A Distributed Platform for Mechanism Design

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(joint work with Farhad Arbab and Huiye Ma)
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A theory of an intelligently guided invisible hand wins the Nobel prize

“WHAT on earth is mechanism design?” was the typical reaction to this year’s Nobel prize in economics, announced on October 15th. In this era of “Freakonomics”, in which everyone is discovering their inner economist, economics has become unexpectedly sexy. So what possessed the Nobel committee to honour a subject that sounds so thoroughly dismal? Why didn’t they follow the lead of the peace-prize judges, who know not to let technicalities about being true to the meaning of the award get in the way of good headlines?

In fact, despite its dreary name, mechanism design is a hugely important area of economics, and underpins much of what dismal scientists do today. It goes to the heart of one of the biggest challenges in economics: how to arrange our economic interactions so that, when everyone behaves in a self-interested manner, the result is something we all like. The word “mechanism” refers to the institutions and the rules of the game that govern our economic activities, which can range from a Ministry of Planning in a command economy to the internal organisation of a company to trading in a market.
A theory of an intelligently guided invisible hand wins the Nobel prize

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[...]

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(The Economist, Oct. 18th, 2007)
We describe design of a structured, highly flexible platform for distributed mechanism design. The system is built as a sequence of layers. Lower layers deal with the operations relevant for distributed computing. Upper layers deal with the relevant aspects of the mechanism design. Specific applications are realized as instances of the top layer. The implementation supports various instances of mechanisms.
Assume

- players $1, \ldots, n$,
- set of decisions $D$,
- for each player
  - set of types (e.g., valuations) $\Theta_i$,
  - utility function $v_i : D \times \Theta_i \rightarrow \mathcal{R}$ that he wants to maximize
    (‘behaves in a self-interested manner’).
- Decision rule: a function $f : \Theta_1 \times \cdots \times \Theta_n \rightarrow D$. 
Mechanism Design: Classical View

The following sequence of events:

- each player $i$ has type (e.g., valuation of an item) $\theta_i$,
- each player $i$ announces to the central authority a type (e.g., a bid) $\theta'_i$,
- the central authority computes decision

$$d := f(\theta'_1, \ldots, \theta'_n)$$

and communicates it to each player.

Problem to solve: Each player $i$ wants to manipulate the choice of $d \in D$ so that his utility $v_i(d, \theta_i)$ is maximized.
Example: Public Project Problem (1)

- There are 4 companies.
- A bridge needs to be constructed.
- Each company submits to the central authority its valuation (willingness to pay).
- Bridge gets built when total exceeds 40.
- If yes, each company pays 10.
Each company wants to manipulate the choice so that its utility is maximized.

In the public project problem \((c = 40, \ n = 4)\):

- if \(\theta_i \geq \frac{c}{n}\), submit \(c\),
- if \(\theta_i < \frac{c}{n}\), submit 0.
Tax-based Mechanisms

The central authority computes

decision \( d := f(\theta') \),
the sequence of taxes \((t_1, \ldots, t_n) := g(\theta')\), and
communicates to each player \( i \) decision \( d \) and tax \( t_i \)
he needs to pay (if \( t_i < 0 \)) or receive (if \( t_i \geq 0 \)),

the resulting utility for player \( i \):
\[ u_i(d, t) := v_i(d, \theta_i) + t_i. \]

Groves mechanisms

By specific use of taxes (function \( g \)) truth-telling
(reporting \( \theta'_i := \theta_i \)) becomes best strategy for player \( i \).
(‘Cheating does not pay off’).
Example: Public Project Problem (2)

\[ d \in \{0, 1\}, \]

\[ t_i(\theta'_i, \theta_i) = \]

\[ \begin{cases} 
\min(0, \frac{n-1}{n} c - \sum_{k \neq i} \theta_k) & \text{if } \sum_{k \neq i} \theta_k + \theta'_i < c \\
\min(0, \sum_{k \neq i} \theta_k - \frac{n-1}{n} c) & \text{otherwise} 
\end{cases} \]

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<tr>
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<td>5</td>
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Some Examples of Groves Mechanisms

- **Vickrey auction.**
  Sealed bid auction.
  The winner pays the second highest bid.

- Decisions concerning public projects.

- Various forms of auctions:
  - adwords (Google),
  - spectrum auction (Federal Communications Commission, FCC),
  - assigning takeoff and landing rights at the airports,
  - bus route auctions (London),
  - trucking services auctions,
  ...
Centralized Perspective
Problems with Centralized Perspective

- Central authority becomes *vulnerable part* of the system: can be unreliable, cannot crash, ...

- It may not exist (internet applications).
Distributed Perspective
Design Decisions (1)

Two views of the agent concept.

- Computer science view:
  - process,
  - collection of interacting agents: a distributed system,
  - focus on message passing, synchronization, deadlock detection, security, etc.

- Economics point of view:
  - player,
  - collection of interacting agents: a strategic game,
  - focus on utility maximization, private information, truth-telling, equilibrium, etc.

How to reconcile these two views?
The system is built as a sequence of layers.

Lower layers provide support for distributed computing.

Upper layers are concerned only with the matters specific to mechanism design.
**Player GUI**: handles interaction with the players (users), so registration, type submission and tax reception.

**Specific mechanisms implemented by instantiating Player Process.**
Registered players pay taxes to each other.

Tax authority collects remaining taxes (if any).
Player Process

(Simplified Version, Balanced Mechanisms)

- process $p_i$ representing player $i$ is created,
- $p_i$ obtains player $i$’s type,
- $p_i$ signs in at the local registry,
- all messages sent to $p_i$ are locked and stored,
- if $p_i$’s registration is confirmed, it broadcasts $i$’s type (and otherwise it terminates),
- the lock of $p_i$ is open,
- $p_i$ invokes the DTD algorithm. When it ends $p_i$ has received all the types,
- $p_i$ computes decision and tax schemes of the registered players and broadcasts them,
- $p_i$ invokes the DTD algorithm and terminates.
Details

- **Lower layers** (9K lines of Java code (Kees Blom)),
- **Software for message passing** between internet-based parallel processes (Han Noot),
- **Upper layers** (3.5K lines of Java code (Huiye Ma)).
Possible Realization
Implemented Examples

- Vickrey auction (only 60 lines of code!),
- Vickrey auction with redistribution (Cavallo ’06),
- Public project problems,
- Unit demand auction (uses Kuhn-Munkres algorithm to compute maximum weighted matching),
- Single minded auction (uses a dynamic algorithm developed by V. Markakis),
- Sequential Groves mechanisms (Apt and Estévez-Fernández ’07)
- Walker mechanism (Walker ’81).
A Demo

Single Minded Auction:

- 5 players,
- 2 local registries,
- tax authority,
- 3 items for sale,
- players bids: A: 20:(1,2), B: 50:(3), C: 32:(2), D: 60:(2,3), E: 19:(1).
- generated allocation: (3:B, 28), (2:C, 10), (1:E, 0).

The allocation is computed using a dynamic programming algorithm (V. Markakis).
Player A's Interface

Single Minded Auction

input your type:

Information board:
Player B's Interface

Single Minded Auction

Input your type:  

Information board:
A Distributed Platform for Mechanism Design

**Player A's Interface**

- **Single Minded Auction**
- **Register**

**Input your type:**

**Information board:**

- Phase 1: The player has registered successfully.
Single Minded Auction

input your type:

Information board:

- Phase 1: The player has registered successfully.
**Information board:**

- Phase 1: The player has registered successfully.
- Phase 2: The player has submitted his type: 20:(1,2)
Player B’s Interface

Single Minded Auction

input your type: 50:(3)

Information board:

- Phase 1: The player has registered successfully.
- Phase 2: The player has submitted his type: 50:(3)
Single Minded Auction

input your type: 20:(1,2)

Information board:

-Phase1: The player has registered successfully.
-Phase2: The player has submitted his type: 20:(1,2)
-Phase3: The player has computed the tax scheme ((3, -1, 28), (4, -1, 10)) and multicast to others.
-Phase4: The player has received the information about the revenue 38 from the tax authority.
-Phase4: This ends the game.
- Phase 1: The player has registered successfully.
- Phase 2: The player has submitted his type: 50: (3)
- Phase 3: The player has received the tax scheme: ((3, -1, 28), (4, -1, 10)) multicast by others.
- Phase 3: The player has submitted tax 28 to the tax authority.
- Phase 4: The player has received the information about the revenue 38 from the tax authority.
- Phase 4: This ends the game.
Conclusions

- **Distributed mechanism design** is realistic.

- Our approach
  - is highly flexible,
  - supports **fault-tolerance**,
  - offers a multi-level **protection** against manipulations,
  - can be used to implement **repeated mechanisms**, e.g. continuous auctions.
THANK YOU!