



The Atomic Components of Thought

John R. Anderson, Christian J. Lebiere

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This book achieves a goal that was set 25 years ago when the HAM theory of human memory was published. This theory reflected one of a number of then-current efforts to create a theory of human cognition that met the twin goals of precision and complexity. Up until then the standard for precision had been the mathematical theories of the 1950s and 1960s. These theories took the form of precise models of specific experiments along with some informal, verbally-stated understanding of how they could be extended to new experiments. They seemed to fall far short of capturing the breadth and power of human cognition that was being demonstrated by the new experimental work in human cognition. The next 10 years saw two major efforts to address the problems of scope. In 1976, the ACT theory was first described and included a production rule system of procedural memory to complement HAM's declarative memory. This provided a computationally adequate system which was indeed capable of accounting for all sorts of cognition. In 1993, a new version of ACT--ACT-R--was published. This was an effort to summarize the theoretical progress made on skill acquisition in the intervening 10 years and to tune the subsymbolic level of ACT-R with the insights of the rational analysis of cognition.

Although the appearance of generally-available, full-function code set off a series of events which was hardly planned, it resulted in this book. The catalyst for this was the emergence of a user community. Lebiere insisted that assembling a critical mass of users was essential to the ultimate success of the theory and that a physical gathering was the only way to achieve that goal. This resulted in the First Annual ACT-R Summer School and Workshop, held in 1994. In writing the book, the authors became seized by an aspiration that went beyond just describing the theory correctly. They decided to try to display what the theory could do by collecting together and describing some of its in-house applications. This book reflects decades of work in ACT-R accumulated by many researchers. The chapters are authored by the people that did that particular work. No doubt the reader will be impressed by the scope of the research and the quality of the individual work. Less apparent, but no less important, was the effort that everyone put into achieving the overall consistency and technical integrity of the book. This is the first work in cognitive science to precisely model such a wide range of phenomena with a single theory.

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