On the Challenges of on-the-fly Knowledge Acquisition for Automated Planning Applications

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Abstract

Automated planning is a prominent AI challenge, and it is now exploited in a range of real-world applications. There are three crucial aspects of automated planning: the planning engine, the domain model, and the problem instance. While the planning engine and the domain model can be engineered and optimised offline, in many applications there is the need to generate problem instances on the fly.

In this paper we focus on the challenges of on-the-fly knowledge acquisition for complex and variegated problem instances. We consider as a case study the application of planning to urban traffic control and we describe the designed and developed knowledge acquisition process. This allows us to discuss a range of lessons learned from the experience, and to point to important lines of research for support the knowledge acquisition process for automated planning applications.

Introduction

Automated planning is one of the most prominent AI challenges; it has been studied extensively for several decades, and it is now exploited in a wide range of applications. Examples include network security penetration testing (Hoffmann 2015), battery load management (Fox, Long, and Magazzeni 2012), and control of robots (Kvarnström and Doherty 2010; Capitanelli et al. 2018).

The three aspects in automated plan generation focused on in the AI literature are the planning engine itself, the domain model that captures the physics of the problem area, and the problem instance that contains the initial state and the goal. Planning engines used in real-world applications rely on the ability that utilising the operational semantics of the domain model will faithfully simulate progression over time of the state of the real world (in particular, crucial in the validation of any generated plan). Not only has the domain model to be an accurate representation of the application's dynamics for this purpose, but the problem instance has to adequately and accurately reflect the current state of the world, and the goal required to be solved. Knowledge engineering and knowledge acquisition issues of the mentioned models and instances are exacerbated in real-time AI planning applications, where the problem instance must be acquired on the fly to allow an agent to deal with problems as they occur. Beside knowledge engineering issues related to the engineering of the domain model that have received significant coverage (McCluskey and Porteous 1997; McCluskey, Vaquero, and Vallati 2017; Vallati and McCluskey 2021) there is the critical aspect of generating problem instances on the fly. This is also important taking into account how poor quality of problem instances can affect the ability of state-of-the-art planning engines to solve (Vallati and Chrpa 2019). Indeed, automation in the construction of a complex initial state not only aids the quality of the problem instance, but helps in the efficiency of knowledge capture. The latter is essential for the cost-effectiveness of employing automated planning in applications. Early work on such automation was demonstrated in the nine contestants of the International Competition on Knowledge Engineering for Planning and Scheduling (ICKEPS) 2009 (Barták, Fratini, and McCluskey 2010), which focused on automation in the generation of planning knowledge from existing application-held data structures, and by recent works on using templates to generate instances (Long, Dolejsi, and Fox 2018; Gregory 2020).

In this paper we focus on aspects of knowledge acquisition in real-time applications where the initial state is complex and variegated, consisting of (i) persistent or static structures, and (ii) a set of values that must be acquired and processed on the fly. We consider as a case study the application of AI planning to urban traffic control (McCluskey and Vallati 2017) for generating in real time traffic signal strategies for a major road corridor of the Kirklees council, that is situated in the Yorkshire county of the United Kingdom. We describe the knowledge acquisition process that has been designed and developed, and we take the opportunity to provide insights into the challenges of generating, validating, and verifying complex initial states on the fly. In particular, we discuss the lessons learned, and we point to important lines of research for knowledge acquisition to foster the use of AI planning in real-world applications.

Research Context

Traditional approaches to urban traffic control are based on the idea of generating fixed strategies for frequent traffic patterns, such as morning and evening peaks, and off peaks. This approach is problematic when unusual or unexpected events happen: considering the impact of COVID-19, for instance, traffic volumes have suddenly varied from -80% to $+30\%$ of typical pre-COVID traffic conditions, and the composition and journeys of traffic has drastically changed as well. To deal with such quickly-changing conditions strategies of interventions have to be generated on the fly, considering the current actual conditions of the network. Generating a detailed strategy of interventions to manage an unusual situation *in real time* is considered to be beyond the capacity of human operators. In this situation, automated planning can help strategy generation if data describing the current situation is available and adequate, and a domain model has been constructed and validated to mirror the application domain.

In this paper we consider an urban road traffic management scenario, where strategies generated are changes to traffic signal timings over a period of time, in response to some real-time goal. Transport operators need the ability to produce regional strategies in real time which will deal with abnormal or unexpected events such as road closures and incidents. These cause huge delays and decreased air quality because of excessive congestion and stationary traffic. The existing conditions and set of corrective goals required to deal with these events are so varied that detailed strategies are impossible to draw up a priori in a large, dense urban area.

There is a growing interest of the planning and scheduling community in dealing with urban traffic control problems, particularly with regards to traffic signal control. On the scheduling side the SURTRAC approach utilises a distributed scheduling system which controls traffic signals in urban areas (Xie, Smith, and Barlow 2012; Hu and Smith 2019; Smith 2020). In SURTRAC, each junction is controlled by a scheduling agent that communicates with connected neighbours to predict future traffic demand, and to minimise predicted vehicles waiting time at the traffic signal. It is currently deployed in Pittsburgh, USA, with its distributed approach suggesting good scale-up but less goal flexibility than if utilising a centralised AI planner.

On the planning side, Gulic et al's system (Gulić, Olivares, and Borrajo 2016) involves joining together a SUMO simulator (Lopez et al. 2018) to an AI Planner, via a monitoring and execution module called the "Intelligent Autonomic System". The planning representation was done using PDDL 2.1 (Fox and Long 2003), with no explicit representation of vehicles in the planner. Instead, traffic concentrations on road links are represented by relative density descriptors, such as very-low, low, medium and high. Traffic light change actions are enumerated to cover all the ways that a particular configuration would effect the arrangements of road links. By abstracting away from explicit counts of vehicles, the system can deal with regions containing thousands of vehicles. Also, the close coupling with SUMO demonstrates the use of monitoring and replanning very effectively, and allows exhaustive testing of the system under sets of disturbances (vehicle influx, road closures). The work by Pozanco, Fernández, and Borrajo (2021) exploits a similar approach to those of Gulic et al, but extends it in a number of ways: the most remarkable being the ability to learn and continuously evolve the knowledge model to better adapt to the network behaviour. In a different line of work Vallati et al. (2016) and McCluskey and Vallati (2017) exploit PDDL+ for encoding a flow model of vehicles through traffic-light controlled junctions. The length of traffic light phases are under the control of the planner, that can decide to prioritise some traffic flows, in order to reach specified goals (a phase determines which of the flows through that junction are on and have traffic flowing). Goals are specified in terms of numbers of vehicles desired on some critical road links.

Description of the Case Study

In this section we briefly introduce the PDDL+ problem model, and then describe the characteristics of the target urban region. Here we build on the work done by McCluskey and Vallati (2017) to use PDDL+ planning to generate strategies for dealing with unexpected or abnormal circumstances in a controlled urban region, such as accidents, roadworks, etc.

The Problem Model

A region of the *road network* can be represented by a directed graph, where edges stand for *road links* and vertices stand for *junctions*. One vertex is used for representing the *outside* of the modelled region. Intuitively, vehicles enter (leave) the network from road sections connected with the outside. Each link has a given maximum *capacity*, i.e. the maximum number of vehicles that can be, at the same time, in the corresponding road, and the current number of vehicles of a road link, which is denoted as *occupancy*.

Traffic in junctions is distributed by *flow rates* that are defined between couples of road links, only for permitted traffic movements. Given two links r_x, r_y, a junction i, and a traffic signal stage p such that r_x is an incoming link to the junction i, r_y is an outgoing link from i, and the flow is active (i.e., has green light) during stage p, the flow rate (r_x,r_y,i,p) stand for the maximum number of vehicles that can leave r_x, pass through i and enter r_y per time unit. For the sake of simplicity, we assume that vehicles going in the same direction move into the correct lane, thus not blocking other vehicles going in the different directions.

Junctions are described in terms of a sequence of traffic signal stages. Specifically, junctions *contain* a signal stage, and stages are connected using a *next* predicate to define their sequence. According to the active traffic stage, one (or more) flow rates are activated, corresponding to the traffic lights that are turned green. For each phase, the *minimum* and *maximum* stage length is specified. Within this range, the planner can decide whether to stop the phase currently active, or not. Between two subsequent signal stage, an *intergreen* interval is specified. Intergreens are (usually) short periods of time designed to allow vehicles that are stacked in the middle of the junction to leave, and pedestrian crossing time, before the next stage is started. The model was encoded so that some junctions can be declared as not under the control of the planner, by introducing a *controllable* predicate.

Given a fully specified traffic planning problem, and using a domain model based on that described in McCluskey and Vallati (2017), the goal is currently specified in terms of desired occupancy of some road links, to be obtained as soon as possible by generating a traffic signal strategy that optimises the length of traffic stages on the controlled junctions.

The Urban Region

The modelled area is situated in West Yorkshire, United Kingdom, specifically within the Kirklees council. It consists of a major corridor that links the Huddersfield ring road with the M1 highway and the southern part of the Kirklees council. It is heavily used by commuters and by delivery vans to get to the centre of the Huddersfield town, or to move between the M62 and the M1 highways. The corridor consists of 6 junctions and 34 road links. Each junction has between 4 and 5 stages, and between 10 and 17 valid traffic movements.

Differently from previous works, where AIMSUN or SUMO models were used (Vallati et al. 2016; McCluskey and Vallati 2017), for the considered area there is no traffic model available. This poses a significant challenge for the exploitation of AI planning approaches, both in terms of data collection and in terms of validation of the generated strategies. All the junctions of the area are controlled using SCOOT (Taale, Fransen, and Dibbits 1998). SCOOT is a demand driven, traffic responsive control aimed at handling cycle-to-cycle changes in demand. In response to changes in traffic flows, SCOOT would gradually adapt and adjust the traffic signal timings. SCOOT is dependent on its own local data sensors, usually inductive loops embedded in the road surface. Further, SCOOT stores the data coming from its sensors, and its internal behaviour, into a dedicated database called ASTRID (Hounsell and McDonald 1990). The data stored into ASTRID become a valuable source of knowledge that can be used to automatically extract information about the structure of the controlled region, as well as its current condition.

On-the-fly Instance Generation

For the considered case study, the planning system would be invoked when unusual circumstances are recorded in the controlled region. When this is the case, there is the need to generate on the fly a planning problem instance that accurately describes the traffic network, and its current condition. It is pivotal to generate instances on the fly also because the quality and informativeness of data, particularly with regards to traffic flows, decay very quickly over time: to contextualise this aspect, let just consider that the traffic demand in 15 minutes will include vehicles that, at the current time, are tens of kilometres away from the controlled region. There is a broad range of events that can affect traffic flows in such a large spatio-temporal space.

For designing and developing the on-the-fly knowledge acquisition process, we took a systematic approach. Starting from the problem model specification, data required for the initial state description have been classified according to their static or dynamic nature with regards to the region in object. The former refers to data that do not change within the class of problems that it is currently addressed (in other words, does not change when the considered urban region remains the same). The latter instead, refers to elements that continuously change according to the status of the network and of its junctions and links. This discrimination is made in terms of PDDL+ predicates of the initial state description. For each required PDDL+ predicate, the relevant data sources have been identified, its format specified, and the flow from raw data to the PDDL+ predicate has been defined and documented. Static data is extracted once, via a dedicated pipeline, thoroughly validated and then stored in an appropriately structured knowledge base. Dynamic data instead have to be extracted on-demand, and dedicated adaptors and processing steps have to be designed and deployed. Further, where possible, validation and verification approaches have been put in operation – to take into account faulty data or flaws in the data flow.

Considering the case study problem, the following data are static for the urban region on which we are focusing:

1. The topology of the road links, junctions, and region boundaries.
2. The vehicle capacity of all the road links. In our model, this is given in numbers of “passenger car units” –PCU– which takes into account the differing size of vehicles.
3. The traffic signal position, stages of signals, minimum and maximum time that a signal stage can be set for.
4. Intergreen timings. Their duration is dependent on stages (preceding and succeeding) and junction.
5. The permitted traffic movements in a junction, i.e. for each incoming link r_i to a junction, all the destination links that can receive traffic from r_i via the considered junction.

A large amount of data is instead dynamic, and need to be adapted and processed according to the day and time that the considered problem is modelling.

A. The average traffic flows between links in number of PCU’s per second. This number represents the number of vehicles flowing via a particular traffic movement of a junction at the considered time of day, when the corresponding traffic signal stage is green. A special case of this are flows in and out of boundary junctions.

B. The occupancy of the links of the network at the initial considered time, i.e. the number of vehicles for each of the links, expressed in PCUs.

C. The state of all the junctions, in terms of stage currently active (or intergreen) and time spent in that state.

Further, there is another kind of data that can possibly be required: the way in which the unusual circumstances are affecting the controlled region. For instance, in the case of a car crash, a lane may operate at reduced capacity, affecting the incoming and outgoing traffic flows. This kind of data

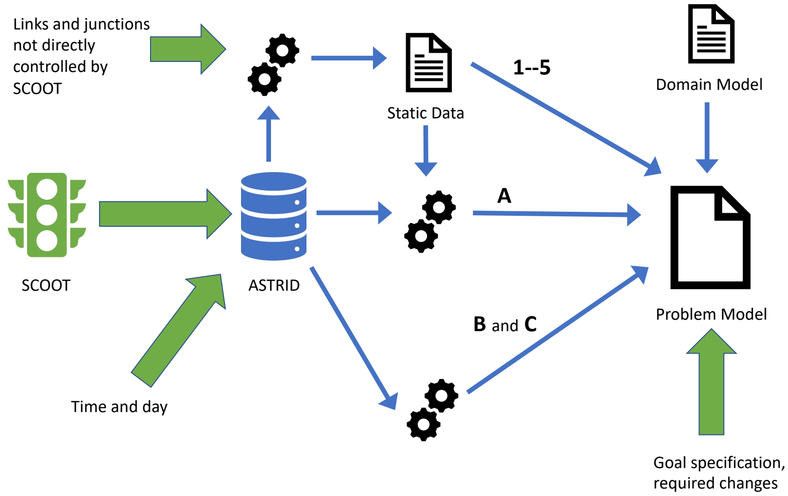

Figure 1: Overview of the knowledge acquisition process for generating a planning instance for the case study. Green arrows indicate input to be provided. Numbers and capital letters refer to the corresponding type of static and dynamic data.

can be labelled as dynamic-unpredictable, since it is impossible to accurately predict, and it is strongly dependent on the current circumstances.

Figure 1 provides an overview of the framework that has been designed to automatically generate a problem instance, green arrows indicate necessary input. This comes under the form of (i) SCOOT data being generated in real-time and stored into the ASTRID database; (ii) specification of links, junctions, etc. not under the direct control of SCOOT and therefore not included in ASTRID; (iii) a manual specification of the goal to be achieved; (iv) manual specification of the changes to the model due to the unexpected conditions (if needed), and (v) a specification of the considered date and initial time. Date and time are needed to correctly define the initial state of the problem, particularly with regard to dynamic data.

The ASTRID database represents the cornerstone of the architecture, as it stores all the data generated and sensed by the SCOOT system deployed in the region. From ASTRID, a number of reports, under the form of structured files, are extracted and processed, in order to produce the data required for the initial state description of the planning problem. It should be noted that for a given region, ASTRID is not the only source of data about the structure of the network. There is usually a number of links and junctions not under the direct control of a SCOOT system, that are therefore missing. This type of additional data can come under different forms: for the considered case study, it was extracted by manually checking maps of the region. Static data of type 1–5 is generated once for a considered urban region, and it requires to extract network information from ASTRID, that allows to understand the structure of the modelled network, in terms of junctions, links, legal traffic movements, etc. Such static data is then also needed to calculate dynamic traffic flows (A) for a specified day and time. This is to be done by considering historical data for similar period of the year, time of the week, and time of the day. Finally, dynamic data about link occupancy and state of traffic lights (B and C) is generated by processing some dedicated reports.

Discussion and Lessons Learned

This section focuses on the main lessons learned from the challenges we had to overcome, and those still outstanding.

Complexity of the acquisition process. Previous applications of AI planning to urban traffic control relied on the use of a traffic simulator as a proxy for the real world. This greatly simplifies the knowledge acquisition process: all the elements are already named using a unique identifier, data are consistent, and all the units of measurement are unified and coherent. That is usually not the case when planning knowledge models have to be generated on-the-fly from a multitude of different data sources, including historical data, real-time sensors, etc. As we early discovered when modelling the case study area, the same entities can be named in different ways according to: (i) the data source, and (ii) the expected use of the corresponding bit of information. There is also no guarantee that data stored in different databases are consistent and correct when pulled together, and that the same measurement units are used. In practice, the above means that there is the need to: (i) fully assess and understand all the data sources to be able to grasp the differences; (ii) design and develop dedicated interfaces for each source to extract and format data; (iii) design and develop approaches to merge data pulled from different sources, and (iv) thoroughly validate and verify that once merged, the resulting knowledge is correct and operational. In the absence of a unified model that encompasses all the data sources, the final validation and verification step is extremely cumbersome, and may require manual validation and verification. In our case study, we had to resort to manual verification and debugging of static data (as for Figure 1).

Data interpretation. Data pulled from different sources may require different interpretations. This is not directly connected to the inconsistent use of identifiers or measurement units, but more related to the semantic of data. The correct interpretation is usually not explicitly described in the database or in the pulled file / report, as it is not needed by domain experts, but is instead described in a dedicated documentation. Documentation that again is designed for domain experts, and heavily relies on domain-specific acronyms and concepts. While in many cases there is a single semantically and syntactically correct interpretation, there are cases where the syntax of the data structure can lend itself to multiple interpretations – those cases are the more challenging to deal with, as the fact that an incorrect interpretation is used can be hard to spot. In our case study we faced this issue with one of the reports generated by the ASTRID system. The report provides the sequence of one type of model message (out of 94 types of model messages) under the name of M37 messages, that are generated by SCOOT to record traffic light stages duration. Such report has a single line per message, and its syntax supports two alternative interpretations: one where a message describes what is going to happen next, and the other where a message retrospectively describes what just happened. Selecting the wrong interpretation can hinder the exploitation of the overall planning-based traffic control approach, as initial condition of the planning problem will not accurately reflect the real-world status.

Verification of the initial state. In recent years, there has been a growing interest of the planning community in tools and techniques for supporting the design and deployment of planning techniques in complex real-world applications (Vallati and Kitchin 2020). This resulted in tools such as VS-studio (Long, Dolejsi, and Fox 2018) and approaches that rely on templates to generate initial state descriptions of planning problems (Gregory 2020). However, most of the existing tools do not provide appropriate support for the verification of the initial state of a planning problem. This issue can have a limited impact when less expressive planning formalisms (such as classical or numeric planning) are used, but becomes pivotal for PDDL+. Existing tools for supporting the knowledge acquisition of PDDL+ initial state descriptions mostly rely on templates for automatising the process given a valid, correct and consistent knowledge base from which the initial state can be derived. There is a lack of approaches that, given a PDDL+ domain and problem models, can help to verify whether the provided initial state description is syntactically correct, but semantically wrong for the application domain. In the considered case study, examples of this include cases where the maximum green time is lower than the minimum, or where some of the traffic flows have negative values. Due to the semantic of PDDL+, such issues are hard to debug, as they may not prevent a planning engine from generating plans. To be automatically fixed, they require dedicated techniques to be developed, either based on the knowledge encoded in the domain model, or based on some additional knowledge provided aside from the PDDL+ models.

Goal definition. In the urban traffic control domain, there are both qualitative and quantitative ways to define desirable conditions of a traffic network. However, it is not straightforward to translate them into an AI planning goal definition, as required by the used PDDL+ language. On the one hand, the general idea of having a goal to reach suits the application domain, as the planning-based approach is expected to be utilised when unexpected or unusual issues arise; this kind of exploitation supports the definition of a goal to be reached to mitigate or solve the detrimental effects of the issue(s). On the other hand, in many cases there is not a direct translation between the traffic engineering "goal" conditions, and a PDDL+ formula that describes the properties of the desired status of the network. In its current implementation, the goal definition is left to be manually specified. A step towards a fully automated on-the-fly generation of problem models is the use of predefined goal templates: considering a range of expected issues, templates of goal definitions can be designed. On the fly, an appropriate template can be selected and populated according to the characteristics of the planning problem at hand. This will require the integration of dedicated techniques for guaranteeing that the goal is reachable and it fits the needs of the network conditions – ensuring that it will not lead to a worsening of the issues.

Validation of generated plans. Even though it is not shown in Figure 1, validation is a crucial step of the knowledge acquisition process, and of the deployment of the planning system. There exists a range of approaches to validate PDDL+ plans: VAL (Howey, Long, and Fox 2004) is a well-known tool; planning engines such as ENHSP (Scala et al. 2020) include validation modules, and KE tools such as VS-studio can support validation by using VAL and providing visual representation of the plan. Existing validation tools are designed to return binary output about the validity of the plan with regards to the considered models, and maybe some additional information about PDDL+ events and processes that are not explicitly mentioned in plans. There is a lack of support for the identification of the reasons why a plan fails the validation check, and the suggestion of corrective actions. In PDDL+, the need is exacerbated by the fact that events and processes are automatically triggered and executed, and not shown (or not easy to follow) in the solution plan.

Dynamic-unpredictable data. This kind of data is extremely hard to acquire, as it is heavily dependent on current circumstances and the way in which they affected the network. For instance, a crash on a link will reduce the capacity of the link, or some unplanned roadworks can change the valid traffic movements of a junction. From a modelling perspective, such cases can be handled in two ways, (i) by modifying the static data to reflect the changes in the topology and structure of the network, and (ii) by modifying the dynamic data appropriately. As an example of type (ii), the fact that a traffic movement is not allowed in a junction can be modelled by assigning it a value of 0.0 PCUs per second – i.e. no vehicles move through that. When possible, we are currently following the second approach, as it does not require to modify the static data and the corresponding pipeline. However, these changes have to be done manually with the support of a domain expert. Further, there are cases where this approach will not work, for instance in the extreme case of a crash or a failure that puts out of operation the traffic lights on a junction. Such cases have to be manually addressed, to make sure that the knowledge encoded in the problem instance accurately reflects the modifications.

Uncertainty. Planning in the urban traffic control domain involves a significant degree of uncertainty. First, as described in the above paragraph, there are aspects that are basically impossible to predict. Second, as dynamic data is collected from sensors, there can be measurement errors, and sensors can be faulty. Measurement errors are quite common in the presence of SCOOT pressure sensors that cover multiple lanes: they tend to underestimate the volume of traffic as multiple vehicles crossing the sensors concurrently over different lanes are counted as a single vehicle. Third, the SCOOT system does provide sensors readings for a link only when the green time for that link terminates. In other words, there can be variable distances between two subsequent readings and, at the point in time when the initial state description of the planning problem instance is generated, some links will have more recent readings than others. This has the potential to increase the noise of the initial state. In our case study, the first class of uncertainty has been dealt with by the support of human experts that are manually describing how the event is affecting the model. The second is dealt with by including in the processing appropriate correction factors, and checking for unusual values that can indicate malfunctioning of a sensor. Finally, the third type of uncertainty is currently dealt with by averaging the values between two subsequent readings. In the future, we plan to employ an approach based on warm-ups, as used by other traffic simulators, where the planning system is run over a short period of time, to stabilise the modelled traffic conditions, before the actual planning process is started.

Transferability of the acquisition process. With regards to the knowledge acquisition process presented in the previous sections and shown in Figure 1, a question that naturally arises is: how easy would it be to transfer such process to a different urban region? In principle, the overall process that allowed to design the exploited knowledge acquisition architecture, that includes discriminating between static and dynamic data, identifying relevant data sources, etc., can be easily transferred between urban regions. However, the adaptors and parsers designed for the case study, as well as the designed approaches for validating and verifying the acquired knowledge, are not likely to be transferred. This is because different traffic authorities rely on different databases and different ways to structure data. Further, they may not use SCOOT systems, or may have a traffic simulation model of the region to be controlled. These are all factors that will require a different flow of data, from raw to PDDL+. On the other hand, the experience gained in the case study can be fruitfully exploited to speed up the process, and to avoid repeating mistakes. The above question can be stretched also to the transferability of the knowledge acquisition process to different application domains. The intuition is that the systematic approach that lead to the design of the acquisition process can be transferred to different application domains, assuming the application domain does not involve life-critical operations. In that case, a significant effort has to be dedicated to ensuring that acquired knowledge is correct and safe. In the case of urban traffic control, this safety aspect is mitigated by the fact that traffic lights are forced to follow very strict regulations, and will ignore commands from the planning system that do not comply with such regulations.

Conclusion

In this paper we described the approach developed for generating on the fly complex problem instances, to be used for real-time planning of traffic light signals in a urban traffic network. Beside the need to generate instances on the fly, the complexity of the knowledge acquisition process is exacerbated by the different kind of data and multiple data sources involved – this is very different from the traditional way in which planning approaches are tested using simulators or thoroughly checked benchmark instances.

We exploited this opportunity to highlight the challenges that this kind of knowledge acquisition poses, and to present the solutions we used to address them in the considerede case study. We observed that there is a lack of support, in terms of tools and techniques, for the validation of generated solutions, the verification of the acquired knowledge, and the inspection of models. While this is partly due to the PDDL language, that does not allow to describe for instance the characteristics of valid states, there is also a lack of work in the area from the planning community, as highlighted by a recent analysis (Chrpa et al. 2017; Vallati and McCluskey 2021).

We see several avenues for future work. First, we are interested in designing approaches to verify initial states expressed in PDDL+; this can be done either by leveraging on additional knowledge provided as an attachment to a planning model, or by analysing the characteristics of the domain model to identify suspicious trajectories. Second, we plan to extend the capabilities of existing validation approaches, to provide additional support when plans are analysed. Finally, we are working on a language for supporting the goal specification, that allows domain experts to express goals in a way that can then be translated into actual PDDL+ code.

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