Combinatorial Tree Analysis of Optimal Strategies in Tic-Tac-Toe

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Abstract*— This paper presents a comprehensive analysis of optimal strategies in Tic-Tac-Toe through the application of combinatorial tree analysis. By constructing a detailed game tree that encapsulates all possible game states and move sequences, we systematically explore the decision-making processes inherent in the game. By leveraging combinatorial techniques, we effectively reduce the complexity of the game tree by identifying and eliminating symmetrical states, thereby streamlining the analysis. The Minimax algorithm is employed to evaluate and assign utility values to terminal states, facilitating the determination of optimal moves under various game conditions. Additionally, probabilistic methods are integrated to assess the likelihood of different outcomes (win, loss, draw) from specific game states, providing a nuanced understanding of strategic advantages. Through scenario-based evaluations and case studies, the paper demonstrates how combinatorial tree analysis can identify and validate optimal strategies, ensuring that player can consistently achieve the best possible outcomes. This study underscores the efficacy of combinatorial tree analysis as a robust framework for strategic decision-making and offers insights into its broader applications in game theory.

***Keywords*— Tic-Tac-Toe, combinatorial analysis, game trees, optimal strategies**

I. Introduction

Tic-Tac-Toe, a simple yet enduring two-player game, has long served as an ideal model for exploring fundamental concepts in game theory, combinatorics, and strategic decision-making. Despite its apparent simplicity, Tic-Tac-Toe encapsulates essential elements of competitive strategy, making it a valuable tool for both educational purposes and theoretical analysis. The game's limited complexity allows for exhaustive exploration of all possible game states and move sequences, providing a clear framework for understanding optimal play and strategic planning.

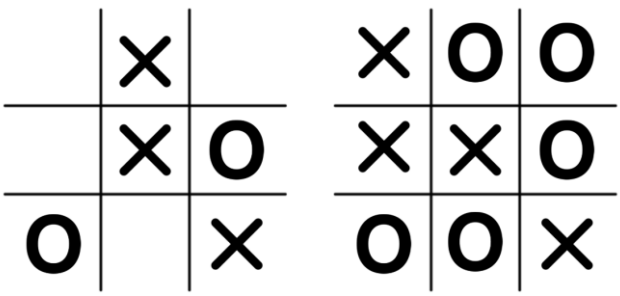

Figure 1. Tic-Tac-Toe gameboard illustration (Source:https://www.canva.com/design/DAGaNN5GAmc/P1QUp3JUdDYAJE_JmiHOTA/edit)

The study of optimal strategies in Tic-Tac-Toe has been a subject of interest for mathematicians and educators alike, primarily due to its deterministic nature and the finite number of possible game outcomes. By systematically analyzing every potential move and its subsequent ramifications, researchers can elucidate the principles that govern winning, losing, and drawing scenarios. This comprehensive analysis not only reinforces foundational mathematical concepts but also offers insights into more complex strategic interactions found in advanced games and real-world-decision-making processes.

Combinatorial tree analysis emerges as a powerful methodological approach for dissecting the strategic landscape of Tic-Tac-Toe. A game tree, representing all possible moves and their outcomes, serves as the backbone on this analysis. By constructing and traversing this tree, one can systematically evaluate each move's potential, identify patterns, and determine the most advantageous strategies. Combinatorial techniques further enhance this process by enabling the enumeration and classification of game states, facilitating the identification of symmetrical positions and the reduction of computational complexity.

This paper aims to demonstrate how combinatorial tree analysis can be effectively employed to uncover and validate optimal strategies in Tic-Tac-Toe, by meticulously constructing the game tree and applying combinatorial principles, we seek to provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the game's dynamics. The analysis will focus on evaluating specific game conditions, assessing the probabilities of various outcomes, and illustrating how strategic decisions can lead to consistent success or inevitability of a draw when both players engage optimally.

II. Related Works

The analysis of optimal strategies in Tic-Tac-Toe has been a focal point in the study of combinatorial game theory and algorithmic strategy development. This section reviews the pivotal research and methodologies that have contributed to understanding and optimizing gameplay in Tic-Tac-Toe.

A. Foundational Game Theory and Tic-Tac-Toe Analysis

Von Neumann and Morgenstern laid the groundwork for modern game theory, introducing concepts such as minimax strategies that are directly applicable to deterministic games like Tic-Tac-Toe [1]. Their seminal work established the

mathematical framework for analyzing competitive interactions and optimal decision-making.

Borel was among the first to explore simple games, providing early insights into deterministic outcomes based on optimal play, which are fundamental to understanding Tic-Tac-Toe's inherent strategy [2].

B. Combinatorial Game Theory

Berlekamp, Conway, and Guy in *Winning Ways for Your Mathematical Plays* offered comprehensive techniques for analyzing impartial and partisan games. Their methodologies for enumerating game states and evaluating move sequences have been instrumental in constructing exhaustive game trees for Tic-Tac-Toe [3].

Conway further advanced combinatorial game theory with concepts like surreal numbers and game values, enriching the mathematical tools available for dissecting optimal strategies in deterministic games [4].

C. Game Tree Construction and Analysis

Shannon introduced the concept of game trees in his paper on programming computers to play chess, a methodology that has been adapted for simpler games like Tic-Tac-Toe. His exploration of game tree complexity underpins the combinatorial approaches used in exhaustive move sequence analysis [5].

The minimax algorithm, a cornerstone in determining optimal strategies, has been extensively studied and refined. Early implementations focused on games like Tic-Tac-Toe to demonstrate its effectiveness in strategic decision-making without relying on artificial intelligence [6].

D. Probabilistic Methods in Game Analysis

While Tic-Tac-Toe is inherently deterministic, probabilistic methods have been applied to assess the likelihood of various outcomes based on different move sequences. Studies have utilized combinatorial probability to evaluate the chances of winning, losing, or drawing from specific game states [7].

Research comparing Tic-Tac-Toe with more complex games like Connect Four and Gomoku has highlighted the scalability of combinatorial tree analysis. These comparisons underscore the applicability of combinatorial methods across different levels of game complexity [8].

III. Theoretical Framework

A. Tic-Tac-Toe Game Mechanics

Tic-Tac-Toe is a classic two-player game characterized by its simplicity and strategic depth. The game is played on a 3x3 grid, where each of the two players takes turns marking a cell with their respective symbols, typically 'X' and 'O'. The primary objective is to be the first player to align three of their symbols horizontally, vertically, or diagonally, thereby securing a win. The game commences with an empty grid, and players alternate turns, with 'X' traditionally making the first move.

The game board of Tic-Tac-Toe consists of nine cells arranged in a 3x3 grid. Each cell can exist in one of three distinct states: empty, marked with an ‘X’, or marked with an ‘O’. This simple yet structured layout provides a clear framework for tracking the progression of layout provides a clear framework for tracking the progression of the game and the placement of each player’s symbols.

Players alternate turns throughout the game, with 'X' traditionally making the first move. During each turn, a player selects an unoccupied cell to place their respective symbol ('X' or 'O'). This alternating sequence ensures fairness and strategic depth, as each player responds to the opponent's previous move while advancing their own strategy.

As we can see on Figure 2, a player achieves victory by placing three of their symbols in a straight line. This alignment can occur horizontally across any of the three rows, vertically down any of the three columns, or diagonally from one corner of the grid to the opposite corner. These clear and concise winning conditions define the objective of the game and guide players in formulating their strategies.

A player incurs a loss if their opponent successfully forms a winning alignment during their turn. This condition underscores the reactive nature of Tic-Tac-Toe, where players must not only pursue their own strategies but also vigilantly defend against the opponent's attempts to secure a win. The loss condition highlights the balance between offensive and defensive play that is crucial for optimal strategy formulation.

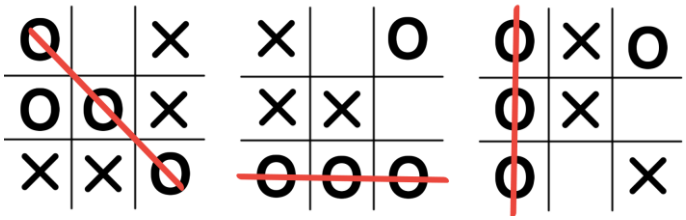

Figure 2. Winning condition for 'O' and Losing condition for 'X' illustration (Source:https://www.canva.com/design/DAGaNN5GAmc/P1QUp3JUdDYAJE_JmiHOTA/edit)

If all nine cells on the board become occupied without either player fulfilling the winning conditions, the game concludes in a draw as shown on Figure 3. This outcome emphasizes the importance of strategic play, as both players must work to block each other's attempts to form a winning alignment.

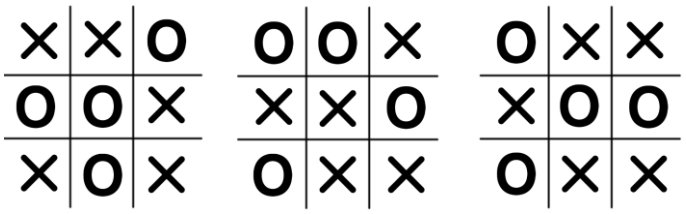

Figure 3. Draw condition for 'O' and 'X (Source:https://www.canva.com/design/DAGaNN5GAmc/P1QUp3JUdDYAJE_JmiHOTA/edit)

B. Combinatorial Game Mechanics

Combinatorics, a fundamental branch of mathematics, deals with the study of counting, arrangement, and combination of objects within a defined set. Its principles are pivotal in understanding and analyzing discrete structures and processes, making it an indispensable tool in various fields, including game theory and strategic decision-making. In the context of Tic-Tac-Toe, combinatorial concepts provide the mathematical

foundation necessary to systematically explore all possible game states and move sequences, thereby enabling the identification of optimal strategies.

At its core, combinatorics involves calculating the number of ways certain patterns or structures can emerge from a given set of elements. This involves key concepts such as permutations and combinations, which quantify the different arrangements and selections possible within the game's framework. For instance, determining the number of possible ways to place 'X' and 'O' on the Tic-Tac-Toe grid at any stage of the game is a direct application of combinatorial calculations.

One of the primary applications of combinatorics in Tic-Tac-Toe is the enumeration of all potential game states. By systematically counting the various configurations of the board, combinatorial methods ensure that every possible scenario is accounted for. This exhaustive enumeration is crucial for constructing a comprehensive game tree, which serves as the basis for analyzing strategic moves and outcomes. Understanding the total number of game states also aids in assessing the game's complexity and the feasibility of performing an exhaustive analysis.

To effectively enumerate and analyze game states in Tic-Tac-Toe, two fundamental combinatorial concepts are employed: permutations and combinations. These concepts facilitate the calculation of the number of possible arrangements of 'X' and 'O' on the game board under various conditions. Permutations refer to the number of ways to arrange a set of objects in a specific order. In the context of Tic-Tac-Toe, permutations can be used to determine the number of distinct sequences of moves leading to a particular game state. The formula for calculating permutations is given by:

$$P(n,r) = \frac{n!}{(n-r)!}$$

Where:

- $P(n,r)$ is the number of permutations,
- n is the total number of available positions (cells),
- r is the number of positions to be filled,
- $n!$ Denotes the factorial of n.

Combinations, on the other hand, refer to the number of ways to select a subset of objects without regard to the order of selection. In Tic-Tac-Toe, combinations are useful for determining the number of unique game states regardless of the sequence in which the moves were made.

$$C(n,r) = \frac{n!}{r!\,(n-r)!}$$

Where:

- $C(n,r)$ is the number of combinations,
- n is the total number of available positions,
- r is the number of positions to be filled,
- $n!$ Denotes the factorial of n.

C. Tree Theory and Node Concepts

In computer science and discrete mathematics, a tree is a widely used abstract data type that simulates a hierarchical tree structure, with a set of connected nodes. Trees are fundamental in various applications, including data storage, search algorithms, and the representation of hierarchical relationships. The study of tree structures encompasses understanding their properties, types, and the relationships between their constituent elements. At the core of tree structures are nodes and edges:

- Nodes: are the fundamental units of a tree, representing individual elements within the structure. Each node can store data and may have connections to other nodes.
- Edges: These are the connections between nodes, indicating the relationship or hierarchy between them.

Understanding the different types of nodes within a tree is essential for analyzing and traversing tree structures effectively. The primary classifications include:

- Root Node: This is the topmost node in a tree from which all other nodes descend. A tree has exactly one root node, which serves as the entry point for traversing the tree.
- Parent and Child Nodes: In a hierarchical tree, a parent node is any node that has one or more nodes connected below it, known as child nodes. Conversely, a child node is directly connected to and dependent on a parent node.
- Leaf Nodes: Also known as terminal nodes, these nodes do not have any children. They represent the endpoints of the tree branches.
- Internal Nodes: These are nodes that have at least one child node. Internal nodes lie between the root and the leaf nodes, serving as connectors within the tree.
- Sibling Nodes: Nodes that share the same parent are referred to as siblings. They reside as the same hierarchical level within the tree.

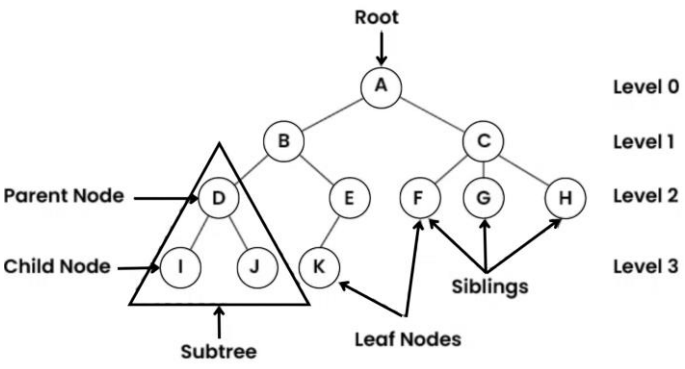

Figure 4. Tree structure illustration (Source:https://www.canva.com/design/DAGaNN5GAmc/P1QUp3JUdDYAJE_JmiHOTA/edit)

Formally, a tree can be defined as a connected, acyclic graph. It can be represented mathematically as $T = (V, E)$, where:

- V is the set of vertices (nodes).
- E Is the set of edges connecting the vertices.

Various specialized tree structures have been developed to address specific need, in a binary tree each node has at most two children, commonly referred to as the left and right child. Binary trees are fundamental in implementing binary search trees and heaps. On the other hand, N-Ary Trees, its nodes can have up to N children, providing greater flexibility in representing complex hierarchical relationships. Balanced trees inherit balanced structure to ensure optimal performance for insertion, deletion, and search operations. Examples include AVL trees and Red-Black trees. While Game trees are specialized trees used in game theory to represent all possible moves and outcomes in a game. Each node represents a game state, and edges represent player moves.

In the context of combinatorial analysis, nodes serve as critical points for evaluating and enumerating all possible configurations within a problem space. Each node encapsulates a unique state or decision, allowing for systematic exploration and optimization of strategies. Understanding the role and properties of nodes within trees facilitates the construction of comprehensive game tree, enabling the identification of optimal paths and strategies in deterministic environments.

IV. METHOD

A. Combinatorial Tree Construction and Overview

To analyze optimal strategies in Tic-Tac-Toe, we employed a combinatorial tree approach that systematically explores all possible game states and move sequences. The foundation of our methodology is the construction of a comprehensive game tree, which serves as a hierarchical representation of every conceivable move from the initial empty board to terminal states (win, loss, or draw). To be more detailed, the combinatorial tree evaluates the shortest path of every possibility (winning, losing, or draw) on each child node to determine its best move avoiding a lose or draw conditions.

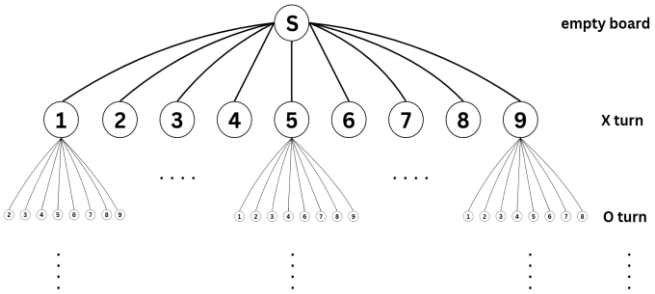

Figure 5. Our Combinatorial Tree Tic-Tac-Toe Model
(Source:https://www.canva.com/design/DAGaNN5GAmc/P1QUp3JUdDYAJE_JmiHOTA/edit)

In the Beginning, a combinatorial Tic-Tac-Toe tree have 9 nodes of children, which each node determines the condition of which box will be filled with ‘X’, assuming ‘X’ starts the first move, as shown on Figure 5. The global root determines its beginning state, which the board were still empty, neither ‘X’ nor ‘O’ has moved yet. Every move executed, either ‘X’ or ‘O’, it enhances to the next stage of node depending on which box in the Tic-Tac-Toe is being filled. For example, player 1 decide to place ‘X’ in box 1 (1,1), then, the main node will enhance to the node 1 in the combinatorial tree and ignore the rest of the global root children’s nodes.

The node will then identify the shortest winning, losing, and drawing node (which in this case the leaf node) throughout its generation node and determine its best move depending on the possibilities. Doing the same thing, traversing through its next node until the next node its Null, then the game ended.

```python
def get_available_moves(board):
    return [i for i, spot in enumerate(board) if spot == ' ']
```

Figure 6. Function To Determine Available Moves
(Source: https://github.com/brii26/Tic-Tac-Toe-Combinatorial-Tree)

The Tic-Tac-Toe board is modeled as a linear list of nine elements, corresponding to the nine cells of the 3x3 grid. Each cell can be in one of three states: empty (' '), marked with 'X', or marked with 'O'. This linear representation facilitates easy indexing and manipulation of the board state within the algorithm. The **`get_available_moves`** function identifies all unoccupied cells by scanning the board list and returns the indices of cells that are still empty, ensuring that only valid moves are considered during tree traversal.

The **`check_winner`** function assesses whether a player has achieved a winning alignment by evaluating predefined win conditions. These conditions include all possible rows, columns, and diagonals where a player can align three of their symbols. By iterating through these conditions, the function determines if the current player has secured a victory, thereby identifying terminal states in the game tree.

```python
def check_winner(board, player):
    win_conditions = [
        [0, 1, 2],
        [3, 4, 5],
        [6, 7, 8],
        [0, 3, 6],
        [1, 4, 7],
        [2, 5, 8],
        [0, 4, 8],
        [2, 4, 6]
    ]
    for condition in win_conditions:
        if all(board[i] == player for i in condition):
            return True
    return False
```

Figure 7. Function to check winner in every round
(Source: https://github.com/brii26/Tic-Tac-Toe-Combinatorial-Tree)

The core of the combinatorial tree construction lies in the recursive exploration of game states. Starting from the initial empty board, the algorithm alternates between players 'X' and 'O', generating child nodes for each possible move. This recursive process continues until a terminal state is reached, either a win for one of the players or a draw. To manage computational complexity, we implemented memoization using Python's functools.lru_cache decorator. This optimization caches the results of previously evaluated game states, preventing redundant computations and significantly enhancing the efficiency of the tree traversal.

The `compute_shortest_paths` function serves as the backbone of our game tree analysis, enabling the evaluation of each game state's potential outcomes under optimal play conditions which will be disclosed in the next section. By recursively exploring all possible moves and leveraging memorization to cache results, the algorithm efficiently navigates the expansive game tree of Tic-Tac-Toe.

B. Minimax Algorithm Implementation

The Minimax algorithm is integral to determining optimal strategies in deterministic, two-player games like Tic-Tac-Toe. It operates by simulating all possible moves and countermoves, evaluating the desirability of each resulting game state from the perspective of both players. The goal is to maximize the player's minimum gain, ensuring that the chosen move leads to the most favourable outcome while minimizing the opponent's opportunities.

In our implementation, the `compute_shortest_paths` function inspired by the Minimax logic. It evaluates the shortest paths to victory, defeat, or draw for each possible move, assigning utility values accordingly. Terminal states are assigned specific utility values: +1 for an 'X' win, -1 for an 'O' win, and 0 for a draw. These values propagate up the game tree, allowing each player to choose moves that optimize their chances of winning while minimizing the opponent's opportunities.

```python
def compute_shortest_paths(board_tuple, current_player):
    board = list(board_tuple)
    opponent = 'O' if current_player == 'X' else 'X'

    # Check win
    if check_winner(board, opponent):
        if opponent == 'X':
            return (0, math.inf, math.inf)
        else:
            return (math.inf, 0, math.inf)

    # Check draw
    if is_board_full(board):
        return (math.inf, math.inf, 0)

    available_moves = get_available_moves(board)

    # Initialize shortest paths
    shortest_x_win = math.inf
    shortest_o_win = math.inf
    shortest_draw = math.inf

    for move in available_moves:
        board[move] = current_player

        if check_winner(board, current_player):
            if current_player == 'X':
                path_x_win = 1
                path_o_win = math.inf
                path_draw = math.inf
            else:
                path_x_win = math.inf
                path_o_win = 1
                path_draw = math.inf
        else:
            sub_x_win, sub_o_win, sub_draw = compute_shortest_paths(tuple(board), opponent)
            if sub_x_win != math.inf:
                path_x_win = sub_x_win + 1
            else:
                path_x_win = math.inf

            if sub_o_win != math.inf:
                path_o_win = sub_o_win + 1
            else:
                path_o_win = math.inf

            if sub_draw != math.inf:
                path_draw = sub_draw + 1
            else:
                path_draw = math.inf

        # Update shortest paths
        shortest_x_win = min(shortest_x_win, path_x_win)
        shortest_o_win = min(shortest_o_win, path_o_win)
        shortest_draw = min(shortest_draw, path_draw)

        board[move] = ' '

    return (shortest_x_win, shortest_o_win, shortest_draw)
```

Figure 8. Our core combinatorial tree algorithm
(Source: https://github.com/brii26/Tic-Tac-Toe-Combinatorial-Tree)

This function recursively assesses each game state, determining the shortest paths to each possible outcome and assigning utility values that guide optimal move selection. By doing so, it effectively balances offensive and defensive strategies, ensuring that players make the most informed and advantageous decisions throughout the game.

C. Probability Assessment and Move Recommendation

Beyond determining optimal strategies, our implementation provides probabilistic insights into the potential outcomes of each available move. This feature aids players in making informed decisions by highlighting the likelihood of achieving a win, loss, or draw based on their current game state.

The `display_move_probabilities` function calculates these probabilities by analysing the shortest paths to each possible outcome from every available move. It inversely weights these paths, emphasizing shorter paths to favourable outcomes (wins) and longer paths to unfavourable ones (losses). The probabilities are then normalized to present a clear percentage distribution for each move's potential outcomes.

Additionally, the system incorporates a move recommendation feature that suggests the most strategically advantageous move based on the calculated probabilities. For player 'X', the recommendation prioritizes moves that maximize the probability of an 'X' win while minimizing the probability of an 'O' win. Conversely, for player 'O', the focus shifts to maximizing 'O' win probabilities and minimizing 'X' win chances.

```python
def display_move_probabilities(board, current_player):
    available_moves = get_available_moves(board)
    move_probabilities = []
    recommendation_scores = []

    for move in available_moves:
        board[move] = current_player
        board_tuple = tuple(board)

        # Compute shortest paths
        shortest_x_win, shortest_o_win, shortest_draw = compute_shortest_paths(board_tuple, 'O' if current_player == 'X' else 'X')
        board[move] = ' '
        paths = []
        if shortest_x_win != math.inf:
            paths.append(shortest_x_win)
        if shortest_o_win != math.inf:
            paths.append(shortest_o_win)
        if shortest_draw != math.inf:
            paths.append(shortest_draw)

        epsilon = 1e-6 # Avoid division by zero
        weight_x = 1 / (shortest_x_win + epsilon) if shortest_x_win != math.inf else 0
        weight_o = 1 / (shortest_o_win + epsilon) if shortest_o_win != math.inf else 0
        weight_d = 1 / (shortest_draw + epsilon) if shortest_draw != math.inf else 0

        total_weight = weight_x + weight_o + weight_d
        if total_weight == 0:
            x_prob = o_prob = draw_prob = 0
        else:
            x_prob = (weight_x / total_weight) * 100
            o_prob = (weight_o / total_weight) * 100
            draw_prob = (weight_d / total_weight) * 100

        move_probabilities.append((move + 1, round(x_prob, 2), round(o_prob, 2), round(draw_prob, 2)))

        # Best move calculation
        if current_player == 'X':
            recommendation_score = x_prob - o_prob
        else:
            recommendation_score = o_prob - x_prob

        recommendation_scores.append((move + 1, recommendation_score))

    # Determine the Best move (biggest percentage)
    if recommendation_scores:
        max_score = max(score for _, score in recommendation_scores)
        best_moves = [move for move, score in recommendation_scores if score == max_score]
        recommended_move = best_moves[0] if best_moves else None
    else:
        recommended_move = None

    # Display probabilities
    header = f"{'Move':<5} | {'X Win Probability':<18} | {'O Win Probability':<18} | {'Draw Probability':<15}"
    separator = "-" * len(header)
    print(header)
    print(separator)
    for move, x_prob, o_prob, draw_prob in move_probabilities:
        print(f"{move:<5} | {x_prob:>17.2f}% | {o_prob:>17.2f}% | {draw_prob:>13.2f}%")
    print(separator + "\n")

    # Display Best Move
    print(f"Best Move: {recommended_move}\n")

if __name__ == "__main__":
    main()
```

Figure 9. Function to display every probability in every round
(Source: https://github.com/brii26/Tic-Tac-Toe-Combinatorial-Tree)

This function enhances user interaction by providing real-time feedback on the strategic implications of each possible move. By presenting a clear probability distribution and recommending the most advantageous move, it empowers players to make informed decisions that align with optimal play strategies.

The formula implemented on determining the best move is based on the shortest length of a node through its local root dividing the shortest winning condition of ‘X’ or ‘O’ with the total length of the shortest winning, losing, and draw condition. In certain cases where there are no chance of a player to get a draw or a lose, the shortest length won’t be counted producing a solid 100% winning chance for the winner.

V. Results & Discussion

This section presents the outcomes of the combinatorial tree analysis applied to Tic-Tac-Toe, demonstrating the algorithm's effectiveness in determining optimal strategies across different game states. The analysis focuses on three primary scenarios: the initial game state, a random mid-game state, and a scenario where Player O intentionally throws the game.

A. Initial Game State Analysis

At the start of the game, the Tic-Tac-Toe board is entirely empty, presenting all nine cells as available moves for Player X. The algorithm evaluates each possible initial move to determine the probabilities of winning, losing, or drawing, assuming optimal play from both participants.

```
   |   |
---+---+---
   |   |
---+---+---
   |   |


Move  | X Win Probability  | O Win Probability  | Draw Probability
-------------------------------------------------------------------
1     |             43.48% |             34.78% |         21.74%
2     |             43.48% |             34.78% |         21.74%
3     |             43.48% |             34.78% |         21.74%
4     |             43.48% |             34.78% |         21.74%
5     |             43.48% |             34.78% |         21.74%
6     |             43.48% |             34.78% |         21.74%
7     |             43.48% |             34.78% |         21.74%
8     |             43.48% |             34.78% |         21.74%
9     |             43.48% |             34.78% |         21.74%
-------------------------------------------------------------------

Best Move: 1

Player X, enter your move (1-9): 1
```

Figure 10. Initial game state condition
(Source: https://github.com/brii26/Tic-Tac-Toe-Combinatorial-Tree)

In the initial state, the algorithm assigns an identical probability distribution across all nine possible initial moves for Player X:

- X win probability: 43.48%
- O win probability: 34.78%
- Draw probability: 21.74%

This uniform distribution suggests that, from a probabilistic standpoint, no single first move offers a significant advantage over others. However, the algorithm recommends Move 1 as the best move.

B. Random Mid-Game State Analysis

Following the initial moves, the board state is as follows, with Player X having chosen Move 1 and Player O responding with Move 2, resulting changes in the board as shown on Figure 12.

```
 X |   |
---+---+---
   |   |
---+---+---
   |   |


Move  | X Win Probability  | O Win Probability  | Draw Probability
-------------------------------------------------------------------
2     |             45.90% |             34.43% |         19.67%
3     |             45.90% |             34.43% |         19.67%
4     |             45.90% |             34.43% |         19.67%
5     |             45.90% |             34.43% |         19.67%
6     |             45.90% |             34.43% |         19.67%
7     |             45.90% |             34.43% |         19.67%
8     |             45.90% |             34.43% |         19.67%
9     |             45.90% |             34.43% |         19.67%
-------------------------------------------------------------------

Best Move: 2

Player O, enter your move (1-9): 2
```

Figure 11. O responds to X first move executing the best move
(Source: https://github.com/brii26/Tic-Tac-Toe-Combinatorial-Tree)

Figure 12. Board state after O responds
(Source: https://github.com/brii26/Tic-Tac-Toe-Combinatorial-Tree)

At this mid-game stage shown on Figure 11, the algorithm reassesses the probabilities for Player X's potential moves. The updated probabilities indicate a slight increase in Player X's chance of winning (45.90%) and a decrease in the chance of losing (34.43%), with the draw probability slightly lower (19.67%) compared to the initial state. The consistent probabilities across available moves suggest that Player X maintains a relatively balanced set of options, with each move offering similar prospects.

C. Intentional Loss Scenario

As shown on Figure 13, Player X makes a move that sets up Player O for a guaranteed win at box 5, however Player O responds x move immediately with a surprising decision, instead of placing its position at box 9 , avoiding Player X to win the game , Player O decides to throw the game by position itself to box 3 , creating an absolute win for Player X on the next move.

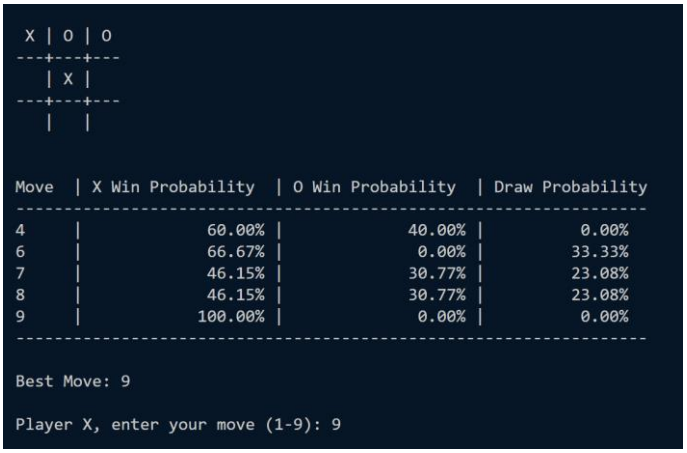

Figure 13. Player O throws the game by position itself at box 3
(Source: https://github.com/brii26/Tic-Tac-Toe-Combinatorial-Tree)

In this scenario, the algorithm identifies Move 9 as an absolute winning move for Player X, assigning a 100.00% probability of winning while nullifying the chances of Player O to win or draw. This move completes a diagonal alignment for Player X, securing an immediate victory.

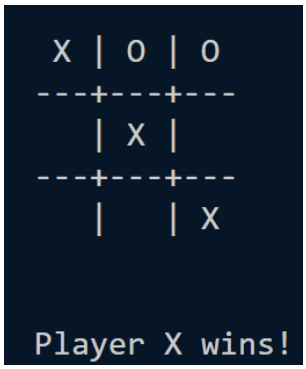

Figure 14. Player X won the game
(Source: https://github.com/brii26/Tic-Tac-Toe-Combinatorial-Tree)

D. Optimal Play Leading to a Draw

When both players adhere strictly to the algorithm's recommended optimal moves, the game progresses without either player achieving a winning alignment, resulting in a draw.

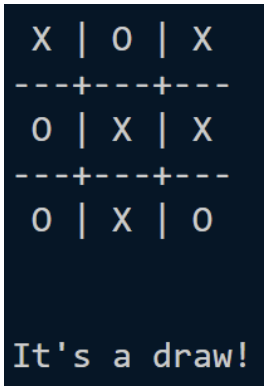

Figure 15. Draw between Player O and Player X
(Source: https://github.com/brii26/Tic-Tac-Toe-Combinatorial-Tree)

This outcome illustrates that when both players follow the algorithm's recommendations, the game concludes in a draw. The balanced move selections and probability assessments ensure that neither player gains an insurmountable advantage, leading to an inevitable tie.

VI. Conclusion

This study successfully demonstrates the application of combinatorial tree analysis in determining optimal strategies for Tic-Tac-Toe. By implementing an algorithm inspired by the Minimax framework, the research effectively evaluates all possible game states and move sequences to provide probabilistic assessments of potential outcomes. The algorithm's ability to assign win, loss, and draw probabilities to each move, as evidenced in various game scenarios, underscores its robustness in strategic decision-making. The initial game state analysis revealed that all starting moves hold equal potential, with the algorithm strategically recommending corner positions to maximize future winning opportunities. This alignment with traditional Tic-Tac-Toe strategies highlights the algorithm's foundational strength in recognizing and leveraging advantages inherent in the game's combinatorial tree structure.

As the game progresses to mid-game states, the algorithm dynamically adjusts its probability assessments based on the evolving board configuration. This adaptability ensures that recommended moves remain optimal, enhancing Player X's chances of winning while simultaneously minimizing Player O's opportunities. The ability to recall and update probabilities in response to the opponent's moves demonstrates the algorithm's proficiency in navigating complex game states and maintaining strategic foresight. Furthermore, the intentional loss scenario showcased the algorithm's capability to identify and execute decisive moves that lead to guaranteed victories, thereby reinforcing its effectiveness in enforcing optimal play within the combinatorial tree framework.

Overall, the combinatorial tree analysis enriches the traditional Minimax approach by incorporating probabilistic evaluations and dynamic assessments, providing a more nuanced and informative framework for strategic decision-making in Tic-Tac-Toe. The algorithm not only facilitates optimal move selection but also enhances the understanding of strategic balance, ensuring that games between two informed players result in fair and balanced outcomes. This study underscores the potential of combinatorial tree methodologies as powerful tools in game theory, offering valuable insights into optimal strategies and decision-making processes.

VII. Appendix

- YouTube video explaining the paper: https://youtu.be/eJb0yRSlhJU
- GitHub repository for the project: https://github.com/brii26/Tic-Tac-Toe-Combinatorial-Tree

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STATEMENT

Hereby, I declare that this paper I have written is my own work, not a reproduction or translation of someone else's paper, and not plagiarized.

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