# Accelerated Variant of Reinforcement Learning Algorithms for Light Control with Non-stationary User Behaviour

Nassim Haddam<sup>1</sup>, Benjamin Cohen Boulakia<sup>1</sup> and Dominique Barth<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>LINEACT - Recherche & Innovation, CESI, Nanterre, France <sup>2</sup>DAVID Laboratory, Paris-Saclay - UVSQ, Versailles, France

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Abstract: In the context of smart building energy management, we address in this work the problem of controlling light so as to minimise energy usage of the building while maintaining the satisfaction of the user regarding comfort using a stateless Reinforcement Learning approach. We consider that the user can freely interact with the building and changes the intensity of the light according to his comfort. Moreover, we consider that the behaviour of the user depends not only on present conditions but also on past behaviour of the control system. In this setting, we use the pursuit algorithm to control the signal and investigate the impact of the discretization of the action space on the convergence speed of the algorithm and the quality of the policies learned by the agent. We propose ways to accelerate convergence speed by varying the maximal duration of the actions while maintaining the quality of the policies and compare different solutions to achieve it.

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

Energy consumption in buildings forms a large part of energy consumption world-wide. Indeed, global buildings account for 30% of total energy in 2019 (GABC, 2020). Energy cost is used to satisfy human needs, but it is expected that a big part of it can be saved if resources are managed intelligently. Recent technological advances to capture, store and process data have developed at an increasing rate. More precisely, one of the questions treated by the research community is to conceive control systems which are capable of learning human preferences and to determine which actions to take in order to reduce energy costs and satisfy human needs.

**Related Work:** This question has attracted a lot of attention in the recent years, be it on thermal control (et al, 2012) (et al, 2018) (Yang et al., 2015), or light control (Cheng et al., 2016) (Park et al., 2019), (Zhang et al., 2021).

In light control, most of the methods used are based on distributions which are extracted from interaction of the user with the building. The first systems which were used were equipped of PIR sensors and did simply switch on/off the lights according to room occupacy (Neida et al., 2001), (F.Reinhart, 2004), (Jennings et al., 2000). But those approaches wasted energy due to Time Delays in sensors activation (Nagy et al., 2015). In (Garg and N.K.Bansal, 2000), a statistical method based on frequency of Time Delays to model the occupant's activities is proposed. The Time Delay is adapted to each occupant and achieved energy saving close to 5%. The work on (Nagy et al., 2015) was inspired by (Garg and N.K.Bansal, 2000) to include illuminance levels in the model. We argue that these methods are limited in that they do not directly optimize energy usage.

A more direct way to control lighting is to optimize energy use by controlling the signal (which represents the light intensity) so as to optimize an objective function. This approach requires the model to have knowledge about user preferences. One way of doing so is by means of a model of user behavior. Several models have been proposed to model user comfort in terms of visual comfort (Mardaljevic, 2013), (P. Petherbridge, 1950), (Einhorn, 1979) but the majority of those models presuppose that we know certain elements of the environment which aren't readily available. The models might need for instance the inclination of the head, the number of glare in the visual field of the user, the distance to lights sources...etc.

**Our Contribution:** An alternative to this approach is to use Reinforcement Learning (RL). Contrary to thermal comfort, there is very little work done to control signal value using Reinforcement Learning (Cheng et al., 2016), (Park et al., 2019). Reinforcement Learning is a really flexible framework and allows the system to learn optimal control policies (with

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or without a model), some behaviour specified by the optimization of a reward signal coming from the environment. In the present work, we study more effective variants of the algorithm proposed on (Haddam et al., 2020) and propose ways to accelerate convergence. The same user model was used, special care were given to its parameters and their relation to the performances of the algorithms, especially the sensibility of the user and its memory.

Provided that we are in a setting where the user has memory of the history of the signal, where low signal values are a source of discomfort for the user, and where we reduce energy by reducing signal value, the contributions of the present paper are as follows. In section 3 we compare the performances of different stateless Reinforcement Learning algorithms which are presented in section 2. We also provide detailed insight on the performance of the LRI algorithm (as proposed on (Haddam et al., 2020)) and the pursuit algorithm, which is generally faster on stationary environments. In section 4, we study the performances of the pursuit algorithm for different set of actions of the action space. We also propose ways to improve speed and quality of convergence of the proposed algorithm. Finally, in section 5 we present some final remarks and perspectives regarding our work.

## 2 CONTROL WITH RL

In this section, we present how to model our problem using Reinforcement Learning. We start by introducing some notations in order to define the actions of the agent. We then proceed to define how the policy is represented in our problem. Finally, we present the Reinforcement Learning algorithms we studied. We emphasize that the goal here is not to learn or guess the user's model, even if we use a user model for simulation purposes as modeled in (Haddam et al., 2020).

We consider that the actions available to the agent are a bunch of speeds of light signal decrease. Those are the slopes the signal takes during its decrease. We define the set of actions  $AC = \{sl \in \mathbb{R}^-_* \mid sl_{max} \le sl \le$  $sl_{min}\}$  where  $sl_{min}$  and  $sl_{max}$  are the smoothest and steepest slopes available to the agent. The control system selects a slope sl and then proceeds to apply the selected control strategy time step by time by lowering the signal according to the selected slope. The maximal duration of an action noted max\_dur is set before the control starts. Upon applying a slope, if the user intervenes, or if the user does not intervene during max\_dur time steps, the action chosen by the agent is stopped and the agent updates its policy as to chose good control strategies more often.

We propose multiple ways to set the maximal duration of the actions. The first way is obviously to impose an infinite maximal duration. In this case, the system has no say on how long an action might take, and only the interventions of the user matter. The second way is to impose a fixed duration limit. In this case, the maximal duration of all the actions is the same and doesn't change with time (we call it a static maximal duration). The third way is to change the maximal duration with time. This case is named dynamic maximal duration. For this case, the maximal duration is the same for all actions, but changes depending on past behaviour of the user. The idea is that the current action could be deactivated to choose another one if the user takes much longer to intervene than usual. We propose two update rules for dynamic maximal duration.

We consider the intervention time of an action to be the time between the moment where the action is chosen and the moment where the user intervenes. The update rules of dynamic maximal duration depend both on the average and the standard deviation of the intervention time. In this case, the action to be taken could be chosen again if the duration of the current action exceeds the average duration of the user's intervention by a factor of the standard deviation of the intervention time (time of the current action >average intervention time + const  $\times$  standard deviation of the intervention time). The first update rule for the dynamic maximal duration is to set it as the sum of the average of the intervention time and a factor of the standard deviation of the intervention time (we name it *update\_mean\_var\_interv*). The second update rule is the same as the first update rule by assuming that the law of probability of the intervention time of the user is an Exponential probability law (even if the memory-less assumption of the Exponential distribution doesn't hold in the context of a non-stationary user). The last update rule gives a way to approximate the standard deviation and alleviates the need to memorize past intervention times and thus might, at least, reduces computation time. For this rule, the standard deviation is therefore the root square of the mean, and we call it update\_mean\_interv.

As stated previously, we use learning algorithms using the framework of Reinforcement Learning (RL) (Sutton and Barto, 1998). The policy of the agent is represented using a stochastic vector. The vector is updated each time the action finishes, and is thus defined for each *k*-th user intervention. The policy of the agent following the *k*-th user intervention is represented by the stochastic vector  $p_k \in [0, 1]^{|SL|}$  where  $p_k[i]$  is the probability of choosing the *i*-th least steep slope of *SL*. The reward of an action applied by the agent from time step *n* to time step *n'* is decomposed in two parts: a part reflecting energy consumption noted *ren<sub>n,n'</sub>* and a part reflecting user comfort noted *rcs<sub>n,n'</sub>*. Together, those two parts form the complete reward which is  $r_{n,n'} = ren_{n,n'} \cdot rcs_{n,n'}^{\gamma}$  where  $\gamma$  is a strictly positive real number. The parameter  $\gamma$  represents how strongly we reward the control system for satisfying the user. Details concerning the reward are on (Haddam et al., 2020).

#### 2.1 The Learning Algorithms

The learning algorithms which were selected for our work are represented as RL agents where the algorithm used for learning is LRI (Linear Reward Inaction) (Thathachar, 1990), LRP (Linear Reward Penalty) (Thathachar, 1990), and the pursuit algorithm (Kanagasabai et al., 1996). The remainder of this section presents the LRI algorithm, the LRP and the pursuit algorithm.

In the LRI algorithm, the policy is represented as a stochastic vector and is updated as to increase the probability of the action selected by the agent linearly to its reward. Suppose a strategy *sl* has triggered the *k*-th intervention of the user. Suppose *sl* has index i[sl] in vector (policy)  $p_k$ . Then, according to LRI,  $p_k$ is updated for each *k* as follows

$$p_{k+1} := p_k + \alpha . r_{n,n'} . (e_{i[sl]} - p_k)$$
(1)

where  $e_{i[sl]}$  is the unitary vector of unit value in the component associated with the slope *sl* in  $p_k$ . Another variant of LRI which is called the LRP (Linear Reward Penalty) decreases the probability of the actions which didn't lead to any reward (in addition to increasing the probability of the actions leading to good reward like LRI).

The idea of the pursuit algorithm is to reinforce not the action chosen at the current moment, but the action that has the best estimate among the available actions. To this end, the algorithm will have to keep in memory the estimates constructed from the rewards obtained by each action. The probability of the action which has the best estimate is increased linearly. If we pick the same notations as before, we can summarize the operations of the pursuit algorithm by the formulas which follows. The update of the policy in the pursuit algorithm is

$$p_{k+1} := p_k + \alpha. (e_h - p_k) \tag{2}$$

where h is the index of the best action according to the estimate of the algorithm.

## 3 COMPARING RL ALGORITHMS

In this section, we start by comparing the pursuit algorithm and the LRI algorithm (in terms of speed and quality of convergence) for a typical setting we considered to get a visual feel for the behaviour of the algorithms. We then do a more systematic comparison of the LRI, the LRP and the pursuit algorithms to provide quantitative estimation of the speed of convergence independently of the parameters of the simulation. This comparison allows us to select the most appropriate algorithm for our problem.

#### **3.1** The Pursuit Algorithm

The experiment we do here extends on (Haddam et al., 2020) done on the LRI algorithm. We run the pursuit algorithm and the LRI 30 times for 1000000 time steps with the user with medium-term memory (the value of the present effect parameter pe is set to pe = 0.35). We select the user with medium-term memory (pe = 0.35) to not draw conclusions on extreme cases (memory which is too small or too large). In order to observe the behaviour of the algorithm, the learning rate is fixed to 0.001. The value of the learning rate was chosen as low as possible to allow the algorithm to converge at a reasonable time. All the estimates are initialized to 0 for the pursuit algorithm (a classical choice which is relevant here because the agent is pessimistic in that all the slopes are bad). The reward is monitored during the run. We take the mean of the reward over the executions. The results are depicted on the curves (Figure 1) containing the mean values. The stochastic vectors at the end of each run are outlined in Figure 1.

We note from the curves that the pursuit algorithm converges a lot faster than the LRI algorithm (nearly 10 times faster). The policies learned by the pursuit algorithm are also of better quality, as the algorithm converges nearly every time. As the pursuit algorithm estimates directly the reward of the actions, it may form a better way to deal with the exploration vs exploitation dilemma characterizing Reinforcement Learning problems, because as the agent gains knowledge from the environment, the action estimated to be the best changes less and less frequently, and the stochastic vector converges more rapidly to it.

But because only the probability of the *best action according to the agent* is updated, the agent may also be tempted to exploit the learned actions more than necessary. Furthermore, the case of study considered in this paper is such as the environment is non-stationary because its state changes in response to



Figure 1: The LRI vs. the pursuit algorithm - 1000000 time steps. For the left column, the x-axis is the time, the y-axis is the reward. For the right column, the x-axis is the index of the slope, the y-axis is the execution number.

the agent, which differs sensibly from the cases most commonly studied by researchers. For those reasons, we present in the next subsection a more quantitative comparison between various Reinforcement Learning algorithms.

### 3.2 Comparison of RL Algorithms

In this section, we compare different (stateless) Reinforcement Learning algorithms to identify the algorithms most suitable for our problem. We took different parameters of the algorithm and the user. The algorithms are tested during 3000000 time steps (subdivided as before into intervals of size 5000 time steps) for 30 runs for different hyperparameters set. The algorithms are then compared by taking the best hyperparameter for each one. A criterion for quality of convergence and speed of convergence were chosen to account effectively for the comparison. For each algorithm, the best hyperparameter is chosen by first taking only those for which the algorithm is considered to be convergent (i.e. when the empirical stochastic vector has a predefined fraction of its weight concentrated on the best action and one of its left or right neighbors). After filtering the bad values of the hyperparameters by the convergence criteria, the best value is chosen by then taking the value of the hyperparameters which has achieved convergence the fastest (using the same threshold as the first step). This selection process was applied for different convergence thresholds (for the values 0.7, 0.8, 0.9, 0.93, 0.95, 0.97, 0.99) each time taking the best hyperparameters and the results are shown in Figure 2. Figure

2 shows a comparison on the speed of convergence of the above-mentioned algorithms for the values of *pe* considered earlier (long term user for pe = 0.05, medium term user for pe = 0.35, and short term user for pe = 0.95 from top to bottom). The abscissa axis represents the convergence thresholds, and the ordinate axis represents the number of intervals required for each algorithm to converge at the corresponding threshold. The values on the y-axis are displayed on logscale for good visualization. Algorithms which didn't converge for any of the tested values of the hyperparameters were not included on the figure.









(c) Comparison with pe = 0.95. Figure 2: Comparison of the speed of convergence for the algorithms : LRI, LRP, the pursuit and the hierarchical pursuit.

We note that there are roughly two kinds of algorithms in terms of speed of convergence, those which takes really long to converge or don't converge at all for all types of users (LRI, LRP) and the ones which converges very well on all kinds of users (pursuit). In terms of the memory of the user and its relation with convergence speed, we notice that the case of a medium-term memory user (pe = 0.35) seems to be the easiest one for all the algorithms considered. The short-term memory user (pe = 0.95) is challenging for the algorithms, probably because the user changes abruptly if the next action is too different from the current action (especially for steep slopes). The case of a long-term memory user (pe = 0.05) is also hard because the reactions of the user depend on control far in the past so that the behaviour of the user might change too much for the same action depending on past actions chosen by the system. In the following, we present a discussion on the performances of the three algorithms.

The LRI and LRP algorithms converge very slowly (50 to 110 bins). Concerning the LRI algorithm, the most common reason for slow convergence is that the learning rate has to be set low so that the agent won't be stuck on suboptimal action. For the LRP algorithm, however, which decreases the probabilities of actions not leading to a good outcome. The slow convergence rate might be better explained by the fact that the stochastic vector juggles around too often before leading to good actions.

According to our experiment, the pursuit algorithm seems to be the fastest algorithm (an order of magnitude faster than LRI and LRP). The update strategy of the pursuit algorithm and its variants might form a better way to balance effectively between exploration and exploitation than LRI. In fact, the best estimated action changes less and less as the algorithm gains knowledge about its environment. This could make the pursuit algorithm more stable than LRI and LRP and allows us to set higher learning rates for the algorithm without suffering performance loss as with the LRI algorithm. We can conclude from our experiment that the pursuit algorithm is the most adequate for our problem, independently of the memory of the user and the learning rate.

## 4 ACCELERATION OF THE ALGORITHMS

We propose in this section ways to accelerate the pursuit algorithm which was selected by the preceding experiments. The first approach to greatly enhance the speed of convergence of the algorithm is to vary the maximal duration of the actions (discretization of the time). The second way to speed up the algorithm is to determine the best set of actions available to the agent (discretization of the action space). We also show how the set of actions available to the agent greatly influences the speed of convergence of the algorithm.

#### 4.1 Maximal Duration of the Actions

To speed up the convergence of Reinforcement Learning algorithms in our problem, we propose to dynamically change the maximal duration of the actions while learning. The following experiment shows the effect of changing the maximal duration of the action on the speed of learning. The number of executions is 30 and the number of time steps per execution is 1,500,000. The time is subdivided into sub-intervals of size 5000 from which we take only the mean of the values calculated (the reward, the energy, and the value of the sensibility of the user m). The learning rate is fixed at 0.002. The experiment was done for different values of the present effect parameter, namely 0.05, 0.35 and 0.95.



Figure 3: Comparison of the performances of the algorithm between different ways to set the decision type and different sizes of the memory of the user, long-term (pe = 0.05), medium term (pe = 0.35) and short-term (pe = 0.95).

The graphs (on Figure 3) show the performance of the control system with the pursuit algorithm for



Figure 4: Heatmaps of the stochastic vectors at the end of each run whe pe = 0.35. (a), (b), (c) and (d) are the cases *base\_pur*, *freq\_dur*, *update\_mean\_var\_interv* and *update\_mean\_interv* respectively.

the case where the decision is made at each user intervention (named *base\_pur*), set to a fixed maximal duration (named *freq\_dur*). The graphs depict also the performances of the system with the two ways to use the update rule of the dynamic maximal duration of the actions. The first one corresponding to update\_mean\_var\_interv), and the second case corresponding to update\_mean\_interv). The left column of Figure 3 shows from top to bottom the evolution through time of the reward for the case where pe =0.35. The right column shows the evolution through time of the value of energy and the value of m. For the curves where the maximal duration of an action is fixed, those durations were the best value among the values  $\{1, 5, 10, 25, 50, 100\}$  for each value of *pe*. For the cases where the maximal duration of the actions changes, the factor associated to the standard deviation is also chosen to be the best value amongst  $\{1, 2, 3, 4\}$  for each *pe*. We also display the heatmaps (Figure 4 for the case pe = 0.35) of the stochastic vectors at the end of training. On the heatmaps, the axes are labelled by the indices of the slopes (x-axis) and by the run (y-axis).

From the curves, we can observe that the reward stabilizes the fastest where the update rule for the maximal duration of the actions is *update\_mean\_interv* for all values of *pe*. Furthermore, the case *update\_mean\_var\_interv* also stabilizes rapidly for the case where we have a long-term memory user and a short-term memory user (pe = 0.05and pe = 0.95) and is even a little higher at the beginning of training for the case of a medium-term memory user (pe = 0.35). The aforementioned observations show the pertinence of using dynamic maximal duration of the actions, especially as the convergence speed is better than the case where the decision time is set to a maximal limit (the cases *base\_pur* and *freq\_dur*).

One of the drawbacks of dynamic maximal duration is that the high convergence speed comes at the cost of a low reward at the end (especially for the shotterm memory user, where the state of the user depends mostly on the present). This can be explained by the fact that the principle of *dynamic maximal duration* of the actions is to stop the slopes (mostly soft slopes because they are the slowest) before the user intervenes, which means that steep slopes will be played a little more often. The playing of steep slopes triggers more reactions from the user (probably the most frequently when the user has short memory). But this phenomenon is a rather mild hindrance because the user is kept at a state close to its most favorable state (m = 41 at worst knowing that  $m_0 = 35$ , it is 10% of the maximal possible value for m) and the energy used to do so is lesser for the dynamic maximal duration of the actions rules. Only the case where pe = 0.35is shown, but the conclusions hold even for the other cases (pe = 0.05, pe = 0.95). We can also see from the heat maps associated to the medium-memory user that the algorithm converges close to the best slope (slope 17) when dynamic maximal duration of the actions is used (in fact, they converge even for other values of *pe* which are not shown here to not clutter up the reading of the article).

Another relatively mild drawback of the dynamic maximal duration of the actions is convergence to exactly the optimal action, we observe that the base case converges more often to the optimal action than the dynamic maximal duration of the actions cases. We can, therefore, conclude that controlling the maximal duration of the actions allows increasing greatly the speed of convergence of the algorithm.

# 4.2 Effect of the Number of Actions on Learning

In this subsection, we study the influence of the number of actions on the speed of convergence of the algorithm. The experience we present in this subsection consists in launching for 30 times the control system for different sets of actions (slopes) corresponding to different action spaces. Those sets correspond to the slopes where the gap between two successive slopes is 5, 10, 15 and 20. Before doing the experiment, the best slope was calculated for each set of actions and for each value of *pe* by repeating them and calculating the mean reward, the mean energy, and the mean value of m during the runs. We note that the optimal action in terms of the reward is the same for the set of actions associated with gaps 5 and 15. The set of actions associated with gaps 10 and 20 have different optimal actions. The algorithm used is the pursuit algorithm, where the learning rate is set to the value lr = 0.001. Each execution has a duration of 1500000 time steps decomposed into intervals of size 5000 where the mean value of the energy, the reward and the value of m are observed. We also calculate the mean of those values for all the executions. The results are shown on Figure 5 for each value of pe (0.05, 0.35, 0.95).



Figure 5: The evolution of the reward (left), the energy (top right), and the state of the user (center right) for the set of actions of gaps 5, 10, 15 and 20 for the slopes.

Each row corresponds to the result of the experiment for different values of pe (0.05, 0.35, 0.95). The left column corresponds to the evolution over time of the reward for all the values of pe. The right column corresponds to the evolution over time of the energy and the value of m for pe = 0.35. We first note that the system improves over time for all the metrics apart from the user state (but the user still remains at the acceptable range because the value of the m parameter is close to the lowest value  $m_0 = 35$  for all cases). The second observation we make is that the performance of the provide the total content of the performance of

mances of the system do not vary linearly with the set of actions (this seems to hold for each value of pe) especially when pe is small. In fact, for the long-term memory user it is clear that the best set of actions in terms of speed of convergence are in descending order 5, 15, 10, 20.

Second, let us analyze the medium-term memory user. We note that the best set of actions is obtained when the gap between actions is 15 and the performances drop the further we go from this set of actions both in terms of speed of convergence and quantity of reward achieved by the agent. With the set of actions where the gap is 20, we note very low energy usage. On the other hand, the user appears to be in a bad state relatively to the other cases because the value of m approaches 45 (half of the signal value interval). The set of actions associated with the gap value 10 achieves the same reward as the previous one, but we can see that energy usage is way higher and the state of the user is way lower than before. Another observation we make is that even when the optimal actions are the same for different set of actions (for example the 5 and 15 set of actions have similar optimal actions), the behaviour of the user and the algorithm change qualitatively.

A possible interpretation for the observations mentioned previously is that there is a trade-off to be taken into account in this case. If we take a very coarse set of actions of the action space, the optimal action (on all sets) may not be on the selected set of actions which leads the algorithm to learn suboptimal actions, but if the set of actions is too dense the system may take way longer to learn the best action because the system needs to try all of them enough times to identify the best action. The selected set of actions may affect the convergence of the algorithm, even when the optimal actions are the same for different sets of actions. A possible approach to deal with those issues is to consider using methods which handle large action spaces by filtering rapidly the good actions from the bad ones. Hierarchical methods (Yazidi et al., 2019) may be a good alternative to explore to deal with this drawback. Finally, we can conclude that the best set of actions is where the gap is 5 for the user with a long-term memory and where the gap is 15 for the user with a medium-term memory. And for a user with a short-term memory, we also prefer to choose the set of actions associated with gap 15 because it seems better at the beginning of learning.

# 5 CONCLUSION AND PERSPECTIVES

In this paper, we propose ways to improve the convergence of Reinforcement Learning algorithms for light signal control to reduce energy costs while satisfying the user. The setting considered in this work is when the reactions of the user depend not only on present conditions but on the entire history of the signal values. Furthermore, we consider the use of a single light source and no change in the activity of the user. We present a detailed study to determine which Reinforcement Learning algorithm is most appropriate for the problem at hand. The pursuit algorithm seems to be the way to go for our problem.

In a future work, we consider taking into account the global lighting environment with several light sources where the activity of the user could vary in the building. We also consider to look into the performances of other variants of the pursuit algorithm (like the hierarchical pursuit algorithm) and compare its performances with other stateless Reinforcement Learning algorithms. This comparison will allow us to make finer conclusions on the behaviour of the algorithms on our problem, and possibly to circumvent the burden of choosing the best set of actions. Also, we consider to look into other variants of the Reinforcement Learning framework, particularly statebased Reinforcement Learning. Challenges to do so include choosing which elements might be relevant as to determine the state and the size of the state. Other areas of building control like HVAC control might also benefit from our work, provided we take into account inertia phenomena and more complex energy consumption models in our approaches.

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