

# Spoofing the Limit Order Book: An Agent-Based Model

Xintong Wang  
xintongw@umich.edu

Michael P. Wellman  
wellman@umich.edu

Computer Science & Engineering  
University of Michigan

## ABSTRACT

We present an agent-based model of manipulating prices in financial markets through *spoofing*: submitting spurious orders to mislead traders who observe the order book. Built around the standard limit-order mechanism, our model captures a complex market environment with combined private and common values, the latter represented by noisy observations upon a dynamic fundamental time series. We consider background agents following two types of trading strategies: *zero intelligence* (ZI) that ignores the order book and *heuristic belief learning* (HBL) that exploits the order book to predict price outcomes. By employing an *empirical game-theoretic analysis* to derive approximate strategic equilibria, we demonstrate the effectiveness of HBL and the usefulness of order book information in a range of non-spoofing environments. We further show that a market with HBL traders is spoofable, in that a spoofer can qualitatively manipulate prices towards its desired direction. After re-equilibrating games with spoofing, we find spoofing generally hurts market surplus and decreases the proportion of HBL. However, HBL's persistence in most environments with spoofing indicates a consistently spoofable market. Our model provides a way to quantify the effect of spoofing on trading behavior and efficiency, and thus measures the profitability and cost of an important form of market manipulation.

## CCS Concepts

•Computing methodologies → Multi-agent systems;

## Keywords

Spoofing, agent-based simulation, trading agents

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Electronic trading platforms have transformed the financial market landscape, supporting automation of trading and consequential scaling of volume and speed across geography and asset classes. Automated traders have unprecedented ability to gather and exploit market information from a broad variety of sources, including transactions and order book information exposed by many market mechanisms. Whereas some of these developments may contribute

**Appears in:** *Proceedings of the 16th International Conference on Autonomous Agents and Multiagent Systems (AAMAS 2017)*, S. Das, E. Durfee, K. Larson, M. Winikoff (eds.), May 8–12, 2017, São Paulo, Brazil.

Copyright © 2017, International Foundation for Autonomous Agents and Multiagent Systems (www.ifaamas.org). All rights reserved.

to improved price discovery and efficiency, the automation and dissemination of market information may also introduce new possibilities of disruptive and manipulative practices in financial markets.

Recent years have witnessed several cases of fraud and manipulation in the financial markets, where traders made tremendous profits by deceiving investors or artificially affecting market beliefs. On April 21, 2015, nearly five years after the “Flash Crash”,<sup>1</sup> the U.S. Department of Justice charged Navinder Singh Sarao with 22 criminal counts, including fraud and market manipulation [3]. Prior to the Flash Crash, Sarao allegedly used an automated program to place orders amounting to about \$200 million worth of bets that the market would fall, and later replaced or modified those orders 19,000 times before cancellation. The U.S. Commodity Futures Trading Commission (CFTC) concluded that Sarao’s manipulative practice was responsible for significant order imbalances. Though recent analysis has cast doubt on the causal role of Sarao on the Flash Crash [1], many agree that such manipulation could increase the vulnerability of markets and exacerbate market fluctuations.

The specific form of manipulation we examine in this paper is *spoofing*. Spoofing refers to the practice of submitting large spurious orders to buy or sell some security. The orders are spurious in that the spoofer does not intend for them to execute, but rather to mislead other traders by feigning strong buy or sell interest in the market. Spoof orders may lead other traders to believe that prices may soon rise or fall, thus altering their own behavior in a way that will directly move the price. To profit on its feint, the spoofer can submit a real order on the opposite side of the market and as soon as the real order transacts, cancel all the spoof orders.

In 2010, the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act was signed into federal law, outlawing spoofing as a deceptive practice. In its allegations against Sarao, the CFTC notes that “many market participants, relying on the information contained in the order book, consider the total relative number of bid and ask offers in the order book when making trading decisions”. In fact spoofing can be effective only to the extent that traders actually use order book information to make trading decisions. Despite detection systems and regulatory enforcement efforts, spoofing is hard to eliminate due to the difficulty in general of determining the manipulation intent behind placement of orders.

<sup>1</sup>The Flash Crash was a sudden trillion-dollar dip in U.S. stock markets on May 6, 2010, during which stock indexes collapsed and rebounded rapidly [11].

In this study, we aim to reproduce spoofing in a computational model, as a first step toward developing more robust measures to characterize and prevent spoofing. Our model implements a *continuous double auction* (CDA) market with a single security traded. The CDA is a two-sided mechanism adopted by most financial and commodity markets [7]. Traders can submit orders at any time, and whenever an incoming order matches an existing one they trade at the incumbent order’s limit price. We adopt an agent-based modeling approach to simulate the interactions among players with different strategies. The market is populated with multiple background traders and in selected treatments, one spoofer. Background traders are further divided into agents using instances of the *zero intelligence* (ZI) and *heuristic belief learning* (HBL) strategy families. In both strategies traders employ a noisy observation of the security’s fundamental value they receive on arrival to trade. The HBL strategy further considers information about orders recently submitted to the order book. The spoofer in our model maintains large buy spoof orders at one tick behind the best bid, designed to manipulate the market by misleading others about the level of demand.

We first address the choice of background traders among HBL and ZI strategies, through *empirical game-theoretic analysis*. In most non-spoofing environments we examine, HBL is adopted in equilibrium and benefits price discovery and social welfare. By executing a spoofer against the found equilibria, we show that spoofing can qualitatively manipulate price given sufficient HBL traders in the market. We finally re-equilibrate games with spoofing and find HBL still exists in some equilibria but with smaller mixture probability. Though the welfare benefits of HBL persist, the presence of spoofing generally decreases market surplus.

The paper is structured as follows. In Section 2, we discuss related work and our contributions. We describe the market model, background trading strategies, and the spoofing strategy in Section 3. In Section 4, we discuss experiments and present main findings. Section 5 concludes with open questions.

## 2. RELATED WORK & CONTRIBUTIONS

### 2.1 Agent-Based Finance

Agent-based modeling (ABM) takes a simulation approach to study complex domains with dynamically interacting decision makers. ABM has been frequently applied to financial markets [12], for example to study the Flash Crash [17] or bubbles and crashes in the abstract [13]. Often the goal of ABM is to reproduce stylized facts of the financial system [18]. Researchers also use ABM to investigate the effects of particular trading practices, such as market making [22] and high-frequency trading [15, 23]. ABM advocates argue that simulation is particularly well-suited to study financial markets [2], as analytic models in this domain typically require extreme stylization for tractability, and pure data-driven approaches cannot answer questions about changing market and agent designs.

### 2.2 Bidding Strategies

There is a substantial literature on autonomous bidding strategies in CDA markets [26]. The basic *zero intelligence* (ZI) strategy [10] submits offers at random offsets from valuation. Despite its simplicity, ZI has been shown surprisingly

effective for modeling some cases [6]. In this study, we adopt an extended and parameterized version of ZI to represent trading strategies that ignore order book information.

Researchers have also extended ZI with adaptive features that exploit observations to tune themselves to market conditions.<sup>2</sup> For example, the *zero intelligence plus* strategy outperforms ZI by adjusting an agent-specific profit margin based on successful and failed trades [4, 5]. *Adaptive aggressiveness* [21] adds another level of strategic adaptation, allowing the agent to control its behavior with respect to short and long time scales.

Gjerstad proposed a more direct approach to learning from market observations, termed *GD* in its original version [9] and named *heuristic belief learning* (HBL) in a subsequent generalized form [8]. The HBL model estimates a heuristic belief function based on market observations over a specific memory length. Variants of HBL (or GD) have featured prominently in the trading agent literature. *GDX* calculates the belief function in a similar manner, but uses dynamic programming to optimize the price and timing of bids [19]. *Modified GD* further adapts the original GD to markets that support persistent orders [20].

We adopt HBL as our representative class of agent strategies that exploit order book information. HBL can be applied with relatively few tunable strategic parameters, compared to other adaptive strategies in the literature. Our study extends the HBL approach to a more complex financial market environment than addressed in previous studies. The extended HBL strategy considers the full cycle of an order, including the times an order is submitted, accepted, canceled, or rejected.

### 2.3 Spoofing in Financial Markets

The literature on spoofing and its impact on financial markets is fairly limited. Some empirical research based on historical financial market data has been conducted to understand spoofing. Lee et al. [14] empirically examine spoofing by analyzing a custom data set, which provides the complete intraday order and trade data associated with identified individual accounts in the Korea Exchange. They found investors strategically spoof the stock market by placing orders with little chance to transact to add imbalance to the order book. They also discovered that spoofing usually targets stocks with high return volatility but low market capitalization and managerial transparency. Wang investigates spoofing on the index futures market in Taiwan, identifying strategy characteristics, profitability, and real-time impact [24]. Martinez-Miranda et al. [16] implement spoofing behavior within a reinforcement learning framework to model conditions where such behavior is effective.

### 2.4 Contributions

Our contributions are threefold. *First*, we adapt HBL to a complex market environment that supports persistent orders, combined private and fundamental values, noisy observations, stochastic arrivals, and ability to trade multiple units with buy or sell flexibility. *Second*, we demonstrate through empirical game-theoretic analysis the effectiveness of our extended HBL and (as corollary) the use-

<sup>2</sup>Note that to some extent, the adaptive functions of these strategies would be implicitly handled by the game-theoretic equilibration process we employ to determine the parametric configurations of the (non-adaptive) trading strategies.

fulness of order book information in the absence of spoofing, in a range of parametrically different market environments. *Third* and most importantly, we provide the first computational model of spoofing a dynamic financial market, and demonstrate the effectiveness of spoofing against approximate-equilibrium traders in that model. Our model provides a way to quantify the effect of spoofing on trading behavior and efficiency, and thus a first step in the design of methods to deter or mitigate market manipulation.

### 3. MARKET MODEL

#### 3.1 Market Environment

The model employs a CDA market mechanism over a single security. Prices are fine-grained and take discrete values at integer multiples of the tick size. Time is also fine-grained and discrete, with trading over a finite horizon  $T$ . Agents in the model submit limit orders, which specify the maximum (minimum) price at which they would be willing to buy (sell) together with the number of units to trade.

The fundamental value  $r$  of the underlying security changes throughout the trading period, according to a mean-reverting stochastic process:

$$r_t = \max\{0, \kappa\bar{r} + (1 - \kappa)r_{t-1} + u_t\}; r_0 = \bar{r}. \quad (1)$$

Here  $r_t$  denotes the fundamental value of the security at time  $t \in [0, T]$ . The parameter  $\kappa \in [0, 1]$  specifies the degree to which the fundamental reverts back to  $\bar{r}$ . The perturbation in the fundamental at time  $t$  is normally distributed:  $u_t \sim N(0, \sigma_s^2)$ .

The CDA market maintains a *limit order book* of outstanding orders, and provides information about the book to traders with zero delay. The buy side of the order book starts with  $BID_t$ , the highest-price buy order at time  $t$ , and extends to lower prices. Similarly, the sell side starts with  $ASK_t$ , the lowest-price sell order at time  $t$ , and extends to higher prices. On order cancellation or transaction, the market removes the corresponding orders and updates the order book. Agents may use order book information at their own discretion.

The market is populated with multiple background traders, and in selected treatments, a spoofer. Background traders represent investors with preferences for holding long or short positions in the underlying security. The spoofer seeks trading profits through its price manipulation actions.

The individual preference of background trader  $i$  is defined by its *private value*  $\Theta_i$ , a vector of length  $2q_{\max}$ , where  $q_{\max}$  is the maximum number of units a trader can be long or short at any time. Private values are subject to diminishing marginal utility and element  $\theta_i^q$  in the vector specifies the incremental private benefit *foregone* by selling one unit of the security given a current net position of  $q$ .

$$\Theta_i = (\theta_i^{-q_{\max}+1}, \dots, \theta_i^0, \theta_i^1, \dots, \theta_i^{q_{\max}})$$

Alternatively,  $\theta_i^{q+1}$  can be understood as the marginal private gain from buying an additional unit given current net position  $q$ . To reflect diminishing marginal utility, that is  $\theta_i^{q'} \leq \theta_i^q$  for all  $q' \geq q$ , we generate  $\Theta_i$  from a set of  $2q_{\max}$  values drawn independently from  $N(0, \sigma_{PV}^2)$ , sort elements in descending order, and assign  $\theta_i^q$  to its respective value in the sorted list. The agent's overall *valuation* for a unit of the security is the sum of fundamental and private value.

The entries of a background trader follow a Poisson process with an arrival rate  $\lambda_a$ . On each entry, the trader observes an agent-and-time-specific noisy fundamental  $o_t = r_t + n_t$  with the observation noise following  $n_t \sim N(0, \sigma_n^2)$ . Given its incomplete information about the fundamental, the agent can potentially benefit by considering market information, which is influenced by the aggregate observations of other agents. When it arrives, the trader withdraws its previous order (if untransacted) and submits a new single-unit limit order, either to buy or sell as instructed with equal probability. The trader's order price is jointly decided by its valuation and *trading strategy*, as discussed in the next section. The spoofing agent, if present, initially arrives at a designated intermediate time  $T_{sp} \in [0, T]$  and executes the manipulation strategy described in Section 3.2.4.

#### 3.2 Trading Strategies

##### 3.2.1 Estimation of the Final Fundamental

As holdings of the security are evaluated at the end of a trading period, traders estimate the final fundamental value based on their noisy observations. We assume the market environment parameters (mean reversion, shock variance, etc.) are common knowledge for background agents.

Given a new noisy observation  $o_t$ , an agent estimates the current fundamental by updating its posterior mean  $\tilde{r}_t$  and variance  $\tilde{\sigma}_t^2$  in a Bayesian manner. Let  $t'$  denote the agent's preceding arrival time. We first update the previous posteriors ( $\tilde{r}_{t'}$  and  $\tilde{\sigma}_{t'}^2$ ) by mean reversion for the interval since preceding arrival ( $\delta = t - t'$ ):

$$\begin{aligned} \tilde{r}_{t'} &\leftarrow (1 - (1 - \kappa)^\delta)\bar{r} + (1 - \kappa)^\delta \tilde{r}_{t'}; \\ \tilde{\sigma}_{t'}^2 &\leftarrow (1 - \kappa)^{2\delta} \tilde{\sigma}_{t'}^2 + \frac{1 - (1 - \kappa)^{2\delta}}{1 - (1 - \kappa)^2} \sigma_s^2. \end{aligned}$$

The estimates for  $t$  are then given by:

$$\tilde{r}_t = \frac{\sigma_n^2}{\sigma_n^2 + \tilde{\sigma}_{t'}^2} \tilde{r}_{t'} + \frac{\tilde{\sigma}_{t'}^2}{\sigma_n^2 + \tilde{\sigma}_{t'}^2} o_t; \quad \tilde{\sigma}_t^2 = \frac{\sigma_n^2 \tilde{\sigma}_{t'}^2}{\sigma_n^2 + \tilde{\sigma}_{t'}^2}.$$

Based on the posterior estimate of  $\tilde{r}_t$ , the trader computes  $\hat{r}_t$ , its estimate at time  $t$  of the terminal fundamental  $r_T$ , by adjusting for mean reversion:

$$\hat{r}_t = (1 - (1 - \kappa)^{T-t})\bar{r} + (1 - \kappa)^{T-t} \tilde{r}_t. \quad (2)$$

##### 3.2.2 ZI as a Background Trading Strategy

ZI traders compute limit-order prices based on fundamental observations and private values. The ZI agent shades its bid from its valuation by a random offset, which is uniformly drawn from  $[R_{\min}, R_{\max}]$ . Specifically, a ZI trader  $i$  arriving at time  $t$  with position  $q$  generates a limit price

$$p_i(t) \sim \begin{cases} U[\hat{r}_t + \theta_i^{q+1} - R_{\max}, \hat{r}_t + \theta_i^{q+1} - R_{\min}] & \text{if buying,} \\ U[\hat{r}_t - \theta_i^q + R_{\min}, \hat{r}_t - \theta_i^q + R_{\max}] & \text{if selling.} \end{cases}$$

Our version of ZI also takes into account the current quoted price, as governed by a strategic threshold parameter  $\eta \in [0, 1]$ . Before submitting a new limit order, if the agent could achieve a fraction  $\eta$  of its requested surplus, it would simply take that quote.

##### 3.2.3 HBL as a Background Trading Strategy

HBL agents go beyond their own observations and private values by also considering order book information. The

strategy is centered on belief functions that traders form on the basis of observed market data. Agents estimate the probability that orders at various prices would be accepted in the market, and choose a limit price maximizing their own expected surplus at current valuation estimates.

The HBL agent's probability estimate is based on observed frequencies of accepted and rejected buy (bid) and sell (ask) orders during the last  $L$  trades, where  $L$ , the agent's *memory length*, is a strategic parameter. On arrival at time  $t$ , the HBL agent builds a belief function  $f_t(P)$ , designed to represent the probability that an order at price  $P$  will result in a transaction. Specifically, the belief function is defined for encountered prices  $P$  by:

$$f_t(P) = \begin{cases} \frac{\text{TBL}_t(P) + \text{AL}_t(P)}{\text{TBL}_t(P) + \text{AL}_t(P) + \text{RBG}_t(P)} & \text{if buying,} \\ \frac{\text{TAG}_t(P) + \text{BG}_t(P)}{\text{TAG}_t(P) + \text{BG}_t(P) + \text{RAL}_t(P)} & \text{if selling.} \end{cases} \quad (3)$$

Here,  $T$  and  $R$  specify *transacted* and *rejected* orders respectively;  $A$  and  $B$  represent *asks* and *bids*;  $L$  and  $G$  describe orders with prices *less* than or equal to and *greater* than or equal to price  $P$  correspondingly. For example,  $\text{TBL}_t(P)$  is the number of transacted bids found in memory with price less than or equal to  $P$  up to time  $t$ . Agents compute the statistics upon each arrival and update their memory whenever the market receives new order submissions, transactions, or cancellations.

Since our market model supports order cancellations and keeps active orders in the order book, the notion of a rejected order is tricky to define. To solve this problem, we introduce a grace period  $\tau_{gp}$  and an alive period  $\tau_{al}$  of an order. We define the grace period  $\tau_{gp} = 1/\lambda_a$  and the alive period  $\tau_{al}$  of an order as the time interval from submission to transaction or withdrawal if it is inactive, or to the current time if active. An order is considered as rejected only if its alive period  $\tau_{al}$  is longer than  $\tau_{gp}$ , otherwise it is partially rejected by a fraction of  $\tau_{al}/\tau_{gp}$ .

As the belief function (3) is defined only at encountered prices, we extend it over the full domain by cubic spline interpolation. To speed the computation, we pick knot points and interpolate only between those points.

After formulating the belief function, agent  $i$  with an arrival time  $t$  and current holdings  $q$  searches for the price  $P_i^*(t)$  that maximizes expected surplus:

$$P_i^*(t) = \begin{cases} \arg \max_p (\hat{r}_t + \theta_i^{q+1} - p) f_t(p) & \text{if buying,} \\ \arg \max_p (p - \theta_i^q - \hat{r}_t) f_t(p) & \text{if selling.} \end{cases}$$

Under the special cases when there are fewer than  $L$  transactions at the beginning of a trading period or when one side of the order book is empty, HBL agents behave the same as ZI agents until enough information is gathered to form the belief function. As those cases are rare, the specific ZI strategy that HBL agents adopt does not materially affect overall performance.

### 3.2.4 Spoofing Strategy

We design a simple spoofing strategy which maintains a large volume of buy orders at one tick behind the best bid. Specifically, upon arrival at  $T_{sp} \in [0, T]$ , the spoofing agent submits a buy order at price  $\text{BID}_{T_{sp}} - 1$  with volume  $Q_{sp} \gg 1$ . Whenever there is an update on the best bid, the spoofer cancels its original spoof order and submits a new one at price  $\text{BID}_t - 1$  with the same volume. As background

traders submit only single-unit orders, they cannot transact with the spoof order, which is shielded by a higher order at  $\text{BID}_{T_{sp}}$ . If that higher order gets executed, the spoofer immediately cancels and replaces its spoof orders before another background trader arrives. We assume in effect that the spoofer can react infinitely fast, in which case its spoof orders are guaranteed never to transact.

By continuously feigning buy interest in the market, this spoofing strategy specifically aims to raise market beliefs. Other spoofing strategies such as adding sell pressure or alternating between buy and sell pressure can be easily constructed by extension from the current version.

## 3.3 Surplus

We calculate market surplus as the sum of agents' surpluses at the end of the trading period  $T$ . An agent's total surplus (i.e., payoff) is its net cash from trading plus the *final valuation* of holdings. The market's final valuation of trader  $i$  with ending holdings  $H$  is  $r_T H + \sum_{k=1}^{k=H} \theta_i^k$  for long position  $H > 0$ , or alternatively,  $r_T H - \sum_{k=H+1}^{k=0} \theta_i^k$  for short position  $H < 0$ .

## 4. EXPERIMENTS AND RESULTS

We conduct simulation experiments for our market model over a variety of parametrically defined market environments. Each simulation run evaluates a specified *profile* of background trading strategies in the designated environment. We sample 20,000 runs for each profile, to account for stochastic features such as market fundamental series, agent arrival patterns, and private valuations. Given the accumulated payoff data from these samples, we estimate an *empirical game model*, and from that derive an approximate *Nash equilibrium*, where agents have no incentive to deviate to other available strategies, given others' choices. This allows us to evaluate market performance and the impact of spoofing in strategically stable settings.

We start by specifying our experimental market settings in Section 4.1. Section 4.2 introduces the *empirical game-theoretic analysis* (EGTA) [25] methods used to identify equilibrium solutions. In Section 4.3, we conduct EGTA on agents' choices among ZI and HBL strategies in games without spoofing. Section 4.4 investigates games with spoofing. We first illustrate that the HBL strategy is spoofable and spoofing can cause a rise in market prices and a redistribution of surplus between ZI and HBL agents. We then re-equilibrate the game with spoofing to investigate the impact of spoofing on HBL adoption and market surplus.

### 4.1 Market Environment Settings

Our simulations consider nine environment settings that differ in the variance defining market shock,  $\sigma_s^2 \in \{10^5, 5 \times 10^5, 10^6\}$ , and observation noise,  $\sigma_n^2 \in \{10^3, 10^6, 10^9\}$ . Shock variance governs fluctuations in the fundamental time series, and observation variance the quality of information agents get about the true fundamental. Preliminary explorations over environment parameters suggested these as the most salient for our study. We label the three low, medium, and high shock variances as  $\{A, B, C\}$  and noisy observation variances as  $\{1, 2, 3\}$  respectively to describe the nine environments. For instance, A1 represents a market with low shock  $\sigma_s^2 = 10^5$ , and low observation noise  $\sigma_n^2 = 10^3$ .

For each environment setting, we consider games with  $N \in \{28, 65\}$  background traders and in selected treatments,

Table 1: Background trading strategies included in empirical game-theoretic analysis.

Strategy	ZI <sub>1</sub>	ZI <sub>2</sub>	ZI <sub>3</sub>	ZI <sub>4</sub>	ZI <sub>5</sub>	ZI <sub>6</sub>	ZI <sub>7</sub>	HBL <sub>1</sub>	HBL <sub>2</sub>	HBL <sub>3</sub>	HBL <sub>4</sub>
$L$	NA	2	3	5	8						
$R_{\min}$	0	0	0	0	0	250	250	250	250	250	250
$R_{\max}$	250	500	1000	1000	2000	500	500	500	500	500	500
$\eta$	1	1	0.8	1	0.8	0.8	1	1	1	1	1

a spoofer. The global fundamental time series is generated according to (1) with fundamental mean  $\bar{r} = 10^5$ , mean reversion  $\kappa = 0.05$ , and shock variance  $\sigma_s^2$ . Each trading period lasts  $T = 10,000$  time steps. Background traders arrive at the market according to a Poisson distribution with a rate  $\lambda_a = 0.005$  and upon each arrival, the trader observes a noisy fundamental  $o_t$ . The maximum number of units background traders can hold at any time is  $q_{\max} = 10$ . Private values are drawn from a Gaussian distribution with zero mean and a variance of  $\sigma_{PV}^2 = 5 \times 10^6$ . The spoofing agent initially arrives at time  $T_{\text{sp}} = 1000$ , submits a large buy order at price  $\text{BID}_{T_{\text{sp}}} - 1$  with volume  $Q_{\text{sp}} = 200$ , and later maintains spoofing orders at price  $\text{BID}_t - 1$ .

To provide a benchmark for market surplus, we calculate the social optimum, which depends solely on the trader population size and valuation distribution. From 20,000 samples of the joint valuations, we estimate mean social optima of 18389 and 43526 for markets with 28 and 65 background traders, respectively. We further calculate the average order book depth (on either buy or sell side) in markets without spoofing. Throughout the trading horizon, the  $N = 28$  market has a relatively thin order book with an average depth of 12, whereas the  $N = 65$  market has a thicker one with an average depth of 30.

The background trading strategy set (Table 1) includes seven versions of ZI and four versions of HBL.<sup>3</sup> Agents are allowed to choose from this restricted set of strategies to maximize their payoffs.

## 4.2 EGTA Process

We model the market as a symmetric game, which is defined by a market environment and a set of players representing background traders. The spoofer agent, when present, implements a fixed policy so is not considered a strategic player. The payoff of a specific strategy in a profile is the average over agents playing that strategy in the profile, and thus depends on the number playing each strategy, not on individual mappings. We are interested in players' strategic choices in Nash equilibria of these games.

As game size grows exponentially in the number of players and strategies, it is computationally prohibitive to analyze games with this many traders. We therefore apply aggregation to approximate the many-player games as games with fewer players. The specific technique we employ, called *deviation-preserving reduction* (DPR) [27], defines reduced-game payoffs in terms of payoffs in the full game as follows. Consider an  $N$ -player symmetric game, which we want to reduce to a  $k$ -player game. The payoff for playing strategy  $s_1$  in the reduced game, with other agents playing strategies  $(s_2, \dots, s_k)$ , is given by the payoff of playing  $s_1$  in the full  $N$ -player game when the other  $N - 1$  agents are evenly

<sup>3</sup>We also considered ZI strategies with larger shading ranges and HBL strategies with longer memory lengths, but they fail to appear in equilibrium.

divided among strategies  $s_2, \dots, s_k$ . To facilitate DPR, we choose values for  $N$  to ensure that the required aggregations come out as integers. Specifically, in this study we reduce the market environments with 28 (65) background traders to games with four (five) background traders. With one background player deviating to a new strategy, we can reduce the remaining 27 (64) players to three (four).

To find the Nash equilibrium of a game, we run simulations to get payoffs for background strategies and conduct EGTA based on those payoffs. Exploration starts with singleton *subgames* (games over strategy subsets), and spreads to consider other strategies incrementally. Equilibria found in a subgame are considered as candidate solutions of the full game. We attempt to refute these candidates by evaluating deviations outside the subgame strategy set, constructing a new subgame when a beneficial deviation is found. If we examine all deviations without refuting, the candidate is *confirmed*. We continue to refine the empirical subgame with additional strategies and corresponding simulations until at least one equilibrium is confirmed and all non-confirmed candidates are refuted.

## 4.3 Games without Spoofing

Since spoofing targets the order book and can be effective only to the extent traders exploit order book information, we first investigate whether background agents adopt the HBL strategy in games without spoofing. Applying EGTA to the eleven background strategies in Table 1, we found at least one equilibrium for each market environment.<sup>4</sup>

As indicated in Figure 4 with blue circles, HBL is adopted with positive probability by background traders in most non-spoofing environments. That is, in the absence of spoofing, investors generally have incentives to make bidding decisions based on order book information. We find that HBL is robust and widely preferred in markets with more traders, low fundamental shocks, and high observation noise. Intuitively, a larger population size implies a thick order book with more learnable aggregated data; low shocks in fundamental time series increase the predictability of future price outcomes; and high observation noise limits what an agent can glean about the true fundamental from its own information. The two exceptions (environments C1 and C2 with 28 background traders) where all agents choose ZI can be explained by the environments' small population size, large fundamental shocks, and relatively small observation noise.

We further conduct EGTA in games where background traders are restricted to strategies in the ZI family (ZI<sub>1</sub>–ZI<sub>7</sub> in Table 1). This is tantamount to disallowing learning from order book information. To understand the effect of order book disclosure on market performance, we compare

<sup>4</sup>Details of the HBL adoption rates and market surpluses of all found equilibria in games with and without spoofing are available in an online appendix at <http://hdl.handle.net/2027.42/136123>

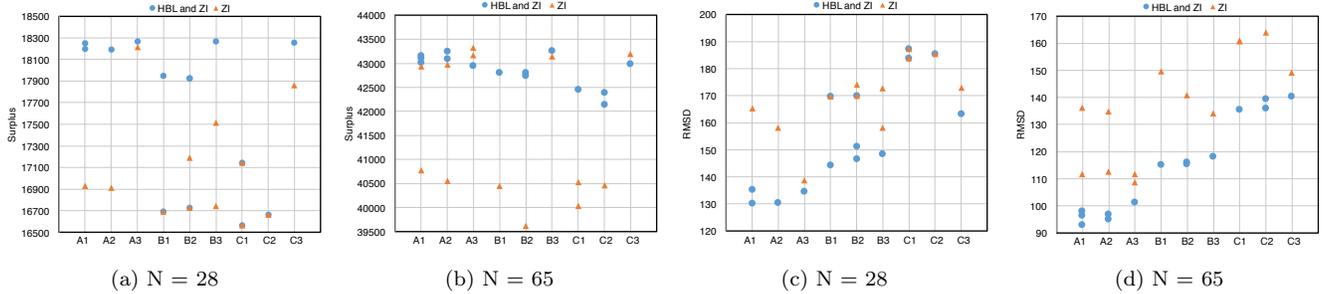


Figure 1: Comparisons of market surplus (Figures 1(a) and 1(b)) and price discovery (Figures 1(c) and 1(d)) for equilibrium in each environment, with and without the HBL strategies available to background traders. Blue circles represent equilibrium outcomes when agents can choose both HBL and ZI strategies; orange triangles represent equilibrium outcomes when agents are restricted to ZI strategies. Overlapped markers are outcomes from the same equilibrium mixture, despite the availability of HBL. The market generally achieves higher surplus and better price discovery when HBL is available.

equilibrium outcomes for each environment, with and without the HBL strategy set available to background traders, on two measures: market surplus and price discovery (Figure 1). Price discovery reflects how well transactions reveal the true value of the security; it is defined as the root-mean-squared deviation (RMSD) of the transaction price from the estimate of the true fundamental (2) over the trading period. Lower RMSD means better price discovery.

Overall in our experiments, background traders achieve higher surplus (Figures 1(a) and 1(b)) and better price discovery (Figures 1(c) and 1(d)) when the market provides order book information and enables the HBL strategy option. When the equilibrium includes HBL, we find transactions reveal fundamental estimates well, especially in markets with lower shock and observation variances (i.e., A1, A2, B1, B2). We also notice small exceptions in scenarios with high observation variance and more background traders (environment A3 and C3 with 65 players) where ZI-only equilibria exhibit higher surplus than equilibria combining HBL and ZI.

## 4.4 Games with Spoofing

### 4.4.1 Comparison across Fixed Strategy Profiles

To examine the effectiveness of the designed spoofing strategy, we play a spoofer against each equilibrium found in Section 4.3 and perform controlled comparisons with and without spoofing. In the paired instances, background agents play identical strategies, and are guaranteed to arrive at the same time, receive identical private values, and observe the same fundamental values. Therefore, any change in behavior is caused by the spoof orders' effects on HBL traders. For every setting, we simulate 20,000 paired instances, and compare their transaction price differences (Figure 2), and surplus differences attained by HBL and ZI traders (Figure 3). Transaction price difference at a specific time is defined as the most recent transaction price of a game with spoofing minus that of the paired game without spoofing. Similarly, surplus difference of HBL or ZI is the aggregated surplus obtained in a game with spoofing minus that of the paired game without spoofing.

Figure 2 shows<sup>5</sup>, across all environments, positive changes in transaction prices subsequent to arrival of a spoofing

agent at  $T_{sp} = 1000$ . This suggests HBL traders are tricked by the spoof buy orders: they believe the underlying security should be worth more and therefore submit or accept limit orders at higher prices. Though ZI agents do not change their bidding behavior directly, they may be passively affected due to the requested surplus fraction  $\eta$ , and make transactions at higher prices.

Several other interesting findings are revealed by the transaction price difference series (Figure 2). *First*, the average price rise caused by spoofing in market with 28 background traders is higher than that of the 65-background-trader market. The market with fewer background traders is more susceptible to spoofing, possibly due to the limited pricing information a thin market could aggregate. *Second*, for markets populated with more HBLs than ZIs, the transaction price differences increase throughout the trading period. This amplification can be explained by HBLs consistently submitting orders at higher prices and confirming each other's spoofed belief. However, for markets with more ZIs, the spoofing effect diminishes as ZIs who do not change their limit-order pricing can partly correct HBLs' illusions. *Third*, differences in transaction prices first increase and then tend to stabilize or decrease as time approaches the end of a trading period. As time approaches  $T = 10,000$ , spoofing wears off in the face of accumulated observations and mean reversion.

Figure 3 demonstrates a redistribution of surplus between HBL and ZI agents when we include a spoofer: HBL's aggregated surplus decreases, while ZI's increases compared to the non-spoofing baseline. That is, the ZI agents benefit from the HBL agents' spoofed beliefs. Since the decreases in HBL surplus are consistently larger than the increases for ZI, the overall market surplus decreases. We also find that markets with a spoofer against background traders at equilibrium have statistically significantly higher RMSD, which affirms the notion that spoofing, as a deceptive practice, hurts price discovery.

### 4.4.2 Spoofing Profitability

To examine the potential to profit from a successful price manipulation, we extend the spoofing agent with an exploitation strategy: buying, then (optionally) spoofing to raise the price, then selling. It starts by buying when it finds a limit sell order with price less than the fundamental mean. It then optionally runs the spoofing trick, or alternatively waits, for 1000 time steps. Finally, the exploiter sells when it finds a limit buy order with price more than fundamental

<sup>5</sup>As spoofing has no impact on pure ZI populations, we display transaction price differences only for equilibria including HBL.

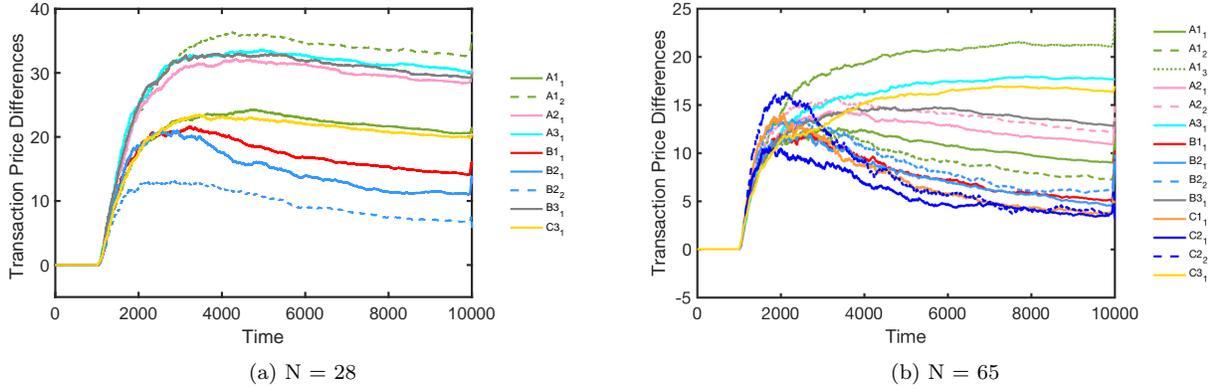


Figure 2: Transaction price differences throughout the trading horizon with and without a spoofer against each HBL-and-ZI equilibrium found in Section 4.3. Multiple lines of the same environment represent different equilibria. A market with HBL agents is spoofable, as the designed spoofing tactic can successfully raise market prices.

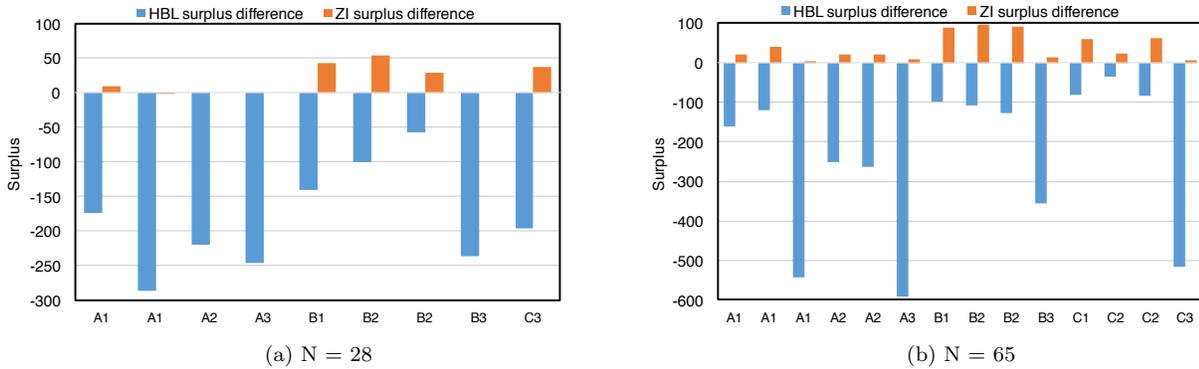


Figure 3: Background trader surplus differences in markets with and without a spoofer against each HBL-and-ZI equilibrium found in Section 4.3. Repetitions of the same market environment represent outcomes of multiple equilibria. Spoofing generally causes a decrease in HBL’s aggregated surplus and an increase in ZI’s total surplus.

mean. Note that even without the spoofer, this exploitation strategy is profitable in expectation due to the mean reversion, and the reliable arrival of background traders willing to sell at prices better than the fundamental.

In controlled experiments, we find that exploitation profits are consistently increased when the spoofer is also deployed. Specifically, across 28-trader market environments, the exploiter makes an average profit of 206.1 and 201.8 with and without spoofing, and the increases in profit range from 1.2 to 11.5. For the 65-trader market, the average profits of this exploitation strategy with and without spoofing are 50.5 and 46.3 respectively, with the increases in profit varying from 1.7 to 9.4 across environments.<sup>6</sup>

#### 4.4.3 Re-Equilibrating Games with Spoofing

To understand how spoofing affects background-trader interactions, we conduct EGTA again to find Nash equilibrium in games with spoofing, where background traders can choose any strategy in Table 1. As indicated in Figure 4 with orange triangles, after re-equilibrating games with spoofing, HBL is generally adopted by a smaller fraction of traders, but may still persist at equilibrium in most market envi-

<sup>6</sup>Statistical tests show all increases in profit are significantly larger than zero. Regardless of spoofing, the exploitation strategy profits more in the thinner market due to the greater variance in transaction prices.

ronments. HBL’s existence after re-equilibration indicates a consistently spoofable market: the designed spoofing tactic fails to eliminate HBL agents and in turn, the persistence of HBL may incentivize a spoofer to continue effectively manipulating the market.

Finally, we investigate the effect of spoofing on market surplus. Figure 5 compares the total surplus achieved by background traders in equilibrium with and without spoofing. Given the presence of HBL traders, spoofing generally decreases total surplus (as in Figure 5, most filled orange triangles are below the filled blue circles). However, spoofing has ambiguous effect in the thicker market with large observation variance (environment A3 and C3 with 65 background agents). This may be because noise and spoofing simultaneously hurt the prediction accuracy of the HBL agents and therefore shift agents to other competitive ZI strategies with higher payoffs. Finally, we find the welfare effects of HBL strategies persist regardless of spoofing’s presence: markets populated with HBL agents in equilibrium generally achieve higher total surplus than those markets without HBL (as in Figure 5, the hollow markers are below the filled markers).

## 5. CONCLUSION

We constructed a computational model of spoofing: the tactic of manipulating market prices by targeting the order

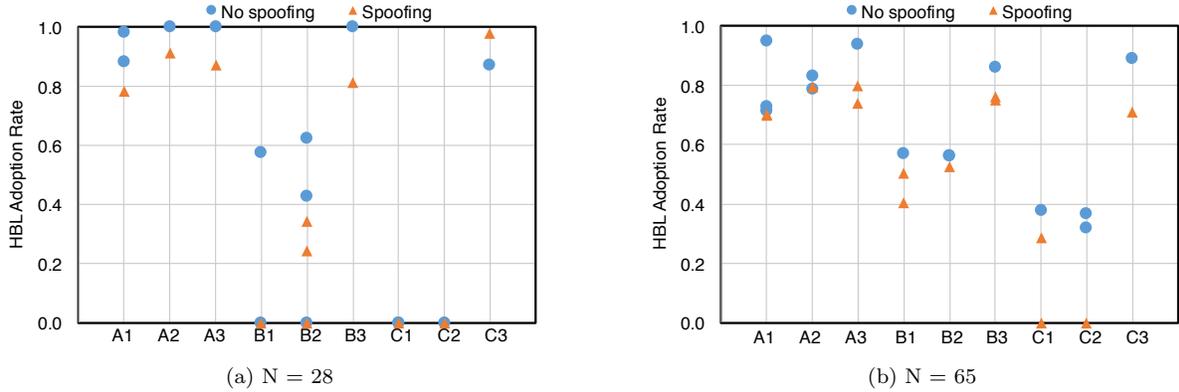


Figure 4: HBL adoption rates at equilibria in games with and without spoofing. Each blue (orange) marker specifies the HBL proportion at one equilibrium found in a specific game environment without (with) spoofing.

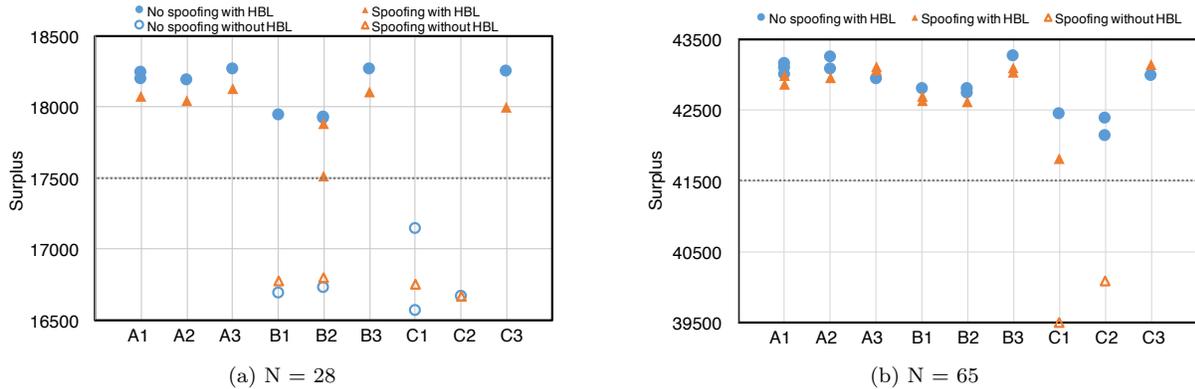


Figure 5: Total surplus achieved at equilibria in games with and without spoofing. Each blue (orange) marker specifies the surplus at one equilibrium found in a specific game environment without (with) spoofing. Surplus achieved at equilibria combining HBL and ZI and equilibria with pure ZI are indicated by markers with and without fills respectively.

book. To do so, we designed an HBL strategy that uses order book information to make pricing decisions. Since HBL traders use the order book, they are potentially spoofable, which we confirmed in simulation analysis. We demonstrate that in the absence of spoofing, HBL is generally adopted in equilibrium and benefits price discovery and social welfare. Though the presence of spoofing decreases the HBL proportion in background traders, HBL’s persistence in equilibrium indicates a robustly spoofable market. By comparing equilibrium outcomes with and without spoofing, we find spoofing tends to decrease market surplus. Comparisons across parametrically different environments reveal factors that may influence the adoption of HBL and the impact of spoofing.

Our agent-based model aims to capture the complex essence of real-world financial markets and the strategic interactions among investors. We acknowledge several factors that limit the accuracy of our equilibrium analysis in individual game instances; these include sampling error, reduced-game approximation, and most importantly, restricted strategy coverage. Despite such limitations (inherent in any complex modeling effort), we believe the model offers a constructive basis for other researchers, regulators, and policymakers to better evaluate spoofing and understand its interplay with other trading strategies.

We close with two open questions for further investigation.

First, *are there more robust ways for exchanges to dis-*

*close order book information?* Similarly, *are there strategies by which traders can exploit market information but in less vulnerable ways?* Preliminary explorations suggest that a modified version of HBL which constructs the same belief function but weights orders based on recency can be less susceptible to spoofing. Intuitively, as the spoofing strategy relies on frequent order cancellations and modifications, spoof orders canceled recently are weighted more which increases the *rejected* order term in the belief function as specified in (3). As a result, the *rejected* term in denominator generally decreases the accept probability of orders with a certain price and undermines the spoofed belief. This modified HBL is just one possible approach—more robust learning schemes that ignore skeptical orders but still learn from market information can be explored based on our model.

Second, *based on a model of this kind, can we design effective spoofing detection methods?* An ability to generate data streams with and without spoofing may provide a useful resource for learning telltale signatures of a spoofer.

## Acknowledgments

We thank Uday Rajan and Erik Brinkman for helpful discussions and the anonymous reviewers for constructive feedback. This work was supported in part by grant IIS-1421391 from the US National Science Foundation.

## REFERENCES

- [1] E. M. Aldrich, J. Grundfest, and G. Laughlin. The Flash Crash: A new deconstruction. *Available at SSRN 2721922*, 2016.
- [2] R. Bookstaber. Using agent-based models for analyzing threats to financial stability. Working Paper 3, Office of Financial Research, 2012.
- [3] S. Brush, T. Schoenberg, and S. Ring. How a mystery trader with an algorithm may have caused the Flash Crash. *Bloomberg News*, 2015.
- [4] D. Cliff. Minimal-intelligence agents for bargaining behaviors in market-based environments. Technical report, Hewlett-Packard Labs, 1997.
- [5] D. Cliff. ZIP60: Further explorations in the evolutionary design of trader agents and online auction-market mechanisms. *IEEE Transactions on Evolutionary Computation*, 13(1):3–18, 2009.
- [6] J. D. Farmer, P. Patelli, and I. I. Zovko. The predictive power of zero intelligence in financial markets. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 102(6):2254–2259, 2005.
- [7] D. Friedman. The double auction market institution: A survey. In *The Double Auction Market: Institutions, Theories, and Evidence*, pages 3–25. Addison-Wesley, 1993.
- [8] S. Gjerstad. The competitive market paradox. *Journal of Economic Dynamics and Control*, 31(5):1753–1780, 2007.
- [9] S. Gjerstad and J. Dickhaut. Price formation in double auctions. *Games and Economic Behavior*, 22(1):1–29, 1998.
- [10] D. K. Gode and S. Sunder. Allocative efficiency of markets with zero-intelligence traders: Market as a partial substitute for individual rationality. *Journal of Political Economy*, pages 119–137, 1993.
- [11] A. A. Kirilenko, A. S. Kyle, M. Samadi, and T. Tuzun. The Flash Crash: High frequency trading in an electronic market. *Journal of Finance*, to appear.
- [12] B. LeBaron. Agent-based computational finance. In L. Tesfatsion and K. L. Judd, editors, *Handbook of Computational Economics*, volume 2, pages 1187–1233. Elsevier, 2006.
- [13] B. LeBaron, W. B. Arthur, and R. Palmer. Time series properties of an artificial stock market. *Journal of Economic Dynamics and Control*, 23(9):1487–1516, 1999.
- [14] E. J. Lee, K. S. Eom, and K. S. Park. Microstructure-based manipulation: Strategic behavior and performance of spoofing traders. *Journal of Financial Markets*, 16(2):227–252, 2013.
- [15] Z. Li and S. Das. An agent-based model of competition between financial exchanges: Can frequent call mechanisms drive trade away from CDAs? In *15th International Conference on Autonomous Agents and Multiagent Systems*, pages 50–58, 2016.
- [16] E. Martínez-Miranda, P. McBurney, and M. Howard. Learning unfair trading: A market manipulation analysis from the reinforcement learning perspective. In *IEEE International Conference on Evolving and Adaptive Intelligent Systems*, pages 103–109, 2016.
- [17] M. Paddrik, R. Hayes, Jr., A. Todd, S. Yang, P. Beling, and W. Scherer. An agent based model of the E-Mini S&P 500 applied to Flash Crash analysis. In *IEEE Conference on Computational Intelligence for Financial Engineering and Economics*, pages 1–8, 2012.
- [18] I. Palit, S. Phelps, and W. L. Ng. Can a zero-intelligence plus model explain the stylized facts of financial time series data? In *11th International Conference on Autonomous Agents and Multiagent Systems*, pages 653–660, 2012.
- [19] G. Tesauro and J. L. Bredin. Strategic sequential bidding in auctions using dynamic programming. In *First International Joint Conference on Autonomous Agents and Multiagent Systems*, pages 591–598, 2002.
- [20] G. Tesauro and R. Das. High-performance bidding agents for the continuous double auction. In *Third ACM Conference on Electronic Commerce*, pages 206–209, 2001.
- [21] P. Vytelingum, D. Cliff, and N. R. Jennings. Strategic bidding in continuous double auctions. *Artificial Intelligence*, 172(14):1700–1729, 2008.
- [22] E. Wah and M. P. Wellman. Welfare effects of market making in continuous double auctions. In *14th International Conference on Autonomous Agents and Multiagent Systems*, pages 57–66, 2015.
- [23] E. Wah and M. P. Wellman. Latency arbitrage in fragmented markets: A strategic agent-based analysis. *Algorithmic Finance*, to appear.
- [24] Y. Wang. Strategic spoofing order trading by different types of investors in the futures markets. *Wall Street Journal*, 2015.
- [25] M. P. Wellman. Methods for empirical game-theoretic analysis (extended abstract). In *21st National Conference on Artificial Intelligence*, pages 1552–1555, 2006.
- [26] M. P. Wellman. *Trading Agents*. Morgan & Claypool, 2011.
- [27] B. Wiedenbeck and M. P. Wellman. Scaling simulation-based game analysis through deviation-preserving reduction. In *11th International Conference on Autonomous Agents and Multiagent Systems*, pages 931–938, 2012.