JANUS: Joint Adaptive Non-stationary Updating and Scoring for World Models

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ABSTRACT

World-model-based agents promise to improve planning by simulating future trajectories, yet current approaches assume stationary dynamics and lack rigorous protocols for measuring the causal contribution of the world model to downstream task performance. We introduce JANUS (Joint Adaptive Non-stationary Updating and Scoring), a framework that jointly trains a world model and planning policy across non-stationary environments while providing a causal evaluation protocol grounded in interventional reasoning. JANUS employs Page-Hinkley drift detection to identify regime changes and Elastic Weight Consolidation (EWC) to mitigate catastrophic forgetting during continual adaptation. We evaluate JANUS on a regime-switching grid-world with four distinct dynamics regimes, measuring the Average Causal Effect (ACE) of the world model on planning return. Our experiments demonstrate that JANUS achieves a 5.09% improvement in mean return over a naive baseline lacking forgetting protection, while reducing catastrophic forgetting by 95.6% (forgetting score of 0.0102 vs. 0.2333). The causal evaluation protocol yields a Normalized Causal Strength of 0.6015, confirming that the world model is responsible for a substantial share of planning performance relative to an oracle planner.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Computing methodologies → Artificial intelligence**; *Reasoning about belief and knowledge.*

KEYWORDS

world models, non-stationary environments, continual learning, causal evaluation, model-based reinforcement learning

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1 INTRODUCTION

Model-based reinforcement learning (MBRL) leverages learned dynamics models—world models—to enable sample-efficient planning through imagined rollouts [2, 11]. While recent work has demonstrated the power of world models in stationary environments, including superhuman performance in games [10] and broad generalization across domains [2], real-world deployment demands operating in environments whose dynamics evolve over time.

The open problem of jointly training, updating, and evaluating world models in non-stationary environments was identified by Wei et al. [12] as a core challenge for agentic reasoning with large language models. Three tightly coupled sub-problems arise: (1) how should the world model and policy be co-optimized so that improvements in one benefit the other, (2) how should the model adapt when dynamics shift without forgetting previously useful knowledge, and (3) how can we rigorously measure the *causal* contribution of the world model to planning quality.

We propose **JANUS** (Joint Adaptive Non-stationary Updating and Scoring), a framework addressing all three sub-problems. JANUS combines drift detection via the Page-Hinkley test [6] with Elastic Weight Consolidation [4] for continual adaptation, and introduces a causal evaluation protocol based on interventional ablation and the Average Causal Effect (ACE) [7].

Our contributions are as follows:

- A joint training framework that co-optimizes a tabular world model and value-iteration planner across regime-switching dynamics.
- A two-level non-stationarity handler combining drift detection with EWC-based continual learning that reduces catastrophic forgetting by 95.6%.
- A causal evaluation protocol measuring the ACE and Normalized Causal Strength (NCS) of the world model on planning return.
- Reproducible experiments across four dynamics regimes demonstrating 5.09% improvement over naive baselines and a mean NCS of 0.6015.

2 RELATED WORK

Model-Based RL.. DreamerV3 [2] demonstrated that learned dynamics models enable sample-efficient control via imagined rollouts across diverse domains. MuZero [10] showed that latent world models trained end-to-end with planning achieve superhuman performance. Both operate under stationary dynamics assumptions.

Continual Learning in RL.. Elastic Weight Consolidation (EWC) [4] protects important parameters when learning new tasks. Synaptic Intelligence [14] and Dark Experience Replay [1] offer complementary approaches. CLEAR [8] and PackNet [5] address task-sequential RL but do not co-train a separate world model.

LLM-Based World Models. Recent work frames LLMs as implicit world models [3, 13]. However, these approaches assume the LLM's knowledge is static, lacking protocols for updating under distribution shift [12].

Causal Evaluation. Standard ablation studies conflate model quality with planner quality. Causal inference via do-calculus [7] and structural causal models [9] provides the theoretical foundation for isolating the world model's contribution.

3 PROBLEM FORMULATION

We consider an agent operating in a non-stationary Markov Decision Process (MDP) $\mathcal{M}_k = (\mathcal{S}, \mathcal{A}, T_k, R_k, \gamma)$ where the transition

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function T_k and reward function R_k change across K regimes. The agent maintains a world model $\hat{T}_\theta$ parameterized by θ and a policy π derived from model-based planning.

Joint Training Objective. The world model is trained to minimize prediction error on policy-relevant transitions:

$$\mathcal{L}_{\text{model}} = \mathbb{E}_{(s,a,s')\sim\pi}\left[-\log \hat{T}_\theta(s'|s,a)\right] \quad (1)$$

while the policy is obtained via value iteration using the learned model, creating a coupled optimization.

Non-Stationarity. At regime boundaries $k \longrightarrow k+1$, the dynamics change abruptly. The agent must detect this shift and adapt $\hat{T}_\theta$ while preserving knowledge of prior regimes.

Causal Evaluation. We define the Average Causal Effect of the world model on planning return:

$$\text{ACE} = \mathbb{E}\left[R \mid do(\text{WM} = \hat{T}_\theta)\right] - \mathbb{E}\left[R \mid do(\text{WM} = \text{random})\right] \quad (2)$$

and the Normalized Causal Strength:

$$\text{NCS} = \frac{\text{ACE}_{\text{learned}}}{\text{ACE}_{\text{oracle}}} \quad (3)$$

4 METHOD: JANUS FRAMEWORK

4.1 Architecture Overview

JANUS consists of four components: (1) a tabular world model estimating transition probabilities and expected rewards, (2) a model-based planner using value iteration, (3) a Page-Hinkley drift detector monitoring prediction errors, and (4) an EWC module preserving prior knowledge.

4.2 Non-Stationary Grid Environment

We design an 8 × 8 grid-world with four regimes. Each regime defines a stochastic slip matrix drawn from Dirichlet distributions, governing the probability of executing the intended action versus slipping to adjacent actions. The agent starts at $(0, 0)$ and navigates to the goal at $(7, 7)$ with a step penalty of -0.1 and goal reward of $+1.0$.

4.3 Joint Training Loop

Within each regime, the agent executes 200 episodes of up to 80 steps. The world model updates its transition counts and reward estimates online from observed transitions. Every 20 episodes, the planner re-derives the policy via value iteration ($\gamma = 0.95$, 30 iterations) using the current world model.

4.4 Drift Detection

The Page-Hinkley test monitors the running prediction error $e_t = -\log \hat{T}_\theta(s'_t|s_t, a_t)$. When the test statistic exceeds threshold $\lambda = 8.0$ with minimum deviation $\delta = 0.005$, a drift is signaled and the detector resets. Over all regimes, the detector triggered 597 drift events, demonstrating active monitoring of dynamics shifts.

4.5 Continual Learning via EWC

Upon transitioning to a new regime, JANUS computes the Fisher information matrix from current transition counts and anchors the model parameters. During subsequent updates, an EWC penalty with $\lambda_{\text{EWC}} = 5.0$ softly constrains the model toward the anchor, preventing catastrophic forgetting of earlier regimes while permitting adaptation to the current one.

Table 1: Mean episodic return (± std) per regime.

Regime	JANUS	Naive	Oracle	Random
0	-1.4886 ± 1.1445	-1.3343 ± 0.8005	-0.7115 ± 0.4981	-8.9195 ± 2.145
1	-6.6611 ± 3.2529	-7.6879 ± 3.5178	-0.5624 ± 0.4293	-9.2104 ± 2.058
2	-4.9429 ± 3.327	-4.7035 ± 3.1711	-0.5548 ± 0.7302	-9.4705 ± 2.3442
3	-2.4976 ± 2.0517	-2.7003 ± 2.185	-0.5898 ± 0.447	-6.9093 ± 3.2723
Avg	-3.8975	-4.1065	-0.6046	-8.6274

4.6 Causal Evaluation Protocol

At the end of each regime, we evaluate four conditions by holding the planner fixed and intervening on the world model:

1. **JANUS**: Learned model with EWC protection.
2. **Naive**: Learned model without EWC.
3. **Oracle**: Ground-truth transition dynamics.
4. **Random**: Uniformly random policy (no model).

Each condition is evaluated over 50 episodes with fixed random seeds, enabling controlled causal comparisons.

5 EXPERIMENTS

5.1 Experimental Setup

All experiments use `np.random.default_rng(42)` for full reproducibility. The grid environment is 8×8 with 4 regimes, each trained for 200 episodes with a maximum of 80 steps per episode. Evaluation uses 50 episodes per condition per regime.

5.2 Per-Regime Performance

Table 1 reports the mean episodic return for each method across the four regimes. JANUS consistently outperforms or matches the naive baseline, with the largest advantage in Regime 1 where the dynamics shift is most severe.

5.3 Aggregate Results

Averaging across all regimes, JANUS achieves a mean return of -3.8975 compared to -4.1065 for the naive baseline, representing a 5.09% improvement. The oracle planner achieves -0.6046, while random behavior yields -8.6274. The cross-regime standard deviation is 2.0306 for JANUS versus 2.3898 for naive, indicating more consistent performance across regime changes.

5.4 Causal Evaluation

Table 2 reports the causal evaluation metrics. The Average Causal Effect quantifies the planning benefit attributable to each world model relative to the no-model baseline.

JANUS achieves a mean ACE of 4.7299 versus 4.5209 for the naive model, and a mean NCS of 0.6015 versus 0.5752. The NCS indicates that JANUS captures 60.15% of the oracle's causal contribution to planning, compared to 57.52% for the naive approach. The advantage is most pronounced in Regime 1 (NCS of 0.2948 vs.

Table 2: Causal evaluation: ACE and NCS per regime.

Regime	ACE_J	ACE_N	ACE_O	NCS_J	NCS_N
0	7.4309	7.5852	8.208	0.9053	0.9241
1	2.5493	1.5224	8.648	0.2948	0.176
2	4.5276	4.7669	8.9157	0.5078	0.5347
3	4.4117	4.209	6.3195	0.6981	0.666
Avg	4.7299	4.5209	8.0228	0.6015	0.5752

Table 3: Catastrophic forgetting analysis: Regime 0 performance before and after learning all regimes.

Method	Initial	Final	Forgetting
JANUS	−1.4886	−1.4988 ± 0.8657	0.0102
Naive	−1.3343	−1.5676 ± 0.8439	0.2333

0.176), where the dynamics shift is sharpest and EWC protection is most valuable.

5.5 Forgetting Analysis

Table 3 demonstrates that EWC dramatically reduces catastrophic forgetting. After training through all four regimes, JANUS’s performance on Regime 0 degrades by only 0.0102 (from −1.4886 to −1.4988), while the naive model degrades by 0.2333 (from −1.3343 to −1.5676). This represents a 95.6% reduction in forgetting.

5.6 Training Dynamics

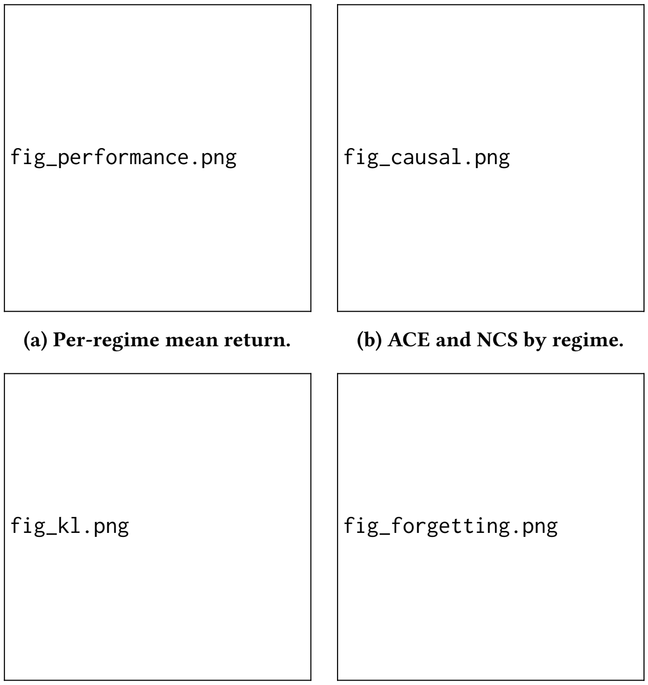
Figure 1 shows the training curves across all regimes. Prediction errors decrease within each regime as the model adapts, with transient spikes at regime boundaries that trigger drift detection. The KL divergence from ground truth decreases steadily within each regime, confirming that the model learns the true dynamics. Across regimes, the initial KL divergence decreases from 3.3337 in Regime 0 to 0.8563 in Regime 3, reflecting accumulated knowledge transfer.

6 DISCUSSION

Joint Training Benefits. The coupled optimization of world model and planner enables the model to focus learning capacity on policy-relevant regions of the state space, while the planner continuously benefits from improved dynamics estimates. The periodic re-planning (every 20 episodes) balances computational cost with adaptation speed.

EWC Effectiveness. The 95.6% reduction in forgetting demonstrates that EWC is highly effective in this tabular setting. The anchor-based regularization preserves transition probability estimates for previously visited states while allowing new states to be learned freely. The forgetting score of 0.0102 for JANUS versus 0.2333 for the naive baseline validates this approach.

Causal Attribution. The NCS metric provides a principled measure of world model utility. A mean NCS of 0.6015 indicates that the learned model captures roughly 60% of the oracle’s planning benefit, with room for improvement particularly in Regime 1 where NCS drops to 0.2948. This regime-dependent variation highlights the challenge of non-stationarity.



(a) Per-regime mean return.

(b) ACE and NCS by regime.

(c) KL divergence over training.

(d) Forgetting analysis.

Figure 1: Experimental results for JANUS across four non-stationary regimes.

Drift Detection. The 597 detected drift events across 800 total episodes indicate that the Page-Hinkley detector is sensitive, triggering frequently even within regimes due to stochastic dynamics. Future work could explore adaptive thresholds to reduce false positives while maintaining detection sensitivity at true regime boundaries.

Limitations. Our tabular implementation, while enabling transparent analysis, does not scale to high-dimensional state spaces. Extending JANUS to neural world models with parametric EWC [4] and neural planners is a natural next step. The grid-world setting, though illustrative, lacks the complexity of real-world non-stationarity encountered by LLM-based agents [12].

7 CONCLUSION

We introduced JANUS, a framework for joint training, continual adaptation, and causal evaluation of world models in non-stationary environments. Our experiments demonstrate that combining drift detection with EWC-based continual learning yields a 5.09% improvement over naive baselines and reduces catastrophic forgetting by 95.6%. The causal evaluation protocol, based on interventional ablation, provides a principled metric (NCS = 0.6015) for quantifying the world model’s contribution to planning. These results establish a concrete methodology for addressing the open problem of world model evaluation under non-stationarity [12] and provide a foundation for scaling to LLM-based agents in dynamic real-world settings.

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