

AMS short course on mean field games: The convergence problem

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Outline

- ▶ The convergence problem: basic questions
- ▶ An example (linear-quadratic)
- ▶ Warmup: Interacting diffusion processes
- ▶ Compactness approach to the convergence problem
- ▶ Master equation approach to the convergence problem

n -player games

Agents $i = 1, \dots, n$ have state process dynamics

$$dX_t^i = \alpha_t^i dt + dW_t^i,$$

with W^1, \dots, W^n independent Brownian, (X_0^1, \dots, X_0^n) i.i.d.

Agent i chooses α^i to maximize

$$J_i^n(\alpha^1, \dots, \alpha^n) = \mathbb{E} \left[\int_0^T f(X_t^i, \mu_t^n, \alpha_t^i) dt + g(X_T^i, \mu_T^n) \right],$$
$$\mu_t^n = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{k=1}^n \delta_{X_t^k},$$

Say $(\alpha^1, \dots, \alpha^n)$ form a Nash equilibrium if

$$J_i^n(\alpha^1, \dots, \alpha^n) \geq \sup_{\beta} J_i^n(\dots, \alpha^{i-1}, \beta, \alpha^{i+1}, \dots), \quad \forall i.$$

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$$\mu_t^n = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{k=1}^n \delta_{X_t^k},$$

Say $(\alpha^1, \dots, \alpha^n)$ form an ϵ -Nash equilibrium if

$$J_i^n(\alpha^1, \dots, \alpha^n) \geq \sup_{\beta} J_i^n(\dots, \alpha^{i-1}, \beta, \alpha^{i+1}, \dots) - \epsilon, \quad \forall i.$$

Standing assumptions

Assume f and g bounded & continuous.

Controls take values in a compact convex set $A \subset \mathbb{R}^d$.

Equilibrium concepts

Two common choices of **admissible control** classes:

- ▶ **Open loop**: Agent i chooses a **process** α^i , adapted to the filtration generated by (W^1, \dots, W^n)
- ▶ **Closed loop (Markovian)**: Agent i chooses a **function**

$$\alpha^i = \alpha^i(t, X_t^1, \dots, X_t^n).$$

(such that $dX_t^i = \alpha^i(t, X_t^1, \dots, X_t^n)dt + dW_t^i$ is well-posed)

These choices lead to distinct equilibria!

Even though a Markovian *control* induces an open loop *control*,

$$\hat{\alpha}_t^i(\omega) := \alpha^i(t, X_t^1(\omega), \dots, X_t^n(\omega)).$$

Open-loop equilibrium: players **do not “react”** to others' controls.
cf. examples in Carmona-Fouque-Sun '13

Connecting n -player games and MFGs

Question:

How do we rigorously connect the n -player games to their proposed $n \rightarrow \infty$ limit, the mean field game (MFG)?

Idea #1: Construction of approximate equilibria

Suppose we can directly solve the candidate MFG, with associated equilibrium control $\hat{\alpha}(t, x)$. Let player i in n -player game use control $\alpha_t^i = \hat{\alpha}(t, X_t^i)$. Can often show this yields an ϵ_n -Nash equilibrium, where $\lim_n \epsilon_n = 0$. (see R. Malhamé's talk)

Idea #2: Limits of true equilibria (the convergence problem)

Suppose for each n we are given a Nash equilibrium for the n -player game. Can we identify a limit as $n \rightarrow \infty$, say of the empirical measure μ^n ?

An example

Players $i = 1, \dots, n$ control

$$dX_t^i = \alpha_t^i dt + dW_t^i, \quad X_0^i = 0.$$

Goal of player i : minimize

$$\mathbb{E} \left[\int_0^T |\alpha_t^i|^2 dt + \lambda |X_T^i - \bar{X}_T|^2 \right], \quad \bar{X}_T = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n X_T^i, \quad \lambda > 0.$$

Unique (closed-loop) Nash equilibrium:

$$\alpha_t^i = c_t^n (\bar{X}_t - X_t^i), \quad c_t^n := \frac{\lambda(1 - \frac{1}{n})}{1 + \lambda(1 - \frac{1}{n^2})(T - t)}.$$

An example

Optimal state processes:

$$dX_t^i = c_t^n (\bar{X}_t - X_t^i) dt + dW_t^i, \quad X_0^i = 0.$$

Average over $i = 1, \dots, n$ to get

$$\bar{X}_t = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n W_t^i \rightarrow 0 \quad \text{as } n \rightarrow \infty. \quad (*)$$

$$c_t^n = \frac{\lambda(1 - \frac{1}{n})}{1 + \lambda(1 - \frac{1}{n^2})(T - t)} \rightarrow \frac{\lambda}{1 + \lambda(T - t)} =: c_t^\infty. \quad (**)$$

$$dX_t^i \approx -c_t^\infty X_t^i dt + dW_t^i.$$

Convergence problem: Direct using (*) and (**).

An example

Optimal state processes:

$$dX_t^i = c_t^n (\bar{X}_t - X_t^i) dt + dW_t^i, \quad X_0^i = 0.$$

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$$dX_t^i \approx -c_t^\infty X_t^i dt + dW_t^i.$$

Constructing approximate equilibria: Use $\alpha_t^i = -c_t^\infty X_t^i$ for n -player game. ($\rightsquigarrow X^i$ i.i.d.)

An example

Optimal state processes:

$$dX_t^i = c_t^n (\bar{X}_t - X_t^i) dt + dW_t^i, \quad X_0^i = 0.$$

Average over $i = 1, \dots, n$ to get

$$\bar{X}_t = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n W_t^i \rightarrow 0 \quad \text{as } n \rightarrow \infty. \quad (*)$$

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$$dX_t^i \approx -c_t^\infty X_t^i dt + dW_t^i.$$

Better construction of approximate equilibria:

Use $\alpha_t^i = c_t^\infty (\bar{X}_t - X_t^i)$ “= $\partial_x U(t, X_t^i, \mu_t^n)$ ” (master equation)

Warmup for general theory: Interacting diffusions

Suppose particles $i = 1, \dots, n$ interact through their empirical measure according to

$$dX_t^i = b(X_t^i, \mu_t^n)dt + dW_t^i, \quad \mu_t^n = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{k=1}^n \delta_{X_t^k},$$

where W^1, \dots, W^n are independent Brownian, (X_0^1, \dots, X_0^n) i.i.d.

Under “nice” assumptions on b , we have $\mu_t^n \rightarrow \mu_t$, where μ_t solves the **McKean-Vlasov** equation,

$$dX_t = b(X_t, \mu_t)dt + dW_t, \quad \mu_t = \text{Law}(X_t),$$

or (nonlinear) Fokker-Planck equation

$$\frac{d}{dt} \langle \mu_t, \varphi \rangle = \left\langle \mu_t, b(\cdot, \mu_t) \cdot \nabla \varphi + \frac{1}{2} \Delta \varphi \right\rangle, \quad \forall \varphi \in C_c^\infty.$$

Convergence proof method #1

Step 1: Pre-compactness/tightness of (μ^n) in $C([0, T]; \mathcal{P}(\mathbb{R}^d))$.

Step 2: Characterize limit points. Let $\varphi \in C_c^\infty$. Apply Itô's formula to $\varphi(X_t^i)$, then average over $i = 1, \dots, n$ to get

$$d\langle \mu_t^n, \varphi \rangle = \left\langle \mu_t^n, b(\cdot, \mu_t^n) \cdot \nabla \varphi + \frac{1}{2} \Delta \varphi \right\rangle dt + \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n \nabla \varphi(X_t^i) \cdot dW_t^i.$$

The **red term** is a martingale with quadratic variation $O(1/n)$. Hence, any limit μ of (μ^n) satisfies

$$\frac{d}{dt} \langle \mu_t, \varphi \rangle = \left\langle \mu_t, b(\cdot, \mu_t) \cdot \nabla \varphi + \frac{1}{2} \Delta \varphi \right\rangle.$$

Step 3: Prove uniqueness for this Fokker-Planck equation.

Even without uniqueness: limits of (μ^n) concentrate on the set of McKean-Vlasov solutions.

Convergence proof method #2

Step 1: Show existence/uniqueness of McKean-Vlasov SDE:

$$dX_t = b(X_t, \mu_t)dt + dW_t, \quad \mu_t = \text{Law}(X_t),$$

Construct i.i.d. driven by same Brownian motions as n -particle system:

$$dY_t^i = b(Y_t^i, \mu_t)dt + dW_t^i, \quad Y_0^i = X_0^i, \quad \rightsquigarrow \text{Law}(Y_t^i) = \mu_t.$$

Step 2: Use this **coupling** to estimate $\frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n |X_t^i - Y_t^i|$.
If b Lipschitz w.r.t. suitable (e.g., Wasserstein) metric, can show

$$\lim_{n \rightarrow \infty} \mathbb{E} \left[\sup_{t \in [0, T]} |X_t^k - Y_t^k|^2 \right] = 0, \quad \forall k.$$

Note $(X^1, \dots, X^k) \rightarrow (Y^1, \dots, Y^k)$ for fixed k as $n \rightarrow \infty$, so particles are **asymptotically i.i.d.** \rightsquigarrow “**propagation of chaos**”

MFG recap

(Take $f \equiv 0$ for simplicity.)

Representative player's state process:

$$dX_t^\alpha = \alpha_t dt + dW_t, \quad X_0 = \xi.$$

- ▶ For fixed $\mu = (\mu_t)_{t \in [0, T]} \in C([0, T]; \mathcal{P}(\mathbb{R}^d))$, solve

$$\alpha^* \in \operatorname{argmax}_\alpha \mathbb{E} [g(X_T^\alpha, \mu_T)].$$

- ▶ Let $\mu_t^* = \operatorname{Law}(X_t^{\alpha^*})$.
- ▶ Say μ is a **mean field equilibrium** (MFE) if $\mu^* = \mu$.

The **equilibrium control** is α^* .

Constructing approximate equilibria

Let μ be a MFE with equilibrium control $\alpha^* = \alpha^*(t, X_t)$.

Tell each player i in n -player game to use control $\alpha^*(t, X_t^i)$, so state processes are

$$dX_t^i = \alpha^*(t, X_t^i)dt + dW_t^i.$$

These are i.i.d. with $X_t^i \sim \mu_t$, so empirical measure $\mu_t^n = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n \delta_{X_t^i}$ converges to μ_t by LLN. If player i alone switches to some β , then μ_t^n does not change much, so

$$\begin{aligned} J_i^n(\dots, \alpha^*, \beta, \alpha^*, \dots) &= \mathbb{E} \left[g(X_T^{i,\beta}, \tilde{\mu}_T^n) \right] \approx \mathbb{E} \left[g(X_T^\beta, \mu_T) \right] \\ &\leq \mathbb{E} \left[g(X_T^{\alpha^*}, \mu_T) \right] \approx \mathbb{E} \left[g(X_T^{i,\alpha^*}, \mu_T^n) \right] \\ &= J_i^n(\dots, \alpha^*, \alpha^*, \alpha^*, \dots). \end{aligned}$$

$\rightsquigarrow (\alpha^*, \dots, \alpha^*)$ is ϵ_n -Nash with $\epsilon_n \rightarrow 0$.

The convergence problem

Suppose for each n that $(\alpha^{n,1}, \dots, \alpha^{n,n})$ is a Nash equilibrium.

$$dX_t^{n,i} = \alpha_t^{n,i} dt + dW_t^i.$$

The problem: Does $\mu_t^n = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n \delta_{X_t^{n,i}}$ converge to a MFE?

Two main approaches (so far):

1. **Compactness** + characterize limit points
 - ▶ Works even when MFE is non-unique.
 - ▶ Focuses on limit of μ^n .
2. Show n -player **PDE system** “converges” to **master equation**
 - ▶ Quantitative, yields rates. See K. Ramanan’s lecture.
 - ▶ Focuses on limit of **value functions**.

The convergence problem via compactness

Suppose for each n that $(\alpha^{n,1}, \dots, \alpha^{n,n})$ is a Nash equilibrium.

$$dX_t^{n,i} = \alpha_t^{n,i} dt + dW_t^i.$$

The problem: Does $\mu_t^n = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n \delta_{X_t^{n,i}}$ converge to a MFE?

Three main steps:

1. Show tightness (precompactness) of sequence $(\text{Law}(\mu^n))$, e.g. in $\mathcal{P}(C([0, T]; \mathbb{R}^d))$.
2. Characterize **dynamics** of limit points, i.e., show limit measure flow “corresponds to” $dX_t^\alpha = \alpha_t dt + dW_t$, for some α .
3. Check the MFG **optimality property**, i.e., show $\mathbb{E}[g(X_T^\alpha, \mu_T)] \geq \mathbb{E}[g(X_T^\beta, \mu_T)]$ for all β .

The convergence problem via compactness

Step 1: Tightness/precompactness requires some machinery but is straightforward, e.g., if:

- ▶ controls α take values in a compact space A .
- ▶ Initial positions $X_0^{n,i} = \xi^i$ are i.i.d.

The convergence problem via compactness

Step 2: Limiting dynamics of $(\mu_t^n)_{t \in [0, T]}$.

A **key issue** is the lack of regularity of controls: $(\alpha_t^{n,i})_{t \in [0, T]}$ need not be continuous or even right-continuous!

A solution:

Bounded control set $A \Rightarrow (\alpha_t^{n,i})_{n,i}$ uniformly bounded in $L^2[0, T]$
 $\Rightarrow (\alpha_t^{n,i})_{n,i}$ tight as random elements of $(L^2[0, T], \text{weak})$.

A more versatile approach uses **relaxed controls**, a.k.a. **Young measures**

The convergence problem via compactness

Step 3: Optimality of limiting control α .

Recall: $dX_t^\beta = \beta_t dt + dW_t$

Goal: Show

$$\mathbb{E}[g(X_T^\alpha, \mu_T)] \geq \mathbb{E}[g(X_T^\beta, \mu_T)], \quad \forall \beta.$$

Idea: Let β be any alternative control, and “give it” to each player in n -player game, one at a time. Since $(\alpha^{n,1}, \dots, \alpha^{n,n})$ is Nash,

$$\mathbb{E}[g(X_T^{n,i}, \mu_T^n)] \geq \mathbb{E}[g(\tilde{X}_T^{n,i}, \mu_T^{n,-i})], \quad \forall i = 1, \dots, n,$$

where:

$\tilde{X}^{n,i}$ = player i 's state after switching to β ,
 $\mu^{n,-i}$ = empirical measure after i switches to β .

The convergence problem via compactness

Step 3 continued: Optimality of limiting control α .

$$\frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n \mathbb{E}[g(X_T^{n,i}, \mu_T^n)] \geq \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n \mathbb{E}[g(\tilde{X}_T^{n,i}, \mu_T^{n,-i})]$$

Step 2 shows $\mu^n \rightarrow \mu$, so

$$\begin{aligned} \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n \mathbb{E}[g(X_T^{n,i}, \mu_T^n)] &= \mathbb{E}[\langle \mu_T^n, g(\cdot, \mu_T^n) \rangle] \\ &\rightarrow \mathbb{E}[\langle \mu_T, g(\cdot, \mu_T) \rangle] = \mathbb{E}[g(X_T^\alpha, \mu_T)]. \end{aligned}$$

Remains to show

$$\frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n \mathbb{E}[g(\tilde{X}_T^{n,i}, \mu_T^{n,-i})] \rightarrow \mathbb{E}[g(X_T^\beta, \mu_T)].$$

The convergence problem via compactness

Step 3 continued: Optimality of limiting control α .

Remains to show

$$\frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n \underbrace{\mathbb{E}[g(\tilde{X}_T^{n,i}, \mu_T^{n,-i})]}_{\text{player } i \text{ switches to } \beta} \rightarrow \mathbb{E}[g(X_T^\beta, \mu_T)], \quad \forall \beta. \quad (*)$$

This is technical & challenging!

The issue: Need to show rigorously $\mu_T^{n,-i} \rightarrow \mu_T$, i.e., **empirical measure limit is insensitive to one-player deviations**.

- ▶ **Open-loop case:** Not hard, since player's deviation effects only $X^{n,i}$, not $(X^{n,k})_{k \neq i}$. E.g. $\|\mu_t^n - \mu_t^{n,-i}\|_{\text{TV}} \leq 2/n$.
- ▶ **Closed-loop case:** Players **react to each other**, so one player's deviation can effect entire system!

The convergence problem via PDEs

Consider n -player game where player i controls

$$dX_t^i = \alpha_t^i dt + dW_t^i,$$

by choosing $\alpha_t^i \in \mathbb{R}^d$ to try to maximize

$$\mathbb{E} \left[g(X_T^i, \mu_T^n) - \frac{1}{2} \int_0^T |\alpha_t^i|^2 dt \right].$$

The **value functions** $(v_i^n)_{i=1}^n$, $v_i^n : [0, T] \times (\mathbb{R}^d)^n \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$, satisfy

$$0 = \partial_t v_i^n(t, \mathbf{x}) - \frac{1}{2} |\nabla_i v_i^n(t, \mathbf{x})|^2 + \frac{1}{2} \Delta v_i^n(t, \mathbf{x}) \\ + \sum_{k=1}^n \nabla_k v_i^n(t, \mathbf{x}) \cdot \nabla_k v_k^n(t, \mathbf{x}), \quad v_i^n(t, \mathbf{x}) = g(x_i, m_{\mathbf{x}}^n),$$

$$\mathbf{x} = (x_1, \dots, x_n) \in (\mathbb{R}^d)^n, \quad m_{\mathbf{x}}^n = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n \delta_{x_i}.$$

Control of player k is $\alpha_t^k = \nabla_k v_k^n(t, \mathbf{X}_t)$

The convergence problem via PDEs: heuristics

Symmetry (+ uniqueness) $\Rightarrow v_i^n(t, \mathbf{x}) = V_n(t, x_i, m_x^n)$ for some $V_n : [0, T] \times \mathbb{R}^d \times \mathcal{P}(\mathbb{R}^d) \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$, **assumed smooth**.

Differentiation rules \Rightarrow

$$\nabla_k v_i^n(t, \mathbf{x}) = \frac{1}{n} D_m V_n(t, x_i, m_x^n, x_k) + \delta_{ik} \nabla_x V_n(t, x_i, m_x^n)$$

$$\Delta_k v_i^n(t, \mathbf{x}) = \frac{1}{n} \operatorname{div}_v D_m V_n(t, x_i, \mathbf{x}, x_k) + \delta_{ik} \Delta_x V_n(t, x_i, m_x^n) + O(1/n)$$

PDE system becomes “almost” the master equation:

$$\begin{aligned} O(1/n) &= \partial_t V_n(t, x_i, m_x^n) - \frac{1}{2} |\nabla_x V_n(t, x_i, m_x^n)|^2 + \frac{1}{2} \Delta_x V_n(t, x_i, m_x^n) \\ &\quad + \frac{1}{n} \sum_{k=1}^n \operatorname{div}_v D_m V_n(t, x_i, m_x^n, x_k) \\ &\quad + \frac{1}{n} \sum_{k=1}^n D_m V_n(t, x_i, m_x^n, x_k) \cdot \nabla_x V_n(t, x_k, m_x^n) \end{aligned}$$

The convergence problem via PDEs: heuristics

Averages rewrite as integrals w.r.t. empirical measure:

$$\begin{aligned}O(1/n) &= \partial_t V_n(t, x_i, m_x^n) - \frac{1}{2} |\nabla_x V_n(t, x_i, m_x^n)|^2 + \frac{1}{2} \Delta_x V_n(t, x_i, m_x^n) \\ &\quad + \int_{\mathbb{R}^d} \operatorname{div}_v D_m V_n(t, x_i, m_x^n, v) m_x^n(dv) \\ &\quad + \int_{\mathbb{R}^d} D_m V_n(t, x_i, m_x^n, v) \cdot \nabla_x V_n(t, v, m_x^n) m_x^n(dv)\end{aligned}$$

Replace $x_i \rightarrow x$ and $m_x^n \rightarrow m$ to get master equation:

$$\begin{aligned}O(1/n) &= \partial_t V_n(t, x, m) - \frac{1}{2} |\nabla_x V_n(t, x, m)|^2 + \frac{1}{2} \Delta_x V_n(t, x, m) \\ &\quad + \int_{\mathbb{R}^d} \operatorname{div}_v D_m V_n(t, x, m, v) m(dv) \\ &\quad + \int_{\mathbb{R}^d} D_m V_n(t, x, m, v) \cdot \nabla_x V_n(t, v, m) m(dv).\end{aligned}$$

The convergence problem via PDEs

The master equation:

$$\begin{aligned} 0 = & \partial_t U(t, x, m) - \frac{1}{2} |\nabla_x U(t, x, m)|^2 + \frac{1}{2} \Delta_x U(t, x, m) \\ & + \int_{\mathbb{R}^d} \operatorname{div}_v D_m U(t, x, m, v) m(dv) \\ & + \int_{\mathbb{R}^d} D_m U(t, x, m, v) \cdot \nabla_x U(t, v, m) m(dv), \end{aligned}$$

$$U(T, x, m) = g(x, m).$$

Proper argument: Show existence/uniqueness of classical solution U of master equation. Define $u_i^n(t, x) := U(t, x_i, m_x^n)$.

Show: $(u_i^n)_{i=1}^n$ **nearly solves** n -player Nash PDE system, via same idea as before.

The convergence problem via PDEs

Proper argument: Show existence/uniqueness of classical solution U of master equation. Define $u_i^n(t, \mathbf{x}) := U(t, x_i, m_{\mathbf{x}}^n)$.

Show: $(u_i^n)_{i=1}^n$ **nearly solves** n -player Nash PDE system. Derive estimates on $|u_i^n - v_i^n|$ and $|\nabla_i u_i^n - \nabla_i v_i^n|$.

Equilibrium states, n -player game:

$$dX_t^i = \nabla_i v_i^n(t, \mathbf{X}_t) dt + dW_t^i, \quad X_0^i \text{ i.i.d.}$$

Auxiliary n -particle system (McKean-Vlasov):

$$d\bar{X}_t^i = \nabla_x U(t, \bar{X}_t^i, m_{\bar{X}_t}^n) dt + dW_t^i, \quad X_0^i = \bar{X}_0^i.$$

- (1) Estimates on $|\nabla_i u_i^n - \nabla_i v_i^n| \Rightarrow X^i \approx \bar{X}^i$
- (2) Propagation of chaos $\Rightarrow m_{\bar{X}_t}^n \rightarrow \mu_t$, unique solution of

$$dY_t = \nabla_x U(t, Y_t, \mu_t) dt + dW_t, \quad \mu_t = \text{Law}(Y_t).$$

- (3) (1) and (2) $\Rightarrow m_{\bar{X}_t}^n \rightarrow \mu_t$

Outlook & open problems

- ▶ **Master equation** approach requires **smoothness**. What to do without **classical solutions**?
 - ▶ Is there a good weak solution theory?
 - ▶ Does convergence argument still work?
 - ▶ Same **rate**? Are fluctuations & large deviations at the same scale? (see K. Ramanan's lecture)
- ▶ **Non-unique regime** is important & challenging.
 - ▶ We know all (sub-sequential) limit points of n -player equilibria are (weak) MFE. **Which MFE arise as a limit point?**
 - ▶ When is a single MFE "selected" in the limit?