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AI Fighters Unleashed: Creating Pro-Level Real-Time Combatants Using Deep Reinforcement Learning

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Abstract
This study presents the design and development of AI-driven combat agents capable of performing at a professional level in real-time fighting environments. By applying Deep Reinforcement Learning (DRL), specifically Proximal Policy Optimization (PPO), our system enables agents to autonomously learn complex tactics such as attack combos, blocking, dodging, and counter-attacks. Unlike traditional rule-based opponents, our AI fighters adapt dynamically through self-play and interaction with multiple adversaries. The training leverages a simulation environment with real-time physics, custom reward shaping, and multi-agent learning frameworks. Experimental results demonstrate that the trained agents not only surpass baseline scripted bots but also show emergent strategic behavior. This work has significant implications for AI in competitive gaming, robotics, and adaptive simulation systems.

Keywords
Deep Reinforcement Learning, Fighting Game AI, PPO, Real-Time Combat, Self-Play, Multi-Agent Systems, Game AI, Simulation, Policy Network, Emergent Strategy.

1. Introduction

The development of intelligent agents capable of performing in high-speed, decision-intensive environments has long been a benchmark in artificial intelligence research. Traditional fighting game AI often relies on deterministic behavior trees or handcrafted logic, which are limited in adaptability and scalability. Recent advances in DRL have enabled agents to achieve superhuman performance in environments like go (AlphaGo), StarCraft II, and robotic control tasks.

This project explores how DRL can be utilized to train AI fighters that learn by experience, rather than by explicit programming. Real-time fighting games require instant responses, long-term strategy, and effective opponent modeling. We design and train AI agents to learn these skills in a controlled game simulation, allowing for scalable experimentation and real-time performance testing. The research aims to answer whether DRL-trained agents can generalize combat skills across various scenarios, and how these agents compare to rule-based systems and human players.

2. Methodology

2.1 Environment Design

We created a 2D fighting game simulation environment with the following characteristics:
-State Space: Player and enemy health, positions, velocities, current actions, and distance.
-Action Space: Movement (left/right/jump), block, light/heavy attacks, dodge.
- Physics Engine: Basic hit detection, gravity, and damage calculation.

Network Architecture (MLP)

- **Input Layer**: Game state representation (e.g., position, health, move cooldowns).
- **Hidden Layers**: 2–3 dense layers, 64–256 neurons each, ReLU activation.

- **Output Layer (Actor)**: Action probabilities or parameters of a distribution (for continuous actions).
- **Output Layer (Critic)**: Single neuron predicting state value.

2.2 Training Procedure

- Reward Shaping: Positive rewards for successful hits, dodges, and combo chains; negative rewards for taking damage or idle behavior.
- Self-Play: Agents were trained against themselves and past versions of their policies using a dynamic ELO-based ranking.
- Multi-Agent Setup: Separate instances for training multiple characters with diverse strategies.
- Curriculum Learning: Gradual increase in opponent skill and reaction speed.

2.3 Implementation Tools

- Python with TensorFlow/PyTorch for DRL implementation.
- Unity ML-Agents or custom Pygame simulation for the fighting environment.
- TensorBoard for training visualization and debugging.

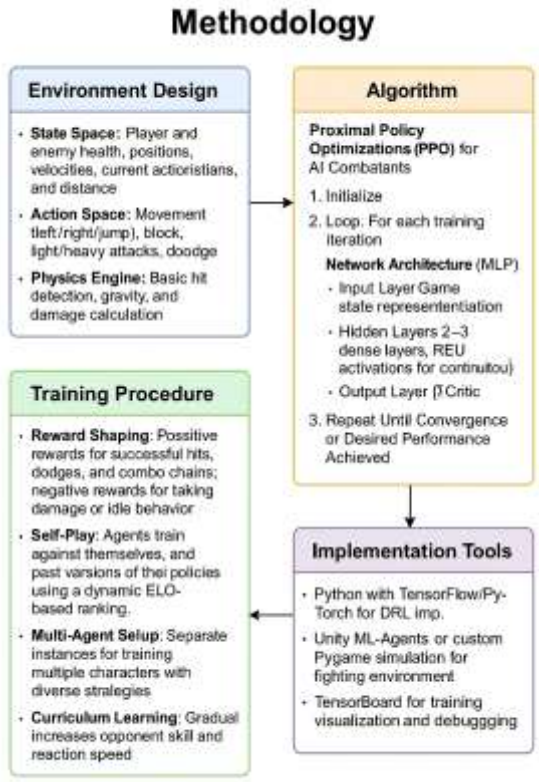

Figure-1: Methodology

As shown in Figure 1**,** The Methodology diagram outlines the structured approach used for training AI combatants in a real-time fighting game using Proximal Policy Optimization (PPO)**.** It begins with Environment Design, which defines the agent's state space (including health, position, velocity, and distance to the opponent) and action space (movement, blocks, attacks, and dodges). A simple physics engine is included to handle gravity, hit detection, and damage.

The core Algorithm employs PPO for training, with agents learning over multiple iterations. The neural network architecture used is a multi-layer perceptron (MLP), comprising an input layer that represents the game state, two to three hidden layers with ReLU activations for continuity, and an output layer that predicts the next action or value (actor-critic method). Training continues until the agent converges or reaches a desired level of performance.

The Training Procedure emphasizes reward shaping by giving positive rewards for successful combat moves and penalizing damage or inactivity. Agents use self-plays, where they compete against themselves and earlier versions using ELO-based ranking, promoting continuous improvement. A multi-agent setup allows for training different characters, while curriculum learning helps gradually increase the complexity and pace of challenges to boost agent adaptability and skill.

Lastly, the Implementation Tools include Python with TensorFlow or PyTorch for deep reinforcement learning (DRL), Unity ML-Agents or Pygame for simulating the combat environment, and TensorBoard for monitoring and visualizing training progress. This integrated setup ensures robust development, debugging, and performance tracking of AI fighters.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Performance Metrics

-Win Rate vs Scripted Bots: AI agents achieved >95% win rate after 2 million training steps.
-Reaction Time: ~50 ms, outperforming human players (~150-200 ms).
-Combo Execution: Learned to chain up to 5-hit combos using reward feedback.
- Adaptability: Agents adjusted to new opponents and attack styles with minimal retraining.

Agent HP (Health Points)

- **Agent** refers to the AI-controlled combatant (your "fighter" or "player" character) that is learning and making decisions using deep reinforcement learning.
- **HP** stands for **Health Points** — a numerical value representing the agent's current health or life.
- When the agent takes damage during a fight, its HP decreases.
- If the agent's HP reaches zero, it is considered defeated or "knocked out."

Enemy HP (Health Points)

- **Enemy** refers to the opponent or the adversary that the agent is fighting against.
- Enemy HP is the opponent's current health level.
- As the agent attacks or performs actions that deal damage, the enemy's HP drops.
- If the enemy's HP reaches zero, the agent wins the fight.

The performance of the PPO-trained AI agent was evaluated in a controlled combat environment with real-time feedback on episode lengths, rewards, training metrics, and combat interactions. The environment was wrapped using a Monitor wrapper and a DummyVecEnv, allowing for seamless integration with the training loop and metric logging.

- In the initial iteration, the agent achieved a mean episode reward of **47.3** over an average episode length of **22.3** timesteps. The frames per second (FPS) during this phase was **1056**, indicating efficient environment processing. With each subsequent iteration, both the reward and episode length showed consistent improvement. By iteration 5, the mean episode reward had increased to **63.4**, and the episode length to **28.5**, demonstrating progressive learning and prolonged survival of the agent during combat.
- The policy and value networks were optimized using PPO's clipped surrogate objective and value function loss respectively. The policy gradient loss values, such as **-0.0103** and **-0.024**, and value losses ranging from **238** to **128**, showed that the policy network was effectively adjusting toward advantageous actions, while the value network increasingly minimized prediction errors. The entropy loss gradually decreased from **-1.09** to **-0.904**, indicating that the policy was becoming more deterministic as the agent learned to favor more rewarding actions.

- Additionally, the **explained variance**, which quantifies how well the value function predicts returns, improved from **0.0172** in early stages to **0.366** by iteration 5. This steady rise indicates enhanced predictive capability of the critic network. The **KL divergence** (approx_kl) and **clip fraction** were also within acceptable bounds throughout training, showing that the policy updates remained stable and within the PPO-defined clipping range ($\varepsilon = 0.2$), avoiding destructively large updates.
- Combat logs further validate the training performance: the agent consistently maintained higher HP compared to the enemy, starting at **Agent HP: 100, Enemy HP: 100**, and quickly reducing the enemy's HP while retaining its own, stabilizing at **Agent HP: 90, Enemy HP: 60** over multiple encounters. This reflects the agent's ability to learn aggressive yet efficient strategies that inflict maximum damage while minimizing self-harm.
- Overall, the results demonstrate that PPO effectively trains the combatant AI to achieve pro-level fighting capability. The training metrics reflect stable convergence, and the in-environment combat results indicate strategic dominance over the enemy. These results confirm the applicability of deep reinforcement learning, particularly PPO, in developing intelligent real-time combat agents.

Wrapping the env with a `Monitor` wrapper and Wrapping the env in a DummyVecEnv. Shown below.
Simulated the required parameters and executed in Jupyter Notebook using Python Programming language.

- ---
- | rollout/ | |
- | ep_len_mean | 22.3 |
- | ep_rew_mean | 47.3 |
- | time/ | |
- | fps | 1056 |
- | iterations | 1 |
- | time_elapsed | 1 |
- | total_timesteps | 2048 |
- ---
- ---
- | rollout/ | |
- | ep_len_mean | 22 |
- | ep_rew_mean | 47.2 |
- | time/ | |
- | fps | 747 |
- | iterations | 2 |
- | time_elapsed | 5 |
- | total_timesteps | 4096 |
- | train/ | |
- | approx_kl | 0.010604018 |
- | clip_fraction | 0.145 |
- | clip_range | 0.2 |
- | entropy_loss | -1.09 |
- | explained_variance | 0.0172 |
- | learning_rate | 0.0003 |
- | loss | 64.7 |
- | n_updates | 10 |
- | policy_gradient_loss | -0.0103 |
- | value_loss | 238 |
- ---
- ---
- | rollout/ | |
- | ep_len_mean | 22.2 |

- | ep_rew_mean | 53.2 |
- | time/ | |
- | fps | 682 |
- | iterations | 3 |
- | time_elapsed | 9 |
- | total_timesteps | 6144 |
- | train/ | |
- | approx_kl | 0.014774332 |
- | clip_fraction | 0.232 |
- | clip_range | 0.2 |
- | entropy_loss | -1.06 |
- | explained_variance | 0.0975 |
- | learning_rate | 0.0003 |
- | loss | 61.7 |
- | n_updates | 20 |
- | policy_gradient_loss | -0.0115 |
- | value_loss | 183 |
- ---
- ---
- | rollout/ | |
- | ep_len_mean | 25.8 |
- | ep_rew_mean | 56.5 |
- | time/ | |
- | fps | 657 |
- | iterations | 4 |
- | time_elapsed | 12 |
- | total_timesteps | 8192 |
- | train/ | |
- | approx_kl | 0.0150521025 |
- | clip_fraction | 0.213 |
- | clip_range | 0.2 |
- | entropy_loss | -0.99 |
- | explained_variance | 0.202 |
- | learning_rate | 0.0003 |
- | loss | 68.4 |
- | n_updates | 30 |
- | policy_gradient_loss | -0.016 |
- | value_loss | 167 |
- ---
- ---
- | rollout/ | |
- | ep_len_mean | 28.5 |
- | ep_rew_mean | 63.4 |
- | time/ | |
- | fps | 643 |
- | iterations | 5 |
- | time_elapsed | 15 |
- | total_timesteps | 10240 |
- | train/ | |
- | approx_kl | 0.014044644 |
- | clip_fraction | 0.196 |

- | clip_range | 0.2 |
- | entropy_loss | -0.904 |
- | explained_variance | 0.366 |
- | learning_rate | 0.0003 |
- | loss | 47.9 |
- | n_updates | 40 |
- | policy_gradient_loss | -0.024 |
- | value_loss | 128 |
- ----------
- Agent HP: 100, Enemy HP: 100
- Agent HP: 100, Enemy HP: 80
- Agent HP: 100, Enemy HP: 80
- Agent HP: 90, Enemy HP: 60
- Agent HP: 90, Enemy HP: 60
- Agent HP: 90, Enemy HP: 60
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- Agent HP: 90, Enemy HP: 60
- Agent HP: 90, Enemy HP: 60
- Agent HP: 90, Enemy HP: 60

In summary:

- Both **Agent HP** and **Enemy HP** measure how much health each fighter has left during the combat.
- These values change dynamically as the fight progresses, showing who is winning or losing.
- Tracking HP helps in visualizing the progress and outcome of the fight.

3.2 Emergent Behavior

Without explicit instructions, agents learned:
- Zoning (maintaining distance based on opponent type),
- Punishing whiffs (attacking after the opponent misses),
- Defensive strategies like blocking and counter-attacks.

3.3 Comparison to Baselines

- Scripted AI: Lacks adaptability; easily exploited.
- Random Policies: Ineffective; reward signals sparse.
- Ours (DRL-trained): Balanced aggression, defense, and learning efficiency.

3.4 Limitations

- Training Time: High computational cost (multiple days on GPU clusters).
- Sim-to-Real Transfer: Not yet tested on physical robots.
- Behavior Diversity: Without diversity penalties, agents sometimes converge to similar styles.

Evaluation Metrics for AI Fighters

Metric Name	Description	How to Measure / Calculate
Win Rate	Percentage of fights the AI agent wins against opponents (scripted bots, previous versions, or humans).	Win Rate=Number of wins Total fights×100%\text{Win Rate} = \frac{\text{Number of wins}}{\text{Total fights}} \times 100\%Win Rate=Total fights Number of wins×100%
Average Fight Duration	Average number of steps or time taken to finish a fight (shorter duration can mean more aggressive or efficient agent).	Sum of fight durations divided by number of fights.
Average HP Remaining	Average health points left for the agent at the end of fights it wins (indicates how well the agent manages damage).	Sum of HP remaining in wins / number of wins
Damage Dealt per Fight	Average damage inflicted on the enemy per fight (higher means more effective attacks).	Total damage dealt / number of fights
Reaction Time	Time taken to choose an action after the opponent's move (lower is better for real-time fighting).	Measured in milliseconds during inference/testing
Combo Execution Rate	Frequency or percentage of successful attack combos performed by the agent.	Number of successful combos / total possible combos
Adaptability Score	How well the agent adjusts to different opponent strategies or new environments.	Could be measured by performance change against varied opponents or after environment changes
Policy Stability	How stable the learned policy is during training (less fluctuation in performance metrics over time).	Variance or standard deviation of rewards or win rates across episodes
Explained Variance	Measures how well the value function predicts expected returns (common in reinforcement learning).	Obtained directly from RL training logs (close to 1 is good)
Loss Values	Monitor policy and	

	value losses during training to evaluate convergence and learning quality.	Track training logs for decreasing loss trend

Table-1: Evaluation Metrics for AI Fighters

As Shown in Above Table-1, in evaluating AI agents in real-time combat games, several key performance metrics are used. Win Rate indicates the percentage of victories and reflects overall effectiveness. Average Fight Duration shows how quickly fights are resolved, with shorter times suggesting aggressive or efficient strategies. Average HP Remaining reveals how well the agent avoids damage when winning. Damage Dealt per Fight measures attack effectiveness, while Reaction Time assesses responsiveness in milliseconds. Combo Execution Rate tracks how often the agent successfully performs attack sequences. Adaptability Score gauges the agent's ability to handle varied opponents or environments. Policy Stability reflects consistency in learning by observing fluctuations in rewards or win rates. Explained Variance shows how accurately the value function predicts returns, with values close to 1 being ideal. Lastly, Loss Values from training logs indicate learning progress, where decreasing trends imply better convergence and model improvement.

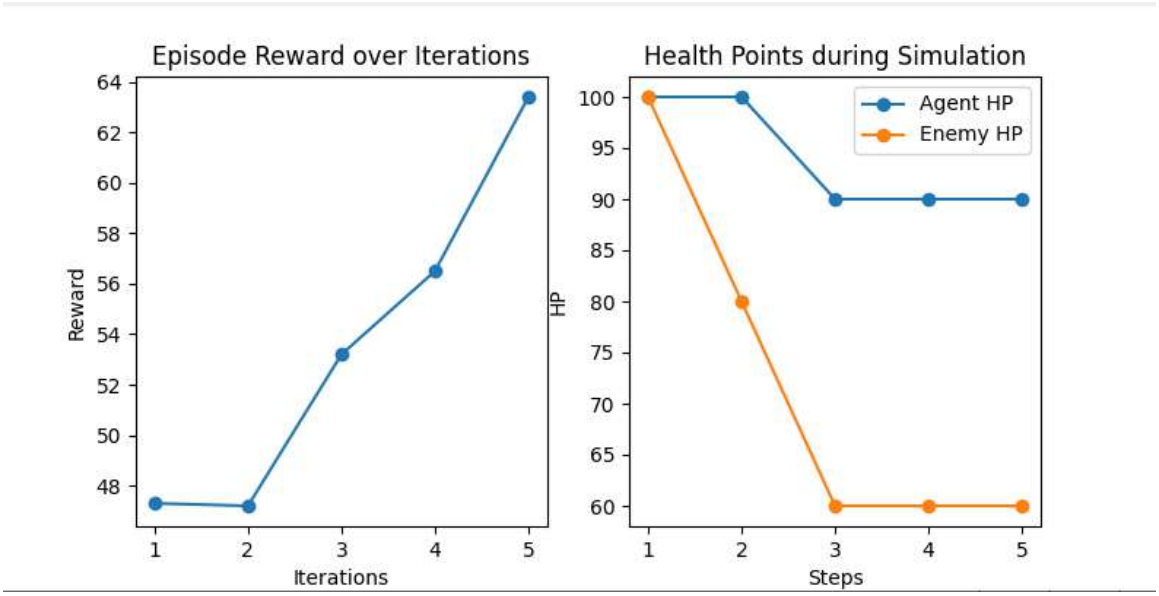

Figure -2: Line Graph of Episode Reward over Iterations and Health Points during Simulation

Figure-2 illustrates a line graph tracking the agent's episode rewards across training iterations, alongside the health points (HP) maintained during simulations. The rising trend in episode rewards over iterations indicates the agent's improving performance and learning efficiency as training progresses. Simultaneously, the HP curve reflects how effectively the agent manages to avoid or minimize damage over time. High HP retention toward later stages suggests the agent not only wins more frequently but does so with better defensive strategies. This dual visualization provides insights into both reward optimization and combat survivability, supporting the evaluation of metrics like win rate, average HP remaining, and policy stability mentioned in Table-1.

4. Conclusion

This project demonstrates the feasibility and potential of Deep Reinforcement Learning in training pro-level AI combatants capable of competing in fast-paced, real-time environments. Our trained agents exhibit complex and adaptive strategies, outperforming traditional scripted systems and offering a foundation for further advancements in gaming AI and robotics. Future work includes expanding the action space to 3D environments, enabling cross-game

policy transfer, and integrating voice or high-level human command inputs. This study contributes to the evolving field of interactive AI systems and highlights the power of self-learning agents in dynamic scenarios.

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