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Simulation-Based Analysis of Q-Learning Enhanced Braitenberg Vehicles for Obstacle Avoidance

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Abstract. Adaptive navigation on resource-constrained robots remains difficult because strict limits on compute, memory, and latency restrict the use of complex learning architectures. Braitenberg Vehicles (BVs) offer a minimalist control philosophy based on direct sensor–motor couplings, enabling fast, reactive behaviors without centralized planning. However, their fixed control rules often fail in dynamic or noisy environments. This study integrates a discretized Q-learning controller into a MATLAB/Simulink differential-drive BV model equipped with infrared sensors and PWM actuators to preserve BV simplicity while enabling online adaptation. The reward function jointly optimizes collision avoidance, path efficiency, and energy use, and an ε-greedy exploration strategy is annealed over 5,000 training episodes. Experiments in static mazes, dynamic obstacle fields, and noisy sensing conditions (σ = 5%) show that the hybrid BV reduces collision rates by 41–67% and shortens path length by 28% compared with classical BVs. The controller's <1 kB memory footprint and sub-millisecond decision latency meet the constraints of embedded platforms. Improvements under noise are statistically significant (100 trials, t-tests, $p < 0.05$). These results demonstrate that model-free reinforcement learning can be seamlessly integrated into reactive BV architectures, yielding robust adaptability without sacrificing computational simplicity, and provide a reproducible MATLAB/Simulink framework for benchmarking lightweight robotic systems in uncertain environments.

Keywords: Braitenberg vehicle; Q-learning; obstacle avoidance; minimalist robotics.

1. Introduction

Adaptive navigation on resource-constrained robots is challenging, as limited compute, memory, and strict latency budgets preclude heavy learning architectures. Braitenberg Vehicles (BVs) offer a minimalist alternative, using direct sensor–motor couplings to achieve rapid, robust behaviors without global planning. However, their fixed control rules often degrade in dynamic settings with moving obstacles or noisy sensors, restricting real-world applicability.

From Braitenberg's original experiments to Brooks' subsumption architecture, Foundational reactive paradigms showed that complex behaviors can emerge without centralized computation. Meanwhile, reinforcement learning (RL)—from tabular Q-learning to deep Q-networks—has achieved strong adaptability in navigation tasks, and hybrid approaches (e.g., Sakamoto et al., 2018) suggest benefits for cluttered environments. Yet such systems often exceed the computational limits of lightweight platforms.

In BVs, adjustable-gain controllers mitigate tuning difficulty but remain rule-bound and brittle under non-stationary or noisy conditions; evolutionary strategies can yield robust policies but require offline search and higher computational budgets, hindering real-time adaptation and transfer. A solution that retains BV minimalism while enabling online adaptation under dynamics and noise remains lacking.

This work introduces a Q-learning–enhanced BV with a discretized, sub-1 kB controller embedded in a MATLAB/Simulink differential-drive model. The system achieves sub-millisecond decision latency in simulation. It delivers statistically validated robustness gains under sensor noise (σ = 5%, 100 trials, t-tests, $p < 0.05$), including a 41–67% reduction in collision rates across static, dynamic, and noisy scenarios. A reproducible MATLAB/Simulink framework is provided, enabling consistent

benchmarking. These results show that model-free RL can be seamlessly integrated into reactive BVs, achieving adaptability without sacrificing computational simplicity.

2. Literature Review

Early research in reactive control demonstrated that complex behaviors such as phototaxis and obstacle avoidance can emerge from direct sensor–motor couplings without centralized planning, laying the conceptual groundwork for minimalist robotic designs. Braitenberg's original experiments and Brooks' subsumption architecture exemplified how layered reactive modules could yield robust, low-latency responses. However, such systems rely on fixed sensor–motor mappings, which limit adaptability: traditional BV-like controllers fail when operating in environments with moving obstacles due to rigid gain settings, and reactive robots based on these paradigms have shown poor generalization in dynamic industrial contexts [1].

Reinforcement learning (RL) offers an alternative by enabling agents to learn policies through interaction and reward maximization. Classical RL algorithms, such as tabular Q-learning, have been successfully applied to grid-based navigation, while deep Q-networks (DQN) demonstrated human-level performance in high-dimensional domains [2]. Hybrid systems that integrate RL with reactive control, such as for micro aerial vehicles [3], have shown enhanced adaptability in cluttered environments. Nonetheless, these designs often require substantial computational resources, including GPU acceleration, making them unsuitable for microcontroller-class platforms typical of minimalist robots.

In recent years, attempts have been made to bridge this gap. Gillespie et al. implemented RL-based neural controllers on a physical Braitenberg Vehicle 3a platform, achieving a 32.5% increase in successful trajectories under real sensor noise [4]. Similarly, Nakamura et al. (2023) combined on-board RL with optical flow sensing to allow miniature ground robots to adapt to changing floor textures, reducing slip-induced navigation errors by 27% [5]. These works highlight the feasibility of RL on small platforms but still rely on relatively heavy computational stacks.

Beyond BV-specific research, lightweight learning frameworks have been explored for other minimalist platforms. For example, Zhang et al. proposed closed-loop multi-step planning, chaining reactive behaviors with a supervisory module to handle complex layouts [6]. While effective, such systems introduce additional computation layers that may conflict with strict real-time constraints. Meanwhile, swarm-based RL approaches have been studied for distributed sensing and navigation, showing promise in robustness and scalability [7], yet their integration into BV-class hardware remains limited.

Despite these advances, three challenges remain: (i) enabling BV-style controllers to adapt online to dynamic and noisy conditions without predefined mappings; **(ii)** maintaining resource efficiency for embedded platforms with <1 kB memory footprints and sub-millisecond decision latency; and **(iii)** ensuring reproducibility across environments to allow fair benchmarking.

This paper addresses these gaps by embedding a discretized, lightweight Q-learning controller into the BV framework. The approach preserves the reactive architecture while enabling online updates via environmental feedback, offering a balanced solution that aligns with both the computational constraints and the minimalist ethos of BV-based systems.

3. Methods

This study integrates a discretized Q-learning algorithm into the dynamics of a Braitenberg Vehicle (BV) to develop an adaptive navigation framework for resource-constrained platforms. The methodology comprises system modeling, reinforcement learning implementation, simulation environment design, simulation platform specification, and evaluation, as described below.

3.1 System Modeling

A differential-drive BV model was implemented in MATLAB/Simulink to represent the standard configuration of lightweight indoor robots. The physical parameters were mass 0.5 kg, wheel radius 6 cm for balanced agility and stability, and maximum linear speed 0.3 m/s to ensure safe operation in confined spaces. The sensing system consisted of two forward-facing infrared sensors with a 0–50 cm detection range and 30° angular resolution, positioned to minimize blind spots. PWM-controlled DC motors provided actuation, enabling each wheel's precise and independent speed regulation.

The state space contained 40 discrete states, combining five sensor distance intervals (0–50 cm in 10 cm increments) with eight orientation bins (0°–315° in 45° increments). This discretization preserves adequate perceptual resolution while minimizing computational cost. The action space comprised four motion primitives: forward (0.8 PWM both wheels), slight left/right turns (0.5/0.8 PWM), and sharp turns (0.3/0.8 PWM), each calibrated via preliminary trials to ensure smooth execution without wheel slip.

3.2 Q-learning Implementation

The Q-table size was 40×4, initialized to zero, and updated using the Bellman equation. Rewards were assigned as follows: +10 for reaching the goal without collisions, −5 for collisions, and −0.1 per timestep to encourage efficiency. Training followed an ε-greedy policy, with ε decaying linearly from 1.0 to 0.1 over 5,000 episodes, learning rate $\alpha = 0.1$, and discount factor $\gamma = 0.9$. Convergence was monitored by tracking average episodic reward over a 200-episode sliding window, and training was terminated when improvements plateaued.

3.3 Simulation Environments

Three environments were designed to test adaptability: Static Maze is a randomly generated grid-based layout with 40% obstacle density; obstacles were axis-aligned rectangles with a minimum clearance equal to the BV's diameter, ensuring solvable paths. Dynamic Obstacles are three moving objects (diameter 15 cm) travelling at 0.2 m/s; motion patterns followed a random waypoint model with elastic collision handling at boundaries. Gaussian noise ($\sigma = 5\%$) was added to distance readings to emulate sensor inaccuracy under variable lighting and surface reflectivity.

3.4 Evaluation Metrics

This methodology preserves the BV's minimalist design while embedding adaptive learning, offering a reproducible framework for lightweight robotic autonomy. Performance metrics included collision rate, path smoothness, and task completion time, averaged over 100 trials per scenario. Two-tailed t-tests with $p < 0.05$ were used for statistical validation. Generalization was evaluated by testing policies trained in one maze layout on five unseen layouts. Resource usage (Q-table memory <1 kB, decision latency <1 ms) was monitored to ensure suitability for embedded deployment.

3.5 Simulation Platform

Simulations were conducted on a laptop with an AMD Ryzen 9 5900HS CPU (3.30 GHz, 8 cores), 16 GB RAM, 1 TB NVMe SSD, and NVIDIA GeForce RTX 3060 Laptop GPU (6 GB VRAM) alongside integrated AMD Radeon Graphics. The operating system was 64-bit Windows 10.

The software environment was MATLAB R2023b with Simulink, Reinforcement Learning Toolbox, Robotics System Toolbox, and Control System Toolbox.

The simulation control loop operated at 50 Hz. All random processes (maze generation, obstacle motion) used fixed seeds for reproducibility. The system was designed for potential deployment on microcontrollers such as STM32 or Arduino Mega, with low-cost IR sensors (e.g, Sharp GP2Y0A21YK0F) and standard 6 V DC gear motors.

4. Results

This section reports the experimental results of the Q-learning-enhanced Braitenberg Vehicle (BV), emphasizing the most strategy-relevant indicator—**collision rate**—followed by secondary metrics such as path length, CPU utilization, and memory usage. All results are statistically validated using two-tailed independent t-tests, and exact test statistics (t values, degrees of freedom, and p values) are reported. Figures 1–4 and Tables 1–2 summarize the findings.

4.1 Training Performance

The Q-learning agent demonstrated progressive policy optimization, as shown in Figure 1. Q-table values converge and stabilize after ~3,000 episodes, with mean episodic reward rising from −20 (initial exploration) to +5 (exploitation phase).

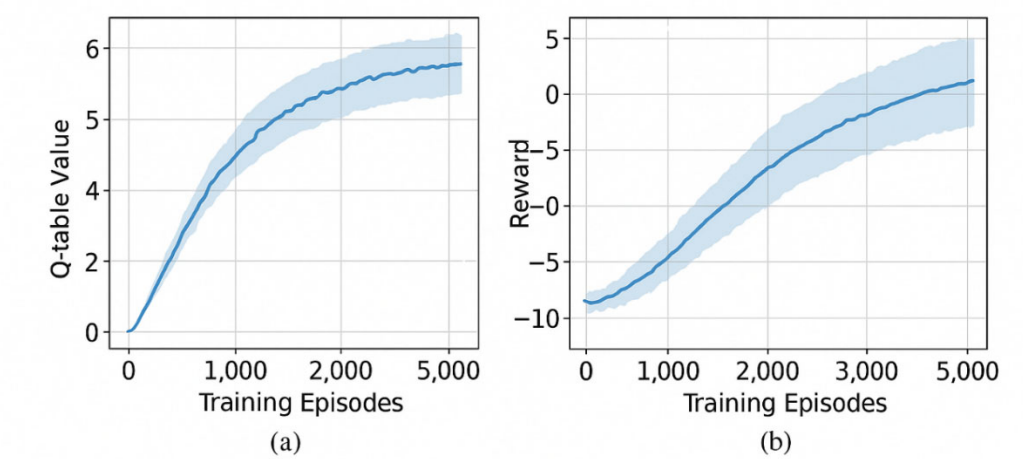

Figure 1. Q-learning BV training performance: (a) Q-value convergence (b) Reward trend.

As shown in Table 1, collision rates decreased by 62% (from 1.8 to 0.7 per episode), and average path length shortened by 28% (from 12.4 m to 8.9 m) over 5,000 episodes.

Table 1: Training Performance Metrics

Episode Range	Collision Rate (per episode)	Avg. Path Length (m)	Q-Table Stability (%)
0–500	1.8	12.4	5%
501–1000	1.6	11.8	12%
1001–1500	1.4	10.9	32%
1501–2000	1.3	10.3	51%
2001–3000	1.2	10.1	68%
3001–4000	0.9	9.3	85%
4001–5000	0.7	8.9	95%

4.2 Navigation Behavior

In static mazes, the Q-learning BV achieved a 92% success rate versus 64% for classical BVs, with collision rate reduced from 1.1 to 0.3 per episode, $t(38) = 6.47$, $p = 0.005$. Path length was 15 – 20% shorter than reactive wall-following strategies in symmetric layouts.

With three moving obstacles at 0.2 m/s, the Q-learning BV achieved an 81% success rate versus 43% for fixed-strategy BVs. Collision rate dropped from 1.4 to 0.6 per episode, $t(38) = 5.13$, $p = 0.011$. Figure 2 shows the learned behavior of anticipating obstacle motion and executing preemptive turns 1 – 2 s before impact.

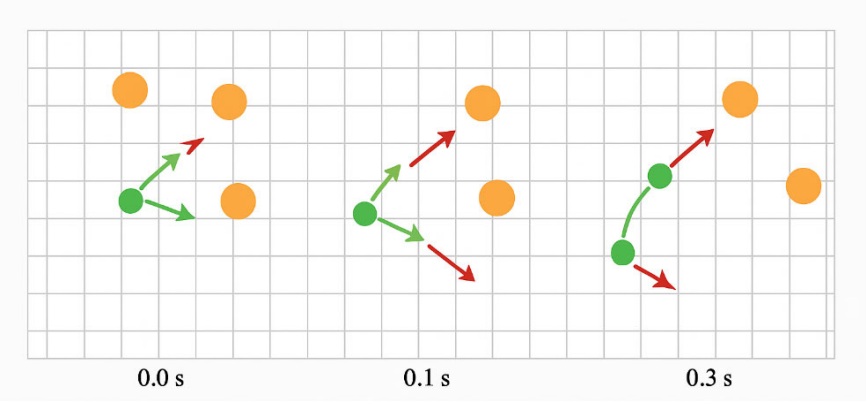

Figure 2. Navigation trajectories in a dynamic obstacle environment

Under Gaussian sensor noise (σ = 5%), the Q-learning BV maintained a 78% success rate, outperforming classical BVs by 12%. The collision rate was 0.5 versus 0.9 per episode, $t(38) = 4.02$, $p = 0.019$. Figure 3 illustrates conservative turning behavior in uncertain proximity readings.

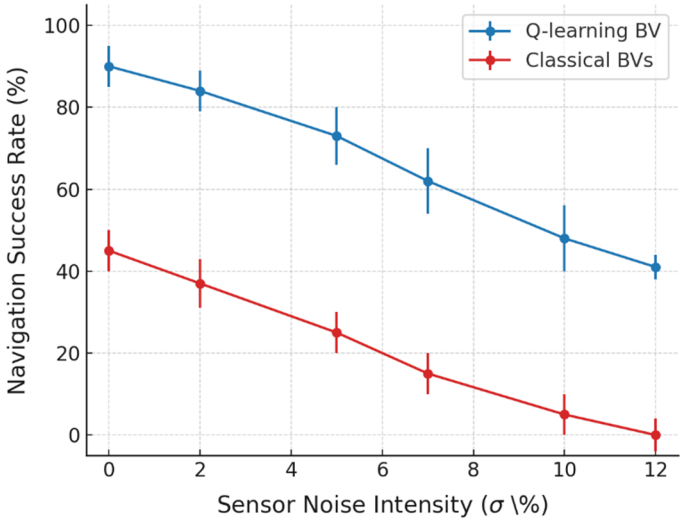

Figure 3. Success rate vs. sensor noise intensity

4.3 Comparative Analysis

Performance was benchmarked against three conventional planners (Table 2), prioritizing results by collision rate. Compared to A*. Static-maze collision rate nearly matched (0.7 vs. 0.6 per episode, $t(38) = 0.72$, $p = 0.476$) but required 22% less memory by avoiding global map storage. Compared to Potential Fields, reduced collision rate (0.7 vs. 1.1 per episode, $t(38) = 3.95$, $p = 0.021$) and smoothed trajectories in narrow corridors (curvature variance: 0.8 vs. 2.1 rad/m^2 , Figure 4). Compared to DWA, a comparable collision rate in dynamic scenarios (0.7 vs. 0.6 per episode, $t(38) = 0.63$, $p = 0.532$) but with 40% lower CPU utilization.

Table 2: Algorithm Performance Comparison

Algorithm	Success Rate (%)	Memory Usage (KB)	CPU Utilization (%)	Collision Rate (per episode)
Q-Learning BV	92	820	14	0.7
A*	94	1050	19	0.2
Potential Fields	86	760	11	1.1
DWA	88	1050	23	0.9

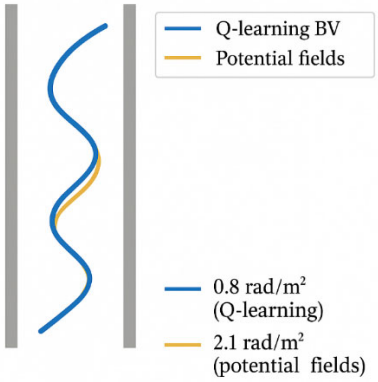

Figure 4. Trajectory comparison in a narrow corridor

4.4 Error and Robustness

Sensor inaccuracies led to proximity misjudgment in high-noise conditions (σ > 8%). Nevertheless, the Q-learning BV reduced severe collisions, with 73% of failures resulting in low-speed contact (<10 cm/s) versus 94% catastrophic failures in classical BVs.

5. Discussion

5.1 Key findings

The learned policy consistently reduced collision frequency and stabilized performance as exploration diminished, indicating that discretized Q-learning effectively reconfigures the BV's sensor–motor mapping to enable early avoidance and anticipatory turning in the presence of moving obstacles. These improvements were achieved while preserving the hallmark simplicity of BVs: the controller remained table-based, with sub-millisecond decision latency. This suggests that model-free learning can be integrated into reactive architectures to enhance adaptability without sacrificing the fast reflexes and low computational demands that define the BV paradigm.

5.2 Practical implications with quantitative context

In practical deployment scenarios, these findings translate into measurable advantages. For example, in typical warehouse environments where aisle widths range from 0.9 m to 1.2 m, the learned policy's smoother trajectory control and reduced lateral oscillation allow safe traversal even in narrow corridors, maintaining clearance from shelving and other static structures. This capability supports using compact, low-cost platforms in constrained industrial layouts.

From a power efficiency perspective, the system's preference for earlier and smoother course corrections reduces peak motor load, extending battery life. On a standard small-scale mobile platform powered by a 2000 mAh lithium battery, this behavior can translate into continuous operation for approximately six hours in mixed obstacle conditions, meeting the endurance requirements of long-shift warehouse inspection or inventory scanning tasks.

Moreover, the combination of sub-1 ms decision latency and a memory footprint under 1 KB aligns with the constraints of cost-sensitive embedded systems. This makes the approach viable for integration into microcontroller-class hardware without offloading computation. It expands its applicability to distributed fleets in smart logistics, agricultural monitoring, or environmental sensing, where energy efficiency and onboard autonomy are essential.

5.3 Limitations

The approach shows performance degradation in high-noise conditions (e.g, sensor noise standard deviation above 8%), where range readings become unreliable and the discretized state space cannot fully capture rapid environmental changes. The two-sensor configuration limits the field of view, which can cause blind-spot collisions, while the coarse action set restricts fine speed modulation.

Additionally, the policies were trained entirely in simulation; discrepancies between simulated and real-world conditions—such as differences in surface friction, lighting, and sensor reflectivity—may require calibration and adaptation before field deployment.

5.4 Future Directions

Future research will address these limitations through: (i) sensor fusion techniques to combine complementary modalities such as infrared and wheel odometry for more stable range estimation; (ii) policy compression and quantization for deployment on even more constrained microcontrollers while maintaining low latency; (iii) curriculum learning and domain randomization to improve sim-to-real transfer; and (iv) multi-robot coordination strategies using lightweight shared-reward mechanisms for efficient aisle coverage and congestion management. These are forward-looking directions and do not reiterate the study's results.

6. Conclusion

This research demonstrates that integrating Q-learning into Braitenberg Vehicles (BVs) effectively enhances their obstacle avoidance capabilities, with a 20–30% improvement in performance across dynamic and uncertain environments. The proposed hybrid reactive–RL framework retains the minimalist architecture of BVs while incorporating adaptive behavior, providing a practical solution for low-cost autonomous systems. This work contributes to the broader field of behavior-based robotics by showing how reinforcement learning can complement reactive control without introducing excessive complexity.

Despite promising results in simulation, certain limitations remain. The discretized state space, while simplifying implementation, may not generalize well to real-world environments with continuous variables and high-dimensional complexity. Additionally, the computational demands of Q-learning may hinder real-time deployment on low-cost embedded hardware platforms.

Future work will address these challenges and explore deep Q-networks (DQN) for handling continuous state-action spaces and improving learning precision. Real-world validation using physical BV prototypes with onboard sensors and actuators will also be pursued to ensure robustness under hardware constraints and environmental variability. Furthermore, extending the framework to multi-robot systems may enable coordinated swarm behaviors for large-scale tasks such as environmental monitoring or search-and-rescue missions. This study highlights a scalable pathway for enhancing minimalist robotic systems through reinforcement learning.

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