MODEL-BASED VISUAL PLANNING WITH SELF-SUPERVISED FUNCTIONAL DISTANCES

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ABSTRACT

A generalist robot must be able to complete a variety of tasks in its environment. One appealing way to specify each task is in terms of a goal observation. However, learning goal-reaching policies with reinforcement learning remains a challenging problem, particularly when rewards are not provided and distances in the observation space are not meaningful. Learned dynamics models are a promising approach for learning about the environment without rewards or task-directed data, but planning to reach goals with such a model requires a notion of functional similarity between observations and goal states. We present a self-supervised method for model-based visual goal reaching, which uses both a visual dynamics model as well as a dynamical distance function learned using model-free reinforcement learning. This approach trains entirely using offline, unlabeled data, making it practical to scale to large and diverse datasets. On several challenging robotic manipulation tasks with only offline, unlabeled data, we find that our algorithm compares favorably to prior model-based and model-free reinforcement learning methods. In ablation experiments, we additionally identify important factors for learning effective distances.

1 INTRODUCTION

Designing general-purpose robots that can perform a wide range of tasks remains an open problem in AI and robotics. Reinforcement learning (RL) represents a particularly promising tool for learning robotic behaviors when skills can be learned one at a time from user-defined reward functions. However, general-purpose robots will likely require large and diverse repertoires of skills, and learning individual tasks one at a time from manually-specified rewards is onerous and time-consuming. How can we design learning systems that can autonomously acquire general-purpose knowledge that allows them to solve many different downstream tasks?

To address this problem, we must resolve three questions. **(1)** How can this robot be commanded to perform specific downstream tasks? A simple and versatile choice is to define tasks in terms of desired outcomes, such as an example observation of the completed task. **(2)** What types of data should this robot learn from? In settings where modern machine learning attains the best generalization results (Deng et al., 2009; Rajpurkar et al., 2016; Devlin et al., 2018), a common theme is that excellent generalization can be achieved by learning from *large* and *diverse* task-agnostic datasets. In the context of RL, this means we need *offline* methods that can use all sources of prior data, even in the *absence of reward labels*. **(3)** What *exactly* should the robot learn from this data to enable goal-reaching? Similar to prior work (Botvinick & Weinstein, 2014; Watter et al., 2015; Finn & Levine, 2017; Ebert et al., 2018b), we note that policies and value functions are specific to a particular task, while a predictive model captures the *physics* of an agent's environment and thus can be used for solving almost any task. This makes model learning particularly effective for learning from large and diverse datasets, which do not necessarily contain successful behaviors.

While model-based approaches have demonstrated promising results, including for vision-based tasks in real-world robotic systems (Ebert et al., 2018a; Finn & Levine, 2017), such methods face two major challenges. First, predictive models on raw images are only effective for short horizons, as uncertainty accumulates far into the future (Denton & Fergus, 2018; Finn et al., 2016; Hafner et al., 2019b; Babaeizadeh et al., 2017). Second, using such models for planning toward goals requires a notion of *similarity* between images. While prior methods have utilized latent variable models (Watter et al., 2015; Nair et al., 2018), ℓ_2 pixel-space distance (Nair & Finn, 2019), and other

heuristic measures of similarity (Ebert et al., 2018b), these metrics only capture *visual* similarity. To enable reliable control with predictive models, we instead need distances that are aware of dynamics.

In this paper, we propose Model-Based RL with Offline Learned Distances (MBOLD), which aims to address *both* of these challenges by learning predictive models together with image-based distance functions that reflect functionality, from offline, unlabeled data. The learned distance function estimates of the number of steps that the optimal policy would take to transition from one state to another, incorporating not just visual appearance, but also an understanding of dynamics. However, to learn dynamical distances from *task-agnostic* data, supervised regression will lead to overestimation, since the paths in the data are not all optimal for any task. Instead, we utilize approximate dynamic programming for distance estimation. While prior work has studied such methods to learn goal-conditioned policies in online model-free RL settings (Eysenbach et al., 2019; Florensa et al., 2019), we extend it to the offline setting and show that approximate dynamic programming techniques derived from Q-learning style Bellman updates can learn effective shortest path dynamical distances. Although this procedure resembles model-free reinforcement learning, we find empirically that it does not by itself produce useful policies. Instead, our method (Fig. 1) combines the strengths of dynamics models and distance functions, using the predictive model to plan over short horizons, and using the learned distances to provide a global cost that captures progress toward distant goals.

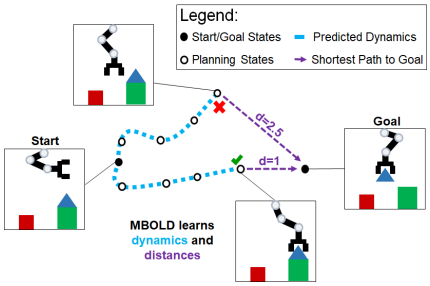

Figure 1: The robot must find actions that quickly achieve the desired goal. State transitions and the true optimal distances between states are unknown, so our method learns an approximate shortest distance function and dynamics model directly on images. These models allow the robot to find the shortest path to the goal at test-time.

The primary contribution of this work is an offline, self-supervised approach for solving arbitrary goal-reaching tasks by combining planning with predictive models and learned dynamical distances. To our knowledge, our method is the first to directly combine predictive models on images with dynamical distance estimators on images, entirely from random, offline data without reward labels. Through our experimental evaluation on challenging simulated robotic object manipulation tasks, we find that our method can outperform previously introduced reward specification methods for visual model-based control with a relative performance improvement of at least 50% across all tasks, and compares favorably to prior work in model-based and model-free RL. We also find that combining Q-functions with planning improves dramatically over policies directly learned with model-free RL.

2 Related Work

Offline and Model-based RL: A number of prior works have studied the problem of learning behaviors from existing offline datasets. While recent progress has been made in applying model-free RL techniques to this problem of "offline" or "batch" RL (Fujimoto et al., 2019; Wu et al., 2019; Kumar et al., 2019; 2020; Nair et al., 2020b), one approach that has shown promise is offline model-based RL (Lowrey et al., 2018; Kidambi et al., 2020; Yu et al., 2020; Argenson & Dulac-Arnold, 2020), where the agent learns a predictive model of the world from data. Such model-based methods have seen success both in the offline and online RL settings, and have a rich history of being effective for planning (Deisenroth & Rasmussen, 2011; Watter et al., 2015; McAllister & Rasmussen, 2016; Chua et al., 2018; Amos et al., 2018; Hafner et al., 2019b; Nagabandi et al., 2018; Kahn et al., 2020) or policy optimization (Sutton, 1991; Weber et al., 2017; Ha & Schmidhuber, 2018; Janner et al., 2019; Wang & Ba, 2019; Hafner et al., 2019a). **Critically, however, the vast majority of these prior works consider the single task setting where the agent aims to maximize a single task reward.** In contrast, in this work we circumvent the need for task rewards by adopting a self-supervised multi-task approach, where a single learned model is used to perform a variety of tasks, specified in a flexible and general way by desired outcomes – i.e., goal images.

Self-supervised goal reaching: While the standard RL problem involves optimizing for a task-specific reward, an alternative and potentially more general formulation involves learning a generic goal reaching policy, without task-specific reward labels. In fact, a number of prior works learn

goal-conditioned policies using model-free RL (Kaelbling, 1993; Nair et al., 2018; Mandlekar et al., 2019; Nair et al., 2020a), or variants of goal-conditioned behavioral cloning (GCBC) (Ghosh et al., 2019; Ding et al., 2019; Lynch et al., 2020). In our experiments, we show that our method outperforms both model-free approaches and goal-conditioned behavioral cloning. A number of methods combine model-free and model-based elements by planning over a graph representation (Eysenbach et al., 2019; Nasiriany et al., 2019; Savinov et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2020). Such methods can struggle in higher dimensions, where constructing graphs that adequately cover the space may require an excessive number of samples. We compare to these methods in our experiments. Similarly to Finn & Levine (2017); Ebert et al. (2018b); Nair & Finn (2019); Yen-Chen et al. (2019); Suh & Tedrake (2020), our method uses an action-conditioned video prediction model to generate plans. However, these prior methods generally utilize hand-crafted image similarity reward measures such as ℓ_2 pixel-error (Ebert et al., 2018a; Nair & Finn, 2019) and pixel-flow prediction (Finn & Levine, 2017). In complex scenes, this can become a major bottleneck: predictions degrade rapidly further in the future, making an informative image similarity metric critical for effective planning. We propose to learn *functional* similarity metrics in terms of dynamical distances, which we find can be combined with predictive models to attain significantly improved results.

Dynamical distance learning: Our method learns dynamical distances – distances that represent shortest paths – from offline data. In the literature, dynamical distances have been learned via direct regression using online data (Hartikainen et al., 2019), representation learning (Warde-Farley et al., 2018; Yu et al., 2019b), or via Q-learning by relabeling goals (Eysenbach et al., 2019; Florensa et al., 2019). While these last two works are most similar to ours, in that they also employ approximate dynamic programming to learn distances, our method directly combines these dynamical distances with visual predictive models and planning. Lastly, while prior work has also explored combining model-based planning with value functions (Zhong et al., 2013; Lowrey et al., 2018; Hafner et al., 2019a; Schrittwieser et al., 2019; Argenson & Dulac-Arnold, 2020), these works consider the single task domain with a reward function, while our learned value function considers the multi-task goal reaching domain from entirely random, offline data without reward labels.

3 THE SELF-SUPERVISED OFFLINE RL PROBLEM STATEMENT

In this section, we introduce notation and define the problem setting. We will employ a Markov decision process (MDP) with state observations $s_t \in \mathcal{S}$ and actions $a_t \in \mathcal{A}$, both indexed by time $t \in 0, 1, \cdots, H$, where H denotes the maximum episode length. The initial state is sampled from an initial state distribution $s_0 \sim p_0(s_0)$, and subsequent states are sampled according to Markovian dynamics: $s_{t+1} \sim p(s_{t+1} \mid s_t, a_t)$. Actions are sampled $a_t \sim \pi(a_t \mid s_t, s_g)$ from a policy that is conditioned on both the current state and a goal state $s_g \in \mathcal{S}$. In our experiments, both the state and goal are images (i.e., $\mathcal{S} = \mathbb{R}^{H \times W \times 3}$).

We tackle offline learning in this setting, assuming access to a fixed dataset $\mathcal{D}$ consisting of trajectories $\{s_0, a_0, s_1, ...s_T\}$ of the agent interacting with the environment. This data can include *any* environment interactions, from expert demonstrations to trajectories which are not particularly successful at any task. In our experiments, we use data collected using a random policy, which is inexpensive to obtain. The agent does not have access to the environment to collect additional training data. Given this dataset, the objective is to determine the optimal goal-conditioned policy $\pi^\star(a_t \mid s_t, s_g)$, under which the agent is able to transition to any goal state s_g from any starting state s_t in the minimum number of time steps possible. Note that unlike in the standard formulation of the RL problem, the agent does not receive any reward signal from its environment.

4 MODEL-BASED VISUAL GOAL-REACHING

In this section we will introduce our method, MBOLD, for offline, goal-conditioned reinforcement learning. MBOLD, illustrated in Fig. 2, is composed of two neural networks: a predictive model and a learned distance function. The video-predictive dynamics model allows the agent to predict the result of hypothetical sequences of actions. However, this model cannot accurately predict far into the future, and has no notion of whether the predicted outcomes are desirable. Thus, we also learn a distance function, which will estimate the timestep length of the shortest path between a

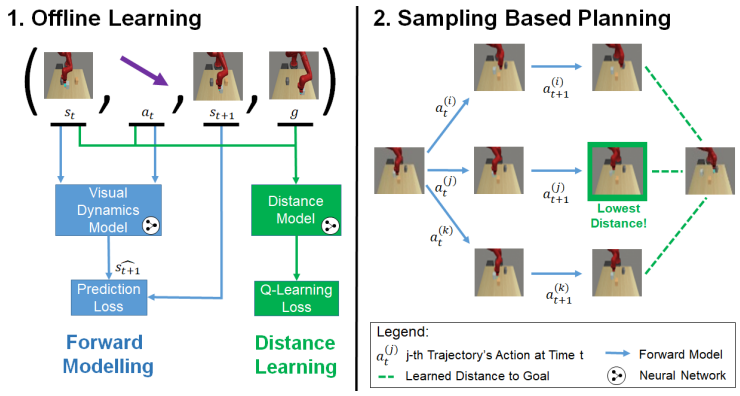

Figure 2: **Model-based visual goal reaching**: *(Left)* During offline learning, we train an image-based predictive model and distance function on the same *random* dataset. *(Right)* At test time, we use the learned distance model for MPC, plugging in the learned distance as a cost function.

predicted state and a given goal. Both networks are trained on the same offline dataset pre-collected by a (possibly random) policy.

At test-time, we use the learned dynamics model and distance function for model-predictive control (MPC). MBOLD predicts future states for candidate action sequences using the learned dynamics model, and uses the learned distance function to determine which action sequence will lead the agent closest to the goal. The first of the actions is then executed, and planning repeats upon receiving the subsequent observation from the environment. The remainder of this section describes how we learn the dynamics model and distance function, and use them to perform control.

Dynamics learning. Our method learns environment dynamics in order to solve for actions during test time, *without* explicit task reward signal during training time. In theory, MBOLD is able to use any image-based forward model, including latent variable models like PlaNet (Hafner et al., 2019b). We implement a deterministic, convolutional video prediction model adapted from SAVP (Lee et al., 2018). The network takes as input the current observation s_t and a sequence of h actions $a_{t:t+h-1}$ and returns a prediction for the next h image observations, $\hat{f}_\theta(s_t, a_{t:t+h-1}) = \{\hat{s}_{t+1}, \ldots, \hat{s}_{t+h}\}$. We train this model to minimize the ℓ_2 image reconstruction loss:

$$\min_\theta \mathbb{E}_\mathcal{D}\left[\frac{1}{h}\sum_{t'=t}^{t+h} \|\hat{f}_\theta(s_t, a_{t:t+h-1})[t'-t] - s_{t'}\|^2\right]. \tag{1}$$

Distance learning. Our method also learns a dynamical distance function, so that it can evaluate a functional sense of distance from predicted states to the goal state, to be used as a planning cost. However, the environment does not provide a reward signal that might be used to deduce these distances. Even worse, the offline dataset likely contains sub-optimal trajectories, so our method may not even have access to examples of shortest path trajectories between states. Our key observation is that a Q-function trained on a modified MDP with an indicator cost function yields values that correspond to shortest path distances in the original environment. Thus, Q-learning-like dynamic programming methods can recover optimal distance functions even from sub-optimal data.

More precisely, we create an MDP by augmenting environment trajectories with the reward function $r(s, a, s_{t+1}, g) = \mathbf{1}_{s_{t+1}=s_g}$, adding a discount factor of γ, and considering episodes terminated once they reach the goal state. Goals are sampled according to a distribution on $\mathcal{S}$, which we will discuss later. Note that if $\gamma < 1$, the Q-values for a policy that maximizes expected *discounted* returns in this MDP can be directly mapped to shortest path distances. Specifically, in discrete state environments, the optimal Q-function can be written as $Q(s, a, g) = \gamma^{d(s,a,g)}$, where $d(s, a, g)$ is a shortest path distance between s and g *after* taking action a. Similarly, we can recover $d(s, a, g) = \log_\gamma Q(s, a, g)$. Ultimately, our Q-learning approach corresponds to the following Bellman error optimization objective:

$$\min_\phi \mathbb{E}_{s_t, a_t, s_{t+1} \sim \mathcal{D}, g \sim \mathcal{S}}\left[Q_\phi(s_t, a_t, g) - (\mathbf{1}_{s_{t+1}=g} + \gamma \mathbf{1}_{s_{t+1} \neq g} \max_{a_{t+1}} Q_\phi(s_{t+1}, a_{t+1}, g))\right]^2. \tag{2}$$

Because the policy used for collecting the offline dataset may not be directed towards any particular goals, we must somehow select goals for each transition to optimize this objective. Naïvely choosing g, say by sampling random states uniformly from the dataset, will provide an extremely sparse reward signal, as two random states will almost never be exactly identical. While the sparse reward problem could be mitigated by selectively sampling as goals the states that were actually reached in future time steps along the same trajectory (Kaelbling, 1993; Andrychowicz et al., 2017), relabeling *all* goals in this way creates a major issue: since the distance function would only be trained on goals that were actually reached, it would systematically underestimate the distance to unreachable goals. Put another way, goals that were *not* reached from s_t would be *out-of-distribution* goals for the resulting Q-function. We found this to result in poor performance. In practice, prior work (Kaelbling, 1993; Andrychowicz et al., 2017) actually relabels with a mixture of reached and commanded goals, resulting in both "positive" and "negative" goals.

To sample *positive goals* for a transition at time step t, we sample a time offset $\Delta \sim \text{Geom}(p)$, where $p \in [0, 1]$ is a hyper-parameter, and use the state at time $t + \Delta$ as the goal. Note that if $\Delta = 1$, the reward for this transition is 1, avoiding the sparsity issue. While prior methods can obtain *negative goals* based on those commanded in online data, in the offline setting we require a procedure to produce state-goal pairs that are distant, yet informative. Randomly selecting dataset states will lead to pairs of images that are clearly distant with high probability (e.g. pairs in which all objects and the robot have been moved). Therefore, we would like a goal sampling procedure that produces less obvious examples of distant states, which are more informative for training. Hard negative mining is one example of such a procedure, where pairs are selected based on the model's predictions, but is computationally expensive with large datasets.

Instead, we build upon the intuition that distance functions are likely to pay excessive attention to fully actuated factors in the state, such as the position of the robot's arm, because they are strongly predictive of distances. We propose sampling pairs of states where the actuated components are similar. When randomly sampling pairs of states under this constraint, the underactuated dimensions (e.g. the objects), which are generally not known, are likely to have distinct positions. Hence, these data points can serve as informative hard negatives that encourage the model to pay more attention to the difficult, underactuated parts of the state. Unlike hard negative mining, this sampling approach is computationally inexpensive, as it does not rely on the current distance function, and practical, as actuated components of the state can typically be measured through encoders on the actuator.

In practice, we sample these goals from observations across all dataset trajectories via nearest-neighbors search, using arm joint ℓ_2 distance as the similarity key. Note that this does assume proprioceptive state information from the agent (e.g. robot joint angles), which is almost always available in real-world robotics settings, but does *not* require knowledge about object positions or other ground-truth environment information. See Appendix A.1 for details.

Control via MBOLD. At test-time, the learned distance function and dynamics model are used together to solve control tasks via MPC. In other words, the dynamics model predicts how candidate actions will affect the environment, and the distance model rates predicted sequences based on which bring the agent closest to the user-defined goal state. This "rating" mechanism works as follows: given the current state s_t, goal state s_g, candidate actions $a_{t:t+h-1}$, and predicted future states $\hat{f}_\theta(s_t, a_{t:t+h-1})$ from the learned dynamics model, the learned distance function calculates

$$V(a_{t:t+h-1}) = \max_{\alpha} Q_\phi(\hat{f}_\theta(s_t, a_{t:t+h-1})[t+h], \alpha, s_g). \tag{3}$$

This equation acts as an objective function for MPC. Plainly, the controller's goal is to find candidate actions $a_{t:t+h-1}$ which minimize the dynamical distance to the goal h steps into the future. After this process completes, the best action is executed by the agent. Note that this controller re-plans after every action taken in the environment (i.e every timestep), in order to prevent errors in dynamics prediction from compounding.

MPC Controller Algorithm. MBOLD uses the CEM algorithm (De Boer et al., 2005) to optimize the objective in Equation 3. It begins by sampling N random trajectories from a prior multi-variate Gaussian distribution. Then, the top K actions which score highest according to $V(a_{t:t+h-1})$ are selected as candidates. A new Gaussian distribution is fit on these candidates, and the loop starts over again by sampling fresh actions from this distribution. After I iterations, the loop finishes and returns the best action found so far. See Appendix A.2 for full CEM implementation details.

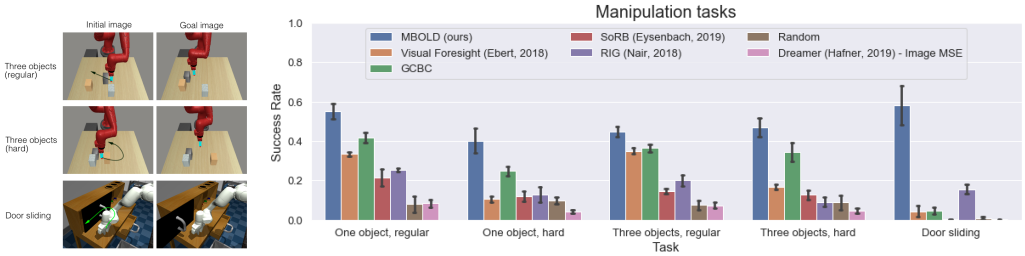

Figure 3: **Comparative evaluation results:** *(Left)* Example initial states and task definitions for Sawyer object pushing and Franka door sliding environments. Note that "hard" tasks require the arm to take detours from moving to the final arm position in order to relocate the object. Arrows indicate successful trajectories for the robot. *(Right)* MBOLD is consistently able to outperform prior methods on these harder manipulation tasks. Its improvement over prior methods is larger on the tasks that are more difficult ("hard" variants of object pushing and door sliding). Error bars show standard deviations over 5 seeds.

5 Experiments

Our experiments aim to answer two questions: (1) How does MBOLD compare to prior model-based and model-free methods when learning to reach goals from task-agnostic offline data? (2) How do different dynamical distance learning methods compare to MBOLD in terms of providing effective distance functions for planning?

We evaluate our method, prior methods, and baselines on three simulated tasks with visual observations: (1) a simple *reaching* task that requires moving a Sawyer 7-DoF arm to a goal location, which provides a way to validate implementations of all methods, (2) *object pushing*, in which a Sawyer arm must relocate an object to a particular goal location, in environments with 1 or 3 objects, and (3) *door sliding*, which requires repositioning a sliding door with a Franka 7-DoF arm. These tasks are challenging because they require long-horizon planning without access to intermediate rewards.

For each task, we define the action space $\mathcal{A}$ such that actions control the Cartesian position of the robot's end-effector, as well as the robot's gripper. We randomly generate a set of 100 test goals, consisting of a goal image and starting state, for each task, on which all methods are tested. A trial is considered successful if the final distance to the goal of each relevant object, e.g. slide position for the door sliding task, ends below a given threshold. For the object relocation task, we evaluate each method on two scenes, containing one and three objects. All evaluation goals require the robot to move one of the objects, with the others serving as distractors. We also study two levels of difficulty: "regular," where goals are generated from random trajectories in which the object moves a certain minimum distance, and "hard," where the arm is additionally enforced to be distant from the object in the goal observation, requiring the robot to push the object and then withdraw the arm. We depict the tasks in Fig. 3 (left) and provide full experimental details in Appendix A.3.

For all tasks, we generate an offline dataset by running random policies for 1e4 episodes of 30 timesteps each. We provide only this offline dataset to all methods, with no online training. At test time, the agent only receives the goal image and current observation at each step, and no intermediate rewards besides those that it computes itself.

Comparative evaluation. We compare MBOLD to prior work in model-based and model-free RL. As MBOLD uses purely offline data and does not require rewards from the environment, we make modifications to these methods where necessary to provide a fair comparison. Many of these prior methods (though not all) require the environment to provide a ground truth reward signal. In this case, we provide these methods with simple "uninformative" rewards, following prior work (Nair et al., 2018), which consist of the MSE between the current and goal image. Many of these methods were initially presented in the online setting. The offline setting is harder for RL methods (Fujimoto et al., 2019; Wu et al., 2019; Kumar

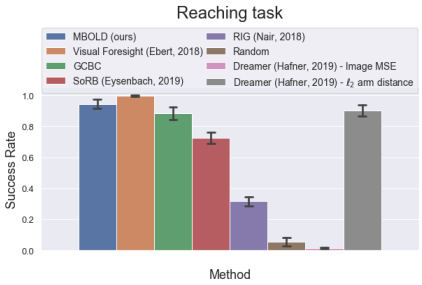

Figure 4: Comparisons on the simple reaching task, where most methods attain good performance.

et al., 2019), partially explaining their poor performance. See Appendix B for details on all baselines.

- **Reinforcement Learning with Imagined Goals (RIG) (Nair et al., 2018)**: RIG is a model-free RL method for visual goal-reaching. Unlike the other methods, we still allow RIG to collect additional *online* data to train its policy.
- **Dreamer (Hafner et al., 2019a)**: Dreamer, a model-based method for image-based tasks, also uses a combination of value functions and planning, but uses online data collection and, crucially, ground truth reward signals. We adapt Dreamer for the offline, reward-free setting.
- **Dreamer ℓ_2 arm distance**: We additionally compare with an "oracle" version of Dreamer that uses privileged information about the ground-truth position of the arm.
- **Search on the Replay Buffer (SoRB) (Eysenbach et al., 2019)**: SoRB performs planning on a graph constructed using learned distances, learned without a reward function.
- **Goal-Conditioned Behavior Cloning**: We train a behavior cloning model using goals sampled from observations achieved further in a given trajectory. This can be viewed as an offline variant of GCSL (Ghosh et al., 2019) or a non-recurrent version of Lynch et al. (2020).
- **Visual Foresight (Ebert et al., 2018b)**: Visual Foresight also plans with an action-conditioned video prediction model, but uses (among other choices) ℓ_2 pixel error as a cost function.

Since all methods are trained from offline data with no additional environment interaction, we present final performance on the test goals as a bar graph, rather than learning curves. The comparison on the simple reaching task is shown in Figure 4, and suggests that on this task, many of the methods perform quite well. However, on the substantially more complex tasks, shown in Figure 3, we see clearer differentiation between the different algorithms. On harder *object pushing* tasks, MBOLD attains the best performance, by a considerable margin. Interestingly, simple goal-conditioned behavioral cloning actually represents one of the strongest baselines on this task. On the hardest *door sliding* task, our method attains the best performance by a large margin.

Qualitative analysis. In this section, we examine the distance functions learned by MBOLD, and show qualitatively that our learned distances better model the dependence of functional separation between two states on the relative positions of objects in their scenes. Figure 6 presents heatmaps of predicted distances for a fixed goal image on the *object pushing* task, as the initial observation is varied based on object position. The robot arm is set to the same position in each initial image. We see that the Q-function is able to learn a relatively well-shaped distance which accounts for the object position.

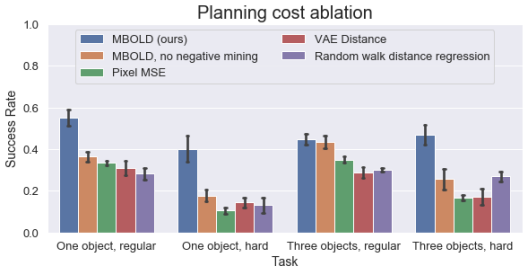

Figure 5: Our learned distance function yields higher success rates than alternative approaches from prior work, such as the ℓ_2 distance of a VAE latent space (Nair et al., 2018) and temporal distance regression (Hartikainen et al., 2019). We also see consistent improvements from using negative transition mining, especially on "hard" tasks.

We additionally visualize baseline distance models for comparison. First, we look at an ablation of our distance model, which is trained via regression to map pairs of states randomly sampled from a given dataset trajectory to the number of timesteps separating them in that trajectory, and can be viewed as an offline variant of DDL (Hartikainen et al., 2019). We call this scheme that effectively predicts random walk distances "temporal distance regression." This produces more sharply peaked distances than the Q-function, and is less desirable as a reward signal during planning, as we find through our ablation experiments. The pixel-wise MSE metric additionally produces low distances near the goal object position, but is impacted by occlusions of the objects as well as the position of the visually pronounced arm. While this analysis does not necessarily directly correspond to control performance, as it ignores the movement of the robot, it demonstrates that our learned distances are aware of the functional similarity of nearby object positions, despite the fact that they are learned entirely from images with actions corresponding to the movement of the *arm*, not the *object*.

Ablations. Our ablation studies aim to answer the following questions: (1) How does Q-learning for learning dynamical distances compare to alternative distance metrics, such as distance in the

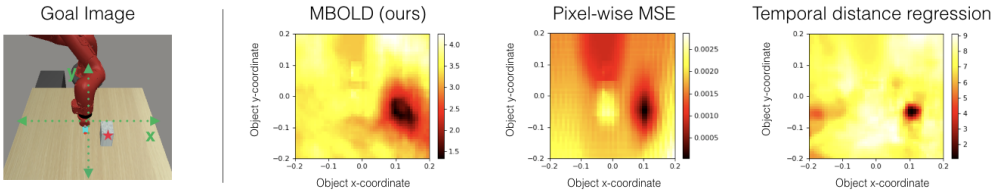

Figure 6: Heatmap visualizations of our distance functions. Each pixel in every heatmap represents the distance between a generated starting image containing the object at that (x, y) coordinate and the fixed goal image (pictured on left). All three distance functions show a minimum when the object position is near the goal position of $(0.1, -0.05)$. However, our Q-function produces a better-shaped signal than the direct regression model, and avoids occlusion errors - like the local minimum at high y-values, which plague pixel-wise MSE.

latent space of a VAE, or dynamical distances learned using direct regression on temporal distances found in random data? (2) How important is mining negative transitions to the performance of our method? (3) How beneficial is it to combine the learned distance function with planning through a predictive model, as compared to directly acting using the learned policy, as in standard model-free offline RL?

To answer the first two questions, we perform experiments in the *object pushing* domain. We evaluate alternative distance metrics for visual planning, by duplicating the planning setup, using the same dynamics model, and only modifying the metric used for scoring candidate trajectories. The first distance we consider is Euclidean distance in the latent space of a VAE, that is, $d(s, g) = \|e(s) - e(g)\|_2$, where e is a learned encoder, which resembles the reward function used in prior work on image-based goal reaching (Nair et al., 2018). The second is the direct temporal distance regression model described previously. As shown in Figure 5, Q-function distances outperform alternative distances on all of the object pushing tasks. While the temporal distance regression scheme provides competitive performance in some settings, it often provides overestimates of distances between states rather than shortest paths, as shown qualitatively in Figure 6.

We also find that the negative transition mining scheme also consistently improves performance, and is particularly important for the "hard" tasks. We hypothesize this is because augmenting the training data in this way causes learned distance functions to better take into account the positions of objects in the scene, rather than just visually prominent components such as arm position.

Table 1: Comparison of our method, which combines Q-functions *and* planning with a model, to a baseline that uses the Q-function to choose actions directly without planning.

	Q-function + planning	Q-function only
1 object push	$\mathbf{55.2 \pm 4.3}\%$	$19.2 \pm 3.6\%$
3 object push	$\mathbf{44.8 \pm 2.9}\%$	$15.6 \pm 3.6\%$
Reach	$\mathbf{94.4 \pm 3.3}\%$	$31.8 \pm 5.2\%$

To address the third question, we compare our method, which uses learned distances for planning, to the policy discovered when performing Q-learning to learn dynamical distances. As shown in Table 1, the policy learned directly from offline RL alone is greatly outperformed by MBOLD. We hypothesize that this is due to challenges in advantage learning from offline data with extremely sparse rewards.

6 Conclusion

We presented a self-supervised approach to tackling goal-reaching tasks, which learns to reach unseen visual goals given only an *offline*, *random* dataset *without reward labels*. Our method combines the strengths of predictive models and learned dynamical distances, where a predictive model can provide effective predictions for planning actions over short horizons, while dynamical distances can provide a useful planning cost that captures distance to goals over longer horizons. By performing visual model predictive control with a learned visual dynamics model and a goal conditioned Q-function as the planning cost, we find that our method is able to perform goal reaching tasks more effectively than model-based planning approaches that utilize other reward specification techniques, as well as purely model-free methods. By leveraging offline data collected without a specific goal in mind, our method may make it possible to utilize large, unstructured, open-world robotic manipulation datasets. Scaling up this method to real-world systems and large data sources therefore represents a particularly exciting direction for future work, which may broaden the capabilities and generality of robotic systems.

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A MBOLD IMPLEMENTATION DETAILS

A.1 DISTANCE FUNCTION

This section explains the implementation details for our distance function. Following prior work (Fujimoto et al., 2018), we learn two independent Q-functions and use the *minimum* for performing Bellman backups. Recall that we sampled goals from two distributions: future states in the same trajectories, and states from different trajectories where the robot arm was in a similar position. To implement the second strategy, we fit a k-nearest neighbors graph on 200000 (about 60% of total) dataset observations, and use the ℓ_2 arm joint distance as the similarity key. Each batch contains equal numbers of transitions generated from each goal sampling method. For computational efficiency, we implement the k-NN search using the GPU-enabled FAISS library (Johnson et al., 2017).

We also modify the reward specification scheme by providing a small positive reward at each step where the goal is not reached, and then a large positive reward upon reaching the goal. Specifically, we choose to give a reward of 1 by default and 10 when the goal is reached (compared to 0 and 1 respectively as presented in the discussion in Section 4), although we do not extensively tune this parameter. We find that it does not affect performance in a statistically significant way (results for each reward choice are within 1 standard deviation of one another) to choose this reward over the $(0, 1)$ rewards. Note that this does not change the interpretation of the Q-function as a shortest path distance, merely slightly complicating the conversion calculations from Q-values to distances in timesteps.

Finally, we add an additional loss term to perform conservative Q-learning (CQL) (Kumar et al., 2020), a method for offline model-free RL, which penalizes Q-values of randomly selected actions and increases Q-values of in-dataset actions. We use the Lagrangian version of CQL to automatically tune the weighting term, and detail the parameters below. We find using CQL improves performance on the door sliding task from a mean success rate of 41% to 58%, but does not significantly impact performance on the others.

The Q-function network architecture consists of convolutional and fully connected layers. We define a network called the *convolutional encoder*, which will be used throughout the appendix. This takes as input an image of shape $64 \times 64 \times 6$, containing the starting and goal images concatenated channel-wise, and consists of 4 2D convolutional layers, with $[8, 16, 32, 64]$ filters, respectively, with all with kernel size $(4, 4)$ and strides of $(2, 2)$. We use Leaky ReLU activations after each intermediate convolutional layer, and batch-norm layers after the second and third Leaky ReLUs.

We flatten the output of the convolutional encoder and feed the features through 6 fully-connected linear layers of 128 units each, with the final layer outputting a single value. Each intermediate fully-connected layer is followed by a ReLu activation and a batch-norm layer.

The actor network architecture first contains the above "convolutional encoder", whose outputs are flattened and input into a 10 layer MLP with 128 fully connected units each, and ReLu activations and batch-norm layers in between. The final output, of dimension 4, is passed through a $\tanh$ activation to constrain it to the normalized action space $[-1, 1]$.

Additional training hyperparameters are detailed in Table 2.

A.2 MODEL-PREDICTIVE CONTROL

In Table 3, we describe the parameters for model-based planning in our experiments. These parameters are shared across all tasks and planning costs (in ablation experiments). Most values are selected based on prior work (Ebert et al., 2018b). We find that replanning every 6 steps produces slightly better performance than replanning every 13 steps, but not by a large margin, and we do not tune this further due to computation constraints. We sample actions using the filtering scheme described in Nagabandi et al. (2020) to make sequences smoother in time. We initialize sampling distributions using each environment's data collection parameters, as shown in Table 4.

To compute the planning cost described in Equation 3, we maximize over α by feeding in the final predicted state to the policy network learned by TD3, and using the outputted action as the maximizer.

Dataset size	10000 trajectories
Train/test/val split	$0.9/0.05/0.05$
Trajectory length	30 steps
Observation dimensions	$64 \times 64 \times 3$
State observations in kNN graph	200000
Goal relabeling sampling parameter (p)	0.3 (tuned over $[0.2, 0.3]$)
Discount factor (γ)	0.8
Learning rate	3e-4
Target network update Polyak factor	0.995
Batch size	64
Actor network noise σ	0.1
Actor network maximum noise magnitude	0.2
Training iterations	93750 (300 epochs)
Optimizer	Adam
CQL Lagrange multiplier learning rate	1e-3
CQL slack parameter τ (object pushing)	3.0
CQL slack parameter τ (reaching)	3.0
CQL slack parameter τ (door sliding)	10.0
CQL number of randomly selected actions	10

Table 2: Hyperparameters for distance learning

Planning horizon (h)	13 steps
Actions executed per planning step (k)	6 actions
CEM Iterations	3 iterations
Elite sample fraction	0.05 (10 samples)
Samples per CEM iteration	200 samples

Table 3: Hyperparameters for model-based planning

A.3 Environments

The Sawyer environments are adapted from the Meta-World benchmark (Yu et al., 2019a), and the *door sliding* environment is based off of the environment presented by Lynch et al. (2020). For each task, we define the 4-dimensional action space $\mathcal{A}$ such that actions control the Cartesian position of the robot's end-effector, as well as the robot's gripper.

We randomly generate a set of 100 different test goals for each setting. Each task is defined by a goal image and starting state, on which all methods are tested. We define success for each task in terms of the final distance to the goal of each relevant object, e.g. object position for the object repositioning task. A trial is considered successful if the final distance is below a certain threshold ϵ manually chosen for each task, listed in the table below. We evaluate the success rate of each method over 5 different random training seeds.

We generate offline datasets for each task by running random policies for $1e4$ episodes of 30 timesteps each. The random policy actions are drawn using a filtering technique, which smooths random zero-mean Gaussian samples across time. We apply the correlated noise scheme described by Nagabandi et al. (2020), setting the hyperparameter $\beta = 0.5$. The parameters of the multi-variate Gaussian samples in each dimension are listed in Table 4.

	Reaching	Object pushing	Door sliding
Data colln. stdev ($diag(\Sigma)$)	[0.6, 0.6, 0.3, 0.3]	[0.6, 0.6, 0.3, 0.3]	[0.3, 0.3, 0.3, 0.15]
Object compared in success threshold	Arm end effector	Object	Slide
Success distance threshold	0.05m	0.05m	0.075m

Table 4: Environment and task details

B COMPARATIVE EVALUATION IMPLEMENTATION DETAILS

B.1 RIG

In this section, we will discuss implementation details of our adaptation of RIG. We begin by training a β-VAE with latent dimension 8. The VAE is trained on randomly sampled states from the entire offline dataset. For the loss, we use a combination of a maximum likelihood term and a KL divergence term which constrains the latent space to a unit Gaussian. In particular, we compute the mean pixel error, that is, $\frac{1}{HW}\|s - \hat{s}\|_2^2$, where s is the original image, and $\hat{s}$ is the reconstruction, both normalized to be in $[0, 1]$. We add this to the KL divergence between the latent distribution and the unit Gaussian, with a weighting factor of $1e^{-3}$ on the KL penalty.

The architecture of the VAE encoder consists of the "convolutional encoder" described in section A.1, whose features are passed through two FC layers with 128 units with a ReLu activation and batch-norm layer in between. The VAE decoder takes as input latent states into two FC layers with 128 units with a batch-norm layer and ReLu activation after each. This is followed by the inverted architecture of the encoder, consisting of transposed 2D convolutions.

Then, we perform model-free RL in a modified MDP, using encoded observations as a substitute for environment observations, and computing rewards as negative ℓ_2 distances in latent space. We sample random goals from the multivariate Gaussian prior ($\mathcal{N}(0, I)$) at the beginning of every episode. We use the open-source implementation of soft actor-critic (SAC) in RLKit, and use the default SAC parameters and architecture found in the implementation, making the following modifications: We increase the number of layers of all MLP networks from 2 to 6. We use a maximum path length of 30 steps for consistency with our other experiments, and a discount factor of 0.95. Along with the goal sampled from the prior at the beginning of each episode, we find that relabeling goals with the achieved observation at the end of the trajectory improves performance, and add these transitions to the replay buffer as well. Note that unlike in the original RIG formulation, we do *not* update the weights of the learned VAE using data collected online. We evaluate the learned policy after 600 epochs of training, long after environment returns plateau.

B.2 DREAMER

Dreamer, a model-based method for image-based tasks, also uses a combination of value functions and planning. We adapt Dreamer from its original single-task setting to learn a goal-conditioned policy, reward predictor, and value function; however, we do not condition the dynamics model on the goal. Dreamer has been previously demonstrated only in settings where the environment provides rewards to the agent, so we modify the method to learn from unlabeled, offline data by using experience replay. We find that using an indicator reward function as in our method or a heuristically defined reward function, image MSE, causes Dreamer to struggle to learn. We thus additionally demonstrate the performance of Dreamer using a manually specified arm distance reward for the Sawyer reaching task.

We build off of the open source implementation of Dreamer by the original authors, written in TensorFlow2 and found at https://github.com/danijar/dreamer. Specifically, to modify the networks to support goal-conditioning, we add independent convolutional encoders which take the goal image as input to each network. Each encoder consists of 2D convolution layers with $[32, 64, 128, 256]$ filters and kernel sizes of 4 to each network, and we concatenate the flattened features to the inputs of each network. We additionally increase the number of fully-connected layers for the value and actor networks from 3 and 2 respectively to 10. We use a discount factor of $\gamma = 0.95$. All other hyperparameter values are defaults from the public implementation.

For training, we relabel trajectories sampled from the fixed, offline dataset with a uniformly randomly selected observation from the trajectory as the goal. In most of our experiments, we compute the negative pixel-wise MSE as the reward, but in one reaching experiment, we use the negative ℓ_2 Euclidean distance between the arm end-effector position and the goal end-effector position. We train for 2000 iterations for each experiment, although initial experiments in which we trained for 20x longer did not yield improved results.

B.3 GOAL-CONDITIONED BEHAVIOR CLONING

To train a goal-conditioned behavior cloning policy, we begin by relabeling random transitions from the dataset with goals which are later achieved in those trajectories. Specifically, we sample state-goal pairs from trajectories in the dataset by first selecting the initial state index t_i uniformly from all timesteps, and then selecting the goal state index t_g uniformly from timesteps greater than t_i. We then train a neural network to predict the transition action a_i given the state s_i and the relabeled goal s_g, using a mean-squared error loss.

The network architecture is the same as that of the actor network used in Q-learning for MBOLD, described in Appendix A.1. We train the model for 3125000 iterations (1000 epochs) using a batch size of 32, and use the same optimizer and learning rate as the distance learned for MBOLD.

B.4 SEARCH ON THE REPLAY BUFFER

For SoRB, we train a distributional Q-function to represent distances as in the original paper. Distributional RL discretizes possible value estimates into a set of bins – we use 10 for all of our experiments. We train this distributional Q-function for 300 epochs, as in the distance function training for MBOLD. We also use the same architecture and training scheme, altering the number of outputs to 10 bins and using the KL-divergence loss for the distributional Q-function as in Eysenbach et al. (2019). However, unlike in Eysenbach et al. (2019), we train on just the fixed, offline dataset. We then perform the planning portion of SoRB with the "maxdist" parameter set to 4, after manual tuning. We use a graph size of 2000 states for all experiments, due to computational constraints.

We find that the policy learned through Q-learning performs very poorly at reaching subgoals, so we instead substitute the GCBC policy for this purpose. We find that this greatly improves performance across all tasks.

B.5 VISUAL FORESIGHT

To compare MBOLD to visual foresight, we use the same dynamics model and planning setup as in MBOLD, however, we substitute the learned dynamical distance function with the ℓ_2 pixel error cost used in visual foresight.

C ABLATION EXPERIMENTS IMPLEMENTATION DETAILS

C.1 VAE DISTANCE

We use the same architecture as the VAE used in the RIG comparison described in Appendix B. We set the latent space dimension to 256 and weight the KL divergence term using a factor of $1e^{-5}$. We train the model for 3125000 iterations (1000 epochs) using a batch size of 32, and use the same optimizer and learning rate as the distance learned for MBOLD.

C.2 TEMPORAL DISTANCE REGRESSION

To train the temporal distance regression model, we sample state-goal pairs from trajectories in the dataset by first selecting the initial state index t_i uniformly from all timesteps, and then selecting the goal state index t_g uniformly from timesteps greater than t_i. We compute the label for this pair as $\min(t_g - t_i, maxdist)$, where $maxdist$ is a hyperparameter we set to 10. The $maxdist$ parameter helps to improve the optimality of distances on average. We train the neural network to regress this target label using an ℓ_2 error loss. We train the network for 3125000 iterations (1000 epochs) with a batch size of 32, and use the same optimizer and learning rate as the distance learned for MBOLD.

The architecture for the temporal distance regression model begins with the convolutional encoder described in Appendix B. Its flattened outputs are fed into 5 fully-connected layers of 256 units each, with batch-norm and ReLu activations after each intermediate layer.

C.3 Q-FUNCTION POLICY

We find that the policy directly learned by our method when learning distances performs extremely poorly. However, performing Q-learning using random shooting over 100 uniformly random actions selected from $[-1, 1]^4$ to optimize over actions to compute target values produces much better results when used directly as a policy, compared to using an actor network to perform this optimization as in our method. Therefore, we report results from acting according to this random shooting method. At test time, we estimate the optimal action $a^\star = \arg\max_a Q(s_t, a, g)$ by again sampling 100 uniformly random actions, and selecting the best one.