

An Open Source Tool to Compare Simulators on Large-Scale Cases — Application to Dynawo

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Abstract—Dynawo is an open source hybrid Modelica/C++ suite of simulation tools for power systems, geared towards the time-domain simulation of large transmission networks at different time scales, from the steady-state calculation to transient stability analysis. In this paper a set of open source tools is presented, designed for: (a) validation of Dynawo based on black-box testing against existing established simulators, or against previous validated versions of Dynawo; (b) exploration and analysis of the effects of modelling changes and model parameters on the network response, by means of A/B testing. In both cases the approach is based on the automatic generation of an extensive set of cases derived from a given base case, typically by means of N-1 contingencies. Most importantly from the point of view of power systems research, a concrete set of metrics is presented to deal with the practical problems of comparing different simulations of large, real-world systems. The tools, based on Python and Jupyter notebooks, are designed with flexibility in mind, in order to adapt the code to future testing scenarios and to extend the metrics used for comparing results.

Index Terms—equation based modelling, time-domain simulation, power flow, blackbox validation

I. INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

Dynawo [1] is a suite of tools for the time-domain simulation, at different time resolution levels, of modern power networks. It has been mainly developed by RTE, and then released as open source.¹ Its design is based on two major guiding principles: the use of a high-level modelling language (Modelica [2]) and a strict separation between the modelling and the solving mechanisms. Its implementation brings to the table a novel hybrid approach that combines the power of declarative, computationally acausal modelling (also referred to as equation-based modelling) with certain high-performance C/C++ modifications that take advantage of the specific optimization opportunities available in large power networks (such as, for instance, the extensive work on high-performance Differential Algebraic Equations (DAE) solvers for these highly sparse systems). Dynawo aims to be a next-generation open source suite of simulation tools that overcomes the limitations of legacy closed-source programs, while being performant enough to be used in production settings at large transmission operators. The key goals are transparency and modelling flexibility, which results in interoperability and robustness. It is hoped that this will enable an effective collaboration

and cooperation in the power system community, something that has proven notoriously difficult using legacy commercial tools. For a recent update on Dynawo developments, see the presentation [3] or consult the official website.

A. Objectives of the developed comparison tools

Validation of time-domain simulators is difficult, and it starts at the level of individual device models. Since these devices are increasingly more complex (with new power electronics) and sometimes governed by algorithmic controls, one needs *whole-system functional testing* in order to assess the behaviour on complete network cases. As in any hierarchical system-of-systems, it is not always evident how the lower-level details (device model choices, parameters, etc.) affect the behaviour of the whole network. This sort of testing is necessarily black-box in style, as there is no systematic way to link the knowledge of the lower-level modelling to the behaviour of the higher-level, other than running simulations. Therefore black box simulations are not only useful for validating the software against previous legacy simulators, or against new versions of the software, but also for exploring and assessing the effects of different model choices, model parameters, solver parameters, etc., on the behaviour of the whole network, *in a systematic way*.

The tools presented here aim to fulfill this double role. They leverage modern components from the Python ecosystem (Pandas and Jupyter notebooks for instance) to automatically generate extensive sets of test cases derived from a given base case, and efficiently manage large amounts of outputs. Initially developed for the validation of Dynawo at the functional level, they are now also used for the exploration of extensive sets of test cases, which could consist of full N-1 contingency sweeps or user-provided sets (see [4] as an example of how to generate statistically representative samples of N-k contingencies).

But besides efficient data-handling, the two key ingredients are the design of an adequate set of *metrics* for comparing the results from two simulators, and the selection of *effective visualization* techniques for the analysis. These are non-trivial problems that required experimenting with different choices. A collateral benefit is that these analysis tools can easily be repurposed for screening contingencies.

This paper describes the tools and reports on our early experience using them on large network cases (actual cases from

¹Available at: <https://dynawo.github.io>

RTE’s operational environment). The two Dyna ω simulators for which they have been constructed, *DynaWaltz* (long-term stability studies) and *DynaFlow* (power flow via time-domain simulation), are first presented.

B. About DynaWaltz and DynaFlow

Dyna ω is flexible enough to accommodate several time scales: from sub-second near-EMT (Electro-Magnetic Transients) [5], to long-term stability, to steady-state calculation [6] studies. DynaWaltz is Dyna ω when used for long-term stability studies, where the time scales are measured in minutes and the typical time steps can be of the order of a few seconds. Used in this mode, Dyna ω simulates the grid in the so-called quasi steady state, by adopting the models that have most impact on the system slow dynamics: tap-changers, loads, static var compensators, etc.; as well as secondary voltage regulation and special protection schemes. It is mostly used to study voltage collapses. Other possible uses in the future may include cascading failure analysis [7].

The validation tools described here have been developed to assess and validate DynaWaltz quantitatively and in a systematic manner, using RTE’s national grid models and cases in the context of long-term stability studies. Initially, the approach was based on comparing against another well-established simulator, *Astre*, which is the current production tool. More specifically, the validation focused on the behaviour of the coordinated Secondary Voltage Control (SVC) systems. Shortly after, the tools have been extended to accommodate the comparison between different Dyna ω versions, or between variations of models, model parameters, and solver parameters. As DynaWaltz is scheduled to be deployed in production at RTE starting in late 2021, these tools become an important enabler of ongoing evolution and change.

DynaFlow [6], on the other hand, is a novel approach to the calculation of steady states that leverages Dyna ω ’s flexibility for modelling the dynamics at different time scales. It overcomes an inherent problem that all static power flows have dealing with controls: discrete event actions, dead-bands, and regulation limits (control type-switching) conspire to produce several possible steady-state solutions, many of them operationally valid. Static power flows arrive at a single solution by means of several “outer loops” in which heuristics (accumulated over years of practice) drive the choice of control changes. However, these heuristics are not bullet-proof (for instance, one may encounter “hunting” oscillations, even with standard tap changers); and more importantly, they do not take into account the time constants and actual dynamics of each control. Therefore, even the most principled approaches from the static camp, such as those based on optimization [8], complementarity constraints [9], or HELM [10] cannot guarantee arriving at the correct solution, since they are blind to the dynamics of competing controls.

In the current scenario, where more complex power electronic devices and algorithm-based controls are being introduced each year, this problem is getting worse. DynaFlow overcomes these problems by simulating the network in the

time domain and using the actual time constants that govern the actions of relevant controls. It also contemplates protection schemes, including modern Special Protection Schemes (SPS), thus opening the door to the realistic simulation of cascading effects in contingency studies.

Following the work done for DynaWaltz, a similar set of tools has been built for DynaFlow. Again, the approach to validation is based on comparison against a well-established power flow, *Hades*, currently in production at RTE. The tool is also prepared for comparing different DynaFlow versions, and more generally, for assessing the effects of varying the case models, model parameters, and solver parameters.

II. STRUCTURE AND WORKFLOW

The validation approach is based on comparing results against a well-known reference simulator, in this case *Astre* for the validation of DynaWaltz and *Hades* for the validation of DynaFlow. The cases used for comparison are essentially all possible single-element disconnections (shunts, lines, etc.). Therefore, the tools are currently oriented towards the generation of contingency cases derived from a given base case. However, the design is quite modular; it is easy to modify the corresponding scripts so that the test set would be something other than contingencies; such as, for instance, variations of a given set of model parameters, or the solver time-step, etc.

The typical workflow is:

- 1) Obtain a study case containing the two set of files that represent the same case (i.e. the DynaWaltz and *Astre* files, or the DynaFlow and *Hades* files); these will be the base for A/B comparison;
- 2) Prepare the base case: standardize the folder and file structure (see below), the XML formatting, and possibly some case-specific input (such as, which curves to extract, for instance);
- 3) Create the contingency cases derived from the base case: for each type of device whose disconnection is supported (shunts, loads, generators, lines, transformers), create the specified number of single-contingency cases.
- 4) Run *Astre* and DynaWaltz (or *Hades* and DynaFlow) on the contingency cases, collect results and logs into organized (and compressed) storage;
- 5) Extract result data in a format common to *Astre* and DynaWaltz (or *Hades* and DynaFlow);
- 6) Compute *metrics* on the obtained results (this requires having selected adequate variables and careful design of the metrics to apply);
- 7) Use the provided Jupyter notebook to browse and analyze the results. Obtain lists of contingency cases that can be ranked according to various compound scores built on those metrics;
- 8) Further analysis is possible using these ranked tables that the notebook exports to CSV files (e.g. using Excel).

Steps 1 and 2 are semi-manual, aided by a few helper scripts. One should firstly make sure that the A/B files do correspond to the same case. This is relatively easy when both cases are Dyna ω , but challenging when the simulators

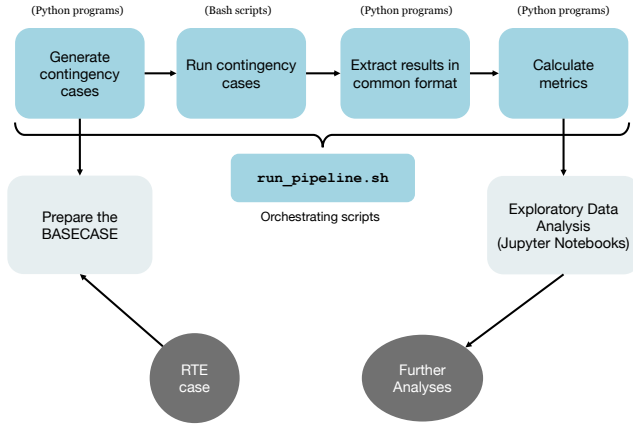


Fig. 1. The processing pipeline for validating based on A/B comparison using contingency cases.

are different. One needs not only the underlying network model to be the same, but additionally the identifiers of at least the most basic elements (buses, loads, generators, etc.) to be the same, or provide a dictionary to match them. By experience, having a single-source asset database feeding the creation of both files is not enough to find a 100% match for all elements—there would always be a small number of non-matching devices, such as, for instance, merged loads, or bus-branch vs. node-breaker representations. Therefore the tools take this into account, only disconnecting elements and comparing variables that can unequivocally be matched.

Beginning with Step 3, the rest of this workflow has been automated through a series of Python programs and Bash shell scripts. In this paper, this system is referred to as the *process pipeline* for validation. This is depicted schematically in Fig. 1. Each script in this pipeline can also be run individually, either for debugging purposes or just because one wants to run the pipeline manually step by step.

For more details than presented here, please consult the source code of the validation projects under the main repository.² The modularity of this design and the use of scripting languages allows for rapid changes and adaptation to other testing scenarios. For instance, our implementation creates comparison cases based on single-element contingencies derived from a common base case, but other users may want to use a different criterion. This can be achieved by replacing only the script that generates the set of comparison cases, while the rest of the pipeline would remain the same.

III. METRICS AND VALIDATION

In this context it is assumed that the simulators and their model libraries have already been validated at the level of simple networks, where device models can be unitarily tested, isolated from complex collective interactions. The challenge is

then to perform a quantitative comparison of results on large scale, real transmission networks. In other words, a verification and validation of the integrated system is needed.

The difficulties lie on several issues: (a) The sheer number of variables, which requires one to properly *reduce the data* in order to attempt any comparison; (b) The fact that the network dynamics is often *sensitive* to small changes, so that slight differences produced at one point may quickly amplify down the time line. This is clearly the case in the presence of thresholding effects, i.e. when a magnitude is close to triggering some actuator (protection relays, shunts, taps).

The work reported here has shown that it is feasible to devise data-reduction techniques and metrics to obtain quantitative results, which combined with rapid exploration and analysis (greatly aided by good visualization choices) allows one to validate simulators via an extensive set of test cases (in this case, exhaustive $N-1$ contingency runs).

Conceptually, the following itinerary has been adopted:

- 1) Begin by selecting the *signals* to be used for the comparison. Which output variables and events should be considered, and which should be discarded? It is indeed not manageable nor practical to compare all of them.
- 2) Generate a suitable *reduced set of parameters* that characterize each type of signal. One is indeed not interested in perfect waveform accuracy (in the case of curves), or in perfect event timings (in the case of automata events).
- 3) Design the *metrics* for measuring the distance between the two simulators results in the space of said reduced parameters.
- 4) Design effective *visualizations*. This is essential not only for the analysis, but as feedback that can guide the design of metrics.
- 5) Define validation *thresholds* for each class of such metrics, which are necessary for establishing hard pass/fail criteria (useful when automating tests).
- 6) Define one or more *compound scoring* schemes for ranking cases. Since the reduced parameters belong to very disparate classes (for instance, change in steady-state bus voltages vs. changes in Mvar peak-to-peak amplitudes), one needs to decide how to combine the metrics into a single figure of merit, for the purposes of ranking and sifting through the cases to select the ones that need a particular attention.

This process is not linear; it entails feedback loops and repeated cycles until the research converges on the most adequate or most effective design decisions, guided by the obtained results. Each of these steps is discussed in detail in the following.

A. DynaWaltz metrics

1) *Selection of signals*: Here the word *signals* is used to refer to both time-dependent continuous variables such as voltages and (P,Q) values, as well as discrete events such as actions fired by control automata. In this paper, signals of the first kind are called “*curves*”, since this is the terminology used for the output in both Astre and Dynawo. For signals of

²See: <https://github.com/dynawo>

TABLE I
REDUCED PARAMETERS FOR TIME-DOMAIN CURVES AND EVENTS

Parameter	description
dSS	“delta-SS”, difference between initial and final steady state
dPP	“delta-PP”, peak-to-peak amplitude during the transient
TT	transient time, the duration of the transient
period	period of the main Prony component of the transient
damping	damping of the main Prony component of the transient
netchange	net change in tap ^a between initial and final steady state
p2pchange	peak-to-peak change in tap value during the transient
numchange	total number of tap changes ^a in the transient

^a Or in shunt connection status.

the second kind, they are called “*automata events*”, or simply automata.

Since DynaWaltz is targeted towards long-term voltage stability studies, our validation criteria have been focused on the behaviour of the coordinated SVC systems. This means that, among the huge number of possible signals available from the simulation, the comparison looks only at these five types:

- 4 types of variables related to the SVC systems: pilot bus voltages, control K-levels (the SVC gain), and (P,Q) injections of participating generators.
- the bus voltage(s) of bus(es) involved in the particular contingency in each case.

Additionally, the criteria also contemplate these types of automata events, coming from anywhere in the network:

- Transformer taps (up/down)
- Load-transformer taps (up/down)
- Shunt capacitor & reactor banks (connect/disconnect)

The base test cases correspond to the whole of France, down to the 45 kV level.

2) *Reduced set of parameters*: The aim is to distill a reduced set of parameters that characterize the whole signal sufficiently well. It is then on these reduced magnitudes that the metrics are defined. Since these are transient signals, it would be pointless to try to match the detailed waveforms; instead, we focused on the most electrically relevant features. Eight parameters have been retained, as shown in Table I. The last three are meant for automata events (tap and shunts). Note how they mimic their respective counterparts in continuous curves: dSS, dPP, and TT, respectively. Figs. 2 and 3 illustrate all these parameters graphically.

3) *Designing the metrics*: For continuous signals, and given the above selected variables and reduced parameters, there are then 25 different categories (5 variable types x 5 parameters). Within each category, there’s usually more than one data point. For instance, if there are 30 SVC controls in the case file, there will be 30 pilot bus-voltage dPP values. A metric has to be chosen in order to reduce the distances to a single number in each variable category. $\max(\text{abs}(\text{diffs}))$, which is the max-norm (also called the L_∞ -norm) has been chosen. A different choice could be $\text{mean}(\text{abs}(\text{diffs}))$, which is the L_1 -norm divided by the number of variables, but this choice smooths out important differences when they are local—which is normally the case when running a very large network.

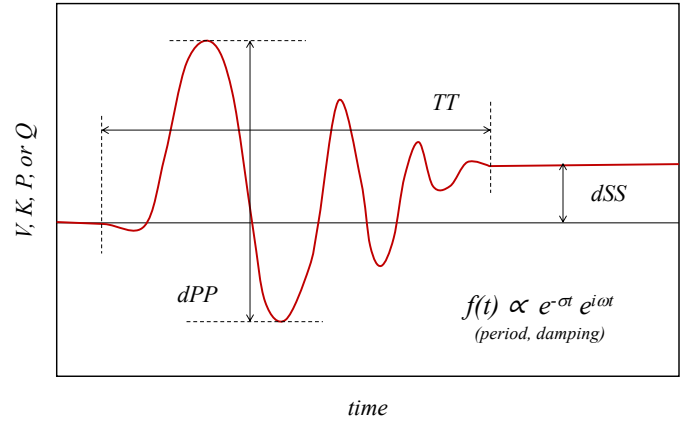


Fig. 2. Selection of reduced parameters for characterizing a continuous time-dependent transient signal, for the purposes of estimating differences.

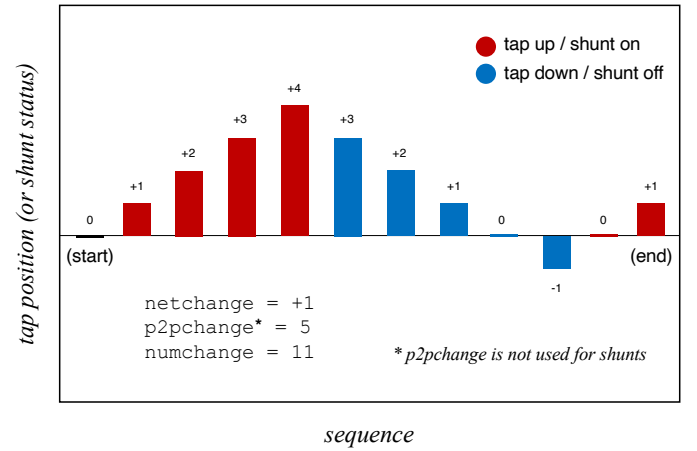


Fig. 3. Selection of reduced parameters for characterizing a sequence of binary (up/down, on/off) events.

For automata events, there are 8 categories (3 variable types x 3 reduced parameters, minus one because p2pchange does not make sense for shunt events). For these the L_1 -norm has been chosen, normalized by the total number of devices (variable tap transformers or switchable shunts). Note that this is *not* $\text{mean}(\text{abs}(\text{diffs}))$, as the denominator is the number of *all* devices that could potentially produce events, not just the ones that have actually produced events. This way the metric can tell apart cases where the number of devices that produced events is very different.

4) *Compound scoring and validation thresholds*: Compounding the 25+8 different categories into an aggregate metric needs to be done carefully, in order to deal with the “apples vs. oranges” problem. Using relative error for each category sidesteps this problem, but brings others. From the point of view of validation, it is more natural to define a set of thresholds, one in each of those categories, using absolute error. One may later decide whether to assign a global pass/not-pass based on some supra-metric on the individual pass/not-pass values.

As for the choice of the actual thresholds, one needs to ex-

periment and use expert judgement. The following thresholds (for absolute errors) have been retained: 0.01 pu for voltages, 5 MW/10 Mvar for generators' (P,Q), and 0.1 (dimensionless) for the SVC gain levels (K). These thresholds have been applied to characteristics dSS and dPP, which in our experiments have shown to be the most reliable for these purposes (TT did not seem to have good sensibility for detecting interesting differences, and the Prony parameters often showed unreliable values). Using these, DynaWaltz is found to pass for more than 80 % of the cases, out of around 20,000 contingency cases using different base cases. Note that, except for cases in which bugs were caught, it is not possible to say that the “failed” cases were wrong. At one point it becomes impossible to say whether any one simulator solution is the right one and a more in-depth analysis of both results is necessary.

B. DynaFlow metrics

Compared to time-domain simulations, the problem of establishing metrics for comparing power flow solutions is, at first sight, comparatively easier. If one only focuses on the electrical steady state, the comparison can take place on the main variables: voltage magnitude at buses, reactive & active power flows through branches, and reactive & active power injections at buses (aggregate values, to sidestep modelling differences due to merged loads, for instance). We then use the L_1 -norm on the differences, either in absolute value or as a relative error—looking at both is often necessary to uncover the most relevant differences. As before, this is done separately for each magnitude type and then compound scoring are defined in order to mix all types into a single figure, so that a single ranking of the “top X worst cases” may be obtained.

More interesting for DynaFlow, though, is to detect discrete events and activations of automatic controls in the simulation (relays, taps, shunts, etc.). When these take place, the differences between Hades and DynaFlow solutions may be too large and uninformative, since the case conditions may have diverged too much. Looking at the timeline of events is then needed in order to make sense of the results. Metrics on the differences between power flow solutions are not helpful in this case—it is simply better to detect the presence and number of such events. In particular, it is useful to try detecting “root cause” events, that is, any significant event that in turn produces several other events in a cascade. This issue is currently being researched on, since such cause–effect relationships are hard to ascribe from the raw timeline of events without a proper electrical analysis. A heuristic has therefore been devised based on the distance between events in time and space (i.e., distance measured by minimal impedance paths across the grid), with which one can group these events. Even with “false positives”, this kind of detection is proving useful when investigating cases with large differences.

On the other hand, if one is comparing DynaFlow vs. DynaFlow results then all time-domain information (events and curves) is kept, because then all metrics and comparisons discussed above for the case of DynaWaltz can be applied here as well.

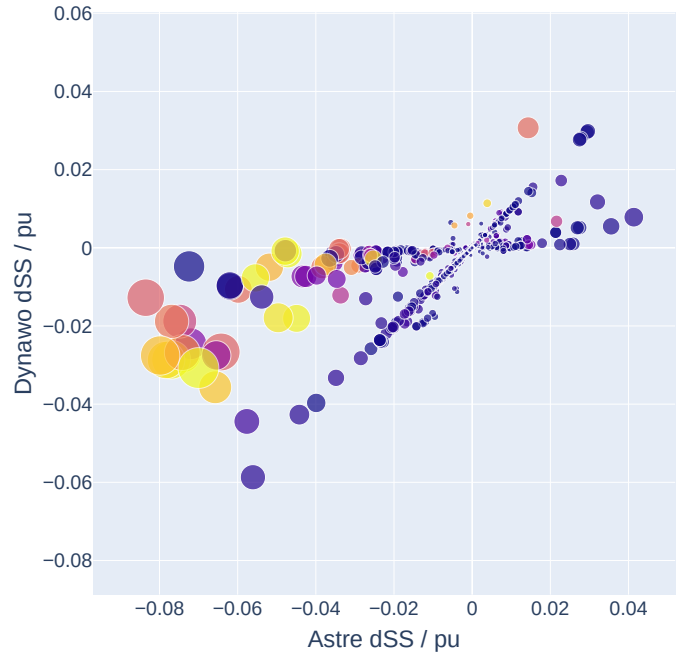


Fig. 4. Scatter plot of dSS (change in steady state) of the bus voltage at the contingency point, for single-generator contingency cases (exhaustive N-1 contingency run: 4,577 cases). The point color encodes the signal's transient length; the size encodes its peak-to-peak amplitude.

IV. USE CASES AND SOME SAMPLE RESULTS

The pipeline results are shown in both graphical and tabular form in a Jupyter notebook designed for interaction. Upon running this notebook, the eyes are drawn to the plot in Fig. 4. This is one of the most useful graphs in the notebook; it is an X-Y scatter plot of the reduced magnitude of choice (dSS, dPP, TT, period, damping), for the variable type of choice: contingency bus voltages, pilot bus voltages, generator P/Q, or SVC control gain K-levels. The point color encodes the signal's transient length, while the size encodes its peak-to-peak amplitude. When the simulator results are the same, all dots accumulate on the diagonal. Any differences are clearly visible as deviations from the diagonal, and the point positions together with their color and size quickly inform the user about the severity of each contingency case.

The power of this plot lies in that it synthesizes the global results. It is useful to detect outliers but, more importantly, it is also very effective at revealing *systematic* differences, that is, patterns in the deviations, which typically signal some sort of modelling differences. Fig. 4 shows an example of this: a significant number of buses accumulate on a small slope line away from the diagonal, possibly indicating that the generators near the contingency have some sort of modelling differences in their voltage control. Hypotheses such as this can quickly be put to the test by exploring the plot. Hovering over each point reveals the device's information (ID, voltage level, etc.), and clicking on it automatically selects the particular contingency case and device signal to plot on the rest of the graphs. This allows one to quickly drill down to specific curve graphs and

analyze behaviours.

Visual inspection of the curve graphs is always useful as a double-check on a number of things. For instance, during development many unexpected outliers were once found, but a quick look at their curves quickly showed that the steady-state had not yet been achieved at the end of the run. If this happens, metrics for the differences are bound to be very large and completely meaningless. This prompted us to improve the mechanisms for detecting and flagging unstable cases, so that they can be removed from the comparison.

The tabular information is also there in the notebook, in case one wants to have access to the actual values and metrics. It is presented in data grid widgets that allow for sorting and filtering. These values are also exported to CSV files, for further analysis in other tools such as Excel. Data tables are particularly useful for ranking contingencies by means of the compound scoring metrics discussed in the previous section.

As a brief example of how to analyze results with the notebook, let us consider a test run and let us focus on the scatter plot for the dSS values of the reactive power injection (Q) of all generators participating in the coordinated SVC systems. Suppose that, unlike Fig. 4, there are no significant patterns of systematic differences, such as lines or clusters off the diagonal; but there are several outliers sprinkled here and there. As we become interested in any of these, we click on one. Then the graphs shown in Fig. 5 update to show the specific information for the chosen generator, in the specific contingency case. The time-domain signal shows indeed a net difference of about 60 Mvar in output, once the new steady state is reached. The graph stacked on top shows the metrics for the global differences in discrete events vs. simulation time (see subsection III-A3 above). In this case it can be seen that shunt and tap events do not differ much after the contingency, meaning that the differences in Q developing after $t \sim 1100$ s must be due to purely local effects. This prompts us to investigate the model of this generator further, and to try finding whether there are commonalities shared by other outliers of this kind, etc.

V. CONCLUSION

A tool has been presented for the testing and validation of time-domain simulators DynaWaltz and DynaFlow on large, real-world transmission networks. The proposed approach is based on the extensive simulation of contingency cases, comparing the results to another already-established simulator. The tool may also be used for testing new versions of the software (i.e., as a complement to Unit Testing); or for exploring the effects of different modelling choices, model parameters, solver parameters, etc. It can be used for deploying automated testing procedures to help evolve the software, the models, and their parameterization.

To meet the challenges involved in measuring the differences between simulations quantitatively, the relevant outputs were researched, along with the corresponding metrics. Another challenge was dealing with very large amounts of data

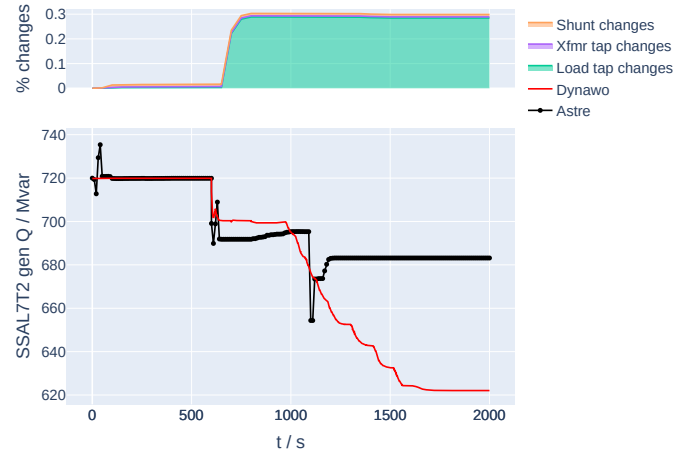


Fig. 5. Bottom: reactive power of a generator participating in SVC (contingency at $t=600$ s). Top: metrics for tap and shunt events vs. time (here “% changes” is shorthand for “normalized L_1 -norm based on numchange”).

efficiently, and designing effective visualizations for the results. For this, several modern libraries and rapid development tools from the Python ecosystem were leveraged. The tool is expected to be released soon as Open Source, under the umbrella of all the other Dynawo sub-projects.

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