Modeling and solving the 2048 Puzzle Using Deep Q- Networks (DQN)

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Abstract — This research investigates the use of Reinforcement Learning (RL) algorithms for solving the 2048 puzzle, which is a stochastic combinatorial optimization problem. Our work centers around implementing and comparing three algorithms - Deep Q-Network (DQN), Actor-Critic, and Temporal Difference Learning (TDL) - and determining which is the optimal choice for producing high-performance gameplay. The environment was simulated via the Gymnasium 2048 API and the models were trained in Google Colab using the PyTorch library. The results demonstrated that while DQN and Actor-Critic showed excellent theoretical abilities, they possessed issues with unstable training and high computational expense. The TDL, however, was found to converge much faster, scores were more consistent, and it was more feasible to compute. As a result, the TDL was the most stable and practical model to use when modeling a deterministic environment such as the game 2048. These results indicate that effective performance can be achieved using simpler value-based algorithms even in a structured and predictable environment as opposed to more complex deep reinforcement learning algorithms.

Index Terms — Reinforcement Learning, Deep Q-Network, Temporal Difference Learning, Actor-Critic, 2048 Puzzle, Deep Learning, Gymnasium Environment, Value-Based Methods, AI Optimization.

I. Introduction

Reinforcement Learning (RL) is rapidly emerging as an area of research in artificial intelligence, investigating how agents learn to take actions in a setting through trial-and-error. [1] The 2048 puzzle is a sliding-tile puzzle game where the intention is to combine numbered tiles along the way to ultimately generate the tile presenting the value 2048 [2]. This puzzle represents a difficult RL problem given its large, stochastic, state space. The ability to solve this problem could affect other areas, like game AI, decision optimization, and adaptive control systems [3].

The challenges of playing the 2048 puzzle are based on the exponential expansion of the state space and the randomness with which new tiles spawn after each movement [4]. Therefore, heuristic or brute force techniques do not have the scalability and generality that reinforcement learning approaches can offer. Despite Deep Q-Networks (DQN) showing exciting success on many games, high computational cost, training instability, and responsiveness to hyperparameters are often challenging with DQNs [5].
The objective of the current study is to tackle these issues by using a DQN to solve the 2048 puzzle and compare the DQN findings to the outcomes of the best Temporal Difference (TD) learning algorithm, which according to our results, was the most efficient and stable method [6].
The specific objectives of this study are:

1. To implement and train a Deep Q-Network model for the 2048 puzzle.
2. To evaluate and compare DQN performance against another algorithm.
3. To identify which reinforcement learning approach yields optimal score performance.

This research hypothesizes that TD learning can achieve performance higher than complex neural-based models, such as DQN, under the constraints of discrete, deterministic games (e.g., 2048), even with its simplicity [7]. The primary contribution of this study is identifying a classic RL method - TD learning which shows expected higher efficiency, stability, and adaptability than their deep model counterparts in settings bounded such as this [8].

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The reinforcement learning techniques most applicable to the type of challenge addressed in this work are Deep Q-Networks (DQN), Dueling-DQN (enhanced version of DQN), Temporal Difference (TD), and Actor-Critic which have been used extensively in sequential decision-making or puzzle-solving problems, such as the 2048 game [9], [10]. The intention is to allow agents to learn optimal strategies through an environment and to achieve maximum cumulative reward [11].

Current methods perform well in terms of pattern recognition and decision optimization, but they each exhibit a number of drawbacks. Classical methods, such as Q-learning and Temporal Difference, afford stable learning, but do not lend themselves sufficiently to large, or continuous, state spaces [12]. Conversely, while DQN can afford a more significant learning capacity through deep neural networks, it tends to be unstable, have overestimation bias, and experience long convergence times [13]. These drawbacks result in DQN being more computationally expensive and providing sensitivity to hyperparameter tuning [14].

This study differs from previous research by comparing Deep Q-Network (DQN) and Temporal Difference (TD) learning performance on the 2048 puzzle. In lieu of complex network architecture, this approach aims for efficiency and stability. The results indicate TD learning is superior to DQN in follow-up results based on speed of convergence, training stability, and computational cost. The results indicate a simpler algorithm can outperform deep models in deterministic environments [3].

The methods tested in this paper are both very much in the model-free, value-based category of reinforcement learning where model-free algorithms are just that they learn optimal policies from experience without a model of the environment. DQN uses deep neural networks to estimate action-value function (Q-function) while TD learning is an incremental update of the state-value function [12]. Both methods focus on maximizing long-term rewards, but considerable differences exist in their complexity or computational requirements [15].

III. METHODOLOGY

1) Environment and Problem Formulation

a) Environment or simulation used

The environment used in this study is "TwentyFortyEight-v0" from the gymnasium_2048 package [16], a gym-compatible simulation of the 2048 puzzle game. This environment follows the Gymnasium API standards, allowing easy integration with reinforcement learning algorithms such as Deep Q-Networks (DQN). The environment provides a 4×4 board where numbered tiles slide and merge according to player actions.

b) State space and action space

State space: The state is represented by a 4×4 grid of numerical tile values, which are powers of 2. Each state is encoded as a flattened array and normalized using logarithmic scaling (i.e., $\log_2(\text{tile value})/\text{max\_pow}$) to prevent excessively large magnitudes from destabilizing training. Thus, the agent perceives the board as a 16-dimensional continuous vector [17].

Action space: The action space consists of four discrete actions corresponding to possible tile movement directions:

Direction	Value
Move Up	0
Move Down	1
Move Left	2
Move Right	3

c) Reward function and rationale

The reward function is customized and shaped to encourage tile merging and penalize stagnation [18].

Specifically:

- The base reward is the environment's merge score.
- max_tile_bonus_scale denotes that an agent will receive extra credit when it increases the maximum tile. This directs the agent toward building large tiles. 0.5 was used in the training call experiment with 0.2 to 1.0
- A consequence (e.g., -0.02) is imposed when a movement results in no change to the board to reduce the opportunity for repeat or invalid moves. This approach encourages the agent to maximize tile values as directly as possible instead of engaging in random movements.

d) Terminal Condition

An episode terminates under two conditions:

1. The board has no valid moves (game over).
2. The agent has not increased its score for a certain number of consecutive moves (stagnation threshold, typically 100 steps), implemented to prevent long unproductive episodes.

e) Episodic or continuous

The task is episodic. In each episode begins with an empty 4×4 board and ends either when the board is filled up, and there are no more moves, or when early termination due to being stagnated. The agent is evaluated across episodes.

2) Algorithm Description

a) Algorithm used

- **Deep Q-Network (DQN)**, which is a reinforcement learning algorithm that is value-based that approximates the Q-function with a neural network [19].
- Using a **Dueling DQN** neural network architecture to stabilize learning through a separate approximation of the value of the state and the advantage function [20].
- **Temporal-Difference Learning (TDL)** updates value estimates based on the difference (TD error) between consecutive predictions, allowing the agent to learn directly from raw experience without waiting for the final outcome of episode [3].
- **Actor-Critic** combines value-based and policy-based methods, where the actor updates the policy parameters to choose actions, and the critic evaluates these actions by estimating the value function, providing a balance between stability and exploration efficiency [21].

Key equations and hyperparameters

The DQN and DDQN update rule follows the Bellman equation [19]:

$$Q(s_t, a_t) \leftarrow Q(s_t, a_t) + \alpha\left(R_{t+1} + \gamma Q'(s_{t+1}, a) - Q(s_t, a_t)\right)$$

where:

Equation	Definition
$Q(s_t, a_t)$	Current Value
α	Learning Rate
R_{t+1}	Immediate Reward
γ	Discount Factor
$Q'(s_{t+1}, a)$	Target Value
s_t	Current State
a_t	Current Action
s_{t+1}	Next State

Key Hyperparameters:

Parameter	Value
Learning rate	0.0005
Discount factor	0.99
Batch size	256
Replay capacity	200,000
Start learning after	2,000 steps
Target update	every 100 episodes
Epsilon decay steps	400,000
Epsilon end	0.05
Max steps per episode	1000
Max stagnant steps	100

Exploration Strategy

- ε starts at 1.0 (fully random)
- Linearly decays to 0.05 over 600,000 steps, balancing exploration (random actions) and exploitation (greedy Q-values) [17].

Modifications and Improvements

The base **DQN** was extended with:

1. Dueling architecture separates value and advantage estimation to stabilize learning.
2. Reward shaping adds logarithmic tile growth bonuses and penalties for stagnation.
3. Early termination ends episodes early when no score improvements occur.

The TDL Implementation is as follows:

This equation is referenced from Szubert and Jaśkowski [3].

$$V(s) \leftarrow V(s) + \alpha\left(r + V(s'') - V(s)\right)$$

Equation	Definition
$\delta = r + V(s'') - V(s)$	TD Error (δ)
$V(s) \leftarrow V(s) + \alpha(r + V(s'') - V(s))$	Value Update Rule
$\pi(s) = argmax_a V(f(s,a))$	Policy (Greedy Selection)
$s'' = tile\_spawn(f(s,a))$	After-state Representation

Key Hyperparameters:

Parameter	Value
Learning rate	0.0025
Discount factor	1.0
Episodes	100,000
Evaluation Frequency	5,000
Save Frequency	-1
Random Seed	42

Exploration Strategy

- Greedy after-state selection always chooses the move with the highest estimated value.
- No explicit ε-greedy; exploration occurs naturally through random tile spawns.
- This ensures sufficient state diversity without added randomness.

Modifications and Improvements

The base **TDL** was extended with:

1. Introduced after-state learning for more stable value updates.
2. Used an n-tuple network for efficient state-value approximation.
3. Applied a small adaptive learning rate (α = 0.0025) for stability.
4. Added periodic evaluation to track and save the best-performing policy.

The Actor-Critic Implementation is as follows:

Equations referenced from GeeksforGeeks [22]:

Equation	Definition
$\nabla_\theta J(\theta) \approx \frac{1}{N}\sum_{i=0}^{N} \nabla_\theta \log \pi_\theta (a_i \mid s_i) \cdot A(s_i, a_i)$	Policy Gradient (Actor)
$\nabla_w J(w) \approx \frac{1}{N}\sum_{i=1}^{N} \nabla_w \left(V_w(s_i) - Q_w(s_i, a_i)\right)^2$	Value Function Update (Critic)
$\theta_{t+1} = \theta_t + \alpha \nabla_\theta J(\theta_t)$	Actor Update
$w_t = w_t - \beta \nabla_w J(w_t)$	Critic Update

Key Hyperparameters:

Parameter	Value
Learning rate	0.0001
Discount factor	0.99
Batch size	Entire episode (on-policy update after each episode)
Start learning after	Immediate (updates after each episode)
Max steps per episode	500

Exploration Strategy

- The Actor–Critic employs stochastic policy sampling, where actions are selected based on probability distributions from the policy network.
- Entropy regularization maintains balanced exploration and exploitation during training.

Modifications and Improvements

The base **Actor-critic** was extended with:

1. Entropy bonus sustains exploration and prevents early convergence.
2. Advantage normalization stabilizes gradient updates.
3. Reward shaping adds bonuses for progress and penalties for stagnation.
4. Early termination ends episodes with no improvement.

3) Implementation Details

DQN, DDQN, and Actor-critic

a) Frameworks and tools

The implementation was developed in Google Colab using:

- PyTorch for neural network modeling and optimization [18].
- Gymnasium and gymnasium_2048 for environment simulation.
- NumPy for numerical operations.
- Matplotlib and ImageIO for visualization and video recording of agent gameplay.

b) Training setup

- The agent was trained for 3,000 episodes using replay buffer sampling and periodic target network synchronization. Each episode runs until termination conditions are met.
- Performance metrics (reward and maximum tile reached) were plotted after training to evaluate progress and learning trends.

Temporal Difference Learning

c) Frameworks and tools

The implementation was developed using:

- Gymnasium and gymnasium_2048 for the 2048 game environment.
- NumPy for array manipulation and numerical operations.
- TQDM for progress tracking during training.
- Logging and OS modules for experiment tracking and model saving.

d) Training Setup

- The agent was trained for 100,000 episodes using after-state Temporal Difference Learning (TDL) with an n-tuple network value function.
- A learning rate of 0.0025 was used for incremental updates.
- The agent was evaluated every 5,000 episodes over 1,000 games, saving the best-performing model based on average score.
- Training continued until episode limits or convergence criteria were reached, with performance measured by mean score, max tile, and winning rate.

e) Hardware specifications

Training and evaluation of all algorithms were conducted on Google Colab's default environment:

- CPU: Intel Xeon @ 2.20 GHz (2 cores)
- GPU (optional): NVIDIA Tesla T4 (15 GB VRAM, CUDA-enabled)
- System RAM: 12.7 GB
- Disk Space: 112 GB (available ~39 GB during runtime)

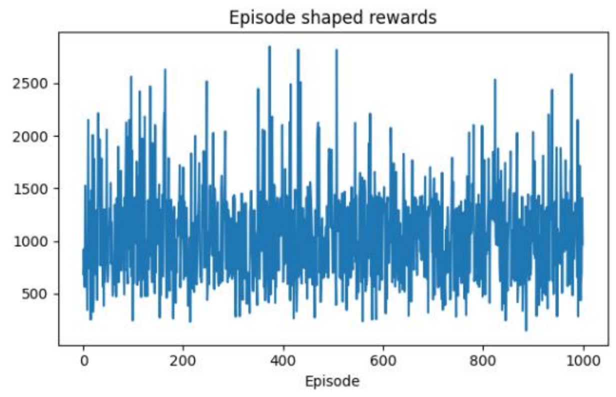
The implementation made it GPU-optional and will run even without having a GPU, while we will utilize GPU-acceleration when available to enhance the speed of tensor computations and training of neural networks.

IV. Discussion

The performance metrics used across all algorithms—Deep Q-Learning (DQL), Dueling Deep Q-Learning (DDQL), Actor-Critic (ACT), and Temporal Difference Method (TDM) include reward, success rate, and convergence speed. Reward measures how effectively the agent maximizes its cumulative score during training. Success rate evaluates the consistency in reaching the target tile, such as 2048, which reflects the agent's reliability. Convergence speed assesses how quickly each algorithm stabilizes its performance and learns an optimal policy, indicating the efficiency of its learning process.

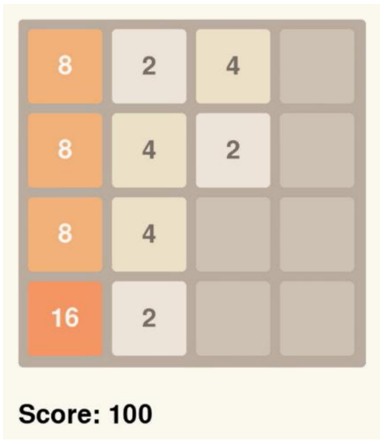
The following graphs visualize the performance of each reinforcement learning algorithm:

DQN Performance:



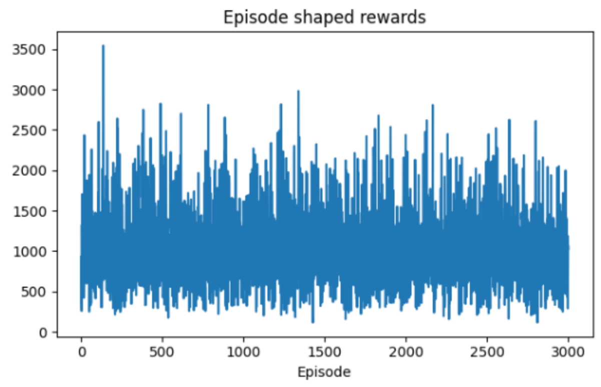
The results indicate that the current Deep Q-Network (DQN) setup encountered difficulties in effectively learning in the 2048 environment properly, as evidenced by the unstable episode rewards and the persistently low maximum tile values. The lack of a pronounced upward learning trend indicates poor convergence and limited policy improvement, which are the results of insufficient exploration strategies, suboptimal hyperparameter settings, or a weak replay buffer. These difficulties bring to light the requirement for making the model's learning stability and efficiency better using techniques such as Double DQN to reduce overestimation bias, Prioritized Experience Replay for better sampling diversity, and optimized epsilon-greedy exploration for effectively striking the right balance between exploration and exploitation during training.

Training Result:



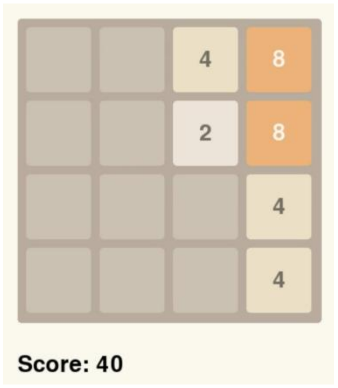
The DQN algorithm shows the highest score of 100, indicating that the model is still in its early learning stage. The gameplay reflects basic movement and merging attempts, but the algorithm has yet to develop an effective strategy for achieving higher tile combinations and maximizing the score.

DDQN Performance:



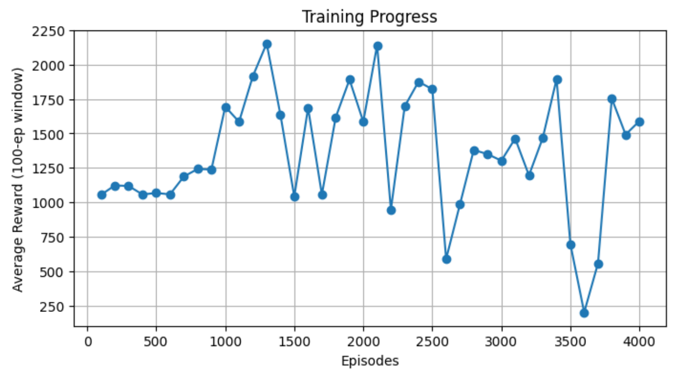
The Dueling Deep Q-Network (DDQN) findings suggest that the model got better but only a little bit in terms of peak rewards when compared to the standard DQN, yet it still experienced instability and poor convergence issues. The left graph, "Episode Shaped Rewards," tells us that the rewards were constantly fluctuating a lot and they didn't really show a movement up, which can be taken to mean that the agent was not able to improve its performance consistently, and for that reason, there is no clear trend. This inconsistency is a sign of overfitting and high variance during training, reflecting the situation with learning updates, which were limited, and hyperparameter tuning being suboptimal. On the other hand, the graph on the right - “Max Tile Reached per Episode” - shows that the DDQN stayed at the lowest level and that its performance did not change even though the training was continued for up to 3000 episodes. The DDQN had already diminished overestimation bias relative to the vanilla DQN, but still, the results confirm that it could not master the art of long-term strategy learning or the deterministic environment of the 2048 game adaptation.

Training Result:



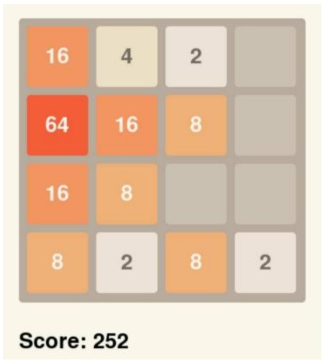
The DDQN algorithm shows a highest score of 40, reflecting the algorithm’s early training stage. The gameplay reveals random movements and minimal tile merging, indicating that the model has not yet learned effective strategies for maximizing scores or forming higher-value tiles.

Actor-critic Performance:



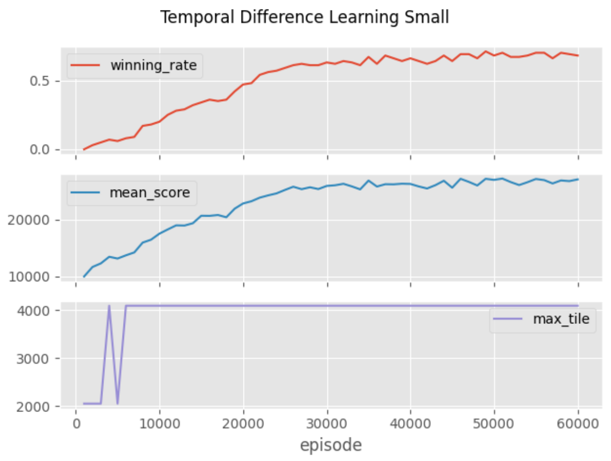
The graph given represents the performance of the Actor-Critic model in the 2048 environment during training, where the reward averaged over a 1000-episode window was drawn for 4,000 episodes. The first step shows a learning curve that was formed as the agent made changes to its strategy in the first episodes, then, in the middle of the training, the curve exhibits the opposite behavior, with significant fluctuations indicating instability in policy and value updates. The swings in the learning process might have been caused by the fact that the model learned and applied two techniques—tile merging and corner building efficiently but could not control the performance because of the fine straddling between the strengths of the actor and critic networks. In short, the Actor-Critic model revealed its strengths by being adjustable and learning, but it also indicated needing more fine-tuning and stabilization to reach consistent convergence.

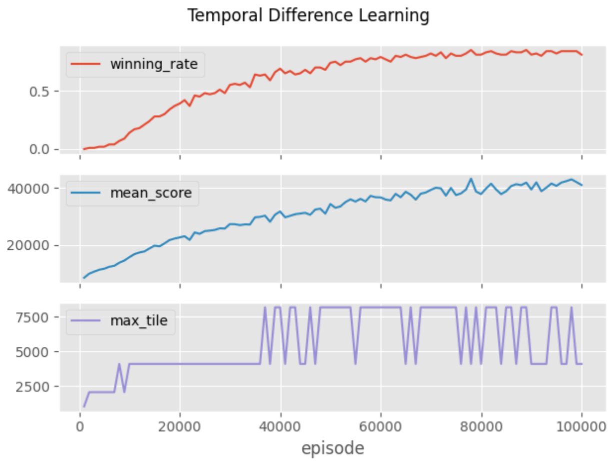
Training Result:



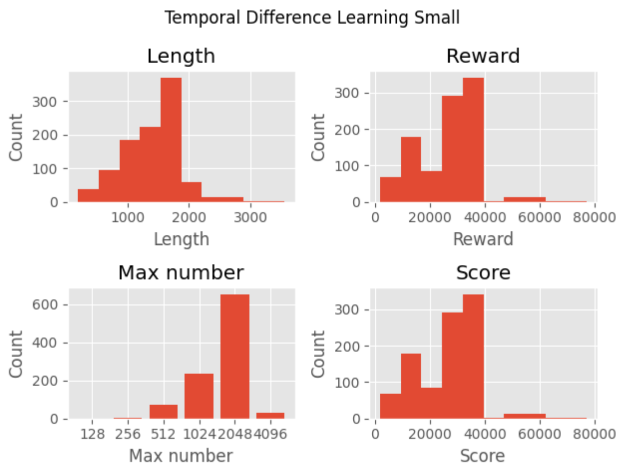
The Actor-critic algorithm shows a full playthrough where the highest score reached is 252, revealing limited tile combinations and early board congestion. It highlights the ACT algorithm's basic execution of game logic but also indicates a need for improved strategy formulation and move optimization to achieve higher scores.

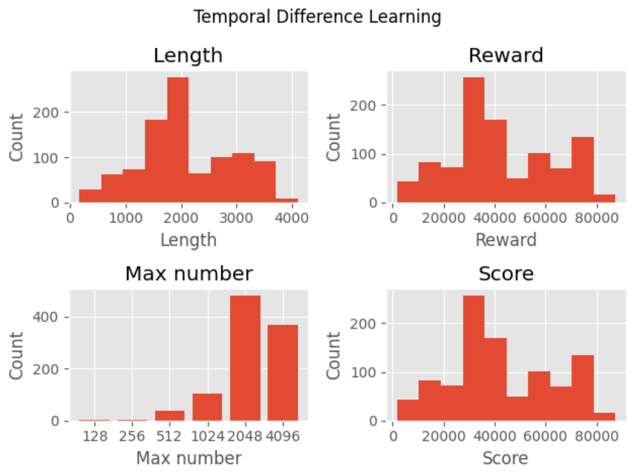
TDL Performance:





Graphical representation is an essential part of the process, and TDL, which is a great algorithm, has proven its worth by being adaptable and working with the 2048 puzzle under the different conditions of the experiments. The top plots correspond to the small runs (60,000 episodes) and the large ones (100,000 episodes), where the TDL agent is portrayed as making a steady learning journey. The winning rate is depicted in the top plots, which are going up slowly and are fixed at around 0.6 eventually, showing that the agent is learning to get high-value tiles more often with the increase in training time. The middle plots depict the mean score, which shows a clear upward trend and eventual stabilization—the agent has learned effectively and has reached the point of learning no more learning. The max tile plots at the bottom indicate that the agent is no longer a beginner; he has already gained experience and thus is performing the policy better by getting the maximum tile size slowly, which is a sign of the policy performance improvement through experience accumulation.





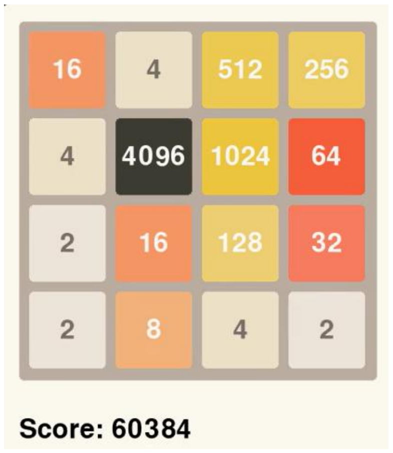
The figure illustrates the performance in four main metrics: the length of the episode, the reward, the maximum tile value, and the score distribution. It can be seen from the graphs that TDL consistently achieved higher rewards and more tile combinations than the deep learning–based models. Most of the episodes made considerable progress, with the 2048 and sometimes even 4096 tile attainment being frequent, which is strong evidence of learning and policy convergence. The histograms for the reward and score distribution indicate a concentration at the higher values, showing that the agent was able to learn efficient strategies for getting the maximum long-term gains.

Overall, these findings underscore TDL's efficiency and stronghold in skill development within predictable surroundings like 2048. Contrary to the deep reinforcement learning techniques such as DQN or Dueling DQN, which may present unstable convergence and consume a lot of computation power, TDL achieves quiet and smooth stable performance with very little fluctuation coming from its variance. Its capability of learning exclusively from ground experience without being dependent on a neural network makes it possible for it to converge in an even shorter time and with fewer resources being used, hence, making it the most practical and trustworthy algorithm for attaining the highest scores and optimal tile formation in this puzzle environment.

The agents' behaviors were mostly in line with what was expected according to their algorithmic specifications. The DQL and DDQL agents were characterized by exploration, though at a very different and inconsistent pace, and would often proceed to tile random combinations before slowly picking up the effective merging patterns. The Actor-Critic agent moved the tiles more thoughtfully and made better policy choices than before, while the TDL agent applied the same logical and efficient merging strategies, thus coming very close to the maximum human play.

Sensitivity analysis revealed that the deep models were highly dependent on hyperparameters such as learning rate, discount factor, and exploration rate. Small changes often led to divergent performance or slower learning. Conversely, TDL showed strong robustness under varying hyperparameters and environmental conditions, maintaining consistent results even with parameter adjustments.

Training Result:



The TDL algorithm shows the highest score of 60,396, demonstrating effective use of strategic merging and algorithmic decision-making. It highlights the player's strong understanding of tile alignment, logical sequencing, and optimization, resulting in higher-value tiles and an impressive final score.

V. Conclusion

The key takeaway from this research is that the Temporal Difference Learning (TDL) algorithm showed better performance in solving the 2048 puzzle than the more intricate Reinforcement Learning (RL) methods, which included the Deep Q-Network (DQN), DDQN, and Actor–Critic methods. The findings imply that TDL allowed for quicker convergence, greater reward stability, and more efficient resource usage than the deep neural-based methods. This suggests that simple, value-based algorithms can be more advantageous than deep learning architecture in the case of deterministic and discrete environments.

The proposed approach advanced the understanding of RL applications by clarifying that effective decision-making does not always require complex network approximations. Instead, stability and adaptability can emerge from direct state–value updates, as implemented in TDL. Through extensive experimentation, this research established that algorithmic simplicity could yield both computational efficiency and learning robustness, making TDL an ideal candidate for constrained or interpretable RL settings.

The main contribution of this research lies in its empirical validation that classical RL algorithms remain highly competitive for structured and deterministic tasks like 2048. For future work, the study recommends exploring hybrid TDL-deep learning models to address more complex or stochastic environments. Further research may also focus on automated hyperparameter optimization, multi-agent extensions, and integration of feature extraction techniques to improve generalization and scalability in broader RL applications.

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