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MODULAR LOCAL SEARCH:
A FRAMEWORK FOR SELF-ADAPTIVE METAHEURISTICS

A THESIS PRESENTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
Doctor of Philosophy
in Decision Science at
Massey University

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2010
This research develops Modular Local Search (MLS), a framework such that trajectory-based metaheuristics can be expressed as subsets of “modules” from a common library, with a common structure. The standardized modules and structure allow the easy formulation of common metaheuristic paradigms, as well as the easy creation of relatively complex hybrids by simply listing the modules that should be included. A new markup language called Modular Local Search Markup Language (MLSML) is developed so that new metaheuristics can be implemented declaratively, rather than programmatically.

Some advanced ideas are introduced and explored, whereby metaheuristics are able to modify themselves during their execution, by varying parameters and swapping modules into and out of activation. This ability introduces the potential for semi-intelligent algorithms that are capable of a type of learning. Several demonstration methods are developed and these show promise on a small test set of problem instances.

A new combinatorial optimization problem is developed to serve as the testing ground for the new heuristic ideas. The Arc Subset Routing Problem (ASRP) involves routing a vehicle on a graph, choosing a subset of the arcs, such that the reward collected by traversing these arcs is maximised subject to a constraint on the total distance travelled. This problem is first formulated and explored as a traditional Operations Research investigation; construction heuristics are developed, as well as some improvement routines for local search, and computational tournaments are performed to compare the methods.

Some attention is given to developing methods to predict which of two heuristics is most suited to a given problem instance, based on an analysis of the characteristics of that problem. Initial results demonstrate the potential of such an approach.

The MLS framework offers a powerful and flexible structure both for the easy and consistent implementation of existing metaheuristics, and also as a platform for the development of new, advanced metaheuristic ideas. Early results are encouraging, and a number of directions for future research are discussed, including some complex real-world problems for which the self-adaptive capabilities of MLS would be especially useful.
I would like to thank all the many people who have supported and encouraged me over the years. It has been a long journey, including several complete changes in direction, and the effort to complete this work has been made easier by their understanding.

First and foremost I need to express my gratitude to my supervisors, Mark Bebbington and John Giffin. Mark, who took over as chief supervisor after John moved to Canterbury, has served as a constant reality check and I appreciate his resisting the urge, overwhelming at times I’m sure, to wash his hands of me as the pressures of developing a career and a family meant that my progress was, at times, intermittent. Extra special thanks are due to John, who served as my mentor and friend during my undergraduate years. Many hours were spent in his office discussing the world and Operations Research, and many ideas were discussed, including the germs of what later became this research, although via a circuitous route. Since then he has provided much timely advice, and encouragement to PhD thinking, which has served, barely, as a restraint on my own tendency to bite off more than I can chew. His critical eye has also prevented many potentially embarrassing typos and misspellings, although of course I take responsibility for any mistakes in the final thesis, mindful of the words of Randy Milholland, who said that “typos are very important to all written form. It gives the reader something to look for so they aren’t distracted by the total lack of content in your writing”. I should also acknowledge a former PhD student of John’s, Mark Johnston, the formatting and layout of whose thesis I shamelessly copied.

Continuing to work on this research over these many years would not have been possible without the support of my boss, Graeme Gee. As well as providing me the opportunity to develop my career in analytics consulting, which has allowed me to gain a hands-on appreciation for techniques that work in the real world, and the complexities of “real” optimization problems, he has been unfailingly supportive. This support has extended to dedicated periods of time where I could focus on my PhD research, financially sponsoring my study, including fees and any text books I decided I must have, and a steady stream of computing resources. In the last stages of writing up this thesis he even drove me to a meeting at Massey because I hadn’t been getting enough sleep to drive safely. His unwavering support has made the completion of this work possible.
Last, but certainly not least, I need to thank my family and friends. My friends, who have offered many opportunities to escape for a time from thinking about anything related to Operations Research, in fact probably too many opportunities. My family, who have always had faith that I would finish; one might say blind faith, but that is what families are for. Especial thanks to my Nana, who has been patiently looking forward to my finishing for more years than I care to count, and to my father, who never fails to nag me about it. My biggest appreciation is reserved for my partner Vin; she has been heroically patient and supportive, especially over the last few months of the write-up while I have been absent in order to devote myself to it. She undertook, mostly without complaint, essentially to act as a single mother to our daughter Tui while I industriously finished this thesis. Thanks are also due to Tui; the burning desire to get back to see her motivated more late nights and early mornings than are really healthy – she finally provided my inspiration to finish, regardless of how “finished” I feel.
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