LS^3: Latent Space Safe Sets for Long-Horizon Visuomotor Control of Iterative Tasks

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Abstract: Reinforcement learning (RL) algorithms have shown impressive success in exploring high-dimensional environments to learn complex, long-horizon tasks, but often exhibit unsafe behaviors and can require a prohibitive amount of environment interactions that can be inefficient and pose significant safety concerns to the robot and its surroundings when exploration is unconstrained. A promising strategy for safe learning in dynamically uncertain environments is requiring that the agent can robustly return to states where task success (and therefore safety) can be guaranteed. While this approach has been successful in low-dimensions, enforcing this constraint in environments with high-dimensional state spaces, such as images, is challenging. We present Latent Space Safe Sets (LS^3), which extends this strategy to iterative, long-horizon tasks with image observations by using suboptimal demonstrations and a learned dynamics model to restrict exploration to the neighborhood of a learned Safe Set where the agent is confident in task completion. We evaluate LS^3 on 4 domains, including a challenging sequential pushing task in simulation and a physical cable routing task. We find that LS^3 can use its learned Safe Set in conjunction with model-based planning to restrict exploration and learn more efficiently than prior algorithms while satisfying constraints. See https://tinyurl.com/latent-safe-sets for supplementary material.

Keywords: Reinforcement Learning, Imitation Learning, Safety

1 Introduction

Visual planning over learned forward dynamics models is a popular area of research in robotic control from images [1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7], as it enables closed-loop, model-based control for tasks where the state of the system is not directly observable or difficult to analytically model, such as the configuration of a sheet of fabric or segment of cable. These methods learn predictive models over either images or a learned latent space, which are then used by model predictive control (MPC) to optimize image-based task costs. While these approaches have significant promise, there are several open challenges in learning policies from visual observations. First, reward specification is particularly challenging for visuomotor control tasks, because high-dimensional observations often do not expose the necessary features required to design informative reward functions [8], especially for long-horizon tasks. Second, while many prior reinforcement learning methods have been successfully applied to image-based control tasks [9, 10, 11, 12, 13], learning policies from image observations often requires extensive exploration due to the high dimensionality of the observation space and the difficulties in reward specification, making safe and efficient learning exceedingly challenging.

Safe reinforcement learning is of critical importance in robotics, as unconstrained exploration can cause serious damage to the robot and its surroundings [14]. Safe learning often leads to efficient learning, as safe learning prevents the agent from exploring clearly suboptimal behaviors. There has been significant prior work on safe policy learning in low-dimensional observation spaces [15, 16, 17, 18, 19]. Thananjeyan et al. [18] present a safe and efficient algorithm for policy learning for tasks with a low-variance start state distribution and fixed goal state by learning a *Safe Set*, which captures the set of states from which the agent has previously completed the task. Safe Sets are a common ingredient in classical control algorithms for guaranteeing policy improvement and constraint satisfaction [19, 17, 20], and restricting exploration to the neighborhood of this set can lead

Submitted to the 5th Conference on Robot Learning (CoRL 2021). Do not distribute.

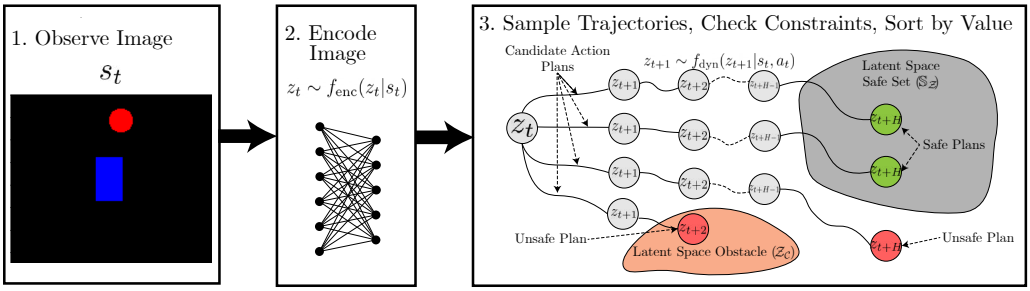

Figure 1: **Latent Space Safe Sets (LS^3):** At time t, LS^3 observes an image s_t of the environment. The image is first encoded to a latent vector $z_t \sim f_{\text{enc}}(z_t|s_t)$. Then, LS^3 uses a sampling-based optimization procedure to optimize H-length action sequences by sampling H-length latent trajectories over the learned latent dynamics model f_{dyn}. For each sampled trajectory, LS^3 checks whether latent space obstacles are avoided and if the terminal state in the trajectory falls in the Latent Space Safe Set. The terminal state constraint encourages the algorithm to ensure it can plan back to regions of safety and task confidence, but still enables exploration. For feasible trajectories, the sum of rewards and value of the terminal state are computed and used for sorting. LS^3 executes the first action in the optimized plan and then performs this procedure again at the next timestep.

to highly efficient and safe learning for long-horizon tasks [18]. Extending these methods to variable start and goal sets in low-dimensional settings has been studied in Thananjeyan et al. [17]. However, scaling these approaches to high-dimensional image observations is challenging, since images do not directly expose details about the system state or dynamics that are typically needed for formal controller analysis [17, 19, 20]. In this work, we study learning in the iterative setting, where the start and goal sets have low variance, and focus on scaling these approaches to image-based inputs. The proposed algorithm makes several practical relaxations and maintains the same safety guarantees under the same additional assumptions as in Thananjeyan et al. [18, 17].

We introduce Latent Space Safe Sets (LS^3), a model-based RL algorithm for visuomotor policy learning that provides safety by learning a continuous relaxation of a Safe Set in a learned latent space. This Latent Space Safe Set ensures that the agent can plan back to regions in which it is confident in task completion even when learning in high dimensional spaces. This constraint makes it possible to (1) improve safely by ensuring that the agent can consistently complete the task (and therefore avoid unsafe behavior) and (2) learn efficiently since the agent only explores promising states in the immediate neighborhood of those in which it was previously successful. LS^3 additionally enforces user-specified state space constraints by estimating the probability of constraint violations over a learned, probabilistic, latent space dynamics model. We contribute (1) Latent Space Safe Sets (LS^3), a novel reinforcement learning algorithm for safely and efficiently learning long-horizon visual planning tasks, (2) simulation experiments on 3 continuous control visuomotor control tasks suggesting that LS^3 can learn to improve upon demonstrations more safely and efficiently than baselines, (3) physical experiments on a vision-based cable routing task on the da Vinci surgical robot suggesting that LS^3 can learn a policy more efficiently than prior algorithms while consistently completing the task and satisfying constraints during learning.

2 Related Work

2.1 Safe, Iterative Learning Control

In iterative learning control (ILC), the agent tracks an initially provided reference trajectory and uses data from controller rollouts to iteratively refine tracking performance [21]. Rosolia et al. [22], Rosolia and Borrelli [23, 19] present a new class of algorithms, known as Learning Model Predictive Control (LMPC), which are reference-free and instead iteratively *improve* upon the performance of an initial feasible trajectory. To achieve this, Rosolia et al. [22], Rosolia and Borrelli [23, 19] present model predictive control algorithms that use data from controller rollouts to learn a Safe Set and value function, with which recursive feasibility, stability, and local optimality can be guaranteed given a known, deterministic nonlinear system or stochastic linear system under certain regularity assumptions. However, a core challenge with these algorithms is that they assume that system dynamics are known, and cannot easily be applied to high-dimensional control problems. Thananjeyan et al. [18] extends the LMPC framework to higher dimensional control settings in which system dynamics are unknown and must be estimated iteratively from experience, but the visuomotor control setting introduces a number of new challenges for iterative learning control algorithms such as learning

system dynamics, Safe Sets, and value functions which can flexibly and efficiently accommodate visual inputs.

2.2 Model Based Reinforcement Learning

There has been significant recent progress in algorithms which combine ideas from model-based planning and control with deep learning [24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29]. These algorithms are gaining popularity in the robotics community as they enable leaning complex policies from data while maintaining some of the sample efficiency and safety benefits of classical model-based control techniques. However, these algorithms typically require hand-engineered dense cost functions for task specification, which can often be difficult to provide, especially in high-dimensional spaces. This motivates leveraging demonstrations (possibly suboptimal) to provide an initial signal regarding desirable agent behavior. There has been some prior work on leveraging demonstrations in model-based algorithms such as Quinlan and Khatib [30] and Ichnowski et al. [31], which use model-based control with known dynamics to refine initially suboptimal motion plans, and Fu et al. [26], which uses demonstrations to seed a learned dynamics model for fast online adaptation using iLQR [26]. Thananjeyan et al. [18], Zhu et al. [32] present ILC algorithms which rapidly improve upon suboptimal demonstrations when system dynamics are unknown. However, these algorithms either require knowledge of system dynamics [30, 31] or are limited to low-dimensional state spaces [26, 18, 32] and cannot be flexibly applied to visuomotor control tasks.

2.3 Reinforcement Learning from Pixels

Reinforcement learning and model-based planning from visual observations is gaining significant recent interest as RGB images provide an easily available observation space for robot learning [1, 33]. Recent work has proposed a number of model-free and model-based algorithms that have seen success in laboratory settings in a number of robotic tasks when learning from visual observations [34, 35, 10, 36, 12, 13, 1, 37, 33]. However, two core issues that prevent application of many RL algorithms in practice, inefficient exploration and safety, are significantly exacerbated when learning from high-dimensional visual observations in which the space of possible behaviors is very large and the features required to determine whether the robot is safe are not readily exposed. There has been significant prior work on addressing inefficiencies in exploration for visuomotor control such as latent space planning [2, 33, 37] and goal-conditioned reinforcement learning [13, 10]. However, safe reinforcement learning for visuomotor tasks has received substantially less attention. Thananjeyan et al. [14] and Kahn et al. [38] present reinforcement learning algorithms which estimate the likelihood of constraint violations to avoid them [14] or reduce the robot's velocity [38]. Unlike these algorithms, which focus on presenting methods to avoid violating user-specified constraints, LS^3 additionally provides consistent task completion during learning by limiting exploration to the neighborhood of prior task successes. This difference makes LS^3 less susceptible to the challenges of unconstrained exploration present in standard model-free reinforcement learning algorithms.

3 Problem Statement

We consider an agent interacting in a finite horizon goal-conditioned Markov Decision Processes (MDP) which can be described with the tuple $\mathcal{M} = (\mathcal{S}, \mathcal{G}, \mathcal{A}, P(\cdot|\cdot,\cdot), R(\cdot,\cdot), \mu, T)$. $\mathcal{S}$ and $\mathcal{A}$ are the state and action spaces, $P : \mathcal{S} \times \mathcal{A} \times \mathcal{S} \to [0, 1]$ maps a state and action to a probability distribution over subsequent states, $R : \mathcal{S} \times \mathcal{A} \times \mathcal{S} \to \mathbb{R}$ is the reward function, μ is the initial state distribution ($s_0 \sim \mu$), and T is the time horizon. In this work, the agent is only provided with RGB image observations $s_t \in \mathbb{R}_+^{W \times H \times 3} = \mathcal{S}$, where W and H are the image width and height in pixels, respectively. We consider tasks in the iterative learning control setting, where the agent must reach goal set $\mathcal{G} \subseteq \mathcal{S}$ as efficiently as possible and the support of μ is small. While there are a number of possible choices of reward functions that would encourage fast convergence to $\mathcal{G}$, providing shaped reward functions can be exceedingly challenging, especially when learning complex tasks in which agents are only provided with high dimensional observations. Thus, as in Thananjeyan et al. [18], we consider a sparse reward function that only provides a signal upon task completion: $R(s, a, s') = 0$ if $s' \in \mathcal{G}$ and -1 otherwise. To incorporate constraints, we augment $\mathcal{M}$ with an extra constraint indicator function $\mathcal{C} : \mathcal{S} \to \{0, 1\}$ which indicates whether a state satisfies user-specified state-space constraints, such as avoiding known obstacles. This is consistent with the modified CMDP formulation used in [14]. We assume that R and $\mathcal{C}$ can be evaluated on the current state of the system, but cannot be used for planning. We make this assumption because in practice we plan over predicted future states, which may not be predicted at sufficiently high fidelity to expose the necessary information to directly evaluate R and $\mathcal{C}$ during planning.

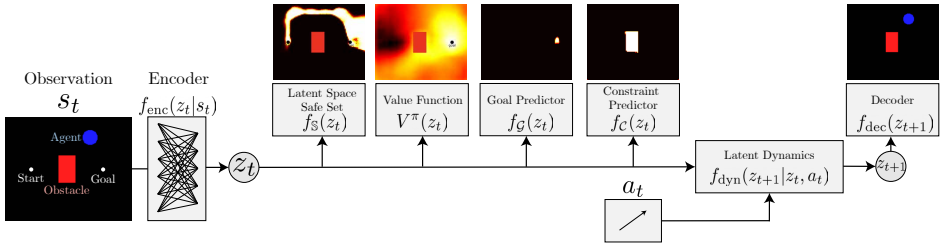

Figure 2: **LS^3 Learned Models**: LS^3 learns a low-dimensional latent representation of image-observations (Section 4.1) and learns a dynamics model, value function, reward function, constraint classifier, and Safe Set for constrained planning and task-completion driven exploration in this learned latent space. These models are then used for model-based planning to maximize the total value of predicted latent states (Section 4.3) while enforcing the Safe Set (Section 4.2) and user-specified constraints (Section 4.3).

Given a policy $\pi : \mathcal{S} \rightarrow \mathcal{A}$, its expected total return in $\mathcal{M}$ can be defined as $R^{\pi} = \mathbb{E}_{\pi,\mu,P}\left[\sum_t R(s_t, a_t)\right]$. Furthermore, we define $P_C^{\pi}(s)$ as the probability of future constraint violation (within time horizon T) under policy π from state s. Then the objective is to maximize the expected return R^{π} while maintaining a constraint violation probability lower than some $\delta_{\mathcal{C}}$. This can be written formally as follows:

$$\pi^* = \arg\max_{\pi \in \Pi} \{R^{\pi} : \mathbb{E}_{s_0 \sim \mu}\left[P_C^{\pi}(s_0)\right] \leq \delta_{\mathcal{C}}\} \tag{1}$$

We assume that the agent is provided with an offline dataset $\mathcal{D}$ of transitions in the environment of which some subset $\mathcal{D}_{\text{constraint}} \subsetneq \mathcal{D}$ are constraint violating and some subset $\mathcal{D}_{\text{success}} \subsetneq \mathcal{D}$ appear in successful demonstrations from a suboptimal supervisor. As in [14], $\mathcal{D}_{\text{constraint}}$ contains examples of constraint violating behaviors (for example from prior runs of different policies or collected under human supervision) so that the agent can learn about states which violate user-specified constraints.

4 Latent Space Safe Sets (LS^3)

Here we describe how LS^3 uses demonstrations and online environment interaction to safely learn iteratively improving policies. Section 4.1 describes how we learn a low-dimensional latent representation of image observations to facilitate efficient model-based planning. To enable this planning, we learn a probabilistic forward dynamics model as in [28] in the learned latent space and models to estimate whether plans will likely complete the task (Section 4.2) and to estimate future rewards and constraint violations (Section 4.3) from predicted trajectories. Finally, in Section 4.4, we discuss how all of these components are combined in LS^3 to enable safe and efficient policy improvement. Dataset $\mathcal{D}$ is expanded using online rollouts of LS^3 and used to update all latent space models (Sections 4.2 and-4.3) after every K rollouts. See Algorithm 1 and the supplement for further details on training procedures and data collection for all components.

Algorithm 1 Latent Space Safe Sets (LS^3)

Require: offline dataset $\mathcal{D}$, number of updates U
Train VAE encoder f_{enc} and decoder f_{dec} (Section 4.1) using data from $\mathcal{D}$
Train dynamics f_{dyn}, Safe Set classifier $f_{\mathbb{S}}$(Section 4.2), and the value function V goal indicator $f_{\mathcal{G}}$, and constraint estimator $f_{\mathcal{C}}$ (Section 4.3) using data from $\mathcal{D}$.
for $j \in \{1, \ldots, U\}$ **do**
  for $k \in \{1, \ldots, K\}$ **do**
    Sample starting state s_0 from μ.
    for $t \in \{1, \ldots, T\}$ **do**
      Choose and execute a_t (Section 4.4)
      Observe s_{t+1}, reward r_t, constraint c_t.
      $\mathcal{D} := \mathcal{D} \cup \{(s_t, a_t, s_{t+1}, r_t, c_t)\}$
  Update f_{dyn}, V, $f_{\mathcal{G}}$, $f_{\mathcal{C}}$, and $f_{\mathbb{S}}$ with data from $\mathcal{D}$.

4.1 Learning a Latent Space for Planning

Learning compressed representations of images has been a popular approach in vision based control to facilitate efficient algorithms for planning and control which can reason about lower dimensional

inputs [2, 37, 6, 39, 40, 33]. To learn such a representation, we train a β-variational autoencoder [41] on states in $\mathcal{D}$ to map states to a probability distribution over a d-dimensional latent space $\mathcal{Z}$. The resulting encoder network $f_{\text{enc}}(z|s)$ is then used to sample latent vectors $z_t \sim f_{\text{enc}}(z_t|s_t)$ to train a forward dynamics model, value function, reward estimator, constraint classifier, Safe Set, and combine these elements to define a policy for model-based planning. Motivated by Laskin et al. [42], during training we augment inputs to the encoder with random cropping, which we found to be helpful in learning representations that are useful for planning. For all environments we use a latent dimension of $d = 32$, as in [2] and found that varying d did not significantly affect performance.

4.2 Latent Safe Sets for Model-Based Control

LS^3 learns a binary classifier for latent states to learn a latent space Safe Set that represents states from which the agent has high confidence in task completion based on prior experience. Because the agent can reach the goal from these states, they are safe: the agent can avoid constraint violations by simply completing the task as before. While classical algorithms use known dynamics to construct Safe Sets, we approximate this set using successful trajectories from prior iterations. At each iteration, the algorithm collects K trajectories in the environment. Let s_k^j denote the set of states in trajectory $k \in [1, K]$ of iteration j: $s_k^j = \{s_{j,t}^k | t \in \mathbb{N}\}$. Let $\mathbb{I}_K^j$ denote the set of tuples (j, k) such that trajectory k of π_j was successful: $\mathbb{I}_k^j = \{(i, k) | i \in [0, j), k \in [0, K], \lim_{t\to\infty} s_{k,t}^i \in \mathcal{G}\}$. We define the sampled Safe Set at iteration j, $\mathbb{S}^j := \bigcup_{(i,k)\in\mathbb{I}_K^j} s_k^i$ as follows: $\mathbb{S}^j = \bigcup_{(i,k)\in\mathbb{I}_K^j} s_k^i$. In short, this is the set of states from which the agent has successfully navigated to $\mathcal{G}$ at iteration j of training.

This discrete set is difficult to plan to with continuous-valued state distributions so we leverage data from $\mathcal{D}_{\text{success}}$ (data in the discrete Safe Set), data from $\mathcal{D} \setminus \mathcal{D}_{\text{success}}$ (data outside the Safe Set), and the learned encoder from Section 4.1 to learn a continuous relaxation of this set in latent space (the Latent Safe Set). We train a neural network with a binary cross-entropy loss to learn a binary classifier $f_{\mathbb{S}}(\cdot)$ that predicts the probability of a state s_t with encoding z_t being in $\mathbb{S}^j$. To mitigate the negative bias that appears when trajectories that start in safe regions fail, we utilize the intuition that if a state $s_{t+1} \in \mathbb{S}^j$ then it is likely that s_t is also safe. To do this, rather than just predict $\mathbb{1}_{\mathbb{S}^j}$, we train $f_{\mathbb{S}}$ to predict $\max(\mathbb{1}_{\mathbb{S}^j}, \gamma_{\mathbb{S}} f_{\mathbb{S}}(s_{t+1}))$. The relaxed Latent Safe Set is parameterized by the superlevel sets of $f_{\mathbb{S}}$, where the level $\delta_{\mathbb{S}}$ is adaptively set during execution: $\mathbb{S}_{\mathcal{Z}}^j = \{z_t | f_{\mathbb{S}}(\cdot)(z_t) \geq \delta_{\mathbb{S}}\}$.

4.3 Reward and Constraint Estimation

In this work, we define rewards based on whether the agent has reached a state $s \in \mathcal{G}$, but we need rewards that are defined on predictions from the dynamics, which may not correspond to valid real images. To address this, we train a classifier $f_{\mathcal{G}} : \mathcal{Z} \to \{0, 1\}$ to map the encoding of a state to whether the state is contained in $\mathcal{G}$ using terminal states in $\mathcal{D}_{\text{success}}$ (which are known to be in $\mathcal{G}$) and other states in $\mathcal{D}$. However, in the temporally-extended, sparse reward tasks we consider, reward prediction alone is insufficient because rewards only indicate whether the agent is in the goal set, and thus provide no signal on task progress unless the agent can plan to the goal set. To address this, as in prior MPC-literature [18, 17, 19, 8], we train a recursively-defined value function (details in the supplement). Similar to the reward function, we use the encoder (Section 4.1) to train a classifier $f_{\mathcal{C}} : \mathcal{Z} \to [0, 1]$ with data of constraint violating states from $\mathcal{D}_{\text{constraint}}$ and the constraint satisfying states in $\mathcal{D} \setminus \mathcal{D}_{\text{constraint}}$ to map the encoding of a state to the probability of constraint violation.

4.4 Model-Based Planning with LS^3

LS^3 aims to maximize total rewards attained in the environment while limiting constraint violation probability within some threshold $\delta_{\mathcal{C}}$ (equation 1). We optimize an approximation of this objective over an H-step receding horizon with model-predictive control. Precisely, LS^3 solves the following optimization problem to generate an action to execute at timestep t:

$$\underset{a_{t:t+H-1}\in\mathcal{A}^H}{\arg\max} \quad \mathbb{E}_{z_{t:t+H}}\left[\sum_{i=1}^{H-1} f_{\mathcal{G}}(z_{t+i}) + V^{\pi}(z_{t+H})\right] \tag{2}$$

$$\text{s.t.} \quad z_t \sim f_{\text{enc}}(z_t|s_t) \tag{3}$$

$$z_{j+1} \sim f_{\text{dyn}}(z_{j+1}|z_j, a_j)\ \forall j \in \{t, \ldots, t+H-1\} \tag{4}$$

$$\hat{\mathbb{P}}\left(z_{t+H} \in \mathbb{S}_{\mathcal{Z}}^{j-1}\right) \geq 1 - \delta_{\mathbb{S}} \tag{5}$$

$$\hat{\mathbb{P}}(z_{t+i} \in \mathcal{Z}_{\mathcal{C}}) \leq \delta_{\mathcal{C}}\ \forall i \in \{0, \ldots, H-1\} \tag{6}$$

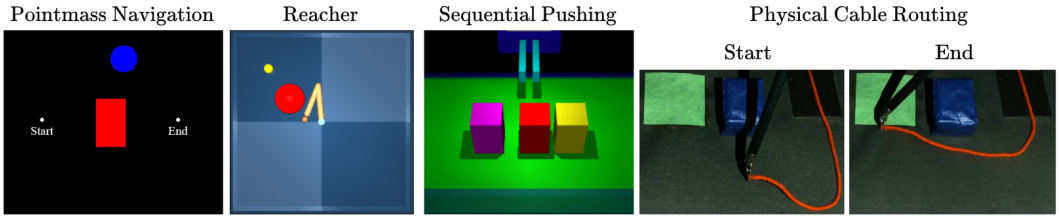

Figure 3: **Experimental Domains:** LS^3 is evaluated on 3 long-horizon, image-based, simulation environments: a visual navigation domain where the goal is to navigate the blue point mass to the right goal set while avoiding the red obstacle, a 2 degree of freedom reacher arm where the task is to navigate around a red obstacle to reach the yellow goal set, and a sequential pushing task where the robot must push each of 3 blocks forward a target displacement from left to right. We also evaluate LS^3 on a physical, cable-routing task on a da Vinci Surgical Robot, where the goal is to guide a red cable to a green target without the cable or robot arm colliding with the blue obstacle. This requires learning visual dynamics, because the agent must model how the rest of the cable will deform during manipulation to avoid collisions with the obstacle.

In this problem, the expectations and probabilities are taken with respect to the learned, probabilistic dynamics model $f_{\text{dyn}}(z_{t+1}|z_t, a_t)$. The optimization problem is solved approximately using the cross-entropy method (CEM) [43] which is a popular optimizer in model-based RL [44, 18, 17, 45, 14].

The objective function is the expected sum of future rewards if the agent executes $a_{t:t+H-1}$ and then subsequently executes π (equation 2). First, the current state s_t is encoded to z_t (equation 3). Then, for a candidate sequence of actions $a_{t:t+H-1}$, an H-step latent trajectory $\{z_{t+1}, \ldots, z_{t+H}\}$ is sampled from the learned dynamics f_{dyn} (equation 4). LS^3 constrains exploration using two chance constraints: (1) the terminal latent state in the plan must fall in the Safe Set (equation 5) and (2) all latent states in the trajectory must satisfy user-specified state-space constraints (equation 6). $\mathcal{Z}_{\mathcal{C}}$ is the set of all latent states such that the corresponding observation is constraint violating. The optimizer estimates constraint satisfaction probabilities for a candidate action sequence by simulating it repeatedly over f_{dyn}. The first chance constraint ensures the agent maintains the ability to return to safe states where it knows how to the task within H steps if necessary. Because the agent replans at each timestep, the agent need not return to the Safe Set: during training, the Safe Set expands, enabling further exploration. In practice, we set $\delta_{\mathbb{S}}$ for the Safe Set classifier $f_{\mathcal{S}}$ adaptively as described in the supplement. The second chance constraint encourages constraint violation probability of no more than $\delta_{\mathcal{C}}$. After solving the optimization problem, the agent executes the first action in the plan: $\pi(z_t) = a_t$ where a_t is the first element of $a^*_{t:t+H-1}$, observes a new state, and replans.

5 Experiments

We evaluate LS^3 on 3 robotic control tasks in simulation and a physical cable routing task on the da Vinci Research Kit (dVRK) [46]. Safe RL is of particular interest for surgical robots such as the dVRK due to its delicate structure, motivating safety, and relatively imprecise controls [18, 47], motivating closed-loop control. We study whether LS^3 can learn more safely and efficiently than algorithms that do not structure exploration based on prior task successes.

5.1 Comparisons

We evaluate LS^3 in comparison to prior algorithms that behavior clone suboptimal demonstrations before exploring online (**SACfD**) [48] or leverage offline reinforcement learning to learn a policy using all offline data before updating the policy online (**AWAC**) [49]. For both of these comparisons we enforce constraints via a tuned reward penalty of λ for constraint violations as in [16]. We also implement a version of SACfD with a learned recovery policy (**SACfD+RRL**) using the Recovery RL algorithm [14] to use prior constraint violating data to try to avoid constraint violating states. Finally, we compare LS^3 to an ablated version without the Safe Set constraint in equation 5 (**LS^3 ($-$Safe Set)**) to evaluate if the Safe Set promotes consistent task completion and stable learning. See the supplement for details on hyperparameters and offline data used for LS^3 and prior algorithms.

5.2 Evaluation Metrics

For each algorithm on each domain, we aggregate statistics over random seeds (10 for simulation experiments, 3 for the physical experiment), reporting the mean and standard error across the seeds. We present learning curves that show the total sum reward for each training trajectory to study how

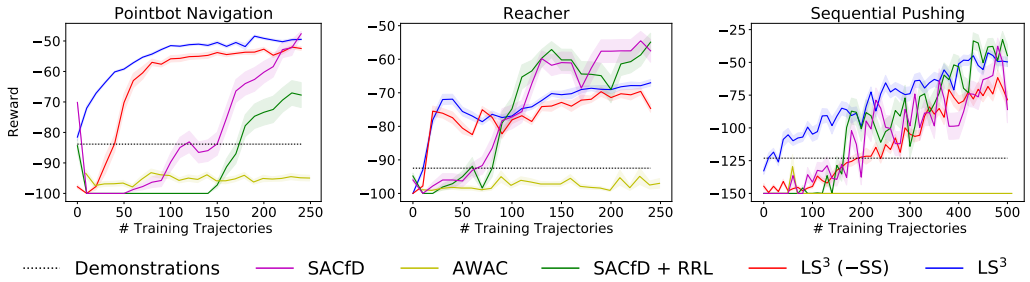

Figure 4: **Simulation Experiments Results:** Learning curves showing mean and standard error over 10 random seeds. We see that LS^3 consistently learns more quickly than baselines, as well as the ablated algorithm without the Safe Set. Although SACfD and SACfD+RRL eventually achieve similar reward values, we see that LS^3 is much more sample efficient and stable across random seeds.

efficiently LS^3 and the comparisons learn each task. Because all tasks use the sparse task completion based rewards defined in Section 3, the total reward for a trajectory is the time to reach the goal set, where more negative rewards correspond to slower convergence to $\mathcal{G}$. Thus, for a task with task horizon T, a total reward greater than $-T$ implies successful task completion. The state is frozen in place upon constraint violation until the task horizon elapses. We report task success and constraint satisfaction rates for LS^3 and comparisons to study if algorithms consistently complete the task during learning and satisfy user-specified state-space constraints. LS^3 collects $K = 10$ trajectories in between training phases on simulated tasks and $K = 5$ in between training phases for physical tasks, while the SACfD and AWAC comparisons update their parameters after each timestep. This presents a calibrated metric in terms of the amount of data collected across algorithms.

5.3 Domains

In simulation, we evaluate LS^3 on 3 vision-based continuous control domains that are illustrated in Figure 3. We evaluate LS^3 and comparisons on a constrained visual navigation task (Pointmass Navigation) where the agent navigates from a fixed start state to a fixed goal set while avoiding a large central obstacle. We study this domain to gain intuition and visualize the learned value function, goal/constraint indicators, and Safe Set in Figure 2. We then study a constrained image-based reaching task (Reacher) based on [50], where the objective is to navigate the end effector of a 2-link planar robotic arm to a yellow goal position without the end-effector entering a red stay out zone. We then study a challenging sequential image-based robotic pushing domain (Sequential Pushing), in which the objective is to push each of the 3 blocks forward on the table without pushing them to either side and causing them to fall out of the workspace. Finally, we evaluate LS^3 with an image-based physical experiment on the da Vinci Research Kit (dVRK) [51] (Figure 3), where the objective is to guide the endpoint of a cable to a goal region without letting the cable or end effector collide with an obstacle. The Pointmass Navigation and Reaching domains have a task horizon of $T = 100$ while the Sequential Pushing domain and physical experiment have task horizons of $T = 150$ and $T = 50$ respectively. See the supplement for more details on all domains.

5.4 Simulation Results

We find that LS^3 is able to learn more stably and efficiently than all comparisons across all simulated domains while converging to similar performance within 250 trajectories collected online (Figure 4). LS^3 is able to consistently complete the task during learning, while the comparisons, which do not learn a Safe Set to structure exploration based on prior successes, exhibit much less stable learning. Additionally, in Table 1 and Table 2, we report the task success rate and constraint violation rate of all algorithms during training. We find that LS^3 achieves a significantly higher task success rate than comparisons on all tasks. We also find that LS^3 violates constraints less often than comparisons on the Reacher task, but violates constraints more often than SACfD and SACfD+RRL on the other domains, likely due to SACfD and SACfD+RRL spending much less time in the neighborhood of constraint violating states during training due to their lower task success rates. We find that the AWAC comparison achieves very low task performance. While AWAC is designed for offline reinforcement learning, to the best of our knowledge, it has not been previously evaluated on long-horizon, image-based tasks as in this paper, which we hypothesize are very challenging for it.

We find LS^3 has a lower success rate when the Safe Set constraint is removed (LS^3($-$Safe Set)) as expected. The Safe Set is particularly important in the sequential pushing task, and LS^3 ($-$Safe Set)

Table 1: **Task Success Rate:** We present the mean and standard error of training-time task completion rate over 10 random seeds. We find LS^3 outperforms all comparisons across all 3 domains, with the gap increasing for the challenging sequential pushing task.

	SACfD	AWAC	SACfD+RRL	LS^3 ($-$SS)	LS^3
Pointmass Navigation	0.363 ± 0.068	0.312 ± 0.093	0.184 ± 0.053	0.818 ± 0.019	$\mathbf{0.988 \pm 0.004}$
Reacher	0.502 ± 0.072	0.255 ± 0.089	0.473 ± 0.056	0.736 ± 0.025	$\mathbf{0.870 \pm 0.024}$
Sequential Pushing	0.425 ± 0.064	0.006 ± 0.003	0.466 ± 0.065	0.366 ± 0.030	$\mathbf{0.648 \pm 0.049}$

Table 2: **Constraint Violation Rate:** We report mean and standard error of training-time constraint violation rate over 10 random seeds. LS^3 violates constraints less than comparisons on the Reacher task, but SAC and SACfD+RRL achieve lower constraint violation rates on the Navigation and Pushing tasks, likely due to spending less time in the neighborhood off constraint violating regions due to their much lower task success rates.

	SACfD	AWAC	SACfD+RRL	LS^3 ($-$SS)	LS^3
Pointmass Navigation	0.006 ± 0.002	0.104 ± 0.070	$\mathbf{0.001 \pm 0.001}$	0.019 ± 0.006	0.005 ± 0.001
Reacher	0.146 ± 0.039	0.398 ± 0.107	0.142 ± 0.031	0.247 ± 0.027	$\mathbf{0.102 \pm 0.027}$
Sequential Pushing	$\mathbf{0.033 \pm 0.003}$	0.138 ± 0.028	0.054 ± 0.006	0.122 ± 0.031	0.107 ± 0.016

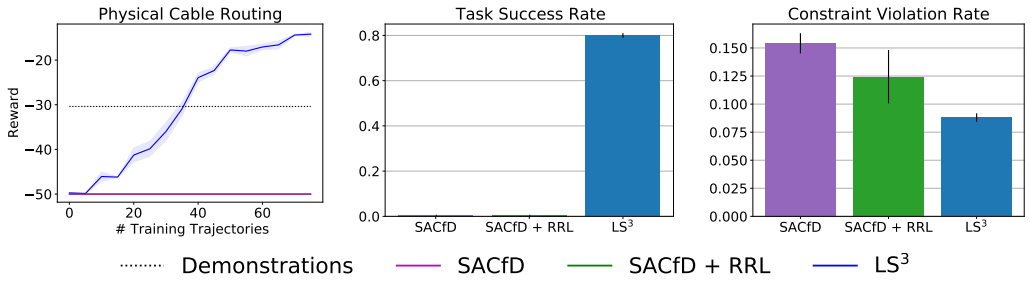

Figure 5: **Physical Cable Routing Results:** We present learning curves, task success rates and constraint violation rates with a mean and standard error across 3 random seeds. LS^3 quickly learns to complete the task more efficiently than the demonstrator while still violating constraints less often than the comparisons, which are unable to learn the task.

has a much lower task completion rate than LS^3. See the supplement for details on experimental parameters and offline data used for LS^3 and comparisons, ablations studying the effect of the planning horizon and threshold used to define the Safe Set, and sweeps of key hyperparameters for all prior algorithms to ensure a fair comparison.

5.5 Physical Results

In physical experiments, we compare LS^3 to SACfD and SACfD+RRL (Figure 5) on the physical cable routing task illustrated in Figure 3. We find LS^3 quickly outperforms the suboptimal demonstrations while succeeding at the task significantly more often than both comparisons, which are unable to learn the task and also violate constraints more than LS^3. We hypothesize that the difficulty of reasoning about cable collisions and deformation from images makes it challenging for prior algorithms to make sufficient task progress as they do not use prior successes to structure exploration. See the supplement for details on experimental parameters and offline data used for LS^3 and comparisons. We use data augmentation to increase the size of the dataset used to train f_{enc} and f_{dec}, taking the images in $\mathcal{D}$ and creating an expanded dataset by adding randomly sampled affine translations and perspective shifts, until $|\mathcal{D}_{\text{VAE}}| > 100000$.

6 Discussion and Future Work

We present LS^3, a scalable algorithm for safe and efficient policy learning for visuomotor tasks. LS^3 structures exploration by learning a safe set in a learned latent space, which captures the set of states from which the agent is confident in task completion. LS^3 then ensures that the agent can plan back to states in safe set, encouraging consistent task completion the task during learning. Experiments suggest that LS^3 is able to use this procedure to safely and efficiently learn 4 visuomotor control tasks, including a challenging sequential pushing task in simulation and a cable routing task on a physical robot. In future work, we are excited to explore further physical evaluation of LS^3 on safety critical visuomotor control tasks such as navigation of home support robots or surgical automation.

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