Goals in the context of BDI plan failure and planning

Sardina, Sebastian; Padgham, Lin


Document Version: Published Version

Repository homepage: https://researchrepository.rmit.edu.au
© 2007 IFAAMAS
Downloaded On 2023/10/22 01:08:54 +1100
ABSTRACT
We develop a Belief-Desire-Intention (BDI) style agent-oriented programming language with special emphasis on the semantics of goals in the presence of the typical BDI failure handling present in many BDI systems and a novel account of hierarchical lookahead planning. The work builds incrementally on two existing languages and accommodates three type of goals: classical BDI-style event goals, declarative goals, and planning goals. We focus on the dynamics of these type of goals and, in particular, on a kind of commitment scheme that brings the new language closer to the solid existing work in agent theory. To that end, we develop a semantics that recognises the usual hierarchical structure of active goals as well as their declarative aspects. In contrast with previous languages, the new language prevents an agent from blindly persisting with a (blocked) subsidiary goal when an alternative strategy for achieving a higher-level motivating goal exists. In addition, the new semantics ensures watchfulness by the agent to ensure that goals that succeed or are deemed impossible are immediately dropped, thus conforming to the requirements of basic rational commitment strategy. Finally, a mechanism for the proactive adoption of new goals, other than a simple reaction to events, and a formal account of interaction with the external environment are provided. We believe that the new language is an important step towards turning BDI programming languages more compatible with the established results in the area of agent theory.

Categories and Subject Descriptors
I.2.11 [Artificial Intelligence]: Distributed Artificial Intelligence—Intelligent Agents. Languages and structures

1. INTRODUCTION
It is well accepted that goals are a central concept for intelligent agents. The BDI (Belief-Desire-Intention) model, based originally on the philosophical work of Bratman [3] and Dennet [9], has been developed into both formal and implemented agent programming languages such as PRS [19], AGENTSPEAK [25], 3APL [16], JACK [5], and CAN [33]. These BDI agent-oriented systems are extremely flexible and responsive to the environment, and as a result, well suited for complex applications with (soft) real-time reasoning and control requirements. However, partly due to practical concerns, the level of support for representing and reasoning about goals has not been commensurate with their importance. For example, AGENTSPEAK—one of the most frequently referenced BDI agent programming languages—has a relatively simplistic representation of goals based on the so-called events. The language does not (natively) account for declarative aspects of goals and fails to capture the typical behaviour of implemented BDI systems, where commitment to a goal ensures that if one approach to achieving a goal fails, other possible approaches are tried. The language CAN [33] (partially) addressed the above two issues by enriching the notion of event-goal with some declarative content and by providing a “fail-and-retry” failure handling mechanism for failed events. Its semantics is then, at some level, consistent with some desired properties of (declarative) goals [7, 24]: persistent, possible, and unachieved. In turn, CANPLAN [27] refined and built on CAN to provide a new kind of goals, namely, lookahead planning goals. This was done by integrating an account of HTN-style planning within BDI-type agents. One can distinguish then three types of goals: classical event-goals, declarative event-goals, and planning goals. Nonetheless, a deep study on the properties of these goals has yet not been performed. Even worse, CAN(PLAN) agents fall short on goals. For example, they may sometimes pursue achieved or impossible goals, or even overcommit to a declarative event-goal. Also, the differences between a goal and its subgoals are not sufficiently represented in either languages.

In this paper, we take goals seriously and develop CANPLAN2, a modular extension of CANPLAN which provides: (a) a more appropriate commitment strategy than that provided by AGENTSPEAK or CAN(PLAN); (b) a semantics which guarantees agent watchfulness regarding fortuitous goal achievement or failure; (c) a differentiation between event-goals (a “reactive” form of goal) and declarative goals (a more persistent type of goals); (d) a mechanism for proactively adopting new goals, other than a simple reaction to external events; and (e) an execution cycle compatible with Rao’s well-known abstract architecture for rational agents [26].

Appropriate persistence of goals and commitment of an agent to its corresponding intentions is a hallmark of the intelligent agent paradigm. The widely accepted single-minded commitment strategy of Rao and Georgeff [24] requires an agent to maintain its commitment to a goal until this either succeeds or is believed impossible. AGENTSPEAK, however, allows to drop a whole intention as...
soon as it is not possible to make a step on it, i.e., if the intention is blocked. As the blocking may well be temporary or there could be alternative ways to achieve the goal in question, this is a lower level type of commitment. CANPLAN, on the other hand, maintains the commitment to a goal until it either succeeds or is deemed impossible by virtue of a special failure condition. While this level of commitment may well be appropriate for top-level goals, it is not always so for a (sub)goal that has been adopted purely in the service of some other higher level motivating goal. For example suppose an agent has the goal to quench her thirst, and in the service of this goal, she adopts the (sub)goal to buy a can of soda. However, upon arrival to the store, she realises that all the cans of soda are sold out. Fortunately, though, the shop has bottles of water. In this situation, it is irrational for the agent to drop the whole goal of quenching her thirst just because soda is not available. An AGENT SPEAK agent may do so though. Similarly, we do not expect the agent to fanatically insist on her (sub)goal and just wait indefinitely for soda to be delivered. A CANPLAN agent may indeed do. What we expect is the agent to merely drop her commitment to buy soda and adopt the alternative (sub)goal to buy a bottle of water, thereby achieving the main goal. This is the commitment semantics associated to goals and intentions that we shall develop in this paper.

2. BDI PROGRAMMING & GOALS

Generally speaking, BDI agent-oriented programming languages are built around an explicit representation of beliefs, desires, and intentions. A BDI architecture addresses how these components are represented, updated, and processed to determine the agent’s actions. There are a number of agent programming languages in the BDI tradition, such as AGENT SPEAK and JASON [25, 1], PERS [19], JAM [17], JACK [5], and 3APL [16].

An agent consists, basically, of a belief set, a set of recorded pending events (goals), a plan library, and an intention base. The belief base encodes the agent’s knowledge about the world. The plan library contains plan rules of the form $e : \psi \leftarrow P$ encoding a plan-body program $P$ for handling an event-goal $e$ when context condition $\psi$ is believed to hold. The intention base contains the current, partially instantiated, plans that the agent has already committed to in order to handle or achieve some event-goal. A BDI system responds to events, the inputs to the system, by committing to handle one pending event-goal, selecting a plan rule from the library, and placing its plan-body program into the intention base. The execution of this program may, in turn, post new subgoal events to be achieved. If at any point a program fails, then an alternative plan rule is found and its plan-body is placed into the intention base for execution. This process repeats until a plan succeeds completely or until there are no more applicable plans, in which case failure is propagated to the event-goal.

BDI agent systems, such as PERS [12] and its various successors, were developed as a way of enabling abstract plans written by programmers to be combined and used in real-time, in a way that was both flexible and robust. In contrast with traditional planning, execution happens at each step. The assumption is that the use of plans’ preconditions to make choices as late as possible, together with the built-in mechanism for retrying alternative options, ensures that a successful execution will eventually be obtained, if possible, even in the context of changes in the environment. Nonetheless, the benefits and feasibility of sometimes engaging in (restricted) lookahead planning within the BDI execution framework has recently been recognised too [27, 10]. In section 3, we shall discuss in detail one formal BDI language of this sort. The concept of a goal is central to both agent theory and agent programming. Agents behave because they try to satisfy and bring about their goals, desires, and objectives. Goals explain and specify the agent’s (proactive) behaviour.

In agent theory [7, 24, 13], planning and reasoning, goals are interpreted in a declarative way, as states of affairs to reach (e.g., not being thirsty). In contrast, most agent programming languages have taken a procedural perspective on goals in that these are tasks or processes the agent need to complete or execute (e.g., drink water). The need to conveniently accommodate declarative aspects of goals in these languages has recently attracted much attention [33, 28, 32, 18, 8]. As argued in [32], even a limited account of declarative goals can help decouple plan execution and goal achievement [15, 33], facilitate goal dynamics [31, 29] and sophisticated plan failure handling [33, 18], enable reasoning about goal and plan interaction [30], enhance goal and plan communication [20], etc.

When it comes to declarative goals there are some desired properties that have to be satisfied [7]: persistent, possible, and achieved. In particular, the persistence of goals and intentions depend much on the agent’s commitment strategy [7, 13], that is, the various ways in which the agent deals with goal and plan abandonment. For example, a blindly committed agent only drops a goal when this is believed to be achieved; a single-minded agent also abandons a goal if this is deemed impossible; and an open-minded agent would even drop a goal if its motivation is no longer valid.

Goal adoption is also an important issue [21, 15, 31, 32]: when and which goals are to be adopted by the agent. There are many reasons why an agent would adopt or generate a new goal. A new goal may be adopted due to communication [20] (e.g., another agent requesting to get the room cleaned), or due to social norms or obligations [4] (e.g., keeping your workplace in good condition). Intrinsic motivations could also result in the adoption of new goals. For instance, an internal agent’s desire (e.g., never be thirsty) may activate and generate a new goal to pursue, or a current active plan may require the adoption of a new subgoal (e.g., buy a drink) in the service of a more abstract goal (e.g., quench thirst) [32].

Below, we shall develop an agent programming language that addresses many, though not all, of the above issues. The long-term objective is an agent framework, with formal semantics, that take goals seriously by accommodating some typical aspects of goals generally recognised in agent theory, while still keeping it practical.

3. THE BASIC BDI LANGUAGE

In this section and the next one, we shall develop a BDI-type agent-oriented language, which we call CANPLAN2. The technical machinery we use to define our language is essentially that of [33] and [27]. However, some adaptation is necessary to suitably model goals, both declarative and procedural, in the context of BDI failure handling and hierarchical planning. In this section, we focus on CANPLAN2’s language and its basic operational semantics capturing the execution of individual intentions. Then, in the next section, we will define the operational semantics of a whole agent who is pursuing multiple goals and intentions concurrently.

So, the language we propose refines and modifies CANPLAN2 to improve the semantics associated with goals. As a consequence, the revised language more accurately captures the widely accepted abstract agent interpreter as described by Rao and Georgeff in [26]. The new language also includes a proactive mechanism for adopting new goals as well as a more expressive semantics for sensing information. For legibility and coherence, we present the full CANPLAN2 language, and highlight and discuss the new features and changes with respect to its predecessor language CANPLAN. An agent configuration is defined, as in CANPLAN, by a tuple consisting of an action description library $\Lambda$, a plan library $\Pi$, a belief base $B$, the sequence of actions already performed by the
agent $A$, and the set of current (active) intentions $\Gamma$. In addition, a CANPLAN2 agent configuration also includes a motivation library $M$, which, as we shall see in section 4, allows for the proactive generation and potential adoption of new goals by the agent.

The belief base $B$ is a set of formulae from any (knowledge representation) logical language that allows for operations to check whether a condition $b$—a logical formula over the agent’s beliefs—follows from a belief set (i.e., $B \models b$), and to add and delete a belief $b$ to and from a belief base (i.e., $B \cup \{b\}$ and $B \setminus \{b\}$, respectively). $\Phi$ and $\Gamma$ denote the important actions $\phi_1$, event-goals $\lambda_e$, and delete $\Lambda_e$, respectively. The set $\Phi$ contains all domain actions.

The belief base $B$ is a set of formulae from any (knowledge representation) logical language that allows for operations to check whether a condition $b$—a logical formula over the agent’s beliefs—follows from a belief set (i.e., $B \models b$), and to add and delete a belief $b$ to and from a belief base (i.e., $B \cup \{b\}$ and $B \setminus \{b\}$, respectively). $\Phi$ and $\Gamma$ denote the important actions $\phi_1$, event-goals $\lambda_e$, and delete $\Lambda_e$, respectively. The set $\Phi$ contains all domain actions.

The newly introduced motivation library $M$ allows for agents to generate their own goals in a proactive manner. At this stage, the library only accounts for what has been elsewhere called desires [32] or automatic events [33]; goals that are conditionally realised by beliefs. Hence, an agent may adopt a new goal on the basis of recognising a particular world state. In concrete, $M$ consists of rules of the form:

$$P := \text{nil} \mid \text{act} \phi_1 \mid \text{add} b \mid \text{del} b \mid \text{goal} \phi_1 \mid \text{goal} \phi_1$$

meaning that if the agent comes to believe $\psi$, she consider adopting the declarative event goal $\text{goal} \phi_1$. For example, Rao’s cleaning robot example [25] could be written as follows:

$$\text{RoomDirty} \sim \text{Busy} \rightarrow \text{Goal} \sim \text{RoomDirty}, \text{Clean, HasWork}.$$ 

That is, an idle agent may adopt the goal of getting the room cleaned when this is believed to be dirty.

This concludes the syntax of the language. Let us turn into its semantics, which is based on operational semantics [23]. A transition relation $\rightarrow$ on so-called configurations is defined by a set of derivation rules. A transition $C \rightarrow C'$ specifies that executing configuration $C$ in a single step yields configuration $C'$. We write $C \rightarrow^* C'$ to state that there exists $C''$ such that $C \rightarrow C'$, and $C \stackrel{\Theta}{\rightarrow}$ to denote the usual reflexive transitive closure of $\rightarrow$. A labelled transition is written as $C \xrightarrow{a\theta} C'$, where $t$ is its label. When no label is stated, all labels apply. A derivation rule consists of a, possibly empty, set of premises, which are transitions together with some auxiliary conditions, and a single transition conclusion derivable from these premises (see [23] for more on operational semantics).

As in CANPLAN, two transition systems are used to define the semantics of CANPLAN2 agents. The first transition system defines what it means to execute a single intention and is defined in terms of

$$\text{Act}(\phi_1) \rightarrow \{\text{add} \phi_1, \text{del} \phi_1, \text{goal} \phi_1\}$$

The second transition system defines what it means to execute a single intention and is defined in terms of

$$\text{Act}(\phi_1) \rightarrow \{\text{add} \phi_1, \text{del} \phi_1, \text{goal} \phi_1\}$$

In practice, the belief base contains ground belief atoms in a first-order language.

3Strictly speaking, the plan and action libraries $\Pi$ and $\Lambda$ should also be part of basic configurations. For legibility purposes, we omit them as they are assumed to be static entities. Configurations must also include a variable substitution $\theta$ for keeping track of all bindings done so far during the execution of a plan-body. Again, for legibility, we keep substitutions implicit in places where they need to be carried across multiple rules (e.g., in rule $\tau$). See [16] on how substitutions are propagated across derivation rules for 3APL.

4Rules that are new or different from CANPLAN are underlined.
only to discover after that there is currently no better option. As we will later discuss and prove in section 5, this simple modification has important ramifications on the kind of commitment and goal persistence that the new language has.

Finally, rule $\mathcal{R}_? \text{ deals with tests by checking that the condition follows from the current belief base, whereas rule } \mathcal{act} \text{ handles the case of primitive actions by using the domain action description library } \Lambda. \text{ The remaining basic core rules can be found in Figure 1. Rules } \mathcal{Seq} \text{ and } \mathcal{Seq}_s, \text{ and } \mathcal{I}, \mathcal{II}, \mathcal{III}, \text{ handle sequencing and interleaved concurrency of programs in the usual way; whereas } +\mathcal{b} \text{ and } -\mathcal{b} \text{ handle belief update operations.}

### Declarative Goals

A central feature of CANPLAN is, in addition to the built-in failure handling mechanism, the goal construct $\mathcal{Goal}(\phi, P, \phi_f)$, which provides a mechanism for representing both declarative and procedural aspects of goals. Intuitively, a goal-program $\mathcal{Goal}(\phi, P, \phi_f)$ states that we should achieve the (declarative) goal $\phi$, by using the (procedural) program $P$; failing if $\phi_f$ becomes true (e.g., the goal is impossible, required more effort, etc.). Recall that, because BDI programmers can only write goal-programs of the form $\mathcal{Goal}(\phi, P, \phi_f)$, the goal construct can be seen as an enhancement of the typical achievement event-goal $\mathcal{G}_I$.

The execution of a goal-program is expected to be consistent with some desired properties of declarative goals: persistent, possible, and achieved. For instance, if $P$ is fully executed but $\phi$ is still not true, $P$ will be retried (i.e., $P$ is restarted); and if $\phi_f$ becomes true during $P$’s execution, the whole goal succeeds.

The new language modifies the basic level semantics of goal-programs in two ways. First, the goal-program $\mathcal{Goal}(\phi, P, \phi_f)$ becomes $\mathcal{Goal}(\phi, P) \text{ at } B \not\models \phi \lor \phi_f \text{ if } B, A, \mathcal{P}_I \rightarrow (B', A', P') \text{ then } B, A, \mathcal{Goal}(\phi, P, \phi_f) \rightarrow (B', A', \mathcal{Goal}(\phi, P, \phi_f))$. The second and third rules handle the cases where either the success condition $\phi$ or the failure condition $\phi_f$ become true. The fourth rule $G_S$ is the one responsible for performing a single step on the current strategy of an already initialised goal-program. Notice that the second part in the pair $P_1 \rightarrow P_2$, the original set of potentially useful strategies for the event-goal, remains constant.

Finally, the revised restart rule $G_{\text{Rest}}$, discussed above, restarts the original program (i.e., $P_2$ in $P_1 \rightarrow P_2$) whenever the current program $P_1$ is not able to achieve the goal. That is, it re-instantiates the original set of relevant plans for the original event. Observe that for a goal to be re-instantiated, the current strategy $P_1$ must be blocked and it must be different from the original set of possible strategies $P_2$. Therefore, if upon re-instantiation of the goal, there is no applicable strategy for achieving the goal in question, then the complete goal-program becomes blocked. This is important because it provides the possibility, due to rule $\mathcal{Rule}_\text{Rest}$, for the agent to actually drop a (blocked) declarative goal-program (e.g., the goal to buy a can of soda) if there is an alternative way (e.g., buying a bottle of water) of achieving a motivating goal (e.g., quenching my thirst). Note that this mechanism relies on the assumption that whenever the context condition of a plan-rule applies, there are sufficient reasons to believe the goal in question will indeed be achieved. Otherwise, one could argue that rule $G_{\text{Rest}}$ may sometimes result in an overcommitment to a goal when there are always executable plans for the goal, but these never actually manage to realise the goal. Note too that a goal-program being blocked is different from $\phi_f$ being true, which would cause the goal-program to immediately fail.

### Local Hierarchical Planning

As expected, CANPLAN2 inherits from CANPLAN the uniform integration of hierarchical planning into the BDI architecture. Thus, a language construct $\mathcal{Plan}$ is used for (local) offline lookahead planning. Importantly, the HTN planning operator operates on the same domain knowledge as the BDI system, but allows lookahead to ensure success, prior to acting. The rules for planning, together with other rules for the language, are shown in figure 1. Fortunately, CANPLAN2 retains unchanged all the original operational rules for the construct $\mathcal{Plan}$, as well as the special basic transition plan label type. However, it also includes the following additional rule for dropping impossible planning goals:

$$ (B, A, \mathcal{Plan}(P)) \quad \mathcal{Rest} \quad (B', A', \text{nil}) \quad P_f $$

In other words, a planning goal may completely fail if it has no solution. See that because of the bdi context of rules $\mathcal{Rule}_\text{Rest}$ and $G_{\text{Rest}}$, failure handling and goal restarting is not available during planning; they are features of the BDI execution cycle only.
4. AGENT LEVEL EXECUTION

On top of the basic transition semantics, we define what it means to execute an agent. An agent configuration \( \langle \Lambda, \Pi, M, B, A, \Gamma \rangle \) contains the set of all current intentions \( \Gamma \); rather than simply one intention as in a basic configuration, as well as the newly introduced motivational library \( M \). It also includes an action description library \( \Lambda \), a BDI plan library \( \Pi \), the agent’s belief base \( B \), and an action sequence of actions \( \Lambda \) executed so far.

The agent-level transition semantics that we provide in this section addresses the remaining issues identified in section 1. In particular, the important aspects of the new semantics at this level are:

- The ability to proactively generate goals on the basis of what is believed about the world.
- Assurance that the agent will notice and react to situations where a goal has succeeded or become impossible.
- An improved ability to model interaction with the environment, including information obtained from sensors.

The semantics provided essentially matches Rao and Georgeff’s abstract interpreter for intelligent rational agents [26] which, roughly speaking, requires the following three steps: (i) select an intention and execute a step, (ii) incorporate any pending external events, (iii) update the set of goals and intentions.

The agent-level execution semantics in CAN(PLAN) was extremely simplistic and thus did not account for the above rational cycle of behavior. Because of that, almost all rules below for CANPLAN2 are new. Four labels are used to define the agent-level transition \( \Rightarrow \). The main agent-labelled transition makes use of three (auxiliary) agent-level transitions, namely, int, event, and goal agent transitions. Let us now describe these transitions.

Generating and Updating Goals

The goal-labelled agent transition \( C \Rightarrow C' \) states that the agent configuration \( C \) evolves to configuration \( C' \) due to a (declarative) goal update. We will provide three derivation rules of this type.

The first derivation rule accommodates a proactive mechanism for generating new goals, besides the classical purely reactive one. Generally speaking, it accounts for the so-called automatic events in JACK [5] and desires as conditional goals in [31]. Using the motivational library \( M \) discussed earlier, the following agent-level derivation rule provides this kind of self-motivating behaviour:

\[
\psi \leadsto \text{Goal}(\phi_\psi, \psi_\psi, \phi_f) \in M \quad \text{if} \quad \psi \not\models \psi_\psi \quad \text{Goal}(\phi_\psi, P, \phi_f) \not\models \Gamma \quad \text{A}_2 \text{goal}
\]

\[
\langle \Lambda, \Pi, M, B, A, \Gamma \rangle \Rightarrow \text{Goal}(\phi_\psi, \psi_\psi, \phi_f) \quad \langle \Lambda, \Pi, M, B, A, \Gamma \cup \text{Goal}(\phi_\psi, \psi_\psi, \phi_f) \rangle \quad \text{A}_1 \text{goal}
\]

That is, if it is believed that \( \psi \) holds, the above rule creates a completely new intention with the corresponding declarative goal as the top-level program to execute, provided such goal is not being already pursued as a top-level program. One could also imagine including other type of motivational attitudes in \( M \) (see discussion section).

Let us now focus on the issue of updating the set of goals currently being pursued—the set of active goals. In original semantics of CAN, an agent configuration included a goal base \( G \) to keep track of currently active declarative goals. This goal base was explicitly updated at each transition step. This is not necessary or even possible in the presence of the new planning construct. In fact, the active goals are already implicitly represented in the intention base \( \Gamma \) and, therefore, there is no need to carry them explicitly. The following definition extracts this (implicit) goal base.

**Definition 1 (Declarative Active Goals).** The set of active goals in an intention \( \Gamma \) is inductively defined as follows:

\[
\Gamma = \left\{ \phi : \exists \psi \in E(\Lambda) \right\}
\]

\[
\langle \Lambda, \Pi, M, B, A, \Gamma \rangle \Rightarrow \langle \Lambda, \Pi, M, B, A, \Gamma \cup \Gamma' \rangle \quad \text{A}_2 \text{cont}
\]

\[
\langle \Lambda, \Pi, M, B, A, \Gamma \rangle \Rightarrow \langle \Lambda, \Pi, M, B \cup \{b\}, A, \Gamma \rangle \quad \text{A}_3 \text{cont}
\]

For simplicity, we keep the environment \( E \) implicit. Technically, though, one could follow [2] and define transitions between pairs of system configurations \( \langle E, C \rangle \), where \( E \) is an environment “circumstance” and \( C \) is an agent configuration.
Executing and Finishing Intentions

Three derivation rules are used to characterise what it means to evolve an active intention in the agent. An intention can evolve by either making a legal basic-level step or terminating. The first case is captured with the usual rule $A_{int}^1$ (called $A_{step}$ in CANPLAN):

$$P \in \Gamma \lceil (B, A, P) \quad \text{ind.} \quad (B', A', P') \quad A_{int}^1$$

An intention may also evolve by terminating, because it has successfully executed fully (i.e., $P = nil$) or it is blocked:

$$P \in \Gamma \lceil (B, A, P) \quad \text{ind.} \quad (B', A', (P') \lor (P')) \quad A_{int}^2$$

Observe that an intention is considered terminating only if it is a reactive intention, that is, it is currently not pursuing any declarative goal. There must be good reasons, though, to drop a declarative goal that is being pursued in an intention, besides being blocked. In short, a declarative goal may be abandoned if the goal has been achieved, is deemed impossible, or is not required anymore as a subsidiary goal for a higher-level motivating goal. We will formalise and prove this in the next section.

Top-Level Agent Execution

We now have all the necessary machinery required to define the main top-level execution of an agent relative to an external environment. When $\rightarrow_B$ is a transition relation, we use $C \rightarrow_B C'$ to compactly denote that $C \rightarrow C'$ and $C' \rightarrow_B$. Informally, $\rightarrow_B$ evolves a configuration as much as possible w.r.t. transition $\rightarrow_B$.

The following two agent-level derivation rules capture the well-known Rao’s abstract BDI execution cycle for rational agents [26]:

$$\begin{align*}
C & \overset{\text{int}}{\rightarrow} C' \\
C' & \overset{\text{event}}{\rightarrow} C'' \\
C' & \overset{\text{goal}}{\rightarrow} C''' \\
C & \overset{\text{act}}{\rightarrow} C'''
\end{align*}$$

Agent$^1$

$$\begin{align*}
C & \overset{\text{start}}{\rightarrow} C' \\
C' & \overset{\text{goal}}{\rightarrow} C'' \\
C' & \overset{\text{act}}{\rightarrow} C''
\end{align*}$$

Agent$^2$

Initially, an intention is selected and evolved as a single step, if possible. This may lead to the selected intention being executed or terminated. After that, all pending events are assimilated, including direct belief updates from sensors. Lastly, currently active goals are updated accordingly, by applying all legal goal-labelled transitions at the end of every cycle. The second agent derivation rule Agent$^2$ accounts for the cases in which no intention can be executed or terminated, but where changes in the world may still arise.

This concludes the specification of the proposed language.

5. PROPERTIES OF CANPLAN2

In this section, we prove that the language we defined above, in contrast with its predecessor versions and other similar BDI languages, enjoys some desired properties regarding goals. In concrete, we demonstrate that CANPLAN2 agents have a commitment on goals, and their corresponding intentions, such that the hierarchical structure of goals is respected and the goal base is correctly updated at every execution cycle as suggested in [26].

To begin, let us formally define the meaning of an agent execution relative to an environment.

DEFINITION 3 (BDI EXECUTION). A BDI execution $E$ of an agent $C_0 = \langle \Lambda, \Pi, M, \Pi, B_0, A_0, \Gamma_0 \rangle$ relative to an environment $E$ is, as a possibly infinite, sequence of agent configurations $C_0, C_1, \ldots$ such that $C_i = \text{seq}(C_{i+1})$ for every $i \geq 0$. A terminating execution is a finite execution $C_0, \ldots, C_n$ where $E_n = \emptyset$. An environment-free execution is one where $E(A_0) = \emptyset$, for every $A_0$.

As argued in section 2, it is generally accepted that a rational agent should not insist on achieved or impossible goals. In the context of our language, we define an agent of that sort as follows.

DEFINITION 4 (SINGLE-MINDED AGENT). A CANPLAN2 agent $\langle \Lambda, \Pi, M, B, A, \Gamma \rangle$ is single-minded if for every declarative goal $G(\phi, \phi_f) \in \text{Goal}$, it is the case that $B \not\models_\text{bd} \phi$ and $B \not\models_\text{bd} \phi_f$.

This definition provides a practical approximation of the notion of single-minded agents by taking advantage of the declarative information in goal-programs. Observe that it is not clear how one could define a similar notion for regular (procedural) BDI event-goals, as in principle, one does not know why those are “executed.” In contrast with the standard definition of single-mindedness from [24], the above definition is not defined as a temporal property. The following theorem, though, states that the single-minded property is propagated through BDI executions.

THEOREM 1. Let $C_0$ be a single-minded CANPLAN2 agent. $E$ be an environment, and $C_0, \ldots, C_n$ be a BDI execution of $C_0$ relative to $E$. Then, $C_i$ is a single-minded agent, for $0 \leq i \leq n$.

PROOF (SKETCH). Direct from the agent-level derivation rules Agent$^1$, Agent$^2$, $A_{goal}^1$ and $A_{goal}^2$.

So no matter how an agent evolves relative to the environment, her goal base is correctly updated—she will never desire goals that are currently true or deemed unfeasible. Because of their simplistic agent-level execution semantics, neither CAN nor CANPLAN satisfies the above theorem (e.g., an achieved goal may still be purged).

Besides a goal being dropped due to its success or failure, there are other reasons why a goal may be abandoned. Because of that,
we shall informally claim that our CANPLAN2 agents have a commitment strategy that we refer to as flexible single-minded: a goal may also be dropped because it might be reconsidered as an appropriate instrument for some higher-level motivating goal. We shall now try to characterise those cases. We first provide three technical definitions that will come handy to express our results.

We start by defining what are the three type of goal-intentions that could be actively executing in an agent.

**Definition 5 (Active Goal).** An active event goal is a program of the form $G = P \triangleright \{ \Delta \}$: an active declarative goal is a program of the form $G = \text{Goal}(\phi, P \triangleright \{ \Delta \}, \phi_I)$; and, finally, an active planning goal is a program of the form $G = \text{Plan}(P)$. Furthermore, program $P$ is referred to as the goal’s current strategy and the set $\Delta$ as its alternative strategies.

At any point, a single intention may be working on several goals simultaneously, and these will in turn be organised hierarchically: some goals are pursued as (mere) instruments for other higher-level goals. The following definition generalises Definition 1 to account for all three types of goals and their usual hierarchical structure.

**Definition 6 (Active Goal Trace).** An active goal trace $\lambda$ is a sequence $G_1, \ldots, G_n$ of active goals. The set $G^*(P)$ of all active goal traces in $P$ is inductively defined as follows:

- If $P = \emptyset$ then $G^*(P) = \{ \}$. If $P = P_1 \triangleright \{ \Delta \}$ then $G^*(P) = \{ P \cdot \lambda' \mid \lambda' \in G^*(P_1) \}$. If $P = P_1 \triangleright \{ \Delta \}$ and $P_2$, then $G^*(P) = G^*(P_1) \cup G^*(P_2)$.

The $k$-th element of an active goal sequence $\lambda$, denoted $Nth(\lambda, k)$, is called the $k$-th (sub)goal in $\lambda$. A goal $G$ is an active goal in $P$ if $Nth(\lambda, n) = G$, for some $\lambda \in G^*(P)$ and $n > 0$.

An active goal trace represents a chain of goals and subgoals that are active in the intention—the $(n+1)$-th subgoal is a subsidiary goal for the motivating $n$-th subgoal. We say that the $n$-th subgoal $G$ in an active goal trace $\lambda$ is part of a planning goal if there exists an $n' < n$, such that the $n'$-th subgoal in $\lambda$ is an active planning goal. To achieve a goal, an agent may be performing a particular strategy. However, the agent may eventually resort to alternative courses of action if such strategy cannot be continued further.

**Definition 7.** Let $(\Lambda, \Pi, M, B, A, \Gamma)$ be an agent, $P$ be an intention in $\Gamma$, and $G$ be an active goal in $P$. The current strategy for $G$ is blocked, if either:

- $G \in \{ \text{Goal}(\phi, P \triangleright \{ \Delta \}, \phi_I) \}$ and $(B, A, P) \Downarrow$.
- $G = \text{Plan}(P)$ and $(B, A, \text{Plan}(P)) \Downarrow$.

In addition, we say that $G$ has an alternative applicable strategy if $G \in \{ P \triangleright \{ \Delta \}, \text{Goal}(\phi, P \triangleright \{ \Delta \}, \phi_I) \}$ and $(B, A, \{ \Delta \}) \Downarrow$.

Basically, an agent may consider dropping the current strategy for a goal and adopting an alternative strategy (by means of basic rule $\triangleright$) when the former cannot be continued. The following result means that, in such cases, the failure handling mechanism respects the hierarchical structure of goals by preserving as much as possible what has been already performed in the world.

**Theorem 2.** Let $(\Lambda, \Pi, M, B, A, \Gamma)$ be an agent and $P$ be an intention in $\Gamma$. Let $\lambda$ be an active goal trace in $P$, i.e., $\lambda \in G^*(P)$, and let $G_k$ be the $k$-th subgoal in $\lambda$ such that its current strategy is blocked. Then, for every $k'$-th subgoal $G_{k'}$ in $\lambda$ such that $k' > k$, it is the case that one of the following cases applies:

1. the current strategy for $G_{k'}$ is blocked and $G_{k'}$ does not have an alternative strategy, or
2. $G_{k'}$ is part of a $k''$-th level planning goal in $\lambda$, with $k < k''$, whose current strategy is blocked.

**Proof (Sketch).** Suppose $G_{k'}$ is not part of a blocked planning goal. If $G_{k'}$’s current strategy is not blocked or $G_{k'}$’s current strategy is blocked but $G_{k'}$ has an alternative applicable strategy, then $G_k$’s current strategy cannot be blocked as it can be progressed one step by evolving its subgoal related to $G_{k'}$. In the latter case, it would do so by means of failure rule $\triangleright$.

Three important points should be mentioned. First, the above theorem points out that the alternative strategies for goal $G_k$, if any, may be considered only if no alternative ways can be found for all the subgoals that are instrumental to $G_k$. Second, an active goal that is instrumental to a (higher) planning goal may be dropped if the whole planning goal cannot be resolved, that is, if the planning goal is blocked. Third, unlike in CAN and CANPLAN, an active declarative-goal-program may indeed be blocked, and as a consequence, instrumental-goal-programs could be abandoned for the sake of an alternative strategy within the hierarchy of active goals.

Finally, let us focus once again on declarative goals. The question is: what are the reasons why a CANPLAN2 agent may consider dropping a declarative goal? Theorem 1 suggests that a declarative goal is dropped because it has just been achieved or deemed unachievable. There could be other reasons, though, why a goal may be abandoned. A goal, for instance, is dropped if it is a subsidiary goal and a higher-level motivating goal is achieved or considered unachievable. A subsidiary goal can also be dropped because the agent does not envision any current way to act upon it, but an alternative strategy is found for a higher-level motivating goal.

The next theorem formally captures all the reasons why an agent would drop a declarative goal.

**Theorem 3.** Let $C$ and $C'$ be two agent configurations such that $C \Downarrow \rightarrow C'$ and such that $G(\phi, \phi_I) \in G(\Gamma)$, but $G(\phi, \phi_I) \notin G(\Gamma')$. Then, one of the following cases must apply:

1. $B' \Downarrow \Leftrightarrow \phi_0$, i.e., the goal has been achieved;
2. $B' \Downarrow \Leftrightarrow \phi_f$, i.e., the goal is believed to be impossible; or
3. if $\lambda$ is an active goal trace in an intention in $\Gamma$ and $G_k = \text{Goal}(\phi, P, \phi_I)$ is the $k$-th subgoal in $\lambda$, then there is a $k'$-th subgoal $G_{k'}$ in $\lambda$, where $k' < k$, such that either:

- (a) $G_{k'} = \text{Goal}(\phi', P', \phi'_I)$, and $B' \Downarrow \Leftrightarrow \phi'_I$;
- (b) $(B, A, G_k) \Downarrow$, but $G_{k'}$ has an alternative applicable strategy, and all $k'$-th subgoals in $\lambda$, where $k' < k'$, have their current strategy blocked and no alternative applicable strategy; or
- (c) $G_{k'} = \text{Plan}(P_1)$ and $(B, A, \text{Plan}(P_1)) \Downarrow$.

In words, a goal may be completely terminated in an agent transition if it has been achieved or aborted (cases 1 and 2), or the goal is not necessary or convenient anymore as an instrumental subgoal for some higher-level goal (case 3). The third case is the most involved one. Case (a) states that a higher-level declarative goal $G_{k'}$ has just been achieved or failed and, thus, fully terminated, together with all its subgoals. Case (b) states that the strategy to achieve the goal is indeed blocked (i.e., no transition is possible), but that there is an alternative way of addressing a higher-level goal for which the (sub)goal in question was just an instrument. Lastly, case (c) accounts for the case where the goal is a subsidiary goal for a higher-level planning goal for which there is no solution.
To recap: we presented three technical results that demonstrate that the BDI-style language that we have developed provides a commitment strategy on goals and intentions that is more accurate of rational agents. CANPLAN2 agents would not pursue goals that are achieved or deemed unachievable (Theorem 1), and would always respect the hierarchical structure of active goals, in which some subgoals are mere instruments for achieving higher level goals (Theorem 2). Finally, we identified all the reasons why a declarative goal may be abandoned by an agent (Theorem 3). Roughly speaking, the "flexible single-minded" type of commitment that we have claimed for our agents lays between the simple single-minded and the sophisticated open-minded commitment strategies.

6. DISCUSSION

The framework presented here has a number of limitations: goals are adopted without checking for negative or positive interactions with current active goals; goals and motivations are restricted to achievement goals only; no account for "suspended" goals or intentions is provided; and planning goals are not repaired upon failure. The new language provides support for further development on reasoning about goals, such as reasoning about conflicts or synergies among current goals within different intentions ([30]). For example, one could extend basic configurations to include the current agent’s goal base, \( G = \gamma (T) \), and extend the goal adoption rule given in section 3 as follows:

\[
P \neq P_1 \triangleright P_2 \quad B \neq \phi \lor \phi_1 \quad B_2 \in G \quad \text{Con}(\gamma(g_1, \phi_1)) \quad (\{ B, \gamma, A, \text{Goal}(\phi_1, P, \gamma_1) \}) \quad (\{ B, \gamma, A, \text{Goal}(\phi, P, \gamma) \})
\]

where relation \( \text{Con}(\gamma(g_1, \phi_2)) \) characterises the conditions under which two declarative goals are in conflict (e.g., goal \( g_1 \) tautologically implies \( \neg g_2 \)). The goal in question will then be adopted provided it does not conflict with current active goals. Similarly, it would be interesting to envision ways for avoiding adopting a goal if this is already implied by some other active goal-intention.

Rational agents may adopt goals of various sorts [8] and for various reasons, besides the ones dealt with here. For example, agent communication [20], social norms and obligations [4] are also common sources of motivations for agents. Our language does not currently support the temporary suspension of an intention. Test goals of the form ‘\( \phi \)’ are bound to fail when false. Sometimes, however, an agent should just “suspend” the intention and wait for the test to become true (e.g., when waiting for some expected change in the environment). Finally, unlike in systems such as RAP [11], there is no explicit account of plan monitoring and recovery. The work in [14] on plan failure and abortion should be orthogonal to CANPLAN2. Further study of all the above issues is required.

Goals are an integral and core aspect of agents. We believe it is necessary to accommodate sophisticated accounts of goals that go beyond simple procedural reactions to the environment, as well as to study their role within these language formally. The language CANPLAN2 presented in this paper is a step towards these objectives, by incrementally building on previous work.

7. REFERENCES


The Sixth Intl. Joint Conf. on Autonomous Agents and Multi-Agent Systems (AAMAS 07)