

# Think before You Simulate: Symbolic Reasoning to Orchestrate Neural Computation for Counterfactual Question Answering

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## Abstract

*Causal and temporal reasoning about video dynamics is a challenging problem. While neuro-symbolic models that combine symbolic reasoning with neural-based perception and prediction have shown promise, they exhibit limitations, especially in answering counterfactual questions. This paper introduces a method to enhance a neuro-symbolic model for counterfactual reasoning, leveraging symbolic reasoning about causal relations among events. We define the notion of a causal graph to represent such relations and use Answer Set Programming (ASP), a declarative logic programming method, to find how to coordinate perception and simulation modules. We validate the effectiveness of our approach on two benchmarks, CLEVRER and CRAFT. Our enhancement achieves state-of-the-art performance on the CLEVRER challenge, significantly outperforming existing models. In the case of the CRAFT benchmark, we leverage a large pre-trained language model, such as GPT-3.5 and GPT-4, as a proxy for a dynamics simulator. Our findings show that this method can further improve its performance on counterfactual questions by providing alternative prompts instructed by symbolic causal reasoning.*

## 1. Introduction

The ability to recognize object movement and reason about its dynamics is a fundamental aspect of human cognition [29]. Deep neural networks have shown remarkable progress in recognizing patterns in complex visual and language inputs [11, 20, 24, 25], but answering questions involving temporal and causal structures in video dynamics remains a significant challenge in AI. This is particularly true when dealing with hypothetical questions such as predictive and counterfactual ones [22, 30, 32]. Highlighting this issue, Yi et al. [32] introduced a challenging benchmark known as CLEVRER<sup>1</sup>. This comprises four types of questions about videos featuring the movement of various objects, each differing in shape, color, and material. They ob-

served that previous state-of-the-art end-to-end models for visual QA, such as TbD-Net [19], MAC [12], and IEP [13], failed to perform well on the CLEVRER benchmark. In response, they proposed a neuro-symbolic hybrid AI model called NS-DR that outperforms these models. The key strategy involves integrating (i) neural components that recognize objects and events and simulate dynamics of objects with (ii) symbolic components that aggregate the outputs of the neural components and apply symbolic logic to answer the natural language questions. Further improvements were made along the same architecture, enhancing the neural components for more accurate perception and prediction. For instance, VRDP [9] incorporates a differentiable physics engine that infers explicit physical properties and uses this knowledge to yield better simulations. However, these models still have room for improvement, particularly concerning counterfactual questions.

On the other hand, a recent end-to-end neural model called Aloe [8], which is based on the self-attention mechanism, has demonstrated significant performance improvements when compared to the earlier neural models. This finding was further bolstered by ODDN-Aloe [28], whose performance has been found to be on par with VRDP. However, it's important to note that these neural models still lack the transparency and interpretability that is often required.

In this paper, we argue that previous neuro-symbolic models have not fully utilized the strength of the neuro-symbolic approach. Instead of using symbolic reasoning only to aggregate information from neural components, we propose incorporating symbolic reasoning at the front as well to orchestrate between neural perception and neural simulation. Specifically, for counterfactual question answering, our method constructs a causal graph by observing the video and taking into account the objects that are intervened upon in the counterfactual question. We then compute the causal effects of this change and use the result to trigger simulation only when needed, starting from the relevant frames. This contrasts with the previous neuro-symbolic models which blindly apply simulation from the beginning. For the computation of a causal graph, we use

<sup>1</sup><http://clevrer.csail.mit.edu>.

Answer Set Programming (ASP) [4, 15], a declarative logic programming method. We claim that our approach enhances baselines as long as perception is more accurate than simulation, which is usually the case for most baselines. Additionally, our model outperforms the baseline neuro-symbolic models even with the use of the same perception and simulation modules from them.

We validate the effectiveness of our method by applying it to two benchmarks, CLEVRER and CRAFT [2]. For the CLEVRER task, we also enhance answering the other types of questions by augmenting baseline models with additional modules, thanks to the modularity of the neuro-symbolic architecture. As a result, we achieve the state-of-the-art result on CLEVRER, outperforming all the models above.

We have also discovered an intriguing use case for large language models (LLMs). Our method assumes the availability of a simulator, but we couldn't find a publicly available simulator for the CRAFT dataset. Instead of constructing a new simulator, we use an LLM, such as GPT-3.5 and GPT-4 [5, 21], as a proxy simulator. We provide GPT-x ( $x \in \{3.5, 4\}$ ) with the natural language descriptions of the scenes in the dataset and use it to answer counterfactual questions. Surprisingly, the vanilla GPT-x reasoning exhibits reasonable performance for the textual descriptions of visual scenes. Moreover, by applying our method, we can further enhance the performance by determining whether a counterfactual question can be answered using factual states, as demonstrated by the causal graph. Since GPT-x handles factual questions more effectively than counterfactual questions, our method significantly improves the accuracy of GPT-x answers. Essentially, our method can be considered a new way of prompting GPT-x for counterfactual questions.

In summary, this paper first introduces a graphical model that formalizes causal and temporal relations among events. Second, we implement the model's computation in the declarative programming language ASP, which we use to improve counterfactual event prediction. Third, we demonstrate the effectiveness of our method by achieving state-of-the-art performance on CLEVRER. Finally, we demonstrate the visual reasoning capability of an LLM and show how it can be further enhanced through our counterfactual reasoning approach.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 provides a brief overview of the necessary background information. In Section 3, we introduce a graphical model that describes causal relationships among temporal events, and Section 4 presents its implementation in ASP. Sections 5 and 6 present experimental results with CLEVRER and CRAFT.

The implementation of our method is publicly available at <https://github.com/azreasoners/crcg>.

## 2. Preliminaries

### 2.1. Neuro-Symbolic Models and CLEVRER

*NS-DR* explicitly combines perception, language, and physical dynamics through symbolic representation. It consists of the following modules.

- The question parser translates the question and answer options to a functional program, which is passed to the program executor.
- The video frame parser (perception module) identifies objects and their trajectories in the video. It returns object trajectories and the intrinsic attributes of objects.
- The dynamics predictor (simulation module) learns the dynamics of objects by training on object masks proposed by the video frame parser.
- The program executor is a symbolic reasoner that executes the functional program. It consists of several functional modules implemented in Python, which query the output of the dynamics predictor (such as getting the post-video or counterfactual collision events), or perform logical operations (such as recursively checking the ancestors of collision events).

A few enhancements were proposed building upon the structure of *NS-DR*. To avoid dense annotations for visual attributes and physical events, *DCL* [6] applies concept learning through weak supervision using question-answer pairs associated with videos. However, its accuracy is only marginally better than that of *NS-DR*.

*VRDP* [9] has a similar architecture, but has a better dynamics predictor. It integrates a differentiable physics engine that infers explicit physical properties, such as mass and velocity, from object-centric representations and uses them to run simulations. Its overall performance on CLEVRER is slightly worse than that of *ODDN-Aloe* except for counterfactual questions.

In all the models above, symbolic reasoning is applied at the end after aggregating all the information from other components to derive the answer.

### 2.2. Answer Set Programming

Answer Set Programming (ASP) [4, 15] is a logic programming paradigm that allows for declarative reasoning in knowledge-intensive applications. It is based on the answer set semantics of logic programs [10], which enables the expression of causal reasoning, default reasoning, aggregates, and various other constraints. There are several efficient solvers, such as *CLINGO*, *DLV*, and *WASP*.

ASP has primarily been applied in symbolic domains, but there are some exceptions that apply ASP in conjunction with visual perception, as demonstrated in [1, 14, 23, 26, 27]. We use *CLINGO* v5.3.0 as an ASP solver. For the language

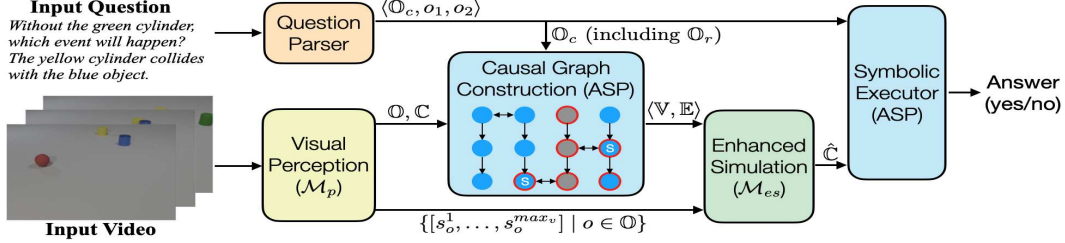


Figure 1. Overview of CRCG — the enhanced counterfactual reasoning using a causal graph. The Causal Graph Construction and the Symbolic Executor modules are realized by ASP and perform symbolic computation.

of CLINGO, we refer the reader to the textbook [16] or the CLINGO manual.<sup>2</sup>

### 3. Counterfactual Reasoning with Causal Graphs

In videos depicting the objects moving and colliding with each other, the *state* of an object  $o$  at a frame  $t$  includes the information about its location, speed, direction, mass, etc. We aim to investigate the causal relationships between these states resulting from changes described in the counterfactual question. We will explore how identifying these causal relations can aid in counterfactual reasoning.

Consider a video  $\mathcal{V}$  depicting a set  $\mathbb{O}$  of objects. Let  $Q = \langle \mathbb{O}_c, o_1, o_2 \rangle$  represent a counterfactual question “if we intervene in (that is, remove or replace) some objects  $\mathbb{O}_c$  ( $\subseteq \mathbb{O}$ ), will there be a collision between objects  $o_1$  and  $o_2$ ?” Let  $\mathbb{O}_r$  ( $\subseteq \mathbb{O}_c$ ) denote the set of removed objects in  $\mathbb{O}_c$  and let  $\mathbb{O}_u$  denote  $\mathbb{O} \setminus \mathbb{O}_r$ .

Let  $\mathcal{M}_p$  denote a *perception model* that detects object states and collisions in the video:

$$\{[s_o^1, \dots, s_o^{max_v}] \mid o \in \mathbb{O}\}, \mathbb{C} \leftarrow \mathcal{M}_p(\mathcal{V}), \quad (1)$$

where  $s_o^t$  denotes the state of object  $o$  at frame  $t$  returned by the perception model (known as the *perception state*);  $max_v$  is the total number of frames in a video; and  $\mathbb{C}$  is a set of collision events of the form  $\langle i, j, t \rangle$  found by the perception model, representing that objects  $i$  and  $j$  collide at frame  $t$ .

Let  $\mathcal{M}_s$  denote a *simulation model* that takes the states of  $\mathbb{O}_u$  at frame  $t$  as input and outputs their states at frame  $t+1$ , and the collisions happened at frame  $t$  in the simulation:

$$\{\hat{s}_o^{t+1} \mid o \in \mathbb{O}_u\}, \hat{\mathbb{C}}^t \leftarrow \mathcal{M}_s(\{\hat{s}_o^t \mid o \in \mathbb{O}_u\})$$

where  $\hat{s}_o^t$  denotes the state of object  $o$  at frame  $t$  returned by the simulation model (*simulated state*);  $\hat{\mathbb{C}}^t$  is a set of detected collisions at frame  $t$ ; and the initial states are from perception, i.e.,  $\hat{s}_o^1 = s_o^1$  for  $o \in \mathbb{O}_u$ .

When comparing known perception states  $s_o^t$  to simulated states  $\hat{s}_o^t$ , we typically find that the latter are less accurate, and that simulation error accumulates over frames.

<sup>2</sup><https://github.com/potassco/guide/releases/tag/v2.2.0>

To answer a counterfactual question, we aim to use the perception states for as long as possible, only switching to the simulated states once the perception states have been “affected” by the intervened objects.

#### 3.1. A Causal Graph with Temporal Events

Our method, which we call CRCG (Counterfactual Reasoning using a Causal Graph), uses a pipeline shown in Figure 1. The pipeline begins with the Causal Graph Construction module that takes as input the intervened objects  $\mathbb{O}_c$  from the Question Parser, and the objects  $\mathbb{O}$  and in-video collisions  $\mathbb{C}$  from the Visual Perception module. The module constructs a graph  $\langle \mathbb{V}, \mathbb{E} \rangle$  using the given inputs.

The Causal Graph Construction module first obtains  $[t_1, \dots, t_k]$  from  $\mathbb{C}$  as an ordered list of frames in the video when collisions occur. Since only  $k$  frames introduce causal relations, we model the causal relations in video  $\mathcal{V}$  with a *causal graph*  $\langle \mathbb{V}, \mathbb{E} \rangle$  where

- $\mathbb{V}$  is a set of nodes  $s_o^t$  for  $o \in \mathbb{O}$  and  $t \in \{t_1, \dots, t_k\}$ ;
- $\mathbb{E}$  is a set of directed edges of two kinds: (i) for every collision  $\langle i, j, t \rangle \in \mathbb{C}$ , there are two *horizontal edges* between nodes  $s_i^t$  and  $s_j^t$ , and (ii) for every object  $o \in \mathbb{O}$  and every consecutive frames  $t_i$  and  $t_{i+1}$  in  $[t_1, \dots, t_k]$ , there is a *vertical edge* from node  $s_o^{t_i}$  to node  $s_o^{t_{i+1}}$ .

Intuitively, each horizontal edge denotes a collision between the two objects, while each vertical edge denotes the state change over time of the same object.

Given a causal graph  $\langle \mathbb{V}, \mathbb{E} \rangle$  constructed for video  $\mathcal{V}$ , we formalize causal relationships among nodes in  $\mathbb{V}$  as follows.

**Definition 1 (Ancestor)** For any two different nodes  $s_o^t$  and  $s_{o'}^{t'}$  in the causal graph, if there is a path from  $s_o^t$  to  $s_{o'}^{t'}$ , we say  $s_o^t$  is an ancestor of  $s_{o'}^{t'}$ .

The ancestor relation is used to determine whether the state of one object affects the state of another object and whether the intervention of some objects affects other objects in subsequent frames.

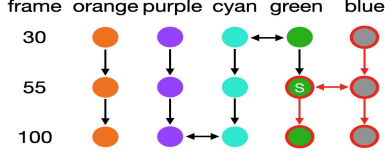


Figure 2. The causal graph for Example 1. The removed object *blue* is colored grey. Affected nodes are circled in red. The sim node is denoted by “s”.

**Definition 2 (Affected)** We say a node  $s_o^t \in \mathbb{V}$  is affected by the intervened objects  $\mathbb{O}_c$  if (i)  $o \in \mathbb{O}_c$  or (ii) there exists a node  $s_{o'}^{t'} \in \mathbb{V}$  that is an ancestor of  $s_o^t$  and  $o' \in \mathbb{O}_c$ .

For any object  $o \in \mathbb{O}_u$  and any frame  $t$ , if  $s_o^t$  is affected by  $\mathbb{O}_c$ , the simulation for  $o$  must start by frame  $t$  at the latest. We define the notion of a “simulation node” that indicates such a node in the causal graph.

**Definition 3 (Sim Node)** For any node  $s_o^t \in \mathbb{V}$ , it is a simulation node (or sim node in short) if (i)  $o \in \mathbb{O}_u$ , (ii)  $s_o^t$  is affected by  $\mathbb{O}_c$ , and (iii) there is no node  $s_{o'}^{t'} \in \mathbb{V}$  such that  $s_o^t$  is affected by  $\mathbb{O}_c$  and  $t' < t$ .

**Example 1** Figure 2 shows an example causal graph for a video, from which  $\mathcal{M}_p$  detects 5 objects  $\mathbb{O} = \{\text{orange, purple, cyan, green, blue}\}$  and 3 collisions  $\mathbb{C} = \{\langle \text{cyan, green, 30} \rangle, \langle \text{green, blue, 55} \rangle, \langle \text{purple, cyan, 100} \rangle\}$ .  $\mathbb{V}$  consists of node  $s_o^t$  for  $o \in \mathbb{O}$  and  $t \in \{30, 55, 100\}$ .  $\mathbb{E}$  consists of horizontal and vertical edges, as illustrated. Specifically,  $\mathbb{E}$  includes horizontal edges between cyan and green object states at frame 30, green and blue object states at 55, and the purple and cyan object states at frame 100. The node  $s_{\text{blue}}^{30}$  is an ancestor of the nodes  $s_{\text{blue}}^{55}$ ,  $s_{\text{blue}}^{100}$ ,  $s_{\text{green}}^{55}$ ,  $s_{\text{green}}^{100}$ , and all are affected by the removed object  $\mathbb{O}_c = \{\text{blue}\}$ . Of these five nodes, only  $s_{\text{green}}^{55}$  satisfies the conditions for being a simulation node. (1) It is not removed, (2) it is affected by some object, and (3) it is the first node  $s_{\text{green}}^t$  to be affected.

### 3.2. Enhancing Simulation with Causal Graphs

If we know that node  $s_o^t$  is a sim node, we can potentially improve the accuracy of the simulation by replacing the preceding simulated states  $\hat{s}_o^i$  with the perception states  $s_o^i$  for  $i \in \{1, \dots, t-1\}$ . This is the idea behind the Enhanced Simulation module in Figure 1. The Enhanced Simulation module, denoted by  $\mathcal{M}_{es}$ , takes as input the causal graph  $\langle \mathbb{V}, \mathbb{E} \rangle$  constructed in the Causal Graph Construction module, a simulation model  $\mathcal{M}_s$ , and the perception states  $s_o^t$  of all remaining objects  $o \in \mathbb{O}_u$  in all video frames  $t \in \{1, \dots, \max_v\}$ . It then outputs their simulated states and collisions:

$$\{[\hat{s}_o^1, \dots, \hat{s}_o^{\max_s}] \mid o \in \mathbb{O}_u\}, \hat{\mathbb{C}} \leftarrow \mathcal{M}_{es}(\langle \mathbb{V}, \mathbb{E} \rangle, \mathcal{M}_s, \{[s_o^1, \dots, s_o^{\max_v}] \mid o \in \mathbb{O}_u\})$$

where  $\max_s$  is the maximum number of frames to simulate, and  $\hat{\mathbb{C}}$  is the set of collisions detected in the enhanced simulation, which will be used in the Symbolic Executor module (shown in Figure 1) to find the answer to the counterfactual question.

#### Algorithm 1 Enhanced Simulation $\mathcal{M}_{es}$

**Input:** A causal graph  $\langle \mathbb{V}, \mathbb{E} \rangle$  (includes sim nodes), a simulator  $\mathcal{M}_s$ , and (perception) states  $[s_o^1, \dots, s_o^{\max_v}]$  for  $o \in \mathbb{O}_u$

**Output:** States  $[\hat{s}_o^1, \dots, \hat{s}_o^{\max_s}]$  for  $o \in \mathbb{O}_u$ , collisions  $\hat{\mathbb{C}}$

```

1:  $\mathbb{O}_p \leftarrow \mathbb{O}_u$ ;  $\hat{s}_o^1 \leftarrow s_o^1$  for  $o \in \mathbb{O}_u$ 
2: for each  $t \in \{1, \dots, \max_s\}$  do
3:    $\{\hat{s}_o^{t+1} \mid o \in \mathbb{O}_u\}, \hat{\mathbb{C}}^t \leftarrow \mathcal{M}_s(\{\hat{s}_o^t \mid o \in \mathbb{O}_u\})$ 
4:   for each  $o \in \mathbb{O}_p$  do
5:     if  $t = \max_v$  or  $s_o^t$  is a sim node or  $\langle o, o', t \rangle \in \hat{\mathbb{C}}^t$  for some  $o' \in \mathbb{O}_u \setminus \mathbb{O}_p$  then
6:        $\mathbb{O}_p \leftarrow \mathbb{O}_p \setminus \{o\}$ 
7:     else
8:        $\hat{s}_o^{t+1} \leftarrow s_o^{t+1}$ 
9:     end if
10:  end for
11: end for
12: return  $\{[\hat{s}_o^1, \dots, \hat{s}_o^{\max_s}] \mid o \in \mathbb{O}_u\}, \hat{\mathbb{C}} = \bigcup_{t=1}^{\max_s} \hat{\mathbb{C}}^t$ 
```

Algorithm 1 describes the detailed procedure in  $\mathcal{M}_{es}$ . In this algorithm, a set of objects  $\mathbb{O}_p$  is maintained, where the simulated states of these objects can be replaced with their perception states. To explain the algorithm’s process, let us consider a single frame  $t$ . First, Algorithm 1 calculates the simulated state  $\hat{s}_o^{t+1}$  for each object  $o \in \mathbb{O}_u$  (line 3). Next, it checks each object  $o \in \mathbb{O}_p$  to see if its perception state is not usable from  $t+1$  (line 5). If this is true, the object is removed from  $\mathbb{O}_p$  (line 6). Otherwise, the algorithm replaces the simulated state  $\hat{s}_o^{t+1}$  of the object with its perception state  $s_o^{t+1}$  (line 8).

Finally, the symbolic executor of our model (as depicted in Figure 1) determines the answer to a counterfactual question  $Q = \langle \mathbb{O}_c, o_1, o_2 \rangle$ . It answers *yes* if there exists a frame  $t$  such that  $\langle o_1, o_2, t \rangle \in \hat{\mathbb{C}}$ , and *no* otherwise.

**Example 1 Continued** When the *blue* object in Figure 2 is removed,  $\mathcal{M}_{es}$  computes the simulated states for the remaining four objects. Figure 3 visualizes the trajectories of all objects in the original video (left) and the trajectories of the unremoved objects in the base (middle) or enhanced (right) simulation. Consider the enhanced simulation (right). For  $o \in \{\text{purple, cyan}\}$ , the simulated states are the same as the perception states, since their states are not affected.

Now, suppose that we are asked whether *cyan* and *purple* collide. The enhanced simulation detects this collision at frame 100, just as in the original video. However, the basic simulation fails due to the accumulated simula-

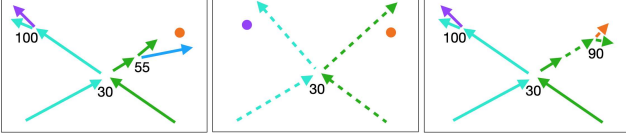


Figure 3. Object trajectories from the location information. The numbers are the frame numbers for the collisions (left) in the perception states by  $\mathcal{M}_p$ ; (middle) in the simulated states by  $\mathcal{M}_s$  where simulation starts from the beginning after removing the blue object; (right) in the enhanced simulation by  $\mathcal{M}_{es}$  using the causal graph. Solid and dashed lines represent trajectories extracted from perception and simulated states, respectively. The left misses to detect the collision between green and orange; the middle misses to detect two collisions; the right found all three collisions.

tion error. Note that although this collision happens much later than the collision of the removed object, it is still not affected, according to our causal graph in Figure 2.

Finally, let’s consider a query about whether green and orange collide. Thanks to the corrected trajectory of green by our enhancement, the enhanced simulation detects this collision at frame 90.

### 3.3. Approximation of CRCG When Frame-by-Frame Simulator is Not Available

Algorithm 1 assumes that the simulation model  $\mathcal{M}_s$  can perform frame-by-frame simulation. It does not apply if  $\mathcal{M}_s$  is a blackbox that could only return the final prediction. However, even if  $\mathcal{M}_s$  is a black box that doesn’t give intermediate frame results and can only make a final counterfactual predictions *yes* or *no*, there is a way to enhance the accuracy by using the information from the causal graph. In the following, we design an approximation of CRCG with a blackbox simulator, where we identify cases where it is appropriate to reason about the perception result in place of simulation by consulting the causal graph.

To achieve this, we introduce a new pipeline denoted by  $\text{CRCG}^{\text{approx}}$ , which is shown in Figure 4. Unlike the previous section, here we restrict a counterfactual question  $Q = \langle \mathbb{O}_r, o_1, o_2 \rangle$  to be a special case “if we *remove* some objects  $\mathbb{O}_r (\subseteq \mathbb{O})$ , will there be a collision between objects  $o_1$  and  $o_2$ ?” as in CLEVRER.

**Definition 4 (Determined)** Consider a counterfactual question  $Q = \langle \mathbb{O}_r, o_1, o_2 \rangle$  and a causal graph constructed on objects  $\mathbb{O}$  and collisions  $\mathbb{C}$ .

- The result of  $Q$  is determined to be yes if there exists some  $t$  such that  $\langle o_1, o_2, t \rangle \in \mathbb{C}$  and  $s_{o_1}^t$  and  $s_{o_2}^t$  are not affected.
- The result of  $Q$  is determined to be no if (i)  $o_1$  or  $o_2$  is in  $\mathbb{O}_r$  or (ii)  $s_{o_1}^t$  and  $s_{o_2}^t$  are not affected and  $\langle o_1, o_2, t \rangle \notin \mathbb{C}$  for any  $t$ .

Intuitively, Definition 4 says that the result of a counterfactual question is determined to be yes if the collision happened in the video and the state of the two queried objects at the moment of the collision is not affected by the removed objects. The result is determined to be no if either (i) a queried object in the collision is removed, or (ii) the collision did not happen in the video and all the states of the queried objects are not affected by the removed objects.

**Remark** Note that, unlike Algorithm 1, it is inevitable that the above-determined result cannot capture the influence from other simulated objects and thus is not guaranteed to be always correct even with a perfect perception model  $\mathcal{M}_p$ . Consider the example in Figure 5 where the counterfactual question is  $Q = \langle \{blue\}, purple, cyan \rangle$ . While its result is determined to be yes according to the above definition, the collision between *purple* and *cyan* shouldn’t happen because *green* would collide with *cyan* if *blue* were removed, which changes the trajectory of *cyan* so that *cyan* wouldn’t hit *purple*. Such examples are possible, yet don’t occur often in practice.<sup>3</sup>

In the end, given a baseline counterfactual prediction  $p_Q \in \{yes, no\}$ , the Enhanced Prediction module in Figure 4 gives the final answer on a counterfactual question  $Q = \langle \mathbb{O}_c, o_1, o_2 \rangle$ : if the result is determined to be yes or no, the final answer is the same. Otherwise (i.e., if the result is not determined), the final answer is the same as  $p_Q$ . In other words, the determined fact obtained from the perception states overrides the baseline’s prediction  $p_Q$ . This can be understood as an approximation of Algorithm 1 where  $max_s = max_v$  and the checking of “ $\langle o, o', t \rangle \in \mathbb{C}^t$  for some  $o' \in \mathbb{O}_u \setminus \mathbb{O}_p$ ” in line 5 is removed.

## 4. Realization of CRCG in ASP

This section models the causal graph using answer set programming and uses an answer set solver to derive the necessary information.

Given a video  $\mathcal{V}$ , a perception model  $\mathcal{M}_p$  returns the in-video collisions  $\mathbb{C}$  and the perception states of all objects  $\mathbb{O}$ . These outputs and a counterfactual question  $Q = \langle \mathbb{O}_c, o_1, o_2 \rangle$  are represented in the ASP facts as follows. We represent each collision  $\langle i, j, t \rangle$  in  $\mathbb{C}$  with an atom `collision(i, j, t)`, and represent each object  $o \in \mathbb{O}$ ,  $o \in \mathbb{O}_c$ , and  $o \in \mathbb{O}_r$  with atoms `object(o)`, `intervened(o)`, and `removed(o)` respectively. The atoms `ancestor(o, t, o', t')`, `affected(o, t)`, and `sim(o, t)` represent “ $s_o^t$  is an ancestor of  $s_{o'}^{t'}$ ,” “ $s_o^t$  is affected (by the intervened objects),” and “ $s_o^t$  is a sim node,” respectively. We designed an ASP program  $\Pi$  to represent the causal graph and to deduce a single answer set  $\mathbb{A}$  such that (i) `ancestor(o, t, o', t') ∈ A` iff  $s_o^t$  is an ancestor of  $s_{o'}^{t'}$ , (ii) `affected(o, t) ∈ A` iff  $s_o^t$  is affected, and

<sup>3</sup>See Table 2 for illustration.

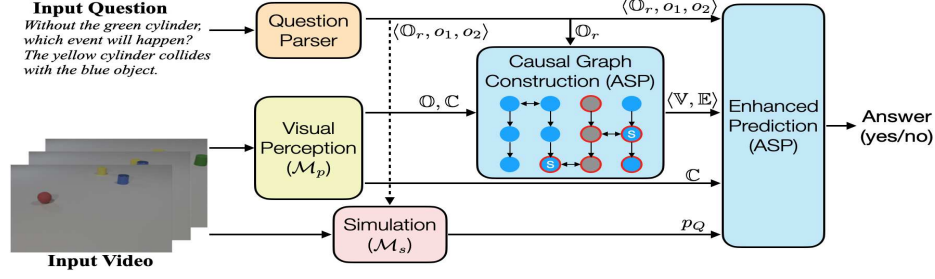


Figure 4. Overview of the approximation of CRCG when no access to a frame-by-frame simulator is available.

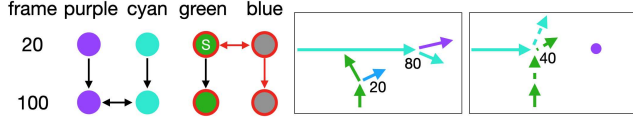


Figure 5. (left) The causal graph constructed for a video with 4 objects and 2 collisions. On its right are object trajectories from the location information in the perception states by  $\mathcal{M}_p$  (middle) or in the simulated states by  $\mathcal{M}_{es}$  (right).

(iii)  $\text{sim}(o, t) \in \mathbb{A}$  iff  $s_o^t$  is a sim node.

The definitions introduced in Section 3 can be represented in ASP in a straightforward way.

**Ancestor** The ancestor relation is introduced either by the same object with different frames (i.e., vertical edges in the causal graph)

```
ancestor(O, T1, O, T2) :- object(O),
                           collision(_, T1), collision(_, T2), T1 < T2.
```

or by a collision (i.e., horizontal edges in the causal graph)

```
ancestor(O1, T, O2, T) :- collision(O1, O2, T).
collision(O1, O2, T) :- collision(O2, O1, T).
```

or by the transitive closure of the ancestor relation itself.

```
ancestor(O1, T1, O2, T2) :- ancestor(O1, T1, O3, T3),
                             ancestor(O3, T3, O2, T2), (O1, T1) != (O2, T2).
```

In ASP, a variable starts with an uppercase letter, a constant starts with a lowercase letter, and an underscore represents an anonymous variable. The term  $(O1, T1) \neq (O2, T2)$  in the last rule guarantees that nodes  $s_{O1}^{T1}$  and  $s_{O2}^{T2}$  are not the same, thus no edge will be introduced to form a self-loop.

**Affected** A node  $s_o^t$  is affected if  $o$  is intervened

```
affected(O, T) :- intervened(O), collision(_, T).
```

or there is an intervened object  $o'$  such that  $s_{o'}^{t'}$  is an ancestor of  $s_o^t$  for some  $t'$ .

```
affected(O, T) :- intervened(O'), ancestor(O', T', O, T).
```

**Sim Node** Node  $s_o^t$  is a sim node if object  $o$  is not removed, node  $s_o^t$  is affected, and no node  $s_o^{t'}$  in earlier frame  $t'$  is affected.

```
sim(O, T) :- not removed(O), affected(O, T),
             T <= T' : affected(O, T').
```

In the above rule,  $T \leq T' : \text{affected}(O, T')$  is a *conditional literal* saying that “for all cases when node  $s_o^{T'}$  is affected,  $T'$  must be greater or equal to  $T$ .”

**Implementation of CRCG (Sec 3.2) using ASP** Assuming the availability of the frame-by-frame simulator  $\mathcal{M}_s$ , we implement Algorithm 1 in “Enhanced Simulation Model ( $\mathcal{M}_{es}$ )” (Figure 1) to find all collisions  $\hat{\mathbb{C}}$  using the perception states detected from  $\mathcal{M}_p$  and the sim node information  $\text{sim}(O, T)$  (encoding  $s_o^t$  is a sim node) computed by ASP. For counterfactual question  $Q = \langle \mathbb{O}_c, o_1, o_2 \rangle$ , the answer is *yes* (i.e., the event in  $Q$  happens) if a collision between  $o_1$  and  $o_2$  belongs to  $\hat{\mathbb{C}}$ . Otherwise, the answer is *no*.

## 5. Experiments with CLEVRER

### 5.1. Applying CRCG to CLEVRER

We utilized our approach, CRCG, in conjunction with both the perception model and the simulation model within VRDP [9]. Specifically, we refer to the combination of CRCG with the VRDP model as  $\text{CRCG}_{\text{VRDP}}$ . Additionally, we applied  $\text{CRCG}^{\text{approx}}$  to enhance the predictions of NS-DR directly, and we denote this combination as  $\text{CRCG}_{\text{NSDR}}^{\text{approx}}$ .

Table 1. Performance comparison with the state-of-the-art methods on counterfactual questions in CLEVRER test set.

| Model                                       | Opt. Accuracy (%) | Ques. Accuracy (%) |
|---------------------------------------------|-------------------|--------------------|
| NS-DR [32]                                  | 74.1              | 42.2               |
| DCL [6]                                     | 80.4              | 46.5               |
| Aloe [8]                                    | 91.4              | 75.6               |
| ODDN-Aloe [28]                              | 93.0              | 80.1               |
| VRDP [9]                                    | 94.8              | 84.3               |
| $\text{CRCG}_{\text{NSDR}}^{\text{approx}}$ | 90.7              | 78.3               |
| $\text{CRCG}_{\text{VRDP}}$                 | <b>96.1</b>       | <b>87.8</b>        |

Table 1 demonstrates the significant improvement in option accuracy and question accuracy resulting from our enhancement of NS-DR predictions. Furthermore,

CRCG<sub>VRDP</sub> outperforms the VRDP baseline and establishes a new state-of-the-art level of performance for counterfactual questions in the CLEVRER dataset. We measure the average runtime of the ASP programs computing the causal graphs to be 6 milliseconds.

Table 2. Ablation study on CLEVRER validation set of how the source (i.e., perception or simulation) of predicted collision for an option affects the option accuracy. The number of options and accuracy are reported for each source.

| Model                                  | determined<br>#opt. / acc(%) | not determined<br>#opt. / acc(%) |
|----------------------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| NS-DR                                  | 20558 / 75.31                | 12493 / 71.78                    |
| CRCG <sup>approx</sup> <sub>NSDR</sub> | 20558 / 95.08                | 12493 / 71.78                    |

In the CLEVRER dataset, every question-option pair can be represented as a tuple  $\langle \odot_c, o_1, o_2 \rangle$ . To evaluate the effectiveness of CRCG<sup>approx</sup> in improving baselines, we have divided these tuples into two sets based on whether the answer is determined or not. The improvements on each set are shown in Table 2. We have observed that CRCG<sup>approx</sup><sub>NSDR</sub> performs much better in the first column. The reason is that collisions detected directly from the video using  $\mathcal{M}_p$  in NS-DR are generally more accurate than the collisions predicted using  $\mathcal{M}_s$  simulation from frame 1 onwards. Applying CRCG significantly enhances the option accuracy from 75.31% to 95.08% for those options where in-video collisions can be used. However, the accuracy remains the same for the remaining options, as both methods use the same baseline prediction  $p_Q$ .

## 5.2. Enhancements for Other Question Types of CLEVRER

This section describes how we can further enhance neuro-symbolic models for other question types in CLEVRER, leveraging their modular architecture. Table 3 presents a comparison of different models’ performance on the CLEVRER test set, including NS-DR and VRDP models improved by our approach.

To achieve state-of-the-art performance on all question categories, we designed two additional modules to improve the accuracy of perception and simulated states, respectively.

**Improved Object Detection (IOD)** IOD is a post-processor for the perception model  $\mathcal{M}_p$  that reduces its output noise and errors through two functions: *trajectory smoothing* and *topmost as center*. *Trajectory smoothing* draws a virtual line to connect the trajectories and interpolates missing frames. This helps reduce noise and errors in the output. In addition, since there are missing trajectories of objects at some frames due to occlusion and errors, *topmost as center* uses the topmost point (instead of center) of an object to trace its trajectory. This is because the topmost position is less likely to be occluded than the center point.

Table 3. Performance of models among all question categories on CLEVRER test set. Also, refer to the leaderboard <https://eval.ai/web/challenges/challenge-page/667/leaderboard/1813>.

| Model                                           | Desc. | Explanatory  |              | Predictive |              | Counterfact. |              |
|-------------------------------------------------|-------|--------------|--------------|------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
|                                                 |       | opt.         | ques.        | opt.       | ques.        | opt.         | ques.        |
| NS-DR [18]                                      | 88.1  | 87.6         | 79.6         | 82.9       | 68.7         | 74.1         | 42.2         |
| DCL [6]                                         | 90.7  | 89.6         | 82.8         | 90.5       | 82.0         | 80.4         | 46.5         |
| Aloe [8]                                        | 94.0  | 98.47        | 96.0         | 93.5       | 87.5         | 91.42        | 75.61        |
| VRDP [9]                                        | 93.4  | 96.3         | 91.9         | 95.7       | 91.4         | 94.8         | 84.3         |
| ODDN-Aloe [28]                                  | 95.8  | 98.9         | 97.0         | 95.7       | 91.8         | 93.0         | 80.1         |
| CRCG <sup>approx</sup> <sub>NSDR</sub> +IOD+SPS | 95.55 | <b>99.94</b> | <b>99.81</b> | 88.12      | 76.64        | 90.73        | 78.31        |
| CRCG <sub>VRDP</sub> +IOD+SPS                   |       | <b>96.46</b> | 99.32        | 98.80      | <b>96.11</b> | <b>92.28</b> | <b>96.61</b> |
|                                                 |       |              |              |            |              | <b>90.72</b> |              |

**Simple Physics Simulator (SPS)** We used the smoothed trajectories generated by IOD to create a basic physics simulator, which serves as  $\mathcal{M}_s$  for predicting and exploring counterfactual scenarios. Our simulator represents the motion of objects in a two-dimensional space, where each object is treated as a point and follows simple kinematic equations to determine its movement.

## 6. Experiments with CRAFT

The CRAFT dataset [2] contains 10,000 videos that depict causal relationships between falling and sliding objects. It also includes 57,000 questions. CRAFT differs from CLEVRER by introducing additional events and presenting many different environments that feature various configurations of immovable objects such as ramps and baskets. The questions in the dataset are divided into three categories, but we only consider counterfactual questions.

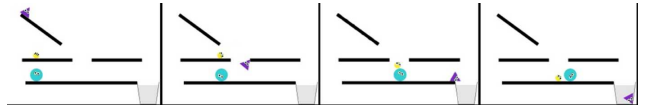


Figure 6. Screenshots from sample CRAFT video #1,179.

As there are no baselines for CRAFT that provide the necessary intermediate information for constructing causal graphs – such as object static features (e.g. color, shape, size) and in-video collision information – we explore an alternative approach. Specifically, we take advantage of GPT-x, a large language model, as a proxy for a simulator (denoted as  $\mathcal{M}_s$  in Figure 4), by utilizing the textual descriptions of the videos available within the CRAFT dataset. For example, a description-query pair for video #1,179 (shown in Figure 6) from the test set is:

Start. Large cyan circle collides with small yellow circle. Small purple triangle enters basket. Large cyan circle collides with small yellow circle. Small purple triangle collides with basket. End.

Will the tiny purple triangle end up in the basket if the large cyan circle is removed?

We compare three settings: vanilla GPT-x,  $\text{CRCG}_{\text{GPTx}}^{\text{approx}}$  using GPT-x as a proxy simulator, and another GPT-x case where we give a modified prompt by leveraging the “determined” information obtained as part of  $\text{CRCG}_{\text{GPTx}}^{\text{approx}}$ .<sup>4</sup>

**GPT-x** The baseline GPT-x model receives two inputs: natural language descriptions of the scenes in the CRAFT dataset, and a prompt generated from video descriptions and a question. It then outputs an answer, such as “Yes” or “No”.

**$\text{CRCG}_{\text{GPTx}}^{\text{approx}}$**  Since we input natural language descriptions of the scenes, we extend the question parser to extract symbolic information, such as removed objects  $\mathbb{O}_c$  and in-video collisions  $\mathbb{C}$  from both the question and the video description. Subsequently, the ASP implementation of  $\text{CRCG}_{\text{GPTx}}^{\text{approx}}$  converts this information into a causal graph and determines whether the result of the question is determined. If it is, in-video collisions  $\mathbb{C}$  are used to answer the question. Otherwise, we resort to the baseline GPT-x prediction as in the first setting.

**GPT-x with CRCG guided prompt** Similar to the second setting, the process first checks if the result is determined. If not, we default to the baseline GPT-x prediction as in the first setting. Conversely, if the result is determined, we rephrase the given counterfactual question (e.g., “Will the blue circle fall to the ground if the large blue triangle is removed?”) as a perception question (e.g., “Did the small blue circle fall to the floor?”), and then use GPT-x to answer it.

Table 4. Accuracy on counterfactual questions in CRAFT test dataset

| Model                                         | Easy Split<br>Ques.(%) | Hard Split<br>Ques.(%) |
|-----------------------------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| LSTM-D [2]                                    | 55.89                  | 56.00                  |
| BERT-D [2]                                    | 80.05                  | 79.34                  |
| GPT-3.5                                       | 52.29                  | 52.53                  |
| $\text{CRCG}_{\text{GPT3.5}}^{\text{approx}}$ | 65.32                  | 68.48                  |
| GPT-3.5 with CRCG guided prompt               | 63.26                  | 65.89                  |
| GPT-4                                         | 77.93                  | 81.20                  |
| $\text{CRCG}_{\text{GPT4}}^{\text{approx}}$   | 79.68                  | 83.64                  |
| GPT-4 with CRCG guided prompt                 | 78.07                  | 81.22                  |

Table 4 compares the performance of the aforementioned cases with the LSTM-D and BERT-D models from [2]. The comparison is based on both the “easy” and “hard” splits of counterfactual questions in the CRAFT test set. While LSTM-D and BERT-D also take questions and textual descriptions of scenes as input, they need to be trained on approximately 34K training instances. In contrast, all GPT-x-based methods are in a few-shot setting.

<sup>4</sup>The GPT-3.5 model used in our experiments is “gpt-3.5-turbo-0613”, the GPT-4 model used is “gpt-4-0613” and the temperature is set to 0 for all experiments.

Table 5. Accuracy on counterfactual questions in CRAFT test dataset whose results are determined.

| Model                                         | Easy Split<br>Ques.(%) | Hard Split<br>Ques.(%) |
|-----------------------------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| GPT-3.5                                       | 57.62                  | 53.99                  |
| $\text{CRCG}_{\text{GPT3.5}}^{\text{approx}}$ | 97.96                  | 99.00                  |
| GPT-3.5 with CRCG guided prompt               | 91.58                  | 91.69                  |
| GPT-4                                         | 92.55                  | 92.11                  |
| $\text{CRCG}_{\text{GPT4}}^{\text{approx}}$   | 97.96                  | 99.00                  |
| GPT-4 with CRCG guided prompt                 | 93.00                  | 92.19                  |

To better understand the effectiveness of CRCG, we compared the test accuracy on 1,128 counterfactual questions (out of 3,489) whose results were determined. The results are presented in Table 5. The  $\text{CRCG}_{\text{GPTx}}^{\text{approx}}$  models achieved an impressive 97.96%/99% accuracy on the easy/hard split, which is much higher than their respective GPT-x baselines. Notably, using determined to guide the GPT-x prompt also improved the baseline accuracy by about 13% for GPT-3.5, demonstrating that prompt engineering can greatly benefit from the causal graph. Note that  $\text{CRCG}_{\text{GPT3.5}}^{\text{approx}}$  and  $\text{CRCG}_{\text{GPT4}}^{\text{approx}}$  have the same performance, this is due to the fact that for the determined cases, the solution is found without using the simulator, thus in both cases no simulator is used and the ASP programs are identical.

There are other similar benchmarks like CLEVRER and CRAFT that deals with counterfactual reasoning under physics constraints, such as ComPhy [7] and Cophy [3]. We believe that our approach is applicable to these datasets as well, but the required frame-by-frame simulator is non-trivial to build and we couldn’t find a publicly available one.

## 7. Conclusion

In this paper, we present a method for strengthening neuro-symbolic models by identifying the relation between actual and counterfactual states via explicit causal reasoning in answer set programming. Our method improves upon the baseline as long as perception is more accurate than simulation (which is typically the case), while using the same perception/simulation modules. As the experimental analysis shows, a further improvement is possible with a more accurate simulation module; this is again a benefit of the modular architecture. Moreover, the computation of our approach is interpretable, which led us to improve some modules by augmenting them with additional computation.

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