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Towards Developing Dialogue Systems with Entertaining Conversations

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Keywords: Dialogue Systems, Game Refinement, Goal-driven Dialogue Systems, Entertaining Conversation.

Abstract: This paper explores a novel approach to developing a dialogue system that is able to make entertaining conversations with users. It proposes a method to improve the current goal-driven dialogue systems which support users for specific tasks while satisfying users' goals with entertaining conversations. It then develops a dialogue system in which a set of features are considered to generate entertaining conversations, while reasonably prolonging the original too short dialogue. The game refinement measure is employed for the assessment of attractiveness since the conversations in dialogue systems can be seen as the process by which a player creates shoots or moves to win a game. The dialogues generated by the proposed method are evaluated by human subjects. The results confirm the effectiveness of the proposed method. The present idea can be a promising way to realize dialogue systems with entertaining conversations although further investigations are needed.

1 INTRODUCTION

Dialogue systems have become applicable in various tasks including technical support services, language learning tools, and entertainment (Young et al., 2013; Shawar and Atwell, 2007). Recently, the systems have been popular in different domains (Banchs and Li, 2012) and commercially exploitable (Pieraccini et al., 2009; Griol et al., 2010). In dialogue systems, a system (or robot) communicates with a human using natural languages in spoken-based or text-based conversations. Dialogue systems can be divided into two branches: task-oriented (or goal-driven), and chat-oriented (or non-goal-driven). Goal-driven systems focus on supporting users to complete a specific task like accommodation services, booking transportation or requesting specific information (Busemann et al., 1997; Seneff and Polifroni, 2000; Stallard, 2000). Meanwhile, the objective of non-goal-driven systems is for entertainment or to provide a means for participating in a game (Weizenbaum, 1966; Ogura et al., 2003; Wallis, 2010).

The most successful approach for goal-driven systems is based on the partially observable Markov decision process (POMDP) (Young et al., 2013; Pietquin and Hastie, 2013) and learning features using neural network models (Henderson et al., 2014). For non-goal-driven systems (Ritter et al., 2011; Banchs and Li, 2012; Ameixa et al., 2014), there are approaches like using neural networks in natural language modeling and machine translation (Sordoni

et al., 2015; Shang et al., 2015).

For the goal-driven applications, one of the main tasks of current dialogue systems is to satisfy users' goals. This is an important task to make the systems applicable. Nevertheless, this may result in the problem that the systems tend to directly respond to satisfy users' goals immediately; in other words, the dialogue speed is too fast. The systems will be successful and effective when they not only satisfy users' goals but also generate interesting and intelligent conversations during the dialogues' progress to attract the users.

In this work, we improve goal-driven dialogue systems to generate interesting and intelligent conversations while benefiting from game refinement theory (Iida et al., 2004). The idea originates from the correspondences between dialogues and games including goals and progress to obtain the goals. In order to win a game, players try to create successful shoots (e.g. in soccer) or moves (e.g. in chess). Meanwhile, for dialogues, users ask questions to a dialogue system in order to reach specific goals, and the conversations between the user and the system to obtain the user's goals correspond to shoots or moves in games. Therefore, the progress to satisfy the user's goals in dialogues can be seen as the progress when players enjoy the game. In order to generate interesting dialogues, we apply game refinement theory (Iida et al., 2004; Sutiono et al., 2015), which has been proposed as a measure of game sophistication. The dialogues are generated and their length is reasonably controlled with a focus on a set of important features of conver-

sations. Experiments are conducted using a data set of dialogues about restaurant information. The game refinement measure is used to assess the attractiveness of dialogues. In addition, we conduct a web-based human evaluation to score the generated dialogues.

The structure of the paper is as follows. In Section 2 we introduce our proposed method to improve dialogue systems. Specifically, the correspondences between dialogues and games are analyzed before we discuss the game refinement measure, the means that we use to improve dialogue systems. Then, we describe proposed features to generate dialogues. Experiments, results and the discussion are presented in Section 3. Finally, concluding remarks are drawn in Section 4.

2 DEVELOPING DIALOGUE SYSTEMS

In this section, we analyze the correspondences between dialogues and games. Then, we discuss game refinement theory, by which we improve dialogue systems that generate attractive dialogues. The dialogues are generated using some features that are described thereafter.

2.1 Dialogues and Games

Dialogues contain some characteristics that are also included in games. In order to win a game like chess or soccer, players should have successful moves or shoots. In dialogue systems, the user also has some specific goals, and each informative answer generated by the system that satisfies the user's goal can be seen as successful moves or shoots in games. The progress of conversations between the system and the user corresponds to the progress in games, in which the user asks questions to reach the goals. When the user obtains all of the goals from information generated by the system, the dialogue can be complete, or in other words, the game finishes. In this way, when the user has a specific number of goals in advance, the dialogues can be seen as pre-set score games like volleyball or tennis.

Game players usually feel excited with games not only because they win the game but because the game progress is also interesting. The question is how to improve dialogue systems so that they not only generate informative answers to satisfy users' goals but also help users feel interested in the dialogues' progress?

2.2 Game Refinement Measure

The game refinement measure was derived from a mathematical model of game outcome uncertainty within the framework of game refinement theory (Lida et al., 2004). In this work, dialogues can be seen as a kind of game, and the game refinement measure is used to evaluate and improve dialogue systems.

2.2.1 Model

In the game refinement theory, there are two important factors: the game speed and the game information progress (Sutiono et al., 2015). Game speed relates to the scoring rate, while game information progress focuses on game outcome. In well-known games like soccer and basketball, the scoring rate is calculated based on two factors: the total score (goals) and the time or steps to achieve the goal(s). The total score is the average number of successful shoots (say G) while the steps needed to achieve the goal are based on the average number of attempted shoots (say T). Therefore, the scoring rate or game speed of the games can be calculated by the ratio of G to T . Meanwhile, other sport games in which the goal is set in advance, like volleyball and tennis, the average number of total points per game corresponds to the time or steps to achieve the goal. For boardgames such as Go and chess, the steps are based on the average depth of game tree (game length), and the goal is estimated by the average branching factor.

When one already knows the game outcome, for instance when the game finishes, the game progress $x(t)$ will be given as a linear function of time t with $0 \leq t \leq T$ and $0 \leq x(t) \leq G$, as shown in Equation (1).

$$x(t) = \frac{G}{T}t \quad (1)$$

Nevertheless, it is difficult to know the game information progress $x(t)$ during the game until it finishes. In other words, the game outcome is uncertain by the endgame in many games, called balanced games or seesaw games. We show in Figure 1 an illustration of game progress in terms of outcome uncertainty. Figure 1 shows that the game outcome is uncertain until the very end of the game in balanced games or seesaw games. This leads to an exponential function as a realistic model of game information progress, which is given by Equation (2).

$$x(t) = G\left(\frac{t}{T}\right)^n \quad (2)$$

Here n stands for a constant parameter which is given based on the perspective of an observer in the game considered. If one knows the game outcome, for example after the game, or if one can exactly predict

in advance the game outcome and its progress, then we have $n = 1$, where $x(t)$ is a linear function of time t . During the in-game period, various values of the parameter n for different observers, including players and supporters, are determined. For example, some observers might be optimistic with $0 \leq t < 1$. However, when one feels any difficulty to win or achieve the goal, the parameter would be $n > 1$. Meanwhile, we reasonable assume that the parameter would be $n \geq 2$ in many cases, like balanced or seesaw games. Thus, the acceleration of game information progress $\bar{x}(t)$ is obtained by deriving Equation (2) twice. Solving it at $t = T$, we have Equation (3).

$$\bar{x}(T) = \frac{G}{T^2}n(n-1) \quad (3)$$

It is assumed in the current model that the game information progress in any type of games is happening in our minds. Hence, it is reasonably expected that the larger the value $\frac{G}{T^2}$ is, the more the game becomes exciting due to the uncertainty of the game outcome. Thus, its root square $\frac{\sqrt{G}}{T}$ is used as a game refinement measure (say R) for the game under consideration, as defined in Equation (4).

$$R = \frac{\sqrt{G}}{T} \quad (4)$$

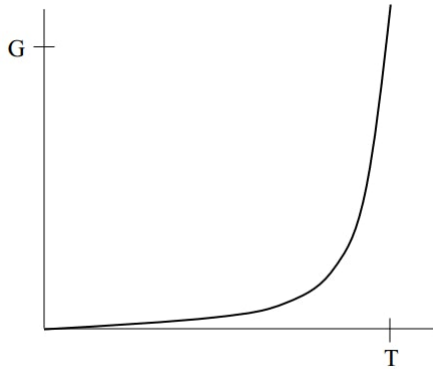


Figure 1: A game progress model of outcome certainty.

2.2.2 Refinement Values of Sophisticated Games

We show, in Table 1, several sophisticated games including soccer, basketball and table tennis from sports games, chess and Go from board games (Sutiono et al., 2015). Note that G and T of board games corresponds to the branching factor and the game length, respectively. We see that sophisticated games have a similar R value which we call a zone value between 0.07 and 0.08. This indicates the same or similar degree of game sophistication where players may feel the same degree of engagement or excitement regardless of different type of games.

Table 1: Refinement values of some well-known games.

| Games | G | T | R |
|--------------|--------|--------|-------|
| Soccer | 2.64 | 22 | 0.073 |
| Basketball | 36.38 | 82.01 | 0.073 |
| Table Tennis | 54.863 | 96.465 | 0.077 |
| Chess | 35 | 80 | 0.074 |
| Go | 250 | 208 | 0.076 |

SYSTEM: Hello, welcome to the parlance dialogue system. You can ask for restaurants by areas, price ranges or food types. How may I help you?
USER: Breakfast near the civic center

a)

SYSTEM: Hello, do you like Japanese foods?
USER: Certainly, I'm a big fan of tempura and sashimi
SYSTEM: OK, now you can ask for restaurants by areas, price ranges or food types. How may I help you?
USER: Breakfast near the civic center

b)

Figure 2: An example of the *greeting* feature.

2.3 Generating Dialogues

The current dialogue systems focus on how to maximize the users' goals. This is an important task that benefits for users in many applications. Nevertheless, the further objective of dialogue systems is not only to satisfy user's goals but also to help the users enjoyable with the dialogue progress. Focusing solely on users' goals as in the current dialogue systems may result in obtaining the goals (the dialogue's speed) fast. In other words, the systems tend to provide informative answers to satisfy the user's goals immediately. This is useful and reasonable; nonetheless, from the viewpoint of game refinement theory or entertaining conversations, the dialogues should contain uncertainty with a longer progress to satisfy the user's goals gradually, which enables to create intelligent dialogues. For this purpose, we focus on some important features such as greeting, user's topics, dialogue prolongment, feedback, surprising and grammar.

Greeting. The system can start conversations with users by some random topics like weather, sports, or foods, etc. We name this feature as greeting. Instead of starting the progress to obtain the user's goal immediately, using random topics would help to reduce the dialogue speed, and this is also a natural method to start conversations of human. We present an exam-

SYSTEM: Hello, welcome to the Parlance dialogue system. You can ask for restaurants by areas, price ranges or food types. How may I help you?
 USER: I'm looking for a restaurant near Inner Richmond that doesn't allow children.

a)

SYSTEM: Hello, can you share me your work?
 USER: I'm a medical doctor.
 SYSTEM: Oh, so you are helping your patients healthier.
 USER: Yes, I feel happy with that.
 SYSTEM: Ok, now you can ask for restaurants by areas, price ranges or food types. How may I help you?
 USER: I'm looking for a restaurant near Inner Richmond that doesn't allow children.

b)

Figure 3: An example of the *user' topics* feature.

ple of this feature in Figure 2, in which Figure 2(a) is a baseline dialogue while Figure 2(b) is the dialogue generated by using the proposed feature.

Users' Topics. Conversations can be also started by some topics related to the users like jobs or hobbies. In order to do that, the system should contain a corpus covering vocabulary and context of various domains including jobs and hobbies. This feature can help to reduce the dialogue speed and attract users because this indicates that the system seems to understand specific fields or domains like human. Figure 3 presents an example of this feature.

Dialogue Prolongment. The system sometimes provides several information together for the user at the same time to answer a specific question of the user. Nevertheless, such multiple information can be divided into smaller parts in order that the necessary information will be provided for the user step by step. This may attract the user raising more questions to obtain the goals when the system partly provides information for the user gradually. By this way, the dialogue speed is also reduced. Nevertheless, it should be further considered when asking so many questions to obtain a goal may lead to negative effects for the user. We show, in Figure 4, an example of this feature.

USER: I'm looking for an expensive restaurant that doesn't allow children.
 SYSTEM: There is a nice restaurant named Skool in the expensive price range that does not allow children.

a)

USER: I'm looking for an expensive restaurant that doesn't allow children.
 SYSTEM: Skool would be a good idea.
 USER: Why do you recommend Skool?
 SYSTEM: It is a nice restaurant.
 USER: How about the price range?
 SYSTEM: The price range is expensive, and I think it doesn't allow kids.

b)

Figure 4: An example of the *dialogue prolongment* feature.

USER: I would like to find a cheap restaurant that doesn't allow children and near the Chinatown.
 SYSTEM: The House of Nanking is cheap and doesn't allow kids.
 USER: I would like to know the phone number and the area?
 SYSTEM: The House of Nanking is in the Hayes Valley or Chinatown area.
 USER: What's the phone number?
 SYSTEM: The phone number for House of Nanking is 4152111429.

a)

USER: I would like to find a cheap restaurant that doesn't allow children and near the Chinatown.
 SYSTEM: We have some options: 884, 1307 YEN for each person. Please let me know which one you like?
 USER: I will choose 884 YEN.
 SYSTEM: The House of Nanking is cheap and doesn't allow kids.
 USER: Excellent!
 SYSTEM: Do you have other requests?
 USER: I would like to know the phone number and the area?
 SYSTEM: It is in the Hayes Valley or Chinatown area.
 USER: What's the phone number?
 SYSTEM: 4154211429

b)

Figure 5: An example of the *feedback* feature.

Feedback. When the user asks a question, the system does not need to respond directly to the question;

```

USER: I need something in South Beach.
SYSTEM: Delancey Street Restaurant is in
South Beach.
USER: Does it have brunch?
SYSTEM: Delancey Street Restaurant is the
only place that serves brunch in South
Beach.

```

a)

```

SYSTEM: Do you like countryside area?
USER: No, I don't.
SYSTEM: Do you like beach?
USER: Yes, that's great.
USER: I need something in South Beach.
SYSTEM: Delancey Street Restaurant is in
South Beach.
USER: Does it have brunch?
SYSTEM: Delancey Street Restaurant is
the only place that serves brunch in
South Beach.

```

b)

Figure 6: An example of the *surprising* feature.

instead the system may provide some specific options related to the answer. This helps to reduce the dialogue speed while the user still obtains necessary information. Figure 5 shows an example of this case.

Surprising. In the game’s progress model as shown in Figure 1, the amount of game outcome information in the game’s opening is small; however, this becomes much more as the game approaches the end. The acceleration of game information progress follows an exponential function. We propose using a feature namely “surprising” in which the system tries to ask questions related to a specific goal. In this case, it is unusual when the system actively asks questions as suggestions for the user even when the user has not yet provided the request. This would enable to create interesting conversations especially when the suggestion can match with the goal in the user’s mind, which may lead to a surprising emotion for the user. It may be exciting when the system actively can satisfy the user rather than the process of asking by the user and answering by the system. This feature is reasonable in the game refinement model when suggesting options by the system may lead to a small amount of necessary information at the beginning of the conversation; however, by the end the user may obtain a goal surprisingly when one of the options matched with a specific goal of the user. We present an example in Figure 6.

```

USER: I would like to know the phone number
and the area?
SYSTEM: The House of Nanking is in the Hayes
Valley or Chinatown area.
USER: What's the phone number?
SYSTEM: The phone number for The House of
Nanking is 4152111429.
USER: Thank you, goodbye.
SYSTEM: Goodbye.

```

a)

```

USER: I would like to know the phone number
and the area?
SYSTEM: The Hayes Valley or Chinatown area.
USER: What's the phone number?
SYSTEM: 4154211429
USER: Thank you, goodbye.
SYSTEM: Goodbye.

```

b)

Figure 7: An example of the *grammar* feature.

Grammar. We describe here a feature which may help to generate natural dialogues. The human-human dialogues usually contain less formal grammar. Therefore, we try to apply this feature in generating dialogues when we remove the complete grammar in some cases. Figure 7 illustrates an example of this feature. In the example, some information like phone number or address may not need to be provided grammatically.

3 ASSESSMENT

Our work is to improve dialogue systems which can ensure providing informative responses to satisfy users’ goals and create an interesting progress in dialogues. For this purpose, it is assumed that the first task of satisfying the goals is already obtained in order that we can focus mainly on the second task which produces interesting progress of dialogues. Thus, we use an existed set of dialogues as the baseline, and our objective is to improve the baseline dialogues that become interesting and intelligent while retaining the user’s goals in the dialogues.

3.1 Data

We use a data set of real dialogues which provide information about certain venues in San Francisco on the restaurants domain (Wen et al., 2015).¹ Dialogues include turns in which each turn is usually a

¹<https://www.repository.cam.ac.uk/handle/1810/251304>

pair of utterances between the system and the user. In reality of human-human conversations, one may sometimes be silent or in other words ignore the turn. In this baseline dialogues data set, almost turns are symmetrical in which each turn usually contains two utterances of both the system and the user. The baseline dialogues contain 1066 dialogues with 6198 turns in which 6 turns on average for each conversation to obtain about three or four goals including the name, address, foods, or areas of a restaurant. This means that the dialogue speed is so fast when almost of the system's response can satisfy one of the user's goals immediately.

In order to generating interesting and intelligent dialogues, we design a set of rules using the features described in Section 2. The proposed ideas are implemented using Java, whereas the rules and implementation detail are available at the site.²

3.2 Assessment using Game Refinement Measure

By using the features, the *baseline dialogues* can be enhanced to prolong with more turns, and we call the generated dialogues as *enhanced dialogues*. Enhancing more turns leads to a slower speed of dialogues, where users need to wait more turns to obtain the goals. Table 2 describes the number of goals and turns in the baseline and the enhanced dialogues. The aver-

Table 2: Statistics on the number of dialogues, goals and turns: baseline dialogues and enhanced dialogues compared.

| Systems | Dialogues | Goals | Turns |
|----------|-----------|-------|--------|
| Baseline | 1,006 | 4,249 | 6,198 |
| Enhanced | 1,006 | 4,249 | 12,534 |

age number of goals and the average number of turns are shown in Table 3. The game refinement value is calculated based on these two parameters using Equation (4), where G and T stands for the average numbers of users' goals and turns in dialogues, respectively. Thus we figure out the game progress model of dialogues $x(t)$ as shown in Equation (1) to derive the game refinement measure.

Table 3: Game refinement values: baseline dialogues and enhanced dialogues compared.

| Systems | Goals | Turns | R |
|----------|-------|--------|-------|
| Baseline | 4.224 | 6.161 | 0.334 |
| Enhanced | 4.224 | 12.459 | 0.165 |

²<https://github.com/nguyenlab/DialogueGame>

The refinement ratio of the baseline dialogues is 0.334 which is much higher than the balanced ratio of sophisticated games as shown in Table 1 which is in the range of 0.076 to 0.078. Meanwhile, our method obtains a lower ratio than the baseline: 0.165. The high ratio of the baseline dialogues indicates that the speed of the dialogues is so fast; in other words, the outcome of the dialogue can be obtained in few turns and easy to predict. This is different from interesting games in which the game's progress should contain some uncertainty, and the game's outcome cannot be predicted until the endgame. In the proposed method, users have to wait for more turns to obtain the goal, which indicates that the progress of the dialogue contains some uncertainty rather than straightforward responses from the system. This can help the users feel more interesting in the dialogue's progress. Nonetheless, this should be further improved to obtain the balanced ratio. In addition, the refinement ratio of dialogues also needs to be further investigated to find a comfortable ratio for this domain.

3.3 Assessment with Human Subjects

We admitted that the change of feelings and emotion does happen in our minds when playing games or being in conversations. Nevertheless, it is quite challenge to measure the exciting or intelligence of dialogues, which is related to biology and emotion in our minds. In order to perform this task, human evaluation experiments were conducted while inviting volunteers to evaluate the dialogues. There were 11 participants (postgraduate students) from various fields including natural language processing (*NLP*), *games*, *robotics*, and *general* (participants work in other fields).

The evaluation contains 20 pairs of dialogues, in which each pair of dialogues includes a baseline dialogue randomly selected from the baseline data set and output dialogue generated by using the proposed method (enhanced dialogue). We created a web-based evaluation page available at³ so that it can be easy to extend and evaluate this task in popularity.

Table 4: Human assessment results. Equal, Better, Worse: the enhanced dialogue achieves equally, better or worse score than the baseline dialogue, respectively.

| Factors | Equal | Better | Worse |
|--------------|--------|--------|-------|
| Satisfaction | 64.25% | 32.40% | 3.35% |
| Interesting | 38.55% | 57.54% | 3.91% |

Table 4 presents the human assessment results.

³<http://150.65.242.105:8080/dialoguesystem/>

We considered two factors to compare the baseline and enhanced dialogues including *satisfaction* and *interesting*. The *satisfaction* indicates the degree that users satisfy with the responses from the system while the *interesting* shows how interesting the dialogue's progress. The results show that the enhanced dialogues are recognized more interesting than the baseline dialogues with up to 57.54% of the dialogues. Meanwhile, the enhanced dialogues still satisfy the users' goals, or even the users can obtain more satisfaction with the enhanced dialogues. Specifically, 64.25% of the enhanced dialogues satisfy the users' goals equally with the baseline dialogues. Surprisingly, 32.40% of the enhanced dialogues are recognized more satisfaction with the users' goals. It should be noted that the enhanced dialogues do not always satisfy users or make the dialogue's progress more interesting, in which 3.35% of the enhanced dialogues do not satisfy the users' goals as the baseline dialogues, and 3.91% is less interesting. This can be explained that users sometimes want to obtain the goals as fast as possible and only consider the knowledge aspect rather than entertaining; in that case, the longer dialogues may lead to less satisfaction and less interesting.

Table 5: Scoring by human subjects working in different fields.

| Area | Factors | Equal (%) | Better (%) | Worse (%) |
|----------|--------------|-----------|------------|-----------|
| Robotics | Satisfaction | 82.50 | 12.50 | 5 |
| | Interesting | 32.50 | 62.50 | 5 |
| NLP | Satisfaction | 61.67 | 31.67 | 6.67 |
| | Interesting | 43.33 | 53.33 | 3.33 |
| Games | Satisfaction | 50 | 50 | 0 |
| | Interesting | 0 | 95 | 5 |
| General | Satisfaction | 59.32 | 40.68 | 0 |
| | Interesting | 50.85 | 45.76 | 3.39 |

The evaluation results are presented in Table 5 to compare between the study areas. The highest ratios that the enhanced dialogues are more interesting than the baseline dialogues are 95% and 62.50%, evaluated by the participants from games and robotics areas, respectively. Meanwhile, the participants from the general field evaluated the high ratio that the enhanced dialogues are better in both satisfaction and interesting factors with 40.68% and 45.76%, respectively.

Table 6 presents the ratios of enhanced dialogues that obtain the higher scores than the baseline dialogues in both factors: satisfaction and interesting. Participants from the games area evaluated this ratio up to 50% while the ratios are 33.90% in the general area and 10% in the robotics area.

Table 6: Ratio of enhanced dialogues that are better than the baseline dialogues in both factors: satisfaction and interesting.

| Area | Ratio |
|----------|--------|
| All | 27.37% |
| Robotics | 10% |
| NLP | 25% |
| Games | 50% |
| General | 33.90% |

3.4 Discussion

This research is the first effort in applying the game refinement theory to evaluate dialogues. It is necessary to find comfortable values of game refinement for the dialogue domain as other games shown in Table 1. The comfortable values can be seen as the value's range of r in Equation (5).

$$r = \frac{\sqrt{G}}{T} \quad (5)$$

Where G and T stands for the average numbers of users' goals and turns in dialogues, respectively. Finding the comfortable refinement values for dialogues is important when we apply the game refinement measure to evaluate attractiveness of dialogues. In order to explore the balanced or comfortable game refinement values in the dialogue domain, we need further investigations using general data of dialogues in which a large data set of human-human dialogues should be analyzed for the game refinement's parameters. This should be conducted in future researches.

4 CONCLUDING REMARKS

To our best knowledge, this is the first result in the direction to develop dialogue systems with entertaining conversations while benefiting from the game refinement theory. We proposed a method to improve the current goal-driven dialogue systems which support users for specific tasks while satisfying users' goals with entertaining conversations. We then developed a dialogue system in which a set of features are considered to generate entertaining conversations while reasonably prolonging the original too short dialogue. Game refinement measure was employed for the assessment of attractiveness since the conversations in dialogue systems can be seen as the process when a player creates shoots or moves to win a game. The enhanced dialogues generated by the proposed method are evaluated by human subjects as well as game refinement measure. The assessment results confirmed

the effectiveness of the proposed method. The present idea can be a promising way to realize dialogue systems with entertaining conversations although further investigations are needed.

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