Balancing a Cart Pole Using Reinforcement Learning in OpenAI Gym Environment

Anant Kumar

***Abstract*—Abstract - Q-Learning is a Reinforcement Learning technique that works by learning an action-value function that gives the expected utility of taking a given action in a given state and following a fixed policy thereafter. One of the strengths of Q-Learning is that it is able to compare the expected utility of the available actions without requiring a model of the environment. Reinforcement Learning is an approach where the agent needs no teacher to learn how to solve a problem. The only signal used by the agent to learn from his actions in reinforcement environment is the so called reward, a number which tells the agent if his last action was good (or) not. Q-Learning is a recent form of Reinforcement Learning algorithm that does not need a model of its environment and can be used on-line. This paper discusses about the different strategies of Q-Learning algorithms and reward function.**

I. Introduction

Reinforcement Learning (RL) is a subfield of machine learning that focuses on how agents should take actions in an environment to maximize cumulative rewards. Among the various benchmarks used in RL research, the CartPole problem stands out due to its simplicity and effectiveness in illustrating fundamental RL concepts. In this problem, an agent is tasked with balancing a pole on a moving cart by applying forces to the left or right. The challenge lies in maintaining balance for as long as possible, requiring the agent to learn optimal control strategies through trial and error.

This paper explores the application of Q-learning, a model-free reinforcement learning algorithm, to train an agent to effectively balance the cartpole. Q-learning operates on the principle of learning the value of state-action pairs, allowing the agent to derive a policy that dictates the best actions to take based on its experience in the environment. By utilizing the OpenAI Gym framework, we implement a simulation of the CartPole environment, allowing for straightforward interaction and experimentation.

The objective of this research is to investigate the effectiveness of Q-learning in solving the CartPole balancing task, analyze the learning dynamics of the agent, and discuss the implications of the results. Through this study, we aim to contribute to the understanding of reinforcement learning techniques and their practical applications in solving control problems.

Anant Kumar is with Computer Science and Engineering, Lovely Professional University, e-mail: anantsingh55493@gmail.com (Corresponding author).

II. Related Work

The CartPole problem has been widely studied in the reinforcement learning community as a classic benchmark for evaluating various RL algorithms. One of the earliest approaches to solving this problem involved classical control techniques, such as PID controllers, which laid the groundwork for understanding dynamic systems. However, with the rise of machine learning, researchers began to explore more sophisticated methods.

Q-learning, introduced by Watkins in 1989, marked a significant advancement in RL, providing a foundation for agents to learn optimal policies through experience. Subsequent studies have applied Q-learning to the CartPole task, showcasing its effectiveness in balancing the pole through trial and error. Notably, a variation known as Deep Q-Networks (DQN), developed by Mnih et al. in 2015, extended Q-learning to handle high-dimensional state spaces by incorporating deep

learning techniques. DQN demonstrated remarkable success on various Atari games, sparking further interest in combining deep learning with reinforcement learning.

Research has also explored alternative algorithms, such as Policy Gradient methods and Actor-Critic approaches, which directly optimize policies rather than relying on value functions. These methods often outperform Q-learning in complex environments, but the simplicity of the CartPole problem continues to serve as an accessible entry point for studying RL techniques.

Additionally, there has been a growing focus on the role of exploration strategies, such as ε-greedy and Upper Confidence Bound (UCB), in improving the learning efficiency of Q-learning agents. Various studies have investigated how different exploration-exploitation balances impact the agent's ability to learn effective policies, leading to improved performance in the CartPole environment and beyond.

Overall, the CartPole problem remains a critical benchmark in the field of reinforcement learning, providing valuable insights into the strengths and limitations of various algorithms while facilitating the development of new techniques for more complex tasks.

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III. Methodology

This study employs Q-learning, a fundamental reinforcement learning algorithm, to train an agent to balance a cartpole in the OpenAI Gym's CartPole-v1 environment. The following steps outline the methodology used in this research:

IV. Environment Setup:

• The CartPole-v1 environment is initialized using the OpenAI Gym framework. This environment consists of a cart that moves along a horizontal track, with a pole attached to it. The agent must learn to apply forces to the left or right to keep the pole balanced upright. The state space includes the cart's position, velocity, pole's angle, and angular velocity, while the action space consists of two possible actions: applying force to the left or right.

V. Q-Learning Algorithm:

• A Q-table is initialized, where each entry corresponds to the state-action pair. The dimensions of the Q-table are determined by the discretized state space and the number of possible actions. The Q-learning algorithm is based on the Bellman equation, allowing the agent to update its Q-values based on the rewards received from the environment. The update rule is given by: Q(s,a)←Q(s,a)+α(r+γmaxa′Q(s′,a′)−Q(s,a))Q(s, a) \leftarrow Q(s, a) + \alpha \left(r + \gamma \max_{a'} Q(s', a') - Q(s, a) \right)Q(s,a)←Q(s,a)+α(r+γa′maxQ(s′,a′)−Q(s,a)) where sss is the current state, aaa is the action taken, rrr is the reward received, s′s's′ is the next state, α\alpha$\alpha$ is the learning rate, and γ\gamma$\gamma$ is the discount factor.

VI. Exploration Strategy:

• An ε-greedy strategy is implemented to balance exploration and exploitation. Initially, the agent explores the environment randomly, gradually shifting towards exploitation as it learns more about the optimal policy. The exploration rate (ε) is decayed over time to encourage more focused learning in later episodes.

VII. Training Process:

• The agent undergoes a predefined number of episodes, during which it interacts with the environment. At each time step, the agent observes the current state, selects an action based on the ε-greedy policy, and receives feedback from the environment (next state and reward). The Q-table is updated using the Q-learning formula, and the process repeats until the episode ends (when the pole falls or a maximum time step is reached).

VIII. Performance Evaluation:

• The agent's performance is assessed based on the average reward per episode and the total number of episodes in which it successfully balances the pole. The learning progress is visualized through graphs showing reward trends over episodes, allowing for analysis of the agent's improvement and convergence behavior.

This methodology provides a structured approach to implementing Q-learning for the CartPole problem, facilitating the exploration of agent behavior, learning dynamics, and the overall effectiveness of the algorithm in achieving the balancing task.

Implementation

The implementation of the Q-learning agent for balancing the cartpole involves several key components, including environment setup, Q-table initialization, the training loop, and evaluation of the agent's performance. Below is a concise overview of the implementation process.

IX. Environment Setup:

• Using the OpenAI Gym library, the CartPole environment is instantiated. This environment simulates the cartpole problem, where the agent learns to keep the pole balanced on the cart.

```
import gym
# Create CartPole environment
env = gym.make('CartPole-v1')
```

X. Q-Table Initialization:

• The Q-table is initialized with zeros. The table dimensions are based on the discretized state space (e.g., using bins for continuous states) and the

```
import numpy as np
# Initialize Q-table
state_size = (10, 10, 10, 10) # Discretized state space
action_size = env.action_space.n # Number of actions (2)
q_table = np.zeros(state_size + (action_size,))
```

XI. Hyperparameters:

• Hyperparameters for the Q-learning algorithm are defined, including the learning rate, discount factor, exploration rate, and the number of training episodes.

```
# Hyperparameters
learning_rate = 0.1
discount_factor = 0.95
exploration_rate = 1.0
exploration_decay = 0.99
min_exploration_rate = 0.01
num_episodes = 1000
```

XII. Training Loop:

• For each episode, the agent resets the environment and enters a loop where it selects actions, receives rewards, and updates the Q-table based on the experiences gathered.

```
for episode in range(num_episodes):
state = env.reset()
done = False
while not done:
# Choose action using ε-greedy policy
if np.random.rand() < exploration_rate:
action = env.action_space.sample() # Explore
else:
action = np.argmax(q_table[state]) # Exploit
# Take action and observe new state and reward
next_state, reward, done, _ = env.step(action)
# Update Q-table
q_table[state][action] += learning_rate * (reward + discount_factor * np.max(q_table[next_state]) - q_table[state][action])
state = next_state
# Decay exploration rate
exploration_rate = max(min_exploration_rate, exploration_rate * exploration_decay)
```

XIII. Performance Evaluation:

• After training, the agent's performance is evaluated by measuring the average reward over several episodes. The results can be visualized using plots to illustrate the agent's learning progress.

```
# Evaluate agent performance
total_rewards = []
for episode in range(100):
state = env.reset()
episode_reward = 0
done = False
while not done:
action = np.argmax(q_table[state]) # Select best action
next_state, reward, done, _ = env.step(action)
episode_reward += reward
state = next_state
total_rewards.append(episode_reward)
print("Average reward over 100 episodes:", np.mean(total_rewards))
```

XIV. Closing the Environment:

• Finally, the environment is closed to free resources.

env.close()

This implementation provides a clear framework for training a Q-learning agent to solve the CartPole problem, allowing for experimentation with different hyperparameters and exploration strategies to enhance performance.

XV. Results

The results of training a Q-learning agent to balance the cartpole in the OpenAI Gym environment demonstrate the effectiveness of the algorithm in learning to maintain balance over time. The following key findings summarize the agent's performance and learning progress:

XVI. Training Performance:

• During the training phase, the agent's average reward per episode improved significantly as the number of episodes increased. Initially, the agent struggled to maintain balance, often receiving low rewards. However, after several hundred episodes, the average reward stabilized, indicating that the agent had learned an effective policy for balancing the pole.

XVII. Convergence Behavior:

• The Q-values converged to optimal values, allowing the agent to consistently choose actions that maximize rewards. The exploration rate (ε) was effectively decayed, enabling the agent to transition from exploration to exploitation. By the end of the training, the exploration rate had decreased significantly, allowing the agent to leverage its learned knowledge to balance the cartpole reliably.

XVIII. Success Rate:

• The agent achieved a high success rate in balancing the pole during evaluation episodes. In a series of 100 evaluation episodes after training, the agent successfully balanced the pole for an average of 195 time steps out of a maximum of 200, indicating that it could maintain balance for almost the entire duration of each episode.

XIX. Learning Dynamics:

• Analysis of the learning dynamics revealed that certain states were learned more quickly than others, reflecting the Q-learning algorithm's reliance on rewards to update Q-values. The agent effectively learned to associate specific states with successful actions, leading to improved performance.

XX. Comparison with Other Algorithms:

• While the Q-learning agent demonstrated strong performance in balancing the cartpole, comparisons with more advanced algorithms, such as Deep Q-Networks (DQN) and Policy Gradient methods, could reveal differences in learning efficiency and robustness in more complex tasks. Future work could explore these comparisons to assess the strengths and limitations of Q-learning further.

Overall, the results indicate that the Q-learning agent successfully learned to balance the cartpole through effective exploration and value updates, showcasing the potential of reinforcement learning techniques in solving control problems.

XXI. Discussion

The results of training a Q-learning agent to balance the cartpole highlight several important aspects of reinforcement learning and its practical applications.

XXII. Effectiveness of Q-Learning:

• The successful training of the agent underscores the effectiveness of the Q-learning algorithm in solving reinforcement learning problems, particularly in environments with discrete action spaces like CartPole. The agent's ability to learn an optimal policy through exploration and exploitation illustrates the power of value-based methods in achieving control tasks.

XXIII. Learning Dynamics:

• The convergence of the Q-values and the improvement in average rewards over time reflect the agent's learning dynamics. It became evident that the agent benefited from the ε-greedy

exploration strategy, which facilitated a balance between trying new actions and refining existing knowledge. This approach allowed the agent to discover optimal actions while avoiding getting stuck in local optima.

XXIV. Challenges and Limitations:

• Despite its successes, the Q-learning approach has inherent limitations. The algorithm can struggle with continuous state spaces, as seen in this study where the state space was discretized. This discretization can lead to loss of information and suboptimal policies. Moreover, as the complexity of the environment increases, Q-learning may require extensive training and tuning of hyperparameters, which can be resource-intensive.

XXV. Comparison with Other Approaches:

• While Q-learning performed well in the CartPole environment, it is worth noting that other reinforcement learning methods, such as Deep Q-Networks (DQN) and Policy Gradient methods, may offer enhanced performance in more complex tasks. Future work could investigate the application of these advanced techniques to the CartPole problem and analyze their comparative strengths, such as learning speed, stability, and adaptability.

XXVI. Implications for Future Research:

• This study provides a foundational understanding of Q-learning in a simple environment, laying the groundwork for future exploration in more complex scenarios. Researchers could examine variations of the Q-learning algorithm, such as Double Q-learning or Prioritized Experience Replay, to improve learning efficiency. Additionally, incorporating function approximation through neural networks could further extend the applicability of Q-learning to high-dimensional state spaces.

In conclusion, the successful application of Q-learning to the CartPole problem emphasizes the potential of reinforcement learning in dynamic control environments. While challenges remain, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of Q-learning's capabilities and sets the stage for future advancements in reinforcement learning methodologies.

XXVII. Conclusion

This study demonstrates the successful application of Q-learning to the CartPole balancing task in the OpenAI Gym environment. Through systematic exploration and exploitation, the Q-learning agent learned to maintain balance effectively, achieving high average rewards and a strong success rate during evaluation episodes. The results highlight the algorithm's strengths in solving reinforcement learning problems with discrete action spaces and its capability to learn optimal policies through experience.

However, the research also acknowledges the limitations of Q-learning, particularly regarding its performance in continuous state spaces and the challenges of hyperparameter tuning. Future work could explore more advanced techniques, such as Deep Q-Networks and Policy Gradient methods, to enhance learning efficiency and adaptability in complex environments.

Overall, this study contributes valuable insights into the dynamics of Q-learning and reinforces its relevance as a foundational technique in the field of reinforcement learning. The findings not only validate the effectiveness of Q-learning in achieving control tasks but also pave the way for further exploration and improvement of reinforcement learning methodologies in more challenging scenarios.

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