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Energy-Efficient Lifelong Learning in Autonomous Systems: A Neuromorphic and Adaptive Memory Replay Approach

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ABSTRACT Autonomous systems must adapt continuously to dynamic environments while retaining prior knowledge. Conventional deep learning methods face two major challenges: catastrophic forgetting, where new tasks overwrite older ones, and high energy demands, which limit deployment on embedded platforms. This paper proposes the Neuromorphic Adaptive Replay (NAR) framework, integrating spiking neural networks (SNNs) with an adaptive memory replay mechanism. SNNs enable low-power, event-driven computation, while adaptive replay selectively prioritizes critical past experiences to preserve knowledge with reduced overhead. Evaluations in autonomous driving and robotics tasks show that NAR improves accuracy (91.8%), accelerates convergence (190 steps), and reduces forgetting (5.3%) compared to reinforcement learning and fixed replay methods. Importantly, NAR lowers energy consumption by 38%, demonstrating its suitability for resource-constrained environments. NAR offers a sustainable pathway for lifelong learning, enabling autonomous systems that are adaptive, resilient, and energy-efficient.

I. INTRODUCTION

Autonomous systems such as drones, robots, and self-driving vehicles increasingly operate in dynamic environments where conditions change unpredictably. Unlike conventional AI models trained once on static datasets, these systems require lifelong learning to continuously acquire new knowledge while retaining prior skills [1]. This capability is crucial in domains such as autonomous driving, where vehicles must adapt to new traffic scenarios, or in robotics, where machines must handle diverse manipulation tasks [2].

A persistent obstacle is catastrophic forgetting [3]. When neural networks learn tasks sequentially, new updates often overwrite older representations, sharply reducing performance on prior tasks [4]. Several solutions have been explored, including regularization methods that constrain weight updates [5], synaptic consolidation inspired by biological learning [7], and experience replay strategies that rehearse past data [6], [8]. While effective, these methods typically assume abundant computational and energy resources.

In practice, energy efficiency is a critical challenge for lifelong learning systems deployed on mobile or embedded platforms [9]. Repeated retraining or replay can quickly drain limited power budgets, restricting real-time deployment [10]. Moreover, the rising computational cost of deep models contributes to environmental concerns [11]-[15]. Addressing catastrophic forgetting without considering energy consumption risks limiting the scalability of lifelong AI.

Neuromorphic computing offers a potential solution. Chips such as Loihi [12] and SpiNNaker [13] emulate the brain's sparse, event-driven activity, enabling efficient on-chip learning with spiking neural networks (SNNs) [11]. These systems achieve competitive results with far lower energy demands [16]-[19]. However, their role in lifelong learning for autonomous systems remains underexplored.

At the algorithmic level, adaptive memory replay provides a complementary strategy. Unlike fixed replay methods that rehearse all stored data, adaptive replay prioritizes the most informative experiences, reducing unnecessary computation [20]-[25]. Combining neuromorphic hardware with adaptive replay creates a framework that addresses both knowledge retention and energy efficiency.

This paper introduces the Neuromorphic Adaptive Replay (NAR) framework, which integrates spiking neuromorphic processors with adaptive replay buffers. We evaluate NAR in autonomous driving (lane keeping, obstacle avoidance, pedestrian detection) and robotics (object manipulation, navigation, grasping). Results show that NAR improves learning speed, task transfer efficiency, and forgetting resistance, while reducing energy use compared to traditional reinforcement learning and memory-based methods.

A. Objectives

A neuromorphic lifelong learning architecture enabling energy-efficient continual learning.

An adaptive memory replay algorithm that minimizes computation while preserving knowledge.

Empirical validation showing significant reductions in energy consumption with competitive accuracy.

By jointly addressing performance and sustainability, this work advances the design of autonomous AI systems capable of real-time lifelong learning under energy constraints.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Lifelong Learning and Catastrophic Forgetting

Lifelong learning, also known as continual learning, refers to the ability of an AI system to learn sequentially from a stream of tasks without discarding previously acquired knowledge [1]. Unlike static models trained on fixed datasets, lifelong learning frameworks must dynamically adapt to new environments, making them especially critical in autonomous systems such as robotics and self-driving vehicles [2]. However, the core challenge remains catastrophic forgetting, where updates to the model for new tasks cause performance degradation on older tasks [3]. This occurs because neural networks lack explicit mechanisms to preserve knowledge representations when parameters are modified [4].

Several approaches have been proposed to mitigate forgetting. Regularization-based methods, such as Elastic Weight Consolidation (EWC) [5], penalize changes to weights deemed important for prior tasks, thereby preserving old knowledge. Synaptic intelligence expands on this idea by measuring parameter importance during training and using it to constrain updates [7]. While these methods reduce forgetting, they often limit flexibility when tasks are highly dissimilar.

Replay-based methods represent another major category. Early approaches stored examples from past tasks in a memory buffer and replayed them during new training phases [6]. More advanced methods introduced deep generative replay (DGR), where a generative model produces synthetic samples of past data [8]. Replay strategies significantly improve retention but are computationally expensive, either because of large memory storage or the cost of generating pseudo-data in real time.

B. Multi-Task Learning and Transfer Learning

Related paradigms such as multi-task learning (MTL) and transfer learning also inform lifelong learning research. MTL trains a model on multiple tasks jointly, encouraging shared representations and improving generalization [21]. Transfer learning fine-tunes a pre-trained model on new tasks, leveraging prior knowledge to accelerate adaptation [18]. However, these paradigms are not inherently sequential, and when tasks are introduced one at a time, they still suffer from catastrophic forgetting [22]. Hybrid strategies combining MTL and lifelong learning have shown promise, though scaling them to complex, dynamic environments with constrained resources remains difficult.

Neuromorphic Computing and Spiking Neural Networks

Most lifelong learning research has emphasized accuracy and memory retention, but energy efficiency is equally important for autonomous systems operating on limited hardware. Neuromorphic computing addresses this by emulating the brain’s sparse, event-driven computations. Platforms such as Intel’s Loihi [12] and SpiNNaker [13] enable on-chip learning with spiking neural networks (SNNs). Unlike conventional deep neural networks, SNNs communicate using discrete spikes, activating only when events occur, which substantially reduces power consumption [16], [19].

Neuromorphic systems have achieved competitive results in recognition, classification, and reinforcement learning tasks, often at a fraction of the energy cost of standard architectures [11]. For example, Loihi integrates plasticity mechanisms that allow local learning without heavy reliance on external memory [12]. Despite these advantages, applying neuromorphic systems to lifelong learning remains underexplored. While SNNs are efficient, they still face difficulties retaining knowledge across sequential tasks without supplementary mechanisms like replay [19].

C. Adaptive Memory Replay

Replay-based solutions, though effective, remain resource-heavy. Adaptive replay addresses this by selecting only the most informative or uncertain samples to rehearse [24]. Unlike fixed replay strategies that treat all experiences equally, adaptive replay prioritizes high-value samples, reducing redundant computation while maintaining knowledge retention. This approach has been applied in reinforcement learning and supervised learning, yielding strong results with smaller replay sets [24].

Some studies have also combined adaptive replay with biologically inspired mechanisms such as spike-timing dependent plasticity (STDP) [19]. These techniques focus updates on temporally correlated activity, further reducing the cost of replay. However, much of this work remains experimental, and integration with neuromorphic hardware is still rare.

D. Research Gap

Although catastrophic forgetting has been studied for decades, most existing strategies either constrain flexibility, require large replay buffers, or ignore energy consumption [3], [5], [8]. Neuromorphic hardware provides energy efficiency, while adaptive replay offers algorithmic efficiency. Yet, very few works integrate these two complementary approaches. Existing studies on neuromorphic lifelong learning often lack replay components [11]-[13], while adaptive replay frameworks rarely consider hardware-level efficiency [24].

This gap highlights the need for a unified approach that merges neuromorphic computing with adaptive replay. Such a system could balance accuracy, retention, and sustainability, enabling real-world autonomous systems to operate continuously under energy constraints.

III. METHODS

The proposed Neuromorphic Adaptive Replay (NAR) framework integrates spiking neural networks (SNNs) with adaptive replay to support energy-efficient lifelong learning in autonomous systems. The design emphasizes three elements: SNN-based perception, adaptive replay buffers, and an energy-aware scheduler.

A. Spiking Neural Networks for Perception

Traditional deep networks require dense computation, making them unsuitable for low-power platforms [12]. SNNs, by contrast, operate through event-driven spikes, activating only when stimuli occur [11]. In NAR, SNNs process sensory data such as images or LiDAR signals by encoding them into spike trains. This allows efficient handling of tasks like lane following in driving or object manipulation in robotics. Learning is enabled through surrogate gradient methods and spike-timing dependent plasticity (STDP), offering balance between adaptability and energy savings [19].

B. Adaptive Memory Replay

Replay is effective against catastrophic forgetting but can be resource-heavy [5], [8]. NAR employs an adaptive replay buffer that prioritizes only the most informative past experiences. Each sample is scored for relevance and uncertainty, with high-value experiences replayed more often. Replay frequency is also adjusted dynamically: early learning uses more replay for stability, while mature stages reduce replay intensity. This targeted approach retains prior knowledge while avoiding unnecessary energy use [24].

C. Energy-Aware Scheduler

To further optimize efficiency, NAR includes an energy-aware scheduler. This module monitors system energy budgets and adjusts replay frequency, batch size, or learning rate as needed. Inspired by neuromorphic accelerators such as Loihi and SpiNNaker [12], [13], the scheduler ensures that performance is preserved while respecting hardware constraints.

D. Experimental Setup

NAR is evaluated in two domains:
Autonomous Driving: Tasks include lane following, obstacle avoidance, and pedestrian detection.
Robotics: Tasks include object manipulation, navigation, and grasping.
Baselines include traditional reinforcement learning (RL) and fixed memory replay methods.

E. Evaluation Metrics

The framework is tested on four key metrics:

- Accuracy (%) – proportion of correct task decisions.
- Learning Speed (steps) – time to convergence on new tasks.
- Forgetting Rate (%) – performance loss on older tasks.
- Energy per Task (Joules) – energy consumed during training and retention.

IV. RESULTS

The proposed Neuromorphic Adaptive Replay (NAR) framework was evaluated in two domains: autonomous driving and robotics. Performance was compared with two baselines: (1) traditional reinforcement learning (RL) without replay and (2) fixed memory replay. Four metrics were used: accuracy, learning speed, forgetting rate, and energy consumption.

A. Overall Performance

Table 1 summarizes the results for the three methods. Traditional RL achieved the lowest accuracy at 85.4% and showed severe catastrophic forgetting with a rate of 36.2%. Memory replay improved performance to 89.1% accuracy and reduced forgetting to 12.5%. In contrast, NAR achieved 91.8% accuracy with a forgetting rate of only 5.3%.

NAR also converged significantly faster, requiring 190 steps to reach optimal performance, compared with 340 for RL and 260 for memory replay. These results confirm that adaptive replay, when combined with spiking neural processing, enhances both efficiency and task retention.

Table 1: Performance Metrics Across Methods

Method	Accuracy (%)	Forgetting Rate (%)	Learning Speed (steps)
Traditional RL	85.4	36.2	340
Memory Replay	89.1	12.5	260
NAR (Proposed)	91.8	5.3	190

B. Energy Consumption

Table 2 presents energy usage for each method. Traditional RL consumed the most energy, at 100 joules per task. Memory replay reduced this to 87 joules, a 13% improvement. NAR achieved the best results, consuming just 62 joules per task—representing a 38% energy saving compared to RL.

Table 2: Energy Efficiency Comparison

Method	Energy per Task (J)	Improvement vs RL (%)
Traditional RL	100	–
Memory Replay	87	13%

NAR (Proposed)	62	38%

C. Domain-Specific Results

In autonomous driving, NAR excelled in lane following, obstacle avoidance, and pedestrian detection. Its adaptive replay preserved earlier skills such as lane keeping, even after exposure to new tasks. In robotics, the framework delivered robust performance in object manipulation, navigation, and grasping. By prioritizing critical experiences, NAR avoided inefficiencies seen in fixed replay methods, which often replayed redundant samples.

Overall, the results demonstrate that NAR achieves strong task performance and energy efficiency, outperforming both conventional RL and memory replay baselines.

V. DISCUSSION

The experimental findings highlight several key insights into the performance of the NAR framework.

Reduction of Catastrophic Forgetting

NAR achieved the lowest forgetting rate (5.3%), significantly outperforming both RL (36.2%) and fixed replay (12.5%). This confirms the value of adaptive replay, which allocates resources to high-importance samples instead of uniformly rehearsing all experiences. By dynamically selecting replay data, NAR preserves older skills while continuing to learn new tasks [5], [24].

A. Faster Learning Speed

The convergence rate of 190 steps illustrates that replaying only critical samples accelerates training. Unlike fixed replay, which often wastes cycles on redundant examples, adaptive replay directs computation to where it is most needed. This efficiency is particularly valuable in time-sensitive domains such as self-driving vehicles, where rapid adaptation is essential.

B. Energy Efficiency Gains

Energy results reveal the major advantage of combining neuromorphic computing with adaptive replay. Spiking neural networks reduce power consumption by processing information through sparse event-driven activity [11], [12]. Adaptive replay further reduces computation by limiting redundant updates [24]. Together, these mechanisms yielded a 38% energy saving compared to RL, demonstrating that lifelong learning can be both effective and sustainable.

C. Domain Relevance

In autonomous driving, retention of fundamental skills like lane following is critical, as forgetting such abilities could compromise safety. NAR's strong performance in retaining older tasks while integrating new ones suggests practical value for real-world deployment. In robotics, the ability to maintain knowledge of object manipulation while learning navigation tasks demonstrates adaptability across heterogeneous skills, supporting flexible operation in changing environments.

D. Limitations and Future Work

Despite these advantages, NAR introduces some computational overhead in scoring replay samples, which may affect scalability. Larger environments with more complex tasks could increase replay management costs. Furthermore, while neuromorphic platforms such as Loihi and SpiNNaker offer promising energy efficiency [12], [13], their accessibility and software support remain limited, constraining immediate large-scale deployment.

Future research should explore hybrid digital-neuromorphic systems, improved importance metrics for replay selection, and deployment on physical hardware to validate scalability. Combining NAR with other biologically inspired mechanisms, such as synaptic consolidation [7], may further enhance robustness while maintaining low power requirements.

VI. CONCLUSION

This paper presented the Neuromorphic Adaptive Replay (NAR) framework, which integrates spiking neural networks with adaptive replay to enable energy-efficient lifelong learning in autonomous systems. The framework addresses catastrophic forgetting while reducing energy consumption, making it suitable for resource-constrained platforms.

Experimental results showed that NAR outperformed traditional reinforcement learning and fixed replay, achieving higher accuracy, faster convergence, and a forgetting rate of only 5.3%. Most notably, it reduced energy use by 38%, highlighting the benefits of combining event-driven neuromorphic computation with selective replay strategies.

The findings confirm that NAR can maintain essential skills while adapting to new tasks, ensuring safety and reliability in domains such as autonomous driving and robotics. While limitations include replay scoring overhead and the emerging nature of neuromorphic hardware, future work will explore scaling the framework and validating performance on physical neuromorphic platforms.

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