University of Strathclyde

Department of Electronic and Electrical Engineering

Learning to Trade Power

by

Richard W. Lincoln

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Abstract

In electrical power engineering, learning algorithms can be used to model the strategies of electricity market participants. The objective of this thesis is to establish if *policy gradient* reinforcement learning algorithms can be used to create participant models superior to those involving previously applied *value function* based methods.

Supply of electricity involves technology, money, people, natural resources and the environment. All of these aspects are changing and electricity market designs must be suitably researched to ensure that they are fit for purpose. In this thesis electricity markets are modelled as non-linear constrained optimisation problems, which are solved using a primal-dual interior point method. Policy gradient reinforcement learning algorithms are used to adjust the parameters of multi-layer feed-forward artificial neural networks that approximate each market participant's policy for selecting power quantities and prices that are offered in the simulated marketplace.

Traditional reinforcement learning methods, that learn a value function, have been previously applied in simulated electricity trade, but they are mostly restricted to use with discrete representations of a market environment. Policy gradient methods have been proven to offer convergence guarantees in continuous environments and avoid many of the problems that mar value function based methods.

Five types of learning algorithm are compared in a series of Nash equilibrium and constraint exploitation simulations. Policy gradient methods are found to be a valid option for modelling the strategies of electricity market participants, but they are outperformed by a traditional action-value function algorithm in all of the tests. Further development of this research could provide opportunities for advanced learning algorithms to be used in descision support and automated energy trade applications.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

This thesis examines reinforcement learning algorithms in the domain of electric power trade. In this chapter the motivation for research into electricity trade is explained, the problem under consideration is defined and the principle research contributions are stated.

1.1 Research Motivation

Quality of life for a person is directly proportional to his or her electricity usage (Alam, Bala, Huo, & Matin, 1991). The world population is currently 6.7 billion and forecast to exceed 9 billion by 2050 (United Nations, 2003). Electricity production currently demands over one third of the annual primary energy extracted (The International Energy Agency, 2010) and as people endeavour to improve their quality of life, finite fuel resources will become increasingly scarce. Market mechanisms, such as auctions, where the final allocation is based upon the claimants' willingness to pay for the goods, provide a device for efficient allocation of resources in short supply.

Commercialisation of large electricity supply industries began two decades ago in the UK. The inability to store electricity, once generated, in a commercially viable quantity prevents trade as a conventional commodity. Trading mechanisms must allow shortfalls in electric energy to be purchased at short notice from quickly dispatchable generators. Designed correctly, a competitive electricity market promotes efficiency and drives down costs to the consumer, while design errors can allow market power abuse and elevated market prices.

The average total demand for electricity in the United Kingdom (UK) is approximately 45GW and the cost of buying 1MW for one hour is around £40 (Department of Energy and Climate Change, 2009). This equates to yearly transaction values of £16 billion. The value of electricity to society is particularly apparent when supply fails. The New York black-out in August 2003 involved a loss of 61.8GW of power supply to approximately 50 million consumers. The majority of supplies were restored within two days, but the event is estimated to have cost more than $6 billion (Minkel, 2008; ICF Consulting, 2003).

The value of electricity to society makes it impractical to experiment with radical changes to trading arrangements on real systems. An alternative is to study abstract mathematical models with sets of simplifying approximations and assumptions and, where possible, to find analytical solutions using digital computer programs. Competition is a fundamental part of all markets, but the strategies of human participants are difficult to model. Reinforcement learning methods can be used to represent adaptive behaviour in competing players and are capable of learning complex strategies (Tesauro, 1994).

1.2 Problem Statement

Individuals participating in an electricity market (be they representing generating companies, load serving entities, firms of traders etc.) must utilise noisy, mostly continuous, multi-dimensional data to their advantage. Certain types of data, e.g. demand forecasts, are uncertain and other types, e.g. the bids of competitors, are hidden. Reinforcement learning algorithms must operate with data of this kind if they are to successfully model participant strategies.

Traditional reinforcement learning methods attempt to find the *value* of each available action in a given state. When discrete state and action spaces are defined, these methods become restricted by Bellman's Curse of Dimensionality (Bellman, 1961) and can not be applied to highly complex problems. When used with function approximation techniques (e.g. artificial neural networks) they can be applied to continuous representations of an environment. However, the greedy updates used by most techniques have been shown to cause algorithms approximating a value function to not converge or even diverge (Tsitsiklis & Roy, 1994; Peters & Schaal, 2008; Gordon, 1995; Baird, 1995).

Policy gradient reinforcement learning methods do not attempt to approximate a value function, but to approximate a *policy-function* that, given the current perceived state of the environment, returns an action. They do not suffer from many of the problems that mar value-function based methods in high-dimensional problems. They have strong convergence properties, do not require that all states be continuously visited and work with state and action spaces that are continuous, discrete or mixed. Policy performance may be degraded by uncertainty in state data, but the learning methods do not need to be altered. They have been successfully applied in many operational settings, including: robotic control (Peters & Schaal, 2006), financial trading (Moody & Saffell, 2001) and network routing (Peshkin & Savova, 2002) applications.

It is proposed in this thesis that agents which learn using policy gradient methods may outperform those using value function based methods in simulated competitive electricity trade. It is further proposed that policy gradient methods may operate better under dynamic electric power system conditions, achieving greater profit by exploiting constraints to their financial benefit. This thesis will use electricity market simulation techniques to compare value function based and policy gradient learning methods to explore these proposals.

1.3 Research Contributions

The research presented in this thesis pertains to the academic fields of Electric Power Engineering, Artificial Intelligence and Economics. The principle contributions made by this thesis are:

- The first application of policy gradient reinforcement learning methods in simulated electricity trade.
- The first application of a non-linear optimal power flow formulation in agent based electricity market simulation.
- A new Stateful Roth-Erev reinforcement learning method.
- Simulation results comparing the convergence to a Nash equilibrium of policy gradient and value function based reinforcement learning methods.
- Simulation results that examine the exploitation of electric power system constraints by policy gradient reinforcement learning methods.
- An implementation of a power exchange auctions market model and multi-learning-agent system for simulating electricity trade.
- The idea of applying Neuro-Fitted Q-Iteration and GQ(λ) in simulations of competitive energy trade.
- A model of the UK transmission system derived from data in the National Grid Seven Year Statement.

The publications that have resulted from this thesis are: Lincoln, Galloway, and Burt (2009, 2007); Lincoln, Galloway, Burt, and McDonald (2006).

1.4 Thesis Outline

The presentation of this thesis is organised into nine chapters. Chapter 2 provides background information on electricity supply, wholesale electricity markets and reinforcement learning. It describes how optimal power flow formulations can be used to model electricity markets and defines the reinforcement learning algorithms that are later compared.

In Chapter 3 the research in this thesis is described in the context of previous work that is related in terms of application field and methodology. Publications on agent based electricity market simulation are reviewed with emphasis on the reinforcement learning methods used. Previous applications of policy gradient learning methods in other types of market setting are reviewed also.

Chapter 4 describes the power exchange auction market model and the multi-agent system used to simulate electricity trade. It defines the association of learning agents with portfolios of generators, the process of offer submission and the reward process.

Simulations that examine the convergence to a Nash equilibrium of systems of multiple electric power trading agents is reported in Chapter 5. A six bus test case is used and results for four learning algorithms under two cost configurations are presented and analysed.

Chapter 6 examines the ability of agents to learn policies for exploiting constraints in simulated power systems. The 24 bus model from the IEEE Reliability Test System provides a complex environment with dynamic loading conditions.

The primary conclusions drawn from the results in this thesis are summarised in Chapter 7. Shortcomings of the approach are noted and the broader implications are addressed. Some ideas for further work are also outlined, including alternative reinforcement learning methods and uses for a model of the UK transmission system.

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