The Trigger Algorithm for the Burst Alert Telescope on Swift

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Abstract. The Swift Burst Alert Telescope (BAT) is a huge (5200 cm$^2$) coded aperture imager that will detect gamma-ray bursts in real time and provide a location that the Swift satellite will use to slew the optical and x-ray telescopes. The huge size of BAT is a challenge for the on-board triggering: a change as small as 1% is equivalent to a 1 $\sigma$ statistical variation in 1 second. There will be three types of triggers, two based on rates and one based on images. The first type of trigger is for short time scales (4 msec to 64 msec). These will be traditional triggers (single background) and we check about 25,000 combinations of time-energy-focal plane subregions per second. The second type of trigger will be similar to what is used on HETE: fits to multiple background regions to remove trends for time scales between 64 msec and 64 seconds. About 500 triggers will be checked per second. For these rate triggers, false triggers and variable non-GRB sources will be rejected by requiring a new source to be present in an image. The third type of trigger works on longer time scales (minutes), and will be based on routine images that are made of the field of view.

INTRODUCTION

The Burst Alert Telescope (BAT) on Swift is a large (5200 cm$^2$) CZT-based coded aperture imager. BAT’s primary role on the Swift satellite is to detect when a gamma-ray burst (GRB) starts, quickly locate it, and direct the Swift satellite to point the optical and x-ray telescopes at the source. The BAT triggers must not only detect the occurrence of a GRB, but they also must select the time periods to form an image. This requires the triggering code to identify a range of times (the "background" period) when there is no apparent emission from the GRB and a range of times (the "foreground" period) where the GRB probably will produce the strongest image.

The BAT triggering code has three types of triggers. Two of these are "rate" triggers based on statistically significant increases in the counting rate in the focal plane (or a portion of the focal plane), and one is an "image" trigger based on new significant sources found in images of the field of view (FOV). The rate triggers are divided into the "short" rate triggers (with foreground periods of less than or equal to 64 msec) and "long" rate triggers (with foreground periods larger than or equal to 64 msec). The image triggers are intended for longer periods of time (from 64 sec to many minutes).

One goal is to explore the widest possible parameter space. As such, as many triggers as possible will be run simultaneously until the flight computer is nearly saturated. Thus, special attention will be paid to the CPU usage.

It is not hard to design a triggering code that responds to GRBs. The real challenge in the triggering code is to avoid false triggers. This is a special problem with BAT because its huge size means that a very slight trend can appear to be a significant increase in the count rate: a 1% change in the BAT count rate between the background and foreground regions appears to be a 1 $\sigma$ variation for a 1 sec foreground sample. Thus, the chief danger is false triggers due to trends in the background, variations of uninteresting sources in the FOV, or minor configuration changes (such as automatic gain adjust) which produce the appearance of a statistically significant increase.

SHORT RATE TRIGGERS

Checking many short time scales in a triggering code can require most of the CPU time. The background counting rate of BAT is not expected to change on short time scales (i.e., less than a few seconds). Thus, for the short time scales we will use simple traditional triggers where there is a single background period of fixed duration before the foreground period. This is the type of trigger that was used on all GRB experiments from Vela to BATSE.

The short trigger looks for statistically significant increases in the count rate on five time scales: 4, 8, 16, 32, and 64 msec. This is done for nine different regions of the focal plane (four quadrants, the left half, right half, top half, bottom half, and the full focal plane) and for
LONG RATE TRIGGERS

To avoid trends on longer time scales, one must fit a function to the background and remove the trend. This is the technique pioneered by the HETE GRB trigger ([Fenimore & Galassi 2001] [Tavenner, et al. 2002]). For each trigger criterion, we specify starting and ending times for up to three background regions and a foreground region. The background regions can either be all before the foreground samples (an extrapolation) or can bracket the foreground sample (an interpolation). A goal of Swift is to rapidly determine locations, so it would seem that having background regions after the foreground would only delay the location determination. However, most likely, a GRB will trigger one of the short traditional triggers or trigger a long extrapolation trigger with a threshold set high enough to suppress false triggers due to trends. The interpolation triggers only come into play to detect the GRB when the other types of triggers have already failed. The other crucial use of the extrapolation triggers is to identify the best foreground/background combination after the event has been detected. The trigger algorithm continues to process the time series after the initial detection in order to find the overall maximum trigger score and use the resulting foreground/background periods until a new source is found in the images.

The long rate triggers are based on time series with 64 msec time resolution and are much more complicated than the short rate triggers. To cover as wide as parameter space as possible, the triggering code must be very efficient. In previous trigger algorithms (such as HETE), most of the CPU usage is for forming sums of counts. For each long trigger, one needs to have the sum of counts in several background periods (probably involving a few hundred 64 msec samples) plus the counts in foregrounds ranging from 64 msec in duration up to perhaps 64 sec. The trick to an efficient triggering algorithm is to store the integral sum of counts, not the counts within samples. The BAT triggering code maintains 36 time series in circular buffers (for the 9 detector regions and 4 energy ranges). Each time series consists of the integer sum of the counts from when the instrument was turned on up to time $T$:

$$I_i(T) = \sum_{0}^{T} C_i.$$  

To obtain the sum of counts within a particular time period (say $T_1$ to $T_2$), one needs only a single arithmetic step, $I_i(T_2) - I_i(T_1)$, rather than a sum over the samples between $T_1$ and $T_2$. (Eventually, the integer sum will overflow the register capability of the computer. This is accommodated by adding the maximum range of the computer registers if the difference is negative.)
A second integral sum adds up the number of invalid samples for each of the 36 region-energy combinations. For example, if there is a configuration change in one of the quadrants, a 1 is added to the corresponding invalid integral sum. Whenever we seek the number of counts from a period of time that includes that sample, we also check that the difference of the integral sum of invalids that cover that same duration is zero. For every time that the high voltage is off or something else disables the detectors, a 1 is added to the sum of invalid samples. The trigger code runs all the time and each criterion turns on as soon as the corresponding difference in the sum of invalid samples is zero. Thus, criteria that require fewer samples turn on as soon as they are ready, increasing the on-time for the triggers.

Each long rate trigger is controlled by about 30 commandable parameters. These parameters define the relative times of several background periods, the time, duration, and amount to step the phase for the foreground period, the degree of the polynomial to fit, a minimum variance ($\sigma_{\text{min}}$, needed for low count rates), a systematic noise level ($\beta$, needed for high count rates), a threshold for declaring a trigger ($\sigma_{\text{threshold}}$), several parameters that control the CPU usage, and an enable/disable parameter. The CPU usage is controlled in several ways. One can specify which tick of the 64 msec clock that each criteria is evaluated. This ensures that the CPU usage is evenly spread out. There is a CPU usage monitor and if a commandable level is exceeded, triggers will autonomously turn themselves off for a commandable period of time to maintain an acceptable CPU usage.

To obtain the long rate trigger score, one first finds the counts and variance on the counts in the foreground period ($C_{\text{fore}}, \sigma_{\text{fore}}^2$). Second, one fits a function (constant, linear, 2nd order) to the background samples. Third, one integrates the fit function during the foreground sample to find the expected background rate ($C_{\text{back}}, \sigma_{\text{back}}^2$). (We use "model variance", so $\sigma_{\text{fore}}^2$ is actually based on $C_{\text{back}}$.) Finally, the trigger score is calculated as:

$$S = \frac{(C_{\text{fore}} - C_{\text{back}})^2}{\sigma_{\text{fore}}^2 + \sigma_{\text{back}}^2 + \sigma_{\text{min}}^2 + \beta^2 C_{\text{back}}^2}.$$  \hfill (3)

Here, $\sigma_{\text{min}}^2$ provides a minimum variance to protect against very low counts and $\beta$ protects against systematic effects at high count rates. When the count rate is very high, the variations will no longer be Poissonian. The presence of $\beta$ converts the trigger score from a signal-to-noise criteria, to a fractional difference criteria. The units on $\beta$ is fractional change per effective $\sigma$. At high count rates, the $C_{\text{back}}$ term will dominate over the $\sigma^2$ terms, and the trigger score becomes

$$S = \left( \frac{C_{\text{fore}} - C_{\text{back}}}{\beta} \right)^2.$$  \hfill (4)

For example, if the foreground has a 5% net increase over the background and $\beta = 0.025$ (i.e., 2.5%), then the trigger score will be $\approx 2^2$. If one did not have the $\beta$ term, a 5% net increase would be about 5 $\sigma$ (assuming the BAT background rate of 10 KHz) and the trigger score would be $5^2$.

The huge size of BAT means that even a small change in a non-transient, but variable source will appear to be a statistically significant change in the count rate. Sources such as Cyg X-1, Her X-1, and Sco X-1 could easily produce constant triggers forcing us to raise our thresholds. To guard against this, we will implement several new concepts. Both are derived from the coded aperture technique "URA-tagging" ([Fenimore 1987]) which effectively deconvolves the mask pattern in real time for selected source locations. Each photon is assigned a weight factor that is related to the probability that it came from a designated source location, that is, whether it could reach the detector through the mask pattern. The sum of the probabilities as a function of time becomes that source’s strength at that time. Background can be removed by scaling the weight factors to be negative for regions totally blocked. Effectively, the sum of the counts in the detectors that cannot see the location is subtracted from the locations which can. Although developed for URA patterns, the mask tagging also works for random patterns such as BAT.

One use of the mask tagged rates is as a "veto" trigger. Some of the trigger criteria will process the mask-tagged time histories in the same way that the 36 region-energy combinations are processed (i.e., they will be stored as integral sums like equation 2). If the trigger criteria exceeds a threshold, a (commandable) set of regular triggers are disabled for that time period. For example, we might have veto triggers that have foreground durations of 1, 5, and 10 sec that are applied to the tagged time series for Cyg X-1. If any of those veto triggers exceed their thresholds, we disable the 1, 5, and 10 sec long rate criteria. We will have the capability to simultaneously track up to three mask-tagged sources for the veto system.

The second use of the mask tagged rates will be to correct trigger series by subtracting out the variations seen by the mask tagged sources. This raises the noise levels so the vetoing system is better if there are only a few excursions to accommodate.

We plan space for about 500 long rate trigger criteria. The parameters that control the CPU usage ensure that we will be able to run as many as possible.

**IMAGE TRIGGERS**

To search for GRBs or other transients on long time scales, we will form images of the FOV and search for
new objects. The flight software forms an on-board encoded image every 8 seconds which are used as the background images for the long rate triggers. Those images are combined together on three different time scales (perhaps 64 sec, 10 minutes, half an orbit) and the on-board image deconvolves the mask pattern. (The on-board image process consists of a non-iterative clean to remove known bright sources, a mask deconvolution, and a back project analysis to refine the location.) We search each such image for significant sources and eliminate known sources using an on-board table. Sources that exceed a commandable threshold are declared sources suitable for Swift to slew to.

**SUMMARY**

The BAT instrument on Swift will have trigger software that can explore a wide parameter space (4 msec to orbital time scales, 4 different energy ranges, subregions of the FOV). About 16,000 commandable “knobs” can be used to optimize its performance. Of course to avoid massive confusion, only a few of those will actually be adjusted on orbit. The software will autonomously adjust the number of criteria to maximize the use of the available CPU power.

We have several lines of defense against false triggers. The first is that the hundreds of parameters that control the trigger calculations are all commandable from the ground. The second is that we can remove trends by fitting a function to background samples. The third is that we will determine in real time the variations of sources such as Cyg X-1 and remove their effects from the triggering. The final line of defense against false triggers is that we will form an image and check to see if the “GRB” is in the direction of a known variable source before slewing the satellite.

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