

Prediction of Taxi-out time using a novel Q-learning approach

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Abstract — The International Air Transport Association (IATA) classifies flight delays into various categories like Passenger and baggage delays, Aircraft and ramp handling delays, Weather delays, Air Traffic Flow Management Restrictions (ATFM), Reactionary delays, etc. The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) reports that among these delays, ATFM, due to taxi-out time delays in particular contributes to 20% of total flight delay. Taxi-out time of a flight is the time noted from the gate (chalks off), along the taxi-way up to the takeoff (wheels off) at the runway. Delays in taxi-out time have a noteworthy impact on the airline's economy. Due to unplanned pushback from the gate, it is difficult to manage fuel consumption, emissions or cost. Moreover since the airport operations are dynamic in nature, prediction of taxi-out time accurately can be challenging. This paper proposes a novel Q-learning approach to predict the accurate taxi-out times, by developing a Markov Decision Process (MDP) for analysis of the operational data received. When seeking more accurate results, this new approach, Q-learning with Temporal Difference (TD) algorithm is useful to formalize the prediction of taxi-out time of flights. The convergence of Q-learning and TD gives a learned policy, the results of which can be compared against the individual algorithms.

Index Terms — Flight delays, Q-learning, Taxi-out time, Temporal Difference.

I. INTRODUCTION

Air Transportation has been progressing at a very fast pace, which has brought great pressure on the airline industry to reduce the flight delays and keeping up the on time performance of flights. The delay phenomenon at the airport has been categorized so that the officials have an accountability of the delay reason. The various categories are Passenger and Baggage Delays, Weather delays, Air Traffic Flow Management Restrictions (ATFM), Engineering delays, delays due to Airport and Government Authorities, Crew movement, Reactionary delays, etc. Among these, most of the delays point to taxi-out time delays. For example, Reactionary delays are caused due one aircraft being delayed because of another aircraft. This other aircraft was late because of yet another aircraft, thus causing a reaction to each delay. The ATFM restrictions comprises of delays that are caused when there are aircrafts co-taxing for the runway, or when a flight is yet to land and the other aircrafts are waiting for its runway slot time. Accurate prediction of taxi-out time under uncertain airport

conditions, allow the schedulers to allow the airlines to achieve a better schedule and dynamically adjust departures so as to avoid scenarios that nears or exceeds the capacity of the airport. According to the FAA more than 20% of total flight delays contribute to the taxi-out time delays. Predicting accurate taxi-out time has significant challenges because of the dynamic airport configurations and unexpected weather changes. An accurate prediction of the taxi-out time would lead to determine whether an aircraft meets its stipulated parking slot time, along its traffic flow.

At an airport, aircrafts compete for resources like the runways, taxiways, ramp and gates. A taxiway is a path on an airport that connects runways with ramps, terminals and gates. Taxi-out time is defined as the time between the chocks off (at the gate) and the wheels off (at the runway) of a flight departure. The Aviation System Performance Metrics (ASPM) falls under two categories: airport data and individual flight data. The Out Off On In timings from the individual flight data gives the details of an aircraft journey. A major function of Aircraft Communication

Addressing and Reporting System (ACARS) is to automatically detect and report changes to the major flight phases (Out of the gate, Off the ground, On ground, and Into gate). Taxi-out time of a flight is calculated as follows:

$$\text{Taxi-out time} = \text{Out Time} - \text{Off time} \dots (1)$$

If an aircraft is scheduled to depart at 3:00 am, the brakes at the wheels of the aircraft are released at 3:00 am. The aircraft taxis from the ramp along the taxiway to the runway where it takes off at 3:12 am. Therefore, the taxi-out time taken is 12 minutes. If the aircraft wheels touch runway of the arrival station at 4:00 am, this time is noted as On Time. Again the aircraft taxis from the runway along the taxiway up to the ramp where the brakes are put on at 4:13 am. This time is noted as In Time. The block time of a flight is calculated as follows:

$$\text{Block time} = \text{In time} - \text{Off time} \dots (2)$$

The block time of the flight is the time between the chocks on time and chocks off time which is 1 hour 25minutes. The flight time is calculated as follows:

$$\text{Flight time} = \text{Out time} - \text{On time} \dots (3)$$

The accurate taxi-out time prediction will lead in fulfilling the estimated block and flight time and thus maintaining the On Time Performance of flights. Apart from that, the airlines will be able to cater to the single largest operating cost, i.e. fuel cost. Also, during peak hours, the passengers, Air Traffic Control (ATC) authorities, ground operations and pilots have to have a Collaborative Decision Making (CDM) process that would facilitate a smooth departure of the flight. A control over the flight delays would also compensate to the unexpected weather conditions. Often, due to prolonged waiting after gate pushback, aircrafts would have to go back to the gate for refueling. Compliance regulations can be met by a good taxi-out time prediction.

In this paper, based on the factors affecting the taxi-out time, a Markovian Decision Process (MDP) model is analyzed. A Reinforcement Learning (RL) approach based on time which when applied on the MDP model would encourage exploration of a more accurate prediction of taxi-out times. RL is identified as a promising approach that performs well for the specific characteristics of the decision making process for prediction of taxi-out times. This approach is a modernized Air Traffic Control (ATC) system with increased automation. Predictions are in real-time, as

the system evolves. Due to uncertainties involved in the departure, and the complex nature of airport operations, it is often difficult to obtain mathematical models to completely describe airport dynamics. But, this can be addressed using reinforcement learning as this method is adaptive to changing airport dynamics. This paper proposes an MDP model for an RL approach with Q learning and Temporal Difference Algorithm to reduce taxi-out time. RL learns by interacting with the environment alleviating need for good training data. A literature review is carried out in the next section. Section III supports the development of the proposed system. Finally in Section IV a conclusion is made.

II. LITERATURE SURVEY

The departure process at Boston Logan International Airport is studied from the report by Idris and Hansman [2]. The main motive was to identify the ATFM restriction delays and inefficiencies in the airport departure process and to investigate the root causes of these restrictions and inefficiencies. Their conclusions suggest that efficiency of the departure flow process must be improved by adopting proactive, as opposed to currently employed reactive methods. Based on previous work, the authors suggest that it is possible to reduce taxi-out times by regulating the flow even when the throughput is kept same.

The IATA put forth a handbook consisting of IATA codes in order to specifically assign accountability for various delay reasons [3]. Prominent among them were 93 K delays, which are reactionary delays. The reactionary delays occur when one aircraft is delayed because of another aircraft due to various reasons, majorly, due to waiting for another aircraft to arrive or depart at the aerodrome.

In a queuing model for prediction of taxi-out times, a takeoff queue size estimate is obtained by predicting the amount of passing aircrafts that it may experience on the airport surface while it is taxiing out, and by considering the number of takeoffs between pushback time and its takeoff time. Other research that develops a departure planning tool for departure time prediction is available in [4-8].

A Bayesian networks approach to predict different segments of flight delay including taxi-out delay has been presented in [9]. An algorithm to reduce departure time estimation error (up to 15%) is

available in [10], which calculates the ground time error and adds it to the estimated ground time at a given departure time. A genetic algorithm based approach to estimating flight departure delay is presented in [11].

Direct predictions attempting to minimize taxi-out delays using accurate surface surveillance data have been presented to literature [12] [13]. Signor and Levy [14] discuss the implications of accurate OOOI (Gate Out, Runway Off, Runway On, Gate In) data for efficient resource utilization.

III. PROPOSED WORK

Reinforcement Learning (RL) is a learning method where the problem of sequential prediction is well-suited to the stochastic dynamic programming formulation. RL is a model free approach that is adaptive to changing airport dynamics. It is suitable for large-scale optimization due to its simple recursive formulation. RL is a learning method based on a feedback (reward) coming from the environment. The idea is that the learner controller interacts with the system by applying changes (actions) while their effect is monitored through the reaction of the environment. Based on this, a policy is generated which tries to maximize the received reward. [1]

The use of a temporal difference (TD) based algorithm provides stable behavior. $V'(s)$ is the updated value of a state s based on the previous state value $V(s)$, and the temporal difference of the previous value of state s and the following state s' , added to the immediate return r . Parameters α and γ are the learning rate and the discount factor, respectively. [1]

$$V'(s) = V(s) + \alpha [r + \gamma V(s') - V(s)]$$

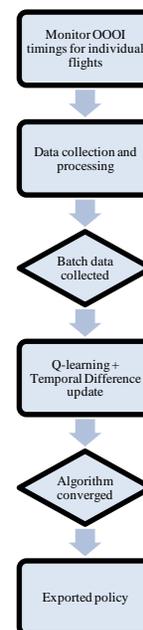
A Q-learning algorithm along with Temporal Difference algorithm is proposed. Q-learning algorithm is based on the TD update rule but instead of estimating the state value $V(s)$, it estimates the state action value $Q(s, a)$ based on the temporal difference of the current state action value and the maximum of the following state:

$$Q'(s, a) = Q(s, a) + \alpha \left[r + \gamma \max_{a'} Q(s', a') - Q(s, a) \right].$$

In this paper, a Q-learning algorithm is applied

within the learning framework, which uses the proposed MDP model. The algorithm estimates all the Q values of the state space based on a number of data sets fed offline. The data sets are in the form of episodes and for every episode the Q values are updated. In the end of every episode, a policy is extracted and updated by finding those actions that generated the biggest Q values. The same process goes until the algorithm has converged and the policy does not update any more. This is called experience reuse [1].

Fig.1 shows the experimental process flow chart. The individual flight data and operational data are first monitored and data is collected as experience sets, which relate the current state of the system with an action and the state after the change. The experience sets are collected in a database to compute the reward and for further analysis of the average taxi-out time. Once a complete batch of taxi-out time experiences has been collected, the batch Q-learning algorithm is applied until convergence has been achieved (Q-value change nearly 0). Then, a policy is extracted that can be used to recommend actions for known states when a new flight's taxi-out time needs to be predicted.



IV. CONCLUSION

In this paper, the first formal Markovian Decision Process (MDP) model and Reinforcement Learning

(RL) approach have been reported for taxi-out time reduction. A formal MDP model was presented for the capture and analysis of the ramp-up process. The MDP states, action characteristics, and feedback reward were defined based on the technical characteristics of an aircraft departure process. An offline batch reinforcement learning algorithm has been developed, which utilizes the MDP to find the most optimal taxi-out time policy from a small number of previous taxi-out time experience cases. For reinforcement learning, a Q-learning algorithm along with a Temporal Difference gives a stable behavior to the stochastic environment. The proposed method requires some initial data to export a good policy. It is better suited generally for either repetitive taxi-out times of similar or the same stations after a disturbance or change.

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