MODEM: ACCELERATING VISUAL MODEL-BASED REINFORCEMENT LEARNING WITH DEMONSTRATIONS

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Paper under double-blind review

ABSTRACT

Poor sample efficiency continues to be the primary challenge for deployment of deep Reinforcement Learning (RL) algorithms for real-world applications, and in particular for visuo-motor control. Model-based RL has the potential to be highly sample efficient by concurrently learning a world model and using synthetic rollouts for planning and policy improvement. However, in practice, sample-efficient learning with model-based RL is bottlenecked by the exploration challenge. In this work, we find that leveraging just a handful of demonstrations can dramatically improve the sample-efficiency of model-based RL. Simply appending demonstrations to the interaction dataset, however, does not suffice. We identify key ingredients for leveraging demonstrations in model learning – policy pretraining, targeted exploration, and oversampling of demonstration data – which forms the three phases of our model-based RL framework. We empirically study three complex visuo-motor control domains and find that our method is $\mathbf{160\%} - \mathbf{250\%}$ more successful in completing sparse reward tasks compared to prior approaches in the low data regime ($\mathbf{100K}$ interaction steps, $\mathbf{5}$ demonstrations).

1 INTRODUCTION

Reinforcement Learning (RL) provides a principled and complete abstraction for training agents in unknown environments. However, poor sample efficiency of existing algorithms prevent their applicability for real-world tasks like object manipulation with robots. This is further exacerbated in visuo-motor control tasks which present both the challenges of visual representation learning as well as motor control. Model-based RL (MBRL) can in principle (Brafman & Tennenholtz, 2002) improve the sample efficiency of RL by concurrently learning a world model and policy (Ha & Schmidhuber, 2018; Schrittwieser et al., 2020; Hafner et al., 2020; Hansen et al., 2022). The use of imaginary rollouts from the learned model can reduce the need for real environment interactions, and thus improve sample efficiency. However, a series of practical challenges like the difficulty of exploration, the need for shaped rewards, and the need for a high-quality visual representation, prevent MBRL from realizing its full potential. In this work, we seek to overcome these challenges from a practical standpoint, and we propose to do so by using expert demonstrations to accelerate MBRL.

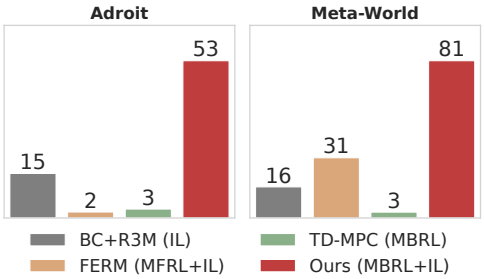

Figure 1. **Success rate (%) in sparse reward tasks.** Given only 5 human demonstrations and a limited amount of online interaction, our method solves **21** hard robotics tasks from pixels, including dexterous manipulation, pick-and-place, and locomotion, while baselines fail to solve most tasks with limited data.

Expert demonstrations for visuo-motor control tasks can be collected using human teleoperation, kinesthetic teaching, or scripted policies. While these demonstrations provide direct supervision to learn complex behaviors, they are hard to collect in large quantities due to human costs and the degree of expertise needed (Baker et al., 2022). However, even a small number of expert demonstrations can significantly accelerate RL by circumventing challenges related to exploration. Prior works have studied this in the context of *model-free* RL (MFRL) algorithms (Rajeswaran et al., 2018; Shah & Kumar, 2021; Zhan et al., 2020). In this work, we propose a new framework to accelerate

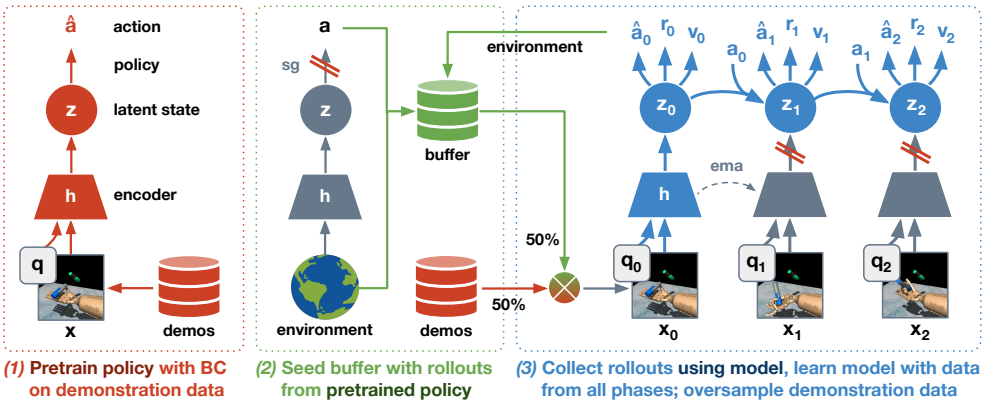

Figure 2. **Our framework (MoDem)** consists of three phases: *(1)* a ***policy pretraining*** phase where representation and policy is trained on a handful of demonstrations via BC, *(2)* a ***seeding*** phase where the pretrained policy is used to generate rollouts for targeted model learning, and *(3)* an ***interactive learning*** phase where the model iteratively collects new rollouts and is trained with data from all three phases. Crucially, we aggressively oversample demonstration data for model learning, regularize the model using data augmentation, and reuse weights across phases. sg: stop-gradient operator.

model-based RL algorithms with demonstrations. On a suite of challenging visuo-motor control tasks, we find that our method can train policies that are approx. $260\% - 350\%$ more successful than prior state-of-the-art (SOTA) baselines.

Off-Policy RL algorithms (Sutton & Barto, 1998) – both model-based and model-free – can in principle admit any dataset in the replay buffer. Consequently, it is tempting to naïvely append demonstrations to the replay buffer of an agent. However, we show that this is a poor choice (see Section 4), since the agent still starts with a random policy and must slowly incorporate the behavioral priors inherent in the demonstrations while learning in the environment. Simply initializing the policy by behavior cloning (Pomerleau, 1988) the demonstrations is also insufficient. Any future learning of the policy is directly impacted by the quality of world model and/or critic – training of which requires sufficiently exploratory datasets. To circumvent these challenges and enable stable and monotonic, yet sample-efficient learning, we propose **Mo**del-based Reinforcement Learning with **Dem**onstrations (**MoDem**), a three-phase framework for visual model-based RL using only a handful of demonstrations. Our framework is summarized in Figure 2 and consists of:

- ***Phase 1: Policy pretraining***, where the visual representation and policy are pretrained on the demonstration dataset via behavior cloning (BC). While this pretraining by itself does not produce successful policies, it provides a strong prior through initialization.
- ***Phase 2: Seeding***, where the pretrained policy, with added exploration, is used to collect a small dataset from the environment. This dataset is used to pretrain the world model and critic. Empirically, data collected by the pretrained policy is far more useful for model and critic learning than random policies used in prior work, and *is key to the success of our work* as it ensures that the world model and critic benefit from the inductive biases provided by demonstrations. Without this phase, interactive learning can quickly cause policy collapse after the first few iterations of training, consequently erasing the benefits of policy pretraining.
- ***Phase 3: Finetuning with interactive learning***, where we interleave policy learning using synthetic rollouts and world model learning using data from all three phases including fresh environment interactions. Crucially, we aggressively oversample demonstration data during world model learning, and regularize with data augmentation in all phases.

Our Contributions. Our primary contribution in this work is the development of MoDem, which we evaluate on **18** challenging visual manipulation tasks from Adroit (Rajeswaran et al., 2018) and Meta-World (Yu et al., 2019) suites with only **sparse rewards**, as well as locomotion tasks from DMControl (Tassa et al., 2018) that use dense rewards. Measured in terms of policy success after **100K** interaction steps (and using just **5** demonstrations), MoDem achieves $160\% - 250\%$ higher relative success and $38\% - 50\%$ higher absolute success compared to strong baselines. Through extensive empirical evaluations, we also elucidate the importance of each phase of MoDem, as well as the role of data augmentations and pre-trained visual representations.

2 PRELIMINARIES

We start by formalizing our problem setting, and then introduce two algorithms, TD-MPC and Behavior Cloning (BC), that were previously proposed for online RL and imitation learning, respectively, and are both central to our work.

Problem Setting We model interaction between an agent and its environment as an infinite-horizon Markov Decision Process (MDP) defined as a tuple $\mathcal{M} \coloneqq \langle \mathcal{S}, \mathcal{A}, \mathcal{T}, \mathcal{R}, \gamma \rangle$, where $\mathcal{S} \in \mathbb{R}^n$, $\mathcal{A} \in \mathbb{R}^m$ are continuous state and action spaces, $\mathcal{T} \colon \mathcal{S} \times \mathcal{A} \mapsto \mathcal{S}$ is the environment transition function, $\mathcal{R} \colon \mathcal{S} \times \mathcal{A} \mapsto \mathbb{R}$ is a scalar reward function, and $\gamma \in [0, 1)$ is the discount factor. $\mathcal{T}, \mathcal{R}$ are assumed to be unknown. The goal for the agent is to learn a policy $\pi_\theta \colon \mathcal{S} \mapsto \mathcal{A}$ parameterized by θ that achieves high long term performance, i.e. $\max_\theta \mathbb{E}_{\pi_\theta} \left[\sum_{t=0}^{\infty} \gamma^t r_t \right]$, while using as few interactions with the environment as possible – referred to as sample efficiency.

In this work, we focus more specifically on **high-dimensional** MDPs with **sparse rewards**. This is motivated by applications in robotics and Embodied Intelligence where the state is not directly observable, but can be well-approximated through the combination: $\mathbf{s} = (\mathbf{x}, \mathbf{q})$, where $\mathbf{x}$ denotes **stacked RGB images** observed by the agent's camera, and $\mathbf{q}$ denotes **proprioceptive** sensory information, *e.g.*, the joint pose of a robot. Furthermore, shaped reward functions can be hard to script for real-world applications (Singh et al., 2019) or result in undesirable artifacts or behaviors (Amodei et al., 2016; Burda et al., 2019). Thus, we desire to learn with simple sparse rewards that accurately capture task completion. The principal challenges with sample efficient learning in such MDPs are exploration due sparse rewards, and learning good representations of the high-dimensional state space (*e.g.* images). To help overcome these challenges, we assume access to a small number of successful **demonstration trajectories** $\mathcal{D}^{\text{demo}} \coloneqq \{D_1, D_2, \ldots, D_N\}$, obtained through human teleoperation, kinesthetic teaching, or other means. Our goal is to learn a successful policy using minimal environment interactions, by accelerating the learning process using the provided demonstration trajectories.

Behavior Cloning (BC) is a simple and widely used framework for imitation learning (IL). This relies entirely on $\mathcal{D}^{\text{demo}}$ and presents an ideal scenario if successful policies can be trained – since it incurs zero interaction sample complexity. BC trains a parameterized policy $\pi_\theta \colon \mathcal{S} \mapsto \mathcal{A}$ to predict the demonstrated action from the corresponding observation (Pomerleau, 1988; Atkeson & Schaal, 1997). Behavior cloning with a small dataset is known to be challenging due to covariate shift (Ross et al., 2011; Rajeswaran et al., 2018) and the challenge of visual representation learning (Parisi et al., 2022; Nair et al., 2022). Further, collecting a large demonstration dataset is often infeasible due to the required human costs and expertise (Baker et al., 2022). More importantly, BC cannot improve beyond the capabilities of the demonstrator since it lacks a notion of task success. Together, these considerations motivate the need for combining demonstrations with sample-efficient RL.

TD-MPC (Hansen et al., 2022) is a model-based RL algorithm that combines Model Predictive Control (MPC), a learned latent-space world model, and a terminal value function learned via temporal difference (TD) learning. Specifically, TD-MPC learns a representation $\mathbf{z} = h_\theta(\mathbf{s})$ that maps the high-dimensional state ($\mathbf{s}$) into a compact representation, and a dynamics model in this latent space $\mathbf{z}' = d_\theta(\mathbf{z}, \mathbf{a})$. In addition, TD-MPC also learns prediction heads, $R_\theta, Q_\theta, \pi_\theta$, for: *(i)* instantaneous reward $r = R_\theta(\mathbf{z}, \mathbf{a})$, *(ii)* state-action value $Q_\theta(\mathbf{z}, \mathbf{a})$, and *(iii)* action $\mathbf{a} \sim \pi_\theta(\mathbf{z})$. The policy π_θ serves to "guide" planning towards high-return trajectories, and is optimized to maximize temporally weighted Q-values. The remaining components are jointly optimized to minimize TD-errors, reward prediction errors, and latent state prediction errors. The objective is given by

$$\begin{aligned} \mathcal{L}_{\text{TD-MPC}}(\theta; (\mathbf{s}, \mathbf{a}, r, \mathbf{s}')_{t:t+H}) = \sum_{i=t}^{t+H} \gamma^{i-t} \Big[& \| Q_\theta(\mathbf{z}_i, \mathbf{a}_i) - (r_i + \gamma Q_{\bar{\theta}}(\mathbf{z}'_i, \pi_\theta(\mathbf{z}'_i))) \|_2^2 \\ + \| R_\theta(\mathbf{z}_i, \mathbf{a}_i) - r_i \|_2^2 + \| d_\theta(\mathbf{z}_i, \mathbf{a}_i) - h_{\bar{\theta}}(\mathbf{s}'_i) \|_2^2 \Big], \;\; & \mathbf{z}_t = h_\theta(\mathbf{s}_t), \;\; \mathbf{z}_{i+1} = d_\theta(\mathbf{z}_i, \mathbf{a}_i), \end{aligned} \tag{1}$$

where $\bar{\theta}$ is an exponential moving average of θ, and $\mathbf{s}'_t, \mathbf{z}'_t$ are the (latent) states at time $t+1$. During environment interaction, TD-MPC uses a sample-based planner (Williams et al., 2015) in conjunction with the learned latent world-model and value function (critic) for action selection. We use TD-MPC as our choice of visual MBRL algorithm due to its simplicity and strong empirical performance (see Appendix B), but our framework, in principle, can be instantiated with any MBRL algorithm.

3 MODEL-BASED REINFORCEMENT LEARNING WITH DEMONSTRATIONS

In this work, our goal is to accelerate the sample efficiency of (visual) model-based RL with a handful of demonstrations. To this end, we propose **Mo**del-based Reinforcement Learning with **Dem**onstrations (**MoDem**), a simple and intuitive framework for visual RL under a strict environment-interaction budget. Figure 2 provides an overview of our method. MoDem consists of three phases: *(1)* a ***policy pretraining*** phase where the policy is trained on a handful of demonstrations via behavior cloning, *(2)* a ***seeding*** phase where the pretrained policy is used to collect a small dataset for targeted world-model learning, and *(3)* an ***interactive learning*** phase where the agent iteratively collects new data and improves using data from all the phases, with special emphasis on the demonstration data. We describe each phase in more detail below.

Phase 1: *policy pretraining*. We start by learning a policy from the demonstration dataset $\mathcal{D}^{\text{demo}} := \{D_1, D_2, \ldots, D_N\}$ where each demonstration D_i consists of $\{\mathbf{s}_0, \mathbf{a}_0, \mathbf{s}_1, \mathbf{a}_1, \ldots, \mathbf{s}_T, \mathbf{a}_T\}$. In general, the demonstrations may be noisy or sub-optimal – we do not explicitly make any optimality assumptions. Let $h_\theta \colon \mathcal{S} \mapsto \mathbb{R}^l$ denote the encoder and $\pi_\theta \colon \mathbb{R}^l \mapsto \mathcal{A}$ denote the policy that maps from the latent state representation to the action space. In Phase 1, we pretrain both the policy and encoder using a behavior-cloning objective, given by

$$\mathcal{L}_{\text{P1}}(\theta) = \mathbb{E}_{(\mathbf{s},\mathbf{a})\sim\mathcal{D}^{\text{demo}}} \left[-\log \pi_\theta\big(\mathbf{a} | h_\theta(\mathbf{s})\big) \right]. \tag{2}$$

When $\pi_\theta(\cdot|\mathbf{z})$ is parameterized by an isotropic Gaussian distribution, as commonly used in practice, Eq. 2 simplifies to the standard MSE loss. As outlined in Section 2, behavior cloning with a small demonstration dataset is known to be difficult, especially from high-dimensional visual observations (Duan et al., 2017; Jang et al., 2021; Parisi et al., 2022). In Section 4, we indeed show that behavior cloning alone cannot train successful policies for the environments and datasets we study, even when using pre-trained visual representations (Parisi et al., 2022; Nair et al., 2022). However, policy pretraining can provide strong inductive priors that facilitate sample-efficient adaptation in subsequent phases outlined below.

Algorithm 1 Model-Based Reinforcement Learning with Demonstrations (MoDem)

Require: θ: randomly initialized parameters
$\mathcal{D}^{\text{demo}}, \mathcal{B}$: demonstrations, (empty) replay buffer
π_θ, Π_θ: policy, planning procedure

*// **Phase 1: policy pretraining***
// Behavior cloning on demonstrations
for each policy update **do**
  $\{\mathbf{s}_t, \mathbf{a}_t\} \sim \mathcal{D}^{\text{demo}}$ *// Sample state-action pair from demos*
  Update h_θ, π_θ by $\mathcal{L}_{\text{P1}}(\theta)$ *// BC objective, Equation 2*
*// **Phase 2: seeding***
// Pretrain model with rollouts from pretrained policy
for each seeding rollout **do**
  $\tau \leftarrow \{\mathbf{s}_t, \mathbf{a}_t, \mathbf{r}_t, \mathbf{s}_{t+1}\}_{0:T}$ where $\mathbf{a}_t \sim \pi_\theta(\mathbf{s}_t)$ *// Act with pretrained policy*
    and $\mathbf{s}_{t+1} \sim \mathcal{T}(\mathbf{s}_t, \mathbf{a}_t),\ r_t \sim \mathcal{R}(\mathbf{s}_t, \mathbf{a}_t)$
  $\mathcal{D}^{\text{seed}} \leftarrow \mathcal{D}^{\text{seed}} \cup \tau$ *// Add rollout to seeding dataset*
for each model update **do**
  $\{\mathbf{s}_t, \mathbf{a}_t, r_t, \mathbf{s}_{t+1}\}_{t:t+H} \sim (\mathcal{D}^{\text{demo}} \cup \mathcal{D}^{\text{seed}})$ *// Sample demos + seeding, oversample demos*
  Update $h_\theta, d_\theta, R_\theta, Q_\theta, \pi_\theta$ by $\mathcal{L}_{\text{P2}}(\theta)$ *// Model objective, Equation 3*
*// **Phase 3: interactive learning***
// Collect rollouts by planning and finetune model
$\mathcal{B} := \mathcal{D}^{\text{seed}}$
while interaction limit is not reached **do**
  $\tau \leftarrow \{\mathbf{s}_t, \mathbf{a}_t, \mathbf{r}_t, \mathbf{s}_{t+1}\}_{0:T}$ where $\mathbf{a}_t \sim \Pi_\theta(\mathbf{s}_t)$ *// Planning with model*
    and $\mathbf{s}_{t+1} \sim \mathcal{T}(\mathbf{s}_t, \mathbf{a}_t),\ r_t \sim \mathcal{R}(\mathbf{s}_t, \mathbf{a}_t)$
  $\mathcal{B} \leftarrow \mathcal{B} \cup \tau$ *// Add rollout to replay buffer*
  $\{\mathbf{s}_t, \mathbf{a}_t, r_t, \mathbf{s}_{t+1}\}_{t:t+H} \sim (\mathcal{D}^{\text{demo}} \cup \mathcal{B})$ *// Sample demos + buffer, oversample demos*
  Update $h_\theta, d_\theta, R_\theta, Q_\theta, \pi_\theta$ by $\mathcal{L}_{\text{P3}}(\theta)$ *// Model objective, Equation 4*
Done! *// Enjoy your new visual latent dynamics model*

Phase 2: *seeding*. In the previous phase, we only pretrained the policy. In Phase 2, our goal is to also pretrain the critic and world-model, which requires a "seeding" dataset with sufficient exploration. A random policy is conventionally used to collect such a dataset in algorithms like TD-MPC. However, for visual RL tasks with sparse rewards, a random policy is unlikely to yield successful trajectories or visit task-relevant parts of the state space. Thus, we collect a small dataset with additive exploration using the policy from phase 1.

Concretely, given π_θ^{P1} and h_θ^{P1} from the first phase, we collect a dataset $\mathcal{D}^{\text{seed}} = \{\tau_1, \tau_2, \dots \tau_K\}$ by rolling out $\pi_\theta^{\text{P1}}(h_\theta^{\text{P1}}(\mathbf{s}))$. To ensure sufficient variability in trajectories, we add Gaussian noise to actions (Hansen et al., 2022). Let $\xi_t = (\mathbf{s}_i, \mathbf{a}_i, r_i, \mathbf{s}'_i)_{i=t}^{t+H}$ be a generic trajectory snippet of length H. In this phase, we learn $\pi_\theta, h_\theta, d_\theta, R_\theta, Q_\theta$ – the policy, representation, dynamics, reward, and value models – by minimizing the loss

$$\mathcal{L}_{\text{P2}}(\theta) \coloneqq \kappa \cdot \mathbb{E}_{\xi_t \sim \mathcal{D}^{\text{demo}}} \left[\mathcal{L}_{\text{TD-MPC}}(\theta, \xi_t)\right] + (1-\kappa) \cdot \mathbb{E}_{\xi_t \sim \mathcal{D}^{\text{seed}}} \left[\mathcal{L}_{\text{TD-MPC}}(\theta, \xi_t)\right], \quad (3)$$

where κ is an "oversampling" rate that provides more weight to the demonstration dataset. In summary, the seeding phase plays the key role of initializing the world model, reward, and critic in the task-relevant parts of the environment, both through data collection and demonstration oversampling. We find in Section 4 that the seeding phase is crucial for sample-efficient learning, without which the learning agent is unable to make best use of the inductive priors in the demonstrations.

Phase 3: *interactive learning*. After initial pretraining of model and policy, we continue to improve the agent using fresh interactions with the environment. To do so, we initialize the replay buffer from the second phase, i.e. $\mathcal{B} \leftarrow \mathcal{D}^{\text{seed}}$. A naïve approach to utilizing the demonstrations is to simply append them to the replay buffer. However, we find this to be ineffective in practice, since online interaction data quickly outnumbers demonstrations. In line with the seeding phase, we propose to aggressively oversample demonstration data throughout training, but progressively anneal away the oversampling through the course of training. Concretely, we minimize the loss

$$\mathcal{L}_{\text{P3}}(\theta) \coloneqq \kappa \cdot \mathbb{E}_{\xi_t \sim \mathcal{D}^{\text{demo}}} \left[\mathcal{L}_{\text{TD-MPC}}(\theta, \xi_t)\right] + (1-\kappa) \cdot \mathbb{E}_{\xi_t \sim \mathcal{B}} \left[\mathcal{L}_{\text{TD-MPC}}(\theta, \xi_t)\right]. \quad (4)$$

Finally, we find it highly effective to regularize the visual representation using **data augmentation**, which we apply in all phases. We detail our proposed algorithm in Algorithm 1.

4 Results & Discussion

Environments and Evaluation For our experimental evaluation, we consider **21** challenging visual control tasks. This includes **3** dexterous hand manipulation tasks from the *Adroit* suite (Rajeswaran et al., 2018), **15** manipulation tasks from *Meta-World*, as well as **3** locomotion tasks involving high-dimensional embodiments from *DMControl* (Tassa et al., 2018). Figure 3 provides illustrative frames from some of these tasks. For Adroit and Meta-World, we use sparse task completion rewards instead of human-shaped rewards. We use DM-Control to illustrate that MoDem provides significant sample-efficiency gains even for visual RL tasks with dense rewards. In the case of Meta-World, we study a diverse collection of *medium*, *hard*, and *very hard* tasks as categorized by Seo et al. (2022). We put strong emphasis on sample-efficiency and evaluate methods under an extremely constrained budget of only **5 demonstrations**[1] and **100K online interactions**, which translates to approximately *one hour* of real-robot time in Adroit. We summarize our experimental setup in Table 1. *We will open-source all code, environments, and demonstrations used in this work*. Through experimental evaluation, we aim to study the following questions:

Table 1. **Experimental setup.** We consider a total of 21 visual RL tasks spanning 3 domains.

Domain	Tasks	Demos	Interactions	Reward
Adroit	3	5	100K	Sparse
Meta-World	15	5	100K	Sparse
DMControl	3	5	100K	Dense

1. Can MoDem effectively accelerate model-based RL with demonstrations and lead to sample-efficient learning in complex visual RL tasks with sparse rewards?
2. What is the relative importance and contributions of each phase of MoDem?
3. How sensitive is MoDem to the source of demonstration data?
4. Does MoDem benefit from the use of pretrained visual representations?

[1] Each demonstration corresponds to 50-500 online interaction steps, depending on the task.

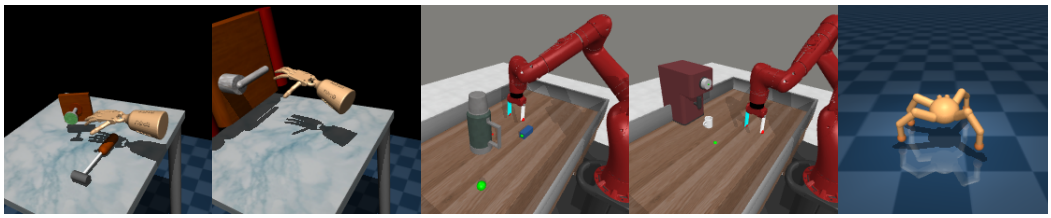

Figure 3. **Tasks.** We evaluate methods on a total of **21** challenging image-based tasks spanning three domains (Adroit (Rajeswaran et al., 2018), Meta-World (Yu et al., 2019), DMControl (Tassa et al., 2018)). Observations are raw high-resolution (224×224) RGB frames (pictured). Environments contain rich visual features such as textures and shading, and require particularly fine-grained control due to complex geometry. See Appendix D and F for additional visualizations and a full list of tasks.

Baselines for Comparison We consider a set of strong baselines from prior work on both visual IL, model-free RL (MFRL) with demonstrations, and visual model-based RL (MBRL). We list the most relevant prior work in Table 2 and select the strongest and most representative methods from each category. Specifically, we select the following baselines: *(1)* **BC + R3M** that leverages the *pretrained* R3M visual representation (Nair et al., 2022) to train a policy by behavior cloning the demonstration dataset. *(2)* state-based (oracle) **DAPG** (Rajeswaran et al., 2018) that regularizes a policy gradient method with demonstrations. *(3)* **FERM** (Zhan et al., 2020) combines model-free RL, contrastive representation learning, and imitation learning. It first performs contrastive pretraining on demonstrations, then trains a model-free SAC (Haarnoja et al., 2018) agent with online environment interactions while incorporating random image augmentations. Finally, we also compare with *(4)* **TD-MPC** (Hansen et al., 2022) instantiated both *with* and *without* demonstrations. Notably, we choose to compare to R3M as it has been shown to improve over both end-to-end BC and other pretrained representations in several robotic domains, and we compare to DAPG as it also serves as a *state-based oracle* for RRL (Shah & Kumar, 2021). We also compare to FERM which is conceptually closest to our method and has demonstrated great sample-efficiency in real-robot manipulation tasks. Furthermore, it is also a superset of SOTA model-free methods that do not leverage demonstrations (Srinivas et al., 2020; Laskin et al., 2020; Kostrikov et al., 2020; Yarats et al., 2021a). Lastly, our TD-MPC baseline appends demonstrations to the replay buffer at the start of training following Zhan et al. (2020) and can thus be interpreted as a model-based analogue of FERM (but without contrastive pretraining). We evaluate all baselines under the same experimental setup as our method (*e.g.*, frame stacking, action repeat, data augmentation, and access to robot state) for a fair comparison.

Table 2. **Baselines.** Given that our problem setting is at the intersection of IL and online RL, there are many potential baselines. We categorize prior work into three distinct categories, and choose the best and most representative methods from each category as our main points of comparison. Selected baselines are in **bold**.

Category	Method
IL	End-to-End BC (Atkeson & Schaal, 1997)
	R3M (Nair et al., 2022)
	VINN (Pari et al., 2022)
Model-free RL + IL	**DAPG** Rajeswaran et al. (2018)
	FERM (Zhan et al., 2020)
	RRL (Shah & Kumar, 2021)
	GAIL (Ho & Ermon, 2016)
	AWAC (Nair et al., 2020)
	HER + demos Nair et al. (2018)
	VRL3 (Wang et al., 2022)
Model-based RL + IL	**TD-MPC** (Hansen et al., 2022)
	Dreamer-V2 (Hafner et al., 2020)
	MWM (Seo et al., 2022)

Benchmark Results Our main results are summarized in Figure 4. Our method achieves an average success rate of 53% at 100K steps across Adroit tasks, whereas all baselines fail to achieve any non-trivial results under this sample budget. FERM solves a small subset of the Meta-World tasks, whereas our method solves *all* 15 tasks; see Figure 5 for individual task curves. We find that our TD-MPC and FERM baselines fare relatively better in DM-Control, which uses dense rewards. Nevertheless, we still observe that MoDem outperforms all baselines. Finally, we also find that behavior cloning – even with pretrained visual representations – is ineffective with just 5 demonstrations.

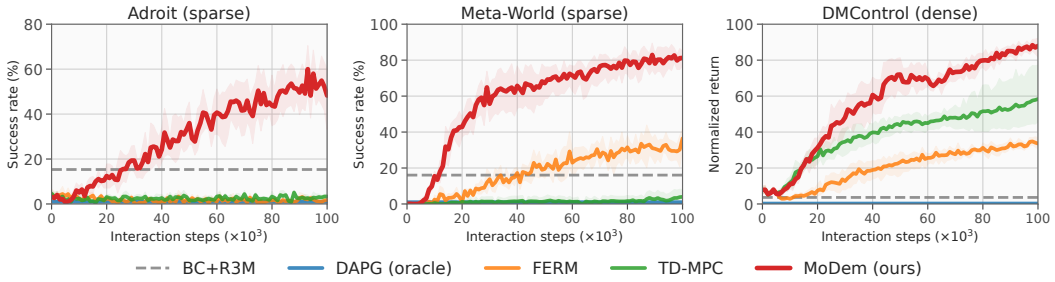

Figure 4. **Main result.** Success rate and episode return as a function of interaction steps for each of the three domains that we consider (Adroit, Meta-World, DMControl), aggregated across a total of **21** challenging, visual robotics tasks. Adroit and Meta-World use *sparse* rewards. Mean of 5 seeds; shaded area indicates 95% CIs. Our method is significantly more sample-efficient than prior methods.

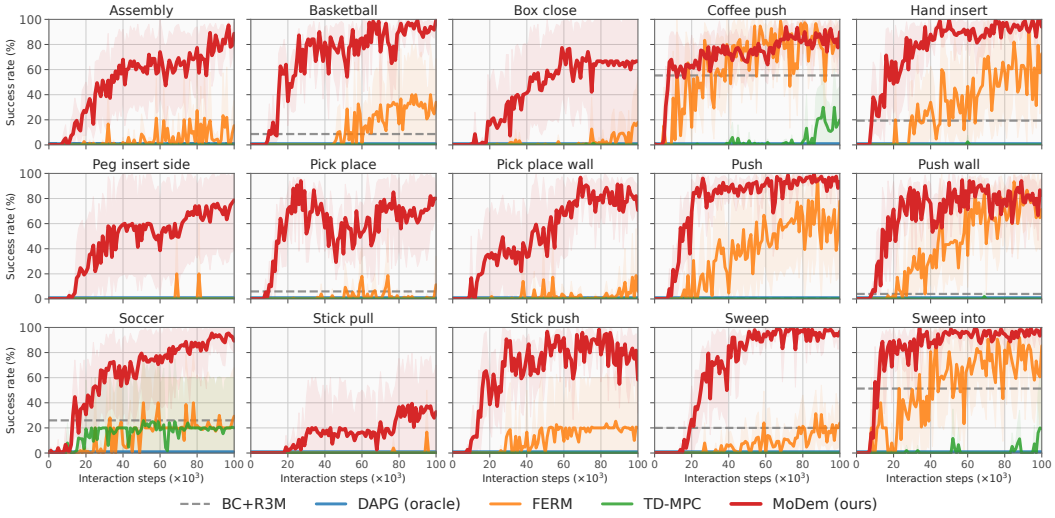

Figure 5. **Meta-World.** Success rate for our method and baselines on 15 difficult, sparse-reward Meta-World tasks with image inputs. Mean of 5 seeds; shaded area indicates 95% CIs.

Relative importance of each phase. We study the relative importance of phases by considering all three Adroit tasks, and exhaustively evaluating all valid combinations of *policy pretraining* – as opposed to random initialization; BC *seeding* – as opposed to seeding with random interactions; and oversampling during *interactive learning* – as opposed to adding demonstrations to the interaction data buffer. Results are shown in Figure 6. We find that each aspect of our framework – policy pretraining, seeding, and oversampling – greatly improve sample-efficiency, both individually and in conjunction. However, naïvely adding demonstrations to TD-MPC has limited impact on its own. In addition, policy pretraining is the least effective on its own. We conjecture that this is due to catastrophical forgetting of the inductive biases learned during pretraining when the model and policy are finetuned in phase two and three. This is a known challenge in RL with pretrained representations (Xiao et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2022), and could also explain the limited benefit of contrastive pretraining in FERM. Interestingly, we find that adding demonstrations to TD-MPC following the procedure of FERM outperforms FERM at the 100K interaction mark. This result suggests that TD-MPC, by virtue of being model-based, can be more sample-efficient in difficult tasks like Adroit compared to its direct model-free counterpart.

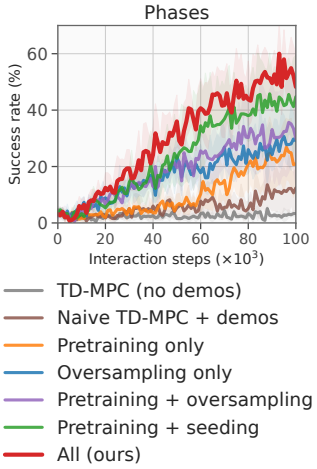

Figure 6. **Relative contribution** of each phase. Mean success across all Adroit tasks. 5 seeds, shaded areas are 95% CIs.

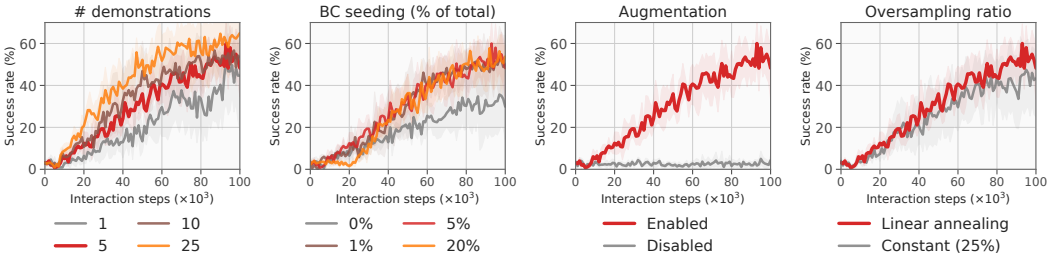

Figure 7. **Ablations.** Success rate for various ablations of MoDem, aggregated across all Adroit tasks. Our ablations highlight the relative importance of each design choice. Mean of 5 seeds; shaded area indicates 95% CIs. See Figure 6 for an ablation of our three phases. **Red** is our default.

Ablations. We ablated our core design choices (each proposed phase) in the previous experiment. In this section, we aim to provide further insights on the quantitative behavior of our method. In Figure 7, we evaluate (from left to right) the influence of following components: *(1)* number of human demonstrations provided, *(2)* percentage of total interaction data seeded from the pretrained policy, *(3)* regularization of the representation h_θ with and without random image shift augmentation, and *(4)* linearly annealing the oversampling ratio from 75% to 25% during training vs. a constant ratio of 25%. Interestingly, we observe that – although more demonstrations are generally helpful – our method still converges with only *a single demonstration*, which strongly suggests that the primary use of demonstrations is to overcome the initial exploration bottleneck. We also find that – although the success rate of the pretrained policy is generally low – seeding model learning with BC rollouts rather than random exploration greatly speeds up convergence. However, our method is insensitive to the actual number of seeding episodes, which further shows that the main challenge is indeed to overcome exploration. Consistent with prior work on visual RL, we find data augmentation to be essential for learning (Laskin et al., 2020; Kostrikov et al., 2020; Yarats et al., 2021a; Zhan et al., 2020; Hansen et al., 2022), whereas we find the oversampling ratio to be relatively less important.

Demonstration source. We evaluate the efficacy of demonstrations depending on the source (human teleoperation vs. near-optimal policies) and report results for both our method and FERM in Figure 8 (*left*). Human demonstrations as well as state-based expert policies (trained with DAPG) are sourced from Rajeswaran et al. (2018). We find that demonstrations generated by a neural network policy lead to marginally faster convergence for our method. We attribute this behavior to human demonstrations being suboptimal, multi-modal with respect to actions, and having non-Markovian properties (Mandlekar et al., 2021). However, more importantly, we find that our method converges to the same asymptotic performance regardless of the demonstration source. In comparison, FERM does not solve any of the Adroit tasks with either demonstration source, which suggests that algorithmic advances provided by MoDem are far more important than the source and quality of demonstrations.

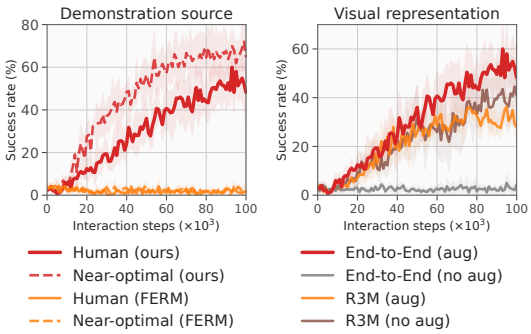

Figure 8. We ablate *(left)* **human vs. oracle policy demonstrations**, and *(right)* **visual representations** for MoDem. Mean success rate across all Adroit tasks. 5 seeds, shaded areas are 95% CIs.

Pretrained visual representations. We consider a variant of our framework that additionally uses R3M (Nair et al., 2022) as a frozen visual representation, similar to the BC+R3M baseline. Results for this experiment are shown in Figure 8 (*right*). We find that learning the representation end-to-end using the BC and model learning objectives of our framework lead to more sample-efficient learning than using a pretrained representation. Interestingly, we find that – while data augmentation is essential to the success of the end-to-end representation – data augmentation is not beneficial when using a pretrained representation. We conjecture that this is because the R3M representation already provides the same inductive biases (*i.e.*, translational invariance) as the random image shift augmentation. Note, however, that all end-to-end image-based baselines throughout our work also use

data augmentation for fair comparison. Lastly, while number of interactions is usually the limiting factor in real-world applications, we remark that using a pretrained representation generally reduces the computational cost of training and can thus be considered a trade-off.

5 Related Work

Imitation Learning, and behavior cloning (Pomerleau, 1988; Atkeson & Schaal, 1997)) in particular, has been successfully applied to a variety of robotics applications such as manipulation (Zhang et al., 2018b; Song et al., 2020; Young et al., 2020), locomotion (Nakanishi et al., 2003), and autonomous driving (Bojarski et al., 2016), where demonstration collection is easy. Recent works have also explored extensions like third-person imitation learning (Torabi et al., 2018; Radosavovic et al., 2021; Zakka et al., 2021; Kumar et al., 2022)) and multi-task learning (Duan et al., 2017; Sharma et al., 2018; Jang et al., 2021; Reed et al., 2022). Regardless, most prior work on IL require large datasets with hundreds of expert demonstrations to provide sufficient coverage of the state space. Instead, we require only a few demonstrations and instead allow a limited amount of online interaction.

Sample-efficient RL. Algorithm design for RL has a large body of work (Mnih et al., 2013; Lillicrap et al., 2016; Schrittwieser et al., 2020; Hansen et al., 2022). However, direct real-world applications remain limited due to poor sample efficiency. Various methods have been proposed to improve sample-efficiency of RL (Levine et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2018a; Ebert et al., 2018; Zhan et al., 2020). For example, Ebert et al. (2018) learn a goal-conditioned world model via video prediction and use the learned model for planning, and other works improve sample-efficiency by using pretrained representations (Shah & Kumar, 2021; Pari et al., 2022; Parisi et al., 2022; Xiao et al., 2022), data augmentation (Yarats et al., 2021b;a; Hansen et al., 2021), and auxiliary objectives (Srinivas et al., 2020). Recently, Wu et al. (2022) have also demonstrated that modern model-based RL algorithms can solve locomotion tasks with only one hour of real-world training. Interestingly, they find that their choice of model-based RL algorithm – Dreamer-V2 (Hafner et al., 2020) – is consistently more sample-efficient than model-free alternatives across all tasks considered. Our work builds upon a state-of-the-art model-based method, TD-MPC (Hansen et al., 2022), and shows that leveraging demonstrations can further yield large gains in sample-efficiency. Our contributions are compatible with and largely orthogonal to most prior work on model-based RL.

RL with demonstrations. While IL and RL have been studied extensively in isolation, recent works have started to explore their intersection (Ho & Ermon, 2016; Rajeswaran et al., 2018; Nair et al., 2018; 2020; Zhan et al., 2020; Shah & Kumar, 2021; Mandlekar et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2022; Baker et al., 2022). Notably, Rajeswaran et al. (2018) augments a policy gradient algorithm with demonstration data to solve dexterous manipulation tasks from states. By virtue of using policy gradient, their method achieves stable learning and high asymptotic performance, but poor sample efficiency. Shah & Kumar (2021) extended this to visual spaces using a pre-trained visual representation network, but inherit the same limitations. Zhan et al. (2020) accelerate a SAC agent (Haarnoja et al., 2018) with demonstrations and contrastive learning. Baker et al. (2022) first learn a policy using imitation learning on a large, crowd-sourced dataset and then finetune the policy using on-policy RL. In contrast to all prior work, we accelerate a model-based algorithm with demonstrations, which we find leads to significantly improved results compared to prior model-free alternatives.

6 Conclusion

In this work, we studied the acceleration of MBRL algorithms with expert demonstrations to improve the sample efficiency. We showed that naively appending demonstration data to an MBRL agent's replay buffer does not meaningfully accelerate the learning. We developed MoDem, a three phase framework to fully utilize demonstrations and accelerate MBRL. Through extensive experimental evaluation, we find that MoDem trains policies that are $250\% - 350\%$ more successful in sparse reward visual RL tasks in the low data regime ($100K$ online interactions, 5 demonstrations). In this process, we also elucidated the importance of different phases in MoDem, the importance of data augmentation for visual MBRL, and the utility of pre-trained visual representations.

Reproducibility statement. Experiments are conducted with publicly available environments. We provide extensive implementation details in appendices, and are committed to releasing our code.

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