TensorFlow: A system for Large-Scale Machine Learning

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Work at the time

• Good single-machine frameworks:
  • High performance: Caffe
  • High flexibility: Torch, Theano

• Good multiple-machine frameworks:
  • DryadLINQ, Spark
    • Low flexibility: data must be immutable – ML training becomes slow
  • MXNet
    • Similar to TensorFlow
    • *Parameter server* architecture – cannot do sparse gradient updates
  • **DistBelief**
    • Does not scale *down* well
Motivation

• TensorFlow comes from the Google Brain team

• **DistBelief** is its predecessor
  • cannot easily define new types of layers in NN architectures
  • Cannot modify the optimisation algorithm (SGD)
  • Cannot modify the training algorithm (pipeline works only for Feedforward Neural Networks)

• Goal: build a framework that is both **flexible** and **scalable**
  • Platform-agnostic: can scale up to any number/type of device
  • Offer flexibility in the design of ML pipelines – create an API for popular programming languages
  • Use the same programming language for ML design and distributed systems design
Design principles (1)

- Computation described by a **dataflow graph**
  - Nodes represent **operations**
  - Edges represent **dependencies**
  - E.g. \( \text{ReLU}(b + W \times x) \)

- Data flows through the graph using **tensors**
  - Typed, multi-dimensional arrays

- TensorFlow automatically builds a gradient graph for the Backpropagation algorithm

- TensorFlow optimises the dataflow graph (e.g. with common subexpression elimination)
Design principles (2)

• Client communicates with a *master*
• *Master* communicates with worker processes
• Workers control devices (CPUs, GPUs, TPUs etc.)
• Devices get a subgraph of the initial dataflow graph
  • Each device has its *own implementation* *(called kernel)* of the operation to execute
• Fault tolerance: user-level checkpointing
Distributed execution

• Greedy heuristic used to choose which node to assign to which device

• Workers send data across only once for multiple nodes on a different worker [TensorFlow has weak consistency guarantees]

• (A)synchronous replica coordination
  • Can have synchronous ML training
  • TensorFlow proactively prepares backup workers in case stragglers exist
Key innovations

• Dynamic control flow
  • Can have conditional and iterative control flow – now possible to implement RNNs

• Nodes represent **single operations** and can hold and update state
  • Dataflow systems at the time: nodes represent functional computation on immutable data
  • **Abstracted computation kernels** for heterogeneous distributed systems

• Optimisation – can experiment with new algorithms

• Ability to scale up and down

• Really cool visualization system: **TensorBoard**
Experimental results

• Single-machine benchmarks
  • TensorFlow similar to Torch because they use the same **matrix multiplication library**

• Multi-machine benchmarks
  • TensorFlow compared to MXNet for the **Inception-v3** model

• **Key takeaway:** TensorFlow has similar performance to its competitors, but it is much more flexible!

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Limitations

• Algorithm to schedule nodes uses a greedy heuristic
• Paper does not show how fast ML training converges
• Paper does not show experimental results for RNNs
• Training for Reinforcement Learning is still too limited
• Not suitable for applications with strong consistency requirements
• Training slower than in other frameworks because of the use of cuDNN library for matrix multiplication
• Does not have fine-grained control over execution order and memory requirements
Impact & Future

• Widely adopted ML framework
• Used in hundreds of research papers
• Downloaded by millions of users

• Nowadays, TensorFlow is losing ground to PyTorch and the new MLGO
Any questions?