Notes of [2]

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1 Problem Setup

There is a tabular *episodic* MDP $\mathcal{M} = (\mathcal{S}, \mathcal{A}, \mathbb{P}, R, H)$ where R is bounded within [0,1] and only the transition probability \mathbb{P} is *unknown*. For simplicity, we also assume the reward function R is *deterministic*. We want to find a policy such that the regret incurred by this policy after K episodes is minimized. Given a policy $\pi = (\pi_1, \dots, \pi_K)$, the regret incurred by this policy is defined by

$$\mathcal{R}_K^{\pi} \stackrel{\text{def}}{=} \mathbb{E}\left[\sum_{k=1}^K (V_1^* - V_1^{\pi_k})(x_{k,1})\right],\,$$

where the initial state for each episode can be either randomized or adversarial.

2 Notations and Definitions

[n]	$\{1,2,\ldots,n\}$
\mathcal{A}	action space
A	$ \mathcal{A} $
\mathcal{S}	state space
S	S
$\mid H \mid$	horizon
K	# of episodes
$\mid T$	HK
$R: \mathcal{S} \times \mathcal{A} \rightarrow [0,1]$	known reward function
$\mathbb{P}: \mathcal{S} imes \mathcal{A} o \Delta(\mathcal{S})$	transition probability of the underlying MDP
$\pi = (\pi_1, \dots, \pi_K)$	an arbitrary policy where π_k is the policy in the kth episode
$Q_h^{\pi_k}: \mathcal{S} \times \mathcal{A} \to \mathbb{R}$	Q-value function of policy π_k starting from time h
$ig V_h^{\pi_k}: \mathcal{S} o \mathbb{R}$	value function of policy π_k starting from time h
Q_h^*	Q-value function of the optimal policy starting from time h
V_h^*	value function of the optimal policy starting from time h
$x_{k,1}$	initial state of the k th episode
$(x_{k,h}, a_{k,h})$	state-action pair in the k th episode and at the h th time step
$\mid \mathcal{H}_k \mid$	history before the kth episode $(x_{1,1}, a_{1,1}, \dots, x_{1,H+1}, \dots, x_{k-1,1}, a_{k-1,1}, \dots, x_{k-1,H+1})$
$n_{k,h}(x,a)$	number of hits of state-action pair (x, a) at the h th time step <i>before</i> the k th episode
$ \begin{vmatrix} n_k(x,a) \\ \widetilde{Q}_{k,h} \\ \widetilde{V}_{k,h} \end{vmatrix} $	number of hits of state-action pair (x, a) before the k th episode
$Q_{k,h}$	estimate of the optimal Q -value function starting from the h th step of the k th episode
$\mid \widetilde{V}_{k,h} \mid$	estimate of the optimal value function starting from the h th step of the k th episode
ρ	an arbitrary transition probability
$\mid V$	an arbitrary value function
$(\rho V)(x,a)$	$\sum_{y \in \mathcal{S}} \rho(y \mid x, a) V(y)$
\mathcal{R}^π_K	regret incurred by policy π

3 Algorithm

Algorithm 1: Q-learning with UCB-Hoeffding ([2])

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1 initialization: \widetilde{Q}_{1,h}(x,a) = H - h + 1 for every (h,x,a) \in [H] \times \mathcal{S} \times \mathcal{A}
2 for episode k = 1 to K do
3 | if k > 1 then
4 | \mathbb{C}_{call} Algorithm 2 to compute \widetilde{Q}_{k,\cdot}(\cdot,\cdot) and \widetilde{V}_{k,\cdot}(\cdot)
5 | for step h = 1 to H do
6 | observe state x_{k,h}
7 | take action a_{k,h} = \operatorname{argmax}_{a \in \mathcal{A}} \widetilde{Q}_{k,h}(x_{k,h},a)
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Algorithm 2: Computation of $\widetilde{Q}_{k,\cdot}(\cdot,\cdot)$ and $\widetilde{V}_{k,\cdot}(\cdot)$

Here c_1 is a constant which will be defined later.

Remark 1. Algorithm 1 is model free since it does not explicitly calculate the transition probability. Hence its running time during each time step is $\mathcal{O}(SA)$.

4 Proofs

4.1 Favorable Events

4.1.1 \mathcal{E}_1

Given any $(h, x, a) \in [K] \times [H] \times S \times A$, let k_i be the episode within which state-action pair (x, a) was hit at the hth time step for the ith time. Define t be the total number of hits. Note that t depends on (h, x, a).

But for cleaner presentation, we have dropped that dependency in the notation. Let

$$\mathcal{E}_1 \stackrel{\text{def}}{=} \left\{ \forall (h, x, a) \in [K] \times [H] \times \mathcal{S} \times \mathcal{A}, \left| \sum_{i=1}^t \alpha_t^i (V_h^*(x_{k_i, h+1}) - (\mathbb{P}V_h^*)(x, a)) \right| \right. \\ \left. \leq c_1 \sqrt{H^2 \sum_{i=1}^t (\alpha_t^i)^2 \cdot \ln(SAH/\delta)} \right\},$$

where c_1 is a constant which will be defined later.

By Azuma's inequality (Lemma 12) and a union bound, there exists a constant c_1 such that $\mathbf{Pr}(\mathcal{E}_1) \ge 1 - \delta/2$.

4.2 Main Theorem

Theorem 2. With probability at least $1 - \delta$, the regret incurred by Algorithm 1 is bounded by

$$\mathcal{O}\left(SAH^2 + H^2\sqrt{SAT\ln(SAH/\delta)} + \sqrt{TH^2\ln(\delta^{-1})}\right)$$
.

Remark 3. When T is large, the upper bound becomes $\widetilde{\mathcal{O}}\left(H^2\sqrt{SAT}\right)$.

Remark 4. The proof can be applied to the MDP where $\mathbb{P}_i \neq \mathbb{P}_j$ for $i \neq j$. Here \mathbb{P}_i denotes the transition probability at the *i*th time step.

Remark 5. There exists a refined proof giving an upper bound $\widetilde{\mathcal{O}}\left(\sqrt{H^3SAT}\right)$ [2].

Proof. The following arguments are conditioned on event $\mathcal{E} \stackrel{\text{def}}{=} \mathcal{E}_1 \wedge \mathcal{E}_2$, where \mathcal{E}_2 will be defined later. And for simplicity, we use $\pi = (\pi_1, \dots, \pi_K)$ to represent Algorithm 1.

We first prove that the estimated Q-value function $Q_{k,h}(x,a)$ is optimistic.

Lemma 6. For every $(k, h, x, a) \in [K] \times [H] \times S \times A$, it holds that

$$\widetilde{Q}_{k,h}(x,a) \ge Q_h^*(x,a).$$

Corollary 7. For every $(k, h, x) \in [K] \times [H] \times S$, it holds that $\widetilde{V}_{k,h}(x) \geq V_h^*(x)$.

Proof. Fix (k, h, x, a) where k > 1 and $n_{k,h}(x, a) > 0$ and let $t = n_{k,h}(x, a)$ which shares the same definition as that in Algorithm 2. Note that

$$\widetilde{Q}_{k,h}(x,a) = (1 - \alpha_t)\widetilde{Q}_{prev(k),h}(x,a) + \alpha_t(R(x,a) + \widetilde{V}_{prev(k),h+1}(x_{prev(k),h+1}) + \beta_t)$$

$$= \cdots$$

$$= \alpha_t^0 \cdot \widetilde{Q}_{1,h}(x,a) + \sum_{i=1}^t \alpha_t^i \cdot (R(x,a) + \widetilde{V}_{k_i,h+1}(x_{k_i,h+1})) + \sum_{i=0}^t \alpha_t^i \beta_i,$$
(1)

where we have defined k_i and prev(k) as the episode when the *i*th time and the last time that state-action pair (x, a) was hit at the *h*th time step *before* the *k*th episode respectively and

$$\alpha_t^0 \stackrel{\text{def}}{=} \prod_{j=1}^t (1 - \alpha_j), \qquad \alpha_t^i \stackrel{\text{def}}{=} \prod_{j=i+1}^t (1 - \alpha_j) \cdot \alpha_i.$$

Substracting both sides of (1) by $Q_h^*(x, a)$, we obtain

$$\widetilde{Q}_{k,h}(x,a) - Q_h^*(x,a) = \alpha_t^0 \cdot (\widetilde{Q}_{1,h}(x,a) - Q_h^*(x,a))
+ \sum_{i=1}^t \alpha_t^i \cdot (R(x,a) + \widetilde{V}_{k_i,h+1}(x_{k_i,h+1}) - Q_h^*(x,a)) + \sum_{i=0}^t \alpha_t^i \beta_i
= \alpha_t^0 \cdot (\widetilde{Q}_{1,h}(x,a) - Q_h^*(x,a)) + \sum_{i=1}^t \alpha_t^i \cdot (\widetilde{V}_{k_i,h+1}(x_{k_i,h+1}) - V^*(x_{k_i,h+1}))
+ \sum_{i=1}^t \alpha_t^i \cdot (V^*(x_{k_i,h+1}) - (\mathbb{P}V^*)(x,a)) + \sum_{i=0}^t \alpha_t^i \beta_i,$$
(2)

where in the last equality we have used the Bellman Optimality Equation $Q_h^*(x,a) = R(x,a) + (\mathbb{P}V_{h+1}^*)(x,a)$.

Lemma 8. α_t^i 's satisfy the following properties (Lemma 4.1 of [2]):

$$\begin{array}{l} \textit{(a)} \ \ \alpha_t^0 = 0 \ \textit{and} \ \frac{1}{\sqrt{t}} \leq \sum_{i=1}^t \frac{\alpha_t^i}{\sqrt{i}} \leq \frac{2}{\sqrt{t}} \textit{for every } t \geq 1 \,, \\ \textit{(b)} \ \ \sum_{i=1}^t (\alpha_t^i)^2 \leq \frac{2H}{t} \textit{for every } t \geq 1 \,, \\ \textit{(c)} \ \ \sum_{t=i}^{+\infty} \alpha_t^i = 1 + \frac{1}{H} \textit{for every } i \geq 1 \,. \end{array}$$

(b)
$$\sum_{i=1}^{t} (\alpha_t^i)^2 \leq \frac{2H}{t}$$
 for every $t \geq 1$,

(c)
$$\sum_{t=i}^{+\infty} \alpha_t^i = 1 + \frac{1}{H}$$
 for every $i \ge 1$.

By event \mathcal{E}_1 and Lemma 8(b), we have $|\sum_{i=1}^t \alpha_t^i \cdot (V^*(x_{k_i,h+1}) - (\mathbb{P}V^*)(x,a))| \le c_1 \sqrt{2} \cdot \sqrt{\frac{H^3 \ln(SAH/\delta)}{t}}$ Further by Lemma 8(a), we have $\sum_{i=0}^t \alpha_t^i \beta_i \geq c_1 \sqrt{2} \cdot \sqrt{\frac{H^3 \ln(SAH/\delta)}{t}} \geq |\sum_{i=1}^t \alpha_t^i \cdot (V^*(x_{k_i,h+1}) - (\mathbb{P}V^*)(x,a))|$. Using mathematical induction, we are able to show $\widetilde{Q}_{k,h}(x,a) - Q_h^*(x,a) \geq 0$ and conclude the result of this lemma. the proof of this lemma.

With optimistic guarantee, we can give a direct upper bound of \mathcal{R}_K^{π} . Note that

$$\mathcal{R}_{K}^{\pi} = \mathbb{E}\left[\sum_{k=1}^{K} (V_{1}^{*} - V_{1}^{\pi_{k}})(x_{k,1})\right]$$

$$\leq \mathbb{E}\left[\sum_{k=1}^{K} (\widetilde{V}_{k,1} - V_{1}^{\pi_{k}})(x_{k,1})\right]$$

$$= \sum_{k=1}^{K} \mathbb{E}\widetilde{\delta}_{k,1}.$$

where we have defined $\widetilde{\delta}_{k,h} \stackrel{\mathrm{def}}{=} (\widetilde{V}_{k,h} - V_h^{\pi_k})(x_{k,h}).$

The next step idea is to rewrite $\widetilde{\delta}_{k,h}$ using $\widetilde{\delta}_{k,h+1}$ and then use recursion to calculate an upper bound of $\sum_{k=1}^{K} \widetilde{\delta}_{k,h}$. We first show

Lemma 9. When $n_{k,h}(x_{k,h}, a_{k,h}) > 0$, it holds that

$$\begin{split} \widetilde{\delta}_{k,h} & \leq \sum_{i=1}^{t} \alpha_{t}^{i} \cdot (\widetilde{V}_{k_{i},h+1}(x_{k_{i},h+1}) - V^{*}(x_{k_{i},h+1})) - (\widetilde{V}_{k,h+1} - V_{h+1}^{*})(x_{k,h+1}) + \widetilde{\delta}_{k,h+1} \\ & + 2c_{1}\sqrt{2} \cdot \sqrt{\frac{H^{3} \ln(SAH/\delta)}{t}} + (\mathbb{P}(V_{h+1}^{*} - V_{h+1}^{\pi_{k}}))(x_{k,h}, a_{k,h}) - (V_{h+1}^{*} - V_{h+1}^{\pi_{k}})(x_{k,h+1}). \end{split}$$

Proof. Note that

$$\widetilde{\delta}_{k,h} = \widetilde{V}_{k,h}(x_{k,h}) - V_h^{\pi_k}(x_{k,h})
= \widetilde{Q}_{k,h}(x_{k,h}, a_{k,h}) - Q_h^{\pi_k}(x_{k,h}, a_{k,h})
= \widetilde{Q}_{k,h}(x_{k,h}, a_{k,h}) - Q_h^{\pi_k}(x_{k,h}, a_{k,h}) + Q_h^*(x_{k,h}, a_{k,h}) - Q_h^{\pi_k}(x_{k,h}, a_{k,h}).$$
(3)

Plugging (2) and $\alpha_t^0 = 0$ from Lemma 8(a) in (3), we obtain

$$\widetilde{\delta}_{k,h} = \sum_{i=1}^{t} \alpha_{t}^{i} \cdot (\widetilde{V}_{k_{i},h+1}(x_{k_{i},h+1}) - V^{*}(x_{k_{i},h+1}))
+ \sum_{i=1}^{t} \alpha_{t}^{i} \cdot (V^{*}(x_{k_{i},h+1}) - (\mathbb{P}V^{*})(x,a)) + \sum_{i=0}^{t} \alpha_{t}^{i} \beta_{i} + Q_{h}^{*}(x_{k,h}, a_{k,h}) - Q_{h}^{\pi_{k}}(x_{k,h}, a_{k,h})
\leq \sum_{i=1}^{t} \alpha_{t}^{i} \cdot (\widetilde{V}_{k_{i},h+1}(x_{k_{i},h+1}) - V^{*}(x_{k_{i},h+1})) + \underbrace{Q_{h}^{*}(x_{k,h}, a_{k,h}) - Q_{h}^{\pi_{k}}(x_{k,h}, a_{k,h})}_{(I)}
+ 2c_{1}\sqrt{2} \cdot \sqrt{\frac{H^{3} \ln(SAH/\delta)}{t}},$$
(4)

where we have used $\sum_{i=1}^t \alpha_t^i \cdot (V^*(x_{k_i,h+1}) - (\mathbb{P}V^*)(x,a)) \leq c_1 \sqrt{2} \cdot \sqrt{\frac{H^3 \ln(SAH/\delta)}{t}}$ and $\sum_{i=0}^t \alpha_t^i \beta_i \leq c_1 \sqrt{2} \cdot \sqrt{\frac{H^3 \ln(SAH/\delta)}{t}}$. Both of them have been proved in the analysis of Lemma 6.

We next take care of (I) and try to expand it. Notice that

$$(I) = (\mathbb{P}(V_{h+1}^* - V_{h+1}^{\pi_k}))(x_{k,h}, a_{k,h})$$

$$= (\mathbb{P}(V_{h+1}^* - V_{h+1}^{\pi_k}))(x_{k,h}, a_{k,h}) - (V_{h+1}^* - V_{h+1}^{\pi_k})(x_{k,h+1}) + \widetilde{\delta}_{k,h+1} - (\widetilde{V}_{k,h+1} - V_{h+1}^*)(x_{k,h+1}).$$
(5)

The intuition to expand (I) in this way is that the expectation of $(\mathbb{P}(V_{h+1}^* - V_{h+1}^{\pi_k}))(x_{k,h}, a_{k,h}) - (V_{h+1}^* - V_{h+1}^{\pi_k})(x_{k,h+1})$ equals 0 conditioning on the history \mathcal{H}_k and $(x_{k,1}, a_{k,1}, \ldots, x_{k,h})$.

Finally, plugging (5) back into (4), we prove this lemma.

Corollary 10.

$$\sum_{k=1}^{K} \widetilde{\delta}_{k,h} \leq SAH + \sum_{k=1}^{K} \sum_{i=1}^{t} \alpha_{t}^{i} \cdot (\widetilde{V}_{k_{i},h+1}(x_{k_{i},h+1}) - V^{*}(x_{k_{i},h+1})) - \sum_{k=1}^{K} (\widetilde{V}_{k,h+1} - V_{h+1}^{*})(x_{k,h+1}) + \sum_{k=1}^{K} \widetilde{\delta}_{k,h+1} + \sum_{k=1}^{K} 2c_{1}\sqrt{2} \cdot \sqrt{\frac{H^{3} \ln(SAH/\delta)}{t}} + \sum_{k=1}^{K} \left((\mathbb{P}(V_{h+1}^{*} - V_{h+1}^{\pi_{k}}))(x_{k,h}, a_{k,h}) - (V_{h+1}^{*} - V_{h+1}^{\pi_{k}})(x_{k,h+1}) \right).$$

Proof. When $n_{k,h}(x_{k,h},a_{k,h})=0$, we apply the naive upper bound i.e., $\widetilde{\delta}_{k,h}\leq H$. Let \mathcal{K} be the set of k's such that $n_{k,h}(x_{k,h},a_{k,h})=0$. Hence $|\{(x_{k,h},a_{k,h}):k\in\mathcal{K}\}|\leq SA$. So $\sum_{k\in\mathcal{K}}\widetilde{\delta}_{k,h}\leq SAH$. Together with Lemma 9, we prove this corollary.

We next focus on bounding

$$\sum_{k=1}^{K} \sum_{i=1}^{t} \alpha_{t}^{i} \cdot (\widetilde{V}_{k_{i},h+1}(x_{k_{i},h+1}) - V^{*}(x_{k_{i},h+1})) - \sum_{k=1}^{K} (\widetilde{V}_{k,h+1} - V_{h+1}^{*})(x_{k,h+1})$$
 (6)

in Corollary 10 and show

Lemma 11.

$$(6) \le \frac{1}{H} \cdot \left(\sum_{k=1}^{K} (\widetilde{V}_{k,h+1} - V_{h+1}^*)(x_{k,h+1}) \right).$$

Proof. Rewrite (6) we have

$$\mathbf{(6)} = \sum_{t=(i+1)}^{K} \alpha_t^i \cdot \left(\sum_{k=1}^{K} (\widetilde{V}_{k,h+1} - V_{h+1}^*)(x_{k,h+1}) \right) - \left(\sum_{k=1}^{K} (\widetilde{V}_{k,h+1} - V_{h+1}^*)(x_{k,h+1}) \right).$$

By Lemma 5, we have $\sum_{t=(i+1)}^{K} \alpha_t^i \leq 1 + \frac{1}{H}$. Using aforementioned inequality, we are able to show this lemma.

By Corollary 10, Lemma 11 and the fact that $V_{h+1}^*(x) \geq V_{h+1}^{\pi_k}(x)$, we have

$$\sum_{k=1}^{K} \widetilde{\delta}_{k,h} \leq SAH + \left(1 + \frac{1}{H}\right) \cdot \sum_{k=1}^{K} \widetilde{\delta}_{k,h+1} + \sum_{k=1}^{K} 2c_1 \sqrt{2} \cdot \sqrt{\frac{H^3 \ln(SAH/\delta)}{t}} + \sum_{k=1}^{K} \left((\mathbb{P}(V_{h+1}^* - V_{h+1}^{\pi_k}))(x_{k,h}, a_{k,h}) - (V_{h+1}^* - V_{h+1}^{\pi_k})(x_{k,h+1}) \right).$$

Hence by recursion, we further obtain

$$\sum_{k=1}^{K} \widetilde{\delta}_{1,h} \leq \left(1 + \frac{1}{H}\right)^{H} \cdot \left(SAH^{2} + \sum_{h=1}^{H} \sum_{k=1}^{K} 2c_{1}\sqrt{2} \cdot \sqrt{\frac{H^{3} \ln(SAH/\delta)}{t}}\right) \\
+ \sum_{h=1}^{H} \sum_{k=1}^{K} \left(\left(\mathbb{P}(V_{h+1}^{*} - V_{h+1}^{\pi_{k}})\right)(x_{k,h}, a_{k,h}) - \left(V_{h+1}^{*} - V_{h+1}^{\pi_{k}}\right)(x_{k,h+1})\right) \\
\lesssim SAH^{2} + \sum_{h=1}^{H} \sum_{k=1}^{K} \sqrt{\frac{H^{3} \ln(SAH/\delta)}{t}} \\
+ \sum_{h=1}^{H} \sum_{k=1}^{K} \left(\left(\mathbb{P}(V_{h+1}^{*} - V_{h+1}^{\pi_{k}})\right)(x_{k,h}, a_{k,h}) - \left(V_{h+1}^{*} - V_{h+1}^{\pi_{k}}\right)(x_{k,h+1})\right). \tag{7}$$

Rewrite (*), we obtain

$$(*) = \sqrt{H^3 \ln(SAH/\delta)} \cdot \sum_{h=1}^{H} \sum_{(x,a)} \sum_{t=1}^{n_{K,h}(x,a)} \sqrt{\frac{1}{t}}.$$

Further applying $\sum_{i=1}^t \frac{1}{i} \leq 2\sqrt{t}$ and Cauchy–Schwarz inequality, we have

$$(*) \lesssim \sqrt{H^3 \ln(SAH/\delta)} \cdot \sum_{(x,a)} \sum_{h=1}^{H} \sqrt{n_{K,h}(x,a)}$$

$$\leq \sqrt{H^3 \ln(SAH/\delta)} \cdot \sum_{(x,a)} \sqrt{H \cdot n_K(x,a)}$$

$$= \mathcal{O}(H^2 \sqrt{SAT \ln(SAH/\delta)})$$
(8)

Let $\mathcal{E}_2 \stackrel{\text{def}}{=} \{(**) \leq c_2 \sqrt{TH^2 \ln(\delta^{-1})}\}$, where c_2 is a constant which will be defined later. By Azuma's inequality, we have there exists a constant c_2 such that $\mathbf{Pr}(\mathcal{E}_2) \geq 1 - \delta/2$. According to event \mathcal{E}_2 , it holds that

$$(**) \le c_2 \sqrt{TH^2 \ln(\delta^{-1})}. \tag{9}$$

Plugging (8) and (9) back into (7), we prove this theorem.

5 Probability Tools

Assuming $X_0 = 0$, a martingale (X_1, \ldots, X_t) is **c**-Lipschitz if $|X_i - X_{i-1}| \le c_i$ where $\mathbf{c} = (c_1, \ldots, c_t)$. The following lemma states Azuma's inequality.

Lemma 12. ([1]) If a martingale (X_1, \ldots, X_t) is **c**-Lipschitz, define $X = X_t$, then for every $\epsilon \geq 0$, it holds that

$$\mathbf{Pr}(|X - \mathbb{E}X| \ge \epsilon) \le 2 \exp\left(-\frac{\epsilon^2}{2\sum_{i=1}^t c_i^2}\right),$$

where $c = (c_1, ..., c_t)$.

References

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- [2] Chi Jin, Zeyuan Allen-Zhu, Sebastien Bubeck, and Michael I Jordan. Is q-learning provably efficient? In *NeurIPS*, pages 4863–4873, 2018.