ELV: Embodied Learning and Vision

Mengye Ren

NYU

Spring 2026

elvcourse.org

Introduction

- Instructor Mengye Ren: Assistant Professor in Data Science and Computer Science.
- Before NYU: Google and Uber ATG (self-driving)
- Agentic Learning AI Lab: Enabling future agentic AIs to learn and adapt flexibly in the real world.
- Representation learning, self-supervised learning meta-learning, continual learning, visual perception and planning

Office Hours and Communication

- Office Hour: Thursday 2:00pm – 3:00pm Room 508, 60 5th Ave
- By appointment. Scheduling link in the syllabus.
- Non-admin related question: Use CampusWire
- Admin related question (e.g. homework): Email TAs

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TA Intro

Ying Wang
Thu 1-2PM
Room 763
Latent Planning

Ellis Brown
Tue 11AM-12PM
Room 402
Spatial Understanding

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Introduction

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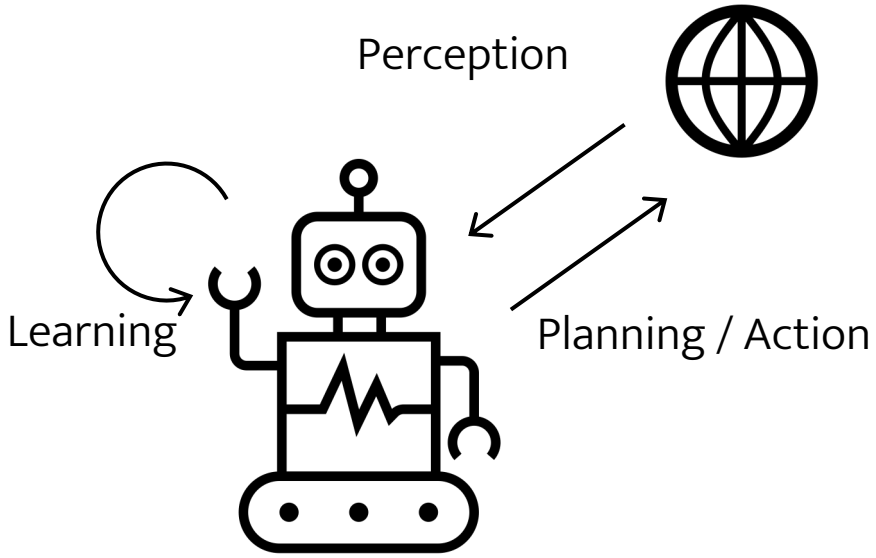
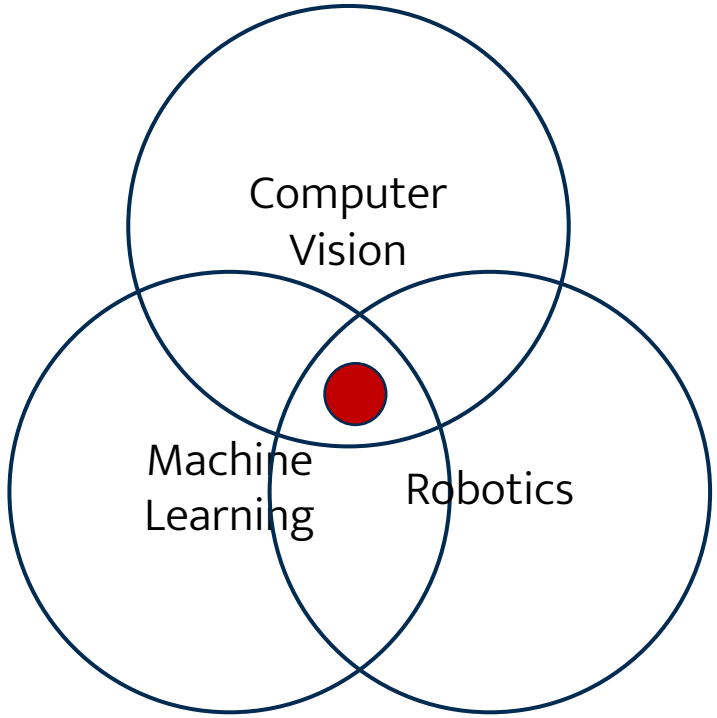
What is this course about?



A General-Purpose Learning Agent



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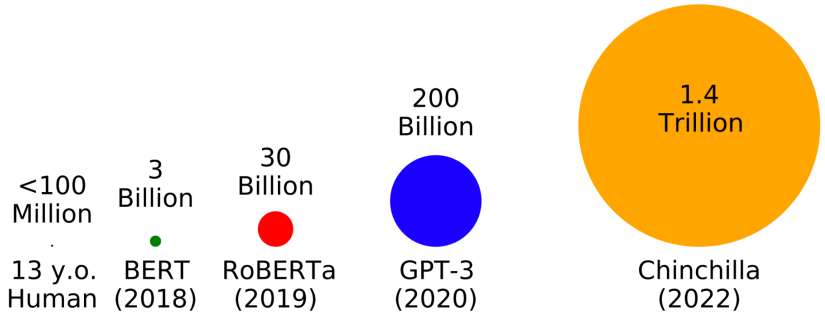
Human vs. Machine Learning



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Language Vs. Embodied Video?

Yann LeCun
@ylecun

* Language is low bandwidth: less than 12 bytes/second. A person can read 270 words/minutes, or 4.5 words/second, which is 12 bytes/s (assuming 2 bytes per token and 0.75 words per token). A modern LLM is typically trained with 1x10^13 two-byte tokens, which is 2x10^13 bytes. This would take about 100,000 years for a person to read (at 12 hours a day).

* Vision is much higher bandwidth: about 20MB/s. Each of the two optical nerves has 1 million nerve fibers, each carrying about 10 bytes per second. A 4 year-old child has been awake a total 16,000 hours, which translates into 1x10^15 bytes.

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- Multimodal
- Incremental
- Physical
- Explore
- Social
- Use language

The Development of Embodied Cognition: Six Lessons from Babies

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Abstract The embodiment hypothesis is the idea that intelligence emerges in the interaction of an agent with an environment and as a result of sensorimotor activity. We offer six lessons for *developing* embodied intelligent agents suggested by research in developmental psychology. We argue that starting as a baby grounded in a physical, social, and linguistic world is crucial to the development of the flexible and inventive intelligence that characterizes humankind.

Keywords
Development, cognition, language, embodiment, motor control

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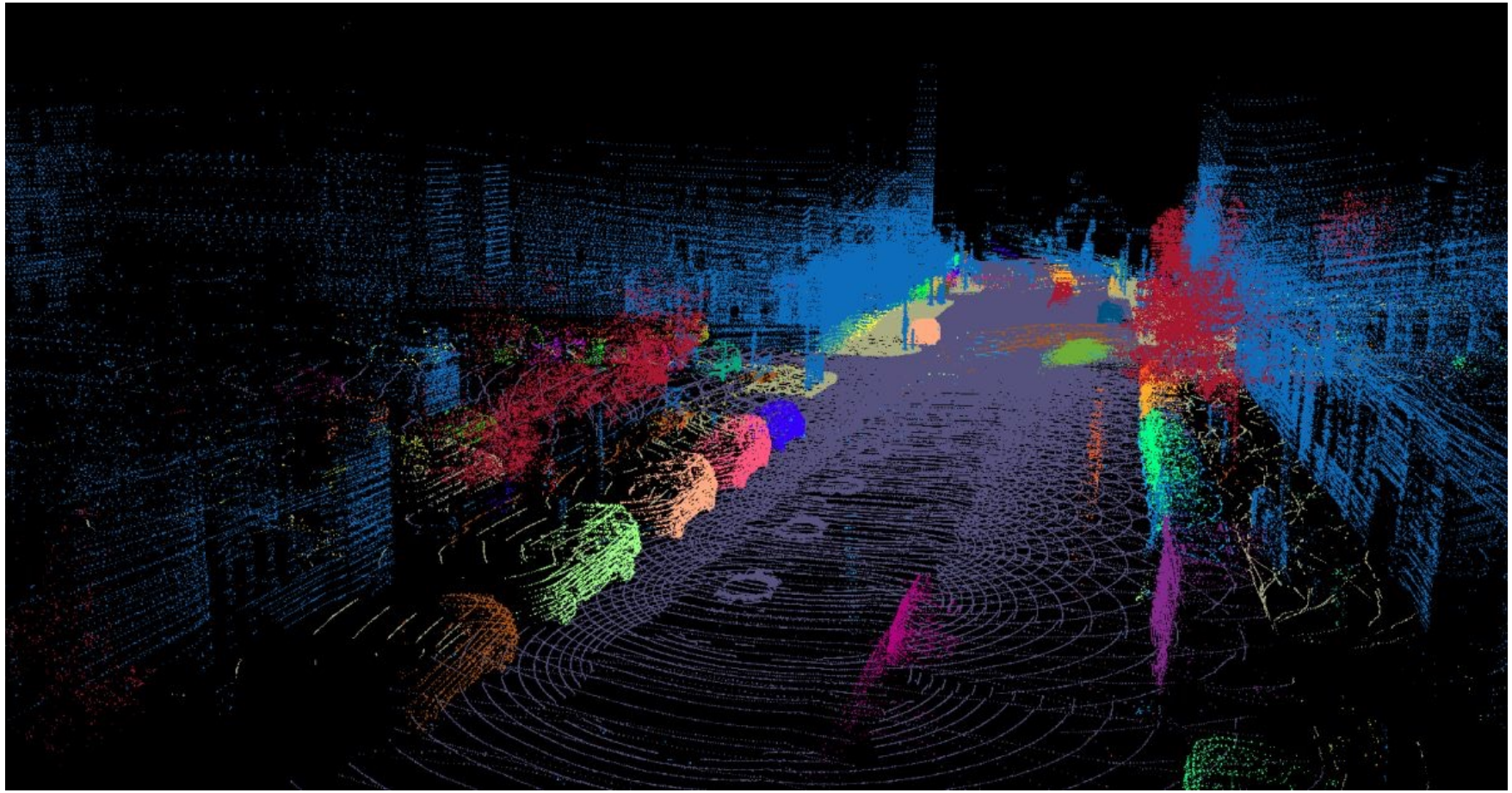
Physical: Geometric and Temporal Structure



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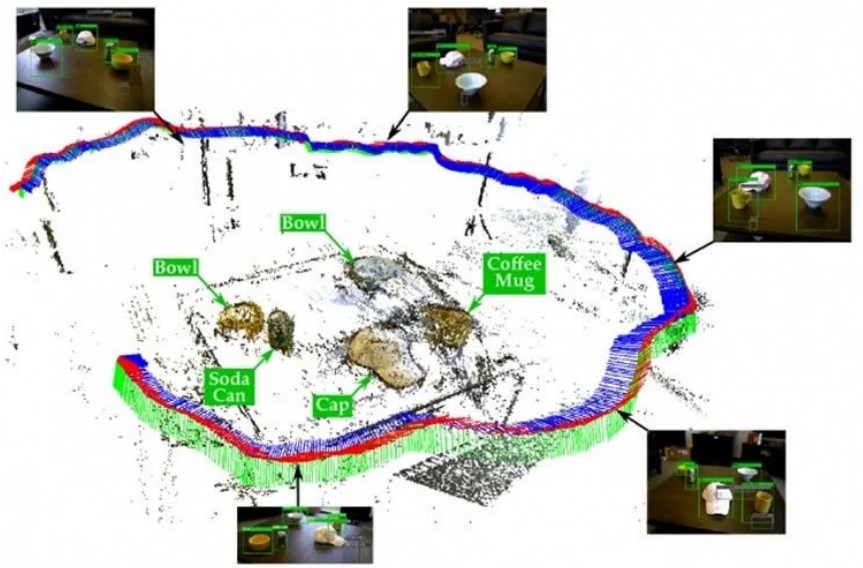
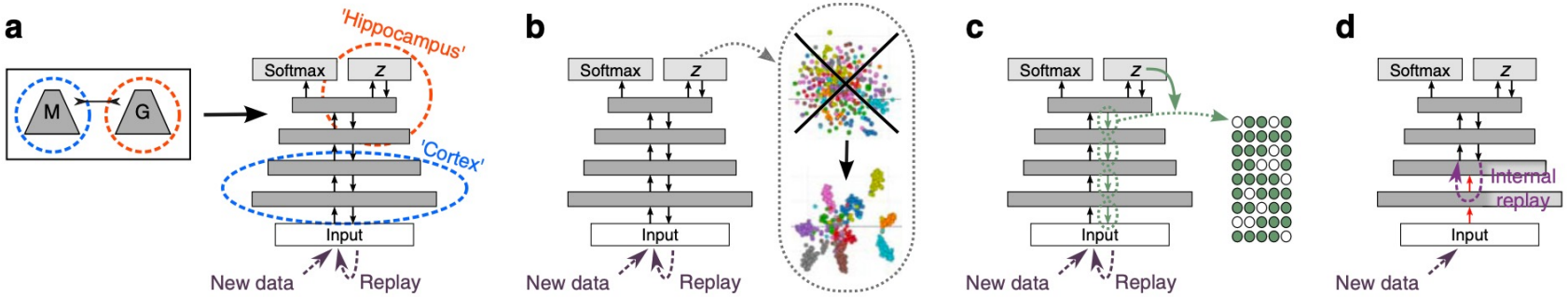
Incremental: Learning and Memory

- Spatial memory (mapping)
- Episodic memory (autobiography)
- Semantic memory (rule learning)
- Procedural memory (skill learning)
- Replay: Generative or storage, consolidation





van de Ven, 2020

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Explore: Learning Efficiency

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Learning Objectives

- Solving embodied problems using deep learning tools
- Leverage geometric and temporal structure from real-world and simulated data
- Understand and design learning and memory in embodied agents

- Advanced graduate level course on a collection of topics
- Combination of lectures, seminars, and research projects
- Develop research skills and conduct cutting edge research

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Applications

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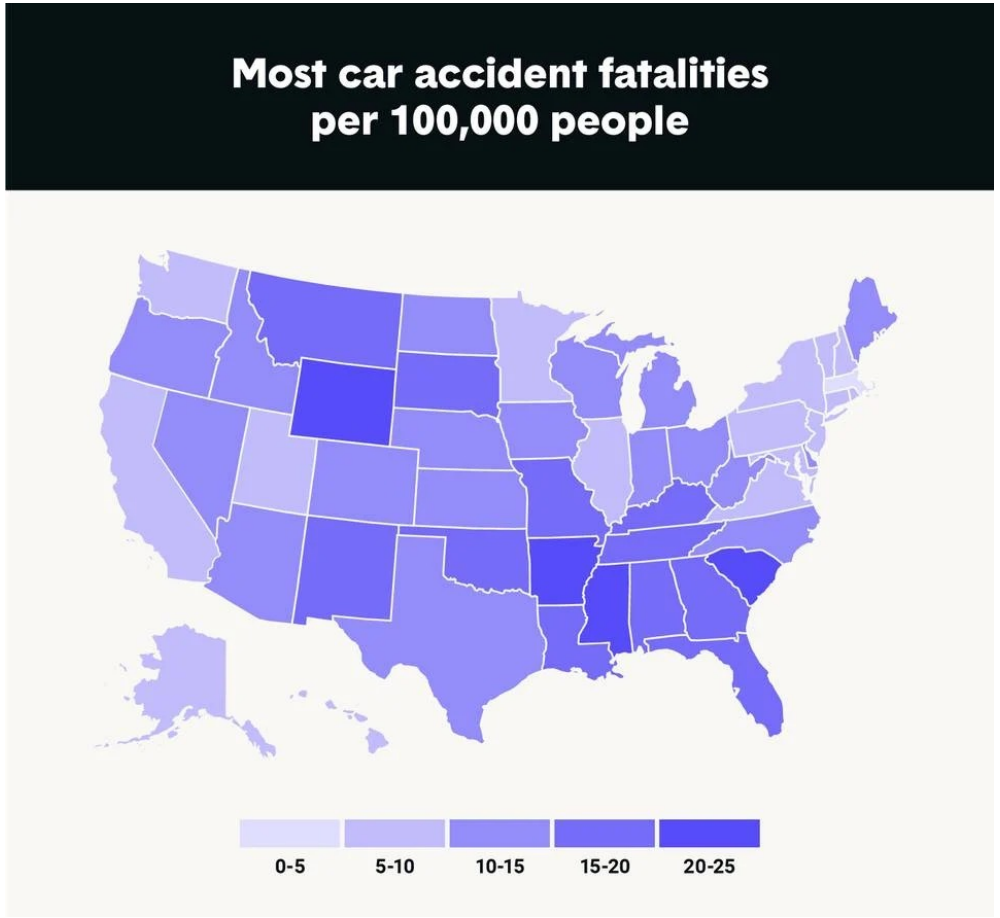
Why Self-Driving Cars

- >1 million people die every year from road
- One of the top 10 leading causes of death and injuries
- Environmental causes
  - Car/battery manufacturing



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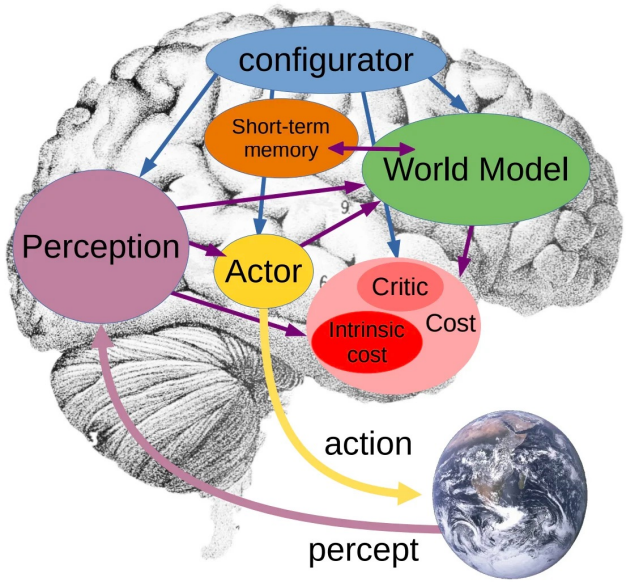
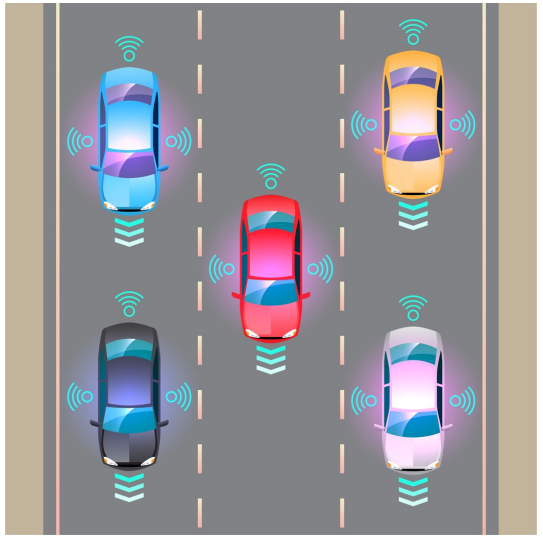
A Test-Bed for General Embodied Intelligence

- Perception, world model, mapping, planning, and control
- Long-term hierarchical planning
- Closed loop learning
- Multi-agent social cognition, intent inference, communication
- Rule-based learning





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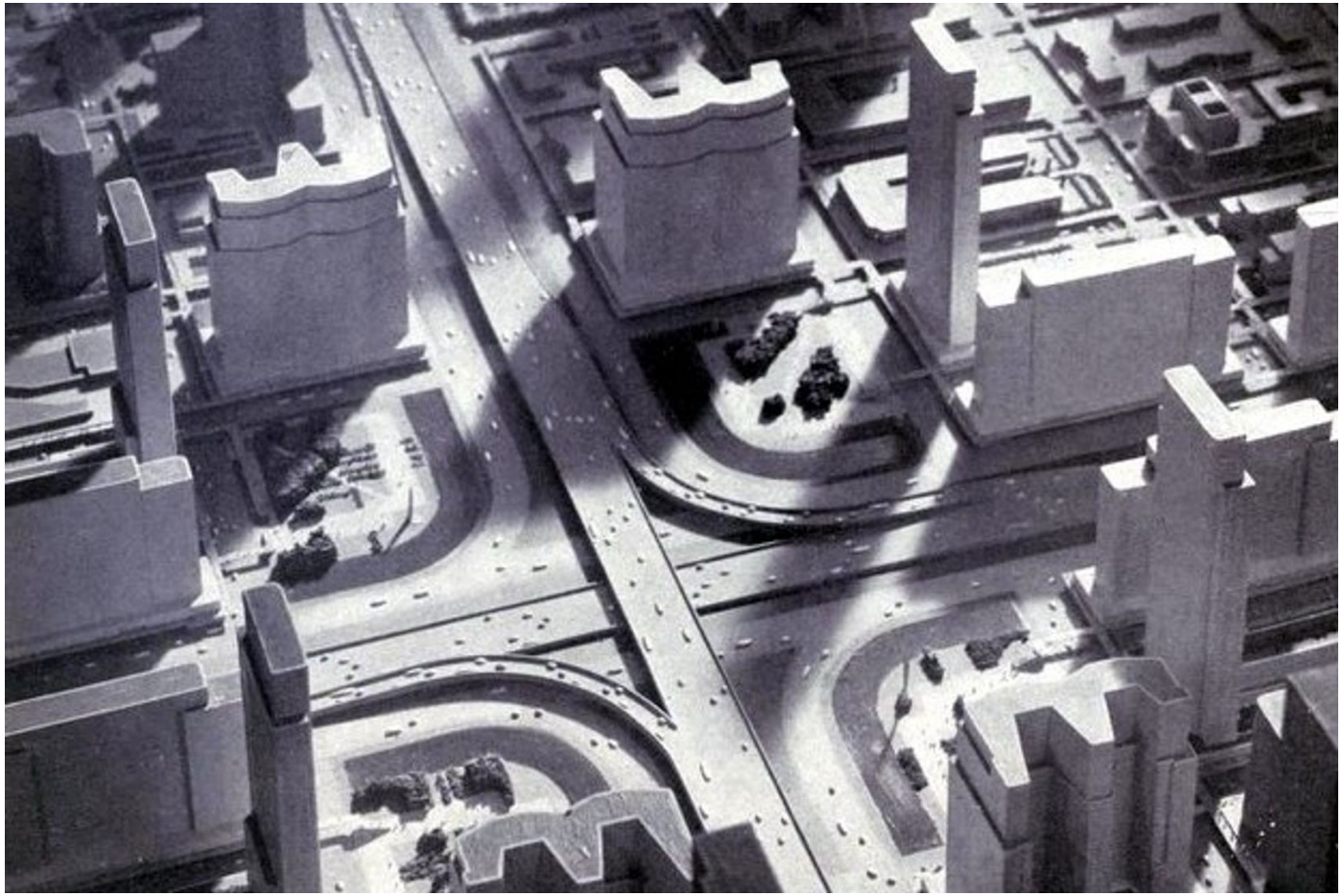
A Brief History of Self-Driving Cars



Norman Bel Geddes' "Magic Motorways" 1939

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1966 LUNAR Stanford University

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Also in 1966

MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

PROJECT MAC

Artificial Intelligence Group — July 7, 1966
Vision Memo. No. 100.

THE SUMMER VISION PROJECT

Seymour Papert

The summer vision project is an attempt to use our summer workers effectively in the construction of a significant part of a visual system. The particular task was chosen partly because it can be segmented into sub-problems which will allow individuals to work independently and yet participate in the construction of a system complex enough to be a real landmark in the development of "pattern recognition".

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1988 ALVINN

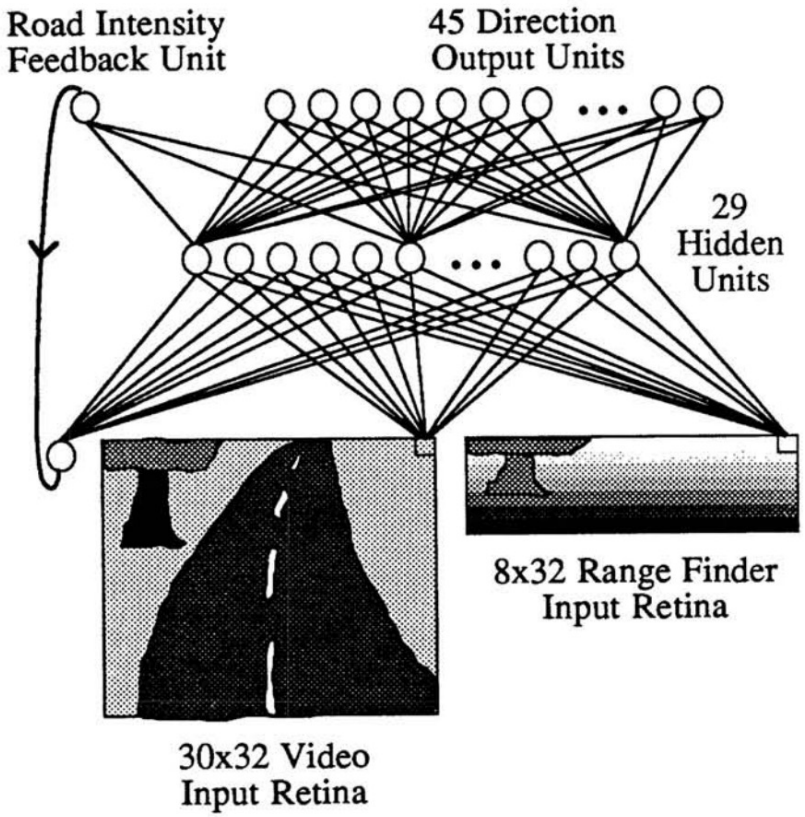

Figure 1: ALVINN Architecture

2004 DARPA Grand Challenge

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2005 DARPA Grand Challenge

2007 DARPA Urban Challenge

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aHYRtOvSx-M

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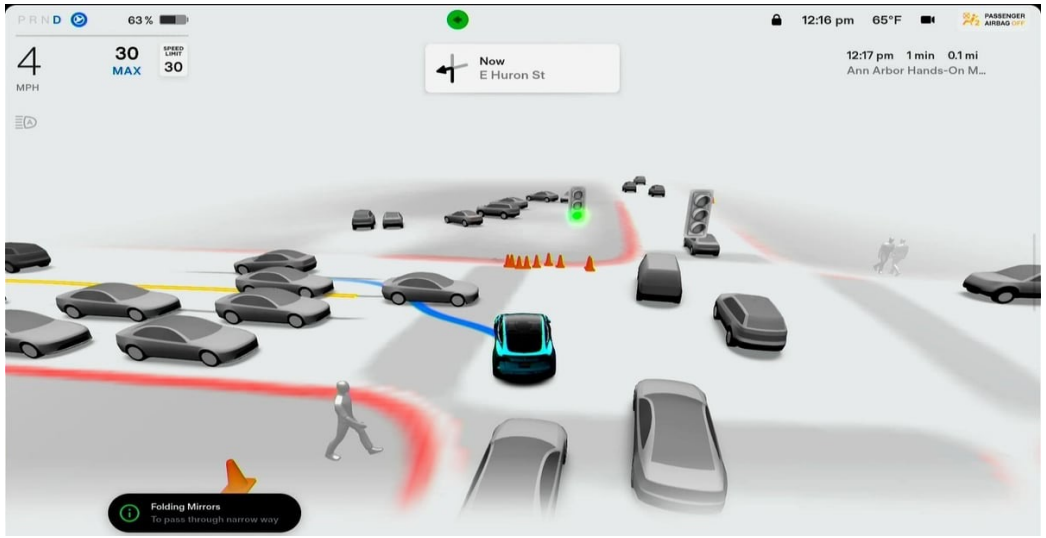
What Has Changed?

- Proof-of-Concept -> L4 autonomy
- Basic obstacle avoidance and planning -> Joint perception and planning, learning from massive data
- No deep learning involved -> Fully deep learning stack



What is Missing General Embodied Intelligence?

- Self-driving as an example for a more general intelligence
- It has perception, mapping, planning, and multi-agent communication.
- Where are we in general embodied intelligence?
- Perception: Exploring new environments, recognizing new signs, objects, etc.
- Learning: Learning from world modeling, future prediction, causal relations, from language instructions, etc. Learning efficiency.
- Memory and mapping: Efficient exploration of new environment without maps.
- Adaptation: Adapting to different hardware, and environments.

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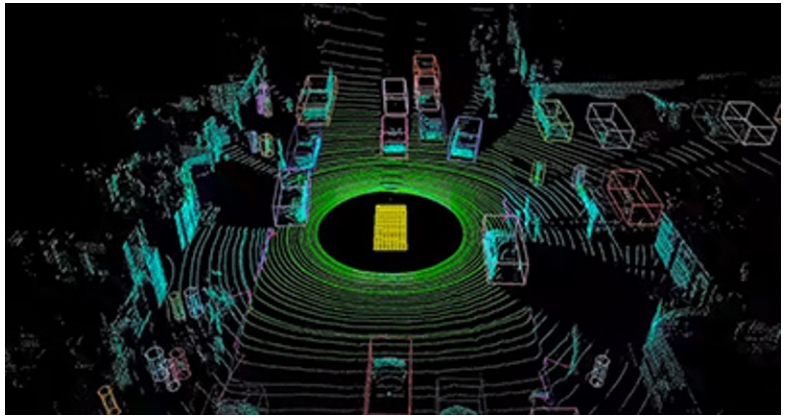
Better Perception

- Deep learning, semantic understanding
- Massively labeled data for training
- Sensor fusion: Camera, Multi-View, LiDAR, Radar, Motion



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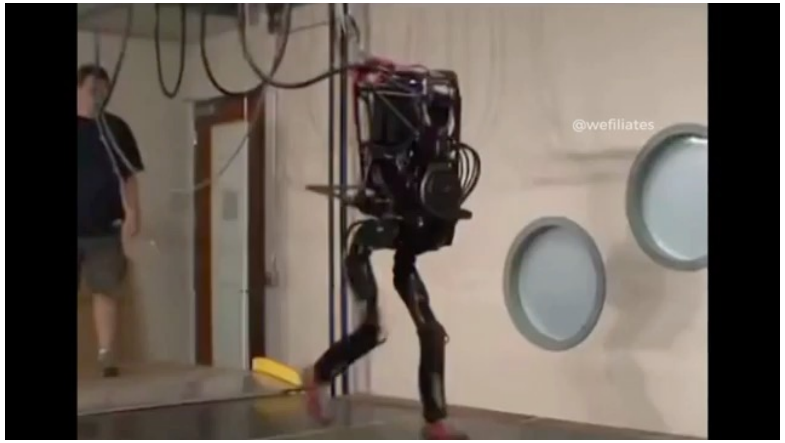
Better Control

Honda Asimo, 2011

Unitree B2W, 2024



Boston Dynamics 2009-2022

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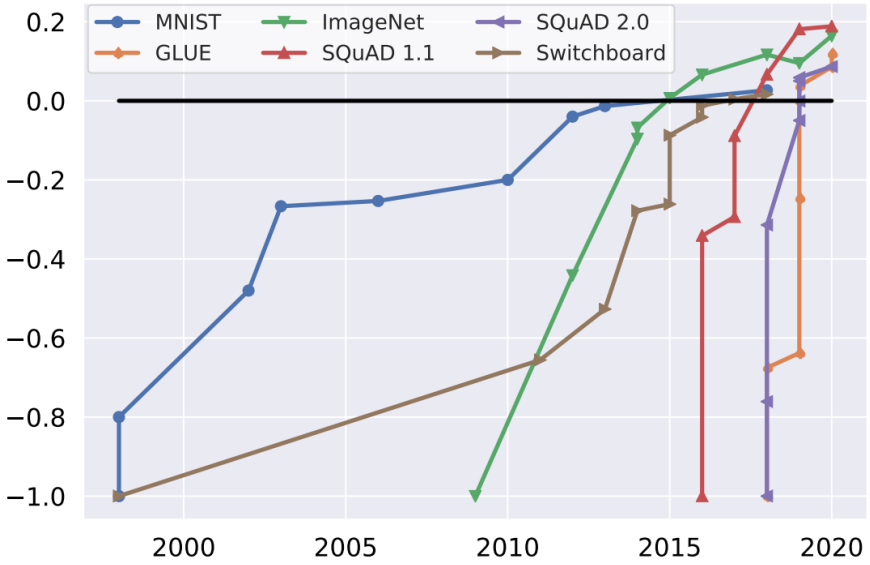
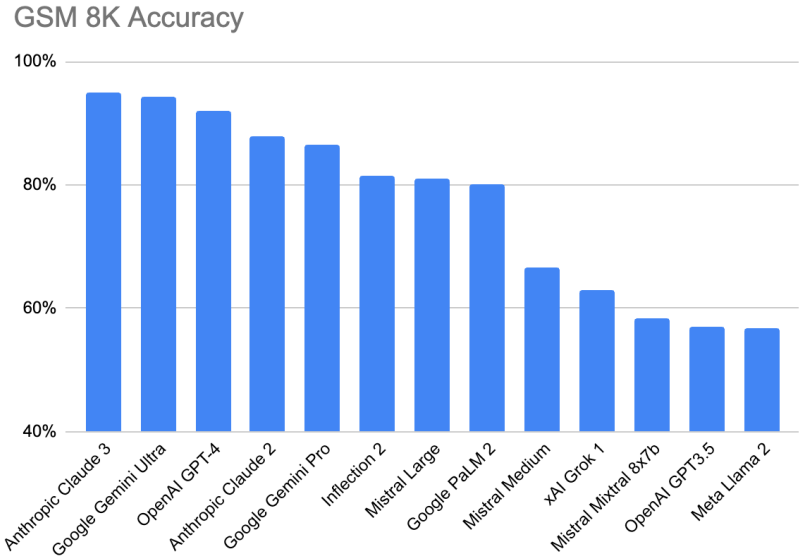
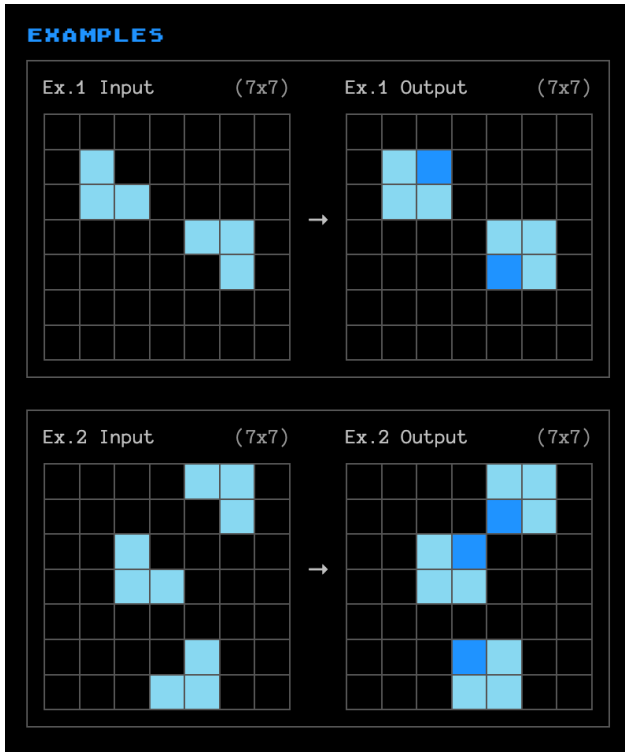
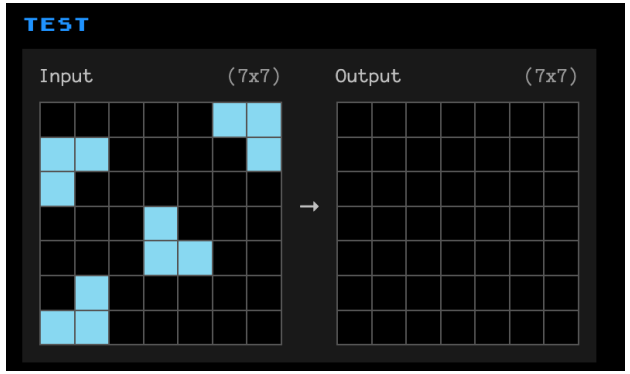
Better Reasoning and Abstraction

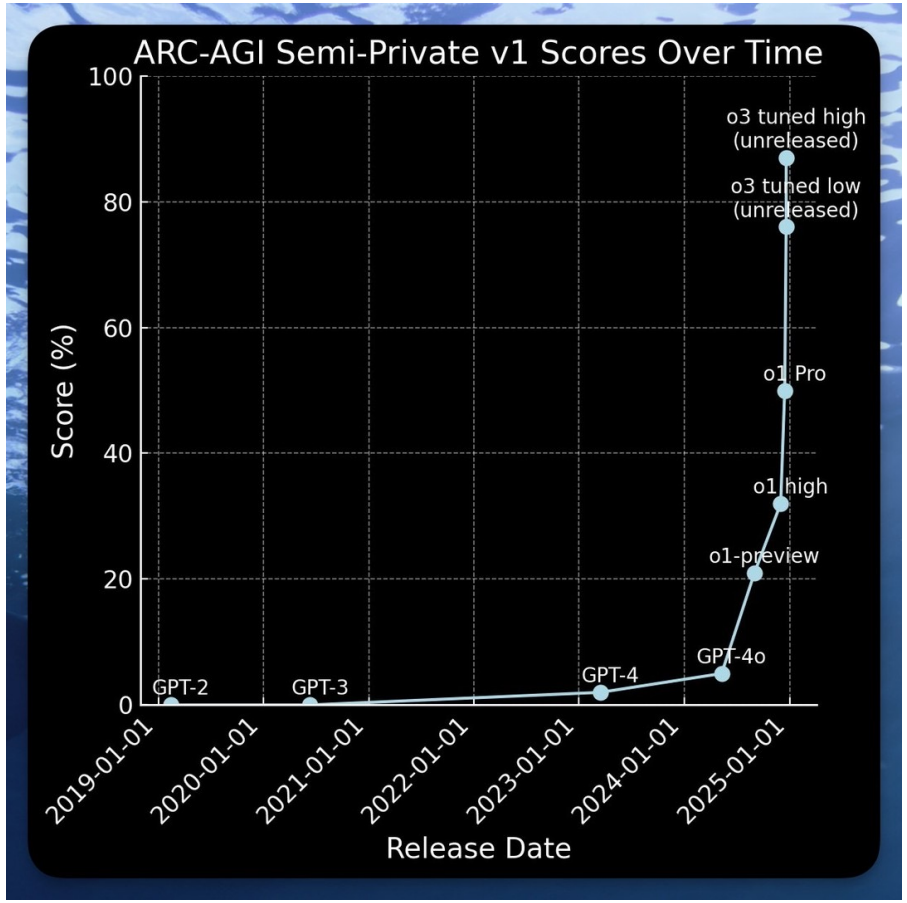
Kiela et al. 2021











Riley Goodside, 2024

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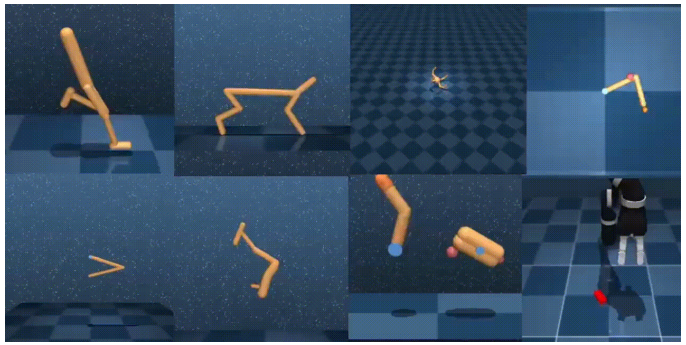
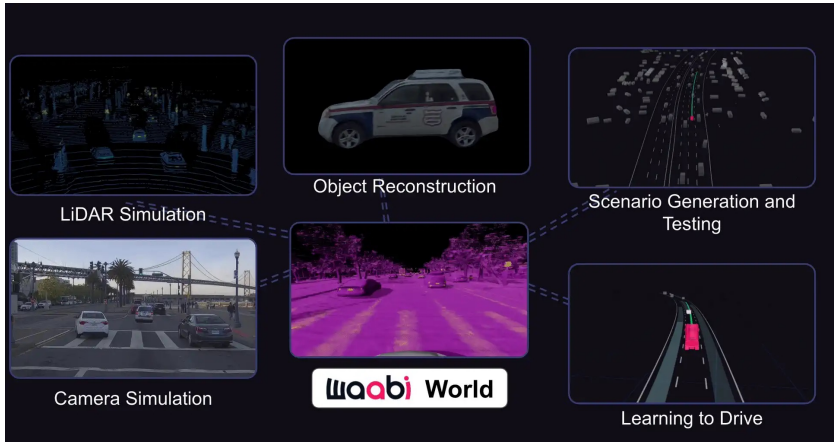
Better Simulation and Benchmarks

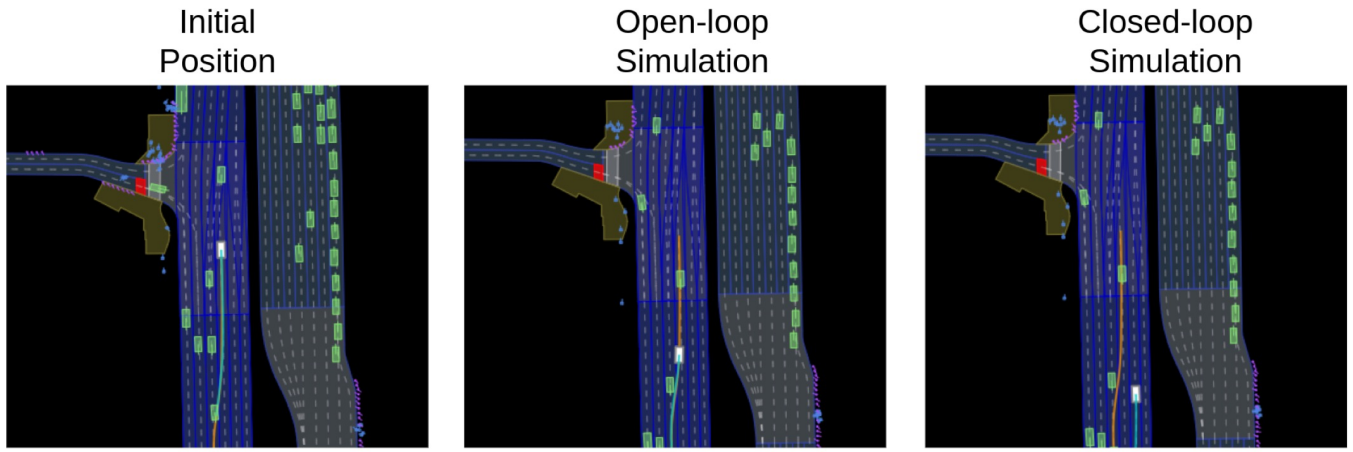


DM Control Suite

MineCraft & MineDojo



Waabi World



nuPlan

Nvidia Isaac Sim

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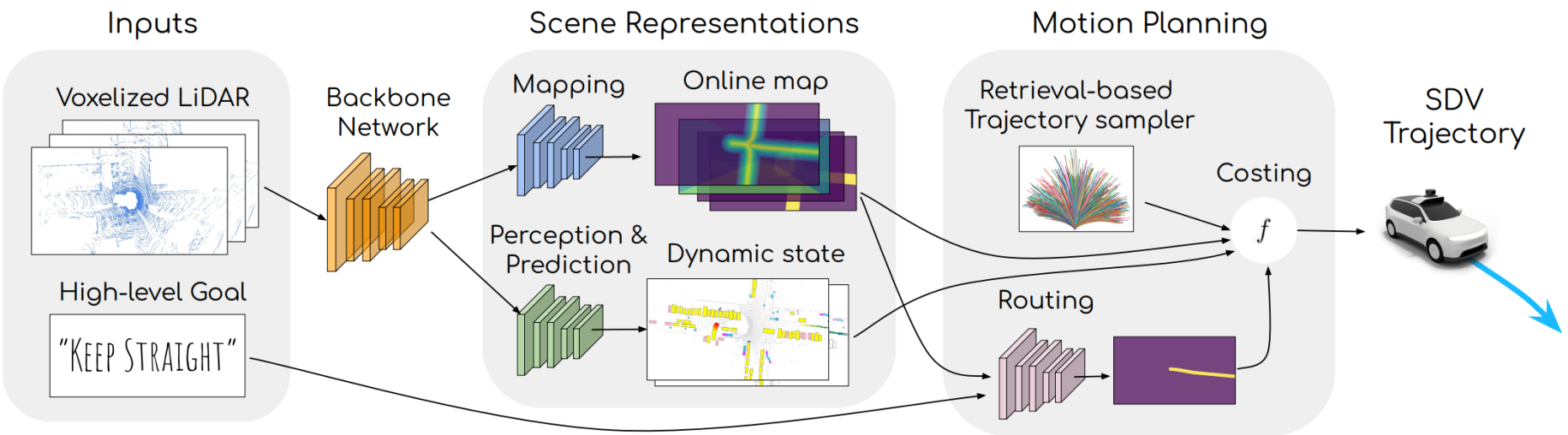
End-to-End Learning

- Continuous and differentiable modules for end-to-end learning.
- We know how to optimize deep networks.
- Maintain rich information throughout decision making.
- Representations & output space modeling.



The Learning Question

- Humans can learn driving in 20 hours
- Current ML requires hundreds of millions of examples
- Ability to learn from noisy streaming data
- Ability to generalize and perform abstraction

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Learning Challenges?

- Learning from physical world, spatial and physical outputs
- Exploration, learning efficiency
- Imbalance, causality
- Flexibility, adaptation, continual learning
- Modular Integration
  - Sensory modality
  - Memory
  - Reasoning
  - Planning

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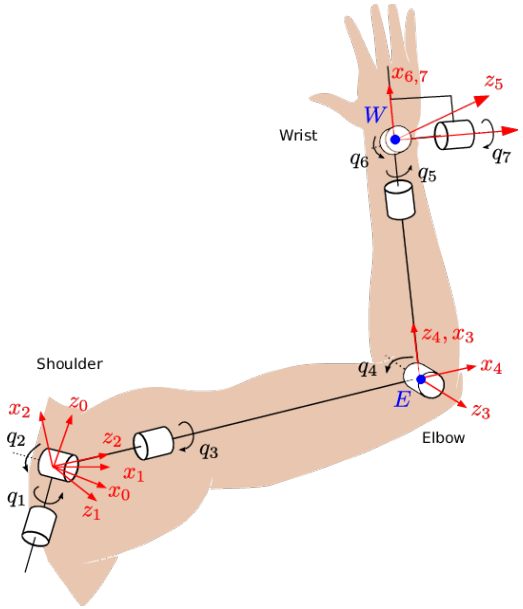
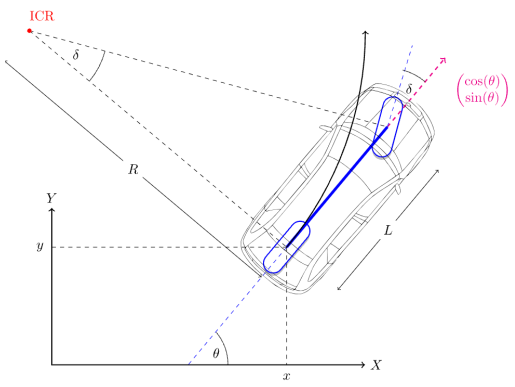
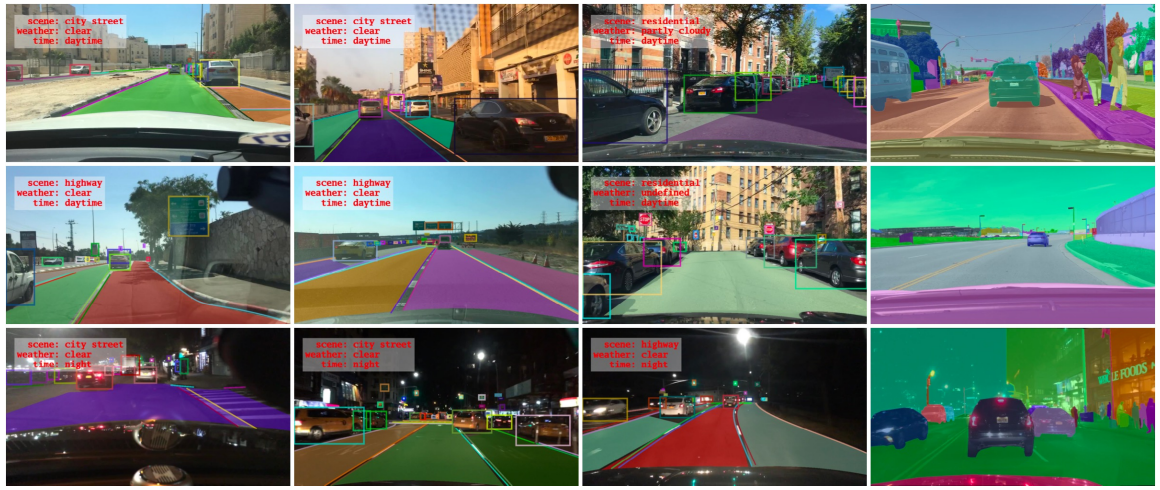
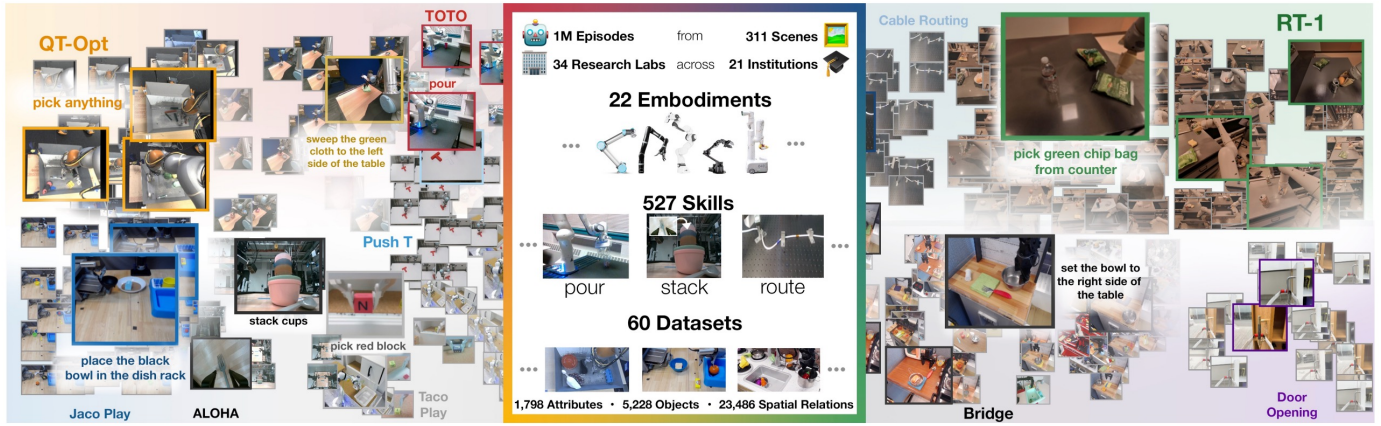
Model Driven Vs. Data Driven





Yu et al. 2018





Open X-Embodiment, 2024

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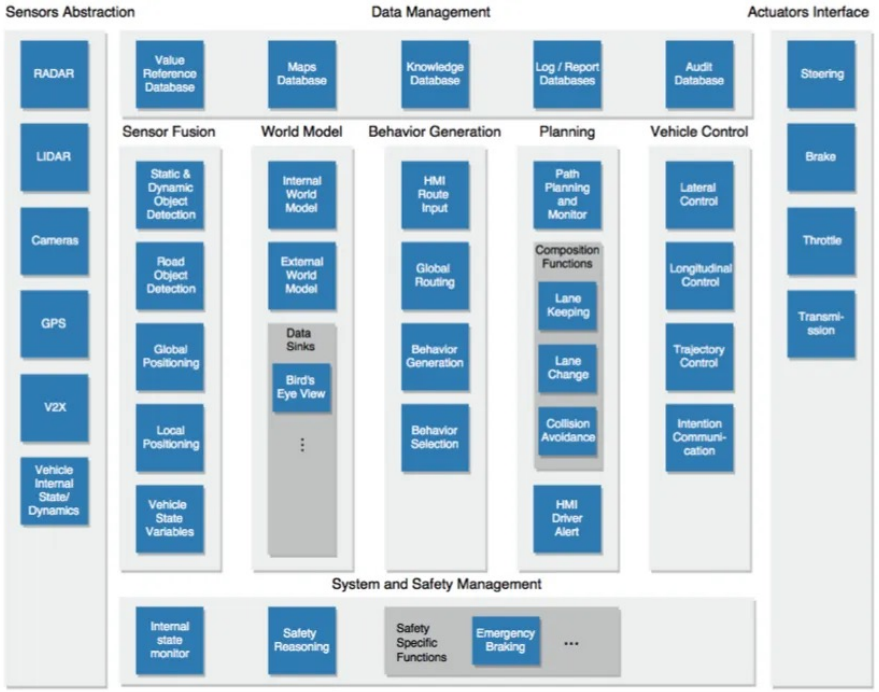
Modular Vs. End-to-End

Modular



End-to-End

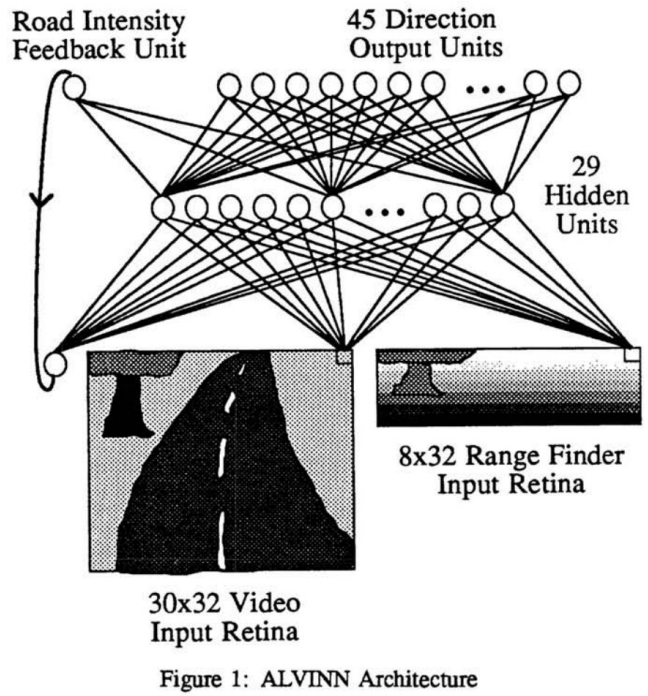
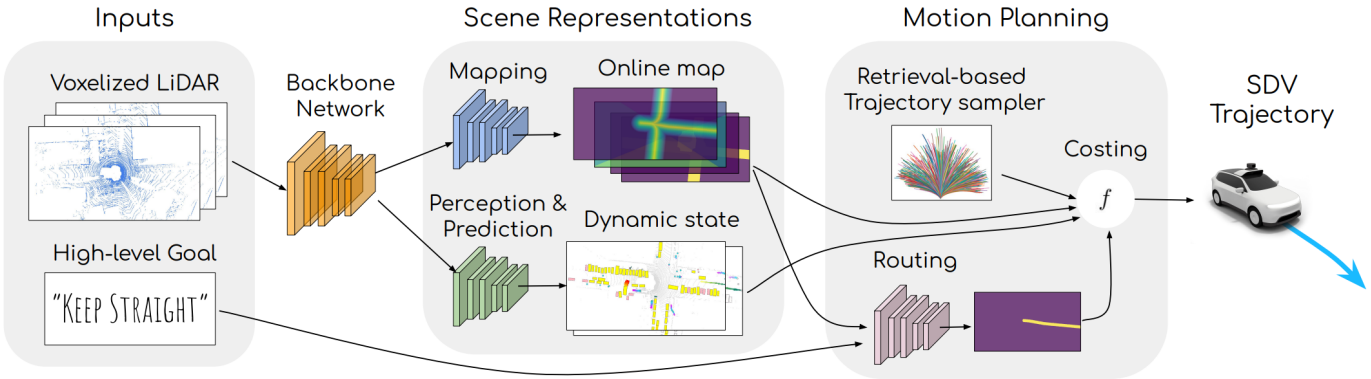


Figure 1: ALVINN Architecture

Modular
and
End-to-End
Differentiable



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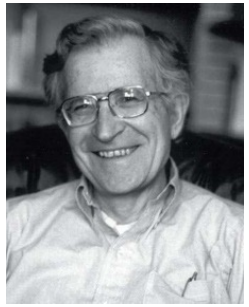
Nature Vs. Nurture

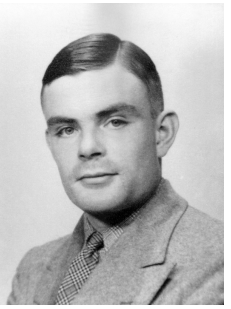


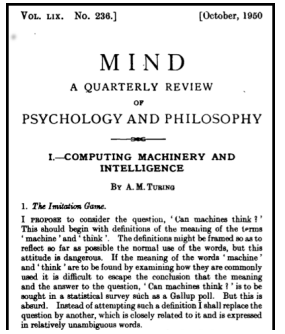
Noam Chomsky

There's an obvious answer to that: the knowledge is built in. You and I can learn English, as well as any other language, with all its richness because we are designed to learn languages based upon a common set of principles, which we may call universal grammar.

Yarek Waszul

In fact, if someone came along and said that a bird embryo is somehow "trained" to grow wings, people would just laugh.





Vol. LIX. No. 236.] [October, 1950

MIND

A QUARTERLY REVIEW OF PSYCHOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY

I.—COMPUTING MACHINERY AND INTELLIGENCE

By A. M. Turing

1. *The Imitation Game.*

I propose to consider the question, 'Can machines think?' This should begin with definitions of the meaning of the terms 'machine' and 'think'. The definitions might be framed so as to reflect so far as possible the normal use of the words, but this attitude is dangerous. If the meaning of the words 'machine' and 'think' are to be found by examining how they are commonly used it is difficult to escape the conclusion that the meaning and the answer to the question, 'Can machines think?' is to be sought in a statistical survey such as a Gallup poll. But this is absurd. Instead of attempting such a definition I shall replace the question by another, which is closely related to it and is expressed in relatively unambiguous words.

COMPUTING MACHINERY AND INTELLIGENCE (Turing, 1950)

Instead of trying to produce a programme to simulate the adult mind, why not rather try to produce one which simulates the child's? If this were then subjected to an appropriate course of education one would obtain the adult brain. Presumably the child brain is something like a notebook as one buys it from the stationer's. Rather little mechanism, and lots of blank sheets. (Mechanism and writing are from our point of view almost synonymous.) Our hope is that there is so little mechanism in the child brain that something like it can be easily programmed.

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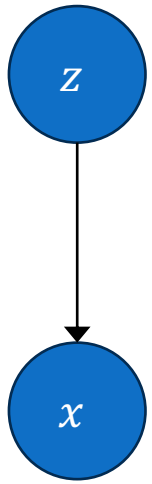
Why Do We Need Learning in Real-World Agents?

- Symbolic Argument: You can represent infinite variations with finite length description of an abstract system. The underlying system remains the same.
- Big World Hypothesis: We always need learning in exploring new environments. There will always be something unknown. There will always be room for improvement. There won't be enough capacity to store all existing knowledge.
- Given resource constraints, we should only adapt to the current moment and generalize to the future.



Javed and Sutton (2024) The Big World Hypothesis and its Ramifications for Artificial Intelligence.

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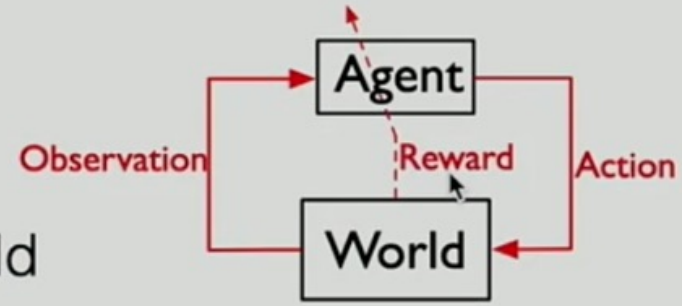
Rich Sutton on the Quest of Continual Learning

General (domain independent)

— contains nothing specific to any world



Experiential

— grows from runtime experience, not from a special training phase

Able to discover its own abstractions in state and time

— in an open-ended way (limited only by computational resources)

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Insights from Biology

- Animals and humans are examples of real-world embodied intelligence.
- There is evidence that higher cognitive functions in animals require more learning and adaptation.
- Evidence on visual acuity and perception in mammals.
- Survival needs:
  - Changing reward functions in the wild.
  - Problem solving skills.

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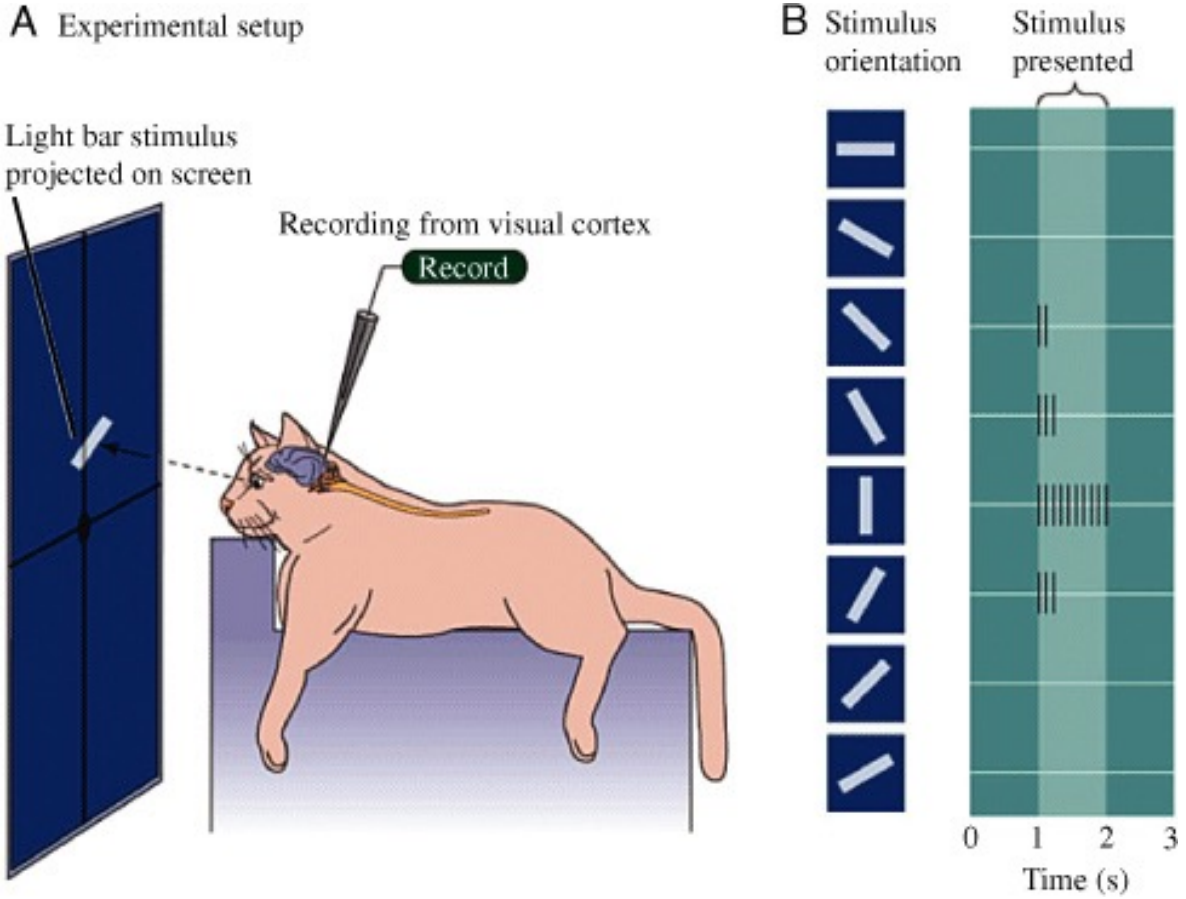
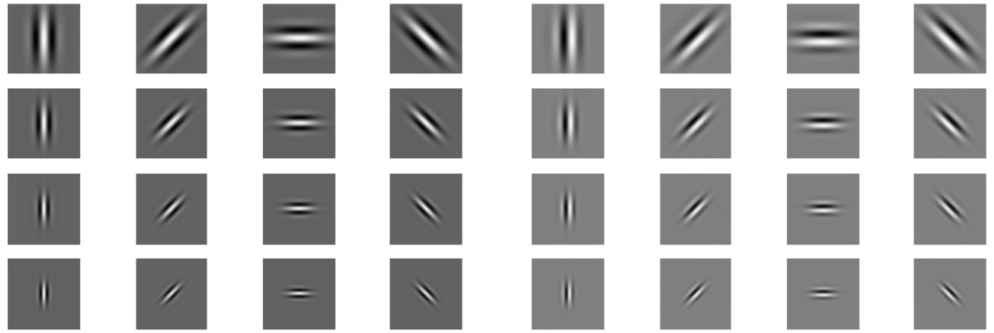
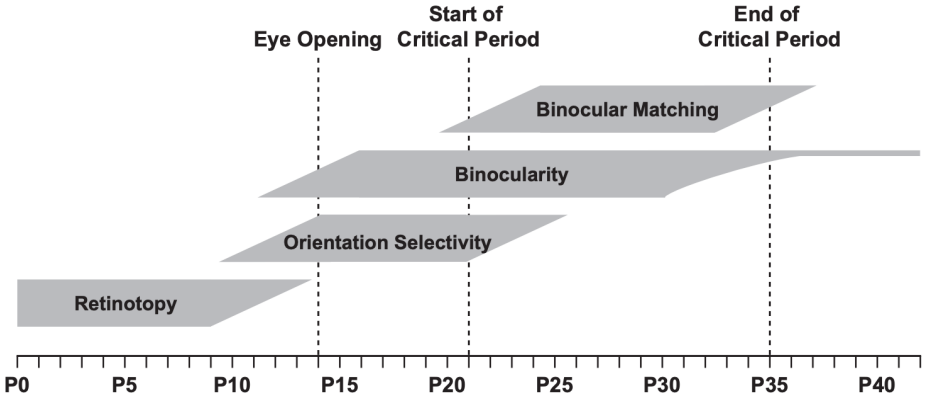
Hubel and Wiesel's Experiments



Wiesel, T.N., and Hubel, D.H. (1963)



Simple Cells, Gabor Filters



Espinosa and Stryker (2012)

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Human Developmental Periods

Sensorimotor learning

Simple Reflexes (birth-1 month)

Infants use reflexes such as rooting, sucking, following moving objects with the eyes, and grasping objects. (For example: Infant closes their hand when a toys touches their palm.)

Primary Circular Reactions (1-4 months)

A primary circular reaction is when an infant tries to reproduce an event that happened by accident because they find it to be pleasurable. (For example: Intentionally mouthing a toy bunny.)

Secondary Circular Reactions (4-8 months)

Child becomes more focused on the world and begins to intentionally repeat an action in order to trigger an environmental response. (For example: purposefully picking up a pacifier to put it in their mouth.)

Coordination Of Secondary Circular Reactions (8-12 months)

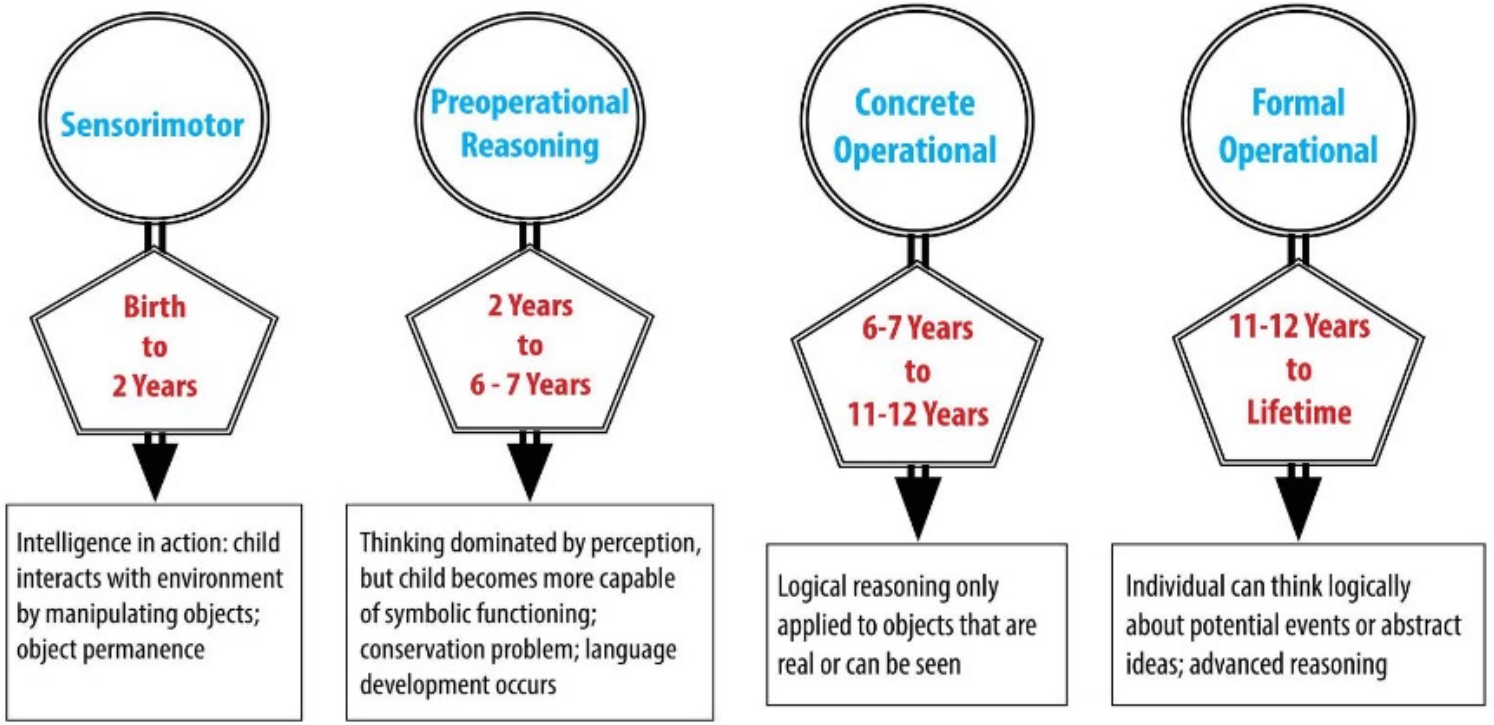
Child acts intentionally and follows steps to achieve goals. Child begin to do things intentionally and understands object permanence. (For example: Child will push one toy aside to get to a second toy partially concealed underneath.)

Tertiary Circular Reactions (12-18 months)

Child discovers new means to meet goals and begins to modify earlier behaviors to meet existing needs. Piaget described children in this stage as "young scientists". (For example: Child repeatedly drops/throws a set of plastic keys and observes how they move through space.)

Internalization of schemas (18-24 months)

Child begins to use symbols and form mental representations. The beginnings of insight and creativity are associated with this stage. (For example: Child pushes a chair across the kitchen and climbs up on it to reach a cookie on the counter.)



Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development

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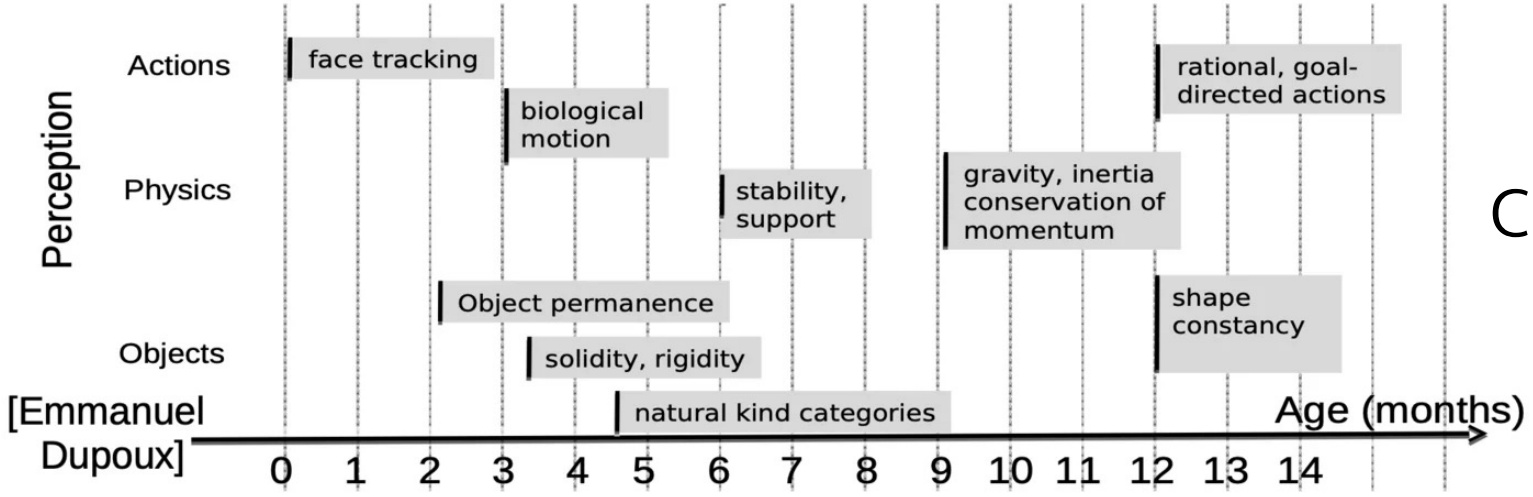
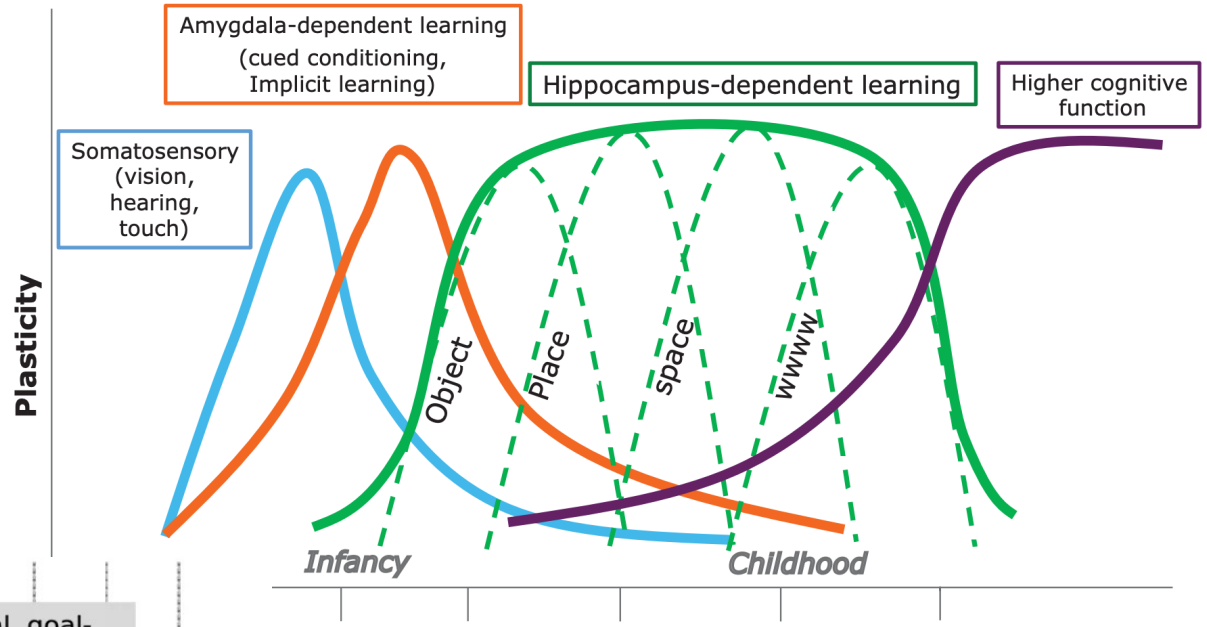
Insights from the Brain

- Perception and motion
- Low-level to high-level representation
- Hippocampus and memory
- Abstraction





Critical Periods of Development

Takeaways

- General embodied and agentic intelligence requires learning in embodied and agentic environments.
- A learning system requires both model inductive biases and data.
- There is a wide space in between pure modular vs. pure model-free (end-to-end).
- Still a huge gap in terms of learning efficiency, robustness, and flexibility.

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Logistics

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Grading

- In-Class Participation (10%)
- Paper Review (15%)
- Paper Presentation (30%)
- Project (45%):
  - Project Proposal (10%)
  - Project Meetings (10%)
  - Report (15%)
  - Presentation (10%)

Course Syllabus

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CampusWire

3052

https://campuswire.com/p/GEFF369DC

People who sign up using this link will get ‘student’ access to the class.

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Gradescope

- For submitting weekly paper reviews
- Entry code: ZJPZ3J

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Introduce Yourself

- Share an introductory post on Campuswire.
  - Please update your profile picture.
  - Say what you are interested in.
  - This also helps you know each other and find a team partner on the course project.

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In-Class Participation

- You get marks for asking good questions in Q&A periods of in-class student presentations, guest lectures, etc.
- Announce your name before asking a question.
- 10% worth of marks

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Paper Reviews

- 15% of the total mark
- Select a paper from the suggested reading list (recent only), or find a recent paper of your interest (with approval)
- One topic each week
- Due before the lectures: W3 – W10

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Paper Reviews

- Please follow the template in the Syllabus.
- Components: Summary, Strengths, Weaknesses,
- New this year: Paper idea illustration.

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Topic Presentation

- Sign Up: Students have to sign up for a slot by Week 3.
- Calendar: Week 7 – 13 (Tentatively).
- Approximately 4 students present on each topic.
- Each student will conduct a 15-20 min presentation on 1-2 designated recent papers including necessary backgrounds.

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Course Project

- 45% of the total mark
  - Project Proposal (10%)
  - Project Meetings (10%)
  - Report (15%)
  - Presentation (10%)
- Project Meetings: Pair with one of the TAs and meet biweekly.
- Week 14 + Week 15 Project Presentation. Week 14: 2% Bonus.
- Target: Top-tier conference workshops and above.
- Key dates in syllabus.

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Project Report Template

- Page limit: 8
- Including Table and Figures
- Does not include Appendix.
- What is enough?
- When you need to squeeze white space and cut down content.

DS-GA 3001 Course Project
Report Template and Instructions

Student Name 1
Affiliation
Address
email

Student Name 2
Affiliation
Address
email

Team [Team ID]

Abstract

This document outlines the instructions for the course project of DS-GA 3001. Your project proposal and final report should use this space for abstract.

1 Course Project

The course project constitutes 45% of your overall grade. The goal of the final project is to let students develop hands-on skills of implementing embodied learning systems for concrete real-world tasks such as toy games, long-form egocentric video understanding, self-driving simulation, indoor navigation, and robotic manipulation.

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Direction 1: End-to-end representation learning for perception and planning

- Existing end-to-end learning-based planning frameworks are mostly focused on supervised learning of labeled objects and human demonstrations.
- Demonstrations and rewards are forms of labels.
- How do we achieve label-efficient learning and exploration through self-supervision?
- Is planning and action necessary for a label-efficient algorithm for perception?
- Explore the full spectrum from end-to-end learning to modular designs.

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Direction 2: Foundation models for spatial and physical intelligence

- Foundation model are trained with discrete tokens and are less familiar with the 3D world to perform exact perception and planning.
- Augment pretrained foundation models with the ability to perceive and plan under physical precision in embodied environments.
- How do we enhance robustness in real-world environments?
- Can be synthetic/realistic, 2D/3D environments.
- Can models with geometric designs beat generic foundation models in terms of learning efficiency?

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Direction 3: Continual learning for embodied intelligence

- How do we apply continual learning algorithms to embodied tasks?
- Skill learning, open world learning
- Memory design, retrieval augmentation, continuous finetuning
- Incremental learning with experience/action abstraction
- Defining subgoals and subproblems
- Replay with spatial and physical constraints
- Actively choosing learning objectives

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Other Directions?

- You are allowed to form your own research ideas.
- Talk to me early in the semester and get approval.

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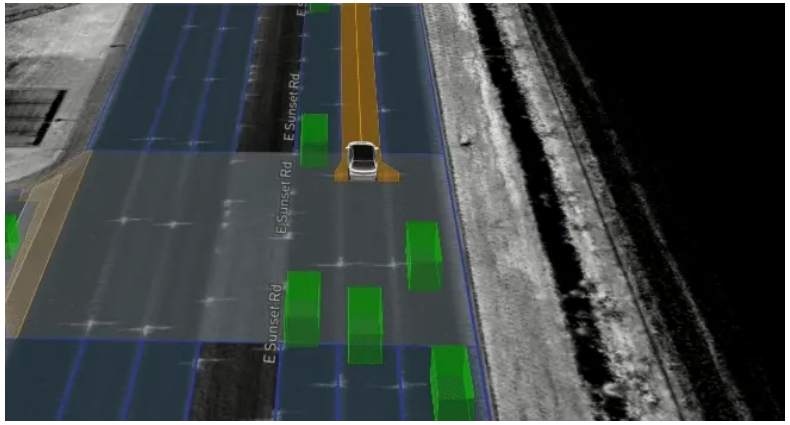
Embodied Environments

- You **must** demonstrate your project in an embodied environment.
- You can focus on one aspect of the algorithm. No need for a full stack.
- Your TAs will showcase demos on some exemplar environments.

Habitat indoor home



NuPlan self-driving

Ego-Exo4D Egocentric Videos

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GenAI Policy

- AI may not be used in weekly paper reviews and paper presentations (except AI illustrations).
- AI may be used towards coding assistance and report writing assistance in the course project.
- The use of AI can still impact the grade if the report contains poor writings and non-factual statements.

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Content

- Introduction, Brief History
- Deep Learning and Structured Outputs
- 3D Vision and Mapping
- Latent Representation Learning and Object Discovery
- World Models and Forecasting
- End-to-End Planning
- Continual Learning
- Few-Shot Learning
- Foundation Model Agents

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What's Next

- Next Week:
  - Deep Learning with Structured Outputs
  - Tutorial on HPC (Cloud Burst) by Ying

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