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Toward a viable, self-reproducing universal computer[★]

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Abstract

Self-reproducing, cellular automata-based systems developed to date broadly fall under two categories; the first consists of machines which are capable of performing elaborate tasks, yet are too complex to simulate, while the second consists of extremely simple machines which can be entirely implemented, yet lack any additional functionality aside from self-reproduction. In this paper we present a self-reproducing system which is completely realizable, while capable of executing any desired program, thereby exhibiting universal computation. Our starting point is a simple self-reproducing loop structure onto which we “attach” an executable program (Turing machine) along with its data. The three parts of our system (loop, program, data) are all reproduced, after which the program is run on the given data. The system reported in this paper has been simulated *in its entirety*; thus, we attain a viable, self-reproducing machine with programmable capabilities.

1. Introduction

The study of artificial self-reproducing structures or “machines” has been taking place for almost half a century. Much of this work is motivated by the desire to understand the fundamental information-processing principles and algorithms involved in self-reproduction, independent of their physical realization [20,25]. An understanding of these principles could prove useful in a number of ways. It may advance our knowledge of biological mechanisms of reproduction by clarifying the conditions that any self-reproducing system must satisfy and by providing alternative explanations for empirically observed phenomena. Work in this area can shed light on issues regarding origin of life theories [20]. The fabrication of artificial self-reproducing machines can also have diverse applications, ranging from nanotechnology [4,5] to space exploration [6]. Ultimately, we wish to produce machines that display an array of desirable biological characteristics, including self-reproduction, self-repair, growth and evolution [15].

[★] vi.a.ble \vi--*-b*1\ \-ble-\ aj [F, fr. MF, fr. vie life, fr. L vita - more at VITAL] 1: capable of living; esp : born alive with such form and development of organs as to be normally capable of living 2: capable of growing or developing [~ seeds~ eggs] 3: WORKABLE - vi.a.bly av

Webster dictionary

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One of the central models used to study self-reproduction is that of cellular automata (CA). CAs are dynamical systems in which space and time are discrete. They consist of an array of cells, each of which can be in one of a finite number of possible states, updated synchronously in discrete time steps according to a local, identical interaction rule. The state of a cell at the next time step is determined by the previous states of a surrounding neighborhood of cells; this is usually specified in the form of a *rule table* (also referred to as the transition function), delineating the cell's next state for each possible neighborhood configuration [24,27]. The cellular array (grid) is n -dimensional, where $n = 1, 2, 3$ is used in practice; in this work we shall concentrate on $n = 2$, i.e., two-dimensional grids.

The self-reproducing systems developed to date broadly fall under two categories. The first consists of universal constructor-computers, which are capable of performing elaborate tasks beyond mere self-reproduction, yet are highly complex machines of prohibitive size, thereby preventing their realization or simulation. The second category consists of extremely simple machines which are completely realizable, yet lack any additional functionality aside from self-reproduction.

Our goal in this paper is to present a self-reproducing system which is completely realizable, while capable of executing any desired program, thereby exhibiting universal computation. Thus, we attain the advantages of both aforementioned categories. Our starting point is a simple self-reproducing structure (a loop) onto which we “attach” an executable program along with its data. The three parts of our system (loop, program, data) are all reproduced, after which the program (Turing machine) is run on the given data. It is important to note that the self-reproducing system reported in this paper has been simulated *in its entirety*. Indeed, this is a crucial requirement since our aim is to attain *viable*, self-reproducing systems with programmable capabilities.

In Section 2 we provide an account of the study of self-reproduction in cellular automata. In Section 3 we describe the basic design of our automaton. Section 4 delineates the functioning of our system, including the self-reproduction process and the execution of the attached program. In Section 5 we describe an example of a self-reproducing machine whose program consists of a parenthesis checker. A discussion of our results follows in Section 6.³

2. Self-reproduction in cellular automata

In this section we provide a short survey of previous work on self-reproduction in cellular automata, concentrating mainly on those works that are relevant to our own. Von Neumann is credited with being the first to conduct a formal investigation of self-reproduction by machines; in particular, he asked whether we can use purely mathematical–logical considerations to discover the specific features of biological automata that make them self-reproducing. To conduct a formal investigation of this issue, von Neumann used the cellular automaton model, conceived by Ulam [25].

Von Neumann used two-dimensional CAs with 29 states per cell and a neighborhood consisting of five cells.⁴ He showed that a *universal computer* can be embedded in such cellular space, namely a device whose computational power is equivalent to that of a universal Turing machine. He also described how a *universal constructor* may be built, namely a machine capable of constructing, through the use of a “constructing arm”, any configuration whose *description* can be stored on its input tape. This universal constructor is therefore capable, given its own description, of constructing a copy of itself, i.e., self-reproduce (Fig. 1). The terms “machine” and “tape” refer to configurations, i.e., assignments of states to grid cells (for formal definitions see [3]). It has been noted that the basic mechanisms von

³ For those readers who are familiar with previous work on self-reproduction in CAs we suggest a quick tour of the figures, by which a basic comprehension of our system may be gained.

⁴ The neighborhood consists of the cell itself together with its four immediate non-diagonal neighbors.

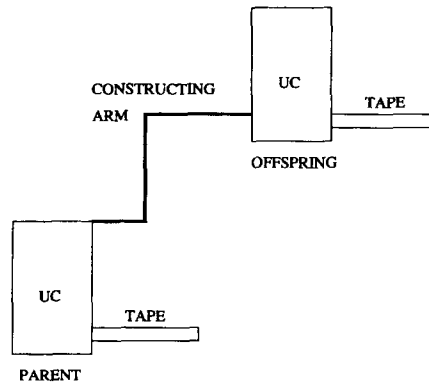


Fig. 1. A schematic diagram of von Neumann's self-reproducing CA.

Neumann proposed for attaining self-reproduction in cellular automata bear strong resemblance to those employed by biological life, discovered during the following decade.

Von Neumann's universal constructor-computer was simplified by Codd who used an 8-state, 5-neighbor cellular space [3]; self-reproduction is obtained as a special case of universal construction, just as with von Neumann's work. The major problem with both these systems is their prohibitive size, due mainly to the property of construction universality; this has prevented simulating them in their entirety.

A different route was taken by Langton who observed that the above systems display *sufficient* capacity for self-reproduction, and asked, conversely, what kind of logical organization is *necessary* for an automaton to be able to reproduce itself [11,12]. He distinguished between trivial self-reproduction, which is entirely coded within the "physics" (cellular rule) of the system (e.g., the xor rule), and non-trivial reproduction in which the construction of the copy is *actively directed* by the configuration itself. The structure may take advantage of certain properties of the transition function "physics" of the cellular space, but not to the extent that the structure is merely passively copied by mechanisms built into the transition rule. We note in passing that the issue of trivial versus non-trivial self-reproduction is far from settled; as a simple counter-argument to Langton's viewpoint consider the observation that essentially any behavior of a CA ultimately results from application of the cellular rule. It is beyond our scope to delve into this issue and we shall content ourselves to Langton's definition, non-formal as it is (an interesting discussion on trivial versus non-trivial self-reproduction is given by Ludwig [14]).

Langton's self-reproducing structure is a loop constructed in 8-state, 5-neighbor cellular space, based on Codd's periodic emitter; while not claiming to be construction-universal nor computation-universal it displays non-trivial self-reproduction. The loop is basically a closed data path, consisting of a string of "core" cells in state 1, surrounded by "sheath" cells in state 2 (Fig. 2(a)). Data paths are capable of transmitting data in the form of "signals", which are packets of two co-traveling states; the signal state itself (state 4, 5, 6, or 7) followed by the state 0 (see Section 3.3).

The signals contained within the loop cycle through it, comprising the instructions for reproduction, i.e., the "genome". As each such signal encounters the "arm" junction it is duplicated, with one copy propagating back around the loop again and the other copy propagating down the arm, where it is translated as an instruction when it reaches the end of the arm. In executing the instructions the arm extends itself and folds, ultimately resulting in a "daughter" loop, also containing the genome needed to reproduce (Fig. 2(b), for a full description see [11]).

A primary characteristic emphasized by Langton is the two different modes in which information is used, interpreted and uninterpreted, which also occur in natural self-reproduction, the former being the process of *translation*, and the latter *transcription*. In Langton's loop, translation is accomplished when the instruction signals are "executed"

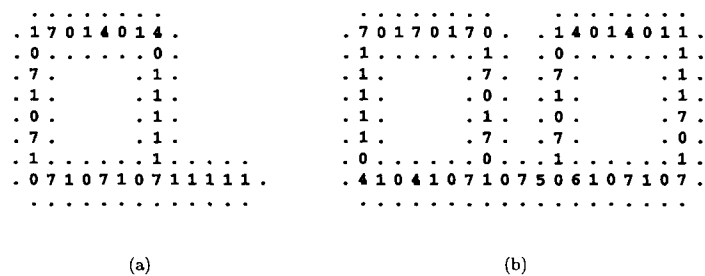


Fig. 2. Langton's self-reproducing loop: (a) time step 0; (b) time step 126. Sheath cells are denoted by dots. Cells in the quiescent state (zero) are shown as spaces.

as they reach the end of the construction arm, and upon collision of signals with other signals. Transcription is accomplished by the duplication of signals at the arm junctions [11].

Following in Langton's footsteps, smaller (non-trivial) self-reproducing loops, embedded in cellular spaces with fewer states, were demonstrated by Byl [2] and later by Reggia et al. [20]. The latter constructed several such loops, sheathed as well as unsheathed, also studying the issue of rotational symmetry (see Section 3.3); the smallest demonstrated loop is unsheathed, consisting of five cells, embedded in 6-state cellular space [20].

The loop structures discussed above display only one functionality, namely self-reproduction; while simple enough to simulate in their entirety they represent an extreme opposite of the works of von Neumann and Codd. As put forward by Langton, one can imagine a scale of complexity of self-reproducing entities, with one end representing simple, marginally non-trivial, self-reproducing structures, and the other end representing highly complex mechanisms such as the universal constructor-computer [11]. The above loops occupy an intermediate position, albeit close to the low complexity end.

The systems designed by von Neumann and Codd are highly complex and do not yield themselves easily to implementation. Taking a different approach we ask whether one can start at the low end of the complexity spectrum, namely with simple self-reproducing structures, and *add* functionalities to these entities, ultimately attaining highly complex machines, that are nonetheless completely realizable. A first step in this direction was recently taken by Tempesti [23]. His self-reproducing system resembles that of Langton's, with the added capability of attaching to the automaton an executable program which is duplicated and executed in each of its copies. The program is stored within the loop, interlaced with the reproduction code and is therefore somewhat limited (see Section 3.2).

Our work takes an additional step forward, by demonstrating a self-reproducing loop that is capable of implementing any program, written in a simple yet universal programming language. The program and its data are reproduced along with the loop, after which program execution takes place.

Before ending this short exposition, we briefly mention a number of recent research themes, which, though not bearing directly on our work, are interesting nonetheless. Ibáñez et al. [7] present a cellular reproduction model based on self-inspection, in which the description of the object to be reproduced (the "genome") is dynamically constructed concomitantly with its interpretation.⁵ This entails a more robust reproduction scheme, which also affords the possibility of inheritance of phenotypical variations in a Lamarckian manner. The *embryonics* (embryological electronics) project is a CA-based approach in which three principles of natural organization are employed: multi-cellular organization, cellular differentiation and cellular division, cf. Mange and co-workers, [15–18]. Their intent is to create an architecture which is complex enough for (quasi) universal computation yet simple enough for physical implementation; among the properties demonstrated by this group is a form of "multi-cellular" reproduction. Finally,

⁵ Self-inspection based methods were first introduced by Laing [8–10] using a different model than that of the CA.

we mention the work of Sipper [21,22], in which a non-uniform, CA-derived model is presented, and used to implement various systems, among them a self-reproducing, multi-cellular loop.

3. Designing a new automaton

In this section we describe the overall design of our automaton. Note that we do not wish to attain construction universality, a property which stood as the main reason for the prohibitive size of the machines designed by von Neumann and Codd; our aim is to attain a self-reproducing system exhibiting universal computation, which is completely realizable.

Our starting point is Langton's self-reproducing loop to which we add the capability of universal computation. Toward this end we must choose a suitable Turing machine model, decide upon the storage method of program and data, and realize the capacity for signal transmission. These issues are discussed ahead.

3.1. The Turing machine model

The Turing machine model chosen for our work is the W-machine, introduced by Wang [26] and named for him by Lee [13], who explored its relation with finite automata (see also [1]). A W-machine is like a Turing machine with two symbols 0 and 1, save that its operation at each time step is guided not by a Turing quintuple but by an instruction from the following list [1]:

- PRINT 0: print the symbol 0 on the square under scan.
- PRINT 1: print the symbol 1 on the square under scan.
- MOVE DOWN: move the read–write head one square down.⁶
- MOVE UP: move the read–write head one square up.
- IF 1 THEN (n) ELSE (next instruction): conditional jump.
- STOP.

The complete program for a particular machine is a finite ordered list of instructions with position in the program corresponding to the state of a Turing machine. After execution of an instruction of the first four types, control is automatically transferred to the next instruction. The conditional jump transfers control to the n th instruction if the square under scan contains a 1 symbol, otherwise it transfers control to the next instruction. Note that this is a program jump, *not* a move on the tape. If control is transferred to the STOP instruction, or to an instruction outside the program, the computation halts [1].

The W-machine is similar to the Turing machine model in that it uses an infinite, cellular tape, however the program consists of more easily manipulable high level instructions rather than a state transition diagram.

3.2. Representing program and data

The W-machine consists of a *program* operating on an infinite *data tape*. We must now consider how these two elements are to be represented within the framework of our self-reproducing computer. We first turn our attention to the data tape, noting that a semi-infinite tape is sufficient for computation universality [19].

There are three possibilities for storing data in our case. The first is to use the interior of the loop for this purpose, the second is to store the data within the loop itself, and the third possibility is to store the data externally with respect to the loop (Fig. 3).

⁶ In our system the tape is vertically oriented.

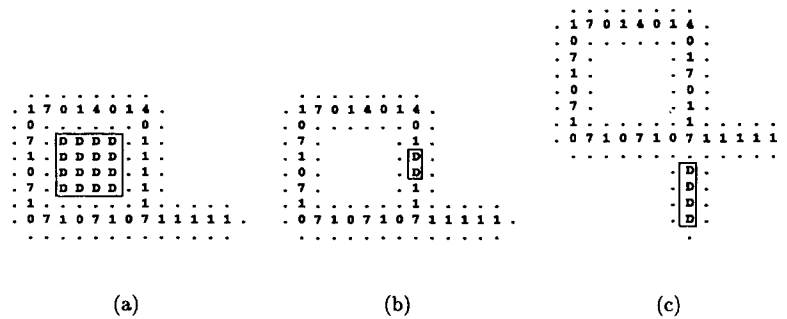


Fig. 3. Three possibilities for data storage: (a) within the interior of the loop; (b) within the loop itself; (c) externally with respect to the loop.

The first two options lack an essential element necessary for the construction of a universal computer, namely an infinitely expandable memory. One can obviously “tailor” the loop a priori to any desirable size, however, once the system begins its operation, memory size is essentially fixed, i.e., finite. Designing such a loop to actually change its size dynamically during operation would be an arduous task; moreover, this creates another problem since we end up with a multitude of loops, dynamically growing in all directions, mutually interfering with each other.⁷

Our choice for data representation lies therefore in the third possibility, which affords dynamic adaptation of tape size. As the tape can grow unchecked in one direction (down) we must limit our reproduction to one dimension (the remaining one). Thus, while previous loops reproduced in two dimensions, ours will be a linear reproduction, the other dimension being reserved for tape “growth”.⁸

As opposed to the data tape whose size cannot be limited at the outset, program size is fixed in advance; therefore any of the above three options can be used for its storage. We have chosen the third option, so that the program is represented in an identical manner to that of the data tape. This is more convenient in practice; the first option would entail a novel mechanism for reading and reproducing the enclosed program, while the second option presents some synchronization problems due to the mobility of the program within the loop.⁹ Using the third option, in which the program is stored externally, eschews these problems; no novel reproduction nor reading mechanism is required, and synchronization is facilitated since the program is essentially immobile.

3.3. Signals

In Section 2 we noted that the process of reproduction involves *signals* which are transmitted between the mother structure and the daughter one. In this section we take a look at some possible signal implementations, choosing the most appropriate one for our case.

Von Neumann’s transition function satisfies weak rotational symmetry; some cell states are directionally oriented [25]. The oriented cell states are such that they permute among one another consistently under successive 90° rotations of the underlying two-dimensional coordinate system [20] (for a formal definition of rotational symmetry in cellular automata see [3]). For example, the cell state designated \uparrow is oriented and thus permutes to different cell states \rightarrow , \downarrow , and \leftarrow under successive 90° rotations; it represents one oriented component that can exist in four

⁷ The loop of Tempesti [23], discussed in Section 2, takes the second approach, i.e., the program and data are stored within the loop itself.

⁸ Another possibility would be to use a three-dimensional cellular space with reproduction occurring, as before, in two dimensions, and tape growth taking place in the third.

⁹ These concern the maintaining of the current instruction “pointer”, and especially the execution of the IF instruction, which entails a break in sequential execution.

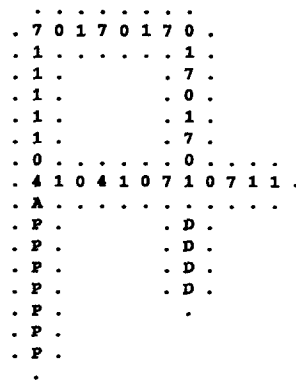


Fig. 4. The automaton structure. P denotes a state belonging to the set of program states, D denotes a state belonging to the set of data states, and A is a state which indicates the position of the program.

different states or orientations. A major problem with this approach is the large number of states required; for each direction two different states are needed, an active one, denoting the presence of a signal, and an inactive one. This also entails a highly complicated implementation of signals intersection.

Codd’s simplified version of von Neumann’s self-reproducing universal constructor-computer [3] and the simpler sheathed loops that followed [2,11,12] are all based on a more stringent criterion called strong rotational symmetry [3]; all cell states are viewed as being unoriented or rotationally symmetric. In this case, the “wire”, i.e., signal path, is bi-directional, and the direction of the signal is indicated by a trailing state. For example, in Codd’s model the two adjoined states {0, 7} represent a value of 7 moving right, while {7, 0} represents the same value moving left. Langton simplified Codd’s construction, making the individual signals more “powerful”, by altering the transition function; for example, one signal is sufficient to cause the loop arm to extend, rather than the two used by Codd. He also added a special signal, which travels *within the sheath*, and upon arriving at the next corner initiates the construction of a new construction arm. In [20] both types of rotational symmetry are studied.

Our choice of signals lies with the latter approach, i.e., that of Codd and Langton, due to their simplified form. Our system consists of three parts: loop, program, and data, with Codd-type signals used for the first part, and Langton-type signals used for the latter two. Essentially, Codd-type signals are used to store the loop’s “genome”, i.e., the instructions necessary for its reproduction, while Langton-type signals are used for handling information pertaining to the program and data.

3.4. The automaton structure

Upon examining the different issues above we arrive at our basic automaton design, shown in Fig. 4. The system consists of a self-reproducing loop onto which we attach the program and data, both of which are reproduced (along with the loop). In Section 4 we describe in detail the functioning of our self-reproducing computer.

4. Description of the automaton’s functioning

In this section we delineate the workings of our system, explicating its two main functionalities: reproduction and program execution. The 5-neighbor cellular space consists of 63 states, theoretically entailing a huge rule table of size 63^5 ; however, the number of table entries actually *used*, i.e., those which do not transform a state to itself (identity transformations), is only 8503. This renders our automaton completely realizable. Note that we did not attempt to

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. . . . .
. 7 0 1 7 0 1 7 0 . . 1 4 0 1 4 0 1 1 .
. 1 . . . . . 1 . . 0 . . . . . 1 .
. 1 . . . . . 7 . . 7 . . . . . 1 .
. 1 . . . . . 0 . . 1 . . . . . 1 .
. 1 . . . . . 1 . . 0 . . . . . 7 .
. 1 . . . . . 7 . . 7 . . . . . 0 .
. 0 . . . . . 0 . . 1 . . . . . 1 .
. 4 1 0 4 1 0 7 1 0 7 5 0 6 1 0 7 1 0 7 .
. A . . . . . . . . 8 . . . . .
. P . . . . . D .
. P . . . . . D .
. P . . . . . D .
. P . . . . . D .
. P . . . . . .
. P .
.

```

Fig. 5. Program reproduction: 1. Daughter loop has been created. Three signals are generated, a left-moving signal which will initiate program reproduction (boxed 5), a program-top marker (boxed 8), and a right-moving signal which will create the data-top marker (boxed 6).

minimize the number of states, though it is most likely that such a reduction is possible, aided by novel CA design tools (see Section 6). In the figures that follow we denote states by illustrative symbols rather than by their actual values.

4.1. Reproduction

Our system consists of three parts: loop, program, and data, each of which is reproduced (in this order) as described ahead. In what follows we use the terms mother unit and daughter unit to denote the respective systems, consisting of all three parts.

4.1.1. Reproduction of the loop

The loop reproduces in an identical manner to Langton's loop [11], with the exception that specialized signals are incorporated within the sheath for handling information pertaining to the program and data (these are explained in the sections ahead).

4.1.2. Reproduction of the program

Once the loop's reproduction ends, i.e., a daughter loop has been created, three special states are generated; the first, traveling toward the mother unit, starts the reproduction of the program, the second creates a "marker" for the program position within the daughter unit (signifying the top of the program structure), and the third creates a marker for the data position (signifying the top of the data structure, see Fig. 5). This last signal will also eventually serve to initiate the reproduction of the daughter unit, once the data structure (tape) has been reproduced in its entirety (thereby ending the reproductive process).

The signal transmitted to the mother unit first acts to cut part of the "umbilical cord" connecting both systems. It then generates a special state at the top of the mother data structure, which blocks "undesirable" signals from entering during program reproduction; this state will also serve to eventually initiate data reproduction (Fig. 6).

The signal continues to propagate until arriving at the top of the mother program structure, where it proceeds to travel down the length of the program, acting as a "read" head. For each program state encountered, a corresponding mobile "traveling" state is generated within the sheath, which travels upward (Fig. 7).

These upward-traveling signals propagate to the daughter unit. There, upon encountering the program-top marker, they travel down the length of the daughter structure under construction; once at the bottom, the newly arrived state is inserted into the growing program structure.

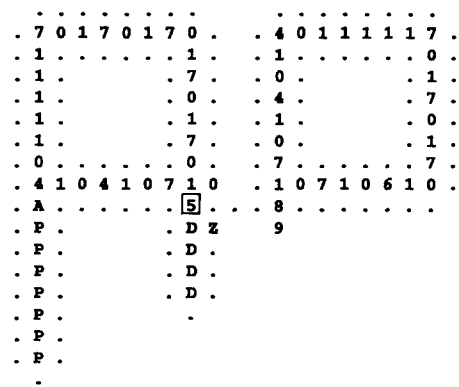


Fig. 6. Program reproduction: 2. “Umbilical cord” is partially severed. The left moving 5 signal, that ultimately initiates program reproduction, creates the blocker signal at the top of the mother data structure (Z). Meanwhile, the program-top marker in the daughter unit has been completed (states 8 , 9), and the 6 signal continues traveling right to create the data-top marker.

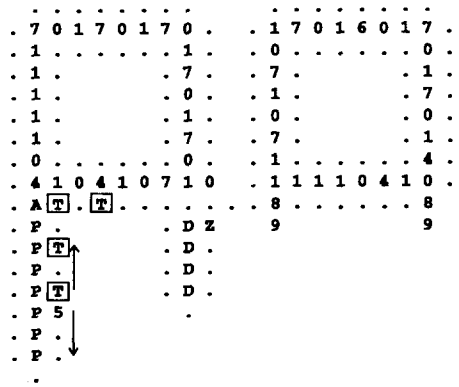


Fig. 7. Program reproduction: 3. Actual program reproduction has started. As the 5 signal moves down the mother structure it generates for each program state a corresponding upward-traveling state within the sheath (boxed T), which travels to the daughter unit. Note that the data-top marker of the daughter unit has been completed.

When the read head arrives at the bottom of the mother program structure, a signal is generated which erases the program-top marker within the daughter unit, and also ends the construction of the daughter program structure (Fig. 8).

4.1.3. Reproduction of the data

The signal that ended program reproduction also serves a second purpose; once arriving at the blocker state, at the top of the mother data structure, it activates the data reproduction process (Fig. 9).

This process is similar to program reproduction. A read “head” (signal) transforms each data state to a corresponding traveling state that travels to the daughter unit. Each such signal arrives at the (daughter) data-top marker, travels down the length of the data structure, and is added to it at the bottom.

The signal that had initiated the entire reproductive process, upon arriving at the end of the mother data structure, generates a signal that signifies the end of reproduction. This will cut the remainder of the umbilical cord, and complete the construction of the daughter data structure. Once this process ends, the entire daughter unit has been formed and can commence its own reproduction.

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. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
. 7 0 1 7 0 1 7 0 . . 1 7 0 1 6 0 1 7 .
. 1 . . . . . 1 . . 0 . . . . . 0 .
. 1 . . . . . 7 . . 7 . . . . . 1 .
. 1 . . . . . 0 . . 1 . . . . . 7 .
. 1 . . . . . 1 . . 0 . . . . . 0 .
. 1 . . . . . 7 . . 7 . . . . . 1 .
. 0 . . . . . 0 . . 1 . . . . . 4 .
. 4 1 0 4 1 0 7 1 0 . 1 1 1 1 0 4 1 0 .
. A . $ T T T T T . 8 . . . . . 8
. P . . D Z T P . . . . . 9
. P . . D . P .
. P . . D . T 9
. P . . D .
. P . .
. P . .
. P .
.

```

Fig. 8. Program reproduction: 4. Final steps of program reproduction. The last “traveling” program states are followed by the final \$ signal. This signal will complete the construction of the daughter program structure, and activate the data reproduction process.

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. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
. 7 0 1 7 0 1 7 0 . . 1 7 0 1 6 0 1 7 .
. 1 . . . . . 1 . . 0 . . . . . 0 .
. 1 . . . . . 7 . . 7 . . . . . 1 .
. 1 . . . . . 0 . . 1 . . . . . 7 .
. 1 . . . . . 1 . . 0 . . . . . 0 .
. 1 . . . . . 7 . . 7 . . . . . 1 .
. 0 . . . . . 0 . . 1 . . . . . 4 .
. 4 1 0 4 1 0 7 1 0 . 1 1 1 1 0 4 1 0 .
. A . . . . . $ . 8 . . . . . 8
. P . . D T T P . . . . . 9
. P . . D . P .
. P . . D . T P .
. P . . D . P .
. P . . . T 9
. P . .
. P .
. P .
.

```

Fig. 9. Data reproduction: the \$ signal, which ends program reproduction, also activates the data reproduction process by creating a read head (§). This head passes down the length of the mother data structure, generating the corresponding traveling states (as with program reproduction).

4.2. Program execution

We have described above the reproductive process by which a mother unit, composed of loop, program, and data, creates an identical daughter unit. Once this process is over, the mother unit can “fulfill” its function by executing the program (Turing machine).

In this section we explicate the manner by which programs are executed. This begins with an initialization phase which occurs immediately after reproduction has terminated, followed by execution of instructions from the instruction set of Section 3.1: PRINT, MOVE, IF, and STOP.

4.2.1. Initialization

As described above, after reproduction of the mother data structure (tape), a signal is sent to the daughter unit to indicate end of reproduction. A second signal is concomitantly generated, that propagates in the opposite direction, toward the (mother) program in order to initiate its execution. On its way this signal creates the data read–write head (henceforth data head) at the sheath’s exterior, and upon arriving at the program top, it generates the program read head (henceforth program head, see Fig. 10). These heads are signals that control the execution of the program; once in place, program execution begins.

```

. . . . .
. 7 0 1 7 0 1 7 0 .
. 1 . . . . . 1 .
. 1 . . . . . 7 .
. 1 . . . . . 0 .
. 1 . . . . . 1 .
. 1 . . . . . 7 .
. 0 . . . . . 0 .
. 4 1 0 4 1 0 7 1 .
. A . . . . . . .
. P H . . . . . D .
. P . . . . . D .
. P . . . . . D .
. P . . . . . D .
. P . . . . . .
. P . . . . . .
. P . . . . . .
.

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Fig. 10. Program execution: end of initialization phase. Program head and data head are in place (boxed H).

<pre> 7 0 1 7 0 1 7 0 . . 1 1 . . 1 7 . . 1 0 . . 1 1 . . 1 7 . . 0 0 . . 4 1 0 4 1 0 7 1 . . A C . C . C . . . P H C - . . P C + . . P + . . P - . . P - . . P H P </pre>	<pre> 7 0 1 7 0 1 7 0 . . 1 1 . . 1 7 . . 1 0 . . 1 1 . . 1 7 . . 0 0 . . 4 1 0 4 1 0 7 1 . . A . C . C . C . . . P C H . + . . P + . . P + . . P - . . P - . . P H P </pre>
(a)	(b)

Fig. 11. Program execution: the PRINT instruction (shown for PRINT 1). Data states are shown as - (0) and + (1). C denotes an instruction (command) on its way to being executed. (a) Before execution: data state at current position of data head is 0 (-). Command (C) at current position of data head is PRINT 1. (b) After execution: data state is 1 (+).

4.2.2. The PRINT instructions

When the program head encounters an instruction PRINT 0 or PRINT 1, it implements it by generating a signal which propagates within the sheath toward the data structure.¹⁰ When the signal arrives at the position of the data head, it is transformed to the appropriate data state (i.e., 0 or 1), and placed in the respective position of the data structure (tape). The process is demonstrated in Fig. 11.

4.2.3. The MOVE instructions

The MOVE DOWN instruction is implemented similar to the PRINT instructions. When the program head encounters this command, a signal is propagated to the data tape, which moves the data head one position down (note that the data itself is left unchanged). The process is demonstrated in Fig. 12.

Whereas in theory the data tape is infinite, in practice we cannot simulate an infinite number of cells in a computer. We therefore start off with a finite-size data tape, assuming all other cells beyond it are in state zero; if the data head

¹⁰ Note that the program can continue executing without waiting for such an instruction to end; we must only insure that successive instructions terminate after this one.

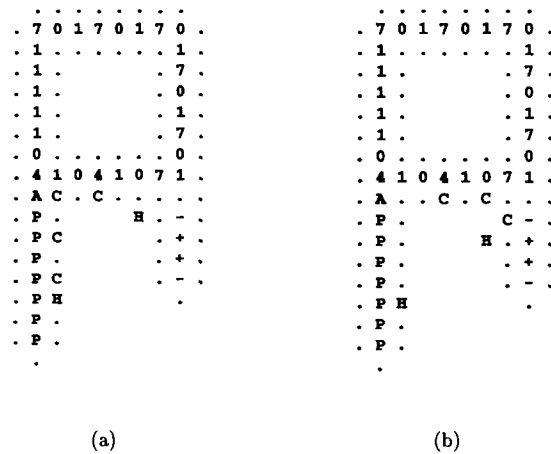


Fig. 12. Program execution – the MOVE DOWN instruction. (a) before execution; (b) after execution. Note that the data head has moved one position down.

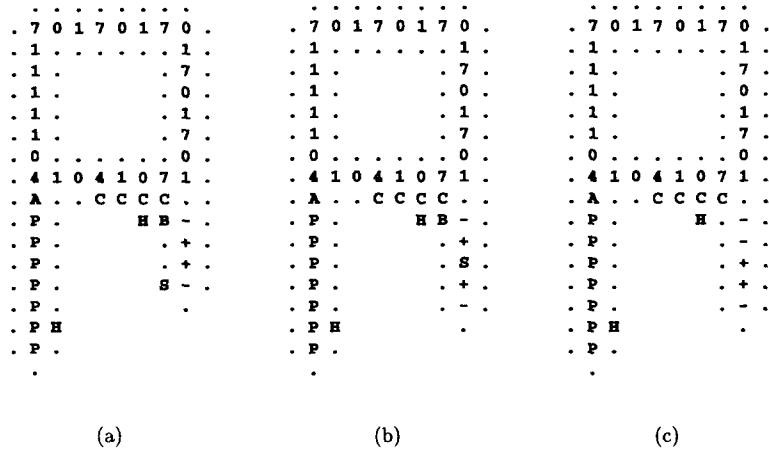


Fig. 13. Program execution – increasing the data tape when the data head is at the top and a MOVE UP is executed: (a) increase signal sent to bottom of data tape (S), while instruction execution is blocked by signal B; (b) tape has been increased by one cell. As the extension signal returns upward the data is shifted one cell down. Note that program execution is still halted. (c) End of tape increase. Data head is at the (new) top; tape has been extended by one cell, and all data shifted downwards. The program resumes execution.

arrives at the tape’s end, and a MOVE DOWN instruction is executed, the tape is dynamically extended by one cell. The MOVE UP instruction is similar to MOVE DOWN, causing a signal to be generated that moves the data head one position up. However, as the data tape is essentially infinite in both directions, we must consider what happens when the data head reaches the top position, and a MOVE UP is executed. As noted in Section 3.2, a semi-infinite tape is sufficient for computation universality, however, the programming of such a machine is more difficult; we therefore automatically augment the size of the data tape. In order to accomplish this, a signal is sent to the bottom of the structure, increasing its size by one cell; upon returning upward the data is shifted one position down, and once this signal arrives at the top the data head can assume its new position.

Note that while the tape increase process takes place, the program must be suspended, i.e., the signals sent by the program head must be blocked. This is accomplished by a blocking signal, which is essentially transparent to the program, i.e., it does not “know” that a certain instruction takes longer than usual to execute (Fig. 13).

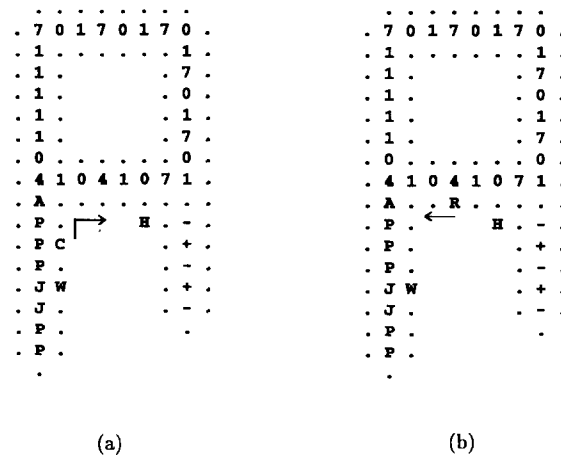


Fig. 14. Program execution: The IF instruction; 1. Testing the condition. (a) A signal is sent to the data head to obtain the current data state. Program head enters a waiting state (w). (b) The current data state, i.e., result of test, is returned (R) to activate the awaiting program head (w). J denotes cells containing the jump address.

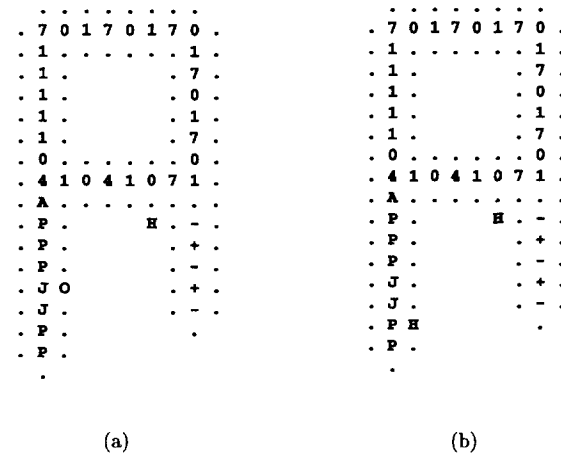


Fig. 15. Program execution: The IF instruction; 2. Condition is false (0). (a) A 0 arrives at the program head, signifying that the condition is false. (b) The program head skips over the cells containing the jump address (denoted by J) and positions itself at the next instruction.

4.2.4. The IF instruction

This instruction is the most complex one; in contrast to the others whose execution is independent of the data tape contents, the IF instruction must read some data value, and possibly engender a break in sequential program execution as a function of this value.

Upon encountering an IF, the program head waits for the response of the data head; this consists of one of the two possible signals, signifying whether the current data cell under scan is in state 0 or 1. The response “retro”-propagates back through the sheath, and activates the awaiting program head (Fig. 14).

The returned data state (i.e., condition value) may be either 0 or 1. In the former case, the program continues executing sequentially, i.e., the program head must position itself at the next instruction. It must therefore skip over the following cells which represent the IF’s jump address; this is easily accomplished since it must simply ignore the cells in jump-states 0 or 1 (these are specific states that only appear as jump addresses, see Fig. 15).

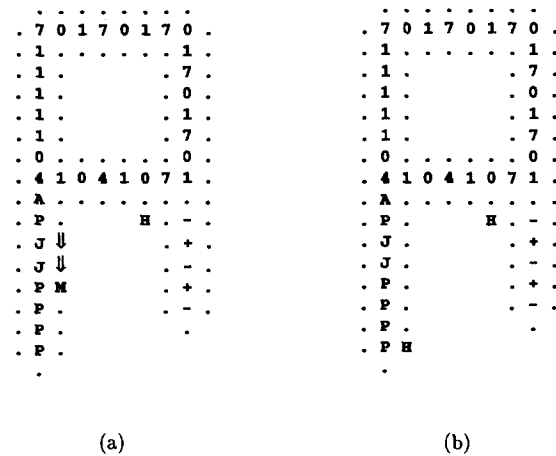


Fig. 16. Program execution: The IF instruction; 3. Condition is true (1), forward jump. (a) Generating advancement signals. Program head is in a special 'receiving-advancement-signals' mode (M). (b) Program head reaches jump destination. Note that two J's signify a displacement of three instructions (see text).

If the condition value is 1, the program head must jump to the appropriate address; this is coded by the following cells, representing a *relative* positive or negative displacement. The cell immediately following the IF instruction is the sign bit, with a value of 1 denoting a forward (downward) jump and a value of 0 denoting a backward (upward) jump.

The forward (downward) jump is accomplished by moving x instructions forward, where x is specified by the number of 1s immediately following the sign bit.¹¹ The program head enters a special state, moving along these 1s, generating for each one an "advancement" signal. When the head reaches the next instruction (i.e., finishes reading the jump address), it enters a state in which it waits for the advancement signals; as each one of these arrives, the program head advances one instruction forward. When the "flow" of advancement signals ceases, the program head changes from the waiting state to its normal state, and resumes program execution. Note that the program head and the advancement signals must be synchronized; if the head is not in the "receiving-advancement-signals" mode, the latter will have no effect. The process is demonstrated in Fig. 16.

For a backward (upward) jump the relative displacement must be read in the following cells (as before), however the jump is in the opposite direction of normal execution. This is carried out by having the program head "split" into two; the first head rests in its place, while the second goes on (down) to generate an advancement signal for each of the displacement bits (J cells), as for the forward jump. This second head will ultimately disappear upon arriving at the end of the jump address. Meanwhile, the first head, which is in a "backward-move" state, travels upward as it encounters the upward-moving advancement signals. When these cease to arrive, the program head changes from the backward-move state to its normal forward state, and resumes program execution.

4.2.5. The STOP instruction

When the program head passes the last instruction or carries out a backward jump beyond the first instruction, it disappears. Thus, the STOP instruction can easily be implemented by inserting a GOTO instruction (see Section 4.3) whose target lies before the first instruction or after the last one, causing the program head to disappear, and the

¹¹ We assume that $x \geq 2$ since using an IF for a one-instruction jump is unnecessary; therefore, the number of 1s needed to specify the displacement is actually $x - 1$. Note that x specifies the number of *instructions* to jump and not the number of cells.

program to terminate. Note that a “terminated” program can easily be detected by the presence of a data head coupled with the absence of a program head.

4.3. Enhancing the instruction set

In this section we describe one possible addition to the instruction set of Section 3.1, namely a GOTO instruction. This is not necessary for computation universality, but is convenient in practice for carrying out unconditional jumps.

The instruction GOTO (n), denoting an unconditional jump n instructions forward, is implemented using the IF instruction in the following manner:

```

i:      IF 1 THEN (n) ELSE (next instruction) { n is the relative displacement to }
i + 1: PRINT 1                               { instruction j }
i + 2: IF 1 THEN (n-3) ELSE (next instruction) { n - 3 is the relative displacement }
i + 3: Continuation of program.              { to instruction j - 1 }
:
j - 2: IF 1 THEN (2) ELSE (next instruction)
j - 1: PRINT 0 { restore previous data state to tape }
j:      Continuation of program.

```

where i and j denote instruction numbers, with the relative displacement between them being n . Note that instruction $j - 2$ is essentially a simplified jump, that skips the PRINT 0 instruction, used in the GOTO implementation; this is necessary so as not to alter the program’s semantics.¹² We note in passing that in certain cases the GOTO implementation can be simplified; for example, if we know that the current data state is 1 then we can eliminate steps $i + 1$, $i + 2$, $j - 2$, and $j - 1$ (other optimizations are also possible).

5. Example: A parenthesis checker

In this section we demonstrate the operation of our automaton by implementing a program that performs parenthesis checking. This problem is to decide whether a sequence of left and right parentheses is *well-formed*, i.e., whether they can be paired off from inside to outside so that each left parenthesis has a right-hand mate. The problem was discussed at length by Minsky [19]; note that the computation involved corresponds to recognition of a non-regular language.

A good procedure for checking parentheses consists of searching to the right for a right parenthesis and then searching to the left for its mate and removing both. One keeps doing this until no more pairs are found. If any unmatched symbols remain, the expression is not well-formed, and conversely. The input consists of left and right parentheses enclosed between the symbol A, e.g., A (() ()) A [19].

To implement this procedure we need four input symbols: (,), A, and X (the removal symbol). As our data tape consists of two symbols, we use the following two bit code:

00	A
01	X
10	(
11)

¹² Note that this instruction is reached only if a jump is made to an instruction between $i + 3$ and $j - 3$.

The program's output is a data state of 1 or 0 placed in the uppermost data cell, signifying whether the input string is well-formed or not well-formed, respectively. The program listing is given in Appendix A. Note that the self-reproducing parenthesis checker has been implemented in its entirety.

6. Discussion

In this paper we presented a self-reproducing system, consisting of three parts: a loop, a program and data; the entire system is reproduced, after which the program is executed on the given data. We remark that as the W-machine used is a Turing-machine equivalent, we can theoretically implement a universal Turing machine, i.e., a machine which accepts as input the description of any program and its data, and then runs (or simulates) the program on the given data.

One problem which as yet remains unresolved is that of dynamical input; currently, the data tape is precisely reproduced, with each daughter unit containing the same data. One possibility is the use of randomly generated data, in cases where the program operates on random input sets; another option is to obtain data at grid boundaries or at specific regions of the grid. These are only traces of ideas; in fact, the problem of data acquisition affects many systems, including CA-based ones, and will require continued research in order to arrive at satisfactory solutions.

A number of possible improvements and extensions of our system are possible. The number of CA states currently used is 63; as noted in Section 4, the actual number of non-identity rule table entries is small, thus rendering our system realizable. Still, it would be interesting to reduce the number of states; indeed, automatic tools for the construction of CA rule tables have recently made their appearance on the scene, e.g., that developed by Tempesti [23] and used as a basis for our work.

The program language we have used (W-machine) is simple, consisting of a small instruction set, of which we have already seen one possible enhancement in Section 4.3. One can conceive of developing a high level language (or using an existing one), with a compiler for our "machine" language. This could form the basis of a programming environment, allowing high level programming of self-reproducing, computing systems.

Looking further into the future one can imagine a system comprising several *interacting* self-reproducing machines, each with a (possibly) different functionality (i.e., program and data). These interactions could be of a cooperative or a competitive nature, the end result being a system displaying some global (worthwhile) functioning. An evolutionary component could also be added to such a system, increasing its adaptive capabilities, and allowing us to control or "program" its behavior [28,29].

Self-reproducing, computing systems hold potential, both from an applicative standpoint as well as from a theoretical one. This work has shed light on the possibility of constructing such systems, and demonstrated the feasibility of their practical implementation.

... living organisms are very complicated aggregations of elementary parts, and by any reasonable theory of probability or thermodynamics highly improbable. That they should occur in the world at all is a miracle of the first magnitude; the only thing which removes, or mitigates, this miracle is that they reproduce themselves. Therefore, if by any peculiar accident there should ever be one of them, from there on the rules of probability do not apply, and there will be many of them, at least if the milieu is reasonable.

John von Neumann
Theory of Self-Reproducing Automata

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Appendix A. Program listing of the parenthesis checker

The program, written using the instruction set of Section 3.1, is based on Minsky’s state transition table detailed in [19, pp. 121–123]

```

LABEL State_0           33      MOVE UP
0      PRINT 0           34      IF 1 THEN 24 (LABEL State_1 + 1)
1      MOVE DOWN        35      PRINT 1
2      IF 1 THEN 12 (LABEL Case_0_1_?) 36      IF 1 THEN 23 (LABEL State_1)

LABEL Case_0_0_?       LABEL Case_1_1_?
3      MOVE DOWN        37      MOVE DOWN
4      IF 1 THEN 1 (LABEL State_0 + 1) 38      IF 1 THEN 44 (LABEL Case_1_1_1)

LABEL Case_0_0_0       LABEL Case_1_1_0
5      MOVE UP           39      MOVE UP
6      MOVE UP           40      PRINT 0
7      MOVE UP           41      MOVE DOWN
8      MOVE UP           42      PRINT 1
9      IF 1 THEN 50 (LABEL State_2 + 1) 43      IF 1 THEN 1 (LABEL State_0 + 1)
10     PRINT 1
11     IF 1 THEN 49 (LABEL State_2)    LABEL Case_1_1_1
44     MOVE UP
45     MOVE UP
46     MOVE UP
47     MOVE UP
48     IF 1 THEN 24 (LABEL State_1 + 1)

LABEL Case_0_1_?       LABEL State_2
12     MOVE DOWN        49     PRINT 0
13     IF 1 THEN 16 (LABEL Case_0_1_1) 50     MOVE DOWN
51     IF 1 THEN 63 (LABEL Last)

LABEL Case_0_1_0       LABEL Case_2_0_?
14     PRINT 1           52     MOVE DOWN
15     IF 1 THEN 0 (LABEL State_0)     53     IF 1 THEN 56 (LABEL Case_2_0_1)

LABEL Case_0_1_1       LABEL Case_2_0_0
16     MOVE UP           54     PRINT 1 (Well-formed)
17     PRINT 0           55     IF 1 THEN 64 (LABEL Last + 1)
18     MOVE UP
19     MOVE UP
20     MOVE UP
21     IF 1 THEN 24 (LABEL State_1 + 1) LABEL Case_2_0_1
22     PRINT 1           56     MOVE UP
57     MOVE UP
58     MOVE UP
59     MOVE UP
60     IF 1 THEN 50 (LABEL State_2 + 1)
61     PRINT 1
62     IF 1 THEN 49 (LABEL State_2)

LABEL State_1
23     PRINT 0
24     MOVE DOWN
25     IF 1 THEN 37 (LABEL Case_1_1_?)
26     MOVE DOWN
27     IF 1 THEN 30 (LABEL Case_1_0_1)

LABEL Case_1_0_0
28     PRINT 1
29     IF 1 THEN 63 (LABEL Last)

LABEL Case_1_0_1
30     MOVE UP
31     MOVE UP
32     MOVE UP

LABEL Last
63     PRINT 0 (NOT Well-formed)
    
```

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