www.ijarp.com ISSN 2456-9992 Page: 01-14

Research Article

International Journal Advanced Research Publications

Volume: 02
Issue: 11

AN INTELLIGENT TRAFFIC SIGNAL CONTROL SYSTEM USING REINFORCEMENT LEARNING FOR URBAN MOBILITY OPTIMIZATION

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Article Received: 08 October 2026, Article Revised: 28 October 2026, Published on: 17 November 2026

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Doi: https://doi-doi.org/101555/ijrpa.4507

ABSTRACT

Urban traffic congestion is a pervasive problem in modern cities, leading to increased travel times, fuel consumption, and environmental pollution. Traditional traffic signal control systems, which rely on fixed-time or simple rule-based actuation, are often inadequate to handle the dynamic, stochastic nature of real-world traffic flow. This paper proposes a novel intelligent traffic signal control system based on Deep Reinforcement Learning (DRL), specifically a Deep Q-Network (DQN) agent. The proposed system learns optimal traffic signal timing policies by interacting with a simulated traffic environment. We model a complex four-way intersection in the Simulation of Urban MObility (SUMO) and train the DQN agent to minimize a composite reward function based on average vehicle waiting time and queue length. The performance of the proposed DRL-based controller is rigorously evaluated against traditional fixed-time and actuated controllers. The results, presented through detailed graphs and tables, demonstrate that the DRL-based system significantly outperforms the conventional methods, reducing average vehicle waiting time by up to 62% and average queue length by 55% during peak traffic hours. The findings underscore the transformative potential of machine learning in creating adaptive, efficient, and intelligent urban transportation infrastructure.

KEYWORDS: Intelligent Traffic Signal Control, Machine Learning, Deep Reinforcement Learning, Deep Q-Network (DQN), SUMO Simulation, Urban Mobility, Adaptive Traffic Control.

I. INTRODUCTION

The rapid pace of urbanization has placed unprecedented strain on existing transportation infrastructure. Traffic congestion has emerged as a critical challenge in metropolitan areas worldwide, with severe economic, environmental, and social ramifications. According to a 2025 report by the Urban Mobility Observatory, the average commuter in a major city loses over 100 hours annually to traffic delays, and the cumulative cost of congestion in terms of lost productivity and fuel waste is estimated to be in the hundreds of billions of dollars globally. A significant contributor to this inefficiency is the suboptimal operation of traffic signal control systems at intersections, which act as critical nodes in the urban traffic network.

Historically, traffic signal control has been dominated by two primary methodologies: fixed-time control and actuated control. Fixed-time controllers operate on pre-determined schedules based on historical traffic patterns. While simple and reliable, they are fundamentally inflexible and cannot adapt to real-time fluctuations in traffic demand, leading to inefficiencies during off-peak hours or unexpected surges. Actuated controllers, which use vehicle detectors (e.g., inductive loops) to extend a green phase as long as vehicles are present, offer a degree of adaptability. However, they are rule-based and operate on a local, reactive level, often failing to optimize for global network performance or anticipate future traffic states.

The advent of artificial intelligence, particularly Machine Learning (ML), has opened new avenues for developing truly intelligent and adaptive traffic management systems. ML algorithms possess the ability to learn complex patterns from data and make optimal decisions in dynamic environments. Among various ML paradigms, Reinforcement Learning (RL) stands out as exceptionally well-suited for traffic signal control. RL is a goal-oriented learning paradigm where an agent learns to make a sequence of decisions (e.g., which signal phase to activate) by interacting with an environment (the intersection and approaching traffic) to maximize a cumulative reward (e.g., minimize delay). This trial-and-error learning process allows the RL agent to develop sophisticated control strategies that go beyond pre-defined rules, effectively learning to anticipate traffic patterns and coordinate actions for long-term benefits.

Deep Reinforcement Learning (DRL), which combines RL with Deep Neural Networks (DNNs), further amplifies this capability by allowing the agent to learn directly from high-dimensional state spaces, such as images of traffic or aggregated sensor data, without the need for manual feature engineering.

This paper presents a comprehensive study on the development and evaluation of an Intelligent Traffic Signal Control System (ITSC) based on a Deep Q-Network (DQN), a popular DRL algorithm. The primary objectives of this research are:

1. To design a DRL-based traffic signal controller that can learn optimal signal timing policies in a realistic, simulated environment.
2. To develop a simulation framework using SUMO (Simulation of Urban MObility) to model a complex intersection and facilitate the training and testing of the DRL agent.
3. To benchmark the performance of the proposed DRL controller against established baseline methods: a traditional fixed-time controller and an actuated controller.
4. To evaluate the system's performance using key metrics such as average waiting time, average queue length, and throughput, particularly under varying traffic load conditions.
5. To analyze the learning curve of the DRL agent and the robustness of the learned policy.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: Section 2 provides a review of the relevant literature, tracing the evolution from conventional control to modern ML-based approaches. Section 3 details the methodology, including the simulation environment setup, the design of the DQN agent (state, action, reward), and the training process. Section 4 presents the results of the experiments, including comparative performance data, graphs, and a discussion of the findings. Finally, Section 5 concludes the paper, summarizes the key contributions, and outlines potential directions for future research.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The domain of traffic signal control has been a fertile ground for research for decades, with methodologies evolving in complexity and intelligence. This review categorizes the literature into three main phases: conventional control, adaptive control, and machine learning-based control, culminating in the modern era of deep reinforcement learning.

2.1. Conventional Traffic Signal Control

Early traffic signal control systems were predominantly based on fixed-time (pre-timed) plans. The foundational work by Webster (1958) established the mathematical basis for optimizing cycle length and green split times for isolated intersections under steady-state

flow conditions. These methods, while effective for predictable, consistent traffic, are static and fail to respond to real-time variations. The subsequent development of actuated control, as described by Kell and Fullerton (1982), introduced a level of responsiveness. Actuated controllers use sensors to detect vehicles and extend green phases accordingly. While an improvement over fixed-time control, their performance is limited by pre-set parameters and a reactive nature that does not consider upstream traffic or future conditions. For coordinated networks, systems like the MAXBAND (Little et al., 1964) were developed to optimize offsets along an arterial to create "green waves." However, these systems are still based on offline optimization and struggle with dynamic, unbalanced traffic.

2.2. Adaptive Traffic Control Systems (ATCS)

To address the limitations of conventional systems, Adaptive Traffic Control Systems (ATCS) emerged. These systems represent a significant step forward, using real-time traffic data to continuously optimize signal timing. Prominent examples include:

- **SCATS (Sydney Coordinated Adaptive Traffic System):** Developed in Australia (Sims & Dobinson, 1980), SCATS is a hierarchical system that adjusts cycle time, phase splits, and offsets based on real-time detector data. It is widely deployed globally but relies on a rule-based, decentralized approach.
- **SCOOT (Split, Cycle, Offset Optimization Technique):** Developed in the UK (Hunt et al., 1981), SCOOT uses a centralized model-based approach. It uses a cyclic time-profile of traffic flow from upstream detectors to optimize signal timings, making it highly effective in coordinated networks but computationally intensive.
- **RHODES (Real-Time Hierarchical Optimized Distributed Effective System)**

Developed at the University of Texas at Austin (Mirchandani & Head, 2001), RHODES is a more sophisticated, hierarchical, predictive control system that uses a microscopic model to anticipate traffic and optimize signals.

While ATCS like SCATS and SCOOT have proven successful, their control logic is often based on heuristics, optimization of simplified models, or extensive manual calibration. They lack the ability to learn and adapt their core strategies from data in a way that modern ML algorithms can.

2.3. Machine Learning for Traffic Signal Control

The application of Machine Learning, particularly Reinforcement Learning, has gained significant momentum over the past two decades. Early RL applications used tabular methods like Q-learning, where the state and action spaces were discretized.

- **Q-Learning:** Early work by Thorpe and Anderson (1996) applied Q-learning to a single intersection, demonstrating that an RL agent could learn to outperform a fixed-time controller. Later studies, such as by Abdulhai, Pringle, and Karakoulas (2003), showed the potential of RL for traffic control, though they were limited by the curse of dimensionality, which made scaling to larger state spaces challenging.
- **Multi-Agent Reinforcement Learning (MARL):** Recognizing that intersections in a network are interdependent, researchers explored MARL. This involves deploying independent RL agents at each intersection that learn to coordinate with their neighbors. However, issues of non-stationarity (where the environment changes as other agents learn) and convergence complexity have been major hurdles.

2.4. Deep Reinforcement Learning (DRL)

The breakthrough came with the integration of Deep Neural Networks into RL, giving rise to DRL. The seminal work by Mnih et al. (2015) on the Deep Q-Network (DQN), which used a DNN as a function approximator and techniques like experience replay and a target network, demonstrated superhuman performance on Atari games directly from raw pixels. This success was quickly adapted to traffic signal control.

- **Deep Q-Networks (DQN):** Genders and Razavi (2016) were among the first to apply a DQN to traffic signal control using a simulated environment, showing that a DQN agent could learn effective policies from raw traffic state information. Their work highlighted the power of DRL to overcome the dimensionality limitations of tabular Q-learning.
- **Advanced DRL Algorithms:** Following the success of DQN, researchers have explored more advanced algorithms to further improve performance and stability. These include **Double DQN** (van Hasselt et al., 2016) to address overestimation bias, **Dueling DQN** (Wang et al., 2016) to separately estimate state value and action advantage, and **Proximal Policy Optimization (PPO)** (Schulman et al., 2017), a policy gradient method that has shown remarkable stability and performance in continuous control tasks. Studies have shown that PPO can outperform DQN in traffic control by enabling smoother policy updates and handling continuous action spaces like variable cycle lengths.

- **Curriculum Learning and Transfer Learning:** More recent research has focused on training DRL agents more efficiently. **Curriculum learning** (Wei et al., 2020) involves training the agent on gradually increasing levels of traffic complexity. **Transfer learning** aims to take a DRL model trained in one intersection or city and adapt it to a new, different scenario with minimal additional training, a crucial step towards practical, scalable deployment.

2.5. Research Gap

While the literature demonstrates the theoretical and simulation-based potential of DRL for traffic signal control, there remains a need for rigorous, reproducible comparative studies that use high-fidelity simulators (like SUMO) and provide a clear, step-by-step methodology. Many studies focus on simple intersections or synthetic traffic patterns. This research aims to contribute by providing a detailed implementation of a DQN-based controller for a complex intersection, with a thorough evaluation against strong baselines under a variety of realistic traffic loads, thereby providing a clear benchmark for the field.

III. METHODOLOGY

This section outlines the systematic approach taken to design, implement, and evaluate the Intelligent Traffic Signal Control System. The methodology is divided into three main components: the simulation environment, the design of the DRL agent, and the training and evaluation protocol.

3.1. Simulation Environment

We used the **Simulation of Urban MObility (SUMO)** version 1.22.0, a highly portable, microscopic, and continuous multi-modal traffic simulation package. SUMO allows for the precise modeling of individual vehicle dynamics, lane-changing behavior, and traffic light logic, making it the de-facto standard for traffic control research.

Network Model: We modeled a single, complex four-way intersection. Each approach consists of three lanes: one dedicated left-turn lane, one through lane, and one through/right-turn lane. The intersection uses a standard 4-phase signal control system:

- **Phase 1 (North-South Through):** Green for North-South through and right-turn lanes. Red for all others.
- **Phase 2 (North-South Left Turn):** Green for North-South left-turn lanes. Red for all others.

- **Phase 3 (East-West Through):** Green for East-West through and right-turn lanes. Red for all others.
- **Phase 4 (East-West Left Turn):** Green for East-West left-turn lanes. Red for all others.

Each phase includes a 4-second yellow interval. The cycle order is fixed and cyclic.

Traffic Demand Modeling: To evaluate performance under different conditions, we generated three distinct traffic demand scenarios:

- **Low Traffic:** Constant inflow of 200 vehicles per hour (vph) on each approach.
- **Medium Traffic:** Constant inflow of 500 vph on each approach.
- **High Traffic (Peak Hour):** An asymmetric, time-varying inflow pattern. For the first 200 seconds, inflow is 200 vph. It then ramps up to a peak of 1000 vph on the East-West approaches and 800 vph on the North-South approaches for the next 600 seconds, before decreasing back to 200 vph. This scenario is designed to mimic a typical morning rush hour.

3.2. Deep Reinforcement Learning Agent Design

We implemented a **Deep Q-Network (DQN)** agent. DQN is a value-based RL algorithm that learns an action-value function Q(s, a), which estimates the expected cumulative future reward for taking action a in state s.

- **State Space (s):** The state is a crucial design choice. We defined a state vector representing the queue length on each lane. The queue length is defined as the number of vehicles within a 50-meter radius of the stop bar that are either stopped or moving at a speed less than 0.1 m/s. This state is captured just before the agent makes a decision. For the 4 approaches with 3 lanes each, the state vector is of length 12. This provides a comprehensive yet manageable representation of traffic pressure at the intersection.
- **Action Space (a):** The action space is discrete, consisting of the 4 phases described in Section 3.1. At each decision step, the agent chooses which phase to activate. The chosen phase remains active for a minimum green time (min_green) of 10 seconds, after which the agent can either end the phase (initiating a yellow transition) or extend it for another second. In our implementation, to simplify and reduce the action space, the agent's decision is triggered every 10 seconds (the minimum green time). If the agent chooses a new phase that is different from the current one, the yellow phase is triggered for 4 seconds before the new phase begins. If it chooses the same phase, it is extended by another 10 seconds. This discrete decision at fixed intervals is a common practice in DRL-based traffic control.

- **Reward Function (R):** The reward function is the most critical component, as it defines the goal for the agent. Our reward is designed to minimize delay and congestion. The reward r_t at decision step t is defined as the negative of the weighted sum of the total waiting time and total queue length across all lanes. This provides a dense reward signal that encourages the agent to reduce both the time vehicles spend waiting and the build-up of queues.

r_t = - (w1 * Σ (waiting_time_i) + w2 * Σ (queue_length_i))

where waiting_time_i is the total waiting time of all vehicles on lane i since the last decision step, and queue_length_i is the number of vehicles in the queue on lane i at the decision moment. Through experimentation, we set the weights w1 = 0.1 and w2 = 1.0 to balance the contribution of waiting time and queue length. The negative sign ensures that as these metrics increase, the reward decreases, guiding the agent to minimize them.

- **DQN Architecture:** The DQN agent uses a neural network as a function approximator for the Q-function.
  - **Input Layer:** 12 neurons (for the 12-lane queue state).
  - **Hidden Layers:** Two fully connected hidden layers, each with 64 neurons, using ReLU (Rectified Linear Unit) activation.
  - **Output Layer:** 4 neurons (for the Q-value of each of the 4 phases). No activation function.
  - **Hyperparameters**
    - Learning Rate: 0.001 (Adam optimizer)
    - Discount Factor (γ): 0.95
    - Replay Buffer Size: 10,000
    - Batch Size for Training: 32
    - Target Network Update Frequency: 100 training steps
    - Exploration Strategy: ε-greedy with ε starting at 1.0 and decaying linearly to 0.05 over the first 1000 episodes.

3.3. Baseline Controllers

To evaluate the performance of the DQN controller, we implemented two baseline controllers:

1. **Fixed-Time Controller:** A pre-timed controller optimized for the medium traffic scenario using the Webster's method. The cycle length was set to 90 seconds, with green splits allocated proportionally to the average traffic volume. The order of phases is fixed and cyclical. This serves as the baseline for non-adaptive control.

2. Actuated Controller: A rule-based controller using SUMO's built-in actuated logic. It uses detector loops at each lane (the same queue length definition) and has a minimum green of 10 seconds, a maximum green of 40 seconds, and an extension time of 3 seconds. If a vehicle is detected, the green phase is extended up to its maximum.

3.4. Training and Evaluation Protocol

The DQN agent was trained over 500 episodes in the **High Traffic** scenario. Each episode lasted 1800 seconds (30 minutes) of simulation time. The agent's learning progress was tracked by its average cumulative reward per episode and the average waiting time per vehicle. The training environment was reset at the start of each episode, but the traffic demand pattern was the same.

For final performance evaluation, the trained DQN agent (with its policy frozen, $\varepsilon=0$) and the baseline controllers were each evaluated for 10 independent runs (with different random seeds for vehicle generation) in each of the three traffic scenarios (Low, Medium, High). The performance metrics were averaged over these runs to ensure statistical significance.

The key performance metrics used for evaluation are:

- **Average Waiting Time (seconds/vehicle):** The total time all vehicles spend waiting (speed < 0.1 m/s) divided by the total number of vehicles that have entered the simulation. This is the primary metric of effectiveness.
- **Average Queue Length (vehicles/lane):** The average number of vehicles in the queue across all lanes, averaged over time.
- **Throughput (vehicles/hour):** The total number of vehicles that have passed through the intersection, normalized to an hourly rate.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and analyzes the results of the experiments. We first examine the training performance of the DQN agent, followed by a comparative analysis against the baseline controllers across different traffic scenarios.

4.1. DQN Training Performance

The learning curve of the DQN agent over 500 training episodes, plotted as the average reward per episode and the average waiting time per vehicle.

The learning curve demonstrates that the DQN agent learns effectively from scratch. In the initial episodes, where the exploration rate (ε) is high, the agent takes random actions, resulting in poor performance (low reward, high waiting time). As the agent begins to learn

and exploit its knowledge, there is a rapid improvement in the first 100 episodes. The reward increases sharply, and the average waiting time decreases correspondingly. After approximately 300 episodes, the agent's performance stabilizes, indicating convergence to a stable policy. The final converged average waiting time is around 35 seconds per vehicle, a significant improvement over the agent's initial random performance.

4.2. Comparative Performance Analysis

After training, we evaluated the performance of the three controllers (Fixed-Time, Actuated, and DQN) across the three traffic scenarios. The averaged results for the key metrics are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Comparative Performance of Traffic Signal Controllers.

Traffic Scenario	Controller	Avg. Waiting Time (s/veh)	Avg. Queue Length (veh/lane)	Throughput (veh/hr)
Low	Fixed-Time	22.4 ± 1.2	2.8 ± 0.2	798 ± 12
	Actuated	18.1 ± 0.9	2.1 ± 0.1	812 ± 10
	DQN	**14.5 ± 0.7**	**1.6 ± 0.1**	**830 ± 8**
Medium	Fixed-Time	45.8 ± 2.5	5.5 ± 0.3	1490 ± 25
	Actuated	38.2 ± 1.8	4.2 ± 0.2	1545 ± 20
	DQN	**25.1 ± 1.1**	**2.8 ± 0.2**	**1620 ± 15**
High	Fixed-Time	98.4 ± 5.2	11.2 ± 0.6	1650 ± 35
	Actuated	75.6 ± 4.1	8.5 ± 0.5	1780 ± 30
	DQN	**36.9 ± 2.0**	**5.0 ± 0.3**	**1890 ± 25**

The results in Table 1 clearly illustrate the superior performance of the DRL-based controller. Several key observations can be made:

- **Low Traffic:** All controllers perform well. The DQN controller still provides a benefit, reducing average waiting time by 20% compared to the actuated controller and 35% compared to the fixed-time controller. This is because the DQN agent has learned to keep the green phase on the main traffic flow but can quickly switch to service smaller demands, minimizing idle time.
- **Medium Traffic:** The performance gap widens. The DQN controller achieves a **34% reduction in average waiting time** (25.1s vs. 38.2s) and a **33% reduction in average queue length** (2.8 vs. 4.2) compared to the actuated controller. This demonstrates the DRL agent's ability to learn optimal timing strategies that go beyond simple "extend if vehicle present" logic.

- **High Traffic (Peak Hour):** This is the most critical scenario, and the results are dramatic. The DQN controller reduces the average waiting time by **51%** compared to the actuated controller (36.9s vs. 75.6s) and a staggering **62%** compared to the fixed-time controller. The average queue length is also drastically reduced by **41%** relative to the actuated controller. Furthermore, the DQN controller increases overall intersection throughput, handling more vehicles per hour than the other controllers, indicating a more efficient use of green time.

4.3. DISCUSSION

The experimental results strongly support the hypothesis that a DRL-based controller can learn superior traffic management policies compared to traditional methods. The superior performance can be attributed to several factors:

1. Anticipatory Behavior: Unlike the reactive nature of the actuated controller, the DQN agent learns to anticipate future traffic states. For instance, if the agent observes a rapid build-up of queue length on the East-West through lanes while currently serving the North-South left turns, it can learn to terminate the current phase earlier (after the minimum green) to preemptively address the impending congestion. This look-ahead capability, inherent in RL's objective of maximizing long-term reward, is a key differentiator.

2. Adaptive Phase Duration: The DQN agent learns to dynamically adjust the duration of each green phase based on real-time conditions. In the High Traffic scenario, the fixed-time controller rigidly allocates time, leading to long queues on the heavier approaches. The actuated controller, while better, can get stuck serving one approach for its maximum green time even if another approach becomes critical. The DQN agent, through its learned Q-values, makes nuanced decisions about when to hold a green phase and when to switch, finding a near-optimal balance for the asymmetric traffic pattern.

3. Global Optimization: The reward function, which considers the total waiting time and queue length across the entire intersection, encourages the agent to act in a way that is globally beneficial, rather than just locally for the lane it is serving. This prevents the "starvation" of low-volume lanes and ensures a fairer and more efficient allocation of green time.

However, the study also highlights some challenges. The training process for the DRL agent was computationally intensive, requiring several hours of simulation time to converge. The performance of the DRL agent is also highly dependent on the design of the reward function. An improperly weighted reward could lead to suboptimal or even undesirable behaviors (e.g., aggressively starving a lane to keep queues low on another). Finally, the learned policy is

specific to the intersection geometry and traffic pattern it was trained on. While it generalizes well across different traffic volumes in this study, its transferability to an intersection with a different layout (e.g., 5-way intersection) would require re-training or advanced transfer learning techniques.

V. CONCLUSION

This research successfully demonstrates the design, implementation, and evaluation of an Intelligent Traffic Signal Control System based on Deep Reinforcement Learning. Using a Deep Q-Network agent trained in the high-fidelity SUMO simulator, we developed a controller that learns optimal phase selection policies to minimize waiting time and queue length. The proposed DRL-based system was rigorously evaluated against traditional fixed-time and actuated controllers under low, medium, and high traffic scenarios.

The experimental results provide compelling evidence of the DRL controller's superiority. It consistently outperformed the baselines across all scenarios, with the most significant gains observed during peak hour conditions. The DRL controller achieved a 51% reduction in average waiting time compared to an actuated controller and a 62% reduction compared to a fixed-time controller under high, asymmetric traffic load. These results underscore the potential of DRL to create adaptive, efficient, and intelligent traffic management systems that can significantly alleviate urban congestion.

The key contributions of this paper are:

- A comprehensive framework for designing and evaluating a DRL-based traffic signal controller using SUMO.
- A clear articulation of the state, action, and reward design for a complex intersection.
- A rigorous quantitative comparison against standard baseline controllers, providing a benchmark for future research.
- Demonstrated proof-of-concept that DRL agents can learn robust and effective policies that generalize across a range of traffic volumes.

While this work focused on a single intersection, it lays the groundwork for more complex and impactful research. Future work will focus on:

- **Multi-Agent DRL:** Extending this approach to a network of intersections, where multiple DRL agents must learn to coordinate their actions to optimize arterial or network-wide performance.

- **Advanced DRL Algorithms:** Exploring more sophisticated algorithms like Proximal Policy Optimization (PPO) and Soft Actor-Critic (SAC) to handle continuous action spaces (e.g., variable green durations) and improve training stability and sample efficiency.
- **Real-World Implementation:** Addressing the significant challenges of deploying these models in the real world, including domain adaptation (bridging the simulation-to-reality gap), latency constraints, and hardware integration.
- **Multi-Modal Integration:** Incorporating data from connected vehicles, IoT sensors, and public transportation to create a more holistic and responsive control system.

In conclusion, the integration of Deep Reinforcement Learning into traffic signal control represents a paradigm shift from reactive, rule-based systems to proactive, learning-based systems. As cities continue to grow and the demand for mobility increases, such intelligent systems will be essential for building sustainable, efficient, and livable urban environments. This study provides a foundational step in that direction, validating the immense potential of DRL to revolutionize a critical component of our urban infrastructure.

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