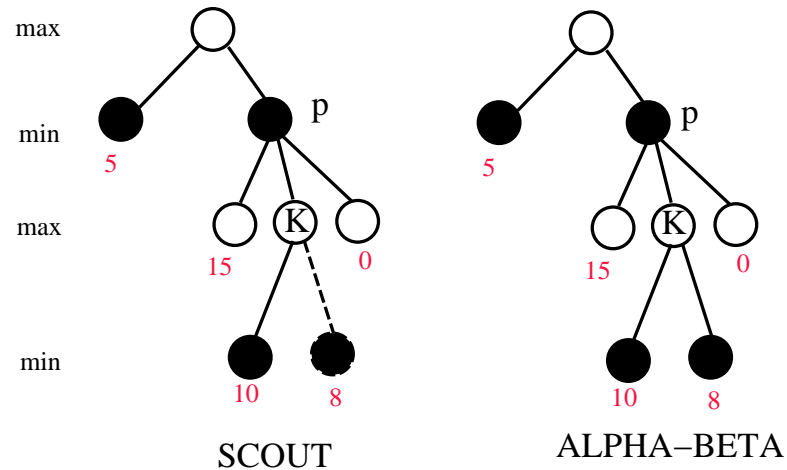
- determine the successor positions  $p_1, \dots, p_b$
- if  $b = 0$ , then return  $f(p)$
- else  $v = SCOUT(p_1)$  // **SCOUT the first branch**
- if  $p$  is a **MAX** node
  - for  $i := 2$  to  $b$  do
    - ▷ if  $TEST_{>}(p_i, v)$  is **TRUE**, // **TEST first for the rest of the branches**  
then  $v = SCOUT(p_i)$  // **find the value of this branch if it can be  $> v$**
- if  $p$  is a **MIN** node
  - for  $i := 2$  to  $b$  do
    - ▷ if  $TEST_{<}(p_i, v)$  is **TRUE**, // **TEST first for the rest of the branches**  
then  $v = SCOUT(p_i)$  // **find the value of this branch if it can be  $< v$**
- return  $v$

# Discussions for SCOUT (1/3)

- Note that  $v$  is the current best value at any moment.
- MAX node:
  - For any  $i > 1$ , if  $\text{TEST}_{>}(p_i, v)$  is TRUE,
    - ▷ then the value returned by  $\text{SCOUT}(p_i)$  must be greater than  $v$ .
  - We say that  $p_i$  **passes the test** if  $\text{TEST}_{>}(p_i, v)$  is TRUE.
- MIN node:
  - For any  $i > 1$ , if  $\text{TEST}_{<}(p_i, v)$  is TRUE,
    - ▷ then the value returned by  $\text{SCOUT}(p_i)$  must be smaller than  $v$ .
  - We say that  $p_i$  **passes the test** if  $\text{TEST}_{<}(p_i, v)$  is TRUE.

# Discussions for SCOUT (2/3)

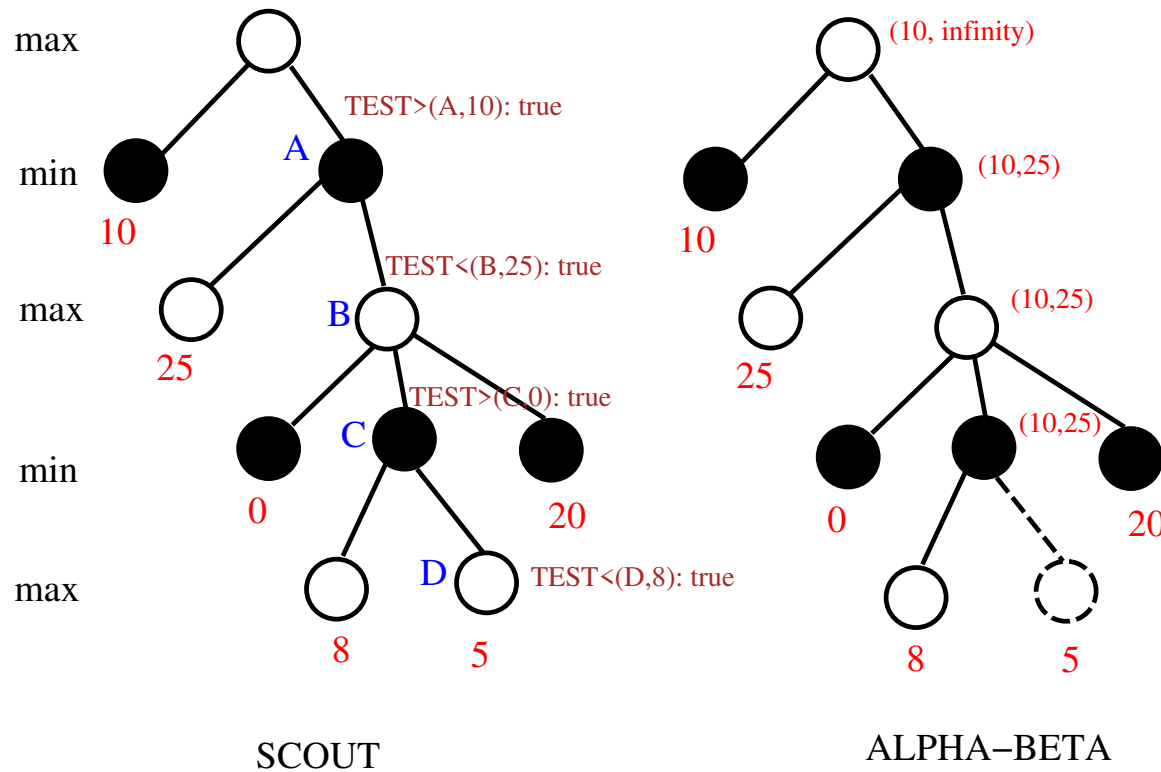
- TEST which is called by SCOUT may visit less nodes than that of alpha-beta.



- Assume  $TEST_{>}(p,5)$  is called by the root after the first branch of the root is evaluated.
  - ▷ It calls  $TEST_{>}(K,5)$  which skips  $K$ 's second branch.
  - ▷  $TEST_{>}(p,5)$  is FALSE, i.e., fails the test, after returning from the 3rd branch.
  - ▷ No need to do SCOUT for the branch rooted  $p$ .
- Alpha-beta needs to visit  $K$ 's second branch.

# Discussions for SCOUT (3/3)

- SCOUT may pay many visits to a node that is cut off by alpha-beta.



# Number of nodes visited (1/4)

- **For TEST to return TRUE for a subtree  $T$ , it needs to evaluate at least**
  - ▷ *one child for a MAX node in  $T$ , and*
  - ▷ *and all of the children for a MIN node in  $T$ .*
  - ▷ *If  $T$  has a fixed branching factor  $b$  and uniform depth  $b$ , the number of nodes evaluated is  $\Omega(b^{\ell/2})$  where  $\ell$  is the depth of the tree.*
- **For TEST to return FALSE for a subtree  $T$ , it needs to evaluate at least**
  - ▷ *one child for a MIN node in  $T$ , and*
  - ▷ *and all of the children for a MAX node in  $T$ .*
  - ▷ *If  $T$  has a fixed branching factor  $b$  and uniform depth  $b$ , the number of nodes evaluated is  $\Omega(b^{\ell/2})$ .*

# Number of nodes visited (2/4)

## ■ Assumptions:

- Assume a full complete  $b$ -ary tree with depth  $\ell$  where  $\ell$  is even.
- The depth of the root, which is a MAX node, is 0.

■ The total number of nodes in the tree is  $\frac{b^{\ell+1}-1}{b-1}$ .

■  $H_1$ : the minimum number of nodes visited by TEST when it returns TRUE.

$$\begin{aligned} H_1 &= 1 + 1 + b + b + b^2 + b^2 + b^3 + b^3 + \dots + b^{\ell/2-1} + b^{\ell/2-1} + b^{\ell/2} \\ &= 2 \cdot (b^0 + b^1 + \dots + b^{\ell/2}) - b^{\ell/2} \\ &= 2 \cdot \frac{b^{\ell/2+1}-1}{b-1} - b^{\ell/2} \end{aligned}$$

# Number of nodes visited (3/4)

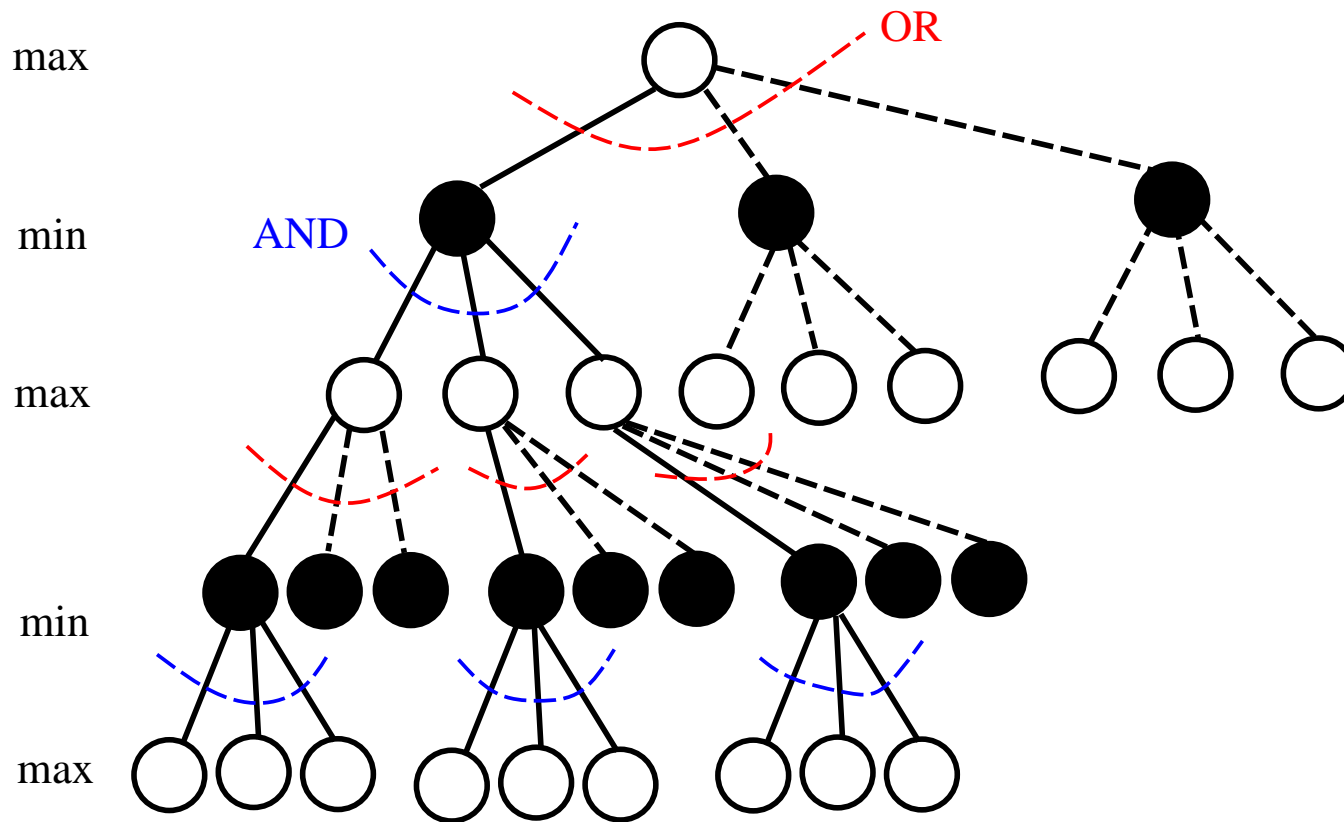
## ■ Assumptions:

- Assume a full complete  $b$ -ary tree with depth  $\ell$  where  $\ell$  is even.
- The depth of the root, which is a MAX node, is 0.

## ■ $H_2$ : the minimum number of nodes visited by alpha-beta.

$$\begin{aligned} H_2 &= \sum_{i=0}^{\ell} (b^{\lceil i/2 \rceil} + b^{\lfloor i/2 \rfloor} - 1) \\ &= \sum_{i=0}^{\ell} b^{\lceil i/2 \rceil} + \sum_{i=0}^{\ell} b^{\lfloor i/2 \rfloor} - (\ell + 1) \\ &= \sum_{i=0}^{\ell} b^{\lceil i/2 \rceil} + H_1 - (\ell + 1) \\ &= (1 + b + b + \dots + b^{\ell/2-1} + b^{\ell/2} + b^{\ell/2}) + H_1 - (\ell + 1) \\ &= (H_1 - 1 + b^{\ell/2} - b^{\ell/2-1}) + H_1 - (\ell + 1) \\ &= 2 \cdot H_1 + b^{\ell/2} - b^{\ell/2-1} - (\ell + 2) \\ &\geq 2 \cdot H_1 \text{ if } b > 2 \end{aligned}$$

# Number of nodes visited (4/4)





# Comparisons

- When the first branch of a node has **the best** value, then TEST scans the tree fast.
  - The best value of the first  $i - 1$  branches is used to test whether the  $i$ th branch needs to be searched exactly.
  - If the value of the first  $i - 1$  branches of the root is better than the value of  $i$ th branch, then we do not have to evaluate exactly for the  $i$ th branch.
- Compared to alpha-beta pruning whose cut off comes from bounds of search windows.
  - It is possible to have some cut-off for alpha-beta pruning as long as some relative move orderings are “good.”
    - ▷ *The moving orders of your children and the children of your ancestor who is odd level up “together” decide a cut-off.*
  - The bounds are updated during searching.
    - ▷ *Sometimes, a deep alpha-beta cut-off occurs because a bound found from your ancestor a distance away.*

# Performance of SCOUT (1/2)

- A node may be visited more than once.
  - First visit is to TEST.
  - Second visit is to SCOUT.
    - ▷ *During SCOUT, it may be TESTed with a different value.*
  - Q: Can information obtained in the first search be used in the second search?
- SCOUT is a recursive procedure.
  - For every node  $v$  in a branch that is not the first visited child of its parent with a depth<sup>1</sup> of  $\ell$ ,
    - ▷ *every ancestor of  $v$  may initiate a TEST to visit  $v$ .*
    - ▷ *It can be visited  $\ell$  times by TEST.*

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<sup>1</sup>The depth of the root is defined to be 0.

# Performance of SCOUT (2/2)

- Show great improvements on  $depth > 3$  for games with small branching factors.
  - It traverses most of the nodes without evaluating them precisely.
  - Few subtrees remained to be revisited to compute their exact mini-max values.
- Experimental data on the game of Kalah show [UCLA Tech Rep UCLA-ENG-80-17, A comparison of the Alpha-Beta and SCOUT algorithms using the game of Kalah, Noe 1980]:
  - SCOUT favors “skinny” game trees, that are game trees with high depth-to-width ratios.
    - ▷ *Q: why?*
  - On depth = 5, it saves over 40% of time.
  - Maybe bad for games with a large branching factor.
  - **Move ordering is very important.**
    - ▷ *The first branch, if is good, offers a great chance of pruning further branches.*

# Comments

- Q:
  - Currently, we use a “feasible” test to decide whether we need to search this branch or not.
    - ▷ *For example in searching a MAX node, if we have currently found a branch with the value  $v$ , then the return value is at least  $v$ .*
    - ▷ *If a new branch has a chance of larger than  $v$ , then we explore it in details. Otherwise, we skip it.*
  - How about using the idea of “infeasible” test?
    - ▷ *If a new branch has no chance of larger than  $v$ , then we do not explore it in details. Otherwise, we do.*

# Alpha-beta revisited

- In an alpha-beta search with a window  $(\alpha, \beta)$ :
  - **Failed-high** means it returns a value that is larger than or equal to its upper bound  $\beta$ .
  - **Failed-low** means it returns a value that is smaller than or equal to its lower bound  $\alpha$ .
- **Null or Zero window search:**
  - Using alpha-beta search with the window  $(m, m + 1)$ .
    - ▷ *Can never happen in a normal alpha-beta pruning when starts with  $(-\infty, \infty)$ .*
  - The result can be either failed-high or failed-low.
  - Failed-high means the return value is at least  $m + 1$ .
    - ▷ *Equivalent to  $TEST_{>}(p, m)$  is TRUE.*
  - Failed-low means the return value is at most  $m$ .
    - ▷ *Equivalent to  $TEST_{>}(p, m)$  is FALSE.*
- The above argument works for the original ( $F1$ ), fail hard ( $F2$ ) and fail soft ( $F3$ ) versions of the alpha-beta algorithm.

# Behaviors of Null window search

- **When  $F1(p, m, m + 1, \infty)$  returns  $m + 1$ :**
  - for the MAX node  $p$ , returns immediately after the first child  $p_i$ , namely the smallest index  $i$ , returning a value  $\geq m + 1$ .
  - for the MIN node  $p_i$ , every child  $p_{i,j}$  returns a value  $\geq m + 1$
  - for each MAX node  $p_{i,j}$ , returns immediately after the first child  $r_{i,j,k}$ , namely the smallest index  $k$ , returning a value  $\geq m + 1$ .
  - ...
- **Exactly like the OR-AND tree shown in TEST<sub>></sub> when TEST is passed.**
- **We can observe similar behaviors when  $F1(p, m, m + 1, \infty)$  returns  $m$  as if TEST is failed.**

# Alpha-Beta + Scout

## ■ Intuition:

- Try to incooperate SCOUT and alpha-beta together.
- The searching window of alpha-beta if properly set can be used as TEST in SCOUT.
- Using a searching window is better than using a single bound as in SCOUT.
- Can also apply alpha-beta cut if it applies.

## ■ Modifications to the SCOUT algorithm:

- Traverse the tree with two bounds as the alpha-beta procedure does.
  - ▷ *A searching window.*
  - ▷ *Use the current best bound to guide the value used in TEST.*
- Use a fail soft version to get a better result when the returned value is out of the window.

# The NegaScout Algorithm – Mini-Max (1/2)

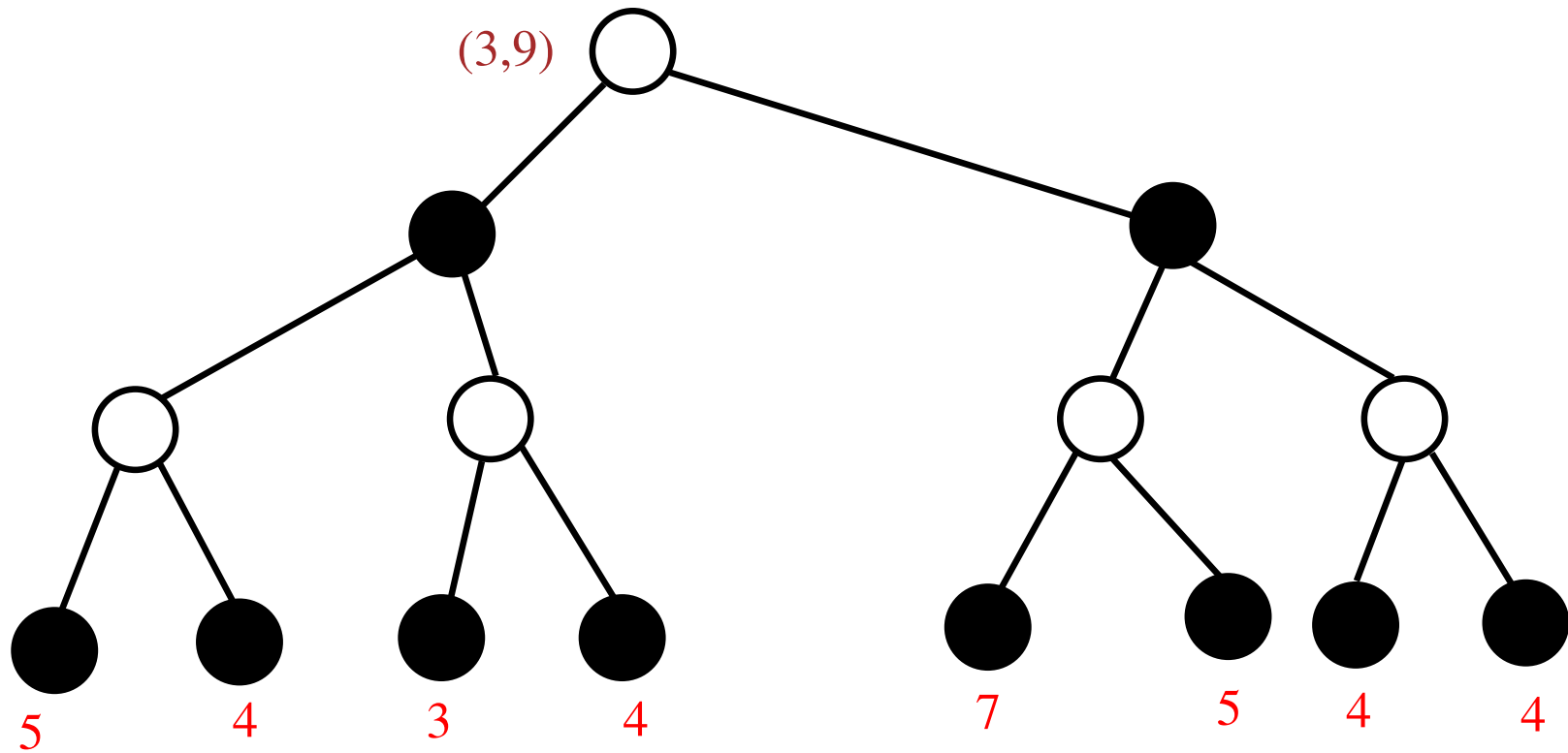
- Algorithm  $F4'$ (position  $p$ , value  $alpha$ , value  $beta$ , integer  $depth$ )
  - determine the successor positions  $p_1, \dots, p_b$
  - if  $b = 0$  // a terminal node  
or  $depth = 0$  //  $depth$  is the remaining depth to search  
or time is running up // from timing control  
or some other constraints are met // apply heuristic here
  - then return  $f(p)$  else  
begin
    - ▷  $m := -\infty$  //  $m$  is the current best lower bound; fail soft  
 $m := \max\{m, G4'(p_1, alpha, beta, depth - 1)\}$  // the first branch  
if  $m \geq beta$  then return( $m$ ) // beta cut off
    - ▷ for  $i := 2$  to  $b$  do
    - ▷ 9:  $t := G4'(p_i, m, m + 1, depth - 1)$  // null window search
    - ▷ 10: if  $t > m$  then // failed-high
    - 11: if ( $depth < 3$  or  $t \geq beta$ )
    - 12: then  $m := t$
    - 13: else  $m := G4'(p_i, t, beta, depth - 1)$  // re-search
    - ▷ 14: if  $m \geq beta$  then return( $m$ ) // beta cut off
  - end
  - return  $m$



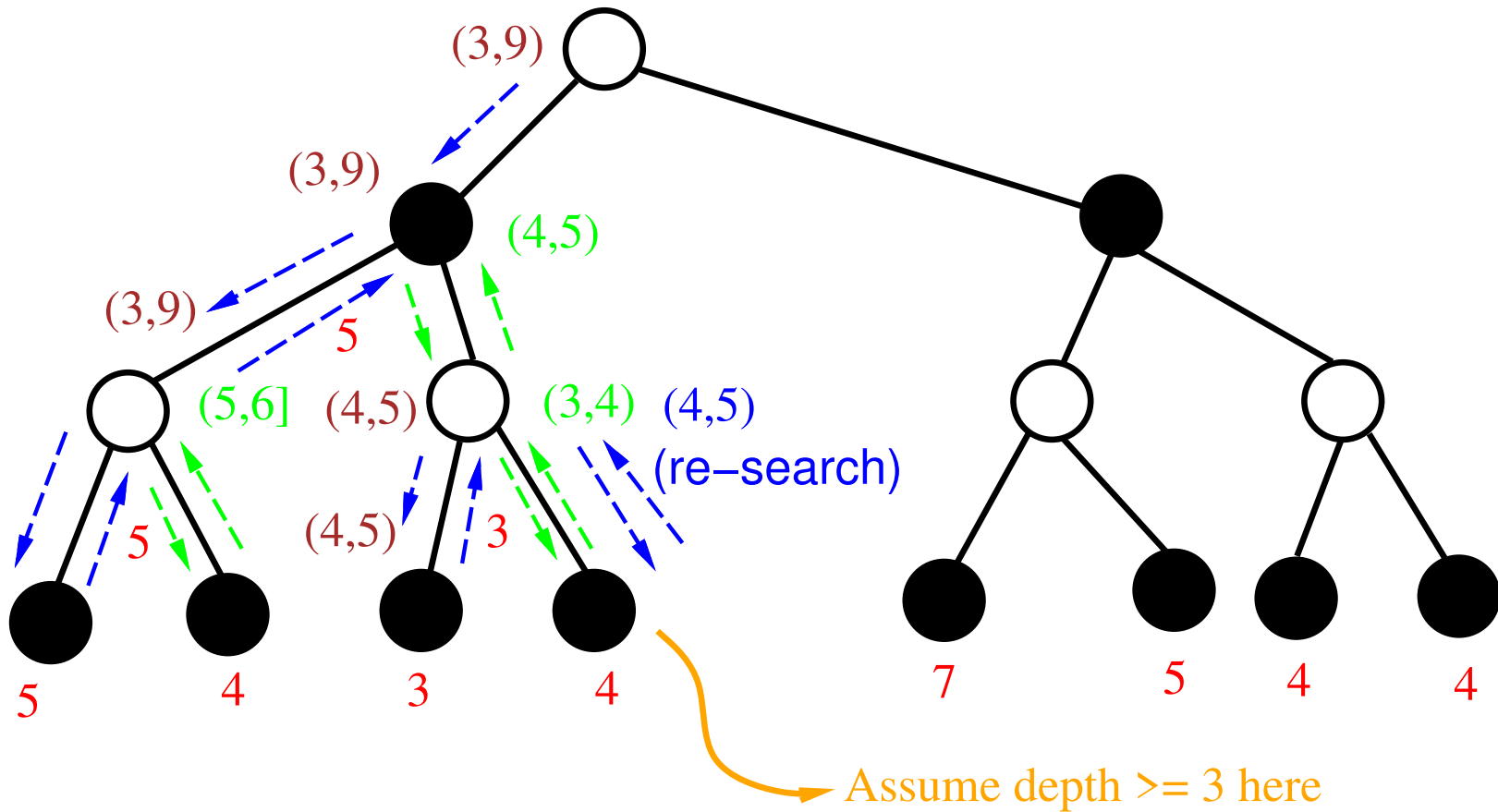
# The NegaScout Algorithm – Mini-Max (2/2)

- Algorithm  $G4'$ (position  $p$ , value  $alpha$ , value  $beta$ , integer  $depth$ )
  - determine the successor positions  $p_1, \dots, p_b$
  - if  $b = 0$  // a terminal node  
or  $depth = 0$  //  $depth$  is the remaining depth to search  
or time is running up // from timing control  
or some other constraints are met // apply heuristic here
  - then return  $f(p)$  else  
begin
    - ▷  $m = \infty$  //  $m$  is the current best upper bound; fail soft  
 $m := \min\{m, F4'(p_1, alpha, beta, depth - 1)\}$  // the first branch  
if  $m \leq alpha$  then return( $m$ ) // alpha cut off
    - ▷ for  $i := 2$  to  $b$  do
    - ▷ 9:  $t := F4'(p_i, m - 1, m, depth - 1)$  // null window search
    - ▷ 10: if  $t < m$  then // failed-low
    - 11: if ( $depth < 3$  or  $t \leq alpha$ )
    - 12: then  $m := t$
    - 13: else  $m := F4'(p_i, alpha, t, depth - 1)$  // re-search
    - ▷ 14: if  $m \leq alpha$  then return( $m$ ) // alpha cut off
  - end
  - return  $m$

# NegaScout – Mini-Max version (1/2)



# NegaScout – Mini-Max version (2/2)



# The NegaScout Algorithm

- Use Nega-MAX format.
- Algorithm  $F4(\text{position } p, \text{value } \alpha, \text{value } \beta, \text{integer } \textit{depth})$ 
  - determine the successor positions  $p_1, \dots, p_b$
  - if  $b = 0$  // a terminal node  
or  $\textit{depth} = 0$  //  $\textit{depth}$  is the remaining depth to search  
or time is running up // from timing control  
or some other constraints are met // apply heuristic here
  - then return  $h(p)$  else
    - ▷  $m := -\infty$  // the current lower bound; fail soft
    - ▷  $n := \beta$  // the current upper bound
    - ▷ for  $i := 1$  to  $b$  do
    - ▷ 9:  $t := -F4(p_i, -n, -\max\{\alpha, m\}, \textit{depth} - 1)$
    - ▷ 10: if  $t > m$  then
    - ▷ 11: if ( $n = \beta$  or  $\textit{depth} < 3$  or  $t \geq \beta$ )
    - ▷ 12: then  $m := t$
    - ▷ 13: else  $m := -F4(p_i, -\beta, -t, \textit{depth} - 1)$  // re-search
    - ▷ 14: if  $m \geq \beta$  then return( $m$ ) // cut off
    - ▷ 15:  $n := \max\{\alpha, m\} + 1$  // set up a null window
  - return  $m$

# Search behaviors (1/3)

- If the depth is enough or it is a terminal position, then stop searching further.

- Return  $h(p)$  as the value computed by an evaluation function.
- Note:

$$h(p) = \begin{cases} f(p) & \text{if depth of } p \text{ is 0 or even} \\ -f(p) & \text{if depth of } p \text{ is odd} \end{cases}$$

- Fail soft version.
- Search the first child  $p_1$  using the normal alpha beta window.

- line 9: normal window for the first child
  - ▷ *the initial value of  $m$  is  $-\infty$ , hence  $-\max\{\alpha, m\} = -\alpha$*
  - ▷  *$m$  is the current best value*
  - ▷ *that is, equivalent to*
    - 9:  $t := -F4(p_i, -\beta, -\alpha, \text{depth} - 1)$
    - searching with the normal window  $(\alpha, \beta)$*

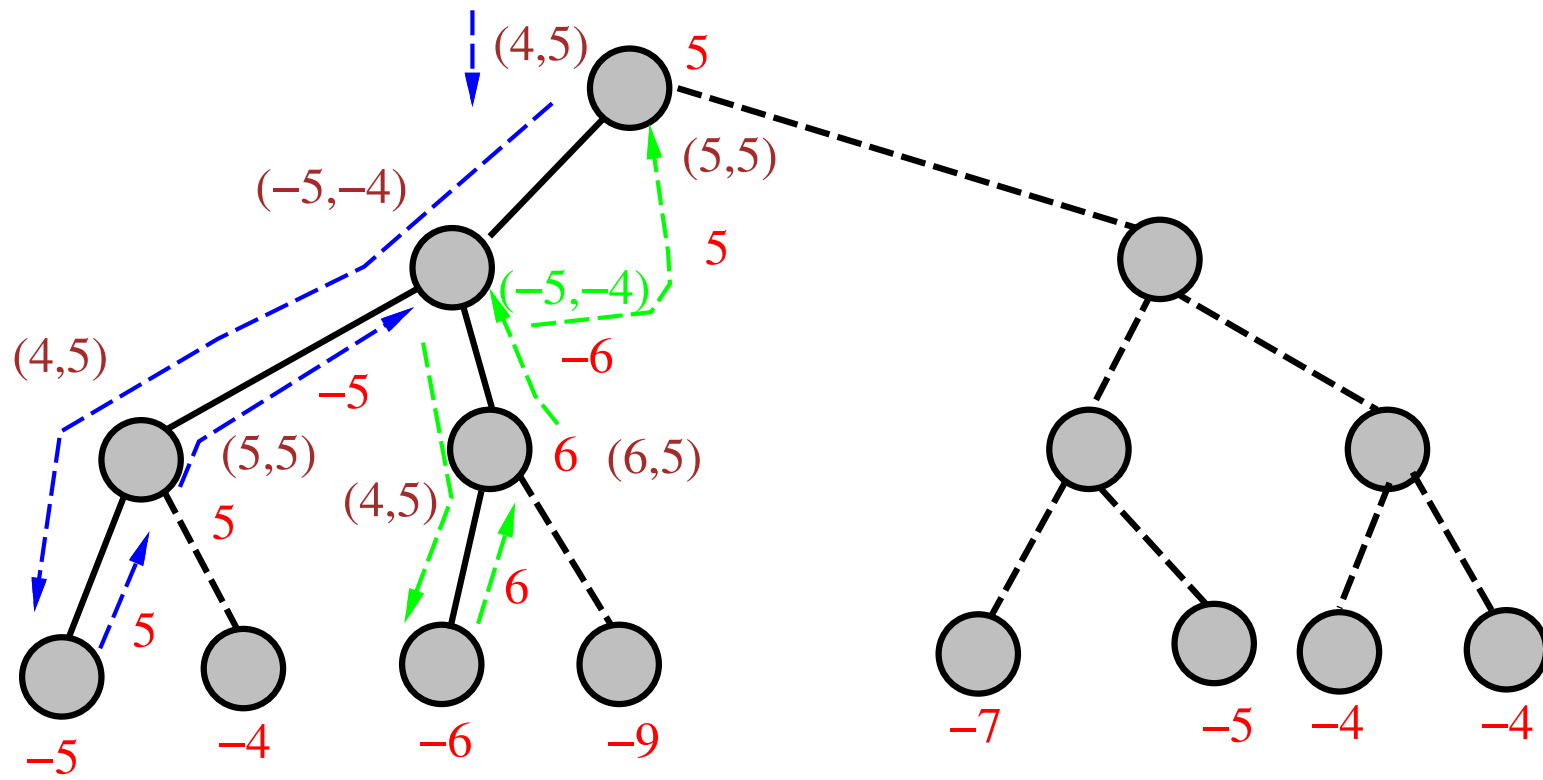
# Search behaviors (2/3)

- For the second child and beyond  $p_i$ ,  $i > 1$ , first perform a null window search for testing whether  $m$  is the answer.
  - line 9: a null-window of  $(n - 1, n)$  searches for the second child and beyond where  $n = \max\{\alpha, m\} + 1$ .
    - ▷  $m$  is best value obtained so far
    - ▷  $\alpha$  is the previous lower bound
    - ▷  $m$ 's value will be first set at line 12 because  $n = \beta$
    - ▷ **The value of  $n = \max\{\alpha, m\} + 1$  is set at line 15.**
  - line 11:
    - ▷ If  $n = \beta$ , we are at the first iteration.
    - ▷ If  $\text{depth} < 3$ , we are on a smaller depth subtree, i.e., depth at most 2, NegaScout always returns the best value.
    - ▷ If  $t \geq \beta$ , we have obtained a good enough value from the failed-soft version to guarantee a beta cut.

# Search behaviors (3/3)

- For the second child and beyond  $p_i$ ,  $i > 1$ , first perform a null window search for testing whether  $m$  is the answer.
  - line 11: on a smaller depth subtree, i.e., depth at most 2, NegaScout always returns the best value.
    - ▷ *Normally, no need to do alpha-beta or any enhancement on very small subtrees.*
    - ▷ *The overhead is too large on small subtrees.*
  - line 13: **re-search** when the null window search fails high.
    - ▷ *The value of this subtree is at least  $t$ .*
    - ▷ *This means the best value in this subtree is more than  $m$ , the current best value.*
    - ▷ *This subtree must be re-searched with the the window  $(t, beta)$ .*
  - line 14: the normal pruning from alpha-beta.

# Example for NegaScout





# Refinements

- When a subtree is re-searched, it is best to use information on the previous search to speed up the current search.
  - Restart from the position that the value  $t$  is returned.
- Maybe want to re-search using the normal alpha-beta procedure.
- $F4$  runs much better with a good move ordering and some form of a transposition table which will be introduced later.
  - Order the moves in a priority list.
  - Reduce the number of re-searching's.

# Performances

- Experiments done on a uniform random game tree [Reinefeld 1983].
  - Normally superior to alpha-beta when searching game trees with branching factors from 20 to 60.
  - Shows about 10 to 20% of improvement.

# Comments

- Incooperating both SCOUT and alpha-beta.
- Used in state-of-the-art game search engines.
- The first search, though maybe unsuccessful, can provide useful information in the second search.
  - Information can be stored and then reused.
- Using TEST in SCOUT to do the first search because it has a chance to visit less nodes than that of ALPHA-BETA.

# References and further readings

- \* J. Pearl. Asymptotic properties of minimax trees and game-searching procedures. *Artificial Intelligence*, 14(2):113–138, 1980.
- \* A. Reinefeld. An improvement of the scout tree search algorithm. *ICCA Journal*, 6(4):4–14, 1983.
- Noe, T. A comparison of the Alpha-Beta and SCOUT algorithms using the game of Kalah Technical Report UCLA-ENG-80-17, Cognitive Systems Laboratory, University of California, Los Angeles, 1980.