A COMPARISON OF RESTART IMPLEMENTATIONS

Marnix J.J. Garvels
Centre for Telematics and
Information Technology
University of Twente
P.O. Box 217, 7500 AE Enschede
The Netherlands

Dirk P. Kroese
Faculty of Mathematical Sciences
University of Twente
P.O. Box 217, 7500 AE Enschede
The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

The RESTART method is a widely applicable simulation technique for the estimation of rare event probabilities. The method is based on the idea to restart the simulation in certain system states, in order to generate more occurrences of the rare event. One of the main questions for any RESTART implementation is how and when to restart the simulation, in order to achieve the most accurate results for a fixed simulation effort.

In this paper we investigate and compare, both theoretically and empirically, different implementations of the RESTART method. We find that the original RESTART implementation, in which each path is split into a fixed number of copies, may not be the most efficient one. It is generally better to fix the total simulation effort for each stage of the simulation. Furthermore, given this effort, the best strategy is to restart an equal number of times from each state, rather than to restart each time from a randomly chosen state.

1 INTRODUCTION

The RESTART (REpetitive Simulation Trials After Reaching Thresholds) method is a simple simulation method for the estimation of small probabilities. It was introduced in Villen-Altamirano (1991) and enhanced in Villen-Altamirano (1994), but it is similar to an older technique called splitting proposed in Kahn et al. (1951). Theoretical aspects of the method were considered in Glasserman et al. (1996a) and Glasserman et al. (1996b). Other studies include Glasserman et al. (1997), where large deviations aspects of the RESTART method were considered, and Schreiber et al. (1996), where a method to control the variance buildup in the estimator was presented.

The basic idea of the RESTART method is to consider the rare event as the intersection of a nested sequence of events. The probability of the rare event is thus the product of conditional probabilities, each of which can usually be estimated much more accurately than the rare event itself, for a given simulation effort.

Although RESTART has been shown to be an efficient and flexible simulation method in many cases, it is not clear what the best implementation is for a given class of problems. To clarify this issue, we investigate and compare various implementations and discuss their advantages and disadvantages. In the original RESTART implementation, at every restart stage each run is split into a fixed number of copies. We call this the Fixed Splitting (FS) method. Analytical and empirical results suggest however that the FS method may not be the best implementation. We propose another implementation, in which the total simulation effort per stage is fixed. We call this the Fixed Effort (FE) method. This strategy not only yields more accurate results (for a fixed simulation budget), but is also more robust, in the sense that it is much less sensitive to the choice of the states in which the simulation is restarted. On the negative side, it requires somewhat more computer memory than the FS method.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. In Section 2 we describe the general setting in which our rare event estimation takes place. We shortly review the RESTART method, and introduce the FE and FS implementations. We discuss some of the properties of the estimator of the rare event probability. In Section 3 we have a closer look at the implementation alternatives, and argue which alternative gives the better performance. In Section 4 a number of simulation experiments are conducted using two different models. Finally, in Section 5 we give our conclusions and some directions for future research.
2 OVERFLOW PROBABILITIES

In this section we describe the class of problems for which we wish to use the RESTART method. The basic setting
is the following (for examples see Section 4): Consider
a Markov process $X := \{X_t, t \geq 0\}$ with space $E$, and
let $f$ be a real-valued measurable function on $E$. Define
$Z_t := f(X_t)$, for all $t \geq 0$. Assume for definiteness that
$Z_0 \geq 0$. For any threshold or level $L > 0$, let $T_L$ denote
the first time that the process $Z := \{Z_t, t \geq 0\}$ hits the
set $[L, \infty)$. and let $T_0$ denote the first time, after 0, that
$Z$ hits the set $(-\infty, 0]$. We assume that $T_L$ and $T_0$ are
well-defined (possibly infinite) stopping times with respect
to the history of $X$.

We are interested in the probability, $\gamma$, say, of the event
$D_L := \{T_L < T_0\}$, i.e., the probability that $Z$ up-crosses
level $L$ before it down-crosses level 0. Note that $\gamma$ depends
on the initial distribution of $X$.

An exact analysis of $\gamma$ is often not possible. A standard way to estimate $\gamma$ by simulation is the following.
Generate independently $r$ realizations (sample paths) of
the Markov process $X$. Each path $z^{(i)} := (z_t^{(i)})$ defines
a realization $z^{(i)} := (z_t^{(i)})$ of $Z$. Let $I_i$ be the indicator
that $z^{(i)}$ up-crosses level $L$ before it down-crosses level 0.
An unbiased estimate for $\gamma$ is given by

$$\hat{\gamma} := \frac{1}{r} \sum_{i=1}^r I_i.$$  (1)

For small values of $\gamma$ this method is not very efficient.
We can see this by examining the relative error (RE) of
the corresponding estimator (We use the same notation for estimate and estimator, as is often done in statistical
inference), which is defined as

$$RE(\hat{\gamma}) := \frac{\sqrt{\text{Var} \hat{\gamma}}}{E \hat{\gamma}} = \sqrt{\frac{1 - \gamma}{r \gamma}}.$$  (2)

Note that the relative error tends to infinity as $\gamma$ tends
to 0. An alternative way to estimate $\gamma$ is based on the
following observation: If $L > K$ then $D_L \subset D_K$, where,
of course, $D_K$ denotes the event that $Z$ up-crosses level
$K$ before it down-crosses level 0. Therefore, we have by
basic conditional probability,

$$\gamma = p_1 p_2,$$

with $p_1 := P(D_K)$ and $p_2 := P(D_L|D_K)$.

Hence, if we estimate both $p_1$ and $p_2$ and multiply
the results, we obtain an estimate for $\gamma$. When $p_1$ and $p_2$
are considerably larger than $\gamma$, this estimation procedure
is likely to be more efficient than the standard method
in Equation (1). Moreover, the same arguments may
be used when we divide the interval $[0, L]$ into multiple
subintervals, instead of just two. We will investigate this
next.

2.1 Fixed Effort RESTART

We describe in this section a simple implementation of
the RESTART method for estimating the probability $\gamma$
deﬁned previously. First, we partition the interval $[0, L]$
into $m$ subintervals $[L_0, L_1), [L_1, L_2), \ldots, [L_{m-1}, L_m]$
with $0 := L_0 < L_1 < \ldots < L_m := L$. Let $D_i$ denote
the event that process $Z$ reaches level $L_i$ before returning
to 0. It is assumed that $Z$ actually hits all thresholds $L_1, \ldots, L_m$ if event $D_L$ occurs. Then $D_1, D_2, \ldots, D_m$
is a nested sequence of events, decreasing to $D_m$. And,
with $p_1 := P(D_1), p_2 := P(D_2|D_1), \ldots, p_m$ we have

$$\gamma = p_1 p_2 \cdots p_m.$$  (3)

We wish to estimate at the $k$th stage ($k = 1, \ldots, m$) the
conditional probability $p_k$. We do this by generating a
fixed number of samples $I_i^{(k)}$, $i = 1, \ldots, m$, of the indicator
that process $Z$ reaches level $L_k$ before returning to 0,
starting from level $L_{k-1}$. We call $r_k$ the simulation effort
at stage $k$, and refer to this RESTART implementation as
the Fixed Effort (FE) method.

How these indicators are generated from samples of
$X$ still remains to be specified, and we will postpone this
issue till Section 3. Nevertheless, we may investigate some
properties of the FE method for the simplest case in which
all the random variables $I_i^{(1)}, \ldots, I_i^{(m)}$ are independent
and identically distributed, with $E I_i^{(k)} = p_k, i = 1, \ldots, r_k, k = 1, \ldots, m$. For this case natural estimators of $p_1, \ldots, p_m$
are given by

$$\hat{p}_k := \frac{R_k}{r_k}, k = 1, \ldots, m,  \quad \text{(2)}$$

where $R_k = \sum_{i=1}^{r_k} I_i^{(k)}$ is the total number of successes
at the $k$th stage. Moreover, the natural estimator of $\gamma$
is

$$\hat{\gamma} := \prod_{k=1}^m \hat{p}_k.  \quad \text{(3)}$$

Obviously these are unbiased estimators. Moreover, the
variance of $\hat{\gamma}$ is given by

$$\text{Var} \hat{\gamma} = E \gamma^2 - (E \hat{\gamma})^2 = E \prod_{i=1}^m \hat{p}_i^2 - \gamma^2
$$

$$= \prod_{i=1}^m \left( \text{Var} \hat{p}_i + (E \hat{p}_i)^2 \right) - \gamma^2
$$

$$= \prod_{i=1}^m \left( \frac{p_i(1-p_i)}{r_i} + p_i^2 \right) - \gamma^2
$$

$$= \gamma^2 \left( \frac{1}{r_i} \frac{1-p_i}{p_i+1} \right).$$

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2.1.1 Parameter optimization

In the estimator \( \hat{\gamma} \) we still have considerable freedom in choosing the simulation parameters. Let us assume that the simulation time of sampling from each Bernoulli \( I_j \) is about the same, and that we are given a fixed total simulation effort \( r = r_1 + \cdots + r_m \). How should we choose the parameters \( m, L_1, \ldots, L_{m-1} \) and \( r_1, \ldots, r_m \) in order to minimize the variance of \( \hat{\gamma} \)? To clarify this issue, first notice that

\[
\text{Var} \hat{\gamma} = \gamma^2 \sum_{i=1}^{m} \frac{1-p_i}{p_i r_i} + o(1/r),
\]

(4)
as \( r \to \infty \). Suppose thus that \( r \) is large enough such that \( \text{Var} \hat{\gamma} \) is approximated well by the sum above. For any given choice of \( m \) and \( p_1, \ldots, p_m \), the optimal choice for \( r_1, \ldots, r_m \) is determined by minimizing \( \sum_{i=1}^{m} b_i/r_i \), with \( b_i := (1-p_i)/p_i \), under the condition \( r_1 + \cdots + r_k = r \). To get an idea what the solution of this discrete optimization program is for large \( r \), we consider the corresponding continuous version (where the \( r_i \) are elements of \( \mathbb{R}_+ \)), adding a Lagrange multiplier. We arrive at the following minimization problem:

\[
\text{minimize} \quad \sum_{i=1}^{m} \frac{b_i}{r_i} + K(r_1 + \cdots + r_m - r),
\]

where the minimum is taken over all \( r_i > 0 \) and \( K > 0 \). It is easy check that the values of \( r_1, \ldots, r_m \) for which all partial derivatives in the expression above are zero, must satisfy

\[
\frac{b_i}{b_j} = \frac{r_j^2}{r_i^2}, \quad i, j \in \{1, \ldots, m\}.
\]

In particular, \( r_i = r_1 \sqrt{b_i/b_1} \), and therefore \( r = r_1 \sum_{i=1}^{m} \sqrt{b_i/b_1} \), so that

\[
r_i = \frac{r \sqrt{b_i}}{\sum_{j=1}^{m} \sqrt{b_j}}, \quad i = 1, \ldots, m.
\]

(5)

Hence, for this choice of the \( r_i \) we have

\[
\text{Var} \hat{\gamma} \approx \gamma^2 \frac{(\sum_{i=1}^{m} \sqrt{b_i})^2}{r} = \gamma^2 \frac{(\sum_{i=1}^{m} \sqrt{1-p_i/p_i})^2}{r}.
\]

(6)

Next, we wish to examine for a fixed \( m \) the optimal choice for the partition \( p_1, \ldots, p_m \), under the condition \( p_1 \cdots p_m = \gamma > 0 \). (From these probabilities we can infer directly the optimal levels \( L_1, \ldots, L_{m-1} \).) By (6) this is equivalent to minimizing \( \sum_{i=1}^{m} \sqrt{(1-p_i)/p_i} \), under the same condition. Again, by introducing a Lagrange multiplier, we easily find that the \( p_i \) should all be equal. Thus, for a fixed choice of \( m \) the variance of \( \hat{\gamma} \) is minimal if we choose \( p_i = \gamma^{1/m} \) and, from (5), \( r_i = r/m \) for all \( i \). The variance is then

\[
\text{Var} \hat{\gamma} \approx \gamma^2 \frac{m^2(1-\gamma^{1/m})}{\gamma^{1/m} r}.
\]

It remains to minimize this last expression with respect to \( m \). For small \( \gamma \), this is equivalent to minimizing \( m^2/\gamma^{1/m} \). This is again a discrete optimization problem. For real positive \( m \) the minimum is attained in \( m = -\log(\gamma)/2 \). This suggests that for small \( \gamma \) we should take approximately \(-\log(\gamma)/2\) thresholds. Or equivalently, the number of thresholds should be such that the probability of crossing a threshold when starting from the previous threshold, i.e., \( p_i \), is roughly equal to \( e^{-2} \approx 0.135 \). The same probability for the original Restart method has been found in Villen-Alamirano (1994).

Thus, if we use these optimal choices for the parameters, we have (for small \( \gamma \) and large \( r \))

\[
\text{Var} \hat{\gamma} \approx \frac{e \gamma \log(\gamma)^2}{4r}.
\]

This should be compared with the variance of the standard estimator, with the same simulation effort \( r \). For small \( \gamma \) this variance is approximately \( \gamma/r \).

Therefore, for the Restart method with fixed effort, the relative error of \( \hat{\gamma} \) is

\[
\text{RE}(\hat{\gamma}) \approx -\frac{e \log(\gamma)}{2\sqrt{\gamma}},
\]

compared with a relative error of approximately \( 1/\sqrt{\gamma} \) for standard simulation, see Equation (2).

2.2 Fixed Splitting Restart

The more “standard” implementation of the Restart method is slightly different from the FE method described before. We divide the estimation procedure into \( m \) stages and at each stage \( k \in \{1, \ldots, m\} \) generate samples \( I_1^{(k)}, \ldots, I_k^{(k)} \) from the indicator that process \( Z \), starting from level \( L_{k-1} \), reaches level \( L_k \) before returning to 0. However, now the effort per stage is random. Specifically, \( r_1 \) is constant, but \( r_k = n_k R_{k-1} \), where \( R_{k-1} = I_1^{(k-1)} + \cdots + I_k^{(k-1)} \) is the number of successes at stage \( k-1 \), and \( n_k \) are some fixed numbers, possibly depending on \( k \), \( k = 2, \ldots, m \). Since each successful path is “split” into a fixed number of copies, we call this the Fixed Splitting (FS) method.

As before, we are at this stage not interested in how these indicators are generated from samples of \( Z \). We will recall some properties of this implementation from Glasserman et al. (1996b), for the simplest case in which all the random variables \( I_1^{(1)}, \ldots, I_m^{(m)} \) are i.i.d. with \( EI_j^{(k)} = p_k \), \( j = 1, \ldots, r_k \), \( k = 1, \ldots, m \).
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The natural estimators of \( p_1, \ldots, p_m \) and \( \gamma \) are again given by (2) and (3). By conditioning on the \( R_k \)'s it is not difficult to see that these estimators are unbiased. Moreover, since \( r_k = n_k R_{k-1} \), for \( k = 2, \ldots, m \), (3) reduces to the simpler formula

\[
\hat{\gamma} := \frac{R_m}{\prod_{k=1}^{m} n_k}, \tag{7}
\]

where we have put \( n_1 := r_1 \).

The variance of \( \hat{\gamma} \) follows through recurrence, and is given (see Glasserman et al (1996b)) by

\[
\text{Var} \hat{\gamma} = \gamma^2 \sum_{k=1}^{m} \frac{1 - p_k}{\prod_{j=1}^{k} p_j n_j} = \gamma^2 \sum_{k=1}^{m} \frac{1 - p_k}{p_k E r_k}. \tag{8}
\]

The last equality follows from the fact that \( E r_k = n_k E R_{k-1} \).

When we compare (8) with (4) we see that for the FS method to be as efficient as the FE method we should choose \( m \approx -\log(\gamma)/2 \), \( p_k \approx e^{-2} \), and \( E r_k = \tau/m \), so that \( n_k \approx 1/p_k \approx e^2 \). Moreover, the FE and FS implementations yield approximately the same variance for some (large) fixed expected total simulation effort \( r \).

2.3 RESTART with dependent runs

We now address the question how the indicator random variables are generated from samples of the Markov process \( X \).

Assume, as before, that the interval \([0, L]\) is divided into levels \( 0 = L_0, L_1, \ldots, L_m = L \). The general RESTART simulation procedure is as follows. From level 0 we run \( r_1 \) (fixed) independent copies of \( X \) (and \( Z \)), and define \( I_j^{(1)} \) as the indicator that the \( j \)th copy of \( Z \) reaches level \( L_1 \) before visiting 0, \( j = 1, \ldots, r_1 \). At the first stage, we save the entrance states of all paths that reach level \( L_1 \). More precisely, for every copy of \( Z \) which crosses level \( L_1 \) we remember the state of the corresponding \( X \) at the time crossing. After that, \( r_2 \) new copies of \( Z \) are started, each copy from a certain saved state (two or more copies may share the same saved state), and we generate Bernoulli \( I_j^{(2)}, j = 1, \ldots, r_2 \), such that \( I_j^{(2)} \) indicates whether the \( j \)th copy of \( Z \) (\( Z \) starting from level \( L_1 \) and \( X \) from a saved state) reaches level \( L_2 \) before 0. This process repeats itself at all the subsequent stages \( 3, \ldots, m \). In the Fixed Effort (FE) implementation, \( r_k \) is fixed at every stage \( k \). In the Fixed Splitting (FS) implementation \( r_k = R_{k-1} n_k \), where \( r_k \) is fixed and \( R_{k-1} \) is the number of successful hits of level \( L_k \) before 0.

A typical outcome of the simulation can thus be viewed as a “tree” of \( Z \)-paths. We start with \( r_1 \) roots. Whenever one of the roots reaches a threshold, it generates offspring, which in turn generate offspring when they hit the next level, etc.

Notice that in general the indicators \( \{I_i^{(k)}\} \) are not independent; the success probability of an indicator depends typically on the state from which \( X \) restarts. Let \( p_k(x) \) be the probability that \( Z \), starting from level \( L_{k-1} \), reaches level \( L_k \) before 0, when \( X \) starts from state \( x \). Also, let \( \mu_k \) be the conditional distribution of \( X \) at the time when \( Z \) crosses \( L_k \), given that this happens before \( Z \) returns to 0. Finally, let \( S_k \) be a random variable with distribution \( \mu_k \). Then, obviously

\[
E p_k(S_k) = p_k, \quad k = 1, \ldots, m.
\]

Now, consider the estimator (3) for the FE method. At every stage \( k \in \{1, \ldots, m\} \) we have

\[
E R_k = r_k E p_k(S_k) = r_k p_k.
\]

Consequently, by first conditioning on \( R_m \), then on \( R_{m-1} \), etc., we find that also in this case (3) is an unbiased estimator for \( \gamma \). For the FS method we can prove similarly that (7) is an unbiased estimator for \( \gamma \).

To investigate the variance of \( \hat{\gamma} = \hat{p}_1 \cdots \hat{p}_m \), let us assume that the total simulation effort in every stage is large, so that \( \hat{p}_k \) is approximately distributed as \( p_k + \sigma_k V_k \), where \( \sigma_k \) is the (small) standard deviation of \( \hat{p}_k \) and \( V_k \) has a standard normal distribution. Because the \( \sigma_k \)'s are assumed to be small, we have

\[
\text{Var} \prod_{k=1}^{m} (p_k + \sigma_k V_k) \approx \text{Var} \sum_{k=1}^{m} \frac{\sigma_k V_k}{p_k} = \gamma^2 \text{Var} \sum_{k=1}^{m} \hat{p}_k.
\]

Let \( Y_i \) denote the total number of paths that hit level \( L_k \) of all the paths that start from the \( i \)th initial state, \( i = 1, \ldots, R_{k-1} \). The \( \{Y_i\} \) and also \( \{(Y_i, Y_j)\}_{i \neq j} \) are identically distributed. We can show that

\[
\text{Var} \hat{p}_k = \frac{p_k(1 - p_k)}{r_k} + \frac{E \left[ R_{k-1} R_{k-1} - 1 \right] \left( Y_1 Y_2 - \frac{R_k}{R_{k-1}} Y_1^2 \right)}{r_k^2}.
\]

3 RESTART IMPLEMENTATIONS

In this section we have a closer look at the implementation issues concerning RESTART. In the previous section we have already encountered two different implementations: the FE method, which fixes the the effort per stage, and the FS method, which fixed the number of splits per reached state in a stage. Also parameter optimization, as discussed in the previous section, is in some sense an implementation issue. It seems reasonable to choose the parameters of any implementation such as suggested in
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Sections 2.1 and 2.2, even if the runs are not independent. Numerical experiments, based on the models of the next section, support this idea.

In what follows, we use the terminology of Section 2.3. The words saved state, entrance state and starting state are used interchangeably.

3.1 Single Step vs. Global Step

In any simulation experiment involving RESTART we have two choices: either we simulate “stage-by-stage” or “root-by-root”. In the first case we complete all the paths starting from a certain stage before we move to the next one. This is called the Single Step approach. In the second case, we generate all the offspring originating from a single root before we move to the next root. We call this the Global Step approach.

Although the “classical” Global Step approach uses, in general, less memory than the Single Step approach, the latter method offers more flexibility in controlling the variance of the estimator. This was also demonstrated in Schreiber et al. (1996). We will therefore mainly use the Single Step approach in our experiments.

3.2 Fixed Effort vs. Fixed Splitting

In the Fixed Splitting (FS) method we create at every stage a fixed number of offspring from each saved state. In the Fixed Effort (FE) method we create at every stage a fixed total number of offspring.

We expect the FS method to perform less than optimal in multistage simulations, because the total number of simulations for each stage is uncontrollable. When the number of splits per stage is too small, we will see the simulation paths "die-out", when on the other hand the number of splits per stage is too high the number of simulation paths will "explode". In the first case the variance in the estimator will become too large, in the second case the time spent on simulation will become too large. It is therefore of utmost importance to keep the underlying branching process "critical". Glasserman et al. have tried this principle in Glasserman et al. (1996a) by randomizing the number of splits in order to ensure the critical nature of the simulation. This again has disadvantages as it needs a pilot run to determine the distribution for the generator of the number of splits per each stage. The Fixed Effort method avoids these problems in a much better way because the number of simulations we will perform per stage is fixed in advance.

3.3 Fixed Assignment vs. Random Assignment

In stage \( k \) of the simulation we have to distribute the \( r_k \) sample paths we need to simulate over the given \( R_{k-1} \) entrance states (created by the successful hits of stage \( k-1 \)). We could draw an entrance state randomly each time we need to generate a sample path in stage \( k \). This seems sensible because we are then using the empirical entrance distribution into stage \( k \) for the starting states. We will call this the Random Assignment method.

An alternative approach is to distribute the \( R_{k-1} \) starting states evenly (deterministically) amongst the \( r_k \) runs. We call this the Fixed Assignment method.

We will analyse the variance generated in the second stage in a two-stage situation for both methods. Suppose we have \( R_1 \) starting states \( S_1, \ldots, S_{R_1} \). \( R_1 \) is assumed here to be fixed. We wish to start a total of \( r_2 := n_2 R_1 \) new runs, where \( n_2 \geq 1 \) is some fixed integer. The success probability from some state \( s \) will be denoted by \( p_2(s) \). Let \( Y_i \) be the number of successful runs (that reach the next level) starting from state \( S_i \). Since we have only one intermediate stage, the \( S_i \)'s are independent and identically distributed samples of the entrance state, and \( E p_2(S_i) = p_2 \). Consequently,

\[
\hat{p}_2 := \frac{1}{r_2} \sum_{i=1}^{R_1} Y_i
\]

is an unbiased estimator for \( p_2 \).

**Fixed Assignment:** From each starting state we start \( n_2 \) independent paths. Then, given the vector of starting states \( S := (S_1, \ldots, S_{R_1}) \), \( Y_i \) has a Binomial distribution of size \( n_2 \) and success probability \( p_2(S_i) \). Let us denote conditional expectation and variance with respect to \( S \) by \( E_S \) and \( Var_S \), respectively. We have

\[
\text{Var} \hat{p}_2 = \frac{1}{r_2} \left\{ p_2(1-p_2) + (n_2 - 1) \text{Var} p_2(S_1) \right\}.
\]

**Random Assignment:** We distribute the \( R_1 \) starting states completely randomly amongst the \( r_2 = n_2 R_1 \) new runs. Let \( K_i \) denote the number of runs that start from state \( S_i \). Then, the vector \( K := (K_1, \ldots, K_{R_1}) \) has a multinomial distribution of size \( r_2 \) and with equal success probabilities \( 1/R_1 \). Notice that the \( Y_i \)'s are identically distributed, but not independent. Also, each pair \( (Y_i, Y_j) \), \( i \neq j \) has the same distribution. Moreover, given \( K \), the \( Y_i \)'s are independent; and given \( K \) and \( S \), each \( Y_i \) has a Binomial distribution with size \( K_i \) and success probability \( p_2(S_i) \). Finally, \( K \) and \( S \) are independent. By conditioning on \( K \) ad \( S \) and using the independencies we arrive at the following equation for the variance of \( p_2 \):

\[
\text{Var} \hat{p}_2 = \frac{1}{r_2} \left\{ p_2(1-p_2) + \frac{(r_2 - 1) \text{Var} p_2(S_1)}{R_1} \right\}.
\]

When we compare this with the variance for the Fixed Assignment case we see that the last formula always gives
a higher variance, irrespective of the unknown constant $\text{Var}_{p2}(S_1)$. This is a perhaps surprising result, which has been verified empirically also to hold for the multilevel case, see Section 4.

4 NUMERICAL EXPERIMENTS

To analyse the behaviour of the different RESTART implementations we conduct a series of simulation experiments using two different models. In particular, we compare the FS and FE implementations, both as Single Step methods. Also, the FE implementation will be evaluated in both the Random Assignment (RA) and the Fixed Assignment (FA) case.

The RESTART parameters (e.g., $m$, $L_1$, \ldots, $L_m$, etc.) are chosen in accordance with the values suggested in Sections 2.1 and 2.2. For example, we try to choose the levels such that success probabilities (of hitting the next level) are near the "optimal" value $e^{-2}$. Also, we have used a truncation procedure to discard unpromising trials, as in Glasserman et al. (1996a).

In all tables $\gamma$ denotes the rare event probability of interest. The estimate of $\gamma$ is given by $\hat{\gamma}$. For each $\hat{\gamma}$ the corresponding estimate of the Relative Error (RE) is included. As a measure of the efficiency of the estimator $\hat{\gamma}$ we use the Relative Time Variance product (RTV), which we define as the simulation time (in seconds of CPU time used on a Sun Ultra 2 using Sun CC 2.1 with optimization level 5) multiplied by the squared (estimate of the) relative error of $\hat{\gamma}$. Notice that the RTV is equivalent to the "work-balanced variance" used in Glyn et al. (1992). Once a stable estimate of the variance is reached, the RTV becomes constant. This constant is smaller for more efficient simulation schemes. Practically, if scheme 1 gives a RTV which is half that of scheme 2, it would take twice as long to estimate $\gamma$ within a certain accuracy via scheme 2 than via scheme 1.

4.1 Tandem Queue

The first model is a 2-node tandem queue. Customers arrive at the first queue according to a Poisson process with rate $\lambda$. The service time of a customer at the first queue is exponential with rate $\mu_1$, independent of the input process and the service time at the second node. The output process of the first queue forms the input process of the second queue. The service time of customer at the second queue is exponential with rate $\mu_2$, also independent of every thing else. This model has received considerable attention in rare event probability estimation, e.g., in Glasserman et al. (1996b) and Parekh et al. (1989). We wish to estimate the probability $\gamma$ of the event that the number of customers in the second queue reaches some (high) level $L$, before the system empties, starting from an empty system. See Figure 1 for a graphical illustration.

![Figure 1: Tandem model](image)

Let $Y_t$ and $Z_t$ be number of clients in the first and the second queue at time $t$, respectively (including the customers in service). Then $X := (Y_t, Z_t, t \geq 0)$ is the underlying Markov process in the general set-up of Section 2.

Remark 1 Notice that $\gamma$ is defined as the probability of overflow before both buffers become empty, not just the second buffer. We therefore have a slightly different setting than described in Section 2. However, the RESTART procedure is easily adapted for this case.

We compare the FE approach with the FS approach of Glasserman et al. (1996a); and we do this for two different cases. In the first case the second buffer has the highest load, and in the second case the first buffer. As service rates we use $\mu_1 = 4, \mu_2 = 2$, in the first case, and $\mu_2 = 4/3, \mu_2 = 2$, in the second case. In both cases $\lambda = 1$. Two different levels are considered: $L = 20$ and 60. The intermediate levels will be chosen as multiples of 2, hence, $L_k := 2k, \quad k = 0, 1, \ldots, m - 1$, where $m$ is 10 and 30, respectively. The number of samples were chosen as $r_k = 10^6, \forall k$ for the FE method and $n_1 = 5 \cdot 10^6, n_2 = 2, n_k = 4, \forall k \geq 3$ for the FS method to optimize comparability between the simulation methods. As in Glasserman et al. (1996a), a cut-off technique has been used to reduce simulation time. The idea is to discard unpromising paths which lead back to zero, since a lot of time is being spent simulating paths back to the empty system state. The simulation results for this model are found in Table 1, along with the exact probabilities which were obtained from Glasserman et al. (1996a). For each estimate of $\gamma$ we have simulated long enough to obtain relative errors of about 3%.

We conclude that also in this case the FE method is more efficient than the FS method. Note that, as observed in Glasserman et al. (1996a), in the second case, where the first buffer is the bottleneck the RTV is much higher (for both the FE and FS implementation) than in the first case. The RTV seems to grow quadratically with $L$. 606
Table 1: Results for the tandem queue. Parameters
\( (\lambda, \mu_1, \mu_2) = (1, 4, 2) \) in top and \( (1, \frac{3}{4}, 2) \) in bottom half

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>( L )</th>
<th>( \hat{\gamma} )</th>
<th>RE</th>
<th>sec</th>
<th>RTV</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>1.16e-18</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>FE</td>
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<td>1.179e-18</td>
<td>1.2e-2</td>
<td>2195</td>
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<td>1.128e-18</td>
<td>1.9e-2</td>
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<table>
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<th>RTV</th>
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</table>

4.2 Flow line

The second model deals with a continuous flow line consisting of three machines and two intermediate buffers. Machine \( i \in \{1, 2, 3\} \) can process the continuous flow products at some maximum rate \( \nu_i \), called the machine speed. Moreover, the machines are prone to failure. The life and repair times of the machine \( i \) are exponentially distributed with parameters \( \lambda_i \) and \( \mu_i \), respectively, and are independent of each other. The buffer capacities are \( C_1 \) and \( C_2 \). The system is depicted in Figure 2.

![Figure 2: Flow line model](image)

This model has been studied in Kroese et al. (1998), where an Importance Sampling procedure was described for the efficient estimation of the overflow probability \( \gamma \) in the second buffer \( B_2 \) (defined as the probability that buffer \( B_2 \) reaches level \( L := C_2 \) before it empties again, starting from an empty system). The translation into the RESTART set-up is the following. Let \( Y_t \) and \( Z_t \) be the level of the first and second buffer at time \( t \), respectively; and let \( M_t \in \{0, 1\}^3 \) denote the state of the machines at time \( t \). Then obviously \( X := (M_t, Y_t, Z_t, t \geq 0) \) is the basic Markov process of Section 2.

We wish to compare the performance of different RESTART methods with that of the Importance Sampling (IS) method in Kroese et al. (1998).

The model parameters are \( \nu_1 = 3, \nu_2 = 2, \nu_3 = 1; \lambda_1 = 5, \lambda_2 = 2; \mu_1 = 1, \mu_2 = 1 \) and \( C_1 = 1 \). The third machine is assumed to be perfectly reliable. In Kroese et al. (1998), a uniformization-based approach is used to implement the IS estimator. A uniformization rate of \( 70 \) was found to give the most accurate results and the number of cycles (runs) is \( 10^5 \). The overflow level \( L \) is taken to be \( 3 \). The intermediate levels for the RESTART methods are \( L_k := k/2, \ k = 1, \ldots, 6 \). The number of runs is \( 1.5 \cdot 10^5 \) for the first stage and \( 10^6 \) for the following stages. The total simulation time for each experiment is about one minute. See Table 2 for simulation results.

Table 2: Results for the flow line model

<table>
<thead>
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<th>( \hat{\gamma} )</th>
<th>RE</th>
<th>sec</th>
<th>RTV</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SS</td>
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<td>0.110</td>
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<tr>
<td>IS</td>
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<tr>
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<td>RS,RA</td>
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<td>0.0077</td>
<td>65</td>
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</table>

Comparing the RTV's we observe that the RESTART method compares very well with IS. It is not safe to conclude that in general the RESTART method outperforms IS, since this would require a more careful consideration of their respective implementations. We found the RESTART method easier to implement, and requiring less critical optimization parameters, and thus a more robust estimator.

5 CONCLUSIONS

We have compared several implementations of the RESTART method and have found that the original RESTART implementation (which we call the Fixed Splitting (FS) implementation), in which each path is split into a fixed number of copies, is in general not the most efficient one. It is better to fix the total simulation effort for each stage of the simulation (we call this the Fixed Effort (FE) implementation). In this way the number of paths that hit the next level will remain approximately the same, irrespective of how we chose the RESTART parameters. On the contrary, the FS implementation is very sensitive to the choice of the RESTART parameters; if we do not choose these parameters exactly right, the paths will either "die-out" or "explode", leading to excessive simulation time. For both methods (FE and FS) the "optimal" parameters are determined by making the success probabilities in each stage approximately \( e^{-2} \), and the number of trials in each phase equal.

We also find that, if we use the FE method, it is better, for a given total effort per stage, to restart an equal number of times from each saved state, rather than to restart each time from a randomly (in this case uniformly) chosen saved state.

We note that if the entrance distribution is (approximately) known, we should sample from this (approximate) distribution, thus rendering the samples independent and
reducing the variance of the estimator. The advantage of such an approach is currently being investigated. Another direction for future research is the estimation of stationary probabilities rather than overflow probabilities via the RESTART method.

6 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors wish to thank Jos de Smit and Victor Nicola for helpful discussions and constructive comments.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

M. J. J. GARVELS is a researcher at the Centre for Telematics and Information Technology at the University of Twente, The Netherlands. His research interests include simulation methods for queueing systems. He holds a degree in Mathematical Sciences from the University of Twente and is currently working towards his Ph.D. there.

D. P. KROESE holds a Ph.D. degree in Mathematical Sciences from the University of Twente, The Netherlands, where he has been a Lecturer from 1990 to 1998. He has held visiting staff positions at Princeton University, U.S.A. and the University of Melbourne, Australia. Currently he holds a research staff position at the Teletraffic Research Centre in Adelaide, Australia. His interests include queueing theory, performance analysis, efficient simulation, point processes and fluid queues.